

WESTERN **STORY** 10 CENTS

**STREET
AND
SMITH'S**

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JUNE 6, 1942



THE CRIMSON QUIRT
BY WILLIAM COLT MAC DONALD

THE STRAY BY ELI COLTER
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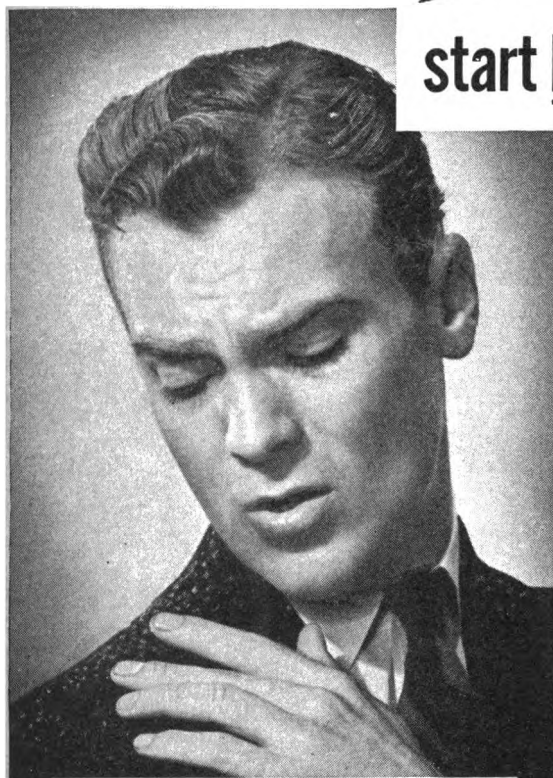
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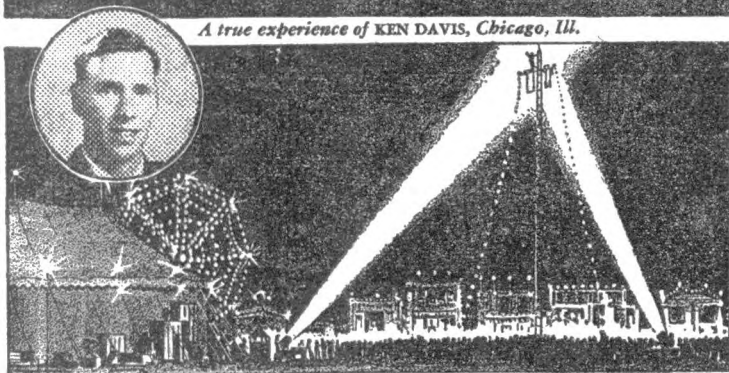
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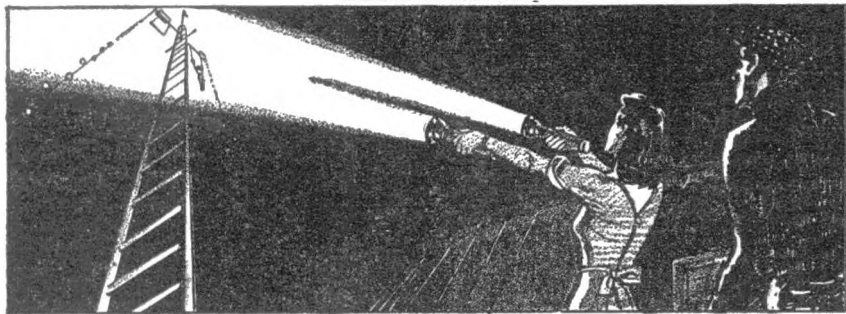
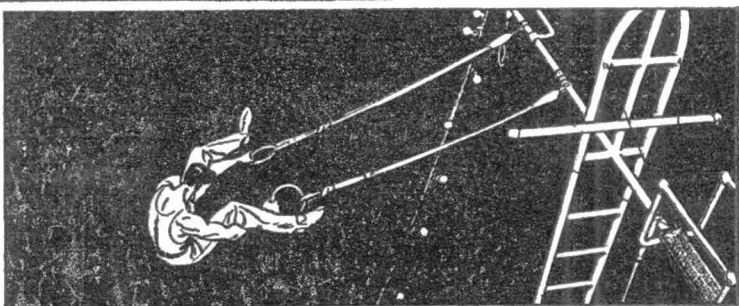
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WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR JUNE 6, 1942

VOL. CC, No. 3

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A murdered man in a rocking chair out in the wilds of the desert country spells sinister mystery to Pete Piper, but snarling bush-whack lead warns him not to try to solve the enigma. . . .

