WESTERN

Story Annual

1946

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN Story Annual

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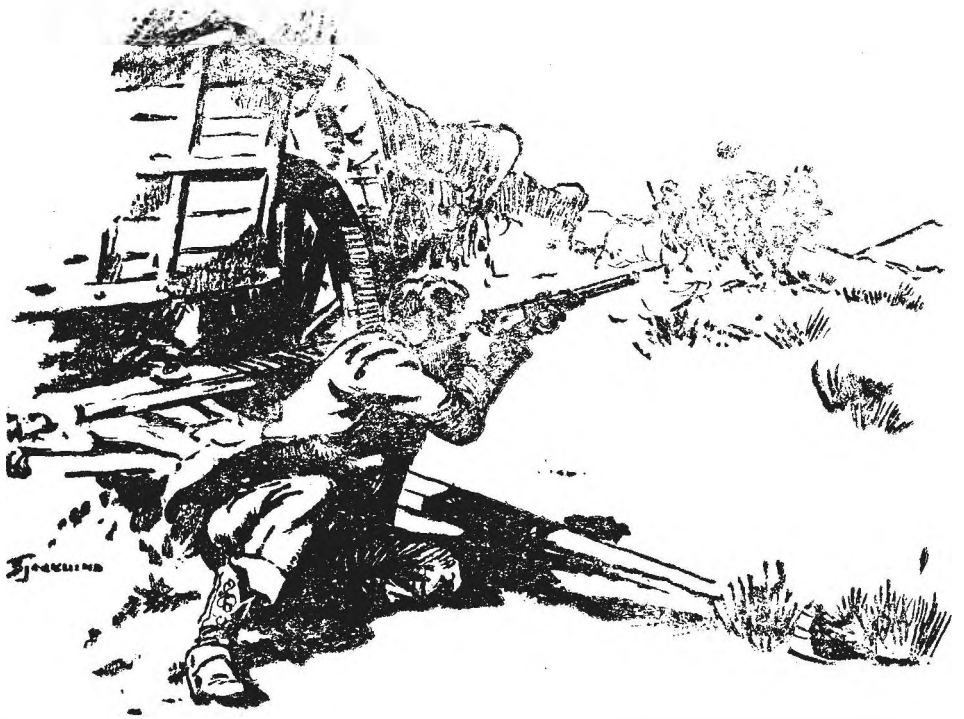
The Western Story Annual is published by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Gerald H. Smith, Exec. Vice President and Treasurer; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Secretary; Franklin S. Forsberg, Vice President.

PRICE 25 CENTS Printed in [redacted] the U. S. A. 30 CENTS IN CANADA

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. 122 EAST 42ND STREET, NEW YORK 17, N. Y.



BOOTHILL FOR BOUNTY HUNTERS

Branded a spy from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, Tim Henry was hunted by the law and the lawless alike when he took command of a wagon train whose gold was bait for the hated Slater gang

by C.K. Shaw

I.

Timothy Henry was rising to fame with Billings & Co., despite the assertion of Solomon Wyeth that the lad was not fitted for the work. Billings supplied shotgun guards for stages, escorted rich gold shipments, provided protection for emigrant trains and hunted outlaws for their bounties. The company's chief business was guarding gold. When lanky Heck Billings sent an agent on a job, he cautioned him never to let the express box from under his eye. Occasionally Billings mentioned the need of protecting human life. He realized it made for good will toward the company for an agent to pitch in a shot now and then to aid distressed passengers. But gold came first.

The company received a lot of reward money, and the agent bringing in a wanted man was paid a percent of the bounty. A wide-awake trailer did well for himself.

Solomon Wyeth was the biggest money maker Billings had, and worked the most quietly and efficiently. He brought in a dead outlaw across his saddle with no more interest in his load than if it were a quarter of beef. Sol was mild, almost self-effacing in manner, his hands hanging at his holsters without threat. Yet his presence in a neighborhood made for a scarcity of outlaws, just as moving a killer hound into a section frees it of wolves.

Fall was merging into winter the day Sol made ready to leave Eagleville in the Sierra Nevadas. Three other Billings agents humped down in their

coats and watched him tighten his cinch. The three were Mason Todd, Ace Fibber and Timothy Henry. Sol addressed them mildly.

"Somethin' is in the air. Watch sharp the lid don't blow from under you."

Mason Todd's crowded features darkened with disgust. "Hangin' around this minin' camp waitin' for the Slater gang to pull somethin' is wastin' time. You're wise to hunt yourself richer pickin's, Wyeth."

Sol overlooked the personal thrust. "Somethin' is in the air," he repeated quietly.

Timothy Henry brought out a saddled horse from the shack the men were using as a stable, and announced he was riding a few miles with Wyeth. Todd's thick lips curled. He glanced at Ace Fibber.

"Tim Henry hangs on Wyeth's words like they was gospel!" he muttered.

Fibber's cigarette bobbed as he answered. "You're jealous 'cause Tim's makin' a better showin' than you. Wyeth is the best man that ever went after pelt money"

Tim and Sol rode away, turning their collars up against the wind. The mining camps of the Sierras would soon be bedding down for the winter. Larger shipments of gold might be expected to roll down the grades these last weeks. Outlaws might be taking bigger chances. But Tim gave such speculations only fleeting attention. The nucleus of his thoughts was the Slater gang. Heck Billings had done some straight talking about that gang. He was sick of having his agents return empty-handed. Especially was he disgusted with Tim Henry. Henry had had a golden opportunity to bring in a prize, and had failed. Heck had made it all very clear the morning Tim had left Sacramento.

The personnel and methods of the Slater gang were changing, and it made them more slippery. More killers were operating this fall than ever before. Once the gang had tried to keep down murder, but this fall Benj Slater seemed to have cut his wolves loose. Death-dealing guns blossomed on every bush when he struck. Or was it Benj that had ordered this change? Sol had hinted that another finger might be in the pie. He hadn't said whose finger, but Tim had guessed. Benj had a son—Phantom Benny. The kid was still in his teens, and a heller if rumor was to be credited. As yet, the law had never cut the trail of the youth. You couldn't go out and arrest a kid on the record of his dad, even a dad like Benj Slater.

"Sol," Tim said, "we've got to get Benj Slater."

"You could have got him last month at Amber if you'd 've took out on a hot trail," Wyeth reminded.

Tim's eyes flashed. "And left a stage driver to bleed to death!"

"I just said you lost out on corralin' the head of the Slater gang," Sol said mildly. "Billings pays you to hunt outlaws, not nurse stage drivers."

Resentment sprang to Tim's face, and the squaring of his jaw suggested an anger that had been a long time building. "I earn my wages from Heck Billings," he said. "He's never lost a dime on me. You can be a man trailer without being inhuman."

"Not a good one," Sol argued. "Now take Mason Todd. He's a natural for this work. But you, Tim, will never come to where you can double back on a man's trail and ambush him from across a draw."

"Thanks, Sol, for crediting me with not being able to throw ambush lead," Tim said ironically.

Sol shook his head. "On this job, it's a question of who howls over whose grave. You don't go out to kill a man deliberately, you do it by instinct. It's him or you and no holds barred. He'd cut down on you from behind a boulder, so you beat him to it."

Tim looked straight ahead. There were moments like these when he almost hated Solomon Wyeth. Unimpressive, colorless, the famed trailer jogged along. If ghost guns ever roared in his ears, or ghost men ever filled his vision, there was no indication of it. Instead he seemed to be listening hungrily for the bark of a rifle to lift him from the stagnation of peace.

"I'll live to howl over the graves of a few more outlaws yet!" Tim spoke sharply.

"I reckon you will," Sol Wyeth said soberly. He turned to face Tim. "I know you better than any livin' person. Your dad was a scrapper and your ma's folks was feudin' fools. They'd start a blood lettin' over a stolen pig and kill off a dozen men. Then one of them would expose hisself to foolhardy death to save a crippled dog. A soft streak in them as wide as the Missouri. An' that same streak is in you. It showed up plenty when you let Benj Slater ride away."

"Because I wouldn't leave a wounded stage driver to bleed to death! If that's a soft streak—then I have one, wide as the Missouri! What would you have me do?"

"I know a job you can get guardin' a stage. Your work would be protectin' the passengers."

"Thanks; I'm staying with Billings & Co."

The impassiveness of Sol Wyeth's nature made it impossible for him to haggle with himself over what to him was a truth. "You'd better quit than wait to be fired," he said.

The words stiffened Tim Henry's spine. His smile was thin above a squared jaw. "Here's where I turn back to town," he said.

"Remember what I told you about somethin' bein' in the air," Sol charged him.

Feeling deepened Tim's smile. "Is your rheumatiz giving you the signal?"

"Nope, the back of my neck's itchin'. So long."

"So long, Sol," Tim said turning his horse.

Tim rode up to the shed back of the house where he was living temporarily with Mason Todd and Ace Fibber. The shed backed the brush of the gully and was used as a stable. As Tim unsaddled, his thoughts coursed along familiar channels. He had lost his company money by staying to aid a wounded stage driver while a famous price man rode away. Heck Billings had all but frothed at the mouth when he learned of it.

As Tim turned to hook his stirrup over a peg on the wall, his hand froze in midair.

A foot had moved stealthily in the brush back of the shed. A window was cut in that rear wall, about on line with a man's shoulder blade. The noise had been slight, instinct furnishing most of the chill at Tim's spine. His right hand was above his head, ready to hook the stirrup on a peg, his left was supporting the heavy saddle. Deliberately he hooked the stirrup over the peg, then he swung about. The window was empty.

From outside the barn came the voice of Mason Todd: "It's time you was gettin' home. It's your turn to cook. See that there ain't sody streaks in the bread."

Tim leaped to the window that overlooked the brush of the draw. Evening shadows dulled outlines, but he noticed a limb twitching. And a bird fluttered up with a throaty cry. Someone had been sneaking up to the barn and had been frightened away by the approach of Mason Todd.

Lighting a cigarette, Todd looked on as Tim fed his horse. "You seem to have your lip buttoned on some deep thoughts," he observed. "Maybe you're figurin' on how you can bag Benj Slater."

"I guess we're all figuring that."

"I'm not. Sol Wyeth knew Slater's gang had drifted south. Otherwise he'd have stayed here to collect pelt money."

"I look for Slater to make a try for this gold that's bound to start rolling this week," Tim maintained.

Todd swore. "Benj Slater ain't within a hundred miles of here."

Supper was an unpleasant meal. Mason Todd, still resentful, harped on Tim's obvious absentmindedness.

"Wyeth must have handed you an earful on that ride," he snapped as Tim passed him the bacon when he had asked for biscuits. "He must've just about drawed you a map on how to catch Benj Slater."

Ace Fibber looked over his coffee cup. "Did Sol spill anything, Tim?" he asked mildly.

"Just said to keep our belts tight for trouble," Tim answered.

Mason Todd kicked back his chair and rose in disgust. "Give me as many breaks as Wyeth's had and I'll show you twice as much speed."

Ace laughed. "If I was an outlaw, I'd rather have a dozen of you and me on my trail than one of Sol Wyeth."

After supper Fibber and Todd lost no time in heading for the saloons where they spent their evenings with the miners. Tim washed the dishes and sat down in the kitchen of the two-roomed shack. The blind was drawn, for men who hunted outlaws realized that they were in turn hunted. Tim never rode skylines, and always backed a wall when strangers were in a room. And Sol Wyeth claimed he had not slept away from his brace of sixes in twenty years.

The fire went out and the room grew chilly. Tim closed the middle door, shutting in the lingering odors of fried bacon and coffee. Sitting down, he gazed absently at the dead ashes piled high on the hearth of the cook stove. Some of the ashes had run over onto the floor. His thoughts were pulled away from the Slater gang to center on the untidiness of spilled ashes. A cheerless sight. He returned to more active thinking.

So Sol Wyeth thought he had better quit Billings & Co. before he was fired. Fired! Why? Because he refused to be molded into a cold machine of destruction. Then every thought was driven from Tim's head as the back of his neck began to tingle. He sprang to his feet, gun ready. The middle door swung open.

Tim stood still. Beyond the doorway was the blackness of the bedroom. A leap was useless; he was caught in the light. Then from the dark pit came a man's voice:

"I want to talk with you, Henry."

"You're calling the dance," Tim replied.

"Put up your gun. If I'd wanted to kill you, I'd have done it when I shoved the door open."

Tim calculated the chances of shooting it out. Later there might come a moment, but right now the man in the bedroom had all the advantage. As Tim slowly holstered his gun, a young man stepped from the blackness, his face dominated by steady, hard eyes. Rocklike, his gun was trained on Tim's heart.

"Your nerves are good, Henry," he observed.

The youth was slight to the point of gauntness. A careless eye might have tagged him as frail, but he reminded Tim of a lithe cat. His muscles were thin as buckskin and as tough. The slender wrist supported the six-shooter unwaveringly, the trigger finger was like so much steel. Tim's judgment told him the lad was cunning as a fox and dangerous beyond any consideration of his years.

"You're Phantom Benny Slater," Tim said. He had never seen the youth before, but he knew he faced the son of the famous outlaw, Benj Slater. It was said that the Phantom Kid could hang up a wreath of smoke faster than his dad's best gunman.

"I'm Phantom Benny," the boy admitted. "I hope you won't make me kill you, Henry. I've come to talk, not fight. I could have got you this evenin' at the barn, but that wasn't my aim."

Tim looked at the gun trained on his heart. "Does your trigger finger ever get St. Vitus' dance when you go visiting?" he asked dryly.

"If I put up this gun, Henry, do you give your word not to start anything?" Almost fanatical eagerness had leaped to the hard eyes. Instead of warming them, it added to their glitter.

"You mean you'd place confidence in the word of a Billings agent?" Tim asked.

"Henry, the only difference between a member of the Slater gang and a Billings agent, is that the agents get paid for their killin's. I'd rather listen to a snake rattle than a Billings killer—usually. Tonight I've come to talk."

There was a force to this boy apart from the power of the gun butted into his palm. There was strength apart from the ability to flame to battle. Somehow, Tim knew Benny Slater was not a killer. For all the hardness in his eyes and all his cunning, he was pathetically young.

"I give you my word not to start trouble," Tim said.

There was a dull glint, and the gun was in its holster. Tim felt a little hot, then cold.

"You're fast," he conceded.

"I'm as fast as dad was."

"Was?"

The boy jerked his head in a nod. "Benj Slater is dead."

II.

The kid was smooth, Tim thought. He was working a gag as old as the hills, but he was putting a freshness into it that almost made you believe him. He spoke briefly of his father's death and of Gin Martin taking over the gang. He himself was still around with the men at times, but now he was breaking away for good. It was what his dad would have wanted him to do, he said. Benj Slater had never planned for his son to wolf it from canyon to canyon.

"Would you help me get established, Henry?" the kid asked. "Would you help me get on at Billings?"

It was all such a pat story. The kid should have doctored it up. His dad dead—quitting the gang—asking for a job with Billings & Co. Wouldn't that be a neat set-up for Benj Slater! Tim knew his game was to string the kid along, get everything out of him, but there was anger in his voice as he shot out his question.

"How could you work with men you hate like rattlers?"

"Some of them are different. Some think of life ahead of blood money. Dad said you tipped your hand at Oak Crick Crossin' last fall to keep the gang from attackin' a stage with two women and an old man in it. It's pelt gitters I hate!"

"I'm a pelt getter like the rest."

The boy clung stubbornly to his point. He wanted a job protecting the lives of passengers against the guns of outlaws. His dad had never been a killer. He, Phantom Benny, was not a killer either. He wanted to prove that to the world. The youth was hunkered down on a box now, looking even younger and slighter than when standing. Tim fought against the feeling that there was some truth in all this. He knew such an idea must be put down. Trust a Slater! Sol Wyeth would say it was his soft streak again.

"I guess it does surprise you," the boy said. "Me tryin' to change my spots." He seemed to dislike the last sentence and spoke again sharply. "I'm not bemoanin' the blood my dad spilled into my veins. I don't want to follow in his tracks, but there's been lots worse men than Benj Slater. Take Gin Martin. Ain't you noticed how the gang's changed since he took over?"

Tim ignored the question. "If you want to start fresh, why don't you go East?"

"And leave the mountains and desert?" The lad's face was incredulous.

The desire to believe Benny Slater was getting stronger. Tim couldn't sponge it from his mind.

"It'd take a lot of fixing to make Heck Billings believe this yarn," he said curtly. "It would take a bigger man with the company than I am to put it across. Why don't you see Sol Wyeth?"

"Because I'm not a fool."

Tim's anger crackled again. "Because you know Wyeth would laugh you to sleep! You think I've a soft streak!"

"Would *you* pick Sol Wyeth if you was me?"

The question was a shrewd one. *Would* he pick Sol Wyeth for a story like this? Hardly. But he held to his point.

"You think because I let Benj Slater ride away from that stage last month I'm an easy mark."

"It was Gin Martin who shot up that stage. Dad is dead."

The boy's consistency was giving things a queer twist. Tim had expected to trap him in his lies; now he himself felt cornered.

"What proof have you of Benj Slater's death?" he demanded.

"These!" The slim fingers dipped downward and plucked a gun from a worn holster. "This is dad's harness. He'd have it strapped on if he was alive. That's proof!" The glitter in the boy's eyes became a glow. "See that S burned in the handle?" he asked, and he seemed to fall under the spell of the mellowed weapon. He touched a deep scar on the

barrel reminiscently. "I'm not goin' back on dad by comin' here," he said softly. "I'm doin' what he'd want me to do."

Tim had risen as the boy drew the gun. He realized that Benny Slater had the effortless speed of his father; the instinct without which, according to Sol Wyeth, no gunman was great. When the youth touched a gun, his soul answered as to a summons.

The cunning was gone from Benny's face, the thinness from his voice as he repeated a question Tim had been evading.

"Ain't the law noticed a difference in the Slater gang?"

"Yes," Tim replied, and the admission weakened him. "How old are you?" he asked hastily.

"I'm eighteen." Benny Slater hesitated. "I reckon you're some older."

That last sentence was the boy's first venture into personal conversation, and there was a hunger in his manner that carried to Tim's heart. He knew he should be listening only with his mind, as Sol Wyeth would have listened. Sol would not be ferreting out a lonely light in the gray eyes; he'd be building a cross, stick by stick, upon which to carry this son of Benj Slater away.

"I'm twenty-four," he said. Then because the kid nodded so eagerly, he smiled. "Neither of us are gray-beards."

Benny began to talk. The way his slim hands filled in when words would not come to express his feelings, told how unused he was to speaking more than brief sentences. He talked so long the oil burned low in the lamp whose chimney was blackened by the flickering of an ill-trimmed wick.

Finally Benny edged forward on his box, face pale with eagerness and hope. "You'll try?" he asked.

"I'll try," Tim promised. "But don't expect swift action. I'll have to wait for the right moment to spring this on Heck Billings and Sol Wyeth."

"Wyeth?" Alarm was in the softly exploded name.

"Sol has to be convinced first, kid. His word is close to law with Heck Billings."

The glitter returned to the boy's eyes. "Sol Wyeth will consider me just so much coyote bait. He don't know how to give anyone a break."

"Sol usually takes the breaks, not gives them," Tim said flatly. "That's why he's alive."

Benny Slater's lips twitched. "I reckon so," he said. From his pocket he took a slip of paper upon which was written an address. It was an old friend's address, he explained, and mail sent there would reach him. Then he left by the middle door, closing it so the light would not betray him as he slipped through the window of the shack.

The following morning a horseman galloped up to the shack the three Billings agents were occupying. He brought word that a stage had been held up.

"I know you fellers make your livin' huntin' vultures, so I thought I'd tell you," the rider said. "The Slater gang whooped it out of the trees at Cradle Crick Crossin' and went on one of their regular killin' sprees."

"How do you know it was the Slater gang?" Todd snapped.

"By the trail of blood they left!" the horseman said grimly and turned away to take the news uptown.

Ace Fibber complained about the small stage lines as he and the other two men were saddling their horses.

"They ain't got no brains," he said bitterly. "With gold to haul, why didn't they call at least one of us fellers to ride with their guard?"

The three men reached the scene of the holdup by noon, and found the earth thereabouts cut up by a posse. Tim suggested that they trail the men already in the field. The more men on a hunt the better, he declared.

"The better for who?" retorted Todd. "The sheriff! If he jumped Benj Slater, we'd just chase him into the arms of the law and what'd that get us but empty stomachs?"

Tim did not answer. He was thinking of the crime, and the deliberate slaying of the guard and driver.

"Benj Slater sure has changed a lot," he said.

"He ain't changed a hair," Todd contradicted. "He's just now hit his stride. He was always a killer, only he couldn't get the right men in his gang. And remember, Phantom Benny Slater is just beginning to cut into the game. Last month at Bock's Mill—" He broke off suddenly, looking from Ace Fibber to Tim.

"Last month what?" Fibber asked.

"Nothin'!"

"Did you cut that kid's sign?"

Todd frowned. "I'm a fool to spill it. Nobody ever lets me in on nothin'. Yes, I cut the kid's sign at Bock's Mill."

Fibber jabbed more questions at him, but Todd refused to answer. Swinging to his saddle, he announced that he was going back to Eagleville. Let the sheriff corral his own outlaws. Ace Fibber watched him go, his nostrils quivering like a hound's as it sniffs food.

"Todd's right," he told Tim. "Why should we wear hoofs to the bone helpin' a sheriff who wouldn't throw no business our way? I'm clearin' for home, too."

Tim understood. "Don't be too sure about that sign Todd mentioned," he said. "Sol Wyeth has

never said anything about crossing Benny Slater's trail."

"Sol wasn't at Bock's Mill, Tim. An' you know Mase Todd is smart! Comin' with me?"

"I'll stick here a few hours, Ace."

Mason Todd was now out of sight, but Fibber spurred away in his wake. Riding off into the hills, Tim was thinking that it would be men like Mason Todd who'd make life tough for a kid like Benny Slater. Todd prized glory next to gold. On the slimmest thread of evidence he would make a statement connecting the kid with the gang, and the law would snap up the words, for the law was expecting such news.

Todd might well have cut some damning sign at Bock's Mill. Benny Slater had told Tim he feared Gin Martin was trying to hang a murder on him to force him to line up with the gang. The fact that Sol Wyeth had not sensed the death of Benj Slater bothered Tim, but the explanation Benny had given last night had seemed convincing. Benj Slater had always worked with his gang through three trusted henchmen. Now only those three knew for certain Benj was dead. But restlessness and suspicion were spreading, and Gin Martin was aware the gang must be told of the leader's death. He was only waiting to weld Benny to his side before admitting that the great Benj Slater was dead.

The famous bandit had always stayed apart from his men when an attack was under way, unless they needed him. Then he would come with two guns roaring to strengthen them and whip them to a new stand. These tactics explained to Tim the long failure of the Billings agents to bring in Slater.

Todd's words had not shaken Tim's confidence in Benny Slater, but they had made him see clearly the difficult task he had undertaken—to prove to the world that Benny Slater wanted a chance to go straight. He'd have to start with Sol Wyeth, and Tim smiled grimly at the thought. The kid had not been far wrong last night when he said Sol would consider him just so much coyote bait.

III.

It was evening when Tim Henry returned to Eagleville. Mason Todd was talking to a crowd of miners as Tim rode into camp, and his voice carried.

"I found him holed up, thinkin' he had his tracks covered. But it takes a good man to cover his tracks from Mase Todd!"

Tim dismounted. "Did Todd get one of the gang?" he asked a miner.

"Yeah, Benny Slater."

Tim got as much of the story as the miner could tell. Todd claimed he had followed tracks from the scene of the robbery, to the camp of Gold Hill. There he had cast about for his man. He had spotted Benny Slater's horse and found the kid asleep in a hay field.

"He'd been out all night robbin' and killin' fellows like you," Todd threw at the crowd. "Fresh in from a killin' job and he was sleepin' like a baby. Ropes are made for murderers like him!"

Todd's charge that Benny Slater had just come from killing and robbing their friends was like oil on the crackling anger of the miners. They listened eagerly as the Billings agent claimed he had been on the kid's trail for the past month.

Tim saw Ace Fibber in the crowd and joined him. Ace had not been able to overtake Todd on the way home, so he knew nothing of the capture of Benny Slater.

"You know Todd lies when he says he followed tracks away from that holdup," Tim said flatly.

Fibber shrugged. "Mase Todd always was one for buildin' up his bloodhoundin'," he said. "He'll hand in a story to the company that will make us look as though we've been asleep."

"He's deliberately whetting these miners to a dangerous mood with his lies," declared Tim. "That kid was just holed up sleeping."

Ace Fibber turned Tim a sharp glance. "Where was he last night that he needs to sleep today? He's got a face like a fox, and eyes like agates. I'd bet my shirt he was at that stage."

Tim's assertion that the miners were getting in an ugly mood, was proved by a cry that cut above the confusion.

"What are we monkeyin' with this killer for?" bellowed a hoarse voice. "Why wait for the sheriff to come?"

Tim pushed through to Todd's side. "You better try stamping out this mob spirit rather than feeding it," he told the other.

Mason Todd's lip curled. "Sore, huh, 'cause I bagged the game 'stead of you? I don't wonder after the way you let Benj Slater slip through your fingers last month."

"Todd, there's a lot of whiskey passing going on in this crowd. I've seen you start two quarts. What's your game? To get Benny Slater hanged before the law gives him a chance to produce an alibi?"

Todd's eyes snapped. "Tryin' to run things, huh? Remember, Henry, my ways suit Heck Billings better than yours. You start anything here and it'll finish you with the company—after the way you fell down on the last job you had."

Ace Fibber had followed him. He pushed in now between the two men. "Lay off, you fellers!" he growled. "We better be usin' our time to put down this crowd. There's strong rope talk building up."

"Todd lied when he said he followed any tracks

from the stage," Tim said. "Now he's trying to get Benny Slater hanged before the kid gets a chance to talk."

"The three of us will be able to stop a hangin'," Ace Fibber said quietly. "Billings agents don't turn prisoners over to a mob."

The veins in Todd's thick neck were bulging and purple, but he bit back his anger. He spoke in a whisper, taking Fibber by the arm. "I'm out to bag Benj Slater! When he hears about this hangin' party—and he'll hear fast enough—he'll come crackin' down to stop the show. That's when you and me—and Henry if his stomach is strong enough—will draw cards."

Fibber's breath caught. "Mase, that's a smart play!" he admitted.

Tim knew the plan had its good points. Heck Billings would approve of such tactics, and Sol Wyeth, too, would give his sanction. The joker was that Benj Slater was dead.

"What if Slater doesn't try to stop the show?" Tim asked.

"He will—that's a cinch!" Todd growled.

"I saw an inscription left by a vigilance committee once," Tim said. "It read: 'Hung the wrong man—joke's on us.'"

Todd leaned toward Tim. "I don't like your manner," he said truculently. "Are you workin' for Billings, or are you tryin' to save the necks of the Slaters?"

"Shut up!" Fibber commanded. "Tim always was against stuff like this. Let's get to plannin' how we'll receive Benj Slater."

Mason Todd drew back, his eyes growing cautious. He knew Tim Henry well enough to see that his last speech had struck into a danger zone. He turned away with Ace Fibber, ready to drop the quarrel.

It was growing dark, and the camp was getting drunk. Every new miner to arrive was met with a free drink. Mason Todd must have passed out plenty of those tall bottles. If this crowd ever started a hanging, they would go through with it. Once they had Benny Slater in their hands, it would be too late for Todd and Fibber to realize that Benj Slater was not coming.

Tim walked toward the livery stable where he knew Benny was being held. The lean-to at the back was not a substantial prison, but it had satisfied Todd. The stableman had no objection to turning the key of the padlocked door over to Tim Henry.

"I was surprised at Todd trustin' me with it," the man admitted in a whisper. "I've been nervous since this hangin' talk started."

Tim unlocked the door, and the stableman brought a lantern which he hung on a nail in the small room. Then he hustled off to tend business. Benny Slater was half lying against a pile of sacked grain, his hands and feet bound. His thin face was pain-racked, but his lips were a tight line, and his eyes told nothing as they met Tim's.

"I just got into camp," Tim said.

Benny hitched his body to a straighter position and Tim saw that his arms were bound so tightly behind him it seemed they would tear from their sockets.

"Todd lies!" the boy croaked from a dry throat. "He never cut my sign at Bock's Mill! And he never followed my tracks away from that stage robbery."

"You were with me while that stage was being stuck up," Tim said quietly.

A gleam cut into the expressionless eyes. "Have you told Todd that?"

"No. For me to spring that story now would be to kill your chances forever with Heck Billings. I'll not play that card until the last."

Shouts from the street carried through the room. Benny's acknowledgment of them was a twisted smile. "I reckon it would be tough on you to step in to save my neck," he said. "From things Todd let drop you ain't strong with the company since you saved a driver instead of goin' after pelt money. I reckon, Henry, that which ever way you play it, you'll be doin' the best you can."

The kid was like a trapped wolf cub. He had small confidence in the friend who had come with vague hints of lifting the steel jaws.

"You could have told Todd where you were last night," Tim said. "He'd have relished such information almost as much as hanging you."

"And you could have said I lied," the kid replied. "The word of a Slater wouldn't hold any water."

"Is there a chance Gin Martin will try and save you from this mob?"

The hard eyes mocked the question. "Gin and me ain't friends."

Tim turned to the door. He intended to get his skinning knife from his saddle pocket and set Benny Slater free. He'd furnish him a gun and then see about the mob. Then a glance from the still eyes caught at him as he was pulling the door shut. The kid thought he was deserting him.

"I'll be back," Tim whispered.

There was no change in the thin face.

Clamping the padlock shut, Tim locked the door. He had caught a stir close at hand, and he spun about, half lifting his gun. The voice of Mason Todd stabbed at him.

"I'll take the key to that room, Henry."

Tim dropped his gun, but he did not remove his hand from above his holster. He was wondering how much Todd had heard.

"I said I'd take that key," repeated Todd.

Tim walked toward the front of the stable, the other man close at his side.

"Where's Ace Fibber?" Tim asked.

"I stationed him at the south end to watch for Benj Slater. Don't stall—fork over that key!"

They were now in the circle of light from a hanging lantern, and Tim faced Todd. "I'm keeping this key. You're not hanging an innocent kid!"

"*Innocent!* Henry, you're actin' mighty queer!"

Dick Mosley, a miner well known about the camp, stepped from the shadows of the stable.

"Henry ain't so hard after blood money as you, Todd," he said bluntly. "Benny Slater was at my shack last night at midnight, which proves he couldn't have been at that stage. I've told you this before, Todd, and you won't listen."

"It's a lie you've built up to save the kid, Dick Mosley. Get on home 'fore I tell this camp about you havin' visits from the Slater gang."

"If this camp wasn't drunk on your free whiskey, it'd know the kid isn't a member of that gang."

Mason Todd's anger blazed. He jabbed his gun into the miner's side. "Get on home!"

"You're going too far in your rush to get this kid hung," Tim said, stepping close. "Take that gun off Mosley. If your trigger finger has an itch, I'm ready to give you action."

Reluctantly Todd holstered his gun. He had gone too far pulling a weapon on Mosley, and he had driven Tim Henry until a rock-ribbed quality in the young agent's voice suggested immediate trouble. Todd tried another line. He pointed out, solicitously, that Tim Henry was slitting his own throat from ear to ear by blocking this attempt to capture Benj Slater. He assured both Tim and the miner, that if Slater didn't come to the rescue of his son, he would see to it that Benny wasn't hurt.

The miner was adamant. He said once a crowd of drunken men got the smell of a hanging in their nostrils, anyone in their path would go down like a cornstalk. Even as he was speaking, a shout rose and some thirty miners poured out of a saloon.

"String up Benny Slater!" was their thundering cry.

Dick Mosley whipped an old gun from beneath his mud-stained jacket. "I'm goin' to try and turn that mob," he declared. "If words won't do it we'll try bullets—huh, Henry?"

"Todd and I will both fight with you," Tim replied, stepping close to the other agent. "Billings

His hand near his gun, Tim watched Mason Todd post the sign reading: "Billings & Co. announces to the world that Timothy Henry is a spy."

doesn't go in for turning its prisoners over to a mob."

The miners were coming toward the stable in a shouting mass. Todd made a last appeal for his plan. He said he would ride to the vantage spot he had selected for himself for the fight with Benj Slater. Hoarsely he promised to free the kid from the mob if the bandit leader didn't appear.

"And if Benj Slater does come, you'll be fightin' him while the mob finishes the kid!" countered Mosley.

"I plan to turn the mob into the fight against Benj," Todd declared. "He'll have his gang with him and be shootin' up the whole camp."

"Todd," Tim ordered, "you're going to stay here at this stable. There's a mob to handle. If Benj Slater appears, we'll take care of him later."

The two agents faced each other, and the lantern light flickered across Tim Henry's face, which was rocklike with determination. Todd's curses thickened in his throat. The mob was rolling closer. Todd's hand dropped downward, but Tim had seen the move reflected in the flushed face, and his own gun slid free of its holster and tipped upward enough to catch a man heart high.

"Are you fighting for your prisoner?" he asked.

Slack came to Mason Todd's heavy jaws. "You've killed a sure-fire play," he snarled. "I'll tell that mob I was usin' the kid for bait."

Tim stood watching as Todd walked to meet the shouting crowd. The miners hailed him with information of their intentions. Todd crowded in among them, speaking hurriedly. There was a lull for a second, then a great shout. Three men rushed Todd and pinned his arms behind him. One of them seized his gun and fired a shot in the air.

Quickly Tim Henry thrust the key to Benny Slater's cell toward Mosley. "Mase Todd told them to take him prisoner!" he said through stiff lips. "Cut that kid loose and get him a horse. See that he starts down the gulch!"

Mosley hesitated a second; it wouldn't be many minutes until that mob struck.

"Go on!" Tim ordered, and the miner leaped to obey.

Out front Mason Todd was struggling with his captors. "Hold your fire!" he called to Tim. "You can't shoot down honest men to save the skin of that killer son of Benj Slater."

Tim crowded close to the stable wall. "I'll shoot any man that comes a step nearer," he answered.

The level threat chilled the fever of the whiskey-fired group. The vanguard of the crowd split to let those pushing from the rear take the lead. The same warning voice slowed this advance.

"Don't try it, boys."

Dick Mosley came crashing back to Tim's side, his gun in hand. From the rear of the stable a shrill cry rose, and the clatter of hoof beats. Benny Slater was pounding down the gulch.

"He waited to get his dad's guns off Todd's saddle," Mosley told Tim.

The crowd knew what that cry and running horse meant. Shouts that Benny Slater had escaped rocked the street. Mason Todd tore himself free of the miners and rushed at Tim Henry.

"This is your work!" he snarled.

Tim Henry stood looking at him calmly. "I thought you were a prisoner of the mob," he drawled.

Todd's face was dark with fury. "I'll pay you back hard for this!"

IV.

Tim Henry kicked open the batwing doors of a saloon in Sacramento and approached the bar. A ripple swept the room at his entry. The bartender hurried to get up his order and set it up with flattering alacrity.

"I hear the Slater gang is keeping you boys sleeping in the saddle these days," somebody called from a corner.

"Business is good," Tim replied. He paid for his drink and returned to the street, where his horse stood. As he picked up his reins Sol Wyeth stepped forward to greet him.

"Glad to see you didn't start swillin' whiskey to kill your hurt," the trailer said mildly.

Tim knotted the reins and hooked them over his arm. The two men walked together toward the Sacramento office of Billings & Co.

"You said I'd better quit instead of waiting to be fired," Tim said. "Looks like you were right."

"Why did you step in to save Benny Slater?" Sol Wyeth asked accusingly.

"Sol, the kid wasn't guilty!"

"Not guilty? That son of a killer! Besides, Todd was right. Benj Slater would have come to the rescue. Whatever else Benj is, he's not a coward."

Tim did not point out that Benj Slater hadn't come. That would only bring up the argument that the bandit had timed his interruption for later. Sol's eyes were reproving. He was probably as disgusted as Heck Billings. Tim knew if he mentioned his meeting with Benny Slater, Sol would suspect the kid of being in Eagleville to spy on the Billings agents while his dad led the gang on a job. The best Tim could do for the kid now would be to keep his mouth shut.

"How come you're in town?" Tim asked Sol.

The question nettled the older man. "You done a fool thing when you turned that son of Benj Slater's loose," he said. "I don't hold with you on it a minute—still I wanted to be around when you had your showdown with Heck Billings."

"Thanks, Sol," Tim smiled dryly. "I could stand somebody at my back so if my stomach gives way—"

"This ain't a laughing matter, Tim."

Tim brought up sharply in the dusty street. When Sol Wyeth spoke so gently, trouble was apt to be around the corner.

"I'm not the first man that Heck Billings ever fired," Tim said. "I can get a job tomorrow with another company."

"Not without recommends, you can't," Wyeth pointed out. "Now don't get hot under the collar. Heck's got enough against you to hold back recommends. You got to keep a civil tongue in your head while you're talkin' to Heck, and not spout against the Billings methods like you did last time. Tim, you ain't buyin' yourself nothin' settin' your jaw at that angle."

The two men entered a building and climbed the stairs to the offices of Billings & Co. They walked into a big room and paused a step inside the door. The atmosphere bristled with expectancy. Heck Billings rose from behind a desk. A tall, lanky man, his suit hung loosely on his frame, and as if in keeping, the skin bagged on his face. He made no move toward the hand shake with which he usually greeted an agent in from the field. Another man rose from beside the large desk. It was Mason Todd, triumph in his eyes.

Billings looked at Sol Wyeth. "This interview won't interest you, Wyeth," he said.

"Nobody can tell what will interest the other fellow," Sol replied, seating himself close to the desk.

Heck Billings seemed to realize that ordering his ace trailer out would be precipitating trouble. Instead, he sat down and commanded Tim and Mason Todd to do likewise.

"Henry," he boomed, "you've done another beautiful job of losing this company money. What's your defense this time?"

"Benny Slater wasn't guilty."

"We're not considering the kid. He wasn't worth pelt money. But you blocked Mase Todd in his efforts to bag Benj Slater."

"I only blocked Todd in his efforts to hang an innocent kid."

Heck Billings tipped back in his chair, his shrewd eyes stabbing at Tim. "Innocent kid! Doesn't that jerk tears! Tim Henry, I'll give you exactly two minutes in which you may speak in defense of your actions at Eagleville."

Tim rose. "Count the time as expired, Billings. I've nothing to say that would stack up favorably with you."

Heck Billings leaned across his deep desk. "I've given you the opportunity to present your case," he said. "You've refused. Now I'll ask some questions. *What were your dealings with Benny Slater that called for secret meetings with him?"*

Mason Todd's eyes were snapping with triumph. His eagerness swept him forward. "I heard you and the kid talkin'!" he charged.

Looking into the challenging face of Heck Billings, Tim was not sorry he had not told of the visit of Benny Slater. He didn't want to buy his way out of trouble at the expense of an eighteen-year-old kid. He read the threat in Billings' manner, heard it echoed in Mason Todd's laugh. What chance would Benj Slater's cub have against such men?

Billings' anger swept him into thick-voiced charges, but Tim Henry seemed to hear him from afar, catching the rumblings of the echoes more than the words themselves. Tim looked at Sol Wyeth, signaling him that he could explain these things later. But Sol was not accepting messages. His lids were low and still over eyes that told nothing.

A sharply uttered word crashed against Tim's ears and jerked him from the rumbling of echoes to stark reality. Heck Billings' lank body was straining at him across the deep desk.

"You're a spy! You wouldn't be having secret meetings with a Slater otherwise. And Mason Todd heard part of your deal!"

Tim Henry swung on Todd. "You lie! So that's why you're here!"

Sol Wyeth rose up between them. "Get back, Tim," he ordered. "You, Todd, don't come across that crack in the floor. You've charged Henry with sellin' information to the Slater gang. Fetch your proof!"

"Todd has furnished me with the proof," Billings cut in. "That's enough."

"It ain't enough for me, Heck. What is the proof? If it's Todd's word—then I'm not takin' it."

"Henry's actions all back up Todd's charges. He turned the Slater kid loose to keep his mouth shut! And last month Henry let Benj Slater himself ride away! *He's a traitor and his name will be posted by Billings & Co."*

Sol blocked Tim's forward thrust.

"Back!" he ordered softly. They were within gun's length of each other. "Back, Tim. This ain't no time for blood lettin'."

The gently spoken words filtered through to Tim's blazing brain. He looked into Sol's eyes and saw that deep beneath their calm, hell was rolling. He settled back. Heck Billings had threatened to post his name. That meant in every Billings office and in every part of the country where Billings' agents operated, placards would be nailed up, warning the public against the spying activities of Timothy Henry.

"You can't post my name on the lies of Mason Todd," Tim told the bleak-faced Billings. "Every word Todd said was a downright lie."

"Henry, your actions are against you—they don't lie."

"Actions don't lie," Wyeth agreed. "Tim was bein' honest with himself when he turned Benny Slater loose after that miner had proved he was innocent. He says Todd lies when he claims there was any secret meetin' 'tween him and the Slater kid. I believe Henry."

"Wyeth, keep out of this!" Billings snapped. "Tim Henry is a spy and his name will be posted."

"I can't stop you from postin' Henry's name," Sol said quietly, "but if you do, I'll see that the country knows Heck Billings sanctioned the cold-blooded hangin' of an innocent kid in order to rake in the pelt money on his dad. That won't set well, considerin' the rumors that are already wingin' around about the hard-cased Billings agents."

Heck Billings strode from behind his desk. "May I ask when you acquired this conscience, Wyeth?"

"Just borrowed it for the occasion. Henry was wrong in turnin' that kid loose, but he ain't a traitor. My word will hold up over the country better than yours, Heck. Better forget about the postin'."

Billings' anger pitched him into a new attack. He swung about, driving his glance against Tim Henry's. "Henry, do you swear you never held a secret talk with Benny Slater?"

Tim was unaccustomed to lying. He did not flinch as he met Billings' eyes, but he hesitated too long before replying. And he spoke too explosively.

"Every word Mason Todd said was a lie!"

Grayness settled over Sol Wyeth as the hollow words echoed. Mason Todd made the first sound! A mocking laugh. Heck Billings looked at Sol Wyeth, turned and walked back behind his desk.

"You can go, Henry," he said.

Tim Henry walked from the room and Sol followed him. They went down the stairs to the street. Tim untied his horse, and still without speech, they turned toward the river. When they were alone, Sol asked the question Tim had been dreading.

"How come you had a secret meetin' with Benny Slater?"

It was Sol Wyeth, the man trailer, who spoke, and the name of Slater was bitter to his tongue. Tim kept walking, looking straight ahead. He could still save himself if he told Sol Wyeth the entire story. Sol would believe him, but he would never believe in the honesty of Benny Slater.

"The kid must have worked a slick game to blind you this way," Sol said after a moment of silent waiting. "I've heard he's as hard to pin down as a snake."

The moment had arrived when Tim had to speak. He paused, looked at Sol. "I didn't have a secret meeting with Benny Slater."

It had to be that way. Tim could not buy his own freedom from suspicion by shifting the load to the slim shoulders of a kid who had listened to the cries of an angry mob without begging for help.

Sol Wyeth thought aloud, shrewdly and coldly: "Benny Slater has trapped you into an agreement. You ain't a traitor, but you're bein' used—lettin' yourself be used. The country will have to be warned against you. If you hold to this stand, Tim, you'll have to be posted same as any other dangerous man."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do for me," Tim said. He did not reaffirm that he had no meeting with Benny Slater. Sol Wyeth knew when a man was lying.

Sol took a step away, turned back. "Tim, there's been three generations of Slaters hanged in the West. There ain't no honest blood in such veins. Turn on this snake kid, and you and me will bust the gang wide open."

"I'll always be ready to bust the Slater gang wide open," Tim answered.

A river boat whistled. Sol looked away for a second. Then:

"So long, Tim," he said quietly.

"So long, Sol."

Tim completed his plans by writing a letter to Benny Slater, asking the kid to meet him as soon as possible at Haystack Rock on the wagon road across the Sierras. It was now as necessary for him, Tim Henry, to prove his honesty of purpose, as for the son of Benj Slater. Tim believed Benny would fall in with his schemes.

Tim ate supper alone, and was finishing his coffee when Mason Todd strode into the restaurant. He carried a sheet of paper which he waved at the room.

"Somebody fetch me a hammer," he called. "I'm tackin' up an important notice for Heck Billings. Gather 'round, you long-eared gents that have always set your clocks by Tim Henry! Pick up an eyeful!"

He drove two tacks, then stepped back, hammer poised. "Billings & Co. announces to the world that Timothy Henry is a spy!" he read.

Tim Henry rose. The silence warned Mason Todd that something was wrong, and he swung about. His hand swooped for his gun as he saw Tim walking toward him. But he let the weapon drop back half drawn when he saw Tim had beaten him to the draw. He flung his hands clear of his holster.

"Don't like this paper, huh?" he gibed. "Better get used to them, Henry. They're goin' to be tacked up all over the country."

"Todd, you managed this whole thing by lies," Tim said. "I'm dropping my gun back to leather. I'm moving my hands away as you have done. Now *—draw!*"

Other diners in the restaurant obligingly moved to side lines, and watched with tense interest.

"I've always wanted to see how much sand Todd had in his craw," somebody said.

Another man laughed. "Is that the shutters batting or Todd's teeth chattering?"

Mason Todd still held his right hand stiffly away from his holster. "I'm not takin' the bait," he told Tim. "You could kill me and then lie out of this charge."

Ordering Todd to stand, Tim backed to the wall and tore the notice down. "Fellows," he said to the men in the room, "I'm asking you to reserve judgment until I have a chance to square myself."

Stepping in behind Mason Todd, he plucked the other's gun from its holster. He tossed it over the counter, and it landed janglingly on a pan.

"Get out," he told Todd. "An' when you come to collect your hardware, pick a time when there's no men around, so you won't get palsy."

His face a dull, pasty white, Todd dived through the door into the street.

"A liar is always a coward," Tim said.

"But a dangerous enemy," a man added. "Better watch your back, Henry."

V.

Tim Henry rode eastward that night, a pack horse snubbed to his saddlehorn. The stars were shut away behind low clouds, and a threat of snow was in the air. Three weeks would probably see the mountains wrapped in their winter blankets. All night and all the next day Tim rode. After that he traveled only by day, allowing his horses the night to graze.

Each morning as he watched the rugged Sierras leap from gloom to glory, more of the hardness was washed from his eyes. The fourth day he passed Haystack Rock, where he had planned to meet Benny Slater. He still continued east, hoping to encounter the kid as he came to the meeting place.

That evening Tim sighted an emigrant train camped along an alder-lined creek. It was dangerously late for wagons to be on the trail. A good two weeks of circuitous travel lay between them and the winter safety of the Sacramento Basin.

As Tim approached the wagon nearest the road, he saw this was not an ordinary train. Paid drivers tended the teams while owners lounged and stretched. Carpets had been spread on the ground and folding tables opened. The wagons were especially fine, and where sheets were rolled back, showed unusual comfort provisions. Women spoke quietly to less boisterous children than were generally heard about emigrant camps.

A tall old man with a patriarchal face stepped to meet Tim as he dismounted.

"Good evening, sir," he said, lifting thin fingers to smooth his white hair disarranged by the breeze.

"Good evening," Tim answered. "Your train is late on the trail." He had been too long with Billings, sometimes as escort to such trains, not to offer this warning.

The old man did not receive the words kindly. "I am sorry you disapprove of us," he said stiffly.

A man in the garb of a teamster hurried over. Overhearing the old gentleman's words, he turned to face Tim. "If you got any complaints to lodge against this train, make them to me," he said brusquely. He wore a belt and gun, and his stance branded him as a gunman. Probably a very fast one.

"I merely said it was late in the season for wagons to be on the trail," Tim answered him.

"Who said it wasn't? You're puttin' in where you're not wanted."

"Such rudeness to strangers is unnecessary, Graves," the old man said crisply.

"Let me handle this, Mr. Kingery," Graves snapped back. "This train don't want any spies around."

Tim heard a horse coming at a gallop from down the train, but he did not take his glance from that of the gunman teamster. The rider slid his horse to a stop.

"What do you want, stranger?" He barked the question at Tim.

Tim moved back in order to keep both men in view. "Strangers," he said mildly, "don't seem to draw a very warm welcome from this train."

The man who had just dismounted leaned forward. "Where have I seen you before?" he asked. He answered his own question. "The Billings agent, Tim Henry! You travel a lot with Sol Wyeth!"

The lips of the teamster twitched. "Old friends, huh? Ain't this reunion touchin'?"

Tim recalled the gaunt man, who seemed to be guide of the train. "You're Lynx Jackson. Met you in a mining camp one evening."

Jackson laughed. "Yeah, you and Sol was just comin' in with two dead outlaws. Rest your saddle a spell, Henry. I want to talk with you after I get this train settled for the night."

"A Billings agent!" the old man said warmly. He held out a thin hand toward Tim. "I'm sorry you received such a blunt welcome. I'm John Kingery. I shall make it up to you by asking you to supper at my table."

Graves turned and walked away. Lynx Jackson stepped to his saddle and rode back up the train.

"I hope you won't refuse," John Kingery said when he and Tim were standing alone beside the wagon. "I don't know much of this great country, but I am aware that the name of Billings & Co. stands for protection."

Tim felt a grim mirth pulling at his lips. He shook his head, having no desire to accept this old

man's hospitality under false colors. Before he could voice his refusal, a lank-bodied youth unfolded from behind a box.

"Did you say a Billings agent, Mr. Kingery?" he asked eagerly. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!"

Kingery laid a hand on the boy's bony shoulder. "This is Horace Bevins," he told Tim. "We call him Lanky. He's helping drive one of my teams through since his father was killed along the way. Now you'll have to stay to supper, Mr. Henry, so Lanky can get some first-hand information."

"Thunder!" the boy gasped, edging up to Tim. "I'm goin' to work for Billings & Co. when I'm older." He eyed Tim from hat to boots. "I bet you're after the Slater gang," he whispered.

"Lanky," John Kingery said sharply, "you better go see if you can coax Padunk to eat his oats."

"Padunk ain't eatin' right," the boy responded worriedly. He took a longing look at the rifle strapped on Tim's saddle. "I keep my gun to the side of me nights," he said. "Them Slaters won't catch me nappin'." He kicked a clod viciously and went to see about the mule.

Tim told John Kingery he would stay for supper. To leave seemed somehow to be letting Lanky Bevins down. A chestnut-haired girl came forward, and Kingery introduced her as his granddaughter. Her hair was darker than gold, more like the brown of the autumnal leaves. Her smile of welcome was warm, lighting up her face and copper-flecked eyes, but there was something back of it that told Tim she had not smiled much of late.

"I hope you can travel with our train for some time," she said.

"We'll try to arrange it that way, Cynthia," her grandfather put in swiftly. "Mr. Henry's arrival is a godsend."

Tim felt his throat go dry. He had no wish to receive this warm welcome, which was not really for him, but for a Billings agent. Bessie Bevins, Lanky's young sister, joined them at the supper table beside the blazing fire. Her eyes were eager and matched her brother's in excitement. She was about seventeen.

Lanky looked up from his plate. "I guess the Slater gang shoots up whole trains and leaves their bones to bleach on the desert," he said, eying Tim.

Cynthia Kingery gave a sharp cry of horror.

"You don't have to be afraid with Mr. Henry here," Lanky reassured her.

They all laughed, but Tim saw the tightening of John Kingery's face and the shadows in Cynthia's eyes.

"You must have had lots of talk recently of the Slater gang," Tim said.

Kingery shoved his plate away. "You might as well know, Mr. Henry, this train has met with trouble. We expected to be safely in the Sacramento Valley before now. But men's plans are puny. Information leaked out that this train was rich, that every wagon carried a store of hidden gold."

"Mr. Kingery," Tim interrupted, "don't speak openly like this of gold in your wagons."

The old man shook his head. "The presence of gold is never a secret for more than a short time. One unguarded word is spoken, and a whisper springs to life that is like a fire-ball in the night." He waved to the craggy mountains, softened now by the plush gloom of twilight. "Even they could not keep their hidden wealth."

Lanky recited the tale of an attack that had been made on the train a month before. His voice was subdued when he spoke of his dad's death, and that of three other teamsters.

"The attack held us back," Kingery took up the story. "We had to wait for injuries to heal, and we had to use care in hiring new teamsters. I didn't hire a new man. Lanky is taking his father's place." He smiled across at the boy, and the lad squared his shoulders.

"This man Graves that met me at your wagon," Tim said. "Was he one of the new men hired?"

"Gad Graves. Yes, he and a friend named Kennedy were hired by the captain of our train. Captain Gilroy was unfortunate enough to lose two of his three teamsters in the fight."

They moved from the table to sit about the fire. Across the rosy light, Tim's eyes often met the coppery ones of Cynthia Kingery. She was not smiling now. Sometimes she gazed fearfully to the mountains, whose feet were planted on great footstools of pine and fir. As the fire snapped and cast off shafts of light, it seemed to Tim all the rich colors of autumn were feasting in the girl's hair.

John Kingery spread his thin hands to the warmth of the fire. "This Slater gang of which we hear so much;" he asked Tim, "is it really such a powerful organization—and so bloodthirsty?"

The whole conversation had been pointed toward this question, and all of them tensed forward for Tim's answer. Lanky's eyes held both anticipation and trepidation, old John's held only dread.

"The Slater gang is a strong one," Tim answered. "But this is a strong train. Your teamsters and guards make quite an army."

Cynthia leaned toward him. "If they could all be trusted." Her eyes met his across the warm glow. "Our strength is problematical." She glanced to the thin hands of her grandfather, to the eager fists of Lanky. "I hope you will be riding with us for a few days, Mr. Henry."

Under the advance of Lynx Jackson to the fire, Tim was able to avoid a direct reply. The bitterness that had rested in his eyes when he rode out of Sacramento, returned. Cynthia Kingery wished he

might ride with the train a few days, but a few days might—probably would—see his name blasted from Salt Lake to San Francisco. Some stage driver or expressman would pause for a word with the train and drop the information.

Jackson shifted nervously beside the fire for a moment, then invited Tim to come with him for a look at the train. Deep lines were etched into the guide's face. There was a shortness in his speech that told Tim this man's discipline would be severe. He would control a train down to the portioning of grain to the mules. His wary eye would penetrate to the smallest detail. It was understandable therefore, that trouble lines should tighten about his mouth. This train was made up of men who were accustomed to giving orders, not obeying them. But it was not of the personnel of his train that Lynx Jackson spoke.

"Did you notice anything different about that teamster, Gad Graves?" he asked when they were beyond the hearing of John Kingery.

"I noticed he was not a teamster."

Jackson stopped abruptly in his long strides. "Henry, the man is a plant. He's here to make trouble."

The trail guide talked freely to Tim Henry, confiding his fear that the train was rolling toward trouble. Ahead lay interlocking ranges that offered grave perils if snow should start to fall. And Jackson's quick eyes had caught things that built up other fears. Chief among them was his apprehension of Gad Graves.

"Get rid of him and his friend, Kennedy," Tim advised sharply. "It will leave you short-handed, but you have guards that can handle a team. In dangerous spots, an old teamster could certainly lend a hand."

"It would throw my train into an uproar, Henry. This company ain't made up of hymn-singin' families willin' to be led to a new home. This is a company of rich men. Captain Gilroy is the richest of the lot—and the biggest fool! Because I have made him step around a time or two, he bears a grudge. He lost two of his teamsters in the attack, and it is for him that Gad Graves and Kennedy work. Gilroy has a big idea of how important he is, and Graves has built on that. He's worked himself in solid. Gilroy won't hear of firin' him."

Tim knew Lynx Jackson was not a man to show needless alarm. If he said the train was rolling toward trouble, there was cause for worry. As they skirted the crackling fires of the company, Tim sensed a tenseness. Teamsters sat about their blazes, glumly silent; owners drew together in close groups, their words too low to carry beyond the circle of light.

"Will you be with the train long, Henry?" Jackson asked as they walked back toward the wagons.

"I'm afraid not," Tim answered quietly.

"I thought maybe—" Jackson hesitated. "You bein' hot after law-breakers kind o' started me thinkin' that you might be on the trail of the Slater gang.

Tim paused while they were yet outside the glow cast by the Kingery fire. "Push this train hard, Jackson," he advised. "Watch Graves and Kennedy. If the Slater gang attacks you, I'll be around to lend a hand."

Lynx Jackson swore with relief. "I know a Billings agent is never loose with information. I'll bet a plug of chewin' that Sol Wyeth himself ain't far off." He laughed. "I might've known that if the Slater gang was circlin' this train, Billings men was circlin' the gang."

"I didn't say that."

Jackson shoved his hand out. "You never said nothin', Henry. Good night."

As Tim approached the group beside the fire, a broad-shouldered man stepped forward. He ignored John Kingery's move toward an introduction.

"I'm Captain Gilroy, Mr. Henry," he said importantly. "I heard from Gad Graves you had stopped with our train. I expected you'd call at my wagons." This last was a reprimand.

"Good evening, Captain Gilroy," Tim said.

Gilroy paid scant attention to Tim's assertion that the train showed exceptionally fine organization. His big voice rumbled forth to take command of the conversation.

"I noticed you talking to Lynx Jackson, our guide. A domineering fellow, always poking his nose into things that shouldn't concern him. I'm sick of him!"

"He's done well with the train," John Kingery defended.

"He's a surly, ignorant tyrant! In fact, it is about Lynx Jackson that I wish to speak to Mr. Henry. I wish to—"

Tim's level voice cut through Gilroy's roar, quieting it. "Lynx Jackson is a guide in good standing with every agency in the West," he said. "Jackson knows the mountains, watches his train carefully, and stands up under danger."

"He fought like a lion when we were attacked," interposed Kingery.

"He fought bravely," Gilroy conceded. "But since Gad Graves has been with me, he has pointed out many weaknesses in Jackson. It has come to me that he may be bad for the train."

"Did Graves suggest himself for the position of guide?" Tim asked. The question was bald. Thus stripped of all adornment, it had an ugly ring.

Captain Gilroy hesitated. "Not exactly—"

Tim stepped close to him. "I'm glad to see a captain taking a vital interest in his train. The best

The knife sticking in Lynx Jackson's back was ominous warning that an unknown killer was traveling with the gold-bearing wagon train.

of guides need checking now and then. I appreciate your asking my counsel, but I feel your level judgment will solve the problem. Lynx Jackson is a man of good reputation, Gad Graves a stranger. Graves might know how to move a train; he might not. He might be willing to fight for the life of this company, or he might curl up like a dead leaf and blow away in the face of real danger."

Captain Gilroy nodded his head as Tim continued to talk. He rumbled now and then to show he was capable of following such an argument. He even threw out a word of explanation occasionally to John Kingery.

"Jackson is perhaps over-zealous about the few extra grains of barley that's fed a mule," Tim said, laughing. "But it's a satisfaction to know that if a pinch hits the train, there will be plenty of barley to see it through—and plenty of bullets."

"My line of reasoning, exactly!" Gilroy agreed. "I've pondered all these angles, every one of them. As you said a minute back, a captain has a large responsibility; he must be alert. I'm glad we had this little talk, Mr. Henry."

Captain Gilroy departed with the friendly hope that Tim Henry would be with the train a few days. Cynthia Kingery slipped her hand through her grandfather's arm and looked eagerly at Tim.

"You haven't said how long you expect to stay with us."

Tim did not try to evade the coppery eyes. "My time is in the hands of others—for now," he answered.

That night as Tim looked up at the stars, he thought of many things. Warmest were his memories of a pair of eyes that toned into the autumn. Sharpest was his thought that the gunman-teamster, Gad Graves, had made an effort to get control of the wagon train.

VI.

The next day Tim rode back west with the train. He was not endangering his chances of meeting Benny Slater, for he had traveled well beyond Haystack Rock.

By evening the wind had turned cuttingly cold. John Kingery shivered as he buttoned his collar.

"An old man doesn't stand this cold," he said to Tim. "It chills through to thinly padded bones." He looked to the mountain tops etched against a mother-of-pearl-gray sky. "This is a land of God's plenty, but I sicken to think of Cynthia alone in so much vastness. My hope is to live to see her in the warm valleys beyond these mountains."

"And you will live to see her there," Tim said quickly. "The best of men shiver in this wind. The old Sierras are hard on man and beast."

"I was too old to undertake this journey," said Kingery. "I now keep up for Cynthia, and she keeps up for me. If I were to die—"

"Don't speak of death, Mr. Kingery. Your journey is almost over."

"The last miles are always the hardest. The strongest arm is always needed for the finish. Mr. Henry, these circumstances that might take you away from us—could they not be handled so you might stay?"

"I see no way to control those circumstances—for a time."

Tim's quiet tones drained hope from the old man's eyes. "I heard Cynthia singing today," he said irrelevantly. "I haven't seen her light-hearted for a long time. I prayed you might be able to answer me differently, Timothy Henry. There is no way? Not even if I should drop by the trail?"

"You should be talking of living," said Tim. "You are not a weak man. You should be looking beyond these mountains to rolling valleys."

"I carry a heavy burden for an old man, Timothy. There is Cynthia, and Bess and Lanky. If I had your promise that if the worst should come, you would lend your strength, I could bear up better."

"Then I give you that promise. I may be driven —by circumstances— away from this train, but if Cynthia or Bess or Lanky need me, I'll return."

"I'll rest better tonight for those words, Timothy," Kingery said.

After supper Captain Gilroy came to the Kingery campfire to announce that he was calling a meeting. "The Antlers Mill cut-off is up the road a few miles," he said. "Gad Graves says we should take it to save time, Lynx Jackson is against it. Henry, have you heard of the road?"

"I know the road. It's a time saver, but the stages don't use it. It's very rough, and has a ten-mile pass where men stationed on the rims of the narrow canyon could cut down shotgun guards."

"Jackson mentioned the pass. The question sifts down to which is our greater menace—the coming winter or outlaws."

"On the cut-off," Tim said dryly, "you take the same chance of a snow blockade, and the added danger of outlaws."

Gilroy nodded thoughtfully. "Will you be good enough to join us at the meeting, Henry?" he asked.

"I'll be pleased to do that, captain," Tim responded.

Eighteen men gathered about a crackling fire. In addition to the owners of the wagons, there were Tim Henry, Gad Graves and Lanky Bevins. Lanky was liked throughout the train, and no objection was offered when he hunkered down beside Kingery at the meeting. A lawyer, Ralph Wheeler, asked the lad why he brought his rifle along, and Dr. Holt joined in the plaguing.

"Better keep your medals well dusted, Henry," the doctor said. "Lanky will be getting your job."

Tim said he felt better to know there was one alert rifle on the job, and he glanced into the darkness as he spoke, as though he were in earnest. He had caught the distant beat of hoofs. Soon others heard the sound and someone remarked that it must be the stage from Sacramento to Salt Lake. The passing of a stage was an event to a wagon train.

The members of the train pushed out toward the road, lifting their voices in a roar of greeting as the stage thundered close. Teamsters and guards joined in the demonstration from another spot. Tim kept tc the back. This driver would know him, and would have heard of the placard Billings & Co. had posted.

Passengers on the stage stood in their seats and howled back to the members of the train. The stage began to slow, and Tim dropped a step farther back.

"Come on up, Henry," boomed Captain Gilroy.

The driver slowed his team to a trot. "Gold is real plentiful in Sacramento Basin," he yelled, "and grass is ankle-deep. Keep your wheels rollin' early and late so's the snow don't catch you!" He let out a long wild yelp and cracked his whip. The team leaped ahead, the coach snapping and creaking. The yells of the passengers died out. The Salt Lake stage had passed.

Back in the light of the fire, Tim's eyes had a slatelike look that hardened his entire face.

Captain Gilroy strode to a spot where the blaze outlined his erect figure and looked about.

"Lynx Jackson is late," he announced with a degree of satisfaction. "That's often the way with men who hold the clock so religiously on others. Lanky, find Jackson and tell him we're waiting."

Lanky loped off to obey.

Tim studied Gad Graves from the shadow of John Kingery's shoulder. Graves' hat was low, cutting away his eyes. There was a twitch to his lips that hinted of strain. Tim had noticed this sign before. If Sol Wyeth were here, he would probably place this gunman who was passing off for a teamster. Sol knew the characteristics of many notorious gunmen. He didn't need to have seen a man to recognize him. A little thing like a forward tilt in a

man's walk was often enough for the sharp eyes of the trailer.

Lanky Bevins came leaping back to the meeting. As he rushed into the light his eyes were round in his white face.

"Lynx Jackson is dead!" he cried. "Down by the crick!"

Men sprang to their feet, and John Kingery grabbed the boy's shoulder.

"What are you saying!"

Captain Gilroy took command. "Keep calm, men. Jackson is likely just drunk. Graves has suspected him of drinking heavily."

"He's dead—down by the crick!" Lanky repeated. "There's a knife and blood!"

Lanky's report was confirmed. They found Lynx Jackson dead, a knife in his back. Gad Graves and Tim carried him back to the edge of the light cast by the fire. The members of the train followed, horror in their eyes. Violence such as this was not common in their lives. Graves drew the knife from the body, examined it, and handed it to Captain Gilroy, who took it gingerly.

"That blade belongs to Fred Hallsley," Graves said. "Remember him and Jackson quarreled this mornin'."

Captain Gilroy held the blood-stained knife with two fingers. Fred Hallsley was his third teamster, a man who had come the entire way with the train.

"Are you certain, Graves?" the captain asked.

"Sure I'm certain," snapped Graves. "I saw Hallsley skin a coyote with that knife two days ago."

"Lanky," Captain Gilroy rumbled. "Bring Fred Hallsley here. Don't speak of—what we've found."

Jackson's body was lifted back into the shadows and a canvas was brought for a cover. Nervously the company settled to await the coming of the teamster. Tim noted that the lawyer, Ralph Wheeler, was not as numbed by the murder as the others. His shrewd eyes had brightened, rather than dulled.

The men drew closer together as the approach of Fred Hallsley sounded loud in the stillness. Gad Graves stepped out into the light beside Captain Gilroy.

"I'll handle Hallsley if he shows fight," he said.

Captain Gilroy started at this idea.

"A man that will murder," Graves said quietly, "ain't a safe gent to monkey with. I'll keep him in his place."

"Thanks, Graves," the captain said gratefully.

Fred Hallsley came into the light, a big man in a heavy short coat. Captain Gilroy held the knife toward him.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

Hallsley bent forward. "Yeah, captain," he said readily. "How come you had it?"

Graves lifted his gun from its holster. Tim felt his hackles rise at the man's speed. Such ease of movement smacked of a master gunman.

"Hallsley," Graves snarled, "don't start nothin' with Captain Gilroy!"

The teamster heaved about. "There goes your lip again, Graves! You hired for a plain teamster, but you put on mighty high manners."

"Showing anger will only hurt your cause," Gilroy warned. "That knife you are holding was found buried in the back of Lynx Jackson."

Hallsley's big hands dropped to his side. "You mean Jackson's been murdered?"

"You quarreled with him this mornin', Hallsley," Graves cut in.

The teamster rocked on his thick legs. "So that's your game, Graves! Chargin' me with killin' Jackson so's to be rid of me. You've tried ever since you come to get me fired."

"Such talk don't throw dust in nobody's eyes, Hallsley. You quarreled with Jackson this mornin' and—"

"Yeah, I did have a scrap with him. Why? Because you ordered me to pull my wagon into a spot that didn't belong to me. You was the captain's head teamster, so I had to follow your orders. Jackson come tearin' down and cracked one of my mules over the head with a quirt, and I got plenty mad. But I didn't hold no grudge against Jackson for it; it was all your fault."

"Hallsley, every word you say is a lie. I tried to reach you to keep you from pulling your team into Wheeler's spot this morning. You tried to get away with it and when Jackson stopped you, you threatened to get even with him. And you did—tonight. *You stabbed him in the back!*"

Fred Hallsley's big muscles bunched for a charge. A drawn gun was no longer enough to hold him back. Tim Henry stepped into his path.

"Hold back, Hallsley," he ordered. "Nobody but Gad Graves is charging you with this murder. If you run into his gun, you'll force him to kill you. That will end the questioning into the murder of Jackson."

Gad Graves weaved forward. "Henry, get out of my way!"

Tim kept his glance on Fred Hallsley until he saw the teamster sink back to his heels; then he faced the other teamster. "Graves, you and I had better fade out of this picture and let Captain Gilroy go on with his investigation. He has a lawyer on whom he can call if he needs outside help."

The lawyer, Ralph Wheeler, stepped forward. "I am at your command," he declared. "I suggest you form the men into a jury, and you, sir, act as judge. I understand that west of the Rockies such courts are common."

Gad Graves did not give Captain Gilroy a chance

to reply. "We better find out first if Hallsley can account for his time tonight," he growled.

"I sure can," the teamster growled. "I've been settin' by my wagon smokin' all evenin'."

"Anybody with you?"

Hallsley hesitated. "No—"

Graves turned to Gilroy. "Do you want me to tie this man up and put him under guard? We can turn him over to the law at the first camp. Holdin' court like Wheeler says wouldn't be legal."

But Captain Gilroy had been caught with the idea of officiating as a judge. "I am sure I have heard of such courts, Graves. Wheeler, I shall appoint you both to prosecute and defend Fred Hallsley. You other gentlemen, I appoint as jurymen. I charge you to take this very seriously. Let us all be honest in our duty."

Ralph Wheeler had edged in close to Tim Henry. "I take it you believe Fred Hallsley is innocent," he whispered.

"That is my belief," Tim replied without turning.

The lawyer walked into the circle of firelight. "Your honor," he said, "I shall do my best." He turned to his jury. "As for alibis, gentlemen, I have found they are something a guilty man always has. An innocent man is not expecting to be asked to account for his time. Fred Hallsley did not approach us tonight as a guilty man, or a nervous man. If his nerves are so cool, why would he rush away from a murder in such confusion that he would leave behind an identifying knife? I want to assure you first off that planting a death weapon at the scene of a crime is a ruse as old as crime itself."

Only when addressing Captain Gilroy did the lawyer fall into flowery language. To the men sitting about the fire he spoke simply and earnestly. He recalled to them the manner in which Fred Hallsley had fought beside them when the train was attacked. He pointed out how the seasoned teamster had aided in training new drivers. He said Lynx Jackson had regarded Hallsley as a man on whom to depend in an emergency.

Then Wheeler called the accused man forward and questioned him regarding the quarrel he had had with Lynx Jackson. The teamster repeated that it had been caused by an order Graves had given him.

The lawyer asked Gad Graves to step forward, and the teamster stepped to the edge of the light circle, turned his shoulder on Wheeler, and spoke to Captain Gilroy. "You know how hard I've tried to get on with that ugly temper of Fred Hallsley's! I told you just last night that he was a dangerous man and—"

"Your honor," the lawyer interrupted severely, "will you instruct the witness to keep to facts."

Graves swung about. *"Facts?"* He leaned toward Wheeler. "Do you mean to say I ain't speakin' the truth about this business?"

"A man's individual beliefs are not accepted in a law court as facts," Ralph Wheeler answered. "Am I right, your honor?"

"You are absolutely right, Wheeler. Graves, confine your statements to what you know, not what you suspect."

Graves' lips twitched and he swung away angrily. The lawyer did not call him back. Ralph Wheeler was too wise to push a line of questioning after a desired impression had been made. Skillfully he proceeded according to his own ethics. At last he turned the jury over to the judge, and Captain Gilroy charged them, in deep, solemn voice, to deliver their verdict with full realization of its meaning.

"It would be our shame, gentlemen," he boomed, "to place an innocent and loyal man in irons for the remainder of this trip. I agree with Wheeler that the planting of a death weapon is an old ruse, hardly one to take us in, gentlemen."

