

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE



10¢

FEBRUARY

TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

• OUTRIDER OF THE IRON HORSE

by L. ERNENWEIN

NOVELLETES

• LEGION OF THE HARD-TO-KILL

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

• BRINGER OF GRINGO LAW

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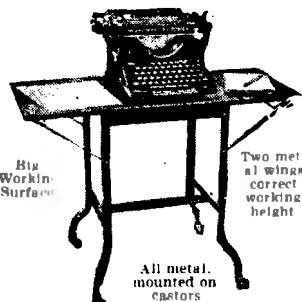
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

MARCH ISSUE
ON SALE
FEBRUARY 7TH

VOLUME XV

FEBRUARY, 1941

NUMBER 2

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OUTRIDER OF THE IRON HORSE L. Ernenwein 6

When hell broke loose at the end of track, Mike McGgettigan was there to stop it—even when the ghost of his bushwhacked partner pointed Mike's guns at an old fire-eating pioneer whose life he had vowed to save!

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A murdering jailbird crowned himself king of Arrowhead range, over the graves of honest cowmen. But could he hold his empire—when three double-crossed heroes waited only a word to leave Boothill and hand out flaming retribution?

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Savage and swift as Murieta himself, El Angel del Muerto struck eleven times—against proud California dons. . . . Then Ranger Slim Jim Bell picked up the Death Angel's cold trail—and baited his trap with good American flesh and blood!

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Down a crooked trail to vengeance rode the Liano Kid—when he sold his deadly guns to the wife-beating political boss he had sworn to stuff in a six-foot pine box!

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Johnson County was too small for big ranchers and small-time nesters alike. And the very barbed wire intended to keep them apart—brought them together in bloody war!

SQUATTERS HAVE GUTS, TOO! Kenneth Perkins 59

A blind sheepdog gave Ted Nevers the courage he needed—to march alone, with flaming guns, against a cowman legion he knew he couldn't lick!

RED MAN'S EL DORADO Raymond Murphy 66

A fabulous fortune in gold lies waiting in the redskins' El Dorado. And Nana, who knows its resting place, finds mute joy in watching the palefaces' futile search!

THE THIRTEENTH NOTCH J. J. Ballinger 70

By the number of corpses, he had left behind, Val McGrath laid claim to the West's respect. Then, with a chance to earn the most coveted notch of all, he learned that a man's last and hardest battle is with himself!

A CAPTAIN FOR VILLA Tom W. Blackburn 76

Why should poor Pepe Amalia, who only wanted to be a farmer, think he could capture the sort of Santa Eulalia—before which the mighty Pancho Villa, himself, lay helpless?

OWLHOOOT ORPHAN'S GLORY RIDE John Colohan 91

Jim Borsak, son of a long-dead killer, vowed he'd pay a life-and-death debt—even though it meant disgrace for the straight-shooter he called dad, and a hangman's knot for himself!

Western Feature

GUNS UP FOR ACTION! The Editor 4

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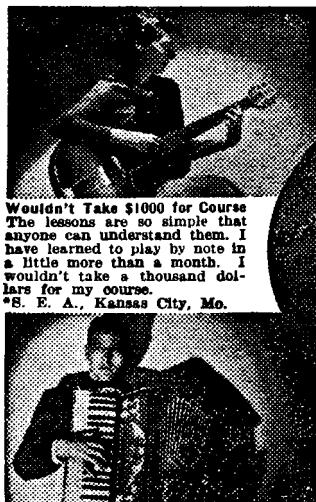
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GUNS UP FOR ACTION!

LONG shadows crept over Lost City. Wind moved through the crooked double row of cottonwoods on Main Street and set the leaves to whispering softly. To big John Keenan, they whispered of trouble before this day was out. He could read the signs.

Kiowa Jake Rath and his Lava Hills Gang were in town. And the marshal and sheriff were out on the trail of stage robbers. For the last hour, while Big John had been going over the accounts at his general store, Kiowa Jake and his men had been liquoring up at the Wishing Saloon, getting noisier by the minute.

It was not yet dusk when Big John, going over an order with Dutch Hess, who ran the store for him most of the time, heard the first crash of gunfire. He went to the door. Five of the Lava Hills Gang, roaring drunk, were in the street, shooting their pistols at empty bottles they had set up on hitching posts, benches and window ledges. A passerby, who had been hit by a stray bullet, crouched behind a barrel on the plank walk, nursing his injured foot.

Lead splintered the doorjamb beside Big John, drove him back into the store. As he ducked inside, he saw Kiowa Jake heading that way. In the store, with Big John Keenan and Hess, were Adam Foote, Big John's partner on the wheat farm they worked near town, and the young orphan the two of them had taken in, Ramon Ortega. Big John had a moment's regret that he and Adam had brought Ramon along with them on this day's trip to Lost City.

Kiowa Jake and three of his men came unsteadily inside. Kiowa pounded on a counter with his gauntleted fist, motioned to Big John with his bared pistol and shouted, "We want service! Come over here!"

He was an arresting figure. Supple as a puma, he stood six feet four in his ornate moccasins. His dark hair was long, brushing the tops of his shoulders. His piercing eyes held a cold, impassive cruelty.

The other three outlaws were at the cigar case. One of them smashed the glass with his pistol, handed boxes of cigars to his fellows. They looked at Big John, hooting and laughing. Big John, regretting the fact that he had removed his gunbelt, went behind the counter and moved along it toward Kiowa Jake. Dutch Hess

kept a pistol under the counter. . . .

Adam was unarmed, too. He started toward Ramon, who stood in front of the candy counter, but one of the outlaws sent lead thudding into the floor at his feet and said, "Dance! I wanna see you dance!"

Adam said, "Go into the back room, Ramon."

The boy started toward the rear. One of the outlaws, weaving about unsteadily, began emptying his sixgun at a row of canned goods on a shelf. He shot holes in the stovepipe. One of the bullets ricocheted.

Too late Big John cried a warning to Ramon. The boy half-turned, went down, and Big John saw the crimson blot just above the waistband.

Something inside Big John exploded. With a lunge, he closed the gap between himself and Dutch Hess' revolver. He snatched up the weapon.

Kiowa Jake's face looked savagely triumphant. His gun roared, and blood cascaded from a furrow on Big John's neck.

Big John pointed his weapon at Kiowa Jake's chest and triggered. The gun clicked emptily.

He vaulted over the low counter. A second bullet from the outlaw's sixshooter took flesh from the lobe of his ear. Then Big John was clubbing Kiowa on the side of the head, grasping his gun. The man slumped forward limply, and Big John caught him in his arms.

Thus shielded, he moved toward the other outlaws. He saw Adam carrying Ramon into the back room, saw Dutch Hess emerge with a pistol in his hand. The store manager fired, and an outlaw cried out, grasping a bullet-shattered wrist. The remaining two dropped their guns.

That's a sample of the double-barreled action in next month's lead novel—an epic of vigilante law in a hell-town that needed taming, by I. L. Thompson. Also in March 10 *Story Western*, there'll be novlettes by Cliff Farrell and Philip Ketchum, plus seven shorter stories!

THE EDITOR.

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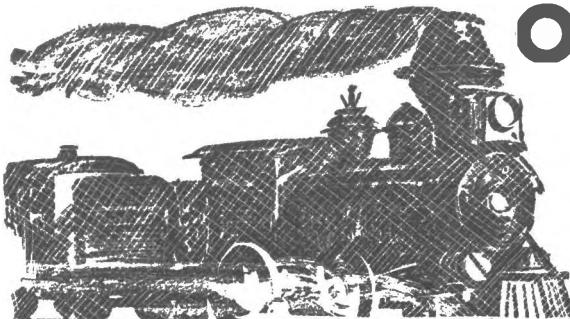
City State

OUTRIDER

A gripping novel of pioneer railroaders

By

L. ERNEN WEIN



CHAPTER ONE

Trouble-Shooter's Homecoming

HE STEPPED from the eastbound train at noon, this gaunt young gunman with the look of ghosts in his gray eyes. He was garbed in the town-gear of a cowman. He balanced a duffle-bag on his left shoulder in the

OF THE IRON HORSE

The gun-blasting, torch-blazing hell at Chapadera Bend was just another job for Mike McGettigan, end-of-track trouble shooter—till the ghost of his bushwhacked partner pointed Mike's retribution irons at the old fire-eating pioneer whose life he had vowed to save!



The canyon echoed to the blast of guns.

manner of a man used to travel. His high-beaked nose had the gently flaring nostrils of a good fighting man; but now, as he gave Chapadera Bend's dusty main thoroughfare a thoughtful consideration, there was a reflective wistfulness on his hawk-featured face.

Pop Hoxie leaned out the depot's bay

window. "Mike!" he called, and thumbed up his green eyeshade. "Mike McGettigan!"

The tall gunman grinned. He walked over to the depot and shook hands with Hoxie in friendly fashion. "Long time no see," he greeted.

"Long time no look," Pop amended. "But I don't blame you for giving this town a wide circle."

McGettigan's long lips twisted. "I been wanting to come back, but they've kept me busy at end-of-track. What's the trouble here, Pop?"

A quick frown pushed the smile from Hoxie's pudgy face. "It's a three-way proposition now," he declared. "Branch Runyon and Jeff Wanamaker bucking our railroad, with Sid Slessinger financing their fight at six percent interest. Night riders burned four box cars and a loading corral this week. They'll be blowing up the Deep Canyon bridge next."

He glanced beyond McGettigan, as if expecting to see someone else get off the train. "Where's Baldyole and Holliday?" he asked.

"They're tied up at Rosario," McGettigan said quietly.

"You mean you came here alone?" Hoxie demanded. "Just you?"

McGettigan nodded.

"That's crowding your luck too damn far, Mike," Hoxie said. "You ain't got Kid Cantrell siding you now. If you make a one-man play here the Kid'll have company up on Cemetery Hill sure as hell!"

"The Kid will have company all right," McGettigan told him. "But mebbe it won't be me."

A telegraph sounder set up its impatient *clickety-clack*, the brassy chatter plainly pulling at Pop Hoxie's attention. McGettigan said, "O.S. your train, Pop—and quit worrying."

He turned from the station platform and walked leisurely across Main Street. Except for the two guns that swayed gently in tied-down holsters, he might have been some young cowpuncher looking for a job. But every man in Chapadera Bend knew that Mike McGettigan was Arizona-Southwestern's Number One trouble-shooter. This town was entirely familiar to him; it made him recall many things he had tried to forget—blasting guns and

Boothill graves, and a blonde girl's accusing eyes. Six months might seem like a long time to a man who was waiting; but it wasn't long enough to forget. . . .

AS HE reached the opposite sidewalk, McGettigan saw Gail Wanamaker in the doorway of the Elite Millinery Store. She was talking to someone inside and she stood so that her oval face was only half revealed. Her presence put a quick awareness in Mike McGettigan; it pulled at his senses like a compelling magnet. She was the only girl he had ever loved . . . but because he refused to quit his gun-guard job with the railroad, she had scoffingly called him a hired killer.

McGettigan was remembering that now, as he went up the Acme Hotel steps. Three men on the veranda glanced sharply at him. But not one of them spoke. Their silence was like a deliberate rebuke. He went on into the lobby. This cowtown hated the railroad which was opening the country to homestead settlement. It hadn't forgotten the bloody conflict the rails had brought; and, remembering, the town hated him.

McGettigan dropped his duffle-bag. The sudden sound registered on the scrawny face of little Tay Benteen, who dozed behind the desk. The Irishman's bushy-browed eyes opened one at a time, which was a sure sign he'd been drinking. "It keeps me from seeing double," Tay had once explained.

When both eyes were open Benteen stared up at McGettigan in scowling silence. For a moment he seemed on the point of closing his eyes again. Then he grumbled, "Dream of the devil and Satan hisself shows up."

"You got a room that's fit for a white man to sleep in?" McGettigan asked.

The hotel proprietor got to his feet and stood cautiously poised, like a sailor on a slippery deck. "I've got the best damn hotel west of the Pecos," he declared, "and you know it. But I ain't aimin' to see it all stunk up with gunsmoke, like the last time you was here."

McGettigan glanced at the grandfather's clock which stood against the stairway, partly shielding the lower steps. The glass panel had been replaced recently; but the pendulum's slow-swinging brass disk still

showed the deep dent of a bullet which had been intended for Mike McGettigan.

He said, "It's first-drink time. Join me?"

Benteen shook his head. "I'm just gettin' over a terrible toot," he muttered. "Branch Runyon is in town, and Spade Vedder is with him. I'm thinkin' they ain't forgot what you did to the Bridle Bit bunch when you was here before."

"Mebbe I should've finished the job then," McGettigan reflected. He glanced at the doorway which made a lobby entrance to the Cattleman's Palace Saloon. "Sure you won't join me?"

Benteen said, "No." He added, slyly, "Gail Wanamaker is still single. She never got around to marryin' Branch Runyon."

McGettigan had already turned toward the saloon, so Tay Benteen couldn't see the quick glint that fleetingly warmed his haunted eyes. . . .

McGETTIGAN'S entrance into the smoke-fogged barroom was like the repetition of an old and oft-rehearsed act. He stood in the doorway for a moment, his questing glance running swiftly along the line of lounging men and, beyond them, to the backbar mirror. It was an involuntary gesture, this swift and silent appraisal; a grim habit which long association with trouble had built up in him.

Almost at once he saw the reflected faces of Jeff Wanamaker and Branch Runyon, side by side; the stage-owner craggy-featured and bleak-eyed; the cattle king blocky and bland, with his big gold teeth glinting in a self-satisfied smile. In that brief moment many thoughts ran through McGettigan's mind—the memory of his short friendship with Gail Wanamaker . . . the stubborn stand of her father because the new railroad would eventually bankrupt his Skyline Stage Company . . . the high-handed arrogance of Branch Runyon, who controlled all this range and wanted Gail Wanamaker to top his pyramid of personal possessions.

Then abruptly McGettigan's searching eyes found the face he had waited six months to see—the crafty, pock-pitted countenance of Spade Vedder. The Bridle Bit's gunslick foreman had once narrowly missed dry-gulching Mike; the bullet

intended for Mike had killed Kid Cantrell, who was like a younger brother to McGettigan. There had been no opportunity to even that score before A. & S. W. moved its end-of-track headquarters on west to Rosario. But McGettigan had known the chance would come eventually . . . as it had now.

An urgent sense of anticipation took hold of him—a hate-prodded eagerness that boiled up in him like a bloodlust brew. But his hands didn't move toward his guns; instead, they balled into fists. For there was a wild Irish streak in Mike McGettigan that gun skill couldn't entirely displace; there was just one way he wanted to pay this debt to a dead pardner—*with his bare hands*. Only the feel of smashed flesh beneath his knuckles could satisfy the searing hate he held for Spade Vedder!

McGettigan was savoring that anticipation, calculating the number of steps he would have to take before he could grasp Spade Vedder's shoulder and yank him around, when Sid Lessinger glanced toward him. The fat barkeep stared wide-eyed, his breath hissing out in words: "McGettigan iss back!"

Those three words were like a command. They brought a dozen faces around, caused a quick and cautious shifting of men along the bar.

A low curse slipped from McGettigan's lips. There was no chance now to slug Spade Vedder; this game would have to be played with guns. Ignoring the others, McGettigan gave Vedder strict attention, waiting for the Bridle Bit's foreman to make his move.

A man eased along the front wall; reaching the doorway, he ducked hastily through it. Jeff Wanamaker tugged nervously at the drooping mustache which gave his hollow-cheeked face a long-drawn gravity.

He said sharply, "You've got a hell of a nerve, coming back here!"

McGettigan's gaze clung to Spade Vedder, watching the gunhawk's hand hover an inch over his gun, fingers splayed and ready. There was a frozen frown on Vedder's lantern-jawed face; it matched the bright expectancy in his unblinking brown eyes and the tension of his half-crouched body.

The silence stretched out. Vedder neither spoke nor moved.

Mike McGettigan understood thoroughly how little it would take to set this man off. With a rash eagerness to have the thing finished, he shifted his glance to Branch Runyon. It appeared to be a careless shift. But it wasn't. It was a deliberate invitation, calculated to tempt Spade Vedder into trying a sneak draw. And it did. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Three Against the Railroad

SPADE VEDDER grabbed his gun with the flicking speed of a striking snake. Yet, fast as he was, Mike McGettigan's two-handed draw was faster; his guns had already blasted when Vedder's shot made a crashing echo to their room-trapped explosion.

Vedder's slug splintered the door frame an inch above McGettigan's head. The Bridle Bit gunslick didn't fire again. He fell back against the bar as if suddenly overcome by fatigue. Blood soaked through his white shirt and blossomed into a red bouquet just below his breast pocket. His heavy, short-snouted gun dropped to the floor.

McGettigan glanced again at Branch Runyon. Seeing the way anger flooded his cheeks, like a red flag unfurled, McGettigan wondered if Runyon would make a play—yet felt certain he wouldn't. It wasn't Runyon's habit to take cards in an even-up game; he would want a better deal than this when he went into action.

McGettigan caught Jeff Wanamaker in the fringe of his vision, saw the shocked whiteness of his vein-mottled face. Gail's father, he thought regretfully, was out of place in this guerilla war against Arizona-Southwestern. So far the old stage owner had steered clear of actual gunplay, but it was merely a matter of time until Wanamaker would be forced into backing his stand with a gun. Unless the showdown could be forced before that time came, Jeff Wanamaker was doomed!

McGettigan was thinking about that now as he watched the Bridle Bit foreman slide slowly down the bar's rosewood front; heard the life run out of him in

one final rasp of sound. For a tense moment, while Vedder's lifeless body sprawled in the sawdust, no one moved or spoke.

Then Sheriff Sam Ivanhoe barged through the curious crowd which had collected in the doorway. His booze-pouched eyes shifted from Vedder's body to Mike McGettigan, and then back to Branch Runyon.

"What's up?" he demanded.

Bridle Bit's boss snapped, "This railroad gunhawk pulled a sneak-draw on Spade."

McGettigan sheathed his guns. He put a speculative appraisal on Runyon and said quietly, "You're a damn liar."

Runyon was wearing a gun in a half-breed holster. But he made no move to grab it. Arrogantly, he said, "You can't call me a liar!"

"I can," McGettigan declared, "and I am. Every man in this room knows Vedder made the first move."

It was, he realized instantly, a futile declaration. Chapadera Bend was Branch Runyon's town. No one would deny his testimony. These men were saying nothing—and saying it often.

Sheriff Ivanhoe's eyes plainly showed the cross-currents of indecision. He stared probingly at McGettigan, as if estimating the chances of arresting him without gunplay. He opened his tobacco-stained lips to speak, changed his mind, and then turned to Runyon. Seeing all this, and strongly sensing its significance, Mike McGettigan smiled to himself. Sam Ivanhoe, he guessed, was regretting the badge which Runyon's political power had given him.

Ivanhoe said apologetically, "Mebby you didn't see the start of it, Branch." Turning to Wanamaker, he asked, "How'd it look to you, Jeff?"

The stage owner scowled. For a long moment he didn't answer. Then he said gruffly, "It was a fair enough fight—but, by God, we want no more of his fancy shooting. Run him out of town!"

Sheriff Ivanhoe's relief was obvious. He glanced at Runyon. "Will that suit you, Branch?"

"You're wearing the star," the blocky-faced cowman grunted. Turning through the batwings, he elbowed his way through

the fast-gathering crowd on the sidewalk.

Ivanhoe motioned to two loungers at the bar. "Carry Spade over to Gillman's furniture store."

Sid Slessinger leaned his huge bulk on the bar and watched the men pick up Vedder's body. "It iss too bad," he muttered. "Spade didn't have a chance."

But if Ivanhoe heard Slessinger he paid no heed. He turned to McGettigan. "I'm giving you just twenty-four hours to get out of town," he said pompously.

"Thanks for being so liberal," McGettigan drawled, and watched the lawman follow Wanamaker out to the street.

MCGETTIGAN sauntered to the bar and waggled a finger at Sid Slessinger. The bullet-headed saloonman eased over, his paunchy stomach riding the rosewood rim. Something Slessinger saw in McGettigan's eyes made him lick his loose lips nervously. For a moment he stood without speaking, a fine sprinkle of perspiration on the fish-belly whiteness of his fat face.

He was, McGettigan reflected, a thoroughly gross and repulsive man. Slessinger had made a tidy fortune selling rotgut whiskey to railroad laborers during the short time Chapadera Bend was an end-of-track boomtown. He had imported painted percentage girls and slick-fingered card sharps from Tombstone; between them they had cheated many a poor Paddy out of his week's pay. Remembering all this, Mike McGettigan waited. . . .

"Vot'll you have, McGettigan?" Slessinger said finally.

McGettigan's lean right hand streaked across the bar, clutched Slessinger's shirt front and pulled him forward. "Mister McGettigan to you!" he snarled. "Don't forget that!"

Slessinger's flabby face took on a salmon-pink hue. An inward heat flared up and blazed in his green-gray eyes. "All right—all right! Mister it iss!"

McGettigan released him. "Bourbon," he ordered, and wiped his right hand on his pants, as if those fingers had contacted filth.

When he went back into the hotel lobby Tay Benteen eyed him quizzically. "You went to a lot o' trouble for one drink," he said. "How many men would you kill

if you was minded to git good and drunk?"

McGettigan signed the dog-eared register and held out his hand for a room key. He picked up his luggage and said flatly, "I drink as much as suits me."

As he went upstairs he heard Benteen exclaim, "You'll never be a drunkard, begorry. You won't live long enough!"

The words were a rankling barb in McGettigan's mind as he dumped his duffle-bag in Number Seven. Pop Hoxie had spouted a grim warning, and now Tay Benteen was muttering about impending doom. Old men, he reflected, were all alike; the longer they lived the tighter they clung to life—like misers clinging to tarnished treasure.

McGettigan went to the window and tugged it open. Hotel rooms were all alike, too; they had the same musky taint of men and meals and mop water.

"Hell," he said disgustedly, "I'm mournful as a tear-jerking preacher at a funeral. I should've taken a couple more drinks."

But he knew booze wouldn't drive out the jittery sickness which always slogged through him after a killing. He had tried whiskey many times. This feeling was a strange thing. He had trained his hands to draw and fire in perfect coordination, had schooled all his reflexes into a controlled and nerveless precision. Men called him a born gunman, without normal fear or feelings—a merciless machine of destruction. Yet Mike McGettigan got sick inside every time he killed a man!

JEFF WANAMAKER and Branch Runyon were waiting when Sid Slessinger came into the Skyline Stage office and carefully shut the door behind him. Wanamaker motioned to a chair and said, "All right, Branch. You're running this show. What's next?"

Runyon's gold teeth clamped tightly on an unlighted cigar. For a long moment he gazed out the dusty front window, as if reluctant to speak. Then he said sourly, "The plan misfired. I figgered if my men burned a few boxcars here it would draw gun-guards away from the grading camp, so's we could get in a raid there that would really put a crimp in their construction work. I didn't figger McGettigan would come here alone. Nobody but

a damn fool like him would've done it."

A worried frown creased Wanamaker's face. "Seems like all your plans backfire," he complained. "You figured A. & S. W. would go broke by this time. Seems like I should've sold out my stage line at the price they offered in the first place."

"It iss a matter of time," Slessinger said smoothly.

"And money," Wanamaker grunted. "It's beginning to look like we'll go broke, instead of the railroad."

That seemed to anger Branch Runyon. He slammed the unsmoked cigar into a cuspidor. "We'd have stopped them before now if you hadn't talked me out of wrecking a few trains. That is the one sure way to lick 'em. They can't guard every bridge and trestle like they guard their grading camps."

"I'll not be a party to train wrecking," Wanamaker said doggedly. "Fighting their damned gunhawks is one thing—taking the lives of innocent passengers is another. I'll sell out my stage line before I'll agree to that!"

Runyon glanced sharply at Sid Slessinger.

Slessinger said, "Your stage company is mortgaged to me, Jeff. If you sell it now for what the railroad offers there would be nothing left after you pay me."

Wanamaker got up and strode back and forth across the floor like a trapped tiger—a very old and shabby tiger. He had pioneered the first stage outfit into the Halcyon Hill country, had weathered Apache raids and bandit holdups to build a successful business enterprise. Then the new railroad had thrust its steel head westward, threatening all that he had built. They had offered him less than half what he considered he should get for his years of struggle. And now Sid Slessinger was reminding him that the cost of this fight had gobbled up most of his equity in Skyline!

Branch Runyon dug another cigar from his vest pocket. "We aren't licked by a long shot," he said confidently. "No use letting Spade's death spook us all up. I've got plenty more gunslingers—and Sam Ivanhoe knows how to handle dynamite."

"I won't agree to train wrecking," Wanamaker insisted. "If that's the only way to lick A. & S. W. I'm through."

"There iss another way—a better way," Slessinger declared. "The Deep Canyon bridge can be blasted without wrecking a train. If it was blasted out it would stop all supplies coming from Tucson. Then, if McGettigan iss killed, that would bring gun-guards running here so that the grading camp could be raided without trouble. You strike them a double blow—and it iss finished!"

"That might do the trick!" Runyon exclaimed. "I'll go have a talk with Sam Ivanhoe."

When he looked up he saw Gail Wanamaker standing in the hallway which led to the upstairs living quarters. By the questioning gravity of her eyes, he knew she had heard too much.

She came on into the room, a tall, supple girl with a woman's warmth and graciousness about her. She had another quality which Branch Runyon couldn't quite comprehend—a resolute independence which he hadn't been able to break down. He had been wanting this blonde daughter of Jeff Wanamaker's for a long time, but she refused to be stampeded into becoming queen of his Bridle Bit cattle kingdom.

Some of that independence of hers showed in her face now as she stood framed in the doorway. "Killing Mike McGettigan won't solve your problem," she said. "It will just mean more shooting and killing, like we had here before."

Runyon stood up, showing her an habitual courtesy. "That's a risk we have to take, Gail," he said. "The future of my range, and your father's stage business, depends on our winning this fight. If we lose there'll be a hundred homesteaders crowding the grass within a year—and the railroad will bankrupt your father."

Gail said wearily, "I know—I know. But at least you'd both be alive. You wouldn't be bullet-blasted bundles of old clothes being carried into Gillman's furniture store, like Spade Vedder."

Jeff Wanamaker resumed his nervous pacing of the floor, but Sid Slessinger sat suave and unstirred. "There iss still a good chance to win," he said. "A very good chance."

"For you, yes!" Gail exclaimed. "No matter which way this ends, you will win without risking your life. Even if Branch and dad are killed you'll collect your loans

with interest. You're smart, Slessinger."

Wanamaker walked over to her. "This isn't a thing for a woman to decide, Gail. You go along upstairs and get supper."

Gail glanced appealingly at Runyon. "Killing McGettigan," she declared, "will be a mistake you'll regret, Branch."

Then she turned obediently back down the hallway.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Fighter's Duty

MIKE McGETTIGAN ate supper with Pop Hoxie at the Oriental Cafe, then accompanied the old telegrapher back to the depot. "Ask Rosario how things are there," he suggested.

Pop turned to the key, tapped out, "RO . . . RO . . . RO," which was the Morse signal for headquarters at end-of-track.

The telegraph intrigued Mike McGettigan; it always had. As a kid cavalryman in the Confederate army he had wanted to be a telegraph operator. But Jeb Stuart had needed troopers, so Mike had quit practicing the code to swing a saber. Now, as he tamped tobacco into his pipe for his usual after-supper smoke, McGettigan listened alertly to the sounder's clicking.

Pop Hoxie glanced up. "You still itching to telegraph?"

McGettigan nodded. "It's a boyhood ambition I've never lived down."

Pop got up, said, "There's RO. Ask him what you want to know."

McGettigan eased into the chair. His teeth tightened on the pipe stem, and a queer nervousness made his hand tremble a little as he reached for the key.

"Haven't touched one of these things since our last practice session six months ago," he muttered, and began slowly tapping out dots and dashes which spelled: "What is new there? McGettigan."

When he closed the key switch his fingers were moist with perspiration. But there was a boyish pride in him as the answer came clicking back across the miles of wire. Picking up a pencil, he concentrated on the staccato rattle of the sounder, translating the electric signals into letters and writing them down, so that they made the words: "All quiet here."

When it was finished Pop slapped him affectionately on the shoulder. "By God," he exclaimed, "you're a Morse man!"

McGettigan was basking in the glow of Pop's approval when Gail Wanamaker stepped into the doorway and said, "Mike, I'd like to talk with you for a moment."

McGettigan looked wonderingly at her lamplit face. He took off his battered gray hat, walked to the doorway and followed her out to the platform.

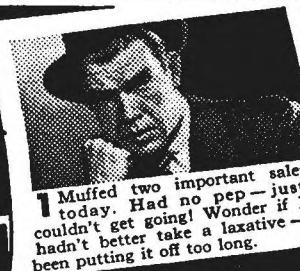
"You can't accomplish anything here," she said urgently. "Why risk your life staying?"

She stood just within the bay window's light, her upturned face softly veiled in the reflected glow. McGettigan decided

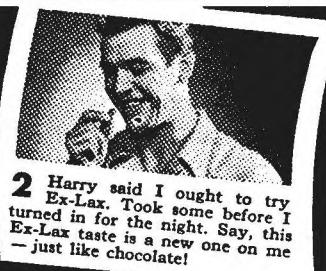
From the Confidential Notebook of Mr. F---



3 Felt like a million when I got up this morning. Ex-Lax worked fine. Just watch me go after those birds today!



1 Muffed two important sales today. Had no pep — just couldn't get going! Wonder if I hadn't better take a laxative — been putting it off too long.



2 Harry said I ought to try Ex-Lax. Took some before I turned in for the night. Say, this Ex-Lax taste is a new one on me — just like chocolate!

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.

10¢ and 25¢



it was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. The nearness of it put a quick warmth in him.

He said, "I accomplished something when I squared Kid Cantrell's killing. It's something that should have been done a long time ago."

"Is that why you came here?" Gail asked. "Are you going back to Rosario now that it's done?"

THE note of hopefulness in her voice puzzled McGettigan. Why, he wondered, was she so anxious to have him leave this town. He said, "No. That was a personal chore. I was sent here to protect railroad property."

"And you intend to stay?"

He nodded, said thoughtfully, "Kid Cantrell and a lot of other good men have died so this railroad could be built, Gail. We aren't going to let Branch Runyon's greed nor your father's stubbornness stop us now."

They stood in silence for a moment, as if separated by some high barrier of conflicting thought. The telegraph instrument inside began chattering, and above that metallic sound came a drum-beat of hoofs as three riders loped out of town, headed east.

Gail's hand grasped McGettigan's sleeve. "They're planning to kill you tonight, Mike. You must leave—before it's too late."

The pressure of her fingers on his arm stirred a potent sense of assurance in Mike McGettigan. It made him remember the one time he had kissed her, how sweetly her lips had surrendered, and how her arms had returned the rash pressure of his embrace. But almost at once he recalled that she had expected him to quit his gun job with Arizona-Southwestern; that she had been amazed and indignant because his love for her was not stronger than his loyalty to a railroad. Now she was trying to talk him into leaving Chapadera Bend, and because of what had gone before, he guessed that it wasn't just to save his life.

"Why are you so anxious to have me leave?" he asked.

She answered without hesitation. "For two reasons. Because I don't want to see you die—and because your death will

bring gunslingers back here for a show-down fight that may mean my father's death."

So that was it! This girl was trying to shield her bleak-eyed father from the doom that inevitably awaited him. She understood that even though her father was no gunfighter, he had joined forces with a gunslick bunch that would eventually be cut down like the wolves they were—and that Wanamaker would go down with them.

McGettigan said, "Your father did a very foolish thing when he joined up in the fight with Runyon. Even if Arizona-Southwestern should go broke it would be just a question of time until another company would pick up where we leave off. This road isn't just a money-making enterprise, Gail—it's the symbol of a progress that can't be stopped by greed and guns."

THE truth of that seemed to impress her deeply. But it didn't weaken the pressure of her fingers on his arm. "Perhaps you are right, Mike," she said. "God knows I'm afraid you are. I've tried to talk dad out of his stand, but he's proud and stubborn. He brought the first stage into these hills and he resents being crowded out; the same as Branch Runyon resents having homesteaders settle on his range."

"Your father," McGettigan admitted, "may have some excuse. But Runyon is a land-grabbing hog. He stole this range from a dozen small outfits that pioneered it ahead of him. He deserves no mercy at all."

"You and Branch have hated each other from the moment you first met. That's why I want you to leave, Mike. He's planning to have you killed."

McGettigan grinned. "I'll take a lot of killing."

"Isn't there anything I can say, or do, that will change your mind?"

He said, "I'm not leaving."

"Not even if I'd go with you, Mike?"

For a full moment, while her unflinching eyes looked up at him, Mike McGettigan stood without speaking. Here was a chance to end the long, lonely trail. With this girl for a wife he could go back to Texas and build a little cow spread of his own; perhaps raise a family. Gail didn't

understand that his quitting the railroad wouldn't really change things here; Arizona-Southwestern would win eventually . . . and Jeff Wanamaker would die fighting for a stage line that was no longer needed. But if Mike stayed there might be a chance to save her father—just one chance in a hundred. If he could force Branch Runyon and Sid Slessinger into a shootout, this whole fight against A. & S. W. might collapse before Wanamaker got himself killed.

His hands grasped her shoulders. "Would you be going with me—just to save your father?"

Her eyes didn't waver. And she made no effort to evade the question. She said very softly, "Yes."

A cynical smile flicked across McGettigan's lean face. His hands loosened their grip on her shoulders and he said flatly, "I'm staying, Gail, for a reason you wouldn't understand."

Something like anger showed in her eyes then. It put a warmth in them, made them glow as they had that day, six months ago, when he had kissed her. But there was no warmth in her lips now, nor in her voice when she said, "You're a stubborn and merciless man, Mike McGettigan. You've no normal feelings at all."

She turned back across Main Street, her hair shining like burnished copper as she passed the lighted windows of the Oriental Cafe. McGettigan fashioned a cigarette and lighted it, his face reflecting deep gravity in the matchflare.

"No normal feelings at all," he mused mockingly, remembering the slogging sickness Spade Vedder's killing had caused.

This, he understood, was just another crazy twist in a trail of many queer turnings. A man didn't shape his own destiny; destiny shaped a man to whatever pattern it chose. A frivolous Fate had offered him a chance to quit this grisly game of swift slaughter by passing up a chance to save the father of the girl he loved. And by choosing to play out the cards the way they were dealt he had lost Gail Wanamaker. . . .

The grim understanding of that caused him to curse as he sauntered toward the Acme Hotel. This town, he reflected, was poison to him.

Tay Benteen stood in the shadows at

the far end of the veranda. "Mike," he said very softly, as McGettigan came up the steps. When McGettigan walked over to him the little Irishman spoke cautiously. "I got some news that might interest you. Important news."

McGettigan perched on the railing, said, "Go ahead."

The Celt lowered his voice to a whisper. "I was sittin' down at the other end of the veranda, right next to the saloon stoop. I heard Runyon tellin' Jeff Wanamaker what they're plannin' to do. Sid Slessinger has a gun behind the bar. He's supposed to knock you off when you come in for a drink, usin' the alibi that you threatened his life this afternoon."

McGettigan chuckled. "I've been itching to put a slug into that fat pig for a long time. Mebbe this will give me my chance to do that little job."

"But there's more to it," Benteen whispered hurriedly. "Runyon, Ivanhoe and Wanamaker are on their way to Deep Canyon. They're going to blast the bridge, so's no trains can come in from Tucson."

McGettigan slid from the railing. "You sure about that?" he demanded, and remembered the three riders he had heard heading east.

"Sure I'm sure," Tay muttered. "I heard 'em talk and I seen 'em ride away. Ivanhoe fetched a sack of dynamite from his office just before they left."

McGettigan gripped Benteen's arm. "Thanks, Tay," he said. "You're a true-blue Mick."

He hitched up his guns with that purely instinctive motion which is a gunfighter's gesture of preparedness, and turned toward the steps.

"Where you goin'?" Tay asked, in a quiet voice.

McGettigan said, "To Deep Canyon," and strode toward the livery stable.

CHAPTER FOUR

Train Orders from Boothill

RIDING a rented horse, McGettigan left Chapadera Bend at a run. The three bridge blasters, he calculated, had at least a half hour's start. But they wouldn't be riding fast, not with Sheriff Ivanhoe packing a sack of dynamite on his saddle.

McGettigan followed the stage road east for five miles, then sent his horse up the steep southern slope of Apache Divide, beyond which was Deep Canyon and the longest trestle Arizona-Southwestern had ever built.

A full moon hung high over the Halcyon Hills; it flooded the roundabout range with a mellow, white light and made this trip through tangled brush and boulders a fast, mile-saving shortcut. At the crest of the divide McGettigan urged his mount to a lunging lope. Yet swift as that pace was, McGettigan's thoughts ran faster. They passed his fleeting shadow, raced on to the canyon where Jeff Wanamaker might even now be crouching with Branch Runyon and Sheriff Ivanhoe in the act of blowing up a bridge. In a matter of minutes there would be a gun fight; if he got to the bridge in time he would have to drive the dynamiters off with bullets. And he *had* to get there in time!

When he was within an eighth of a mile of Deep Canyon, McGettigan dismounted. Tying his sweat-lathered horse to a stunted pine, he ran along the boulder-strewn crest on foot.

Below him, to the north, where the railroad swung in a flaring curve to approach the bridge, steel rails gleamed in the moonlight. He was close to the trestle now, could feel the down-draft of air into the canyon. Perhaps he had beaten the nightriders here; they might have decided to approach the bridge from its eastern end.

Reaching the rim of the canyon, McGettigan studied the towering trestle and the ground below it, where the spindly framework of supporting timbers shone like silver spires in the bright moonlight. There was no sign of movement down there.

For a long moment, while a tight hush hung over the hills, he wondered if Tay Benteen had double-crossed him, if the grouchy little Irishman had deliberately sent him on a wild-goose chase. Or could it be that Runyon had framed the eavesdropping play purposely, to get McGettigan out of town while he raided the depot?

He was wondering about that and had almost decided to race back to town, when the bridge was suddenly illuminated by a dazzling flare. The blue-tinted flame was

followed instantly by a blast that seemed to shake the canyon walls. The terrific impact of crashing sound racketed up and up, like a high-crested wave. It hung for a second, as if suspended, then died with a long-reaching echo that ran far along the canyon like a shuddering groan.

McGettigan's ringing ears registered the rending crash of splintered timbers. He saw a middle section of supports spray out like kindling wood from the trestle's base. As he waited for the collapse of the whole structure, he cursed himself for being too late.

THE bridge seemed to teeter before his eyes, seemed to sway drunkenly in the upsurge of billowing smoke and dust. But though the central portion of the trestle sagged slightly, it didn't collapse!

In the abrupt silence which followed the explosion's fading echoes, McGettigan heard voices almost directly below him. Leaning over the rim, he glimpsed Branch Runyon and Jeff Wanamaker standing on a secondary ridge halfway down the canyon's slope.

"Damn it, Sam, you didn't use enough dynamite!" Runyon shouted angrily. "Give it another jolt! And this time do it right!"

For a moment McGettigan couldn't locate Sheriff Ivanhoe. Then the lawman called, "All right—all right," and McGettigan saw him slide down a steep bank farther along the canyon.