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"I'll see you in Mill City . . . for the last round of a finish fight." When Red Vance made that promise, Link Darby, who always had one more double cross up his sleeve, retorted: "And I'll take that round!"

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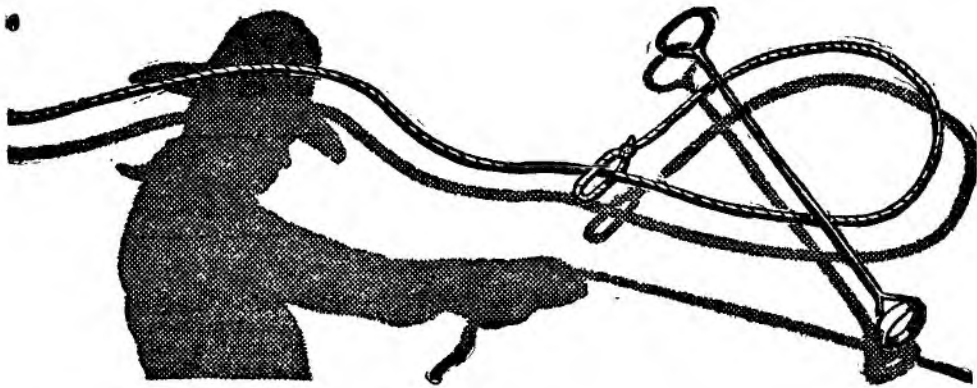
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The Roundup

THE latest excitement in Brooklyn—where there's never a dull moment, anyhow—was a stampede. We ain't foolin'. A herd of bulls got loose and lit a shuck right through the middle of town.

It's an old saying that anything can happen in Brooklyn, and why not. Western Story has got some mighty good friends over that way, and the folks who live there are no different from the folks who live anywhere else. They haven't got anything to do with all the strange goings-on—well, anyhow, not every time. The doggonedest things just somehow look Brooklyn up to happen in.

Take that herd of bulls that was being peacefully driven in a truck to a sausage factory. Anywhere else they would have arrived before an hombre could say, "Pass the mustard." But not in Brooklyn. The truck stopped for a red light, the tailboard came loose, and quicker than Léo Durocher can get out of the dugout to squawk to an umpire, ten big bulls were out of the truck and on the prod.

Pedestrians didn't have any corral

fence to climb, but they did a job of climbing just the same as those bulls took off in search of greener pastures. A hurry call went out for roundup hands. They came a-foggin' it, sirens going full blast. The blue-coated cowpunchers hung to running boards while they twirled their ropes, made their casts and tied fast. Maybe the roping wasn't graceful, but it was plumb permanent. Anyhow, the bulls thought so as they were herded back to the truck in short order—or for a short order.

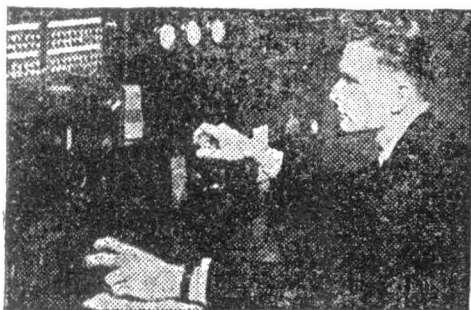
The old bologna is dished up just anywhere, but for bologna on the hoof—well, the West is sort of far away, but we can always take a pasear out to Rancho Brooklyn.

