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CONTENTS FOR JUNE 12, 1943 — VOL. CCVII, No. 4

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DEPARTMENTS

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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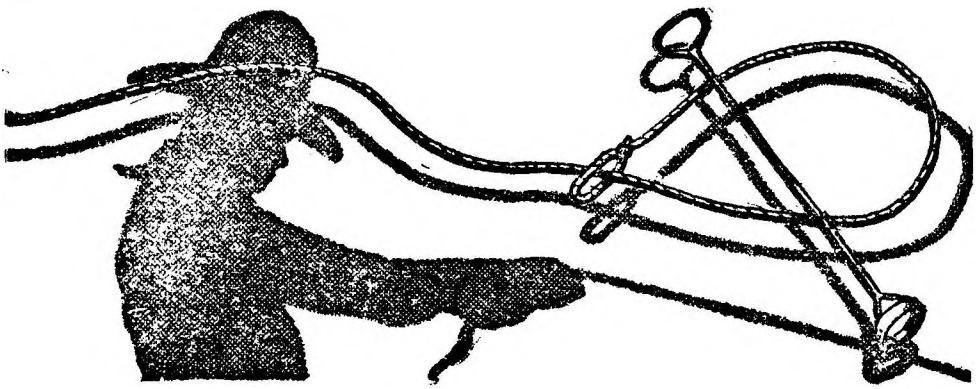

The Roundup

NATURALLY we're pleased and gratified when one of our readers expresses his admiration for our magazine. But when this is coupled with a sincere thanks for the help and advice given, it makes us doubly happy. Not long ago one of our Canadian readers, a Corporal Rogers, wrote us that he'd long been keen on the Mines and Mining Departments which appears regularly and are authored by John A. Thompson. The good corporal tells us that he's started a scrapbook of these departments which he finds not only interesting reading, but extremely helpful in a practical way. We're right glad to have heard from Corporal Rogers and wish him luck. We hope he'll not only enjoy his scrapbook in years to come (and of course Western Story), but we hope, too, that it won't be too long before he finds "pay dirt."

To the many inquiring readers who have written in asking how come we have had so few of Larry Bjorklund's splendid cow-country illustrations of late, we wish to pass you the word that Larry is now serving his country in an important defense job in an airplane factory to help keep 'em flying. We're glad to report, however, that he'll still be able to do the fine drawings for our regular feature, RANGE SAVVY, which has been so popular with you all these many months.

From Jeanette Watterson, of New Orleans, Louisiana, comes a letter of high praise for THE BIG ROUNDUP, S. Omar Barker's poem which we published in our February 13th issue. Writes Miss Watterson:

> I love everything connected with the West and I was very moved when I read THE BIG ROUNDUP. Barker certainly ranks tops when it comes to Western verse. Not only does he understand the country and its people, but he has the ability to present his feelings in a truly inspiring manner. I consider THE BIG ROUNDUP a great patriotic poem of this war! Thanks, Mr. Barker, and here's hoping we'll see more of your splendid work in Western Story.

Friend Barker is a real Westerner, Miss Watterson, having been born and reared in New Mexico, and we heartily agree with you that he's *keno* when it comes to telling stories of the cow country in ballad form. And be assured that there will be more of this great favorite's stories in verse in our future issues.

Sometime last summer, H. W. Scott, our cover artist, had an exhibition of his Western paintings at the Ward Eggleston Galleries, here in New York City. We took a little pasear uptown and had a gander at 'em. And a right fine collection it was! Sure got a bang out of seeing about a score of our Western Story covers all dressed up in frames and saying howdy to a critical public. The show went over with a wallop, too—so much so, in fact, that Scotty was asked to show again this spring. This time the old master had some landscapes and portraits as well. Wish the rest of you Roundup members could have seen 'em, for they sure were tops! Not only did the critics give them high acclaim, but even yours truly, who don't pretend to know much about art, came rackin' back to the home ranch filled with wonder and admiration. This Scotty sure is a versatile hombre—as well as one who is making history in the art of America.

There's no doubt about it, the most important news subject on the home front these days is the food problem. We were surprised to learn the other day that America's biggest war plant is—the American Farm, which spreads over a million and a half square miles, requires the services of thirty million people and takes up fifty-six percent of America's land area.

But whether we have a several-hundred-acre farm or merely a garden plot, it's our patriotic duty to *produce*—anything and everything so that our boys fighting on the far-flung battle fronts, our people at home and our allies will not lack the food they need so urgently to carry on the many-sided effort for victory.

An estimate has been made that there will be some eighteen million Victory Gardens planted this year, and we reckon many of you readers are already watching yours in their early stages. Many of us are, of course, city dwellers and have no opportunity for making a garden of our own. However, there's one thing each and everyone of us can do to lend a hand—join America's great Land Army and help the farm folks who are raising crops.

For those of us who are unfamiliar with farm work many schools and organizations throughout the country have established training centers. With the tremendous shortage of help the farmers are going to have a mighty tough time sowing, caring for and harvesting their crops. Unless we all dig in and help them, there will be a tragic waste of vital food and terrific hardship among our people. *We must have food to win this war!* So, pardners, let's all turn to and prove that we, as good Americans, can also make good "hands."

Coming in the next issue—A salty, action-packed novel by Rod Patterson—GUN THE MAN DOWN. "If we can't run crooks and tinhorns clean off this range, we can make it tough for 'em to stay!" proclaimed John Tulane, and his words were a declaration of war against a renegade land hog who tried to use the law to back his six-gun play. You'll enjoy this fast-moving yarn as well as the other top fiction we've lined up for you, including THE TRAIL TO KINGDOM COME, a blazing mystery novelette by that old favorite, W. C. Tuttle, and a string of outstanding short stories by C. K. Shaw, Jim Kjelgaard and many others. And, needless to say, there'll be a full list of departments, features and articles as well as another installment of Seth Ranger's GUN-SMOKE LEGACY.

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Gun-smoke Legacy

PART I

Jack called to Bill to hurry up, but the young doctor needed no urging. Something told him he was desperately needed in Border.

by Seth Ranger

CHAPTER I

DEATH-BRANDED

JACK THE BARBER knew nothing of crystal balls and star gazing, nor could he predict events with cards and tea leaves, but he recognized trouble when it was a long way off. And trouble was headed for the timber-cattle town of Border. It might arrive tonight if a minor fight between a cowpuncher and a logger happened to touch off the spark and brought a showdown between the Merediths, who were logging operators, and Wolf Banning whose personal six-guns and hired killers had given him control of a cattle empire.

With varying emotions, which his poker face never betrayed, Jack looked at the row of men waiting for their turn in his chair. Some of those men were going to die soon —die violently. Perhaps tonight.

Others would drag out a wretched existence, never fully recovering from wounds yet to be received. Certain fortunate ones would ride with Lady Luck at their side and go through an ordained timber-cattle war without a scratch.

Professionally, Jack the Barber played no favorites. Every man who sat down in the battered chair was given full measure of Jack's skill. There had been more than one occasion when a good violent slip of a razor on the barber's part would have rendered a great public service. But the hand never slipped.

Jack gave the finishing touches to a logger, then glanced at Young Jim Meredith and said: "Next!"

As Young Jim moved his six feet three inches and two hundred and twenty-five pounds toward the chair, Wolf Banning said: "I'm in a hurry, Meredith; you're after me."

Jack the Barber's eyes flashed. So trouble had arrived at last! Having no more cattle worlds to conquer, Wolf Banning had decided to take on the Meredith! He was gambling on a half-million-dollar proposition. "Big, slow, easygoing Jim," the barber thought. "Fighting it out with a wolf like Banning is just plain murder."

Wolf Banning's move was the foundation of a quarrel. Either Jim Meredith must back down—something his kind didn't do—or else take a stand. Later Banning would trick him into playing his game with the cattle rustler's weapons. When Young Jim was dead, there would be Wolf's claims of self-defense and he would escape as he had done on other occasions.

THE barber's voice broke the tension. "Meredith's next, Banning," he said crisply. "Millionaire or bum, lawman or outlaw, they all take their turn in my place. When Thomas Jefferson, or whoever it was, said all men were created free and equal, he had the Gem Barber Shop in mind."

"Hold on, Jack," the logger protested. "You don't have to fight my battles for me. If Banning is in a hurry, and asks me to give way like a gentleman, then I'll act like a gent and let him have my turn. Otherwise—"

"I'm not askin'," Banning cut in. "I never ask. I *tell*."

"Gentlemen," Jack the Barber said, jerking two six-guns from holsters attached to the back of his chair, "I maintain peace in my shop even if I have to wreck the place, and shoot up customers to do it. Meredith, get into this chair. Banning, you wait your turn." As customers started to edge toward the door to escape flying lead, he added: "You innocent bystanders don't need to worry. I place my lead so it won't glance."

Wolf Banning had heard rumors of Jack the Barber's nerve and gun prowess. Outwardly mild, of medium build, bald except for a fringe of hair around his head, the barber wasn't an impressive-looking individual. But now Wolf realized he meant business. The cattleman glared, and went back and sat down.

He watched the barber return the guns to their holsters, strop a razor and shave Meredith's heavily lathered face. He had never seen a steadier hand. This barber, he realized, spoke the truth when he said he placed his shots.

Jack the Barber's thoughts as he shaved Young Jim, were depressing. Wolf Banning couldn't harness his urge to conquer new worlds even if he wanted to. His kind survived only as long as they maintained their momentum. Banning's hired gunmen wouldn't let him quit, because they had tasted the rich rewards of looting a cattle country made up of small ranchers who had

never offered united resistance. They wanted more of those rewards, and big timber was the only answer.

The barber knew that the rustler was inclined to fight with his guns and the knife. A logger, by nature, relied on his fists to settle disputes. But even fists as big as Young Jim Meredith's had no chance against a six-gun.

Jack tried to banish the picture his imagination conjured up, but he knew from experience a man can't escape such things. Experience and imagination told him that the next time he shaved Young Jim Meredith it would be when he prepared him for burial.

That would end a long line of Meredith loggers who had started in Maine and worked their way slowly across the nation to the West coast.

Jack the Barber lifted his eyes briefly, and he read in Banning's eyes confirmation of his own reflections. Wolf Banning hated Young Jim Meredith because the logger stood in his way.

Of course there was Old Jim Meredith, but he was eighty and his fighting days were behind him. And Young Jim's brother, Bill, didn't count. Any logger would tell you that Bill was Meredith in appearance only. The old-timers remembered him as a sickly baby who had never had the stamina of his older brother.

They recalled that Bill had lived because the flame of resolve burned fiercely in his frail body. They remembered he had hated violence and fighting, but that he had fought at times, when there was no alternative. The sight of blood made him sick at the stomach, so he forced himself to take care of his companions' wounds.

Later, Bill Meredith had paled when men were crushed in logging operations, or were gored handling cattle. Such men were brought to Doc Steele at Border, the nearest doctor. Usually they got well, but often they were cripples, and Bill insisted that with the right attention most of them wouldn't have been permanently maimed.

And because he hated the taking of life, either by accident or design, Bill had resolved to become a doctor. "It might be a good idea at that," Old Jim had agreed. "Jim can carry on the logging tradition in the family, and you can patch up the men the trees smash up."

Jack the Barber and others in Border had watched Bill Meredith leave for medical school. "If he's good," some of them said, "he won't waste his time on folks like us. There'll be too much fame and money in the big cities. And if he's no good, he'll be no improvement over Doc Steele."

WHILE Jack was shaving Young Jim, several loggers came in, carrying a companion on an improvised stretcher. "It's Ole Stenstrom," one of them explained. "We found him back of Borderland, dead to the world and pockets empty."

"Pretty early in the day to find 'em out cold," Jack the Barber observed. "Why didn't you take him to Doc Steele?"

"Doc's higher'n a kite," the logger answered. "You're the next best bet." He fished a quart bottle out of his pocket. "We found this inside Stenstrom's shirt. Chances are Borderland put knock-out drops in it when they sold Ole the bottle. We figger to have doc test it."

"Let's see it," Wolf Banning said. The logger handed it to him, and Wolf reached out to take it, but it slipped from his hands and would have struck the floor and shattered if the barber had not broken the fall by hastily thrusting out his toe.

Wolf Banning's money was said

to be behind the town's biggest resort, Borderland, and Jack had been all set when the man asked for the bottle. He had a hunch Banning would drop it and pretend it was an accident.

"I'll take care of this, boys," Jack said easily and put the bottle on the shelf with his bay rum and hair-tonic bottles. "We'll have Doc Steele analyze the stuff."

A man named Brodie Lane, who had won his nickname because he was always ready to take a chance, snatched the bottle and drank a big swig before anyone could stop him.

"Brodie, you're a fool," Jack said bluntly.

"Everybody knows I came in here cold sober," Lane argued. "You all saw me drink the stuff. If I pass out, Borderland is convicted. If not, then Ole Stenstrom can't handle hard liquor, that's all. As for doc, he isn't reliable. Neither side would accept his report."

The barber aroused Stenstrom sufficiently to get some kind of liquid down his throat, then detailed his companions to look after the logger. "He's going to be sicker'n a dog," he predicted, "but my doctoring should turn the trick and get the poison out of his system."

Then he finished shaving Young Jim and said: "Next!"

Wolf Banning got into the chair and the razor slid over his throat. It might have been fastened in a moving vise. The barber must have realized that his customer resented his taking a hand in the play of a few minutes before. "And yet he ain't nervous," Wolf thought. "He's colder'n ice."

"Relax, Wolf," Jack whispered. "I'm not going to cut your throat."

Wolf Banning's face purpled with rage. He thought he had covered his inward nervousness, but Jack had detected it. "He ain't human," Banning thought.

FOR the first time in his life, the barber decided to break the self-imposed silence he had always maintained when trouble was brewing on the frontier. He felt, though rather dubiously, a word might save many lives.

"Wolf," he whispered, "today I'm shaving men who are death-branded if things go along as you've planned. I once knew a man who took a little chew of tobacco and he got along just fine and dandy. Then he took a bigger chew and choked to death."

"What're you drivin' at, Jack?" Wolf growled in a low tone.

"You're planning to run the Merediths out of big timber, the way you chased the small ranchers out of the cattle country," the barber answered. "Your tactics are the same—kill off the key men who might block you. In this case it's Young Jim Meredith."

"You're crazy," Wolf answered.

"You're going to lose this fight, Wolf," predicted the barber. "Why? Because a man I know will battle you to a standstill. He's the last man you, or most of the others, figure will fight. But he's smarter than you, Wolf, and what's more, he isn't . . . yellow."

"If you didn't have a razor to my throat, you wouldn't say that, Jack," Banning snarled.

"Wolf, you know differently." Jack removed the razor from his customer's throat. "You're yellow, Wolf. I found out when I felt you cringe and turn pale as I started to shave you. Only two men know you're yellow at heart. I'm one."

"And who's the other?"

"You."

"I ain't heard about it yet," Wolf said evenly.

"Some folks find things out the hard way," the barber told him. "I'm just trying to save some lives, yours included. You see," he added with grim humor. "Business isn't

any too good with me as it is. And for every man killed, I'm out a customer. Think it over and don't grow too big for your britches."

"Mebbe you're askin' for a death brand yourself?" Wolf Banning suggested.

"Nobody's going to kill me," the barber retorted cheerfully. "Not even you. Because if I'm not around, there'll be no one to make you look natural when your few surviving friends come for the funeral services."

"Blast you!" Banning snarled. "Keep your mouth shut and tend to business."

"We aim to please our customers," Jack answered in a mild voice. "When you leave my chair even you'll admit I've done a good job with the material I had to work on."

CHAPTER II

DOCTOR BILL

WHILE he worked on Wolf Banning Jack the Barber glanced at Brodie Lane occasionally. Brodie's eyes were glassy, his face muscles were sagging and a silly grin played about his mouth. His speech became thick and incoherent. Suddenly he slumped forward in the chair and would have fallen to the floor if a couple of loggers hadn't caught him.

"There's the answer to the question," Young Jim Meredith declared. It was the first time anyone in the shop had seen him thoroughly aroused. "Come on, boys," he said. "You can get shaved later."

Young Jim was twenty-eight years old. He had done his share of fighting, rough-and-tumble, and at such times he had been angry. But this was the first time he had known cold rage. He stalked down the street, the calks of his boots biting deep into the wooden sidewalks, and leaving little splinters behind.

His shoulders, rather than his arms, parted the batwing doors of Borderland, and then he was in an atmosphere of thick smoke, the odors of varied kinds of refreshments, and mild brawling.

He glanced at the bartenders and turned sharply into the office of Dead-face Dunbar, the reputed owner of Borderland. Dunbar looked surprised.

"Hello, Meredith," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Have a drink," Young Jim growled. He extended the bottle found on Stenstrom. A good pint remained.

"I don't drink when I'm on duty," said Dunbar. His face, the color of cheese, was cold and suspicious.

"I've seen you drink, on duty, as you call it," Meredith retorted. "Get this down."

"No . . . thanks."

"It couldn't be that you're afraid of it, Dunbar?" the logger inquired softly. "I don't see why. One of my men came in, asked for a bottle of good liquor and this was what was sold him. It's a hell of a businessman who won't stand back of his own product. Drink it!"

Dunbar's hand started toward a drawer containing a revolver, and it was then his nose started bleeding. Meredith's huge fist was the direct cause. He pinned the man to the wall and growled: "This bottle is going into your mouth, mister. You'd better open up, or you'll lose some teeth."

Dunbar's mouth popped open and Meredith forced him to drain the bottle.

Meredith shoved him back in his chair and stalked into the resort's main room and up to the bar.

"Listen, you," he said to the bartender. "I believe in going to headquarters when I've got a complaint to make. I've just made Dunbar drink some of the stuff you fellows

have been selling my loggers. If any more of 'em pass out, I'll make you drink the stuff you're pushing over the bar. Is that clear?"

IT was so clear that bartenders began snatching back drinks they had set up on the bar. Young Jim Meredith watch them briefly, then returned to Dunbar's office. Dead-face had passed out completely. The logger carried him to the display window, placed him among the bottles, put a pillow under his head and a sign in the window, reading:

THIS MAN HAS JUST TAKEN *ONE* DRINK OF HIS OWN LIQUOR.

As Jim Meredith came out to the walk to size up his window display, a logger handed him a six-gun. "Wolf Banning is talkin' big," he said, "and packin' a gun. I swiped this from Jack the Barber."

"Did Jack see you do it?" asked Jim.

"He tried not to see me take the gun," the logger answered, "and it's just possible he succeeded."

Jim wasn't much of a hand with a six-gun and he had a hunch a killer of Banning's type would know it, nevertheless he thrust the weapon, muzzle downward, inside his pants, and sauntered around the town. He was not a trouble maker by nature, on the other hand he wasn't running away from trouble. Previously, he had decided to leave at ten o'clock on a speeder for Camp 1. He had published a notice to that effect in the town's restaurant and in Borderland, so that any loggers who wanted to return with him could do so.

Young Jim Meredith frequented his usual haunts until ten o'clock, then he walked down to the siding where the speeder was located. When the engineer saw him he heaved a sigh of relief. "All of us was expectin' gun smoke," he said. "And while you're hell on fightin' wood smoke when the forest fire season is on, you ain't much on gun smoke, Jim. You wouldn't have a chance with Wolf Bannin'."

"I'm afraid you're right," Meredith admitted. "What've you heard, Enoch? You stay sober, and know what's going on."

"There's been talk of Bannin's gun fighters movin' in on the loggin' business," Enoch answered, squirting oil on a bearing. That White Water Stand of timber is mighty temptin', you know. It's worth a half million dollars right now. And if prices go up—"

"But Wolf Banning isn't a logger," Jim Meredith argued.

"He wasn't a cattleman, either, when he moved in on the range ten years ago. He was just a punk kid of twenty-three or four who could draw a gun faster'n other folks. As I see it, he spent a few dollars in ca'tridges and run them dollars into a big spread. He's got his organization, which is a killin' outfit, and that's all he needs. If you're out of the way, who's left but Dr. Bill?"

"Bill's a logger. Old Jim saw to that," Young Jim said.

"But he don't work at it. Besides, when a man's existence is savin' lives and repairin' smashed bodies, killin' don't come natural to him. So you Meredith boys don't have any edge at all when it comes to matchin' wits and guns with professional killers."

"There's a lot to what you say," admitted Young Jim. "What do you suppose Banning will do about me putting Dead-face Dunbar in his own window?"

"I'm coming to that," the old engineer said. "You see, in every town there're always tinhorns who'll try to get on the good side of a dangerous man by tattletalin'. A feller made a beeline for Bannin',

and I caught some of their talk. The feller was all for takin' Dunbar out of the window. He claimed it would be humiliatin' for Dead-face to wake up and find hisself there. But Bannin' had another idea—let him wake up and feel humiliated. Then mebbe he'd be mad enough to kill you. Killin' you—and I'm lettin' you have it straight from the shoulder, Jim—is their first order of business."

Several loggers arrived a few minutes later and shortly after ten o'clock, the speeder departed for Camp 1.

JACK THE BARBER listened to the speeder's departure with a sense of relief. For several hours he had expected to hear the crack of six-guns breaking the tenseness that had suddenly come to Border.

The silence could mean but one thing—Wolf Banning wasn't ready to play his hand. At eleven o'clock the barber closed his shop and went down the street. A crowd had gathered about the Borderland window and was laughing at Dunbar's heavy snores, audible through the glass.

Everyone was curious to see what would happen when Dunbar awakened. To insure this, it was necessary to remain at the window. Bets were made, and a big pool formed. By paying a dollar a man could make a guess as to when Dunbar would rouse and do something about his situation. The man coming closest would win the pot.

Jack the Barber was unanimously appointed judge. He didn't relish the honor. "I'll make a rule now," he said. "Opening his eyes and looking around doesn't count. He may go back to sleep again. It's when he does something that decides it."

Charley Ellis, who published the Border *Eagle*, sauntered up. He was nearly eighty, and claimed he was active because he was usually two jumps ahead of civilization. Whenever a community gave signs of large, permanent growth, Ellis packed up his type, printing press and paper and moved on. His sane editorials were often quoted in the big newspapers.

The editor exchanged a knowing glance with Jack. "First time I've ever seen a thing just like this happen, Jack," he observed. "Old Jim Meredith, and his father before him, used original tricks in overcoming the obstacles in the logging game. Some of their originality seems to have gone down to Young Jim."

"It's deserved," the barber said, "but it means war. Dead-face Dunbar will never live this down."

"I think I'll put a story on the wire," Ellis said. "There's no doubt the liquor knocked him out?"

"None in the world," answered Jack. "First Stenstrom was laid out. Then to prove it was the liquor Brodie Lane downed a swig. Now both of 'em are dead to the world. And you can see the shape Dunbar's in."

The editor departed, filed his story and returned. It was four o'clock in the morning before Dead-face Dunbar blinked stupidly at the crowd. He probably saw distorted faces and thought he was having a nightmare, because he dropped heavily back and was instantly asleep. At five o'clock he shook himself, blinked, stared a long time then shook himself again.

The grins were real, and the faces were real. The roar of laughter that followed was something Dead-face would never forget. In blind fury he hurled a bottle through the window, and as the glass broke, he threw quarts of liquor at everyone in sight. Then he climbed through the hole he had made, swore furiously at the crowd and went back to his office, staggering weakly.

The pot winner collected his money and said: "Come on, boys, the drinks are on me."

JACK made his way to his living quarters in a thoughtful mood. Instead of going to bed, he sat down and wrote:

DEAR DR. BILL:

You'll probably be surprised to hear from the man who barbered your hair from the time you were ten years old, but here goes:

You know, I always keep my fingers on the pulse of things. I think one hell of a war between your folks and Wolf Banning is about to break out. Young Jim had a run-in with Banning and Dead-face Dunbar today, or rather last night, and came out on top. But you know the set-up. Jim works out in the open, and Banning is tricky. He's a great man to have others do his dirty work while he keeps in a safe place and pulls the strings. When he's sure the odds are in his favor, he'll move into a gun fight.

Another thing. You know Banning has a bullet scar on his left cheek. It's purplish and if you watch it, you can tell his mood by the color. He has a trick of rubbing it lightly with the tip of his fingers when he's up to something. Sometimes it diverts attention and gives him a chance to beat his victim to the draw. Well, Wolf has been rubbing that scar a lot lately.

The barber stopped writing and sauntered to the window. He wasn't sure whether he was justified in going on with the letter because it might influence the course of a young doctor's life. It might take him away from an internship too soon and deny him the skill that might later prove the margin between life and death for his patients.

To the eastward, the sun was rimming the range land with gold. Perched as it was on a high ridge, Border got the sunlight ahead of the lower country. It was still dark in the coulees and in the White Water River canyon. But the light was flooding the White Water stand of timber that the Merediths planned on logging as soon as there was a market.

To the westward it was still dark. In the years that he had been at Border Jack had heard the Meredith logging engines come slowly from the lower country, until at last the dense forests immediately below him had been thinned and he could see the logged-off land and the snake-like roadbeds the Merediths had built to reach the timber. He could even see abandoned camps with their bunkhouses and grass-grown streets. When the sun flooded the country in late afternoon a touch of green could also be seen—seedling trees sowed by nature and the Merediths to insure a timber crop in years to come.

Looking to east and to west had never failed to give Jack the Barber a clearer viewpoint of his problems. "There's only one thing to do," he concluded after a long period of weighing many angles, "suggest that Dr. Bill come back," Jack the Barber went back to his letter and wrote:

Doc Steele hasn't improved any and that leaves this country practically without a medico. I wouldn't presume to advise you, Bill. You're on the job back there and you know how much progress you've made. If you can handle the kind of cases you're likely to get out here, we can use you. If not, then send somebody else. One thing's sure. We're going to need a doctor bad—and soon.

Yours truly,

JACK THE BARBER.

DR. BILL MEREDITH found the letter in his box several days later. And while he was reading it, one of the other interns came into his room.

"Here's a clipping about a big logger named Meredith forcing a saloonkeeper to drink the doped whiskey he was selling his loggers," the intern told Bill. "When the saloonman passed out, the logger put him

on exhibition in his own saloon window. That sounds like a Meredith trick. Is this fellow any relation of yours?"

Bill glanced at the clipping. "Yes, he's my brother, Jim. It must have taken a lot to stir Jim up like that. He's twenty-eight, three years older than I am. He's a moose of a man."

"You're no runt, Bill."

"I'm the runt of the Meredith family. Five feet nine inches, and weighing about a hundred and fifty pounds these days," Bill answered. "I've always been going to build myself up, but there's never time. There's so much to do."

"I know," the other agreed. "In a big city like this you feel that if you keep going an extra hour you'll save one more life, or make some poor devil's last hours a little easier, so you keep going, and the first thing you know a couple of men in white coats come for *you*. In your case, it's paid dividends both ways. Doc Kelso has you slated for his assistant in a couple of months. Is that letting a cat out of a bag?"

"Something like that," admitted Bill. "I'm not *that* good."

"You're just that good, son," the other intern insisted, "or Kelso wouldn't have considered you. You don't realize the reputation you've made in a short time. You're thorough, skilled and have the courage to go ahead without hesitation."

"You've always been generous—"

"I'm dealing with cold facts," his colleague told him. "Stick around here, contact a few wealthy patients, keep your charity work going and some of these days you'll be one of the nation's greatest."

"I'd like to believe that," Bill Meredith said quietly. "Not for any personal glory. That's unimportant. But a man that good would be a blessing." He lit a cigarette and puffed it thoughtfully as he drew his conclusions from the clipping and Jack the Barber's letter. "However, I think I'll go home. There's trouble brewing and someone has to be out there."

"Hold on, Bill! Don't go off half-cocked. Your place is here. You owe it to yourself, to your profession and to humanity."

"Cross off the first reason and that brings it down to my profession and humanity," Bill answered, smiling gravely, "I came East for one thing —to become a doctor capable of meeting the cases logging and cattle raising create. It's time to go home." An odd sense of urgency gripped him. "I think I'll talk to Dr. Kelso right now," he said.

"Bill," the other said, slapping the frailer man's shoulder, "you're a sermon in unselfishness. What kind of a hospital will you have out there?"

"The best money can buy," Bill answered. "It's been ordered and delivered. My father did that for me. It's a graduation present. The money has been available all through my internship. I've bought a piece of equipment every little while, after getting the views of Kelso and others. It'll be a fifteen-bed affair and a specialist can walk into it and find what he needs."

"General practitioner?"

"That's me. Everything from a scalp injury down to a cut foot," Bill replied.

Ten minutes later Bill entered Dr. Kelso's office and when he came out the great surgeon was smiling with a mixture of admiration and regret. His hand was on Bill's shoulder, a sign of affection Kelso rarely showed.

"Drop in on me before you go, my boy," Kelso said, "and keep in touch with me afterward. I know you're going to succeed beyond your own hopes."

BILL MEREDITH studied the menu gravely and considered what he wanted for breakfast. The first night on the train was behind him and he had slept soundly. It had been months since he had slept straight through without being called to look after some emergency case. He was hungry, and for once could take his time about eating.

"Hm-m-m. A large glass of orange juice, then ham and eggs; a stack of flapjacks; and, of course, hashed brown spuds. Yeah . . . and coffee," he told the waiter.

He had just given his order when the dining-car conductor seated a girl at his table. After the girl had ordered her breakfast, their eyes met and Bill said:

"I'm Bill Meredith and I'm glad they brought you here. I don't like to eat alone."

The girl was a golden blonde and had the bluest eyes Bill had ever seen. She was about five feet four inches and her small body fairly radiated good health and high spirits. Beautiful and probably a little dumb was Bill's first impression, but a second glance convinced him that she was mentally alert and that there was plenty of character in her face.

He liked the honest way she put the cards down on the table. "This didn't just happen, Mr. Meredith," she said. "I arranged it. I heard there was a man on the train who had bought a ticket for Border. As I'm going to Border to visit an uncle I've never met I thought I might learn something about him. So I ran my quarry to earth, learned that his name was Bill Meredith, asked the dining car man to seat me at his table—and here I am."

"We're getting off to a great start," Bill thought. "This drag across the country won't be so bad, after all." Then aloud he said: "I was raised in Border; know the country and people. But you've missed one little detail."

"What?"

"Your name!"

"Of course. I'm Margie Banning. And my uncle is called Wolf Banning, for some strange reason."

"Wolf Banning," Bill repeated.

"Do you know him?"

"The Merediths are loggers, and Wolf Banning goes in for cattle raising, but as Border is on the transcontinental railroad—a place where all trains stop for water—we naturally have met. We don't buy each other drinks or play poker, though."

"Oh, then the loggers don't like the cattlemen?" she suggested. "Is there some sort of range war going on?"

"I'd say there's little in common between cattlemen and loggers," Bill said. "Different conditions, different methods of operation, you know."

"That shouldn't make any difference to us, should it?" she asked. "I'm just a New England girl. I've never been West, so I'm not lined up on one side or the other. And you're a logger and so far as I know haven't a thing against a young lady from New England."

"Not yet I haven't," Bill answered. "But if we can't have at least two meals together each day I'll declare war."

"It's a date," she replied.

CHAPTER III

THE WHITE WATER STAND

"HOW long since you've seen your Uncle . . . Wolf?" Bill asked Margie Banning. He supposed Banning had been given a name as a child, but in the West he had always been known as Wolf, and that was the way he signed his checks at the Border State Bank.

"I've never seen him," Margie replied. "He's my father's younger brother—the one who went West to

find excitement. He must have found it, because he's never returned home, and I'm told his farm is acres and acres in area and he has hundreds of cattle."

Bill grinned. "Wolf Banning runs thousands of head of cattle on a ranch you measure in sections of land, Margie. And he's worth plenty of money. Quite a power in the community, too. Hasn't he told you about himself?"

"To be honest, we've had no correspondence until recently, then I wrote my uncle that I was passing through on my way to the West coast and would like to stop off and say hello," she replied. "If he doesn't spread out the welcome mat I'll have them put my bags back onto the train again in a hurry."

"It will have to be in a hurry," Bill remarked. "The train does little more than pause at Border."

They sat together a lot during the ride across the country and Margie's interest in the West was equal to Bill's as the train roared through the level stretches of range land or climbed slowly over the mountains.

"I'm going to like this country," she said again and again. "There's so much elbow room and the air is so clean." But there were moments when Margie was solemn, almost grim, and at such times Bill had the feeling he was catching her off guard. Then she would snap out of it and be gay again.

As they passed through towns, famed in Western history, Margie asked about killings, holdups and gamblers. "You must have read a lot," Bill declared. "You know almost as much about the big names as I do."

When they stopped at Red Bank, Margie said: "Let's go out and stretch our legs while they're taking on water."

She looked around curiously at the row of false-front stores on the single street, and the winding dusty road that went on and on until it vanished into the horizon.

"Wasn't there trouble here four or five years ago?" she asked. "Something about a mine. I believe."

"Yes," Bill answered. "You can see the dump on the hillside above the town. A young fellow from the East was backing it—his name was Dick Winslow—and he was killed just as the mine got into production. It was tough luck in several ways, because it was his faith that had kept the weaker stockholders going."

"How was he killed?"

"There was gunplay and he was hit by stray bullets," Bill said.

"Was he fighting, too?"

"No. He didn't pack a gun. Dick Winslow was an easygoing young fellow. He always said that he hadn't an enemy in the world and wasn't mad at anyone, so why should he pack a gun?" Bill wanted to change the subject, because it was his opinion that Wolf Banning had framed a supposed gun fight and then had deliberately killed the unarmed Winslow during the excitement when neutral witnesses were so busy hunting cover they saw little of what was going on and remembered even less. But the verdict of the coroner's jury was self-defense."

The mine closed down shortly afterward and a sheriff sold everything to satisfy several small judgments. Bill Meredith thought it rather significant that Wolf Banning had bought the property and that it was now adding to his income. The mine was hundreds of miles from Border, but it was constant proof that Banning's interests were widespread.

BILL could see no sense in spoiling the girl's impression of the West by going into details that made her uncle look bad. She would

learn Wolf Banning's true character soon enough. Or would she? As long as she was under Wolf Banning's roof, she would hear only things to his credit. And when the man was in a mood to make the effort, or saw that something could be gained, he could be most agreeable.

"The cemetery is a dreary place," Margie said, gazing steadily at the almost bare, brown hill behind the town. "The ground looks . . . baked. Yes, that's it, baked, except for one green spot."

"It is baked," Bill answered. "The green spot marks Dick Winslow's grave. He liked green, growing things. After his death the stockholders remembered that, and they passed the hat and collected enough money to put up a small windmill. It only pumps a trickle of water, but it keeps Winslow's grave green, and the remaining water goes to those trees you see growing on the hill. In time they'll shade the whole cemetery."

"I like that part of the story," the girl said quietly. "The part about the stockholders remembering a man even when he could no longer be of any use to them."

"There're some pretty sordid incidents on the frontier, but the brighter side outweighs them," Bill observed.

Late that afternoon the train began following a river. "White Water River," Bill explained. "It's source is in the high mountains, well above timber line. It flows through our White Water Stand. For the first time in years the Merediths plan to use a stream instead of a railroad to move their logs. See that green patch up there?"

Margie nodded. "Yes."

"That's the stand. Border is high above the timber. Our present operations are on the western side of the watershed," Bill continued. "Dad and Jim figured there would be so much rock work to cross the divide and extend rails from our present logging road that the cost would be too much."

"Why not run a spur from the main transcontinental line?" she suggested.

"The line doesn't touch the White Water Stand," Bill explained, "and a spur would mean building two steel bridges across canyons upstream, or else miles of rock work following the canyon. No, the logical answer is to develop markets in the lower country, put up a couple of sawmills at the key points and supply them with river-driven logs. And that's going to be something in itself, because there's white water in some of them lower canyons that'll make your hair curl."

"A log drive through the heart of the cattle country," she suggested. "Isn't that unusual?"

"Yes, but it's happened before," he replied.

"Who owns the cattle country?"

"Some of the upper stuff is owned by a man named Wolf Banning," Bill replied.

"Could cattle people object to your driving logs through their country?" asked Margie.

"Yes," he admitted, "they could. Then of course the loggers would insist on their rights, and the first thing you know there'd be trouble."

"Oh." She was thoughtful, and Bill was puzzled. For a moment he wondered if, perhaps, Wolf Banning hadn't planted her on the train for the express purpose of learning the Merediths' plans. The next instant he was inwardly defending her against any such deception.

"Still," he reflected, "when a man gets all steamed up over a girl, and I'm sure steamed over this one, she can't do any wrong. Thus the man becomes a sucker. Oh, shucks.

That's a bridge I'll cross when I came to it."

BILL MEREDITH was pointing out Wolf Banning's range, green and beautiful in the late afternoon sun, when the conductor came through the train with a telegram.

"Dr. Meredith?" he asked, and when Bill nodded, he added: "Sign here, please."

Bill opened the telegram and read:

LEAVE TRAIN AT HORSESHOE BEND STOP WILL MEET YOU WITH HORSES STOP

JACK THE BARBER

"Bad news?" Margie asked.

"Puzzling news, which I'm afraid is bad," Bill answered. He passed over the telegram and when she had read it, said: "Jack the Barber is a cool proposition and the situation is serious or he wouldn't wire me."

"But can you reach Border sooner on horseback?" she asked.

Jim got Dead-face Dunbar by the collar and forced him to drain the bottle of doped liquor.

"Yes. The country I've been pointing out to you is much higher than it looks to be," Bill explained. "The train climbs the grade in a series of switchbacks. Unless they put on another engine, it'll be three hours before we arrive at Border. By using an old pack train trail I can be there in an hour. I wonder what's happened."

"Will the train stop at the Horseshoe Bend?"

"I'm going to see about that now," Bill said. He walked through the train until he located the conductor, then handed him the telegram.

"Do you think it is life and death, doctor?" the man asked.

"It must be," Bill replied. "There may be several lives involved. Things have looked bad at Border for weeks. There's probably been a shooting."

"We'll stop," agreed the conductor. "You may want to put wounded men aboard the train at Border. Doc Steele has let his hospital go to seed, you know. There's a good hospital sixty miles the other side of the divide."

"I shipped out a complete unit," Bill said, "but I doubt if it's been set up. So we may be on hand with wounded men."

He went back to Margie and she regarded him with grave eyes.

"First case?" she asked gravely.

"Yes, since I've been on my own," he answered. "Of course I was on the go all the time during my internship." He scowled at the scenery and the distant green patches that marked Banning's Box B. "Train seems to be crawling," he grumbled.

"It is crawling," declared Margie.

Long before it slowed down for the Horseshoe Bend, Bill and his bags were in the vestibule, ready. He stood there, with Margie, talking mechanically.

"I'll manage to look you up as soon as I can, Margie," he promised. "I might even be at the train, but I doubt it unless it's to go out with patients."

IT was almost dark when the train stopped because here the canyon narrowed and shut out the early morning and late afternoon sun, but Margie saw a medium-built man with four saddled horses, and a pack horse.

"That's Jack," Bill said. "He's got spare horses. That means it's going to be a hard ride."

"Good luck, Dr. Bill," Margie called as he jumped down.

"See you later," he answered without looking back.

"Put your bags on the pack horse," Jack the Barber said. "We'd better start riding. I've got your horse warmed up."

"Who is it, Jack?"

"There was a shooting scrape," the barber answered, "and . . . Jim stopped one of the bullets."

"Jim! How bad is he?"

"I don't know for sure. I figured it was a job for you and not Doc Steele, though doc gave him first aid," the barber answered. "There's a waitress at the Quail Café who used to be a trained nurse, and I had her check over Doc Steele's equipment and give everything a good boiling. Your stuff is still in storage. We didn't think this would happen before you were ready."

"Maybe that's why it happened," Bill answered.

The horses were going up a steep switchback, driving themselves in a series of heaves and jumps at times. Bill could hardly see the trail, but he knew what it was like, and he could hear rocks dropping after a long plunge into a narrow canyon. Halfway up they changed horses. Bill said little. Time enough later to learn details of what had happened. His first job was to find out

what was wrong with Young Jim.

"Hell of a homecoming," the barber commented once.

"Thanks for sending for me, Jack," Bill said. "I wish Kelso was here. There's a man!"

"You're on your own hind legs from now on, Bill," Jack said. "You studied under Kelso, you worked with him, you know his technique. Apply it, and forget the patient is your brother. That's going to be the real hurdle."

"You're right," Bill said. Lights were visible through the trees a half mile away. They were close—one more stiff climb, then a short level stretch. Bill could feel the horse's heartbeats hammering against his legs. They were maintaining a pace that could easily kill an animal. But the horses stood up under the drive and in a few minutes Bill jumped down and ran up the creaky steps of Doc Steele's ramshackle hospital.

A woman, who appeared to be in her late forties, came to meet him. "I'm Clara Rand, the nurse," she said. "Everything is ready, doctor. Your brother is conscious. A speeder has gone for your father."

CHAPTER IV

"YOU'RE IN THE LOGGING GAME!"

YOUNG JIM lay on a freshly made bed and Doc Steele, obviously nervous, sat in a chair at the bedside.

"Hello, Bill . . . or I mean, doctor," Steele said awkwardly.

"Hello, doctor," Bill answered, his eyes on his brother's face.

At sound of the familiar voice, Jim Meredith opened his eyes. "Hello . . . Banty," he whispered. It was a pet name—contraction of Bantam Rooster—Jim had given his brother when he was a little fellow. In those days Bill's neat, slender figure, his briskness and fighting qualities had reminded Jim of a fighting cock. "Figured to meet you at the train," the wounded man said slowly, "but a bullet picked me off. Ruckus among the Banning outfit."

"We'll take that up later, Jim," Bill said.

"Dunbar's bullet got him," Doc Steele said tonelessly. "An accident. You see a man named Tolt pulled a gun on Dunbar. He said something about bad liquor and losing his stake. He fired and missed. He shifted his position and was about to fire again when Dunbar shot. Jim stepped into the bullet. He was trying to get behind a post."

"There's too much of me to get behind a post," Jim said wryly.

Bill made a thorough examination, conscious of the fact that his brother's eyes were on his face.

"Bad, eh, Bantam?" Jim questioned. "Don't kid me along. You never could fool me, you know. It just missed the heart, didn't it?"

"It was a close shave, Jim," Bill said, "but we'll fix you up." He motioned to the old doctor. "Let's have a look at your X-ray equipment." Beyond earshot of the wounded man he said: "What do you think, doctor?"

"Just what you do. That bullet's got to come out or he'll bleed to death," Steele replied. "And removing it is dangerous, too. Now if a man like Kelso—"

"Kelso isn't here," Bill said savagely. "I'll do the job." He checked over Steele's equipment, then called in the nurse.

"I haven't forgotten my training," she assured him. "I can give an anæsthetic, or help you."

"Dr. Steele will look after the anæsthetic," Bill said. "You can help me."

As Bill stopped speaking he heard the roar of a speeder and the scream of flanges against steel rails. "That's your father coming, Bill," Doc Steele

said. "They couldn't get word to him right away."

"You get everything ready," Bill directed. "I'll step outside and meet dad."

Old Jim Meredith was eighty years old, but he jumped from the speeder while it was still running and raced across rough ground to the hospital. "Bill! Bill!" he exclaimed. "You got here! They told me they'd tried to reach you on the train." He shook hands and hard as the old logger was, Bill saw tears in his eyes. "No beatin' 'round the bush. How is he?"

"One chance in five," Bill answered.

"One chance in five," repeated Old Jim, and in the silence that followed they could hear the thunder of the westbound train as it toiled up the grade. The exhaust echoed and re-echoed through the deep canyons and bounced along the cliffs until it seemed as if there were a dozen locomotives hauling the train. "I've taken longer odds than that and won." He patted his son's shoulder. "If he can be saved, you can save him. Get him in shape, Bill, and we'll carry the war to Wolf Banning. He started it, but now that it's started, the way to win is to carry the fight to the enemy. You don't win standin' your ground and hittin' back."

"Do you want to see Jim?" Bill asked.

"I might as well." Old Jim yanked his rain-stained hat down over his eyes and shifted his waterproof coat slightly, turning up the collar to partly conceal his face. Then he walked over to the hospital with Bill who took him into Jim's room. The old logger looked down at his oldest son. "Hello, Jim," he said huskily.

The wounded man opened his eyes. "Well, the three of us are together again. It's what we've long looked forward to. We were going to have a drink, remember? Let's have it."

Old Jim stifled a sob. "What about it . . . doctor?"

"Jim wants it that way," Bill said. "We were to celebrate my homecoming. I'm . . . here."

Doc Steele brought out a bottle and glasses. Bill filled three of them and held one to Young Jim's lips. The wounded man did little more than wet his tongue. With an operation ahead, Bill wet his and no more, but Old Jim tossed his off in the manner of a man who needed it badly.

"Luck all around," Young Jim said. "What's next, Dr. Bill?"

"Remove the bullet," Bill replied.

"Let's go, then," Young Jim said.

SOMETIME later Bill Meredith heard the train stop, take on water and go on. As the last sound had died away he removed the bullet and finished the operation.

"Have you typed the blood of anyone in Border?" he asked Steele.

"Yes. I knew a transfusion would be necessary. Brodie Lane's will do," Steele replied.

"Bring him in, please," said Bill.

Brodie was outside waiting. "Take a gallon, Bill," he said, "if it'll do any good. Take it all. Jim's more use to the world than I am. He's goin' to pull through, ain't he?" Then he took a quick look at Bill's face and said: "Oh!"

It was later that Brodie stepped out into the cold air and breathed deeply. He looked at the stars and listened to the murmur of wind blowing through the treetops. He caught the undertone of White Water River, which could only be heard on very quiet nights. Brodie's face was grim as he walked along.

"If anything happens to Jim," he said, "I'll get Dead-face Dunbar if it's the last thing I do."

"How is he, Brodie?" a voice asked from the darkness.

"He's in bad shape," answered Brodie. A logger came into view, his husky form bulking even larger in the shadows. "It was a frame-up. The idea was to get Jim. Dunbar made a deal with Tolt to put on a fake fight. Tolt was pretty well shook up afterward. He had to fire close to Dunbar to make it look natural, and mighty near got him."

"Some of the boys saw Tolt and Dunbar afterward," said the logger. "Three of the Bannin' crowd went through the motions of makin' 'em shake hands. The whole business should be turned over to the sheriff."