Whereupon McGettigan drew his right-hand gun and sent a quick shot at Ivanhoe. The sheriff, who was cradling the sack of dynamite in his arms, yelled, "What the hell!" He rolled behind an outcrop of rocks, and in the next instant a gun barked below McGettigan, the slug sailing wide by several feet.

For a time, then, while McGettigan crawled to a better vantage point, the canyon echoed to the blast of guns. Bullets were coming at him from two angles now, some so close that they sang in his ears. The thought came to him that he didn't want to shoot Jeff Wanamaker. Hell, his whole strategy had been to bring a quick end to the trouble so that Gail's father wouldn't be drawn into gunplay. If a slug should cut the old man down now . . .

With the fear of that in his mind, McGettigan concentrated his fire on Sheriff Ivanhoe. He crawled farther along the crest, trying to come at the lawman from a flanking position. But the guns to his left kept smashing slugs at him; they made it impossible to get a decent shot at Ivanhoe. When a bullet sliced a raw furrow across his ribs McGettigan cursed angrily and raked the lower ridge with random shots.

Then, while he reloaded both guns, the firing slowed down. He heard Branch Runyon yell to Ivanhoe, but the words were lost in the blast of the lawman's continued shooting. Soon after that McGettigan heard horses moving beyond the bulge of the ridge, and he guessed that Runyon and Wanamaker were planning to circle and come up behind him. If he didn't down Ivanhoe before this rear action took place, the battle would be soon over!

With that grim realization in him, McGettigan reached a quick decision. Sam Ivanhoe had to be stopped quickly if the bridge was to be saved from complete destruction. And there was only one way to stop him. Grasping both guns in his hands, McGettigan moved to the edge of the slope and, ignoring the snarl of slugs which greeted him, went down the sandy bank in a dust-swirling slide.

It was a foolhardy move. The odds were all against him—all except one. That was the element of surprise, of doing the one thing Sam Ivanhoe wouldn't expect him to do. And there was another possible advantage in this crazy, feet-first charge toward a forted-up enemy; if Sheriff Ivanhoe had a yellow streak in him he might be buffaloed into a confused retreat. And Mike McGettigan was counting on that yellow streak!

FOR fleeting seconds, as the momentum of his sliding fall increased, McGettigan felt sure that Ivanhoe was going to stampede. The lawman had stopped shooting. McGettigan was within a few feet of the bottom before he caught a glimpse of him. Then, as he saw Ivanhoe loom above that yonder barricade of boulders, he knew instantly how greatly he had underestimated this tin-star lawdog. For Ivanhoe wasn't running; he was lighting the

fuse on a stick of dynamite, drawing the stick back in position to toss it!

In that breathless instant, as his boot heels slid toward solid ground, Mike McGettigan knew there was no chance to escape the oncoming dynamite. This, he thought futilely, was a hell of a way for a high-class gun-slinger to die—with two guns in his hands and no chance to use them.

He reached the secondary ridge as Sam Ivanhoe drew back his arm, took deliberate aim and made his throw. In that tense interval, while the stick sailed through the moonlight with its sputtering fuse sparkling behind it, Mike McGettigan's mind grasped at a thin-raveled strand of hope; a desperate, fast-dwindling thing. But a hope!

Dropping his right-hand gun, he glued his gaze on that flashing cylinder of destruction. He willed all his faculties to one single purpose. If he could catch that dynamite before it exploded . . .

The down-arching stick seemed strangely dwarfed, like a silver blade slicing the air; a blade so slender that no hand could catch it. Yet because McGettigan's senses were concentrated to a razor-sharp edge of perception, the hurtling dynamite seemed to travel in slow-motion, as if strangely suspended.

His clutching fingers stabbed at the falling stick—grasped it. And, with a hair-fine agility which was to be perfected, years later, by the American doughboys in far-off Flanders, his arm swung swiftly back, cushioning the impact, then continued up in a sweep of perfect co-ordination so fluidly smooth that the throw seemed delayed, almost deliberate. But it wasn't. For his fingers released the dynamite instantly and the stick sailed swiftly back to the rock barricade.

As the dynamite left his hand, McGettigan threw himself backward and down. For one taut instant there was absolute silence; a vacuum-like hush so complete that he thought the dynamite must have missed fire. Then an ear-splitting explosion burst with a concussion so tremendous that the ground seemed to rise up and smash against his face.

* * *

Ten minutes later Mike McGettigan

rode back across Apache Divide. Behind him was a damaged bridge and a broken barricade of bloody boulders which were all the monument Sheriff Sam Ivanhoe would ever need.

McGettigan halted his horse at frequent intervals, listening for sound of Runyon and Wanamaker. But he heard nothing, and when he entered the stage road he saw the recently made tracks of two horses heading toward Chapadera Bend. He wondered why these men had deserted Sam Ivanhoe. He was still wondering about that when he rode into town and went directly to the depot.

AN EASTBOUND train stood at the station, its locomotive releasing long, gusty chugs, as if panting after the hard pull from Rosario. The conductor stood in the depot doorway, impatiently juggling his stem-winding watch.

"Deep Canyon bridge has been blasted," McGettigan told him. "Don't pull out."

He hurried on inside, intending to have Pop Hoxie notify the dispatcher at Tucson. He stopped abruptly. He turned to the conductor, who had followed him inside. "Where's Pop?"

"How the hell should I know?" the conductor snapped. "I been waiting seven minutes for him, and the old fool ain't showed up."

McGettigan glanced at the telegraph table, saw Pop's pipe lying there. Picking it up, he felt of the bowl. It was still warm. Something else caught at his attention: the fact that Hoxie's green eyeshade wasn't on the table. If, for some unaccountable reason, Pop had gone out to Main Street, he would have left his eyeshade on the desk.

It occurred to him then that Branch Runyon had probably beaten him back to town by almost an hour. The depot's side door was open, and he went to it. He lit a match and peered at the dust outside. Two sets of tracks showed in the sandy soil—the flat imprint of shoes, and the smaller impression of high-heeled boots.

Hoxie, he knew then, had been shanghaied. But why? The answer came abruptly. Branch Runyon knew the bridge had been weakened, that it probably wouldn't support a heavy train. He knew

that two trains were scheduled to cross that trestle tonight; the eastbound passenger and a westbound freight from Tucson. And he didn't want either of those trains warned against the wreck that awaited them!

McGettigan strode hurriedly back to Hoxie's desk. The conductor said excitedly, "If that bridge is out the dispatcher ought to be told before Number Three leaves Apache Junction. I'll go hunt up Hoxie."

"Don't bother," McGettigan muttered. "He's been shanghaied."

The conductor's mouth sagged open. "Then—there ain't no way to stop Number Twelve?" he blurted blankly.

McGettigan ignored the question. Sitting down at the table, he opened the key switch, steeled his wrist muscles against the nervous trembling that always accompanied his first movements at a key. Gripping the rubber knob of the instrument, he made the call letters for Apache Junction: dot-dash . . . space . . . dash-dot . . . dash-dot—"AJ" over and over, until the circuit was finally opened and Apache Junction answered.

During the next five minutes, while a pop-eyed conductor stared incredulously, Mike McGettigan sent his first train order—a terse command to stop Number Three at Apache Junction. Then he reported the bridge blast to headquarters at Rosario, suggested a repair crew be sent to Deep Canyon at once.

After that he headed toward the Cattleman's Palace for a much-needed drink. Telegraphing, he decided, was a more nerve-wracking game than gun-fighting.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Rides the Cab

MCGETTIGAN was halfway across Main Street when Gail Wanamaker came running from the opposite sidewalk. "Mike," she cried excitedly. "Dad's been shot! He's got to go to Tucson on that train!"

Only three of those words really registered in McGettigan's mind. "Dad's been shot!" The rest of them were lost in the stark knowledge that one of his bullets had sought out Jeff Wanamaker in that

recent gunfight at Deep Canyon. . . .

Here, he knew instantly, was the answer to why Sam Ivanhoe had been deserted. Runyon had brought Wanamaker back to a medico, and then, with a murderer's sly scheming, had grabbed Pop Hoxie.

He said, "I'm sorry, Gail. Sorrier than I've ever been."

Her eyes flashed scornfully. "It's too late for that," she declared. "But you can hold the train until we bring dad down on a stretcher."

Remembering the damaged bridge, McGettigan shook his head. "What about Doc Brown? Can't he take care of your father here?"

"So that's how dad got shot!" she exclaimed. "Branch said you did it, but he wouldn't tell how it happened. And I didn't believe him."

McGettigan sighed. "It was none of my choosing, Gail."

She turned away, her shoulders slumped, her slender body seeming suddenly small and dejected. She wasn't crying, yet; but she would be soon. Because her father couldn't possibly survive a long, jolting stage ride to Tucson.

The sense of her utter hopelessness stabbed McGettigan like a sharp-pointed lance. Even though this girl hated him, he loved her . . . and he always would.

Such hell-for-leather gents as Mike McGettigan, L. Ernenwein's colorful character in this novel, fought to tame the world's most dramatic frontier. Another great character of the old West that you'll want to know is Sudden John Irons, quick-draw trouble-shooter, in Dee Linford's smashing novel, "Murder Builds a Boom-Camp," appearing in the present issue of *Star Western!* Buy your copy of this famous all-novel Western magazine today!

"The bullet is lodged against dad's spine. Doc Brown won't attempt the operation. He says the slightest slip of a scalpel would mean sure death; only a surgeon can possibly remove that bullet. Dad's only chance is to reach Tucson quick!"

The irony of that brought a tight scowl to McGettigan's face. What a hell of a trick Fate had played here tonight! Even while plans for saving Jeff Wanamaker from future death had been fresh in his mind, McGettigan had shot the old stage-owner; and Wanamaker, attempting to wreck a railroad bridge, had ruined his one chance of reaching a hospital in time!

Grasping at straws, McGettigan said, "How about using one of your father's stagecoaches?"

"Do you hate him that much?" Gail demanded incredulously. "Would you see him die so that you can prove your argument that this country needs a railroad instead of a stage line?"

Whereupon Mike McGettigan told her about the bridge; how its base had been damaged and the whole structure weakened.

The frantic fingers of his mind snatched desperately for a plan, any plan that might mean a fighting chance. If there were only some way to get Jeff Wanamaker to Tucson!

Suddenly, then, he took a quick step after her, put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around. "There's one way we might get him here in time," he said hastily. "There's a fifty-fifty chance that bridge might stand up under an engine and one car."

Some of the slump went out of her shoulders. "Why didn't you say so before? If there's only one chance in a hundred I want to take it!"

McGettigan grinned. This girl, he thought fleetingly, had a gambler's spirit. "I'll arrange for the train," he said, and he watched her run toward Doc Brown's house, holding her long skirt up out of the dust.

During the next ten minutes, in the time it took Doc Brown to prepare his patient for a race against death, Mike McGettigan rode rough-shod over all objections at the depot. When the conductor flatly refused to have anything to do with

the run across the damaged bridge, McGettigan hurried to the locomotive and put his proposition to the engineer. In an effort to minimize the danger he declared reassuringly, "That trestle will stand up under an engine and baggage car!"

But here also he was bucking the high barrier of fear. "Then handle her yourself," the engineer muttered stubbornly and climbed down from the cab.

McGettigan glanced at the smoke-smudged face of the fireman. "How'd you like to be promoted to engineer?" he asked.

The brawny young fireman grinned. "What ye think I've been sweating me heart out for if it ain't for that?"

McGettigan glanced down the train, saw Doc Brown assisting Gail into the baggage car. Then he climbed into the cab and said, "Beginning right now you're an engineer, and I'm a fireman. Roll her out of here!"

AS THE one-car train pulled out, McGettigan took off his buckskin jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The newly-appointed engineer handled the throttle like an old-timer. By the time the big locomotive cleared the east end of the yards the click of rail joints beneath the drivers had increased to a rapid *clickity-clack, clickity-clack*.

The cab's odor of coal gas and hot metal and burning oil was familiar to McGettigan. He had ridden the "head end" many times during the two years he had been a gun-guard for Arizona-Southwestern. But he had never fired an engine before, and he was glad to find a full-bodied bed of coals when he opened the fire-box door.

"She won't need much till we hit the grade on the other side," the ex-fireman declared. "And mebbe we won't git to that other side."

McGettigan roosted on the narrow seat and looked ahead. When the engine took the long curve approaching the canyon and the high-arched trestle was plainly visible in the moonlight, the young engineer asked, "Ye reckon she'll stand up?"

McGettigan recalled the splintered supports he had seen, and the sagging center portion. "Mebbe yes—mebbe no. What's

your name, amigo?" His face was blank.

"Shaughnessy," the engineer said. "Patrick Shaughnessy."

He had shoved the throttle close to the boiler-head, so that the locomotive was barely moving as it eased out onto the bridge.

McGettigan said, "The Lord loves the Irish, Pat. Mebbe we'll make it."

The engine's weight set up a creaking complaint in the supporting timbers. The twin ribbons of rail seemed to sway, and for the first time in his life Mike McGettigan felt strangely insecure in the cab. Always before, the locomotive's great bulk had made him feel safe; but now that bulk was a ponderous threat to security.

With the patient judgment of a man walking a tight rope, Pat Shaughnessy manipulated the throttle and air valves, keeping the engine to a steady, crawling speed. McGettigan felt the trestle give under them as they neared the center of the long span—saw the tracks sway like silver ribbons. Looking down into the deep shadows below, he felt suddenly dizzy. Strange, he reflected, how the whole pattern of a man's life kept repeating itself. He had gambled against death in this same canyon two hours ago; now he was gambling again—with a girl who hated him.

Abruptly then a supporting beam broke with an explosive crack. The sound rose sharply above the locomotive's steady chugging and the constant complaint of contracting timbers. McGettigan glanced at Shaughnessy, saw the young Irishman's face go greenish-gray. But he wasn't thinking about Pat Shaughnessy now, nor about himself. He was remembering that Gail Wanamaker was back there in the baggage car with her father; that when this locomotive plunged into Deep Canyon she would go with it!

IN THAT seemingly endless interval, while all his senses flinched from the expected crash of splintering timbers, McGettigan cursed the tricks of Fate which had led up to this moment. If the bridge buckled now the resulting wreck wouldn't stop Arizona-Southwestern; it wouldn't cheat Kid Cantrell of the monument he deserved—a completed railroad. But it would cost the life of the grandest

girl Mike McGettigan had ever known!

He became aware of the fact that he was gripping the seat, pulling up on it, subconsciously attempting to lessen the weight of his own body on the weakened bridge. He glanced at Shaughnessy, who sat staring at the track as if the sight of that swaying steel held him in an hypnotic spell.

Stealthily, like a great ghost slinking slowly in the moonlight, the locomotive inched forward. While the smoke of its belching breath swirled into the cab and its side-rods clanked to the turn of its wheels, this hulk of steel and steam rolled out over the yawning depth of Deep Canyon.

Then, as blast-weakened timbers groaned ominously under the terrific strain, another beam let go with a rending snarl. The engine seemed to tilt forward, seemed to be floundering on the very brink of its downward plunge. Coupling gear rattled as the baggage car dipped into this sagging section of track, and McGettigan thought: "Now—now we're in the weakest part!"

Each fraction of a second was like an hour clawed from the greedy grip of eternity. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the engine rumbled across that sagging span. McGettigan's ear drums ached with the strain of listening for the thing he dreaded to hear—the screeching bedlam of breaking beams. But that high, swaying framework didn't buckle. . . . It held!

McGettigan saw a grin loosen Pat Shaughnessy's sooty lips. The young Celt yelled, "We made it, be gorry! We made it!"

A long sigh slipped between Mike McGettigan's clenched teeth. He loosened the lifting grip of his hand on the seat and said, almost reverently, "The Lord *must* love the Irish."

The rest of the run to Apache Junction was a strange mixture of exultation and regret, and sweating toil for McGettigan. Gail Wanamaker had risked her life to give her father a chance to live. And she had won. The understanding of that put a high-riding satisfaction in McGettigan; but that was quickly blanketed by the grim thought that it was his bullet in Jeff Wanamaker's back which had made Gail's gamble necessary.

Keeping pace with the run of his thoughts, was the constant necessity of stoking the fire. Pat Shaughnessy yanked the throttle wide open on the flats east of Apache Junction, and it took all the stoking speed McGettigan could marshal to plug the gaping holes in the firebed. When the train pulled into the station and a fireman climbed up to relieve him, McGettigan dropped out of the cab reeling like a drunken man.

His back felt as if he'd been pounded with an iron bar. Every muscle in his body ached, and his throat was fuzzy with thirst. But because he wanted to inquire about Wanamaker's condition he stumbled back toward the baggage car.

The door was closed. He was on the verge of calling to Gail, of telling her that the rest of the trip would take less than an hour. But the train was already in motion, so he just stood there watching the red and green tail lights slide on down the track and wondered grimly if Gail's father was still alive.

CHAPTER SIX

The Long Walk to Hell

MIKE McGETTIGAN'S return to Chapadera Bend the next afternoon was quiet, like the tight hush before an impending storm. He stepped from a stagecoach in front of the Skyline office and walked unhurriedly toward the Acme Hotel. He didn't look like a man who intended to force a finish fight, to kill or be killed before sundown. But he was.

Tay Benteen reared up from his chair behind the desk. "Where the hell you been?"

McGettigan passed that question with a shrug of his high shoulders. "Did Pop Hoxie show up?" he asked.

Benteen nodded. "Pop staggered in here early this mornin' with a drunken man's dream of bein' took prisoner by Branch Runyon. Which is another way of saying Pop went on a toot."

"No he didn't," McGettigan said. "He was shanghaied. Is Runyon in town?"

Benteen gestured toward the saloon doorway. "He's been in there all day with Slessinger. Reckon they been expectin' you."

McGettigan listened for a moment. But there was no sound from the saloon; not even the clink of a glass. That tell-tale silence was significant; it meant that they were waiting for him.

He said loudly, "I'll be down after a spell. We'll have a drink." And he went on upstairs.

"Not with me, you won't," Benteen protested. "I ain't takin' no lead poisonin' with my likker. Not at my age."

There was a mocking smile on McGettigan's lips as he took off his soot-smeared shirt and prepared to shave. He was remembering Kid Cantrell's habit of slicking up before a gunfight. "Always like to start a long journey with a clean shave," Cantrell had declared. "And I don't want no undertaker scrapin' my face with a dull razor."

Because Mike McGettigan felt the same way about undertakers' razors, he was taking particular pains with this shave. When he finally put the razor down he had a curiously strong premonition that he wouldn't use it again. But he wiped the blade clean and dry, nevertheless.

McGettigan dug a clean shirt from his duffle-bag and put it on. He examined the loads in both guns, and rubbed their butts with a piece of rosin, to offset the nervous perspiration that always moistened his palms in a gunfight. Strange, he reflected, how a man could control all his emotions and hold them in check, yet couldn't keep the sweat from oozing out of his pores.

When he stepped into the hall he walked carefully. He didn't go down the front stairs; instead, he went along the hall to a rear stairway which brought him down to a back alley. The setup in the saloon would be tough enough without walking into a trap Branch Runyon might have set for him. The Bridle Bit boss and Sid Slessinger would be expecting him to come in by the lobby doorway. If they got him in a cross-fire, he couldn't live long enough to kill them both—which was the only way to bring peace to this greed-bossed town.

But if he came into the saloon by the street entrance he might have a fair chance to chop them both down before he joined Kid Cantrell up on Cemetery Hill. Besides, he wanted to talk to Pop Hoxie before staging this showdown.

CROSSING Main Street, well west of the Cattleman's Palace, he gained the railroad tracks and walked up them to the depot, where Pop Hoxie greeted him enthusiastically.

"A real boomer telegraph operator if ever I seen one!" Pop declared, and shook his hand. "That was a great piece of brass pounding, Mike. You should hang up your guns and take to the key!"

McGettigan grinned. "That's an idea, Pop. But what I want to know is what happened to you last night."

The old operator scowled. "Runyon stuck a gun in my brisket, marched me to the livery corral and then conked me with his gun barrel. When I came to, there was a bottle beside me and I smelled like I'd been swimming in whiskey. Everybody in town thinks I was drunk."

"I don't," McGettigan muttered. "And I can lick the galoot that says you were."

Hoxie said angrily, "I've never been a hand to use guns, Mike. But come payday I'm buying one, and I'll shoot Runyon if it's the last chore I ever do."

"Branch Runyon may not live until payday," McGettigan reflected. Then: "How's things at Rosario?"

"Another raid on the mule corrals last night. Seems like the Bridle Bit bunch are trying to keep 'em so busy up there they can't give you a hand here. The repair gang started work on the bridge at daylight this morning. They've got it fixed for passenger traffic now and we'll be moving freight over it by tomorrow this time."

That information was welcome to McGettigan. But it wasn't the reason he had made this visit. There was only one thing he wanted to know: whether Jeff Wanamaker was dead or alive. And Pop either didn't have that information, or hadn't thought to give it.

So McGettigan asked, "Any news from Tucson?"

Pop Hoxie grinned. "I was wondering when you'd get around to that," he chuckled, and picked up a yellow blank from his desk. "This came in five minutes ago, but I ain't hurryin' none to get it delivered."

The telegram was addressed to Branch Runyon. It said: "Operation successful. Dad wants to see you immediately. Gail."

A quick surge of gladness brought a smile to McGettigan's lips. His bullet hadn't killed Jeff Wanamaker! Maybe Gail would still hate him—but it wouldn't be the hate of an orphan.

Hoxie said dryly, "You made railroad history on that run last night, Mike. But I'm thinking it was a waste of time. That stubborn old fool won't quit until somebody stops him permanent."

McGettigan put the telegram back onto the desk. "Jeff Wanamaker wouldn't have fought us in the first place if Runyon hadn't talked him into it. It's my guess that, without Runyon's guns and Sles-singer's money, this fight would end *muy pronto*. I aim to find out."

"How?" Pop asked.

"By using the only language they both understand." McGettigan tapped his guns significantly. "Right now."

Hoxie grabbed his arm. "Don't be a damned fool!" he blurted. "Wait and take 'em one at a time, when the sign is right. You've been luckier than seven cats in this town up to now—but there's a limit even to Irish luck, Mike!"

McGettigan grinned. "After what happened in Deep Canyon last night, I'm not so sure."

But Pop Hoxie didn't grin. He said nervously, "Wait for a few hours, Mike. I'll wire headquarters to send Baldoyle and Holliday here to give you a hand." McGettigan shook his head. "They're needed where they are," he said flatly, and pushed the old man away. "Hell, you're getting spooky in your old age, Pop. I'll cut these two sons down like paper dolls!"

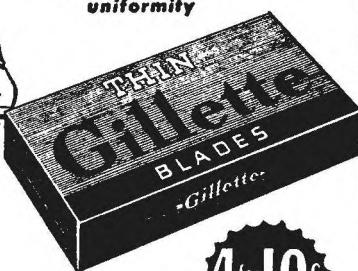
TILTING his hatbrim against the slanting rays of late sunlight, Mike McGettigan began a leisurely march toward Main Street. It was supper time now, and the street was deserted. When he passed the Oriental Cafe the aroma of freshly baked biscuits came from the kitchen window. It was so sharply tantalizing that he was half minded to stop by for a meal.

Farther along Main Street a woman called her husband to supper. Something in the sound of that summons stirred a rankling regret in McGettigan. No wom-

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an had ever called him to supper, and that lack seemed somehow fundamental—as if life had cheated him of a precious privilege.

A train's faroff whistle drifted mournfully in from the eastern hills. That, he mused cynically, was his kind of call; an insistent reminder of a job that needed finishing. Turning into Main Street, he glanced quickly at the Cattleman's Palace and saw something that set off a quick signal in his brain. Sid Slessinger's fat white face showed above the batwings—and Branch Runyon stood in the Acme Hotel doorway!

So these two had out-maneuvered him! They had him solidly hooked between them! Every step he took now would bring him deeper into the trap of their cross-fire. The positions of this play made a triangle pattern, with his body for one sharp point of that triangle.

The sun was resting on the western rim of the hills now, its beams slanting almost horizontally down the wide thoroughfare. Branch Runyon's face shone ruddy in the harsh glare. His lips were parted in a self-satisfied smile. This cattle king boss of Chapadera Bend had finally framed the gimmick game he wanted—the only game he would play. No matter how fast a gun-hawk might be, he couldn't concentrate on two targets at so wide an angle. Endeavoring to cover them both, he might easily miss both.

McGettigan walked forward slowly. When he was almost to the middle of Main Street's sun-burnished dust he saw Sid Slessinger's big belly bulge the batwings slowly open. It was a gentle, almost trivial move, as subtle as the closing of Branch Runyon's lips over sun-glittered gold teeth. But because all the years he could remember had been filled with the need for constant vigilance, McGettigan appraised these things and knew they were important.

Because he had a thorough understanding of the way the game was played, he guessed that a set of wheel tracks in the center of this street was the deadline these two men had agreed upon. When he reached those dusty ruts, the waiting would be ended. A quiver of eagerness, to have this thing over and done with, ran through him. Until a moment ago he had

believed there was a fair chance he might kill Runyon and Slessinger and live to take that yonderly-coming train back to end-of-track. Now he knew that this strip of street dust was to be his end-of-track. Remembering Pop Hoxie's spooky spouting, he smiled to himself. Pop couldn't have foreseen this setup, but he had been right just the same.

McGettigan halted one step from the wheel tracks. It was a small thing, that decision to stop short of the deadline. But it might be a slight upset to a prearranged plan.

Keeping Slessinger in the fringe of his vision, McGettigan glanced at Runyon. "What are you waiting for, bridge blaster?" he called.

That seemed to surprise the Bridle Bit boss. He stared at McGettigan for a second, then shifted his eyes to Slessinger. Quickly following that glance, McGettigan saw the saloonkeeper snake up his gun—knew instantly that Sid Slessinger had been elected to lead this odds-on duel.

EVEN as his hands slapped gunbutts, McGettigan's mind registered the fact that Branch Runyon was running true to form. He was letting another man break trail for him. Then, as his hands reacted to familiar reflexes which propelled them without conscious thought or volition, McGettigan's guns exploded a hair-line fraction of a second before Slessinger slammed a slug through the muscles of his right arm.

The smacking blow of that bullet knocked McGettigan into a side-stepping stagger, and ironically enough it saved him from Branch Runyon's first hurried shots. Those slugs whanged so close to his head they put a vibrating concussion in his ears; made him remember what Kid Cantrell had once said: "Singing slugs never bite. It's the ones you don't hear that hurt." And so it was now; Slessinger's slug left a burning core of pain which spiraled down his arm in a way that made his fingers loosen their grip on the gun.

All this in the fleeting moment it took McGettigan to swivel around into firing position—to see that Branch Runyon had backed hastily into the hotel lobby and was firing from behind the doorframe. Slessinger had fallen to the saloon stoop.

But he wasn't dead. He slumped on his knees like a huge hog at a swill trough. And he was tilting his gun up.

In that breathless instant it occurred to McGettigan that he couldn't possibly last long enough to kill both these men. Runyon's cowardly caution had spoiled that.

So McGettigan ignored Runyon completely. He turned his left-hand gun at Slessinger and dropped hammer. He saw the shock of that slug knock Slessinger's fat face up and back, so that the saloon-keeper's gun was pointing straight up when it exploded. And because there was a wild Irish streak in Mike McGettigan, and a need for revenge against this big-bellied robber of railroad Paddies, he sent a deliberately aimed slug into that wide, gaping mouth.

Then, as one of Branch Runyon's bullets plucked at his sleeve like a snatching hand, McGettigan made ready to die. There wasn't a chance to reach the hotel doorway, but it was the only thing left for him to try.

Methodically, like a man keeping an appointment long planned, McGettigan strode toward the hotel. For a moment the silence was so profound that the scuff of his boots in the street's deep dust was loud in his ears. Then he heard a locomotive whistle three short and impatient blasts somewhere east of town. After that the constant ringing of its bell was like a dirge.

McGettigan was within a yard of the sidewalk now. He was wondering if Branch Runyon would let him live to reach it. He kept his gaze glued on the doorway, against the moment Runyon's gun would blast a finish to this fight. . . .

THEN an amazing thing happened. Branch Runyon plunged into the doorway as if pushed. The astonishment of that stopped McGettigan in his tracks. But it didn't stop the hammer of his gun . . . nor spoil the snap aim of a bullet which slashed through the cigars in Branch Runyon's shirt pocket.

For a seemingly endless interval Bridle Bit's blocky boss teetered on his high heels, as though undecided between falling and standing. His gun blasted once, and the slug slogged into the dust at

McGettigan's feet. Then Runyon's mouth sagged open. His gold teeth caught the last rays of the setting sun as his body tipped slowly over.

Mike McGettigan sheathed his smoking gun. Behind him a train was grinding to a halt at the depot. His bullet-broken right arm dangled at his side, and people were stepping cautiously from doorways on both sides of the street. All these things he understood. But the fact that he was alive, that Branch Runyon had quit his secure position behind that doorway, was a thing he couldn't comprehend.

Then Tay Benteen stepped over Runyon's sprawled form and said gruffly, "The big son will know better'n to use my hotel for a fort next time, begorry."

"Did you push him, Tay?"

"That I did," the little Irishman declared. "What with you headed this way and new glass just put into that grandfather's clock, I wasn't aimin' to see me place all stunk up with gunsmoke again."

McGettigan grinned. "By God, you're a true-blue Mick," he muttered.

Tay's wizened face creased into one of its infrequent smiles. "There comes a friend of yours," he said slyly.

Gail Wanamaker cried, "Oh, Mike—you're hurt!"

He stopped and stood staring at her as she came quickly to him. He didn't speak. He just stood there, like a man dreaming.

She said excitedly, "I tried to save you from this, Mike. That's why I sent Branch that telegram—to bring him to Tucson, so you wouldn't be killed."

Tay Benteen chuckled. "You was tryin' to save the wrong man, ma'am. Runyon was the one that needed savin'."

Afterward, when McGettigan stood with Gail at the depot, waiting for the train to leave, Pop Hoxie stuck his head out of the bay window. "Mike," he yelled, nudging his green eyeshade up, "you're luckier than hell!"

McGettigan's good left arm tightened around Gail's shoulders. "Would you marry a one-armed gunhawk, Gail?"

"Why do you think I deserted a sick father and rushed here from Tucson?" she murmured.

Which was all the answer Mike McGettigan needed. . . .

Boothill's Election Day

By WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSON

WHEN the Llano Kid went into Sheibler's Del Norte Casino in El Paso that morning and stood there, lingering over his drink, a long, smoky trail lay behind him. The Lincoln County war, a Mexican revolution and those hard, unfriendly years beyond the Mescaleros had tagged him with a brand that was known from the Powder River to far below the Border.

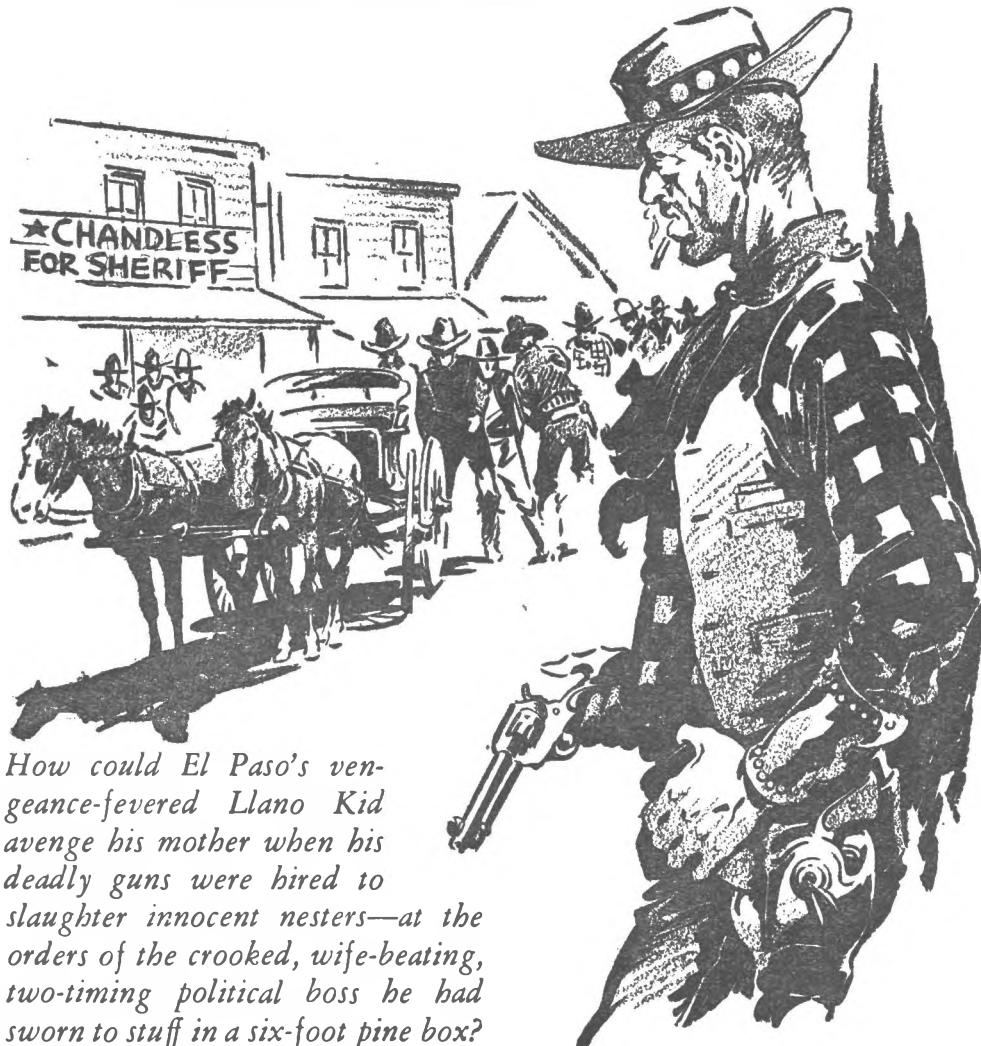
Matt Sheibler came out of his private office and, seeing the Kid's empty glass, nodded to the bartender to fill it.

"On the house," he said, and poured a drink for himself.

The Kid said, "Thanks, Matt," and waited, knowing that the man had something to say.

Sheibler laid down the statement tentatively. "All kinds of news," he said,

Across the street a man with a ragged beard was hefting a naked gun.



How could El Paso's vengeance-fevered Llano Kid avenge his mother when his deadly guns were hired to slaughter innocent nesters—at the orders of the crooked, wife-beating, two-timing political boss he had sworn to stuff in a six-foot pine box?

"drifts into a place like this. I know where a gent might make a year's wages in a couple of days."

The Kid shook his head. "I guess not." Faint discontent honed his voice to a thin edge.

Sheibler shrugged. "Well, I didn't know. You riding north, huh?"

The Kid said, "Maybe." He picked up the bottle and refilled the two glasses, putting a coin on the bar.

With the proposition so stated and passed, Sheibler's manner changed, became easy.

across the room to sit with his back against the yonder wall and wait for the eastbound train.

HE arrived at Coulter City when the heat of Tuesday morning was beginning to make itself felt; when men who had come in for the election were forming loose groups here and there along the dusty streets.

From the station he walked leisurely to the Reeves Hotel and took a chair on the shaded porch. Evincing no particular interest, his slow, careful glance meas-

Next month—A smashing hell-town Vigilante novel by I. L. Thompson! Don't miss it! March 10 Story Western will go on sale February 7th!

"It's an old story—in Pecos Valley this time. Hoemen are filling the flats and pushing cattle back to the bench country. And a sheriff's election comes off at Coulter City Tuesday.

"If the ranchers can hire enough,"—Sheibler paused, selected his words carefully—"enough outside riders to put Chandless in office, they'll have a chance. Jake Chandless is tough. He may break the nesters' patience and prod 'em into something that will give the cattlemen a lawful excuse to drive 'em out."

At the mention of Jake Chandless' name, a memory turned the Kid's eyes dark and still.

"You may have run into Jake," Sheibler suggested, "if you've ever been up in that part of the state."

The Kid said, "Rambling about, you meet a lot of folks. It's hard to remember." He took his drink, then fell into a remote, taciturn silence.

Sheibler sensed that something was wrong, and moved on. The Kid stood there a while, making a cigarette and idly brushing spilled tobacco off the bar.

Presently he walked out of the casino and along the street to the railway station.

"One to Coulter City," he told the agent.

The man inside the window stamped a ticket, said mechanically, "Change cars at Pecos."

"I know," the Kid replied, and went

ured the town, his long experience with trouble permitting him to fit all he saw into an old, familiar pattern.

Ponies of the big valley spreads filled hitchracks from the North Trail Saloon to Mill's Emporium, and the to-and-fro movements of the riders made it evident that the North Trail was their headquarters for this day.

At the end of the street, nester wagons were beginning to move into the vacant lot on the near side of the blacksmith shop. A freight, which had taken the siding for the passenger to pass, now puffed busily about, shunting cars in and out of the switch alongside the cattle pens. The hoemen stood and watched the engine until it picked up its caboose and went banging and swaying across the flatlands eastward.

The Kid saw something of the patience and loneliness of these people in the manner of their watching, and something of their fears in the way they stood so close together. With that same insight, he laid an accurate reckoning upon the hay spread thinly across the floors of their wagons, and understood why the men did not wander far from the lot.

A banner, with its legend: CHANDLESS FOR SHERIFF, hung limply across the courthouse front. Beneath this, a group of cattlemen stood listening to the low-voiced talk of Bill Provine, of the Wind Spring Syndicate, and old Les-

ter Barton, who owned the B Square.

Presently the attention of these men shifted and the Llano Kid, following their glances, saw Tom Callis and his daughter, Brenda, coming along the street.

Callis was a stooped, heavy-shouldered man and his plodding, measured step betrayed the years he had followed a plow. Beside him, his daughter was like a splash of color inadvertently dropped on Coulter City's drab, sunbaked streets.

Her gingham dress was bright and fresh, and in this strong light her hair was like new gold. There was pride in the tilt of her head; strength and a hint of fortitude in the carriage of her tall, beautifully proportioned body.

Looking at her, a brief change came to the Kid's features, warming his cold eyes and momentarily relaxing the grim set of his lips.

Yet there was about him a vigilance which nothing could completely divert, and he saw Buck Martin, the Wind Spring segundo, the instant he left the courthouse steps and, with two of his riders, angled across the street, moving too leisurely and with unconvincing indifference.

Their way intersected that of Callis and his daughter, immediately in front of the hotel porch.

Buck Martin touched his hat with a perfunctory gesture, said, "Well, Callis, by night, either you or Jake Chandless will be our new sheriff."

"Yes," Tom Callis said, and because of the pressure Brenda put against his arm, would have moved on if Buck Martin and his riders had not blocked the way.

"Still think you'll win?" Martin asked. His tone was insolent, provocative, contemptuous.

Callis said, "If I get a fair count."

The Llano Kid felt trouble boil up like smoke from a smouldering fire. Quietly he dropped his cigarette and ground it out beneath the heel of his boot.

BUCK MARTIN said softly, "My brother Lem is one of the judges. You don't think *he'd* do anything crooked, do you?"

Tom Callis saw the trap, now that it was sprung, and considered his answer

carefully, laying narrow-eyed interest upon the three men who stood before him.