Next week's line-up—Cherry Wilson returns to Western Story with *RIDIN' FOR GLORY*, a colorful, drama-packed novel of a horse "with the devil in his heart," and an hombre who was bound to ride him; C. K. Shaw, Tom W. Blackburn, Dave Lavender, Stephen Payne, William Colt MacDonald, Carl Raht and many others contribute a string of outstanding stories; and, as always, there'll be a full list of interesting and informative departments and features.

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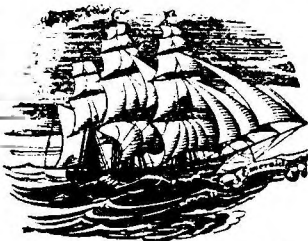
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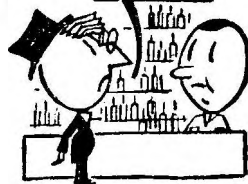
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How I Solved My Liquor Dither *by don herold*

I used to quiver with confusion every time I started out to buy some sort of indoor drinking ammunition. I was baffled by brands—hundreds of them. I'm not a liquor expert, are you? I mean, drinking is a pleasure with me—not a life work.

Then an old-timer, a friend of mine who has been around a lot of liquors, said "Settle on Old Mr. Boston."

Yes, sir! "Old Mr. Boston" is a handy handle by which we buyers can grasp this whole liquor-brand proposition.

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Every drink in the Old Mr. Boston line smacks of that skilled New England craftsmanship which for three centuries has been the tradition of the great old city of Boston.

Why play hide and seek with liquor brands? Join me today, and settle on good Old Mr. Boston.

THE *Crimson* QUIRT

PART ONE



There was something sinister and mysterious about the rocking chair and its gray-haired occupant, and the sight of the man's six-gun and rifle did nothing to reassure Pete.

by William Colt MacDonald

CHAPTER I

DEATH ON ROCKERS!

It was shortly after he had struck the trail leading to Beauregard City that the rider on the rangy roan

gelding noticed, silhouetted against the vast expanse of turquoise sky, the trio of soaring buzzards. On either side of the well-traveled trail was a wide stretch of slightly rolling country, covered with mesquite,

cacti, paloverde trees and creosote bush. To the east, at the rear of the rider, were the foothills of the Picadero Mountains; far to the west, their serrated peaks etched sharply in the bright morning sunlight, were the towering granite slopes of the Sierra Trabadura Range.

However, it was the buzzards, swinging closer and closer to the earth in their erratic flight, that held the rider's attention. One, more bold than its companions, suddenly zoomed down to disappear behind the foliage of a paloverde; it didn't rise again. The other two birds swooped nearer, swinging wide on curving, split-tipped wings. His curiosity thoroughly aroused, the rider touched spurs to his mount and moved off the trail, heading across the loose sandy soil toward the point where the first bird had vanished. The remaining two birds, noting his approach, spiraled abruptly once more and floated far above on motionless wings against the wide blue expanse.

"It might be a dead cow or some other animal that's attracted those *xopilote* birds," the man on the horse mused. "Again, it might be a man."

The horse picked its way carefully through the semidesert plant growth, its shod hoofs now and then striking loose bits of rock embedded in the soil. The rider knew he was nearing the buzzards' point of interest when the third bird rose heavily, almost reluctantly, from beyond the lacy branches of a mesquite not more than fifty feet ahead and took to the air on sluggish, flapping wings. The rider moved on a bit faster.

THEN, rounding a tall clump of prickly pear, he suddenly checked his mount and came to a halt, his keen gray eyes intent on the scene before him.

"What in thunder!" was the involuntary exclamation that rose to his lips. The sight was so incongruous as to be unbelievable.

"If this isn't the damndest thing I ever saw, my name's not Pete Piper," the rider told himself.

In the first place, what was a rocking chair doing away out here, miles from everywhere? And in the second place, why should anyone come out here to sit in the rocking chair, surrounded by brush and cacti? There wasn't any house nearby; there wasn't even a wagon that might have transported the sitter and his chair. It was all loco, Piper told himself.