Ralph Wheeler's shrewd eyes gleamed as he stepped in beside Tim Henry. "We might have been out of step with the law on a count or two," he said softly. "Still, it wasn't bad for a court on top of the Sierras."

The jury brought in a verdict of not guilty. Fred Hallsley thanked them for their trust in him, but he did not smile.

"We got to remember this," he said harshly, "the murderer of Lynx Jackson is runnin' loose. He'll strike again!"

The significance of the words held the group silent after Hallsley's footsteps had died away. Word of the murder and trial had drifted over camp, and teamsters and guides were hanging in the shadows. Some of the women now approached the fire, Cynthia Kingery among them.

The men stirred, spoke of burying Jackson. It came to them with force that they were now without a guide. Worse still, they were without a single mind to direct the day-to-day routine of the train. Jackson's eye had been wary and penetrating. Despite opposition, he had kept the wagons rolling day after day, week after week. He had given sweat and blood, and now his life. It might have been some compensation to Lynx Jackson could he have looked beyond the canvas pressing his still lids to the consternation his passing caused.

Captain Gilroy again took command of the company. He cautioned the men against delay in selecting someone to take Jackson's place. Winter was close. Not a single day could be lost if they were to reach the valley to westward before snow. They must have a man who could move a train speedily. Worry took the usual rumble from his voice.

"Gad Graves is the only man we have for the position," he said, "and Graves has shown himself hasty

in judgment this evening. I confess I would hesitate to name him if winter were not at our heels."

"Would Timothy Henry take the job?" Wheeler asked.

"I know from having talked with Henry, that he has plans that might take him away from this train on a moment's notice." Gilroy paused and looked into the shadows where Tim sat. "Could we prevail upon you to change those—plans, Timothy Henry?"

Tim felt the group tense for his reply. His pulse slowed. He was glad the light was not against his face. It would be easier to voice a refusal from the shadows. Then he felt a hand on his arm and knew without turning that it was Cynthia Kingery.

"Don't leave us to the mercy of Gad Graves," she whispered.

Her fingers trembled and Tim took them into his hand.

"May we gather hope from your silence?" boomed Captain Gilroy.

Tim felt the girl's fingers pressing against his. They were cold, like his heart. "I will accept," he said soberly.

Gad Graves' lean mouth wore a sneer. He turned and walked into the blackness as Captain Gilroy launched into his usual grandiloquent phrases.

VII.

The next evening Captain Gilroy asked Tim to supper at his table. Tim glanced across the treed valley. Over there, where the mountains reared on their haunches and pitched upward, was Haystack Rock. Benny Slater should be there waiting tonight.

"I'm taking a bite in the saddle this evening, captain," Tim said. "I want to cast about for sign while there's some light. I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's best to keep these worries from the train."

"Certainly we do," Gilroy said promptly. "Count on me to smooth over your absence."

Tim rode rapidly toward Haystack Rock. He was anxious to see Benny Slater at the earliest possible moment, for he believed the boy would join him in a move to bust the Slater gang. Each hour now that he rode with the train was fraught with greater risk, no time was to be lost. He believed Graves was a plant of the outlaws, and hoped Benny could throw enough light on this to justify an offensive move—a move whereby both he and Benny could prove to the world their honesty of purpose.

Tim approached Haystack Rock while there was yet light enough to see the outlines of brush clumps. His hands were on the horn, his reins loosely held. He had made sure on leaving the train that he had not been followed, but now suddenly he was conscious of a strange feeling of tension and menace in the air.

Sliding his hands from the horn, he reached for his gun. Black pockets of shadow surrounded him, night noises were absorbing the last of the day sounds. It was not a strange noise that had set his scalp to tingling; it was the feeling that hostile eyes followed him. He jumped his horse for a clump of brush, hitting from the saddle with gun leveled before him.

A cynical voice came from the shadows of Haystack Rock. "Why are you nervous, Henry?"

Tim shifted his gun to cover the voice. "Are you alone, kid?"

"I always travel alone, Henry."

Tim stood absolutely still for a second. Then he holstered his gun and stepped out into the still, faintly lighted clearing. Despite Sol's warnings, he had no doubts of Benny Slater. He took three steps, and froze. The kid had laughed mockingly.

"You're a fool, Henry. A bold play won't save you."

Benny Slater came from the shadows with drawn gun. The dim light showed a taut face.

"I got your letter," he said.

"Do you meet all your friends with drawn gun?" asked Tim.

"Don't stall, Henry. You sent word to Gin Martin that I was rattin' on the gang—sellin' them out! You thought Gin would kill me when we met, but I can smoke 'em, too. Dead men was left after that meetin', but *my* number wasn't called."

"Kid, put up that gun before you pull a trigger you'll regret. If I'd wanted you dead, I'd have let them hang you in Eagleville. I didn't send any word to Gin Martin."

"You intended me to hang in Eagleville! A friend of mine cut me loose!"

"And how did Dick Mosley get the key to your prison?"

"I thought that night you'd slipped it to him—but that was before I found out you'd sent word to Gin."

"Kid, I never told Gin Martin a thing!"

"No? Then I talk in my sleep, 'cause he knew I'd met you! You was lyin' to me all the time—trickin' me." Benny grew more bitter. Disillusionment thinned his voice to a thread. "You tricked me, and I'm goin' to kill you for it."

"Go talk to that miner, Dick Mosley," Tim urged. "He'll tell you I held off that mob while he cut you loose. Listen to me before you spring any more talk about killing. Mason Todd was outside your prison when I left. He overheard us talking and knew we'd met before. He busted down to Heck Billings with a story about how I was selling information to the Slater gang. From what you say, it looks like he turned the story around for Gin Martin."

A tremor of hope struck in Benny Slater's voice.

"If Todd sprung a story like that on Billings, how come you wasn't fired?"

"I was. I no longer work for Billings & Co."

The spark of confidence in the kid's tones blinked out. "That's a lie! You're conductin' a rich wagon train in the name of Billings! Henry, if Gin Martin had double-crossed me, I'd have taken it as all in a day's work, but I believed you. I come here to kill you, and I don't see no reason to change my plans."

Tim answered the threat with level words. He told briefly his connections with the train. He spoke of Gad Graves, and the murder of Lynx Jackson and the manner in which the emigrants were now pinning their hopes of reaching the Sacramento Valley on him.

"I was pinning my hopes on you, kid," he finished. "But it looks like Mason Todd has struck deeper than I realized."

"You got plenty of words, Henry," Benny said. "You had plenty of words the night we talked in your shack. You made me believe you then, and now you make it so I can't shoot you down like a coyote. Maybe you *do* want to help that old man and his granddaughter and them other two kids."

He made a move and the gun was gone from his hand. "I'm goin' to give you an even break. We'll count three. Do you want to toll 'em off?"

"A man is a long time dead," Tim said quietly. "The light will hold for another ten minutes, so let's spend five talking. This wagon train which we both know is in danger of being attacked, is now my responsibility. If you should kill me, kid, that responsibility would pass to you. I'd like your promise that you wouldn't shirk it."

Benny's thin laugh cut out. "That train is made up of a bunch of rich men that don't even tend their own horses. Why should I risk my life to help them?"

"Because you'll have been the one to deprive them of my support—shaky as it is. There's a lanky kid who keeps his old rifle beside him nights to fight off the Slater gang. He tries to give courage to his sister, and together they take the place of their dad. You'll have to take my place with them, kid."

"Don't waste this good light on talk like that!" Benny said scornfully. "Is there anything I can say that will make you dip your hand for your gun? Has your courage gone back on you?"

"I'll draw the instant you promise to ride herd on that train—if you win, which I'm not taking for granted."

"I'm not takin' on any fight against Gin Martin's gang, to help a bunch of men that'd hang me if they learned my name!"

"Then you admit the gang is after that train?"

"And they're goin' to git it!"

"Start counting, kid," Tim said quietly. His voice was toneless. "I'll kill you on the third beat."

Benny Slater was suddenly under more pressure than Tim Henry.

"Start counting," Tim said. "Or shall I?"

"Damn you, Henry!" the kid whispered. "You ain't got speed enough to beat me. Nobody in these mountains has! I believe you lied to me in Eagleville, and you're lyin' now, but I'm goin' to talk with Dick Mosley 'fore I kill you."

He took a step backward toward Haystack Rock.

"I want to ask you a question before you leave," Tim said.

"I'm lettin' you live. Ain't that enough?"

"Do you know a man named Gad Graves?"

"No."

"He has sand-colored eyebrows and squinty eyes and lips that twitch under strain."

"Maybe I do know him," Benny said slowly.

"He calls himself Gad Graves and is trying to get control of that train. Boys like Lanky Bevins won't last long against his guns. Old men won't have a chance either—or women."

Benny Slater stood silently back in the shadows. "Gin Martin has imported some new guns to strengthen his gang," he said at last. "I ain't met none of them. This Graves might be Early Lorell."

"Lorell!"

"I said *might*."

Now it was Tim who was silent. He stood as still as the trees for several seconds. "He *is* Lorell," he said heavily. "Early Lorell. I better be getting back to my job."

VIII.

It was sundown the following evening that an eastbound express pulled down as it came abreast of the wagon train. Tim kept to the shelter of the wagons as he rode forward. The familiar tightness was in his throat. It seemed now to be with him most of the time.

Word flew along the train that one of the express passengers was ill and that a doctor was needed. A cot was brought and the sick man was lifted from the hack. Tim knew the stage driver, a man named Andy Dent.

"If this man is too sick to go on," Dent said, "it ain't likely he'll be any better in an hour or so. I'll have to leave him with you for the next express to pick up."

"He seems very ill," remarked Captain Gilroy. "Acute attacks such as this often prove fatal."

"If he's goin' to die, he's better off in a bed than joltin' along in an express wagon," Dent said, and turned toward his team.

"Hold on a minute," thundered Captain Gilroy. "We've just held one funeral, and funerals are bad on the morale of a company. You'll have to speak to Timothy Henry, our trail guide, about this."

Tim was close enough to see Andy Dent straighten to full height. "Did you say Tim Henry?" the stage driver asked.

"I did. Timothy Henry is conducting this train."

"Conductin' this train?"

Tim slid from his saddle, leaving his reins drag. The doom that had leered at him from each new skyline, was now stalking down into the valley. He was no longer to know the respect of men or have the confidence of women. Blood pounded in his ears, booming one second, thinning to a rhythmic beat the next. War drums sounding a call to arms. The strain of days and nights had been cumulative, and now that the evil had struck, relief suddenly burst in beads of cold sweat. The war drums died down to whispers of caution. This was the hour of Gad Graves' triumph—and Graves was the notorious Arizona killer, Early Lorell.

The scene beside the express wagon gathered momentum. "I say you are crazy!" Captain Gilroy said angrily. "Stark mad!"

"Crazy am I?" Dent snapped back. "Take a look at these notices Billings & Co. is sendin' to Salt Lake by me!"

Tim heard a step and turned to face Cynthia Kingery.

"Tim," she whispered, "what is it? What has happened?"

Her cool eyes held steadily against his, full of confidence. When she saw that his hand rested on his gun she drew closer. Her glance flew to the group beside the express and returned to him.

"Tim," she breathed, "tell me!"

"Cynthia," he said quietly, "that driver is placing a black charge against me. It is not true. It is a mistake that I could have straightened out if they'd given me time." He forgot to keep his hand near his gun, and reached for the slim fingers that were creeping to meet his. "You've got to believe in me, Cynthia!"

"I do, Tim." Her voice was cool, her eyes steady and promising.

"Keep your grandfather and Lanky and Bess believing in me. Tell Mr. Kingery I won't forget the promise I made him."

Cynthia's face went white. "Are you leaving the train?"

"They'll drive me away." He pressed her fingers tighter. "It's going to take a lot of faith for you to go on trusting me, Cynthia."

Words rolled higher above the express-wagon group. The name of Tim Henry was tossed from tongue to tongue. The girl drew closer to him in alarm.

"I'll keep faith in you, Tim," she whispered. "I promise."

Andy Dent leaped up to his driver's seat. "Personal," he called down, "I ain't got a thing against Tim Henry, but I wouldn't be easy if he was conductin' a wagon train I was in—not after them notices."

"He has gained control of our train as cleverly as a fox!" thundered Captain Gilroy.

The driver, having launched his cyclone of trouble, was anxious to be off. Leaving the sick passenger and a friend behind for the next stage or hack to pick up, he snapped his four-horse whip, and the express rattled away.

Captain Gilroy turned to his companions. "Let's find Henry!"

Tim released Cynthia's hand. "Go to your wagon," he told her gently.

But, stricken with fear, she crowded closer. Captain Gilroy was leading a march toward the spot where they stood. Tim saw, as the men spread, that Gad Graves was not among them.

"Go!" he said sharply to the girl. "Leave me free to make my fight."

"Let me stay," she begged. Then she looked into his eyes and understood. She turned away, but she had delayed a second too long.

Graves stepped from the rear of the wagon. "Get your paws up!" he ordered Tim Henry, and he made a step that placed Cynthia Kingery in the path of an exchange of bullets.

Tim instantly lifted his hands. "Don't shoot!" he cried to Graves. "Get back," he commanded the girl.

She drew to the side, but the damage had been done.

"Hidin' behind a woman, are you, Henry?" Graves asked, loud enough to carry to the advancing men. "Captain, did you hear him yell for quarter. 'Don't shoot,' he yells, knowin' shootin' is what he deserves."

"He cried that to save *me!*" Cynthia faced the men that poured onto the scene.

"Cynthia," ordered Captain Gilroy, "go to your wagon. This man is a spy, so branded publicly by Billings & Co."

"I don't believe it!" the girl answered, and her steady voice cut through the tense atmosphere with more force than had the rumble of the captain. "I shall never believe it!"

John Kingery took the Billings placard from Captain Gilroy and extended it to the lawyer, Ralph Wheeler. "We must be making a mistake in the reading," he said shakily. "Study it, Wheeler, and tell us the truth!"

"There is only one interpretation, Mr. Kingery," Wheeler replied. "Tim Henry is suspected of being a spy. Billings & Co. is warning the public against trusting him."

Cynthia Kingery drew a breath of pain. "Grand-

Sol Wyeth's toughest assignment as a Billings agent ended when he saw those grisly bundles loaded on an express stage that was headed for Sacramento.

father—all of you!" she cried. "Tim Henry is not a spy!"

"Send the women and old men to their wagons, captain," Gad Graves snapped. "I got a dangerous man to handle here."

"Go to your wagon, Cynthia," Tim urged. Their eyes met. For a moment her trust blazed across to him; then she turned and left.

"That charge is a lie," Tim said to the men. "You won't believe it in the face of that notice, but it's a lie!"

Graves laughed. "You've worked hard to get me fired, ain't you, Henry, so's you could get organized to rob this train? You've been afraid all along of me."

"I recognized you as a spy, Graves—or Lorell!" Tim swung on Captain Gilroy. "I warned you again last night about trusting Graves!"

"You had me talked into believing he was the spy," Gilroy thundered. "We'd have had him in irons in another few hours. You were clever, Henry!"

Gad Graves had hunched forward on hearing the name of Lorell. If Tim had needed proof that Benny's guess was correct, he had it now in the killer light fanning in the outlaw's eyes. Murder was stalking here.

"We got to get this man put away 'fore night," Gad Graves said in a voice that quieted the burst of talk that had risen among the men. "If we leave him alive, the Slater gang will swoop down and set him free. I'm still willin' to help this train—even after the way it's turned me down and took up with a spy—but I'm not liftin' a finger if Tim Henry is left alive. If you want me to guide this train across the mountains, we'll take this spy out yonder to a tree *right now!*"

"What kind of talk is that!" Kingery protested.

"The kind of talk I dish up to a spy!" snapped Graves.

"We've blocked Graves all along," Captain Gilroy thundered. "Now we find he has been right. We *must* have his help."

"Which do you want, me or this spy?" Graves asked the group.

Not for a second had the gunman relaxed his caution. His glance had held steadily on Tim's, his gun remained trained. Triumph turned his lips upward in a smile, taunting lights mingled with the death threat in his eyes.

Tim made no effort to lower his hands. But by uneasy shifts of position he had managed to dig his toes into the earth. His horse stood with dragging reins a few feet away. But those few feet might as well have been miles. Graves would welcome the faintest show of resistance as excuse to wipe a dangerous enemy from his path.

The sick man left by the express had joined the crowd, leaning on the arm of his friend. In the heat

of much excitement, he was forgotten. It came to Tim, that for a man so recently dying, he had recovered his strength rapidly. Then another thought followed. It arose from the deep satisfaction these two strangers were showing over the turn events had taken. They might be other members of Gin Martin's gang.

Ralph Wheeler turned to Captain Gilroy. "Gilroy, are you seconding Graves' desire to hang Henry? Remember, Billings & Co. didn't have enough against him even to put him in jail. If we hang Tim Henry, we may have a few questions to answer when we reach Sacramento."

"I assure you there will be no questions asked in Sacramento," said one of the strangers left by the express. "For years Billings & Co. have posted the names of untrustworthy persons. If an innocent man were posted, he could call in the law to protect him, but Heck Billings has never made a mistake. This man Henry is a spy, or he'd have called in the law, instead of sneaking away and getting control of a wealthy wagon train."

"We drafted Henry for the position he occupies with this train!" John Kingery cried. "I'll never agree to a hanging."

"Nor I," the lawyer seconded.

"You don't understand your danger," the stranger persisted. "What this man has done calls for a necktie party. The West is no place for weak gizzards."

Captain Gilroy turned on the speaker. "Our gizzards are strong enough to permit us to make our own decisions. We will not hang Timothy Henry. Graves, bind his hands and feet. I myself will take a rifle and go on guard, and I will depend for relief upon owners in this train. That way our regular guards will not be doubly taxed."

No plan could have suited Gad Graves less. He had failed to whip the men to a hanging peak, and it seemed that he would not even have a chance to do away with the prisoner later. The anger in his squinting eyes fanned higher, his lips twitched. He turned to Kennedy, the teamster who had been hired with him after the attack on the train.

"Empty this spy's holster," he ordered.

The command was brittle. The killer light reached its zenith. Gad Graves was going to make some excuse to shoot down his captive later and claim self-defense. He held his gun in readiness, banking on enough resistance from Tim to give him an excuse to press trigger.

Tim ignored the advancing Kennedy and looked at Captain Gilroy. "I will keep my hands well lifted, so there will be no claim of a self-defense murder by Gad Graves," he said quietly.

As Tim had hoped, this snapped the gunman's control. He lashed at Kennedy, ordering him to hurry; he cursed Tim Henry for a coward, tried by every vile accusation to drive him to resistance. The strength of his verbal effort dulled his alertness. Kennedy moved in recklessly, fear of Graves' anger greater than fear of a move from the man beside the wagon wheel.

Tim lunged, knowing that the move would cost a life—his or Kennedy's. The breaks would decide that. He let his weight go against the teamster, and the dead spat of Graves' gun followed. Kennedy closed with Tim, bellowing at Graves to hold fire. With an empty, and awful determination, Graves mowed down the teamster to get at the man behind him. Horrible oaths filled Kennedy's throat, his loyalty sickened and he turned loose of Tim Henry to paw for his own gun.

As the big tough body collapsed, Tim fired. He did not press trigger hurriedly, for he was not banking on being alive for a second shot. Gad Graves, stumbled, and his gun flew from his hand. With turmoil all around him, Tim leaped for his horse.

The men of the wagon train had shrunk back when the lightning of battle struck. It passed in forked fury before their minds could thaw. The two strangers left by the express, whipped out guns, and fired as Tim Henry jumped his horse around a wagon.

Tim cleared the lead wagon and streaked into the open for a knoll a hundred yards away. A rifle woke behind him as he made a safety line. Ahead lay a friendly wilderness already folded in night shadows. He did not bother to answer that rifle at his rear.

Tim cleared from his mind the memory of Kennedy's dying curses. The living were more important. Gin Martin had that day planted two more men with the wagon train. That must mean he was ready to strike. Why not tonight? The country was wild. The eastbound express had already passed. Tim looked west to the beetling, weathered rocks of Poverty Point. Yes, why not tonight?

IX.

Tim Henry drew into a thicket and swung from the saddle. He was being followed. It had been an hour since he escaped from the emigrant train, and the fire of the setting sun no longer outlined the western peaks. Tying his horse, he doubled back to lie in wait for the man on his heels. He settled down at a point where the steep-banked arroyo left only one path of advance through the defile in the mountains.

Tim was hoping that this man on his trail might be Sol Wyeth. It could easily be, for with the Slater gang planning another big job, this would be a likely section for the man trailer to be ranging. But his hopes died as he heard a rider coming at a swift trot. Sol Wyeth did not track his victims so openly. Tim stepped close to a tree and leveled his gun.

"Get 'em up!" he ordered as a man swept to view.

It was Benny Slater. Tim's gun held to its bead. "I said, get 'em up."

Benny lifted his hands.

"You've been trailing me since I left that butte in the valley," Tim said. "What do you want?"

"And I thought I was doin' a slick job of heelin'," the kid said. "I stopped that express to find out what the row was at the wagon train, and the driver showed me one of the Billings cards. Can I take my hands down?"

Tim saw then how gray the boy was. His eyes were stricken like those of a dog that has somehow made a mistake and nipped his master. Tim nodded and holstered his gun.

Benny slid from his horse. "I don't blame you for thinkin' I'm a snake," he said miserably.

"Mason Todd worked a slick game on both of us, kid."

"I figure he's the Billings spy Gin's been braggin' about."

They walked on toward Tim's horse. Tim told of his plans to go to the defense of the train if Gin Martin attacked.

"You're goin' to fight for men that just booted you out?" Benny asked sharply.

"They meant to be fair. I saw Lanky try to kick in to help me with his old rifle when they mentioned hanging. Cynthia Kingery has faith in me despite those notices. Trust like that is a call to arms, kid."

"But Gin's got the deck stacked! He's in these mountains with at least a dozen men!"

"And the express dropped two more. I know the odds are heavy."

Benny Slater's lathe-thin body tightened. "Well, I guess there's no call to hang on to life forever," he said. "How about you and me teamin' up?"

"You know the odds better than I, and how slim the chance that either of us live to reap any glory. Teaming up suits me if you want it that way."

Benny Slater extended his hand. "I never had a pard except dad," he said, and there was something wistful in his voice.

They both understood this pact was to the death. They shook hands, battle plans springing to their eyes.

"Have you seen hoof or horns of Sol Wyeth?" Tim asked.

"Nobody sees Wyeth if he don't want to be seen," Benny said, "but him and Mase Todd are in the mountains. I've cut their trail twice."

"Sol and that spy together! Kid, that puts Wyeth in a dangerous spot. Gin Martin has probably given Todd the job of putting Sol out of the way."

"Yeah, Gin would want Wyeth done for. I figure Gin ordered Todd to get me hanged in Eagleville, and now his job is Wyeth." Benny Slater chuckled. "I'd rather Todd had the job than me, but whichever way it goes, I can't squeeze any tears out for Sol."

"I know how you feel about Wyeth, but you'll have to admit that as long as his guns are alive, you and I have a better chance to win our war."

Benny nodded. "I hate Wyeth, but I hate Gin Martin more. I hope that wolf-smart brain of Wyeth's smells out the plot."

"Kid, I'm going to warn Sol Wyeth," Tim said suddenly.

They had reached Tim's horse and were both mounted. Benny's lips instantly tightened at Tim's assertion.

"Wyeth knows by now you took charge of that train under the name of Billings when you had no right," Benny argued. "He'll figure you was workin' under Gin Martin's orders, and be gunnin' for you the same as the rest of the gang."

"I'll have to use caution approaching him."

"Slip up on his blind side, maybe," the boy said ironically. "Injunin' up on Wyeth is a job that's been tried by several gents who are now pushin' up the daisies. Remember, Sol Wyeth will toss bullets, not words!"

"I know a different Sol Wyeth than you do, kid. The man I know stands at your back like a stone wall."

"But it'll be the Wyeth I know that you'll be meetin'. The Wyeth that don't let nothin' stand in the way of collectin' a scalp, the Wyeth that comes at you like a ghost through the wall, only his lead ain't ghostly. If you want to help that train, stay away from Sol Wyeth. You won't be any good with a bullet in your back."

Tim's eyes chilled. "If you and I are to remain friends, kid, don't ever again mention Sol Wyeth shooting me in the back."

"I hope you know him better than me," the boy replied dryly.

They made simple plans in case the train was attacked. Benny was to circle and try to locate Gin Martin's gang. Tim was to attempt to contact Sol Wyeth. They were to meet later at Poverty Point. If the attack came before they met again, they would both pitch in. Benny turned in his saddle as he was stepping his horse away.

"You only creased Early Lorell in that fight," he said. "He'll be killin' mad. Leave him to me."

"Is there any reason why I should hold off from Lorell?"

"Henry, Lorell's rep ain't a sham. I'm faster'n you."

The words tore at Tim's heart. This slim boy had simple codes and scant words in which to express them.

"Benny," Tim said, "we're pards. Neither of us will pass the buck to the other."

The boy's face lit up. "I'm glad you called me Benny," he said. "I like that better than 'kid.'"

Tim gave the call of a night bird and after three counts, repeated it. Sol would know that signal, for they had used it many times in their work together. When he received no answer, Tim was not surprised. Sol never did things in the usual way.

Darkness, thinned by starlight, descended as Tim waited among some boulders on a hillside. He had sized up the train's camp, and selected the side he felt certain Wyeth would use for his night's vigil. And he did not doubt that the trailer was lying in wait to strike against Gin Martin's gang.

From a boulder, in front and to the left, came a soft whistle. Sol Wyeth! Pride suddenly warmed Tim's heart. Judging by that single call, the trailer had approached to within a few yards of the spot from which it had issued. Seconds passed after Tim answered the whistle. He quieted his uneasiness by remembering that Sol was always very cautious, that he never moved swiftly. But Benny Slater's thin voice kept tracing through his brain. The kid had said Sol would use bullets, not words.

The silence was beginning to hit at the pit of Tim's stomach when a whisper came: "What do you want?"

It was Sol's voice, stripped of all friendliness.

"I want to talk to you about Mason Todd and that wagon train," Tim answered.

"Go ahead and talk."

Tim knew then, that Sol was not going to chance approaching any closer. He was guarding against treachery.

"Are you afraid of me?" Anger heated Tim's low voice.

"I'm not afraid. It's you that's set into this game with a weak hand. Why don't you ride out of the country? Why don't you recall some of the preachin' I've done at you for so long? Huntin' scalps was never your line. Why don't you—"

Tim's hand dropped to his gun. Sol Wyeth was wasting words, and Sol never wasted anything at a time like this, even words. But Tim's realization of danger came too late. A clubbed gun crashed against his head, and a triumphant laugh followed.

Tim knew a terrible resentment as he toppled backward. Sol had tricked him. He had planned to hold his attention to the front, while Mason Todd approached from the rear. The thing had been timed to a split second. Todd's thick, satisfied laugh was still in the air.

The black shadows wrapped chokingly closer. Tim could barely recall Benny's warning. The boy had said Sol would come like a ghost, but his methods would not be ghostly. Tricked! Sol Wyeth had no soft streaks in his make-up; he even beat down his friends.

All Tim could think of was that Gin Martin would soon attack the train—and that Benny Slater would ride into those big odds alone! That Cynthia and Lanky would be waiting for help— Desperately he flung out his arm to push the blackness away, struggled to breathe.

Mason Todd snarled, and Tim heard his clubbed gun swish back for another blow. A voice that ripped like a knife stopped Todd. It must be a big moment when Sol Wyeth's voice got up that much steam, Tim thought. The trailer was angry at somebody, and Todd was too busy to laugh any more.

Every second Tim fought against the blackness, he held back stubbornly from the pit of oblivion toward which the clouds tried to drag him. He had to get ready to pitch into that wagon fight! He couldn't leave Benny Slater to walk into a trap. But the weight on his chest made it impossible for him to speak, and besides the voices he heard were all too far away for him to join them.

He was still conscious when they threw him across a saddle and started to move. The sway of the horse made pains in his head, but the pains drove through that terrible blackness and made it easier to think. The voice of Mason Todd was hot in the night.

"It's crazy for us to tip our hands by goin' down to that wagon camp. Henry don't need a doctor! We can tie his hands and leave him here 'til after the fight."

"We're now doin' *my* way, Todd," came the voice of Sol Wyeth. "I told you to slip behind Henry and stick him up. Instead you beefed him. That was *your* way, and it fixed him so's he couldn't talk."

"He was liftin' up to pot-shoot you when I let him have it," Todd argued. "Benj Slater has probably offered him big money to bring in your scalp."

"I reckon Slater has offered more than one man big money for my scalp, but I'm still wearin' it. There's a couple of things that ain't addin' up right tonight, Todd. I'm goin' to have a doc fix Henry up and hear what he has to say."

Tim tried to speak, but a groan was all that came from his dry throat. Todd's anger blazed like a wind-whipped torch.

"Wastin' time *now* to talk to a spy! Playin' into the hands of the Slater gang by showin' at that wagon camp! If you're that crazy, go ahead—I'll stay out here on the hill."

"We'll stick together, Todd," Sol Wyeth said mildly.

"I'll stay here," Todd snarled.

"Lead the way to camp, Todd."

Tim wondered if Mason Todd knew that the gentle whisper of Sol's meant a danger zone. He evidently did, for he plodded away in the darkness without any more argument, and Sol Wyeth walked at his back.

X.

"Who's there?" The call came, loud and blunt, from within the circle of wagons.

"Travelers comin' with a wounded man," Sol Wyeth answered.

Tim felt the warmth of the fire as he was lifted from the saddle. He opened his eyes a crack and saw men crowding about him.

"It's Timothy Henry!" cried Captain Gilroy. "A spy that escaped from this train a few hours ago!"

The voice of Gad Graves came next. "This gent creased me with a bullet in his break for freedom." He shoved Tim with his toe and spoke to the group. "You've voted me in charge of this train, and I'm handlin' Tim Henry to suit myself. I guess after the way you saw him shoot down Kennedy and try to kill me, and spray bullets at everybody else, you won't object to that necktie party."

"He needs a doctor," Sol Wyeth said.

Until that second, the trailer had kept to the shadows. He stepped to the light as he spoke, and Gad Graves spun to meet him. Graves' eyes squeezed almost shut.

"Who are you?" he demanded sharply.

"Sol Wyth."

Graves shot a single glance at Mason Todd, then concentrated on the man before him.

"Sol Wyeth," he repeated, as though the name fascinated him.

"Solomon Wyeth?" boomed Captain Gilroy.

"I reckon it's Solomon," came the quiet answer.

Gilroy's assurance returned with a bound. He, as well as all members of the train, had heard that name. He launched into a jumpy recital of the last few days' happenings.

"Gad Graves, here, suspected Timothy Henry from the first," he finished.

Graves' eyes were still puckered to a glinting line. "I'll handle Henry for you," he told Wyeth.

"I won't need help," the trailer replied. He turned to Captain Gilroy. "Call a doctor for my prisoner."

"Henry is *my* prisoner," Graves cut in, and flicked a glance to the two strangers the express had left. They glided apart, circling to come up behind Wyeth.

"He was your prisoner, but you lost him," the man trailer replied, and shifted his position to upset the plans of the two men attempting to place him at a disadvantage. "Captain, have your doc look at Tim Henry."

Captain Gilroy motioned to Dr. Holt, and the doctor sent to his wagon for his satchel. The heat from the fire was easing the tension in Tim's throat, and he was able to swallow. He opened his eyes and looked hard at Sol Wyeth. As if he felt the gaze, Sol turned and shot him a single message. It was for silence. Tim closed his eyes to the narrow crack. Blood was beginning to flow warmly through his veins, taking away the heavy feeling in arms and legs. The doctor worked skillfully and rapidly.

Gad Graves loomed over Tim's still body as Dr. Holt moved away from the fire.

"Parks," Graves said to one of the express strangers, "you showed yourself a quick thinker with a gun when this spy broke away from us this evenin'. I am now goin' to turn him over to you—*to guard*. Take him to that last Gilroy wagon. I guess after the way you saw him perform, I don't have to warn you to keep your gun cocked."

Parks hurried forward. "He'll be safe with me, Graves. I'd be in favor of the hanging you suggested, but since Mr. Wyeth objects, we'll let it go—this way."

Sol's easy tones interposed. "Parks might be all right, but I'd feel better if a Billings man was on guard. Todd, you take Henry to the wagon."

The glow of hope that had been building up in Tim was dashed out. Sol Wyeth still trusted Mason Todd. The trailer evidently had spotted Graves and the two strangers as outlaws, but he was not connecting Todd with them. Tim moistened his lips for a warning, then kept silent. Sol was speaking to the group, wasting time on mere talk.

"It takes a smart hombre to handle men like Tim Henry—as you likely noticed. Tim's used his wits on more'n one outlaw, and come out with their pelts to his belt. He ain't dangerous now; he's been clubbed half to death, but he'll be comin' to in an hour or so. Then Todd will have to keep a sharp watch. But I ain't worried. A Billings man always knows how to handle a spy."

"A Billings man knows how to handle a spy!" Tim's brain seemed to repeat the words. He understood. Sol was warning him of Mason Todd and putting it up to him to outwit him. The man trailer was saying in clear language that he would have his hands full with Graves and his henchmen.

Tim groaned when they lifted him to his feet, and doubled forward helplessly. John Kingery offered to assist Todd with the injured man, and Todd grudgingly accepted. It was hard for even the two of them to lead the prisoner away.

The Gilroy wagons were at the far end of the formation, completely withdrawn from the light. By the time Tim arrived there, some strength was returning to his knees, but this he kept secret. He stumbled against a wheel and managed to keep on his feet.

"You can go," Todd told Kingery.

"I wish to talk to Timothy Henry a moment," the old gentleman said.

"You heard Sol Wyeth say this was a smart and dangerous prisoner. I don't want nobody clutterin' up the scenery when I'm on guard."

Lanky Bevins came running up and grabbed Tim's arm. "I'm goin' to help you!" he promised. "Me and Mr. Kingery both!"

"Get on your way, kid!" Todd ordered.

"Come on, Lanky," John Kingery said. "We can't disobey the guard."

They walked away, the boy with a sob in his throat.

Tim rested against the wheel, his head sagging forward, hoarding his strength. He was shaky and his gun was gone. One way to cut down the odds was to jab Mason Todd to a fury. Fury dulled caution.

"So you are a spy!" Tim whispered.

Mason Todd started as though a ghost had spoken. He whipped out his gun. "Do you want to die?"

"Todd, you've gummed the play. You didn't get Benny Slater in Eagleville, and tonight you've failed to get Wyeth. Gin Martin will begin to think you're a poor spy."

Tim sagged as though the words took all his strength. Todd raised his gun, his breath whispering harshly through his lips. Then he seemed to remember the job called for quiet.

"I've not done so bad," he whispered. "I've got *you,* and Sol Wyeth won't last long."

A low command came from the shadows.

"Lift 'em Todd!"

The voice was at Todd's back. Benny Slater stepped forward. Todd's body jerked and his clubbed gun fell from his hands.

"Phantom!" he choked, and shoved his arms skyward.

"Yes—Phantom Benny. You tried to hang me, Todd, an' work like that calls for a payoff. Does the thought of dyin' send a chill up your spine? Does your stomach fade out of the picture and leave a vacant spot under your belt?"

"Phantom, you're crazy! Gin wants you to help him weld the gang together. I never tried to get you hung!"

"My spine chilled some, too, Todd, while I was in that cell listenin' to the mob that was drunk on your whiskey. My stomach reared up a time or so. Then it settled. Is yours settlin', Todd?"

Todd's whisper was too thick to form into words. The boy's tones had thinned to almost nothing. Tim straightened.

"There's a rope on this wagon," he said. "I'll get it and we'll tie Todd up."

"Is there any use wastin' time on this man, Henry?"

"Benny," Tim rebuked him, "remember the way the law's supposed to handle prisoners."

The silence hurt for a second, then Benny Slater spoke. "Fetch a rope."

Mason Todd was bound hand and foot. Tim found material in the wagon for a gag, and the job was quickly done. But he and Benny were left no time to plan their next move. From the fire came an order that struck flatly through the night.

"Mow him down!"

Gad Graves issued the order. For an instant the words were supreme, then the bolt struck. Streaks of flame patterned the night, and death snapped its fingers in time to the burst of six-guns.

Tim grabbed Mason Todd's gun and belt, and started toward the firing. He swayed as he tried to put speed into his shaky muscles, and Benny took him by the arm. Together they hurried forward. Neither of them had rifles, and the range was too great for short weapons.

In those few instants the battle seemed to have reached its zenith. Gad Graves and his two men were charging. Sol Wyeth's guns were throwing up flame as the trailer leaped backward toward some brush that had been dragged up for the fire. The weapons were like twin tornadoes controlled by puny hands. Tim knew how the man trailer's soul rose to a fight. Even when his life was the pawn, the bark of a gun was not discordant to his ears.

Life and death tripped over each other at the blazing fire. The men of the train had shrunk back, stunned by the violence they did not understand. The edged scream of death rose as one of the express strangers pitched to his face. The other man who had so recently joined the train, took several crazy running steps, then folded over a wobbly gun. Sol Wyeth toppled backward over the brush pile, his guns hammering to the last. Gad Graves had dropped behind protection and his gun spat as Wyeth sank from sight.

The fight had been as swift as the opening and shutting of a door. Death had stepped across the sill and claimed one victim. Now the Gray Beard leaned on his scythe waiting for a wind to reopen the door.

Then rifle fire came from the direction of the mule and horse bands. Wild whoops and charging riders were heard. Evidently an attempt was being made to put down resistance before it was born. Gad Graves came from hiding to face the men of the wagon train.

"I'll drop anybody that moves a hoof!" he warned. Then he spoke to his companion. "Parks, line these fellows up and start their tongues to waggin' about the gold. Drop anybody that don't ante up—then we'll make his wife talk."

Parks was still folded over his wounded stomach, but by bracing his legs apart he could stand and train his gun. "They better talk fast!" he snarled.

Gad Graves was shoving fresh shells into his gun. "I'll finish Sol Wyeth—if he needs finishin'. I think my last bullet salivated him."

XI.

Tim Henry turned from the shadow of the wagons to break into the open, but Benny pulled him back.

"Let go!" Tim ordered. "Sol went over that brush pile fighting, but he was hard hit. He's had time to reload and open up again—and he hasn't done it!"

Benny blocked his path. "I know, but you ain't fit to face Early Lorell in a gun battle. Let me take him."

"It's my job—not yours. Sol is *my* friend."

"Tim, hear them shouts dyin' out at the foot of the hill? The guards are already whipped. Soon Gin Martin and his men will ride at this train. You stay here and get Parks, then throw some fight into the emigrants. I'll tend to Lorell."

The men of the wagon train were not lining up peacefully. Gad Graves was snarling at them, afraid to leave the wounded Parks alone until the men subsided.

"Them men ain't cowards," Benny whispered. "They'll fight for *you*, Tim!"

Tim knew the kid was right. Even in the face of a threatening gun, the lawyer, Ralph Wheeler, was speaking his mind. Captain Gilroy was roaring his anger at Graves. These men would fight if they had a leader. Tim caught Benny's arm.

"Your way is best. Good luck to you, Benny!"

Turning from the men who had at last quieted before his threats, Graves had begun a cautious approach on the pile of brush behind which lay Sol Wyeth. Tim pressed stumblingly forward toward Parks and the men lined up for the last act of the grim play. His feet had no cunning, and a stick snapped loudly.

"That you, Todd?" called Parks.

"Yeah," mumbled Tim, and ran around the end of the line of men before he lurched to the light. He called to them to clear away, but the order was not needed. The members of the train melted from the space between the two gunmen with surprising alacrity. They had learned that spots of shelter were in order when guns cut loose.

Tim and Parks both fired—then fired again. Tim felt a bullet nick his shoulder. Lead was flying wildly. Suddenly Parks dropped his gun and slumped to the earth. Tim was glad to slip his own heavy weapon to holster.

"Get every rifle in camp," he commanded the men. "This fight has a long way to go yet."

The men swung about to obey, then hesitated. Over by the fire two men were walking toward each other in a death march. Step by step, Gad Graves and a slim youth were cutting down the distance between them. Both held drawn guns, yet both waited for the most deadly distance. They knew one exchange of shots would write the story. When a heart was cut in two, a trigger finger was stilled.

The explosion of the guns came in a single crash. There were two streaks of flame. Both men stumbled. Graves' was the stiff lurch of a corpse. With the instinct of a wounded animal, Benny Slater weaved toward the protection of the brush pile.

Horses were now pounding toward the wagons and the emigrants came to action. Death was no longer a thing for lasting horror.

"Get your rifles as Henry orders!" boomed Captain Gilroy. "We'll fight to the last man!"

Tim had little time to plan. The women and children were placed in wagons removed from any cross fire, the men sent to what scant protection there was. The wagons were not in good formation; Graves had placed them so riders could charge through from two points.

"Hold your fire until they crash into the circle," was Tim's final order.

The outlaws came at a run, whooping and firing, confident that Graves and his friends now held control of the camp. They were caught by rifle fire from two sides. The members of the train were not marksmen, but they were primed to fight. They had already received their baptism of fire, and their nerves were beyond further shock. Horses plunged, squealed and bolted. For a surprised moment there was a near stampede.

Lanky Bevins was stretched beside Tim behind a wagon wheel. "I'm takin' aim and shootin' slow like you said," the boy whispered tremulously.

"We gave them a stunner!" Tim called to the men in hearing. "Now I'm going to try a flank move. Remember, shoot in relays and always keep a trained gun in case they charge you."

Tim crawled along the wagons. The outlaws had steadied and sized up their resistance. A man on a gray horse that looked like a plunging ghost in the starlight, took command.

"It's just them emigrants—blast 'em apart!"

Tim lifted on one knee. He was in a poorly protected spot, but that speaker was Gin Martin. Benny had said the bandit rode a gray horse. Dropping the leader would lower the morale of an attacking force, Tim knew. He pressed trigger, and the last of the command shot upward in a rattling groan. The ghostly gray horse loped off with an empty saddle.

The men turned in wavering fury on the spot from whence that single shot had come. Tim felt a bullet tear through his shoulder, but he could still work his rifle by flattening it along the earth. The emigrants were chugging away.

Then the devil lighted a new fire. An eruption burst from the brush pile behind which Sol Wyeth had tumbled. Two new guns bucked into the fight, and two saddles were emptied. Tim hoisted his rifle a few inches and emptied a third.

Riderless horses found the openings between the wagons and bolted into the night. Then horses with riders slicked to their necks were headed in the same direction. It was a mad rout after that.

Men with lead whistling in their ears rode away from their fallen companions. On into the mountains thundered the hoofs. Then there were only echoes, and at last even the echoes died.

The emigrants came, grim-lipped, from shelter, unable to believe their battle won. Some were wounded, but all were able to walk.

"We've taught those outlaws a lesson they'll remember to their dying day!" Captain Gilroy cried triumphantly.

Sol Wyeth waved a shaky hand toward several still forms. "There's some that's sure had a good lesson." He was weaving badly, dazed from a head wound and bleeding from a bullet in the side. Gently, the men lowered him to the earth.

Tim Henry pulled himself to his feet beside a wheel, and help quickly came. Dr. Holt called briskly for water to be heated and cots to be brought. Tim shook his head against the attention.

"There's a man hurt worse than Wyeth or I—that kid that got Graves."

"He's bad hit," Sol Wyeth added. "I was just comin' from a daze when I saw him and Early Lorell come together. He staggered behind that brush pile back of the fire."

They brought Benny Slater into the light of the rekindled fire and the doctor set to work. Less skilled hands cared for Tim and Sol until Dr. Holt should be free. When the medico had finished, he shook his head.

"If the lad were robust, I'd say he had an even chance. But he's frail."

Sol Wyeth's heavy lids lifted. "'Bout as frail as barbed wire and buckskin. He'll be ridin' a horse in a week."

Lanky Bevins was keeping close to Tim's cot. "Thunder!" he whispered. "Benny Slater don't look much older'n me."

"He isn't—a lot," Tim replied. "You'll have to make things easy for him while he's getting well."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Do you think he'll notice me?"

Three days later Sol Wyeth flagged an express for Sacramento. He loaded on two bodies, and reserved a seat for himself and his prisoner, Mason Todd. The day before he had sent two other canvas-covered packages to Heck Billings by stage. The driver whistled as he took on the load.

"Business is rushin'!" he declared.

Sol jerked a thumb toward the bodies. "Early Lorell and Gin Martin. I knew Lorell by the way his lips twitched. Me and Benny Slater and Tim Henry have cleaned up the Slater gang."

Before he left, Sol visited the wagon where Benny Slater lay. The lad was enjoying the best comfort the train afforded, which was luxury to him. Bessie Bevins had just brought him a bowl of soup, and before she left, she insisted on seeing if he could hold the spoon. Benny's gaze followed her as she tripped away.

Sol glanced at the boy's slim, agile fingers. They were trembling. The man trailer shook his head.

"It's a good thing for my bacon you didn't have a set of nerves like that when you marched against Early Lorell," he said mildly.

Benny grinned. His eyes were still gray, but they no longer shimmered like steel. They were still observing eyes, though. They noted the life flowing about the camp, the nods and smiles of passing men, the bobbing of Bessie's head as she moved farther away.

"Benny," Wyeth said presently, "I'm headin' for Sacramento. Do you still want me to place you with Billings & Co.?"

The lad's face lighted, and that glow expressed the many changes that had taken place in his life. "Nope, Sol," he answered. "John Kingery needs me and Tim to help him build up a ranch. Some day Tim and me might get a ranch of our own."

"Not a bad idea," Sol said. "When my eyes get too old to see a sight, I'll come live with you."

Lanky Bevins came rushing to say good-by. "Mr. Wyeth," he begged, "don't forget you said I could come around to Billings for a job in about two years."

Sol dropped a hand to the thin shoulder. "I'll remember. In the meantime, you have Benny and Tim knock a few of the rough edges off."

"Hear that!" Lanky cried at Benny. "He says he'll remember!"

As Sol turned away from the wagon, he met Tim Henry. As they walked toward the waiting express Tim glanced at Mason Todd standing with bound hands.

"Poor devil," he said.

"There goes that soft streak in you again," Sol said. "It's good you're gettin' out of this business—you're not fitted for it."

They shook hands, and the driver yelled that if Sol Wyeth were always this slow on the move, he didn't see how he ever caught up with an outlaw.

Cynthia Kingery came and stood by Tim as the express rolled away.

"He's such a gray, lonely man," the girl whispered.

Tim took her hand, laughing. "Sol Wyeth lonely? Never. The sky makes him a good roof and the rattle of a gun is his company."

John Kingery paused beside them. "The West needs men like Solomon Wyeth," he said.

Tim nodded. "And Sol needs the West."

THE END.

WHAT'S A SHERIFF?

BY S. OMAR BARKER

They asked me, "What's a sheriff?" I thought everybody knowed
That in the West a sheriff is the main high horny toad
Of county law an' order, or in other words, the chief
Of them that wear the gun an' star against outlaw an' thief.
What some folks do not savvy: Any sheriff worth a hoot
Don't do a heap of killin' just because he's fixed to shoot.

His duty, huntin' outlaws, it requires of him to strive
To make arrests, not killin's, an' to bring 'em in alive,
He's got to know when *not* to shoot, as well as when to draw.
He gits some outlaw cornered an' could drill him like a pup,
But first he's got to offer him a chance to put 'em up.

Right then's the touchy moment in a sheriff's occupation,
For the hunted men ain't under no such legal obligation.
He shoots without no warnin', while the lawman has to wait
To offer him surrender—so sometimes shoots too late.
That's somethin' which it's bound to take a heap of guts to do—
Which no doubt is one reason shore 'nough sheriffs is so few.

The sheriff is elected by the votes of folks that figger
He'll always be just quick enough—not too quick—on the trigger.
He may have friends a-many, but as far as duty goes,
He'll serve a warrant just the same on friends as on his foes.
He may be young, he may be old, gotch-eared or plumb good-lookin',
Just so he's able for the job when lawless trouble's cookin'.

They asked me, "What's a sheriff?" He's the long hand of the law
That seizes them that flout it, an' yanks 'em up to taw.
He's sworn to uphold *every* law—though laws ain't wrote to please him;
No matter who the warrant's for, them sheriffs always seize him.
That's maybe why, out on the range where horseback lawmen ride,
The cowboy's got a name for him that fits him like his hide:
You've heard about Great Caesar with them laurels on his brow?
The sheriff is "Great Seizer" in the land of horse an' cow!

Having a law badge offered to him was something new for the Preacher but before he even got it pinned on his chest, he was a target for the guns of every border freebooter in beef-booming Trinidad

TRIGGER TRINITY

by L. L. Foreman

I.

The tall rider of the dusty black horse sensed a sharp element almost as soon as he entered Trinidad. Being what he was, he sent his gray stare ranging abroad for visible evidence of lurking trouble. Vigilance was the rent which he paid for the privilege of inhabiting the earth in a reasonably healthy condition, and he was seldom delinquent in paying that bill.

Trinidad was on a boom, swaggery with the prideful prestige of being a brand-new cattle capitol. It had just been reached by the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad, which was building across the continent toward old Santa Fe, slumbering in the sun and the heart of the New Mexico Territory, the Land of Poco Tiempo. Trinidad had wakened to the lively fact that it was a junction connecting the new railroad with the old Trinidad Trail, which ran south to the Llano River cattle country of Texas. While its shining hour lasted, Trinidad vied with Abilene and Dodge City as a cattle-shipping point. There was money in this town, money that flowed fast and easy, spent with a bang and a flourish.

But these things did not account for the sober hush that greeted the tall rider. The virtues of temperance and sedate silence had never yet gone hand in hand with cattle prosperity. With the hard wisdom of experience he was not long in picking out recognizable symptoms. It was getting late in the evening, yet no lights studded the dusk on the south side of the plaza, nor along the main street that ran out from that side. Explosive events lurked in the unnatural hush that hung over that section of town, the section of saloons and mushroom gambling palaces, where the trail drivers and cattlemen hung out, and where the money flowed fastest. Somebody, perhaps, was due to see smoke.

"Me?" he mused, and considered it possible. His

ways were haunted with enemies, violence, and sudden emergencies.

Nevertheless, he kept his long-legged black to its steady walk across the hoof-deep dust of the plaza. He had smashed his way out of too many pitfalls not to be something of a fatalist, and he had no abiding faith in the efficacy of going the long way around to avoid trouble. Besides, he had marked this town as representing for him a few drinks, some profitable poker, and maybe a good bed if the games didn't last too long. It was the town's privilege to make other decisions about that, if it so chose, but it would have to work at it to convince him that he was in error.

It was so quiet that a few words from an unseen speaker sounded loud in the dusk-shadowed plaza. "That feller's sure missed his chance to sprout gray whiskers!" said the voice, and two more made muttered assent.

That, alone, signified the presence of watching men behind blank doorways. A big saloon standing at the corner could have been empty and dead, from the look of it. Its painted sign proclaimed it to be the Silver Spur Saloon and Hotel.

Across from it, at an angle, was the small and narrow office of the city marshal, and when the rider of the dusty black horse entered the main street off the plaza he saw Doc Sunday's Livery a little farther on. Beyond that, three more saloons spaced the street to the Mexican end of town. Trinidad had a sizable Mexican quarter, but the Mexicans, being either more clannish or less supplied with cash, had only one saloon, the Casa Colorado. The Casa jutted its front right out into the street to the edge of the boardwalk line, and there the boardwalk ended.

These things the rider gathered at a glance, and more. Along this end of the street men stood out in sight—five along the front of Doc Sunday's Livery, one on the other side at a blacksmith's shop, and only the scant width of the street between them.

As the rider came around the corner, five pairs of eyes flicked to him and leveled again at the lone man across the street. That man did not look up, did not

shift his position. He had the blank wall of the blacksmith's shop at his back, and no cover nearer than the corner, some twenty paces away. Squatting on his heels, his hat shoved back, he gave the impression of spending all his attention upon a cigarette that he was carefully shaping up. The five lounged alertly, spread apart, and the full force of the street's brooding hush had its focus in their eyes—eyes that mutely promised explosive events soon to come.

The rider sized up the situation, perceived that its point was not aimed at himself, and kept to his course. He was hard to the bone, but his tired horse was his first concern, and the livery was his objective. To reach it he could either turn back and go around the block by way of the plaza, or pass between the five gun-slung loungers and the squatting man.

He kept to the street, and when the five saw his intention they grew a little more still and expectant. The passing of a chance rider could be used as a blind to cover swift action. The rider thought it likely that they had been waiting for just some such break to happen along. They looked tough and ready, but so did the lone man squatting by the blacksmith's wall.

The lone man raised his eyes as he licked the edge of his wheat straw and ran a rapid glance over the five. He was young, cool-eyed, with the weathered skin and worn garb of a working cowman. From the cut and heaviness of his leather chaps, he was evidently a brush-country man or a cactus buster, and his big Spanish spurs bespoke Arizona. Between his eyes there was a scar which did not take a tan, and it showed up like a small white arrowhead.

His single holster dangled while he squatted. He fished out a match from his cowhide vest, and in the same movement of striking it gave his holster a forward hitch. Then the match flared, and with five waiting to cut him down he could still light his cigarette with a steady hand.

The rider took note of that, and switched his impersonal regard to the five. He was coldly amused at the expectant way they waited for him to come abreast, and contempt salted his amusement. Five against one—and the five waiting for a lucky break before opening up their play. He and his black horse came abreast, between the one and the five, and it was as if by that action he had begun cocking the hammer for their fight. The Arizona brush buster rose easily to his feet, cigarette between his lips, as the rider partly cut off his view. The five began a concerted move, closing in to use the stranger as a bulwark.

The rider drew to a halt and spoke gently, bitingly: "I got no chips in your game, hombres, far's I know . . . but I'll sure play 'em off the cuff, you try to use me for your table!"

The five paused. Five pairs of eyes again stabbed at him, this time with closer regard, and now they could see what manner of man this was. With their minds concentrated upon their immediate problem of gun violence, they had seen him only as a chance element to be used as an asset. Now, with his voice and his presence suddenly strong upon them, they stood halted by indecision, inspecting him.

Now they saw him as a dark enigma, this rider, a giant in somber black broadcloth. His long black coat, of austere cut and style, hinted of the pulpit and the clergy. His black, flat-crowned hat would have furthered the illusion, but for the slightly rakish sweep of its broad brim. Under that ministerial hat, a strong-lined and saturnine face dispelled all that suggestion of divinity, and by its forbidding harshness made the puritanical garb a grimly appropriate part of the man.

It was the face that caught and held the regard of the five men. In their fashion they were readers of character, and here was character for anyone with knowledge to read. The nose was a predatory beak. The gray, deep-set eyes, chill and startling against the darkly burned skin, looked as if they could shine in the dark. The wide, hard mouth was stamped with a cynical quirk that meant a satanic turn of humor. A dominant and dangerous hawk, this, and not one to swallow annoyances.

The casually arrogant challenge that he radiated could not be overlooked. It grated upon the ego of one of the five, a pointed-chinned man with buck teeth and protruding eyes.

"You sure take up a lot o' landscape, mister," said the pointed-chinned man, and dragged off his hat to wallop the black horse on its way.

The brush buster put in his say from across the street. "Watch 'em! That's a dodge!"

He was ignored, at least by the tall horseman, who had his own notions about allowing any buck-toothed bucko to get that familiar with his horse. The hat slashed down, and the big stranger did three things, swiftly, efficiently, and all in the same space of time. He heeled his black horse in a spin, stuck out his long left leg, and made a gun appear from somewhere under his coat. The gun appeared in his right hand, and looked as if it belonged there. It was a heavy gun, long in the barrel as a Buntline Special. It roared a red flash as the horse changed ends, but not at Buck-tooth. That one was already down on his back in the dirt, slammed down by the thrusting kick of a long, booted leg.

Another hat came off, dusted on both sides by a bullet, and its owner turned and grabbed for it. That was a mistake. The toe of the high black riding boot caught him where he wasn't looking,

and he skated on his face until he fetched up against the boardwalk. The long-barreled gun sounded off again, and the Arizona brushy came running to get in on the party. Somebody else lost a hat, but didn't try to retrieve it, for the big man buffaloed him with a swipe of his gun barrel, and just then the city marshal emerged from his little office with a Sharp's repeater.

Everything broke up at that point. Doorways filled with staring citizens. A girl with a shotgun hurried past the marshal, eluded his grasp at her, and came purposefully onward. The gun quintet hastily retreated as a foursome, the buffaloed member being in no condition to use his feet. The young Arizonan made off down the street with the girl, and the big rider of the black horse unhurriedly continued on his way to the livery. The incident was closed—for the time being. Even the city marshal slackened his stride, evidently electing not to push any investigation.

In the livery stable the big man had definite things to say concerning the care of his horse. The stableman, impressed both by the man and the animal, began suggesting a treatment for a slight sand crack of the front right hoof, but he paused respectfully as a little man in an ancient frock coat joined them.

The little man had a gentle, solemn face. He wore a plug hat, and carried an old leather satchel that smelled of liniments and salves.

"I'll attend to that hoof, myself," he said kindly, and he had the lisping voice of a child.

He smiled mistily at the big, black-garbed stranger. "I shall consider it an honor to board and take care of your splendid horse, sir," he stated earnestly. "For nothing. I saw what you did to those ruffians out there."

"You a veterinary?" queried the big man.

"Oh, yes." The misty smile came again. "I am Dr. Elias Sunday, the proprietor." He waved a fluttery hand around the stable. "I think I can say in . . . ah . . . all modesty that I am equipped to deal with anything in my line. Yes, indeed, sir."

There were shelves cluttered with bottles and jars, and on one stood a battered old strong box labeled, "Prescriptions—private," in large and faded lettering.

The big man nodded. "All right, doc. But I'll pay my bill."

When he came out of the livery it was near dark, and the Silver Spur had come alive with plenty of light. He bent his course that way and passed by the Arizona brush buster, who stood in a dark doorway talking with the girl of the shotgun. Returning a nod to the cowman's greeting, he went on to the Silver Spur.

Like the city marshal, the black-garbed man was in no mood to go inquiring into the details that had brought about the lively little fracas in the street. Unlike that worthy, however, he just didn't give a damn what might have caused it. Life was too full of such eruptions for a man to fritter away his time in digging into the roots of them. Anyway, right now his taste ran in the direction of a stiff drink, a long cigar, and some constructive draw poker.

II.

He had a glass in his left hand and an unlighted cigar between his teeth, when the city marshal entered the Silver Spur and came up to him at the end of the bar. They stood together, two big men exchanging weighing looks.

The lawman accepted the offer of a drink, and introduced himself. "I'm Tom Conant, marshal o' this town," he said, and fastened his gaze on his drink. There was heft to him, but he wasn't fat. He had a trick of masking his eyes by squinting them half shut. "I reckon I already know who you are. The Preacher . . . right? Preacher Devlin?"

Preacher Devlin took his cigar from his mouth, trimmed the end, and nodded. Gifted gambler, master gun fighter, man of wide notoriety, he rarely expected to get by anywhere for long without recognition. He was known from the Colorado River to Galveston Bay, and from south in Old Mexico north to Dodge City. Few forgot him, after one meeting. He could be hated and reviled, condemned for what he was and what he wasn't, and even be admired by various individuals who at the same time were apt to deplore his strong penchant for disregarding law and order when they got in his way—but never forgotten. For those who had missed the positive experience of meeting and seeing him, there were always the sheafs of wanted bills to peruse.

He gazed meditatively at the marshal, and on farther at the gambling end of the barroom where poker chips were beginning to show up in pleasantly large stacks. "I kind o' like your town," he remarked. His deep-set eyes went coldly opaque as he bit into his cigar. "I wouldn't want anything to spoil my night here!"

Marshal Tom Conant squinted at nothing. "Nor me," he said. "I got my limitations, but I'm here to tell you, Devlin, this town's cocked to go off on a hair trigger . . . an' you're the trigger! There's plenty wild an' curly specimens here, an' you've already made yourself damned unsociable with some o' them. It's like you was a hell of a big wolf that comes ambling into a strange pack an' starts in right away whippin' the leaders. Natchally, they're out to get you on gen'ral principles. You know how 'tis."

To Devlin the situation presented no novelty and few problems. "I'll try to take care o' myself," he

murmured dryly, and studied the games. There was one that looked promising, with plenty of blue chips on the table.

"That," allowed Conant heavily, "I can believe! Wish you'd step outside with me. I got a proposition to make, an' it ain't none too private in here. Won't take a minute."

Outside, steering the way to his office, the marshal showed his hand. "I'm tryin' to wind up my term with a good record, because I'm runnin' for re-election next month. If you get in a bust an' go shootin' up some of our ornery citizens, that wouldn't be so good for me. I'd be expected to stand up to you . . . an' like I said, I got my limitations! But there's one thing I can do, an'—"

He stopped, midway in the street, and his eyebrows bushed together. Walking the shadows toward the plaza came two figures, the Arizonan and the girl.

The marshal's voice rapped out, sharp and gruff. "Vada! What'd I tell you? Get back to the house an' stay there! You, Ballinger, I'm warning you for the last time: Keep clear o' my daughter an' get out o' this town, or by Satan I'll run you out!"

The Arizonan took it, but it was fairly obvious that the presence of the girl was the reason for that. Both paused before the band of light that fanned out from the window of the marshal's office, and there they parted. The cowman tipped his hat to the girl, slid a cool glance over the marshal, sent Devlin an odd kind of stare, and walked off back the way he had come.

The girl bade him good night and continued on her way, her head high and eyes blazing, without a word to the marshal. She had engagingly good looks, Devlin noted, but he mistrusted her determined little chin. These honey-haired girls with clear hazel eyes looked harmless and pretty, and maybe were all right to marry—if a man had that in mind—but when they got their temper up they could raise more blazes than a stray lamb in a cow camp.

Marshal Conant stared after the girl in angry bafflement. "It ain't noways easy, bein' a father," he grumbled to Devlin, who could well believe it. "Vada's a problem now she's a grown girl. She's took a crazy fancy to that Banjo Ballinger, an' him an ornery young Arizona rip lookin' for trouble. He trailed up here with a beef herd . . . Banjo brand, mostly; his own cows. Sold out, lost the money, an' now he's lookin' to kick up a big ruckus."

Devlin glanced after the departing Banjo Ballinger, and it was his private opinion that the busted young cowman would likely go a long way toward reaching his present ambition, once he got started. There was stubborn fight in every line of that cactus buster, and plenty of nerve with it.

They stepped up onto the boardwalk before the marshal's office and through the window Devlin noticed the small, shabbily neat figure of Doc Sunday, reading a tattered book by the light of the lamp, his inevitable veterinary bag by his side. Evidently doc and the marshal were friends.

"What I want to do," explained Conant, "is give you a deputy marshal badge, Devlin. You don't need to wear it. But if things pop, you can flash it out. Then it won't matter so bad what happens. I'll swear I made you my deputy, that you was helpin' me rod the law, an' so I'll be in the clear. Wait, I'll get you a badge." He entered his office.

From habit, Devlin moved out of the light. He thought the lawman's stratagem a little on the comic side, but he could appreciate the motives behind it, and was tolerantly willing to co-operate. Political job holders had to pull devious tricks to look out for their livelihood. He had no particular grudge against law officers, as long as they didn't crowd him. He heard Conant jerk open a desk drawer in the office and ransack through it, and the lighted lamp was brought up closer to the window.

While he waited, he inspected the street. The Silver Spur had drawn most of the life of the town into it, while the other saloons down the street didn't appear to be doing so well. The Casa, and a low-roofed beer hall facing it, hadn't even lighted up yet for the night. It seemed like a nice enough town now, wide open, broad-minded, untrammeled by civic reform and suchlike superfluous trappings.

Conant came out of his office, flipping a badge from one hand to the other. The shiny bit of metal flashed and glittered as it spun in the light of the lamp at the window. "Here y'are, Devlin," he said, and held it out.

Devlin reached for the badge and had to step into the light to take it. He dropped it into his coat pocket and turned to cross to the Silver Spur. The marshal started back into his lighted office, then suddenly let out a yell.

"Watch y'self, Devlin!"

Two seconds later, Devlin drastically revised his opinion as to this being a right kind of town for a congenial poker session. The marshal's office light went out. Booted feet pounded somewhere on a boardwalk, running. Down the street, guns opened up with a chattering roar that shattered the peace and quiet of Trinidad like all hell coming to election. The Silver Spur's lights blinked out next, prompt and fast, and a knot of men came spilling out of the side door. By that time Devlin was leaping for the marshal's office, quitting a street that had abruptly changed into a bullet-screaming ambuscade.

Not rattled, but considerably annoyed, the gun fighter flipped out a pair of long man stoppers as he made his leap, and pitched two shots down the flash-studded street. Certain misguided broncos

were obviously out to eliminate him in the quickest way, and there'd be no poker this night. He got a tugging punch high in the leg, and took a header over the doorstep into the marshal's office.

"Damn you an' your deputy badge, Conant!" he swore, picking himself up. "I think you're a Jonah!" His chill eyes glimmered dourly in the darkness. He spat out the fragments of his cigar which had broken in his teeth. "What in Satan's name brought *that* on? You ought to know; you squalled two seconds ahead of it."

Conant's voice sounded in a mutter. "Just a hunch. It was doc who put out the light. I reckon he got a hunch, too. Did you, doc?" There was no answer. "I reckon he beat it out the back door. Doc ain't much of a hand to—"

The marshal didn't get time to finish, for more gunfire thudded afresh in the street, this time directly outside and nearby. Two ragged stars appeared in the marshal's window, and bits of adobe plaster fell from the inside wall. The next wild bullet finished the window. Somebody came plunging through the open doorway, whirled around and, flinging himself down, began hammering shots back into the street.

With a gun cocked and aimed, Devlin changed his mind about putting a hole in the newcomer. "That you, Ballinger?" he rapped.

"It's me, all right." The Arizonan backed from the doorway and got up. The furious flurry of gunfire had quit as suddenly as it began. "You're Devlin? I knew this was due to bust."

"Did, huh?" Devlin's temper was sharpening fast. "Blast it, did you get a hunch, too?"

"Might call it that." Banjo Ballinger slipped fresh shells into his gun. His tone changed. "Conant, some o' your Silver Spur voters took advantage o' that riot an' made another try for me, but I stung 'em plenty! Devlin, that little 'buscado was aimed at you by some hombres in the Casa. They'll try again, an' keep on tryin'. What you goin' to do about it?"

Devlin was feeling his way toward the back door. "I'm on my way to the Casa, right now!" he said shortly.

"That sure suits me." Banjo came following after him. "I got business with those hombres, too. The Silver Spur crowd can wait their turn till I get around to 'em. For a week I been waitin' for my chance to blow the lid off. Let's do a job, Preacher!"

There were elements and turgid undercurrents here which Devlin sensed, but this was not the time to analyze them. It was enough that certain parties were trying hard to run him into a six-foot hole. They needed a correction of ideas and ambitions. Later on, if it mattered, motives could be kicked to light and examined. Certain it was that this Banjo Ballinger either had more enemies in the town than was good for him, or else he was fight-crazy. Or maybe both.

Racing through the back alley behind Devlin, Banjo stopped and called a question. "Say, what's that jingle I keep hearin'? Who's throwin' money at us?"

"Nobody," growled Devlin. "Bullet tore my pants cash pocket an' damn near blew me full o' loose change. I'm sheddin' dimes an' quarters. Never mind pickin' 'em up. Where's that Casa?"

"Right across from Mike McCall's beer hall . . . an' here's the beer hall." Banjo turned off into a side alley that led back to the street. "There's the Casa, right over— Wow!"

He jerked his head in as a flash and report spat from the darkened front of the Casa Colorado across the empty street. "I guess they're onto us. Hey, don't shoot my ear off, Preacher!"

"Then flap your damned ear back out o' my way!" said Devlin, and let loose with a gun. He pumped three fast shots, ducked back while broken glass tinkled, and listened with pleasure to a yelp in the Casa. "How many in there, d'you know?"

"Quite a bunch," answered Banjo. Squatting down on his heels with his back to the alley wall, he drew out his tobacco sack and papers. It seemed to be his favorite occupation, when facing a tight spot. "Devlin, these hombres ain't just out to win a rep. They already got big reps, I can tell you. They're out to get *you!*"

"Any particular reasons?"

"Pretty much the same reasons I got for bein' here," said Banjo cryptically, shaking out grain tobacco. "You may not know it, but you've already cut yourself in on the game. Yeah . . . forty thousand reasons. Forty thousand dollars!"

Devlin narrowed eyes that were suddenly interested in more than the Casa. "I don't care for fool riddles," he murmured. "Who's got this forty thousand, an' where does he keep it?"

Banjo got his cigarette built, but he didn't light it. He looked up into the dark, sardonic face of the gun master. "Those hombres yonder in the Casa. It was my money. If a gent was to help me get it back, I'd cut him in on a share of it."

Here was deliberate bait, and Devlin recognized it as such. The young cowman was tempting him to plunge all the way into this tangled and unexplained business. Yet his voice rang true when he mentioned the money. This Banjo Ballinger was bucking a tough set-up, and he badly needed an ace to fill out his hand. He was desperate, despite the coolness of his eyes—as desperate as a sheepherder trying to call in a blood-hungry wolf to help save his flock from coyotes. Everybody who knew anything about Preacher Devlin, knew that he seldom played for anything less than all the pot.

Another shot cracked from the Casa, and the bullet droned off the steel hoop of one of the beer barrels stacked along the alley wall of the beer hall. At the same time Devlin grew aware of activity elsewhere. From where he stood at the mouth of the alley he could view an angle of the street, and along there on the other side men were gliding from one point of cover to another. Devlin caught the long gleam of a shotgun barrel, and he had half a mind to clip a bullet that way. Such a stealthy advance reminded him of the five gunmen who had tried to use him for a battle rampart.

"Some o' your Silver Spur warriors?" he queried Banjo, and indicated them with a nod.

Banjo swore softly. "Sure are, or I'm a burro's tail! I might have known they'd come hornin' in. Bet a dollar there's more of 'em movin' up the alley back of us." He rolled out three barrels, set them together, and got down behind them.

"What in blazes are you doin'? Devlin inquired.

"Diggin' in for stormy weather!" responded Banjo. "You better hunker down, too, before they—"

"It don't appeal to me," Devlin interrupted. "You handle your fight, an' I'll handle mine. I'm goin' over this wall and on from there."

"Where'll that get you?"

"It'll get me started on my way around to the rear o' the Casa yonder, if you must know. Forty thousand, you said? Uh-huh. Then that's where my fight is!"

III.

The front of the Casa was of adobe, but the rear was built of slab lumber, a two-storied addition thrown up in a hurry and intended as a cheap hotel to get the trade of the railroad graders. It had served its purpose. The graders had moved on south with the lengthening of the roadbed, and now the cramped little rooms of the Casa had become less exclusive in their type of tenantry. A high-fenced horse corral, also of slab lumber, formed a back yard for the building. Customers of the Casa were not the kind to be fussy about horse and stable aromas.

Devlin, who, unseen, had crossed the street down below the beer hall and worked around to the rear of the Casa, took stock of the place. An occasional shot speared from the front, and other isolated reports sounded in the street. Banjo Ballinger, snipped at from several directions, including the Casa, was making a lone stand of it behind his beer barrels.

There were horses in the corral, and Devlin remained outside to keep from spooking them. He moved along the outside to where one end of the high fence ran against the rear of the building, and there he climbed, but not into the corral. Perched on the top of the fence, he rose to his full height and hooked his fingers over the rough sill of an upstairs back window. He hauled himself up, rested his weight on one elbow, eased the window open, and crawled through.

