
A
STREET AND SMITH'S
WESTERN
STORY
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JAN. '47
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AFTER THE PARTY

Look out for a Cold... *Gargle* LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

GOING from over-heated rooms into the chilly night air often can lower body resistance so that cold germs called the "secondary invaders" may invade the tissue. After a party it's only sensible to gargle with Listerine Antiseptic when you reach home because this precaution may forestall a mass invasion by these germs.

While a virus is believed to start many colds, certain threatening germs called the "secondary invaders" produce many of those miserable symptoms of a cold and its complications.

Anything that lowers body resistance, such as wet or cold feet, drafts, fatigue, or sudden change of temperature, may make it easier for the "secondary invaders" to stage a mass invasion of the tissue.

Listerine Antiseptic—Quick!

So, when you've been thus exposed, gargle with Listerine Antiseptic at once. Used early and often Listerine Antiseptic, because of its amazing germ-killing power, may halt such mass invasions... may help head off the cold entirely or lessen its severity.

It is the delightful, easy precaution that countless thousands use regularly, night and morning, and oftener when they feel a cold coming on.

Fewer Colds and Sore Throats in Tests

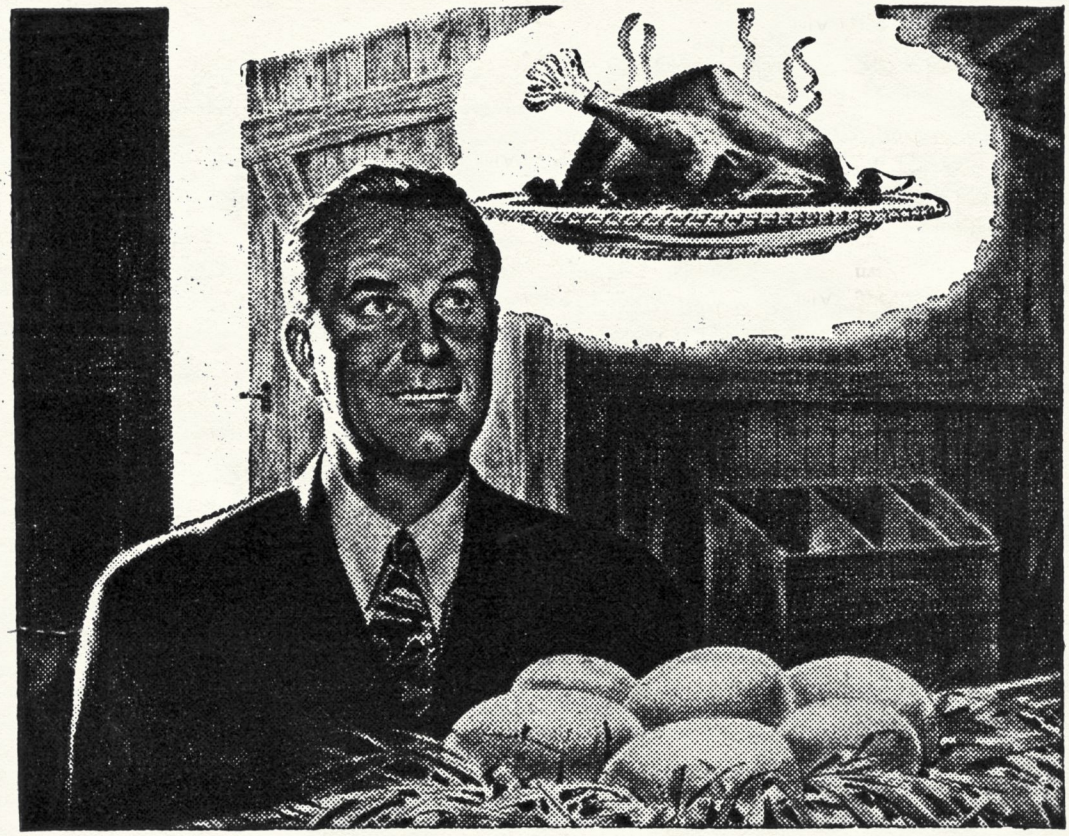
Bear in mind that tests during 12 years revealed this impressive result: Those who gargled with Listerine Antiseptic twice a day had fewer colds and usually milder colds than those who did not gargle...and fewer sore throats.

Get into the habit of using Listerine Antiseptic regularly and, at the first sneeze... the first tightening of the throat or other signs of a cold... increase the frequency of the gargle, meanwhile seeing that you get plenty of rest, that you keep warm, and that you eat wisely.

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

Germs Reduced up to 96.7% in Tests

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



Sometimes you can break a good rule!

It's usually a wise rule not to plan a chicken dinner before the eggs are hatched.

But not always!

If the "chicken dinner" represents your future, and the "eggs" are financial nest eggs—go ahead and plan!

Especially if your *nest eggs* are U. S. War Bonds and U. S. Savings Bonds. For your government *guarantees* that these will hatch out in just 10 years.

Millions of Americans have found them the safest, surest way to save money . . . and they've proved that buying Bonds on the Payroll Savings Plan is the easiest way to pile up dollars that there is.

So keep on buying Savings Bonds at banks, post offices, or on the Payroll Plan.

Then you *can* count your chickens before they're hatched . . . plan exactly the kind of future you want, *and get it!*

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

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STREET & SMITH'S

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SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

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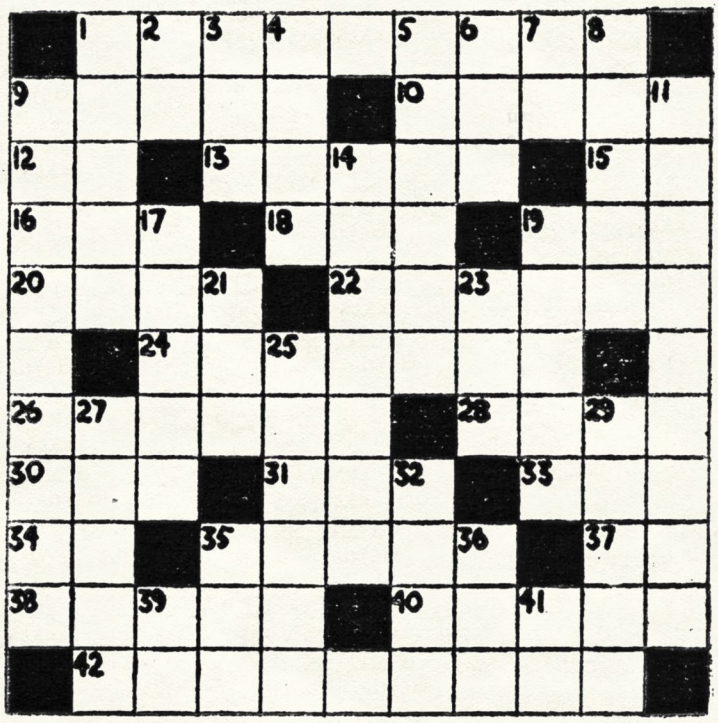


ACROSS

1. Burdened equine
9. Early settler of England
10. Russian distance measure
12. Yes
13. French hat
15. Knockout: abbr.
16. Beaded moisture
18. Always: poetic
19. Edge of a garment
20. Fall in drops
22. Word qualifying a verb
24. Ransack
26. Admittance
28. Major portion
30. Pooh!
31. Bitter vetch
33. Duo
34. Near
35. Pay a call
37. At home
38. French urchin
40. Unhobbled, free
42. Western old-timers

DOWN

1. Giver of money
2. Lumberjack's tool
3. Fancy-stepping horse
4. Leg joint
5. Exaggerate
6. Soak flax
7. Elder: abbr.
8. Glacially formed ridge
9. Horseman's pouch
11. Famous Arizona mining town
14. Harvesting machines
17. Breadth
19. Slave
21. Through
23. Vigor
25. This is believing
27. Pertaining to origin
29. Kind of cheese
32. Storage place for grain
35. Wine: Fr.
36. Craggy peak
39. State: abbr.
41. Ahead

(The solution ot this puzzle may be found on page 124)

by BENNETT FOSTER

I

In April, when green grass pushed through the old brown growth, when small creeks, fat with melted snow, gurgled happily, when cock grouse drummed and the sage put forth the sheen of new leaves, Hamish MacDonald, his small dog, Wee Wallace, his much-thumbed copy of Robert Burns and his bagpipes, moved from his little rock house on the flank of Baldy Mountain back to the headquarters of Fergus Ferguson's sheep ranch.

It was a trying time to Hamish, a time filled with nostalgia. Under order of The MacDonald, Hamish had escorted thirty head of black-faced Cheviot bucks across the ocean

Could Hamish MacDonald keep those feuding cowmen from gunplay by putting a swarm of bees in their bonnets?

BRIDLEBIT BUSCADERO

to this foreign land and had remained with Fergus Ferguson who owned the Cheviot bucks. Stoutly Hamish had striven for a place in this outland. Baldy's slope was like that of Ben Nevis above the Linne Loch. The gurgling creeks sang the same tunes as did the rills of Scotland. The green sage was very like the heather. But always, Hamish's heart—so he believed—was in the Hielands, far away.

Hamish could not see how deep his roots had grown in the good Wyoming soil. He did not know that he would not have traded his small rock house for any crofter's cot in Moidart. He did not realize that Baldy's grandeur surpassed that of Ben Nevis, or that, amidst the heather, he

would have been homesick for the sage; that his friends were here, his life was here. Your true Scot is never happy unless he is unhappy, and in the soft spring evenings, Hamish MacDonald's pipes wailed his happiness, for, oh, he was homesick in the spring.

Indeed, Hamish was so filled with his happy melancholia that he failed to heed the talk about him, to sense what was astir in the Bridlebit country. He missed the tension that grew as spring progressed, for the Bridlebit, like many another self-sufficient country, mixed its own poison, and the first ingredient of a very potent brew had arrived.

In April, on a sunny, cloudless day, the Westbound Limited made an unwonted stop at Bridlebit's depot. The usual crowd of depot loafers saw a passenger alight, witnessed his meeting with Curly Welch, foreman of the OYO, saw both passengers and luggage placed in the OYO buckboard and go whirling away.

Word of his advent spread by the telegraphy of the rangeland and, mysteriously, his name and the nature of his business also spread. Rumor had it that the Eastern company that owned the OYO had sent out a ranch manager and that Curly Welch would shortly be out of a job. As usual, rumor was only partially right.

In the town of Bridlebit, Curly met his nearest neighbor, Dan Cassidy, and at a table in the rear of the Bull Head Saloon the two took a modest drink and talked together.

At first the conversation was of the coming grass and the condition of the cattle. Then Cassidy broached the subject uppermost in his mind. "I hear you've got a new man at the ranch."

"Yeah," Curly agreed, and his eyes avoided Cassidy's. "The Company sent him out. Name's Andrews. He's Frank Black's nephew."

Frank Black had started the OYO when Cassidy started the Hentrack. Black was an Eastern man and had returned home when he had come into an inheritance. He was the principal stockholder in the OYO Land and Cattle Company. Frank Black had almost raised Curly Welch and had made him foreman. Dan Cassidy knew Curly's loyalty to Frank Black.

"He's goin' to manage the business end," Curly informed after a pause. "Frank wrote me. He wants Andrews to take hold." Again a pause, then Curly said: "Andrews is a lawyer."

There was more coming. Curly cleared his throat and, looking up, met Cassidy's eyes directly. "I been meanin' to come over," he said. "Look, Dan. I ain't goin' to throw in with you this spring. We're goin' to run our own wagon on roundup."

The words were as direct as a blow in the face. Since the beginning the OYO and the Hentrack had worked together on roundup, the arrangement of mutual benefit.

"Yeah?" said Cassidy, eyes narrowing. "Your idea?"

Curly looked away. "I . . ." he began, and then, loyalty to his outfit overcoming his desire to tell the truth, he equivocated. "I want to get a clean work on the calves this year. We missed some last spring."

Calves are always missed at branding time. The few that leak through are picked up later. Curly's excuse would not hold water.

"I see," Dan Cassidy said, hurt. He forgot that Curly Welch was young and proud, and that he, too, had been hurt by Frank Black's apparent lack of faith. "Well, let me know when you start and I'll send over a stray man."

"I'll do that." Curly was eager to retain a valued friendship. "Sure, I'll let you know, Dan."

"I'll expect you to send a man to work with my wagon." Cassidy's voice was cold. "I'll let you know when it pulls out. So long, Welch." He got up from the table and walked out of the Bull Head. Curly Welch, miserable, followed him with his eyes.

South of the railroad tracks that divided the Bridlebit was cattle, and north of the tracks was sheep. North, as well as south of the tracks, the arrival of Paul Andrews at the OYO was noted and commented upon.

A week after the meeting between Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy, Fergus Ferguson, with Hamish MacDonald beside him, met Gil Morrison en route to Bridlebit town. Sheepmen both, they pulled their teams to a stop.

When greetings had been exchanged Morrison's first question was of the happenings in town. Ferguson, fresh from Bridlebit, had news. Dan Cassidy, angry, had spoken to sundry citizens of Curly's decision to run a separate roundup wagon. Morrison scowled and shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said. "The OYO and the Hentrack have always got along."

"And they're still gettin' along," Fergus pointed out. "Just because they run two roundup wagons is no sign they'll fight."

"Maybe not," admitted Morrison. An older man than Ferguson, Gil Morrison had been in the Bridlebit country when there was trouble, when sheepmen and cowmen had not pulled together. He sensed, rather than saw, a rift in the peace of the country. "Just the same, I don't like it, Fergus. That new man at the OYO —Andrews, is it?—this looks like his doings."

"Maybe it is." Ferguson shrugged. "Anyhow, Gil, it's not our business. We run sheep."

"And," Morrison agreed, "we keep north of the railroad tracks. So long, Fergus. I'd better get on to town."

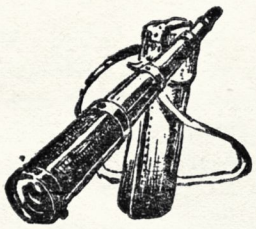
The wagons moved apart and for a time Fergus was silent. Then: "It's none of our business, anyhow, is it, Hamish?"

Hamish awakened with a start. Having greeted Gil Morrison, he had withdrawn into himself and paid no attention to the conversation, being engaged in the mental fashioning of a bit of pipe music. Now, recalled to the prosaic things of life, Hamish asked a question.

"What's that, ye say?"

"Never mind." Fergus grinned at his companion. "What were you thinking about?"

"Aboot nae havin' any honey," Hamish dissimulated. "There's nae



honey at a' in Bridlebit. An' how, I ask ye, can a mon mak' th' Brose wi'oot honey?"

Lack of honey was one of the minor trials of Hamish's existence. His mother had come from Athole and from her Hamish had inherited the knack of making Athole Brose, that smooth, insidious, apparently innocuous concoction of whiskey and honey embodied with all the potentialities of sixty percent dynamite. Hamish, the bagpipes, and Athole Brose were synonymous in the Bridlebit. Men liked Hamish for himself and they tolerated the pipes because of the Brose that Hamish made —when honey was available.

Ferguson laughed. "You'll have to take to keepin' bees," he advised. "That's the only way you'll ever be sure of havin' honey when you want it."

"It's no a bad idea," Hamish admitted. Then, shaking his head regretfully: "But I nae sa' guid wi' th' bees."

II

Toward the end of May Hamish MacDonald moved back to his rock house. At evening time it was his custom to sit on the stoop of his cottage and, through a long brass telescope, scan the country all about. The telescope, a true deer stalker's glass and Scottish made, brought distance to Hamish's very door. Through it he could see the section hands at work on the tracks below him, and could watch the wagons and riders on the highway that paralleled the railroad. It was through this glass that Hamish saw the OYO roundup wagon camp on Skunk Creek Flat, where, in the fall, both the OYO and the Hentrack cut hay.

The wagons had gone out as ordained, each ranch sending its own roundup crew on their long circles. All through June the wagon crews worked at branding, and finally trouble flared up between the OYO and the Hentrack. The story was simple enough. Sam King, OYO strayman working with the Hentrack wagon, had claimed an unbranded yearling for his outfit. Cassidy's wagon boss disputed the claim, stating that he knew the yearling and that its mother was a Hentrack cow. After hot words the yearling had been branded Hentrack, and King, rolling his bed, had left the Hentrack wagon.

On the following day Curly Welch had come to interview Cassidy, his intentions entirely pacific, or so the story ran. But with Curly had come the Eastern man, Paul Andrews, and between Cassidy and Andrews there had been an argument into which Curly Welch was reluctantly drawn. In the town of Bridlebit, old-timers, remembering less peaceful days, shook their heads and made prophesy.

"That Andrews is a trouble maker. He shot off his head an' Cassidy took

him up on it. Welch tried to quiet 'em down an' the next thing he knew, he was in it. Cassidy cussed him out. There wasn't nothin' for Welch to do but back up Andrews. He's workin' for the OYO, ain't he? He's got to back his outfit. Looks like trouble to me."

Ian Gordon, deputy sheriff in the Bridlebit country, heard the talk and rode out to visit the Hentrack and the OYO. In both camps he found men who were morose and angry, for a rider is loyal to his brand, and in the heat of argument, both Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy had said some things that pride forbade them to retract. Gordon returned to Bridlebit and sought Sol Backman in his store.

"Do you know where I can address a letter to Frank Black?" Gordon asked the merchant.

Hamish MacDonald, isolated on Baldy's southern slope, heard none of this. And then, late in June, he acquired a neighbor. Through the glass he saw a canvas wagon top on Skunk Creek Flat. The next morning Hamish attended to the bucks and then, leaving Wee Wallace with the sheep, set out to satisfy his curiosity.

It was mid-morning when Hamish arrived. He found two wagons with a tent pitched beside them. Two heavy work teams were grazing and a jersey cow contentedly cropping the heavy blue stem. From the sod house set in a slope above Skunk Creek and which in the fall served as a hay camp for the OYO and the Hentrack, the owners of the wagons came out to meet Hamish.

The newcomers saw a tall man, red hair beginning to gray at the edges beneath a battered tam-o-shanter, blue eyes set wide apart in a face that might have been chipped from Scottish granite. Hamish, in turn, saw a broad-shouldered, fresh-faced, blond-haired youngster with the big strong hands of the farm-raised boy, and a small, cheerfully plump, flaxen-haired girl, her face smudged with the dirt which she had been cleaning out of the soddy. All liked what they saw.

"I gie ye good den," Hamish greeted them gravely. "I'm Hamish MacDonald, frae th' mountain yonder." He waved a broad-palmed hand toward Baldy.

The newcomers reciprocated. They were, they said, Bill and Mary Benton. A baby chortled in a wagon and Mary went to get it, a chubby, blue-eyed youngster whose name was Tom.

The Bentons were full of questions and information. Hamish, his reserve broken by Tom's chortlings, answered the questions as best he could and assimilated the information. The Bentons were from Iowa. They had come West to homestead land. They had looked along the way as they traveled and had found the place they wanted. Skunk Creek Flats was that place.

Standing between the two, Hamish listened to their talk and viewed the spot that Mary indicated where the house that she planned would stand; followed the direction of Bill's pointing finger as he showed where he would plant wheat and where the vegetable garden would be placed. The Bentons were filled with enthusi-

asm and they had an audience. Bill, so Mary said, would go to the land office at once to file upon the place.

When the first talk was done Hamish gravely accompanied the three Bentons about their new-found home. He saw the cow and her calf. He examined the work teams. He peered into the soddy to see the miracles of cleaning already wrought and, in front of the soddy, on a wooden bench, he saw five hives of bees busily at work.

"Bees!" said Hamish. "Honey!" Unthinkingly his tongue licked his lips.

The Bentons pressed Hamish to stay when he said that he must get back to his sheep, but he was firm. He had to go. So Mary, putting Tom in his crib in the wagon, bustled about and, before Hamish strode away, pressed a parcel upon him.

"It's just a comb of honey," she said. "Please take it. And please come back, Mr. MacDonald. Come back and see us."

Hamish promised that he would return, and thanked her for the honey. He stalked away, pausing on the railroad embankment to look back at the little homestead on Skunk Creek Flat, and the long flat meadow that followed the creek, dotted with the stacks of hay cut by the Hentrack and the OYO. Mary and Bill waved to him.

Hamish was not alone in discovering the advent of the Bentons. Roundup was over and riders were out from the ranches. An OYO hand dropped in on the Bentons on the afternoon of Hamish's visit. The next day a Hentrack man called briefly. Skunk Creek bordered between the two ranches and both outfits had men riding it. Both riders reported to their respective bosses and neither Curly Welch nor Dan Cassidy liked the report. The Skunk Creek Flats was valuable hayland and both the OYO and the Hentrack used it. This Curly explained in detail to Paul Andrews.

Neither Cassidy nor Curly Welch made an immediate investigation, however. The Fourth of July was but a few days' distant and on the Fourth all Bridlebit forgathered in Bridlebit town for the celebration. There was a rodeo and much good fellowship. Both Cassidy and Curly Welch postponed any action until after the Fourth.

III

The Fourth of July was bright and fair. All morning wagons bearing sheepmen and their families streamed in from the north, and other wagons came from the south with the families of the cowmen.

From both north and south riders poured into town. Dan Cassidy was there with the Hentrack crew, and Curly Welch and Paul Andrews came in with the riders from the OYO. The owners and the men of the Seven Up and Down and the Bar T Cross arrived. Gil Morrison and Poke Stevens, sheepmen, came in. Fergus Ferguson arrived, and all the herders that could leave their flocks, convened in Bridlebit.

Hamish MacDonald, in all his glory, came with Ferguson. Gone

now was the rawboned shepherd. Instead here was a piper of the Clan MacDonald. Glengarry rakishly cocked and ribbons fluttering, plaid across his shoulder, kilt swirling about hairy, bony knees, sporan swinging, dirk in stocking and pipes under his arm. Hamish was as much a part of the celebration as the bucking horses or the barbecue.

On July Fourth Hanish was the Piper of Bridlebit. It was his day, and men held their frightened horses and cheered him on as he tramped back and forth with the drones of his pipes moaning and the chanter skirling under his knowing fingers. The Fourth of July was a braw grand day for Hamish MacDonald, with only one rift in its happiness: Hamish's new neighbors were absent.

By nightfall the celebration had progressed to the stage where everyone was pleasantly tired. Sober family men had taken their families and departed, but there were not many sober family men.

Hamish, in company with Gil Morrison and Fergus Ferguson, was in the Bull Head Saloon and in his mind a slow resolution was forming. His neighbors, the Bentons, had not seen Hamish in his glory, nor had they heard him play the pipes. Hamish resolved to do something about it.

That resolution had but formed when Hamish's train of thoughts was interrupted by angry voices. He turned from the bar to confront a silent room in which Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy faced each other. Beside Curly was a man, strange to Hamish; a young man, smooth-faced, with teeth that protruded slightly and close-set blue eyes that seemed as prominent as the teeth.

"But you distinctly said I was to ride the range today!"

"Tomorrow," Cassidy stated, and there was a challenge in his voice, "I'll take my crew an' go down an' run that nester off my hay land."

"*Your* hay land?" Curly's voice was also challenging. "When did the Skunk Creek Flats get to belong to the Hentrack? Tomorrow *I'll* go down an' visit that nester!"

"The Hentrack has cut hay on Skunk Creek ever since I started the brand," Cassidy stated harshly. "You'll stay out of my business, Welch!"

"It seems to me that the OYO has a just claim," the smooth-faced stranger beside Curly Welch spoke up. "After all, possession is nine points in the law. We have squatters' rights on Skunk Creek, from what Welch tells me."

"Then Welch lies!" Cassidy flung out the word. "I've let him cut hay there but I'm through now. And—" Cassidy got no farther. Fully en-

raged, Curly leaped at the older man. Hamish took a swift step forward and was checked by Ferguson's grip on his arm.

"Stay out of it!" rasped Ferguson. "It's their business."

"But they're ma' friends," Hamish expostulated. "They—"

There were others who had no one to restrain them. Neither Dan Cassidy nor Curly Welch was armed. Men seized them and pulled them apart, but not until blows had been struck. OYO riders and Hentrack hands, eager to back up their outfits, pushed into the crowd. Trouble broke in the Bull Head and Paddy Ryan and his bartender came over the bar top, one with a maul, the other with a sling shot. But Ryan and the bartender were not enough. Ian Gordon, face as hard as a rock and voice as hard as his face, came through the door and, flinging men aside, forced his way between the two angry cowmen.

"Stop it!" Gordon commanded. "Stop it, you fools!"

Ian Gordon was young but he was deputy in Bridlebit because he could hold down the job. And he had help. Merchants and townsmen who depended upon the sheep and cowmen for their living came pushing in.

Gordon wasted no time in learning the cause of the quarrel. He had a hard-won wisdom and he knew that any investigation would only cause a new upheaval. Hard and flat, he laid down his commands.

"I'll have no trouble here. Welch, take your crew and pull out for home. Cassidy, you and your men will stay here until they're gone. Close up, Paddy. Bridlebit's through for tonight."

Fergus Ferguson pulled on Hamish's arm. "Come on, Hamish," he ordered. "Let's get out of here."

The sheepmen were the first out of the Bull Head. Fergus Ferguson went to reclaim his team from the wagon yard and Hamish waited. While he stood beside the hitch rail, Curly Welch and the OYO men came out of the saloon. Curly was grim-faced and silent, but the smooth-faced man was talking. "I tell you, we have every right to the Skunk Creek hay," the stranger was saying. "Under the law . . ."

"To hell with the law!" Curly broke his silence. "I'll *make* what law I need. I'll run that nester out tomorrow. Cassidy, too, if he butts in."

The OYO men untied their horses and, mounting, rode away. Not even Curly spoke to Hamish.

When Ferguson returned with his wagon he could not locate Hamish MacDonald. He searched in every likely spot but found no sign of his man. Finally he went to the depot. The third-trick operator nodded when the sheepman asked his question.

"Hamish? Yeah, he was here awhile ago. There was an eastbound freight in the hole for Number Four. I guess Hamish talked the engineer into givin' him a ride down to Baldy Sidin'."

"Well, damn him!" Fergus said, but with relief. "Why in thunder didn't he tell me he was goin' home?"

Actually Fergus Ferguson and the third-trick operator were only partially right. The Scotsman was not going home although Baldy Siding was his destination.

The freight crews that ran through the Bridlebit country were accustomed to shepherds, and sometimes compunchers, bumming them for rides, and because a lot of railroad revenue was derived from sheep and cattle in Bridlebit the railroaders seldom said "no." Truthfully, the freight engineer was a little surprised when a full-fledged piper with all the accoutrements asked in broad Scots for a ride to Baldy Siding, but he recovered from the shock and said "Climb on." So Hamish, with many things in mind, secured transportation.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when the freight slowed and Hamish unloaded. Seeking a swale of tall grass, he wrapped himself in his plaid and went to sleep, the stars and the balmy July night serving for extra covers.

Wakening with the sun, Hamish stretched and yawned and sought the bank of Skunk Creek where he made a meagre toilet. Then, crossing the railroad, he trudged on down the flats to the Benton soddy. Bill had moved in a stove and smoke was coming from the chimney of the house. Hamish noted the smoke and also observed with pleasure that the bees were already busy. He knocked and Bill came to the door.

Overcoming his surprise at the early-morning visitor, Bill invited Hamish to come in. Mary was at the stove and coffee was boiling. Hamish was invited to stay for breakfast.

"Ye were no at Bridlebit yesterday," Hamish stated. "I missed ye."

"I just came back last night," Bill explained. "I went to the land office and filed on this place." Both he and Mary were beaming.

"And some day it will be ours," Mary said. "Three hundred and twenty acres."

"Ummm," said Hamish. "Did ye think noo about the others who have been usin' the land?"

Bill's face darkened and defiance firmed Mary's small chin.

"They talked to me at the land office," Bill answered. "I know that the ranchmen have been cutting hay here; but there's plenty of hay meadow left down the creek. This is public domain and I've filed on it."

"Umm," Hamish murmured again. "An' if they try to put ye oot?"

Bill shook his head. "They won't," he answered firmly. "I've filed on the land. The Commissioner told me all about it. He said I might have trouble, and I told him I didn't think so. I believe the cowmen are fair. They know the law and they know that I have a right here." He paused. "And if they don't"—Bill's face darkened again—"we'll fight. This is our home, ain't it, Mary?"

Mary stood beside her husband. her arm through his. They presented a united front to Hamish.

"Well," said Hamish, "I'll stay awhile, if ye'll ha' me. Foreby ye'll have veesitors today an' they ken me."

"We'll be glad to have you," Bill answered gratefully, sensing an ally.

Breakfast was ready and they sat down to it. No one referred to the expected visitors. When the meal was over, Bill went out to look after the teams and the milk cow, and Mary busied herself with the dishes.

Hamish picked up his pipes, blew into the mouthpiece and fingered a minor sprig of tune. Young Tom eyed Hamish doubtfully and then, accepting this as some new form of entertainment designed particularly for him, crowed and bounced in the crib. Hamish grinned all across his craggy face.

"He's the ear for't!" he exclaimed. "Th' vurra ear for't."

Bill came into the house. "They're comin'," he announced briefly. Hamish laid aside the pipes and followed Bill outside. From the west where lay the OYO, a little clump of riders came trotting. Curly led the OYO contingent, with Paul Andrews and Sam King and another hand accompanying him. When the riders drew to a halt, Hamish greeted them.

"Good den to ye, Curly. Ye're airly."

"Hello, Hamish." Curly Welch was crisp. His eyes sought Bill Benton's. None of the riders dismounted. "You the man who moved in here?" Curly continued.

"Yes," answered Benton.

"Move out!" Curly directed harshly. "Get started now!"

"I've homesteaded on this place." Benton's voice was steady. "I've filed my claim an' I've got the papers. I'm not goin' to move!"

"Wait noo, Curly," Hamish expostulated. "Ye're awa' too fast. Bill's a guid mon; ye can see that. An' mairover he keeps th' bees. Honey, d'ye ken? T' make th' Brose."

"Shut up!" Curly hardly glanced at Hamish. "I've told you what you're goin' to do, nester! Get started!"

"No!"

The horse moved as Curly leaned forward, his hand going back to the gun on his hip. "You'll . . ." he began.

"Hentrack is comin'," Sam King said.

Curly straightened. Hamish, looking to his left, saw Dan Cassidy and three Hentrack riders trotting along the creek. No one spoke. Cassidy and his men arrived in front of the soddy.

"What are you doin' here on my land, Welch?" Cassidy rasped.

"*Your* land?" Curly glared at Cassidy.

Hamish spoke swiftly to Bill and to Mary who stood beside her husband. "Gae t' th' hoose! Quick!"

Trouble was right there. Curly had his hand on the butt of his Colt, and so too did Dan Cassidy. Sam King and the other OYO man had each singled out a Hentrack rider, but Paul Andrews turned his horse and moved away. Hamish did not wait for his command to be obeyed. Seizing Bill's arm, he swept his other arm about Mary's waist, lifted her and, hauling Bill along, made for the sod house.

He reached the soddy, dropped Mary beyond the threshold, thrust Bill after her, and, as he pushed Bill through the door, Hamish MacDon-

ald's heather boot thumped against the bench upon which the bee hives rested. One well-directed kick and no more. Bench and hives went tumbling, and the door of the soddy banged shut behind Hamish's broad shoulders.

From the overturned hives the bees buzzed out, angry, vengeful. Within seconds the little yard in front of the sod house was a bedlam of yells, of fighting, cursing men, and pitching, squealing horses.

Hamish peered through the small window in the soddy's front and saw the turmoil he had wrought. He saw Sam King, bucked off his horse, stumble in circles until he caught the frightened animal, saw Curly's hat fly in one direction and his gun in another as Curly fought both horse and bees; saw Dan Cassidy's horse stampede down the creek, a cloud of vengeful insects following.

No idea of running off the nesters lingered with the Hentrack and OYO men and they had lost all their hostility toward each other. Nor were they worried about the respective rights to Skunk Creek Flats. They had come hunting trouble, but not the kind they had found. A man's determination, no matter how grim, is lost when his eyes are swollen shut by bee stings and his horse is frantic with fright and hurt. Hentrack and OYO together stampeded away from the soddy and the bees pursued them. In not more than two minutes after Hamish had upset the hives, the yard in front of the sod house was empty save for the buzzing victors of the stricken field.

"Weel," said Hamish, slowly withdrawing from the window. "Weel, noo. It's haard on the bees, I'm thinkin'. Unco haard!"

Mary Benton's arms went about Hamish's neck and her lips pressed against his stubbled cheek. "I just love you, Hamish MacDonald," she exclaimed.

"But th' bees?" said Hamish ruefully

"They'll swarm in the trees along the creek," Bill assured him. "I'll get them back into their hives."

IV

The Bentons were not again molested after the episode of the bees. There were several reasons for the truce. First of these was that to everyone save those concerned, the rout of the Hentrack and the OYO was not without its humor. All Bridlebit recognized the seriousness of the situation, knew that the deep-seated animosity between the OYO and the Hentrack might burst into flame at any moment. Bridlebit saw no way to prevent such a situation. Bridlebit knew, too, that the nesters on Skunk Creek were due for trouble. But, in the meantime, Bridlebit chuckled.

"Run 'em off with a bunch of bees, by golly! Who'd ever thought of that? There was Welch an' Cassidy, all ready to go to shootin', an' Hamish kicked over the beehives. Like to stung 'em to death!" So the OYO and the Hentrack were laughed at and the humor rankled and burned deep, but could not be avoided. And, like a child burned by fire, neither Curly Welch nor Dan Cassidy cared

to expose himself again. In some mysterious manner the buzzing bees had put public opinion behind the Bentons.

There was also another and more cogent reason for the truce. A lanky, gray-haired man wearing a deputy U. S. marshal's badge on his vest, arrived in Bridlebit and consulted with Ian Gordon. His chief, the deputy marshal said, wanted no trouble in the country. And so the deputy, with Gordon and Sol Backman, Paddy Ryan and other sober and influential citizens of the town, rode to the OYO and to the Hentrack and stated a proposition.

If trouble arose in the Bridlebit, then the forces of the law, both Federal and county, and the heavy force of public opinion would all align against the originator. Neither Curly Welch nor Dan Cassidy was a fool. They knew that they must keep the peace. But they did not have to be friendly. That was not in the compact.

Returning after the visit to the OYO, Sol Backman questioned Ian Gordon. "Did you write to Frank Black, Ian?"

"I did." Gordon nodded. "He's not in the country. I had a letter from his office an' it said that he'd gone to England to buy some shorthorn bulls."

With a truce settled over the Bridlebit, the summer stretched along. July gave way to August and August to September, and the time for beef roundup was hard at hand.

September is also the month to hay, and north and south of the tracks hay was cut; but the brown-cured grass waved unmolested on Skunk Creek Flats. Neither the OYO nor the Hentrack moved in hay crews. To do so would have been to invite friction and neither Curly Welch nor Dan Cassidy wished to ask for trouble. The hay cut in previous years remained in the stacks, dotting the flats.

While Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy stayed clear of Skunk Creek, there was another who did not. Paul Andrews rode down from the OYO, his destination a secret to his fellows. He was courteous and friendly. Bill and Mary Benton responded readily to Andrews' glib explanation concerning his presence on that former occasion. They were strangers in the country, young and eager for friends.

Pursuing his plan, Andrews visited once and then again. On his third visit he broached an idea. He would, he told Bill, buy the homestead from the Bentons. He would advance them enough to pre-empt the claim, and would pay them for the time they had spent on it.

Neither Bill nor Mary took Andrews' offer seriously until it had been renewed a second time. Save for Hamish MacDonald and Paul Andrews, no one visited them. The

Bridlebit's opinion might be behind the nesters, but actually the newcomers were looked upon as interlopers. Moreover, to visit the Bentons might appear to be taking sides. It was lonely on the Skunk Creek Flats and as September wore along Bill and Mary began to weaken. It might have been that eventually they would have agreed to Andrews' plan. But Andrews himself prevented that.

Mary Benton was pretty and unaffected, naive and friendly. One day Bill, coming unexpectedly to the sod house, found a thoroughly frightened Mary with little Tom in her arms, facing Paul Andrews across the table. Bill dealt promptly with the situation. The two men went out of the soddy. Shortly thereafter Paul Andrews rode away and did not come back, and Bill's knuckles were skinned when he returned to the soddy.

September was dry. The grass on Bridlebit range was growing brown and brittle. Men were careful of their fires, and the section crews renewed the fireguards along the railroad. The whole country was like tinder.

Throughout the summer Hamish MacDonald had been in and out of his rock house. He worked with the shearers when they came, and he tended the buck herd for Ferguson. When he was at home he took whatever occasion he could make, to call on the Bentons. When he could not go down to the Skunk Creek Flats he watched with his telescope, making sure of his friends' welfare. In a measure he had adopted the residents. More particularly he felt a proprietary interest in the bees, now restored to their hives, for Hamish had a one-track mind and those bees, so busily at work, were insurance of a honey supply and Athole Brose at Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years.

On an early morning in late September Hamish, looking through his glass, saw a pinto horse behind the railroad embankment on Skunk Creek. The horse was saddled but riderless.

Hamish kept the glass to his eye. He saw a man come scrambling over the embankment, mount the horse and ride off, staying north of the tracks and so hidden from the sod house on the flats. Hamish lowered the telescope and scratched his head, still looking toward the flats, and as he looked, he saw a wisp of smoke trail up and grow and grow. Coming to his feet, Hamish put the telescope away.