But there it was, the rocking chair, placed in a cleared space, with its occupant's head resting comfortably against a small cushion at the back of the chair. The man sat quietly enough, without moving, or even deigning to notice the arrival of the rider. "Maybe he didn't hear me," Pete mused. "He's sort of turned away, so he might not have seen me, either." He could see now that the man seated in the rocking chair was elderly; a long gray beard hung halfway down his chest. Tangled white locks straggled from below the rim of the black sombrero.

Piper raised his voice. "Hi yuh, old-timer!"

The man in the chair didn't move.

"Probably deaf as a rock," Pete told himself and repeated the greeting in a louder tone. Still no movement from the old man in the rocker.

Pete frowned and slipped down from his saddle. His legs carried him in long strides toward the rocking chair. After a moment he saw that the elderly man's eyes were wide open. Then he saw something else: a dark spreading stain of crimson showed on the denim shirt beneath

the straggling ends of the gray whiskers.

Pete stiffened, then relaxed again. His eyes narrowed as he approached closer to the silent form in the chair. The elderly man was dead; no doubt about that.

"No wonder you didn't see me, old-timer," Pete said softly.

Putting out a hand, Pete touched the left arm resting on the arm of the rocking chair. The flesh was stiff, cool to the touch. Still, rigor mortis hadn't set in completely. Death couldn't have occurred more than an hour or so before. Piper stepped back and surveyed the silent figure in the chair. The right hand was clenched about the butt of a six-shooter, resting in the dead man's lap. Leaning against the side of the chair was a .30-30 Winchester rifle. The glassy eyes, wide open, stared vacantly at the surrounding brush and trees. The feet, in their shabby, run-down boots, rested on the gravelly earth.

Pete's gaze noted other details. The rocking chair itself, for instance. It had been constructed with a walnut frame and curving arm rests. The high back and seat—what Piper could see of the seat—was of cane. A cushion for the head and one beneath the chair's occupant had been provided.

"If this isn't the dangedest!" muttered Pete. "What did he do . . . bring his favorite rocking chair out here and then commit suicide? If so, where's the horse or wagon that carried the chair? Nope. It's not suicide. If that was what he'd been aiming at, he wouldn't have brought out two guns. One would have been plenty."

He stooped and sniffed at the muzzle of the rifle resting against the chair arm, then moved around and stooping lower, placed his nose close

to the barrel of the six-shooter held by the dead man. There was an odor of burned powder lingering about both guns. Both had been fired fairly recently, sometime that morning at least.

MOVING carefully around the back of the chair, Pete noticed something else: Through the openings in the woven cane back, he could see where a bullet had entered the old man's shoulder. He frowned and muttered: "At least that proves one shot was fired before he sat in the chair; the chair ain't hurt any."

Now, Piper stepped back, watching carefully where he placed his feet and commenced to examine the earth around the dead man. He moved in ever-widening circles, noting both hoof and footprints as his narrowed gray eyes took in every inch of space. Several yards away from the dead form in the chair, he saw tracks attesting that a wagon had passed recently. That didn't help much, though. It only increased the puzzle. What was a wagon doing off here in the brush and mesquite, instead of on the road that ran from Beauregard City?

Pete shook his head in perplexity and started to follow the wagon-wheel tracks, his head with its flat-topped black sombrero bent toward the earth as he moved. He was a tall, lean individual with red hair and a strongly molded jaw. His shoulders were wide in their tightly fitting woolen shirt. He wore corduroy trousers tucked into the tops of well-worn riding boots, and a Bull Durham tag dangled from one pocket of his open vest. Slung about his waist was a cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter.

For about ten minutes Pete followed the wagon tracks until they joined the trail that ran to Beaure-

gard City. But the wagon hadn't taken that direction; it had headed east. The hoofprints of the team drawing it proved that the vehicle had been pushed along at a sharp rate of speed. Why?

