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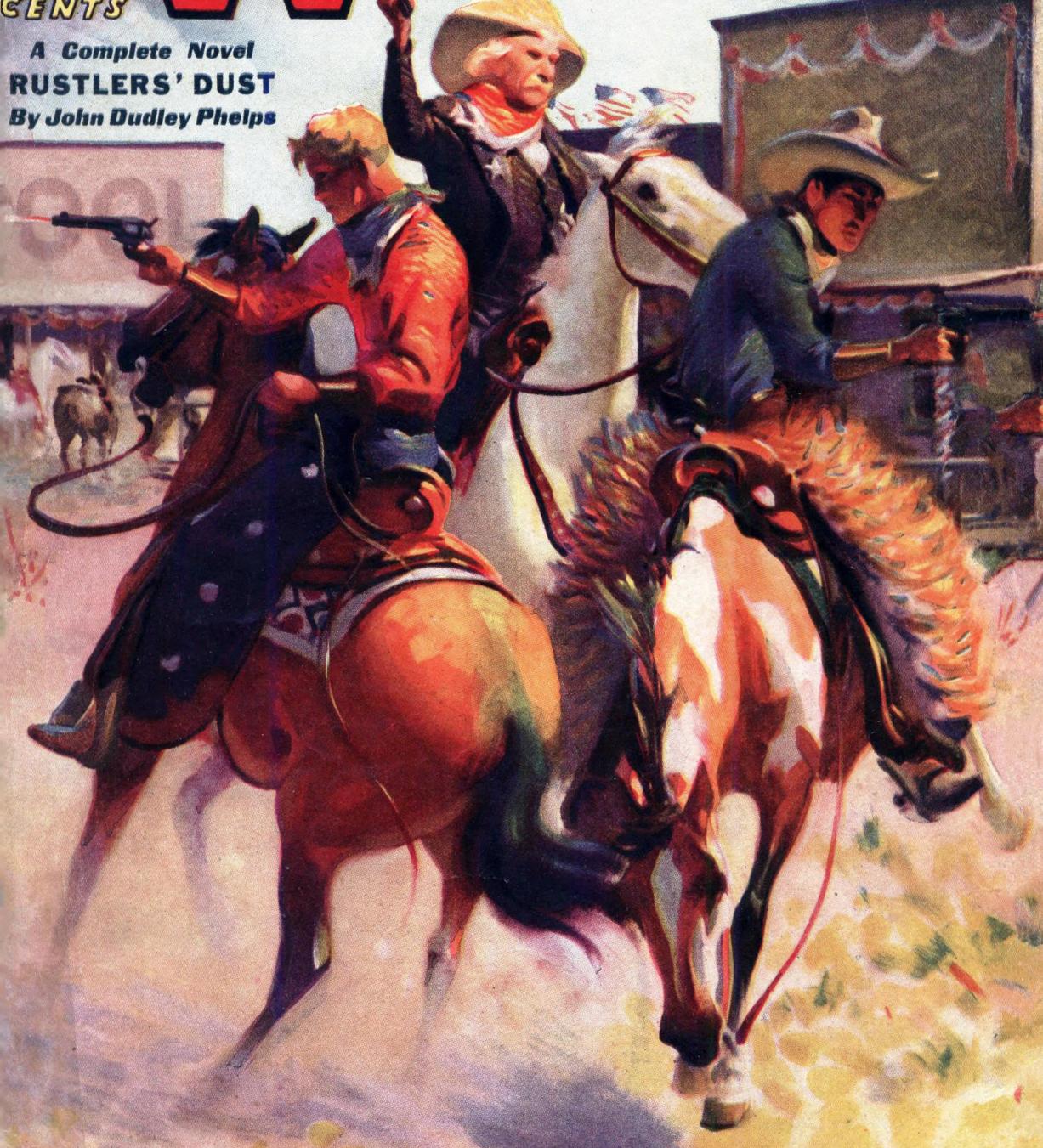
STREET
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WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE

JULY 10
1937

A Complete Novel
RUSTLERS' DUST
By John Dudley Phelps



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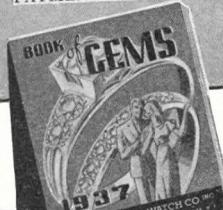
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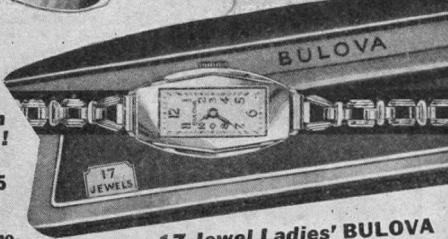
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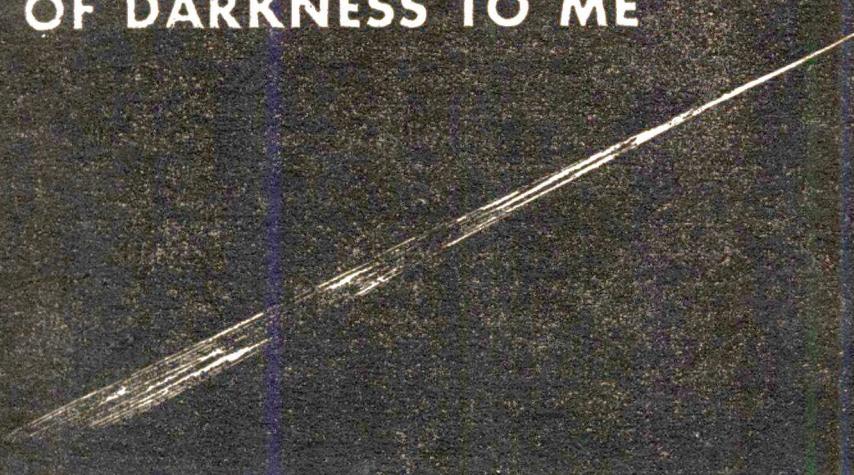
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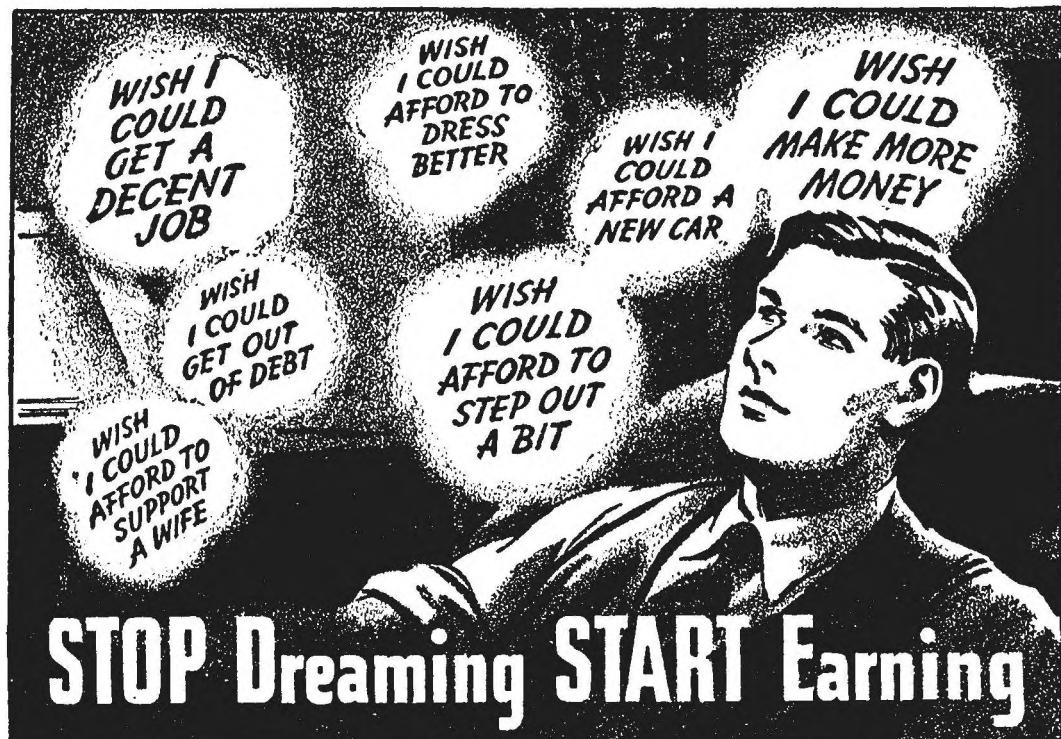
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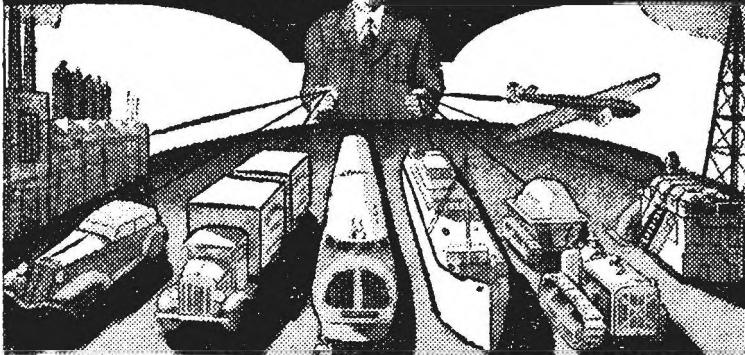
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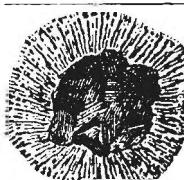
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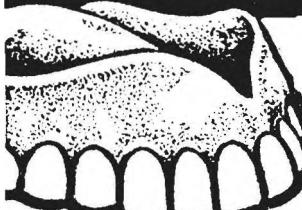
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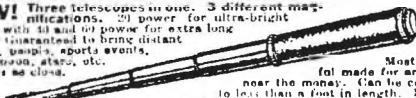
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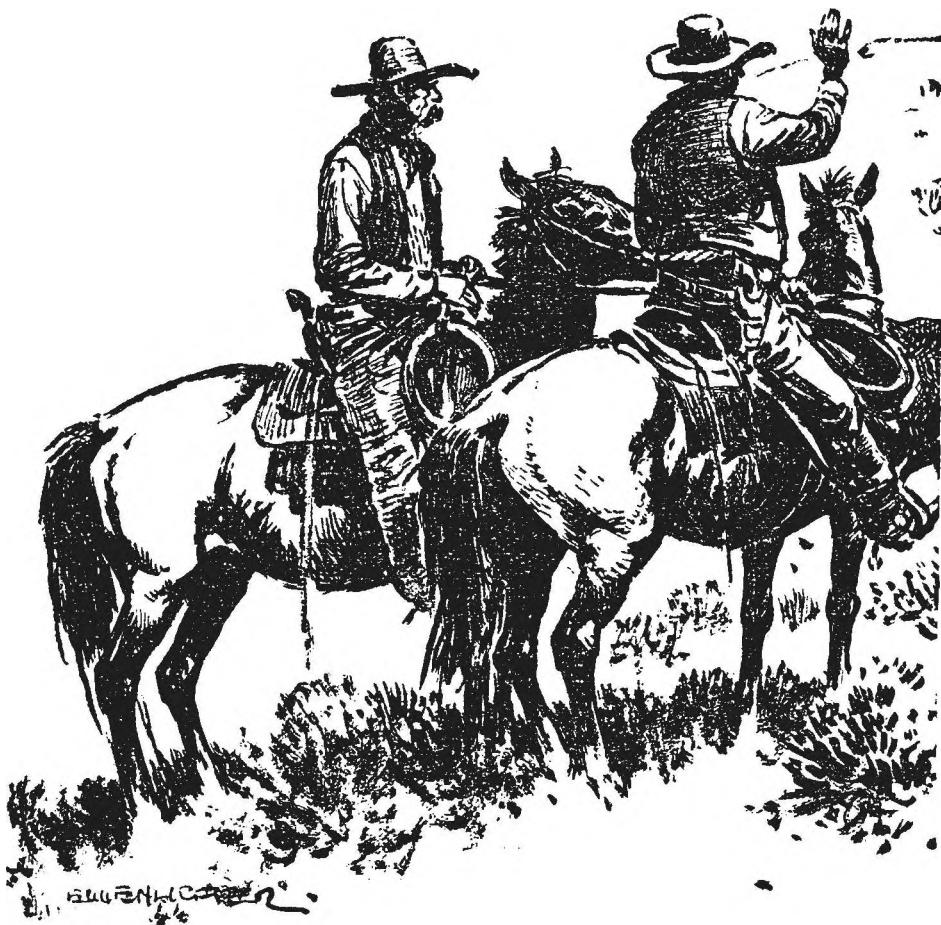
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RUSTLERS' DUST

By JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS

Author of "The Blue Barrier," etc.

CHAPTER I.

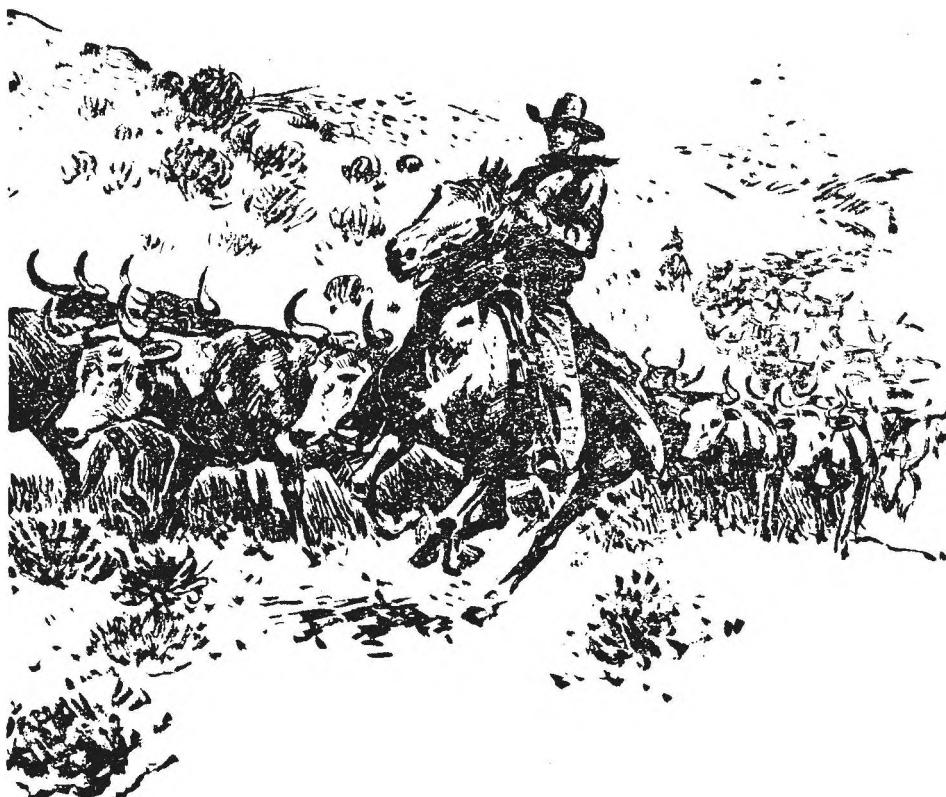
THIEVES' TRAIL.

THE young man reined his horse to the exact center of the wide trail and smiled a tight-lipped smile at his companion whose snow-white hair gleamed in the twilight.

"I'm a-tellin' you, Mae, all of it is a plumb, tee-total fool idea," the elder insisted.

"Listen," said the young man. From down the chaparral-covered slope sounded faintly in the distance the rustling tramp of a herd of cattle, not visible because of the intervening shoulder of the hill.

"There'll be trouble," said the



older man, twisting one down-drooping horn of his tobacco-stained mustache.

"Trouble," quietly repeated the young man. "Ain't this always been a land of big trouble, Steve?"

The other grunted.

Mace Brody had just passed his twenty-first birthday. He was a broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped young man with a freckled face and a nose inclined to be snubby. He smiled easily, though his square jaw could set solidly and his gray eyes never lost the quality of seeming to see all things at once. His hair was chestnut, almost red, and caught and held glowingly every light ray. The vagrant strands under his sombrero brim caught the light of the match with which Steve set aglow his cigarette stub.

Steve cocked an ear. The listless tramp of slow-moving cattle sounded clearer. Steve Miller was stringy, slightly bent with the years, but, in spite of his white hair, his unwrinkled, sun-browned face was youthful and his keen blue eyes were always defiant.

He edged his horse closer to Mace and drew a deep breath.

"You're goin' through with it?" he said with the air and tone of a man who asks a final question regarding a hopeless situation.

"I'm going through with it," Mace answered and under lowered lids watched the wise, old face of his foreman.

Then the old-timer loosed his gun in its holster.

"I came here with your father nigh onto forty year ago," he said softly,

as if he thought aloud, "when he started with a patch of a ranch of five hundred acres. Now—now"—Steve ground out the cigarette stub on the horn of his saddle—"you got ten thousand of the finest acres that a cow ever grazed. Boy, you've got a good herd of cows. And what you're doin' is jest the same as invitin' all the grief in these here parts to come a-hootin' to visit you. 'Nother thing," Steve went on quickly, "no man ever crossed Dill Beck and got very far." He looked at Mace's set face. "Jest as stubborn as your father was," he muttered.

Mace said nothing.

They sat listening to the approaching herd. The sunset colors still lingered in faint glows of rose and gold. Mace looked downslope southward. The land flowed in gentle undulations. Blue shadows were gathering on the eastern side of the live oaks and along the line of the chaparral while the open land, with its coverage of feed dried to a light yellow, was a soft golden hue. The crest of the distant Mexican hills was tinted with rose. The international boundary between Mexico and the United States was about a half mile south of where the two men waited in saddle. Above the western horizon, the sky was a quiet green under a band of pink clouds. There was no breeze, and in the air was the scent of sage because the horses had bruised the plant in passing. Just then appeared the point of the herd, dimly seen more as a moving shadow than as creatures of substance.

"There they are," Mace said.

Steve leaned toward the cows.

"Nobody ridin' the point," he observed.

"The hill's on one side and high chaparral on the other," Mace

pointed out. "Wonder how many men with 'em?"

"Three, four," Steve guessed. "Well, they'll be some chin music pronto."

That was true prophecy, for, with Mace and Steve blocking the trail, the cows slowed, swung their heads from side to side and bawled at the animals crowding them from behind. They tried to mill, but space would not permit.

Steve leaned out and, with his hat, slapped back a black-headed cow.

"When he whirled, did you catch the brand?" Mace asked.

"Block V, I'd call it."

"Block Arrowhead," Mace corrected. "That spread belongs to Colonel Kincade and is seventy miles from here. There's another Arrowhead cow."

"I spied a Tumbling T. That spotted feller."

"There's a Bar Cross," Mace added.

"And that's a long way off," Steve supplemented. "Hey, Mace, here comes a feller." This last was whispered.

A rider advanced between hillside and cattle, crooning to quiet the disturbed animals. He rode a small, wiry paint horse and was wiry himself.

MACE waited for the newcomer to speak, waited for him to come near enough to be recognized. The arrival worked cautiously around the cows and rode close enough for Mace to see his narrow face with a pointed chin. Mace knew him. He was "Slim" Sweet, Dill Beck's most trusted man. Sweet pulled up, and the pinto began to tongue the roller of his bit.

"Howdy," was his greeting, and, not waiting for return salutation, he

said, "You fellers holdin' us up a-purpose?" There was an aggressive ring in his voice.

"I figured you'd grab the idea at the first jump," Mace answered. "Beck showed you my letter?"

"Sure, he did, but he didn't believe it." Slim smiled, and his eyes, which were set a trifle obliquely, narrowed. "What's chewin' on you?" he demanded.

"I'm fed up on having my ranch a stampin' ground for Beck's stolen cattle," Mace said bluntly. "If he'll have his drive vent-branded and road-branded all legal, why, he can cross my land."

"Your ranch!" Slim said sneeringly. "Your old man's been dead 'bout a week."

"I buried him three days ago," Mace said huskily.

"He never said nothin' to Beck," Slim went on. "Your old man didn't give a hoot 'bout Beck trailin' his cows over this little panhandle of his ranch." The sneer still remained in Slim's speech. "Why are you rarin' up of a sudden?"

"My father was bedridden for a year before he died," Mace explained. "He never left the house in that time. He carried three bullets in his body. He was in continual pain. He never knew about Beck's tricks. If he had—" Hot resentment surged in Mace and he clamped his jaws, not trusting his tongue for further speech.

The cows had quieted, for those behind had ceased to press forward. Mace figured there were not many animals in the herd and this trial was Beck's answer to his letter. Steve sat motionless, his gaze fixed on Slim. The brief twilight was fast fading.

Slim moved restlessly in saddle.

"That was tough 'bout your old man," he said, but there was no sympathy in the tone of his voice. "We'll

just drive these here cows along." He pulled his horse's head around.

"Take 'em back the way you brought 'em," Mace snapped.

"You mean that?" Slim shot out, his voice rising sharply.

"Sure do."

Slim considered a moment.

"Feller," he snarled, "you're sure huntin' trouble. Got your gang, I see." He was looking south between Mace and Steve.

Mace gave a glance southward, and for a few seconds surprise held him rigid. About thirty feet away was a horseman, head and back of the horse and the upper body of the rider a shadowy silhouette against the distant light background. The horse had a white chest, the forefoot was white and also the off knee. This horse was a Brody horse, called White Shirt, but had not been ridden by any of the three cowboys who had accompanied Mace and Steve and who had been ordered to keep out of sight unless signaled. No man remained at the ranch except the Chinese cook, Chin Wah. Who this fellow was puzzled Mace, but he had no time to put thought on it.

Slim laughed, but not pleasantly.

"This was my idea," he confessed. "Dill didn't think you'd do anything but write letters, so I win twenty bucks. All right, Brody, we're trailin' back. The Brody brand is the Flyin' B, ain't it?"

"You know it is. Why?"

"Figure it out yourself," and, with this thrust, Slim put two fingers between his lips and whistled a shrill blast.

Like echo returned a faint halloo. A few minutes passed, then a rider was heard working his way between cows and hillside. Another man followed the first. They remained shadowy and unknown to Mace.

At their appearance, Slim ordered, "Turn this bunch back."

"How come?" one of Slim's men asked.

"Oh, none of your damn business," was Slim's short retort. "Make the drag the point and git gone. I got some ridin' to do."

Mace guessed Slim would streak to his boss. The Beck men began to work savagely to turn the cows. Mace and Steve kept apart, ready for any trick, but none was tried. Bawling, shoving and crowding, the cattle were forced back on the trail. Dust was in the air. Finally, riders and cows dissolved in the shadows.

Steve rode close to Mace and said: "That was pretty easy, too dang easy."

Mace was looking at the rider on the white-fronted horse that had not moved. Steve turned.

"Say, who rode that——" which was as far as he got.

"I'll go see," Mace put in. "Stay here and watch, just in case." He turned his horse and started him toward the motionless rider.

Mace believed in attention to details, that there was a reason for every act of man. His thought was that some friend or neighbor had borrowed his horse. He drew close to the white-marked horse.

"Good evening," was his greeting.

"Are—are you Mr. Mace Brody?"

"Why—great snakes! Uh!" And here, honest surprise held him speechless, for the voice was that of a girl. He managed to gasp out, "Pardon me," and snatched his hand from the butt of his holstered gun.

"I had to see you—as soon as I could," she said rapidly and paused to order her thoughts. Her voice was tense, vibrant with excitement. "I—I don't know where to begin."

"At the beginning," Mace suggested.

HE noticed she sat perfectly still. Her hands rested on the saddle horn. He wished he could see her face. He could see the oval of it. He could see she was slim and that she wore a jacket and pants.

"I've ridden seventy miles today," she commenced hurriedly. "I rode one horse to death, foundered another and rented one at the livery in—in that little town six or seven miles from your ranch house. He threw me right in front of your house and ran back to town."

By the way she said "me," Mace knew she was not accustomed to being thrown by a horse.

Suddenly, she swayed in saddle, her right arm shot out and that hand groped. Mace took her hand, supported her with his other hand. Contact of her firm, slender fingers caused a tingle to race through Mace, made him glad. Her face came near enough for him to see how perfect were her features. Then she straightened, braced her shoulders and raised her head. She withdrew her hand from his hold.

"My fault," she murmured huskily. "I haven't eaten since—since yesterday."

"You come right along with me," Mace invited. "Can you ride four miles?"

"You bet I can."

"Be right back."

Mace rode to where Steve watched. The foreman had moved down the trail a short way. Faintly sounded the rustle of hoofs. Crickets chirped from the chaparral, and Steve's horse stamped impatiently.

"They're goin', meek as Moses," Steve said. "No more spunk'n you'd find in a bale of hay."

"Go get the boys," Mace ordered, "and stick around here for a' hour."

He wasn't ready to tell Steve

about the girl. There was too much he didn't know himself. He turned his horse quickly.

"Who was that rode up on White Shirt?"

Mace pretended he didn't hear. He rode to the girl.

"Follow me close, Miss——" Purposely, he accented the title.

"Oh, I'm Della Kincade." There she stopped as if she had said enough.

But the name Kincade and the girl's seventy-mile ride informed Mace that this girl was from the Block Arrowhead Ranch. And there had been cows with Colonel Kincade's brand in the herd tended by Slim Sweet. He wanted to ask her the reason for her wild ride, but restrained.

They rode at a walk for a short distance to where a boulder loomed in shadowy grayness east of the trail.

Mace pulled up and called: "Hi, George, Joe, Tod!"

"All here," came the response.

"Ride uptrail a hundred yards or so and you'll find Steve. He'll tell you what to do."

"Yeah, all right, Mace."

Stirrings and the subdued voices of men sounded from the vicinity of the boulder. Mace rode on down the trail, turned to the west where was open ground.

Della rode beside Mace. He set the pace, a fast walk.

She said: "Those men back there asked you no questions."

"No, they didn't," Mace replied slowly. "Here along the border we've got the habit of not asking questions."

"That's pretty much true all over the West," she remarked.

"Specially here," he added. "But I'm going to break the rule. Why did you come to me and how did you find me?"

The horses paced a couple of rope lengths before she spoke.

"I got to town about an hour before sunset," she began. "My horse was pretty bad, and the first thing he did was break for a water trough. I couldn't stop him, and anyway the reins broke. I made a lot of fuss, I guess, and a big man—he was a whopper—came out of a store. He had long, red hair and a great, bushy, red beard."

"That was Wes Marble," Mace said, "the town marshal. He's a good friend of mine."

"I found that out," Della said. "He certainly is. He admires you no end. Well, that scrub horse just about finished the water in the trough before Mr. Marble could stop him. He—I mean the horse—stood there with his front legs spread and his head dropped and he trembled all over. He—I mean Mr. Marble—got some men to take him to the livery. And when I told him what I wanted, he sent me to you. He said you'd fill the bill. Are you a law officer, Mr. Brody?"

Mace shook his head, then said, "No." He explained there wasn't any law around there except Wes Marble, whose authority did not extend beyond the township wherein was located the small cow town of La Salina.

"Ride sharp to the left," Mace cautioned. "There's an old oak trunk which we must ride around."

"I know," Della said. "Your Chinaman warned me."

Mace's thought was that this girl got around easily by following directions.

Perhaps she sensed his thought for she said: "It was easy to find you. Your cook said I'd find a wide space between the oaks and just follow it to the cross trail."

"That's right."

ACROSS the panhandle was a clear swath among the trees a hundred yards wide and straight as a die. Mace was amused because this girl seemed unaware she had not given her reason in seeking him out. She was alert and clear-headed, he decided, had high courage and, too, that indefinable something which, for lack of a better term, caused a person to be known as a thoroughbred. He did not want to press her for her story until she had eaten. He watched closely for signs of weakness in her, but noted none.

"Isn't that light from your ranch house?" she asked, pointing ahead and a little to the right.

"Yes. We'll be there in a few minutes."

The horses quickened their pace.

The Brody home ranch was an L-shaped adobe, white-walled and with a wide overhang of shake roof. A wide, open porch lay along the inner angle of the L and this was the front. Three oaks in a row stood before the house, and two of them were connected by a four-by-four timber which served as hitch rail. The windows in the L were aglow, and two large ones at the other end. The front door was a dark oblong in the white wall.

The door opened, and against the light was outlined a chubby figure.

"Hey, Chin Wah," Mace called. "We have company. You get some grub."

"Me know; me fix him," the Chinaman answered in a squeaky singsong.

"You go in the house, Miss Kincaide," Mace directed. "Chin Wah will show you where you wash. I'll go corral the horses."

As he rode off, leading White Shirt, Chin Wah was bowing Della into the house. Mace watered the horses,

hung up the saddles and took care of the gear. He washed at the faucet by the bunk house, then hurried to the house.

The long, wide, familiar room with its comfort-worn furniture was deserted. He walked to the table and turned up the wick of the lamp. He noticed Chin Wah had set places for two at an end of the table. Mace scowled at the litter upon the hearth, the helter-skelter positions of chairs, the general disorder, and thought it took a woman to keep a house neat. There had been no woman in the Brody house since the death of Mace's mother ten years past.

Della entered from the hall that led to a spare bedroom. Involuntarily, Mace started. Della Kincaide's hair was red, not brick-red or caroty, but some shade between copper and gold.

She smiled slowly at Mace. "You came near being a redhead yourself," she said.

"You sure hit what was on my mind," Mace said, grinning back. "I can't lay tongue to the color of your hair, but it's beau—pretty," he ended lamely.

She walked leisurely to the table. From one hand dangled the gun belt with its holstered weapon which she had worn.

"I haven't paid much attention to the color, but it's just Kincaide, I guess." She placed belt and gun upon a chair. "It's still loaded. My father says an unloaded gun is as useful as a stick of firewood."

Mace nodded in approval. He unbuckled his gun belt and with the holstered weapon laid it upon the clear end of the table.

Chin Wah, felt-soled slippers slapping the floor, came in on a trot, bearing a trayful of food which he placed on the table. Mace and Della

sat down, she taking the chair next to the one where her gun lay.

"You—you'll excuse me if I eat a lot?" Della said, eying the mound of biscuits, the boiled beef, gravy and "spuds."

Mace grinned and answered: "You tie in for all you're worth."

When Della had taken the edge from her hunger, she began to talk.

She said directly: "Late yesterday afternoon, twenty-five hundred head of prime stock were rustled from our Block Arrowhead ranch. Two of our men were killed, my father wounded."

Mace dropped his fork, gripped the table edge.

"As soon as I knew my father was out of danger, I saddled and followed the thieves. They headed south towards the border. I rode on ahead. I told you I killed one horse. I got another and he took me to—what is the name of that little town?"

"La Salina."

"Yes. The marshal helped me. I asked him to name me an honest, brave man." A flush came to Della's cheeks. She looked down at her empty plate.

Mace felt his own face grow warm.

"Was that all you told him?" he asked.

She nodded.

He thought a moment. Doubtless, the herd was being driven to the border across the panhandle, the only outlet, in fact, for stolen cattle.

"You said two of your men were killed?" he inquired, knowing a ranch the size of the Block Arrowhead must carry a good-sized crew.

"My brother and six men were building a line fence on our northern line, fifteen miles away. I sent a man to tell him."

"Any plan for getting in touch with your brother?"

"No. I left that to chance. That herd can't get here before day after to-morrow."

"That's about right."

There came a loud knock on the door.

Mace got to his feet.

"Come in!"

The lock clicked and the door swung in. There loomed in the doorway a tall, wide man. The sombrero was pushed to the back of his head, exposing fully a round face with a low forehead under curling, black hair. He was coatless and wore a vest made of the hide of a brindle calf, hair out. His heavy lips were shaped to a smile that tried to be friendly. He lounged against the doorframe with right arm hidden from sight. A gun belt slanted across his loins, but the holster was not visible. Dark eyes opened wide, his gaze held fast on Mace. He bowed to Della and smiled afresh.

"What do you want, Dill Beck?" Mace wanted to know.

CHAPTER II.

BECK LOSES HIS HAT.

JUST dropped in," Dill said, "sort of neighborlylike. Got your letter." His voice, not unpleasant, had a rumbling quality to it.

"It was plain enough, wasn't it?"

"Not entirely, Brody! Pretty hard to believe that one cowman is shuttin' off his land to another."

"Seen Slim Sweet?"

"Nope. Not since—he's see." Dill screwed his right eye shut and thought. "Not since early this mornin'." His eyes narrowed.

To Mace, the ring of truth was not in Dill's voice.

"The trail across your little panhandle," Dill went on, "has been the way cows was drove to Mexico long afore us white men settled these

parts. And why? 'Cause it's the only way in fifty mile where cows can be drove to Mexico. I do a lot of business with Mexico."

"I'll tell you what I told Slim," Mace declared. "You can drive all the cows you want over my property if you'll have 'em vent-branded and road-branded in a legal fashion."

"That hain't necessary," Dill argued. "The sheriff and his deputies are playin' checkers at the county seat a hundred miles away." He licked his lips.

Mace began to lose patience, but tried to hold himself in check. Unrealized by him, his left boot toe began a soft tapping on the floor. He kept his gaze upon Beck, tried, too, to catch a sound that would show he had men with him. Yet Mace knew Beck had brought company. Della sat sideways in her chair; one hand was on the chair back, the other lay in her lap. She watched the space behind Beck.

"Well," Beck began, rubbing his right shoulder against the doorframe, "that panhandle you own sticks outa the bulk of your ranch like a thumb, only not so large. Somewhere's around three hundred acres, hain't it?"

"It's a mile along the border and about a half mile wide. Yes, there's about three hundred acres in it. Why?"

"Give you five dollars a' acre?"

Mace just looked at him.

"That's a fair price, Mace."

"Not for sale."

"Ten?"

"Not for sale, I said." Mace's boot toe tapped louder.

"Fifteen?"

"No!"

"Uh, eighteen?"

"Look here, Beck, I'm not selling

anything to you. Get that in your head."

Beck considered Mace in a calculating way. "I'll go twenty. Six thousand fer a bunch of land that's jest good to hold the earth together. What say?"

With a stamp, Mace quieted his tapping foot. "You asked for it," he stated. "I'll give you the whole works. You came to this country a year ago. A few months later, herds along the border were whittled."

"Herds are allus whittled along the border," Beck growled. "Mine was, too."

Mace continued as if there had been no interruption: "The whittling quit along the border, then commenced worse than ever in a widening circle, half a circle, rather."

"What are you gittin' at?"

"The center point of that circle is your ranch."

"Meanin'?"

"Say, Beck," Mace began explosively, "you know blame well what I'm getting at. I got proof you're running stolen cattle. I know—"

"Somebody's been talkin'," Beck shouted, quieted. "I mean," he amended, "somebody's been tellin' damned lies." His eyes narrowed, his jaw outthrust.

Mace's boot toe was tapping vigorously. He thought Beck was entitled to a show-down, but he did not intend to expose the proof he possessed. And yet that proof could do no good unless presented to legal authority. Dill Beck would allow no time for that.

Beck stiffened slightly in his lounging position.

"Nothin' hain't happened to you. You hain't lost no money. You hain't been pestered."

"In other words, it's none of my business."

"You can cut it that way."

"I sort of figure it is my business," Mace said. "My father came here and took up this land and with it he took up a heap of trouble. He carried three bullets to his grave, but he made this a decent country for men to live in, and it stayed that way until you busted in here. While my father was bedridden, he couldn't do anything, nor could I, but now I'm starting where he left off and I aim to put this country back where he left it. Can you savvy that, Beck?"

"Your old man was called Honest Bill Brody," Beck sneered. "S'pose you figure to heir his nickname like you heired his ranch and cows."

"I'm done talking, Beck. Take your mug out of my doorway and get gone."

"You won't sell?"

Mace kept silent.

"How 'bout j'inin' up with me?"

There was cold insult in the big man's voice.

Mace sprang from the table. His face was red, his eyes blazing. Beck snapped away from the doorframe, and his hidden right arm came to view, six-gun held in hand. The weapon leveled on Mace.

"Pull up, cowboy, unless you want to buck lead."

MACE came to a rocking halt, caught his balance. He knew he should have snatched for his holstered gun that lay upon the table. Now, he was too far from the table.

"You got some nerve tanglin' with me," Beck snarled. "I could take you apart with one hand tied behind me."

Mace was calculating his chance for a quick leap.

"An' don't move outa your tracks," Beck said and considered. "Go on an' try to jump me. I'm goin' to plug you, anyhow. I'm tellin' you

now, I'll grab your ranch, the whole kit an' b'ilin' of it. Any particular place you want to git shot? Sing out."

"Go to the devil, Beck."

"You're gittin' your ticket in a couple shakes."

Mace saw the gun steady, saw Beck's thumb press upon the hammer. The knuckle of the thumb whitened with the pressure. To Mace, it seemed the thumb was as large as a whole hand and was pressing downward rapidly. He tensed, ready to leap aside; he could dodge if he could outguess Beck. Mace thought he detected a moment's hesitation in Beck and started a lunging drive for the shelter of the table.

A gun roared, but not Beck's. Della, keeping quiet and motionless, had gained her gun from the chair beside her. The bullet struck the doorframe on a level with Beck's head. Splinters showered upon his face. Her second shot sped close enough to his head to hit the sombrero, which whirled from his head.

Beck staggered back, ducked and disappeared from sight.

Mace got to his feet, grabbed his gun from the table, blew out the lamp and dashed to the door. He slipped just outside. He was sure Beck had not come alone and yet no sound indicated the presence of any man. Katydids and crickets chirped, a slow night breeze disturbed the foliage of the oaks, and from the direction of the corrals, a horse squealed.

"Listen," came a whisper at Mace's elbow.

So intent had he been, Mace was unaware that Della stood beside him. He listened, heard nothing; then, faint as fall of raindrops in the dust, came the measured beat of hoofs. Mace listened until he was sure.

"From the east," he said.

"The way we came."

"Yes. Likely, Steve and the boys are riding in."

"Where do you suppose Beck went to?"

Mace shook his head.

"Listen, Mace."

He did for several seconds and heard nothing, but the louder beat of hoofs from the east.

"Two riders went west, towards the town. Of course, I don't know if they're going to town," she added.

"You sure have sharp ears."

"Father says I have ears like a fox."

"I believe it." The hoofbeats were louder, nearer. "Let's go," Mace went on. "We can't take chances."

They entered the house and stood close to the door.

Chin Wah's slippers slapped the hallway from the kitchen.

He called: "Hi, you, Mace!"

"Right here."

"All light, me see." He approached. "Me heah bang, bang. Look out window. Lamp shine out window. Me see two men lun velly fast. Go west."

"Recognize them, Chin Wah?"

"No can do. Lamp shine not much. One man got no hat."

"I did get his hat," Della put in.

Mace recalled he had noticed a sombrero on the floor near the doorway and stooped to hunt for it. His groping fingers closed upon the tip of Beck's high-crowned sombrero. Between the pinch of felt was some obstruction, and his ear caught a slight crackling. Feeling with a hand inside the crown, his fingers met folds of paper. Many a man carried papers in his hat. Mace itched with curiosity.

Della said: "Here are those riders."

Closing the hat firmly so the pa-

pers within could not fall out, Mace went to the door. Four riders were pulling up before the house.

"That you, Steve?"

"Yeah," came the quick return. "We're all here."

"Tie up and blow in."

There were jinglings of bridle rings and spur rowels as the cowboys dismounted.

"It's safe enough now," Mace said to no one in particular, then told Chin Wah to light the lamp.

"He went back to the kitchen, I think," Della said.

Mace put the hat on the table, scratched a match on his pants, and cupped the growing flame in his hands. The wick caught and he replaced the chimney and shade. The four men came into the room, hitching up pants and adjusting gun belts. At sight of Della they pulled up as one man, snatched off their hats.

"My gosh!" exclaimed Munn.

Steve Miller tugged at a mustache end and made no attempt to conceal his admiration.

"This is Miss Kincade," Mace said. "Miss Kincade, those two gents by the door are Joe Brooks and Tod Trent. You can sort out Joe from Tod because Joe has the buck-teeth and Tod owns that funny face, but he ain't sensitive. And that's George Munn fooling with his hat, but generally he doesn't keep his eyes and mouth open so wide. Then there's Steve Miller, who's been foreman of the Flying B since Heck was a pup." Mace waited until the nods and murmurs of the introductions were finished, then became serious.

HE told of Beck's visit, closing his eyes and thinking hard so as to miss no details. As yet he said nothing of the Block Arrowhead's rustled herd. He finished the account.

Della was looking, brow puckered with thought, at Beck's sombrero, which still held the papers. The three cowboys stood with their hands on their hips, and their attitude and the expression on their faces portrayed their willingness to back up their boss.

Steve shook his white head, and his voice was dolorous as he declared: "You shouldn't have started it now, Mace. We ain't—"

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," Mace took the words from the foreman's mouth. "Do you think, knowing how my father felt about such things, that I'd lay off?" His boot toe began to tap the floor. "Then there's this: the Block Arrowhead Ranch has been raided, and this moment twenty-five hundred head of beef are being driven this way."

"Kincade's Block Arrowhead!" Steve murmured.

All eyes looked upon Della.

"She'll tell you," Mace said.

And Della did.

Mace broke the silence that followed.

"That's a circumstance that helps us," he said. "That's luck, because Beck's force will be divided. But get this, you fellers: this ain't a war against rustlers. We can't do much about rustling, for as long as there's cows, there'll be two-legged varmints to steal 'em. Dill Beck has to be busted and run out of the country. For if he ain't, he'll git us. He's started already. If allowed his own way, he'd gobble the Flying B as he's got other ranches. How about Pop Jones's spread?"

It was a general question answered by George Munn, who said: "Pop Jones, who was a lone man, disappeared. Word come, through Beck, he'd sold out to Beck and vamoosed. Pop had a wooden leg and couldn't

ride, so he pirooted around in a buckboard drawn by a pair of claybanks. Nobody saw Pop drag off. Nobody ever see the claybanks, but I spotted the buckboard, repainted, bein' used by some of Beck's hired help."

"How do you know it was Pop Jones's rig?" Della asked.

"I used to work for Pop, and once I flung a hot stamp iron in the buckboard bed. The brand was still there when Beck had it, though it was daubed over with paint. Shucks, miss, once you know a rig, paint can't fool you."

Della accepted the proof.

"There's no need to go over how Beck got hold of the Alvarez layout or the Buckeye ranch." Mace paused for breath; his boot toe was busy.

"But why don't you honest cowmen get together?" Della wanted to know.

"We got Beck on two sides of us," Mace explained, "and there's nobody interested on the other side. The fourth side is Mexico." He drew a deep breath. "So," he began, "it ain't rustling we have to fight; it's a fight to keep this border country a decent place for decent men to live. If we don't, we'll have a' outlaw kingdom run by Beck, only we won't be here to know about it." Mace drew another breath. "Guess that's a chore to hold us a while."

Sober-faced, his men nodded assent.

"I'm gittin' old," Steve said, "and I don't crave a ruckus, but I'll tote my end." The old-timer squared his shoulders. "I reckon, Mace, you got the situation sized up rightly. What do you figure to do?"

Mace had been thinking along that line. He put his thoughts in order. His gaze was upon the rock fireplace with its hearth littered by cigarette butts and burned match

sticks. By the hearth stood the raw-hide-bottomed chair wherein his father had sat the few times he could be carried from his bed. From Honest Bill Brody, Mace inherited the same spirit which sent the knights of old stampeding to the Holy Land. He didn't know that; he knew only he had a job to do in the world and he wasn't going to be hindered by Beck and the qualities he stood for.

"Looks to me," Mace began, "the best hunch is to ride out and meet the Block Arrowhead herd."

"Fair enough," agreed George, "but won't Beck take a whirl at us?"

"That fits in," Mace answered. "He has, anyhow, twice as many men as we have and most of 'em don't give a hoot what they do or how. There's five of us here, and Shorty Baker and Dutch Baumgarten are out at the west line camp. You ride out and fetch 'em in, Joe."

The sound of approaching, slapping slippers was heard.

"O. K.," Joe agreed. He pulled his pants belt in a notch.

"Hit! You come eat him glub. Bum-by, no good. Me thlow him out." There was impatience in Chin Wah's squeaky singsong.

"Go eat, you fellers," Mace ordered. "Miss Kincade and I had our dinner."

"I'd just as soon ride right away," Joe volunteered.

"You eat first," Mace advised.

THE four men went to eat. Sounded the scrape and thump of chairs, then the subdued murmur of excited conversation.

"Those are all fine men," Della praised. She was standing by the table.

"They are," Mace agreed. His glance came to rest upon Beck's sombrero, which he had forgotten.

"And every last one of 'em is a cow-man."

"That doesn't mean they can't hold their own with outlaws, Mace."

"You bet your boots it doesn't," he said, still looking at the hat.