"Stay wi' th' sheep, Wallace." He spoke harshly to Wee Wallace. Then he went striding down the slope, almost running. Above the Skunk Creek Flats the smoke thickened.

When Hamish reached the railroad all of the flats was lost in the smoke haze. Soaking himself in the creek, Hamish followed along the stream, plunging through the shallows. Then, cutting abruptly to the left, he struck out for the sod house.

Fire had licked over the soddy; it was black and deserted. The bench which had held the hives was still burning as were the hives themselves. There was no sign of life about the place. With a curse Hamish wheeled

and ran back to the creek, following it south toward the roar of the fire.

Both sides of the creek had been burned. Only the lack of wind had delayed the progress of the fire and now the wind was blowing in small gusts, and from the north. Hamish, below the cut banks of the creek, was protected in a measure, and when he reached the line of the fire, he stooped low and crawled through the water. Beyond the fire, he straightened and ran and presently climbed out of the creek bottom. Smoke was all about him. Through the smoke Hamish saw movement and ran toward it, stumbling over furrows. He was on the land that Bill Benton had plowed.

At the southern edge of the plowed ground Hamish found Bill. With both teams hitched to his breaking plow, lines over neck and shoulder and hands on the plow handles, Bill was somehow managing the horses and turning a furrow.

"Mary an' th' bairn?" Hamish panted.

"Down the creek. I've got them an' the cow in the big bend. Help me, Hamish!"

"Gi' me th' pleugh!" Hamish ordered and settled broad hands on the plow handles.

With Hamish to hold the plow while Bill managed the horses, the work went more rapidly. The land Bill had already broken on the east bank of the creek had checked the fire which was working around on either side. West of the creek a little tributary came in, and the dry bed of the tributary formed a minor barrier to the flames. They would cross that barrier in time but it afforded a momentary check. Bill Benton, taking advantage of the plowed land and the tributary, was plowing long horns back on either side of the land already broken, curving them toward the north, hoping to contain the fire within them. As the men worked, Bill shouted information to his helper.

"I knew I couldn't save the soddy. I got Mary an' Tom an' the cow an' sent them to the big bend. Then I hooked up the team an' came out here. I thought I could save the hay."

Peering through the smoke, Hamish could see haystacks to the south. The Skunk Creek Flats widened south of the plowed ground and formed the principal hay meadow. Dotting that meadow were the stacks of the OYO and the Hentrack, precious winter feed should need arise. Winter feed! And Bill Benton was laboring to save it!

"Must have been a spark from an engine that set it," Bill shouted.

"Na!" Hamish called in reply. "'Twas nae engine, mon! Watch yere hoorses noo!" They were at the end of the furrow and Hamish swung the plow around.

Alone, Hamish and Bill Benton could not have stopped the fire; but they were not long alone. As they turned the back furrow, Hamish saw men on horseback looming through the smoke and realized that reinforcements had arrived. A rider swung close and Hamish recognized Dan Cassidy. Cassidy yelled inarticulately and disappeared. Another

rider came through the smoke, up to the plowmen. It was Curly Welch.

"You've got the fireguard wide enough here!" he shouted. "Go across the creek. We'll fight it along the edges so that it won't break back."

Curly, like Cassidy, was lost in the smoke. Hamish and Bill drove their furrow through to the creek and sought a crossing. They found it, hauled across, and resumed their work. The fire had jumped the dry bed of the tributary stream.

The smoke haze thinned. As they worked, Hamish and Bill saw Cassidy and Welch. With their ropes the two dragged the disemboweled carcass of a cow along the edge of the fire, smothering it. Other Hentrack and OYO men were fighting fire with saddle blankets, with shovels, with whatever they could lay hands on.

V

It was the plowed fireguard that broke the back of the fire. The brown furrows were broached in a place or two, but the breaks were beaten out. The OYO and the Hentrack hands kept the fire from turning the edges of the fireguard, and toward noon the fighters were reinforced by the section crew. But it was the plowed land that made victory possible at all, and by evening the fire was whipped. As the smoke lifted and sooty-faced men sighed with relief, Mary, carrying Tom and driving the cow and calf came from her refuge in the big bend. Gradually the men forgathered at a central point: the gutted sod house. Bill and Hamish, with the plow teams and the plow, arrived together to find Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy standing side by side.

"What started it?" Cassidy demanded. "A spark from an engine?"

"I thought so." Bill sat down wearily on the plow beam while the horses stood, heads hanging. "But Hamish says . . ."

" 'Twas nae th' railroad." Hamish sat down beside Bill.

"Then what?"

"A mon!"

Cowmen and section hands stared at Hamish. "A man, you say?" Curly Welch demanded.

"Aye. I spied him through ma' glass frae yonder." Hamish waved toward Baldy Mountain.

For a time no one spoke. Men looked suspiciously at one another. "I couldna' recognize him," Hamish said. "It's a guid glass, but th' deestance was too much for't."

Instinctively OYO and Hentrack men drew apart, and the section crew huddled together. Someone had set this fire, had tried to burn the Skunk Creek Flats.

"Look yonder," the section boss said.

Three mounted men topped the railroad embankment and their

horses picked their way carefully across the black-burned sod. Ian Gordon was a little in the lead, with Paul Andrews and a white-haired stranger dressed in a business suit following him. Andrews rode a pinto horse and Hamish came slowly to his feet as the men stopped. Dan Cassidy and Curly Welch each took a step forward.

"Mr. Black!" Curly exclaimed.

"Frank Black!" There was amazement in Cassidy's voice.

Gordon and the white-haired man dismounted. "Curly . . ." Frank Black began, but Hamish interrupted.

Hamish laid two eleven-inch hands on Paul Andrews' leg and his voice rasped as he hauled the man from the saddle.

"Ye leetle *sassenach!* Ye wee villain! *You* set th' fire. I ken yere horse!"

Andrews struck the ground with a thud, and Hamish, fierce face black with soot, bent threateningly over him. It was too much for Paul Andrews.

"I didn't know it would get this bad!" he squealed. "I thought it would just burn the house. I didn't mean to!"

With futile hands Andrews sought to fend off the Scot. Gordon and the section foreman pulled Hamish away and Andrews scrambled to his feet, staring wildly around at the accusing faces.

"I didn't mean to," he babbled. "Benton knocked me down and I wanted to get even with him. I didn't know the blasted hay would burn so fast. I didn't think . . ."

Ian Gordon stepped hastily to join Frank Black and together they faced the men that surged forward. It was Black who spoke. "Hold it now. We'll take care of him!"

The forward surge checked fractionally and Black spoke again. "Curly, I heard that you and Dan had some trouble."

Momentarily Paul Andrews was forgotten. Curly looked at Dan Cassidy who had turned toward him. Instinctively the OYO and the Hentrack men eyed one another, and Black, taking advantage of the momentary lapse, spoke swiftly and low-voiced to Gordon. "Get him out of here while you've got the chance!"

The young deputy whirled Andrews around, caught the trailing reins of the pinto and thrust them into Andrews' lax hands. "Get on your horse!" he ordered, his voice as low as Black's had been. "Get started before they hang you!"

For an instant Andrews hesitated. Then, as Gordon shoved him, he flung himself into the saddle and the pinto broke into a run.

Instantly the attention of the group changed. Curly Welch shouted, "He's gettin' away," and ran toward his horse. One man drew a gun and Frank Black lifted his voice.

"Hold it! Hold it now! Gordon will get him!"

Ian Gordon, already mounted, went pounding after Andrews. The two disappeared over the railroad embankment and, slowly, men straggled back together, their voices babbling. Once more Black confronted Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy.

"Gordon wrote to me," he said

crisply. "I was out of the country when his letter came, but as soon as I got back I came out here. Now what's the trouble between you two? Gordon told me a little but I want to hear it from you. What is it, Dan?"

Frank Black was Dan Cassidy's old-time friend; they had known and respected each other for years. Frank Black had raised Curly Welch, had taken him when he was a twenty-dollar-a-month horse wrangler and brought him along. Dan Cassidy and Curly Welch looked at Black and then, a little sheepishly, at each other.

Fire burns tinder-dry grass, and wood and brush and all things inflammable. Fire had licked across the Skunk Creek Flats, destroying Bill Benton's wagons and the little pen he had built for the cow, and gutting the sod house. And the fire had burned something else as well. From Frank Black, Curly and Dan Cassidy looked at each other, their eyes meeting squarely.

"Nothin' much," Dan Cassidy answered Black. "Except that I was a damned fool!"

"No more than me!" stated Curly.

"Nor me." Black's face relaxed a little. "I was a fool. I sent Andrews out and he started the trouble. But, Curly, you shouldn't have thought I meant him to take over the ranch. That's where you were wrong. Andrews was in trouble and my brother-in-law asked me if I could find a place for him and . . . Let's sit down and talk this over."

They sat together, Black on the plow beam, Curly and Dan Cassidy squatting before him. OYO and Hentrack men, seeing the bosses in consultation, drifted together and talked. Presently Curly called two OYO riders to him. They were to go to the ranch, he said, and get a wagon and supplies and bring them back.

"We'll keep a guard here tonight," Curly explained. The two men pulled out and, after a little further talk, Curly Welch, Dan Cassidy and Frank Black sought Bill Benton.

"He saved our hay," Curly said as the three walked toward the sod house. "His own place was burnt out an' he could have got his wife an' kid across the railroad an' let things go, but he didn't. He stuck an' saved the hay an' we're goin' to need it this winter from the looks of things." Curly paused. Then, with self-accusation in his voice, he said: "After I tried to run him out, too."

"An' me!" Cassidy's voice also carried self-accusation.

Bill, with Tom in his arms and Mary beside him, stood with Hamish in front of the soddy. The young farmer turned to face the cowmen and his face was defiant and his shoulders square despite his weariness. Mary turned as Bill did, but not so Hamish. Hamish paid no attention to the three men. Hamish surveyed the ruin of the bench and hives and dried his wierd.

"Ma honey!" Hamish wailed. "Ma honey's burned. All o' it!"

"We want to talk to you, Benton," Curly announced awkwardly, "I was wrong. Dan an' me was both wrong. We . . ." Curly looked appealingly at Frank Black.

"What Curly wants to tell you," Black interposed smoothly, "is that there'll be no more difficulty about you staying here."

Bill did not answer, but a little, tremulous smile began to form about Mary's lips.

"That's it!" Curly stated, with relief. "That's what I wanted to say. Dan an' me been talkin'. You saved our hay an' we're goin' to need it for feed this winter. We figured after you'd got set up again that maybe you'd cut some more hay for us. We'd pay you, of course. An' mebbe. . . ."

"Curly wants you to go to the OYO an' stay 'til you get straightened around," Dan Cassidy interrupted. "But if you'd come to the Hentrack, I'd be pleased to have you." He was as awkward as Curly.

"What we mean," Curly blurted, "is that we want you to stay in the country. We don't want this fire to run you out."

"I'll assure you that your losses will be made good," Black said. "I can take care of that. Your furniture and your household goods and everything."

To all this talk Hamish had paid scant heed, but Black's words cut through his preoccupation. "Th' bees?" Hamish demanded, wheeling toward the men. "Five hives, ye ken? So there'll be plenty o' honey to make th' Athole Brose?"

"Certainly I'll replace the bees," Black stated stiffly, for he did not know Hamish.

"What do you say, Benton?" Dan Cassidy demanded anxiously. "Will you stay? An' are you comin' down to the Hentrack, or are you goin' over to the OYO?"

Bill Benton did not answer immediately. He was watching his wife. Mary was crying, but she was smiling through her tears, and in his father's arms, young Tom wakened and stretched and yawned, as babies will, exposing two small teeth.

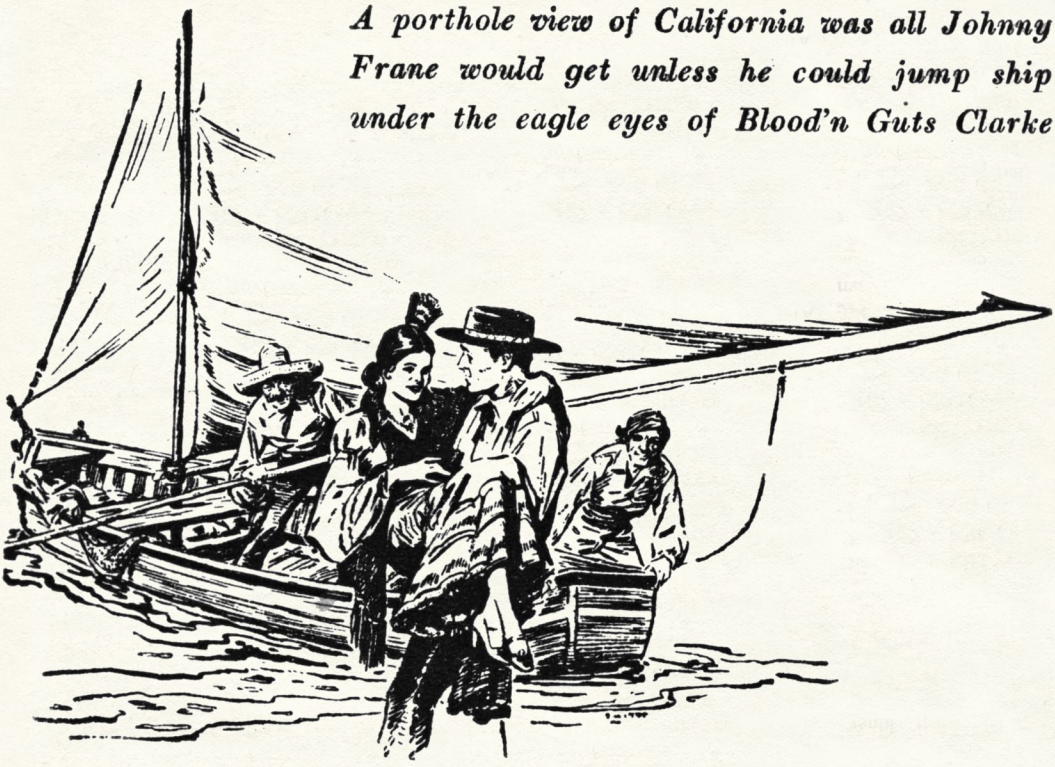
"We'll stay," Bill said.

The tension was gone from the Bridlebit country, entirely gone. Bill looked at Mary and she at him, their eyes alight. Curly Welch and Dan Cassidy and Frank Black surveyed one another with satisfaction. On the road to Bridlebit town Paul Andrews, cowed and frightened, rode to certain punishment in Ian Gordon's custody.

And in front of the burned sod house Hamish MacDonald surveyed the charred remnants of bench and bee hives and did not see them. Instead Hamish saw a small, but model, apiary, its tenants busily at work storing good sage honey. His tongue touched his lips in anticipation of the Athole Brose that honey would make when properly compounded by his knowing hands.

Certainly the tightness and the tension was gone from the Bridlebit, for, while the Bridlebit might mix its own poison, the Bridlebit also killed its own snakes.

THE END



A porthole view of California was all Johnny Frane would get unless he could jump ship under the eagle eyes of Blood'n Guts Clarke

YANKEE CABALLERO

by M. HOWARD LANE

He looked like some bloody, dying animal, lying in the blackness of the *Don Quixote's* brig. Wisps of straw clung to the raw welts that creased his back and shoulders, and the rats in the brig, attracted by the smell of blood, kept coming back to the attack. So far Johnny Frane had fended them off but he was growing weary now. A man was a fool to keep fighting when death would be so much more comfortable. Yet there was that stubbornness in him that kept him moving his arms and legs to frighten the rats. He had not sailed here to Monterey to die.

It had all started back in Boston, in this year of 1827, when the ships were loading themselves like bargain stores, and all the talk along the docks was about the "California trade."

Some of the ships were having trouble recruiting crews, for California was far away, and a man would be gone a long time from his native New England. But, as New England was not his native country anyway, Johnny Frane had not feared the voyage.

"I've seen my share of the world," he'd told Mr. Ben Clarke, first mate

of the *Don Quixote*. "I've lived in Spain, and know the lingo these *Californios* talk. I've sailored under more than one flag, and I can stand my trick at the wheel."

"Ye're mighty young for such brash talk," the first mate had growled, "but this ain't the time to be particular. Any crew is better than none. Sign on!"

Johnny fanned a big arm at the rats whose eyes, in the darkness, were moist red jewels as they waited patiently for him to die.

The rats couldn't know that it wasn't in Johnny Frane to quit the fight, because that was something he wouldn't do until he got his crack at Mr. Ben Clarke. Blood'n-guts Clarke, the crew called the mate behind the backs of their hands, and Johnny had made the mistake of doing the same thing without first looking over his shoulder. The mate had been stepping, quiet as a padding cat, close behind him when Johnny had told the cabin boy:

"Old Blood'n-guts Clarke won't be keeping me aboard the *Don Quixote* once we reach Monterey harbor. I'll jump this damned ship so fast he'll think I never was here—"

"Oh, will you now?" Clarke had said with heavy sarcasm. "So I'm Blood'n-guts Clarke to you for'c'sle scum? All right, my bucko, you're a fine, strapping lad. Suppose we give the rest a demonstration of what blood'n-guts look like!"

They'd trussed Johnny to the forepeak ladder, and Mr. Ben Clarke had laid on the cat-o'-nine-tails until his arm was tired and Johnny Frane's back was a mass of bloody flesh.

"Douse him with a bucket of salt water," Clarke had ordered the second mate, "it'll keep the maggots out of his hide until it heals. I don't want the cuss to die. I want to see him suffer when he looks at Monterey through a porthole. He won't be jumpin' my ship this trip, and neither will the rest of ye. The first man that tries gets the same dose."

Chains clanked on Johnny Frane's ankles, and his body was one living mass of pain, and yet mixed with his agony was a certain exhilaration.

Even here in the brig a man could almost smell California. It was a great land, this jealously guarded Spanish outpost. Spain had tried to keep all visitors from her colonial borders, but that was as futile as trying to dam a river with a single shovel. Where there were markets, Yankee merchants would find them.

Johnny Frane's father had been a Yankee shipmaster who had cruised the seas with his wife and son until a fateful storm had sent his ship crashing against the coast of Spain. A wave that had drowned his father and mother had carried Johnny to the rocky shore, and fisherfolk in a nearby village had reared the stripling boy, and told him fanciful tales of this California where men ruled a thousand leagues and could not count their cattle.

Johnny had listened and he had made up his mind that some day he would visit that fabulous country. The time had come eventually when

he was grown enough to sail the seas in his own right, and his sailoring had never been bad, he thought, as he rolled and tossed on the filthy straw that floored the brig of the *Don Quixote*. Blood'n-guts Clarke had just wanted an excuse to lay the cat on somebody.

"I'll fix him some way, sometime, so he'll never do it again," Johnny promised himself.

And now, certain that he was dreaming, Johnny Frane heard the tramp of feet in the corridor outside the brig, and the barred door was flung open. A seaman entered, and Johnny gasped as a bucket of salt water was flung over him. It made the creases in his back sting like hell fire for a moment, and then a sensation of well-being stole over him.

He looked up, and in the fitful glow of a ship's lantern, he saw Mr. Clarke standing in the corridor. The mate was short, almost as broad as he was tall, and there wasn't an ounce of fat on his body. Muscles crawled along his thick arms, and his face was full of arrogance.

"Get him on his feet," the mate growled at the seaman. "He ain't hurt bad, so why the captain should want to see him in his cabin is beyond me."

The seaman reached down, but Johnny rose without help. He stood there in the lantern's glow, a black-browed, shag-haired young sailor, and the light danced off his lean, half-naked body.

Captain Timothy Fenton wanted to see him! Johnny Frane had no more idea than the mate why this should happen, but he was not in the position to look any favor in the eye.

"I can walk," he growled at the seaman.

"Ye'll do no walkin' by the time I'm through with ye," Ben Clarke threatened.

Johnny Frane felt all the anger in him well up, but he quelled the words that reached his lips. Antagonizing Mr. Clarke would gain him nothing now.

Johnny stood before Captain Fenton, and answered questions almost automatically. This was all like a dream, for he had no way of knowing what was in the captain's mind.

"You're fit to walk?" the captain asked.

"Aye." Johnny nodded.

"Ye hold no malice toward the *Don Quixote* and her cargo?"

"A ship's a ship," said Johnny, and he did not mention the mate, nor his plan to jump the *Don Quixote* now that he was out of the brig.

"You understand this lingo they talk here in Monterey?" the captain asked.

"*Si, señor,*" Johnny said promptly, and he began to get a wild notion in his head. The supercargo who was to handle the sale of goods on this floating bargain store could not understand the language of the *Californios* who would come to buy his wares.

"Dress him up," ordered Captain Fenton. "Shave him. He'll do, Mr. Clarke, and my congratulations to you, sir, on learning so well the capabilities of your crew."

The mate looked pleased. Johnny Frane grinned at him, but there was no mirth about his lips.

Shaving with the captain's own razor was a luxury seldom accorded an ordinary seaman, and when the steward brought in black broadcloth breeches with a slight flare at the bottom, and a broad blue stripe of velveteen sewn along the seams, Johnny could not control his laughter. He looked at the bright red sash of finest Cathay silk, and the white cambric shirt, the polished boots, and wide-brimmed black hat with a low, round crown.

"I'll look like a peacock in that rig," he told the steward.

"Ye'll be wearin' the clothes of this fooforaw country," the steward growled sourly. "And ye'll be expected to sell the same to the dandies who'll be visitin' the ship this afternoon. Of course, it ain't for the likes of me to be givin' advice, but I'd say ye'd best do some sellin', because if ye don't, you and your fine clothes will be back in the brig come night!"

The ship's barber came to trim Johnny Frane's black hair, and he was as pleased as the rest of the *Don Quixote* crew to see Johnny out of the brig.

"The boys are calling you the Lad from Boston," he confided, "and layin' odds that ye'll sell these *Californios* a scad. T'was a break for you when the old man found out that his supercargo couldn't speak this language. Mr. Clarke is fit to be tied at his own yard-arm, but there ain't a thing he can do about it—unless ye fail. If ye do, t'will be the brig for ye again, don't forget."

"Not for me it won't," Johnny Frane said grimly. "I've had all of Mr. Clarke I want."

The barber's name was Jimson Brown. He was a merry-faced little man without a hair on his own head, and he stopped his shearing long enough to step around and look at Johnny with something almost like awe in his eyes.

"You know," he said softly, "ye've put an idea in my noggin, Johnny Frane. This Monterey town should be able to use the services of a good barber . . ."

"Not Monterey," Johnny contradicted. "You jump ship with me, Jimson, and we'll have to do some traveling. Strangers ain't very welcome—and don't forget Mr. Clarke."

"I'd like to hone my razor on his windpipe!" said Brown. "How you goin' about making your break? I hear there'll be sentries posted on deck tonight with muskets ready to shoot the first man that goes near the rail."

"Find yourself some clothes like these I'm wearing," Johnny murmured, "and stay close to the landing ladder. There'll be a heap of people out to visit the ship this afternoon, and a man could get lost amongst them."

The barber sighed like a leaky bellows. "Wagh!" he grunted. "The Lad from Boston has brains as well as hair to cover them!"

There were señoritas with decorous duennas to keep an eye on them while they fingered the silks and satins, the combs and stilt-heeled slippers.

There were caballeros and dons, to

look over the hardware and solid Colonial furniture that might suit their haciendas. Their eyes studied the new fashions in men's clothing, and approved the garb worn by Johnny Frane. His easy command of their language was enough to inspire their confidence and, after all, they could purchase whatever they might desire by signing their names to slips of paper provided by the supercargo. The sales would be completed the next day when their *mozos* brought hides and *arrobas* of tallow to be traded for these luxuries.

Captain Timothy Fenton beamed on the gathering, and nodded his approval to Johnny Frane. Mr. Ben Clarke stood in the background, a dour, silent man, and Johnny knew the mate's eyes were never off his tall figure.

The sun coasted westward behind the gnarled cypress and pines that crested the skyline of the hills above white-walled Monterey, and the longboats got busy ferrying passengers back to the city. Johnny drew a long breath as he realized it was time for him to make his break for freedom.

He stepped clear of the tables where the ship's cargo was displayed, and put his hand beneath the elbow of a señorita. "Permit me to escort you," he said, and he saw the girl's duenna stiffen her back in scandalized dudgeon.

The girl raised impish black eyes. "I am Conchita Contrearas," she said softly, "and I will be honored, señor, but I fear *mi madre* will hear of your attentions."

"She won't be the only one!" Johnny said dryly. He nodded pleasantly to Captain Fenton, and he saw Mr. Clarke start forward, then halt irresolutely, for the good will this afternoon's business had built up would vanish instantly if there was trouble aboard the ship.

Clarke moved to the rail, though, and he was standing close to the landing ladder when Johnny Frane handed the girl down to the waiting boat.

"Don't do it, Frane," he whispered raggedly. "Don't do it. I'll hound you to hell and back if you pull this trick on me."

"What does he tell you, señor?" Conchita asked as Johnny stepped into the longboat beside her.

"He is bidding me 'adios' in our own language," Johnny told her calmly.

"Adios?" the girl said, and her dark eyes widened. "You do not plan to return to the ship, señor?"

"No" Johnny told her gravely.

The girl's fingers tightened impulsively on his arm. "Our rancho is ten leagues away, up the *Valle de Salina*," she whispered. "Find your way there, and you will be safe. But do not tarry in Monterey, señor. It is not a good place for gringos. *Capitan* Rodriguez Ortega of the Presidio does not like the Americanos. He has told me many times of the ee-sport he and his *soldados* have, dragging them at the ends of their riatas back to the ships from which they have deserted. I have also hear that the *capitan* receives much gold coin for returning these men. So, señor—"

"I'll be careful," Johnny assured

her, and he realized for the first time that this girl was beautiful. But now was not the time to think of it, for he saw that he had made the mistake of stepping into one of the *Don Quixote's* own longboats being used to ferry passengers to and from the quay.

The men at the oars would do their damndest to take him back to the ship with them, for Ben Clarke's wrath would descend on each head that failed its duty. And then Johnny spotted the barber.

Jimson Brown was dressed like no California caballero. He was wearing a red bandanna tied 'round his head, and his jersey and pants were those of a sailor. He was handling an oar with the others. One eye winked at Johnny Frane. At least there would be the two of them. Johnny breathed deep of the heady fragrance of California.

He saw Ben Clarke standing at the *Don Quixote's* rail, and there was death and damnation in the mate's eyes.

The longboat reached the quay, and the sailors shipped their oars. Johnny Frane looked into the impish eyes of Conchita Contrearas, and he found a little trouble with his breathing.

"Señorita," he murmured, "I will see you in the *Valle de Salina.*"

"*Vaya con Dios,* señor," the girl murmured. "Go with God!"

The coxswain behind them evidently understood a smattering of Spanish, for he said: "You ain't goin' anywhere, Frane, but back to the ship. Boys, we got one passenger who won't be goin' ashore, and I think you know who I mean."

The growl of the crew was answer enough, and then Johnny saw Jimson Brown stand up with his oar gripped in both hands.

"We're goin'!" said Jimson, and swung the oar like a flail as the last passenger stepped to the float at the edge of the quay.

Johnny turned and lashed a savage right into the face of the coxswain. A leap carried him to the float. Grabbing Jimson Brown, he hauled him up from the longboat.

"Give our regards to Mr. Clarke!" he said, and pushed hard with the barber's oar. The longboat danced away from the float.

"Look yonder!" Brown panted.

Johnny glanced out across the bay to where the *Don Quixote* rested like a tired gull, and he saw the flash of oars as another ship's boat came across the water. It carried only one passenger. A squat, broad man was standing in the stern.

"He won't leave our trail," Brown grunted, "and I dunno as I care very much. I got my razor tucked in my pants, and I'd still like the chance to hone it on his Adam's apple."

"You may get it," Johnny told him.

The shadows were lengthening, and Johnny was thankful for that. He led the way into a narrow alley that stank of fish, and tripped over a net on which an old man was working.

The fisherman screamed voluble curses, and Johnny Frane grinned at him, spreading his hands with Latin simplicity. His own curses were a

match for the fisherman's, and the man paused to listen in admiration.

"*Muy bien,*" he said at last. "You have done some fishing yourself, señor, for only a fisherman could swear with such sincerity."

"*Si,*" Johnny told him. "I have, old one. And now we need a boat, *muy pronto,* to carry us across this bay to the *Valle de Salina.*"

"I am yours to command," the fisherman said simply. "Come. The valley of the Salinas is vast. There you will find rest and peace."

Johnny Frane laughed a little as they followed the boatman, and he drank in the beauty of the darkening sky, and listened to the song of the gulls, white as snowflakes above them. It was a strange thing, but this seemed to Johnny Frane like a homecoming. He did not feel like a deserter. This country was home. It was simple as that.

The fisherman's boat was beached, and the three men strained at it together, breaking the keel free of the sand. They tumbled into it, and the fisherman lifted the small sail. Johnny took the tiller and when he gave a last glance at the shore, a shout that he couldn't hold back parted his lips. He swung the boat and headed toward the beach, for there was a figure in flying skirts racing across the sand to the water's edge.

This was all part of the same magnificent dream—that Conchita Contrearas should share his escape. Johnny leaped past the startled fisherman as the boat touched sand, and lifted the girl over the prow.

"*Mi corarón,*" she whispered with her face against his shoulder. "I slipped away from my duenna, and watched the way you came. You see it occurred to me," she added demurely as he set her on her feet, "that you might lose your way in the *Salina* without a guide."

Johnny Frane put his arm around the girl's waist, as the sloop danced gaily across the shadowed waters. He had often wondered how the lightning of love would strike a man, and now he knew.

They reached the *Rio Salina* and sailed a short distance up the estuary to a small dock where hides and tallow from the valley were loaded for transport to ships in the bay.

The boatman swung his craft in skillfully, and leaped to the dock. Bowing graciously, he helped the girl from the sloop, and Jimson Brown clambered up alongside her.

"I don't know much about these things, Johnny," the barber said across his shoulder, "but I got me a hunch I'm going to be best man at a country weddin' before long—"

"Not tonight or ever!" a heavy voice said from the shore end of the pier, and a gun boomed redly against the darkness.

Johnny Frane felt the ball strike his thigh, and grind deep, but he still had the momentum to reach Ben Clarke's side and grapple with him.

"I figured you'd head for this shore," Clarke panted. "Most of the deserters do."

A short bright dirk came up from Clarke's belt, and Johnny caught at the mate's wrist. Bending the knife

inward toward Clarke's body, Johnny put his weight against it and heard a great breath gust from the other's chest.

He had thought that he wanted to kill this man, but now he knew that he didn't. Ben Clarke, dead, would follow Johnny Frane forever, casting a shadow over the promised happiness that awaited him up the Salina.

No, there was a better way. A way Ben Clarke would not forget. Johnny had thought back there in the brig of the *Don Quixote* that he would fix the mate so he'd never lay the cat on another sailor's shoulders, and now he thought he knew how.

The mate shivered as the wicked tip of the dirk pressed against his stomach, and Johnny looked down into Ben Clarke's face. The man's eyes were like an animal's, shining in the darkness.

"Mr. Clarke," Johnny said, "I'm not going to kill you, unless you force me. You did your damndest to break me, but I'll let you sail back to your ship on one word from you."

The mate's sigh was like the rasp of rope through a hawsehole, and his eyes were red and full of fear as the tip of the dirk pricked his skin.

"What is that 'word'?" he muttered.

"You hided the skin off my back and tossed me in your brig," Johnny said softly. "Now I want you to sail back to the *Don Quixote* and tell Captain Fenton I gave you the slip. Tell him you'll never lay the cat on another sailor—"

"Ye're willing to take my word that I'll do it?" Ben Clarke asked huskily.

"Aye," Johnny said in the same soft ones. "The word of Blood'n-guts Clarke is good enough for me."

"It's yours," Mr. Clarke said simply. "Yes, I'll tell the captain that, Frane. And I'll say this, if it's any consolation to ye. I never saw a man take the cat better'n ye did. This is new country, and they need men in it who can stand up to punishment. Ye'll have no more trouble from me, Johnny Frane; I can promise you that."

Ben Clarke stepped back, and the dirk clattered heedlessly to the planking between the two men. The mate turned, with his head down, and as Clarke moved off toward the rushes where he'd hidden his own craft, Johnny Frane felt Conchita step close to him.

"I am glad you did not kill him, my Johnny," she said softly. "It would be something we would remember over long. No, it is better that our past will not be stained with ugly memories. The future is too bright."

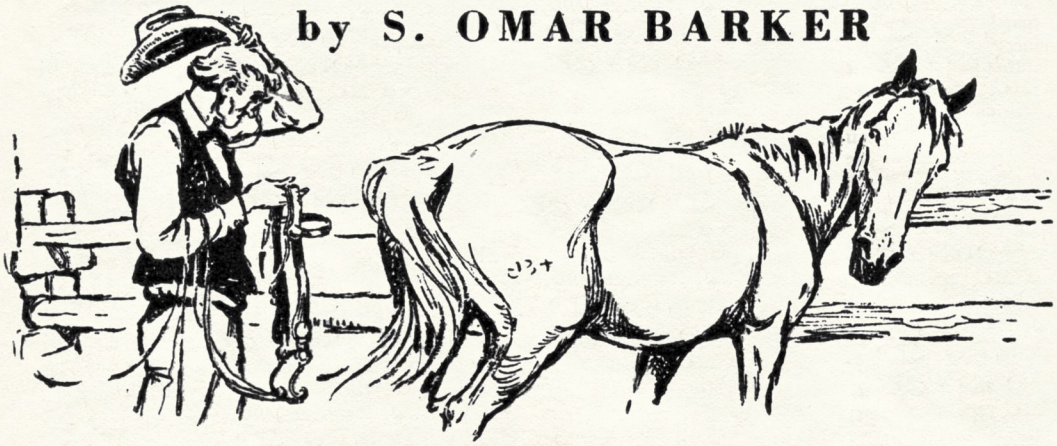
"Yes," Johnny Frane said in tones as soft as hers. "Our future will be like the dawn—always."

"And one of these fine days," Jimson Brown chuckled, "there'll be a flock of little Franes needin' old Jimson to shear 'em. Yep, I'm glad I come along with ye, Johnny Frane. Desertin' has its good points!"

THE END

CURLY-WOLF COLLEGE

by S. OMAR BARKER



I went up to a college an' they asked me what I knowed
To justify embarkin' on the education road.
I told 'em that my Pa an' Ma had figgered I was smart,
For I could purt near always tell a horse an' cow apart:
A cow's the one that wears the horns, a horse is what yuh ride,
An' both of them most always wears the hairy part outside.
They asked me what I knowed about the hist'ry of the earth.
I told 'em that I understood it started at Fort Worth,
Where Adam, the first Texan, found a market for his steers,
An' started raisin' buckaroos with red an' hairy ears.

They asked about my algebra—I told 'em it was tough,
The way most any cowboy's gits that's ridden long enough.
They asked me what philosophy of life I favored most,
An' that one sure did snub me right up to the snubbin' post.
I pondered some, then told 'em that I always do my best
To aim my spittin' eastwards when the wind is in the west.
They asked about my Grammer, an' I told 'em she was dead.
They didn't mention Grampa, but I told 'em what he'd said:
That any man was foolish an' was shorely bound to fail
Who'd kick a boar hog barefoot or bite cows on the tail!

I went up to this college, but I didn't stay there long,
For they asked a heap of questions an' my answers was all wrong.
At least that's how *they* figgered, like them college fellers do,
But I brought a prof back with me just to spend a week or two
A-ridin' on the rancho with a hoss between his knees,
Where the wolves is wild an' curly an' the kiotes all got fleas.
About this here perfessor I won't say no word unkind,
For he packs a heap of knowledge in that thing he calls his mind;
But now *my* lack of learnin' don't seem near so woebegone—
At least *I* know which end to put the horse's bridle on!

by WALT COBURN

When Tom Stuart put Old Hackamore Hob's brand on that outlaw bull, he took chips in a range war that would be fought with blazing bushwack lead

THE BLACK MAVERICK

I

WHEN a cowman's years begin crowding seventy, it's about time he started to sit back and take it easy. But not so Old Hob Crutchfield. There on his Lazy H range where the cow country was, for the most part, "stood on end" in the Mesquite Mountains in Arizona, Old Hob was still hard to follow. He owned the best cow horses in the country and he knew how to ride 'em. No slant was too steep, no basin too brushy for Old Hob.

His Lazy H was a one-man outfit. Old Hob Crutchfield was just too damned ornery, they said, to work for. So his was a greasy-sack spread and he gloried in his toughness, asking no favor of any man on earth, nor granting even the smallest. Nary a friend on earth. And his own kin hating Old Hob the worst of all.

Tall, rawboned, with a gray stubble on his long lean jaw and his drooping tobacco-stained white mustache hiding the bitter hard corners of a lipless mouth, Old Hob had hard, bright, ice-blue eyes that peered out from under ragged gray brows, and a jutting hawk-beaked nose. His big ungloved hands scabbed from thorns and his battered old Stetson pulled

shapeless on his shaggy gray head, Old Hob rode a long stirrup and swung a hungry loop. He rode his Lazy H horses with a hackamore, bragging that he'd hackamore-broke and saddle-broke every horse in his Lazy H iron and he didn't own a bridle bit. Hackamore Hob, he liked to be called. He had his strange brand of vanity. He'd brag how he had killed more than one man that needed killing, and how he'd never fought a horse. . . .