He was in a dark and narrow room meagerly furnished with a cot and a washstand. The floor boards were flimsy, and he had to test them for betraying squeaks in treading carefully to the door. When he gently opened the door, he found a gallery outside and the darkened barroom below. He could see the dim square of the main front window, its glass smashed, and the smaller squares of other windows on both sides.

It was quiet down there, until a gun's report flared over the sill of the broken window. Somebody muttered a word and laughed briefly. The shooter moved away from the window, scraped a match, and lighted a cigarette. While the illumination of the tiny flame lasted, Devlin imprinted a picture of the barroom on his mind. The indefinite outlines of ten or a dozen men showed here and there, most of them crouching below the windows. They were strung with crossed cartridge belts and bandoleers, and all appeared to have rifles. One of them moved over and got a light for himself before the match went out. The lighted cigarette changed hands, passing along the line, and other dots of glowing tobacco sprang up in the darkness. A cool crew, this, heavily armed and unexcited.

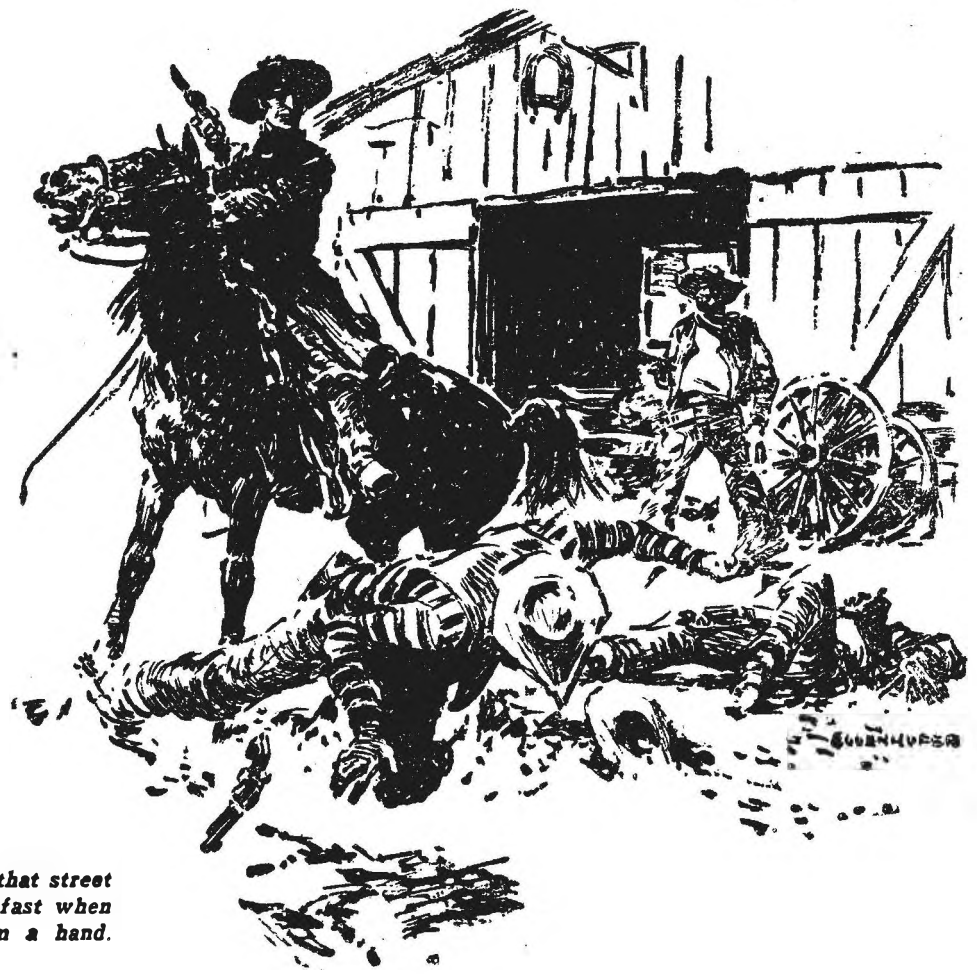
The fact that they were Mexicans did not greatly surprise Devlin, nor did it influence his feelings one way or the other. He counted his friends and enemies among all classes of men, north and south of the border, without distinction of color, race or creed. To his broad mind, a man was as big as the heart in him, as good as his shooting eye, and as bad as his intentions, regardless of where and how he happened to have been born. The Rio Grande was no barrier to the passage of human vices and virtues, nor had it ever proved any barrier to his own wayward path.

Taking out a fresh cigar, Devlin bit into its end, drew his guns, and stepped out onto the gallery. The gallery creaked dismally and sagged a little under his weight. Of frail and rickety construction, it had apparently suffered hard abuse in the past, and nobody had ever seen fit to repair it. The glowing cigarette ends below shifted quickly as heads turned toward the sound. A voice snapped a sharp demand.

"Quien es?"

Devlin cocked an ear to that voice. He wasn't sure, but it had a familiar ring. "Share these among you, hombres!" he called pleasantly, and his long guns burst into exploding action as he worked the triggers.

For the first two shots there was no reaction.



Devlin didn't have any chips in that street brawl but he went into action fast when the Trinidad gunnies dealt him a hand.

Then came a yell as the barroom 'buscados all seemed struck with the same impulse. There was a noise of wild scrambling as they pelted across the floor and over the bar, and Devlin blazed his guns empty before jumping back into the little room. The shock of his jump left the gallery boards dancing. Gunfire roared from below, and splinters flew from the spot which he had left.

Their maneuver was good, and he gave the ambushers a certain amount of credit for using their heads in a pinch. The bar ran directly underneath and he couldn't sight them any more, but they could shoot up and riddle the sorry excuse for a gallery. He reloaded his guns, his fingers fast and capable, keeping well inside the room and against the side wall. Smoke from the powder being burned below rose and fouled the air, and the racket was an infernal assault on the ears. They weren't fooling down there.

Devlin caught the sound of a groaning board, saw the gallery shake, and guessed that they weren't satisfied to remain below. They were coming up the stairs onto the gallery, pushing the fight while they had the advantage, and blazing away like mad at the doorway to make him keep his head in. Outside in the street, the occasional sniping suddenly rose to a furious tempo, and a rumbling sound threaded a muted note through the uproar. This town of Trinidad was getting the lid blown off it tonight, sure enough, but it was mighty doubtful whether that Arizona brush popper was getting any kind of good out of it.

Devlin lined up his guns, waiting for the first head to show itself in the bullet-scarred doorway. In the moment of grim waiting he speculated again about the familiar ring of that voice, about the riddle of Banjo Ballinger's forty-thousand-dollar fight, and about the rumbling sound outside. That rumble sounded like a wooden ball being trundled in the street, and it was coming closer, and mighty fast.

Something hit the front door of the barroom, a terrific blow that shook the whole building, and right away there wasn't much door left. A large beer barrel came bouncing into the barroom, bringing with it the remains of the door, and behind it ran a crouching man who gave a reckless shout.

"Let's give 'em hell, Preacher!"

The beer barrel rolled from Devlin's restricted view and crashed into the bar. Banjo Ballinger raised another yell, got off a shot, and Devlin snatched the chance to quit the little room. The gun master took a jump through the doorway, stiffened his long legs, and came down with all his weight on the outer edge of the gallery. As he jumped out, he got a glimpse of bandoleer-strung figures crowded in a murky mass on the gallery, all staring down into the barroom and bringing their guns to line, but it was no more than a brief impression. The gallery, already overloaded and strained to the last nail, surrendered under the pounding force of Devlin's jump upon it.

It parted company with the wall, swayed outward, and tilted over, throwing the group against the railing and increasing the strain. A wooden support cracked like a pistol shot. Part of the adobe wall broke away, freeing another supporting timber. Then the whole sorry contraption came crashing down onto the bar below. Above the racket, another shout sounded from Banjo, this time more startled than reckless.

"Hey, what the—"

Devlin didn't linger on his first jump, but made another, taking part of the railing with him, and he was spraddled on the barroom floor when the gallery joined the bar. He reared up with his guns out and looked for something to shoot at, but it was like hunting for strays on a foggy night. It was dark, the air was aswirl with risen dust, and where the bar had been was now a shapeless pile of wreckage, broken bottles, and profanely struggling men, all in a confused tangle.

A shot lanced from the debris. Devlin replied to it, and shifted out of line of the windows to prowl around the walls like a cat waiting for mice to come out of a hole. He was tempted to bombard the wreckage indiscriminately, but he wasn't sure of Banjo's location. The Arizonan had vanished and nothing was being heard from him.

"Where in hell are you, Ballinger?" Devlin called.

"In hell is right!" came Banjo's muffled reply. "I was doin' all right till you booted the place down on me. Now I'm up to my neck in busted glass an' kindlin'! Watch out for the ramrod o' these *orejanos*. Risa's his name, an' he's one skallyhootin'—"

"*Who?*" Devlin cut in sharply. "De Risa?" He recollected that familiar voice that he had heard in the darkness, and at once the alertness of his senses keened to a finer edge.

"That's his name. You know him?"

"Yeah, I know the cuss," said Devlin dourly, and that was somewhat in the nature of an understatement. He peered balefully through the murk of dust and darkness, seeking an old enemy. "Rico, you dog, where are you?"

"Looking for you!" snapped the familiar voice of Don Ricardo de Risa—one-time Mexican army general and revolutionary leader, adventurer extraordinary, political and civil outlaw, and all-time rascal. The Don's gun again lanced its short flare.

There were sufficient reasons why Don Ricardo should be seeking Preacher Devlin over a gun sight—as many reasons as Devlin had for having the same violent designs against the Don. But it struck Devlin that there was something particularly special and virulent at the bottom of the Don's present animosity. Whenever their dark trails had crossed in the past, they had matched wits and played deadly and unforgivable tricks on each other. Their war was an intermittent and dangerous game that they carried to the point of death, but played under tacitly accepted rules that had evolved in the wild course of their many clashes. Always it had been in a spirit of rivalry and grim mischief, each putting forth all the guile at his command to best the other.

For one of them to attempt a graceless assassination of the other without at least a preliminary gesture of warning and challenge—as Don Ricardo had done in his savage ambuscade in the street—was outside the unwritten code. It was crude, foreign to the Don's usual subtlety.

"Why, you hell-smeared, bushwhackin' son o' Satan!" Devlin growled angrily, and hammered shots at the flash. But the Don had already darted off, as was evidenced by another gun spurt from a different spot. Some of the Don's fighters had got clear of the wreckage, but they were lying low, apparently trying to size up how the game stood.

A hail sounded in the street. "Devlin! How're you makin' out in there?"

"C'm on in an' see for yourself, if you're interested," Devlin returned curtly, and went on warily stalking the elusive Don around the barroom.

Banjo could be heard grunting and swearing, heaving planks out of his way as he extricated himself. "Don't let 'em in here, Devlin . . . not till I find my gun, anyway!" he called. "An', mind you, don't kill Risa. He's the hombre who knows where my forty thousand went!"

"I also know where a certain badge went!" put in the Don bitterly, with another close shot at Devlin. "It went to an unprincipled blackguard who has sunk so low that he sells out to a renegade lawman and turns his guns against his own kind!"

"Damn your slanderin' black soul—" began Devlin, his temper rising high. To be shot at without warning was bad enough, but to be insulted along with it was going altogether too far.

"Devlin! Risa! Call off your fight, for the love

o' Mike!" broke in Banjo urgently. "Listen to what's goin' on out there . . . we're all in the same hole!"

There were mutterings and the noises of a crowd gathering in the street and around the Casa. A voice rose above the murmur. Surprisingly, it was the piping voice of Doc Sunday.

"Citizens of Trinidad, I call on every man to give his full support to the marshal!" squeaked the little veterinary. "The law must be upheld. That saloon there is a sink of iniquity, a den of criminals and notorious outlaws, and must be wiped out! Marshal Conant, this town is behind you. Let's wipe out that foul spot on our town, burn the ungodly place and shoot down those lawless wolves as they come out!"

With the ending of the pious and inflaming speech, a moment's silence settled inside the embattled barroom.

"It's a frame-up, Devlin!" Banjo called softly. "Conant set it goin' when he gave you that badge. He an' his crowd are out to finish Risa, an' he used you for the big stick to get things started. He's playin' a deep game . . . playin' one ace against another . . . an' my forty thousand is the jackpot!"

"Your forty thousand dollars," observed Devlin, "'pears to have more bright specimens gunnin' for it than flies round a honey jug. . . . Rico, quit slingin' lead at me, an' I'll do the same favor for you . . . for the time bein'. Looks like we better smoke our way out o' here before we finish our argument. Meet me at the door. Ballinger, you join us there. You know so much, feller, I aim to keep you with me till you tell the rest."

They met near the smashed doorway, against the wall. In the faint light that came in from the street, Don Ricardo de Risa looked somewhat damaged. Usually trim and debonair, even dandyish, his tumble with the gallery had marred his elegance. Even his swarthily handsome face had not escaped unscathed, for one side of it was grazed and dirty, and his thin line of black mustache lacked the fine points of carefully waved ends.

But the Don's dark eyes held a quiet glitter, and he held his slim body in a naturally graceful pose, one hand resting negligently on his hip, the other on a holstered gun butt. He could always be trusted to cut a dash, under any circumstances, and at the same time be perfectly ready to deal out deft slaughter if the occasion and the chance warranted it.

"I notice that you do not wear your badge in sight," he murmured with silken politeness. "Can it be that you are ashamed of it?"

"You mention that damned badge just once more," Devlin promised acidly, "an' I'll bend a gun barrel over your bonnet! I seem to've stepped into some cussed mess of yours, an' the only part I like about it is the forty thousand dollars. Now, you pass the word to those *paisanos* o' yours . . . what's left of 'em . . . to saddle those nags in the rear corral. We've got to move out, pronto."

"They'll have that back alley covered," Banjo pointed out. "We'll never quit town that way!"

Don Ricardo flashed his white teeth in an intimate and knowing smile at Devlin. "He underestimates us, amigo," he remarked, and now he was all fraternal amiability. "Your plan, of course, is the same as mine, no? I and my men will get the horses ready. You will create a diversion to draw most of this town's annoying animals around here to the street. Thus we will have the rear alley cleared for our break. Am I right, old friend?"

"Pretty close guess, Rico," Devlin acknowledged.

"I and my men will wait for you, of course," added the Don brightly.

"Of course."

The Don departed rearward, taking his men along, and Banjo stared at Devlin. "Hell's windmills!" he exclaimed. "Why, he'll skip out an' leave us up the stump! D'you trust that slippery sinner to wait for us?"

Devlin shifted his cigar and took a look through the broken window at the armed mob massing outside. "Yeah," he murmured, "I trust Rico . . . just about as far as I'd trust an unrepentent horse thief on a dark night!"

IV.

Rifle shots began cracking behind the building. Another yelled query came from the street in front. "What's the score, Devlin? If you're still on your feet, come on out an' let us finish the job in there!"

"An' get your head blown off!" whispered Banjo. "That's Shang Tate, the one with the big teeth an' chisel chin that you booted."

Devlin nodded. From the sounds in the rear, he judged that Don Ricardo and his bandit crew were readying to make their break out of the corral. "If you proddy citizens figure you're big on the scrap," he called out, "why don't you head off those hombres? They're bustin' out through the back!"

A group of men at once cut diagonally across the street toward the side alley, and most of the citizen crowd went swarming on their heels. Devlin turned and headed for the back door, Banjo following him.

The corral was a madhouse when they looked out into it. The mob was surrounding it, blazing blindly through the cracks in the high slab fence. Saddled horses plunged and reared inside the corral, held and fought by straining men who tried to trigger back a return fire while they kept their grasp on the threshing bridle reins. Two or three

of the horses, riderless and on the loose, bucked around the corral with their heads tucked in and tails flying high.

Devlin glimpsed a splendid silhouette, a tossing rider who somehow was holding his seat in the chaos and keeping a gun spurting at the same time.

"This way, Rico!" he barked. "Through the barroom . . . but don't forget to duck goin' through the doors!" He leaped out of the way and into the milling ruckus of the corral. "Grab y'self a horse, Ballinger!"

Hoofs thundered into the barroom. By some miracle the Don got his horse through the back doorway without dismounting, but his followers had to drag and punish theirs through. Devlin made connections with the snapping reins of a riderless horse that had lost its last grain of sense, and managed to browbeat it through the doorway, colliding with Banjo and a captive sorrel en route.

Stamping horses and cursing men choked the barroom. The front exit was blocked by Don Ricardo, whose fractious mount refused to get itself headed in the right direction and had an insane desire to remain where it was. Devlin checked his own borrowed horse and stepped up into the saddle. He reached over and thumped a gun barrel against the flank of the Don's contrary brute, and De Risa barely got his head down in time to clear the door frame as his horse lunged through with a squeal. Then every horse in the barroom took the notion to follow, but Devlin got out ahead of the rush.

They came plunging out one after another, dodging the hitch rack, their owners mounting on the run as they hit the street. Devlin whipped a shot into the side alley as he flashed by it, and another at a dim figure kneeling in a doorway with a rifle. Not all the mob had gone around to the corral, and some of those who had gone there had caught onto the maneuver and were racing back into the street. But nobody appeared sold on the idea of getting in the way of the charging string of hard-shooting horsemen, and Tom Conant was nowhere around to set the example.

Devlin ran his horse abreast of Don Ricardo, riding out through the town's adobe fringe where doors were hurriedly slammed shut as the clattering cavalcade raced by. "Our little play worked all right, Rico," he called dryly.

"Excellently, from your viewpoint," returned the Don in his fluent English, and sent Devlin a sour glance. "It would have worked better, amigo, had you taken me more fully into your confidence! I lost two or three good men in that corral."

"Just so you didn't lose that forty thousand," drawled Devlin, "let's have no regrets."

The Don uttered a bitter shred of a laugh. "This time, beloved friend, your enviable and highly developed nose for gold has led you onto a cold trail. I lost that forty thousand dollars a week ago!"

North along the Purgatoire they drew up in a bunch, and Devlin, knowing the breed of men who followed fortune with the Don, allowed none of them to get behind his back.

They rested their horses under the skyline of the long ridge that overlooked their back trail, the shining tracks of the new railroad, and the winding stream of the Purgatoire. Having loosened cinches, they lighted up cigarettes and cocked ears toward Trinidad for possible sounds of pursuit.

"Now, Rico," Devlin opened up, "about your forty thousand—"

"*My* forty thousand!" Banjo broke in. "Here's the way it was, Preacher. I brought a good beef herd up from Arizona, an' sold out to Doc Sunday for cash on the line. Doc's a lot more than just a vet. You might not think it to look at him, but he owns a sizable ranch besides his livery business an' other town interests, an' he's a big dealer in cattle on the side. He's got contracts to sell beef to the railroad construction camps at Fort Union, an' to the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico. He needed cattle to fill those contracts, so he paid me full market price . . . forty thousand dollars. Next day somebody got away with that forty thousand, an' it's no secret that this Risa bandit did it!"

Don Ricardo eyed him thoughtfully. "I suppose I should shoot you," he murmured, "but perhaps you are more useful alive than dead. You see, last week I was approached by . . . ah . . . a certain gentleman who assured me that the stagecoach to Taos would be carrying a large sum in cash the next trip. The cash, he said, was owned by a man with a scar on his face, who would also be on the stage. I agreed to . . . hem . . . look into the matter and share the profits with the gentleman. Incidentally, he wanted the owner killed. He thought it would be best."

"But you had other ideas, huh?" Devlin interposed.

Don Ricardo inclined his sleek head. "Naturally, I had no intention of sharing the cash with this gentleman, if that is what you mean. Oh, the man with the scar? Yes, he was killed in the holdup. He made the foolish mistake of reaching for a gun. Chapalillo, here, shot him very neatly." He turned to Banjo inquiringly. "Who *was* that fellow?"

"It wasn't me," said Banjo. "I'd planned to take that stage, but I changed my mind after I met Vada Co— Never mind that. Anyway, I shipped my cash on ahead, an' stayed over for the next stage. The man you killed happened to be the mayor o' Trinidad. He had a scar, too."

"So that was why the town was so hostile, keep-

ing me penned up in that cursed saloon!" exclaimed the Don. "I didn't dare step outside or show a light. They knew who did it. Conant knew, at least, but he found it hard to gather enough guns to come at me openly. So he hired a certain Señor Devlin to—"

"You're a liar," Devlin cut in calmly. "I don't thank you for cutting loose at me on the street, when you saw him hand me that badge. But I'll take that up with you later on. Let's get down to what happened to the cash."

"Oh, yes, the cash. I must confess that I slipped very badly there." Don Ricardo winced at the memory. "The gentleman arranged to meet us in his buckboard to get his share. I certainly had no idea of meeting him, but after the holdup we found the country full of deputies and posses. They seemed to spring up everywhere! So we scattered, and I went to meet the gentleman. I handed him the express box of cash, expecting to catch up with the buckboard later and take it away from him after he had got it safely past the posses. But the thieving hypocrite double-crossed me! He turned off the road somewhere and I never did find him, and he got safely into Trinidad with all the loot, devil take his treacherous soul!"

The Don's righteous wrath brought a faint grin to Devlin's hard mouth. It wasn't often that Rico could be tricked successfully. When it did happen he was indignant. It injured his healthy self-esteem and ego. This particular trick had all the earmarks of careful planning on the part of somebody who didn't lack for brains and nerve.

"I have been waiting and watching for a chance to get at that slimy thief!" declared the Don, and his dark eyes gleamed. "He may surround himself with his gunmen, but some day he'll fall into my hands, and then—"

"Who is he?" Banjo demanded impatiently.

"Doc Sunday!"

Banjo stared. "Well, damn my thick skull, why didn't I guess that?" he blurted. "Here all the time I've been thinkin' it was Conant . . . thinkin' they were his gunmen pals who were layin' for me. I'm sure glad for Vada's sake it isn't her father who's the —"

"Restrain your gladness," interrupted the Don coldly. "Conant is hand in glove with Doc Sunday. Doc is the boss and the brains, and Conant is his law protection. The Silver Spur crowd does as it is told, for pay. The only reason Doc didn't get Shang Tate and the rest to do the holdup is that he would have had to pay them most of the loot. So he used me, and then he and Conant tried to have me wiped out! *Me!*"

"I got kind o' used, too, when that damned badge was pushed onto me," Devlin observed. He shook his head slightly, half in admiration, half in anger. "A neat little devil, that Doc Sunday. Run his sandy over all three of us. Got him a beef herd, an' got the price of it back, free an' clear, without spendin' a cent! Got the law all on his side an' against us. Wonder where he's cached that forty thousand?"

"Satan only knows," muttered Banjo. "I do know he's got my cattle down in the railroad pens, all ready to ship out when the train rolls in. I'd sure like to toss him into one o' those pens. My cattle came out o' the brush . . . plenty wild, an' sore at the world. You got any ideas how to get hold o' that cash?"

Devlin met Don Ricardo's eye, and both tried to read the other's mind. The Don smiled affably, but imps of deviltry danced in his eyes. "Shall we go after it together, amigo?" he suggested softly.

The proposal was a mockery and a dare. Knowing each other so well, and having no illusions left, both comprehended clearly the nature of such a pact. It could be nothing else than a duel of wits and steel for cash stakes. A competitive glint crept into Devlin's opaque gray eyes. He preferred a hard game and a tough and resourceful opponent. Life, as he chose to live it, was a combat and a streak of vivid color, and he wanted it no other way.

He nodded toward Banjo. "What about him? Maybe he still figures he's got an interest in that dinero."

"We'll cut him in," offered the Don generously, "if we get it . . . and if he helps us get it. Is that fair?"

"Downright charitable," said Banjo with some sarcasm. His expression, as he studied the two notorious long riders, gave away his thoughts. They would work together, those two, against the common enemy. They would fight like devils for the cause, savagely, ruthlessly. But the showdown would come when and if they ever got within reach of that cash, and then a third party wouldn't stand much of a look in. Still, there was always a chance. It was not unknown for a nervy terrier to dart in and carry off the bone while sharp-fanged wolfhounds fought to the death over it.

"Is it a deal?" asked Don Ricardo. "Yes? *Bueno!* Then let us plan our campaign. I suggest that we strike at Doc Sunday through Conant, seeing that Doc is so hard to catch. If we can get at Conant we can make him talk. No doubt Conant could tell many interesting things about Doc's private life . . . and to keep them private, Doc could be made to pay us that money!"

"Blackmail, huh?" remarked Devlin. "Leave it tc you to conjure up something like that! How would you whip Conant into line?"

The Don spread his graceful hands. "Simple,

amigo . . . very simple. Conant has a young and charming daughter. I have seen her. A father is a father, the world over, pathetically willing to sacrifice anything for the safety of a young daughter, not so? I have observed that Ballinger is on friendly terms with the girl. It would be easy for him to— Ballinger, why do you glare at me like that?"

Devlin shoved the furious Banjo back with a sweep of his long arm. "Cool off before you try to answer that question, young feller!" he advised. "Rico, you got a nice idea there. Nice an' dirty! Too dirty even for me!"

The Don frowned offendedly and drew himself up. "The girl would not really be harmed," he protested. "Surely you do not think that I, for one, would actually— What in the name of all the saints is that noise?"

It was an alien kind of noise that they heard, a growling hum and a steady rumble such as no hoofed beasts had ever made. "Train comin' down the tracks," said Banjo shortly. "Cattle train, I reckon, to load those cattle in the Trinidad pens."

Chewing contemplatively on his cigar, Devlin gazed at the Don. "Ever stick up a train, Rico?" he inquired conversationally.

"Not an empty cattle train, no," disclaimed the Don.

"Then here's your chance to complete your education," said Devlin. "Banjo, you said those brush dusters are in the railroad loadin' pens just outside town, right? Uh-huh. If those cows broke out an' stampeded through town, there'd be quite some excitement . . . enough so we could maybe raid Doc's livery an' his office, an' find what we're lookin' for. The town wouldn't be expectin' us back so quick, not on a cattle train, anyhow!"

"How would we get out again?" Banjo asked.

"Plenty horses in Doc's livery, an' my black's one of 'em. Anyway, Rico can leave behind two-three men here to pick up these horses we got, after we climb on the rattler. They can start back toward town with 'em, an' be thereabouts to meet the rest of us as we make our getaway."

"I still think my own plan is best," demurred Don Ricardo. "It would be so simple to—"

"Quit diggin' for an excuse to ring that girl in on the party, you second-hand Lothario!" Devlin flung at him, and got back into his saddle as the

The cattle pens couldn't hold those Arizona outlaws once they were spooked. They crashed through the crumpled fences in a bawling, terrified mass.

headlight of the coming train beamed around a bend. "C'm on . . . let's jump that rattler, hombres!"

V.

The rattle and bang of the train's champing wheels drowned out the swift thudding of hoofs racing alongside the tracks. The engineer poked his head out of the cab to scan the right of way, while the fireman rested on his coal scoop. Speed was being cut down as the train rolled on toward Trinidad.

A brakeman rose from the caboose and came stepping along the jiggling catwalk over the cattle cars. He stopped short at what he saw, and the jerk of his head meant that he was shouting, but the wind tore his voice away. He broke into a trot, gesturing and swinging his lighted lantern. A tiny, wicked flash blinked from one of the riders loping in the darkness and the brakeman found himself swinging a dead and ruined lantern. He flattened down on the catwalk and stayed there. Cowpunchers on a lark were rough playmates, and he wanted no part in whatever crack-brained prank these night-riding saddle sinners were up to.

The engineer gaped foolishly as a wild-eyed and terrified horse almost spilled itself against the engine. Its rider leaned far over and kicked loose of the stirrups, and then a sinister black apparition was swinging aboard the cab while his horse bolted free. The fireman straightened up, his eyes popping. Train holdups were not uncommon, but nobody yet had aspired to stick up a string of empty cattle cars, and it didn't make sense.

"S-say, you!" stuttered the engineer, backing off and groping behind him for a heavy wrench. "Wh-what's the idea?"

"Just hitchin' a ride is all, brother," Devlin comforted him, and knocked the wrench from his fist. "Put the spurs to this coal eater o' yours . . . we need a little more speed around here!"

Banjo came climbing over the tender. Taking hold of the scoop, he began feeding more coal into the firebox. "I savvy how to run this iron bronco . . . I think," he called to Devlin. "Ran a dinky down in old Mexico once, when I was a button."

"Yeah?" Devlin ran his eyes over the inside of the cab. "Well, which o' these doodads do you wiggle to fetch up a gallop out o' this thing?"

"The throttle." Banjo pushed the stuttering engineer aside. "This is it, I reckon. There, see? You just drag it open a notch or two. Easy, drivin' these things, ain't it? Just nothin' to it."

The outraged engineer found his voice again and brought out a bellow. "You crazy idjits, quit that! We gotta slow down for a stop, this side o' Trinidad, an' crawl in after daylight. It's special orders! Cattle in the new loadin' pens . . . train would upset 'em!"

"Fun, huh?" grinned Banjo. "Skipper, you don't know those cows like I do. Your puffer won't upset 'em. It'll just natchally explode 'em from here to Pike's Peak! More speed, Devlin?"

"Sure. This thing's got more rattle than git up." Devlin yanked the throttle all the way open. "Where's Rico an' his merry cutthroats?"

"Ridin' the bumps back yonder, I reckon. They jumped on some o' the cars, down along the tail end. She don't ride any too easy, does she? Listen to the racket she makes goin' round the curve. Y'know, Devlin, these things ain't noways perfect yet. I'll take a horse an' saddle for mine. You can go to sleep on a horse an' it'll take you home. They got sense. You go dozin' off on this tin whoozis, an' you're li'ble to end up most any damn place. Ain't that right, skipper?"

The engineer didn't offer any opinion, and neither did the fireman. They were huddled at the other door of the cab, apparently trying to decide whether to jump out now or wait for something worse to occur. The train screeched around the curves, lurching perilously, steel grinding on steel, and on the straight stretches it hit a speed never contemplated by its designers. On the last curve down the sloping hill country the inside wheels lifted and pounded the rails, and the cab shivered. The slam and bang of the cars as they were wrenched around the curve sounded like so many head-on collisions. The fireman shut his eyes tight and prayed loudly, but the engineer just clung on and stared out, his eyes as big as silver dollars.

Then the lights of Trinidad came rushing to meet them. Devlin took a fresh bite on his cigar. Banjo rolled and lighted a cigarette. Both looked out and gazed interestedly ahead at the lights. Something was soon due to happen, and they didn't want to miss it. Banjo got one last inspiration. He pulled the whistle cord and hung onto it.

Hot wheels pounding, couplings grinding, the whistle hooting full blast and red sparks showering from the firebox, the cattle train roared into Trinidad—with Devlin at the throttle.

Under the glaring headlights the crowded loading pens loomed up, the chutes jutting up aslant from them like gangways to nowhere. A multitude of longhorned heads and redly shining eyes sprouted up in the pens, and for an instant they were motionless, the cattle fear-frozen by the glare and clangor of the onrushing monster. But when the panic struck, it was as if a tornado ripped into and through them.

The great ungainly bodies rose, hump-backed, stiff-tailed, and the snorting bawl of them was an eruptive blare that no cattleman could mistake. Pawing, kicking, they piled up against the fences, all trying to climb their brethren to get out of the pens and away from the strange terror. A fence crumpled, the splintering crackle of it only a puny sound in the loud clacking of wide-spreading, pointed horns. Then another, and another.

The pens had been built to hold reasonably belligerent cattle, but they could not withstand this solid, jarring pressure. These brush outlaws had been belligerent enough to begin with, wild as buffalo and twice as ugly. The dark shapes charged free from the broken pens with their heads thrust forward like double-pronged battering-rams, and the matter of a town standing in their path of flight was no obstruction.

"They're off!" Devlin called to Banjo. "How d'you halt this rattle chariot?" He closed the throttle, but the train coasted on.

Banjo pulled his head in. "Where's the brake?"

"How the hell do I know? You said you savvied how to run this thing."

"Well, I ran it, didn't I? But stoppin' it . . . I dunno. This is rigged different from that dinky I ran down in—"

"Damn you an' your Mexican dinky! Hey, engineer, where's the brake?"

The engineer gabbled something about wrecking the whole train if they threw on the emergency brake at this hurtling speed. Then, midway, he changed his tune as something worse occurred to him, and he began yelling for the emergency to be thrown on right away. He pointed a shaking finger at it, and he and the fireman prepared to jump.

"You mean this . . . or this?" shouted Banjo, and tugged his weight on everything in sight.

Instinct told Devlin to get a grip on the nearest firm object, which happened to be the engineer's hand rail. Even at that, he nearly knocked out his front teeth on the edge of the cab. When he did that he knew that Banjo, by some lucky accident, had got results. The flanged wheels shrieked horribly as they locked, gouging the rails, and it was then that Devlin found himself being thrown against the edge of the cab. The train didn't stop, but it lost momentum with a rapid series of violent jerks that threw forward everything lying loose. It sounded, too, as if all the cattle cars behind were trying to climb up over the locomotive. The engineer and fireman decided to take their chances and jumped from the rocking, jerking cab.

Devlin got braced to leap out, but he looked back into the cab first to see what was delaying Banjo. The latter, he observed, wasn't doing very well for himself. He was lying on the floor of the cab, knocked out after having fetched his head a fearful crack against something or other when the train first bucked on the locked wheels. Devlin coughed up that cigar that the edge of the cab had rammed past his teeth, swore, and bent over the Arizonan.

The train groaned and shook to a slackening impetus, until it slowed to a tired crawl that would soon be a stop. Banjo was knocked completely out, no doubt of that. Somewhere back along the tracks the train crew was howling bloody murder, and over in the cattle-stampeded town things were certainly running into a noisy mess.

Devlin swore again, deeply and impatiently. Here was the chance to raid Doc Sunday's quarters while the town was in an uproar, and here lay this Arizonan, dead to the world. To abandon Banjo to the wrath of the train crew and the vengeance of the town just couldn't be done. It wasn't as if he were Rico. And yet he couldn't be lugged along handily, either. Devlin debated it and made his decision.

"'Bout the best I can do for you, feller, is see you clear," he muttered. "It's up to you to do the rest from there on."

He located the locked emergency brake and knocked it off. He opened the throttle a notch, stepped down from the moving cab, and left Banjo where he lay. The train's slowing speed steadied, picked up a little, and the long string of cattle cars rumbled past Devlin. He reasoned roughly that it would roll along at that sedate pace until Banjo got his senses back and stopped it somewhere along the line. By that time Banjo would be pretty well out of danger of capture. As to what the young cattleman's problems might be after that—well, that was his affair. No man had a right to expect too much, after letting himself be knocked out by a locomotive.

Devlin took off toward the town, and saw no sign of Don Ricardo and his scrappers. He muttered imprecations on the banged head of Banjo Ballinger. While he had been wasting precious time in saving the hide of that cactus bender, the Don had got a start on him and maybe already had his hands on that forty thousand dollars. Trinidad was in a turmoil, Devlin could tell by the uproar. It was full of wild cows, wilder men, and gunfire.

He sprinted through an alley, dodged a rampaging and bewildered steer as he came out of it, and cut along one side of the plaza to the main street.

A terrific crash rang out, booming through the night and dwarfing all other sounds while it lasted. It came from down along the railroad right of way —the smashing din of a train wrecking itself on the roadbed. At last it died out in far-off echoes, and the noises of the town could be heard again.

Devlin shook his head slightly, and kept on into the main street. "That brush buster's got the damnedest brand o' bad luck," he muttered. "I clear forgot about the tracks endin' down along there a ways! Maybe that's why the engineer got so excited!"

From the looks of things, most of the escaped cattle had stampeded through the town and gone on through, leaving some devastation here and there, but excited confusion still ruled the main street. Devlin slipped around behind the livery, and as soon as he looked inside the back door he knew for sure that Don Ricardo had also passed through and left his mark. There wasn't a horse left in the stable, and now Devlin was too blazing mad to swear. Among those missing horses was his own big black, an animal that was more than just a horse to him, and which the Don—excellent judge of horses that he was—had long coveted.

Out in the street, in front of the livery, half the town's dazed population shouted questions at the stableman.

"What in thunder hit this place, Harvey?"

"Who was they?"

"Where's—"

The stableman made himself heard. "Cut out all your squallin' an' I'll tell you! They was the Risa mob. They run off ev'ry last horse in the stable, an' looted Doc Sunday's office! Them cows came bustin' up the street, an' I started slammin' the front doors to keep 'em out. Vada Conant, she run in here off the street, so I let her tend the doors while I went back to the horses. Some of 'em was gettin' spooky at the noise. Them cows was still on the stomp when the Risa mob busted in. One of 'em backed me up with a gun, an' I thought I was sure a corpse! They grabbed Vada, kicked in Doc's office door—"

"*What-aat?* Where's the marshal? Why ain't he here?"

"He was . . . but they grabbed him, too!" howled the stableman. "Vada hollered, an' Tom Conant came runnin' in, but he didn't get far. I heard a smack, an' then there was Tom down on his face. That Risa hombre was cussin' soft an' low when he come out o' Doc's office. They slapped saddles on all the horses, slung Tom on one an' Vada on another, an' sailed out on the high lope. The feller who had the gun on me, he made a face at me an' I liked to faint! Gents, I ain't no fightin' man, an' I don't claim to be. I'm just a—"

"Where's Doc?"

"He left for his ranch after the Casa fight, but he

said he'd be right back. What he'll do about this, I dunno! Gents, you know it warn't no fault o' mine. What could I do? I ain't no—"

"Here's Doc's buckboard comin' now!" somebody broke in. "Man, look at him come!"

Devlin eased through the stable and peered out into the street. The crowd was hastily splitting apart to make way for a buckboard and team. The buckboard was old and paint-peeled, but the team was a fine pair of big duns. Doc hauled the duns to a hoof-digging halt, and stood up in the buckboard. He was small and skinny, a dried-out wisp of a man in stingily genteel attire, and yet he stood and glowered about him with an air of despotic command. And the crowd, tough and truculent as it was, fell silent before that shabby little man.

"What's going on here?" Doc demanded, and even his reedy voice held dominance. "Who let my cattle loose? Shang, where are you? Where's Conant? Speak up, damn you!"

It was incongruous to see Shang Tate, that buck-toothed gunman, step forward and nervously clear his throat. "The Risa mob came back when we wasn't lookin' for 'em, Doc," he reported, and his manner was a mixture of sullenness and deference. "They stampeded your cows out o' the pens an' that sent everybody to cover. Wrecked a train, looted your office, caught Conant an' his kid, an' got clear away!"

Doc stood very still. Only his sucked-in lips betrayed anything of his emotions. "Get after them!" he snapped. "Form a posse, quick!"

"What with?" retorted Shang Tate. "Them cows came sudden when they came through! Nobody had a chance to reach a hitchin' rack. You can figger what happened to our horses. They hightailed. All we got left of 'em is a bunch o' broken bridle reins. An' the Risa mob cleaned out your stable! I doubt there's a horse left in this town, outside o' your duns there. We're set afoot, I'm here to tell you! If ever I— Hell's pitch pot, what's comin' now?"

It was the train crew, stamping up the street, shouting for the law, and dragging a badly banged-up young Arizona cattleman with them.

"Wrecked my train, he did!" bellowed the engineer, leading the party and waving his arms. "Him an' a big black son o' blazes as crazy as him! You got law here? You got a jail? Well, where . . . tell me that!"

The center of the crowd shifted, surrounding the trainmen and their sagging prisoner. Doc Sunday turned to stare, and Shang Tate called tonelessly to him: "It's Ballinger, skin me if it ain't!"

Devlin plucked a gun from under his long black coat, knocked several citizens sprawling in his exit from the livery, and sprang at the buckboard.

VI.

Doc Sunday didn't have much time to be more than startled, and no time at all in which to do anything about it. The buckboard bounced as Devlin landed onto it. Doc whipped around with an oath, almost losing his balance, but a large and muscular hand crushed his hat down over his eyes and forced him to the floor boards. A foot planted itself on him and held him securely there out of mischief. Then Devlin snatched up the dropped lines, slapped them along the backs of the duns, and the team lunged forward.

What the astounded crowd thought about it was contained in a medley of yells. Devlin got off a shot in the direction of Shang Tate, but the buck-toothed gunman was diving behind the train crew and attempting to sight a shot on his own account. The engineer, strongly objecting to being placed in a cross fire, lost his head and tried to get around behind Tate. The last Devlin saw of them, they were side-stepping each other, the engineer in the way of Tate's gun, and Tate cursing him. Some others of the Silver Spur bunch got active when they realized what was going on, but by that time the fast duns were in full stride and scattering the outer fringe of the citizen crowd.

The buckboard swung around the next bend, pulled out of the street's ruts, and onto the Taos trail, south out of Trinidad. Devlin, standing with his long legs straddling the seat, took his foot off Doc Sunday and hauled him up from the floor.

"If you know where Rico is likely to head . . . an' you better know—" he began, and when he got that much said he found he had to act.

Doc Sunday was only halfway up on his feet, but from somewhere he had plucked a snub-nosed pistol. Quick as a sand lizard, he jabbed it at his tall captor. Devlin struck at it and it exploded along his forearm, so close that it burned his sleeve, before he twisted it from Doc's fingers and flung it away.

He slammed the veterinary down onto the seat. "Sit there an' drive, you damn little wasp, where I can keep an eye on you! Here, take the lines. Where's Rico likely to head for? Where was he campin' out when you first got in touch with him? Wherever 'tis, you drive there . . . an' fast!"

But Doc wasn't through yet. There were depths of hatred and sheer vitriolic dangerousness in the little man that his genteel appearance belied. Five minutes later, when Devlin turned to gaze rearward, Doc stopped and straightened again so swiftly that Devlin, catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, ducked just barely in time. Doc's black veterinary bag missed his head by scant inches. Before the bag had fallen into the brush that lined the trail, Devlin had Sunday by the neck.

"One more bit o' horseplay out o' you, an' I'll use you for a quirt to whip up these nags!" he growled. Glimmering gray eyes, sinister and menacing, pinned baleful little green ones. "Now you take me along to Rico's hide-out camp . . . an' bear in mind that if I don't see it tonight, you'll not see the sun tomorrow mornin'!"

It was gray dawn, and they had long ago turned off the Taos trail, when Doc Sunday pulled the tired team to a halt and sat stiffly on the seat, his face pale and expressionless.

"The old Pueblo stronghold," he said in little more than a dry whisper. "About another mile down river, this side. They may have gone back there, or they may not. They used it early this spring as a camp and a horse holdout. Stolen horses. I bought from them."

He turned his face slowly to Devlin. His eyes showed dread, and it was naked and ugly in them. This little man had self-control, brains and nerve, but he was drawn too taut, and his kind of courage could be broken as it was breaking now. "Let me go!" he said hushedly. "If they get me—"

Devlin was not incapable of pity, but he had none for the likes of this viperish little hypocrite. "Drive on!" he commanded. "You're payin' this call with me!"

Doc shut his eyes and shuddered. Devlin had to shake up the team and get it going again. He had no use and little sympathy for strained nerves, his own being as sound and healthy as his appetite. He looked forward to catching up with Rico.

"Tricky damned horse thief!" he grunted.

He saw the high, broken battlements of the old *caliche* walls rising against the slatey sky, as the buckboard jounced slowly over the hilly terrain. The heavy silence of the place was definite and brooding.

Once a swarming beehive of activity in the old times, now a long abandoned ruin, the Pueblo stronghold stood there in its limitless patience, crumbling bit by bit with the aging years. Pueblo Indians had built and used it before the coming of the white man, for protection against the nomads of the desert country—the marauding Comanches and loot-loving Apaches. It had served its time and purposes, outlived its usefulness, and been left to join the lonely company of other disintegrating strongholds like it.

Ruined *kivas* dotted the tawny ground about it, their mud roofs caved in and leaving the subterranean ceremonial chambers merely as holes in the ground. Devlin, smelling a tang of wood smoke, and not trusting the silence, halted the duns. Dead ahead gaped the great gateway in the high wall, its doors gone, and between the gateway and the buckboard lay a stretch of sun-hardened earth.

Devlin climbed out of the buckboard on the off side and dragged Doc Sunday with him. With the dun horses between himself and the crumbling stronghold, he scanned the roofless *kivas*. He was not startled when a rifle spoke its flat crack across the silence, but he regretted somewhat the fact that he had no rifle with which to liven things up for that shooter. The range was a little long for six-guns.

He raised a hail. "You'll never get rich that way, Rico, happen you kill Doc, here!"

He waited for that to sink in. Far up the lofty Sangre de Cristo slopes two coyotes exchanged their morning howls, and the silence crept back. At last a dapper figure appeared at the open gateway.

High-headed and debonairly sure of himself as a fighting cock, Don Ricardo came stepping jauntily over toward the buckboard, half a dozen of his heavily armed men slouching warily at heel behind him. He wore his splendid sombrero at a conquering tilt, and he puffed a cigarette as he picked his almost dainty way over the stone-rubbled ground. His pair of bone-handled guns rocked gently in their silver-studded holsters, snug and flat against his thighs, and his slender hands did not swing far away from them at any time.

He was halfway across the stretch of barren ground when Devlin snapped a thinly disguised warning to him. "No need to bring your *orejanos*, Rico. Let 'em rest easy right there!"

The Don spoke a careless word over his shoulder, and came on alone. He was smiling cheerfully as he neared the buckboard. "Amigo, what a joy it is to see you safely here!" he greeted Devlin, blandly and innocently. "I was worried that some misfortune might have happened to you in Trinidad. But . . . er . . . what delayed you?"

"Some low-down thief lifted my horse!" Devlin answered briefly, fixing a cold eye on him.

"But how fortunate that you were able to secure a buckboard and team . . . and the owner!" murmured the Don. His eyes rested on Doc Sunday. He still smiled gently, but Doc shuddered again. "Come, let us go in by the fire. Breakfast is ready."

"I don't need coffee that bad, Rico!"

"No?" The Don glanced back at his half dozen followers, and again at the tall, flinty-faced gun fighter. A gesture or a word could spark off a powder keg here—but there could be no profit or satisfaction in being blown up along with it. Rico was well acquainted with those long-barreled guns hidden under the black ministerial coat. He had a sincere respect for them, as well as a reluctant and half-mocking respect for the man who owned them. "Then supposing we make a trade?"

"That's what I'm here for!"

"*Bueno!* You let me have Doc Sunday, and I

think I may be able to . . . ah . . . locate your horse for you."

"Not good enough, Rico. I'll raise you. You didn't find that forty thousand, did you? I thought not. So Doc's still got it cached away. You trot out Conant an' his daughter, an' we'll get down to business."

Don Ricardo shrugged and passed word to his watching men. One of them returned to the camp inside the walls. Soon Conant and Vada approached the buckboard, surrounded by the Don's full force. The Don called again, and Conant was brought on alone by two guards, leaving Vada at the midway halt with the rest.

Marshal Conant's head was tied up in a rag, and he looked haggard and worn. He stumbled a little, and when he sighted Doc Sunday behind the buckboard his face twitched.

"Hell burn your hide an' soul, Doc, look what you got me into!" he burst out. "I've strung along with you . . . done your dirty work an' played the game your way . . . but I warned you! I warned you if Vada ever got dragged into it, I'd blow the works! I'm ready to—"

"Shut your mouth, you fool!" Doc snarled at him.

Don Ricardo winked fraternally at Devlin. "When rogues fall out, eh? Come, Conant, keep on talking. Confession is good for the soul, so I'm told!"

Conant pointed a rigid finger at Doc Sunday. "Years ago, before I settled down, I ran with the wild bunch. He knew it. I'm still on the wanted listed, up in Montana. He knew that, too, an' he used it. He held it over me, made me string along with him, made me cover up his dirty work for him. But now I'm through! It was for Vada's sake I did it. She don't know. I'm ready to do anything to keep her from knowin' . . . or anyhow to keep her safe! By Peter's ghost, I'll be glad to end all the crooked connivin', and make another start somewhere else, if I can take my girl with me. What is it you want, Risa?"

The Don toyed with his cigarette. "I presume you and Doc went in pretty deep, eh?"

"Plenty! Holdups, cattle stealin', killings an' land grabs . . . Sunday's stung everybody, an' I covered up for him."

"You must have done a nice business," commented the Don enviously. "Would you be willing to expose him? It means putting your own neck in the noose, too, of course. But I'm afraid that is the lowest price that I would take for your very charming daughter! After all, I had to go to considerable trouble to secure her as my . . . hem . . . guest!"

Conant looked as if he craved to smash a fist into

His team whipped into a break-neck gallop, Tom Conant was taking no chances on being caught before he had his showdown with Rico.

that smiling, darkly handsome face. But he nodded. "I'll do it!"

The Don shifted his inquiring gaze to Doc Sunday. "And what price are *you* ready to pay, *Señor Médico*, to keep me from making him talk?" he purred. "Shall we say . . . forty thousand dollars?"

Doc's lips sucked in. "It's in the Trinidad Bank," he whispered huskily. "I'll give you a check."

The Don's white teeth flashed. "You will give me the cash, you liar! You would not have dared put stolen cash in the bank. Conant, you will go with him and see that he gets it. Your daughter will stay with me until I have the cash. If you fail—" He lifted his shoulders and finished delicately: "In that event, I would seek consolation, to take the edge off my bitter disappointment. *Sabe?*" He glanced toward Vada Conant, who was out of hearing, and his expressive eyes were interested.

Conant breathed heavily. "I'll see that he gets it. Where'll I bring it?"

"Ride north out of Trinidad at sundown," directed the Don, "and have the money in a sack. We will be posted outside town, watching for you. You know that gravel pit up along the railroad, that the graders left? Stop there and wait. Now get into that buckboard with Doc, and—"

"Not so fast, Rico," put in Devlin. "What do I get out of this?"

"Your horse, amigo . . . your beautiful horse! But not until I get that money!"

Devlin had his coat open, his thumbs in his crossed belts. He had held that stance right along, and he knew that the Don was not unaware of its potential significance. The Don was fast, very fast. He modestly claimed to be a shade faster than any man he had ever met—bar one. The one was Preacher Devlin, and Rico didn't pretend otherwise.

Rico looked consideringly at those muscular, flexible hands, and once more at his men, waiting at fifty yards' distance. He pensively crushed out the stub of his cigarette.

"You surely must admit, Don Preacher, that I am in the position to make terms," he said quietly. "But let not two devoted old friends like us make a quarrel over mere money. Wait, I have it . . . the cattle! Doc Sunday will cancel the bill of sale which Ballinger made out to him when he sold the herd, and you—"

Doc Sunday uttered a muffled squawk and the Don stared pitilessly at him. "You are lucky to get off alive!" he snapped. "Have you that bill of sale in your pocket? Get it out! Here is a pencil. Cancel it and sign it."

Doc obeyed, the agony of a miser etching his pale face. The Don took the paper from him, and passed it on to Devlin with a grand flourish. "There, amigo! In return for getting back the title to his herd, Ballinger should be willing to sign half the cows over to you."

"Those cows," stated Devlin, "are scattered from hell to Christmas, an' Ballinger's in the calaboose!"

"Too bad," sighed the Don sympathetically. "But we all have our little problems, no? Perhaps you can break Ballinger out of the jail, or something."

"Bring out my horse, damn you!"

"Amigo, it distresses me to refuse you," the Don said sorrowfully, while his eyes danced with the glee of a boy stealing apples from the parsonage orchard. "I know how you esteem that fine animal. Therefore I must hold onto it for a while, to keep you on your good behavior! But I can lend you another horse in the meantime . . . if you will first give me your solemn word of honor that you will not interfere with Conant's delivery of that money sack!"

Devlin compressed his wide, hard mouth. It was in him to send the lightning into his ready hands, and he saw that his crimson thought communicated itself to the Don, for Rico's quirking smile froze. But Devlin's glinting eyes touched upon Vada Conant, back there in the Don's ruffian crew. He recalled his first impression of her, of her probable capacity for becoming an unwitting source of trouble among men, and he took no satisfaction in reflecting that he had been right.

A girl—particularly a girl as pretty as that—was a responsibility, a big trouble in a small package, and a bar to powder-smoke progress. In a flaring gun fight she'd be in the way, would likely manage to get herself killed or maimed, and then a man's memory would deal him misery for the rest of his life. The Don had pulled a neat and simple trick out of the bag, parking the girl there among his border freebooters, and he had built that trick up to a pyramid of skullduggery with forty thousand dollars on the apex.

"All right, you blackmailin' son of a Chihuahua pickpocket . . . we'll let it ride at that!" Devlin agreed harshly.

Don Ricardo let out a long breath, like a high-stakes gambler who had scraped by with an ill-gotten ace and taken the pot. The bright smile that played over his face was an irritation and a mockery. He clicked his heels, bowed extravagantly, swept the ground with his sombrero. He was in his element, riding the crest of victory and crowing over his old enemy who had bested him too often in the past.

"To compromise is the essence of diplomacy, and to bargain without anger is the test of true friendship!" he intoned with fine and fluent sarcasm. "Thus, amigo, we avoid hard feeling between us!"

VII.

Trinidad before sundown was a town of lingering peace where housewives called children off the streets for supper, visiting cattlemen gathered in the cafés, and the Mexican end of town began to waken from its half-day siesta. In an hour or so, reversing nature's procedure, Trinidad would bloom fully alive with the dying of the day.

The pattern held true despite the volcanic disturbances of yesterday. Transient visitors shrugged off the happenings as none of their affair, and the bulk of citizens went about their own private business. Few cared to ask too many questions, or to note too closely the comings and goings of the Silver Spur crowd. Queer things were in the wind—Doc Sunday and Marshal Conant driving back together into town, for instance, after being seized and carried off separately—but it was neither good policy nor profitable to press for explanations.

Nobody took much notice of the dozing rider in the ragged blanket poncho and straw sombrero who jogged lazily into town on a bony grulla horse as the sun sank to redness behind him. He rode across the shadow-streaked plaza to the main street, lifted his drooping head to look about him, and languidly dismounted at the livery. For a moment he leaned against his horse, apparently debating whether to pay for stabling or do without, for he drew out a few coins from under his poncho and laboriously counted up the sum.

Across the street, Marshal Conant hurried out of his office and stepped over to the Silver Spur hitching rack. There, Doc Sunday was examining the hoofs of a spotted horse and conferring with its owner. The marshal came up to them, and the conversation broke off.

"Uh . . . thanks, Doc. I'll do that," said the owner of the horse, and walked into the Silver Spur.

The marshal jerked his head to Doc Sunday and led the way back to his office. He kept his eyes busy and a shotgun under one arm, but the man in the ragged poncho was the only other one in the vicinity, and he was still counting his coins. The marshal paid him small heed. He was not on the lookout for any stray Mexican peon.

The peon finally led his grulla into the livery. There he found the stableman gone to supper, and after a while he wandered out again and rode away.

In half an hour he was back again, still drooping dozily in the saddle, and nearly got run into by a buckboard and team that wheeled smartly out of the livery, driven by the marshal. His grulla shied out of the way, but he kept his seat. He gazed broodingly after the rapidly retreating buckboard, sent a sour look at the livery, and nudged his horse on. A passing group of cattlemen chuckled, watching him pull up and dismount at the marshal's office.

"Gonna put in a complaint, mebbe," grinned one, and wagged his head. "That tarantula juice some o' them Mexicans gargle sure dims their light."

In the marshal's office a temporary jailer held down the fort, lounging in the marshal's chair. He was one of the Silver Spur mob, and he eyed without enthusiasm the poverty-marked visitor.

"If it's the marshal you want, hombre, he ain't here . . . an' you don't need to wait!"

"That suits me," drawled the man in the poncho, and hit him. He hit with a gun barrel, and it required only one lick. The jailer sagged out of his chair, a surprised look still on his face, and went to rest on the floor.

Occupying one of the two cells in the rear, Banjo Ballinger stopped short in his caged-bear pacing, as a tall and silent shape moved into the darkening gloom outside his cell and paused at the strap-iron door. A key clinked in the lock. Banjo crouched, his eyes glaring his suspicion of a lynching bee.

"Hey, you ain't the jailer!"

"Do tell!"

"Huh? What— *Devlin!*"

"Pipe down, railroader!"

Devlin found the right key and unlocked the cell door. "Step lively. I want to get out o' here an' get shed o' this cussed poncho. It's got more small game in it than the Apache Reservation!"

Banjo wasted no time coming out. His face was a sight and his clothes were in shreds, but none of the fight had yet been beaten out of him. They bred them tough where he'd come from.

"I was goin' loco in there," he admitted. "I sure didn't look for you to come an' break me out."

"I didn't have to break a damn thing, 'cept mebbe that jailer's head," Devlin mentioned. "Go take his gun an' shell belt. There's a middlin' good horse over at the saloon rack. Doc was foolin' over its feet, but I'll stake a bet there's nothin' wrong with 'em."

"Where's Vada? They say—"

"Young feller, you better worry about one thing at a time! Conant pulled out in Doc's buckboard a while ago, to meet Rico with your forty thousand. He had Doc's old strong box in the buckboard. I had an idea Doc might be usin' that box for something more than prescription slips. It'd be the last place anybody would hunt, bein' right out in plain sight there in the stable. But I missed out on that."

"Got here too late to grab it, huh? Hell with it! It's Vada I'm—"

"You ki-yi over an' lift that horse. I'll cover for you. Git!"

It was almost night dark now, and the Silver Spur was lighted up. Standing well back in the marshal's doorway, Devlin scratched himself and abruptly de-

cided that he'd had plenty enough of the poncho. He'd bought it and the straw sombrero from a Mexican wood chopper, on his way in from the old Pueblo ruin. It hadn't been washed since the weaving, and it had attained a ripe odor.

He drew his black hat from under his coat, punched it back into shape, and exchanged it for the straw sombrero. The poncho he flung over the senseless jailer. He found a few cigars in the marshal's desk and helped himself. Feeling some better, although itchy in spots, he chewed on a cigar and sent his attention back to the Silver Spur in time to see a bartender step out for air.

The bartender cocked his bald head forward, peering at the hitching rack. "Who's that? Say, that skew bald ain't yours! What you doin' there?"

He got an unexpected answer. Banjo bobbed up and shot at his feet, at the same time that Devlin fired over his head and scored a noisy hit on a bottle-loaded back-bar shelf in the saloon. The bartender went through the batwing doors so fast he tore a hinge askew, and they banged like a drum when they flapped together again. Banjo lifted himself onto the skew-bald gelding, and Devlin jumped for the grulla.

They dusted down the aroused street, lashing their horses, and swung sharp into the plaza, while behind them the batwing doors banged again as the customers spilled out. The plaza, always a favorite haunt of old-timers on warm nights, was a pool of garrulous harmony and reminiscence until the two riders burst through it, pursued by running citizens who blazed away with more volume than accuracy. Devlin took care to rein aside from a bemused old buffalo hunter who waved a cap and ball pistol as long as his arm, and struck for the north road out along the Purgatoire.

Banjo caught up with Devlin along the road, and began hurling questions. "Where do we go? What happened last night? Where did Conant—"

Devlin turned a glance on him. "Conant's buyin' back his daughter from Rico, with your cow money . . . or he thinks he is! Lift that nag along, or trail behind. I want to catch up with Conant."

"You're not goin' to stop him, Devlin! It's my money, an' I'm willin' to—"

"It's anybody's money . . . anybody who can get it! I've got your cattle bill o' sale in my pocket, cancelled by Doc. That turns your cows right back to you. All you got to do is find 'em!"

They failed to catch up with Conant, but they sighted the buckboard on the road in the moonlight, careening along, the marshal standing up and flogging the team.

The buckboard turned off the road onto a wagon track that ran up between two hills, and Devlin, when he swung his horse onto the wagon track, heard the wheels crunching into the open gravel pit. He bit a little harder on his cigar, half inclined to pull up, but kept on going.

The gravel pit was a huge hole gouged out of the sloping bowl between the hills, with the wagon track leading into it. With so much of the hills cut away, what was left formed a high, circular cliff around the pit. Cutting had been done on the wagon road, too, to grade it down for the work mules. Following it into the gravel pit was like going along a wide and deepening ditch into a roofless ampitheater.

Devlin slowed his horse, coming out into the great pit, and his eyes ranged about him, checking all points. A wagon with a broken back had been discarded by the graders, and rubbish thrown on and around it. The foreman's shack still remained, perched on the edge of the highest point of the cut-away cliff, overlooking the level bed of the pit. Saddled horses stood in a bunch, reins grounded, and close to them were grouped those who had ridden them here. The buckboard had pulled up before them, and Conant was climbing out, staring back over his shoulder at the two horsemen following him.

"Is that you, Don Preacher?" came Don Ricardo's voice, slurred and low-pitched. "And Ballinger, too, eh? Well, well!" His tone changed to a crisp and metallic bark. "Keep your distance! Watch him, hombres! So you tried for the money, eh? Amigo, I fear you forfeit your horse for that . . . and more, if you make a move!"

He meant it, Devlin knew. With the money so close to his hand, the Don was a touchy tiger, ready to lash out at anybody.

But Devlin paid more attention to the foreman's shack up there on the point, than to Don Ricardo and his carbine toters. The gravel had been cut away so deeply from under it that much of the foundation had caved away, leaving the shack leaning halfway out over the edge. The Irish railroad graders had had a sense of humor, but the foreman had braced up his floor with timber stilts, and dashed the graders' hopes of seeing him and his establishment tumble down into the pit. So there it perched like a gun tower grimly menacing a prison yard, stoutly built of squared logs and split railroad ties thick enough to stop a bullet.

"Conant, tell your daughter to stand back and keep still, please . . . our business is not yet finished!" rapped the Don. He was all curt efficiency now, and no foolishness. "Where is the money?"

"In that box on the buckboard."

The Don darted a brittle stare at Devlin, who was shifting. "Stay where you are and don't move, or—"

"Go to hell, you cash-crazy mucker!" growled

Devlin, dropping from his horse. *"Look up at that shack!"*

The Don refused to look. He was not to be taken off guard that way. He dodged behind the buckboard, got his holsters emptied, and spat a command: "Shoot, hombres!"

Gun thunder blared in the gravel pit, but not from the carbines of the Don's hombres. Bits of stone flew apart, whistling shrilly to the sullen drone of ricochet bullets, and Banjo's skew bald dropped as if hit with a slaughterer's hammer. Two men let their carbines fall and clutched each other for support, one shaking his head as if trying to deny a brutal fact. A horse tore squealing around the pit, driving the rest wild.

Devlin punched his grulla, got it headed toward the broken wagon, and raced alongside it for cover, Banjo hard on his heels. They passed the buckboard, its plunging team swinging it this way and that, and Don Ricardo came pattering around it to join them in their dash. The grulla swerved off, and Devlin and the Don sprinted the rest of the way without it. The Don, fast on his feet when he had to be, got under the wagon first, and Devlin dived in on top of him, but Banjo had gone off at a tangent with the grulla.

The Don said things in two languages, mufflledly, the wind pounded out of him by Devlin's dive onto him. He squirmed loose, sat up, and cracked his head against the bottom of the wagon. His swearing was reaching perfection, until Devlin poked him in the eye with an ungentle elbow.

"Quit singin' your sorrows, an' see can you spot those flashes up yonder, Rico!"

The Don wiped tears from his poked eye. "Where?"

"Hell, I told you where . . . up in that shack!" It's the Silver Spur crowd. Doc Sunday got word to 'em. That's why I chased after Conant, but I sure didn't plan to come all the way in to a massacre! We're in a hell of a hole, any way you look at it!"

VIII.

Three of the Don's men took off for the wagon road gap, one riding, the others hanging on. The rider spilled, and the two runners dug in their boot heels and changed their course. That one exit out of the gravel pit was marked by the sharpshooters up above. There would be no escape that way. Men and horses milled around, seeking shelter from the spattering hail. Over on the far side of the pit, Banjo was straining to heave a dead horse off Vada's foot. The girl lay pinned. Conant appeared, running to help, but stumbling weakly.

Devlin rose to his knees. "There's Ballinger, tryin' to bring the girl in . . . an' here comes your mob with the horses, huntin' cover! C'm on, let's give that brush popper a hand!"

Often, in an expansive mood, Don Ricardo claimed to be of high-born lineage and noble blood. When he was drunk, it was royal blood. At that, Devlin sometimes almost believed it, for there were times when the Don was capable of quixotic deeds that surprised even himself. He was at his best in tight disaster—as long as he could meet it with a flourish.

He was first out from under the wagon, and with a gun in each hand he met his stampeding men. "Back with those horses! Back, I say! Follow me, *mis valientes!*"

It might have been the compliment he paid them, or the threat of his guns, but his rattled *valientes* wheeled and followed him.

With the mass of men and horses to cover them, Devlin and the Don rolled the dead horse over, and Banjo picked up Vada. Then all made a dash for the wagon, and turned loose the horses when they reached it. The mound of rubbish piled on the wagon made a fairly good shield, but it was cramped quarters for everybody underneath. Some of the men began using their carbines, getting off snap shots at the shack, and ducking back in again.

"You're wastin' shells," Devlin asserted. "Those are thick timbers, an' they're shootin' down through the cracks."

He was reaching out and searching through the rubbish around the wagon, chancing a bullet in his arm, and at last he found the kind of thing he sought. He dragged in a bent and rusted crowbar. Split at one end and mushroomed at the other, it had been discarded by the graders as worn out, but it was long and heavy. Devlin estimated the distance to the foot of the cut-away hill below the shack, and he wished the moon were not quite so bright.

"Blaze like hell for a minute, hombres, an' keep 'em busy while I get out o' here," he muttered.

"Where are you going?" queried the Don.

Devlin got a grip on the crowbar. "Follow me, *valiente!*" he mocked, and started his flying run across the bed of the gravel pit.

A bullet clanged off the crowbar, another scattered stones at Devlin's feet, and then the carbines back at the wagon hammered a volley. He had a hope that the floor of the shack was tightly built, that the Silver Spur sharpshooters could fire only through the wall cracks and the small window, and that to get directly beneath the shack would mean getting out of their angle of fire. But he threw that hope away when he reached the foot of the gravel slope, and saw a red star wink down at him from the cabin floor.

Devlin drew one gun, rested it on his free wrist for steady aim, and spaced three shots at the spot.

The floor stayed black, and he started climbing. It was awkward, with the heavy crowbar dragging in one hand, and a gun in the other, and the gravel was steep and loose. Quick reports stabbed from the same spot in the floor. He sighted another slow shot, and cursed, knowing that he could never make it up there with things going like this.

A gun thudded close at his back, and he whipped around. Don Ricardo crouched there, smoke curling from an up-tilted carbine. The Don loaded and fired again. He nodded to Devlin. "I think I can cover you, amigo . . . but what in the name of the devil do you want with that piece of iron?"

Devlin gave him the ghost of a grin. An ornery, slick, double-dealing horse thief, the Don. But a damned good man to take along in a tight.

"I just want to get up there with it, Rico, that's all," Devlin responded.

The Don returned his grin, and a reckless glitter brightened his eyes. At a time like this they were brothers, fellow adventurers out on the same limb, old feuds forgotten. "Forward, *valiente!*"

Devlin climbed, slowly clawing his way upward, no longer troubling to keep an eye on that floor. Rico was attending to that for him. The Don climbed behind him, pausing every few seconds to

"Look up at that shack!" yelled Devlin, and old feuds were forgotten as he and the Don poured lead at Doc Sunday's gun crew.

aim a careful shot at the mark. Once a head poked out from the small window in the wall of the shack, followed by the upper part of a man, and a rifle. The rifleman leaned out, taking sight at the two climbing figures below. The Don, lining for another shot at the floor, changed his aim swiftly and fired.

"Nice shootin', Rico," commented Devlin. The rifle fell, struck the steep slope, and slid to the bottom. Its owner remained at the window, half in and half out, arms dangling.

Devlin reached to the bottom of a timber stilt under the shack, and hauled himself up. He briefly studied the arrangement of props, selected one, and went to work on it with the crowbar. The Don chuckled, found the crack in the floor, and methodically pumped lead up through it. The upper end of the timber stilt came away under the levering wrench of the crowbar, and Devlin started on the next.

They were shouting and arguing in the shack. Their voices could be plainly heard through the floor. Shang Tate wanted to step out and try for that pair, if the rest would back up his play. But somebody else had a better idea.

"Let's rip out a plank an' pour hell into 'em!"

Don Ricardo looked thoughtful at that, and Devlin doubled his efforts with the crowbar. The Don looked even more pensive when the shack suddenly lurched over a few inches. He and Devlin were underneath it. It sagged some more as Devlin knocked out another stilt with a swing of the crowbar. The Don scrambled off, floundered hastily upward, and got onto the flat of the hill. His guns chattered as the door of the shack scraped open, and he sang out a joyous yell.

"Destroy the Philistines, Don Preacher! Bring down the temple of sin!"

Devlin smashed out the last prop, let go of the crowbar, and leaped clear. He flattened out against the gravel, spread his arms and legs to keep from rolling down, and looked at the shack. It was keeling over. Its floor sill dug into the slope, and it came all the way over. A figure spilled out from the flapping door, and the Don cut a shot at it while it was still in the air. Then the shack was bowling and bouncing down the gravel slide, like a box kicked over a cliff. The Don chopped shots after it as it fell.

"Ah, amigo, that was fun!" he cried to Devlin.

With the final crash and the end of gunfire, another sound intruded, a confused drumming on hard earth. Devlin caught Don Ricardo's eye, and nodded. "Half o' Trinidad is rampsin' up here on the high lope, I reckon. Let's git!"

They cut through the wagon track, and saw in the distance a dark bulge moving along the moonlit road from Trinidad. Don Ricardo had not forgotten the strong box. He loped along behind the buckboard where he could keep guard over Banjo, who was driving it. Tom Conant and Vada rode in the buckboard, too, the marshal sick with a bullet in his shoulder, the girl lamed by her wrenched foot.

"Turn west to the old Delagua road, then south back to the Taos trail," the Don commanded.

Devlin had got his black horse out of the bunch, and was riding it. "Just what hole are you streakin' for now, Rico?" he inquired.

"Mexico! I presume you will . . . ah . . . be leaving us soon, eh?"

"Yeah. About the same time that girl does!"

The Don said nothing to that, but it wasn't long before Devlin began having a little trouble in keeping track of the Don's remaining men. They kept scattering out and trying to let him get in front of them. The old game of wits was on again.

They had to leave the Delagua road, to keep from riding on into Trinidad, and they struck across country onto the Taos trail just below the town. As the buckboard wheeled onto the road, Banjo said something and pointed. The Don turned to look.

"A horse, tied in the brush," he commented. "Chapalillo, go get it and look around."

Chapalillo, a war-scarred old ruffian, reined off, and went circling through the brush. "Only the horse, *mi jefe,*" he called. "Only the— *Mil santos!* What goes there?"

Something tore through the brush, and Conant, who had stood up to look at the tied horse, got out of the buckboard and limped off without a word. A pistol spat, and again the brush rustled. Chapalillo kept to his horse and gathered in the other animal, but Conant could be heard stalking on the trail of something. The pistol spat again, and a thin, shaking voice shrieked a warning.

"Keep away from me, Conant! Damn you, back up, or—"

A gun rapped three times, and the voice died out. Conant reappeared, stumbling slowly, and when he reached the road he stood staring at nothing.

"It was Doc," he said heavily. "I killed him!"

"Best thing you ever did!" observed the Don. "But what was that *zorro* doing out here?" He frowned. "I don't like it! Something is wrong here. Conant, open that box."

Conant shook his head. "Doc lost his keys last night. Maybe he was lookin' for 'em. The money's in the box. I saw him put it there last week."

The Don dragged the box out onto the road. He drew a gun and held its muzzle to the lock. "We will make sure!"

Devlin didn't look. He was estimating possibilities and finding them not good. Chapalillo was out there in the darkness, and the rest were scattered loosely around, carbines resting across their saddles. The Don fired into the lock and forced open the

lid, and for a moment there was silence.

