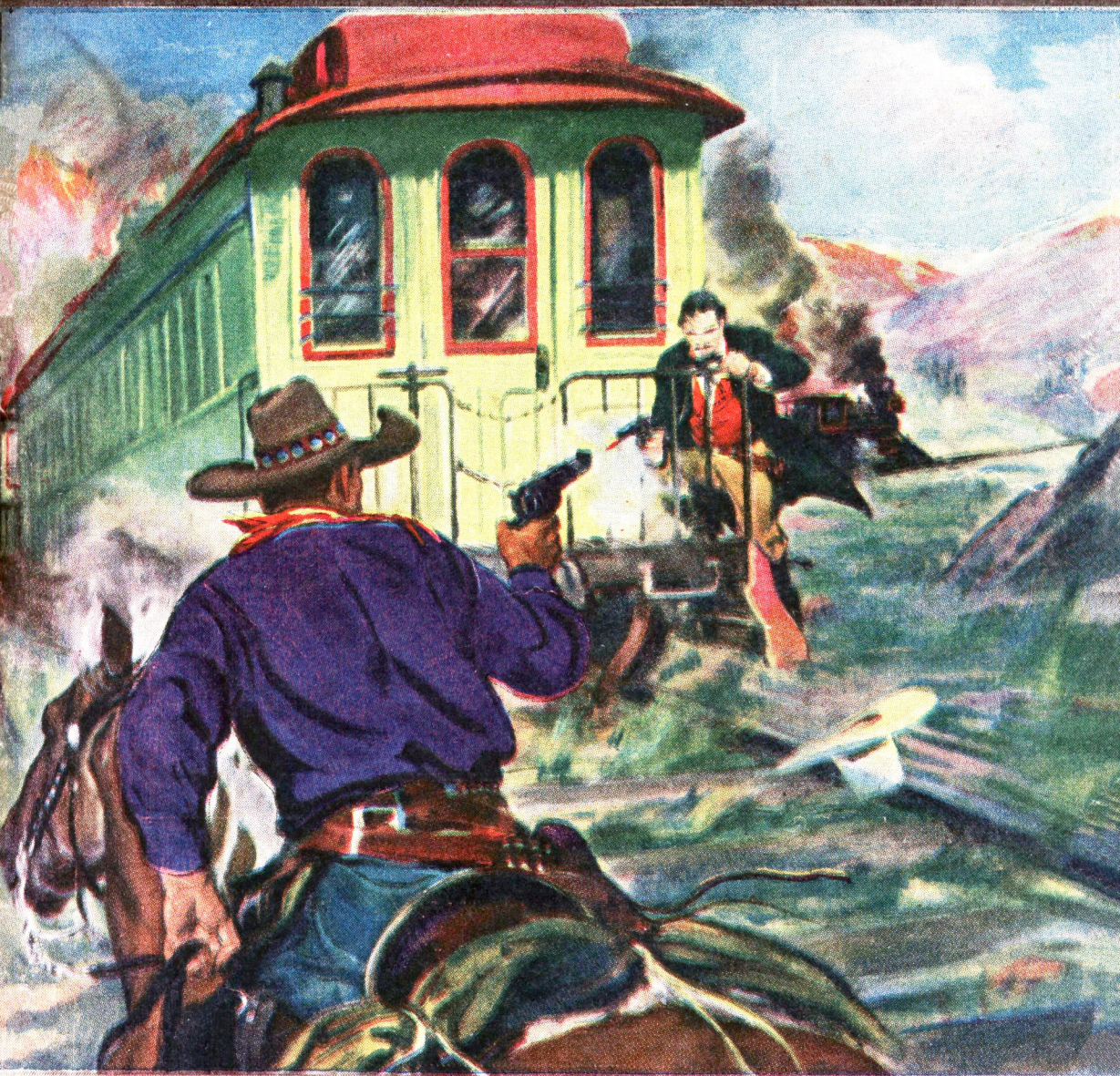


WESTERN STORY

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Aug.-Sept. 1949
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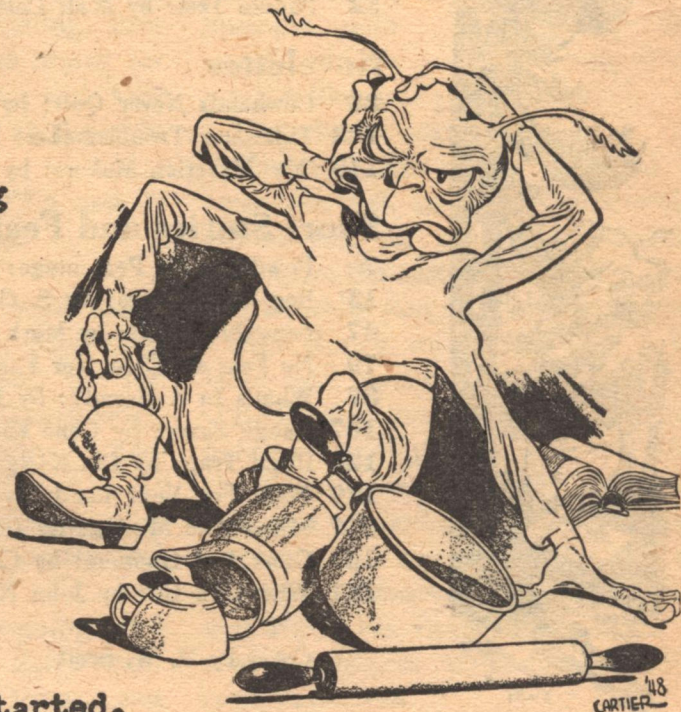
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Tally Branding

GRAND ADVENTURE

T. T. Flynn (Bullet Bounty, page 14) has been a too infrequent rider on this range of late but we're mighty happy to welcome him back in this issue of Western Story.

Trailwise, Flynn thinks that the West, with all its glamour and traditions, is the epitome of the daring and hazardous feats which make up the drama of our American scene. Herewith a few of his remarks on what he considers "the grand adventure."

"Here's hoping Western Story readers get some of the punch in reading Tally Branding that I got in writing for it. The Texas brush country, the Bradsada, the hide-and-tallow factories, are just one of the many vivid threads in the greatest fabric of adventure this country has ever known. Or any other country, to my mind.

"Ten thousand threads, a thousand colors, woven across the great years of growth and expansion. Some accept it; some never have realized the greatness of those years. As a writer, it all grew on me.

"With a base in New Mexico, a writer's mobile office in a trailer, I

shuttled about the West for pleasure and business, for years. Fun and business. But the "feel" of what was around me kept growing. Not only what one saw. But what had been back of it in former years. What had happened, been done, and the whys and wherefores. Old-timers talking, yarning. Bits of history, still clearly remembered by the older people.

"I remember one day in a small Spanish-American town, when the weekly newspaper published a reprint column of fifty years before—that the Apaches had broken off the reservation. There was near-panic among many of the old men and women who didn't realize it was a reprint and who recalled only too well what had happened when the Apaches broke out, years before.

"That's the West, yesterday and today. An empire. A way of life. A grand adventure for anyone who tastes, touches or contacts it. How could a writer who moved in it, among it, and through it, with the "feel" of it growing all the time, keep away from recreating it on his typewriter? Not this writer. So—here's to Tally Branding; luck to it and its readers."

TRAVEL ITEM

"I sure get a bang out of those goofy pics 'd.c.' does on your humorous stories," writes Luke M. Bridewell, of Kew Gardens, New York, "but what kind of a stage is that on page 7 of your April issue, illustrating Howard Haynes' *The Widder's Might*?"

Author Haynes supplies the answer.

"No doubt the word 'stage' is associated with stagecoach. However, after the stagecoaches were no longer used, mail and passengers were carried in one- and two-seated buckboards and, for heavier loads and on rough trails, sturdier, spring wagons were used. They're still being used in remote mountain acres of the West. When I was a boy in the North Park (Colorado) country, we referred to them as 'rigs.'"

VOTE OF THANKS

And from Denver, Colorado, R. D. Shirley sends us a cheer and thanks. "I have just finished reading the May issue," he comments, "and I enjoyed it very much. I thought *Cattle From The Caribou* was exceptionally good. I liked Frank R. Pierce's tale because it has a new angle, and thank goodness I didn't find any of his characters whose eyes became 'slits,' or that some hombre got shot in the shoulder!

"*Red River Legacy*, by Clark Gray, also appealed to me. And let's have more stories from Jim Kjelgaard. I don't want to tell you what to publish in your magazine but I just want to take time to tell you how I feel—and thanks very much."

DESERT RAT

Hugh T. McCorlin, who writes from San Diego, California, informs us that he's an old desert rat hisownself. "I just want you to know," he says, "that the poem, *Desert Rat*, and the picture by Joe Rodríguez, which you had in your May issue, were okay. That author sure got the spirit of things.

"Although I'm pretty much on the shelf these days, I should know, for it's been more than fifty years that 'me and my burro don't aim to change our way,' as the writer puts it."

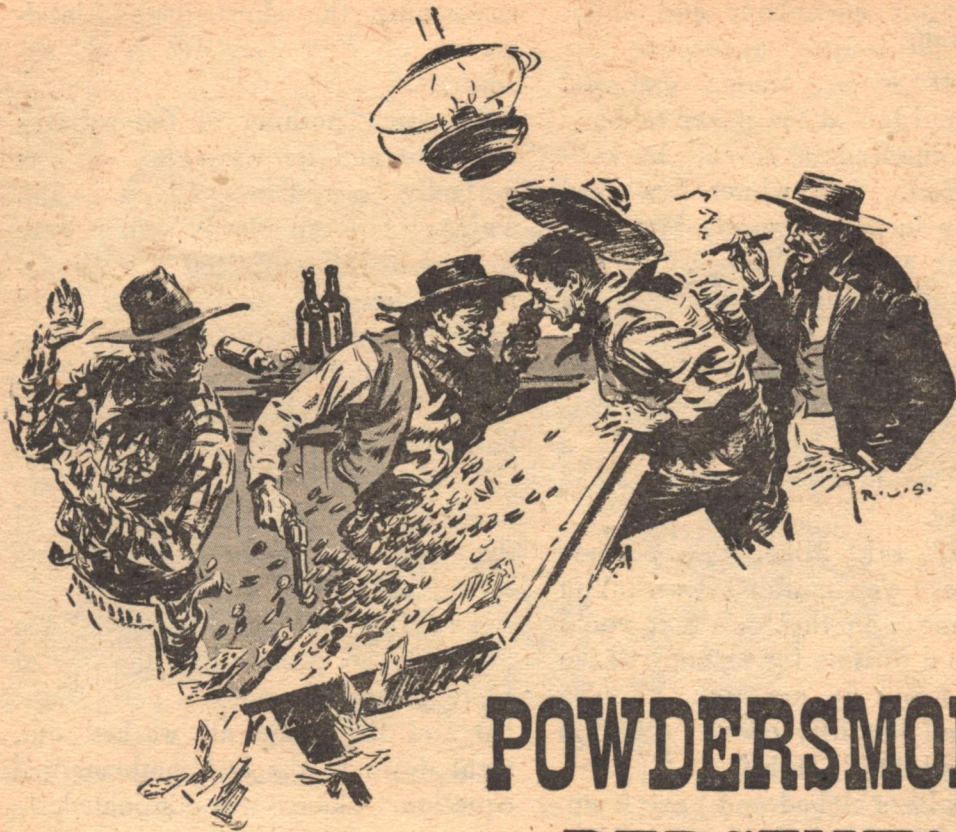
WELCOME WORDS

"Briefly," says Fred A. Thompson, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, "I liked *Trigger Traitor* by L. L. Foreman, which appeared in your March issue. As in his other stories, Foreman handled the 'Paisano' problem very nicely. His deep understanding of human nature shows in what he writes. See if you can't encourage him to do a few more yarns of this type.

"Also S. Omar Barker's *Buckaroo's Best Bet*, in the same issue, was fine. I like Barker's poems so well that I think he should get out another edition of his *Buckaroo Ballads*."

SUGGESTION

"Why not," suggests Jerry L. Noden, of Spokane, Washington, "give us some more articles like John A. Thompson's *Your Stake In Conservation*, which you published some time ago. Surely such a vitally important subject to our country deserves space in a magazine like *Western Story*!"



POWDERSMOKE PERCENTAGE

By L. L. Foreman

*Mr. Adams could give the odds on any gamble—and
that was about all he did give his startled sidekick*

AROUND midnight when the games in the North Star House had become heavy and interesting, Mike Murray made known to his misguiding genius, Mr. Horace Adams, his opinion of gambling.

"A trap for suckers!" he said bitterly. "Like us!"

Mr. Horace Adams gave a moment's fair and thoughtful consideration to Mike's statement, and rejected

it. For most of his life Mr. Adams had dealt with the pure science of mathematics and he knew that its rules were positive, not theoretical. He was convinced, after serious study, that poker was a scientific game. Patiently, he tried to explain to Mike that although the money was lost, the method of playing had been technically correct.

Mike, being a good deal younger

and a lot less scholarly and philosophical, failed to appreciate the point. It was his money that Mr. Adams had lost at the poker table.

"Two hundred an' seventy bucks!" he groaned. "All winter I worked for it, up in that blizzardy Montana. Now look at me! Why—*why* did I let you talk me into handin' you my money to gamble with?"

Mr. Adams assured him in simple language that his bout with the cards had not been a gamble. Merely a practical application of mathematical principles.

"Look," said Mike. "You made me believe you couldn't lose. You loaded me with the idea that you'd clean up a fortune for us both. Like a fool, I put up my cash. You've lost it, all but fifty cents. An' that ain't gamblin'? Huh!"

Mr. Adams sighed and gave it up. It was difficult to illustrate to Mike the fundamental principles of the law of averages and the rules of percentage, now that his money was lost. The human equation was a powerful element. Mr. Adams distrusted the human equation. It was prejudiced, biased, and unpredictable. It conformed to no neat laws and rules.

He was recently from the East, from New England, as his clothes indicated, for he wore a respectable frock coat, beaver hat and buttoned shoes. Back home, he'd mentioned to Mike, he had been a teacher of mathematics and then a bank accountant. He never explained why he had come West, suddenly, but he did pass a scathing remark or two

concerning the short-sighted intolerance of New England bank examiners.

He knew nothing of the country out here and its ways, but he was perfectly confident and unafraid. Values and standards here were somewhat different, but the fundamental laws of mathematics held sway wherever human beings congregated and had their activities. Toward poker, a major activity, he had given his trained power of analysis. Was any problem simpler? He had expounded to Mike his grasp of the game. He was broke, completely broke, and needed some capital.

To Mike he had spoken of the principles of probability, the law of averages and the rules of percentage. He had the game all worked out, right down to the last mathematical equation. Chance was eliminated.

The prospect of getting two pairs, in a four-card draw, was one in twenty-two. To get three of a kind, one in sixty-six. Therefore it was never good play to draw four cards. Nor was it sensible to draw to an interior straight, as the prospect of filling it was only one in fourteen. A high pair in the deal was actually more valuable than two small pairs, for the prospect of improving it in the draw was one in nine for three of a kind, and one in slightly more than four for two high pair.

And so on. Mr. Adams was logical and persuasive, full of figures. So Mike gave him all his cash to turn into a fortune for them both.

Something went wrong with the mathematical equation. Or maybe the cards weren't aware of the laws and rules. It might possibly have been the fault of the dealer. Mr. Adams withdrew, minus Mike's two hundred and seventy dollars, all but fifty cents, which wasn't sufficient for ante.

Mike's sorrowing touched Mr. Adams' conscience. He was sincerely regretful about Mike's money. "I'll get it back for you, don't worry," he promised. After all, a promise cost nothing and often did some good.

Mike eyed him anxiously. "Not goin' to try to stick up the place, are you?"

"By no means!" Mr. Adams hurriedly disclaimed, glancing around to see if such a thing might be done profitably.

The North Star House was large, noisy, crowded with male customers who were supposed to check their guns but hadn't, female habitués impulsively inclined to wield broken bottles on occasion, and professional gamblers able to produce two-shot .41 derringers on short notice.

The proprietor, Lew Flexner, packed heavy armpit hardware, visible as bulges under his fine-fitting coat, and his bartenders and bouncers were brawny bruisers. The spotter, a noted ex-lawman and sure shot, sat high up in a bullet-proof, steel-box arrangement, heavily armed with a shotgun, repeating rifle and a pair of six-shooters, keeping his eyes on everybody.

Mr. Adams decided that the laws

of average and percentage were definitely against such an attempt. The North Star House had never been successfully held up. As far as he was concerned, it never would be. No doubt it could be managed, but, offhand, he didn't see how.

A tall cattleman brushed by him, smoking a cigar, a long stogie bought at the bar. Mr. Adams sniffed the blue smoke of it, and was lost. He fingered the half dollar in his pocket and eased over to the bar.

"An unprofitable investment, perhaps," he admitted to Mike, when he returned, smoking eight inches of black-leaf tobacco. "But the pleasure is out of all proportion to the small sum expended. Fifty cents! It can hardly be called money!"

"It was all we had!" growled Mike.

"I am willing to share this," said Mr. Adams, but Mike shuddered at the smell and shook his head.

Among the coming and going customers who kept the batwing doors flapping, a lean and lanky cow-puncher lounged in with a coiled rope in his hand. He spoke to Lew Flexner, who shrugged and nodded indifferently. A stocky man at the bar said loudly:

"Hey, that's California Slim. He can make a rope do everything but talk! Must be he's broke. Wind 'er up, Slim! I'll pass the hat round for you after!"

"Thanky, mister," said California Slim, and shook out a big loop. The crowd gave him room on the floor, watching idly.

His dexterity drew Mr. Adams'

admiration. The lariat twirled gracefully like a live thing. California Slim skipped in and out of the spinning loop, effortlessly languidly. He made it travel up and down his body with only inches to spare.

"Watch him!" called the stocky man at the bar. "You don't see this every day! He's just warmin' up!"

"Amazing!" Mr. Adams murmured to Mike. "True artistry!"

"Yeah," grunted Mike. "I used to think so, too, when I was twelve an' did it with *two* ropes!"

The spotter leaned out of his steel box to watch the roper below. California Slim glanced up, and performed an especially artistic feat. The loop leaped upward, whipped over the spotter's head and settled snugly around his neck. A powerful jerk, and the spotter came hurtling down, arms and legs all spraddled out, and landed on his head on the floor.

The stocky man at the bar moved swiftly. His right arm rose and fell, and Lew Flexner keeled over. Mr. Adams saw with surprise that the stocky man had hit the proprietor with the barrel of a gun. With further surprise he noticed that California Slim had dropped the rope and drawn a pair of cocked six-shooters from under his shirt. He was downright astonished when several other men cropped up here and there with guns in their hands.

"Okay, everybody—take it easy!" barked the stocky man. "Don't nobody do nothin' foolish! You're all

covered!" He swung half around, at a low call from California Slim, and fired over the bar at a bartender who was ducking to grab a weapon. California Slim slung a shot at the same time. There were two thuds on the floor, one that of the bartender, the other that of a houseman who dropped his gun and fell on it.

"It's . . . it's a holdup!" exclaimed Mr. Adams.

"You don't say!" Mike muttered, his palms raised. "Quit fiddlin' with that cigar an' let 'em see both your hands, or you're a gone gosling!"

He sighed. "Ah, me! I guess, even if you hadn't gone an' lost my money, these hombres woulda got it anyhow. I guess my luck's out!"

"Luck," stated Mr. Adams, puffing at his cigar and holding his hands up like everybody else in the place, "is a myth, a fallacy, as I have explained to you. It has no real existence in—"

"Aw, shut up!" rudely cut in a cattleman whose pockets sagged with his spring beef-sale cash. "You better have some hard money to dig out for these ducks, or they'll down you for keeps! This is the Brasada Bunch, or I'm crazy! Damn Texans!"

Mike, a Texan, quivered and started to make a retort, but the Brasada Bunch was doing business and announcing the rules.

"Empty the cashier's cage first, boys!" called the stocky man. "Spread out, gents, an' keep your hands clean! Line 'em up on your side, Slim. March 'em by that poker table, an' clean 'em as they go! Watch 'em, boys—watch 'em!"

Under the menace of Slim's guns the line formed and moved slowly along the wall. Cash from emptied pockets poured onto the poker table, and guns clattered on the floor.

The stocky man, walking over to the table, kept up a running fire of talk while his round blue eyes darted everywhere. "That's fine, gents—that's real fine! All donations thankfully received, an' please don't try to hold out on us! Boys, it's a real nice haul, but don't let anybody by without he pays his taxes! We don't like to shoot, but we do it when we have to! Come on, gents, move a little faster—we ain't got all night!"

The town marshal came charging in, having evidently heard the shots. A man lounging by the batwing doors reached over and clipped him with a gun barrel. The marshal put his nose to the floor, mumbling to himself.

A saloon girl screamed involuntarily, eyes wide and hands over her mouth. The stocky man frowned, and walked over and hit her, sending her sprawling against the bar.

"Quiet!" he commanded. "I kill squawlin' cats that get on my nerves! Walk right up, gents, an' leave your contributions!"

"Scoundrel!" whispered Mr. Adams, moving along in the line behind Mike. "Ruffian! This is intolerable!"

"It sure is!" Mike muttered over his shoulder. "An' it'll be more so when we reach the table an' don't drop nothin' on it! Wish I hadn't sold my gun! You got one?"

Mr. Adams shook his head. "No.

But it occurs to me that we should do something."

"You don't say!"

"Yes! Positively! Let us suppose that you sprang at that scoundrel and—"

"Huh? Me? No, let's s'pose *you* sprang at him! Then what?"

"Everybody," stated Mr. Adams, "would naturally follow our example. Your example, I mean."

"An' bury us later with suitable honors!" said Mike. "It's a good idea. You try it! Maybe you could hold 'em off with the stink o' that so-called cigar that you bought so free with my last fifty cents!"

"H'm!" said Mr. Adams, puffing at the cigar.

They approached the loot-laden poker table. It came Mike's turn to cough up a donation. He hesitated, wondering if they would accept his spurs. Mr. Adams drew his cigar from his mouth, eyeing severely the stocky man, who regarded him coldly in return.

It was then that the even pattern of the North Star stickup got tangled and went to blazes. They talked about it for years afterward.

Mike uttered a fearsome yell and plunged forward. He hit the table, carried it before him, and knocked the stocky man over with it. Somebody fired a gun. The bullet burned Mike's ribs, and right away Mike knew that he was in a jackpot from which, depending on his efforts and luck, he could emerge as a dead duck or a live Texan.

He struck hard at the stocky man, at the same time that the stocky man struck at him with his gun. Mike slumped on top of his groggy adversary then, and so he missed the rest of the North Star battle.

He didn't see the line break, the bartenders and bouncers and housemen jump into action, the girls snatch for bottles, and the customers grab for guns. Nor was he privileged to witness California Slim leading a getaway, getting snarled up in his rope, and landing on his face with ten or fifteen citizens on top of him. He failed to hear the wild shooting of three members of the Brasada Bunch who backed into a corner and made smoke spurt until their guns emptied and their lives ended.

When he came to, all he knew was that he had a cut on his head, a throbbing rib, and a scorching pain across the back of his neck. Men were bending over him, talking, and all their talk was complimentary. They told him that he was a roaring wampus and a hell-spitting Texan. He had charged the whole gang, he learned, alone and unarmed.

"Gentlemen!" said Mr. Adams, and excused himself. "Ladies and gentlemen! My young friend, here, has saved us all from great loss, at grave risk to himself! He is poor, through no fault of his own, and had nothing to lose. Yet, in his courage, he alone leaped into the face of danger! May I suggest that we pass the hat, and reward him with a title of what we

would have lost had he not done what he did? Thank you, sir. What size? Kindly take mine—it's larger!"

They rode southward the following morning in the glow of the early sunshine.

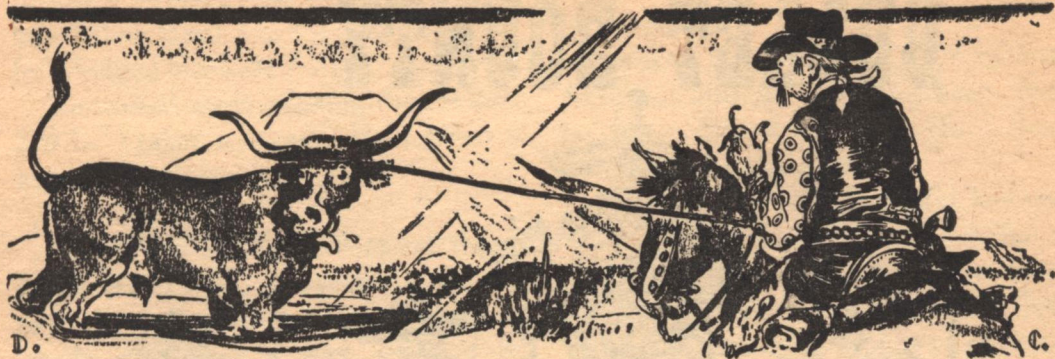
"It merely goes to prove," Mr. Adams lectured Mike, while puffing at a fresh cigar, "that an expenditure, regarded as extravagant and unprofitable at the time, may very well be the means of restoring one's fortunes. I promised that I would get you that money back, plus interest." He patted comfortably the inside pocket of his coat. "Eight hundred dollars each is not a bad return on your two hundred and seventy dollars' investment! It was generous of Mr. Lew Flexner to throw in that five hundred."

"Yeah," Mike agreed, nursing the back of his neck. "But look! When you burned me in the neck with that blasted cigar an' made me jump, how could you know I wouldn't get killed?"

"Perfectly simple, my boy. Perfectly simple. Merely a matter of mathematics." Mr. Adams waved his cigar. "There were only eight of those robbers. There were at least two hundred victims. The probability of losing, therefore, worked out at roughly one in twenty-five. In other words, our margin of risk was merely four percent. Do you follow me?"

"Yeah," said Mike. "But not for long!"

THE END



By S. Omar Barker

BOG RIDER BLUES

*In the springtime—who can doubt it?—
Cowpokes dream of gals and town,
But they can't do much about it
When pore cows are boggin' down.*

*For the springtime boghole battle
Is a job you've got to do
When you're hired to work with cattle
As a ranch-hand buckaroo.*

*You've got to muddy up your rope
To save ol' cows so pore
They've done give up the faintest hope
Of livin' any more.*

*You ain't got time for flowers
Nor for moonin' on romance
When you're sweatin' out long hours
In a pair of muddy pants.*

*In the spring romantic notions
Stir the cowpoke's gizzard, too—
But he can't do much about it
When he's on the boghole crew!*

BULLET BOUNTY



By T. T. Flynn

"A partner pays his debts," declared Bill Severan—and that kind of payoff called for a gunsmoke showdown with outlaws who were rustling the cow country to the bone

THE body had been dragged back into the thorn thickets by a saddle rope and left for the wild javelina boars. Their distant grunting and squealing were audible even before Juan Domingo stopped his horse and said, "Blood!"

Bill Severan had been riding in hard thought. He reined up and followed Juan's down-pointing finger with a practised eye.

They were in the Angel Creek thickets, inland from the Texas coast, north of the Nueces. Thorn brush fifteen feet high walled the narrow trail.

Cattle funneling along here toward hide-and-tallow packeries on the coast had cut and tramped the trail earth. A long golden bar of sunshine lay on bloodstained dirt at one side of the trail.

Juan Domingo's sharp, roving eyes caught things like that. The sudden uneasiness of their horses had meaning now.

Bill Severan's quick scrutiny read the story easily enough. Horses had passed this way since cattle. Something had been dragged along the edge of the trail for a few yards, and pulled into the deep thicket toward the snuffling, grunting javelinas.

Juan Domingo shifted silently in the saddle, watching Severan.

Juan was short, stocky, mahogany dark. His old gray hat was held to his head by the chin strap, the *barboquejo*. Thorn-scarred leggings of bullhide armored him to the waist.

Leather gloves with gauntlets armored his hands. The heavy canvas brush jacket gave protection above the leggings.

Bill Severan had spent more money on his brush popper's outfit. His leather work was the finest. The black hat, with gold braid around the crown and hand-embossed strap under the chin, had cost more than all Juan Domingo's outfit. But Juan was a better man in the brush. Juan was born to the brush, knew nothing else, wanted nothing else.

Bill Severan had wanted many things. He was getting them. He would have more. Even now, at twenty-six, all dark-tan and whipcord, he had much.

Now, frowning, he read the sign on the ground.

"Another killing!" Anger threaded his comment as he put the big black horse crashing through the high thorn growth which sided the trail. Juan followed.

Javelinas scurried away before the tearing approach of the two horses. Bill ducked expertly under a low thorny mesquite limb, burst through and pulled up in a half-acre opening in the brush.

The dead man lay there, shot through the back of the head. Twice.

He was Mexican, an old man with white hair. His deeply wrinkled face had been benign, kindly. And shrewd. Bullet lead had wiped all that out.

"Old Gonzales," Bill said as he swung down out of his saddle.

Juan dismounted and crossed himself as he studied the body. "Wan good hombre," he said. His sharp eyes went to Severan, then back to the body and the ground around it. His broad dark face was pokerlike.

You could think Juan was stolid and with little interest. Bill Severan knew better. He knew what Juan was thinking. The same thing was in his mind.

"Gonzales collected almost three hundred for the cattle he brought in yesterday," he said. "I saw Jubal Hoyt pay it to him at the packery office yesterday afternoon."

"Si," Juan assented. He was studying the ground as he talked. "Las' night he estay weeth his nephew, Colosimo Gonzales. Talk late. Esleep happy."

"Which Gonzales is that?"

"Wan weeth pretty daughter," answered Juan with the same poker face. Juan Domingo knew every pretty daughter in a hundred miles.

There was meaning in what Juan said now. Purpose hardened the question Bill Severan asked briefly.

"How about the two cowhands who helped him trail his cattle?"

"Las' night they are paid. They ride up coast," said Juan. He shrugged. "Not them. Wan man do thees."

Severan made a rough quick search of the body.

"No money on him," he said, straightening. He thought a moment then said curtly, "Get him back to the Jones Ranch. His relatives can take over from there."

Juan nodded. But when Bill swung into the saddle, the vaquero stepped to the stirrup and held up a single dirty-white coarse hair from the tail of a horse.

"Thees on the *agarita*." Juan meant the tangle of wild currant bushes behind them, each spiny leaf a clawing trap. "Gonzales, hees horse was grullo mare."

Bill pulled off his gauntlet glove and studied the long white hair. Juan eyed him impassively.

Severan suspected what the vaquero was thinking. His own thoughts were that way, almost reluctantly.

"You don't miss anything," Bill said. He pulled off his fine black hat and carefully laid the white hair inside the sweat band. "See you at the packery."

"*Salud*," Juan said. Only that.

But as Bill Severan rode across the small opening in the brush, away from the trail, he guessed Juan Domingo had doubts about seeing him again at the hide-and-tallow packery on the coast.

Two horses had left tracks this way into the deeper thickets. One horse would be the grullo mare of old Gonzales. The killer, riding the other horse, would be sharply watchful of his back trail.

This was the edge of the Brasada, the great thorn thicket country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. Law stopped at the Nueces. The Brasada belonged to gunmen, thieves, killers, rustlers. Wanted dead or alive somewhere, most of them. They

were hard-case, seldom working. They ran stolen cattle and horses from Texas into Mexico. They brought wet stock back over the Rio Grande.

They lived by the gun, died by the gun. But not too many Brasada horses would leave white tail hairs on the *agarita* bushes north of the Nueces.

Still fewer Brasada outlaws would have guessed old man Gonzales would be carrying hard cash through the Angel Creek brush today.

One man fitted all that. He was not an outlaw. Not yet. No price rode his head. No warrants were out for him, nor sheriffs hunting him. Nothing had been proved against him. He was therefore respectable. And he was more dangerous than a dozen Brasada outlaws. If this was his trail, the man who followed it was reckless and close to being a fool.

Bill Severan, of all men, was twice a fool to think of it.

II

All that had been in Severan's mind as he studied the white tail hair and put it inside his hat.

Now he trailed the horse tracks into the deeper brush, ducking overhanging limbs, cracking through thorny tangles. Now and then he crossed open pastures deep in the thickets.

Half-wild brush steers, fast as deer, plunged off in the growth as he approached. In a broad pasture he found the grullo mare, minus saddle and bridle, turned loose to join the

mustang bands or graze in the thickets unnoticed for weeks or months.

The afternoon was running on. Bill smoked a cigarette, thinking it over.

Tracks of a single horse would be easy to lose. In several hours they'd vanish for the night. Easy to lose—easy to forget . . .

The man ahead of him seemed to be making a roundabout swing toward the Hang Oak road. Severan made his gamble on that and headed due north.

In less than an hour he reached the road. The black horse's run drew dust into Hang Oak, which had a store, a saloon, a stage relay station and less than a dozen small dwellings under great oak and elm trees.

Six outlaws had once been hanged together from the huge hanging oak beside the saloon. Deacon Wilks, who owned the store and saloon, set out free drinks each time a hanging took place outside his windows.

Travelers who entered the saloon for drinks while the stages stopped, often went out back to view the graves and hear Deacon Wilks' hair-raising accounts of the desperadoes who had swung from the hang oak.

The stage for Corpus Christi and Brownsville was just in, running late, when Severan rode to the hitchrack at Hang Oak Store and Saloon.

Most of the small settlement was out as usual to watch the stage. In one degree or another, Bill Severan knew the half-dozen local men loitering around the saloon steps and on the dusty unpainted gallery which ran

across the front of saloon and adjoining store.

The lift of Severan's gloved hand to the nearest men drew civil recognition. Several hands lifted. Most of the men nodded. One said, "Howdy, Severan."

A stranger might not have noticed the lack of warmth. Bill Severan did. He'd been expecting it. Increasingly, the last few months, he'd noticed growing reserve and coolness wherever he went.

But as his glance swept along the hitchrack, Severan showed no awareness of the reserve.

A wagon, two buggies, and seven horses were at the hitchrack. One horse was a powerful black-and-white pinto mustang stallion with a snow-white tail.

It was a fast, hard horse, a beauty, caught in a trap pen on the upper Blanco River as a wild mustang colt. Caught by the four O'Reilly brothers—and apt to be ridden by any of them.

Severan wrapped reins at the end of the rack and paused there to roll a cigarette. He hitched his gunbelt easier at the waist and drew smoke deep and lazily as he moved along the front of the hitchrack.

The O'Reilly pinto had bled recently on the left front leg where thorn brush had raked hard.

Any horse coming into Hang Oak was apt to be brush-marked that way. But this brush-cut horse had a white tail and mane.

Gray-bearded old Con Tillman was loitering on the gallery. Severan's

smile was friendly as he stepped to the gallery.

"Off your pasture a little, aren't you, Tillman?"

Con Tillman had killed his share of Comanches, Apaches and raiders out of Mexico. He ran the Double X Bar Y brand up by the big bend of the Nueces. His shoulders were stooped now and his gray beard scraggly and tobacco-stained. His brush jacket, leather leggings, boots and old slouch hat had seen long and hard use. He looked like a worn-out old cowhand, not much good for anything.

Actually Con Tillman was a canny, steel-muscled old hellion of the brush. He was worth more than any man around Hang Oak—make it in cows, cash, riding, shooting or cutthroat poker.

Con Tillman was all man—and his reply had the dry snap of dead sticks cracking.

"My boys is keepin' my pasture safe, Severan. Don't let it worry you."

"No reason to," Severan said. His faint smile lingered for Con Tillman and the Hang Oak men to see. But back in his eyes anger clouded and hardened. "When did the pinto come in?" he inquired.

"'Bout half an hour ago. Big Red O'Reilly's in there buyin' drinks." Tillman shifted his chewing and spat over the gallery edge. "Red an' his brothers still workin' fer you an' Jubal Hoyt?"

"The O'Reillys never did work for us," Severan retorted promptly.

"I'm gittin' old. Git things mixed up," said Tillman sadly. He spat again. "Cain't see so good. Cain't hear so well. I git funny ideers."

Every man within earshot was listening. Severan caught the ghost of a grin on more than one face.

"We'll all be busted down and wore out too," Severan told Con Tillman with sympathy. The old fox. Anger still clouded Severan's look as he walked inside.

Eight men were lined at the bar. Five of them had the look of travelers off the stage.

Big Red O'Reilly was at the far end of the line, buying again. He tossed another silver dollar clattering on the bar. His voice, always loud, boomed as the stage passengers surveyed the newcomer.

"What'll you have, Severan?"

The four O'Reilly brothers were Big Red, Little Red, Gil and Frank. They ranched a little, worked a little, traded some—and faced the world as one man.

Touch one O'Reilly and you touched all four. Trouble with one O'Reilly meant trouble with all. Each O'Reilly was dangerous alone, and four times as dangerous after you counted in his brothers.

Most of the Hang Oak men were outside, passing up the free drinks with Big Red O'Reilly. Severan said, "Whiskey, Deacon." He ignored the strangers off the stage and ranged up beside Big Red, who topped him by an inch and outweighed him by at least twenty pounds.

"Didn't expect to see you over this way, Red."

"Hell, why not, Severan? I get around."

Big Red and Little Red had broad swarthy features, wide flat noses and the same kind of muddy red hair. Some said they had a strong dash of Mexican Indian blood.

Gil and Frank had hair almost black and their faces had lean, chiseled lines. But they were as dangerous as Big Red and Little Red. More so, if anything.

All that was in Severan's mind as the Deacon brought whiskey bottle and glass.

"How's everything at the packery?" Deacon Wilks asked importantly. Anything that came to Hang Oak was important to the Deacon.

"Schooner in from New York, loading barreled beef and hides," Severan said. He picked up Big Red O'Reilly's silver dollar as the Deacon reached for it.

"Not getting many fat cattle in lately," Severan said. He tossed the dollar over in his left palm, scanning both sides of it.

Big Red, elbow on the bar, was watching the hand and the dollar.

"You're gettin' good beef," Big Red said. "I seen some yesterday in the pens. If they'd been mine, I'd have held 'em to send north with a trail herd."

"Old man Gonzales needed the money now," said Severan thoughtfully.

He laid the bright new silver dollar down on the bar. The Deacon's

hand started toward it, and drew back as Severan's forefinger stayed on the dollar.

"Packery prices aren't much," Severan said mildly. "But a man always gets cash when he sells to Jubal Hoyt. That's something."

The Deacon moistened lips and nodded. He had a vaguely puzzled look about the dollar which Severan's forefinger kept pressed against the damp wood. The strangers from the stage were listening.

Big Red O'Reilly's voice had its usual loud rasp.

"Cash is a hell of a lot, Severan! Some folks kick about the low prices you an' Jubal Hoyt pay. But I say when a man needs cash, he's damn lucky to git hands on it quick! An' you an' Jubal have always got the cash."

"We try to have it on hand," Severan agreed. "Sometimes we're short. Jubal was ready to send to San Antonio for more cash when that New York schooner brought some kegs of new silver dollars." Severan's finger tapped the money on the bar. "Old man Gonzales got paid for his steers out of the first keg that was opened. New dollars. Latest mint date, like this one."

The travelers were losing interest in what Severan was saying. Deacon Wilks' puzzled look was growing. Big Red O'Reilly reached for the whiskey bottle and then drew his hand back. He still leaned lazily against the bar. But an intentness was in him now.

"I got a few of them new dollars

from Jubal Hoyt," he said. "That's one of them."

Severan took his finger off the dollar. Deacon Wilks picked up the money. He was eying it curiously as Severan downed his drink, returned the glass to the bar, and tossed a half dollar beside the glass.

"For my drink, Deacon," Severan said calmly. He faced Big Red O'Reilly. "Old Gonzales is the *only one* who got any of those new dollars yesterday. I found his body back in the Angel Creek brush today. A white-tailed horse left a tail hair there. The thief rode on over this way."

A kind of stricken silence fell over the traveling strangers. Deacon Wilks dropped the bright new dollar on the bar as if it were suddenly hot. And Big Red O'Reilly's loud rough challenge filled the room.

"You saying I kilt that flea-bitten old goat eater?"

"Hold it, boys! Drink on the house!" the Deacon begged nervously.

Severan said, "You killed him, robbed him, and started spending the money here like a damn fool!"

"Look out!" the Deacon yelled. His bald head was dropping behind the bar as he gave warning.

III

Few men ever asked for trouble with the O'Reillys. Big Red seemed to need half a breath to realize what was happening. Then his bull roar oath signaled his grab to gun holster.

But Bill Severan's anger had been building as he rode through the heat of the thickets. It had fanned higher as he talked with Con Tillman. Sight of the bright new silver dollar on the bar had decided him. That was his advantage; he had decided.

Severan's gun muzzle barely cleared the holster and crashed its report. He could have belly-shot the man. He tried instead for O'Reilly's gun hand.

The blast seemed to push O'Reilly back a little. He stood loosely, swaying, mouth open soundlessly on the echo of his furious oath as his gun clattered on the floor.

The building shook, under the pounding stampede of strangers trying to get outside. A look of disbelief flashed on Big Red's swarthy face. He held up his hand. Bright red blood streamed from it.

Severan almost made the second shot, the belly shot. It was in his mind. It was explosive in tightened muscles and nerves. The touch of death was on Big Red O'Reilly in that instant. It hung by a hair.

"Where's the rest of the money?" Severan demanded.

Big Red O'Reilly's groan had wild and helpless rage. He was looking at his crippled gun hand, forever useless now.

"The boys'll kill you fer this!" he choked. Then the wild, bitter rage came out of him in a rising yell, "*Kill you, damn you!*"

"Where's the money?" Bill Severan demanded again.

"Money, hell! Gut-shoot me, damn you! I ain't no good now!" Big Red swayed there, thick mouth working, neck muscles cording. He was poised to dive at the cocked gun.

Severan sucked a thin breath. The hot, hard recklessness of his nature blazed in his own kind of anger.

"Come on, Red! Jump and get it! The Deacon can preach over you and plant you out back!"

O'Reilly's rage reached a berserk pitch. Swarthy face was purple. Eyes were bulging. All his huge frame was corded to leap on the gun muzzle lined just above his big brass gunbelt buckle.

It was death. Big Red knew it. He didn't seem to care. He had been a swaggering bully boy, dangerous with his gun. Now in the Brasada camps, the river towns and the hard threat of the deep thorn thickets which were his world, Big Red O'Reilly was no longer a man. No one with a gun needed to fear him.

But even now Big Red was not afraid. A cautious edge of Severan's mind tallied that fact.

The stage passengers were outside. Deacon Wilks was hiding behind the bar. Severan heard quick steps enter through the swinging doors. He let them come, not looking.

Big Red, facing that way, saw who it was. He watched for a breath, a second . . . Then Con Tillman's dry, brittle voice spoke out.

"You're messin' up the floor, O'Reilly! Tie up that hand!"

A damp wadded bar towel sailed past Severan and struck O'Reilly's

broad chest. Big Red's good hand caught automatically at the towel and the berserk edge of his fury was broken.

He backed off a step, wrapping the towel around his hand. He was a sane man again, wildly bitter, and still not afraid. He caught up the whiskey bottle, filled a water glass and gulped the raw contents without catching breath. Then he poured the rest of the whiskey over the wrapped towel, tossed the empty bottle across the bar and stooped for his gun.

"Leave it!" said Severan curtly.

Big Red left the gun there on the floor. His swarthy face was congested as he brushed past Severan and kept going out through the swing door. Outside, his big-spurred boots pounded in unafraid haste.

Severan holstered his gun and built a cigarette. Con Tillman's half-lidded eyes watched the fingers shape the cigarette. They were steady fingers.

"Three more O'Reillys back of him," Tillman remarked dryly. "What happened?"

"Ask Wilks," said Severan shortly. "He went for his gun. I should have killed him."

"You'll have your chance," said Tillman with the same dryness.

The departing rush of the black-and-white pinto was audible. Hang Oak citizens began to sidle in. Deacon Wilks stood up near the front of his bar.

"Drinks on the house," announced the Deacon unsteadily.

Severan left them like that and walked out. He heard Tillman's steps following. The scraggly-bearded old man caught up with him at the hitchrack.

"I run to bein' neighborly," said Tillman. He gnawed off a fresh mouthful of tobacco and shoved the dry twist in his leggings pocket. "Neighbor o' mine drove a buggy in today to visit you an' Hoyt."

He spat. "I reckon the visit is to friends up the coast. But they's a little business too with you fellers. I'll take it kindly if you pay close mind to the business."

"Always do," said Severan. Some of the hard anger still smoldered in the look he laid on Tillman. "Who's the neighbor?"

"Little lady name o' Joy Anderson."

Severan's face held its blankness under Tillman's shrewd look. "I know the lady," he said.

"Uh-huh," Tillman agreed. He could have meant anything by the dry grunt. "I sided her buggy this mornin'. Folks out our way think a heap o' Joy Anderson, 'specially since she took holt of that ranch after her pappy was found out in the brush with his gizzard shot up." Tillman spat in the dust under the rack bar. "Shot in the back," he recalled.

"The lady and her business are welcome at the packery," said Severan-coolly. "Jubal Hoyt was to be there all day. Likely he's attended to everything."

"Likely," Con Tillman agreed. He looked like a stooped, broken-down old cowhand. But there was a blue

metallic hardness in his look. "Jes' tell Jubal Hoyt I'll take it kindly if he's helped the lady."

He turned away, closing the matter. But he'd taken a stand. He'd given a veiled warning.

Big Red O'Reilly had spurred his horse on inland. Severan rode for the coast, knowing the worst was ahead. And, in a way, glad of it. He'd taken a stand, too. There'd be no turning back from this.

Hoyt and Severan owned the packery on Gordo Bay, where Little River ran out into salt water. In a way it was a strange business for a man off the wide ranges like Severan.

It was a business of haggling, trading, slaughtering, selling.

But a man could make money. Shrewd men could make money fast, even with the best Texas cattle moving up the trails to northern markets and ranges.

The great thorn thickets were still full of old mossyhorns and cull cattle not worth throwing into the trail herds. And ranchers were always needing cash money and could get it at the packeries.

Jubal Hoyt was the haggler, slaughterer, trader. The shrewd one.

A year and a half back Jubal had known of the small packery he could buy cheap. All he needed was a young, aggressive partner with some money.

Severan had decided Hoyt was right. With luck money could be made faster than the slow years of building a cattle herd. Also, there

had been Bess Hoyt, Jubal's daughter.

Severan had suspected then in San Antonio, and he was sure now, that he'd been baited with Bess Hoyt. And he still liked the idea.

Bess had her blond careful beauty. She dressed like a lady, acted like a lady. A man could do worse than know, as Severan did now, that Bess was more shrewd and bent on making money than her father.

A man with a wife like Bess would go far. She'd help him, prod him. And Bess could make a man's heart beat faster and fill his mind on the long lonely rides through the brush.

Everything had worked out. They'd made money fast. They'd make more. In a few years they'd have all the money they needed.

The stench of the packery came to Severan on the salt wind off the bay. He rode by the small neat cottage where the Hoyts lived, and passed his own cruder hut.

The river was at his left, and on the point of land reaching out into the bay were the corrals and packery sheds, and the small wharf where the New York schooner was tied.

The silver disk of the moon was rising from the far waters of the Gulf. The schooner's tall masts and riggings lifted in a black, thin grace against the glow. Hogsheads of brined beef and stacks of hides littered the wharf.

Bess Hoyt's tassel-topped buggy and matched pair of slim fast bay mares waited in front of the weathered plank office. Severan was not sur-

prised. Bess and her father were busy with books and accounts when he stepped in.

That was not surprising, either. Bess kept herself informed of every detail of the business. In the lamp-light, turning from ledgers on the bookkeeper's desk against the wall, Bess was lovely in her blue high-waisted dress. Tall, slender, her hair like ripe wheat, her face flawless, Bess would be an artist's delight.