Brenda Callis turned and looked down the street, color slowly draining from her face when she saw that no nester was closer than the blacksmith shop. Swinging back, her glance encountered that of the Kid. For one brief interval they regarded each other gravely, and he saw a quick, indefinable change sweep across her eyes.

Martin said again, "You don't think my brother would do anything crooked, do you?"

Some strong, inexplicable force touched the Kid and impelled him to get up and step off the porch, so that he stood directly in front of Buck Martin.

He said, "I'm a stranger. Can you tell me where Jake Chandless is to be found?" He crowded the men a little, so that they moved to the edge of the sidewalk.

Martin's face turned brick red. "What the hell is this?" he said.

The Kid said, "A question—that's all."

"A damned funny time to ask it," one rider interposed.

The Kid said, very gently, "Do I hear anybody laughing, friend?"

The quality of that speech held Martin and his riders still, thrust upon them the significance of the Kid's low, expertly tied holsters and bland expressionless stare. Across the street a man with a ragged beard was hefting a naked gun. But he didn't bother the Kid. The Kid knew he wouldn't do anything now.

Tom and Brenda Callis had moved on and the Kid, satisfied, stood there and waited out these three men, untroubled because he knew that their hesitancy was leading to an inevitable and harmless conclusion.

The courthouse clock bonged out nine slow, deep-voiced tones, and Blake Fentress, officer of the election, stepped out to the street and called, "Oyez, Oyez, the polls are now open."

Whereupon Buck Martin and his men wheeled away. The Kid watched them go, speaking no word and showing no emotion at all.

Under the impetus of Fentress' announcement, the town stirred and a few men drifted into the courthouse; some to cast their votes and others to form

talkative groups in and around the polling place. Down by the blacksmith shop, the hoemen watched and did nothing. And the manner of their waiting put its weight all along this hot, dust-rutted street.

Presently Brenda Callis and her father came out of Shane's General Mercantile and passed the hotel again, going back to their wagon. Brenda showed the Kid a slow, deliberate smile and he, acknowledging her unspoken thanks, lifted his hat with grave courtesy.

Later he crossed to the North Trail and shouldered his way through the bat-wing doors.

Election day was manifest here in the size and restlessness of the crowd. Even at this early hour dancehall girls were mingling with customers, and all the poker tables were filled. At the yonder end of the main room, a faro lay-out drew its followers; inside the dancehall, a fat, bald man beat galloping music out of a piano, and a Mexican girl swirled her bright skirts in a graceful Spanish dance, her heels whipping out quick, rhythmic sounds on the hard floor.

Bill Provine and Lester Barton and Jake Chandless stood just inside the open door of the back room, talking and watching the crowd.

There lay in the Llano Kid's mind a memory so faded that it was like an almost forgotten dream, but sight of Chandless gave color and vividness to all its pale and indistinct parts. Yet nothing of this was visible on the Kid's smooth features as he moved to the bar without a second glance toward the back room.

The barman set out a bottle and glass, said, "Everybody gets his first one free today—compliments of our next sheriff, Jake Chandless."

The Mexican girl finished her dance, and applause ran a loud and boisterous way through the North Trail.

During this diversion, Chandless crossed the room. The Llano Kid's attention never once wavered from the backbar mirror, and he watched Chandless and waited just as he was, not lifting either hand to pick up his glass.

From directly behind him, Chandless said, "Buck Martin claims that you were asking questions about me, stranger. What about it?"

THE Kid made a slow, smooth turn. "You're Jake Chandless, maybe?"

Chandless said, "Yeah! What's on your mind?"

The Kid saw suspicion on the man's coarse face; felt the implacable animosity of his small, shifty eyes.

"Sometimes," the Kid told him, "I hang around the Del Norte Casino, down El Paso way—listening to the talk."

"Whose talk?"

The Kid said, "Matt Sheibler's," and Chandless' attitude changed instantly and completely.

He put his arm about the Kid's shoulders and stood like that for a while, letting the significance of this explain the stranger's status to every person in the room.

Men pushed the Mexican girl up to the bar, clamoring to buy her a drink.

One moment her smile was mechanical, then it became warm and genuine and surged upward to light her eyes.

"The Llano Keed," she cried, and ran forward, letting her hands touch the Kid's shoulders and run down along his arms. "A long time I not see you, not since you help drive the insurrectos out of our house and off the streets of Papagayos."

The Kid smiled, said, "Hello, Carita," and stood there, listening to the run of her chatter and showing no attention to that moment of silence which followed the pronouncement of his name, nor to the subsequent murmur which rippled through the room.

Jake Chandless touched his elbow, said, "Sheibler will get double pay for sending me a top hand," and moved away, his laughter drifting back through the crowd.

The fat man ran his fingers along the piano keys, swung into *Birdie In A Cage*.

Carita said, "You weel dance, no?"

The Kid shook his head.

Carita laughed at him, touched the worn butts of his guns with the tips of her fingers. "Me," she said impudently, "I have to *work* for my leaving," and went to the arms of a man who was waiting to dance with her.

The Kid walked out to the street and back to the hotel porch. Morning hours slipped by and he sat there, smoking and strengthening his memories of this town.

He tried to remember when he was eight years old and had lived here; when his widowed mother had married Jake Chandless and endured him for six or seven months.

Out of all this, nothing was crystal clear except that day when Chandless had driven his mother away from home—had beaten her and cut a deep, ugly gash beneath her left eye; had kicked her and broken ligaments in her knee that gave her a permanent limp.

The Kid remembered rushing to her assistance and how Chandless had struck him down. The pain of that blow came back with such clarity that involuntarily he raised his hand and touched his cheek. Beneath tense fingers his cigarette broke and spilled out a part of its tobacco.

Chandless had told his mother, "Get out of here, and stay out, and say nothing to anybody about this. If you stir up trouble, that brat of yours won't be living a week from today."

Wichita then, and a poverty-ridden but happy time until his mother had died when he was fifteen. The Kid recalled how bewildered he had been, alone in the world, and sensed something of why his fears and loneliness had changed to bitterness and hostility. And now ten years had run along and when he looked at incidents of that long interval his mind turned bleak and tired.

He stared at his broken cigarette, then threw it away. Idly he brushed the spilled tobacco off his lap and sat on, his still, remote features betraying nothing of his thoughts.

Before him, the street was quiet except for noise that spilled out of the North Trail; activities were limited almost entirely to goings and comings between the saloon and the courthouse.

The nesters stayed close to the shade of the locusts alongside the blacksmith shop, making no movement toward the polls. Now and then a group of riders formed on the courthouse steps to stare insolently across that interval. The nesters stared back, stoic, unmoved.

NOON came and Blake Fentress closed the polls. The hotel's dinner triangle sent its iron-toned invitation vibrating through the still air—and Coulter City

relaxed, its crowd milling about for a short while, then making a slow, concerted drift toward the dining room. Down the street, the hoemen got out their baskets and ate. They did not leave the lot.

The Kid went inside the hotel, had his dinner and came back to the chair on the porch. The big clock struck one. The polls re-opened. Coulter City dropped back to its waiting, like a cat that is still, except for the constant twitching of its tail.

Presently the hoemen stirred and went to their wagons, raked aside hay and lifted out shotguns and rifles. Then they moved to the courthouse in a compact body.

Ten of them put aside their weapons and went in and voted. These came out and ten others walked up the broad steps. Thus it went until all had cast their ballots.

Whereupon the group closed its ranks and stood at the end of the porch, taking the merciless heat of the sun and not giving themselves to much talk.

At three o'clock, a man came out of the North Trail and passed the hotel.

He said, "Chandless wants you."

The Kid got up and went across to the saloon. Without asking any questions he continued on to the closed door of the back room and opened it.

Jake Chandless said, "Come in." The Kid took a chair by the south window.

Bill Provine and Lester Barton sat at an improvised desk. Scattered about the room were Willis Macon, who owned the place, Buck Martin and half a dozen Wind Spring and B Square riders. Chandless was chewing on a cigar, letting anger show through to his flushed face.

"The nesters," he said, "held off their voting until past twelve, and it wouldn't have done any good to switch boxes during the noon recess. Now they've cast enough votes to beat me, and you're a damned fool, Barton, if you think we're going to take it lying down."

Old Lester Barton got up, pushed back his chair. "Don't overspeak your piece, Jake. Remember that you're just a hired hand, whether you're elected sheriff or not."

Bill Provine threw quick, conciliatory words at the two men.

"Nothing's to be gained by quarreling among ourselves," he told them. "Sit down, Lester, and let's hear what Jake has to say."

Chandless threw away his mutilated cigar. "You and Barton control the county court," he pointed out. "If something should happen to Tom Callis—say in a personal quarrel—the court could appoint me to fill the vacancy."

Lester Barton muttered some unintelligible profanity.

Provine said sharply, "You mean to have Callis killed?"

Chandless looked at the Llano Kid. "I've got the man to do it—ready and waiting."

The Kid felt the hard concentration of their attention, and returned their stares inscrutably, showing them nothing except stony indifference.

Lester Barton said, "No, by God! I'll have no hand in a deliberate murder."

Provine stopped Chandless' retort with a peremptory gesture and got up to stand beside Barton.

"It's a little too raw, Jake, for this day and time," he said. "I don't think anything like that will be necessary. Our friends are in charge of the election—officer, judges and clerks. We can simply count Callis out. The voting is close enough to make it a fairly easy matter."

Barton shook his head. "The hoemen won't stand for that. They're going to demand watchers to check the counting."

Chandless saw that his own plan was completely discarded and hurriedly aligned himself with Provine.

"Fentress, as officer, can rule against watchers," he interposed. "That will put the next move up to the nesters. If trouble begins, they'll have to start it."

"If they do, we've got enough men to take care of them," Provine said. "And we'll be legally in the clear on the whole thing."

Lester Barton stood there a long time, considering this. . . .

TWO riders went along the back street and their raked-up dust made a slow drift through the saloon windows. Piano music, flat and tinny, ran in from the main room and some man there let out a great, booming burst of laughter.

Barton sat down again. "All right," he agreed, "but this is a serious thing, and I want it understood that there'll be no trouble unless the nesters fire the first shot."

Chandless turned to Buck Martin. "Get your men to the courthouse and spot 'em in the right places." To the Llano Kid he said, "Be on hand for the showdown and look to me or Macon for your pay."

The Kid nodded and left the room, passing on to the street and along to the courthouse. He entered the main hall and put the tip of his shoulder against the near wall and waited like that.

Presently the nesters moved up to the porch and along the corridor. The clock struck four loud, even-spaced notes and Blake Fentress came to the door and announced: "Oyez, oyez, the polls are now closed."

By prearrangement, Lem Martin rose from the judges' table and said, "Clear the room so that we can begin counting."



Fentress gave him immediate support. "That's it—everybody outside."

Tom Callis said carefully, "We've picked two of our men as watchers."

"No watchers today," Fentress told him. "You and Chandless will have to get your men out of here."

"Fair for one as it is for the other," Chandless agreed. "You're in charge, Blake, and if you say no watchers, we'll back you to the limit on it."

Callis drew a deep, gusty breath and back of him the nesters moved forward a step or two, their heavy boots making a scrape and a dry shuffle along the floor.

Callis said, "Without watchers, we wouldn't have any sort of a chance. We won't allow that."

His ultimatum stiffened both groups and lay between them like a sword that is drawn from its scabbard and shows its sharp, wicked edges.

It became very quiet. A horse on the street, stamping at flies, raised sounds that ran all through that still corridor. Somewhere among the nesters, the back-drawn hammer of a rifle made a clean, metallic *click*. The Llano Kid threw away his cigarette.

Then Brenda Callis came up the steps, drew her father aside and held him in earnest, low-voiced conversation. He kept shaking his head and Brenda's urgency evidenced itself in the changing of her features. Finally Callis nodded and walked back and spoke to his men.

"I believe all of you have faith in Brenda and in her judgment, so I'm asking you to side me in a mighty strange thing."

"He turned to Jake Chandless, said, "Select one of your men as a watcher and we'll take a disinterested party—that stranger standing against the wall."

A murmur of consternation and protest ran through the nester ranks, but one deep, quiet voice said, "Stand hitched! We're backing Tom in whatever he does, come hell or high water." The murmur ran itself out to silence.

Chandless struggled against showing his satisfaction, but the effort was not entirely successful.

"That's all right with me, if Blake Fentress will agree to it," he said. His glance at the officer was an open com-

mand—a command that would be obeyed.

Fentress said, "Well, if that's the way both parties want it."

Chandless named himself as his own watcher and motioned his men away. "All right," he told Callis, "get your boys out." To the Kid, he said, "Come on over, mister, and let's get started."

But the Llano Kid waited to see this full hand laid down, and did not move away from the wall until the last rider and hoeman had left the corridor. Then he went inside the room and closed the door.

THE two judges were seated at one side of a big table. The two clerks, tally sheets and pens ready, sat at the other. Squarely in front of this was a small table, high and narrow. Here Chandless took his seat. The Kid sat down opposite him.

Blake Fentress broke the seal on the ballot box and took out the first ticket.

"One for Chandless," he said loudly and gave the ticket to the judges, who looked at it and passed it on to the smaller table, leaving it so that it lay between Chandless and the Kid.

Chandless nodded and the Kid, seeing that the ballot had been properly called, turned it face down on the table.

Whereupon the clerks made their entries and Fentress took out another ticket and called it.

This ran on, long and unbroken, except for the infrequent scrape of a moved chair and the clerks call of "Tally" when each candidate received a total of five votes.

After awhile, Fentress made his first move in a systematic count-out, and that ticket passed the judges without correction and came on to the little table.

Chandless nodded, but the Kid said, "This vote was cast for Callis, but called for Chandless."

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Chandless said, "Shut up, you damned fool! What's the matter with you?"

The Kid slipped his right hand gun from its holster and moved it along under the high, narrow table. His eyes were so still and devoid of expression that Chandless had no intimation of this until

the muzzle of the gun touched his stomach.

His face changed then, so completely that every feature was somehow affected. He lifted his hands slowly and put them in plain sight on top of the table. His eyes were narrowed.

He said, "Whatever this is, you'll never get away with it. A stranger can't come here and—"

"Not exactly a stranger," the Kid replied. "I was born in this town and my father died here. My mother married a second time. Maybe some of you remember her? She was a small, dark-haired woman who limped a little and had an ugly scar just beneath her left eye."

Chandless made an inarticulate sound and started to get up. Staring at the Kid's eyes, he decided against it. Then he moved his hands slightly and reconsidered that, too.

He said, "You're Mary's son—you're Giles Kirby."

"For a long time I've carried another name," the Kid said.

The patience of the listeners raveled out and Blake Fentress said, "What the hell is this?"

The Kid meticulously divided his attention between Chandless and the men at the other table.

"It's a private game and the stakes are high," he said. "If you sit in, you're almost sure to lose your shirts—and everything that's inside them."

The men understood every word and every implication and made no move and no reply.

The Kid pressed his gun a little closer against Chandless' stomach, said, "Go on with the count."

Sweat beaded Jake Chandless' upper lip and made a wet shine across his forehead. He swallowed, visibly and audibly. His face was getting a little white.

Then he repeated, "Go on with the count—and call 'em just as they are."

After that Fentress' voice became high-pitched, and the run of it was interminable.

The courthouse clock struck five, and long after that, the last vote was called and tabulated.

The Kid said, "sign the tally sheets."

THE officials signed and passed the papers to Jake Chandless, who added his name laboriously.

"Go to the door and announce the results," the Kid told Fentress.

From the judges' side of the big table Lem Martin said, "We can't let him get away with this, Jake. It will—"

"Shut up and stay still," Chandless retorted savagely. "You ain't got a gun jammed against your guts."

Fentress showed a faint hesitancy, then walked to the door, opened it and sent his call out to the street.

"Tom Callis wins," he announced, "by a plurality of fifty-seven votes."

Outside, the nesters did not cheer or make any demonstration, this victory being too long-sought and too steeped in patience for outward exuberance.

Fentress turned back into the room and the Llano Kid stood up. The men saw the revolver in his hand then; saw that his thumb held the hammer at half-cock.

He said, "School's out, gents—take a walk and stretch your legs."

Chandless moved, became still again. He got half-way up, then dropped back into his chair.

"Go on with the others," the Kid told him. "We've been sitting on a powder keg all day and I'm not setting it off unless I have to."

Chandless took courage at this and, leaving, said, "We'll meet again before you leave this town. Next time *I'll* have the drop."

The Kid said, "Maybe," and walked to the door and closed and locked it.

Waning sunlight came obliquely through the west window and the Kid pulled a chair to the inner edge of this brilliance, and, screened by it, sat there and looked at the town.

Jake Chandless walked rapidly to the North Trail. After awhile Lester Barton brought his riders out those swinging doors and herded them to their ponies. Soon Coulter City had nothing left of the B Square except a yellow, slow-settling cloud of kicked-up dust.

Presently Bill Provine appeared and forked his horse and rode away, several of his men going with him. Down by the blacksmith shop, nester wagons began to roll, and a through freight came past

with a rush and a rattle, filling the town with the scent of coal smoke and sending back the sound of its whistle in a long, lonely wail.

The incumbent sheriff, old William Loftin, appeared on the street for the first time this day. The Kid heard him say to a passer-by, "Thank the Lord I wasn't up for re-election, and that the whole thing is over without any trouble. Callis is a good man."

Buck and Lem Martin came out of the North Trail and walked down the street together. Then Lem crossed to Paxton's Hardware Store and loitered beneath the canopy. Buck passed the courthouse and took his stand outside Mill's Emporium. His face was deathly white, his body strained.

The Llano Kid lay his reckoning upon this, then looked at the town and saw that it had relaxed. Whereupon he got up, unlocked the door and walked out to the street.

Almost immediately Jake Chandless left the saloon and came toward him—and from the hardware store Lem Martin began angling in.

A faint smile lengthened the Kid's lips and he went on, unhurried and unpertrurbed by the knowledge that Buck Martin was behind him, moving up to close the jaws of this three-way trap that was fated to spell death.

AT PRECISELY the right moment the Kid made an abrupt turn and went back down the street; not back toward the courthouse, but in the direction of the blacksmith shop.

This exposed Buck Martin's hand and he hesitated, but seeing that the Kid was swinging toward him in a wide circle, moved on.

Jake Chandless and Lem Martin paused, too, but there was no time for a re-arrangement of their plans. They had to play what cards they had.

Thus the three men met and closed their dragnet, but the Llano Kid was not inside it. He was behind Buck Martin, and that was an entirely different matter. It made things very tough.

Chandless and the two Martins faced about. The Kid approached them leisurely, weighing his chances and seeing

that an advantage lay in their bewilderment at the frustration of their scheme—and that his own reputation was putting weight and a hot impatience against their nerves.

That was the weakest link, and he struck at it by stopping and waiting; knowing also that his superior gun-skill would be most effective at long range. But if they drew him in too close....

Lem Martin was the first to break. He muffed a too-hurried draw, and the Kid sent a bullet crashing through his chest. Without waiting to see the effect of that shot he swung his revolver and beat Buck Martin by a thundering split-second.

Jake Chandless' initial bullet blew a hot breath against the Kid's neck, but his second one raked up a long streamer of dust—the Kid's gun having spoken again in that swift interval. The Kid watched with narrowed eyes.

Chandless made a quick, stiff turn. He ran a few stumbling steps, then crashed solidly into the side of a building. This threw him back and spun him around and he stood like that, swaying and making a palsied effort to lift his heavy gun.

Whereupon the Llano Kid, remembering the exact location of that ugly scar on his mother's face, raised his own weapon with careful deliberation and shot Chandless directly below the left eye—and laughed as he did it!

Then he turned and walked to the blacksmith shop, and around it, to where Brenda sat alone in the Callis wagon, her face ashen.

"One question," he said. "How did you figure to trust me with something that meant so much to you and to your people?"

Her eyes were round and wide still from the wicked roll of those guns, but he saw them change and soften, become beautiful.

She said, "There are some things that a woman is never uncertain about." Her eyes were shining now.

"Maybe you also knew that I was coming down here to ask you that question?" the Kid said.

"Yes," she admitted. "That's why I asked father to go on with the Daltons

—so that you could ride straight home with me."

The Llano Kid pushed back his hat and looked closely at this unpredictable girl.

"In our valley, there is rich land, free for the taking," she continued. "After this day, there'll be peace. A man could build a home and raise a family—and forget all the things that he wanted to forget." Her soft body was very close to him. He could smell her hair.

The Kid smiled and this time the corners of his lips lifted and his eyes showed a faint twinkle. The twinkle grew more pronounced as he spoke.

"Marrying and raising a family," he

said, "would be pretty hard things for a man to do alone. I just can't see how it can be done."

Brenda's eyes turned very blue and a slow flush colored her cheeks. With her glance full and unfaltering upon his face, she moved over on the seat and held out the lines to him. Her hands trembled just the slightest bit.

And the Kid, looking at her, had his wordless answer, and ten dark, lost years ran out and away from him. Still smiling, he stepped into the wagon, took the lines and drove out of Coulter City, with Brenda Callis' shoulder a warm, steady pressure against his arm. The Llano Kid had found happiness.



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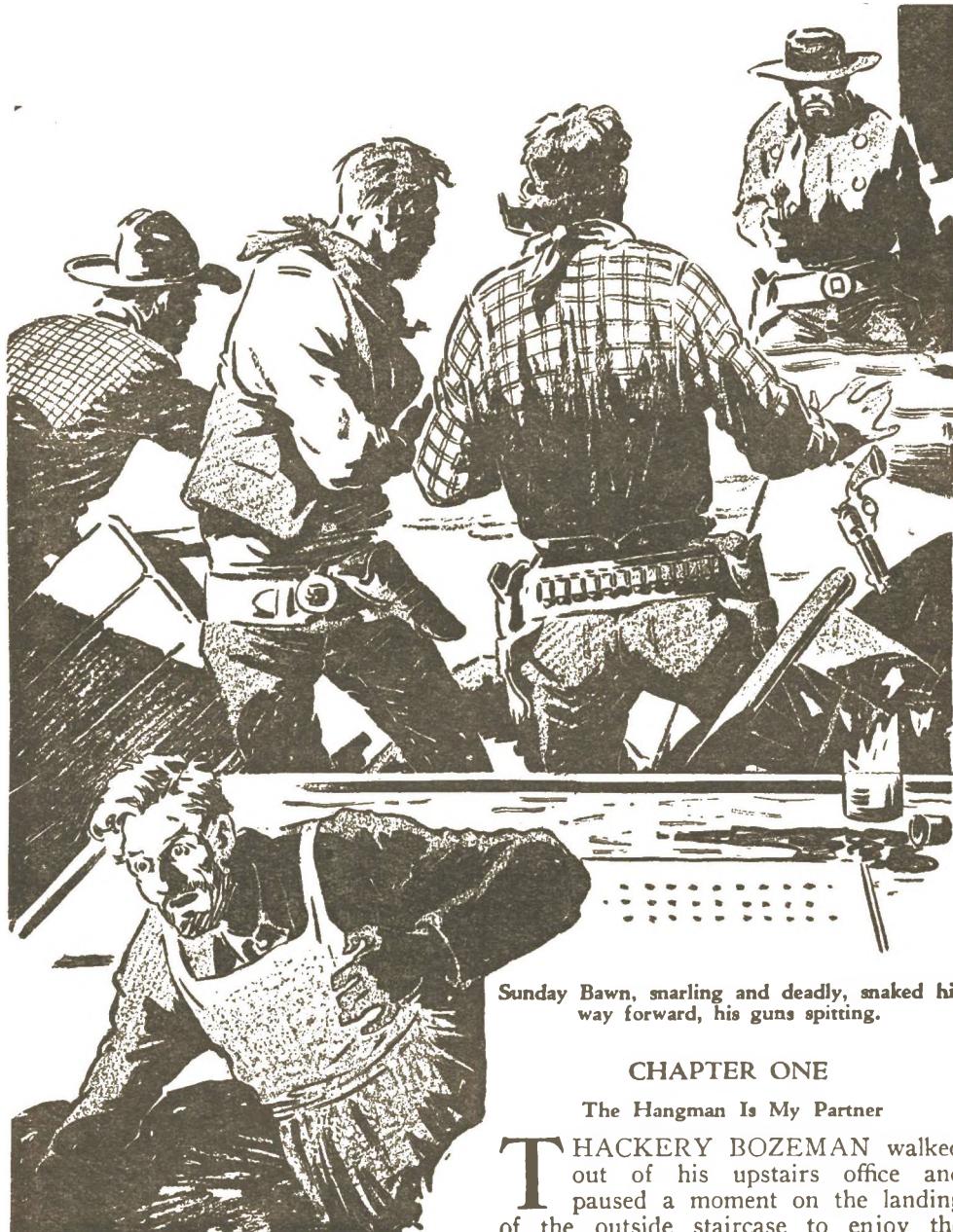
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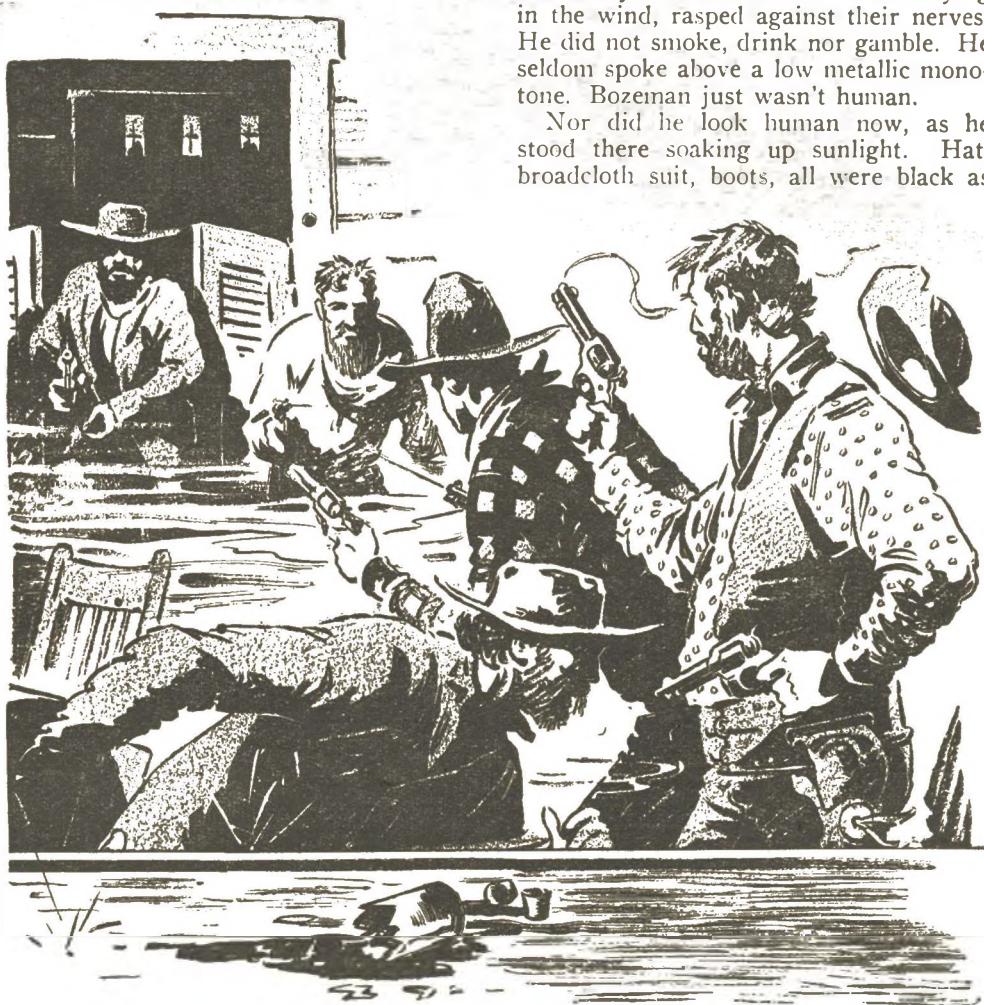
CHAPTER ONE

The Hangman Is My Partner

THACKERY BOZEMAN walked out of his upstairs office and paused a moment on the landing of the outside staircase to enjoy the

the HARD- TO- KILL

*A great novelette of cowtown
pioneers who refused to knuckle
under*



warmth of the bright sun. No sooner had he appeared than dozens of pairs of eyes shuttled to him and clung to his long, cadaverous figure with fascination of a sort.

The effect this dry, pinched, parsimonious lawyer had on the folks of Arrowhead City was almost funny. Some men present really feared the cold glance he shot through his thick, steel-rimmed eye glasses. But they admired him for his

unshakable, nerveless calm. He never seemed off balance, never surprised, grateful, resentful or emotional.

Men had a way of starting when his voice, dry and flat as dead leaves flying in the wind, rasped against their nerves. He did not smoke, drink nor gamble. He seldom spoke above a low metallic monotone. Bozeman just wasn't human.

Nor did he look human now, as he stood there soaking up sunlight. Hat, broadcloth suit, boots, all were black as

death's chosen color. Stooped of shoulder, sunken of chest, slack of knee, he looked like nothing more than a great buzzard gloating over the town he had so lately adopted by purchase of the business of Lawyer Porter Heston, deceased.

Thackery Bozeman was sick. Even as they watched him now, a cough racked him; his gaunt, death's-head face contorted with pain and his right hand dug violently into his side. Doc Stebbins,

who claimed folks should pay a medico for keeping them well instead of curing them when they got sick, had taken instant note of the lawyer's condition. Stebbins had offered to study his case and try to effect a cure, but Bozeman, with a weary shake of his head, had refused.

"No use, Doc," he had husked. "Specialists tell me the only cure for what I have is to . . . to die."

He might have added that foremost among those specialists was the Federal Judge who had said, ". . . in my opinion, the only cure for one so grasping, so murderous, so depraved, is the gallows. I regret that the verdict permits me no other choice than to sentence you to the Federal Prison at Leavenworth for twenty-five years on each of the three counts you have been found guilty of—highway robbery involving the mail, mail robbery and manslaughter. The sentences will run consecutively. . . ."

But the good people of Arrowhead didn't know this. In fact, they knew nothing about this strange man, save that he was forever in pain. They pitied him in a way, and at the same time, were awed by him.

Townsmen watched him now as he slowly descended the staircase and shuffled dejectedly along the walk. The mid-summer heat bore down cruelly, despite the early hour, and a number of men, equally dejected, were seated beneath the awning of the Territorial Bar, seeking what relief it afforded. These men in faded, threadbare levis, whittling idly, watched Thackery Bozeman approach.

Each male under that awning had been a prosperous cattleman less than three years before. But the prolonged drought had cleaned them out, just as it had most every business man in western Colorado. It had been heart-breaking. First there had been a slump in the beef market. So poor was the demand for a year that it hardly paid to round up the stock, let alone ship it. Then the rain gods seemed to forget the Arrowhead Valley.

Dried-up tanks and water holes grew white with the bones of dead cattle. One of Arrowhead City's two banks closed its doors, carried down by too great a burden of cowman paper. The cattlemen

who had survived the price drop hung on to see their ranges burned and bare, the water holes and springs a playground for dust stirred by the restless wind.

These men squatted before the Territorial Bar were victims of this revolt of Nature, men living from day to day, without hope, bewildered, hardly daring to think of the morrow. And upon them the deeply sunken eyes of Thackery Bozeman fell, with a look as close to pity as he could command.

"Pretty bad, ain't it, boys?"

THEIR eyes climbed to his. "Bad?" It was a sneer from Cort Cosper, whose bank statement had once run into six figures. "You don't call this bad, do yuh, Bozeman? Little dry spell like this? Hell it's only seven hundred and two days, today, since God turned off the rain. Give him a chance, can't yuh?"

"You lawyers," growled Pete Havery, one-time owner of the huge Lazy H, "thrive on trouble. What's the matter? Don't this kind of trouble fetch in no business. How's for the loan of a cigarette, Bozeman?"

"I don't use tobacco," the lawyer said hollowly. "And as for trouble, I never wished it on any man. There are more important things than business in this world, my friends. I am sincerely sorry for you. If I could turn on the rain, you may be assured I would do so."

No one answered him. Their eyes were turned down again, their fingers busy with their whittling, their faces bleak as the face of the dead range. Bozeman twisted uneasily, changed his mind about whatever it was he might have said, and moved away.

To the cowmen looking after him, there was no connection between his pausing, some doors farther down, doubling a little and going through one of his periodical spasms, and the tall, heavy-shouldered man, who stood opposite him at a hitchbar, idly stroking the neck of his horse. Nor could they have possibly heard the murmured conversation that passed between them.

"What's the good word, Thack?" the heavy man said.

"Tonight, Link. Be at my office when the last light's gone."

"Fetch Sunday Bawn?"

"Why not? What do you think I'm paying him for? Tonight's it."

The man whistled softly. "What about the sheriff?"

"I'm on my way to see him now. I'll arrange to have him out of the way. I'll go over the whole thing with you both in the office. Can't be any hitch in this one."

He moved on down the walk like a man stricken, slowly, haltingly, digging his fist into his side. Because he knew that the eyes of the town were on him, he forced himself to appear more miserable, more wracked with pain. For a long minute he paused outside the combination jail and sheriff's office. Then he walked in, lifting his feet up the steps with painful effort.

Sheriff Lon Reno looked up from the letter he was writing. "Hullo, Bozeman," Reno said. "You look sick, man. Sit down. I'm glad you dropped in. Suppose you heard I had to pistol-whip Tuffy Barr last night, and throw him into the jug. He tried to drink the town dry, shot up the Rimrock Saloon and staged a one-man riot. He's been calling for you for an hour. Reckon he thinks you can peel the jail right off him."

"I can," said the lawyer, without a flicker of a face muscle, "providing he's got half a leg to stand on."

"I don't think he has, Bozeman. You aiming to take his case?"

"Can't say, Sheriff. Give him another day to sober up, then I'll be in to talk with him. If he's got any money, I'll see what I can do for him. If not—" He shrugged.

Distaste twisted Lon Reno's lean face. He ran fingers through a mat of prematurely gray hair and looked narrowly at the enigma of Arrowhead City. Not once did Bozeman meet his glance.

After an interminable wait, Reno said, "What's on your mind, Bozeman? Something you wanted to take up with me?"

Only then did Bozeman turn those burning, colorless eyes upon the sheriff. "You're a good friend of Cort Cosper's, eh, Sheriff?"

"I aim to be, Bozeman. Cort's like a brother to me. Anything I've got is his for the asking. Why?"

Bozeman pressed the tips of his fingers together, regarding the cage so formed as if it held the clue to what he wanted words to say. "I hope you'll understand my position, Reno, and not misjudge. I'm acting first and last for my client, Mister Pullen—"

"You mean," Reno rasped, "that lank-jawed workhorse who came in to see me yesterday? Stoop shouldered, with a brace of guns, and acting like he owned this scope of country. To be frank about it, Bozeman, I don't like the man and wouldn't do anything for him if I could."

Bozeman's face contorted; he rose from his chair, coughing and digging his fist into his side. A moment later the spasm had passed and he sagged back weakly.

"**A** MAN cannot help his looks, Sheriff," he said huskily. "Link Pullen is not a bad man, I find. But he's determined. He gets what he goes after, if not one way, then another. He's looked this country over carefully for a location. He likes Cort Cosper's Twin C outfit. He's prepared to pay a good price for it and expects a little more consideration from Cosper than he's had. I—I was hoping you'd use your good offices with your friend."

Lon Reno shook his head. "Not a chance, Bozeman. Cosper don't want to sell his spread, and why should he? He owns Quail Springs, the only water hole in this whole range that hasn't dried up. He could sell water to the rest and make a fortune, but that ain't Cort's way. He's letting them water such cattle as they have left, free of charge."

"Why, only last week, the Arrowhead Cattlemen's Association met and voted to turn one out of every ten cows saved into Cort's iron, when this crisis is over. He'll come out of this big, and respected by every man in the basin. Your client can't expect a man to sell a layout like that. Cort's said, 'No,' and that's an end to it."

"I wish I could think you were right, Reno." There was weariness in Bozeman's dry, nasal tones.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said before. Pullen is a determined man. I've checked on him

and find that he's a hard man when crossed. He'll stop at nothing. I like Cort Cosper and don't want to see trouble come to him. It would be so much safer and easier to avoid it by accepting Pullen's fair offer. In fact, he can get his own price."

"There ain't no price, Bozeman," the sheriff said stiffly. "I've told you the Twin C ain't for sale."

"Then," Bozeman said sadly, "I fear for Cosper."

Reno laughed. "Don't lose no sleep over it, Bozeman. Any time Cort's in danger, I'll be standin' right with him."

"What can you do? Arrest Pullen for what I tell you might be in his mind? No, you can't do that. Or maybe you're thinking of going after Pullen, once he's taken his spite out on your friend. That will do Cosper no good."

Reno laughed again. "If Pullen starts shoving Cort around, I'll not hesitate a minute in turning in my star and throwing my gun against him. And the same goes for Tom Stepdown, Cort's neighbor, on the Ladder outfit. Us three have been close friends for years. Grown up together. We was all born in the same week. What harms one, harms us all."

"I've heard of your friendship," Bozeman said, in a monotone. "Very admirable."

"Maybe you never heard of the gypsy fortune teller that was here with a carnival, some years ago," smiled Reno, savoring the recollection. "Me and Cort and Tommy went in to see her, one by one. She didn't know us from nothin'. Told us all the same thing—that we was one of three friends that would hang together till we died; that we would be rubbed out fightin' the same battle, and be buried side by side on the same day. Maybe that was stretchin' it a bit, but you can tell your client that we three are that way. I can't help you, Bozeman."

"I see your point," said the lawyer, rising and turning to the door. And Reno admired him for the way he brushed aside sentiment and accepted the hard truth. "Maybe the gypsy was right," Bozeman finished.

He moved out into the glaring sunlight, the ghost of a sneer on his face. And he was thinking of the fragmentary

scene he had recently witnessed: Cort Cosper reviling Banker Herman Eberhard for refusing to advance him money for hay on a straight mortgage, hay needed by his ruined neighbors, whose assets and credit had been consumed by two years of burning sunshine.

"The sentimental fool," muttered Bozeman. "Friendship and sympathy have put him right into my hind pocket."

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Night

TEN hours later Cort Cosper sat at his table in the Twin C log house, enjoying a cigarette with his last cup of coffee. This object of Thack Bozeman's concern was a fine figure of young manhood, wide of shoulder, slim of flank, with the hard-muscled legs of a horseman.

Intelligent gray eyes looked out from beneath brows as black as his jet hair. His features were too blunt to have rated him handsome, yet there was a wholesomeness there, a hint of doggedness handed down with his heritage of strength from a hardy, fighting breed. His eyes blazed now and his face was contorted.

"Herman Eberhard!" he snorted, and it was like a curse. "The damned old Dutch skinflint. Everything he's got, he's made off the ranchers of this valley. He came in here with his boots down at the heel and tended bar for Old Wade Purdy, in the Silver Dollar Saloon. Saved his money, never spendin' nothin' with nobody else, until he had enough to make a few loans."

"He took a chance on the risks the Arrowhead State Bank wouldn't handle, but he sure hung on the interest. Now the State Bank is broke, and Herman's Ranchers and Merchants Bank is riding high, refusin' help to the men who made him rich. I'd like to rain his gold down his damned fat neck until he'd need a wheelbarrow to tote his paunch."