"If you go to rescue our herd, what about your own property? Would Beck burn your house and barn?"

Mace didn't want to talk about that. He figured he had to attack, not wait until the enemy came to him fully prepared. Then, if Beck continued his policy of ranch grabbing, he would not destroy that which he desired.

"I'll chance that; have to," Mace said.

She changed the subject and asked: "Why are you staring so hard at that hat?"

"That reminds me," Mace said. "I haven't thanked you for saving my life. I do now. And—well, it's sort of hard to find the right kind of words."

Della's face flushed and she smiled as she said quickly, "That's all right." She was embarrassed a moment. She changed the subject by saying: "Is that hole in the crown where my bullet went?"

"Sure is. You nearly nailed him."

Della paled. "I—I didn't want to kill him—only scare him."

Mace gave his attention to the hat so Della could pull herself together. There were two folded papers in the crown of the sombrero. One was soiled and had been folded and unfolded many times. This one he took up and smoothed out. He held the sheet nearer the light.

"Look here, Della."

She stood beside Mace, perused the paper.

"It's a tally sheet of some sort," she decided.

Mace nodded. On the left-hand side of the paper was a list of brands

and opposite each were tally marks. Again, the tally marks opposite a brand were divided among themselves by brackets and each bracket dated.

"There's our brand, the last one!" Della cried.

Opposite the Block Arrowhead was a full tally followed by two marks.

"Seven," Mace counted. "Steve and I spotted a couple to-night in that small bunch Slim had. And the date is to-day. Hm-m-m! Sort of looks like we got a hold of Beck's private rustlin' tally sheet."

"I guess those seven cows of ours were strays," Della put in. "We haven't been whittled that I know about. They couldn't be from the big herd."

Mace nodded. He was checking the brands and totaling the tally marks.

"Ten brands and three hundred and eight tally marks," he concluded. "All of the brands came from quite a distance. Looks like Beck has been widening out. This"—he shook the paper—"backs up the proof I got while my father was sick. Let's see what this other paper is."

He opened it out to find a letter addressed to Beck. By the formation of the capitals, the spelling and phraseology, Mace knew the writing was by a Mexican. To confirm this, he glanced at the bottom of the sheet to find the signature, Don Pedro. As he read the letter, his jaw set and his boot toe began to tap.

"Read this, Della," he said abruptly.

She took the letter and read it, gave it back to Mace.

"That certainly gives us a new angle," she observed. "This Don Pedro wants action."

"Beck ain't like those who won't try," Mace returned, and scowled.

"There'll sure be a hot time around here." He grinned, then sobered. "That letter has to go to a United States marshal as soon as possible." He thought for a few seconds. "Maybe Wes Marble can help me."

"Where is the marshal?"

"Dunno. Some place up north." Mace looked about for his gun belt and hat. "I'll ride one of the horses at the rail outside."

"I'll go, too."

"No. Listen, Della. I have to go alone. No use of company. And you'll tell the boys when I'm gone. Don't want 'em butting in." The clatter of knife and fork and hum of voices came undiminished. "I'll give you instructions."

She was to tell Steve that all of them except Joe, who was to fetch Shorty and Dutch, were to stick around the home ranch and wait his return. He put the papers from Beck's hat in a pocket.

"So long, Della."

He could see she didn't like the arrangement.

She took three quick steps in his direction, halted.

"Good luck," she breathed.

Mace smiled at her, then went quietly out into the night.

CHAPTER III.

A SCHEME IS HATCHED.

SLIM SWEET heard the two shots fired in the Flying B ranch house and, with drawn gun, started on a dead run for the front door. Swerving about an oak, he nearly collided with Beck, who was tearing along at top speed.

Beck barked out an oath and continued.

Slim followed. Both men ran on their toes. Fifty yards west of the house, their horses waited. Slim swung into saddle, while Beck

climbed clumsily to his seat, yanked up his horse's head.

"You'll break that horse's jaw," Slim warned.

"To hell with him!"

"Where's your hat?"

"To hell with it!"

"Say, what's chewin'—"

"To hell with you!"

"Must think he owns the place," Slim grumbled to himself.

He made no attempt at further conversation. He was used to Beck's black moods, knew how dangerous it was to monkey with him in any way when such a spell was on him. Nor did Slim try to keep pace with his boss, who was cursing as he spurred his horse to a mad run, headed for La Salina. He figured there was no necessity to kill two horses.

Slim pulled up about a quarter of a mile from the ranch house. Light shone out of the open door, illuminating a space before the house. He heard the distant beat of hoofs, saw the riders pull up before the house, then the men file into the dwelling. He waited, tense. No one reappeared, and he waited long enough to assure himself there would be no immediate pursuit. He rode on after Beck, stopping on the crests of rises to listen. He heard no sound of following horses.

Slim was a level-headed outlaw and concerned himself not at all with riddles. He figured Beck had shot Mace Brody, which act had its good points, but at the present time was mighty poor judgment. Brody's men weren't the sort of *hombres* to sit on their pants and do nothing about injury or death to one of them. Slim shrugged his shoulders and rode on at a good clip, knowing he would find Beck at his favorite hang-out, the Blue Star Saloon.

The road dropped gently down, and there on the plain below glim-

mered the lights of La Salina. Slim smiled. It wasn't often he got to town. He figured he could tip over a couple of his favorite drinks before he had to face Beck. The horse increased his pace.

"You'll be lucky to get a bellyful of water," he told the horse.

The buildings were shadowy oblongs in the night; the direct shine of lamps through windows or doors was a golden hue; indirect light was gray. Slim looked at the golden light. There was nothing better in the world than gold. He would have plenty if events during the next few days turned out O. K.

He walked his horse into town. The Blue Star was at the other end. Salina consisted of three saloons, a restaurant, a general store, blacksmith shop, a livery stable, several small dwellings, and a few other establishments. There was always an air of desuetude about the place. All buildings were run down, and long since, most of the paint had weathered away; but the saloons were all right, especially the Blue Star.

As Slim passed the Telegraph Bar, he glanced at the two horses at the hitch rail and raised in stirrups in an attempt to see over the swinging doors, but he couldn't make it. There were a couple of nags at the hitch rail of the Red Front Saloon, but none before the Blue Star. Slim was not concerned because Beck's horse was not visible. Beck had to be at the Blue Star because he was expecting a message.

Slim nosed his horse to the rail of the Blue Star, swung from the saddle, yanked the reins over the horse's head and strode on. He pushed through the doors into the saloon.

The bartender looked up. He was

a thin fellow with a fringe of hair around his bald pate.

"'Bout time," he declared, putting the glass he had just wiped upon the back bar. "Beck's waitin'. He's busted one chair."

Slim looked at the short hallway leading to the room which Beck was accustomed to occupy.

"Gimme a drink, Walt." Slim pointed to a whisky bottle with a green label.

A lusty thump sounded from the hallway.

The bartender winced and said: "You go smooth him down afore he busts all the furniture."

"Gimme a—"

"No! Beat it!" The bartender motioned violently. "You're the only one what can handle him."

A crash resounded.

"There's another," moaned the bartender. "Slim, you git in thar."

"All right, all right," Slim agreed and hastened to go to Beck.

He opened the door and paused at the threshold of a dingy room. Beck sat slumped in his seat; his curling black hair was wind-whipped, and his eyes smoldered. One arm lay upon the table. The light from the bracket lamp fell full upon his face, revealing the pout upon his heavy lips and a streak of dried blood upon his right cheek.

SLIM closed the door and righted the chair that lay upon its side. He sat down, to discover the chair had lost a leg, broken off by Beck in his fury; so he balanced upon the remaining three. He looked at the whisky bottle and glass upon the table; glanced at the one window, which was so grimy it was impossible to see through the glass.

Gradually, Beck's lips relaxed; he hunched himself upward in the chair and reached for the bottle.

"Have a drink?" he growled, upending the bottle on his mouth.

Slim waited until the drink could take effect and smiled inwardly, for Beck was beginning to calm.

"What happened, Dill?" Slim wanted a drink, but he didn't like Beck's sort of liquor.

"Damn near got my head blown off."

"That happens to all of us once so often," Slim returned casually.

"And by a gal." Beck's fist banged the table.

"Girl!" Hastily, Slim caught his balance.

"Yes, gal."

"Didn't know Brody had any woman hanging around."

"She hain't the kind you think," Beck said grudgingly. "I had a bead on Brody, had him dead to rights, and, when I was about to squeeze the trigger, she fetched up a gun from som'eres and damn near got me. Is my face bleedin'?"

"Streak of blood on your right cheek."

"Splinter from the doorframe got me, and at the next pop she blew my hat off."

"Blowed your hat off!"

"Don't sit there yammerin' 'bout a hat," Beck stormed. He opened his mouth, closed it. "Uh, great gosh a'mighty!" burst from him. He leaped to his feet and began to claw at his pockets. The pocket openings in the calfskin vest were stiff and gave him trouble, but he probed each one. "Gone!" he shouted. "Gone!" He stared wildly at his foreman.

"What's gone?"

"The papers."

Light came to Slim. "Fool habit of yours of carrying papers in your hat," he murmured.

"What's that?"

"Aw, nothin'." Slim eased his po-

sition. "What papers was in your lid?" he asked.

"Tally sheet of what we've run across the border lately and the letter from Don Pedro."

"He been writin' again?"

Beck grabbed for the whisky bottle, took a long swig and banged the bottle on the table. The glass jumped in air, landed sideways and rolled in a semicircle upon the table.

"Got the letter just as I was ridin' out to meet you to see how you'd made out," Beck began in explanation. "Didn't have a show to tell you. Anyhow, I forgot." He scowled and dropped heavily upon the chair.

Slim, balancing upon the three-legged chair, put his head in his hands and waited patiently. He had warned Beck not to get rough with Brody, to remain friendly, or at least show no resentment. And Beck sure had put his foot in it. Upon Don Pedro, Slim knew, depended the fortune of Beck and of himself, to a lesser degree, as shareholder.

"What's Don Pedro's word?"

"Give a feller time," Beck growled. His lips twisted as if reluctant to speak. "You know how quick-tempered Don Pedro is?"

"And if he don't get his own way, he's the devil himself," Slim added and to himself, "He ain't the only one with a hot head."

Beck nodded. A worried look came to his face.

"He says he has to have three thousand head o' beef over the border by Saturday."

"Well, we got a big bunch comin' down from the Block Arrowhead; just how many, we don't know until that rider comes in with the tally. He ain't showed up yet?"

"No," Beck answered mechanically and returned to the subject of Don Pedro. "If he don't git the

beef, he can't go on with his revolution. He has to have the beef to feed his men. You know how them Mexicans are: plenty of frijoles and meat, they'll stick and fight. No grub, no stick. No army, and Don Pedro will have to be mighty shifty to keep outa the clutches of the rurales. So we don't come through with the beef, we lose—what's three thousand times twenty-five dollars?"

"A lot of money," Slim said gloomily. His cut was ten per cent. He snapped up his head. "Say, don't Don Pedro owe us for that last run?"

"Uh-huh, dammit!"

The two men looked into each other's eyes. Slim's narrow face seemed squeezed, accenting his pointed, fox-like chin. Beck's large mouth was drawn into hard lines.

Then, as with one voice, both exclaimed: "Mace Brody."

Their looks still held.

"He's got to be bad," Beck declared in a hoarse whisper.

"He sure does," Slim agreed.

And it was just too bad. Slim thought, that now, a crucial time, Beck had put himself in a position where it was legitimate for Brody or any of Brody's men to shoot him on sight. There was just one answer, Mace Brody's death.

Beck reached for the whisky bottle, but stayed his hand as light footfalls sounded in the hallway. Came a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in!" Beck invited.

THE door opened to admit a slight cowboy. He had a boyish face, though his blue eyes had in them the glint of steel. His lips were thin and bloodless. About his lean loins were buckled crossed gun belts, each supporting a holstered, pearl-handled six-gun. On his face, clothes, and hat lay the dust of travel. He bobbed his head.

"How're tricks, Buck?"

"Slick," he answered. "Couldn't be slicker." There was a silky softness to his low-pitched voice. "We got the Block Arrowhead herd. You'll have to excuse us, Dill, 'cause we ain't had time to tally 'em. About twenty-five, twenty-six hundred we figure."

"No trouble, eh?"

"Not a bit, so far," Buck answered, and somehow Slim got the impression Buck was sorry there was no trouble.

"Men git there?"

"The six men you sent blew in middle of the afternoon. They're guardin' the rear."

"Good! When you git back, there'll be twelve men with the herd." Beck thought, then asked: "Sure you hain't followed—the herd, I mean?"

"If so, they ain't showed up." Buck's thin lips parted. His teeth were even, clean as a wolf's. "One rider did tail us for a while, then swung to the west out of sight."

"West?" Beck repeated, puckering his brows. "Hain't no place that a way he could git help. Any idear what he was up to?"

"It wasn't a him; it was a her," Buck said slyly. "Found that out later from a nester who's hogged a water hole halfway between the Block Arrowhead and La Salina. He told me a girl in man's clothing came to get a horse. She'd ridden her own clean out. I saw the dead horse. It had the Block Arrowhead branded on the off shoulder."

"That all you found out?" Beck was opening and shutting a hand.

"That's all. The nester didn't know who she was. He never seen her before. She saddled herself and lit out hell-bent-for-election."

"Why did he let her have a horse?

No nester has more'n a couple of nags."

"Dunno, Dill. Maybe she was a good-looker."

"Maybe the nester lied?"

"Maybe," granted Buck. "If he did, he deserved the beatin' I give him." He said this as casually as if remarking he had stepped on a tarantula. "Anyhow, I do your work," he added.

At the statement, Slim moved on the chair which he had forgotten was broken. He nearly pitched onto his head and swore to himself as he balanced again.

"I fetched the word you wanted," Buck said. "Anything else?"

"Yes. You fellers listen, 'specially you, Buck," Beck said, "and you might as well help, seein' you're here. We gotta git this ring-tailed walloper, Mace Brody. For your benefit, Buck, I'll tell why."

Buck leaned against the door, his face impassive.

Slim listened with eyes closed. Beck told Buck of the closing by Brody of the panhandle trail; told what happened at the ranch house. Beck concentrated on Mace Brody and said nothing concerning the complication with Don Pedro or the large amount of money at stake. That was O. K., Slim thought, for it was just as well not to tell all the hired help everything. But those papers had to be recovered. Slim wondered if Beck had thought of that. He was word-whipping himself to fury again.

"Ca'm down, Dill; ca'm down," Slim advised.

"Huh!"

"Take it easy. You'll be steaming again if you don't cool down. Talk sense."

Beck blinked at Slim and swallowed twice; his mouth twisted.

"Listen!" Slim put up a hand.

Even as Slim spoke, hurrying feet reached the door of the room and knuckles rapped.

Beck glowered at the door.

Buck stepped away from it.

"Come in," Slim called.

The door opened and there stood the bartender. His bald head gleamed in the lamplight.

Beck looked at the whisky bottle. It was half full. He scowled.

"One of Wes Marble's kids came in the barroom," Walt said hastily, eying Beck with sideways glance. "Uh, that is, one of his grandkids. Uh, the one with spindly legs and two rope-colored pigtails. Uh—she was lookin' for Wes."

"What fer? Git on with it!"

"She said"—unconsciously, the bartender tried to imitate the high treble voice of the little girl—"that nice Mr. Brody wants to see my gran'poppa right away.' Figured you might want to know."

Beck leaped to his feet, his mouth wide open. The bartender fled, leaving the door open. Buck closed the door. Slim picked himself off the floor and cursed the three-legged chair which he slammed upright and kept to his feet.

Beck licked his lips and his face lighted with satisfaction.

"He came to see the law," Beck said in restrained tones. "Wes Marble is all the law in these here parts. Likely he bring the papers with him." He licked his lips again.

"What papers?" Buck asked.

"Never mind. You'll know if we git 'em." Beck looked meaningfully at Slim. "If them papers git to the Federal gover'ment, we'll be up a tree fer sure. Le's see?" His brow furrowed, then smoothed a little. "We'll go—" His hand dropped to his holster to find it empty of weapon. He remembered he had lost the Colt at the Brody ranch

house. "Mislaid my gun," he claimed, unwilling to explain. "You two go git him," he ordered. "That ought to be easy. He must be over to Marble's house."

Buck unholstered his right gun and looked it over. He put the gun back and made sure it was loose in the leather.

Slim walked around the three-legged chair and stood beside Buck.

"Want we should tangle with Marble?" he inquired.

Beck considered. "Not if you can help it," he said, considered further. "Maybe you'd better fetch Brody here. We'll arrange a' accident." He thought again. "Yes, fetch him here." He licked his lips.

He reached for the whisky bottle as his two henchmen left the room. He heard them go out by the back door of the saloon and smiled happily for the first time that day.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE-LEGGED CHAIR.

MACE BRODY did not ride the main street into La Salina, but circled out to the left so as to approach the rear of the first dwelling on the west side of the street. There was a small barn behind the house and from the barn came the stamp of a horse. Mace tied his horse to the back fence, climbed under and started for the rear door, which was screened and gave onto a screened porch.

The kitchen door was open. Mace quietly entered the porch and looked into the kitchen. A steamy, soapy smell flowed out upon him. A gaunt woman, the marshal's daughter and a widow, in a blue apron and with sleeves rolled high, bent low and labored, scrubbing a small boy in a tin washtub upon the floor. A tow-headed girl perched on a stool and

watched with morbid curiosity the cleansing of her brother. From her depressed air, Mace judged she was the next victim.

"You're plumb ruinin' my ear, maw! Ouch!" howled the lad.

"Stop it, Chester! Where do you get all the dirt? Oh!" The soap slipped from the hand that flew to her bosom. "Mace Brody! Why, you nearly scared the daylights out of me!"

The little girl gave a shrill squeal of delight and slid from her perch.

The boy blinked soapy eyes and grinned at the visitor.

"Howdy, partner?" he shouted.

Mace gathered up the towhead.

"How's Betsy?" he asked, cuddling her in his arms. "Sorry, I scared you, Mrs. Ross. Where's Wes?"

"Chester, get right back in that tub! Why, around and about, I reckon," Mrs. Ross said. "I don't know just where. Mebbe playing checkers at the livery stable." She pushed her slippery son back into the suds.

"Can I send Betsy to hunt him up?" Mace inquired.

"Hey!" shrilled Chester. "You wait till I get my pants and boots on. I'll go, Mace. I'll round grandpop up."

"Betsy's all dressed and ready to go," Mace argued. "I'm in sort of a hurry." He lowered the girl to the floor. "You get a wiggle on, Betsy, and I'll give you two-bits."

Before he could say more, the tow-headed youngster squealed and darted to the porch. The screen door slammed behind her. The patter of her feet sounded for a few moments. So, Betsy went on what to her was high adventure. Being on business for a grown-up, she could seek forbidden places. And her re-

ward was to be a great big two-bit piece!

"Guess I should have explained," Mace said, "I didn't want to prowl around myself."

"Trouble, Mace?"

He nodded and glanced at Chester.

But the bright little mind caught on. Water splashed from the tub.

"Tell me; tell me," he clamored. "I have to know! Gee whiskers! I bet when I'm bigger I hope I can shoot and ride as good as you, Mace." He panted for breath.

"There, there, Chester."

"I'll go out front and wait for Betsy," Mace said, not wishing to cause further disturbance. "See you later, Mrs. Ross."

The wash rag effectively closed Chester's mouth.

Mace hurried, going on tiptoe to the front of the house. The gate in the fence was open as Betsy had left it. He leaned on a gatepost and craned his neck to see beyond the bulge of a rosebush. There was little to be seen, but that didn't fool Mace. Many riders tied their horses at some handy point not on the one street; others patronized the livery stable, which was the news center for that part of the borderland. Mace could see two horses before the nearest saloon, the Telegraph Bar, but the Blue Star was at the far end of town, too distant to observe if any horses were tied before it and the night too dark to see far.

He didn't know for sure if Beck had come to town, nor could he know how many men he had with him if he were there. Mace figured it was best to be cautious. He became deeply engrossed, speculating on who Wes would recommend as messenger. The slow minutes passed. Mace put hard thought on the whole problem. Beck had to get the beef over the line, he had a force of fighting men,

so Mace's conclusion was Beck would make directly for the panhandle trail. It was an open-and-shut proposition.

A slight sound, his horse, Mace guessed, came from the rear. He noticed a front room of the house was lighted now. Two shadows, one large, one small, crossed the dim oblong formed by the drawn shade. Chester was being bedded down. Mace stepped out before the gate and peered up the street. There was no sign of Betsy, no movement, no sound at all. The silence was depressing, weighed upon him. He felt restless. There was a tingling, electric prickle along his spine. He studied the shadows and the few light streaks and from them constructed the town. His restlessness increased.

"Don't get spooky," he said in a whisper loud enough for his ears to hear.

He paced out into the street, then hurried back to the gate and shelter of the rosebush.

A gun jabbed into his ribs. Arms circled him, pinning his own arms to his sides. The hard breathing of the man that pinioned him brushed the nape of his neck.

"I got his gun," one of them said.

And as the six-gun was dragged from its holster, Mace recognized Slim's voice.

"Haze him along," ordered the other.

Mace did not know the second man's voice. He was shoved on. Slim released his hold and two guns prodded him onward across the street. Mace knew all he could do was to go. Something might turn up.

"We gotta watch this feller like a hawk," Slim informed his companion. "He's fast as greased lightnin'."

"Let him try some funny business," answered the other.

It was almost an invitation, Mace thought. He tried to think how to get rid of the papers which reposed in the inside pocket of his vest. Cautiously, he raised his left hand.

The movement was immediately detected and brought a snarled order to keep his paws down or get gun-whipped.

HE was jabbed over the street and beyond across open ground, then he was pushed to the left toward the rear of the blacksmith shop. A chill came over Mace. They were herding him behind the stores, and out a way, east of town, was heavy chaparral which bordered the cut bank of a dry, sandy watercourse. The people of La Salina, whenever the need, buried dead horses there because the digging was easy. Each of his captors held him with a hand and punched him along with their gun muzzles.

"If you don't mind," Mace said in protest, "change your jabbing higher or lower. I'm doing the best you'll let me."

Slim jabbed on a higher spot; the other did not, nor did he shift his gun muzzle.

The latter asked: "What are you goin' to do about it?"

There was nothing to do about it.

With relief, Mace saw they were not heading toward the brush. But in that direction, the east, he noticed the sky was brightening, sign the moon would soon rise. They passed behind the blacksmith shop, the general store. They crowded Mace on at a faster pace. He sensed now he was being taken to the Blue Star Saloon, which meant Beck was waiting there. With the suddenness of a blow, the thought snapped to him that Beck and his men got their

knowledge he had come to town through Betsy. Imaged in his mind her pert, little face all eager to serve him. He smiled a little.

There were three steps up to the back door of the saloon. Mace was shoved up and into the hallway. Light reflected into the short passage. Slim opened a door and Mace was thrust into a dingy room.

Beck sat at the table, his black hair tousled and matted. He had been writing, and folded the paper as Mace was forced in. His bulging wallet lay on the table. Mace glanced hurriedly about the room, noted the bracket lamp, the grimy window, the chair. For the first time he saw the face of Slim's companion, who was a stranger to him. Eyes brilliant and as hard as those of a sidewinder stared at him, teeth gleamed. Mace tried to hold back a shiver.

Beck put the paper in the wallet, the wallet in a hip pocket and rubbed his hands down the calfskin vest. He looked up, bright-eyed, at Mace, and his heavy lips parted in an expansive smile.

"So, now, I'm havin' a piece of luck," he said exultantly. "Good work, boys. Listen, Brody, I give you credit fer bein' able to raise considerable rumpus, but you're all done. We got clear goin' with you outa the way. Them few men you got won't last as long as a mouthful of smoke in a whirlwind. I got twelve men with the herd. We have—"

Slim interrupted with: "Why talk to him?" He released his hold on Mace.

"Buzzard meat can't talk," Beck commented and continued his baiting. "You know about the herd we're bringin' in?"

Mace gave him no answer. The gun held by Buck was boring into

his back and a hand maintained a viselike grip on a shoulder. What Beck said was perfectly true, the Flying B men could not withstand the outlaw forces.

"Sure you know 'bout that herd," Beck declared. "That gal told you." He paused to scowl.

"What's the use of chewin' the rag?" Slim said.

Beck grunted. "Shut up," he said. "I'm havin' a good time. I got a lot more to tell him. That Kincade gal, now. She'll do to take along." He looked carefully at Mace to see the effect of this remark.

All the sign Mace gave was a curling of his lips. His mind was busy, but he saw no chance for a break, for any move. He wondered what lay the other side of the window. His back was numb from the thrust of the gun.

"Set him down," Beck ordered Buck. "I want to tell him how I figure to take over the Flyin' B. Set him down, Buck."

As Buck shoved Mace down upon the chair, a startled cry came from Slim's lips. Mace landed upon the three-legged chair, which immediately toppled under him, throwing him to the floor. He sprang up and his shoulder caught the edge of the table which was hurled against Buck. Mace's right hand grabbed the back of the toppled chair and he swung it at Slim, who caught it full and toppled against Beck and threw him off balance. Mace gave a lunging dive for the window.

Mace's head struck the crossed window mullions that separated the panes of the lower sash. His sombrero protected his head and face; his hands were tight clasped over his stomach. He landed sprawling on hands and knees; got up cat-quick and, like some caged thing that has

just been hurled to freedom, hesitated, looked this way and that.

Within the room, Buck was wrenching at the table which like a trapdoor confined him between the wall and its own surface. Slim, on hands and knees, was shaking his head to clear away the daze caused by the grazing blow of the chair swung by Mace. Beck lay sprawled on his back, bellowing like a gored bull.

He became coherent to shout: "He has them papers; he has them papers!"

The three men got to their feet at the same time.

"Gimme a gun," Beck roared. He snatched the gun from Buck's left-hand holster. "Come on! We gotta git that varmint."

They crowded through the doorway.

Mace heard Beck roar: "He has them papers!" and knew they would search and follow as relentlessly as a starving coyote on the trail of a jack rabbit. He could not seek help, for death accompanied him to strike any man he went to. He saw clearly that he himself must do what need be done. As he thought, he ran to the street, and before the saloon were two saddled horses. One was dust-coated and with muddy lather streaks at the edges of the saddle blanket. The other was a wiry pinto which he recognized as Slim's horse.

Mace scrambled under the hitch rail, reached for the hanging reins and vaulted to the saddle. He pulled the paint's head around and spurred. The horse responded and in three strides was on the run. Mace looked back. Two men were jamming themselves through the swing doors. Mace bent low, urged his horse on. He heard a crackling snap in the air somewhere near his head. Above the pounds of the pinto's hoofs, came

the crack of six-guns. If any more bullets came near, he did not hear them. Steady thuds of the pinto's hoofs was in his ears; the wind of his passage pressed the sombrero brim flat against the crown, brushed soothingly against his cheeks and brought too, the wild, pleasant odors of the land.

THE country was an open, level plain with no cover save stunted chaparral not large enough to conceal a hat. The upper rim of the moon was just visible over the eastern horizon and a shadowy world began to be changed to substance. Mace looked at the long shadow of himself on the loping pinto and scowled. Soon from the bowl of the sky, the bright moonlight would flow down, revealing all things upon the earth. Mace pulled his horse to a stop.

It was time, he figured, to ride back to La Salina and make contact with Wes Marble. Beck and his men knew he, Mace, had not seen the marshal and it was unlikely the outlaws would molest Wes. They could gain nothing by so doing. On the other hand, Wes, by this time, must know Mace had come to town. There was the evidence of Mrs. Ross and the kids and his horse tied to the back fence. The shooting must have been heard by Wes.

Mace allowed the horse to rest, though the animal was fresh and untired. Mace watched the moon ascend. In the clear air it seemed as large as a washtub. It would lose size with height gained, but that same clear air would enable the mellow light to show all things as clearly as if by day. A hush lay upon the earth. Mace was debating whether to circle to the east or to the west, then remembered when one rode with the light at his back, it was

much easier to see ahead and around. He decided to ride to the west. But he must go slowly for the land there was riddled with the burrows of ground squirrels and no horse could avoid the holes unless allowed time to pick his way.

"All right——" Mace never got the word, "horse," out of his mouth.

Faint, but unfailing as heart-throbs, came from the south the rhythmical tattoo of pounding hoofs. Mace jerked sideways in the saddle. His right hand dropped instinctively to his holster to find it empty. Slim or Buck had snatched it, he recalled. He could see the rider moving clearly in the tide of moonlight. And the pinto would be easier seen for the horse's white splotches must show up like banners. Mace thought the rider increased his horse's pace.

Mace nudged the pinto to motion, tickled him gently with the spurs to a run. Now, he could not circle. He would be cut off, nor could he chance the ground squirrel holes. The only open path was the road north. And to the north, thirty, forty, fifty miles, the Block Arrowhead herd was bedded down, or, likely as not, being hazed along under the brilliant moon. Thieves' cattle had to travel.

So Mace Brody, weaponless, closely pursued, rode on, aided by the slight knowledge he had gained from Beck in the Blue Star and his own stout heart. Dust twisted behind him.

Dill Beck and Slim Sweet rode out of the livery stable. The foreman was leading an unsaddled horse. As usual, Beck spurred his horse to a run. Slim shouted at him and, though handicapped by the horse he led, managed to catch up with Beck a quarter mile north of town.

"Take it easy," Slim counseled.

"We got a night of ridin' ahead of us."

"Brody hain't got more'n a ten-minute start on us," Beck said. He pulled down to a slower pace. "In what shape is your paint horse he stole?"

"That horse of mine is a dog-gone good one," Slim claimed, giving a vicious jerk on the lead rope. "He ain't no race horse, but he can lope along all day and night. That's why you gotta save that horse you're forkin'."

"Hain't no better horses in the country 'n what we're on."

Beck kept several good horses at the livery stable for use in emergency.

"We'll need 'em," Slim answered. "An' don't forget I'm draggin' a horse for Buck."

Beck peered ahead.

"Buck's horse is liable to give out 'most any time," he said. "We oughta be seein' him. He started 'bout five minutes after Brody high-tailed it."

They rode on. The horses' hoofs drummed upon the road, churning the dust to a rising cloud. The disk of the moon floated above the horizon and made visible the whole spreading surface of the plain with its covering of stunted brush and herbage that was dried to a straw color.

"Most bright as day," Beck commented. "Sometimes moonlight is a hindrance, but this time it's a help, sure is."

"There's Buck," Slim said.

"I see him." Beck leaned forward in saddle. "Hey, take a good squint up ahead of Buck. Hain't that sumpn'?"

Slim, accustomed to seeing by night or by day, looked keenly forward.

"Dust," he said. "And sure's I'm

a foot high, I can make out the white off rump of my pinto."

Beck let go a roar of laughter.

"We got him," he exulted, "got him dead to rights. And him with no gun!"

Buck pulled up and waited for his companions. When they arrived, he stood with saddle blanket in hand, the saddle ready to be placed on his fresh horse.

"Just about time," was his greeting. "My horse has been draggin' on his nerve."

Slim slowed and reached down with the lead rope.

"Grab this mecate," he said. "Tie it and the hackamore to your horn."

"We're ridin' on," Beck shouted, not slowing at all. "Git goin', Buck! Come on, Slim!"

Slim caught up with Beck. There ahead was the pinto, moving steadily before a banner of dust.

"This is a cinch," Beck said, raising his voice. "He's ridin' right spang into the Block Arrowhead herd." He chuckled loudly.

Slim wasn't so sure of that, but he hoped it was so. There was so much at stake.

"And him with no gun!" Beck howled and followed a skyrocket of laughter.

"You don't be rough on your horse," Slim advised.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLOCK ARROWHEAD HERD.

MACE knew the futility of attempting to outrun his pursuers. Horseflesh was capable of doing just so much. He judged he had a half-mile lead. Body relaxed, legs hanging, elbows tucked in, hands motionless, but maintaining a light feel of the reins, Mace sat saddle in perfect harmony with the movement of the pinto.

Casting a quick glance backward once in a while, he noted there were two pursuers where had been one. When he turned again, he held his look. There were three riders now, men and horses ranging before a curtain of dust. The more the merrier, he thought. Then at longer intervals he looked to judge the lead he had. It was about the same, he decided. And during the next half hour, he confirmed this.

It was possible for the enemy to make a charge within effective gun shot, but by so doing they might exhaust their horses and lose all chances of victory over Mace, for good marksmanship from the saddle of a running horse was mostly a matter of luck. Beck had to be sure. They were herding Mace in the general direction of the stolen herd. Twelve of Beck's men were with the cattle. Mace considered these things. True, he was being herded, but also he was riding in the only direction in which help lay. It was true he might get help, but too late to save the Block Arrowhead herd. A consequence was that Dill Beck would be a fugitive from the United States, but remain alive to harry the borderland, making conditions for law-abiding men worse than ever. On the other hand, Beck had to have those papers to preserve himself. Mace realized the future was mighty uncertain. There was no use reaching out into the future for trouble. There was always enough on hand to go around, plenty for all.

There was no change in scenery, no change in the pounds of the pinto's hoofs, no change in the dust cloud that twisted lazily in air behind the horse. The only change was that the moon slowly climbed higher into the sky with undiminished splendor. The illusion came to Mace that he was eternally fixed in space.

The motion of the horse did not count, for it never varied. And fixed, too, was the position of the three pursuers. But no monotony could dull Mace's senses.

Higher and higher, rose the moon. The stars dimmed as if withdrawing behind a veil of light. The shadow of man and horse slowly withdrew from the west to hide for a space beneath the animal, then slowly emerged to the east, growing longer and longer. Slow hours passed marked by the beats of the tireless hoofs of the pinto. Mace's brain rested while the senses of hearing and sight remained sentinel.

The moon was low in the west when Mace became all alert. Something in the slow-moving western breeze, something in the dust, some quality in the moonlight-washed land brought a premonition to him. The scene had not changed. The pinto turned his nose a trifle to the east, pointed his ears in the same direction. Mace looked also, saw nothing. There was something. The horse gave sign of that. Mace figured as well as he could the miles he had traveled from La Salina, forty, forty-five, fifty, perhaps. He could only estimate. No doubt, the pinto's speed had slackened, but he had grown saddle-weary in the same ratio and could not tell. Dust coated the horse, lay heavy upon Mace's clothing. He could feel a mask of it on his face. His lips were caked with dust, his eyes bloodshot.

The moon was near the set. Before it had dropped from sight, the sun would rise. The pinto gave sign he was interested in something to the northeast. The gentle breeze still brought a message to him.

And after Mace, relentless as flood waters, came the three outlaws, content, it seemed, to follow, sure of their prey.

WS-3E

The pinto faltered. Mace spoke to him, patted his neck and the paint went on as before, though with effort, Mace thought. The moon had voyaged near to the rim of the western horizon. The pinto turned to the northeast, held his head pointed and twitched his ears. It was as if he wanted to attract his rider's attention to what was there.

So Mace gave his whole attention to what the horse smelled and saw. Then he saw at the level of the horizon, though much nearer, a broken line, darker than the dried herbage of the field. There was nothing to gauge whether or not it moved, though Mace sensed it did. As he gazed, he knew he was looking at a trail herd moving slowly. And the conviction came here were the Block Arrowhead cows.

The pinto turned in the direction of the herd.

Mace's hand moved to pull him back on the road and the paint obeyed reluctantly.

"Figured you was a good cow horse," Mace murmured.

His left toe was fidgeting in the stirrup.

The pinto faltered, broke pace, but gamely picked up his feet.

The horse was tired, dog-tired; he couldn't go on forever. Mace looked back. The pursuers had crept up, he was certain. The pinto made another attempt to leave the road and go in the direction of the herd.

"Why not?" Mace asked himself.

The horse was fast tiring. Beck and his men would ride him down. It was six of one and a half dozen of the other whether he kept on or rode for the herd. By flight, he could accomplish nothing; by attack, he might—a wild idea came to him, more insane than any brain storm ever conceived by the maddest of

March hares. He gave the pinto his head.

"Go on, Paint," he urged.

And the horse stretched out his head, reached with his hoofs and lunged from the road. Gone now were all signs of weariness. The pinto raced on. It might be his last sprint but he went about it gallantly.

A rod from the road and the horse twitched back his ears. A few seconds later came the cracks of a scattered volley of shots. The horse heard the bullets, but not Mace. He laughed, glanced back to see the three had lost ground. And the pinto was scooting along like a streak. It was certain Beck couldn't catch up until Mace had gained the herd. What then?

THE herd had changed from a line to a long band, its upper edge irregular. Mace saw the herd was long strung out. He rode for a point midway between the point and the swing. He wanted to find out how many men rode the point. If there were two there and one along the swing, he would tackle the single man. He had no time to bother about the three behind him.

The pinto wanted to go to the point. Mace guessed that was his job, as his rider, Slim Sweet, was foreman and the point man had to be good. Maybe it was a hunch. Mace was on Slim's horse, he, himself, was disguised by a veneer of dust and, too, the light was not good. He raced on. He made out a lone rider at the point a hundred yards from the slow-moving cattle. The pinto stumbled, down went his head, but Mace pulled it up.

The man at the point approached at an easy jog. He was on a big, powerful horse. When Mace was within forty feet, he called out.

"Hi, Slim!"

"Yeah," was Mace's shouted answer.

He started to slow up, pulled in short when alongside the cowboy who started to speak. Just then Mace's fist caught him on the jaw. Mace reached for the sagging body. His right hand jerked the stranger's gun from its holster. The unconscious cowboy slipped from Mace's grasp and slumped from the saddle. Mace let him drop, traded horses, spurred for the point of the herd. He looked back. His three pursuers were coming on for all they were worth. He could hear the pounds of their horses' hoofs above the slow murmurous tramping of the herd.

They opened fire. Their guns crashed, roared again. A cow gave a bellow of rage and pain. Mace wheeled, pulled up short and opened fire on the rushing enemy. Deliberately, he aimed and fired, once, twice and again. The three riders broke, the horses plunging wildly. Two riders wheeled and ran. A horse with an empty saddle galloped away. Mace couldn't know whom he had shot. He had driven them off and so gained a little time. He reloaded his gun while he kept his horse on a walk.

On the pommel was a roll. Quickly, he jerked open the knots of the saddle strings, grabbed the roll which consisted of a blanket wrapped in a slicker. The blanket he tossed away. Slicker in left hand, gun in the right, Mace spurred, guided the horse with his knees, sent him directly against the point.

The gray light that precedes the dawn was flowing in now, paling the moon as the moon had paled the stars. The cows were restless from the long drive. They didn't like the eternal slow tramp with no rest. They wanted quiet in which to chew their cuds. Those animals at the

point were close-packed, spooky from the shooting and the tumult of plunging horses. Several of them had been struck by the bullets of the outlaws, and the smell of blood was in the air. Mace rushed his horse at them, waved the slicker, shouted and fired his gun. What they had endured and this mad thing were more than bovine nature could stand. The lead "cow" shied, shaking his head, bellowing protest. Mace crowded him. The cow turned and leaped to escape. The blast of the six-gun burned the animal's face, the explosion was close to his ear. The cow swung away and ran, tail humped. His fellow creatures began to follow, rushing faster, more and more of them, while the contagion of fear spread through the herd. Then like the crest of water that bursts the dam, the herd was in uncontrollable motion.

Mace swung away. The stampede was headed east. The earth shook under the thunder of hoofs. The spurned earth sprang upward in swirls and rolling clouds of dust. Bellowing and roaring, the flood of beef rushed across the plain, senseless as the wind, implacable as an avalanche, a solid mass of power no living creature could withstand. The herd would run itself to exhaustion, would cover miles and the individuals of it would be scattered all over the country.

Mace rode out clear of the dust. He had to ride a half mile before he could gain an idea of what was happening. In clear air, he reined in, sat spellbound. All the sound was a dull, muffled rumbling. The solid earth smoked, puffed to the heavens, low but swift twisting behind the herd, expanding slowly to huge, rounded puffs. Swift as a knife stab, clear as a knife cut, the first ray of the rising sun sliced through the

highest dome of dust, turning the dome to gold, while below were slow turning coils of a tawny hue. Off to the east was a roaring, swift-traveling dragon, hidden by the smoke of its own making, but no other moving thing was visible. In the bright, morning sky were black specks; others were close enough to be revealed as buzzards, all coursing straight to the stampede.

For a moment, the feeling of utter loneliness came over Mace, then he smiled. Dill Beck was licked as far as the Block Arrowhead herd was concerned. It would take days to round up the cows, even if unhindered. Don Pedro and his men would eat no Kincade beef, for a while, at least. Faintly came three evenly spaced shots, the call for help. And no man was in sight. The dust hid all the plain before Mace. Still, the herd rushed on and was swinging toward the north.

As the sun uprose, its rays burdened the high dust clouds with gold and the dust began to settle, spreading wider upon the plain as it did so. Again, sounded the three signal shots. Some hurt man might be calling for help or the outlaws might be assembling their band. The nearer dust must settle soon and even if Mace could not see through it, men hidden by it might see him. Anyhow, he couldn't sit on his horse all day. He started on a good clip to the east, intending to circle to the north and follow the trail of the herd. The buzzards were already wheeling low in diminishing circles.

Mace rode on, keeping a watch on all sides. The herd was still streaming into the north and the dust arose behind them with as much vigor as ever. At the point where the stampede had started the air was clearing of dust. There, Mace saw, small in distance, three objects upon the

ground. These, he knew were cows. Then, far beyond, appeared in the dust haze a group of riders. They were strung out in slow parade. Mace counted, four—five—six, seven, eight. The leader halted. Mace saw gun smoke puff above the leader's head. As the third shot jettied smoke, the report of the first came to Mace's ears.

MACE knew Beck had twelve men with the herd and with himself and two companions the original total of his force was fifteen. Mace had shot one from his saddle and, perhaps, some had perished in the stampede. The point man and swing man on the eastern side of the herd must have had close calls, being in the path of the stampede, or they might have been overwhelmed. Mace had no doubt he was witnessing the assembly of the outlaws. They were grouped now. Two more rode up to the cluster.

Mace rode on, looking at the distant riders.

"They'll have a heck of a time getting those cows together," he told his horse, and grinned.

The grin left his face. His job wasn't finished, couldn't be, until Dill Beck was rounded up. It was too much to hope for that Beck had either been shot or been trampled. And what would Beck do? Mace traded that question for the one: What was he going to do? He still had Beck's papers.

The horse shied. Mace snapped his head around. There was the trampled earth and the odor of it was in the air. Just ahead lay the carcass of a horse and beside the sprawled figure of a man. Mace pulled his horse's head around, forced him closer to the quiet bodies. The horse didn't want to go, held back and snorted. Mace saw a fore-

leg of the dead horse was twisted into an unnatural position, broken. The horse had been shot and smell of blood put fear into Mace's horse. There was no sign upon the man of what had happened to him. He might be stunned. Mace saw the dead horse bore the Block Arrowhead brand upon the shoulder.

Quickly, Mace dismounted, grasped the reins and began to lead his horse. He had a tussle for a moment. He turned to inspect the man and looked squarely into the black muzzle of a six-gun.

The sprawled figure had come very much alive.

He said: "You dirty, cow-stealin' skunk, h'ist your paws, or I'll let daylight plumb through you!"

Dill Beck sat before a semicircle of his men. All faces were grimy, muddy with mingled sweat and dust. Their clothing was gray with dust. Beck's two hands were clenched upon the saddle horn. His look moved slowly and searchingly from man to man.

"That's what we're goin' to do," Beck declared. "There hain't nothin' else to do." There was defiance in his voice as if he dared any man to dispute him.

Every man, save one, gave silent consent by nod or motion of a hand and the exception was Slim Sweet. His face was grayer than any of his companions'. He sat hunched over, right hand clasped upon his left shoulder, the left arm hanging. Circling the arm at the shoulder was a bandage made of his neckerchief. The bandage did not cover well his wound. Blood showed at the crevices between the fingers of his right hand. Blood had seeped onto his shirt and dust caked the blood. His chin almost touched his breast.

"Ten of us left," Beck said, tallying his men by eye.

"There's 'leven of us," one of his men corrected, pointing at Slim.

"Hain't countin' him," Beck said, lowering his voice.

He gave a glowering look to the distant dust cloak that hid the vanished herd. His lips trembled, began to mutter, to speak.

"Damn Brody, afoot or horseback, sleepin' or awake; damn his eyes an' his ears! Damn him—" He stopped and his tongue rolled between his lips. "Damn the dust," he roared. "Le's ride." He pulled his horse's head around and glared southward. "Come on, damn you!" His spurs jabbed.

His tired horse reared.