"You were to be gone a week," she said, and her inquiring smile asked the reason for this night return.

Jubal Hoyt, a tall man too, had a square-cut graying beard, shaved clean on the long upper lip. It gave him a solid, stern expression, an air of substance, of almost sanctimonious dignity and square dealing.

Severan had learned the truth of that. Jubal was cold, greedy. Other emotions stayed in the background. Now Jubal merely turned at his old roll-top desk and stared.

"Have the O'Reilly brothers been working for us?" Severan asked.

Jubal looked quickly at his daughter. Severan caught it over the cigarette he was rolling. He watched Bess frown slightly as she studied him.

"Who said such a thing?" Bess inquired, and then, "You didn't turn back to ask that question, did you?"

Severan shook his head and lighted the cigarette. "Have they?" he insisted.

"Naturally not," Jubal said. "That is . . ." He cleared his throat.

Bess was impatient. "Does it matter? They haven't been on the pay-

roll, of course. Now and then they've brought some cattle in, like anyone else."

"I thought so," Severan said dryly. He watched Bess flush a little. That was her way of showing anger. She kept all her emotions in close restraint.

Severan pulled on the cigarette and watched them somberly. He could feel their closeness, their oneness facing his unwelcome questions.

"Has Miss Joy Anderson been in from the Nueces?" he asked.

This time Bess looked quickly at her father. Her pale flush grew deeper. Jubal Hoyt's desk chair creaked as he leaned back.

"She has," Jubal said shortly. "An obnoxious young woman, if I could not say so to her face."

"A cheap, common little brush wench," said Bess coolly. "She doesn't know how to dress or use proper manners. I was here when she came, and I think I let her know, in a lady-like manner, exactly what she was."

"I think she's damned pretty," Severan said.

He did it deliberately. The blazing look Bess gave him was what he expected. Bess disliked any other pretty girl. If she grew angry enough, she'd talk bluntly.

"What was her business?" Severan asked Jubal. "I saw Con Tillman. He said to tell you he'd be obliged if you paid close attention to Miss Anderson's business."

"Damn that old windbag!" Jubal Hoyt said explosively. He came to his feet, angry and excited. "The

Anderson girl claims we've been buying stolen cattle! She had the nerve to threaten trouble!"

"Well, have we been buying stolen cattle?"

"Naturally not!" Jubal cleared his throat. "That is . . . not that we know."

"Which means," said Severan, "we have." His silver-inlaid spurs chimed softly as he moved across the office and back. All the hot, hard recklessness of his nature was dark on his face. "You damned thief!" he said roughly to Jubal Hoyt. "You mealy-mouthed, greedy thief!"

"You can't talk—" Bess blazed.

"Keep quiet!" Severan rasped so coldly that Bess gaped.

IV

Jubal Hoyt was not a fighting man. He spoke sadly, "Profits vanish when partners quarrel. Bess, go to the house. This isn't woman's business. You know nothing about it."

"Yes, father," Bess said with sudden meekness.

Severan closed the door behind her. "Jubal, how much rustled beef have we bought?"

Jubal sat down. The sadness was still on him.

"Lawless country, lawless times, my boy. There have been few complaints. They were easily satisfied."

"Or killed," said Severan. "How many head have we bought from the O'Reilly brothers?"

"Not many." Jubal brought his finger tips together. "We buy all the

cattle we can. As cheap as we can. Couldn't make money otherwise."

"There's usually an O'Reilly around when I ride in from a buying trip," said Severan. "Frank O'Reilly, especially. Hanging around Bess like he was part of the business."

Jubal lifted a reassuring hand. "It's natural for a young man to be jealous, my boy. And of course Bess is attractive. But I give you my word . . ."

"Bess can tell me about that if I ask her. You tell me, Jubal, about the cases of cartridges and rifles and six-guns that were unloaded from the schooner and locked in the end room of the warehouse."

Jubal's fingers locked together, clasping tightly. "So I'm spied on," he murmured. He sighed softly. "A small venture of my own. Most ranchers would like one of the latest model guns. The profit is handsome."

"You lying old hypocrite!" said Severan roughly. "Did you think you had a fool for a partner? I helped you get started in a small honest business. But that wasn't enough. The cattle I've been buying from honest ranchers weren't enough. You've been dealing with the cut-throats and outlaws out of the Braxada. Want me to tell you how you have been doing it?"

Jubal had closed his eyes. The sadness was growing on him. "I'm listening," he murmured.

"You've been doing it through the O'Reilly brothers. Thieves of a kind. And the ranchers aren't fools, either. I've been noticing how they've been

cooling off when I ride up. And how the outlaws are moving in on the ranchers."

"Troubles of the ranchers are not our business."

"They are when folks get an idea the O'Reillys have a hand in it and are working for us."

"Lies," said Jubal, his eyes still closed. "We're making money. The ones who lie loudest will bring cattle to us fastest when they need cash money. Times are hard."

"Old Gonzales isn't the first man who never got home with his money."

"Lawless times," Jubal murmured.

Severan's hand went to his gun holster. Jubal's eyes flew open.

"I always thought you could see like a cat when your eyes seemed closed," said Severan. "It's a good trick. But don't count on it, Jubal, in a tight. And the rest of your tricks stop now. We'll buy no more cattle that aren't tallied through by every honest rancher who might have an interest in the brand."

"You have as much right to give orders as I have," Jubal conceded.

"And we won't be doing business with the O'Reillys."

Jubal shrugged.

Severan's smile was sardonic.

"Think fast, Jubal. You'll need to. Big Red killed old Gonzales in the Angel Creek brush today and took his money. I caught up with Big Red at Hang Oak. He was spending some of those new Yankee dollars that Gonzales carried away. We spoke about it. Big Red went for his gun. I shot him in the hand. He'll never

use it for any gun work again."

Jubal Hoyt's, "*Oh, you fool!*" was the wrenching groan of a hard-hit man. His face above the square-cut beard looked ashen as he jumped to his feet.

"The O'Reillys," said Jubal hoarsely, "know every outlaw killer in the Brasada and work with them! And those brothers never forget a wrong!" He was panting. "I let you talk on, you young fool! But now they'll think . . ."

His hand was shaking as he opened a desk drawer and snatched out a whiskey bottle. "We're ruined!" he groaned. "All of us!"

He was gulping from the whiskey bottle as Severan walked out.

The Mexican hostler at the horse corral was waiting for Bess Hoyt to turn her mares in for the night. Severan gave the man brief orders.

"Rub this one down and feed him good. Saddle that blue roan stallion and bring him to the house."

A little later, stripped to the waist in the lean-to room at the back of his house, Severan was washing and shaving by lamplight when he heard the faint receding run of Bess Hoyt's matched mares going off into the night, inland.

He listened a moment, to be sure. His partly lathered face was hard and bleak in the mirror when he resumed shaving. He was drying his face when his hand swept out suddenly and knocked the lamp chimney off. The damp towel slapped down and cut off the wick flame.

Severan was crouched at the end of the table, gun cocked in his hand, as the hot chimney rolled off the table and shattered on the floor.

A soft voice spoke in the night close to the window. "Wan fool, *señor*, to stan' in light like that. Weel be tro'ble now."

Severan let down the gun hammer and stepped to the open window. Juan Domingo was one man he could trust.

"Where's Hoyt?"

"Locked in hees house."

"Miss Hoyt?"

"She don' say. Jus' tell her papa to estop swearing an' go to sleep. They weel have everything yet, she promise."

"Were you listening outside the office, too?"

"Leetle bit."

"Get yourself shot some day, being so curious. You think Frank O'Reilly will listen to her?"

Juan was a gentleman in such matters. He evaded politely. "I t'ink maybe Maria, who work for Mees Hoyt, t'ink so. Don Frank O'Reilly ees roll his eyes like sick bull w'en he watch Mees Hoyt. So Maria say. Me . . . I don' know."

Juan's back-door gossip was usually accurate. In the darkness Severan gave grudging admiration to Bess Hoyt's cool calculations.

"Juan, I've been a fool."

"Ees so," Juan agreed. He was still invisible.

"I've been away too much, buying cattle. And when I began to get suspicious, I waited too long."

"Si," came Juan's quiet tones.

"I'm tarred with all the dirt. I came here a stranger. I guess I'm still a stranger. Mighty few men trust me. The men who count are suspicious of Hoyt and Severan."

"Ees so," Juan agreed quietly outside the window.

"I'm not exactly sure what's going to happen. First off, the O'Reillys will try to kill me. Which they probably will." Severan was thinking aloud. "I came here halfway honest, at least. Men treated me that way at first. They've been double-crossed. I got half the profit, and I'll take all the blame. Should have stopped it before it started. A partner pays his partner's debts. Savvy?"

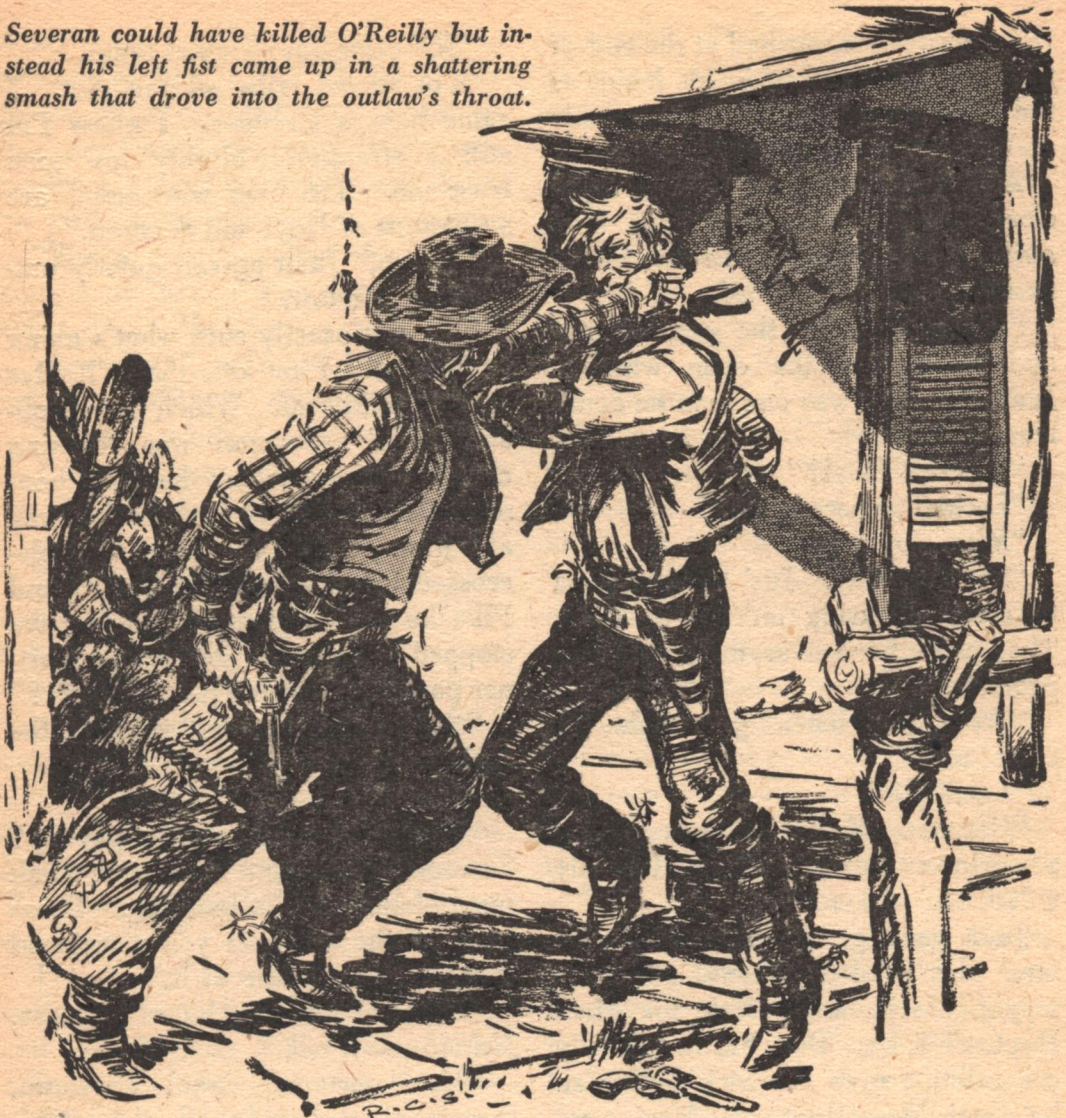
"Si," said Juan's soft voice in the night.

"This debt will take some paying," Severan went on. "Because I think pure bloody hell is building. Those guns off the schooner you mentioned today made me sure of it."

"*Señor*, I am wan burro vaquero. No *sabe* soch talk."

"My partner," said Severan, "wants all the money in the world. All he can grab from this spot, at least. He's got the cash and the outside markets. I think he's planning to use every outlaw in the Brasada to get every head of cattle, every ranch brand, and every dollar he can squeeze out of this country. He'll have men killed who stand in the way. He'll have the local law shot down, buffaloeed or bought off if it makes trouble. Some of that has been

Severan could have killed O'Reilly but instead his left fist came up in a shattering smash that drove into the outlaw's throat.



happening in the past year, if you think back."

Juan Domingo was dubious in the dark outside the window. "Ees sound like madman."

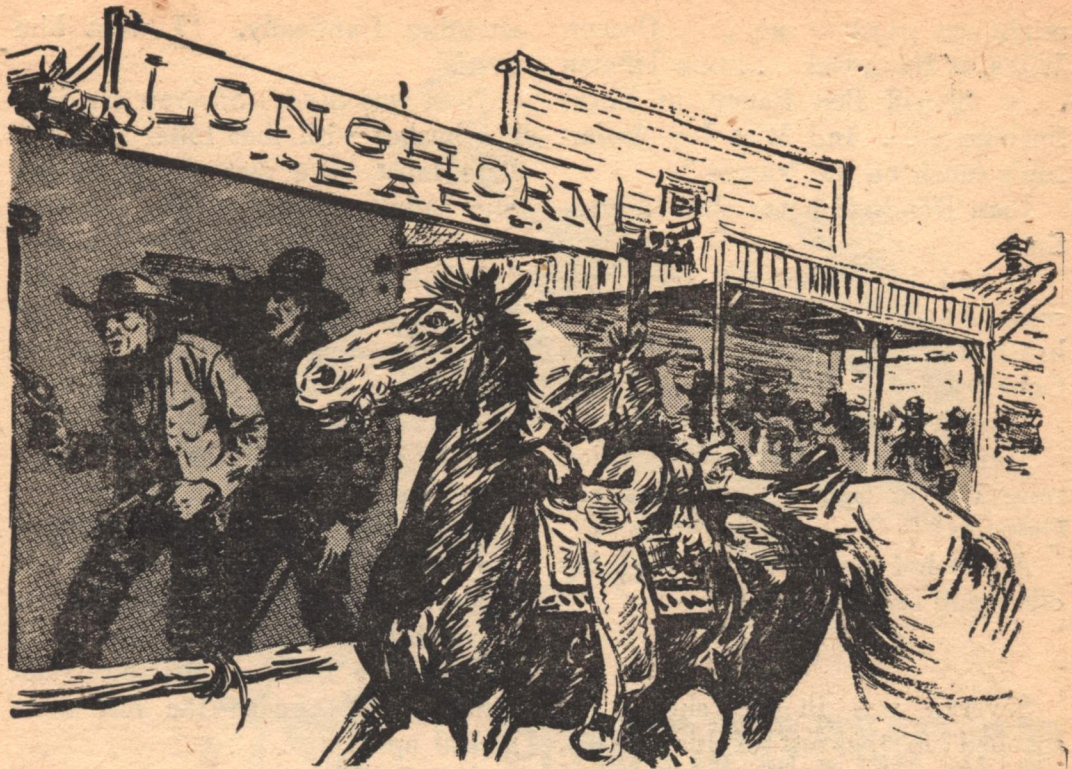
"It's business with Hoyt," explained Severan. "A big gamble to cash in big. All he needs is a link with the Brasada outlaws. He found that in the O'Reillys. Could have been their idea in the first place. If

they can be smoothed down now about Big Red's hand, Jubal can go on with his plans, legal and safe. He sits here at the packery and pulls the strings. The outlaws do the dirty work. Two-three years of it and Hoyt will have all he wants."

Juan had a simple practical mind.

"Ees better kill *Señor Hoyt* now."

"Can't kill a man without proof. I'm guessing about a lot of this. And



he's my partner until he makes a move against me."

"I t'ink you dead *muy pronto* then," Juan decided. "Me too. Always I ride weeth you."

"This time you ride alone, Juan." Severan leaned against the window frame, shaping his plans as he talked softly.

"You know every vaquero and Mexican in the country. The good ones and the bad ones. I want to know what the O'Reillys are doing. What strangers are drifting around. Jubal can't wait now. He knows I can stop him. He'll have to stop me. And the O'Reillys won't wait."

"W'at you do?"

"First, I won't let the O'Reillys gang up on me and kill me. That would settle everything for Jubal."

"I t'ink they start after you to-night already, *señor*." Juan guessed shrewdly.

"Depends on where Big Red finds them. They might be riding in any minute. Could be as late as tomorrow."

"But you, *señor*," Juan persisted. "W'at you do—one man alone?"

Severan's dry chuckle brushed the darkness.

"Worse than alone," he said. "The ranchers don't trust me and the O'Reillys want me. I'll have to keep moving until I make a rope and let Jubal hang himself. Might pay back that way some of the dirt already done in my name. Now listen, Juan . . ."

"*Si?*"

"I can think of four places you

might get word to me. . . . Deacon Wilks, at Hang Oak. . . . Con Tillman . . . Sheriff Ben Raney, at Three Springs. . . . And Miss Joy Anderson's ranch on the Nueces."

Juan Domingo never showed emotion.

"I t'ink I never see you again," he said calmly. "Somewhere in the brush the javelinas weel find you like Gonzales. . . . *Adios.*"

Juan walked away into the night.

Moments later his loud question rang out in Spanish. "*Quien es? Quien es?*"

A gunshot topped the words. Another gun crashed in. . . .

V

Severan was in his shirt. He scooped up the rest of his clothes, jacket, hat, gloves, rifle—and jumped for the back door of the lean-to.

Juan had walked back toward the Hoyt cottage, which was the way also to the small settlement a half mile away called Gut Town, where most of the packery workers lived and a few fishing boats homed.

The bawling anger of Big Red O'Reilly was shouting the guns silent.

"You shot the wrong man, dammit! Git to his house!"

Here under the tall elms and oaks, shadows were thick and bushes grew. The O'Reillys were in the shadows on foot. Juan had met them closing in. They came running now, fanned out from the road. More men than the three O'Reilly brothers, Severan guessed by the sounds.

"Don't kill him!" Big Red was

shouting frantically. "I want him first!"

Juan was dead. Severan ran into the bushes with that bitter thought. Bess must have met the O'Reillys. She hadn't stopped them. But had she urged Gil O'Reilly on? And was Jubal hiding in his house, or standing at a window waiting for good news?

This morning Bill Severan had had a girl, a partner, a future. Now as he ducked away from the hut, into the shadows and bushes, he wasn't sure what he had.

His horse hadn't been brought from the corral. He hauled on hat and jacket and shoved the gauntlet gloves inside his belt as he ran, making as little noise as possible. Behind him he heard the hut door kicked open. . . .

Big Red's bawling orders were furious. "He ain't in there waitin' fer you! Scatter out! He's close! She said he didn't have no hoss!"

That brought the bitterness up in Severan's throat. Sick and furious. Bess had done that. They'd ridden together in the moonlight. Bess' face had been soft, her lips warm.

Tonight in the moonlight she'd tried to turn him over to the O'Reilly guns. For money.

Severan ran then to live, driven by a rage so furious it gagged him.

"*There he goes! Hear him?*"

They'd left their horses somewhere beyond the Hoyt house. On foot they came after him, no faster than he was. But confident, now that they saw where he was heading. For the trees thinned out just ahead. The

narrowing neck of land ran out past the cattle pens, the packery buildings and the wharf.

Once out there he was trapped, river on one side, bay on the other side and ahead. But the horse corral was there too, and a chance that the blue roan was saddled.

The last bushes grew thicker. Severan ran out into the moonlight on the road.

"*There he is!*"

A rifle spoke after him. The lead screamed close. And on the right of the road, just beyond the last trees, a horse wheeled around under its rider.

Severan brought his cocked six-gun up as he ran; then saw that the rider was starting to retreat.

"Pablo!" he called.

The rifle tried again . . . and again. Lead burned Severan's thigh. Close; the moonlight was a little tricky. . . . The rider had reined back toward Severan and put the horse running.

The big fast blue roan had never looked so good. Pablo flung out of the saddle. Severan swarmed up, gasping.

"Climb up! They'll shoot you for this!" he panted.

The roan took them both in a hard-spurred run away from the road, angling back across the neck of land and a hail of lead from rifles and six-guns as men burst clear of the last trees and sighted them.

Two hundred yards of it. Then the first scraggly bayside bushes gave them a screen. On around the curve of land with the bay to the left. The

hard-running horse reached the cattle trail leading to the shore road.

"Thees good!" said Pablo behind Severan's shoulder. "I hide now!"

"They'll be coming!" Severan warned as he pulled up and Pablo slipped down. "Juan Domingo got shot back there, near the Hoyt house. See that he's buried right, *amigo!*"

Severan had several minutes' start. No more. Blood was down in his left boot. The anger was still wild in him.

Bad enough to have played Jubal Hoyt's game. But Bess had gotten into his emotions. She must have been amused. And in the showdown she'd turned him over to the O'Reillys. Another fool, no longer useful.

Sometime after midnight, far inland, Severan slept on the ground in a chaparral thicket, beside a great sheltering clump of prickly pear.

At dawn when he stood up stiffly, he was just another hunted man of the thickets, like any Brasada outlaw. Worse. If the outlaws kept out of trouble, the law didn't bother them. What little law there was.

Severan inspected the roan for brush cuts, and rode on easily. He had to keep a strong horse under him now. At midmorning he washed at a deep-dug well behind the mesquite-log hut of a Mexican vaquero who was working at a ranch some thirty miles away. The woman fed him tortillas, beans and jerky in thick greasy gravy.

Feeling better, Severan rode on, cutting across country to Three Springs, a county seat. He came in at dusk from the north, so that he passed only a few houses before dis-

mounting at the white-washed picket fence of Sheriff Ben Raney.

He had visited the comfortable little frame house before. Probably he had swaggered a little when he opened the white picket gate and went to the vine-hung porch. He had been the prosperous, confident younger partner of Hoyt and Severan.

Now he limped. Beard stubble roughened his face. Blood caked the cloth of left trousers leg. He was tired, a little feverish. The bitter hardness was in him as he stopped short at the porch step, staring at Joy Anderson, who ranched in Con Tillman's neighborhood on the Nueces.

They had met at a dance in San Antonio about the time Severan began dickering with Jubal Hoyt. On a moonlit gallery behind the ballroom, Severan had had his face properly slapped, and they could have become close friends.

Joy had been that kind of a girl, in San Antonio, before her father had been killed. A lissome girl of sun and wind and the open ranges, young, laughing, frank.

Then somehow Bess had demanded attention. Bess had been coolly disdainful the one time she met Joy. Then later Tom Anderson had died and some of the night smokiness of Joy's black hair had come to stay back in her eyes.

She had been less friendly each time her path and Severan's crossed. Now, sitting on Ben Raney's porch in a rocking chair, Joy had an aloofness understandable after her recent

visit to the Hoyt and Severan packery.

"The sheriff and Con Tillman went up the street about an hour ago," she said. "You'd better keep running. Frank O'Reilly, Little Red O'Reilly, and three friends rode past here, asking about you. Tillman and Raney followed them to see if anything happened."

In the last twilight Joy had the richer prettiness of youth maturing. Some of the light laughter had left her forever, Severan guessed. The heavy hand of responsibility and trouble was pressing on her.

"I'm sorry you weren't well received at the packery," he said apologetically.

"As well as I expected." Joy shrugged. "You'd better move on. They're looking for you. . . . When thieves fall out, honest people profit," she said calmly.

"Hoyt says you've been losing cattle and think the packery has been buying your rustled beef."

"I didn't tell Hoyt and his daughter that. I wasn't given a chance to say much. Actually the cattle are being run into Mexico. Most of them, at least. Your packery has been buying Mexican cattle from the same thieves. It amounts to the same thing. You and your partner are doing business with them. You've been working with the O'Reillys. People know about them too."

"I think you're right," Severan said. "But I've been away from the packery so much I didn't realize what was going on."

The curve of Joy's faint smile had

more scorn than Severan had ever expected to face.

"Now the devil a saint would be, with the O'Reillys hunting him down," said Joy. "Before the men left, we were wondering if that wouldn't happen." She leaned forward a little. "It won't work, Mr. Severan. People have been learning about you and your partner."

A man could fall a long way from pride and ambition. Flushing, Severan locked his lips on an angry reply. "I'll wait for Raney and Tillman," he decided, and sat on the edge of the porch.

Joy Anderson got up. "I'll wait in the house," she said coldly.

Three Springs was a small town. Severan sat alone in the deepening dusk, waiting for sound of the O'Reilly bunch. He was there when Con Tillman and Ben Raney came walking back alone.

"Ain't you lucky," Tillman greeted him dryly. "Friends o' your'n jes' moved on, lookin' fer you."

Ben Raney, big, easy-going and honest, said bluntly, "I don't want trouble in town. Ain't a thing I can do for you, Severan. Best move on. Take my advice an' keep moving. They'll get you sure if you try to face it out."

"Probably," Severan agreed. "You can't help me. But I might be able to help you. Tillman saw how this O'Reilly trouble started. That was personal. Doesn't count. What's behind it does, for all of you."

Standing there by the step, with the

new night closing about them, Severan talked bluntly, briefly. He sensed the verdict before he finished.

Con Tillman turned his head and spat. "Crooked work—but you didn't know nothin' about it," he said sarcastically. "You got a crooked partner—but all the time you been white as a woolly lamb. You picked trouble with Big Red—an' now the O'Reillys ain't men you should've been doin' business with. Know what that sounds like to a old wore-out brush popper like me, young feller?"

"Say it, Tillman."

"Sounds like you got bogged in your own dirt, an' the yellow's oozin' out of you, an' you're hollerin' for help from the same men you've done dirt to while you shook their hands."

Ben Raney said, "I'm told Jubal Hoyt will swear he gave Big Red O'Reilly that new money you made a fight over at Hang Oak. The O'Reillys claim you must've killed that Mexican, and robbed him. You an' that vaquero who rides out with you all the time. Seems to be plenty proof you killed the vaquero last night to shut his mouth when the O'Reillys come after you."

"Going to arrest me for that, sheriff?" Severan faced them, ominous now.

"Didn't happen in my county," said Raney. "Ain't had a complaint made to git you. Make trouble if I locked you up. The O'Reillys'd be after you in my jail. My advice is to keep on the run clean to California. These parts will be well shut of you. Ain't a man I know of wants to hear you

hollering that everybody is crooked but you."

"The O'Reillys ranch here in your county, Raney."

"They ain't made any trouble around here. Git 'em if they do."

"Your partner has kept busy at the packery," Tillman said. "You're the one who's been ridin' around makin' deals with people. Could be you're the one who's done it all. Not meanin' to bring a lady into it, but didn't you git bristled up about your partner's daughter not takin' a fancy to you? Put you in a frame of mind to git back at her an' her father?"

Severan laughed. It had a savage sound, even to his own ears. He'd thought all this couldn't be worse. But it was. Jubal's shrewdness had worked fast.

"I'll take your advice and travel," Severan said. "But keep this in mind, Tillman. . . . You too, Raney. I tried. Now I'm getting out of the country. Whatever happens at the packery, or with the O'Reillys and their friends, can't be laid to me. It's your trouble now." Severan turned to the dark porch and open door and windows.

"Your trouble too, Miss Anderson."

Joy had been sitting inside the dark window at the left of the doorway, listening. Her cool reply came out the window.

"Good-by, Mr. Severan."

VI

It might have been different if Juan Domingo had lived. . . . Or if

Ben Raney and Con Tillman had trusted a little, Severan would have stayed.

He rode north to San Antonio. Certain banking business, his leg properly treated, a new outfit bought, took a day. He left word with the bankers that he was traveling to Galveston and New Orleans. Jubal would shortly hear that.

Three weeks later, traveling easily with a pack horse, he camped a night by the salt cedars at the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos. Two months after that he was at Chihuahua, in Old Mexico, moving south leisurely, making lonely camps.

South from Chihuahua through the tawny mountains; then swinging east across the great flat reaches toward the Eastern Sierras, which looked from Monterey over the flat lands running to the lower Rio Grande and the Brasada outlaw thickets.

Severan kept moving, a man who had vanished, who lived under the sky. The last idle flesh left his bones. Hair and curly beard grew out. His outfit aged to trail-worn shabbiness.

A hardness grew in him, a wolf persistence closing in for the kill as he drew the great loop of travel to an end.

There had been time for Jubal Hoyt to fashion his own hang rope. Jubal wouldn't wait. He was too greedy for money. . . .

Severan came down out of the Sierras to the famous monte games in the plaza at Monterey. His mother would not have known the wolflike, shabby stranger emerging unobtru-

sively from the interior of Mexico.

Fiesta crowded Monterey. The long wooden monte tables in the plaza were piled with gold and silver coins. Each game had its knot of players and spectators. There was other gambling. A man could name his pleasure and find it.

Here was the first contact in months with the world Severan had left. Men from Texas, from the far buffalo plains, from distant gay New Orleans, were here in Monterey for pleasure, gambling and business.

A man could have all the talk he wanted by buying drinks. A rancher named Joe Kenner, from the Frio River country, who had sold cattle to the Hoyt and Severan packery, talked readily to the shabby, bearded prospector who asked news of Texas.

"Gits worse, mister. The damn country's gittin' rustled to the bone again. Them Brasada thickets is a snake's nest. A man never knows when he'll git a gun stuck in his face. Most often his back."

"Friend of mine is sheriff at Three Springs. . . . Raney."

"They ain't no sheriff at Three Springs—or the next county, either. Raney got kilt three months ago. They got 'em a new sheriff. He got kilt in a week. Half-dozen good family men I know of have sold out an' pult out for new parts. They want a chance to git ahead without losin' all they got. Prospectin' is the right business, friend. Nothin' to lose. . . . What'd you say your name was?"

"Smith," was the stranger's answer.

Kenner grinned. "Hell of a lot of Smiths between here an' San Antonio. But they ain't diggin' fer gold an' silver. They're ridin', rustlin' and shootin' for it. Step out in the plaza to them monte games an' spit. Most likely you'll hit one."

Kenner had not recognized Bill Severan. Bill bought other drinks, stored up more news. The Hoyt and Severan packery was flourishing. The O'Reillys were powerful. Here in Monterey hard-looking men were gambling more money at monte than they had ever earned in wages.

Severan crossed the Rio Grande at night, in the dark of the moon, and vanished in the thorn thickets, making a new camp each night. He met hard-looking strangers, and he was one of them, listening to their talk.

One night he sat cross-legged in the shadowy background of a small campfire while Little Red O'Reilly and two companions gulped tin cups of hot coffee laced with whiskey and talked in low tones with the leader of the small hard-cased bunch camped there for the night.

Little Red had the flat swarthy features of Big Red O'Reilly. He stood in the flickering light of the campfire and gestured toward Severan with the tin cup.

"Who's that'n?"

"Feller been prospectin' over in Mexico. He's on this side of the river for another grubstake. Calls hisself Smith."

"Smith . . . or Brown, Black or Blue, he can earn a stake with you

boys," said Little Red, grinning around at the others. A thought struck him. He turned to the shadows where Severan sat in silence.

"Smith, you run acrost ary man named Severan over there in Mexico?"

Severan looked into his own tin cup thoughtfully. Shook his head. "Didn't hear the name, mister. Friend of yours?"

Little Red grinned. A couple of the outlaws laughed.

"I aim to meet him," Little Red said. "They's five thousand dollars' gold waitin' fer the man brings Severan's head in a sack to the O'Reilly ranch. Cash—jes' so the head ain't too ripe to be recognized."

"Name's Severan, huh?"

"That's right."

Severan drank the last of his black coffee. "Might bring his head around. Beats prospectin' for ore."

"Salt it if you got a long trip in to collect," advised Little Red. "Got to recognize him when you roll him out o' the sack." Little Red tossed his cup down. "Boys, I got to get on. See you in a couple weeks."

When the visitors rode away, Barlow, the bunch leader, a tall, thin man with black mustaches, poured himself more coffee from the fire-blackened pot.

"Don't go spendin' that head money, Smith. They's a hundred men in the brush lookin' to earn it every time they ride out. Been three heads brought in to the O'Reillys already on the chance the dead man was Severan. Hard luck each time."

Barlow gulped a swallow of the scalding coffee. "How about it—you makin' money with us?"

"How?"

Barlow grinned, too. "How, hell! That'll be told when the time comes."

"Most likely I'll be around," said Severan mildly. "But I don't button close to you for the next two weeks. Mean to see a little of this side of the river for a change."

"Ride to Three Springs when the two weeks is nigh up. Drink in the Longhorn Bar. You'll see me."

"Look for me," Severan said.

He pulled out at sunrise, one more armed stranger moving through the Brasada thickets.

Two days later, in Rio Grande City, Severan lounged with other idlers in front of a poolroom and watched a fine polished carriage roll by. The two spirited bay horses were trotting smartly. The driver, in neat broadcloth and gray sombrero, was Frank O'Reilly. Bess Hoyt sat beside him.

The lean lines of Frank O'Reilly's face were not unhandsome. But he had a narrow, cold look.

Bess wore an elegant dress and hat with plume. A slight set smile was on her face; not a happy smile, not pleasant.

Her restless look was on the walk. Severan marked the quick jump of her glance to the spot where he stood. He saw her lips stop moving.

No need to wonder what had happened. It had taken a woman's eye to probe through the shabbiness and beard and fined-down wolfishness.

The buggy slowed down. Severan waited for Frank O'Reilly to get out and walk back to the stranger Bess had noticed.

But the carriage kept on. It was anyone's guess what Bess had said to O'Reilly. . . .

Half an hour later Severan was riding out of Rio Grande City, back to the thorn brush thickets.

He wondered if Bess' cheek was as soft to O'Reilly in the moonlight, her hair as fragrant and her murmuring voice as sweet as they had once seemed to himself.

Severan smiled thinly in the untrimmed beard. He'd never thought to pity an O'Reilly. Now he did. . . .

Five days later Severan rode out of the brush into the hoof- and wheel-marked yard in front of Con Tillman's ranchhouse—and suddenly flung himself off his horse, pulling his six-gun as he struck the ground with the horse between himself and the house.

Bess Hoyt had stepped out on the weather-beaten gallery.

VII

Severan looked for the O'Reillys. Corrals, bunkhouse and other buildings were out back. But he was a good rifle target from a dozen points in the nearby brush.

"Bill!" Bess called. She was coming off the porch.

Then Con Tillman, arm in a black cloth sling, moved out of the open doorway. He said:

"Come in, Severan, when you're through talkin' with the lady."

Severan holstered the gun. Con Tillman wasn't the man to run an ambush.

The afternoon sunlight played in Bess' wheat-colored hair as they met in front of the horse. She was pale and tense.

"I looked for you in Rio Grande City, Bill."

"Thought you would," he said laconically. "Where's your friend?"

"Frank doesn't know I'm here." Bess swallowed again. "I went to Miss Anderson's ranch. I thought you'd head there. They told me she was here at the Tillman ranch. I thought you might be here too, and I drove as fast as I could."

Severan looked toward the weathered old frame ranchhouse. Joy Anderson wasn't visible. Con Tillman had gone back inside.

"What are you up to now, Bess?"

"Come back, Bill. You're needed."

Severan's grin was tight in the beard. "Trying to earn that five thousand for my head in a sack?"

"The O'Reillys offered that," said Bess. "And not because you shot Big Red's hand useless."

"My guess would be Jubal put up the money for my head. My share of the packery goes to him if I die."

"He didn't; he wants you, Bill." Bess' white ladylike hand went to Severan's arm. She was pleading. "The O'Reillys are giving us orders, Bill. They're going to own everything. Their men, or one of the brothers, are around all the time."

"Tell Frank O'Reilly about it." Severan added dryly, "Hold him

close and whisper it in his ear."

He had never seen Bess' chin tremble. It did now.

"Frank and I were married months ago. It's a secret," Bess said. "But Frank doesn't love me. Doesn't trust me. He makes it plain that if father doesn't take orders, something will happen to him. Then Frank will be married to our half of the business. And if you're killed, the O'Reillys will have all of it."

Bess was lovely with tears in her eyes. And now the reason for the strain and unhappiness behind her set smile in Rio Grande City was plain.

A slow smile, more pity than anything else, touched Severan's bearded mouth.

"So you played with the devil and couldn't manage him. Jubal got caught in his own dirt finally. But your own husband, Bess—why won't he trust you?"

Her cool pride was a sick and pleading thing now. And for once Severan knew he was hearing the truth from Bess.

"Frank says if I'd ride to them for help, and say you were at home without a horse, where they could find you, I'd do the same to him," said Bess, pale in the sunlight. "He didn't tell me that until we were married; then he made it plain he married me to get control of the packery."

"And you married him to get control of the O'Reillys," Severan said. "Like you would have married me." He looked at her. "Go back to Frank O'Reilly, Bess. You married him."

Red flamed in Bess' pale cheeks. "It's that girl—that Joy Anderson, isn't it?"

"You're married, Bess. Go to your husband."

Then Severan saw hate, naked and blazing.

"It will be ten thousand for your head when he hears you're back!" Bess choked. "And I'll be there when they open the sack and roll it on the ground!" Her voice was rising hysterically. "If that's what I have to take, I'll be worse than the rest of them! You fool! I could have helped you!"

She whirled, running around the side of the house.

Con Tillman called out the door. "Come in, Severan, while I git the lady started in her buggy."

Joy Anderson was inside, dressed like a brush popper, chaps, hat and brush jacket. More of the grave maturity was on her as Severan walked into the sparsely furnished room.

"Why didn't you stay away?" she said with no sign of friendliness. "Now this will make it worse. We've had enough trouble."

Severan put his carbine beside the open doorway. "Trouble when I was here. Trouble after I pulled out and left everything to you folks. Can't satisfy a woman."

"Oh, you were right," Joy said coldly. "And we couldn't handle it. We're all going broke. But now she'll make it worse. You shouldn't have come here."

Bess lashed her buggy horses

around the house and took the thicket-walled ranch road at a furious run. Joy's lip curled. "A kiss would have stopped her! Now she'll have your head! Won't you ever learn?"

Joy wheeled out of the room and kept going out back. She rode a roan horse fast around the house a few moments later and did not look back as Severan watched from the doorway.

Con Tillman stamped in. "You sure make wimmen mad fast, Severan. What's on your mind?"

"Hell of a lot more than I brought here. Seems things have changed. I thought Jubal Hoyt was the snake around here. He's only the tail."

Con Tillman still looked like a worn-out old brush hand with scraggly tobacco-stained beard. But his old eyes were like two pieces of blue hard glass.

"It's a big snake now, mister. Got a hundred heads. Lop one off an' two more grows on."

"Mistake to try for the heads. Get the bōdy and the heads will die off."

"They's four bodies to this snake. All called O'Reilly," said Tillman. "An' they stay back from trouble where the law can't touch 'em."

"They won't stay out of this when Bess brings her report," said Severan. "They'll come for my head themselves. It'll be straight murder and they won't give a damn. If there was any law in these parts, it'd be enough to hang them." He caught his carbine from beside the doorway.

"Leavin'?"

"Hate to have my head salted and

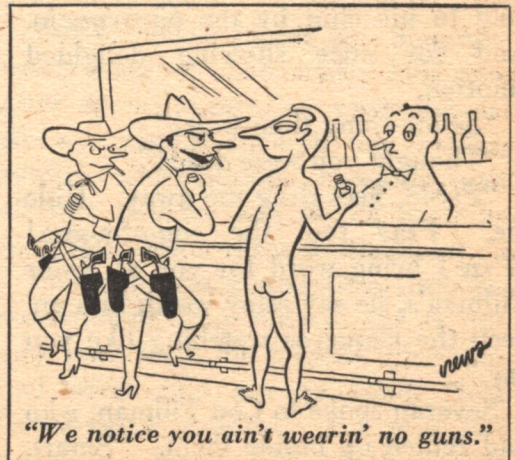
delivered in a sack," said Severan shortly. "I'll take it to them. Better spread word that the ranchers through here are due for more trouble. The O'Reillys are gathering men at Three Springs in less than a week."

"Strangers scoutin' around already," said Con Tillman calmly. "Lookin' things over. Comin' into Three Springs for grub an' drinks. Looks like a big clean-out is coming. The O'Reillys are at Gut Town an' the packery. Frank O'Reilly put up a house there, near Hoyt's place. Last night they was all there. Big Red was drunk an' target-shootin' with his left hand. Does it all the time now, trying to git natural with that left hand."

Severan decided abruptly. "I'll take time to get out of these whiskers. Don't want a mistake about whose head I'm delivering."

Two riders left the ranch corrals at a gallop while Severan was shaving. . . .

Con Tillman rode with Severan when he left.



"Got to meet a man down the road," Tillman said briefly. He looked at the hard-chiseled leanness of Severan's face. "Ary message to leave friends after you're kilt?"

"Got no friends."

"What'd you come back for?"

"Business; I own half the packery."

"You owned it when you went away," Con Tillman reminded dryly.

"Thought I'd let Jubal Hoyt run it his way for a time. Now the O'Reillys don't suit me for partners."

"Why'd you come to my place?"

"Thought I'd warn you trouble was coming."

"Been nothin' but trouble," said Con Tillman, and they rode in silence, putting the miles behind.

The rider who swung around a turn of the brush-walled road shouted suddenly at sight of them. Severan shouted an instant later. They both shook horses into a run, and met in a dust-geysering pull up, hands reaching out in hard delighted clasp.

Juan Domingo was back from the dead, stocky, dark-skinned, old hat held to his chin by the *barbequejo*. And for once showing delighted emotion.

"*Señor*—long time wait!"

"Thought you were dead!"

"Pablo, hees drag me away. Hide me. Pray too, the son-of-a-gun! W'en I bring word for you at *Señor* Tillman's, he say estay weeth him an' keep the vaqueros watching like you say."

Severan spoke to Con Tillman, who had reined up beside them. "Smart,

aren't you, keeping all this under your hat!"

"Hated to admit how big a fool I was when you come to Ben Raney an' me," said Con Tillman dryly. "This feller set me straight about you. Been bringin' in reports steady from his vaquero friends. A lot of it don't amount to much. Tally it up an' a man can see honest folks is being crowded out. Since Ben Raney got shot up an' kilt, I been waitin' for you to git back an' finish what you started."

"Plenty men around to do something about it."

"Plenty has tried," said Tillman in his dry manner. "They tackled the snake by snipin' at a head when it showed. Didn't do no good. Lately I've been clawin' back from a grave hole. Didn't dast tell about this feller an' his friends makin' reports. Would've leaked out. Mexicans would have been on the bounty list every time an outlaw sighted one."

Juan's face went serious. "Ees plenty strangers around. One here, one there . . . t'ree-four 'nother place. Scout around."

"A big clean-up comin' while there ain't no law around. No sheriff at Three Springs," said Con Tillman.

"Today," Juan Domingo told them, "*Señor* Gil O'Reilly, hees talk to t'ree strangers at Hang Oak. Same time hees brothers ride to Three Springs."

"You come from Three Springs?" Severan asked.

"No," said Juan. "Vaquero friend ride from Hang Oak to Angel Creek store an' tell me thees. Yesterday I'm

ride here from Three Springs."

"See a tall thin stranger there? Maybe around the Longhorn Bar. Calls himself Barlow. Long black mustaches."

"That," said Tillman bleakly, "would be Blackie Barlow. Drifted into the Brasada from Fort Griffin, which is the niggest thing to hell, boys back from there say. The buffalo hunters outfit there. Soldiers an' hunters an' thieves an' killers an' gamblers is runnin' wild. Blackie Barlow an' friends was murderin' buffalo hunters for their money an' outfits. They got too bad for even Fort Griffin an' made a run fer the Brasada thickets to lay low." Tillman turned his head and spat. "We been gittin' a line on outlaws in these parts, if we ain't tamed 'em."

"Thees Barlow stop Angel Creek store yesterday, headin' for Three Springs," said Juan Domingo. He squinted at them under the sagging brim of his hat. "*Señor Hoyt's* daughter, she's drive buggy fast to Three Springs. One frien' tell me down the road."

Severan smiled thinly at Con Tillman. "Bess means business. She must have known Frank O'Reilly and the others would be in Three Springs today. Which means the O'Reillys' plans have been set."

Juan Domingo was frowning a little, hesitating, as if the subject was delicate. "Same man say," he said, "the *Señorita* Anderson ees ride her horse fast after the buggy."

Con Tillman swore in his scraggly beard. "I'll bet Joy knowed when

she left, what she meant to do!"

Severan was trying to grasp it. "Stop Bess?"

"What else?" Tillman wanted to know. "An' it'll get 'em all square against her! Bess Hoyt'll see to that!" He wheeled his horse. "We better git goin'!"

VIII

Juan Domingo fell in at Severan's left as a matter of course. Severan was groping, half angry, because this new worry had struck at him.

"Bess was my worry! Why should Joy mix in!"

"A man that'll kiss a gal in San Antonio, an' take up with another gal right off, oughta be fergot!" said Con Tillman. The wind tugged in his beard as the horses hit a high road run. He had to call his words. "What good's a man without no head? Couldn't hear a girl tell him what a skunk he was! Joy aims to tell you, I've gathered."

It had been a long time since Severan had laughed like this, deep-throated and enjoying it. Things held back in the deep corners of his mind were stirring. Memories, released vividly.

"A lady who feels that way needs her chance to say it," said Severan. "And her chance to run her ranch peacefully. I'll work on that four-bodied O'Reilly snake until they get me. Might be enough men in these parts to finish what I leave."

A strange thing happened then. Con Tillman stripped off the black bandanna arm sling. His gun arm

which he flexed seemed good enough. He caught Severan's look. A grimace stirred in the flying beard.

"Stayed a cripple 'till the time was right." Con fished in the leggings pocket and pinned a sheriff's star on his brush jacket. "This has been kept quiet, too! Good a way as any for a wore-out old cowman to cash in!"

Even Juan Domingo was astonished.

"Snaky, aren't you?" Severan called over as they rode fast. "Anything else up your sleeve?"

"Got to have a head deputy! Raise your hand an' swear to handle the law like I say!"

Severan's grin had a rising joyousness. Now he was not alone. Not an outcast. A man who suited Con Tillman would do.

"How do you say 'handle the law'?" Severan called over.

"Don't give 'em a chance. Snakes is snakes! I've got enough sworn reports an' warrants issued on the quiet to hang the O'Reillys an' half the outlaws in the Brasada. Knowed it was time to move when the Hoyt gal said she'd seen you in Rio Grande City. Knowed you was back for business. Warrants say alive or dead! Take your choice. I've sent for good men to head to Three Springs for a hang-noose roundup! There's law in these parts from today!"

A man could believe the dry, hard rasp of Con Tillman's voice. "Does Joy Anderson know all this?" Severan questioned.

"Nope!" was Tillman's reply.

They were short miles from Three Springs when a turn of the brush-walled road brought them suddenly to the standing buggy. Joy's lathered horse stood ground-tied beside it. The two girls were on the buggy seat, side by side. Two calm, rather pale, almost demure young ladies as the men pulled up and looked at them.