Don Ricardo began muttering in a choked whisper. His muttering rose, grew almost coherent, but it was all profanity except the last word: "Empty!"

"So it is," agreed Devlin.

"Empty!" shouted the Don. He spun around and glared at Conant. "You . . . you— Chapalillo, drive that buckboard! Ballinger, get down! No, not the girl, she stays! Devlin, if you try to—"

"Take it easy before you bust somethin'," Devlin advised him. "An' don't go off yet. I'll be back." He left his horse and walked off into the brush.

When he returned, the Don was still swearing, and his men had their carbines leveled at Banjo and Conant. The Don choked himself off when he noticed Devlin carrying something. "What have you there?" he snapped.

"A vet's tool bag," drawled Devlin. "Doc Sunday's little black bag that he always carried around with him. That's what he was lookin' for. It fell in the brush last night, when he made a fake play of throwin' it at me. I should've known he had a special reason for that. I reckon he fooled Conant about that strong box, let Conant see him put the money in it, then took it out again right after."

"You mean— Bah! Another trick!" The Don spat his disgust.

Devlin shrugged and opened the leather bag. It was half full of oblong packets in bank wrappers. He took out one, broke it open, and whistled softly. "If this here isn't money in twenty-dollar greenbacks, then I've been poor all my life!" he observed, and riffled the sheaf of bills through his fingers.

The Don's eyes popped wide open, fastened upon the crisp notes. He reached out with both hands. "Amigo!"

Devlin shoved him back. "Not so fast! What about my cut out o' this?"

They eyed each other over the money. The Don flicked a rapid glance at his men. They still held their carbines leveled at Banjo and Conant. He still held the mastery of the situation. "As a token of our friendship, amigo," he beamed, "you may keep that broken packet of money which you just now slipped into your pocket!"

Devlin surveyed him with stony disfavor, and snapped the bag shut. "Damned Shylock! All right, let's get that buckboard turned round an' started off, first. Climb in, Conant. All set, Banjo? Well, get goin'!"

He let the buckboard get well away, before throwing the bag to Rico, and mounted his horse. "S'long, burglar!"

"Adios, amigo!" cried the Don tenderly, hugging the bag. "May the gods grant us many more such profitable ventures!"

Devlin caught up with the buckboard when it halted at the turn-off that led to the Amarillo road. Conant sat on a rock beside the road at a discreet distance from the buckboard, but what Banjo was saying to Vada could be heard easily enough.

"I'm broke, an' my cows are scattered like feathers in a big blow," he was saying. "I'm wanted for shootin' up the town, stealin' a train an' wreckin' it, an' breakin' out o' jail! Will you marry me?"

Conant looked up at Devlin, and down again at his boots. "That's the way it goes. Oh, well . . . could be worse. I sure got my explanations to make when I get back to town. I won't be runnin' for re-election next month."

Devlin moved on to the buckboard and coughed for attention, which he got eventually. "What you better do, Banjo," he said, "is let Conant hire riders to round up your cows, an' he can sell 'em for you. That'll give him a job till he gets back on his feet."

"Takes money to hire riders, Devlin!" Banjo pointed out.

"I'm comin' to that." Devlin felt in his pockets. "Here's that cancelled bill o' sale. You've had considerable wear an' tear, trailin' along with me. An' now you got to hire riders, an' some o' those cows you never will see again. Maybe I owe you somethin' for all that." He began pulling out paper money from various pockets. "So I'il pay my bill now. I feel generous tonight!"

"An' rich!" blurted Banjo, staring at the money. "Where did you get all that?"

Devlin raised his head, listening. "Here come those Trinidad citizens again. Huh? Why, I got it from Doc's bag. Thought first it might be in that strong box, an' I took a look, half an hour before I broke you out o' jail. Doc lost his keys, all right. I got 'em off him last night! Nothin' but prescriptions in the box, so I went after the bag. Sure enough, the cash was in it, waitin' for him to pick it up again where he'd pitched it. Here, take this. About ten thousand there, more or less. All right?"

"Sure! But listen . . . you gave that money to Risa! I saw the bank packets in—"

"I got to go," said Devlin. "You two better beat it down to Amarillo. Rico might be comin' back this way. In fact, I'm pretty damned sure he will, when he breaks open those packets!"

"But that one you broke open had money in it," Banjo protested.

"That was the only one that did!"

"Huh? Well, I'll be— What was in the others?"

Devlin gathered up his reins to depart. His hard mouth twitched in a brief grin. "Doc's prescription slips! They may come in handy to Rico, at that . . . the ornery horse thief! S'long!"

THE END.

"Someday you'll find a gun you can't beat," Jim Smith was warned, and on that day of bullet reckoning, he discovered that

TROUBLE BRANDS AN HOMBRE

by Bennett Foster

I.

Even in bed there was something of the eagle about Tom Devore. He scanned Jim Smith with half-lidded, steel-gray eyes and his voice rumbled: "Sit down, Jim."

Smith slid into the chair beside the bed. A silence held between the two men as each surveyed the other.

The D's were expanding that year. In Texas and Wyoming, in New Mexico and Colorado and Montana, cattle that were owned or contracted for by Tom Devore, grazed on brown grass, and now with fall and delivery time hard upon him, Devore was laid up. The big man on the bed shifted his cast-incased leg upon its pillow.

"I sent for you," he growled in explanation.

"Yeah," said Jim Smith, lighting a cigar.

Smith had been quietly working on a minor matter of mavericking when Devore's message reached him. Its urgency prompted him to snap his trap before it was ready. One mavericker was in jail, and another was in the hospital at Fort Worth with a bullet in his shoulder, and a wound in his leg; but the rest of the gang rode free. Jim Smith waited, a little angry because he had been called from his work.

"You're range manager, Jim," Devore announced. "Now hold on!"

Smith closed his mouth upon his objection. Tom Devore was the only man who could command Jim Smith, and this because of friendship and the long-standing respect they had for each other.

This was the kind of set-up Jim had expected but for once his own smoke-pole wasn't enough to handle the over-whelming odds stacked against him.

"Well?" Smith demanded, when Devore did not continue.

"Well," explained Devore, "I've found out somethin' in the last few days. I come down here to the Casa Azul ten days ago. A young horse went to buck with me. Five years ago I would've rode him. Ten years ago I'd've made him buck just for the hell of it. Last week he throwed me an' broke my leg."

"So?" prompted the man named Smith.

"So I'm gettin' old. I learnt that from a half-broke bronc."

There was more to come and Jim Smith did not interrupt.

"If I'm gettin' old, so are you," Devore continued. "You an' me started together. You've gone into some tough places, Jim. I've run the cattle an' you've taken care of the trouble an' we've made a good team. They call the D my outfit, but it's as much yours as mine."

"Have I complained?" Smith asked quietly.

"No." Devore shook his shaggy gray head. "You ain't. But it's time you quit the rimrocks an' took your rightful place."

Still Smith made no comment. "Cattle an' horses have been my end, an' I found a horse I couldn't ride," Devore growled. "Guns an' trouble have been your part of it, an' some day you'll find a man that you can't handle, an' a gun that you can't beat. With you, it won't be just a broken leg like it was with me, Jim. I want you to be range manager while I'm laid up."

"An' who," Smith drawled, "will look after the trouble, Tom?"

"Somebody," Devore answered confidently. "Not you. We're big enough to stand some trouble. If we lose a few head, what's the harm?"

Jim Smith did not answer. He knew, just as Tom Devore knew, that it would not be a matter of losing a few head. Once the thieves got started, once the maverickers and the grass hogs and the water stealers began to work, they could clean the D, big as it was.

"Find somebody," Devore ordered petulantly. "Look around an' hire a tough hand. There's plenty of 'em. Right now I want you to go to Montana. We've got fifteen hundred steers up there that we're due to receive. You look after that an' stay out of trouble."

Jim Smith's small, light-blue eyes were very tired. Under their steady gaze Devore shifted uneasily and moved his broken leg and cast.

"Anyhow," the D owner growled, "stay out of what trouble you can. Now, about these steers—"

Jim Smith played his last card. "I don't know nothin' about business, Tom," he said.

"You'll learn!" Devore said implacably. "About them steers, now: I gave Frobisher a check for two thousand dollars. That was honest money. I've got his contract—" His voice rumbled on.

Montana is a long way from the Texas Panhandle. From the Casa Azul, Jim Smith took a devious course. His wrinkled blue suit accumulated dust and cinders in smoking cars. In Omaha he talked to commission men and to the general freight agents of two railroads, and in Missoula he spoke confidentially to bankers. Then in the way car of a local freight, he rode to the town of Plentypine.

In Plentypine, Smith left his sacked saddle at the livery barn and, quiet and unassuming, carried his worn saddlebags to the hotel. He might have been a small-scale cattle buyer, or an itinerant preacher; almost anything but what he was. He rented a room in the hotel and seated himself in the lobby, almost hidden by a big, rawhide-covered chair.

A whiff of strong cigar smoke drifted down to him and a voice, fat and a little unctuous, said: "So you've bought Frobisher's cattle? I thought he had them contracted."

Another voice, not so deep as the first, thinner and with a tenor twang, answered. "He contracted some to a Texas man. I've got the rest." There followed a sly, almost cunning, chuckle. "Cattle prices have gone up since spring."

"I see," the fat voice said.

"There's been some drought up here this year," the tenor voice commented, as though there were no connection. Again came the almost sly chuckle.

Jim Smith did not move. The speakers drifted away and from the pocket of his wrinkled coat Smith produced a long, black and crooked cigar, a Wheeling stogie. Tom Devore had contracted fifteen hundred steers from King Frobisher and there had been a drought on part of Frobisher's pasture. Nothing unusual, nothing to concern Jim Smith. He knew the kind of cattle that he was supposed to receive; it was written in the contract that he carried in his pocket. And there was nothing wrong with Frobisher's selling the rest of his cattle to some other man besides Tom Devore. Cattle prices were rising, going clear out of sight, and Frobisher was entitled to make some money if he could. But that slyly cunning laugh and the other voice, unctuous and complacent, bothered Smith. The stogie fuming evilly, he got up and strolled to the door of the hotel.

A pallid moon gleamed down on Plentypine's dusky street, and Jim Smith shivered. Montana was cold to a man whose blood has been thinned by Texas sun. Light gleamed out of a saloon's windows and the opening door emitted pleasant warmth and the sound of drawling voices. One drink, a small one, Smith would allow himself; then to bed.

He entered the saloon as unobtrusively as a lobo slips into a coulee. The back-bar mirror glittered

and the men along the walnut bar did not turn their heads. At a cloth-covered table a poker game was in desultory progress. The bartender, his hair sleekly oiled and a diamond horseshoe stickpin in his tie, finally observed the newcomer, and Smith, having poured a modest drink, stood warming it in his cupped hands. The bartender walked away, and peace and good fellowship pervaded the place. Then, as Jim Smith took his drink, the peace was broken.

At the poker table a voice boomed: "I had a flush, that's what I had!" It was an overbearing, rasping voice and Smith could see its owner, half out of his chair. The bartender, bringing Smith's change, paused and turned toward the table, and two men at the bar moved hastily.

"Nobody's goin' to run a blazer on me," the half-risen man boomed. "Nobody!"

"You discarded." A man, slight, pallid-faced, the gambler stamp plain upon him, looked up at the speaker, not moving from his chair. "If you had a flush—"

"Here they are! All hearts." The big man with the big voice was standing now, his left hand reached out to the table top, his right at the skirt of his coat. "Are you tryin' to call me a liar, Trombone?"

For just an instant the gambler hesitated, then his face changed expression. "If you say you had 'em, you had 'em," he said lamely.

"I had 'em. It's my pot!" The big man's right hand dropped from his coat and his left scooped up chips. His laughter boomed, contemptuously. "I'll cash in. I don't sit in a game that ain't straight."

The gambler shifted in his chair and then, eyes lowered, began to count out money.

"I think," Jim Smith drawled to the bartender, "I'll take one more little drink."

He was pouring his modest libation when the big man passed him, his face triumphant, his walk a cocky swagger. He jerked the door wide as though its full width was hardly sufficient for his passage, and when he went through he left the door standing open. Smith quietly closed the door, and the bartender muttered, "Born in a barn!" then looked frightened as though afraid he had been heard.

Back at the card table the gambler folded his cards together and spoke to the remaining players. "I'll cash you boys in. I'm done."

Smith knew what had happened just as well as though he had been at the table. The big fellow had drawn to a hand, bluffed, been caught, and then before the hands were fully exposed, had thrown his own into the discard. At the showdown he had turned up enough cards from his own hand and the discard to show five hearts, and claimed that he had held them. It was a cheat, a rank fraud that, with hard men, would not have held. But for some strange reason every man at the card table had let it pass.

"Who is the big fellow?" Jim Smith asked the bartender.

The bartender shrugged. "King Frobisher," he answered.

II.

In the morning, Jim Smith argued quietly with the depot agent. The agent found himself agreeing, against all good judgment, to have cattle cars on the sidings at short notice, and somehow felt that he had been done a favor instead of doing one himself. From the depot Jim Smith went back to the livery barn and ordered a horse saddled.

While he waited, he observed a comedy across the street. A restaurant faced the livery barn, and at its door two cowpunchers appeared. One was tall, with an easy leanness and square-hewn, bold features. The other, shorter, no taller than Smith himself, had a boy's unformed face. The two paused at the restaurant door, turning to laugh with the waitress who accompanied them.

Jim Smith had noted the girl when he ate his breakfast. She was fresh-faced and clean; altogether a desirable young woman, and Smith had wondered idly why there was no wedding ring on her finger. In this country, scarce in water and women, such a girl should have been bespoken long ago. Now Smith saw that she did not lack for suitors. She laughed and blushed at something the tall cowhand said, and the round-faced youth's comment brought more laughter.

Turning, the girl went into the restaurant and returned shortly with two small packages wrapped in newspaper. Handing one to each of the men, she laughed again. For a brief time the three stood talking, and Jim Smith, observant always, thought that the tall man was the favorite. Then the hostler brought his horse and, with no excuse for delaying longer, Smith mounted and rode out. The two punchers and the girl still stood beside the restaurant door.

Following the hostler's directions, Smith racked his livery horse along, appreciating the easy, single-foot gait. He was a good three miles out of Plentypine when he heard riders coming up behind him. As they drew near, he recognized King Frobisher and the two men who had stood beside the restaurant door. Smith did not hurry and the men came abreast of him. Frobisher pulled close to his right hand and spoke.

"You're Smith, ain't you? Why didn't you let me know you was in town? I'd come in to meet you. I'm King Frobisher."

The livery horse stopped. Jim Smith looked at Frobisher's arrogant face and let his lips smile under his close-cropped gray mustache.

"Why," he drawled, "I never interfere with a

man's business and I thought I could find my way to your place without help. This is the road, ain't it?"

"It's the road," Frobisher answered. "But I'd come especially to meet you. I had a letter from Devore sayin' that he was laid up an' that he'd sent you to receive the steers."

"An' that's right," agreed Smith.

"I've got 'em bunched," Frobisher announced. "They're at the headquarters. Devore didn't know what road he'd use to ship when he contracted 'em. If I'd known I'd've held 'em closer to Plentypine."

"We didn't know until I'd talked to the general freight agent," Smith answered. "The Northeastern gives us the better rate. How far are the steers from town?"

"About ninety miles," answered Frobisher. "We'll not get to 'em tonight. If I'd just known I'd've brought you in a horse."

"This pony will do," Smith said. "I'll get along."

The horses started again, the livery-stable nag falling into place beside King Frobisher's big roan horse.

"We'll stop tonight at my west camp," Frobisher said. "That suit you?"

"Anything suits me," answered Smith.

There was no nooning on that ride. Like any cowman, Jim Smith was hungry when there was a place to eat and thirsty when there was water to drink, but not before. He smoked a long black stogie in place of his meal and he grinned when the tall cowhand—Scott Gentry, Frobisher called him—commented that he'd "eat another belt hole an' drink a cigarette." The younger rider had no comment. He was a silent youth and spoke only when spoken to. Frobisher called him Bob or, sometimes, Kid.

The west camp of the T Three-quarter Box was a soddy banked with dirt. A solitary, dour-faced man held down the camp and made them welcome with a grunt and the announcement, "Supper's ready." The meal was wordless, a brief interlude of stoking hungry stomachs with hot food. While the camp man washed the dishes, Bob and Scott sucked on brown-paper cigarettes and Jim Smith worked on a stogie. Frobisher smoked a fat cigar and eyed Smith speculatively.

"Had some drought up here," he said suddenly. "It hit most of this country."

Smith offered no comment, save raised eyebrows and Frobisher amplified. "This is the second year it's been dry."

"Likely to happen that way," drawled Smith. "Drought hurts the cattle."

Frobisher shrugged. His bold eyes, a little prominent, turned from Smith to his cowhands and then came back. "It hurts 'em," he agreed. "I sold a bunch of steers to a packin' house last year. They sent a fellow out to receive 'em. Of course, dry the way we were, I had some droughty steers in the bunch. He had a three-per-cent cut comin' an' he went to whittlin' on 'em. Hollered about the droughty steers. You know what I told him?"

Again Smith's eyebrows lifted in polite question.

"I told him that he'd take what I brought in," Frobisher's voice rumbled. "He wasn't goin' to at first, but I convinced him. He was dealin' with King Frobisher. He took every damned steer, that's what he done!"

"Likely," Smith drawled, "he had a place for 'em. Personally I don't care much for droughty cattle." Removing the stogie, he knocked off the ash. "I hope you ain't got too many that show drought. Tom Devore don't like droughty cattle, either."

The big cowman scowled above the beak of his nose. "You'll like my cattle, all right," he rumbled. "Every cow buyer that comes up this way likes 'em."

"I think," drawled Smith, "that I'll go to bed if you'll show me where to turn in."

Frobisher got up. "I reckon," he announced, "that you'll sleep in the shed. There's an extra bed out there. You show him, Bob."

Men who buy cattle don't sleep in sheds. A cow buyer is well treated, for the seller wants him to come back. His face expressionless, Smith got up and stretched.

"Where's the shed?" he asked.

Young Bob, the round-faced boy, took him to the shed. There, on clean hay, the puncher unrolled a bed.

"Likely be cold tonight," he offered. "I'll get you a blanket."

It was dark in the shed and Smith heard Bob stirring. Then a blanket fell upon his bed. Smith tugged at a boot and Bob passed by against the lighter gloom of the shed door. The boy came back and squatted beside Smith.

"Have some pie," he invited. "You're Jim Smith, ain't you?"

"I'm Jim Smith." Smith felt the sticky sweetness that Bob put into his hand. "She gave you the pie this mornin', didn't she?"

"Elsa?" Surprise showed in Bob's voice. "Oh. That was you across the street in the livery barn. Yeah. She gave Scott an' me both a piece. My daddy knew you in Texas, Mr. Smith. His name was the same as mine: Bob McMain."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Bob McMain. Jim Smith had sent a cow thief named Bob McMain to jail for stealing D calves.

"Hm-m-m," Smith said.

"Yeah." Bob's voice was placid. "Dad said you could've killed him instead of sendin' him up. We moved here after he got out. He died a year ago."

"I see." Smith's quiet voice was thoughtful.

"Well, good night." Bob McMain slid into his covers. "I expect there'll be better accommodations for you at the ranch tomorrow."

"Good night," Smith said, and grinned thinly in the dark. Bob McMain's pie and the extra blanket and the words he said were a covert apology for the treatment Jim Smith had received.

In the morning they went on, all mounted on fresh horses. That evening they reached the T Three-quarter Box headquarters and, as Bob McMain had said, there were better accommodations. Smith stayed in the big house, along with King Frobisher and Frobisher's foreman, a sullen-faced fellow named Saunders. They ate supper together and after the meal Frobisher brought out a bottle. Both he and his foreman had a few drinks, and the talk was large.

Frobisher, it appeared, had found a lot of trouble in his day. He had battled for grass and water, and he boasted of his victories. Saunders had the stamp of gunhand plain upon him, and his small, dark, bloodshot eyes followed Jim Smith's every movement.

"So," King Frobisher completed a tale, "I sent Bill here, down to the nester's. I don't know how it happened, but some way the fool granger's stack yard caught afire an' he was burnt out. An' you know, he had the nerve to jump me in Plentypine about it! Come at me with a shotgun an' I had to down him."

"Kill him?" Smith asked politely.

"Naw. Just scorched his leg. He yelled like he was hurt. I sent Bill around with ten dollars to give his wife, an' they pulled out of the country. That's right, ain't it, Bill?"

Saunders nodded his dark head. "I had to slap that oldest boy of theirs," he said, cruel relish in his tone. "There was an uppity kid!"

"Sometimes," Smith said thoughtfully, "an uppity fellow needs a little correctin'. I've come a long way, gentlemen, an' I'm due to cut cattle tomorrow. If you'll excuse me, I'll go to bed."

III.

The following morning, with Frobisher and Saunders, Jim Smith rode to where the steers were bunched. A wagon was camped down beside a creek, and half a mile from the wagon was the dark mass of cattle. As the three arrived, young Bob McMain and his partner, Scott, came loping up. They had ridden out the night before to start the crew working early in the morning. The cook had hot coffee, and while Frobisher, Saunders and Jim Smith held their tin cups, the cowman spoke.

"There's the cattle, Smith. I bunched aplenty. You're supposed to get fifteen hundred head out of 'em."

"That's right," Smith agreed.

"There's plenty there. I want to tell you, Smith: You'll get all that you got comin', but I won't stand for you whittlin' 'em too close."

"We'll look at the cattle." Smith's tone was noncommittal. "I'm ready to go if you are." He dropped his empty cup in the wreck pan.

When they reached the herd Smith saw trouble. There were not more than seventeen or eighteen hundred head in the herd and there were plenty of droughty cattle. He would not, he knew, be able to get fifteen hundred head of the kind of steers his contract called for. Devore had contracted three's and four's, of a certain weight and quality, and they simply weren't there.

"I'd like a couple of men to work," Smith drawled after he and Frobisher and Saunders had ridden around the herd.

"I'll give you two." Frobisher glanced to the the right. "Scott, you an' Bob come here."

When the riders arrived, Frobisher spoke again. "Cut out what Mr. Smith wants," he directed. And then: "I'll be at the wagon, Saunders, if anythin' comes up." He loped away toward the wagon, and Smith, flanked by Bob McMain and Scott, rode into the cattle.

All that morning Jim Smith trimmed the herd. When he pointed out an animal, either young Bob or Scott took it out. Smith worked carefully. Despite the dislike he had formed for Frobisher, despite the bragging and the bluffing of the ranchman, Smith gave him every break. He trimmed out the under-age and thin steers, he shoved out cattle that showed drought badly, but when there was a question in his mind he gave Frobisher the benefit.

He liked the way Scott Gentry worked. The lean, tall youngster was a cowhand and a good one. He far surpassed McMain. Scott knew what a steer was going to do before the steer knew it, and he kept his cutting horse right on top of the animals that Smith selected. More than this, he had an eye for beef, as was proved when Smith paused and considered one steer.

"He ought to go out," Scott said. "He's like that line-backed roan you cut."

"That's right, he is," agreed Smith. "Take him out."

All morning long steers came out of the herd. At noon, when he ate dinner and changed horses at the wagon, Smith found a stranger had arrived.

"Meet Mr. Askins, Smith," Frobisher said. "He's buyin' the cut."

Smith shook hands with a smooth-faced man whose tenor voice said: "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith." Later Smith heard Askins chuckle, the

same sly, almost cunning chuckle he had heard in the hotel lobby in Plentypine.

"Ain't you pretty near through cuttin'?" Askins queried.

"I've just begun." Smith's voice was cold. "There's a lot of under-aged, light stuff that's got to come out of here yet. I won't be through today."

"Your contract calls—" began Frobisher.

"I know what it calls for," Smith cut in. "Three's an' four's an' nothin' under a thousand pounds. I take up to fifteen hundred head."

Frobisher lapsed into sullen silence and Jim Smith went back to the herd.

That evening when he came in, while the crew drifted the herd down to the creek to water, Askins and Frobisher met him.

"About through?" Frobisher asked, and there was a suspicious cheerfulness in his voice.

Smith shook his head. There was a day, perhaps two more days' work with the herd. He wanted as many cattle as he could get, but he wanted only the right kind.

"Not yet," he answered.

"You've got your cars ordered, haven't you?" Askins asked carefully.

"Yeah."

"It would be mighty expensive to tie 'em up."

That was true. The railroad would charge for those cars. Smith said nothing.

"Why don't you," Askins drawled, "cut the balance of 'em while you move? He could do that, couldn't he, King?"

Frobisher nodded. "I own most of the country between here an' town," he said. "You could do it if you wanted to, Smith."

Instant decision formed in Jim Smith's mind. It would take five days to get to town with the steers. He could cut on the way. "That suits me fine," he announced. "It's mighty decent of you, Frobisher."

"That's all right," the rancher answered largely.

They started with the cattle the following morning. Smith, riding along beside the steers, Gentry and McMain following him. Now and then Smith pointed out an animal he did not want, and the riders cut the beef and drove it off. At noon Askins, who had ridden along with them, departed for Plentypine. He had, he said, some business to look after. That evening when the herd was bedded, Smith had cut fifty more steers. Frobisher had no comment, but Saunders' eyes were antagonistic.

The next day was a repetition of the first and so was the third day. The steers moved slowly, and Smith, almost through, trimmed out a few more. That night when the wagon camped, Askins made his appearance., He had, it subsequently developed, ridden out from town on a friendly mission.

"I was in town," he announced, "and down at the depot. Yours cars are comin' in tomorrow, Smith. The agent said so."

"They weren't ordered for tomorrow," Smith said. "That fool agent!"

Askins shrugged. "You can quarrel with him about it. If I was you I'd go in."

For an instant Smith debated. He was not quite done shaping up the steers. On the other hand demurrage on the cars would be costly. He was of two minds.

"You're through cuttin', ain't you?" Askins asked blandly.

"Not quite." Smith scowled out into the dark where the steers were bedded. Scott Gentry and Bob McMain sat beside the fire, directly in his line of sight.

"I'll tell you what"—Smith, his decision made, turned to Frobisher—"there's some more cattle to come out of here. Gentry and McMain have been cuttin' out what I wanted an' they know the kind. You let them cut a hundred head more between here an' town, an' I'll take the balance. How's that?"

For just a moment Frobisher hesitated. Then: "That's all right," he agreed. "You want to get to town to look after the cars, I know. Scott, you an' the Kid come here."

Gentry and McMain joined the group and Smith explained what he wanted. Gentry nodded his head. "We'll do our best," he promised.

"Then," Smith announced, "I'll head for town early in the mornin'."

He left the herd at dawn. By two o'clock he reached Plentypine and went directly to the depot.

"Your cars are due tonight sometime," the puzzled agent told him. "Yeah. I told Askins that they were due then. I ordered 'em all right, Mr. Smith. I had to get 'em in tonight. It's all right, ain't it?"

"It's all right, I guess," Jim Smith said. "Yeah. An' thanks a lot for the accommodation." Leaving the agent he mounted and rode on to the town.

There was a question in his mind as he rode. Perhaps all this was right and on the level. Perhaps Askins had misunderstood the agent, or perhaps the agent had said that the cars would be in today, meaning sometime within the twenty-four hours. But remembering Frobisher's big talk, remembering the sullen eyes of Saunders, and Askins' laugh there in the lobby of the hotel, Jim Smith was uneasy. He was tempted to ride back to the cattle, but thought better of that. Mechanically dismounting in front of the livery barn, he turned his tired horse over to the hostler and crossed the street to the restaurant.

At the counter Smith ordered coffee and pie from the fair-haired Elsa. He ate moodily, rousing only

when the girl asked him if he wished another cup of coffee. When she brought it, Smith smiled at her and the girl blushed.

"This coffee," Smith declared, "is pretty near as good as the pie. I had a sample of your pie some time ago."

"I don't remember your being in here," Elsa said. "Maybe mamma waited on you. Sometimes when we're not busy I go out awhile and she looks after the place alone. Was that it?"

Smith shook his head. "A boy named Bob McMain gave me a piece," he answered.

Elsa blushed again. "Oh . . . Bob!" she said. "I gave him and Scott both a piece of pie the day they left town."

"I saw you do it." A little twinkle came to Smith's eyes as he forgot his worries. "I judge Bob hated to give up his pie, but he was mighty courteous. You must have quite a business, givin' pie away to cowhands."

"I don't give pie to everybody," Elsa refuted quickly. "Just to . . . well, I gave Bob and Scott a piece."

"Just to kind of special friends," Smith drawled, relishing the girl's confusion. "If I might have another piece of that raisin pie, Miss Elsa?"

"Who told you my name?"

"Lemme see." Jim Smith scratched his head. "Was it Bob, now, or was it Scott? I can't remember. They'll be in town tomorrow, an' I'll ask 'em."

"They'll be in?" The girl's voice was eager.

"Tomorrow," Smith repeated. "I reckon you won't be half as glad to see 'em as they will be to see you—on account of the pie, of course."

Elsa retired in confusion and Jim Smith ate his pie, enjoying his small joke. But when he had paid for his meal and left the restaurant, the dull and somber feeling returned. There was nothing wrong, Smith told himself. Nothing wrong at all; but, somehow, he felt uneasy.

The next morning he was at the depot early, finding his cars on the siding and an agent who assured him that there would be an engine to spot the cars when he was ready to load. With that matter off his mind, Smith returned to town and visited the bank. There in the banker's office he exhibited his credentials and made arrangements to pay for the steers. The banker was the possessor of a fat and unctuous voice that Smith had heard before.

Leaving the bank, he killed time, watching the east. A dust cloud formed there, a little gauzy haze, and hurrying to the livery barn, Smith procured a horse. He rode out toward the herd and a good mile from the stockyard met the leaders. Frobisher loped ahead to join him and fell in place on Smith's left.

"Get the cars all right?" the rancher asked him.

"They're here," Smith answered. "Have any trouble?"

"Not a bit."

"I'll look 'em over," Smith said, and stopped his horse. Frobisher also stopped and the wagon came lumbering past, the cook riding high on his seat.

Slowly the steers passed by. The leaders were big and strong and Smith's eyes lighted as he saw them. They were good steers, money makers on any market. Then, when the leaders were by, Smith's eyes narrowed. Here were droughty steers, under-aged steers, light steers. He wheeled to face King Frobisher. Askins came loping up, Saunders with him.

"Just what," Jim Smith said slowly, "are you tryin' to pull, Frobisher? What kind of a deal are you tryin' to hand me?"

Frobisher met his gaze levelly. "Why," he drawled, "what do you mean, Smith? Ain't you satisfied?"

"You know damned well I'll not receive that kind of cattle," Smith stated.

"I think you will." Frobisher's voice was hard. "I bunched my cattle an' you cut 'em. You left a representative with me to cut a hundred more head. They were cut. These are the cattle you picked out, Smith, an' these are the cattle you'll pay for. I've got witnesses to the whole business."

"That's correct, Mr. Smith." Askins' voice was smooth. "I heard the whole deal."

Jim Smith felt the jaws of a steel trap closing down on him. He had been tricked! Anger, hot and hasty, tensed his muscles as he glared at King Frobisher.

"If you think that you can get away with this, you're mistaken, Frobisher," he drawled. "I've got a contract."

Frobisher shrugged. "It's not my fault if you can't cut cattle," he said coolly. "Devore should have sent a man that knew how. You'll take these steers an' you'll pay me for 'em, Smith, an' that's final!"

Smith did not answer at once. His cars were on the siding, ready to load. He had said that he would take the steers providing a hundred more were cut by Scott Gentry, and no doubt there were men who would swear that these were the cattle he had selected and that Gentry had cut a hundred head. He was a fool, Smith told himself; an utter idiot. But King Frobisher would not get away with his play. Not against Jim Smith.

"I'll not take these," Smith said flatly, and, turning his horse, loped off toward the town. He could hear, behind him, Askins' light tenor laugh, and Frobishers' heavier glee.

He left his horse at the livery and, walking to the hotel, went to his room. Here he was with cars on the siding and an engine coming. More, he had a

tentative delivery date in Omaha with a commission man. More still, he was in a tight that his own foolhardiness had brought about. He was tempted to telegraph Tom Devore, but passed by the impulse. He was in a hot spot of his own making and he would get out of it himself. One thing was certain: He wouldn't receive those steers from Frobisher. Deliberately he got up and left the hotel room. He'd hunt King Frobisher and have it out.

IV.

Frobisher was not in the hotel lobby, nor was he at the bank. He wasn't any place that Jim Smith looked. Smith did not find Frobisher, but he did encounter Bob McMain and Scott Gentry in the little restaurant. Gentry was talking with Elsa, but Bob sat glumly in a corner of the room. Both men saw Jim Smith come in the door and stop.

"I'm lookin' for your boss," Smith said levelly. "I haven't found him. But I've got somethin' to say to you. I left you to cut some steers for me. You let Frobisher throw back every steer I'd cut. You ain't cowhands an' you ain't skunks. You're lower down than skunks. I might've knowed what to expect from you, McMain. You're a cow thief's son an' you had it in for me; but you shaped up like a hand, Gentry." With that he turned and walked out to resume his search.

"An' that's yore tough Jim Smith," Gentry scoffed when Smith was gone. "He don't act so bad, Bob."

Bob McMain got up. "I expect I'll walk around a little," he said slowly. "Elsa, you've heard Scott braggin' about what he done, an' the money that Frobisher's goin' to pay him. I'll tell you now that I've quit Frobisher. I quit him this mornin' when he shoved that drive of culls into the bunch an' dropped out Smith's steers. I got a question to ask you an' I want an answer: Are you goin' to put up with what Scott did?"

"Why"—the girl looked from Bob McMain to Scott Gentry, and back again—"I— It's like Scott says, Bob. He's working for Mr. Frobisher, and he takes Mr. Frobisher's orders. I don't see where Scott's to blame."

"That," said McMain, his voice wooden, "is all I wanted to know. Good-by, Elsa." He, too, walked out of the little restaurant.

Jim Smith, having failed to find the man he sought, went to the livery barn. If King Frobisher was not in town he must be with the cattle. The hostler said, "You want a horse, Mr. Smith?" and was startled by Jim Smith's voice. "Get me one."

The hostler went back into the barn and Smith followed.

Just the presence of the D man made the hostler nervous. He was working under pressure just because Smith was there. The hostler could feel the tension and he made mistakes. It took him longer than it should have to select and saddle a horse.

Taking the reins, Smith led the horse to the door. There he stopped. King Frobisher and Askins, with Saunders following them, were riding down the street. Smith dropped the reins and stepped out to meet them.

The riders reined in, forming a loose line. Facing that line, standing squarely in the middle of the street, Smith spoke: "I'll go with you now an' cut the cattle, Frobisher."

The cowman eased in his saddle. Saunders shifted his horse to the left. Askins, too, moved his horse out toward the right.

"You'll cut no more of my cattle, Smith," Frobisher started. "You'll take these or none at all."

"Then I'll take none."

King Frobisher shrugged. "That suits me," he announced. "Your honest money is forfeit then."

Silence came into the street, hanging heavily. Jim Smith broke it. "The play is this," he drawled. "The price of beef's gone up. You sold too cheap to Tom Devore. Now you've made a deal with Askins to sell him your cattle. He'll take 'em at a higher price an' he's been helpin' you to frame me. But I don't stay framed. Either you deliver steers that I can take, or you'll write me a check for that forfeit money. That's your choice, Frobisher."

"I've brought the steers to town," Frobisher answered levelly, and behind his voice Jim Smith could feel the coldness and the cruelty, the force that made King Frobisher a big man in the Plenty-pine country. "Either you'll take 'em or lose the forfeit money. That's your choice, Smith."

Again the silence. Then from the left end of the line, Saunders spoke out. "Quit foolin' with him, King. I don't like him, anyhow. If he's dead, there ain't no argument."

Jim Smith took half a step back. He knew that Frobisher was bad, and Saunders worse, but once in his life he was caught off guard. It had not seemed to Smith to be a killing matter, not yet, at least. And still there were thousands of dollars involved.

Bitterly, in that fractional second, Smith thought of Tom Devore's words: "Some day you'll meet a man you can't handle, an' a gun that you can't beat." Was this the time? Had Jim Smith, in his confidence, underestimated King Frobisher and Saunders? Even as he moved back, his right hand came up under the lapel of his coat to conjure out his gun, and as his hand touched the butt he saw that he was too late. Saunders had moved and drawn as he spoke. This *was* the time. These *were* the men he couldn't handle, the guns he couldn't beat.

Saunders' gun had lifted and fallen level. Smith, continuing his turn and draw, half-faced the gunman. He would go down, but he would take that mad dog with him. King Frobisher, too, if he could.

Then a gun roared harshly. It was not his own, Smith knew. His own gun was barely clear of the holster. Nor was it Saunders', for the gun hand, an expression of utter surprise on his face, had dropped his weapon and clapped his left hand to his right shoulder, even as he swayed in the saddle.

Saunders was falling, and Jim Smith, his gun out now and level, jerked back to face King Frobisher. The cowman, his Colt almost out of its scabbard, dropped the weapon back and wheeled his horse, while Askins, terror-stricken, turned his mount and clattered into the dark entrance of the livery barn, knocking down the hostler in his mad dash. Jim Smith turned back to Saunders, who lay on the ground, holding his shoulder. From beside the restaurant a round-faced boy stepped out, a slight youngster, a gun dangling in his hand.

"They meant to down you, Mr. Smith," said young Bob McMain. "An' you sure called the turn on Frobisher. He run all them cull cattle into the herd. I told him it wasn't right, an' quit him. On'y you was wrong in one thing: It wasn't Frobisher that figgered out the play. It was Askins an' Saunders. King Frobisher ain't that smart."

Jim Smith stared unbelievingly at the boy whom he had called the son of a cow thief, whom he had condemned in his mind.

Bob McMain flushed under the stare. "I was comin' to tell you," he said hesitantly. "But you was sore when you come into the restaurant an'—well, I didn't get the job done."

"*I* think you got the job done," said Jim Smith. "I *sure* think you got the job done, son." And then from stores and saloons and the livery barn and the restaurant, the men of Plentypine came running to the scene of the excitement.

Just three days later, Jim Smith and Bob McMain sat in the caboose of a freight train headed east. Ahead of them twenty cars of big three and four-year-old steers rocked along the rails, not a droughty one in the bunch. Up in the cupola the conductor and the brakeman sat looking ahead to where the engine spewed smoke. Jim Smith worked on a Wheeling stogie, relishing the bitter, acrid flavor of that vicious weed, and Bob McMain sucked meditatively on a cigarette.

"I still don't see how you done it," young Bob said suddenly. "You sure had Frobisher an' Askins eatin' out of your hand. That banker, too. You sure put them down the chute, Mr. Smith."

Removing the cigar, Jim Smith waved it gently. "It wasn't hard," he said. "You see, I had a contract an' Frobisher was bound to fill it. He had to. Particularly when you come out an' told what he'd done. And the banker—" Smith paused a moment. "After I'd got on the wire an' telegraphed Missouli an' the banker got a wire back from the bank there, he was fixed all right. I reckon he'd've liked to see Frobisher sell his steers to Askins, but the bank in Missouli changed *his* mind."

"Yeah," Bob agreed.

"I wasn't very smart," confessed Smith, and grinned at his companion. "I didn't think they'd go as far as they did. If it hadn't been for you—" He paused.

"Well"—Bob's voice was uneasy—"I just happened to be standin' there by the restaurant. An' when Saunders pulled his gun—well, it just seemed like I kind've took a shot at him."

"An' upset his apple cart," Jim Smith commented. "You were right timely, Bob."

Silence fell while the car wheels clicked. Bob shifted uneasily. "You think I'm goin' to make good on this job you got for me?" he asked. "Do you think I can handle it, Mr. Smith? You ain't said just what kind of a job it is yet, an' I ain't too good a cowhand."

Smith puffed the stogie to life. "I think you can handle it, Bob," he assured the young man. "It don't call for too much cowpunchin'."

"That's good." Bob McMain heaved a sigh of relief. "It sure seems swell to be goin' back to Texas."

Jim Smith blew the smoke from his lips in a long stream. His eyes twinkled when he looked at Bob. What would Tom Devore say when he saw the boy and learned what Smith had in mind? Jim Smith could just hear old Tom explode.

"That wet-eared kid to take your place? Are you crazy, Jim?" old Tom would roar. Maybe it was crazy. Maybe it was, but no crazier than for Tom Devore to make Jim Smith range manager. Not a bit.

"I'll tell you somethin', Mr. Smith," Bob McMain said thoughtfully. "You know when I pulled down on Saunders?"

"Yeah." Smith knew well enough. He would recall that event as long as he lived.

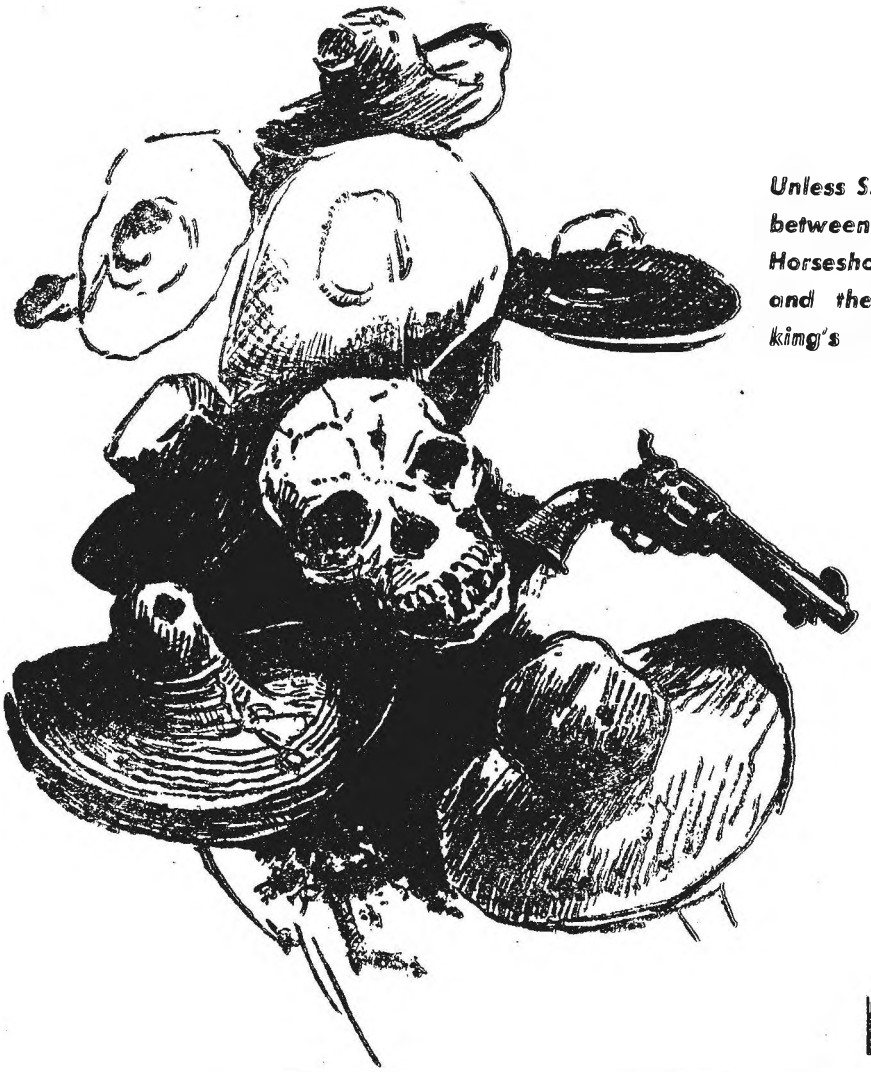
"Well"—there was confession in Bob's voice—"I pulled right on his belt buckle, I did. I aimed to fix his clock. An' instead I hit him in the shoulder. I didn't even hurt him very bad. I ain't much on shootin', either, Mr. Smith."

Again the clicking of the wheels over the rail joints and the rush and roar of the train filled the caboose. Then Jim Smith grinned a peculiar grin as he looked at Bob McMain.

"You'll learn," he drawled. "Yeah, Bob. You'll live an' learn—I reckon we both will."

And to Bob McMain's utter astonishment, Jim Smith laughed heartily.

THE END.



Unless Sheriff Lon Jackson could make peace between the battling young owners of the Horseshoe and Muleshoe outfits, his Stetson and theirs would be added to a range king's gruesome, gun-pocked collection

by Walt Coburn

DEAD MEN'S HATS

I.

There was a thin, cold drizzle of rain, and water was beginning to puddle in the two open graves. The muddy ground made bad footing for the cowpunchers who were lowering the two pine-board coffins with their two dead men. They used saddle ropes to lower the coffins, and their high boot heels dug deep as they paid the ropes out slowly, hand over hand. One of the Muleshoe cowpunchers slipped and nearly went into the grave after the pine box, and a tipsy man in the crowd sort of chuckled and hiccuped, then sobered up under the cold-eyed glare of the grim-lipped men near him.

The sky pilot, a circuit-rider preacher who had just happened along in time, stood at the head of the two graves. Blue-nosed, shivering, he wore an old leaky cavalry poncho.

The Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers stood in groups on opposite sides of the two open graves where the owners of those two cow outfits were being buried.

The cowboys wore tightly buttoned faded denim brush jackets and brush-scarred chaps. And they had cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters buckled around their middles because they had come here not only to bury their two bosses but to fight.

Stocky, black-haired, gray-eyed Jake Brandon, son of Big Bill Brandon of the Muleshoe outfit, stood there, his eyes bleak, at the foot of his father's grave. He was wearing a brand-new yellow saddle slicker to protect his town clothes from the drizzling rain.

Pete Statler, tall, lean, tow-headed and blue-eyed, had bought himself a black saddle slicker to cover his store clothes. He stood, as Jake Brandon stood, bareheaded in the rain, heedless of its wet chill, his eyes puckered with dull pain as he watched the wooden box that held his dead father being lowered into that sodden hole in the ground.

Their slickers hid their cartridge belts and guns, but like the punchers who worked for the two outfits, these two young cowboys, both in their early twenties, had ridden to town to bury their fathers, then to fight it out.

Sheriff Lon Jackson had called them off their horses and into his office as they rode into town.

"Before you two young fellers and the cowpunchers workin' for your outfits go to shootin', you'd better hear what I've got to say," he had told them bluntly.

"Bill Brandon and Tom Statler was found there on the trail that runs through Los Gatos Pass. They was both shot in two-three places and they was dead. Their six-shooters had bin used. And it looked fer all the world like they'd met there on the trail and shot it out and killed each other.

"I'd taken a man or two and went there and fetched the two bodies here to Los Gatos. And it wasn't till me and the coroner got to lookin' them two dead men over that we discovered somethin'. Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler had both bin shot in the back. Boys, them two shots was the first uns fired. They was the two shots that killed your daddies. The two bullets come from .30-30 saddle carbines. Now think that over before you start shootin' at one another."

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had once been boyhood pardners. Later they had punched cows together, shared the same blankets and tobacco. Even as their fathers had been friends.

Then the two outfits had locked horns. Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler had become enemies. Their sons had strung along with their fathers.

This double killing had worn all the earmarks of a six-shooter duel when the two cowmen had met there in the narrow rocky pass that crosses the Arizona-Mexico line. Now the big, rawboned, gray-mustached sheriff of Los Gatos was telling Jake and Pete that their fathers had been bushwhacked, murdered, shot in the back. Because it was impossible for two men to shoot each other in the back—with a saddle carbine. And neither of the cowmen had packed a saddle gun that day.

"If I was you two boys," drawled Sheriff Jackson, "I'd bury the hatchet. Somebody who had it in for Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler killed 'em both or hired the job done. You two boys should set your plans accordin'. You was friends once. Shake hands. Then ride on down the street and tell them brush-popper cowhands of yours to quit their paw and beller."

So now the Muleshoe and Hourglass cowhands stood on opposite sides of the two open graves. While Jake Brandon and Pete Statler stood almost side by side with their hats in their hands and bitter grief remolding their boyhood pardnership with a stronger bond.

Sheriff Lon Jackson stood back a ways, in behind the circuit-rider sky pilot, his hard black eyes missing nothing. He had ridden here to pay his respects to the two dead men and to maintain peace.

There was the rattle of buckboard wheels and the squashy thud of shod hoofs. The buckboard was drawn by a well-matched team of sorrels, and the man who held the reins was big. Bigger than any six-footer in the cowpuncher crowd. He would weigh two hundred and fifty pounds and all of it was big bone and tough meat. His face was more red than tanned, and a drooping, reddish-gray mustache hid the hard grim line of his mouth. From under the slanted brim of his dripping hat his eyes showed gray-green under shaggy brows. His jaw was square, and his nose had been broken and set more than once. One of his ears was a shapeless lump.

Beside him sat a girl who wore a man's Stetson and a slicker that covered her from neck to boots. Her eyes were the same gray-green color as the big man's but softer, larger, fringed with heavy lashes. What hair showed beneath her hat was black with coppery tints.

Behind the buckboard came a man on horseback. A wide-shouldered man who rode a long stirrup, with his weight a little in the left iron. Clean shaved save for a carefully trimmed black mustache, he had yellow-brown eyes that were set over a hawk-beaked nose. There was the barest hint of a grin on his tight, hard lips. He wore a short black saddle slicker and brush-scarred chaps. His saddle was a little fancier than that of the usual hard-working cowpuncher, etched with ornate carving.

Pulling his sorrel team to a halt, the big man cramped the front wheels and stepped down. The man on horseback rode up and swung from his saddle onto the buckboard without touching the ground. Taking the lines from the big man's gloved hands, he sat beside the girl.

The big man walked over to where Sheriff Lon Jackson stood. When the circuit rider took off his hat and held it to shield his open Bible from the rain and began to read in a nasal voice, the man who had come in the buckboard removed his hat and stood there with the drizzle wetting his heavy shock of graying reddish hair.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had looked at the big man, at the girl, at the man on horseback who

now sat in the buckboard with her. They glanced at each other and came as near grinning as their grief would permit. Then they bowed their heads and listened to the preacher.

"Bar Nothin' Plunkett," muttered a Muleshoe cowpuncher.

"And his bodyguard," said another.

"Who's the girl?"

"*Quién sabe?* Dunno."

They stood bareheaded in the drizzling rain while the blue-nosed circuit rider's whining voice came from behind his chattering teeth.

". . . . I am the resurrection and the life—"

At last the nasal voice ceased and, covering their heads with their hats, the men turned away from the open graves to where their saddled horses stood humped, rumps to the rain.

All but Jake Brandon and Pete Statler.

"Whoever killed our fathers, Pete—" Jake Brandon's voice was husky.

"Whoever done it, Jake—"

They shook hands. Then, putting on their hats, they started walking through the mud to where their saddled horses stood. The big man halted them.

"I just got word, boys. Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler were the best friends I had. Meet me at my house. I'd like to talk to you both. And I want you to have dinner with me." Then he turned and walked over to the buckboard.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler looked at each other. Again they nearly grinned.

"Was that an invite, Jake, or an order?"

"Bar Nothin' Plunkett," said Jake. "Mr. Los Gatos hisself."

Then they both looked toward the girl. Her eyes were watching them. Plunkett took the lines. The big man's bodyguard stepped back into his saddle without setting foot on the ground.

"Wonder who she is," said Pete.

Jake shrugged his thick shoulders. They stood there by their horses and watched a couple of Mexicans start shoveling the wet dirt in on top of the two coffins. Then they mounted their horses and rode away from the cemetery and on back to town. With them rode their cowpunchers.

". . . and without muddyin' them fancy boots. That Ace Hartnell! Fancy man!" There was a mixture of contempt, envy and admiration in some cowpuncher's voice.

"Ever see Ace Hartnell rope?"

"Or fan a bronc?"

"Or use that fancy white-handled six-shooter of his?"

"He'll pull it once too often some day and he'll be too slow."

"Meanin' Lon Jackson?"

"Just that, cowhand. Meanin' Sheriff Lon Jackson. The only human bein', the only thing in yonder cow town of Los Gatos that Bar Nothin' Plunkett don't own. Lon don't wear Plunkett's Bar O brand."

"Ner no other man's iron. That long-geared Texican is his own man."

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler heard only snatches of the talk between their cowpunchers. They rode along in silence, side by side, dry-eyed, grim-lipped. Pardners.

Sheriff Lon Jackson had loped on ahead. Behind him rattled the buckboard. And alongside the buckboard rode Ace Hartnell. Bringing up the rear of this procession came the circuit-rider sky pilot on a big gray mule.

Meanwhile, back at the cemetery the Mexican grave-diggers filled the two graves.

II.

Riley Plunkett was a big man in more ways than one. He owned the little adobe cow town of Los Gatos, at the Arizona end of the pass that had its southern outlet in Mexico. He claimed the mountains and desert stretches, the little valleys and the water rights to the creeks on the thousands of acres he called his range. And he held that range by ruthless strength.

Thousands of cattle wore his Bar O brand. The brand that was better known as the Bar Nothing.

Nobody knew much about Plunkett's past. He had come out of Mexico with a couple of pack mules loaded with gold and had ridden through Los Gatos Pass on a dark night. His money had built the little adobe village into a sizable town—a store, a saloon and gambling house.

His own house was a low-roofed rambling adobe built around a patio. The windows had iron bars. The floors were of Mexican tile. Mahogany furniture made by hand. Mexican and Indian rugs. Mexican servants whose loyalty was proven. Plunkett had built a church for the Mexicans and paid a padre to come to Los Gatos once a month to say mass. On Mexican fiesta days and on other occasions he gave a big barbecue.

The Bar O cowpunchers were all Mexicans. Plunkett paid them fair wages, mounted them on good horses, and his range bosses drove those vaqueros hard.

Nobody knew why Riley Plunkett had pinned a law badge on Lon Jackson from Texas. Nobody but Lon himself, and he was not a talkative man.

Then there was Ace Hartnell. Nobody knew where Hartnell had come from or why Riley Plunkett had hired him for a sort of bodyguard and right-hand man. Because if anyone in the cow country was capable of taking care of himself, it was Bar Nothing Plunkett.

There were times when the big man got roaring

drunk and smashed everything in his own saloon. His big, bellowing roar would challenge any and all men to tackle him. He would fight a saloon full of men, a grin on his brick-red face, his gray-green eyes bloodshot and glinting. And the drinks were free to all who would get drunk with him.

Sober, he was good-natured, without bluster. He gave orders quietly. But even when he laughed and joked and swapped stories, his eyes never lost their wariness, their coldness. No man had ever been able to figure out Bar Nothing Plunkett.

A few times different bunches of border-jumper cattle rustlers had tried to whittle on Bar O cattle. Those rustlers now lay buried in unmarked lonely graves.

Sometimes on such occasions Plunkett would take Sheriff Lon Jackson with him. Or Ace Hartnell. But more than once he had saddled a horse, taken a carbine and plenty of cartridges and a sack of jerky, and followed his men into Mexico. In a week or a month he would return. In a gunny sack tied on his saddle would be the hats those rustlers had worn.

There was one room in his ornately furnished adobe house that Plunkett called his office. It was a large square room with a big fireplace and a huge, flat-topped mahogany desk. A big liquor cabinet stood in a corner. Deep leather chairs were scattered about. There was a filled gun rack that held guns of every caliber. And on the walls were tacked a score or more of hats.

It was into this room that a Mexican servant ushered Jake Brandon and Pete Statler.

Riley Plunkett was alone. He shook hands with the two young cowmen and poured them drinks.

"To Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler," he said. "Drink, boys. Then throw your empty glasses into the fire."

They drank and when Plunkett threw his glass into the fire, Jake and Pete followed suit.

Bar Nothing Plunkett picked up two legal-looking papers. He handed one to Jake Brandon, the other to Pete Statler.

"Those," he said, "are the mortgages I've held on the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits for five years. Toss 'em into the fire."

There was a gruff heartiness to his voice. The sort of tone that belongs to a big man accustomed to making large gestures of that kind. But behind it was the grim hint of a command.

Jake and Pete looked at each other. Then Jake spoke to the big man.

"This is the first time that I knew my father had given anybody a mortgage on the place." Jake was slow-spoken, slow-moving, except when he wanted to stir himself into swift action. The grin on his wide mouth matched the deliberate tone of his words. "I wouldn't want ary debts of that kind to go unpaid. So I reckon I'll hang onto this mortgage paper and pay it off as best I know how."

Pete Statler nodded. There were times in those bygone years when the hot-tempered, quick-motioned Pete had laid back and kept still and let the slow-spoken Jake make decisions. He did so now.

"What Jake says goes double. I'll pay this mortgage off, sir."

The only light in the room came from two thick Mexican candles that stood in tall wrought-iron stands that ended in sharp spikes whose points ran up into the base of the candles. Their flickering light threw shadows across the face of Bar Nothing Plunkett. The color of his face seemed to darken and his gray-green eyes glinted. The big man was not accustomed to having anybody brush aside one of those large gestures he so liked to make

There was a tense sort of silence in the room whose walls were decorated with the hats of dead men. Plunkett got slowly to his feet. The only sound in the room was the crackling of the open fire.

The only window in the place was the iron-barred one behind which the two young cowmen stood side by side.

As Bar Nothing Plunkett got to his feet there was the sound of a shot outside. Broken glass tinkled as a bullet smashed the window pane, and the bullet thudded into the thick adobe wall behind Plunkett. That bullet had whined in between the heads of Jake Brandon and Pete Statler, missing them by inches, and grazing the Bar O owner.

The big man was the first to go into action, and he moved with the powerful speed of a grizzly bear. His two hands knocked over the lighted candles, plunging the room into a darkness that now held only the dull-red glow of the fire.

Bar Nothing Plunkett came over or around his big mahogany desk swiftly. This big man, who liked to whip a saloon full of tough men, had all his two hundred and fifty pounds of bone and beef behind the rush that knocked Jake Brandon and Pete Statler down. His big arms held them flat on the floor as half a dozen bullets crashed through the barred window.

The two young cowmen had been thrown hard, flung against the wall with a stunning force. They lay there half knocked out.

Bar Nothing Plunkett crouched near the window and the six-shooter in his hand filled the room with its deafening roar. Outside, in the rain-filled darkness, there sounded the pounding of shod hoofs and the rattle of gunfire.

As Jake and Pete got to their feet, Plunkett threw a Mexican serape across the window.

"Couldn't see a blasted thing out yonder," he growled. "Had to shoot at the flash of their guns."

He loomed big and powerful there in the red glow of the open fire.

"Sorry I had to knock you boys down, but somebody out yonder was shootin' at you or me and we made good targets. If you'll pick up them two candles and light 'em we'll have a drink."

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler righted the tall iron candlesticks and lit the two big candles. They were still a little dazed and bewildered by what had happened.

Plunkett grinned. He stooped and picked up the two mortgage papers that had somehow been loosened from the hands of the two young cowmen.

"Like I was sayin' before we got interrupted," Bar Nothing Plunkett drawled, "we'll burn these."

He stepped over to the fire and tossed the papers into the blaze.

A door opened and Ace Hartnell came in. There was a sardonic grin on his thin-lipped mouth, and his eyes were as yellow as a cougar's.

"What the hell goes on out there, Hartnell?" growled Plunkett.

"The Mexicans on guard stepped in out of the rain. I was in my room. Whoever it was got away in the dark."

Ace Hartnell was dressed in cowpuncher pants and a short jacket and flannel shirt tailored to fit his well-knit frame. His clothes and straight, coarse black hair were wet with rain. Ejecting six empty shells from a silver-mounted, ivory-handled six-shooter, he tossed them into the fire, reloaded his fancy gun and shoved it back in its holster.

Bar Nothing Plunkett opened the long blade of a jackknife and dug a couple of lead slugs slugs out of the adobe wall behind his desk.

"Somebody," he said, "don't like me. Or mebbe so it's young Jake Brandon and Pete Statler they don't like."

The door that Ace Hartnell had used opened slowly. The girl who had been with Bar Nothing Plunkett in the buckboard stood in the doorway, the soft candlelight reflected in the coppery tint of her heavy black hair. She wore a dress made of soft green material, and high-heeled slippers of the same color. A large Spanish tortoise-shell comb set off her costume.

"Come in, Della," said Plunkett, a softness in his deep voice. "I want you to know Jake Brandon and Pete Statler. Pete's the tall un. Boys, this is my daughter, Della Plunkett."

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler looked and felt awkward. They had never seen a girl like this. And they never had heard of Bar Nothing Plunkett having a daughter.

The yellow eyes of Ace Hartnell watched them. His thin-lipped grin was like a quirt whipped across their faces. Riley Plunkett was grinning, too.

It was the girl herself who put the two young cowpunchers at ease. She crossed the room, moving with an easy litheness. Her smile was genuine and there was something in the depths of her gray-green eyes that backed up the honesty of her words. Her two hands reached out and took the hands of the two young cowmen.

"You've lost your fathers. I'm sorry. I didn't get rigged out in this outfit to make you feel awkward. But you know my father better than I do and he wanted me to get dressed up to fit his furniture. Now if you'll have your drinks, I'll take a glass of sherry. I smell gun smoke. I heard shooting. But I suppose that's none of my business."

For a moment the girl hung onto the hands of Jake Brandon and Pete Statler. Each of them felt the slight shiver, something like fear, in the tightening of her grip. Then she let go their hands and walked over to where her father stood.

"There is a man out in the hall"—her voice was quiet-toned, steady—"who wants to see you. His name is Sheriff Lon Jackson. He has a hat to add to your collection. He said to tell you and Ace Hartnell that the Bar Nothing gun-slinger to whom it belonged won't have any further use for it."

The eyes of Bar Nothing Plunkett and his daughter met and held. Then the big man grinned and he cut a hard, swift look at Ace Hartnell. Walking across the room to the hall door, he opened it.

"Come in, Lon. You're just in time for a drink."

III.

Sheriff Lon Jackson came slowly into the room. His own hat was on his head but in his hand he carried a high-crowned, silver-braided Mexican sombrero. There was some blood on it.

The lawman still wore his slicker and his boots were muddy. The water and mud were soiling the rug, but the tall, rawboned Texan seemed rudely unaware of the fact that he was muddying the floor or that he was wearing his hat. His hard black eyes looked past Bar Nothing Plunkett and straight at Ace Hartnell. The sheriff's slicker was unbuttoned and his right hand was near his gun.

"You're goin' to be short-handed that pock-marked *paisano* called Pancho."

Sheriff Lon Jackson tossed the rain-sodden, blood-stained sombrero on the mahogany desk.

"Tack it up on the wall, Plunkett." His voice was a lazy drawl, but his black eyes were hard.

Bar Nothing Plunkett still had three or four lead slugs that he had dug out of the adobe wall behind his desk. He tossed them on the wide brim of the sombrero.

"Have a drink, Lon."

"Not tonight. Too many cowboys in town. Jake, you and Pete had better come along with me. Them

Unless Jake and Pete could get the grudge out of their systems by slugging at each other, their two outfits would be plunged into a bitter range war.

cowpunchers of yours is beginnin' to git kind o' out of hand. I need you."

"They're stayin' for supper." A growl crept into Plunkett's voice.

"Not tonight, Plunkett. Them cowpunchers will take orders from Jake and Pete. I'm deputizin' these two boys to help me keep a lot of good cowhands from makin' a bad mistake."

The sheriff's eyes cut back to Ace Hartnell. Those two men hated one another. Both were dangerous. Bar Nothing Plunkett walked in between them.

"Lon, I want you to shake hands with my daughter Della. I'd like you to be good friends."

"I met her out in the hall." Sheriff Lon Jackson grinned faintly. "We got kind o' acquainted." He pulled off his hat slowly. There was a bullet rip in the crown. Some blood wet his thick, iron-gray hair, a thin trickle of it crawling slowly down in front of his right ear.

Ace Hartnell saw it. Bar Nothing Plunkett saw it, too, and gave a growl like a wounded grizzly.

"Who done that, Lon? That pock-marked Pancho?"

Sheriff Lon Jackson rubbed the blood away with the heel of his hand. His voice lost nothing of its slow drawl as he looked straight at Ace Hartnell.

"Pancho was already dead when that bullet creased this thick skull of mine."

The sheriff turned to the girl and bowed stiffly. "Glad to have met you, Miss Della. That's a shore purty dress for a shore purty girl." Then he put his hat on and his voice hardened. "Jake, you and Pete better git your hats. Them Muleshoe and Hourglass brush poppers is about to lock horns."

For a long moment the silence in the room was tense. Jake Brandon and Pete Statler looked at each other, then at the others in the room.

Bar Nothing Plunkett's red-tanned face was like something carved out of rock and his eyes were as green as glass. He was the man who owned this little cow town of Los Gatos. He was king here. Men took his orders or got paid off in hard coin.

He was looking at Sheriff Lon Jackson but he spoke to Ace Hartnell.

"Clear out, Ace. Git back to where you belong." And he waited until Hartnell had left the room before his deep growl sounded again.

"Who," he asked the sheriff, "do you reckon that pock-marked, marijuana-smokin' Pancho was shootin' at when he shot through the window?"

"Your guess," said Lon Jackson, "would be better than mine."

"Don't be too sure about that." Plunkett turned to his daughter. "I reckon, Della, that Lon will be able to drink with us now."

"Make it light, ma'am," the sheriff said.

Della Plunkett poured the drinks. Her hand was steady and her eyes were as hard now as those of her father. Then she smiled and that hardness was gone.

"I'll bandage your head, sheriff. I'm not afraid of a little blood."

"There's a doc up town," said Lon Jackson. "I'm obliged, just the same."

Bar Nothing Plunkett grinned. "Now about them cowpunchers uptown, Lon. The Muleshoe and Hourglass cowboys?"

The lawman's eyes puckered. "They're havin' a little fun. Barrin' that, they're gittin' along good. There'll be a few fights. Grudges paid off. But that's about all."

Sheriff Lon Jackson held his drink in his hand and looked straight into the hard gray-green eyes of Bar Nothing Plunkett.

"I done told Pete and Jake and their cowpunchers that Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler didn't kill one another in the Los Gatos Pass."

"I didn't know," said the big man, as if he were talking to himself, convincing himself of something, "a damn thing about it."

Then Bar Nothing Plunkett hunched his heavy shoulders and his big fist hit his glass of whiskey.

"This is my young un, Lon. You knowed her mother. She might have her old man's eyes, but she's got her mother's heart. Protect her, regardless."

"I don't reckon," Lon Jackson said quietly, "you needed to say that."

The girl and Jake Brandon and Pete Statler stood over in the shadows of the candlelight. The big man's voice rumbled softly.

"The Bar Nothin' outfit is hers when I die, Lon."

"We'll drink on that un, Plunkett." Jackson's voice was as quiet-toned as the cattleman's.

"She'll need friends, Lon. Friends like young Jake Brandon and young Pete Statler. Her own age. Honest."

"Honest," nodded Lon Jackson. "Do you know that them same two boys rode to Los Gatos this mornin' with every intention of killin' each other?"

Della Plunkett pulled her breath in sharply. Her eyes looked up at the two young cowmen. Jake grinned slowly and shook his head. Pete Statler took her hand and held it. She groped around and found Jake's hand and clung to it.

"I didn't know, Lon. That's the truth. You'd better believe that." There was a mixture of pleading and grim command in the big man's voice. And few men had ever heard Bar Nothing Plunkett plead for anything.

There was something passing back and forth between Bar Nothing Plunkett and Sheriff Lon Jackson that nobody but those two men understood. Something grim and dangerous as dynamite with a lighted fuse. There was no friendship there between these two men. But some bond, far stronger than the easy ties of friendship, held them together here at Los Gatos.

Lon Jackson hated Ace Hartnell. He had refused to take a drink while that handsome, smooth-tongued gun-slinger was in the room. But he would take a drink with Plunkett.

Like Jake Brandon and Pete Statler told each other afterward, they felt like a pair of school kids stood off in a corner. And yet they were a vital part of it all. And so was this girl who stood between them, holding onto their hands, bravery and fear in her eyes, in the coldness of her fingers.

"There's a lot," said Lon Jackson, "that's got to be proved. Till then I'll play the cards as they fall. I come to your house tonight for the first time to keep Jake Brandon and Pete Statler from bein' killed."

Bar Nothing Plunkett's mouth pulled sideways in a mirthless grin as he took off his coat and threw it on the desk. He was wearing a gray flannel shirt and the back of it was torn and sodden with blood. There was a deep gash where a bullet had torn the muscles of his shoulder, near his spine.

"I twisted around," said the big man, "just in time to miss what Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler got. Della, will you tell one of them thick-brained *mozos* to fetch in some hot water and bandages and tell 'em that Sheriff Lon Jackson is stayin' for supper? Scoot, young un."

When she had gone, tight-lipped, that same mixture of fear and bravery in her eyes, Bar Nothing Plunkett ripped off his blood-soaked shirt and undershirt and grinned at Sheriff Lon Jackson.

"I don't think it was you, Lon. You got too much guts to shoot at a man through the window. I know it wasn't Jake Brandon or Pete Statler. So who done the shootin'? You said my guess was better than yours. If it was, Lon, I'd be on his trail now. Set down with your drinks."

If Bar Nothing Plunkett felt any pain he did not show it. Instead he grinned. His eyes were a little

bloodshot and his voice was thickening. He lifted the bottle of whiskey and drank it down like water. The big man was getting drunk. Drunk on hatred and revenge and hundred-proof whiskey.

"Before I start," he rumbled. "Before anything happens . . . Jake Brandon . . . Pete Statler, your outfits need money to run on."

Opening a drawer of his mahogany desk, Bar Nothing Plunkett reached in and pulled out two leather envelopes. He tossed them on his desk with a loud, slapping noise.

"There's your runnin' expenses. Town money on the side. When that runs out, come back to Bar Nothin' Plunkett. Open your traps to thank me and I'll knock your teeth plumb into your tripes. Now, damn you, Lon Jackson, will you drink?"

Della came back into the room with a basin of hot water and rolls of bandage. She was wearing a long white apron to protect her dress. Her father looked surprised. He started to say something, then shook his head and grinned.

The girl worked without a wasted motion. She had the bullet rip in her father's back cleaned and bandaged in a few minutes. Then she bandaged Sheriff Lon Jackson's bullet-creased head. As she finished her job and got ready to leave with the basin of bloodstained water and rags, she answered the question in her father's eyes.

"They taught that at the convent school in Texas. Nursing and other things. Supper is about ready."

She was crossing the room when the door opened and Ace Hartnell came in. He held the door open for her. His white teeth flashed the girl a quick smile and his yellow eyes followed her out of the room.

Bar Nothing Plunkett was pulling on the clean shirt his daughter had fetched him. Scowling, he reached for the bottle and drank.

"What's on your mind, Hartnell? he growled.

The gun-slinger cut a hard look at Lon Jackson, at Jake Brandon and Pete Statler, and grinned faintly.

"It can wait," he said flatly.

But the whiskey and pain had made the big man irritable. "The hell it kin wait. Spit it out, Hartnell."

"The boys caught a man hiding in a shed that's about fifty yards from that window. They rushed him and got his rifle and locked him up."

"Who is he?"

"That circuit-rider sky pilot that preached the funeral sermon."

IV.

The lanky circuit rider looked like a blue-nosed scarecrow in his rusty black clothes and badly soiled white shirt. His bony face was grayish in the candlelight, and his pale, deep-set eyes burned feverishly. He kept cracking the big knuckles of his long, dirty-nailed fingers until Bar Nothing Plunkett growled at him to stop it.

"Now what in blazes was you doin' in that shed with a rifle?" the big man rumbled. "What made you try to kill me 'n' these two young cowmen? Talk straight, you blue-nosed sandhill crane!"