Hackamore Hob's only companion at his Lazy H Ranch was an ageless ketch dog, a big wiry-haired mixed breed with ragged ears and a stub tail that never wagged. Brindle in color, deep of chest and with the head and jaws of a Great Dane, yellow-eyed, game-hearted, raised from a tiny fat pup by Old Hackamore Hob, the dog paid no attention to any other human on earth. Big Brin would tackle anything that Hackamore Hob Crutchfield told him to go after.

"Git 'em, dawg!" Old Hob would say. And Big Brin would git 'em. He was the best ketch dog in any man's cow country.

Hackamore Hob Crutchfield had left Big Brin at the ranch that early morning. They had come in from a hard two weeks range branding, and the big hound was gaunt and footsore and needed a rest. So did the string of horses Hob pulled the shoes off and turned loose. He shod a fresh horse and pulled out before daybreak in the black drizzle of rain that had commenced yesterday.

Dawn found Hackamore Hob rimming out on top of the scrub-timbered ridge that divided his Lazy H range from the Hayhook range. The gray drizzle had soaked through his faded old denim brush jumper and shirt, chilling his tough old hide. His old joints stiff, he sat humped over his rope-marked saddlehorn, head thrust forward like a turkey buzzard's, his face gray with cold, his puckered eyes narrowed to ice-blue slits as he peered down into the Brushy Basin below. Hackamore Hob was on the early-morning prowl for mavericks. And he was peering out from under the dripping slanted brim of his old Stetson hat and down into the fog-shrouded Brushy Basin that belonged to his neighbor and was forbidden land.

Time had not dimmed the sharpness of Hackamore Hob's eyes. They could spot the slick unmarked ears of an unbranded maverick as quick

or as far off as any pair of younger eyes. Those slitted eyes were trying to pierce the thick mountain fog that rolled up out of Brushy Basin. His nostrils quivered. His gnarled, brush-scabbed hand flipped the loop of his rope strap from the saddle-horn and he shook a stiff small loop into his wet ketch rope.

"Me'n my Big Brin ketch dawg," Hackamore Hob made whiskey talk, "kin smell out a mav'rick." And old-timers believed Hob Crutchfield when he said so.

Hackamore Hob Crutchfield had no time to bother about the laws of God or man. Boundary lines meant nothing. Fence a line and Old Hackamore Hob would cut the fence. Hob Crutchfield's only law was the old wooden-handled six-shooter he packed in the deep pocket of his brush-scarred bullhide chaps. He lived by it, he'd die by it when the time came. Old-timers passed the word down to their sons and their hired hands. Let Hackamore Hob alone. Don't bother the ornery old son unless you want to get the worst of a whipping. . . .

Hackamore Hob quit peering down into the fog-shrouded basin. His slitted eyes watched the black ears of his line-backed dun quarter horse. The dun was hardly more than a green bronco. But he came from good cow-horse stock. And a bronco was never too young to commence learning. . . .

Hob's quid of tobacco bulged his lean grizzled jaw and he spat at the slippery wet ground. The dun's black ears pointed forward. Fifty yards down the steep slant the brush cracked, its wet foliage quivering in the billowing fog. The fog rolled up over the brush. Hackamore Hob cocked his stiff wet loop back over his shoulder and touched his spurs, jumping the bronc down the steep slippery slant, wide open. Just enough pull on the braided horse-hair hackamore rein to steady his horse on balance.

Fear had been left out of Hob Crutchfield's makeup. At nearly seventy, he was as wild and reckless as he'd been at twenty. Countless bad pile-ups and the knots of broken bones had never slowed Hob Crutchfield. He pointed that bronc down a slippery wet slant, discounting brush and boulders, sure of himself and his horse. Strong big yellow tobacco-stained teeth bared in a a wolfish grin as he caught a brief glimpse of the big black two-year-old maverick bull that broke brush down the slant.

"He's ourn!" Hackamore Hob spurred down the steep slant, his loop cocked back across his wet denim shoulder to keep it from fouling in the brush. He gritted a curse as the black bull went charging down into the thick billowing fog, lost to sight. Lost, plumb lost if a man's ears went back on him. . . . Foller by the crack of popping brush now. Stay on that black ox's tail, pony. You'll never learn it younger. . . . If only the ketch dawg had come along. Big Brin'd be swingin' on that black mav'rick's bushy tail by now, have that black ox by the nose down yonder by the time a man got there a-horseback. . . . The ketch

dawg was worth a crew of brush-popper cowhands. . . .

Brush broke down the slippery slant as the dun bronc kicked gravel, hit a shale strip and slid. Slide on your dun rump till the hair smokes. Dodge them boulders, pony. You'll never learn no sooner. Through or over or around that brush patch. Twist around it and not a split second lost and down into the fog and foller the sound of that busting brush, pony. Your mammy was steel-dust and your daddy busted the quarter mile record at Eagle Pass, in Texas. You got to be a natural, you line-back yaller claybank quarter-hoss cowpony. Or I'll— Ourn!

The fog rolled back and there was the black bull going down the slant. The slant was steep and it was odds against man and pony to close the gap and ride up on that black bull when the maverick reached that open strip. Not a hundred foot of open clearing and the slant was steep but it was the only spot before a man hit the brush-choked basin to lose his maverick, that he could swing a loop.

The dun bronc took Hob there. He was on top of the black bull when it reached the open slant. The wet ground was slippery as soap, the slant too steep and the horse between Hob's long legs no more than a green bronc. But the devil in hell hates a coward. . . .

Once, twice, the wet loop, no larger than need be to drop over the wide horn spread, swung. Then it sped out and dropped over the horns. The slack jerked tight, the rope hard and fast to the saddlehorn. The two-year-old black Mexican bull hit the end with a jerk. The taut wet rope quivered and its hard-twist hemp held. The bronc was set back on its rump. The black bull turned over in a somersault. Then the treacherous rain-soaked ground slipped out from under the bronc's front hoofs and the horse and man were down on the slant. The black bull came from the Old Mexico stock of black bulls bred for the bull ring. Bawling, red-eyed, it charged.

The dun bronc was down, back down-hill, feet on the up-hill side striking and kicking and pawing. Hackamore Hob's right leg was pinned down under the weight. The years had caught up with Hackamore Hob Crutchfield. Ten years ago he'd have had that right foot kicked out of the tapadero-covered stirrup, the leg free when the horse was jerked down. Ten years ago. . . .

Old Hob covered his head with both arms and ducked low as the bull charged. A horn, black, sharp-pointed, ripped up the back of his old denim jacket. Hoofs tromped over him and went on. Blood and mud smeared the tough old cowman's face and grizzled head. He moved feebly and his head fell back in the cold wet mud.

The bull hit the end of the rope again and was swung off its feet, jerking the horse off Hob's leg. The bronc scrambled to its feet as the black bull got up and there was less than twenty-five feet of rope that held the bronc and the maverick bull together. The half-trained dun bronc backed up the slippery slope in a game try to keep the rope taut. The

black bull charged and the spooked bronc dodged. The bull's swinging horns grazed the dun rump and the cloven hoofs kicked mud in the face of Hackamore Hob who was trying in vain to get to his feet. The bronc and the black Mexican bull, tied together, battled it out on the wet slant and Old Hackamore Hob Crutchfield lay there crippled in the tromped broad middle of the battleground.

"Git 'im, dawg!" Old Hackamore Hob croaked. But the Big Brin was not along this morning.

Hackamore Hob tried to crawl clear of the fighting animals and couldn't. The bull tromped him again as it charged the dun bronc. Old Hob had laid motionless, covering his head and face with his arms. But he couldn't stand much more tromping.

It was the devil of a way for a man to die. Besides, he had two-three men to kill before he cashed in his chips. Shirt-tail Crutchfield kin. Mark and Len Crutchfield. Nephews that had beat their own Uncle Hob out of all but this two-bit corner of what had been the biggest cow outfit in that part of Arizona Territory.

The black bull charged and hit the end of the rope. The dun bronc was learning fast—the tough way. Four feet braced now every time the bull charged. Then the horse dodged and whirled and the bull hit the end of the ketch rope. And the horse had learned to get the up-hill side each time, circling. But Old Hob was still caught in the middle of it. He didn't see the cowpuncher on the bay Hayhook Morgan horse.

Old Hob heard a man's laugh coming from somewhere in the brush-and-fog-bound nightmare. Then he saw the cowpuncher on the bay horse ride down the slant and past him, dip a swinging loop to pick up the black bull's heels.

The cowpuncher was young, thirty at the oldest. Wiry black hair showed from under his hat brim. A week's growth of wiry black beard. He had gray-blue eyes under heavy black brows, a short stubby nose and long upper lip, and a wide-mouthed grin and a blunt jaw. He was short and husky around the shoulders, bow-legged when he stepped off his horse with his hogging string to tie down the stretched-out black maverick bull.

He did a quick sure job hogtying. Then he walked along the taut rope to the dun bronc's head, talking to the horse in a sort of laughing voice. The bronc, mud-smeared, skinned-up, with a shallow cut in his thigh from the horn, was still a little spooked. But he quieted down under the cowpuncher's talk. The black-haired cowhand got the rope slacked and off the bull's horns.

Old Hackamore Hob Crutchfield had watched. One eye open to a sliver, he lay motionless, playing possum. He knew the bay horse. It was one of the Hayhook remuda. Mark and Len Crutchfield had grabbed the Hayhook after somebody had killed off tough Hank Hooker. Then this would be that smart-aleck rodeo cowboy, Tom Stuart, who had bought the Hayhook remnants and ranch. A damned rodeo cowboy! Get plumb lost if ever he strayed out the gate at one of his show-off rodeo contests. Flashy, no-good, trick-

ridin', rope-spinner cowboys. Fancy pants. Now this rodeo dude thing had done Hackamore Hob a favor. Put Hob Crutchfield into his debt.

"I'd ruther've died. . . ." Hackamore snarled it out of a mud-and-blood-plastered mask.

Tom Stuart stood there in his rain-sodden denim jacket and saddle-warped chaps, an old Stetson yanked down on his wiry black head. A lop-sided grin showed on his black-whiskered face and his gray-blue eyes twinkled with hard bright specks of grim amusement.

"Go right ahead," he said, "while you're in the notion. It'd beat hangin', at that."

Tom Stuart poked in under the manzanita after dry twigs to start a branding fire. He paid no more attention to the crippled old cowman. Whistling through big, strong white teeth, he squatted on his hunkers and got a branding fire started in the drizzle. He got his running iron from its scabbard on his saddle and took Old Hob's running iron. When he had them heating he rolled a brown-paper cigarette and lit it with a burning twig. Then he took another good look at the dun.

"A Hayhook Morgan," Tom Stuart spoke to the dun bronc and not the tough old cowman who owned the horse, "mightn't've got on top of that black ox so fast, but he'd've kept his feet, once he had his bull snared. You might bust the track record at Eagle Pass, but this Hayhook Morgan will be ketchin' wild uns in the roughs a plenty long time after your fast race horses pull up lame."

"Circus cowboy!" Hackamore Hob bit off a corner of mud-smeared plug. "Don't have the hoss sense to know when he's afoot. Ridin' a string of them damned Hayhook Morgan plow horses. . . ." He sat up and wiped at the blood and mud. His ice-blue eyes were wicked.

The running irons were getting hot. When they were cherry red, Tom Stuart took one in his gloved hand. He brushed the mud off the black hide over the left ribs and ran on part of a brand. When the iron cooled he tossed it on the wet ground and finished the job with Hackamore Hob's running iron.

Old Hackamore Hob's ice-blue eyes slitted. He watched Tom Stuart take his jackknife and cut Hob's crop and swallow fork in the ears. Hob snorted and spat tobacco juice.

"You earned it," Tom Stuart grinned flatly. "I watched the race."

He jerked off the hogging string and tailed up the black maverick that now wore Hob Crutchfield's Lazy H brand.

"I saved him for a bull. Not that his calves will be worth anything outside of a bullfight ring. But it'll give you somethin' to remember the day you sight that black bull again."

Tom cooled off his running iron in the wet ground and stepped up on his horse.

"So long, Hob." A lopsided grin on his face, he rode down the slope in the gray drizzle.

Hackamore Hob Crutchfield did not call after the new owner of the Hayhook. Old Hob's leg was giving him hell. Broken, he reckoned. And he had nothing but a bronc to ride

fifteen miles of up-and-down rough trail back to his ranch and nobody there to lend him a hand even if he made it alive. But he'd die and rot here before he'd ask that smart aleck to help him up onto his feet and on his horse. . . . That rodeo circus cowboy!

II

Tom Stuart had not traveled more than a hundred yards down the brushy slope into the basin when the brush cracked and a girl in hard-used cowpuncher clothes rode out from behind the brush and boulders to block his trail down into Brushy Basin.

She was riding a good-looking chestnut sorrel with a bald face and four white stocking legs and the girl's hair was almost the exact shade of warm chestnut sorrel as her horse. Her eyes were slate-gray and black-fringed under black brows that were almost too heavy for a girl. Her tanned cheeks were paled now and her eyes dark with anger.

"You'd leave an old man like that crippled and alone, to suffer and die!" Her voice was brittle. "You . . . you . . . you . . ."

"Cuss me out," grinned Tom Stuart, "It might do you good. Hob Crutchfield ain't *my* uncle."

The girl's face flushed hotly. "He'd rather die than let me help him. How did you know I was a Crutchfield?"

"I saw you in Black Mesa the day I closed the deal with Mark and Len Crutchfield when they unloaded the Hayhook on me for a sucker. I asked who you was and someone told me you was a sister to Mark and Len. Your name's Sally Crutchfield. That's your Uncle Hob up yonder. Like you said, he's old and crippled and he'll lay there and die slow unless he swallows the end of that six-shooter he packs, and pulls the trigger. For a—for Hob Crutchfield, it should beat hangin', at that."

"For any Crutchfield, you wanted to say." The girl's voice was cold-toned.

"That's right . . . The Crutchfield men, that is." Tom grinned.

"How about the women?"

"You're the only she-Crutchfield I've run into. I'll hold back my opinion."

"For a stranger in a strange land," said Sally Crutchfield, "you've gotten a little free with your opinion of the Crutchfields, he's or she's. Didn't anybody warn you that was bad luck?"

Tom pulled off his rain-wet hat. There was a faint mirthless twist to his mouth and his blue-gray eyes watched her as he poked a finger through a bullet rip in the hat crown. He creased the hat again and pulled it down on his wiry black head.

Sally Crutchfield was studying him narrowly. She motioned with her head.

"Hackamore Hob?" She kept her voice low-toned.

"Too much orneriness gets blamed on Hob Crutchfield," said Tom flatly. "It was moonlight. The shot came from the brush. You don't usually sight a bushwhacker. . . . You aim to let your Uncle Hob lay up yonder?"

"No." Her slate-gray eyes

watched him. Her red mouth twisted in a little smile. "You said you asked somebody at Black Mesa who I was?"

"Yeah. I saw you eatin' dinner with Mark and Len Crutchfield. I asked Fess Massey who was the purty red-headed girl who was travelin' in such bad company. Fess Massey said your name was Sally Crutchfield and the ornery company you were with were your older brothers. And furthermore to speak easy because Miss Sally Crutchfield was the lady who was goin' to be his wife."

Tom Stuart watched the color flush the girl's tanned cheeks, saw the slate-gray eyes darken with smoldering anger. He reined his horse and rode back up to where old Hackamore Hob was trying to catch his bronc.

Old Hackamore Hob was having a time of it. He could not stand on his injured leg. He'd tried hobbling on one leg and had fallen a time or two and now he was crawling, dragging his weight along the wet ground. And the bronc was spooked and traveling off crabwise, hackamore rope trailing just beyond the old cowman's reach.

III

Tom Stuart caught the dun. Dismounting, he unsaddled the bronc and his own horse and changed saddles. He told Hob that the Hayhook Morgan bay was broke to pack anything, even a bunged-up Crutchfield.

Hackamore Hob sat there on the wet slope in the gray drizzle. Cold sweat broke out on his tough old hide and he was shivering like a man taken down with chills and fever. But no whimper of pain came from behind his gritted teeth. His ice-blue eyes were slitted.

Sally Crutchfield had not followed Tom up the slope. He never bothered to look back to where he had left her sitting her horse. He whistled tunelessly through his teeth as he led the Hayhook bay over to where Old Hob sat. When he had the horse on the lower side of the steep slant, he dropped the bridle reins and the bay gelding stood there motionless, ground-tied. Tom Stuart got Old Hackamore Hob in under his shoulders and lifted him up onto his feet with a slow, steady, easy pull. He steadied the old cowman there for a few moments, then hoisted him up across his saddle and handed him the bridle reins. Hackamore Hob muttered something about still being afoot and spat tobacco juice. His slitted eyes were watching Tom Stuart when the young cowman stepped up on the dun bronc.

Old Hob expected the bronc to break in two and pitch. But Tom had stepped up in the middle like he was mounting some gentle well-trained rope horse. He reined the dun around on a loose rein.

"I kin tie you on," he told Hackamore Hob, "if you aim to go dizzy."

"I'll manage."

With Tom Stuart riding alongside him, Hackamore Hob Crutchfield headed for his own Lazy H home ranch. He was stewing in his own peppery broth. It was a gut shot, a dull, rusty knife twisted in his back,

to be beholden to this smart-aleck rodeo circus cowboy. But it was that or die suffering.

Tom Stuart was paying the tough old cowman little attention. Nor was his indifference all pretense. Tom Stuart was a horse lover and he was forking the best horse he had ever been on in his life. Now and then he would rein the dun bronc. The braided horsehair hackamore rope rein would hardly touch the dun's neck. The bronc handled sweeter than honey. And Tom Stuart could feel the short-coupled speed and power of the bulldog quarter horse that had been sired by one of the greatest quarter horse studs of all time. Tom was like some drunkard with a quart of twenty-year-old whiskey. It must have showed in his eyes or the way he sat the Lazy H dun bronc. Because Old Hackamore Hob detected it before they had traveled half a mile. Pain-racked as he was, the tough old cowman grinned, then wiped the grin off his blood and mud-smeared face with the palm of his hand.

"You aim to go all the way?" he asked.

"All the way. I don't want your carcass rottin' on my Hayhook range."

"I was never beholden to ary man on earth."

"So I bin told."

They rode along a ways further in silence. Old Hob broke it.

"I wouldn't own a horse any damned fool kin step up on and ride off."

"Somebody told me," said Tom Stuart, "that every geldin' in your Lazy H remuda was a strictly one-man horse."

"That's correct."

They covered another mile or more. Tom was wondering what had become of Sally Crutchfield. She hadn't shown up. No sight of her. Old Hackamore Hob's voice creaked like a rusty hinge.

"Crowbait! That thing's nothin' but a sorry, limber-legged stumble-an'-fall-down, two-bit, yaller claybank hunk o' crowbait. . . . A man wants somethin' that'll pack him. . . ."

"Yeah, sir."

"That's his name. Claybank. . . . He's yourn."

Tom Stuart felt something warm glow inside him. He dared not open his mouth to voice any word of thanks or protest. He knew that Hackamore Hob Crutchfield had turned down Fess Massey's offer of a thousand dollars cash for the Claybank dun and given Massey a cussing out to boot. Tom leaned forward and tugged the Claybank dun's black mane. He felt like he'd felt when he was a kid and got his first pair of red-topped brass-toed boots.

Old Hackamore Hob began covering up, as though he was reading the young cowman's thoughts.

"That Fess Massey!" he creaked. "If he had a million and laid it all on the line and throwed in all the range that them thievin' Crutchfield nephews of mine stole from me at the land office, he still couldn't buy a pack mule offen Hob Crutchfield. Fess Massey might be the World's Champeen roper. But he's a horse killer—a spade-bit man. A man

that'll fight a horse is a man that needs killin'!"

"I'll try to remember that," said Tom, "whenever the sign is right." He looked straight into the ice-blue eyes of Old Hackamore Hob.

Hob Crutchfield sloughed off the pain that tore through his big tough frame and studied Tom Stuart with a disconcerting cold-eyed scrutiny.

"You might not be such a circus clown, at that," he conceded grudgingly. "How good do you know Fess Massey?"

Tom Stuart grinned crookedly. "You mean how bad do I know him. Plenty. I've roped against Fess Massey at Calgary, Cheyenne, Denver, Fort Worth, Prescott, Arizona, Pendleton—wherever there's big prize money. . . . You git to know a man thataway. Cowboy contestin' tries a man out for guts and what's called sportsmanship. Fess Massey is the present World's Champion roper. It takes more than just fool luck to get to the top of the heap. He's good. The payoff ranks him at the top of the list. Let it ride thataway."

"It was Fess Massey steered you here to Arizona to buy the Hayhook offen Mark and Len Crutchfield?"

Tom Stuart nodded. "I matched a five-calf ropin' with Fess at Prescott. He made it a thousand dollars per calf. Or five thousand bucks on the total average. Take my choice. I taken the five thousand on the total average, gamblin' that Fess Massey would blow up, before he got his five calves wrapped up. When Fess Massey's hair-trigger temper goes off half-cocked, he might as well coil up his ketch rope. . . .

"Fess had me beat the first three calves. He broke his rope on the fourth. Missed his second loop. When he pulled his doubled rope down acrost his pony's ears, it was my contest. But Fess didn't have the five thousand dollars, when the dust settled, to pay his lost bet and he signed me over what he claimed was his half int'rest with the Crutchfield boys in the Hayhook outfit, located next to his 7L Ranch here in the Mesquite Mountains. He made it sound like I was gettin' the way best of the deal, and it looked thataway when I bought out Mark and Len Crutchfield's half interest in the Hayhook. It was after I got sole ownership to the Hayhook that I commenced gittin' bothered. . . . I ain't wringin' out no cryin' towel, mister. You asked me if I knowed Fess Massey. And it seemed like a good time to set you halfway straight on how I come to own the Hayhook."

"It clears the air some," admitted Hob Crutchfield.

It was a long tortuous ride for Old Hob. His face was gray and his ice-blue eyes seared with pain when they rode down into the huge canyon called Hob's Box.

Smoke came from the cabin chimney. The Big Brin ketch dog met them before they reached the corral. The big dog was whining and growling as he piloted them on to the cabin.

The cabin door was open and Old Hob's hand went to his gun. It came away slowly when Sally Crutchfield showed up in the doorway. Old Hob

glared at his niece. Her face flushed and her chin tilted and she shook her thick chestnut red curls like some wild colt. She had taken her hat off and she had a flour-sack apron tied around her slim waist. Her sleeves were rolled up on slim, strong, tanned arms. Tom Stewart saw her tanned hands clench until the knuckles showed bone white.

Then the big brindle ketch dog came to the girl and he shoved his big scarred head against one clenched fist. Her hand opened and she scratched the ketch dog's ragged ears. Big Brin's yellow eyes looked up at her but his stumpy tail did not wag.

"First time," Old Hob's voice creaked. "First time anybody got past my ketch dawg. Looks like I better shoot 'im. That one-man dawg's no more account to me now. . . ."

Tom Stuart was whistling tunelessly between his teeth. His blue-gray eyes puckered. Swinging from his saddle, he stood alongside Old Hob's left stirrup and reached up and helped the cowman out of his saddle.

Pain twisted the grizzled cowman's face. He swayed like a drunken man and went over limp. Tom Stuart caught him in his arms and carried him into the cabin.

Sally Crutchfield had Hob's bunk ready and water boiling in the big kettle. She helped Tom Stuart get the old cowman's clothes off and she went about examining the injured leg with deft expertness that made Tom look at her puzzled.

"Pull the slack up in your jaw," she said sharply, "and quit gawking. I've had two years hospital training. . . . Fill that big basin with hot water. That's whiskey in the jug. Pour him a big drink. . . . No bones broken so far as I can tell. Ankle swollen and discolored. It's a sprain. And a bad sprain is painful. It'll take a while to reduce the swelling and it will be weeks before he can get around to make a hand for himself . . ."

Old Hackamore Hob opened a slitted ice-blue eye. Otherwise he never moved. Whenever they looked at him, he closed the ice-blue slit and he played possum like that for a long time. He wanted a drink of whiskey but that would wait. He endured the pain without flinching while Sally worked on his injured leg, his ears taking in what his eyes missed.

"Prideful . . ." sounded Tom Stuart's low-pitched voice. "He wouldn't go in debt for any man's favor. So he gave me the best horse in his Lazy H remuda. Like he'd throw a bare bone to a stray dog. The damned old rascal! And speakin' of dogs, how did you git past that big brindle ketch dog, anyhow?"

"I've been here before." Sally's voice was a whisper. "He'd go hog-wild if he ever found out. First time I showed up, Big Brin kept me on my horse, but gradually he got to trust me. I'd slip over here and tidy up this boar's nest of a cabin. Cook a decent meal and leave it in the oven. Uncle Hob's all alone. Nobody to look after him if he got sick. But he's too tough to fall sick. Too darned ornery . . ." Sally winked at Tom Stuart. She had caught a

fleeting glimpse of one of Hob's eyes opening.

She had the old cowman's face washed and the bruises salved. Then she took a few stitches in his torn scalp and washed and brushed his grizzled hair.

"Somebody," she said finally, "will have to stay here with him. Do the ranch chores—and he's let 'em pile up a-plenty. Anything Uncle Hob can't do a-horseback just don't get done. . . . Try pouring some of that corn likker between his teeth, will you? It'll quicken his pulse."

Tom Stuart held the half-filled tin cup to Old Hob's mouth. The cowman pretended he was still unconscious but his Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a cork as he gulped the raw whiskey. And he opened his eyes to bloodshot ice-blue slits and looked at Tom Stuart and Sally Crutchfield.

"Cunnin'," croaked Old Hackamore Hob. "Cunnin' like a fox! Figgerin' I'll sign over what I got left of my outfit to her when I kick the bucket. Workin' on the soft side of a man to rob him. Sent here, like as not, by her pair of thievin' brothers. You kin fool a brindle dawg, you young hussy, but by grab you ain't got Ol' Hob fooled fer a danged minute. Clear out! Afore I set the ketch dawg on yuh! Git fer home. Tell them murderin', thievin' brothers of yourn the trick didn't work. Don't never set foot here no more. Git out!"

The girl stood there motionless, the color drained from her face so that the sprinkling of tiny freckles across her nose and cheekbones looked like soot specks. But her slate-gray eyes did not flinch. And then she turned her back and pulled up the faded blue flannel shirt from the waistband of her old denim Levis and both men stared at the ugly red welts across her back. Then she pulled her shirt tail down and tucked it in.

"Quirt marks." Sally Crutchfield's voice was tense, vibrant. "That's what Mark and Len gave me when they found out I'd been coming here."

She yanked off the flour-sack apron and reached for her Stetson hat that she'd hung on a wooden peg in the adobe wall. She went out through the open doorway, her silver-mounted spurs jingling, the high heels of her small shop-made boots beating an angry tattoo on the pine-board floor.

"Let 'er go," creaked Old Hackamore Hob. "No doubt she's lyin'. Like as not, they quirted her fer lollygaggin' aroun' with Fess Massey. She trails that spur-jingler rodeo cowboy like a pet coon dawg. . . ."

Tom Stuart yanked his hat on. Anger blazed in his eyes. His voice was harsh. "It'd serve you right if we left you here to shift for yourself, you cranky, ornery, old ingrate!" He slammed the door on his way out.

IV

Sally was saddling her horse when Tom got to the barn. There were tears in her eyes. But they were the scalding hot tears of anger. The big ketch dog was nuzzling at her hand.

Tom pulled up short before she could take out her fury on him. He shook his head and gave her a lop-sided grin.

"I'd stay on here now," he said, "if it killed me. Make him eat a bait of crow meat. You ain't lettin' him run you off that easy!"

"I wouldn't have his darned old two-bit, greasy-sack spread if he served it on a gold platter! You think I'd stay here a second longer than I have to?"

"Somebody's got to stay here. That cattle tank's goin' dry. Looks like his windmill's broke down. Somebody'll cut his horse pasture fence the first night they find out he's laid up helpless. And the ornery old son-of-a-gun is hurt a lot worse than he'll let on. I'll fix the windmill and take care of his horses but if he gits worse, I'm no doctor. And I can't leave him alone here while I ride to town to fetch the doc. However, make it easy on yourself, lady. I'll manage somehow, I reckon."

"If you could rope," said Sally Crutchfield, "as fast as you talk, you'd beat Fess Massey's time."

"I aim," grinned Tom, looking straight into her slate-gray eyes, "to beat Fess Massey's time." And he saw the color mount in her cheeks.

"Don't gamble on it," Sally said flatly. She jerked the latigo tight and mounted.

"You're pullin' out, then."

"I'm hightailing it for town. I'll send doc out to take a look at Uncle Hob."

"If it ain't too much trouble and too far off your trail, I'd like to have you stop at my place and tell my Mexicans I won't be back for a week or ten days and to go ahead without me. Otherwise old Ramon might figure they drygulched me like they did Hank Hooker, and they'd spook on me."

"I'll tell Ramon."

Sally Crutchfield sat straight in her saddle, a faint smile on her face, her black brows pulling into a little frown.

"You know what you're doing," she said slowly. "Or mebby you don't. You throw in with Hackamore Hob and that declares a range war."

"You kin be the one to carry that news to your two brothers. And to Fess Massey."

Tom turned and walked back to the cabin. He heard the girl ride away but did not look around.

Old Hob was sitting up on his bunk with the whiskey jug. His voice was a creaky snarl.

"Dammit all! You let 'er git away!"

"You can't hold a wild bronk filly with a cotton wrappin' twine."

"You'll have better luck with thin twine than a rawhide riata, son. I'm kind o' disappointed in you."

"After you went and run her off?"

"Yep. Hazed her straight at you and you wasn't man enough to ketch her. She's the only danged Crutchfield that ain't got a rotten streak. . . . This is good likker. Stilled it myself. . . . Fill yourself a cupfull."

Tom poured himself a drink. Not because he wanted the raw potent booze, but because Old Hob never offered any man a drink. But before he drank with Old Hob, Tom took off his hat, shoved his finger through the bullet rip in its crown.

"Somebody," he said quietly, "creased this John B. of mine with a .30-30 bullet one moonlight night."

"Don't look at me, son."

Tom nodded and tossed the hat on a wooden peg. He lifted his tin cup. Old Hob tilted his jug.

They drank together and Hackamore Hob corked the jug. The big ketch dog came in and the old cowman scratched the big hound's ragged ears, his hard thin-lipped mouth spreading under the drooping ends of his tobacco-stained mustache.

"You'll find pen and ink and paper in that cupboard. Fetch 'em. Write down what I tell you. It's the last will and testament of Old Hob Crutchfield. I'm willin' all I got on this earth to leave behind me, to Tom Stuart and Sally Crutchfield. To be turned over to you both on your weddin' day!"

Old Hackamore Hob Crutchfield hotly and profanely declared that no such motive as big-heartedness or gratefulness had prompted the large gesture.

"Them two big nephews of mine stole what they could grab of my outfit. I managed to hang onto this corner of it. They're settin' back like a pair of buzzards a-waitin' fer Ol' Hob to die off so's they kin glaum onto it. Best way I know how to make that pair feel sick is to hand the Lazy H to a rank stranger. . . ."

"But this weddin' deal?" Tom Stuart felt his face redden under the ice-blue stare of the tough old cowman.

"Know where you kin do ary better, young feller?"

"No, sir."

"Then sign here fer a witness. Sally kin sign fer the second witness when she gits back. Then by the hell if I kick the bucket, they'll swear the pair of you murdered Ol' Hackamore Hob Crutchfield to git a-holt of his Lazy H. I'm a-handin' you nothin', son, that you won't have to fight like hell to hang onto. They was just a-funnin' when they air-holed your hat with a bullet. From here on they're playin' fer keeps. Them bushwhackin' Crutchfield boys has run off or killed every man that I ever hired to help me. They got that rodeo cowboy to side 'em. Fess Massey is bad medicine. . . . They told you I killed Hank Hooker?"

Tom Stuart nodded.

"But that didn't stop you from helpin' me out of a bad tight this mornin'."

"A man don't have to believe all he hears," said Tom.

"And you don't have to stay here. I'll git along. They're a-watchin' you like buzzards. By tomorrow they'll know you've throwed in with Ol' Hob. That'll fetch things to a head.

They'll be gunnin' fer you. It'll be war, young feller."

"That's what Sally Crutchfield said."

"And what'd you say to that?"

Tom grinned flatly. "I told her to take the news to her two brothers and Fess Massey."

"Declared yourself."

"Yep."

"You got more guts than brains. . . . Where'd the young un head for?"

"Black Mesa, she said. To fetch the doc."

"She knows damn well that drunken sorry excuse won't come. I wouldn't let him on my place, to commence with. . . . That girl kin set a broke bone or doctor sick folks well a heap better'n that sawbones. Young Sally went home to fetch her bag of doctor stuff. They'll shore stop her from comin' back if they ketch her."

V

While it was still daylight Tom Stuart did the barn chores and he got the windmill repaired and running. Then he cooked supper and fed the ketch dog. After he had pulled the window blinds and lit the lamp he cleaned the .30-30 saddle carbine and put it back on its pegs. Old Hob told him to let Big Brin out for the night. The ketch dog would warn them if anybody was on the prowl out there in the dark.

Old Hob didn't eat much. He was suffering a lot more than he let on and kept nibbling at the jug. A big vein was swollen and throbbing on his temple below the bandage Sally had wrapped around his cut scalp. His eyes squinted almost shut against the pain that pounded inside his skull. The sprained ankle and bruised leg were minor injuries compared to what was a possible fracture or concussion under the head bandage. The booze wasn't helping it any but Tom knew better than to take the jug away from the tough old cowman. Old Hob's leathery gray skin took on a dark-red color and his talk rambled. Before midnight the fever had mounted and Old Hob was delirious. Tom put the jug on the shelf and tied Hob down on his bunk.

The storm outside got worse. The rain came down now in a heavy steady downpour and the wind whipped it in under the door and around the window frames. Thunder rolled and the chain lightning struck all around the canyon called Hob's Box.

Tom Stuart turned the lamp low. He pulled aside a window blind and peered out into the stormy night. A white lightning flash showed him the big brindle ketch dog inside the flimsy shelter of a woodshed. He opened the door and called to the dog but Big Brin wouldn't come in. The dog was on guard out there and wasn't deserting his post.

Tom felt almighty helpless, alone with the injured fever-stricken cowman. He had no knowledge of such things. All he could do was keep cold towels on Old Hob's head and listen to his delirious talk. Some of it made sense and the rest of it was incoherent. But Tom pieced together

the broken bits that could be true facts and he got a grim story from it.

As near as he could make out, Hob Crutchfield and his half-brother Charlie had built up the big outfit together, starting with no more than a string of good horses and a few head of cows and their ketch ropes and running irons. They grabbed all the land they wanted, running off any man who happened to claim what land they figured they needed. They were both tough and ruthless. But so were the men they fought for illegal possession of the free range.

Charlie Crutchfield had married. His wife was the pretty sister of Hank Hooker who owned the Hayhook Ranch. She bore Charlie two sons. Twins. And as soon as they were big enough to fork a horse, Charlie Crutchfield had begun training them to follow his ornery ways. He'd done a more than thorough and brutal job of it. Mark and Len grew up to hate their own father and their Uncle Hob who had moved to Hob's Box when his half-brother Charlie and Charlie's big tough sons had taken the bulge on him. And Charlie's wife was ailing under hard work and rough treatment. She needed somebody to help her with the cooking. Too stingy to pay a hired girl, Charlie had fetched home an orphan girl about ten years old and, in order to keep from paying the girl wages, he had adopted her. The adopted child was Sally Crutchfield.

When the girl's kitchen work was finished, Charlie Crutchfield had put her to doing ranch chores. She was fifteen when Charlie Crutchfield gave her a quirting for taking her foster mother's part in one of their bitter quarrels. Sally ran away. She lied about her age and got a job as a student nurse at the hospital at Tucson, using another name. Then Sally heard that her foster mother was sick. Hank Hooker was the one who found Sally working as a nurse and told her.

Sally had come back of her own accord to nurse the only mother she had ever known. She was still looking after the bedridden mother of Mark and Len Crutchfield.

Hank Hooker had never been a fighting man. But he took a gun and rode over, to the Crutchfield ranch and called Charlie Crutchfield to his door and shot him, then rode back to his Hayhook Ranch.

Hank Hooker changed horses and rode to Hob's Box. Mark and Len Crutchfield, and Fess Massey who was ramrodding their outfit, had been smart enough to get legal title to all the land Charlie and Hob Crutchfield had grabbed illegally. They had, with their father's backing, run Old Hob off the big range so all he had left was the little outfit here at Hob's Box. The Lazy H was the brand registered in his name. Mark and Len had registered a brand called the Window. It was easy enough to work the Lazy H into the Window brand.

Hank Hooker had ridden to Hob's Box and told Hob that he'd killed Charlie. Hob said it was the only thing he'd ever known Harmless Hank Hooker do that he could really brag about. The two of them got drunk together that night.

On his way back to his Hayhook Ranch Hank Hooker was drygulched. The killing was blamed on Old Hob who never took the trouble to deny it. Old Hackamore Hob never gave a hoot what opinion anybody had about him.

All this was what Tom Stuart pieced together. He added it to what he knew, what he'd learned after he'd bought the Hayhook Ranch and remnant cattle. They'd sold him the Hayhook. Now they were going to run him off or kill him and they didn't much give a damn which. Buying the Hayhook had taken every dollar Tom had earned contesting; he wasn't running. He'd thrown in with Old Hackamore Hob, mainly because he admired the old rascal's toughness. They couldn't kill Tom Stuart more than once. It didn't make much difference now when they declared war on him. The sooner the quicker. And one thing stood out like a bright ray of sunlight in a stormy sky. Sally. Sally wasn't a blood relative of Mark and Len Crutchfield. She was an orphan like himself. Tom Stuart had been pulling himself up by his boot straps since that first pair of red-topped, brass-toed boots. . . .