A wicked red line lay across Joy's cheek. Both girls had a vague, disheveled look. Joy's rawhide quirt was gripped firmly in her right hand.

"Tea party?" Severan asked gravely.

"Just talking," Joy said coldly. "Mrs. O'Reilly says her husband and brothers are supposed to be in Three Springs. You'd better turn back."

"The law," Severan said, still gravely, "never turns back." He tapped the deputy's badge. His humor was a dancing light back in his look.

Joy swallowed. "Three of you! And the O'Reillys have a dozen men at least! Con Tillman—this is your doing!"

"Uh-huh," Tillman agreed. "Ain't I a pesky old devil?"

"You'll all be killed!"

"They certainly will!" Bess said spitefully. "And good enough for them!"

Severan grinned. "Thanks, lady." He spoke to Joy. "Give Mrs. O'Reilly another cup of tea. I'll tell her kin-folks she's coming to town shortly. . . . And when they pick up the pieces, there's a will in the San Antonio bank. Made it when I left. You girls should be able to guess who I named."

Bess knew. Her angry flush betrayed her.

The full danger of Three Springs hit Joy Anderson. "Don't ride into town, Bill Severan!" she said, pleading. "Con Tillman . . ."

"It's always harder on the women," Tillman said. "Jist waitin'—afraid. But men can't duck a showdown if they're worth waitin' for."

Tillman wheeled his horse on. Severan followed. The shrill, hating promise of Bess Hoyt reached after them.

"We'll wait—wait for the dead!"

The thorn thickets were a spiky living wall to the very edge of Three Springs. The little town seemed to huddle breathlessly under its oaks and elms and China trees.

In front of Ben Raney's deserted house, a short squint-eyed man stood beside his horse, smoking a cigarette. Severan knew him—Gus Frankel, who ranched on Maribo Creek.

"Ain't so many reached town yet," Frankel greeted Tillman. "Gooney Lee is passin' word around town you're due in for business."

"All the O'Reillys here?" asked Severan.

Frankel squinted at the deputy's badge. It told him Con Tillman's attitude, and seemed to satisfy him. "Loafing," he said. "No trouble yet."

"Don't be hasty," Tillman warned.

"I haven't been," Severan said. The hardness was on him again. "It started in my name," he said, and saw Tillman's hooded stare of understanding as he rode on.

Tillman knew. A man paid his

debts, his partner's debts. Strangers could not wash a man's past clean. Severan had a calm acceptance that he was a dead man. One of the O'Reillys would get him.

But in the name of Hoyt and Severan, the O'Reillys had fastened their grip on the country. In the name of Hoyt and Severan, it had to be lifted.

The small dusty plaza was quiet in the afternoon heat. Horses drooped at hitchracks. Men loitered under the shade roofs over the walks. Some townsmen, some strangers. Severan couldn't separate them all.

But he was known—Severan, of Hoyt and Severan. And men knew the O'Reillys wanted him for crippling Big Red O'Reilly. Severan saw recognition stir as his dusty, lathered horse paced into the plaza.

Then occurred one of those meetings of chance, as if fate had made its own little move of sardonic enjoyment. Square across the plaza stepped a tall figure with square-cut graying beard and long upper lip shaved clean. The sun was in his eyes. The quick swing of Severan's horse was almost to him when Jubal Hoyt looked up. He stopped short, upper lip working.

"Jubal, where are they?" Severan asked.

"You're back, my boy!" Jubal said huskily. The clean upper lip was still working. Speech seemed to fail the man. He turned stiffly, arm coming up to point.

Severan hardly saw the gesture. His sweeping glance had picked up

the hard, scrambling run of a short bowlegged man, diving through the swing doors of the Longhorn Saloon.

Jubal's arm was up that way as Severan's hard-spurred horse bolted past him. Straight to the Longhorn hitchrack, a few steps to the left of the bat doors. Severan made a running drop from the saddle, dived under the rack pole, and saw men scattering as he came upright, gun in hand. In the same instant the bat doors burst outward before the great lunge of Big Red O'Reilly.

It was as if time had stopped back there at Hang Oak, long months ago. The same berserk rage was on Big Red's swarthy face. His thick neck muscles were corded. He burst out hatless, head forward and cocked gun in his left hand.

"Here, Red!" Severan called.

His eyes were pin-pointed and the devil was running riot in him as Big Red came wheeling around in surprise at the nearness of his victim.

Only the devil could have made Severan take the chance he did. The double roar of his gun was faster than he should have shot. Big Red stopped short. He lifted his shattered empty left hand and looked at blood spurting from it. Never more good for a gun with either hand.

Gil O'Reilly, lean and black-haired like his brother, Frank, bolted out with the next swing of the doors. The shattered hand, the great berserk scream of Big Red's charge at Severan's gun seemed to freeze Gil O'Reilly. . . . Then Big Red's rush came between Severan and Gil.

Hang Oak had almost seen this happen. There was a wild, raging primitiveness about Big Red. He was not a thinking man now. He was brute force raging out of control. And he had no gun.

Severan couldn't do it. Habit, perhaps. Not pity. There would be no pity in town today. His own cold anger was in the fast side step he took, in the savage chop of his fist beating down Big Red's left arm, in the strike in with the gun steel at Big Red's head.

The man's strength was incredible. Severan barely got the head blow in as Big Red's arm threw off the chopping fist. Then Big Red's rush drove Severan reeling. Crippled right fist and bloody left fist beat at him. A steer would have dropped under the slamming gun steel.

Big Red's bellow had a thick deep note. His eyes seemed to bulge after the blow. Blood spurted from the edge of his hair as he carried Severan back. A hammering fist split Severan's cheek to the bone. Still Bill could have killed the man, for Big Red did not grab for the gun. He was trying to destroy with hands and muscle—a bleeding, bellowing hulk, no longer thinking. No longer human.

With a kind of revulsion, Severan took a blow of the wounded hand across the mouth. It mashed his lips back in the teeth. It gave him the instant needed to brace up with his own corded muscles.

His left fist drove up in a shudder-

ing smash. It sank into Big Red's throat. The man retched, staggered. Then Severan hit him above the ear with the gun steel again. Hit him with a kind of return primitive fury. Big Red fell against him as if his legs had been cut off.

As Severan leaped back, the man crashed down heavily. And a blasting gun shot furrowed Severan's cheek. Gil O'Reilly had run out to the edge of the walk and shot, too hastily as his brother collapsed.

Through a haze Severan saw the narrow-faced man behind the smoking gun muzzle. They fired together, and Severan felt his left arm go numb. Gil O'Reilly was staggering, trying to hold his gun up. Severan's next bullet struck him center, above the belt, doubled him over, dropped him, finished him.

The gun Big Red had dropped had more bullets. Severan scooped it up and staggered. He was dizzy. He set his legs hard, shook blood from his face. They wouldn't all be in the Longhorn. Guns had opened up on the other side of the plaza. A rush of spurred horses was sweeping into the plaza. Men were running out into the open. . . .

Two more O'Reillys were in town. And Blackie Barlow, too treacherous even for Fort Griffin, hell hole of the buffalo plains. And outlaws in for orders. . . .

Severan backed against the front of the Longhorn, beside the bat doors. Blood was trickling over his left wrist.

"Any more O'Reillys or Blackie

Barlow in there?" he called bleakly.

A voice inside answered him. "Not in here! No one comin' out, mister!"

Maybe not. Severan swung his head. Half a minute had passed. Less, perhaps. Jubal Hoyt had vanished. The moment of quiet had a false peace. A yell split the air on the west side of the plaza.

"Barlow men! Barlow men!"

The Alamo Bar was over there. The man who came running out, cutting across the plaza toward the Longhorn, was Little Red O'Reilly. Severan stepped past the end of the Longhorn hitchrack to meet him.

"Here's the head, Red! Come get it!" Severan called. It had a thick sound through his mashed lips.

Little Red stopped short, waiting. Not afraid. None of the O'Reillys was afraid. It bothered Severan. Men were running to a bunch in front of the Alamo. Barlow men. Outlaws. Severan immediately recognized Blackie Barlow's tall black-mustached figure.

Then he saw why Little Red had halted. From the north side of the plaza Frank O'Reilly came running lightly in broadcloth and polished boots, gun in either hand. And Con Tillman's high yell split the heat.

"Sheriff's men—git 'em!"

Little Red ran forward. They were coming at Severan from two angles—O'Reillys fighting side by side.

Severan knew they had him. He was vaguely conscious of men with rifles, shotguns, six-guns, running out of doorways. He never did see the scraggly-bearded figure of Tillman.

The plaza had narrowed down to the catlike run of Little Red O'Reilly, nimble even in heavy leather leggings. He was the nearest, and the opening slam of his gunfire was caught up by other guns blasting.

A bullet hit Severan's leg. It gave way under him. Frank O'Reilly had fired that lead. Severan rolled in the dust. Lead struck beside his head.

Flat on his belly, he got the gun muzzle up. Lead screamed into the ground under his chin and threw dust up. Little Red looked bigger, seen from the ground. Severan got the sights square on him, pulled the trigger—and pulled again. . . .

He was watching Little Red fall when a great blow struck the side of his head. He was blind . . . falling into a dark abyss. But not dead. Not unconscious.

Severan heard the roaring guns. He had a thought—a weary thought that there were too many O'Reilly brothers. And Bess would be glad to hear her husband had killed him. For Frank O'Reilly would finish it off now. . . . Another second or so . . .

But Con Tillman's law would sweep the Three Springs plaza—and the thorn thickets clear to the Rio Grande. Frank O'Reilly alone couldn't stop that. And Joy Anderson's half of the packery, with Con Tillman's law, would stop Jubal and Bess. And when honest men spoke of Bill Severan in the years to come, they'd speak of him as an honest man. . . .

Then Con Tillman's dry voice was

speaking. "She's a widow now, an' couldn't even find a tear fer her dead husband. Right pretty, too. Free to hunt fer a man again. Might be she'll get him."

Joy Anderson's voice said, "Welcome to him if that's the way it goes."

"I heerd him. Didn't say which gal he left his money to."

"Keep quiet, Con Tillman!"

"With the law ridin' strong again, Severan'll do well in business. Be a ketch for any gal. But if he left his money to the Hoyt gal, you're wastin' time nursin' him."

"Get out of here, Con Tillman! We don't even know whether he'll live or not!"

Tillman chuckled. "Dry them eyes, honey. He's tough."

Severan tried to open his eyes. All was black. He brought his right hand up to his face. He was wrapped in bandages. Not a sound was around him as Severan's hand lifted, gesturing weakly.

Then a warm, soft hand slipped into his hand, pressing reassuringly. "This is Joy Anderson. How do you feel?"

Severan's fingers closed firmly. He could speak through swollen lips. Even grin painfully, while his eyes saw back to a San Antonio balcony, to a girl riding to stop Bess Hoyt. To a future that now seemed rich with promise.

"Get out of here, Con Tillman," he said, "while I tell her."

THE END

SOMETHING REAL

By Mark Lish



Even the enemies of young Clay Bartles had to admit: "You're too good a man to git wasted on a bullet."

"MAYBE Bat Harmon won't show."

There was something like hope in the tone of the taller man of the lounging, watchful pair. But the other spoke confidently, and his words deepened small fretful lines across his brother's features.

"He'll show. Just givin' the kid extra time to worry, likely. Clay is worried, too; I caught him bein'

sick to his stomach, out back of the hotel 'while ago."

"Ought to be one of us with him, seems like." There was sympathy in the tall man's voice. "Waiting's hard."

"No," was the flat answer. "Got to hoe his own row. He'll make out. Enough Bartles in him for that, 'spite of his weak-spined mother."

"Oh, he won't back down." There was no doubt, no worry on that score at least, in the tall brother's inflection. "But you know, Mart, I almost wish he would."

Mart Bartles' face and voice went hard. "That soft streak of yours again, Jeff. An' goin' too far, this time. S'pose you explain just why you 'almost wish' the kid'd show yellow, disgrace the whole Bartles tribe?"

"Funny thing, this gun fighting." Jeff's tone was musing, detached. "A habit—and one that grows like any other habit. One youngster shoots another, over a poker game or a horse or a horse race—or over some fool girl at a dance, the way this thing came up between Bat Harmon and Clay. Both too stubborn to back down, and they meet and one of 'em dies or gets hurt bad, and the other feels upset inside a day or two and then finds he's got a rep to live up to and—"

"You ain't answered my question," Mart pressed, truculent, scornful. "You scairt we—I ain't learned the kid enough to hold his own? That a second-rater like Bat Harmon'll down him? Well, even then he'd be better off 'n backin' out like a rabbit. You or me would dump young Bat on top of him, and the kid'd be remembered as a Bartles—the son of Tom Bartles who went out in the smoke too, like a man. Yeah, I'd sooner see *that*, than see him take water."

"Not sure it wouldn't be better, at that," Jeff returned, his gloomy tones

taking an edge of temper from the other's arrogance. He paused, hawk's eyes fixed on distance, indicated with least lift of chin a tiny dust cloud there, rising above intervening hills like thin smoke, slowly settling.

"Could be Bat," he murmured unemotionally, and went back to his musing theme as if there had been no interruption:

"Hang it, Mart, what've us Bartleses ever really amounted to? Known as gutty men that'll fight anybody, any time and any place at the drop of a hat. Drop the hat ourselves. And that's just exactly *all* we're noted for. Why, when we buried Tom two years ago, there wasn't a real mourner at the funeral, outside his wife and kids. And Tom might be called the best of the lot, seeing he did at least get to be marshal here. The neighbors, the town—nobody was really sorry. Nobody *missed* Tom, then or since—"

"They miss him all right—when some tough gent rides in an' trees the town," Mart retorted. "And if some of 'em was mebbly a little glad to see Tom git it, I notice they was mighty careful not to let 'er show. They'll keep right on bein' careful, too. They know us Bartleses."

"Yeah. They know us Bartleses." Jeff's tonelessness brought a glare from Mart.

"Well, by gravy! You sound ashamed, instead of proud! What's there to be prouder of, than a record like ours? Never backin' down from no man, always meetin'—"

"Proud like Doc Parker, that's saved lives all over the country and is loved by most of it," Jeff groped. "Proud like Chris Blaney, that has bred up his stock and is helping the cow business get a fresh holt, and respected for it. Like Myers, who makes the best saddles and is known far and wide among riding men. Looked up to like—"

Mart Bartles snorted. "Ain't one of them you named didn't holler fer Tom, when Tom was marshal here, ever' time a drunk bully come pesterin' around. 'Stead of 'tendin' the gent themselves, standin' on their hind laigs in the smoke like any Bartles would."

"Just out of their line," Jeff defended sturdily. "They have something better to do—something real—"

"So Clay, he oughta holler for old Heeney to run Bat off." There was disgust in Mart's mockery. "Or let one of us—*me*, a real Bartles—take up his fight for him. Go on: Explain to me how that'd make the kid an improvement on the Bartleses."

"I don't mean what you just said, exactly." Jeff was uncertain, a little desperate under his brother's driving sarcasm. But he stood to his guns: "It's just that . . . well, the kid's just now starting life. Finished the grade school—which no other Bartles ever did—and could go further. Thinks he'd like to be a doctor, for instance. If he don't get side-tracked, Clay might make something real of himself—"

"*That* again!" Mart's tone dripped contempt. "'Somethin' real', hunh?"

"Somethin' realer'n playin' a man's part, hunh? You know dang well, Jeff Bartles, you'd hang your head if Clay backed down—"

He broke off as five riders surged into view on the tall ridge that was skyline, spilled over it, swooped down the final slope. Bat Harmon, riding to his appointed date, fulfilling his challenge sent the youngest Bartles. Tacitly, to settle their rivalry for the favors of a certain young lady—though neither young man, Western-raised, would have put into words that angle of the situation. Jeff Bartles sighed.

Mart let out a pent breath, grinned wolfishly. "Good help, Bat fetched. Got a chore, you and me—if it's Clay goes under. See the way they're dividin' up, placin' themselves. That Chalk-eye Peters has downed three good fast men to my knowledge. Walks into the smoke with both eyes open and nary flinch. Other three is just Circle cowboys, I reckon. But game and willing, or they wouldn't be sidin' Bat Harmon this morning." He glanced toward the hotel, a little nervously. "Clay's seen 'em. He's come to the hotel door . . . standin' there . . ."

Both stood now, waiting their nephew's move. Neither would have admitted, even to himself, the slightest doubt that young Clay would come walking down the dusty street. Yet . . .

Still-faced, young Bat Harmon was tying his horse at a rail, controlling rebellious nerves with obvious effort,

steeling himself to face this ordeal—his first, as it was Clay Bartles' first. Wishing now perhaps, deep down, that he had not sent that challenge, committed himself to face one of the redoubtable Bartles clan. Yet determined too. Standing by his mount, he made final inspection of the weapon belted at his hip, slipped in a sixth cartridge, moved then on stiff knees free of the tethered line of horses, into the open street.

Mart Bartles, appraising him with knowing eyes, muttered aside to Jeff: "Got himself keyed up to it, all right. But I doubt he's as gun-handly as Clay."

Mart sighed his relief, Jeff Bartles merely sighed, as the slim youth came down the porch steps of the hotel, pulled his hat brim forward to shade his eyes, crossed the wooden sidewalk on steady legs.

Too late, Old Man Heeney, town marshal these two years since Tom Bartles' death, came out of Herrig's General Store; saw the two young men walking grimly to meet each other, read instantly the story old to him. These youths alone, Heeney might have tried to stop. But yonder stood the Brothers Bartles, and what one Bartles set out to do, other Bartleses always helped complete. Not to mention the backers of young Bat Harmon, recognized farther down the street. Sensibly, Marshal Heeney remembered an item he had forgotten to buy and turned back into the store. Mart Bartles snorted mockery at his brother Jeff.

"There's your 'something real'—

Town Marshal Heeney, takin' cover! Tom never—"

The first gunshot cut him off. Young Bat Harmon, nervous, was unable to wait, cut down the distance, seek surety as Clay Bartles was doing. Once, twice—three times, he wasted bullets at the oncoming slim figure before Clay's hand dragged forth his own long-barreled weapon. Twice more while Clay Bartles aimed. Then Clay's bullet found Bat's shoulder like a heavy mallet, and spun him all the way around still on his feet, to lose balance and sprawl his length in the dust, the heavy gun weighting down a hand.

From the sidewalk Mart Bartles cried: "Finish him, Clay! Don't walk onto that sixth bullet!"

But though young Clay held his own weapon high and ready, watching keenly in case that other gun should be lifted from the dust, he did not shoot again; he walked steadily, quietly on, toward the man he had just shot down.

Marshal Heeney came now from the store, unhurried, cool. He reached the down man first, plucked the curving long gun handle from pain-tight fingers, opened the shirt where blood pumped in a thick, gusty stream. Six other men came, too, on converging paths, unhurried as the marshal, wary, tense, ready.

Marshal Heeney raised his eyes to meet Clay Bartles'.

"No need for more, I reckon," he said quietly. "Bullet cut a big artery. He's nigh bled to death already. He

added, still quietly, for benefit of the Bartles brothers. "No arrest either, I reckon—with the lad here wasting the first five shots. Though I reckon *you* two ought . . ."

He had meant to go on: ". . . ought to be thrown in jail." But there wasn't any use in that, now. Too late. Too late, deemed Marshal Heeney, both for young Bat Harmon and young Clay Bartles.

Across the sprawled figure, Chalk-eye Peters faced the elder Bartleses, still-faced, watchful, grim. But one of the younger cowboys went to his knees beside Marshal Heeney.

"Git Doc Parker somebody, quick," he cried. "Mebby— Run get Doc, Charley—"

But Marshal Heeney shook his gray head slowly. "Doc's out of town, deliverin' a baby. And no way *I* know to stop such bleedin' as that."

Clay Bartles pushed his Uncle Mart to one side, dropped to a knee. "I can do it. I've helped Doc Parker. If you boys'll let me, trust me . . ."

The kneeling cowboy spoke, surprise in his eyes but only urgency in his voice. "I'm Bat's cousin. Reckon I got the say-so since Bat can't talk. Do your dangdest."

Young Clay came to his feet, and there was a ring in his voice and his features were alive. "Carry him into Doc's office. Spare instruments there."

Jeff Bartles released a long sigh that brought Mart's eyes around to his. Mart shrugged, stood aside while

Clay showed three cowboys how to carry the wounded man.

Almost an hour later Clay Bartles came to the door of Dr. Parker's little office on Main Street. White-faced, he showed strain, yet his bearing was erect and proud. Men had gathered. Chris Blaney; Myers, the saddlemaker; others. Grizzled men waiting, listening now eagerly to what young Clay Bartles had to say, hanging on his words:

"He'll make out, now. Got the bullet out, and patched the artery. Of course, when Doc Parker gets here . . ."

Faces cleared, talk rose. Chris Blaney stepped suddenly from the group, thrust his hand at young Clay Bartles, said gruffly, "Young feller, I'm proud to know you. Savin' a man's life . . ."

Myers; Marshal Heeney; Chalk-eye Peters; cowboys; ranchers; the town's businessmen. They all closed about Clay Bartles. Chalk-eye Peters grinned across his hand shake, and said:

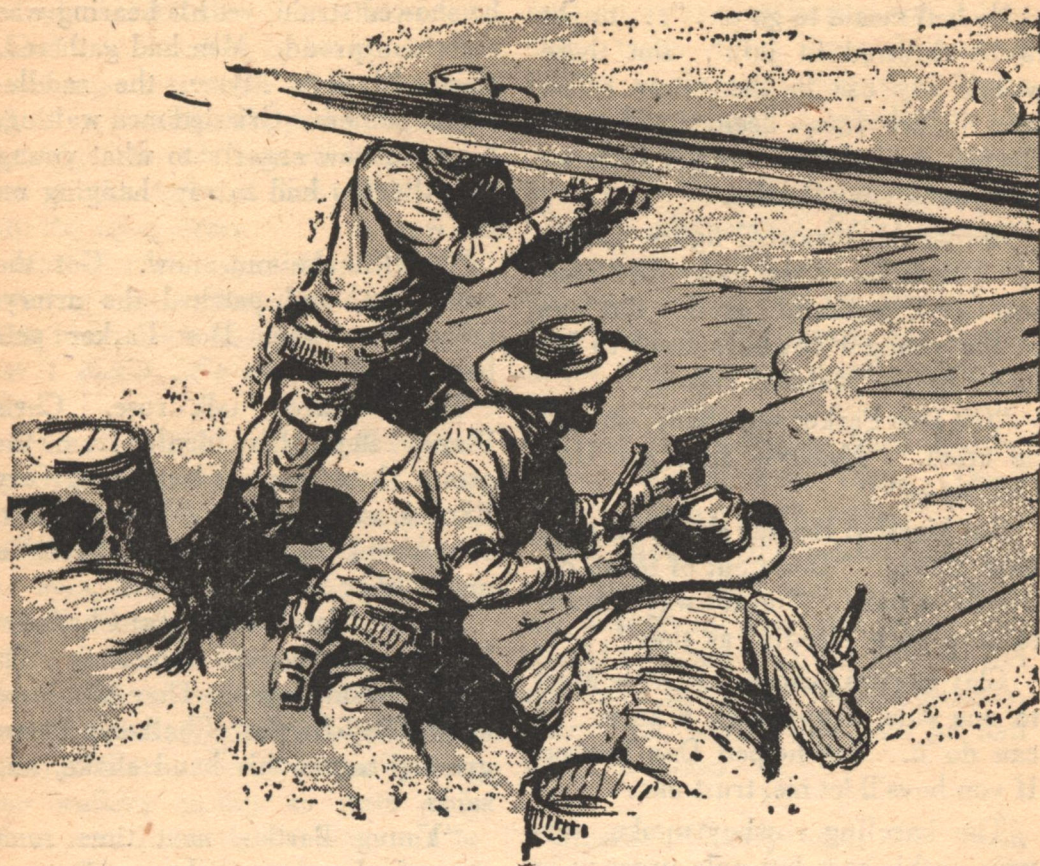
"Young Bartles, next time some damn fool wants to fight you, just you send for me. You're too good a man to git wasted on some bum's bullet."

On the crowd's fringe, unnoticed, forgotten, ignored, Jeff Bartles and Mart stood silent. But riding home an hour later, Mart edged his mount alongside his brother's.

"I been thinkin' Jeff . . . You . . . uh . . . you reckon we kin scare up money to send Clay to that there school you mentioned?"

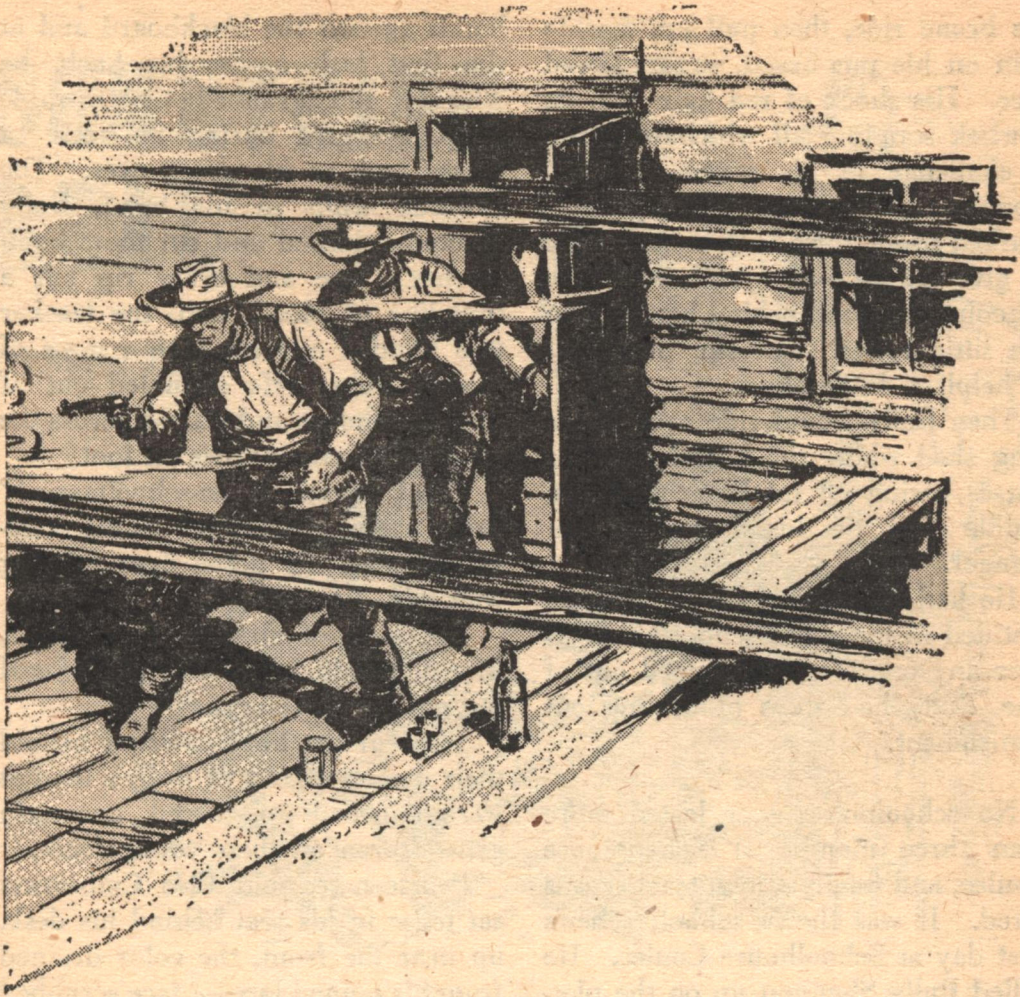
THE END

SADDLE TEST



By Walt Coburn

Clee Culbertson and the Brown's Hole broncs made a bunch quitter out of big tough Bully Shannon but he was still as dangerous as a cornered grizzly



I

BULLY SHANNON was fifteen years old and big for his age. He packed a bone-handled knife with a four-inch blade that opened with a button spring, and he always rode a bronc to school.

It was fifteen miles from Shannon's Hog Ranch to the little log school in Schoolhouse Coulee. Bully made a habit of always being late. Even when his old man saw to it that the boy got an early start, Bully would

take it slow until he heard the big school bell. Then when the other kids were all in school and standing behind their desks to sing the *Star Spangled Banner*, Bully Shannon would ride down the easy slant off the ridge, hanging his spurs on the bronc's shoulders to make the horse buck, and fanning with his hat and yip-yipping, plumb up to the schoolhouse door.

While the other kids sang the National Anthem, somewhat off-key, they would stare out the windows and watch the big, man-grown Bully make

his bronc ride, then pull up, a wide grin on his pug-nosed, square-jawed face. His shock of red hair with its cowlick standing all whichaway and a challenge in his green eyes, he would sit his sweating, blowing, spur-marked bronc for a long enough time to give the kids an eyeful, while the schoolmarm stood behind her desk on the little raised platform, in a sort of helpless, futile anger.

Then Bully would ride over to the long shed where the kids kept their horses, swing off to the ground, unsaddle and tie his horse to the manger.

He had the fear of Bully Shannon instilled in the other school kids. If ever any one of them stepped out of line, Bully had ways of dealing out punishment.

No schoolmarm ever lasted more than three months at Schoolhouse Coulee, and finally a man teacher was hired. It was the he-schoolteacher's first day at Schoolhouse Coulee. He called Bully Shannon up on the platform for wearing his spurs into school.

Bully swaggered from behind his desk, walked down the aisle and up on the platform where the unfortunate schoolteacher stood with his whip made of hard, twisted rawhide. Every step Bully took, his high-heeled boots made his spurs jangle defiantly. He was six feet tall and rawboned, and he stood towering above the spectacled, white-lipped schoolteacher, a wide grin on his freckled face.

Bully turned his back with his

hands against the blackboard and at the first lash across his back, he whirled and grabbed the rawhide whip, his grin baring his teeth, a glassy look in his green eyes. The rawhide whip in his hand, Bully Shannon slashed and cut the schoolteacher's face and every rip left a thin line of blood, until the teacher was blinded and his face a mass of bloody welts. He stumbled out of the schoolhouse and started across the rolling Montana prairie on foot.

"That damned he-schoolmarm!" Bully Shannon stood on his big wide-spread legs, his green eyes glinting wickedly.

The girls of all ages from six to fifteen, huddled together, white-faced but not daring to cry.

Some of the boys cowered behind their desks. A few of Bully's toadies were bunched up, forced, uncertain grins frozen on their young faces.

Fourteen-year-old Clee Culbertson sat tense in his seat behind his desk, up near the front, the color drained from his tanned face—a face scrubbed till the freckles showed. He knew that Bully would single him out and dreaded it with a fear that was like a hard knot in his belly.

There were not enough desks to go around and Clee shared his seat with a half-breed boy named Tom Ball. Bully had nicknamed Tom Ball "Injun." Tom's squawman father, Jim Ball, was stock tender and the boy's Assiniboine mother cooked at the stage station called Shannon's Hog Ranch. Usually it was Injun who tended to Bully's saddle horse.

Bully Shannon's green eyes swept the room. Clee felt the hard, cruel impact of their stare. Then Bully looked at the Injun and said:

"Gut eater."

Tom Ball was Clee's age, with straight, coarse black hair that needed trimming. Above the high cheek bones his eyes were sky blue like his squawman father's. He was slight of build and small-boned. His almost threadbare blue cotton shirt and Levi overalls were clean and patched at the elbows and knees.

Then Bully Shannon's coarse-lipped mouth twisted and he passed Clee and the Injun up, and Clee knew that he had some idea in his mind.

Without turning his head, Clee knew by the way Bully licked his lips, where his green eyes were looking.

Tom Ball had a kid sister thirteen years old. They came together to school in an old cart with long shafts that was used to break the horses Bully Shannon's father used for his stagecoach teams. They drove an old paint Indian pony that always traveled at a slow trot, the only gait the Many Spots paint had.

Bully's nickname for Rose Ball was the "Breed Brat."

"You Breed Brat." Bully Shannon pointed his rawhide whip at the girl who sat in the back row alone. "Come up here."

Rose got to her feet. She was dressed in a clean faded gingham dress and wore patched stockings and moccasins, her black hair parted in the middle and plaited in two long

braids. Her skin was white but she had her mother's black eyes and they were shadowed by long, thick black lashes and deep-set under black brows. She had a lithe, quick way of moving and she came down the aisle with high head, her black eyes opaque.

She stepped up on the platform and stood there, straight-backed. She had to tilt back her head to look into Bully's green eyes.

"Take a fresh hunk of chalk," he ordered. "Start at the top of the blackboard. Write 'Rose kissed Bully' until you got that blackboard covered."

Rose stepped to the blackboard and picked up a new piece of chalk. Then she turned and looked at her brother and at Clee Culbertson.

"Don't either of you try to take this up for me. That's exactly what Bully wants you to do. What Bully is makin' me write, doesn't mean anything. Because everybody knows it's a lie. Don't try to fight him. He's got the whip and he packs a knife. Don't you two boys try to take it up for me. What Bully is making me write is a dirty lie."

Then Rose turned to the blackboard and commenced writing in a round clear handwriting, the chalk held in a steady hand.

Bully Shannon stood there, his face getting redder and redder as he watched the girl write "Rose kissed Bully," the anger swelling up inside his big hulk.

Then Bully threw away the whip and grabbed the girl by her two

braids, yanking her back. He pulled her roughly into his arms and his mouth mashed against her lips.

II

Clee and Tom were up on their feet, piling on Bully's back. Bully was expecting it. He threw the girl against the blackboard and reached for his knife. Clee had him by the shock of his thick red curly hair, his free hand smashing into Bully's fleshy face.

Tom grabbed Bully's arm. Bully had the knife out, thumbing the spring button. The long blade sprang into sight. The Injun's strong white teeth sank deep into Bully's wrist and the blood spurted as the big vein was severed. The knife dropped to the floor and Tom was down on one knee and had the knife handle gripped in his lean hand. The long, whetted steel blade flashed and glittered as it slashed again and again.

Bully's loud harsh scream of terror filled the schoolhouse, a wild bull-like bellow of rage and pain and fear. Bully was down and Clee and Tom piled on top. The three of them rolled off the platform in a wild tangle. Then Rose twisted the knife from her brother's hand.

"Don't kill him," the girl screamed. The window was open and Rose flung the knife out through it.

The three boys were in a wild tangle and there was blood all over their clothes and on their faces and hands. One of the smaller girls was sobbing and another girl was scream-

ing as she crouched, terrified, behind her desk.

The other boys, wide-eyed, huddled together in a slack-jawed sort of protection.

Rose seemed to be the only one who had any degree of calm and she moved swiftly. She slapped the screaming girl with her open hand across the face until the girl stopped. Then Rose put her arm around the smaller sobbing girl for a moment to comfort her.

When the little girl was quieted, Rose pulled her brother and Clee away from Bully Shannon. She jerked the clean roller towel and began tearing it into strips. The blood was spurting from Bully's wrist where the Injun's teeth had bitten deep. Rose used a strip of the towel to tie it and a ruler to tighten the tourniquet.

"Lend a hand here, Cheater." She called to the towheaded buck-toothed boy who was Bully's side pardner and pet crony. "Quick, now, fill that basin with water and get that bottle of carbolic from the teacher's desk."

The boy called Cheater was a gangling kid with pale eyes. His name was Ted Larson and his father was Shannon's stage driver. He always smelled of sweat, and his shirt and Levis were dirty.

"Get the soap and wash your hands for once," Rose told him. "Your dirty face doesn't count."

Then the girl went to work. Bully lay there on the floor, sobbing and whimpering that he was dying. Rose

paid no attention as she got the blood flow stopped and his knife cuts bandaged. Her hands were not gentle but they were efficient. Whenever the carbolic touched the raw wounds, Bully would bellow with pain.

"You better not move around too much or you'll bleed to death," Rose warned him. "When I get you patched up, I'll take you back to Shannon's Hog Ranch in the cart. You other kids better get what saddle blankets you fetched to school and put them in the cart."

Cheater looked scared. The Injun and Clee Culbertson stood near the door and whenever they glanced at Cheater, he looked ready to beg off.

Now that the ruckus was over, Clee and Tom stood together and apart from the others, their hot anger wilted into a sort of defiant, uncertain dread. They kept watching Bully, waiting for him to die or show some sign of his overbearing threats.

When some semblance of their former schoolroom order calmed them, there was talk among the followers of Bully Shannon about reprisal.

"Wait till old man Shannon catches you two." That was the gist of it.

As soon as Rose had washed the blood from her hands, she told Cheater to throw the harness on the old Many Spots paint and hook him to the cart. Then she got her brother and Clee outside, away and beyond earshot.

"There's no telling what old man Shannon will do to you, whether or not Bully makes a live of it," she told

them. "You better hide out for awhile. You take Bully's bronc, Clee, and you take Cheater's horse, Tom. I'll take Cheater along in the cart. Whatever you do, don't show up at the Hog Ranch, unless you want Shannon to tie you both to the snubbing post and work you over with a blacksnake."

She turned to Clee Culbertson. "You any idea where your father is?"

"Ridin' the rough string for some cow outfit. There's no tellin' where. He can't hold a job long on account of booze gettin' him into trouble. Neal Culbertson is no good. He farmed me out to Seth Larson for a chore boy, but Larson put me tendin' his whiskey still, and Cheater Larson piled all his ranch chores on me besides. Seth Larson makes the rotgut for Shannon's Hog Ranch and whenever he needs beef, he has me butcher a stolen one and cut the brand out. I'd rather go to jail than find my father."

There was bitterness in Clee's voice, a hopeless sort of bitterness. Then he grinned a lopsided twisted grin. "I got nowhere to go," he said, "except down."

"You don't have to be like Neal Culbertson," said Rose quietly. "You can go up. A long ways up."

She spoke to her brother in Assiniboine.

"Maybe they'll follow you, but you two head for town or for the Missouri River badlands when you leave here. Then, when it gets dark, back-trail and head for the Reservation.

You know where the lodge of Names The Star is. He'll send you on into the Little Rockies to the pocket at the head of Dry Beaver, or he'll mark a map in the dirt and tell you boys to follow it. Names The Star is our grandfather, Tom. He's a medicine man and he doesn't lie. You know how to cover your trail and hide the sign you make. You're good boys. Your hearts are good."

Clee spoke and understood Assiniboine. He spoke now in the Indian sign language: "My heart is on the ground for you, Rose."

"Me?" A guttural tone was in the girl's voice as she spoke in the white man's tongue. "I have saved the life of Bully Shannon. The schoolmaster will not let it rest that way. The kids are my witnesses. That writing will stay on the blackboard. Shannon cannot hurt me. My mother has her Indian rights. The Wachpachta, the Indian Agent, put my father off the Reservation because he was a bad man and sold whiskey to the Assiniboines and the Gros Ventres. But my mother can go back to the Agency and I will go with her. I will go to the Indian school at Fort Shaw. My father can stay with Shannon at the Hog Ranch.

"Clee, you and my brother Tom are friends," she continued. "Like brothers. You will take care of each other. Listen then to Names The Star and remember what our old grandfather tells you. Shannon has his stage-coach line. He has the Hog Ranch where he sells whiskey. But he is not the Manitou. He is not God. And

Shannon is not the law of Montana. Nothing that he or his son Bully can do will ever hurt me. Now, go."

They both knew that Rose was right. Clee saddled the bronc Bully had ridden to school and Tom saddled Cheater Larson's horse, and they rode away from the Schoolhouse Coulee together.

Cheater and Rose lifted Bully, wrapped in blankets, into the cart and headed for Shannon's Hog Ranch. The other ranch kids saddled their horses or harnessed gentle horses and hooked them to old rigs, to take them to their ranch homes.

Rose locked the schoolhouse door before they left. School was dismissed.

III

Shannon was not the Manitou. Nor was he God. Nor was he the Law of Montana. He was far from any of those things.

But he stood six feet five when he took his boots off to run a foot race for money, marbles or chalk, and all of it was big rawbone, muscled meat and tough hide. He was what the cow country called "much man."

He was not the Manitou in whom the Indians believed, but he was the man who told Sid Larson, the sub-agent at Lodge Pole, what to do. Sid Larson was the brother of Seth Larson.

The Larson brothers had both been Army sutlers, the storekeepers who had government contracts to sell supplies and liquor to the soldiers. Seth Larson had been suspected of ped-

dling whiskey to the Indians and was ordered to leave the Reservation. But his brother Sid continued as sub-agent at Lodge Pole.

Sid Larson listed the names of the Assiniboinés and the Gros Ventres in his government I.D. ledger. Listed them as Good Injuns or Bad Injuns. The Good Injuns could be fooled or blinded by Seth Larson's bootleg rot-gut, while the Bad Injuns could not be tempted by it and were therefore dangerous to Sid Larson, who took his orders from Shannon.

On Issue Day the Assiniboinés and Gros Ventres came with their squaws and papooses to the sub-agency at Lodge Pole. The old men, the women and the kids rode in democrat issue wagons and the young bucks on horseback. They came long miles by wagon road with their issue canvas tepees and their lodge poles and what meager grub they had in the wagons. The young bucks would cut across the Little Rockies by the short-cut trail they knew, camping along the way, and below the high benchland they would put up their tepees along the creek.

At the log cabin sub-agency store, the old men, the treaty signers, would squat around outside, their hair in braids, daubs of red across their cheek bones. Smoking their pipes of trade tobacco mixed with kinnikinnik, they waited, as only an Indian knows how to wait, with patience for their allotted grub and their dry goods, calico, beads and cheap tobacco.

Their squaws stayed at camp and if the berries were ripe, the women and

children went out with lard buckets to pick the service berries and wild currants and gooseberries, the buffalo berries and chokecherries, which they would spread out on the canvas wagon sheets to dry and then pound into pulp for food.

Then later, dressed in their best clothes, they would all gather outside the sub-agency to look through the windows or the open doorway into the store at the laden shelves and bolts of calico on the pine-board counter. They were forbidden to enter that sanctum of sanctums where the stoop-shouldered Larson peered through steel-rimmed spectacles at the long list of Indian names inked on his ledger with its seal of the United States Government, Indian Division, stamped on the leather-bound heavy gray canvas cover.

The Old Men were the treaty signers who had smoked the peace pipe with men like General Miles and General Crook, survivors of the historic battle with the cavalry at Four Buttes when Chief Joseph surrendered, not knowing that when he smoked the peace pipe with the white man he was surrendering his birthright.

While the Good Injuns were rationed their allotted government supplies by the sub-agent, the Bad Injuns waited with patience, hours, days, even weeks, before they broke camp and moved back home to the Reservation, empty-handed. Somewhat bewildered and disillusioned, they wondered why the Great White Father in a place called Washington would fail to keep the promise his generals made

when they had smoked the peace pipe with Chief Joseph.

Behind Sid Larson's steel-rimmed spectacles were a pair of pale, crafty eyes. His breath smelled of the cloves he kept in his vest pocket to kill the odor of whiskey. He wore a dirty white stiff-bosomed shirt with an old stained celluloid collar, a sleazy blue serge suit and cracked patent leather button shoes. He carried two double-barreled .41 derringer pistols concealed in his clothes, besides an Army pistol in an army belt with a flap holster on his leg. Despite his meek, almost cringing appearance, Sid Larson was dangerous. Far more dangerous than his bloated, pot-gutted, red-nosed brother Seth.

"Tell that squaw of yourn, Ball, to take your breed brat and git back to her Reservation," Shannon told Jim Ball, his stock tender, when the doctor told Shannon that his son Bully owed his life to Rose.

"I'll take the old lady and Rose back. We're quittin' the Hog Ranch."

"You'll stay here, damn you. I said to send the squaw and the breed brat back. I need you."

Jim Ball wasn't anything to be proud of. A wiry man of medium height with drab brown hair that was balding, he had a drooping, drab mustache that hid his weak mouth and a pair of kindly eyes that were as blue as a rain-washed summer sky. He had a way with horses, and even the green broncs Bully spurred and quirted until they bucked, understood Jim Ball and were gentle as dogs with

him. He had gone into the infantry when he was old enough to enlist, but his two bunions bothered him so he had transferred to the cavalry.

It was while Jim Ball was in the army that he met up with the Larsons. He mustered out of the army, married a squaw and took advantage of his squawman's rights to pick out a good ranch on the Reservation. Each of his children was entitled to his or her Indian Rights and Jim was taking it easy until Seth Larson talked him into peddling whiskey. When Seth was caught, he put the blame on Jim Ball and they were both told to leave the Reservation.

Shannon, at his Hog Ranch, was always on the lookout for weak renegades. He located Seth Larson on a homestead and he hired Jim Ball for stock tender. Seth kept the Hog Ranch supplied with stolen meat; Jim Ball gentled the colts Shannon stole, and between them they did most of Shannon's petty-larceny work.

Even as Shannon had Sid Larson under his big thumb, he also had Neal Culbertson who was then running the I.D. roundup wagon, until Neal got tired stealing cattle for Shannon and wanted a fifty-fifty cut of the stolen Indian Division cattle. Shannon had told Neal long ago that he did not believe in banks and that he kept his money cached all over the Hog Ranch.

Neal Culbertson had waited until the sign was right and then shoved enough cattle through the hidden "key gates" in the Reservation fence to fill the cars of a long cattle train. He

left the I.D. roundup where it was camped and rode up to the Hog Ranch one midnight. He woke Shannon up out of a whiskey sleep.

"Dammit to hell, Neal, you're supposed to be runnin' the gut wagon." Shannon knuckled the sleep from his eyes and reached for the jug under his bunk. "You locoed drunk on Seth's rotgut?"

Then Shannon had found himself looking into the barrel of Neal Culbertson's ivory-handled .45 six-shooter.

"All I want is a half split, Shannon," Culbertson told him. "It's no crime to rob a damned thief. Divvy up or I'll pull the trigger. I'm tired of ramroddin' that gut wagon, the only white man in that outfit of breeds and Injuns, on chicken-feed pay. I'm after a South America stake. Dig deep or I'll shoot."

"You no-good two-bit coyote! I might've knowed I couldn't trust you. You can't take your Clee kid along and travel fast. Your kid's farmed out to Seth Larson. I got ways of lettin' Seth Larson know if somethin' goes haywire here at the Hog Ranch. You better think twice."

"Bother that kid of mine and I'll come back from hell to git your half of the cut. I kin gut-shoot you, Shannon, and ride off a-whistlin' a hungry tune through my teeth. I never had nothin' to lose, since my missus died in childbirth. That little lady was my one and my all. I got only that Clee kid to show for my loss. He's in my Culbertson iron and so help me if

he's harmed, I'll wipe this all out. You better dig deep, Shannon."

"Lemme pull on my britches, Neal, and put on my boots. What money I've got hid is scattered from hell to breakfast."

"There's a belly gun in your britches, Shannon, and a sneak gun hid in your boots. Them red flannels will do, and you're able to run foot races in your sock feet. Only thing you need is a shovel outside the door. Dig deep, Shannon."

Neal Culbertson stood spread-legged, six feet of rawhide, his hat pushed back from his wiry, iron-gray hair. He had a wiry black stubble on his jaw and a hell-bent grin on his mouth, and from under black brows his eyes were slivers of gray-blue steel. Neal Culbertson, top cowhand and bronc rider, was playing for keeps.

Shannon knew it. He got to his feet, a little shaky because he needed a drink. With Culbertson's gun shoved in his back, he walked out in his dirty red flannel underwear and picked up the shovel. Shannon dug deep that night.

But he never forgot it. Shannon never forgave a bad debt. And now after several years, he remembered. He was big and tough and brutal, ruthless and cunning. Cunning with all that hate he had stored up running like poison through his blood.

Shannon was giving Clee Culbertson enough long rope to throw out and fetch back his father. Shannon had never told anyone about Neal Culbertson's holdup. He was too prideful. He always bragged that

no man ever got the best of him.