Pete Piper retraced his steps and, having reached the dead man once more, circled off in the opposite direction. Here, after a time, he saw the prints of three riders, also traveling fast. Two had been traveling together, apparently in pursuit of the third. The prints of the third horse abruptly swung off to the south. These Pete followed until they led him behind a tall clump of opuntia cactus where the carcass of the horse lay sprawled, dead, on the earth. It had been shot twice, though from the position of the wounds, Piper judged the animal had run some distance before dropping.

There were footprints near the body of the horse, too; wide-spaced prints which conjured up a vision of a running man, and which, after a time, became less certain and took on a stumbling aspect. These footprints led Piper back to the rigid form seated in the rocking chair. Everything was as he had last left it. There seemed little more he could do.

"I'd sure like to examine those guns," Pete muttered, "but I reckon I'd better leave things as they are and get on to Beauregard City to report this. Might be the coroner wouldn't like me messing around the body."

Still, he was reluctant to leave. Again he glanced at the hoofprints near the chair. They led off to the north, in the direction of a hogback, which reared its sloping sides well above the wide stretch of semidesert growth, a quarter of a mile away. Pete glanced toward the top of the

hogback; nothing but trees and brush to be seen up that way.

THAT seemed to be all there was to it. Pete glanced toward the sky; the buzzards were still hovering about up there, waiting for him to leave. "Damn scavengers!" he muttered and started toward his horse to get a blanket to cover the body. He wasn't following quite the same path now as he had taken when arriving. Then, suddenly, his eye was caught by a bright-red object nestling among the lacy branches of a mesquite tree. He paused and, reaching among the branches, drew out a riding quirt such as American cowboys and Mexican vaqueros often carry. What was this red quirt doing here? He examined it with growing interest.

The quirt had a heavy round handle, with a sort of braided leather knob at the top, covered with woven horsehair. Below the handle was a length of braided rawhide, from which hung twin strips of heavy leather, about a foot and a half long, the sort that would urge a horse to a speedier gait, or cut its hide to ribbons, depending on the mood and temperament of its rider. A rawhide wrist loop dangled from the handle. The quirt, a vivid crimson, was about three feet long, over all.

"Hm-m-m! Wonder where this came from?" Pete mused. "Looks like Mexican handiwork. How did it get caught in the branches of this mesquite? Has it been here long? Nope, I don't reckon so. It doesn't look as though it had been exposed much to the weather. Just shows ordinary usage, and not much of that. I've got a hunch there's some connection between this red quirt and that dead man back there."

He stood scrutinizing the quirt a moment or two longer, then resumed

his way to the pony. Procuring a blanket, he hastened back and spread it over the silent form in the rocking chair, then prepared to continue the journey to Beauregard City.

Still reluctant to leave, he examined the crimson quirt again, before slipping the wrist loop over his left hand. He stood idly, slapping the twin lashes against his boot, brow furrowed in concentration. "Queer est mix-up I ever ran into," he muttered. Then it happened:

A swift breeze fanned his right cheek. Leaves from a tree near his shoulder fluttered to the earth. A sharp whining sound droned in his ears. All this before he heard the sharp crack of the rifle.

The sound wasn't difficult to locate. Instantly Pete raised his gaze to the top of that hogback, a quarter mile distant. There, drifting lazily upward, against a background of brush, was a swiftly dissolving puff of powder smoke. Even while he watched, a second shot cracked out. This time the bullet threw up dust and gravel a few yards from Pete's feet.

CHAPTER II

SHARPSHOOTING

PETE whirled and, running back to his horse, jerked his rifle from the boot on the saddle. He screened himself behind a paloverde tree and with the rifle butt at shoulder, peered through the branches of the tree toward the top of the hogback. Three minutes passed. Five. There weren't any more shots. Nor was there any movement to be noted on top of the hogback.

Slowly Pete started to lower his Winchester. Then he paused. Up, atop the long ridge, he'd caught a silvery metallic gleam in the tangled brush. Again his rifle came up, one finger slowly tightening about the

trigger of the weapon. The silvery gleam was gone now, but Pete fired, shooting in the direction from which the gleam had come.