The storm was wearing itself out and it was almost daybreak. Old Hob was fighting his ropes again and Tom was trying to keep a cold wet towel on the cowman's head. The door opened and let in a gust of wind and rain.

Tom whirled, his gun in his hand. Then he lowered the six-shooter. Sally Crutchfield shoved the door shut and stood leaning against it. She was hatless, soaking wet, and gripped in her hand was a long black bag such as doctors carry. There was an ugly bruise on one cheek and her face looked white and strained. She looked as though she was ready to drop in her sodden tracks.

"Those dry washes," she said, "are swimming. If you'll put up my horse I'll take over here. I got back as quick as I could make it. . . ."

Tom poured her hot coffee and spiked it with whiskey and sat her down in a chair by the stove. Then he stabled her horse.

He wasn't gone more than a few minutes but when he got back to the cabin Sally had dried her hair and face and hands. She had her bag open and was giving Old Hob a hypodermic shot.

"Mamma's dead." Sally was bending over Old Hob. "She died a little while after I got there. Her troubles are over now. . . . Can you hear me, Uncle Hob?"

"I ain't deef." The ice-blue eyes were open.

"She sent a message. She said to tell you she'd married the wrong Crutchfield, that it was Hobson Crutchfield she'd always loved. But you never asked her to marry you . . . and when you quarreled, she married your half-brother Charlie for spite . . . and was too proud to admit her mistake. . . . She wanted you to know. . . ."

"It was me that was too ornery prideful," said Old Hob. "We give ourselves a hell of a tough deal. Don't you and this boy make that

kind of a mistake. . . . Tom Stuart's a white man; he'll do to take along. Tie onto him, young un. . . . Now where the hell's my likker?"

Tough as a boot, Old Hackamore Hob Crutchfield. He lay back, his ice-blue eyes slitted, and cussed Tom Stuart for a whiskey thief when they wouldn't give him his jug. Finally his creaky voice faded to a croaking whisper as the medicine Sally had shot into his blood took hold. Then he slept. And at daybreak the dry fever broke out in a sweat and when the sky outside cleared around noon, Old Hackamore Hob was sleeping quietly. Out of danger, Sally told Tom. And she went out into the sunlight for some fresh air.

The big ketch dog hadn't given any alarm last night when Sally rode up. He muzzled her hand now as she stood there in the sunlight. Tom came out of the cabin and stood beside her.

"I took you up on it, Tom." Sally squatted on her boot heels beside the big ketch dog. "I told Mark and Len that Tom Stuart had thrown in with Hackamore Hob."

"That's all right."

"I stayed there until their mother died. Then I told them I was leaving them, for keeps. I told them I was coming here to Hob's Box, that I was throwing in from now on with Uncle Hob. Uncle Hob and Tom Stuart. They tried to stop me. . . ." Her voice was low-toned, barely audible.

Tom squatted on his hunkers beside her. He reached out and took hold of Sally's hand. It felt cold. She did not look at him. Her other hand was scratching the big ketch dog's ragged ears.

"I never had much practice at this, Sally. This is the first time I ever found the girl I wanted to ask to be my wife. I feel kind o' awkward. . . . And this ain't the proper time nor place to . . ."

Sally turned her head. Her eyes were dark, soft, deep. Her hand tightened in his and felt warmer.

"For a green hand," she smiled at him quietly, "you seem to be doing all right, Tom. . . . You've got nothing on me. It's my first time to tell any man I'd marry him. But don't you think it would be a good idea if you kissed me?"

They were both pulled off balance when Tom put his arms around her and they sat down suddenly. He kissed her clumsily and it was Sally who seemed the older and more experienced when she took his face in her hands and kissed his mouth. The big ketch dog eyed them, growling uncertainly, hackles lifting until Sally freed one hand and rubbed the ragged ears and told the big hound that it was all right.

Then they were looking into each other's eyes, a little bewildered by what had happened to them both. And Tom grinned and said something about beating Fess Massey's time.

"Fess Massey never made any kind of time with me, Tom," Sally said quietly. "I trailed him around, let him build up whatever he wanted in the way of hopes—and he's conceited enough to do a fancy job of it. But somebody murdered Hank Hooker.

Hank had been decent to me when I was a kid and his sister was the only mother I ever had. I hoped to get past Fess Massey's guard to find out who killed Hank Hooker. I kept Fess at arm's length and it wasn't too easy. Nor was it any cinch to fight off Mark or Len. You're the first man I ever let kiss me, Tom. And I had to throw myself at you. . . ."

Tom was holding her and her arms were around his neck, when Old Hackamore Hob's voice, creaky, chuckling, broke them apart.

"Hogtied in my own danged bunk. . . . Where in hell's my likker jug?"

The big ketch dog was growling deeply now, hackles lifted, yellow eyes fixed on the timbered ridge above Hob's Box where three men on horseback had reined up and were looking down at the ranch in the canyon.

VI

There was only one trail down from either side of the steep-walled box canyon into Hob's Box. There was the trail down from the timbered ridge that divided the Lazy H range from the Hayhook. . . . And there was this trail from the opposite wall of the canyon that came from the old Crutchfield Lazy H headquarters ranch. The three men on horseback were Mark and Len Crutchfield and Fess Massey. They were coming to kill Old Hackamore Hob and Tom Stuart. And Fess Massey was coming to claim Sally Crutchfield.

They sat their horses on the scrub-timbered ridge at the top of the trail down into the box canyon for perhaps five minutes or longer. Then Fess Massey rode down in the lead of the two Crutchfield nephews. He had a white silk neck handkerchief tied to the end of his saddle carbine barrel and he carried it the way he would carry the flag at the head of a rodeo grand entry parade, the stock of the saddle gun braced on his thigh.

Old Hob told Tom and Sally to untie the ropes that held him down and to hand him his saddle carbine and a hatful of cartridges and prop open the cabin door. They were to leave the ketch dog with him and were to take their stand at the barn.

"They got to come acrost the clearin'," creaked Old Hob, "to git to the barn or my cabin. We'll have 'em out yonder in the broad middle. If they bush up, I'll send the ketch dawg in to run 'em out. . . . You ain't got anything better'n your six-shooter, son?"

Tom said his saddle gun was back at the Hayhook Ranch. But there was a .30-30 in Sally's saddle scabbard at the barn. He'd seen it when he unsaddled her horse.

Sally said she had fetched the saddle gun for Tom to use. She hadn't had time to stop at the Hayhook Ranch. She gave both men a defiant little smile.

"I sort of took the play away from you both. The showdown had to come sooner or later, so I hurried it up the best I could. I told Mark and Len that Uncle Hob was crippled so bad he couldn't get out of his bunk for a week and that Tom Stuart was looking after Uncle Hob's chores. I told 'em I was coming here to nurse Uncle Hob and keep house for the

pair of you, and that if Fess Massey wanted me for his reward for helping them steal the Lazy H away from Hob Crutchfield, and for bushwhacking Hank Hooker and catching Tom Stuart in their rustler trap, then Fess Massey would find me at Hob's Box. . . . If I played it wrong, you can take it out of my hide."

Old Hob chuckled. He allowed that'd be Tom Stuart's lifelong job. Tom grinned and said he'd work at it, all the spare time he got. Then the old cowman sent them on to the barn. And he told the big ketch dog to crawl in under his bunk and lay there. Old Hackamore Hob sat propped up, his jug alongside him, his saddle carbine across his lap and his hat filled with .30-30 cartridges. There was a wolfish grin on his face and his eyes were thin slivers.

Tom took Sally's saddle gun and shoved cartridges into his pocket. He made her go back into the far end of the barn with the horses and took his stand just inside the partly open barn door.

After about half an hour of waiting they could hear the three riders come down the brush-and-boulder-flanked trail. They were hidden most of the time and Tom was beginning to feel the strain of waiting when he heard Fess Massey's voice call out from behind the brush at the far end of the clearing, a hundred yards away.

"I'm packin' a white flag, Hob! Don't shoot me!"

Fess Massey was no man's coward. He might be a spur jingler and braggart, crooked and treacherous, a bushwhacker killer who protected his handsome hide, but when it came to a showdown, he had his share of fighting guts.

He rode out now like he was leading a rodeo grand-entry parade, sitting his horse with a saddle swagger, straight-backed, the carbine held braced like a flag, the white silk neck handkerchief fluttering in the breeze. The carbine was loaded and Fess Massey gripped it so that he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger at split-second timing.

Massey was tall and slim, dressed like a rodeo cowboy on parade. His silver-mounted saddle and bridle and belt buckle and spurs all were trophies he had won at rodeos all over the country. He had curly yellow hair and his mustache had its ends waxed and twisted to points. His pale eyes were cold and almost colorless against the deep-tanned color of his skin. Handsome was the word for Fess Massey. And cold-blooded as a snake. . . .

Old Hackamore Hob let Massey ride out into the broad middle of the clearing before he called a halt.

"That'll be close enough, Massey!" creaked Old Hob. "What's on your mind?"

"We come to make a dicker with you, Hob." Fess Massey had a sharp-edged voice. "We ain't after you. All we want is to make a dicker with you."

"Hob Crutchfield don't deal with no two-bit hired man!" Old Hob's voice was a rasping snarl. "If them blackleg nephews of mine can't do their own talkin', they ain't fit to use the Crutchfield name. Lope on back

to the brush where you belong before I set the dawg on yuh! You, Mark! Len! Come out from behind that brush or I'll send the ketch dawg in to run yuh out!"

Fess Massey's teeth bared. "Where you bushed-up, Stuart? Where you got my girl hid out?"

Tom Stuart was about to step out into the open when Sally grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked him back. Her voice was a brittle whisper.

"Don't be a fool, Tom! They'll shoot you down from the brush! Give yourself a fighting chance! I can't marry a bushwhacked dead corpse!" Her arms were around his neck like a strangle hold.

When Massey loped his horse back in behind the brush, Sally let go. She was breathing fast and her slate-gray eyes were dark.

"Fess Massey bragged how he'd creased your hat with a bullet. He and the big Crutchfield twins are playing for keeps this time. You let Uncle Hob outwolf 'em. You don't know how. You're too much white man. . . ."

Mark and Len Crutchfield rode out with a blustering show of boldness. They looked alike—big, rawboned, black-haired, with pale eyes. Their guns were in their hands.

"You take 'er easy now, Uncle Hob!" called one of them. "All we want is a fair an' square deal. We'll buy you out and we'll take care of Tom Stuart. We ain't aimin' to harm Sally."

Old Hackamore Hob let his two big tough nephews get halfway across the clearing. Then he called out to them in his creaky voice.

"Come on the rest of the way a-shootin', you thievin', murderin', lowdown whelps! Come a-shootin', I said. Turn your backs and I'll shoot you where your galluses cross. I'm in here alone. Come an' git it!"

Old Hob fired his first shot so that the bullet whined in between his big twin nephews. Mark and Len Crutchfield were both half drunk. They spurred their horses to a run and charged the cabin, their guns blazing as they shot through the open door.

Old Hackamore Hob was a man who believed in saving his bullets. He lay propped up on his bunk and his carbine lifted and leveled as his ice-blue eye lined his sights. He shot twice. Once at Mark Crutchfield, once again at Len Crutchfield. Both were gut shots. And the .30-30 bullets tore through the bellies of the big tough Crutchfield nephews. They screamed hoarsely and their big frames swayed, though they kept on and their guns kept spitting fire. But their shots were wild and Old Hob waited until their horses swerved and then he took two swift snap shots as they swayed off-balance in their saddles and the two bullets tore through ribs and flesh to pierce the hearts of Mark and Len Crutchfield. They were dead when they crashed to the ground. Their spooked horses stampeded, stirrups flopping.

It was over swiftly, the killing done before the gun echoes died in the high walls of the box canyon known as Hob's Box. All the saved-up, hoarded hatred that had for so

many long bitter years poisoned Old Hackamore Hob was purged from his tough old heart as he levered the last smoking .30-30 shell from his saddle gun and reached for his jug.

"That Fess Massey thing," he called out through the open door, "is yourn, son. If the Sally gal ain't worth fightin' for, then you ain't the man to claim her." He tilted his jug and drank deeply.

Fess Massey was not a coward. But he had seen the two big tough Crutchfield twins shot out of their saddles and he stared at their dead bullet-ripped hulks a stone's toss in front of Old Hackamore Hob's cabin. Fess Massey wanted no part of it. He'd had enough without chewing off so much as a bite of this ruckus.

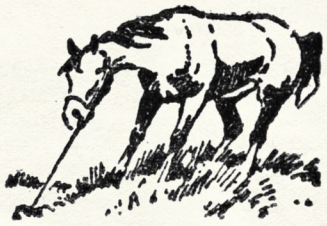
For years Fess had ramrodded the Crutchfield Window outfit and done their dirty work and taken vacations from his dirty chores to pile up fame and glory and prize money and silver trophies at the big rodeos. He had his own 7L iron and little ranch. With Mark and Len both dead, he had first claim on their big outfit and he'd marry Sally for her share of it. He'd ride away now. Come back when the sign was right to kill off tough Old Hob, bushwhack Tom Stuart when the same sign showed right for a safe killing . . .

Fess Massey was riding away from this bad luck ruckus. The high brush hid him, screened his getaway.

But Old Hackamore had anticipated Massey's sneak play. His rasping voice creaked like a rusty hinge.

"Git 'im, dawg!"

The big brindle ketch dog came out through the cabin doorway like



a streak. Big, savage, swift, Brin was across the clearing and into the brush before anybody but Old Hob knew what it was all about. Old Hob and his ketch dog knew.

Fess Massey did not know the dog was after him till his horse spooked, and then it was too late to do anything but ride it out.

The big brindle dog had grabbed the horse's tail. Grabbed it above the horse's hocks and just below the root of the tail. High enough to keep from being kicked loose. Big jaws clamped like the jaws of a steel trap.

The terrified horse jumped and pitched, and Massey yanked its head up. A spade-bit man, Fess Massey. A horse killer. The spade bit yanked the horse's head up but nothing could keep the scared gelding from stampeding. The ketch dog hung on, his hundred pounds of compact muscle and bone swinging from the tail of the running horse.

The horse carried Fess Massey out of the brush and out into the middle of the clearing. Massey's face was white now, his teeth bared. His big hat knocked off by the brush, he cut a wild pale-eyed look around, gripping his gun. The horse fought for its head and got it and broke in two, pitching, squealing, bucking high and crooked in a terrified effort to get rid

of the fiercely clinging ketch dog.

Fess Massey was one of the fastest and best ropers in the world. But he was no bronc rider. He lost a stirrup the second jump, and he was bucked off the third jump.

"Turn it loose, dawg!" creaked Old Hob. And the big ketch dog let go and was swung clear to roll over and over and onto its four feet to trot, limping, panting, tongue lolling, yellow eyes gleaming, back into the cabin to where Old Hob had poured a big slug of booze into the animal's water bucket.

Tom Stuart let Fess Massey get up onto his feet. He waited until the man he hated had time to gather himself. Then he walked out of the barn and out into the open, his six-shooter in his hand.

Fess Massey stood on widespread legs and there was murder in his pale eyes. He fired the first shot and Tom felt the stinging burn of the .45 slug as it nicked his ribs below his left armpit. Then he was shooting at Fess Massey's lean belly, shooting to hit. And his first bullet kicked Massey in the briskit and doubled him up. Massey went down on both knees, holding his six-shooter now in both hands. But his shots went wild. And Tom's next two bullets thudded into Fess Massey's chest. And as Massey lobbed forward, Tom put a last .45 slug into the man's head.

It was the first time in his life Tom Stuart had ever used a gun on any man. He stared at Fess Massey's dead body. He felt weak-kneed and a wave of nausea shuddered through him. Throwing his smoking six-shooter away, he wiped the sweating palms of both hands along his faded Levis as if to cleanse them of the dead man's blood.

Then Sally came out of the barn and took his arm. She was chalk-white and the freckles showed across her short nose. Without a word she led him on to the cabin, guiding him as she would a blind or drunken man, around the dead bodies of Fess Massey and the two hulks of the Crutchfield nephews.

Old Hackamore Hob had watched everything. His ice-blue eyes had missed no detail. He splashed raw corn likker to the brim of a tin cup and shoved it at Tom Stuart and told him to empty it fast.

The raw potent booze had no taste at all. And it took a while for its fire to thaw the chill out of Tom's knotted cold belly. At last the color came back into Tom's face and he managed a sickly grin. Sally shoved him down into a big old rawhide armchair and unbuttoned his shirt and began cleansing the bullet scratch along his ribs.

Old Hackamore Hob Crutchfield hadn't been so much as nicked by a bullet. He scratched the ragged ears of the big ketch dog that stood beside the bunk. When Sally had finished bandaging Tom's nicked ribs, the big dog walked over to where she knelt beside Tom's chair and licked her throat. It was the first time Big Brin had ever licked anybody's face. The first time the stumpy tail had ever wagged.

"That dawg"—Old Hob grinned like an old gray wolf—"is a little likkered up. Damned if I got ary use

fer a drunk ketch dawg. About all I kin do is give 'im away to some female fer a lap dawg . . ."

Big Brin went to the door growling, hackles lifted. Old Hob looked out and up to the high rim of the canyon.

"Yonder's ol' Hayhook Ramon an' his Mexicans. Better motion 'em on down here, son. They kin tend to the grave chores. And you might as well send one of 'em back to town with the news that Ol' Hackamore Hob Crutchfield has got his outfit back and is givin' it to Tom Stuart an' his bride fer a weddin' present. I'll hang onto Hob's Box fer a while, I reckon."

"There's a padre at Black Mesa," said Sally. "One of those padres that wears a brown monk's robe. Till Charlie Crutchfield took me away from the Sisters' orphanage, I had a lot of religion, for a kid. It's helped me over the tough spots. When the Mexican takes the news to town, he could fetch Padre Juan back. We could be married here at Hob's Box. . . . You reckon you could manage to give the bride away, Uncle Hob?"

A big black bull wearing the Lazy H brand roams the rough Mesquite Mountains. Each season's calf crop has its sprinkling of black calves. . . .

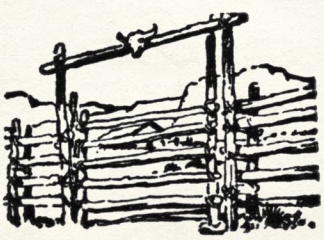
On rare occasions Old Hackamore Hob and Tom Stuart sight the big black bull as they ride the range together. They pull up to a halt and watch him.

The big black bull is wild. He stands there, staring at them and their horses as though he remembers them. Then he tosses his sharp black-pointed horns and whirls and the brush cracks and breaks as he charges off through the rough brush and rocks.

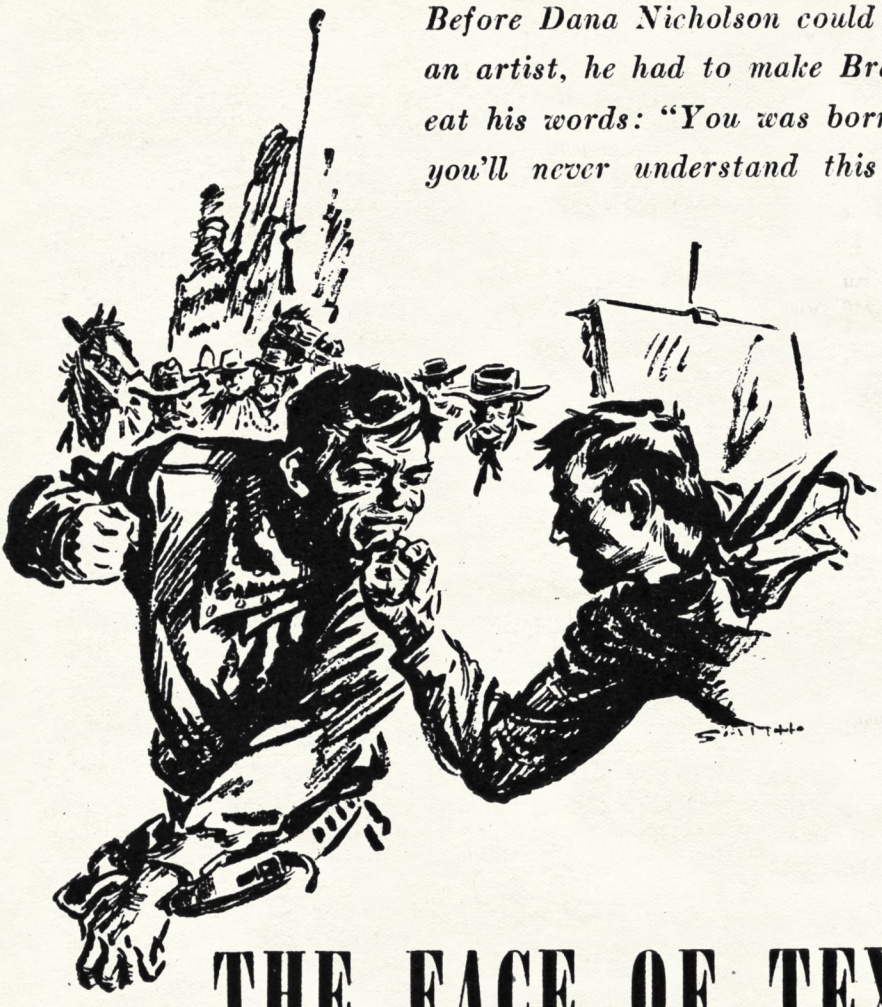
Old Hackamore Hob and Tom look at each other and grin. When they get back to the home ranch they'll tell Sally and the big pensioned-off ketch dog that they have again sighted the big black bull.

Before long there will be a son born. His name will be Hobson Stuart. Hob Stuart. Old Hackamore Hob will raise him and he'll be hackamore broke. Never a spade bit used to curb his wild young spirit. And he'll be told the story of the black maverick bull that made all this possible. . . . It will be told as a great saga—a legend. . . . The black maverick bull that will never die—told by Old Hackamore Hob who will live on forever by the same token of that saga. . . .

THE END



Before Dana Nicholson could succeed as an artist, he had to make Braid Marino eat his words: "You was born here, but you'll never understand this country!"



THE FACE OF TEXAS

by HAROLD R. STOAKES

DANA NICHOLSON looked out the stagecoach window at the sprawling grayness of the Gaylord Hotel, but even before the hostler opened the door, he knew that he should never have come back to Texas. A man's hunger for his home was one thing; the things he found there were another. Too often they were different. They didn't mix.

Stepping down, Dana glanced around at the familiar shapes of the town. The adobe-walled houses were still there, with the sun slanting off them, and so was the old Mexican well in the center of the grassless square. And so were the people.

Dana looked around at the group that loafed about the steps of the hotel. A stranger to the parts might have thought it was a welcoming committee, come down to greet the prodigal son, but Dana knew better than that. It was only the curious

crowd who came down to meet every stage.

The familiarity of their faces came back to memory as Dana looked at them. Braid Marino was there, less the schoolboy now, but with the same grasping eyes that Dana could remember. Braid had grown up. His chest was a great barrel and coarse black hairs thrust out through the open throat of his shirt.

Mack Fannin, as skinny and toothless as ever, with tobacco trickles stiffening the edges of his whiskers, leaped forward.

"Land of the jumpin' coy-o-tes, if it ain't Dana Nicholson come all the way home from Noo York," he yelped. "You come to stay, boy?"

Dana felt the thin, wirelike grasp of Mack's fingers. He shook his head. "Just for a visit," he said.

"Come back to do some paintin'?"

Dana nodded.

"Hear tell you kind of covered yourself with glory in Noo York town," Mack said glowingly. "Heard tell they had one of them ex-he-bitions for you."

Dana winced, looking around at the stolid, incurious eyes of the hotel hangers-on. New York hadn't paid much attention to the small exhibit of his paintings. Old Mollenbach, his teacher, had termed it a failure. But the home-town paper had heard about it and played it up big.

Braid Marino straightened by the steps, the rough seams of his face smoothed into a half smile.

"Maybe I'll let you paint my picture," he said mockingly. "I been doin' good while you been fiddlin' with your drawing. Better even than Ellerd Crawford. I reckon I can commission an artist."

"I'm not a portrait painter," Dana said curtly, his lips sucked inward, while the bladed hoe of memory trailed a furrow through his thoughts. "I don't paint people."

Braid shuffled lazily down the steps.

"You never did fancy people much, did you?" he said contemptuously. "Or maybe my money ain't no good."

"I don't fancy some people, nor their money, either one," retorted Dana. He looked at Braid's hands, dangling like weighty cleavers at his sides, and at the huge lumpishness of Braid's knuckles.

"Like I suspected," Braid smirked. "Give a man a taste of Noo York and he goes high and mighty on yah. You ain't goin' to paint Texas. Leastways you won't paint it so you can be proud to carry it back East. You was born here, but you'll never understand this country."

Dana stiffened. Ellerd Crawford had said almost the same words a long time ago.

"You got a few Texas lessons to learn over again," Braid snarled.

Dana stood, with the coldness trickling down to the tips of his slender fingers. It was like all the times he could remember—Braid shuffling forward, bullying. Only always, it seemed, Ellerd Crawford had appeared by magic to fight Dana's battles.

As though in answer to his thoughts, Dana heard Ellerd's big

voice, and saw Braid's head turn slowly.

"Lay off, Braid," Ellerd ordered. "Unless you want to hold yourself accountable to me."

Dana sensed the razor-edge sharpness of the silence that ringed the walk. Ellerd and Braid had fought like bulls when they were youngsters, and they'd fight as men, brawn against brawn, over things that mattered.

As he looked at Ellerd's large, square-jawed face, Dana was gripped by unreasoning anger. Always Ellerd had been there—a self-appointed big brother. Dana had always admired Ellerd's great strength and his clean, sure-minded sense of justice, but a person had to look after himself.

"I'll take care of my own fights, Ellerd," Dana said tautly.

Ellerd turned. There was laughter from the group. Dana could see that the laughter stung at Ellerd's pride, goaded him.

"What'll you use for fighting with?" Ellerd said, glancing at Dana's slight shoulders and thin, tapered fingers.

"Whatever I've got, or whatever I can lay my hands on," answered Dana softly. "That goes for you or for Braid, or for anyone else."

Dana noticed the shuffling of the crowd. The tension had been diverted. There'd be no fight now.

"Kind of grown yourself up into a bantam, haven't you?" Ellerd said gruffly, turning away.

Dana watched the box-square stolidness of Ellerd's back as the crowd drifted on down the walk. There was only one time Dana could ever remember that Ellerd had been wholly in the wrong—but that memory still festered like a raw wound between them.

Dana couldn't remember his own mother, but Ellerd's ma had taken her place. It had been Ma Crawford who had wanted Ellerd's portrait painted.

The two boys were both in their teens then, but Ellerd had already bulked up to almost as much of a man as he was now. Dana had always known how Ellerd felt about his painting.

Painting wasn't a man's work, Ellerd once said disdainfully. Unbeknown to Ellerd, Dana had studied him, trying to catch the turn of his lips and the squareness of his jaw on canvas.

Ellerd raged, smashing the portrait when he discovered it. It wasn't until later that he discovered how badly his mother had wanted it.

Ellerd had become a perplexed giant then, trying to atone for the quickness of his anger. Always afterward he had been doggedly protective of Dana and Dana's art, but there were no words in either of them for talking about it. Ellerd's protectiveness was worse than his anger had been. It silently expressed his belief that an artist could never grow into a man capable of handling a man's problems.

Dana turned toward the wind-scoured steps of the hotel. Ma Crawford was dead now, and there would never be a reason for Ellerd to sit for a portrait. It was odd, though,

how memories of the past blocked out the future.

It was the memory of a smashed canvas and of Ellerd's angry face that always brought a shaking to Dana's hand when he tried to paint a portrait. It was something which he could never completely escape.

Dana glanced obliquely at Mack Fannin. There was a thoughtful expression on the old man's face.

"Looks like you jest got yourself cross-branded in the biggest fight that's been buildin' itself in Texas since the Alamo," he said reflectively.

"You mean Ellerd and Braid?" asked Dana, looking away toward the square bell tower of the Mission.

Mack nodded. "Since you been gone, Braid's busied himself buildin' up a regular mule trust. Runs his mule wagons all the way down to Galveston."

He sent a brown stream of juice spurting across the splintered walk. "Ellerd's been workin' his store, and gettin' hisself richer and stronger with the passin' of time."

"Not much in that to bring them to cross purposes," Dana commented. "As long as they stick to their own trades."

"As long as they stick to their trades is a good way of puttin' it," Mack allowed. "Like I said, though, Ellerd's been gettin' hisself richer and stronger and now he's goin' into railroadin'."

"Here in Texas?"

Mack nodded again. "Right here in Texas, and runnin' down to Galveston. Got some Eastern men interested in puttin' up what money he ain't got."

Dana pursed his lips reflectively. "Same country that Braid's covering with his mule teams."

Mack moved away, across the walk. "Maybe bein' cross-branded ain't so bad," he said musingly. "I wouldn't care for bein' in either camp when Ellerd and Braid start fightin'."

When he was settled in a room in the Gaylord Hotel, Dana sat for hours by the window, while the shadows below lengthened from the base of the old Mexican well.

He'd traveled two thousand miles to paint the well, and the precipice-edged canyon trail—to bring to life on canvas the face of Texas, but now he knew that he would fail. He'd never be able to paint Texas so that he'd be proud to take his paintings back East.

It had been the same before he left. Never had he been able to imprison the spirit of that old Mexican well on canvas. Under his hand, the stones became weighted—dead and useless—a heap of rubble in a sleepy Texas town. All he needed, he had told himself then, was teaching. But now he knew that he needed more than that.

Dana stood up, feeling the coolness of the iron bedstead in the growing darkness of the room. Old Mollenbach had sensed the gray lifelessness of his landscapes.

"Maybe you should try portraits," the teacher had suggested.

Dana frowned, remembering the stringy edges of a smashed canvas.

"My portraits are worse than the landscapes."

"You don't like people much, do you?" Mollenbach had questioned shrewdly.

"I . . . like them," Dana's voice had faltered. "I guess I don't understand them much."

"An artist has to work those things out in his own way," Mollenbach had told him.

Moodily Dana went down to the hotel veranda. A little talent was a bitter thing for a man—the talent for painting or for living, either one. He'd hate Texas soon, feeding himself on the meatless core of rebellion, failing even at that, until he was shriveled up inside.

As he walked silently along the darkened street, Dana was conscious of the heat that slowly seeped from the adobe walls of the buildings. Opposite the yellow-lighted windows of the saloon, a shadowed figure moved across the walk toward him. Mack Fannin, still chewing ruminatively, paced at his side.

"Braid's over in the saloon, loaded for bear," Mack said warningly. He's sent word out for you to come see him."

Dana angled across the street toward the Mexican well, glancing toward the yellowish blob of light that spread away from the batwings of the saloon.

"Tell Braid he can come up to the hotel if he's itching to see me," he retorted.

"This once I'd swaller my pride and go see him," Mack said reflectively. "Braid and Ellerd's been buildin' for a fight for a long time. Braid's as touchy as a spring-branded calf. You can save a heap of trouble by goin' over."

Dana glanced again at the saloon and shrugged. Sooner or later there would be a showdown with Braid. It might as well be tonight.

When Dana walked into the smoke-ridden light of the saloon, Braid Marino was slouched over the bar. For a moment, his big body seemed almost soft and tired, but when he turned there was no softness in his face.

"You and Ellerd figure on playing me for a slit-tongued maverick?" he demanded harshly.

Dana noted the long emptiness of the bar and felt the uneasiness of glances from the gaming tables beyond. Men made it a practice to stay away from bars when a fight was brewing. He looked back at Braid Marino.

"I don't know what Ellerd's playing you for," he said. "For myself, I'm not much interested."

He remained motionless as Braid shuffled away from the bar. Braid had been drinking, but his hands were steady.

"That little put-up argument you and Ellerd flared into didn't fool me none," Braid snarled.

Dana glanced again at the crushing hugeness of Braid's hands.

"Where you aimin' to paint?" Braid questioned suspiciously, suddenly switching the conversation.

Dana looked over and beyond Braid, watching the tenseness of the onlookers in the back-bar mirror.

"I figure on painting a lot of things," Dana answered, anger tightening the words in his throat.

"You calculate on painting the mountain road?"

"I aim to paint where I damn please."

The blurred motion of Braid's fist came too quickly for Dana to duck. He was smashed back along the bar and blood gushed around the edges of his bruised lips. Braid stood, squat and heavy in the yellow light, his eyes flaming.

"You stay off the mountain road, and you git out of town!" he stormed. "You ain't paintin' no pictures of Texas country for Ellerd to show them Eastern capitalists. You ain't doin' no map work for a railroad."

The pain of Dana's gashed lips flamed inside him. Ever since they had been kids Braid had been ordering him around, but there were other ways of showing Braid that brawn wasn't the only ruling power in Texas.

"If you want me in the morning, Braid," Dana said softly, "you'll find me painting — up on the mountain road."

Back in his room, Dana bathed his torn lips and glanced reflectively in the cracked glass of the mirror above the bureau. Already his mouth had swollen grotesquely, so that his lips were pulled to one side.

Gingerly, he pressed a cold cloth against his lips, feeling almost a pleasure in the pain that it brought. Never before had he felt the weight of Braid Marino's fist. Always Ellerd had been there, like a big brother, to fight Dana's battles for him.

Dana knew then that he'd found much of the cause of his unrest. Much as he loved Texas, he'd never earned the right to live there. Ellerd Crawford had always looked after him, until even he had grown a little contemptuous, as though Dana were not quite a man.

Dana looked down at the splotched blood on the cloth. He might never learn to paint Texas as he wanted it painted, but he could at least earn the right to live there—to come and go as he pleased.

The next morning when Dana set up his easel on a wide promontory overlooking the mountain road, his fingers felt stiff and brittle, but his hands were steady. It was like Braid to reason that he had come to paint the road so that Ellerd could show Eastern engineers the contour of the land, helping them to judge the problems of building a railroad.

Dana sat down on the small stool that he had brought, but even before his paints were ready a shadow fell across the easel and he knew that Braid had come.

Braid sent the easel toppling with a blow of his palm.

"You know the kind of trouble you're askin' for?" he rasped.

Dana stood up, his fingers still numbed with the feeling of ice, but there was no nervousness in him. Always he'd wondered what it would be like facing up to Braid—if there would be fear and panic, a brittleness of the legs, the clawing desire to run away. It was a thing you always wondered when someone else fought your battles.

Dana looked at the half dozen mule skinners who hovered behind Braid.

"Is it a one-man fight, or do I have to buck the gang?" Dana asked.

Braid's eyes flashed with fury. "I fight my own fights," he snarled. "That's more than I can say for some people."

Dana stood for a moment, coolly studying the rage in Braid Marino's eyes. It seemed childish that he had to fight Braid now that they were grown men, but that was the way it had to be. It was something left over from childhood, like the painting of Ellerd's portrait—a thing that had to be finished before he could claim that he was completely grown up.

Dana hadn't heard the sound, but one of the mule skinners turned.

"Ellerd Crawford's comin' up the hill."

Dana became conscious of the first fear that he'd known. Ellerd was stalking stolidly up the hill with enough men to outnumber Braid's group. Ellerd was still trying to pay the debt his anger had cost. Skinny Mack Fannin tagged along at the tail of the group.

Braid turned back to Dana.

"So you run to Ellerd!" he snarled. "No wonder you were feeling sassy."

Braid swung out with his big hand, but Dana ducked under it. Then for the first time he felt the blazing pain of anger. The weight in his pocket was lumpish against his thigh.

"I got a gun, Braid," Dana said tonelessly. "I think you'll see how I aim to use it."

Ellerd came on, his footsteps thumping against the earth. He faced Braid belligerently.

"I told you to lay off Dana."

Braid Marino's face was as stony as granite.

Dana saw the two of them—faced off—like giants of the earth. Braid and Ellerd had been building for a fight for a long time. But he could not let them finish it now. His fingers touched on something cold.

"It's my fight, Ellerd," he said shortly.

Ellerd hardly turned his head. "Hell, you can't fight Braid. He outweighs you nearly a hundred pounds."

Dana had the gun then, like a chunk of ice against the palm of his hand.

"It's my fight," he said again softly. "I'll gut-shoot the first man that steps in my way."

Dana saw the hesitant indecision in Ellerd's eyes. Finally Ellerd stepped back.

"O.K., kid. We'll see you get a fair fight of it."

Kid! Ellerd hadn't called him that for a long time. Not since they had been schoolboys together. But to Ellerd he'd probably never be more than that. Dana was aware of the spreading of the circle around them as he handed the gun to Mack Fannin.

Braid Marino seemed larger even than before. Dana balanced on the balls of his feet as Braid clawed forward.

As Braid closed in, Dana rapped out with his fist and felt his knuckles slithering along the other's chin. Then Dana danced away, dodging under Braid's outflung arm.

There was a roar from the onlookers as Dana circled. There had been a few hours of boxing in a New York gymnasium. Maybe it would be enough. At least enough to keep Braid at a distance, wear him down.

Dana saw the sudden rage in Braid's eyes, and the taut hardening of his face. Braid charged again and this time Dana knew that a few hours of boxing in a city gymnasium weren't enough.