When the doctor told Shannon his son would live, that Rose had saved him from bleeding to death, Shannon shuffled his marked cards and dealt them.

"Send your squaw and your breed brat back to the Reservation, Ball." His grin was evil. "How much did your squaw cost you?"

"Old Names The Star wouldn't sell her. But I made him a present of a sack of flour, a side of salt bacon, a twenty pound sack of sugar and three pounds of trade tobacco that Sid Larson sold me at half price. I worked the bill out peddling likker."

"I'll buy her back and you send her to that damned old trouble-maker." Shannon grabbed Jim Ball by the shirt front and shook him. "And, by the hell, you'll work that out, Ball. It'll take you the rest of your life to work it out." He lowered his voice.

"You take your squaw and her brat and your forty years' gatherin's in the wagon and dump 'em at the camp of Names The Star. Hang around till the Injun police locate you and run you off the reserve. It's very likely that Clee Culbertson and your Injun went there. Names The Star will have 'em hid out, or he'll tell 'em where to go. You find out where them two kids went but say nothin'. Then you come back here and commence workin' out your debt. Now load your wagon and pull out."

Shannon found Cheater Larson. Cheater was waiting on Bully Shan-

non, hand and foot. Shannon cussed out his son for letting Clee and the Injun whup him. Then he glared, green-eyed, at Cheater.

"You snivelin', yellow-bellied Cheater! Wipe your nose and mind what I tell you and make no mistakes. You take this note to your old man. Tell Seth to git busy."

Shannon had written his note to Seth Larson. It had no formal salutation, no signature at the end of the penned scrawl.

"You cut down on your drinkin'," it was worded. "I want Neal Culbertson located. The renegades who buy your booze know how to handle the job. They savvy the rustling of the leaves along the trail yonderly. They've all heard the owl hoot. Cut 'em off your booze list and pass the word to 'em they'll git no more fresh horses at Shannon's Hog Ranch unless they fetch back news of Neal Culbertson. Steam open every letter at your blind post office. Don't let your big mouth run off at the head when you should be listenin', and stay halfway sober and keep your ear to the ground. Don't talk, even to yourself. When you locate Neal, fetch the news here and tell it to me. Tell Cheater nothin'. Now git busy."

Shannon glued the flap of the envelope and marked it across with a stubby indelible pencil. He handed it to Cheater and told him to get for home and come back quick to take Jim Ball's job until the squawman returned from Lodge Pole.

"Tell your old man I'm runnin' short of beef," Shannon ordered.

"He'd better butcher this evenin' and send you back with the fresh meat."

Then Shannon sat back to wait, like a giant red spider weaving a web.

He had leased the Schoolhouse Coulee school section. He called a meeting of all the ranchers who sent their kids to the school and told them that Bully had been to blame and that he was taking his son out of school and putting him to work. The meeting was held at the schoolhouse and Shannon fetched Bully and made him erase the words he had forced Rose Ball to write.

Then, after sending Bully back to the Hog Ranch, Shannon took a big roll of money from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. He said it was to pay the damages and to hire a new schoolmarm. Shannon had bathed and shaved and used the horse clippers on his graying red hair. He wore clean clothes and his boots were tallowed. He was sober when he made his speech and he toned down his usual bellow. He said he wanted them to send the schoolmaster a year's pay. Shannon had the gift of gab and he stood there before the ranchers and told them that, after all, he was just shanty Irish. That he'd make his son Bully work till he sweated the meanness out of him. Then he walked out, leaving the roll of money on the desk. The ranchers watched him leave in a sort of strained, uncomfortable, awkward silence.

Shannon waited until he was out of sight before he pulled his uncorked

bottle and tipped it up. Bully was waiting where his father had told him to wait. Shannon shoved the bottle into Bully's bandaged hand and grinned.

"One of these times, Bully, I'll give you your chance to get even with Clee and Injun, but don't go makin' so much as the word of a threat. When you do get that chance, you better go the limit, or you're no son of Shannon. I got cattle on the Reservation and when the roundup starts I'm sendin' you and Cheater to rep with the I.D. gut wagon. There'll be a bottle in Cheater's bedroll, but both of you stay sober and be careful which Injun or breed you let drink out of that bottle. Don't talk. Listen. Keep your ear to the ground. You're bound to learn somethin'. If you run into Clee or Injun, you shake hands and eat crow, and then git word to me. It's Neal Culbertson I'm layin' for. When I git my hands on Neal, I'll hand Clee and Injun over to you and Cheater. Now mind what I'm a-tellin' you."

The school-board ranchers located the schoolmaster at the cow town and mining camp of Landusky in the Little Rockies. He had quit teaching school and was now practicing law and surveying. He had his name, John St. John, on the log cabin that was his office and living quarters. The name was lettered on a pine board above the door: JOHN ST. JOHN, ATTORNEY AT LAW AND SURVEYOR—JUSTICE OF THE PEACE. The citizens of Landusky had so elected him.

The judge put every dollar of Shan-

non's money in an envelope and wrote "Judge St. John" in neat surveyor's printing in the upper left hand corner, and addressed it to "Shannon, Shannon's Hog Ranch," sealing it with red wax and stamping the warm wax with his official seal. Handing the envelope to the stage driver, he told him to give it in person to Shannon.

There was a grim set to John St. John's mouth, a steely look in his eyes. Shannon's stage driver looked scared. Judge St. John was the law here at the town of Landusky.

When the stage driver got to the Hog Ranch he handed the sealed envelope to Shannon. The owner of the Hog Ranch looked puzzled.

"It's from the he-schoolmarm. If you're ever in Landusky, Shannon, walk slow and speak easy." The stage driver looked at Bully who was unhooking his four-horse team, and grinned faintly. "That goes double for you, Bully."

When the stage driver got to the end of the line at Malta, he quit and got a job tending bar.

"If I was Shannon," he confided to the saloon-keeper, "I'd shore dig me a deep hole and crawl in it, and take Bully boy in with me, and pull the hole in behind us."

IV

Clee Culbertson and Tom Ball never went near the Indian Reservation. They rode wide around the Reservation fence at the south end and into the badlands, crossing the Missouri

River at Rocky Point. They talked it over and Clee said there was no use in getting Names The Star on Shannon's Bad Injun list. They changed horses as they went along.

"Just borrowin' the horses till we ride the grub line and git us a job." Clee said. "Driftin' yonderly till we git that Hog Ranch stink out of our clothes."

They were both good cowhands, for kids. They crossed the State line into Wyoming. Clee said they were headed for Brown's Hole and that somewhere in Brown's Hole was the corner marker of Wyoming, Colorado and Utah. They rode up to a ranch in the Brown's Hole outlaw country.

The cowman owner was a quiet-mannered, cold-eyed man and he ran a sizable bunch of cattle. He grinned when he sized up Clee and Tom but he didn't question them and never even asked their last names. He called them Clee and Tom. He paid them forty a month and fed them good.

There were guns in the bunkhouse if the two boys wanted to help themselves to a six-shooter or saddle gun. Now and then somebody brought a jug from town along with the newspapers and the mail for the rancher. Neither Clee nor Tom ever drank a drop, but they each carried a six-shooter in their chaps pocket. After about six months or so there were a few Montana newspapers in the batch that some man fetched to the ranch. When the two boys picked them out of the lot to read, that was the only hint the Brown's Hole rancher had of

where the cowboys had come from.

Clee Culbertson and Tom Ball worked five years for the cowman at the Brown's Hole ranch.

They punched cows and did everything there was to do in the way of ranch work. They broke broncs and made cow horses out of them. Tom had his father's gentle way with a colt but Clee rode the broncs that threw Tom. He rode clean and straight and without ever fighting a horse.

One day the rancher brought in a few salty broncs.

"You're a shore purty rider, Clee," he told the young cowboy, "but them renegades is mean and ornery and dangerous. You don't need to tackle 'em. I got 'em to peddle off to a man that handles rodeo contest broncs."

"We'll try, anyhow, boss."

"I kin git a hundred, mebbys two hundred for them broncs as they stand. Contest horses. I'd shore be losin' money if you boys kin make fifty-dollar cow horses out o' that string."

Then he showed Clee and Tom something that had come in the mail. It was a large rodeo poster advertising the Cheyenne Frontier Days Cowboy Contest. On it was printed the names of the top rodeo contestants. The rancher spread it out on the bunkhouse table.

There it was printed in big black letters:

BULLY SHANNON

WORLD'S CHAMPION BRONC RIDER!

Below it was a picture of Bully,

riding a bronc. Bully looked bigger and tougher than ever.

Clee and Tom stared at it in silence.

"I've watched him ride at different contests," said the rancher. "He's not a pretty rider, all main strength and toughness. He's got saddle-muscled legs, thick as tree trunks. But there's a yellow streak down his back and he has to be half drunk to make a ride. He'll ride on his spurs if the judges don't watch him close. He weighs two hundred pounds and that's a lot of weight in the saddle.

"I've fetched in five broncs. Hand-picked 'em from the outlawed string. Each of them broncs has thrown Bully Shannon. Whenever he'd draw one of their names out o' the hat, he'd alibi. Swap 'em for money and plenty boot for another bronc rider's mount."

The rancher looked at Clee. "If I didn't figure you could ride 'em, I wouldn't have brought 'em in for you to practice on. You're as purty a bronc rider as ever I've watched, and I've seen about all of 'em. You've got a bronc rider's balance, a split-second sense of timing. You're a natural. Those five renegade broncs have thrown every man before the gun cracked. I'll buy you a new Stetson hat if you set 'em."

"I'll try, boss." Clee's blue-gray eyes were steely.

"Good man. Don't try to gentle 'em. Just ride 'em and Tom will haze for you. I'll clock each ride you make and Tom will pick you off your saddle if you're still a-straddle of it.

"I got a notion," the rancher ex-

plained as he rolled and lit a cigarette. "There's a bronc-ridin' contest at Miles City, next month. I got the contract to furnish the buckin' horses. I'm takin' you two boys along. Now let's git at it."

Clee rode the five broncs. Every one of them threw him the first time, but each time Clee would pick himself out of the dust and ask for a re-ride. The rancher timed the rides and Tom hazed. At the end of the week Clee could ride each of those five renegades.

"I think I got the hang of it, boss," he declared.

Clee was skinned up and shaken by the end of the week but he savvied now how each bronc in the string would pitch.

The rancher took a brand-new 7X beaver Stetson hat from the box. Clee tried it on for fit.

"I'll wear it at Miles City." He grinned and put the hat back in its round cardboard box.

"I've never seen a more natural bronc rider, Clee," said the Brown's Hole rancher. "Except one." He looked straight into Clee's eyes. "His name was Neal Culbertson."

Clee almost dropped the big hat box.

"You . . . you know Neal Culbertson?" Clee's voice sort of stuck in his throat.

"Off and on. . . . Here and there." The cigarette smoke seemed to get in the rancher's eyes. "Fact is, young Neal Culbertson run off with my only daughter when he was about your age.

I never seen either of 'em after, until some years ago when Neal showed up at the ranch. He stayed over night and he left a parcel with me. Then he rode away."

"Then you must be. . . ."

"My name is Ambrose Clee. I've heard the owl hoot. Got trapped and done my time in the pen. Since then all I've asked is to live it honest and quiet here on my ranch in Brown's Hole. I married a half-breed girl and we had a daughter. Neal's father and I rode the outlaw trail together and after he was killed I raised his son. Neal and my girl was brought up together, like brother and sister. Then they run off and got married. My wife's grave is out yonder where the wild rose bushes are."

He laid a hand on Clee's shoulder. "I never said nothin' till now. But I knowed you the minute I laid eyes on you. You're the spittin' image of Neal when he was your age. I wanted to see how you'd turn out. You'll do. And your good friend Tom will do to take along."

From under shaggy gray brows, the old man's eyes puckered. "How'd you ever happen to come here, son?"

"Neal always talked about Brown's Hole. He drew a sort of trail in the dirt and told me if I ever got in a tight to follow that trail. So I came here and brought Tom Ball with me."

Ambrose Clee took a thick envelope from his pocket. It had no name on it, no stamp. Somebody had brought it here and given it to the rancher.

"It's for you and your pardner. A

man left it here with me for you.”

The letter was from Rose Ball—the first word Cleo and Tom had had from anybody. It brought them up to date on the news. They read it several times to get what was written between the lines. It never mentioned their names and it was unsigned, but there was no mistaking Rose’s handwriting.

It said that Shannon was at his Hog Ranch but that Sid Larson was no longer sub-agent at Lodge Pole. The writer had finished her schooling and had gotten a bookkeeping job at the Agency. She had checked up with the Indian Agent on Sid Larson’s books. After Names The Star had died and other old men had given their testimony at the Agency, Sid Larson had quit the Reservation before the ax fell. He was now with his brother Seth.

Shannon’s permit to run cattle on the Indian Reservation had been canceled, and Cheater, who had been running the I.D. roundup, had quit before he had been caught stealing I.D. cattle.

Bully Shannon and Cheater Larson had gotten drunk at Landusky and had shot up the town. They had been arrested and jailed. Judge John St. John, the ex-schoolmaster at Schoolhouse Coulee, had found them guilty.

The two of them had broken jail and quit the country. Bully was building a name for himself as champion bronc rider and Cheater was making more money gambling with the rodeo contestants than his partner

made with his rodeo bronc riding.

Judge John St. John had taken the U.S. mail and express contracts away from Shannon, and Shannon couldn’t make his stagecoach line pay by hauling passengers. His stagecoaches were weathered and rotting on their wheels in the shed at the Hog Ranch which was now a blind pig saloon and gambling place honest cowmen and cowpunchers rode wide around to avoid.

Jim Ball still worked for Shannon, tending bar. Shannon had failed to locate Neal Culbertson and it rankled the man like slow poison.

Judge John St. John had a bench warrant for Shannon if ever the man came to Landusky. And Shannon had threatened to kill St. John if ever he showed up at his Hog Ranch.

Shannon and the Larson brothers were running sheep. There were tough renegades staying at Shannon’s Hog Ranch. They were supposed to be camp tenders for the sheep outfit. They all packed saddle guns. Cattle had been shot during the night and a couple of the smaller ranchers had been found dead, bushwhacked. They had refused to sell out to Shannon’s sheep outfit and had been killed.

Judge St. John had been trying to get enough proof against Shannon and the two Larson brothers to arrest them and bring them to trial. Shannon was still a power in his section of the Montana cow country and the situation was becoming dangerous. Things looked bad.

“Don’t bother to come back here,” Rose had written finally, “unless you

come back prepared to fight.”

There was a postscript. “I am now working at Landusky as clerk and bookkeeper in Judge St. John’s office. I left the Indian Agency after my mother’s death.”

There was a note of desperation in the letter, a sort of hopelessness.

Clee and Tom looked at each other. Both were grown men now. Their eyes were seared with the same pain.

“It’s time we went back, Tom.”

“It’s time, Clee.”

Clee handed the letter to his grandfather who read it slowly. The old man’s gray-mustached face was grim and his eyes were hard.

“It’s three weeks till the Miles City roundup. This has waited five years. It kin wait three weeks longer, boys.”

V

There were a lot of local forty-a-month cowhands from Montana’s big cow outfits entered in the Miles City Roundup. The livestock was fresh and salty and the cash prizes were big enough to fetch in the champion rodeo contestants. There was a lot of money in the pockets of the big ranchers and they were betting any or all of it on their own bronc riders and ropers.

Ambrose Clee and the two young cowhands got to Miles City the night before the show. The cow town was packed to overflowing, Saloons were jammed and there were high-stake stud and poker games going on. There was a lot of yip-yipping from men who rode down the street and

into the saloons before they stabled their saddle horses in the feed barn or corrals.

Nobody paid much attention to the arrival of the three men from Brown’s Hole. Clee and Tom watered, fed and grained their horses at the big corral set aside for the bucking stock. Then, after eating at one of the chuck wagons outside the town, they rode to the corral where they had dumped their bedrolls. Ambrose Clee was the only one who went into town. He went straight to the rodeo headquarters in the hotel.

“I’ve fetched the bucking stock,” he told the officials. “Forty head. They’ll give those bronc riders a contest. There ain’t a race horse in the lot. Also I’ve fetched along five outlaw broncs. You needn’t put their names in the hat. I call ’em the Brown’s Hole broncs. I brought them along for a purpose. . . . You got the World’s Champion Bronc Rider, Bully Shannon, entered?”

“Bully’s entered. And he’s got his side pardner, Cheater Larson, with him.”

“Good enough. I’ve brought in a bronc rider who’ll beat Bully, knock that champ’s crown from his red head. Providin’ Bully’s willing to gamble his championship. He kin back it with foldin’ money and I’ll cover every dollar of it.

“Here’s the deal,” Clee went on. “You can make it a sort of special event on your program. The World Champion will ride each of them five renegades. This boy I fetched along will ride them same five broncs.

His name's Clee Culbertson and he's never ridden in a professional cowboy contest. "If he wins three out of five bronc rides, then Clee Culbertson knocks the World Champion's crown off Bully Shannon's red head. Is that fair enough?"

"That's fair enough," the spokesman for the officials agreed. "Providin' Bully Shannon has the guts to match the five bronc rides, which I doubt. Bully helped condemn each of them broncs you have. He's scared to ride 'em."

"You men are reppin' for the big rodeos. You're the bosses. Bully Shannon don't make the rules. Looks to me like it's up to you. If Bully refuses to ride them five broncs, it looks like he'd lose his World Championship Bronc Rider title by default," argued Ambrose Clee.

The officials took a vote on it. The result was unanimous. Bully Shannon would have to ride, or attempt to ride, each of those five broncs.

"Only one thing," Ambrose Clee added. "When Clee Culbertson rides his broncs, he'll name his own pickup man, Tom Ball, and Tom won't make no mistakes. He won't ride near Clee till the gun cracks, then he'll pick Clee off his bronc. Bully kin choose his own pickup man."

"It's a deal," the committee agreed, "all the way through."

"I've brought along a little loose change," said the rancher from Brown's Hole. "I'm bettin' any or all of it that Clee Culbertson wins the nod on the bronc ridin'." Ambrose Clee yanked down his Stetson hat so

it shadowed his eyes and his mouth spread in a flat grin under his gray mustache.

It was somewhere between midnight and daybreak when Ambrose Clee showed up at the feed corral where the two cowhands had unrolled their beds. Both were awake at the first sound of his approach, their guns in their hands.

"Take 'er easy, boys. You could not pry Bully Shannon and Cheater away from that saloon with a block and tackle. They're afraid of the dark. I got it made for a deal with the rodeo judges Cheater Larson has all their money bet and I've covered all bets. With all them rodeo contestants around, Cheater didn't have no choice but to lay the dough on the line. Bully was half drunk and braggin'. You're to ride the five Brown's Hole broncs first, Clee. Then Bully tackles 'em."

It was out at the rodeo grounds the next morning that Clee Culbertson and Tom Ball saw Bully Shannon and Cheater Larson for the first time in about five years.

The red-headed Bully looked tough, bulking big as a bull, with Cheater beside him.

Each pair eyed the other with a mixture of curiosity and hatred.

"I'll ride the Brown's Hole broncs first," said Clee, "and then turn 'em over to Bully Shannon in the order that I ride 'em." He looked into Bully's bloodshot green eyes. "I'll leave enough buck in each of those broncs, Bully, to give you a contest."

Then Clee turned to the judges and timers. "When does this bronc ridin' event come off?"

"In the afternoon, right after the relay race. About three o'clock."

"We'll show up at three," Clee said. He and Tom wore their old work clothes and they both needed a bath and a trip to the barber shop.

The other contestants eyed them with curiosity. They looked shabby and unshaven in their sweaty old hats and dusty boots, compared to Bully and Cheater who wore gaudy shirts, tight-fitting pants, expensive hats and fancy boots.

"Just a couple of ol' country boys come to town. Bug-eyed and they don't know which way to go," Bully said to Cheater in a voice loud enough to be heard by the other contestants. It got a laugh out of Bully's followers.

"Let's git cleaned up, Tom," Clee said quietly, and he and Tom mounted their horses.

Ambrose Clee handed his grandson the key to his hotel room, and dug in his pocket and pulled out some folding money.

"To pay your barber shop bill, Clee. I'll take care of the Brown's Hole broncs. Use my room to change clothes."

Clee and Tom got the works at the barber shop and changed to clean shirts and Levi overalls. Returning to the hotel, they found some boxes on the bed in Ambrose Clee's room. A couple of the boxes bore the name of a bootmaker and held two pairs of shopmade alligator boots. Two other boxes held Clee's new Stetson and a

new hat for Tom. They grinned at each other.

"I hope, Tom, we don't look as foolish as we feel."

The rodeo had already begun and the main street was deserted. Everybody in town seemed to have gone out to the rodeo grounds. But when Clee handed the room key to the hotel clerk behind the desk, he heard his name spoken.

He turned around there in the empty lobby. Tom stood there and with him was a small, trimly built black-haired, black-eyed young lady in a neatly tailored suit. She came across the little deserted hotel lobby. When Clee stood there, pulling off his new hat, she reached out her arms. The arms went around his neck and her lips were against his mouth and there were tears misting her black eyes.

"Rose!" Her name choked in Clee's throat.

"Clee!" She was laughing and sobbing at the same time.

Tom just stood there, grinning. "Looks like we'd have to find 'em a parson," he said to the tall gray-haired man in cowpuncher clothes who had followed him and Rose into the lobby.

Then Rose shoved Clee away and turned him towards Tom and the gray-haired man. A grin spread across the man's leathery face, and Clee remembered that grin.

It was Neal Culbertson. He held out his hand and his son gripped it. "I've bin in the Wyoming pen,

Clee, under another name," Neal explained. "I gave myself up some years ago on a cattle-rustling charge. I've bin a trusty ramrodding the prison ranch. Only Ambrose Clee knew where I was and he sent me word that you were safe with him at his Brown's Hole ranch. He got me pardoned out—to watch you ride some broncs, he claimed. Judge St. John and this young lady did their share.

"This Judge St. John at Landusky thinks I might come in handy. He sent me this." Neal took a nickle-plated deputy sheriff badge from his pocket. "I never thought Neal Culbertson would come to this." He smiled grimly as he pinned it to his shirt.

"My father, Jim Ball," explained Rose, "gathered enough eye-witness evidence against Shannon and Seth and Sid Larson to hang them all for murder, while he was working out his debt to Shannon. Jim Ball managed to get all the proof the law needed in writing and brought it to Judge St. John in Landusky. On his way back to the Hog Ranch, Jim Ball was murdered. It was perhaps the only brave thing he ever did."

"Judge St. John sent bench warrants for Shannon and Seth and Sid Larson with the law badge," said Neal. "I'm going to serve 'em. Along with bench warrants for Bully Shannon and Cheater Larson."

"But Bully and Cheater haven't done anything to get arrested for," said Clee.

"Not yet. But they will before nightfall. Now you two boys ride on

out to the contest grounds. Rose and I will be watching you make the bronc rides, Clee."

VI

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The rodeo boss had ridden out on horseback with a megaphone. In a leather-lunged voice, he announced that Clee Culbertson would ride, or attempt to ride, the five horses known as the Brown's Hole broncs. After that, the World Champion Bronc Rider, Bully Shannon, would ride, or attempt to ride, each of the horses. The World's Bronc Riding Championship was at stake.

"Clear the arena! Clee Culbertson is coming out of Chute Number One on the first of his Brown's Hole broncs, the Zebra Dun. Tom Ball will be his pickup man. Hang onto your hats, folks!"

Bully Shannon and Cheater were drinking from the same bottle in behind the bucking chutes.

Clee rode the big line-backed buckskin called the Zebra Dun. He rode clean. When the gun cracked, Tom spurred his horse to a run and, riding up alongside the pitching bronc, picked Clee off his saddle.

The next bronc was a sunfisher named Baldy Buck.

"Take your time, Clee," said Tom. "Git your wind back."

"I'm ready." Clee eased himself down off the chute into the saddle. He grinned at Bully Shannon and Cheater. "I got 'im. Open the gate!"

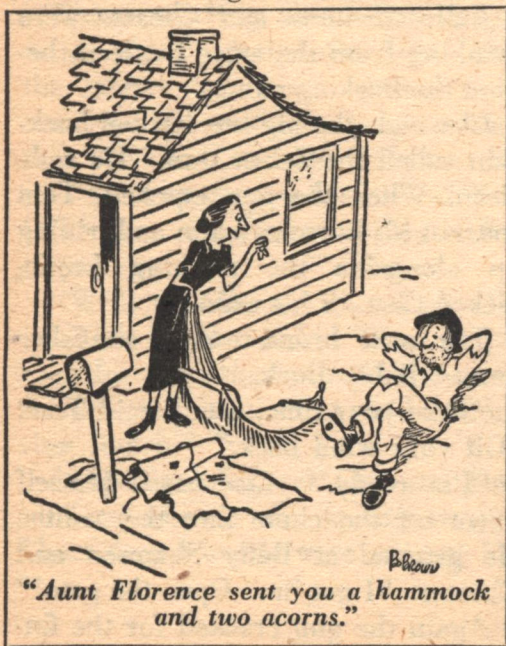
Again the gun cracked for the fin-

ish of the bronc ride. Tom put his horse alongside, and Clee rode behind Tom back to the chute for his next bronc, a big brown horse called Sidewinder.

"This un's a spinner." Clee told his partner. "You don't need to sweat your horse, Tom. This bronc spins you dizzy before he pitches. You can pick me up after the gun cracks, about fifty feet away. Let 'im pitch a few jumps to clear the dizzy feelin' out o' my bonehead."

No man had ever made a contest ride on the Sidewinder. But Clee rode the bronc clean and the gun cracked. It wasn't until the Sidewinder had pitched a few more jumps after the gun that Clee hollered for Tom to pick him out of the saddle.

When Clee swung off from behind Tom's saddle, he reeled like a drunken man. It took a few minutes before he could walk straight.



"Aunt Florence sent you a hammock and two acorns."

"Take your time, Clee," Tom urged.

Clee shook his head. "The next un ready, Tom?" He looked around for Bully Shannon and Cheater Larson. Neither of them was in sight. Clee climbed up on the bucking chute and straddled it.

The next bronc was called Funeral Wagon. When he landed, it felt like an earthquake.

"Bully must've found another bottle," Clee told Tom. "When the gun cracks on this bronc, pick me off before my brains git jarred into the seat of my britches. I got 'im. Open the gate!"

When Tom picked Clee out of the saddle, blood trickled from his nose and mouth. He looked white, as though his insides had been jarred loose. He washed his face in a water bucket.

"The last un is Skyrocket," Clee told Tom. "He'll give me a chance to make a shore fancy ride unless he goes limber-legged and turns over. Git there when the gun cracks, Tom, before he cartwheels. Where's Bully? He on deck for his first bronc?"

"Ain't seen him. Nor Cheater. Mebbysy they're killin' Bully's bottle of brave-maker."

"Lemme have the Skyrocket. When the gun cracks I'll kick both feet out o' the stirrups. You might have to be ready to ketch me on the first bounce."

Skyrocket came out of the chute squealing and pitching. Clee rode the bronc till the gun cracked. Dimly

he heard its sound and kicked both feet out of the stirrups. Tom put his horse alongside just as the bronc went limber-legged and turned over. Tom made a grab for Clee but missed and Clee was thrown clear of the somersaulting bronc.

Clee lay there on his back in the dust, knocked out. He never knew until later that Tom was on the ground beside him and hollering for somebody to fetch water.

Clee lay there, sweaty and dust-powdered, looking dead. Then water splashed in his face and his eyes blinked open. Ambrose Clee, Rose and Tom, looking white-faced, were watching him. They tried to make Clee lie there, his dust- and sweat-matted head in Rose's lap, but when he shook his head and said he was all right, they helped him to his feet.

"I'm spittin' cotton. All I need's a drink of crick water," he insisted. "Then I'll watch Bully Shannon ride 'em."

"Bully Shannon's up!" bellowed the rodeo boss. "Bully Shannon, comin' out of Chute Number One on the Zebra Dun. Bully Shannon, World's Champion Bronc Rider, will defend his title on the Brown's Hole broncs."

But Bully Shannon was not there, nor was Cheater. After a long delay, Neal Culbertson rode over to the foot of the judges' stand where Clee and Tom stood with Rose and Ambrose Clee. There was a flat grin on Neal's leathery face but his eyes were cold and hard.

"You got the World's Champion Bronc Rider crown, Clee. Bully and

Cheater Larson just held up the First And Last Chance Saloon. They got away with all the money that was bet and left at the saloon for safekeeping. Bully and Cheater are headed north, probably for Shannon's Hog Ranch. Soon as you boys are able to set fresh horses, I'm takin' you along. We'll overtake Bully and Cheater at the Hog Ranch."

The rodeo boss announced that Bully Shannon lacked the guts to defend his title, and that Clee Culbertson was now the World's Champion Bronc Rider.

When the wild cheering had quieted down, the rodeo boss made his second announcement.

"While Clee Culbertson was making his bronc rides, Bully Shannon and Cheater Larson held up the First And Last Chance Saloon and got away with all the betting money. When the saloon-keeper, who was in cahoots with Bully and Cheater, tried to claim his divvy from the holdup, Bully cut him up and left him for dead. Takin' Bully's trail is Deputy Sheriff Neal Culbertson, Clee's daddy, and he has deputized his son and Tom Ball to go along on the manhunt. All us gentle Annies kin do is wish them luck!"

VII

It was about one hundred and fifty miles from Miles City to the Shannon Hog Ranch east of the Little Rockies. The news of Bully Shannon's defeat and the saloon holdup and the knifing of the saloon-keeper by the former World's Champion

Bronc Rider, Bully Shannon, and his pardner, Cheater Larson, was on the telegraph wires half an hour after it happened.

Before midnight Shannon's tough hands brought the telegraphed information that was picked up at the little cow town of Malta, to the Hog Ranch. The news was in big headlines on the front page of the *Malta Enterprise* and told how Deputy Sheriff Neal Culbertson had taken the manhunt trail with his son Clee and Tom Ball.

Shannon's drunken bellow was loud enough to wake the dead. He gathered the bloated, pot-gutted Seth Larson and the shifty-eyed, spectacled Sid Larson and their half-dozen tough renegade camp tenders for a medicine talk. Shannon was the law here and when he made his war talk, they had to listen and take his orders. He and the Larsons were ready for a pitched battle before Bully and Cheater crossed the Missouri River and were on the last lap of their ride to the Hog Ranch.

Shannon was big and tough. The Hog Ranch was Bully Shannon's home and Bully was more than welcome. Shannon was ready for the kill and it showed in his bloodshot green eyes. He got rid of the honkatonk girls and the professor who played the piano.

Shannon was also prepared for a fast getaway after the kill, but he did not include any of the Larsons in his plans. When the gunsmoke cleared, Shannon and Bully would make their getaway together. Shannon had dug up all the money he had cached

around the Hog Ranch. It was all in banknotes of big denomination in a money belt he buckled on next to his hide.

Bully and Cheater showed up after dark, riding sweat-marked, leg-weary horses. No light showed at the Hog Ranch but Shannon loomed up out of the black shadows of the barn. His growl was savage.

"You blunderin', drunken, clumsy whelp! Fetchin' the law down on a man! I got a notion to gut-shoot you and Cheater. You had the world by its bushy tail and you let Clee Culbertson and that damn Injun, Tom Ball, take it away. I got a damn good notion—"

"You better change the notion, Shannon." Bully's voice sounded vicious. "I didn't show up at the Hog Ranch broke. I got money in this gunnysack—the money you let Neal Culbertson take away from you when he made you walk out in the dark in your underclothes, barefoot. Neal told you to dig deep and you dug deep, Shannon. I was a kid then and hid out in the brush, and I watched the pair of you. I kept my mouth shut until right now. Ambrose Clee had the money and he fetched it from his Brown's Hole ranch and laid it on the line for a bet to cover all me'n Cheater could dig up. Ambrose Clee told me it was the money Neal Culbertson had taken away from Shannon at his Hog Ranch. I got it all in this gunnysack and a damn sight more.

"You bin tryin' to locate Neal

Culbertson for years. You sent word out by the renegades down the outlaw trail by the rustlin' of the leaves. You bin braggin' big what you'd do to Neal Culbertson if you located him. Well, he's bin doin' time in the Wyoming pen under another name. All the good them renegades that stopped at Seth Larson's whiskey still done was to louse up yore deal.

"One of 'em that got sick on Larson's rotgut stopped at Ambrose Clee's ranch in Brown's Hole. Neal Culbertson married Ambrose Clee's daughter and Clee's named for him. When that renegade did some talking at the Brown's Hole ranch, Ambrose Clee got word to the Injun's sister Rose who worked for Judge St. John, and she wrote a letter to Clee and her brother and sent it back by the same renegade who drunk Seth Larson's rotgut. Ambrose Clee got Neal Culbertson pardoned out, and Judge St. John sent Rose to Miles City with a deputy sheriff's badge to pin on Neal's shirt. Jim Ball got the goods on you and put it in writin' for St. John. You fouled your own nest here at the Hog Ranch, Shannon. And when the Larsons and you dry-gulched Jim Ball, you put the hangin' rope around your own necks."

"Who the devil told you all this, Bully?"

"I run into Rose Ball at Miles City. She handed me a letter while Clee Culbertson was ridin' the string of Brown's Hole broncs. Ambrose Clee was with her, and so was Neal Culbertson. But I didn't git to open the letter and read it till after me'n

Cheater held up the First And Last Chance. I had to knife that damned saloonman because he wanted his cut of the money. The hell with that. Me'n Cheater was takin' all the risks. I cut him up and put a counterfeit five dollar bill in his greedy hand. And I'm leadin' Neal Culbertson and Clee and the Injun into whatever you got for a gun trap. Match dollar for dollar, Shannon, for what I've got in this gunnysack, and we'll pool it for a South America stake. Otherwise, I'll just change horses and drift yonderly. Take it or let it lay, Shannon."

"You're gettin' mighty big for your tight britches, Bully."

"I come by it natural. Chip off the red-headed Shannon block."

"You must've stopped by Seth Larson's whiskey still. I kin match what you got in that sack. But you'll have to stay here long enough to dirty a gun barrel. I've got the gun trap laid for Neal and his kid Clee and the Injun. Ready and a-waitin'. How far they behind you?"

"They're due about now. Ambrose Clee is with 'em. Just them four. How many men you got for backin'?"

"Seth and Sid Larson. They're in the saloon. And half a dozen tough renegades are staked out around the Hog Ranch. You two turn your horses loose. You go to the saloon, Cheater. Tell Seth and Sid to light the lights, and set out the drinks."

When Shannon and his son were alone at the barn, Bully threw his saddle on a fresh horse. He rolled

and lit a cigarette and his grin flattened as his eyes matched the green eyes of his father.

"To hell with Cheater and the Larsons," said Bully. "You got your money on you. Let's travel from here fast. Leave the Larson brothers and Cheater to do the shootin'. Let's git to hell gone."

The match went out. Shannon's growl came out of the darkness in the barn. His gun barrel jabbed Bully in the back.

"I'd a damn sight rather see you dead than turn yellow. I'm waitin' for Neal Culbertson, and if you've got ary guts you'll want to kill Clee. You git on to where the light's showin' in the saloon, or I'll kill you. Shannon's got guts. His whelp is supposed to have the Shannon guts. When we've done our killin', we'll ride on, yonderly. Me'n you. No others. You got the guts to fight?"

"I got the guts, Shannon," Bully's voice croaked in the darkness.

"Then let's have a drink at the Hog Ranch bar. You got that gunny-sack tied to your saddle?"

"It's tied on," said Bully.

Shannon and Bully walked through the open door into the Hog Ranch Saloon, where Seth and Sid Larson and Cheater stood at the bar drinking.

"We're all here. Lamplit and on our feet," growled Shannon. "It's a decoy. Neal Culbertson and Clee and the Injun and this Ambrose Clee will ride up. Neal always played it high, wide and handsome and out in the open. He'll think Shannon

and his outfit will play it thataway. Shannon always had the guts." Shannon's grin slid across his heavy face and his green eyes were crafty. "Then about the time Neal Culbertson and his outfit steps off their horses, Shannon springs his gun trap.

"Them half dozen tough renegades I got staked outside let you pass, Bully. And they'll let Deputy Sheriff Neal Culbertson and his henyard posse ride past. But those tough hands will be close behind 'em. And when I beller out, 'Long time no see you, Neal!' that'll be the signal for them hired gun-slingers to cut loose, and them that don't git shot in the back, we kin take care of."

Their glasses were filled to the brim. Shannon had the bottle in his left hand when there came the sounds of shod hoofs outside.

Riders pulled up and swung from their saddles—Deputy Sheriff Neal Culbertson, Clee and Tom Ball.

"You set your horse, Ambrose," said Neal, "in case some of 'em try to rabbit."

Then Neal Culbertson, with Clee and Tom close behind to flank him on either side, stepped through the door of the Hog Ranch Saloon.

"Long time no see you, Neal!" bellowed Shannon.

But no shots sounded from outside. There was only silence. Then Ambrose Clee stepped down from his horse and came in, kicking the door shut behind him. Every man had a six-shooter in his hand. The grunted voice of Judge John St. John

came in from the open window.

"I sprung your bear trap, Shannon. I had the law grab all your tough gunhands. It's 'Kitty, bar the door!'"

Every gun inside the log cabin saloon seemed to explode at the same instant. Neal had his man gun-sighted and the man was Shannon. Clee took Bully, and Tom Ball's gun was pointed at Cheater. That left Ambrose Clee the two Larson brothers. It was close quarters and the heavy-calibered guns all exploding at once hammered their eardrums. The stench of burnt powder smoke was thick, there in the lamplight.

Through the heavy gun explosions sounded Shannon's bellow. It had a hellish sound, hoarse, toneless, crashing through the gun echoes. Shannon stood there with his back against the log wall, a six-shooter gripped in his hand, looming giant-sized in the smoke-filled shadows thrown from the big Rochester lamp that hung in a bracket behind the bar. The huge green-eyed man looked inhuman, and he seemed bullet-proof.

Sid Larson's steel-rimmed spectacles had been knocked off. He had a derringer pistol in one hand and a .38 double-action belly gun in the other. Blind without his specs, he dove through the window. Judge St. John was outside with a sawed-off shotgun, and its blast of buckshot tore into Sid Larson and he lay dead across the sill of the open window.

Seth Larson and Cheater tried to duck behind the bar. Tom Ball's gun spat fire and the bullet broke Cheat-

er's back and he died screaming horribly, the shrill sound threading through Shannon's bellow.

Shannon kicked Seth Larson in the face as he tried to duck past the big man to get behind the bar. Ambrose Clee's two shots were gut shots that dropped Seth.

Bully was shooting as fast as he could thumb back the gun hammer and pull the trigger, but his shots were wild. He kept hollering in a terrified voice. "I don't wanta die! I don't wanta die!"

Clee was crouched alongside his father. He shot Bully twice and the second bullet crashed through Bully's big ribs and tore out his heart. Bully quit yelling and his knees buckled and he went down.

Suddenly Neal Culbertson flung Clee aside with his left hand, knocking him off balance and down on all fours. Neal took Shannon's bullet that was meant for his son. His legs were buckling and he had to lift his six-shooter in both hands to shoot Shannon square between his slitted green eyes. Then Neal's back slid down against the log wall beside Clee. He was dying, that hell-bent grin on his mouth and his eyes puckered as he looked at his son.

"So-long, Clee. You're a good man. Stay that way. I'm shore proud to claim you. . . . So-long, son."

"So-long, dad. . . . That goes double. I'm proud to claim you for a father."

Clee had been shot through the thigh and Tom had been wounded in the shoulder. Ambrose Clee sat with

his back against the wall, leaning a little forward. His face was gray and he spoke to Clee through clenched teeth and when his lips moved there was a trickle of blood threading down from the corners.

"Whatever money is in that gunnysack and what money you find on Shannon, you keep it, Clee. It's all yours to share with your partner Tom Ball." He looked up at Judge St. John who had shoved open the door and come in.

"You'll tend to selling my Brown's Hole ranch, judge? Put the money in trust for my grandson."

"I'll give you my word on that." Judge St. John spoke quietly.

"So-long, Clee, and Tom. Neal's gone on ahead of me. It's come out just about as both of us wanted it. Take care of each other. Rose and Clee have my blessing."

Shannon's Hog Ranch Saloon was a shambles. Judge St. John took the money belt from around Shannon's middle and got the gunnysack that Bully had brought. He told his men to wrap the dead bodies of Neal Culbertson and Ambrose Clee in bed tarps.

"We'll take them to Landusky for burial," he decided. "Dig graves here for the others, and burn down this saloon. It's the last of Shannon's Hog Ranch."

Judge St. John took Clee and Tom to Landusky in the spring wagon. Their flesh wounds were painful but

not dangerous. Rose was waiting for them.

"After the funeral," Judge St. John told them, "I'm marrying Clee Culbertson and Rose Ball. You two boys are grubstaked enough to go into the ranching business anywhere you want to locate. Rose and Tom can either use their Indian rights or locate somewhere else off the Reservation."

"Names The Star," said Rose, "left me his place. If Clee doesn't mind using his squawman's rights, I'd like to live there."

"You named it, Rose," said Clee. "I'm part Injun myself."

"As for you, Tom," Rose told her brother. "You're the new sub-agent at Lodge Pole, and you'll run the I. D. roundup. Shannon made Sid Larson put Names The Star on his Bad Injun list and our grandfather starved to death. We both owe something to Names The Star." Rose spoke the last sentence in the Indian sign language.

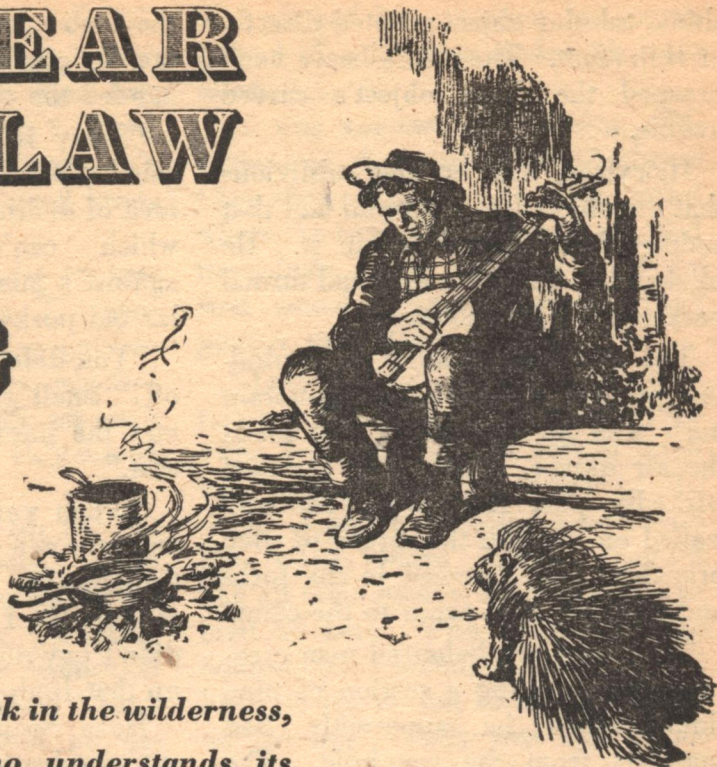
"Names The Star has spoken," Tom Ball also spoke in the Assiniboine tongue. "His medicine is good. You are my sister. You have talked. I will represent our people at the sub-agency. Clee understands; he is one of us. We will do what Names The Star would like to have us do. He did not die in vain. Clee and I have come back home."

"Names The Star," Clee too spoke in Assiniboine, "was a medicine man. His medicine was always good."

THE END

NO FEAR OF CLAW NOR FANG

By
Ralph
Yergen



*Sudden death may lurk in the wilderness,
but to the man who understands its
ways there can be friendship, too . . .*

UNKNOWN to Hairyfoot, sudden death was primed to blast out his life in one agonizing smash. Crouched in the forks of a stunted pine tree, the porcupine contentedly nibbled on a strip of bark sweet with freshly risen sap. The noon sun glistened through interlaced branches and warmed Hairyfoot's black topcoat of hair and quills. It was a peaceful spring day with Nature at her tranquil best—but man creatures were near.

Hairyfoot could see the three man creatures well enough. They were standing in the camp below him. Yet they aroused in him no fear at all. For one of the man creatures lived in

the camp, and he was Hairyfoot's friend.

He was a tall, muscular young man with curly black hair and dark eyes. He was talking, and his tone was much sharper than Hairyfoot had ever heard it.

One of the visiting man creatures stood apart in a lax, slumped posture. His toothless mouth gaped open, and a silly expression claimed his unshaven face. The other was a heavy-bodied man, built like a bear. Red beard stubble blanketed his rugged face. His eyes were close-set, cloudy. And at present one of them was closed as the other squinted along a

shiny, tubular object pointed directly at Hairyfoot. The man's beefy hand grasped the shiny object's curved handle.

Hairyfoot was entirely oblivious that the object was a six-gun and that sudden death lurked within it. He blinked his dark little eyes and turned back to his bark nibbling.

The smashing thunder of exploding powder shattered the mountain hush with an abruptness that made the air quiver. Something crackled wickedly past Hairyfoot's ear and wailed on through the screen of pine branches. He flattened in the forks and his gaze sped again to the camp.

The young, curly-haired man creature was clutching a section of pine limb, which he apparently had snatched from the woodpile. The big, bearlike man was wringing his wrist and uttering harsh sounds to indicate he was in pain. The object with the smooth hard glitter was lying in the dirt several yards away, a thin streamer of smoke still drifting upward from the muzzle. The third man was standing in his tracks, but the limp silliness on his face was replaced by a cold, wolfish glare.

There was no more air-cracking thunder. Only man talk. And in a few moments Hairyfoot had forgotten the incident and was sampling the tasty bark again.

None of the man creatures, however, seemed to be forgetting. The curly-haired youth, who answered to the name of Wade Bentley, dropped

the limb and strode over to pick up the six-gun from the ground. He handed the object to the heavy man.

"Sorry if I hurt you, Snell," he said. "But I never did cotton to the idea of drilling harmless wild critters which can't protect themselves against a gun. Besides, that particular old porky is a pet of mine."

"You didn't have to knock my arm off!" Snell growled. "I ort to hammer the infernal tar out of you for that."

"When you said you were trying out your new hogleg by putting a hole through that porcupine's belly, I saw red, Snell. I hollered at you but you didn't pay no attention. So I picked up that limb and swung."

Hoke Snell pulled a dirt-covered cut of tobacco from his hind pocket and ground off a chunk with his powerful jaws. "That swing will cost you something, Bentley. You ain't movin' a pole off'n my property less'n you pay me two cents' stumpage."

Young Wade Bentley stared at the bear-bodied timber owner.

"What you mean, Snell? I've got my copy of the contract right in that pack sack. It calls for one cent a pole stumpage. And the right to haul 'em any time."

Wade's thoughts returned to the day he had made the deal with Hoke Snell, who lived with Soupy, his toothless hired man, in a cabin up Foam Creek a couple of miles. He had been shaky about bargaining with a man of Hoke Snell's reputation for trouble making. But Snell

owned the best stand of young lodgepole pine in the entire Wigwam Mountain country.

Wade Bentley was cutting and peeling the poles with a view to selling them to ranchmen down in the valleys for use in building corrals.

He had found both Snell and Soupy agreeable enough until today. The pair often stopped in at mealtime and consumed vast quantities of bacon, beans and biscuits. Always they reeked strongly of whiskey, but Wade had never seen them drunk enough to be in an ugly mood. Now, however, Snell's true colors seemed to be unfolding.