The echoes of the shot died away. Piper waited, gaze intent on the top of the hogback. He couldn't be sure, at this distance, but he thought he detected a sort of agitated movement. A sound that resembled a curse of pain faintly reached his ears.

A slow grin spread on Pete's bronzed features. "If I hit anything, or anybody, at this distance, and without even seeing them, that's sure sharpshooting," he told himself. "Reckon I'll wait a few minutes more, then go see."

There weren't any more shots, nor was there any movement that he could perceive at the top of the long ridge.

"Reckon I'd better go see," Pete told himself. Shoving his rifle back into its boot, he gathered up his horse's reins and climbed into the saddle, then set off in the direction of the ridge, guiding the animal carefully between the various growths that barred the way and never once removing his gaze from the hogback.

It was a foolhardy thing to do; Piper realized that, but he possessed an insatiable curiosity as to the reason for anyone shooting at him. "I don't know anybody in this neck of the range," was the thought that passed through his mind. "If whoever did that shooting was trying to drive me away from that corpse in the rocker, I was leaving anyway . . . so there was no reason for shooting. Howsomever, when anybody shakes lead out of barrel in my direction, I want to know the reason why."

His horse reached the foot of the hogback and commenced the steep ascent. It occurred to Pete that

somebody might be waiting to ambush him at the top, but he kept steadily on, though by this time the walnut butt of his six-shooter was gripped in his right hand. Twice, the horse slipped and slid back a few feet, necessitating a search for easier paths to the top. However, the animal finally made it, puffing and blowing, its hide streaked with perspiration.

Here, at the top, was a tangle of brush and stunted trees. Piper drew to a halt to rest his mount, his eyes alert in all directions, his ears sharp for the first hostile sound. But there was nothing to be seen or heard except a few birds moving among the leaves and branches and a tiny lizard that went scooting for shelter a few feet in front of the gelding.

PETE relaxed a trifle, his eyes now sweeping the surrounding country below the hogback. Suddenly, off to the northwest, he spied two swiftly traveling clouds of dust. His gaze narrowed.

"Two riders," he spoke half aloud. "Those hombres are sure demolishing space. Must be they're shy on guts to let me run the two of 'em off, thataway. Well, well!" He drew out his Durham and papers and slowly rolled a cigarette, his eyes still intent on the fast-vanishing riders. They were too far away for Pete to determine anything regarding their features or general getup. "And I never would be able to catch 'em now," he told himself, scratching a match for his cigarette.

He inhaled deeply and blew out a gray cloud of smoke. "Two against one," he repeated. "Why didn't they stay and fill me full of lead while I was climbing this ridge? They sure must have lost their nerve plumb sudden. Anyway, it still doesn't explain why they shot at me in the

first place. Well, I'll give a look-see."

He dismounted and made his way into the brushy thicket, heading for the point from which he judged the shooting had come. There was a good deal of prickly pear up here, some scrub oak and other low growths, but finally he located a spot where the leaves and brush showed signs of trampling. There were the marks of booted feet, too, though none were plainly discernible. Farther back, droppings showed where two horses had been tethered. After some further search, Pete picked from the earth two empty .30-30 rifle shells. These he slipped into his pocket.

He had started to head back toward his horse when his toe stubbed against a heavy object only a few yards from the point where he had picked up the cartridge shells. He stooped down and retrieved a pair of field glasses. That is, the object had been field glasses. Now, the binoculars were ruined, at least the lens in the right barrel was. Only a few splinters of glass remained at one side of the barrel's rim and there were tiny flecks of lead adhering to the metal where a bullet had ripped through the outer half of the barrel.

A slow grin twisted Piper's lips as comprehension dawned upon him: "No wonder those two hightailed it," he chuckled. "They sure must have thought I was doing some real sharp-shooting. Shucks! Talk about a lucky shot! And one of those hombres must have been looking at me when it happened. Probably plumb forgot that these glasses would give off a glint of light. And said glint was gone, complete, by the time I fired my shot. I couldn't do it again in a million years, but those two didn't wait around for me to try." A low laugh suddenly welled from

his throat. "I'd like to bet a plugged peso that the hombre that had these glasses up to his eyes sure got a heavy bump when my slug struck. He's just lucky it came at an angle. Otherwise he'd have had an eye put out."