With every evidence of high disgust, Cort rose, poured boiling water into a dish pan and prepared to muck up his supper dishes. And it was then that the door rattled to a peremptory knock.

Cort, thinking it was his neighbor, Tom Stepdown, hollered, "Come on in, feller. And I hope you've practiced up some on your pitch game, 'cause I'm feelin' lucky—"

He cut off abruptly, staring at the two men who came through the door. Although they were strangers to him, they possessed certain characteristics that commanded his full attention and stirred a chill stream along his spine.

The first man was big, short of leg and arm, so short, in fact, as to peculiarly emphasize the girth of chest, width of shoulders and broadness of hip. His palms hung scarcely below the butts of his high-belted guns. And one hand, Cort noted, hung grotesquely, loosely, and was stained with dried blood. His high-boned face was gray, as if with pain, and his wide nostrils flared. His close-set, pit black eyes fixed Cort, and there was a strange hoarseness in his voice.

"You Cosper?"

"Yes. I thought you was somebody else."

"Shoulda hailed you before ridin' up," the big man apologized. "Name's Galt, John Galt." His good right hand came out to grip Cort's. "This is my pardner, Sep Holliday."

Cort looked the little man over as he shook hands with him. He had seen the type before. The small gent had a pinched, wrinkled face, eyes that danced nervously, down-curving lips that mumbled, "Pleased to meetcha," without conviction, a warped, twisted body. Yes, Cort had seen men like him before. And he posted the reflection that he had never known one like him that was worth the salt to pickle him.

"Take chairs, boys," Cort invited. "Had your supper? I can get you something—"

"No, no, we've done et . . ." The big man waved his hand, wincing as pain shot through his shoulder. "Thanks just the same. We're here—"

"Looks like you've got a bad arm there," Cort broke in. "Better let me take a look at it."

"Don't bother," John Galt said. "My brone tried to drag me off under a tree. Skinned me up some an' made me lame as all get out. But I'll be all right. And, anyway, I'm in a hurry. I'm trying to make the rounds with this paper from Herman Eberhard."

"Eberhard?" Cort grimaced. "What kind of a paper? What's the old Shylock want now?"

"Come on, John," the little man put in, sourly. "We're wastin' time. Herman said Cosper would never cooperate."

"Shut up, Sep." Then, to Cort: "You've got old Herman all wrong. He's full of public spirit, but you can't blame him for wanting to take care of his money." He whipped a paper from his coat. "He's worked out a plan to save what cattle are left in the Arrowhead. But you'll all have to sign it, every damn rancher. He figgers you're the toughest, so I'm stoppin' here first. Here, read this over."

Cort took the sheet of legal cap. It read as follows:

Agreement:

For and in consideration of the payment by Herman Eberhard of the sum of one hundred thousand dollars to the treasurer of the Arrowhead Cattlemen's Association,

MAD



When a cough, due to a cold, drives you mad, Smith Brothers Cough Drops usually give soothing, pleasant relief. Black or Menthol—5¢.

Smith Bros. Cough Drops are the only drops containing VITAMIN A

Vitamin A (Carotene) raises the resistance of mucous membranes of nose and throat to cold infections, when lack of resistance is due to Vitamin A deficiency.



the undersigned agree to execute, each and several, a note for the principal sum, with mortgage, each and several, covering all real property recorded in me, within the County of Arrowhead, State of Colorado, said notes to fall due and become payable one year from date.

Signed.....

Witness:.....

Signed.....

Witness:.....

Signed.....

WARRING emotions shook Cort. Surprise, and some relief, almost overcame his prejudice against Eberhard.

"Well," he said, "the old boy must have had a change of heart. Can't imagine what's got into him. Why didn't he send out the notes and mortgages, instead of this useless agreement?"

"That's no secret." Sweat beaded John Galt's forehead. He gritted his teeth against his pain. "This is your own proposition, the one Herman refused a day or so ago. You told him the whole Association is for it. This paper will tell the story. If everybody signs, the Association will get the money. If not, it's all off."

"He wants to make damned sure he gets this whole valley if we can't pay," sneered Cort.

"By payin' a hell of a lot more'n it's worth," Galt countered. "What you going to do? If you don't want to play, the deal is off, an' I can get back to town an' have this shoulder fixed up. Make up your mind."

"Nothing to do but sign it," Cort mourned. "We've got to have hay, and soon."

He walked to a shelf for pen and ink, bent over the document to sign it. Galt and Holliday rose, stood looking over his shoulder as he affixed his signature.

He had just completed his name when the silence of the room was split by the rasp of guns sliding from greased holsters. Cort whirled, stabbing for his Colt. But Sep Holliday's hand was on the weapon first. Two swinging gun barrels crashed against his head, filling his eyes with blackness and his brain with streaks of fire.

Desperate with the urge for self preservation, Cort hurled himself blindly at his attackers. Dimly, he was conscious of his

fingers sinking into the cloth of a coat, of John Galt's bitter, bellowed curses.

"The dirty, yellow-livered son of a she-coyote!" he bawled. "He got me in that plugged shoulder."

A pistol blared squarely in Cort's face. He felt the faint sting of the powder and the exquisite agony of lead as it smashed through his body. With the last of his strength, he tried to seize the murder weapon, failed as his legs turned to jelly, dropping him. He knew he was going to the floor, but he had no recollection of hitting it. He seemed to be spinning down, down, down, into a bottomless void. After that—nothing.

CORT COSPER slowly emerged from the pit of pain that held him. A dim flicker of distant light grew and grew until it materialized into his own lamp, burning undimmed on his own table. Sick at the stomach from bullet shock, suffering agony from the hole in his right shoulder, he had difficulty for some moments recalling what had happened. His eyes shuttled around, fell upon the open door, swinging in the breeze. Then it all came back—Galt, Holliday and the paper he had signed.

He knew he had been tricked when he'd signed that document. He tried to figure out how, but it was no use. His head was pounding. Weakness clung to him like a leech. He found himself thinking that if he didn't do something, he would die, and wondered what he should do. He must have slipped into unconsciousness again then, for suddenly he was awake once more, with the sound of hoof-beats and the dull mutter of men's voices in his ears. Riders were dismounting in the dooryard.

Cort tried to lift himself, moaned, then rolled to a sitting posture. That was the way Sheriff Lon Reno found him when he stepped through the door. Behind him loomed the faces of twenty other men, all armed.

"Lon," Cort said weakly. "I—I'm awful glad you—come when you did."

The young sheriff just stood there, looking down at him, without joy, without even sympathy. There was a frown on his lean face.

"In the shoulder, eh, Cort?" he asked;

icily, Cort thought. Then he was hunched beside the wounded man, looking into his eyes. "What happened, feller?"

The suspicion in his voice was like a blow. It woke brief resentment. "What you think happened?" he flared. "Two gents came in here with a paper to sign. When I signed it, they pistol-whipped me, then shot me."

"Paper?" Reno lifted his brows. "What kind of a paper, Cort?"

"An agreement to mortgage every place in the valley for the hundred thousand dollars Herman Eberhard is going to loan the Association to buy hay."

Reno shook his head. "Pretty thin, Cort. Everybody knows Herman refused to even consider that deal; you told too many people that a couple of days ago. Now tell me the whole truth. It'll go easier with you if you do."

Rage hit Cort, cleared his mind. "What the hell is this, Lon? I don't know why Herman changed his mind any more'n you do. Hell, you act like I've committed some kind of a crime. What's the idea? What's happened?"

A laugh ran through the group outside. "Tell him, Lon."

"Nothing much," Reno said lazily. "Only, two men stood up the Ranchers and Merchants Bank tonight, killed Herman Eberhard and got away with God only knows how much money. One of the pair dribbled blood down the steps as he ran, and he was seen to be holding onto his shoulder. One cap was cracked in Herman's gun. Who helped you, Cort?"

Fear, like a keen knife, stabbed Cort Cosper's heart. "Who helped me?" he cried. "Are you crazy, Lon? I've been right here all evening. Never left the place. Was just making to wash my supper dishes when two boys came in with that agreement from Eberhard. One, a big, thick feller, was hurt in the shoulder. Dried blood on his fingers, and he allowed his bronc tried to scrape him off under a tree. You—you've got me all wrong, Lon."

"Can be, feller. Tell you what. While I get something on that wound, the boys will look around. No objections?"

Faced by this new calamity, Cort couldn't have objected if he had wanted to. He groaned with pain as Lon Reno

picked him up and laid him on the bed. He didn't remember much as the sheriff washed the clotting from his shoulder, poured whiskey into the raw wound and bound him up with strips torn from Cort's Sunday-go-to-meeting shirt.

In fact, the sting of the alcohol bludgeoned him into insensibility for a few minutes. He came out of it, choking on the whiskey Lon had forced down his throat, to find the posse ranged around the bed. There was an ugly look in their eyes, and a sort of fierce gloating as one man held up a small bag, half full of clinking coins.

"Part of the bank loot," he barked. "Found it cached in a cook pot, back of the stove. Where's the rest?"

"I don't know," Cort groaned. "I didn't have nothing to do with it, boys. The job was done by them two that came in here an' shot me. They planted it there."

"Maybe so," Lon Reno said. "Matt, you and Chunky take Cort into Arrowhead and turn him over to Doc Gibson. The rest of you come with me. We're going over to Tom Stepdown's. If Cort's tarred with this stick, so is Tom."

THAT trip into town was a nightmare to Cort. Every step of the horse sent waves of pain through his body. His head seemed about to burst, and there were times when, for brief periods, unconsciousness offered him blessed relief. It was the same, only worse, when he lay in Doc Gibson's office, while the medico probed for and extracted the bullet and then bound him up with clean bandages.

A few stiff jolts of whiskey revived his strength so that he could walk down to the jailhouse, with two possemen supporting him. When they were gone, and the cell door had clang'd locked behind him, Cort fell asleep on the cell cot.

Dawn was breaking when he awoke. The sheriff's office was full of men. Tom Stepdown was just being turned into the cell with him. The Ladder boss was seething with anger.

"It's a dirty frame," he raged. "Them two gents came to my place with that paper you'd signed and got my John Henry. I made 'em some coffee an' they

left. Afterward Lon showed up, colder eyed than I've even seen him, an' turned up a bag of gold from under my saddle. He's got me accused of helpin' you kill Eberhard an' rob the bank. Hell, I'd just got in from ridin' my highline all day."

"Take it easy, Tom," Cort said wearily. "They can't hang us for something we didn't do."

"They can if we can't turn up them two devils that done this to us. I begged Lon to let me go lookin' for 'em, but you'd have thought he was a plumb stranger the way he refused. It makes me so damned mad—"

"Take it easy," Cort repeated. "Lon couldn't do anything else, Tom. Not with a posse watchin' his every move. I was so fuzzy-brained last night I couldn't tell him nothin'. But now I can, an' will. He's got to get out after that short-armed gunnie with the hole through his shoulder. Feller like that can't hide, 'cause there ain't nobody else like him. Let's get Lon in here an' start him on their trail."

"Which I've already done," Tom growled, sinking onto the cot and running his fingers through his hair. "I've described them two to a hair, an' Lon's out after 'em now. But I think he figgers we're liars who have fixed a yarn an' aim to stay with it."

Tom Stepdown, having talked Cort asleep while exhausting his rage, gave in then to his own weariness, and slept. Twice that day a grinning Chinese brought trays of food, was admitted and waited for them to eat. Cort, worried about Lon Reno's absence, had little appetite.

"If he turns against us," he told Tom, "we're sunk."

"He won't," Stepdown promised. "Hell, he can't. It just ain't human nature, Cort. I'm hoping he'll catch them two devils, but if he don't, I'm bankin' on him gettin' us out of this split stick."

They clung to that hope desperately. Late in the afternoon, Doc Gibson came and pronounced Cort rallying nicely. His wound was cool, uninjected. And Cort knew he was right when, after a fair night's sleep, he awoke, hungry and refreshed. His head no longer pained, and his wound, while devilishly sore, no longer throbbed continuously.

He ate a good breakfast and could josh a little with the still fuming Stepdown. An hour after they had eaten, Reno came in, dust-covered and red-eyed. But there was a noticeable absence of the grimness he had evidenced that first night. A sly smile hovered about his wide mouth.

"Looks like you boys told the truth," he announced. "I picked up the trail of two horsebackers, leading from the Twin C to the Ladder. From there it led to the lava cliffs, where a feller might as well try to trail an ant. But I did find where they'd took time out to grab a few hours sleep an' divide the money they didn't use for plantin' purposes. I found a couple of coins there, showin' they was in a hurry."

"Mighty thin evidence," Cort growled, "when a man is fightin' for his life. If you don't get that pair, Lon, we're likely to swing."

"Reckon I'll get 'em," the sheriff grinned. "I haven't the slightest idea who the little gent could be, but from your description of the big feller, I've a purty good notion who he is. An' if I'm right, he won't be goin' far."

"Who you think?" Stepdown demanded.

"Big feller called himself John Galt," Cort recalled. "The little one Sep Holliday."

"Names," Reno snorted. "One's as good as another. If I haven't guessed wrong, the big feller's Link Pullen. He's been movin' heaven an' earth, through Lawyer Bozeman, to have me influence Cort to sell the Twin C."

CHAPTER THREE

Graves for Two Live Men?

"HIM?" Cort started. "Bozeman's been out so often I'm plumb sick of him. But if Pullen was the one, why that agreement paper for Eberhard?"

Reno and Stepdown shook their heads. "It don't make sense," Tom said.

"Something to make you boys feel good." Reno let himself out of the cell. "Doc Gibson says that the gun that shot you was held within a few feet of you. He says there's powder embedded in the

skin of your chin. An' the bullet hole through your shirt is muzzle-burned. All of which seems to bear out your story. So hang an' rattle, boys."

He walked from the cell block, out into his office. Thackery Bozeman was waiting, his long face lugubrious as he strove to ignore the ill-concealed un-friendliness of the men loitering about the room. Bozeman gestured, and Reno dismissed the townsmen.

"What's on your mind, Bozeman?"

"I'm here," the lawyer said, "to offer my services to the men you're holding for the murder of Herman Eberhard.

padded into the cell block. A moment later he emerged, still beaming. "Plenty soon me come back bimeby."

"All right, Wong. I'll be here." Reno didn't even lift his eyes—not until it seemed that the restaurant man went out and then ducked right back in again. The light had grown faint. The man who was suddenly in the room was between Reno and the window. The light dimmed. Reno looked up, came abruptly to his feet. He had never seen the little man before, yet it was as if he had seen him many times, so accurately had Cort and Stepdown described him.

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They'll need counsel, and I feel I can help them. It is plain they are victims of some sort of a plant. I would like to uncover it, by acting for them."

Reno's eyes narrowed. In the back of his mind was the growing certainty that Link Pullen had done the bank job. And Pullen was Bozeman's client. It smelled bad.

"For them, I'll thank you, Bozeman," he said lazily. "But Cort is in no position to talk business. And Stepdown is fit to tie. No hurry, is there? In a few days, we'll take it up with them. Between us, we'll have to see that no jury finds them guilty."

"And that we will," Bozeman said smugly. "I'll be in tomorrow."

Lon Reno stared after him, pulling at his square chin. "You're too anxious, my long-coupled friend," he murmured. "All-together too anxious."

About an hour after sunset, the Chinaman came with the prisoners' trays. Lon Reno, busy at his desk, looked up.

"Take 'em right in, Wong," he ordered. "The cell door's unlocked, an' I reckon the boys are hungry."

"Me slabby." The Oriental grinned and

"Hello!" Reno said. His luck was not dead yet. "I didn't see you come in. What's on your mind?"

"Sheriff Reno?" The pinched face of the little man was cast in a mold meant for a smile.

"The same." Reno said slowly. "What can I do for you?"

The little man looked out the door, then came to the desk. "Name's Henry Jones," he said. "I'm a deputy from Coconino County. I'm on the trail of a big, slab-built feller name of Link Pullen. I followed him into the Arrowhead Basin and—"

"Let's see your credentials," Reno said.

"Credentials?" The man stared. "Oh yes . . . got 'em here somewhere—" He dug into an inside pocket of his coat and came out with a gun. The weapon vomited flame.

Reno staggered, clutched at the edge of the desk, then went down, groaning.

His assailant whirled, darted outside, his voice shrill.

"Prisoners loose!" he screamed. "They just shot the sheriff!" He was throwing back lead into the office as if to prevent the escape of Cosper and Stepdown.

BACK in the cell, Cort and Tom Stepdown had welcomed the Chinaman and his food. Following Wong's swift departure, they settled themselves on their cots, leveled the trays and whipped off the napkin covers. Then they were looking blankly at one another. On each tray, beside the food, was a shiny Colt .45.

"What the hell?" Stepdown breathed.

"It's a trick," Cort snapped as he looked at the loads. There were five unspent cartridges—and one empty. Tom's gun was full.

"What fool sent us these?" Cort said. "Who could be dumb enough to think we'd use these on Lon."

"Easy," Stepdown snarled. "Show me that feller an' I'll show you the hombre who killed Eberhard. Listen, we can have some fun with Lon. After we've et, let's walk out with these guns. It'll scare him green an' teach him a good lesson. Lon's too damned careless to be a sheriff."

"Just tellin' him will teach him a lesson," Cort countered, "an' likely scare him just as bad. Besides, I don't like playin' with guns unless I aim to use 'em. Let's eat."

They were only vaguely conscious of the murmur of voices in the sheriff's office. But with their mouths full of food, they were brought straight up by a sudden shot, the sound of a falling body and someone shrilling: "Prisoners loose! They just shot the sheriff."

"Come on!" Stepdown barked, and quit the cell on the run, his gun ready. Cort, still weak and unsteady, followed as fast as he could, not forgetting to sing out a warning to Stepdown.

"Careful, Tom. Don't trust that gun. It may be fixed."

Cort skidded into the office. His first look at Lon told him he was dead. Tom, struck by a slug that had come through the doorway, was cursing madly.

"The dirty damned snake-trackin' sons," he raved. "They got Lon an' we're stuck with it. Looks like the gypsy was right, pardner."

"Looks like it," Cort muttered weakly. Then: "Hear 'em! They're lynch crazy right now."

It was true. The town, aroused by the

yells of the self-styled deputy from Coconino County, was boiling. The steady pound of guns rocked the street. Lead poured through the windows, breaking glass, bringing a stream of lead inside.

The prisoners, in momentary danger of suffering Lon's fate, backed into the blind end of the cell block, closed the iron door and waited, guns in hand, each trying to read a flicker of hope in the other's face.

"What we gonna do?" Tom asked.

"Search me." Cort was suddenly aware that he was wet with the sweat of weakness, trembling as if he had the ague. "Stand our hand, I reckon, an' blast down anybody that tries to get us. If we gotta be hung, we might's well take some of the boys along. It'll make a fine legend for your grandchildren."

"Fat chance I've got of havin' any," the Ladder boss said bitterly. "But you're right. We go out fighting. You take that window. I'll take this one."

The shells in their gift pistols were good. And, at the first discharge, there was a swift scattering of the crowd that milled like cattle about the jail. The townsmen withdrew to the shelter of another building. All shooting died away.

"Now what?" Tom glared at Cort.

"Pow-wow, I reckon. Figgerin' on ways an' means to blast us out. It should be over quick, if they really rush us. Luck to you, kid. I wish I could get you clear of this."

"Right back at you."

They shook hands, then resumed their places at the windows. The light was wan- ing outside, but enough still remained to show them the shadowy figures ad- vancing in a cordon around the jail.

One shot, from each of the defenders served to turn back the attack. Then followed five minutes of sustained firing, with streams of bullets pouring into the jail.

Then, harsh, dry, unmoved, Thackery Bozeman's voice struck through the suc- ceeding hush.

"Powder!" he ordered. "Bring powder and fuse and caps from the hardware store."

"This ought to be nice," Tom Step- down said.

"Don't matter much," Cort said. "It's bound to add up to the same thing."

But even so, it was Cort who tried to drop the horseman who came spurring up with a bundle of dynamite, to which was attached a fuming fuse. Cort sent two shots through the bars. But he missed, partly because of the moving target, partly because of his own weakness. He saw the make-shift bomb come sailing through the air, heard it thud against the foundation of the stone jail . . . He hurled himself across the corridor and onto the cell floor. Tom, holding his breath, flattened beside him. The floor suddenly seemed to buckle and split. Cort never did know whether he heard the explosion or not. Fire danced before his eyes. He was conscious of falling stone and mortar, of the smothering effect of air that seemed turned suddenly to dust. A giant hand picked him up and shook him. He heard Tom Stepdown cursing. Then he was smashed into unconsciousness . . .

THROUGH a dense fog of semi-consciousness, impressions came to Cort Cosper. The crisp words of men. The swaying and jostling of the stretcher upon which they were carrying him. The tramp of many boots.

"Where do you want 'em, Grimes?" It was the voice of Thackery Bozeman, lawyer.

"In this side door, Bozeman," the undertaker said. "A pity," he continued sorrowfully, "the sheriff had to die with those scoundrels."

"His own fault," Bozeman growled. "He had an idea they were his friends, and innocent. He was too careless."

The stretcher bumped a doorway jamb. "Now where?" Bozeman said.

"Dump 'em on these slabs, boys. That's it."

Cort's senses ebbed as rough handling sent rivers of pain through him. But he heard Bozeman's faint order. "Link, you and Sunday stay here with me. The rest clear out!"

"Good God, Bozeman," the undertaker said suddenly, "there's life in every one of these men."

"You can fix that," the lawyer said. "A little embalming fluid . . ."

"No!" Grimes almost shrieked. "Not

that, Bozeman. I agreed to get out of the way and let you do what you wanted. But not—not murder. I—I can't do it."

"Quit hollerin'!" Bozeman murmured. "You want to wise up the whole town? I knew you'd refuse. But even if you hadn't, I wouldn't have trusted you. You've been paid, and if you want to live, you'll keep your mouth shut. Understand? Now get out. I'll take care of this."

Desperately, Cort tried to rally his faculties. His brain was capable of thought, but it wouldn't command his body. He knew that Reno and Stepdown were alive. He knew that they, along with himself, were soon to be slaughtered by Bozeman. But he didn't know why.

Tobacco smoke stung his nostrils. The murmur of excited men on the street came to his ears. Occasionally his three guards exchanged brief remarks, but for the most part they were silent.

"All right, boys, it's dark," Bozeman finally said. "How about you, Link. Think you can handle one of these with that sore shoulder of yours?"

"Easy," boasted the man who had called himself John Galt. "A scratch don't stop Link Pullen. Open that back door, help me lift one."

Rough hands lifted Cort. Then, he was being carried through the cool night air. He wondered where they were going until he caught the angry muttering of the Arrowhead River. Then he knew.

"Out on yonder point, boys," Bozeman ordered. "Deep water below that. I don't want 'em to be found. If we dump 'em into the current, they will be swept clear out of the country. Food for the catfish."

Cort prayed to God he could curse Bozeman. But no words came. The renegades halted, dumped their burdens to the ground. The impact shook Cort's tiny hold on consciousness and he knew no more until he was falling—falling into a bottomless void. Terrific shock hit him. Water closed over him, cutting off his breath, sucking him down . . .

Somehow he held his breath. He was whirled, buffeted, banged against rocks for what seemed an eternity. His lungs ached. There was a tremendous roaring in his ears. Then the current shot him to the surface for a gulp of life-giving air.

Too weak and battered to swim, he still found enough control to remain on the surface once he got there, turning on his back and making pitiful little strokes with his feeble arms.

His boots were gone and he thanked God that a renegade had fancied them. His gun was gone too. His clothes weighed him down, and at times he was drawn under for so long a period it seemed certain he must drown.

The water took what little strength he had and, after what seemed hours and hours in the swift current, he seemed to lose all interest in living. Unconsciousness claimed him again. The river moved silently on . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

To Boothill and Back

CORT came back to consciousness with the sound of soft feminine voices in his ears—voices speaking a strange language. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on a pile of sheepskins, inside a brush wickiup. A fat Indian woman squatted beside him, talking to a group of children huddled about the door.

When she saw his eyes flutter open, she caught her breath, rose and darted outside. Cort heard her shrill voice calling to someone. A moment later a tall, slender Indian buck entered the wickiup, to stand regarding him with strange impassiveness.

"Chee!" murmured Cort. He recalled days when he had allowed this Navajo herder of sheep and goats to graze his flocks on the Twin C brush range, after the fierce sun of the drought had withered the grass in the lowlands. "You fetched me here?"

"My woman," the sheep man said. "She pull you out of river. Bad hurt, but no go for doctor because me away with sheep. That near one moon ago."

"One moon?" Cort lifted his hand to his face, knew by the whiskers there that the Indian told the truth. "And I've laid here for a whole month, like a dead man?"

"Like dead. You heap sick. Talk plenty.

Me go for doctor now? To Arrowhead City?"

Cort shook his head. "No, Chee. I'll get well pretty soon and pay your woman for caring for me. Tell nobody I'm here, understand?"

"Me not tell," Chee said.

His promise brought Cort little comfort. Word travels fast among the Navajos and, if anyone talked into the right ears, Bozeman would be out to finish his job.

That was a fear Cort was to wrestle with for many a day as he lay there, weak, helpless. But as week followed week, with no sign of anyone looking for him, the fear became dulled, submerged beneath a greater fear. He seemed to be lingering. Was he ever to get well?

So far, he knew, he had cheated the gypsy who had foretold that he and Lon Reno and Tom Stepdown would die and be buried together. His friends were dead and it seemed now that he lived only to settle their score.

Chee, ranging his few sheep along the bottoms of the Arrowhead River, managed to keep them alive. He brought tender lambs, so that Cort might have food. Little by little, Chee's woman pawned her jewelry at the trading post, that there might be flour and baking powder, coffee and rice in the *hogan*. They had not forgotten Cort's kindness to them, and were repaying in the only way they knew. But still he didn't get any better.

Summer turned to fall, fall to winter. Chee moved his family back to the big tight *hogan*, against the increased chill of nights. He had to carry Cort, put him on a pony, tie him and carry him inside when they had finished the move. To Cort there seemed nothing particularly wrong with him, except for his weakness. Strength was terribly slow in returning. And so it was until it clouded, blew strong and damp from the south, then rained. It was the first moisture in more than two years.

Lying in the *hogan*, Cort reacted strangely to the splash of water off the mud roof. An aching lump formed in his throat and he rolled to the little pool forming under the firehole, dabbed his fingers in it and turned his face up. How

good it felt on his cheeks! How hungrily the parched earth drank it up! That was the tonic he had needed, it seemed, and he began to improve, slowly but surely.

Spring came, and it was a verdant, rainy one. He was able to sit outside in the sun, frolicking with those of the children not yet old enough to work with the sheep. But there were times when all joy left him, and the children shrank away. And those times became more frequent as he became stronger. It was the fever in him—the lust to kill!

It was June when he could stand it no longer. "Chee," he said, tiring of watching the Indian fashion a bracelet and fix the turquoise. "I'm going away. Maybe I won't be back. If I don't see you again, I'll be dead. If I live, you'll be well paid for taking care of me. Will you do one more thing for me, Chee?"

"You do good for Chee," the Indian said simply. "What I can do now?"

"Save me a long hike by letting me have a pony."

The Navajo waved his hand toward the horse herd. "Which one?" he asked . . .

BY the lights of such business places as were still open, Arrowhead City looked unchanged. Yet there was a different feel to the place, an emptiness reflecting and recalling the absence of Lon Reno and Tom Stepdown. Cort's eyes went to the dark jailhouse, and he wondered who had succeeded Lon as sheriff.

Then he was glancing toward the western hills, thinking of the Twin C, and the little bunch of wizened cattle he had so carefully nursed through the cruel drought. And Tom's adjoining Ladder spread, what of that? How had the two outfits fared, untenanted and unattended?

A jangle of tin-pan music struck from the Territorial Bar. It drew Cort, almost as if a voice were telling him that among the revelers he would find Thackery Bozeman. It was fitting that here, Cort should hand-mark things: *Paid in Full!*

Bozeman's office was dark and, obeying his first impulse, Cort reined toward the saloon hitchbar. He realized suddenly that his first need was a gun. With no concrete plan of action, he reined across

the street and into the gloom of the town stable.

From the dimly lighted office of the barn came the gaunt, bearded hostler, limping grotesquely on a shortened leg. A big gun swung at his right hip. The hostler took the bridle reins, peering at Cort from beneath heavy brows.

"Corral him, mister—" He had jumped back as Cort whipped the gun from its scabbard. "What the hell!"

"Get into your office!" Cort rapped. "It takes a gun to kill three men. An' this is it. But until I find the men, I take no chances. Sorry, feller, but I've got to rope and gag you."

The man's hollow eyes were wide, but not with fear. His mouth was open and, as Cort closed the office door behind them, the hostler chuckled, sank weakly into a swivel chair.

"Cort Cosper!" he muttered faintly. "Me and Tom was so dead sure you'd be back that we've held off scotchin' them snakes. We was agreed the gypsy fortune teller couldn't be wrong. If one of us escaped, the rest had to. We'd just about give up, though."

"My God!" Cort breathed. "Lon! Alive. An' Tom Stepdown too, eh? Where is he?"

"Swampin' in the Territorial Bar, Cort. Pretty bad broke up, he is, but a lot better man than he lets on."

Cort leaned against the wall, forcing his mind to accept all this. So fully had he reconciled himself to the certainty that his lifelong friends were dead that this sudden reunion hit him hard. He searched Lon Reno's face. It was written there what the one-time sheriff had been through in that year—from his twisted body to his emaciated face and almost white hair.

"What about the Twin C?" he asked tonelessly. "And the Ladder?"

"Owned by Bozeman," Lon Reno muttered. "Link Pullen runs your old spread; Sunday Bawn, Tom's outfit. They're top dogs around here, feller. Thack Bozeman recorded deeds to both ranches, properly signed an' witnessed—"

"Them signatures," Cort gasped. "That's why he wanted us to sign a paper supposed to come from Herman Eberhard."

"Right," Lon snapped. He pulled open a drawer, handed Lon a bright new .45 Colt, six full. "Knowin' them things made it hard for me an' Tom to curb our tempers an' wait an' wait. Glad we did now. 'Cause waitin's done . . . tonight. Here, take this gun. I bought it for you with my first money here . . . Bozeman's money, 'cause he owns this stable now. Come on. Let's go over an' see Tom."

With that strange limp that so thoroughly submerged the image of Sheriff Lon Reno, he led Cort across the street, between buildings to the rear door of the Territorial Bar. At his rap, a bolt slid back and the panel swung open. Reno pushed Cort across the threshold to face the stooped man inside.

It was Tom Stepdown, though Cort never would have recognized him. The once cropped, curly, black locks hung nearly to his shoulders. And the once round boyish, face was like granite, with a bushy black beard reaching almost to the eyes.

"Hello, Cort," he said, quietly. "You're long overdue." He turned to a chest of drawers, from which he took a rolled gunbelt and a well-oiled pistol.

"They're all out there in the barroom, boys," he said. "No use delaying it. Cort, Bozeman is yours. I'll take Pullen. Lon, Bawn is your meat, 'cause he's the one that shot you."

AS HE spoke, Cort caught the flash of his image in the looking glass on the wall, turned to regard himself. He was cadaverous, bearded, immeasurably aged. His pards were peering over his shoulder. It made a picture of a triple-headed scarecrow, men broken in the grinding mills of the gods, yet men who could still laugh at the ravages of the past and scorn the threat of the future.

With Stepdown leading, they walked out into the barroom. The place was thronged, every gambling table working to capacity, the bar lined. Punchers, miners and freighters, with a sprinkling of gun hirelings.

Down at the rear end of the bar, Bozeman stood with his lieutenants—Pullen and Bawn. The lawyer was unchanged, still funereal and buzzard-like, wrapped in a mantle of icy calm. But Pullen and

Bawn showed the effect of their new prosperity; they were duded up, patently more arrogant and overbearing. A full rod from them, Stepdown pulled up.

"Bozeman!" he shouted, "I want you to meet a couple friends of mine."

The whole room stared. Bozeman turned slowly, fixing the three scarecrows with his frigid glance. His lips curled. "What do I care for the hobo friends of a saloon swamper?" he demanded. "You're fired! Get your time from the bartender."

Stepdown laughed. "Too late, Bozeman. I quit just five minutes ago, when my friends stepped into the box you gave me to live in. Take a good look. Don't you recognize a man who's cleaned up your slop while one of your bootlickers held down his Ladder spread?"

"Stepdown!" For the first time Arrowhead City saw Bozeman register emotion. His sunken eyes blinked, his lips trembled and his lank cheeks paled.

"It's him!" Pullen croaked. "The murderin' son that killed Sheriff Reno."

"With two gunies to side him!" Sunday Bawn yelped—and he was drawing.

In the split second before death struck that barroom the world seemed to hold its breath. The characters in the drama seemed ruled by some law of slow motion. Pullen lurched free of the bar and his hands were plummeting for his twin guns. Bozeman hardly seemed to move. His right hand fluttered somewhere near his shirt front and then there was a gun in his fingers. But, for perhaps the first time in his experience, he and his hirelings were facing a new brand of recklessness—one that recked not of the cost, only of what it bought.

Starting behind his lieutenants, Bozeman was way ahead. But before he could level on Stepdown, Cort's pistol blazed. Drilled through the heart, Bozeman fell, cured of his ailment.

Pullen triggered, but Tom Stepdown was a flash before him. The renegade went down for the long count.

Sunday Bawn, snarling and deadly, snaked forward, his guns spitting. But the slugs were plumping into the floor. Lon Reno's bullet was in his chest. Crying weakly, he caught at the bar, lost strength and fell.

Smoke coiled about the chandeliers

and the three gun ghosts were wheeling to face the stunned patronage.

"Anybody care to pick up their hands an' try to play 'em?" Stepdown said.

For a moment nobody stirred. Then a lank, sorrowful looking man stepped forth and moved toward them.

"Not just the way you mean that, Stepdown," he said, turning back his lapel to flash his sheriff's badge. "But I'll have to take cards. You're wanted for the murder of Sheriff Lon Reno."

"What about me?" taunted Cort. "The name's Cosper."

"You too." The officer halted to regard him, from a safe distance. "I'll be forced to ask you to drop your guns and come along peaceable."

"Wait a minute, Sheriff." Lon Reno was chuckling. "You ain't got nothing on them two boys. Can you prove that they killed me?"

"You?" All the starch went out of the lawman. "You're—"

"Lon Reno. Shot down in cold blood by Sunday Bawn, who gave the alarm,"

THE END

hoping you townsmen would rise and kill Stepdown and Cosper—which they nearly done, thanks to that crook, Bozeman."

Clipping his phrases, he told the whole sordid story, a telling that brought back life to the dead eyes of men crushed down by Bozeman's pressure, that caused certain gents to slink from the barroom.

When the full impact of Bozeman's game hit Arrowhead, there was quite a celebration, with Bozeman's whiskey. And during that celebration, three of the town barbers volunteered to shave the three scarecrows, and cut their hair.

None of the three cronies would ever look the same, but the range found them unchanged. A circuit judge, confronted with the evidence of Bozeman's guilt, hesitated not at all in restoring the Twin C and the Ladder to their rightful owners. And, a hero worshipping populace elected Lon Reno sheriff again. The words of a gypsy fortune teller came to be bandied about in those days, as something of a miracle of prevision. Even Cort Cosper believes it now.

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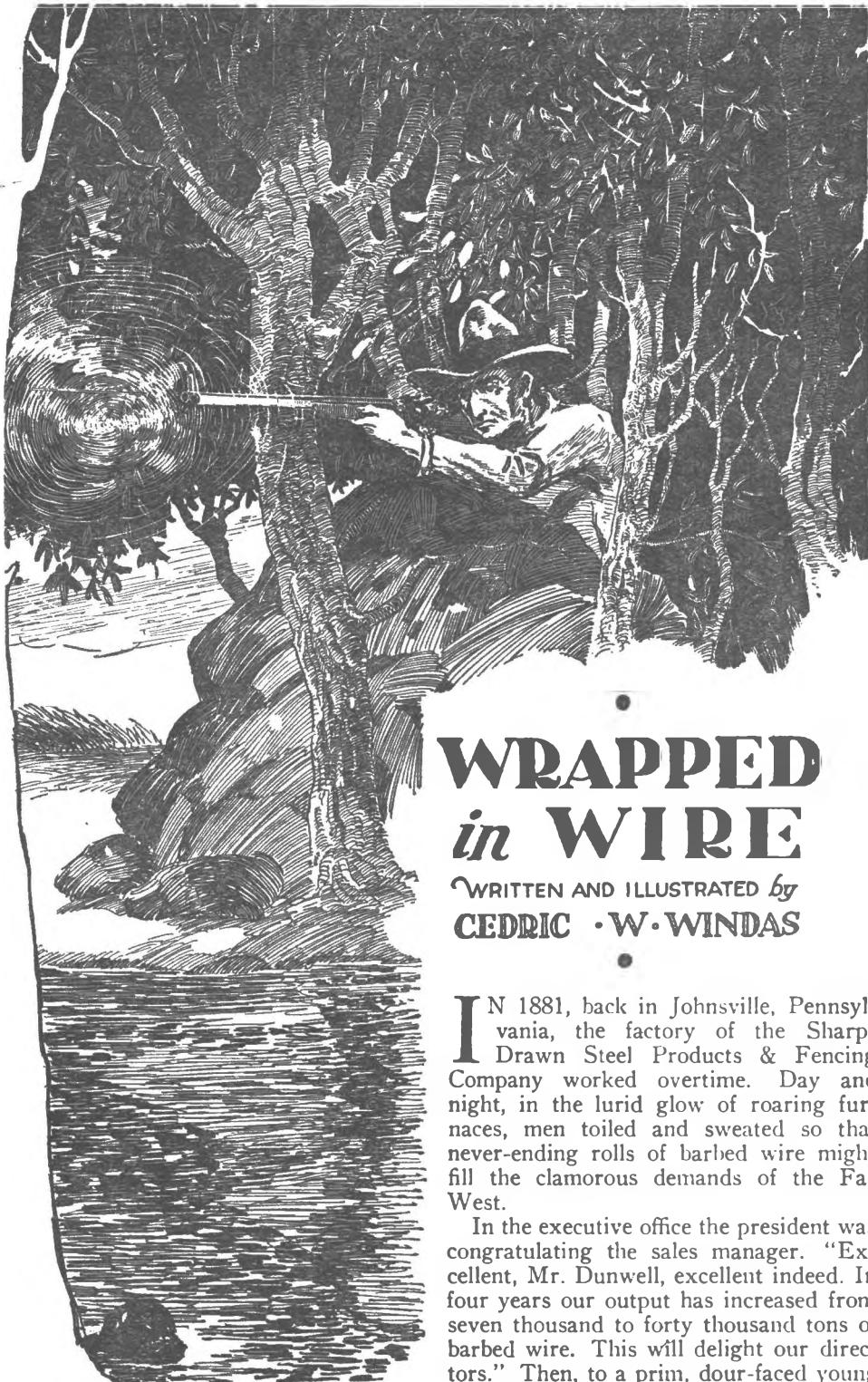
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WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED *by*
CEDRIC • W. WINDAS

IN 1881, back in Johnsville, Pennsylvania, the factory of the Sharps Drawn Steel Products & Fencing Company worked overtime. Day and night, in the lurid glow of roaring furnaces, men toiled and sweated so that never-ending rolls of barbed wire might fill the clamorous demands of the Far West.