"Take it easy, boss," one of the men shouted. "We ain't got no remuda, you know. We lost—" He got no further.

"Lost!" Beck almost shrieked. "Damn the pack horses we lost! We lost Buck, shot outa his seat like he'd been smashed with a' anvil! The best gun fighter in these parts. Lost Chili, Pete, Smudge—" He looked at Slim and choked with rage, unable to go on. He regained his voice. "Every one of you what can, git gone." His glance swept them all except Slim.

Beck led the way at a sensible pace. One by one, his men did likewise except Slim and one other.

"Hey, Slim, we're ridin' on."

No answer, no sign.

The rustler put a hand on Slim's unhurt shoulder and the move, though gentle, almost shoved Slim from his saddle. With effort, Slim caught his balance. He said nothing, did not raise his head.

The cowboy gave a penetrating look at Slim's gray face, set spurs and hurried on to Beck's side.

"Slim's in a bad way," he told Beck. "Want I should help him?"

"No!" Beck growled. "We need every gun we can git. Hain't I promised you plenty of pay?"

"Yes. But—"

"But nothing! We can't be hindered by no cripple. You ride along."

"For the love of Pete, Dill—"

"Aw, shut your mealy mouth. Slim's agoin' to cash in. Lost too much blood not to. Hain't no use monkeyin' with a dead man. You understand now?"

The rustler nodded and turned his head away from Beck. He rode on.

Slim aroused and looked about. His right hand groped for the reins, his feet raised a little to fall back. At the gentle nudge of the spurs, the horse started forward on a walk. Slim's body sagged forward and he straightened. This happened several times and each time he recovered with greater effort. His hot, cracked lips began to move, but no sound came. His right hand dropped the reins to press the bandage tighter upon the wound.

Beck and his crew were becoming smaller and smaller in the distance. Slim could just make them out. All the world was filled with dust which obscured all things. He tried to spur, put all the force he could into his feet. One boot slipped from its stirrup. He began to fall. His right hand instinctively snatched for the reins and his fingers twined about the leather. Slowly he slumped forward, then plunged from the saddle to strike with a thud upon the ground. His right hand was clamped upon the reins. He lay still. The horse lowered his head and sniffed, drew back as far as he could, but did not attempt to go.

Slim's fevered lips murmured; "Gimme water."

And with that, mercifully he became unconscious. He lay breathing slowly upon the hoof-scarred sod while the horse stood guard over him.

CHAPTER VI.

BACK TRAIL.

AT the gun-sponsored command: "—h'ist yore paws or I'll let daylight plumb through you," Mace's hands raised slowly. He stared open-mouthed at the dust-be grimed cowboy whose mouth was set in hard lines and whose eyes glittered. He was not young, about fifty, Mace judged. He was crouched on his knees. He got to his feet, holding the gun steadily on Mace's middle.

"Dog-gone cow thief!" he muttered.

"Say, you're making a mistake, hombre," Mace said. "I ain't no rustler."

"How come," sneered the other, "your hoss has the same brand as one we shot last night? Shot the dog-gone thief on him, too." This last was said with great satisfaction.

"I stole this horse," Mace explained.

"Don't doubt it," snarled the other. "I'll bet you stole them pants and that gun and—" He stopped and glowered over his gun at Mace.

"You're getting me all wrong," Mace declared. "I mean, I had to borrow that horse or get shot. I was—"

"Hoss thieves generally do run," observed the other. "Face around, hoss stealer, I'm goin' to snare your gun. Any monkey business and I'll blow your back out front."

Mace obeyed and stood like a statue while he was disarmed. The cowboy put Mace's gun in his own holster. Mace figured if he could keep his captor talking long enough,

something might turn up, but the next speech of the cowboy sent cold apprehension upon Mace.

"Might as well get this over," the cowboy muttered.

Mace's hands were still in air.

"You wouldn't murder a man in cold blood, would you?" he asked.

"Reckon that's the only kind of blood cow thieves has," returned the other. "You or your dog-gone feller skunks didn't hesitate none to send a couple of our boys to kingdom come."

"You're a Kincade man?" Mace shot in, knowing such was fact.

"None of your dog-gone business who I be."

"I'm Mace Brody. I own the Flying B Ranch along the border. I forbade Dill Beck to run his rustled cows over my land. I stamped your herd."

"You—huh?"

"I said I stam—"

"You're the most talented, ring-tailed liar I ever see. Stamped? Rats!"

"You don't suppose they stamped on their own hook?"

"Prime beef treated like them critters been by long drivin' would run by themselves. If you warn't a' ornery hoss thief, you'd know that. Most anythin' would start 'em. Mebbe a skunk blewed his nose or dropped his hat."

"Didn't you hear shooting just before the cows broke?"

"No, I didn't hear any shootin'. But you're goin' to *poco pronto*, or mebbe you won't. You're goin' to be buz—"

The crosslike shadow of a buzzard flickered over the ground and across the cowboy's face. He raised his eyes, his gun muzzle lifted.

Quick as lightning flash, Mace sprang. His outstretched hand seized his opponent's gun wrist,

thrusting it aside as the gun roared. Mace came down atop the cowboy with knees on his chest. He wrenched away his gun, got to his feet and recovered his own gun which he holstered.

"Get up."

The other obeyed. His jaw sagged, he swallowed hard, but tried to keep a bold front.

"Get it over, skunk," he growled huskily.

Mace shook his head.

"Been trying to get into your nut that I'm a' honest cowman," Mace said. "What's your name?"

"Silas Crum."

"Who's in charge of your crew?"

"Jess Kincaide."

"That's fine. His sister, Della——"

"Why didn't you said so? Where is she?" Silas clamored. His face lighted. Hope came to his eyes. "We been 'most loco. Where——"

"Keep your shirt on," Mace cut in. "She's at my ranch. She's all right. She——" Mace broke off to look in the direction in which he had last seen the gathering of the outlaws. They had gone from sight.

"Looks like a hoss standin' away off yonder," Silas said, pointing.

"Guess so," Mace returned. He was not thinking of horses. He turned and gave Silas the gun in his hand. "Here's your gun, Si."

The cowboy took the gun and thrust it as if it were red-hot into its leather.

"Thanks, mister," he murmured, "I'm plumb gratified that Della's safe."

"We'd better hunt up your boss," Mace suggested.

The plain lay quiet. The mark of the stampeding herd was as if a wide swath had been harrowed over the land. To the north the air was hazy with dust and far away, dust yet marked where was the herd. The

animals had run themselves out by this time, Mace thought, and held his look northward.

"Near the time my hoss stuck a foot in a squirrel hole and busted a leg, I see a flock of riders herd up over yonder where that hoss is standin'," Silas said. He rambled on. "Had to shoot him. I mean, my hoss. That's 'nother score I got to settle with them dog-gone skunks. After I got myself picked up and settled my hoss, they'd trailed off. You see 'em?"

AT the question, Mace turned his head. Two horsemen were riding out of the east toward them. They came straight on, evidently having spotted the two men and the horse.

"Turn around and look, Si."

Silas looked.

Mace loosened his gun in the holster.

"Never mind your hawg-laig," Si said. "That's Jess and Bert ridin' in."

Mace folded his arms upon his breast. Both faced the coming riders.

"That's Jess on the north side," Si pointed out and waved his hat.

Jess Kincaide was a wiry fellow with sloping shoulders. His hat was on the back of his head and, even under the coating of dust, there was a ruddy tinge to his hair. His face bore a marked resemblance to that of Della. His companion, Bert Leslie, was chunky, had a chunky face, and rode with elbows flapping. A gallon canteen hung to his saddle horn. When a rod distant from the pair, they slowed to a walk.

"Who've you got there, Si?" Jess called.

"He's a friend," the cowboy replied. "You'd better chin with him pronto. Della is up to his ranch."

Jess was mystified. He swung from saddle and dropped the reins over his horse's head.

"There's quite a lot to tell," Mace began and gave a brief outline of events.

Jess Kincade listened, his eyes fixed on Mace's face.

"Mighty thankful she came to you," he said. "Where do you suppose that Beck gang headed for?"

"Dunno," Mace said, and scowled. "They expected to get your beef over the border by to-morrow."

Silas uttered a cackling laugh.

"Choke off," Jess advised Silas, then said to Mace. "Do you aim to go on with those papers?"

"No. I'll give 'em to you to take on when, as, and if you can." Mace's eyes had a troubled look. "I figure I'd better go on back home."

"I'm going with you," Jess declared. "The herd's all right. I got another man. That is, if nothin's happened to him." He paused to look about. "Guess that's him over to the south now." A rider was approaching from that direction. Jess kept his look on the horseman and continued, "The herd will drift north to water about ten miles from here. We sent out a call and help should be breezing along any time." He shifted his look and pointed to the west. "Say, ain't that a horse 'way over there?"

"I been talkin' 'bout that hoss for a long time," Silas said. "I ain't got no hoss."

"No harm riding over to see," Jess said.

Mace and Jess mounted while Silas clambered up behind Bert.

"Mebbe that hoss stands still 'cause he has a busted leg," Silas called.

"Might be," Mace granted.

Jess signaled to the oncoming rider.

They rode unhurriedly in silence, each man occupied with his own thoughts. Mace was worried. He had a long back trail to cover and he never forgot for a moment Beck would be upon him like a ton of hay if he got the quarter of a chance. He couldn't see the use of one man, Jess Kincade, returning with him. Four men or more to go with him would be a different matter. And anyhow, Jess had troubles of his own. Della was safe if she remained on the Flying B. What if she didn't?

"There's a man, a body, lying under that horse," Jess said and brought Mace back to earth.

He looked, saw the still form and noted the sombrero lay over the face. Silas was the first to dismount and he ran ahead of the riders. He made for the horse and secured the reins. Mace noticed he had to jerk them from the grasp of the body's hand.

"Dog-gone cow thief!" Silas rasped, pointing to the horse's brand.

Mace got out of his saddle. Jess remained in his seat. Mace picked up the sombrero and stared down upon Slim Sweet's pale face.

"His mug's the same color as a toad's belly," Silas remarked. "Dog-gone cow pirate!"

"Looks like he's cashed in," Jess observed.

Mace bent low. "Slim!" he called. "Slim!"

After a moment, the hurt man's eyelids moved, opened, and his eyes stared uncomprehendingly up at Mace.

"Water," murmured the pale lips.

Mace straightened. "Didn't I see a canteen on one of you fellers' saddles?"

"I got it," Bert said, reaching down with the canteen.

Mace rinsed out his handkerchief, bathed Slim's face and allowed a few drops to trickle between the wounded

man's lips. When he had taken a little water, a slight flush livened his face. He looked at Mace.

"Dill's goin' after your herd," he mumbled, haltingly. "He—he lost out here. He's goin' to rush your cows across the—the border." He paused and begged with his eyes for water. He licked his lips and continued, "He—he can do it."

Jess leaned down. "What's he saying? I can't get it."

"Hold on a shake and I'll tell you," Mace replied. "I want to look over his hurt. One of you waddies give me a hand."

INSTANTLY, Jess dismounted. At this time, the cowboy who had come in from the south arrived. The newcomer was a keen-looking, young cowpoke with a boyish face. A carbine in its boot was fastened under the saddle skirt.

"They're headin' south," he said to Jess, "right, spang south. There's ten of 'em."

"Ten too many," Silas muttered.

Jess nodded and bent to aid Mace. Mace cut away the shirt and undershirt. Gently, he washed around the wound.

"It's eaked over so it has quit bleeding," he said. "It's a bad hole and I hope the slug didn't smash the collar bone. If we can find some cloth to bandage with, we can hold it. He's bled like a stuck pig, but maybe he'll pull through."

"Why should you pull him through?" Silas demanded, his face all one scowl. "Gosh ding it to thunder, ain't he a cow thief?"

"His gang left him to die," Mace explained patiently. "He told me what Beck's plan is and by doing that, I figure he's sort of made up for what he's been. Anyhow, I take it as a personal favor, so I'm doing all I can to help him."

Jess nodded. "This business of a tooth for a tooth and a' eye for a' eye ain't what it's cracked up to be," he said.

"Dog-gone it, no," Silas murmured. "Who wants to swap teeth? A cow for a cow would be more like it."

Jess discovered the new arrival. "Here's Kansas," he said. "Got any clean clothes we can make into bandages in that roll on your cantle board?"

"Got a roller towel I swiped from the bunk house," Kansas admitted sheepishly, laying a hand on the roll at his pommel.

"You blame dude, fork her over."

With the towel torn into strips, Mace did a fair job of bandaging. He made Slim as comfortable as possible.

The rustler motioned for Mace to bend over him.

"Look out for Dill," he whispered for Mace's ear alone and with pauses between each word. "He swore he'd git you if it was the last thing he done on earth. You stampeded the herd. You done it all alone." Slim ceased and for a space kept his eyes closed. His lips moved to say, "That girl—he—she—" Then, bitter with hate, burst from his lips: "Get him, Mace; get that snake!"

Mace made a sign to Jess and the two stepped aside. When Jess heard of Beck's threat to his sister, his jaw stiffened and his eyes became hard.

"I'll have to leave it to you, Mace," he said evenly. "I'm stringing along with you. There's just this I ain't sure of: Any chance this feller's pulling a sandy on us?"

"No," Mace answered with conviction. "He's straight. He figures he's due to kick the bucket and he's doing what he can to square accounts with Beck. He's given us the low-down, Jess."

"Just wanted to make sure," Jess replied. "Head her out, Mace. You're the wagon boss."

The arrangements were soon made. Slim was given into Silas's charge with instructions to start for the Block Arrowhead. And Silas had a tough job to carry a wounded man before him on the saddle. He was in for a long, slow journey, but he didn't grumble since he had to do it.

Mace figured Slim's chances for pulling through were mighty few. Kansas and Bert were to stay with the herd to await the expected reinforcements. The Block Arrowhead men had captured a pack horse bearing grub which would tide them over for a day or so. Water was ten miles to the north.

Mace borrowed the carbine and boot, also ammunition from Kansas. Jess had his own six-gun and wore, too, Slim's belt and gun. They set out, heading west for the south road to the border. Each man was intent with his own thoughts until they reached the road. They moved along at an easy lope.

"Mace, I owe you a lot." Jess tried to speak casually. "Your stampeding the herd was quite a chore. You saved our beef."

"As far as the stampede goes, Slim was a little off," Mace claimed. "Them three rustlers helped me by raising six or seven kinds of rumpus right there at the point. But let it ride, Jess. You'd have done the same for me. I figure what's happened has been a picnic to what is coming up."

"Can Beck and his gang rustle your beef?"

"Well, yes. That is, they can round up enough to take the place of your herd in a day if they ain't hindered. What worries me is that they'll clean up my men first. My outfit don't know ten killers are riding their way. And Beck will have

all the advantage, especially if my men scatter out to cover the approaches to the panhandle trail. You see that trail—" Mace explained the geography of the border country and of his ranch.

"I savvy," Jess said. "That panhandle trail is the natural way to drive cows to Mexico and on your ranch there's only a couple of fences between your herds and the border."

"Yes, that's about the size of it."

They loped along in silence. Mace glanced at the sun and figured the time as ten o'clock. It would be the middle of the afternoon before they could reach La Salina. No doubt, Beck would get fresh horses there. As for the horses ridden by Jess and himself, they were in as good condition as those of the outlaws.

Mace thought of Wes Marble, what he had done, and what he could do. Came to him Della's flushed face, the last glimpse he had had of her as he hurried out the doorway. He looked at Jess. Each smiled at the other. Mace found comfort in that he was in the company of Della's brother. Jess's muscular body and air of dependability was an assurance.

"Was thinking," Jess began and hesitated.

"About Della," Mace supplied spontaneously.

Jess nodded. "And what Slim said; rather, what he left unsaid." There was an uneasy look upon his face.

"We'll get there just as soon as we can," Mace said.

The horses were going as fast as the men dared ride, though it seemed they were traveling at a snail's pace.

Suddenly, Mace remembered. His hand darted to the pocket where he had put the papers. They were still there. For a moment he was too stunned to curse his neglect in turn-

ing them over to Silas. There was no help for it now, he reasoned.

He smiled at Jess and said: "Looks like a' interesting day, don't it?"

DELLA paced back and forth before the Flying B ranch house and continually bent an ear in the direction of the out road to La Salina. Steve Miller stood braced against an oak tree. He was tugging at his mustache. He muttered something.

"What did you say, Steve?"

"Aw, I was tellin' myself I got one side of my mustache 'most pulled off and I better start yankin' tother side."

"Seems to me Mace ought to be back," Della said. "He's been gone over two hours."

"That's a fact, Miss Della."

"What are we going to do?"

"We should wait a spell," Steve advised, "and if he don't show, we'll all ride into La Salina."

"Joe hasn't come back," she reminded him.

"Have to give Joe another hour," Steve said. "Maybe Shorty and Dutch ain't where they're supposed to be."

Five saddled horses were tied to the hitch rail. George and Tod were busy examining all the firearms on the ranch and collecting ammunition. At intervals, Chin Wali came out of the house, looked around and pattered in again. There was all about the air of hurried, ineffectual effort which comes when leadership is lacking. Della sensed this and it worried her. She caught herself wringing her hands as she paced back and forth. She clasped her hands firmly and watched the glow of the moon rise in the east.

Came to her ears the distant sounds of a horse's hoofs. Breath held, heart beating rapidly, she

waited until the thudding hoofbeats were plainer and nearer.

"Here he comes!" she cried and started to run.

"Better pull in, Miss Della," Steve called after her. "That ain't Mace."

She ran back to Steve.

"How can you tell?"

Steve snorted. "Oh, I dunno," he answered. "Don't sound like the way Mace rides a horse, that's all. Been seein' and hearin' him ride since he was knee-high to a boot."

She didn't believe Steve, but his assertion steadied her.

The rider came in sight, shadowy and indistinct, became clearer to sight. Della ran to meet him.

"Mr. Marble!"

Wes Marble got heavily to ground. He bulged large in all directions and his face with its heavy features seemed to be supported by a series of chins. He took his hat off and with it slapped at his garments.

"Whew!" he uttered. "Gittin' too heavy to fork a horse."

"Mace?" Della cried. "Where's Mace? That's his horse you've got!"

Wes was not to be hurried. "See you got here all right, miss. That livery horse came home."

Della danced with impatience.

"What do you know about Mace?" she demanded. "That horse!"

"Whoa there! Let me sit."

He went over to the porch and sat on the edge of it. Della and Steve followed him. George and Tod came up and stood attentively.

Wes drew a vast breath and began to speak. He left out no detail. He was out in Dick Fenton's barn with Dick looking at a sick horse. He heard shots and ran—"waddled" was the word Wes used—to the main street. What he learned, he had from the liveryman. The bartender at the Blue Star wouldn't talk.

Somehow Mace had hooked up with Beck and two of his men, Slim and Buck. Mace escaped as the broken window and disordered room at the Blue Star indicated. Then he had jumped Slim's paint horse and ridden north pursued by Beck and his two varmints.

"Figured Mace mighta gone to my house," Wes went on. "Sure 'nough he had. Left his horse. My daughter told me Mace had sent Betsy, my granddaughter, to hunt me up. The young un didn't find me on account of me lookin' at the sick horse. So I climb on Mace's horse and come here."

Wes's account was all right as far as it went, Della thought. She told him about the papers Mace had with him. The Flying B men had already been informed about the papers and the contents. She listened to the discussion of the men.

"If Mace rode north, he was takin' them there papers," Steve said. "Like as not, Wes, he wanted to give you them papers."

"He's got 'em and he'll go on with 'em," George opined.

"If he goes north far enough, he might run smack into that rustled trail herd," Tod said.

"And a bunch of Beck's men," George added. "He'll sure keep clear of tanglin' with them. He can't do nothin' to twenty-five hundred cows all by hisself."

"Why don't they get on with it, plan to do something?" Della asked herself.

THE other men agreed with George's statement. There was no doubt in their minds that Beck would bring on the herd. He had to. What Mace would do, they couldn't know.

"The only thing to do," Steve decided as foreman, "is to wire off the

panhandle trail. Do it in a dozen places. We got a nice, bright moon to work by. We'll twist wire from trees to the chaparral, make a nest of it that the devil himself couldn't get out of. Thataway we hold 'em up and give Mace the chance to work back or do whatever he decides to do."

"That's the ticket!" Tod acclaimed.

"Sure," George agreed. "And we can hide out in the chaparral and give those rustlers some star-spangled excitement."

"That's sensible," Wes said. "Only I ain't much good at fence stringin'. I'll set here with Miss Della. We'll be the home guards, won't we, miss?"

"I guess so," Della said.

There wasn't anything else to do. She didn't like the arrangement. All the men at one place and that removed from the rest of the ranch. One man, at least, ought to ramble around. And yet it was certain Beck must drive to the panhandle trail. But she didn't like it at all. She wondered if she were just being feminine and contrary or if there were sense in her idea.

She watched the men go toward the ranch buildings for barbed wire, staples and hatchets.

"It's goin' to be a lovely night, ain't it?"

She had it on the tip of her tongue to bet Wes her boots it wouldn't be, but instead she said, "That sure is a glorious moon."

Dill Beck rode at the head of his cavalcade. Beside him rode a heavy set man with a scarred face. His eyes were unusually small, though wide apart. He claimed his name was Charlie Parsons, but he was called "Snake Eyes" behind his back and "Chas" to his face.

With growing impatience, Beck listened to Snake Eyes, who he knew was trying to horn into the place occupied by Slim. Beck held a burning resentment against Slim for getting himself shot. This was aggravated by the presence of Snake Eyes and the advice he was forking out so freely. Slim never yapped. He laid low and kind of eased in with his talk. With something of a shock, Beck realized that Slim made it so that he, Beck, thought he was having his own way, but really was influenced by his wiry foreman. Beck admitted Slim was mostly right. His resentment grew. Slim was buzzard bait by now.

"So you see, Dill," Snake Eyes was saying, "none of 'em at th' Flyin' B know about the herd not comin' up an' they won't know what's up. So natcherly, they'll lay fer us at the panhandle trail. Say, won't that be a humdinger of a joke on 'em?" He slapped his thigh. "Then we start at the west end of the Flyin' B an' rush the cows to'ard the border. We have to cover a lot of ground an' we'll have to work day an' night, but we kin sure cut the mustard." He continued with practical details of the operation.

Dill frowned. He caught the general import of Snake Eyes's words and the direct advice added to his anger.

Yes, Slim was buzzard meat. It occurred to Beck that Slim wasn't altogether to blame, that really Mace Brody was to blame. His accumulated anger turned on Mace Brody, the cause of all his trouble. Yeah, and Brody would come traipsin' back. Sure, that kind of law-abidin', 'pussyfootin' fool always came hornin' in on what didn't concern him. Yeah, Brody would come back. For a moment, he longed for Slim's advice.

"So you see, Dill, them Flyin' B jackasses will wake up when it's too late an' find they ain't got any more cows'n a jack rabbit."

"Aw, shut up."

Snake Eyes's jaw dropped. He stared wide-eyed at Beck.

"Git outa my sight," Beck roared. "Tellin' me what to do! I'm goin' to take Brody's spread plumb apart, house, barns, everything. I'm startin' on the house." He shook one clenched fist. He spurred with all his might. At the first jump of the horse, his swinging hand struck the side of his bare head. "Hang it!" he howled at the sting of the blow.

His hat! Where was it? He remembered; remembered, too, the papers that had been in it. He pulled his horse to a sensible pace. Brody had them. All right, he would settle with Brody, one thing at a time. With Brody out of the way, who could do anything; who would press the charges? Nobody, he decided. He thought of the profit to himself. Then there was that red-headed gal. She would do to take along. He felt proud of himself. He gave a wild whoop.

Snake Eyes drew back alongside the nearest man.

"He's plumb, tee-total loco," he said.

"What's that?"

"I said," yelled Snake Eyes, above the drumming of hoofs, "Beck is plumb loco."

"Loco or not," yelled back the rider, "we got to trail with him."

CHAPTER VII.

FIRES OF HATE.

MACE miscalculated. The time was about an hour before sunset when he and Jess Kincaide rode their jaded horses through the wide doorway of the

La Salina livery stable. At the front and where the livery rigs were parked was fair light, but beyond, where the stalls were located, was a duskiness. The rump of a white horse extended from the first stall. The window at the far end by the water trough was obscured by grime and spider webs. The air was heavy with the mingled smells of horse, hay, and liniment.

Saddle leather creaked as Mace swung from his seat. He almost collided with a weedy man who hurried from the shadows of his office. A straw dangled from a corner of his pinched mouth.

He came face to face with Mace, sprang back. The straw fell from his mouth.

"Good gosh! Mace Brody!"

"You look like you just saw a ghost, Bass."

Bass Snyder, the liveryman, gulped.

"Uh, sure did, Mace," he said weakly. "Reckoned you was it." He managed a twisted smile.

"I'll get down to business," Mace said. "We have to have two fresh horses."

The liveryman shook his head. "No kin do," he declared. "Beck came along and cleaned me. Didn't have enough so he borrowed every horse in town."

"Every horse!"

"Every dad-blamed one."

Here was hindrance and delay. Mace knew Snyder received thirty or forty dollars a month for boarding horse stock for Beck. He did not trust the liveryman. Quickly, he inspected the horses in the seven stalls, looked into the corral at the rear of the stable. There wasn't a fresh horse in sight. Mace knew time was the essence of Beck's contract to deliver beef to Mexico. Therefore, as time pressed, Beck

would commence his cattle raid as soon as possible. Mace joined Jess and the liveryman.

"How long ago did Beck and his gang pull out?" Mace asked the liveryman.

"All of a' hour and a half."

This was a lie, because the outlaws did not have over a half hour's start, and Mace and Jess had held the same pace as their enemies. Mace let it go.

"Where was Beck heading?"

"Dunno."

"Did you talk with him?"

"No. He changed horses and got out soon's he could."

Mace drew his gun, balanced it with the muzzle pointing over Snyder's head.

"You're going to saddle a horse and ride with us. Those horses Beck brought in are in as good a shape as these we have. You'll ride in advance of us, Snyder, with a rope on you."

Even in that poor light, Mace saw the liveryman's face whiten.

"No; no!" he whined. "I gotta family and—"

Mace cut him short with a poke from the gun. "Talk, Snyder, and talk fast or else you ride."

"He's headin' for the Flying B. I know that." The liveryman was wringing his hands. "There warn't much talk. Honest, there warn't, Mace. And some of 'em are layin' for you on your in road. There, I've told it!" He seemed in actual pain.

Mace gave a nod to Jess, then mounted. The horses did not want to go, but were forced to the street, forced to the semblance of a lope.

Mace pulled up before Wes Marble's home, ran to the door and knocked. The front window opened and Mrs. Ross thrust out her head. One hand was on her bosom.

"I'm so relieved, Mace."

Mace had no time for conversation.

"Where's Wes?" he wanted to know.

"Rode out to your ranch last night on your horse. He hasn't come back. I'm scared, Mace."

"So'm I," Mace answered. "Wes's horse in the barn?"

"No. That's what I'm scared of. Beck took him. He told me to keep my snoot in the house."

"I'm in a hurry, Mrs. Ross," Mace said, making for his horse. "How're the kids?"

"Under the bed. I had to tie Chester there. He—"

The rest was lost as Mace mounted, and by the time he and Jess had forced the tired horses to their best pace, they were away from town and at the foot of the long, gently rising grade. The horses bent their heads and slowed with the uphill pull.

"They're laying for us," Jess remarked. He pulled his gun and twirled the cylinder, tried the action. "Got all six chambers filled. Good places for ambushes on your road?"

"Plenty," Mace replied. "I'm not worrying about that; I figure Beck wouldn't leave more than four men to settle us. What does bother me is what Beck's going to do at the ranch house. If all my men were there, it wouldn't be so bad, but likely they'll be over guarding the panhandle trail." He quit talking, though there was much he could have conjectured. He hoped Della was with the men.

Evidently, Jess's mind was burdened.

"When do we get to your spread, Mace?"

"Hour and a half if we don't have to walk."

There was silence for a space, but

when near the top of the rise, Mace said: "We turn east here."

There was no marked trail, but Mace set a course that led south-easterly. He kept to open ground, weaving among the oaks and avoiding the chaparral. The hills rose higher, but Mace angled up the slopes. This way to the ranch was shorter in distance than the road, but a fast walk was the best pace possible. They covered a few miles, both men curbing their impatience. The sun had set, though its afterglow lingered. Unerringly, Mace differentiated between shadow and substance. Ahead rose a steep hillside, chaparral-covered.

Mace called back to Jess: "How are you on brush poppin'?"

"Left my chaps home on the piano," Jess answered.

"Well, tuck in your legs."

MACE broke the trail, reining the horse to take advantage of any thinness of the brush. He received many a sharp jab, and the horse did, too. The stiff branches tore Mace's pants, but finally they breasted the slope and stood at the crest to rest the blowing horses.

"Say, it's too early for the moon," Jess said with a puzzled quality to his voice.

"Yes. Why?"

"Look yonder." Jess pointed a little to the east of south.

A faint glow was visible. It was more the promise of light than light itself. The glow brightened, making clearer the outlines of intervening oaks.

"That's my home ranch," Mace breathed. "My home!" He spurred his horse. The exhausted animal tried to respond, but the best he could achieve was a shambling walk. Mace raised the spurs, held them

suspended, then allowed his feet to fall. "I can't do it," he moaned. He appealed to the horse. "Go on," he urged. "Take me through and I'll feed you the rest of your life. You'll never have a stitch of work to do. Go on!"

Something in Mace's voice made that weary horse pick up his feet and move on, but at the same old spiritless lope. Mace had to be content. High-heel boots were not made for footwork. There was yet a mile to cover.

Jess talked, but Mace had no ear for his words.

The glow became brighter, grew to a half circle of ruddy light. Mace kept his gaze there. He couldn't be sure what building had been fired; all, perhaps. He strained his ears, but heard no sound but the methodical *clump, clump, clump* of horses' hoofs. One thing Mace knew: the fire would be a beacon to call all Flying B men to the home ranch, call them before the muzzles of hidden guns. Mace didn't let his thoughts dwell on Della. Some things are best unthought about.

They rode up a rise to level land that continued to where the ranch buildings stood. Red banners of flames twisted toward the sky. Smoke billowed.

"It's the west feed barn," Mace shouted, though there was no need to shout.

They rode on in the night toward the light, and the shadows died unwillingly, writhing and twisting, as the light of the flickering flames grew stronger. They came to a fence a quarter of a mile from the fire. The west barn burned fiercely because it was nearly empty. The murmurous roar of the flames was like the pur of a great cat fiercely enjoying a fresh kill. Flames rolled from the blazing walls and the light from them

made a spreading pool dammed at its margins by black shadows. The ruddy fire glow fell fitfully upon the walls of the east feed barn, crammed with hay, which was far enough away from the blaze to be safe from falling sparks and brands. Mace slipped the carbine from its boot.

"This is as far as we can ride," he decided, his look upon the east barn, which he expected to start burning at any moment. "This fence, Jess, is about on the shadow line. We can run along this side and work towards the ranch buildings. They are the other side of the barns."

"We can do our sneaking better on foot than in saddle," Jess agreed.

They started, bending low, on an easy run along the fence. The roof of the burning barn fell. From the ruin came a torrent of sound. Flames and brands shot straight to the heavens. The smoke was a tower. The multitude of flames roared like an army in triumph. All the surrounding land was brighter than day. Through the hum of flames, the crackle and snap of blazing wood, sounded the sharp patter of gunfire. Mace glanced over a shoulder at Jess, who quickened his pace, also. They came to a turn of a fence, crawled under and spurted. They passed close to the fire. Heat from the fire rolled upon them; they shaded their faces with their hats. They ran past the corrals. Horses there were huddled in a corner farthest from the fire. As they raced on, the gunfire increased. Yells of men resounded. They passed the blacksmith shop, the bunk house, reached the water tank. The light spread out ahead. They came to the weeping willow and the oaks which stood between the water tank and the open space before the ranch house. They halted in the shadow of the willow, moved cautiously

around the long, trailing foliage of the tree. The battle swung to the ground before the house.

Five riders surged in, misty figures swimming in wavering light. There was the dark ranch house, the oaks before it. Mace's comprehending glance caught details: the ruddy reflection held by a house window, the hitch rail between the oaks, the sprawled figure on the porch before the door, then the plunging horses and their riders. The pound of hoofs was like the roll of a drum. The six-guns roared and flashed; powder smoke jetted. All this came to Mace between two flicks of his eyelids. And he knew the riders were Flying B men. He also knew they had engaged the enemy and were now charging. And it must have been that the fire signaled them to come in from the panhandle.

Five riders came to do battle in defense of the home ranch. Five? Flitted to Mace's mind the names of his men: Steve, George, Joe, Tod, Shorty and Dutch. Where was the sixth Flying B man? A horse went down. The rider catapulted from saddle, turned a somersault and lay still. The enemy fire came from the wall at the west end of the house and on Mace's side, a little to the east of him where fennel grew, watered by the overflow of the tank. The horsemen swept on, three of them. One horse, saddle emptied, galloped with the rest. Gunfire died down, punctuated at the last by one solitary shot.

Mace choked, shook his head. He had forgotten Jess. He dropped the carbine and its belt, glided from the shelter of the willow and ran full tilt for the clump of fennel. His head was clear. He strove to keep it so, else memory of that somersaulting cowboy and the empty saddle would have made him seethe.

THREE men came out of the fennel ambuscade, came out swiftly with the play of the firelight upon their sombreros and shoulders.

Mace halted. The three faces turned toward him. He saw an arm of the nearest man rise.

"Who're you?" came the demand.

"Flying B."

"Let him—"

Then Mace cut loose. He knew he had a nest of snakes to wipe out, and here was the start. He fired three times, stepped aside from the powder smoke and fired twice more. He thought he had been fired upon, but wasn't sure and didn't care. Deliberately, he loaded all the chambers of his gun, then walked to where lay the three. They had fallen in grotesque attitudes. There was no time to examine them to find out if they were killed or wounded. He plucked a gun from a holster, saw it was loaded and went to locate Jess.

"Hey, Jess!" he called softly.

There was an unearthly silence about. The roar of the flames had died to a dull undertone, still menacing and hungry.

"Jess?"

"Over here, Mace," came quietly.

"At first, Mace did not see his friend, then located him sitting on the ground in the shadow of an oak.

"When those buzzards fired at you, I stopped one with my leg," Jess explained. "Got it above the knee and inside through the meat. Sure made me sick for a minute."

"Take your hand away, Jess."

Mace cut away the pants leg, but couldn't make out how bad was the wound. He hurried to where lay the three outlaws and took their neckerchiefs. One of the men moaned, another moved feebly. Mace started to bind Jess's wound. There was a crash and the light became bright

while the flames roared eagerly. Mace figured the side walls of the barn had fallen inward.

"I can finish it, Mace. Something doing down to the west."

That was the way the three Flying B men had gone. Above the rumble of the flames sounded hoofbeats. Six-guns began to pop.

"Better get set, Mace."

The two of them listened.

"I'll bet," Jess said, "your men bumped into those fellers what was to hide out for us."

"Guess you're right." Mace got to his feet. In each hand he held a gun. "Never was much of a shot with my left hand," he remarked. "Had all I could do to use my right hand."

Jess picked up the carbine.

Hoofs pounded nearer. Broke into sight a group of three riders closely pursued by a group of four. Steve Miller's white head was among the three. Mace ran to the open, forgetful of cover, jumped over the fallen Flying B horse. Steve jerked in saddle, slumped forward and his arms hugged his horse's neck. The horse raced on. Mace drew down on the leading rider and fired and missed, missed again. He shot the horse. Two more shots got the second horse. The next shot was just a shot. He changed guns, fired at the third horse. One of the tumbled riders sat up and began firing at Mace. At Mace's third shot, the outlaw slammed back on the ground. The fourth horse swept on.

"Mace, Mace!" The cry came from Jess.

Mace ran to him.

"You was spang out in the light," Jess said. "I shot one of them fellers what toppled off his shot horse; you got one, and by the looks, the third don't require shooting. Two buzzards were at the west end of

the house. I got one, I think. This carbine came in right handy. The other ran in the house. He was a big fella, wearing a sort of red vest."

"Sort of red?" Mace repeated. "Could it have been a vest made out of a bridle calf skin?"

"Yes. It seemed kind of familiar," Jess said. "He went like a streak."

Mace looked to the house. The door seemed to be open, but he couldn't be sure.

"I haven't lost much blood," Jess claimed. "I can sit here and shoot. Good steady position."

"You sure got a game heart, Jess."

A scream, shrill, penetrating, split the air.

"Della! The house!" Jess shouted. He tried to get up, but the thick bandaging prevented him.

Mace leaped away, his long shadow leading him on. The flames, devouring the last of the barn, shone brightly. Dead horses and the bodies of men lay scattered around. Mace avoided them. He headed straight for the doorway. The hitch rail barred his way. He ducked under and the rail scraped off his hat. In two jumps, he was upon the porch, thudding lightly upon the balls of his feet. A spur dragged. To the right of the doorway lay a body which, by the bulk of it, Mace knew to be Wes Marble.

"Don't come in! Don't come in!"

A growl, more like that of a beast than a man, sounded.

Mace stood balanced, a gun in each hand. He watched the doorway. The door was half open. Fire-light played upon it, lapped through the space between door and doorframe.

"Come out, Beck; come out and fight."

Mace did not expect the outlaw to show himself. He would hold his

advantage. Mace watched the one window from which a shot could be fired and the doorway.

"Come out, Beck. All your men are down."

This might not be true. One outlaw had gone on in the wake of Steve and another Flying B rider.

Still there was no reply. Mace hoped Beck would speak so his voice would indicate his position.

"Come out, you yellow coyote."

"He's waiting by the door."

"You she—" Beck got no more words out, but gave vent to a bellow.

Boots clumped, a cry came, followed by a thud.

MACE went through the doorway as he had gone through the window of the Blue Star, in a low, diving lunge. He felt the burn as his shoulder skidded along the floor. He twisted out of the path of light upon the floor. He crouched on his knees, waited, saw a bukiing shadow and fired both guns as he flopped low and squirmed to a new position. The return fire came from a different direction, just where, he couldn't determine. Mace had been mistaken in his shadow.

The powder smoke of the three shots made a mist in the air. The flickering light of the fire flowing through windows and doorway made blue blocks in the smoke. Mace held his breath. He heard no sound within the room. Thought of all Beck had done, goaded Mace, cried to him to get going, to blast the outlaw and all he stood for from the fair face of the earth, but he dared not move. Della was there; where or what had happened to her he could not know. Silence reigned.

The nervous tension within Mace increased. He clenched his teeth. He couldn't play Beck's game by making the first move. Where was

Della? Why was she so still? He knew how game she was, how fearless. She had foiled Beck when he had the drop on Mace. And Mace knew she had some part in the outlaw's design. He had to find out; he could hold back no longer. And, if he did move, suppose Beck was using Della as a shield? That held him for ten frozen seconds.

He sprang up as a steel spring uncoils, came standing and weaving with a shout on his lips. And the outlaw gun roared. Continually moving, Mace fired at the flash, aiming high. He crowded in, zigzagging, holding his fire. He couldn't see for the powder smoke. He rushed, came full tilt upon some hard object and flung headlong to the floor. Flashed to his mind that there was something queer about that chair. It didn't move when he stumbled over it. But a gun was belching lead at him. He lay on his back and fired both guns, got to his knees, was on his feet still firing, pressed triggers until the hammers fell on dead shells.

Then Mace's hands fell to his sides. In his ears was still the roaring clamor of guns. The smoke fog lay heavy in the air. Beck? Mace had to know. Firelight flowed upon the smoke-clouded doorway. Something lay across the threshold. Heavy-footed, Mace went there, looked down. Beck lay upon his back, his face illuminated by the light from the ruddy flames, his dead eyes staring at all eternity. Mace instinctively laid one gun down, loaded the other and holstered it.

He went to hunt for Della, fearing what he should find.

"Della!" He hardly breathed her name.

Quick as an echo came the soft reply, "Mace!"

His heart leaped within him. Vanished fear and weariness.

"Here I am, Mace. Tied to the chair."

Miraculously, he was kneeling by the chair, fumbling for the knots that held her. His fingers danced at the job, making three times the work necessary.

Della was composed. She directed him.

"He came up and scratched my face with something," she said, "and I screamed. That's what he wanted me to do."

"To decoy me. How did he know I had come?"

"After the last shooting outside," she explained, "he came in the house. He said you had come back. He said he knew you would come back, and he was going to settle with you if it was the last thing he did. Mace, there's another rope around my waist."

Mace's fingers worked better now. A last twitch of the rope and she was free. He lifted her to her feet and she clung to him.

Della said: "Six riders came in, and Wes was here. We went outside and they shot Wes down. Beck caught me and tied me to the chair. He said—he"—her voice broke—"said he was keeping me so I wouldn't get hurt."

She began to sob, gently at first, and clung the tighter. Her head lay on his shoulder and he held her close.

"There, there," he soothed her and softly patted her back with a hand. "Everything is all right, Della."

She clung tighter while sobs shook her. Gradually, she quieted and still clung. Mace looked out the doorway. He did not even think of the corpse sprawled across the threshold. The light of the flames was slowly ebbing. He stood there with Della's warm, young body clasped in his arms, and such a peace as he had

never known came over him. The spell passed and Mace tried to hold it, but it went.

But all around was silence, a silence complete and whole. And peace, too, gained at a price. Yes, everything was gained at a price. There was a price for life, for liberty, for love. The borderland would have peace now and security, but gained at a great price.

Della stirred, bringing Mace's thoughts back to her. Locks of her hair brushed his cheek. He bent and brushed the top of her head with his lips. For a space nothing happened at all. Mace bent his head, and Della's lips came to meet his. Della drew away, but held Mace's hand in hers.

From the hallway came a familiar slapping sound, but not as it should be. There was light: Chin Wah came wabbling into the room, lantern held level with his face. He wore one sandal; the other foot was bare. A blood streak lay across his face, and about his head was wound a dish-towel, knotted behind. The ends of the cloth above the knot were like two ears. Chin Wah's appearance was that of a sallow-faced rabbit.

Della and Mace began to laugh. The ears wagged. They laughed the more.

"What a mallah, you?" the Chinaman inquired squeakily. He wabbled over and held the lantern beside Beck's body. "Velly good," he said. "You likee tea?"

"You catchum tea," Mace said.

He was glad for the relief of laughter which eased weariness and hunger and heartache. Chin Wah, his one sandal slapping vigorously, went out.

"Jess is out there and he's all right," Mace said. "He has a wound in the leg. Now, don't get excited."

"I won't," she promised. "I don't

think I can ever get excited again. Oh, Mace!"

She didn't have to say what she wanted. Mace knew as he bent to meet her upturned lips.

"Come on, sweetheart; there's plenty to do."

"Listen, Mace. Horses!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL'S WELL.

RELUCTANTLY, Mace drew gun from the holster, peered forth over Beck's body. Enough light came from the dying fire to temper the darkness. The slow hoofbeats came from the east. Mace made out two riders whose horses slowly paced side by side. One man supported the other. One had a white head. Mace ran out.

"Who's there?" he called.

"George," came the answer. "Steve's hurt. Gimme a hand."

They carried Steve to the house, and he protested he was mostly tired, that his shooting was around the edges and didn't amount to much. His wounds proved not severe, but he was old and had sustained bad shocks. He couldn't foresee the weeks he must spend in bed while his time-worn body recuperated. They cared for him as best they could.

Heartsick, Mace got George to help him with Wes Marble's body. He had no doubt the marshal was dead, but to their surprise Wes was breathing. Examination showed he had been creased. The furrow in his scalp was blood-clotted. They laid him on a bed, being able to do no more for him. When he regained consciousness hours later, he explained the reason it took so long for him to come to was because there was so much of him.

Jess was carried in and given in

charge of Della. He claimed he had a nice clean bullet hole and was grateful for the rest he must take while the wound healed. Mace washed the wound with dilute carbolic and got out of it a piece of pants cloth.

At intervals, Chin Wah squeaked lustily: "Him tea no good, you no drink."

But the time had not come for tea.

"It's blame lucky," Mace said as they set out to survey the fire, "there's no wind."

"Looks to me," George returned, "we're entitled to some luck."

But those two never got a chance to inspect the fire that night. Faint, from the west, came the grate of wheels which slowed as the rig approached the ranch house.

"I got a couple more kicks in me," George said and sighed resignedly, "though I'm willin' to call it a day."

"Got a hunch it's fellers from town," Mace said, lowering the hand which had shaded his eyes. "If those horses ain't the span of white plugs belonging to the blacksmith, I'll eat your shirt."