Braid's smashing arms knocked Dana's guard aside. Dana felt the roaring thunder of the big man's knuckles against his chin. He reeled back, but even as he fell, Braid's iron-hard fist caught the side of his head.

On the dusty ground, Dana could hear Braid's heavy breathing over him, could see Braid's boots, waiting for him to rise.

A numbing paralysis set in alongside Dana's face where Braid's knuckles had welted the flesh. Cautiously he rose to his knees. Before Braid could judge the move, Dana sprang to his feet, moving away, and then he turned.

Braid wouldn't expect a little man to charge. Dana cut in, smashing his fists against Braid's chin, but even the slight rocking of Braid's head told him that the blows hadn't hurt. All the strength he could muster was like the drifting of a feather against a rock.

Braid's eyes flamed anew, but there was a different set to his jaw as he rocked forward. Dana felt the thundering of Braid's fist against his chest.

The big man was holding his punches now, rocking Dana's head with short, sledgelike blows. Blows that were meant to leave a man on his feet to take more punishment. Blows that were meant to make a man give in.

Dana watched the set calculation in Braid's eyes as his own senses dimmed. Vaguely Dana was conscious of the tense, silent circle around.

"Dana's had enough," Ellerd shouted hoarsely.

Dana's legs suddenly became rubber bands under him as he shriveled to his knees, gasping and choking. Blood streamed across his eyes and stiffened the side of his face. Breathing was a pain that tortured his chest. Then the fear was there, echoing along the sound of Ellerd's words.

Dana looked at Mack Fannin, and knew dimly that Mack understood. Only a skinny little man like Mack could be expected to know.

"It's for Dana to say when he's had enough," Mack said, motioning with the gun.

Over him, Dana could see the shadowy bulk of Braid Marino.

"You give up?" Braid snarled.

Limply, Dana dragged himself to his feet. Braid's meaty fist thundered into his chest. Dana stumbled back. Uncertainly at first, Dana felt the earth begin to whirl, turning slowly, then faster and faster.

Dana became aware that he was standing, swaying. Grimly he prayed for strength to stand on his feet. If he ever went down again he knew that he'd never be able to claw his way back up.

Braid pushed forward, like an avalanche roaring down a mountainside. Hazily Dana saw Braid's face. Braid would kill him now. Braid would have to kill him before he'd give up.

Wearily Dana knew that his own arms hung limply at his sides, without the strength to raise them. Braid was close upon him, and then the expression in the big man's eyes changed. Braid knew, too, that he could kill, but that he could not conquer.

Then Dana was aware that Braid's huge fists had fallen to his sides—that Braid had turned and was walking away.

Dana's knees sagged under him. Ellerd's arm was around his shoulders.

"Kid, kid," Ellerd said softly.

The earth was still whirling as Dana sat on a rock, but there was a new tone even to the way Ellerd had said the words. Dana's eyes cleared when they brought water to wash away the blood.

There was a puffed agony to Dana's head and a torture to every move of his muscles, but somehow he felt a shiver of warmth deep inside.

When Dana could see clearly there was a new, strange look of respect in Ellerd Crawford's eyes. Dana knew then that he'd won the thing he'd hoped to win. Braid Marino wouldn't bother him again. He was free to come and go as he pleased—in Texas or anywhere else.

Dana looked at Ellerd's eyes, studying them, and then he remembered Braid Marino's eyes. Dana couldn't remember every sledgelike blow that had fallen, but he could remember the changing look in Braid's eyes.

The hatred at first. Then the brutal will to conquer, the calculating eagerness to wound, and finally the dullness of defeat — the despairing realization that something more than brawn was needed to win.

As long as he lived, Dana knew that he would be able to paint Braid's face from memory, etching every line of it.

"I guess I had you wrong, kid," Ellerd said.

Dana looked at Ellerd's face, remembering the expression in Braid's eyes, and then he knew suddenly what was wrong with his painting.

Always he'd tried to paint a mountain road or a portrait as it seemed. But something more was needed. To paint a man's smile, you had to know what he looked like when he frowned. To paint a Texas cliff, you had to grasp a feeling for the grandeur of its past, the beauty of its present, the strength of its future.

It was good that he had seen Ellerd's face in a scarlet rage that time long ago. It would help him now when he painted Ellerd smiling.

"When I'm able to paint again I want you to sit for me," Dana said slowly.

Ellerd stood for a long time, silent. Dana could see the shame of the memories that clouded his old friend's eyes.

"I came out here to paint the face of Texas," Dana said, trying to force a grin. "But there's more of Texas in your face than any place else I've looked."

Behind the grin, Dana felt the strained aching of his thoughts. Somehow he wanted Ellerd to know why he'd had to fight—how he felt. And why he had to paint Ellerd's portrait, so that the shaking would be gone from his hands and he would be free for the future.

"I think I can paint it so I'll be proud to take it back East," Dana said tonelessly.

Ellerd's large head turned slowly. The pointed edges of a memory shriveled into nothingness. Dana knew that Ellerd understood.

Dana had never dared hope to be free of Braid's bullying, and to come of age in Ellerd's eyes — all in the same day.

"I know you can, Dana," Ellerd said, the way one man talks to another. "But you better hang tight to it after you've got it, because there won't be much left of the State. I'll be so all-fired proud, I'll blast the face of Texas clean off the earth!"

THE END

COWPUNCHER'S PALLET

The "Tucson bed" is well designed
To suit the nature lover:
Your own back is the mattress, and
Your belly is the cover!

S. Omar Barker

Jim Roday couldn't clear himself with the law until he tracked down the ruthless double-crossing murderer who had made him the

WILLOW BASIN OUTCAST

I

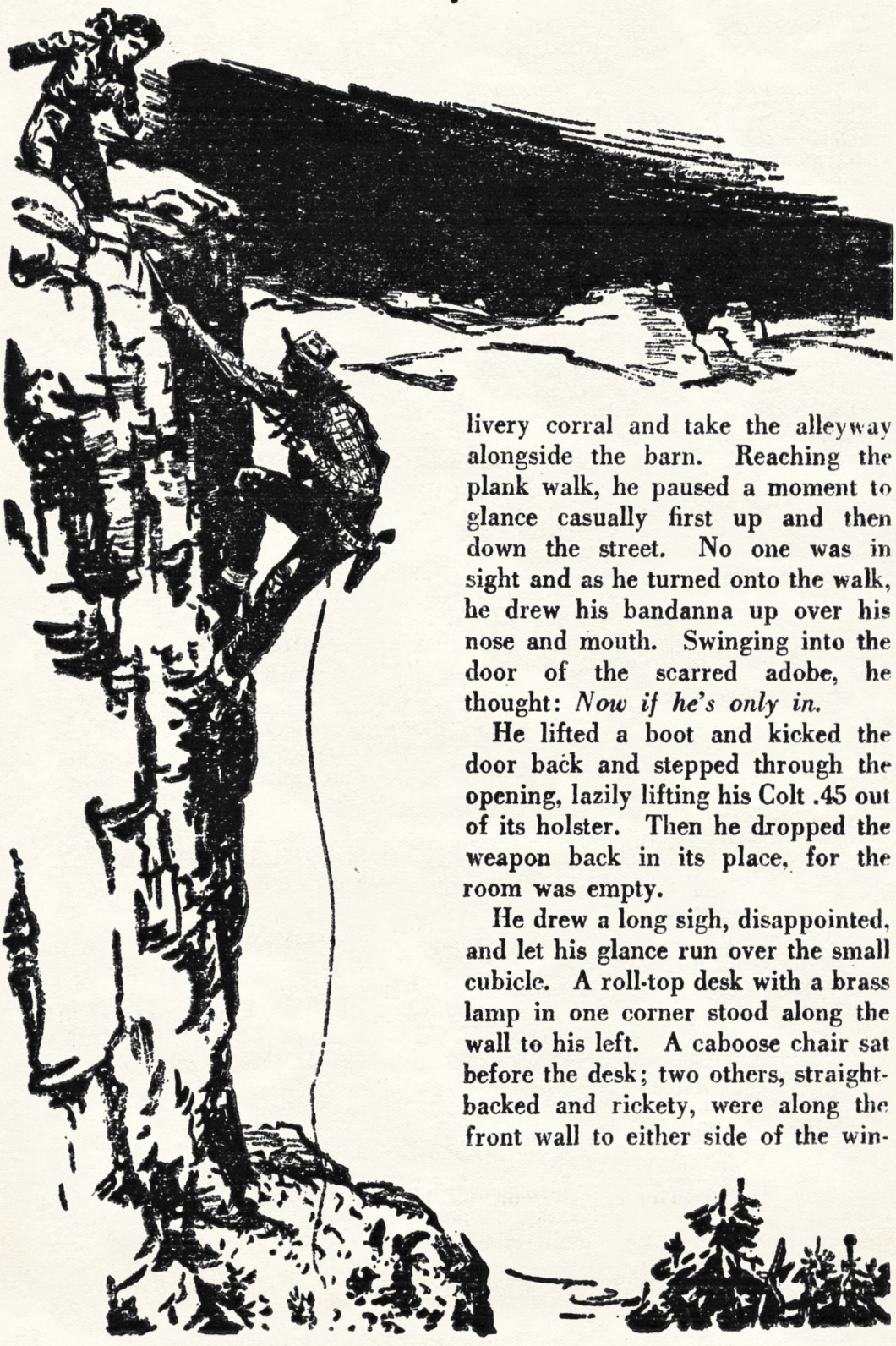
THIS was the month of the winds and Pine City lay smothered in a haze of dust as Jim Roday looked down upon it for the first time in three years. Long streamers of grit lashed at the corner of the Western House from the sand flat along the creek, and the fine adobe dirt of the street was blown by the gusts. The walks were empty and the few buildings with shutters were using them. A wagon team at the hardware store rack stood awry and down-headed, hindquarters to the blast.

Jim Roday was restless and impatient after his long week in the saddle. He had expected to wait here until dark. But now the querulous voice of the wind seemed to be urging him on, telling him that this was no time to hesitate.

Finally it had its way, sending him up through the trees to the wash where he had tied his sorrel. He loosened the cinch and tested the knot in the reins and then walked back down the rocky slope, a tall man with a generous span of shoulders, outfitted in worn waist overalls, denim jumper, boots and wide hat. As he cleared the trees, his blue-eyed glance was fixed on one spot along the dust-fogged street below.

To reach the building on which his attention was fixed—a narrow deep adobe on the street's near side—he had to cross two hundred yards of open cedar-dotted ground, circle the

by PETER DAWSON



livery corral and take the alleyway alongside the barn. Reaching the plank walk, he paused a moment to glance casually first up and then down the street. No one was in sight and as he turned onto the walk, he drew his bandanna up over his nose and mouth. Swinging into the door of the scarred adobe, he thought: *Now if he's only in.*

He lifted a boot and kicked the door back and stepped through the opening, lazily lifting his Colt .45 out of its holster. Then he dropped the weapon back in its place, for the room was empty.

He drew a long sigh, disappointed, and let his glance run over the small cubicle. A roll-top desk with a brass lamp in one corner stood along the wall to his left. A caboose chair sat before the desk; two others, straight-backed and rickety, were along the front wall to either side of the win-

dow. At the back wall, a small safe was near the big nail-studded door that Jim knew led to the jail.

A litter of papers half covered the desk top along with others stuffed in the pigeonholes. These took Jim's attention and he went over there and rummaged through them. Not finding what he wanted, he opened the top drawer. A quick glance disappointed him. He shut the drawer and opened the next.

At the limit of his vision he was aware of a shadow passing the window. He straightened and turned as a blond man's thin shape blocked the doorway. He said explosively, "I'll be—" then lunged back as the man at the door swept right hand up along thigh, drawing.

The shot blasted above the whine of the wind as Jim instinctively began his draw. The bullet tore through the bulge of his jumper as he quickly swung out of line and into the corner beyond the window.

"Bob, don't! Dammit, it's me—Jim!" His voice was muffled and he pulled the bandanna down.

There was a moment's silence before the man out there spoke. "Say that again."

"It's me. Jim Roday."

Riding in over the steady voice of the wind came a shout from somewhere across the street. Out on the walk, the man there answered loudly: "All a mistake, boys."

Then his spare frame wheeled in through the door. He slammed it shut, scowled as the broken latch didn't catch and moved a chair over to prop it shut. Then, turning slowly, he faced Jim Roday, his weapon hanging at his side. A nickeled star was pinned to a pocket of his open vest.

"I'll be damned if it isn't!" he breathed as he soberly surveyed his visitor and sheathed his gun.

But then alarm showed on his acquiline face and he said hurriedly, "Pull that blind." Stepping over to the desk, he wiped a match alight along the seat of his Levis. As Jim Roday drew the torn blind down across the window, he lit the lamp.

Now a slow grin came to Jim's dark face as they looked at each other. He thumbed the Stetson to the back of his head. "*Sheriff* Rand," he queried. "Since when, Bob?"

"You loco fool," Bob Rand said sharply. You're crowdin' your luck, comin' in here like this."

"You're doin' the crowdin'. Came close to wingin' me."

"All I could see was someone goin' through my desk. Why'd you have your face covered?"

"I was primed to walk in on Ben Maffey," Jim told him. "Wanted to surprise the old gent." His blue eyes looked pointedly at Rand's vest. "Since when the star?"

Rand seemed more at ease now. He took the chair at the desk as he said: "Ben's crippled. Rheumatism. They wished me off onto him as deputy last summer, then voted me in when he wouldn't run again." He frowned as he thought of something. "Shucks, I told you all this in the letter."

"What letter?"

"The one I sent you in Silver City

in January. Your father gave me the address."

"I move around," Jim drawled. "On purpose."

Rand's glance studied him carefully. "But you must've heard."

"Yeah," Jim said bleakly. "I've heard that a dodger's out on me. Heard it the hard way. From someone who tried to collect the reward."

Rand tilted back in his chair, took a sack of tobacco from vest pocket and sifted a portion of the weed onto a wheat-straw paper. He offered the sack to Jim, who refused it. "So you know all about it?" he said.

"Just that I'm wanted for murder. This bounty hunter couldn't remember who I'm supposed to've killed. That's why I was goin' through the desk."

"You're telling the truth, aren't you?" Bob Rand said with awe. You damn well don't know."

Jim didn't answer, waiting. Rand thumbed a match alight, lit his smoke.

"Hugh Hallett was killed last October," he told Jim. "Someone used a shotgun through a window of his cabin one night. While he was alone on the place. Mary and Bill were up in the hills with the roundup crew."

Shock ran through Jim, subsiding slowly. The pattern of his thinking was changing and it was several moments before he could rearrange it. "So they tied in that old rustlin' charge Hallett had against me and made their guess?" he said finally.

The sheriff nodded. "I did all I could for you, Jim. Even held back the story of the tracks until the inquest. But they put me under oath. Maybe because I was your friend."

"What tracks?"

"Up on the ridge east of Hallett's place. Ben sent me out to look around and I ran onto 'em. That bay stallion you rode out of here was the only animal there's ever been on this range with a shoe that big."

Jim stared at him levelly. "The bay pulled a tendon my first week out of here. I sold him for thirty dollars, to a nester near Big Springs. Three years ago."

Bob Rand lifted his hands in a helpless way. "Sure. I believe you. But no one knew about it."

Jim thrust his hands deep in pockets and stared down at the floor. "Go on," he said tonelessly. "Let's have the rest."

"The rest isn't much," Rand told him. "Mark Davies dug up what he could on that old charge and sold the jury on indicting you for murder. He even put up the reward."

Jim smiled meagerly. "So Davies still casts the big shadow around here?"

Rand nodded. "Bigger than ever. The best break I ever had was getting this job and leavin' that outfit. This pays me less but I sleep a damn sight better."

"Who rods for him now?"

"Jeff Mears."

Thinking it out, Jim leaned down and beat the dust from his denims.

"So you play to lose any way you look at it," said Rand. "You'd better ride, friend. And ride far."

Jim ignored that. "How about Mary and Bill Hallett?" he asked.

"They're all right. Mary's grown

up. Pretty. Bill still throws the money around like he had it."

"There was some paper on the outfit, wasn't there?"

"Still is," Bob answered. "The bank holds it. It's only for a couple of thousand. But with these last two bad summers, two's as good as ten."

Jim considered this. "And my dad?" he asked. "Did he ever get out from under?"

The lawman shook his head. "Far as I know, Davies is still carryin' him along."

"Davies?" Jim echoed sharply.

"Didn't you know? The bank nearly went on the rocks last summer. Mark Davies tossed in forty thousand and took it over."

"So?" This was all adding up, was making more sense to Jim now.

As though reading his friend's thoughts, Rand nodded. "I know. I've thought the same thing. If Davies ever takes those two outfits, he's got the whole Willow Creek Basin."

He looked up at Jim in a speculative way and abruptly rose from the chair, stepping over to the big door set in the middle of the rear wall. There he took down a brass key from a nail on the door facing, saying as he opened the big lock: "Got something here to show you. And you're not going to like it."

Swinging the heavy door open, he motioned to Jim to follow and stepped through.

A momentary wariness struck through Jim, then left him feeling a little foolish. Here was a friend he could trust, trust all the way. He went into the jail to find Bob Rand standing in the narrow corridor facing the bars of two cells, looking down into the left-hand one at a figure sprawled on the cot there.

This was a semi-dark and foul-smelling place, the only source of light and air being a small barred skylight. The light was so poor that it was several moments before Jim could make out the features of the man on the cot and recognize Tate Higgins. Outside the wind dropped briefly and he could hear Tate's even breathing.

"Still pullin' at the bottle, eh?" Jim drawled, a smile on his lean face.

"Still," Rand agreed gravely. "Only finally it's cost someone. Your dad."

Jim shrugged. "It's cost the old man in a lot of ways. Keepin' Tate out o' trouble these last ten years. What is it this time?"

"Day before yesterday, Tate came in for a load of grub. Had a few drinks at the Pride and left town along about dark. He must've bought a bottle and killed it on the way home."

"The usual," Jim said.

"Anyway, your dad finally got tired of waitin' for him and turned in. Along about midnight the horses in that small corral started raisin' hell and woke him. He found his barn on fire and Tate staggerin' around near the well tryin' to draw water to put it out. Naturally, Tate doesn't remember how it happened."

"He never could remember when he'd been drinkin'," Jim said as the full impact of what Rand had been

telling him struck home. "How bad was it?" he asked soberly.

"The barn's gone along with some machinery. A couple of horses had to be shot."

Jim turned and went out. He heard Rand closing the jail door behind him. When he finally faced the sheriff again, the flat planes of his serious face were sharper and there was no longer that warmth in his blue eyes.

"Anyone usin' that shack of Davies up along Bear Ridge?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"I'm going up there."

"To stay?"

Jim nodded. He reached over and turned down the wick of the lamp which was smoking.

"What'll it get you, Jim, if you stay around?"

"Who can tell? Nothin' maybe. Then again . . ."

"Why do it? If you're spotted and the word gets to Davies or Jeff Means, they'll put that whole Block D crew out after you. And if they turn you over to me there's not one damned thing I can do to help."

"I rode out on a thing like this once," Jim reminded him.

"There was nothing you could do about that rustlin' charge," Rand insisted. "You were framed. So you got out. There's nothing you can do about this. So the thing to do is ride."

Jim gave a slow shake of the head. "I'll look around."

"Look where?"

Jim's only answer to that was a shrug. He moved the chair from the door, letting it blow open. He didn't look back as he went out.

II

In those two hours since leaving town that same restless energy and impatience of the past week had been in Jim Roday. But now at sundown, as he climbed the long slope below the Halletts' log house, he felt played out, weary to the bone, without hope. His brief visit with his father had added nothing to what he already knew. Except for one thing. John Roday no longer had faith in his son, although he'd tried not to show it.

Jim swung wearily out of the saddle at the pole fence footing the Hallett yard, tied the sorrel alongside the gate and walked on through. The light was too poor for him to recognize immediately the figure that came up out of the chair on the wide porch.

It wasn't until that figure called sharply, "Sis! Come out here," that he knew who it was.

He had stopped at the foot of the steps and was staring up at Bill Hallett before Bill spoke again, this time tartly. "Either I'm seein' things or—" He broke off momentarily, before adding loudly and urgently: "Mary! It's Jim Roday."

Jim heard a light step crossing the darkened room beyond the open door as he said quietly: "Can I come up, Bill?"

"Don't know whether you can or not," Bill Hallett said levelly as they eyed each other.

Jim was unsurprised by Bill's antagonism. His attention shifted

abruptly as Mary Hallett came out of the door. She stopped just clear of the opening and what little he could see of her showed him a tall pretty girl whose dark eyes even in this poor light were bright with loathing and hatred.

"Get out!" she said so softly that he could barely hear her. "Get out or I swear I'll turn a gun on you!"

"Easy, sis, easy!" Bill said. His glance held to Jim. "What's on your mind?"

Jim had no chance to reply, for Mary spoke again. "Get rid of him," she said, her voice breaking with anger. "And don't ever ride this way again, Jim Roday. I'll shoot you on sight."

"Now look, Mary—" Bill began.

But she cut him off, swinging around into the door. "Do you get rid of him or do I?"

"But this is—"

"Forget it," Jim put in.

All at once he saw the futility of any compromise between them. He turned away and went down along the path and through the gate.

He was gathering up the reins when he heard a step behind him and swung around to find Bill Hallett coming through the gate.

From the porch, Mary called: "Bill, come back here!"

Bill muttered an oath and came up to Jim. "You were never a fool," he said. "And if all they've tallied against you was true this'd be a damn-fool play. What's on your mind?"

Jim chose his words carefully, knowing how much they had to count.

"A lot of things," he answered finally. "I came here knowin' I was wanted. Only that. Today Bob Rand told me I bushwhacked your dad. Maybe I been doin' a lot of things like that I don't know about. You know of anything else?"

Hallett considered this and for a moment his expression lost its challenging enmity. But then his face tightened once more. "You've developed the habit of talkin' smooth, fella."

For a moment a live burning anger flared in Jim. Then wordlessly, he swung up into the saddle.

"All right, I take that back," Bill said sharply. "But we've been hatin' you too damn' long to have flowers ready and waitin'."

"It's no good," Jim told him. "I'll drag along on my own."

"You're stayin' in this country?"

Jim nodded. "For a while. To see what I can run onto."

"Where you stayin'?"

Jim's first instinct was to give an indefinite answer. But all at once he realized that placing trust in Bill Hallett might be one way of overcoming the man's hostility.

So he said: "In that line shack on Bear Ridge."

Bill frowned. "The rats have taken it over."

"I'll clean it up." Jim was about to turn the sorrel out from the gate when he thought of something. "Did you see that sign over on the ridge after they got Hugh?" he asked.

"No. Bob had a look at it before it washed out. We had a storm that day. It rained during the funeral."

Hallett gave this information in a flat, uncompromising tone.

"No one else saw it then?"

Hallett shrugged. "I don't think so. But I can ask Mary. She sees Bob now and then. More than I do. She'd know."

Jim nodded. All he said was, "See you later," and rode away.

The better part of an hour later he discovered that Bill Hallett had been right about the pack rats. The roof of the shack was half gone and the inside littered with straw and shreds of cloth torn from the single bunk's thin mattress. Jim had heard the rats scurrying away as he forced the sprung door open, and now, having surveyed it in the light of a match, he knew that he would spend a more comfortable night outside.

A hundred yards back through the pines south of the shack he found a small grassy clearing. There he offsaddled and staked out the sorrel and made his bed behind an outcrop of rock. Hunger was gnawing at him and he built his fire and cooked his meal quickly, wolfing the food. Then he hit the blankets, aching with weariness.

The brittle explosion of a rifle shot brought Jim suddenly awake. He sat up in his blankets as the high whine of a ricochetting bullet cut the stillness of the cold, before-dawn air. A second shot cracked out from the crest of a rise close above, then another and another, evenly spaced, deliberate.

He lifted the blankets aside and pulled on his boots, counting now—four—five—six—seven. Abruptly the shots stopped. He reached over and drew his .30-30 from its scabbard and was coming erect when the rifle began speaking again in that same methodical way. Once a rock-glancing bullet sang out over the deep void beyond the ridge. Facing the sound of the rifle, Jim stared up through the trees, trying to pick out details in the gray half light.

The rifle went silent a second time and the stillnesss settled down once more. Then the faint clatter of an iron-shod hoof striking rock sounded from above. Jim listened for that sound again. But it didn't come.

Taking the carbine, he made a wide circle and climbed the rise. When he finally stood on its summit the light was stronger and he could look down on the shack, less than a hundred yards away, and see it in minute detail. Even from here the weathered slabs showed their fresh scars, ripped and split by the bullets.

The gravelly earth up here told Jim little. But further down along the far side he came upon the tracks of a horse. The line of the sign swung northward about a quarter mile back from the ridge and, standing there, his glance going in that direction, he remembered meeting a stranger riding a Block D branded horse on the timbered trail to his father's layout yesterday afternoon.

"So it's Davies again," he breathed, the anger crowding him.

He was sure of it. Sure even though he remembered that Bob Rand, Bill Hallett and probably Mary knew of his intention to come up here. Rand he trusted and immediately put aside as a possibility. Bill

Hallett probably hated him enough to try to kill him; but Bill would choose a more direct way, would meet him openly in an even shoot-out. Mary seemingly despised him even more than her brother, but this shooting had been a cold, deliberate, sure thing and no woman could have done it.

No. Mark Davies was the answer. It tied in with everything else that had gone on in Jim's absence. The rider he had met yesterday would naturally have been curious over the presence of a stranger in the basin. He'd have gone back to Block D and reported either to Davies or Jeff Mears and described Jim. They had probably sent someone—possibly Jeff Mears himself—to watch the Hallett layout and seen Jim ride away, followed him to the Hallett place and then on up here.

He could be thankful now for having arrived here after dark, for the luck that sent him from the shack back into the timber where his supper fire had been hidden. But that thankfulness was a short-lived emotion before his anger, an emotion that slowly took complete possession of him.

"Lightning struck this one!"

The temptation to go down and examine the shack more closely was strong. But he forced himself to a wariness which made him roll his blankets, saddle and ride a full mile deeper into the timber before building his breakfast fire in the shelter of a high-walled, narrow canyon.

When his hunger was satisfied, Jim mounted the sorrel and struck north into the higher hills, anger still strong in him but now blended with a cool cunning.

Twice he came upon trails, pausing each time to dismount and ground-halter the gelding while he went ahead to scan the worn earth. He found no fresh sign. But this didn't disappoint him, sure as he was of the answer.

Mark Davies' Block D sprawled outward from both banks of Willow Creek where the timber had been gouged out at the head of the high basin. It was typical of the man, Jim thought as he sighted the layout through the wind-swaying pines, that in building his place Davies hadn't wasted one square foot of the grass lower down. The house, shaped like a squared-off C facing south, was built of logs and served as owner's quarters, bunk and cook house.

Jim remembered that Davies lived in the three small rooms of the far, western, wing. And now as he saw that the timber crowded that portion of the building, he could smile. He

made a mile-wide circle to come down through the trees there and left the sorrel a good two hundred yards above.

He gained the shelter of a low-growing cedar close behind the house and stood there a moment. Directly opposite the cedar was a dusty-paned window half open at the bottom. Looking both ways quickly and seeing no one, Jim crossed the last twenty feet to the house.

A glance in under the raised window showed him a bedroom. No one was in it. Lifting the window as far as it would go, he climbed in.

The bedroom was plain, a bed, a straight chair, a chest of drawers and a curtained wardrobe space along the far wall the only furnishings. Across the chair lay a pair of scarred chaps. A mound of soiled clothing lay in the corner nearest the window.

From beyond the closed door a deep voice boomed out plainly enough for Jim to hear the words: "Jeff, get in here."

It was Mark Davies who had spoken. His arrogant tone now lifted the pitch of Jim's anger to the point where he crossed the room and threw the door open. He was looking out into the hallway on the far side of which another door stood open. He crossed the hallway, went through that door.

The burly shape of Block D's owner stood at the single window of the room, his office. His back was to the door.

He said sourly, without turning: "Who the devil would be shootin' deer up there this time of year? Think up a better one."

Jim had time to survey the room carefully, knowing that Davies had heard him come in and supposed it was Jeff Mears. Half a dozen carbines and a shotgun leaned against the end of a horsehair sofa that took up most of the space of one side wall, facing a flat-topped desk along the other. A row of Stockmen's Gazettes filled a shelf above the sofa. There were three chairs, one a cushioned one at the desk. Slickers, a hat, a rope and a sheepskin coat hung from pegs alongside the door.

One pane was gone from the window's upper sash and now as a wind gust traveled the yard, the blind at the window flapped noisily.

That sound seemed to try Davies' patience, for he spoke querulously, "I said think up a better one." He swung around, scowling heavily.

His full square face went slack when he saw who it was. Jim reached back and pushed the door shut with the toe of a boot.

Davies' glance shifted momentarily to the end of the sofa and the guns standing there before it whipped back again.

"Go on. Make a try," Jim drawled.

The rancher's surprise had faded. He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it and closed it again.

"Go ahead. Try and collect your thousand," Jim taunted. "Your hard case messed up that job on the ridge this mornin'. Maybe you'll have better luck yourself."

"What hard case?" Davies said

finally. "You mean those shots up on Bear along about sunup?"

"You wouldn't know, would you?" When Jim got no reply, but only what he judged was a feigned look of perplexity, he went on: "Just like not knowin' who fired the barn down at our place the other night and wished the job on Tate."

"You're damn right I don't know about that!" Davies stated flatly.

"And you didn't pay one of your killers to blow a hole through Hallett. And you're not one damn bit interested in closin' out on those two outfits so your fence'll take in the rest of the basin."

Jim laughed mirthlessly, "It goes as far back as three years, doesn't it? When you framed me with that rustlin'."

Out in the hall a board squeaked. Jim tensed as he caught the sound but then relaxed as the wind flapped the blind at a window.

"You're puttin' names to me no man's ever dared to, Roday," Davies said soberly.

"I've only started, mister."

"In the first place," the rancher went on, making a visible effort to control his anger, "I don't even hold the paper on Hallett's and your father's place any longer. The bank sold them to a Denver man over two months ago."

"Sure. You'd cover your tracks," Jim drawled. "That's all part of—"

He broke off as he caught a hint of motion. He wheeled, right hand streaking up and palming out the Colt. A numbing blow chopped his wrist down, sent the gun spinning across the floor and Jeff Mears' hard shoulder slam knocked him off balance and staggering back into the desk.

Braced against the desk, Jim lifted a boot and met the foreman's rush, throwing all his weight into straightening his leg and prodding the brawny Mears back. Off to his left, Davies moved in at him and he wheeled out from the desk, sweeping a china lamp from its corner, half throwing it at the man. As the lamp crashed to the floor, he turned and swung as Mears rushed him again, missing with his right, and his left connecting with the other man's shoulder. Mears kicked out and raked Jim's shin with a sharp-roweled spur. Jim suddenly closed on him, spinning him around and lifting him bodily from the floor.

Holding Mears that way, he heaved sharply around and the foreman's legs caught Davies in the midriff and knocked him sideways onto the sofa. Jim suddenly let Mears go, bringing a knee up brutally in the small of the man's back as he fell. He saw Davies reaching for the guns at the sofa end and picked up the small chair standing by the door, swinging and throwing it. Davies bent double and the chair hit the wall above his head, coming apart.

Jim caught Mears as he was rising, caught him with a hard full right below the ear. Mears went down loosely, unconscious. Then a pair of arms closed on Jim from behind and a boot tripped him and he went down, a man's solid weight coming down on him to drive the wind from his lungs. He kicked out but could

find no target. Breathing heavily, he lay there, arms still pinned.

"Let him up, Ed," he heard Davies say. The hold on his arms eased and the other's weight left his back and when he rolled over it was to see the lean, dour-looking hand he had met on the trail yesterday coming erect beside Davies at the desk.

The rancher held a gun he had taken from a desk drawer and with it motioned to Jim. "On your feet," he said.

Jim rose, still reaching for wind. Davies nodded to the rope on the wall peg and Ed stepped over there, took it down and uncoiled it.

Davies thumbed back the .45's hammer. "I'm deliverin' you to the sheriff, Roday," he said. "It's up to you whether you go in dead or alive." With a meager lift of the gun, he motioned to his man.

Thirty seconds later Jim's arms were bound so tightly that all he could move was his hands. The Block D man left him then and knelt beside Jeff Mears. Davies had laid the .45 on the desk and was observing Jim narrowly.

"Just for the record, Roday," he said, "I know less than you about those shots on the ridge this mornin'."

"Save it for church," Jim drawled. That same unreasoning anger he had ridden in with was still holding him.

Ordinarily, such a reply would have touched off the rancher's unstable temper but now, strangely, he seemed unruffled.

"How long've you been around?" he queried.

"Long enough not to like the smell of a few things." Jim answered flatly.

Davies shrugged and turned away, saying to Ed: "We'll take him on in to Rand this afternoon. There's a directors' meetin' at five. No use my goin' in now and waitin' around the whole day."

III

Mark Davies and four Block D riders reached Pine City with their prisoner shortly before five that afternoon. No one was in the sheriff's office, so Davies unceremoniously opened the jail with the key that always hung on the door. He put Jim in the empty cell.

The rancher stood in the narrow corridor a moment studying the sleeping Tate Higgins in the adjoining cell. Tate lay in almost the exact position as yesterday, breathing sonorously and mouth open. Then, with a shrug, Davies went out, closing and locking the big door.

The day had paid Jim no dividends beyound strengthening his conviction that Mark Davies' scheming brain was behind the developments of the past weeks. The shooting on the ridge this morning had at first been an enigma to him, remembering as he did Davies' remark before knowing that it was Jim, not Jeff Mears, in the room with him.

On the surface those words had had the ring of innocence, of Davies' knowing nothing of who had fired those shots. But Jim had finally reasoned that in the reference to deer shooting he had caught the rancher and his foreman in an attempt at thinking up an explanation of the shots on the ridge—an explanation to

offer anyone who had heard them and might become curious.

Davies' denials of knowing anything of Hallett's murder or of the burning of the Roday barn followed the pattern Jim had expected. The sale of the mortgages by the bank was, he admitted, a clever piece of maneuvering. But here again was added proof of Davies' cunning.

By the time they had started the ride for town, Jim had been convinced of one thing; that, when this was over, not one particle of evidence would point to Mark Davies beyond the final outcome of his having possession of the two basin outfits. This morning, the Block D owner had missed his chance at killing the only man who had ever fought him. Now he was leaving it to the law to deal with Jim.

Jim listened as Davies' heavy step crossed the office. He caught the thud of the street door slamming and, frowning as he breathed the stale air of this close room, turned from the barred head of the cell and stepped over to look down at Tate Higgins.

He saw Tate's eyes open all at once and peer up at him. The next moment the oldster was whispering: "Is he gone?"

Jim nodded over his surprise and then Tate swung his feet to the floor and stood up. His eyes were clear and alert. He smiled broadly, exposing a gap where two teeth were missing. "Damn! It's good to see you, Jim!" he said and thrust a hand through the bars.

Jim took the proffered hand. "Playin' possum, eh?" he queried.

Tate nodded, fingering his drooping gray mustache. "Have been for three days." He squinted one eye. "Take a look." He turned and lifted aside the straw mattress on his cot. Underneath it lay two full quart bottles of whiskey.

Not understanding, Jim said: "You haven't touched 'em?"

"Not a drop," Tate told him with excusable pride. His glance went up to the barred opening overhead. "Someone—damned if I know who—has been passin' me a bottle through the skylight every night since I been here. I killed the first one, three nights ago. Then I got to thinkin'."

As the oldster paused, Jim finished the thought for him. "That someone's interested in keepin' you under the influence?"

Tate grinned toothily, nodded. Then an expression of contriteness patterned his gaunt face. "Jim," he said, "I've got one hell of a lot to make up to you and the old man."

Jim lifted his shoulders a little. "You've got a taste for the stuff. They say you can't do much about it when it's that way."

Tate shook his head, almost savagely. "I ain't talkin' about that. Sure, I like my red-eye. But it's somethin' else."

Jim waited, wondering what the other was getting at.

"Remember Ike Stallings?" Tate asked.

"That's a damn-fool question," Jim drawled.

Tate lifted a hand. "All right. Don't get sore now. I had to start some way." He swallowed as though his mouth was dry. "How it got out

that Ike had bought that rustled beef of Hallett's from you, I'll never know. One day I'll see him and get the truth. Anyway, here's how it goes. Remember the time I asked your old man to hold back my wages? Except for tobacco money?"

Jim nodded. "Thought you'd cure yourself of the habit if you couldn't buy the stuff."

"Yeah. Well, it'll sound funny to you now, but I got sore as hell at John for that. Even though it was my own idea. Then one Saturday night here in town I run into Ike."

Jim's brows came up and the oldster noticed that and said: "Oh, he used to ride over whenever he wanted. Not many around here knew him. Anyway, that night I borrowed twenty dollars from him and got drunk. Somethin' I never told you was that Ike and me worked for the same outfit before I hired on with John. Well, after that night I stayed sober a long time, couple of months. Then one day haulin' salt up to that upper tank I run onto Ike again. He didn't want his money back. Only asked if I'd like to make some extra, the easy way."

"Rustlin'?" queried Jim.

"Rustlin'," Tate admitted. "In the old days Ike and me were . . . well, you might say partners. Until I got the hell scared out of me. After that I went straight. But this time, the way Ike explained it, it seemed easy."

He paused, turned and took a bottle from under his mattress. Uncorking it, he offered it to Jim. When Jim shook his head, Tate said simply, "I'm goin' to need this," and took a long swallow out of the bottle.