"Sheriff's yellow," Brodie answered. "And he takes his orders from Wolf Bannin', besides. The thing for us to do is to keep our shirts on until we see how Jim comes out. If he dies, then I'm for tearin' the lid offn this town. The trouble is, us loggers have always minded our own business. Sure, we've had rough-and-tumble fights and busted things up, but there's never been a cold-blooded killin'. So them buzzards figger we're afraid. Hey! What was that?"

"You know what it was. A rifle shot," the logger said.

"Another job for Doc Bill," suggested Brodie.

"Or Jack the Barber," the logger added. "Here comes Doc Bill."

Bill Meredith came out of the hospital and paced slowly up and down the sidewalk. He breathed deeply and twisted his fists into hard knots trying to get a grip on himself. "My first real case," he said. "My own brother. Aw, hell!"

He could hear two speeders climbing the grade from Camp 2 and knew from their progress they must be heavily loaded with loggers. Bill walked over to Brodie.

"The boys are coming in droves," he said. "They've heard about Jim, and figure there's an account to settle. Tell them I want them to behave themselves. That's an order."

"An order, Bill?" Brodie's voice was soft. "I thought you'd quit the loggin' game for the doctor business."

"I have, but I'm running Meredith loggers until Jim's on his feet again. We don't want our men smashing property, you know."

"A man can bust up what he owns can't he?" Brodie inquired.

"I suppose he could, but he'd be a fool if he did," Bill answered, slightly puzzled.

"Well, I figure, what with bad liquor we've bought at Borderland, the crooked card games, and the knock-out drops and robbin', us loggers paid for Borderland years ago," said Brodie. "Look, Bill or doc—whichever you are—there's the huckleberry I'd like to squash." He pointed to a buckboard coming up the street from the depot. "I may take a chance on it sometime."

Wolf Banning was driving the buckboard, and Margie was sitting beside him. They were little more than shadows in the gloom, but Bill could see that the girl's trunk was in the back of the rig, and piled on top, well lashed, were her bags. It was evident "Uncle Wolf" had insisted on her making a lengthy visit.

JACK THE BARBER hurried up while Bill's eyes were following the rig. "How is he, Bill?"

"I've done my best," answered Bill. "Now we'll have to wait, and time passes slowly, you know."

The two began walking back and forth, talking in low tones. "I was at the station when Margie Banning arrived," Jack said. "Wolf's expression was that of a man who expected a poor relation, and a homely one, at that, to drop in on him. He

lurked in the shadows until he could size her up."

"Then what?"

"Why, she came down to the platform and looked around. She has an eager, freshness about her, you know—"

"Don't I know!" Bill said.

"Wolf shot out of the shadows like a seed squirted out of a lemon and yelled, 'Margie!' Then he kissed her. After that he began introducing her right and left. It's a funny thing, Bill, but I've seen her before somewhere, or someone who looks a lot like her."

"You've always been great on studying faces," Bill said.

"A barber is closer to faces than most people," Jack answered. "I suppose Margie Banning resembles her uncle in some respects. The family brand is usually there, though mighty faint at times. Maybe it's the eyebrows, the cheekbones, the nose, chin or ears, but you can find it."

Sheriff Nord joined them. He shook hands with Bill, and said something unconvincing about being glad to see him back.

"I'm glad to be back, Nord," Bill said.

"I'm sorry about Jim," the lawman said after an uneasy pause. "I know the law. It wasn't murder because there was no intent, but I can make out a manslaughter case against the guilty man. That is if Jim don't make the grade."

"I'm told Dead-face Dunbar's the guilty man," Bill said.

"That's just talk, though he might be. I've taken all the guns that got shot off during the fight, and I'm here to get the slug you took out of Jim. It won't take long to find out who done it. Then I'm goin' to make the arrest."

Without hesitation Bill reached into his pocket. "Here's the bullet, sheriff," he said.

Apparently Nord had expected Bill to object, but as soon as he recovered from his surprise, he was off.

"You shouldn't have given that evidence to him, Bill," Jack the Barber said. "He's not only yellow, but crooked as a snake."

"Let him play out his hand," said Bill.

The two speeders were nearer now, and their headlights swept the timber as the cars followed the curves in the roadbed. When they came into the open, the lights of the rear speeder flooded the one ahead. It was black with men in heavy boots, tin pants, flannel shirt and rain-stained hats. They were grimly silent men. Bill had just started over to talk to them, when the nurse called to him from the hospital door. He fairly ran into the hospital.

"Your brother is conscious," the nurse told him.

Bill's face was smiling and confident as he hurried to the bed, and he hoped his eyes wouldn't betray his professional conclusions. "The operation was a success, Jim," he said. "Now just behave yourself and in a week or so—"

"There were four aces against you, Bill," whispered Jim. "Hell of a homecoming, but anyway we had our drink as we'd planned."

"And we'll have many more," Bill told him.

"We never kidded each other on big things, Bill," Jim said. "I've seen men die. Often they seemed to know. Something told them. Something bigger than a hunch. That something banished fear of death, too. I know there's no chance. Right? Don't kid me."

"Right, Jim."

"I'm sorry, Bill. I'd liked to have logged that White Water Stand and licked Wolf Banning," Jim whispered. The words came slowly, chosen with care, and well spaced.

"A man makes his plans and fate comes along and knocks 'em to smithereens. You figured to be a doctor. Fate steps in . . . and you're in the logging game, Bill. You're in . . . the logging game."

A trace of solid affection for the younger man gave his eyes a fine light, then the lids fluttered and closed. For the first time Dr. William Meredith fully understood the helplessness of one who has given the limit of the skill of his calling and found it inadequate.

After a while the nurse's hand fell gently on his shoulder. "I guess it's time for Jack to take over, doctor. You'd better go to your father, now."

Brodie Lane, eyes and ears to the partly open window, missed nothing. He turned slowly, his face grim. "I'm going to tell the boys," he growled, "and let them use their own judgment. This place has needed a cleanin' for a long time. I'm—"

"Brodie! Is that you?" A logger hurried up. "Did you hear that shot a while ago?"

"Yes."

"Somebody got Dead-face Dunbar."

"Kill him?"

"No. But he's bad hit. Some of the Bannin' outfit took him away in a spring wagon," the other said. "How's Jim?"

"Just died."

Sorrow mingled with anger showed on the logger's craggy face. Then he said: "Well, we know what's to be done. Let's get goin'."

Brodie nodded and they fell into step.

CHAPTER V

EMERGENCY CALL

BILL MEREDITH left Jack the Barber with his brother's remains and went into an adjoining room to break the news to his father. Old Jim Meredith sat in a chair, smoking a pipe, eyes gazing intently at the wall, but seeing nothing. He turned as Bill entered the room, glanced quickly at his son's face, then said: "So it's all over!"

Bill knew that the old man had prepared himself for the worst in his own way. That had been a lifelong habit with Jim Meredith—to make it easier on others coming to him with bad news.

"Things can happen fast in the loggin' game, Bill," he said. "You make a barrel of money in a few months, and lose it in a few days. A man can be in the prime of life in the mornin' and dead at sundown. Bill, what do you want me to do?"

"What do you mean, dad?"

"About the loggin' game. If we stay in it, it means you'll have to give up your practice—for a while anyway—and run the works. I can help, but I'm too old to be much good in a rough-and-tumble fight. About all I can do is holler, yell and cuss. Sometimes that works, but in a good fight you've got to be able to punch. What I'm gettin' at is this: I'll sell out the whole shebang if you want me to."

"I might do both," Bill suggested.

"No, you can't be a logger and a doctor, too," Old Jim said. "It'd be like a man ridin' two horses. Pretty soon the horses part company and he's got to get on one or the other or be busted in half. There's time enough to decide, but I thought you'd like to know I'll string along with the doctorin' game if that's the way you want it."

"I don't need to think this over," Bill said. "There's only one answer. I'm in the logging game. To quit would mean passing our business over to Wolf Banning. And it would mean letting down a bunch of old fellows you've kept on the pay roll all these years."

"I couldn't fire men who'd stuck with me when the sleddin' was hard,"

the old logger protested. "Of course they ain't much good. They've been worked out for years, but I'm not much good myself."

"Wolf Banning would send them down the skidroad in a hurry," Bill said. "No, my only course is to keep Meredith Logging Co. moving, with the hope of developing some young fellow to take over later on. I'm young. Two or three years' postponement of practice won't hurt anything." It was one of the hardest things Bill had ever said, but he didn't hesitate. The decision was made and that settled it.

"We're takin' on Wolf Banning," Old Jim warned. "So you'd better practice up with a six-gun. You'll need it before the fight's won."

The full significance of this statement struck Bill with tremendous impact. "A doctor can't kill," he told himself. "It's against his code. His whole life is given to making people live. I couldn't bring myself to destroy even Wolf Banning. I could see him sent to the pen for life, or even to be hanged, but I couldn't kill him myself. And yet, Wolf isn't handicaped by my code. He'll kill me at the first opportunity, if he thinks he can get away with it. It gives him the edge. And the fight will be tough enough without his having an edge."

BILL waited until his father had knocked the ashes out of his pipe. Then he said: "We might as well go home. We can't do anything more around here."

The grinding of calked boots on gravel, the blending of many voices, came through the open window. "A lot of men in town," Old Jim said. "There must be somethin' up."

"I think there is," Bill agreed. He went out the back door, located a mass of moving men and dropped in behind them. "What's up?" he asked a man.

"They're goin' to wipe out the Borderland," the man replied. "We ain't goin' to take a thing, not even a drink or a match, because we ain't goin' to have it said we looted. But the place will be mostly glass and wood splinters when we're finished. You must be a stranger hereabouts."

"I've been away," Bill admitted.

Two blocks from Borderland, which was on the edge of town, a man came out of the shadows. "I'm all for this," he said, "but we've got to call it off. Sheriff Nord's inside the Borderland with a bunch of Banning's men. That means the law's on their side."

"Not the real law," a logger argued. "Right's on our side."

"Nord ain't the real law and never has been," shouted another man.

Bill worked his way to the front until only Brodie Lane and two of his close friends were ahead. Bill pushed them aside, got out in front, turned and faced them. "I'm Bill Meredith, new general manager of Meredith Logging Co.," he said. "I know what's behind your mood, and I understand it, but you're walking into something, boys. You're doing exactly what Banning and his outfit want you to do. They're inside waiting, and when you start wrecking the place they'll start shooting. Turn around and go back to the speeders. That's my first order."

In the gloom Bill could see faces turn toward Brodie Lane. Before that aggressive and daring young fellow could answer, Bill said: "Take 'em back, Brodie. I've just made you woods boss."

Brodie hesitated, torn between loyalty and righteous impulse. "All right, Bill," he growled. Then he raised his voice. "We're backin' Bill Meredith's hand from now on. That's the way he wants it and that's what it's goin' to be."

As the men turned, two streaks of fire lanced the night a hundred

yards to their right. They heard the clatter of glass as bullets ripped through the display window and shattered the Borderland's back-bar mirror.

"Everybody down!" Bill ordered. He flattened himself as he spoke, and the next instant a dozen weapons blazed from the Borderland. Lead whined viciously overhead.

"Crawl until you get something between you," Bill ordered. "Then leg it for the speeders. I'll be with you in a moment. Come on, Brodie."

Half crouching, the two men left the others and approached the spot concealing the men who had first fired. "Take off your boots, Brodie," Bill ordered. He removed his own shoes, and as soon as Brodie's boots were off they rushed the spot, half crouching.

BILL took the man to the right, and Brodie pounced on the other. Bill's man weighed over two hundred, and he almost threw the lighter man aside. But Bill's thumb dug hard against a nerve and the big fellow's enthusiasm for trouble ended in a low moan.

Brodie banged his man's head against the ground with such force the fellow went limp. Bill dragged his man and Brodie carried his. They stopped several blocks away in a convenient thicket.

"Why'd you fire on the Borderland?" Bill asked the man he had collared.

"I'll talk when my lawyer's around," snarled the man.

"He ain't goin' to be around," Brodie predicted. "Let's take 'em over to the boys, Bill. They'll soften 'em up."

That did it. Bill could feel his man wilt. "Talk," he ordered.

"Bannin' figgered the loggers would try and wreck Borderland if Young Jim died," the man muttered. "But he was afraid Doc Meredith, that's you, would stop trouble. He planted us in the brush with orders to shoot holes through the window."

"So that those inside could fire on the loggers?" suggested Bill.

"I guess that's about the size of it," the man admitted.

Brodie struck a match and held it near the men's faces. "Bill's goin' to turn you loose; I can see it comin'," he said, "but I'm takin' a good look at you and next time I see you I'm shootin' you on sight. And what's more I'm tellin' Bannin' you spilled the truth to save your skin, and you know what that'll mean."

"Now get out," Bill ordered the two men. Then he went over to Doc Steele's hospital and got his father.

The loggers, still feeling that they should go back and take the Borderland apart in spite of flying lead, were on the speeders when they arrived. "Let's go," Bill ordered. The speeders started under their own power, but after that they coasted, with sparks flying from brake shoes and flanges screaming.

Day was breaking when they arrived at Camp 2. Things hadn't changed much. Lou Sing, the Chinese cook, now so old and thin it looked as if a good wind might blow him away, trotted out. Bill shook hands and slapped the cook's bony shoulder. Lou Sing asked no questions. He knew Bill's presence at the camp meant Young Jim was dead.

Lou Sing moved like a shadow into the big house, glanced swiftly about to assure himself everything was in order. Running upstairs, he closed the door to Jim's room. Then, remembering that Jim's pipe and tobacco jar were on a stand near the fireplace, he ran down again and

hid them before Bill and his father came in.

"I guess we'd better turn in, dad," Bill said. "We've had quite a session."

The old man nodded and went upstairs. The fire was gone from his body, and he moved like one who felt very old and tired. He was no longer the sixty years that so many guessed him to be, but his full eighty.

Bill looked around his own room, freshly cleaned for his arrival. There were many visible chapters of his growth from boyhood to manhood —fishing tackle, a deflated football, a baseball bat with carefully wound trolling line on the handle, his skates and an old .44 Colt an uncle had given him.

The books on his shelves ranged from "Tom Sawyer" to weighty medical tomes. Bill opened a small closet door, and Chauncy, the skeleton his father had given him when he insisted his life was medicine, dangled from wires. Lou Sing had dusted everything in the room, but he had left Chauncey strictly alone and the dust from the skeleton was heavy.

Downstairs Bill heard a telephone ring, and Lou Sing answer it. It could hardly be in connection with the logging business this early in the morning, Bill thought. More than likely, it was a call for Dr. Meredith, Sing seemed to be having some difficulty understanding and Bill ran down and picked up the receiver.

"Hello. Bill Meredith speaking," he said.

"Bill?" a faint voice asked. "This is Margie. I'm calling to—" The line went dead, and Bill stood there for several seconds before hanging up.

He walked over to the wall where a map of the region hung. Presumably Margie had been calling from Box B and that meant a long trip for a call. From Banning ranch it would go to a small community that was little more than a wide place on a trail, then to a Forest Service line, from there to Border, and finally to the Meredith's private line. It was possible that one of the operators had broken the connection or that a tree had fallen across the wire, but Bill doubted it.

He was sure that someone had deliberately broken the connection at Box B. He wondered what Margie wanted at this hour in the morning. Whatever it was, it must be important, he decided, so he brought down a mattress and went to bed near the telephone to be ready to answer instantly in case it rang. It was noon when he awakened and no call had come through.

CAMP 2 was the largest of the Meredith Logging Co.'s several camps. In the cattle business it would have been the home ranch. Here were located the roundhouse, and repair shop for the locomotives, donkey engines and logging trucks. There were permanent and portable bunkhouses, a row of cottages occupied by married loggers, and a cleared stretch of rich black loam where men could raise garden truck if they had the ambition.

A company store carried everything a small community needed except business suits and ladies' evening gowns. All merchandise was sold at cost plus a small charge for breakage. The company broke even on an average.

A room back of the store was devoted to first aid equipment where injured men were patched up and sent on to the hospital, or were held until able to travel. A one-room building served as schoolhouse, church and for community gatherings. When a traveling minister came through, services were held.

The building was also the scene of Saturday night dances and an occasional wedding.

Brodie Lane took charge of Young Jim's funeral. Reckless, a gambler by nature and willing to take long chances, laughing his way through life, nevertheless, Brodie had his serious moments and this was one of them.

He gave his orders in a quiet, firm tone, and men, after their first start of surprise, hopped to obey. A minister came up from the lower country on a speeder, and a few minutes later Jack the Barber arrived from Border with the remains. A number of Border people, including Doc Steele came down. Forest rangers, small ranchers, who had lived in the region before Wolf Banning had forced them out, and lumbermen were among those who gathered for the last rites.

"Attend a man's funeral," Jack the Barber said to Bill, "and you'll know who his friends were, and his standing in the community. The men you see here today are the little fellows. You never see their names in the paper, unless they get married or die, but they're the backbone of the nation, and that makes 'em the biggest men in the land."

"Jack, can I bunk at your place a few days," Bill asked when the services were over. "We're going to log the White Water Stand and I want to get things started. I'm going to set up my hospital and have it ready for an emergency; build a small office, then study the most effective way of handling the logs. As soon as we're in operation, we'll build Camp 7 somewhere along White Water River, but Border will be our base of supplies."

"Sure, move in and stay as long as you want to, Bill," Jack replied. "I've got an extra room. Hadn't you better give Old Jim a job to get his mind off of Young Jim?"

Bill nodded. "He isn't showing it outwardly," he said, "but he's hit pretty hard. I'll put him to work supervising a crew of men getting out new skids for the donkey engines."

The barber grinned. "The old-timers who'll adz the skids will know more about the job than your dad does, 'cause they've been doing it most of their lives, but they'll give him some friendly arguments and occupy his mind."

Bill went up to Border that evening and Jack showed him the spare room. "It's your home," he said. "Turn in when you please and get up when the spirit moves. I'm going to open up the shop awhile—either cut the hair from some long-haired birds I saw in town, or sell them fiddles. S'long."

BILL unpacked and turned in. He was dozing off when the door opened and at first he thought it was Jack quietly picking up something he needed. He relaxed and was dozing again when a sense of danger gripped him. He opened his eyes suddenly and in the faint light realized Wolf Banning was standing over him.

Banning's six-gun tapped his chest. "This is an emergency call, doc," he said softly. "Get your clothes on, your little black bag with the knives and pills, and come along. Don't make any noise or you'll be operating on yourself."

"Is this a professional call, Banning?" Bill asked.

"It's a professional call," answered Banning. "You'll have to operate on one of my men."

"Then if it's professional you don't need to hold a gun on me," Bill said. "I'll need anæsthetic, too." He fumbled a moment in a large bag. "Put that in your pocket, Banning. I can't carry everything."

Banning took the anæsthetic. "Now you walk out the back door," he ordered, "and take the trail down to Horseshoe Bend. One false move and—"

"I told you that if it is a professional call I'd go, didn't I?" Bill spoke savagely and Banning regarded him curiously. "So don't act like a damned fool!"

"One false move," Banning repeated, "and I'll let you have it right between the shoulders."

CHAPTER VI

SHERIFF'S REPORT

BILL MEREDITH and Wolf Banning left Border afoot, but mounted horses just beyond the town limits, and soon began the switchback descent. Later they crossed White Water River at a ford, the horses swimming and stumbling their way to the opposite bank. It was a long climb out and when they reached the high country, fresh horses were waiting for them. It was so dark Bill couldn't see his hand before his eyes most of the time, but he knew that they were taking a short cut the Bannings used in an emergency. He tried to remember each turn with the hope of finding his way back. Now that he was a key man in Meredith affairs it didn't seem likely Banning would let him return of his own free will.

Banning now led the way at a gallop, with Bill so close behind he rarely got the dust kicked up by Banning's horse. As they neared the big house the man had recently built, the atmosphere became less and less that of the cattle rustler and outlaw, and more that of the wealthy cattle rancher who felt himself secure in his own domain.

A swarthy individual who looked as if he could slit a man's throat and sleep soundly afterward, took the horses, and Banning showed Bill to a room where he could scrub up. Bill removed the dust and grime and followed Banning into a bedroom.

"There's your patient," Banning said. "Wounded the same night Margie arrived in Border. We brought him here, because of the feelin' against him. At first he seemed in pretty good shape, but he's been bad lately."

"Dead-face Dunbar!" Bill exclaimed. "Banning, he killed my brother! I'll see you fellows in hell before I'll touch him. Let the coyote die."

"It ain't as easy as that, Meredith," Fanning said. "Unless Dunbar lives, you haven't a chance of gettin' out of here alive, yourself. You know it, or should." His eyes were cold and penetrating. The coyote in the man enjoyed watching the emotions of one in Bill's situation. Bill Meredith had to choose between his own life and saving the life of the man who had killed his brother.

For the moment, at least, Dunbar's life or death was unimportant. Banning was enjoying himself. Bill Meredith was all logger now. He had shed the cloak of his profession and its restrictions. Bill lit a cigarette and made himself at ease.

"Where's Margie Banning?" he asked.

"Gone on a little fishin' trip," Banning answered. "She wanted to get into the mountains."

"You shipped her out before she got next to your methods," Bill accused. "I know you for what you are, and you know that I do, but I kept my mouth shut on the train. I had a fine chance to tell her of your hand in Dick Winslow's death when the train stopped, but I didn't."

"Margie is broadminded," Banning said. "Let's get back to Dunbar. He didn't kill Jim. That's

just loose talk. I checked on what happened. It was a ruckus. A few of the boys had had too many drinks and got careless with their guns. Jim got in the line of fire."

"I know what happened—a typical Banning trick. You faked a fight and Dunbar murdered Jim," Bill said evenly. "You don't like my straight talk, but you're getting it." He walked over and looked at the unconscious man for the first time. "He won't last more than a couple of days."

"And you're goin' to let him die?"

"Sure," Bill answered. "You've been around a lot, Banning. You must have picked up a fair knowledge of human nature or you'd have been dead long ago. So you know I mean what I say."

Banning drew his six-gun. "I like the idea of buryin' you and Dunbar in the same grave. You'd squirm until Judgment Day." He laughed harshly, then his finger squeezed the trigger and slowly the hammer was drawn back. When it fell—

The barrel looked as big as a cannon to Bill, and he speculated, curiously enough, if he would see the flame before he felt the bullet's impact. "You've got a better idea," he remarked. "You need Dunbar in your business."

Banning called in his cook. "Take the doctor's instruments out and boil 'em, he's goin' to operate in a few minutes," he ordered.

The cook obeyed, and Banning's eyes narrowed. He was through amusing himself. The time had come to dominate the situation.

"I'll tell you why you're goin' to operate," he went on. "I asked Margie if a doctor would operate on his worst enemy, and she said he would. You fellows take some kind of a oath. You never give up tryin' to save a man's life as long as it's in him. Color, religion, or how you feel, has nothin' to do with it. Did you take that oath, Meredith?"

"Yes," Bill said reluctantly.

"Then I'm about to find out what kind of a man you are," Banning said.

"I'm a hell of a doctor," Bill thought, detesting himself for the moment. "I'd forgotten my oath." He tossed aside his cigarette. "Completely blinded by hate. I never thought it would happen to me. Well, here goes." Then aloud he said: "I'll do what I can for Dunbar."

"I've rigged up a table," Banning told him.

A HALF-HOUR later Dead-face Dunbar was a patient in Bill's eyes, and nothing else. He worked with his strong surgeon's fingers and Banning, administering the anæsthetic under the doctor's direction, watched with growing respect.

At last Bill dropped a twisted piece of lead on a tray, and Banning claimed it.

"Some day I'm goin' to find the man who fired that shot," Banning asserted. "The sheriff don't know much about such things, but I have a friend in the next State who can look through a glass and tell from what gun a bullet comes. He'll tell you who killed Jim. The sheriff collected all the guns."

"I know," Bill said. "Forget it."

Later, when Bill said the job was finished, but the success or failure wouldn't be known for a couple of days, Banning told him: "You're stayin' until we know."

"I've done my best. Even you know that."

"He's got to live," Banning insisted doggedly.

"I'll stay with him," Bill promised. "But I should telephone Jack the Barber or he'll put out a searching party."

"The line's been out of order," Banning said. "I'll see if it's fixed."

A few minutes later he called Bill. "Be careful what you say," he warned. "I've got a gun on you."

"I know it," Bill answered. "Hello, Jack. This is Bill. I'm on a case, so don't expect me for a couple of days."

"Where are you?" Jack asked. "Are you speaking freely, or has someone a gun on you? If Banning's got you just tell me you're going to hang up now." His voice was almost a whisper.

"I'm going to hang up now," Bill said. "I have to keep an eye on my patient. I wasn't called for forty-eight hours or so. It's going to be nip and tuck." He hung up feeling that a smart man like Jack would figure out the patient's identity. He turned to Banning. "I could eat a square meal. Then I'd like a cot put in Dunbar's room. I plan to sleep there."

Banning gave him the necessary orders, then he went outside and called several of his men. "The damned fool operated on Dunbar and done a good job," he said. "Some kind of a doctor's oath made him do it. I think he's on the level in this, but I'm not sure. If he tries to make a sneak, rope and tie him. We need him until Dunbar's out of danger."

"Then what? Gun smoke?"

"Meredith's all that stands between me and that White Water Stand," Banning replied. "The trouble is, too many people know it. You've got to take a step at a time. Crowd things and folks forget their business and make trouble. Jim Meredith's dead. If this cuss is finished off the same way, there'll be trouble."

"What about sendin' him back on Rip-saw?" one man suggested. "I've never seen the hombre yet who could ride him. He's a killer hoss, and all the Meredithes think they can ride tough critters."

"I think that'll be it," Banning said. He returned to find Bill Meredith putting away a heavy meal. He watched him smoke a cigarette and turn in. Dunbar was breathing heavily, and Banning wondered if the saloonman was dying. Morning should tell one way or another.

WHISPERING awakened Bill Meredith from a heavy slumber. At first he wondered where he was, then with a start he realized his situation. He swung his feet to the floor and sat on the cot, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Dunbar was delirious, but words were falling from his lips that should never have been said. He never completed a sentence, nor followed a line of thought through, but his words were significant and set Bill to thinking. In a way they were like a puzzle. You could fit some of them together and get a partial picture, but there were blank spaces.

"Shut that woman up. A gun butt . . . stop . . . squawkin'! Let the damned house burn. Wolf wants the ranch." Bill listened for names, but they rarely came, and when they did meant nothing to him. He had been away too long. "Let him have it . . . stomach. It makes 'em sick."

When Dunbar wasn't burning ranchhouses he was riding to escape. Or he would be in the Borderland ordering a man's drink doped. There was nothing decent in anything the man had done. Bill reached over and touched Dunbar's head. It was hot. The man was running a temperature.

Suddenly Dunbar said: "Is that you, Wolf? Turn on the light! Wolf!"

"It's the doctor," Bill answered. "You're all right."

"Oh, Doc Steele." Then Dunbar was muttering again. The words Bill was waiting for came

at last. "I got Jim Meredith. I couldn't miss. But who got me?"

"Who do you think?" Bill asked, but the man was wandering again. Bill waited patiently. He was hearing evidence no court procedure would ever get from Dunbar's lips.

The floor creaked just beyond the door, and Banning came into the room, a lighted lamp in his hand. "I thought I heard him call me," he said.

"He called your name. He's out of his head," Bill answered. "There's nothing much to be done. I'll give him something to reduce his temperature."

"You didn't get him," Dunbar muttered. "Wolf got Winslow. Dusted him front and back. Dust spurted from his shirt when the bullet went in and when it come out."

"Get out of here," Banning told Bill brusquely. "I'll watch him." As Bill started to leave, he added: "Wait a minute. I don't know what you've heard, but a doctor can't repeat what a patient says to him, whether he's out of his head or not. Ain't that right?"

"That's right," Bill admitted.

Bill went into the living room and sat down in a comfortable chair to ponder on the situation. "I'm in a hell of a fix," he growled. "As Dr. William Meredith I'm in possession of facts Logger Bill Meredith could use to his advantage if he knew them. But professional ethics come in."

He finally went to sleep in a chair to be awakened by the cook, saying: "Bacon, eggs, flapjacks and coffee, doc." Bill could smell the food, and he washed up and went into the dining room.

BANNING came in as Bill was finishing his breakfast.

"Dunbar's sleepin' and his head ain't hot," Banning announced. "Them pills done the work, I guess. But you keep away from him until he's got sense enough to know what he's talkin' about."

There was no change in the wounded man's condition during the day. He held his own, and that was about all. He passed the crisis the second day, and Bill suggested that it was time he got back to Border.

"Hang around another day," Banning ordered. "I ain't takin' no chances. You can go tomorrow afternoon. I'll lend you one of my best horses. When you get to Border just tie up the stirrups and head him home. He'll come. His name's Rip-saw. He may buck a little, or he may not."

"I've ridden before." Bill answered dryly.

Margie arrived that evening, apparently ahead of time, because Banning began cussing as soon as he saw her coming, but he was very pleasant when she arrived.

"Bill!" Margie exclaimed. "I'm glad to see you. And how is the wounded man, uncle? Mr. Dunbar, isn't it?"

"He's on the road to recovery," Bill answered.

"I tried to get you on the phone, Bill, but something went wrong with the line just as your home answered. I wanted to learn how your brother was getting along and to tell you someone had tried to kill Mr. Dunbar."

"My brother died," Bill answered.

"Oh." Margie's voice showed her sympathy. "Because you were here I supposed he was getting along all right. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," Bill said. "I understand. What kind of a trip did you have?"

"Marvelous. I brought back two dozen trout. I'd never fished before. Do you want to see them?"

"Of course." He followed her to the kitchen. The trout ran between

twelve and fifteen inches in length and were firm and cold. Ferns and moss had created a sort of refrigeration and supplied a background for their beauty.

"Shall we walk around until the cook gets us a bite to eat?" Margie asked. "I'm a little tired, but I'm not used to riding, and perhaps walking will loosen up my muscles."

THEY sauntered down the road leading to the big house, and Bill noticed there was usually someone hovering in the background. Mostly they were smoking cigarettes and looking at the stars. And somehow Bill was sure they didn't have the slightest interest in a beautiful night.

"I'm crazy about this country," Margie confided, "but there is so much violence in it. Uncle tells me he has to employ armed guards to protect himself and property."

"He's right," Bill agreed, his voice rather grim, "there are people who don't like him."

"But why? What has he done?"

"Oh, it's the way of the frontier," Bill explained. "First men gets to fighting nature, then they fight each other. Usually there's some fellow who has made a go of it. Then there's a lazy, worthless cuss who wants to take it away from him. It doesn't make much difference what it is—cattle, timber, gold, water or a mining claim. The owner wants to hang onto it, then the shooting starts. That keeps up until the sort of order that makes civilization advance comes."

"And that sort of order is behind schedule in this country?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Why doesn't the Meredith Logging Co. set a good example by staying within the law?" she asked. "As I understand it, the loggers are always starting trouble with the cattle people."

Bill nearly exploded, but he forced himself to answer gravely.

"My own idea, Margie, is that this is your first visit here, and I've been away a long time, so neither of us can form a safe conclusion," he said. "Suppose we await developments."

"That will keep us from flying at each other's throats, at least," she agreed, smiling.

Later that evening a rider came in from Border and handed Banning a letter from Sheriff Nord. Banning read it and passed it over to Bill. It read:

DEAR WOLF:

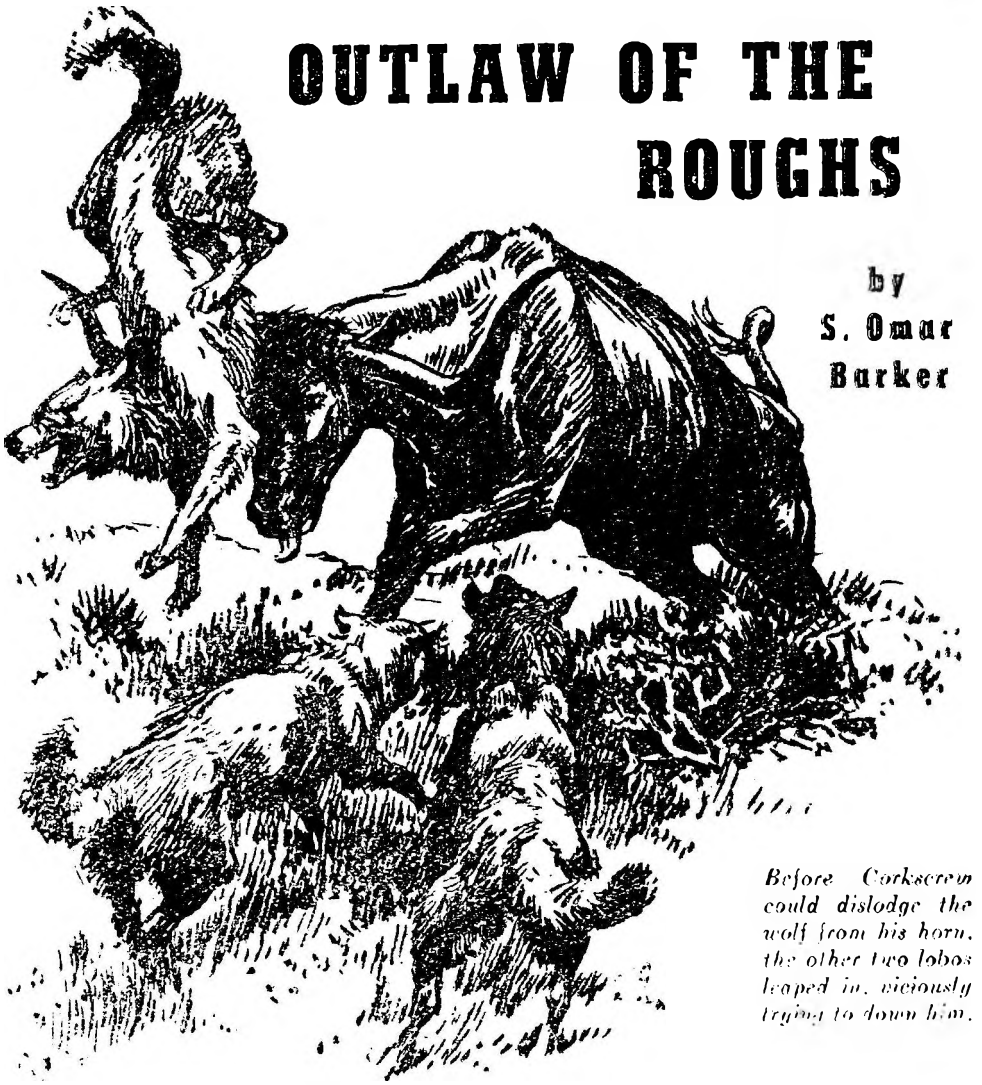
I just got a report on the bullet taken from Jim Meredith's body. It didn't come from Dunbar's gun, so that clears him. I turned the bullet over to the prosecuting attorney. He'll hold it as evidence until the guilty man can be arrested. I'm working on the case. NORD.

"That seems to settle it," Bill said. Inwardly he was seething. Dunbar had admitted his guilt as he lay muttering on the bed. The letter proved that Nord and Wolf were working together, with the sheriff undoubtedly taking orders from the rustler. It looked to Bill as if his first move must be to elect a new sheriff. But who would run? No mere figurehead could stand up against the Banning gang, and he knew of no one offhand who had the courage and experience to be a strictly on-the-square sheriff. "Unless it's Jack the Barber," he mused. "But he's always kept out of politics, claiming it was bad for the barber business. I'll have to see if I can't change his mind."

What will happen to Bill when he tries to ride Rip-saw? Will Jack the Barber agree to run for sheriff? Is there any chance of proving that Dead-face Dunbar murdered Jim Meredith? Don't miss the second installment of this smashing story of a cattle-timber war.

OUTLAW OF THE ROUGHS

by S. Omar Barker



Before Corkscrew could dislodge the wolf from his horn, the other two lobos leaped in, viciously trying to down him.

If he had been branded when little, maybe this Old Corkscrew steer wouldn't ever have got so wild. You take a calf of the longhorn breed and if it ain't jammed up in a herd when you go to rope it, it'll spook and run like all git out, wild as a deer. It'll raise plenty ruckus about being throwed, maybe even show fight when you let it up from the ordeal of hot iron and knife; but in the main it don't seem to hold onto the memory of this torment like an older critter does.

Of course cattle ain't human—not quite anyhow—but take yourself, for instance; chances are your pa paddled you plenty when you were little and you don't recollect much about it, but if he whipped you too big—well, I've knowed boys to run off to the wild bunch from too rough handling after they was old enough to feel their pride.

That's about the way it was with Old Corkscrew, except he was wild already. Born thataway, like his mother before him and all her high-hipped ancestors of the Texas breed before her, generation upon generation. It was his mother's own wildness that gave Corkscrew his start

unbranded. That old brown cow wasn't just man-shy by accident; she was wild on purpose, and that purpose was freedom.

But one spring the Tolliver cow hunt caught her too heavy with calf to outrun a horse, so they gathered her in and started her up the trail with a mixed herd. Now this old dun cow never aimed to walk all the way to Kansas for nobody. The night she knew her calf was going to be born, she sneaked off the bed ground and bore her bony-legged baby in a draw two miles away. Most cows wouldn't ever have been missed without a tally, but because of the remarkable corkscrew shape of her horns, and the trouble she'd given them, the drag men noticed this one was gone right away. So the trail boss spared a man to hunt her, while the herd moved on.

"Carry her calf on your saddle and she'll foller," advised the trail boss. "Once she's back in the herd we'll knock the calf in the head."

That was the fate of most calves born on the trail, too wabble-legged to keep up. How this mousy-dun little feller with a dark stripe down his back happened to escape it was because his longhorn ma got too dang proddy.

"Ain't moo-cow maternity marvelous!" growled this cow-huntin' cowpoke when he rejoined the herd without either the cow or calf, but with several horn rips in his pants. "Ever' time I got hold of that calf, he bellered his tongue out a foot, an' ever' time he bellered, this old four-legged she-lightnin' speared a horn through my shirt tail! Who wants to ride pantless to Kansas just for an ol' seven-dollar cow?"

"She'll drift back to home range," the trail boss said.

IN that opinion he was only partly wrong. The old brown cow drifted in the direction of her old home range, all right, but on the way she come onto a wild, brushy, rough and rugged patch of country that just seemed to suit her own wild nature. There, with a waterhole near the mouth of a rocky, brush-choked canyon to kind o' center on, she took up residence. And there, as wild and wary as any wolf, her mousy-dun calf grew into a big-boned, high-hipped yearling before he ever laid eyes on another critter of his own kind. He was a coming two-year-old when a couple of old mossy-horn renegades from a trail stampede, joined up with him and his ma to make them wilder than ever.

One thing about them Texas longhorns: they had noses as keen as a wolf's—and twice as suspicious. Corkscrew smelt them two renegade steers coming down to the waterhole long before they come in sight, and being a young bull now, he pawed the dirt and bellered some fight talk about it. But when they come close, snuffing and bowing their necks plumb unconvincing like steers do, he caught a faint whiff of another smell that made him shy away. The faint lingering hot-iron smell of these steers' road brand was the first man scent Corkscrew had smelled since he was a new-dropped calf, but it was enough to send him sidling warily into the brush.

Of course him and his ma both got used to them steers in time, and the four of 'em made up a little bunch of *cimarrones* wilder than deer.

Corkscrew was coming three, with curving horns two foot long, when he got his instinctive fear of humans painfully confirmed. One morning he was browsing Spanish dagger blossoms on a rocky bench high under the canyon's rim, when he heard cattle bawling. The sound was faint, but the young bull's ears were as keen as his nose. Right

away he placed it as way down to the southeast where the canyon flattened out into sandy flats and low-rolling hills. It was country he never had ventured into because it looked too open, but now that sound of bawling cattle gave him a mighty urge to git on down there and no foolin'."

For a starter he pawed the earth a couple of times and raised his head in a loud and squawky beller. His ma and the two steers stopped browsing and looked at him. They'd heard the cattle bawling, too, but with only a mild, passing interest. Just the same, when Corkscrew zigzagged down off the bench through brush and boulders, kind o' rumbling in his throat with every step, purty soon they follered.

Once the young bull begun to get out onto the flats where there wasn't much cover, he moved purty wary, for along with the smell of cattle that pulled him on into spite of himself, his nose also caught an occasional whiff of scent that made him want to turn tail and run—the sweaty smell of man and his riding gear. Once or twice Corkscrew stopped for a full minute, head high, testing the wind, undecided. But when there came to his forward-pricked ears the challenge of another bull bellering, that settled it. No bull could sass him like that and get away with it.

But he never did get to lock horns with this newcomer.

DRIVING their cattle onto this new range they'd picked out, Sam Bardee and his two boys had heard the wild bull coming, and they were ready for him. When Corkscrew hove over a rise into sight of the cattle, two men and a boy on horseback closed in on him. With a big, snuffy snort Corkscrew forgot all about bull fight and took out for cover. But the first rider he ran past laid a loop over his horns, and almost before he knew it, he was stretched out on the ground with the wind knocked out of him.

"He's a maverick," said Sam Bardee. "Billy, make us a fire."

Billy was only a big-eyed, tow-headed kid about ten or eleven, but he soon had a fire going.

Sam Bardee ran his fingers around the base of one horn where the coarse hair grew out long over it.

"Just makin' the first wrinkle," he commented. "Mighty fine curve for a three-year-old bull. More like a steer's horns, Deet."

Deet Bardee, already mustached at twenty, looked up from whetting his knife and winked at his kid brother.

"You want to slap the hot iron on him, Billy?"

Billy shook his head. Hurting critters was one thing about cowboying he was afraid he wouldn't ever come to like, and Deet was always rawhiding him about it. He watched the dun longhorn go through his ordeal of hot iron and knife with nary a beller—only sort of a smothered grunt or two when it hurt the worst. Maybe you've noticed how it's often the wildest cattle that beller the least.

"Poor feller," said Billy as the hot iron seared the helpless steer's hide. Deet Bardee looked at him kind o' funny.

"Save your symapthy an' climb on your horse," he said, purty sharp. "This un will fight!"

But all this mousy-dun steer wanted when they let him up was to get away from there, and the way he struck out for the brush, it was a good thing nobody got in his road.

"He's a mite wild, boys," said old Sam Bardee. "We'd better have beefed him. We're liable never to gather him again."

"I'll gather him, all right"—Deet

Bardee laughed that bold way he had—"when the time comes."

But when the Bardees gathered steers off their new range the next early summer to drive to market, all they saw of this Corkscrew steer was a brownish flash through the brush and the gleam of sun on polished horn. But they did get a good view of the other two *ladrónes* running with him, and of the old brown cow.

"Only way we'll ever gather them boogers," Sam Bardee opined, "is to shoot 'em an' pack out the meat."

But to Dee Bardee the wild cattle were a challenge.

"The steer never growed horns that I can't bring in alive," he bragged.

"All right," agreed his father. "I can spare you three days. Better take Billy along. The experience will do him good. But don't you get him hurt."

IT was mighty cruel, brush-choked country, and the two Bardee brothers came out of it after three days' riding, plenty tired, torn and tattered—but without any wild steer.

That was the last this Corkscrew steer saw or smelt of humans till cow-hunt time the next year. You might think that with all the other cattle ranging within sound and smell of his own favorite hide-outs, Corkscrew would have taken to running with them, but he didn't. Even when the other two renegade rannies gradually took up with the tamer cattle, Corkscrew and his bony-hipped ma continued to range off to themselves. Maybe he was a natural-born loner, or maybe he remembered what had happened the first time he'd set out to join a herd. Whatever the reason, he seemed now to have lost most of his interest in other cattle, except to be suspicious of them.

That year when the Bardee market herd moved north, bound for far-off slaughterhouses, the other two longhorn wildies went along—one of them with a busted horn and a knot in his tail as a result of the fight he put up when Deet Bardee roped him, neck-yoked him to a tame ox and brought him in. But up on his favorite brushy bench under the rimrock, Corkscrew still ranged free.

In all that spring's riding the Bardees had managed to get more than a glimpse of him only once as he paused on a ridge top to gauge the danger of horsemen approaching from two directions and decide which way to run.

If the steer had only known it, he could have headed right on past one of the riders, for Billy Bardee was still a mite young to rope a *cimarrón* the size of Corkscrew. Not knowing that, the steer dodged off into a narrow canyon, just as Deet Bardee had planned, and found his course blocked by new-raised poles across the narrows. Hoof sounds and brush crashing behind him warned that it was too late to turn back. Somewhere in the chase the old brown cow had given them the slip, but Corkscrew, it seemed, was trapped. Plumb panicked, he crashed head on into the barrier of poles and sent it toppling. All Deet Bardee found of his trapped steer when he arrived were a few tufts of mousy-dun hair snagged on a broken pole.

"Gee," said young Billy Bardee, "did you see the curve of them horns gleamin' in the sun when he stopped back there on the ridge? Sure growed since we branded him, ain't they?"

"Yeah," grunted Deet, in a tone that sounded as though he plumb hated this steer just for getting away from him. "The corkscrew-horned old outlaw!"

That, I reckon, was when they really first begun calling him Old Corkscrew, though of course he wasn't but a five-year-old. That might be purty old for a steer nowadays, but it was practically the prime of youth for a longhorn.

THAT winter Corkscrew learnt that cattle had other enemies beside men. Old and mossy-horned as she was, the old brown cow had had another calf, and one sharp moonlight night a pack of four lobos decided to beef it. At the old cow's beller, Corkscrew came on the trot.

Though the cow was standing them off, already the wolves had brought blood, and the smell of it maddened Corkscrew. With a snuff of wind you could have heard half a mile away, Corkscrew rammed a spear-sharp horn clear through the nearest wolf so that the lobo, gasping and snarling, was still spitted on the horn when he raised his had.

Naturally this kind o' blinded and confused the steer for a second, and before he could dislodge the dying wolf, another lobo leaped into slash at his rear. Half an inch deeper, the ripping fangs would have hamstrung him for sure. As it was, the wolves now concentrated on the calf and dragged it down. Once it ceased bellering, both Corkscrew and the cow quit the fight. A week later the old brown cow died from her wounds, and Corkscrew himself come into the spring with a festered lump of soreness in his lower ham meat. It was this limp that betrayed him into grazing up on the flat mesa top above the rimrock where it did not hurt him so bad to walk as it did in the roughs.