In the executive office the president was congratulating the sales manager. "Excellent, Mr. Dunwell, excellent indeed. In four years our output has increased from seven thousand to forty thousand tons of barbed wire. This will delight our directors." Then, to a prim, dour-faced young

woman sitting at one of those new-fangled contraptions known as a typewriting machine: "Miss Underwood, take a letter. The er—the Weston Land and Cattle Company, Casper, Wyoming. Gentlemen: Your valued order . . ."

All of which was very good, from the manufacturer's point of view. . . .

But in the little town of Buffalo, Wyoming, a group of sullen, angry men gathered in a barn, listening morosely, while a vehement speaker, mounted on a kitchen table, enumerated their grievances. "Something's gotta be done," he declared bitterly. "The big cattle companies is just wrappin' the ranges up in bobwire. They're stranglin' us little cowmen. The Weston Land and Cattle outfit alone has fenced in a hundred miles and more of free range. *A hundred miles of it!* An' that means starvation for the herds of a dozen small ranches. Where's Henry Billings? He'd oughta be here. He was one of them that was forced out."

"The Weston's gunhawk, George Henderson, an' some o' their riders lynched Billings this mawnin' for cuttin' their fences so his cattle could get water at the Twelve Mile," growled a man.

"But the Twelve Mile's on Henry's own ranch!"

"He ain't got no ranch. They burned the house an' run off the cows. Henry's dead an' his wife an' kid is with my missus. What the hell kin we do about it?"

"We can do *this* about it," roared the man on the table. "We can band together and shoot them thievin', lynchin' buzzards any time they steal more of our land or murder one of us. If the Law can't help us, we can help ourselves. We'll bushwhack when *they* bushwhack; we'll lynch when *they* lynch!"

The barn rocked with shouts of approval. Fists waved, hands closed over gunbutts. And in that moment, fear, hate and indignation brewed the hell's broth that nourished the Johnson County War.

In all fairness to the big cattle companies, it should be stated that well into the '90's, cattle rustling was rife in every corner of Wyoming. To such an extent was it developed that company losses in some years amounted to almost fifty percent of their herds.

But to point the finger of suspicion

at the legitimate small rancher and settler, in order to grab their holdings, smeared a curse over the state in general, and Johnson County in particular.

However, it seems that in the case of James Averill, the postmaster at Powder River, and his girl friend, Ella Watson (more colorfully known as "Cattle Kate"), either of the opposing factions would have been justified in curtailing the exploits of the scheming pair. For Averill filled in his spare time when not sorting mail by helping Cattle Kate run a wide loop without regard to brands. Their efforts were persevering and profitable, until Kate was caught in the act of changing an S lazy L to a Box B.

Her captors tied her hands to the saddle horn and rode with her to the little post-office. When the cavalcade clattered up, Averill stepped out to inquire their business. Then, for the first time, he noticed their prisoner.

He smiled wryly at Cattle Kate, but said nothing. He stepped up onto his horse, which was tied at the hitchrack, and moved over to her side.

Down the road half a mile the sinister group halted again. The hands of both captives were bound behind them; their mounts led to a cottonwood bough.

There was no talking. The rustlers knew what they were here for and what was going to happen. The posse *knew* that they knew. Only when two lariats were flung over the bough and a loop fitted to each doomed neck, was the silence broken.

"Goodbye, Jimmy."

"So long, Kate. I'm sorry it ended this way."

Then James Averill performed his last duty for Uncle Sam. Scanning the masked faces of those about him, he said deliberately, "If one of you sons is Hank Emory, there's a piece of registered mail waitin' fer you at the postoffice."

THE members of that necktie party were never identified and prosecuted, which would seem to prove that Johnson County was unanimous in approving the removal of Kate and Jimmy. Factional hatred flamed high, however, when Tom Waggon's body was found not far from his famous horse ranch near Newcastle.

Tom was everyone's friend. Many a small rancher in distress remembered Tom's helping hand in times of trouble. His only crime lay in the fact that his lush feed grounds were coveted by big interests.

Three men, claiming they were U. S. marshals, walked into Tom's stable, where he was busy inspecting a prime mare, with a fake warrant for his arrest. They kept their guns on him while he put on his coat to ride away with them. Only his little daughter witnessed the scene. Tom must have known what was in store for him, for he asked to be allowed to kiss her goodbye. He told her to "Tell mamma I went away with three men."

From the child's description it would appear that George B. Henderson was the leader of the mysterious trio. The others were never even partially identified.

Waggon's wife rushed frantically to Sheriff Angus for help. Men, organized into searching parties, scoured the county for more than a week. Tom had vanished into thin air. Then, on the tenth day following his removal, a lone scout found the horse-breeder's body hanging from a tree.

From that moment disguises were flung aside. Johnson County was an armed camp. Either you hired yourself at fighting wages to the big interests, or you buckled on the old wooden-handled Colt, grabbed a Winchester, and sallied forth a la traditional Minute-Man, to help the little fellows. There was no middle course.

George B. Henderson led the forces of the cattle-baron's cavaliers; Orley Jones waged guerilla warfare against them, with the backing of his grimly determined neighbors. Death raked the streets of Casper; reached out with chilly fingers

to touch lonely riders on far-flung cattle trails.

A roving detachment of Henderson's "army" trapped Ross Gillbertson and Nate Champion in a line hut by the river. But Bill Jones, a Cattleman's Association gunhawk (no relation to Orley), was killed in the blistering fight which followed, and the would-be lynchers lost interest, leaving the cabin to its defenders. They left hurriedly, not even pausing to bury their dead comrade.

August and September waned. The heat of the long summer passed, but not the heat of the civil war.

Orley Jones was driving home from Buffalo in a new buckboard. He urged the horses to a smart clip, for it was starting to rain and he had no slicker with him. Besides, the days were shortening and he wanted the missus and the kids to see the bright new colors of the buggy before darkness fell.

He slowed the team to a walk as they entered the shallow crossing at Muddy Creek. He watched the rain-dotted water, thinking casually that winter floods would soon change the sluggish stream to a raging torrent. He'd have done better to watch a nearby clump of rocks.

With a roar that sent echoes dancing up and down the adjacent canyon, a heavy gunblast blew the top of his head off, flung him out of the buckboard.

The frightened horses sprang forward, careening the buggy, dragging it on its side across the ford. On the far bank they quieted down and stood disconsolate.

Daylight faded in the murky downpour. It showed vaguely the two horses waiting patiently to be relieved of the overturned



buckboard; showed Orley Jones laying with his face in the mud.

IN ALL the annals of cattle war history, it is doubtful whether any aggressor was more ruthless or better organized than in the Johnson County trouble.

The Cattleman's Association filled its war chest with contributions from members; flagrantly labeled it "Extermination Fund." It blotted the escutcheons of state officials whose crooked partisanship shamed Wyoming. Editors who should have known better accepted paid advertisements, and couched their editorials to fit the Association's propaganda.

The aims and objects of the cattle barons were widely publicized. Their "Help Wanted" ads filled the columns of newspapers from Colorado to Texas. Gunmen from Denver and killers from the Panhandle were brazenly invited to congregate at Casper, then to move against Buffalo, kill Sheriff Angus and his deputies, and capture the town.

Some twenty-five of the citizens of Buffalo were named on the death list, together with nearly two hundred nesters and small ranchers who occupied holdings on the coveted Johnson County ranges.

For their services, the gunhawks were offered five dollars a day, plus all expenses, including horse, rifle, sixgun, and abundant ammunition. In addition, a bounty of fifty dollars was offered for every man killed.

So in Casper, Wyoming, in the year of our Lord 1892, there gathered together, like vultures to the kill, as vicious a bunch of fifty bleak-faced killers as ever graced Execution Dock.

J. A. Tisdale, who lived sixty miles from Buffalo, went to town for supplies—and never saw home again. He was shot in the back on the return journey by one of the "army," Frank Canton, who shot Tisdale's horses, as well, leaving the dead man, the buckboard, and the dead horses in the lonely road.

Up to this time George Henderson, in charge of campaign operations against the settlers, had led a charmed life. But his nemesis was creeping up on him. George made the mistake of using the same road back and forth to town on approximately regular schedule. An observant nester,

with more enterprise than ethics, lay in wait at Three Crossings and emptied both barrels of heavy buckshot into him at a range of fifteen feet.

Henderson was lying on his back in the shallows when they found him. His arms were flung wide in the abandonment of death. On his grim face was a look which suggested that at last he had learned the bitter lesson that he who takes to the sword shall perish by the sword.

Spring came to Johnson County in a blaze of glory. Under the blue dome of the sky peaceful valleys spread their green carpets of lush grass as far as the eye could see.

But north out of Casper moved a black shadow that crept, snake-like, along the winding highway in the direction of the K. C. Ranch. Cattleman and killer, gunhawk and land-grabber, were riding knee to knee on a mission of extermination.

They rode in an orderly column of twos, methodical, unhurried; bleak-eyed riders who looked neither to the right nor left.

They swung into position around the K. C. Ranch that night, and waited for dawn to commence operations. It was barely daylight when a man left the house and walked to the nearby stream.

As he stopped for water, rough hands grabbed him and hauled him back of the stables, where the leaders of the "exterminators" were gathered.

As they were questioning their prisoner, another man stepped from the ranch and came over to the stables. They took him, also, and learned that both were strangers who had taken shelter in the ranchhouse overnight. These two volunteered the information that Nate Champion and Nick Ray were in the house.

As these latter were the ones "wanted" by the Association's gunhawks, the two captives, Jones and Walker, were restrained from leaving.

A little later, Nick Ray came out and started to gather firewood. They slammed him down with a volley of rifle fire, and he fell, badly wounded, ten feet from the ranch door.

The noise of the discharge brought Nate Champion out to the rescue of his wounded friend. Twice he was driven back, but finally he succeeded in dragging Ray in to shelter.

The siege lasted all day. Nate cared for the wounded man, held the attackers at bay, and nonchalantly filled in his spare time during those blistering hours by writing a blow-by-blow description of the fight.

The following notes made by him are almost classic, in that they leave a record of the reactions of a gallant man who is about to die:

April 9th, 6 A. M. Me and Nick was getting breakfast when the attack began. Two men were with us, Bill Jones and another one. The old man went out after water about daylight. He did not come back. His friend went out to see what was the matter, and he didn't come back neither. Nick started out and I told him to look out, that I thought there was someone at the stable that would not let them come back. . . .

Nick is shot but not dead, but he's awful sick, I must go and wait on him. It is now about two hours since first shots — Nick still alive. They are shooting all around the house. Boys, there is bullets coming in like hell. . . .

Them fellows is in such a shape I can't get at them. They is shooting from the stable and the river and the back of the house — Nick is dead. He died about 9 o'clock. I see a smoke down at the stable. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time.

Boys, I don't know what they have done to them two fellows who stayed last night. . . .

Boys, I feel pretty lonesome right now. I wish there was someone with me so we could watch all sides at once. I wish they'd fool around so I could get a good shot at them — It is about 3 o'clock. There is a man in a buckboard and one on horseback just passed. They fired at them but I don't know if they killed them. I seen a lot of men on horses take out after them across the river. . . .

I shot at a man in the stable. Don't know if I got him or not. I must go and take another look. There is 12 or 15 men out there. Don't look like there's much chance of my getting away. I hope that they didn't catch them fellows they chased over the river. . . .

They are shelling the house again like hell. I hear them splitting the wood. I guess they are going to fire the house. I think I'll make a break tonight if I live —

I think they will fire the house this time, and its not yet night. The house is all fired, I must make my break — Goodbye, boys, if I never see you again.

Nate Champion.

And he never did see them again, for he made his break for freedom and lost.

Nate Champion was a brave man, and he died unafraid. His enemies pinned a card to his breast which read, "Cattle thieves beware."

Back went the column along the road it had come, but this time it numbered some riderless horses whose owners would raise no more hell in Colorado.

IN THE meantime, Jack Flagg and his stepson (the man in the buckboard and the one on horseback mentioned in Nate Champion's notes) had escaped their pursuers and warned Sheriff Angus.

No story of this colossal feud would be complete without paying tribute to the gallant sheriff of Johnson County. Day and night throughout the seemingly hopeless struggle he was there to advise the desperate, protect the weak. Bribes could not tempt him, though many were offered. Attempts on his life only made him counsel his indignant friends against reprisals. His abiding faith was in the Law which he so splendidly represented.

A quiet, deliberate man, Angus listened to Flagg's recital, then went to his deputies and to others he could trust, dragging men from warm beds to send them riding the length and breadth of the county, like modern Paul Reveres, calling patriots to fight for home and liberty.

All that day, April 10, 1892, armed men rode into Buffalo and were instructed and deputized by Sheriff Angus. In twos and threes they came, and sometimes in little groups of six or seven. From the hills and the valleys they gathered; grim-faced settlers and resolute ranchers, convinced that the hour was at hand to strike a united blow against tyranny.

By sunset, over three hundred were assembled, ready and anxious.

Arapahoe Brown, veteran of the Indian fights, was put in charge of field operations. He speedily grouped the men into a dozen companies, each under the leadership of a resolute fighting man. Scouts were sent out to gather information regarding the strength and movements of the enemy. They returned to report that the gunhawks had word of the combined forces against them, and had hauled out of Buffalo for the T. A. Ranch on Crazy Woman Creek.

Arapahoe Brown moved with lightning

speed, and by daylight of the next morning his men encircled the big T. A. spread.

The Association's warriors showed poor judgment in holing up at this ranch, for it was commanded on all sides by high ridges from which a steady rain of lead could be poured into the house and adjoining cabins from every angle.

It is a grimly significant fact that no courier was sent to the gunhawks in their improvised fort with a demand for surrender; the "exterminators" were to be exterminated.

THAT day the fight waxed hot and strong, and not all the men who died were in the houses in the hollow. In vain, Brown pleaded with his men to exercise caution and keep under cover. The ranchers and settlers were brave to a point of recklessness.

Night came, but it brought no cessation of hostilities. Fires were started, which supplied light for the besiegers' target and prevented any possible escape under cover of dark.

Morning dawned bright and clear on the second day. For an hour the shooting from the ridges slackened to an occasional warning blast. The men of Johnson County were burying their dead.

Then gunfire roared anew, shattering doors and window shutters.

Inside the house a grim garrison counted its losses and mocked the efforts of those outside with taunts and jeers. Loudly and blasphemously they offered to wager that the besiegers couldn't take the fort inside a week. One renegade roared he would bet his bonus money for the killing of Jimmy Walker that he could stick it out for ten days.

But the men on the hillsides only cursed them—and redoubled the hail of death.

Brown was busy building a contraption he called a "go-devil." It consisted of the running gear of two wagons supporting a barricade of stout logs which could be pushed close to the ranchhouse. From behind its shelter a score of men would blast the house by hurling giant powder at the shattered windows and doors.

It was a good idea and might have worked, but Fate ruled otherwise.

Before the imported gunslingers had

retired into their fort, they had dispatched two riders to notify the Association of the tide rising against them.

The Association was in a tight jam. Either it must cease its land-grabbing program of destruction and get its hired killers out of the country, or face collective trial on murder charges, with the unpleasant knowledge that any survivors of the T. A. Ranch might turn state's evidence against them.

They cursed their luck, and chose the former alternative; pulling wires with Governor Baker, who in turn burned wires to Washington, D. C.

So it came about, after two days of bitter bloodshed, that the men on the hills looked down to see the scarlet and white guidons of U. S. Cavalry fluttering between them and the ranchhouse.

Three troops of Uncle Sam's mounted fighting men, under Colonel J. J. Van Horn, took complete charge of the situation. A conference was arranged.

The survivors in the ranch, delighted at the chance to leave Johnson County alive, surrendered to the military and were jailed at Fort Russell.

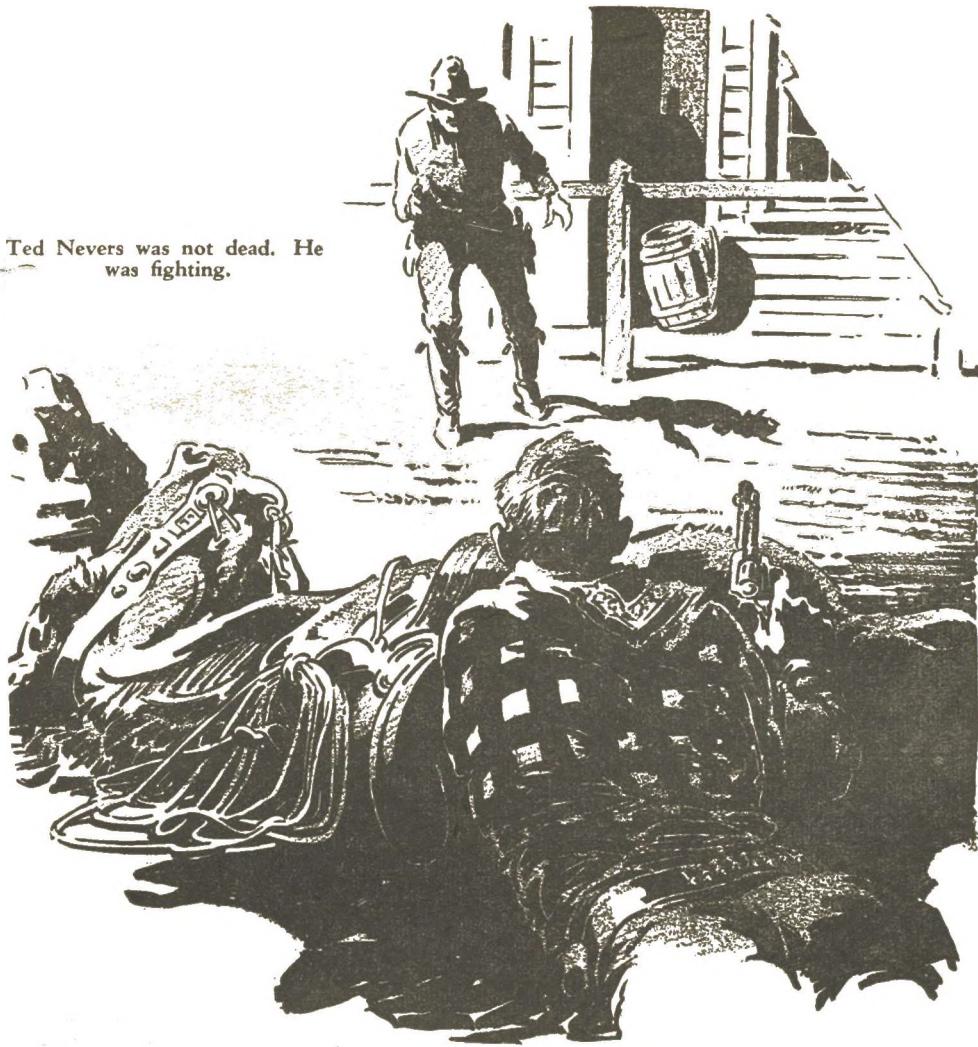
It was almost a year before they were brought to trial. For the good of both parties concerned, it was deemed best to send the surviving gunhawks back to their own hunting grounds, and wipe the case off the calendar.

This was the end of the war. The Association was blocked in its primitive attempt to remove competitors. Men were free to live again on the county's free range. Rifles were hung up, Colts grew rusty from disuse. Even the bitterness faded with the passing of the years.

Sometimes when a particularly wintry blast sweeps through the valleys and canyons of Johnson County, it leaves reverberations in the hills like the muffled rattle of distant gunfire; stirs strange sounds in the open fields, vaguely reminiscent of hoofbeats in the rain.

Old-timers, toasting their shins before blazing logs, look wise and say it's the ghosts of Texas gunhawks who died in the big T. A. fight, striving to cut their way through Angus' avenging hosts and find a little peace in their far-off native Panhandle.

Ted Nevers was not dead. He
was fighting.



Squatters Have Guts, Too!

A blind sheepdog's glorious courage gave Squatter Ted Nevers back his fading manhood and the guts to march alone, with flaming guns, against a cowman legion he knew he couldn't live to lick!

By **KENNETH PERKINS**

THE wagon horses, unhitched, stood with rumps to the wind, their snow-powdered muzzles reaching for a fire that had gone out. Vague prints showed where the driver had gone up over the hill, leaving the wagon bogged down in a drift.

The horses were not alone. A sheepdog paced up and down in front of them, his back bristling, as if each hair were electrified. He could not see the pairs of slanting amber lights in the shadows, for he was blind. But he could smell wet wolf fur and wolf drool. He caught the

sour whiff long before the horses did.

He stopped barking so he could listen. Being blind, he had to see with his ears, hence he was always silent when danger threatened. Besides, barking for help was futile, for every ranch dog on the Bench had been barking for hours—as they will when timber wolves make their mournful medicine to the moon.

The howls echoing in the coulees had stopped, as if the pack had drifted out to the prairie. But the blind sheep dog, Homer, knew better. He lifted his quivering nose into the falling snow, seeking a scent in that vast rush of cold.

He caught the hated smell all about him, and he knew from memory what the picture was: gray forms creeping on their bellies, snouts in their forepaws, eyes fixed on him. He knew that he could not run to fetch his master without heading straight through them. He could smell all that, and as an undertone of the storm's shrieking, he heard the splintering of iced grass, the soft hiss of snow, the crack of a frozen twig, the pant of lolling tongues.

The horses knew the truth now, too. Hoofs thudded in the snow. The animals began yanking at their tethers. Homer could not and would not go for his master, for he knew the moment he left those two horses they would be sliced to pieces. He had a paternal love for them. Like himself, they had been given to the horse doctor. They all had been sick and useless until he had made them over. The pack would have to tear up Homer first.

It was not until he had the whole desperate lay-out sized up that he barked. But the wind drowned his call for help, and as for his master, he was inside a shack, half a mile away, busy tending a wounded nester.

Ted Nevers was the wounded man, a burned and battered young rancher who lived alone in a tar-papered, tin-roofed shack, high on the Bench. But on this occasion the shack and lean-to kitchen were crowded. A neighboring nester had come with his wife and brother-in-law and four frightened, sniffling children. Another old neighbor was there with his daughter, a tall young girl with eyes now smoky and hard.

Despite the hum of pine chunks in the stove and the radiance of kerosene lamps,

the scene was one of gloom. For the wounded man was the only hope of these lonely people in their fight to fence their squats against the cowmen.

THE horse doctor, Rusty Torvester, said, "Heard about your getting hit, Ted. Thought I'd drop around to have a look."

"There were three against him!" the tall girl spoke up hotly.

One of the little boys piped, "They shot his right hand or he'd of gun-whopped 'em plenty, Ted would!"

Rusty Torvester took off his windbreaker and unpacked bottles and bandages from its sagging pockets. "Let's have a look."

Ted Nevers rolled up the sleeve of his hickory shirt and let the horse doctor take off the tourniquet and bandage the girl had placed there. "Just a crease," Nevers said. "The only trouble is, it's my gun hand."

Rusty put on his silver-rimmed glasses. "Maybe a muscle cut. They won't plant any more fights on you, Ted. Because you won't be able to fight back. Not for a long time."

"How long?"

Everyone in the room seemed to stop breathing.

"Listen," the veterinarian said. "I don't know what you call this muscle in a human being, but it's like a horse having his extensor pedis cut. That's the muscle that works the knee and pastern and lifts the toe. What I mean is, the slug cut a muscle that works your trigger finger."

Loretta McGill gave a little gasp, but Rusty believed it was a gasp of enormous relief. "That settles it, Ted," she said softly. "You've got to give up now."

"The rest of us are giving up, Ted," her father said. "We're packing out for Oregon. Without you, there's no hope for us nesters fighting a whole range of stockmen."

Everyone looked at Nevers. He glanced at Loretta, then his eyes slipped away. "Maybe, like you say, all the outfits are cutting our fences," he muttered to McGill. "But it's only one that's burning our barns. I mean the Bullard spread. And it's not the old man, either. It's

his son Lam Bullard. I know for sure." Rusty asked for boiling water.

"Murgatroyd's helping them," Nevers continued, "because cowboys spend money in his baile and nesters don't. And there's Hiko, a crooked marshal. If I could just top off those three—"

"Look, Ted," Torvester interrupted. "You were elected for being topped off yourself tonight. Murgatroyd had his barkeep sass you so you'd draw. It was only because the marshal made a mistake and shot you loose from your gun that they couldn't finish you."

"There were too many in the saloon, I hear, and it would've looked like murder. What they'd planned was to let you shoot first, then three men were to cut down on you. Nobody told me this, it just stacks up that way in the cards, slick and simple."

"Sure! Three men!" Nevers repeated, half to himself. "The marshal and the Bullard kid and the baile house man. Those three—"

An old-timer interrupted quickly. "We'll help you pack out, Ted," he said, "seeing you can only use one hand."

Rusty said, "Any gambler will quit a game when he smells a rigged deck."

"If you stay you'll be all alone," McGill warned. "Jim Parker is giving up, account of his womenfolk. Bowtell and Hump Thompson were dry-gulched. There is lots of quarter-sections for the asking and better land. This is dry country and cow country. Sure, it'll all be settled up and wired some day, but only after lots of smoke."

TEDE NEVERS looked back at Loretta's pleading eyes. It was a ranch that two could live on, perhaps in another year—this squat of his. If Loretta would take his side, he was thinking, he would not back down. He would fight, even with every card marked and every ace slicked against him.

"When are you packing out?" he asked her.

"At sun-up. If you want to trail with us, dad and I will wait till you're packed."

"We'll put your disk harrow and plough in our Murphy wagon," the nester with the family said. "Any other heavy stuff?"

Nevers shook his head, said dully, "I

can crate the chickens myself and pack what air-tights I got."

When the hoarse hysterical yelps of his dog drifted up from the coulee, Rusty Torvester put on his windbreaker and pocketed his bottles. Loretta McGill had already hurried into the kitchen to pack the pots, pans and provisions. The homesteaders went out to the barn to tend to Ted's heavy stuff. Nevers followed the horse doctor.

"Reckon old Homer's smelled a coyote somewhere," Rusty said. "It's coyotes that spook him up that way."

Ted, resigned to what plain horse sense dictated, wanted to take a farewell moonlight stroll over his fields. The land shone dazzling white now, but in his mind he saw the pastel green of the mixed clover he had intended planting this year. Last year it was small grain, the year before that, corn. His mind and heart leaped to the third harvest—clover, winter wheat and Loretta as his wife.

Torvester knew enough not to talk. They trudged along over glazed grass, the barking of the dog in the coulee coming ever nearer. Suddenly the frantic call for help was silenced. Rusty and Ted Nevers stopped immediately on the rim of the Bench.

Down in the bottoms they saw the two wagon horses plunging at their ropes. In front of them the black sheepdog paced stiffly back and forth, facing the jet shadows of the draws. He stopped at every turn, his head cocked. In the blackness, green dots burned with the wolf sheen of reflected moonlight. Rusty saw the prowling forms, scrawny wraiths against house-sized rocks where the drifts threw back a bluish glow.

Old Homer waited, not knowing from which side Death would come first. Death stalked in every corner, in every shift of the wind. One form nosed up, creeping on its belly, ravenous for horse meat, which wolves love more than veal. Homer spun, changing directions on all fours. The crack of ice, the sniff of mangy wolf fur, of frosty wolf breath, warned him the first leap was coming.

Of course a blind dog had no chance against even one wolf, let alone a pack, but Homer did not seem to know this. Perhaps he did know, and was bringing

into play the favorite trick of all dogs, which is to bluff. Or else, perhaps, he knew it was a lost fight at the start, but that he must fight anyway—and fight to the death.

The horse doctor paused, fascinated for one brief moment, but then he leaped down a snow-filled break, wallowing and plunging and rolling. Ted Nevers followed Torvester.

Homer had discovered that his master was here, and with that assurance, he made the first leap himself. He slid past one wolf, missing it in his blind rush. It was a hopeless set-up. Two wolves leaped for the kill, and this time Homer knew where they were—for they were on top of him.

Rusty and Ted kicked loose some ice-bound rocks, but they could only throw at a jumble of yelping throats and reddened teeth and crunching bone. And Ted, for his part, could only throw left-handed.

The blind dog had a giant lobo by the nape of the neck, cracking it with a whipping motion of his head. He leaped back and groped with his jaws for the next wolf that was at his throat. He could not make use of what he had of terrier instinct in his mixed blood, the instinct to slice and leap back and fence and spar. He had to fight clumsily, like a bulldog, find a hold, then cling and crunch. He crunched and twisted the neck of one lobo while three ripped him. Rusty and Ted had never seen such desperate courage, nor such certain defeat.

IT WAS certain, except for luck. The blind dog, needless to say, had not one chance in ten, or rather, not one in a thousand. But two men rushed in, hurling rocks and yelling. The pack scattered. Loboes dragged themselves over snow mounds. One fell, its skull bashed in by a rock. The rest whisked for the timber.

When he dragged himself in a vague direction toward the scent and voice and footsteps of his master, Homer felt two long bony arms lift him. Limp and sodden, he sank in a nest of blankets that smelled of his master's body. He was in the wagon, a haven redolent of liniment, of aloes and horse drenches and chinchona bark.

Ted Nevers built a fire in the wagon

stove and heated water. Rusty started to work with scissors and syringe. "Pretty woolly country," he said, "where they even gang up on a blind dog." He worked fast. "Better be glad you're quittin it. Ted."

Ted Nevers watched the dog twitching on the bunk. As if in answer to Rusty's last statement, he said slowly, "That dog didn't quit!"

Rusty glanced over his spectacles. He saw the hard grin of admiration on Ted's face. It startled him. He remembered that inspired look after Ted left. And as he nursed old blind Homer he remembered those words, "*The dog didn't quit!*"

When he knew that Homer was going to live, Rusty left him swathed in blankets on the bunk and made a bed for himself on the lengthwise bench under his shelves of bottles and cans and firing irons. Here he slumped, exhausted, and dozed off.

He did not really sleep. He talked to himself. "Ted's goin' on with the fight. I got to stop him. The casino men will kill him. They won't give him a chance again, knowing he's a sharpshooter. They will gang up on him."

He mumbled on, "Murgatroyd will come Injun on him. So will the Bullard kid and Hiko. Hiko, being town marshal, will bottom-deal, so the killers won't be outlawed. I got to stop the kid from bucking that. He's blind. I simply *got* to stop him!"

When he jerked up his head, catching himself napping, his lugubrious eyes looked out at the new day.

"It's the big day!" he said, with the feeling he always had when he awoke at the end-of-rodeo week, when there was to be broken bones, which meant lots of work for him. No, it was not a rodeo. He had forgotten something. Yet it was The Day!

Now he remembered. He had dreamed endlessly of stopping Ted Nevers from hurling himself over a cliff. He had stopped him from fighting three big brands and their scores of riders. He had snatched him from a pack of wolves.

But Ted, half dog, half man, kept fighting. He had dreamed of tussling with him, wrenching the gun out of his bleeding hand, clipping him on the chin, saving him by knocking him out.

Awake, Rusty yanked on his floppy hat, buckled it with a miniature cinch under his lantern jaw, and leaped out to the snow drifts. The sun was high over the Bench when he got the bogged wagon out of the drifts and hit the trail.

WITH the dog still sleeping in the bunk, Rusty drove over the hill to Ted Nevers' shack. Ted's harrow and plough and pot-bellied stove were in a wagon. The nesters and Loretta had seen to that.

The girl had packed his air-tights and pots and pans in a neat squaw pack. Ted was ready, it would seem, to join the trek to Oregon with the rest of the beaten homesteaders. But he was not in his shack. And his paint was not in the brush corral.

Rusty did not drive to the neighboring squat, although, over there, he saw a nester and his family loading a wagon. Doubtless all the homesteaders, including Seth McGill and his daughter, expected Ted to join them any minute.

Rusty had no time to leave the wagon-track trail and tell them what was on his mind: "There's no use waiting for Ted Nevers. That was what he had in his mind: There's no use waiting for Ted not hear him, but he shouted across the wind at them, nevertheless, "Ted's not riding with you folks today. Or tomorrow! Or ever!"

He drove on down the switchbacks from the Bench, his horses stretched to a hammering trot, heading, when he reached the bottoms, straight for Ten-Lode.

He found the sleepy cowtown awake and tense. Something had already happened. At the can dumps and the outermost saloon of the town he called to the first man he saw. A barkeep had been spreading the morning sawdust, but he was tucking his apron in his waist, snatching up a sombrero and hiking into town.

"A fool nester tangled horns with Bob Hiko, the town marshal," the barkeep said. "And, what I mean, they shot each other up about right."

"What you mean, about right?"

"I mean if they'd aimed any worse they'd still be fighting, and if they'd aimed better they'd both be dead."

That, Rusty thought, was to be expected. If neither man were killed it amounted to a good deal. At least it would stop Ted Nevers from making another suicidal play.

As Torvester drove up Ten-Lode's main street he found it deserted except at the farther end. Here the doorways of saloons, the hay-and-grain store, the false-fronted hotel, were crowded with waiting, silent men.

In the middle of the wide street a horse sprawled in a heap. Rusty accurately judged it had been shot under the shoulder blade. The whole thing was clear. The morning sunlight poured down on every warped plank and knothole of the shacks. The light was dazzling, thrown by the snowy buttes which, in that air, seemed, not their actual distance of thirty miles, but overhanging and bright as silver.

Ted Nevers lay stretched out so stiffly behind his horse that he looked dead. But his head was lifted. The horse doctor was aghast that a whole town would just stand there, scorning a wounded man. But, having shot the town marshal, the man was an outlaw, and it was not the business of good citizens to help him out.

Rusty whacked his horses, the wagon wheels banged sharp in the silence. The blast of a gun seemed more in tune with the vibrations of the air. It came again as Rusty drove on. Then again.

Ted Nevers was not dead. He was fighting. He had fired all three shots across the horse's belly, aiming at the swinging door under the casino's wooden awning.

"Get that wagon out of the way, Doc!" a man called to Rusty from the casino.

Rusty glanced under the wooden awning to see who had called. Lam Bullard's thick body was pressed against the door jam. Rusty knew all about Lam Bullard. Although his father, the Old Man of the biggest brand on the Bench, did not believe in promiscuous gunplay, Lam Bullard kept up this persecution of the nesters purely for the love of smoke.

He had ridden, off and on, with the Bad Bunch, and it was only because his father was a "wheel-horse" in politics that he had managed to keep out of jail. Rusty decided not to truck with a man like that. He drove the wagon over to the opposite side of the street.

But he kept on, heading for the dead horse and Ted Nevers. It was his firm intention to pick up the wounded man. It was his duty as a doctor, even as a horse doctor. The whole town of cowmen would respect that prerogative. So, perhaps, would Lam Bullard.

But as Rusty passed one saloon, then the barber shop, he saw a rider in an empty lot, shoving his horse against the wall of a shack, staying out of Ted Nevers' sight. It was Murgatroyd.

EVIDENTLY Ted expected to find this gunman, Murgatroyd, inside the casino he owned. At any rate he hadn't bargained for this kind of a cold deck. But he should have, knowing Murgatroyd's reputation. Without being actually in the pay of the cowmen, Murgatroyd had appointed himself their ace bully. His reward was the patronage of the cowboys.

He was a grifter at cards and a crack shot as well. In the past he had ridden as shotgun guard on an Overland stage, then traveled with a rodeo company as a carnival marksman. Yet, with all his skill at the trigger, he was avoiding a straight shootout with that wounded man. Murgatroyd was hiding so he could snap a bushwhack shot into the play.

Torvester reminded himself of the blind dog fighting a wolf pack. He checked his wagon directly between Murgatroyd and Ted Nevers. Rusty saw that Ted was badly hit. His head moved up groggily over the horse's flank until he saw the veterinarian. Then his gray lips tightened, and he grinned.

Inside the wagon old Homer barked as he dreamed of his battle with the wolves. His magnificent roar was only a gentle yap, like a ewe's that has dropped a lamb and turned half dumb as mother ewes will. But the pitiful dream of courage was just audible enough for Rusty to hear. He glanced back quickly at his dog.

Homer whimpered. Doubtless, many wolves were slicing him. His horses and his home were lost, unless he fought to the death. That was the dog's dream. And that was Ted Nevers' dream. The contagion of its madness had spread from one to the other, from the dog to the man.

Rusty Torvester had the stark picture

of a man losing a fight to save his home, of a girl who had pleaded desperately against his fighting, knowing she would have to wait more years.

Rusty had just seen that whole tragedy on Ted Nevers' face. Ted's blood-drained eyes were like Homer's eyes. His teeth, bared by pain-drawn lips, were Homer's teeth. Dog and man were akin, seeing nothing, fearing nothing.

Rusty called down to Nevers. "Murgatroyd's in the sand lot behind you, Ted. Get set to salt him when I drive this wagon out of your way."

Nevers lifted himself to his knees. One arm was limp.

Rusty drove on.

Ted's left arm threw a shot across the belly of his horse. "I'm lone-wolfing this table, Murgatroyd!" he yelled. "You ain't even in the game any more!"

Murgatroyd jerked back from the slug, tried to pull leather to keep himself on the horse, then toppled headlong.

The air was strangely still when that shot's echoes died. Then, of its own tensity, it seemed to shake. The dog Homer felt the change in his bones, a vibration caused by the rumble of wheels. The sound, even though it came from far down the wagon-tracked road, jangled on his nerves. The dog jerked his toes in his nightmare. Homer dreamed that his wagon—that is to say, his home—was plunging wildly down slopes of timber.

Actually it was another wagon, a buckboard rattling into town. A girl was driving, a gray-haired nester clutching the seat with both hands.

The sight of Loretta McGill must have given Ted new strength. He stiffened his arm, lifted his head, dragged himself over the body of his horse. He got to his feet in a crazy lurch, as if falling upward instead of down.

Perhaps no one among all the store-keepers and freighters and stockmen in Ten-Lode was as astounded as Lam Bullard. Lam had stepped out of the casino door and into the scalding sunshine. He did it with a big flourish, knowing the whole town was watching him. He entered the stage as he had done at rodeo contests, his gun still in its leather. He could not lose. For, as he thought, Murgatroyd was backing him up.

It was not until he was out in the street that he discovered, to his consternation, that his partner had been dumped. For the first time, perhaps in Lam Bullard's life, he was shooting it out with a man single-handed. It must have sent a quiver into his hand.

Ted Nevers was staggering down the street toward him, slaming away wildly with his gun. Bullard's amazement was confounded by the nester's buckboard dashing down the street, almost running him down as he lifted his arm to throw.

Instead of firing, Lam Bullard's left hand went up to his chest. He clutched it frantically, his mouth twisting. He turned for the casino with a curious stagger.

Homer, of course, awoke. He tried to cock a tattered ear. His nose trembled, and he knew that there were more people at his bunkside than the one man a sheep wagon is built to accommodate. He knew that a man was laid on the bunk by his side. He also knew that the man was wounded, for he heard the shake in his voice and smelled the clothes, and heard his master, Rusty, boiling instruments.

Homer knew that there was someone else right above the bunk, who had the voice of a woman. He could smell her hands and the whiskey she was holding to the man's lips.

Besides these three in the cramped cabin, Homer sensed the crowd peering in through the door, stopping the snow-scented draughts. By their exultant voices he knew they were not enemies.

"He did it single-handed, left handed at that! He smoked up Murgatroyd and the marshal and Lam Bullard, all three!" the girl's father shouted.