"I fired no shots. Look at the barrel of my rifle. I had sought shelter from the storm. I am a servant of the Lord. Satan prowls the earth in the form of many men. 'Vengeance is Mine,' saith the Lord.

"He had time to clean his rifle," said Ace Hartnell. "The long-maned old faker."

The eyes of the circuit rider blazed. His long arm lifted and a bony forefinger pointed straight at Hartnell.

"Spawn of the devil in hell!"

Bar Nothing Plunkett chuckled and motioned Hartnell back. Then he filled a water tumbler with raw whiskey and handed it to the preacher.

"You look like a corpse dug up. Drink that. You give a man the shivers to look at you."

Bar Nothing Plunkett called in one of his Mexican servants and told him to feed the long-haired preacher and give him a warm bed. Then, picking up the rifle that belonged to the preacher, Plunkett sniffed its muzzle and handed it to the circuit rider with a grin.

When the Mexican had taken the preacher away to supper, the big man shrugged his shoulders.

"Locoed as a sheepherder! He might've mistook us for spawns of the devil and tried to wipe us out, at that. His gun barrel smells of burned powder. It ain't bin cleaned in a long time. Damned if Hartnell's face didn't look shore comical. Spawn of the devil in hell! The long-haired, blue-nosed ol' circuit rider called the bet."

They went in to supper. Ace Hartnell sat opposite Lon Jackson at the long black mahogany table. Della sat on her father's right across from Jake Brandon and Pete Statler.

Bar Nothing Plunkett carried a decanter of whiskey with him to the table and his huge frame filled the specially made leather-and-mahogany chair.

In the long dining room with an open fire and heavy-beamed ceiling and whitewashed adobe walls, there was only the light of more huge candles. The table gleamed with white linen and heavy silver. The Mexican dishes were handmade. There was food enough for a score of people. Wine in colored glass goblets made in Mexico. In another room a Mexican stringed orchestra played and sang ranchero songs, and after supper a Mexican girl in native costume danced.

Bar Nothing Plunkett lived like some don, like a king. Even Lon Jackson, who was callous to most things of that sort, admitted the Plunkett town house was something to remember.

But the real highlight of that long, rainy evening was when Della Plunkett sat down at the piano in the big living room. She played and sang in a husky, throaty voice, songs like "Annie Laurie," "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," and "Old Black Joe."

It was as if she had forgotten that anyone was there. She was singing to herself or to someone who was not present. And the effect of her songs on those men was varied. Varied and strange.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had long ago lost all feeling of awkwardness here in this house. The liquor had warmed them. The supper had satisfied a hunger that they had forgotten in their bitter grief. And now, as they sat near each other, their eyes watching this girl—the sort of a girl they had never known—their grief was forgotten. Now and then they would look at each other and grin, and then their eyes would go back to the girl at the piano.

Sheriff Lon Jackson leaned back in his chair, a dead cigar in his teeth, the hardness gone from his opaque black eyes.

Bar Nothing Plunkett sat in a deep leather chair, an untouched drink gripped in his big hand, watching his daughter, listening to her songs. Motionless, silent, his bloodshot gray-green eyes filmed.

Ace Hartnell sat off to himself in the shadows. For once the faint, sardonic, thin-lipped smile was wiped from his face. He stared, not at Della Plunkett, but into the open fire. And his yellow eyes were brooding, half-closed, dark with strange memories.

Nobody took notice of him when he roused himself from that brooding and quit his chair. He left the room quietly. In the hallway he picked up his hat and let himself out the front door. It was perhaps two hours later when Ace Hartnell walked into the Bar O Saloon. He was soaked to the skin and his dark face looked as gray as ashes. There was a strange look in his yellow eyes and the cowpunchers gave way for him. Ace Hartnell seldom took a drink. He stood there now in his sodden clothes and mud-caked boots, drinking whiskey from a bottle like a thirsty man drinks water. His eyes seemed to see nobody, his face was a gray mask.

Men who had sworn to kill Ace Hartnell when they caught him off guard had that chance now. Anybody could have beaten that quick-triggered gun-slinger to the draw.

But Sheriff Lon Jackson had come in behind Hartnell. The law officer's black eyes held a hard warning.

With Lon Jackson came Jake Brandon and Pete Statler. They were both still a little dazed and bewildered.

They had left Bar Nothing Plunkett sitting there in his deep leather chair. He had not even seen them leave the room. And the whiskey had spilled from his glass onto the floor. It would have been dangerous then to have tried to rouse the big man from his thoughts.

It was Della Plunkett who had gone to the door with Sheriff Lon Jackson and the two young cowmen.

"My father needs you," she said in a low tone, "even more than you might need him. Don't let him down."

"We won't," said Jake and Pete quickly.

"It's you," Lon Jackson told the girl, "that we're not lettin' down. Why did you come here? He didn't send for you."

"I came," said Della Plunkett, "to take the Bar O Ranch. Now I'm staying to help my father. The man I'd been taught to hate. I can't hate him. He's too big and splendid. No matter what he has done, there must have been a reason for it. And now if you don't mind, I'll go back there to him and stay with him. He needs me."

Sheriff Jackson nodded. "Bar Nothin' Plunkett never asked anybody for help. Neither did Lon Jackson. Nor Big Bill Brandon nor Long Tom Statler. This is a man's game. Riley Plunkett shouldn't let you buy chips in it. Wait just a minute."

Lon Jackson turned to the two young cowmen. His eyes were bleak.

"Them two leather things with the money. The runnin' expenses. Hand 'em over. Or do you want to spend money handed you by the outfit that murdered your daddies?"

Della Plunkett caught her breath with an audible gasp. In the candle light her eyes were gray-green and as hard as Riley Plunkett's.

"That's a lie!" Her voice was a whisper.

"I'd give a purty," said Lon Jackson, "to believe otherwise. You two boys gimme that money."

Jake and Pete handed over the leather envelopes that were stuffed with bank notes of large denomination. Sheriff Lon Jackson handed them to the girl.

"There's blood on this money. It don't show, ma'am, but it's there. Just lay them two leather envelopes on Plunkett's desk in the room where he keeps his hats. He'll find 'em. And he'll savvy."

There was nothing that Jake Brandon and Pete Statler could say. Della Plunkett stood there in the candlelit hallway, her face a little white, her gray-green eyes hard, yet tear-dimmed.

Her hand was steady as she took the two leather envelopes from Lon Jackson.

"I'll tell my father," she spoke in a low tone, "what you said. Tomorrow. If I told him now he'd come out here and kill the three of you where you stand."

"That," said the lawman, "would be considerable of a chore, even for Bar Nothin' Plunkett. But you got him peaceful now and there's the old sayin' about lettin' sleepin' dogs lay quiet. Them songs

your mother used to sing kind o' got under the big feller's tough hide. Like they got under mine. Her dress. Her voice. Only it was in the Bird Cage Opera House at Tombstone that we first heard her sing. A long time ago, Della."

His black eyes studied her. "Take a look at these two young cowboys. They'd fight anything, anybody this side of hell for your smile. They're cowboys and good uns. They won't never let you down. But there might come a day when they'll split their friendship and fight each other to win a look from your eyes. But I don't reckon I have to tell you what cards you're a-holdin'. One purty girl kin outguess a corral full of cowhands. Good night, young lady. It's bin a pleasure, just listenin' to songs that your mother sang when she wore that same green dress."

Sheriff Lon Jackson had almost shoved Jake Brandon and Pete Statler out the door and into the black drizzle. They had left their slickers behind. Dressed in the store clothes they had bought to attend the funeral, they had had to stand out in that black drizzle for at least ten minutes.

"Keep your guns in your hands," Sheriff Jackson told them. "Shoot at anything that moves and don't shoot to miss. Stand here till I git back."

While they waited, the cold drizzle soaking them, sobering them, in the blackness, Pete Statler found his voice.

"Just two big ol' country boys, Jake. What the hell is it all about?"

"Dunno, Pete. Only I had a quick look at that mortgage. My dad never put his name to that paper. I'd know that signature of his anywheres."

"My dad told me," said Pete Statler, "that the outfit was clear. That the Hourglass had paid off its debts."

"Lon Jackson. . . . How far kin a man trust him?"

"He told us, Pete, that somebody had murdered our dads. Otherwise me 'n' you would be somewheres else but here. He wasn't lyin' to us."

"Lon Jackson don't lie," Jake Brandon agreed. "But he's playin' a game. It's for high stakes."

"We're bein' used, somehow."

"Yeah. Two cow-country kids that knowed every brand and earmark in the country but spelled cow C Circle W. Ain't she somethin' to remember on night guard?"

"Too high-toned for us, feller."

"Can't kill a man for tryin'."

"That's the old sayin'," said Pete Statler.

"Then it's a hoss race?"

"A hoss race, feller."

In that black drizzle the two young cowmen could not see one another but they could tell, each of them, just about how the other looked.

Jake Brandon, just under medium height, with the stocky build that went along with his slow voice and easy manner that could turn into bull-like swiftness, horns sharp. Pete Statler, tall, lean, tow-headed, blue-eyed, who had a quick way of talking sometimes, and a pair of long legs and whiplike arms that could loop in a pair of hard fists that slashed and punished. A twisted grin on his face and his blue eyes dangerous.

They had grown up together, been friends. Then enemies. And this new mending of that old pardnership had its weak strands. Stronger, in some ways, than that boyhood friendship. Weaker, in a place or two, because they were older now and the sort of life they had led made them wary of close friendships with any man.

They had, after all, only the word of Sheriff Lon Jackson that their fathers had not fought a gun duel. And they were each wondering now, there in that black drizzle, how far they could trust Lon Jackson or Bar Nothing Plunkett or any other man on earth.

"He said," Jake's voice broke a silence, "to shoot at anything that moved."

"Then don't move." Pete Statler's voice was bantering. But behind it was something that made Jake drop his hand on his gun.

"I hope you're joshin', Pete."

"Just joshin', Jake."

But they moved a little apart in the rain-filled darkness, their hands on their guns.

They could see the dim yellow blob of lights uptown. Blurred spots in the distance, two-three hundred yards away. An awkward silence held the two cowpunchers. They had their six-shooters in their hands.

Somebody was coming. There was the sucking sound of mud and water when a boot is pulled out.

Jake's and Pete's six-shooters *click-clicked* to full cock. Then the Texan drawl of Sheriff Lon Jackson came out of the rain-swept night.

"Keep your shirts on, cowhands."

It was good to hear that Texan's voice. Jake and Pete eased the hammers of their guns down and slid their six-shooters into their holsters.

"We might as well go on uptown," said Sheriff Lon Jackson. His tone was flat, bitter. "We done lost our man."

"What man?" Pete Statler's voice was sharp.

"The circuit-rider preacher. The man that saw Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler git killed."

"What? You mean that blue-nosed sky pilot—"

"Seen the job done. Said it was a vision. That there was a lightnin' flash and the thunder split the sky apart and rolled rocks down. . . . Hell!"

There was disgust and self-reproach in the sheriff's voice. His long, rawboned frame loomed close now in the darkness.

"Locoed as hell, but he had somethin' to tell and he was sellin' it to the highest bidder. Not so locoed,

mebbe. I located his room . . . the *warm* bed that Bar Nothin' Plunkett was stakin' him to. There was a man in the bed, but it wasn't the circuit rider. It was one of Plunkett's Mexican guards. His throat was cut from ear to ear and his own Mexican knife was stuck handle deep into his briskit."

Sheriff Lon Jackson's voice had a metallic tone to it there in the black rain.

"The only man that seen Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler murdered," said Jackson, "has pulled out on us. We might as well go uptown and have us a drink."

So they had come into the Bar O Saloon not more than a minute behind Ace Hartnell.

They saw Hartnell standing alone at the end of the bar, his fancy clothes ruined by the rain, his alligator boots caked with mud. There was a weary droop to his shoulders and the brim of his hat was pulled low.

There were a dozen men in that saloon who wanted to kill Ace Hartnell. Men who had been whipped, taunted, stung by the fancy-dressed bodyguard of Bar Nothing Plunkett. Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers; Mexicans who worked for the Bar O; others. And still they had been afraid to make a gunplay. They were afraid of Ace Hartnell. They were watching him, gathering in little clanlike groups of twos or threes behind the man's back. Not daring to talk. Watching the man they wanted to kill and watching his blurred reflection in the back-bar mirror that needed cleaning. They watched him drink. Watched the white-handled six-shooter in its fancy holster. And because it was said of Ace Hartnell that he always held an ace in the hole, they watched his other hand, his armpits, his belly, for a second gun. And none of them had the courage to challenge the gunman, drunk and dazed as he seemed to be.

Then Sheriff Lon Jackson had come in with Jake Brandon and Pete Statler. Shoving the two young cowpunchers back with a wide sweep of his left arm, the lawman faced the men in the saloon who were watching Ace Hartnell.

Lon Jackson never opened his mouth. He just stood there, his hard black eyes sweeping them with cold contempt. He did not need any kind of words to tell them what was in his mind.

Then Sheriff Lon Jackson did something that no man in the saloon could understand. He walked up to the bar and stood alongside Ace Hartnell, the man he hated with a bitterness that was beyond the tipsy comprehension of any man there.

"I'll have a drink with you, Hartnell. Then I'll git you out of here before you git hamstrung."

Nobody but Ace Hartnell could hear that low-spoken voice. His yellow eyes cleared. He tried to pull that sardonic grin across a mouth that was gray and bloodless. The grin got halfway, then tightened and quivered and failed.

The silence in the Bar O Saloon was broken by the heavy whiskey breathing of the men who were in there, and the low moaning of some drunk who was between sleep and delirium. Otherwise it was quiet, and every man there knew that this was something that was as dangerous as a hair-triggered loaded gun.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had lost something of their friendship back there in the black night and they had come away from Plunkett's house ready to fight for a girl whom they did not know. But they had to stand back now and let something bigger than their own feud take its place in this smoke-filled saloon.

Ace Hartnell shook his head like a man coming out of a nightmare. His yellow eyes lost their dazed look. He saw every man, every little tiny detail of the saloon. The men in it. Their eyes. Everything. Grabbing the whiskey bottle he had been using, he threw it into a far corner. The gray pallor began to leave his face. His left hand brushed across his neatly trimmed mustache.

"A horse on me, Lon," he said with his old tight-lipped grin. "What do you want me to do? Lick your damned boots?"

"Better bed down, Hartnell. My cabin. Nobody will cut your throat."

The gunman's yellow eyes were bloodshot, wicked, dangerous. His hand dropped to the butt of his ivory-handled gun.

"Nobody cuts anybody's throat, Lon."

"That's what I said."

"But you meant—"

"Nothin', Hartnell. My house is yours. Or you kin bed down in jail. Or you kin yank that fancy gun and I'll kill you before you git it clear of its leather. I got the bulge tonight, Hartnell. If I traveled in your kind of company, I'd use it."

Then the tough little cow town of Los Gatos saw something that they afterward talked about. They saw Ace Hartnell hand over his white-handled six-shooter, butt first, to Sheriff Lon Jackson.

"I'll give it back to you in the mornin', Hartnell." Lon Jackson's voice was an easy drawl. "You kin keep your two sneak guns. You might need 'em. Now let's git on to my place . . . the jail buildin'."

V.

It was still raining when Jake Brandon and Pete Statler rode out of Los Gatos with their cowpunchers, headed for the Muleshoe and Hourglass Ranches, in a lead-gray dawn.

For ten or fifteen miles they would follow the same wagon trail. Then the trail would fork and angle off. But for the next fifteen miles they would

be on the Bar O range which lay between the Muleshoe and Hourglass ranges and the Mexican border.

Nobody wore a slicker. Slickers are no good in the cat's-claw and mesquite brush. A cowpuncher has to tough out the rain and cold.

Some of the cowpunchers had fetched along bottles and they passed them back and forth. A rye-whiskey overcoat. Most of the men were a little drunk.

Sheriff Lon Jackson had ridden out of town an hour or so before daybreak. He was trailing the circuit-rider preacher. The sky pilot, a little locoed perhaps, had told the sheriff before the funeral that he had seen two men killed by bushwhackers on Los Gatos Pass. He had identified the dead bodies of Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler as the two murdered men. It had been a queer-sounding story, full of Bible quotations and contradictions, but Lon Jackson had taken at least a part of the rambling tale for the truth.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had time now to think. They asked one another what had taken their fathers onto the Bar O range and into Los Gatos Pass. Bill Brandon and Tom Statler had been almighty close-mouthed about things.

Los Gatos Pass had a sinister reputation. Arizona Rangers and cattle rustlers had had several gun skirmishes there in the narrow, rocky-walled pass that crossed the Mexican border. There were some unmarked graves in the pass. Also the bleached and scattered bones of other men who had not been given the benefit of a grave. Outlaws used the pass. Renegade Yaquis and Apaches rode it sometimes at night.

It was said that Bar Nothing Plunkett had brought a lot of cattle up out of Mexico and through Los Gatos Pass when the moon was right. That the beginning of his first big herd had been brought up through the pass by rustlers. And that even now the big cowman dealt with cattle rustlers.

Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers, Jake and Pete knew, had had orders to stay clear of Los Gatos Pass.

"Bill Brandon," said Jake, "and Tom Statler wasn't ridin' into Los Gatos Pass of a moonlight night jest to look at the stars."

"Lon Jackson just as much as accused Plunkett or his outfit, anyhow, of killin' 'em. Lon don't like Plunkett. And he hates Ace Hartnell's guts," Pete added.

"The sheriff kind o' wanted us to git the idea that the only reason he came into Plunkett's house, then stayed on, was to keep you and me from gittin' killed," said Jake.

"Lon Jackson kept Ace Hartnell from gittin' killed last night. Mebbeso he wants to do that job

Even the breathtaking beauty of Della Plunkett couldn't blind Jake and Pete to the grim significance of that wall of dead men's hats.

himself. But he wants Hartnell to be sober when he tackles him."

"That'd be one reason, Pete. Another reason is that Hartnell knows somethin' that Lon Jackson couldn't ever learn from a dead man."

"You always was long-headed at figurin' things out, Jake. Have a snort of this tarant'lar juice. Warm your gizzard while your hide freezes."

They had been drinking since they were in their early teens. Not much, but enough to know how to handle the stuff or at least to get a fair idea how much it would take to get them tipsy. Their fathers had never objected. Jake and Pete were cowboys. That covered it.

Out of the gray drizzle loomed three riders. The big bulk of Bar Nothing Plunkett; Ace Hartnell sitting his horse with a saddle swagger; Della Plunkett. The girl was wearing chaps and a denim jacket and she sat her horse like she'd been born in the saddle. All three packed saddle guns.

Plunkett and Hartnell were both sober. But the Bar O man's temper was surly and the gun-slinger's face looked drawn and strained.

"The lower outfit is gatherin' cattle," Plunkett explained to Pete and Jake. "We're goin' to work with the roundup a few days."

Jake said that the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits were pickin' up their roundup work where they had left off a couple of days ago.

No mention was made of the circuit rider or Lon Jackson. Or the two leather envelopes with the money that had been given the girl.

They rode along together in a sort of dismal silence, Jake and Pete on either side of Della; Bar Nothing Plunkett and Hartnell riding ahead about a hundred yards.

Off to one side a coyote loped out from some brush. Bar Nothing Plunkett called across his shoulder:

"Take a shot at it, Della."

She yanked her saddle gun and shot three times. The bullets kicked up spurts of mud ahead of the coyote, changing its course each time.

Then as the gray shape of the coyote streaked

away, Ace Hartnell slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard and shot once. The coyote leaped into the air, twisted, landed in a kicking heap, then lay dead in the mud a good three hundred yards away.

The girl's shooting had been nice target work. She had not tried to kill the coyote, just turn it. But Hartnell's one shot had been really something to remember.

Della Plunkett had pulled her horse to a halt, raised her carbine to her shoulder and aimed quickly. But the gunman had not slacked the running walk of his horse. The fancy walnut stock of his specially made .30-30 had not lifted above the level of his flat belly.

Ace Hartnell levered the empty shell from the breech of his gun and shoved a fresh cartridge into the magazine. Sliding the Winchester back into its saddle scabbard, he rode on without even looking back.

Della was frowning a little as she shoved cartridges into the magazine of her saddle gun. She slid it back into its scabbard with an angry thud.

"He should have known," grinned Pete Statler, "that you was missin' on purpose."

"Yours was good shootin'," added Jake, his ears reddening.

Della's gray-green eyes were angry. She cut them each a swift, hard look, then stared at the back of Ace Hartnell.

"He knew I was shooting to miss. That was his way of winning an argument. I've never killed anything in my life. I hate killing. Ace Hartnell knows it."

"Then why," blundered Jake Brandon, "do you pack a saddle gun and a six-shooter?"

Her white teeth flashed in a smile, but her eyes looked green as ice in the gray rain.

"For purely selfish reasons, cowboy. I'd rather kill than be killed."

Then she looked at Pete Statler. "You both heard what Sheriff Lon Jackson said last night. About it being a man's game. I'm taking a man's chances. Don't either of you cow-country Romeos wait for Della Plunkett to yell for help in a tight. I'll take my own part. Tell that to your guardian angel, Lon Jackson." From an inside pocket of her jacket she slid the two bulky leather envelopes. Then shoved them back out of sight.

"Your bloodstained money, cowhands. Bar Nothing Plunkett told me to buy myself a running iron with it. And you can pass that along to your Texican nurse!"

Della Plunkett touched her horse with the spurs. She was riding a long-legged mahogany bay gelding, one of the top horses in the Bar O remuda. The big bay bunched, jumped, broke into a run. Shod hoofs threw muddy water into the faces of Jake and Pete.

Jake rubbed a big blob of slimy mud out of his eyes and grinned faintly.

"She's got a lot of bronc in her."

Pete Statler's face was plastered with mud. His white teeth grinned through the muddy mask, and his puckered blue eyes were bright.

"The next time I cut that gal's sign," he promised, "I'm goin' to haul off and kiss her."

He grinned back at the cowpunchers who had heard nothing of the conversation, but had seen the girl jump her horse out in a shower of puddled water and mud.

"Yonder, cowhands, rides the daughter of Bar Nothin' Plunkett. She'll wear the Hourglass brand one of these days."

Pete's tone was reckless, joshing. He looked at Jake Brandon.

Jake's thick, heavy black brows were pulled into a hard scowl and his gray eyes were cold.

"I got a damned good notion"—Jake's voice was harsh—"to drag you off that horse and whip you!"

"That's fight talk."

Pete reined his horse to a halt and swung his right leg across the saddlehorn. He landed on both feet in the mud.

Jake Brandon quit his horse with that same swiftness that had helped make him the fastest roper in that part of the cow country. He charged the tall, lanky puncher with the sudden ferocity of a bull on the prod.

They went down in the mud and water, punching hard, wrestling, fighting without rules. They had no fighting science. Only youth and toughness and hard muscle. Hampered by chaps and tightly buttoned denim jackets, spurs, the mud, and their hot-tempered anger.

This was not the first time that Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had fought like this. They had been fighting since they were kids, whenever their tempers clashed.

Sometimes Jake had won. Other times Pete had whipped the blocky, shorter boy. But their fights had always been fair, just as this fight was. Give and take. No gouging, no biting, no kind of dirty fighting. Hard fists smashing. Legs tangling as they rolled over and over in the mud and little puddles of rain water.

The Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers grinned. They stayed in their saddles and their horses formed a wide ring around the two fighters.

Bar Nothing Plunkett had seen the fight start. A grin spread across his battered-looking, red-tan square face as he loped back to watch the fight.

"This," Ace Hartnell commented, smiling thinly at the girl, "is goin' to be worth the price of admission. I've got a notion you started it. Let's lope back and see who is the best man."

Della's face had lost something of its healthy

color. There was a mixture of fear and anger in her gray-green eyes as she rode back with Hartnell.

"Who," asked the too handsome bodyguard of Bar Nothing Plunkett, "do you like for a winner, Della?"

If the girl heard him she gave no sign of it. She had caught her lower lip between her teeth and bitten it until a drop of blood showed.

VI.

It was any man's fight from the start to the finish. Jake and Pete rolled over in the slimy mud. They lost their hats, and the bottle in Pete's chaps pocket smashed. They wrestled there in the mud, pounding at each other's face, then broke away and got onto their feet.

Behind this fight lay long months of animosity that was not of their own making but the will of their fathers. They had ridden to town to shoot it out. Sheriff Lon Jackson had blocked that. He had acted as peacemaker, made them shake hands, made them tell their cowpunchers to stay peaceful.

Their old friendship had been spliced together once more, but now a girl with coppery black hair and gray-green eyes had somehow managed to cut that knot of friendship. Jake Brandon and Pete Statler, mud-smeared, sodden, stood on widespread legs and traded blow for blow.

Pete's arms were long and he looped long, whipping fists into Jake's face. But a lot of those blows were blocked by Jake's thick shoulders. Pete would miss. His fist would glance off Jake's shoulder, off the mud-plastered wiry black hair and hard skull of the shorter cowboy.

The swing would throw Pete off balance and Jake would step in with short, hard, punishing fists that worked on Pete's belly and ribs. And when Pete doubled up, Jake would straighten him with vicious uppercuts that landed on Pete's jaw with the sound of slapping leather, jerking Pete's head back.

Then Pete Statler would move his long legs and get out of the way and he would hold Jake off with a stabbing long left arm and whip those right-hand looping swings into the shorter cowpuncher's face.

The Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers had separated so that they were a ring on horseback that was half Muleshoe, half Hourglass. Their hands were on their guns.

There had been half a dozen fights during the night between cowpunchers of the two outfits. But the fights had not brought a gun or knife into play, and the combatants had shaken hands afterward and had another drink.

But with Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler dead, and only Lon Jackson's word for it that the two cowmen had not killed each other, with young Jake Brandon and young Pete Statler standing there pounding at each other, anything might happen. These cowpunchers were ready to take it up wherever Jake or Pete said to commence.

Then Bar Nothing Plunkett and Ace Hartnell rode up. And that was something else again. And there was Plunkett's daughter, who had caused the ruckus, sitting her horse behind the circle of riders.

Bar Nothing Plunkett's hard, gray-green eyes swept the circle of cowpunchers. His voice was a growl.

"Take your hands off your guns. Let them two young roosters git it out o' their systems. This ain't a gun quarrel."

Ace Hartnell's eyes narrowed. The look that he cut covertly at the big cowman had venom in it. Then the gunman saw that Della was watching him and he smiled thinly.

"I always enjoy a nice clean fight," he told her in a low tone.

She gave no sign that she heard him as she shoved her horse between his and her father's.

There was nothing about this fight to make anybody cheer. Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had grown up as kids together. Shared everything that two cowpunchers can share together in the way of hardships and hell raising. Now they stood there, almost ankle-deep in the mud and rain, and smashed at each other's face.

It was hard to tell who was winning or losing or taking the more punishment. Their noses were bleeding, their eyes bruised and swelling, and their faces were masks of blood and mud.

Then Della Plunkett was off her horse and before anybody could stop her she was in between Jake Brandon and Pete Statler.

"You fools!" Her voice was shrill, brittle. "Quit it!"

The two cowpunchers were winded, battered, groggy. They backed away from one another, wiping with hands and forearms at their eyes to clear away the mud and blood and water.

Bar Nothing Plunkett looked disappointed and angry. He stepped his horse alongside his daughter and reached down. His big hairy hand gripped Della's shoulders and he spun her around. He growled like a grizzly.

"You git back onto your horse where you belong. If you don't like the sight of it, git for home. Or I'll double a rope and learn you. You don't git that soft streak from me or your mother. Git on your horse."

Della Plunkett looked up at her father. She was not wincing under that bearlike grip on her shoulder. Her eyes met his, held, then she reached up and slowly took his hand off her shoulder.

"Go ahead with your fight, cowhands," she said in a voice that was harsh and strained. She walked back through the mud to her horse and mounted.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler stood there, breath-

ing heavily. Pete spat out a mouthful of blood and slimy mud. He forced a grin.

"You got aplenty, Jacob?"

"Not unless you got a bellyful, Peter."

"Too many folks around, Jake."

"We kin take 'er up another time," Jake Brandon said.

"Yeah." Pete shoved a hand into his chaps pocket and pulled it out, filled with broken glass. He flung the glass in the mud.

"I got one," said Jake. "Tied in that slicker on my saddle."

Bar Nothing Plunkett rumbled something in a low voice. He reined his horse around and rode away, taking his daughter and his bodyguard with him.

Jake's muddy, skinned-knuckled hands jerked at his saddle strings. He got the slicker untied and took out a sealed quart of whiskey.

"Who," he asked, "is packin' a corkscrew?"

An Hourglass cowpuncher got the cork out by using the blades of two jackknives. Jake and Pete had a drink.

They watched Bar Nothing Plunkett, his daughter Della and Ace Hartnell ride out of sight. Then they grinned at each other.

"Just a couple of ol' country boys," Pete Statler declared.

"Playin' in the mud," said Jake Brandon.

VII.

It takes money to run a cow outfit. Cowpunchers have to be paid. There is the all-important matter of grub. Such necessary items as horseshoes and catch ropes, pack saddles, other things.

Up until now Jake Brandon and Pete Statler had not given much thought to it. Their fathers had handled the check books. Their credit at the Plunkett-owned general store in Los Gatos had been something they had taken for granted.

Now, thanks to Sheriff Lon Jackson, their credit in Bar Nothing Plunkett's town was closed. There was a few hundred dollars in the bank to the credit of the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. They had thrown Plunkett's money back at him, or had let Lon Jackson do it, which amounted to the same thing. And this was the beginning of the roundup season.

At the Muleshoe Ranch the two battered young cowmen talked it over. The only thing to do was to pool the two outfits, cut down their roundup crews to a few men, work the rough mountain country as best they could, short-handed, gather and sell a few hundred head of cattle and go easy on what money the cattle fetched.

"Kind of a greasy-sack spread," Pete said.

They didn't even have enough money between them to pay off the cowboys they were going to let go.

The Muleshoe and Hourglass brush-popper cowhands talked it over and told Jake and Pete how they felt about it.

"We just finished a town drunk that'll hold us awhile. Money ain't no good out in the brush. We kin live on jerky and beans and bread and coffee. We'll just hang and rattle along with you two boys."

Which they did. The two outfits split to get a better work on the rough country. Before they started out the next morning Jake told Pete he had done some thinking during the night.

"Plunkett and Hartnell and the girl wasn't headed for the Bar O roundup, Pete. They were headed for Los Gatos Pass and they packed saddle guns. I keep wonderin' why Plunkett lied. Why he figured he had to lie to us. When a big man like Bar Nothin' Plunkett takes the trouble to lie to a couple of bone-headed young cowhands like us, there's a reason behind it."

"If you figure it's that important," Pete said, "then there's just one way of findin' out what the tally is." He took his saddle carbine from the rack.

Their cowpunchers knew what to do, how to work the country. And in charge of each crew was a seasoned top hand.

"Lon Jackson says," Pete and Jake told their men, "to ride in pairs."

The storm had broken and the sky was blue with a warm sun to thaw them out. Pete and Jake, packing saddle guns, headed south toward Los Gatos Pass. Their fist fight had gotten the grudge out of their systems and they could josh one another now. They were crossing the Bar Nothing range. The storm had spent most of its force here in the mountains. The sign showed where dry washes had been filled with flood water. Cattle that had taken to high ground were grazing back into the lower country. Hundreds of cattle. More cattle than should be here. And Bar Nothing Plunkett was too good a cowman to overstock his range. Jake and Pete rode through the cattle, reading the brands, puzzled.

There was a lot of Bar O cattle. Some Mexican stuff that had not yet been put into the Bar O iron. The Mexican cattle were gaunt and showed signs of having been driven long and hard. They had been turned loose here at the north end of Los Gatos Pass within the last few days.

"Yonder," said Pete, "are a couple of Muleshoe cows with calves big enough to wean."

Jake grunted. "And their calves in the Hourglass iron. How come, Pete?"

But Pete had ridden off at a trot. He motioned Jake. There were eight or ten Hourglass cows with Muleshoe calves following them.

"How come, Jake?" he grinned mirthlessly.

They found other cows and calves wearing the wrong brand. The two punchers looked at each other. Jake pointed toward the rough mountains, on either side of Los Gatos Pass.

"That's where these cows and calves come from. And, pardner, they don't handle like mountain cattle. They're too gentle."

The ground was still wet enough to show tracks and the two young cowmen began back trailing.

The Mexican cattle had probably gotten away from the Bar O Mexican vaqueros during the storm. Otherwise they would never have been turned loose until Plunkett's Bar O brand had been burned on their hides. But by this time those vaqueros should have their scattered cattle rounded up again.

"Somethin' queer about that," declared Jake.

But it was not the Mexican cattle that had probably been brought up out of Mexico by rustlers that bothered Pete and Jake. It was these Muleshoe and Hourglass cows with the misbranded calves.

Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler had quarreled and broken their friendship. But they were both too big, too square to steal from each other. That went for their cowpunchers. Besides, these cows and calves were on the Bar O range, where they did not belong.

"Look at them cows," said Jake. "They're driftin' back right now to'rds their home range. This business stinks like skunk to me."

They followed the cattle tracks out of the foothills and into the mountains. Back trailing. The Mexican cattle had come through Los Gatos Pass. Pete and Jake didn't bother at all with their sign. The tracks of those Muleshoe and Hourglass cows came from a long deep canyon known as Yaqui Canyon.

It was long past noon when Jake and Pete rode into the canyon and followed the tracks. The water had come down the canyon high and deep and swift. There were some dead cows and calves that had been caught in the flood. Their bloated carcasses wore the Muleshoe and Hourglass brands.

Then the two cowmen pulled up at what remained of a barbed-wire and brush fence that had fenced the canyon off and made a large trap pasture of it. The flood had torn the fence out. Cattle that had not been drowned had come out of the canyon after the flood water had abated. The story was there for Pete and Jake to read it.

They rode on up the canyon. About a mile from the ruined fence they found what was left of a branding corral. They dug around in the mud-caked debris and found half a dozen Muleshoe and Hourglass branding irons.

"This tells the tale, Pete," said Jake.

"But why," Pete Statler asked, "would they stamp an Hourglass on a Muleshoe cow's calf. And then put an Hourglass cow's calf into the Muleshoe? Hell's bells, it don't make sense, Jake. This is Bar O range. Them calves is about ready to wean. If Bar O cowpunchers did this, why didn't they run a Bar O on them calves?"

"Bar Nothin' Plunkett hasn't time to mess around with twenty-thirty head of calves," said Jake. "But if them cows and calves was drifted back on their own ranges just before our roundups worked there, and the cows with the wrong brands on the calves caused Bill Brandon and Tom Statler to lock horns, if the two outfits had gotten into a gun-slingin' range war, killin' one another off, that would be big stakes. Then Bar Nothin' Plunkett could manage to get holt of the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. Two good-sized outfits that he's had his green eyes on for many a year."

Pete whistled soundlessly. "You got a long head for figurin', Jake. Keep talkin'."

Jake said that was as far as he could get. Those cows and calves hadn't been turned loose. The flood had broken the fence and let them out. Bill Brandon and Tom Statler were dead.

"But there's this much, Pete. In a week or two our outfits would be workin' along the strip of range next to the Bar Nothin' range. Now supposin' Lon Jackson hadn't told us that it was impossible for our daddies to have killed each other. And providin' we hadn't locked horns in town. I'd be ramroddin' my roundup, you'd be roddin' yours. We'd have picked up those cows and calves on the roundup, while we were usin' Bar Nothin' Plunkett's money to run on. It'd be plumb natural to suppose that Jake Brandon and Pete Statler would go after one another with guns. Our cowpunchers would tangle. When the gun smoke cleared, Bar Nothin' Plunkett would claim both outfits somehow."

"That's hard to take, Jake," said Pete. "I like that big son of a gun. Plunkett ain't the only man in the cow country who'd like to claim the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. Sheriff Lon Jackson is a cowman and a good un. And he's as tough as a boot. I've heard this spot right here called Jackson Canyon."

Jake grinned slowly. "It used to be called Yaqui Canyon. Then Sheriff Lon Jackson trailed some rustlers here, trapped 'em in this box canyon and killed 'em as they tried to git out."

"You ever bin here, Jake?"

Jake Brandon shook his head. "Nope. Them Bar Nothin' Mexicans don't like strangers ridin' around."

"It's my first time here, too," said Pete. "Let's ride on up to the head of 'er."

They got on their horses and rode on up the canyon. It began to narrow. The high, rocky walls shut out the sun and the shadows were thickening.

Jake pulled up. He pointed at the ground. There was the print of a large mule shoe in the still muddy ground.

"The circuit rider," said Jake, lowering his voice, "rides a big gray mule."

Then they saw the huge cave under the towering rimrock that marked the head of the box canyon. They could see the small blaze of a campfire in the cave.

Somewhere a rifle cracked. A heavy lead slug whined over the heads of the two cowmen. The high rocky walls tossed the gun echoes back and forth until it could have been half a dozen guns shooting. Two or three more bullets whined over the heads of the two men. In the gathering dusk, with the brush and boulders ahead and on both sides of the canyon, there was no telling where the shooting came from. But whoever it was, was not shooting to kill. Not yet.

"Here," grinned Pete Statler, his carbine in his hand, "is where we'd better turn back."

Jake Brandon had his hand on the stock of his saddle gun, but had not drawn it from its scabbard. His eyes were gray slits under heavy black brows. Then he pointed at a fairly fresh track going up the canyon. It had been made by a shod horse.

"The circuit rider's mule didn't make that track, Pete." Jake Brandon touched his frightened horse with the spurs and rode on up the canyon.

"Jake, you damned fool!"

Then there was a sharper crack of another gun. Pete saw Jake Brandon lurch forward across his saddlehorn, then straighten up. Jake took off his hat and shoved a finger through a hole in its crown. His tanned face looked a little pale. He grinned slowly and rode back to where Pete sat his horse.

"I reckon, Pete"—he forced his slow grin—"we might as well be gittin' on back." Jake's voice was unsteady and he was hanging onto the saddlehorn. He reached up with the hand that held his hat and rubbed the top of his head. The heel and palm of his hand came away from his shock of wiry black hair stained with fresh blood.

"I saw the flash of the gun up yonder in the rocks. Must've bin two hundred yards. Nice target shootin'. But cuttin' it a little too fine to please the target. I could stand a drink."

Pete Statler was cussing. He rode alongside Jake and shoved a pint bottle at him. Steadied Jake in the saddle as they rode back down the canyon.

The whiskey went down Jake's throat and into his empty belly, and the color began to come back into his tanned face. The glazed look left his eyes and they were as cold and gray as old ice.

"The man that killed our daddies is in that box canyon, Pete. He ain't comin' out alive. I'm waitin' down near that brandin' corral for him an' I'm killin' him as soon as I get my sights on him."

"What goes up must come down"—Pete's grin was flat-lipped—"as we used to say when we was kids and tossed rocks in the air. Whoever is in that box canyon has to ride out some time. There'll be two of us waitin' for—"

His voice broke off. Down the canyon somewhere in the gathering dusk a woman had screamed. Then half a dozen shots. Or it might have been no more than one shot with the canyon walls tossing its echoes back and forth.

But shrill and brittle as it had been, that scream could have been made by only one person: Della Plunkett.

Their saddle guns gripped in their hands, Jake and Pete spurred their horses to a run. They saw the girl's horse spook off into the brush, then swing to a halt as the trailing bridle reins caught and hung in the manzanita thicket.

Pete and Jake both saw the two men on horseback, spurring for a getaway. Their carbines spat fire. The range was long, but the two young cowmen were not missing too badly. One of the riders lurched drunkenly in his saddle. They both began shooting now at the other rider. They saw him topple sideways and land on his head and shoulders in the rocks and lie there without moving. They shot the wounded man out of his saddle. He went over backward and turned partly over in the air as his horse pitched and stampeded. He lay now sprawled on his face and belly.

Then Pete and Jake saw Della Plunkett. She was getting to her feet slowly. She had lost her hat and there was blood on her face.

Pete reached her first. Jake Brandon had ridden on down to where the two dead men lay. There was a grim set to his jaw as he rode back to where Pete was standing with his arm around Della's shoulder. He had yanked the black silk handkerchief from around his throat and was wiping the blood from her face as he steadied her. As Jake rode up, Pete deliberately kissed Della Plunkett on the mouth.

"Us Statlers," he grinned, "never bust a promise. She got raked by the cat's-claw brush and her horse piled her in the rocks and skinned her face some, so she's kind o' groggy. Better kiss her, Jake. Only chance you'll ever git. Who was they?"

"A couple of those border jumpers that's bin peddlin' Mexican cattle to the Bar Nothin' outfit." Jake's voice was harsh.

He stepped off his horse and his left hand gripped the front of Pete's shirt, up near the collar. His right fist caught the lanky cowboy on the point of the jaw.

Pete's blue eyes rolled back in his head. His long legs buckled at the knees and he went down in a heap.

"I've bin tryin' for years," Jake looked at Della and grinned slowly, "to land that un on Pete."

When Jake and Pete saw the two riders spurring for a getaway, their carbines spat fire and the roar of their guns turned Yaqui Canyon into a death trap.

He bent down and slid the pint of whiskey from Pete's chaps pocket. Pulling the cork, he wiped the neck of the bottle on the sleeve of his denim jacket and held the bottle toward the girl.

"It'll burn the linin' of your throat," he told her, "but it's good medicine. Us cow-country Romeos use it for all that ails the cowboy. Mebbeso we had one too many . . . because we thought we heard a girl holler."

Della swallowed some of the raw whiskey and choked. But most of it got down her throat and the color was coming back into her cheeks by the time Pete Statler groaned, blinked his eyes open, shook his head and got slowly to his feet.

Jake slapped Pete's hat on his tow-colored head. Grinned again.

"I've got it now, Pete. Take off your hat and beg the lady's pardon or I'll rock you to sleep again."

Pete took off his hat and made an unsteady bow. Then he rubbed his jaw and reached for the bottle.

"Jake Brandon," he said, "is a whiskey thief. Also he's part mule. And speakin' of mules—"

But something in Della Plunkett's gray-green eyes wiped the grins from the faces of both men.

"My father," she said, her voice steady, "has been hurt. He's shot . . . perhaps he's dead. . . . At the mouth of the canyon. I'm asking you to help him. I think you are the only two men who would help him and me. This is crawling on my knees . . . begging—"

"Ketch her horse, Pete," Jake ordered. "We'll git at it."

They rode past the two dead men and on down the canyon in the dusk. They found Bar Nothing Plunkett sitting with a Winchester across his lap, naked to the waist, ripping his undershirt into strips and bandaging a bullet rip that had torn his chest muscles and grazed his upper ribs.

The cattleman's red-tanned face looked mottled and the look in his gray-green eyes was dangerous. He grinned and lowered the six-shooter in his hand. Then his grin faded.

"Where," he asked, "is Lon Jackson?"

Jake and Pete shook their heads. Plunkett pulled his shirt over the bullet rip in his chest and the last night's tear on his shoulder.

"Lon Jackson," said Bar Nothing Plunkett, "is

either the damndest snake that ever crawled, or he's the toughest man that ever sided two dead men. Meanin' Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler. I hope he lives to prove hisself, one way or the other. I sent you home this mornin', Della."

"But I didn't go."

"I kin see that."

"I trailed you here," she told him flatly. "You're my father. I wasn't letting you play a lone hand. I should have gone back to town, though. I haven't helped you any."

"You fetched Jake Brandon and Pete Statler." Plunkett got slowly to his feet. "That's a day's work."

Then the big man braced himself on widespread legs and looked at Jake and Pete.

"I never held a mortgage on the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. I made that play to git you two boys on my side. It didn't work. I tried to give you money to run your outfits. Lon Jackson blocked that. Why? *Quién sabe?* Only Lon Jackson knows that answer.

"Night before last my Mexicans and some border-jumper rustlers tangled, there in Los Gatos Pass, and a big drive of Mexican cattle got spilled," Plunkett went on. "Those vaqueros of mine were hired to work cattle, not to fight with guns. They got the worst of it.

"Ace Hartnell . . . I told him to ride into Los Gatos Pass and find out what had happened. I sent Della back to town. And I came on alone to see where a bunch of Muleshoe and Hourglass cows with misbranded calves come from. . . . Got shot out of my saddle.

"I've always wanted the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. But I wasn't murderin' Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler to git those spreads." Bar Nothing Plunkett saw Pete's bottle and reached for it. He took a long drink and grinned. There was no mirth in that grin and his eyes glinted dangerously. "But somebody murdered those two cowmen. Like they tried to bushwhack me. And usin' the same damned bait!"

"Meanin' those cows and calves with the wrong brands," Jake spoke quietly.

Plunkett took another drink from Pete's bottle and nodded. "Somebody told Bill Brandon and Tom Statler that the Bar Nothin' outfit was holdin' them cows and calves in Jackson Canyon. They rode there to find out the truth. They got murdered. Ketch that Jake boy, Pete! He's hurt!"

The throbbing pain, the hammering inside Jake Brandon's skull had kept getting worse. The big man's words had dimmed, blurred. His eyes had gone sort of blind and then everything was a black whirl and he had toppled forward, knees buckling. Pete caught him and eased him to the ground.

Jake Brandon's wiry black hair was matted with sweat and oozing blood. While Della Plunkett and Pete Statler got water and poured raw whiskey into the scalp wound, Bar Nothing Plunkett studied Jake's hat with its bullet rip. There was a hard, bitter, ugly glint in the big man's eyes.

On the wall in Bar Nothing Plunkett's office, which he often called the Boar's Den, were fastened hats. In the crown of each hat was a bullet hole. Old dried blood caked the inside and sweatband. It was said of Bar Nothing Plunkett that he always shot at a man's head. That when he shot, he seldom missed.

"Somebody," he growled, lifting Pete's bottle and draining it, "is tryin' to steal Bar Nothin' Plunkett's trade-mark."

VIII.

Jake came awake in a few minutes. His head ached as though it had been split in two with an ax, but otherwise he felt all right. Pete was fetching a hatful of water from the nearby creek. Bar Nothing Plunkett was growling like a wounded bear.

Della Plunkett had Jake's head pillowed in her lap and was wiping at the scalp rip with a handkerchief soaked with raw whiskey. The stinging pain helped rouse Jake and he moved and sat up.

"You bonehead," grinned Pete. "Man, that'd bin me I'd have stayed right there. Played possum. Old Slow-motion Jake."

"Speed doesn't always win a race," said Della, grinning back at him. "Feel better, Jake?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Bar Nothing Plunkett growled at them. "Somebody comin' up the canyon and he's movin' fast. Della, git in behind them rocks and stay there. Jake, you and Pete duck for cover. I'm ramroddin' this spread."

In the uncertain light they could make out a lone rider. He was traveling at a long trot and had a carbine in his hand. It was Sheriff Lon Jackson.

"Stand your hand, Lon!" rumbled Plunkett.

Lon Jackson slid his horse to a halt. "Jake Brandon and Pete Statler rode into this canyon. What's become of 'em?"

"What do you want of them two boys, Lon? Lay your cards on the table or I'll blow your belly in two. Was it you that killed Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler?"

"That's what I'm askin' you, Plunkett. You cold-trailed Jake and Pete here. I heard shootin'. You want the Muleshoe and Hourglass outfits. Don't point that gun at me. When it goes off, my gun is goin' to shoot and it won't miss."

Jake and Pete came out from behind some brush. Lon Jackson lowered his gun. Then he saw Della and touched his hat brim. His black eyes watched them all.

"That circuit rider is up at the head of the can-

yon," Jake said bluntly. "There's another man with him."

Sheriff Lon Jackson nodded. "The man with him is Ace Hartnell." His black eyes looked at Bar Nothing Plunkett.

"The locoed sky-pilot psalm shouter," rumbled Plunkett, "and the devil's spawn. That's hard to swallow, Lon. Them two don't make ary kind of a team."

"The circuit rider has bin holed up in the cave at the head of this box canyon," said Jackson. "I paid that cave a visit. Looked through some letters and papers he had in a big bakin'-powder can. I kept the letters and papers. Then rode out of the canyon. I wanted to see who would ride into Jackson Canyon. I didn't know there'd be this big a crowd. Hell's fire, Plunkett, this is no place for the girl!"

"He sent me home this morning," said Della. "I cold-trailed him here. He got shot. Jake's hair was parted by a bullet. Jake and Pete killed two rustlers that tried to rope me. I think it's about time you and my father quit hating each other. Neither of you killed Bill Brandon and Tom Statler. Neither of you hired the job done."

"Plunkett," said Lon Jackson, "take the girl and git for home. Jake and Pete had better go along with you. I'm the law. It's my job. A one-man job."

From the upper end of the canyon sounded three shots, spaced about ten seconds apart. Then from the lower end of the canyon there came three answering shots.

Sheriff Lon Jackson and Bar Nothing Plunkett looked at each other. The big man growled.

"Trapped," said Lon Jackson flatly. "Hartnell's renegades are comin' up the canyon right now."

He was staring hard at Bar Nothing Plunkett. It was Della Plunkett who broke the silence.

"Hartnell doesn't work for Bar Nothing Plunkett any more." Her voice was metallic. "The only reason my father ever hired Ace was so he'd have him where he could watch him. He knew that sooner or later Ace Hartnell would double-cross him. Hartnell is after the Bar O, the Muleshoe and the Hourglass outfits. I want to believe he wasn't taking his killing orders from Sheriff Lon Jackson."

Lon Jackson grinned flatly. "I've let Hartnell live too long. Since Bar Nothin' Plunkett fetched that killer out of Mexico, I've wanted to kill him. But I waited. Plunkett married the woman I loved, and I hated him. Hartnell is an ex-convict. He killed a guard when he broke prison and went to Mexico. Plunkett knew that. So he pinned a law badge on me, his enemy, to keep Hartnell in line. He knows and I know that Ace Hartnell is ramrodding a bunch of rustlers. I figured that there would come a time when Hartnell would turn on Plunkett. And then I was goin' to step in and grab the Bar O outfit. That was my game. I didn't want the Muleshoe or Hourglass outfits. Big Bill Brandon and Long Tom Statler were more use to me alive than dead. When and if ever I got holt of the Bar O outfit, they'd have made good neighbors."

He looked straight at the girl now. "What was it you said to Ace Hartnell last night before you sat down at the piano and played and sang them songs. It must have bin somethin' that hit him hard."

Della Plunkett nodded. She walked over to where Bar Nothing Plunkett stood, his carbine in the crook of his arm, and gripped his free hand. But she was looking at the sheriff when she spoke.

"You two met my mother in Tombstone when she sang at the Bird Cage Opera House. But neither of you knew that she had been married before. That she had run away from the man she had married because she found out he was a maniacal killer. He was going to kill her and her baby boy. She left the baby with relatives and ran away. She never saw the baby again. They told her that he was dead. Later she found out that her husband had stolen the child.

"My mother married Riley Plunkett when she heard her first husband and her boy were both dead. She died when I was ten years old. My father put me in a convent school. I found an old tin trunk that had been my mother's. In it were old letters, her marriage certificate. The birth certificate of her baby boy. My mother's first husband was named John Hartnell. The boy had been named Asa Hartnell.

"So last night, before I sang the songs my mother had sung, when Ace Hartnell asked me to marry him, I told him that I knew he was my half brother."

Bar Nothing Plunkett's voice was a low rumble. Sheriff Lon Jackson's eyes were hard and cold.

"That circuit rider's name is John Hartnell," he said flatly. "He came here to kill Riley Plunkett, like as not. But it was Ace Hartnell who shot through the window."

"And tried to blame it on his own father?" said Jake Brandon.

"That psalm-singin' killer is locoed," declared the sheriff. "Ace was scared to trust him. If John Hartnell had said the wrong thing, Ace was ready to kill him where he stood. I've got a notion that it was the locoed circuit rider who murdered Bill Brandon and Tom Statler when they located those cows and calves here in Jackson Canyon. I'd told Bill and Tom about those cows and calves. Made them shake hands that day in my office. Ace Hartnell happened by as they was shakin' hands.

"I'd bin watchin' this canyon. The tracks that

went in and out the trap-pasture gate was made by a big mule. I reckon that the locoed circuit rider was holed up here, ridin' close herd on them cows and calves. Takin' orders from his son, Ace Hartnell."

Above them was a sky painted blood-red by the sunset. But here in the high, rock-walled box canyon the shadows were thickening into darkness. From out of that darkness came a harsh, maniacal voice.

"Thou sons of Satan! Repent! Prepare to meet thy Maker. I am the Avenging Angel. In a vision I have seen it. There was a bolt of lightning that tore the sky asunder and a thunderclap that was the wrath of God. There they were. Two prowling creatures of hell in the guise of human form. And the Avenging Angel smote them. Even as I have wreaked the vengeance of God upon other such spawns of Satan. And there at their graves I committed their souls, cleansed now by the Avenging Angel, into the keeping of the Lord. 'Vengeance is Mine,' saith the Lord. And I am His Avenging Angel!"

Jake Brandon grabbed Della and shoved her in behind some big granite boulders.

Pete Statler gave Jake a hard shove that sent him sprawling. Then Pete was standing there in the open, his carbine spewing fire.

The circuit rider on the gray mule had loomed up out of the night's first shadows, his rifle spitting jets of flame.

Bar Nothing Plunkett rushed Pete, flung him off his feet, threw him into the shelter of the brush. Then Plunkett's gun cracked.

Sheriff Lon Jackson had quit his horse. His carbine cracked once and the circuit rider's long frame slumped across his saddlehorn. There was a bullet hole in his lean chest. Another bullet hole between his eyes. Where that bullet had drilled a small black hole in the locoed preacher's forehead, it had torn away the back of his head and left a gaping hole in his rusty black hat.

Then all of them, Plunkett, Lon Jackson, Jake Brandon, Pete Statler and Della Plunkett, were crouched in behind the barricade of huge granite boulders.

Brush cracked and half a dozen or more riders came up the canyon, spurring their horses to a run. And at the upper end of the box canyon sounded the flat-toned voice of Ace Hartnell.

"Quit your horses and take to the brush, you curly wolves!"

But they could not hear his voice on account of the shooting and gun echoes.

"Take 'er easy, boys," growled Plunkett. "Your job is to ride herd on Della. Me 'n' Lon Jackson kin handle this."

But Jake and Pete were taking snap shots at the riders that charged them. And Della Plunkett's saddle gun was spitting streaks of fire.

Pete's left shoulder was throbbing with pain and another bullet had grazed his thigh. His left arm was almost useless and his shots were missing.

Jake Brandon was not missing. He shoved Della down behind the rocks and his voice was flat-toned.

"Stay there, damn it! You're in the way!"

When the girl tried to get back on her feet Jake gave her a shove that rapped the back of her head against a big granite boulder. After that she did not move. Della Plunkett was knocked out cold.

The renegades scattered, took to the brush. Others rode up the canyon more cautiously.

There was a lull in the shooting and Ace Hartnell's voice came out of the shadows.

"You, Plunkett! If you're still alive! We don't fight women. I don't want my half sister killed. Send her down the canyon. Nobody will bother her."

"You yellow-eyed whelp of a murderer!" Bar Nothing Plunkett's voice was a roar that filled the canyon. "She's my daughter and she's fightin'! Who killed Bill Brandon and Tom Statler?"

"The Avengin' Angel, Plunkett. Then he took their six-shooters and emptied 'em into their dead carcasses. And preached their funeral sermon. The damned old buzzard liked to kill men off so he could preach his funeral sermons. He took the first shot through the window at you and Jake and Pete. He missed because his hands was too cold and he was soakin' wet and shiverin'. I tried to finish the job. Then Lon Jackson showed up and I used my last cartridge. Grazed his skull. I wanted it to look like you'd done it. That Pancho Mexican was in on it. He spooked and Jackson killed him. Let Della ride out of this. Damn your big bull-dozin' hide, Plunkett, that girl's my half sister."

"That's no fault of hers," roared the cattleman. "And you lie, Hartnell. I know the whole story. They switched babies. You're no kin to this girl. My wife never bore a thing like you. She was a kid when she married John Hartnell. Her folks married her off to that buzzard. I know your dirty pedigree. I'm comin' after you now."

Lon Jackson's hand gripped the big man's shoulder. The Texan's voice was flat-toned.

"You're hurt, Plunkett. That yellow-eyed killer wouldn't give you a chance. It's my job." Jackson slid out between two of the big boulders.

From somewhere in the darkness a man's voice cracked like a whiplash.

"Too much jaw music, boys. Hartnell's gone soft. Let's git this job done."

The renegades came with a rush from all sides. Bar Nothing Plunkett and Jake Brandon and Pete Statler met the fierce attack with blazing guns.

Jake felt Della's left shoulder against his right arm. Then her carbine was cracking. The canyon was filled with the echoing roar of guns. The renegades were driven back.

Then from the mouth of the canyon came the cowboy yelps of a score of riders. The Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers were on their way.

The bellowing roar of Bar Nothing Plunkett's voice sounded clearly through the rattle of gunfire.

"Come on, you cowhands! Pop brush! Don't miss a damn one of 'em!"

His roaring voice thudded in the ears of Jake Brandon and Pete Statler.

"I told your cowhands to foller me," he explained. "Told 'em that Bar Nothin' Plunkett was payin' 'em fightin' wages to back you two young roosters!"

Bar Nothing Plunkett was, when it was all said and done, an almighty big man. He was in his glory now. Driving those rustlers back to their horses. Hazing them with bullets down the canyon and into the gunfire of the Muleshoe and Hourglass cowpunchers. While Jake and Pete backed the big man's play and Della added her two bits' worth in the way of shooting.

There was about fifteen minutes of gun triggering that crashed and echoed and crashed again in Jackson Canyon. Then it was over and there were only the groans and moaning of wounded men. The whining pleading of renegades throwing away their guns and begging for their lives.

Then a round white moon was overhead and the canyon was bathed in its light. And they all saw something that would forever live in their memories.

Sheriff Lon Jackson and Ace Hartnell standing out in the open, perhaps a hundred feet apart. Then their six-shooters lifted from their holsters and the two guns spewed fire. The fancy, white-handled, silver-mounted gun of Ace Hartnell—the service-worn, wooden-handled six-shooter in Lon Jackson's hand.

There had been some sort of a signal between them. Then they had drawn their guns, there in the white moonlight. Winner take all.

None of those who watched could have told you which gun was the first to come out of its holster. It was split-second work.

Ace Hartnell's eyes glittered like yellow slits. His legs were spread wide and he was leaning a little forward, half crouched. Then he began swaying like a drunken man and the bullets from his silver-mounted gun were tearing furrows in the ground a few feet in front of him. His tailored flannel shirt was spotted across the chest with holes and the impact of .45 slugs was swaying him on his braced legs. Then the white-handled gun slid from his hand and he collapsed like an empty sack, pitching forward on his face.

Sheriff Lon Jackson's six-shooter had never lifted higher than his cartridge belt. Now it dropped on the ground in front of him and those who watched saw that he was holding his right wrist in the grip of his left hand. Now that grip slackened and the big, rawboned Texan stood there, a twisted grin moving his gray mustache, both arms dangling uselessly, broken by Hartnell's bullets. Otherwise the big Texan was unhurt. He forced a grin when Bar Nothing Plunkett came up.

"I'm shore glad," Lon Jackson said, "that you got his pedigree straightened out. It would have hurt a man to kill a son of *hers*, regardless."

IX.

Cowhands have to be tough. Otherwise there would be no cowhands. That's what Sheriff Lon Jackson and Bar Nothing Plunkett told Jake Brandon and Pete Statler as the four of them lay on cots in the big living room of Bar Nothing Plunkett's house at Los Gatos. And Della Plunkett helped the doctor and two trained nurses.

Jake and Pete had each been shot in a place or two, but the wounds were flesh wounds and more painful than dangerous.

When the doctor said that whiskey was the worst thing the wounded men could take into their systems, Bar Nothing Plunkett told him that a real cowhand used whiskey to cure anything from bunions to dandruff.

"Pour another light un, Della," he rumbled, "down the neck of Lon Jackson. His drinkin' arm is out of kilter."

Della obeyed, telling the doctor that there wasn't a darned thing he could do about it.

"Who," Lon Jackson asked the girl, "sent you here to this tough strip of cow country?"

"Nobody. I just came. I'd been told that my father was a law-protected outlaw who took what he wanted along the Mexican border. He'd left me in that convent school in Texas. Now I know he did that to protect me. I came here to see what kind of a man he was. When he looked at me and I looked at him and he took me into his arms and bawled like a kid, I knew that his heart was as big as the rest of him. And that I'd never quit him. I came here to claim a daughter's right to the Bar O outfit. But I stayed to take care of my father. I'd spent my vacations on ranches. Learned to ride and rope and shoot a gun. It all came natural. I knew why when I saw the man who is my father."

"Riley Plunkett," Lon Jackson told her, "and I split a long friendship when he married the only woman I ever looked at twice. But you've mended that. I hope that you—" His voice trailed off into silence. His eyes were questioning the girl's.

They had been talking in low-pitched tones. From the other end of the big room sounded Pete's voice.

"Listen here, Jake. You better git this straight or I'll git up out of bed and give you just about the damndest whuppin' a man ever got! Listen. It was a hoss race. You won. You might be long-headed some ways, but you shore have a thick skull. If you haven't got the guts to ask her to marry you, then you don't deserve a break. Old Slow-motion Jake!"

"You never seen the day, Pete, when you could whip me." That was Jake's voice.

Della crossed the room. The bright sky-blue eyes of Pete Statler met the gray-green eyes of Della Plunkett. They grinned at each other, then looked at Jake Brandon, who was hunched in an awkward position to ease the pain, his face toward the wall.

Della bent over and kissed Pete. Then she walked over to where Jake was shifting under his blankets, his eyes squinted with pain.

"How goes it, Jake?" Della's voice turned him over. He forced a slow grin.

From the other side of the room sounded the growl of Bar Nothing Plunkett's voice.

". . . so we'll pool the three outfits, Lon. And Los Gatos Pass is closed to rustlers. Me 'n' you kin whittle and tell how it used to be done while Jake and Pete do the work."

Jake's bandages had slipped. Della had to fix them. He stood the pain, jaws clamped.

"There's somethin'," he said in his slow voice, "that's bin on my mind all the time. Even when I was kind o' out o' my head."

The mesquite wood crackled softly in the fire. There was no other sound in the room. Della's hands were a little unsteady as she taped the fresh bandages into place.

"Yes, Jake?" her voice was low-toned.

"That hat of mine," said Jake. "With the bullet hole in it. I'd like it to be hung on the wall in the office along with the other hats. Not that it really belongs there. But just for the hell of it."

Pete Statler groaned. There was the sound of a cork being pulled from the neck of a bottle and Plunkett told Jackson to take a good un.

"That gatherment of hats," Jake went on. "They—"

"Yes, Jake." Della Plunkett's voice was brittle. "Ace Hartnell's hat was buried with him. There'll be no more hats hung on the wall."

"I forgot," said Jake. "I'm sorry. I always say the wrong thing at the wrong time. I remember once, when I was a kid—"

Pete Statler groaned again. "You'll have to do the job, Della."

"I'm afraid so, Pete."

"When I was a kid," Jake went on, "and there was an old-maid schoolmarm stayin' at the ranch—"

Della's hand slid across Jake's mouth. There was anger and tolerance and something else in her voice.

"Will you marry me, Jake?"

Jake reached out and took her hand off his mouth. He hung onto her hand and tried to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. Then finally he found his voice.

"Gosh, I didn't have the nerve to ask you— Gosh, ma'am."

"Old Slow-motion Jake," said Pete Statler. "Now that that's over, we'll all have a drink. Like my dad used to say when he took his razor strap down off the wall and eared me out to the woodshed, 'This is harder on me than it is on you, Jake.' I'll side you at the weddin' and kiss the bride."

But Jake Brandon and Della Plunkett did not hear him.

"We'll call it," growled Bar Nothing Plunkett, "the Los Gatos Pool. Me 'n' you, Lon, will do the whittlin' and spittin'. Them two boys will pop the brush apart. Pete, whatever become of the little red-headed schoolmarm you and Jake had that fight about?"

"She taken up a ranch near Nogales," answered Pete. "I'm two weeks late right now, gittin' over there. Jake, hold off a few hours and we'll make it a double weddin'."

But it was a month later, when bullet wounds had healed and when the padre came to Los Gatos, that there was a double wedding and that little border cow town celebrated its greatest fiesta.

Then the fiesta was over and the roundup went into full swing. Jake Brandon and Pete Statler ramrodding the upper and lower outfits. Bar Nothing Plunkett and Sheriff Lon Jackson sitting in the shade, whittling.

Jake Brandon and Pete Statler threw their herds together and rode on the point. This was the Los Gatos Pool outfit now.

"Providin'," Pete called across the strung-out point of the cattle, "some day, mebbe . . . and they're both boys . . . there'll be a Tom Brandon and a Bill Statler. That's just guessin', cowhand—"

"Middle names," Jake called back across the point of the trail herd, "Bar Nothin' and Lon."

"You always was a long thinker, Jake."

Prophets on a roundup. There came into the world two baby boys. Tom Bar Nothing Brandon. Bill Lon Statler.

"It'll take a lifetime," said Bar Nothing Plunkett when he and Lon Jackson touched glasses, drank, and smashed the glasses into the open fire, "for them two pore innocent babies to live down them names."

"Or to live up to 'em," said Sheriff Lon Jackson.

THE END.

DANGER RIDES THE RIVER

by Norman A. Fox

Could a man who had a memory that was only a day old pilot a treasure-laden packet through the perils of a river whose waters were preyed upon by a phantom pirate and his cutthroat crew?

I.

When the tall man came back to consciousness, his head throbbed like a Sioux war drum. As he started to raise his hand to the jagged, blood-crusted gash along his scalp, he discovered he was clutching a gun. Mechanically he eased the iron into the holster at his hip, and for the first few minutes after that he was content to lie still. A roof stretched dimly above him, walls were on all sides, and his back was to the planks of a floor. Outside, the river sang its steady song, and adding this fact to the sum of his knowledge, he decided he was in a shack on the bank of the Missouri. A sense of foreboding beginning to clamor, he came to his feet, his eyes questing the shadowy interior for a danger he could neither name nor define. But he was quite alone, he discovered after a look around, except for the dead man.

The fellow was heaped in a corner, a bullet hole in his left temple, one leg curled grotesquely. From his garb, he had been a steamboater, the tall man judged. But he himself had no memory of ever having seen the dead man before. And it came to him that if anyone should ask him his own name at the moment, or the business that had brought him here, he couldn't have told. A bullet had gashed his scalp, and that bullet had taken his memory with it.

At first that realization filled him with dread and a sense of hopeless futility. His brow corrugated, he began looking into his pockets, searching frantically for anything that might provide a key to memory. He was wearing a fringed buckskin shirt and a serviceable pair of trousers, but the pockets were empty. The gun at his hip had two spent

shells. The dead man's gun, lying nearby had been fired once.

Stooping, he started through the dead man's clothes. He found a pilot's license made out to Pinkham Wicks, a certificate of membership in the Pilots' Benevolent Association, a knife, chewing tobacco and some coins. In the man's vest he came across a ring, greenish gold and designed to represent a serpent, its tail in its mouth, its eyes small stones of some sort.

All these things the tall man examined, then absently stowed them into his own pockets. Finding the door of the shack, he stepped out into the brilliant sunshine of a June midafternoon. The river ran at his feet, broad, tawny and swift, and he bathed the blood from his scalp wound. Yonder, about a quarter of a mile away, a scatteration of buildings broke the dun drabness of the prairie. That would be Yancey, gateway to Dakota Territory, a booming settlement near the mouth of the Niobrara on the southern fringe of Sioux country. The tall man frowned, wondering how he could know that when he couldn't remember his own name. But the riddle made his head hurt, so he ceased thinking about it.

Yet he couldn't so easily dismiss the grim possibilities of his predicament. A man named Pinkham Wicks lay dead in yonder shack. The sign said he'd killed Wicks. Frontier justice was swift as a rope could make it, and a man couldn't talk himself out of a tight when the truth lay behind a black curtain of oblivion. Shrugging wearily, the tall man faced toward the settlement.

Yancey was teeming with life when he came into it, men elbowing along in a steady, colorful stream, high-sided freight wagons lumbering behind as many as six span of oxen, sway-backed prairie schooners rubbing hubs with lighter vehicles. Down toward the river could be glimpsed the smokestacks of half a dozen packets, and in the opposite direction smoke spiraled from the camping grounds of overland emigrants. Such was Yancey, jumping-off place to the Black Hills and the far Montana diggings. There were saloons in plenty, and the tall man stepped inside one.

Standing at the bar, he had a drink, studying himself in the bar mirror as the raw whiskey burned through him. He had a nice breadth of shoulder, he discovered, and a shock of black hair surmounting a face the sun had stained to a deep brown. He was in his mid-twenties, he judged, and he looked like a man who'd make a good friend or a bad enemy. He had to smile at the irony of appraising a stranger who was himself, yet his desperate need to rend the black curtain still haunted him. Stopping a sweating bartender, he said:

"Ever see me before?"

The apron wasted a moment on him. "Maybe. With hundreds going up river and overland, I see too many faces."

Disappointed, the tall man turned away. At his elbow, a graybeard in the fringed buckskin of a trapper said to a whiskered companion: "Wagh! This old hoss has been drier'n buffler bones. It's been weeks since I tried buyin' out the Warbonnet in Fort Benton, drink by drink. Now thar's a saloon for yer, or I don't know poor bull from fat cow!"

The tall man stopped abruptly, his brow wrinkling. The Warbonnet Saloon! Instantly he could see its bar and the crowd that frequented it—trappers and freighters, prospectors and rivermen. It was clear in his mind's eye, but even as he probed the picture for details, the scene began to fade. Frantically he tried to cling to it, just as a desert wayfarer tries to hold to a mirage, but it vanished. Panic gripped him then, the throat-clutching, hair-tingling panic of a man who is lost, even to himself. But now at least he had something tangible that tied him to his past—a saloon in Fort Benton, the Warbonnet.

Coming to the street again, he walked with greater purpose, for suddenly he'd reached a decision. He had to get out of Yancey before that body in the shack was discovered and the hue and cry began. He had to put this settlement behind him, so he'd head for Fort Benton and have a look at the Warbonnet Saloon, see if the sight of it jarred his memory. And why not? Up until a moment ago he'd had no more purpose than a piece of driftwood carried southward by the turgid Missouri. Now at least he had a destination and something to do.

Not that it wouldn't take considerable doing. Fort Benton, head of navigation on the upper Missouri, was many watery miles away. A steamboat ticket from St. Louis to Benton cost three hundred dollars, and it would take at least half that much to board a boat here in Dakota. That was another of those things he knew without being aware of the source of his knowledge. But a man could work his way if a captain needed hands.

Thus he came down toward the landing, and as he neared it, the steamboats loomed larger until he could see the ornamental work between the twin smokestacks of the biggest side-wheeler, and he could read its name, *Prairie Rose,* painted on the wheel housing. Finding a gathering crowd on the wharf and a singing excitement in the air, he pressed forward for a better look.

Three men formed the core of the crowd, one gesticulating wildly, a broad-shouldered, red-bearded man, obviously a packet captain. At his side stood a portly, silver-haired man, elegant in black broadcloth and white silk, a long gold toothpick dangling from a chain stretched across his ex-

pansive stomach. These two faced a third man, a squat, sinewy fellow with a broad, florid face, a man who looked altogether incongruous in the fancy garb he wore. A tall beaver hat was tipped rakishly atop his bullet-shaped head, and he smiled toothily.

"Certainly I can understand the fix you're in, Captain McDonald," he was saying. "Your booze-fightin' pilot has gone off on another spree. You can't waste hours combing the saloons and honkatonks for him, and you can't move your boat without a pilot licensed by the government. That makes me the man you're needing. But Fancy Ben Beaumont doesn't budge for less than a thousand dollars a month!"