That was where Deet Bardee found him and laid a loop over them mighty corkscrew horns of his. Deet was on a fresh, fast horse, and with his limp Old Corkscrew just couldn't put on the speed to get to cover. Once caught, the steer put up plenty of fight. Such a fight, in fact, that Deet couldn't ever have handled him if young Billy hadn't heard the ruckus and topped the rim about then to help. Deet's horse already had a horn rip along its flank and one leg of Deet's chaps was torn and blood-streaked at the bottom when Billy rode up.

Though only about thirteen or fourteen, now, young Billy had enough experience of roping so that the fighting set-up of this ruckus made him look mighty sober.

"He's sure on the prod, Deet!" he yelled. "You reckon we better cut him aloose?"

"What's the matter—you skeered to put your twine on him?"

It was not Deet's taunt that threw young Billy's rope arm suddenly into gear. It was because he saw that in just one more gnat's wink, his over-brash brother was mighty liable to be crushed under a hooked down horse, if Billy didn't do something to stop it.

With two ropes on him, Old Corkscrew still made it a tussle, but they finally hogged him down. For good measure, Deet's iron-muscled hands tied a knot in his tail—not just the hair, but in the limber part of the bone.

"You oughtn't to do that to him, Deet!" Billy protested.

"That'll label him till we git back," grunted Deet. "Tomorrow we'll bring up a tame ox to yoke him too and drag him in."

He pulled out the makin's, rolled a brown one and lit it. When it was burning good he stooped and held the hot end to the helpless steer's nose.

"Now beller!" he said. "Maybe that'll learn you not to hook my horse next time!"

Old Corkscrew's muscles tightened and quivered, but he didn't beller. Young Billy's boot toe sud-

denly kicked the burning cigarette out of Deet's hand.

"Ain't you ashamed!" he said, a little white around the gills.

Deet looked at him kind o' funny, but didn't say anything. Then he got on his horse.

"We might just as well split the ridin' an' gather what we can on the way in," he said. "I'll swing around down the main canyon; you drop off the rim about a mile east."

The next day when old Sam Bardee came back with his two boys and a tame ox to yoke the captive steer to, all they found was a piece of busted hoggin' string. The big mousy-dun *cimarrón* with the corkscrew horns was gone.

"The blankety-blanked ol' booger!" snorted Deet. "I'm goin' to bring him in some day if it's the last thing I ever do!"

THEREAFTER, year after year, every time he could spare a few days, Deet Bardee would purt near wear hisself out riding these roughs after that steer. You might say it purty near got to be a mania with him to prove that he could capture that old longhorn alive.

But Old Corkscrew must have remembered the torment it had cost him both times when he'd let a loop reach him, and it was plain he didn't aim ever to let it happen again. The wolf wound in his thigh had healed up, so that except for sort of a jerky gait in his hind parts, it didn't bother him no more. Certainly it didn't prevent him from giving the slip to Deet Bardee and to several other cowboys that took a whirl at ketching him, just for the hell of it.

When other steers dodged roundups for a year or two and went wild, always sooner or later some hell-for-leather cowpoke brought them in. But not Old Corkscrew. A loner born, his whole existence seemed to be devoted to just two things: one was to grow more curve, length and wrinkles onto them magnificent horns of his; the other was to stay free.

Sometimes Billy Bardee rode with Deet on these hunts, for though the two brothers never did plumb agree on the question of rough-treating cattle, they did have a natural brother's likin' for each other, so that when old Sam Bardee died they still stuck together at cattle raising. Sometimes they'd sight Old Corkscrew within rifle range, and more than once Billy spoke his mind:

"I wish you'd shoot that old *cimarrón*, Deet, and be done with it—or else make up your mind to let him be!"

But Deet wouldn't shoot the critter nor hear of anyone else doing it. He'd said that the steer didn't live he couldn't capture alive, and, by golly, he aimed to prove it!

In the meantime nine more wrinkles grew on Old Corkscrew's horns, and with the growth of each wrinkle his fame spread as the longhorn *ladino* that couldn't be caught. But all the big, rawboned, mousy-dun steer with corkscrew horns and a busted tail bone knowed about it was that only by constant vigilance he still ranged free.

THE year Old Corkscrew was sixteen, Billy Bardee about twenty-three or four and Deet Bardee thirty-three, a drought hit the country, the like of which nobody had ever seen. One by one nearly all the waterholes dried up and the grass shriveled until there was nothing left for the Bardees to do but gather their cattle—what hadn't already died on them—and move them to another range.

So once more, like him and his ma done at first, Old Corkscrew wintered alone in the rough country, and come into spring so ga'nt and

pore that his shoulder top was sharp enough to split a hailstone, if there'd been any falling. What belly he had left seemed to be tucked plumb up into his flanks, and his back was swayed and bony.

For a while in the early summer of that second year of the drought, Old Corkscrew managed to find quite a few Spanish dagger blossoms to browse on. These not only gave him food, but enough moisture that he still hadn't had to venture down to the old waterhole at the mouth of the canyon, near which he had first been roped. For ever since the coming of the Bardee cattle, he had shunned that waterhole and the country near it.

But when the season of yucca blossoms passed and all the little waterhole farther up the canyon had gone bone dry, Old Corkscrew remembered that much-feared waterhole. Every day for a week, big silvery thunderheads had been rolling up over this rough country's upper rim, but still it didn't rain. Whether Old Corkscrew's nose was really keen enough to smell water in them clouds and waiting for it to rain, or whether it was his fear of going near that waterhole that held him back nobody knows. Whichever it was, he put off going to water down there as long as he could—long enough for any of these modern beef cattle to have long since thirsted to death. But there come a day when thirst blindness begun to make things look weavy before his eyes, and he couldn't put it off any longer.

Purty near two miles away Corkscrew smelt the water and broke into a high, jerky trot. But when he came out onto the open flat about a hundred yards from where them big old wide-branched cottonwoods shaded the stinky little waterhole, he jerked suddenly to a dead stop. Putting his great big old head down, he snuffed the ground.

Already Corkscrew's eyesight was so weakened from thirst that the hazy sight of a high pole corral around the waterhole did not bother him. Neither did he see the man crouched still as death in the fork of a big cottonwood limb that branched out over the gateway into the stout little corral. As far as what he saw was concerned, Old Corkscrew never would have stopped that far away. But somehow the suspicion got through to his wary old brain that there was something human around somewhere, so it must have been through his nose that it got there.

Whatever it was, some deep-rooted instinct of danger stopped him at the brush's rim, and finally, after an hour of wary, cautious circling, drove him back, still thirsty, into the thickets.

That, it happened, was in broad daylight with a hot sun shimmering the air, and from his perch in the limb crotch over the gate, Deet Bardee saw the steer and grinned to himself with satisfaction.

"He'll be back," he thought, "an' quick as he's inside, I'll drop this pole across the openin', jump down there and rack up them others—an' I've got him! Nossir, the steer don't live that I can't bring in alive once I make up my mind!"

But at dark Deet was still waiting. A mile up the canyon Old Corkscrew, his jerky gait weaving a little, was heading back into the roughs to search again for some dribble of water he could drink in safety, his fear still stronger than his thirst.

THAT was how come the steer neither saw nor heard the rider who came with a spare horse, down onto which Deet swung from the cottonwood without touching the ground, after lowering the barrier pole across the gate.

"I'll be hanged!" whispered Deet, when he saw who it was that had brought the horse for him, instead of the Mexican he expected. "What the devil you doin' here, Billy?"

His brother's voice was plumb quiet.

"I've been up on the Escoba scoutin' for grass," he said. "So I just rode back this way. I found Pablo at the old camp and he told me you was here, trying to trap Old Corkscrew. He told me how you'd rigged this trap, and how he was supposed to come bring you a horse to climb down on so you wouldn't get no fresh boot scent on the ground. Said you'd raise the devil if it wasn't done right, so I told him I'd see to it. Deet, have you gone plumb crazy?"

"Maybe it looks like it, Billy." Deet shrugged. "But for ten dang years that old scalawag steer has been givin' me the slip. Now with this drought on, I've got him where the hair is short. Crazy or not, I'm goin' to lay over that water trap till I gather him in!"

For a moment Billy Bardee didn't say anything; then he spoke:

"But suppose he comes to water while you're gone?"

"I'm countin' on that pole I let down acrost the gate to stop him," said Deet. "It's got the smell of my hands on it. Besides, at moonrise I'll be back there, waitin' for him. The way the night air always lifts, he won't smell me up that high. Billy, I'm goin' to pen that steer if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The way Billy told it later, for a minute he had half a notion to see if the smack of a gun butt over his brother's head would knock the foolishness out of him. But instead he talked about other things, how the cattle were making out on their new range, the prospects of rain, and so on. Then, without any comment, he brought Deet back and boosted him up on his perch again along about moonrise.

"When you git him penned," he said, pinching out his "tailor-made" cigarette as he fixed to ride away, "just holler. I'll be down the draw a piece and bring your horse. Your pen will hold Old Corkscrew overnight, won't it?"

"Yeah," said Deet, "if he ever steps into it, I've got him!"

"Maybe he smelt you and won't come back," Billy suggested.

"He'll come back all right! He *got* to or die of thirst!"

And that, though not in words, was what Old Corkscrew snuffing hopelessly at the faint dampness of waterless waterholes up the canyon, was thinking about then his own self.

With the white moon looking all the whiter because of the midnight blackness of thunderclouds booming over the northwestern horizon, Old Corkscrew came back, and this time he did not stop at the edge of the brush. In moonlight almost as bright as day, Deet Bardee froze motionless on his perch and watched him. He came slow, he came wary, snuffy at every step—but he came. About twenty yards away he stopped, his great head thrown high, his corkscrew horns gleaming in the moonlight. It was a magnificent head, the finest horns Deet Bardee had ever seen. But the great, tall body behind them was gaunt, its flanks sunken, its ribs visible even in that poor light; and probably for the first time in his life Deet Bardee felt a little sorry for a cow critter.

"Never mind, you old outlaw!" he thought. "Just step inside here and you can drink all the dang water you want!"

DEET had heard Injuns say that just "thinkin' toward" a wild animal is liable to spook it, and the

way this steer suddenly whirled made him purt' near believe it. But there was an aching dryness inside Old Corkscrew that brought him back again, and this time he kept coming. Slow. Mighty slow, snuffing every inch of the ground so careful that it took him a full ten minutes to come that last twenty yards.

Cow critters ain't built to see upward much, and the natural lift of night air kept the man odor high, so that neither sight nor scent of the man up in the cottonwood fork was a give-away. With his head just inside the opening to the pen, Corkscrew snuffed eagerly toward the water, letting out a low, moaning bawl that seemed to say he couldn't stand it no longer. But even then he backed away again to smell up and down the uprights of the gate. But a week's sun and wind had purified them since human hands had last touched them.

From somewhere far to the north, come a low rumble of thunder. Old Corkscrew turned his head toward the brush that had so long sheltered his wildness, and for a full minute stood that way, undecided. Then with his head low, snuffing the ground, he stepped inside the gate. Deet could see the sharp shoulder peak directly under him, then the bony, dark-lined back, then the high bones of the hips, as the steer advanced slowly into the trap, pulled by a thirst he could no longer resist.

By that time I expect Deet's nerves were as much on edge as the steer's. For years he'd been braggin' that he'd capture this old rannihan of the roughs, and now the time had come!

"Swappin' his freedom for a drink of stinky water," thought the cowboy. "Two more steps an' I've got him!"

Deet never did know which exploded first, that old steer's big windy snuff as he whirled back out from that gate, or the crack of thunder off up the canyon.

A dozen yards away from the gate, Old Corkscrew stopped, threw up his head and stood dead still except for the wrinkling of his leathery old nose, sniffing the smell of the rain that Deet could now hear roaring down out of black clouds somewhere up the canyon. Then the steer bawled once, kind o' low, eager sound, and hit a high trot for the thickets—headin' for that free water the black sky was putting down to fill old waterholes.

"You win, you old blankety-blank!" Deet yelled as he saw Old Corkscrew's bent tail vanish into the brush. "Git an' be danged!"

Down the draw Billy Bardee heard the yell, but not the words, and came on the lope. Deet was down inside the pole pen, when Billy got there and swung down beside him.

"Didn't you git him, Deet? I thought I heard you yell!"

"I had the booger!" Deet sounded rueful. "One more step an' I'd have dropped the pole! But to blazes with him! Any critter smart enough to know when thunder means rain, I'm through monkeyin' with, Billy!"

Casually Billy Bardee stepped on the white butt of a dead tailor-made cigarette gleaming in the moonlight about a steer's length inside the gate.

"You never know what'll spook a longhorn," he said.

But Billy Bardee thought he knew all right what had spooked this one. He knew it hadn't been thunder, but the smell of that cigarette butt he himself had tossed there only a few hours ago for exactly that purpose. Just like he knew—but hadn't ever told—who had busted Old Corkscrew's hoggin' string for him that time ten years ago up on the mesa.

THE END

LAWMAN'S LAST RIDE

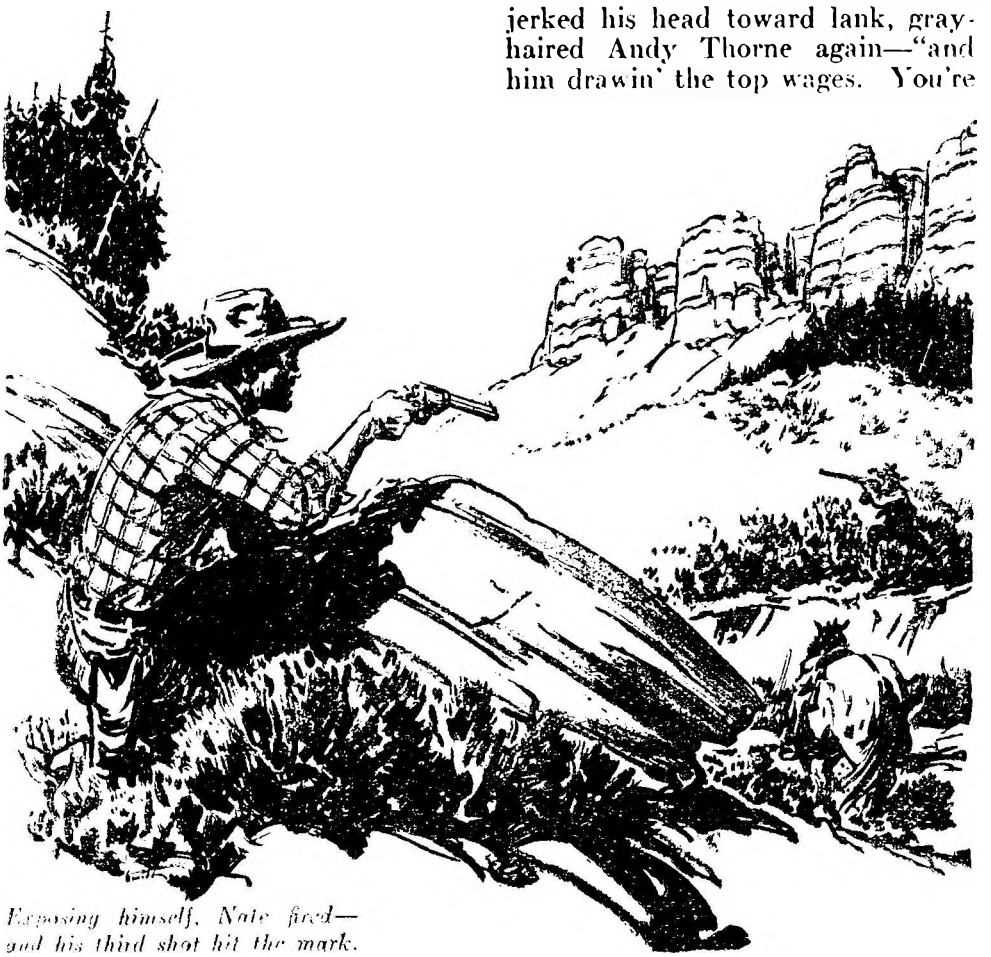
by Cliff Walters

PAUSING to roll a cigarette before mounting his horse, young Nate Tyler, deputy sheriff of Basin County, said to the plump, one-armed man who leaned against the barn, "Thanks for inviting a couple hungry lawmen in for dinner, John. That grub sure hit the spot."

John Larrabee nodded toward the other lawman, old Sheriff Andy Thorne, who was already riding away, and said, "He's got all of ten miles to ride 'fore he can serve a certain warrant and get back to Basinville. You'll have about sixty miles of it 'fore *you* get back to town. That is, if you find that bay team that was sold by a man who forgot they was mortgaged."

Nate grinned easily. "That's all right. I'm young and strong. So's my sorrel here."

"You're a fool!" the rancher snorted. "Doin' all his work"—he jerked his head toward lank, gray-haired Andy Thorne again—"and him drawin' the top wages. You're



Exposing himself, Nate fired—and his third shot hit the mark.

doin' the sheriff's work, and have been for three-four years, while Thorue draws the big money. Folks are talkin' about it, and callin' you what you are, Nate—a fool! You could've been elected sheriff last year if you'd had gumption enough to—"

"Folks can talk too much, John." The smile on Nate's face vanished. His tone took on an edge as he added, "They forget about a young cowpuncher that got busted up by a buckin' horse. A feller that got medical care—and a good job after he was well again—because old Andy Thorne felt sorry for him."

"You've squared that debt long ago, Nate," Larrabee persisted "And you can't deny that Andy's practically takin' a pension now from the county. Why don't he turn over his star to you and—"

"He was a good-enough sheriff when he caught, and throwed behind bars, the rustler that shot your arm off, wasn't he, John? Yeah! But that's all water under the bridge now."

"I won't argue with you, Nate," came the reply. "I think the world of old Andy. So does everybody else. But he just ain't fit to be sheriff no more. He's too old, too slow—"

Nate didn't hear any more. He was suddenly watching a rider, a woman astride a harnessed horse, galloping along to intercept Andy Thorne. And, even at that distance, Nate could hear her scream, "Sheriff! My husband—he's been shot!"

Nate leaped to his saddle and rode fast toward the sheriff, who was beckoning to him. Then he heard the woman's brief, tearful story. Her husband, Steve McNeal, had been shot while unloading hay at the corral, and by an assailant who had fired from the ridge overlooking the McNeal Ranch.

"It was Humpy Mulhorn!" she declared. "I got a glimpse of him when he was making his getaway on a black horse!"

"Mulhorn?" old Andy Thorne echoed. "The State's got both him and his gun-fightin' brother, Link, workin' in a convict road gang way over on—"

"He's got away, then," Nate cut in quickly. "How bad's Steve shot up, Mrs. McNeal?"

"Not badly, I hope," she answered. "But I've got to get back to him. I thought John Larrabee would go to town for the doctor."

"He will. He's comin' up here now," Nate said. "Come on, Mrs. McNeal. I'll ride home with you, pick up Mulhorn's trail!"

"Yeah, we'd better do that," said old Andy Thorne.

ABOUT half an hour later Nate and his boss, an elderly sheriff whose best years were behind him, headed up Loop Creek and into the rough, butte-turreted country beyond. Old Andy wondered if both the Mulhorn brothers, rounded up and jailed a year ago by Nate Tyler and Steve McNeal while trying to get out of the country with a dozen of the latter's horses, had escaped from the convict road gang.

"They might've, all right," Andy Thorne said, frowning. "Some folks claimed that Link Mulhorn, dang his thievin' hide, had a few hundred dollars cached away in that old cabin where him and Humpy camped, over at Swamp Springs. Maybe while Humpy was tryin' to get even with Steve McNeal, for havin' him sent up, Link went to their old cabin. They wouldn't have expected we'd be ridin' so close to the McNeal place today, and that we'd be on Humpy's trail—"

Nate Tyler was impatient at this idle speculation, and the leisurely gait of Andy's old roan horse. He wanted to go faster. Now, glimpsing a rider on a black horse, crossing

a hogback up there in the rough country on the mountain slope, he could restrain himself no longer.

"There he is, Andy!" he said excitedly. "I'm travelin'!"

"Where do you see—"

But Nate, letting the sure-footed sorrel step out at a fast, and dangerous, pace for such rough going, was leaving his boss behind. And hating to, in a way. Still, if Humpy Mulhorn was to be caught and put back where he deserved to be—

Nate's sorrel was fleet and strong. He was taking the rough country in his stride, was making toward that distant hogback over which a fugitive had vanished. Then Nate met a sheep wagon lurching down a rocky trail, a wagon whose rough lock scarred a jagged mark into the steep trail.

The driver stopped his team, but Nate didn't even slacken his pace. The deputy had no time to waste in passing the time of day with loquacious, gossipy old Merino Marsh today. Waving, Nate spurred on, leaving Merino gaping after him.

Half a mile farther on his way, Nate looked back. He could see old Andy Thorne talking to the man on the sheep wagon, and a little twinge of resentment flicked the deputy. Humpy Mulhorn might be clear over the mountains and into the next county before old Andy Thorne ever caught up with him. Then came the thought that old Andy might not want to catch up with a desperate, would-be murderer, an escaped convict.

Nate's jaw set a little as he rode on. Somebody had to put Humpy Mulhorn back behind bars. And maybe they'd keep him there this time! Well, here was a typical example of what one-armed John Larrabee had said today, "He just ain't fit to be sheriff no more. He's too old, too slow—"

Nate put those thoughts from his head. He forgot what Larrabee had said, and remembered what a friend in need old Andy had been to an unfortunate cowpuncher who had been smashed up by a bucking horse.

RIDING along a rocky slope, and scanning the country ahead for sight of the man he sought, Nate heard the echoing whinny of a horse —the first evidence that he was closer to Humpy Mulhorn than he had expected. The sound was interrupted by the crack of a rifle, the scream of lead that, passing just in front of Nate's saddle, took a nick out of a bridle rein.

Nate flung himself from the saddle, and, pulling his .45, the only weapon he was carrying, leaped behind the protection of a round-topped rock. Another rifle bullet screamed off that rock and dusted him with granite spray as he dropped to his knees.

Humpy Mulhorn had cached himself in a little clump of jack pines across a shallow ravine, and over on the other slope; had abruptly veered from his course, at a spot where it wouldn't be expected, to launch his ambush. That was why Nate had presented a broadside target. And that first rifle shot might have been disastrous, if it hadn't been hurried by the betraying whinny of a stolen black horse. A horse that stood tied—with only the top of its head visible to the deputy —in the ravine.

"You shouldn't've missed that first shot, Mulhorn," Nate said grimly to himself. "Sooner or later you're goin' to have to make a break for your horse, unless you've got an awful lot of rifle ammunition!"

At that moment Nate was more worried about his sorrel than about anything else. No doubt Mulhorn would try to put Nate afoot, and, under the circumstances, that wouldn't be hard to do. No rock on

this slope was large enough to protect a horse, no rock nearby, or the sorrel, the best horse Nate had ever worked, would have had that protection.

Now, with dread in his heart for the safety of his horse, Nate risked his own neck to sight, if he could, the man taking refuge in the clump of jack pines across the ravine. He drew another bullet from that rifle over there, one that barely missed its mark.

The sorrel horse, having filled up on dry hay at noon, and thirsty now after its long, uphill trip, began moving toward the ravine which carried a small trickle of water. Perhaps that move saved the animal's life. Once down in that ravine, it would be closer to Mulhorn than it was to Nate. And Mulhorn needed a fast horse. If the fugitive could get hold of the sorrel's reins, and could put a bullet through the little black horse he had ridden far and hard, thereby leaving the deputy afoot, he'd be able to make his getaway.

Mulhorn's eagerness to reach the sorrel, which soon passed out of Nate's sight, was what proved the outlaw's undoing. Realizing that Nate had only a six-shooter, and that the range was quite long for such a weapon, Mulhorn bombarded the deputy's rock protection with a couple of shots, then scurried, humped back, weaving above the sagebrush, toward the ravine.

Nate lanced two shots in that direction, although he was forced to expose himself. His third shot, unhurried, hit the mark. And Humpy Mulhorn staggered, went down in the sage. Then Nate, racing toward the shelter of a rock nearer the ravine, yelled, "Better give up, Mulhorn, or—"

Hit hard, the convict still had strength enough to rise to his knees and pull the trigger of his rifle, a quick but lucky shot that smashed Nate's right wrist. Dropping his gun, the deputy flung himself behind the rock toward which he had been racing, but he had nothing more to fear. Humpy Mulhorn had fired his last shot. Now he was sagging to the earth.

NATE was down at the water in the ravine, awkwardly applying a bandanna bandage to his injured wrist when old Andy Thorne, guided by sound of gunfire, came riding down toward him.

"You got him, Nate," Andy said, "but it looks like he nearly got you, too."

"He came close enough," admitted the deputy calmly. "Me, I'm glad I got in the best shot, though. My gun arm's no good right now. And I've never learned to handle a six-shooter with my left hand like I've seen some do. You, for instance." He grinned a little.

"Can I help you tie that up?" the sheriff asked.

"No, thanks, Andy. This bandage'll do till we get back to town. But I'm glad you're here. With one arm on the blink, I'll need help loadin' Humpy on that black horse there."

"Yeah," said the sheriff, "that's right."

After that unpleasant task had been accomplished, Andy Thorne said, "You ride over to Bellmare Springs—it's only about three miles east of here—and get old Sam Merritt's wife to fix that arm up for you, Nate. The old lady's good at such jobs. And I can lead this black horse back to town, so just take your time."

"Shucks, this is nothing," Nate told him. "I'll wait till I get to town 'fore I—"

"You do as I tell you," Andy Thorne cut in flatly.

"O. K.," answered the deputy, but his mouth set just a little. A little

awkwardly he mounted his sorrel horse and rode away. Rode away with resentment plaguing him. And with John Larrabee's words ringing in his ears, "He just ain't fit to be sheriff no more. He's too old, too slow. . . . He's practically on a pension—"

Well, old Andy was taking advantage, here and now, of an opportunity to change public opinion. The sheriff, having arrived at the scene after the shooting and danger were over, was now going to ride in triumph back to Basinville. Ride alone into the little town, leading a horse which bore the body of a notorious outlaw.

THE farther Nate Tyler rode in the direction of Bellmare Springs, the hotter grew the flame of his resentment. He appreciated all that old Andy Thorne had done for him, and he had tried to show that appreciation by doing the work of two men this past year. But now, old Andy was rubbing it in, was making the most of an opportunity—

Nate changed his course and, riding slowly, headed back toward town. When his injured arm was dressed, it would be dressed by a doctor. Old Andy had no right to give him orders about something like this.

About an hour later, Nate rode from the mouth of a canyon and struck a trail which bore the jagged mark of a rough-lock chain, the trail where he had passed old Merino Marsh earlier that afternoon. Other tracks on that steep-pitched trail showed that Andy Thorne, leading a black horse, had passed here on his way to town not so long ago.

Nate rode another mile or so before he entered a grassy swale and saw a bunch of sheep stringing down, from the north, toward a sheep wagon which had stopped beside the little creek. Old Merino had pulled camp for his herder, and was now establishing a new one.

As Nate watched the distant flock string through the cedars, he suddenly heard above the faint tinkling of bells, the sharp, jarring noise of gunfire coming from the broadening swale below the camp.

Nate took one look in that direction. Then, putting spurs to his sorrel, and ignoring the yells of old Merino Marsh who stood in the doorway of his wagon, the deputy sped hell-bent toward a scene where danger was again striking. Striking at old Andy Thorne who, a sun-glinting gun in his hand, was battling it out with another rider, a big man on a buckskin horse.

One glance at that big man had been enough for Nate. It was Link Mulhorn, Humpy's brother. And Link was the tougher of the two, cooler, more dangerous. Evidently he had headed up this way to join his brother, and instead had met up with Sheriff Thorne.

Those gunshots down there seemed to be hammering at Nate Tyler's heart, a heart suddenly filled, not with the resentment that had been there, but with a terible anxiety for an old sheriff who was gamely battling for his life. An old man who was leaning in his saddle, and then toppling off the roan horse which sashayed out from under him.

Trying awkwardly to pull his gun with his left hand, Nate drew near the scene. Now, seeing old Andy go down to the earth, the deputy flamed with anger. He would kill that big, hulking man who still clung to his own saddle. Kill him, somehow, if—

Sighting the fleet sorrel that came toward him, Mulhorn tried to wheel his buckskin horse and head for a clump of cedars on the rim of the swale. He never got that far. He, too, was reeling in his saddle. Then,

toppling, he crashed to the ground as the scared buckskin raced on. Nor did the outlaw move after he struck the ground.

A MOMENT later, Nate was bending over old Andy Thorne. Badly shot though he was, the sheriff managed to smile feebly.

"Don't look like that, Nate," he told his deputy. "It's all right. A man that wears a star—even if he's too old to be wearin' one—has got to expect things like this. And I got him, too, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Nate answered in a low voice. "And proved that you ain't too old to be wearin' a star, Andy. Any man that can shoot it out with Link Mulhorn, and win the—"

"I didn't win," Andy said feebly. "That is, in a way I didn't. I'm satisfied, though, just knowin' that Link Mulhorn'll never pull a gun on anybody else. Folks in this county'll be glad to see you wearin' my star, too, Nate. They know, and I know, that you've really been their sheriff this last year or two."

"Don't talk like that, Andy," Nate said, tortured by the realization of his own helplessness.

Andy Thorne's voice was fading. "I'm glad we could ride . . . together today. One last thing, pard. Learn to use . . . a gun in your left . . . hand."

That was the last thing old Andy Thorne said. But Nate was still kneeling there when Merino Marsh came galloping down the swale on a work horse.

Merino saw Andy Thorne's body, and said, "I'm sorry, Nate. But I ain't too surprised at what's just happened. I knowed Link Mulhorn was down on this end of the range. I seen him this afternoon. That's what I was goin' to tell you when I stopped my wagon on the trail, but you was chasin' Humpy, and didn't have time to stop and talk. Old Andy stopped, though. He knowed that Link was down this way."

"Yeah?" Nate was still looking down at the old sheriff who had died in harness. "So that's why he told me to go to Bellmare Springs to get my arm dressed. He knew I couldn't handle a gun with my left hand. And he knew, even if he was with me, I'd be an easy target for a lead slinger like that buzzard layin' out there. And . . . and me thinkin' he was a glory hunter."

"I don't quite savvy," said Merino.

"You will!" Nate answered. "Everybody will. They'll know, like I do, that they've just lost the best sheriff any county ever had. An old man with a heart as game as they come!"

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

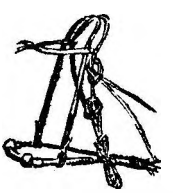
by Carl Raht

The prairies in Dakota Territory in 1879 were crisscrossed with buffalo trails. When traveling undisturbed the buffalo walked one behind the other in files, with the leaders of each file abreast the next leader for many columns wide, leaving deep ruts paralleling one another. After the settler came in, he was likely to arise at daylight to feed his stock and see buffalo that had bedded with his cows and oxen, jump to their feet and go lumbering away in the dim dawn.

The hair pipe was an ornament in great demand on the Great Plains from the earliest times until recently. The name, hair pipe, originated in frontier trading posts east of the Mississippi and was introduced by the itinerant traders to the plains region. During the nineteenth century the Shawnee, Kickapoo, Illinois, Miami, Ottawa and other Plains Indians used thin tubes of silver in which they confined individual locks of hair, hence the name hair pipes. Later shell pipes replaced those of silver. Great quantities of these pipes were made at a wampum factory in Pascack, Bergen County, New Jersey, from the interior portion of the Bahama conch shells. The pipes were usually around six inches long.

Shorty before 1850, the wampum factory in New Jersey invented a machine which enabled the manufacturer to drill six pipes at a time. The factory supplied the bulk of such ornaments to the trading posts operating west of the Mississippi. Later still, in the 60's, the Indians began making breastplates of these pipes. As the supply of shell beads dwindled, imitation pipes of bone were imported to the Plains, and today one often sees these bone pipes strung like beads on Indian costumes, somewhat like the breast ornaments on the uniforms worn by the Russian Cossacks.

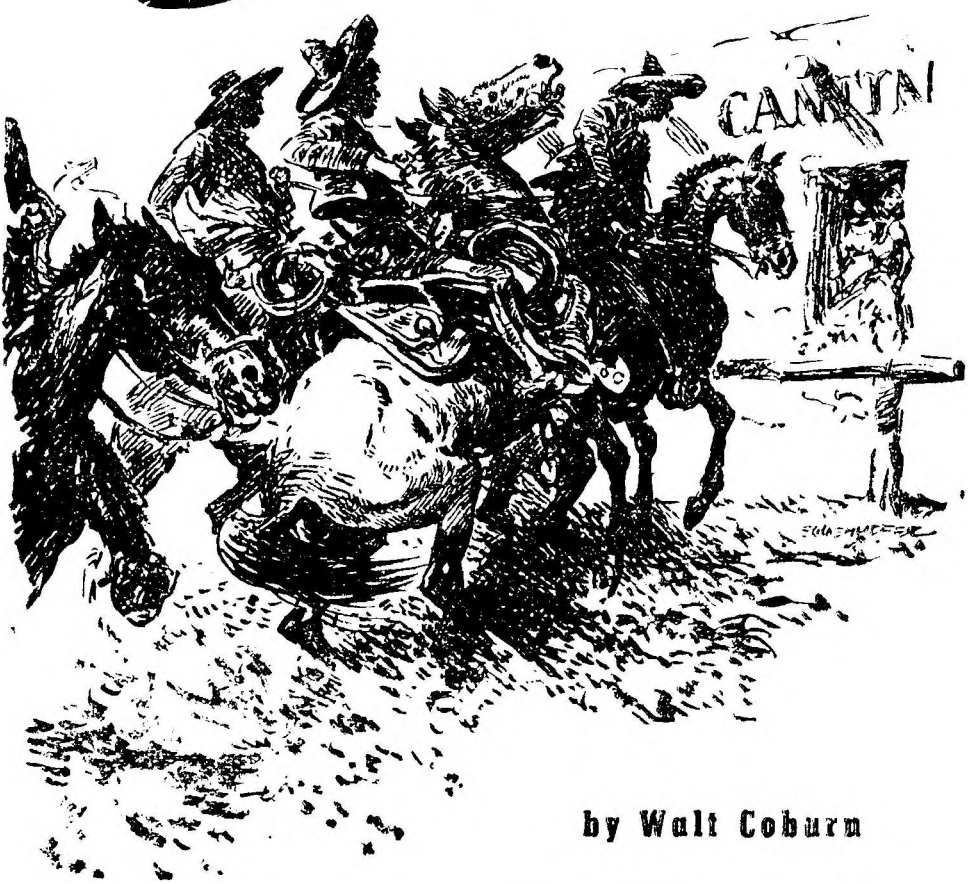
The hackamore, derived from the Mexican *jacama*, or halter, means just that, and is generally used in breaking young horses, although on many ranges cowhands work with cattle, rope and brand, and cut herds mounted on horses trained only to the hackamore. On the Mexican side, the vaquero has reins of plaited rawhide, with quirt, or *romal*, attached to the *jacama*. The Texas cowhand depends less on the hackamore than the northern rider, the centerfire and dally man. Up Northwest the rider or bronc twister starts his bronc with a hackamore, and gradually breaks him to the use of snaffle or broken bit, and finally graduates him to the stiff bit, usually a spade. When the hackamore is finally discarded, the horse is supposed to be bridle-wise. In the plains country, where the tie-fast and double-inch *hombre* builds his loop with a thirty-five-foot rope, he usually starts his bronc with a loose hackamore, then steps him up to the curb bit and begins work with cattle.



Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

Men on horseback would ride up in the night and swing from their saddles in front of the low-roofed adobe cantina.

Rebel Rancho Sombrero



by Walt Coburn

CHAPTER I

DANGER SIGNALS

JOHN WHITESIDE and Lupe Brendan were eating their noonday lunch on the river bank, there in the shade of the giant hackberry trees, when tragedy struck. Like lightning out of the cloudless, blue sky. Like a *diablito*.

"*Diablito*" is the Mexican name for the swift-moving whirlwinds or "dust devils" that are miniature cyclones in size. These toy-sized tornadoes gather the yellow dust of the Southwest deserts and whirl them in spectacular spirals miles high in the cloudless, turquoise sky.

Diablito was also the name given the small adobe settlement that sprawled out lazily across the Mexico and Arizona border, the high, rocky, forbidding mountains at its back on the northern side, the vast

stretch of waterless mesquite and cactus-strewn desert reaching out into Mexico to the ragged blue mountain range beyond. And hardly an hour of any day in the year went past when a watcher could not sight at least one of those twisting dust devils out yonder on the flat desert.

Diablito is, strictly speaking, a derivative of the name "Diablo." And Diablo means Satan or the Devil. So Diablito actually means "Little Devil."

A stranger from the East with plenty of leisure time on his hands and gifted with the vision of a philosopher and the powers of keen observation, a student of human nature with the proper amount of tolerance and a sense of humor and something of a true understanding of a people not of his own kind, could find here something worthwhile studying. Such a man could sit in the shade and count the dust devils out on the desert and tell himself that the little border village was properly named. He had counted no less than a score of those Diablitos during the long, lazy day.

That same man would watch the magnificent sunset that painted desert and mountains and sky with unbelievable colors. Then the purple dusk and the stars would appear like some trick of magic. Soft, yellow candlelights would show inside the dark adobe houses. Campfires would glow and there would be the enticing odors of frijoles and carne cooked in chili and the inviting smell of strong Mexican coffee simmering in blackened coffeepots at the edges of the campfires. Or on some fiesta occasion, a barbecue. Voices. The shrill squeals of children playing. The musical laughter of some señorita, some caballero strumming his guitar and singing little ranchero songs in the moonrise.

The thudding of shod hoofs and the creak of saddle leather and the jingle of big-roweled silver-mounted spurs and men on horseback would ride up out of the starlit night and swing from their saddles at the long hitch rack in front of the low-roofed adobe cantina. Mexican vaqueros and Americano cowpunchers. Money in their pockets and the craving for drink and revelry. The drab little border town would come to life. Before sunrise there would be the flash of naked knife blades or the crashing roar of .45 six-shooters. Cursing. The shrill scream of a terrified dance-hall señorita. Swift pounding of shod hoofs fading into silence out yonder in the desert; blood spilled on the hard-packed adobe, and death. The acrid tang of burnt gunpowder blotting out the lesser odors of stale sweat and cheap perfume, tobacco smoke and tequila, inside the cantina. On such wild nights the man from the East would forget about the dust devils he had been watching all that lazy day. And the name Diablito would take on its other meaning for this Mexican border town where the passions of men ran hot after the liking of the Señor Diablo.

THE stranger from back East was John Whiteside. He had given up a promising law practice back there and had come West to die. So certain was he that his days were numbered, he had not taken the trouble to fetch along his law library. One of those coughing spells would leave him exhausted and shaken and there would be crimson splotches on the white linen handkerchief he'd held to his mouth. There had been no hope in his heart. He called himself a walking dead man, living on borrowed time. Though he was not yet thirty, his black hair was thickly sprinkled with gray. His thin-lipped mouth was twisted with the bitterness that

left no room in his heart for even a desperate prayer. The utter hopelessness inside him was reflected in his deep-set hazel eyes as he lay on a canvas cot outside the best adobe house at Diablito and watched his first sunset, wondering in his grim bitterness if he were watching that sun go down for the last time.

But it had not been John Whiteside's last sunset. The bitter hopelessness inside his heart was gradually replaced by a strange new zest for living. His hatred and loathing for the tough, drab, sun-baked little border town and its mixed population of Mexicans and Americans, stubbornly gave way to something that was akin to a real fondness for the place and an understanding of its citizenry. He was rapidly learning the Mexican language and the ways of its people. His pale, tightly stetched skin took on a tanned, leathery color. His mouth lost its bitter twist and his hazel eyes became clear and bright, crinkled at the corners from long days of watching the desert and mountains.

A year and half of another year passed and John Whiteside's cough was gone and he could not remember how long it had been since there had been blood on his white-linen handkerchief. The man who had come to Diablito to die had lived to see more than one big, husky, hard-bitten man "go west" in a blaze of gunfire and powder smoke. He had heard the desert-rat prospector say that gold was where you found it, and the tough cowhand's fatalistic prophecy that a man didn't die till his time came.

John Whiteside lazed in the shade and watched the dust devils out across the Mexican desert. He ate Mexican grub and drank tequila and at night he sat at his corner table at the cantina with his glass and his bottle of tequila, a plate of sliced Mexican limes and a shaker of salt. The stringed orchestra played the pieces he liked best. The brown-eyed señoritas sang and danced for him. Friends, both Mexicans and Americanos, brought their drinks to his table and sat with him and talked. Not even the most quarrelsome among them ever bothered him. He had no enemies. He had money and he spent it freely, but without any sort of prodigal or spendthrift gestures. And once his bitterness had left him, he made friends easily and quietly.

John Whiteside had formed the habit of walking down to the little adobe school at the edge of town. There were big hackberry trees that gave him shade. The little river flowed past between green, brush-covered banks. The pupils at the little adobe school ranged in sizes and ages from small first-graders to the older ones who would, in a larger and more advantageous seat of learning, have been ready for college or in high-school grades. They were Mexicans and Americanos and mixed breeds and the fact that they were the younger generation and offspring of Diablito's men and women, good and bad, made them an interesting study for John Whiteside. He never allowed himself to think that perhaps another vastly interesting subject for study, the schoolmarm of Diablito, might be a stronger magnet than her pupils to draw him here to the shade of the old hackberrys every week day with his lunch in a paper bag.

THE schoolteacher's name was Guadalupe Brennan. She was an orphan, born and raised in the old pueblo of Tucson. Her mother came from an old Mexican family. Her father had been a saloonkeeper and freighter. She had blue-black hair, laughing blue eyes and an olive skin, and a quick temper that was often saved by her sense of humor.

She had a short nose and a wide, flexible mouth and called herself an old-maid schoolmarm. Her pupils called her Miss Lupe. And, as did all Diablito, they referred to John Whiteside as the Lunger.

Sitting together there on the river bank, John Whiteside and the schoolteacher had missed the first danger signals that would have warned them that trouble was coming.

The little schoolmarm of Diablito had made it a point never to interfere with the games, amusements or quarrels of her pupils. The girls and the smaller youngsters gave her no cause to worry. They worshiped her. Her wish was their law. But the older boys, town-raised or reared on the nearby vast holdings of the Sombrero Ranch, were in some ways grown men with a man's capacity for friendship and hatred. And there was little or nothing the little schoolmarm could do about it except let them fight out their own real or fancied grudges in their own way, according to their own lights.

At the first indications of a fight Lupe Brennan had smiled and shaken her head.

"That will be Bully Pemberton ribbing it," she said wearily. "He never lets anybody forget that he's the son of Don Mateo Pemberton, owner of the Sombrero outfit. Bully is big enough to lick all the other boys put together. But he'll get Young Tripp to do his fighting. And Young Tripp will like it. His full name is Roland Tripp, John. But nobody ever calls him anything but Young Tripp. And because his father is Deputy Sheriff Tripp, gun fighter and hired killer for the Sombrero outfit, Young Tripp fancies himself a chip off the tough Tripp block. And he's doing his best to build himself a suitable reputation.

"It's dollars to tortillas," Lupe went on, "that the quarrel has started over one of Chappo Caballero's games. And there we run into it again, John. Like father, like son. Pablo Caballero was a gambler. That handsome young Chappo with his yellow eyes and cold smile is always inventing new games of chance. He's won all their marbles, he gets their pocket money with his 'put-and-take' top that he alone knows how to spin for keeps, or he'll pitch pesos at a crack and never lose. And most it's Bully Pemberton's pocket that's emptied. But like Bully, young Chappo has a faculty for never getting his nose bloodied. Young red-headed Pitch O'Neil is Chappo's champion."

"And the father of young red-headed Pitch is—"

"Is hell on wheels. You've been here long enough to hear some of the yarns they tell about Sonora Pat O'Neil, ramrod of the Mexican half of the Sombrero outfit. A spur-jingling, swashbuckling, cowpunching, gun-running, one time-rebel captain under Pancho Villa. And talk about chips from hardwood blocks—"

"Lupe! Lupe! Lupe!"

The little Mexican girl who came running and screaming was no older than thirteen, but she had already outgrown the leggy awkwardness of her first teens. Even now, with her thick, curly black hair undone and rampant, with her red dress torn, dust and tears and a trickle of blood coming from a long scratch on her cheek, she was as beautiful as some wild thing, and badly frightened.

Lupe Brennan got to her feet and gathered the youngster in her arms.

"What is it, Carmelita?"

"Ees Peetch! They are keelin' Peetch! They got knifes!"

CHAPTER II

A STRANGER STEPS IN

JOHN WHITESIDE scrambled to his feet and stood there, staring at the crowd of big boys milling

around in a dust cloud. Then he saw the wicked flash of a knife blade in the sunlight and headed for the schoolboy melee at a long-legged run.

He saw the slim, quick-moving young Chappo jump on the big thick back of Bully Pemberton. The big husky heir to the Sombrero outfit went clumsily to his knees, then over onto one shoulder and the smaller young Mexican got a fistful of Bully's curly, yellow hair in one hand, his free hand clawing at the bigger boy's eyes.

Then Whiteside saw Young Tripp with a knife in his hand, slashing savagely at the fast-moving tall, slim red-headed young Pitch O'Neil who ducked and twisted and smashed with a pair of swift, flailing fists at Young Tripp's dust-coated, sweaty face. Pitch's shirt was torn and ripped and there was blood on his face and hands. But he fought against that slashing knife with the cool-headed ferocity of a grown man.

Pitch moved in fast. His right fist smashed Tripp's nose, and blood spurted. Then he grabbed the wrist above the knife hand and held on. They went down in a fighting tangle. There was the snap of a broken bone and a scream of pain. Pitch rolled over and onto his feet, kicked at the screaming Young Tripp, then jumped sideways to avoid the charging rush of big Bully Pemberton. Bully had shaken off Chappo and pounded heavy fists into the young Mexican's face, smashing Chappo's nose and eyes and mouth. Now Bully had a buggy-spoke in one hand and a long-bladed Mexican knife in the other. He was spitting blood and dirt and his pale-blue eyes were as dangerous as a man's.