Rusty was too busy to point out that this was not entirely accurate.

Old Seth McGill continued, standing on the wagon tongue as he addressed the crowd. "Any herders figure on punching their stock across Nevers' land, let 'em step up and say so!"

Ted Nevers heard this cocky voice and he looked up at the girl. Her face was grim and quiet and hard-lipped, but her eyes were shining.

When Rusty's long red face moved in between them, Ted said, gasping, "Listen,

Doc. Who was it hit that pot-bellied lizard Lam Bullard?"

"You did!" Rusty lied.

Ted's hollow eyes seemed to reflect the brighter light in Loretta's. "Reckon my luck was running strong," he mumbled.

"It wasn't luck the way you salted Murgatroyd."

Rusty meant what he said. It was not luck, nor was it a miracle. The horse doctor did not believe in miracles. There must have been some reason for Lam Bullard, a professional gunman, getting licked by a wounded man who was blasting away half blind.

Perhaps the blind dog knew the answer: Ted Nevers won because, like Homer, he fought long after he was beaten down. Lam Bullard quit because he found himself trying a shoot-out with a madman who would not stay put when he was shot. Being a horse doctor, Rusty was still wondering why Bullard had clutched a wound in his chest and then limped as if the wound was in his leg! Was he shot twice? Or what?

"Who's next?" Rusty called. He came to the wagon door, wiping his long hands with a towel.

"Better have a look at Murgatroyd, Rusty," someone called from the sidewalk. "The marshal can wait."

"How about Lam Bullard?"

"Bullard? Hell, he's sloped. The belly-achin' bully wasn't even scratched!"

Another man on the sidewalk laughed. "Bullard pretended he was hit in the chest and then forgot and made out it was his leg—or else both!"

One of the big brand cowmen elbowed his way through the crowd. It was Lam Bullard's father. "How's that young nester makin' out, Rusty?"

"He's too tough to kill."

The cowboss said, "I reckon if the rest of these homesteaders have that kind of fight in 'em, they can stay on their squats, and us cowfolks will have to like it."

Homer heard the response from many throats. The shouting troubled his throbbing ears for a moment, but then he felt comforted, detecting an amiable note.

According to the dog's guess, Ten-Lode was cheering.

Red Man's El Dorado

By RAYMOND MURPHY

The gold is still there, in the redskins' fabulous El Dorado, but only one man knows its resting place. And Nana, the stern-lipped Apache chief, looks down at the futile efforts of the pale-faces to find the yellow treasure, but will not speak. . . .



Hundreds of Apaches were riding and running about, waving scalps in their bloody hands.

IN 1864 a group of light-hearted adventurers dug one hundred thousand dollars in gold dust from the earth, cached it in the hollow of an open fireplace and covered it with a light flagstone.

Today, that gold is still there, and the ghostly form of stalwart Chief Nana still

effectively bars the path of generations of hardy prospectors striving to reach it.

The tale of this mine has been handed down from family to family, different stories springing up as to its exact size and location. Only the Apache, Chief Nana, knows the truth . . . and he will not speak.

The mine is the lost Adams Diggings and the effort to locate it has added legend and drama to the thrilling saga of gold mining in the southwest. Scores of men have given up their lives in the effort to find it.

Adams, the man for whom the mine is named, is a somewhat shadowy figure.

He was engaged in freighting goods between Tucson and Los Angeles, and upon reaching a village of the friendly Pima Indians one evening, he found himself the center of interest.

A crowd of miners had collected and were eager to give him anything in return for his twelve sturdy horses. The explanation was that someone had struck gold in the vicinity.

One of the Indians turned out to be a Mexican who had been captured by the Apaches when a young lad, and had been raised by the savages. He was called Gotch Ear, one ear being horribly mutilated. Gotch Ear had been astonished at the commotion raised by these gold seekers.

"I know a place," he had declared. "where in one day you can get enough gold to load a pack horse. There are golden nuggets as big as acorns."

It took only a short time for the excited miners to convince Gotch Ear that he ought to lead them to this fabulous mine.

Gotch Ear agreed, on condition that he would be given money, horses, guns and ammunition. But, they had no horses. And here Adams entered the picture.

By lending his horses to the expedition, Adams, was given command of the outfit. On August 20, they started out, twenty-two men and pack horses, with Gotch Ear in the lead.

THE exact direction taken by the party is still in the realm of speculation, but later Adams claimed that they went

north-east, passing the White mountains of Arizona and crossing the historical Gila river.

At any rate, the men traveled for days, going deeper into endless mountain passes and wild, uninhabited country.

Gotch Ear appeared to know his directions, at length reaching a trail over which wagons had passed recently.

"Remember this place," he said. "This trail leads to the fort where you can buy supplies." It was believed he referred to Fort Wingate, New Mexico.

One morning they passed through a canyon so narrow the riders could reach out and touch both sides with their hands. At noon, they seemed to be heading straight toward a steeply-walled precipice.

One of the men asked Gotch Ear if they had to climb that sheer wall of stone.

He smiled and said, "In a minute, you will see."

Skillfully, he guided them around a huge boulder which seemed from afar to be part of the canyon wall. Behind this boulder was a small passageway, the so-called secret door for which men have searched vainly ever since.

Twisting and turning endlessly, Gotch Ear finally led them into a wider canyon covered with grass and trees. The men halted beside a stream of crystal clear water.

Gotch Ear pointed to the running stream. "There is your gold. You have only to pick it from the gravel."

The men let out a great cheer and scrambled wildly to the water's edge, eager to try this new found El Dorado.

Shouts of "*Gold! Plenty of it! Look at this!*" echoed from the canyon walls.

Gotch Ear warned them not to make too much noise because of the presence of Indians nearby, and then abruptly asked for his promised reward. He was given horses, guns and money. Showing his contempt for the gold, Gotch Ear wished the men luck and immediately took his leave. He was never heard from again.

There was very little sleep obtained in the camp that night. The men were too excited by their new-found riches.

Gold for the panning, water for their horses, wood, grass and plenty of game for the shooting. . . This was paradise.

NEXT day, as they were busily panning gold from the stream, the men were startled to look up and see veteran Chief Nana and a group of his Apaches idly watching them. Their stealthy approach should have been a warning to the miners, but on this occasion the warriors seemed to be on a friendly mission.

"You find gold here? Good," grunted the chief. But, pointing his hand beyond the canyon, he shook his huge head, "White men stay away from there. My people camp there."

The gold-seekers readily agreed to the old chief's warning and silently watched the redskins depart. But some of the men had doubts about the peaceful intentions of the savages.

They decided to build a cabin, store the gold in one central place and divide it evenly among themselves.

Ten days later, provisions began to run low and a party of six men set out for the old fort trail that had been pointed out by Gotch Ear.

When the cabin was near completion, a fireplace in one end was chosen for the gold cache. A flagstone was used as a cover, being replaced each day as the gold was deposited.

With plenty of gold within reach of their hands, one would think these men would be satisfied to work their diggings. But gold-seekers are a race unto themselves. The temptation to violate Chief Nana's warning and stray above the canyon proved too much for them. Stealthy visits were made to the forbidden ground, and each time the men returned with good-sized nuggets. And each time Adams cautioned the men about their promise.

Nine days after the party left for provisions Adams became worried. The men should have returned. He set out with a companion to look for them.

At the secret entrance to the canyon, Adams found them. Every man was dead, scalped, and the provisions scattered over the rocks. All signs pointed to a surprise attack by Indians.

Quickly the two men hid the bodies in the rocks to protect them from wild animals.

"Nana and his band are out to kill us

all," said Adams. "I warned the men this would happen. We'll go back and warn the rest of them."

They hurried back along the trail until they came to a high point from which the cabin was visible. As they neared the top wild yells and screams were heard from the direction of the camp. The men exchanged significant glances, but neither dared to speak his thoughts.

IT was even worse than they had feared. The cabin was in flames and hundreds of Apaches were riding and running about, waving scalps in their bloody hands.

Adams knew that he and his companion would be missed. They ran back to their horses, threw away the saddles and sent the horses galloping in a different direction. Then, with the blood-curdling yells still ringing in their ears, they hid themselves behind a hastily erected barricade of rocks to await the coming of darkness.

Under cover of night, they crept cautiously back to view the camp. Shadowy forms of Indians could be seen stealing away from the smoking ruins until all were gone and a deathly stillness settled over the area.

After a whispered conference, they decided to attempt to reach the burned cabin, get the gold from the fireplace and hurry away. There was over one hundred thousand dollars in gold stored there and it was worth taking the risk.

Warily, they crept down to the smoking ruins and, after listening, assured themselves no savages were about.

They reached the fireplace and discovered that smouldering beams and white hot rocks effectually barred their path to the golden hoard.

A few moments with the axe and a few buckets of water would fix everything, but the noise might bring back the Indians. They decided to wait and see if the rocks and beams would cool sufficiently to move them.

But time was precious and dawn was approaching swiftly. Gold was in their blood, but life was more to them than the yellow metal. Reluctantly, the two men abandoned hope of bringing out any of the gold.

They turned back and hit the trail, the only exit they knew. Their return to civilization was a nightmare of suffering. Traveling only at night, not daring to show themselves in the light of day, they realized the savage Apaches would be searching for them. During the day they hid in sheltered rocks and woods, taking turns getting a little sleep when they dared. Afraid to discharge their guns for game, they lived only on nuts and rain water left in rock crevices. At length, Adams, desperate for food, shot a rabbit, their only solid food for days.

One morning they heard the sound of horses and, peering from their hideout, discovered a troop of soldiers from Fort Apache, Arizona. The troop picked them up, two wild, unshaven, famished men with fear-crazed eyes.

At the fort, the soldiers gave them food and a tent in which to live, while they slowly regained strength.

But Adams couldn't get the spectre of the wild Apaches from his fevered brain. His nerves, shattered and on edge, he awoke one morning in his tent to see a group of Indians peering in at him. Suddenly he drew his pistol, killing two of the red men.

UNFORTUNATELY for him, they were friendly Indians on a peaceful mission and Adams was seized and plac-

ed in the guardhouse to await trial for murder. The army at that time was bent on making peace with the Indians and the rash act of Adams was not going to help matters along.

But Adams spent only a short time in jail. One night he escaped and, stealing a horse, made his way to Los Angeles, where his wife and children waited.

Settling down in his home, Adams had all intentions of re-establishing himself and going back to the diggings at the first opportunity.

He set himself up in business, running a livery stable and then a furniture store. Sometime he would save enough money to organize another expedition.

However the necessary money seemed never to be forthcoming and Adams finished his life far from the war cries and arrows of the savage Apaches.

But the Adams Diggings lived on long after its namesake.

The Diggings have been a jinx and a death trap for hardy souls with the spell of the yellow metal in their veins. Many expeditions were organized to ferret out the treasure, even one by airplane. But, all met with ill luck and dire misfortune.

Prospectors believe that over the fabulous Diggings hovers the spirit of Chief Nana and his Apaches, leering in derision at the futile efforts of the paleface to wrest the gold from its final hiding place.



BUCKING the worst blizzard that had struck the Arctic in years he took off from Nome Airport on his mad flight across the frozen wastes—Ravenhill, that nonesuch specimen of the genus remittance man, who "never took sides" and whose motto was "Ravenhill Comes First"—which meant that, in those sub-polar badlands the rest of the world could—

FREEZE AND BE DAMNED!

It's Robert Ormond Case's greatest yarn since "Wings North"—stirring saga of Alaskan adventure and a race between plane and dog-team for a fortune in platinum.

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The Thirteenth Notch

By J. J. BALLINGER

There were thirteen notches on young Val McGrath's guns, and he aimed to carve plenty more. But when the rival gunswift he had sworn to kill gave Val his chance to earn two more tallies, Val learned that a man's most desperate battle must be fought alone—and without guns!

VAL MCGRATH gulped his drink and turned a scornful stare upon the occupants of the Crescent Saloon. He noted with satisfaction that they had given him plenty of elbow room. That, and the air of strained gayety about

the place told him that his identity was known here. He could sense the brittle tension in the smoke-wreathed air about him, the walk-softly attitude, the labored effort everybody was making to be casual.



Almost instantaneously, it seemed, he was standing there holding one of Val's guns gripped in each hand.

The presence of death hung over the room like black crepe. That was something that followed Val McGrath wherever he went.

An exhilarating feeling of power built up in him, mingling with the fumes of alcohol that rioted through his brain. The evening looked promising. Maybe events would shape themselves into the familiar pattern: Some drunken gun bender who thought he was tough would come lurching into the place looking for trouble, and through ignorance of Val's identity or because he wanted to build up his own gun rep at the expense of Val's life. . . .

Val grinned wolfishly. That was just the kind of gent he liked to meet up with. Maybe he could add another notch to the grip of his sixgun and get past the fatal thirteen that was his present tally. He had been a little nervous when he carved that thirteenth notch but then, he reflected, there comes a time in every gun-slinger's career when he has a score of thirteen—unless he happens to be lucky enough to knock over two at once, at the right moment.

Young Val had acquired a black outlook on life at an early age. For one thing, his mother had been possessed of a lamentable tendency to name her children from significant dates on the calendar. That had been all right in the case of his older sister, June, who was born in that month and it would have been all right in his own case if he could have picked his day, St. Patrick's for instance, but he had first seen daylight on February the fourteenth and had immediately become Valentine McGrath.

The name, with its implications of lavender and old lace had been a constant target for his schoolmates' ridicule, and he was forced to win many a hard-fought battle before it was shortened to Val.

This alone was not responsible for turning him into a gunman, but it helped.

The main reason for young Val's warped viewpoint was the fact that he was the son of Tom McGrath, owner of a beggarly little shirttail spread, so situated that it was constantly being ground down between the mill stones of the bigger outfits on either side of it.

Existence on the ranch had been a

never-ending struggle against drouth, mortgages, rustlers, and the encroachment of stronger neighbors. There always had been the pinch of poverty, and always the McGraths had been pushed from pillar to post and forced to play politics with the jangling factions about them in order to be allowed to remain on the range at all.

And Val was just "that McGrath kid," a furtive-eyed youngster with a haircut like it had been chewed off by a horse, and his clothes held together by huge pie-shaped patches of off-color material.

BUT all that ended in one blazing day of glory.

Dude Verlane, a snake-eyed gambling man, made gutter remarks about Val's sister June; remarks that called for gunplay. The loafers told Val about it for the fun of watching him take the bitter humiliation of it.

He listened, then went home and got his father's Peacemaker and called Verlane out into the street and killed him there in the dust with the Saturday afternoon crowd watching from the sidewalk.

Val liked to live those moments over again in memory. He had given Verlane his chance at a draw and then had coldly and methodically outdrawn him and killed him to the tune of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, gushing from a hurdy-gurdy in a nearby saloon. The music had ground on endlessly while he stood, gun poised, watching Verlane crawl painfully through the dust in a dying effort to reach his gun.

He heard someone say, "My God—almost as fast a draw as Frank Deacon's!"

He felt a slight stir of resentment in himself at the words, as if they were trying to steal some of the red glory of the moment from him by placing him below the great Frank Deacon.

"If there's anyone else here got anything to say about the McGraths, just step out!" he shouted. "And from now on, watch out—all of you, because *I'm not through!*"

Gunmen, gamblers, merchants, cowboys, ranchers who could buy out the McGraths a hundred times over—they were all there, a wavering blur of faces, as

though he were seeing them through a rain-washed window. But no one stepped forward. They respected the mad rage of this sixteen-year-old and the fistful of death he held in his hand.

His mother and June cried when he walked in the house with the old Peacemaker strapped to his hip and told them about it, and his father's face got long and sober. Not that they weren't proud of him for protecting his sister's name, but they didn't like the way he told it, down to the last twitch of Verlane's face. They didn't like the way he laughed when he told about how funny Verlane looked trying to crawl through the dust toward his gun.

His father studied him bleakly when he related with a show of resentment how he had been rated *almost* as good as Frank Deacon, and there was a tortured look in his mother's eyes when he hinted darkly that someday he might have a chance to show people a thing or two about just how good Frank Deacon was.

They gave up the ranch and moved to Solana not long afterward. That didn't have anything to do with his shooting Verlane; they couldn't have held out any longer, anyway. So they just moved off and left, getting what they could out of their stock and leaving the range for the Scissors outfit and the Sawbuck outfit to fight over.

Which they did. For a year the Solana Basin rocked with gunfire and young Val McGrath drew gun wages, riding for the Scissors outfit. His reputation grew, but he had no friends. He became known as a lad to let strictly alone. He hated his saddlemates as much as he hated the riders for the Sawbuck and he let them know that it mattered very little to him which side he was on so long as he got paid.

After the war was over he drifted on. To hell with Solana and the Basin! They could have it. Nobody liked him around there anyhow, and his mother just mooned around all the time because she'd raised a gunman, and June came home from the store where she worked and nagged the life out of him to settle down and quit wearing his guns.

What the hell did she expect him to do? Help the old man raise vegetables

for those dirty so-and-sos around there? That'd be a fine thing for a gunslick like him to be caught doing! And he was getting damn sick of hearing people tell how good Frank Deacon was. He reckoned it was about time he hunted this jasper up and had a little talk with him. . . .

IT HAD been three years since he'd left Solana, but he'd never run across Frank Deacon yet. When he was drinking and got talkative he let it be known that he was looking for him, but no one seemed to know anything about what had become of him. He guessed maybe someone had blasted Deacon or else the pup had noshed his nerve and was hiding out somewhere. . . .

Val idly studied the little groups of men there in the Crescent. The novelty of his presence had worn off somewhat and they were laughing and talking and joshing among themselves as if he weren't there.

Val often wondered what people found to laugh about. Val himself never laughed. And whenever he got near a bunch the laughter always stopped and they started being polite and cautious, and before long they'd always commence to drift away.

He knew they didn't like to be around him. They were scared of him! They knew he didn't take anything from anybody. Well, to hell with 'em! To hell with every mother's son of 'em!

It got kind of lonesome though. . . .

Val poured himself another drink. The display of bricabrac on the wall back of the bar caught his eye. There was a buffalo head above the bar mirror with a Sharps rifle pegged to the wall underneath it. A dust-coated golden eagle and a snarling, rather moth-eaten badger flanked the head on either side. On the wall, directly in front of him, was a fan-shaped spray of arrows, surmounted by a pair of crossed, feathered lances.

But what caught Val's eye was the display of pistols nailed to the wall underneath the arrows. They were arranged like the spokes of a wheel, barrels pointed inward toward a card in the center, which read: *These guns were left here by dead men.*

Val identified the makes: Navy Colts,

Peacemakers, a Frontier Model with the trigger and guard removed, ornate little derringers and even an old Spanish gun.

He sneered. All of these guns had been owned by second-raters, men who weren't *quite* good enough. . . .

HE JERKED around as the half doors bellied in, protesting thinly on dry hinges. A tall, homely waddy came stalking into the room. Just inside the doors his head collided with the bowl of a hanging lamp, sending a play of light and shadow careening about the room.

He stood there for a moment, rubbing his head, a rueful grin twisting at his lips. He calmly sized up the crowd, then catching sight of Val, he sauntered up, leaned heavily on the bar beside him. Val noticed with disappointment that the intruder wasn't wearing any guns.

The stranger drummed his knuckles on the bar. "Another glass here, bartender!" Then to Val, by way of conversation, "Lord, but I'm dry!"

"Listen—Pilgrim," Val rasped. "I'm not hankerin' for any company, so you can just drag your carcass away from here, *pronto!*"

If the stranger noticed Val's hands fingering the grips of his guns he didn't show it. He poured himself a drink, took his time about drinking it, then stared regretfully at the empty glass. "Happens I'm different," he announced calmly. "I like company."

"Listen, Jasper," Val breathed in a tone of deadly casualness, "did you ever hear of a gent, name of Val McGrath?"

"Yeah, sure—you're him." He lowered his voice. "And I'm Frank Deacon."

Val stiffened, looked the big man over cautiously, then sneered openly. "So you're the great Frank Deacon. I sort of figured you'd gone yellow. Well, you saved your life by comin' here without your guns."

Deacon was studying Val closely. "You look a lot like your sister, Kid," he said. "Same eyes, same color hair—yeah, you look a lot like June."

Val's eyes narrowed. "Just what do you know about my sister?"

"Quite a lot. You see—I married her. 'Bout a year after you high-tailed it out of Solana."

"You married June!" Val snorted. "Why she hates gunmen like they was poison!"

"Don't I know it! Especially one named Frank Deacon. She sorta figures this Deacon hombre was responsible for her mutton-headed kid brother goin' wrong—says he hit the gun trail tryin' to be as good as this gent—"

"I'm as good as you are, any day of the week!" Val retorted hotly. "Go get yourself a gun, Deacon, and I'll show you how good—"

Deacon raised a silencing hand. "Now the wife don't know that me and this Deacon rascal are one and the same, but I sorta feel guilty about it, anyhow, so I takes myself a little pasear to hunt up this button and chase him home. That's how come I'm not wearin' my guns—figured I'd have a better chance to bring him back alive, without 'em."

Young Val McGrath was almost too furious to talk. "You talk like a damned law-dog," gritted. "You'll be almighty lucky if you crawl back there alive yourself."

All this talk had taken place in a low tone and an unnatural quiet had settled over the room. Curious ears were straining through the silence, trying to pick up the conversation. The pop-eyed bartender was casually inching his way toward them, wiping at the bar for an excuse.

Deacon waved him away with an authoritative hand, then turned to the gaping crowd.

"All right, folks," he said quietly. "Just go on about your business."

There was a guilty stir among them and an attempt to appear nonchalant, but Val could see that they were still curious. If he could talk this big son into getting himself a gun he'd show them something. Deacon was yellow, all right. He knew Val's code wouldn't let him beef an unarmed man.

Val reached for the bottle and slopped a drink into his glass. Deacon took the bottle then and set it out of his reach. "Better be careful of that stuff," he said, reprovingly, "or you'll have a head-ache tomorrow."

Val opened his mouth to snarl something but this last affront had left him

speechless. He hastily gulped his drink. He had difficulty getting the raw whiskey past the lump of anger which had risen in his throat. He choked and tears came to his eyes.

DEACON watched him quizzically, with an expression of mock concern on his face.

When Val had caught his breath he said to Deacon: "If you married my sister under a false name, you're a dirty skunk and I oughta gut-shoot you." A shrewd look came into his eyes. "How the hell do I know you're Frank Deacon?" he asked.

The big man moved swiftly and precisely then, and almost instantaneously, it seemed, he was standing there holding one of Val's guns gripped in each hand. There was an audible gasp from everybody in the room.

"I'll kill you for that," Val said furiously. "Damn you—!"

He suddenly felt like crying and the knowledge of this weakness gripped him with a fury that left him silent, unable to speak. This man had shamed him in front of a roomful of people—had tricked him, coming in here unheeled, knowing that Val wouldn't shoot an unarmed man!

Deacon examined the guns curiously, counting the notches on the butts. "Thirteen, huh? And every notch a dead man." He spoke musingly, as if to himself. "Now I never put notches on my guns. First place, that's kid stuff. Second place—" his voice went low and serious—"there are notches I'd have to put on 'em that I wouldn't want there. There'd have to be a notch for the kid that got in the line of fire down in San Antone, the time I beefed Mart Dillman. There'd have to be one for Red Conroy's mother. Red needed killing but his ma was as nice a lady as ever breathed. . . . She only lived a month after they planted Red. And one for the button that wanted to get himself a gun rep. . . . I tried to let him off easy, but gangrene set in. . . ."

Deacon reached in his pocket, fished out a penknife and flicked open the blade.

"And while we're on the subject," his voice was cold and brittle, "there's a

couple more notches you should have on here."

The knife blade bit deep into the wood of one forty-five. "That's for your mother, kid . . . and this one's for your dad.

"Dad and mother—they're—they're not—"

"Nope. Not yet, but they won't last long, grievin' for you the way they are, wonderin' when you're comin' back to make a man of yourself, takin' no interest in life. . . ."

He finished the notch in the second gun, laid it on the bar beside its mate and pocketed his knife. He spoke softly then.

"I got sick of the life I was living, kid—so sick of it I couldn't stand it. So I hit Solana with a brand new name and the slate wiped clean. I met June there. Maybe I am a dirty skunk, like you say, but all I know is I've made your sister happy under the name of Frank Clayton and I couldn't have done it usin' my real name

"We're not at Solana any more, Val. We've got the sweetest piece of range you ever saw in your life — sixty miles or so out past the Big Bonita, up next to the Guadaloupes. I stumbled onto it when I was scouting for the army at Fort Stanton. It'd been Apache country out there and everyone was afraid of it, but the Apaches are on their reservation now and we got first whack at it. We pooled our money and filed on three hundred and twenty acres that takes in the headwaters of a stream, givin' us control of a lot more range than our original claim.

"We had a tough go of it, first season. Didn't have much money to put into stock after we'd paid our filing fee, but we got a good increase the second season and it's all debt free. We built a big log ranch house last winter, odd spells, and the way things are goin' we'll have to have a bunkhouse about year after next and take on a crew of riders.

"There's a town springin' up out there, too, and some day our spread is gonna be one of the biggest in that part of the country. It's part yours, kid—all you gotta do is come along an' grow with the country. Your ma and pa are there, an' June, and we all want you to come —"

VAL stared at his empty glass. He couldn't account for the feeling of utter desolation that swept through him, the feeling that he had been traveling along a deserted road that led nowhere. But stubbornly he banished the thoughts that racked at him, replaced them with the false pride that ruled his life.

"If you think I'm gonna come crawling back home like a sneakin' coyote, you've got another thought comin' —"

"Don't be a chump, Val," Deacon replied softly.

"You've heard me. You can take your range and go to hell with it!"

Deacon gazed at him sadly. He reached out a hand and pushed the guns toward him.

"All right, then," he said. "You can go for your guns any time. *Draw!*"

"You're loco!" Val retorted. "I won't draw on an unarmed man."

"I don't need a gun to handle a wrong-headed squirt like you. You heard me—*go for your guns!* But you'd better make good, because you're either gonna kill me or I'm gonna turn you across my knee and blister your backside for you—"

Val couldn't believe his ears. "You wouldn't try anything like that," he muttered, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"You have your choice," Deacon said icily, "between the ranch, or the chance to kill me and take a wallopin' in front of all these people if you fail. Whichever way you want it..."

He had been tricked, Val realized. If he killed Deacon he must forever bear the stigma of having gunned an unarmed

man. He might even be hanged for it. If he didn't kill Deacon, the big hombre looked fully determined and plenty able to make good his threat. And he would never be able to face the world again, after that.

That left only one choice. He closed his eyes against the sting that was in them and saw the ranch at the foot of the Guadaloupes, the ranchhouse roof golden in the early morning sun. He heard the creak of saddle gear, the soft crooning of the night trick as they took their easy swing around the herd, bedded on some moon-washed flat.

Above the stale barroom reek he could smell the crisp tang of the cook's fire and the tantalizing drift of odors from the Dutch ovens . . . black coffee dipped steaming from a tall shotgun can . . . friendly faces around the fire . . . These impressions were a swift tide flowing through his mind, sweeping away what had been there before.

It was quite a while before he dared open his eyes. When he did, Deacon was standing there, homely as ever, waiting for his choice.

Hell, he didn't want to kill the big critter! He reached in his pocket, got out a dollar and tossed it on the bar.

He grinned then and said softly, "You win."

The bartender stopped them at the door. "You forgot your guns, Mr. McGrath," he said politely.

"Add 'em to your collection," Val replied over his shoulder as they swung through the batwing doors. "I won't be needing them any more."





They drove swiftly for the low east gate of the town.

A Captain For Villa

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

IT was a sad day. Capitan Pepe Amalia sat under his crude brush shelter and stared at the endless rain. If the assault on Santa Eulalia failed, the sacred tide of the revolution would surely ebb. Pancho Villa would go down in

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What catastrophe made Peon Pepe Amalia, who only wanted to be a farmer, go kill-crazy and, almost single-handed, take the fort of Santa Eulalia — before which the mighty Pancho Villa, himself, lay helpless?

history as a luckless bandido. Aside from that, failure would make Pancho angry. Pepe hoped fervently that in his great anger, Pancho would remember that Pepe Amalia was his cousin. Even a revolutionist like Pancho did not shoot

down his own blood cousin, Pepe hoped.

Pepe cursed the rain and wished now he had not forsaken his ancient plow and machete for the glory of the sword—even to be called El Capitan. Of plows and crops he knew much, of soldering, nothing at all. It would have shocked Pepe's simple brain had he realized that Pancho was cognizant of this shortcoming. Pancho was aware, and for that reason had appointed Timoteo to act as Pepe's advisor in all things military. Pepe longed for advice, now. But Timoteo had been absent for hours. Pepe cursed both Timoteo and the rain.

Before Santa Eulalia on the plain, Villa was holding his main force. Rain was no trouble on the flats. But Pepe's fifty men, and their eternal camp women, were in the down-slope of a mountain canyon, sent there by Pancho to make a flanking attack. The rain came straight down on them. It cascaded off the side walls of the canyon. And it came down the rocky bottom, where they crouched, in a turgid current which sought continually to roll them under.

A very bad place, and sad. Nor did it stop with the rain. Somehow their plans had leaked out. For below Pepe, in the canyon narrows, secure in a deserted house whose roof was yet good, a Federales patrol had taken up its vigil. They were armed with one of those new-style guns which spew death like water from a pump-hose.

And Pepe knew, with great bitterness of heart, that without the distraction of his flanking attack, his illustrious cousin, Pancho Villa, was helpless before Santa Eulalia. Pepe hoped again that Pancho would be just when he meted out punishment for this failure.

Pepe knew further gloom when a small patrol he had sent out to see about the Federales in the narrows came back, carrying two of their number—dead. It was then, in Pepe's darkest moment, that Timoteo came baying down the waist-high water of the wash to Pepe's saturated shelter.

Pepe almost smiled his relief. Now, from the solid knowledge of his soldier's trade, Timoteo would conjure up a judgment for Pepe to voice.

But Timoteo, the great soldier, Pepe's

crying need in this dire hour, cried out, "Senora de Los Angeles! This I cannot endure! Capitan, I must have help. I shall die. I cannot live the hour!"

Pepe gulped, gave a careful glance at his plainly locoed aid, daggers of uncertainty stabbing him.

"The Federales!" he guessed desperately "They attack? You have been shot!"

Through his hurt, Timoteo grimaced his disgust at such a hazard. "The Federales!" he snorted. "Ha! Would I weep, patron, were I so careless as to let those dogs put one ounce of their feebly-aimed lead into my belly? No! So much the worse, this is, I tell to you! Rosa—my chiquita! Come quickly, Capitan. For a certainty, I shall die!"

IF there was a subject about which he knew less than warfare, it was women. Thus Pepe Amalia was not one small amount relieved when he was led into a pocket among the rocks, where the camp followers of his band were couched, and learned that Timoteo's agony was not first, but second-hand.

There was a young woman among the harridans who marched with his men and served their pleasures according to the dictates of Villa, who had sufficient beauty of face to stir even Pepe. And there was a look in her eyes toward Timoteo which might have unseated the reason of a man much older than the young *soldado*. In honesty to his advisor, Pepe admitted this fact to himself. But he permitted no more of this admission to find voice than a vague clucking behind his teeth.

"She is sick?" he asked carefully.

"Sick!" Timoteo howled. "She is dying!"

Suddenly he broke off his tirade with a queer look at his capitan. He spoke a quick word, and the other women drew back from this one called Rosa. The woman was revealed as more than a face. Pepe backed up a little and sat down with his head between his hands.

This Rosa was sick, of a certainty. Sick with the sickness which came each spring to the women of the village where Pepe had lived his years. Was it not enough that there was rain when the skies should have been clear for Villa's

army? That the Federales were where they should not be for the success of the plans that had been made? It was too much that a woman must, in the midst of these things, give signs of presenting, to the best soldier and wisest war-maker of the company, a child!

For quite a long time, there in the rain, Pepe fought desperately with the same reasonless panic which had made a worthless thing of Timoteo and his wisdom. And he might have lost the fight, even then, had he not repeated to himself with savage insistence that he was old . . . that both the woman and the coming child belonged to Timoteo and not to him.

This argument at length checked the panic, and he went on with it. Rosa's condition filled him with fear, not for her, but himself. A situation was arising which was clearly not within the duties of even a capitán for Villa.

He could, Pepe decided at length, be stoical in the face of defeat and the loss of Timoteo's counsel. But not in the face of Rosa's impending motherhood. Something must be done swiftly. For instance, there was a gringo medico among the Villistas. A very able man. Before the revolution he had been rich with the rewards of one who tends well the women of the great haciendas. A very noble man, who could, in this hour, be of assistance to a harried capitán.

It was an inspiration, that thought. Pepe recognized it immediately. And to have sired it, unaided, filled him with such pride that he made no note of the stubborn fact that the gringo medical man was with Villa himself, on the plain before Santa Eulalia.

What did that matter, if he could free himself of an experience that filled him with horrible anticipation? It was nothing! Pepe felt he had a grip on things again. He stood up and pulled his belt around so that the sword his cousin had given him was where he could reach it. He pulled the blade out into the rain.

"It is too wet here!" he remarked to the surrounding faces, which turned toward him in surprise. "We will go. *Vayamos!*"

Hardly anybody made a move for a moment. A number of the *soldados* turned

toward Timoteo, but he only hovered in tortured nervousness over Rosa's complacent form. Then one of the harridans caught the wink of steel in Pepe's hand and even perhaps an inkling of Pepe's intent. For she rose up, shouting to her man.

"*Jose! Andale! We march!*"

The cry caught and went on up the canyon. The sodden forms of the *soldados* came from the brush, keeping their rifles dry as best they could. Pepe saw them all in motion and waded out into the current which covered their only pathway to the plain. In but moments they had rounded a twist of the canyon and come to that place where the machine-gun of the Federales might reach them.

The lead from the devil-gun made very unpleasant, warning talk in Pepe's ears. A small voice deep inside him swore that the talk it made was good advice. But Pepe would not permit himself to heed it. There was, after all, Rosa. And the gringo medico was beyond the devil-gun, somewhere beyond the plain.

It was a difficult matter, getting to the Federales patrol in that old hacienda. And had there been among them a desperate farmer who might guess what another of his own breed might do, Pepe would never have made it. It was obvious the chattering devil-gun made it impossible for a living man to get down the canyon to that house. So it became the duty of a dead one.

PEPE climbed out on the rocks above the flooded canyon bed and clung there a moment. When the first bark of the gun came from the hacienda, before it could find and test its mark, Pepe stiffened, flung his arms wide, and plunged backward into the muddy flood. His rifle went wide in the fall, and as the water closed over him he remembered dully that he would have to answer personally to Pancho, as must any man of the army who lost a precious weapon.

But these were desperate moments in commission of a desperate enterprise. So Pepe forgot the gun and Pancho, and turned himself to keeping air and life in his body as it tumbled down with the water, and yet giving no sign of the existence of life, to the marksmen who

watched their victim wash toward them.

There were rocks and considerable rubbish in the current, and they beat at Pepe with pleasure. For a moment he wondered at himself. But there was Rosa, and no other course was left open to him.

One man of the Federales came out of the house into the rain and worked down over the steep bluff to that place where Pepe Amalia permitted himself to be washed ashore. The man came, Pepe knew, for plunder. What he found, Pepe did not know. Certainly not the dead Villista he expected to rob.

Pepe leaped at him. There was shock against his muscles. His hands and feet and teeth did things beyond his direction or control. He threshed on the ground in silence. And his fingers must have been at the other's throat from the beginning, for there was no sound.

It was done in the time it takes a man to strangle. An impossible piece of business. Certainly not one Timoteo would have proposed, had there been no Rosa to distract him. But thus far successful, for all of that. There was, as a consequence, pleasure in Pepe Amalia, and a further cunning.

For an officer of the Villistas there were, as a usual thing, honor, glory and safety. But no splendor—no uniform. Not even one link of braid. Nothing but the *mestizo* rags in which he had left his village. But this Federale—ha! He was a handsome one, dressed to a fine style. Pepe changed clothes pleasurable with him on the muddy brink of the stream.

And, in this instance, vanity was wisdom—nearly as powerful as the handgun Pepe found in the man's belt. For, without the uniform and his slow, unstudied approach to the door of the old house, he would never have lived to use the gun in his belt.

The door swung inward to his hand. He stepped in with a gust of rain. The three remaining members of the devil-gun patrol stared stupidly at him until he had cut one of them down with a clumsy shot. The second sought to tug the devil-gun from its place at the window and whip its barrel around and into the room. Only the third was wise. And

his wisdom cost Pepe Amalia a queer, burning numbness in his left side before this one, too, became bloody and surprised-looking, and fell to the floor.

Realization had just come upon Pepe that he had been shot when the first of his own men poured into the house. They waited there, secure from the rain, until all had gathered. Even the harridans and Timoteo and his troublesome Rosa. And while this gathering was in process, there were further plans to be considered. With the effort planning cost him, Pepe forgot his wound and was sorry he had lost Pancho's sword. It was a comforting thing to have and to wave when a man couldn't think what to say nor how to say it.

THE shelter of the old house after the misery of the rain was a tempting thing to them all. But although Rosa still made her own awkward way undisturbed, Timoteo took up his wailing afresh and redoubled his efforts to ease her pain. So Pepe plunged once more into the rain and the punishment of the canyon flood. And his command strung out behind him with pride. The most ease-seeking of them all would not have it said he feared to follow where a capitán who had been a *mestizo* farmer could find sufficient courage to lead.

In this fashion the company at length debouched from the hills. None of them happy, Pepe knew. Most of them weary, uneasy, grumbling unwillingness. But they held together in some form until they sighted Villa's main force, far across the plain before the town. And they held together after that until Villa had sighted them against the hills and mistaken the reason for their appearance as the success of his plan.

He signalled the launching of the full attack, and Pepe Amalia moaned bitterly to himself. What if the gringo medical man should be killed in the fighting? What if Rosa should not wait until the attack was done? Pepe moaned again and hurried toward the rear, where Timoteo walked with his woman.

They were now as close to the ancient walls of Santa Eulalia as they were to Villa's force below them. Pepe looked eagerly at Rosa. Her smile had attain-

ed a seraphic quality which struck foreboding into his heart. And Timoteo was babbling and beseeching. These were desperate and bitter moments for Pepe Amalia. Turning, he watched his magnificent cousin swing a frontal attack against the town.

Timoteo clawed pitifully at his arm.

So, against such poor judgment as he possessed, Pepe at length ordered his men, also, against the walls of Santa Eulalia. Some would have stayed with the women, refusing madness even for the sake of Timoteo and his woman. But Pepe, who was a patient man of a patient race, had a gnawing wound in his shoulder and had already endured more than a plain man's share of the misery of others.

A strange and welcome tide of righteous anger welled within him. He drew his borrowed gun and spread his borrowed uniform across his chest. He made certain promises to those who would have lagged. He gave teeth to his words with a pair of badly-aimed, but no less convincing, shots from the gun. So that in the end, every *soldado* moved with him, even the white-faced Timoteo. And they drove swiftly for the low east gate of the town.

BY the time they had reached the gate a premonition came to rest in Pepe Amalia that he was bound to nobler souls in this hour. That, for the first time since the beginnings of Mexico, a farmer's corded hand was shaping history. Santa Eulalia was a supply-center. How important a one he did not dream until he, himself, felt the desperate defense which met the assault of the Villistas.