The red-bearded Captain McDonald waved his arms again. "It's plain piracy!" he shouted. "Pilots on the Fraser line have always gotten six hundred dollars a month, and that's top salary. You're a thief, Beaumont!"

The man with the gold toothpick stirred. "We'll have to meet his terms, captain," he said reluctantly. "We're at his mercy, and he knows it. And we've got to to get up river."

McDonald's red beard was stiff with rage. "You're the owner, Mr. Fraser," he conceded. "If you want him, then that's an order. But I hate knuckling under to this scamp. Pilots of his breed make a habit of laying up in these river settlements, waiting for a packet to lose a pilot so they can come aboard at their own price."

Fancy Ben Beaumont yawned elaborately. "I've heard it told that Eliot Fraser is a man of good sense. So now, Mr. Fraser, if you'll just send one of the roustabouts to get my baggage—"

The tall man, a silent listener to all this, took a step forward and raised his voice. "I'm a pilot," he announced. "I'll take your boat to Fort Benton at regular wages, Mr. Fraser."

That swung every eye to him, and the tall man was as surprised as any. His outburst had been voiced without any conscious thought to prompt it. Yet even as he'd spoken, he'd known that he *was* a pilot, and that he could take the *Prairie Rose* or any other packet wherever water ran. More unexpected knowledge out of nowhere! Beaumont's high-handed attitude had angered him, so he'd bid against the pilot, yet a man with a dead body behind him had no business making himself the center of attention. Better the obscurity of the deck than the prominence of a pilothouse.

But McDonald was staring at him hopefully. "Hear that, Mr. Fraser?" the packet captain cried. "Hire him before he changes his mind!"

Fancy Ben Beaumont had his eyes on the tall man, too, and Beaumont had lost some of his color. Beaumont wasn't used to being crossed, the tall man judged, and at the same time he had the feeling that he'd known this over-dressed pilot somewhere. But before he could search the shadowy reaches of his mind, Beaumont took a step toward him, belligerent and menacing.

"Nobody cuts into Fancy Ben Beaumont's game!" the pilot thundered. "Them that tries has got a fight to make!"

Beaumont's hand was snaking under his coat, reaching for a gun. Something was wrong here—mighty wrong—for Beaumont's wrath was all out of proportion to this incident that had prompted it, but the tall man didn't take time to probe into that. Nor did he try for his own gun, not with Beaumont's already flicking into view. His right fist arcing, the tall man sent his bunched knuckles smashing against Beaumont's ponderous chin. The pilot's gun exploded, lead zipping harmlessly toward the sky. Then Beaumont was going down, hitting the planking and stretching out still. That blow had made the tall man's scalp wound start throbbing, and he thought he was going to fall sprawling across Beaumont. But Captain McDonald hurried to support him.

"I'm thinking," the captain said dryly, "that this settles it, Mr. Fraser. There just isn't anybody handy to hire but this bucko."

Eliot Fraser fingered the gold toothpick. "And we've lost hours as it is," he reflected. "Mister, you're pilot of the *Prairie Rose!*"

Thus the tall, nameless man was escorted up the gangplank of the packet to climb to the cupola-like pilothouse atop the texas deck. He saw the wheel and put his hands upon it, and it seemed to him that this was where he belonged. The engine crew had kept up a full head of steam, and he made the proper signal to send the packet nosing out into the Missouri. "There's a bad sandbar a mile or two upstream," he told Captain McDonald. "It's probably submerged by this June rise. Have one of the deckhands take soundings and fetch me the reports."

McDonald, giving him a glance of approval, departed, and the tall man maneuvered his boat out into midstream. Yancey was falling behind, and he had the feeling that a great adventure had begun. There were many things he'd have liked to try to figure out, but his head still hurt when he tried. He saw a yawl put out from shore, and he watched it from the corner of his eye until the small boat was out of his sight as it swung in close to the packet. He wondered if the drunken pilot of the *Prairie Rose* was in that yawl, coming to overtake his boat. It didn't matter, he decided. He'd won Captain McDonald's approval. He was sure the man would keep him aboard, at least as an extra pilot.

Such was the run of his thoughts as Captain McDonald came back into the pilothouse. With him was Eliot Fraser and a girl with a pretty oval of

face beneath the broad brim of a sunbonnet. The tall man was stealing a look at her when McDonald said: "There wasn't much time ashore for names or formalities, bucko. But, if you don't mind, we'd like to see your pilot's license."

That gave the tall man a bad moment. The only license he had bore another man's name, and that name might be known to the Fraser line. Yet in these years when as many as forty steamboats were on the Missouri in a single season, the odds were against any one pilot's being known to all the owners. It was a gamble he had to take.

"In my shirt pocket," he said, his hands on the wheel. "Help yourself."

Captain McDonald reached for the papers and spread them open. Fraser and the girl crowded close. Then McDonald spoke. "That clinches it," he said, the tenseness in his voice swinging the tall man's eyes to him. McDonald had a gun in his hand, a gun that was pointed at the pilot. "A yawl just came out from Yancey with word of our pilot," the captain snapped. "We thought a whiskey bottle had been keeping Pinky Wicks busy, but we were wrong. Pinky was shot to death in a shack beside the river. The law of Yancey just found his body and had it identified by an ex-deckhand who used to work for us. Bucko, I'd like to know how you come by Pinky's papers?"

II.

Eliot Fraser took a quick step and yanked the gun out of the pilot's holster. After that there was a thunderous silence in the pilothouse, and the tall man could hear the throbbing of the engines far below, the sloshing of the paddle wheels. He was in a tight and he knew it. When he'd boarded the *Prairie Rose* he'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Pinky Wicks had been the pilot of this very packet! Pinky Wicks hadn't returned because he was dead in a shack—that same shack where the tall man had found himself, gun in hand. Now Captain McDonald wanted an answer—and McDonald had him at pistol point.

Twice the tall man cleared his throat, and then he blurted out the truth. "I was unconscious in that same shack with Wicks," he said. "I searched his body to discover who he was, and I pocketed his papers. I had no real reason for keeping them. But my head was hurting and I couldn't even think. It was the same with me at the landing when you needed a pilot. I spoke up because I am one, even if I haven't got papers of my own to prove it."

He knew how weak and garbled that sounded, and he could see skepticism in the faces of the two men. "You admit you were in that shack with Wicks!" Fraser snapped. "It looks to me like you shot him in order to rob him! Just who are you, mister?"

"I don't know!" the tall man confessed, his fingers straying to the gash along his scalp. "I . . . I can't remember. I can't remember anything that happened before I went unconscious."

Captain McDonald snorted derisively, and the girl spoke for the first time. "He's been hurt!" she cried. "Anybody can see that! Don't stand here torturing him with questions and accusations, dad! Maybe he's really lost his memory like he says. I'm going to get Dr. Hartz. He's probably down in Reverend Peckenham's cabin playing chess."

"No, Lou—" Fraser began, but the girl was already darting from the pilothouse. Captain McDonald said: "Maybe this *is* a case for a doctor, as well as for a lawman." But he still held the gun.

Eliot Fraser frowned. "Captain," he said, "I'm curious as to why you didn't tell those men in the yawl that you had a suspicion Wicks' murderer was aboard?"

"We still have to have a pilot, Mr. Fraser," McDonald said slowly. "You know that."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that we've got to get our cargo up river. License or no license, this man knows his trade. He's already proved that as far as I'm concerned. If he killed Wicks, we can turn him over to Marshal Brett Hawthorn when Hawthorn meets us up river out of Fort Benton. Meanwhile, we need him. With our hold full of minted money, we can't be turning back to Yancey for another pilot."

"McDonald!"

The captain shrugged. "I know what you're thinking. It's crossed my mind, too, that this bucko might be one of Captain Blade's men, put aboard to scamp the ship. If he is, he already knows what we're carrying. Our cargo was no secret in St. Louis. And if he isn't, it doesn't make much difference what we say in front of him. How about it, bucko? Ever hear of Odin Blade? Or is that something *else* you can't remember?"

The tall man wrinkled his forehead. "Captain Blade?" he repeated vaguely.

"A dehorned devil!" growled McDonald. "A man who heads a band of freebooters who wreck steamers for loot—a man that some say is only a legend! Brett Hawthorn, the Federal marshal who'll take charge of our cargo at Benton, has been after Blade for years. And if Hawthorn's suspicions are right, we'll meet up with Captain Odin Blade before this run is over!"

Lou Fraser came hurrying back into the pilothouse. Behind the girl were two men, each as tall as the pilot. The one, dark and saturnine and thin of features, had a professional air about him, and the pilot judged him to be Dr. Hartz. That made the other, a moon-faced man who wore thick-lensed

glasses and who was dressed in clerical black, the Reverend Peckenham. Probably a missionary en route up river. "So your daughter has found a patient for me, Mr. Fraser," Dr. Hartz said. "What's this about a pilot with a lost memory?"

"Take a look at him," Fraser invited.

While Dr. Hartz made his examination of the tall man's wound, Captain McDonald took the wheel. Afterward Hartz dressed the wound, and as he worked, the medico put studied questions to his patient. For some there were answers, vague and stumbling, for some there weren't. Then the doctor made his pronouncement. "Partial amnesia," he declared. "Induced by a gunshot wound."

"Can he be cured?" the girl asked quickly.

Dr. Hartz shrugged. "Amnesia is tricky, and this man's case seems to be unusual. Sometimes memory is restored gradually; sometimes it comes back with a rush. The sight of a familiar face or place often turns the trick. I can promise nothing. But I can assure you, gentlemen, that this man is not feigning an affliction. Miss Fraser tells me that Mr. Wicks' papers were found on him."

"True," Fraser admitted. "And that whole business presents a problem. Doctor, both you and Reverend Peckenham know what cargo we're carrying—the kind to tempt a man like Captain Blade. For all we know, this man might belong to Blade's outfit. Perhaps he killed Wicks in order to replace him as pilot. Perhaps not. I don't know. But we need his services badly, whether he killed Wicks or not. Do you think he can handle the piloting?"

"Likely," Hartz answered. "Why not ask him how *he* feels about it?"

"That's right," Fraser said. "How do you feel, mister? By all rights, I should turn you over to the law at the first settlement, tell them the facts, such are we know them, and wash my hands of you. But a drastic situation calls for drastic measures. I need a pilot, and I'm willing to take an unlicensed one and square myself with the government later. I'll pay you the regular salary, and you may find the money useful for lawyers when you come to court to answer for Wicks' death. That's as much as I can do for you. Marshal Hawthorn should be coming down river to guard the cargo, and I'll have to surrender you to him."

The tall man didn't have to think it over. "I haven't much choice," he said.

"Very well." Fraser nodded. "We understand each other, mister— Say, we'll have to get a name for you."

The tall man remembered the decision he'd made in Yancey, the decision that had given him a purpose in this new life that had started for him today. "Call me Driftwood," he suggested. "It will do until I can remember my own name." Then he turned to the girl and had his chance to notice that she had deep-blue eyes and a host of golden curls crowding under her bonnet. "Thank you, miss," he said gravely. "I'm beholden to you."

Thus the *Prairie Rose* got a pilot, the man named Driftwood retaining that most exalted of all positions aboard a packet, though he was virtually a prisoner. His job, ironically, was to bring the boat safely to the upper Missouri—and deliver himself over to the law. From each dawn, when the day began with the ringing of a gong, until late at night when they tied up to the bank, he was kept busy in the pilothouse. Always another officer was with him, sometimes red-bearded Captain McDonald, sometimes one of the mates or an engineer off duty below decks. Always these men made talk of the river or dozed, but Driftwood wasn't fooled. There'd be no escaping for him.

After the first week, this vigilance was relaxed. Fort Pierre had slipped behind, and the packet was deep into Indian country. A man might jump the boat easily enough, but it would be suicide to dare this trackless wilderness afoot and unarmed. Driftwood now had the freedom of the packet, yet he was as much a prisoner as before.

It was then about this time that he discovered that somebody aboard wanted him dead. The first attempt on his life came on a night when he was leaning across the railing of the main deck, watching the river flowing beneath him. And it was only some slight, furtive movement on the deck above and a clamoring instinct that warned him. Afterward he was to wonder about that. But at the time he only jerked aside, pulling himself into the shelter of the overhang just as a heavy piece of scrap iron whizzed past his nose to splash into the river.

Turning, he came up the ladder possessed of a flaming desire to get his hands on whoever had dropped that iron, but already boots were pounding up another companionway. Peering hard in the darkness, Driftwood sprinted for the hurricane deck and from there to the texas, finding these upper decks dark and silent. Someone among the first-class passengers or the officers had been the would-be killer, it appeared. But who was he?

Driftwood didn't know. He'd made only one enemy in the brief days of his new existence, and that enemy was Fancy Ben Beaumont who was back in Yancey. So Driftwood could only dismiss the matter. But he adopted alertness in the ensuing days, days of tedious toil when the boat had to be grasshoppered over sandbars, days when they put into wood camps for fuel or laid up to have the boilers cleaned.

Driftwood had friends aboard now, or at least there were people who knew of the mystery surrounding him yet chose to treat him as an equal. Lou Fraser, Eliot Fraser's golden-haired daughter,

was one of these. Reverend Peckenham was another. And saturnine Dr. Hartz often exchanged words with Driftwood, probing him with questions and showing more than a professional interest in his affliction. But to none of them did Driftwood mention that attempt at murder. Whoever had struck might strike again. Next time he intended to be ready.

Then there came a night when he paced the main deck once again, and thus it was that he happened to glimpse the four shadowy figures that headed down one of the companionways leading into the hold. For a moment he only stood staring, trying to satisfy himself that these were crew members going about their ordinary business. But those four had been furtive beyond any honest need, and one of them had carried something perched upon his shoulder that looked suspiciously like a powder keg. More than curious, Driftwood stole after them.

He didn't ask himself where his duty lay in such a matter. He only knew that something was wrong, and he meant to find out the whys and wherefores. He was a steamboat man, the pilot of the *Prairie Rose*. He drew his pay, and he'd protect his boat. It was as simple as that. And so thinking, he eased down into the hold, threading a darkness rancid with the smells of a varied cargo, and he was proceeding by feel alone when he collided with someone.

Whoever it was, the man was ready for trouble. Instantly his arms wrapped around Driftwood, and the two struggled silently, fighting to get at each other's throats until a wheezy gasp and a muttered curse identified the pilot's assailant.

"Mr. Fraser!" Driftwood whispered. "I didn't know it was you. I was following four men who came down here."

"You, eh?" Fraser panted and turned silent. Driftwood could almost feel the suspicious run of the man's thoughts. Then: "I saw those four myself. Couldn't sleep. I'm jumpy as a cat these nights. Which way did they go?"

They had their answer in a sudden slithering of boot soles, a sudden wild rush out of the darkness. Then fists were beating at them, bodies pressing hard upon them, and Driftwood went down beneath the weight of numbers. Fighting futilely to free himself, he got in a solid blow and heard somebody groan. Then, half stunned, he was dragged deeper into the hold. Doors opened and lantern light beat against his eyes, and he was hurled hard against a stack of goods. A moment later Eliot Fraser was heaped on top of him. A door banged, a key grated, and someone said: "Hurry it up, can't you?" Another door banged and the silence became deep and heavy.

"Driftwood?" Fraser barked. "Are you hurt? They just about knocked the wind out of me!"

They came to their feet together, a dim lantern swinging overhead giving them a glimpse of their surroundings. Driftwood had never been in this part of the *Prairie Rose* before, but he knew this was a small storage room for food. Barrels of vinegar and flour and heaped cases crowded against the walls. A heavy door stood between them and the next room, a door with a small window, about six inches square, set high in it. But the door was locked, as they discovered when they put their combined weight against it.

"Hatchet around here somewhere," panted Fraser. "The cook uses it for opening cases."

"It wouldn't help," Driftwood said ruefully. "We'll need hours to cut through this door with a hatchet. What fetched those men below decks anyway?"

His eyes were at a level with the little window in the door, and as he gazed through he had his answer. Beyond was another small storage room, also lighted by a lantern, and Driftwood saw something that sent fear lancing through him. In that other room sat a powder keg, its fuse trailing across the floor. Whoever had hauled them here and locked them up had lighted that fuse before departing. Already the spark had crawled half the length of the fuse toward the keg and the doom that slept within it.

III.

Eliot Fraser, crowding Driftwood's elbow, could see that burning fuse, too. It was a sight that might have thrown both these trapped men into a wild, impotent panic, and Driftwood's admiration for the silver-haired steamboat owner soared as Fraser calmly raised his fist and smashed out the tiny pane of glass in the door.

"Find that hatchet," Fraser said. Tiny beads of sweat gleamed on his upper lip, but his voice was steady enough. "The fuse is almost flat against the floor. Maybe we can throw the hatchet and cut it."

Driftwood was instantly rummaging in search of the hand ax, but he had no faith in the scheme. The height and position of the small window was such that a man, thrusting his arm through it, would be in an awkward position for accurate throwing since he couldn't see his target as he hurled the hatchet. There'd be one blind chance, and when it was gone hope would be gone, too. Spying the hatchet, he grasped it. Smoke from the burning fuse was seeping into this locked room through the half inch of space between the bottom of the door and the floor.

That sight gave Driftwood his inspiration. Near him stood a barrel with a spigot attached, its sour smell identifying it as a vinegar cask. Swinging the hatchet, he smashed in the head of the barrel with a few swift blows.

"Lend a hand!" he cried to Fraser who was re-

garding him with astonishment. Grasping the barrel, Driftwood swung it off its stand, spilling vinegar over himself as he swung his burden toward the door. Fraser was helping him now, blindly and without understanding, from the look of him. Near the door, Driftwood tipped over the barrel and the vinegar cascaded out.

"See how it will work?" Driftwood panted.

Vinegar spilled along the floor, spreading out to make a many tentacled puddle as it flowed under the door. Eliot Fraser peered through the tiny window. "You've turned the trick!" he gasped. "You've put out that fuse with vinegar!"

Slipping to a sitting position on a case of goods, the packet owner passed a hand over his glistening face. "That was mighty quick thinking, boy! Now that the danger is over, I'm scared to death. Give me a minute to get hold of myself, and I'll spell you at hacking our way through that door."

"I don't think we've got time for that, sir," Driftwood said. "When that powder keg doesn't go off, those men will be back to see why it didn't."

Grasping the door handle, Driftwood shook it vigorously. Then he stooped and peered through the keyhole. "The key's on the other side," he announced. Thrusting his arm through the window opening, he groped for a moment. "Can't quite reach it," he grunted.

He stepped back a pace and studied the door for a long, thoughtful moment. Righting the vinegar keg, he wheeled it out of the way.

"Have you got a piece of paper?" he asked. "A good-sized one?"

Eliot Fraser showed his astonishment again, but he felt into an inner coat pocket. "Here's Pinky Wicks' pilot license," he said. "I've been carrying it since the day we took it from you."

Driftwood accepted the license, unfolded it carefully and bent the creases backward until the paper lay perfectly smooth. Stooping, he slid the license under the door, directly below the keyhole, slid it until only an inch or two of the paper still showed. Then he began looking around, his eyes questing for any object that would serve his purpose.

"That gold toothpick of yours!" he said finally. "Let me have it."

Obediently Fraser detached the long metal toothpick from its chain and passed it over. Driftwood poked into the keyhole with it. Fraser's eyes were widening with comprehension, and he stood beside Driftwood with eager interest. Suddenly there was a metallic tinkle, the *thunk* of the dropped key.

"Think you've got it?" Fraser whispered.

"If it didn't bounce or slide," Driftwood said. Grasping the edge of the paper gingerly, he began to ease it toward him, sliding it from under the door. When he finally drew the paper into the locked room, the key was lying upon it. In a moment Driftwood had it into the keyhole, was turning the bit of metal and swinging the door open. The powder fuse, stretched across the floor, was sopping wet with vinegar and dead, but Driftwood jerked it from the keg just the same.

"When there's time, I'll thank you properly, boy," Fraser said. "Just now there's work to do. I'm going to rouse every man on this packet. And I'm going to find the four who left us down here to die!"

Driftwood was having a look at the powder keg. "I'm wondering if that would be wise?" he mused thoughtfully. "After all, we couldn't identify the men who attacked us. And what about this powder keg? What was their idea in setting it off?"

"To scamp my boat," Fraser snapped. "Don't you understand? Captain Blade has put men aboard. Probably he had others lurking along the shore. By cutting overland, they could easily keep up with us until the time to strike. We were to be attacked from within and without."

"There's enough powder here that we'd have been killed for sure, close as we were to the keg," Driftwood observed. "But the boat wouldn't have been damaged much, considering. They wouldn't have wanted the boat blasted anyway, not if it meant they might lose the cargo. But there'd have been a fire. That would have meant all hands hard at work putting it out. What a time that would have been for raiders to attack from shore! And what a way to signal those on shore to come!"

"Memory or no memory, you've got a head for thinking," Fraser conceded. "You've an idea right now. I can see it in your face. And I'm willing to listen to it."

"There's half a dozen yawls aboard," Driftwood said. "Supposing you hand-pick a party you know you can trust. We'll take the powder keg upstream beyond the next bend and set it off. Then we'll build a brush fire to make it appear, from a distance, that the packet is on fire. If my guess is right, the raiders are somewhere close, waiting and watching for such a signal. When they come, we'll have a surprise for them. We'll have them under our guns before they can get in a shot!"

Fraser smote his left palm with his fist. "It's worth a try!" he decided. "It's worth a try!"

They groped out of the hold, Driftwood carrying the powder keg, and no one attempted to bar their way. They came up the companionways to the texas deck, and there Fraser summoned Captain McDonald and made low-voiced talk with him. After that McDonald departed to find men of proved integrity.

In less than half an hour, a full thirty were assembled—crew members who had been with Fraser for years, officers who were off duty, cabin passengers personally known to Fraser. Among these

were Dr. Hartz and the Reverend Peckenham. The missionary blinked owlishly behind his thick glasses.

"Doctor and I were having a chess game when Captain McDonald called," he explained. "I've handled a gun on hunting trips, and you can't bring the gospel to Montana without having firearms to back it up at times. I'll be proud to help, Mr. Fraser."

Fraser, grunting his consent, was busy explaining matters to his men. Twenty of them would leave the boat, it was decided, this group to be divided among five yawls. The other ten, under orders from Gus Hanson, one of the mates, would keep guard aboard the packet in case the scheme misfired and the raiders, not fooled by the fake explosion, struck at the *Prairie Rose*. Rifles were passed out, Fraser himself unhesitantly pressing one into Driftwood's hands, and the fighting party went to work lowering the yawls, those flat-bottomed rowboats which were used by the packet for messenger service or short trips.

There'd be a moon shortly, but now the night lay black and thick, the timbered shore a ragged blob against the darkness. One by one the yawls headed upstream, men hauling away at the oars. To Driftwood, in the first yawl with Fraser and two crew members, it was like groping through pitch. Only the riding lights of the packet oriented them, fitful fireflies burning in the blackness behind, and soon these were lost to sight as the yawl rounded a bend. A low-voiced order sent the flat-bottomed boat to shore to grate against a sandy beach, and Driftwood leaped to firm footing, the powder keg in his arms.

Carrying it about fifty paces, he dug the fuse from his pocket, feeling along it for a dry length. He cut the fuse and inserted it into the keg. When he got it burning, he came running back to the yawl.

"She'll go in a minute," he reported, and hard on the heels of his words the ground shuddered, a bluish flame licked upward, and the silence was split asunder by the roar of the exploding powder.

Instantly the four men were gathering up dry brush, heaping it on the sandy strip of shore. Fraser got the brush afire, and the flames licked upward, throwing a bloody rim of light far out upon the waters. In this glow they could see the four other yawls out on the stream, men working the oars only enough to keep the boats from drifting back down river with the current. For about ten minutes Fraser's group let the brush burn, then kicked the fire into the river, working methodically until the last spark had hissed out.

The blackness was the deeper for that brief span of glaring light as the Fraser yawl slipped out into the stream again. Driftwood, pressed shoulder to shoulder against the packet owner, could feel the tenseness of the man.

"It's a gamble from here on," Fraser whispered, slapping at a swarm of mosquitoes. "A pure gamble. If any of the renegades are close, they've heard the explosion and seen the fire glow against the sky. We've got to hope that they'll think we've controlled the fire but are still busy fighting it. And we've got to hope that they don't stumble upon the packet as they come looking for this place."

"And let's hope that they strike before moonrise, which won't be long," Driftwood added. "The boys have their orders. Not a shot's to be fired till we've got them surrounded. We'll have them where we want them if the deep dark holds."

Wait . . . wait in this thick and impenetrable darkness, wait in silence while the feeling grew that you were alone in a black, watery world. A dozen times Driftwood fought the impulse to call out, to make sure those other yawls weren't far away. A dozen times he heard the dip of one of their oars and started nervously, certain that the sound heralded the coming of the crew of the phantom-like Captain Blade. And then, his eyes growing more accustomed to the darkness, he saw a large boat looming to his right, a boat that must have put out from the far shore.

"A Mackinaw!" he whispered. "And a mighty big one, too! That craft holds a dozen men, if I'm any judge. Can you make it out, Mr. Fraser?"

"Yes," Fraser replied. "It's them! In a few minutes they'll be right in among the bunch of us. We'll have them where we can put them in a cross fire if they refuse to surrender. I—"

His words were drowned out by a rifle shot, the gun blaring off somewhere in the darkness, laying a crimson streak of fire against the night. In one of the yawls there'd been a nervous trigger finger —or a traitor. And the damage was done, the warning given. The Mackinaw doubled its speed, bearing down on the Fraser yawl as renegade arms bent against the oars. Guns began spitting from the big craft and the fight was on.

IV.

One moment the night had been wrapped in silence. Now it echoed to shout and curse and the ragged beat of rifle fire. Angry at the luck that had spoiled this carefully laid scheme, Driftwood got his gun to his shoulder, and he was firing as a white moth of a moon began edging over the eastern horizon. But he triggered only once, no more, for the Mackinaw was coming straight toward him, either by intent or accident, and its sharp prow smashed into the yawl. Wood splintered, someone screamed shrilly, and Driftwood found himself hurled into the river.

Clawing to the surface and treading water, he brushed his black shock of hair from his eyes. The Mackinaw was very close. Someone leaned and

looked down at him, then swung an oar at his head. A quick side stroke put Driftwood beyond the blow, and he had another fleeting glimpse of the dim blob of face as the Mackinaw streaked on past. But that was all he needed. Fancy Ben Beaumont was aboard that Mackinaw! Fancy Ben Beaumont, last seen in Yancey, was here on the upper Missouri!

Then Driftwood forgot Beaumont as arms flailed at him wildly. A man was floundering in the water, trying to get a hold on him. It was Eliot Fraser, and the frantic tone of his feeble, "Help!" told Driftwood the incredible truth. Eliot Fraser, powerful owner of a packet line, couldn't swim!

Driftwood planted a fist in Fraser's twisted face. There was nothing else he could do. With the man partially stunned by the blow, Driftwood was able to get a grip on his collar. Keeping Fraser's head above water, he let the current carry the two of them. The Mackinaw appeared to be veering toward the near shore. Rifles were still cracking, both from the big boat and from the yawls, and lead zipped uncomfortably close to Driftwood's ear.

Diving, the pilot dragged Fraser under with him, and when they came to the surface again, the current swept them around the bend and Driftwood could see the riding lights of the packet down yonder. Fraser was flailing his arms again.

"Quiet!" Driftwood ordered, taking a firmer grip on the man.

In this manner they drifted toward the steamboat. Ready hands along the main deck grasped them and hauled them aboard. The crew had heard the firing upriver and guessed what it portended. Under orders from Hanson, the mate, they had been alert for any sort of trouble. Passengers had come spilling out of the cabins, and Fraser brushed aside a dozen startled questions as he and Driftwood climbed to Fraser's own cabin on the texas. Here Lou Fraser took charge of them, insisting that they both change clothes at once. By the time they'd gotten into dry garb, the yawls were alongside, the fighting men of the *Prairie Rose* coming aboard. At Fraser's order, they all reported to his cabin, crowding it full.

"That Mackinaw beached and its crew took to the brush," Captain McDonald reported. "We didn't give them chase, because we were afraid of ambush. Looks like we scared 'em off, though; they couldn't have expected to row into a ring of rifles. But if we'd had better luck, we could have bagged the whole bunch."

"I know it," Fraser snapped. "And I want to know which one of you let go with a rifle before we were ready!"

"It happened in my yawl, sir," Dr. Hartz spoke up. "I'm sure of that."

A crew member glanced sheepishly at the floor. "I'm the one who fired, sir," he confessed. "But I didn't mean to. I was waiting the signal. Then somebody jostled my arm, and my finger was on the trigger. I'm sorry, sir."

Fraser gave him a long, appraising look. "You've been with me a good many years, Hawkins," he said. "I'm judging that what happened was an accident." Then he glanced at the others. "We fared badly tonight, but at least we saved the boat from being attacked. I want to thank all of you for your help. If the pilot thinks it's feasible we'll make a night run, now that the moon is up. That way we'll put miles between ourselves and Blade's renegades before they make another try."

Driftwood nodded his approval, and the engine crew hurried to get steam up. In a short time the boat was nosing into the current again, and Driftwood was at the wheel, following the silvery thread of the channel beneath the climbing moon. For a full hour passengers and crew milled along the decks, the aftermath of excitement keeping them awake. Then the boat became comparatively quiet. But there was no sleep for Driftwood, and Eliot Fraser and his daughter kept him company.

"I'm wondering," Fraser said, "if that gunshot was really an accident."

"Hawkins seemed to be telling a straight story," Driftwood judged. "But there was another shot that certainly wasn't an accident—the bullet that almost got us in the water. That shot came from one of the yawls—*not* from the Mackinaw. There're traitors aboard, we know that. At least one of them was out in the yawls. And I'm wondering if you knew that Fancy Ben Beaumont was aboard the Mackinaw."

"Beaumont! You're sure?"

"He struck at me with an oar. It was mighty dark, and things were happening fast, so I only had a glimpse of his face. Yet I'd take my oath that it was Beaumont."

Fraser fell to pacing the width of the pilothouse. "Beaumont!" he muttered. "He wanted to come aboard at Yancey, yet he didn't seem to be too anxious. If he was after a chance to scamp my ship, why did he hold out for a high salary as though he didn't care whether we hired him or not?"

"I don't know," Driftwood said. "He went for his gun when I underbid him in Yancey, remember. A pilot doesn't have to do murder to get a job. I thought there was something wrong at the time."

"It's queer," declared Fraser. "Mighty queer."

"I've got to get the answers," Driftwood said. "I'm tangled up in this, somehow. Sometimes I feel as though I could almost reach out and put my hand on the truth, but it always slips away from me. When I first saw Beaumont, I had the sensation that I'd known him before. And when Captain McDonald first mentioned the names of Marshal Brett Hawthorn and Captain Odin Blade, I knew that I'd

Caught unawares by the trio of river toughs, Driftwood was hurled over the side of the steamboat, and the river seemed to reach up to claim him.

heard of them before. From all accounts, Captain Blade is more legend than man. Could Beaumont be Blade?"

"No," Fraser said. "You see, I've come face to face with Captain Blade."

"You've seen him?"

"Oh, he was masked. Dressed like a fine gentleman and masked like the thief he is. But he's not built on the squat lines of Beaumont. He's a tall man—as tall as you. He and his crew boarded the *Cheyenne,* another of my boats, one night two years ago when we were tied up below the Niobrara. We weren't carrying valuable cargo, as Blade soon found out. But he robbed every officer and passenger of his personal belongings, and tweaked my nose in the bargain. No, Beaumont may be one of Blade's men, but he certainly isn't Odin Blade himself."

Passing his hand through his silvery hair, he yawned. "There are a lot of riddles," he concluded. "I'm going to sleep on some of them. Good night."

After he was gone, Lou Fraser came closer to the wheel and put her hand on Driftwood's arm. "I'll be saying good night, too," she murmured. "But first I want to thank you. From all accounts you saved my father's life twice tonight—once in the hold, and once when the yawl was upset. I want you to know that the Frasers don't forget."

Then she left, and Driftwood was alone with his work and his thoughts while the long night ran its course. The packet was tied up to the bank in the darkness before dawn. From then on they ran whenever moonlight permitted, snatching their sleep in the drowsy hours of the June afternoons. Guards swarmed the boat constantly, making sure there wouldn't be a repetition of the powder-keg episode. There were traitors aboard, but those traitors would have scant chance to strike.

Thus the days blended one with another, the packet passing Fort Rice and Fort Abraham Lincoln, and then Fort Berthold fell behind the churning steamer. Soon they were into Montana Territory, and the river was a meandering willow-fringed lane cutting across an endless expanse of prairie beneath the smiling blue of the sky.

Life had taken on a sunnier hue for Driftwood. Once a prisoner, he now had the freedom of the boat and the respect of its owner. Dr. Hartz still questioned him daily, trying numberless tricks to probe the shadowy reaches of Driftwood's memory; Captain McDonald made the talk of rivermen with him, and Reverend Peckenham, that indefatigable player of chess, tried to teach him the game. But, most gratifying of all to Driftwood, Lou Fraser took to walking the decks with him in his free hours.

Each turn of the paddle wheels was bringing them closer to Fort Benton and journey's end. That was the shadow, and Driftwood couldn't ignore it. Lou found him in a somber mood as he leaned across the railing of the hurricane deck on the evening when they were only twenty-four hours away from Benton, and she held silent, the breeze ruffling her golden curls. When the engines began throbbing, Driftwood stirred with interest, and Lou said: "We're making another night run. The nearer we get to Benton, the more nervous dad seems to get. But Captain McDonald knows this stretch of river as well as any pilot. He told me to tell you he'd spell you in the pilothouse for the first watch."

"That's fine," said Driftwood.

She was silent again, and he sensed that she was choosing words carefully. "We'll soon be in Benton," she said finally. "Dad and I were talking about that this evening. In fact, Marshal Hawthorn should be riding out to meet us at any time, probably with an armed escort."

"I know," he said gloomily.

"Father likes you, Driftwood," Lou assured him. "So do I. We talked about that, too. I hope you understand dad's position. He's a good man, and a just one. He owes you his life twice over. Don't think that isn't torturing him."

Turning, Driftwood regarded her gravely. "You don't have to explain," he said. "He's got his duty to do. He'll have to turn me over to the law, regardless, and tell Hawthorn my story so far as he knows it. A man died in Yancey, and somebody must pay."

"He'll put in a word for you," she assured him. "He'll tell Hawthorn how you've behaved aboard ship—and how much we all owe you. Hawthorn will take that into consideration."

He put his hand over hers. "Don't worry about it," he said. "And tell your father not to worry, either."

The boat was churning out into the channel, and with the decks throbbing to the pulsing of the engines, Driftwood didn't hear the girl leave. But when he turned to speak to her again, he found himself alone. Leaning across the rail, he gave himself to gloomy contemplation of the rushing waters. Off there to the west was Fort Benton. He might have said much to Lou Fraser, but he was a man with an uncertain future and a lost past.

His forehead furrowed, he tried thinking, tried in vain. There was that shack out of Yancey, and Pinky Wicks heaped dead in a corner. There was the name of a saloon—the Warbonnet—and the picture it had once conjured. That, and nothing more. And in the depth of his concentration, he heard no warning, no slithering of boot soles. The men who came were upon him before he was aware of their presence.

He couldn't even be sure whether there were two of them, or ten. It all happened too quickly. One instant they were laying hands on him, grasping him bodily. The next instant he was arcing through space, hurled overboard, and the river seemed to be rushing upward to claim him.

V.

Twisting as he hurtled through the air, Driftwood made a titanic effort to straighten himself out for a clean dive, but he hit the water awkwardly, going deep and clawing back to the surface. His first impulse was to get himself clear of the paddle wheel, so he struck out from the packet, the *Prairie Rose* churning past as the current carried him downstream. Half numbed by the fall, Driftwood stroked sluggishly toward the south shore, which was nearest. By the time he'd dragged himself, spent and dripping, to the bank, the packet was well upstream.

At first a consuming anger gripped him as he sat hunched, waiting for his breath to come back. Here was another attempt to get rid of him, and his desire to close with those who'd attacked him grew,

even though no part of the plot against him made any sense. First there'd been that falling piece of scrap iron. Then he'd been doomed below decks, left to die when a powder keg exploded. After that someone had shot at him from the yawls when he'd been floundering in the river, trying to support Eliot Fraser. And now this!

Why did somebody want him dead? Was the hatred against him impersonal, designed to get him out of the way merely because he was the pilot of a treasure-laden boat? Then why this latest attack? The packet was almost to Benton; Captain McDonald could handle the wheel from here. Small point in killing a pilot whose usefulness had practically ended.

At last Driftwood dismissed the riddle with a helpless shrug. Coming to his feet, he headed overland. With the river winding like a tortured snake, he could short-cut and overtake the steamboat easily enough. He couldn't have told how he knew this, and he'd long since ceased marveling at those unexpected bits of knowledge that came to him out of nowhere. But before he had walked a dozen paces, he realized that it was senseless to return to the packet.

Beyond lay Fort Benton—and the Warbonnet Saloon. Beyond lay the one chance to penetrate into his past, the chance he'd wanted so desperately in Yancey. The *Prairie Rose* meant being surrendered to Marshal Brett Hawthorn. Sooner or later the law would have him anyway, and he'd have to answer for the death of Pinky Wicks. But when he faced a court, he wanted to be able to speak in his own defense. His only chance at a key to knowledge lay in Fort Benton.

But supposing the Warbonnet proved a false hope? Supposing the sight of it still left him in oblivion? Pausing in midstride, he felt the old hopeless futility come back upon him. But he put his will against it and strode on.

There was always the wilderness when all hope failed. There were mountains to the west where a man could lose himself and live out his years as a prospector or a trapper. Yet escape held no allure for Driftwood. Not that kind. Something deep within him, something nameless that belonged to the yesterdays, clamored that he must vindicate himself, must walk among other men with no fear of the law laying a hand on his shoulder. And it came to him quite suddenly that Lou Fraser was the real reason why he had to find his name and clear it.

He loved her. If he'd never been sure before, he was sure now, at this moment when she seemed farther away than the stars winking against the velvety canopy overhead. He guessed that he'd loved her from the moment she'd first spoken for him in the pilothouse and had gone for a doctor to look at his wound. Yet even in those walks with her along the silent decks of the steamboat, he'd refused to face the truth. Now he had it to keep him company on this lonely march.

He set a mile-eating pace, putting time and distance behind him as the night wore on and a great moon rose to make the prairie bright and to dust the sage clump with a sheen of silver. Before midnight, he neared the river again and had a glimpse of the *Prairie Rose*. The packet lay motionless, its lighted cabins rising in banked tiers to the pilothouse, and at first he thought that Captain McDonald had decided to tie up for the night, after all. But a yawl bobbed on the water upstream, and Driftwood understood. McDonald had found the channel blocked by a sandbar and was sounding the river for a deep-water passage around the obstruction.

For a minute Driftwood stood motionless on the bank, his glance and his thoughts over there where the packet rocked gently. Then he was heading upstream again, skirting the willowy fringe of the river till a bend put the boat out of sight. And shortly after that he saw lights ahead of him along the shore—twinkling lanterns and the lurid glow of a campfire reflecting from the dark bulk of a building.

A wood yard, Driftwood decided. Fuel was an eternal problem along the Big Muddy, especially in this high, treeless prairie country. A man who is wanted for murder walks furtively, and Driftwood came toward the camp on feathery feet. It was well that he did so. For just beyond the rim of light, he paused, held by the sight of a man who stood gesticulating, talking to a ring of men who squatted about the campfire. And that man was Fancy Ben Beaumont.

No doubt about it, though this wasn't the flashily dressed pilot of Yancey, but a roughly clad man who looked entirely in keeping with this savage land and savage company. No honest wood hawks these, men who lived a harried, Indian-menaced life so that the Big Muddy could be a pathway from civilization. This was the camp of Captain Odin Blade's freebooters, for Ben Beaumont's words proved it.

"This is our last chance, and we'll answer to Captain Blade if we don't grab it," Beaumont was saying. "The steamboaters were still sounding the channel a half hour ago. We've got to strike at 'em before they get moving! By tomorrow night the *Prairie Rose* will be unloading minted money at Fort Benton, turning it over to Hawthorn, and we'll never get a smell of it. We tried for the cargo once and failed. We've got to try again—now!"

A mutter of approval ran the circle. There'd been only a dozen men in the Mackinaw that had come

to raid the *Prairie Rose* above Fort Pierre, but there were over fifty men here. That puzzled Driftwood until he found the answer. Fort Benton was the rendezvous of Blade's freebooters. Probably they maintained a permanent camp here close to the famous river port. Ben Beaumont, commissioned to scamp the boat down the river, had joined up with the full strength of the renegades. And Beaumont was ready to strike.

"A handful of men can take over a steamboat if they play their cards right," Beaumont continued. "With this bunch, we can't fail. Even if we're outnumbered, we'll be swarming aboard before they know what's up. You boys know how to handle the job."

Fading backward into the shadows, Driftwood put himself safely beyond the camp and sprinted downstream. Then he paused, faced by a problem. He was on his way to warn the steamboat, yet doing so would mean that he'd be a prisoner again with no chance to see the Warbonnet Saloon or to unearth any other clues that might unlock his memory. Perhaps it wasn't necessary to warn the steamboat, he told himself. The combined passengers and crew of the packet would more than outnumber Blade's bunch. Yet he knew that the renegades, ruthless and trained for their task, would make up in surprise and savagery what they lacked in numbers. And he knew that only a small part of those aboard the packet would be worth a whoop in a fight.

Here was his chance to get to Fort Benton before the law claimed him, and he had to throw that chance away. There was Eliot Fraser to think about, Fraser who was his friend, yet who'd have to turn him over to Hawthorn. There was gruff, red-bearded Captain McDonald, and Dr. Hartz who'd tried to restore his memory, and Reverend Peckenham who'd wanted to teach him chess. There was Hanson, the mate, and Hawkins whose trigger finger had slipped, and a host of others. And there was Lou Fraser who'd given him kindness and a reason for loving her.

It left a man with little choice, and suddenly Driftwood was ashamed of his moment of hesitancy. Breaking into a run again, he came around the bend, seeing the *Prairie Rose* at a distance, still tied to the north bank. With a running leap, he dived into the water and swam toward the steamboat, striking out obliquely so the current wouldn't carry him downstream from the boat. The river seemed as wide as the world, but soon he was grasping a trailing rope and hauling himself onto the main deck. Then he was swarming up the companionways to the texas and the cabin of Eliot Fraser.

Fraser was there when Driftwood came lunging through the doorway, dripping wet and disheveled, and Captain McDonald and Lou were with the owner. The three regarded the pilot with startled eyes.

"Driftwood! You back?" Fraser cried. "When we discovered you'd jumped the boat, we thought you'd escaped for good!"

Regret was in Fraser's voice, genuine regret, and it came to Driftwood that a Gordian knot had been cut for the packet owner tonight, and now it was tied again.

"I didn't jump boat," Driftwood said. "I was thrown overboard. But there isn't time to talk about that! Blade's bunch is camped a mile upriver. Beaumont's bringing them to attack the boat! Can you move? Have you found a channel?"

Captain McDonald swore a hearty oath and made no apology to Lou. "I was just going out to take some more soundings," he said. "Will you come along in the yawl?"

"It might take hours," Driftwood argued. "We'd do better to spend the time getting the crew ready to repel an attack!"

"He's right," Fraser cried, his fist smiting his palm. "Come on, captain. We've got rifles to pass out, work to do. Driftwood, I'm in your debt again. I'll see you as soon as I've got my fighters lined up."

He hurried from the cabin, Captain McDonald with him, and soon the packet was throbbing with excitement, feet scurrying along the decks, moonlight glinting from rifle barrels, crew members running to stations. From the railing of the texas, Driftwood and Lou heard the sounds of preparation, heard a packet being turned into a fortress. Driftwood's eyes were usually on the river, watching that dim south shore, watching for the crew that would be spewed forth by the night.

"So you came back," Lou said softly. "You had a hundred chances to escape, but you never took them, and when you might have stayed free, you came back. Why, Driftwood?"

"Because you were aboard," he said simply.

She put her hands on his shoulders and forced him to face her. "I was wondering if I'd ever be able to make you say something like that," she said.

She was so close that he could smell the faint perfume of her hair, and he knew that in another minute he'd be babbling wild, incoherent words he had no right to say.

"And I came for the others, too," he mumbled. "Your father, and Dr. Hartz, and Peckenham—"

"Are you afraid to tell me you love me, Driftwood?" Lou broke in.

He stared in amazement. "Then you know?" he asked.

"A girl always knows. What locks your tongue, Driftwood? Is it because of Pinky Wicks? If

you killed him, you had a reason. I know that. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," he said. "There's nothing I could promise you, Lou. Nothing but long, endless waiting—and maybe not even that. There's no return from a hang rope. Now do you understand why I've never spoken?"

"It doesn't matter," she said again, and suddenly he was holding her close and the moonlight was all tangled in her hair, and he was kissing her. "I'll wait," she said. "I'll wait until you can come to me, free and sure."

"And I'll come," he said. Fumbling in his pocket, he found the greenish-gold ring he'd taken from Pinky Wicks. He'd studied it many times, and now he had a use of it. "This is all I've got, and it isn't even mine," he said. "But I wish you'd wear it for me. Whenever you look at it, remember that I'll be coming back to you."

He held the ring out and the moonlight glinted on the small stones that were the serpent's eyes. Lou looked at it and suddenly she was recoiling from him, her face white.

"That ring!" she gasped. "So father's first guess was right! Out of Yancey he told me he was afraid you might be one of Captain Blade's men. And you must be, or you wouldn't have that ring! It used to be my father's. It was taken from him by Captain Blade, the time Blade raided the *Cheyenne* and stripped everyone of their belongings! Oh—"

Turning, she fled from him. Driftwood called after her incoherently, trying to tell her how he'd come by the ring. But now a wild, low murmur was going the length of the packet, a whisper that rose and swelled as a dozen voices caught it and carried it along.

"The raiders are coming! Look to the south shore! The raiders are coming!"

VI.

Wheeling about, Driftwood gazed across the moonlit waters and knew that no false alarm was sweeping the steamboat. Out from the south bank crept a strange flotilla that had rounded the bend hugging close to the shore—pirogues, yawls, Indian-style bull boats and one huge Mackinaw, a dozen craft in all, easing downstream with muffled paddles and oars. A rifle spat from the boiler deck of the *Prairie Rose,* lead skipping along the water. From a renegade craft a gun answered as the flotilla veered diagonally across the river, and then a hundred guns were yammering. It was a fight to the finish now.

A few quick strides took Driftwood into Eliot Fraser's cabin. A rifle was racked on the wall, and he wrenched it free and got to the railing again. The rifle to his cheek, he sighted and triggered. A man reared upward in one of the yawls, raised his hands toward the sky as though in supplication, then pitched into the stream.

Driftwood's lips tightened with a bleak smile. Blade's men had come prepared for a fight, and they were getting one. Firing again, he wondered where Lou had fled. He wanted desperately to see her, to tell her the truth about that serpentine ring, but that would have to wait. There was work for a fighting man tonight, and he was into the thick of it.

He was no man of Captain Odin Blade's, he grimly decided. Or was he? That disquieting thought thrust itself upon him and couldn't be denied. He'd gotten that ring from Pinky Wicks, of course. Therefore it followed that there was a connection between Wicks and Captain Blade, for Blade had stolen the ring from Eliot Fraser. Perhaps Wicks himself had been Blade. But how did he, Driftwood, fit into the picture?

Had he been a Blade man, one of the crew strung along the river to strike at the *Prairie Rose* and its precious cargo? Was that what had fetched him to Yancey? Maybe he and Wicks had met in that shack as fellow conspirators. Maybe they'd had a falling out and settled their differences with guns. Or perhaps a third party, an outsider, had been in on the fight. There'd been two shots fired from his own gun, Driftwood recollected. Yet there'd been only one bullet hole in Wicks.

And what about those attempts on his life since he'd boarded the *Prairie Rose?* Was that because he had somehow been marked by Blade's bunch as a traitor after he'd struck Ben Beaumont on the Yancey landing? Had he unwittingly changed sides when the black curtain had fallen for him?

All of this was conjecture, and it made Driftwood's head spin. Yet the run of his thoughts suggested sinister implications that he couldn't overlook. Marshal Brett Hawthorn would be interested in him as a suspected murderer. That was bad enough. But what if Hawthorn, nemesis of the Blade outfit, recognized him as one of that crew? Even the benefit of doubt would be denied him then.

While Driftwood was thinking of these things, he was still firing, pouring lead at the raiders who were creeping ever closer. His rifle clicked empty, and there was no ammunition to be found in Fraser's cabin, so he dropped down a companionway to the deck below to get more bullets.

A dozen defenders of the boat were here, crouching behind the railings, pouring a steady fire at the little flotilla beyond. Eliot Fraser had ordered the passengers to keep to their cabins, Driftwood learned, making exceptions for men of proved fighting ability. Dr. Hartz and Reverend Peckenham were among these exceptions. Both of them had rifles, and Driftwood lent a hand to the black-garbed missionary as Peckenham tugged a sofa

from his own cabin to make a bulwark between himself and the singing lead. Peckenham had lost his black, flat-brimmed hat, and his eyes, behind his thick glasses, were wild with excitement as he cradled a rifle against his cheek.

"Steady," Driftwood advised. "Take it easy, parson. You're wasting most of your lead."

Loading and firing again, he left Peckenham and began working up toward the bow as he fought. There was scarcely any current in this sandbar-choked stretch of the river, and the raiders were not hard put to keep from being swept downstream and away from the packet. Their boats were moving forward in a wide semi-circle, making a dozen targets instead of one.

Driftwood, trying to get a certain bull boat in his sights, saw it drift from his view as it crowded in close to the packet. Leaping for a companionway, the pilot came down to the main deck. Defenders were here, too, but most of them were clustered at the stern.

Hurrying to the bow, Driftwood found the bull boat bumping alongside, two renegades clambering up onto the steamboat. The pilot slammed his left fist into the face of one, sending the fellow splashing into the river. The other fired point-blank with a pistol, the bullet lifting the fringe along Driftwood's sleeve. Clubbing at the renegade with his rifle barrel, Driftwood knocked the second man into the water before the fellow could get in another shot. The first renegade was swimming away, and Driftwood saw him stiffen convulsively as a bullet tagged him from one of the upper decks. The one he'd struck with his rifle never rose to the surface.

Panting, Driftwood spun to see if any other enemy craft was close enough for its crew to board the packet. And that was when he saw the wisps of smoke curling from a companionway leading down into the hold. Others had noticed that telltale sign, too, and suddenly another cry was sweeping the deck, no whisper this time, a wild, throaty cry of anger and despair: "Fire! The hold's on fire!"

Those traitors aboard! With the fighting men of the packet busy defending their boat, the men of Captain Blade who'd once planted a powder keg below decks had made another play! And Driftwood could instantly see how disastrous it might be at a time like this. Eliot Fraser came tumbling down to the main deck, a commanding figure with a smoking pistol in his hand, his silvery hair flying.

"Into the hold, some of you!" he bellowed. "Get down there and smother that fire! No, not all of you. Every second man stay here on deck. Don't you see? They're counting on us quitting our posts to fight the fire!"

Instantly half the main deck defenders were hurrying into the hold, other fire fighters swarming down from the upper decks. The rifles were speaking again, but it was the renegades who were doing most of the firing now. Another boat bumped up against the packet, and Driftwood and two crew members hurried to repel boarders. There was a hot, heavy few minutes of hand-to-hand work, and there was a dead man on the deck and two in the river when it was over. But more boats were coming

Eliot Fraser pressed close to Driftwood. "It's bad," the owner shouted. "I've just been down in the hold. The boys have got the fire under control, but they haven't got it out. I can't spare a man from the decks to go below, or a man below to come up and handle a gun. Those scheming devils plannned this exactly right. They've got us licked, boy. It's only a matter of time till some of them get aboard to stay."

"Look!" Driftwood cried. "Gun flashes over there on the south shore! Do you see that bunch of riders on the bank? More of Blade's men! They must have come out from Fort Benton!"

Fraser put a hand above his eyes, peering hard. "I see them!" he said, and there was a shrill note of excitement in his voice. "Look again, Driftwood. Those boys are in blue, all except one. Those aren't Blade's men! It's Marshal Brett Hawthorn—Hawthorn and a troop of cavalry from the fort. They've come to escort us into Fort Benton. And they've come just in time!"

Then Driftwood understood. Those newcomers were friends, not enemies, and if he'd had any last doubt it was dispelled as he heard the clear notes of a bugle above the rattle of gunfire. The shore party's bullets were aimed at the renegade flotilla. Some of those cavalrymen were even crowding their mounts out into the river, firing as the horses swam forward. And renewed hope and a fierce exaltation was in Eliot Fraser's face.

"We've got 'em in a cross fire!" he cried. "Give 'em Green River, boys!" That ancient war cry of the mountain men sounded strange on a steamboater's lips, but the men got the idea. Rifles began banging furiously, and other guns still volleyed from the shore. Chaos was spreading rapidly through the renegade flotilla, chaos that had voice in startled curses and wild cries of fear. What had been an attack was becoming a rout.

Raiders who'd put their strength against paddles and oars to keep abreast of the steamboat now put those paddles to work to try to make an escape, some even throwing their guns into the river. But there was no escape for most of them. Steamboaters and cavalrymen alike were seeing to that. Over the water floated a wild cry: "Hold your fire, soldiers, and let us come ashore. We surrender!"

Driftwood heard the bugle again. Boats were being beached, and as he peered hard, he made out figures splashing ashore with hands raised high

above heads. But there was one who wasn't surrendering. He was alone in a bull boat, and he'd gotten far enough downstream so that the current had caught the craft and was whirling it away. Once that lone figure turned, shaking his fist at the steamboat and hoisting his gun for a last shot. Driftwood raised his rifle, triggered and knew that he'd missed, and then the bull boat was bobbing around a bend. Fancy Ben Beaumont had made his escape.

"Put out a yawl," Eliot Fraser was ordering. "Marshal Hawthorn will want to come aboard. Hurry, men."

A flat-bottomed boat was lowered, stout arms sending it skimming across the river. From a shadowy end of the main deck, Driftwood watched it make the crossing, saw a tall figure climb into it. Then the yawl came bobbing back toward the *Prairie Rose*. It was halfway to the packet when Driftwood made his decision.

A few more minutes and Marshal Brett Hawthorn would be aboard. A few more minutes and Eliot Fraser would have to do his duty and turn a prisoner over to the law. There was no choice for Fraser, but there was still a choice for Driftwood, and he made it. Lou Fraser had left him in loathing and disgust. She would know part of the truth if he sought her out and told her the whole story about that ring. But part of the truth wouldn't do; it hadn't been enough from the very first. Driftwood had to rend the black curtain before he faced her again.

Slipping over the railing, he eased into the water, striking out for the near north shore. He swam with scarcely a splash, but as he pulled himself up onto the bank, someone on the steamboat cried: "There goes another of Blade's bunch!" A rifle banged, the bullet clipping a leaf from one of the trees crowding down to the water's edge. Into the brush, Driftwood began squirming away.

Soon he was at a safe distance so that he could get to his feet. Then he struck out overland. For the *Prairie Rose,* the danger and trouble was over. Captain Blade had lost his last chance at the cargo; the minted money was safe. But for the man called Driftwood, the situation was the same. For him there was only a shadowy hope that lay somewhere beyond the hills that hemmed Fort Benton town.

VII.

Another midnight was near when Driftwood came to Fort Benton. The distance hadn't been great, but several times he'd had to hide from far-flung groups of riders who diligently scoured the coulees and draws. These were some of the cavalrymen who'd ridden with Marshal Hawthorn, and whether they were looking for him or for stragglers from Blade's bunch, Driftwood couldn't tell. He'd played safe by keeping under cover, and thus it was night before he saw the twinkling lights of Fort Benton, head of navigation on the upper Missouri.

Fort Benton! Teeming streets and crowded landing wharfs. Mexicans and mountain men, steamboaters and soldiers, gold prospectors and gamblers. An adobe-walled fort with cannon frowning from its bastions. A hurly-burly of buildings. A row of packets discharging cargo. Rioting color and lusty life. It was all as he'd expected it to be. It was like coming home again, though he had no real knowledge of ever having been here before.

He got himself something to eat in a crowded restaurant, and, listening to the talk at the tables, he learned that the *Prairie Rose* had docked that evening. There were tales of that attack down river and of the timely arrival of the soldiers, but Driftwood wasn't interested in the details. Fed and rested, he came into into the street again and headed for the Warbonnet Saloon.

He didn't ask the way. He knew it. And when he pushed inside the place, seeing the smoky interior, the long stretch of bar, the gaming tables and the lanterns overhead, it was the very picture he'd conjured in distant Yancey. He moved like a man walking through a mirage that somehow failed to fade. Many an eye turned to measure his tall, broad-shouldered figure with curious interest, but he was oblivious to these stares. Other pictures were crowding at the edge of his memory, but he couldn't quite see them. He moved to the bar and ordered a drink, then left it untasted. He needed a clear head tonight.

At the back of the barroom, a stairs led upward to a second story. That stairs was exactly where he'd expected it to be, and suddenly he was possessed of a desire to climb it. But before he did, he surreptitiously lifted a gun from the holster of a drunken freighter who stood next to him at the bar, an act that was purely instinctive. Quickly tucking the gun inside his shirt, he made his way up the stairs.

At the head of the steps, a dim hallway ran the length of the building, doors giving off into rooms that flanked the hall on either side. There were half a dozen of them, but he went unerringly to a room at the front of the building. Testing the doorknob, he entered the room and closed the door behind him. Moonlight filtered in through an unwashed window, and he had a look around.

This room was uncarpeted and almost bare of furniture. A crude table was in its center, and there was a scattering of crippled chairs and several empty whiskey barrels standing in one corner. Nothing more. Yet Driftwood was tingling with excitement, alive with the feeling that this place meant something to him. His forehead wrinkled

with his effort to discover what that something was. And then he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

He got in behind those barrels as quickly and as silently as he could. Crouching down out of sight, he heard the door open, heard several men come into the room. One cursed as he collided with a chair; then a match scraped and a lamp was lighted. The voice of Fancy Ben Beaumont said: "I'm not too sure we're safe here. Hawthorn's been on our trail for months, and he might have known about this place. I tell you, Blade, we've got to scatter and make ourselves scarce till we can build up a new crew."

Blade! Captain Odin Blade, half man and half legend, was here, and as he began speaking Driftwood listened in incredulous astonishment at the man's voice.

"Get a hold on yourself, Ben," Blade was saying. "What I've got to tell you won't take long, and this is as good a place as any to say it. We can't be seen on the street together, and nobody will bother us here. You've bungled from the very first, Beaumont. Do you understand that? You left that man alive in Yancey, and you let him get aboard the *Prairie Rose*. Fortunately he'd lost his memory, but that was just plain luck for us. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I didn't mean to fail," Beaumont countered. "The *Prairie Rose* had docked at Yancey, and Pinky came ashore to tell me you'd spotted the hold that held the minted money. We were talking things over in a shack up the river, just to be sure nobody was close enough to overhear us. But that gent must have seen us leave town and followed us. When we caught him snooping around the shack, there was gunplay."

"Two of you against him, and he lived!"

"He got a shot into Pinky first thing, and he sent a bullet at me, Blade, but my lead knocked him down just as he fired. Honest, Blade, I thought he was dead. His head was all bloody. I searched him for papers and burned them, so that anybody who found his carcass wouldn't be able to tell who he was. They'd figger he was some drifter who'd tried to rob Pinky."

"And when he showed up at the landing an hour later," Blade interjected savagely, "did you still think he was dead?"

"I wasn't expecting that, chief," Beaumont defended himself. "McDonald and Fraser were trying to hire a pilot, and I saw a good chance to get aboard and take Pinky's place. That was part of your plan, chief, to have one of the bunch piloting the boat. I figgered I was doing what you'd want me to do. But it might have made Fraser suspicious if I was too anxious to get aboard. That's why I held out for the highest money. I didn't think there'd be any competition and I'd be hired anyway. When that jigger came along, it was like seeing a ghost. I tried to get another shot at him, but he knocked me out before I got my gun leveled."

"Very well," Blade said. "Maybe it was mostly bad luck that worked against you, Ben. I had my own share of it. I was afraid from the first that he'd get his memory back and have a story to tell Eliot Fraser. There was no telling how much he really knew. I made three tries at killing him, and all of them failed. We've lost this hand, but there'll be others. Confound Hawthorn! We might have taken the boat last night. But men are easy to get, and we'll raise a new crew. The Big Muddy hasn't heard the last of Captain Odin Blade, and—"

"Chief!" one of the other men shouted. *"Somebody's stirrin' in there behind them barrels!"*

Driftwood bobbed erect, standing up with the stolen gun in his hand. They'd heard him and they'd come questing for him, but there was no point in waiting for that. He had five of them to face, and he recognized them all. One was Beaumont. Three had been members of the packet's crew, and those same three had doubtless been the ones who'd once carried a powder keg below decks, and who'd tried to fire the ship again last night. The fifth man was Captain Blade.

The man wore almost the same garb as when Driftwood had last seen him. His glasses were gone, and so was the clerical look of the man, but Driftwood knew him, had known him from the moment he'd heard Blade's voice in this room.

"No wonder you were firing wild when your men were attacking the boat last night," Driftwood said, "You played your part pretty well, *Reverend Peckenham!*"

They were all staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment, but that only lasted for a split second and then they were going for their guns. Fancy Ben Beaumont was the fastest of the bunch, and the first to die. Driftwood triggered in his direction, and Beaumont tottered a step forward and fell, smashing the table to kindling.

Then the room was a-roar with gun thunder, the lamp blinking with the concussion of the shots, the powder smoke swirling. Dancing and dodging, Driftwood tried to be everywhere at once. He got one of the crew members, his lead slamming the fellow hard against the wall, but Blade and his men were making their bullets count, too. Fire burned in Driftwood's shoulder, another bullet creased his thigh, and he was tense with the certainty that he'd never leave this room alive. Not against these odds.

He tried to get Captain Blade in his sights, but the round face of the pseudo-missionary was like a will-o'-the-wisp, hard to find and harder to hit. Another man went down, another bullet hit Driftwood.

His gun was getting heavier, and it seemed to be a sizable chore to ear back the hammer. And then the door was bursting inward, and four men were crowding into the room, firing as they came. Odin Blade went down before their barrage, and the last of his men sprawled across him, and the fight was over. Only then did Driftwood realize that Eliot Fraser and Captain McDonald and Dr. Hartz were here. And with them was a tall, gaunt man wearing the badge of Federal law pinned upon his vest —Marshal Brett Hawthorn.

He supposed he should be glad to see them, Driftwood reflected. He supposed he should thank them for saving his life. Yet this was no moment of triumph for him, but a time of grim despair. At long last he'd seen the Warbonnet Saloon. It had stirred phantom memories, but it hadn't lifted the black curtain for him. And now the law was here, and he'd be made a prisoner. True, he now knew that he'd been no member of Captain Blade's renegade gang. Instead he was someone whom Blade had tried from the first to destroy. But where was the proof of that? Captain Blade might have had it, but Blade was dead.

He lifted resigned eyes to meet the astonished stare of Brett Hawthorn, and as he looked at that leather-faced old lawman, Driftwood's own eyes widened. Passing a hand across his forehead, he took two stumbling steps forward. "Dad!" he cried incoherently. *"Dad!"*

"Dave, boy!" Marshal Hawthorn muttered. "It *is* you! But I knew it was, just as quick as Fraser, here, described you last night. Gents, meet my son, Dave Hawthorn, one of the best pilots on the Big Muddy, and a sort of unofficial deputy of mine this last year. It was him that first smelled out the fact that Blade's bunch was using Fort Benton as their rendezvous and this Warbonnet Saloon as their town headquarters. That's why I told you tonight, gents, that this place was worth looking over on the chance of finding Ben Beaumont."

"I remember . . ." Dave Hawthorn said dazedly.

"When we got wind of the plot to scamp the *Prairie Rose* for its cargo, Dave insisted on going down river to meet the packet and help protect it," Marshal Hawthorn explained. "Since you'd never met Dave, Mr. Fraser, I gave him a letter introducing himself. I take it he lost it. So this is Driftwood, the man you found without a memory!"

"But I *can* remember!" Dave cried. "It all came back to me the minute I saw your face, dad!" Dr. Hartz, it happened just like you said it might. A familiar face. . . . Beaumont's didn't turn the trick. I'd known him for one of Blade's bunch here in Fort Benton. Dad, if I'd only stayed on the packet till you came aboard last night! In any case, we've finished out job. Yonder lies Captain Blade. You packet men have seen him before."

"Peckenham!" Dr. Hartz gasped. "So he was an impostor! That makes it easy to understand who jostled Hawkins' trigger finger that night in the yawl. Peckenham was in that same boat with us. But you're hurt, Hawthorn."

They patched him up right there in that room over the Warbonnet, the room where Captain Blade had plotted his deviltry and come to his end.

"In cases of true amnesia, the patient forgets the blank interlude as soon as his memory is restored," Hartz said. "Yours has been an unusual case from the start, Dave. You remember everything that happened on the boat, then?"

"Everything," Dave Hawthorn said, and his eyes singled out Eliot Fraser.

Later he had his chance for a moment alone with the steamboat owner. Marshal Hawthorn had gone downstairs to answer the questions of saloon patrons who'd heard the shooting, and Dr. Hartz and Captain McDonald had trooped after him. Dave Hawthorn looked at Fraser. "Lou—" he began.

"She's aboard the ship," Fraser told him. "Last night I had to lock her in her cabin while the fight was on. It was the only way I could keep her out of the thick of it. But I had a minute or two with her before your father came aboard. She said she was ashamed to face you, and asked me to tell you something for her. When you showed her a certain ring, she was so shocked that she jumped to a natural conclusion. But she wanted you to know that after she'd had time to think, it didn't matter how you'd come by the ring. She wanted me to tell you that she loved you anyway."

"I found the ring on Wicks," Driftwood explained "He must have gotten it from Blade, probably as his share of the loot of the *Cheyenne* raid. We'll never know the real truth." He came to his feet and found that he could stand. "I'm going to slip away," he said. "Will you tell my father that I'll see him later?"

A few minutes later found him out of the Warbonnet Saloon and hurrying along the crowded streets of Fort Benton. He was fired with impatience, and he jostled men rudely, but they saw the look in his eyes and they smiled and forgave him. He was running when he came to the landing and the *Prairie Rose* and he climbed the gangplank and the companionways as quickly as a wounded man could. There was a stretch of deck where he and Lou had strolled on many a night. There was a railing where they'd leaned together to watch the stars reflected in the water and to share a communion of silence. And that was where he found her now.

THE END.

If Jay Jargo kept the bitter vow he'd made when he buried his town-taming sixes, the cross fire of renegade range hogs would take a deadly trigger toll of helpless women and children

RAMROD OF SATAN'S RANGE

by Cliff Farrell

I.

Jay Jargo sat at the spur-scarred desk in the marshal's office and watched Clem Durkin ride into Platte City. Clem Durkin was a gunman and a killer. Seeing how indelibly the brand was marked upon him made Jay wonder just how deep that same rough-hand brand was being etched into his own character.

"There he comes," said Owen Forbes. "Jest like he said he would. What are you aimin' to do, Jay?"

Owen Forbes was the mayor of the rough, noisy trail town which stood on the muddy Platte at the halfway point to northern range. Mopping his shining bald head, he looked at Jargo worriedly.

Jay did not answer. His mind was wandering back over two seasons he had worn the badge in Platte City. He thought of the four graves he had filled in boothill. One of those graves held the body of Clem Durkin's brother. Red Durkin, tough, vicious and merciless, had tried to earn a reputation for himself by killing Jay Jargo, the famous gun marshal of Platte City.

He had been fast on the draw—but not fast enough. Red Durkin had been sleeping in boothill for a little over two months. And now his brother was riding into town, packing his short-barreled flash guns in greased leathers. With the arrogance of his kind, he had sent word ahead of his coming.

"Clem Durkin has killed five or six good men," Forbes said hesitantly. "He'll be harder to bring

down than Red was. They say he's maybe the quickest gun-slinger in the West."

Jay noticed the way Platte City was holing up. The crooked plank sidewalks suddenly looked deserted. Men were hurriedly leading all harness and saddle stock off the street until only Clem Durkin's shaggy cow pony stood in sight at the rail of the Montana Bar into which its owner had swaggered.

"Drop down to the Montana, Owen," Jay said quietly. "Mention to Clem Durkin that we enforce a gun-totin' law. Tell him he's got fifteen minutes to check his steel or face a fine. I'll be along directly to see if he has complied."

The mayor drew a deep sigh. He thrust out a pudgy hand. "Luck to you, Jay. I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd decided different. You know what this means to Platte City. There's a dozen trail crews in town today, every man hatin' northern towns an' folks like us. They'll tear this place down to the base logs tonight if . . . if you go under."

"I savvy," said Jay. "I'll do my best."

"I'm bettin' on you, boy. Clem Durkin may be fast, but you're the swiftest human I've ever seen with a gun. You'll be the one to walk out of the Montana. It's wrote in the cards."

"Pass the word around," Jay told him, "to everyone who doesn't want to get hurt to stay away from the Montana Bar for the next quarter of an hour. Everyone! You understand?"

"I wisht I could help you, Jay," Forbes said huskily. "But I'm an old man. Gun fightin' ain't in my line."

Jay's straight mouth twisted slightly in a weary smile as he watched the mayor hurry away to warn all neutrals to stay clear of the Montana Bar.

"Gun fightin' ain't in my line!" Forbes' words rang in Jay's mind. But, he reflected bitterly, it was taken for granted that gun fighting was in Jay Jargo's line. A sultry resentment tided up in him that destiny had seen fit to bestow upon him nerves of steel and a lightning trigger finger.

He arose and looked at himself in a heat-warped mirror. He stood five feet eleven and weighed one hundred and eighty-five pounds, though he looked smaller. The image he saw was that of a lean-cheeked, bronzed man of twenty-five in clean white shirt, dark breeches and black, high-heeled boots. His light-blue eyes, which had once been lazy and humorous, now held a depth of grimness and knowledge of life beyond his years. He studied his straight jaw and square lips, searching for the granite hardness he had seen in all of those men who slept now in boothill.

He told himself that these merciless signs were not in his face—yet. But they would come if he stayed in the game. It was time to quit—if he lived through this day.

To Jay's ears came the wailing of a sleepy baby somewhere in the town; the stamp of idle hoofs from a mule yard, and the drowsy tinkle of a piano from the professor's academy of music drifted dreamily through the August heat. The jingle of trace chains and the slam of wheels as the stage from Ogallala arrived sent a small tide of sound over the town—accenting its strange and unnatural quiet.

These homely sounds were the hallmark of a peaceful community which aimed to plant its roots deep in the future. The people of Platte City meant to remain here after the trail men and their violence had passed on to other scenes. These were the reasons why Jay Jargo had worn the badge two years, guarding with his nerves of ice and his lightning gun hand those citizens who had no such deadly gift to protect themselves.

If he went under today, Platte City, by nightfall, would be the playground of wild, unbridled men who would probably burn it to the ground to avenge fancied wrongs of the past. But if the settlement rode out this storm its future was assured, for the trail season was nearing its end. Next year the trail would swing farther west to avoid the plowed land and fences that were moving deeper into the plains. Platte City would sink into the peaceful lethargy of a farming community as had Abilene, Baxter Springs, Caldwell and other towns before it.