Pitch dodged the first rush. Blood spilled from the knife rips on his shoulders. He was badly winded, his fighting speed slowed down. He barely got away from the six-foot Bully's next rush. The swinging buggy-spoke missed Pitch's head and struck his shoulder a glancing blow. The bone in his shoulder blade cracked as though it had broken. Pain shot through his shoulder and into his neck and numbed his left arm. But Pitch O'Neil did not run. His white teeth bared in a ghastly, blood-spattered and dirt-and-sweat-grimed grin.

"Git away from me, Bully! Come at me again, and I'll kill yuh!"

Bully Pemberton yelled some profane challenge and charged, head lowered, gripping the buggy-spoke and knife.

PITCH'S right hand slid inside his knife-ripped shirt and came out holding a short-barreled .45 gun. The gun roared, spewing a jet of flame, and Bully Pemberton was jerked sideways and off balance as the heavy slug hit him. He pitched over forward and sideways into the thick yellow dust and lay there, slobbering and moaning.

"He's killed me! Pitch O'Neil's killed me!"

John Whiteside pulled up short. Reaching out a long arm, he grabbed Lupe Brennan as she tried to run past him. He held her inside the circle of his arm, close against him, the little Mexican girl still clinging to the schoolmarm's skirt.

Whiteside was looking into the round black muzzle of Pitch O'Neil's gun. A thin bit of powder smoke drifted from the gun barrel. Young seventeen-year-old Pitch's voice was harsh, gritty. His eyes were as shining and gray as splinters of steel.

"Don't bother me, mister. Don't nobody bother me. Bully got what he asked for. I'm pullin' out now. Don't try to stop me."

Pitch backed away. Bully was lying there in the heavy dust, his

eyes wide with fear, blood spreading across his shoulder and chest. Young Tripp was whimpering with pain, holding his broken wrist.

There was an open-thatched roof *ramada* where a dozen saddle horses, some Mexican mules and a couple of burros stood tied to the long feed manger. Pitch O'Neil ran toward it now. He threw his saddle on a stout buckskin horse with black mane and tail and a wide black stripe down its back.

"He's running away, John!" whispered the white-faced schoolmarm. "Do something! Stop him!"

"Easy, Lupe," said John Whiteside. "Take it easy, dear. It's not for us to stop that boy. He shot the only son of Don Mateo Pemberton of the Sombrero Ranch. I know Matt Pemberton. He'd have young Pitch drawn and quartered."

John Whiteside's sun-puckered eyes watched young Pitch O'Neil ride out of sight through the scattered clumps of mesquite, heading south into Mexico. The Lunger's heart was pounding against his lean ribs. His eyes saw more than just a runaway boy. He was looking out toward the dangerous years that lay ahead of that hot-headed young fighting son of the notorious Sonora Pat O'Neil. They would be hard and brutal years, lean years, robbing Pitch of the rightful heritage of his youth and hardening him into swift manhood. But that red-headed young cowboy would not weaken or quit or whimper and, as his wild father had in his day, so would the only son of Sonora Pat snatch at the things of life that he could grab and hold for a brief time, then let go of, as he rode his headlong way.

John Whiteside had never known high adventure. But he had read books and dreamed and now he was watching the happening of such wild adventure as he's cherished in the thwarted dreams of his own youth.

"Good luck, Pitch. On your trail to High Adventure!" John Whiteside's lips barely moved, his voice was hardly audible. He was still holding Guadalupe Brennan in the hard, lean circle of his arm.

A *diablito* whirlwind picked up the yellow desert dust from the swift hoofs of Pitch O'Neil's line-backed dun gelding, and long after horse and rider were gone from sight, the yellow *diablito* spiraled skyward and to John Whiteside it seemed like some gallant and reckless farewell salute.

"John, please. Can't you do something for Bully?"

The man was jerked back to reality by the little schoolmarm's voice. He discovered that his arm was still around her and he felt his cheeks redden. Grinning awkwardly, he released her and looked down at his arm.

"I'll swear, Lupe, I don't know how it got there. Bully? Surely. Send one of your older boys for Dr. Molino."

"Chappo," said the schoolmarm, "fetch the doctor. Pronto."

SMALL, slim, quick-moving Chappo Caballero had been standing there without moving, a thin smile on his lips and his yellow eyes restless. He'd watched Pitch O'Neil ride out of sight. Now he cut a hard, quick look of mingled contempt and triumph at Young Tripp and the blood smeared, moaning Bully, then looked straight at his schoolteacher.

"Pitch was my *compadre*," said Chappo quietly. "Like a brother. It is Tripp's wrist that's broke, not his legs. Let him go, then, for Dr. Molino. Me, I want to stay here and watch that Bully Pemberton die."

It was the first time that the always polite and polished young Mexican boy had ever in any way

disobeyed Lupe Brennan and she knew better than to make an issue of it. She sent one of the other boys on a run.

John Whiteside, too, had been startled by Chappo's words. Coming from a man, he could have understood. But Chappo was no more than fifteen. Yet he had a man's loyalty to a friend, a man's hatred for an enemy.

Whiteside had cut away Bully's shirt and was using it to stanch the flow of blood from the bullet rip that had done no more than tear an ugly gash in the hard fat and soft muscle across Bully's chest and under his arm. There was a lot of blood and it would take a few weeks for the bullet rip to mend, but beyond the loss of blood and the danger of infection the wound was not serious. Lupe Brennan brought water in a bucket and clean towels. They had the blood flow stopped and a crude bandage adjusted when Dr. Molino got there.

With the Mexican doctor came Matt Pemberton, the Don Mateo of the great Sombrero Ranch.

Don Mateo was a huge man, weighing well over two hundred pounds. His hard muscle was thickening with years of soft living, and his thick, curly blond hair was getting gray. A heavy drinker, its effect showed in the florid red color of his heavy face and his pale-blue eyes were congested and bloodshot. Fear for his son and boiling wrath mottled his brick-red face and thickened his heavy voice.

"What kind of a school are you running here?" he snarled at Lupe Brennan. "Letting that red-headed young whelp pack a gun to school! You and this damned dude Lunger lallygagging while a tough young hoodlum murders my son! You . . . you—"

John Whiteside stepped in front of the little schoolmarm. His sun-tanned face had whitened and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Watch your language, man. That big hulking bulldozing son of yours isn't more than scratched. He got what he asked for. But it won't teach him a lesson. You'd better put the blame where it belongs. Say another word against this lady and I'll—"

The big man growled. His heavy fist caught John Whiteside in the face. A vicious, terrific blow that came without any warning. John Whiteside's long legs buckled at the knees and he went down in a crumpled heap, blood spilling from his nose and mouth.

NOBODY had noticed the man on the sweat-streaked, gaunt-flanked sorrel horse. He had stopped at the creek near the school to water his horse and to quench his own thirst. Now he rode up and there was a long-barreled six-shooter in his hand.

"A gun in your hand would give you an even break for your taw, Matt. Feel like tryin' your luck?"

Don Mateo of the Sombrero Ranch was breathing hard. His wicked pale eyes glared at the intruder on horseback. But the hand that had started for the white-handled gun he always wore, let the weapon alone.

"Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

The man laughed. It had a flat, ugly sound that matched his gaunt gray face and the sunken feverish black eyes. His voice never rose above a rasping whisper.

"Five years at Tres Marias Prison changes a man. Your blackleg Tripp might recognize what's left of me. Load that blubbering whelp of yours and that kid of Tripp's into the doc's buckboard. And before you go, listen careful, Matt. Don't ever lay a hand on this man again, who-

ever he is. And don't do anything to harm the daughter of my old amigo, Tom Brennan. Because if you do, I'll kill yuh. Git busy, Don Mateo."

When Don Mateo and Dr. Molino had taken the two boys to town, the man on the sweat-streaked sorrel horse broke the silence.

"You was a little thing when I seen you last, young lady. Your father, Tom Brennan, was as good a friend as ever I had. It don't make much difference who I am or what fetched me here. Who was the sorrel-headed boy who rode away from the ruckus?"

"Pitch O'Neil," answered Lupe Brennan. "His father is Sonora Pat O'Neil. Perhaps you know him?"

The blind Reata pulled his horse to a halt and raised his gun to warn the others. Down in the black arroyo below, danger was waiting.

"Better than most men ever got to know Sonora Pat. We—"

The man coughed, bending across his rope-marked saddlehorn. The coughing racked his lean body and when he straightened up there was a trickle of frothy red staining his bluish-gray lips. He wiped it away with a soiled black silk neck handkerchief. Then his lean hand pulled a pint flask from the pocket of his brush-scarred chaps. He lifted the bottle to his mouth and drank slowly. A little color had come into his battered, ravaged-looking gray face when he corked the bottle and shoved it back into his chaps pocket.

John Whiteside had wiped the blood from his mouth and nose. He'd stood there, a stricken look in his eyes, watching the man on the sorrel horse cough, as he, the Lunger of Diablito had coughed more than once. He and this man from prison belonged to that same brotherhood of the crimson stain.

"There should be a Mexican livin' near here," whispered the man on the sorrel horse. "I'd like to find him. He's an old friend. His name is Ramon Acosta. We called him Reata because he was handy with the eighty-foot rawhide reatas he made—"

"Ees my *abuelo!*" cried little Carmelita. "My gran'papa! Ees home. Ees make reatas. Ees blind. Ees always talk about revolutions. Ees a evil man. Santa Madre, but ees wicked, that *abuelo!*"

"That's Reata Acosta." The gray-faced man smiled grimly.

GUADALUPE BRENNAN then pointed out the trail to the Acosta place beyond town. When the gray-faced man had ridden away, she shivered, though the sun was warm and there was not a single cloud to mar the turquoise-blue sky overhead.

"He's like a ghost," she said. "A dead man on horseback."

"Yes." John Whiteside's voice was edged now with that almost forgotten bitterness. "One of the living dead."

Lupe Brennan gave a hurt little sound and reached for his hand. It was the first time either of them had ever referred to the Lunger's affliction.

"Don't be a darned fool, John. You're getting well. Dr. Molino told me that as long as you stayed in Arizona you'd stay cured. I wasn't talking about that man's cough but his eyes. Did you see them?"

John Whiteside nodded. He'd shivered inside when he'd looked into that pair of sunken red-black eyes. Eyes that had peered into the very depths of hell until the terrible sight was forever mirrored in them.

Guadalupe Brennan dismissed school for the day. Little Carmelita still clung tightly to her hand, refusing to start for home with her brood of small brothers and sisters. Lupe had washed the stains of dust and tears and dried blood from the little girl's scratched cheek and brushed the thick, wavy black hair. But Carmelita still clung to her.

"I am the reasons for the fight," she finally sobbed. "In the lunch box for us Acosta kids was only tortillas and frijole beans. Always that Bully brings plenty candy and a pie. Pitch swiped Bully's lunch for us poor Mexican kids. Tripp seen him and squeals. Ees fight. Now Pitch ees ron away and never comes back. I guess I better die!"

It was Chappo who quieted Carmelita with a large stick of candy that had once been in Bully's lunch box. And it was Chappo who took the little girl home.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN FROM TRES MARIAS

THE gray-faced man on the leg-weary sorrel gelding rode up to the little Acosta ranch a few miles south of town. His croaking, whispering voice called a cautious greeting to the blind old Mexican plaiting a rawhide reata in the shade of an old hackberry tree.

"*Quién es?*" demanded the old Mexican sharply. His white head lifted and the gray-faced man saw the scarred, sightless sockets before the old man slid red silk bandage down from his white mane and across his maimed eye sockets.

"Who did that to you, old compadre?" he whispered. "Reata, amigo!"

"Who are you who calls me reata?" A skinny old hand crept up under the faded serape and closed over the butt of a silver-handled six-shooter.

"You would forget a man who won a sombrero full of gold money from Pancho Villa who was foolish enough to bet against that reata of yours?" The stranger spoke in rapid Mexican.

"*Caballero!*" Old Reata Acosta's seamed, leathery, wicked old face brightened. Then went back to its stern, cruel lines. "But no. My ears are my eyes now. Yours is not the voice of that Caballero. Besides, that gambling one is dead."

"Dead, yes. But still living, old amigo. One dies when he goes to the prison at Tres Marias."

"My fingers will know your face, hombre. Come closer."

"My own son saw me a while ago," said the gray-faced man. "He is my own Chappo. He has sharp eyes. They did not know me. Even Don Mateo did not recognize me. But he will know me, just before he dies. Young Pitch O'Neil stopped here a short while ago?"

"If Don Mateo or that Tripp has sent you here to trap me, hombre," said the old Mexican fiercely, "*por diablos,* I will shoot your belly!" The silver handled six-shooter slid into sight. It was pointed straight at the other man's lean middle.

The old Mexican with the scarlet bandage across the upper part of his face had tilted his white-maned head a little sideways. He was listening for the telltale click of the other man's gun being thumbed to full cock.

"Prison guards," whispered the man on the sorrel horse, "would put a rope around my neck and string me up until I choked black in the face. That kind of punishment finally left me nothing of a voice but this damned croak. You want proof? Then listen. Who were the three men who took a blood oath one time that they would stick together always, even after death? You, Señor Reata Acosta, were one. A gambler called Caballero was another. The third man was Sonora Pat O'Neil. When our trails split three ways, when my small son was left without a mother, I sent him here to you. When Sonora Pat O'Neil saw death coming, he sent young Pitch to you. I was caught and sent to Tres Marias to rot in prison. Sonora Pat was stood against the adobe wall and shot. Now I find you blind. Little news ever reaches a man at Tres Marias. I escaped. The trail I follow is cold. Five years cold. The tracks on it are dimmed out. But I have come back from hell to kill Tripp and Matt Pemberton. Put away that gun I gave you many years ago, compadre. You would not use it to kill Caballero."

"Compadre," whispered the old Mexican, shoving the silver-handled gun back in under the faded serape. "Tears can no longer come." His skinny old hand touched the scarlet

bandage. "But inside I am weeping. Tears keep alive the hatred inside my heart. They murdered my son. I am alone here with his widow and *niños*. Pitch O'Neil and your Chappo have been my eyes. Now Pitch has gone. He said he had killed the only son of Don Mateo. He rode south to the big hacienda. To find his father."

"PITCH'S father is dead," said Caballero bleakly. "I saw them dobe-wall Sonora Pat. He stood there with a last cigarette in his mouth. He told them to shoot for his heart and not to miss. They were Mexican vaqueros who had called him their *patrón*, their boss, and had followed him through hell and high water until Tripp brought orders from Diablito, from their damned Don Mateo, to kill Sonora Pat O'Neil and his amigo Caballero.

"It was bright moonlight. It made a picture, compadre, to haunt a man. I was shot in half a dozen places and tied like a hogtied bull. Those poor damned vaqueros were more scared than Sonora Pat. He called them each by name and told them to steady their guns. That yellow Tripp hadn't guts enough to face Pat O'Neil even when Pat's hands was tied behind his back. He hadn't the guts to look at me when I was shot to hell and he was shippin' what was left of me to Tres Marias to die.

"Six vaqueros with saddle carbines. They had to git drunk to do their dirty job. But they had to do it or git sent to Tres Marias or dobe-walled by the Federalistas for cattle rustlin'. Tripp give 'em their orders, then rode off to the federal barracks at La Paz.

"When they fired that volley I saw Sonora Pat go down," Caballero went on. "I tried to git loose and they clubbed me with their guns. It was a week before I come alive again. I woke up in a flea-bit hospital with rurales guardin' me. When I was well enough to travel they shipped me to Tres Marias.

"But I'd had to watch 'em dobe-wall as good a friend as any man ever had on earth. 'Adios, Caballero!' were Sonora Pat O'Neil's last words. 'Remember, and tell Reata Acosta when you cut his trail, tell Reata that the three of us are to tough to die. That we'll live in the hearts of our three sons. Adios, Caballero!' "

"And then," finished the gray-faced man from Tres Marias, "Sonora Pat O'Neil gave them six scared, half-drunken hombres their orders to git ready, aim, then fire!"

The old white-haired Mexican touched the scarlet silk bandage that hid his scarred eye sockets.

"I have heard that story," he said. "Chappo and Pitch had been sent here to me. I gave them to my son Rafael and his wife to care for. I saddled a horse and started across the desert for the Sombrero headquarters rancho in Sonora. I never got there. I was ambushed, shot from my horse at night. Some Mexicans found me wandering on foot and alone and locoed in the head, my eyes burned out. They knew who I was and brought me here to my son's little rancho. It was many weeks before I was alive again and my brain no longer locoed. Then they told me that my son Rafael had gone to find me. He had been ambushed and killed.

"For five years now I have lived in a blind world. Never once has Tripp or Don Mateo come near this place. Chappo and Pitch have been my eyes. But they are still too young to be told secret things. So they know only what I have heard through them. That Caballero is dead. That Sonora Pat O'Neil is at the headquarters ranch in Sonora."

"Caballero has been dead enough," croaked the gray-faced man, "Tres Marias prison is no more than a grave for the living dead. But I saw Sonora Pat O'Neil shot down!"

"Those hombres shot low," the old Mexican told him. "Perhaps they were too drunk. Or maybe their gun sights had been fixed. Their bullets broke Sonora Pat's both hips. When you watched him shot down, Sonora Pat O'Neil stood on his two legs for the last time. He has not walked since. His both legs are shriveled, useless. But from the waist up that *hombrecito* is alive. He has a chair with wheels on it. He runs that big rancho from his wheel chair. Those vaqueros who shot low, they now look after him. They are afraid of him.

"I am told that the hacienda is guarded like some fort. That Tripp dares not go near there or he would be killed. The great Don Mateo would not go within gun range of his Sombrero Ranch in Sonora for all the cattle in Mexico. Sonora Pat O'Neil dares not come away from his stronghold down there. He is only half a man now, but he is Don Patricio down there and even the government of Mexico respects him. He burns a new brand on the Sonora cattle. They no longer wear Don Mateo's big Sombrero brand. The new brand is Three Crosses, connected. Sonora Pat calls it the Triple Cross and he sells his Triple Cross cattle to the big Mexican buyers. You should have heard."

"I've talked to nobody till now," said the gray-faced man. "I'm marked off the books as dead. Until I found you, there was nobody I could talk to. And now if you'll stake me to a fresh horse, I'll drift yonderly. Mebbeso I'll overtake young Pitch."

"But you'll wait to talk to your son? Your own boy Chappo?"

HE saw me today," Caballero said bitterly. "The man he looked at was something to turn anybody's stomach. The prison mark is on me, compadre. I look like what I am—a livin' dead man. My lungs is gone. My hide is the color of a long-dead corpse. When a coughin' spell hits me I spill blood. You kin hear my voice. The rest of me matches it. That's what they've left of the spur-jinglin', gamblin', fancy-dressed Caballero. You sabe what the name Caballero means, compadre? It means a kind of a cavalier, a knight on horseback in shinin' armor, gay and handsome and cuttin' a fancy step. No, I saw the look in the boy's eyes an hour ago. I saw the way the other kids looked at me. Scared, like they wanted to run. And Tom Brennan's girl, Lupe, that I used to buy pretty little dresses and red slippers for, there was somethin' like pity and horror in her eyes. And there was a tall, lean gent with her who looked like a lunger. He watched me throwin' a coughin' spell and he looked like a man watchin' a movin' corpse. No, I can't face Chappo no more, ever.

"So I'll saddle a fresh horse and drift yonderly. Before young Pitch O'Neil gits across the desert he might need me and my guns. That young Bull Pemberton won't die. But Don Mateo is goin' to hamstring young Pitch if he kin overtake him. I'd be proud to meet Matt Pemberton or Tripp out yonder on the desert. I've got to ketch up with Pitch O'Neil."

The gray-faced man had a peculiar way of talking, mixing and blending the Mexican and American languages with a facility that was smooth and natural. Old Reata Acosta would have remembered that trail in the man he'd known only as Caballero, had he been less agitated by young Pitch O'Neil's

fracas. He remembered it now. And he kept delaying Caballero, holding him back with talk.

Both the blind old Mexican and the gray-faced man who had been buried alive for five years at Tres Marias prison would have given much to sit here and talk until they ran out of words. But Pitch O'Neil was somewhere out on that wide strip of desert, headed for the Sonora headquarters of the old Sombrero Ranch. A fifty-mile strip of danger. And Pitch too young and inexperienced to savvy the tricks of gun fighting and ambush. So argued the impatient Caballero.

Old Reata Acosta smiled. He said he would go along. "Two guns are better than one, Caballero. Though I am blind, still I have practiced shooting at sounds. And I live only for revenge."

"Then it is better to live a while longer, amigo," Caballero said. "Chappo is old enough now to begin to learn what he should know about us. Keep him here and train him to kill when the time comes. I'll overtake young Pitch or if I can't ketch up with him, I'll stop anybody that's trailin' him. Pitch must live and Chappo must not make mistakes that will trip him up. A man rides faster and dodges quicker when he is alone. Your place is here, old Reata compadre."

"True, amigo. A blind old man is of little value and his small worth is overbalanced by the burden of his infirmities."

"Think hard, old amigo. Sift all the stories you have heard about Sonora Pat O'Neil. His Triple Cross brand that was the sign us three compadres used. Separate the true stories from the lies. What have you?"

"This!" said the blind old Mexican fiercely. "This much and no more can you believe for the truth. Sonora Pat O'Neil is not dead. But he is no more than a prisoner at the lower ranch in Sonora. He sits in a chair on wheels. His legs are crippled. That much I know for the truth. The rest could be lies."

CABALLERO'S gray-blue lips spread in a flat grin. The blind man, tough as he was, would have shivered if he could have seen that grin.

"It's plain enough now," sounded the croaking whisper of the gray-faced man from Tres Marias. "Tripp gave those vaqueros orders to shoot Pat O'Neil's legs away. He had them cripple me so that I could be taken alive and sent to Tres Marias. He had you ambushed and your eyes burnt out and had you fetched back to Diablito to suffer in your everlasting darkness. Tripp did that. But Matt Pemberton, Don Mateo himself, gave Tripp his dirty orders. That's the first part of the damned scheme of Don Mateo, the *Diablazo*, the Great Devil.

"So now, amigo, we are at the second part. We have Sonora Pat O'Neil a prisoner, half a man with dead legs, at the lower ranch in Sonora. You sit here in your blind world making reatas and shooting at sounds, perhaps a little locoed at times, no? And your blind eyes can't see what's left of the gay Caballero. When I'd had the life taken out of my body and my soul warped, they let me crawl away in my filthy prison rags. Tres Marias prison is on an insland. The water around it is filled with always hungry man-eatin' sharks. One does not escape from Tres Marias prison. I was set loose to crawl back like a living thing from a slimy grave. It's taken me months to get here to Diablito. I had to beg and borrow and steal my way along. I stole the clothes I wear, the six-shooter and saddle gun, the saddle and horse and chaps, this hat and these boots. I

am like my voice, a whisper, an empty husk. Matt did not know me. But when I mentioned Tres Marias, that big hombre's face turned sick. He knew me then. I let him carry his damned fear away with him.

"The great *Diablazo* did not kill the three men he feared and hated. Quick death was too good, too easy for us. He gave Tripp his orders. Tripp did the work. And now we are like this. We called ourselves great names. We were too tough to die, we told one another and each of us believed what he said. You, in your locoed blindness still believed it. No doubt Sonora Pat keeps telling himself that now when he looks down at his withered legs. I told myself that when they let me 'escape' from Tres Marias.

"*Caramba*, man, but we were three fools! We've each died a million times in the past five years. While Tripp and Matt Pemberton, the great Don *Diablazo*, laughed over their tequila. How they have chuckled and laughed when they got drunk and told each other how they had chosen not to kill the three compadres who boasted that they were too tough to die!" Caballero's laugh was harsh, ugly, brittle.

THE old Mexican's scarred face twisted. It was as if the blind man could see his old amigo Caballero now.

"What is there left," asked the blind Mexican, "for three such cripples? You, Caballero, were always the foxy one. You did not come back from hell to croak such dismal things. You came back to kill."

"Or to be killed," whispered the gray-faced man bitterly, "like a sick wolf that's no longer fit to fight. Somewhere Tripp is waitin' to kill me. His men have cold-trailed me this far. I can't travel fast. But I headed for Diablito instead of the lower ranch. Don Mateo wasn't expectin' me, that's certain. That schoolhouse scrap has gummed the cards all around. It calls for a new deal. A man's brains get maggoty at Tres Marias."

"Then," said the blind Mexican, "perhaps a younger set of brains would be of help."

Old Reata Acosta's scarred, deeply lined face twisted in a crafty grin under the scarlet bandage. He lifted his voice a little.

"'*Sta bueno*, Chappo! You have watched and heard everything. It is time for you to come out of the brush."

The gray-faced man from Tres Marias choked back a whispered oath. The blind old Mexican shook his white head and smiled.

"Chappo heard you ask for me at the schoolhouse. He took the short cut here to warn me that a man with a gun and death in his eyes was coming to pay old Reata a visit. And then you told me who you were and it was too late to warn Chappo away. Besides, my blind eyes had no way of knowing if you lied. I am an old man, Caballero I am more wise, perhaps, than you, concerning a son's love for his father. Young Chappo will be proud and glad to claim you."

The boy came from behind the brush. He was smiling tightly and his yellow eyes were hard and bright. He held out a slim brown hand.

"You do not scare me," he told the gray-faced man. "You do not make anybody sick to their belly. When I saw you ride up and ask Don Mateo to fight, I said to myself: 'There is the brave kind of a man I want to be.' And you are not a dead man, señor. You should have seen the Lunger a year ago. Face the color of white paper and his eyes were sick. That was him you saw Don Mateo knock down. He is a lunger and Miss Lupe says

he'll be a judge some day. Or even governor. But he was like a white-faced dead man a year ago. Your eyes ain't sick."

The gray-faced man gripped his son's hand and grinned for the first time in five years. His eyes were misted.

"Good boy, Chappo. Reata was right. Thank God Almighty."

CHAPTER IV

BUSHWHACK BOOMERANG

YOUNG Pitch O'Neil had outgrown his first boyish fear of the blind old Mexican. That fear gradually became respect and the respect was softened by a genuine fondness for the scarred-faced old man who spent his days plaiting strips of rawhide into reatas. Other times, Pitch and Chappo gathered tin cans and threw the cans as far as they could and when the falling can hit the ground the blind old Mexican would shoot at the sound. At first his bullets went wild. But after many long months of practice the blind old Reata Acosta would hit the tin can every shot.

And then the two boys would watch him clean his silver-handled six-shooter and the .30-30 saddle gun he'd been using, and they would sit there on the ground nearby and listen to the old man tell swashbuckling tales about Caballero and Sonora Pat O'Neil and about his own part in the dangerous days of revolutions when they called themselves the Three Wolves or the Three Rebels. And how they had won the dangerous friendship of the notorious Pancho Villa. And how, when Villa had come into power, he had given those three hard-fighting followers the big land grant in Sonora that was known as the Sombrero Grant, legally deeding to them the hundreds of miles of mountain and desert range, fertile valleys, creeks and rivers, and all the cattle that grazed wild on that vast range. And how they had been outlawed later when Pancho Villa's power was gone and his murder lost them their one stanch friend in Mexico. And how a new government had taken away their big Sombrero holdings and sold it or given it to Matt Pemberton who called himself Don Mateo now. And how Don Mateo had put a price on the heads of the Three Rebels, outlawed them, and had sent his ramrod Tripp into Sonora with a pack of hired killers to hunt them down.

"But the day will come, young *hombrecitos*," the blind old Reata would promise the two boys over and over, "when you two, Chappo Caballero and Pitch O'Neil, will get back the big Rancho Sombrero. There is a big map, big enough to cover the inside of the biggest room in the house like a carpet. And a big sombrero that is very heavy with all its gold and silver threads woven into the seal of Mexico. And a heavy rolled paper with red seals and red, white and green ribbons. That map hung on a wall at Chapultapec, in Mexico City. And the day we rode into Mexico City with the great Pancho Villa and he sat in the gold chair of the presidente, Pancho Villa had us take that map from its wall and spread it on the floor. Then he took that sombrero and tossed it on the map of Mexico. Its wide brim covered a big part of Sonora.

"'Take red ink, compadre,' Pancho Villa told us Three Rebels, 'or some hombre's blood, and mark around the brim of the sombrero. And inside that red circle is the Sombrero Grant. That is yours, my three amigos. Pancho Villa gives that to you in payment for your loyalty. I will have it written on

paper and signed and no man can take it from you. That is your Rancho Sombrero. Marry. Have children. Hand it down to them. It must never be sold. That reward from Pancho Villa must never be allowed to die!'

AND so, my two young *hombrecitos*," the blind old Reata Acosta would tell Pitch and Chappo, "you see how things are. Pancho Villa has been killed. The Three Rebels are outlawed. I am blind. Caballero was sent to Tres Marias to a slow death. Sonora Pat O'Neil is crippled. But he still lives at the Rancho Sombrero and what there is left of him is tough. And buried there where no man can find it is that big map and the large sombrero and the rolled paper that was signed by Pancho Villa.

"I am told that such proof still buried there and guarded even now by Sonora Pat O'Neil, will hold in legal court. Even the government in power now, the presidente living now at Chapultepec, will honor such proof. The problem is to get it safely to him at Mexico City. I am old and blind and of no value; Sonora Pat O'Neil is crippled and ready to die when the map and sombrero and sealed deed to Rancho Sombrero is filed at Mexico City. No one knows what has become of Caballero. So it is for you two young *hombrecitos* and my granddaughter Carmelita Acosta that proof to the ownership of the Rancho Sombrero must be filed in Mexico City. Or at the capital city of Arizona. You, Pitch O'Neil, you, Chappo Caballero, must grow into manhood swiftly. The fight for Rancho Sombrero is to be given to you. Don Mateo must be killed. Tripp must be killed. Perhaps even the only sons of those two hombres must be killed. That will be your jobs.

"So learn to ride and shoot and fight and take care of your hides. And take care of little Carmelita, as you would guard your sister. And all this, young *hombrecitos*, is secret. Speak of it to nobody. Now I will toss the cans in the air. You shoot and hit each can before it strikes the ground. Ready, *hombrecitos!*"

And while old Reata's daughter-in-law herded the brood of younger children into the house, the shooting would begin. And only Carmelita would be hiding in the bushes, watching wide-eyed.

THE blind old Reata Acosta had not scolded Pitch for shooting Bully Pemberton. He had shaken his grizzled head and said that the time had come too soon for his plans. But that it was probably the will of the Señor Dios himself, and that Pitch would be better off, perhaps, with his father. So he told young Pitch how to get there.

"But don't start across the desert until dark, my young red-headed rebel," Reata warned. "Ride down the river a few miles. Hide there until dark. Wait until Chappo joins you. He'll know by then which way Don Mateo's man hunters have ridden. Perhaps I may decide to let Chappo go with you to Rancho Sombrero. Hah! *Como no?* Why not? Why not Reata Acosta also? I remember the trails. I can tell you as we ride along, the landmarks to watch for, which fork of the trail to take from time to time. My daughter-in-law likes me not. Only Carmelita is the child of my dead son. The others are by her new husband and he is a *borrochon*, soaked always in tequila and too friendly with Tripp, I hear. I have money saved, hidden away. I'll give it to your schoolteacher. She will take Carmelita. She has wanted her before, to live with her. *Bueno.* Wait down the river, *Pichito.* At

dark Chappo will take me to your hiding place. You two *hombrecitos* shall be my eyes. I shall be your brains, no? *Bueno!* 'Sta *bueno! Como no?* Why not?"

The blind old Mexican had dumped his strings of rawhide into the big wooden tub of water. Excitement had pounded blood and color into his scarred old face. He had sent Pitch on his way to a hiding place that Chappo would know.

So Pitch O'Neil waited now in the gathering darkness, beside his stout flat-backed buckskin horse. And his impatience was finally rewarded. But he counted three riders, instead of two, skylighted against the stars.

That was young Chappo in the lead, the blind old Reata behind him on his big hammer-headed apaloosa and riding with a far more easy seat in the saddle than the average young vaquero with two seeing eyes. The man behind was a stranger.

Chappo called out his signal. Only somebody with highly trained ears would have detected the forgery of Chappo's *tecolote* owl call. Pitch's *tecolote* night signal matched it.

"Like old times, eh, Caballero?" chuckled the blind Reata Acosta.

"Aye, compadre," whispered the gray-faced man from Tres Marias, "like old times. And *por diablos*, will this outfit give Senora Pat the surprise!"

"Pitch," called Chappo, his voice tense with excitement, "this is my father. This is Caballero. From Tres Marias. Shake hands with him. That damn Bully never died. But we're goin' to the lower Sombrero Ranch, anyhow. To see Sonora Pat. That's somethin', huh?"

It was the first time Pitch had ever seen Chappo show real excitement. And once Pitch got over his first shock of seeing that gray face with deep-set, burning red-black eyes, and accustomed to that graveyard whisper, he quit shivering inside when he looked at the man who had once been the handsome, legendary Caballero. It was hard to fit this ghoulish gray-skinned man with the laughing, knife-fighting, guitar-playing Caballero Pitch had heard old Reata talk about. But Pitch was too well-mannered to

show his feelings. He had grinned and shaken hands with Chappo's father.

CHAPPO told Pitch all about what had happened after Pitch had ridden away from school.

Chappo said that Don Mateo had sent out every man who owned a gun and horse or mule, to hunt down Pitch and fetch him back dead or alive. Tripp, the deputy sheriff, was not a Diablito. Nobody knew where that cold-blooded man hunter was. But Caballero said they'd probably meet him between Diablito and the Sombrero Ranch. And the meeting would be dangerous.

Chappo had taken Carmelita to live with Guadalupe Brennan. He'd found John Whiteside, the Lunger, at the schoolmarm's house. Miss Lupe had been packing her clothes and she had looked as though she'd been crying. And the Lunger had looked grim and hard-eyed. Don Mateo had given them until tomorrow to get out of Diablito and never come back. Miss Lupe was going back to Tucson and John Whiteside was going along with her. The Lunger was fighting mad. But he was too frail and sick to whip a big man like Don Mateo and Lupe wouldn't let him shoot the big man who owned the whole town. So John Whiteside was sending back East for his law books. And he was going to start up in the law practice.

And before he was finished, Chappo had heard the Lunger tell Miss Lupe, he'd put Matt Pemberton behind prison bars, if one tenth of the rumors he'd heard about the big Don Mateo proved anywhere near true. And Chappo said the Lunger got so mad and worked up about it that he up and asked Miss Lupe to marry him when he got to be a whole man again. Miss Lupe had up and kissed the Lunger and told him they'd waited too long already and it was time they got married so she could look after him a little. And then they'd come outside and told Chappo the news and said he was the first to know about it. Just as if he hadn't heard every word they'd been saying in there. And they'd taken little Carmelita and Miss Lupe had fussed over her.

Miss Lupe had brought out a small red dress and bright-red slippers from her trunk. She said that Chappo would never guess who gave them to her when she was the age of little Carmelita.

"The great Caballero gave them to me, Chappo!" Young Chappo said she told him. "Your father!"

"So I told her, Pitch. I said, just like I'm talkin' now to you: "That was my father on the sorrel horse today."

"Miss Lupe give a little squeak." Chappo grinned. "Then she looked like she was goin' to cry and the Lunger hugged her and they acted mushy. I was glad to get away. But you should've seen Carmelita in that red outfit. She was sure puttin' on fancy airs. And the way Miss Lupe and the Lunger acted you'd've thought she was their own kid. Mushy stuff. But don't think that Lunger ain't got the guts, boy. And some day he's gonna be a judge, then mebbe governor. And, say, he'll get that Rancho Sombrero for us when he gets his law books. He'll hang Don Mateo's hide on the fence. Tripp's, to boot. If he knew about that big map from Chapultepec and the paper with the Mexican seals and ribbons and Pancho Villa's sombrero, John Whiteside would savvy what to do about it—"

Blind old Reata's growl silenced Chappo. "Caballero rides now ahead. You two young *hombrecitos* behind him and no more talk. I ride behind. Is somebody to remem-

ber, Caballero, that Señor Juan Whiteside."

The last words of the blind Mexican were prophetic. Though none of them realized it that star-filled night on the trail to Rancho Sombrero.

CHAPTER V

REBEL'S REUNION

THEY made a strange little cavalcade as they crossed the desert along a trail that twisted like a long snake around and in between patches of mesquite, giant organ-pipe cactus and tall sentinel sahuaro cactus. There was a lopsided moon and the millions of stars hung low, and there was something ghostly about the vast silence. A silence unbroken save for the soft thud of shod hoofs in the sand, the faint creak of saddle leather, the bell-like music of blind old Reata's silver-crusted Mexican spurs that had rowels as big as saucers. The moonlight found the faces under the shadow of their hat brims and the brim of the blind Mexican's huge, high-crowned felt sombrero that was heavy with the silver-embroidered Mexican eagle. Such a sombrero had been tossed on a huge wall map of Mexico by Pancho Villa and where it covered the map, spread on the mosaic tiled floor of a room at Chapultepec Palace, there had been marked the circle in red that was the Rancho Sombrero.

"Mark around the sombrero with red ink," Pancho Villa had told the Three Rebels. "Or, better yet, use blood."

Blood had been used, claimed old Reata. Blood had been used to dedicate that land grant and more blood had stained the very soil they claimed. And still more blood was destined to be wantonly spilled.

Look at the scarred, grim faces of those two men. One as gray as a death mask. The other stained as dark as old leather that has endured years of hard weather and is wrinkled and cracked and blackened and scarred and its upper half masked by crimson silk.

And then at the faces of two youths. Fifteen or sixteen-year-old Chappo with his yellow eyes and frozen smile and skin like dark ivory. And the taller, heavier-boned Pitch O'Neil with his rust-colored hair and freckles showing through the tanned color of his blunt-jawed, short-nosed, wide-mouthed face. A reckless grin that came easily, and a pair of steely blue-gray eyes to match it.

Men and boys riding with guns in their hands, blued steel gun barrels glinting in the moonlight. Silent now, and on the alert, peering ahead and to either side and back across their shoulders.

They sighted scattered bunches of riders hunting for Pitch and they threaded their way in between and past these men and went on. And it was not until almost daybreak, and they were on the last ten-mile stretch of their fifty-mile ride and had left the desert for the broken foothills, that they smelt out the real danger of ambush ahead. For it was the blind old Mexican, not Caballero or the two boys, who sensed the ambush. And old Reata swore it was his nose that told him.

He pulled his horse to a halt and lifted one arm for the others to stop. His head was tilted sideways and upward. In that big sombrero, and the shabby leather charro clothes that had once been the dress uniform of a luckless rural who had crossed Reata's trail when that quick-triggered Mexican had been a ragged Villista in need of clothes, sitting a silver-crusted saddle with a flat horn as big as a plate, tall, gaunt, his carbine lifted, the blind old man made a striking picture.

"THERE is the smell of a camp," he spoke in a low tone. "Horses and men. That will be the Señor Tripp's ambush waiting for Caballero. Describe the trail, Chappo."

"The hills are brushy and chopped up. The trail goes into a black arroyo and climbs out beyond. Down, steep, then up. We are not skylighted. The apaloosa horse is seeing the steep trail down. Below is dark and brushy."

"*De reata?*" questioned the blind man.

"*Si, señor. De reata.* Single file. The trail is too narrow for more than one *caballo.*"

"*De reata. Bueno.* I take the lead. Let none of you cross in front of me. You behind me, Caballero. The two *muchachos* behind. Shoot to kill. Like old times, eh, amigo? Ready, then? *Anda! Anda!*"

No other horse and rider could have done it. At breakneck speed down a steep slant and a blind man in the saddle. Reata's voice shattering the peaceful silence, shouting the wild marching song of Pancho Villa.

"*La Cucaracha! La Cucaracha!*"

From the floor of the black arroyo half a dozen guns spat flame. The carbine in old Reata's hand cracking its deadly reply. And as they spurred down the slant behind the blind old warrior, Caballero and the two boys took snapshots at the gun flashes below.

It took less than a minute to get down the slant. Then they were on level ground and the brush was thick, and for the next few minutes the fight was a deadly scramble of men and horses. Guns spat death. And then it was over as suddenly as it had begun. And for the fraction of a moment a lone rider was skylighted on the ridge above before he vanished from sight, riding hard for a getaway.

"Tripp!" Pitch O'Neil yelled. "That was Tripp. He got away!"

"*Ay! Ayme!*" growled old Reata. "And Tripp's *compañeros?*"

"Will fight no more," the gray-faced Caballero croaked. "They are too dead to run away."

"Who of you is wounded or dead?" asked the blind old Mexican.

"Nobody, compadre," said Caballero. "They were expecting to ambush one man. When we piled down from the ridge like a troop of cavalry, they lost their taste for fight. But there was no time for 'em to change their minds. Only Tripp was tricky enough to get away. I saw you get one hombre, Reata. Chappo got his first bite of wolf meat. Pitch fights for all the world like Sonora Pat in a tight. And Caballero didn't miss. But you, old compadre? Snake-bit?"

"Bullets," boasted the wicked blind old Villista, "glance off my tough hide like pebbles. It was the long waiting for one sick wolf that weakened those coyotes. And when it sounded like a whole wolf pack coming down on them, their guts were gone. So empty their dead pockets, *hombrecitos.* Take what is worth keeping. Boots or sombreros, their cartridge belts and guns and knives and machetes, their horses and saddles. Leave the carcasses for the buzzards. Such *cabrons* do not deserve a grave."

They rode down a gentle slant into a green valley at the foot of the mountains. The sun was rising. The trail was wide and the two men rode in the lead, the pair of boys behind. They were singing "*La Cucaracha*" and the boys led the horses, with filled cartridge belts and holstered guns hanging from the rope-marked horns of empty saddles.

BELOW, there in the valley along both sides of a little river, were whitewashed adobe houses and corrals made of mesquite and thatched-

roofed *ramadas*. There were giant shade trees, green fields of corn and peppers and hay, a grove of fruit trees and a small vineyard. Rancho Sombrero looked like a small Mexican village, far cleaner and more prosperous than Diablito.

Half a dozen heavily armed vaqueros watched the coming of that strange little cavalcade. Women and children stood in doorways. And on the long, wide veranda of the main house Sonora Pat O'Neil sat in his wheel chair, a bright-colored serape across his useless legs, a carbine in his hands. A powerfully built man from the waist up, clean-shaven, with thick white hair and hard, bright, puckered gray-green eyes. And somehow the crippled man managed to retain something of his youthful, swashbuckling swagger.

As they rode up under the guns of his vaqueros, Sonora Pat O'Neil knew them for who they were. Emotion choked him and tears welled in his eyes and coursed unchecked and unashamed down his deeply lined, bronzed face. Then he found his voice.

"Reata! Caballero! Too tough to kill! I knew you'd show up! That'll be young Chappo. And that spittin' livin' image of young Pat O'Neil will be Michael, called Pitch. Me own broth av a boy. And the lot of ye ridin' here out of a sunrise a-singin' and with the spoils av battle like the old days. 'Tis enough to pinch the tears from a man's heart and . . . Pedro! Estaban! Francisco! Juanito! Enriquito! Lorenzo! Pronto! Look who we have here! Hombres, are you too *borrochon* drunk that you don't remember Caballero and Reata? And little Chappo and young Pitch? Ring the big bell. Make a fiesta! Butcher the fattest beef! Roll out a cask of the oldest wine! Tequila! Make some *musica*. *Musica coreada* with everybody in the chorus! *Mucisa ritmica* with all the guitars you can dig up! Sing for these compadres that song we made about Rancho Sombrero! Fiesta!"

So, with tears drying on his lined cheeks and a huskiness in his laughter Sonora Pat O'Neil hid the horror inside his heart at the sight of Reata's blindness and the deathlike gray pallor of Caballero and the humiliation of his own crippled legs. And he gave nobody a chance to say a single word that might mar the heart-gripping moment of this reunion that must have nothing of sadness in it. And that gave his six grizzled vaqueros time to recover from their first shock at the sight of the blind man and the man from Tres Marias whom they had been remembering as those two men had been at the height of their reckless hard-riding days.

It was easy enough, John Whiteside would have said, had he been here to watch this reunion of the Three Rebels, to understand why men had followed this Sonora Pat O'Neil through hell and high water. Why six Mexican vaqueros had risked their lives and the lives of their families, to defy Don Mateo's orders and nurse back to life the leader Tripp had forced them to shoot down. They had been told to guard him as a prisoner, keep him chained and jailed in darkness. But they had dedicated their lives, instead, to Sonora Pat. And now, at his shouting invitation, they gathered to shake hands with blind old Reata and the gray-faced Caballero.

John Whiteside would have liked this glorious and heart-twisting reunion. But he and Lupe Brennan were on the wagon trail to the old pueblo called Tucson to be married. And with them was little Carmelita Acosta.

At the Rancho Sombrero a big old Spanish belt filled the little valley with its deep-toned sound. And the

Whenever those wild mountain cattle began to stampede, the Sombrero punchers knew the hard-riding Triple Cross gun crew was raiding again.

faster tempo of its ringing told younger vaqueros in scattered camps that it was a summons to either a battle or a barbecue, a fight or a fiesta. And so they came on sweat-dripping horses and stout little Spanish mules. And for the first time in over five years there was a great fiesta at the Rancho Sombrero.

CHAPTER VI

SONORA RAIDERS

THERE were no thousands of Sonora cattle wearing the Triple Cross brand. But now and then, during the months that lengthened into years since the sunny day young Pitch O'Neil had shot Bully Pemberton at the Diablito schoolhouse, that Triple Cross brand would be seen on one of those black bulls that are bred for bullfighting.

The black bull would be found near Diablito on the day after a night's swift, hard-riding raid on the upper headquarters ranch where Don Mateo lived and where Tripp and his tough crew of renegade cowpunchers burned the Sombrero brand on livestock claimed by Matt Pemberton. After the raiders had struck and gone with a bunch of cattle or horses, such a fighting black bull would be found, on the prod and wearing that Triple Cross brand.

Those night raids were dangerous and the raiders welcomed, rather

than avoided, armed clashes with Tripp's renegades. The leaders of the raiding Mexicans were Pitch O'Neil and Chappo, and those hard-riding, straight-shooting young guerrillas were rapidly gaining reputations almost as legendary as their father's and Reata Acosta's.

Don Mateo put fancy bounties on their scalps. Tripp's renegade cowpunchers rode in pairs or bunches of three or four. Don Mateo wrote countless letters of protestation to Mexico City. The name "Matt Pemberton" was signed to as many more letters of similar wording to the governor of Arizona.