"Contract be hanged!" Snell growled. "Them poles is still on my property, Bentley. If you try movin' 'em without payin' me two cents per pole, you'll find your health gittin' mighty bad all of a sudden. Let's go, Soupy."

Wade shrugged and picked up an ax. He walked over to the tree where Hairyfoot was still occupied with his meal of bark.

Looking upward, he said, "Pal, it looks like you got me into a bad jam today. But I'd do the same all over again. I'd sure miss you if you weren't around come night time."

Hairyfoot gazed down gravely at the pole cutter.

Climbing away from Foam Creek, Wade Bentley emerged from the scraggly timber onto a wide mountain bench. Everywhere, stacks of long sleek poles were drying in the sun. Beyond, the standing growth of

lodgepoles formed a gray-green wall. Every day that wall of pine retreated before his ax.

When he reached the edge of standing timber, Wade peeled off his shirt and began to slash the trees, one by one. The sun boiled down on his bronzed back. Sweat rivered from his pores. But the steady mountain breeze prevented the heat from sapping his strength.

By midafternoon, Wade was ready to begin trimming off the branches. Then he discovered he had forgotten to bring his light trimming ax from camp.

"Reckon that tiff with Snell was too much on my mind," he told himself. "I'll hoof it back to camp and get that ax. Need a drink of good old creek water, anyhow."

Silent in his moccasins, Wade glided through the pine shadows. His camp swung into his vision, and he saw movement there—human movement. Creeping nearer, he spied Hoke Snell's burly torso bending over a pack sack. With a huge paw, Snell was fishing among the contents.

"Lose something, Snell?" Wade asked in a neutral tone.

The bearlike man's shoulders came up in an explosive movement. His cloudy eyes found Bentley and shifted.

"Lookin' fer a match," he mumbled.

"To burn the contract? Just for your information, Snell, that contract is now in my pocket. And it stays there. Here's a match."

His face threatening as a thunder-

cloud, Hoke Snell accepted the match without a word. He wheeled heavily and strode toward his horse.

At this dynamic moment, Hairy-foot chose to wander into camp. Observing that his friend was present, the porcupine waddled lazily toward him. Wade spotted the fearless animal. And so did Hoke Snell. Then Wade watched Snell leave his course toward his horse and move over to one side to block Hairyfoot's advance.

Snell abruptly drew a heavy boot and sent it swishing toward the porcupine. The blunt toe smashed against Hairyfoot's nose, hurling him backward like a rolling ball. Blood spurted from the animal's nostrils and painted a trail as he rolled.

"Take that, you spike-hided son-of-a-bluffer!" Snell rumbled. "And don't head my way no more." He veered toward his horse.

Wade caught up with the heavy man in swift strides. His fingers closed abruptly on Snell's greasy shirt collar. His right foot swung upward and connected solidly with the seat of Snell's pants.

"You went out of your way to kick that porky," Wade said angrily. "And I don't hanker for hombres to be pawing through my trappings. From now on stay a long way from my camp. Savvy?"

A profane roar spilled out of Hoke Snell's throat. He spun in a movement agile for such a weighty man. His right fist came around at the same instant, aimed for Wade Bentley's jaw. Wade ducked fast, and the blow whizzed over the top of his head.

"No damned pole cutter tells Hoke Snell what to do," the timber owner frothed. "I'll rip you apart like a clock!"

Sinking his head low between thick shoulders, Snell rammed at Wade. Those beefy fists punished the air as the young pole cutter side-stepped. Spotting an open shot at Hoke Snell's cheek bone, Wade drove his right fist at it with all the power of his young body. Snell was moving forward with the punch, and Wade's knuckles splattered the man's ear, snapping his head to one side.

Snell roared in pain and rage. He reached his right hand behind him and brought it around him clutching a camp ax which had lain near the wood pile.

"Now, by Satan, I'll slice your belly wide open," he grated.

Icy torrents cascaded down Wade Bentley's spine. He watched Snell advance steadily. He backed away in an irregular circle, stalling for time. Time to think. Time to figure a way to elude that threatening ax.

Then Wade recalled the trimming ax. If he remembered right, it was sticking in a tree about forty feet behind him. But he wasn't sure. Anxiety filling him, he began to back toward that tree.

Suddenly Hoke Snell decided to finish it fast. He charged at Wade, wielding the camp ax as if it were a toothpick in his powerful grip. Wade danced back fast. His gaze flicked to the tree. The ax was there, within reach. He seized the handle and

yanked it free. Hoke Snell was upon him in that instant. Wade slid behind the tree and the sturdy trunk blocked Snell's swing.

Wade continued to back away. Hoke Snell followed, his battered face twisted into a murderous snarl. But Wade sensed that Snell's confidence was waning.

Abruptly Snell plowed forward with a roar of hate and rage. His ax whizzed in a stroke designed to split Wade's skull wide open.

Wade Bentley halted his retreat. He met Snell's hurtling ax with a sharp, expertly timed swing of his own.

The two ax heads collided in mid-air. Sparks splattered from the honed steel. The clanging report was like a pistol shot. The echoes rang through the timber like an alarm bell.

The terrific force of impact jarred the handles out of each man's grip. As the two axes fell, Wade Bentley stepped into the heavy man, hammering at his bulging paunch again and again.

Now Hoke Snell was backing up, driven by the force of Wade's blows. He was shaking his head, groggy, bewildered, whipped. Suddenly he turned and staggered toward his horse.

Wade watched the man drag himself into the saddle. The horse trotted down to the creek, splashed across and headed up trail toward the Snell headquarters.

"That's what he asked for," Wade murmured, with an optimism he

didn't wholly feel. "Maybe he won't bother me again."

His battered nose a swollen, aching mass, Hairyfoot emerged gingerly from the underbrush. He waddled across open ground to where Wade sat on a bench drying his face after washing in the creek.

Hairyfoot observed the pole cutter with grave, trusting eyes.

Wade held out a hand. "You got me into another fracas, you old loafer. Why don't you lay low when Hoke Snell comes around!"

Hairyfoot edged closer. The hand came down under his chin and massaged his throat. He chuckled softly. There was a lot of difference in the way man creatures treated him.

When Wade left camp again, Hairyfoot ambled into the forest. His appetite was somewhat jaded. But he enjoyed cruising about, tasting a bit of wood here and there.

Fear of predators was almost wholly lacking in Hairyfoot. His protective armor of quills was enough to discourage even the hungriest wild creature. Coyotes sometimes bedeviled him. He had seen his kinfolk rolled over by coyotes attacking in a pack. Hairyfoot knew that once a porcupine is on his back, he's helpless to the slash of claw or fangs. For no quills cover the tender flesh of his throat and belly. But Hairyfoot had always taken good care to stay right side up.

The sun had faded from the peaks, and the violet softness of mountain dusk robed the slopes when the por-

cupine came back to Wade Bentley's camp.

Bentley's fire was crackling. The smell of warming food blended with the pine smoke. Much to Hairyfoot's relief, the pole cutter was alone. He advanced to where the heat reached out and touched him lightly. Here he squatted, watching the flames.

Drowsiness soon overtook Hairyfoot. When he awakened, the deep recess of night had swallowed the hills. Stars glittered frostily in the sky. The fire felt exceptionally good.

Wade Bentley was tuning his banjo. Soon he began to play, and the forest acoustics mellowed the tones. Hairyfoot listened, but could arouse no appreciation for music. On the other hand, it did not disturb him. He yawned and decided it was time for his nightly drink.

Sleeping beside the warm fire always made him thirsty. He picked himself up and shuffled down slope toward the swift, clean waters of Foam Creek.

Finally, he traveled lazily back to the fire and settled down, contentment deep within him. He was totally unaware that at the moment death was being plotted for himself and his man creature friend.

The whiskey bottle on the table at the Snell cabin was almost empty by the time Hoke Snell and his man Soupy had perfected their plans to murder Wade Bentley.

"Here's the way we'll work it," Snell summed up, planting a hairy fist beside the flickering lamp. "To-

morrow night when Bentley is plunkin' that damned banjo beside his campfire, we pouch our sixes and mosey along. Soupy, your job is to head up through the brush and hide on the slope near that camp. You wait there with your peepers open. I'll take the creek trail. Opposite his camp, I'll cross the creek and sneak up on him. Squattin' by the fire, he ort to make a perfect target. One shot should do it. But if he's still kickin', you cut loose. He'll be trapped in a cross fire. Don't shoot unless you got to, though. That ax rastler is my meat, damn his hide!"

Soupy's lax mouth twisted into an evil grin. "Lissens good, Hoke. But why not wait until the jasper goes to sleep? Safer."

Snell shook his shaggy head. "He'll be cagey. He won't dare sleep near his camp. Likely we couldn't find him in the dark. But he won't be expectin' us so early. He'll be a sittin' duck, there in the firelight."

Soupy spilled a glass of whiskey down his throat. He gulped and nodded. "A setup. Then we clean camp, huh, Hoke?"

"We round up all his riggings and dump the whole caboodle includin' the dead man into that old well behind the barn. Nobody'll ever find him in there."

"Them poles will fetch good dinero, Hoke."

Snell sloshed whiskey into his glass. "You're dang right. We gits some skinner to haul 'em down to the valley where we sells 'em. The pro-

ceeds will hold us in good lick for many a moon."

Laughter slithered out of Soupy. "And that fool Bentley has been workin' like a slave all this time."

Snell passed a hand gingerly over his battered nose. "Serves the young whelp right. And don't fergit. That consarned varmint of a porcupine will be hangin' around somewheres. Blow his brains out!"

Night came again to the mountain forest, soft and blue and star-sprinkled. The wailing of a coyote somewhere in the timber filled Hoke Snell's ears as he plodded along the Foam Creek trail. Soon the wail faded and the mufed tinkle of a banjo floated through the darkness.

As Snell advanced, a spot of orange fire glow brightened the forest shadows. Opposite the Bentley camp, Snell halted and listened. The camp itself was hidden by the brush-fringed stream bank.

There was no sound except the singing of the waters and the rhythmic melody of the banjo. Soupy, with his head start, should be ensconced in this position, Snell thought. He drew his six-gun and checked the loads. Everything was in order. He would cross the creek and climb the opposite bank. Nicely lighted by the fire, the camp would be visible through the bushes. One shot . . .

Hoke Snell's boot found a solid boulder humping above the foam-crested water. He stepped to the next rock, a dark blot on the creamy

surface. Two more, and he was across.

As he skulked up the bank, Snell became suddenly aware that the music had stopped. Alarmed, he lifted his rugged head and peered through the bushes. The fire sent red waves of light dancing over the camp, reaching into the timber and playing tag with the shadows. Every detail of the camp was clear. But the only living thing in sight was Hairyfoot, huddled beside the fire and staring into the darkness at the spot where Hoke Snell crouched.

"What the devil!" Snell muttered. "How did Bentley get wise? There's his blasted porcupine."

Snell remained motionless, watching and trying to figure it out. Where was Bentley? Had Soupy seen him leave camp? Maybe he would come back; Snell would wait. He was in no hurry. Bentley couldn't possibly know he was here. Maybe Bentley had wandered off to bed early. Maybe they would have to return again tomorrow night—earlier—for their planned murder.

Snell lined his six-gun sights on Hairyfoot. If it were not for warning Bentley with a gun shot, that pesky porcupine would get his bullet in the belly, Snell thought. He . . .

The voice that interrupted Snell's thought seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Yet there was no mistaking its meaning.

"Hold that pose, Snell!"

It was Wade Bentley's voice. And Bentley was standing behind Hoke.

Wade came up close behind the timber owner and pressed his pistol muzzle against the thick back. "I'll take charge of that smoker," he said grimly. He reached over Snell's shoulder and appropriated the six-gun.

"How did you know I was here!" Snell grumbled.

"Mosey up toward camp and I'll show you."

When they had climbed the bank and were faintly touched by the fire glow, Wade said, "See Hairyfoot over there? He's the one that told me you were around."

"You're locoed," Snell snorted. "That critter can't talk."

"No. But his actions told me. I've been around old Hairyfoot a lot. He's never been afraid of any living thing, Snell. Not until you kicked him the other day. Now he's afraid of you. He's a slow, lazy old loafer. I never saw him in a hurry until tonight.

"Every night he goes to the creek for a drink. Usually stays about five minutes, then toddles back. Tonight I don't think he even reached the creek. He came back fast. He was running. He was scared. That told me he had spotted Hoke Snell down this way.

"I kept on picking the banjo while I moved away from the fire. When I got to the edge of the shadows, I dropped the banjo and grabbed my gun. I circled around through the brush. Then I came up the creek and spotted your noggin outlined against the fire glow. I—"

The bullet came out of the night like a lightning flash. It scraped the bone along Wade's left shoulder. Its numbing force jarred him so that he reeled toward Snell. With the thunderous roar filling his ears, he sensed that the slug had come from a thicket off to his right, beyond the touch of fire glow.

"Plug him again, Soupy!" Snell yelled, almost in Wade's ear.

The heavy man spun about. But Wade's mind was working fast. A sharp flip of his six-gun barrel laid a crease across Snell's forehead. The man grunted and wobbled like a man in the last stages of drunkenness.

The gun in the thicket was bellowing again. A bullet hissed past Wade's ear. Another ripped the holster from his belt. He leaped behind Hoke Snell and clamped an arm about the man's huge girth. Snell was not completely out, and he struggled feebly, interfering with Wade's aim as he tried to shoot back at the powder flares.

Despite Wade's protection, Soupy kept on blazing. Wade felt the jolt of lead plowing into Snell's bearlike body. A screech tore from the man's throat, trailing into a groan. His muscles began to twitch. Wade released him. As Snell sank down, Wade dropped to one knee.

A red dart of flame sliced the night, and Wade's gun boomed a reply. He combed the thicket with a hot pattern of lead. A howl of pain told him he had connected with some part of Soup's anatomy. He threw down his empty weapon, exchanging it for the

six-gun he had lifted from Snell.

With cold, systematic workmanship he blasted slugs into that thicket. The powder flashes ceased, and he heard a threshing sound in the brush. The next minute Soupy's bullet-broken body rolled into the fire glow and lay sprawled in a grotesque position that told a plain story.

An examination revealed that one of Soupy's last bullets had sunk into Hoke Snell an inch above his belt buckle, and the man was breathing his last.

"Reckon all that whiskey Soupy drank didn't help his shooting any," Wade told himself. "But nobody could have done a better job on Hoke

Snell. Only it was me Soupy was trying to kill."

Beside the fire, Hairyfoot was still shivering at those terrifying blasts of man-made thunder that had filled the mountain night. But when Wade came back and picked up his banjo despite his wounded shoulder, Hairyfoot somehow knew the mountain world was no longer troubled.

The fire's warmth seeped into his thick coat of hair and quills. He would do without his drink of creek water tonight. But nothing would rob him of his cozy nap. Easily, with the strumming of the banjo in his ears, Hairyfoot drifted off to untroubled slumberland. . . .

THE END

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

By JACK LUZZATTO





Here's a mixed group of brands — some easy, some hard. You'll be doing very well if you can decode No. 2 in two or three minutes. No. 6

may prove to be a stopper, too. The rest won't give you so much trouble, but they're all fun. The first two winners also show that the competition is sharpening up. It's a nice mental workout designed to keep your wits from getting rusty. If you do need a little oil, the answers can be found on page 137.

No. 1 sent in by Bill Heffelfinger, Marion, Ohio.

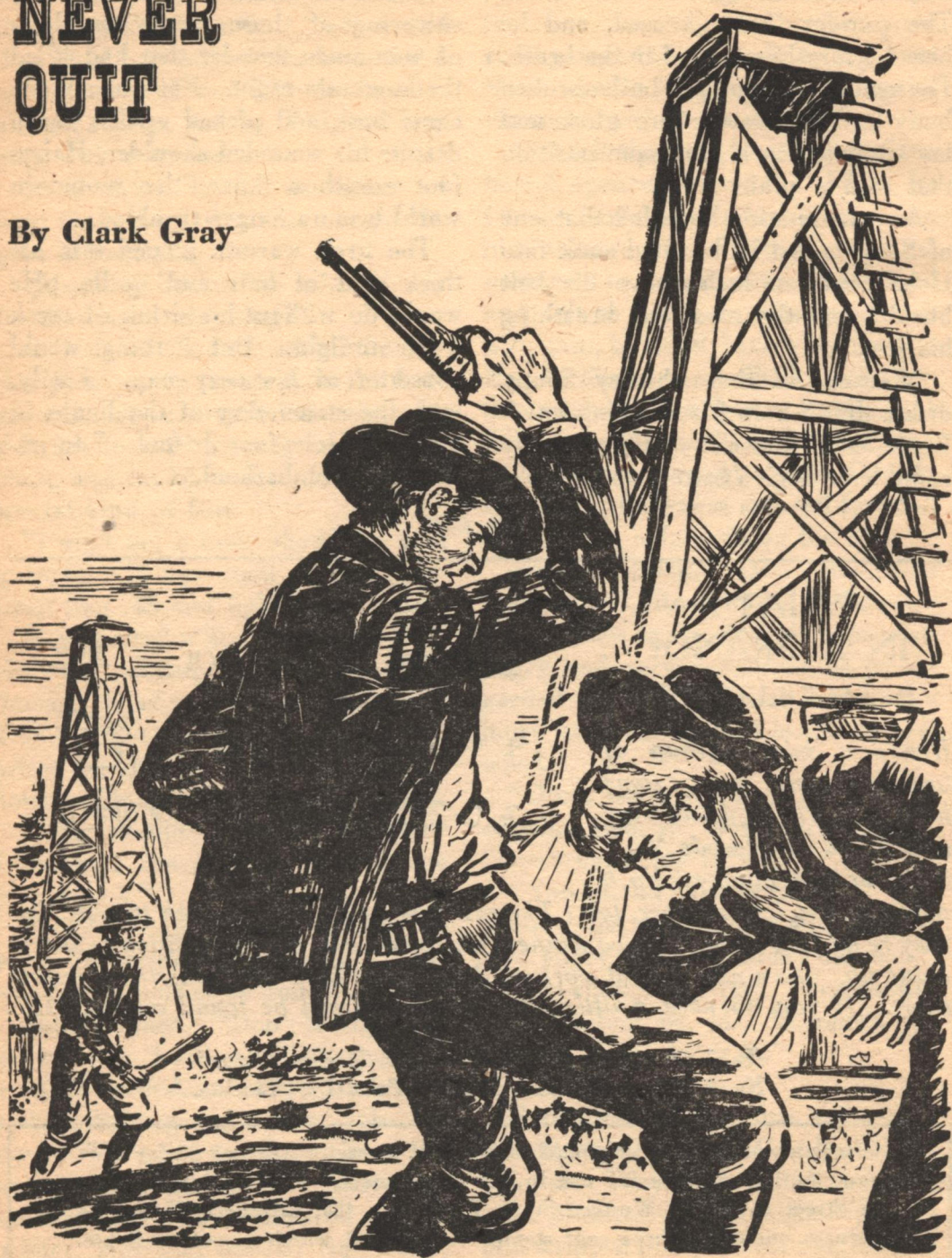
No. 2 sent in by Math Michels, Palm Bay, Florida.

Can you work out an *original* brand? Mr. Luzzatto will pay \$5 for each contribution suitable for use in this department. Address him in care of Street & Smith's Western Store, P. O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure to enclose a three-cent stamp for material which is not available.

1.  2. =N  3. $\frac{\text{BOY}}{\text{W}}$
4.  5. $\frac{\text{I}}{\text{WORK M}}$ 6. $\frac{\text{HANG}}{\square}$
7. O-2-DO 8. NO= 9. HI * R

COWHANDS NEVER QUIT

By Clark Gray



Cattle and oil don't mix, Tod Davis discovered when he had to decide whether to fight against his own neighbors or desert the man who paid his wages

I

ENTERING the mercantile after the bright glare of the street, Tod Davis saw first Shad Conelly's two gold-filled teeth. It happened this way: The mercantile was dark after the five o'clock brilliance of the street, and an arrow of sunlight entered the big plate glass window behind Tod's shoulder, splashing the far end of the building with dusty yellow. It was back there, at the far end, where Tod saw Shad's two gold teeth glinting in the sunlight.

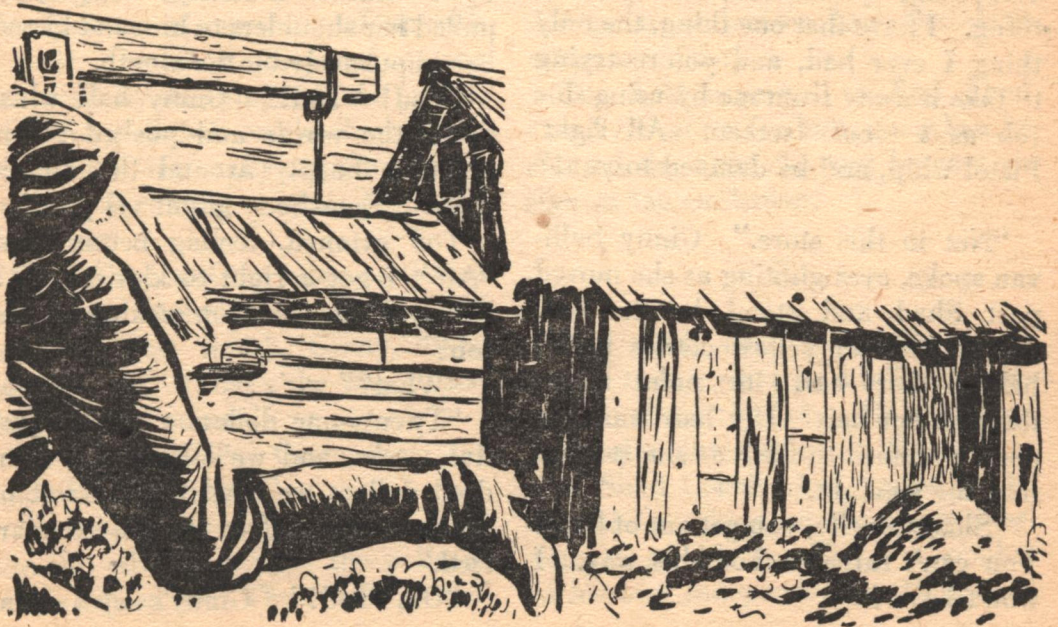
Tod halted, and the sick, inevitable drag of fear rolled through him. Tod Davis was only a slim youth. Supple as a bamboo stick and with no beard,

even at twenty-two. He was no match for Shad Conelly, and knew it; and the knowledge had been like a leech, bleeding his confidence.

Moving down the long counter after his momentary pause, Tod was painfully aware of Shad Conelly's malicious grin. Behind the grin, Shad's whiskers looked blue, even though the man was close shaven. At the edge of the splash of light, Tod saw Ginny.

He said quietly, "Afternoon, Ginny. Shad, I see you didn't wait to let me tell her."

Shad grinned. "Huh-uh. I told Ginny you took that job. Sonny, any man that works for McIntosh is nothing but a damned traitor."



Tod ducked his head, feeling a hot flush paint the back of his neck. He thought despairingly, *So Shad won't give up, damn him! Even now.* Aloud he said:

"I took the job because I need the money. Dang it, Shad, you got no call to tell a body where he can work."

"I got a call," Shad said grimly, "to protect my cattle. Any damned way I see fit, bucko. I promised a pistol whipping to the man that took a job with McIntosh. You ain't hardly a man, but it looks like you're my customer."

Tod grinned crookedly. There was this fear in him, yet he knew it was no ordinary fear. He, Tod Davis, was not afraid of the pain of a pistol whipping. The fear was born of some essential difference between him and Shad Conelly.

Tod said carefully, "Shad, you're a spoiled man. You've always had everything you want, except one thing. I have that one thing, the only thing I ever had, and you're trying to take it away from me by using this job as a smoke screen. All right. Pistol whip, and be damned to you!"

"Not in this store." Ginny Sullivan spoke, eyes glinting as she moved past Shad and stood beside Tod. Ginny had her yellow clerk's pencil behind her ear, its point stuck through her hair. Her hair was copper; it seemed to flash as she stepped into the sunlight.

"Shad Conelly, you get out of here! You can't threaten Tod this way. I won't have it."

Tod grunted and moved forward, knowing instantly this wouldn't work. Ginny was speaking through her loyalty to him, but he could not let her defend him. Gently he tried to move her aside.

Shad Conelly was grinning mockingly. "All right, Ginny. I'll let him hide behind a woman's skirts—this time. But I'm going up to McIntosh's rig tonight. If I find Tod there, that offer of a pistol whipping still goes."

"I'll be there," Tod said, and silently he cursed the excited shrillness of his own voice. "If you want fight, Shad, come up and get it."

It was for Ginny that he was doing this. When Shad disappeared, Tod faced her, and the tension faded from him. He smiled at Ginny, smiled at the upturned nose, at the mass of copper hair that cascaded over her shoulders, at the anxiety in her blue eyes. Out of a strange hunger, he pulled her shoulders to him and kissed her impulsively on the mouth.

"Tod! Tod!" Ginny half-whispered the words and pushed away, glancing hastily around the dim-lit store. "Somebody might see you."

Tod grinned, feeling better now. "Ain't I got a right to kiss my gal? Honey, know what I'm making on this job?"

"What?"

"Twenty-one dollars a week. Just five weeks, and we'll have that hundred dollars we need for the rest of the furniture. Then we can get married."

"Oh, Tod!" Ginny's eyes went

soft for an instant. She put a hand on his arm, gazing at him, and the dream that the two of them shared was very plain on her face. Then she sighed.

"Tod, what about Shad Conelly?"

Tod looked at her thoughtfully. "Honey, you know Shad better than I do."

Ginny flushed. "All right. I guess he *is* jealous. After all, we were engaged . . . sort of . . . before you came to town. But I mean what about his cattle. Is it true that McIntosh's oil wells are killing cattle?"

"I reckon so, honey." Tod sighed, and his own doubts came back at this moment, making him wonder once again if he had done the right thing in taking this job with Dan McIntosh. The man was an oil driller from the sandstone lens fields of Kansas. He had two small producing wells here in the Strip, and was drilling a third. The two producers flowed a considerable quantity of salt water, along with the oil. McIntosh disposed of the salt water by dumping it in the creeks, and the polluted creeks had killed some cattle, internally crippling many more. Including some of Shad Conelly's.

"But Shad and the other cattlemen are suing McIntosh in the federal court at Fort Smith, Ginny," Tod pointed out. "That's the way to settle it—in the courts."

"And meanwhile," Ginny said, "the cattle keep on dying."

"Not so many now, Ginny. Shad and the others have got the polluted creeks fenced off. They trade around

—pool what good water they've got left. It's unhandy, but they can make out. It won't hurt nobody for me to take this job with McIntosh. Shad's just using that as an excuse to make trouble."

Ginny said, "I see," and her eyes showed him that she did. She was a young girl, Ginny, just turned eighteen. But she had a woman's wisdom and a woman's patience, and Tod felt she understood his own uncertainties.

"Just be careful, Tod. When you go up there tonight—be careful. Don't fight Shad if you can help it."

Tod knew that a fight with Shad Conelly was something he very likely couldn't help, but he didn't say so. Fifteen minutes later he told Ginny good-by and said good-night to her father, who owned the mercantile. Heading for the rig, he took a short cut through the blackjacks. The leaves of the trees were brown already, with the August drought, and the grass underfoot had the dead crispness of hay.

Tod half expected to find Shad Conelly waiting for him, but when he entered the little clearing he saw no sign of the cattleman.

II

Tod had seen the drilling rig earlier today, when he'd talked to McIntosh about the job. He'd had no particular interest in it then. But now Shad Conelly had forced an issue, and working on the rig had become a symbol for Tod. A symbol of his own independence. He looked

over the rig curiously, suddenly determined to give his very best to this job.

The rig itself was a spider web of high crossed timbers and shining cable, with the walking beam slowly seesawing on the sampson post. McIntosh had piped gas from his producing wells for light, and the flares cut bright yellow swaths in the evening dusk. The steam engine chugged with a steady roar.

Through a loose batten in the belt house, Tod could see the huge red belt slapping as it turned. And from somewhere deep underground, he felt the insistent jarring as the heavy steel bit pounded its way into the crust of the earth. Tod grinned cheerfully as McIntosh came striding toward him, hairy arms glistening with sweat.

McIntosh spit out a chew of tobacco. "Ready to start to work, kid? You got a lot to learn."

Tod nodded. McIntosh was a burly, fast-moving man of about forty, with red threads of sleeplessness running through the whites of his eyeballs. The driller had told Tod that he, himself, was working day and night, because he couldn't afford to hire an experienced man to supervise night-time operations. Tod was to work as night tool dresser. The previous toolie had got drunk on the job and McIntosh had had to fire him.

"Okay, kid. Fire up the boiler from that pile of wood, over there. I'm about finished drilling a screw. I'll pull the tools and run the bailer; then we'll see how you can handle a sixteen-pound sledge. I aim to work

your tail off on this job, sonny."

But Tod Davis had no fear of work. He might be young, he told himself. Others might call him kid, or sonny, and he might resent bitterly the strange fact that until a man has a beard, he isn't considered a man. But he could work. An hour later he and McIntosh finished dressing and tempering the bit, and had it screwed back to the tool string.

"So far, so good, sonny," McIntosh said. "You got muscle. Now let's see if you've got brains. I'm going to explain just once how the rig works. After that, I expect you to know."

It was complicated. It seemed to Tod there were a thousand levers and gadgets, but as McIntosh explained, Tod began to see the pattern of the work. Actual drilling was done by the two-ton string of tools, suspended in the bottom of the hole by the walking beam. The walking beam seesawed up and down, pounding the tools against the bottom.

Water was run into the hole while drilling was in progress, and at regular intervals the tools were pulled and the bailer run. The bailer was like a giant, extremely narrow bucket, with a plunger at the bottom, which allowed it to bring up the mud from the bottom of the hole. This mud, which McIntosh called cuttings, was emptied into a dump box which led to a small, man-made pond, called the slush pond.

"Now I'm going to drill a screw and bail out," McIntosh said. "When

that's done, I'm going to watch you do the same."

In the effort of concentration, Tod chewed his lip till it was sore, and when McIntosh finally turned the machine over to him for trial, Tod's hands were slimy with sweat. But McIntosh apparently was satisfied with his fumbling efforts.

At midnight McIntosh produced sandwiches and a jug of coffee. Tod had forgotten to bring anything to eat, and he felt the rumblings of hunger now, but the driller had plenty. They sat on the lazy bench, munching sociably.

"What do you do around here, kid?" asked McIntosh.

"Milk cows." Tod spoke grinning around a mouthful of bread and beef. "I got me eight Jerseys. I'm selling milk in town, and using the money to buy Herefords. I own ten white-face cows now, and a good bull, paid for by them Jerseys."

McIntosh grunted. "Lots of work, milking cows. Not many cattlemen would do it."

"Uh-huh. But it's a good way to get a start. I aim to switch to Herefords all the way, when I get enough. If I don't have no-tough luck."

Rock suddenly seemed to form in McIntosh's cheek bones. McIntosh's eyes focused on Tod's face, and there was mistrust in them.

"Look, sonny. You ain't going to make me no argument about salt water?"

Tod shook his head. "They ain't no salt water in the creek that runs

through my place. Not yet. Besides, I got a well I can use to water my stock. I ain't taking your side, but I figure to let the law settle it, Mr. McIntosh."

The suspicion gradually faded from McIntosh's eyes. The driller grinned and shoved a newspaper-wrapped sandwich toward Tod across the lazy bench.

"You're a sensible lad," McIntosh said. "The creeks are free for any man to use. But there's some in town that don't think that."

Tod nodded, lowering his half-eaten sandwich to his knee. "Shad Conelly is one. He said he was coming up here tonight. To give me a pistol whipping. Funny he ain't here by now."

III

It was five in the morning before Shad Conelly appeared. By that time, Tod had learned to operate the drilling machine fairly well. With McIntosh's help, he had dressed the big cutting bit once more. Then McIntosh had disappeared behind the engine house to sleep on a pile of straw. McIntosh's last words had been:

"Wake me up, kid, if Conelly shows. I ain't going to have him beating up no tool dresser of mine."

And it was these words of McIntosh's, strangely, that kept Tod from waking the driller when he saw Shad's figure appear out of the morning mist. Tod had his own pride. It was, he thought, about time he fought his own battles.

Shad Conelly wore a tattered Stet-

son and a worn brush jacket, white at the elbows. In the blue light of first dawn, his unshaven whiskers looked black as soot. Tod sensed that Shad had picked this hour for a purpose. Shad would be fresh, after a night's sleep, and he, Tod, was sagging with weariness.

Shad grinned, and a flicker of light from the gas torches caught the gold in his teeth.

"Morning, bucko," he said. "Ready for that pistol whipping?"

Grim-faced, Tod moved off the derrick floor, down the steps to the bare ground that surrounded the rig. Inside, his heart began to hammer at his chest, and he knew that this was his special kind of fear.

"I ain't got a gun, Shad," he said quietly. "If you want to fight, unstrap that .45 and fight like a man."

Shad halted a few feet from Tod. His eyes traveled past Tod, searching the rig. Shad wouldn't see McIntosh, Tod thought, because McIntosh was asleep on the far side of the engine house. Finally Shad laughed curtly.

"Why should I take off the gun? I reckon I can say you came at me with a rock."

"Shad, I ain't done nothing to you," Tod argued desperately. "This won't help your cows none."

Shad grinned. "Don't let my cows worry you, bucko. That's just an excuse I needed." His face darkened, and something ugly came into his eyes. "I'm going to marry Ginny if I have to kill you to do it." Then Shad was moving. His .45 arced out of holster, and Tod ducked frantically,

in a quick drive for Shad's knees.

Shad's pistol struck a slamming blow across Tod's shoulder, numbing his arm. Then the two of them were rolling together toward the rig, and Shad was striking again and again, viciously, with the pistol.

Tod felt the steel front sight of the barrel open a cut on his cheek; he felt the barrel nearly break a bone in his forearm. Then with a shove, he managed to break away from Shad and roll to his feet. His mind dull with pain, he stood, breathing heavily. He was dimly aware Shad was rising, the pistol still clenched in his fist. At that moment something thudded, and to Tod's amazement, Shad Conelly buckled at the knees and fell forward on his face, chin striking the dirt.

Behind Shad, Dan McIntosh straightened. Rock was in McIntosh's cheek bones again, and his eyes were angry and very dangerous as he regarded Shad Conelly. In McIntosh's hairy hand was a short length of fire-wood.

"Don't never try to whip a toolie of mine, buddy," McIntosh breathed. "Don't never try it."

"You should have let him be." Tod shouted the words, and suddenly he was angry with McIntosh for spoiling his chance at pride. "You should have let him be, Mr. McIntosh. It was my fight, damn it!"

Sometime between five and six in the morning, Shad Conelly disappeared. They had left him there, after McIntosh had unloaded the .45 and stripped the spare cartridges from

Shad's belt. They had gone back to work, running the bailer, dumping the cuttings into the ever-growing slush pond. At six, when the sun was a round red ball shining through the blackjacks, the day tool dresser appeared, and Tod looked around for Shad and found him gone.

Tod grinned wearily at McIntosh and headed home, through the dried, drought-stricken grass. Shad, he hoped, had had enough for one day. At home, Tod's cows were waiting for him.

Tod had always had a vague dislike for Jersey cattle, even while making his living with them. He preferred stock cattle, Herefords, especially. But now, physically very tired after his night's work, he felt a surge of affection for the big-eared, yellow animals as they came lowing from the creek.

He did his milking quickly and efficiently. He strained the milk into ten-gallon cans and let it cool out in his homemade water cooler while he ate a hurried breakfast. Then he bottled the milk in quart fruit jars, packed the jars in wet burlap in the back of his old spring wagon, hitched his mule, and drove to town to deliver the milk.

Tod had operated his little dairy for two years, since before knowing Ginny. His Jerseys produced an average of nine hundred gallons of milk a year, per head. Most of this milk he sold at a nickle a quart, reserving only enough to raise a few likely-looking heifers. Out of his profits, he had bought ten Hereford cows and

a low-slung, three-quarter-ton bull.

Because he had been so anxious to build his Hereford herd, he had cut his living costs as fine as possible. Thus, when he became engaged to Ginny, he lacked the ready cash to build and furnish the tar-paper shack they had planned for their first home. He needed a hundred dollars, and he had taken the job with McIntosh as the quickest way of getting it.

IV

After delivering his milk, Tod dropped into the mercantile to see Ginny for a moment. She came from behind her linen counter with the yellow pencil in her hands. Tod saw that the pencil was frayed at the end, and he remembered a habit Ginny had of nibbling her pencil when she was worried.

"Tod!" Ginny said. "Thank heaven you're here! Shad Conelly lost some more cattle. And he's furious about this morning."

Tod was so tired now that he did not catch the full meaning of this. Not at first. He leaned against the counter and listened wearily to the girl's explanation.

A half dozen of Shad Conelly's cattle, Ginny said, had broken through to salt water. The nearest unpolluted water had been a mile away, through several fences, and Shad had been unable to water stock from this end of his pasture more than once a day. So the thirsty cattle had gotten to their own water, and Shad was busy with the veterinarian now,

trying desperately to save as many as he could.

"Ginny, Shad tried to give me that pistol whipping," Tod told the girl. "This morning. If he'd been tending his business instead, this might not have happened."

Ginny looked at him queerly. "Shad said you hit him over the head with a stick of firewood, Tod. From behind."

Tod stared. "Me! It wasn't me hit him. It was McIntosh." Anger flooded him as he realized what Shad Conelly was trying to do. He said earnestly, "You don't believe that, Ginny. McIntosh hit him. And Shad had a gun on me at the time. You don't believe Shad, Ginny. Do you?"

Ginny hesitated, then gently shook her head. "Of course not, Tod. If you say so." She smiled warmly. "After all, I'm going to marry you. I have to believe the man I love. But, Tod, what about all these cattle dying? Are you sure you're doing the right thing—working for McIntosh?"

Tod wasn't sure. He hadn't been sure from the beginning. He went home, turning it in his mind. A man had a right, he thought, to work where he chose, so long as it was honest work. McIntosh was doing wrong; Tod was sure of that. But was he, Tod, in any way responsible for this?

He didn't know. And weariness was dragging at him now till none of his thoughts made sense, anyhow. But he walked to the creek before he entered his log shack. The creek had

shrunk to about half its normal size.

He scooped up a handful of water and tasted it, carefully rolling it on his tongue. He could detect no salt. Not yet. But there was no telling how much of the salt in nearby creeks would work underground, to appear later in his own water supply. He went to bed then, wearily resolving to keep a close check, morning and night.

Shad Conelly put in no appearance at the rig that night. Tod fully expected him. He expected Shad the next night, and the next. But Shad had abruptly changed his tactics. Tod got the story from Ginny about the meetings in town. Shad was trying to organize the cattlemen, Ginny told Tod, arguing that a night raid to destroy McIntosh's rig was the only way to stop the steadily increasing loss of cattle.

That would be like Shad, Tod thought. That was the way Shad would operate. Tod remembered Shad's warning that he intended to marry Ginny if he, Shad, had to kill Tod to do it. This would be a part of the pattern. Blackening Tod's name along with McIntosh's. It could not fail to have its effect on Ginny. But Tod didn't worry greatly. The rest of the cattlemen would be sensible. If the drought didn't last too long, there'd be no cause for McIntosh to worry.

But the drought continued. The unpolluted creeks, suffering the heavy drain of watering all the cattle in the area, were fast becoming mud holes. Tod gave permission to three neigh-

boring cattlemen to drive across his pasture and water in his creek. The condition of the cattle, thin and dull-coated from thirst and from too much salt, appalled him. One night he spoke to McIntosh about it, and he was surprised at the reasonableness of the oil driller's answer.

"Yes," McIntosh said, "the boys that run cattle have got a problem. I ain't denying it, laddie. But what can I do? I've got maybe a hundred barrels of salt water a day from my two producers. It's got to go some place. Where else can I put it except into the creeks?"

"Besides," McIntosh scrubbed his hairy forearms thoughtfully. "This country was made for an oil country, sonny. Take my word for it. Fifty years from now, the oil business here in the Nations will make cattle look like a pauper's game. If you want a chance at real money, you'd best forget about your milk cows and stick with me."

Tod grinned and shook his head. A married man, he thought, had no business changing work. And he was going to be a married man in just four weeks now, if this job held out. McIntosh had already drilled to one thousand feet. The driller wasn't sure just how far he had to go to find oil—if he found it—but he'd told Tod he expected to drill as far as fifteen hundred feet before giving up. Oil could come at any time now.

At the end of the second week, Tod had learned to operate the rig as well as McIntosh. He could keep the right tension on the drilling line by the

feel of the big cable. McIntosh no longer worried about Tod drilling crooked hole, or pounding the bit to pieces on a limestone ledge. McIntosh slept now whenever he pleased, except when the bit needed dressing, and Tod kept a sharp lookout for trouble from Shad Conelly. It was not at the rig, however, that trouble developed.

Tod's first inkling of trouble came when, leaving the mercantile and Ginny one noon, he saw the knot of grim-faced men clustered outside the hotel. The gathering broke up as he approached, and a friend, a grizzled cattleman who was a neighbor, crooked a finger at him.

"Shad Conelly has finally won out, Tod." The old man's eyes were haggard. "Looks like we can't get no help from the law, so we're stopping McIntosh any way we can, before it's too late. Let me give you a warning, son. Stay away from that rig to-night."

Tod lifted his hand. Instinctively his fingers touched his beardless chin, and he was thinking that Shad Conelly had him in a corner now. A grim vision came to him of the range wars of another day. This would be like those times, he knew.

It was this knowledge, more than the warning, that moved him bleakly through the heat-filled blackjacks in the middle of the airless afternoon. He might work for McIntosh, he thought. Take his money, do his chores. But not when it came to siding an oil man against his own kind.

Tod wondered if Shad Conelly had planned it this way.

McIntosh was bending over the dump box, a flush of excitement on his drawn face. The driller had an arm deep in the box, the other arm hooked around the bailer as the day toolie cautiously lowered the sand line. The dart at the bottom of the bailer plunged into the box; the watery cuttings cascaded toward McIntosh's; and McIntosh brought up a dripping fist. He opened his fist, looked at the object in his palm, and let off a wild yipee.

"It's the sand! We're on the sand!"

Curiously Tod moved forward, momentarily forgetting his reason for being here. McIntosh, seeing him standing there, held out his opened fist, grinning.

The oil sand was a grayish powdery substance, something like wet salt. It looked to Tod very similar to several of the limestone strata through which they'd drilled. He could see no oil, but there was no denying the excitement in McIntosh's feverish face.

"We're drilling in, kid," McIntosh shouted, clapping Tod on the back jubilantly. "It'll be tonight. I'll run the casing by dark, and tonight you're going to hear a two-ton string of tools hit the control head—or I don't know oil sand from donkey spit!"

"Not tonight, Mr. McIntosh," Tod said. "I quit."

McIntosh dropped his arm. The red slowly died out of his face, and his eyes probed Tod. Tod had seen

McIntosh before when the rock came into the driller's cheek bones; now he saw that happen again. McIntosh's mouth went bitter.

"Scared out, sonny?" he asked.

"It ain't that," Tod blurted. "Mr. McIntosh, they're coming after you tonight. A whole crowd of 'em. I couldn't stay and fight my own people. I . . . I . . . At least I came to warn you."

"Yeah. Thanks for nothing, kid!" McIntosh turned on his heel, strode into the engine house, and reappeared presently with a heavy double-barreled shotgun.

"Tell your friends," he said, "to stay off my property. I'll shoot the first man that sets foot in this clearing. Kid, I mean that like I never meant nothing in this life."

V

On his way home, Tod struggled with his own sense of guilt. He had felt wrong about working for McIntosh in the first place. Now he felt worse about quitting, even though Shad Conelly had forced him to it. It was as if he were floundering in a strange morass, not knowing right from wrong, where nothing was solid but his love for Ginny.

Sunlight was slanting through the blackjacks when he arrived at his own shanty. It was nearly milking time; his chores had to be done, whatever happened. Somberly he unsacked a new bag of feed, poured it in the barrel that he kept in his milk shed, and put the first feeding into the stan

chions. Then, when the cows did not appear, he walked to the creek to find them.

The cows were not at the creek. Tod tasted the water for salt, automatically, then passed on to his little patch of bluestem meadow. The cows were not in the meadow. Tod stood in the meadow nibbling his lip, unaccountably worried. He began to make a circle of his fence.

He had reached the far edge of the pasture before he found the tracks.

The tracks dipped into a clump of buckbrush, passed through it, and then, miraculously, straight through an unbroken fence. Cattle tracks. From the looks of it, the tracks of his whole herd, Jerseys and Herefords.

Tod stood with his fists clenched tight at his sides, unwilling to believe this. The fence, he could see, had been carefully let down for a length of three or four posts. It had been restapled with new staples, bright and shiny against the bois d'arc posts. The reason for this was obvious, he thought grimly, and it was not theft.

Salt water creeks lay outside Tod's land in almost any direction, but most of them lay to the south, the way his cattle had been driven. Just a mile or two. If the cattle were thirsty after their short drive, they would likely drink enough to kill them. And after a few moments of that, Tod would be penniless—the owner of several tons of dead worthless carcass, fit for dumping in a gully and nothing else.

And if he were penniless, Tod reflected rapidly, he could not marry Ginny. Would not, as Shad knew.

Tod wheeled away from the fence and walked slowly back toward his shack. Then the urgency of this came to him, and he began to run. He might yet have time. At his shack, he quickly caught his mule. He had no saddle, but the mule was trained to be ridden. Tod got a short length of rope and took a half hitch around the animal's nose, using the end of the rope for a rein. He wished desperately at this moment that he had a gun, but he owned no weapon. Grim-jawed, he vaulted up on the mule's back and flicked it with the end of his rope rein.

Leaving his own property, the tracks veered eastward, through a stand of second-growth hickory, then straight south. Over them, Tod could see the tracks of a horse whose rider had undoubtedly driven the cattle before him. Studying the horse tracks, Tod saw that the animal had thrown its left hind shoe. Tod laid the rope to his own mule and the animal broke into a startled trot.

Ahead of him was a gentle rise of ground, and on the other side, he knew, lay Birch Creek. Birch Creek was one of the worst polluted of all. Tod had a sharp instant of dread as he pulled up the rise; then, topping it, he saw the cattle.

They were scattered over a little bottom area that bordered the creek, hock-deep in bluestem. The creek itself had a slightly yellow tinge from the oily salt water, and along the edges salt had crusted, killing the grass and weeds. Tod glanced sharply again at the cattle and saw that

they were grazing quietly well back from the creek. Evidently something about the water excited their suspicion; they would not drink, then, unless compelled by thirst.

Tod grunted in vast relief and guided the mule down the grassy slope. He was halfway down when he saw Shad.

Shad Conelly sat on a rock near the creek bank. He had his hat shoved back, and he was leisurely smoking a cigarette. His gold teeth showed in his wide grin.

Beside Shad a buckskin horse stood quietly switching his tail, reins tied to a sapling.

Shad said, when Tod came within speaking distance, "Howdy, bucko. If these are your cattle, you been mighty careless with 'em."

Tod did not speak. Suddenly rage was choking him, making it hard for him to breathe. He got down off the mule and let the rope rein drag. Ignoring Shad, he walked to Shad's horse, took a turn around the animal. He was aware that Shad watched him, grinning, and then he saw the reason why. The horse had all four shoes intact.

Tod stood a minute, puzzled, his fury fading. How could he have been wrong, he asked himself. And he knew he wasn't wrong, that Shad had tricked him some way. His eye fell on the saddlebags the horse carried, and suddenly Tod had an impulse to open those bags. He moved quickly, sensing only that this would be something Conelly hadn't expected. He had the leather strings untied and the

flap lifted up before Shad shouted: "Kid! Get away from there, damn you!"