Jay looked at his reflection in the mirror. "This will be the last," he said aloud. "Win or lose!"

He watched Don Stanton cross the dusty street, escorting a girl who had just arrived on the Ogallala stage. They were headed for Jay's office.

Don Stanton was Jay's best friend. Chunky-shouldered, vigorous, with merry blue eyes and an unruly shock of yellow hair, he operated a flourishing little brand up the Platte. He and Jay were planning on throwing in together in a more ambitious cattle venture in the near future, after Jay laid aside the badge.

A flame kindled in Jay's eyes as he looked at the girl. Don had told him that a sister was coming from Colorado to keep house for him, but Jay hadn't expected her to be like this.

Constance Stanton was small and trim, carrying herself with an easy pride. Her hair, where it showed beneath her poke bonnet, was a coppery golden hue. She looked at Platte City with troubled violet eyes, and Jay sensed that she was seeing only its roughness, and its capacity for violence.

The taut excitement in Don's demeanor was evidence that he knew about the arrival of Clem Durkin. Jay guessed that the girl also knew, for she held back, studying him with a remote horror as her brother ushered her into the office.

"Jay," Don Stanton said, "this is my sister. Connie, this is Jay Jargo. You know who he is."

The girl inclined her head. "Yes, I know."

"Jay," Don demanded, "is it true that Tejano killer is in town?"

Jay nodded. "I'm goin' down to the Montana in a minute to look him over."

"Alone?" Don exclaimed. "Not by a hatful. It's whispered that Durkin has set a deadfall for you. They say maybe one of his pals from that tough trail crew he came north with is planted there to help him out. Maybe they'll cross-fire you. I'm going to the Montana Bar with you, kid."

Jay shook his head. "You better see your sister out of town, Don. You've got quite a ride ahead of you to hit your spread before sundown."

"But I'm going with you. We're pals, aren't we?"

"Please, Don," Connie said pleadingly. "You're not a . . . a gunman. It's no place for you."

Jay turned away. The girl's words had been like the thrust of a hot iron.

"Whatever you do, Don," he spoke over his shoulder, "stay away from the Montana. I don't want any mistakes made. It's always the wrong man that stops the stray lead. Remember that."

He heard Don Stanton protesting the restraining hand his sister held on his arm.

"No . . . no!" The girl's voice was frantic. "Have some sense, Don. Jay Jargo is paid to do that kind of work. It's not your kind. None of the Stantons has ever been handy with a gun. You're not a . . . a killer!"

Jay wished that his ears had not been so keen. A sheen of gray crept beneath the tan on his lean cheeks, making them look as hard and lifeless as granite.

Platte City seemed to draw a long fervent sigh, then remain motionless, rigid, as Jay Jargo walked across the street. No sound came from behind the green-baized windows of the saloon. The marshal stepped on the sidewalk, then walked into Pete Wiegel's little tobacco shop, which adjoined the saloon building.

Pete sat at his bench amid his fragrant tobacco leaves. He stared sympathetically at the young marshal from behind thick-lensed glasses.

Jay moved to a door at the left which led directly into the Montana Bar. Tawdry velvet drapes concealed it on the barroom side. This side door was known to all regular patrons of the Montana, but the chances were that Clem Durkin was unaware that the barroom could be entered from the cigar store.

Jay pushed the dusty drapes aside and stepped into the Montana Bar. He emerged back of the roulette wheel, which stood uncovered but deserted.

Mindful of Don Stanton's warning that he might have more than one opponent to face, his glance brushed the long room, but found only one man present, except for a bartender.

It was Clem Durkin. The gunman had taken his position at the rear end of the bar and stood only about a dozen feet away, his back turned to Jay. He wore two six-shooters, whanged low on his thighs, and his lean hands rested on their grips.

Cat-hammed, predatory, the outlaw had come here prepared to kill. He was eager for the smell of blood. He believed he had all the advantage as he waited where he could watch both the street and alley doors, ready to begin shooting instantly.

Jay could have killed him easily, for Clem Durkin was not aware of his presence until the bartender ducked hastily out of sight below the bar. Then the gunman whirled, his flat, metallic eyes dilating.

Jay stood with his two black-handled guns hanging flat against his thighs, his lean, brown hands dangling free and easy near their grips.

"What'll it be, Durkin?" he asked softly. "Do you check your hardware accordin' to law—or do you prefer to keep 'em?"

"I'm keepin' them," rasped Durkin, and he flashed his draw as he spoke.

Jay had known it would be this way. His right gun flipped up, bellowed harshly a shade ahead of Durkin's shot. He felt the heat of the gun flame from the outlaw's gun—but no bullet shock, and knew the man had missed.

Durkin staggered, and Jay saw a little spurt of dust drift up from his flannel shirt where the bullet had hit.

Reptilian tenacity kept Durkin on his feet for a moment. He thumbed the hammer of his gun convulsively again—and again, even as he began slumping to the floor.

Jay fired twice more. Both slugs drove hard and deep. They sent Clem Durkin sprawling in a crimson shambles partly beneath a poker table.

The lawman whirled as the rear door was jerked open. He glimpsed the square silhouette of a man against the hard, flat sunlight outside and saw the glint of a poised six-shooter.

Don Stanton's warning that Durkin might have a pal in ambush was still sharp in Jay's mind. In that moment he was a man of iron, swayed by only one purpose. He meant to live through this day for the sake of Platte City. He had warned all noncombatants to stay clear of this place. That knowledge comforted him now as he fired at that shadowy figure, the shot coming as an echo to his duel with Clem Durkin.

The charging man lurched and gave a long, agonized sigh.

Jay's gun wavered. Sheer ice drove through him in a terrible, devastating wave.

The stricken man who came staggering into the

room was no enemy. It was a man who had defied all warnings and had rushed through that door to help him. It was—Don Stanton, his friend.

Don sank to his knees, and Jay could see the fearful blotch of crimson spreading down his friend's flannel shirt. Covering the few feet of space with stiff strides, as though in a nightmare, Jay took the sagging man in his arms.

Don looked up at him, trying to summon a smile. "My fault, Jay," he gasped. "Don't blame yourself. Don't ever do that. You warned me. I should have knowed better than to come in that door. You did the right thing. You had to stay alive . . . today. Take care of . . . Connie . Jumpin' Jupiter . . . you are fast with a gun!"

Then Don Stanton was dead in Jay's arms.

II.

Silent, appalled men gathered around and looked down at them. A stricken scream sounded. Then Connie Stanton dropped on her knees beside her dead brother, pushing Jay aside.

"He's dead! He's dead!"

Her eyes, big, deep with tragedy, turned on Jay and he saw the raw disbelief, the pitiful grief there.

"He insisted on following you," Connie moaned. "He thought you were so fine—so magnificent. You and your terrible guns! Your black, awful guns! Quick-death Jargo! That's what they call you behind your back. You lived up to your name, didn't you?"

Owen Forbes tried to lift her to her feet. "It wasn't Jay's fault—" he began.

"It *was* my fault," Jay said, his voice dead, heavy. "She's right. I killed him. Me an' my cursed gun speed. Too fast! Too fast! I could have waited—but I didn't. I was too fast on the trigger."

He pushed blindly through the bystanders, walked out of that place. He didn't see anything in that saloon. He did not look at Clem Durkin's body, which lay soddenly there in the sawdust—dead, along with the forces of violence he represented.

Jay didn't see the way women and men of the town looked at him as he walked woodenly to the marshal's office. There was thankfulness in their eyes. A weight of fear had been lifted from their minds. They regarded him as their strong shield which had not failed them in their greatest hour of need.

Don Stanton was burled at noon the next day. Jay stood at the foot of the grave, bare-headed, his curly dark hair ruffled by the hot wind. His guns hung in their black holsters at his side.

Connie Stanton, her violet eyes dark with grief, lifted her pale face toward him once. She looked at the grim Colts he wore, then bowed her head as the minister spoke the words of consecration.

The services ended, but Jay remained there, looking down into the open grave. Then he slowly unbuckled his guns. Kneeling, he gently lowered them, laid them on Don Stanton's coffin.

He turned, walked away from there alone. Citizens stared at the two black-handled six-shooters and black-leather holsters which lay in the grave and glanced at each other questioningly.

Jay Jargo was burying his deadly guns along with the body of his friend who had died beneath their blasting might.

Jay rode out of Platte City two hours later, leading a pack horse which carried his bedroll and what few personal belongings he owned. By sundown he was thirty miles away from the town where he had enforced the law with unflinching determination. Within a week he was in Idaho territory. A month after that he was in Oregon. Winter found him in Arizona.

He changed his name, calling himself Jack Kling. At first he hoped whiskey would lull the gnawing torment in his soul, make him forget. But whiskey only whetted the keen lash of memory.

He rode roundup for this outfit and that. More than one rancher, sizing him up and watching the way he handled himself, offered him something better than a drifter's future if he would stay. But a fierce restlessness goaded him always onward.

His mouth became a tight line, walling in his thoughts. He never packed a six-shooter, but men, for some reason they could not have explained, were careful to sidestep trouble with him.

Now and then he heard the name of Jay Jargo mentioned when cowboys in barrooms or bunkhouses began recalling mighty deeds and stirring epics of the frontier.

"Jay Jargo must be dead," a talkative puncher named Slats Gilroy declared one night at a roundup wagon on the Nueces River in Texas, where Jay was working. "Nobody's seen hide nor hair o' him since that day more'n three years ago, when he rode out of Platte City, Nebraska, after killin' Clem Durkin."

"That must ha' been a ruckus worth watchin'," another rider observed. "They say Jargo gave Clem Durkin first draw an' beat him to the shot. I seen Durkin kill a man in Ogallala one day. He was fast, I'll tell a man. But Jay Jargo must have been chain lightnin'!"

Jay said nothing. He was accounted as dead, and his reputation was becoming a legend in the West. It satisfied him to let Jay Jargo remained buried along with the two guns he had placed in Don Stanton's grave.

"Jay Jargo was too fast fer his own good," Slats Gilroy was rambling on. "He killed his best friend that day by bein' too sudden on the trigger. I

growed up with Don Stanton an' his kid brother Tom, an' their sister up in the Hackberry country in Colorado. That reminds me—I took a swing through Hackberry Basin last July an' talked to Tom an' Connie Stanton. She's shore as purty as a red wagon. She was in Platte City the day Jay Jargo killed her older brother by mistake. She had gone up there to visit Don, but after his death she come back to the Hackberry an' went partners with Tom in a little beef outfit. But their luck shore has curdled. Jay Jargo must have put the black sign on the Stantons. They was up agin' it for fair last summer."

Jay's head lifted. "Yeah?" he questioned. "How come?"

Gilroy was flattered by the sudden and unexpected interest the taciturn puncher showed in his gossip.

"They wasn't eatin' any too regular," he explained. "Tom's wife died two years ago, leavin' him with a boy who's about five years old now. Connie is raisin' the button. But a big rancher named Bart Cushman is crowdin' them. The Stantons own a nice little stretch of graze that Cushman wants. He had 'em about squeezed out last summer. All the Stanton beef had been run off, or poisoned. Tom and Connie Stanton own title, an' they refused to sell at the dirt-cheap price Cushman was offering. But I reckon they've caved in by this time an' sold out."

"Cushman?" Jay questioned. "Bart Cushman? I never heard the name."

"Cushman rods a tough outfit called the Rimfire. He's a grass hog from the fork o' the crick. Mean as they come, an' a gun slick to boot. He's got Tex Varney an' Doc Steele and a little snake-eyed killer called the Medicine Kid as his top fightin' men. They've brought everybody to heel in the Hackberry. Only Tom Stanton was holdin' out agin' them. Connie wanted Tom to quit before he got killed, but he was too mule-headed. But even Tom was about washed up when I was up there. He was havin' a hard time even wranglin' enough to eat for his sister an' his kid."

Jay sat there a long time after the crew were asleep in their soogans, staring into the dying ashes of the wagon fire. He had placed his guns in a grave; by now they should be masses of rust. He had vowed never to pack a six-shooter again.

But the haunting vision of Connie Stanton's accusing eyes was before him as vividly as though their meeting had been yesterday instead of three years in the past. Time had never dimmed that memory. And Slats Gilroy had said that she might not even have enough to eat.

Jay cut his string the next morning. Riding his private horse, he headed north that same day. It was a race against winter. The hoofs of his roan crunched through crusty, three-inch snow as he rode through the freezing twilight of an early November day into sight of Hackberry town a month later.

III.

It was a small remote cow town of a dozen business establishments set in a mountain park amid the cathedral spires of towering evergreens. The window lights of two saloons and a mercantile streamed into the rutted, snowbound street as Jay rode into the settlement.

He made out the sign of a livery and swung down in the mouth of the open-end barn. A wizened hostler, limping on a rheumatic leg, came with a lantern, peering at him curiously as he off-saddled and ordered a full measure of corn and a generous helping of hay for his mount.

"Stranger in these parts, ain't you, cowboy?" the hostler questioned. "You signin' up with Cushman?"

"Maybe," Jay said. "I was told at the Rimfire that Cushman was in town tonight. Is he hirin' riders at this time o' year?"

The hostler's faded eyes probed the long blanket coat Jay wore, and it was apparent he was searching for the bulge of holster guns.

"Cushman's over to the Mercantile, if you want to see him," the man said evasively. "I jest seen him go in there, along with Doc Steele an' Tex Varney."

Jay walked to the street and looked at the Mercantile. A ranch spring wagon stood at the rail with two shaggy roans in harness.

A tiny figure stood on the sidewalk before the frost-rimmed display window of the store. Jay walked closer, and a smile suddenly broke the tightness of his mouth.

It was a boy of five or six, with a blanket wrapped around his little body. His stubby nose pressed almost against the windowpane, he was staring with rapt round eyes at something inside.

Jay moved nearer. The window was crammed with a disorderly display of crockery and hardware and cooking utensils, but he saw now that it was a box of brilliantly colored marbles which fascinated the lad.

Jay squatted down on his high heels alongside the tow-headed boy. Something in the youngster's pinched cheeks and round, sea-blue eyes brought a lump to Jay's throat. It was as though he had heard a chord of sweet, long-forgotten music.

"If a feller owned a string of aggies like that," he said, "he'd sure have the world with a tail holt, wouldn't he, old-timer?"

The lad nodded eagerly. "They're gonna be mine, mister. Dad's in there buyin' them. Tomorrow's my birthday. I'll be six years old. Aunt Connie promised that she'd play marbles all day with me."

"Aunt Connie?" Jay repeated almost mechanically.

He stared through the frosted window and saw Connie Stanton and a young, sandy-haired, blocky-jawed cowboy standing at the counter talking to a limber-jointed storeman. The girl wore a heavy canvas windbreaker and a fur turban. Her face seemed perhaps a trifle thinner, but three years had only deepened and tempered her womanly, gentle beauty.

Jay remembered that the cowboy on the Nueces had mentioned that Connie was raising her brother's motherless child. This wistful lad here beside him was a Stanton. The cowboy in the store was Connie's brother, Tom Stanton.

Three men stood in the rear of the store near a red-bellied cannon stove, their canvas coats open, their thumbs hooked in brass-studded gun belts. They were watching Tom and Connie Stanton with sardonic amusement. One, bull-necked, heavy-jowled, had the arrogant air of a leader, and Jay guessed that this was Bart Cushman.

Doc Steele, slight of stature, with the lifeless, waxen skin of a drug addict, and Tex Varney, a tall, lean, hard-cased cowboy who had turned killer, had been described to him, and he recognized them now by their earmarks.

Hearing Tom Stanton's voice rise in angry dispute with the skinny-necked storeman, Jay moved to the door, thumbed the latch and stepped inside. The eyes of the three gun-hung men shifted swiftly to him, appraised him coldly and completely. Tom Stanton and his sister were too intent on the store owner to look up.

"What kind of a man are you, Slocum?" Tom Stanton was raging. "Five dollars a pound for smoke meat an' spuds an' flour. A hundred dollars for that bunch of marbles I want to buy for my boy. We got to eat, but you know doggone well we can't pay money like that!"

The storekeeper shot a miserable glance at the three men by the stove. Bart Cushman scowled and gave him a warning look.

"That's my price," the man mumbled, shame-faced.

Stanton whirled on the three gunman. "You've cleaned me out of the last hoof an' horn I owned, Cushman," he cried. "Now you bulldoze Slocum into refusin' to sell grub to us. I sold my last saddle horse this mornin' for only ten dollars so I could buy grub an' a birthday present to give the kid. An' I can't even do that with the money I raised."

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars for a quit-claim deed to your graze, Stanton," Cushman snapped. "Now! Tonight! You can buy all the grub you need with that amount of money. Prices maybe won't be as high tomorrow."

Tom Stanton's square face was a mask of frenzied desperation. "If I had a gun, I'd blow your dirty heart out!" he said thickly.

Bart Cushman's yellowish eyes flickered to the storekeeper. "Sell him a gun, Slocum. Load it an' lay it there on the counter. Charge the cost to me. When a man makes fight talk to me he's got to back it up."

"No, no!" Connie cried. "Stop it, Tom! That's what they've always tried to prod you into—a gun fight so they'll have an excuse to kill you."

But her brother was past the point of listening to reason. "Load a gun, Slocum," he ordered harshly.

The cringing proprietor hesitated, but an oath from Bart Cushman sent him hurrying to a case where half a dozen six-shooters were on display. With shaking hands he broke open a box of shells, loaded a .45 and placed it on the counter.

The girl threw her arms about her brother, pleading frantically with him to leave the store, but Tom Stanton sent her reeling away with a wrench of his shoulders.

"Go out there with little Don," he ordered. "Take care o' the kid, Connie, if . . . if I can't. I'm sick of starvin' and being hazed around by this pack of snakebloods."

"You can't fight them," cried Connie. "They're killers. You're no gunman. You won't have a chance, Tom. Think of little Don."

"That's who I am thinkin' of. I don't want the kid to grow up in the same world with a thing like Bart Cushman. Whatever happens, I'm takin' Cushman with me. It's time that someone did the job."

Jay saw a tinge of doubt cross Bart Cushman's face. His two killers moved a long pace away from him. They were spotting themselves to cross-fire Tom Stanton. They didn't intend to give him a chance to blast Cushman down.

"This'll be self-defense," Cushman said hoarsely. "You threatened me, Stanton. I've got a right to defend myself."

"Self-defense!" Tom Stanton jeered. "The law probably will call it that. But at least it'll be better than bein' drilled in the back the way Ed Parker was. I saw that killin'. You didn't know I was up on the ridge that day. I've always hoped I'd get the chance to step on a witness stand an' send you to the gallows for that—"

"Be quiet, Tom!" his sister cried frenziedly. "You're signing your death war—"

The new gun lay on the counter, its blue steel muzzle cold and sinister in the yellow lamplight. Tom Stanton took a stride toward it. Connie, half fainting, swayed toward him to halt him.

Jay caught the girl's arm, jerked her back. He moved in then. Tom Stanton had hardly been aware of Jay's presence, so intense was his concentration on the three men by the stove.

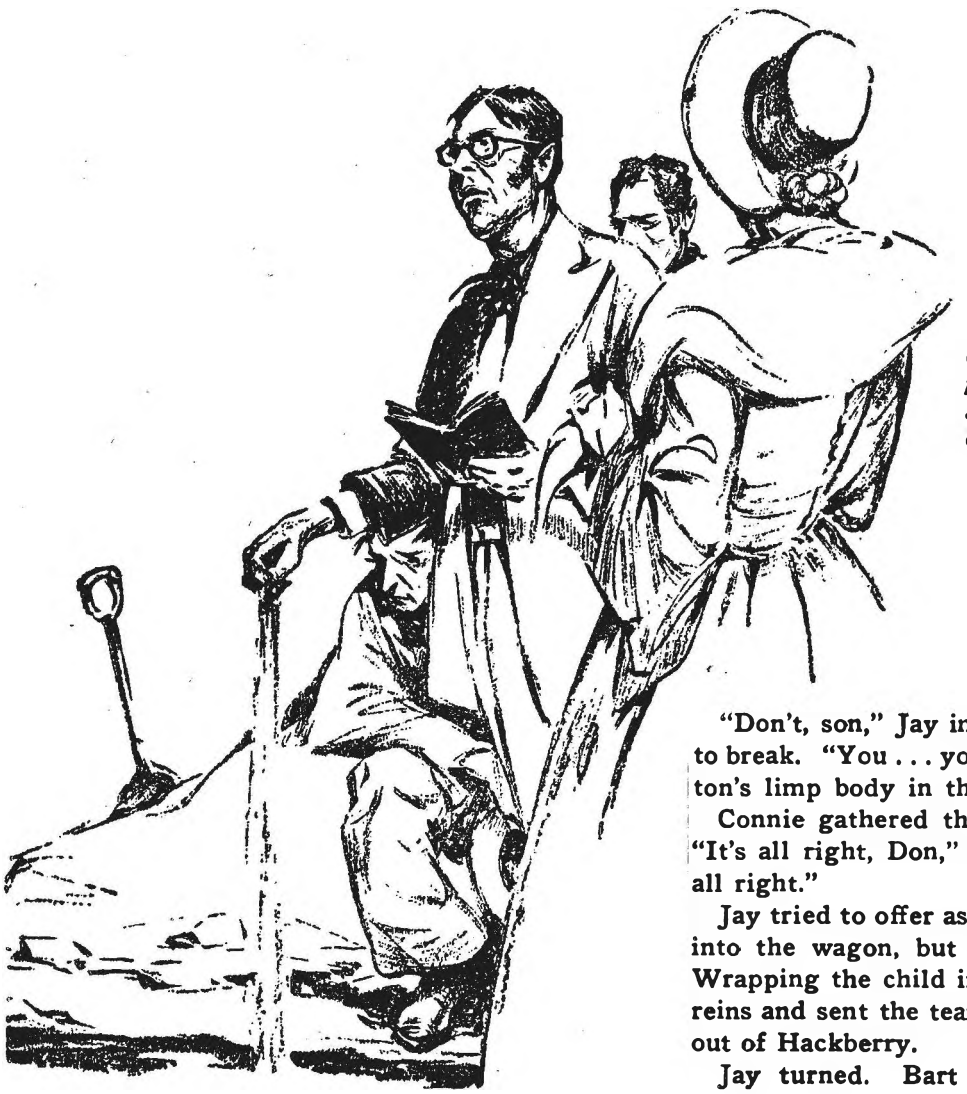
Jay swung a fist with calculated precision. Stanton was reaching to snatch up the gun from the counter as the punch landed at the base of his jaw. He never knew what hit him. His knees buckled instantly, and Jay caught him as he fell. Tom Stanton had been knocked cold.

Jay, holding the limp cowboy in his arms, looked at the girl. Her eyes widened, stared in dazed incredulity.

"You!" She clutched at the counter, fighting off faintness. Then she began to sob and laugh hysterically. "I . . . I might have known. This is where you belong—with Cushman and his killers. How much is he paying you to help him starve and rob us and drive us out of this range?"

Jay's face was hard, impassive. Without a word he carried Tom Stanton out of the store. Little Don rushed at him, weeping and kicking at his legs, beating him with tiny fists.

"You hit my daddy," the lad screamed. "You let go of my daddy. Make him let go, Aunt Connie."



Connie and the assembled townspeople stared as Jay Jargo knelt and gently laid his famous guns on top of Don Stanton's coffin.

"Don't, son," Jay implored, his voice threatening to break. "You . . . you don't savvy." He laid Stanton's limp body in the wagon.

Connie gathered the wailing child in her arms. "It's all right, Don," she choked. "Daddy will be all right."

Jay tried to offer assistance to her as she climbed into the wagon, but she shrank away from him. Wrapping the child in blankets, she picked up the reins and sent the team racing down the street and out of Hackberry.

Jay turned. Bart Cushman and his two gun

hawks stood on the store steps, regarding him with scowls.

"Kind o' horned into a game where you wasn't invited, didn't you, stranger?" Cushman snapped. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Name of Kling," Jay said. "Jack Kling. I horned in because I didn't think it was exactly polite for that hombre to start spillin' lead with his wife present. She might have got hurt. An' I saved your bacon, fella. That jigger meant to ventilate you, no matter how much lead you poured into him."

Bart Cushman studied him, and any suspicions he entertained began to subside. "I reckon you ain't acquainted with 'em," he shrugged, "or you'd know the girl wasn't his wife. She's his sister. After this, maybe you better think twice before drawing cards in a game in this town. Maybe the stakes are a little high for you. Connie Stanton acted like she knew you by the way she spoke. How come?"

The last question was put abruptly, as though Cushman hoped to take the stranger off guard.

Jay shrugged. "Maybe she saw me some place. Julesburg, or Cheyenne, or Miles City. I've been around."

"Footloose, huh?" Cushman said speculatively. "You've got the earmarks of a man that knows which way is up. You lookin' for a job? I pay top wages an' the work ain't tedious."

"I'll think it over," Jay drawled. "Give me time to brush the saddle burs off me."

He pushed past them and went into the store. Bart Cushman followed and warmed himself at the stove while he continued to study Jay. The two gunmen crossed the street and entered the biggest of the two saloons.

Jay beckoned the lanky storeman, who was still pale and shaken.

"My grub pack is empty, mister," he said. "I could use a side of smoke meat an' all the trimmings. Did I hear you say smoke meat was five bucks a pound? Is that the regular price or just for certain people?"

In the background, Cushman chuckled. "Slocum hikes the ante on special occasions, Kling. But if you're travelin' on tomorrow he'll sell to you at regular cost."

Jay kept the storekeeper hustling, filling his orders for flour, salt, sugar, coffee and sorghum. He stuffed the purchases into a heavy canvas grub sack the storeman furnished. Then, moving to the front display window, he lifted out the box of marbles and looked at the price penciled on the bottom of the cardboard.

"I'm takin' the marbles, too," he said. "Add another dollar to the bill. Also a couple of dozen cans of condensed milk, along with a couple of bags of that stick candy you've got on the counter."

The storeman stopped dead in his tracks. Bart Cushman had been rolling a cigarette. He cast the makings aside with a sudden oath of fury.

"What in Hades!" Cushman raged. "Are you buyin' that grub for the Stantons an' their kid?"

He caught Jay's arm, whirling him around. Jay met that with explosive violence. His fist shot out and Bart Cushman's head reeled drunkenly. Stepping in, Jay swung again, and Cushman's bulky body hit the floor with limp impact. The man lay there motionless. He was out—colder than Tom Stanton had been.

IV.

The storekeeper stared, slack-jawed, appalled. Jay tossed a gold piece on the counter and shoved the box of marbles into the grub sack, along with the candy and canned milk.

"Add up the damage, Slocum," he said icily.

The man tried twice and finally found his voice. "Stranger," he whispered hoarsely, "you're buyin' a bait of misery. Take my advice an' light a shuck out of this country. Cushman will turn his pack loose on you. Tex Varney is over there in the saloon, along with Doc Steele an' the Medicine Kid. They're sudden death. Cushman is kingpin in these parts. You signed your death warrant when you knuckle-busted him, jest like Tom Stanton did tonight when he admitted he saw the killin' of Ed—"

Slocum caught himself and went fearfully silent, as though realizing he was saying too much.

"Keep talkin', mister," Jay said bleakly. "Tom Stanton mentioned he was an eyewitness to the murder of a gent named Ed Parker. Who was this Ed Parker? Speak up, Cushman can't hear you. He won't be interested in anything for another five minutes."

Slocum was sweating, but he suddenly got a grip on his courage. "Ed Parker owned a little spread up in the basin that Cushman wanted," he whispered. "He was shot by Cushman six months ago. Four of Rimfire's crew claimed to be eyewitnesses an' said it was self-defense on Cushman's part. But Parker was shot in the back. Cushman grabbed Parker's graze after he was dead, jest like he's grabbed everything else worth ownin' in the Hackberry."

"The law?" Jay questioned.

"Law?" the man said bitterly. "Bart Cushman has been the law in the Hackberry. The county seat is ninety miles away, an' the sheriff draws hush money from Cushman to stay clear of this range. Men like me take orders from Cushman, or we're pistol whipped and maybe shot. But an honest prosecuting attorney was elected in this county a week ago. It's whispered that he'll bring a murder charge against Cushman if he can get enough evidence for an indictment. Up to tonight, nobody

knew that Tom Santon had been a witness to that killing."

"I savvy," Jay said slowly. "You think that makes Tom Stanton a candidate for a dose of lead poison, so he can't ever testify against Cushman."

"That's as sure as judgment day. Cushman has been tryin' to squeeze Tom off his graze for three years. But Tom has hung on, though he's been stripped of every head of stock he owned. He's had a tough time even eatin' regular, but up to now Cushman hasn't had the guts to bushwhack a man who has a child an' a sister to look after. Tom never packs a gun, an' everybody knows it. His sister made him take a vow on his wife's grave that he'd never tote hardware. Connie is dead set again' gun fightin'. Her older brother Don was killed in a gun ruckus a few years back.

"Cushman has tried to prod Tom into packin' a gun so as to give his killers an excuse for rubbin' him out. Stanton near stepped into the trap tonight. You saved his life, stranger, when you beefed him with your fist. But you acted a little too late. Cushman won't let Tom stay alive now that he knows he saw the Parker murder."

Jay shouldered the grub sack. "How far to Tom Stanton's ranch?" he asked.

"About ten miles. Follow the south trail. The wagon tracks in the snow will lead you. Luck to you, stranger. I'll give you five minutes' start before I slosh some water on Cushman. I'll tell him he was in waw-waw land less'n a minute. If he knew I'd told you these things, my life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso."

The mountain cow town was silent as Jay hurried to the livery, routed out the hostler and saddled the roan. Carrying the grub sack across the cantle, he hit the south trail, following the tracks of the spring wagon in the snow. The hoof marks showed that the girl had tooled the rig at a long lope.

It was nearly two hours later when Jay rode into sight of a homey-looking little ranchhouse set in a wind-sheltered park in the high timber.

Lamplight showed from the windows, and the smoke of a freshly replenished fire drifted from the snow-banked stone chimney. The Stantons had arrived home only a few minutes ahead of him, he knew.

Jay hesitated now, fighting it out with himself. Connie Stanton had taken it for granted that he was a member of Cushman's crew. That could be explained, but there were other memories which were not as easy to erase.

Jay steeled himself to face it out, then rode up to the ranch. Tying his horse in the shelter shed out of the driving, icy wind, he shouldered the grub sack and approached the door, lifting his voice in a hail.

"Who's there?" Tom Stanton's voice sounded.

Jay paused before the door. "Jay Jargo," he said. "Alone."

There was a moment of silence. Then the door opened, and Connie stood there silhouetted against the lamplight. Her brother loomed at her shoulder, a shotgun in his hands, and she pushed him back, trying to keep him out of the light. Then she faced Jay.

"What do you want?" she demanded coldly.

"You forgot your supplies when you left Slocum's store," Jay said. "I fetched the grub along."

"What kind of a sandy are you tryin' to run, Jargo?" Tom said bitterly. "Connie tells me you're the one that slugged me when my back was turned there in the store."

"I buffaloed you," Jay said tersely. "I never could get used to standin' by while a game man committed suicide."

He pushed past the girl, who moved reluctantly aside, and placed the grub sack on the floor of the room. He grinned at little Don, who was sitting up in bed, blinking from half-frightened blue eyes.

Delving into the sack, Jay brought out the box of marbles. "Here's the aggies your daddy bought for your birthday, old-timer," he said. "An' here's some barber-pole candy your Aunt Connie told me to fetch."

The child's face lighted. He leaped from the bed, clutching the treasures with wild joy. Laughing in glee, he sat down on the floor and began laying out the marbles.

"Come on, Aunt Connie," he shouted. "You said you'd play taw with me."

Lowering the shotgun, Tom walked to the grub sack and saw the staples with which it was crammed.

Jay turned toward the door. Connie Stanton was staring in fascination at the child, who was crowing in ecstasy over his gifts. Tears suddenly streamed down the girl's cheeks. Turning, she barred Jay's path to the door.

"Why . . . why did you do this, Jay Jargo?"

Jay's voice was a trifle blurred. He indicated the child. "He looks like Don, doesn't he? The same eyes, the same forehead. He'll be another Don Stanton when he grows up. That's . . . that's why I came here."

He turned to Tom. "I'm sorry I had to slug you tonight. It seems that I'm bad luck to you and your kind."

Stanton drew a long breath. His blocky face was haggard but clean cut. The bruise showed where Jay's fist had landed.

"Maybe it's me that ought to do the thanking, Jargo," he said. "You saved my bacon there at Slocum's; I savvy that now. I didn't have a chance in

the world against those three gun hawks. You stopped me the only way I could be stopped. I wasn't in a mood to listen to reason."

Jay looked at the girl. She met his glance levelly and nodded. "I realized it, too, after . . . after I had a chance to think it over," she said.

"Then you don't really believe I came here to work for Bart Cushman?" Jay asked bluntly.

Her glance did not waver. "No. I don't believe that. I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I'm learning that it's easy to be wrong—difficult to see the truth sometimes."

A tumult moved inside of Jay, releasing a sudden surge of emotion and wild hope. He looked at Tom Stanton.

"There comes a time in a man's life when he has to choose between pride and reason," he said. "You've got the lad to think about, and your sister. It's no disgrace to back away from trouble when the future of a child is at stake."

"I savvy," Tom said grimly. "I ran off the head there in Slocum's tonight. Spilled a secret I've kept for six months. Now you're warning me to turn tail and run." His stubborn jaw squared. "But I'm not runnin'," he added. "I'm sendin' Connie and Don away tomorrow. We've got folks in Denver where they can stay."

"You're going with us, Tom." There was determination in Connie's voice.

He shook his head. "I'm staying here. From this day I'm packin' a gun. Never again will I step aside for Bart Cushman or any of his gun crew."

"You can't, Tom!" the girl protested. "It's certain death. You're no fighting man. You would have no chance against them."

"Better to die than live and have my son know I was yellow. I've listened too long to you, Connie. I let you talk me into gettin' rid of my six-shooter so that Cushman wouldn't have any excuse to claim self-defense. I've been hazed and hoorawed around by him and his heel dogs. We've lived from hand to mouth. I'm sick of eatin' venison an' trout. Until Jay Jargo brought this grub we haven't had milk or bread, or vegetables, even, to give Don, for more'n a week. I've stood these things because you preached that it was fine and glorious to avoid bloodshed. But you were wrong, Connie. Life isn't worth living under that system. Where's that brace of six-shooters you've got hid out somewhere?"

Stanton's final demand seemed to be a stunning surprise to the girl. She backed away, shaken. She was on the defensive.

"How did you know about . . . about those guns?" she asked huskily.

"Little Don told me. He saw them one day in your trunk. I searched for them yesterday, but you had moved them somewhere else. You never told me there were six-shooters in the house, or where they came from. But I want them now."

Connie's lips were the color of chalk. "No, Tom," she said brokenly. "I'll never give you those guns. Never!"

"I'll beg or borrow or steal a gun somewhere else," her brother warned. "I'll—"

A bullet, fired from the timber beyond the house, smashed a windowpane, sending shattered glass flying across the room. Tom Stanton staggered. Groaning, he clutched at his shoulder. Blood flowed between his fingers.

Then more guns opened up. Bullets wailed through every window, filling the house with flying glass and the threat of death. The heavy front door groaned on its hinges under their impact.

Jay and the girl leaped toward Don, who sat frozen in childish terror, his little fists filled with marbles.

As Jay reached to snatch up the lad, intending to shield him with his own body, he saw a little fleck of crimson appear on the sleeve of the youngster's flannel sleeping garment. Little Don uttered a moan of pain and looked numbly at his arm.

It was only a scratch, a bullet crease that had barely broken the lad's tender skin. But the sight of blood on that innocent child did something to Jay. The scene was suddenly bathed in a mad, sanguine hue before his eyes.

And it did something to Connie Stanton. She looked at that growing stain on the child's sleeve, and Jay saw devastating fury overwhelm her, an outrage that reached to the primitive roots of her soul.

Jay carried the child to a corner where the shoulder of the fireplace and solid log walls offered a measure of protection. He overturned the table as an additional barricade and blew out the lamp. The blazing pine knots in the fireplace lighted the room.

Bullets continued to thud into the walls and scream through the smashed windows as Jay carried Tom Stanton to the corner. He tore away the wounded man's shirt and saw that the bullet had made a clean hole through the collar bone. Stanton was still dazed by the shock of the injury.

While Connie cared for the child's slight injury, Jay fashioned a hasty bandage to check the blood from Stanton's wound. Listening to the gunfire, he counted the shots and realized that only four rifles were in operation.

The girl was listening, also. Her voice held a taut, vast quality of fury as she spoke four names. "Bart Cushman! Doc Steele! Tex Varney! The Medicine Kid! The unholy four! They've held Hackberry Basin under their heels, murdered men, terrorized women and children. They've got to die! It's the only way to stop their killing!"

V.

Connie Stanton kissed little Don and hurried into a little side room which Jay saw was her bedroom.

The gunfire ceased as though on signal, and Jay heard the mutter of hoofs which died swiftly away in the night. The killers were pulling out. Jay guessed they had seen Tom Stanton fall and believed their work was done.

Connie returned. She had pulled on her heavy, fleece-lined saddle coat and was carrying a weighty bundle, wrapped in a pillow case, beneath an arm.

"I'm riding to town to fetch the doctor," she explained.

Jay blocked the door as she moved toward it and reached for the bundle she carried. She recoiled from him suddenly.

Lifting her chin, Jay forced the girl to look at him. He saw the flames of vengeance burning in her violet eyes.

"I'll take those guns," he said quietly. "They're mine."

"No . . . no!" she choked.

"I've believed for three years that my guns were buried with Don in his grave, but I guessed the truth a moment ago when you refused to surrender them to Tom. You didn't want those guns to be the cause of his death, also. Why did you keep those six-shooters, Connie?"

"Don't ask me that now—tonight," she said, white-faced. "I can't—I won't answer that question, Jay Jargo."

"Maybe I can answer it. You meant to return those guns to me some day. You don't hate me because of . . . of Don."

"I don't hate you, Jay." She was sobbing now. "I've always bitterly regretted the way I condemned you. Owen Forbes and other men in Platte City told me the truth about Jay Jargo. They told me how wrong I had been, and the injustice I did you. But you had left town then. I tried to locate you, get some word to you. But you could never be found. I began to fear you were dead. I didn't let them bury your guns with Don. I've kept them, hoping some day I could give them back to you as partial atonement for the injury I did you."

"I'll take my guns—now," Jay said gently and reached for the buncle.

She tried to hold him away from her. "Not now," she protested wildly. "Not tonight. It would be sending you to your death, Jay. I know what you mean to do. This isn't your fight. It isn't right that you—"

"But you meant to use my guns," Jay broke in. "You were going to hunt down Bart Cushman and kill him. I could see it in your face. Give me the six-shooters. It's no job for a woman. This will be for Don. He'll be at my side tonight."

He took the bundle from Connie and removed the black-handled, beautifully matched six-shooters which still reposed in their plain black holsters. The guns were in perfect condition. Jay flipped the chambers and saw that they were fully loaded.

He buckled the guns on, then bent down and ruffled little Don's silky hair. "Maybe you an' me will have a marble game tomorrow, old-timer," he said. "If not, then think of me now and then as you grow up."

Connie tried to hold him back, but he gently disengaged her hands. She fought to cling to him, her arms slipping to his knees, but he drew free from her, and she lay there half fainting, calling to him in an almost inaudible voice to come back. But Jay strode to the shelter shed, mounted his roan and spurred away at a long lope.

The trail of the four departing riders was plain in the snow. Those hoof marks led through the timber for three miles, then swung into the wagon road leading back to town.

"They've got men in Hackberry tonight who'll take oath the four of them never left town," Jay reflected. "They believe Tom Stanton is dead. As far as they know, Connie and little Don are lying back there dead, or wounded and freezing to death."

It was nearing midnight when Jay pulled up on the fringe of Hackberry. Slocum's store was dark and silent. The only light that showed was from the green-baized windows of the biggest of the two saloons.

Leaving his horse, Jay walked down the snowy sidewalk. He noticed the shingle of a doctor on one of the cottages and knocked on the door until the medico appeared.

"You're needed at the Stanton place," Jay said. "A man has been wounded there by a gunshot."

Then he walked on down the sidewalk to the door of the saloon. The weight of the guns at his sides brought back the memory of the hot afternoon in Platte City when he had last worn those six-shooters. A killer had died under those guns that day—and his best friend had died under them, also.

Jay pushed open the storm door of the barroom and looked over the inner swing doors. Bart Cushman and his three gunmen were sitting at a rear table, playing poker. A half-emptied quart of whiskey stood close at hand.

Jay stepped into the barroom. Cushman dropped his cards suddenly, then slid his hands out of sight beneath the table top, nearer his holster. His glance flickered to the holstered .45s at Jay's sides, and he seemed to coil like a startled snake.

Tex Varney's hard, smooth-shaven face was taut, and his thin lips began pulling sullenly down at the corners. Doc Steele leaned back in his chair, one thin, pale hand toying with an elk-tooth watch

charm. It was a position calculated to give him a quick advantage in reaching the gun he carried in a shoulder spring clip.

The Medicine Kid, young, tough, coarse-mouthed, with bristly red hair, kept his freckled hands boldly on the table and showed his crooked teeth in a mocking grin. The Medicine Kid was young. He saw only one opponent there, and plainly he expected to enjoy himself.

"I just came from the Stanton place," Jay spoke into the taut silence, "following four bushwhacking rats that tried to murder a man and a girl and a child tonight. Cushman, you've got melted snow on the elbows of your coat where you were layin' in the timber, pulling a bead on that ranchhouse. An' your heel dogs have fresh-melted snow on their boots, too."

"We've been in this saloon the past three hours," Cushman countered with a sneer. "Our horses ain't left the livery tonight. Half a dozen men will swear to that."

"They may perjure themselves," Jay acknowledged. "But you won't be alive to hear it, Cushman."

The bartender, who was the only spectator, drew a faint sigh and began to cringe lower below the bar.

Doc Steele spoke. "Seems to me your face is familiar, stranger. Jack Kling isn't your right name, maybe."

"Back in Platte City," Jay said, "I was known as Jay Jargo."

"Jay Jargo!" It was the Medicine Kid who exploded that name. And suddenly all the humor vanished from this scene for the Kid. His smile fled, and he sat straighter. He was realizing that he stood in the presence of death.

"I'm askin' you to submit to arrest," Jay said. "Stand up, all of you. Lift your hands."

He knew they wouldn't comply. He stood with his hands hanging straight down, his eyelids slitted, staring across that thirty feet of distance down the length of the room.

"Up, I say," he ordered curtly.

The Medicine Kid's nerve was the first to crack. With sudden, frenzied energy, he snatched for the .45 he carried. As he moved, his three companions also drew.

The Medicine Kid died before his gun cleared the leather. Jay drew, fired, and his bullet tore through the young killer's throat, sending him toppling backward in his chair.

In the next instant three guns bellowed at Jay, but he had dropped flat on the floor. The wall back of where he had stood was tunneled by the slugs.

Jay rocked the hammers of both guns as he dropped. Doc Steele, a silver-mounted six-shooter in his hand, was driven hard against the rear wall as both bullets tore through his thin chest. He seemed to hang spread-eagled there.

Jay's guns roared again. He had veered his sights on Tex Varney. But a slug from Varney's six-shooter drilled hard through his side as he rocked the hammers, and he missed. Bart Cushman, shooting from both hands, creased Jay's shoulder an instant later.

Jay steadied himself, fighting back the shock of those two wounds, and killed Tex Varney with a slug that tore through the lank gunman's bulging forehead.

The hard smash of another bullet from Cushman's gun shook Jay. He could feel himself slipping, but he braced himself on an elbow and caught Cushman over the smooth length of the two lean, blue muzzles. He rolled the hammers for the last time.

He could see the kingpin killer falling, saw the spurt of crimson over his heart and knew then that he had got them all. Four of them in a gun-to-gun fight.

He was content to release his grip on all things then and sink into the black folds of the peace that beckoned. He was thinking that this was death, and that Don Stanton was waiting for him just around the corner in that land where there were no blazing six-shooters, and no regrets to torment a man.

Then Jay heard a voice calling his name, appealing to him to come back from that mystery into which he was moving.

It was the voice of Connie Stanton. Jay listened to that appeal dully at first, and then with a sudden surge of interest.

Connie wanted him to come back! She wanted him for herself alone. Something in the frantic desperation in her call assured him of that. He turned his back on death then. The will to live returned.

His eyes drifted open and he saw Connie's face bending over him. Vaguely he realized that she had followed him to town, and had been there at the door as that death duel was staged.

"Jay," she was pleading. "Jay! Wait! Hang on! The doctor will be here in a minute. I met him on the trail as I brought Tom and little Don to town! Wait! Wait, my dear!"

"I'll wait," Jay said faintly. "I'm not going away —Connie."

She began weeping then as she gathered his head in her arms, holding him close. Her lips were soft with a promise as she kissed him.

THE END.

RYAN OF THE MOUNTED

by Frank Richardson Pierce

I.

Summer in the North country brought nesting geese and eager tourists in great numbers to Sheedy Post. The geese wanted nothing but to be let alone, but the tourists expected sled dogs, Indians, trappers who looked moth-eaten, and at least one mounted policeman—preferably one who had just gotten his man.

Constable Jerry Ryan's six feet and two hundred pounds supplied the police atmosphere. The young officer looked very elegant in his scarlet-and-gold uniform, and there was a touch of daring in the tilt of his hard-brimmed hat. His ready smile and the reckless gleam in his blue eyes won the complete approval of the fair passengers who arrived on the river steamers.

Today the last of the ice going downstream reminded Jerry that the tourist season was at hand. His expression unusually serious, he stalked into Sergeant Sheridan's office at the barracks.

"Any orders, sir?" he asked briskly. "Any chance for me to make the Dismal Harbor patrol?"

How could Constable Jerry Ryan ever hope to trap a fugitive outlaw who had the Force's own records to help him cut his way through the dragnet spread for him?

Dismal Harbor was a bleak spot on the Arctic coastline far from tourists.

Sergeant Sheridan knew well enough what bothered the young officer, and he sympathized with him, but his grizzled face betrayed nothing as he answered: "No orders have been issued regarding you, Jerry, except to meet all steamers and deport yourself as a good policeman should."

"My father joined the force to hunt outlaws and maintain order," Jerry roared. "I joined for the same reason. And what's happening? Why, the force is making a drug-store Mounty out of me. Even the natives are commencing to think I'm good only for exhibition purposes. It's enough to make my father turn over in his grave."

"Your father was one of the greatest men the force ever knew," Sheridan said quietly. "He taught me all I know. One of the things I learned was to obey orders and not complain."

"All right," Jerry said, "I had that coming. But why is it necessary to have a policeman at Sheedy Landing? Emigration and customs men have already examined tourists and their baggage. Nothing ever happens here—"

"Jerry," the sergeant explained patiently, "the force built itself a reputation. Imaginative folks have clothed that reputation with romance. Against our wishes we policemen have all become romantic, colorful figures. We stand for courage, courtesy, consideration, understanding—all that women and men, too, like to see in a man.

"We're a tourist attraction," Jerry said bitterly.

"Part of the time, yes," admitted Sheridan. "People see motion pictures of our country and the force. Or they read books about it. They come North to see the real thing. If they find it, they tell their friends, who in turn come up here. Tourists spend their money and, Jerry, you know what that money means to a region like this when trapping and mining have been poor."

"Yes, it's a lifesaver," Jerry agreed. "I'm sorry I blew off steam. But nothing ever happens here."

"It was your father's experience and mine, Jerry," Sheridan said, "that anything can happen—anywhere. The famous Loose Leader case happened out of a clear sky, and had its beginnings in a city, at that. Another thing, the very fact that an area is quiet suggests to the criminal that the police are relaxed—off guard. And that, my boy, is when things *do* happen."

When Constable Jerry Ryan left his immediate superior officer, his ruffled feelings had been pretty well soothed. He had to admit Sheridan was right in every respect. But it didn't stop Jerry from wishing things were different. "I didn't tell the sergeant so," he growled, "but I'd like to be told to go out and get Skookum George and not to come back empty-handed."

In asking for such a patrol, Jerry Ryan was asking for the toughest assignment a young mounted policeman could be given.

Several days later the season's first steamer whistle sounded. Immediately every Husky at Sheedy Post bounded to the landing, howling. The dogs hadn't forgotten steamer cooks often toss meaty bones from the galley window. Leading the pack was Jerry Ryan's loose leader, Pumeuk.

Jerry walked down to the landing and braced himself for the ordeal. Some he "pop-off" would be sure to ask in a loud voice if he had "got his man yet this year." Girls would giggle and smile.

A few minutes after, the gangplank thumped the bank, and Sheedy Post swung into its routine. Dogs nipped tufts of fur from their fellows; Indians scowled or summoned hauteur; swarms of mosquitoes roared from the swamps and bored into the fattest legs; and shutters began clicking.

Patiently Jerry posed with breathless young girls and buxom matrons. He answered questions by the score, and was just explaining that trappers sometimes wear rubbers over their moccasins in wet weather when he saw *her*.

The girl who was just coming down the gangplank had dark hair and the fresh, peach-bloom look that comes from living in a rainy country. "She's more than pretty, too," Jerry decided; "she's plenty smart. That curly black hair doesn't cover an empty head." It seemed to him there was a hint of unhappiness in her brown eyes, but her smile was friendly and cheerful.

She stood a little to the side, and as soon as Ryan was free she came over to him.

"I'm Ann Deering," she explained, "and I'm doing a book and sketches of the force—stalking local color to its lair. I may remain only a week or two, or I might stay on until snow flies. It all depends on how much material I find. Meanwhile, I wonder if you could suggest a place for me to live?"

"Mrs. McLeod, the factor's wife, will take you in," Jerry answered. "You'll have to eat with the family, though—pot luck."

"I'll love that," Ann assured him. "Now one more question: Am I right in believing that Sergeant Sheridan is full of stories of the force?"

"Yes," Jerry replied, "that's true. But it's hard to get him to talk."

"And there's so much I want to know," the girl said with a rueful smile that won Jerry completely. "I won't bother you until the steamer's gone, but after that I'll be a regular pest."

"You couldn't be," the constable said gallantly.

After the tourists drifted on, Jerry returned to the barracks to report. "There's a nice-looking girl doing a book on the force," he told the sergeant. "She wants to talk to you."

"Huh!" Sergeant Sheridan grunted. "She'll do the talking, not me. I'm like that Indian!" He nodded toward a swarthy giant who moved about with the grace of a dancing girl as he made camp nearby. "He came here with furs to sell the tourists."

"Producer to consumer," Jerry remarked. "Say, where'd he come from?"

"I was waiting for that," Sheridan said. "He isn't a local native. I'd say he's from the Crooked Lakes region. Here's the point, though: He didn't make the mistake of offering Crooked Lakes furs, Jerry. He said he'd trapped at Moose Crossing and, by jingo, he brought Moose Crossing furs. He's a shrewd one."

"Maybe he wintered there?" Jerry suggested.

"I don't think so," said Sheridan. "He was shaky on weather conditions last winter."

Jerry grinned. Repeatedly he had watched Sheridan trick a man into revealing something about himself by asking seemingly innocent questions about such things as weather conditions, the price of fur, or illness in a region.

"Does he speak English?"

"Claims he doesn't," Sheridan replied. "He understands several native dialects. What I'm getting at is this: Skookum George has been at large in remote sections for two years. As you know, he came from some Canadian or States' city. He's raised the devil, engaged in sluicebox robberies, and proved himself as slippery a customer as the force ever faced. Naturally, he'd like to get himself and his spoils south of the border. This native—by the way, he calls himself Wolf Dog with no little pride—might be sizing up Sheedy Post as an avenue of escape."

"No such luck," Jerry grumbled. "And yet there might be something in your idea. Still— No, hanged if I'm going to go in for wishful thinking. With your permission, though, I'll keep an eye on the fellow."

"Go ahead," Sheridan told him.

Jerry found Wolf Dog at the landing. The native had placed a plank across two packing boxes and spread out his furs. He was all smiles as women tourists examined the pelts. When they asked the price he answered by muttering, "Dollar," and holding up his fingers to indicate the number.

Wolf Dog studied the tourists with keen interest. Once he glanced around as if to make sure he was unobserved, then quickly pulled a small snapshot from his pocket and studied it intently and shoved it back into his pocket.

Wolf Dog sold several furs before the women moved on to other points of interest. When the native was alone, Jerry sauntered over.

"Let's take a look at the picture, Wolf Dog," he said. "The one you slipped into your pocket a few minutes ago."

Craft filled the native's eyes, but his face was a study in bewilderment. He shook his head. "No English," he muttered. Then his face lighted in a smile of pretended understanding, and he extended a pelt.

"No, not fur," Jerry said. "I'm talking about the picture." He reached for the native's pocket, but Wolf Dog whirled around, jerking out the picture. Crumpling it with a swift, crushing movement, he stuffed it into his mouth and chewed rapidly.

Jerry tapped him on the arm and pointed toward the barracks. "Maybe you don't speak English and maybe you do," he said, "but we're going over to the barracks."

"You work fast, Jerry," Sergeant Sheridan observed as the pair entered his office. "What's the charge?"

"None—yet," answered Jerry. "This fellow was comparing faces with a photograph or snapshot. When I asked to see the thing, he swallowed it."

Sheridan questioned Wolf Dog in dialect for a few minutes, then turned to Jerry with a frown.

"Constable," he said reprovingly, "you don't understand. That was a picture of one of his gods. If a white man touches it, it brings bad luck. You've got to be careful in dealing with these people. This fellow, who worships strange gods, is an honest man. Don't bother him again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jerry answered stiffly. He waited until Wolf Dog had made a leisurely departure, then he said: "Do I understand I'm reprimanded, sergeant?"

"Not at all, Jerry," Sheridan replied. "I'm sure that beggar understands and speaks English. My words were chosen with the idea of lulling any suspicions he might have. He thinks he's put something over. I wonder whose face was on that snapshot?"

"I'd give a year's pay to know," said Jerry.

"Well, the steamer will be leaving soon," Sheridan said; "you'd better return to your role of romantic, dashing Mounty." He grinned as Jerry departed, cursing under his breath.

II.

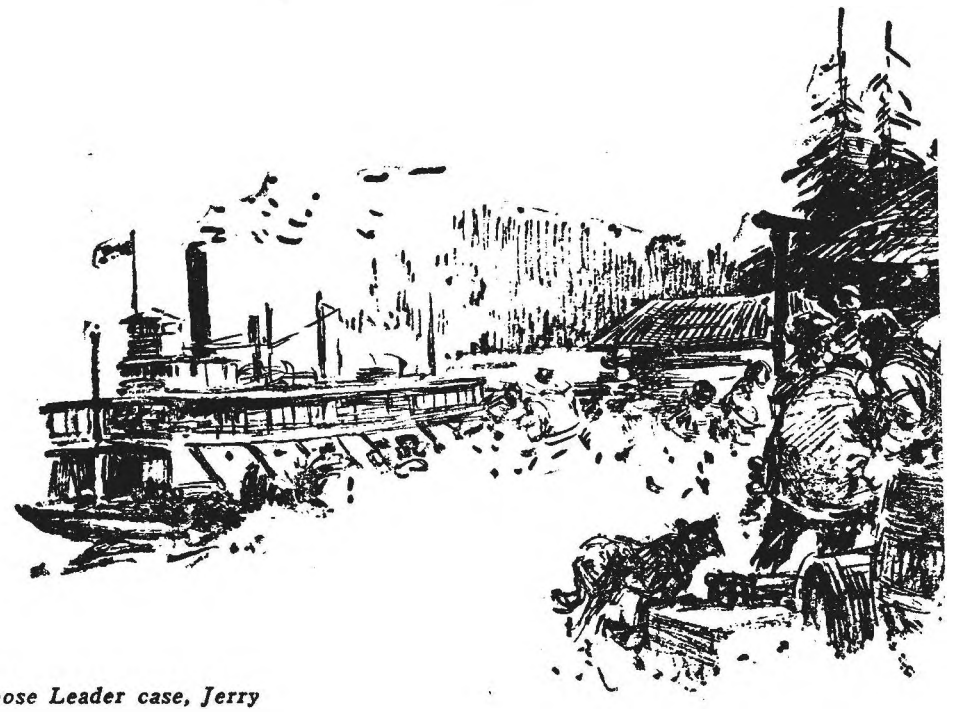
Jerry Ryan's ears caught a loud whisper as he passed a thicket a short distance from the landing. A native, almost pop-eyed with fear, motioned for him to come close. Pointing at Wolf Dog's bulking figure, the native asked:

"Who him?"

"What do you know about him?" asked Jerry.

"Him come long ways. Him bad."

"How do you know?" demanded Jerry sharply.



As soon as Ann mentioned the Loose Leader case, Jerry stiffened and the answer he gave her was brief and guarded

"One boy run fast and tell 'nother boy," the native explained; "'nother boy run fast tell 'nother boy. Bimeby boy tell me. I tell Ailin' Angus. Angus—him go 'way."

Jerry understood this cryptic statement. Moccasin telegraph, the swift and amazing means of communication in the North, had brought word that Wolf Dog was dangerous. But it wasn't like Ailing Angus to be frightened into running away. He was a brave man, in spite of his nickname, which had been bestowed on him because he liked to take medicine and was forever pretending to be sick. As Jerry reflected, he recalled that Ailing Angus had once spent a winter trapping in the Crooked Lakes region. Possibly he had clashed with Wolf Dog. If so, Angus could prove the native hailed from Crooked Lakes instead of from Moose Crossing.

"I'll round up the fellow as soon as the steamer leaves," Jerry decided. He left the frightened native in his thicket, after assuring him that the force protected all—natives as well as whites.

The usual reception awaited Jerry as he stepped onto the landing. Some tourists had forgotten to turn the film in their cameras in the excitement and had made double exposures. Would Constable Ryan pose again? He would. Others had thought of new poses. Jerry obliged. Nearby, Ann Deering sat furiously sketching. The steamer left at last and Jerry stood on the landing, with Pumeuk at his heels, and his hands full of good cigars thrust on him by admiring male tourists.

Jerry walked over and looked at Ann's sketches. He whistled softly in admiration. This girl had something. She had put life into her sketch of the tourists and himself. These were much more than just faithful outlines of human beings.

"Of course, this is rough work," Ann explained. "I'll smooth it up later. I wanted to catch the scene while it was taking place."

"I'd call it perfect as it stands," said Jerry.

"Do you suppose that Indian would object to my sketching him?" asked the girl. "He's the most magnificent-looking human being I've ever seen. And—" she lowered her voice—"the cruelest."

"Oh, so you noticed it, too, eh?" said Jerry.

"Of course," she answered. "It's there lurking close to the surface of his smiling manner."

"A tradesman's smile when he's trying to sell something," Jerry observed. "And he's cashed in on it. Must have sold five or six hundred dollars' worth of fox pelts alone."

Ann walked over to Wolf Dog, pointed to her sketching board, then at him. The native understood. Momentarily his eyes narrowed in intent study. They seemed to burn deep into the girl, then they changed and were warm and friendly. When Ann poised her pencil, as if waiting for his permission, he solemnly nodded, and remained like a statue while she made a quick, faithful outline.

"You amaze me," Jerry said in honest admiration. "You manage to catch the spirit of the country and people. And much more."

"What do you mean?" Ann asked curiously.

"I haven't time to tell you now," he said. "How'd you make out with the McLeods?"

"They're grand people," exclaimed Ann enthusiastically. "They treated me like a relative—a welcome relative."

"If you're unpacked," Jerry said, "I'd like to drop over and see you this evening."

"Do come," she urged.

As she finished speaking, Wolf Dog pointed to the sketch, then at his fur.

"He's trying to tell you," Jerry said, "that as long as he posed for you there's no reason why you shouldn't buy a fur from him."

"He's right, of course," Ann laughed. "I don't know much about fur, though. They're all good, I suppose?"

Jerry examined the pile of fox pelts, shaking each to give life to the fur, then peering at it closely to note the length and condition. He looked on the tanned side and nodded.

"All prime. You can't make a mistake on any of them."

He returned to the barracks to discuss the Ailing Angus matter with Sergeant Sheridan. Inwardly he was praying he would be ordered on a patrol to round up the fleeing native. Anything to escape his role of "prop" Mounty.

As Ryan entered the barracks, Wolf Dog looked at the girl and for the first time spoke English.

"You're the girl in the picture," he observed. "Yellow-legs"—he pointed toward the barracks—"wanted to see the picture, but I ate it. You *are* the girl?"

"Yes, I'm the girl," Ann said eagerly.

"I have a letter," said Wolf Dog. He handed her an envelope wrapped in soft rawhide. "I waited for the steamer and sold furs. I fooled Yellow-legs." There was satisfaction in his tone.

"Jerry Ryan's no fool," warned the girl. "You'd better behave yourself, Wolf Dog."

"Ugh!" he grunted in disgust. "He's soft. No good! Struts in front of white ladies like a papa grouse. He's not like old-time Yellow-legs."

"He doesn't strut, Wolf Dog," Ann said thoughtfully. "I don't think he cares for that part of his job. Now *I'll* buy a fur from you."

"No, I'll give you one," the native declared. He picked out a fine silver fox and Ann realized he would be offended if she insisted on paying for it.

"You will draw my picture plenty," Wolf Dog said significantly. "Then we will talk."

"Of course," agreed Ann.

She gathered up fur and sketches and returned to the McLeods. In her room, with the door locked, she eagerly opened the letter Wolf Dog had brought her.

Late that afternoon Wolf Dog moved his few belongings from an open camp near the barracks to an empty log cabin.

Days were long at this time of year, nights short. The sun was still in the sky when Constable Jerry Ryan walked over to pay his respects to Ann Deering. Wolf Dog waited for the shadows to gather,

and as soon as he felt it was safe, he slipped into the thicket growing close to the back door of his cabin.

He followed the stream the natives called Big River nearly a mile, then turned up a creek. He drove his powerful body until his lungs sobbed for breath and things at times swam before his eyes. Even when his legs faltered he hardly slackened his pace. Again and again he demanded more of himself, and as often his reserve strength responded.

His cruel lips twisted in contempt as he thought of Jerry Ryan back at Sheedy Post. The new generation of Mounty was soft and stupid. The great Jim Parker and Sergeant Strong, who had brought the most desperate men to justice, and added glory to the force, wouldn't have strutted as this constable did. Not them. Wolf Dog eased up a little at the thought. Things in the future would be less difficult when a man did things against the law. He smiled and pictured Jerry relaxed before McLeod's fireplace, enjoying a girl's smiles. A smart girl, too, in Wolf Dog's opinion.

Wolf Dog's picture wasn't far wrong. But Jerry wasn't relaxed. He was tense and restless, and frequently paced the room as he talked to Ann Deering. He had wanted to run down Ailing Angus and learn what he had to fear from Wolf Dog. Sergeant Sheridan had turned thumbs down on the idea.

"It'd take an Indian trailer, and a good one, to follow Angus if he's really scared," Sheridan said. "And it'd be a waste of time. I'd rather have you here watching Wolf Dog. When he leaves camp I want you to follow him. If you can trail him without being caught, he'll lead you to something."

"How long do you expect him to stay here?" Jerry had inquired.

"Indications point to his staying here some little time," the wise old sergeant answered. "I checked on the supplies he bought at McLeod's this afternoon."

"Cabin grub, eh?"

"Cabin grub," agreed Sheridan.

Jerry supposed the sergeant was right. In any event, he was in command, and it was Jerry's business to execute orders. Nevertheless, Jerry would have liked to make a short patrol in the hope that Angus had camped near Sheedy Post.

Ann had noticed his restlessness. "Why don't you relax a little?" she suggested gently. "You're burning up energy you may need sometime. Sit down and tell me something of the force's work. My sketches, you know, will go into a book, and I need copy." She hesitated a moment before she said: "Tell me the story behind the Loose Leader case."

Jerry looked at her and grinned cheerfully. "That's one story the force isn't telling," he said. "And, in a way, it's certainly the most dramatic."

"So I've heard. Why aren't the facts being told?"

"We might want to use the same trick again," he explained. "Naturally we don't want to show criminals our trump card. Fair enough, isn't it?"

"Of course," she agreed. "Will you tell me this, then? What tricks outlaws have used to escape the police. And the methods the police used to trap them. Something that's common knowledge among outlaws and police, but will interest the public generally."

"I can tell you a story or two," he answered. "But Sergeant Sheridan is really your man."

Jerry talked until one o'clock in the morning. When he was about to leave, Mrs. McLeod poked her head into the parlor.

"I've sandwiches and coffee in the kitchen," she said. "Come and help yourselves."

The factor himself, usually dour and grudging of words, was thawed by the girl's warm personality. He talked of breeds, trappers and fights in which men used knives and feet.

"Jerry's father was a handy man with his feet," he said. "I mind the time—"

He was off on another yarn, and it was three o'clock before Jerry left. As he passed Wolf Dog's cabin, he stopped and listened a moment. The man was sleeping, but with the lightness of those who are instantly alert to personal danger.

Jerry knew by the sudden change in breathing that Wolf Dog had heard him pause. He walked on, turning the strange, sinister character over in his mind.

Three hours' sleep was ample for a man who wasn't behind on his rest. Jerry performed his routine duties after breakfast, and was on hand at eleven o'clock when Ann Deering appeared. He introduced the girl to Sergeant Sheridan.

"So you're the young lady who makes the sketches and wants stories," said Sheridan. "Let's see your sketches."

Sheridan's tongue was in his cheek when he began looking at Ann's work, but when he had finished her folder of partially completed drawings, he was won completely.

"This is something the force has needed a long time," he declared. "Your policemen might step right off the paper and snap into a salute."

"I'd like to hear whatever you care to tell me," said Ann, "and I'll stay until I've worn out my welcome. I feel, though, that the last chapter in my book should be the inside story of the Loose Leader case."

"It would make a grand closing story," Sheridan agreed, "but—" He shook his head slowly, much as Jerry had done.

Ann remained only an hour, but during that time Sheridan told her a couple of stories, and when

Jerry passed the McLeod home late that afternoon he heard a typewriter clacking.

Early the following morning Jerry was awakened by an excited native. He managed to calm the fellow somewhat, then took him to Sheridan's office.

"This man was coming down Wolverine Creek late yesterday afternoon," he explained. "His dogs turned into a camp he had often made, then began to whimper. He investigated and found Ailing Angus dead. He touched nothing."

"Was Angus murdered?" asked Sheridan.

"Yes. Shot," Jerry replied. "And don't forget he was afraid of Wolf Dog."

"I'm not forgetting," Sheridan said, "but it's fifteen miles from here." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "What's the longest time the beggar has been out of our sight?"

"Four hours," Jerry replied. "Night before last when I spent the evening with the McLeods."

"The McLeods?" Sheridan queried, his eyes twinkling.

"Ann Deering, then," Jerry confessed. "Wolf Dog sat on his cabin steps until a while before dusk. Then he went inside and I saw sparks come from his chimney about eleven o'clock, when he put on more wood."

"He'd have had to average seven and a half miles an hour," Sheridan said. "It can't be done."

Sheridan called in several natives to act as packers, then he led the way to the scene of the crime. Jerry took one side of Wolverine Creek and the sergeant the other. Each searched for signs that might indicate the murderer, but found none. The sergeant had argued that only a native trailer could locate the fleeing Angus when Jerry had suggested locating him. Now Sheridan was convinced that not only had a real trailer located Angus, but the man had done a sweet job covering his tracks.

They found Ailing Angus sprawled on his face. His two pack dogs were chained to nearby trees, and his sleeping bag covered him from his hips down.

"Angus' suspicions were aroused," Jerry said. "He started to crawl from the bag, and was shot."

"Head wound," Sheridan said. "But he didn't die instantly. Look here."

Angus' dying act had been an effort to accuse his slayer. He had tried to scrawl a message on the moist earth in front of him. The sharp-pointed stick was still clutched in his fingers. The message read:

Wolf Dog kill I know dog Smoky smell. . . .

The message ended in a series of jerks as strength had drained from the native's stout body.

"Not too clear," Sheridan observed, "but clear enough to anyone who knew Angus and his dogs."

"As I get it, Angus' dog, Smoky, hated Wolf Dog," said Jerry, "and Smoky scented his enemy a few seconds before the shot was fired and let his master know it."

"That's right," Sheridan agreed. "And plenty good evidence for us, but not worth a hang in court. Still, how could he do it in the space of four hours? We've got to look facts in the face. I've never known of a man who could make that time in this country. Well, let's pack the remains back to the post."

The body was placed in the sleeping bag, which was loaded onto a stretcher, and the men began the long trek back. There would be weeping and wailing in the native quarter in the days to come.

"Anyway, you and I were the only men to read that message," Sheridan said. Jerry nodded. They had kept the natives back until the investigation had been completed. "Most of them can't read anyway. We don't want it gossiped about that Wolf Dog is the murderer. Some of Angus' friends might go out for a bit of native revenge."

III.

Jerry kept a strong grip on Smoky as they approached Sheedy Post. He purposely passed close to Wolf Dog's cabin, and, as he expected, the dog leaped and snarled in an effort to reach the structure.

Wolf Dog came to the door and stared at the dog. The native wasn't one to dodge an issue. No doubt he reasoned that sooner or later the settlement was bound to discover that Smoky didn't like him.

"The dog accuses," Sheridan observed. "I'll bet Wolf Dog will kill it before the week's ended."

"I don't think so," Jerry argued in a low tone. "It's the thing we'd naturally expect. Wolf Dog does the unexpected." He grinned and shook his head. "And only a few days ago I was saying nothing ever happened at Sheedy Post."

Funeral services for Ailing Angus were held the following day, and when the period of mourning ended and natives thought less of their loss and more of justice, Jerry sensed a changed attitude in their manner. Murder had come to Sheedy Post for the first time in the memory of the oldest man. They were asking what the Yellow-legs were doing about it. Hadn't they been told the force was infallible? Didn't the force pursue a killer, or even robber, the length and breadth of the Dominion? And didn't these same Yellow-legs keep constantly at it until the outlaw was brought to the barracks a prisoner?

And didn't the promise of relentless pursuit hold many bad natives in check? The answer, they had been taught, was invariably yes. And yet Sergeant Sheridan and Constable Ryan were doing nothing.

Not only that, but word reached the post by moccasin telegraph that natives all the way to the Arctic were asking the same question. Skookum George,

who robbed natives and whites alike, was free. True, he shifted constantly, and appeared where least expected. True, also, he was a man of tremendous strength and capable of covering great distances. But where were the police? And why didn't they employ bigger men, who could travel faster and run the outlaw white man to earth?

Jerry Ryan heard all this. Sometimes it came from friendly natives. Often he picked up snatches of conversation as the matter was discussed in dialect.

"We've got to land Skookum George this winter," Sheridan declared when Jerry related what he had heard. "We could arrest Wolf Dog, but it would only be a gesture. If we had to release him for lack of evidence, our position would be even worse. And I'm hoping that beggar will lead us to something important."

As tourist steamers arrived and departed, and Wolf Dog's supply of furs dwindled, Jerry expected the native to vanish, but he remained in his cabin, or took long walks in the hills to retain the strength of wind and hardness of muscle so necessary to his way of life.

"I think he'll disappear shortly after a steamer arrives," Sheridan told Jerry in late summer. "As I reason it, the fellow is expecting something or someone to arrive. That's why he was comparing faces with the snapshot he swallowed."

"He won't go down Big River, either," Jerry said. "Chances are he'll follow Little River down to the Crooked Lakes country."

"That's it," agreed Sheridan. With the patience of a man who relies on hard work and much thought rather than luck and miracles he had tried to anticipate Wolf Dog's probable action. "As soon as the boat departs you'll quietly make your way to Little River and maintain a thirty-six-hour constant watch. If Wolf Dog doesn't show up in that time you can be reasonably sure he'll wait for another boat. You'll return and follow the routine."