Mexico City shrugged and smiled and shook its head. Arizona grinned and told Matt Pemberton and Tripp to buy a new stock of cryin' towels. A border cowman is supposed to stand on his own two legs.

Matt Pemberton was topping his own record as a quart-a-day man. He roared and cussed and hired a pair of gun-slinging bodyguards who never let him out of their sight. He slept behind barred windows and locked doors at his ranchhouse or his house in town. He sent his big hulking son, Bully, out with Tripp and young Tripp to make a fighting man out of him. And when he had enough whiskey in his big belly to make him reckless, Matt Pemberton went with them.

But Pitch and Chappo and their picked crew of Mexicans and some cowpunchers from the Arizona side who had hired out to the lower Sombrero for the hell of it and for fighting pay, were like heel flies.

Tripp's roundup would be holding a big gathernent of wild mountain cattle. Cowhands with Winchesters would be on night guard. A double horse guard would be watching the remuda. Tripp and young Tripp and Bully, perhaps Don Mateo and his pair of tough bodyguards, would be there with the roundup.

The night would be star-filled or cloudy, balmy or with the bite of frost in it. But warm or cold, clear or overcast, it would be peaceful and quiet and there would be no sign of stray riders. No indication of danger.

Until somewhere in the distance, not too far off, there would be the night call of a *tecolote* owl. An answering *tecolote*. Then another. And another. Coming from the black shadows of brush and rocks. The relay of *tecolote* owl calls would travel in a wide circle around the bedded herd and the grazing remuda of saddle horses and pack mules.

TRIPP and his renegades had heard that *tecolote* signal before. They savvied its dread portent. They knew, to a man, the meaning of its bad omen, its swift-moving and deadly threat. Their guns slid from holsters and saddle scabbards and the hair along the backs of their scalps stiffened and a cold and clammy grip of fear tightened around their hearts and knotted inside their bellies and chilled their guts.

There would be a wait. Half an hour. Perhaps longer. Then the *tecolote* signal would sound again and the circle of sound would be closer.

If Tripp and his men rode out there, they would find nothing. Nothing but rocks and brush. No riders. No guns to challenge them. Tripp had tried more than a few times to catch them. Always with the same empty-handed results. And so the only thing to do was wait. Wait until your nerves were stretched to the snapping point, until the butt of your gun was sweaty in your hand. Until your ears heard imaginary sounds and your eyes mistook a rock or a bush for the moving shadow of a man on horseback.

Then some puncher's taut nerves would crack. His gun would crash into sudden fire. The bullet that struck the granite rock that had been mistaken for a rider, would ricochet off with a pinging whine.

Immediately the close-held herd of mountain cattle would be on their feet and running. Men and horses would race to try to outrun the stampede. Others rode behind it and on the flanks, trying to stay with the stampede and keep the cattle from spilling until they got leg weary and slowed down and the point of the herd could be turned and swung back and the milling herd held until they balked or were played out.

But those cowpunchers who stayed with the herd would have more than the stampeding cattle to think about. One rider looks pretty much like another rider at night, Low-pulled hat, denim jacket, steerhide chaps. Until that rider's gun gestures a grim warning and the harsh, uncompromising voice of a night raider barks its warning:

"Throw away your gun, Tripp, or use it!"

The raiders called every man of them "Tripp." The challenge never came until that luckless rider on the Matt Pemberton pay roll was at the raider's mercy. He could throw away his gun and ride back to camp. Or he could use it and get shot down. Most of them quit without fighting. Those who chose to do battle would be picked up the next day, dead.

One by one, or if they rode in pairs, two by two, those Don Mateo renegade cowhands were taken out of the game. Shot or sent back gunless to camp or sometimes set afoot and left to walk back in disgrace. And in their places rode the hand-picked cowpuncher crew from the lower Sombrero outfit. It took courage and skill and savvy to point that running herd south, holding the bulk, letting the wilder stuff spill out on either side, and hazing the drags along. They kept the stolen herd moving southward like the tormenting heel flies that bite and sting cattle into pain-driven motion.

Sometimes Tripp gathered his renegades and followed. And they would ride into a gun trap that would scatter them and send them back to camp.

Nine times out of ten, while the cattle were stampeded, something would spook the remuda before the riders on horse guard could get the cavvy to the Sombrero camp and inside the corral. And daylight would find Tripp's roundup with the sorry part of their remuda left.

A LESS stubborn man than Matt Pemberton might have quit. Sold his outfit if he could find anybody who was fool enough to buy it. Or most men would have said "The devil with it," and ridden out of the country, leaving the outfit behind.

But Matt Pemberton, the great Don Mateo, was half insane from whiskey and a terrible hatred. Whiskey dulled the fear in him and added fuel to the smoldering fire of his ugly bitter, brooding. And it had been months now since he had spoken to Tripp without cursing him for having let Sonora Pat and Caballero and old Reata Acosta live, and for letting young Chappo and Pitch stay alive here at Diablito.

Tripp was a small man. Lean and tough as jerky, he was thin-lipped and hawk beaked, with a pair of slitted eyes that were opaque black, their whites a bloodshot yellowish color. There was no mercy in him. He hated Matt Pemberton far worse than he hated any other man on earth. Tripp was the only man in that part of the country who packed two six-shooters and could

use them both with deadly speed and accuracy. He was as quick as a striking rattler. He could have killed Don Mateo when the big cowman cursed him. But before he could kill both quick-triggered bodyguards, one of them would get him. And Tripp was not ready to die. Besides, Tripp never pulled either of his guns unless he had the bulge and was dead certain of his man. He had killed a lot of men, nobody knew how many. But he had never given any of those men a real fighting chance. There was a thin streak of killer's cowardice in Tripp. But few men knew it. They knew him for a cold-blooded killer and feared him accordingly.

Tripp had his own plans. Not even his son shared any part of his secret. His plans were simple enough. Kill off every man at the Rancho Sombrero: Sonora Pat O'Neil, Caballero, blind old Reata. Kill off young Pitch and Chappo. Kill off the six Mexicans there, and any of their offspring who might be dangerous.

Then Tripp would kill Matt Pemberton and his son, Bully. And after that Tripp would claim the big Sombrero outfit, the lower Rancho Sombrero and the upper outfit that was Don Mateo's headquarters ranch.

Nor did Tripp forgot or in any way discount that big map, the sealed, signed deed to Rancho Sombrero and the silver and gold-crusted old sombrero that had been the property of Pancho Villa. Simmered down, that might be the real and legal claim to all the huge Sonora grant. And the only living heir left to lay legal claim by those old Villa rights would be little Carmelita Acosta. And so it fitted into Tripp's grim plans that his only son, Roland Tripp, would marry little Carmelita. That cinched it.

That was one reason why Tripp guarded his son almighty carefully. And while he protected Young Tripp, he kept goading Bully Pemberton into dangerous situations, hoping that a lucky bullet would kill that big bulking bulldozer who was doing his best to live up to his nickname—Bully.

TRIPP had his plans cut and dried. But the carrying out of those plans was far more difficult than he'd counted on. He'd made the mistakes for which Don Mateo cursed him. Bitterly enough he admitted it to himself. Now he'd have to outwolf those three maimed men he had crippled to satisfy his own sadistic appetite.

Meanwhile another big gatherment of mountain and desert cattle was stampeded. Two thirds of a newly purchased remuda got spooked the same night and Tripp's roundup outfit was set afoot for good horses. Tripp was fit to be tied. Don Mateo cursed himself into a lather. Young Tripp and Bully Pemberton had been on horse guard that night and had showed up at sunrise with the culls of the new remuda and conflicting stories that called each other cowards and liars.

"I'd've held them horses, regardless," whined Bully Pemberton when his father cussed him out for a quitter, "but Young Tripp coyoted on me."

"Yeah?" Young Tripp snarled, then turned to his father. They had the same lipless mouths, the same thin nostriled, high-bridged hawk beaks, the same opaque black eyes. They savvied each other.

"Look at 'im!" said Young Tripp, jerking a thumb in Bully's direction. "Standin' there like a kinky-headed Hereford bull, full of paw and beller now in the daylight with his Don Mateo to back his play. But last

night when them *tecolote* calls started to circle us, yonder big hunk of bull meat turned rabbit. Talk about a bunch quitter!"

"You gonna stand for that, son?" roared Matt Pemberton. "You're big enough to tear 'im apart!"

"He packs a knife," Bully muttered. "He fights with a knife."

Young Tripp slid a long-bladed knife from its leather sheath. A quick flip and its sharp point sank into the trunk of the big hackberry tree against which Bully had been leaning. The knife had grazed the top of Bully's hat crown and the big hulking two-hundred-pound cowhand had ducked, his face whitening. Young Tripp grinned thinly. His opaque black eyes watched Bully.

Bully Pemberton stood there, his big fists clenched, his mouth working, fear in his pale-blue eyes. He was afraid of Young Tripp. Afraid to take up the smaller young cowpuncher's challenge. Bully muttered something and turned away.

DON MATEO blocked his son's way. The big man's white-hot rage was beyond control. He grabbed Bully by the front of his shirt and with his other hand slapped his big son's face. It was like being cuffed by a mad grizzly. Then he whirled Bully around and kicked him hard in the seat of his pants.

"Tear 'im apart, I told yuh!" Don Mateo's voice was thick. "Finish what yuh started or I'll beat your brains out!"

Bully Pemberton feared his father's terrible drunken wrath even more than he dreaded a whipping from Young Tripp. And it was that fear which gave the big, bull-necked, powerful Bully a desperate sort of fighting guts. He shook his head clear of dizzy pain and charged Young Tripp. The sudden and unexpected ferocity caught Young Tripp off guard. He'd been too certain of Bully's cowardice, too overconfident of his own power. Before he could dodge or side-step, Bully was on top of him. Young Tripp was small like his father, wiry and fast and treacherous. More than once he'd taunted Bully into charging him like that, head down like a bull on the prod. And always before he'd side-stepped as coolly and cleverly as a bull-ring matador. Now it was the bull's turn.

Young Tripp was a battered, blood-sodden, unconscious and beaten victim of his own taunting. Don Mateo pulled his son off before he killed Young Tripp. But not until the older Tripp had spoken in his hard flat-toned voice.

"My kid's had aplenty, Matt. Haul your Bully off him."

Matt Pemberton yanked his son to his feet and slapped him on his thick-muscled back. Then shoved a half-empty bottle of tequila into his son's hand.

"You had it in yuh all the time, son. Only you didn't know it. I'm proud of yuh, Bully."

Young Tripp had lost his power over the big slow-witted Bully Pemberton. He knew it when he wiped the blood and dirt out of his battered eyes.

Bully walked over to the hackberry tree. Pulling the knife from the tree trunk, he broke the thin, sharp-pointed whetted blade in his big hands, then tossed the broken knife at the beaten Young Tripp.

"Bother me again," warned Bully, grinning, "and I'll break your back. Like I busted your pig sticker."

Don Mateo was eying the older Tripp with something of Bully's expression in his eyes. His big hairy fists clenched and unclenched. His two quick-triggered bodyguards had their hands on their guns.

"Git busy, Tripp," growled Don Mateo, "and buy up another remuda. Git a clean work on the cattle that's left. You lose another herd or any more horses and I'll give you what you just seen my son give that knife-slingin' whelp of yourn. Got that straight in your skull, Tripp?"

"I'LL buy up enough horses to mount the men I'm hirin'," said Tripp. "But we'll gather no cattle. I'm carryin' the fight to that outfit at the lower ranch. I'm takin' over Rancho Sombrero an' killin' off them three old wolves and the two wolf whelps. Killin' off every damned man they got workin' for fightin' pay. You and your big-meat Bully kin come along to look after your int'rest. Or you kin stay here at Diablito. You'll find one of them black Triple Cross bulls in your corral today, like as not. That's their challenge. I'm takin' it up!"

Matt Pemberton's bloodshot eyes stared hard at Tripp. He knew that he'd cussed out Tripp for the last time. This fight between the two boys had brought things to a head. Tripp was no fist fighter. He'd kill any man who got close enough to lay a hand on him. This, then, was something of a showdown between the owner of the Sombrero outfit and his gun-slinging ramrod. Tripp was laying his cards on the table. Tripp was ramrodding the outfit. And if he killed off those men down below, that same hard-eyed ramrod would move in down there in Sonora, claim the outfit he'd taken in a Winchester and Colt roundup, and leave the great Don Mateo holding the empty sack at Diablito.

"Yo're damned right Bully and me will go along, Tripp," Matt Pemberton said. "And don't git your brain cluttered up with big notions. I bought the Sombrero outfit from the jefe, the governor of Sonora. It's mine. The upper and lower outfits, the land and all the livestock, the Sombrero brand. I own it, lock, stock and barrel. Me, Matt Pemberton. Don Mateo!"

Tripp smiled thinly. "Tell it to the Three Rebels, Matt. And that Triple Cross black bull you'll find in your home corral is their answer. Rancho Sombrero belongs to the man or men that's tough enough to hold it. That crooked jefe who sold it to you was dobe-walled by the Mexican gover'ment for a thief. Now take your big overgrowed, muscle-bound Bully and your pair of six-shooter nurses and lope on home, Don Mateo. I'll let you know when I got a fightin' outfit gathered. After we wipe out them Three Rebels and their whelps and their gun fighters me'n' you kin cut high card or spit at a target to see who gits the big Rancho Sombrero. So long, Don Matt. My regards to the Triple Cross bull."

CHAPTER VII

SPAWN OF THE REBELS

IT had been five years since a blind man, a convict from Tres Marias prison and two young cowpunchers with the fresh blood mark of gun fighting on them, had ridden out of a red sunrise to Rancho Sombrero where a third maimed and broken derelict had been waiting too long.

The three grizzled Rebels had come into their own. All day long they sat on the huge veranda, smoking and drinking tequila and talking over plans for the next raid on Don Mateo's outfit. Blind old Reata Acosta worked his steer hides into eighty-foot reatas. Caballero let the sun and clean dry air brown the gray pallor from his skin and heal his scarred lungs. Sonora Pat O'Neil would whirl his wheel chair

around and back and forth as he talked out new schemes of revenge. Revenge was the only thing these three broken men lived for now. They were making Matt Pemberton and Tripp pay through the nose.

Pitch and Chappo were more than just a pair of hard-riding young boys grown to tough manhood. They were quick-triggered, well-trained human machines that plundered and killed. Schooled in every wolfish outlaw trick, they were seasoned guerrillas who had mastered all the twists and angles that they must know to survive in a dangerous game.

Tall, rawboned, hard-muscled, lean-jawed, red-headed Pitch O'Neil, with eyes like cold steel and a fighting heart. He had learned quickly enough how to grin at death.

Yellow-eyed Chappo with his frozen smile was as cunning at stealthy and deadly attack and swift escape as a Mexican tiger. Where Pitch, left alone, would have made an open, headlong attack, disregarding big odds and discounting danger, Chappo favored the more crafty and safer and far more deadly night stealth. So between them they had all that was needed to make those night raids pay renegade dividends. The Three Rebels had plenty of reasons to be proud of them. They were as dangerous a pair of men as ever had ridden the dim trails of Mexico. They had been trained to kill. They were a grim credit to their three masters.

Sonora Pat O'Neil and Caballero loved their sons. But that love between father and son was warped by revenge, bloodstained by an overpowering lust to kill. And it was choking to death the better and decent and softer part of father and son affections. In schooling and training their sons to be fighting men, toughening the two boys into manhood that they might outwolf their enemies and survive while those hated enemies died, Sonora Pat O'Neil and Caballero had robbed their sons of their rightful heritage to more pleasant things of life. And both men were unaware of it, totally blind to what they were doing to their only sons. It was the blind old Reata, with no eyes to see, who was the only one of them all, men or boys, to realize what was happening. But whatever the wicked old Villista's thoughts or reactions were, he hid them in silence behind the scarred mask of his face.

IT was blind old Reata Acosta, not the two men with sharp, hard eyes, who saw that dangerous barrier that was growing slowly, with deadly certainty, between Pitch and Chappo. A black shadow that hid a growing, ugly hatred between the two pardners, though Pitch and Chappo did their utmost to hide it from the three men, and from each other. The blind old Mexican was the only one of them all who saw the ugly thing that crouched in the black shadow ready to spring at the young throats of Pitch and Chappo. And blind old Reata knew the thing for what it was. A jackal thing men call jealousy. And the reason for that jealousy was a dark-eyed, black-haired girl grown to ripening womanhood. Her name was Carmelita and she was the granddaughter of blind old Reata Acosta. She lived at Tucson with John Whiteside, now a federal judge, and his wife Guadalupe. She was called the most beautiful girl in the old pueblo of Tucson. And Carmelita Acosta had given her love to no man.

Pitch and Chappo would take their hard-riding, quick-shooting crew of raiders and lead those men on a night raid that would rob Tripp and Don Mateo of a big herd that had taken Tripp's cowpunchers a

month or six weeks to gather. They would run off Tripp's remuda of top saddle horses and stout pack mules. They would shove the cattle and horses down onto the lower Sombrero range. Then Pitch and Chappo would shave and bathe and put on clean clothes and saddle their top horses. They would cross the border at night. The next night they would be in Tucson and Carmelita would be waiting to welcome them.

A few days or a week there, then Pitch and Chappo would make the long, dangerous ride across the border and down to the Rancho Sombrero. More than a few times they had been sighted and had had to shoot their way through, fighting side by side or back to back, willing and eager to die for each other. Pitch had saved Chappo's life once or twice. Chappo had kept Pitch from being killed more than once. No two men had ever been bound by closer ties. That was what made the growing black shadow all the more ugly and dangerous.

Their first reckless trip to visit Carmelita at Tucson had been sheer spur-jingling braggadocio, boyish show-off. Running the dangerous gantlet of Tripp's roaming tough renegades, crossing the border without being questioned and turned back by the border patrol. Surprising the Lunger and Miss Lupe, his wife. Watching Carmelita's round-eyed astonishment when she saw them. The pasear was well-spiced with danger. And danger had become meat and drink to Pitch and Chappo.

Then there had been a second such trip to Tucson, and a third until now it had become a part of their schedule and they never rode back to Rancho Sombrero after a raid, until they had paid a visit to Carmelita.

It was as much a part of their raiding as that fighting black Triple Cross bull they would leave corralled where Don Mateo would find it after a night raid on his outfit.

AT first Sonora Pat O'Neil and Caballero had voiced a hard-bitten protest against those pasears to Tucson.

"If it's girlin' you want," said Sonora Pat, "we'll give you a *baile* here at the ranch. Nothin' like a dance and a drunk to git the steam out o' your young systems. There's fifteen, twenty mighty purty señoritas around here. Crossin' the border is downright kid nonsense."

"You are bein' trained to heel-fly them Don Mateo cattle and horses," said Caballero, his voice a croaking whisper. "We're teachin' you to slash and cut and run and go back again to slash and cut some more. You'll have time for love makin'

when we smash Don Matt and Tripp."

Blind old Reata Acosta said nothing until Pitch grinned and put the question to him.

"And you, *abuelo?* You, grandfather? You are the toughest Rebel of them all? What say you, señor?" Pitch spoke in the Mexican language.

"Sonora Pat O'Neil," said blind old Reata, "and Caballero have poor memories. I could remind them of times when they tossed my advice aside like a worn-out boot and made their pasears through all manner of foolhardy danger to get the smile of some señorita. And in my caballero days I was perhaps as foolish and headstrong as they were—as you two young roosters are now. It is the habit of the old to croak dismally at the habits of youth. Tell me, is my little Carmelita worth the dangers of such a pasear?"

"What kin a man do about it, Caballero," chuckled Sonora Pat O'Neil, "when an old hellion like that gits his second boyhood? Faith, let the two young Rebels ride their own way. Let 'em have at it. But when they crawl back to Rancho Sombrero to lick their wounds like the two young wolves they are, they'll no doubt decide it's not been worth the trouble. You heard that sinful old hellion's question. Was she worth the ride?"

"I got cut out." Chappo smiled. "Spent my time talkin' to Miss Lupe and Judge John Whiteside. The judge wants to send Matt Pemberton and Tripp to Yuma prison for the rest of their lives. And if we'll give him the map and sombrero and the document signed by Pancho Villa he'll git el presidente at Mexico City to honor the deed to Rancho Sombrero. No, I don't stand a chance against this big sorrel-maned Irish spur jingler. Since we were kids, Carmelita's had eyes for nobody but Pitch."

"It was Chappo who took her to the *baile*," declared Pitch, grinning. "I'm all right a-horseback. But afoot on the dance floor, I'm clumsy as a work ox. Chappo cut me into the culls with the old folks."

They sat around and smoked and the older men drank tequila with slices of Mexican limes and a shaker of salt. The Three Rebels swapped wild tales of youthful escapades that put into the shade this pasear to Tucson. And so it was passed over and nothing more was ever said against those border-jumping trips. And that was about as close as Pitch and Chappo ever came to discussing their rivalry for the smiles of Carmelita Acosta.

THE next day and the weeks and months and years after were too filled with the grimmer business of dealing hell to Don Mateo and Tripp. Pitch and Chappo would return from a raid, bullet nicks in their tough hides, with stories to tell about the fighting. Licking their wounds, as Sonora Pat had said, like a pair of young wolves. Planning the next raid, marking down mistakes they'd made and profiting by each little error.

And during these talks that often lasted all night, with the tequila like fire in their veins, Sonora Pat and Caballero forgot that Pitch and Chappo were their young sons and talked about them as chess players speak of their pawns. But the blind old Mexican, Reata Acosta, became more and more silent and shut up within himself as he smoked and sipped tequila and listened. And it was what young Pitch and Chappo left unsaid that the white-haired old Mexican with scarred eyes sockets hidden under a scarlet silk bandage heard. The expression on his face

never changed. He sat there in brooding silence, his face a scarred old Mexican mahogany mask with a bright crimson band across it and the shock of white hair above.

"We're done with the raiding," announced Sonora Pat O'Neil, when Pitch and Chappo returned from their last night riding. "We've done enough heel-fly stampeding. Let John Whiteside send Matt Pemberton and Tripp to that hell-hole pen at Yuma to rot and die. I've heard it's worse than Tres Marias. Five years is as long as a white man kin live inside Yuma Prison. You delivered that letter to Judge John Whiteside, Pitch?"

His son nodded. "While Chappo was swingin' Carmelita at another *baile*." Pitch's grin was flat-lipped and his eyes were steel splinters in the candlelight.

Chappo stood there in the big front room, his yellow eyes glittering, that frozen smile on his handsome face. He wore a brush-scarred leather charro suit and a clean white silk shirt and there was a scarlet silk handkerchief knotted loosely around his neck.

"The only chance I'll ever have with Carmelita," said Chappo, his voice toneless, "will be when Pitch stops a Don Mateo bullet with his name on it. . . . Judge Whiteside read your letter," he told Sonora Red. "He's sendin' the law after Don Mateo and Tripp. But there's still Bully and Young Tripp to pay off. Pitch and I will do that job of hamstringin'."

"Whenever you say, Chappo." Pitch O'Neil grinned. "We'd have wiped 'em out long ago if I'd had my way."

"Don't pass that buck to me," said Chappo flatly. "We took our fightin' orders from the Three Rebels. Those orders said to lay off Bully and Young Tripp. Let Judge Whiteside send Don Mateo and Tripp to the pen. Then I'll ride with you in broad daylight to Diablito, Red Irish, and kill Bully Pemberton and Young Tripp where we find 'em."

"Broad daylight, Chappo? Ain't you scared of sunburn?"

In the tense silence that followed that remark, Sonora Pat O'Neil and Caballero stared hard at their two sons. For the first time the two Rebels sensed the incredible enmity between Pitch and Chappo. There in the big room, in the flickering candlelight, tobacco smoke a blue haze, they saw Pitch and Chappo facing each other across the room, their hands on their guns and hatred and murder glinting in their eyes. There was nothing the two Rebels could say or do. They had to sit there and watch, holding their breath.

IT was blind old Reata who left his chair and strode across the room to stand between the two young cowpunchers, directly in the line of fire if they pulled their guns.

"Not even my granddaughter Carmelita," growled the blind old Mexican, "is worth that much, my two *hombrecitos*. You have both done your jobs well. Too well for your own good. Since you were small boys you have been like brothers. You owe your lives to each other. So that now neither of you has the right to destroy the life of the other. And though Carmelita is my own granddaughter and all that I have to claim in this blind world of mine, I would rather see her dead than to have you two sons of the Three Rebels make such an evil mistake. I am done talking. Let none of you break the silence until these two sons of the Three Rebels think over what I have said. Then let them speak. This is the thing I have watched grow with my blindness. This is the hour I have

dreaded. No woman on earth is worth it, *hombrecitos*. I have no more to say."

Blind old Reata Acosta walked slowly back to his big armchair. Pitch and Chappo eyed each other across the room, the candlelight throwing flickering shadows across their faces. Sonora Pat in his wheel chair and Caballero, with the gray shadow back in his tanned skin, sat silent and tense and grim, sick inside.

From outside sounded the thud of shod hoofs, the jingle of Mexican spurs. There was a pounding on the heavy front door, then the harsh voice of a Mexican vaquero, excited and frightened.

"Señors! Señors! They come! Don Mateo and many men!"

Sonora Pat muttered: "The saints be thanked!"

Then his big voice filled the room and again he was the reckless swashbuckling Sonora Pat O'Neil.

"Pitch! Chappo! Git out there and at 'em. You know what to do! Don Mateo's come a long ways to find a fight. We'll give him a bellyful! Split your men into two outfits. You take one bunch, Pitch. Chappo takes the other. Scatter. Then flank 'em. Cut 'em down if they try to run. Do what you please about Bully Pemberton and Young Tripp. They're your meat. But haze Don Mateo and Tripp into the gun sights of the Three Rebels. Good luck to both of you!"

"Good luck, boys!" croaked the gray-faced Caballero. "Send us our bear meat!"

"*Vaya con Dios, muchachos!*" rumbled the blind old Reata. And nobody thought it strange that the wicked, shriveled-hearted old Villista would tell the two young cowhands to "Go with God."

Pitch and Chappo reached the door at the same time. Pitch grinned and slapped Chappo on the back. Chappo threw an arm across Pitch's shoulders.

"Me'n' my pardner Chappo," Pitch declared, grinning, "will heel-fly Don Mateo and Tripp right up into your gun sights. Good luck, you Three Rebels!"

The door opened and they went out into the night, their guns in their hands. Blind old Reata closed the door and reached for his carbine.

CHAPTER VIII

PAYOFF—IN BULLETS

THERE was a round white moon that gave enough light for a man to line his gun sights. But the hard-riding cowpunchers following Pitch O'Neil were not taking time to aim. Their saddle guns never lifted to shoulder level. They pointed and pulled the trigger without tightening a bridle rein. And when they came close enough they shoved carbines into the saddle scabbards and did their work with six-shooters. A moonlight night was made to order for Pitch and his punchers. None of that bushing up and *tecolote* owl calling tonight. It was headlong charging and to the devil with the odds. And Pitch O'Neil riding in the lead.

They were outnumbered half a dozen to one. But Pitch had held his men back until Don Mateo's outfit, riding bunched, rode into a long barranca. Then Pitch signaled his men and they spurred down the slope and down onto the men below. Straight into gunfire that would have been deadly if they had not caught Don Mateo's outfit by surprise. For once Pitch was fighting according to his own liking. Reckless and wild and in the open. Counting on the element of surprise to outbalance the big odds in numbers.

Pitch grinned flatly as he heard the bellowing voice of Don Mateo roaring orders to his fighting men, and Bully's loud shouting. And then Pitch was shooting his way through milling riders to get to Bully Pemberton. It was deadly and headlong and more foolhardy than courageous. But Pitch's men were right behind him and not one of them weakening. This was the scrap Pitch had been promising them. Most of them were Texans and all of them picked for toughness. They let Pitch take the lead but they'd keep the enemy off his back.

Pitch let out a shout as he saw Bully not a hundred feet ahead of him. Bully whirled his horse and began shooting. Both of them were in the moonlight and clear of any shelter. Pitch had Bully cut off from the safety of the brush and rocks. An army could have been shooting point-blank at Pitch O'Neil now and he wouldn't have stopped. His horse was gun broke and was headed for Bully and his horse.

Bully's shots were wild. His voice was lifted to a bellowing shout.

"Tripp! Tripp! Git here!"

Bully's hulking frame made a large target to shoot at. Pitch shot twice. The saddle gun in Bully's hands went into the air as though he'd thrown it away.

"Don't!" Bully pleaded. "Don't kill me, Pitch! I'm shot! You got me!" Bully pitched over drunkenly and his big bulk hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Pitch reined his horse to one side and kept going. He caught a brief glimpse of Don Mateo and his two bodyguards as they spurred hard in the direction of the ranch buildings beyond.

Then shots whined past Pitch's head and he looked back across his shoulder. It seemed as though all the men in the world were charging down the slant at him as he jumped his horse in behind the shelter of some huge granite boulders and reined up. He was cut off from his men, trapped here alone. That was Tripp's outfit coming down the slant from the ridge. Where in thunder was Chappo? What had happened to Chappo and his Mexicans who were supposed to surround Tripp's men and massacre them? What was keeping Chappo out of the fight?

For one brief, ugly minute Pitch thought he had the answer and it made the inside of his belly crawl. Chappo was letting him get cut down by Tripp's men. Chappo had warned him. Carmelita had told Chappo that as long as Pitch O'Neil was alive, Pitch was the only man in her world. As long as Pitch was alive. After that, it would be Chappo. And Chappo was making that possible now.

Pitch was caught here in the barranca. Tripp's men were coming at him. Pitch's Texans had their fighting hands full back yonder. They'd overmatched themselves and were scrapping it out against odds. In that wild chase after Bully, Pitch had ridden too far beyond them.

No hope of help from down the barranca. Pitch had just seen Don Mateo and his two bodyguards getting away in that direction. Not a shot had challenged their flight. The brush and rocks down the barranca were black shadows and no more. And here came Tripp and Young Tripp and their tough renegades.

PITCH gripped his saddle gun and sat his horse. He'd sell out at a high price. He'd get Young Tripp and a few more. But he'd let the older Tripp go. Save him for the Three Rebels. Just as he'd let Don

Mateo and his bodyguards get away without firing a shot at them.

All right. This was it. Here they come. It's "Kitty, bar the door." The devil in hell hates a quitter. Who was it said wait till you sight the whites of their eyes?

Then, so near that Pitch jerked a little in his saddle, there sounded the clear call of a *tecolote* owl. It was picked up and repeated. And at the same split second every bush and rock around Pitch seemed to come alive. Guns spat short streaks of fire from behind those patches of brush and from behind the boulders.

Chappo spurred out from behind a patch of brush. He was grinning stiffly as he rode so close to Pitch that the red-headed cowhand could have knocked the gun out of his hand. Then Pitch saw Chappo pull up, out there in the open.

"You and me, Young Tripp!" Chappo yelled. "For Carmelita!"

Young Tripp's gun spewed flame. Chappo's saddle carbine was cracking, spitting streaks of fire. Young Tripp doubled up across his saddlehorn and hung there as though the leather-covered steel horn was impaled in his belly. Chappo kept shooting. Young Tripp's head lolled on a limber neck and his hat dropped off and Pitch saw that the top of Young Tripp's skull was gone. Then the horse whirled and lunged and what was left of Young Tripp pitched headlong onto the ground.

Pitch saw Chappo swaying in his saddle as though he was drunk. He'd dropped his saddle gun and was hanging onto the horn. Pitch spurred out from behind the big boulders. Riding alongside, he grabbed Chappo as he went limp. Carried him back in behind the boulders.

Chappo's Mexicans were, as they had planned, massacring Tripp's gun-fighter renegades. But no gun spat death at the older Tripp as he raked his horse with the spurs and headed at breakneck speed down the barranca.

Pitch held Chappo in his arms, then knelt on one knee and laid him gently on the ground.

Chappo's yellow eyes glinted in the moonlight. He had that frozen smile on his face.

"I was goin' to let Tripp's outfit cut you down, Pitch. Then, at the last second, I couldn't. Mebbe it was because I have got a sort of conscience, after all. Mebbe I was afraid you'd haunt me after Carmelita did marry me. Or mebbe I was scared that old Reata would know. I'd tell 'em all that I'd done the best I could; that you'd outrun your Texans to get Bully. That Tripp's outfit cut you down before I could help you. And that was almost the truth. We'd let Don Mateo pass. We crept up the barranca and scattered just as Tripp's outfit charged down. But true or not, old blind Reata Acosta would never have swallowed that story. And even if he never told, never mentioned it to me or to Carmelita, to anybody, he'd know. And I'd know that he knew.

"So I played it the only way a man's pardner could play it. The way you'd have played it for me, Pitch, regardless. And I'm glad I'm goin'. There's no pain. But I'd suffer the tortures of hell on earth if I lived to see Carmelita married to you. I'd kill you or make you kill me. So this is best, pardner. Adios and so long."

Chappo's yellow eyes closed. His slim, bullet-torn body shivered, then lay still. Chappo lay there on the ground as though he was asleep, the faint smile still on his lips. So

Chappo, son of Caballero, lived and died according to his lights.

Pitch took off his faded denim jacket and covered Chappo's face. Then he mounted his horse and rode on toward the ranch buildings. His fighting Texans had mopped up back yonder and came riding down the barranca. Chappo's Mexicans had finished the last of their bloody killing. Pitch called to them to follow him. Then rode on. His eyes felt itchy, as though there was sand in them, and the sound of his own voice had seemed choked and harsh and he felt sick and empty and icy-cold inside his belly. Chappo had been his pardner. Chappo had saved Pitch's life, then thrown his own life away with a terrible and splendid gesture. Chappo.

THEY sighted Don Mateo and Tripp and Don Matt's two gun-fighting bodyguards crouched near the corrals, watching the main house that was dark and empty and deserted-looking. No lights shone inside. No sign of life.

"Kill the two bodyguards," gritted Pitch. "Haze Don Matt and Tripp out o' the corrals!"

Their bullets drove Don Mateo and Tripp out into the open. The two men raced their horses toward the main house, reached the long hitch rack.

Then, from the black shadows of the porch sounded the voice of Sonora Pat O'Neil.

"Long time no see you, gents!"

"Don't kill me!" bawled Don Matt. "I'll give you—"

"Shut up, Matt," snapped Tripp. "Take things easy, O'Neil. You claim to have all the guts in the world. Then give me a fightin' chance for my taw."

"You'll git it, Tripp. I'm matchin' a blind man agin' you, mister. You burnt his eyes out. He's bin waitin' a long time for this. Sing out, Tripp. Reata can't see you. He's got to shoot at the sound. You got your gun in your hand. Sing out!"

"What kind of a dirty trick—"

"Got it, Reata?" Sonora Pat's voice sounded on the dark veranda.

"*Si, compadre.*"

The silver-handled six-shooter in old blind Reata's hand spat flame out of the darkness. Tripp's gun roared its reply as he shot at Reata's gun flame, then lurched in behind his horse, shot in the thigh.

"Hold it, Reata. He's ducked behind his horse. Take it up, Caballero. I'll try out Don Matt."

Sonora Pat O'Neil propelled his wheel chair out of the dark shadows. Caballero stalked out behind him. For the fraction of a second there was a tense silence. Then guns roared.

Don Mateo stood there like a big

gorilla, his smoking gun in his hand. Bullets thudded into his big belly but for a long moment he did not fall. Just stood swaying a little, the gun slipping from his hand, pale eyes wide and glazing, his beefy face a mottled yellow. Then his legs gave way and he fell with a heavy crash, blood spilling from his slack mouth. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Tripp was down on his knees, a six-shooter gripped in both hands. His teeth were bared in a ghastly grin and his arms seemed too weak to hold the heavy gun. And walking down the three steps from the veranda came the man whom Tripp had buried alive at Tres Marias. His face was as gray as old ashes, blood trickling from his lipless mouth. Tripp's gun exploded and the bullet struck Caballero in the chest, staggering him. Then Caballero took another step. He stood almost on top of Tripp now and his red-black eyes burned in his gray face. He stood there and emptied his gun into Tripp's dying body. And when the gun hammer fell on an exploded shell, the bullet-torn husk of the once gay Caballero collapsed.

THE shooting was over, and when the last gun echoes had died away there was a deathlike hush.

"Is all over," said blind old Reata.

"All over, old compadre."

"Caballero is dead."

"Dead, yeah."

"It is better for a man to die than live on with only hate and bitterness in his heart. May the *Señor Dios* have mercy on his soul. *Diablazo* had his torture from that Rebel, here on earth."

"And you, old Reata?"

"Will live for a few years That is Pitch I hear coming. But not Chappo. That is as it should be. Chappo had a cold heart. He is dead."

"Chappo," said Pitch, coming up on the porch, "died savin' my life. You're all right, father?"

"Like Reata," Sonora Pat O'Neil said, "I've made up my mind to live a while. The sons of those two men are dead, I reckon? Then have your men take care of their wounded. They can turn the wounded men over to the Mexican women. Get the dead buried. Have graves dug on the high knoll yonder for Caballero and Chappo. . . . You don't look like you'd gotten shot up much.

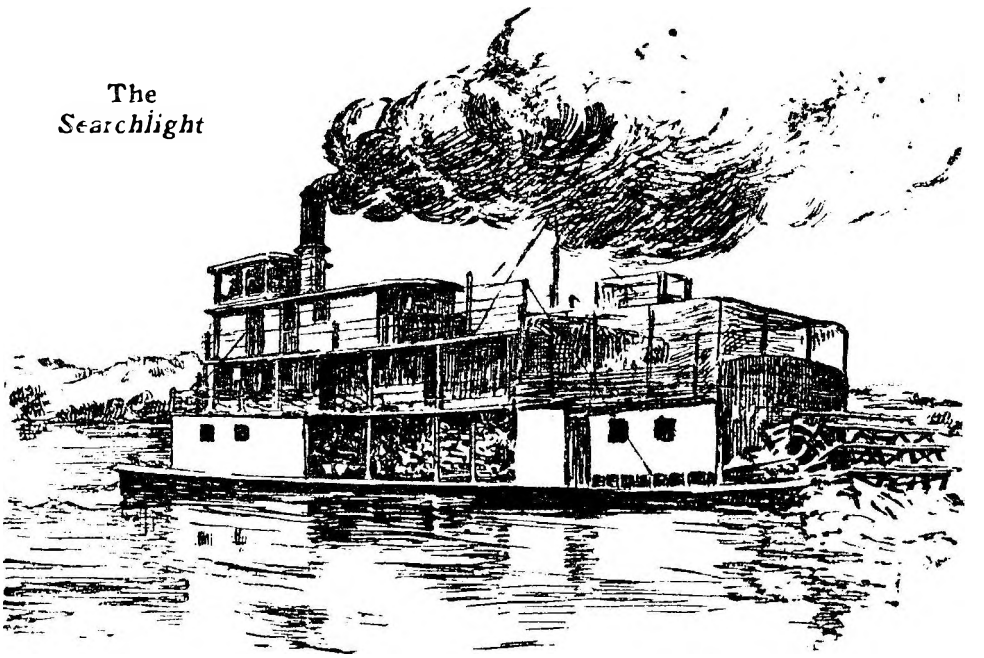
Pitch said he'd gotten out of the fracas without so much as a nick.

"Saddle a fresh horse, then, son," Sonora Pat told him. "Hit the trail for Tucson. Don't come back till you've got the stink of blood and powder smoke out o' your nose. Reata and me'll run the ranch. We'll expect you to fetch Judge John Whiteside and his wife. I knew Lupe Brennan's old man. Best saloonman in Arizona Territory. Ain't seen Lupe since she was a little thing.

"Don't rush back here, Pitch. Stay away till you've forgotten all that you've learnt from the Three Rebels. Until little Carmelita has taught you how to laugh an' how to dance.

"Then fetch her here. John Whiteside and Lupe will come with you an' we'll round up a padre to do the splicin'. Old Reata will want to give the bride away and I'll be somewhere near your side to back the play when you claim her. But don't come back till Rancho Sombrero looks to you like what it really is—the greatest ranch on earth. Adios and so long, son—till you come back a-singin'."

THE END



STEAMBOAT DAYS IN ARIZONA

by Jim West

STRANGE as it may sound to modern ears, Arizona, a land largely composed of arid mountains and interminable desert, was once a "steamboat" State. In the early days it boasted a bustling river traffic along the turbulent, silt-laden waters of the Colorado River. The southwestern version of "steamboating on the Mississippi" was complete in every detail, though everything was on a smaller scale.

Stern wheelers struggled majestically against the swirling, brown current upriver from Yuma, their destination almost forgotten ports like old Hardyville near Fort Mohave two hundred miles away. Pilots who knew every bend and bar in the navigable portions of the treacherous stream captained the boats, some of which ventured as far north as Bullshead Landing, just off the present mining camp of Katherine about forty miles west of Kingman, Arizona. Piles of cordwood were heaped on the river banks. Generally the wood was sold by Indians. When a steamer needed more fuel, she pulled in to the nearest pile and all hands tossed the wood aboard.

In the '60's when this river traffic was at its height barges and small

sailing craft also plied the Colorado and a prospector floating downstream in a rowboat or a flat-bottomed scow was a common sight to passengers on the steamboat. Sailboats on a river as narrow as the Colorado were themselves something of a surprise. The river lacked sufficient width to permit the craft to tack back and forth against the wind.

Nature, however, gave them a helping hand. The prevailing winds blew either up or down the Colorado River. It was a perfect arrangement when wind and boat were headed in the same direction. Unfortunately this couldn't always be the case. The upriver boat's wind was the down-river boat's lay over. Since it was impossible for a boat to tack, encountering anything but a following breeze meant tying up somewhere along the bank until the wind changed. Sailboats seldom made their trips on a pre-arranged schedule.

Even the timetable of the sternwheelers was subject to change without notice. Navigating the Colorado with its shifting bars, its snags and submerged boulders was a job that required all the skill of a frontier river pilot. Charts meant little. The river shifted its sandbars almost overnight. At any time a slip of the wheel, misjudgment in rounding a bend or in estimating the strength of the current might ground a boat anywhere along its hazardous journey.

SOMETIMES a grounded vessel could be backed off a bar within an hour or so, the boat's engines throbbing over the task, steam enought in the boiler to burst its seams, and the clanking paddle wheel churning the silty waters to an angry froth. At other times all efforts to break the grip of mud and sand fell flat. Passengers and crew might be stranded on the gurgling brown river in the midst of the desert for days, or weeks, or even a month at a time. The boat remained where it was until rising waters floated it free, or the vagaries of the river current swept enough of the sand out from under the hull to enable the boat to pull loose by its own power.

For steamers navigating the river south of Yuma to its mouth there was another danger. At times, particularly in the spring, tidal waves called bores—"burros" to the early boatmen—roared and foamed upstream in a solid wall of water from ten to twenty feet high. Bores could and sometimes did splinter boats to matchwood.

They occurred when the incoming tides of the sea in the Gulf of California met the outflow from the river. Each tried to push the other back. The result was a ridge or hump of seething waves, and the sea always won, sending the bore thundering upstream with a gradually diminishing force.

Spring was the worst time for bores. The river was at flood stage then and could put up a stiffer battle with the sea before it was finally conquered. The stiffer the fight, the higher the tidal wave.

In spite of these divergent difficulties river traffic continued, though with greatly lessened importance, until as late as 1910 or thereabouts. But from its inception until the coming of the railroads in the '80s a tremendous part of Arizona's commerce made use of water travel on the Colorado. The river was the main artery of trade not only for Arizona but also for southeastern Cailfornia. Wagon trains lumbered down from Utah to meet barges at landings miles above the end of steamboat navigation.

Today Yuma is the center of one of the largest and richest irrigated

farm areas in Arizona. It used to be a salty steamboat town, the Colorado's principal port. Its wharves and docks were busier than those of many a river city twice its size back East.

OCEAN-BORN freight destined for towns along the Colorado was transferred from the deep-sea steamers, packets and sailing vessels at the mouth of the river, generally at Port Isabel or Johnson's Landing. There the cargoes were loaded onto river boats and barges for the upstream journey. And there at the head of the Gulf of California the bigger ships took on their return invoices of frontier products—bullion, silver and high-grade metal ores destined for ultimate smelting perhaps in Wales or Norway. Besides these products of the mines, hides and bales of furs from deep in the interior were often shipped out via the Colorado River.

Incoming cargoes consisted chiefly of mining machinery and supplies, of foodstuffs, merchandise and pioneer trade goods. A good portion of the cargo coming upstream by river boat was discharged at Yuma where freighters were waiting to take it from the docks and start their big wagons rolling over the desert to the mines and mining camps, the ranches and the pioneer settlements that were beginning to freckle the surface of southern Arizona.

At each successive river town above Yuma more freight was unloaded and more wagons were ready to carry it to other inland destinations. The wharves at Ehrenberg collected shipments to and from the mining country around Wickenberg a hundred miles of empty desert away. At Hardyville goods, marked "Prescott," were unloaded. Prescott, which was once the Territorial capital. Up the river beyond the present site of Boulder Dam was Callville, a Mormon settlement below the point where the Virgin River empties into the Colorado. It was too far upstream for steamboat traffic, but barges made the long, arduous journey. From Callville a wagon road ran north through Utah all the way to Salt Lake City.

Colorado River boats drew their business from a tremendous area of pioneer wilderness. Apparently, if the rates the boats charged are any sort of index, it was a profitable business. It has been reported it cost $150 to ship a ton of ore from one of the upstream river towns virtually halfway around the world to smelters in Europe for treatment. But here's the twister. Of this amount the river steamer collected $140 for transporting the ore to tidewater, and the other $10 was paid for the ocean voyage.

In addition a shipper had, of course, to pay to have his ore freighted from the mine to the landing on the river. Small wonder Arizona prospectors sought bonanzas those days, and nothing else. Nothing else would pay. Aside from gold that could be handled by simple milling methods, ores of other metals had to be distinctly high grade to make both ends meet. Anything that couldn't be sorted out to about five hundred dollars a ton was simply put in the file-and-forget department as far as the pioneer miners were concerned.

The freighters weren't in business for their health either. They charged unblushingly for their services. In fact, their high freight rates contributed more or less directly to the establishment of river traffic on the Colorado. Before the boats began operating, most of the supplies for the government post at Fort Yuma were landed down near the river's mouth, a hundred and seventy-five miles away. Freighters brought it overland to the fort for a price—$75 a ton.