"Guess I keep my shirt," George said a moment later. "I know the rattle of that spring wagon."

Nevertheless, the two waited in the shelter of an oak trunk until assured Mace's hunch was right.

"That you, Tom?" Mace called.

"It's me," Tom Morgan, the blacksmith, answered. "Brought some of the boys. There's Doc Botts, the Garfield brothers, Pete Smith and Ham Young and me, and a cowhand I don't know. What's your name, Bub?"

"Jim Long."

"All right. Pile out, fellers. Say, what's them things on the ground yonder?"

"Men and horses—dead."

"Gosh sakes! We couldn't come

no sooner 'cause that dad-blamed Beck took all our good horses. We come to see what the fire was about."

"Beck cashed in."

"I, for one, ain't puttin' on mournin'. Git along, boys."

Mace corralled Doc Botts. He was a veterinarian, but had had as much practice on humans as on horses. He went to work caring for and rebandaging the wounded. The advent of the La Salina men was a life-saver for Mace. They went out to the fire to do what they could.

Moonlight came to replace the firelight, and then Mace had food and tea. He went to sleep over the third cup of tea.

The death toll of the Flying B was four men: Joe Brooks, Tod Trent, Shorty Baker and Dutch Baumgarten. These men found their last resting place in the little cemetery of the ranch. Of the outlaws, six were killed outright, two died of their wounds, and two recovered to enter the walls of a penitentiary, but that was months later.

The La Salina men buried the dead men and disposed of the carcasses of the horses. They returned to their homes late the next day, with the exception of the cowboy, Jim Long, a likable fellow, whom Mace hired. Jim was sent to the Kincade ranch with messages from Mace, Jess, and Della. He was to turn back any help sent by the Block Arrowhead.

MACE figured he wouldn't replace the burned feed barn for a while. He intended to file a claim against the estate of Dill Beck, a claim which would not be contested. Other cattlemen would do the same. The papers found in Beck's sombrero would prove him a thief and aid in the collection of damages.

Della and Mace were together most of the time. Together with George, they had to do the riding of five men. Mace expected to hire three men when he could find the ones he wanted. Steve was coming along slowly. Jess was irritable in confinement except when Mace and Della were with him. He kept his gaze upon them, and there was a knowing look upon his face.

Jim Long got back from his errand. He brought kind, loving letters from the colonel for Della and for Jess. His note to Mace was brimful of gratitude. The Block Arrowhead herd was back home with a loss of fifty head, most of which were killed or maimed in the stampede. He would visit the Flying B as soon as he could travel by buckboard.

Jim brought Mace a letter from Silas. He grinned as he handed it over.

"That bird Si is one queer horned toad," he remarked.

Mace read the letter, which was as follows:

DEAR MACE BRODY: Yore pet cow thief is alive, dang him, and will soon be well enough to hang. I have nussed him fer that particular occasion, dog-gone his onery hide. What I want to know is, shall I hang him in a sort of offhand way, or invite in all the fellers? I got a good tree picked out close to a sandy creek bottom. Or should you like to do the job? I'm willing to do the job if it will save you bother. And should he be allowed to say some last words? I am looking forward to the ceremony and will wear my best shirt. Let me know about the hanging. Hoping you are the same— (This was scratched out.) Hoping you keep well. I remain your faithful servant, SILAS CRUM.

A postscript followed:

Dog-gone him, he is dog-gone foxy. He is making me like him. Say, Mace, is it necessary a black cap be black? Or is a

black cap only used fer dude hangings?
How about a gunny sack? Yours some
more.

S. C.

Mace handed the letter to Jim with the remark: "S'pose you know who this refers to?"

Jim read the letter, and his face cracked with a grin. He wiped away the tears of laughter.

"Yes, I saw him," he said. "I never knew him when he was rustlin', but he seems like a pretty good feller. Maybe he changed. What you aim to do with him, Mace?"

"Figured I'd bring him here and give him a chance to earn a honest living. I judge there's some good in Slim Sweet on account of the way he treats horses. I'm asking you to rest up and ride to the Block Arrow-head again, Jim. Take your time getting back here."

"All right," Jim agreed. "I hate to disappoint Si. He's a card, that old-timer. And I don't mind trail ridin' a bit."

"Give you letters later."

Jim hit the trail the next day, and Mace took up ranch work. He and Della were riding in to the home ranch one late afternoon. They were moving at a slow walk.

"You know what, Mace?"

He looked at her and dropped from his mind the cattleman's problem he was pondering.

"Do I know what?"

She smiled at him. "Mace, do you realize love came right spang in full bloom to us?"

"I figure that's the way it should. Saved me a lot of bother. Plumb labor-saving, I call it. Didn't have to go mooning around bumping into trees and falling off my horse."

"Well, what about me?"

"Well, what about you?"

"No moon."

"We should have waited. No, no,

I don't mean that, Della. I'm right sorry about the moon."

"No roses."

"Not a dog-gone rose! Nary a one on the ranch. I'll tell you, you can have a whole orchard of them."

"Stop now! Be serious."

Mace pulled a long face. "Go on," he urged in his deepest voice, "and hurry up. I can't do this to my mug much longer."

"Mace, I didn't have the fun of watching you, not knowing if you would pop the question or not. I wasn't kept on pins and needles at all."

"The pins and needles will come later."

"Mace Brody, you're horrid! Begin at the beginning?"

"Beginning of what?"

"Beginning of love-making, silly!"

"I ain't had no experience."

"You mean to tell me you've never made love to a girl?"

"Sure haven't."

"Mace, you're a darling."

"I know it. Gimme a kiss."

"You've got to earn it."

"Get out your hoop. I'll jump through it."

"Will you be serious?"

"Why, I am! I'm trying to fill your order."

"Pretend you never saw me before."

"Who's going to introduce us, the horse?"

"You're hopeless." But in her eyes was a dancing light. "I wonder what you would have done if we didn't fall in love right there after the battle?"

A SHADOW crossed Mace's face, then it lighted again.

"I'd have managed, Della. Couldn't help it. Love would just have busted out of me in all direc-

tions like one of them Fourth of July pinwheels."

"I'm glad," was all Della said.

For a space, they ambled along in silence.

"You've earned your kiss, Mace."

He didn't have to reach far to collect it.

"Thanks, Della. I admit that was good."

"Not bad for an amateur," she said, smiling shyly. "And, Mace, we'll be married when father is well enough to come down."

"You bet your boots."

"Who will be best man?"

"Hm-m-m! Think there's any?"

"No, of course not. But you must have a best man."

"I've selected Jess," Mace said. "You see, he's called best man because he feels better'n the groom. Nothing ain't going to happen to him. His chore is to herd the groom along so the parson can hawg-tie him proper."

"How about the blushing bride?"

"Shucks, there never was a bride who couldn't look after her end."

"Tell me how much you love me, Mace."

"Oh, my dear," and there he had to stop. "The bowl of the sky ain't big enough to hold my love for you," he said quietly. "There ain't enough earth to load it on. All the oceans are just a drop, compared to how I love you."

"Go on, Mace. Please! When you talk like that I could fly away into the sunset."

"I love you. Just those three words tell more than a stack of books a mile high."

They pulled in and sat looking into each other's eyes.

Della nodded her head slowly.

"Speaking of sunsets," Mace began. "Ride with me to the top of

that little hill and I'll guarantee a real sunset. Pink clouds tied in true lovers' knots, cupids flapping around, hearts entwined—that is, if it can be done—and everything."

"I'll beat you there!" she cried and spurred.

"Shucks, you couldn't beat a flea."

She didn't beat Mace. He got there first by a rope length and grinned.

She made a face at him and reined in by his side.

Mace raised an arm and pointed to the west.

The sun's disk was flattening at the horizon; the top began to draw in until it was very like a pyramid, then slowly it dissolved from sight. But the glory of it remained in the sky, and the clouds gathered the ruddy glow. Between the lowest clouds, the sky was a living green, while higher was a soft blue which hardened with distance up to the vault of heaven.

"A sunset makes you think," Mace said softly.

Della reached for his hand, held it between her two.

"You're the grandest man, Mace."

He had to bend his head to catch her words.

"You fought for what you think is right. It isn't so much you stamped out Beck and his gang; it is that you fought for the ideal that this land must be a safe place for honest folks."

"I'm thinking of my four cowboys in the burying ground; thinking, too, of my dad. He was called Honest Bill Brody. He fought for justice and got three bullets in his body and a year's agony for his trouble. But he never kicked. Before he took to his bed, he had the borderland a decent place. Then Beck came in."

"Your men didn't die in vain,

Mace, and you've carried on your father's work. He would be proud of you."

"It's all in the day's work, Della. We, you and me, Della, will sort of go on, doing our best to make this neck of the woods a good place to

live in." His face eased. "Maybe, if we have any kids, when they grow up, they won't have no trouble. That last kiss has wore out. I need a fresh one."

Della smiled and reached her arms to him.

THE CAT CAME BACK

THREE is an old belief that cats like places and dogs like people, but this is not always the case. Sometimes a cat will be so fond of a family that it will follow the members wherever they go.

Sheriff Newman, of Yuma, Arizona, took his family and a large white cat to the mountains in order to get away from the humid temperatures of the lowlands. When it was time to return home in the fall, Mr. Pussy was not to be found. Cats have a way of disappearing at the critical moment and turning up later as if nothing had happened.

But this particular white cat went on a foraging expedition, or what-have-you, at the wrong moment. When he returned to his summer home his family had gone, and they failed to come back. There was nothing to do but to walk home—a trip of one hundred and fifty miles. But he didn't know that or he might not have started out.

Having begun the journey he kept on, stopping here and there for a few days' rest and sustenance from some kind-hearted person. It was not until early spring that he arrived at the sheriff's house, a little gaunt and awfully glad to get to the end of his trip through miles and miles of mountains and desert.

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Code of the Big Sticks

By HOWARD J. PERRY

Author of "Range Law," etc.

THEY were celebrating the Fourth of July in Hogan's saloon at Junction City when Big Joe drifted into town. A full representation from every logging camp on the Olympic Peninsula was aiding the town in observing the birth of the nation; and, if patriotism was measured by the quantity of liquor consumed, then the timbermen were not found wanting in love of country.

Just when the big fellow entered Hogan's was not recorded on any one's memory. The carousing loggers became aware of his hulky

presence by degrees as he lounged at the far end of the room watching the drinking and card playing with the frank curiosity of one who was seeing it for the first time in his life. A broad, freckled face topped by a thatch of rusty hair rode his broad shoulders. The angles of youth showed in his six-foot sinewy frame.

But at that he was slightly larger than the average of those husky workers of the timberlands and he would have gone unnoticed had it not been for "Quid" Austin, colossal giant from the camp across the river. Quid was the king-pin of the rough-and-tumble fighters on the Pen-

insula. He had never faced a man he couldn't lick and under the stimulation of liquor the ego of his physical superiority was always inflated to the bursting point.

Quid had reached that stage of intoxication wherein the only thing that could further satisfy him was a battle. At such moments he seemed to skip back a thousand generations to his savage ancestors.

The impulse for action was sudden. With a whoop that shook the rafters of Hogan's saloon, he lurched into the middle of the floor.

"I'm a meat-eatin' catamount!" His voice could have been heard across the river.

Jerry Hogan leaned over the bar and spoke quickly to several near-by loggers. "Don't let him get started, boys," he pleaded. "The last time he well-nigh busted all the furniture before he was stopped."

The men nodded. "Let him get his speech out of his system," one of them replied.

"I'm a meat-eatin' calamont!" Quid repeated. This time a little louder. "And I eat it raw. Any lousy timber beast says I can't?"

Legs apart, arms crooked before him, he glared upon the assemblage. No one spoke and neither did they smile. They knew Quid too well. When he had a chip on his shoulder the least motion or expression on the part of any man would single him out for the target of the big fellow's assault.

Quid's inflamed gaze made the circuit of the room and then stopped abruptly as it came to rest upon "Big Joe." The youngster was grinning broadly.

"What'n the devil you laughin' at?" Quid inquired with a snarl.

"Nothing, I guess," said Big Joe, still showing his white teeth.

"Then I'll give you something,"

Quid roared, lurching forward on his toes, his great body uncoiling like a spring.

Before Big Joe knew what had happened, a hamlike fist crashed on the side of his head and he spun backward against the wall.

The loggers grinned with relief. It was tough on the kid, but any sap should know better than to laugh at a man in Quid's humor. It served him right. Besides, Quid's appetite for battle would be appeased and they could all go back to their drinking. In fact, some of them had half turned to the bar when they caught the look on the kid's face. The blood had drained from it and his blue eyes had become fine points of fire.

For a long moment he stood against the wall as if gathering his strength. The next instant he lunged forward, his long arms shooting out like steam-driven pistons. Knuckles thudded on flesh as his fists hammered into Quid's surprised face. Caught off balance, Quid went backward on his heels, but Big Joe was upon him; those fists never ceased their relentless attack. In a few seconds, Quid's face was the color of raw beefsteak. He flailed out with his great arms—they fanned the air or landed on the kid's body.

Then Quid backed up against the opposite wall. He tried to dodge, but Big Joe's driving arms pinioned him, the tattoo of those blasting, sapping blows splitting the awed stillness of the saloon. Quid's knees sagged. If Big Joe had stopped for a moment, the big fellow would have gone down, but the kid's murderous assault held him up.

"For the love of Mike!" Hogan screamed. "Stop him!"

It was the saloon owner's voice that saved Quid. Big Joe hesitated

just a moment and it was long enough to allow Quid's unconscious form to fall face forward, on the floor.

For an instant Big Joe stared at the inert hulk before him. All the fire had gone from his eyes, leaving only vague incomprehension as though he had been caught in a shameful exhibition.

The loggers gaped in wonderment. They had witnessed something too strange for words. Quid Austin had been beaten to a pulp by a hulking kid.

Big Joe slowly let his gaze travel about the room. Then half stumbling he rushed out of the saloon. Purple twilight lay over the timberland as he made his way to the river. Misery raked his soul as he sought the solitude of a log jam that jutted out into the white water. A cool wind, perfumed with cedar and hemlock, came down from the high peaks. It was from those high peaks he had come seeking his first job in the logging camps, and he had made a bad start of it, beating a drunken guy like that. Of course, he had lost his head, but a man never made good in the camps losing his head that way—and he wanted to make good. All his life in those lonely spaces among the mountains he had dreamed of the day when he could take his place among other men, and the first time he did, he had made a fool of himself.

Darkness was upon the valley when he finally returned to the cheap lodging house where he had taken a room. The following morning he was up early and appeared at Camp Seven.

The superintendent eyed him appraisingly when he announced that he wanted a job. It was a fortuitous moment to ask for work. A Fourth

of July celebration always thinned the ranks of the loggers.

"Think you can hold down a scaler's job?" the superintendent asked. "You ought to, you're big enough."

Big Joe swallowed a couple of times. It was more than he had expected. A scaler had to trim the limbs from the fallen trees and cut the logs in proper lengths, but he had handled a saw and ax all his life.

"I—I guess I could—I could try hard enough."

"Well, I'll give you a whirl at it. I'm short-handed, and we've got a lot of work to do."

"Thanks," said Big Joe.

"Report to Chris Johnson. He's acting woods boss till I get another man."

The men had already left for the woods. Big Joe's heart pounded joyfully as he followed the skid road, a four-pound, double-bit ax over his shoulder. He would make good; he had to. He had gotten his chance.

CHRIS JOHNSON was helping a couple of choker-setters with a fouled choker when Big Joe came up and announced that he was ready to go to work. Chris hardly glanced up. He jerked his head toward the slope above.

"All right, go up there and work with Slim Akers. He's that lanky guy without a hat."

Big Joe started away when Chris suddenly called out after him.

"Hey, you. Ain't you the guy who slammed the stullin' out of Quid Austin over in Hogan's last night?"

Big Joe stopped. He had hoped that no one in this outfit would remember him. "Yes. I guess I was the one. Lost my head—didn't mean to hurt the poor fellow."

Chris Johnson uttered a roar.

"Poor fellow! That's rich! That was the first time Quid was ever licked. You're a pretty neat scrapper for a punk kid."

Big Joe looked at him with the color mounting his cheeks. Maybe Chris was poking fun at him. But Chris had sounded sincere.

"I ain't no fighter," Big Joe said. "If he hadn't been drunk he would have trimmed me good."

Again Chris laughed. "You don't know Quid. He's at his best when he's crooked. But take a tip from me, don't go hanging around where Quid is. He'll never let that whipping go unchallenged. Hop up there and give Slim a hand."

Big Joe hurried away. Johnson's words had been freighted with meaning. Well, he wouldn't get in Quid's way. He didn't want to get in any one's way. He only wanted to make good in the camps. He was through fighting.

He found "Slim" Akers an agreeable chap, willing to give him a few pointers on the work and Big Joe proved a good pupil. When they quit for lunch, he overheard Slim tell Chris that the kid was a working wild cat.

That night in camp while the crew was eating in the cook shack, Big Joe saw the men eying him curiously. A couple of the loggers came up to him afterward and told him what a swell scrap he had put up against Quid. Big Joe slipped away from them and sought his bunk house. He didn't want to hear what they thought of the exhibition he had put on in Hogan's. Slim's few words of praise for his work that day meant a lot more.

But it remained for "Liver Pill," the camp's veteran and diminutive bullock, to convince him that the matter would not be dropped.

"Course, it ain't any o' my busi-

ness, Big Joe," the little fellow said one evening a few days later, "but you'd better stay clear o' Quid. He works across the river, but some of the men from over there say he's taken that whipping to heart. If he finds out you're here, he'll likely come lookin' for trouble. Quid's poison."

"I'll stay away from him," said Big Joe. "I don't want any trouble."

And in the days that followed he refrained from visiting Junction City. He proved to be a good woodsman, willing to do just a little more than his share of any job he was put on. Beyond that he remained an enigma. Uncommunicative, he drew a shroud of taciturnity about himself. Had not the memory of that night in Hogan's remained so poignant in the minds of the crew some of them might have exercised their proclivity for badgering—a customary persecution that fell to the lot of green hands such as Big Joe. But they remembered.

Then one morning when he was walking into the woods with the crew, Slim Akers spoke to him.

"Got some bad news for you, Big Joe."

Big Joe looked frightened. "I ain't fired?"

"Gosh, no," Slim retorted. "But this is worse. Quid Austin has been moved from across the river. He's the new woods boss for this camp."

"What's so bad about that?" Big Joe asked. "Ain't he a good man?"

"Sure, he's a good logger—one of the best," Slim retorted. "I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?"

Slim shook his head sadly. "Gee, but you're dumb at times! Don't you know Quid has been taking a ribbing ever since you slammed him around at Hogan's? Just because

he was soured to the ears that night, don't think he ain't remembered—and Quid holds a grudge. If I were you, I'd pull out."

Big Joe looked at the other with widened eyes. "I don't want to pull out. This is my first job in the woods—I want to make good. If I do my work, he won't have a kick coming."

Slim wagged his head hopelessly. "All right! All right! But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Sure, I won't," said Big Joe.

Quid appeared later that day and took charge in the woods. Big Joe heard his voice booming orders. Quid was a driver of men, but he knew how to get a job done.

It was not until the afternoon that he came out where the scalers were working. Joe was trimming down a big fir, his ax taking the thick limbs at a stroke. When he looked up there was Quid eying him from a log a few yards away.

The big fellow's face lit with surprise which changed to a grimace of sardonic glee.

"Hey, there, you red-headed boomer!" Quid yelled. "Step on it. You ain't splittin' kindling wood."

Big Joe felt the hot blood rush to his cheeks. He knew he was doing a good job. But he remembered Slim's warning. Quid wanted to get a rise out of him. He didn't answer, but only quickened his pace.

That was the begining. The next day Quid shifted Slim to another job and put a new man in his place. He was an older man with a disposition to loaf on the job. It takes two men to do a good bucking job and Big Joe soon discovered that his companion was riding his end of the crosscut saw. At the rate they were going they would tail the rest of the scalers by a wide margin.

Quid showed up in the afternoon

and watched them for a few moments. Then he spoke.

"Listen, you big yokel," he snarled. "I'm high-ballin' this outfit and we ain't got no place for lead tails. Snap out of it!"

BIG JOE swallowed hard. It was plainly evident that Quid was trying "to get his goat." Instead of retorting, he drove his shoulders into the long saw and for the rest of the day he did three quarters of the work. That night he dragged his weary body into camp.

"You're a prize palooka," Slim Akers said after supper. "Didn't I tell you Quid would ride you. Why don't you bust him one? He's trying to get you into a fight so you might as well take it now. You can lick him, or make a good try at it. He'll make you fight sooner or later."

"I ain't going to fight," said Big Joe stubbornly.

After eating he slipped out of camp and followed the trail up the river. He found a great rock jutting out over the water. Here he tried to think things out. Maybe Slim was right. He ought to quit, but that would be admitting he was afraid, and he wasn't afraid. He didn't want to fight, that was all. But Quid would make him, make it so unbearable he would have to. But there were other jobs—better ones—and he would still make good. Yes, he would have to pull out. There was no other choice.

A light step sounded behind him, breaking into his thoughts. It was followed by a gay little laugh.

Whirling, he found himself staring into a pair of merry dancing eyes, which, he realized, despite his embarrassment, belonged to a slender, wholesome-looking girl. As she stood there, her much-used outing

clothes giving a hint of mountain streams waded and forest trails followed, she could have been taken for a supple boy, had it not been for her hair—chestnut curls rampant over her shapely head.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," she said, eyes flashing. "But curiosity got the best of me."

Big Joe wet his lips. He swallowed hard; opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"I've been watching you," she went on. "Why were you staring so hard into the water?" She came closer and peered into the green depth below as if seeking to see the thing that had held his attention.

The veins in Big Joe's neck swelled and pulsated. His face flushed. It was the first time he had ever seen a girl so beautiful. In fact, he hadn't seen many girls in his life.

"I guess I was just thinking," he said. "I sorta like all this." He made a gesture with his big paw to include the rough brown corrugation of the floating logs, the blended greens of the forest tangle beyond and the leaping white water. "Don't you like it?"

"Oh, I think it's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "And I've seen other things, too. But I didn't know that loggers ever noticed the beauty in their work." She fastened quizzical eyes upon him. "You're working at Camp Seven, aren't you?"

He nodded. His face was toward the water again, but furtive glances were diverted to her from the corners of his eyes.

"You—you live up here?" He seemed suddenly aware of his big hands, pitched-stained and scarred.

"Yes," she answered. "Over there." She pointed to the farther shore. "But I like to come over here and sit on this rock."

His eyes were fixed on her now. He made no effort to conceal their incredulity.

"Don't you believe me?"

He gave a guilty start. "Yeah—yeah. I ain't sayin' I don't, only—only—" The color spread to his neck and ears. He gulped against the lump in his throat.

"Only what?" she prompted, curious brows arched.

"Well—I didn't know there were girls like—like you up here." He bolted the words and his eyes leaped back to the river.

She seemed pleased and was about to answer when voices came to them from down the river.

"Somebody's coming," she said. "I guess I'd better go. It's getting dark, anyway."

"I gotta go now, too," he said.

They went down the river trail together, Big Joe's thick frame towering above her, the close intimacy of the wilderness pressing about them. Where the trail branched, one going up the hill to Camp Seven and the other leading to the bridge below, she stopped.

"I never told you my name," she declared. "It's Jenny."

"Mine's Big Joe," he replied simply.

Her eyes widened. "I've heard of you." Then she laughed. "Maybe I'll see you at the rock again?"

"I'd like for you to," he said.

"Very soon," she said and then was gone.

Big Joe went back to Camp Seven. "Gosh," he muttered half aloud. "Gosh, I guess I can't leave now. I don't want to."

But the work in the woods became almost unbearable. Quid was driving all the men. It was nearing the time for the big push of logs down the river and Camp Seven was behind in production. It was a good

excuse for Quid to persecute Big Joe. There wasn't a day that he didn't lash out with curses, finding fault with everything the kid did.

Then, finding that he couldn't pick a quarrel that way, he tried other methods. He put Joe on the rigging-slinging crew, and whenever he saw the kid inside the bight of a line, he would signal the donkey engine for a quick pull. Once Big Joe saved himself from being hit by leaping over the suddenly tautened line. Again he put the kid on the downhill side of a big fir. Just as Big Joe hooked the choker, Quid signaled the donkey engine. The log started to roll and Big Joe had to pitch headlong down the embankment to escape being struck.

By this time the Camp Seven crew was showing its scorn of the kid's display of cowardice.

"If I hadn't seen him whip Quid, I wouldn't believe it," Slim Akers muttered one night. "The fool will get hurt yet. What do you think's the matter with him?"

But no one could answer that question. Big Joe continued to put everything into his work. But bitter hate grew within him against Quid. Slowly the realization took root in his brain that a fight was inevitable. Unless something happened it would have to come.

THREE was, however, one release from the persecution. That was the big rock up the river where he met Jenny often and they talked of many things, or rather Jenny talked and he listened—listened with his heart pounding and his throat choking with words that couldn't be spoken. But he would speak them some day—some day when he had made good.

Then the day for the big drive was set. It was to be the biggest push

in the history of the Peninsula. The camp crews were augmented by river hogs who came up especially for the drive. On Friday night before the start, the men would celebrate in Junction City, and there would be a big dance in addition to other entertainment.

It was Jenny who told Big Joe about the dance when she left him on Thursday night.

"You're coming, aren't you, Big Joe?"

"Gosh, I never thought about it. You going?"

"Yes, and I'll be looking for you. You won't forget?"

He shook his head. "I'll not forget."

The next night Joe scrubbed the pitch from his hands and doned a new shirt he had bought for the occasion. Then he hurried away and crossed the river to Junction City. Jenny hadn't said that he was to meet her, but he knew where the dance was to be held and if he got there early he would see her arrive.

The crowd of loggers and river hogs had begun to gather in the street and saloons. Big Joe took up a position across from the dance hall. Couples old and young began to wander in that direction. Big Joe felt his pulse quickening as he studied the faces.

Then down the street he saw Jenny. His heart leaped, but the next instant something went dead within him. Jenny wasn't alone. There was some one with her and she was clinging to his arm. Her face was uplifted with radiance to the swarthy features of Quid Austin.

Big Joe recoiled like a man dazed from an unexpected blow. For a few brief seconds, his bewildered gaze rested on the pair. Then he turned and ran.

Across the bridge and up the river trail to the big rock above the log boom, he moved as in a trance. There he threw himself down on the hard surface.

The hush of evening had settled over the river. Through it, a night-hawk wheeled its eerie nocturnal challenge. The wind sprang up from the valley below and answered disconsolately in the tops of the swaying firs.

Darkness had taken the twilight into its deeper hue when Big Joe raised his head. Slowly he got to his feet. For an undecided moment he stared into the murky shadows below.

"I might've known it," he muttered aloud to the swirling river. "I might have known it. But she had no call to keep coming here. I guess it's because I'm just a dumb yokel, but she didn't look like that kind. She's too good for the likes of him." His body tightened. He lifted his face to the mocking dome of stars. Then he turned and went toward camp.

The next morning the whole outfit was thrown into a hubbub of preparations for the drive. It was a fortunate circumstance for Big Joe. None noticed or commented on his grim, haggard face. He threw himself into the work as though he sought to drug with weariness the ache in his heart.

He was assigned to the winging-up crew. Theirs were the mighty muscles which rolled the huge logs free from the sand or gravel bars upon which they stranded.

Ten minutes after the clarion call of the river hogs echoed down the canyon announcing the start of the drive, Big Joe snapped a peavey handle.

"Why all the fight, big boy?" a strange river hog demanded. "You

got a long, hard day ahead. Save your steam. You'll want it at the end to brace your legs against the bar."

Big Joe grabbed another peavey and strained his shoulders into the work.

"I'll be there drinking you all down," he growled.

They were working a quarter of a mile behind the nose of the drive. Out on the water an occasional riverman skinned past, riding a mammoth log, his feet dancing nimbly on the revolving log.

Womenfolks from the camps assembled on the bridge, their eyes alight with pride to watch their men handling the big push. It was the peak toward which all logging interest climbed.

Big Joe did not raise his gaze to the faces above. He couldn't. Perhaps she would be there, and he feared for his actions in case she was.

Suddenly from down the river where the waters charged through a narrow gorge at the bend, a cry of warning rose, high and shrill above the tumult. Big Joe lifted his gaze. The logs were rearing up like crazed cattle checked in a mad stampede.

"She's jammin' on 'em!" shouted his companion. "The boys are hung up on that bend. They'd better crack 'em loose quick or there'll be the devil to pay. I'm glad I ain't mixed up in it."

But even as they watched, the tangled mass of timber grew. Logs from the rear hurled upon those in front. The air shuddered with the impact of splitting timber.

Loggers were rushing from all directions. Big Joe joined them. He had seen drives jam before. It wasn't a pretty sight to see the work of months lock like that, perhaps never to get loose. By the time he arrived the big sticks had all but

choked the flow of the stream. Frantically the river hogs struggled to set them free. More logs came from behind to increase the pressure.

"Tighter'n the hubs o' Hades!" yelled a voice in his ear. "Pretty tough. Somebody bungled."

"Yeah," said Big Joe. "An' somebody's going to get hurt out there if she busts loose."

FROM the bowels of the jam came a deep, grinding groan. In mad haste the river hogs scurried for safety.

"She's moving!" came a cry.

Big Joe watched the heap tremble as if stirred by some Gargantuan hand.

"Just settling for a long stay," some one muttered.

Then from the shore a new figure raced out on the jam. Big Joe blinked hard. It was Quid Austin. There was something of deadly recklessness in the big fellow's pace.

A fierce, ugly thought came to Big Joe. His heart thumped heavily against his ribs. Quid was going to gamble with death. Well, let him. It would serve the fool right.

At the same instant a scream of anguish pierced the air. It came from the group of women who had left the bridge and had joined the men down beside the jam. Big Joe looked and saw Jenny's face white with horror.

The sudden hope that had been born a moment before died in his breast. It was true, after all. She did love Quid. Something was released inside of him. Before he fully understood his own decision he was halfway out on the jam. A confusion of yells pursued him. Underfoot he felt the threatening heave of the log mound. The jam was none too secure, after all. The thought only drove him faster.

Quid Austin wasn't many yards away. He had slowed up, his eyes searching the depths of the tangle. Not until Big Joe was within a few paces from him did he see him. The startled look on his face gave way to a wolfish snarl.

"What you doing?" he barked. "Get outta here, you crazy fool, before you get your neck broken!"

Again that menacing heave beneath their feet.

Big Joe's brain groped for words that wouldn't come. What could he say to Quid? Only one thought stood out clearly. Quid couldn't be killed. That white-stricken face on the river bank had convinced him of that. If she loved him—and surely she must. No, he had to get Quid out of there. Nothing else counted. He moved sullenly toward the other, dropping his peavey.

"You got to go back, Quid—now! It don't matter if I don't get out. Besides, I can crack this jam loose."

Quid let out a curse and drove his peavey into a log. Then he spun on Big Joe.

"You limp-brained ass!" he snapped. "I said get out and I meant it. You gone nuts?"

Big Joe shook his head and came on.

Quid's fist flashed out smashing full into Big Joe's face. But the kid only rocked back and blinked to clear his numbed senses. The blow had shocked him into sudden consciousness. He knew now what had to be done. There was only one way to get Quid out of there—he would have to drag him. The logs beneath him rumbled their warning. Any minute now the jam might go out on its own accord. Every second was vital. Settling his muscles, he leaped at Quid.

Quid met him toe to toe. Above the roar of the river sounded the im-

pact of flesh against flesh. Only timber giants like these two could have stood up under that punishment. Neither dogged or gave an inch. There wasn't time for that. Each knew he must crush the other and in the quickest possible time.

On the riverbank the crowd gaped at the unexpected spectacle. They forgot the drive and the jam. Something far more elemental, far more unexplainable was being enacted before their eyes. They even forgot to shout or to take sides in that primitive combat.

Then out of the mob the slender figure of Jenny rushed. Before any one could collect his wits and stop her, she was out on the jam, her small feet carrying her as if by some instinct. Straight for the two fighters she sped.

They didn't see her until she flung herself between them.

"Stop!" Her voice was pitched to a high frenzy. "You've both gone crazy!"

Big Joe stopped as if from a blow far mightier than anything human. Quid stared at the slender, sobbing form clinging to his arm. Both men realized now that there was danger to some one else besides themselves. As if in answer to their thoughts the log jam trembled like a huge monster with the ague.

Quid looked at Big Joe, apprehension replacing the hot anger that had flamed in his brooding eyes.

Big Joe took a step toward her.

"Get back to shore! She may crack up any minute. You want to be killed?"

Jenny faced them both, eyes defiant, lips trembling.

"I won't move a step if you two don't stop making horrible fools of yourselves. You're both men, not animals!" She flung one slim hand toward the tangled heap of timber. "Your work is there. I'll leave when you go back to your jobs—and not before!"

The two men looked at each other. Then Big Joe turned and picked up his peavey. Quid grabbed his.

Jenny watched them narrowly for a second, apparently uncertain, but when they faced the heart of the jam, she gave a little sob, then raced back toward the shore.

A hundred throats on the bank released a loud whoop.

BIG JOE saw Quid turn to a mountainous snarl of timber and drop down into it. Here was the very nub of the jam. Somewhere in that jumble one or two logs caused all the trouble. Big Joe's common sense told him that it might give way any moment, re-

So much more
FLAVOR
- WHEN YOU
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leasing those thousands of tons of timber. He also knew that it might settle tighter, locking the drive against all possible human effort.

Presently from below Quid called up.

"I've found her. Here's the baby that's causing it all."

At the same time he swung his peavey into the end of the big fir suspended crosswise and upon which rested the nose of the jam.

Big Joe's pulse hammered. If Quid succeeded in releasing that key log the whole heap would crumble upon him. There was one chance in a thousand of any man getting out alive. But he had to take that chance.

Quid threw his two hundred pounds on the stout peavey handle. The log moved a few inches. Again he heaved, blue veins standing out on his sinewy arms. But the stick failed to give again.

"Hold her," said Big Joe. "Wait'll I take a hand." He swung down beside the other.

Quid Austin looked at him, a queer light in his dark eyes.

"No use both of us being killed," he said.

Big Joe didn't answer him. Instead he jammed his peavey into the log.

"All right," he said. "Let's give it to her. If the jam goes, jump clear."

Both men threw their weight on the peaveys. The log moved. It moved again. The great mass groaned as if a vital nerve had been touched.

"Once more," said Big Joe between clenched teeth.

The big fir kicked over as if unlatched by some giant spring.

Big Joe dropped his peavey and sprang backward, grabbing Quid as he went.

"She's going!" he yelled.

A gnashing roar drowned out all other sound. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the heap rear up. Even as it descended, he caught sight of a patch of open water below them. Hurling Quid ahead of him, he pitched headlong into the whirling fury.

In those few seconds that seemed an eternity he fought the icy waters. His body was battered by the hurtling timber. At last his head came above the surface. He gulped in the welcome air. A big log leaped by him and he swung his arm over its barked surface. He shot a quick glance over the maelstrom of whirling logs.

Ten feet away he saw a hand upflung from the flood, fingers clutching at nothing. Throwing himself across the intervening space, he caught the arm as it started to disappear. Grabbing another swift passing log, he hauled the limp figure of Quid Austin up until he could link his free arm around the big fellow's waist.

He fought with every ounce of vitality to hang onto that treacherous log. His body was battered from the pounding of other timber. His brain was numb and shadows came before his eyes, but he had to hold on to some thread of consciousness. Back in his brain a spark of reasoning told him how important it was. Any moment he would be torn loose. His strength was waning and sooner or later he would have to give up.

Something dealt him a vicious blow on the back of the head. He felt his strength give way. His hold began slipping from Quid. Then fingers seemed to be clawing at his collar. He was being lifted up—or had his senses betrayed him? Hands were tearing at his locked arm

around Quid's waist. He felt his feet dragging over rocks—then blackness.

When he opened his eyes he was lying on his back on the grass. He struggled to a sitting position. Across from him a couple of loggers were helping Quid to his feet. The big fellow saw Joe and jerked away from the two.

Big Joe stood up weakly as Quid lurched toward him, hand outstretched.

"I guess I was all wrong about you," Quid said. "Maybe I ought to apologize."

Big Joe started to speak, but he saw Jenny rushing toward them.

"She'll be glad you're safe," Big Joe managed to say at last.

He started to step back, but Jenny rushed forward and threw herself against him, tears streaming down her face.

Big Joe's great arms hung limp at his sides. In helpless agony, he raised appealing eyes to Quid.

But Quid was grinning.

"It's all right, Big Joe," he said. "Jenny couldn't find a better guy, especially a fellow that's done what you've done."

Joe looked down into Jenny's upturned face, his brows furrowed.

"I should have told you before, Big Joe," she said. "But I knew about that fight in the saloon. If you had come to the dance last night you would have known that Quid had finally agreed to forget it all."

"Then—you—and he ain't in love?" Big Joe stumbled over the word and held his breath for the answer.

Quid burst into a roar. It was joined by the other loggers.

"Gee! Is that what you thought?" he said.

Jenny turned on him. "Why shouldn't he think so? I never told him you were my brother."

It was then that understanding exploded on Big Joe's brain. But the only thing he did about it was to wrap his arms about the supple body of the girl.

In Next Week's Issue, "JOB FOR A DEPUTY," by GUTHRIE BROWN.

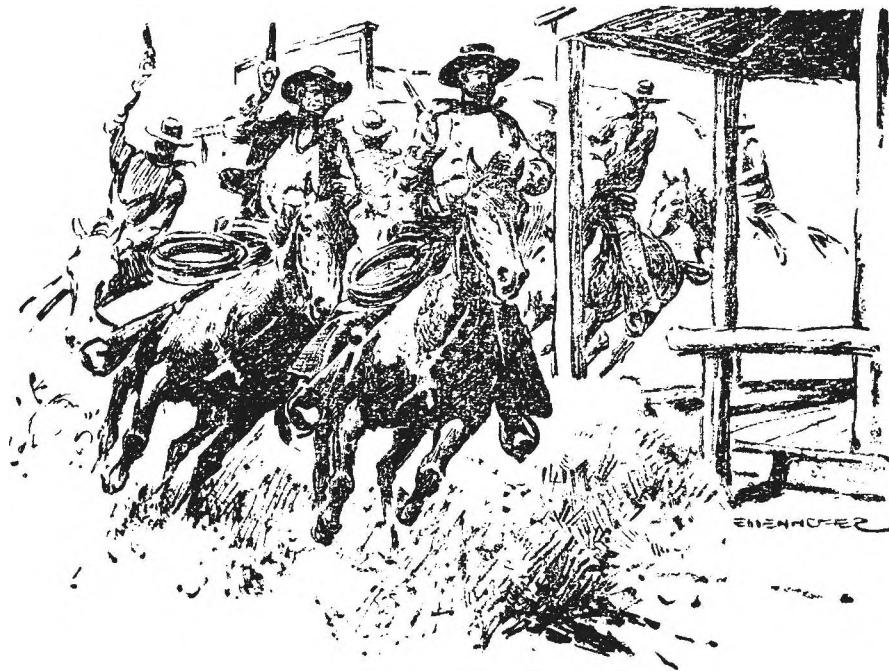
KEEP COOL

EVERY one has been warned at one time or another never to go to sleep if caught in a blizzard, as it will surely result in the last sleep, from which there is no awaking. But as time goes on we find many of the "don'ts" becoming "do's."

From a veteran explorer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, comes word that, in his belief, many deaths from freezing are the result of the victim adhering to the old rule that to go to sleep is fatal.

"The blizzard's victim will keep himself in violent motion so as not to fall asleep and thus uses up the fuel reserve in his digestive tract and tissues which might otherwise keep him warm for many hours," says Stefansson. "Furthermore, he perspires, getting his clothes wet so that they no longer protect him from the cold. The best thing to do is to sleep as much as possible and thereby save energy. A chill will awaken one as quickly outdoors as in one's home."

"If one moves around just enough to get the blood in circulation before dozing off, one can sit out any blizzard," says Stefansson.



Six = gun Spurs

PART I.

By E. B. MANN

Author of "Man Hunter," etc.

CHAPTER I.

TRAIL-END TOWN.

ASHRILL, defiant yell rose waveringly above the sudden beat of hoofs down Carson Street. It climbed and soared, a thin rocket of sound that burst at last in a staccato spattering of pistol shots.

The hard round echoes of the .45s rattled the clapboards of the Trail's End Inn, hitting the windowpanes with an uneven gusty violence. Clay Bannerman turned his lathered face from the mirror and stood for a mo-

ment, looking down from his upstairs window at the tight wedge of riders that wheeled around the corner of the square to halt in front of Sabin's Paradise. The leader, standing straight and tall in his stirrups, his red hair like a tangled flame about his head, was Dave Parsons. The sight of him took all the slackness out of Bannerman and pulled him taut.

Somewhere below a man yelled, "Yea-a-a-a, Texas!" and the Parsons men answered him with brazen whoops. Those sounds, and all the noises of the town, came up to Bannerman and stirred an unwilling

pulse in him, an undercurrent of excitement, a mounting fever that came out of the town itself.

Voices. Back-slapping, laughter, and profanity. Boots hitting the loose planks of wide sidewalks, and the silvery music of spur wheels. A horse squealing, and the sound of a hat beating dusty leather. A piano somewhere, spilling a tinny repetitious melody.

Bannerman turned and frowned at the reflection of his face in the cracked mirror and brought his razor down along the hard flat surface of his lower jaw. This town was bad, but there were good things here. Warm water; soap, a good keen blade. Those things were luxuries.

He brought the blade down again slowly, cutting a narrow swath through beard and lather. Behind the blade his skin showed russet-brown, the color of tanned leather. It was scuffed a little and reddened by sun and wind, but it was clean. His whole body was responsive to the smell and feel of cleanliness. Clean skin, clean clothes. A man learned to appreciate such things during the long months between the Pecos River ranges and the end of the railroad here in Kansas.

He twisted his mouth and turned the narrow corner under his nose, taking his time. There was no hurry. In another three hours, or four, his own trail crew would come smashing down that street out there to make their own brief ripple on the surface of the deep, muddy, roaring flood of this town. It would be a brief ripple, soon forgotten; for this was Bird.

BIRD CITY. Trail-end town. The northern terminal for Texas herds. Boom town. Another Abilene. Another Dodge. Another bloody, blatant cattle capi-

tal. A lusty, lawless, brawling town; the point at which the narrow steel ribbons that were the tentacles of the market octopus in the East met the broad-grooved dusty trail of Texas beef.

A greedy town, gorging itself on the unending streams of money pouring into it: money for Texas cattle; money that burned the fingers of men eager to turn their desires loose after long, aching months of toil and sweat and cold and suffering, men made a little mad by long proximity to death.

For there was death along the trail. Death that struck with bullets; cold, choking death in swollen streams; swift, mangling death from pounding hoofs.

Men came from that ordeal drawn thin, nerves stretched almost beyond the breaking point, hungry for pleasures long denied. And they found a town here built to their needs: drink, women, games.

But there was death here, too. Red, blazing death from sudden guns. Bird City's average was a man a day.

A year ago, at the time of Bannerman's last trip North from Texas, Bird City had been a city of tents, an ugly gray-white mushroom growth sprung overnight out of the black loam where the Squaw River made its great bend westward. But it had been a lusty infant even then, a little dazed still by the miracle of its birth and by the uproarious violence of the railroad construction gangs who had spanked it into squalling life; surprised, but suckling sturdily on the last dregs of that summer's flow of Texas beef and Eastern money, building its strength and its capacity with a shrewd foresight to the more abundant nourishment that would come from the

South and from the East with another summer.

It was still a tent city in part; but there were many buildings now, some already gray from a winter's weathering, some rawly new. Two—marvel of marvels—were built of brick. Bannerman had seen them and blinked at them as he rode into town. One of them, two stories high with white Ionic columns on its face, stood at the southwest corner of the central square and housed the Drovers' Bank & Trust Co. The other, square, squat, utilitarian, faced it from the center of the square itself—the jail. Bannerman would see the inside of the Drovers' Bank building within an hour, for its second story held the offices of the buyers: the representatives of Eastern packing houses, the brokers, the speculators. He might see the inside of that other brick building, too, before he said good-by to Bird; but the thought held no terrors for him.

Other buildings, one and two-story, big and little, made a nearly solid wall around the central square and back into the branching streets. Roofed porches hung like beetling eyebrows over wide plank sidewalks so that a man might walk around the square without ever setting his foot to the ground except at the crossings. Streets cut to quagmire depth of mud or dust by heavy wagons hauling lumber and supplies and hides; by bright-wheeled buggies carrying men in broadcloth and ladies in silks; by steel-shod hoofs and cloven ones. A hustling, up-and-coming town; a town where a man could get action for his money. A wild, pulse-quickenning town. Already Bannerman could feel the thrill of it.