"I'd better cache grub on Little River," Jerry suggested, "so that I can follow him if I have to."

"Yes, grub and sleeping bag," Sheridan said.

"By the way," Jerry reminded, "keep an eye on Pumeuk. Her pups will be almost worth their weight in gold when they arrive."

Sheridan nodded. Jerry was breeding a special strain of dog for police trail work, a breed that could carry heavy loads long distances and make good time. He was blending the best in the wolf with the domestic strain, and the expected litter, both hoped, would prove to be the post's greatest team.

The two policemen were sitting in Sheridan's office one afternoon when Ann Deering arrived.

"Busy?" she asked, hesitating at the door.

"No," Sheridan answered. "Come in and sit down."

"I'm wondering if I have the facts of the Markel case correct," Ann said.

"Let's hear," suggested Sheridan.

The girl read from her notebook: "Sergeant Trent, after two months' pursuit, cornered his man at Graham Portage. The portage was deserted, except for a dead Indian woman and her child, a boy of seven. In Trent's opinion the boy was dying. If he remained to nurse the child, Markel, the outlaw, would make good his escape. He probably would kill others before the police trapped him again. Trent's problem was to weigh the situation and make a decision. Should he remain with a child almost certain to die? Or should he leave the child, arrest Markel, and probably save one or more lives of men in good health? Sergeant Trent remained with the child, which lived because of his care. Markel wasn't arrested until two years later, during which time he killed two men."

"That's a true account," the sergeant told Ann.

"I'll enlarge on it, of course," said the girl. "The readers should know the native boy grew to manhood, was educated, and became a doctor, who worked among his people and died a hero's death fighting an epidemic among them."

"How's the book? About done?"

"The outline is complete," she said. "Now I have to put it into shape. I'll make some sketches as soon as snow flies. I want winter scenes, too. Are you sure there isn't a chance of including the Loose Leader case?"

"None in the world," Sheridan told her flatly.

"But," she persisted, "if I managed to learn about it through other sources, could I publish it?"

Jerry had never seen Sheridan more serious. "We couldn't stop you," he said. "It would be entirely up to your conscience."

"Yes, of course," the girl agreed.

Returning to her room, Ann put a copy of her outline into an envelope, which she placed in a waterproof bag. Then she gathered up her sketching material and walked over to Wolf Dog's cabin. She knocked and the native came out.

"I want to sketch you," she said. "Standing in the doorway."

"You brought what he wants?" Wolf Dog asked in a low voice.

"Yes," she said, "in this waterproof bag. It took a long time."

During the sketching she managed to hand him the waterproof bag without being observed. She didn't ask when he would leave Sheedy Post, nor did Wolf Dog tell her. She finished the sketch and returned to the McLeods.

Jerry Ryan dropped in that evening. McLeod greeted him warmly and prepared to sit in the par-

If Wolf Dog had picked up the trail, Ryan's one chance of trapping the outlaw, Skookum George, was gone.

lor as usual. His wife nipped the intrusion in the bud with a peremptory, "Hist . . . mon!" Out in the kitchen she explained that a man and maid, if given a chance, could fall in love in the fall as well as in spring. Summer and winter were good times, also, she added.

Mrs. McLeod knew time and Ann Deering were working a spell with Jerry Ryan. She wasn't so sure of Ann. But little happened at Sheedy Post, and if a romance could blossom under her very eyes, and with her help, she was all for it. It was time, she decided, for her husband to let the two young people have the parlor.

Jerry didn't know what started him telling Ann of his plans, but suddenly he was saying: "One of these days I'm going into the fox-ranch game. Several years ago I grubstaked an old-timer. He struck a pocket, and my share went into the bank. When that sum is large enough I'll buy an island off the Canadian coast and stock it with foxes. Until then I'll stick with the force. Meanwhile, if the right girl comes along, I'll be set to take care of her."

"Without the island?" asked Ann.

"Without the island," he said. "A girl would find it tough going. You couldn't expect any woman to start from scratch in the fox-raising business."

"It seems to me," Ann said slowly, "if a girl loved you enough, Jerry, she'd be willing to start life with you if you had nothing but a sleeping bag, ax, matches, rifle, ammunition and a pocketful of salt."

"A girl would have to love a man a lot to do that," said Jerry. "I wouldn't ask it of her." He stared thoughtfully at the fire. "Mustn't let myself get sidetracked," he said. "Before there's a girl, fox ranch or anything else, there's the Ailing Angus murder case to be solved. Besides, no Mounty wants to get out of harness until Skookum George is behind the bars."

"What's Skookum George like?" Ann asked curiously.

"The natives who've seen him say he's tall, with thick black hair and black eyes that look right through you. He's supposed to have tremendous endurance. He has a knife scar on his left cheek that only a beard or parka hood can cover. He has a trick, too, of winking knowingly at a man when he talks. It's a nervous affliction, I suppose. Capturing the average outlaw puts a feather in any policeman's cap, but the lad who bags Skookum George will have more feathers than an Indian chief."

Someone knocked on the kitchen door and Jerry heard McLeod answer. A moment later the factor shouted: "Jerry! Come here!"

When Jerry went into the kitchen McLeod was talking to a native.

"This man just passed my storehouse," the factor explained. "Someone's broken in."

Jerry and McLeod hurried to the log structure located on the river bank. Here were stored the winter's supplies, which were taken to the trading post when needed. The door had been forced and supplies scattered. The thief had evidently been hunting for needed items. Possibly ammunition or smoked meat. Only a check-up would tell.

"This is the beginnin', Jerry," McLeod said soberly. "The natives are beginning to think the force has gone soft. Too much meeting of tourists and

the like. Oh, I'm not blamin' you, lad. It's somethin' men like Skookum George start, but it's the first ball in a snow slide. The bad ones feel they're safe. Thievin' starts, and from that it goes to murder."

"I'll bring Sergeant Sheridan," Jerry said. "He may pick up a clue I'll miss."

The old sergeant leaped from bed when Jerry knocked on his door. When he had heard the story, he exploded wrathfully.

"From the day Wolf Dog swallowed that snapshot," he exclaimed, "I've been playing the game in my own way. I'm after big fish, not small fry. But I wasn't expecting thievin' under my nose. Hit the trail at once, Jerry. Circle wide and see if you can't pick up the fellow's tracks. And say nothing of this, but within twelve hours strike Little River, and watch. I think Wolf Dog is about to clear out."

"You think the thieving was a red herring?"

"A red herring or wild goose. Whichever it is, the idea is to divert the force," Sheridan said.

Before Jerry left about ten minutes later, he stopped for a hasty farewell to Ann.

"This is a test case," he told her. "Unless we grab the thief, no post will be safe from petty looting. Moccasin telegraph is a swift method of communication at times. You might put that into your book."

IV.

Jerry Ryan made his way to the bank of Little River and seated himself in a thicket, overlooking the bank. Eighteen hours of tracking lay behind him, but he had failed to follow the thief's trail more than a mile. Then it had vanished. Jerry knew the man was carrying a heavy load because the depth of the moccasin prints in soft ground proved it.

He wasn't particularly surprised or disappointed at failure. There were countless small streams and lakes where a man could cache a canoe to be used in his escape. Canoes leave no trail.

Even conceding it was difficult to predict what Wolf Dog might do, nevertheless the two members of the force were agreed he wouldn't follow Big River out of Sheedy Post. There were too many settlements along the banks of the stream—too many eyes to report the appearance of a strange native.

Moreover, steamers made frequent landings at various points on Big River. But there were no steamers on Little River. It was studded with rocks, and the frequent waterfalls prevented the use of canoes for any distance. Some of the falls were located in deep canyons, so it was impossible to portage the canoes and freight over the surrounding cliffs.

Little River was fed by numerous small creeks, and it was a large stream where it emptied into Crooked Lakes. A few villages were located on the creeks, and the natives made a fair living trapping and fishing. Fish, in fact, was the chief source of food. In the early spring, before the breakup, natives journeyed over the ice to Sheedy Post, exchanging fur for flour, salt, sugar, cloth, ammunition and other items that they needed.

Except an occasional driftwood jam, which invariably went out during the high-water period, there were no crossings. A man on the east bank of the river stayed there. And even when he found a jam the chances were good that he wouldn't use it to cross the river, because he might not be able to get back again.

This, then, was the trail to Crooked Lakes. It was not strange that the natives were somewhat wilder here, and inclined to superstition. They weren't so sure the Yellow-legs invariably ran wrongdoers to earth.

As Jerry Ryan watched, he half-expected to see the thief come swinging down the game trail which followed the river and was used by man, also, because there was no other. Shortly before noon his watch was rewarded in the way he hoped. Wolf Dog was swinging along at a pace that would have been killing for the ordinary man. He carried a hundred-pound pack, plus a .30-30 rifle.

Whenever possible, the man walked along the edge of the stream, knowing the action of the water would wipe out his tracks instantly. When forced to dry ground, he selected his trail with care, walking on rocks or on down trees, leaping across moist earth.

When directly opposite Jerry's hiding place Wolf Dog looked up quickly. His eyes roved the thicket, shifted to the dense, stunted timber nearby, then he walked on.

"The same instinct for danger we find in wild animals is in that fellow," Jerry reflected. "He *felt* danger."

Matching wits with such a man, Jerry concluded, would be the toughest job he had tackled since joining the force. Well, he should be prepared for it. His father had grounded him in the art of tracking and man-hunting. Sheridan and others had added their knowledge.

Wolf Dog would resort to his own knowledge, and he would employ nature to his advantage at every opportunity. It was a challenge, and the constable was eager to accept it.

An hour passed and Jerry didn't move. Then, suddenly, he, too, was conscious of danger. Silently, like a feather floating on the wind, Wolf Dog passed within thirty feet of where Jerry sprawled.

"It was a good thing I didn't smoke," Jerry reflected, "or that fellow's nose would have scented

the odor. He pulled the old trick—doubled back in the hope of picking up a following trail."

Wolf Dog continued on to the river bank and studied the ground, rocks and even water. Concluding, with evident reluctance, that he wasn't being followed, the man finally disappeared.

Still Jerry remained under cover. A half-hour later Wolf Dog was there again, emerging with sinister silence from the brush. As before, he looked for a following trail. This time he was convinced no one was following. He swung off at a pace which proved he was out to make up lost time.

Jerry followed, making no effort to cover his tracks. If he had taken time for caution, he would have been hopelessly outdistanced. When night came he made a fireless camp. Groping his way through the darkness to a nearby ridge, Jerry studied the lower country. No gleam of campfire broke the solid darkness. Not even a reflection against a wall.

Forty-eight hours passed before Jerry sighted the native. Wolf Dog had taken the precaution of studying the country ahead before venturing across an open area. And it was well he did. Momentarily Wolf Dog was outlined against a bold cliff about two miles ahead.

A half hour after the native vanished, Jerry crossed the open stretch. He forged ahead at top speed, and saw Wolf Dog making a campfire. The man had chosen his spot well. Dense thickets prevented the light from visibility unless a man was within a hundred yards of the spot. A curve in the stream concealed the fire from anyone upstream who might look down.

After watching for several minutes, Jerry started to retreat. The breeze, which had stirred the trees and added to the roar of the nearby river, suddenly died down. A branch fell nearby, clearly audible above the sound of flowing water. Wolf Dog looked up quickly, identified the sound, and continued his cooking.

Jerry decided he had better remain where he was until the breeze came again. The native was infernally clever at catching foreign sounds.

Wolf Dog broiled a steak and topped it off with white man's grub taken from cans. It must have been the first good meal he had had since leaving Sheedy Post. Jerry's mouth watered.

Presently the native opened his pack, brought out a waterproof bag and opened it. He drew out a sheaf of papers and began to read. Jerry couldn't see what the papers were, but he knew they must be in English. It proved Wolf Dog could read at least.

Jerry squinted until his eyes grew tired, but he couldn't see what it was held Wolf Dog's interest. The fire died down and the native placed his papers on a rock and began adding sticks of dry wood to the coals. Wind stirred the trees in a sudden gust, but Jerry didn't move. His eyes were fixed on the sheaf of papers. Suddenly the wind caught and scattered them before Wolf Dog's huge, sprawling fingers could catch the fluttering sheets. The native scurried about, grabbing a sheet here and another there. The gust had died down and several of the sheets were visible, caught in nearby brush.

"He got 'em all," Jerry said softly. "All but one. That was caught by an up draft and carried over the thicket."

It was midnight before Jerry retreated to his pack. He ate some cold food and crawled into his sleeping bag, but it was hard to sleep. He was trying to imagine where that sheet of paper would blow after clearing the thicket.

Jerry awakened at daybreak. He was too close to Wolf Dog's camp to risk moving about, so he remained in the sleeping bag until the native had time to break camp, then he breakfasted on cold food and made up his own pack.

He approached the native's camp with extreme caution, until he made sure it was deserted. Then he shed his pack and prowled about a good hour before he found the missing sheet of paper. It had blown along the ground and lodged between two weeds.

As he read the first two or three lines, his face sobered.

"Carbon copy of some of Ann's outline," he exclaimed. "Now how in blazes did he get that?" Suddenly a number of things became very clear—odd pieces of the puzzle fitted perfectly into the general pattern. "I've got it," he said. "Wolf Dog was looking for Ann. It was her snapshot he swallowed. So that's what was back of this book business! It's hard to believe, but Ann must be—" He shook his head, finding it difficult to believe what logically appeared to be a grim fact.

Jerry folded the sheet carefully, then rolled it tightly. Opening his pack, he placed the rolled paper in a bottle where it would escape a possible wetting. Then he continued the trek. He was convinced now that if he could remain under cover Wolf Dog would take him straight to Skookum George or some other badly wanted men. Of one thing he was certain: Wolf Dog hadn't journeyed to Sheedy Post to sell fur to tourists. The native had had a single purpose in mind—to collect, and take away, an outline of methods outlaws had used to escape the police, and the tricks the police had used to capture them.

"In justice to Ann," Jerry reflected, "she gave Wolf Dog nothing that wasn't common knowledge, but the deuce of it is, much of it has been forgotten by the public. Now it's in compact form to be used by any outlaw as a convenient textbook on escape."

He drifted along during the day, making little effort to trail Wolf Dog. He was confident the man would continue on to Crooked Lakes. Occasionally he checked on moccasin prints.

Then a turn in the trail brought Jerry to a startling scene. Wolf Dog was crossing the river at one of the narrow points where water flowed fastest and swiftest. A rope, fastened to a rock on the opposite side, served as the means of ferrying.

The native made no attempt to cross hand over hand. His pack was too heavy for even his great strength. Besides, the rope didn't clear the water sufficiently. Instead, Wolf Dog made his pack secure, covered it with a tarp, then with the pack on his shoulders, stepped into the stream. Clinging to the rope, he worked his way to deep water. The current snatched him from the bank, but the rope drew him to the opposite side as the tumbling water swept him downward. At times he was almost submerged in white water, but Jerry saw him climb up the bank, coil the rope, and disappear into the woods.

"A clever trick," Jerry mused, "and it puts me in the hole. I'm on the wrong side, and can't follow him." He continued on downstream, hoping to find a log jam, but sure none existed, since the native would have used it.

Matching wits against a clever outlaw had stimulated the brain processes of famous man hunters, and it annoyed Jerry because he didn't instantly find a solution for the crossing.

"If I had a pole," he growled, "hanged if I wouldn't try pole vaulting across." Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. His brain, whipped to its best by the fact that his man was getting away, suddenly sparked.

"The pole vault, done flat instead of vertical, might do it," he exclaimed.

He studied trees as he followed the stream. A mile below he found what he wanted. He dropped it, a tall, slim dead tree eighty feet in length. It rolled down the bank and into the stream. At this point the river narrowed, entering a canyon about a quarter mile below.

Jerry floated the tree until the butt lodged against a boulder, with the top upstream. Making his pack as compact as possible, he placed it on the tip of the tree, then pushed off. The current pressed his body against the tip, swinging the tree outward. The current tore at him with a thousand fingers. In midstream he went under again and again in a smother of white water. Then he was beyond the center, and the tree was at right angles from the bank. He knew now the tip, swinging downward, would again work toward the bank he had just left. He freed the pack and struck off, pushing the pack in front of him and swimming with his legs.

The canyon rushed at him, but he had an ample margin of safety as his feet struck bottom. He staggered to the nearest bar, sat down, and caught his breath.

"Hope I never have to pull that trick again," he gasped. "Nearly drowned out there in the middle."

He dried out and took the trail. Wolf Dog's tracks were plain, and it wasn't difficult to follow them. At dusk he turned in after another cold meal, and slept soundly.

Jerry took the trail the following morning with visions of being led to Skookum George. He repressed a desire to speed up. He mustn't become over-eager and surprise Wolf Dog before the native's meeting with the outlaw.

Late that afternoon Jerry topped a ridge, brought out his binoculars, and looked at the country ahead. He picked up the native's figure at last, moving along at a rapid pace. As he watched, another figure emerged from the brush.

The two men met and shook hands. The second one's face was turned toward Jerry. It was heavily bearded. The man, himself, was even larger than Wolf Dog. Jerry realized, with a thrill, that he was looking at Skookum George.

It would take a bit of doing, he decided, to arrest that pair and bring them to Sheedy Post, but it was an opportunity no Mounty had had since the big white man had started on his life of crime. Sergeant Sheridan had estimated that Skookum George must have taken at least a hundred pounds of gold in his robberies, perhaps considerably more. It would be cached conveniently.

Suddenly Skookum George turned, his elbows extending outward. Jerry froze. He knew from the man's position he was examining the country through binoculars. A good three minutes elapsed before the outlaw again turned to Wolf Dog. The two talked briefly, then the white man led off at a swift pace.

Jerry didn't get within striking distance of the pair that day, nor the next. He kept increasing his pace until he was afraid of walking into an ambush, but still they remained ahead. He slept short hours and worked long days, and the pace began to tell on him.

Dropping into a valley formed by a creek which fed Little River, Jerry came face to face with a young squaw. Her face was bruised, and she seemed to move about in a daze. Jerry stopped.

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

"My little boy," the woman sobbed. "Him out on island." She pointed to a slim figure standing at the water's edge. The island split the river in half, and the current roared along on either side.

"How'd he get out there?"

"Big Indian come," she explained. "He hit me with fist. Everything black. I wake up and look 'round and then I see my little boy out there."

"How'd he get there?" Jerry asked sharply.

"I show you." She led the way to a canoe. It had been smashed beyond all hope of repair.

Jerry saw through the trick clearly. Skookum George *had* spotted him through binoculars, and the pair had tried to shake him off by setting a killing pace. Not succeeding in that, they had taken a leaf from the Markel case. Instead of a sick child, Jerry faced a youngster marooned on an island. The boy would certainly die if not rescued. Ann Deering's notes were paying dividends already.

Jerry looked into the mother's anxious eyes. Instead of the sublime faith most natives had when they brought their troubles to the force, this wretched woman was filled with doubt and fear. Jerry swore softly as he thought of Skookum George and Wolf Dog vanishing downstream, then he smiled at the squaw.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I'll get the boy off. Remember, when you're in trouble, always come to the Yellow-legs. They'll never fail you."

V.

No raft would live to cross the water to the island and return. Rafts move too slowly. Jerry knew it was up to him to build a canoe—and build it from the materials he had on hand. The squaw, he learned, had come down the creek some thirty miles to fish at the mouth. Because her mate was in the upper country hunting she had brought the boy along.

When Jerry questioned her she explained that the canoe was the only one they had, and that no other families lived near them. Jerry located a dry tree, cut it down and chopped out a section, which he directed the squaw to split.

While she was thus engaged he made his way to the nearest moose pasture. It was an easy matter to kill a big bull with his service revolver. Skinning it was a tougher problem, but he managed it, shifting the carcass with the aid of the leverage of a long pole.

He staggered back to the river with the raw skin and put the squaw to work cleaning it. Meanwhile he set about building a boat frame, securing the various pieces with rawhide. He and the squaw took turns that night keeping a fire going to reassure the boy.

Jerry crossed to the island late the following afternoon, and found the boy hungry, but unharmed.

"Who brought you over?" Jerry asked the youngster. "Indian or white man?"

"Big Indian," the boy replied. "Him stay. Watch trail. White man go." He pointed downstream.

"I see," Jerry said thoughtfully. "He knew I was coming, then he swung into action against you."

Jerry turned the boy over to his mother, then continued downstream on foot to the nearest village, a two-day trek. He went directly to the chief.

"Big white man! Big Indian come through." It was a statement and not a query.

The chief, after some hesitation, agreed.

"They're bad men," Jerry said. "The Yellow-legs have come to get them. Tomorrow I want ten of your finest, bravest young men to go with me and get this white man and Indian."

Fear came into the chief's eyes, but he nodded. "I will tell them," he said in slow, halting English. "They will be ready."

Jerry heard nothing that night to indicate anything unusual was taking place, but when he awakened in the morning only women and children remained in the village. The men had vanished, to the oldest man.

"I've found out what I want to know," Jerry told himself. "Wolf Dog and Skookum George have put fear into the hearts of these people. The reputation of the force is sure on the down grade." He shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't risk failure in the final attempt to run his quarry to earth. There was nothing to do but return to Sheedy Post and prepare for a winter patrol. It wouldn't be easy to return empty-handed to face the questioning eyes of the natives, but it was the only route to ultimate success. And ultimate success was the base of all planning.

Sergeant Sheridan was anxiously waiting when Constable Ryan reported back from his patrol.

"I know it wasn't easy to turn back," Sheridan said, "but it was the smart thing to do. I don't know about Skookum George, but Wolf Dog isn't above murder, as we well know. Things are bad, generally. There are many reports of petty thieving, and some of the bolder natives are raiding fur caches. There have been three reports of sluice-box robberies."

"The others think if Skookum George can get away with it," Jerry said, "they can, too."

"George probably committed some of the recent sluice-box raids," Sheridan declared. "It takes time for a report to reach us. But of this I'm certain: He's ready to make a break for the border and he's selected the Sheedy Post region because of rumors of drug-store police here." Sheridan paced back and forth for several minutes. "And Wolf Dog was sent to blaze the way."

"Right!"

"I nearly forgot," the sergeant said suddenly. "Pumeuk's had her pups. They'll make the greatest dog team in the world, or I know nothing of Northern sled dogs."

Jerry rushed over to the kennel. Pumeuk gazed

proudly at her master, then at the pups swarming over her. Jerry inspected them.

"Perfect dogs," he said. "Not a weakling in the lot. I'll get wheelers, swingers and maybe a loose leader or two out of them."

"You'll never get a better loose leader than Pumeuk," Sheridan said. "Well now, take a rest, see your girl, and then we'll work out a plan to outsmart Wolf Dog and Skookum George. I want to bag them with the gold. The poor devils they robbed need it."

Jerry slicked up that evening and when Mrs. McLeod saw him coming she called Ann and chased her husband into the kitchen. The factor grumbled, and dragged his favorite chair into the kitchen. Mrs. McLeod shut the door. She had an idea something big was going to happen.

Jerry came into the parlor and looked at Ann. Then something made him open his arms, and a force stronger than herself made Ann rush into them. She relaxed, as if after a long time she had found a refuge.

"I've missed you terribly," she sighed.

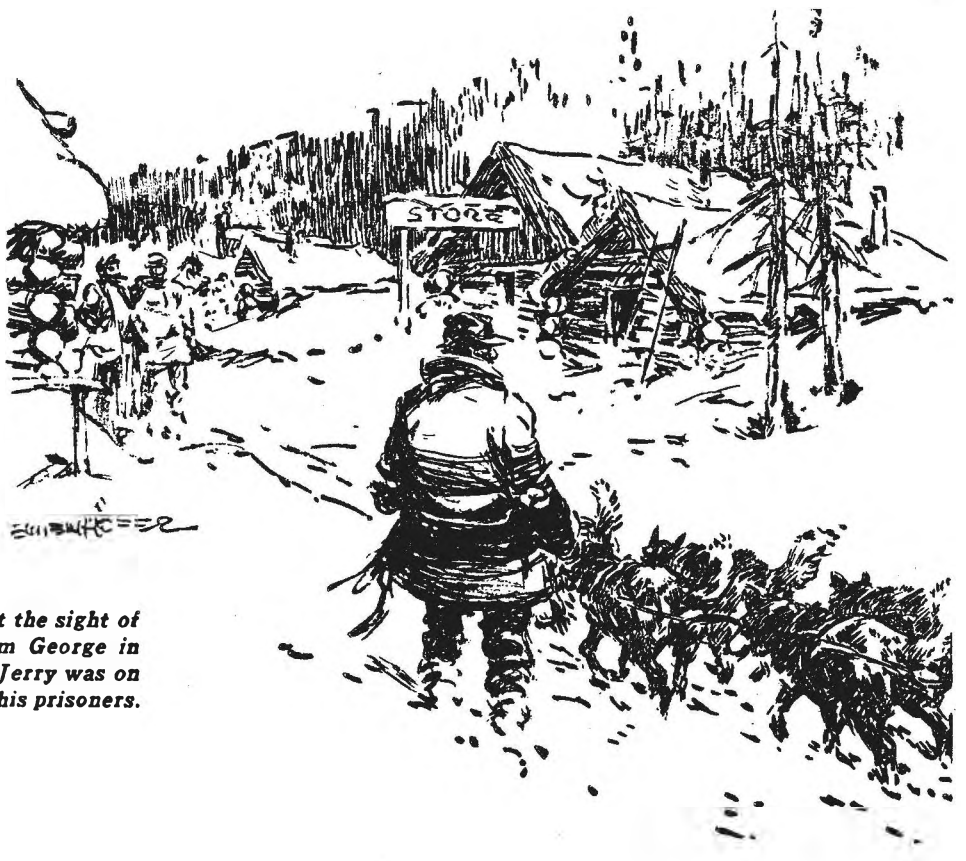
"It's been that way with me," said Jerry. "A man has a chance to think a lot on the trail. He walks along mechanically, and that leaves his brain free to think and plan. It's Jerry Ryan, man, speaking to Ann Deering, maid, now. I love you and I'm asking you to marry me."

"And it is Ann Deering, maid, answering," she said. "I love you, Jerry, and . . . I'll marry you." She was breathing hard, as if suddenly tortured by deep emotion. "But, Jerry, there's . . . there's something—"

He kissed her tenderly and stood back. "I know," he said. "And now it's Constable Jerry Ryan speaking. You've been working with an outlaw, supplying information that would help him escape across the border. Here is a sheet of paper Wolf Dog lost." He handed her the paper, and when she glanced at it, he returned it to his pocket. "Evidence," he said.

"Of course," she answered. "I've been trying to help my brother. He's been in trouble before, but this is the first time he asked me to help him. He promised, if he could cross the border into the States, he would get hold of himself and make a new start. He sent word out by a trapper."

"He believed the soft spot in the force's wall against him was Sheedy Post," Jerry said with a touch of bitterness in his voice, "and he arranged for Wolf Dog to come and meet you here."



The natives stared in amazement at the sight of the feared Wolf Dog and Skookum George in the custody of a lone Mounty, but Jerry was on the alert for an attempted break by his prisoners.

"Yes. I was to supply what information I could about police and their methods," admitted Ann.

"That's pretty serious," Jerry said gravely. "Particularly when the information is going to Skookum George."

"But he isn't Skookum George," she protested. "He's just Bill Deering, a boy who was too full of energy for his own good, and who got into trouble when he expended it. If I thought—but no, he isn't, he couldn't be. Jerry, you're wrong on that—dead wrong."

"I hope I am," Jerry said. "But that doesn't change our position—officially. You have aided an outlaw, or, to put it generously, a wanted man."

"It's going to take a strong love between us to win through this," Ann said.

"Ours couldn't be a weak one," declared Jerry. "Now I've got to take you down to the barracks, and so—I arrest you in the name of the king."

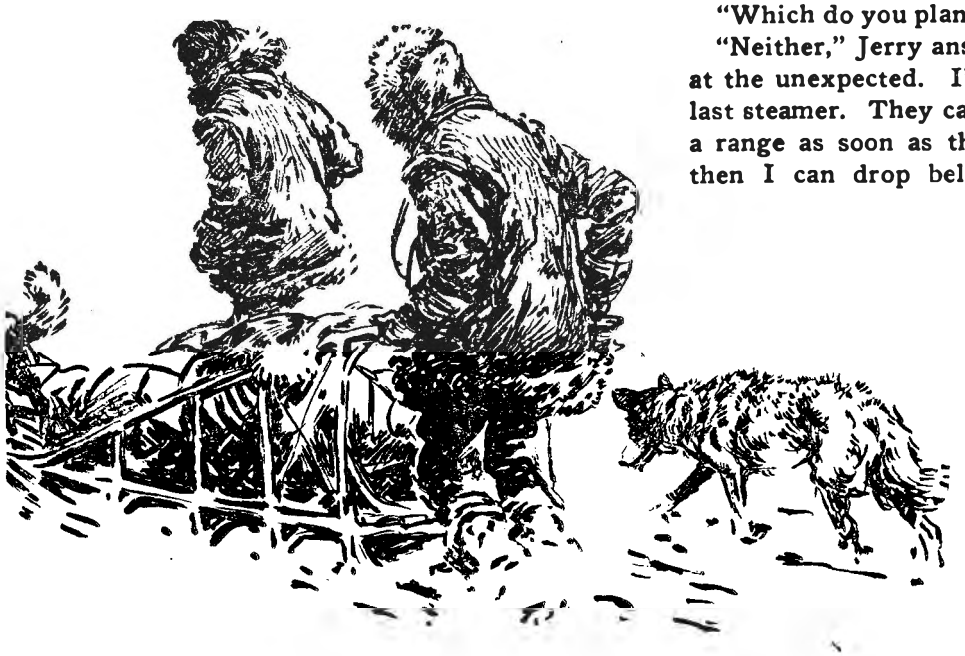
Sergeant Sheridan was amazed when Jerry brought in his prisoner.

"You?" he exclaimed. "Huh! I should know better'n to mix police work with the fair sex."

"As I see it," said Ann a little defiantly, "my crime is nothing more than compiling certain facts, and then illustrating them. Known facts."

"Hm-m-m!" The sergeant was thoughtful. "I must hold you, nevertheless. Now if you'll give me your word of honor to stop all communication, of whatever nature, with wanted men, I'll release you. You will not attempt to escape, of course."

She thought a moment. "No, I won't do it. I came to help my brother, and I'll go through with it."



"I thought you would," chuckled Sheridan. "Stout lass!"

"Speaking now as an engaged man," Jerry said, "can't her cell be fixed up a little? A rug on the floor, good light, her typewriter and notes?" He looked at Ann. "You're writing a book, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"We'll be happy to make you comfortable," Sheridan told her. "I shall instruct Constable Ryan accordingly."

Jerry went over to McLeod's with Ann to gather up the things she would need. The trader shook his head gloomily.

"Moccasin telegraph will let the bush country know the Sheedy Post police have made an arrest at last—a woman."

"I know it," Jerry answered savagely. "And I don't like it. But it's part of the job."

Mrs. McLeod shook her head for a different reason. She saw the only romance she had known—except her own—flying out the window.

VI.

When the sole prisoner in the barracks was made comfortable, Sheridan gave Jerry a brief order.

"You will locate and arrest the outlaws known as Wolf Dog and Skookum George, and bring them to these barracks. You will, if possible, bring in the stolen gold. You are strictly on your own, using your own judgment in all matters." Then he added a personal note: "Sometimes orders handicap a man. Now what do you need to carry on?"

"I've weighed every angle of the situation," Jerry said. "They'll be expecting one of two courses—either the force will come over the ice, or else wait for them to come up. Movement by water is too late to be successful. They know it. We know it, too."

"Which do you plan?"

"Neither," Jerry answered. "I'd like to have a go at the unexpected. I'll go down Big River on the last steamer. They can set me ashore, and I'll cross a range as soon as the snow is deep enough, and then I can drop below their probable location."

"A needle-in-haystack hunt," Sheridan suggested.

"Perhaps," admitted Jerry, "but more likely a still hunt. And I'll have plenty of assistance."

"Mighty little assistance you'll get," Sheridan predicted. "When you called for it the last time the natives vanished into thin air."

"That's why I called," Jerry replied. "I wanted to know where I stood. I'm counting on a different breed—Husky dogs. I'll want Smoky and five others, and I'll take Pumeuk along as loose leader. She knows that country. You'll remember I loaned her to Constable Stuart when he made a patrol last winter. We know how Smoky feels about Wolf Dog, and I'll stake my life on Pumeuk any day in the week."

"Have you forgotten her pups?"

"No. I'll take two with me to keep her contented. You'll have to raise the others on a bottle. The pups won't weigh much, and except for dog food I'll travel light."

Time was short, for the geese and tourists had already gone south. Jerry packed his dogs, outfit and sled onto a raft one night and dropped five miles below Sheedy Post. Sheridan would secretly notify the steamer captain to pick him up. They wanted no word leaving Sheedy Post by moccasin telegraph if they could help it.

Jerry's parting with Ann had been brief. "I'll be back when the job's finished," he had said. She had gone pale, but nodded. She was beginning to wonder if perhaps her brother wasn't really Skookum George. She knew George's reputation; she knew Wolf Dog's, too. She had regarded him as a means of communication with her brother. Now she thought he might be a partner in crime. She knew Jerry was no drug-store Mounty, and she was afraid either her brother or fiancé might not return.

The real strain, Jerry knew, would be Ann's. He would be too busily engaged in matching wits with Skookum George and Wolf Dog to feel the torture of uncertainty day after day, week after week.

The steamer whistled, thrust a plank ashore, and a few minutes later Jerry Ryan, his seven dogs, two pups, and the outfit were aboard.

"There was a rumor you was on a Little River patrol when I left Sheedy Post," the captain said. "Not a soul except the sergeant knows you're down here. I didn't know it until I'd cast off my lines. Then Sheridan told me. Take a good rest, because you'll need it. You've the toughest days of your life ahead. Got everything—the medicine, bandages, snow glasses and the little important things a man forgets in a hurry?"

"I've got everything," Jerry assured him, "including the all-important snow glasses. We get some blinding light on crisp fall days when it's clear."

Jerry unloaded as quietly as he had boarded the steamer. There were only three passengers aboard, and these could be trusted. They watched him dissolve into the darkness of the bank, and shook their heads. None would have relished his job.

At daybreak Jerry studied the mountain passes high above him. Snow was flying and the snow line was crawling slowly downward. A film of ice had formed on nearby pools during the night. Jerry packed the dogs, slipped the pups into his parka hood, and climbed to snow line. He chained the dogs, gave Pumeuk her pups, then went back for the empty sled.

Darkness caught him three miles below snow line. He camped and made the remaining distance as soon as it was light. Snow was falling lightly on the dogs, and there was depth enough to support the sled.

The next two days Jerry spent in relaying the load over the bad places, locating stretches of snow and building improvised bridges across the stream, which was icing over at the upper levels. A week after leaving the steamer he camped on a creek a mile from Little River. To the north lay Crooked Lakes. To the south, far upstream, was the Sheedy Post country. Somewhere between, Jerry hoped, were Skookum George and Wolf Dog.

The creek froze that night and failed to thaw the following day. Jerry walked down to Little River. It was dropping rapidly, and its surface was covered with mush ice, brought down from above. The thermometer had fallen to ten below zero, and a raw wind howled down from the Arctic.

Taking advantage of the first snowstorm, Jerry followed Little River a distance of some ten miles. He kept back a quarter-mile so that anyone following the stream wouldn't notice his tracks. From a thicket he studied the natives in two small villages. There was a furtiveness about them born of fear. Their eyes moved nervously from each others' faces, as if friend was afraid to trust friend.

"Wolf Dog isn't far off," Jerry reflected. "Their attitude proves it."

A second village, five miles downstream, was seething with excitement when he approached. Two men, suffering from scurvy and weakness, stood in the center of the village. Jerry worked his way to a fringe of brush on the edge of the settlement. Concealed there, he could see the white breath coming from the stronger of the pair. It came in short, sharp puffs, which might indicate either anger or weakness.

"Wolf Dog!" the man snarled. "You cleaned out our grub cache and left us to starve. Took our fur. Figgered we'd die. But we lived. Got to the river. We waited until she froze over and crossed."

Jerry was astounded. The ice was far from safe, but their crossing was proof of their desperation.

"Shut up!" the other pleaded. "He'll kill us."

"No, he won't," the stronger argued. "Too many eyes. He's afraid. So we lived, Wolf Dog, and we'll see the time when we get even."

Then Jerry saw the big native for the first time. He got out his service pistol, ready for business. He still counted on Wolf Dog leading the way to Skookum George, and he didn't want the present development to force his hand. But he wouldn't permit murder.

Wolf Dog, leaning indolently against a cabin wall, listened to the tirade with contempt for several minutes. Outwardly he was calm, relaxed, but Jerry saw murder blazing from his eyes. Suddenly Wolf Dog leaped, lashed out with both moccasined feet, and landed lightly on the snow. His feet struck the older man on the chest, knocking him backward. The white vapor billowed from his mouth in a cloud as the air left his lungs, then he writhed, gasping for air. His companion, enraged, hurled himself on the native. A slap of the hand knocked the man unconscious.

Jerry found it hard to restrain himself, but he waited. The first man, gasping for breath, got to his feet. He had been a fine, proud man in his time, but disease had weakened him. He must have realized the futility of a struggle, because suddenly he shrugged. "Later," he said thickly. "Later." He turned from the grim native to the villagers. "What's the matter, ain't you goin' to take us in? What's the country comin' to, when the Yeller-legs lose their grip and natives won't lift a hand for a white man?"

The natives exchanged glances, but made no move. They stood, as if waiting for orders from Wolf Dog. The stronger of the old sourdoughs lifted the weaker to his feet, and they pushed their way into the nearest cabin.

Jerry waited for the next development. Wolf Dog walked into a cabin, closed the door and the other natives drifted away. When Wolf Dog gave no sign of coming out again, Jerry returned to his own camp.

The dogs were covered with snow, except for their nostrils. Pumeuk, with her pups, had been given the tent—an oiled silk affair six feet by seven and a half, and two and a half feet high at the entrance. It was light, small, but it kept out the cold.

The following morning Jerry planned a two or three days' scouting trip. The dogs were a problem. They needed to be tied up and fed. When a man went on a dangerous trip and left his dog chained, he was inviting tragedy should something happen to himself. Jerry had occasionally found chained skeletons when a patrol took him to a remote region.

A little logic answered his present problem. The other dogs would remain with Pumeuk, and she would stay with her pups. Jerry tied up the pups, knowing their mother would nurse them regularly, and if necessary she could forage. He was planning on returning within three days. On the other hand, he knew he might never return.

Jerry fastened the lightest chain to Smoky's collar; then, with a small quantity of grub packed on his back, he was ready. He planned to siwash it at night—sleep out, with nothing but a fire to keep him warm. A sleeping bag would be a handicap.

Jerry approached the village downwind, so that the native dogs wouldn't scent Smoky, and he remained a half-mile distant until after darkness had set in. When he felt it safe, Jerry worked his way to the rear of the cabin the two sourdoughs had entered.

A window, on hinges, had been set in the end. Jerry knocked on the window and the grumbling of a miner protesting his lot stopped abruptly. A bearded face peered cautiously a moment, then the window swung open.

"Hell's fire!" one of the men exclaimed. "A Yeller-legs. Come in before somebody sees you."

Jerry squirmed through the window. In brief, whispered sentences he explained the need of caution. "Now," he said, "who are you?"

"Do you remember the story that always commenced, 'It seems there was a couple of Irishmen named Pat and Mike?' Well, we're Pat and Mike. I'm Mike."

"Now for some questions: Is Wolf Dog here?"

"I don't know," Mike said. "But I'd guess not. The natives ain't so scared, though they keep clear of us. Afraid if they help us Wolf Dog will get mad. They want us to move, but we won't for a couple of reasons. We're too weak. And second, that human wolverine will kill us if we get into the bush again. I'd like to take him on if I had meat on my bones, but—"

"Do you know Skookum George?"

"Do we know him? He took our clean-up and disappeared, then Wolf Dog cleaned out our food cache," Mike said. "George must have two hundred pounds of gold by now. Fifty pounds of it is ourn. And he's got some fur besides."

"Where's George and the gold?"

"Can't be far from here. Upstream in the direction of Sheedy Post, I'd guess," Mike said. "They're waitin', as I figger it, to find out what the Mounted is up to, then they'll outsmart you boys. They got natives watchin' all the way up river to report if you show up. Five hundred dollars in guns and ammunition go to the native who brings in a report. If some cuss comes in with a false report, Wolf Dog's set to murder him. That sort o' makes the natives want to be sure of anything they report."

"Tell him the rest," Pat urged.

"Wolf Dog's offered a thousand dollars in fur to the native who'll kill any Mounty sent out," Mike

added. "All he's got to do is show the body in uniform."

"Pleasant fellow," Jerry observed dryly.

"The man's playin' for big stakes," said Pat. "He's an educated Indian, and he figgers to control the fur output from the Arctic ocean to Sheedy Post. To do it he's got to make the natives believe you Yeller-legs is helpless, and he's got to have 'em scared of him. One feller didn't scare. Wouldn't knuckle down. He cleared out, though. His name was Ailin' Angus. Great hand to eat and drink pills and medicine."

"Ailing Angus is dead," Jerry said. "Now here's the play. I'm out to run down Wolf Dog, Skookum George and locate the gold if I can."

"Wouldn't want to take on a couple of wars in your spare time?" Pat suggested dryly.

"If I don't show up in a week," Jerry said, "take care of my dogs, and get word to Sheedy Post, if you can." He explained the location of his camp.

"Shh!" Pat whispered. "Somebody's comin'." He was on his feet instantly. Swinging the table over a few feet, he motioned toward the loft, a few planks laid on cross beams. Jerry swung up and Pat put the table back. A moment later the door opened, and the village chief entered.

"Top o' the evenin' to you," Pat said cheerfully.

"You go!" The native pointed upstream. "Ice thick. You go—Sheedy Post."

"Listen, chief," said Pat, "if you get tough with us the Yeller-legs will swarm all over you."

"Yeller-legs? Huh! The chief sneered. "Him catch squaw. Him 'fraid of Wolf Dog."

"Everybody's afraid of Wolf Dog," Pat said. "But we aren't goin' to hit the trail. We're stayin' right here. If you want to shoot us, hop to it. But we aren't afraid of that. Do you know why?" He waited a moment. "I'll tell you, because you're yeller. You laid down cold to Wolf Dog. Now get out."

The chief scowled, but he obeyed. After a while Jerry dropped to the floor.

"You called his bluff," he said approvingly. "It's obvious Wolf Dog wanted you ordered out for a little private murdering. He must be close. Well, so long."

He returned to Smoky, unchained him, and crossed the trail several times, watching the dog. It was evident Wolf Dog was south of the village. Jerry circled the village and headed upstream. In less than a quarter-mile Smoky straightened out the chain as he caught a hated scent. His powerful legs dug in and he tried to drag Jerry along. Deep snarls came from his throat.

Chaining the dog, Jerry went ahead. A half mile distant he saw Wolf Dog striding through the gloom. It was difficult to keep him in sight and at the same time not be caught trailing, but when the native stopped, Jerry stopped. In a few moments Skookum George joined Wolf Dog.

Conversation was brief, with the native doing most of the talking. Jerry couldn't catch the conversation in full, but it was evident Wolf Dog was urging the white man to head upstream. He seemed to think movement was safe, particularly as natives along the bank would report the approach of white men from Sheedy Post.

Wolf Dog ended the conversation so abruptly Jerry was almost caught flat-footed. He crouched in the shadows and waited. The native came toward him in slow strides, while Skookum George disappeared upstream. Jerry had an idea Pat and Mike's presence and their refusal to allow Wolf Dog to work on them in his own effective way, was back of the decision to shift southward.

As Wolf Dog came opposite, Jerry thrust his service revolver against the man's side. The muzzle went low down so a sudden swing of elbow wouldn't knock it aside.

"Wolf Dog, the game's up!" Jerry said. "No funny moves. And don't pretend you don't understand English, because you'll be just as dead. I'm turning you over to another constable."

He forced the native to put his hands behind his back, then he lashed them together. Searching his prisoner thoroughly, he located a six-gun and a pair of knives sharp enough for shaving. When they reached the tree where Smoky was tied, Jerry said: "There's the other constable. Know him? Sure you do."

Smoky was in a frenzy. Jerry untied the native's hands and ordered him up a nearby tree. He removed Wolf Dog's moccasins, and gave him a pair of wool socks, which would keep his feet from freezing, yet prevent him from traveling far. To insure the native's remaining a prisoner, Jerry released Smoky.

"You can use your own judgment about escaping," he told Wolf Dog. "I don't care much what happens to you."

The moon was up now, making the scene considerably lighter. As Jerry departed, he knew the native was weighing his chances of leaping down and killing Smoky before the dog got to him.

Jerry, confident surprise was in his favor, traveled fast. He made his way to the point where the two men had met, then he followed Skookum George's trail.

The trail turned from the river and entered a gulch. A few minutes later Jerry sighted Skookum George. The man was bent over, digging, and Jerry was elated.

"Gold cache," he said softly. He waited until Skookum George straightened up, then called: "Bill Deering. Imagine meeting you up here!"

The man whirled, startled, but there was a glint in his eyes that indicated he had expected to meet someone he knew. Then he saw the gun in the constable's hands.

"Sorry, Deering," Jerry said, "but the force has caught up with you at last."

"You've nothing on me," the other answered. "Sure, I'm Bill Deering. I've been knocking around the country, and now I'm heading out over the ice. Hadn't you better put down the gun and talk things over? From what I've heard, the force isn't regarded so highly in these parts. You can't afford to make a mistake like this one."

"I'll worry about that," Jerry said. "First we'll look over the gun-and-knife situation." He searched the man and found two guns and a knife. "Now pick up the gold and come along."

Deering walked ahead in silence, his back bent slightly under the weight of the gold. Jerry was a little disappointed. This wasn't the main cache—hardly more than fifty pounds. But it was gold.

Deering stopped suddenly as he rounded a turn. "Look! A wolf's got a man up a tree. Do something!"

"Your friend Wolf Dog," Jerry explained. "And the wolf is a dog named Smoky. The native killed his master. I imagine you had an idea Wolf Dog was free—to do something about me taking you back a prisoner."

Deering's face betrayed nothing. He was a cool customer. Jerry secured Smoky, gave Wolf Dog his moccasins, and then ordered him down.

"If you make a bolt," he warned, "I'll turn the dog loose." He turned to Deering. "And for you—a bullet."

"What're you going north for?" Deering asked. "Sheedy Post is south."

"I'm doing this for a good reason," Jerry answered.

He kept them moving until he reached Pat and Mike's cabin. A shout brought the old-timers to the door, and it aroused the village as well. The natives stared in amazement at the sight of a lone Yellow-legs with the terrible Wolf Dog in custody. The chief expressed his astonishment, but Wolf Dog bared his teeth.

"It's a long way to Sheedy Post," he snarled.

But Jerry had made the desired impression. The natives again believed the arm of the force was long, and it reached forth silently.

"I want a good night's sleep," Jerry told the sourdoughs. "Will you boys keep watch on this pair?"

"We will," Mike said. "And we only hope they'll give us an excuse to shoot 'em. That's my gold Skookum George packed in."

"It's evidence," Jerry explained. "You stay here, get in shape, come over the ice this winter, give proof of ownership, and it'll be returned to you."

"Couldn't we bring it up?" asked Pat. "Seems like takin' them in is big-enough job, without flyin' in the face of Providence with fifty pounds of gold."

"It's all part of the same job," said Jerry. "Now I'm going to turn in."

During the night he awakened several times to find the Irishmen, wide awake and on watch. The prisoners slept lightly, but soundly. Each had made up his mind to get as much rest as possible against the hour when an opportunity came to make a break. They had the advantage, and knew it. The Mounty would have to remain alert at all times, and yet get his rest.

Jerry made an early start the following morning. Deering packed the gold, Wolf Dog the sleeping bags, while Jerry followed with the eager Smoky. He reached Pumeuk and her pups at noon. The dogs were hungry, for foraging had been poor. Jerry harnessed them without difficulty, put Smoky in the leader's harness, and gave Pumeuk the loose leader's role.

As the trim little Husky deftly picked the best trail, the prisoners' eyes glittered with admiration. Such a dog could save a driver much strength each day. They figured Pumeuk in their future plans.

Shortly before darkness Jerry encountered a village. He drove through without stopping, but he knew the natives saw his prisoners. The moccasin telegraph would be mighty active for many days to come.

VII.

Falling snow gave way to brilliant sunshine, and the dogs made good time, with Pumeuk leading the way. Snow had fallen on the river ice and packed nicely.

Bill Deering and Wolf Dog took turns at the sled handle bars. Jerry brought up the rear. The fifth day on the trail Pumeuk turned up a creek and led the way to rolling country. It was new to Jerry, but he knew from her actions the dog had been over it before. It would save packing sled, dogs and outfit up the almost sheer stretches of rough ice, which in the warm months were waterfalls.

At the noon stop, Jerry went through his pack looking for his snow goggles. They were gone. He had stowed them in a certain place where they couldn't get broken and there was little chance of them shifting.

"This is serious," he reflected, "but my eyes have always been good. Hope they hold out."

Wolf Dog took the sled bars that afternoon. The big native followed, running lightly, but with his eyes closed against the glare. Whenever the sled lurched violently, the native opened his eyes briefly, straightened the sled, and then continued plodding.

"The pace is getting too fast for me," Deering complained the following morning. "Are we going to a fire?"

"I thought they called you Skookum George," Jerry said. The big man scowled at the barb. "We'll cut it down. A day or two more won't make any difference."

He cut it down, falling in with Deering's suggestion. He knew the man wasn't weakening, but was playing some deep game. Probably he figured that the longer the Mounty was on the trail, the more chance there was of his cracking.

Each night Jerry followed the same method in insuring himself a good rest and protection. He forced his prisoners to strip and get into their sleeping bags, then he took their clothing. He placed his own bag in a ring formed by his dogs. Smoky's hate hadn't slackened in the slightest. He was ready to tear into Wolf Dog at the first opportunity, and Jerry knew if the native attempted to approach, the dog would warn him. Pumeuk would stand for no nonsense at night, either, particularly as she had the responsibility of her pups. She regarded everyone except Jerry as a possible enemy.

The brightness continued, and even at the slower pace they made good time. Jerry's eyes were a little tired, but there was no pain. One night he awakened with the feeling there was something in his eyes. He blinked several times, expecting the tears to wash away the source of irritation, but it persisted.

He dozed off finally, only to awaken with a start. Sand seemed to be pressing against his eyeballs. It was a maddening pain, from which there was no escape. He blinked constantly, but found no relief.

"I'm in for it," he told himself. "Tomorrow I'll have to bluff it through. If I hang to the handle bars I can keep my eyes closed. That should help. This thing didn't give me much warning."

At daybreak he arranged his prisoners' clothing in neat bundles, then he built a fire and prepared breakfast.

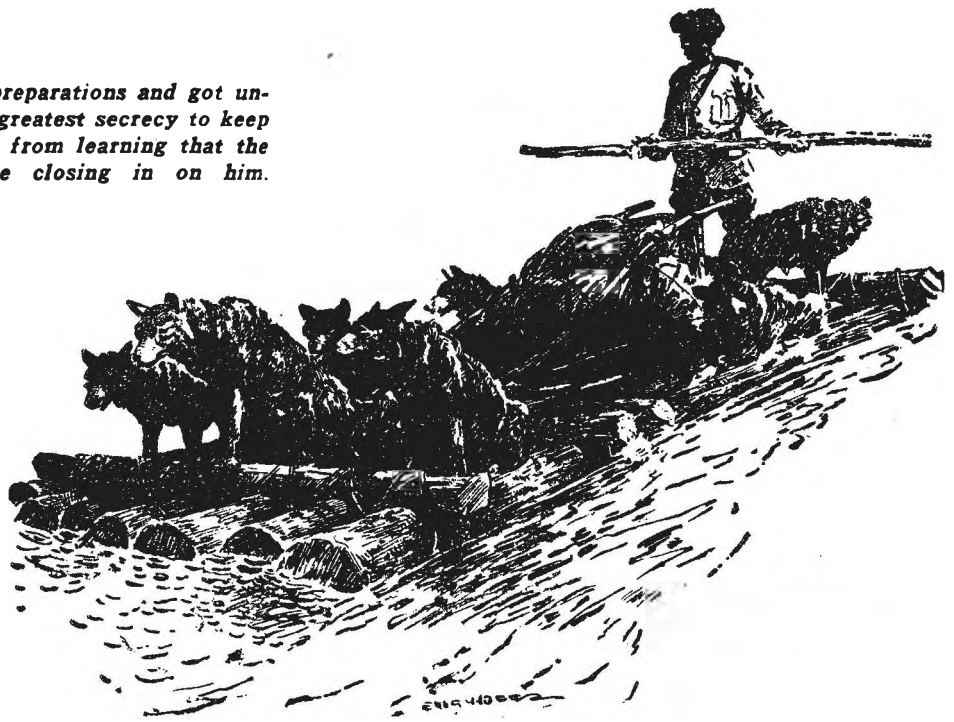
"All right, boys," he said, "dress and eat." He ate while they dressed, then harnessed the dogs. Tears made a blur of everything, but the wolverine fur on his parka facing concealed his eyes from the men.

"You're slowing things up so I'll tire, Deering," he said when they were ready to start, "so I'll offset that by riding the runners. You men get ahead and break trail."

They exchanged defiant glances, but when the Mounty started the dogs, the two went ahead. Jerry, eyes closed tightly with pain, stumbled along behind the sled. The hours dragged. The sun came out, and the glare sent pains stabbing from eyeballs backward. It was like a red-hot awl penetrating the brain again and again. Jerry had set his teeth to keep from crying out in pain. Nothing he had ever known equaled it.

"When do we eat?" Deering asked. "It's noon." The man had dropped back.

Jerry turned his face toward the voice. He forced his eyelids open, but saw nothing. He was blind.



Jerry made his preparations and got underway with the greatest secrecy to keep Skookum George from learning that the Yellow-legs were closing in on him.

"We'll eat at the first good place," he said.

"What's the matter with this—" Deering broke off, stepped closer, and looked into the Mounty's face.

Jerry felt the other's breath. "What're you looking at?" he demanded. "Get up in front and break trail."

Deering waved his hand before Jerry's eyes. The Mounty made no protest.

"Blind," the outlaw said. "Snow-blind! Hey! Wolf Dog! He's blind."

The native bounded to the rear of the sled and swung his fist against Jerry's jaw. The impact lifted the Mounty off his feet, and he collapsed in a heap.

"Look out for that dog!" Deering warned. At the same time he grasped Smoky's collar.

"I'll fix the dog," the native snarled. "I'll cut him up with his chain."

"Wait!" Deering warned. "Don't be a fool. We need this dog's strength. The load will be plenty heavy."

"Plenty heavy!" The words penetrated the fog engulfing Jerry Ryan. "Plenty heavy with what?" he vaguely asked himself. Then he knew. They must be near the gold cache. He realized why Deering had wanted to slow down.

"Leave this Yellow-legs to me," Wolf Dog said thickly. "I'll kill—"

"No, you won't. I said there'd be no killing at any time. Do you think I want to be hanged at the barracks?" Deering demanded sharply. He was showing the forcefulness of his character for the first time, revealing traits that had won him the nickname, Skookum George. "I'll have none of it."

"What we do with him?" Wolf Dog asked.

"Leave him here. What can a blind man do? It will be snowing by tonight, and if he lives to see, our trail will be gone. Now here's the plan: We take what we need and leave the rest."

"I want that loose leader," Wolf Dog said. "She's plenty smart, and knows a good trail. And I want Smoky. I'll kill him when we're through."

"Keep the weight down," Deering warned. "Every pound counts when we travel fast. There's some stiff country ahead. We'll have to take one of the pups to keep Pumeuk contented. We'll put her in harness, too, until we're sure she won't come back."

Jerry heard objects hitting the snow as the two men cut down the load to bare necessities. A pup whimpered and presently Jerry felt its soft, warm body against his hands. It was strange how quickly a pup learns a man will take care of him.

A few minutes later Jerry felt Wolf Dog's hands going over his clothing looking for weapons. The native gave the Mounty a parting kick, and a moment later the whip cracked and a dog howled.

The silence following the departure of the two men was thick enough to cut with a knife. After a while Jerry groped about in the snow on hands and knees, reclaiming every object that touched his hands. Here, frozen salmon; there canned goods; then flour and a piece of bacon. He found his extra clothing in a bundle, and finally came to his sleeping bag last. There must have been other items his hands had missed, but at least he had food of sorts, and warmth.

He crawled into the bag, taking the pup with him. Now he was alone with his thoughts. What of wolves following the dogs' trail? If he heard them he would have to stand up and face their snarls, trusting they wouldn't attack a man on his feet. If they did—

"A chapter for Ann's book," he said grimly.

The warmth left the land, and he knew the sun had gone down. Bitter cold came, and during the night it began snowing. The weight of the snow was heavy when Jerry awakened in the morning. The pain in his eyes was less, but he still saw nothing. He kept a bandage across his eyes. He wanted vision to return as early as possible.

So far, the case was similar to the famed Loose Leader case of another generation. Jerry wondered if it would be the same to the final chapter. He ate food from a can and listened to the hungry pup's whimpers.

"Tough, boy," he said sympathetically. "No canned milk, no fire to warm it with if I had one. You've got to tighten your belt, and you're pretty young for that."

Now that the pain was less, Jerry could go over the events of recent days and clear up a few points. Wolf Dog had managed, somehow, to get into his pack long enough to find the snow goggles. It was evident, too, that the native's willingness to hang on to the handle bars was to save his own eyes.

"If I'd ever had snow blindness before," Jerry reflected, "I wouldn't have been caught off guard so easily. But my eyes felt fine until I was laid low."

The pup's cries continued throughout the day and most of the night. Toward dawn, from weakness, no doubt, it stopped whimpering and slept.

Hot breath against his face awakened Jerry. He thought of wolves and roared. There was a tense moment, then a tongue licked Jerry's cheek. "Pumeuk?" the query was low. It was answered by a whimper of delight. The pup in the sleeping bag was growing frantic. Jerry let it out, and a moment later the pup was filling a long-empty stomach.

Jerry's hand groped and found his heap of belongings. He located a chain, and then he reached for Pumeuk's collar. It was missing. He wasn't surprised. She had escaped by pulling her head through the collar. Jerry took a turn with the chain

and snapped it. It was a rough collar, but it would serve. He made up a pack, got it onto his shoulders, then placed the pup in the wolverine hood of his parka.

"Ready, girl," he ordered. "Mush!"

He felt the chain tighten, and followed. Hour after hour he stumbled along over a dark trail. He kept his head bowed to protect his face and to turn low-hanging branches over his head. Often he fell, and sometimes the shock knocked the wind from his lungs, but soon he was on his feet again, following the insistent tugging of the chain.

Pumeuk, dead on her feet as she was, resisted his efforts to make camp, but Jerry's body had taken a beating for ten straight hours, and he was exhausted. Falls were more frequent when he was worn out.

He had lost track of time. It might have been about five o'clock in the morning when he awakened, or it might have been later. He knew Pumeuk was eager to be off. He fed her bacon, ate the contents of a can of beans, and slipped the chain about his wrist.

An hour later he fell. He dropped into snow to his armpits, and pulled the dog with him. He floundered uncertainly for several minutes, then his fingers reached for the bandage over his eyes. The suspense was tremendous. He lifted the bandage and blinked. Darkness pressed in around him. Blinking, he threw back his parka hood. He saw indistinct objects, and the walls of a canyon.

He knew now he had tumbled over a ten-foot drop that in warm weather was a waterfall. The snowdrift below had saved him. He fought his way out and reached solid ice. Undoubtedly Pumeuk was following a creek, but none of the landmarks was familiar.

Jerry's delay, as he looked about, made the dog almost frantic. To be on the safe side, he kept his eyes half closed as he followed her. The canyon grew wider, and the light penetrated from above. Jerry looked up and saw low, black clouds in the sky.

"May be a blizzard," he mused, "but it's better than sunlight."

Pumeuk tried to climb a steep slope, but fell back. When she fell back for the third time, Jerry decided this was a short cut she had taken when returning to him. He boosted her up and followed. The country ahead was rolling, and timbered with leafless trees.

The dog trotted now and Jerry followed her. It was growing lighter every minute. The dark trail was behind.

VIII.

Pumeuk broke through a thicket and Jerry halted so suddenly the dog backed on her haunches.

"Easy, girl," he whispered. "I wasn't expecting this so soon."

He took a cautious observation. His dogs were tied up to convenient trees. His sled was covered with various items of the outfit, and Wolf Dog and Bill Deering lay in their sleeping bags in the shelter of a snowdrift.

Jerry's eyes searched for an ax. None was visible. He picked up a club, then shook his head. He might get one man, but while doing so, the other would get him. Both Wolf Dog and Deering were armed.

"It's a two-man job," Jerry reflected, "even with surprise in my favor." Then his eyes fell on Smoky. "Well, boy, I guess this is your inning."

He secured Pumeuk so her sudden arrival wouldn't arouse the camp, then, shedding his pack, he crawled to Smoky. The big Husky looked at Jerry, and strained on his chain as he turned toward Wolf Dog.

Jerry released the dog, and at the same time he crossed the intervening snow and pounced at Deering. The man was half out of his sleeping bag before Jerry got to him. His arms went out and he brought the constable down. Then he got his legs clear.

Jerry got to his feet, and, as Deering rushed in, the Mounty leaped and struck out. His feet crashed against Deering's chest, and the man dropped. He turned, his hand reaching into the sleeping bag for a six-gun. Jerry got him from behind and slipped his arm around Deering's throat. Both of the outlaw's big hands grasped Jerry's arm and tried to break the grip. The Mounty hung on. Nearby, Wolf Dog and Smoky were engaged in a finish fight. The Husky kept throwing his ninety pounds on the native. He kept him down, and at the same time his darting fangs reached for the throat.

Wolf Dog tried to protect himself with his forearms, and the dog's fangs cut them again and again.

"Take him off!" the native screamed in sudden terror. "He's got my throat. Take him off!"

Jerry had his hands full and couldn't let go of Deering until the man suddenly went limp. The Mounty lashed his wrists and ran over to Smoky.

"Take him off," Wolf Dog cried frantically. "I'll talk. Sure, I killed Ailin' Angus. He knew I'd killed a native in Crooked Lakes country. I was afraid he'd talk. Take him off! He's got my throat!"

Jerry got a six-gun—his own—out of Wolf Dog's sleeping bag, then he caught Smoky's chain and pulled with all of his strength. The dog, releasing his hold to get a better one, suddenly found himself pulled back. Jerry took a turn around a tree, then jumped back at the native.

"Plain yellow!" he accused. "If he'd had your throat you couldn't have talked, nor yelled for help."

He tied Wolf Dog, then turned his attention to Deering. The man was breathing again. He kept gently rubbing his throat with his hand.

"How'd you find us?" he muttered.

"There was one case your sister didn't include in her outline," Jerry said quietly. "The Loose Leader case. And it's a good thing Sergeant Sheridan didn't give it to her." He walked over to the sled and lifted a tarp. Moosehide pokes, stiff with gold, lay in a tempting pile. "The rest of the loot, eh?"

"Yeah, that's it," Deering said. "I brought it over the ice last spring. The breakup caught me before I could get to Sheedy Post, so I cached it. That was why I asked you to slow up. I didn't want to back-track. We figured we could get past Sheedy Post and be on our way to the border before you located us."

Getting out the first-aid kit, Jerry went to work on Wolf Dog's wounds. Smoky had slashed both forearms badly, and there was one small cut on the throat. It was this cut that broke a man who had inflicted pain on numerous people in his time. The fear of fangs ran deep in Wolf Dog.

Jerry freed Pumeuk, and she hurried to feed the other pup. From now on the two would enjoy regular meals. When Jerry was ready to take the trail again Wolf Dog spoke.

"Yellow-legs, you're a fool!" he declared. "You take us to barracks, and what do you get? Nothing! Just pay. Let us go and we'll give you gold." He nodded toward the sled. "We'll split three ways."

"You're wasting your breath, Wolf Dog," Deering said. "This man is one who can't be bought. I know. My sister wrote all about him in a letter she sent along with the outline of her book."

"She did?" Jerry asked.

"Sure," Deering said. "You two are pretty much in love, aren't you? It's too bad it had to turn out this way. This will break her heart. You see, Ryan, we're twins. And we've always been pretty close."

"You look older," commented Jerry.

"It's this thick, black beard. I'm only twenty-three," Deering said. "How old will I be when I get out? Oh, I know I'm in for it," he added bitterly. "I never got a break in my life, and I don't expect it now."

"You cried for what you wanted as a kid," Jerry suggested, "and got it in the end. Well, you won't find a frontier jury moved by tears, I'm afraid."

"The devil of it is," Deering went on, "I won't have a thin dime for my defense."

"Get going!" Jerry ordered.

It was snowing again when Constable Jerry Ryan, Bill Deering and Wolf Dog arrived at Sheedy Post. Moccasin telegraph had notified everyone of their approach. Men and women came out of their cabins as the dog team, the loose leader running lightly in advance, came down the trail.

Jerry glanced at Ann's cell window as he passed the barracks. He couldn't see her face, but he knew she stood behind a lace curtain, and he imagined she was tense and tortured. He was feeling no elation whatever in his hour of triumph. There wasn't a man on the force who wouldn't have gloried in bringing in Skookum George, but Jerry was almost sorry he had been successful in his man hunt.

Facing the future without Ann would be a dreary business. But he saw no reason for changing his plans. He'd start his fox island and carry on, but he knew he'd ask himself again and again, "For what?"

Jerry stopped in front of the barracks and a breed took charge of his team. "You bring two pups back, eh?" he said. "Good. Other pups plenty fat. Pretty soon give 'em moose meat and dried salmon."

"And pretty soon, too, they'll be the finest team in the North," Jerry said. He wished they were grown now. He would take them and strike out to some remote place and trap foxes alive—stock for his ranch.

Sergeant Sheridan was waiting for him. His eyes glowed with pride as if he were saying to himself: "I trained him, passed on what his father taught me."

Jerry officially reported the completion of his patrol. "In the name of the king," he said, "I arrested Skookum George, whose real name is Bill Deering."

"So he's her brother," Sheridan said. "And she's such a brave girl. Not a mean streak in her—just intensely loyal." He lifted his eyes quickly. "And the evidence?"

"A couple of hundred pounds of gold on the sled," Jerry answered. "Two old-timers named Pat and Mike will show up in time. They'll testify that Deering held them up and took their clean-up. Others who've been robbed should show up this winter. It won't take long for the news to travel."

"And this man, Wolf Dog?"

"Confessed Ailing Angus' murder," Jerry said. "He's yellow. Now that he's behind the bars, natives will be coming in to testify against him. He held a lot of people in fear of revenge."

"Wolf Dog and Deering are partners?" asked Sheridan.

Jerry caught the significance of the query. If the two men were partners, engaged in conspiracy, then Deering would be tried and probably convicted of murder. Jerry was glad he could honestly answer the murder charge was something else. Deering had hired Wolf Dog to go to Sheedy Creek and get the outline which he hoped would enable him to reach the border. In return the native received the fur Deering had stolen in his raids and a portion of the gold that was their only connection.

"They are separate cases," Jerry reported. "Now that Deering is here and his sister can't help him, is there any reason for holding her?"

"Do you think we can get a conviction?" asked Sheridan.

"What do *you* think?" Jerry countered.

"Fortunately for her the material she sent her brother was a matter of record. Oh, I know, in a round-about way, we might make out a case of aiding a criminal, but when the relationship became known—well, you know what you'd do if you were on a jury. I'd do the same, so let's save the crown the cost of her trial."

Jerry's face showed his relief.

"Can I tell her she's released?" he asked eagerly.

"Go ahead."

Jerry went upstairs to the cell. He could see that Ann's sketches were complete, and the final draft of the manuscript was finished. The girl faced him silently.

"I'm back," he said.

"Yes. I saw Bill. Jerry"—she spoke with a catch in her voice—"he isn't Skookum George?"

"We've tried to believe otherwise from the first," Jerry answered, "but we were sure right along he was. He made his play for a fortune and lost. I'm sorry I had to be the one who ran him down."

She nodded. "Where do you go from here?"

"I'd planned to resign this winter and start my fox business," he said. "I had in my mind the thought of holding myself subject to call by the force. I'd like to keep my hand in, you know."

"Yes."

"So I guess that's what I'll do," he said. "Now do you want to go down?"

"Can't Bill be brought up?"

"Sure," he answered.

He shouted down and a few minutes later Bill Deering came up the stairs. Jerry heard Ann's sad, "Oh, Bill," and that was all he wanted to hear.

Later Sergeant Sheridan went up to lock Deering in a cell, and once again Jerry heard Ann's voice.

"It isn't much, Bill," she was saying, "but I'll give it to the best lawyer I can find. You'll get justice, Bill. That's all. You're all I have in the world, and I've never deserted you, and I'm not going to now."

"It isn't much," Bill agreed. "I wonder how much justice a man can buy with it?"

Then the door closed and Ann, crying softly, hurried outside and across to her room in McLeod's. She carried her sketches and script tightly under her arm.

"Well, Jerry?" Sheridan's voice was deep with sympathy. "You went through with it, all the way, as I knew you would. But that doesn't make it easier. What now, lad?"

"I won't be needed here until next spring when the ice goes and the tourists and geese come, and the judge comes with them," said Jerry. "I'll quit now. You're in for a quiet winter. The natives between Sheedy Post and Crooked Lakes know the arm of the law is long. And I think I'll start now, taking Smoky and the rest, but leaving Pumeuk and you to raise the pups," he said.

Jerry went over to McLeod's to buy his winter's supplies, then upstairs to Ann's room. She was sitting in a chair, staring at a photo of a twin boy and girl.

"We were like that once," she said. "Bill was a lovable boy and everyone spoiled him. He was never denied a thing. And now—"

"I'm leaving, Ann," Jerry said. "Starting with little more than the matches and pocket of salt we once mentioned. As for the rest, you see, I brought your brother to justice. And now I want to see he gets all the consideration the law allows. I've thrown my stake into the common pot."

"Jerry!" Ann exclaimed, and there were tears in her eyes. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I wanted to," he said. "Now I'll know I tried to do the job right—all the way down the line. The winter will be tough, but toughness hardens a man, so I don't mind."

"Jerry, I'm going along with a match, an ax and a pocketful of salt," declared Ann. "If it can toughen a man it can strengthen a woman, too." Then she looked at him doubtfully. "But maybe you don't want me?"

"Want you?" Jerry asked exultantly. "I've never wanted anything more! Come on, I have a hunch we'll find Father O'Shea still up."

Ann's smile was radiant. "I'll come with you as soon as I wrap my sketches and copy for mailing to the publisher. It'll go out on the winter mail."

"And it goes out without the Loose Leader case?" Jerry asked soberly. "You know now what it is?"

Ann nodded. "Yes. It has to do with a dog who was faithful to her pups, a Mounty who was snow-blind—and an outlaw." She paused, and for a moment her face was tortured. "And Sergeant Sheridan is right," she said finally. "It shouldn't be told. How different it might have been if he had told it. Bill might still be out there, going on and on, perhaps to a murder and hanging in the barracks. I'll only be a moment, Jerry."

"I'll get hold of Father O'Shea," Jerry grinned. "And while I'm at it, I'll stop by and have McLeod double my order for a full winter's supplies."

THE END.

STREET & SMITH'S WESTERN STORY ANNUAL 1946

PRINTED IN U.S.A.