The government thought this was a little steep, and decided to try the river. It sent an army engineer out to look the Colorado over from Yuma to its mouth.

In due time Lieutenant Derby arrived at the head of the Gulf of California in a small schooner. But he arrived at a time when the river was low. Nevertheless he started in the schooner for Yuma. About twenty-five miles upstream he stuck. The water was too shallow for any further progress. Derby got in a small boat and went another fifty or sixty miles up the river.

Though his first trip wasn't exactly a success, it was a start in the right direction. The opening of the river to trade and traffic followed shortly thereafter.

ANOTHER army lieutenant, Joseph C. Ives, later took a steamboat, the *Explorer*, from the mouth of the Colorado virtually to the mouth of the Virgin River. Ives landed at the head of the Gulf of California in 1857. On board the ship that brought him was his shallow-draft, fifty-foot iron steamboat—a stern-wheeler made in knock-down pattern and especially constructed for him in Philadelphia.

At Port Isabel Ives and his party put the craft together and churned way up to Yuma. Early the following year the lieutenant made his exploratory voyage to the head of navigation. In the official report he wrote concerning his journey, Ives didn't think much of the country which the river traversed. But he averred that should the occasion arise, or there be any business to warrant it, steamboats could navigate the Colorado far above Fort Yuma.

A few years later, in the '60s, river captains were making regular trips up and down the "longest river in the West." Ives' pessimism about the country had failed to take into account the riches in gold, silver and other metals the surrounding miles of empty desert were capable of producing.

Old-timers who know or knew the Colorado River section from Bullshead down to Yuma may still remember the *Cochan*, the *Searchlight* and the *St. Valerie*. They were among the last to go of the boats that once plied their trade along the Colorado. The huge dams that finally tamed the river and harnessed its waters created a new irrigated farm land out of the fertile valley soil. But building them put an end to one of the most colorful paradoxes of the Southwest, steamboating through the desert.

THE END

TRIGGER TRUMPET

by

L. Ernenwein

He arrived in Raider's Pass on the eastbound stage, this slim-shanked young rider whose eyes were too old for his face. He was garbed in the frayed gear of a cowpuncher and his gaunt features held the pallor of a man who'd been laid up by long illness. But Lee Bernadette hadn't been in a hospital. He'd been in hell.

Stepping into the Wells Fargo office, Bernadette bought a ticket to Fort Verde and asked: "Is the Third Cavalry still up there—Major Mackenzie commanding?"

Gun blasts still sounded from both sides of the high-walled pass, and Lee Bernadette saw a shadowy shape ease stealthily over the rimrock.

The clerk nodded, and Bernadette went out to the sidewalk. For a moment he stood there, idly juggling two brass buttons in the palm of his left hand. It was an old habit, this juggling; it had begun here in Raider's Pass two years ago.

Warily, as if expecting recognition and not wanting it, Bernadette scanned Main Street. This town, he reflected, hadn't changed; it still bore the hardscrabble stamp of the Arizona frontier. He glimpsed remotely familiar faces in the stage station crowd, and upon entering the Silver Dollar Saloon next door, recalled that this same pink-cheeked bartender had served him the whiskey which had produced his crazy spree two years ago. He wondered if the saloonman would recognize him. Not that it mattered much. Nothing mattered now—nothing except the revenge he'd waited so long to collect.

Bernadette was thinking about that while he drank a glass of bourbon. *Two years.* Over seven hundred days. A long time to wait. Especially when you did the waiting in Yuma prison's heat-hammered cells. It was an eternity of time beyond all measurement or reckoning; it was like a lingering, feverish nightmare that wouldn't end. But it had ended finally and now he was back where the nightmare had begun. In another few hours he'd be at Fort Verde; would be facing Sergeant Sam Orondorff and Major Mackenzie, the men who'd started him down the road to prison!

That thought, and the whiskey's warming jolt, kindled a glow in Lee Bernadette's brain. There'd been no bourbon in Yuma—nothing to drink except stale coffee and stinking water from the muddy Colorado. He called for a second drink, gulped it down thirstily, and ordered another. It occurred to him then that he hadn't intended to celebrate until *after* he'd collected his revenge at Fort Verde. But a man needed to fortify himself against the dust of travel up through those rough-and-tumble Apache Hills.

He was finishing his third drink when the bartender said thoughtfully: "Seems like I've seen you before, stranger."

THE whiskey glow was like a warming flame in Bernadette now. After long abstinence the bourbon made him feel downright sociable—almost jovial. He said grinningly, "I wouldn't wonder if you had seen me," and recalling how this town's citizens had stared at a manacled prisoner the day he left here, added: "I wouldn't wonder at all!"

Whereupon he paid for the drinks and walking a trifle unsteadily, strode outside.

The northbound stage was coming out of the wagon yard. Its six-horse hitch stepped briskly, the leaders swinging wide as the driver expertly tooled the Concord to a stop before the stage office. The sun, Bernadette noticed, had disappeared, and a rising breeze formed fumaroles in the street's deep dust. He watched two passengers climb into the stage, a spongy-faced drummer carrying a dry-goods sample case and a slim, shapely girl with delicately molded features. A stylish little pancake hat was tilted pertly on the girl's head its twin ostrich tips making a black fringe above eyes as blue as any Lee Bernadette had ever seen.

Idly, Bernadette wondered why she was heading for Fort Verde. Nothing up there but a cavalry post and a tough mining camp. Respectable women didn't travel alone in this wild country; yet she didn't look like a dance-hall girl going up to sell her smiles in Bart Tannenbaum's saloon. Bernadette was still wondering about that when he eased into

a seat beside the drummer and glanced at the girl across from him.

The drummer said smoothly, "Looks like we're in for another dust storm," and when neither Bernadette nor the girl said anything, he added: "I'm Angus Slade, representing the El Paso Mercantile Co."

"So?" Bernadette muttered and the curt acknowledgment brought a faint smile to the blond girl's lips.

For a time then, as the stage creaked and swayed up the first steep grade, Bernadette relaxed into a whiskey-hazed mood of reflection. This was the day he'd dreamed about—the day he'd waited for so long. A hundred times he'd pictured how he'd make this last lap of the vengeance journey with a loaded gun holstered close to one hand and two brass buttons in the other. He closed his eyes and presently fell into a half-drunken doze.

A STIFF breeze was rattling the canvas window flaps and dust made a yellow haze in the stagecoach when Bernadette opened his eyes. He saw that the blond-haired girl was holding a lace handkerchief over her mouth and nose as a shield against the dust; but the drummer was still gabbing.

"It's an outrage the way Washington treats Arizona Territory," Slade declared. "A downright political outrage!"

The girl lowered her handkerchief. "What makes you say that?" she asked quietly.

"Wait till you've been here a while and you'll understand," the salesman predicted. "Arizona asked for protection against bloodthirsty Apaches and what did Washington send us—a few drunken cavalrymen commanded by an old man from West Point. What does he know about Indian fighting? Why, he's even got ex-Confederates in his regiment; some of the same rebels that fought against the Union at Gettysburg!"

That declaration brought a bitter frown to Lee Bernadette's lips. It made him remember how Sergeant Sam Orondorff had called him a Johnny Reb and used that against him at the court-martial.

"Were you at Gettysburg, Mr. Slade?" the girl asked.

"No. I . . . I served the commissary department in a civilian capacity," the drummer admitted.

A damned carpetbagger, Bernadette thought contemptuously; one of the fat jackals who'd profited while fighting men died in bloody conflict. And even though his hatred for Major John Mackenzie was like a long-festering sore inside him, Bernadette resented this drummer's loose criticism of a high-ranking officer.

Turning to Slade, he said: "Give your jaws a rest, peddler. I don't like your talk."

Anger barbed Bernadette's voice, yet even then the soft drawl of the Old South was in it. And that drawl stirred a sudden cautiousness in Slade, caused him to say timorously: "I didn't know you was a Southerner. I beg your parden."

"There's no North or South any more," Bernadette muttered. "Just one Union—and I don't like to hear muffin-mouthed cowards scoff at its army officers!"

That seemed to please the blond girl. Her lips curved into a smile and she held out a gloved hand, saying: "Here's something you dropped while you were napping, Mr.—"

"Bernadette," he offered, removing his hat with an habitual courtesy. "Lee Bernadette."

Then he took the two brass buttons from her palm and eyed them contemplatively. They were twin symbols, these buttons—symbols of shame and disgrace and bitter hatred. They were all that remained

of a career that had begun when an ex-Confederate cavalryman signed up for frontier service with the U. S. army after Lee's surrender.

He said, "Thank you, ma'am," and, slipping the buttons into a pocket, remembered his dishonorable discharge at Fort Verde—how he'd stood tight-lipped and sick inside while Major Mackenzie ripped captain's insignia and buttons from his uniform jacket. The major had missed two of those buttons and they had become constant reminders of that dismal occasion.

The wind was blowing harder now. It whipped slanting sheets of dust into the coach; it muffled the driver's constant urging of the teams and its brassy billows obscured the final remnants of daylight.

"I've seen some bad dust storms," Slade complained, "but this is the worst yet."

"Perhaps we should ask the government to do something about it—or the army," suggested the girl.

Bernadette chuckled and at this exact instant heard the driver yell frantically: "*Injuns!*"

THAT shrill warning swept the last strand of whiskey fog from Bernadette's brain. Hastily drawing his gun he opened a window flap and peered outside. A copper-colored haze of wind-swept dust masked Skyline Pass through which the stage was lurching now at top speed. Sunset's slanting rays made a rusty, unreal glow and in that weird light Bernadette caught a glimpse of riders on the high bank above the road—fantastic, wild riding shapes with dirty white cloths binding their black hair. And in this fleeting, dust-swirled glimpse Bernadette saw that they weren't using bows and arrows: *they were using guns!*

The driver was already shooting, the close blast of his rifle instantly echoed by a series of wind-muffled reports from the ridge top. Even as Bernadette began firing through the window, a slug slashed wickedly past his head. Another bullet tore through the roof so close it showered his hat with splinters. He shot at a dim shape and, seeing it collapse, felt a quick surge of satisfaction. If there weren't too many in the raiding party; and if the teams kept going there might be a chance.

But in the next moment, as the stage careened deeper into the dust-choked defile, the Apaches were completely hidden by the high walls of the pass. Bernadette cursed futilely. The Indians had picked a perfect place for ambush; they could send slugs down at the stage without being targets for a return fire!

Which was when Bernadette became aware of Slade's panic-stricken whimpering. The spongy-faced drummer was down between the seats holding his sample case above him for a shield. He was croaking fearfully: "We'll never reach Fort Verde alive! We'll all be killed and scalped!"

Glancing at the girl, Bernadette saw her pluck a small, pearl-handled pistol from a hastily opened valise. She was moving toward the rear window when Bernadette pushed her back. "Keep down," he ordered and, turning to Slade, said gruffly: "Get up and give me a hand."

"I got no gun," the drummer protested, and when Bernadette nodded at the girl's pistol, Slade whined: "No . . . no! I might get hit up there!"

The girl said, "Let him be," and pushing the rear window flap aside, peered calmly for a target.

Abruptly then the stage careened to the side of the road and jolted to a stop. The driver yelled, "Leaders both down," and he was opening the door when a bullet smashed him in the back. He fell forward

into the coach and was dead when he hit the floor.

Bernadette snatched up the driver's Henry rifle and scanned the ridge top for sign of the attacking Apaches. It was almost dark now and only the dust-hazed bloom of muzzle flare was visible to his probing eyes. As he fired at those brief, shifting targets, he inwardly cursed the prank of fate which had brought him to this slaughter trap. After two long years of waiting he was being cheated out of his revenge by a bunch of bloodthirsty savages bent on plundering a stagecoach. Here, within three hours' ride of Fort Verde, he was losing his chance for vengeance against Mackenzie and Orondorff. It didn't occur to Lee Bernadette that he might also lose his life.

Gun blasts still sounded from both sides of the high-walled pass. A horse screamed in bullet-shaded agony and Angus Slade was chattering hysterically in a corner of the coach. Bernadette saw a shadowy shape ease stealthily over the rimrock; he took time for deliberate aim and, firing, saw the shape slide down the bank and sprawl motionless in the road. The Apaches, he guessed, had dismounted. They were preparing to sneak down into the pass for a final assault. And there was no way to stop them; no way to hold them off for long in this steadily increasing darkness!

Bernadette cursed softly, bitterly. Seven hundred days and nights of waiting—for this. All his hate-prodded planning wasted. He fired at a yellow blob of muzzle flame and cursed again. If there were only some way of getting out of this mess, of living long enough to reach Fort Verde.

The girl's pistol exploded twice in rapid succession then, that pair of sharp reports reminding Bernadette of her presence. And of her peril. He hadn't even thought about what would happen to her when those stinking marauders closed in. They wouldn't kill her; not right away, at least. But she'd be better off dead before they got through with her.

THAT realization whipped up gentlemanly impulses long discarded. It shaped Lee Bernadette's thoughts to something besides hate and his hope for vengeance. Even though this girl meant nothing to him; even though he was in no way responsible for her being here, he owed her a man's protection. So thinking, he turned toward the dim shadow she made over by the window.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said quietly, and waiting out an interval of random firing from the ridge, added: "But Mr. Slade is dead. A bullet came through the roof and killed him."

Good riddance to worthless rubbish, Bernadette thought grimly. A man had no right to live if he couldn't be a man. All carpetbaggers were cringing cowards until the fighting was finished and they could collect the spoils of war.

He said soberly: "It's only a matter of time until another bullet will do the same thing to you, ma'am. Unless you get out of here."

"I was thinking the same thing," she murmured. "Do you think we'd have a chance if we sneaked on through the pass?"

Her use of the word "we" startled Bernadette. She wasn't just considering her own safety; she was including his welfare in her thinking. And he had ignored her risk until this moment.

"No, not much," he answered. "But there might be a good chance of you getting away alone while I keep those red devils occupied."

And because even now the loss of his revenge meant more to him than the chance he was giving this girl,

there was no enthusiasm in him when he said: "Go ahead, ma'am. Make your try. It's dark enough and the wind is making so much noise they may not hear you."

Turning back to the front window, he sent three random shots at the rimrock's quilted gloom, using his revolver for this chore. He was reloading the weapon when the girl said. "I think we'd both have a chance, and I'll not let you sacrifice yourself for me. Let's try it together."

Those words, and the soft cadence of her throaty voice made a brief change in Lee Bernadette. They altered his thinking; made him remember a time when he'd been something besides a hate-scourged renegade —a time when life had meant something more than living for revenge. But hard on the heels of that fleeting reflection, came another thought. If there *was* a chance for escape he might still have his gun-smoke showdown at Fort Verde!

Whereupon a rash grin twisted his lips and he drawled: "All right. Let's try our luck together."

Stealthily, almost breathlessly, Bernadette stepped over the driver's sprawled body. This, he realized, was as crazy a play as he'd ever made—trying to make a getaway with a girl when there was only half a chance even if he tried it alone. For a single instant then, as his feet struck the ground, Lee Bernadette had a wild urge to keep going —to let nothing stand in the way of his vengeance-prodded desire. But almost at once he tromped that urge down.

IT was wholly dark now; so dark that when Lee turned to help the girl she was only an obscure shadow against the gloom. Wind-driven dust prickled Bernadette's face like myriad needles. Remembering the girl's tiny, lace handkerchief, he removed his neck scarf and took time to arrange it so that most of her face would be shielded against the scourging sand.

Guns exploded sporadically from somewhere on the ridge, all those slugs missing the stage. The Apaches, Bernadette guessed, were purposely aiming their bullets ahead and behind the stage as a random barrage against an attempted escape. The wily renegades weren't taking any chances at all; they were playing it crafty, holding their victims in the coach until daylight. Or attempting to.

Bernadette placed his lips so close to the girl's head that the scent of her hair was like a delicious perfume. "You go on, while I give 'em one last tune on my trigger trumpet," he whispered. "I'll catch up to you *muy pronto*."

Her hand came up and grasped his shoulder and she asked: "Do you promise to come quickly?"

When he agreed, she added gravely: "On your honor as a soldier?"

He said, "Yes," and watching the small, indistinct blur of her departing figure, wondered how she could know he'd once been a soldier; a very proud and well-disciplined soldier. Then, as he got back into the stage, he remembered the two buttons she'd retrieved from the floor. She had a good head on her small shoulders, he decided. She had recognized those buttons as being from an army uniform.

Whereupon Bernadette began firing up at the rimrock. Using both the rifle and his revolver, he endeavored to give the impression that at least two men remained in the coach by firing from opposite windows. The Apaches centered their fire directly at the coach then, one of these bullets slicing a bloody furrow across Bernadette's cheek. But because there was a good soldier's

fatalistic streak in him, Bernadette merely chuckled. According to his grim philosophy, man didn't die till his time came and these narrow escapes were additional proof that this was true!

Hastily reloading his revolver, Bernadette again stepped over the driver's body. He was like that, poised for a stealthy drop to the ground, when a bullet smashed into his right shoulder with an impact that knocked him completely off balance. Falling sideways, his head struck the heavy brake block on the rear wheel and the collision sent a burst of bright lights through his brain.

GROGGILY, like a man awakening from a drunken stupor, Bernadette struggled to his feet. That movement sent sharp splinters of pain spiraling from his bullet-smashed shoulder. It made him sick to his stomach. But it cleared the groggy haze from his head. Gritting his teeth, Bernadette moved cautiously past the sprawled shapes of the harness-tangled teams and came presently to where the girl stood awaiting him.

"All right," he muttered, ignoring her soft, glad greeting. "Follow me close, and don't stumble."

For a time, while the need for stealth was of paramount importance, Bernadette moved slowly, feeling out each step. An occasional shot sounded behind them, those wind-muffled reports already seeming far off. But they weren't far off, and because each additional moment of silence back there at the stage would increase the Apaches' suspicion, Bernadette quickened his stride. When this departure was discovered, the Indians would come after them like ravenous, meat-hungry wolves!

That thought spurred an urgent eagerness for speed in Bernadette. Once out of this high-walled pass, he could veer away from the stage road; and because wind-blown dust would soon cover their tracks, they would have a fair chance of escape. But if the Apaches came in pursuit now there'd be no chance at all.

Reaching for the girl's hand he placed it on his gun belt, said: Hang on, we've got to hustle."

Then, with the wound in his shoulder becoming a hot core of pain that merged with a sickness at the pit of his stomach, Bernadette jogged forward. Feeling the pull of the girl's grip on his belt, he cursed the trick of circumstance which had placed her in his care. If a man ever needed to be unhampered, he needed to be now. Especially with a vengeance payoff waiting for him at Fort Verde!

As they neared the northern end of the pass the wind increased steadily until it became a tangible force against which Bernadette leaned in savage impatience. Flying grit stung his eyes; it clogged his throat and nostrils, until each breath he drew was like a lung-choking mass of dust. There was no sound of shooting from behind them now, which might mean that the wind's rising howl was wiping out all other sound. Or it might mean that the Apaches had discovered their departure and were now chasing them through the pass.

Bernadette lunged forward and soon noticed that the tugging pressure was gone from his belt. Even before he turned, he knew that the girl had let go, that she must have fallen.

Glancing back, Bernadette probed the murky shadows, glimpsed her sitting on the ground. He hurried back to her. "What's wrong?" he demanded almost impatiently.

"I . . . I turned my ankle," she gasped in a pain-ridden voice.

Bernadette felt the bitterness of

dispair well in him. No chance for speed now. Only a fool's luck could save him for a showdown with Major Mackenzie and Sergeant Sam Orondorff. He helped the girl up and when she uttered an involuntary cry of pain, he knew he'd have to carry her.

"This piggy-back ride probably won't last long," he muttered. "But we'll give it a try."

And thus it was that Lee Bernadette, who'd spent two hate-scourged years planning his revenge, stumbled through Skyline Pass with a sorrel-haired girl on his back. Yet even with the ironical aspects of his predicament twisting his lips to a mirthless smile, he had no inkling of how grossly a frivolous fate had stacked the cards against him.

REACHING the north end of the pass, Bernadette turned sharply left and, leaving the stage road, stumbled across the crest of the ridge. The girl's weight on his back was becoming a heavier and heavier burden; when he waded through ankle-deep sand in the lee of a rock outcrop his leg muscles seemed to tear loose from aching shin bones. Yet, because each step now forged another link in the long chain of his vengeance plan, he staggered doggedly ahead.

For a time, as slanting sheets of wind-blown sand tore at his face with increasing ferocity, Bernadette's mind was centered wholly on the tremendous task of keeping in motion; of breathing and walking and fighting off the thirst that gripped his throat like a clutching hand. He was remotely aware of his shirt's soggy wetness below his wounded shoulder and a wooden numbness in his right arm. Once, when a terrfic rush of wind knocked him off balance and he went to his knees, the girl's voice came faintly to him. But the wind's shrill scream distorted her words and he staggered down the west slope without knowing what she said, or earing.

Below the ridge, where the land was broken by a series of wooded bluffs, the wind's pressure lessened. And although fatigue pulled at his muscles constantly, Bernadette felt a rising tide of confidence. The Apaches couldn't possibly track him until daylight, and by that time his footprints would be entirely obliterated by drifting dust. Survival now was merely a matter of staying on his feet and trudging in the direction of Fort Verde. It occurred to him then that he had ridden across this country many times, and that the Diamond T horse ranch was located in these brush-blotched hills. He'd been chasing gunrunner renegades near the Diamond T the day his detail had been ambushed and ten men of I Troop had died in the sun-sparkled dust. Only he and Sergeant Sam Orondorff had escaped without serious wounds. And because Orondorff had accused him of careless command, Major Mackenzie had ordered a court-martial.

Afterward, just before his commanding officer ripped the buttons from his jacket, Bernadette had tried to tell him that it was Orondorff's carelessness on scouting detail which had led them into the massacre. But the major had ignored his attempt to explain. Three days later, endeavoring to blot out the disgrace of a dishonorable discharge, Lee had gone on a spree at Raider's Pass and somehow got implicated in a free-for-all shooting scrape which had netted him a two-year sentence in Yuma Prison.

These were the things Lee Bernadette was remembering now as he trudged wearily through the dust-swirled darkness with a girl on his back. And presently, when he came to a brush barricade at the edge of a dry wash, he uttered an eager ex-

clamation. This barricade must be the eastern side of the Diamond T horse trap; if he followed it north he'd come to the gate—and water!

It was a matter of minutes then until he was crossing the ranch yard at a shambling trot. Until he was seeing the faint shine of lamp light in a window and hearing the blond girl cry gadly, almost hysterically: "You've won, Lee Bernadette! You've saved us both!"

And then, when Lee was within three steps of the house, the door swung open and a man with a gun in his hand called harshly: "Stop! Stop right there!"

A tall, blocky-shaped man with a trooper's campaign cap tilted over his eyes, and the bully brashness of Sergeant Sam Orondorff in his voice!

LEE BERNADETTE stood still gripped in utter astonishment. For a single instant, as his dust-inflamed eyes stared at Orondorff, he had the crazy notion that this wasn't real, that his senses were playing tricks on him. Why should a cavalry sergeant be holed up at a renegade horse trader's shack in the middle of the night?

Orondorff said, "So you came back, like I figgered you would," and, peering at the girl on Bernadette's back, added: "and brought a lady friend along with you!"

Abruptly then Bernadette guessed why the stage had been attacked. And guessing that, had his first inkling of how monstrous a game this black-hearted soldier was playing here in the Apache Hills. It had been common knowledge at the Fort, Lee knew, that renegade gunrunners had been supplying the Indians with firearms. Orondorff was in cahoots with the gunrunners who supplied the Indians with firearms. No wonder he had let a pursuing detail ride into ambush two years ago, and then testified against his captain at the court-martial!

All Bernadette's stored-up hate rose like a tide inside him. The lust to kill was an inward heat that blazed in his brain. It made him forget the girl clinging to him; it splayed the fingers of his right hand into a gun-clutching claw and made him silently curse the wooden numbness that reached all the way down to his wrist. Here was the miserable specimen of a man who'd sent him down the dismal road to disgrace!

"Bring your girl inside," Orondorff invited, keeping a wary watch on Bernadette's hands. "The boys should be back soon from the pass."

That brazen admission that he was in with the gunrunners didn't surprise Bernadette. Orondorff wasn't afraid of witnesses here. A dead ex-

convict and a dead girl couldn't testify against him. But Bernadette wasn't prepared for what happened when he eased the blond girl on to a chair.

"Thanks, Lee," she murmured, then turning to Orondorff, said sharply: "I don't understand your attitude, sergeant. But I want you to take a message to Fort Verde at once."

Orondorff's roan face creased into a leering grin. "I'm going to be busy for a spell," he declared, "but I might deliver your message later on, girlie. What is it?"

"I want you to notify Major Mackenzie that I have a sprained ankle, that his daughter needs an ambulance for herself and escort.

Major Mackenzie's daughter!

For the second time this night utter astonishment grasped at Lee Bernadette's senses. This blond-haired girl he had toted all those weary miles was the daughter of the man he'd marked for vengeance!

No wonder she'd recognized the two brass buttons as belonging to a soldier's uniform. No wonder she'd been so calm back there in the bullet-slashed stagecoach—and here, facing this renegade sergeant.

Confidently, as if she were sitting in a house an Officer's Row at some army post, she said: "My father isn't expecting me until next week. But he won't take kindly to my being delayed here unnecessarily, sergeant. You'd better be riding!"

It was then that Bernadette heard the muffled tromp of oncoming horses —and they were approaching from the direction of Skyline Pass!

Orondorff heard them also, for he smiled and said: "Company coming. They'll be pleased to find visitors, especially a good-lookin' white girl."

At this exact instant, as Orondorff's ogling glance shifted to the girl, Lee Bernadette grabbed for his gun. It wasn't a fast draw, because of the numbness in his arm, it was even a bit clumsy. And as the weapon cleared leather he knew that Orondorff would have the first shot.

THAT first, hastily fired slug slammed against Bernadette's ribs with an impact which knocked him sideways. And it was this involuntary shift which saved him from the bullets that instantly followed. Then his own gun was bucking against his palm and for a strangely suspended interval of room-trapped explosions he was aware of only one thing,—a savagely urgent eagerness to smash down that scowling, smoke-wreathed face across the room.

Ignoring the sharp splinters of pain that stabbed upward from his ribs, Bernadette watched Orondorff

fall back against the wall, saw him hang there for a moment as if nailed to the boards. And because his hate was like a raging tempest inside him, Bernadette fired again and again at that collapsing shape. Until finally the hammer of his gun clicked on a spent shell.

Then, with the hoof pound of hard-ridden horses sounding close in the yard, Bernadette began hastily reloading. He glanced at the girl and seeing the fear in her startled eyes, felt a dismal sense of regret. He wouldn't be able to save her again; but he could play one more tune for her on his trigger trumpet.

CURSING grimly, Bernadette took a step toward the door, that movement whipping up a hot hell of pain in his side. He tried to ignore it—tried to push aside the black boots of sickness that were tromping him down. He took another step, and seeing the floor tilt upward, tried to prop himself against falling. But the floor was swaying like a drunkard's dream and he heard the girl cry out hysterically just before the boards smashed against his face.

The rest of it was like a crazy, feverish dream. Bernadette became remotely aware of men's voices in the room—crisp, disciplined voices. Soldiers' voices!

That didn't make sense, and when he opened his eyes what he saw didn't make sense, either. A cavalryman was tying a bandage around his ribs, the blond girl held his head in her lap—and Major John Mackenzie stood above him, talking!

"I've been suspicious of Orondorff for some time," the old commander was saying. "When he left the post today we trailed him, and saw his Apache friends start up Skyline Pass. We caught up with them just after they'd ambushed the stage. We wiped them out, and came here to get Orondorff."

All the fuzzy haze cleared from Bernadette's brain then and when Major Mackenzie reached down and gripped his hand, Bernadette really smiled for the first time in two years.

"I'm sorry I misjudged you so grossly," the major declared haltingly. "And I am deeply grateful for the way you saved my daughter from those red devils. If there's any way I can repay you—"

Bernadette reached into his pants pocket and, bringing out the two brass buttons, juggled them thoughtfully in his left hand. Then he said: "I'd sure like to wear these buttons on a uniform, sir—if it could be arranged."

"It can be!" Major Mackenzie declared quickly. "And it will be at once!"

Bernadette started to get up, but the girl pushed him gently back, saying: "Lie quietly, Lee, until the ambulance arrives."

It occurred to him then that despite all they'd been through together, he didn't know her name. He knew the scent of her blond hair was like a delicious perfume, and that she had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. But he didn't know her name.

As if sharing his thoughts, she murmured: "My name's Nancy—Nancy Jane."

Then she glanced up at her father and inquired pointedly: "Am I holding a captain's head in my lap, dad?"

Major Mackenzie nodded, and seeing the proud glow that came into Lee Bernadette's prison-haunted eyes, said gruffly: "A captain—and a first-class fighting man!"

THE END

For a moment Strap was safe from the guns of Powler's men, but how long would that tree limb support his weight?

LOOP ARTIST

by Archie Joscelyn

THERE was nothing particularly outstanding about the cowboy on the spotted cayuse, ambling along the road beneath scattered pine trees, unless it was the well-developed arm and shoulder muscles which showed through his shirt. Nothing that met the eye, though he was casually twirling a coiled lariat rope and whistling soundlessly between his teeth.

A black-and-white magpie had perched teeteringly on a branch twenty feet above the road, eying the world suspiciously. Abruptly, with only a flick of the wrist, the cowboy shot the loop of the lariat out and up, and the magpie squawked plaintively and flapped away, leaving half a dozen feathers fluttering behind.

"Not so bad, considerin'," the cowboy mused, recoiling the supple length of the lariat. "Just a little rusty—"

The shrill *ki-yi*-ing of a dog burst on the peaceful quiet of the road, the sound coming from just around a turn. The cowboy rounded the bend an instant later and his nearly soundless whistle became more plaintive at what he saw. A tall man, smoothly shaven, yet with the black of whiskers showing on his lean jowls, was kicking at a non-descript mongrel as it tried to get

to its feet and slink away. At that moment, from the brush in the opposite direction, a wiry, tow-headed boy of ten or twelve dashed into sight and ran to protect the dog. As the boy stooped to pick the cringing hound up in his arms, the black-jowled man kicked him in turn, sending both boy and dog rolling.

"This time I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget, bub," he shouted. "You Wilkins are just like yore hound, always snoopin' around—"

The boy was cowering away, still trying to protect the dog. He stumbled and fell, and the big man was almost upon him a second time when he seemed to be jerked back by an invisible hand. Frothing with rage, he swung around, jerking at the lariat, to meet the faintly sardonic gaze of the cowboy.

"What the devil! Who do you think you are, buttin' in here?" he choked.

"Folks mostly call me Strap," the cowboy confessed, his eyes wide and innocent. "I reckon likely 'cause my dad used to use one in my upbringin'—somethin' that was neglected in yores, the way it looks—"

"Watch out for him, mister?" the boy yelled suddenly. "He's got a gun!"

WITHOUT warning, the big man's hand was darting for a hidden weapon, but the hand was caught and jerked back by the flicking loop of the lariat again, which seemed to move like a live thing with merely a flick of Strap's wrist. The cowboy's tone was chiding.

"Looks a'most as if you was huntin' for trouble," he said. "Kickin' a dog and a boy is askin' for it. And this here . . . well, I guess I'll just have to oblige you and give you one of them lickin's you missed previous. And this is going to hurt you more than it will me."

Dismounting, he was hardly out of the saddle before the big man rushed him, aiming a vicious kick which didn't find its mark. Strap merely side-stepped it and punched his opponent in the face as he tried to regain his balance. To the watching, wide-eyed boy, the thing was marvelous, almost incredible. This was the bully of Bearpaw, who had never been bested with his fists. Besides, he must have outweighed Strap by at least thirty pounds.

But Strap possessed a catlike quickness, and the muscles in his arms and shoulders seemed like supple steel springs. He side-stepped the big man's rushes, ducked his wild swings, and hit him almost at will. A few minutes later, with breath coming as even as ever, Strap swung back into the saddle and stared down at his opponent who was raising dazedly on one elbow.

"I'm hopin' the lesson hasn't been wasted," Strap said. "Though if you didn't get the fine points, I'll be glad to demonstrate again what I mean, when you're feelin' better. The main point is, don't go around kickin' boys and dogs."

Strap waved nonchalantly to where the boy and dog had been watching, and were now disappearing in the trees again. He rode on, coming to town a half mile farther on. This, from the signs, was Bearpaw, and Strap felt inclined to turn up his nose at it. The streets were rutted, muddy, the wooden sidewalks broken, and a general air of decrepitness seemed to pervade the place.

HAVING stabled his horse, Strap started slowly back up the main street, and his eyes brightened a little at sight of a sign above a doorway reading: "Star Freighting Co." He pushed open the door and halted abruptly.

The big man to whom he had administered the lesson was seated be-

hind the desk, his face washed clean of the blood that had smeared it a few minutes before, but with plenty of other evidence still remaining of the power of Strap's fists. Sudden rage flared into his eyes at sight of his visitor.

"You!" he choked. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Strap's gaze was bland.

"Reckon we kind of neglected the ceremonies, back there on the road," he said. "I'm Strap, to my friends, billed as the cowboy wonder, the loop artist extraordinary with a rope in the rodeos, and so on. And since you're here, I take it that means you're Powler, managin' this freightin' company?"

"I'm Powler, all right," the big man snarled. "And if you came here lookin' for a job, you come to the wrong place. I've been hirin' good men when I could find 'em, lately, but there ain't no place around here for you! Get out, and stay out! And that means out of town and out of this country—if you know what's good for you!"

Strap eyed him speculatively, shaking his head.

"My, my, but he's impetuous!" he sighed. "There might be two sides to a question, like turnin' a stone over and findin' a worm hidin' under it. But you're right about one thing. I don't reckon I'd care much about workin' for you, Powler. I had sort of figgered on a job around here, but this place smells too much of polecat for a sensitive nose."

With a shrug, he turned and sauntered back to the street again, jigging his looped rope in one hand, while Powler cursed deep in his throat. Another hundred yards down the street, and Strap stopped at a breathless hail. Turning, he saw the tow-headed boy running toward him, followed by the dog, and accompanying them, a girl of eighteen or nineteen, whom Strap decided at once must be the boy's sister, though her hair was a soft silvery gold.

"Wait a minute, mister," the boy called. "I been wantin' to thank you for helpin' me and Shep, out there. And sis, here, she wants to thank you, too."

"I certainly do," the girl agreed. "Powler is so . . . so mean when he gets in a rage. Johnny's dog had frightened his horse a little. I don't know what he might have done to Johnny—"

"He aimed to just about half kill me, to try and scare us out of the country," growled Johnny.

There was sudden distress in the girl's eyes as she surveyed Strap.

"I'll bet you came to town in response to Powler's asking for drivers for his wagons," she went on. "You just came out of the Star office, and you didn't stay in there long. I'm sorry if what you've done has caused you to lose a chance at a job—"

"Shucks, now, ma'am, don't you worry any about that," Strap reassured her. "I been workin' pretty steady with a rodeo show for a spell, and I ain't too anxious to find me a new job. And after I saw who was occupyin' that office, I lost any hankerin' I had for a job like that, anyway."

"Can you handle six horses the way you handled Powler?" Johnny demanded. "If you can, maybe there's a job for you, anyway."

The girl looked thoughtful.

"I guess we haven't even introduced ourselves," she said. "I'm Doris Wilkins, and this is my brother, Johnny. As to the job, we're trying to keep the Wilkins Wagons running, for we haul freight, too. And we do need a good man, badly. But I'm afraid it's a pretty hopeless proposition, and compared to a job with the Star line—"

"We ain't licked yet, sis," Johnny

protested fiercely. "Nor we ain't going to be—not by that Powler!"

"That's the spirit, Johnny," Strap commended. "My friends call me Strap, Miss Wilkins. What's this all about, now?"

They had turned into another building, with the sign, "Wilkins Wagons," on a faded board above the door. Doris sighed.

"The Star Freighting Co. has always been a big outfit, but it used to be a square one, in every way, while old Huff Starringer was running it," she explained. "But Huff died a few months back, and Powler seems to have taken over. Now there's nothing the same about the outfit except the name. Powler's out to get all the business in the country, and to run all competition out, any way he can do it. His drivers have stolen our business, our horses have been killed, wagons smashed—"

"And that ain't the worst of it," Johnny cut in indignantly. "We've had two drivers killed, too, and a couple more hurt. And some others run out of the country. It's gettin' so nobody dares drive a wagon for us, any more."

"That's what I meant," Doris explained gravely. "Powler doesn't like you, to start with. And if you try to work for us it'll be at the risk of your life."

"What sort of a job you got that needs doing?" Strap asked.

"We got a wagon load of freight that needs to go to Leesville tomorrow," Johnny explained. "Haulin' for Hank Milton. The Star'll be runnin' a wagon, too, with some of Hank's stuff. If we deliver, we keep gettin' some of Hank's custom. If we don't, we just fold up. And we ain't even got a driver. D-dad died here, six weeks ago. Sis has been carryin' on, and she's talkin' of takin' that wagon herself, but though she's a good driver, it ain't no job for a girl. And she won't let me take it—"

"Why should either of you worry about it, when you've got a good driver like me to do it?" Strap grinned. "Let's get things ready."

BY the next morning Strap had learned a lot. Doris and Johnny had told him a part, and he had heard more around Bearpaw. Leesville was twenty miles away, across Bearpaw Pass which, according to the concensus of public opinion, was the devil's own road. And tomorrow Strap would be pitted against Black Mike Callahan, the toughest driver on the Star wagons, where toughness was paramount.

Undisturbed, Strap inspected his own big wagon briefly, making sure that the high-piled freight was well roped in place. The six horses were eager to go. Strap swung to the seat, dropped his coiled rope to the floor beside his feet and gathered up the reins. Doris and Johnny called encouragement as he kicked off the brake and rolled down the street. A pair of mighty game kids, he reflected, trying to keep up a business which a strong man had built, against tougher competition than it had ever known.

He had gone only a couple of blocks when, abruptly and without warning, a second wagon swung suddenly out into the street just ahead of him, coming from a side street. One glance was enough to identify it as a Star wagon, with Black Mike on the seat. That its arrival had been timed was demonstrated a moment later. Black Mike slowed his team, swinging them to the left.

It was a move to force Strap to swing his team more to the left as well. Ordinarily, there would have been plenty of room for that, here in the street. But now the whole left side of the street was a bog, a

morass of apparently bottomless mud. The road to the right was passable, but Strap didn't need to be told that if his heavily laden wagon got over there in that pit, it would sink more than hub deep, and would stay there until the wagon was unloaded, before it could be pulled out again.

The trick was a deliberate one, to stop Strap before he got well started. Strap's jaw set a little. He spoke sharply to his own big horses, magnificent animals weighing seventeen hundred apiece, sending them forward at a trot, swinging to the right, crowding close in against Black Mike's team. The trick that Black Mike was trying called for good driving, and the thing that Strap was attempting needed an even closer calculation. It must all happen in a space of seconds.

Black Mike swore suddenly and tried to swing back. He was just too late. His team at a full trot now, Strap brought his wagon up at a sudden angle. The heavy hub of the right front wheel rasped against the left front wheel of the Star wagon, there was a crunching, grinding roar, and the Star wheel was sagging, letting the corner of the wagon drop with it, three or four spokes splintering.

Strap was swinging quickly back again and on, his own wheel unharmed. It was the sort of trick that drivers of Roman chariots had been so adept at playing on their opponents two thousand years before, and it took a lot of daring and skill, but it was effective when it worked.

The wagon was rolling ahead when a sudden shrill yell of warning reached his ears—the voice of Johnny Wilkins. Strap swung about, ducking instinctively, as a bullet whistled past. Black Mike, his face a mask of rage, was standing up in his wagon now, shooting.

"So it's murder you'd try, is it?" Strap muttered, and his own hand came up, holding a gun. Ducked down behind his own load, he was now a poor target, but Black Mike was still in full view, his gun spitting lead venomously. Strap took his time, squeezed the trigger. He saw the gun jerk and tumble from Black Mike's hand, his arm fall limp at his side, with a red stain appearing on the arm a little below the shoulder. Casually Strap holstered his own gun and kept going.

THAT little brush was merely a preliminary, Strap was certain. It was twenty miles to Leesville, and half the distance was a steady, hard climb to the top of the pass. At least eight hours of traveling in all, which would give Powler and Black Mike plenty of time for further counter-measures, since that first trick hadn't worked.

The first five miles weren't bad. The road wound through a little valley, gradually climbing, with a small stream tinkling along at one side, flowers studding the hillsides, the spicy tang of evergreens fragrant on the air. The next five miles were tough, with the road corkscrewing back and back, climbing steadily, the creek lost far below. The six big horses had to halt and rest frequently, with the brake kicked on to give them a respite. As he finally neared the crest of Bearpaw, Strap could see why it was called the devil's own road.

Its steepness and hairpin curves were bad enough. But up here it was a dug road along the side of the mountain, with a sheer drop off on the one side often five hundred feet below, and more cliffs rising up on the other side. Any accident which would send a wagon off here would be fatal for all concerned. And two Wilkins wagons had gone off here in the last five weeks!

Which wouldn't be any accident! But at least it was down grade now all the rest of the way to Leesville. Strap kicked off the brake and the heavy wagon began to roll, the horses settling back in their traces now. He had gone another quarter of a mile, around a turn in the road, when he heard the clattering bang of another wagon coming from behind, and coming, apparently, at reckless speed.

Strap looked around. Every now and then a place had been widened out where two wagons could pass, but most of the road was too narrow for passing. The noise of the other wagon rose to thunder as it came around the bend, and a glance showed Strap that it was a Star wagon, with Powler himself driving, face looking black despite another shave that morning, to match one eye which was black-ringed.

The wagon came on without a slackening of pace. Strap watched warily, suspecting a trick. Nor was he disappointed. When the leaders of the other team had their noses almost touching his wagon, they stopped abruptly, and a couple of men came tumbling out from the Star wagon, running toward his own, guns in hand. Strap grabbed for his own, halted the motion as a savage roar came from the other direction.

"Pull up, and no foolin', or we'll fill yez full of lead!"

THAT was Black Mike's roar, and there was Black Mike and two more men, just ahead of him, likewise with drawn guns. As he kicked on the brake, Strap understood the trick, and gave grudging credit. Enraged by what had happened back in town, Black Mike, Powler and four more men had set out after him with an otherwise empty wagon, enabling them to travel fast.

They had been close behind him

as he neared the crest of the divide, but the steep twists of the road and the shrouding trees had hidden them from sight. Black Mike, wounded arm bandaged, and two others had gotten out and hurried ahead on foot, circling on a trail to get ahead of him. When Powler and those with him knew that they had had time enough to do so, they had come along fast with the wagon, to close the trap from behind and attract his full attention.

Now, with six guns covering him from both directions, Strap was trapped, and knew it. He gave a quick look around. Three feet out from the wheels the road fell sheer away to a dizzying drop. Twenty feet below the brink he could see the branch of a pine tree, which had gained a precarious root hold in a crack in the ledge and clung there for years. The gaunt limb jutted out starkly, like a limb made for a hangman's rope.

The six men were coming up now, Powler directing. One of them took Strap's gun and made a swift search for other weapons.

"Thought you was dammed smart, didn't you?" Powler jeered. "Well, I warned you yesterday to light a shuck out of this country, but you was too big a fool to do it. I don't tell folks that but once."

He gestured to his men.

"Unhook the team. Unload the freight and put it in our wagon. We're scheduled to deliver a load in Leesville today, which same we'll do. When this wagon's empty, we'll shove it over the bank. And you'll be in it when it goes, hombre. Stayin' with yore wagon to the end."

Strap shivered a little as he glanced outward again. Nothing could survive a tumble like that. The wagon would be smashed to kindling wood, and he would fare no better if he went with it.

"Shall we tie him up, boss?" one of the men asked.

Powler shook his head. "Nope. Wouldn't look too good, if he was ever found. Not necessary, anyway. You keep a gun on him, Sam. If he wants to jump into a bullet, that'll be all right."

Strap watched while the team was unhitched and driven a little way ahead. Already the others were unloading the freight, carrying it back to the Star wagon and reloading it. Sam, who looked like a gorilla with the fur rubbed off, squatted nearby and watched Strap with grim enjoyment, revolver at the ready. Another five minutes and the wagon would be empty, and then they'd be shoving it over.

Strap shuffled his feet a little, moving his coiled rope, which he had dropped in the wagon that morning. Casually he hunkered down on his heels, so that he was crouching above the rope, keeping it pretty well out of sight.

"Don't you aim to give a man any chance?" he asked.

Powler smiled venomously.

"I gave you a chance yesterday," he said. "If you can fly like a buzzard today, that'll be yore chance, but the only one you'll get. You stay put, now. If you try jumpin' before the wagon goes over, we'll make a sieve of you. All right, boys, shove it off."

The wagon was empty now, save for Strap. One of the men loosened the brake, another picked up the tongue, cramped it sharply, and started to push. Strap still hunkered there in the bottom of the wagon box, but now he was poised like a steel spring about to be released.

AS he felt the hind wheels start to slide out into space, Strap went into action, springing up, the rope in his hands. This was a trick

he'd done numberless times at the rodeo, even as he'd fooled the startled magpie with it—shooting out the loop with an uncanny accuracy, without any preliminary swing or motion.

Now the wagon was starting its downward plunge. He could feel it going, knew there would be only a couple of seconds before it really got to twisting, dropping at a dizzy speed. But for the moment the floor of the box beneath his feet was fairly solid. The loop flicked out, straight toward that outjutting limb on the weathered old pine tree, clinging there alongside the cliff. This was a time when he couldn't afford any error in judgment.

Strap saw the loop slide around the limb, jerk tight, then the wagon was gone from under him and he was jerking as the rope grew taut, a wrench that seemed about to pop his arms from their pits or break the rope itself, while he swung wildly like the pendulum of a clock. If that old limb happened to be rotten, now—

But it hadn't broken with the sudden strain, and long practice with and on ropes had toughened Strap's muscles for even this sort of a job. So far, those up above on the road didn't know just what was happening, but they'd soon find out. Strap climbed, hand over hand, heard a startled yell, and a bullet zipped viciously past. Then he reached the limb, pulled himself up and crouched on it.