He returned the bottle to its place under the mattress. "So three nights later I made up a story. Told John I wanted the next day off to go to a dance over in Piute. That night I rode 'way up in the hills and picked up the first twenty or thirty critters I come across. They just happened to be Hallett's stuff. I drove 'em over Windy Pass. By noon the next day I was holdin' 'em in a canyon Ike had told me about. He met me there, paid me fifty dollars and said to forget the loan. The whole thing was easy. Damned if I wouldn't have done it again if they hadn't framed it on you."

Beads of perspiration were standing out on the oldster's brow now. He looked up at Jim, saw the cold impassive set of his face, and went on stubbornly. "So it was me that framed you, Jim. I'd have owned up to it except that—" A sudden half-angry glint came to his eye. "Damn it, Jim! I'm crooked. Always have been."

The anger that was in Jim melted before this admission. And as he looked beyond the facts Tate had given him, a strange thought came to him.

"Maybe it was best the way it happened," he said. "Maybe if he hadn't gotten away with it that first time,

he'd have given up and we'd never have known who he was."

"You mean Ike?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I mean whoever paid Ike to have you steal that beef."

"Davies?"

"It looks like it."

"Sure as hell does," Tate agreed. He was relieved now. "He figured you'd be the only one to put up a fight when he made his grab for those two outfits. Got rid of you."

Jim was thinking of something else. "How about the other night, Tate?" he asked. "The night you burned the barn down?"

"Me?" Tate soberly shook his head. "Jim, I'll swear to my dyin' day it wasn't me. Even if I don't remember." He squinted, eying Jim directly. "Now there's another funny thing. Here's someone been passin' me whiskey every night. That night, the night of the fire, it was the same. I'd had some drinks before I picked up that load from the store. But I wasn't near drunk. Then when I come out of the store I found a bottle under the seat cushion."

"And you drank it?"

"Sure. Who wouldn't? It was part gone and I figured some jasper a little too much under the weather had put it there by mistake, thinkin' it was his rig."

"Then you were tanked when you got home?"

Tate didn't answer at once, frowning and scratching his head. Finally he drew a deep sigh. "I've been tryin' to remember, Jim. All I know is—"

They heard the office door slam and someone crossed the room out there. Tate's look became panicked, until Jim said softly: "Hit the blankets again. You haven't been awake."

Tate lay down immediately and at once appeared to be dead asleep, snoring a little. As the key rattled in the door's big lock, Jim sat on his cot, back to the end wall, boots on the straw-filled mattress. He pulled his hat down over his eyes.

When Bob Rand swung the door open and stepped in, Jim gave a start, sat up and stretched and yawned.

Rand closed the door and, with a brief glance at Tate, came over to Jim's cell. His expression was grave and for a moment he met the straightforward glance of Jim's blue eyes with a look almost of sadness. Then, letting his breath out, he drawled: "Well, you've done it!"

Jim nodded.

Rand went on with a touch of anger: "Last night I lay awake plannin' things. How you and me between us could dope this out." He shrugged wearily. "Now you're here. Not doin' anyone any damned good. Not even yourself."

"Bob, some one made a try for me up at that shack this mornin'. I don't take that from any man."

"When you're playin' for stakes like this, you take a lot of things," Rand told him. "Any ideas on who made the try at you?"

"Not one. Except the hunch I played that it was Davies. I was damn near loco this mornin'." Jim said gravely. "Didn't think, I guess."

Rand waved a hand impatiently. "If you know it, let's forget it. How did you make out with Bill and Mary? Or did you see them?"

Jim nodded. "I did. They were what you might call unfriendly."

"Bill wouldn't listen to you?"

"He might've if it hadn't been for Mary. I just wasted my time."

Rand was silent a moment before saying: "Then that leaves you without anyone to count on. Except me. How about your father?"

Jim only shook his head.

"Don't you see the spot you've put me in?" Rand asked irritably. "I'm sheriff here. You're wanted. Any personal feelings I have can't count for a damn now."

"I know."

Again, the lawman gave that meager lift of the shoulders. "Well, I'll try and think of something," he said. He stepped over to the adjoining cell. "Might as well get rid of this problem right now." He unlocked the door and went in and reached down to shake Tate.

The oldster only grunted and turned over. But Rand kept on and in the next half minute Tate made the pretence of coming reluctantly awake, and staggered to his feet.

Rand shook the old man harder now that he had him standing. "Tate, I'm sending you home," he said. "Now for Pete's sake stay away from the bottle for a while."

"Shur, Bob," Tate mumbled thickly. "Stay 'way from th' stuff f'r th' resta m' life."

Rand led him out, leaving the jail door open. Jim heard them go out onto the street and out there Rand asked: "You sure you can ride?" Tate made some incoherent reply and then there was silence for a time. Finally Rand reappeared for a moment, telling Jim: "I'll go over to Joe's and get your supper."

It was ten minutes before the sheriff was back with a pail full of stew and half a loaf of bread and a lantern. He opened the cell and passed the things in to Jim. "Nothing fancy," he said. "Need anything more?"

"No. This'll do." Jim hung the lantern above the cot and Bob closed and locked the door.

Jim ate only part of the meal, although it was good. He had no appetite. He couldn't even think straight. He was thankful, shortly, to find that he was sleepy. He blew out the lantern and pulled up a blanket and tried to keep from thinking he was beaten.

IV

Jim came sluggishly awake, lying for a moment in a confused groping to know where he was. The stale air seemed to have drugged him and he pushed up onto one elbow and shook his head, slowly remembering.

A glance at the skylight showed him the pale blur of stars, too indistinct to recognize so that he could gauge the time. He wondered what had wakened him and had his answer as the lock on the jail door faintly clicked. Instantly his nerves went tight and he threw back the blanket and rolled full length to the floor, remembering clearly the shots on the ridge.

The hinges of the door creaked

suddenly with a noise that raised the hackles along his neck. They squealed again, more faintly, and he knew the door had closed. Listening intently, Jim thought he could hear a man's breathing. Someone was in the room with him.

Suddenly a slit of light from a shaded lantern cut the blackness of his cell, swinging to and fro and settling finally full on him.

"What's the matter?" a voice asked. "The bed too hard?"

Jim lay there rigid, waiting for Bill Hallett's next move. He was searching the shadows, trying to make out the other's shape, trying to catch the glint of light from a gun barrel. But the lantern's bright slit blinded him.

In another moment he passed beyond fear and into that mood of recklessness and not caring that always came to him in times of acute danger. He picked himself up, drawling: "Get it over with."

"Get what over with?" Hallett asked. He set the lantern on the floor then and moved around it to the cell door. There came the jingle of keys as he added: "You're leavin' here, fella. We've smoked the pipe of peace."

This was the Bill Hallett Jim remembered and, as the tension fell away, he found that he was trembling slightly, that hope had come alive in him once more.

"That sister of yours'll take the hide off you for this, Bill," he said.

"She's been rawhidin' me all day." The door swung open. "Only not the way you think. Last night she pried it out of me where you were stayin'. Then this mornin' she was up and out before I was awake. She heard shots as she was comin' up to the ridge and she saw how the shack had been beaten up. Came back down and carried on like a crazy woman. She was sure you'd been killed and your carcass dragged away."

"That should've made her happy."

"Well, it didn't. Damned if I know how she thought it out. But she did. Said she knew you were in trouble and that we were the only ones who could help. Made me ride over to Davies' with her and sit there in the timber watchin' the place and waitin' for something to happen. Finally it did. We saw them bring you in."

For the first time in over a week Jim Roday felt the surge of an emotion that was akin to happiness. It lifted him immediately from the deep depression of the past two days.

Bill picked up the lantern, waiting for Jim to come out of the cell. "Mary's hell on wheels when she gets started," he drawled. "Went down to the livery a few minutes ago and helped herself to one of Bob's saddles and that big black of Doc Erlanger's. Next thing I know, they'll have her for horse stealin'. And these keys. She knew where Bob had hid 'em."

Mary was holding the three horses in the alley behind the jail, out of the wind. As Jim appeared and stood before her she looked up at him a moment, with a sober expression and then held out her hand to him.

"Can an old friend say she's sorry, Jim?" she asked.

"She can," Jim answered, and the strong pressure of her grasp told him even more of the change in her than her words.

"What now?" Bill asked, breaking an awkward silence.

"That's up to Jim," Mary said. She stepped in beside a wiry white-stockinged mare, the smallest of the three horses, and unbuckled a saddle pouch and took something from it. Handing it to Jim, she told him: "This was dad's. He'd want you to have it if he were here now."

In the starlight, Jim looked down on a simply tooled shell belt and holster. The gun was horn-handled, a .38 Colt. He knew it now, remembered Hugh Hallett's pride in this weapon. Here was as final and convincing a sign of Mary Hallett's changed belief in him as anything could be. Soberly, he buckled the filled belt about his waist and thonged the holster to his thigh.

"Tate Higgins got started on a tale today that'll interest you two," he said. "Didn't get a chance to finish tellin' me what it was. Bob let him go tonight. Suppose we head for our place and hear the rest of it."

They turned down the alleyway beyond the barn and then rode out the wind-swept street of the sleeping town, heads down against the fitful blasts. They were barely past the last house when Mary began her questions. Bill, riding ahead, was impatient and once called back for them to hurry. Then he heard their talk and dropped back to listen as Jim explained in detail all that had gone on these past two days.

Finally Jim had finished and they fell silent, covering several miles without a further word. Then Mary said abruptly: "You shouldn't have let us run you out three years ago."

"I know."

"If I'd only believed then as I wanted to," she said, letting him read his own meaning into her words.

Above Rocky Point, where the trail narrowed and cut up the high-angling face of the rim that footed Willow Basin, they came upon it. Bill, riding ahead, pulled in sharply, calling back: "Hang it, a slide!"

They came up with him as he turned his horse up the steep slope, intending to ride around a heap of rubble and rock that blocked the trail. Jim, more curious, said, "Hold on." He was thinking back, trying to remember, looking up the slope that was indistinct and shadowed in the starlight.

"This was never a bad place," he said finally. "Further up it is. But that rock up there is sound."

And now he looked downward, seeing that the rim dropped steeply away from the trail for thirty feet or so to a jutting ledge. Below that ledge was a like downward distance to the rim's base where it joined the flats.

Directly downward a section of the ledge was broken off, giving the rim face at this point a straight downward angling line to a mound of rubble at its base.

Bill had turned and come back and was following the direction of Jim's

glance. "Something went over here, hit that ledge and caved it in," he said. "Must've shaken loose that stuff from above."

"Could it have been a wagon?" Mary asked.

Jim swung down out of his saddle. "How about your rope, Bill?" he drawled.

He took the rope Bill handed him, tying it to the horn of Erlanger's black gelding. Mary saw what he intended and came aground to hold the reins of the black as he tossed the coil of rope out and watched it uncurl downward. He ignored Bill's puzzled, "I don't get it," and stepped over the trail's edge and downward, braced erect by his hold on the rope.

Along part of that downward distance he lost all footing and lowered himself by taking his full weight against the rope. Once the wind caught him as he hung free and pushed him sharply against the face of the rim. Finally his boots felt the outward slope of the slide and he let the rope go and half slid, half walked the remaining distance to the mound's downward margin.

Now that he was down here he was thinking that there was little this heap of dirt and rock could tell him. Angling around its base and finding nothing, he began to climb the far margin back to the rope. Then a dark scar against the pale shadow of the slide surface off to his left caught his attention and took him over there on hands and knees.

He stopped, crouching, within arm reach of what he had seen, sudden shock settling through him. A boot and a man's lower leg were cocked up at an awkward angle out of the rubble.

V

Two minutes later, after frantically digging into the rubble, Jim settled back on his heels. He said softly, "Here's hopin' the drinks are on the house from now on, old-timer." And he had his deep regret over the price Tate Higgins had paid for his part in this.

He thought then of finishing the digging out of the body and taking it on in to town tonight. But time now was a precious thing and in the end he climbed on up the slope, knowing that were Tate alive he would have understood. Holding the rope once more, he worked his way over to a point above the body. There he loosed a slide of rubble by kicking loose a holding rock. When the wind had whipped the gray fog of dust away, the body was no longer there. Tate was safe until morning. And with that thought Jim climbed the face of the rim.

As he pulled himself back onto the trail, Bill said impatiently: "No luck?" When Jim didn't immediately answer, he added: "Time's wastin', friend. Let's get out and see Tate."

Jim nodded downward. "You won't have to ride far."

Mary caught her breath and Bill spoke quickly. "Down there?"

"Dead," Jim said. "Shot through the head."

For a long moment the two were wordless, taking in what he had told them. It was Mary who broke the

silence. "Poor Tate. He was always making a new start."

Bill nodded soberly. He took out tobacco and rolled a smoke and passed the makin's on over to Jim. "Any ideas on who did it?" he asked.

"No. But we might try and find out."

"How?" Mary asked.

Jim thought a moment, looking up at the stars. "It's not too late," he said. "The night owls would still be hangin' out at the Pride. And you'd have to tell Bob. Gettin' the word around might do some good before the night's over."

"What good?"

"Maybe a lot. If we made it the right kind of a story."

"The right kind?"

Jim nodded. "Suppose we say you and Mary found Tate just knocked out. Suppose he had come to long enough to tell you he saw who shot him, without namin' who it was. You'd tell 'em that you and Mary had taken him over to your place and put him in that end room of your father's. You're in town after Doc Erlanger."

When Bill frowned, Mary said eagerly: "Whoever shot Tate might hear about it. He'd have to do something."

"But if it was Davies, he wouldn't get the word tonight," objected Bill.

"Yes, he would," Mary told him. "His horse was in the stable when I was there awhile ago. That means he's probably staying over night at the hotel."

With a doubtful look still on his face, Bill stepped to his horse and climbed into the saddle. He said, "See you later at our place. Erlanger's goin' to be sore as hell at me makin' him ride all that way for nothin'." He had lifted the reins, about to ride away, when he thought of something. "I'll tell Bob what really did happen."

"No," Jim said. "There's plenty of time for that. He's a poor liar. So tell him what you do the others."

Bill shook his head puzzledly and turned his horse back toward Pine City.

The wind quickly cut off the sound of his going. Mary looked up at Jim. "You know, don't you?" she said evenly. At Jim's answering shrug, she insisted: "Could you tell me?"

"Not yet. I might be wrong."

Mary turned to her horse then and they rode up and around the block in the trail, the black once slipping dangerously but steadying as Jim pulled his head up.

About forty minutes later they raised a single light that was the Hallett place high along the timber-edged basin. Here the wind was a wild thing, shrieking through the pines with a never-ending cry. Jim sent Mary up to the house and took the horses to the corral.

When he joined her in the kitchen, taking the cup of coffee she had waiting for him, he nodded to the door that led to the main part of the log house. "We'd better get things fixed."

Mary gave him a puzzled look as he led the way in across the living

room that was chinked with white plaster. He took the lamp from the big center table and headed for a door on the far side.

As he was opening it, Mary said: "I haven't been in there, Jim. Not since that night."

Jim paused. "Then let me do it," he said, going on into Hugh Hallett's bedroom.

It was a simply furnished large cubicle, its severity relieved by a feminine touch—printed calico curtains at the single window, an embroidered white scarf on the dresser. A wide bed, the dresser, two chairs and a high mahogany wardrobe were ranged along the walls.

Jim turned down the spread on the bed, rumpled the pillow. In the wardrobe he found two blankets which he rolled and thrust under the bed covering. He stepped to the window and surveyed the bed, going back to it once to put a bend in the roll of blankets. Finally it satisfied him. He left the lighted lamp on the dresser and went back into the living room.

"I might need a rifle," he said.

Mary went to the gun rack in the back corner and came back carrying a .30-30. She handed him a box of shells, looking up at him in a questioning way but saying nothing.

"You'd better turn in," he told her. He saw a canvas wind-breaker of Bill's lying on the couch and stepped over to pull it on, grinning as he extended his arms and forced them far out of the too-short sleeves. "Just right."

Mary smiled faintly but was in no mood for light-heartedness. "You're really expecting someone?" she asked.

He nodded and, the rifle under his arm, turned to the door.

She said quickly, "Jim," and he stopped.

She came over to him and what he saw in her eyes stirred him first to disbelief, then wonder and a sense of something new and with deep meaning lying in this moment.

"Be careful, Jim," was all she said as she turned away. But there was an eloquence to those words that was not lost upon him.

Jim went out into the night and around the far corner of the house, leaning into the quick rush of the wind there. He passed the lighted window of Hugh Hallett's bedroom and looked out and across the yard beyond, finally heading for the vague low outline of the root cellar and the tangle of willow alongside it where the spring came down the gradual slope beyond the edge of timber, about a hundred yards away. He loaded the carbine and put the box of shells in his jacket pocket.

VI

Jim hunkered down between the thicket's edge and the earth wall of the cellar, not making himself too comfortable, knowing he might have a long wait. His view of the bedroom window and the shaft of light beyond it was from time to time criss-crossed by the leafy pattern of the willow branches swayed by the wind. He leaned the rifle against the wall beside him.

That look Mary had given him kept coming back and with it a dozen incidents he had filed far back in the pigeonholes of his mind. He remembered his first dance, how Mary had asked to be taken and how he had refused and then finally his jealousy when she had come with another young fellow whose name he had forgotten.

He thought of Bob Rand and began to wonder if he had read the right meaning into Mary's glance. Bill's casual mention of Mary and Bob the other night had its obscure meaning and he couldn't overlook that. And now the bitter-learned resignation and denial of these past three years was in him, making him feel that Mary Hallett was not for him.

When he thought to look up at the stars he was surprised at what they told him. He had been sitting here for better than an hour. He realized abruptly that he was cold and stiff and that the restless pitch of the wind was pulling at his nerves. He stood up, his knee joints stiff, and looked into the far shadows of the yard, impatient because they told him nothing.

Something hard jabbed into his back and Bob Rand's voice said lazily, close behind him: "Don't move."

Jim wheeled halfway around in his surprise before reading the full meaning of his danger into the coolness of those words. He felt the weight of the .38 abruptly leave his thigh and then he made out the other's thin shape, taking a backward step.

Rand gave a low laugh. "The wind let you down. It would've been a good idea except for that."

Jim turned completely around now, the toe of his boot touching something stiffly yielding. It was the Winchester and his pulse quickened as he realized that his body had shielded the weapon from Rand's view.

"You took your time getting here," he said. "But you had to come, eh?"

Again Bob's low laugh rose above the sigh of the wind. "Bill lied about Tate. I'd found the jail empty. Puttin' two and two together, I knew it was you. You trumped up a good story."

Jim said nothing, waiting, his down-hanging right hand against the cold steel of the Winchester's barrel.

"Tate was dead when he fell out of his saddle," Rand said. "At fifty yards I couldn't miss."

The man's calm cold admission did more to bring home to Jim his danger than anything else. "So it all adds up," he drawled. "Ike Stallings; the sign in the timber no one else saw, the whiskey you passed in

to Tate. Was Davies tellin' the truth when he said the bank had sold that paper to someone in Denver?"

He could see Rand well enough to catch his nod. "I have a brother in Denver. Asked him to make a small investment for me and keep his mouth shut," the sheriff admitted.

Jim leaned against the wall of the root cellar as Rand went on, angrily: "I didn't want this, Jim. You asked for it. I gave you the chance to get out."

"And Mary," Jim asked. "What about her?"

Taking his chance on the depth of shadow, judging the lighted window behind him to be well out of line, Jim tilted the carbine up, shifted his hand suddenly and gripped it lower along the fore part of the stock. He stiffened with apprehension when the butt of the weapon thudded against the wall. As the tempo of the wind in the timber above increased in pitch, he stood there expecting the slam of a bullet.

Then Rand said, "I'll marry her if she'll have me," and Jim knew that the wind had played its second fateful part this night, hiding the sound from Rand.

"Would she, knowing this?" he asked tonelessly.

"Who said she'd know? This wind'll cover my tracks by mornin'. I'll borrow from the bank to buy back those two notes from this supposed stranger in Denver. When we're married we'll live here."

"And let Davies take the blame?" Jim shifted his hold once more and now felt the trigger guard of the weapon right behind his hand.

"No one'll ever know about Davies, will they?" Amusement edged Rand's tone. "Maybe he's finished here. Maybe he'll never be able to live this down. Someone may have to take over his layout. The bank might go along with me after they buy Davies out."

A wind blast ripped through the crest of the pines close above and in its covering sound Jim hefted the Winchester once more, caught it with his finger through the trigger guard. He thumbed back the hammer.

Its click rose audibly over the sudden dying sound of the wind and Jim saw Rand's frame stiffen. He lined the Winchester at his hip and squeezed the trigger and the sharp report came as the other lunged violently to one side.

Rand's right hand was swinging up as Jim realized he hadn't hit him. Pushing out from the wall, he threw himself into the thicket, falling sideways. Rand's gun exploded deafeningly and the bullet broke a thick leafy stem and lashed it across Jim's cheek.

The branches cushioned Jim's fall. Lying there on his side, he swept aside the branches, levering in a new shell as the gun on the thicket's far side spoke again. His right shoulder jarred back from a hard impact. He aimed the Winchester a foot below the rosy wing of gun flame he had seen a moment ago through the branches. He squeezed the trigger and winced at the sharp pain the kick of the weapon sent through his shoulder. He levered again, shot again and was only vaguely aware of a single an-

swering explosion. Rolling out of the thicket, he lay there listening and, the wind dying now, heard Bob Rand cough.

That sound told him that one of his bullets had found a mark, for it was the rattly cough of a man with congested lungs.

Jim started crawling back along the wall of the root cellar, hugging the ground, left hand reaching out before him. Pain like the burning of a hot iron was in his right shoulder as he dragged the Winchester with that arm. He had covered about ten feet in this way when Rand shot again, blindly, the bullet tearing through the thicket.

Hard on the heels of that shot came other sounds. First the faint but quickly strengthening hoof pound of running horses rising over the whine of the wind, coming along the trail below. And then Jim heard Mary's voice calling his name from close below.

All at once his groping hand touched something hard and cold and a moment later he was gripping Hugh Hallett's .38, knowing that Rand must have dropped it in his haste to dodge aside with that first shot.

Jim let go the Winchester now, a deep thankfulness in him. Aiming a Colt blindly was hard enough, but lining a Winchester accurately without being able to see the front sight, he had found infinitely harder. He crawled toward the back edge of the thicket where Rand waited, no longer minding the pain in his shoulder. And now he could hear two, or perhaps three, riders running in toward the house. Shortly, a man's voice shouted something down there. Although Jim couldn't be sure of that voice, it sounded a little like Mark Davies'.

He was within a few feet of the thicket's back edge when Rand all at once spoke from close in front of him, spoke softly and hoarsely and in a labored breath:

"I'm comin' after you."

There was the scrape of a boot beyond the thicket and Jim realized that Rand was circling it on the far side. He stood up then and in two swift soundless strides was around the end of the thicket and seeing Rand's tall shape some thirty feet away between him and the lighted window below.

Jim had his sure chance at the man. But from deep within him rose a perverse resolve not to use this advantage.

"Up here," he called.

Rand whirled around, shooting as he moved. Jim felt the breath of a bullet along the side of his face. He thumbed a shot at Rand, then another, deliberately taking his time. He saw his second bullet jar Rand's tall frame backward.

And now he deliberately raised the .38 and had a clear look at Rand's wide chest along the front sight as he squeezed the trigger. The bullet spun Rand halfway around and he went down loosely, the momentum of his fall carrying him over and onto his back, his arms spread-eagled.

A door slammed at the house and, looking down there, Jim made out four figures, one of them Mary's, by the flickering light of a lantern.

"Jim!" Bill Hallett's voice called stridently.

"Here," he answered, and they started up toward him. He was shaking a little now, feeling faint, and his shoulder throbbed with a steady aching. He moved his arm carefully and it was a relief to realize that no bones were broken. He sat down, laid the .38 on the ground beside him and leaned over resting his head on his knees, hearing them approach.

It was Mark Davies who spoke abruptly from close below, saying in an awed tone: "Great Tophet, it's Rand! Dead."

Jim lifted his head then and saw Davies holding the lantern, Doc Erlanger kneeling beside Rand's inert shape and Bill and Mary coming toward him, several steps this side of Davies.

All at once Mary cried softly: "Jim, you're hurt!"

Then Davies' voice sounded sharply. "Hold on, you two! Don't go near him." He suddenly reached down and snatched Rand's gun from the ground and lined it at Jim. "You, Roday!" he ordered. "Reach!"

Jim stayed as he was, right arm resting limply on the ground, bracing himself with his left, suddenly realizing something that had escaped him until this moment. He and he alone knew the enormity of Bob Rand's deception. No one, with the possible exception of Mary and Bill, would believe the things Rand had admitted. To all appearances, Rand had come out here on a hunch to arrest a prisoner who had broken jail, and had been killed doing his duty.

Bill and Mary had stopped at Davies' word and now Bill swung around on the man. "Easy, Davies," he drawled. "We'll hear what he has to say."

Davies' glance didn't stray from Jim. "What could he have to say?"

"You were talking to Bob before the shots came, Jim," Mary said urgently. And he saw that her eyes were pleading with him, bright with tears she couldn't hold back. All at once her look changed to one of defiance and she, too, turned toward Davies. "If Jim caught Bob Rand sneaking in on the house, it means that Bob killed Tate Higgins."

Davies smiled mirthlessly. "Why would he? No. He knew Roday was here and he came after him." He added ominously, his look still hard on Jim: "If you move that right hand, Roday, I'm going to let you have it."

"Mary," Jim said.

When she turned to him again, he told her, "Bob did kill Tate. And your father. He had his brother in Denver buy those notes from the bank under an assumed name."

"Think up a better one," Davies put in tauntingly.

"He even had the idea he could lay all the blame on Davies and maybe in the end force Davies to pull out. Then he was going to buy up Davies' outfit," Jim went on, ignoring the interruption. "That's about all there was, Mary. He figured I knew he was the one and he came out after me."

"You'll need a damned good lawyer to sell that to a jury," Davies cut in once more. He added: "If you live long enough to stand trial."

"Try makin' a lynch mob out o' your crew, Davies," Bill said angrily, "and I'll—"

"Just a minute," Doc Erlanger's voice interrupted urgently.

They saw him bend close to the body on the ground and Jim realized then that Rand wasn't dead. Jim pushed himself erect and a moment later he heard Rand speak weakly, the words indistinguishable.

The medico looked up quickly at Davies. "Did you hear that?"

Davies nodded, no longer looking at Jim. He went down on one knee beside the doctor. But Erlanger shook his head, saying simply: "Too late. He's gone."

Kneeling there, Davies looked across at Jim and said levelly: "I'm beggin' your pardon, Roday. What he said was: 'I'd have had that Block D layout, too. None of you could've stopped me. Why did Jim Roday have to come back here, anyway?' "

"Oh, Jim!" Mary cried and came over to him. Then she was in his arms, her face uplifted. He kissed her tenderly, not minding the pain in his shoulder now.

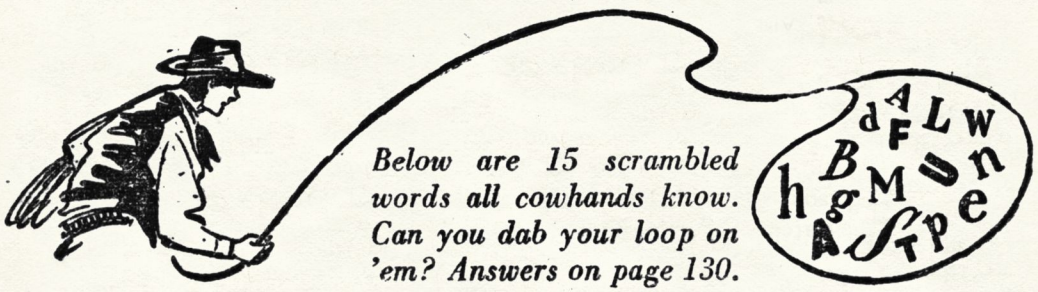
He remembered something that made him say softly, so that the others couldn't hear: "Bill said something the other night about you and Bob."

Mary pushed away from him and looked up in a wondering way. "What about Bob and me?"

She was silent a moment, finally understanding. "Never anyone but you, Jim," she said, coming close to him again. "It's been so long since you went away," she murmured. "So long trying not to believe in you but knowing there could never be anyone else."

All the restlessness and wildness and that sense of not belonging that had ridden so constantly with Jim Roday over these three years was gone now. He was home again.

THE END

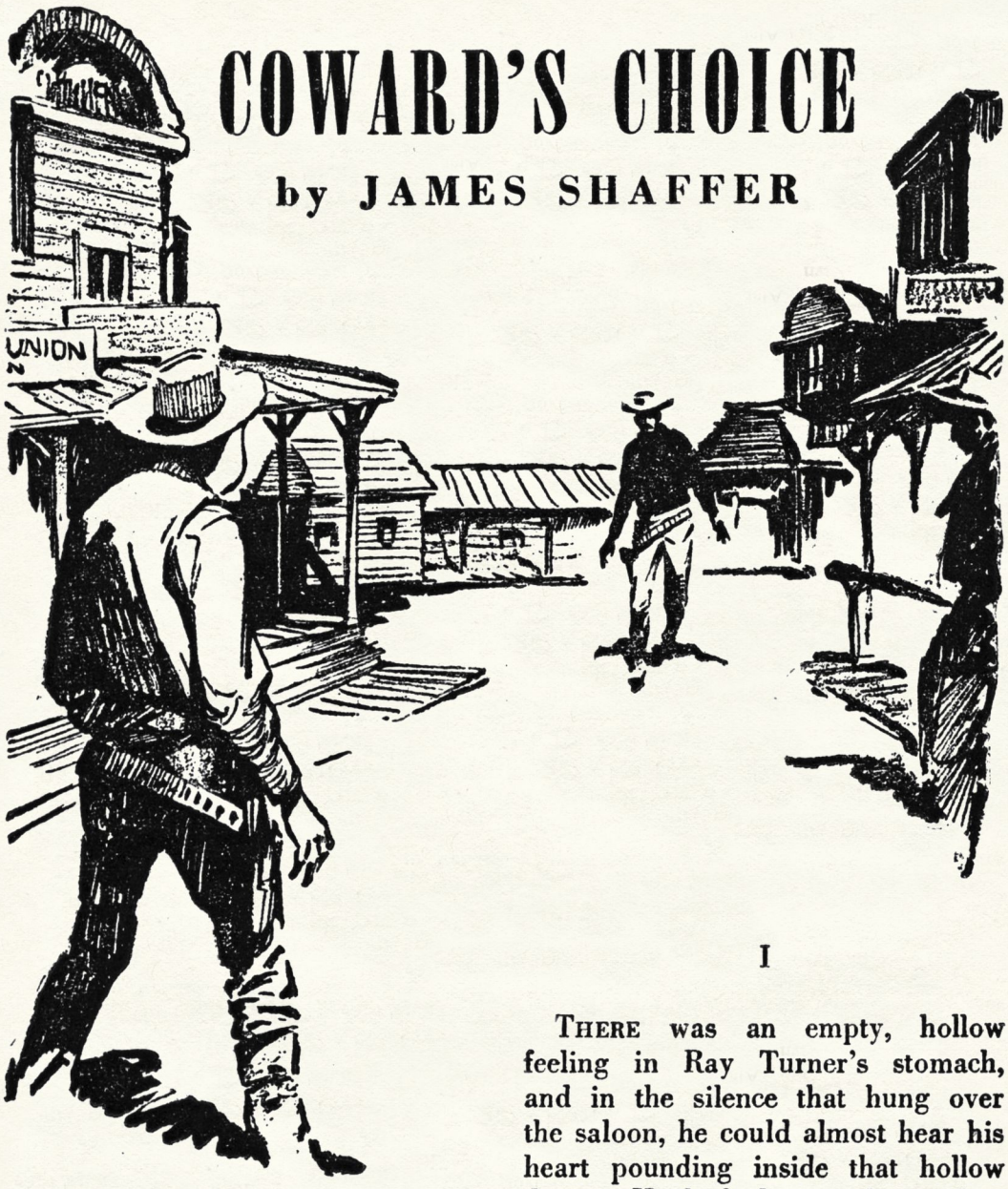


Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.

1. camil
2. draystock
3. woodrife
4. gunteg
5. nett
6. natazanim
7. vace
8. gronhib
9. skramut
10. ranb
11. worra
12. arbo
13. croan
14. brag
15. gingsgid

COWARD'S CHOICE

by JAMES SHAFFER



If Ray Turner refused that offer of a twenty-four-hour truce, he had just five minutes to break a treacherous killer's nerve and make a death trap boomerang

I

THERE was an empty, hollow feeling in Ray Turner's stomach, and in the silence that hung over the saloon, he could almost hear his heart pounding inside that hollow drum. He looked around, wondering if anyone else could hear the pounding, but the men in Rip Collins' place were studiously intent on their drinking. They were making an effort to pay no attention to Ray.

"Another bourbon, Rip," he told Collins, and his voice sounded loud and raspy in the hushed silence.

The saloonman moved with jerky motions as he poured the small shot glass full. Ray lifted the glass halfway and paused, his eyes roving. He saw the familiar faces lining the bar; the familiar, battered furniture and pool tables of Collins' saloon. And through the wide front windows, he could see the main street of town, the familiar store fronts; familiar wagons and horses tied up along the hitchracks.

But nothing seemed familiar this morning. There was a strange, unworldly look about everything. As if, Ray thought, he were seeing those things for the first time, *or the last.*

His fingers contracted a little, and some of the liquor spilled over the edge of the glass. He gulped the drink down quickly, wondering if things had looked this way to George Adams. He wondered if George had felt the same way he was feeling, the day George came to town, and didn't come back. Ray looked at his empty glass. The liquor had gone down like water; he hadn't tasted or felt anything.

He was shoving his glass down the bar, getting ready to call for another drink when Sully Mason came in. Sully ran the newspaper in town, and was forever getting some new gadget to show off and write about in long stories in his paper. His bright eyes were twinkling now as he stepped briskly inside, waving a small mahogany box.

"Look here, Ray," he said in his bubbling, enthused voice. "Just got it from back East. Know what it is? It's a barometer. It'll tell a person when the weather's going to change."

"Yeah?" Ray tried to keep his voice at the level of casual interest that was expected of a man even on a day like this.

"Bourbon, Rip," Sully said. He set the box down on the bar. "You know what, Ray? I left the thing out all night, and this morning she reads that it's going to rain today. Ain't that good news? Rain! Boy! The drought is over." He lifted his voice to the other men at the bar. "Hear that, boys? Rain! The dry spell's over!"

"We sure need rain," Ray said mechanically. Yesterday that would have been the most important news he could have heard. But today; rain, drought, what difference did it make now?

Sully laughed and slapped him on the back. "Reckon when them first few drops start to splatter, your troubles will be over—"

"Have another drink, Sully," Rip Collins cut in quickly, with a sharp glance at the newspaper editor. Sully's voice died away in embarrassed silence, and his eyes were straight ahead, not daring to look at Ray.

The silence built up for a long moment, and became oppressive, before Len Haverman, down the bar, spoke loudly.

"Your gadget is lying to you, Sully," he said with forced heartiness. "There ain't a cloud in the sky."

Ordinarily, that would have

brought a spirited reply from Sully, but the editor was acutely conscious of Ray standing beside him, and his voice was listless.

"The thing says she'll rain, and she will."

Ray shoved his glass toward Collins. "Another, Rip."

The saloonman hesitated, his face working. He pulled the cork on the bottle, then shoved it back.

"Don't you think you've had enough, Ray?"

"Enough?" Was there enough whiskey in the world to fill that hollow in his stomach? Was there any whiskey in the world hot or fiery enough for him to feel as it went down his throat?

"Enough, Rip?"

"Blast it—yes, man!" Collins burst out. "Give yourself all the odds you can, Ray. Don't lessen your chances by slowing your hand down with liquor!"

Ray sighed, and the hollow feeling seemed to lessen for a moment. He was glad it was out; the subject that every man in the place had been avoiding since he'd stepped inside. The thing he knew was uppermost in every mind there, though they'd studiously avoided mentioning it.

"I haven't even felt the drinks," Ray told the saloonman.

"Just the same, why take a chance?" argued Rip earnestly. "Git all the odds you can on your side, boy!"

"Better still," Sully Mason broke in quietly, "folk your bronc and git out of town—before the deadline."

That quiet remark hit Ray in the stomach like a fist. How easy it would be to ride out. It was only twenty steps from the bar out to his horse. In an hour he could be miles from town; by nightfall he would be far out on the trail. Nightfall! The word had a strange sound in his mind. It was as if he'd found something he'd lost and never expected to see again.

But he could see nightfall again—if he rode out. He could spread his blankets out and look up at the stars that night. He could listen to the moan of the wind through the pines, and to the distant howl of a coyote. And he could lie there in his blankets and know that he was alive!

He wondered if George had thought of those things; he wondered if everything had seemed strange and unreal to George that morning he'd ridden into town with a tight grin on his face. Ray looked at Sully.

"In your three years out West, you ought to know that a man don't ride out like you suggest, Sully," he said through tight lips.

"Like blazes they don't!" Haverman burst out. "When a man's been called by a killer like Grat Brucker, the smart thing to do is ride on!"

Rip Collins polished a spot on the bar. "There's a lot of men alive today that was smart enough to pull that trick," he said. "Nobody in this town would blame you, Ray."

"That Grat Brucker!" Mason growled. "Something's wrong with

the world when a man like him can kill. . . ." He broke off and stared into his glass. "Me and my big mouth," he muttered.