Placing the binoculars to his eyes, Piper adjusted the lens in the left barrel and gazed down toward the spot where the dead man sat in his chair. The sight came into view with astonishing clarity and nearness. Almost, Pete felt as though he could reach out and touch the still form in the rocker.

He lowered the glasses soberly. "Why, those sidewinders could watch every move I was making. Ten to one, they were eying me while I looked for sign, and when I found that red quilt. I wonder—" He paused, pondering the problem, frowning. Glancing down at the quilt, dangling from his wrist, he continued: "Could those hombres have wanted this quilt? It could easily have been overlooked in that tree where I found it. It was quite a little distance from where the dead man sat. And are they the ones who killed him? Pete Piper, you sure got yourself tangled in a problem this time."

He gave a last glance around, then, taking the damaged binoculars with him, retraced his steps to the waiting pony, meanwhile deciding: "No, they couldn't have wanted this quilt. Men don't kill just to gain possession of a riding quilt. But those two sure didn't want me down there."

The sun had passed meridian by the time Pete and his horse once more reached the bottom of the hog-back. It was hot, no doubt about that. Pete wiped perspiration from his face with the bandanna knotted about his neck, then touched spurs

to his mount and moved on at a faster gait.

Within a few minutes he was back at the spot where the blanket-covered figure rested in the rocking chair. Nothing had changed since he left. Above, three buzzards still hovered high above the earth. Pete didn't dismount but pushed on until he turned right on the trail that ran to Beauregard City.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE AHEAD

IT was shortly after one thirty in the afternoon when Pete Piper rode into Beauregard City, which gave the impression of being a thriving cattle center. There were three or four streets paralleling the main thoroughfare and an equal number crossing these. Southeast of the town, Piper had noticed a group of cattle pens arranged along a spur of the T. N. & A. S. Railroad. Tall cottonwood trees, particularly plentiful in the residential section, furnished shade from the broiling rays of the sun.

Along Main Street, as he pulled the roan gelding to a walk, Pete saw several saloons, two general stores, a bank and a two-story brick hotel which bore the sign "Cowmen's Rest Hotel." There were restaurants, a photograph gallery, a feed store, at least one barber shop, and two livery stables. Many of the buildings had false fronts from which the paint was peeling, due to the action of desert wind and sun. The roadway was dusty, unpaved, with a plank sidewalk on both sides. An almost unbroken line of wooden awnings projected from buildings, above the sidewalks. Saddled horses and wagons waited at hitch racks on either side.