But desperation, even in defense of supplies which might govern the course of the whole revolt, was no match for the fury of Pepe Amalia. Santa Eulalia lay between himself and the gringo medico. Rosa was couched just beyond the town, waiting. Timoteo was a swampcat, gone mad at his side. And time was all-important.

He was on top of the wall. There were three heads. He shot at them. The heads were still there. He kicked one of them and leaped upon the other two, carrying them, their owners, and the ladders upon which they stood, to the

ground inside. A knife shredded his cheek. He found it and broke its blade off in a green jacket. A man shoved a rifle at him. He caught the muzzle, slanting it sharply upwards. The weapon exploded and burned his hands. Then he had it and found its long barrel easier to aim than the hand gun he'd dropped on top of the wall.

A man was on top of Timoteo. Pepe broke the fellow's head with the gun-barrel. Timoteo fired from the ground and blew away most of a savage face behind Pepe's shoulder. Pepe ran, then stopped and worked the rifle, and ran again. Once the rifle ceased to fire. Timoteo did something with it and it was a good weapon again. They got in the door of a church. Pepe's shoulder hurt him like a weight, dragging him down. Some of his fifty men came up, running low, and crouched beside him.

Timoteo was not moaning, now. He saw something, and said words, and they all ran again, and Pepe's shoulder ceased to hurt. There were a lot of other running figures in the street. Some Pepe shot at and some he didn't, and all of them kept running, just the same. Timoteo barked out a chuckling word. Two or three of the company, who were close, laughed, and one of them slapped Pepe on the back, on the side that was wounded—but the blow felt good and he shot at some more running men.

After an interminable time they came to the square. They, themselves, were like a dull knife, sawing at the press of Federales there. And from the other side, something else was sawing. For suddenly the pack before the cathedral parted, broke, and crumbled into scattered, scrambling men, dropping their guns and seeking holes like rabbits. It seemed strange to Pepe that the fighting should end so suddenly.

He did not understand what it could mean—until he saw the man at the head of the ragged company plunging into the other side of the square.

He was a big man, generous in size from foot to lion's head. And he had a great voice which boomed out over all Santa Eulalia.

"Pepe!" it thundered. "Pepe Amalia!" Villa! That cousin Pancho! Pepe

started for him, grew suddenly heavy, and fell.

SO many things leaped to Pepe's attention when his eyes cleared of the sand-storm which had burst within his head. It was night, for there were candles. There was a long, new sword leaning against the wall at the foot of his cot. Timoteo, usually a sober man, was very drunk, and wandered about the room with an armful of bottles, offering them to whoever wanted one.

Pepe suddenly remembered. "The medico!" he babbled. "In the name of El Señor Dios!"

A great laugh sounded, and Pepe turned his head. Pancho Villa, his illustrious cousin, stood there beside the American doctor who was but now rolling down

Timoteo stared. A comprehension seemed to penetrate his fogged senses. His eyes widened. His mouth opened. The bottles fell with a crash to the floor and Timoteo was suddenly gone.

"*Todos los santos!*" Pancho grunted in puzzlement. "That one is so crazy. No?"

Pepe only groaned and shut his eyes. Nor did he open them again until his cot squeaked and he found Timoteo sitting there—a suddenly sober and dejected man, still breathless from his hasty quest.

"Rosa!" Pepe begged. "She—?"

She does well, *mi Coronel*," mourned Timoteo. "Even now she is washing the soiled uniforms of the cursed Federales—for gold!"

"And what is so wrong with this," de-

In those days the Border meant gunsmoke and renegades and sudden death. But to Scott, the last of the ill-starred Leysons, it meant one desperate chance to regain the manhood he had all but lost! Read "Fifteen Wagons to Hell" in the February issue of ACE-HIGH.

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his sleeves. Pancho's big hand clapped Pepe's wounded shoulder very hard.

"Pepe, my rooster," he boomed. "Mother of God, but you are a strange soldier! You take Santa Eulalia for me, then bawl like a baby for a doctor. Think you that I would let one so brave like you—a *coronel* in my own army—die of wounds gained in the cause of our liberty! Ha! I think not!"

Pepe stirred feebly, his mind not comprehending what his ears told him. Pancho waved his huge hand.

"Don't pop the eyes at me, little cousin," he chuckled. "For certain I have make you a Colonel. Right in the square. And from the moment you fell, El Señor Doctor has worked on you constantly. You will live, my *Coronel*!"

"Worked on me?" squeaked Pepe desperately, and his wild eyes swung to his drunkenly grinning aide. He sat up and howled, "Timoteo! Rosa—she—she—did you not?"

manded Pepe. "So long as there is gold! But what about the child?"

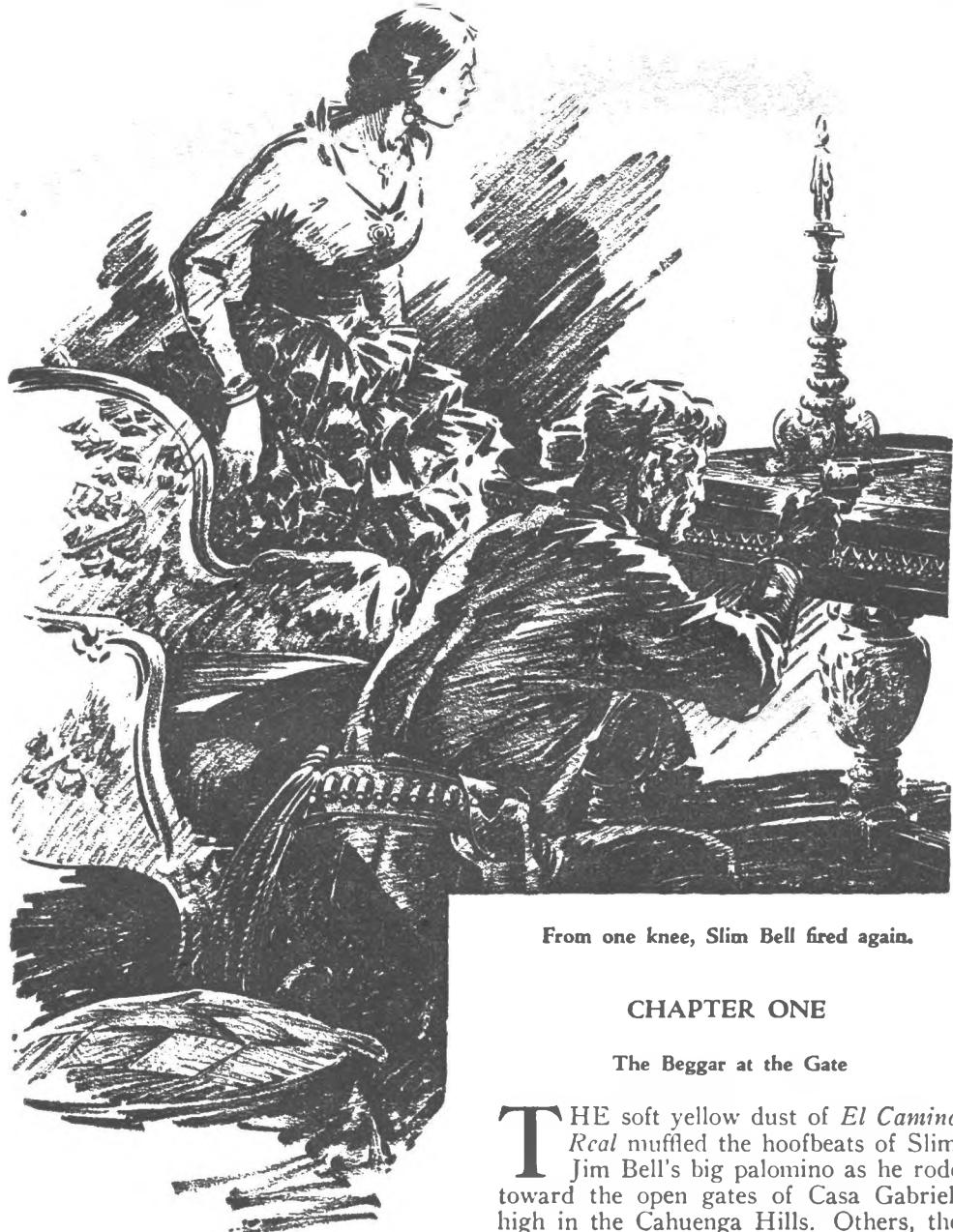
Timoteo rubbed his clasped knuckles against the inside of his knees. "Ah, that!" he muttered. "A girl child. *Valgame Dios, Coronel*, what will a soldier do with a girl child? Can you tell me that? No. Life is unjust!"

Pepe thought for a moment and nodded his head solemnly. "*Es verdad*," he admitted. "Life is unjust. This morning I was no more than a happy capitán. Now you hear it—I am a colonel. Timoteo, I tell to you . . ." He reached out and gripped his dejected aide's arm, fiercely. "You will pass along this word: The next one—boy child, girl child, it makes to me no difference, in my regiment—I shoot his papa personal! You understand, Timoteo? I want no more of this business. I will not be a general—not even if Pancho wants me. Never! Now get out. I am sick of you and this accursed war. *Vayase!*"

BRINGER OF GRINGO LAW

A fast-action novelette of Old California

By M. HOWARD LANE



From one knee, Slim Bell fired again.

CHAPTER ONE

The Beggar at the Gate

THE soft yellow dust of *El Camino Real* muffled the hoofbeats of Slim Jim Bell's big palomino as he rode toward the open gates of Casa Gabriel, high in the Cahuenga Hills. Others, the

Savage and swift as Murieta himself, El Angelo del Muerto struck eleven times — against California dons too proud, or too frightened, to seek the protection of gringo lawmen. . . . Then Ranger Bell picked up the Death Angel's cold trail — and baited his trap with good American flesh and blood!



gente fina of all Southern California, had wended their way here to bring gifts and offer felicitations to Don Gabriel Senati and his bride-to-be, the Señorita Maria de Avila. But Slim Bell was coming on another, grimmer errand.

The pulse-stirring rhythm of Spanish guitars and violins floated across the walled patio of Casa Gabriel as he drew near the scrolled iron gates, but Slim felt it was a spurious gaiety. For *El Angelo del Muerto* had visited the ranchos hereabouts, and more than one don had disappeared at his call. The Angel of Death always left his mark — a scrawled pair of wings above a death's head.

No one knew why the Angel called. For two months Captain Jack Lacey and his Los Angeles Rangers had been trying to answer that question. They had asked the governor for help—and he had sent them Slim Jim Bell, Ranger at Large, who was coming now to report to his friend, Captain Jack Lacey. He had failed on his last two assignments, Slim Bell reflected grimly, and this was to be his third and final chance. The governor had made that plain.

Then Slim Jim saw the beggar. The man was crouched against one of the white-washed gate posts. He looked like a bundle of dirty white rags, save for the dark thatch of his hair and the mahogany brown of his face, hands and sandaled feet. He struck a discordant note.

Even as the thought crossed Slim's mind, he saw two strapping mozos, in laced Mexican *calzonera* breeches and yellow silk shirts, stalk through the gate toward the beggar. Slim single-footed his palomino, Del Oro, closer.

He heard one of the charros say harshly, "Begone, beggar! Don Gabriel orders it. Your presence is like an open sore on a pretty face. If it is *dinero* you want, here is a handful of gold—to choke you!" The charro stooped, and with one swift motion ground a fistful of coins into the beggar's face.

Slim Bell's grip tightened on Del Oro's reins. He saw the beggar topple back against the gate post, sprawl sidewise to the ground. A boot swung swiftly, caught the beggar in the pit of the stomach.

The man's groan of anguish came clearly to Bell, as did his reply. "Señores," the beggar cried, "have mercy on this poor one! Mercy! I come only to speak with El Capitan Jack Lacey, of our blessed *Rangeros de los Angeles*. Call him to me, and I will leave this cursed place as though the plague were here!"

"Capitan Lacey is busy, *garron*," one of the charros said roughly. "He has no time to speak with the likes of you. *Vaya!* Begone!"

SLIM JIM BELL'S interest quickened. The thick dust muffled the sound of his approach. He reined in. Neither the charros nor the beggar had noticed him as yet.

Groveling in the dust, the beggar an-

swered his tormentors. "I will not go," he said stubbornly. "I must see El Capitan Lacey—"

The *suplicante's* face was caked with dirt and grime. He appeared bent with the weight of years, gnarled like the crooked, oaken staff that lay beside him. That was about all Slim Jim Bell could make out, for the loose cotton clothes that covered him hid the shape of his body. He squirmed on the ground like a wounded animal, his hands clasped tightly across his middle.

The charros, standing above him, might have been twins, from the look of them. They had the same broad noses, and wide, flat lips, and sooty black eyes. Hair, unruly as wire, hung across their brows. Their short, thick-set bodies showed the strength of bulls. Slim decided they must be brothers.

One of them swung another kick to the seat of the *suplicante's* loose cotton breeches, and the other reached down a hairy arm to grab the beggar's shirt.

Cloth ripped as the beggar twisted to free himself. The front of his blouse split from collar to waist. Slim Bell caught a glimpse of the man's brown chest—and of something else.

The charro who had ripped the shirt jerked erect with an exclamation of surprise. For an instant the bestial-faced mozo stood like one frozen. His brother, likewise, seemed rooted to the spot. Even the *suplicante* was quiet, unmoving.

And while that breathless pause held, Slim Bell studied the belt that had been exposed under the torn shirt.

It was a *biricu*, an ancient sword belt, made of fine, golden-grained Spanish leather. Time had given it a luster that polish couldn't duplicate. About four inches wide, the belt was a maze of intricately carved medallions and scrolled lines. Two chased silver buckles caught it about the beggar's waist.

For the space of a minute, the silent tableau held. Then the beggar's hands moved frantically to claw the front of his shirt together. Those hands, Slim Bell noticed, were smooth. He had no time, though, to give the matter any thought, for the beggar's move to hide the belt seemed to break the spell that held the two charros.

"Por Dios!" one of the brothers cried.

"It is the Belt of Joaquin! Por Dios!"

The other wasted no words. A bone-handled knife came into his hand, swung high, sunlight glittering on the bright blade.

Slim Bell spoke for the first time. His voice crossed the ten feet of space separating him from the combatants. "Daylight is no time for murder, señores!"

THE mozo with the knife whirled like a man stung. His round, sooty eyes studied Slim Jim Bell. The charro saw the tall, broad-shouldered, wasp-waisted American dressed in fawn-hued breeches that fitted his slender legs snugly. He took in the dusty blue shirt and small neckscarf the rider wore, and passed up across Slim Jim's cleft chin, firm lips and high-bridged nose. Slim was wearing a tuck-crowned sombrero, with some of the yellow road dust caught in the curl of the brim. A silver ring snugged the buckskin lanyard strings of the hat beneath his chin.

There were two matched Colts in saddle holsters strapped to the pommel of his plain black saddle, but the flaps of the holsters were buttoned. Slim Jim Bell had the air of a man who could take care of himself, but the charro disregarded that.

Slim read the mozo's intent in the sooty eyes. He kicked free of his stirrups as the man's arm whipped back. He twisted sidewise out of the saddle—as the charro's knife came at him like a streak of light.

He heard it hum through the air above him as he struck the roadway. The charro wanted that belt mighty bad to be willing to kill for it, Slim thought, as he came to his feet. One springing lunge carried him half the distance to the mozo.

"*Gringo cabrone!*" the Mexican spat. "Death misses but once!" A small derringer, deadly as a diamondback, slipped from his sleeve.

Slim Bell swung forward in a long, frantic dive. He had expected the knife, but not the gun. Don Gabriel Senati's charros came well-heeled. Pale flame bloomed from the muzzle of the little weapon. Slim felt the ball slice through the crown of his hat and knock it back, to hang by its lanyard strings between his shoulders.

Then his long arms circled the mozo's legs just above the knees. The Mexican went over backward. He struck at Bell's head with the derringer. Slim took the blow on a lifted shoulder and swung his right fist. It was a looping, overhand blow that caught the charro behind the ear. Slim felt the man's wiry body relax beneath him. He gained his feet, wondering why the other charro hadn't interfered.

Slim saw the reason as he turned. The second Mexican was on the ground, ankle caught in the crook of the beggar's oak staff. As the charro squirmed free, the staff rose and fell. The stout oak stave shivered against the man's skull. He buried his face in the dust a second time. He was out cold when Slim Bell rolled him over to keep him from smothering.

The Ranger was smiling when he straightened. The smile made wrinkles form at the corners of his eyes.

To the beggar it appeared that this lanky gringo found pleasure in putting his fists against knife and gun. And he was not far wrong.

Death was no stranger to Slim Bell. He had faced it in American river gold camps, on the San Francisco Embarcadero, on the burning sands of Death Valley. He had faced it in the line of duty to an infant state, for his was an unusual commission. Tucked in the money-belt he carried beneath his shirt were his credentials as Ranger at Large, signed by Governor Lee Tuckerman of California.

There were few who knew Slim Bell for what he was. An occasional newspaper editor cautiously mentioned that a personal representative of the governor had aided sheriffs, marshals, Vigilantes or Ranger companies in breaking up the organized outlawry that was gutting California of its wealth in this year of 1854. There were also a few who knew the tall, slim Ranger for the quality of his mercy. And there were another few who knew the speed of his guns, but they were mostly dead.

CHAPTER TWO

The Twelfth Man Dies

SLIM BELL watched the beggar clamber to his knees and pull himself erect with the aid of his staff. The supli-

cante had folded his shirt together, hiding the belt again.

As Slim looked at the man, he wondered why that belt was worth murder. He hoped the beggar would offer an explanation. He tried to put the *suplicante* at ease.

"*Mucho gracias*," he nodded. "You're handy with that crutch. You're damned handy with the crutch."

The beggar kept his eyes lowered. "It is I who should thank you, señor," he said humbly. "You have saved my life. So, many thanks, señor."

Slim waited for the man to mention the belt, but he had nothing more to say. Perhaps he would tell Jack Lacey about it. Slim turned toward the gate. "Let's go in and find the captain," he suggested.

"Me, señor?" the beggar cried. "I dare not go beyond this gate."

Slim glanced at the unconscious charros. A dry smile moved across his lips. "You won't last long if you stay here," he said succinctly. "Those hombres are going to wake up with blood in their eye, and you'll get it in the neck."

Bell beckoned to Del Oro as though it were human. The palomino came toward him, stepping daintily to avoid trailing reins. The Ranger led the way through the open gate, the beggar hobbling at his side, the horse following.

Across the tiled patio sprawled Casa Gabriel—a great, red-roofed adobe, with many wings shaded by cool, tile-roofed verandas. The patio itself was full of vibrant life. One glance at the swirling crowd was enough to show Slim Bell that Lacey was going to be hard to find. Men and women were everywhere. Some watched the whole steers barbecuing in the pits, others were dancing, still others were gathered about the wine casks set in the shade beneath a drooping pepper tree.

"One comes, señor," the beggar said, "who will know the whereabouts of El Capitan Lacey."

Slim Bell saw her then, a tall, slender girl who was all in white save for the red ribbon banding her waist and the red slippers that peeped from beneath her wide skirts. Others, too, were turning now to stare at the erect, sandy-haired gringo and the golden palomino that fol-

lowed him like a faithful dog. Curiosity was in their eyes, but it turned to disgust as they saw the beggar in his filthy clothes.

There was neither disgust nor curiosity in the warm eyes of the *señorita* as she paused before the Ranger. Slim read warm welcome and his sudden indrawn breath paid her beauty an unspoken compliment. He guessed that she was the *Señorita Maria de Avila*, Don Gabriel Senati's betrothed.

Her smile included them both impersonally. Then Slim saw her study the beggar more closely. A sudden change came over the girl. The smile turned to a grimace that might have been terror. Her slim body became tense as a ramrod. Slim saw her nails bite hard against her palms. She acted, he realized, as though she recognized the tall beggar.

With an effort she brought back her smile. "*Buenos días, señor*," she said to Slim Bell. "I bid you welcome to Casa Gabriel."

Slim bowed with the courtesy of a Californio. "We are not guests, *señorita*," he explained. "We'd like a word with Captain Lacey. Could you direct us to him?"

He watched the girl's eyes turn to the beggar. He thought he read a question in them, but her pause was so slight that he couldn't be sure. She smiled at the Ranger again. "I saw El Captain Lacey enter the casa, señor. The end room—" She gestured toward a wing that overlooked the San Fernando Valley.

Slim nodded, murmured his thanks. He watched the girl turn. Only a powerful effort of her will seemed to keep her from breaking into a run. Slim looked at the beggar. The man had his head averted.

Lips tight, Slim led the way across the patio. He promised himself that this strange beggar would answer some questions when they found Jack.

Flowering hibiscus screened the veranda. They found the door the girl had indicated.

"Wait here," he said briefly. "I'll get the captain." He had his knuckles raised to rap on the door when he saw a blot of dark, red liquid staining the sill. A deep, startled breath shook him. The liquid was blood.

HOOFS churned across the patio behind him, their beat sending crisp echoes against the white walls. Slim Bell whirled. He heard the door creak open behind him, but he was too startled to pay any attention, for Del Oro was racing across the yard toward the iron gate, with the beggar in the saddle. A beggar from whom the trappings of age had dropped like a discarded cocoon!

The charro brothers came running through the open gateway. Slim Jim saw them leap toward the rider. Del Oro turned, at a touch of the reins, and thundered straight toward the six-foot wall surrounding the patio. Slim waited, every muscle in his body tense. He could guide Del Oro over that wall himself, but he didn't know what would happen with a strange rider in the saddle. A shiver ran up his spine.

He saw the palomino seem to crouch, the rider settle, then lean forward as though to lift the big animal over the barrier. Del Oro rose like a golden bird, tucking in his heels.

'Slim Bell felt himself breathe again as he listened to the fading beat of galloping hoofs. Del Oro had made the jump safely. His horse was gone, but he had a hunch he would see it and the beggar again—and the Belt of Joaquin.

The door behind him creaked once more. Slim swung around, remembering the blood.

Don Gabriel Senati stood in the opening. Slim recognized the man from a description given him by Lieutenant Dade Cutler at Ranger headquarters in Los Angeles. Cutler had said, among other things, "It beats me what this *Señorita de Avila* can see in Senati." Slim Bell could agree with the lieutenant, he thought, as he looked at Senati.

Under normal circumstances Don Gabriel might remind one of a Gila monster lurking beneath the sand to attack the unwary. He had the same gross body, the same sleepy expression. Swarthy-faced, the folded flesh of his jowls was flabby as the wrinkled wattles on a buzzard's neck. A red sash banded his bulging middle, the fringed ends trailing to the bend of his knee.

He stood there now, blinking, and Slim caught the same expression on his gross

face that had crossed Maria de Avila's when she had recognized the beggar. Don Gabriel looked as though he had seen a ghost.

Then Slim saw the scrap of parchment Senati clutched in his fingers.

Senati followed the direction of Slim's gaze. "Yes, señor," he said huskily. "It is *El Angelo's* calling card. The Angel of Death has visited us!"

SLIM BELL crossed the porch in two long strides as Senati stepped aside. He looked about the room. Chairs were against the walls. A dark oak table occupied the center of the polished tile floor. A couch stood against the opposite wall, beside an open door. That drying pool of blood on the sill was the only reminder that there had been a struggle here. Slim stepped across the room, to the open door. He ducked automatically as he went through it. Lintel were frequently too low for his six-four height. A trail led from the steps down a sage-brush hill to the golden floor of the San Fernando Valley.

Two horses had stood at the foot of the steps. Their hoofs had scuffed up the ground. *El Angelo Del Muerto* had taken Jack Lacey with him. Slim felt a sense of quick relief. If Jack Lacey were dead, the Angel would not have bothered to take him away.

"He is the twelfth man, señor," Don Gabriel Senati said.

Slim swung around.

Senati was leaning against the table, and in the dusk of the room his face appeared pasty pale. "The twelfth man," he repeated. "I wonder who will be the thirteenth?"

Slim, himself, was wondering that, with the same growing helplessness that had caused Jack Lacey to send for him.

"What do you know about this?" he asked the don.

Senati shrugged. "Nothing, señor." His voice was smooth and soft. "I saw *El Capitan* Lacey enter some time ago. He did not come out. Por Dios, I thought perhaps he had been taken ill, so I come to ask if I could serve him. The blood and this—is all I find." He gestured toward the scrap of parchment he had laid on the table.

Slim picked it up. The rudely drawn death's head on it seemed to leer at him, defying him as it had defied every lawman in Southern California for sixty days. Sixty days that had seen twelve men disappear. He had gone over the list of their names with Lieutenant Cutler.

He had come to the conclusion that every man on the list had been taken prisoner for a definite reason. The answer to the mystery lay right there—if a man could put his finger on it. The name of Carrillo, father and son, had headed that list. There were eleven Californios, altogether. Now another name would be added—a gringo!

Slim Bell drew a deep breath. He felt like a man with a key in his hand, unable to find the keyhole it fitted. But he had to find that keyhole, for a number of reasons. Jack Lacey had ridden many long trails with him. Jack Lacey was his friend. The reputation of the Rangers was at stake. Only the fear of their swift action kept many a hot-blooded Californio from seeking to revenge himself against the hated gringo conquerors. Nobody knew better than Slim Bell how close to revolt Joaquin Murieta had carried the young state. It needed only a man with money to buy smuggled arms, and the personality to capture the hot-bloods' allegiance to send revolt flaming the length of the state. El Angelo was off to a good start, he realized grimly; almost as good a start as Murieta had had.

The thought reminded him of the beggar, and of the strange belt he wore beneath his rags. "Ever hear of the Belt of Joaquin, Don Gabriel?" he asked abruptly.

The don raised his eyes lazily to the tall Ranger. "No, señor," he said calmly.

"The charros you sent to drive the beggar away from your gate have heard of it," Slim said. "They would have killed the man to get it, if I hadn't stopped them."

Don Gabriel Senati's voice came smoothly again. "By what right do you interfere with my affairs, señor?"

Slim Bell's hatchet-thin face turned as smooth as the don's. "It is my affair, Don Gabriel, when my horse is stolen by a beggar who is not a beggar at all, but a caballero wearing the garb of a *suplicante*.

A beggar wearing a belt valuable enough to make one of your mozos try to kill me as well as him. A beggar you recognized, but now refuse to acknowledge."

"I will provide you with a mount, señor, and an escort back to Los Angeles."

"I can do without the escort," Slim snapped.

He put the horse Don Gabriel Senati loaned him to a run along *El Camino Real*, but he could not escape the helpless, angry feeling in him that he was doing the wrong thing—that the key to the mystery lay behind him, within the walls of Casa Gabriel.

CHAPTER THREE

The Angel of Death

LIEUTENANT Dade Cutler was white-haired, short, wiry. He had spent a good share of his life mule-skinning along the Santa Fe Trail, and the language he had picked up in bygone days was standing him in good stead now as he paced the floor of Ranger headquarters.

"I told Jack to stay away from that damned barbecue!" he proclaimed lustily. "But damme, he was hell-bent on goin'. Said he might meet somebody there."

Slim Jim flipped a half-spent cigarette through the door. It was not the first. Night had fallen since he had returned to Los Angeles. "The beggar," Slim nodded, "who ain't a beggar. Have you heard of the Belt of Joaquin?"

"No," Dade Cutler groaned. He ran his fingers through his bushy white hair. "Warn't like Jack," he grumbled, "to go off half-cocked. Do you suppose he went to get that belt?"

"I'm tired of supposing," Slim said. "The beggar ain't here to talk. Senati won't talk. That leaves the girl. She recognized the beggar, too. Mebby so she'll know something about the belt he was wearing."

Dade Cutler had quieted enough to take a healthy chew of tobacco. "When it started," he said reflectively, "a couple of weeks went by between each grab. We never knew where the lightnin' was going to strike next—Southern California is a

big place, and we couldn't give every don a bodyguard. Now things have speeded up, mucho plenty. Two men in two days. Don Julian Ortega disappeared right off Upper Main Street yesterday. The Angel left a death's head, and wings on a wall to let us know how it happened. Sometimes," he growled reflectively, "I wish Murieta and his pards were still on the loose. This damned black Angel wouldn't be grabbing the likes of Carrillo and Ortega if Joaquin was alive."

"Why?" Slim Bell was listening with only half an ear, for he could hear a running horse rapidly nearing Ranger headquarters.

"Every danged man that has been visited by this Angel was a friend of Murieta's at one time or another, and folks didn't bother Joaquin's amigos if they valued their ears. What in hell's that? What in—"

Wood splintered outside as though a spent horse had stumbled blindly into the hitchrack at the edge of the boardwalk. Slim stepped to the door. A foundered horse had struck the rail. The animal stood there now, head between his knees. Even as he watched, the horse sank forward, seemed to melt into the earth. A peon in dust-covered breeches and loose shirt staggered forward, caught Bell about the waist, blubbering out unintelligible words.

Slim pushed the man into the room. "Talk straight," he gritted. "What's happened?"

"That's one of old Juan Avila's *caballos*," Dade Cutler said.

His words seemed to quiet the peon. The man nodded violently. "Señores," the words tumbled out, "mi patron, Don Juan, ees gone. *El Angelo*—that black consort of the Devil, called no more than one hour ago. Señorita Maria, she ordered me to take a fast horse and fly here."

"Did anybody see the Angel come?" Slim jerked out the question as he led the way back inside.

"No one saw him, señor, but I—I saw him go, like a great black bat on a black horse. And on another *caballo* was *mi patron*, with his hands bound tight behind his back."

"The thirteenth man!" Dade Cutler said harshly. "Bell—"

HE DIDN'T have time to finish the sentence. The soft whicker of another horse had caught Slim Jim's ear. He ran to the door. He went through it and across the boardwalk with one long step. A summer moon hung in the fogless night sky, lighting the white dust of the streets, and pooling shadows down the length of Nigger Valley, where saloons and honk-tonks sent a raucous invitation into the night.

A figure was heading toward the alley at a fast run. Slim Jim caught the flutter of ragged pants and shirt, even as his eyes supported the opinion of his ears that the whicker had come from Del Oro. The big palomino, looking none the worse for wear, was standing near the dead Avila horse.

Slim caught up the reins and straddled the saddle. He whirled the palomino. Spurs weren't needed to set the animal into racing run. Slim loosened his riata, built a loop, and let it hang over his shoulder. Rapidly he overtook the fleeing figure. If he could dab his loop on the beggar, their troubles might be over. At least the man could tell them more than they knew now.

The beggar glanced across his shoulder. He saw the rope as the Ranger sped it from his fingers. He dodged, and the rope brushed his shoulders. Then he was gone down a black passage too narrow for Del Oro to enter.

Slim Jim heard the fading patter of the man's feet as he reined in. He thought a moment, then deliberately called down the alley, "Thanks for my *caballo*. I'm going to need it. We just got word that Maria Avila is a prisoner of The Angel!"

Lieutenant Cutler was waiting out front of Ranger headquarters with the peon when he rode back. "So you missed him," Cutler said. "I knew damned well you would. Bell, why'd that hombre bring back your *caballo*? Why'd he run away in the first place? Why'd he want to see Jack? What's the belt he's wearing got to do with The Angel?"

Slim Bell smiled down at the red-faced lieutenant. "I don't know," he replied, and told Cutler what he had done. He ended, "I'mbettin' my chips the beggar will be headin' for Casa de Avila pronto."

Dade Cutler grunted. "I hope so. I

also hope you were only talkin' through your hat about the girl."

An orderly brought three horses from the barns behind the station. "I'm going along," Cutler said.

THE rising moon was shouldering into the blue-black sky when they rode up to Casa de Avila. Maria de Avila received them in the great *sala* of the hacienda.

She spoke directly to Slim Bell, who was watching her intently. "My father," she said, "was alone here. He was going over some of the ranch accounts—" She gestured toward two parchment ledgers.

Slim moved toward the ledgers as the stubby, red-faced lieutenant took up the questioning. "Señorita," he said, "can't you give any reason for this Angel wanting to get his hands on your father?"

"No."

"Mebbe," Slim spoke out of the silence that fell, "I'll be able to tell you that, and a lot more—in a minute."

Dade Cutler ran his fingers through his bushy hair. "By the great horn spoon," he exclaimed, "you found something?"

The two ledgers were great, iron-bound volumes. Slim leafed through one of the big books, glancing at neatly penned entries.

"Thirty golden bars taken from the Santa Barbara to Los Angeles mail coach," he read aloud. "Forty silver plates and one dozen golden candlesticks from Rancho San Pascual. One thousand *reals* of gold from the coastal steamer City of San Francisco." "There's more," he added quietly, "but this gives you an idea of what's here."

He glanced at his listeners. Maria de Avila was standing motionless against the fireplace, her face as white as her dress. She was staring at the ledger as though it were a viper.

"Did you know," Slim asked gently, "that your father was Joaquin Murieta's—shall we say, bookkeeper?"

The girl's breasts, beneath the tight bodice of her dress, drew up. "No," she whispered. "No, señor—"

"There were many who sheltered Joaquin," Slim said gently. "He had lots of friends. It's no secret that your father was one who admired him, which is no

crime. There were things about Murieta I, myself admired. But the fact that your padre was one of his Southern California henchmen, as this proves, could bring disgrace to the Avila name."

"You will forget?" the girl implored.

"I've got a good memory and a bad one," Slim Bell said enigmatically. "Right now, I'm interested in *your* memory."

"Señor, I will tell you anything!"

"Ain't you bein' kinda hard on the girl, Bell?" Cutler growled.

Slim's eyes swung to the lieutenant. The fine lines about his mouth deepened. "Not half as hard as the Angel is going to be on thirteen men, if he doesn't get what he wants."

The girl had started to sag. She caught the back of a chair beside her and clung to it. "Twelve men, señor," she whispered. "One has escaped his trap."

Slim's gaze swung back to her. "You mean the beggar?"

"Yes, señor. He is Don Jose Antonio Carrillo—my lover. He—he and his father were two of the first to disappear. Antonio and I were to have married. But word come to me from this devil—this Angelo del Muerto—that I must wed with Don Gabriel Senati, instead. If I did not, Antonio would die!"

"That skunk—so he's the one!"

Slim halted the lieutenant's flow of words with a shake of his head. They were getting somewhere at last. "Now," he asked quietly, "what do you know of the Belt of Joaquin?"

"Nothing señor. I swear it—I—"

"Perhaps, señores, I can answer your questions!" a voice said in stilted English from the doorway behind Slim Bell.

For a fraction of a second, the Ranger thought the voice belonged to the beggar. Then he saw the mask of terror that dropped like a veil across Maria's face, and he knew that the Angel of Death was calling again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devil's Trail to Treasure

A GUN-HAMMER clicked drily in the silence. Slim felt the skin between his shoulders start to pucker, as though preparing itself for the shock of lead.

(Continued on page 104)



The door flew open under the impact.

LIGE COLBY was topping a bronc in the pole corral behind his cabin when Sheriff Mike McCune rode up. Afoot, Lige Colby was long-legged, freckled and unimpressive. But, hair-pinned on a fighting horse, he made a picture to remember. So the fat sheriff lingered by the corral gate, watching Colby and the bronc with appreciative eyes.

Three hundred and some odd days out of each year Lige Colby was a run-of-the-mill cowman in frayed levis and well-worn boots. But, once each year, for a brief spell, he emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon. These were the days when he traded colorless range garb for flaring

Owlhoot Orphan's Glory Ride

By JOHN
COLOHAN

Born in the shadow of the gallows, reared among righteous narrowbacks who waited, gloating, for the black blood of his long-dead killer father to show, would Jim Borsak have guts enough to repay a life and death debt to an honest cowman . . . when payment meant disgrace for the fighter he called dad, and a hangman's knot for himself?

chaps and flaming shirts to travel the rodeo circuit. And, in his travels, Colby usually held his own with the best bronc twisters in the business. He'd won firsts at Cheyenne, Pendleton and Monte Vista; he was right up at the top of the heap, even in the fastest company.

In the midst of a series of spine-jolting leaps, Colby saw McCune. He lifted a hand in greeting, and a moment later came through the corral gate with his saddle under his arm. The two men walked to the porch together. Colby eased his lanky frame against one of the porch uprights.

"Long time no see," Lige Colby said.

"I hope and trust this visit is just social?"

"So to speak," said fat Sheriff McCune. He fumbled in his pocket, found a yellow sheet of paper and handed it to Colby. "I got me a telegram from Hank Route," McCune offered.

Colby saw the following:

HURD BORSAK BANK ROBBER REPORTED GETTING MAIL SILT COLORADO UNDER NAME GEORGE DODGE INVESTIGATE BORSAK IS SIX ONE BROWN EYES SANDY HAIR HOOK NOSE ARROWHEAD BIRTHMARK RIGHT SHOULDER DANGEROUS
HENRY ROUTE U S MARSHALL

Lige Colby nodded. "Interesting—if true."

"Yeah," McCune said. He mopped sweat from his moon face with a big bandanna. "According to the Silt postmaster this Dodge jasper is camped at the old Pattison homestead in Little Park. He just sorta moved in. He only got one letter, and the postmaster never got much of a look at him. Nobody else, either, seems like. I thought mebbe you'd know if he wore the right brand marks. Thought mebbe you could help me out."

The freckled cowman shook his head. "Heard somebody moved in there," he said. "That's all I know—I never saw the gent."

"Hank Route builds him up somewhat scary," the fat sheriff said. "Along about the time I was ten miles outta Laporte I got to thinking mebbe I oughta bring along a deputy, in case I needed reinforcements. Then I remembered you. I figured I'd pick you up here, save a man a ride from town and at the same time slip you an easy day's pay as deputy. Which would leave everybody satisfied, I figured."

"You're somewhat careless with your figures," Colby said. "If this jasper turns out to be Borsak—"

"He won't," the fat man said gloomily. "I've made these trips before. He'll turn out to be a bald-headed little guy with a wife and mebbe six-seven kids. Hell, Lige, what would an outlaw be doing camped out there? Only I got to ride out, and you might as well come along. Go ahead and saddle a horse."

HALF an hour later the two men rode down on a little cabin perched on high ground between trees. Weeds and sagebrush were crowding the sad-looking homestead cabin. A wisp of smoke hung above the chimney. The door was closed.

The sheriff and Lige Colby dismounted. McCune pounded on the door.

It opened at once. The man who stood in the doorway was tall. He had sparse sandy hair and a thin beak of a nose jutting out between a pair of watery brown eyes; he had, in brief, all the brands mentioned in the telegram.

He didn't look like an outlaw. He wore neither gun nor gun-belt. And, quite evidently he had been washing dishes, for he still held a dirty dish towel and a tin plate in one hand. He stood there, blinking.

"Howdy, gents," he said.

"It's this way, Borsak," Mike McCune said. "I'm the sheriff—"

The roar of a gun drowned out the sheriff's voice. The gaunt man had not moved, had not changed expression. Standing there in the doorway he'd shot Mike McCune at point-blank range—shot the fat sheriff through the heart with the gun he'd kept hidden under the dish towel. Even as McCune was falling he ripped the towel away and turned the gun on Colby.

Luck saved Lige Colby. The hook-nosed killer had struck with a rattler's speed, and Colby needed luck. The gun was pointing straight at him, death an arm's-length away, when McCune's body hit the gunman's hand and knocked the Colt out of line.