He hadn't bothered to look down, for the distance below was too great, too dizzy, with no sort of a hold for hundreds of feet on down. But as he had judged, this limb was only about twenty feet below the road, and it carried the advantage he had suspected and hoped for, but hadn't been too sure of from up above.

The rocky cliff of the road itself jutted outward, up above, for three or four feet at that one point. And the overhang was enough to shelter him, as he crawled to the close side of the tree trunk on another limb, so that he was safe from their bullets if they tried to shoot down.

That was one count in his favor. A second was that he was still alive, instead of a mangled bit of flesh down where the wagon had splintered. Opposed to that was the fact that Powler and his men knew where he was now, and were doubly infuriated at being outthought. And determined to rectify that error as speedily as possible.

One of the gun-slingers tried to peer over the edge and locate him

for a target, but to look down for hundreds of feet and try to look back under was too much. Dizzily, the man drew back, muttering.

"Why not forget him?" he asked. "He's down there, but he can't get up, nor down. Let him perch there till he tumbles off."

"We'll take no more chances with him," Powler growled. "Somebody might come along and hear him, and throw him a rope. You boys go down the road, get to the bottom and circle back. You can pick him off from down below. I'll wait here and keep watch."

STRAP heard them start. It would take them at least half an hour to circle and get to a point where they could pick him off, he

estimated, but they'd do it, sooner or later. He studied the situation carefully. That overhang was solid rock at this point, and hope quickened in him as he saw a thumblike projection, almost directly above. A bit of rock five or six inches wide and sticking outward an equal distance.

Carefully he loosened the noose from the limb, then, balancing carefully, flipped his loop upward again. This was as ticklish and difficult a throw as he'd made from the wagon, even more so in that this throw was upward, like the one at the magpie. But the rope settled over the thumb, and without hesitation, Strap started to climb again. There were plenty of ifs waiting up there, plenty risks to this course, but it was his only chance.

For the moment, at least, Powler didn't suspect that anything was happening. But a small bit of stone, loose there beside the rope, slid noisily as the rope creaked and twisted with his climbing, and Strap heard Powler's step on the rocky road above. As one hand reached to secure a hold on the thumb of rock, he saw Powler's startled face. Powler sent a hasty shot at him, which missed by half a foot.

Strap didn't miss. He had his hold, and heaved upward, grabbing with his other hand, and his fingers closed on Powler's ankle, jerked. With a shrill howl of terror, Powler felt himself falling, flung himself frantically downward, face forward, clawing to pull himself back on to the road.

In that he succeeded, dropping the gun. Still holding fast to Powler's ankle, Strap scrambled to the road and to his feet, snatching up the dropped gun as he straightened. Powler stared up, face beaded with sweat, into the muzzle.

"You're too impetuous, Powler," Strap chided. "By takin' it easy you had plenty of time to shoot and not miss. A time like that, you can't afford to miss."

He tensed, listening. From the sound, several riders were coming, pushing their horses hard. Strap watched warily as they swept around the bend up the road, then relaxed. Johnny Wilkins was in the lead, with Doris close behind, and half a dozen other men with them. Their glances ranged to the one wagon, the two teams, and the two men standing there. Doris seemed speechless as something of what had been happening came to her, but Johnny wasn't.

"Gosh, you been havin' trouble, ain't you, Strap?" he gasped. "I figgered you would, when I saw this polecat here pull out with an empty wagon and a load of men. We rounded up some help and come as fast as we could—"

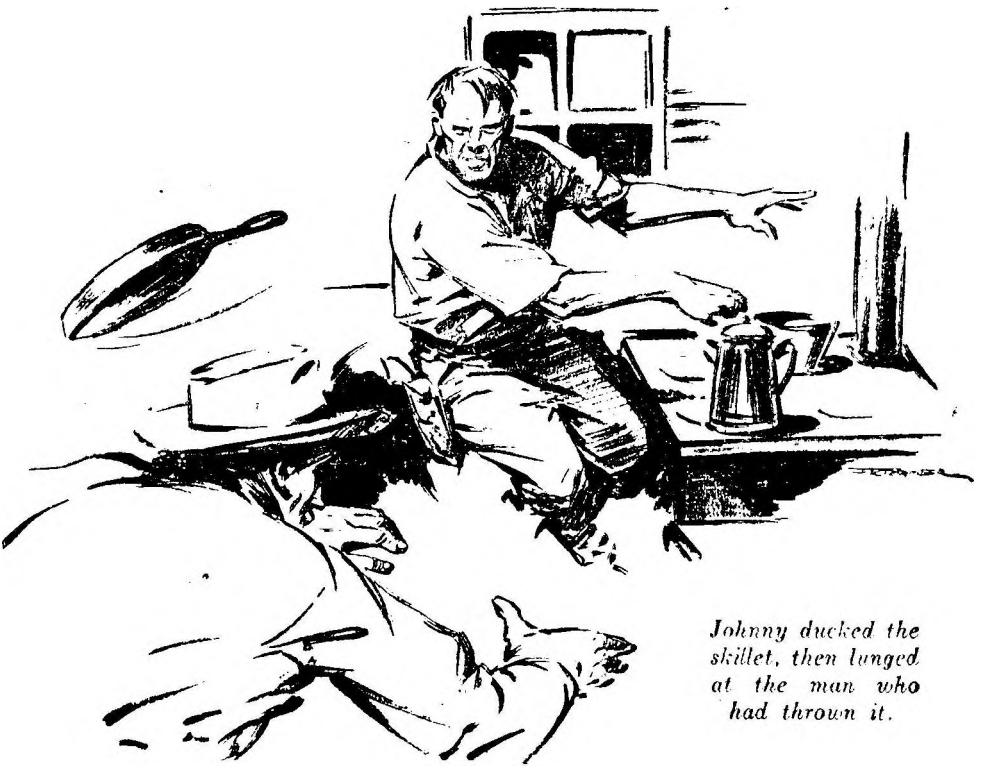
"And I'm right glad to see you," Strap confirmed warmly. "I'll deliver your load of freight in Leesville today, all right, but the wagon's gone. Though maybe you'd just as soon trade for the one it's in now—"

"But that's a Star wagon," Doris exclaimed.

Strap grinned.

"Yeah, it is that," he agreed. "But it's only fair for you to have it, unless we run this freightin' on a partnership business, maybe. You see, I'm Strap Starringer, Huff's nephew, and that makes me owner of the Star line—as I aimed to explain to this polecat manager of mine yesterday. But added to other things, one of his troubles is that he's too impetuous. Goes off half-cocked and never gives a fellow time to say anything. Though where you're going, Powler, you'll have plenty time to reflect on things thataway."

THE END



Johnny ducked the skillet, then lunged at the man who had thrown it.

BOUNTY FROM BOOTHILL

by Gunnison Steele

BLOCKY, red-haired Johnny Ring had ridden far and fast and now, as he crossed the sparsely settled Jicarilla range, both he and his buckskin were tired and gaunted. He peered eagerly ahead at the old shack he had spotted just a few moments before.

Obviously, it was merely a line shack. But blue smoke curled from the mud chimney, and that, Johnny hoped, meant food. Behind the shack, at the base of a nest of red cliffs, was a rickety pole corral, and inside the corral was a long-legged, mean-eyed roan horse, wearing a saddle but no bridle. Clear water, seeping from a niche near the base of one of the cliffs, had been piped to a trough inside the corral.

Johnny Ring saw no sign of anybody as he rode up and stopped before the shack, but he heard sounds inside that told him somebody was busy over a stove. He dismounted, letting the reins drag, his boots making almost no racket on the spongy ground as he went toward the shack. There was no porch, so he stepped right into the open doorway.

Johnny grinned at what he saw. A heavy-set man, his back to the door, was holding a sizzling skillet over a hot stove. The odor of fry-

ing beef that filled the cabin was sweet to the redhead's nostrils. Quite obviously, the heavy-set hombre hadn't seen him ride up.

Still grinning, Johnny said: "Put in some extra slices of that beef, mister, 'cause you're gonna need it!"

What happened then made Johnny's mouth fly open with amazement.

The man at the stove whirled like a startled cat. Cursing, he flung the sizzling skillet straight at Johnny's head. Then he grabbed for his gun.

Johnny yelled, ducked under the skillet, at the same time driving his blocky body in a headlong dive across the room at the burly man's legs. He heard a gun roar, felt the burn of powder smoke on his neck, heard the waspish hiss of a bullet. Then his hurtling body hit the burly man and smashed him backward against the hot stove.

THE heavy-set man yelped sharply with pain, writhing away from the stove. But he held onto the gun, and now its muzzle again swung toward Johnny. The redhead drove in again, yelling: "You locoed, lame-brained idiot, quit it! I only want to—"

The next bullet burned a fiery gash across his ribs. Righteous anger boiled up inside him. With his left hand he grasped the would-be killer's gun wrist, and his right fist blasted explosively into the burly man's hawkish face. He felt the man's straining muscles relax slightly. And the man's eyes—one of them chalk-colored and the other brown—bulged glassily.

Seizing the advantage, Johnny tried to tear the gun from the other's fingers. He didn't want to hurt the man, for he didn't know what this was all about. All he wanted right now was to keep from getting killed.

But the heavy-set stranger recovered quickly. Jerking the gun loose, he snarled: "Blast you, you ain't takin' that money!"

Johnny clutched at him again, and they rolled over and over. Then suddenly there was a muffled explosion, and gunpowder boiled up. Johnny Ring got slowly to his feet, a dazed look on his brown face. The heavy-set man wasn't struggling any more. He lay very still there on the floor, the smoking gun still clutched in an outstretched hand.

Johnny knelt quickly. The burly man was dead, shot through the heart accidentally with his own gun! Seeking some clue to what had just happened, Johnny went through the dead man's pockets. In a coat pocket he found a wallet that contained nearly two hundred dollars, and some papers carrying the name of Sam Donly. One of the papers was a sales slip, dated the day before, for a certain number of cattle sold for four thousand dollars. The slip was signed by a Kansas City cattle company.

"Must've figured I meant to rob him," the redhead murmured. "But, shucks, two hundred dollars wasn't worth killin'—or gettin' killed—over. Must have the four thousand cached somewhere close. Can't blame him for bein' jumpy, with that much dinero close by. But, dang it, if he'd just listened—"

JOHNNY didn't quite know what to do. It came to him that if he were found here, with the dead man, it would be hard to explain. He would likely be arrested and held in jail for no telling how long before he could convince the law of his innocence.

And Johnny Ring didn't have any time to lose. The Staghorn range was still a hundred miles away, and he was in a hurry to get there. If he reported the death of this Sam Donly, even if he weren't arrested, he would certainly be detained for

several days as a witness. He reached a sudden decision.

First, he ate his fill of the beefsteak and bread already cooked. Then, putting the wallet containing the money and papers back into the coat pocket, he went outside. He wasn't tempted to take the money, nor to look for the bigger cache. His buckskin pony stood with spread legs and drooping head, completely tired out.

Johnny unsaddled the buckskin and turned it into the pole corral, tossing in a couple of bales of hay which he found in a shed nearby. Then he roped the big roan. His first intention was to change saddles, but he decided not to, and instead took a pencil and piece of paper from his bedroll and scribbled a few sentences:

Sam Dooly accidentally shot himself. I'm taking his horse, leaving mine in its place, which is more than a fair swap. Case anybody wants to ask some questions, I'll be back this way sometime soon when I'm not in such a hurry.

He didn't sign his name, but tacked the paper to the cantle of his saddle which he left astride the corral fence. Then he got on the mean-eyed roan and rode away fast. He hoped he could get off the Jicarilla range before the body was discovered.

He camped that night in a ravine, and was in the saddle again at dawn. This was wild, rough country, and, except for a few herds of half-wild cattle, Johnny had seen no signs of life since leaving the line shack the day before. Two more days and he would be on his own home range, the Staghorn, where he was badly needed.

A RIFLE shot, and a whining bullet over his head, jarred Johnny's mind rudely back to the present. Looking over his shoulder, he saw half a dozen riders coming

swiftly toward him. The men had rifles in their hands, and now they all opened up, the bullets hissing like a swarm of angry hornets about Johnny.

His first thought was: "They're not trying to scare me—they mean to kill me!"

He set spurs to the roan, and the big beast leaped into a dead run. But quickly, as a second group of riders whipped in ahead of him from an angle, Johnny saw that he was trapped. He was on the open prairie, without shelter—and, anyway, a six-shooter was useless against rifles.

His first panic gone, Johnny muttered: "Shucks, what am I runnin' for, anyway? I didn't kill anybody. Them gents are possemen. They'll see things my way—I hope!"

He stopped the roan, and sat there very still as the two groups of riders converged on him. They had stopped shooting, but they were grim-faced and watchful as they rode up and surrounded him. None of them wore badges. Obviously, they were ranchers.

"Get his gun, somebody!" snapped a big, hawk-faced hombre.

Johnny sat still as one of them kneed his horse forward and grabbed his six-shooter. "You hold the top cards, boys," he said calmly. "But I'm not complainin'. I'm ready to be locked up. It won't take me long to explain how it happened."

"It'll take longer than you've got, Mr. Masked Killer," said another rider.

"Masked Killer?" Johnny looked puzzled. "I don't get it."

"You will—in the neck!"

Johnny Ring looked slowly at the circle of hostile faces and didn't like what he saw. "Now, wait a minute!" he said sharply. "I didn't kill Sam Donly. He shot himself, accidentally."

"Shot hisself, did he? How'd it happen?"

"Why, we got into a ruckus, and the gun he was tryin' to kill me with went off and killed him instead. He thought I meant to rob him—"

Johnny paused, quick anger stirring inside him at the burst of hard, derisive laughter.

"I can't imagine why he'd think that," Hawk-face said sarcastically. "That's Sam's hoss you're ridin' there. Where's the four thousand in cow money you robbed him of?"

"I didn't see any four thousand. I only—"

"Get offa that hoss!" Then, as Johnny obeyed: "Search him—and the saddle pockets, too!"

ANGER and uneasiness mingling inside him, Johnny stood still as a couple of the grim-faced men searched him thoroughly. When they found nothing of interest, they turned to the roan. Johnny's smoky-blue eyes widened as he saw a thick sheaf of bank notes taken from one of the saddle pockets.

"Didn't see no four thousand, huh?" Hawk-face sneered. Quickly he thumbed through the bank notes. "Exactly four thousand here. Just what Sam Donly got for his beef stuff."

"And here's the skunk's mask!" a tow-headed waddy said.

Johnny looked dazedly at the thing the tow-headed puncher had taken from the other saddle pocket—a black, hoodlike piece of cloth with rude eye slits—and silently berated himself for not having looked in the pockets of the borrowed saddle. He didn't *sabe* these things, but it didn't take much *sabe* to know that he was in good and deep now. The hostility in the ranchers' eyes was turning to murderous anger. Making a quick calculation, Johnny knew that his chances were just about zero.

"We're wastin' time," yelled a bearded rider. "Let's get this over with, and take this money back to pore Sam's widder. Over yonder about a mile is some cottonwoods."

"Get back on that hoss, mister," Hawk-face ordered coldly.

Johnny didn't move. "Hang me if you just gotta," he told them. "But, like I told you, I didn't kill Sam Donly. And what's this about a masked killer?"

"Got a short memory, ain't you?" Hawk-face said. "But if it'll help you any: During the last six months there've been eight holdups on this range, and half as many killin's, all done by the same man, a gent about your size, who always wore a black hood over his head and face. Tried to murder in cold blood every man he robbed, and did get four of 'em, includin' Sam Donly. The other four was bad hurt, but lived. This murderin' snake—which is you—come to be known as the Masked Killer. That refresh your memory any?"

"You gents possemen?" Johnny countered.

"Hell, no! We're just friends of Sam Donly, and them others that was killed, who aim to see justice done. Ike Snow is a good sheriff, but he has funny ideas about lettin' the law take its course. Us, we just make our own law. And we ain't got but one law for a rotten killer—a hang rope! Now get on that hoss, 'less you want us to drag you over to them cottonwoods at the end of a rope!"

White-faced, Johnny Ring got back onto the roan. He tried to tell them what had happened, but Hawk-face snarled: "Shut up! We don't want to hear any more of your lies! You was ridin' Sam's roan, had his money. That mask cinches it. And it cinches us the thousand-dollar bounty the State put on the Masked Killer's head!"

REACHING the clump of cottonwood trees, the ranchers went about their task swiftly and efficiently. They knotted a rope about Johnny Ring's neck, and tossed the other end of the rope across a cottonwood limb. Hawk-face stood beside the roan, a quirt in his hand.

"You don't deserve any last favor," Hawk-face said. "But if you've got something to ask for, get it over with quick."

"Just one thing," Johnny said quietly. "Somebody tell old Dave Ring, up on the Staghorn range, what happened to me, so he'll know I tried to get there. Dave Ring's my dad. My feet got to itchin' six years ago, and I up and left home. Haven't been back since. But, ten days ago down on the border, I got word my dad needed me. He's had a lot of hard luck since I left. Now he's sick, and he's about to lose his outfit because he can't pay off a thousand-dollar mortgage."

The men grinned, and one of them said derisively: "That's most as good as a story book. And you're headed back home to pay off that mortgage, I reckon?"

"Not exactly," Johnny denied. "I'm busted flat. But I figured, if I got there in time, I could sure do somethin'. I been ridin' day and night to get there. Just get word to Dave Ring that I tried, that's all the favor I ask. And now, I'm ready whenever you gents are!"

"That's a pretty good yarn, younker, but it just won't go over," Hawk-face said. "You sure that's all you crave to say?"

"That's all."

Hawk-face raised the quirt to slash it down across the roan's rump. But just then there was a quick clatter of hoofs, and a foghorn voice bellowed:

"Hold up there, doggone you! What you hombres think you're doin' with that rope?"

A rawboned, gray-mustached rider thundered up and dragged his lathered horse back on its haunches. There was a sheriff's badge on the fiery-eyed oldster's vest, and a long-barreled six-shooter in his hand. The gun muzzle weaved like a snake's head.

"What you spavined lunkheads fixin' to do with this kid?" Sheriff Ike Snow demanded wrathfully.

"Why, we was fixin' to save the taxpayers some money, and you some trouble, sheriff," Hawk-face explained. "He may be a kid, but he's the Masked Killer, too. He's the skunk that killed Sam Donly."

"How you know that? He confess?"

"Naw, he didn't confess. But he was ridin' Sam's roan an' had Sam's cow money. Besides, we found the mask he always wore. Looks pretty conclusive, don't it?"

"Mebbeso," grunted the old sheriff. "A jury'll decide if he's guilty. I'll just take him off your hands, now, and lock him up. The law will take its course."

THE ranchers were looking a trifle sullenly at one another. Plainly, they didn't like the idea of turning their prisoner over to the tall old lawman.

"We ain't so sure, sheriff," one of them muttered. "There's too many chances for a snake to wriggle out of a jail. He's plain guilty, I say, and he ought to dance on thin air, right now!"

Sheriff Snow jiggled the gun muzzle. "The law's takin' over, I said. Anybody that gets in the way will get hurt. Anyhow, I'm not so sure this younker's guilty. It was daytime, you remember, when Sam Donly was robbed and shot over on the west trail two days ago, and he got a good look at the Masked Killer. Sam lived long enough to talk, and he swears the killer had off-color eyes—one chalk-colored and the other brown. This kid's eyes match, as you can plain see."

The would-be lynchers were quiet, and now Johnny could see doubt on their faces. He grimaced distastefully, reached up and took the rope from about his neck.

"You say Sam Donly was killed two days ago?" he asked Sheriff Snow.

"That's right."

"And this thousand-dollar bounty on the Masked Killer—does that mean dead or alive?"

"Dead or alive, yeah. Why?"

Johnny Ring grinned broadly.

"Then I'm stickin' around long enough to collect that thousand dollars," he declared. "I was forty miles to the south two days ago, and I can prove it. The Masked Killer killed Sam Donly, and I killed the Masked Killer. Or you might say he just up and committed suicide. Anyhow, he's lying back yonder in a line shack. Funny thing . . . I just now remembered that hombre had off-color eyes!"

THE END

Guns and Gunners

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

Who was the greatest gun inventor of all time?

That question is not so very difficult to answer. This writer believes him to have been John M. Browning, American.

John Mose Browning came by his gunsmithing ideas naturally. His father, Jonathan Browning (1805-1879), was a gunsmith. John was born in 1855. He died in Europe in 1926. His passing was broadcast on every radio; countless newspapers throughout the world carried the story. John M. Browning was decorated by so many different nations on so many occasions that it is doubtful if the complete list has ever been recovered.

When he died, he had to his credit the greatest number of inventions in firearms history. If all of his inventions had borne his name, Browning would have been better known than Henry Ford.

John Browning invented most of the Winchester rifles on the market. He developed most of the Winchester shotguns. He also designed most of the Remington line of rifles, slide-action, automatic and the shotgun family. He designed all of the Colt automatic pistols. His name appears on none of these inventions. But Browning was better known in foreign lands. Guns, bearing the Browning name have been made in most large countries.

When the first World War broke out, the U. S. army had little more than a few obsolete Maxim and Vickers machine guns. John Browning designed the present Browning machine gun, made in both .30 and .50 calibers. He also designed the heavy Browning machine rifle, used by our armed forces ever since the first World War.

John Browning made his first gun design when he was thirteen, playing around his father's shop. He made his own wooden model. John's father made the guns and sold them under the Browning name.

The Brownings were Mormons and lived in Utah. John joined the Winchester organization in 1879, but refused to live in New England. In the early days he merely made an annual trip to the factory to turn over his new gun designs and to get them started. In Ogden, Utah, he helped to found the gun store known as Browning Brothers, fa-

mous all over the world. In his shop in that store were born most of his ideas.

When John Browning died in 1926, he held 134 different patents on firearms, with many others in the "applied-for" class. His developments in guns were unique and unusual. Browning-designed guns always worked—and kept on working through heavy service.

The first Browning automatic pistol was made in the Belgian factory, Fabrique Nationale d'Arms de Guerre (National Manufactory of Arms of War) at Liege, Belgium. This was his famous .32 auto, later added to the Colt line and today made by Colt in both .32 and .380 calibers. Browning designed the ammunition, the .32 being known abroad as the 7.65 mm. Browning and the .380 as the 9 mm. Browning Short. The .38 Colt auto cartridge is known as the 9 mm. Browning Long.

A newspaper account I read back around 1922 clearly pictured Browning. A prominent official of a large arms factory went to Ogden to visit Browning. He called at the Browning store and was told to go upstairs to John's shop. He soon returned.

"The only man upstairs," he explained, "is a janitor or mechanic or something; some bird who stands at a bench and whittles and doesn't say anything to me."

That was John Browning. He was busy on a new gun model.

Browning's first machine gun came out in the middle 1890s and was known as the Colt. Chambered for Krag rifle cartridges, it saw much service in the Spanish-American War and in China during the Boxer Rebellion. It was a gas-operated model, not recoil-operated. It worked, but was abandoned, only to be revived during the first World War with modifications when it became known as the Marlin-Rockwell for its makers.

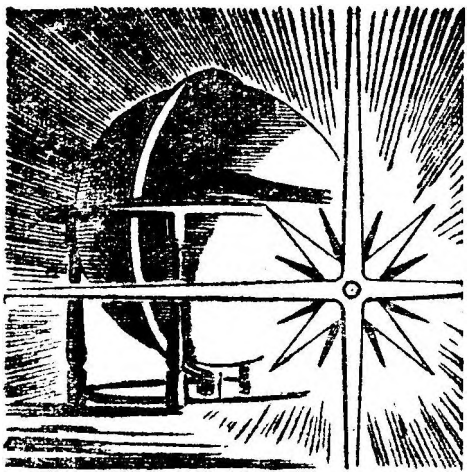
In 1917 Browning designed an automatic aircraft cannon shooting the 37 mm. shell, and some were built for the heavier naval one-pounder.

Browning died in harness at his plant in Belgium where he was putting the finishing touches on his new-famous Browning Over-Under shotgun.

From 1879 until 1911, John Browning developed a new gun idea annually for Winchester. The latter's factory designer was P. C. Johnson. Browning would bring the plans and a model to the factory, and Johnson would draw up the manufacturing plans and the patent application data. It saved Browning much unnecessary work. When he designed his automatic shotgun, he refused to make an outright sale of it, requesting royalty. Winchester refused, so Browning took his gun to Remington. Thus was born the Remington automatic shotgun.

John M. Browning did more than invent guns. He held hundreds of minor patents on gun and other types of machinery—and every invention he turned out was a major improvement in existing equipment. He rarely guessed wrong.

● This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, United States Army. He will continue to answer all letters from readers, either civilians or members of the services, with the least possible delay. Just address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

ANYONE planning a trip to Flossie Lake, Idaho, had better go fully prepared. It is a plunge into a real wilderness section. The lake lies in the high mountain country above the precipitous canyon of the Salmon River—the River of No Return.

A fellow needs to take along his own camping outfit, his food supply and the sort of clothing that will stand plenty of rough, outdoors treatment. Roads are nonexistent. Even pack trails are not always too plentiful. Moreover, it is a region that is going to be kept that way.

A. W. wrote us a letter from Logan, Montana, a while ago in which he hankered, among other things, for some data on the Flossie Lake region in Idaho. The lake lies in Idaho County, inside the northern end of what is known as the Primitive Area in central Idaho. This huge, million-acre tract of forest, meadow and crag has been established by the government as a gigantic game preserve and more or less permanent hunter's and camper's paradise. And the fishing there is something completely out of this world. That includes Flossie Lake, well stocked with both native and rainbow trout.

The plan back of this salted-away wilderness is to keep a segment of the country just as it was in the days of the pioneers, when game and fish abounded on every hand and a man had to live by his outdoor knowledge to get by at all. Fancy camps and fluffed-up camp sites are taboo. Camp grounds are strictly "unimproved." Trails are marked and labeled, though. That is about the only concession that has been made against the chance of a tenderfoot or a stranger getting lost in the deep forests which cover most of the area.

There are about fifty lakes in the region. They vary from little ten-acre ponds to hundred-acre bodies of water. Most of them are found at the head of streams in the upland country. Melting snow from the mountains keeps them supplied with clear, cold water. Around most of them the shore line is timbered. Here and there are meadows with wild hay affording natural graze for pack animals.

The climate in the Area varies greatly. While there is little winter snowfall in the narrow cut that forms the actual course of the Salmon, or along the Middle Fork of that river, the upland and mountain country only a few linear miles away is likely to be buried in deep, real deep snowdrifts for much of the winter season.

Hunters in the late fall and summer-vacation campers as well as fishing enthusiasts use the Area more than anybody else. It is hard to get into and therefore still in little

danger of becoming overcrowded, at least for a long time to come. The only permanent human inhabitants in the whole prescribed stretch, outside of forest rangers and fire wardens, are the handful of people who live on a few scattered ranches, or who work the few mines inside the Primitive Area limits.

Flossie Lake is near the northern limit of the Area. Though the Area can be entered from all sides, the northern gateway is a tough one. It calls for a hard foot climb to scramble out of the canyon of the Salmon. To get in this way you can start at Salmon City and take a boat down the River of No Return. It is a thrilling white-water trip. The boat lets you out along the canyon, and you make the high climb at an appointed place to be met on the rim by the fellow with the pack string and duffel who has of necessity come in by an easier, if less spectacular, route. Or if you are going it alone and have your light gear along with you, and know the country, once you have scaled the canyon rim you can hike to Flossie Lake. Later you can make your way out of the mountains afoot, back to some south or west entrance and civilization.

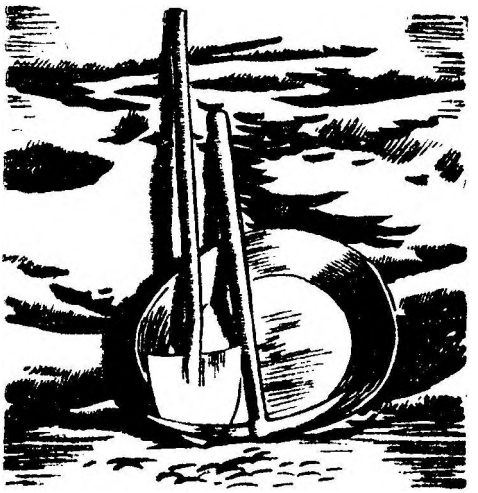
Returning *up* the river the way you came in is out of the question. You can, however, go back down the canyon wall to the river and if previous arrangements for a boat have been made, pick up the boat and take it downstream clear to Riggins, or even Lewiston. That, too, is an adventure in itself.

Other ways to get into the Area are: From the east, Salmon City via the Yellowjacket road. From the south, via Stanley. From the west, Cascade via Landmark, or Cascade north to McCall and Burgdorf then west to Warren and Edwardsburg.

The principal big-game animal in this Primitive Area is the Rocky Mountain mule deer. Elk are found in the Chamberlain watershed. Bear are moderately plentiful. Mountain goats and mountain sheep are found in the higher altitudes. Among smaller animals coyotes are common. Red and gray fox are there but not so abundantly. There are plenty of bobcats and some mountain lions back in the rougher sections. Fur bearers include beaver, mink, marten, otter and badger.

To F. B., Wilmington, Delaware: Timber is one of Alaska's important natural resources. There are almost twenty million acres of forest in southeastern Alaska. Alaskan lumber is used locally in fish boxes, for barrels and for building material. Biggest future development in the Territory's timber will probably lie in the pulp and paper field. Most of the forests are hemlock and spruce, both excellent paper-making woods.

It is true the interior of Alaska is "studded" with trees. But the trees there are usually found in scattered, individual groves rather than in a continuous forest such as is required for large-scale commercial lumbering operations.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

Gold mining is an old and richly exciting story in Brazil. Fabulous fortunes in New World gold were won there long before the discovery of bonanza gold in California. Way back in the days of sailing vessels, of wooden ships and iron men, "Rolling down to Rio" was more than just a sailor's chantey. It meant gold. For many years Rio de Janeiro was the jumping-off place for the rich gold fields of Minas Geraes in the mountains three hundred miles away.

The rush to the Brazilian El Dorado rivaled our own California stampede in hardships, excitement and the wealth of gold that poured from the favored districts. Today, after more than two centuries of mining, Minas Geraes has been proved one of the world's most outstanding storehouses of mineral treasure. More than half of Brazil's gold production, totaling to date over forty million ounces of yellow metal, has come from this area. Other minerals, too, are found there, such as deposits of rich iron ore, manganese, and other needed strategic industrial metals.

S. M., writing from Niagara Falls, New York, says the idea of prospecting in South America has always fascinated him. "Particularly gold prospecting in Brazil," states his letter. "Can you tell me where some of the gold regions are, and something about them?"

That's a large order, S. M. It covers a lot of territory, countless miles of it little-explored and little-developed mountain and forest wilderness. Though Brazil is just one country in South America, its land area is larger than that of continental United States by about two hundred and fifty thousand square miles. Much of Brazil is heavily wooded, dense jungle country, particularly in the Amazon Basin. Other sections consist of high mountain ranges interspersed with fertile valleys. And gold is largely "where you find it." Almost as much so, in fact, as where "it ought to be."

Brazil has vast mineral wealth of many kinds. Much of it, especially in the case of its industrial metals, is virtually unexploited. As for gold, the chief yellow metal deposits appear to be found in the following States: Minas Geraes, Para Maranhao, Bahia, Sao Paulo, Goyaz and Matto Grosso. Most of Brazil's gold production has come from placers, stream gravels from which the metal can be recovered by panning or sluicing, or often in modern instances by dredges, which are more economical.

Gold placers are found and worked along the headwaters of the Cassipore River in Para near the border of French Guiana. Jungle country. Then in the northern part of the State of Maranhao placer gold exists in the gravels along the Tury-assu River. Those are just two definite

areas. Bahia is noted chiefly as Brazil's great diamond-mining center. But some placer gold is at times encountered in the diamond workings along with the precious stones.

In southern Brazil north of Bage around Lavras, pocket mining has been carried on, sometimes with happy results for the lucky prospector. Rich pockets of gold and thin stringers containing ribbons of nearly pure metal have been located and mined in this neighborhood. The pockets and stringers are generally short-lived, but you are likely to hit the jackpot if you find one.

Goyaz is mainly placer country, the gold being found in the bars and beds of numerous streams and rivers there. This applies generally to Matto Grosso also. In the latter State the district around Cuyaba is a notable gold center.

The mineralized region of Minas Geraes, like the rich Mother Lode of California, has produced millions in both placer and lode gold. In both cases it was the more easily discovered and won metal washed from stream sands that caused the initial wholesale rushes to the districts. Later prospecting disclosed the ore bodies of lode gold, the treasure-bearing veins that cut through the surrounding country rock.

One gold mine in Minas Geraes, the Morro Velho, has been in operation almost continuously since 1834, and is credited with a production of a *hundred million dollars*' worth of gold from a single ore shoot. For a long time the Morro Velho, mining ore at a depth of over seven thousand five hundred feet, nearly a mile and a half straight down, was the deepest mine in the world. Underground temperatures at that depth were of course extremely high, something like 130° F., and elaborate refrigerating and air-conditioning plants had to be maintained to keep the air cool enough for the miners to work in.

This mine lies less than five miles southeast of Bello Horizonte, capital and principal city in Minas Geraes. "Bello," by the way is not the sort of town most people think of in connection with a mining "camp." It is a beautiful, modern South American city with up-to-date shops and great, broad, tree-lined avenues and its population is somewhere in the vicinity of two hundred thousand. Ouro Preto is another pleasant, though smaller, mining town in the Minas Geraes gold country.

Much of this district can now be reached from Rio by plane, train or bus over a modern auto highway, but in the old days it was a case of traveling on muleback or going afoot. The original, stony trails into the mountains were too steep and narrow for any kind of wheeled vehicle.

To D. M., Denver, Colorado: Uruguay's gold areas are not on a par with those of Brazil. Placer gold output in Uruguay has been relatively unimportant, though some small placers have been mined near Pampa, about two hundred miles from Montevideo.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We don't recall another letter that has seemed so much a part of Western Story as this one from Mrs. Bee Littlefield of Marysville, California. It might have been written a hundred years ago, so typical is it of the pioneer spirit on which the great Western part of our continent was founded. We sincerely regret that Mrs. Littlefield's letter did not arrive in time for us to have a part in fulfilling her birthday wish, but we know that the many friends she makes through the Hollow Tree this year will not let her twenty-sixth birthday pass unheralded. And our tardy birthday wish, Mrs. Littlefield, is that the future will always be bright for you and your family and may your dreams always come true.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have spent the afternoon looking through our Western Story magazines hoping to find just one plea in the Hollow Tree from a mother, who, like myself, has plenty to do, yet gets awfully lonesome. I love excitement and adventure and have had quite a lot of both. My biggest adventure, though, started four years ago when my husband and I and our two children left Los Angeles to seek our future. Since then, we've added two more children. We have found a very promising future here on a twenty-seven acre ranch, built our own little home and it sure is exciting to watch our stock increase. As the saying goes: "We started from scratch." It has meant hard work and scrimping, but we've done it. It goes to show you can do what you set out to do, and dreams really do come true. Please, you lonesome mothers, your age and race doesn't matter, just write. I'm hoping for an overflowing mailbox on February 26th, as that's my twenty-fifth birthday. All letters and post cards are more than welcome. Mrs. Bee Littlefield, R. R. No. 3, Loma Rica Road, Marysville, California.

Any Indian relics to trade?

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my first appeal for Pen Pals and I hope you won't disappoint me. I'm sixteen years old, have blue eyes and dark hair and stand about six feet tall. I like good music, all kinds of sports, particularly football, and would like to hear from all boys and girls around my age, especially female members and readers. And if any of you are interested in Indians and would care to trade some relics from your territory, I would certainly like to do so. So come on, boys and girls from every State in the Union, and fill my mailbox. I will answer all letters, despite the number, and will send picture post cards of Philadelphia to all who would like them. Please write soon and fill my mailbox.—Joseph Loftus, 7113 Sellers Avenue, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania.

Faith likes to see her mailbox full—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old, have blue eyes and brown hair and am five feet four inches tall. I just love to receive mail and thought maybe I could get Pen Pals, either male or female, by sending in my letter. I am interested in sports. —Faith Baker, Box 344, Mitchell, Nebraska.

A Georgia boy wants a break—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please give a Georgia boy a chance. I live on a farm and would like to hear from girls between fifteen and twenty years of age living anywhere in the United States. I'll try to answer all letters, exchange snapshots and will tell all about myself. Come on, girls, and fill my mailbox.—Leland Sands, R. F. No. 1, Glennville, Georgia.

Ann is a sports enthusiast—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is my plea for Pen Pals. I am fifteen years old, five feet two inches tall, and have blond hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are skating, swimming, skiing, horseback riding and Ping-pong.—Ann Buckley, 55 Province Street, Laconia, New Hampshire.

Lonesome boys, write to Cookie—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is the second time I have written to you and I'm hoping I have some luck in getting Pen Pals. I am fifteen years old, have

blue eyes and blond hair, weigh ninety-six pounds and am five feet two inches tall. I am a junior in Lake Mills High School and am interested in basketball, baseball, football, swimming and skating. My hobbies are collecting perfume bottles, match covers, pictures of movie stars and souvenirs from all over. I'd prefer to hear from boys who are away from home and lonesome.—Cookie Lea, Box 304, Lake Mills, Iowa

Station RED announcing—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Calling all Pen Pals! Calling all Pen Pals! Please write to an eighteen-year-old girl who is interested in new friends over sixteen years of age. I live close to the Ohio River. My hobby is collecting pictures and writing letters and I enjoy swimming and all outdoor sports. My nickname is Red and I'll exchange photos with all who write. Station RED signing off!—Margaret Boring, Reedsville, Ohio

Outdoor life appeals to Ed—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I please enter my plea in the Hollow Tree? I am a young man twenty-seven years old, very busy working most of the day, and I would like a few Pen Pals to write to in the evenings. I am not in the army due to an injury to my shoulder. I would like especially to write to people living on ranches and farms as I like an outdoor life. Will exchange snapshots with all.—Edward Stoch, 2064 N. Western, Chicago, Illinois

Young Dannye wants to say it in Spanish—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope there is a little space for my plea in the Hollow Tree. I want Pen Pals from all over the United States, especially those who would like to correspond in Spanish. I am fourteen years old, have brown hair and eyes, an olive complexion, and am five feet two inches tall. Yes, I want to hear from all of you. My hobbies are collecting song-hit books and I will exchange snapshots with all who write.—Dannye Joyce Metcalf, San Augustine, Texas

The colors of the flag—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please print my plea for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree. I am nineteen years old, have red hair, white skin and blue eyes—people call me a walking flag! I love all sports.—Louise Taylor, c/o T. N. Cash, Rt. No. 12, Knoxville, Tennessee

Calling all men under thirty—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have my name put in the Hollow Tree. I have just read about that girl who asked for a flood of letters and then was unable to answer them. Well, I'm not like that. I have had a lot of experience corresponding and I faithfully promise to answer letters from every fellow under thirty who writes to me. I have many interests, such as travel, photography, languages, music, art, hiking, radio, reading, writing, and collecting things. I am especially interested in the South and would like to hear from a lot of Southern fellows. Whether I receive one hundred or five hundred letters, they will all be answered eventually. I have lived here in Chicago all my life and can tell you some very interesting things about this city. I shall be glad to answer any questions about it that I can.—Ernest T. Jones, 7538 North Winchester Avenue, Apt. F-1, Roger's Park Station, Chicago, Illinois

Write to this lonesome sixteen-year-old—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there room in the Hollow Tree for one more? I live on a farm in the beautiful State of Illinois. I am a freshman in high school and have blue eyes and dark-brown hair. My hobbies are collecting snapshots, songs and letters. I like all sports. Come on, all you guys and gals, and write to a lonely sixteen-year-old girl.—Ada Alylen, R. R. No. 1, Abingdown, Illinois

Bette has high aspirations—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like very much for you to put my letter in the Hollow Tree. I am sixteen years old, have blond hair and blue eyes and am five feet seven inches tall. I love dancing and singing and would like very much to sing over the radio. I would like to hear from anyone, any age from anywhere. I will answer all letters and exchange photographs.—Bette Krominga, Box 173, Titonka, Iowa

This junior miss is talented—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Flip! and here comes my letter for Pen Pals. I am a lonely girl who lives on a cattle farm. I have wavy brown hair, blue eyes and rosy cheeks, and am thirteen years old. I like all sports, especially riding, bicycling, and playing ball. I am also fond of dancing, like to sing and play the guitar, violin and banjo. I am five feet two and built on the slim scale. I also like the movies, reading and listening to the radio. I'll exchange photos and answer all letters.—Fannie Teague, Rt. No. 1, Calhoun Falls, South Carolina

Evelyn will write cheerful letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you kindly publish this plea for Pen Pals from a lonely girl? This is the first time I have tried to enter the Hollow Tree, and I surely hope I will find the door thrown wide open for me. I am five feet tall, have blue eyes and blond hair and am in my teens. I would especially enjoy hearing from boys who are away from home and lonesome, as I would like to cheer them up. If you would like to exchange snapshots you just bet I would. I have many different hobbies so if you really want a faithful friend, write.—Evelyn Nantz, Helton, Kentucky

Mickey knows how to use his right—

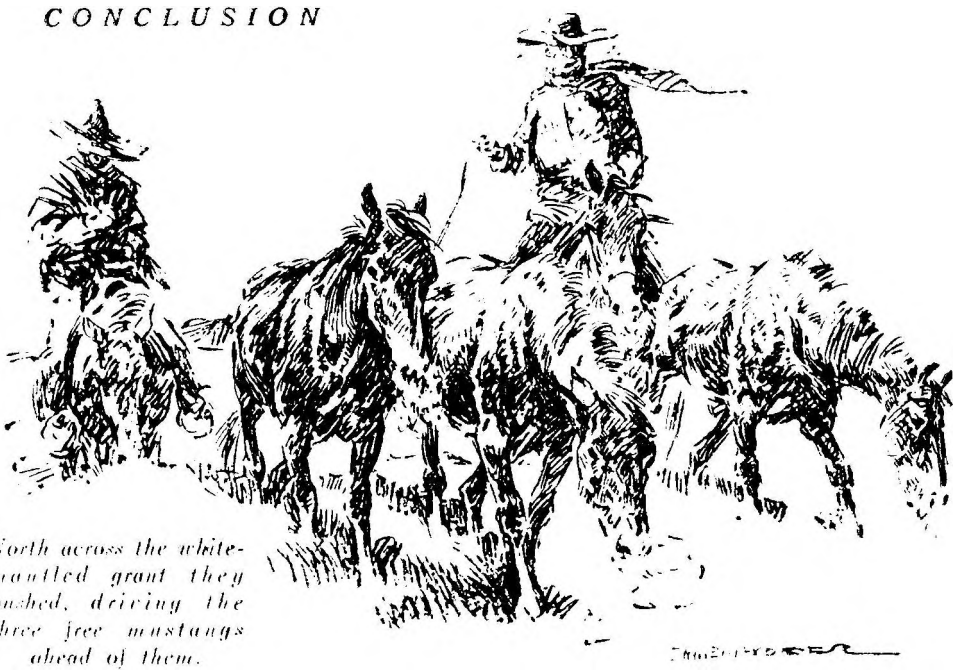
Dear Miss Rivers:

I would be very grateful if you would print my name in the Hollow Tree. I'm very anxious to have Pen Pals. The reason I want them is to hear what people do. I will try to answer as many letters as I possibly can. I am very considerate of other people and am very proud of it. The sooner you print my name in the Hollow Tree the sooner I'll be able to put to good advantage the extra time I have at home. I am sixteen years old, have black hair and a dark complexion, am five feet six inches tall and weigh one hundred and twenty-eight pounds. My favorite sport is boxing.—Mickey Keenan, 3250 Park Street, Beaumont, Texas

THE RANGE FINDERS

by Allan Vaughan Elston

CONCLUSION



North across the white-mantled grant they pushed, driving the three free mustangs ahead of them.

The Story So Far:

Bound for Santa Fe by way of Taos, Johnny Cameron hears shots and rides to the help of a renegade-attacked burro train. Two of the bandits are killed; the third, a masked man, apparently a Mexican, escapes and Johnny picks up a glove he has dropped. Johnny accompanies the owner of the burro train, Don Ygnacio Sandoval, to Taos where he is able to trace the bandit's glove to the store from which it was purchased, although he can get no information about the man who bought it.

In Santa Fe, Johnny is the honored guest of Don Ygnacio during the annual fiesta. With the rest of the household he attends a ball at which he is introduced to Don Ramon de la Montoya, the fiancé of Don Ygnacio's granddaughter. To his amazement, Johnny is able to identify Don Ramon as the masked bandit of Cimarron Canyon.

Realizing he can offer no proof of Don Ramon's treachery, Johnny decides not to make any accusation for the present. He proceeds with the business which brought him to Santa Fe—to get the financial backing of Banker Stephen Elkins in bringing a herd of pure-bred Herefords to New Mexico. He and his four partners, who are to bring the herd, plan to homestead the *pozo hondo*, a section of range which offers good graze but which has been neglected because a gang of outlaws uses it as a hide-out.

Meanwhile Don Ramon, who realizes the danger he faces if Johnny ever proves that he is the bandit of Cimarron Canyon, plots with Fadeaway Fallon, chief of the *pozo hondo* outlaws, to have Johnny bushwhacked when he and his pards ride into the *pozo*. Frenchy Welsh, one of Fallon's men, shoots Johnny from ambush and is trailed by Ogallala, one of Johnny's partners. When Ogallala finally traps Frenchy they shoot it out and the outlaw is killed.

Ramon Montoya bribes five of his peons to homestead land sections around the five springs in the *pozo hondo* which alone have water during the dry season. When Johnny and his pards discover this they

realize Montoya has struck a mortal blow at their plans to build a cattle spread in the *pozo hondo*. Now, unless Johnny can prove Ramon's treachery, he and his pards will see their investment in valuable beef cattle wiped out. Moreover, unknown to them, Fadeaway Fallon is planning his raid on their herd.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RAID

JOHNNY returned to the cabin and reported on his tangle with Fadeaway Fallon.

"Why didn't yuh ventilate that buzzard?" demanded Slim.

"I was savin' him for you, Slim," Johnny told his partner solemnly.

"Chances are he'll hightail out o' here," Sweetwater predicted, "now that Johnny's given him the right steer on that gold yarn."