And this, he knew, was only the beginning. This was the middle of

July and the herds already here were only the vanguard of those to come. The trail was thick with them, the point riders of one herd hustling the stragglers of the herd ahead; a moving river, miles wide, stretching all the way from the Squaw to south Texas.

And from the East via the railroad, from West and North in wagons and on horseback, came other hordes to greet the Texas men. Buyers, merchants, gamblers, killers. Carpenters, barkeepers, teamsters, clerks, seeking the high wages prevalent where cost is secondary to speed; tradesmen lured by visions of quick turnover at high profit. Honest men, and scavengers.

A GUN somewhere spat swift, five-syllabled defiance, and Bannerman held his razor poised for a moment, listening. A woman's shrill laughter mocked at him. The steady beat of boots on wood went on, unhurrying, and Bannerman bent to his task again, frowning a little. This town was hard. Gunfire meant nothing here. That was a thing he'd have to learn again.

A hard, quick-tempered, boisterous town. He wondered, vaguely, what it held for him. Last year there had been that business with Sabin. For that matter there was still that business with Sabin. Judging by the looks of the man and by the reputation he bore, Ben Sabin was not the man soon to forget the thing Clay Bannerman had done to him.

And Sabin was here. Last year, Ben Sabin had been merely one of a dozen of his kind in Bird: gambler, proprietor of a rowdy gambling place. But he was bigger now. Even in Texas the news of Sabin's growth had come to Bannerman.

"Sabin's buildin' him a big saloon and gamblin' house. Says it's to be the finest in the West. Got the longest bar west o' the Mississippi." Ben Sabin's Paradise. Bannerman had seen its blatant sign across the front of the town's biggest building as he rode in. And other signs: "Ben Sabin's Hay & Grain Co." "Gen'l Mdse., Ben Sabin, Prop." And, on a window in the second story of the Drovers' bank, "Sabin & Steen, Cattle Buyers."

And now—the Parsons crowd. Sam, Dave, and Jim, and their hard-bitten crew.

Bannerman knotted the scarf around his throat and ran a comb back through his hair. Anyway, it was good to be here; good to see the end in sight. The end of strain. He had carried a crew of men and four thousand head of cattle on his shoulders all the way from Texas, and it had made him old.

He turned abruptly as a knock sounded on his door. His glance ran swiftly to his gun belt hanging over the back of a chair six feet away. His money belt was there, too. Not that that last was very important. The belt was thin. He'd gauged expenses pretty fine. Most of his dollars had come from Texas on the hoof. That way they grew. The dollars a man carried dwindled.

Two sidelong steps placed him behind the chair. It wasn't likely that trouble would come knocking at his door so soon, but still— A trip or two up the Trail cured a man of taking unnecessary chances. It either cured him or killed him. And this was Bird. This town was dangerous and unpredictable.

He said, "Come in." And waited.

The door swung in, and Bannerman relaxed. John Stanley stood there in the opening, portly, erect,

immaculate, his round face beaming friendliness. Back of Stanley, Bannerman saw a man's arm and shoulder. The arm and shoulder were clad in black broadcloth worn and brushed to a faintly greenish tinge, and the shoulder came above John Stanley's ear. That would be Felix Hardman, senior member of the firm of Hardman & Stanley, Cattle Buyers.

"Clay Bannerman!" John Stanley's voice boomed cordially. "Welcome to our city! Heard you were here. Thought we'd just drop in and—"

Hardman turned slowly, his long face tipped downward as he spoke to some one beside him. Bannerman had a glimpse of a blond head that came just to the level of the top button of Hardman's vest. A fluid, modulated voice said, "Yes, of course." The head turned then, and Bannerman looked into clear-blue eyes.

STANLEY'S bustling greeting claimed him again, and Clay turned back to him. There was surprising strength in Stanley's grip. Clay matched his own lean strength to it and grinned. There was surprising shrewdness back of Stanley's eyes, as well. John Stanley might have the face and figure of a well-fed friendly puppy, but he was smart. Felix Hardman, lean and tall, with his big dour face and his slow speech, got the credit for providing the brains for the firm of Hardman & Stanley, but Bannerman knew that that was not entirely true. Hardman was wise; a dour Scot, keen in a bargain and a judge of men; but Hardman had been a well-to-do successful man when young John Stanley came to him as a clerk. And now they were partners. No man rose to share Felix Hardman's

confidence on anything other than merit, and Bannerman knew it.

"Clay, you old son of a gun, you! It's good to see you!"

"It's good to be here." Clay's voice was flat, detached. Over Stanley's shoulder his eyes had turned back irresistibly toward the girl. Her steady gaze met his and measured him.

John Stanley laughed and turned. There was something faintly possessive in that gesture, and something lacking. It lacked assurance; certainty. Bannerman sensed that lack and weighed it accurately. He thought, "He's not sure where he stands with her." But he forgot that instantly.

"Clay, this is Janet Harker. Janet is Hardman's niece, and our new secretary. Jan, this is Bannerman."

He would have given her his hand, but she stood motionless; and so he bowed and stood erect again. This girl was slender, poised, completely alien. Her beauty had a strange, disturbing quality for him. Her smile accepted him, and yet her level scrutiny made him feel ill at ease and overgrown; somehow uncouth.

Yet Stanley, watching them, wondered at Bannerman's calm dignity. And yet, why not? A man like Bannerman, lean-hipped, wire-hard, six feet two inches and two hundred pounds of human catamount, could be assured, could be self-confident.

"I told them you wouldn't want a woman mixing into your business, Mr. Bannerman. John made me come."

"John is a friend of mine," Bannerman said deliberately.

He held a chair for her, watching her sift the meaning from his words. She smiled, and confidence came back to him. He turned, then, and

found a whimsical approval in Felix Hardman's shrewd eyes.

There was a hearty friendliness in Hardman's handshake, too. "How are you, Clay? It's good to see you back again."

"It's mighty nice of you to welcome me. Ten minutes more and I'd have been in your office; but this is better. Have a chair."

Hardman grunted and sat down.

"Don't give me too much credit, Bannerman. Comin' here gives me the first crack at you; before the other buyers get to you. You have a good trip up?"

"Good trip? I'm here." Clay's gaze turned back toward the girl. His eyes were sparkling now, lighted with a new audacity. "Now that I'm here, the trip don't seem so bad, somehow."

Janet Harker's brief ripple of laughter made golden music in the quiet room. She met John Stanley's startled eyes and raised her brows.

"You told me he'd be shy!" she said.

Felix Hardman chuckled a little. "Bannerman is a Texan, my dear," he said heavily. "Texans are the softest-spoken, hardest-fighting men in all the world except maybe the Irish—and Bannerman is part Irish. Beware of Texas men. They'll turn your head! Well, Clay. You've beef to sell."

"Yes, sir. Four thousand head; maybe forty-one hundred. All prime stuff. We started early and we didn't crowd 'em. The last half of the drive I kept clear of the main trail, where the grass was better. They'll weigh out a good ten pounds heavier than any herd I've seen this side of the Canadian."

Hardman nodded. "That's what you said last year, and it was true. We paid you a good price then, and we made a profit. You're a good

driver, Clay. That's why we came to you. We want your herd."

Bannerman eased his weight down to the sill of the open window.

"How much?" he asked flatly.

"Twelve dollars." Felix Hardman shot a shrewd look up at him and frowned. "That's what they're payin'. But, knowin' you, and hearin' what you say about your cattle, I'll add—a dollar onto that. Thirteen."

IT was a good offer; better than some would ever get. Bannerman knew that. He felt the girl's inquiring gaze and looked at her; knew that she was measuring him again but in a different way; measuring him now against Felix Hardman's shrewdness. He grinned at her.

"Sixteen," he said.

Hardman frowned. "Fourteen."

Clay shook his head. There was a thrill in this, like playing a hand of poker at high stakes.

Felix Hardman shot a quick glance at Stanley. He shrugged and stood up heavily.

"Fifteen," he said. "And not a red cent more than that."

Clay grinned and let the breath run out of him. A load fell off him. His job was done. He said, "You've bought some cows." And saw Jan Harker's slow approving smile.

Hardman grunted, not displeased. "Yes, at a good two dollars a head more'n I figured to pay for them, I have. Well, Jan has the contract drawn. Nothin' to do but write in the figures and sign it. The usual terms: cash on delivery; chute count; your cattle until we accept delivery at the loading pens. All right?"

Bannerman nodded and bent to sign the document Jan Harker spread for him.

She said slowly: "You've come a long way, haven't you? John has told me about you. You were a thirty-dollar-a-month cowboy when you came up with your first herd. The second trip you were trail boss. This time, you drove four thousand head of your own cattle. You should be proud."

He said, "I am." And it was true. Sixty thousand dollars; that was what it would amount to. Plus what he could get for his saddle stock, less what he owed. Roughly, fifty thousand dollars net profit. He'd done right well.

John Stanley said: "Proud? Say, he's rich! Now that you've sold them, Clay, tell what you paid for them? Two bucks a head?"

Bannerman nodded. It would average a little less than that. But he was watching Jan Harker now; watching her mind sum up the profit there. Somehow that angered him.

He said sharply: "You think that's easy money, don't you? Well, it ain't! My whole life's in that herd out there; ten years of it. Every dime I could scrape together—wages, poker winnings, even money I borrowed—all bunched on this single throw of the dice. And it is a gamble, drivin' a herd from Texas here. Rustlers, a single real bad break and that whole herd could be wiped out. Two dollars a head in Texas, fifteen in Bird. You think that's easy money? Listen! My first trip up we lost five men. The next time, three. This time, Eddie Anderson got caught in the quicksand, tryin' to save one o' my steers. We broke his back tryin' to haul him out of it. You call that easy money?"

He wheeled away from them. Through the window, he saw Ben Sabin cross the street. Ben Sabin in a fawn-tan suit with a long-tailed

coat, wearing a flat-brimmed fifty-dollar hat. Ben Sabin, wearing a snub-nosed Colt under his left arm and maybe a palm-sized derringer inside his sleeve as well, in case some Texas man made trouble when Sabin's slender hands cajoled a deck.

Easy money. He hadn't meant to say all that. It had spilled out of him. He felt the silence back of him, but there was a streak of dogged stubbornness in him. He did not turn.

He sensed the girl's presence beside him even before she spoke to him.

"Those things are things you must forget," she said gently.

"How?"

She smiled at him. "Come out with John and Uncle Felix and me to-night. Dinner, the four of us. We'll talk—"

He shook his head. "To-night," he said, "I'll have to stay with my herd. To-morrow night—I'll probably be drunk."

He did not say it merely to shock her. It was the simple truth. He knew himself; knew how liquor would hit him now that the load was gone.

She smiled at him. "Some other time," she said. And turned away from him.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE PARADISE.

JAN'S pretty fine, eh, Bannerman? I'd almost forgotten there were girls like her. Then she came out—"

Felix Hardman and Janet Harker were gone now, leaving Stanley alone with Bannerman. Stanley stood, smiling, his chubby fingers working the band off a cigar. Clay did not speak, and Stanley added wistfully:

"She likes you, Clay. That's plain."

Bannerman stooped stiffly and dragged his old shirt from the little heap of discarded garments by the bed. He found tobacco and papers in the pocket and began the building of a cigarette. The same bitterness that had caused his unintended outburst a while ago still edged his voice.

"She's curious, that's all. I'm new to her."

Stanley shook his head. "You're not the first wild Texas man she's seen," he said. "It's more than that."

He let it go, accepting Bannerman's silence at its face value. "I stayed," he said, "for two reasons. First: come and have a drink with me. You need it."

Bannerman nodded. He licked the flap along the cigarette and reached for his gun. The leather of the laden cartridge belt fell into natural curves, fitting him like a well-worn glove. He stooped and tied the leather thong at the tip of the holster around his leg and when he straightened again, he was smiling.

"One drink," he said. "Or maybe two. Not more than that. I've got to get back to the herd. That's the hell of bein' boss." He pulled a thin packet of bills out of his money belt and rifled it. "There's just about enough here to take the edge off the outfit's thirst. They're cuttin' cards out there now, I reckon, to see which two will ride night herd with me to-night. When I get back, I'll split this roll between the lucky ones and turn 'em loose."

"Don't."

Stanley's emphatic negative drew Bannerman's gaze down suddenly to hard focus. Stanley said slowly:

"That's my second reason for

stayin': to warn you. Keep all your men on guard to-night. Remember that clause in your contract; the cattle are yours till we accept delivery at the loading chutes. You're still responsible."

Responsible. The word hit Bannerman and angered him. He said: "You've said too much, or not enough. That clause—it's usual. It's in all contracts."

"Yes. But here, now, it's important. Clay, you had some trouble on the trail this time, didn't you?"

"Trouble? No more than usual." He paused, remembering the men he'd seen ride in a while ago. "We had a little run-in with the Parsons crowd. Little matter of some eighty-odd head of my stuff that got mixed in with theirs. I got my cattle back. That what you mean?"

Stanley shook his head. "I reckon not. What I meant was—rustler trouble."

Bannerman shrugged. "That's between here and the Cimarron. I heard, before I started, that the Indians were makin' that stretch plenty dangerous, so I dodged it. After crossin' the Cimarron, I angled east, kept off the regular trail."

"You mean you forded Pinto Creek?"

"Instead o' drivin' seventy-odd miles around it; yeah."

"But I thought Pinto was quicksand?"

Bannerman's lips tightened. "It is," he said. A moment passed before he spoke again. "We spent two days cuttin' swale grass and trampin' it into the creek bed before we crossed. We only lost six head. But"—he paused, remembering the smile on Eddie Anderson's white, tortured face—"if I had it to do over again, I reckon I'd take a chance on rustlers."

Stanley said slowly: "There's a

rumor here that the reservation Indians doin' that raidin'—wear high-heeled boots."

All the motion drained out of Bannerman's lean frame. "The devil you say!"

Stanley nodded. "In other words, not Indians at all but white men posin' as Indians, hitting the herds as they come by, cuttin' out what stock they can, hazin' 'em back into the hills, smearin' the brands enough to pass a casual inspection—and some of the buyers are willin' to make their inspection mighty casual—and butcherin' the rest for meat to sell in town. That's the rumor."

Bannerman stood silent for a moment. "What's all that got to do with lettin' my men come into town to-night?"

"Just this: Not all the raidin' is done on that seventy-mile stretch of trail around the head of the Pinto. Some herds have been hit right here, on the bed grounds. They wait till the herds get here, till the men leave 'em to come into town, and hit 'em when they're underguarded. It couldn't have happened when the bed grounds used to be close in; but now that the graze is bad in close to town, the herds are beddin' farther out. It's rough country out there. A night stampede will split a herd into four or five parts, most likely. By the time you get 'em rounded up again, you've lost two weeks and maybe four-five hundred head o' cattle. There'll be that many that you'll never find."

Clay Bannerman swore softly.

John Stanley shrugged. "Somebody here don't like you, Clay." He reached inside his coat and drew a scrap of paper out of an inside pocket. "This note was slipped under the door of my office one morning several weeks ago. Felix and I talked it over and decided to send

a messenger down the trail to meet you; told him to wait for you at the Cimarron crossin'. I reckon he's still waitin'. You swingin' east the way you did, you'd have missed him."

Clay took the note. Penciled words in printed characters:

You're a friend of Clay Bannerman's, aren't you? Get word to him to double his night guard after he crosses the Cimarron.

It was unsigned.

Clay frowned. "Whoever wrote that," he said slowly, "knew that somebody had somethin' special planned—for me."

Stanley nodded. "It looks like that. And, since they missed you down there, they might be figurin' to hit you here. Got any idea who might have a crow to pick with you?"

Bannerman said: "There's Sabin. And the Parsons boys."

"And Trent," Stanley said softly. "Trent's here. He's made some talk."

Bannerman nodded. "And Trent," he said. "I was forgettin' him. Thanks, John. On second thought, I'll buy that drink."

THEY walked down the stairs together and crossed the lobby and stepped out into the teeming life of Carson Street. A man Bannerman had met last year called, "Howdy, Bannerman," and Clay nodded and spoke, but could not remember the man's name. He frowned, afterward. Calling his name like that had made people turn to look at him. Some man in the passing crowd said:

"That's Clay Bannerman, the man that killed Bart Hathaway."

John Stanley shot a searching look at Bannerman, and the look of

displeasure he saw on Bannerman's face pleased him. He said, "You're famous, Clay," and smiled a little.

Bannerman growled. "There's kinds of fame I'd rather have!" and shouldered his way toward the curb. He halted there and stood there, motionless, his eyes and ears and nostrils drinking in the sights and sounds and smells of this uproarious town.

John Stanley came and stood beside him. He did not speak for a little while, giving Bannerman time to see and measure what he saw.

It was late afternoon, almost six o'clock, but the sun still hung above dark, stormy clouds yonder at the end of Carson Street, and the square lay in long cool shadows that stretched across its width and ran halfway up the buildings on the other side. But the coolness was a mirage, for the air was heavy with heat. A tiny fitful evening breeze brought rumors of sweat and dust and leather and horses, of food cooking somewhere, and of tobacco smoke. Doors slammed, and the murmur of men's voices and the thud of their boots on the plank sidewalks made a rippling current of unending sound. The Trail's End Inn stood on the corner of Main and Carson streets, facing north across the central square. A traffic of wagons and buggies and mounted men flowed past two sides of it, snarling at the corner into conflicting eddies.

John Stanley said: "You're facin' Carson Street. The street on the far side of the square, the north side, runnin' parallel to Carson, is Catlin Street. The street on your right is Main. Comin' from the south, Main hits the square in the middle and splits. It's East Main on one side of the square and West Main on the other. It opens again on the north

side o' the square, opposite where it ended, and from there on it's just Main Street again. The brick building at your left, at the corner of Carson and West Main, is the Drovers' bank. Our office is on the second floor."

Bannerman nodded. "Let's get that drink."

"It would be almost a breach of etiquette if a trail driver bought his first drink anywhere but in Ben Sabin's Paradise. That's the big two-story building on your right, corner of Carson and East Main. That suit you?"

Bannerman nodded. "It might be more to the point," he said softly, "to ask Ben Sabin if it suited him!"

They had crossed Main Street and were walking east on Carson before John Stanley sifted the meaning out of Bannerman's remark. When he did get it, he gave a startled exclamation.

Clay turned to grin at him. "You forgettin' my run-in with Sabin?" he asked gently.

"I was! I just remembered it! Look, Clay. There's other bars—"

"But you said it was a rule, or somethin', that trail drivers buy their first drink in the Paradise."

"I know. But that was just a joke, Clay! It wasn't a dare!"

Stanley paused, his eyes troubled, watching Bannerman's high shoulders shake with silent laughter.

But Bannerman's voice was sober enough when he spoke, though there was still a glint of humor in his smoky eyes. He said: "It's like this, John. I'm here, and Sabin's here. I don't know how long I'll stay here, but, what time I'm here, I don't intend to spend it dodgin' Ben Sabin. I don't think Sabin's huntin' any fuss with me, but, if he is, he'd find me. And, in the mean-

time, the liquor may be runnin' low. Come on!"

But Stanley, stretching his short legs to match Clay Bannerman's long stride, was worried still. He sent his mind back over the story of Bannerman's "run-in" with Ben Sabin, as he had heard it, and he did not think that Sabin would forgive what Bannerman had done to him.

IT had happened last year. Bannerman had reached the infant town of Bird City in August, gaunt and haggard, limping a little as a result of a bullet that had chipped his hip. He had had little to say about his trip, but his eyes had been bleak, and from that and from what remarks Stanley had heard, Stanley had gained a tragic picture of that drive. The extension of the railroad westward to Bird had bent the northern end of the trail accordingly, and those last miles through new country, harassed by rustlers, over rivers and creeks swollen by unprecedented rains, had drawn Clay Bannerman close to the breaking point. He had sold his herd to Hardman & Stanley and that night he had staged a celebration that was still talked about with a respectful awe by men who had witnessed it or shared in it.

Bannerman had had the foresight to leave his gun with Felix Hardman before he began his crusade that night. Having taken that precaution, he had then proceeded to fight his way the entire length and breadth of town, drinking steadily, yet never losing the sweet coördination of his muscles, never losing the rapt eager smile of a boy pleasantly engaged in the piecemeal destruction of a toy.

His formula was simple. Buy a drink for the crowd, then challenge

any and all comers. No malice; no bickering; just a lust for battle and a joy in it. It got results.

Stanley could understand that, even though it sprouted from a nature directly opposite his own. Bannerman was naturally a fighting man. After that long struggle up the trail, Bannerman had been like a mighty spring, long compressed, releasing itself. He had settled, in the early-morning hours, into a poker game in which he had lost a sum variously estimated at figures ranging from five hundred to five thousand; had departed then and had come back, coldly sober, and had won back his losses, with interest. That fact alone had, to a large extent, absolved Bannerman in the eyes of Felix Hardman. Hardman, the canny Scot, could forgive a blow or even a brawl; but waste he could not ever have condoned.

But the "run-in" with Sabin had had nothing to do with Bannerman's personal celebration. It had hinged upon the less spectacular doings of a cowboy—Stanley could not remember the youngster's name; one of Bannerman's riders. By some strange miracle, probably by reason of being a comparatively small fish in the wake of bigger ones, this lad had won something over a thousand dollars at a roulette wheel in Ben Sabin's gambling house. Ignored until his winnings had piled up to what was, to him, a mighty sum, he had cashed in and had then been practically forced into a dice game run by Ben Sabin himself. He lost; lost steadily. He had just picked up the dice for what must certainly have been his final roll when Bannerman's private war reached Sabin's place. In the ensuing upheaval the youth had kept the dice.

The dice were loaded.

Bannerman had appeared in the

office of Hardman & Stanley next day and had demanded his gun. Felix Hardman had gone with him to Sabin's place.

Bannerman had presented his case, proved it by the mute evidence of the dice themselves, and demanded a refund of the cowboy's winnings. He had done it quietly, careful to make no public display of the affair. Felix Hardman, Bannerman, Sabin, and a squat, evil-faced little gunman, by the name of Bart Hathaway, had been the only witnesses.

Sabin's first answer had been a sneering refusal. His second was a threat. The second was the one Bannerman accepted.

As to what happened, Felix Hardman had always been a little vague. The suddenness of it had dazed him. Bart Hathaway had made a movement toward his gun. So had Sabin. When the smoke cleared away, Ben Sabin's right arm was broken at the wrist from contact with Bannerman's gun barrel, and Bart Hathaway was dead.

Bart Hathaway had had a reputation as a fast gunman. It was on that account that he had been in Sabin's employ.

Sabin had paid.

THERE had been considerable repercussion. In view of Bannerman's celebration of the night before, there had been an inclination on the part of Bird City's more conservative element to look upon him as a trouble maker; but Felix Hardman's testimony, plus Sabin's own grudging admission that Hathaway had drawn first, had forced a final verdict of self-defense. But that same testimony had turned the spotlight of public attention on Clay Bannerman. Any man who could knock a gun out of Ben

Sabin's deft fingers and kill Bart Hathaway, having first given Hathaway the advantage, was worthy of note.

Ben Sabin's wrist had mended, leaving him no permanent injury to his skill with either cards, dice, or guns. But there had been an inevitable seepage of rumor as to the cause of the quarrel, and that had damaged Sabin's reputation and had made men wary of him as a gambler. There had been, too, the injury to Sabin's pride. And those were things Ben Sabin would not soon forget.

An outgrowing group of men barred their way at the doors of the Paradise, and Bannerman, accompanied by Stanley, halted for a moment, letting the stream of traffic split against his high solidity, all his senses thirstily alive. Somewhere near by a piano played, "Oh, Susannah." In one of the rooms above the Paradise a woman's voice picked up the melody:

"Oh, Susannah, now don't you cry for me—"

The voice was raw, untrained, yet laden with a wistful sadness that was oddly sweet. Bannerman sensed that sweetness and was

stirred by it. There was a fever in this town, a driving restlessness.

Town Marshal Daniel Leffinger came through the side door of the brick jail in the center of the square and turned purposefully toward the meal awaiting him in the dining room of the Trail's End Inn. But he saw Clay Bannerman standing there in the swirl of movement at the door of Sabin's Paradise and he paused and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully with one gnarled finger. He shrugged at last and altered his course. If Clay Bannerman was going into Sabin's Paradise, this was no time for a peace officer to choose for supper. He was not more than ten feet back of Bannerman when Bannerman thrust through those swing doors.

A man looked up from a card game over to the left of the door, saw Bannerman, and lifted his body half out of his chair. His face broke in a cordial smile.

"Hi, Bannerman!"

Bannerman raised his left hand in a half salute, but his eyes were busy with this crowded room.

A bearded burly man standing at the end of the long bar that ran the full length of that room, to the right of the door, stopped speaking sud-

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denly and stared. He gulped his drink and turned, and Bannerman saw him drive a passage through the crowd. Stanley saw it, too, and felt a tingling in his finger tips. That was Pierre le Du—"French Pete"—official "bouncer" for the Paradise, the brawn of Sabin's two-man body-guard. Le Du was on his way to Sabin now.

A bartender slid a bottle and glasses down the bar, and Stanley poured, conscious of a vague embarrassment because his hand shook a little so that the bottle clinked

against the glasses. Bannerman poured his own glass full and turned, sniffing the liquor as he faced the room. Stanley looked up at him and saw an eager little smile twisting the corners of Bannerman's mouth.

A door opened at the back of the room, and Stanley said breathlessly: "There's Sabin now."

"Why, yes. That's so." Clay raised his glass. "Here's mud in your eye, John. You know, I think I'm goin' to like this town!" His grin was insolent.

To be continued in next week's issue.

WESTERN CANALS

AMONG the first great irrigation systems of the West was the "canal" taken out of the Rio Grande River at Del Norte, Colorado, by T. C. Henry, the promoter for whom the present town of Monte Vista was named originally.

Later, this big ditch was enlarged and finally became part of the great Farmers Union System, that has done so much to develop the San Luis Valley. The obstacles encountered by the pioneers in irrigation seemed as difficult and baffling as that of crossing the "Great American Desert." After the surveys were completed and the actual excavation of the canal had been started, it was discovered that the loose gravel at the upper portion of the valley would not make a satisfactory floor.

The "wisecrackers" of that day said, "Henry's scheme won't 'hold water.'" However, their ridicule was silenced by nature, for when the spring freshets came, bringing the silt eroded from the clay hills along the tributaries of the upper Rio Grande, this first difficulty was surmounted. The soft clay filled in around the pebbles, making an impervious water-resisting floor for the canal.

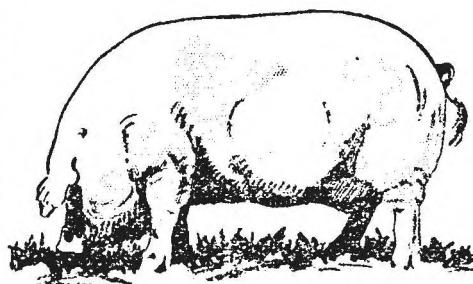
The question of sub-irrigation became an important one and frequently men who owned no water rights found that the supply of water seeping through the subsoil was sufficient to raise abundant crops. Later, the very thing that had seemed to be a blessing proved disastrous, as the increasing number of ditches brought too much water to certain areas, necessitating the installation of expensive drainage systems. However, in spite of all the problems that confronted the builders of the first canals in the San Luis, these waterways resulted in the development of a great wheat growing area and turned a valley that was supposed to be only good for stock raising purposes into some of the most famous potato farms in the world.

G. C. F.

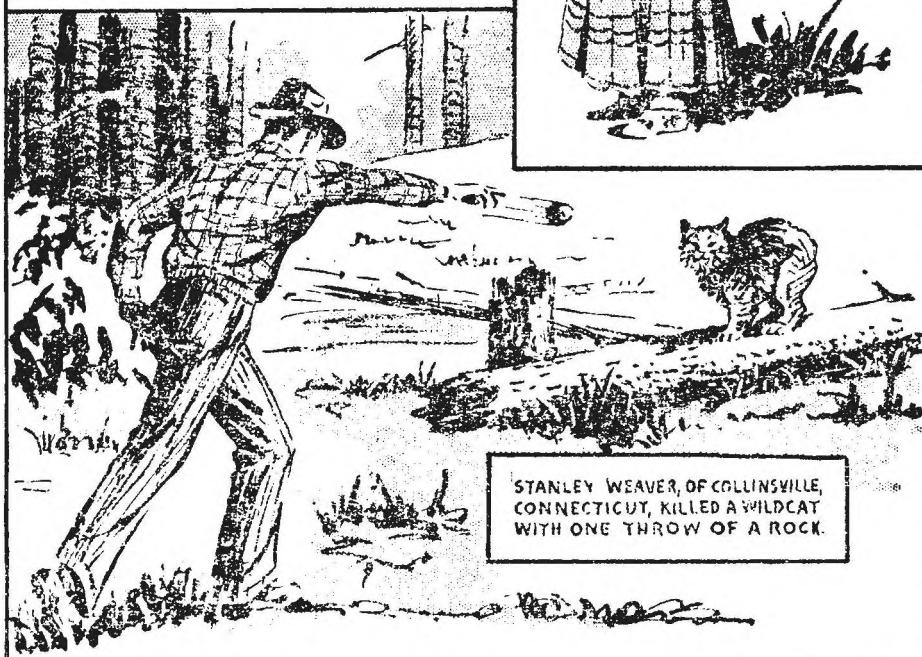
Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

THE FIRST HOGS TO REACH AMERICA WERE BROUGHT BY DESOTO IN 1543. SOME OF THESE ESCAPED, AND FROM THEM CAME THE THOUSANDS OF "RAZOR BACKS" THAT INFEST THE WOODS FROM GEORGIA TO TEXAS.



SERI INDIAN MOTHERS CARRY THEIR BABIES IN THEIR HATS. SORONA, MEXICO.



STANLEY WEAVER, OF COLLINSVILLE, CONNECTICUT, KILLED A WILDCAT WITH ONE THROW OF A ROCK.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.

MORE LAND

By GUTHRIE
BROWN

Author of "All in the Day's Work," etc.

THE two brothers faced each other across the long pine table in the ranch-house kitchen. The face of the younger, Mel Warden, was flushed with anger. His dark eyes snapped as he spoke.

"Dad's will left you in charge here. I think that was unfair to begin with. And you're sure makin' a fine mess o' things! What right have you got to turn down such an offer? You know as well as me that we need more land. This measly little quarter section isn't big enough for any kind of a cattle business worth the name. And here you get the chance of a lifetime to trade it for five hundred—five hundred!—acres of pasture and hay land, and won't do it!"

Gene Warden, big and blond and slow-spoken, rested patient eyes on his brother's face.

"I've tried to tell you, Mel. It doesn't seem playing quite fair with dad, to give up the homestead. He expected us to stay here and develop it and make something of it. Besides, when feed is as cheap as it is here in the La Torre Valley, where's the sense in paying taxes on more land? And it would take every cent we've saved to fix up the buildings and fences on that five hundred acres. We wouldn't have anything



left over to put into pure-bred stock, like we'd planned."

"Like you'd planned!" was Mel's bitter retort. "I've tried to pound it into your skull that range stuff is the thing to buy for this country. You don't get enough more for the beeves to pay the extra cost of feeding. But you've got your head set that way, because it was dad's plan. You're just the same kind of a stick-in-the-mud he was. The only way to make money here is to have lots of cattle and lots of pasture. Look at Luke Hunter. He does business the right way. He's got twenty men ridin' on the range, and when he sells in the fall he gets a real check, instead of a few hundred dollars, the way we do!"

"Well," Gene said reasonably, "you've got to remember, Mel, that

expenses come out of that check. Then, too, if we did business the way Luke Hunter does—”

“There you go!” Mel broke in angrily. “You might amount to something if you’d try his way of doing business once. Suppose he does brand a stray once in a while, what of it? Doesn’t everybody?”

“We don’t,” Gene reminded him.

“No, and where are we gettin’? Anyway, Luke made you a darn good offer for this rock pile. The east end o’ this place never will be good for anything but buffalo grass and thistles!” The longer Mel talked, the more angry he became.

Gene still tried to win him. “Mel, that’s the thing I’ve been thinking about. What does Luke Hunter want of this rock pile, as you call it. What good is it going to do him? Our north eighty joins his pasture, it’s true; but so does the land that he’s offering to trade us. Why should he want to make a trade that’s a loss to him, on the face of it?”

“Well,” said Mel, “if you must know, he’s trying to give you a break. To be perfectly plain about it, he’s tryin’ to give me a break. He knows that you been holdin’ me back, and he figured on makin’ you an offer that you couldn’t turn down.”

Gene’s voice was slower than usual. “You—talked to him, and he told you that?”

The answer was a defiant nod. “Why shouldn’t I talk? Luke’s a friend o’ mine. He understands things. He’s a swell guy, no matter what you think about him. He says that the La Torre country is in for a spell o’ good times, with this new dam goin’ in on the creek and settlers takin’ up land under it. He says there’ll be a big home market

for beef, with a hundred men workin’ on the dam and their families to feed. We can get in on the ground floor. But this fiddlin’ along with a dinky herd and tryin’ to improve the breed—rats! There’s another thing, too. We haven’t got too good a water right here, and this whole place is above the new reservoir, but part of that five hundred acres will be under it.”

Gene’s face did not change. Mel picked up his hat from the table and stood turning it on his thumb. His tone was suddenly tight.

“Gene, I’m askin’ you for the last time. Will you take up Hunter’s offer?”

“I can’t do it, bud, and you’ll see that—”

“I won’t see!” Color rose in the face of the younger man as decision flamed in him. “I’m through! Hear that? Through! I’ve taken all I’m gonna take from you. I’ll get out and start on my own, from the bottom. You can have the property! I’ll never amount to beans if I stick around you.”

Gene put out a protesting hand that shook without his knowing it.

“Mel, you don’t know what you’re saying. You wouldn’t do that!”

His feeling maddened his brother. “You’re right I’ll do it! I’m doing it!” His spurs rattled as he stamped across the floor. The door slammed.

Gene Warden stared at it in utter disbelief for a minute. He felt all gone inside. His brother Mel was the core of Gene’s life, had been ever since the older brother had hauled a curly-headed baby about in a small red wagon. Gene was confused and shaken. Was he wrong? Was Mel right?

He strode halfway across the room, then halted. No! He was

not wrong. Something deep in him made him sure of it. And Mel would not go. He would not really go. He had blown up before, and got over it.

Gene Warden stood at the window with the warm April sunlight streaming through, and watched his brother gallop down the lane to the main road. Without a backward glance, Mel disappeared along the highway in a cloud of dust.

Numbly, the big, slow-moving man turned back to the strangely empty room. He realized that this was the end. Even if Mel ever came to his senses and knew what he'd done, he wouldn't admit it. Proud and high-headed, Mel was.

A timid voice spoke behind the young rancher. "Gene, did you tend to those calves yet?" It was the aunt who kept house for the brothers.

Half blindly the young man felt along the wall for his hat, hanging on a prong of elkhorn. Though his world might crash about his shoulders, there was stock to feed and water to set, and the numberless chores of a ranch.

THE town of La Torre was little more than a trading post in the heart of the valley and rolling hills. But when Mel rode in after noon, the one principal street was busy. Saturday meant holiday for most of the cowboys and freighters and ranchers, as well as for the workers at the dam site, three miles below on the creek. Preparations were going forward for a big dance at the schoolhouse, and Mel wished briefly that he had stopped to get his Sunday clothes.

However, he was not feeling much like hilarity. He knew that he had done the right thing, but he kept

seeing Gene's face, white and still in the bright morning. But Gene had no cause to feel bad. All the property was his now. Everybody wouldn't, Mel thought, be as generous as that.

He was glad it was all over with. He straightened his shoulders and strode down the street. He would drop into Scotty's and get a drink. Damn it! Why couldn't he forget Gene's face?

"Hello there, Mel! How's the boy to-day? Came down for the dance, did you? Here, this is gonna be on me."

"Hello, Luke," Mel greeted the rancher. "No, it'd break you up to pay for all that I feel like drinkin' right now."

Luke Hunter looked sharply at the speaker. Hunter was a burly man with a smiling mouth and a predatory eye. He asked:

"What's got your back up, young feller?"

"Oh, nothing," Mel replied, and tossed down his drink. "What about a ridin' job with you, Luke?"

"Oh-ho!" chortled Hunter. "So that's how the land lays, is it? Got tired at last of old Gene and his slow-poke ways, didn't you? I knew you'd come to it some day."

"Did you?" Mel asked coldly. "How about the job?"

"Sure's you're a foot high!" cried Hunter, and slapped Mel on the back. "Well, this is good news. I'm dog-goned lucky to get a hand like you, the first of the season, this way. You can ride on out to my place and go right to work. Top wages, and a job as long as you like."

Mel's throat tightened a little. It was good to have a friend like that, somebody you could bank on.

"Thanks, Luke. See you later."

The cowboy walked out, afraid of showing his feeling.

Luke Hunter watched until the door had closed on him. Then the rancher swept a glance about the room. His chin jerked up in a beckoning motion; and a lanky, surly-looking puncher lounged up to the bar beside him, and listened without expression while Hunter talked in a low tone.

Along about dusk, Mel decided that he had had enough of town. He met Hunter on the street.

"Guess I'll ride on out to the ranch, Luke. Where'll I find me a bunk?"

Hunter told him. A quick light had flashed and passed in his eye. He asked: "How'd you like to go over into the Red Rim basin and ride the breaks for strays? You could get a good early start in the mornin'."

"Sure," Mel answered. "I'd better take about three days' grub for that."

Hunter nodded. "So long, and good luck. See you some time Wednesday, then." There was an odd ring of triumph in the rancher's tone, but Mel did not think of it at the time.

He was scarcely out of town when he heard the rapid beat of hoofs on the road behind him. He thought, "Somebody's in a devil of a hurry," and pulled aside to let the rider pass. But the horse was jerked to a stop beside him, and through the dark he recognized one of Hunter's cowboys.

"Hello, Jake. How come you to be in such a thunderin' rush?"

The lanky Jake Bingham explained in his surly voice: "The boss sent me back to the ranch to tend to some water he'd forgotten and left runnin' on the hay. He

said you'd already started, and I thought we'd ride along together."

Mel offered: "Tell me where the water is and I'll tend to it, and you can go back to town."

Jake shot him a quick glance and seemed at a loss for an answer. He finally said: "No, the old man told me to do it, and he'll be sore if I try to get out of it."

Mel said no more. It seemed that he was elected for some company for which he did not particularly care. They came in sight of the dam workings.

"Why," exclaimed Mel, "I didn't know that they worked here at night!"

"Huh!" said Jake. "They never stop. Three eight-hour shifts."

Mel decided: "I'm gonna hang around and watch 'em for a while. I haven't had a chance for a good look at this."

"We-ell," Jake demurred, "I'd oughta be gettin' home and tendin' to that water."

"Get home, then," said Mel. "I'm not stoppin' you. Guess you know the way."

"Yeah, but—but I figgered on company."

Mel turned to look at him. "Since when have you been 'fraid o' the dark?"

Jake returned the look with interest. "You ain't very careful o' your words, guy. Anyhow, I'm waitin' for you."

It seemed to Mel that Jake was behaving rather peculiarly. He wished to shake his companion, but for some reason Jake wouldn't shake. Then Mel forgot him.

The young man had an insatiable curiosity about any kind of construction. He always wanted to know how things were put together

and what made them go. And right there he remembered Gene with a stab. Gene was always so proud of his brother's general knowledge. "Ask Mel," Gene would say. "He can tell you about that."

Mel shook off the thought and climbed up the hillside, Jake at his heels, to watch concrete being poured for one wing of the dam. Mel leaped to the top of the wooden form, to walk along it.

Jake cried sharply: "You can't go out there!"

Mel looked back. "Why not?"

"They don't allow nobody on the workin's."

Mel laughed. "I'll come back when they throw me off." Mel had been blessed with a rare sense of balance. He felt as safe on the twelve-inch foot plank as on a sidewalk.

A WORKMAN saw him, moved to shout a warning, then grinned and waved a hand. The man saw that the figure in the wide-brimmed hat and dusty overalls was perfectly at home on the narrow path, was holding himself at the proper angle against the stiff wind down the creek.

The scene fascinated Mel—the biviklike industry under the glare of the great arcs. He squatted on his heels at the end of the form to watch the work. Then he sat on the plank and swung his spurs over space and began asking questions. He got from the workmen the last ounce of information they had about what they were doing. He had never seen concrete mixed before. He hung at a perilous angle to watch the mixer below him, and he asked more questions.

At one of the answers, Mel turned his head sharply toward the speaker, then requested:

"Say that again, will you?"

The man repeated his words. There was a pause. Mel's eyes began to snap. He asked more questions, and hung tensely on the replies. The men saw that something had excited him. They couldn't make him out, but they told him what he wanted to know.

All at once he leaped to his feet and ran back along the plank. He dropped to the ground and shouted:

"You know what I'm gonna do, Jake? I'm goin' back to that dance!"

"You ain't doin' no such crazy thing," Jake announced. "You're comin' on to the ranch, like you started to do."

The two swung into their saddles at the same time. Mel turned the head of his horse toward town. Jake reached for his bridle reins.

"You're comin' along with me, guy!"

Mel thought: "He really means it. Then he has been set to watch me."

His instant's hesitation let Jake get a firm grip on the rein, and he agreed: "Oh, all right," in a meek tone.

They turned the horses around. When they had left the lights behind, Jake Bingham felt something hard against his ribs and heard:

"You're headin' for town, waddy. And don't you get more'n ten feet ahead o' me, or I'll let you have all I'm holdin'. Hit the trail!"

The sullen Jake obeyed, well frightened, though he got up the courage to say: "Where do you pack that gun? You'll sure pay for this, smart guy!" Mel made no reply.

The two came into town. Mel had been thinking hard. He needed

a fresh horse. And he wouldn't take time to find out whether Luke Hunter was still in town. It was a good bet that he was not. But what about the horse? Coss Hooker, the livery-stable owner was notoriously slow moving, also inquisitive. And Mel was in a hurry, and he couldn't answer questions. Suddenly he chuckled to himself. He turned quietly up a side street where there were no lights. Jake rode on for nearly a block before he discovered that there was no one behind him. When he found it out, he cursed and drove in the spurs.

The livery-barn owner came out of his doze with a start. He was being violently shaken.

"Gimme the best saddle horse you got, Coss!" Jake Bingham shook him again. "Come out of it! Get that horse. Luke Hunter'll sure give you what for, if you don't come to life."

Coss Hooker came to life. Luke Hunter held a mortgage on every hide and stick he owned.

Jake was saddling the horse in the runway between the stalls, when something hit him behind the ear. He sank to the floor. Coss stared for a moment with dropped jaw, then burst out of the barn, yelling for help.

Mel flung his saddle on the snorting horse, led him at a run through the back door of the barn, and heard Coss returning, talking volubly to the town marshal. He rode quietly until he was out of hearing. When he was clear of town, he set his horse at a steady lope along the road he had come that morning. So far as he could tell he wasn't being followed. He didn't think that Jake would recover very quickly.

Not far from the Warden house, as he was moving up the lane at a jog, he heard a voice.

"What's that?"

Mel pulled to a stop and dismounted noiselessly. A second voice asked, "What'd you hear, George?"

"I thought I heard a horse. I'm gonna walk down the lane a ways."

Mel knew both those voices. He slipped bridle and saddle from the livery horse, turned him around and with a soft slap sent him back toward home.

"Come on, Hank!" The voice was excited now. "Somebody's come in the front gate and is beatin' it back again!"

Mel slid through the fence. Two figures passed him, running. The horse broke into a lope as he heard pursuit.

Mel laughed to himself. Those two punchers of Hunter's would have a chase. He hoped that there were no other watchers about. Convinced, after a careful survey, that there were not, he approached the house quietly for a look in the living-room window. Hunter and his foreman, Rafferty, were seated opposite Gene. Hunter was talking. Gene, his face quietly set, was saying nothing. Mel could not hear a word. He must hear what was going on in that room.

IN the dark of the kitchen entry, he lifted the latch of the back door carefully. He remembered suddenly that the door hinge squeaked! So he had to move very slowly. But at last he stood inside. And it looked as if he were too late to hear anything of consequence.

Hunter and Rafferty were getting up. The voice of the rancher was a cold rasp.