Tod plunged his hand inside the saddlebag, and he felt something cold and brought it up. It was a hammer. Shad was coming toward him. Hastily Tod fumbled in the bag again, and found a small paper sack. Inside the sack, he discovered a half dozen unused horseshoe nails.

Tod Davis grinned. Replacing the hammer and nails in the bag, he turned to face Shad, who had halted now before him. Shad's face was twisted. His eyes were haggard with doubt, and this brought Tod an added conviction. Shad's hand was near the black butt of his .45.

"You were afraid Ginny would marry me, weren't you, Shad?" Tod said. "Even though you suspected I'd quit my job with McIntosh. You knew everything I have is tied up in these cattle, so you ran them off to keep me from selling enough to get the money to marry Ginny. You took the left hind shoe off your horse to do it. Then you nailed the shoe back on, to cover your tracks. Didn't you, Shad?"

Without waiting for an answer, Tod moved up and hit Shad. He put his fury into the blow; his own baffled doubts; his long period of inactivity, when he had not known whom or what or how to fight. And his desire for a man's own pride. He struck Shad on the bristled side of the jaw, taking a vicious pleasure in the way the jaw gave under his fist. Shad's

head jerked sideways under the blow, and he tumbled backwards.

As Shad fell, Tod sensed the man was reaching for his gun. Tod left his feet, plunging forward, and he took a great savage joy in landing atop Conelly, knocking the gun upward with a sweep of his forearm. The gun exploded harmlessly into the air. Tod grappled for it, got it, and flung it toward the creek. Then he jerked Shad to his feet.

A twist of blood was dribbling from Shad's mouth down the whiskers of his chin. His eyes showed hurt, but he was far from out. There was in this fight more than the desire of one man to best another. More than the cattle were at stake. Tod knew this, and he was aware that Shad Conelly knew it, too.

Shad moved in low this time, shoulders hunched a little, arms hanging like an ape's. Tod sensed a subtle change in Shad's intent, and he pivoted. Just in time, for Conelly straightened hard and brought up a knee. But the knee slid harmlessly off Tod's thigh.

Tod lashed back with his elbow, caught Shad on the neck and staggered the man. Then Shad began kicking, launching his sharp-toed boots desperately at the lower part of Tod's body, striving for a lucky blow. Tod had to side-step for a moment in a little dancing jig. Sharp-eyed, he watched Shad's feet, and at the right moment he shot out a cupped hand, catching Shad's spurred heel.

The spur dug flesh out of Tod's hand, but he held on, upsetting Shad.

Shad struck the ground on his back, and the breath whooshed out of him. Grimly now Tod dragged Shad to his feet. Close up, not giving Shad a chance to use his knees, Tod struck a blow into Shad's nose. He felt the gristle in the nose give way, and savagely he struck again. Blood spurted. Shad Conelly tilted backwards to the ground. He lay quietly, moaning, with panic in his eyes.

VI

Standing over Shad Conelly, Tod became aware that something strange had happened to him. It wasn't in his body. It was his mind.

He picked up Shad's gun and watched quietly while Shad staggered to his feet. Shad hobbled to the creek and splashed water into his face; Tod saw him wince as the salt entered his cuts. Haggard-faced with pain, Shad returned, groping, to his horse.

Holding the gun carelessly against his leg, Tod said:

"Shad, I ain't the man to hold a grudge. You stole my cattle, and I could jail you for it. But you help me put 'em back, and I'll forget this ever happened."

Still holding the gun, he waited until Shad, sullen, but beaten for the moment, had started the cattle over the rise toward home. Then Tod mounted his mule and followed.

Tod thumbed the cartridges from Shad's gun, then tossed it to its owner.

"Don't plan on shooting me in the

back tonight at McIntosh's, Shad. I quit him an hour ago."

Shad Conelly leaned forward in saddle, his bruised face brutal.

"You never finish anything, do you?"

"I finished this." Tod grinned crookedly. "Get riding, Shad."

Conelly's remark rankled. Even after Shad had gone and Tod was hunkered on his stool beside the cows, doing his milking, he thought of it and wondered once again if it were true. And then it came to him that there was one way to make sure. If he went to see McIntosh . . .

Tod finished his milking hurriedly. He would stop to see Ginny first, he told himself. She might have caught some rumor of what was to happen tonight and be worried about him.



Then he'd try to talk some sense into McIntosh.

Ginny was not at home. Tod hesitated at her doorway, then remembered that this was Saturday and the mercantile would still be open.

Ginny was alone behind her linen counter, reading a newspaper. Or at least, Tod thought, her eyes were on the paper. But when she glanced up, he saw she had been crying, and the knowledge was a sudden warning to him.

"Ginny, I—I had to quit McIntosh," Tod blurted. "I couldn't fight my own kind. Could I?"

"I don't know, Tod. But you had no trouble fighting Shad."

Tod felt a muscle harden in his throat. "What did Shad tell you?"

"What difference does it make?" Ginny shrugged wearily. "That you slipped up behind him, when he was resting his horse on Birch Creek. That you hit him with a rock, then beat him when he was unconscious. Tod, this is the second time."

"Shad Conelly lies."

"Tod, I have known Shad for a long time—longer than I've known you. I have never known him to lie."

"Look, Ginny," Tod said, grimly patient. "It's a cowardly thing to do what Shad says I did—hit a man from behind. But it's worse to lie about a man to the woman he loves. You're a woman with a good mind, Ginny. You don't like to believe bad things about people. You had to make a choice: to believe Shad or to believe me. Your sense of decency led you

to believe Shad. You couldn't understand that a man would lie as he is doing."

"Indeed?" Ginny began to fold her newspaper very carefully, her eyes watching her hands. When the paper was folded, she dropped it on the counter and looked up at Tod.

"Tod," she said, "I am . . . too uncertain to marry you now."

VII

Tod took it standing there.

"You think I'm a coward, then, Ginny?" he said at last. "Shad has convinced you?"

Ginny's face was twisted. "Look at it from my viewpoint, Tod. I know you hate Shad, and he hates you. But twice you've struck Shad from behind. Or at least Shad says so. And you have quit your job with McIntosh. Why would you do that, if you weren't afraid of what is going to happen there tonight?"

Anger stirred sluggishly inside Tod. "Ginny, I never blamed McIntosh for saying I was a coward. I don't aim to marry McIntosh. But it's hard to take this from you."

"Try to see my side, Tod." Ginny was almost pleading. "Please. It isn't . . . easy to know what to do."

"Look, honey. I don't think we ought to talk about this any more right now. Besides, I've got a chore to do."

Abruptly he left her, holding himself completely rigid as he passed down the long counter. The knowledge of what had happened struck him fully now as he turned into the

street, and a feeling of numbness dropped over him. This was a kind of failure he had not anticipated. Blindly he strode through the darkening town, only once brought aware of his surroundings by the sight of half a dozen horses before the hotel.

This, Tod thought, would be the first of the cattlemen gathering. In an hour their numbers would likely be swelled to twenty or thirty.

Full dark had descended when he reached the rig. The gas flares cast eerie shadows through the trees, making the trunks appear to dance weirdly. The steam engine was turning over with a smooth, chugging sound, but the rig itself was silent. Tod wondered about that, but when he rode into the clearing he saw why.

McIntosh and the day toolie were screwing a control head over the innermost string of casing. To one side, a hundred barrel wooden tank had been set up sometime during the afternoon, and now McIntosh attached a series of two-inch lines from control head to tank. The control head was a heavy fitting with an adjustable opening to close snugly on the drilling line. It was a device, Tod knew, to control pressure, to keep a flowing well from shooting the tools through the crown block and wasting hundreds of barrels of oil.

Tod crossed the clearing. "I want to see you, McIntosh," he said.

McIntosh's head jerked round as if on a string.

"Sonny, I got no time to play games. Get out of the way."

McIntosh brushed aside, completely ignoring Tod. It was, Tod thought, as though McIntosh had made his judgment of him and would not change it now. But there was a way to make him change it. Tod crossed the drilling platform, where McIntosh was working on a lever. He took McIntosh by the shoulder and turned him around.

"I said I wanted to talk to you, damn it. This won't take but a minute. Then you can drill in your well."

McIntosh grunted. He studied the younger man, and it seemed to Tod that McIntosh saw something that interested him. McIntosh pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chew, then spoke around it.

"All right, Tod. Speak up."

Tod grinned. "I just had an idea, McIntosh. You dump your cuttings in a slush pond, don't you? Why couldn't you make a bigger slush pond close to your producing wells? You could hold your salt water in those ponds till it came a big rain. Then you could dump it, when the creeks were running full. Likely that wouldn't hurt the cattle."

McIntosh put his hairy arms on his hips, and there was a friendly jeer in his voice.

"Now ain't that the bright idea! Sonny, I knew that all the time. But it takes money to build a big enough slush pond. I ain't got the money. But I'll have it—when this well comes in. Sonny, I got a feeling about this well. Don't worry, I'll build some big ponds, and I'll pay for them dead

cows, too. But right now I'm busy, confound it! You want to help?"

"Sure." Tod's grin felt a half-mile wide. "Maybe I'll never be a good oil man, McIntosh, but if you can use a cowboy, just put me to work."

The well came in fifteen minutes later.

McIntosh had extinguished the gas flares to eliminate any danger of fire. Tod had been handling the drilling line, working by the yellow light of a half moon. He had lowered the temper screw about two-thirds its distance when the line suddenly slackened. From underground, somewhere, a low rumble slowly became audible. The rumble grew to a roar, and the control head on the derrick floor began to vibrate like a match stick on rushing water.

Tod shut down the rig quickly, and he heard McIntosh's wild bellow, and at this moment gas began to hiss around the control head, rising a high whistle.

"Open a valve on the Christmas tree, boy!" McIntosh screamed. "Open it up! Easy, though, or you'll blow the tools."

Tod knew what to do. He knew what McIntosh meant, and he had a moment of small pride that this was a job he understood. He opened one of the valves on the control head, which McIntosh called the Christmas tree. Something flowed with a whispering sound through the line pipe, and Tod heard the sound of fluid running into the hundred-barrel tank.

McIntosh roared, "We hit it! Glory be, we hit it! She's flowing,

and flowing fast. A five-thousand-barrel well, or my mother never was as Irish as a pig in Dublin! Tod, me boy, I'm a millionaire!"

In his excitement, McIntosh raised his arms above his flushed face and began dancing a wild jig in the moonlight. Tod grinned, and pounded the driller on the back. Inside him, he felt a genuine happiness for McIntosh. The man had worked hard, finding his gold at the end of the rainbow, and now success had come. This reminded Tod of his own dreams, and he had his moment of bitter memory, but cheerfully he hid it and kept on grinning and pounding at McIntosh.

The hundred-barrel tank, being filled now from other lines, suddenly ran over, and Tod leaped to shut the well down, not wanting to waste a drop of McIntosh's precious oil. McIntosh relit the gas flares. When Tod was closing the last valve, he heard McIntosh grunt suddenly in amazement.

"Glory! Glory be!" McIntosh breathed. And then, in a taut voice, "Tod, your friends are here."

Tod closed the last valve. The rumbling from deep underground ceased, as pressure equalized itself within the reservoir and the casing and control head of the well. Tod straightened, and this new thing caused him no fear of any kind. He glanced at the edge of the clearing, and there he saw the circle of horsemen.

The horsemen had halted just at

the edge of the flickering gas flarelight. They were still mounted, sitting motionless, faces white and yellow and red as the flares waved this way and that in the gusty night. Tod recognized them. They were his neighbors. And—as McIntosh had said—his friends.

"I'll talk to them," Tod said. "They won't be hard. I know them all; and they're honest men. All they want is the justice you've promised, McIntosh. But keep your damned scatter gun out of sight."

Tod moved off the derrick floor, and for the first time he saw Shad Conelly. Shad was in the middle of the semicircle, as befitted the leader. His bruised, purple face was twisted out of shape with malevolent passion. Like rubber, Tod thought vaguely. Tod halted inside the line of riders, facing Shad.

"I take it you're the ramrod, Shad," Tod said.

Shad Conelly nodded curtly. "The boys want to give you and McIntosh a chance to save yourselves. You can leave peaceable before we tip this rig over."

Tod grinned. "You don't want us to leave, though, do you, Shad? You'd rather shoot us. Shoot two unarmed men. That'd be about your speed."

Shad Conelly's eyes went black in the flarelight. But he only said, "You've got ten minutes. Make up your mind fast, bucko."

"Don't be so anxious to raise hell, Shad. I got a proposition—or rather, McIntosh has. He offers to pay for

all the dead cattle and to fix his wells so they won't do any more damage." Tod grinned, and he impaled Shad Conelly with a meaning look. "Only he wants an honest tally of the dead stuff. You know what I mean, Shad. A cow thief ain't to be trusted in such matters."

Tod had luck, then. He hadn't really expected Shad to break, not with thirty witnesses. But Shad cursed and went white at the lips and made a slapping stab for his .45.

The thundering reverberation of McIntosh's scatter gun crashed over the blackjacks. McIntosh's bellow came from the rig.

"Drop that gun, Conelly. I got another barrel. Drop, or I'll give you a bellyful of bird seed you can't digest."

Shad Conelly's white lips twitched, but otherwise the man was frozen. At this moment Tod was acutely conscious of his own vulnerability. He had no gun; he felt naked. He could feel the tension in the cowmen, felt that this moment was important, a crisis to all of them. Then an old rider on Shad's right said wearily:

"Go ahead and drop the gun, Shad. You hadn't ought to have drawn on Tod. Fact is, I begin to see a lot of things you hadn't ought to have done. Tod, come on up here and tell us more about paying for those dead cows."

It was McIntosh's show, after that. Tod beckoned to the driller, and Mc-

Intosh came hobbling off the derrick, grinning. McIntosh had a charm about him. In five minutes he had made thirty friends and was showing them the rig and his hundred barrels of oil.

"The Irish," McIntosh was saying, "have luck and stubbornness. Between them, gentlemen, I have found the oil that will make your country a cornucopia of prosperity."

Tod moved aside, elbowing through the crowd around the tank, smiling at McIntosh's words. The derrick floor was deserted, when he reached it. The gas flares were bright here, and he sat heavily on the lazy bench, feeling a sudden dejection, in spite of his victory. He lit a cigarette, and he was wondering whether he should go see Ginny now, when a voice said:

"Tod, I couldn't stay away. I followed the men out here."

Shock brought Tod to his feet. Ginny stood in the center of the rig, smiling at him, and the flarelight caught her copper hair and made it shimmer.

"I saw what Shad tried to do, Tod," she said. "It took courage to stand there the way you did."

Tod dropped his cigarette. For a moment he could not speak. Then he said, "You thought I didn't have courage, Ginny."

Ginny nodded and smiled as she said gently, "But a girl can be wrong, Tod. Can't she?"

THE END

RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King

Always a big business, cattle ranching in the West is flourishing as never before. Old Paint is still in the picture, but on many of the larger spreads particularly in the Southwest, riding the range on wings has taken over much of the faithful cow pony's former job. More than a few of today's modern-minded cattlemen operate not one, but several planes regularly in their business. Cleared landing strips on the flat, semi-arid desert grass ranges are coming to be a familiar feature of the local landscape. Ranchers claim the planes are unexcelled for such chores as "flying" fence, checking tanks and water-holes, inspecting forage conditions and locating strays—and taking the Missus to Phoenix, Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston or Tulsa, Oklahoma, on a shopping spree.



Though "quick freeze" and frozen foods are generally considered something new, they are old hat to residents of interior Alaska and the Far North. Many a north-country trapper or prospector has long caught fish through holes in the ice-covered lakes and streams, let them freeze uncleaned and kept them that way until he was ready to thaw them out and prepare them for the frying pan. Similarly, bread, baked in large batches and set outside while still warm, to freeze in forty below weather can be kept indefinitely through the winter. Such a loaf, thawed in the oven when needed, tastes as good, if not better, than bread freshly baked.

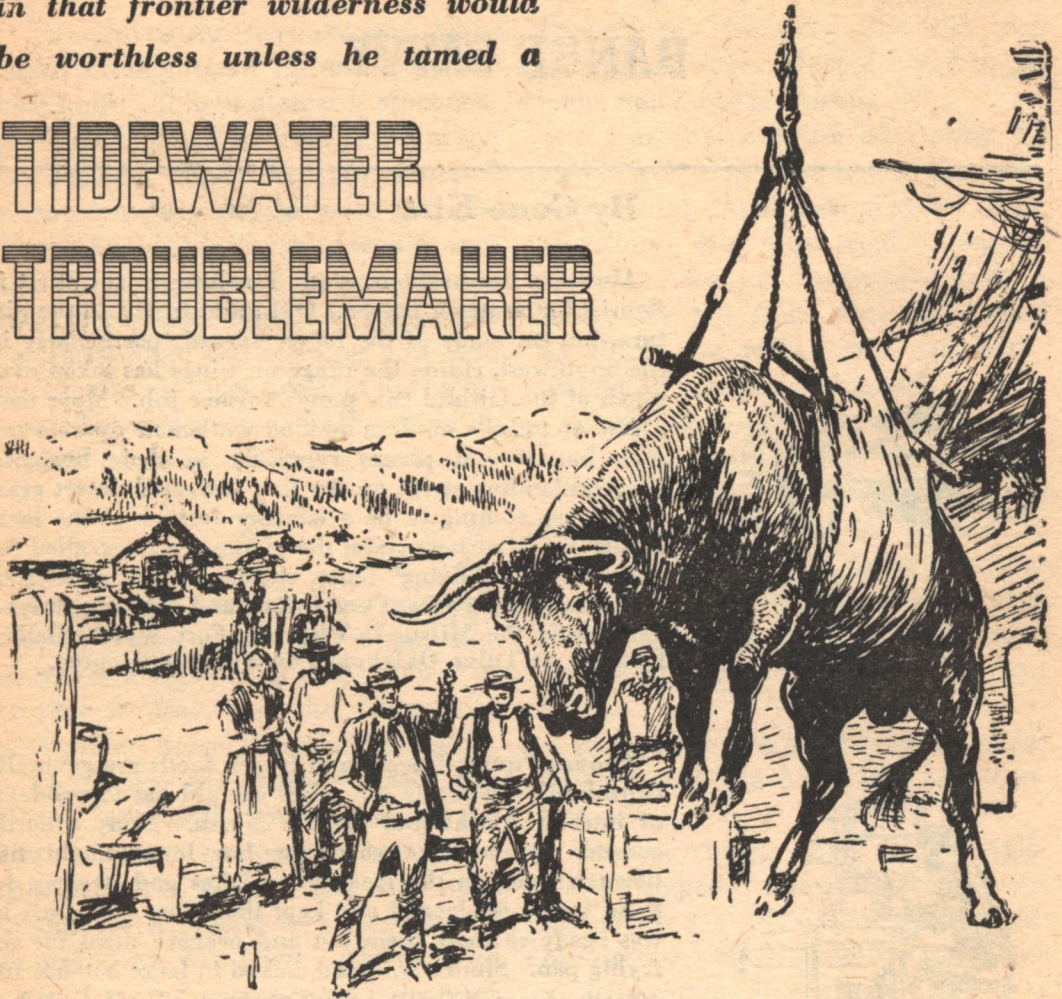


Old-time cowhands may wince at the thought but the plastics industry has inevitably caught up with their calling. It now offers something new in saddles—a plastic job, instead of the conventional leather kak. Made of shiny vinylite in a wide variety of bright colors, these ultra-modern saddles are said to be non-warping under any weather conditions and unaffected by water, alcohol, oils or other corrosive elements. They look pretty too. Plastic bridles come in the same colors as the saddles.



The claim Dave Porter staked out
in that frontier wilderness would
be worthless unless he tamed a

TIDEWATER TROUBLEMAKER

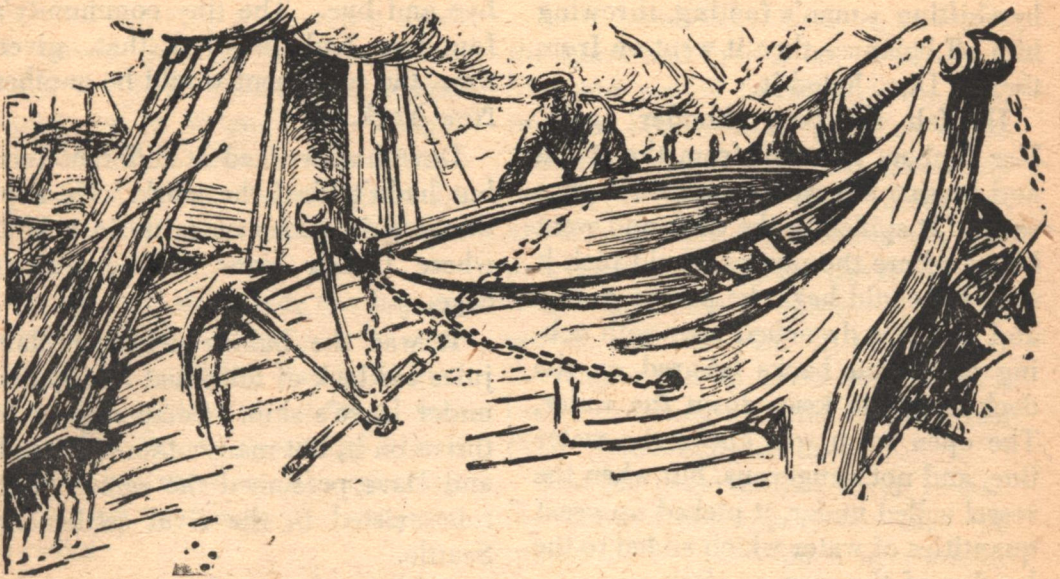


I

"It looks like fresh beef again, for all hands and the cook," remarked Captain Seth Jessup, of the brig, *Richard Bronson*. It was the spring of 1853 and the brig was bound from San Francisco to the village of Seattle on Puget Sound.

For three days now, the stout craft had pitched and tossed in a violent

storm, the fourth she had encountered since leaving San Francisco. Each storm had blown her off her course and each had taken its toll in sails, spars and injuries to the crew. During each storm one of Dave Porter's four head of cows had been killed because of broken legs. And as he killed each injured cow, Dave's dream of starting a dairy herd in the new town was less likely to come true.



Only one cow and the bull remained. Now, as Dave fought to prevent injury to the last surviving cow, his bitterness mounted, though he was not by nature a bitter man. At twenty-three a man should be hopeful, rather than bitter. But Dave was black and blue from being tossed against the sides of the hold in which his cattle had been confined.

The bull, held tightly by heavily padded timbers, bellowed in his misery. His eyes were bright with fear, and he looked at the man, as frightened animals often do, for comfort.

"They'll sure laugh at me in Seattle if I come ashore with a bull," Dave thought. "I can hear 'em now: 'Where's that milk, butter and cheese you promised us, Dave?' Or, 'What good is a bull going to be if you haven't any cows?'"

That was the way it would be. When the brig tied up at Yesler's wharf, every one in the village would be down there. Yesler's mill would likely shut down for an hour or so.

The brig heeled far over as waves buffeted her. The cow went to her knees and got up again, bawling with fright. Buck, the cow pony Dave had bought from a Mexican cowboy in San Francisco, screamed in fear, and the bull's low moan rose to a mighty bellow.

"I'd give a million dollars for a breath of fresh air," Dave muttered wretchedly.

By nature a landsman, Dave Porter had crossed the plains in a covered wagon, had fought Indians, the winds of the plains and the mountain blizzards. Such things he understood. A

man's feet were always on the ground. They were stable. But the sea began by shifting a man's footing, throwing him off balance—then it went on from there. Dave hated it.

He felt the brig shudder again. Her timbers groaned from the strain and he saw sea water ooze through a seam. It spilled to the deck and went below where the pumps would pick it up. He could hear the pumps going, and he knew drenched men with aching arms and backs labored on the deck above to keep down the water. The open seam was above the water line, and not dangerous, but when the vessel rolled under, it picked up great quantities of water which added to the burden of the men on deck.

Another sea staggered the brig and she rolled far over. Dave heard the timbers holding the bull crack, then break. The animal went to his knees, then rolled over. He skidded into the pen containing the cow and the two went on, smashing against the horse's stall. The impact was light, for the brig had started rolling in the opposite direction. The horse was safe.

Dave roped the bull's horns and secured them to a stanchion; then he lashed the cow to another stanchion. The cattle were no longer living battering rams, and the horse was safe. Then Dave noticed that the cow's left leg was out of line. He examined it, and straightened up dejectedly.

"Broken," he said. "One more failure."

Dave remembered his arrival on Puget Sound—overland from Salem by the way of Portland, Oregon Ter-

ritory, to New York Alki, on Alki Point. Alki was the Indian term for bye and bye. The tiny community's founders had believed that, given time, the settlement would be another New York.

Dave had worked at different jobs but hadn't liked the work. He kept thinking in terms of cattle in a land where timber grew to the water's edge.

It was the babies drinking clam juice for lack of milk that had gotten under Dave's skin. Some seemed to thrive on it, but many others suffered, and Dave presumed the same condition existed in the rival settlement, Seattle.

With others, Dave had gone across the bay to Seattle and worked for Yesler. He had quit and started clerking in a store, but he had kept thinking of fresh milk for babies and butter and cheese for the grown-ups. Butter came in tubs and was rancid, selling for a dollar and a half a pound. Pork was forty-five dollars a barrel, and flour twenty dollars a barrel. Everything had to be shipped in, and Dave had kept thinking of this as he helped load ships with lumber, piling and cord wood.

Dave's thoughts kept returning to a dairy ranch and beef cattle. It seemed to him that this was the last of the West, for here the emigrants had been stopped by the great forests and salt water.

"Dave," one of the settlers had said, in well-meant advice, "you don't

succeed at anything because your heart isn't in it. In this town you're a square peg in a round hole. Folks are beginning to laugh at you because of your repeated failures. Why don't you move away and get into something you like before you yourself lose faith in Dave Porter?"

"The children still have to drink clam juice most of the time," Dave had argued. "I'm going to start a little cattle business. You folks have your dreams—big sawmills, shipyards, lumber going to the ends of the earth—in time a big city on the bay named after the Indian chief, Seattle. I see a need for dairy products and beef. I'll grow as you grow. I've saved my money; I'm going to San Francisco and buy a small herd. I'll take up a donation claim on the Duwamish River. I can deliver my products by boat. Some day there'll be roads."

He didn't tell what else was in his thoughts—his feeling for lovely blond Mary Lawrence, who taught in the little school. Most of the unmarried men had blazed a trail through the stumps to her door. Mary could have her choice. Unmarried women were few, indeed, and the competition keen, but a girl like Mary Lawrence would have been outstanding even in a large city.

As Dave Porter looked at his last cow's broken leg, he thought of his arrival with a bull, the town's laughter and Mary Lawrence. There was Bill Thorpe, for instance—handsome and, in the opinion of the town, a man with a future. He would own a sawmill some day, or a logging camp.

And there was Danny McCall who was working on a banking project. A community couldn't succeed without a good bank. Danny was handy with figures and knew the value of a dollar. He was in love with Mary Lawrence, too. Perhaps she was promised to someone during Dave's absence.

The brig's master had required him to pay freight in advance, and had refused to be responsible for livestock. "The loss, if any, young man," Captain Jessup had said, "will fall entirely on you." And Dave had had to agree.

He butchered the cow because she was in agony each time the brig rolled. Then he managed to repair the bull's stall and got the big animal into it again. Finally he had a chance to go on deck for some fresh air.

The brig was standing in toward a timbered headland, and there was a white line of breaking surf below the green of the timber. Black clouds, spilling rain, tumbled over each other ahead and astern. Not only rain water, but salty spray filled the air. Captain Jessup stood at the rail.

"Two hours more," the master said, "and we'll be in the Straits of Juan de Fuca. How's your stock?"

"I've butchered the last cow," Dave answered quietly. "The ship's company and passengers ate the others, but this one will be sold in Seattle."

II

Men seemed to drop in their tracks as soon as the brig was safe, but

at last they pulled themselves together and got into dry clothing. They made temporary repairs and finally went to their bunks. Dave, too exhausted to think of food, went to bed. When he awakened, the brig had finished her easterly run and was now headed southerly toward lower Puget Sound. A smart breeze was taking her along at a brisk clip. The timbered shoreline moved steadily astern. The tides gave them trouble at times, but the following morning a big bay lay dead ahead.

To starboard, Dave saw the cabins on Alki Point, and to port, smoke from Yesler's mill. About an hour later the master dropped a boat which carried a line to Yesler's wharf. Once the line was made fast, the crew warped the brig to her berth.

It was "boat day" and everyone was on the wharf. Dave saw Mary Lawrence being helped over a loose plank by the possessive Bill Thorpe.

Thorpe, in the neat clothes of a young businessman, looked like a dandy, but Dave had him sized up as a cold-blooded, tough customer who would resort to trickery if above-board methods failed to accomplish his purpose. Danny McCall, closer to Thorpe than his shadow, was following his friend as usual.

"Time will show up that pair," Dave predicted. "Thorpe the dangerous one, McCall the weakling."

Mary saw Dave and waved. He waved back, thinking, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder . . . for the other fellow, maybe." Then

he leaped to the wharf, not waiting for the gangway.

"It looks as if you'd been in a gale, captain," a man called up to the master.

"Rough passage," Captain Jessup answered. "Young Porter lost his livestock except for a horse and bull."

"Hard-luck Dave," Thorpe grinned. "Nothing works out for him. He dreams of milk cows and returns with a bull." He slapped Danny McCall on the shoulder, then roared with laughter.

Danny's laughter matched Thorpe's. "Ever the square peg in the round hole," he said.

People all along the wharf began to grin, with one exception. Mary Lawrence's face became grave, then stormy.

Dave heard the hatch covering lift, and he turned and went back aboard. "Captain," he said, "laughter cuts deep. There's a hurdle for me here. Or are you laughing, too?"

"We've come through a storm, lad," the master answered. "We know; they don't. I'm not laughing."

"I'd like to settle the issue—have it out with them. Will you set my bull on the wharf ahead of everything . . . ahead of the mail?"

"That I'll do, lad," Jessup answered in a low voice. "Be ready to receive him. He's pretty well subdued, thanks to the storm, but you can never tell."

The bull came out of the hold, a sling under his belly, his hoofs pawing at the air, his nostrils snorting. Dave held the animal's head while

sailors carefully removed the sling.

"There's our milk and butter, folks," Bill Thorpe again reminded those on the wharf. From a ripple the laughter grew into a roar.

Dave eyed his hecklers coldly. "Laugh, you fools," he said evenly. "I've had the hard luck so far. You've had the good luck. Sure, I'm a square peg and I've sense enough to know I'd better find a square hole. I'm trying. But you're just riding your good luck. The town will be in a hell of a shape if the demand for lumber falls off now or in the future. You storekeepers may lose every dollar you own if we have hard times, or if a fire ever breaks out in the village."

"Who do you think you're talking to," Bill Thorpe demanded. His fists clenched, he advanced threateningly.

Mary Lawrence was quietly watching the drama. Basic characteristics in the two men were coming to the surface under pressure.

"If the shoe fits any man, let him put it on," Dave said. "If my words hurt, the hurt is deserved. My courage has been tested. I didn't have to come back to the place where I had failed. But I came back to make a new start."

"You talk big, Dave," Thorpe taunted. "Can you fight, or is it all wind?"

"There are no fences around you, Thorpe," pointed out Dave. "You know where I am."

Work on the brig had stopped. The sailors were watching with interest.

Someone either had to back down or take a beating. The men's hearts were with Dave Porter, because they knew him. They had seen him tried under fire, fight a good fight, lose his stock to the perils of the sea, all without a whimper. But the storm had taken a toll in strength and weight. Dave was no match for Bill Thorpe, well fed, hard from work in the woods, and confident.

Bill struck the first blow and Dave countered, bringing blood to Thorpe's nose and setting off a blazing rage in him. Dave fought Thorpe off, but he was arm-weary, leg-weary and his defense went under the attack, as he crashed to the wharf under a shower of punches.

"Finish him," Danny McCall urged. "Whip the whelp!"

"Let's see if he's man enough to get up and ask for more," Thorpe said. The killer light was blazing in his eyes, and it increased as Dave shook off the fog and began getting up on rubbery legs.

"Was there any doubt in your minds that Dave Porter would get up?" Mary asked. "If there was, Bill Thorpe, you're a bigger fool than I think you are. Dave's right. We haven't been tested. He has. Oh, we've had hardships—the rain, cold, illness. But we haven't really been tested. I've enjoyed teaching school and you tell me I'm successful. Suppose I had tried something else. I might have failed. And what have you, Bill Thorpe, other than plans and hopes? You've not gone far enough along with them to know how

they'll turn out in the end."

The girl's scornful eyes settled on Danny McCall. "Danny, how you do love a fight!"

"You bet I do," Danny said with proud defiance.

"But I've never seen you in one," she retorted. "You're always on the side lines applauding. When I see you with a pair of black eyes and a dent in that fine straight nose of yours, I'll arrive at some sort of opinion of your character. And the rest of you, standing there with silly smirks on your faces, how do you loom up in your self-opinions after a little reflection?"

"You don't have to take my part," protested Dave. "I don't want a girl fighting my battles."

"No one has to fight your battles, Dave," Mary answered. "I'm heartily ashamed of the people of my community, and I'm trying to open their eyes. I'm speaking words long overdue. Dave, you once asked me to marry you. Do you still want me?"

"More than anything else in the world," Dave assured her.

"Whenever you're ready," she told him, "I'm ready."

"When I have a small herd and a cabin fit for you to live in," said Dave, "I'll be ready."

"She'll be an old lady before that time comes," Bill Thorpe muttered under his breath.

Dave tied the horse and bull to a lumber pile, and then offered the butchered cow's meat for sale. A man who had been a butcher before

he crossed the plains cut the meat into roasts, steaks, chops and boiling pieces. The bidding was brisk and the meat went fast.

"Where are you going from here?" Mary asked Dave.

"I've a little clearing on the Duwamish River," Dave answered. "I sowed different kinds of grass seed to see how it would grow, and which would grow best. If it's turned out well, I'll stake a donation claim."

"Did you put up a cabin?"

"No. It didn't seem worthwhile until I found out what the soil was like. I've been living in a cedar stump," explained Dave. "I'll let you know how I make out. I know where a bunch of wild cattle is hanging out. I may get cows from the herd—if I can find it."

"Doesn't anyone own the cattle?" Mary wanted to know.

"They aren't branded," Dave answered. "They're descendants of Hudson's Bay Company cattle and those lost by emigrant trains in the eastern part of the territory. It's good rangeland over the mountains, but when it's dry, the cattle work up, and some have drifted through. They followed Indian trails almost to salt water."

When Mary left him to go back to school, Dave was thoughtful for several minutes. Did she love him, he wondered, or had the town's attitude outraged her sense of fair play and caused her to go farther than she had intended? He had never kissed her. She was not the sort who would be free with her kisses, he knew. She

had him at arm's length, and Dave presumed she had kept the other fellows in their places, too. There was nothing deceitful about her. She wouldn't play one man against another.

"And she'd be too honorable to back down," he thought. "Still, she has too much sense to give herself in marriage to a man she didn't love. She's the one-man type of girl. I'll have to find out in my own way how she feels. But . . . there's a little business to do with the brig's master, now that I have money in my pocket."

He left the horse and bull and boarded the brig. The master was in the cabin, listing orders. He wanted to build up a steady trade with these frontiersmen, which meant he must do a little personal shopping for them. He wrote down Dave's needs, accepted his money and smiled understandingly.

"I hated to see you whipped, Porter," he said. "Put some meat on your bones and try again. The bad trip we had about wore you out. Next time you'll beat Thorpe."

"I don't think there'll be a next time," Dave told him. "I don't believe in picking fights myself."

"You won't pick it. Thorpe will take care of that," Captain Jessup predicted. "He's thirsting for revenge because of what the girl did. She has plenty of spirit. But she's sweet and gentle by nature, Porter. You'll be very happy."

Dave rode the horse and led the bull to the town's outskirts and when the tide began ebbing, he followed

the beach. Over the beach or by boat were the only possible methods of travel until the community could afford roads. He crossed numerous small streams, for the dense timber, with a forest floor deep in rotted moss and leaf mold, held the rain water in check, releasing it slowly, steadily all through summer.

III

An eagerness gripped Dave as he neared the clearing on the river bank. The deep black soil the river had brought down in centuries of overflows had yielded a big hay crop while he was away. It wasn't ready for cutting, but the growth was heavy, juicy and green. The bull and horse eyed it with approval.

"You'll get your teeth in that later," Dave told them. "The bigger the crop, the better chance I'll have of getting through the winter without worrying over feed problems."

He staked the animals at a bend in the river where natural grass grew, then made his way to the stump. It had originally been a cedar tree about twelve feet in diameter. But the heart had rotted until the tree died. A wind had broken it off some thirty feet above the ground.

Dave had cleaned out the accumulated rot and burned it. Then he had covered the opening on top with cedar shakes. He had cut two windows and inserted real glass panes instead of stretching a skin scraped thin over the openings. The door, made of cedar shakes, fitted well

enough. A sheet-iron stove with pipe emerging from the side of the stump, bunk, table and chairs provided him with comfortable living quarters.

He had already measured the boundaries of the claim and put up the appropriate markers. But he hadn't legally committed himself to taking this particular tract by filing the papers. The following day he rode to town, bought supplies and filed on the claim.

"I'm going to locate there for good," he announced.

One of the town's leaders came up and thrust out his hand. "I'm ashamed I laughed about the bull," he said. "I hope you'll forget it."

"Sure," Dave answered quickly. "It was funny in a way. A man leaves with the intention of bringing a dairy herd to town and shows up months later with a bull."

"It isn't funny," the man said soberly. "Not when I see the skinny babies in town that should be fat."

Dave dropped by to talk to Mary between classes. He was anxious to tell her the news. Then he returned to the claim and went to work clearing land.

Saturday morning Dave was awakened by voices. It sounded as if most of the town was gathered outside. He glanced at the sun. It was about five o'clock, for the days were long.

"Get up, lazybones," a man yelled. "You can't expect to get ahead in the world if you lay abed until noon."

Dave dressed and came out, looking at the smiling faces of his neighbors in bewilderment.

"Our consciences bothered us," one of the men explained. "We sort o' figgered out how to show we're sorry. Where are you going to put up your cabin?"

"A cabin raising!" Dave thought. The women were carrying lunches, the men tools and materials. Because of the tide they had had to get up before daylight. Dave went over to Mary who had come with the group.

"Where do you want the cabin?" he asked. "A woman should make that choice."

She walked around the small clearing. "Here," she said finally, pacing off the area and marking the corners with stones.

"You won't have any view," a woman protested.

"We will have when the forest is pushed back," Mary said. "And Dave will push it back. He can't grow grass on the river."

When the townspeople left that night, the cabin was up, the roof on and the fireplace of stones completed. Dave swallowed hard as he tried to express his gratitude. Just because they had laughed at his bull was no reason why they should build his cabin. Their faith in him, coupled with Mary's, made success imperative.

That night Dave slept, as usual, in the stump. The cabin wouldn't be occupied by anyone until he carried Mary across the threshold as a bride.

He left the next day for the mountain country to locate, if possible, one

of the reported bands of wild cattle. Bill Thorpe and Danny McCall had learned of his plans and they watched him start on the trip.

"Why is it everybody's suddenly excited over that fellow," Thorpe wanted to know, "when only a short time ago he was little better than the town fool? He couldn't get interested in what the rest of us were doing. He hasn't changed, and yet now everyone admires him. It's sickening."

"Did you apologize to Mary?" Danny asked.

"Shucks, yes," Thorpe answered. "But damned if I'd help build a cabin. The answer to our problem is simple—see that Dave Porter fails."

"We shouldn't have much trouble bringing that about," McCall said. "The hell of it is, in a small community everyone knows your movements."

Thorpe and McCall had dropped hints that they were going exploring in the hope of locating new oyster beds. The oysters they had found were very small. Their first thought was to burn Dave's cabin, but the possibility of being caught checked them.

"Would you stop at killing him?" McCall asked after awhile.

"If you had asked me that six months ago, I'd have struck you down," Thorpe told him. "Killing a fellow man would have been shocking. But it's strange what hate and jealousy will do to a man's viewpoint. I wouldn't kill a man in the village—Yesler, Brown, Terry . . . any of them.

Money couldn't hire me to kill them. And yet, it doesn't seem like murder to kill Dave Porter."

"I wouldn't kill him," said McCall. "He has rubbed me the wrong way. I hate him, but he hasn't stolen my girl. But if you do go ahead with a killing, why not divert suspicion toward the Indians? The Puget Sound Indians are friendly enough, but the interior Indians are liable to break loose any time. They pick off miners in the Cascade Mountains. And Porter is heading in that general direction."

"I think you've found the answer," Thorpe said thoughtfully. But he hesitated. It wasn't enough to satisfy his lust for revenge. Dave Porter, killed by Indians, would be a hero. Thorpe shook his head. "Death isn't enough," he said.

"Death isn't enough?" McCall exclaimed.

"I want him to fail again. I want Mary to know that he has failed. I couldn't wish him any worse fate than to fail and to realize Mary knew that he had failed." Thorpe said. He gazed intently at the cabin. "He hasn't occupied it, you'll notice. Some silly sentiment about carrying Mary through the doorway after the wedding and occupying it together. Now suppose Porter fails, and I get Mary on the rebound, marry her and we occupy the cabin together. That would hurt Porter. It would hurt like hell. It would break him for good."

"But would you want a girl who

only married you on the rebound?"

"Mary is very desirable," Thorpe answered. "I don't care particularly how I win her just so she belongs to me. As for a small cattle ranch, I think I might like it. I'm beginning to realize the possibilities. There is a crying need for beef, butter and milk."

"Well, what do we do first and when?" asked McCall.

"Porter thinks highly of his bull, Pedro," Thorpe said. "From what I hear, he visited several ranches in California before he made the selection. Suppose we move Pedro fifteen or twenty miles up the trail and turn him loose? The woods are full of cougars and wolves."

"That should take care of Pedro," McCall agreed.

They approached the bull cautiously, with a profound respect for the strength of his neck and the sharpness of his horns. But it was no trouble to rope him and lead him from the small corral. Pedro regarded them mildly. People were always taking him somewhere and doing something with him. Long ago he had concluded he would be happier if he drifted with the current instead of trying to fight it.

Mile after mile, Pedro plodded over a narrow trail worn deep in places by the hoofs of deer and elk, the paws of bears, cougars and smaller fur bearers, and the moccasins of raiding Indians. Thorpe and McCall forded small creeks and pushed through mucky swamps, but mostly the trail led through the dense tim-

ber and was moist, but not too muddy.

When they found cougar sign, they left Pedro and turned back, spending the night behind a windfall. They arrived at Dave's ranch the next day and remembered to smash the fence so it would appear that the bull had escaped. When the tide was right they returned to the village, displaying several pounds of small oysters they had made it a point to gather.

"We don't think they grow any larger in this region," Thorpe solemnly informed a group that had gathered on the wharf.

"There was talk of organizing a search party for you," Mary told them. "We were beginning to worry."

"Unfavorable tides held us up," Thorpe explained blandly. "We didn't want to fight our way through the timber above the beach."

"Where'd you find these oysters?" asked the girl.

Thorpe pointed toward the head of the bay. "There, on the tide flats," he answered.

"They believed us," Thorpe assured McCall when they were in the cabin they shared. "By this time, Pedro should be pretty well taken care of by cougars and wolves."

IV

Pedro, at that moment, was still taking care of himself. He had left the trail in search of grass, and had gotten into considerable trouble in a thicket of dead wood but, having found grass and filled himself, he was

still inclined to eye the world with approval.

A wind came up a canyon a creek had carved through the forest and carried the bull's scent to a cougar sleeping on a ledge. The cougar blinked his eyes, dozed, then blinked them again. He was intrigued by the scent and he realized he was hungry.

Moving into the wind, the big cat presently gazed curiously at a creature unlike anything he had ever seen. This animal was neither deer nor elk, but the scent assured him it was good red meat—and in quantity. The cougar instinctively remained downwind.

After awhile, with much crashing, Pedro fought his way out of the thicket. He had picked up a scent that was vaguely familiar, and with growing interest attempted to locate its source. The cougar drifted ahead with the silence of wind-blown vapor.

Pedro came to another thicket and decided to push through with brute strength rather than go around. The clatter of breaking branches and loosened stones sent a black bear and three deer running. They pounded to the game trail, then swerved suddenly as they saw Dave Porter.

Dave stopped and watched them vanish. He listened to the snapping branches and said to himself, "Wonder what's going on over there. Elk probably. It'd take a big animal to make that noise." He had found the trail left by a small band of wild cattle. Three cows with calves and a bull, if he read the hoof prints cor-

rectly. Now he was returning to the village for supplies.

Dave touched his horse lightly with the spurs and moved on. Pedro saw him and waited futilely for the man to drive him to some place or other. The cougar, relaxed, had missed no detail of the movement going on about him. The horse scent was new and interested him, but the man scent with it held him in check. Again he moved with the bull. An hour later the cougar ran up a tree and out on a limb overhanging the game trail Pedro had wandered onto.

The big cat's routine never varied. He knew from experience that the impact of his body on a deer's neck or head broke the spine and dropped the victim in its tracks. If he missed, he went on and hunted new prey, or if the deer was merely crippled, he sprang to its flank and dragged it to earth. There was no shaking off his claws once they were into a deer.

Pedro was in a benign mood. His belly was full; it was a nice day, and, except for the thickets, he had no problems. As he neared the danger point, he stopped, as if viewing the scenery. He sniffed, and then went on. A ripple of excitement ran through the cougar and his fur moved in a series of tiny waves, as if stirred gently by a breeze.

The cat gathered for the spring and dropped silently. Pedro saw him coming and dropped his head. It was not a craftily planned maneuver to lessen the impact by "rolling with the punch" as fighters do. Rather, Pedro was lowering his head prepara-

tory to tossing it upward to meet danger. The cougar's weight drove Pedro's head to the ground and the bull went to his knees.

Pedro's neck was shorter and stronger than a deer's. It stood up under the impact. His shorter legs were stronger, too. He tossed his head upward while still on his knees, and one short, sharp horn sank deep into the furry stomach. Then the legs heaved upward and Pedro was standing. His bellows of fury sent the small fur bearers to cover.

The cougar's paw caught the bull's shoulder with a glancing blow, leaving crimson furrows in the thick hide. Pedro tossed the cougar clear, then charged. The cougar hesitated, then fled, leaving a crimson trail behind him. The bull followed, bellowing with rage, his killer instinct aroused. The cougar crossed a swamp and Pedro followed. But when the bull was knee deep, he stopped, deep, angry rumbles coming from his lungs and plumes of steam from his nostrils as he exhaled in quick gasps.

Slowly, surely, Pedro pulled his legs from the muck and went back to the game trail. He stopped at the first creek and drank the water that came tumbling from melting snow banks. Then he went on, his pace deliberate—the pace of an animal that kept a tremendous pool of brute strength in constant reserve.

A week passed before Pedro's nostrils picked up the scent of his kind. The grass scent had come first, borne on a brisk wind, and he had resolutely

pushed into the teeth of the wind and the scent had grown stronger. As he reached the clearing and gazed on wild hay, shoulder high, the scent of a herd came vaguely. He stood sniffing, scornful to eat, though hungry.

The first sound to come was a calf's bawling as it chased its mother which was trying to wean it. The cow came into the clearing and postponed the issue, letting the calf fill himself while she ate. The other cows came in a few minutes later. The bull ambled in last. He was not as large as Pedro, but he was tougher from his wilderness existence.