"It's good advice we're offering, boy," Collins said. "Hit leather and ride. Sleep under the stars tonight—the kind o' sleep that you'll wake up from in the morning."

It was funny that Collins should make that remark, Ray thought. The men in the saloon must know, somehow, the thoughts that were going through his mind.

He shook his head, a twisted grin on his face. "Nope, it wouldn't work, Rip. I could run from this Grat Brucker, but anywhere I went, there'd always be another one just like him."

Collins polished the bar savagely. They all knew the truth of Ray's words. Once a man started running, he never quit. It might take a tough, cold-blooded killer like Grat Brucker to make him run the first time, but the next time he'd run before a man that wasn't so tough. And it would keep on that way.

"And besides," Ray said, forcing a chuckle into his voice. "How do you know that it won't be *me* that steps in here for a drink, after—"

"Why, sure!" Sully Mason blustered with false heartiness. "Shucks, we're hanging crepe too darn soon, it seems to me!"

The little group in the saloon joined with Sully in a loud guffaw of optimism, but it took no trained ear to catch the hollow mockery in their voices. With an effort Ray forced a mechanical grin on his face and walked out into the street.

II

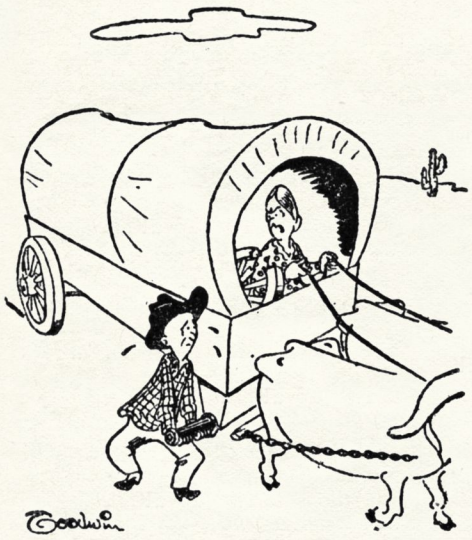
Ray was stepping off the curb when the sight of a lounging figure sent an electric shock through him. His right hand jerked spasmodically, and the lounging man gave a short chuckle.

"Kind o' nervous, ain't ye, Ray?" Niles Prang grinned. The skinny little foreman of Grat Brucker's big ranch spread his feet and hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. "I had a bet with the boss that you'd pull your freight before the deadline. Looks like I'm gonna lose."

"You sure as blazes are!" Ray said in a raspy tone. "I'll be here."

Niles laughed, a harsh throaty chuckle, and stalked down the street. The laugh reminded Ray of Grat Brucker's laugh; that raspy throaty gurgle that always broke through Brucker's bearded lips just before he fired. That laugh of Brucker's had been the last sound that five men had heard on this earth. And the last of those men had been George.

Ray crossed the street in long strides. Though there was sweat breaking out on his forehead, he forced himself not to wipe it away.



"We ain't never goin' to git to Alpine City if you stop to rest every hour!"

The lobby of the hotel was cool, but prickly heat was still breaking out all over him as he took the stairs to his room two at a time, ignoring the desk clerk.

In his room, he sat down and forced himself to roll a tight, smooth cigarette with steady hands, and to hold the match flame steady as he lit it. He took three or four long drags, then laid the cigarette down and stood up.

Facing the bureau mirror, he dropped into a slight crouch, then whipped his hand toward his gun. The mirror showed him the gun clearing leather in a series of jerks and twitches, before the muzzle was lined up straight and true on the target.

He tried it again and again, and then sat down and picked up his cigarette. There was no use kidding himself. There was no speed in his draw. Once his gun was out, he was an accurate shot. But he was slower on the draw than George Adams had been.

And George had died before the gun of Grat Brucker; died hearing, as his last sounds on earth, the roar of Brucker's gun, and that rasping laugh of the big bearded killer. Less than two weeks ago, that had been.

Grat Brucker had started out to build himself a range empire. George Adams had been one of those to stand in his way. So Grat had picked a fight with George, and when it was over, the obstacle had been removed.

Grat was moving fast toward his goal of power and conquest. It had taken him less than two weeks to set the stage to remove him, Ray thought. To Brucker, Ray Turner was only another man that stood in his way, and therefore had to be killed. But to Ray Turner, the life that Grat Brucker sought was the most precious thing. . . .

He tried to break his thoughts off, but they kept turning back to the day two weeks ago. He could see Brucker stepping out into the street, and then George stepping out to meet him. Like sleepwalkers, they had moved slowly toward each other.

Sheriff Windberger and Niles Prang were the only other two men on the street. The old lawman's voice had cut through the silence, arguing with the two of them to hold off, pleading with Brucker to stop.

"George can stop it," Brucker had jeered. "He's still got time to

hit leather and ride. How about it, George?"

Niles Prang had been leaning against a store front, the perpetual, tobacco-stained grin on his face, his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. Brucker made his foreman stand out in plain sight during those fights to keep down talk of any bush-whacking tricks.

"How about it, George?" Sheriff Windberger's voice was loud and insistent. "Call this whole thing off!"

Adams hadn't replied. He had just shaken his head, his lips tight, his eyes riveted on Grat Brucker's big right hand.

Then Brucker had laughed. There was a blur of motion as both men's hands dipped toward their guns. And with Brucker's ghastly cackle still ringing in the air, two guns had blasted together. George Adams had matched Brucker's draw!

For a wild instant, then, hope had surged through Ray Turner, only to die in that same instant. There had been the solid thud of lead striking flesh, and George had swayed. But Brucker was still laughing; laughing at a futile spurt of dust at his feet where George's bullet had struck. . . .

Suddenly Ray found himself headed for the street again. He felt as if he had to get some air, had to draw in great lungfuls of it, to stave off the feeling of suffocation that gripped him. He slammed out the hotel doors and into the street, then slowed down, conscious that the few people nearby were staring at him. Then he heard Niles Prang's laugh.

"Up in your room practicing your draw, eh, Ray?" the foreman sneered. "Good idea, but it's a little late to start that now, ain't it?"

Ray felt his face growing blood-red, and saw people turn their eyes away from him. He realized he must have been standing in front of the hotel window, and that the whole town must have seen him drawing in front of the mirror.

"That's enough of that sassy lip of yours, Niles," Sheriff Windberger said harshly, coming up the street. "Shoot off that big mouth of yours any more and I'll throw you in the cooler till this thing's . . . till tonight."

Niles started to argue, then thought better of it. He shrugged his bony shoulders, widened his grin a little and walked off. Sheriff Windberger came on up the street, tugging at his graying mustache.

"Ray, don't be a damn fool," he muttered. "First George Adams—and now you."

"Somebody's got to stop Brucker, ain't they?" Ray asked flatly.

The lawman's face was lined and seamed with worry. "You won't be stopping him, Ray, and you know it. You'll be playing right into his hands. The way to stop Brucker would be to ride out of town without selling him that property of yours. This way, he gets it cheap. But the other way—"

Ray laughed. "He'd use my land anyhow. Same thing."

"You could sue him then. Git a court order for him to stay off your property," suggested the sheriff.

Ray looked into the lawman's worried eyes. "You been wearing that badge a long time, sheriff. Maybe some day differences like this will be settled in the courts. But right now—what do you think?"

The lawman scuffed the dust with the toe of his boot. Ray knew what they were both thinking. There was law in the West, after a fashion. But a man still had to fight to hold what was his. If a man didn't think it was worth fighting for, no court would think he deserved to have it.

"I could see you—up in your room," Windberger said haltingly. "You *are* slower than George. A lot slower."

Ray nodded, tight-lipped. "I know, and it would worry me except for one thing. George beat Grat to the draw. It wasn't speed that beat George. It was . . . I don't exactly know . . . but it wasn't speed alone."

"Whatever it was, it was enough," Sheriff Windberger reminded bluntly. "Remember that, Ray."

Ray nodded and crossed the street to Collins' saloon. He stepped quietly through the swinging doors and up to the bar.

". . . I'm willing to take all bets that it'll rain today!" Sully Mason was arguing h e a t e d l y. "This contraption says it's going to rain, and I'll back it with hard cash!"

"But there ain't a cloud in the sky!" Len Haverman guffawed. "And this ain't even the rainy season."

"I'll back it with cash!" Sully insisted. "It'll rain before the day's over. . . ."

"Another one, Ray?" Collins asked, and the talk in the saloon died down. The saloonman poured a drink and Ray downed it neat. As he turned to leave, Sully called after him.

"Don't rush off, Ray. Stick around and watch me take these scoffers to the cleaners."

"I got more important things to do than argue whether it'll rain or not!" Ray rapped and walked out. Out on the street, he cursed himself bitterly. Sully had been trying to be friendly, and Ray had snarled at him like a strange dog.

Was his nerve giving away? Was that Grat Brucker's secret in winning those fights of his? It had been yesterday afternoon that Grat had told him he had twenty-four hours to leave town. At three o'clock this afternoon the time would be up. Did Grat deliberately tell a man that far ahead, so that the long hours of waiting would be bound to raw up his opponent's nerves to the breaking point?

III

Ray walked through the length of town and down to the little creek at the edge of town. He sat down on the bank and stared into the water. He was convinced that Brucker had a trick. There had to be some trick to the whole thing. George Adams had beaten Brucker to the draw, but Brucker had come out of that fight alive.

But Ray shook his head as he wondered about the long hours of waiting. It would be as hard on Brucker's nerve to wait that twenty-four hours, as it was on the other man's nerve.

Then Ray's head lifted quickly, and for the first time since George Adams had died, he grinned happily. Brucker's laugh!

That was it! That raspy, gloating chuckle, just before the big man went for his gun. The very sound of it set a man's nerves on edge; it was enough to throw a man off balance for the fraction of a second. It was . . .

"Ray!"

He whirled, and his heart started the old familiar pounding as it always did at the sight of Winifred Caldwell. Her face was white, and there was stark, raw fear in her eyes.

"Ray, you're not going through with it! It . . . it would be suicide! I just heard about it this morning and came straight to town. Where's your horse . . . I'll go with you . . ."

He shook his head and saw the dread build up in her eyes, saw the quiver of her lips as she tried to fight back tears.

"It's going to be all right," he said as he got to his feet. He put his arm gently around her shoulders and tilted her strained face upward. "I just figured out Brucker's secret —the thing that licked George."

"What do you mean?"

Ray grinned. He felt elated, like a little boy who's worked out a particularly hard arithmetic problem by himself.

"Brucker's not fast, but he learned somewhere along the line that that laugh of his rubbed a man's nerves —threw a man off balance for a minute—and he laughs just before he draws . . ."

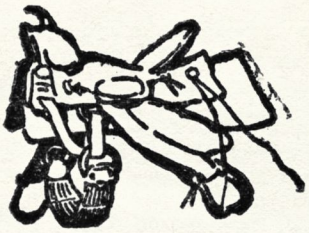
He read the fear and disbelief in Winifred's eyes. "No, Ray, it's not as simple as that. You're grabbing at straws." She gripped his arms tight. "I won't let you do it— I won't! Not after all we've planned —the things we hope to do."

"It's got to be this way," he told her simply.

"No, I won't believe that. We can go away, and this time we won't wait for you to get your ranch going before we get married. We'll get married right away, and build the ranch up together."

A shadow raced across the quiet waters of the little creek, and Ray looked up at the sky. There were clouds. They were small, but they were gathering. In spite of himself, he grinned. So Sully Mason's barometer had been right, after all. It was beginning to look like rain.

Funny, he thought, now he was



interested in seeing whether it would rain or not. His interest in his surroundings and happenings was coming back, stronger than ever. Rain! In his mind's eye, he could see his parched range begin to come alive again. It was going to be a good year, after all. The price of beef was up, and with the drought broken, he'd be able to ship a sizable herd, come roundup time.

"It's got to be this way, Winnie," he said. "We've got to hang on to the ranch we have now, or we'll never have a ranch. If I ran from this and started over some place else, it would be the same story. Somebody would try to crowd me off and I wouldn't know how to stand and fight. I'd only know how to run. Don't you see?"

"No!" she burst out. "I'll never see it that way!" The tears came then, brimming up and spilling down her cheeks. Ray tried to draw her close, but she twisted free and ran for her horse. She climbed into the saddle and rode off without looking back.

Ray sighed and looked up at the sky. *I know Brucker's secret, he thought.* Overhead, the dark rain clouds were gathering fast. . . .

Ray stood in Rip Collins' saloon, with a glass of beer untouched before him. Rip's place was well filled, now. Men had been riding in all morning. Everybody within a twenty-mile radius who could get to town that day had come in.

Looking at their faces, Ray could read their thoughts plainly. There was a stubborn hope in them, he thought, that he would down Grat Brucker. But there was also a gnawing dread that they'd see him go down like George Adams.

A faint twinge of a smile touched his lips as he shoved his hands in his pants pocket. His probing fingers found something soft and fluffy. Cotton. It was silly, maybe. A man forewarned shouldn't let that raspy, gloating laugh get under his nerves.

But he was taking no chances. When he walked into the street to meet Grat Brucker, there'd be cotton in his ears to shut out that sound. He was slow on the draw, but he could hit what he shot at, once his gun was clear of leather.

Sheriff Windberger came in, and a soft murmur went through the crowd as the lawman stopped at the bar beside Ray.

"It's five minutes to three, Ray," Windberger said. "You still got time. Don't be a fool—ride out."

For an answer, Ray carefully lifted his gun out. With slow, sure movements he checked its mechanism and slipped a live shell in the chamber under the hammer where he usually carried an empty cartridge.

"Why don't you try to talk Grat Brucker out of it?" he suggested.

"I'm going to," the lawman said simply. "As soon as he hits town." He rubbed a weary hand over his face. "It's all so damn senseless."

A loud clap of thunder rolled along the streets of the town. Ray looked out the windows of the saloon. There was no sunlight on the street now, and the patch of sky he could see was covered with heavy masses of rain clouds.

"Wish I'd gotten in on some of that betting with you, Sully," he called to the newspaper editor. "We'd been winners. It's sure gonna rain."

The editor was drawing circles on the bar with the wet bottom of his whiskey glass. He didn't look up. "Yeah," he muttered. "Clouding up, all right."

"Grat Brucker just rode in," somebody near the door said, and Sheriff Windberger hurried away.

Ray took a sip of the beer and then set the glass down again. "This one's getting warm, Rip," he said. "Draw me a cool one, and I'll be back for it in a minute."

With a steady stride, he walked to the batwing doors and pushed through them. His fingers were rolling the cotton into little balls and he stuffed them into his ears.

The main street was deserted except for himself and three other figures. He glanced up at the sky, before looking at those three figures. The clouds were hanging low and heavy, and any moment they might loose their life-giving rain. The empty street looked dark and gloomy with not a streak of sunlight breaking through. Ray took all this in, then turned his attention to the three men in the street.

He started to ignore the first one. That was Niles Prang. The little foreman was in his usual position, leaning against a store building, in plain sight of the whole town. Ray started to shift his gaze from Prang, but didn't. Instead, his eyes narrowed.

He's not grinning, Ray thought. The perpetual grin had left the foreman's face. The distance was too far to make sure, but Prang seemed to have a worried look on his face. Ray's heart leaped. Had the little foreman seen him stuff his ears with cotton, and guessed the reason? He grinned tightly and let his eyes turn up the street.

IV

Grat Brucker, six foot, two hundred pounds of surly temper, had climbed out of the saddle. Sheriff Windberger had stepped in front of him and now stood between Ray and Brucker. Ray could see the lawman talking earnestly to the rancher.

Ray stepped off the sidewalk and started walking. And Grat Brucker pushed the lawman to one side. The huge, bearded killer spread his feet wide in an attitude of waiting.

"So I've got to come after you, Brucker!" Ray called out. "All the others you've walked to meet. But if that's the way . . ."

His voice trailed off, and a cold, cold chill ran up his spine and spread to every fiber of his body.

The cotton! In his haste he had stuffed it in quickly and it was working loose!

He started to lift his hands to shove it back in; then realized that at the slightest movement of his hands, Brucker would draw. His lips were suddenly dry and hot, and the old familiar hollow feeling was back in his stomach. His legs seemed heavy as lead as he lifted them. He wondered if the cotton was loose enough for him to hear. And then, the next moment, he had the answer to that.

"I'm asking you for the last time, Grat!" Sheriff Windberger's voice hit Ray's eardrums plainly. "Call this damn business off. This thing can be settled without gunfire!"

Grat was still standing wide-legged, as Ray approached. He knew he had slowed his walk, and it was as if he were walking against an invisible barrier that he had to push against. Brucker's gaze flitted for an instant to Niles Prang, and then to the lawman.

Ray found time to puzzle over that. Grat Brucker wasn't the type of man to shift his gaze at a time like this. And then Ray's puzzlement turned to outright wonder, as Brucker spoke.

"All right, sheriff," the bearded killer said loudly, and Ray wondered if he were imagining that note of panic in Brucker's voice. Or was it really there? "Maybe we can settle this thing without guns. I'm willing to stall off for another twenty-four hours!"

A sigh seemed to run through the town, half of wonder, half of relief.

Ray's legs quit moving. He stood stock-still, there in the middle of the dusty street.

"Hear that, Ray Turner!" Brucker's voice held its old-time bluster. "I'm giving you twenty-four hours more. You know what I want, and you can save yourself within the next twenty-four hours. I want that land of mine that you're squatting on."

"That land's mine. I bought it. You were the squatter—using it without owning it." Ray was surprised at the clear sound of his own voice.

A curious expression flitted across Brucker's face, and again he looked away from Ray. This time he looked up at the low-hanging clouds.

"Now, Ray," Sheriff Windberger yelled, "Grat's being reasonable. Let's go in Rip's place and talk this thing over."

Ray shook his head quickly, and the little plugs of cotton fell out. A grin, a hard, cold grin, twisted his face as he felt the cotton leave his ears. He dropped into a slight crouch, and his voice rapped like pistol shots.

"Brucker! I'm giving *you* five minutes to leave town!"

His whole attention was centered on Brucker, and he saw the effect those words had on the big man. It was as if the bearded giant had been struck a physical blow.

"Now, Ray . . ." The sheriff's pleading voice broke the silence.

"Not twenty-four hours, Brucker." Ray's voice was like icicles being broken off a house eave with a stick. "Not even five hours. *Five minutes!*"

Grat Brucker's chest heaved as he

sucked in a lungful of air. His big hands clenched and loosed almost as though he were nervous.

"You fool!" His voice was hoarse and shaky. "I'm giving you your chance . . ."

Ray was walking forward now with slow, even strides. His right hand was tense and expectant.

"You're not giving me a thing, Brucker, and you know it," he rapped out. "Look up at those clouds! They ruined your murder trap, didn't they? In twenty-four hours the sun will be shining again, and Niles Prang can shine his mirror in my eyes—*Draw*, damn you!"

A hoarse cry broke from Grat Brucker's lips. His hand jerked spasmodically for his gun, but his fingers fumbled pitifully as he tried to draw the weapon. A laugh, a harsh, rasping, gloating laugh floated through the streets. It came from Ray Turner's lips, as his gun lifted and its muzzle lined on Grat Brucker's stomach.

"No!" Fear tore the cry from Brucker's lips. He flung his gun aside as if it were red hot. Turning, he ran, a shambling, stumbling run toward where his horse was waiting.

"Stop, Grat, or I'll fire!" Ray waited until he saw Brucker slow down, then turned and walked over to Niles Prang. The little foreman waited, wooden-faced until he was quite near, then he broke and started to run. Ray lunged forward and caught him.

He slammed the little man against a building and held him easily while he fished in Prang's shirt pocket and, after a moment, brought out a small round mirror.

"I kept thinking about George," Ray said, as the crowd began to gather around. "He beat Brucker to the draw. Then, with his gun out, he sort of hesitated and blinked his eyes —and his shot wasn't anywhere close to Brucker!" He turned as Sheriff Windberger pushed Grat Brucker through the crowd. Brucker's face was still a ghastly white under his beard.

"I knew you had a trick, Grat," Ray said, "but I kept thinking it was that laugh of yours—till I saw you glance up at the clouds." He turned his face upward as the first drop of rain fell on his cheek. "It looks like the rain broke more than the drought."

THE END

RANGE SAVVY,

BY GENE KING

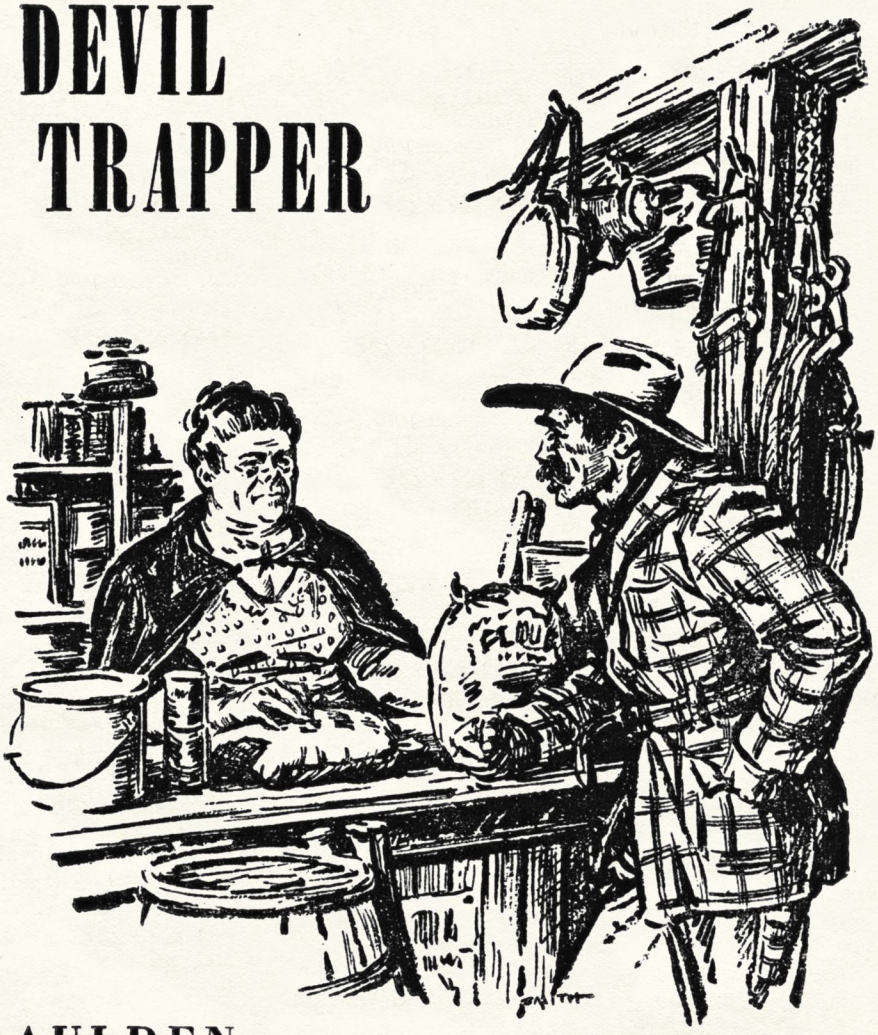
"Tumbling tumbleweeds" is a lilting phrase for the writer of cowboy songs but from a practical standpoint the weeds are a constant nuisance. Uprooted by wind, the big, balloonlike growths skim along the ground, to lodge and accumulate against barb-wire fences. A mass of tumbleweeds surging opposite to the staples can force the latter from the posts, tearing down the loosened wire. Banked against the stapled side of a fence, the weeds will hold indefinitely. If they are not cleared away, wind-blown sand and dirt will, in time, fill in the interstices, forming a solidly packed earth ramp over which stock can cross.

Brands, as any man familiar with the Western range country knows, are an old story. They afford a necessary and positive identification of stock to their owners, and also to cattle buyers and others connected with the business. In Nevada official brands were formerly filed on squares of leather with the brand marks to be registered burned into them. Today that old custom has been done away with and simple drawings on standard-sized cards are kept in steel filing cabinets in the State Brand Registration Office. To keep the records up to date, old brands still active must be re-recorded every five years. Many of the brands are used on both cattle and horses. And in a few cases they are even burned on the hides of hogs.

Rats and mice have few friends, in the West or elsewhere. But metal miners frequently feed the rodents with scraps from their daily lunch pails for they firmly believe the creatures, which are common in mines, have a sixth sense regarding such underground hazards as cave-ins, or timbering about to give way. Whenever the periodic cracking of mine timbers as the wood adjusts itself to new stresses in the mine workings sends the rats scurrying out of a stope, the men follow suit, certain that disaster is impending.

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.

THE DEVIL IS A TRAPPER



by
RAY GAULDEN

That bloodstained gold cache was so well guarded it could only be stolen over Big Jock Lash's dead body

BIG JOCK LASH opened the door of his cabin and stopped, stood motionless, a frightened look crossing his coarse, bearded face as his mean little eyes went to the rough pine floor, to a spot beneath his bunk. Panic laid its cold hand on him and he cast a furtive glance about the dirty, ill-smelling cabin. Certain that it was empty, he shut the door and went quickly across the room, dropping to his knees beside the crudely constructed bunk.

Big Jock's trembling hands jerked up a loose board in the floor and the fear drained out of him, left him weak with relief. The gold was still there and he laughed, a low, shaky

sound. Then a scowl darkened his face. He could have sworn somebody had been here. A chair was out of place and the cupboard door was open. He went to the cupboard and looked inside.

"Hello the cabin!"

Big Jock spun around and grabbed a rifle down from the wall. He crossed to the door and opened it a crack, his heart pounding. But he relaxed and put the rifle down when he recognized the man coming up the trail toward him.

Bert Mason, a thin, pale-eyed little man, ran a trading post about a mile from Jock's place. He came close, but Jock did not invite him inside the cabin.

"Been to town," said Mason. "Just thought I'd drop by and tell you what happened the other night."

Big Jock already knew what had happened, but he played dumb. "Somethin' wrong?" he asked.

Mason nodded. "Yeah, old man Bailey was found murdered in the back room of his store. Reckon somebody did it to get all that gold he's been hoardin'."

Jock put on a concerned expression. "Too bad. They got any idea who done it?"

Mason shook his head. "No. Bailey didn't have an enemy in the world. The sheriff was over from the county seat, but he said there wasn't any clues."

Mason went on and Jock closed the door. As he began building a fire in the stove, he told himself he didn't have a thing to worry about. He would just go on working his trap line for a few months, until the murder had been forgotten, and then he'd take the gold and head for Denver. That dark-eyed little dancer down there maybe wouldn't give him such a cold shoulder the next time. She had been mighty snooty at first, wouldn't even have a drink with him. But he had an idea that when she got a glimpse of some of those gold nuggets, she'd sing a different kind of tune.

Jock was pretty proud of himself and he grinned as he lay in his bunk that night and thought of the future. New clothes and champagne to drink and dollar cigars to smoke. The wind came up after a while and Jock's elation faded. He shivered and drew the covers up closer about him. Damn those pine trees, anyhow. They had a way of sighing that was almost human.

He got up and took a long pull from a gallon jug. When he went back to his bunk he put his six-gun under the pillow. He wondered about Mason. Did the man suspect something? Was he after the gold?

The next morning Big Jock decided to go over to Mason's trading post to get some things he needed. He threw one last look at the spot where the treasure was hidden, locked both the front and back doors, and went

out, walking a mile across the mountain side to Mason's place.

As he entered the low-roofed log building he saw Mason's wife, a fat, slovenly woman, behind the counter. She looked at Jock with unfriendly eyes. She had never liked him since one time when he had attempted to cheat her husband on some pelts he had sold him.

Jock told her what he wanted—some canned milk, flour and sugar. When she had put the things on the counter, the trapper asked: "Bert around?"

Mrs. Mason shook her head. "No, he left about an hour ago. He didn't say where he was going."

Jock paid her for the things and wondered if he didn't detect some secretive light in her eyes. He went out and headed back toward his cabin, walking swiftly, a small voice back in his head whispering to him, telling him to hurry. Maybe Mason had been watching when he left this morning. Maybe the man was down there now, trying to get his hands on the hidden gold.

Big Jock began to run and when he broke into the clearing before his cabin, his heart was thumping wildly. He went forward cautiously and tried the door. It was still locked and he looked carefully to see if the lock had been tampered with. He wasn't sure. Once more he found the gold just as he had left it. But again there was that feeling that someone had been prowling around.

That night Jock sat in front of the stove, his jug on the floor beside him. He heard a sound, as if someone were trying to get in the back door, and he crept into the little lean-to kitchen, his gun gripped in his hand, a muscle twitching in the side of his face. Was the doorknob turning or had he been hitting the jug too often? He shot three times through the door, then rushed forward and slid the bolt back, flinging it open.

He crouched there, staring stupidly at the empty doorway and the cold wind began to chill him. Then his eyes moved to a pine thicket not far from the house. Had he seen a man duck into that thicket, or was it his imagination again? Well, he wasn't going outside the cabin to try to find out.

Big Jock spent the rest of the night by the fire, cursing himself for being a superstitious fool. And he kept hitting the jug, trying to fight down his mounting fear. Someone was after the gold, of that he was almost certain. And he had a pretty good idea who it was.

What was he going to do about it? He couldn't stay here in the cabin all the time guarding the gold. Tomorrow he would have to see after his trap line. Trap line . . . Traps. . . . That gave him an idea and a plan began to form in his mind. He glanced at the shotgun on the wall and a cunning gleam came into his evil little eyes.

Early next morning Jock shrugged

into his heavy coat and let himself out the back door, locking it behind him. He wondered if Mason was out there somewhere watching him. But he didn't look around and he tried not to act as if he suspected anything. He would go ahead and see after his trap line and give the man a chance to search the cabin. He wasn't worried about the gold being discovered. He had even left the front door of the cabin unlocked. He grinned slyly and did not look back.

The sky was slate-colored and there was a bite to the wind lashing down from the higher peaks. The first two traps Jock found empty. He went on and soon it began to snow. He scowled and pulled his collar up tighter about his neck. Finally he came to Clear Creek, to the place where he usually crossed. There was an old log thrown across the boulder-filled stream and he had been telling himself that he should replace it with a new one. But, somehow, he had never gotten around to it.

He was walking across the log, was in the middle of it when the rotten piece of timber gave way. Jock uttered a little cry and waved his arms wildly. He struck the cold water and he was off balance. His head slammed against a big rock and the blow stunned him. A wave of blackness rolled over him. Desperately, he fought to hold onto consciousness. Half-blind with pain, but lashed by fear, he managed to drag himself from the stream and onto the bank. Then he passed out.

When Jock opened his eyes again, he was sick and cold and his wet clothing had frozen to his body. The mountainside was white and it was still snowing hard—a swirling white curtain through which it was difficult to see. He struggled to his feet, his head spinning crazily, unable to think clearly. He knew he could never make it back to his cabin in this shape. Dimly he remembered the trading post and began moving in that direction, his head down against the white flakes needling his face, blinding him.

He floundered through the drifts, half sobbing, cursing the pain in his head that caused him to stagger, made it hard for him to figure where he was going. He was colder than he had ever been in his life and he knew with growing panic that unless he reached shelter soon, he would be a thing of ice, left out here in the cold for the hungry wolves to find and devour.

He fell into a shallow gully, sprawled on his face and lay there awhile, not wanting to get up, wanting to go to sleep. But a voice kept screaming at him, telling him he had to go on. He staggered ahead, rubbing his hands across his eyes, trying to figure out where he was. He should be near Mason's place by now.

Big Jock plunged ahead into that gray, bleak world of snow and wind. A nerve-shattering fear gnawed at his insides. He was lost. He would never live to spend the gold. He would never see that girl in Denver and live

the life of Riley as he had planned. If only the fog would lift from his head, he might be able to figure out where he was.

Then a glad cry tore from his lips and he moved faster as he sighted a building not far ahead. Laughing and crying and muttering things that didn't make sense, he struggled through the piled-high snow. He wasn't going to freeze to death. This was Mason's place. There would be a fire and whiskey to warm his insides.

He reached the door and slumped against it, yelling hoarsely, cursing the stupid fools. But no one came and finally he pulled himself up and fumbled with the knob, swung the door open. Then a great blast filled his ears and something like a giant hand struck him, driving him back.

He sank down in the snow, knowing vaguely what had happened. Delirious, he had returned to his own cabin. That piece of twine he had tied to the door had been jerked tight, pulling the trigger of the shotgun he had fastened to the table. Big Jock Lash had walked into his own death trap.

The pine trees whispered mockingly as the darkness closed in on him, and those voices back in his head were jabbering again, telling Big Jock that where he was going now he would have no need for the stolen gold he had tried so hard to guard.

THE END

PRAIRIE DOGS

by

Jim West

WHEN the white man reached the West innumerable colonies of wide-eyed, chubby little prairie dogs dotted the prairies. The rodents, usually fat as butter, were a reddish color and had stubby black tails. Good-sized ones weighed six pounds.

At first the dogs were a curiosity. Many a pioneer hunter rated his marksmanship by his ability to hit and retrieve a prairie dog. The chances are, more hits were scored than credit was given for. The difficulty in bagging a prairie dog came from the speed with which it managed, even when struck, to fall into its hole and roll out of sight.

Nor was it safe to reach into a prairie dog's den to try to draw out a shot dog. Rattlesnakes sometimes lived in the same dens. There was nothing neighborly about this communal life. The snakes feasted on young prairie dogs, and the dogs have been known to break up their artfully contrived dens and bury in them the unwelcome snakes.

As the West settled up, prairie dogs became a nuisance, then a menace. The dens in which the colonies lived were dangerous for a rider. They could break a horse's leg. Cattlemen viewed them seriously. Farmers liked them no better, and for an additional reason. As night raiders, prairie dogs would nibble a planted field down to zero in nothing flat.

The creatures were exterminated ruthlessly by government agencies and land owners alike. In some prairie States it was made compulsory by law for land owners to destroy all prairie dog colonies on their premises.

Under an attack of that sort countless thousands of the animals were killed. Others seem to have migrated, moving West ahead of the pioneer settlers and establishing their colonies in the leaner, semi-arid sections. Even there they have largely been rooted out of their homes. Nowadays the queer mounds that form the protecting rims of their underground colonies are not apt to be encountered except in the more remote regions of the country.

There is, or was a few years ago, quite a colony, a regular dog town back in the desert east of the Albuquerque highway a few miles south of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Others are likely to be found in the Texas Panhandle and parts of Oklahoma.

Essentially dry-land dwellers, prairie dogs appear to exist solely on grass and green stuff. But they are not choosey. They will eat whatever type or kind is handy, even storing, in cold country, a winter supply in their dens like squirrels. They are night feeders.

The animals get their name because of the sharp, shrill bark they emit when alarmed. To a prairie dog an alarm means a dive, almost faster than the eye can follow, far down into the safety of their dens.

One reason for the apparent machine-gun speed with which a prairie dog can disappear is the surface construction of the den which is rimmed with a solidly packed, waterproof fairly high embankment. Unless a person is right over the den itself, the split second a prairie dog clears the embankment, his favorite sunning place in daytime, he vanishes from sight.

The dogs have to be quick in their almost automatic tumbling into the den. It is the only defense the animals have. Their short, stubby legs don't fit them for running, nor are they creatures adapted to a standing fight.

Prairie-dog burrows are no simple holes in the ground. They are in their own way marvels of instinctive animal construction and sagacity. The tunnels slant down from the opening for about fifteen feet, take a right-angled turn, and range upward almost the same distance. The second or upward slanting part provides the living quarters and has special "rooms" dug out from the main passageway, affording a regular underground apartment house. Some of the rooms appear to be used for storing grass, and others as nurseries for the young.

Perhaps the most puzzling thing of all about the prairie dog's existence in dry country is his source of water. Old-timers and scientists alike still wonder where he gets it.

Aside from rattlesnakes and man himself, the hawk, eagle, coyote, badger and ferret are the principal enemies of the prairie dog. Both badger and ferret, fast diggers in their own right, can burrow down into a prairie dog village after its defenseless inhabitants.

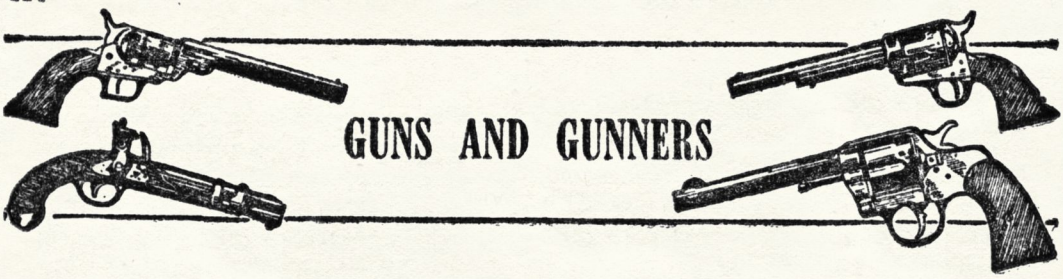
The hawk and eagle, on the other hand, are stymied if the little creatures see or sense the birds' bullet-speed dives and have so much as a split second in which to somersault into their dens. The deep burrows are likewise safe from coyote depredations.

Coyotes rely on stealth and cunning in capturing prairie dogs. During a rain coyotes have been observed breaking down the protective embankment around a burrow entrance, letting the water flood the dens and then catching the hapless prairie dogs as they scurried out to escape drowning.