"All right, Warden! You've made your bed, and you can lie in it. I've offered you three times as much as this two-by-six patch o' laud is worth. I've done everything in rea-

son to get you to make a deal, and now—”

“Everything,” said Gene, “except tell me the truth about why you want this two-by-six patch.”

“I want it. That’s all you need to know. What’s more, you can take it from me, I’m gonna get it. There’s more’n one way o’ skinnin’ a cat. The creek that waters your land runs through my pasture.” Hunter paused significantly. “And all kinda things can happen to calves—and barns—and haystacks, you know.”

Gene’s eyes narrowed. “Forewarned,” he retorted.

“Did I make any threats?” Hunter inquired with a sneer. “Prove it!”

Gene knew that he couldn’t prove it. That was the reason the rancher had brought his foreman along, to swear to the conversation.

“Come on, Raff,” Hunter said. “We’ve wasted enough time on this mudhead.” He turned back to ask: “Know what that sweet-scented brother o’ yours said about you to-day? Like to know, wouldn’t you? He come whinin’ to me for a job. I’ll kick the pup out, soon’s I’m settled with you. But he has his uses. I guess there ain’t any kinda two-timin’ coyote that don’t have—”

Mel moved, but he didn’t move half as swiftly as Gene. Gene had Hunter by the throat and was shaking him as if he were a rag.

“Take that back, you foul-mouthed liar! Mel’s ten times the man you ever thought o’ being! Take it back!”

The astonished Rafferty had recovered and swung up his pistol butt to strike Gene from behind. Then all three men stood rooted. For the moment they appeared ludicrously like children playing “statue.”

Into the middle of the room saun-

tered Mel Warden, thumbs in his belt, hat on the back of his head, whistling a personal version of “Sweet Adeline.” The amazed watchers slowly assumed normal positions and backed away from each other.

Mel said calmly, but with a dangerously sparkling eye: “Don’t let the dirty rat worry you, Gene. And don’t you get heavy, Luke.” He sat on the edge of the table and swung a foot as he studied the wealthiest rancher in the La Torre Valley.

“You know, Luke, I never would’ve admitted before that you was a better educated man than either Gene or me. You was, but not any more, Luke.” Mel’s tone was pensive. “I bit me off some education to-night. And maybe I wouldn’t a’ got my schoolin’ if you hadn’t a’ been so anxious to get me outta the way. Maybe you thought that even I would smell a rat, if you offered to buy this place instead of trade. Or maybe you just wanted to make Gene think I’d been talkin’ mean about him, so he’d want to leave here. I guess you don’t know much about Gene.”

Mel stopped to roll a smoke, while Hunter and Rafferty waited uneasily, and Gene watched without a glimmer of comprehension.

Mel got the cigarette going and went on: “Awful interestin’ things one picks up, here and there. About lime and clay, for instance—and gravel. Stand still, Luke. I’m not through yet.”

Mel looked at his brother and winked; and Gene’s face was suddenly no longer set. Mel told him:

“The reason Luke wanted our land, Gene, was that gravel deposit on the north eighty. Remember what dad used to say? That this was an old glacier region, and that the ridge up there was a moraine.

Part of it is that gravel deposit behind the knoll. Remember how he used to cuss that gravel? He said if it was only out of there, we'd have the finest natural reservoir in the country and never need to worry about water again. Because the bottom of that gravel-filled basin is a clay subsoil and will hold water like a jug.

"Well, to get back to that education I've been gatherin' to-night. The most expensive material the contractors have to buy for the dam down there is gravel, because it has to be brought so far. The man bossin' the concrete work told me that they've got their eye on a fine gravel bed, and that they're just waitin' for the land to get out of litigation. That's a new word I learned. Luke musta thought it up, because that's the cock-and-bull story he's been handin' them. And, of course, they wouldn't know whose land the deposit was on, when he took 'em up there to look at it. Well"—this was the longest speech Mel had ever made and he was getting tired—"that about covers it. We'll get paid good money to have our reservoir cleaned out, and—"

Hunter was something of an actor. His manner was jovial as he broke in.

"You're a queer duck, Mel! I ain't got an idea in this world what you're gassin' about. We might's well be movin', Raff."

"Just as well," Mel agreed cheerfully. "And take along your watchmen, Luke. I s'pose they was all

set to start some deviltry to-night if Gene turned you down. I heard what you said about haystacks and calves, you know." Mel sent a last shot after the departing backs of the visitors. "And about Jake, Luke. You mustn't blame him. He got kinda mixed up in his head. He more or less mistook my thumb for a gun muzzle."

When they had gone, Mel shame-facedly met Gene's glowing eyes.

"Don't you go and think too well of me, Gene. After I'd talked with those men at the dam I come a-runnin', all right. But I wasn't thinkin' of a darn thing besides myself, and what a boost the sale o' that gravel would give me. But—but when I saw you jump onto that skunk, just because he told the truth about me—"

"Want me to jump onto you?" asked Gene with twinkling eyes. Then his face became solemn. "If you expect to stay around here, mister, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you mention my brother."

Mel turned away quickly. After he was sure of his voice he suggested:

"How'd it be for both of us to go to town to-morrow? The Twin Star outfit is offerin' their pure-bred stuff dirt cheap. While you look 'em over, I might see what I can wangle outta those contractors. Course, there'll be no deal till you approve it."

Gene's answer was a nod. He couldn't think of any words right then.

Coming Next Week,

"RED'S RESCUE," by HUGH F. GRINSTEAD.



BORDER TRAP

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "Held Up," etc.

AFTERWARD, Bill Clyde could remember no sign of warning; could see no way in which he had failed to guard the young border patrol probationer who was in his charge. But old Luke Jordan, the boy's father, would blame him. Bill knew that. So would the girl, Sally.

That night they had built their camp fire away from the willows of Salt Springs water hole. This was in keeping with border custom when men are patrolling the line in country that might be dangerous. Bill Clyde had shown young Ed Jordan how to pile up rocks to shield the tiny blaze,

and he had used only the driest twigs, to make no smoke.

They had eaten their evening meal crouched by that faint red glow. The horses were picketed in larger boulders behind them. Then Bill Clyde had taken a folding canvas bucket, to go down to the spring for water.

Even as he crossed the hundred feet of open sandy ground, concern for Ed Jordan's safety was in his mind. It was strange how he always thought of Ed as "young" Jordan. They were of the same age, twenty-four; the same six-foot build. But Bill Clyde had three years in the border service behind him, three

years of constant danger that had put a steady, probing watchfulness in his gray eyes, and a set tension in the flat muscles of his lean weathered face. Ed Jordan, still in his six months' period of probation, was new on the border; an eager, likable kid from a Kansas farm.

Approaching the black clump of willow, Bill hitched his .38 forward on his hard right thigh. It was an instinctive gesture of precaution. He felt no danger. This twenty-mile ride out from Apache City had been merely a routine part of Ed Jordan's training. The whole Arizona border had been peaceful for a month. Perhaps, Bill had thought once, too peaceful.

He stooped a little where the trail struck into the low-branching willows—and the shot came then. One smashing roar, behind him.

As he pivoted, whipping out his own gun, he knew the shot had not been aimed in his direction. From back at the tiny camp blaze came a cry of agony, then silence. He had seen the spurt of red flame from the rocky ridge, close toward the bottom. For one second he stood rooted. Then he charged, keeping himself covered in the boulders, aiming a course upward that would cut the ambusher off.

A shadow darted up ahead of him. Twice he fired. But the range was too far. The shadow continued, topped the ridge and was briefly outlined there—a man of gigantic size. He vanished next instant and Bill Clyde halted. It would be suicide to show himself against the sky line. Plainly the man was intent only on getting away. There might be others hidden down the far side of the ridge.

Ed Jordan was groaning when Bill raced back and knelt beside him.

"Ed, where—" he began; then his hands touched a warm smear on the shirt front. There was another at the boy's back. The slug had passed clear through his chest. Gently, he finished, "Take it easy. Don't try to talk, and don't move."

This was no new thing in his experience. He knew it would be a race against time. He brought a first-aid kit from his saddle pockets. Working fast, he sterilized the wounds, stopped the bleeding, taped gauze pads across each darkening bullet hole.

He gave the boy a drink, then asked, "Can you hold onto your saddle if I get you up?"

Ed Jordan had proved what good stuff he was made of. Clenched teeth held back any more sound of pain. Now he looked up, his tight lips trying to smile. "You're a good doc, Bill. Get me on a horse. I'll stick."

It was a brave promise. But when Bill Clyde brought young Jordan's horse and lifted the boy into the saddle, he knew there was trouble ahead. Twenty miles lay before them; it would take three hours at the best. He fitted Ed's boots into the stirrups, braced both of his hands on the saddle horn, then brought his own tall black and mounted.

The border trail was a well-worn rut. He turned Jordan's horse into it, and for a little while rode behind, watching the ridge that flanked them. When the trail struck out upon the flat desert he moved up abreast and asked, "All right?"

A nod from the hunched, rigid figure answered him.

Bill held his position, riding close, and moving along through the night, he tried to figure this out. Why was Ed Jordan the one shot at? Who would want to kill off this boy,

and let a regular patrolman go? He knew the ambusher had crept down while they were both at the camp fire. The fellow had waited to get in that one deadly shot.

Bill scowled in the dark and a savage anger gripped him. The huge form of the man was his only clew. Was Brad Briscoe back? And was Luke Jordan, Ed's father, dealing again with that line-jumper?

It looked so; and suddenly his anger turned to an impatience to get in to town and on out to the Jordan ranch. Things may be happening there to-night! He moved his black to a faster pace, saying, "Let me know, Ed, if it gets too much."

Again his answer was that nod of stubborn courage. Stubbornness was a trait in the Jordan family, put to good use in the case of this boy, but not so with his father. Old Luke Jordan was fighting the border patrol. And now, with his son wounded, he would have more reason than ever to hate the service.

LUKE JORDAN had come down from Kansas a year ago and had bought the Cross Trails Ranch. He had got it cheap. The Cross Trails had a bad history. It was claimed that an honest man could not live there, while a dishonest one never lasted long. For it was like a small oasis ten miles north of the border. There was no other grass nor water to any extent in a fifty-mile strip of desert hills. So the Cross Trails could be put to a certain profitable use, if its owner wanted to turn his back on stolen horses and cattle, traveling either north or south.

Jordan had not done that. He was honest in wanting to build up a herd of CT cattle. But his money was spent. Within the past month,

Bill Clyde had ridden up to look over a bunch of steers there, and had found ten with Mexican brands hidden away in a pocket. Luke Jordan had cursed him.

"Why can't you fellows leave a man alone!" he raged. "All I want is to get a start."

Bill had talked to him with patience. "I know, Jordan, maybe it looks all right to you. Some one comes here with a bunch of cattle cheap, you take them and ask no questions. But you're dealing with the wrong kind of people. You don't know the border tricks. In the end, they'll clean you, or kill you. They'll let you build up a herd, then steal it some night and go south."

"I'll handle that!" Jordan had retorted. He was a strong, solid man, sure that his strength was all he needed.

Bill Clyde had given him one final word of advice. "If it's Brad Brisco you're dealing with, watch out."

It was no part of his duty to go easy on a man who was so openly antagonistic. Yet for this year Bill had spared Luke Jordan as much as possible. He had three good reasons. His natural sympathy was for the cowman who wanted to get a start. Jordan, he felt, was not a bad sort underneath his bitter stubbornness. All the man needed was a lesson to show him that this country was not Kansas, and that the border patrol was here for his own good. Ed was another reason; he had made a friend of the boy at once, and later got him a job in the service.

Also, on that first trip to the Cross Trails Ranch, he had met the daughter, Sally. It had taken only one more time, seeing her, to know he was in love with the girl. And to-night, more than anything else, he hated facing Sally Jordan with

the news of what had happened to her brother.

For fifteen miles Ed held on in grim silence. They still had five more to go, when he gasped suddenly, gave a choking cough and swayed. He would have fallen, but Bill was close. His arm shot out, circled the slack body. He rose in his stirrups and dropped behind his own seat, hauling Ed across and into the saddle.

It had happened so quickly that the horses had not stopped moving. His arm tightened, holding the boy upright. There was nothing he could do. A cold wave of fear swept him. Nothing but get on to a doctor!

The black horse was an easy traveler. Bill thanked Heaven for that. Even at a lope there was little jolting. Yet five miles had never been so long. His arm was cramped and his shoulders were aching by the time the first lights of town winked across the darkness. He struck into a road and then the scattered adobes were around him. The lights were farther on, growing now into broad smears from two border saloons.

The rapid thud of his horse along the street brought figures to both saloon doorways as he passed. Then the whitewashed adobe of the patrol station was ahead of him and he swung in close, shouting at an open window: "Cameron!"

His chief's tall form leaped across the light. The door opened. "What do—"

"Get Doc Lane!" Bill broke in. He hadn't stopped. Cameron ran ahead of him to the third adobe beyond.

Many times this drama of the border had happened here. No questions were asked while Ed Jordan was lowered from the saddle

and carried to a cot in one of Doc Lane's rooms. Lane was a thin, bald man, a skilled surgeon, blunt in his speech.

"Now get out," he said, and the two border men retreated to a front office.

There Cameron faced Bill Clyde sternly. "What happened?"

"Ambushed out at Salt Springs," Bill told him. "Some one aiming to get young Jordan. I don't see why. No shot was fired at me."

"Know who it was?"

"Only a guess. I chased him to the top of the ridge. I think Brisco is back."

Cameron shook his head. "Couldn't have been Brisco. Sure he's back. I saw him half an hour ago."

"Here, you mean, in town?" Bill scowled suddenly.

"He's probably at the Golden Eagle Saloon right now."

Bill considered that. "Just the same," he said in a moment, "I think it was Brisco out there. He could have cut around me on the desert and come in ahead of me easy enough."

"All right," Cameron granted. "Then what do you figure this means?"

"I don't know," Bill admitted. "It may mean that Luke Jordan is dealing with him again. For some reason Brisco wants Ed out of the way. It looks bad. As soon as we get Lane's report, I'm going to the ranch."

CAMERON'S lean face hardened a little as he said, "You've favored Luke Jordan too much already. It's time we rounded him up. I know, you think he can be brought over to our side. He's had his chance. And as for that girl—I've told you this be-

fore—it's bad business for you to tangle with one who rides around with a man of Brisco's stripe."

"She isn't serious about Brad," Bill answered. "She's young, and new here. Brisco is good-looking and showy enough to amuse any girl for a while."

"She'll find it's costly amusement, I'm afraid!"

They fell silent. Bill paced the little room, smoked a cigarette, and knew Cameron was right. He had talked to Sally about it once, but it had seemed like jealousy, coming from him. And Brad Brisco was gallant with women—a border caballero. It had been a lonely year for Sally Jordan. She said so, and argued that she saw no harm in riding to town occasionally with Brad as an escort.

Now Bill cursed himself for letting it go like that. He should have convinced her some way.

Lane's office door opened. The doctor came out, smiling. "He'll pull through. I've made him comfortable. To-morrow we'll take him to the hospital in Douglas."

Bill turned to Cameron. "I'll go then." He nodded at Lane. "Thanks, doc."

Outside, he had reached his horse and was lifting the reins to his saddle horn, when a step crunched behind him. He pivoted. A man swayed heavily out of the dark, a huge shape, broad-shouldered, face hidden beneath a wide black hat.

Bill waited, puzzled and wary. This was Brisco!

The man came close, dull light gleaming from his two silver-mounted gun holsters. His voice was thick with drinking when he asked, "You brought a man in, huh? Who was it?"

The muscles of Bill Clyde's face

tightened. His right hand clenched. "Don't know, do you, Brad?"

He studied the huge shape, placing it against the one he had seen on the ridge top, and could swear it was the same. His eyes kept watch of the two big hands hanging loosely beside the guns.

Brisco swayed and shook his head. "No, you don't," he answered. "You don't tie anything onto me! Been right here in town all evening. Plenty of men to prove it. Cameron saw me."

Bill eyed him, saying nothing. Cold sober, Brisco might not have given himself away so plainly. But this seemed too much building up his innocence ahead of time. And yet, why had the fellow come in to town at all? He must know that he could not have been recognized positively there on the ridge. There was only one reason that Bill could figure. Brisco had come in to make sure he had got Ed Jordan. He wanted that boy dead!

Why? No telling! This border killer was as crafty as he was cold-blooded. But knowing suddenly that Ed's ambush was only some part of a deeper plot, Bill turned, took down his reins and walked on without further talk.

Instead of mounting, he went afoot to the long building where the patrol horses were stabled and entered it. He closed the doors. Brisco, he hoped, would think he was through riding for to-night.

Quickly he went down the runway between rows of stalls, let himself out through a rear door into the corral and saw the gate was open. Then he mounted, holding the black to a silent walk until the empty desert was around him.

By usual travel, Cross Trails Ranch was a two-hour ride from Apache City. Bill Clyde made it

in little more than an hour. He talked to the black horse, urging him on, and the animal understood. In three years on the border he had owned no other mount; there had grown up between them a bond of friendship that was as close as between two humans.

It was midnight when he burst through a gap in the low barren hills and came into the first growth of paloverde that marked Luke Jordan's holdings. The trail he had followed curved into a wagon road. Here he drew in once more to a silent walk, cautious about approaching too suddenly this way in the dead of night.

The thin, smokelike paloverde thickened. The road passed through an opening in a fence made of live cactus as high as a horse.

Low, sprawling buildings loomed on a flat of cleared ground. Suddenly Bill halted, scowling eyes fixed upon the oblong shape of the main adobe house.

Two front windows made yellow squares of lamplight against the darkness. He sat for a moment, watching. Ranch folk didn't usually sit up so late. Some other visitor here ahead of him? He got down from his saddle. It would be well to make sure.

Feeling his way slowly, he turned from the road and circled the corrals and sheds. Scrub trees hid him. They grew close to the house and he was still protected when he approached one dark end of the adobe. He left his reins hooked on the saddle horn, saying quietly to the black, "You wait here. I won't be long."

A hitch rack in front of the house was empty. That reassured him. There had been only two horses in the corrals, and no sound of any others in the stable. He stepped out at an angle that brought him a short

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distance away from the first lighted window.

It was a peaceful scene he glanced in upon. A girl was reading at a table, her fair head showing softly golden in the lamplight. He had not seen Sally Jordan for a week, and sight of her now quickened his heartbeat and stirred him as she never failed to do. Her father was in a chair back against the wall. He faced the door—and looking at him, Bill Clyde's sense of peace in that room was jolted away. For there was something crouched and waiting in Luke Jordan's attitude, a set grim expression on his leathery face.

Bill called out as he took a step forward, "Jordan. It's Clyde here."

THE effect was as if he had fired a gun. Sally jumped up and leaped back from the table. The door was yanked open. Luke Jordan stood there, a revolver leveled in his hand.

Quickly, Bill said, "Hold it, Luke!" Then he moved into the fan of light.

Jordan stepped back, still holding the gun up against his body.

Bill entered and closed the door. "Expecting some one? Who?"

For a moment the Cross Trails man didn't answer. He was a hard spare figure, strongly built. His gray eyes to-night looked hounded. Then he said, "Not you, Clyde. What do you want?"

Bill turned his head and looked at the girl. "Want to tell me, Sally? What's the trouble?" It was always hard for him to think of these two as father and daughter. The girl was small and slim and blue-eyed; she had spirit, but none of Luke Jordan's unyielding stubbornness.

She came across to him quickly

and gripped his arms. "Bill, I'm glad you've come! Somehow I knew you would!" She turned. "Dad, why don't you talk! Oh, I know. You said you'd never ask help from the border patrol."

"Jordan," Bill put in, "what is it? You've got no fight with me. You know that. So open up. What help do you need? Maybe I can guess. I know Brad Brisco is back."

Jordan jerked visibly. "Where? Where'd you see him?"

"In town."

Suddenly the girl let her hands drop. "Dad, I'm going to tell. After all, it's my fault. You warned me, Bill. I was a fool."

"You mean with Brisco?" He stared down into her face. The news he had brought to-night could wait.

"Yes," she answered. "He came here this afternoon"—a shudder racked her slim body—"to marry me—take me away. Dad drove him off with a gun."

Savagely, Jordan said, "I'll kill him if he comes here again!"

Bill swung toward him. "You're just a little late. You've played Brisco's game too long. He'll get what he wants here, or wipe you all out. He's started that already. Ed was ambushed at Salt Springs to-night!" The girl gasped and he put in quickly, "No, not killed. I got him to town and Doc Lane says he'll pull through. But that's the beginning of Brisco's work. Now you've got to get out of here. Come with me."

It was sudden terror in her eyes that cut him off and pivoted him, right hand dropping to his holster. But even in the split second of his turning, the door crashed wide open, a thick voice snarled, "Drop it!" He faced Brad Brisco's two guns.

Brisco was drunk; but in the cold savage drunkenness that seemed to steady the killer's nerves.

He came in a step. "Smart trick, Clyde! You fooled me, sure. I thought you were still in town. Unbuckle that belt. Watch yourself! Toss it over here."

Bill obeyed. One slight false move would bring fire from those two guns, and he knew it. He tossed his belt and .38 onto the floor at Brisco's feet.

The dark hard eyes moved a little. "You're a dam' fool, Jordan! I gave you your choice this afternoon. You could have lived a long time yet."

A cold tingle went down Bill Clyde's backbone. His mind groped for some way out of this. Stalling for time, he said, "You'll never get far, Brisco."

"You border flatfoot!" the man sneered. "You're through. And who'll know, huh? I'm in town right now. Plenty of men to prove it." Again his eyes shifted and a bleared grin spread over his face as he looked at the girl. "You're a sweet kid. Get a coat on. We're goin' south."

"I'm not, Brad!" Her voice choked. "You can't—"

"Can't I!" Brisco took her in hungrily. Thick-voiced, he said, "I won't hurt you. I'll make you a good man. But don't fool with me now. I said we're goin' south!"

No one in the room had moved. Bill Clyde stood back from the table edge. Sally was on his left, toward the kitchen. Luke Jordan was next to Sally, and Brisco had remained two paces in front of the open door.

All three heard the slow step outside in the same instant. Bill shouted: "Bob! Take him!" Nothing was clear then. He ducked low,

grabbed the lamp and hurled it. A gun's roar thundered in the room and by its flare he saw Brad Brisco pivoting as a shape moved behind him. There was the sound of the man thudding into something hard and solid—and Bill Clyde lunged.

The room was pitch dark now. His outstretched arms caught the heavy body. He drove one fist upward, missed the blow, but wrapped that arm around Brisco's neck, threw his full weight backward. They crashed onto the floor. He twisted free. Brisco was cursing in a drunken throaty rage. The steadiness he had shown on his feet had left him. Dimly Bill saw the huge shape try to rise, and he gave the killer no chance. One driving blow rocked the man's head on his thick neck. A second dropped him flat.

Bill's ears were ringing with the pounding of his blood. He dragged himself up onto his feet, breathing hard. "Sally!"

"Bill, here!"

"Bring a light."

Then he heard Luke Jordan say hoarsely, "Look there! Look in the door!"

Bill grinned in the dark. "It's all right. Bob does that—comes to

hunt for me when I've been gone too long."

When the girl struck a match and brought another lighted lamp, the black horse was still there in the opening, blinking at them with curious eyes.

On the floor, Brisco was coming to. "Here, Jordan," Bill said. "Help me carry him outside. We'll tie him to a hitch post and let him sober up. I'll take him to town later."

After that job was done, and he was back in the house again, he smiled suddenly at the girl. "Any coffee in the kitchen, Sally? I'd like a pot full!"

"There certainly is," she answered.

He stepped to her side. "I'll go with you."

They left Luke Jordan in the lighted front room, and out in the dark one they turned to each other without a word. Bill's arms crushed her, hard, and she let herself go in them completely. Then she lifted her face and he kissed her.

"Honey," he said, "we've waited long enough."

"Too long, Bill. But I'm glad this happened. Dad won't fight the border patrol any more."

*A Complete Novel, "HIP LAW," by SETH RANGER,
in Next Week's Issue.*

SPEARHEAD FOUND IN ALASKA

IN the jawbone of a baby mammoth, the skull of which was found in the Fairbanks area of Alaska, was a spearhead, which scientists say is of very fine workmanship. It was forwarded to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The latest find is regarded as certain proof that a fairly high order of man once roamed the frozen creeks of Alaska and used weapons to spear fish and probably to protect themselves from mammoths and other now extinct animals.



Menace In Red Chaps

PART V.

By ELI COLTER

A POSSE is out to get Kurt Quillan for the killing of Lem Strickland, owner of the L-Over-S Ranch, who had cared for Kurt since he was left an orphan at the age of three through the murder of his mother, Bess Quillan, in Lobo Pass. Kurt is regarded as a killer, for in the year since he was twenty, he has fatally shot eight men, including Lem. Previously, he bore a good reputation and none of the ranchers of the Seco range can understand why he suddenly went on a rampage.

Bill Stagg, a Circle G cowhand,

and an old friend of Kurt's mother, does not join the posse, but attempts to take Kurt single-handed by dazing the outlaw to face him in the Idle Hour Saloon in Seco Springs. They meet in the saloon and when Kurt goes for his guns, Stagg, unarmed, unlooses a punch with his fist that breaks the young outlaw's jaw. The posse returns and Stagg holds the ranchers off by agreeing to take full responsibility for Kurt and to see that he does no more killing.

Bill takes the injured young man to Doctor Mordan at Arroyo, where

he is cared for and held prisoner by the doctor and his niece, Micky, who has just arrived in town.

The girl is attracted to the young outlaw and while nursing him becomes interested, but, like her uncle, she mistrusts his sincerity. Kurt makes a break to escape but is foiled by the doctor, who calls Bill Stagg and orders Bill to take Kurt away. As they leave, the doctor and his niece realize they have misjudged the outlaw and his desire to make a fresh start.

Bill takes Kurt to a cave hide-out in Lobo Pass, but the outlaw escapes, taking both horses. Bill gets a horse at the nearest ranch, the Seven Up, and rides to Doctor Mordan. A stranger, Owen Barnes, who arrives soon afterward, asking the doctor directions to Lon Ivey's ranch, recalls another stranger, Warren Cottrelle, who had asked similar directions two months before and had promptly disappeared.

Stagg gets the idea that the stranger's visit may have something to do with Kurt, and decides to follow Barnes. Before he rides, however, the doctor inquires as to his interest in Kurt Quillan. Bill tells him and Micky he was in love with Bess Quillan and had seen her killed the night Lem Strickland rescued the little boy. Bill says that he got a job near by so he could see that Bess's boy was not mistreated. The doctor then tells Bill that he and Micky feel that much injustice has been done Kurt; that the killings he is charged with may not be what they seem.

As Bill rides to Seco Springs, Kurt Quillan rides toward the Crazy L, Lispy Louie le Grande's ranch, and although unarmed, is shot at by Lon Ivey and wounded. He is found by Lispy Louie, who had been trailing

Lon, and Louie brings him to Doctor Mordan.

On the way, Kurt accuses Louie of shooting him from ambush the day Lem Strickland was killed and Louie is amazed—some one apparently has been masquerading in clothes similar to Louie's—faded-blue shirt, stained tan hat, and red angora chaps.

Louie then tells Kurt that he has proof that Kurt is heir to rich ranch property on the Seco range and some one is trying to do him out of it, to kill him before his twenty-first birthday, two weeks away. Louie urges Kurt to keep under cover at Doctor Mordan's and let Bill Stagg run down his enemy. Kurt agrees.

Meanwhile, Bill Stagg pushes on to Lispy Louie's. Louie repeats the story he told Kurt and shows Bill the deed to the ranch Kurt is heir to—it names the L-Over-S, Lem Strickland's spread—and also brings forth a marriage certificate showing that Lon Ivey was Bess Quillan's husband. Both of these documents have come to Louie through his kleptomaniacal proclivities, well known through the valley. They were taken, Louie confesses, from Lon's ranch house, once while Louie was investigating Cottrelle's disappearance. Louie also declares that some one is impersonating him, trying to frame him.

At the Mordan home, Kurt tells the doctor what Louie had told him, also of the impersonation—that some one dressed like Louie was shooting at him when Lem Strickland ran between them and stopped one of Kurt's bullets. That killing was an accident, Kurt declares, although he is glad of it, as he believes Lem murdered his mother. They try to figure out who the impersonator is.

In the meantime a letter comes to

Pete Gulick, owner of the Circle G, telling of the mission of Owen Barnes, who turns out to be Kurt's uncle trying to find a trace of Bess Quillan.

With the idea that perhaps the Strickland ranch is the one he is to inherit, Kurt leaves for the L-Over-S to talk with Mrs. Strickland. In taking leave of Micky, Kurt tells her he loves her and she admits her love for him. He withholds any other show of his affection, however, until he has won his fight for redemption. At the L-Over-S, he learns that Mrs. Strickland and the foreman, Coke Laughlin, are away being married.

As he rides back to Arroyo, Kurt tries to fix the identity of the man in the red chaps, and after eliminating Frank Cross of the Cross Bar and Coke Laughlin, narrows his thoughts to Lon Ivey, who also could answer the description. Stagg, in the meantime, goes to Ivey's place.

At the L I spread, Lon Ivey tells Stagg of his marriage to Bess Quillan and of her murder by Lem Strickland, who he says had wanted to marry her. When Bill tells him of the masquerader in red chaps, Lon pledges his aid in rounding up Louie's malicious double.

Bill returns to the Crazy L and finds Lispy Louie completely terror-stricken—he cannot talk. Bill calms him and the next morning learns that Louie has seen the menace in red chaps at work—torturing Owen Barnes to death. Kurt arrives and together they go to the spot where both Barnes and Cottrelle are buried in a shale slide.

The three decide to organize the ranchers to round up the man in red chaps and in the meantime hide Louie in the cave in Lobo Pass. Kurt rides with Louie, and they are

ambushed near the pass. Louie is wounded and Kurt takes him to the Seven Up Ranch where they find Doctor Mordan and Micky, called to attend a hand. Kurt also is injured, but slightly. Kurt speeds messengers from the Seven Up to have the man hunters concentrate near that ranch, then goes out to follow the man who attacked him and Louie. Micky goes with him a short way. He jumps on his horse and leaves her. A moment later there is a shot and Kurt tumbles from his horse. As Micky runs toward him, she is grasped by a masked man. She struggles, and he knocks her unconscious and kidnaps her.

Micky arouses to consciousness and sees that her captor is the man in the red chaps. She thinks he is Frank Cross of the Cross Bar and he does not disillusion her. Certain that Kurt will follow the girl, the man in red chaps builds a camp fire to lure Kurt into gun range. He gags Micky. He admits to her that his seven gunmen had failed to kill Kurt, so he'll do the job himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

REDEMPTION.

AMAN can pursue a criminal course with seeming immunity only about so long. Then there comes a time when all men and all circumstances suddenly coöperate to conspire against him, and he is trapped. He is a phenomenally shrewd and clever man who can escape that combined set of opposing forces. That hour had come for Micky's captor. He had pursued his dark trail for years unhindered, but—he was both shrewd and clever, as well as desperate.

All night in the clearing among

the trees he had kept that beacon fire burning, while Micky, helpless, dumb behind the brutal gag, drooped on the log in her bonds, and twice he had fallen asleep by the fire, and wakened and cursed himself; but Kurt Quillan had not come.

Kurt had gone to the north, a little to the west of the direction the Seven Up men had taken, and even in the moonlight seeking a fugitive in those gullies and forests became a wearing and futile thing. The Seven Up men turned south toward the ranch buildings, to get something to eat, coffee to drink, to rest a few hours and wait for daylight.

Only Kurt rode slowly on, because he visioned that thing which can be the gift of destiny, which may seem like the veriest chance, yet is in reality the reward granted a man whose vigilance and pertinacity are granted no lapse in the hours of crises. Somewhere in these hills rode Micky and her captor, the captor on his own horse, and Micky on the horse Kurt had been riding and which the captor had taken when he took Micky.

And if he, Kurt, rode on, weaving back and forth, watching and waiting, that reward of the vigilant might be granted him, dusk or dark, moonlight or dawn. He rode on.

And the man in the red chaps, furious at the failure of his attempt to trap Kurt, who was several miles to the east, decided to take his captive and move farther into the hills, as the first light of the breaking day began to seep like a fog through the trees. He released Micky from the log and ordered her onto the horse he had taken when Kurt had thrown himself from its back. The girl's muscles were so stiff she could scarcely keep her feet, they cramped with pain when she tried to move. Her throat ached and her mouth was

dry and miserable from the gag. The man seized her arm and propelled her angrily ahead, when she was unable to move fast enough to satisfy him. His paramount idea now was to get well to the north before the Seven Up men could surround him.

And there he began to run afoul of those men and circumstances conspiring against him. They were gathering rapidly.

Bill Stagg had reached the Seven Up hours ago. Shortly after his arrival the Seven Up men came in, reporting that there was no sign of the man they sought, not to the east toward Lobo Pass. And Stagg said he was going to follow Kurt. He wanted to be in the hills by daylight. He mounted big white Skater and rode due north from the Seven Up buildings, west of the area the Seven Up men had combed.

Within three quarters of an hour after Stagg's departure, the Circle G men arrived, with little, fat Pete Gulick. With the Seven Up men, the entire crew of the Circle G save Benny Blaine rode north, a little east of the course Stagg had taken. In that hour, the Cross Bar men, all save Cross himself and the two cowboys who had gone with him toward the Crazy L, were cutting across the Circle G in a diagonal line, nearing the Seven Up southwest line. The L I men were close behind them.

The crew of the L-Over-S was moving northeast over the Cross Bar, nearing the Circle G south line. Forty-one men, the entire male population of the Seco range, converging to the spot where a killer skulked, a girl was held captive, and an outlaw fought desperately for redemption and a higher trail.

That the girl was almost a stranger, whom only a few of them had seen, and of whom most of them

had only heard, mattered not at all. She was the doctor's niece, she had become one of them, and woman was not to be submitted to indignity on the Seco range.

The killer in the red chaps was mystery, and he was the first sinister and brutal figure the Seco had known. His continued existence was not to be suffered for another day. And Kurt was the boy they had known for most of his days, by sight or by hearsay, who had strangely turned to killing, himself, and confounded them all. Some of them would have shot him down, some of them would have seen him reprieved, all of them would be willing to listen if there was for him any reasonable defense. But not a man of them, able to get on a horse, could have been kept from the dénouement imminent there on the Seven Up.

And at the Seven Up ranch house, Doctor Mordan was sitting by Louie's bedside, and Louie was asking once again:

"Doc, am I goin' to die?"

THIS time there was a warming smile on Mordan's lean gray face, lifting the tired mouth under the white mustache. "No, Louie. You are not going to die. Not from this bullet wound. You will have to lie still for several days, before we'll dare move you. But I can say with confidence now that you aren't going to die. You came awfully close. You must have something to do in this world yet, Louie."

"Have they found Micky yet?"

"Not—yet, Louie."

"I've been athleep, haven't I?"

"You slept most of the night, Louie. Bill Stagg came, and the Circle G boys came, and you didn't know a thing about it. Mrs. Ryan

is going to bring you a hot, nourishing breakfast."

"What do you thuppothe maybe I've got to do in thith world, doc?"

"I don't know, Louie. Perhaps you may know some little thing, that seems to you of no importance, but at the last minute may shove the last piece of the puzzle into place. The ways of the Almighty are strange."

"Ith it breaking daylight, doc?"

"Yes, Louie. It's been day for nearly an hour. I'll put up the blind. You'd better not talk any more right now. I'll go out and tell Mrs. Ryan you're awake and can have your breakfast."

He rose and went out of the room, and his haggard gray eyes looked toward the front of the house, alive with swift hope, and his thin long body drew tensely erect, waiting, as he heard men ride into the yard. Then he went swiftly to swing wide the front door. But his tired shoulders drooped again. It was only the Cross Bar men, all save Cross and two of his boys, and part of the L I crew, who had overtaken them, along with Pete Gulick's man, Benny Blaine. There was no sign of Micky, or of Bill Stagg, or Kurt Quillan. Several of the men hailed the doctor, and he stepped out onto the porch.

"What's orders, doc? Pat here? Pete Gulick get here yet?"

"Pat and Pete are out with their men. I don't suppose there are any orders, Joe. You didn't see anything as you were working over this way?"

"Not a sign, doc."

"Well, I suspect you might as well go north and join in the hunt. There isn't anything else to do. And sitting around waiting isn't good for your sanity. I've been doing it all night."

A grim little silence fell, and the men turned awkwardly away, and the doctor went into the house and closed the door. He was whispering to himself:

"His ways aren't always my ways, and He never let me down yet. Whatever it is, whatever happens, it will be all right. But I wish—I knew—where she is."

She was some eighteen miles northwest of the Seven Up, across the Seco Trail, bound onto the horse where her captor had placed her, half exhausted by physical suffering and fatigue. The horses were going slowly now. The man in the red chaps was prey to apprehension and worry. He was growing more desperate with every lengthening hour. He was getting farther into the hills, and going was becoming difficult. He had very often to take advantage of clear spots, which were dangerously exposing, if he would advance at all, and advance he must.

He rode with his hand on the edge of his thigh near his gun, his harried eyes sharply surveying every yard of terrane as he proceeded. He wished he were free of the girl now, but he had told the truth when he had said he feared the reprisal killing her would precipitate. Better leave her back here somewhere for some one to find later. But he still hoped that his possession of her would draw Quillan into his line of fire.

For some time now Quillan had been veering more directly west. The man in the red chaps had been forced toward the east, by the sheer lie of the land and the natural obstructions he encountered as he worked deeper into the hills. The man's ears were strained to the sharpness a fugitive's ears know.

He heard the sound of a horse's feet on rock. He looked frantically

about for cover. There was none for several yards in any direction, save to the east.

This was one of those dangerous open spots, of which he must take advantage if he would advance to the north at all. The man in the red chaps listened again intently. One horse. Only one. Then he gave a harsh, leering laugh, pulled his mount to a halt, and leaped from the saddle.

The advancing horse, almost in sight now beyond a fringe of brush to the east, was a Seven Up horse. Kurt Quillan was on its back. Kurt had no warning. He was riding slowly, his cold blue eyes clear wells in which despair had kindled its consuming flame. He rode out of the brush into the clear, and even the horse he rode must have felt then the might of the driving force that leaped and quivered about him. The horse stopped.

There is a belief that when a man faces death, all his past life crowds before his eyes. That was not true of Kurt Quillan. He knew that death was there, and would strike at him within another instant; but all of the past that rose to confront him was the section of it which had endured since the hour when he first looked up from the bed, where he lay with a broken jaw, and gazed into Micky's face.

He could not see much of her face now, in that unreal vision that seemed almost to swim, as if his eyes were blurred with moisture, or as if he were struck in the stomach by nausea. The two horses stood there, in the clear space before him, broadside toward him. The first horse was riderless. On the second horse Micky Blue sat tied into the saddle. A handkerchief was bound tightly about her face. Her pale blond hair was a disheveled, curling mass,

dusted with silver by the sun. Her face was without color. Her amber eyes were wide upon him, in a kind of numb horror that was hushed by resignation, and a pride in him, for all he could have given her, for all he might have been, had it been granted him to survive. There was no shrinking, no weakness of hysteria.

THIS was the girl who had said there was no percentage in making a fool of yourself. It was also the girl who had said: "There is another world waiting, and I'll meet you there some day."

He knew then that she was right. If this paid the score, it was still worth it. And surely, this must pay the score—because he had no chance; this must be some inescapable reprisal ordered by a higher power.

His enemy, the small man in the red chaps, stood behind Micky's horse, his body completely hidden by the horse, nothing of him showing but the rim of his tan, stained hat thrusting out from behind the girl's back, the ragged ends of his chaps below the horse's belly, and the bore of his gun across the horse's back pointing straight at Kurt's breast.

As Kurt pulled his feet free of his stirrups, the gun across the horse's back, in the hand of the man in the red chaps, belched and crashed. The bullet hit Kurt high in the right shoulder. Micky's horse quivered and started.

With a supreme effort, Quillan flung himself from his own mount, and as he struck the ground both guns were out. The facility and ease with which he leveled them, lying there on his stomach, was so great that both the speed and accuracy with which it was done would have

been lost to a beholder. It was lost to Micky's unwinking, exalted gaze.

Kurt's right-hand gun blasted its defiant answer. The bullet passed between the horse's hind legs and shattered the bone in the small man's right shin. It brought him to his knees. Kurt's left-hand gun spoke. That bullet tore into the small man's groin.

And now the man in the red chaps was shooting again, and the horse beneath Micky quivered and started, and leaped ahead, and stopped, leaving the two men facing each other on the ground.

The small man's next shot struck Kurt in the chest. He felt it plow in. He said aloud:

"If this is to be my last, I might as well make a good job of it."

And the two guns in his hands crashed together, again, and again. And they were empty. The small man in the red chaps lay still. His gun had fallen to the ground. It was empty also. Kurt's brain, as clear as if bathed in some white, revealing light, functioned in one straight line. He had felt every bullet strike. His wide eyes, the cleanest, coldest blue they had ever been, strove to see Micky's face.

He spoke clearly just one word: "Eight."

And collapsed flat upon his face. But just before he fell so, he smiled. The two dimples drove deep into the faintly colored cheeks. Then he lay still, and the sun built its fire in his chestnut hair.

Micky raised her gaze. Which way did man's spirit go, up, or out, or merely away? She turned slowly in the saddle and looked back at the man in the red chaps. He was a mangled, bloody mass. He, too, had paid his score, in full. She was conscious of a queer exaltation. She

bowed her head, and a lightness seized her. She fainted.

She still huddled there, quite unconscious, fifteen minutes later, when big white Skater came racing into the clearing. Stagg brought the gelding to such a wild halt that the horse stumbled for footing. Behind Stagg rode Pet Gulick. Stagg turned his gaze upon Gulick, beyond all words. Then he raised his gun and fired three times into the air, and got down from the saddle, slowly, wearily, as if all will to locomotion had been drained from him.

Gulick dismounted, and stood still. His round fat face was a stiff mask of sorrow.

"Could you do it?" he asked, and wet his lips, and swallowed. "Just to be sure?" He made a small gesture toward Micky's inert body. "Before she comes to, yet?"

Stagg made no answer, save to walk toward the body that lay nearest, the lithe long figure of Kurt. He stood over it for a moment as if this were something he could not quite do. Then he bent, laid one hand gently on Kurt's shoulder, and turned the body over. There was one bullet hole and a round patch of crimson high in the right shoulder. There were two bullet holes in the chest, one squarely over the heart. The entire shirt front was a mass of blood. He had fallen with his left arm doubled under him, against his chest, and the sleeve was saturated with blood. There was no bullet hole in the sleeve.

"So it had to be this way!" The voice was Micky's. Stagg and Gulick both turned their heads toward her. The blast of Stagg's signal had dragged her back to consciousness. She sat erect, with that still exalted air of pride clothing her like a radiant garment.

"Yes," said Stagg. "He is quite dead."

He walked on to the body of the man in the red chaps, and bent a little, and blinked, and his black eyes stared. "My gad," he said slowly, "he took all twelve bullets! Kurt emptied both guns into him."

"Yah." Gulick's voice quavered. "But, Himmel! Who is he? Pull dot rag off mit his face!"

From east and west, men called by that significant signal of Stagg's, heralded their approach in thundering horses' hoofs, as Stagg leaned to draw aside from the small man's face the blood-wet bandanna, twice as red as it had ever been before.

And Gulick stared, and again wet his lips, and half whispered. "Himmel! Nein! It couldn't be!"

IN the ranch house at the Seven Up, like an echo, Doctor Mor-dan was saying the same words. "Heavens, no! It couldn't be."

The remaining men of the Seco, who had been approaching the Seven Up, all save Frank Cross, were gathered in the room where Louie lay, and Louie had just said stubbornly:

"It'th Lon Ivey! It hath to be Lon Ivey." And when the doctor replied that it couldn't be, Louie's one good eye fixed on the doctor's face. "Thomehow I jutht know it. Litthen—thomebody ith comin'."

Mrs. Ryan, pale with weariness, but upheld by unprecedented excitement, hurried out to open the front door as the sound of a buckboard approaching and stopping before the house reached all their ears.

She swung back the door, and there, coming across the porch toward her, was Martha Strickland, Martha Laughlin now, and Coke Laughlin was close behind her. Martha reached out both her hands.

"Oh, Nanny, my dear! This is a

terrible thing! Coke and I came back as soon as we got Rocky's telegram. And when Pete Gulick's man told us what was happening, we hitched up the buckboard and started immediately, but we had to come by the Cross Bar road, and it took us longer than the boys. Nanny, Nanny! I must see the doctor. I know the truth. I know what must be all of the truth."