It was some time before the bull caught Pedro's scent. Then he lifted his head and bellowed a challenge. Pedro stepped from a thicket that had concealed him, bellowed and pawed the earth. The tough bull believed in attack and he charged. Lowering his horns, Pedro waited. He acted as if he had fought before. Suddenly he charged. The tough bull side-stepped, and Pedro dug his horns into the ground, turning completely over. The impact of his body shook the earth. Before he could get up, the rival bull struck him and turned over as his horns ripped into Pedro.

With a roar of fury, Pedro charged as the tough bull got to his feet. This time the bull dodged the wrong way. The error in judgment cost him the battle. Pedro almost tore him apart as his head went into his opponent's ribs. The air left the wild bull's lungs in a mighty rush and with it went the desire to fight. Thus far the wild bull

had met challengers that were invariably inferior to him. He had never known defeat, and after a few charges the enemy usually fled.

The wild bull staggered off, lungs sobbing for air, legs rubbery. Pedro's lowered head caught him in the rear and he spilled down a steep slope like a ball. Pedro waited, as he invariably did, to meet another charge. When it didn't come he joined the herd. The cows eyed him indifferently, then went on feeding. Pedro watched a couple of calves frolic, bumping heads, then he too began grazing.

In the days that followed, the herd moved slowly from pasture to pasture. Coyotes stalked the cattle, hoping to pick off a calf, but alert and easily angered cows kept them at their distance. A month passed before Dave Porter appeared.

Dave's beard was thick, his eyes heavy from lack of sleep, and his clothing was badly torn. His horse moved wearily.

"Well, at last, Pedro!" Dave said when he saw his bull. He had found Pedro missing on his return for grub and had trailed him over the game trail for a considerable distance, then had lost the animal's tracks. He guessed that Pedro had taken to a creek bed where the going would be easier. The water would naturally wash out the tracks.

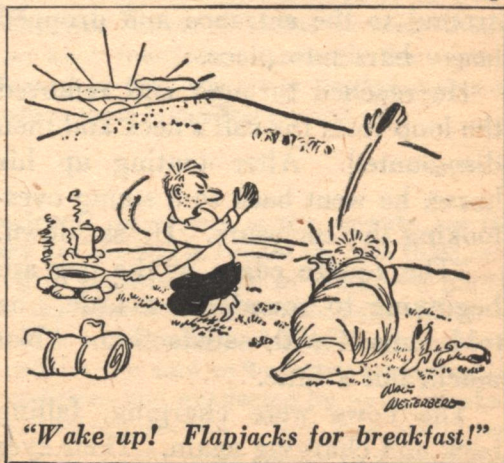
Day after day Dave had checked on game trails, searching for the bull's hoof prints without success. He had encountered several scrawny cows and eyed them indifferently.

"No milk, and their flesh as tough as sole leather, no doubt," he had told himself. When his grub was gone he had lived off the country—trout, upland birds and ducks.

Dave killed a spike buck that night and camped near the herd. The following morning he headed Pedro onto the main game trail. As long as he was mounted, the cows didn't seem to mind him. Perhaps they thought the man-horse combination was some strange species of elk, an animal they were used to.

It took slow, patient work to move the herd toward tidewater. Sometimes Dave made five miles in a day, once seven, but the average was three or four. And he never made a move on foot.

The cows balked at the clearing. Perhaps the charred logs where Dave had burned brush in clearing land was a warning. Possibly there were warning smells from the cabin. Dave didn't know. It couldn't be any special smell, he was sure. Probably it was the lack of familiar odors. The smell from the tide flats was strong,



too, for today the wind was from the north.

The calves ran forward and Dave hazed them toward the enclosure he had built. It was almost a stockade. He had set small fir trees in pairs ten feet apart. Then he had dropped trees between them, to serve as rails. The branches, he hoped, would conceal the suggestion of a trap. But the cows were suspicious. Dave got three calves through the opening and held his breath. He was again at the crossroads between success in the thing he wanted to do most, and failure.

V

Dave rode around the enclosure, flipped a loop over a calf's head and snubbed it tight to a tree. The calf bawled in fear, and the cows, wild with anger, horns tossing, charged in.

They saw the horse's head and Dave's head and shoulders above the rim of the enclosure, and they charged. The trees shifted under the impact, then moved into place again as the cows fell back. Dave raced around to the entrance and dropped heavy bars into place.

He reached through and removed the loop from the calf's neck and then dismounted. After putting up his horse, he went back to a stump overlooking the enclosure. He sat down.

"The square edges of the peg are beginning to round out a little," he told himself with satisfaction. "Not much, but a little."

The cows were charging, falling back and charging again. Their eyes

were rolling with a mixture of fury and fright. They were exhausting themselves. Satisfied that the trap would hold them, Dave decided to get some much-needed sleep.

It was twelve hours later when he awakened. He went out to the cows and found them resigned to their situation. But they tried to charge him as soon as his head appeared above the top rail. One even tried to climb the rails. She fell back, leaped up and milled around.

Watering the cows became a problem, as they kicked over the half barrel he lowered to them. Dave straightened it several times before he could fill it. Feeding them was simpler. He threw freshly cut grass over the top rail, then left. When he came back a couple of hours later they had eaten.

Meanwhile Pedro roamed in the pasture with the horse and was content.

That evening, after a struggle, Dave dragged the bawling calves from the enclosure. At dawn he roped the best-looking cow in the lot and, after a ten-minute battle, snubbed her against two stout uprights. One held her head tightly, the other her hind quarters. Dave reached between rails and milked her. She had almost dried up, but he got a quart.

"If I milk them regularly," he thought, "I may be able to increase the supply."

From the other two cows he got a little less than a quart. He poured the milk into two bottles and put it in a spring to cool. Then he went in

and shaved and trimmed off some of his hair.

"Before the peg is rounded," he thought, "two things must be done, and beating Bill Thorpe is one of them."

Dave waited briefly for the tide to start out, then walked the beach. He timed his arrival for noon, when the mill would be shut down and the children out of school. Someone saw him coming, and since it was a bit of news, passed the word along. Most of the town was outside when Dave left the flats and started up the street which wound through the stumps. Thorpe and McCall were among the crowd that gathered.

Thorpe began laughing. "Here comes the milkman. Look! Almost two quarts. And where's the butter and cheese?"

"The point escapes you," Dave thought. "And how many of them do get the idea?" He knew that wild cows would never solve his problem. Another shipment of livestock must come from San Francisco—cows of good breed and fit for Pedro. Some day the town would know the thoroughness with which he had planned. He hadn't just bought a bull. He had told the rancher who sold Pedro to him:

"It's a wild country up there on Puget Sound, cougars and wolves. I want a bull that's reasonable with a man who treats him fairly, but can take care of himself when the big cats are on the prowl."

"Pedro, on our east range, is the

bull you want," the rancher had answered. "He can handle mountain lions, which are the same as cougars. But he'll cost you more money than the other bulls."

"He'll be cheap in the end," Dave had asserted. "A cougar-killed bull is of no use in the cattle business."

"After all this time," Thorpe jeered now, "two quarts of bluish milk."

"You fool!" Mary said scornfully. "Don't you know the quantity is unimportant? What is important is that a man knew what he wanted and kept driving away, against all opposition, until he achieved his goal. Those two bottles of poor-grade milk are symbols of one man's way of filling a community need. They're as important as the first cabin on Alki Point, the first board from Yesler's mill, and the first baby born in this settlement."

Others in the crowd began to catch what the quick-witted teacher had instantly realized. They began cheering, but though Dave was conscious of a warm glow sweeping through him, he wished they would quiet down. His own mood was grim. He went straight to the cabin where the baby who seemed scrawniest and most in need of fresh milk lived.

"I'm your new milk man," he tried to say matter-of-factly but something in the mother's face, as she stared at the milk, brought a lump to his throat. Until that moment, even he hadn't realized the full importance of his project.

"It's really milk!" she said. "Cow's milk. I didn't think anyone could

bring this about . . . in time." She drew a deep breath. "Somehow I . . . I can't find the right words to express my thanks."

"You don't have to," Dave said quickly. "Deliveries three times a week, and the quality will improve in time."

He turned and, seeing Thorpe in the crowd, started for him. Mary, sensing his purpose, asked, "Must you?"

"This is long overdue," Dave answered. "Thorpe learns slowly." He tossed his coat onto a stump. Mary picked it up and brushed off the bark fragments.

Dave saw the self-confidence drain from Thorpe's face. The man realized this was a different Dave Porter. He knew that he was in for a beating this time, and the man who admits that is whipped before the first blow is struck.

Thorpe fought with a cold, desperate fury, hoping for a lucky punch or intervention by the spectators. He knocked Dave down, but Dave didn't stay down. After awhile Thorpe grew arm-weary, and heard only Dave's wrathful voice.

"You turned my bull out to be killed by cougars. I found your tracks and the bull's in a stretch of clay a few miles from my place. It's no fault of yours that the bull survived. This town isn't big enough to hold the two of us. One of us has got to go."

Dave's fist lashed out and rocked

Thorpe's head, and as the man raised his guard, Dave's other fist whipped into his stomach. Thorpe didn't wait to be knocked down. He shrugged his shoulders while maintaining his guard.

"I've had enough," he said. "I can't beat you. I'll clear out."

Thorpe turned his back and walked over to McCall who looked dumfounded by this turn in affairs. "Pack my stuff and bring it down to the ship." He indicated a three-master loading lumber for San Francisco. "I'm taking passage."

"Thorpe would look funny without a shadow," Dave said. "Pack your own stuff and go with him, McCall. If you stay here, it won't be long until you're bothering busy men."

Dave wiped the blood from his face and the perspiration from his brow. "I must head home before the tide rises," he told Yesler. "I don't like logging. It doesn't come natural to me, but I'm cutting timber on my claim and I'll float it to your mill when wind and tide are favorable. I need money to buy cattle."

"Cash will be waiting," Yesler answered, "whenever you're ready, Dave . . . whenever you're ready."

Dave turned to Mary. "When will you marry me?" he asked in a low voice.

There was no hesitation in her answer and her smile was radiant. "Whenever you are ready, Dave, whenever you are ready. My needle was very busy while you were away."

THE END

*Cousin Lightner was always a brave
maker—so long as he could rely on a*

BLIND TRAP



By Jim Kjelgaard

My COUSIN Lightner is the kindest and best man I ever knew. He has given me a home since my father died, and anybody who would be like a father to his younger cousin just has to be kind. All I have to do is work ten hours a day on his farm.

But, of course, anybody would be glad to work for a fine cousin like Lightner, who is ailing all the time and never able to work. All he can do is hunt and fish. It pains my heart and that of Annie, Lightner's

wife, to see him limping painfully out with a gun or a fishing rod most every morning because he cannot do anything else.

But he is a fine cousin, and only last week I found out that he is brave as a lion. I was fixing the rack where Lightner keeps his bear traps when I heard somebody holler.

"Hey. Who's home?"

I looked out the woodshed door and the biggest man I've ever seen was standing on our back porch. He

was all of six feet five, and his blue shirt was open down to his belt. Annie came to the door.

"Cousin Elrod!" she said.

"Where's Lightner?" asked Cousin Elrod, and it did not sound to me as though he was very fond of my cousin.

"Oh, dear!" said Annie. "He's fishin'."

"Ha!" Cousin Elrod grunted. "I just got out of jail. If Lightner hadn't of been too lazy to hide my still when I asked him to I never would of went there! Besides, I lost the still! Tell Lightner that I'll be back at seven this evenin' to break every bone in his body!"

Annie was crying when Cousin Lightner same back from fishing, and I was scared. Cousin Elrod, mad, was enough to scare anybody.

Cousin Lightner hung his rod on its hooks and laid his creel of trout on the sink.

"Why is my little girl crying?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, L-Lightner! C-Cousin Elrod just got out of jail, and he's mad at you, and he's comin' back at seven o'clock to b-break every bone in your body!"

I wish you could have seen that man! I just wish you could have! Here was Cousin Elrod, strong as a bull and twice as mad, waiting to break every bone in Cousin Lightner's body, and what did Cousin Lightner do? He laughed! Laughed! That's what he did!

"Ha ha," he laughed. "I'm certainly glad it's not serious."

Annie wiped her eyes on her apron and looked at him as though she didn't believe what she heard.

"You mean you can lick Cousin Elrod?"

"Easy if I had to," said Cousin Lightner, "but I shan't lower myself." For a minute he looked, sadlike, at the floor. Then he raised his head. "Annie, it pains me to admit this about any member of my family, but Cousin Elrod is a coward. The minute a man faced him, eye to eye, he would fold up like a broken balloon."

"Oh, dear," Annie said in a relieved tone. "Now I'm comforted! You tell him that when he comes back at seven o'clock."

"You tell him," said Cousin Lightner. "I've got important business at six o'clock. I won't be back until quite late, maybe not before morning."

Just as he'd promised, Cousin Elrod came back at seven o'clock. He opened the front gate, walked up the path, and rapped on the door.

"Well," he asked Annie, "where is he?"

"He has important business," replied Annie. "He might not be back until morning."

Cousin Elrod scratched his head and blinked his eyes, as though he couldn't quite figure that one. He blinked again.

"Cousin Lightner says you're a coward," I told him. "He says that, the minute a real man gets at you, you'll fold up—just like a broken balloon."

"Oh, he did!" Cousin Elrod looked around as though he didn't quite know what to do. "Look," he said, "I didn't mind the jail. But the still was the best one I ever had. I ain't forgettin' that. You tell Lightner that I'm comin' at nine o'clock tomorrow mornin' to give him the beatin' of his life!"

We didn't get a chance to tell Cousin Lightner until midnight, which is when he came home. He looked tired; probably the important business he had to attend to had played him out.

"Ha!" he said, when we told him that Cousin Elrod was coming at nine o'clock to give him the beating of his life, "a flea pecking at an elephant! It just so happens that I have more important business at eight o'clock. Tell that big coward when he comes that you don't know when I'll get home!"

He came home late at night, and he had more important business that took him out before daylight. Things went on that way for nearly a week and I was very disappointed because I wanted to see Cousin Lightner meet Cousin Elrod and fold him up like a broken balloon. He surely would have met him if he'd stayed around the farm because Cousin Elrod—and it just proves that even he can think of things—took to coming around at all hours of the day without mentioning any time. But he always came through the front gate and he always made his last visit around five o'clock. I guess that Cousin Elrod was pretty much set in his ways.

I was still so proud of Cousin Lightner! He proved more than once during that week that Cousin Elrod was beneath his notice. Every day he left the house before daylight to tend to important business, and he hardly ever got back before night. Once, when he was in the house and Cousin Elrod started up the path, Cousin Lightner had important business in the barn.

He ran out the back way and said not to tell Cousin Elrod where he was because he did not want to be disturbed. When I went to get him for supper I found him lying under a pile of hay. He explained that he was just going through it to pull out the thistles so the stock wouldn't hurt their mouths. Nobody but Cousin Lightner would be kind enough to think of that.

But, of course, the neighbors did not understand that Cousin Elrod was really beneath Cousin Lightner's notice because Cousin Elrod himself told them why he was looking for him. They believed Cousin Elrod instead of the truth, which is what Cousin Lightner always tells. Cousin Lightner and I were walking down the road when we met Jess Nolton.

"Better watch the next bush!" Jess hollered. "Cousin Elrod might be behind it!"

That was just the limit. When Jeb Bolens and John Hartney hollered about Cousin Elrod, Cousin Lightner turned right around and went back to the house.

"Was Cousin Elrod here?" was the first thing he asked Annie.

"Yes," answered Annie, "and he is coming again at five o'clock."

"That's enough," said Cousin Lightner. "I'm going to put him in his place once and for all. Uh . . . you two stay in the back room. I'm going to fix the walk. Where's my pick and shovel?"

Let me tell you one thing, and you'd better believe it. I couldn't sit still in the back room more than an hour. I just had to get out on the front porch to see if Cousin Elrod was coming, and I saw the fresh dirt where Cousin Lightner had fixed the walk. About three minutes of five I saw Cousin Elrod.

"Cousin Lightner!" I hollered. "Here he comes!"

Cousin Lightner came out on the porch. He walked right down the front steps and down the path to within about six feet of the front gate. Cousin Elrod came up the road to stand on the other side.

"Elrod," said Cousin Lightner, "I hear you're looking for me?"

"And at last I got'cha!"

"Step right through that gate into the yard," said Cousin Lightner. "I'm going to take you apart piece by piece. I think I'll gouge your eyes out first of all."

Oh, but I was proud of my cousin! He was a lion, no less! And it was easy to see that Cousin Elrod was a coward. Just as Cousin Lightner had said, Cousin Elrod *did* fold up like a breaking balloon.

"Huh?" he grunted.

"Step right through that gate," repeated Cousin Lightner. "I want to gouge your eyes out."

"But my eyes . . . I . . . I . . . I got to see with 'em!"

"Elrod," said Cousin Lightner, "you've been hounding me for a week and I haven't had time for you. Now I have. Are you going to step in here and take your beating like a man?"

"Lightner! I . . . I never thought you was a fightin' man!"

"You've found out!" said Cousin Lightner.

"Well . . . It was just a still, Lightner. An' thutty days in jail wa'nt bad."

"Get out!" said Cousin Lightner.

"Yes, Lightner."

Cousin Elrod started back down the road. Cousin Lightner had faced him out, just like he said he would. I wanted to see Cousin Elrod go, and started towards the gate so I could see better. But Cousin Lightner stopped me with,

"Just a minute."

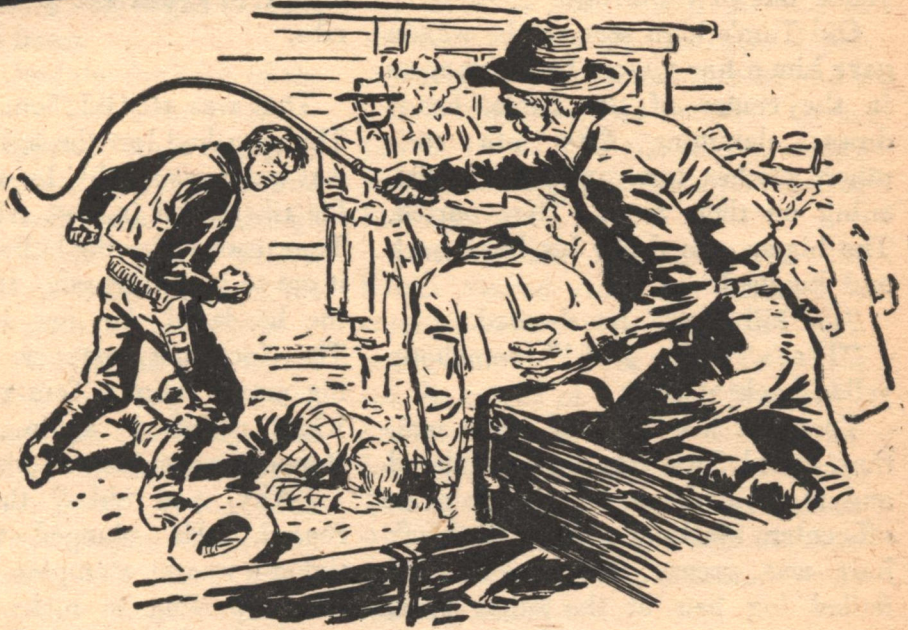
Oh, but my Cousin Lightner is smart! There isn't a thing he doesn't think of! He walked up to the gate and pulled out the three set bear traps he had buried in front of it.

"I thought a bear trying to get a calf might come this way," he said. "But on second thought, there don't seem to be much danger.

"Does there?"

THE END

FIGHT FOR YOUR LAND



By Robert L. Trimnell

The price on Ben Mack's spread went sky-high after old Tinker Tom put in a little work with his bullwhip

WHEN Tinker Tom Wilkes drove his wagon into Bullhorn, he wasn't surprised that nobody noticed him. And that was an odd thing in his old life, for people always noticed him. First came his floppy-eared roan mule, then the jangling wagon loaded with old and new pots and pans, hardware and bedsprings,

soldering kit and patching bag.

Old Tom himself was sitting high on the wagon seat, lanky and loose-jointed in baggy clothes, and sporting the biggest and reddest nose west of the river. There was his whip, too, sticking up out of its holder, a long bullwhip left over from his mule-skipping days.

He could see why nobody had greeted him. Almost every man in Bullhorn was trying to edge into a great circle down in the middle of the street. Tom wiped his bulbous nose with the back of his hand and clucked to the mule. They eased up alongside the crowd.

"Kill him, Jack!" somebody yelled out of the crowd.

Old Tom's high seat on the wagon gave him a fine view. Two men were in the center of the circle, heads down, slamming fists into each other, clothes torn and sweat glistening on their arms. They parted. The bigger one threw his head back and laughed.

"I'll kill him!" he shouted.

"That's right, Jack!" somebody yelled back at him.

Tom felt his lips curl. The man they called Jack was big-shouldered and big-bellied, mouth split into an off-center, mocking grin. His black hair was greasy with sweat. He flailed big fists at the other man, laughing as he plowed forward.

The smaller man battered him with arms that drove like pistons. He was a stocky fellow with short-cut sandy hair. Blood was running from the corner of his mouth down on his shirt. Tom sucked in his breath when he saw the blows bounce harmlessly off the black-haired fighter. Those fists should hurt. But they didn't. Tom rubbed a bony hand across his nose. The shorter fellow should be able to hit harder than that. The oldster decided that spirit was lacking. The sandy-haired man

didn't seem to believe in the fight.

Big Jack blasted a straight long one, and it landed with a crunch. The smaller man reeled. Another long one crushed in, and the fight was over. The sandy-haired man stumbled, collapsed in a heap. Jack wasted no time. He roared out a laugh and dove forward, heavy boots aimed to crush the prostrate man's ribs.

That was all Old Tom could take. The man had lost the fight, but there was no reason why he should have his ribs caved in, too. Automatically Tom reached for the bullwhip, flipped it out to its full length. It sailed over the heads of the men in the ring. The foot-long snapper tagged the big man's rump. Tom retrieved his whip, coiled it again. Big Jack stopped, spun toward him.

"Why, you old—" the big man roared. He plunged toward the tinker's wagon, stomping heavily, the crowd parting to make way.

"Hold off, buddy," Tom cackled out, moving the bullwhip suggestively. "I may be old but this bullwhip ain't. I'll bust it in yer face next time. Take a man's nose off, that cracker will."

The big man halted, black eyes narrowing as they raked the tinker.

Tom lost no time in pushing his advantage. "Somebody haul that beat feller over here to the wagon, then send his hoss home. Feller's got no right to kill a man when he's down."

His cracked old voice rang out

clearly over the subdued crowd. Men who had been willing to let the battle run to a finish were snapped to their senses. The crowd milled into the open space, dragged the sandy-haired man to the wagon and laid him down among the pots and pans on the wagon bed. Tom saw lips moving rapidly, talk being exchanged between the big black-haired man and a couple of friends.

"Where's he live?" Tom asked one of those who had carried the beaten man to the wagon.

"Straight out of town. Left at the big pine to the dam. That's his place."

Tom clucked to the mule and moved his wagon slowly out of town. He glanced back, saw Jack and his two friends staring after him. He thought they were grinning. He didn't like grins on men with tied-down guns. They weren't the kind of grins that did anybody any good.

You couldn't miss the big pine. In that dry country there weren't many trees. Tom eased the wagon up the ruddy road and over a lot of rocks that didn't do any good to the battered man lying back on the wagon bed. There were a few moans, to be expected from a man who was beaten that badly. Tom wondered. The fellow was tough and muscular-looking. He lacked the other man's weight, but he was younger and faster. Tom shook his head. Something had been missing.

The dam was easy to find. He burst out of a mesquite thicket and

there it was. A narrow stone and concrete wall that backed up a neat little lake, and below it, green irrigated fields of alfalfa and barley. Tom nodded approvingly. There was no cattle. Likely, the boy was working up from scratch.

The tinker glanced at the shack next to the dam and frowned. It was battered and weather-stained, with a pane of glass missing in the only window, and the door hanging crazily.

"You're home, buddy," Tom cackled. He looked ruefully at the broken window on the shack, and at the door that hung from broken hinges. "If'n a feller can call that home," he mumbled to himself.

There was no sound from the man on the wagon bed. Tom eased his long legs down over the wagon seat and took a look at him. Unconscious. One eye blacked, lumps on his forehead, and the whole battered face covered with a mixture of dried blood, sweat and mud from the street.

Tom sighed, dragged the man off the wagon and to the shack. He grunted plenty from the effort. Ten years now, he'd been just too blamed old to do hard work. When he was this younker's age, he'd skinned mules from St. Joe to Santa Fe. And he would have licked Big Jack when he was that age. Yessir. He grunted as he dragged the boy into the shack, hoisted him up to a bed. The boy hadn't even groaned when he was dragged along. He was out cold.

Tom went over to the corner of the shack that served as a kitchen and got a coffeepot. He busied himself for a minute with starting a fire and filling the pot. Then he took a pan of cold water over to the bed and slopped the blood and muck off the boy's face. He wasn't bad-looking, Tom decided. Old enough to be dry behind the ears, a determined mouth and chin. He shook his head. Why had the kid lost the fight? Tom looked around at the shack. Clean enough. But there seemed to be no attempt to make a home out of it.

Tom was pouring coffee when the kid came to. He sat up in his bunk and stared at the oldster, blinking and working his battered jaw. It hurt. He touched a square hand gingerly to the bruised flesh.

"Bout time yuh come to," Tom remarked. "When I was your age I'd been jumpin' around by this time, ready for another go at that black hombre."

The kid's words came out unhandily through his swollen lips. "Much . . . obliged, partner. I don't remember . . ."

Tom dumped some coffee in a mug, handed it to the youngster, then got a cup for himself. He sat down and pulled a hard Mexican cigar out of his pocket. He got it lit and puffed hard.

"Yuh let 'em beat yuh, buddy. Never hear the end of it, if'n you don't go out and lick him again right off. He was laughin' when I drug you away."

The youngster absorbed it in si-

lence, gulped some of the scalding brew. He seemed to feel better. Sitting on the edge of the bunk, he rolled a cigarette with shaking fingers.

"My name's Mack. Ben Mack, and still much obliged to you, old-timer."

Tom let out a stream of foul tobacco juice that even tasted bad to him. "Never could smoke these Mex cigars. Feller gave me a box of 'em, change for solderin' some pots and a little glazin' job. Give me right good chow, he did, so reckon I can't kick."

The youngster lit his cigarette, flinched at the pain when he moved his jaw. He eyed Tom thoughtfully with his one eye that was undamaged.

"I'm Tinker Tom Wilkes, buddy."

"Seems like I've heard tell of you, Tom."

Tom leaned back in his chair and jerked the cigar up to an angle that made it touch the end of his bulbous nose. "I was better knowed as Skinner Wilkes in the old days, Ben." He closed his eyes slightly. "I could hitch a trace chain four mules ahead with my bullwhip."

The youngster nodded. "You must be Tinker Tom. The best liar that ever snapped a bullwhip." He grinned painfully, pushed to his feet, swayed there as though he were drunk, then staggered over to the doorway. He stood there staring out over the fields. He looked back, pulling deep on his cigarette. "Jack Hallis offered me five hundred dollars for the spread. How's that kind

of offer sound to you, Tom?"

Tom pitched the Mexican cigar out the window and spat after it. "I kin see why you had that fight with him, if that's the Jack I'm thinkin' of."

The youngster turned back to the doorway. "Yeah, that's him. My neighbor, you might say. Owns the land all around me. But I've got the only place around that can be watered. He'd sure like a piece of irrigated ground on his spread, since it gets awful dry here, about a month or two from now."

"He can't make you sell."

"Selling was my idea. That's why I built the dam and worked the land into shape for irrigating. I'm no farmer."

Old Tom wiped his fist along his nose. "You got a nice place here. And you want to sell it. Reckon I don't catch on. How come you were fightin' with Black Jack?"

The youngster turned wearily toward him. "He pushed me into it. He's trying to work me down to where I'll sell cheap." He pointed to the dam. "He could ruin me in a minute if he wanted. One stick of dynamite would smash that dam and water'd wash all my crops down into the valley. Only he wants the dam. Jack Hallis is trying to break me, little by little." He turned back into the shack, lay down on the bunk. "Tom, what's in it for you, bringing me out here?"

"Nuthin'. Just a place to live and some chow long's I'm around Bullhorn. I allus do it thataway, because then I can take what money

I make and buy red-eye and play stud poker. Works out nice." He noticed that the last few words were heard only by himself and maybe the lop-eared mule outside. Mack was asleep. "Feller needs sleep when he's taken a beatin' like that," Tom told himself.

He strolled outside and saw the mule trying to chew his bit off. "Ease yerself a bit," he told the animal. He took the bridle off, unhitched the trace trains and let the animal wander away with its harness hanging on. From the wagon he got a work box, swung it out and set it down before the door to the shack. The door, he found, had been badly hung in the first place, then neglected when a pin bolt became bent. He spat on the defective hinge, rubbed his hand across his nose, and went to work.

Twenty minutes later he stepped back to survey the door. It hung properly, would keep out all kinds of weather, and, more important, made the house look as though somebody liked living there. Tom was about to tackle the broken window when the hoofbeats came. He didn't look up, but the dry click told him they were on hard ground. A minute later they were plopping more gently. On one of the irrigated fields, he figured.

Still without looking, he went to the wagon and dragged a long-barreled shotgun out, broke it open and stuffed in a couple of shells. Then he turned to face Jack Hallis. He

knew that was who it would be. Hallis was trying to break Ben down, and so he was coming back to press his advantage. Tom cocked both barrels, climbed up on the wagon seat, and turned toward the hoofbeats.

"The old goat now," was all he got out of their talk. Three of them, with Jack Hallis, in the lead, riding a barrel-chested gelding. Tom sized them up with a couple of quick calculations. They wore their guns tied down, which meant that they were either killers or trying to look that way. And since their clothes were work-worn, he didn't think they were outlaws. So what it summed up to was that they were trying to look like killers. Which might not be too bad. Tom decided to make a test. He raised the shotgun to a point where lead should pass a few

feet over their heads. He glanced at the half-sneer on Jack Hallis' face. Then he pulled the trigger.

The blast nearly pitched Tom himself off the wagon. He struggled with the gun, pulled himself back into position. He let out a chortle when he saw the three riders forcing their rearing horses back to the ground. They were good horsemen. Otherwise they'd be flat on their backs.

"Got another barrel," he cackled. "So jist set still while I listen two minutes to what yuh goin' to say. Then yuh can start runnin' so I kin try my hand at long range with this here gun."

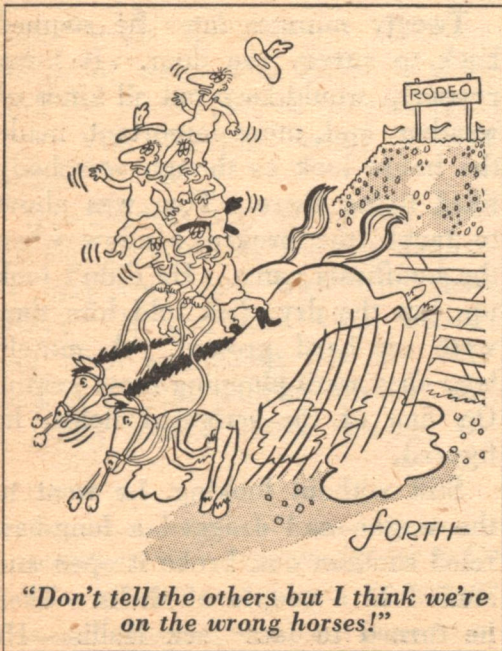
"What are you doing here?" Hallis growled.

Tom curled his thumb over the hammer on the unfired barrel. He spat over the side of the wagon, tugged a chaw of tobacco out from his jacket and tore off a mouthful. He figured it was nice of Hallis to ask him that. He hadn't done much practicing with his lying all day long.

"This here younker's my nephew," he told them, punctuating the statement with a blast of tobacco juice. "He owes his daddy two thousand dollars, and since his daddy owes me that much money, I come here to collect it. Told me he'd give it to me when he sells you this fine little spread here."

Jack Hallis laughed. "My price is five hundred dollars."

Tom allowed his jaw to drop open. "Is that right! Well, mister, in that case I can't get no two thousand dollars out of it, sellin' to you. So I



reckon we'll just not sell. I'm goin' to stay here until I get two thousand dollars out of the profits on the place. Two years, maybe." He raised the shotgun, squinted through the groove between the barrels. "You best go now, Hallis. Come back in a couple weeks. My brother and Ben's three brothers and my four sons is all comin' here to help with the harvest. Maybe we'll take up that little argument you started today." He sighted over the gun barrels and squirted tobacco juice along them. He saw how uncomfortably the three were acting.

"How much yuh want to sell *yore* spread for, Hallis? Mebbe when the rest of the family comes, we'll be able to buy it cheap."

Hallis squirmed. He glanced at his two companions, at the oldster. Then his eyes switched to the shack, and Tom's followed them. Ben Mack was coming out, walking with a firm step. He stared at Hallis and then his eyes faltered. Tom saw it, and he knew that Hallis saw it. The rancher let out a burst of laughter.

"So the old scarecrow there does your fighting, eh, Mack? I don't know if you got a lot of brothers and cousins or not, but they aren't here now. I just came to tell you that irrigating has loosened up your fence posts. When I drive the market herd down here in the morning, they're likely to push the whole fence down. They'll be hungry and might take the short cut across your place. Might even get in the barley."

Ben Mack tried to stare the rancher down, but it was no good. And Tom knew he had to be quiet. If the youngster were ever to face Hallis down, he couldn't do it on the strength of Tom Wilkes' lies or shotgun.

"We'll see," Mack said. "Maybe those fence posts won't push down in the morning. Maybe your steers aren't big enough."

Hallis laughed hoarsely. "Maybe, Mack. Maybe. We'll see at day-break." He wheeled his pony and the three galloped off across the irrigated land, through a gate and into the mesquite.

Tom lowered his shotgun slowly. He glanced out of the corner of his eye. Ben was looking at him, and there was a lost look in his eyes.

"I didn't do so good, did I, Tom?"

The oldster eased the hammer of his shotgun down, broke it open and began loading it again. "Me neither, buddy. Them lies about our big family might make Hallis think a little, but they ain't goin' to help tomorrow mornin'."

He laid the shotgun down and walked over to the dam. The top was only a couple of feet wide. The little lake reached almost to the top, and on the other side the rock wall was six feet high. The spillway, Tom thought, was a well-done job. The boy had taken a deal of pride in it. Below was the ditch and pool, a quagmire where water lay before it was run out into the fields. It ran some forty feet down from the dam, ten feet wide, with low earth walls

around that were cut through when water was to be run out.

"You got a gal friend, buddy?" Tom said.

The youngster nodded.

"After you marry up, can't expect her to live in that shack."

"I told you, I'm goin' to sell this place."

"You'd stay here if you give yourself a chance. It's a good place. We'll build a house over there on that knoll." He pointed a bony finger across the fields. "Then I can take over this shack and fix it up a bit for me. Plenty work for two men on this place."

Ben grinned. It was the second time Tom had seen him grin, and in spite of the bumps and bruises, it looked good. But the youngster shook his head.

Tom pointed down to the quagmire below, where two shovels stuck out of the ground. "You figured on a long stay when you bought two shovels. Only Hallis has got you worried, and you don't believe in the land enough to fight for it. I mean fight!"

For a moment Tom saw something in Ben Mack's eyes. Something he'd been looking for. Then the youngster turned, before Tom could see what happened to that look. He walked to the edge of the dam, jumped down and grabbed one of the shovels.

"I got some ditching to do, Tom. Some thinkin', maybe. You go ahead and fix that window, like you were

figurin' on doing, anyway."

Tom gnawed thoughtfully on his chew of tobacco. He knew that Jack Hallis would be there at dawn with a herd of cattle and a bunch of cowhands. And he knew that Hallis and his men wore their guns tied low.

For a minute he shoved that thought aside and let a rosy haze obscure the rich land below him. He saw himself riding a hay mower behind a three-mule team. And getting off the rig and going up to a little white house that belonged to Ben Mack and his wife, and telling a few lies to their kids while he ate supper with them. Then coming back to his own shack later, to tinker a bit, and smoke some cigars that weren't made of black Mexican tobacco. A trip into town once a week for red-eye and stud. It looked good. Fields below him that would always be green from irrigation water. He couldn't do much ditching at his age, he knew that. But he could ride the mowers and take care of the mules.

But at dawn Jack Hallis would come. And for Tom himself, there wasn't much to do. He still gnawed thoughtfully as he went to put a new pane of glass in the window.

They stood there in the pitch dark, watching for the first glimmer of light over the mountains. Tom had his double-barreled shotgun cradled in his arms. Ben stood beside him, shorter and sturdy, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"Maybe a few minutes," the young man said. "Right, Tom?"

"Reckon." He spat tobacco juice over the side of the dam.

"He's got five cowhands workin' for him."

Tom tried to peer through the darkness. He caught the first glimmer of light, and it seemed to blind him.

"He'll use all five, if'n he figures to drive steers to the railroad."

"He likes his cowhands tough," said Ben.

"Ain't none tougher'n him, or he wouldn't be boss. And he's boss."

They waited in silence. Fingers of light lanced up to the clouds above, then faded. False dawn. The glow became stronger behind the mountains. But they quit marking time by the sun. A hoarse cry came out of the mesquite, and the snapping of a horse's hoofs. There was a bellow. A steer had his own mind about where he wanted to go.

"Those fence posts aren't washed much by irrigation, are they, buddy?"

There was no answer. Ben took out papers and tobacco bag, began rolling a cigarette. In the dim light Tom couldn't see if his fingers were shaking.

There were rustlings in the mesquite and the dull sound of cattle on the march. Occasionally there was the faster rattle of horses' hoofs. The growing light showed a steer rumbling out of the mesquite, looking at the fence, then stopping. A heavy clashing of hoofs came, several horses riding steadily, straight for the dam.

"That's them," Tom whispered to Ben.

The hoofs halted, and one horse came forward slowly. Jack Hallis, leaned forward over the saddlehorn, a grin on his face.

"How's those fence posts, Mack?"

Tom saw Ben suck in a deep breath.

"They looked strong to me last night."

Hallis laughed. "I heard you went to Bullhorn last night."

"I did. Bought six sticks of dynamite."

"Dynamite?"

"Enough to blow the dam, when my fields are full of your cattle. Enough water behind that dam to drown or cripple every one of 'em, Hallis."

Hallis stopped laughing. "And the old goat will shoot it off with his shotgun, eh?" He said it half to himself. Louder, he said, "Looks like the old goat runs this place."

"Maybe I run it, Hallis."

"I don't think you'd say that without that shotgun behind you."

Tom saw the boy's hands then. They were shaking. Suddenly Ben spun his cigarette down into the drain pool. It glowed a minute, then

What's In A Brand Answers (page 87)

1. Bootjack; 2. Bar N—Yard (3 feet!) Barnyard; 3. W under Boy: Wonder Boy; 4. Hornpipe; 5. I Overwork 'em;
6. Hangover Square; 7. Nothing to do; 8. No Bar-Gun: No Bargain; 9. HI Jack R: Hijacker.

blinked out in the quagmire. Ben glanced once at the rancher, then jumped, landed on the ground on the opposite side of the drain pool from Hallis. He grabbed the handle of a shovel to steady himself. Tom saw him running those strong, square hands up and down the shovel handle.

Hallis jumped down off his horse. He walked to the edge of the quagmire, stood with his hand on pistol butt.

"If one of us was shot dead," Ben said, "the sheriff'd know who needed hanging." He took off his gunbelt, threw it on the ground. Instinctively, his hands returned to the shovel handle. He was gripping it hard.

Hallis tried to laugh as he unbuckled his own belt, dropped it behind. Tom saw that the laugh didn't come out well. Hallis had faced the same man the day before. But maybe it wasn't the same man.

Ben jerked his shovel out of the mud, gripped each end with a hand. Tom could see mud ooze out between the fingers of his right hand. Ben took a step forward, sank knee-deep in mud. He forced himself another step further.

"Looks like you've raised the price on this land," Hallis said.

"No. There's no price on my land, Hallis." Ben dragged a boot out of the mud, struggled another step further.

Tom glanced toward the fence. Five men sat there on their horses, while cattle milled behind them.

Hallis grinned. "I'm going to teach

you about the price on this land, Mack." He saw the shovel stuck in the mud before him and yanked it out. Then he stepped into the mud. His grin was gone. He lumbered forward, sinking in, the shovel held across his chest. Ben slogged toward him. A fiery ray of sun came over the mountains, and threw their shadows against the dam. The shadows jerked closer. About ten feet apart, they stopped.

"What price, Mack?"

"No price."

Hallis swung his shovel, sweeping wide, the full strength of his bull-like shoulders and chest behind it. Ben caught it with the blade of his shovel. Steel rang and icy shivers jumped up old Tom's spine. Near the fence he saw the five riders jerk at the same time. Steel rang again. Mack drove his shovel blade in straight, and the bigger man batted it into the mud. It came up, caught Hallis' arm. He howled out, jabbed, missed, swung it over his shoulder and, pushing a step forward into the ooze, drove it like a club, crashing at Mack's head.

Ben ducked, took the flat of the blade on the shoulder. It staggered him, but his own shovel was driving forward, and Hallis couldn't defend himself. It cut into his belly. He doubled over, backed a step, groaning.

"It's on my land, Hallis."

Tom heard it, and he waved his shotgun over his head. "That's it, buddy! Yore land!"

Both men were plastered with mud now, and the rising sun showed blood running down Ben Mack's arm and

slippery sweat on his opponent's face. For a moment they stood almost toe to toe, swinging, ducking, slamming shovels into each other. It was young men's work, Tom thought. Mack jammed his shovel blade into the other's arm, brought the handle down and smashed it into Hallis' forehead. Hallis smashed back, but he might have been hitting a fence post. Ben seemed to feel nothing. He was grinning now, smashing, smashing, forgetting everything else.

"My land, Hallis!" he growled out.

The big man knew then. He could never beat Mack. He staggered back, took a bruising handle blow across his neck, unloosed a swing that should have knocked the younger man off his feet. It didn't. A blade chopped into Hallis' arm. For a moment he sagged, then crumpled into the mud. He didn't get up. Ben Mack looked at him once and laughed. He grabbed the man's muddy shoulders, dragged him out to solid ground. Hallis stumbled to his feet.

"It's my land, Hallis. You can take the long way around for your cattle. Those fence posts are rooted pretty solid."

Tom saw the other man try to straighten his shoulders. The oldster shook his head. He could tell when

a man was beaten. And he knew Hallis was beaten as soon as Ben Mack got that ditching shovel in his hands and felt his feet sink into the mud. Tom knew the boy had found it was his own land. He watched almost indifferently as a couple of cowhands helped Jack Hallis onto his horse, and hurried off when he told them to start moving the cattle.

"The house, Tom. We'll build it up on that knoll where you said."

Tom looked at the stocky figure below, mud-caked and bloody, hands gripping the handle of a shovel, the blade buried well in the ground.

"Bring that other shovel with you, buddy," Tom told him. "We got cement to make for that foundation, if we're goin' to start today." He spat tobacco juice over the dam. "Might's well throw those dynamite sticks in the lake. No use for 'em now. Say, buddy, d'you think we'd 've used them, if we'd had to?"

The youngster shrugged and grinned up at Tom. "Dunno, Tom. No chance to find out. The fence posts held."

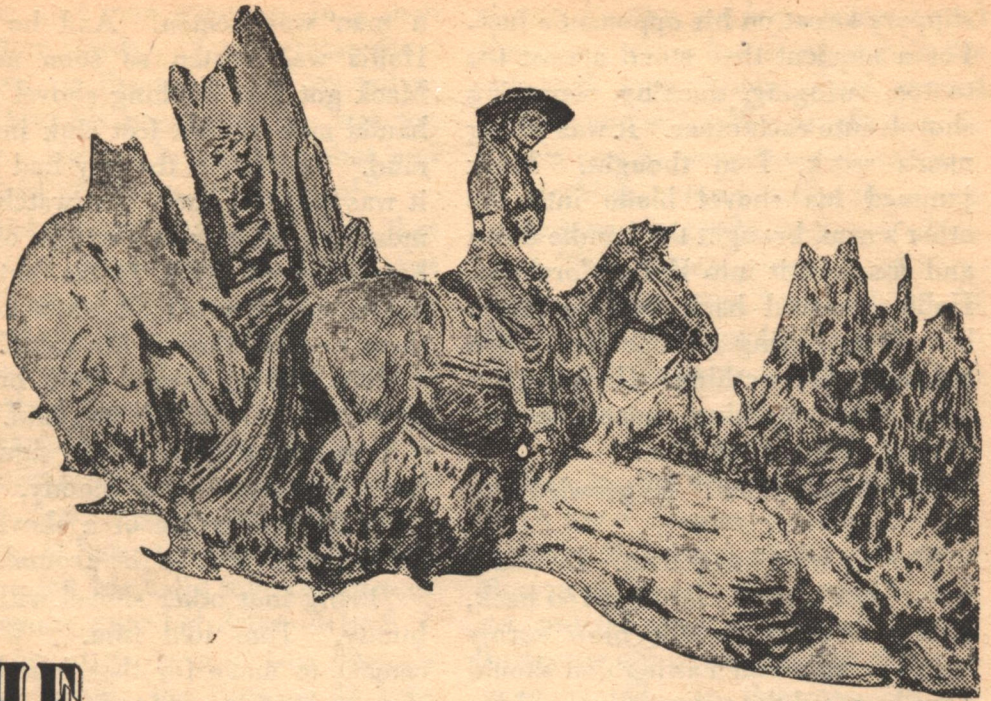
"Yeah," Tom said absently. "They did." But he wasn't thinking of fence posts. He was thinking of a mower and a three-mule team. And the thought started him whistling cheerfully to himself.

THE END

A TEXAS TOAST

*May your horse never stumble,
Your spurs never rust,
Your guts never grumble,
Your cinch never bust!*

S. OMAR BARKER



THE MAVERICK MAKERS

“Rocking H is a coyote outfit and I’ve got a bellyful of it,” asserted Dan Morton— but could one man vent that rustlers’ brand?

By D. B. Newton

I

THROWING his bedroll in place behind the cante, Dan Morton strapped it down with deliberate movements, while from under protecting hat brim his hard glance gave every detail of

the Rocking H yard a careful scrutiny, testing the quality of the silence that hung heavily around him. Wash of wind in cottonwood heads behind the scattered log buildings seemed unnaturally loud in the sun-heated stillness. Over by the corrals Morton



saw Champ Burkes watching, and two other men stood back in the shadow of the bunk shack.

No one had made a challenge yet, or any hostile move; but time was running out and Morton knew he was not going to be allowed to ride away from here without a showdown. Not when he knew as much as he did about the lawless methods that ruled today on the Rocking H.

He took a hitch at the gunbelt which held a battered six-gun against his denim-covered thigh, walked around to the head of his geld-

ing and gathered the trailing reins in rope-scarred fingers. He did not mount, nor did he hurry. Leading the bronc, right hand swinging free near gun butt, he moved across the yard toward the rambling log house.

As he did so, Champ Burkes left his station by the pens and started forward, dust spurting up under the solid tramp of heavy boots, danger in the shape of his shoulders. The others were also in motion now, traveling so as to converge on the door of the ranchhouse. Dan Morton swung the gray around to his back so that

he had a clear view of the nearing trio, and he called Gus Henry's name in a flat, hard tone.