"Main grief we got now," Rosy complained, "is them five dummies of Montoya's that filed all the *pozo* water."

"How about offerin' 'em a hundred apiece for relinquishments?" suggested Johnny.

"They wouldn't sell," declared Ogallala.

"Besides," Rosy added, "where'd we get the five hundred dollars? We might as well face facts, gents. We're broke, with a hard winter comin' on. And no water in sight for the cow stuff next summer."

"And don't forgit we got interest comin' due at the bank," Sweetwater chimed in. "Semiannual, ain't it, Johnny?"

"That's one reason I'm ridin' to Santa Fe tomorrow," Johnny announced. "If you fellers'll let me pledge next year's calf crop, I'll guarantee to raise some mazuma."

"Help yerself, kid," agreed Ogallala. The others nodded.

Early the next morning Johnny was off for Santa Fe. He took a route which would miss both the Sandoval grant and Montoya's silver mine on the mesa. Breaking a trail up to the rimrock wasn't easy, but Johnny's consolation was that these same mountain drifts offered a protection to the cattle. It would be hard for rustlers to get them out of the *pozo*. In any case, a raid should leave tracks easy to follow.

Beyond the mesa Johnny found less snow. The trail was bare by the time he reached the Rio Grande. By sundown he was within six miles of Santa Fe. Some corrals along the road reminded him that here lay the suburban hacienda of Don Pablo Lucero.

Johnny turned in through a gate and dismounted before a long low ranchhouse with alamos standing nude in the patio.

A barking of dogs brought out Don Pablo, who remembered Johnny and greeted him warmly. "*Bien venida, señor.* Have you changed your mind about selling me those heifers?"

"Nope," Johnny said. "But if you feel right liberal I might contract next year's calf crop."

"Come in to the fire, my friend."

DON PEDRO declined to talk further business until Johnny's horse was stabled and the guest himself was seated before the living room fireplace with a glass of wine in hand.

"The stuff's doin' fine," Johnny said. "We got a winter calf yesterday. Most of 'em'll come along, though, in February, March and April. By November first we oughta have about a sixty percent calf crop, ready to wean."

"For how much will you contract them, señor, delivered at weaning age to my corrals?"

"Thirty dollars a head," Johnny said.

A look of pain crossed Don Pablo's face. "But that is too much, señor.

Only last week I bought calves for eight pesos."

"Jackrabbit cattle," Johnny scoffed. "I'm offerin' you real and fancy calf stuff."

"Fifteen dollars," Don Pablo said hopefully.

"Thirty," insisted Johnny.

"I am sorry, señor. At such a price I am not interested."

But Johnny knew he was. The man was avid to become the owner of Herefords.

Supper was announced and the business was dropped, since by the standards of Don Pablo one did not haggle with a guest over a meal. He insisted, however, that Johnny stay all night.

Later, over cigarettes, the host offered seventeen dollars. By bedtime he was up to twenty-one.

"It's no deal, Don Pablo," Johnny said regretfully. "If you want any bally calves, looks like you'll have to trail clear back to Missouri. Mine'll cost you thirty a round."

It was after breakfast the next morning that Johnny dropped to twenty-eight dollars a head and the deal was closed. Don Pablo drew up a contract and signed. All the Circle Dot increase of weaning age by next November was to be delivered to him at these same corrals.

With the contract Johnny rode on into Santa Fe and stabled his horse. He called at the bank where Stephen Elkins received him cordially.

"On the strength of this," Johnny said, tossing the contract on the desk, "we want some more backing."

Elkins read the paper and smiled. "How much, Cameron?"

"First, we want to be grubstaked until next November."

Again the banker smiled. "That won't break the bank. A wagonload of frijoles ought to suffice, considering the wild game in the *pozo*. What else?"

"We want five hundred dollars to buy relinquishments with." Johnny explained about the five watered claims. "They're dummy claims," he insisted. "We figure these hombres staked 'em out for somebody higher up."

"Which is contrary to the spirit of the homestead law," Elkins agreed shrewdly. "If sincere homeseekers were to contest these claims, and prove that the filers were merely dummies for someone else, the land office would revoke the original filings."

He provided Johnny with a pad of relinquishment forms and offered advice as to the manner in which the five claimants should be approached.

JOHNNY thanked him and went out. When his horse had been fed, he rode into a suburban quarter of the city. Here the houses were small and poor, the district being inhabited only by lower class peons. Johnny consulted names on a list. The first name was Carlos Ortiz.

He found Ortiz in a squalid mud hut. The man had a flat, unintelligent face and was sitting on his door stoop cracking piñons as Johnny accosted him.

"Carlos, I'm not out to do wrong by you. You're a poor man, and no one deserves a little rancho of his own better than you. But do you really want one, or are you just letting some *rico* play dice with your name?"

Carlos stared vacantly. "I do not understand, señor."

"How much did Montoya pay you for the use of your name?"

Carlos continued to stare. "My English is slight, señor."

Johnny produced a relinquishment blank and filled it out ready for signing. He dropped it on the sill beside Carlos and then said in Spanish: "If you really want that rancho for a home, tear this paper up. But

if you don't, and are just letting another man use your name, then you better go hire yourself a lawyer."

The word startled Carlos. He looked uneasy. "I have no money for lawyers, señor."

"You'll need one if I contest your homestead. The court will put you on oath and ask you to swear that no undercover party is in on it. If you perjure yourself, they'll put you in jail."

Again a word frightened Carlos. "I have done nothing to go to jail, señor."

"Not yet. And you don't want to, either. I can see you're an honest hombre, Carlos. So am I. If what is on this paper is true, which is that you do not want the land for a personal home, I offer you one hundred pesos to sign it. Think it over, Carlos. If you decide to sign, take the paper to Don Stephano's bank and exchange it for one hundred pesos."

Leaving Carlos to think it over, Johnny proceeded to four other addresses. In each case he left a relinquishment blank and an offer of one hundred dollars. Each call convinced him more and more that these men were mere pawns of Montoya's. In no case, however, did any of them admit this. Johnny couldn't be sure whether his offers would be accepted or rejected.

But it was all he could do. Now in late afternoon he proceeded to a sixth address. This proved to be a shabby cantina on the road leading west out of town.

Only a slovenly Mexican woman was on duty there. Johnny asked her: "Does Enrico Robles have a room here?"

"Si, señor. But he has not been home for a long time."

"Know where he is?"

"*Quién sabe, señor?* But I have heard that he has found employment with Don Ramon Montoya."

"As a *mozo?*" asked Johnny.

The woman shrugged. "Perhaps. Once he was *mozo* for the Señor Calaveras. After that he tended bar for La Marta. How he will serve Don Ramon I do not know."

Johnny thanked her and rode west to the Pablo Lucero road-side hacienda, where he was again made welcome for the night.

MORNING brought a flurry of snow. "Go to get goin'," Johnny said to Don Pablo, "before those mesa drifts get too deep."

He was off early down a whitened trail. He crossed the Rio Grande and found it slow going to the mesa beyond. From there, fearful of the rimrock drifts farther north, he rode down into the Sandoval grant. The spruce boughs wore silver coats as he brushed through them.

Below in the grant basin he saw no sign of life. Sheep had all been corralled for this storm.

Johnny cut directly toward the upper Puerco, avoiding the Sandoval buildings by several miles. With snow beating against his face he climbed to the *pozo* gap. There was still an hour of daylight when he rode into the home basin.

Falling flakes kept him from seeing far. Riding through them he heard no lowing of cattle. It disturbed Johnny a little. He knew that in a snowstorm the cows would huddle in the more sheltered swales, and that isolated stragglers would low in seeking the others.

But now the entire *pozo* had the stillness of a morgue. Just as light failed, Johnny came to the rock cabin. Its chimney showed no smoke, and again he felt worry. He saw no horse in the corral. In the gloom he saw Jason's mule, though. The mule, hobbled to keep it from straying, was trying to paw feed out of an eight-inch blanket of snow.

Dismounting, Johnny kicked open

the door. Darkness confronted him. He groped forward and lighted an oil lamp. Then he heard a groan from the bunk room. He took the lamp in there and saw Ogallala. Ogallala was swaying drunkenly and holding both hands to his head.

Rosy, Jason and Sweetwater Smith were in collapse on the bunks, and Slim lay in a face-down sprawl on the floor.

A thick mutter came from Ogallala. "Get him, Johnny. Throw down on that hombre—" His voice trailed off in a moan.

"What hombre?" demanded Johnny.

"That one-eyed skunk named—" Ogallala doubled up in a fit of coughing. His eyes were inflamed and his face was a blotchy yellow.

"You mean Enrico Robles, the ex-barkeep?" Johnny gasped.

"Blast his hide!" exploded Ogallala. "Grab him quick, Johnny, before he gets away."

"He's already gotten away," Johnny said. He took a bucket and went out to the well. Returning, he dashed cold water over Sweetwater. Sweetwater opened his eyes, groaned, stared groggily about the room, then rolled from bunk to floor. He tried to get up, but collapsed. His muscles seemed to be paralyzed.

"He knocked us out cold," Ogallala mumbled.

Johnny tossed water over Slim, Rosy and Jason. They came to half-consciousness with Johnny firing questions all the while at Ogallala.

The first coherent story came from Rosy. The redhead was able to sit up with nothing worse than a headache. "He rid up and ast fer you, Johnny."

"When?"

"We was eatin' breakfast. Mebbe it was this mornin'. Maybe it was yestiddy mornin'. I wouldn't know."

"What did he want to see me for?"

It came out bit by bit. Enrico Robles, it seemed, had declined to state his business to anyone but Johnny Cameron.

"We figgered he wanted to sell us some dirt on Montoya," Slim explained when his head cleared. "So we set him down to breakfast and told him to make hisself at home till you showed up."

"And him bein' a ex-barkeep," Rosy put in, "he knew all about knockout drops. Don't know what he slipped into the coffeepot, but it could outkick Jason's mule."

CHAPTER XXV

THE WHITE TRAIL

IT put us to sleep pronto," admitted Slim.

"I come to with a bellyache." Ogallala groaned.

"Round up the broncs, Johnny," Rosy said, "and we'll track that jasper down."

Johnny shook his head. "You won't find any tracks. It's been snowin' all day."

He went to the door, looked out, saw nothing but a flake-dappled darkness and his own tired horse. The range was silent.

And now Johnny knew why he had failed to hear the lowing of storm-punished cattle.

He turned savagely to his five groggy companions. "A fine bunch of cowhands you are! I take a ride to Santa Fe and you let the whole Circle Dot brand get rustled plumb out of the *pozo*. That's what they were waitin' for—the first big fall of snow."

"So we can't track 'em!" Sweetwater echoed.

"That's it, all right," Slim admitted bitterly. "When we look out in the mornin', we won't even know which way they went."

"They got a twenty-four-hour start toward Arizona!" Rosy guessed.

"More likely they headed north toward Colorado."

"They'll have a longer start than that, time we pick up their trail."

"There won't be no trail, in this snow."

After a chorus of chagrin, Johnny broke in: "Might as well turn Muchacho loose. He'll find high grass in some swale tonight, or paw his supper out o' the snow. In the mornin' I'll use Jason's mule to round up mounts."

"If they ain't all been rustled," Slim said gloomily, "along with the cow stuff."

But Johnny had no choice. He couldn't leave his horse stand saddled all night. So he went out and turned Muchacho loose.

Sweetwater tried to be hopeful. "Them rustlers can't push the stuff very fast. We could ketch 'em on burros, if we only knew which way to head."

"Montoya figured this play out," Johnny said with conviction. "He waited for a snowfall and then sent Robles down here to knock you fellers out."

"But why," Sweetwater puzzled, "did he have Robles ask for *you*?"

"Because he knew I wasn't here. He got wind that I'd ridden to Santa Fe. So Robles asked for me on a stall—and you took him in just like one of the family."

"He only stayed long enough to slip them headache powders in the coffeepot," Ogallala said. "I reckon he hightailed to Fadeaway Fallon's gang, then, and told 'em to help themselves to the heifers."

A moan came from one of the bunks and Rosy said: "Reckon I better go tend to old Jason. This here's hit him pretty hard, and he ain't as young as we are."

WHILE Rosy went into the bunk room, Slim made a fire in the tin stove. "We got half a sack o' grain left," Slim said. "Means we can give the broncs one good feed in the mornin'."

"They'll sure need it," Ogallala said sadly, "seein' as how we gotta ride half a dozen trails at once."

Slim put on coffee and warmed a pot of beans. But only Johnny had an appetite. Ogallala waved his plate away. "I've heard about folks bein' seasick. And that's just the way I feel now."

"Me, too," Sweetwater said hollowly.

It was a doleful night. Johnny made the best of it by mapping a campaign for tomorrow. "There are only seven gaps where they could drive a cow herd out o' the *pozo*," he said. "One goes south into the Sandoval grant, so we can skip that'n'."

They agreed that Fadeaway wouldn't drive stolen cattle south into the grant.

"Which leaves six other outlets. One for each of us. Maybe we can find sign on the brush where the cows pushed through."

He made them go to bed. "You look like a pack o' sick coyotes. Get some rest and I'll roust you at daylight."

Johnny himself lay down on a bunk, but he couldn't sleep. All through the night his mind grappled nervously with two issues: the Herefords must be trailed and brought back; Montoya must be exposed before December 12th, exactly one week from today.

Dawn came and Johnny saw that it was still snowing. The tarp-covered wagon out there made a lump of white against an unbroken expanse beyond. In another direction Johnny saw Jason's hobbled mule in the lee of a greasewood bush. No other equine was in sight.

But why should there be? Wouldn't the rustlers cheat pursuit by taking the horses, too?

The thought desolated Johnny as he went out with a bridle to catch the mule. Leading the animal back to the wagon, he gave it a quart of grain. Then he brought out Jason's battered old saddle and threw it on. The boys could rest while he scouted for the horses.

A half an hour later Johnny rode the mule to the top of a butte which overlooked most of the basin. Through a curtain of flakes he made out the dim shape of a horse. One only. He rode down to it and found Muchacho feeding on high swale grass.

TOSSING a rope on Muchacho, Johnny led the horse as he rode the mule in a wide circle. He saw neither horse, cow nor hoofprint. The worst was certain, now. Four riding horses and the wagon team had been driven off with the cattle. Otherwise one or more of them would be in sight. The wagon stock, especially, would be edging in hungrily toward the cabin, hoping to be grained.

"We're afoot in a blizzard and no place to go," Johnny reported at the cabin.

They were all up except Jason. The old man lay with closed eyes on a bunk, his face paler than his beard.

"Them knockout drops didn't do him no good," Slim said worriedly. "He's a sick hombre."

"Poor old feller!" murmured Sweetwater. "His stomach can't do a comeback like ourn can. Looks like this here's his last roundup."

"I got to ride to Sandoval's and borrow some bronies," Johnny said. "And I'll bring back someone to take care of Jason."

After wolfing some breakfast he saddled Muchacho. "I sure hate to

ask any more favors over there," he muttered.

"While you're gone," Ogallala promised, "I'll use the mule to hunt sign with." He mounted the mule and rode toward the west rim of the *pozo*.

Johnny rode south toward the grant. Snow was still fluttering when he reached the gap. And on the high land, drifts made the going slow. Johnny pushed doggedly through them and broke a trail down to the Puerco.

It was past noon when he spurred the jaded Muchacho through the barn-lot gate. The major-domo was lounging just inside the barn, smoking a cigarette. Johnny hailed him. "Rustlers cleaned us out, hide and hoof, Arturo. What about borrowin' five fresh cayuses?"

Assent came readily from Arturo. "But of course, señor. Don Ygnacio is not at home, but always he is glad to help a neighbor."

"Where did he go?"

"To Santa Fe, señor. All the family has gone to the *casa* there to make ready for the wedding."

"Did they take Miguel along?"

"Miguel? No, señor. The servants will go in later."

"Look, Arturo. Old Jason Holt's in a bad way. He'll cash in if I don't take back someone to look after him while we chase cow thieves. May I borrow Miguel?"

The major-domo was not so sure of this. His conclusion was to let Miguel decide for himself. "But I will have horses ready for you right away, señor."

Johnny stabled Muchacho, then went to the house to see Miguel.

THE old servant was sympathetic. "But I must obey orders from the patron, Don Juan. When the snow is over, he is expecting me at Santa Fe. They will need me for many things. So I cannot go to the *pozo*."

Johnny was reluctant to trust anyone else. "It means I gotta tell you somethin', Miguel, that *el viejo* made me promise to keep secret. It's a matter of pride with him. I'm tellin' you because it's the only way I can persuade you to go along."

"What is it, señor?"

"You know that Josefita was found wrapped in a buffalo robe?"

"Si, señor."

"Jason Holt shot that buffalo. He's her real grandfather."

Miguel stared. "That is a strange story, señor."

"It's true. That's why the old man's been hangin' around here all these years. It was to see as much as he could of Josefita."

"I have seen him look at her with love," Miguel admitted.

"Will you come, then?"

"I do not know if it is true," Miguel said. "But if it is true and I do not go, then Josefita would never forgive me. So I will go with you, and I will take along medicines, señor."

Miguel went to make a pack of comforts and remedies. Johnny returned to the corrals and found that five skittish mustangs had been assembled by the major-domo. "They are small," he admitted. But they have tough Mexico legs, señor. They will carry you well on the trail of *ladrónes*."

"Only trouble is we haven't got any trail," Johnny said wryly.

Arturo helped him saddle two of the mustangs. Then Miguel, all bundled up in a serape, came out with a pack. He and Johnny swung to saddles. Arturo opened the gate and they drove the other three mounts out before them.

"Head 'em for the *pozo*, Miguel," Johnny directed.

Miguel proved to be a competent drover. "When I was young I have

been a vaquero, señor," he informed Johnny.

North across the white-mantled grant they pushed, driving the three free mustangs ahead of them. Light was fading when they made the pass. But snow had stopped falling and the skies were clearing. "The rustlers get another day's start on us," Johnny said. "But I reckon it's worth it to have fresh broncs."

They rode on down into the *pozo* and soon after nightfall came to the rock cabin. A hail brought Slim out to open the corral gate. The horses were driven in and the riders dismounted.

"Do these mustangs know how to eat grain, Miguel?" Johnny asked. He knew that many range horses never learn to eat anything but forage.

"These have fed on grain," Miguel told him. "We grow oats on the grant."

"We got about two short rations apiece fer 'em," Slim said.

JOHNNY took Miguel inside where they found Ogallala, Rosy and Sweetwater grouped gravely about Jason's bunk. The old prospector was barely conscious. Miguel immediately took charge of him, herding the others into the front room.

"What luck lookin' for sign?" Johnny asked.

"I got a zero score," growled Ogallala. "First, I rid that mule brute up to the west outlet, 'cause it seemed the most likely. The shacks at that old sheep camp up there was deserted. Nothin' but snowdrifts up that way. The mule an' me floundered around half a day but couldn't pick up no sign."

"What about the north gap?"

"Tried that'n' in the afternoon. It's the one I chased Frenchy through. A blank haul this time, kid. Mebbe they went out that way, and mebbe they didn't. They must've brushed snow off the spruce boughs passin' through, but plenty o' more snow came to cover up."

"It snowed thirty hours straight since them rustlers left here," Sweetwater muttered.

They turned in early to be fresh for the next day.

Johnny awoke to find Miguel warming gruel for Jason. "He is asleep, señor," the Mexican reported. "I think he is better."

Johnny went out and found Slim feeding the last of the grain.

An hour later the horses were saddled. In each saddle scabbard was a Winchester .44-40 centerfire carbine. In each hip holster was a .45 Colt.

"We start throwin' lead," Rosy said grimly, "the minute we sight them jaspers."

"But which way do we look fer 'em?" wondered Sweetwater.

"No use rakin' snow fer sign at the gaps," Ogallala said. "I tried that yestiddy. So we might as well flip a coin to see whether we head west or north."

"Or maybe northeast toward Questa," Rosy offered. "I hear there's some rough country up that way."

"I say straight west to Arizony," Slim contended.

"We'll flip fer it." Ogallala fished out a coin. "Heads we ride north, tails we ride west." He tossed the coin, catching it in his hat.

But no one looked to see how the coin fell. For a sound came to them from the distant northwest. Johnny knew instantly what it was. Then he saw a red-and-white lump floundering through the snow.

THE plaintive cry of a cow came nearer. She ran at a trot, often stumbling in the snow, but keeping persistently on from timber to the open basin.

"Yeow!" Johnny yelled. "If we'd

had any sense, we might've known she'd come back. We might've known they couldn't take that four-day-old calf along."

"Sure." Ogallala grinned. "A cow crittur'll allers come foggin' back to a young calf. So we don't need to flip no coin, fellers."

Johnny spurred toward the north end of the basin, remembering a swale there where he had seen the newborn calf hidden in a bush. The others loped after him. "Yeah," agreed Sweetwater. "They always come back. 'Specially if it's a first calf. I've known a wet cow to run all the way from Kansas back to Texas, lookin' fer a calf she was driv' away from."

"Bet this'n'll find her starved or froze," Rosy said worriedly. "Don't reckon the poor little feller could live forty-eight hours without its mammy."

"More likely a coyote got it," Slim guessed. "If she finds it gone, I reckon that cow'll bawl her head off."

They rode as hard as a foot of soft snow would permit. The pace put them in the greasewood swale about two minutes ahead of the cow.

Johnny rode close to a bush and looked into it. He saw a little red-and-white bundle there, as still as a sleeping kitten.

"He's still here, fellers. Just like Moses in the bullrush."

The cow came up with frantic mooings, braving the horses, and charged to the bush. Her bawling seemed to burst from a broken heart. Then came a feeble cry from the bush. The men saw a tiny calf try to stand, then collapse on its thin, unnourished legs.

The cow stopped bawling and began licking the calf. The five men drew back out of the way.

"She'll lick strength back into it," Ogallala chuckled. "Purty soon it'll stand up and feed."

Johnny looked northwest. There he saw plain tracks in the snow made by the cow on her homeward journey.

"Chances are she busted away at the first night camp out o' here," Johnny said. "Likely she tried to break away from the drive half a dozen times, but they always headed her off. Come night time, she got away."

"Which gives us a trail right to 'em, Johnny."

"Sure does. Load your guns, you Circle Dots."

CHAPTER XXVI

GHOSTS OF WRATH

OGALLALA took the lead and they rode single file northwest, back-tracking a cow whose mother love had forced her home to the *pozo*. The trail led up through timber and into interlocking hills which the Circle Dot men had never before explored.

Drifts slowed them to a walk. The lead horse broke trail for the others. "Still and all," Ogallala called back cheerfully, "we can make a lot better time'n they could with them cows. If we could lope, we'd ketch up with 'em by sundown."

The tracks led in a beeline. They followed up to and across a brushless bench and struck timber again. Here the tracks veered slightly to miss the shoulder of a mesa. The shoulder of another mesa interlocked, so that the two seemed from a distance to be one.

"They's a pass out between 'em, though," Ogallala was sure. "An easy way to get out with the cow stuff." The snow was shallower here and he spurred to a trot.

The pass between the mesas was winding and brought them finally to a new watershed. Here the cow

tracks straightened out, again due northwest.

"Looks like they're headin' for Utah," Slim said.

"Utah or Hades," declared Sweetwater Smith, "we'll feed 'em lead and brimstone when we get a bead on them buzzards."

The grade was down now. The pursuers made better time. On the white expanse ahead lay only a single set of tracks, the hoofprints of a homing cow. To follow them in reverse was simple, in or out of timber. On the plain below them a line of naked cottonwoods led off northwest.

"From what I know of this country," Ogallala said, "we're on the headwaters of the San Juan."

"I recollect lookin' at a gov'ment map once," Sweetwater said. "Seems like this here San Juan erik, if yuh foller it fur enough, takes you exactly to where four territories corner. Colorado, Utah, Arizony and New Mex."

By midafternoon they struck cottonwoods at an upper fork of the San Juan. A small stream ran under thin ice there. Directly down the left bank, the tracks of a cow led through some eight inches of snow. A few miles on, the tracks stopped.

"The cow was right here when it quit snowin'," Slim said.

"Makes no difference," declared Ogallala. "Because we can bet they kept on follerin' the lee side of this erik. Them cottonwoods make a good windbreak. And the erik bottom gives 'em an easy water grade. If they turned away from it they'd have to fight hills and deep snow."

A few miles farther on Johnny saw a charred circle in the snow. Undoubtedly a night camp had been made at this spot.

"Right here's where the cow broke

away and headed back toward the *pozo*," Sweetwater guessed.

THEY pushed on and in a little while a wide swath of hoof tracks appeared in the snow ahead. Rosy cheered. "Here's where the main bunch got to when it quit snowin'. Reckon the fall o' snow stopped here a little before it did in the *pozo*."

With the trail well broken now, the pursuers advanced at a lope. "We're makin' four miles to one o' theirs," Ogallala calculated. "Might sight 'em any minute."

At sundown the swatch of trodden snow turned across the stream. On the other bank, Johnny saw that the cattle had been driven off at right angles toward a saddle of hills.

He spurred to a lope and in ten minutes reached the saddle. Peering over it, he saw the quarry. Nine men were in a pocket down there. They were making camp for the night. Scattered about the pocket stood a drove of tired Herefords. Two horses were picketed near the campfire. Johnny counted thirteen other horses grazing, or pawing at the snow to find grass.

Johnny backed his own mount out of sight. "Nine of 'em," he reported as the others caught up. "Seven gringos and two Mexicans."

"Montoya with 'em?" Sweetwater grunted. He pumped a shell into the chamber of his Winchester.

"He's not there," said Johnny. "Him bein' a fine caballero, he's likely in Santa Fe gettin' his hair slicked back for a weddin'. But I spotted Fadeaway Fallon, all right."

"For the two Mexicans," Ogallala guessed, "I nominate Pancho Archuleta and that one-eyed ex-barkeep, Robles."

"Let's spread out," Sweetwater said impatiently, "an' take 'em."

They deployed in a front with about ten yards between adjacent horses. Then Ogallala dismounted. "No sense gettin' our broncs shot up," he said grimly.

Slim nodded agreement. "Besides, a feller can allers shoot straighter on his feet."

When they were all dismounted, they advanced in an even line over the saddle's brow. In the snow they made no sound.

THEY were about thirty yards beyond the crest when campers in the pocket saw them. And even then this winter-white land was silent. Nine outlaws, petrified by surprise, stood staring. While five grim cowboys, each with a level rifle, came stalking on across the snow like ghosts of wrath. Suddenly the rustlers seemed to come to life. They jumped to a heap of saddles and snatched rifles.

"Throw them guns down and reach up!" Ogallala yelled. He sent a bullet whirring over Fadeaway Fallon.

Two men dropped rifles and threw themselves flat in the snow. The other seven began firing. The range was less than a hundred yards. Johnny dropped to his knees and drew a bead on the outlaw farthest to the right. A bullet burned his sleeve as he pulled the trigger. He saw his target pitch forward.

Slim and Sweetwater were shooting straight and fast, raking the camp with lead. Two more of the *pozo* gang doubled up by the fire there. Rosy stood erect, pumping shot after shot. A slug had tipped his hat back and his red hair flamed against a ground of snow.

"It's brandin' day fer the Circle Dot!" Rosy yelled.

Three of the *pozo* gang were still upright and firing. A bullet plowed snow by Johnny's boot. He heard a cry to his left and saw Ogallala stumble. Johnny swung his aim through a short arc and squeezed with his trigger finger. Through

white smoke he saw Fadeaway Fallon stagger, then collapse in the snow.

"Dead-center 'em!" yelled Sweetwater. He had been advancing with gun stock at his cheek all the while. His next shot echoed one from Rosy, and another outlaw crumpled by the fire.

The last man threw up his hands.

"And just as I had a bead on him!" Slim complained.

Rosy gave a yelp of victory. "Who says the Circle Dot can't brand!"

"Teach 'em to fool with our cow stuff," Sweetwater muttered. "How bad did they hit you, Ogallala?"

Johnny was already bending over Ogallala, discovering a bullet through the leg.

"Patch me up, kid," Ogallala said hoarsely. "Did we stampede them heifers?"

"If they was longhorns," Sweetwater said as he came up, "they'd be a mile away by now, tails high. But look at these Herefords! Still chewin' their cuds, by Jiminy!"

"Shucks!" Slim grumbled as he joined them. "This here wasn't no fight. This centerfire saddle gun o' mine didn't hardly get warmed up."

Rosy and Johnny used their bandannas to stop the blood from Ogallala's leg wound. "He's tougher'n a buffalo bull, Johnny," Rosy said with a grin. "You can't hurt him."

"I just tallied the casualties," Slim reported. "Four dead and three down, not countin' two others that quit before it started."

A couch of saddle blankets was made by the fire and they carried Ogallala to it. Sweetwater limped back over the hill for the horses.

DARK came on, and Johnny fed piñon chunks to the fire until its heat melted a wide circle of snow. At the rim of that circle, covered with their own blankets, lay four dead men. Near them huddled five prisoners of whom three were wounded.

"They've rid their last raid," said Sweetwater. "Next time you meet a *ladrón* in some dark dry gulch, his name won't be Fadeaway Fallon.

Toes up beside Fallon lay Pete Adler, wanted for the killing of Deputy Billy Biglow at E-Town.

The only unscathed outlaws were Enrico Robles and Pancho Archuleta. These two, with wrists bound securely, were yanked to their feet by Johnny Cameron. Pancho was close to a panic, but the one-eyed Enrico remained tight-lipped and sullen.

"Gosh!" Slim complained. "Heck of a job we'll have hazin' this outfit back to the *pozo!* Four hundred ninety-nine cows, ten bulls, twenty head o' horse stock and nine *ladrónes!*"

"And with me all crippled up!" sighed Ogallala.

"Take your time with 'em, fellers," Johnny said. "Me, I'm ridin' to Santa Fe with two witnesses."

"What witnesses?"

"Archuleta and Robles."

Archuleta began whimpering. "I know nothing, señor. I was only the cook for them."

"Better start cookin' up a story, then," Sweetwater suggested.

Rosy winked ominously. "He'll look cute kickin' on a rope, won't he?"

"He won't need to do that," argued Johnny. "If he uses his head, he oughta get off with only about thirty days in jail. You'd settle for that, wouldn't you, Pancho?"

A surprised hope came to Pancho's sallow face. "Only thirty days? What do you mean, señor?"

"Just this. You don't have to admit stealin' cows and horses. You don't have to admit helpin' Fadeaway hold up wagon trains. In

your case we'll let all that pass. Just own up to takin' the hammer off my rifle in Sandoval's barn, and say who paid you to do it, and we'll forget the rest."

It was a bargain from Pancho's standpoint. "Do you promise I will be accused only of that, señor?" he asked eagerly.

"*Seguro.* It oughtn't to get you more than thirty days in the *carcel.* Beats bein' hanged for a dry-gulchin' cow thief, don't it?"

"I will do it, señor."

JOHNNY turned to Enrico Robles. "And you, Robles, get an even better deal than that. If we laid your crimes end to end, they'd reach plumb to Kaycee. But we'll wash the slate clean except for the dinkiest little chunk of orneriness you ever pulled. How about it, Robles?"

Enrico's one eye narrowed cagily. "You cannot make me talk."

Johnny shrugged. "Suit yourself. If you'd rather kick on a rope than do thirty days in jail—" Johnny rolled a cigarette and let Robles think it over.

"What do you want me to say?" Robles sparred finally.

"You don't need to say anything about helpin' your first boss, Manuel Calaveras, hold up a gold shipment and bury it in the *pozo.* You don't have to admit he came back later to dig it up and start a gamblin' joint with it. You don't have to own up that Ramon Montoya found that out and has been makin' you eat out of his hand."

"Montoya? I do not know him," denied Robles.

"You don't need to confess," Johnny resumed, "that all the time you were tendin' bar at the gamblin' joint you tipped Montoya to the big winners so that Fadeaway's gunmen could hold 'em up on the way home. You don't even have to admit that Montoya made you dope the Circle Dot coffee, or that you helped Fadeaway steal the Circle Dot stock."

"I did not—"

"Makes no difference," Johnny broke in. "Because we'll pass up all that if you'll just come clean about the Marta Calaveras will. Why are you hiding it until after the twelfth of December?"

"I did not hide it," Enrico maintained. His eyes grew sly as he added: "But if you will make no charge of anything else, I will tell you about the will."

"It's a deal."

"I burned the will," Enrico announced.

"Come again," Johnny scoffed. "Montoya wouldn't have you burn a will that leaves him a pot of money."

"You are mistake'," Enrico countered. "The will say La Marta leaves all her estate to *los pobres* of Santa Fe, except one peso."

"Left it all to the poor, did she, except one peso? Who gets the peso?"

"It say the one peso is for Ramon Montoya, and La Marta leaves him also her forgiveness for a broken promise."

Johnny whistled. Instantly he was convinced, because this solution was more logical than his own. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! No wonder Ramon made you touch a match to that will! That's all you have to admit, Enrico."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST LADRÓN

WEDDING bells were ringing in Santa Fe. Don Ramon heard them from his newly refurbished house on Agua Frio Road. It lacked only half an hour, now, of high noon.

Don Ramon stood before a mirror brushing back his wavy black hair.

His elegance made a smile play on his lips. Fortune was at a zenith, and this ancient mansion of the Montoyas was now redeemed and ready to receive a new mistress. In only an hour he would bring her here, Josefita, the most lovely bride in all New Mexico.

The distant chiming of the bells reminded him that it would not be polite to permit the bride to arrive first at the church. So Don Ramon hurried down to the patio where a friend was waiting with two horses. One of the horses was the same handsome white stallion which had served Diego de Vargas at the fiesta. Once more, for this momentous occasion, Montoya had borrowed it from Don Pablo Lucero.

"*Listo?*" inquired Don Pablo.

"Ready," Don Ramon said.

They mounted and rode stirrup to stirrup down the Agua Frio Road. Soon they passed the Sandoval house and saw a carriage drawn up in front. In a few minutes Josefita would emerge on the arm of Don Ygnacio, and ride in the carriage to the church. It was not proper for Ramon to greet her, though, until she met him at the altar.

The sun shone brightly and the snow was almost gone now.

With Don Pablo flanking him, Don Ramon rode on to the plaza. Church bells were still chiming. Avenues merged into the plaza like spokes to a hub and along these came horsemen and carriages. *Ricos* in all their finery were parading to the wedding. And the *pobres* lined the walks, as Don Ramon rode proudly by. He tossed pesos here and there.

"We will drink your health, patron," the recipients shouted back.

With Don Pablo, Ramon rode on past La Fonda Tavern and the palace. Beyond them loomed the tall cathedral tower with its ringing bells.

Guests were already alighting

from carriages. The elite of Santa Fe were filing into the church. Don Ramon smiled, waved at them, dismounted and tossed the reins to a boy.

Don Pablo did the same. "This way, Ramon," he said, and led the way to one of two anterooms winding from the chancel. This one was for the groom and his caballero. The other one was for the bride and her maids.

Once inside, Don Pablo produced cigarettes. "To calm your nerves, Ramon." Don Ramon took one and stood puffing in a glow of contentment at a forward window. From it he could watch the guests still arriving.

Don Pablo stood at the door, peering into the chancel. "It is full to overflowing," he whispered.

DON RAMON remained at the front window looking out, to observe the arrival of the bride. In a little while her carriage rolled up with a flourish. The coachman halted it directly in front of the church. Don Ygnacio got out and reached up a hand to Josefita.

A cloak and mantilla covered all but her face and the fringes of her veil. She looked pale, Ramon thought. But she was beautiful. A crowd of *pobres* cheered as she alighted, and then—

Ramon Montoya, observing from his window, was startled by the intrusion of three men. They pushed through the crowd to the elbow of Don Ygnacio. One of them was Sheriff Gonzales. The other two were Pancho Archuleta and Enrico Robles. Gonzalez held each of the men by a wrist, and it was clear that they were here under pressure.

Then Montoya saw Johnny Cameron. The American sat a horse in the background, not intruding, but with his gaze fixed militantly upon the others.

Gonzales appeared to make some

apology to Don Ygnacio. It annoyed Don Ygnacio. Then he turned in arrogant impatience to the cringing Pancho Archuleta. Pancho made some statement which reached no farther than the group by the carriage. Evidently it shocked both Don Ygnacio and Josefita.

Then Enrico Robles made a statement. Montoya couldn't hear it, but his ears burned. Blood flushed to his cheekbones. Fear and anger thumped at his heart.

He saw Don Ygnacio question Pancho and Enrico. As they answered with vigorous nods, Josefita swayed and Don Ygnacio had to catch her in his arms.

The plaza crowd stood by, gaping and confused.

Montoya saw Johnny Cameron turn away and ride to a hitch rack on the plaza. He saw Johnny dismount and sit down on a bench there, and roll a cigarette with the air of one whose work is done.

By this time Don Ygnacio had handed Josefita back into the carriage. She was hiding her face in her mantilla. Montoya saw an usher rush out from the church to inquire: "Is there anything wrong, Don Ygnacio?"

Faintly the response carried to Montoya: "The señorita is ill. I must take her home. You will inform our friends, señor?"

The whole world seemed to crash about Montoya's head as he watched the bridal carriage drive away.

Don Pablo had also sensed something amiss. "I will find out what it is, Ramon," he said quickly and stepped out into the chancel.

Montoya waited alone. He saw confused guests emerging from the church. None were more confused than Don Pablo when he returned. "Word has been brought," he reported, "that Josefita is ill. I am sorry, Ramon."

Ramon was too bitterly confounded to answer. He stood at the window staring out toward the distant plaza bench where Johnny Cameron sat. Sheriff Gonzalez and his two prisoners were no longer in sight.

"You will go to Josefita at once?" suggested Don Pablo.

"Of course," Montoya murmured. But he knew he wouldn't. He could never again go to the house of Sandoval.

He went out now to his horse and Don Pablo followed to inquire: "Is there anything I can do for you, Ramon?"

Montoya managed to mask his bitterness. "Yes, Pablo," he said. "An Americano named Cameron is on a bench in the plaza. I have a slight unfinished business with him. Will you tell him that if he will wait there one hour, I will see him?"

"But of course, amigo."

Pablo crossed toward the plaza. Ramon Montoya mounted and rode up the Agua Frio Road, as though to the house of the Sandovals. Actually he passed there without turning his head and rode on to his own residence.

Under the shelter of it, his anger broke leash. He poured rum and drank damnation to Johnny Cameron. Then, removing his wedding coat, Montoya buckled on a .45 gun.

JOHNNY waited in the plaza. The sun shone warmly on his face, but his heart was heavy. He had hurt Josefita. Exposing to her at such an hour the unworthiness of Montoya had been too crushing and sudden a shock.

And now had come a message from Montoya. Ramon would meet him here in one hour.

A step back of him made Johnny whirl about. He relaxed to see that it was only Stephen Elkins, the banker.

"Been to the wedding, Cameron?" Elkins asked cheerily.

"No," Johnny said.

"It seems to be over," Elkins remarked. "Crowd's coming out. I meant to go myself, but affairs at the bank delayed me. By the way, here's a note for you to sign, Cameron."

He presented a note for five hundred dollars and smiled. "Yes, those five *pozo* homesteaders dropped in and signed relinquishments. According to our arrangement, I paid each of them a hundred dollars."

"Thanks." Johnny signed the note.

It meant complete control of the *pozo* for the Circle Dot.

Elkins hurried back to the bank. And Johnny Cameron fixed his gaze on that corner of the plaza which gave to the Agua Frio Road, expecting to see Montoya appear there. Instead he saw an elderly Mexican ride into view on a mule.

The mule was Jason Holt's. The rider was Miguel.

Miguel came directly to Johnny's bench. "I have brought sad news, Don Juan," he reported.

"About old Jason?" Johnny asked anxiously.

"*El viejo*," announced Miguel, "is dead."

"I was afraid of it, Miguel. He was a bit too old for a jolt like that."

"Before he died, señor, he gave me permission to tell Josefita."

"Don't tell her today," Johnny warned. "She's got more than she can stand. But I can see how the old man felt, at the last. Living, he didn't want to be a drag on her. But now he wants her to remember that he stood by."

"That is it, señor. And he has asked one other thing."

"What, Miguel?"

"When he is laid away, he wished to be wrapped in that same buffalo robe, señor."

The cigarette quivered between Johnny's lips. "I think it can be arranged, Miguel."

The old servant rode away on the mule.

Then Johnny saw a white stallion. Its rider appeared from the Agua Frio Road. Ramon Montoya sat stiffly in the saddle, his face flushed, his eyes rimmed with redness and fixed in malignant challenge upon Johnny Cameron.

The man rode to a hitch rack and dismounted there. Then he walked rapidly toward Johnny's bench.

Johnny stood up. His holster flap was open. He fixed his eyes on Montoya's slender right hand. That hand was gloveless, now, while the left hand was gloved. That in itself forewarned of the man's errand here.

Stopping at ten paces, Montoya made it clear. "I have come to kill you, señor."

"Help yourself," invited Johnny.

Montoya drew and fired. The draw was a flash, but the bullet missed its target, for Johnny had stepped to the right at the first crook of Montoya's arm. Then Johnny stepped back to the left as Montoya's gun boomed again.

Johnny's own gun was out now. Wrist braced against his hip, he

squeezed the trigger and saw Montoya fall. The man's knees hit the ground first, then his outstretched hands. For a moment the drifting white smoke curtained him. When it cleared, Johnny saw Montoya sprawled face down on the plaza grass.

Men came running from the plaza shops. They formed a circle about Montoya. One of them said to Johnny: "We saw him shoot first and twice, señor."

Johnny went to his horse and rode up the Agua Frio Road. The street was quiet. It was the hour of siesta in Santa Fe.

THE gate in the Sandoval wall was closed. Tall, brown stalks of hollyhocks grew there, and alamos in the patio reached leafless arms across the wall. Drawn shutters warned of a forbidding privacy.

Nevertheless, Johnny Cameron squared his shoulders and advanced to the door. He knocked, feeling far from sure of his welcome. He wouldn't blame them if they turned him away. But he knew that within the hour Don Ygnacio would be informed of the plaza shooting; and Johnny much preferred to bring the news of it himself.

The door opened. Don Ygnacio Sandoval's thin figure was framed there, his face still pale from shock, his shoulders drooped, his goatee grayer than ever, his eyes weary and disillusioned.

"Enter, Señor Cameron," he said quietly.

"Maybe you won't want me to. I just killed Montoya."

The *haciendado* stared for a moment. Then he opened the door a bit wider. "Enter, my friend."

Johnny stepped into the *sala*. "He wrangled me into a showdown and so—"

Don Ygnacio raised a hand. "Will you do me the favor not to speak of it, Señor Cameron?"

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He rang a bell and Miguel appeared.

"Bring the chokecherry wine, Miguel."

Miguel brought a decanter and glasses. He served his master and Johnny Cameron.

"Your health," said Don Ygnacio. He raised his glass. His face was still pallid and strained.

"And yours," said Johnny.

"May the winter be kind to your cattle, Señor Cameron."

"They'll pull through all right."

"I have heard that your calf crop will go to Don Pablo next year, señor."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, he contracted for 'em."

"The year after next, I shall bid for your calves myself. We must spread the blood of this new stock through all New Mexico."

"Sure." Johnny took his hat and stood up. "I gotta get started for the *pozo*," he said.

"But you must stay for *comida!*"

"Not this time. Thanks."

Leaving the house, Johnny crossed the patio and passed out through the high adobe wall. He found Muchacho hitched at the rack there. And waiting by the horse stood a girl in a long, black shawl.

"Josephine!"

"I saw your horse from my window, señor," Josefita said. "And there is something I must say to you."

"I reckon you feel pretty much broke up," Johnny said.

"I feel like one who has escaped, señor."

Her hands came impulsively from the shawl and Johnny took them.

"Remember the last thing I said to you?" he asked her.

"What was it?"

"I said I'd be at your wedding. And I still aim to be there, Josephine."

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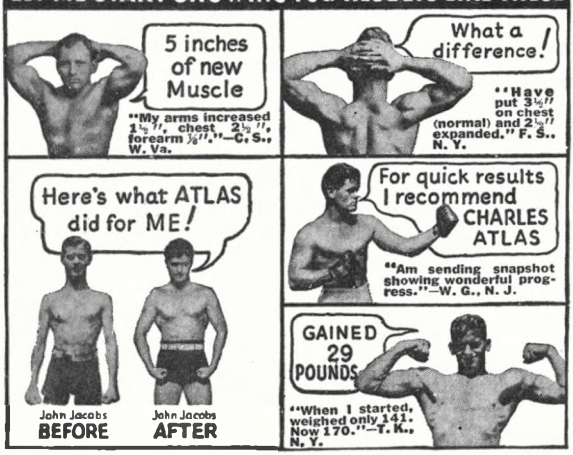

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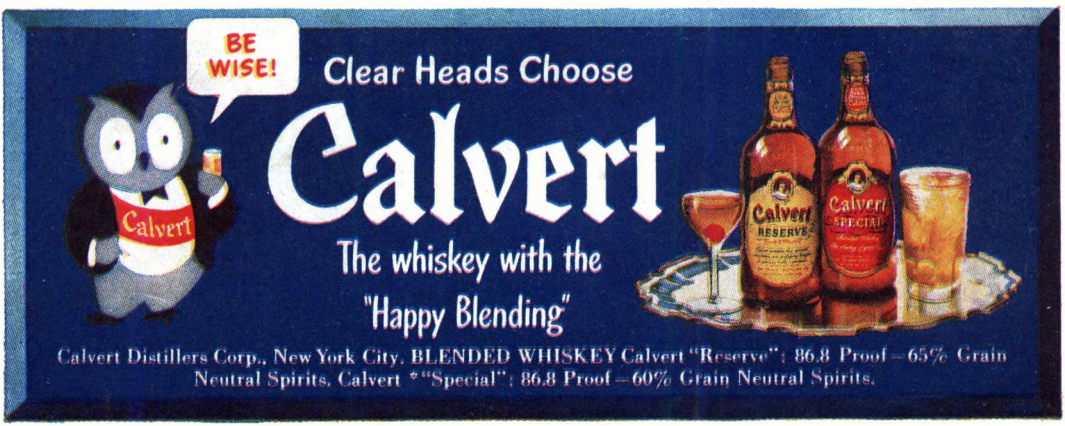
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