"Steady, honey!" Laughlin's arm went around her, and his dark, handsome face was set with concern. "Don't go to pieces."

"Oh, come in! Come in!" cried Mrs. Ryan in relief. "We're all of us about crazy with worry. If you can tell us anything to help! Right this way, Martha. The doctor is in Pat's room, with Louie and some of the men." She hustled ahead, and the Laughlins followed in a tense and nervous eagerness.

Mordan turned quickly to see who had come, and his face lighted with a surprise that smoothed, a little, some of the lines on his weary gray visage. "Why, Mrs. Strick—Mrs. Laughlin!"

Martha Laughlin went straight to him. "Doctor, we had to come. There's some awful mistake, and I know I can help to set it right. There can be no deed leaving Kurt the L-Over-S. Lem owned it long before Bess Quillan came. He never would have sold it to any one. I know. Lem often told me all about it.

"I had hoped so long that he could bring things right for Kurt, and then he was—killed. And I was afraid it was forever too late. He never could do anything with Ivey. Because Ivey held that—that terrible happening over him. And Lem had hoped to the last that Kurt would never have to know."

The doctor interrupted. "Sit

down, Mrs. Laughlin. Mrs. Ryan, bring me a glass of water. Keep still for a moment, Mrs. Laughlin. Please." He gently forced her into the chair by Louie's bedside. From his kit he took a little long bottle, and out of the bottle a white paper folded over white powder. He closed the kit as Mrs. Ryan hurried into the room, accepted the glass from her hand, and shook the powder into it. "Drink this, Mrs. Laughlin, and sit still. You're going to break, yourself, if you don't take this business a little easier. Drink it down. That's the girl!"

He set the emptied glass on the near little square table, and forced a casual smile. "Now you listen, while I talk a minute, and get your breath. I'll tell you what Bill Stagg learned from Lon, and you can fill in the lapses."

And he recounted concisely the story Ivey had related to Stagg, concerning that tragic night in the pass when Bess had come to her death, and the subsequent events. "Now, if you know anything more than that, tell us. But don't let yourself get so wrought up again. And remember that no one wants to make you any trouble, but that wedding certificate exists, and the deed to the L-Over-S, and Stagg saw them, and says they are absolutely legal."

"Yeth, and I thaw 'em!" said Louie, his one good eye fixed earnestly on Mrs. Laughlin's face. "I've got 'em!"

"But Lem never sold the L-Over-S," Martha Laughlin protested. "There's some crooked work somewhere, doctor! Lon told Bill Stagg the truth, most of the truth, but he mixed the truth so smoothly with lies! And he took Bill in, he fooled him, just as he fooled Bess Quillan. He did meet her in Madder Junction, but he was not there with any

herd. He had no herd! He was just a scheming drifter. He had nothing. He made her believe he had a ranch, when he was only a hand on the L I. Not a very good hand, either. Bess always believed he got a glimpse of the money she slipped into her carpet bag there in the station, and made his plans right then.

"He told her Lem had left this country, he offered her a place as housekeeper on his ranch. She had no place to turn, and he was so smooth. She went to the L I with him, only, of course, it wasn't the L I then. Bess never wrote any letter to explain to Lem. She never knew Lem was here till after she'd married Ivey. That was when she left him, when she heard that, and faced him with it, and he went into a fury, and she was afraid of him."

"But how do you know all this, Mrs. Laughlin?" Mordan asked.

WHEN Bess told Lem herself! When she left Lon, she inquired the way to the L-Over-S, at Seco Springs, and came straight to Lem. She told him what had happened to her, and it broke him all up. He hadn't known what had become of her. He never stopped loving her. She told him she was leaving Ivey, and she was getting a divorce from him, and after it was all over, she would come back and marry Lem. But she was afraid of Ivey. She was afraid he'd follow her, and she wanted Lem to ride with her to the pass, to see her safe out of the country.

"And that—that's another place Lon lied to Bill Stagg. Lon did not ride with Bess to the pass; he followed her and Lem. She had her wedding certificate and some other paper in the bosom of her dress, she told Lem so, but she didn't say what

the other paper was. Lem told me she didn't. Lem rode with her almost to the pass, over the Circle G road, and by then she felt certain she was safe, and urged him to turn back. It was only such a short way through the pass and on to Madder Junction. They hadn't seen any sign of Ivey anywhere, and Lem didn't believe Ivey could be very vicious anyway, so he did turn back.

"But Lon had followed by Seco Trail, and when he saw Lem turn back, he rode up and cornered Bess, and attacked her, fighting for those papers in her dress. Bess fought back, screaming, and he dragged her off her horse, and knocked Kurt to the ground. She screamed as loud as she could, hoping Lem would hear. Lem hadn't gone far, he had stopped and turned around and started to overtake her; he was worried about her, and he had decided to insist on going to Madder Junction with her. He came into sight of her at her first scream. He saw the whole thing.

"When Lem came racing up, Lon snatched something from Bess's dress, and knocked her down, and jumped onto his horse. Lem started firing at him, and Lon started firing back, and Bess staggered to her feet and got between them. Lem didn't mean to kill her. It was an accident. It ruined his whole life. He never got over it. When he saw her fall, he knew by the way she was shot that she'd been killed instantly. His horse had blundered back into the brush, frightened. Lem went after the horse so he could pursue Lon. While he was catching the horse, another rider came dashing out of the pass and rode after Lon. Lem heard them both firing as they disappeared in the dusk. He never knew the other man was Bill Stagg.

"And he went back to Bess, and

picked Kurt up. That's the truth of the thing, doctor. He loved Kurt like his own son. It broke his heart when Kurt grew up and started killing people. He and Lon were always at odds. He was always trying to get those papers back, and Lon held it over him that if he ever made a move he would reveal the fact that Lem had killed Bess, and Lem didn't want Kurt to know."

"And the other paper," said the doctor gently, "was the deed to the L-Over-S."

"Oh, dear Lord, it couldn't be!" Martha Laughlin's lips quivered. "Lem would have told me! He loved Kurt so much. He never even blamed Kurt for killing him, Stagg said. He thought Kurt had been impelled by some awful mistake—or that maybe Lon had at last told Kurt—about Bess. So he knew the truth as he died. If we'd only known what made Kurt go bad—he'd been such a fine boy—"

"He'th thill thwell," said Lispy Louie. "He never drew on a man firht in hith life. That'th why I wathn't afraid to go up to him. That'th why he wouldn't thhoot me, even when he thought I jumped him. Jutht like all thothe other fellath jumped him. I know. I picked up one of 'em Kurt had thhot, and he wath dyin', and he told me it wath hith own fault, he'd jumped Kurt firht. And thomehow I've always believed it wath the thame with the otherth. I know the man in the red chapth wath Lon Ivey. I've been knowin' it better every hour thinthe I been layin' here."

"It would be like Ivey," said Martha Laughlin. "But I don't see—there he was on his own ranch when the man in the red chaps shot you and Kurt. He was here on the Seven Up when you saw the man kill Barnes."

"Wait!" Louie's voice rose almost to a shout. "I know! I know. I wath thure I'd get it if I figgered long enough. Joe—did you thee Lon at the camp fire, or at the houthe when you thtarted? Did you thee him with your own eyeth?"

"Why, no." Joe shook his head. "But I heard him. I yelled and he answered. And José said he was there."

Louie was quivering with excitement. "Did Pat thee him, Mithuth Ryan?"

"N-n-no, Louie. But José said he was waiting down the road a piece, so Pat told me."

"Don't you get it?" cried Louie, his greasy face sweating in excitement, his cocked eye rolling wildly. "You didn't thee him—you heard him—Jothay thaid he wath there! Jothay wath in with him! Jothey could mock him till you'd thwear it wath Lon only ten feet away. I've heard him. He didn't come over here with the herd! He rode a wayth with 'em and turned back, to kill Barnth, who he had tied up thomehere. And Jothay covered it. Lon knew Bill wath comin'. He wath jutht waitin' out there in the night for Bill to thhow up, and he told Bill all that about Beth, mixin' it with lieth, to throw Bill off the track.

"And he wathn't back there with the pothee. Jothay covered that, too. He wath followin' Kurt and me, and he jumped uth the firht chanthe he got. And he thtole Micky to draw Kurt on and—"

"Louie!" Mordan laid a hand over the excited little man's mouth. "This won't do. Keep still. You've said plenty. I told you you had something to live for. I know now why Micky wanted Bill to ask Kurt why he hadn't shot at you. She read the man better than any of us."

Mrs. Ryan! Horsemen! Maybe it's some word——" The doctor's voice trailed away from the words he could not say.

BUT Mrs. Ryan had no need to go to the front door. It opened, and a man's footsteps hurried through the front room, down the hall, and the waiting gaze of the group turned to the doorway of the bedroom.

Frank Cross stepped into sight. "Anybody get Ivey?"

Mordan shook his head helplessly. "Not that I know. Was it Ivey, Frank?"

"Yes. I'd suspected it for days. That's why I took two of the boys and started for the L I. I asked for Ivey all along the line, and all along the line they sent me north, till I reached José Sanchez. He said the boss was right around there somewhere. I went on, looking, and I heard a horse passing in the brush. I called. Ivey answered. And I knew Ivey wasn't there. I knew it was José answering. It took me nearly an hour to corner him, but I did it! So that finally I looked through the brush and saw him do it, heard Ivey's voice, coming out of that mouth above José's monstrous jaw. I knew then. I stepped out and let him have it, right between the eyes. I came on here, working over the north of the open range and the Circle G. But I didn't find any trace of Ivey. I——"

Cross interrupted himself and turned as heavy steps ran up the front-porch stairs, the door burst open, and little fat Pete Gulick came rushing in, and Cross backed into the bedroom, and eyes and breath held at the sight of Gulick's countenance. It looked almost thin, dried and yellowed with an unbearable grief.

"Stagg—he sent me to tell you, yet." Even his voice was dry and thinned with grief. "Der boys iss all coming. Micky is all right. Kurt, he got her, doc. We heard der shots und come on der run. Kurt—he emptied both guns into Ivey. Und—und he took four of Ivey's bulletts. Der boys is bringing dem. Dey is both—both dead. I—I—oh, Himmel, doc! Let me sit down or I don't stand somethings more."

Mrs. Laughlin began to sob softly. "Oh, my poor Kurt. I loved him, too, doctor."

"It ain't right! It ain't fair!" Little Louie's eyes were wet, the cocked and the good one. "He thaid he wanted to thit in on a new game. There ain't no——"

"Hush!" said Mordan. His thin long frame drooped, but his lined gray face was stilled into calm. "Whatever He decrees is right. If that was the way Kurt had to pay, it must have been best. Hush. Here they come."

Fraught silence fell over the room, the kind of silence that falls where sleep those who may never waken again till the last trumpet calls. The sound of many horses ridden slowly came to a stop outside. Footfalls, light, yet slow, ascended the steps into the house, and Stagg appeared in the doorway, all the other men crowding behind him, Kurt's limp body cradled in his arms, Kurt's lolling chestnut head burning its fire against his shoulder. Beside Stagg walked Micky, her head high, that same exalted pride clothing her like a garment.

Stagg stood still, and Mordan's eyes leaped to the great stain of blood on Kurt's breast. The doctor motioned silently to the bed, and again Stagg moved lightly but slowly forward, and laid Kurt's body beside little Louie. The doctor's

gaze passed over the bullet holes in the breast of the shirt. He tried to speak, failed, and tried again.

"No man on earth—could have done anything—for him. He—Micky! My dear—" His arms went around his niece.

Her amber eyes shone with that white pride. "He accepted his way. He tallied his score. He washed it clean as a crystal."

"Yes. He—he—" The doctor's gaze widened, stared, fixed on Kurt. He almost shoved his niece from him. He bent over the bed. "Bill! Did you say this man is dead?"

"I thought he was dead till I picked him up." Stagg's black eyes were wells of weariness and pain. "I saw then that he was barely breathing. I didn't say anything. I knew, as you just said, that no man could do anything for him. And—for Micky—I saw no use in rousing a hope that had to be in vain. I wish you hadn't said it—till we'd got her away."

"While there's life there's hope!" said Mordan harshly. "Stand back while I look at this boy!"

He leaned over Kurt, and his deft hands flashed into motion. Little Louie's cocked eye was still, staring into space, his one good eye on Mordan's tense gray countenance.

Stagg's gaze went to Micky, oblivious to the packed gathering of those hushed men of the Seco range, to Micky, whom he had striven to save from this. She had seen Kurt die once. Bitter draft, that she must see him die again. She was like something that feared to live, yet clung to life because it must. Her delicate face, he thought, was what an angel's face must be, when it lifted to its Lord. Her amber eyes were unearthly lights. He remembered that he had read somewhere

that there was an angel, a kind of mythical angel, that embodied a beautiful thought. That angel must look as Micky looked now. Only he couldn't remember the angel's name. What was it? It began with an S. Why, yes, that was it! Memory leaped; of course, that was it.

He said aloud, "Yes, of course—San—Sandalphon!"

Micky didn't hear him.

Louie whispered: "Than—than what?"

Stagg's organ tones resounded softly. "Sandalphon." His eyes were still on Micky's face. "Sandalphon, the angel of prayer. He takes the prayers of men, and weaves them into crowns, to present to his God. He's the mortal's go-between, old-timer. Sandalphon—angel of—prayer."

DOCTOR MORDAN raised to his long thin height. His gray face was alight, as if he had encountered something that was beyond the reach and understanding of any one related to earth, least of all his humble and striving self. His voice was muted, yet it seemed to shimmer, as glass dust shimmers in a beam of sun. He said:

"He has never let me down!"

"Who?" said little Louie.

The doctor's smile erased half the lines on his face. He addressed the transfixed crowd in the room. "Men—have you any verdict?"

Rocky Andover answered. "We didn't understand. We didn't know what he was. We didn't know what had been done to him. I guess any of us would give all we've got to bring him back and tell him so."

Mordan's face flushed with even brighter light. "He hasn't gone very far, Rocky. In all my experience, I have never seen anything like this. One bullet, it must have

slanted up from below him, when he sat on his horse, perhaps, simply cut through the flesh between the clavicle and the scapula. It never even touched bone. It simply bored through skin and a little flesh."

"Doctor——" Stagg groped. "You're technical."

"I'm sorry. It went between the collar bone and the shoulder blade. The two holes in the shirt front—one bullet hit something and caromed; he must have been lying on his stomach from then on; the bullet struck into the flesh of his left breast, it had barely enough force left to lodge there, loose, it's lying upon the sternum—the breast bone. One simply raked down his skin along the stomach and lodged against his gun belt, merely burned the skin. The worst one slid under the cuff of his left sleeve and plowed through the flesh of his lower arm from above the wrist to the elbow. It's loose in his sleeve. It didn't even cut an artery.

"When he fell on the arm, the pressure of his body gradually stopped the bleeding. That's where all the blood on his chest came from; from his arm. For a man who has tried to stop eight bullets he'd done a damned poor job of it. There's practically nothing the matter with him."

"Uncle Dan!"

"Yes, my dear. I told you there was such a thing as—destiny."

"But"—Stagg's organ tones groped again—"he's so still, he's hardly breathing——"

"He's asleep!" Mordan almost snorted. "That's the light breathing of exhaustion, man! Have you stopped to think how long it's been since that boy has had any sleep? He left my house night before last; he's been riding, fighting, eating when he could, and had no sleep

since then. A little bullet shock knocked him out, and he simply went to sleep. I am not going to waken him if I can help it. The sleep will do him more good than anything else. All he needs is nourishment, a little cleaning up, and a good bit of rest."

"Doctor." Martha Laughlin rose from the chair beside the bed. "Before he wakes, this one last thing. I must see that deed, somehow. He has been my son, too. If Bess really purchased the L-Over-S, it is his. Coke and I—we—maybe he would let us stay on, doctor. I know he would. Where can I see the deed?"

"Here," answered Bill Stagg. "Excuse me, Louie, but I got it, after you went out yesterday morning, and brought it along." He drew the paper from his pocket and extended it toward Mrs. Laughlin. "I thought we might need it for something."

Martha Laughlin took it with reluctant and yet eager fingers. She unfolded it, and her eyes lighted with sudden understanding. "Why, this isn't a deed to the L-Over-S Ranch. It's a deed to the L I. These east boundary markers absolutely prove it!" Something half-way between a sob and an hysterical laugh shook her voice. "Don't you see the way the letters are all run together? Lovers, not L-Over-S! Lovers! When Bess first came, when Lon was merely working there, Jack Lovers owned it. It was known then simply as the Lovers ranch."

"By Jiminy!" cried fat little Pete Gulick. "I remember dot! I vas knowing Jack Lovers mineself! But he just vent avay, already, und der ranch vas der L I, und I never t'ought noddings about it."

Bill Stagg straightened to his astounding height. His deep voice rolled through the room. "There is a bigger justice than men can deal.

Bess's dreams were in that house. In that ranch. She wanted it for her son."

"Yes." Mordan's voice cut in, sharp and commanding. "And for that son's sake, all of you move out of here. I have to do a few things for him. They're little enough, but they're important. And I don't want him wakened by all your racket. Come along. Get out into the other part of the house, please."

They went. In a silent file, ready to burst into excited conversation once they were beyond the room where Kurt Quillan lay in reviving sleep. Stagg was one of the last to go, and Louie's abashed voice halted him.

"Bill! You know—you and me, on the Crazy L—right next door—we could have thome thwell timeth, maybe."

Stagg smiled down at him. "I'll be there, Louie! Try to keep me away!"

"Please go, Bill!" said Mordan anxiously. "I want to get those wounds cleaned and dressed."

Stagg went quietly out and closed the door behind him. Only Micky remained, facing the doctor with that hot high pride.

"Should I go, too, Uncle Dan?"

"No, sweet." The voice came from the bed.

Both Micky and the doctor turned. From beside little Louie, Kurt raised his eyes; clear eyes, cool clean blue. The force that was Kurt Quillan was pent no longer. It spread and flowered. Unharried, potent and serene, it quivered in the air about him like a light. He smiled. The dimples at the corners of his full curved mouth drove deep. The sun from the window burned in his chestnut hair.

"No, sweet," he repeated, and the tone sang like the muted A string of a guitar. "You do not go from me—ever."

THE END

COYOTES FOR RABBITS

IT is a real heartache for a trapper to set a well-laid trap for a coyote and find a jack rabbit has sprung it, instead. To combat this nuisance, two trappers of San Antonio, Texas, have devised a scheme which they claim is fool proof.

"Use 'old reliable' coyote scent bait, add a dash of rabbit-hound bait (using only bait from a rabbit-hound that is known to run rabbits), and bait the coyote sets as you do for coyotes. Then take a flat rock, set it on end about twenty feet from the coyote set, and paint a black spot on the lower edge about six inches in diameter. Mr. Jack Rabbit will be attracted by coyote bait and come hippity-hop. When within two feet he will detect the rabbit-hound bait and come to a sliding stop, about face and race for his hole. The flat rock with the black spot resembles, home sweet home, to him and he heads right into it, which kills him instantly."



Ridin' Herd For Willie

By **GLENN H. WICHMAN**

Author of "Six-gun Obligation," etc.

EVER so often my partner, "Hep" Gallegher, could be counted on to have a burst of what he called mental gymnastics. It would break out on him as though he had the measles and there was nothing much to do except let it run its course. For a month or so, Gallegher would work along peaceably enough as a reasonably good cow nurse, and then some fine morning he would wake up and decide that his muscles had had enough exercise for the present and that it was time that he gave his mind a chance.

"Dogie chasin'," Hep would say, "may be O. K. for my one hundred and forty-five pounds of bone and

muscle and physical prowess, but a fella oughta give some thought to his brains. What's goin' to become of my brains unless I exercise 'em? First thing I know they'll have ossified or solidified or petrified and then where'll I be?"

"Right where you are now," I'd tell him. "It wouldn't make a bit of difference. I never heard tell of a gent exercising something that he didn't have."

This would make Gallegher mad and give him a good excuse for discontinuing manual labor, which was what he'd have done anyway. Actually it really didn't make him mad at all. In fact, he'd be tickled half to death at me for disagreeing with

him. What was the use of having an argument unless there was somebody to argue with. One of my duties in life seemed to be to argue with Gallegher. One reason why I did this was because I liked him and another reason was that I hated to see people take advantage of him. Not that I could ever prevent the latter, but I was always in hopes of doing it. The world had never bred a greater faller-downer than Hep, that is, when he got away from dogie chasing. Not only would he fall down but he would very obligingly dig his own hole to fall in.

That was the way things stood when one morning Gallegher decided, for both of us, that it was time we quit our jobs on the Slash A and went in for higher things. It was right after breakfast, and we were walking down to the horse corrals when the idea hit him with all the suddenness of a ton of bricks.

"George," said Hep to me, "did you ever notice that you can be so close to a thing that you can't see it. Take that freckle, for instance, on the end of your nose. Even if you was to turn yourself inside out you couldn't see it without the aid of a mirror, yet I can see it. From such a little thing as that a great idea has been born. Here I was, thinkin' that mebbe my mind had curdled and turned to cheese, and just like that, I give birth to a great idea! All I have to do is let my brains develop it or it develop my brains and there's no tellin' where I'll end up. Probably as a great financial magnet."

"What you say," I told him, "is unusually lacking in sense."

"It's only natural," chuckled Gallegher, "that I should be several mental jumps ahead of you. Never in ten years have my mental processes been in finer fettle than they

are this morning. My mind feels like a stable full of race horses or alarm clocks. It's literally about to burst with possibilities."

Hep had stopped walking; he stood there looking up at the sky.

"The boss expects us to saddle and ride the east line," I informed him. "Not to go into a trance."

"Nope!" declared Hep. "I'm through ridin' fences. George, has it ever occurred to you why cow outfits fail, fold up and collapse? Of course, it hasn't, but I'll ask you, anyway."

"Poor grass," I said, "is one of the reasons. Then there's a lack of water or a low price for beef, bad weather or poor management—"

"Hah!" exploded Gallegher. "With those last two words, 'poor management,' you've hit the nail on the head with a mallet. Didn't suppose you had that much astuteness. Thereof was what I was talking about in the first place."

"What," I inquired, "has poor management got to do with the freckle on my nose?"

"It's a little deep," elucidated Hep, "but here's the general idea: The freckle is so near you that you can't see it. Poor management is likewise so near the owner of a ranch that he can't see it. The poor, unfortunate rancher goes stumbling along down into bankruptcy because he can't see what he's falling over. Just as I can see the freckle on your nose so I can see what's the matter with a ranch that's petering out. It's as though I was on a cloud floating over it. With my unprejudiced mind I can spot the weaknesses in the management and plug up the leaks."

"Seems to be something to it," I admitted, "provided you can find the leaks."

"That," declared Gallegher, "will

be a cinch. Of course, just for the present I can't do much about the weather, or the price of beef, but when it comes to poor management, I'll be like a physician and a surgeon. George, I'm going to become a cow counsellor!"

THIS made me want to laugh, but I didn't. Hep had started off on one of his periodic journeys into the higher accomplishments and there wasn't much for me to do except follow him and be on hand to pick up the pieces. Presently we went up to the ranch house and drew our time. The boss didn't mind because there wasn't much to do anyway, and he'd been hoping we'd quit. Then we packed our duffel and rode into the neighboring town of Salome Gulch, which was where Gallegher thought he'd have his headquarters for counselling.

One thing after another took place in Salome Gulch in logical order. First we put out horses in the livery barn and then we went to the Highgate Saloon where we had three good snorts of bourbon. Presently Hep rented an empty store building and hustled up four chairs, a table and two cots. The chairs and table went into the front room of the store and the cots in the back room.

"All that remains," said Gallegher, "is to make a sign so that the citizens passing by will know what I'm up to."

After a time he came back with some red paint, a brush and some boards. He had quite a time with the sign. Gallegher thought that the word "counsellor" only had one "l" in it and I thought that it had two. He compromised by using three.

Hep stood back when he had finished and looked at his handiwork. "That," said he, "is probably one of

the finest signs that was ever made. It oughta bring business by droves."

"It oughta bring somethin'," I said, "and it probably will."

The sign read:

HEPBURN C. GALLEGHER, COW COUNSELLOR. BRING ME YOUR TROUBLES. TROUBLES OF ALL KINDS SOLVED DIRT CHEAP. HIGH-GRADE AND EFFICIENT COUNSELLING. IF YOU ARE THREATENED WITH BANKRUPTCY SEE HEPBURN C. GALLEGHER, COW COUNSELLOR

"Sounds sorta like a poem except that it hasn't any meter and the words don't rhyme," observed Hep. "But that word counsellor looks kinda odd."

"Don't let it fret you," I advised him. "A little thing like that hadn't oughta worry such a far-seeing gent as you're pretending to be."

Hep nailed the sign on the front of the store building, and then we went back inside to await results. Some few people, including the sheriff, were attracted by the sound of the hammering and came over to see what the racket had been. They read the sign. Some of them laughed, some of them didn't know what to do, and one gent looked positively frightened. None of them came inside.

"Just as I thought," explained Gallegher. "It'll take a week for such a bright idea as I've got here to soak through their thick cabezos."

"In the meantime," I offered, "we might as well go over and hold communion with the bartender. From the saloon we can keep one eye on this joint and if anybody comes in here and wants to be counselled we can come runnin' over and counsel 'em."

"Kindly don't make light of the thing," grunted Hep, "or I might be called upon to hit you!"

We went over to the saloon. Gus DeLong was behind the counter. Me and Hep had known Gus for some time and he was a pretty nice fellow.

"Hep," said Gus, the bartender, as he set out a bottle and three glasses, "far be it from me to suggest such a thing but are you sure you're still in possession of your faculties?"

"Faculties!" roared Hep. "Why, I've never had more or better ones!"

Then Gallegher delivered a speech in such a loud tone of voice that all the loafers in the barroom could hear him. He began, like he did with me, by speaking of the freckle on my nose and ended up by floating on a cloud above some nearly defunct cow ranch. "It's simply," concluded Hep, "the case of an outsider seeing things that a man familiar with the situation wouldn't even notice."

"Sorta like a bird's-eye view," suggested Gus DeLong.

"Sorta," agreed Hep, "except that I've got more sense than a bird."

Gus DeLong scratched his chin. "Far be it from me to even mention the matter," he continued, "but if somebody was to ask you what experience you'd ever had in running a beefsteak farm, what'd you tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em!" grumbled Hep. "Why, I've worked with beef critters since I was eighteen years old, except when I was doin' something else."

"Not for anything in the world would I even hint at it," persisted the barman, "but it strikes me that there's a yard or so of difference between running a cow uphill and down and running a cow ranch."

"The principle is the same," said Gallegher, as he emptied the bottle. "Even as a cow goes uphill and down, so goes a business. That is, if it isn't run right, it'll go uphill

and down, mostly down. But if gents with cow ranches will only follow an intelligent cowboy's advice they—"

At this point Hep couldn't seem to remember exactly what it was he was going to say. In fact, he even forgot what it was he was talking about.

"No matter," said Gus DeLong. "While I'm hardly an expert at other people's affairs and hardly know anything about anything I would suggest that you go over to your office and sit down."

"Why, certainly," observed Hep. "I was just going to do that. In fact, I was under the general impression that I was already there. I will go over now and sit down and by this time to-morrow the information that I have opened an institution for the salvaging of under-nourished cow ranches will have percolated throughout the country and I'll be literally swamped with business."

WITH that he shook his fist at the bartender and then me and him went across the street. Hep was wrong about being buried alive under an avalanche of clients but along in the middle of the next forenoon he actually did have one. Gallegher was sitting at the table, with his aching head propped up by his hands, when the gent came in. A rather tired-appearing sort of a man he was, too, with a long, sad face and a walrus mustaches.

"Well, well!" declared Gallegher. "Welcome! Sit down and unbosom yourself."

But the stranger did not choose to sit. He stood there crumpling his hat between his hands and looking as sad as an old horse. "I have come here," he began, "to engage you to save my ranch from a most unexplicable situation. My name

is William Bannock, but they call me Willie Bannock for short." His smile was as bleak looking as a blizzard.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Willie," replied Hep. "Now just let me have the details of what's bothering you and I'll diagnose the trouble as quickly as you can say 'seat.'"

Willie cleared his throat. "Do you know where the Bar F is?"

Hep didn't, but it turned out that the Bar F was in the south end of the valley which was a location that we had never been in because we had been working in the north end.

"I own the Bar F," continued Bannock, "but I won't own it for long unless this unexplicable matter is cleared up."

"My business in life," Gallegher told him, "is clearing things up. Kindly go on."

Mr. Bannock rolled his eyes and went on: "I drive my beef when they're ready for the market through the Larchmount Mountains and down to the railroad siding at Little Jumbo, which is much shorter'n drivin' 'em up here to Salome Gulch. It's a matter of poundage at the loading pens—"

"Don't tell me anything about the details of cattle raising," interrupted Hep, "because I know all about it. Kindly stay with your troubles."

"Lately," explained Willie, "I've been marketing my steers in lots of a hundred. I'll get the hundred steers together and drive 'em over to Little Jumbo, but when I get to Little Jumbo there'll only be seventy-five of 'em. Anyway you can count 'em there'll only be seventy-five. Seventy-five, even."

"That's odd," admitted Gallegher. "Can we assume to start with that you know how to count?"

Bannock rolled his hat up into a wad. "I've never been accused of

being a great mathematician," he slowly said, "but I'm sure I can count to a hundred."

"All right then," concluded Hep, "I've never known anybody who couldn't, so we'll let the matter pass. Who was it did the trail herding?"

"Me and three of my men," explained Bannock, "which is certainly enough hands to handle a hundred beef. We'd all count the stock before we started the drive, and then we'd count 'em when we got to the loading pens at Little Jumbo and there'd never be more than seventy-five; neither more nor less. Just seventy-five."

Gallegher looked astonished. "How often has this happened?"

"Four times, hand running. The same thing's happened each time. In all I've lost a hundred steers. And here's another thing: those critters were never out of my sight from the time they left my ranch until they got to the loading pen. I'd even go without my sleep to watch 'em."

Gallegher looked incredulous, but then he realized that as smart a man as he was shouldn't look incredulous so he began to laugh. "It's obvious," he chuckled, "that each time something has happened to twenty-five of the steers—"

"Why," I interrupted, "couldn't something have happened say to twenty-three of them or even to twenty-eight of them? Why always twenty-five?"

Hep looked at me with annoyance. "Quite by accident," he informed me, "you have stumbled upon the nub of the matter, which was, of course, too obvious for me to have mentioned. This is a plain case of overfamiliarity. Mr. Bannock and his men are so familiar with the route they've taken with the cattle that they've failed to notice what became of twenty-five of

their charges. Nothing could be simpler. If I was to cast my eye over the trail they took through the mountains——”

“Which is just what I want you to do,” put in the sad-looking Willie. “To-morrow morning I want you and your partner to start off with a hundred of my steer critters. If you get to Little Jumbo with the hundred I’ll make you a present of ten. I’ll be waiting there for you.”

“A very commendable arrangement,” declared Hep. “It kinda puts me on my mettle, which is where I like to be put. When it comes to trail herding, I’ll take odds from nobody. But, of course, I won’t do it as a steady thing. I’ll just show you where you’ve made your mistake.”

“Fine,” declared Willie Bannock, exhibiting more life than he had yet shown. “For the first time in a month I begin to feel better. In order that nobody’ll be on hand to bother you, neither me or any of my men will be anywhere around. The steers will be in a fenced-in pasture and all ready to go.” He came up to the table and asked for a piece of paper. Then Willie Bannock spent a long time drawing a map of the south end of the valley and of the Bar F and of the Larchmount Mountains and of the exact route we were to take in going through them.

“Of course, Bannock,” said Hep, when the rancher had finished with his map drawing, “you must promise not to tell this to any one.”

WILLIE stepped away from the table. “Not to a living soul,” he promised. “Me and my men’ll gather up the stock this afternoon and shove ‘em into the corral. I’ll tell my men that we’re getting ready for a drive that’s to start three days from now. Ac-

tually it’ll start to-morrow morning, but nobody’ll know it except us three. You boys had better spend the night in the hills and be on hand at the corral by sunup.”

“Agreed!” declared Hep.

We all shook hands and then Willie Bannock went outside, climbed on his horse and rode away.

“I’m off to a flying start,” said Galleher. “After I’ve plugged up the holes in the Bar F’s method of shipping cattle, people will be standing in line to hire me.”

“Shucks!” said I. “Probably Mr. Bannock’s just getting himself some work done for nothing. After we’ve shoved his cattle over the mountains he’ll forget all about the bargain. That bird’s a smart one. Of course, we’ll be careful not to lose any of his beef. If we do lose any we won’t get paid. That man’s about twice as smart as he looks.”

“You’re no judge of mankind,” declared Galleher. “That’s one reason why you’ve never amounted to anything.”

We went out and had some dinner and then over to the Highgate Saloon to see how Gus DeLong had recovered from the night before. But Gus was nowhere around. The proprietor of the fire water emporium said that DeLong had taken three or four days off so as to rest his nerves. The day was wearing along; me and Hep saddled our horses, laid in a supply of trail grub and took the road that ran down the valley. Ever so often, Galleher consulted the map that Willie Bannock had drawn; evening and we were camped in the hills above the Bar F.

Before sunrise next morning Hep was up and around cooking breakfast. By the time it was daylight we had drifted down out of the hills and had located the fenced-in pasture that Bannock had told us

about. Inside the fence were some of the finest looking Herefords that either of us had ever laid an eye on. They all bore the Bar F brand.

"You chase 'em out through the gate," said Hep, "while I count 'em."

I did that. It took considerable riding around to do it, but eventually they were all through the gate.

"A hundred even," announced Gallegher, "which proves that Bannock wasn't a liar."

"Doesn't prove anything," I said, "except that there're a hundred prime steers."

From then on we had our hands full. We started drifting the herd up through a draw that was south of the pasture. The beef didn't take much to the idea, but we made them go, anyway. Within an hour and according to the map we were off of Bar F ground and onto the public domain. Both of us were too busy to pay much attention to anything except to keep the herd on the route that Bannock had told us to follow.

Noon came and we drew up to rest and eat a cold bacon sandwich. By now, we were well into a series of parallel canyons that flanked the mountain. So far as I could detect, there was no pass out ahead that we could possibly go through.

"Listen, Hep," I said, "if we keep on the way we're going we'll end up on the east side of the valley instead of the west side. If I know anything about geography, Little Jumbo lies to the west of the Bar F. I remember seein' it once on a map. An' the way we're goin' now'll take us straight to the border and Mexico. Bannock wouldn't be likely to send his cattle into Chihuahua."

Gallegher looked first at the sun and then at every point of the compass. "I've kinda lost my bearings," he admitted, "but, of course, you're

bound to be mistaken. I've taken every turn that Willie Bannock said to take, and, of course, it follows that he wouldn't be lunatic enough to run his stock into Chihuahua."

"Nothing follows——" I began, but Gallegher was busy counting the herd, which had quieted down in the little basin where we had stopped to eat the sandwiches.

"Haven't lost a single one of 'em," presently announced Hep. "We started with a hundred an' we've still got a hundred, which proves that I know what I'm up to. When it comes to trail herdin', there ain't a smarter gent than I am. Willie Bannock don't know how lucky he is that he's hired me."

Just then a horseman broke cover from among the boulders that lay along the east side of the basin. Me and Hep stood there watching him.

"Durned if it ain't our old friend Gus DeLong, the bartender," exclaimed Gallegher. "Wonder what he's doin' up in these parts?"

DeLong rode up to where we stood and climbed down out of the saddle. "Greetings, gents," said Gus. "It's a pleasure to see you. I've been riding around to rest my nerves and my constitution——" Then, even as he talked, the fella did something that I'd never seen a bartender do before; he drew a pair of guns so quickly that we could hardly see him do it. A six-gun covered each of us! "I wouldn't mention it for anything," purred DeLong, "but if you buzzards don't want your heads blown off you'd better put your arms up, and keep 'em up!"

WE did just that, because there wasn't anything else to do. Then came surprise No. 2. A second gent broke cover from among the boulders and came riding toward us.

"Damn my suspender buttons!" whispered Hep out of the corner of his mouth. "It's Willie Bannock! We're about to be rescued!"

But, as usual, Hep was wrong. Bannock came riding up, dismounted and relieved us of our hardware. Willie didn't look at all sad now. In fact, he was laughing. "Well! Well!" Willie chuckled. "How are my little cow counsellors! Thanks a lot for bringin' the beef up here. It isn't every day that I'm able to get somebody to do my stealing for me."

Me and Gallegher were entirely speechless.

Then Bannock whistled loud and long, and surprise No. 3 showed up. This time it was in the form of four as villainous-looking Mexicans as ever forked mustangs. They came riding out from the head of the basin and the leader, who was a big fellow, dismounted. In his hand he held a canvas sack which appeared to contain money.

"Ah—señors," said the big Mex, with a flash of teeth, "we weel now bargain for the steers. Tie up the foolish gringos and we begin."

Both of us objected to his, to say nothing of being insulted, but in about three minutes we were bound hand and foot and laid to one side like a couple of mummies. Then Gus DeLong and Willie Bannock began haggling with the big Mexican over how much he was to pay for the beef that we had so obligingly rustled.

They were about to come to an agreement when suddenly surprise No. 4 broke loose. Shucks! I never heard so many guns go off at one time in my life. Little hard to see what was happenin' from where I lay, but I could see some more horsemen coming out through the boulders. Two or three of them were

yelling at the rustlers to surrender. The first volley of slugs had purposely gone high. But neither the greasers nor Willie Bannock or the bartender had any thought of surrendering.

Right at that minute the battle started, and at that same minute the hundred steers stampeded. There was never anything like it. Between the horses and the beef and the guns, the basin was a madhouse. Me and Gallegher flattened out on the ground like a couple of pancakes and hardly even breathed. The big Mexican was the first to collect a slug; he got it right between the eyes. His three companions didn't have much stomach for a fight and were trying to get away. Bannock and DeLong were jumping around and pulling triggers like mad men.

First off, I thought it was another gang of cow thieves that had attacked us. But in an instant I recognized one of the men who had come from the boulders. It was Sheriff Mattom of Salome Gulch. Steers' hoofs were thudding all around us. We couldn't move, dodge them, or do anything. Two minutes of undiluted agony and things began to quiet down.

By now, most of the beef had stampeded out of the basin. Gradually the firing lessened and then it stopped altogether. Other than a lot of shouting and cursing by the members of the sheriff's posse there weren't any sounds but the drum of distant hoofs. Sheriff Mattom came over to where me and Gallegher lay and cut the rope ends that bound us.

"What a priceless pair of idiots!" growled Mattom, as we staggered to our feet. "If you weren't both lunatics I'd hang the lot of you!"

Even Gallegher blushed and it

took a lot to make Hep feel embarrassed.

"For some time now," explained the sheriff, "I've suspected Willie Bannock and Gus of rustling cattle in their spare time and selling them to Mexicans from across the border. But this is the first time they ever did it wholesale. I overheard a few words they said in the saloon. They were talking about you! They thought you were crazy, which was perfectly correct. The rest was easy for me. All I had to do was follow 'em. Neither Gus or Willie'll rustle cattle again for a long time. When they get over their wounds they'll be workin' in the penitentiary."

"Reckon me and my partner'll be driftin' along," put in Hep.

"I reckon you won't!" roared Mat-tom. "It'll be up to you two lame-brained gents to round up those hundred steers. And if you don't find every last one of 'em—"

It took me and Gallegher two solid weeks to do the job and we didn't get a dime for it, either.

"Sometimes," said Hep, as we prodded the hundredth steer back toward the Bar F, "I think I oughta stay with cow nursin'."

"Which," I told him, "is the only sensible thing you've said in the past ten or twenty years."

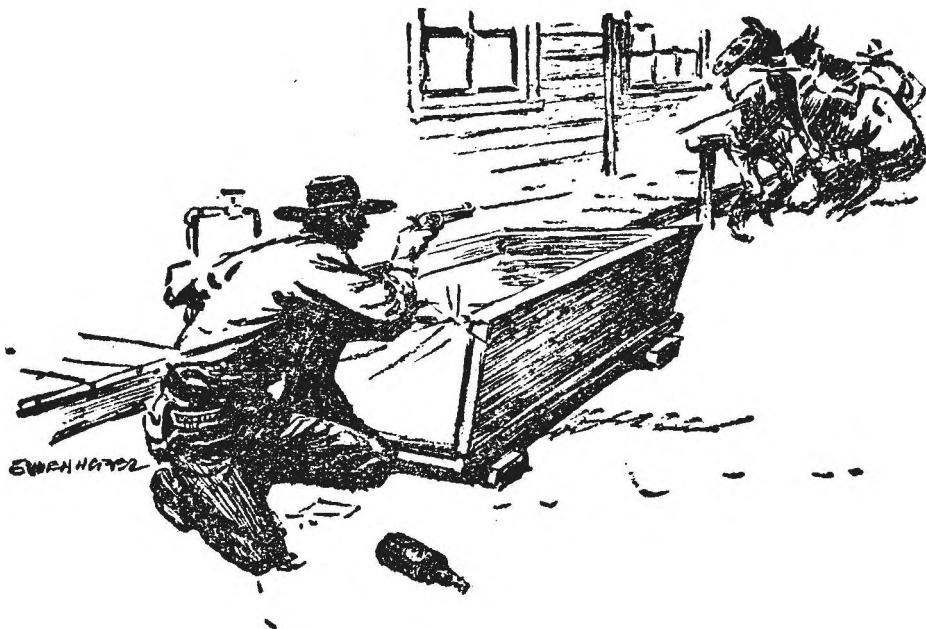
SNOWSLIDES

READERS of stories of the Rocky Mountains are frequently confused by the apparent discrepancy as to the speed of snowslides. In one instance, the devastating slide is described as rushing down the mountainside at such speed as to make the escape of any creature in its path impossible. Again, an equally competent observer may refer to it as the slowly moving mass that crushes everything before it.

Paradoxical as it may appear to be, both writers may be right; for while the light, wind-drifted deposits along the ridges, that form the basins above timber line, do slide at incredible speed, the wet heavy avalanches of late spring move more slowly and are not so easily started.

The explanation is simple: Along the moist back ranges, grass grows rapidly during the short summers and forms a surface that is very smooth, as every mountain climber has discovered. If the first snow in the fall is accompanied by freezing temperatures—what is called by the mountain men a "dry snow"—there is nothing to hold it to the slick surface of the grass, and as the depth increases the slightest jar will start a slide that will sweep down the mountain like a flash.

However, if the first heavy storm starts out with a wet, warm snow that soaks around the blades of grass and settles into the crevices of the rocks before freezing, a fairly strong foundation has been laid down for the support of the mass that will be piled up during the winter. Under such conditions a slide that has been known to run several times in one winter, perhaps twice during the same storm, may not run at all until late spring, when the warm days cause the snow to melt from beneath. Then when the protective foundation is gone, the huge banks settle and the big blocks of frozen snow and ice rumble and roar down the mountainside. C. L.



Sheriff's Swan Song

By **FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE**

Author of "Horse Thief Ghosts," etc.

SHERIFF ACE CARRIGAN shoved the outlaw into the cell, closed the door and locked it. "I've made my last arrest," he informed Coroner Jack Hyneman. "My farewell appearance, as you might say. As soon as I can find a man to take my place I'm going to take off my star and hang up my guns. I've got to catch up on my hunting and fishing. Then ma and me figure to do a little running around and seeing things."

"Farewell appearance?" The coroner snorted. "You've made more farewell appearances than Lillian Russell. It's about time you quit and did some of the things you've had in mind."

"The first thing ma and me'll do is to take that honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls," Sheriff Ace Carrigan continued. "We started, but was called back. That was fifty years ago next Saturday. We're going to have a blow-out Saturday and get married all over again. You're invited to see the fun, Jack. Bring your drums along. We're expecting all of our sons to be in town."

The coroner left to hold an inquest over the outlaw's partner and the sheriff went downstairs to his office. He sat down heavily and made some remark about not being the man he used to be. No one considered the sheriff to be an old man when they saw him astride a horse. He sat erect, with his shoulders square and

rode with the grace that comes from years in the saddle. He could stay on the toughest horses and was as deadly as ever with a six-gun.

But when he dismounted, he limped from an old bullet wound, and his legs seemed uncertain. He sat down at his desk to examine ten days' accumulation of mail.

His chief deputy hovered nervously in the background. He was old, like the sheriff, but normally he was calm. He leaned against the wall and began biting his nails—a strange thing for a gunman to do.

A smile brightened Ace Carrigan's weathered face as he read the first four letters. "Mike," he said to the chief deputy, "four of the boys are coming to the golden wedding blow-out."