He knew Henry had been watching him, too, just out of sight in the shadows beyond the door; but it was a long moment before the Rocking H owner came reluctantly into view and halted, looking down at Morton from the threshold. Yonder, Champ Burkes was slowing his pace a little, coming in carefully. Dan could make out the expression of Burkes' flat features now, with its brush of black mustache and the small, opaquely lidded eyes. He kept his attention on Burkes as he spoke quietly to Gus Henry.

"I'll take the pay I got coming, Gus."

"Dan," said the man in the doorway, and stopped. There was the sickness of indecision in the way he stood there, his hands knotting and opening, his mouth working so that you could tell he was chewing at the inside of his lower lip the way a man will when he is nervous. He tried a second time: "Hate to see you leave, Dan. You've been with me a long time."

"Yeah, I know," said Dan Morton. "Too bad . . ."

Too bad to have to watch the change in a man, and the death of honor in him. Once, Morton was thinking, Gus Henry had been his friend; but that was before the coming of Champ Burkes. Now the owner of the Rocking H had been too long under the tough foreman's

evil influence, and that had done it.

But would Henry go along with murder? Had he been so far corrupted, dragged so deep into the mire, that even long friendship could not affect him? This was the test; and Gus Henry seemed on the verge of breaking under its weight.

Dan Morton said, pushing him to a decision: "You're holding two months' pay for me in your safe, Gus. I'll take it."

The rancher shrugged, then. "All right," he said, in a tone of tired resignation. He had the money in his pocket, already counted out and held by a rubber band. He dug forth the roll and tossed it down to Morton, who caught it and stowed it away without looking at it.

Morton said, "So long, Gus." He turned to his gray and was reaching for stirrup when it came.

"Hold on, there!"

Champ Burkes was moving forward again as he spoke. He came to within three yards of the puncher, and Morton straightened and turned slowly, facing him. They were about of a height, maybe an inch under six feet, but Burkes had perhaps twenty pounds on Morton.

"You didn't really think we'd let you pull out of here, did you?" the foreman asked icily.

Up on the step Gus Henry choked out something, but no one looked at him. It was between these two now, and the gunmen waited to back up any play their leader made.

"No, Champ, I didn't figure you'd like it," Dan Morton told the Rocking

H foreman. "But you can't scare me into staying. This was a decent iron to work for once, before you came along and put sneaky ideas into Gus Henry's skull. Now Rocking H is a plain coyote brand and I've got a bellyful of it. If you don't want me leaving, you'll have to try to stop me!"

The mouth beneath Burkes' mustache hardened. "I'll stop you!" he grunted heavily. There was a quick movement and a gun had slid into his hand, its muzzle pointed at Dan's belt buckle. Another whisper of metal against leather, off to his right, told Morton without looking that either Dugan or the Jaybird had circled him on that side and also had him covered.

"Step away from that horse!" muttered Burkes.

Morton stood where he was, not trying to reach his gun because he knew he had no chance of clearing it. He said, calmly, "You'd have killed me before, wouldn't you, if you'd thought Gus would stand for it? You figure now he's in too deep to put up a fuss. We'll see if you're right. . . . Start shooting!"

"Don't kid me!" growled Burkes. "Nobody just asks for it like that, so quit trying to act brave and tough. Stand away from the bronc, put your hands down real careful and unbuckle that gunbelt and let it drop!"

But suddenly Dan Morton was not even looking at the bully foreman. His narrow eyes had cut past toward the sun-shimmering flats behind

him. And, strangely, a half smile began to quirk his hard features.

"You're wrong, Burkes!" he said. "I'm stepping into saddle and I'm riding away from here; and I don't think either you or your friends are going to say or do a thing about it—not when you take yourselves a look at what I see heading this way. Go on," he prodded. "Turn around and look."

Burkes wouldn't turn. Still boring at Morton with his opaque stare, he said harshly across one shoulder: "What the devil is the guy talking about, Jaybird? He see anything?"

A curse answered him. "Hanged if he don't, Champ. It's the sheriff. And Ward of the Bell brand . . ."

"Better put up your guns, boys," Dan Morton suggested with icy humor. "I reckon you don't want any gunplay, after all! Not with them for witnesses!"

Angry color rushed into Champ Burkes' craggy face, and then with a savage twist of his body, he pivoted and himself stared at the approaching riders. They were already quite near, only a couple of hundred yards away now across the flat level of sage and bunch grass. If the Rocking H men had not been absorbed by the dangerous tension of the scene, they would surely have heard the growing, ragged beat of hoof sound.

Champ Burkes cursed, shoved his gun deep into holster but kept his hand upon it. And moments later the two riders had jingled out of the grass and drawn rein before the sprawling ranchhouse.

II

Ed Spackman, the county sheriff, was a rangy, middle-aged man with an honest face and a pair of penetrating eyes. His companion was older, erect in saddle, with just a trace of a paunch pushing out his waistband. He had the prosperous look of a successful rancher which was what he was; the Bell iron, which Tom Ward had built up in the early days from nothing, was the brand dominating this corner of the cattle ranges. His rugged face had a dangerous cast to it now and he made no greeting.

"Who'll do the talking, Ed?" he asked bluntly.

"I'll do it!" The sheriff hitched over in the saddle, leaned his left forearm on the horn; that way his belted gun stuck out at an angle, and his right hand, resting on the cantle of the saddle, was handy to it. He said, without preamble, "Trouble, boys. But we'll talk it over peaceable and maybe it won't have to go farther than that."

"Yeah?" grunted Henry. He was a slow-witted man and his thought processes were probably still involved in the scene that had been interrupted so unexpectedly.

"Tom, here," said the sheriff, "brought me word this morning that one of his riders found some Bell stock separated from their calves by a brush fence thrown across the mouth of a draw in the Chimney Creek country. I been there and looked the situation over. It's the

way he says. You know what that means, Gus. Somebody's making mavericks. When the calves are weaned, he'll put his own brand on them and Ward will be the loser. And Chimney Creek's on your range!"

Champ Burkes cut in: "That don't prove nothing!"

"I agree . . ." the sheriff started to say, nodding.

"But it looks suspicious as hell!" the Bell owner interrupted. "It's no accident my calf crop has been falling below count lately; and I figure it would be pretty damn risky for the maverickers to do their work on such a large scale and so close to your headquarters, unless you were a party to it!"

Ed Spackman turned on the cowman. "Whoa!" he grunted. "Easy does it, Tom. Give the boys a chance to talk."

Thumbs hooked in gunbelt, Champ Burkes spat into the dust. "Lemme just ask you: how long since you put *your* brand on another man's calf, Ward?"

"Yeah—there's a good question!" agreed Gus Henry belligerently. "I guess your own hands ain't any too clean. Only, now that you got your iron built, you're in a hurry to sic the wolves on another man for doin' no worse than the things you yourself did in the old days!"

"Enough of this!" Ed Spackman put in before Tom Ward, face gone thunderous, could make an angry retort. "Nobody's callin' names, or

digging up dead issues. Times change," he went on. "Laws get written and we have to abide by those laws. And right now there's one been broken and all I want to ask is whether you know anything that will help us any. If you've maybe seen anything peculiar going on, over toward that Chimney Creek sector lately . . ."

There was silence for a moment. Dan Morton, standing beside his saddled horse with one hand on the horn, let his glance run across the faces around him. And that was how he caught the exchange of looks between Champ Burkes and Jaybird Rawlins, saw the slight nod of the foreman's head. It was a signal; and the Jaybird must have understood his cue.

He stepped forward quickly. "I reckon maybe I know something, sheriff, that I didn't attach any importance to until now. I think maybe it's what you want."

"And what is it?"

"Why, this fellow Morton, here. He's got a registered brand of his own and some stock the boss has been letting him run on Rocking H graze. Lately, I've spotted him more than once riding out of the Chimney Creek brakes, and there wasn't any business to take him there. He's your maverick maker—I'll stake my gun on it!"

The words were hardly spoken before Dan was on him. Morton did not draw his gun, or even touch it; he saw the shape of the frame-up—

that he was supposed to draw against the Jaybird, and Champ Burkes in turn would kill him before he could throw off a shot. That way they meant to rid themselves both of this mavericking charge and of the dangerous knowledge Dan Morton held against them. Such was the plan and the message that Burkes had conveyed to Rawlins in a single glance, a single nod of the head. Only, Dan Morton refused to rise to the bait.

Dan kept his gun hand clear as he moved toward the Jaybird. His eyes were icy and his face granite hard as he clipped:

"You lie like hell! Tell them that, while you're at it!"

The Jaybird's pale eyes had dilated, and he looked a little wild as he met Morton's advance. He was a stringy, unprepossessing character, with buck teeth, a mop of jet-black hair and a vacuous expression. But he could be dangerous, as a cornered rat is dangerous.

Dan Morton was forgetting none of this as he said again. "Tell them the truth. That I haven't been near Chimney Creek in the past month!"

With this pressure against him, the Jaybird cracked a little. He flung a glance past Morton, at Burkes. Dan knew the foreman would be standing with a hand clamped on gun handle, ready to pull and fire at Dan's back if the latter made a move for his own weapon. But without that provocation Burkes was unable to draw, and the trap he had planned could not be sprung.

And Champ Burkes' hesitation

proved fatal. Rawlins, seeing that he was not being given the backing he looked for, broke suddenly under the prodding of Dan Morton's dangerous stare. His glance broke, fell before it. He put out a narrow tongue, flecked dry lips with it.

"Maybe I was mistaken," he muttered. "I saw somebody that looked like you, from a distance. . ."

Satisfied, Morton turned his back to show his contempt for the man. But Champ Burkes wasn't through. Gun half drawn, the tough Rocking H foreman was going to salvage what he could from this misfiring of his plans.

"I'm thinking he *wasn't* mistaken!" he barked. "I'm calling you a dirty crook that don't care a damn what kind of a bad name you give the iron you work for. What do you say to that?"

"Take off your gun," Dan told him. "I'm no hard-case gun thrower, and you know you'd have me bested in a gun fight. But shuck your iron and I'll beat that talk out of you!"

Fingers knotting and opening, Burkes returned his glare. But now, in the doorway, Gus Henry had finally found his tongue. "You're through, Morton! I can't afford to have any of my crew mavericking brands behind my back and getting me in trouble! Get off this range and stay off. Set foot on it again and my riders will have instructions to shoot!"

Dan almost blinked in astonish-

ment at the way the Rocking H owner had twisted things against him. Before he could say anything, however, Tom Ward was speaking.

"I'll add something to that!" Ward's scowl was uncompromising as he turned on Morton. "My riders will have their orders, too. You've got twenty-four hours to leave this country, and you can be glad you're getting that much of a break!"

Dan Morton saw the running of the tide, then, and it staggered him. He had cracked Jaybird Rawlins and made him back down but, even so, the man's story had had its effect since Ward believed it. The powerful ranch owner's suspicions had been switched to Morton and this made a combination against him which Dan could not hope to buck.

He swallowed down a swelling, helpless rage, made all the stronger by the mockery in Champ Burkes' expression. It was too late now. Even if Dan wanted to make an accusation against Gus Henry and the others he would not be believed.

It was the sheriff who spoke, on a sharp note of anger. "Let's cut out this shootin' talk! If anybody's broken the law, the law will settle it. That clear? I'm looking right straight at you, Tom Ward!"

Plainly here was no time-serving officer holder who held an undue regard for the mere bigness of a spread the size of Bell. Ed Spackman was all man, and without fear.

Now the sheriff swung on Dan Morton, not waiting for Ward's answer. "You mount up and ride

along with me, young fellow.”

“You arresting me?” demanded Morton.

“I’m not arresting anybody. I’m just busting this up before it leads to worse than talk. Better get on home, Tom. You, Morton—climb into saddle!”

Dan Morton obeyed, moving woodenly as he found stirrup, lifted his lithe frame and settled into the kak. But with the reins in his hands, he turned for a final thrust at Burkes.

“You think you’re framing me,” he said flatly, “but I’m telling you it won’t work.” He lifted his eyes to Gus Henry, made the Rocking H owner’s glance waver under his accusing look. “So long, Gus. I’m not forgetting we were friends once. But that’s all washed out, and all I got to say is I’m doggone sorry for you and I hope you wake up to yourself before it’s too late.

“I’m leaving, but I got a couple hundred head of stock grazing your range and I’m taking them with me. And if anybody tries to interfere with me when I’m rounding them up, I intend to look out for myself and my own property. I’m serving that notice now, in the sheriff’s presence.”

He didn’t even look at Jaybird Rawlins, or at Tom Ward. He jerked the reins, and Spackman fell in beside him. They rode away without haste, and the sheriff kept a hand on his gun as a precaution until the buildings of Rocking H were lost behind them and the sage and high bunch-grass clumps stretched to the

horizon rims. Here, Ed Spackman pulled in and Morton followed suit; the stillness lay about them, heavy with the scent of sun-warmed sage.

Spackman squinted across space toward a single feather of tawny dust that moved southeastward across the flats, miles away from them.

“There goes Ward,” he muttered. He turned to the other. “All right, Morton. You’re free to go. That’s all I wanted of you.”

Dan Morton was considering the lawman, closely. “You heard it all, Ed. Do you think it’s the way Burkes and the Jaybird tried to make it out? You think I’m the guilty one?”

The sheriff didn’t answer for a minute, seemingly studying some minute point in the stitching of his saddle leather. He shrugged, then. “When men start calling each other liars and crooks, there’s sometimes no way of telling where the truth falls. Personally, I’d rather believe you than a shifty-eyed character like Rawlins; but I’ve got no proof one way or the other. Meanwhile, until the thing is settled, I’m going to ask you a favor, Dan—one you ain’t gonna like.”

“Well?”

“I’m thinking of my sister-in-law. Beth wouldn’t care much what the gossips might say about her, but I don’t figure you’d want her dragged into this mess. Of course, I can’t order you to stay away from her . . .”

“No, you can’t,” agreed Morton crisply. “So don’t waste your breath. I’m not guilty of anything and I don’t aim to start acting like it. And if

Beth Colby wants to talk to me, you don't need to expect me to walk away from her."

"All right." The sheriff's honest face was a little hard as he took this. He picked up the reins. "I couldn't do less than ask. For the rest—I'd just advise you to watch your step, Morton. This isn't a very good range for you, now . . ."

III

Dan Morton knew that was true enough. He remembered it as he rode deliberately back onto Rocking H grass, circling wide of the headquarters and riding with an alert eye for Champ Burkes' men. If one of them got the first look, he doubted if he would live to know it, despite the sheriff's warning to Gus Henry. His back-shot body could be easily hidden, and even if it were found he doubted if Ed Spackman could get far with an investigation.

But there were two hundred steers that carried Morton's registered Box M brand. Working alone, Dan fashioned a corral fence at the mouth of a box canyon for a collecting point, and then set to work driving this stock out of the draws, cutting his own from the Rocking H beef, and shoving them into the corral. After he had them gathered, he would hire a man or two to help move them off Henry's graze, where he had run them with his friend's permission while slowly building the start of a herd.

Night overtook him and he moved

up onto higher land to make camp, laying the smallest of fires to fix his grub. When he turned in, he staked out his gray close to the spot where he spread his blankets, so that at any disturbance the horse could give him warning and rouse him in time to protect himself. But nothing happened, though during the night he more than once started up with hand reaching for holster, to find it had been only a tangle of wind in brush that had startled him.

With morning the work went forward under the blazing sun and the silence of the slants.

The sun was halfway up the sky before Dan caught first sight of another rider.

He was quartering down a shrubby slope, a couple of Box M steers running ahead of his whirling rope, when movement at the edge of timber to his left caught his quick attention. Morton dropped the rope, reaching for holster leather. The gun winked, reflected sunlight as it came into his hand, and then he was lowering it, hastily hauling rein. For the rider who came out of the trees was a girl—a small, shapely figure in jeans and loose silk blouse, with brown curls spilling down softly over trim shoulders.

Her hat was in her hand and she waved to Dan with it. As she came to him across the slope, she pulled the hat on and adjusted the chin strap about her pretty, heart-shaped face. Shoving his gun back into holster, the cowboy was thinking with a scowl how close that had been. The edge

his nerves were on, he might have started shooting a moment too soon—a moment before he recognized her . . .

Dan had his rope and was coiling it in strong, brown fingers as Beth Colby rode up, a troubled frown between her brown eyes.

"Dan!" she cried. "I've been looking all over. I figured you'd be somewhere hereabouts but I couldn't find you and it had me frightened."

"I've tried to keep out of sight," he answered grimly. "But I wasn't going to leave without what belonged to me, even if it meant playing tag with Rocking H gunmen from here to the sandstones. . . . You seen any of them around?"

Beth shook her head in answer. "What's it all about, Dan? I only know what Ed told me and Marjorie—which wasn't much. That you were in trouble with both Gus Henry and Bell . . ."

"And that you'd better keep away from me?" he finished, with a hard smile.

Beth reached out quickly, touched his hand with her own firm fingers.

"Ed Spackman's only my sister's husband. I can ride wherever and see whomever I please—and I had to see you, to learn what it was that had happened."

Dan flashed her a quick smile and squeezed the fingers resting in his own. "I had an idea that's the way it would be with you," he said, and then went on seriously: "Nothing happened, really. Just a lot of talk

about some stolen calves. Jaybird Rawlins tried to pin it on me and I made him back down, but Tom Ward seemed inclined to believe his yarn. He and Gus both gave me orders to clear out of the country within twenty-four hours."

"But—Gus Henry!" Beth exclaimed. "I thought you and he were friends."

He nodded, grimly. "We were, up until the time that no-good Champ Burkes and his toughs showed up and Gus got in too thick with them. Gus has been going to the dogs ever since; Burkes has got him to thinking it's a sucker game to stay on the honest side of the line, and lately they've started getting a little careless about whose beef they put the Rocking H brand on. It got too thick for me, finally. I made up my mind to leave—and then they got scared about me knowing too much. I dunno where it will end."

"It's terrible!" the girl said worriedly. "Why don't you talk to Ed? If you could get him on your side . . ."

"No, Beth. If I told the sheriff what I know, it would maybe put Gus Henry outside the law and I don't want to do that. I still like Gus; I rode for him for five years and I know he's not a bad fellow. I can't help hoping he'll come to his senses and kick that Champ Burkes and his tough hands off the place."

Beth shook her head, a troubled frown in her pretty eyes. "But meanwhile, you're in danger."

"I reckon I can look out for myself. . . ."

They rode down the grassy slope in

silence, stirrups touching. Dust still tanged the air faintly, in the wake of the two Box M steers. Where the hill leveled off, the flank of the timber came in close and there was just a jumble of granite boulders fallen from the caprock. And as they rounded this obstruction a horseman stepped his bronc out of the shadows, where he had waited for them.

The rider was Jaybird Rawlins. He had a rifle cradled in his hands, ready; his face showed a snarl of hatred as his eyes met Dan's, and the rifle snapped up against his shoulder for a point-blank shot.

IV

Dan Morton saw, in that split second's time, that the Jaybird meant to kill him; he saw too that with her roan shouldered close to his own horse, Beth Colby would be in immediate peril from a hasty bullet. It was this thought that put all caution from him and drove him ahead, straight into the muzzle of the waiting gun.

"Pull out!" Dan yelled at the girl as he slapped in spurs. "Watch it!" Then the bay was jumping forward, plunging headlong at the shoulder of the Jaybird's mount. The rifle cracked, its flame blasting in his face. His own six-shooter was clawed part way out of holster when the broncs collided, and his free hand grabbed for the barrel of the smoking rifle, wrenched sideward.

Rawlins snarled a curse and drove

a fist into the other's face. Dan's head rang under the blow. He kept his hold on the rifle barrel, forcing it up and out of line, but he had to grab for saddle leather with the hand with which he had started to draw his six-gun. The frightened horses bucked and swung around in rising dust, and then both men were being dragged out of saddle, the Jaybird clawing for Morton's throat as they went down into the dirt.

They lost the rifle, and six-guns were forgotten in that hand-to-hand struggle. Dan Morton had landed on his shoulders, underneath the Jaybird's stringy frame. An iron-shod hoof stamped the earth inches from his ear as one of the horses scrambled across their prone bodies; then the clawing hands of the other man were tightening at his windpipe, furious hatred putting steel into the clamping fingers. Dan could not tear them loose. They tightened despite the blows that he hammered against the head of his opponent.

Desperately Morton pulled up his knees and then drove his legs forward, a pistoning kick. The throttling hands were jerked clear as Rawlins was flung off him, bodily. Dan came rolling to his feet, gulping at the dust-filled air. The Jaybird had caromed into the side of one of the horses and that stopped his backward course. Legs braced, he was waiting for Morton and he sent a hard blow swinging as the latter came in. Morton ducked it, his own hard fist connecting with all the weight of his lunge behind it.

The Jaybird was driven off balance, swung around. Then he stumbled and went down in a sprawling dive onto one hip and elbow. The dust streaked in a tawny film. As it thinned, Morton saw that the man was fumbling for his holstered gun.

"Don't—" Dan began, but the weapon was out of leather and he had no choice. Standing spread-legged, body bent forward in a crouch, he made a hurried grab for his own gun and brought it up. He was no fast-draw man but desperation gave him speed. Even so, Rawlins got off the first bullet. It burned across Morton's arm, causing him to wince at the fierce swipe of pain. But he held his aim and squeezed off his shot, and as the mingled echoes of the gunfire whipped away into the high air, he saw Jaybird Rawlins' prone shape jerk and drop limply upon its back.

Dan had never shot a man before and for a moment revulsion touched him so that he could only stand where he was, the smoking gun in his hand and the burn of the bullet crease throbbing along his arm. Then Beth Colby was out of saddle and beside him, clutching at him. "Dan! You're all right?" Her frightened voice steadied him.

"All right," he grunted. He flexed the wounded arm, found its sting bearable, and ran a sleeve across his face to wipe away sweat and dirt and blood. Then he shoved his gun back into the holster, not reloading, and strode to the fallen Jaybird.

The man was not dead. He lay on his back, stirring and moaning a lit-

tle, and the blood was already flowing to stain the shoulder of his checkered shirt. As Morton's shadow fell across his face he opened his eyes; there was pain and fury in them, and his loose mouth twisted.

"Damn you!" the fallen man gritted. "I'll get you yet—for making me back down yesterday. And for this . . ." His hoarse indrawn breathing was a sob in his tight throat.

"So it's on account of yesterday that you made this try at me?" said Morton. He shrugged. "Well, you'll have to wait for some other time to square that account. Now, lie still and let me see how bad you're hurt!"

"Get away! Keep your dirty paws off me!" But the effort of his angry talk had exhausted the Jaybird and he fell back, eyes closed, tortured breath sawing in and out as Dan knelt and began to tear away the bloody shirt.

He shook his head at what he saw. The bullet had drilled squarely into the right shoulder, smashing the arm. Blood was gushing from the hole where splintered bone showed against lacerated flesh and muscle. Dan heard the girl's gasp of horror, and he hunkered there for a long moment, scowling and not certain what he should do.

"It's bad, isn't it?" said Beth, her voice a little shaky.

"Yes." He was at work then, tearing Rawlins' shirt into strips and binding the shoulder tightly, trying to staunch the flow of blood. Rising, he turned to the girl.

"He'll bleed to death if something isn't done. I doubt if he'd last the trip to town; the nearest place I can take him is to Rocking H. Will you see how fast you can get word to the doctor and send him out there?"

"Of course, Dan. But . . ." Beth's fingers were knotted together, her eyes filled with alarm as she faced him, head tilted to look into his grim face. "Rocking H! It's too dangerous taking him there. They'll know you shot him. What will they do?"

"I dunno," he admitted. "But I can't let him lie here like this. If there's any decency left in Gus Henry, he'll see that and not let any of that tough crowd bother me. It's what I'm counting on."

"I'm . . . afraid, Dan!"

The worry in Beth's eyes was so appealing that Dan took her chin in one of his big hands and kissed her. Her warm lips clung to his and her arms went around his neck. Then Dan released himself and stepped back, hand on her arm to turn her toward her waiting pony.

"Can't waste any time," he said gently. "Maybe Jaybird Rawlins ain't worth all the trouble, but he's a man and a bad hurt one."

"I'll get the doctor," promised Beth. She hesitated with one foot in the stirrup, glancing back at him anxiously. "You're hurt too, Dan."

He shook his head. "It's nothing—stopped bleeding already. It'll be all right until the doc can take a look at it."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "Good luck to you, Dan."

He watched until she had ridden out of sight into the rolling sage flats, and then he returned to the hurt gunman. Rawlins was breathing hard, and he was unconscious. Morton tested the makeshift dressing on the bullet wound and then he got the two horses. With reins trailing, they had not run far and were cropping the bunch grass near at hand.

The Jaybird did not weigh much; even with one hurt arm it was not too difficult a task to get him belly down across the saddle and lashed there with Rawlins' own rope. The horses didn't like the scent of blood but Dan kept them on a tight rein as he lifted to his own saddle and, with the other bronc trailing, started off on the shortest route to Rocking H headquarters.

He was both surprised and relieved to find the log buildings deserted. This was a small outfit, with only a four-man crew and no regular camp cook. The men ate in the kitchen which occupied half of the two-room ranchhouse, taking turns at slinging grub. And now all of them were on the range and the corral was empty of horses.

Morton got the Jaybird down from his saddle and carried him, still unconscious, in to deposit him on Gus Henry's bunk in the front room of the house. There were coals still glowing in the stove and he added pitch and split-pine lengths to them. With the fire going well, he soon had water heating. He hardly knew what he was doing, having no experience with a

wound as bad as this one, but it seemed to him he should try at least to cleanse the dirt out of it. Only a doctor could tell if Rawlins was going to lose his arm or not.

He found a bottle of iodine and a clean sheet he tore into rags, and gingerly he bathed the torn flesh in warm water. The bleeding had lessened and all but stopped, which, Dan supposed, was a good sign. He dabbed the disinfectant on, put on a clean bandage.

After he had washed the blood from his hands, Dan came back and found that Rawlins had recovered consciousness and was lying in the bunk with pain twisting his bony features, beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Damn you, Morton!" the Jaybird snarled at him. He fumbled with his good hand toward the bandaged shoulder, and Morton struck the hand away.

"Leave it alone," Dan said. "I know it hurts but I did the best I could, and there'll be a doctor here as soon as he can be fetched."

"You're gonna wish to hell you killed me!" Hatred was mixed with the agony in Rawlins' bright black eyes. "If I ever get my hand on a gun again—either hand!"

Morton considered the hard-case, contempt rising inside him. There were some men, he supposed, to whom gratitude meant nothing. Dan Morton had bested the Jaybird in fair fight, and had made an effort to help the man when there would have been every excuse not to bother. But the Jaybird's hatred of him was not at all

affected by this; if anything, it had increased. For now Rawlins owed him not only the humiliation of yesterday afternoon, but life itself, and the thought was a festering spot in the gunman's warped soul.

Shoulders lifting in a shrug, Morton said heavily, "I reckon a man can hate who he's of a mind to . . ."

From the kitchen doorway at his back, Champ Burkes' voice slapped across the stillness:

"Don't make a move, buckaroo! Keep your hands just where they are!"

V

Dan Morton wheeled, and saw him. Burkes bulked large, filling the entrance, a gun muzzle that looked black and wide as a tunnel mouth, leveled squarely at Morton's belt buckle.

"All right, Dugan!" the Rocking H foreman called, and a shadow filled the open front door at Morton's left hand. Champ Burkes moved forward, Gus Henry sliding in behind him. Dan didn't need to look to see the gun in the hand of Dugan, blocking the other entrance. The three of them had taken him by complete surprise.

"The broncs," said Champ Burkes by way of explanation, his mouth beneath the brush of mustache warping in amusement. "We saw them tied out front and they tipped us off that something was afoot. We thought we'd better come in careful-like till we found out what it was." His glance shifted to the man in the bunk. "What's going on, Jaybird?"

The hurt man answered in a rush of bitter words. "I ran across Morton out on the range and started to give him his needings. He was too lucky. He got in the first shot and smashed my damn arm for me!"

"And brought you here? Now, that was real considerate of him! Set things up for us so we could take him without any trouble at all!"

There was evil in Champ Burkes' face, then, that showed his intentions as clearly as the words—or the way his hand tightened on the butt plates of the gun. Dan Morton saw death looking at him out of that ugly stare, and he felt his belly muscles go taut against the expected drive of lead.

He heard the rasp of Gus Henry's caught breath; the Rocking H boss had caught the meaning of his foreman's look, too.

"Wait a minute, Champ!" Henry said. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to shut his mouth and shut it good!" said Burkes. "And take him out in the hills and cave a cutbank in on him where nobody'll ever look for him."

From the bunk Jaybird Rawlins put in hastily, "Better be careful! That girl—that sister-in-law of the sheriff's—she was with Morton when we tangled. She knows he was bringing me here."

This stopped Burkes for only a second. Then his sharp glance lit upon an iron box safe that stood in a corner of the room behind Morton and he grunted with satisfaction. "No difference! We'll just make up a little

story. Morton got here, remembered that there was a bunch of cash in the safe and, sore at being fired, started to help himself. We caught him in the act and he went down shooting.

"Nothing wrong with that," he opined, nodding with malicious pleasure. "His name's already mud hereabouts. There won't anybody doubt that he'd turn to cracking a safe. The range will thank us for plowing him under!"

Over by the front door, the other tough hand, Dugan, sounded his approval. Bitterness of despair filled Morton as he saw the inevitable ending and the ease with which Champ Burkes would put across the thing he contemplated. In that moment the doomed man's glance crossed with Gus Henry's. Henry, for whom he'd ridden and fought blackleg and drought and storm, and whom he had once called friend.

Morton said nothing, but his look held such contempt in that moment that Henry suddenly broke gaze, not able to meet the cowboy's eyes. Morton saw the man's fists tighten at his sides, and suddenly Henry was turning to Champ Burkes and there was something changed in the set of his jaw.

"I can't let you do it, Champ," he said.

Burkes turned on him as though this was the last source of interference he would have expected. A heavy scowl dragged at his brow. "What's that?"

"Murder is something I can't go

along with. Not when it's a gent that's done as much for me as Dan has, in the past."

"You damn fool!" Anger sharpened Burkes' heavy voice. "What's the past got to do with it? Morton knows what's been going on around here. He knows how we been makin' mavericks out of Tom Ward's calf crop. He's apt to find somebody who'll believe his story and then it will be all up with the bunch of us. That's why we've got to close his jaw for him!"

But there was determination in the shake of Henry's head, and more steel in the set of his backbone than Morton had ever seen in the rancher since he first came under the corrupting influence of the bully foreman. "I'm still boss here. I guess I've let you drag me pretty damn low but not as low as this. I'm telling you to put your gun back in the holster. I don't care if we all get sent to the pen—I'm not letting you murder Dan!"

Champ Burkes said nothing. Instead, with rage blackening his face, he turned his gun on the Rocking H boss and deliberately shot him down.

Dan Morton saw it coming an instant too late, and started a wild dive for his own holstered gun. But something clamped hard onto his wrist, holding it; and, whirling, he saw that Jaybird Rawlins had reached out of the bunk and grabbed his arm with his one good hand.

Cursing, Morton yanked to free himself. A scream broke from the Jaybird as he was hauled halfway off the bunk, his smashed arm trapped

underneath him. He collapsed. Morton, freed, was sent staggering sideways and he went down, slamming hard against the box safe in the corner.

But he had his gun and, half sprawled there, he brought it up and fired twice into the blast of the weapon Burkes swiveled down at him. He felt the tap of air concussion against his face, as lead missed him by the narrowest margin; and then he saw Champ Burkes buckle, twisting as he went down to the rough floor beside Henry's still form.

Then, belatedly, Dugan put in a bullet that spanged and caromed off the metal face of the safe at Morton's back. Dan shifted, flung a hasty shot at the man in the doorway. It went wild, peeling a sliver of pinewood from the jamb at Dugan's elbow; but, left alone, Dugan did not have much nerve and it broke with him, and he spun around, colliding with the door frame in his haste to get free of that place of trapped gun sound and powder sting.

A little dazed, Morton got to his knees and then to his feet. In amazement, then, he heard a voice outside yelling: "Hold it, Dugan! Stop where you are, dang it, and throw down your gun!"

It was the voice of Ed Spackman, and now for the first time Morton was aware of the sound of horses in the yard, and then of boots thudding up the steps.

When the sheriff came bursting in, Dan Morton was kneeling beside Gus

Henry's bloody shape. The Rocking H boss wasn't as badly hurt as Dan had expected to find; Burkes' treacherous slug had grooved a furrow along his side but it was painful rather than serious. It was bullet shock that knocked him out and he was rousing now as the face of Tom Ward, the Bell rancher, showed behind the sheriff.

"Ward!" Gus Henry said hoarsely, the words pouring out in a rush. "Listen to me! Dan Morton never mavericked your calves. That's the truth! It was my doin'. Dan was the only man around here that wasn't a damn crook."

The old rancher's face was strangely unreadable as he looked at the sheriff and again at Henry. "You better not try to do any talking," he said gruffly, "until Beth Colby gets here with the doctor."

"We ran into her a couple miles from here," Spackman explained to Morton. "She told us what had happened and we thought we'd better take a pasear this way."

A deputy came in, shoving the whining Dugan ahead of him. "What do I do with this one?"

The sheriff looked uncertain. "What do you say, Ward?"

The Bell owner had been looking at the other bullet-riddled pair the room held. He scratched his thatch of white hair, pushing back a shapeless hat. "Champ Burkes is dead. That one in the bunk has got an arm I don't think any doctor can fix so he'd ever be able to use a gun again.

I'd say let's put Dugan and the Jaybird onto their broncs and let 'em know what'll happen if they ever show their ugly pelts around here again!"

"Suits me," agreed the sheriff. "As soon as Rawlins is able to set a saddle . . ."

Tom Ward went back to Gus Henry, stood over the hurt man on spread and solid legs. "Henry, something that was said here yesterday hit pretty close to home with me. Reckon maybe my conscience ain't any clearer than it should be, considering the methods some of us used in the old, free days when an unbranded critter was anybody's fair game. And now that you've had the decency to confess to this mavericking I think we can let the thing drop, if you'll give me your word it won't happen again. Or maybe I ought to ask the sheriff to parole you into the custody of this young fellow here—that I owe an apology to, by the way."

Unbelief struggled with the pain in Gus Henry's eyes. The sheriff suppressed a smile as he nodded sagely, considering Ward's suggestion.

"Looks like you got an idea there, Tom," Spackman agreed. "I think Gus is wise to himself now, and there's no reason not to be lenient. As for this buckaroo . . ." The grin broke through, broadly, as he looked at Dan Morton. "Well, you know how things stand between him and my wife's sister. I certainly wouldn't object to turning a prisoner over to his custody. After all—it'd be practically in the family!"

THE END



MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

SQUAW CREEK! Rainy Hollow! Lying up in the rugged mountain country of northwestern British Columbia, they are names for the gold seeker to remember. Together they constitute a wilderness mining district of 750 square miles that affords a prospector a chance for making a better than average gold strike.

It is rough country. Once you are in you're on your own. There are no permanent settlements in the district that is some forty-five miles long and from ten to twenty miles wide just across the Alaska-British Columbia boundary line in the vicinity of Klehini River.

During the summer and early part of autumn—the open season—a few prospectors and placer miners set up their camps along Squaw Creek. But in winter when northern blizzards howl around the high mountains and sweep into the valleys with stinging force, the miners move out.

Paddy Duncan, an Indian from Klukshu, staked the first claim on Squaw Creek in 1927. It is not an old discovery as placer strikes in British Columbia or the Yukon go. Paddy found a streak of bonanza gold that started a rush to the region.

The country, however, proved

rougher and more remote than most prospectors care to tackle. No roads, no chance to go to town for supplies and a movie on Saturday nights. Your nearest neighbor might have been ten miles away. More than that, if you cared to push into the still little-prospected side valleys and mountain streams in the area. Nevertheless the few that stuck have taken out perhaps \$200,000 in placer gold. And though the region is hardly scratched as yet, a lot of folks have practically forgotten Squaw Creek.

Nuggets weighing more than an ounce—that's \$35 or better per pebble of heavy, yellow virgin gold—have been fairly common in the Squaw Creek area. One nugget—king's size—was discovered in 1937 that weighed 46 ounces. Roughly, that's about \$1500 worth of gold. Enough to cover a season's grubstake with plenty of profit left over.

The big nuggets are a gamble, of course. They always are in any placer-gold country. But if you can stand roughing it and are willing to take the chance, the Squaw Creek-Rainy Hollow area may be just what the doctor ordered.

Besides, something new has been added. The recently completed

Haines "Cut-off" road that connects Haines, Alaska, with the already famous wartime-built Alaska Highway. The "Cut-off" runs smack-dab through the Squaw Creek-Rainy Hollow section. It's a fairly straight, 30-foot-wide, 159-mile-long graveled highway.

Starting from Haines, the first forty-two miles are in Alaska, the next fifty-two in British Columbia and the northernmost sixty-five cut through the Yukon Territory to the Alaska Highway. Shelter huts have been set up for the benefit of wayfarers at eight points along the road in the rough, untimbered regions between Stanley and Datlasaka Creeks and between Kusawak Lake and Rainy Hollow.

There is another bet on getting in. Under favorable weather conditions, a good north-country charter pilot could probably land on Kellsall Lake within the Squaw Creek-Rainy Hollow district.

Such things are making the whole area more accessible than it was in the past.

Formerly you had to make it over the old Dalton Trail, a route that hordes of gold seekers once followed from Pyramid Harbor on Chilkat Inlet to the confluence of the Norden-skiold and Lewes Rivers in their head-long trek to the bonanza riches of

the Klondike. At best it was arduous travel, though the trail cut right through Rainy Hollow.

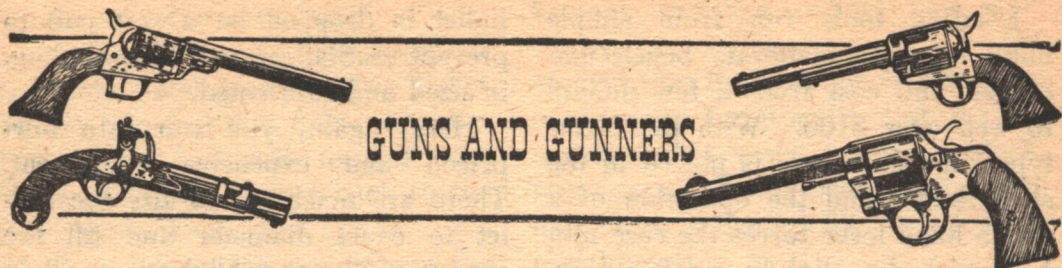
But since the war, and particularly in the past year or so, prospectors and miners in gradually increasing numbers have traveled in via the Haines road, using both ends of it to reach their objective. That is, some come down into Rainy Hollow and Squaw Creek from the Alaska Highway to the north. Others travel up the road from Haines.

Here, too, is a thought and a suggestion. With a road now existing through the region and the area being opened up to or reachable by modern transportation, it seems that aside from the placer gold possibilities a smart prospector might do well to keep his eyes open for lode deposits of gold and other valuable metals such as the copper-silver and lead-zinc-silver veins that are known to exist in numerous parts of the area.

They might pay today whereas they wouldn't formerly because of the remoteness of the country in which they lie.

That about wraps it up, J. K., of Dayton, Ohio, for you and your three wartime buddies who wrote in and asked us about the Squaw Creek-Rainy Hollow district as a real wilderness north country prospecting area. It's all of that, and then some.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter enclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



GUNS AND GUNNERS

By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

ONE recent writer to this department takes authors to task in their writings on the subject of handloading ammunition. "Why is it," he asks, "that they write as though everyone who reads is already an expert? I'd like to see something written for a true beginner who knows nothing about the subject."

His point was well taken. At a service club meeting the other day, a college professor of physics gave a very interesting talk on atomic energy. Only trouble was that most of us didn't have the two or three years of education in physics necessary to understand what he was talking about. It made me think of this letter I received.

The art of reloading or handloading is not complicated. It is limited to centerfire ammunition. If you use factory ammunition, that little brass case you throw away is the most expensive part of the cartridge.

A cartridge consists of four components: the bullet which travels through the air to the target; the powder which burns and generates high-pressure gas to push the bullet through the barrel; the cap or primer which ignites the powder when it is struck by the hammer or

firing pin; and the brass case which holds them all together.

If that brass cartridge case was made the *exact* size of the chamber of the gun, it would be difficult to force into the chamber, so it is made a few thousandths of an inch undersize. When it is fired, the case expands to fill the chamber as a seal, preventing the high-pressure gas from leaking back through the gun action into the shooter's face. Before you can use it again, it must be resized to its original dimensions.

Take a loaded cartridge and one that has been fired. Poke the nose of the bullet into the mouth of the fired case. You will see that it fits loosely. Therefore the case must be resized so it will hold your new bullet.

In the head of the case is the primer or cap—the heart of the cartridge. Once fired, it is worthless, so the old one is punched out and a new one inserted. Then with the case resized, you are ready to load. The charge of powder is weighed or measured, then poured into the case through a small funnel. The bullet is gently started into the case mouth with the fingers and then forced into the neck with a bullet seater. Your ammunition is now loaded.

Loading tools run from simple hand types to elaborate bench machines, and cost from a few dollars to well over \$100. With the better types, the fired case is placed in the shell holder and the operation of a single hand lever forces the case into a special die slightly smaller than the gun chamber. In one operation the case is resized; a rod with a pin tip pokes out the fired primer, and an "expander" is pulled through the resized neck to bring it to proper dimensions inside so that the bullet will be held properly. In some tools an automatic feed supplies and seats the new primer in its pocket in the cartridge head during the same operation. With other tools there is a separate operation.

Both powder measures and balances or scales are used to prepare uniform charges of powder, and the correct type for the cartridge and bullet must be chosen. Loading blocks of wood with holes in them hold the filled cases to prevent spilling. You are then ready to seat bullets.

Handloaders may either buy commercial jacketed or hunting bullets, or may cast their own from lead alloys. If you cast your bullets, you need a melting pot for your lead, a special pouring dipper, and a bullet mold. After casting, the

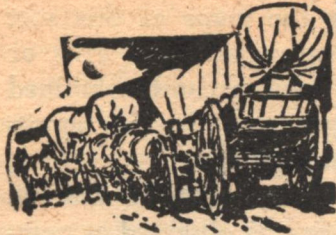
bullet is dropped on a soft pad to prevent mutilation, and after cooling, is sized and lubricated.

Here, again, you run into low-priced and expensive equipment. There are machines to size the bullet to exact diameter and fill the grooves with special lubricant, all in one operation. Simple hand tools will do the job as well, but more slowly.

There you have the basic idea of hand-loading. And beginners always ask the question: "If you have to buy those tools, wouldn't it be cheaper to buy factory ammunition?"

That depends on the amount of shooting you do. For the average man who just uses his gun to hunt game, factory ammunition will be cheaper. But the hundreds of thousands of handloaders in this country enjoy the sport of "rolling their own." In addition, they can take a high-power rifle and not only duplicate the factory loads—they can also have light and medium loads for target and small game. There are today some several dozen loading tools on the market. One police department alone loads more than 1½ million cartridges a year for the training of its officers. Recently a national magazine devoting its pages to news and current events, gave space to this growing hobby of the shooting fans.

Address all letters concerning firearms to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



WHERE TO GO

By John North

AMONG the smaller items that can make or mar a wilderness camping trip is a good map. It is surprising how often it is overlooked.

Such maps cost little. Usually they are readily obtainable. And they can be worth their weight in gold. If you have ever been lost, even temporarily in country you thought you knew like a book, you will know just what we mean.

Reader L. P., writing from Anderson, Indiana, recently asked us what we thought about maps as an adjunct to any off-the-highway camping trip. "Do you consider them important, or do you think they are 'sissy' stuff for a real outdoorsman?" L. P. wrote.

L. P., nothing that may save your life, or save you and your companions needless worry is "sissy" stuff on any outdoor venture. And a good map is in the former category.

As a matter of fact, even for on-the-highway outdoors-country auto tripping, a reliable road map is mighty handy to have along. It will show you roadside parks and public camping places in the States that have them, State parks and recreation centers, route numbers, distances to town and larger cities, and afford lots of other useful information too.

Carrying a map in any instance doesn't necessarily mean that you have to stick to a strict, cut-and-dried travel schedule. But it will show you where you are, where you have been and the best way to get to where you want to go. And highway maps are free. You can stop at any filling station and pick one up.

As for wilderness trips, and quite aside from its value in an emergency, a good topographical map of the immediate region you intend to be in serves many useful purposes. It is an almost necessary help in pre-planning any extended outdoor vacation. Canoe trips in Canada, for instance. Or a long invigorating hike along the famous Appalachian Trail that stretches from Maine down into Georgia. Or a back-packing trip on the still longer Pacific Crest Trail winding along the high West Coast mountains from Canada to Mexico.

Once your trip has been route-sketched on a map to suit your particular taste and the time you have available, the map will keep you in touch with exactly where you are at any particular moment of the journey. Moreover for many outdoor trippers there is a world of pleasure in bringing your field maps home with

you. It's fun to pore over them. They help recall especially good camping sites, scenic spots and precisely where such and such outstanding incidents of the trip occurred.

Of course you have to know how to use maps. It's no trick to learn. The top of a standard map, for instance, is always north. Lay the map out so that the top edge actually is north if you have to do that to get your bearings and avoid confusion.

The scale on the map will show the length of a mile translated into inches or fractions thereof on paper. Contour lines on topographic maps give the varying altitudes and a scale will show just what the difference in height is between each weaving contour. Thickly bunched contour lines represent steep slopes, widely spaced ones flatter country. Symbols denoting swamps, marsh land or other features are explained on each map.

In the United States, excellent detailed topographical maps prepared by the U. S. Geological Survey can be obtained for almost any local area in the whole country. The individual sheets cost little, fifteen or twenty-five cents as a rule, and show in intimate detail the exact "quad-angle" or section of the country they cover. The maps themselves can often be bought in local map and stationery stores in larger cities. And key

lists, showing the maps of this sort available for any particular area or section of the country can be obtained free of charge from the Survey itself in Washington.

For almost any part of Canada similar maps can be obtained at nominal cost through or from Canadian government agencies.

In the United States in addition to the Geological Survey maps, much of the outdoorsman's favorite vacation camping trip country in the western mountain regions, the northern wilderness lake country and the forest and woods sections of the East and Southeast is covered in serviceable detail by maps put out by the U. S. Forest Service. These maps can be obtained free from the Regional Forester's office of any of our vast network of National Forests in which you plan to camp or travel.

Many of the more popular outdoor tourist States—Colorado for one example—put out at modest cost (usually about 25 cents a sheet) excellent maps covering each individual county.

No, L. P., with maps so useful and good ones so readily obtainable, there's little excuse and no reason for starting a wilderness camping trip without one. And dollars to doughnuts you'll be mighty glad you toted it along.

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 enclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J.



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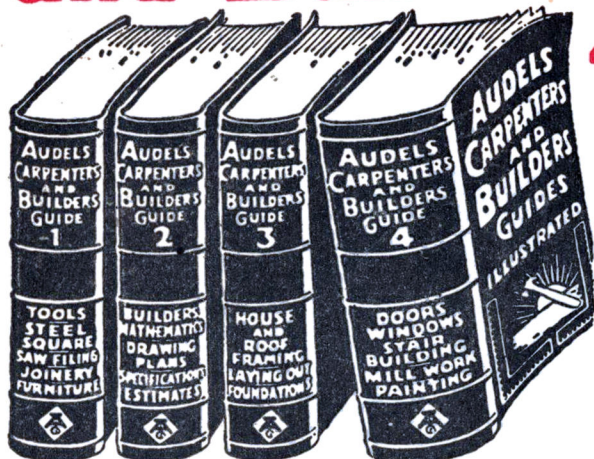
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