Lige Colby hurled himself aside; his gun was out when he flattened against the cabin wall. He was thumbing lead fast when the door slammed shut. And Borsak was *inside* the cabin.

Silence came down as Colby crouched against the log wall, neatly trapped between two windows. Fat Mike McCune lay sprawled on the porch in the sunshine, a dark pool of blood spreading beneath his body. Colby knew Mike was dead. And he could picture Borsak inside the cabin, waiting for him to make a break for shelter.

What Lige Colby did next was nowise sensible. But the murder of the sheriff had turned everything red, and he was

just a little insane. He wasn't even careful. He kicked spent shells from his Colt, replaced the bullets; he stepped over and lifted the dead lawman's gun from the holster. Then, one hundred and eighty pounds of concentrated fury, Lige Colby hit the cabin door like something flung from a catapult.

The door flew open under the impact. Colby hit the floor, rolled over; he came to his knees with a gun in each hand—both vomiting flame and potential death. He was fanning lead in a wide arc when he saw a gaunt figure materialize before him. The room was full of smoke and roaring sound. Fire touched Colby on the cheek. Then he saw the gaunt man stagger, go down in a heap. He leaped to his feet, crossed the floor and kicked the gun out of the man's hand.

Suddenly rage washed out of him, leaving him sick, shaken. He stood still, staring stupidly at this abandoned cabin where a human being had reached trail's end. The room was bare, almost empty. A sagging roof, a table, a broken stove and a couple of smashed chairs.

Hurd Borsak was lying face down on the floor. In one corner was something that looked like a discarded garment. And in the next instant the big cowman wondered if he were seeing things. That garment . . . looked like a child. . . .

IT WASN'T possible, of course. Incredulous yet, despite the evidence of two good eyes, Lige Colby went across the room. He dropped to his knees, then caught his breath as he stared at the still figure of a child. The little boy could have been no more than four years old, a boy with straw-colored hair and a dirty face, bare-footed, in faded blue jeans and a shirt which had been white before the blood spattered over it. And he seemed to be dead . . .

"My God!" Lige Colby whispered. "A boy—a baby . . ."

He touched the dirty face. It was still warm. He fumbled for a pulse, found it and felt the faint valiant beat of a small heart. He carried the boy to the table, cut away the bloody shirt and looked at the hole a heavy caliber bullet had made. Lige Colby's bullet . . .

Afterward, there were parts of it that

Lige Colby didn't remember clearly. Realizing his utter helplessness, he lost his head for a moment. There was nothing in this abandoned shack—nothing; not even a clean rag to use to try to clean the wound. Lige Colby remembered tearing his undershirt into strips to make a bandage. He remembered picking up the child in his arms, carrying him outside into the clean sunlight. Then, somehow, Lige Colby was in the saddle, the child cradled in his arms, and they were racing down the long road to town. It was seventeen miles to Laporte and the nearest doc.

Although parts of it were vague, Lige Colby remembered always the long flight of stairs leading up to Doc Hazen's office, when he didn't know whether the boy he carried was alive or whether he'd died on that terrible ride. He remembered kicking the office door open, remembered putting the body on Hazen's operating table.

"He's shot, Doc," Lige Colby whispered. His tongue was like sandpaper: his voice dry as ashes. "Maybe he's dead. I wish you'd do what you can."

Hazen went to work. He was a bony-faced, capable little man. To Lige Colby it seemed an hour before he looked up. "He's alive," Hazen said. "That's all." "Is he . . . can he make it, doc?" "I don't see how."

There were more hours then, when Lige Colby and the doc. and the doc's wife sat in a quiet room and watched a tiny figure in a bed cling tenaciously to life.

The doc and his wife moved in and out of the silent room, but Colby sat in a chair beside the bed as though carved out of stone. It grew dark, and Hazen lighted a lamp, turning the wick down until the light was just a dull glow in the darkness.

Night wore on, and Lige Colby still sat in his chair. Dawn crept in through the windows, and Lige Colby put one hand on the bed.

"It's morning, kid," he whispered hoarsely, although he knew that the small boy was far beyond his voice. "Morning! You hear me, kid? You've got to hold on now!"

* * *

Lige Colby missed Cheyenne that year,

although he'd laid plans to make his usual swing around the rodeo circuit. More important matters interfered. For one thing, using the prize money he'd been piling up during the years, Lige Colby was building a new house. When it was finished he made arrangements for Juan Trujillo and his wife to move in with him, the idea being that Juan was to ride for Lige while his wife served as cook and housekeeper.

On the face of it the move didn't seem too smart, since there'd never been enough work on the place to keep Colby more than half way busy. But Colby figured it was the proper thing to do. Lige Colby had accumulated a family.

When it became certain that the boy whom Lige had accidentally shot was going to recover, there had been considerable discussion regarding his case. That he'd been the son of Hurd Borsak, slain outlaw, seemed pretty certain, although even that was not established beyond doubt, since there were blanks in Borsak's past which the law had never managed to fill in properly. At any rate, the boy was an orphan, and nobody was very much interested in a killer's son. There'd even been talk of putting him in an institution.

Lige Colby put an end to that. He hired a lawyer and adopted the boy. When the last paper was signed the boy's name was James Edward Colby. It was all done legally, strictly according to Hoyle.

OFFICIALLY, the boy was James Edward Colby—otherwise he was just Little Lige. A tow-headed youngster with big blue eyes and a sunny smile, he could always wrap Big Lige around his fingers, right from the very start. He changed the whole plan of Big Lige's life. The kid would need clothes and an education; he'd need a chance at all the things Lige Colby had missed. He'd need money over the years ahead. So Big Lige set out to get it.

The boy was four years old when Colby adopted him. Colby was twenty-eight. By simple arithmetic, when the boy was twelve, Lige Colby was thirty-six. Big Lige was on his way then. He'd speculated in land and cows. He'd made money hand-over-fist. Luck brought some money, hard work brought more. Colby's Brad-

ded S was a big outfit now, with a bunkhouse full of riders working for Lige Colby and his kid.

This was the year Frank Heber paid a call on Colby. Heber owned the Star Cross outfit, over the hill. He was a director in the Laporte bank. He was also a member of the local school board. It was in this latter capacity he called on Lige Colby.

"It's about the kid, Lige." Heber, a gnarled, oak of a man, settled himself deeper in the easy chair in Colby's living room. "His teacher says she can't do anything with him. Says he's always fighting, always raising hell. He knocked a couple of teeth out of one of George Dover's kids."

Colby glanced at him. "You ever do any fighting when you was a kid, Frank?" "Some," conceded Heber. He hesitated. "There's something else—" He approached it warily. "I think you'd want to know this, Lige," he said. "Seems like his teacher cashed her school warrant the other day. The money was in her purse, and the purse was in a drawer of her desk in school. When she checked up that night a twenty-dollar bill was missing. She figures Little Lige got it."

The color left Colby's face. "Is she . . . sure of that?"

"She's pretty sure, Lige."

Lige Colby stood up. His voice was like ice. "You tell her," Colby said, "to be damned sure before she says anything like that about a kid of mine."

After Heber had gone, and after some of his rage had subsided, he called Little Lige into the living room. "What about this fighting at school?" he asked. "What about that fight with the Dover kid?"

Little Lige shifted uneasily. He was a gangling youngster now, all arms and legs and freckles, but you could tell that some day he would be a big man. His face got red.

"You mean—Pinkie Dover?"

"I reckon it was Pinkie," Colby said.

The story came from Little Lige in a rush of words. "Pinkie said you weren't my dad," he said. "Pinkie said my dad was a bank robber and a killer. He said I had black blood."

Big Lige let himself sink deeper into
(Continued on page 96)

GIVEN BIKE



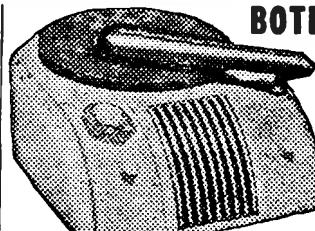
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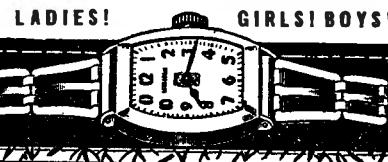
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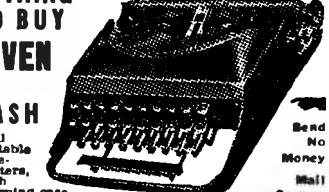
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(Continued from page 94)

the easy chair. In his blindness he'd hoped to keep that story from the kid. He knew, now, that it wasn't possible, not in this country. Too many people would remember; too many people would talk. You couldn't bury that kind of a story, ever.

“WHAT did you do?” Colby almost fumbled the words.

“I whopped him, Lige,” said Little Lige. “I'd like to have beat his head off. I made him say he was a liar.”

Lige Colby sat in his chair after the kid left. He'd have to figure out some way to explain to Little Lige about his dad. And he'd have to explain that black blood wasn't something you inherited. Little Lige was pretty young, but maybe he'd understand.

He pushed himself out of the chair at last. He went upstairs to the small room which served as a sort of office. There he wrote a check for twenty dollars, making it payable to Little Lige's teacher. He put the check in a letter without explanation. He sealed the letter, addressed it and shoved it in his pocket.

He hadn't mentioned the twenty-dollar bill to Little Lige. Likely the teacher had lost the money, or mislaid it; likely she'd find it later on. At any rate, he was pretty sure that Little Lige wasn't a thief. It was just that old story.

Lige Colby shook his head. “Black blood,” he said.

It would follow the kid all his life, he mused. People would remember that old affair at Little Park. They would talk, and the talk would keep drifting back to Little Lige. People who were old enough to know better, people like Frank Heber...

“That damned old renegade!” Lige Colby muttered. “If I had a dollar for every calf he stole...”

* * *

Little Lige was twenty-two, Big Lige forty-six. A lot of water had gone under the bridge since that day, eighteen years ago, when Lige Colby had made a wild ride out of Little Park with a wounded baby in his arms. In fifteen of those years Big Lige had pyramidized a few cows and a scrubby homestead into a fortune. Then,

OWLHOOOT ORPHAN'S GLORY RIDE

in three short, disastrous seasons, when beef dragged bottom, he'd lost every dime of it.

He still held the ranch, still ran the outfit. Only Lige Colby and his banker knew that Big Lige was somewhat worse than broke. Only he and his banker knew of the note tucked away in Colby's desk—the note which mentioned money, and set a time limit. The amount was five thousand dollars. The time limit didn't matter because Colby couldn't float five thousand if the bank gave him a year.

Colby sat in the office, adding figures on the back of an old envelope, when he heard the clatter of riding gear in the yard below. He looked down and saw Little Lige and another rider stepping out of saddle. The stranger's back was turned, but Colby saw Little Lige standing tall and straight and wide-shouldered.

The kid had turned out all right, he thought. There wasn't a better cowman in the country than Little Lige. A trifle wild, maybe, so that he seemed to step out of one jam into another, but that was all right, too. Lige Colby wouldn't have had him otherwise. Big Lige was proud of him.

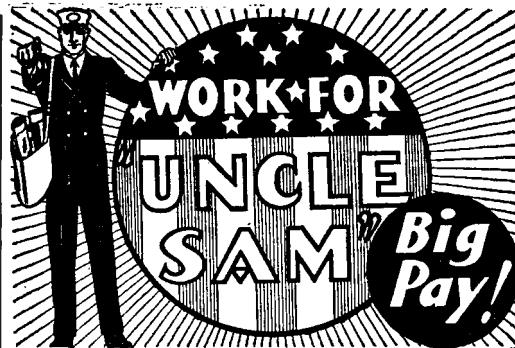
Colby sat at his desk, listening to the two men moving around in the living room below. He heard the murmur of voices, the tinkling of glasses against a bottle. He wasn't consciously listening until suddenly a single sentence cut through his preoccupation. That metallic voice belonged to Duke Herndon, Laporte saloonman and gambler.

"I wouldn't be crowding you, kid," Herndon was saying, "only I'm crowded myself. I figured your IOU was good, or I wouldn't have carried you, but twenty-five hundred bucks is too much to kiss away. Can't you get it from Old Lige?"

Old Lige sat up straight in his chair. He was thinking: "An IOU . . . a gambling debt . . . twenty-five hundred dollars . . ."

"Lige is out of it," the kid said. "He's paid enough already without forking out for gambling debts. Anyhow, he hasn't got the money. That's out, Duke. I'll get it myself."

There was a long moment of silence. When Herndon spoke again his voice was

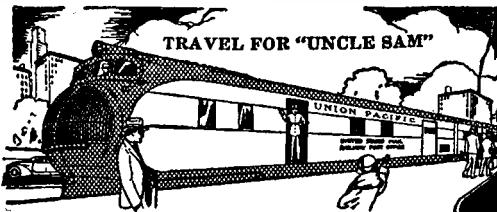


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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

so soft Lige Colby could barely distinguish words. "Maybe," Herndon said, "maybe I could tell you how to get, say—ten thousand, kid."

"Maybe you could," the kid said.

"I'VE been thinking about old Bill Tollman," Herndon said. "The county treasurer. He was sick for a couple of months and I reckon he must have run behind in his work. He's been working nights lately. The courthouse is empty after six o'clock, all but old Tollman working there alone, with a big safe crammed with county money right there at his back. See what I mean?"

Little Lige's voice sounded strange. "I'm listening," he said.

"It's made to order for some smart gent to step in there some night," Duke Herndon said. "He could shove a gun in the old man's back, make him open the safe, and grab off the dinero."

Lige Colby waited. He sat at his desk, his big fists clenched, waiting for the kid to throw the words in Herndon's teeth . . .

Little Lige spoke, his voice thoughtful. "Maybe you got something, Duke," he said. "Ten thousand is a helluva lot of money."

Lige Colby pushed to his feet. All at once he was mad. Not toward Little Lige. You couldn't blame the kid. You couldn't blame Little Lige when you remembered all the years he'd been hearing about his dad. Big Lige started for the door.

Something struck him! Something that was like a bolt of lightning, that drove him to his knees, that sent pain stabbing through his body, that turned the world dark before his eyes. "The doc was right," Lige Colby thought as his legs went out from under him.

The doc had warned him, a year ago, that his heart was bad—that he'd have to take things easy. He'd thought the doctor was a fool . . .

* * *

Dusk filled the little office. Lige Colby was lying on the floor. For a long time he didn't know why he happened to be there. Memory came back slowly. He pushed himself erect and felt his way to

the door on shaky legs ; felt his way down-stairs and dropped into a chair in the dark living room. He heard voices in the kitchen.

He called, "Juan!" and white-haired Juan Trujillo came in. He struck a match and lighted the swinging lamp. "You call me, Lige?" he asked.

Colby nodded. "Where's Little Lige?"

"Town. He rode in, hour or so ago."

Colby frowned. "Saddle me a horse, Juan."

"Right now?" Trujillo said. He hesitated, staring at the big man in the chair. "You feeling all right, Lige?"

"Never felt better," Colby said.

There was no strength in him as he pulled himself into saddle and turned toward Laporte. He set his jaw grimly. He had to get to town. He had to get to town and settle Duke Herndon's hash. He had to find Little Lige before the kid turned crazy.

The road seemed longer than usual but the night air was cool against his face, and by the time he reached Laporte he felt almost as good as ever. At the first street light he looked at his watch. It was twenty to nine. On impulse he pointed his horse toward the courthouse.

In soft darkness he rode a circle around the big stone building. A light was above the front door, and more light showed through two windows on a ground floor corner. That corner was the treasurer's office. Then Lige Colby saw something else. . . . A lone horse was standing in a pool of shadow cast by the great cottonwoods flanking the courthouse on the far side of the town.

The sight was like a blow in the face. He'd been so sure of Little Lige! All these years he'd been sure of him, and now he wasn't sure at all.

Lige Colby rode around the building and tied his horse to the courthouse hitch-rack. He cut back across the lawn afoot. His boots made no sound in the soft grass. He kept on until he reached the treasurer's office window. He could just about see inside.

He could not have timed it better if he'd planned things with a stop-watch. He saw the white head of old Bill Tollman as he bent over his desk ; he saw the office door

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

behind Tollman. A masked man stood in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

THE masked man took three quick, short steps across the floor and shoved the gun against Tollman's back. Colby saw the old treasurer's hands go up; saw the moment of hesitation before Tollman got up and crossed the room to the big safe in the corner. Lige Colby watched the old man fumble with the dial.

Colby saw Tollman pull the iron door open, then stand erect; saw the masked man drive the old treasurer across the room, lock him in a closet.

Lige Colby quit the window then. He walked behind the courthouse and toward the line of cottonwoods, where a lone horse stood. He leaned against a tree and waited.

He had not long to wait. A dark figure raced across the lawn. Lige Colby stepped out, held up one hand. "I'll take the sack, kid."

Moonlight touched a shining gun. A voice rasped, "Get your hands up, mister! Fast! I'm riding out of here!"

"I'll take the sack," Colby repeated. "Then you can ride to hell, for all of me."

The gun dropped back into its holster. "Is that you, Lige?" asked Little Lige incredulously.

"It's me," Colby said grimly. "It's you and me, kid—and a hell of a place for both of us!" He reached out, took the canvas bag from Little Lige's unresisting hand. "Get on your horse and ride. I'll try to cover you."

Something jolted Lige Colby's back.

Duke Herndon's voice said, "Freeze, Colby!"

"Never mind the sack, kid," Duke Herndon said. "I'll take care of the money—and I'll take care of Lige."

Lige Colby pulled away from the gun and turned. Herndon was a short, squat shape before him.

Little Lige said, "I'll handle this, Duke. Put your gun away." His voice sounded strange, unreal. "I've been a damn fool, Lige," he said to Colby.

"Better be riding, kid," Colby said.

Little Lige shook his head. "No. I'm not riding anywhere. I must have been crazy, Lige, but I'm taking the money back. Mebbe it's not too late—"

OWLHOOT ORPHAN'S GLORY RIDE

"You damned fool!" Herndon snarled. He whirled, gun gleaming, stabbed for the canvas bag and tore it from Colby's grasp. He backed off slowly. "You poor, damned fool! It's too late for anything but bars for you. I've got a bronc cached across the street. I figured—"

"You figured on double-crossing the kid, eh, Duke?" Lige Colby said.

The gun swung. Herndon's voice was shrill. "Damn you, Colby! You had to butt in on this! You had to break it up. You'll never break up another man's game—"

Big Lige Colby stood flat-footed, braced, realizing quite suddenly that he was looking straight at death, sensing the desperate purpose stirring in the brain of the man behind the shining gun. Here was a robbery gone awry, but, by murder, things might yet be salvaged. If Big Lige could be silenced. . . .

Big Lige waited. There was nothing he could do, no hope of beating a gun already leveled. A warm little breeze rustled the cottonwoods, and Colby watched a shining gun. . . .

SEVERAL things happened all at once. Little Lige, forgotten in that instant by both men, hurled himself forward, straight into the path of a bullet meant for Big Lige. His shoulder hit Colby, knocked him sidewise just as Herndon's gun roared. . . .

Lige Colby was lying on his back in the soft dust of the street. There was a roaring in his head and the taste of blood was in his mouth. But the ground was warm. . . .

Then Little Lige was bending over him. "He got you, Lige," Little Lige was whispering. "He got you."

It came back to Lige Colby then. Little Lige . . . Little Lige was in a jam. He had no business here. It was time for Little Lige to ride.

"Where's Herndon?" Lige Colby asked.

"He's dead," Little Lige said. "I—got him, Lige."

"I'm all right, kid," Colby muttered. "Grab your horse. Ride for it."

"Ride!" snarled Little Lige. "Ride—hell! I'm going for a doctor."

He was gone before Big Lige could tell him that there wasn't any need to call a doctor.

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But Little Lige was gone, and Big Lige was lying there alone, with the warm ground under him and a moonlit sky above. Not a bad way to die. . . .

He was worried about the kid. His dad had been a killer, and Lige Colby could remember all the years when people had waited for the black blood of the father to show up in the son. They'd say that this was it. They wouldn't know how Little Lige had changed his mind.

Colby lay there quietly on the ground, thinking it over. Remembering when Little Lige had been a baby. . . .

Lanterns were coming from three directions at once. The doctor got there first, with Little Lige holding a bull's-eye lantern, and looking white and sick above the yellow glare. Sheriff Sim Ferguson was right behind. So was old Bill Tollman. Tollman had a rifle in his hand. The doctor went down on his knees beside Colby.

BIG LIGE grinned weakly. "You diagnosed me—wrong—doc," he said. "You said—heart trouble. It's—lead poisoning—"

The sheriff said, "It's Lige Colby! What in hell—"

Big Lige looked up at the lawman. "Just a damned fool, Sim," he muttered. "But the bank—wanted money—" He was curiously drowsy, and it was hard to talk. "Tried to get it—with a gun—"

"Lige!" Tollman cried. "You mean to say—"

The ghost of a grin twisted Big Lige Colby's lips. His voice was just a whisper. "Had to laugh—locking you—in closet—Bill—"

The whisper faded out . . .

* * *

Very much to his surprise Lige Colby woke up between white sheets, in bed in a darkened room. Sheriff Ferguson sat at the bedside. Colby lay quiet for a spell, staring up at Ferguson and trying to get things straight in his mind. He spoke at last, carefully.

"Where's . . . Little Lige?"

"In bed," Ferguson said.

"In bed?" repeated Colby.

The sheriff leaned forward. "Fool kid

OWLHOOT ORPHAN'S GLORY RIDE

damn near bled to death," he said. "Holding a lantern while the doc worked on you—and none of us knowing he was shot."

Big Lige hadn't known it, either. "Shot?" he said.

Ferguson nodded. "Bullet that hit you went through Little Lige's shoulder first. Which is why you're alive. The slug was pretty much spent by the time it got to you. But Little Lige nearly bled to death before we found out about it."

Colby closed his eyes, then opened them again. There was something else he wanted to know, but he didn't know how to ask about it. The sheriff saved him the trouble.

"Hell of a mess," Ferguson growled. "Bill Tollman robbed; Duke Herndon dead; you and Little Lige both shot. Twelve thousand dollars in county money laying there on the ground. You claiming to be the gent who stuck up Tollman, and Little Lige claiming likewise, and both of you lying, far as I can tell."

"How you figure that, Sim?"

"Your story don't hold water," the sheriff said. "You claimed you stuck up Tollman because you needed money. I had me a talk with Ed Clark down at the bank. Ed claims the bank is ready to back you to the end of the road—says one good year will put you on your feet, and he figures this is the year. Besides, neither you nor Little Lige answer the description right."

Colby stared up at him. "Description?"

"You forgot something, Lige," Ferguson said. "Bill Tollman was there when the robbery took place. Bill claims the gent who stuck him up was a short, heavy-set jasper wearing a blue suit and a mask. That couldn't be anyone but Duke Herndon." The sheriff stood up. "The case is over, far as I'm concerned. I'm washing my hands of it."

Lige Colby nodded. He wasn't quite sure how it had happened, but it had turned out better than he had dared to hope. He knew he would never have to worry about Little Lige again.

A warm something came into his heart when he thought again of the years he'd given to Little Lige.

"I-it's almost," he thought, "as though he is—my son . . ."



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(Continued from page 90)

But the man behind them was not ready to shoot yet. He had to gloat over his kill before making it, like a cat pawing a rat. "You are a dangerous man, Señor Bell, and you, Señor Cutler," he said. "You have sent many good Californios to stoke the fires of hell. Soon it will be your turn."

Slim's fingers closed about an end of the ledger he had been studying. He weaved down to his knees, and whirled. In the same sweeping motion he sent the book flying from his hand like a flail.

He heard lead smack solidly into flesh as the spurting crash of a cap-and-ball Colt filled the room with sound and powdersmoke. Through the smoke, he saw Dade Cutler clutch at his side, stumble a step forward, with an amazed expression on his leathery face, then fall down.

Hatred filled Slim's eyes. He saw the man who had fired throw up an arm to ward off the ledger, but the heavy book crashed through his guard, caught him in the chest, staggered him. One of Slim's Dragoons spurted flame, and the bullet clipped the calciniae from the wall where the man's head had been a moment before.

A black cloak draped the killer from shoulders to feet, its brocaded, upright collar hiding the lower half of his face. A flat-crowned, wide-brimmed black hat was pulled low enough across his brow to mask the rest of his face.

From one knee, Slim Bell fired again, and saw the cloak twitch, but it wasn't enough to halt the killer as he came forward a step, gun flaming in his hand.

A red branding iron was pressed suddenly against Slim's head. He knew he had been hit. As he fell he tried to steady himself on his outflung arms, but they were like rubber. The floor hit him in the face, hard. The shock drove some of the flaming pain out of his brain.

Black boots that he had seen before were coming toward him. They were small, ornate boots. Then he remembered where he had seen them. At Casa Gabriel. They were Don Senati's boots!

The fact did not surprise him, after what the girl had told them of the order she had received to marry the owner of Casa Gabriel. It only made him angry

BRINGER OF GRINGO LAW

that he had not guessed it sooner. But it was an anger that he could not satisfy. His gun was too heavy to lift.

The man stepped on past him. He seemed to have lost all interest in him.

Slim heard Maria de Avila cry out, "No! No—" Her words faded on the sound of a slap, the thud of a fist, and a moan. A flash of clarity came through the roaring in Slim Bell's head. *El Angel del Muerto* was taking Maria with him!

The man's boots came back into view. The girl's body hung down across his shoulder, her arms loose.

The thought spurred Slim Bell. If he were dying, he had nothing more to lose. The Angel was disappearing through the door into the dark hall when Slim gritted his teeth and rolled to his knees.

One eye was already gummed shut by the blood flowing from his head wound as he followed the Angel.

Slim stumbled after them. Don Gabriel Senati was so busy climbing into the saddle with his helpless burden that he paid no attention to the bloody, reeling figure that came staggering out to the porch.

Again Slim raised his gun, then dropped it. His eyes were playing tricks on him. That wasn't a man out there climbing aboard a black horse. It was a great, black bat, wearing a cloak that had turned into dark wings.

THE sound of hoofs helped clear his head. The black horse was probably fresh, and Del Oro was fagged, but the black was carrying double.

"Got to follow him," Slim heard himself mutter. "Cutler would like that—"

He staggered down to Del Oro. He caught at his hat, hanging by its lanyard strings between his shoulders, and jammed it tight across his head.

The black horse and rider were streaking across the courtyard. The gunfire had awokened the rancho's retainers. Slim saw peons come tumbling from huts.

The Angel's Colt winked once, there ahead of him. Slim heard a thin scream, and cursed savagely as a peon died.

Slim pulled himself to Del Oro's saddle. He clung drunkenly to the pommel. Cries from the mozos sped him on his way past

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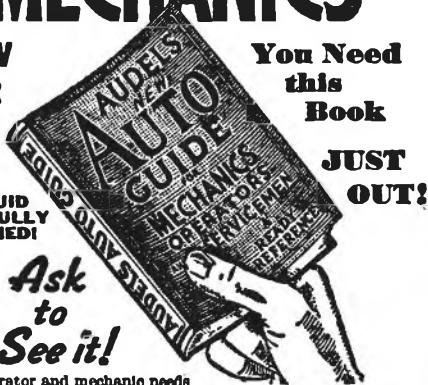
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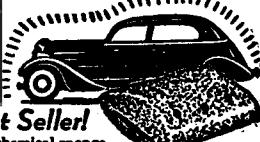
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

the barn. The wide reaches of San Fernando Valley spread out like a golden lake on either side of them, but the fleeing black rider kept straight on.

Slim followed, pain exploding in his head each time Del Oro's hoofs struck the ground. He saw the black rider disappear into the V-shaped mouth of a canyon. Slim kept forcing Del Oro toward it. The pain was turning to a full numbness that seemed to be creeping downward through his body. He wondered why the Angel had returned for Maria de Avila. He wondered why the beggar, if he was in love with the girl, hadn't showed up at the casa.

Straggling beams of moonlight marked the bed of the canyon when Slim Jim guided Del Oro into it.

The fading sound of hoofs came back to him like mocking laughter, then faded abruptly. Either the Angel had stopped to listen, Slim Bell decided, or he had reached his destination. Slim decided the latter answer was more probable. He climbed down from the saddle, and reeled ahead on foot.

He was expecting anything but what he found. The dying coals of a campfire beneath a spreading sycamore showed ahead as he reached the edge of the brush. A shadow weaved across the fire. Then Slim saw what it was—a body dangling from a limb of a tree.

Then he saw something more, and it sent him plunging into the open. The hanged man wasn't dead yet. His hands clutched the taut rope, trying desperately to ease the pressure.

Slim cut the man down, staggered with him to a place beside the fire. A bladder of water lay nearby. He forced a little between the Spaniard's lips.

"Gracias, señor." The man's words were barely audible. He was dying, but he clung to life a moment longer. "Follow the trail of Joaquin, señor," he husked. One of his hands flung out with sudden strength toward the wall of the canyon. He died that way.

Boots had scuffed the sand, their marks plain in a patch of moonlight that fell through the limbs of the sycamore. Slim studied the tracks. The narrowness of the trail led him to believe

BRINGER OF GRINGO LAW

that the men who had walked this way had moved in single file. He tried to estimate how many there had been.

"Leastways a dozen," he decided, and followed the marks to the edge of the clearing. The brush lay about it in an apparently thick wall, but the tracks disappeared into it.

Manzanita screened the start of an overgrown trail. Slim wondered if he would find Jack Lacey's body along it.

Slim moved along slowly, careful to avoid rustling the dry brush. He had come a good three hundred yards, quartering at a fairly steep slant up the canyon wall, when a patch of moonlight picked out the lumpy shape of another dead man.

Slim weaved to a halt, and felt the hair at the base of his scalp start to prickle. This man lay in a pool of his own blood, head half-severed from his body.

Slim pushed himself erect again. He had traveled many strange trails in his time, but never one like this—with dead men for guideposts.

Steadily the way grew rougher, as the trail climbed steeply toward the rimrock cliffs that buttressed the sides of the canyon. He was close to the base of the high cliffs when he almost stumbled on the third dead don.

The man lay in a crumpled heap alongside the rubble-strewn path, and the chunk of stone that had been used to smash in his skull lay beside him.

Each of these Spaniards, Slim thought, as he rested for a moment, had been friends of Joaquin Murieta—amigos the outlaw could trust. Men who might have buried the treasure listed in the parchment ledger at Casa de Avila. Treasure the Angel wanted!

That might be the answer. But why, Slim asked himself, was it taking twelve men to lead the way to the trove? Twelve men, dying one by one, as their usefulness was ended. Twelve men murdered so that one might have the gold to buy smuggled guns and equip an outlaw army. This was a blood trail that could end only in death—death for dark-haired Maria.

THE thought brought Slim Bell to his feet again. He looked at the cliffs towering ahead. The end of the trail must

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lie there. The next question was, could he make it there and have enough strength left to fight for the girl and Jack Lacey and any of the dons who might still be alive? Slim Bell didn't know the answer. The numbness was down to his legs now, but they would still move.

A fourth dead man lay at the base of the slanting bluff, a guide to handholds that had been chiseled into the rock. Slim looked up the cliff. A spot of light glowed halfway to the rimrock.

Clumsily he started climbing. Lead weighted his arms and legs. Then a voice, crying angrily through the silence of the night high above him, made him forget the clumsiness of his body.

He could hear the man plainly in the vast stillness of the canyon. It was Don Gabriel Senati's voice. "The gold is not here!" the voice cried in Spanish. "Cabrones, you have tricked me!"

"But this is the cave." It was Maria de Avila answering him. "My father swears it. Was he not the last man of twelve to

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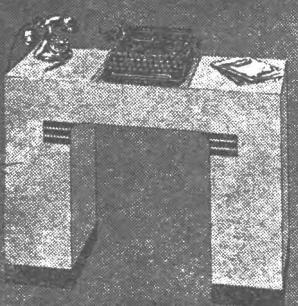
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bring the treasure here? You came for me"—the girl's words whipped their captor—"because you knew there was no other way to make my father lead you here. It is not his fault the gold has disappeared."

Another voice came winging down to the climbing Ranger: "Señor, Joaquin came to my casa. He said to me, 'Where there is gold, I trust no man.' And he showed me a *biricu*, a sword-belt with lines upon it. 'This is a *derrotero*,' he said, 'a map.' Eleven men have carried the treasure over the trail marked upon this belt. No one of them knew the path the next man was to follow. But each in turn, when his task was done, came back to me with a description of his route, and I inscribed it here. All but the last part of a league has been covered, *amigo mio*. I give to you the task of taking our wealth the final step.' Señor," Juan de Avila's voice swelled through the dark, "you have my word that this cave was where I buried the treasure."

This was the answer to mystery. This explained the beggar's belt, and why it was called the Belt of Joaquin. But it did not explain the disappearance of Murieta's

treasure. Slim heard Don Gabriel Senati's loud voice curse his prisoners viciously.

"Then dig," the Angel said. "Dig deep, because this will be your grave!"

A SHELF of rock lay before the cave, hiding it from the view of anyone in the canyon below. Slim's hands closed over the rim of the shelf. He pulled himself up, lay gasping there in the dark.

A pair of smoking torches lit the inside of a low-roofed, shallow cave. Slim saw Jack Lacey's dust-grimed face appear as he lifted a shovel-full of earth. He felt quick relief. At least Jack was still alive.

Torchlight glinted on a pair of yellow shirts, and on the long revolvers their wearers held. Slim recognized the men. They were the charro brothers he had met at the gate of Casa Gabriel. Those two, Lacey, the girl and her father, and the black-cloaked figure of the Angel, were the only occupants of the cave. The others, Slim Bell realized grimly, were dead. The buzzards would find their bodies in the morning—stretched from the Cahuenga Hills to this canyon in the San Rafaels.

Sound drifted down from the bluff that towered above the cave. A pebble came

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bouncing through the sparse brush that clung to the cliff-side. Slim stared up from where he lay, and for a moment he thought that his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Two men were easing down through the brush toward the cave. Moonlight showed Dade Cutler's bushy white hair, and the ragged white garb of the beggar.

Inside the cavern the Angel was cursing monotonously, driving Jack Lacey and Juan de Avila to faster digging. "You will have company in death, *mi amigos*," he kept promising them over and over again. "Yes, company. Antonio Carrillo will join you. He and the belt that lies. For if I could not read Joaquin's *derrotero*, he could not either."

The rest of the picture was plain now to Slim Bell. Young Carrillo had stolen the sword belt, and escaped. He had hoped to give it to Jack Lacey, who was an authority and collector of ancient treasure maps. That was why the Angel had made him captive. He had expected Jack to decipher Joaquin's map for him. But that had been before he had known Carrillo had stolen the Belt of Joaquin and escaped. After that the Angel had been forced to rely on the memories of men, making each man who had once carried the treasure retrace his steps.

Another pebble came bouncing through the brush. It struck the shelf in front of the cave. The sounds stirred the yellow-shirted charros. Like padding cats, they came into the open. One of them stared upward. Slim weaved to his feet. He had to sacrifice himself to keep the charros from picking off Cutler and the beggar like a couple of flies on a wall.

His sudden move brought the pain rushing back over him.

Dimly he heard one of the charros exclaim, "*El Ranger!*" The scream of a bullet followed on the heels of the words.

His own guns spurted an answer as he plunged forward.

Cloak flying, Don Gabriel sprinted from the cave. His revolver roared, and the bullet struck Slim in the leg. But it didn't stop him. The Angel couldn't know that he was shooting at a man who had long ago counted himself dying, and so had no fear of death.

BRINGER OF GRINGO LAW

A FLUNG shovel came hurtling like a spear from the cave. Slim saw the blade of it catch Don Gabriel between the shoulders, heard the crunch of shattered vertebrae. A cry came from the Angel's lips. He teetered on the rim of the shelf, then the night breeze caught beneath his cape, spreading the cloth like black wings as he toppled outward into space.

One of the charros was dead, and one of Slim Bell's arms hung limp at his side. The other charro was coming at him now, screaming like a madman. Slim set himself and triggered. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He flung his empty Colt at the plunging charro.

Then, through a sort of red haze, he found Jack Lacey and Dade Cutler on either side of him, holding him erect.

"You'll live," Dade Cutler was chuckling. "Rangers are too ornery to die!"

Then the beggar, with his arm about the waist of Maria de Avila, was beside him, too. Slim's tongue felt thick when he asked his question. "Is that a lyin' belt you got, Carrillo?"

"No, señor." The young caballero shook his head. "The treasure is safe. Last night I changed its hiding place, for I was able to read what Don Gabriel's greedy eyes could not. The treasure will serve a little to pay back the señoritas of those who died in its quest."

Dade Cutler grinned approvingly at the young couple. "An' provide quite a dowry to boot," he added, with a wink.

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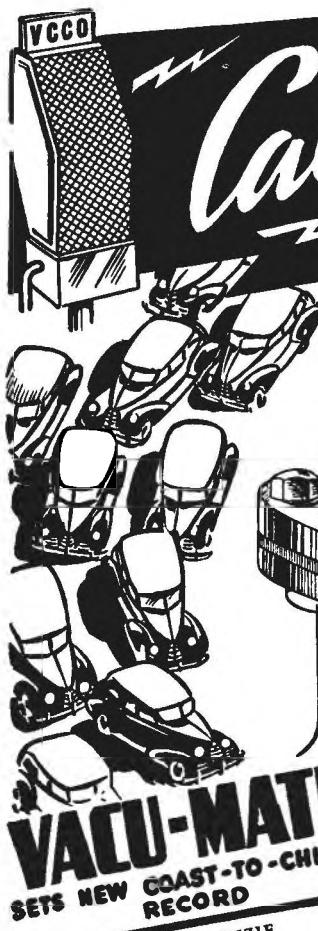
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The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-nine hours and forty-two minutes, an officially timed run over the United States, which gave an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and the Vacu-matic averaged 18-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased the gas mileage 3-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,
Bob M. McKenzie

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The Vacu-matic Co.

Wauwatosa, Wis.

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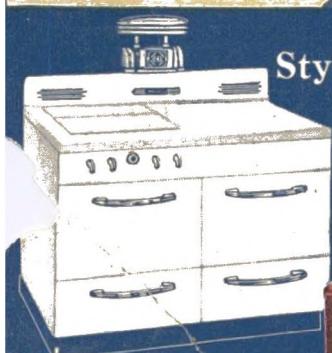
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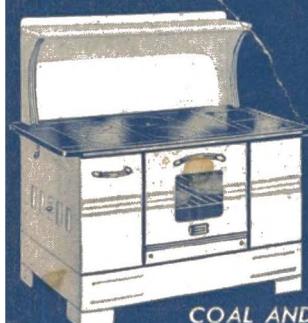
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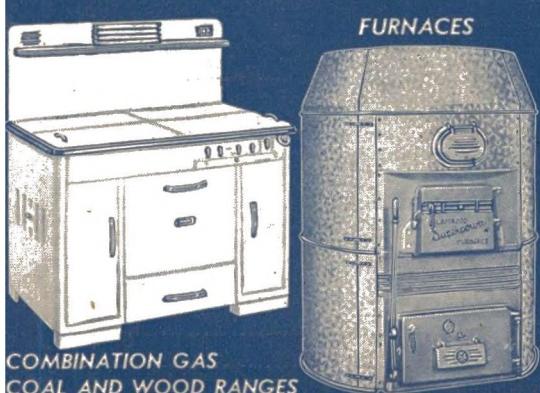


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