"You've got four of the finest boys in the world, sheriff," Mike observed. "You trained every one to be a sheriff. Each one went to another county, served a few years as deputy and was then elected sheriff of his county." Privately, Mike believed Sheriff Ace's reputation had helped his sons get elected, but he was too smart to say so. And besides, the sons were making good on their own efforts.

"Mike, you're getting old and forgetful," the sheriff growled. "I ain't got four sons. I've got five, and there ain't any better boys in the world. You forgot my youngest, Deuce. Oh, I know he was the wild one of the bunch, but he's all wool and a yard wide, as the feller says."

"Um-m-m," Mike agreed, biting his nails harder than ever.

The sheriff whirled in his swivel chair. "What's eating you, Mike, you don't act natural? And stop biting them nails! Out with it."

"I've finally got trace of Deuce," Mike said reluctantly. "You re-

member, two years ago, he got sore at everybody except his ma, and up and pulled his freight."

"Sore?" the sheriff roared. "He got bitter. And why shouldn't he? First this cussed town calls him Deuce because he's the smallest and youngest in the family. That's enough to hurt anybody's pride."

"Folks called him Deuce because he was the last card in the deck, you being Ace," Mike argued. "It weren't no slam at the boy. But him being high-strung and sensitive took it that way. He drifted across the border. We found that out a year ago. Last week I arrested a breed—a smart, dangerous kind of a breed. He said Deuce had thrown in with the Bat Darby gang."

Ace Carrigan stiffened, then relaxed. "That don't make sense," he said without looking at Mike. He lifted his eyes to Deuce's photograph on the wall. Deuce was broad-shouldered, firm-jawed, and his gaze was level. There was bitterness about his lips, and more than a suggestion of contempt. His hair was blond and unruly and this added to the suggestion of defiance in his pose. "It don't make sense," Ace said again.

"He is more like you than the other boys," Mike said, "and you had it hot and heavy before he lit out."

"Yeah, I told him he wasn't worth a hoot in hell, and if he was as fair-minded as I thought he was, he'd admit it," Ace said. "He couldn't seem to get his mind set on any one thing."

"Young fellers are sometimes that way," Mike argued. "You weren't much of a bet when you was twenty-two. That was Deuce's age when he left. Anyway, he's with the Bat Darby bunch."

THE sheriff got up and paced the room. His faith was hard to shake and it was obvious to Mike he was groping for understanding. If there was an unfinished piece of business on the sheriff's record it was Bat Darby. The man had gathered a small, but highly intelligent group of young men and taught them to ride, shoot, and fight.

The outfit rustled cattle, robbed gold-laden stages, and helped themselves to mine pay rolls. Bat Darby was cruel by nature and would pass up a bank holdup any time to exact his vengeance from an enemy. His revenge frequently took forms that made a rancher's blood run cold. Not one man in a hundred would think of giving a sheriff information of the gang's movements.

Sheriff Ace himself had had old friends look him squarely in the eyes and lie. People simply became dumb and blind when Bat Darby was involved. "It would be like Bat to want to win my son over and turn him against me," he said at length. "But I can't imagine Deuce being won."

"Deuce was bitter, mighty bitter," Mike observed, and his tone spoke volumes.

"What else did you find out?" the sheriff sharply demanded. Mike squirmed uneasily under his superior's demanding gaze. "Stop biting them nails and talk."

"Bat Darby's outfit is about to make the biggest raid yet," Mike replied. "I couldn't get the breed to admit it, but it looks as if Bat was going to show the world what he thinks of you by holding up Coulee State Bank, right here in this town." He gulped uneasily. "Maybe we'd better prepare a reception."

"If we prepare a reception somebody will tip it off to Bat and he

won't come," the sheriff argued. "I've been pounding that into your thick head for years."

"That's just what I'm driving at," Mike said boldly. "We don't want 'em to come. You don't want to fight your own son, Ace. And we don't want no fight before your golden-wedding day. Suppose you'd be killed. It'd just about break your wife's heart."

"She's faced that for years," the sheriff answered, "and she's prepared for it."

"But after fifty years," Mike said, "a woman sort of thinks a man bears a charmed life. This is different. She's fixin' over her old wedding dress so she can get into it. And she's sorta hoping you'll knock off work for a month and take that trip to Niagara Falls."

"She knows I can't leave the county until Bat Darby's bunch is rounded up, or—they find a man to take my place," Ace protested.

"Womenfolks are funny," Mike said. "They sorta hope things will come out right in the end. Hadn't we better fix up that reception for Bat."

Sheriff Ace Carrigan didn't even hesitate. "I'm pretty old to start dodgin' trouble," he said. Abruptly his manner grew crisp. "Mike, take a posse, ride up to Telephone Creek and see if you can pick up that bunch of tinhorn cattle rustlers. Don't shoot unless you have to. Chances are they're crazy kids."

"Sheriff, that's a trick to get me out of town so I can't scare off Bat," Mike protested.

"You're danged tooting it is a trick," the sheriff retorted. "Also, it's an order. Light out this afternoon. Be back in time for the golden-wedding blow-out, two o'clock Saturday afternoon."

He called his deputies into the office and sent them off on duties that would keep them busy at points far removed from Coulee City for several days. Then he sat down at his desk and studied Deuce Carrigan's photograph again. It was queer, he reflected, how much more interesting his wild son was than the steadier boys. Not that he loved Deuce more. It was just the uncertainty.

Although Ace Carrigan was alone, he looked around as if to reassure himself no others were present. "Kid," he said to the photograph, "I learned you everything you know about shooting. I know all your little tricks. Yes, and you know mine, too. If you come here with Bat Darby, we'll have it out."

Every instinct told Sheriff Carrigan something would happen before the end of the week. Coulee City was not a large town. There were others in the county much larger, but it boasted the oldest—and largest—bank in the region. When the cattle money came in from the East, the bank had as much as five hundred thousand dollars in checks and cash at one time. The cash itself often ran close to two hundred thousand dollars. Most of this was in five, ten, and twenty-dollar bills—ideal for bandits to circulate without attracting attention.

ACE was confident Bat Darby had a man in town ready to warn him of possible traps. For that reason he followed a normal routine. He got up at the same time, appeared at the office as usual, had his mid-afternoon drink and game of solo at the Pastime, and then knocked off in time for supper, which was six o'clock in the evening.

Wednesday evening his wife called

to him as he entered the house. "Come in, Ace, and see me," she invited.

He entered the parlor, which was only used on state occasions, and found her standing near the window. She was wearing her wedding dress. "I had to let it out some, Ace. I was so slim when we were married."

He kissed her. "You aren't any heavier than when I married you fifty years ago," he gallantly informed her. "And you're just as sweet. Sweeter, in fact."

"Did you get a letter from Deuce to-day?" she anxiously inquired. "He must know Saturday will be fifty years for us. Besides, it has been in all of the papers. He won't fail us unless—" she faltered, and something in her eyes made Ace hurt all over.

"Unless—what?" he asked.

"Unless something has happened to him," she explained, "and he's sick. He'd have to be terribly sick, Ace, or he'd write."

"Deuce won't let us down," he confidently predicted. "We'll hear from him."

"I hope so. I wouldn't want the day spoiled. The other boys are coming—with their families," she said happily. "And there's one more thing, Ace," she continued. "You won't be angry with me?"

"No, of course not," he answered.

"Sure?"

"Sure!"

"I've bought tickets to Niagara Falls," she said, and caught her breath sharply. "Now don't say you can't go."

"I can't go as long as the Bat Darby outfit—"

"Oh, bother Bat Darby," she said impatiently. "He has stood like a shadow over us for nearly five years.

You owe something to yourself and —to me."

Sheriff Ace Carrigan thought a long time. If he killed Darby he could go on the vacation. But if Darby killed him—well, it would be cruel if ma planned not only the wedding, but the second honeymoon, and he couldn't go. "Darby planned the bank robbery," he thought, "just to spoil my wedding plans. That's like him. In over fifty years as a peace officer, I've never met a man who hated me as he does."

"What are you thinking about, Ace?" she asked. "You look terribly serious."

"I'm thinking about the honeymoon. I won't promise, mind you, but I'll make every effort to get my business arranged so we can go to Niagara Falls." She kissed him this time then hurried off to change her dress.

Thursday passed without incident. Friday dawned with the promise of a hot day. Coulee City would be dozing by noon to escape the heat. "It'll happen to-day or not at all," Ace Carrigan predicted. "Bat Darby won't wait until my four other boys are here. That'd be like playing with dynamite."

He dressed, examined his guns carefully, ate breakfast and then made his way to the office. There was no letter from Deuce. He wasn't expecting any, now. He felt like moving nearer the bank, but that might warn Darby's lookout. He loafed around the office until noon, then went home for lunch.

Ace Carrigan sat down to the table, looked at his food, then got up again. "I ain't hungry, ma," he said.

"Ace, are you sick?"

"No," he answered. "I couldn't eat fifty years ago, either. The excitement before my wedding tied

my stomach up in knots. I'll take a walk and ca'm down."

Ace slipped out the back door and slinking along a hedge sized up the front of his home. An indolent-appearing stranger was loafing across the street. "He's making a show of watching them dogs," Ace said, "but actually he's watching my front door. He's the lookout. My hunch was right—Bat Darby waited until I would be eating my lunch."

Ace raced along the hedge, then crossed into the open. The lookout whipped out his gun and started to aim. The sheriff was out of range before the lookout could pull the trigger. Ace hurried across a vacant lot and rounded the corner. A masked man was backing out of the bank door. He held a gun in one hand, and a grain sack in the other.

"There's fifty thousand dollars in that grain sack," a bank clerk yelled from a second-story window.

The outlaw raised his gun and fired. It was a graceful gesture and—murderous. Glass fell to the sidewalk in a shower. The clerk's head vanished with a jerk.

ACE CARRIGAN risked a bullet and ran headlong fifty feet and dropped behind a water trough. He looked at the man with the sack. He was wearing a black Stetson, a pink shirt, and his legs were covered with goatskin chaps. "It's Deuce," Ace Carrigan panted. "I'll hold my fire—a second."

Above him the clerk's voice screamed, "Kill that cuss with the bag, sheriff!"

Ace did not answer. A second man bounced from the bank's open door. He had a small sack slung around his neck and a pair of guns in large, steady hands. He ran in behind Deuce before Ace could get

in a shot. Two other men began firing from the bank window and each bullet clipped a bit of wood off the watering trough.

The sheriff risked a shot. One of the men half turned and howled. The pair vanished, then reappeared, legging it for their horses. Ace fired and one fell sprawling, his hands clutching desperately at a grain sack. Ace shifted his body slightly and Deuce fired point-blank.

The sheriff went down, a single, startled cry escaping his tight-set lips. "Fine work, Deuce," the second man said. "I wondered if you'd do it."

"I said I was in this thing to the finish," Deuce answered. "And I am, Bat."

Bat Darby's eyes were hard and glassy as they gleamed through the slits in his mask. "You're a better shot than Ace," he said. "That makes you the best shot in the Southwest. He's done. Let's clear out before this man's town gets to thinking straight again." His ruthless mouth twisted into a grin. "Ace Carrigan made his farewell appearance." Bat Darby waved his gun. "Mount, and I'll cover your retreat."

"Joe's wounded. It's all he can do to ride. I'll try and pick up his sack as I pass," Deuce Carrigan said.

He laid across his horse's back the instant he mounted, circled, sent the horse in toward the wounded Joe, leaned and scooped up the sack. It was heavy, with stacks of currency.

Ace Carrigan drew himself together with an obvious effort. He couldn't get in a shot at either Bat Darby, nor the third man. He set his teeth and aimed just as Deuce leaned down to pick up the sack. Two shots cracked out with amazing swiftness, and there were some

who swore the sheriff had fired but once. Others saw Deuce's hat go off, then the man himself tumble headlong into the dust.

Some one fired a shotgun loaded with bird shot at Bat Darby. The number five shot stung the outlaw leader and sent his horse into a mighty lunge. He vanished behind the nearest building and joined his companion.

Sheriff Ace Carrigan jumped to his feet. He covered the fifty yards between himself and Deuce Carrigan who lay sprawled on the street.

Blood streamed down the sheriff's forehead. He wiped it away from his eyes and dropped down beside Deuce. Pulling off the latter's chaps, pink shirt, mask and black Stetson, he hastily donned them. He yelled an order to the banker, then mounted Deuce's horse. Clutching the bags containing currency in the hollow of his left arm, his right hand gripped one of Deuce's six-guns.

"Follow me," he roared as men began to gather, "if we take that short cut back of town there's a chance we'll overtake 'em. Let me have a good lead and shoot at me every few minutes."

Ace Carrigan turned into an alley, galloped down a steep, abandoned road and swerved into the main road two minutes later. He could see Bat Darby and his companion a half mile ahead. Ace had to admit the man used superb horses. "And why shouldn't he?" Ace thought, "when he rustles the pick of the range."

Ace looked back. Men with high-powered rifles were pouring from the short cut into the main road. They made a fine show of attempting to wing the lone rider. The bullets droned twenty and thirty feet above the sheriff's head. Answering fire whined from a ridge ahead and added to the singing above Ace's

ears. "Those are the men Bat stationed to cover his get-away," the sheriff reflected. "As long as they think I'm Deuce, I'm safe enough."

He waited until he was around a turn in the road before he closed in. His mask, stained crimson, completely covered his face. He swayed in the saddle as he approached Bat Darby, then tossed him one of the sacks. "Your old man shot you in the head, eh?" Darby said. "I didn't think you'd make it."

"Deuce didn't make it," Ace snapped. His gun cracked and Darby's right arm fell limply. He wheeled and tumbled the other outlaw with his second shot and as the man hit the dirt, Ace rode into Bat Darby and yanked the remaining six-gun from the outlaw leader's holster. Then he handcuffed him.

"Ace Carrigan!" Bat Darby gasped. "I—I thought it was Deuce who had double-crossed us."

"Naw," Ace snapped. "Deuce's bullet never touched me. I slashed my scalp with a gun sight, figuring I could safely close in on you if I was wounded and wore Deuce's clothes."

Ace jerked a rifle from the saddle boot, rode up the nearest ridge and dropped a few bullets in the vicinity of the remaining outlaws. Caught between two fires, the men surrendered to the group that had followed Ace.

As the sheriff and prisoners rode into Coulee City, the coroner galloped up in his buckboard. "I heard you were making another farewell appearance," he said, "and hitched up. I suppose I'd better start with the dead outlaw in front of the bank."

"There's no dead outlaw," the sheriff answered. "That's my son, Deuce. And get this straight—he's my new deputy. I'll admit I worried when I first heard he'd thrown in with Bat. Then my common sense figured that he was trying to trap the band single-handed and he'd bit off more than he could chew."

He walked over to the sprawled figure. "You can get up now, Deuce," he said. "There's no danger of some hothead bumping you off."

"When your bullet went through my hat instead of my head," Deuce said as he got to his feet, "I knew you had the situation figured out. I couldn't do much, because Bat never really completely trusted me. He was always ready to put a bullet through my back."

"Come on, son," Ace said, "and get cleaned up. When your brothers get here we're going to have a blow-out. Then your ma and me are going to Niagara Falls. It looks as if you'd run the sheriff's office while I'm gone."

Coming Next Week:

"LEFT-HAND DRAW"

by B. Bristow Green



The Round-Up

OLKS, to-night we are going to give you the low-down on Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, the hombre who runs that fascinating department called "Guns And Gunners." Many of you pistol experts and firearms addicts will be glad to know something about Lieutenant Chapel.

Lieutenant Chapel has accomplished more in thirty-three years than many of us have in an entire lifetime. It is hard to believe that it was only May 26th, 1904, that Lieutenant Chapel first saw the light of day, but he is a very ambitious person, has a quick-thinking mind, and is not happy unless he has a number of irons in the fire at the same time.

Lieutenant Chapel's birthplace is Manchester, Iowa. He attended public school there and also the State University of Iowa for a year and a half. Then he went to the Naval Academy at Annapolis three years, and to the University of Missouri for one year. During his college career he contributed to various college newspapers and magazines. He was graduated with an A. B.

Lieutenant Chapel claims to be the author of the first text book in English on forensic ballistics, which you gunners know means finger-printing bullets. Many of the detective bureaus in the United States and foreign countries use this text book. He is a member of the International Association for Identification, and honorary life member of the National Rifle Association of America. There are only fourteen of the latter. He also has been a director of marksmanship for the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

When he was a young boy Mr. Chapel served in Troop "A," 113th Cavalry, Iowa National Guard, and he was a cadet sergeant in the Iowa University R. O. T. C. while attending high school. While still a freshman in college he was cadet company commander of a prize-winning drill. In July, 1926, he was commissioned second lieutenant, U. S. M. C., and promoted to first lieutenant five years later. He served at sea aboard the U. S. S. *California*; in Nicaragua, and in charge of an antipirate guard aboard an American merchantman one thousand five hundred miles up the Yangtze River,

China. At various navy and marine corps rifle and pistol matches he served as team captain, coach, and range officer, and he has also been judge advocate, general court martial, Naval Operating Base, Fifth Naval District.

His early ambition was to be a lawyer and this ambition is carried out to some extent in the last-mentioned occupation. At present he is experimenting with various small arms, especially machine guns, trying to effect some improvements. As a hobby he is interested in the promotion of rifle and pistol marksmanship among civilians, by holding matches and awarding medals and trophies to the winners. The motto for the National Rifle Association is: "Make America once more a nation of riflemen," and Lieutenant Chapel means to help accomplish this.

We heard of an interesting experience that Lieutenant Chapel had when he was about one thousand miles up the Yangtze River in China. He was aboard the American merchantman, *I-An* when a radio message came for them to stand by the *Chi Chuen*, another vessel in the steamship line. He had four marines with him. A marine gunner named Murphy was aboard the *Chi Chuen* with four marines. The *Chi Chuen* had hit a rock and was only kept afloat by working the pumps and tying Chinese junks on either side of the bow.

The cargo of the *Chi Chuen* included silk and silver dollars to pay the Chinese army. About a thousand Chinese men collected on the beach, many of them armed, and about five hundred rivermen in junks and sampans gathered near the wreck, awaiting a chance to come aboard the *Chi Chuen* and take the valuable cargo.

By virtue of seniority, Lieutenant

Chapel took charge of the two guards, but he and his party were vastly outnumbered, so they rigged floodlights on the beach and the river and later rigged a little magic lantern which they borrowed from a missionary passenger. Just before they expected the Chinese to seize the ship, they turned out all floodlights and then focused the magic lantern on a large white rock on the beach.

The slide they used was a picture of the Chinese god of war, Kwang Ti, who is feared by the Chinese. They then yanked out this slide and put on a slide with a picture of the American flag, which they shimmied back and forth. One of the passengers on the ship played "The Star Spangled Banner." The Chinese recognized the flag; it was even painted on the bows of the American river ships. Some of the pirates were deserters from the Chinese Army and knew the anthem when they heard it. The effect was miraculous. They took off over the side of a hill and downstream as though ten thousand devils were after them. They thought that the god of war had gone into partnership with the United States. Lieutenant Chapel and those with him got a nice collection of antique arms, and a commendatory letter out of it.

Another interesting experience which Lieutenant Chapel experienced was in handling the guards at President Roosevelt's inaugural. There were twice as many congressmen and members of the diplomatic corps present as they had seats for, plus newspapermen, et cetera. This was right after the assassination of Mayor Cermak, of Chicago, at Miami, and they were afraid some crazy man might cause trouble. Fortunately, nothing happened, but it was a tense occasion.

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



HERE'S a reader of this department who is interested in gold placer mining—G. M. B., of Duluth, Minnesota. He asks this question in a recent letter: "When I get out into gold mining country where should I look for placer gold?"

First, G. M. B., remember that there are several different types of placer gold deposits, and that of these, particularly for the small-scale operator, creek placers are perhaps the most important. That means that your initial best bet is to pan gravel deposits in the stream beds in the country you are prospecting; also, using your gold pan, test sand and gravel bars in the stream for colors, and likewise all tributary creeks and gulches.

When you find a likely trail of color, especially any coarse gold, stay with your pay streak until you have roughly determined its course and extent. In testing such a stream bed, pan gravel at various points along the straightway and at bends and twists in the creek. Where first panning shows a heavy concentration of heavy minerals—black iron sands—pan more care-

fully before you give up the search for gold. Moreover, as gold and black sands will often be found concentrated on bed rock, test all bed rock exposures along the stream. Test particularly the upper reaches and spots where the bed rock temporarily flattens out, is rough and weathered, crevassy, or forms natural depressions which would prove natural catch basins for the gold.

In panning gravel patches, if they are fairly shallow, get down to bed rock in testing them. That is where, more than likely, your richest yellow metal concentrations will be found.

So much for actual creek placers, although they by no means exhaust your possibilities. For instance, there are often found rich "bench" gravels. That is, old gravel deposits in beds that represent the ancient course of the stream and are apt to be found anywhere from fifty up to several hundred feet above the present deeper-cut creek channel.

If you locate such bench gravels, take samples down to the stream and pan them for colors. Somewhat similar are what are known as "hillside" placers, generally located on a higher bed rock plane. These gravels are generally found adjacent

to the stream, resting on a bed rock only slight higher than that of the present creek bed and where external surface indications give no evidence of regular "benching."

Even that does not limit your chances. At times in bottled-in valleys there may be present shallow lakes, or traces of ancient lake basins formed by some great landslide, or heavy glacial damming-up action in past geological ages.

Such basins may carry sufficient gold concentrations to make them favorable placering areas. Deposits of this type probably occur in many of the high, swampy swales in the Thunder Mountain gold district of central Idaho.

For those interested in further details of small-scale placer prospecting, there is available, in limited supply, an excellent free pamphlet on the subject. We will be glad to give readers the address from which this booklet may be obtained. Simply send in your request promptly, inclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope for reply and mail it to the Mines And Mining Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Yet, by and large, G. M. B., streams and stream beds are your main stand-by. Prospect them thoroughly. Highly enriched placer pockets may be encountered in natural depressions in the bed rock of small streams, particularly if the bed rock is decomposed or fractured. The particles of gold settle with uncanny clingingness into the cracks

and creases of such rock formations, and stay there until some diligent prospector discovers them.

Arthur Ouellette, of Nashua, New Hampshire, asks us about the size of gold particles found in placer areas. The range, Arthur, is tremendous. All the way up from sizable pebbles and stones of solid gold nuggets weighing a half ounce, an ounce, several ounces, or, in rare instances, even pounds down to the tiniest colors barely visible to the naked eye.

According to Young's standard classification of gold particles the various sizes have been lined out as follows:

Nuggets:

Coarse Gold—Particles that will not pass through a 10-mesh screen (10 openings per linear inch).

Medium Gold—Particles that will not pass through a 20-mesh screen. It takes about 2,000 of these to make an ounce.

Fine Gold—Particles that will go through a 20-mesh screen, but remain on a 40-mesh screen. Takes about 12,000 of these to make an ounce.

Very Fine Gold—Particles that slip through a 40-mesh screen. Average about 40,000 colors to make an ounce of gold.

Flour Gold—Particles even smaller than Very Fine Gold which may require anywhere from 300,000 to almost 900,000 colors to produce an ounce of metal.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



JUST below the arctic circle is the Yukon country and Fairbanks, Alaska. "Big Delta Jim" has trekked this Northland from the Yukon southward. He offers information on this land to any who write him.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

For the past six years I have been home-steading near Fairbanks, trapping in the winter and working out in the summer. Besides good trapping in the winter there is hunting all year round. I can get mountain sheep, caribou, moose, bear, ducks, and grouse almost at my door. In fact, a moose passed by my cabin not ten feet away last night. And there is plenty of fish—lake fish, et cetera.

I am a Texan by birth, thirty-six years

of age. I traveled some before I came up here. I have been in the South Americas, England, Germany, Canada, and have lived in France, Italy, and Mexico. In fact, I was reared in Mexico.

Boys, I will be glad to give any information about Alaska as I have about covered all this country from the Yukon and Fairbanks, south. So come on, folks, and ask me questions!

BIG DELTA JIM.

Care of The Tree.

Hombres, an "Aussie" is here to yarn with you-all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Folks, I am a young Londoner, twenty years of age, and I came here to western Australia some thirteen years ago. I reside on a small dairy farm which carries thirty-two head of stock, including twenty milking cows, and is situated in the center of the southwest dairy district. Two creeks flow through this property, thus giving its name, "Twin Creeks."

The country for miles around here is heavily timbered with jarrah, karri, tuit, black-but, red and blue gum, she-oak and banksia. Jarrah and karri are the two most important trees of the southwest, and they are much sought after. Some of these trees grow to extreme heights and measure five to seven feet in diameter.

There is not such a variety of game around here as one would expect to find, but kangaroos by the hundreds galivant around the country at night all the year round, and swarms of rabbits scamper about the pastures during the summer months. There are also some foxes and native cats that harbor around the chicken pens and a few dingoes will make a break on some one's cattle now and again. An emu or two wanders down this way occasionally but this kind of bird is mostly seen farther north where they roam around in bands. Quoggers and opossums would keep one busily occupied setting snares. Hunting and fishing are two of my favorite sports; others are riding, cycling, swimming, dancing, cricket, and soccer.

Well, folks, here's hoping I won't be too old to fork a bronc when I hit the West-

ern trails, and I'll sure welcome your correspondence right pronto.

LESLIE C. ALLEN.
Twin Creeks, Metricup,
Via Busselton, Western Australia.

From South Africa comes this friend-seeker.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Of Irish parentage, I was born in Cape Town, South Africa, twenty-one years ago. I am lonely out here in Johannesburg, and I am looking for a few American guys as pen friends. I am willing to exchange or send stamps and photos of the wild life of African natives and animals, and also snaps of the different towns as well as lots of other things which may interest you folks.

J. R. McCARTHY.

129 Loveday Street, Clifton,

Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa.

Here's a new member who will prove a worth-while Pen Pal.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My age is twenty-one and my hobbies are pencil sketching and miniature outdoor photography. Any one interested in these hobbies or those who would like to exchange post cards, send 'em along and I'll do likewise. I will answer each and every letter, so don't hesitate—write right now!

JOHN LUDWIGSON.

58-39 61st Street, Maspeth, New York.

New Mexico is this hombre's stomping ground.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I came here to New Mexico several years ago for my health, and now I find myself reluctant to leave this land of enchantment—the Southwest! I am thirty-eight, a bachelor, and I should like to hear from those interested in the Southwest, especially those who are interested in the lore and legend of lost mines and buried treasure.

P. W. GRAVES.

Box 676, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

You folks who have a grubstake may be considered as eligible partners.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My home is up among the pines of a range of mountains in one of our Western States. My place is on a scenic highway

going through the heart of the mountains and it is a very fine location for a tourist camp, which I already have started. However, I am progressing slowly on account of limited means, and I would like to find some good honest person to come in with me. I will go fifty-fifty with the right party, and I will guarantee that there will be no loss. I wish I could impress the greatness of the opportunity upon the mind of some deserving person who has the grubstake to operate on.

A LOVER OF THE MOUNTAINS.
Care of The Tree.



Hombres, if you are interested in the Northland from the standpoint of homesteading, hunting, or trapping, just speak right up to Big Delta Jim, who had trekked Alaska from Fairbanks southward. Wear your friend-maker, membership badges, boys, and get right busy with your pens.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering be sure to state which you wish.

Richard is acquainted with the "out-back" country of Australia.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Plenty of Pen friends from any part of the world would just suit me fine, and I would also be pleased to get in touch with people collecting stamps who would like to do some exchanging. I am a young man of twenty-six, and I am fond of all outdoor sports, especially tennis. I will answer all letters and questions regarding our country, especially the out-back, as I have been living on and working on sheep and cattle stations all my life.

RICHARD F. MARTYN.
Curimbah, N. S. W., Australia.

This hombre has a few rare tunes to exchange with you-all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Collecting cowboy and hobo songs is my hobby. I am a young fellow of nineteen,

and I play a guitar and sing cowboy songs. I have been saving them for years and therefore I have a few of the rare tunes. I am very anxious to communicate with other collectors. Any one who desires any songs is welcome to write. F. REED.

1729 N. Taney Street,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Folks from the West are especially invited to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Is there a place in the old Holla for me? I'm sixteen years of age, and I am still attending high school. I love all outdoor sports, but I'm most interested in horseback riding, swimming, and all ball games. I enjoy singing cowboy songs and am considered a good yodler. My hobbies are writing letters, collecting cowboy and mountain ballads, and sketching. I will exchange snapshots and I will answer all letters faithfully.

Come on, all you folks from Oklahoma, California, Wyoming, Montana, and especially Texas—heed my plea! Please don't disappoint me.

L. MASCARA.

R. R. 1, Lansdale, Pennsylvania.

John is a stamp collector who will trade with you folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

May I join The Hollow Tree and find some Pen Pals and also fellow stamp collectors? I am nineteen years old. I have been to England via a cattle boat and I can answer any queries. I have also done geophysical survey work in our far northern

parts of Canada, and I have been in the army three years.

I have a small collection of stamps and I wish to form a world circle. I want collectors to write from every place under the sun! I have oodles of Canadian stamps, beautiful and colorful, to send you.

JOHN ALLEN.

7556 Berri Street,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Montana is this hombre's home State.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

May a seventeen-year-old Montana boy join the old Holla? I am of French descent. I live on a hundred-acre irrigated farm in the Mill River Valley with my dad. We also have a three-hundred-and-sixty-acre ranch in the "north hills."

My favorite sports are just about all the common ones, and I have several hobbies. I would like to hear from any one, and I promise to answer all letters.

HARDING YEATER.
Box 927, Malta, Montana.

Helen is a junior member who hails from Alberta.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Is there any one living out of my province who wishes to write to me? I live in a little coal-mining town in Alberta. I am fifteen years old, and I like to dance, skate, ski, and swim. I will exchange snapshots.

HELEN GATE.

Box 136, Coleman, Alberta, Canada.

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Rivers, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

NOT so long ago we had some discussion in this department relative to the salmon industry of the Northwest, and this week Norman J., of Butte, Montana, is making inquiries about a similar undertaking, that of growing oysters along the shores of Washington's sheltered harbors.

"From all I've heard on the subject, growing oysters appeals to me as a coming industry in the Northwest, Mr. North, and I'd like to get in on the ground floor, so to speak. Can you give me any details of this

job and tell me where in the State of Washington it is carried on? All facts will be greatly appreciated."

Yes, oyster growing is a mighty interesting proposition, Norman, and one that is increasing to big business proportions out on the shores of the Pacific. The job is something like farming. Choice lands are sought on which to propagate and develop the crop, but they are tide flats which are alternately flooded and bare of sea water. The soil texture and consistency come into consideration and the location is selected with an eye to protection

of the oysters, probable food supply, and convenience for tending and harvesting.

Seed is required to produce new acres of oysters. The crop needs protection and cultivation during the growing season. Cultivation consists of breaking apart clusters which form as they grow, keeping them spread about on the land or bed when action of the water has moved them into rows or piles. A rainy season in the fall and early winter is beneficial to the crop. Oysters feed on cell life present in certain waters.

Willapa Harbor, lying on the Pacific Ocean, in southwestern Washington, is a major growing region. The oyster native to this area began to die out, but some years ago seed of the Japanese oyster was imported and planted. This has continued, but now the species is becoming more

generally known as the Pacific oyster and home-grown seed and self-propagating beds are being developed, looking to the time when dependence on Japanese supplies for planting will be a thing of the past. And now, too, the native Willapas are beginning to come back and are increasing.

There are fourteen different oyster operations on Willapa Harbor. Towns that had become listless, with their former industries of one kind or another about gone, most of them

small lumber industries of some character, have picked up. Their people are working in the oyster business. The new industry's pay roll was \$250,000 last year. Employees in fresh oyster plants, canning factories and in transportation from the beds to factory number between 500 and 600. More than 5,000 acres are in cultivation, although not all is being harvested yet. Over half a million gallons were sent out fresh to market last year and almost 100,000 cases of canned oysters came from the area.

A few weeks ago another kind of industry made its bow on the harbor. This one freezes oysters. They can be shipped any place there is refrigerator service, held as long as desired at low temperature and, when used immediately on being thawed out, are exceedingly fine.

Building, equipping and servicing of these industries requires much labor and materials. Willapa's oyster industry has moved into the million-dollar class. The quality of the product is expected to bring for some time a continually widening market. The Pacific oyster will grow to large sizes, and it is no trouble to pick out a couple from the bed, that together, separated from their shells, will fill a pint container. Smaller sizes are used, however, in commercial trade.

SPECIAL NOTICE

FREE FOR THE ASKING

- (1) Directions for Building a Log Cabin.
- (2) Camp Cooking Recipes.
- (3) Choice Recipes from Old Mexico.
- (4) How to Travel with a Pack on Your Back.
- (5) How to Outfit for a Camping Trip.

To obtain copies of any of the above folders, readers need only check the items in which they are interested and return this notice, together with their names and addresses, to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Bound also for the Far West is Bert W., of Cincinnati, Ohio.

"My partner and I are making plans to hit the highway out to Idaho this summer, Mr. North. We want to spend our time in some place off the beaten path, where we can find real wilderness country with all that offers in the way of recreation. Can you make any suggestions as to such spots?"

We surely can, Bert. Our advice would be for you and your partner to steer for Idaho's extensive central wilderness, some of which is so wild that it can only be reached by pack train in summer, and dog team and airplane in winter. To be more specific, you'll find that the Clearwater, Salmon River, and Sawtooth Mountain regions offer lake-dotted forested country as wild as any one could desire, fulfilling every vacation need. In the Sawtooth country is located Idaho's Primitive Area, a region set apart to preserve for future generations an unspoiled sample of nature's handicraft.

The Gem State also offers other attractive vacation regions, accessible by good roads. Summers homes and resorts dot the shores of such lakes as Priest, Pend Oreille, Spirit, Twin, Hayden Cœur d'Alene, and Chatcolet. Lake Cœur d'Alene has been rated by the National Geographic Society as the fifth most beautiful lake in the world, while

Lake Pend Oreille is one of the largest freshwater lakes wholly within the boundaries of the U. S.

Hombres who trek into the real wilderness for their vacations will doubtless put in some time canoeing on secluded waterways. If you are new at this sport and are in doubt about the proper outfit, just ask John North to send his list of the necessary equipment along.

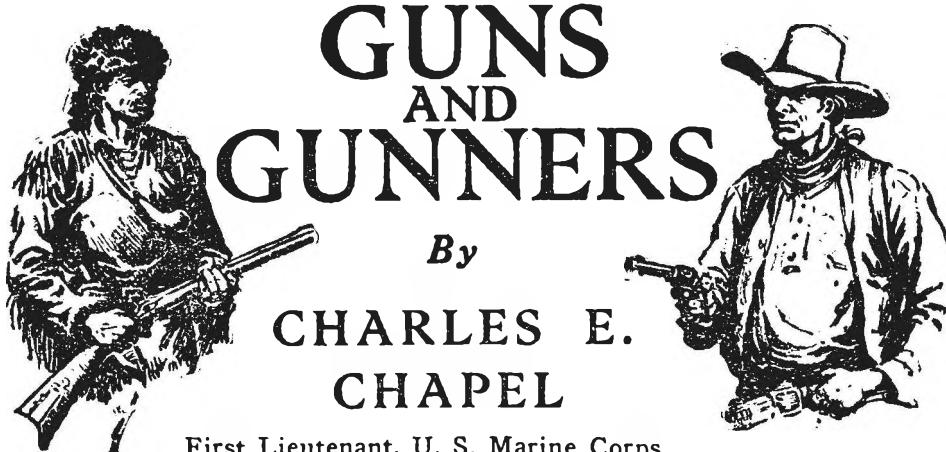
In search of some honest-to-goodness Western atmosphere, Charles P., of Des Moines, Iowa, is bound for the Silver State.

"I'd like to spend some time this summer in real cow country, Mr. North, and have been told I'll find plenty of open range, cattle and cowboys in Colorado. Is this correct?"

It surely is, Charles. Colorado still has huge areas where you'll find numerous cow waddies, resplendent in the regalia of the range, consisting of leather pants, giant sombreros, and high heels. The whole "Four Corners" country in the southwestern part of the State has this sort of Western atmosphere and so has the northwest of the State. Real cattle country can also be found in the Huerfano (Orphan) Valley, with its typical cow towns of Gardner, Redwing, and Sharpsdale, as well as in the San Juan Basin.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains, and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



GUNS AND GUNNERS

By
CHARLES E.
CHAPEL

First Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

THURMAN RANDLE, one of our veteran, medal-winning readers, recently said: "It's a few points that mean the difference between a championship and a mediocre score. To win consistently, under all conditions of weather and terrain, you must have good nerves, reasonable eyesight, and good equipment. I have found that in long-range shooting, a prismatic spotting scope helps me dope the shots when the wind and mirage are constantly changing."

Most of you will remember that Mr. Randle won one of the rifle marksmanship medals we awarded several years ago in our International Mail Marksmanship Contest. His opinion is well worth considering.

A good spotting scope is expensive, the price ranging from

thirty to fifty dollars. Although this is beyond the reach of most of our readers, they meet the problem by forming community gun clubs, and buying a good scope out of the treasury. Then, when a member goes to an important match he carries with him equipment that will reflect credit on the club and the shooter. "In union there is strength."

Whether you are interested in spotting scopes, or the organization of gun clubs, we are glad to hear from you, and prompt in sending you the literature you need.

Only the most interesting questions are answered here.

Reason for reloading.

G. J. R., Mount Carmel, Illinois: The empty cartridge cases fired in a bolt-action rifle or revolver, and in

The U. S. Rifle, (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, in excellent condition, is sold to citizens of the United States, by the government, for \$8.87, under certain conditions which will be explained to readers sending a stamped, addressed envelope.

A ten-cent handbook for boy and girl marksmen will be mailed free, as long as the supply lasts, to those who request it. Please inclose the usual stamped, addressed envelope.

the more lightly charged cartridges for lever and pump-action rifles, can be reloaded several times if they are center-fire cartridges. Economy is the first reason, but another is that factory-loaded cartridges are loaded as heavily as possible to give increased killing power on big game, and this makes them unsuitable for small game. By reloading fired cases with a small charge, the sportsman has an all-around rifle for all kinds of game.

Special shotgun features.

L. L. F., Millvale, Pennsylvania: Special shotgun features all have merit, but few of them are essential. A single trigger, for instance, lacks the selectivity of double triggers. A self-ejector is only useful if you have time to fire more than two shots, which is rare. A ventilated rib gives a good sighting plane and keeps heat waves from obstructing the vision but it adds to the weight. Every special shotgun feature has an off-setting disadvantage.

Remington shotguns.

C. R. W., Jackson, Ohio: The Remington people have been in business fifty years. Thirty years ago they put out the first model of their autoloading shotguns, probably the most popular guns in this class in America. To-day the autoloaders are made in 12-, 16-, and 20-gauge, in standard length of barrel 28 inches, with 26-, 30-, and 32-inch lengths optional. They are made in two models. The Model 11 is a

5-shot gun, with a 3-shot magazine plug to meet the requirements of the migratory bird law. The "Sportsman" model is made for three shots, so no plug is necessary to comply with recent legislation for the protection of wildfowl.

Help for small hands.

T. T. C., Rock Springs, Wyoming: If your hands are small, install a grip adapter on your revolver, or build up the forward surface of the butt with plastic wood.

Adjustable cleaning rods.

M. T. D., Ithaca, New York: Modern cleaning rods are made with steel shafts on which are screwed various types of tips. Cleaning rod tips roughly fall into three classes, slot, button, and jagged. These are for use with flannel patches. Another valuable tip has a brass bristle brush to remove metal fouling.

Enfield good material for amateur gunsmith.

F. F. R., Orange, Texas: The U. S. rifle, caliber .30, Model 1917, commonly called the Enfield, requires much more work on the metal parts to remodel it into a sporter than the Springfield. It is suitable for hunting in the condition as sold by the government, but an amateur gunsmith can have a lot of fun "dolling it up." New sights, sling swivels, butt plates, and pistol grip caps, as well as a new stock can be installed without much cost if done on the home workbench.

These assertions are the private opinion of the firearms editor, and are not to be construed as official, or reflecting the views of the Navy Department, or the naval service at large.

Address inquiries regarding firearms, marksmanship, and hunting, to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, "Guns and Gunners," Street & Smith's WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope.

MISSING DEPARTMENT

ELDER, LOLA and WILLIAM.—My husband's sister and father who have not been heard from since our marriage in 1931. My husband also had an uncle, who was once governor of Idaho, named Brady and another uncle, named Ike Elder. Would like to get in touch with any of these relatives as I have two links, an old school dictionary belonging to Edith Elder, and a picture of my husband's uncle's ranch in Kansas which I would like to return to their rightful owners. Please communicate with Mrs. John Earl Elder, Canajoharie, New York.

MAIER, JOE E.—He left home October 3, 1936, enroute for Kruger Consumers Bakery, where he worked as a baker. He has not been heard from since. He has also worked as a crane operator in steel mills. I need his help. Bills are due and taxes must be paid. Cannot get loan or sell anything without his signature. We had no quarrel nor have we had feelings toward one another. He kissed me good-by as usual and I have not seen or heard from him since. Any one knowing of his whereabouts please notify, Mrs. Helen Maier, 4102 Lake Park Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

REUCE.—My grandfather's name was James Beuice. He had three sons, Levi, Harvie, and Billie. Billie, my father, married Louisa Armstrong somewhere near Bado, Texas County, Missouri. I am Mary Ann Teliethic. I believe grandfather was in the mining business around Joplin, Missouri. I am a widow and all alone and would like to find some of my relatives. Information appreciated by Mrs. B. M. Knowles, Hythe, Alberta, Canada.

STRUBLE, EDWARD and JAMES.—My brothers. The last time Edward was heard from was when he was in Rochester thirty years ago. Four years ago James was in Fair Plains, New York. Any information will be appreciated by J. M. Struble, R. 3, Glencoe, Oklahoma.

MARTIN, AGNES CURTIN and CATHERINE.—My mother and sister. In 1915 my mother lived at 13 Stockton Street, New York. At this time she placed me in the St. John's Orphan Home, Brooklyn, New York, and my brother, James, in the Angel Guardian Home, 12th Avenue and 64th Street, Brooklyn, New York. My sister, Catherine, stayed with my mother. I have found my brother, James, and would like to find my mother and sister. Any information will be appreciated by Charles Martin, Star Route, Des Moines, New Mexico.

BROWN, OLIVER, HOMER ETYL, and FRED.—These boys are brothers. Ages, twenty-eight, twenty-six, and nineteen, respectively. During the last part of 1913 they lived with their mother at Joe Edge's sawmill, near Antlers, Oklahoma. After they left there they went to Stringtown, Oklahoma. Please write to an old friend, W. S., care of Western Story Magazine.

MARVINI, WALTER.—Last seen six years ago when he was aboard the U. S. S. *Davies*. He has since been discharged. Would like to get in touch with him again. Please write to N. P., care of Western Story Magazine.

BURTON, DOYLE.—My son who left home in October, 1936. Believed to have been in Drew, Mississippi, in December. He is seventeen years of age, has blue-gray eyes, a fair complexion, and dark-brown hair. He is about five feet eleven inches tall, and weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. He has a scar on the back of his head which has been there since 1932. Everything is O. K. Please come home to your anxious mother, Mrs. Leona Burton, R. 1, Box 72 B, Itta Bena, Mississippi.

PARKS, OSCAR.—Son of Robert and Mary Parks. His father died when he was small and after that his mother married George Massey. About forty years ago Mr. Massey took Oscar to Schectobah, Oklahoma, and his sister, Myrtle, to Fayetteville, Arkansas. Have not heard from Oscar since. Any information will be appreciated by his sister, Mrs. A. J. Dodson, R. F. D. No. 1, Paris, Arkansas.

WILLIAMS, HENRY and sons, WALTER and FRED.—Last heard from in 1886, in Obion County, Tennessee. Please write to J. H. Dempsey, Route 1, Nocona, Texas.

BIDWELL, MAJOR.—In 1888 and 1889 he lived in Martinez, California. Would like to hear from him or his family. Please write to your old friend, W. P. Carey, care of Captain G. H. Harry, Q. M. Depot, Hobabird, Baltimore, Maryland.

MCCABE-VAUGHN, ARTHUR B.—After his mother's death he was adopted by the constable of Laurenceburg, Indiana. Later this family moved to Black Butte, Wyoming. We have not heard from Arthur since. He was twenty-one years of age, April 23, 1937. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write to his brother, Everett McCabe, R. R. 1, Osgood, Indiana.

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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