Old-time Westerners claim coyotes sometimes hunt prairie dogs in pairs. The first coyote loping up to a burrow scatters the frightened creatures into the depths of their village—and moves on. A short time later the prairie dogs' natural curiosity brings them out again to see what became of coyote number one. And coyote number two having crept up while the prairie dogs were in hiding is waiting at the den entrance to seize the unsuspecting morsels. At intervals the lead coyote and his companion swap positions, thus insuring a prairie dog meal for both.

Be that as it may, it is a fact that coyotes do destroy an incredibly large number of prairie dogs each year in sections where the latter are still numerous throughout the West.

THE END



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WELL, we are about to start another year. Just what did the first post-war year do for the American gun bug—and what will this year, 1947, have to offer?

Little 1946 got off to a bad start. In fact, his short life was half over before he really got started, and with stunted growth, there was little he could do.

Firearms came back on the market. You didn't get your long-awaited gun? Here's the reason. Strikes in steel, coal, copper, brass, lead, paper and chemicals. I do not recall any strikes in the arms or ammunition industries. But strikes have a way of reaching into everything, creating havoc. There were plenty of shutdowns in the industry. Ammunition makers couldn't get lead, and it takes over two pounds of lead to every box of high-velocity 12-gauge shells you buy. They couldn't get brass, or copper, or paper, or chemicals. Despite this, they did a good job.

Let's look over 1946. Winchester brought out nothing new. It slowly returned to civilian production after rebuilding much of its factory equipment. Only the most popular rifles were made at first, because of the big pile of orders awaiting them. Slowly other favorites were added. Some models have not been placed on the market yet, but will be by the middle of 1947.

Remington was about in the same boat. Only the most popular models were produced, but it won't be long now.

Savage and its subsidiary, Stevens, were a little different. Stevens produced most of its line, but Savage was moving. The plant at Utica, N. Y., was converted at the start to manufacture their professional refrigeration equipment, and the gun machinery was moved to Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, into a big war plant operated by Stevens during war years to produce British rifles. The plant is now in partial production on the Savage line, and in a short time will be at it in full stride.

Harrington & Richardson, of Worcester, Massachusetts, was doing fairly well with its reconversion. It brought out some new rifles it had never produced before, and is now about at normal.

Smith & Wesson had a better break. Police departments had piled in new gun orders, mostly for the famous Military and Police .38 Special revolver, a favorite for forty years. Now it happens that S&W made these by countless thousands, first for the

British, and later for the U. S. Army and Navy. Thus there wasn't a great deal of "reconversion." Early in 1946 they were in full blast. Thousands were going to fill priority orders, and by mid-1946, you could get this gun on the retail market.

The S&W target line didn't fare so well. So many orders for the standard model. It was announced that target models would be ready about April 1st. Actually production on them did not get underway until late fall. You should be able to get what you want before spring.

Colt didn't do so well. Colt made very few hand guns during the war. The Army kept them busy on machine guns, and when the war ended, Colt had many parts and experimental contracts. By mid-1946 it was producing some police guns, and just a few target models started through by the latter part of the year. Parts of the plant are still on military contract, but it should be producing the full line of civilian guns by mid-1947.

The same thing is true of the ammunition boys—they produced, but not as much as they desired to take care of the demand. Ammunition was tight in 1946, but not impossible to get if you shopped around for the more popular cartridges. By mid-1947, the industry hopes to be in a position to take care of all orders.

As for new guns—in getting around at the plants, I have seen a number of them, but to bring out a new gun in these times would be foolish. The firearms manufacturers can't take the time to tool up for them. A few new ones will appear in 1947, as they are ready to go, but others will not be ready before 1948.

Smith & Wesson came out with the new Masterpiece line of target revolvers a couple of months ago, although these were supposed to have been ready in April. Three new guns, matching target weapons in .22, .32 and .38 Special are ready. Ribbed barrels, improved speed action, improved double action, easier-to-handle hammer, and other features make these guns excellent target models. Accumulated orders will take care of the output into the spring of 1947.

And a final bit of warning. This department cannot tell you where you can purchase parts or get repairs, and ammunition for your foreign military weapons brought in as "trophies." Only a few of the hundreds of foreign cartridges have ever been made in this country. No repair parts have been made.

But some ex-GI's are cashing in. They have a "trophy" on their hands. Countless thousands of these foreign guns, both military and sporting types, are now offered for sale at fabulous prices. Don't buy them unless you are a collector, and don't pay much because most of them turn out to be more or less worthless.

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.

WHERE TO GO

BY JOHN NORTH

Few wild animals are as wary of capture or as hard to trap as the fox.

For generations this crafty fur bearer has provided a handsome revenue for trappers, sport for the hunter and, in fox-infested areas, a headache for the farmer. Not so long ago one important poultry-raising section in Oregon—Yamhill County—reported 205 turkeys and 104 chickens killed on four ranches by foxes in a single month. Similar farm depredations have occurred in other widespread parts of the country.

That's bad business. There has been a large increase in the fox population during the recent war years. And Br'er Renard, when his numbers are not held in check, can cause serious economic losses to farmers in poultry and sometimes other farm animals.

The farmer's loss, however, may be the trapper's gain. Throughout the United States fox hunters and trappers should be in for several bumper seasons.

Reader C. F., of Racine, Wisconsin, whose just-received letter brought up the fox question, has asked for some general information on foxes and fox trapping. And we're mighty glad to comply with his request, to the very best of our ability.

Eliminating the Arctic fox of the Far North and Alaska, the two principal fox families in the United States are the red fox and the gray fox. The kit and desert foxes familiar to the far western plains and desert country are, as far as the nation as a whole is concerned, of relatively little economic importance. They are small individuals anyhow, yellowish-gray with a white throat and a black tip on their tails, and weigh on an average slightly less than five pounds.

Among the red foxes, though their common color is red or reddish-yellow, there are three definite color phases: Red, of course; also black or silver (a black with silver-tipped hairs), and the cross. Markings of the cross fox display a dark band along the back and another across the shoulders forming a distinct "cross" on the skin. Hence the name.

All or any of these color types may show up in a single litter of red fox pups. Mature red foxes average about ten pounds. All have a large bushy tail, that is usually white-tipped.

Reds are the smartest foxes, as a rule, and prefer fairly open country with some brush covering for protection such as is often found on

farm lands. On the whole their range is not extensive. Red foxes, mostly active at night, seldom rove more than five miles from their homes or dens. Now and then exceptional individuals will break this general rule.

The gray foxes, averaging perhaps eight pounds in weight for adults, are smaller than the reds and are not customarily credited with as much cunning as their larger brothers. Red and gray foxes overlap in many parts of the country. The rule, however, is that reds are the more abundant in cold regions, grays in warmer areas particularly in lightly timbered, brushy and swampy sections.

From the trapper's standpoint, the red fox has the pelt that brings in the most money.

While conservation officials have declared that foxes in moderate numbers are not excessively destructive, heavy infestations in a single area should be trapped out or their numbers otherwise cut down. So, of course, should individuals who have taken to raiding poultry, barnyard chickens or other small stock.

It takes a smart trapper to make consistently successful fox sets, particularly red fox sets. To start with, he has to prove he's smarter than the fox.

The No. 2, either double spring or coil spring steel trap, makes a good fox trap. No. 3 double spring traps are sometimes used for foxes, but most trappers consider them larger than is really necessary.

Because foxes have a keen scent sense backed by a superlative caution, both new and old fox traps should be boiled half an hour or more with twigs of spruce, hemlock, birch, sassafras or other scented growths to remove any odor a fox might shy away from. Along these same lines and for the same reason, a setting cloth and gloves should always be used in making a fox set. A cloth of sheepskin, or calfhide arouses less suspicion than a canvas cloth. If canvas is used, bury it in the ground a few days to remove any human scent. Do the same with canvas gloves. Then keep the gloves to use only when setting your fox traps.

The setting cloth, about 3 feet square, is used to kneel on when digging the hole in which you wish to set your fox trap. A pungent scent lure is commonly used to attract foxes to the set. A bait set for foxes may be used also, by burying a small piece of tainted meat, or tainted woodchuck, rabbit, squirrel or chicken beneath the trap.

And one more tip: Visit your traplines daily, but when you make your rounds don't go any closer to them than is necessary to see whether they have been disturbed or not. You'll catch more foxes that way.

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

PROSPECTING for gold is glamorous. But there is money too in the discovery of new deposits of such primary industrial metals as copper, lead and zinc.

Outcrops of the important commercial ores of these so-called base metals can lead to the development of substantial mining properties.

Even if "big" mines do not result, smaller mines may be uncovered that will pay the prospector to work himself, either with the aid of a partner or two, or by hiring a modest amount of mining help. There are literally hundreds of such mines in the West today. Usually they ship their ore to local mills or custom smelters for final treatment.

Planning a long-range prospecting trip into Idaho's minerally rich backcountry areas, Reader H. S., of Knoxville, Tennessee, has recently asked us for some data on copper ores, one of the most important of all modern industrial metals. "And," his letter added, "can you tell me if minable copper deposits have ever been found in Idaho? If so, in what general localities?"

Idaho, high on the list of western States with large future prospecting possibilities, has quite a few copper mines under development, H. S., and a still greater number of already discovered but undeveloped veins. How many potential, workable new copper deposits await the enterprise of postwar prospectors and mining men is anybody's guess.

All we can do here, not being crystal-gazers by trade or avocation, is tell you where copper has been found or produced in Idaho and the sections that therefore seem the more promising for future possible discoveries.

So far, Custer, Lemhi and Shoshone have been the most important copper-producing counties in Idaho. From discoveries made but not yet fully developed, Washington and Adams Counties may eventually become increasingly important in Idaho's copper-production picture.

Aside from the five above-named sections, promising copper deposits or individual producing copper mines occur in Bonner, Idaho, Blaine, Butte, Clearwater, Latah, and Lewis Counties. It is noteworthy that in Idaho practically all the copper ores so far discovered have carried appreciable amounts of gold and silver along with the base metal.

Taking only the counties named, the Seven Devils district and surrounding mining districts in Adams County appear to be that county's best copper-prospecting bet. Copper

possibilities in this general region lap over into adjacent portions of Washington County to the south.

Custer County, in the heart of central Idaho's mountain wilderness area, has been shipping copper ore from properties near Mackay in the Alder Creek district during recent years. In Lemhi County, another excellent all-around back-country prospecting and mining section, varying amounts of copper-bearing ore have been shipped from the Blue Wing and Eureka mining districts.

Up in the steeply mountainous Idaho Panhandle, Shoshone County, long the largest silver-producing area in the United States and the second largest producer of lead and zinc, annually turns out the bulk of the Gem State's copper output. Some three-fourths of Idaho's copper comes from established mines in this highly developed mining region.

To the north Bonner County also may have copper possibilities. Blaine County, a rugged area in southcentral Idaho, offers perhaps some of the best opportunities for present-day and future prospecting in the State. Its mineral resources include copper possibilities, as well as silver, lead, gold, zinc, antimony and mercury in the valuable metal category. The ores found in this section are frequently high grade, affording an ideal setup for the small-scale operator, or moderate-sized mining outfit.

Butte County, east of Blaine County, is best known for its rich lead-silver ores. It may, however, offer a prospector a speculative chance of encountering copper ores. Gold, tungsten, zinc and manganese are other metals that have already been found and mined there.

Idaho County, primarily a gold producer in the hard-to-reach central section of the State, likewise counts copper among its potential but as yet virtually undeveloped metallic mineral resources. Keep on the lookout for copper ores and copper outcrops in the widespread mining districts, particularly the Crooks Corral district near Lucille.

Complex ores containing copper, gold, silver and lead have been found in the Pierce district in Clearwater County, another famous Idaho gold section. In Latah County, where the principal industries are lumbering and stock raising rather than mining, copper minerals exist in the Hoodoo district near Harvard. Considerable development has been done on at least two deposits there carrying noteworthy values in copper, gold and silver.

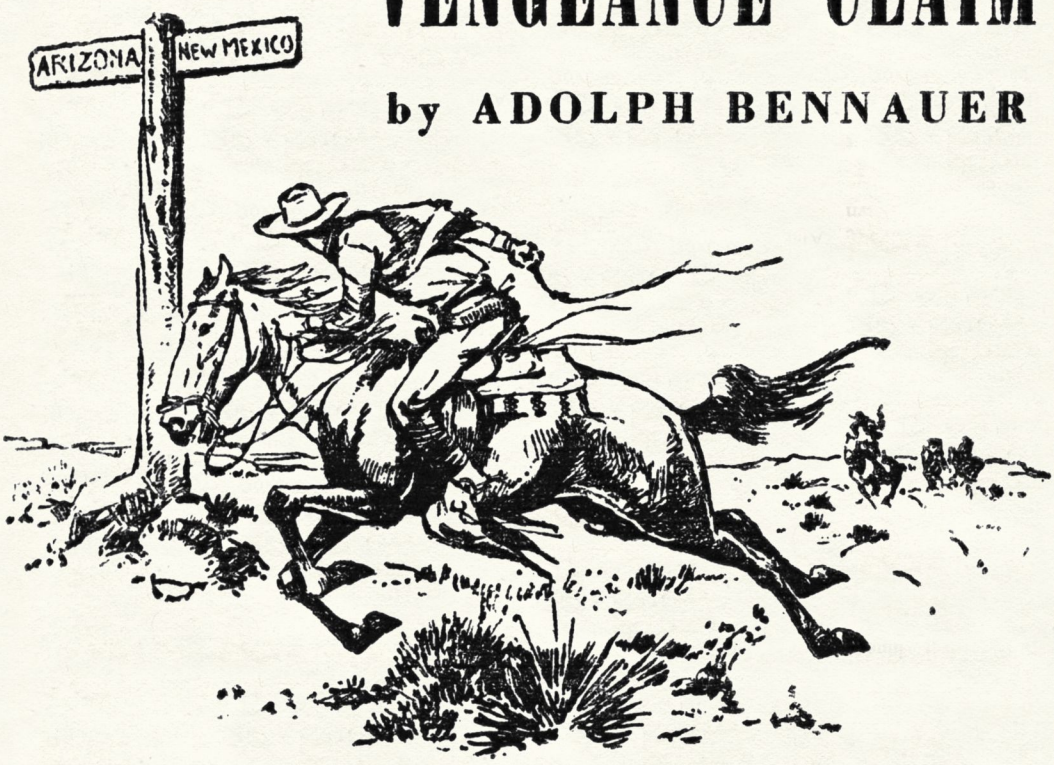
Finally Lewis County lying mostly on the Camas Prairie, with the exception of a small area occupied by the Craig Mountains, also counts copper among its potential mining resources.

Yes, sir, Idaho still affords the prospector a chance to uncover new deposits of many valuable metals. And copper is included in the list.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosng a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Sreet & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.

VENGEANCE CLAIM

by ADOLPH BENNAUER



Keeping two steps ahead of the sheriff was easy enough for Duke Scanlon but he had to make sure he didn't start traveling in circles

A FUNNEL of gray dust poured back from the flying hoofs of the palomino. Sweat streaked the game animal's flanks and plastered its silken mane against its outstretched neck. But there was no mercy in the heart of the rider. Duke Scanlon's spurred heels continued to bite savagely into the horse's sides, while his black eyes turned every now and then to glance anxiously behind him.

Less than half a mile distant was another dust cloud, a cloud kicked up by the mounts of Sheriff Barlow and his two deputies. Riding fresher horses than Scanlon, the posse, for the past quarter of an hour, had been gaining steadily upon him. But now it began to look as if this gain would prove of no avail. For not more than a mile ahead was the sun-bleached post that marked the boundary line between New Mexico and Arizona, and it seemed that only a stumble or fall could prevent Scanlon from reaching it.

But the palomino did not fall! A few minutes later it flashed triumphantly past the boundary post and Duke Scanlon was safe on Arizona soil! Jerking his horse to a halt, he waited insolently for the posse to come up.

"So sorry, Barlow," he called jeer-

ingly. "You couldn't shoot me down and you couldn't run me down, either! Seems to me, it's about time you were turning in your star and letting someone else take over your job!"

If ever Sheriff Barlow showed his character, he showed it now. There was no futile outburst of anger on his part; his gaunt face was as calm as his voice when he answered.

"Maybe so, Duke! But somehow I don't figure this partin' is goin' to be permanent. It's too bad Arizona won't grant extradition for polecats like yourself, guilty of everything from crooked gamblin' to cold-blooded murder, even if all them charges can't be proven; but I've got a hunch that, sooner or later, you'll be back in New Mexico an' we'll meet again, so I'm aimin' to hang onto my star, just to have it handy."

Scanlon's laugh rang with satisfaction.

"Have it your own way, Barlow! Only I wouldn't advise you to lose any sleep waiting for me! I've cleaned up all the dinero I can in your State, and now I'm going to see what I can do in Arizona. If I have any luck, you'll probably hear about it. Adios, amigo—and take care of yourself!"

Still laughing, he swung back into the trail and continued westward. Since there was no further need for haste, he let the palomino proceed at an easy lope. Besides, he wanted a little leisure to enjoy his triumph over Sheriff Barlow. Despite the latter's calm, Scanlon knew that the sheriff's failure to capture him had hurt deeply and this thought was like balm to the outlaw's evil heart.

Guilty of every crime of which Jeff Barlow had accused him, Duke Scanlon hated the sheriff with all the venom in his soul. In his mind's eye he could picture Barlow waiting for his return — waiting with that supreme confidence which had formerly infuriated Duke, but which he now found merely amusing—and the picture suggested an idea that filled him with unholy delight. Not for any consideration in the world would he return to New Mexico, but he'd locate somewhere near the State line, just beyond the sheriff's reach, and play with Barlow as a cat might play with a mouse!

Near sundown Scanlon reached the Terrapin Hills, a range of treeless undulations running down from the northeast and lying, at this point, about seven miles west of the State line. Following these hills south for another mile or so, he rode into Faro City, a typical desert town of about five hundred inhabitants, boasting a bank, a hotel, half a dozen business houses and a hundred or more weather-beaten dwelling shacks.

As he sought out the livery stable, Scanlon noticed that most of the business establishments were saloons and gambling halls, and his thin lips curled in a cynical smile of satisfaction. No use going any farther! He couldn't think of a more suitable spot than this!

Most elaborate of all the gambling houses in Faro City was the Casa Fortuna. That night found Duke Scanlon sitting at one of its poker tables, though he had not come there merely for the entertainment. He had a very definite purpose in mind and over

five thousand dollars in his money belt to back it. Playing a crooked game, as always, he began to win from the start and, one by one, the other players dropped out. At the end of an hour Scanlon was facing the house dealer alone and his original pile of money had been almost doubled.

"That does it," the houseman announced laconically, as Scanlon raked in another pot. "My table can't stand a loss of more than five thousand in a single night. If you want to play any more, you'll have to see Lew Macey, the proprietor."

A dark, heavy-set man who had been standing behind Scanlon's chair, watching his every move, stepped quietly forward.

"I'm Macey," he stated coolly. "I've still got enough cash in the house to match your pile. Shall we make it a ten-thousand-dollar stake?"

"Get your money on the table," Scanlon told him insolently, "and let's cut for deal!"

Although the sky was the limit at the Casa Fortuna, stakes had never before been as high as ten thousand dollars. As news of the record amount spread, men left the bar, the music and the stage show stopped and everyone surged toward Scanlon's table. Macey won the cut, dealt the cards swiftly, drew two and called his opponent with a full house. Scanlon merely grinned as he laid down a straight flush.

"Sure looks like my lucky night, Macey! But I'm no piker. I'll cut you for the twenty thousand!"

There was resentment and suspicion in Lew Macey's narrowed eyes.

"You know I'm cleaned! What's the gag?"

"You've still got this place," Scanlon hinted. "My twenty thousand against the Casa Fortuna! Sounds fair enough to me. Is it a deal?"

No one breathed in the long moment that the two men studied each other.

"It's a deal," agreed Macey finally.

He drew a card from the deck and turned it face up — the queen of diamonds! Smiling contemptuously, Scanlon slid the deck over to the edge of the table, broke it with a lightning-like flip of his wrist and tossed out the ace of spades! And just as he did so, Macey sprang to his feet.

"I saw that, you dirty—"

His words were cut short by the report of the gun that leaped into Scanlon's right hand and he dropped back into his chair, his head and arms falling limply upon the table.

"Self-defense, gentlemen," snapped Scanlon, his black eyes challenging the crowd. "It was his life or mine! You're all witnesses!"

The tragedy had occurred so quickly that the others had no opportunity to form any opinion regarding it. And by the time they were able to do so, their judgment was biased by the sight of that smoking gun in Duke Scanlon's hand. Since the only law in Faro City was the law of might, this was little cause for wonder. Lew Macey had no intimate friends and he meant nothing to the general townspeople, save as a source of entertainment.

So Duke Scanlon took over the Casa Fortuna and carried on where

Lew Macey had left off. He started the new management with free drinks for all, gave Macey an elaborate funeral which he himself attended, and retained all the former employees on the payroll. His success was even greater and speedier than he had hoped. He was now firmly established in a profitable business within a stone's throw of the State line. All he needed to complete his satisfaction was to have Sheriff Barlow learn about it. And this did not take long!

On the afternoon of the third day after Scanlon's arrival, Barlow walked into the Casa Fortuna. Since he had no legal authority in Arizona, the sheriff had discarded his star, but the peculiar gleam in his gray eyes indicated that his visit was not exactly a social one. Reading the lawman's mind like an open book, Scanlon was delighted, and, with ironic hospitality, insisted on setting up the drinks, an invitation which Barlow as ironically accepted.

"So you own the Casa Fortuna now," the sheriff commented. "Won it all with a hand of cards. Sleight of hand, I'd say!"

"Oh, come, sheriff," chided Scanlon, thoroughly enjoying the situation. "You know I wouldn't cheat an honest player like Macey! Too bad he got that same impression!"

The sheriff nodded. "You shot him in self-defense, I suppose — like all the others?"

"Naturally," Scanlon agreed. "It was his life or mine!"

"That's strange," mused Barlow. "I knew Lew Macey a long time, but I never knew him to draw on another man first! Well, I'll have to be gettin' back! If you ever come to Bakerville again, be sure to look me up!"

Scanlon grinned. "Thanks, sheriff! But my business here keeps me pretty well tied up. I'll be glad to see you, though, any time you care to ride over!"

The world looked as bright as a new dollar to Scanlon now. His plan of revenge was working out even better than he had hoped it would. Once more he had succeeded in triumphing over his hated enemy, and he knew that if his previous actions had exasperated Barlow, his present success must be literally torturing the man. He found a diabolical joy in speculating upon what Barlow would do next, realizing that the sheriff's determination to capture him was as great as his own determination to avoid that mishap.

But Duke was not so wrapped up in his revenge as to neglect his business. His sudden rise to power had made him more avaricious than ever. So when one of the bartenders tipped him off the next evening that a prospector had drifted in, carrying two pokes full of dust and nuggets, Scanlon temporarily forgot about Sheriff Barlow.

The prospector's name was Nick Jorgenson, and the gold he was carrying represented the cleanup from a claim owned by himself and his partner. He had reached Faro City too late to deposit it in the bank, and, with plenty of time on his hands, had dropped into the Casa Fortuna for a little entertainment.

Duke Scanlon saw to it personally that Jorgenson was not disappointed.

After a few drinks of rotgut and a little petting by a couple of the girls, it was not difficult to lure the prospector into a private poker game. Still attended by the girls and plied heavily with liquor, he was permitted to win at first. Then, with cold deliberation, Scanlon reversed his tactics and proceeded to clean the half-drunken Swede to the bone. There was a good five thousand dollars' worth of dust and nuggets in the two pokes, and at the end of an hour Scanlon had it all.

"O.K., girls," he directed curtly, as he picked up the gold and arose. "You can say good night to him now!"

But Nick Jorgenson, dazed and uncomprehending, resisted the good-natured tugging of the painted sirens.

"Ay don't go yet," he protested. "Ve play some more! Ay vant chance to vin my gold back!"

Scanlon regarded him contemptuously.

"You can't play any more, you fool! You haven't got anything to play with! You're cleaned — wiped out! Get me?"

The grim truth seemed at last to penetrate Jorgenson's befuddled brain. Brushing aside the two girls, he staggered to his feet, a sort of berserk madness upon him.

"Ay t'ink you cheat," he bellowed. "Ay give you my share of gold, but ay vant partner's share back!"

Arms flailing like windmills, he advanced upon Scanlon. The latter stepped nimbly aside and beckoned to a couple of his bouncers. Still bellowing like a stricken bull, the big Swede was half dragged, half carried to the rear door and pitched out into the alley. The bouncers stood by for a moment, in case he tried to return. Instead, they heard the report of a shot and, when they went out to investigate, found Jorgenson lying dead, with his gun still in his hand. His remorse over losing his partner's share of the gold had evidently proved too much for him.

Again Duke Scanlon made an ironically magnanimous gesture.

"See that he gets a decent burial," he ordered, "and charge it to me! I want the citizens of Faro City to know that the Casa Fortuna always takes care of its own!"

Several days passed, with business brisk at the gambling hall and Scanlon's life running like a well-oiled machine. But the outlaw's restless spirit soon tired of this prosperous monotony. He wanted the thrill of matching wits with Jeff Barlow again. Had the lawman at last decided to give up the fight? Or was he trying to beat Scanlon at his own game, hoping that, if he remained away long enough, the gambler's obsession would draw him irresistibly back across the State boundary line?

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

■	P	A	C	K	H	O	R	S	E	■
S	A	X	O	N	■	V	E	R	S	T
A	Y	■	B	E	R	E	T	■	K	O
D	E	W	■	E	E	R	■	H	E	M
D	R	I	P	■	A	D	V	E	R	B
L	■	D	E	S	P	O	I	L	■	S
E	N	T	R	E	E	■	M	O	S	T
B	A	H	■	E	R	S	■	T	W	O
A	T	■	V	I	S	I	T	■	I	N
G	A	M	I	N	■	L	O	O	S	E
■	L	O	N	G	H	O	R	N	S	■

And then, one forenoon, Scanlon's life brightened again when Barlow once more walked into the Casa Fortuna. This time the sheriff had a more tangible excuse for his visit. Under his arm he carried some gaudily printed posters announcing the forthcoming rodeo at Bakerville, always the biggest event of the year for that part of New Mexico.

"I was wonderin' if you'd let me put up a couple in your place," he suggested. "A free ticket to the rodeo goes with 'em, of course!"

Duke Scanlon was fairly beaming as he poured out the drinks.

"Why, certainly, Barlow! I'm always willing to help a good thing along! And one of the boys will be glad to use the ticket!"

"You might drop over yourself," hinted the sheriff. "There'll be a lot o' loose money around an' plenty o' suckers to fall for shell games, marked cards an' loaded dice. You could clean up quite a pile in three days."

Scanlon raised his glass with a chuckle.

"Always kidding, aren't you, Barlow? You know darned well the Casa Fortuna will be busier than ever with a rodeo right next door. Plenty of gents looking for entertainment that they can't find in Bakerville!"

"Like Nick Jorgenson, the prospector?" the sheriff suggested. "You sure outdid yourself that time, didn't you! Well, thanks for the drink! See you later!"

If Duke Scanlon made no answer, it was not because of any feeling of resentment. He knew that he had won this tilt with Barlow as decisively as he had won all the others, and secretly he was delighted. But he wanted the lawman to think that he was beginning to break, so Barlow would be sure to come again. In reality, he was convinced that it was the lawman himself who was breaking.

All in all, Duke Scanlon felt pretty well pleased with himself again. And then, the very day that the rodeo opened, something transpired which brought his attention sharply back to the business of his establishment.

It was a tip from one of his bouncers.

"See that old prospector down at the end of the bar?" said the bouncer. "He calls hisself Gopher Thompson. Says he staked out a new claim a few days ago. He rode into town this afternoon to record it, but found that the recorder was gone to Bakerville to take in the rodeo, so he dropped in here to look us over. He's loaded with dust an' nuggets, but he's as cagey as an old coon. He ain't drinkin' much an' he don't want to do any gamblin', either."

"Hm," commented Scanlon, his nostrils dilating like those of a hound dog. "You're sure he isn't just bluffing?"

"Bluffin', nothin'!" the bouncer snorted. "I saw some o' the nuggets myself. A couple of 'em as big as hens' eggs!"

The gambler's black eyes fairly gleamed with avarice.

"O.K., Buck! You've done your part of the job. I'll take care of the rest of it!"

It was not of Gopher Thompson's gold alone, however, that Duke Scanlon was thinking as he sauntered over

to the old prospector. He was much more interested in the claim itself—a claim which had yielded nuggets as big as hen's eggs and which had not yet been recorded! If he could obtain possession of a bonanza like that, he would have more wealth and power than he had dared dream of!

But he was not so eager as to be incautious. One look at Gopher Thompson told him that the latter would have to be handled with more finesse than had been necessary with Nick Jorgenson. Not because of Thompson's physical appearance, for the prospector was only a withered runt of a man, scarcely five feet in height, but because of the shrewd, obviously distrustful light in his fishy blue eyes —eyes which just now were peering furtively over the glass he held in his right hand, while the fingers of his other hand clutched, but did not quite conceal, a huge lump of virgin gold!

Casually Scanlon moved up to the bar next to the prospector.

"Getting a little free with your talk, aren't you?" he remarked. "Word is spreading all over the place that you've just located a rich claim and have come to Faro City to record it."

Gopher Thompson regarded him with mingled surprise and resentment.

"You're darned right I have!" he retorted. "An' if you don't believe me, here's the gold to—"

Scanlon interrupted him with a firm grip on his arm.

"That's just it," he remonstrated. "You should know better than to come in here, boasting about a claim that hasn't yet been recorded! I try to run a respectable place, my friend, but I can't be responsible for the actions of the people who come here. Just take a look around you. There's at least a dozen men in this room who'd slit your throat for that claim!"

The old prospector smiled craftily. "Mebbe so! But they don't know where it is! Ain't nobody knows where it is but me! An' I wasn't fool enough to bring along a map of it, either!"

"You wouldn't have to," retorted Scanlon. "A knife at your throat or a gun in your ribs would make you talk plenty! Now I'm telling you this for your own good. Get on your horse and hightail it back to your claim and stay there till the rodeo is over and the recorder returns from Bakerville!"

Impressed by the saloon owner's apparent sincerity, Gopher began to show a little concern.

"Gosh! Mebbe you're right, at that," he admitted. "Anyways, I reckon it's best to play safe. My hoss is tied around at the side. Guess I'll be startin' back right now!"

Pocketing his gold, he made a move toward the front door; but again Scanlon's hand closed upon his arm.

"No, no! You mustn't let anybody see you leave! Let's go back to my office. It has a rear door leading into the alley. You can slip out that way."

The ruse worked to perfection. In the darkness no one saw Gopher Thompson leave the Casa Fortuna save Scanlon himself. And no one saw the gambler, a few minutes

later, swing into his own saddle and follow close upon the old prospector's trail. With every greedy instinct in his nature aroused, Scanlon was going to let nothing prevent him from obtaining possession of that claim. He had a canteen of fresh water hanging from his saddlehorn and some canned beans in his saddlebags. No matter how far the trail might lead, he meant to follow it to the end.

There was no moon, but the night was studded with stars, which furnished light enough for Scanlon to keep his quarry in sight while still remaining a safe distance behind him. But it was no trouble at all for him to follow Gopher Thompson. Though the prospector had left town at a gallop, he slowed his mount down to a walk as soon as the twinkling lights faded away behind him, which exasperated Scanlon in the extreme. Not only was the gambler impatient to get his stakes into that claim, but he knew that the men he had left in charge of his establishment could not be trusted for long.

As he had expected, Gopher Thompson was heading straight north for the Terrapin Hills. To proceed at anything faster than a walk from now on was quite impossible, for the trail led across gravel washes, through narrow defiles and along the brink of steep ledges. In order for Scanlon to keep his man in sight he was compelled to shorten the distance between them, though this no longer entailed any risk. He tried to keep his sense of direction to facilitate his return,

but the darkness and the number of cutbacks confused him—without, however, causing him any great concern. Getting to that claim was the main thing! He'd manage to find his way back, somehow!

To relieve the tedium of his progress, Scanlon turned his thoughts upon Jeff Barlow. On this, the first night of the rodeo, he knew that the sheriff must be a very busy man—and also, he reflected ironically, a greatly worried one. For, as clearly as if he were upon the scene, Scanlon could picture Barlow going from one gambling concession to another, hoping that Duke Scanlon had been foolish enough to be lured across the State line by the prospect of some of that easy money.

If only Barlow could see him now and know what kind of a stake he was really after! The thought was like a tonic to Duke Scanlon. And more exhilarating still was the thought of the smashing victory he would score over Barlow when he finally obtained possession of Gopher Thompson's claim. That achievement would be his master stroke, something which would make all his other triumphs seem insignificant by comparison. He would be willing to let the sheriff alone after that. His desire for vengeance would be completely satisfied!

And then, with a suddenness that almost caught him off his guard, he came to the end of the trail! For the past fifteen minutes or so he had been following the course of a dry stream through a steep-walled canyon, but now this canyon spread abruptly into a sort of amphitheatre, across the middle of which the stream had spread a strip of gravel and small boulders about a hundred yards wide. On the north side of this area, close against the hills, Scanlon could perceive the outlines of a prospector's tent and a short distance southeast of the tent, he could distinguish the stone monument that marked the center of a claim.

That this was Gopher Thompson's claim, there could be no question, for the prospector was now heading directly toward the tent. Black eyes agleam, Duke Scanlon watched him from the mouth of the canyon, his evil mind working swiftly. His first move would be to shoot old Thompson and bury his body farther back in the hills; then he would come back and restake the claim and put his own papers in the tin can in the stone monument! All this could be done in an hour's time if he hurried, and, since he could not be more than ten miles from Faro City, he should be able to return to town by midnight!

Impatiently he waited until Thompson had entered the tent and struck a light, the pale radiance of the candle causing the canvas structure to stand out with a phosphorescent-like glow against the darker background of the hills. Immediately Scanlon swung down and tied his horse's reins to a manzanita bush. He knew that Gopher Thompson was not the type of man to give up his claim without a fight and he was taking no chances on warning the

old prospector of his approach. Drawing his gun from its holster, he started picking his way on foot across the gravel-strewn area.

The night was ominously still, with no call of bird or rustle of brush to disturb it. Halfway to the tent, however, Scanlon heard the mournful wail of a coyote and grinned contemptuously as he saw, against the canvas wall, the grotesque shadow of Gopher Thompson straighten perceptibly. He hadn't thought the old prospector would be bothered by anything as familiar as a coyote's howl! Without a betraying sound he reached the tent, paused a moment to mark Thompson's exact position, then jerked aside the flap and stepped inside.

"All right, pop!" he snapped. "Never mind fixing your bed. You won't be needing it any more!"

Blanket in hand, Gopher Thompson turned about. But there was no expression of surprise on his weather-beaten face, no slightest indication of fear. Instead, his pale-blue eyes held a hard, almost mocking, light.

"Save yore breath, Duke Scanlon," he retorted. "You ain't scarin' nobody! I knowed you was follerin' me ever since I left Faro City, an' I knowed exactly why! But you're makin' a mistake this time! There ain't any gold claim here, an' there never was!"

Half-angered, half-incredulous, Scanlon took a threatening step forward.

"You're lying, you old coot! You

didn't know anybody was following you! And those nuggets you flashed back at the Casa Fortuna—"

"Souvenirs I've been keepin' for a year or more," Thompson interrupted him scornfully. "I used 'em as bait to lure you out here so I could square a little personal account with you! Remember Nick Jorgenson, the Swede prospector that you robbed at your poker table a few weeks ago! He was my pardner, Scanlon, an' I'm holdin' you directly responsible for his death! For that I'm aimin' to make you pay—an' pay plenty!"

There could no longer be any doubt that Gopher Thompson was speaking the truth. And the knowledge that he had played deliberately into this man's hands turned Duke Scanlon's face livid with wrath. He took another step forward, jamming the muzzle of his gun hard into Gopher Thompson's stomach.

"Think you're being smart, eh? Listen, you withered old toad! Suppose Nick Jorgenson was your partner, and suppose I was responsible for his death! How are you going to make me pay? How can you make me pay when you've only got about five seconds more to live?"

Though Gopher backed away from the pressure of Scanlon's gun, he still showed no evidence of alarm. His pale-blue eyes met the other's unflinchingly and there was a note of cold triumph in his voice when he spoke.

"S'pose *you* tell him, sheriff! That ought to make it sound more official!"

Another trick! Scanlon's brain was too befuddled with hate to think clearly. And then, the instant he decided to turn, he realized that it was too late.

"If you make a move, it'll be your last," said the calm voice of Jeff Barlow from the entrance. "Take his gun, Gopher, an' then snap these bracelets around his wrists!" Quietly the sheriff came forward. "It ain't Thompson hisself who's goin' to make you pay, Scanlon," he said. "It's the people of New Mexico! They've been waitin' a long time for the chance to get you, an' now, thanks to this little scheme that Gopher an' me cooked up, that chance has come!

"You see, when you left the mouth o' that canyon back there you passed out o' the State of Arizona! I was watchin' you from behind the tent an' when you crossed over the boundary line, I tipped off Gopher here with a coyote howl. You've come back to New Mexico again, Scanlon, just like I always said you would, an' if I know the verdict of the jury that's goin' to try you, that's where you're goin' to stay—at least, for the next twenty years!"

THE END

Answers to Scrambled Words on page 93.

1. claim 2. stockyard 3. firewood 4. nugget 5. tent 6. manzanita 7. cave 8. bighorn 9. muskrat 10. barn 11. arrow 12. boar 13. acorn 14. garb 15. diggings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