Pedestrians moved along the

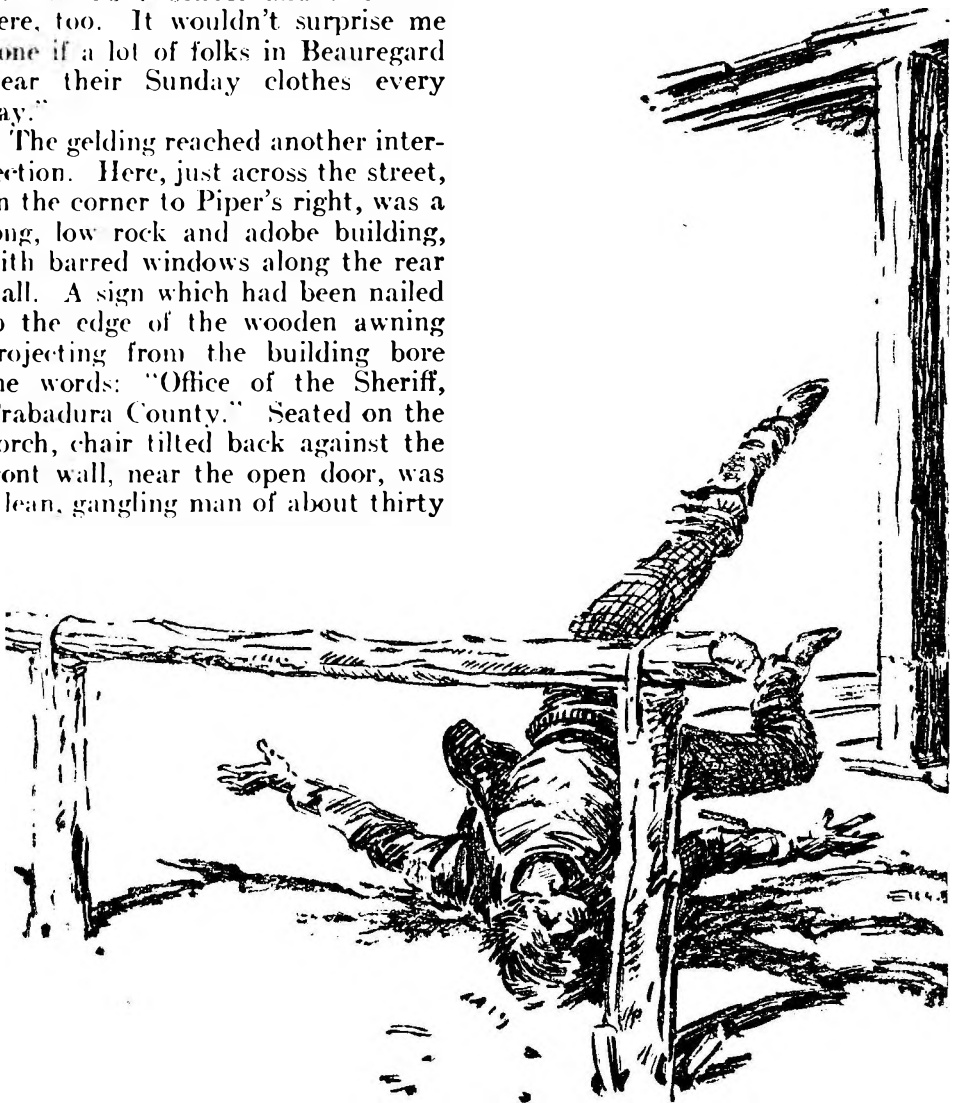
street. Mostly they wore sombreros, but a few "sported" derby hats. Apparently, the fashion of the day had reached Beauregard. Men stood in the shade of buildings, talking idly, or pushed through the swinging doors of saloons. Piper passed two women carrying parasols.

"Right likely up and coming town," he mused. "What's this Southwest country coming to? Parasols and hard-boiled hats! I'll bet there's a school and a church here, too. It wouldn't surprise me none if a lot of folks in Beauregard wear their Sunday clothes every day."

The gelding reached another intersection. Here, just across the street, on the corner to Piper's right, was a long, low rock and adobe building, with barred windows along the rear wall. A sign which had been nailed to the edge of the wooden awning projecting from the building bore the words: "Office of the Sheriff, Trabadura County." Seated on the porch, chair tilted back against the front wall, near the open door, was a lean, gangling man of about thirty

years of age, with sleepy blue eyes and tousled hair, the color of hemp, showing beneath a gray sombrero that rested precariously over one ear. A gun sagged at the man's right thigh and there was a badge pinned to his open vest.

PETE pulled over to the hitch rack and dismounted. The man with the hemp-colored hair eyed him drowsily a moment, then again bent



his attention to the short stick of yellow pine he held in one hand, while a keen-bladed Barlow knife peeled off a long, thin shaving. A small pile of shavings had collected about the man's chair.

"Just another hombre whittling away his life," Pete thought. "It doesn't look too encouraging. I could be wrong, though." He rounded the end of the hitch rack and stepped to the porch. The whittler didn't look up. Pete said: "You the sheriff, hereabouts?"

The sleepy eyes concentrated on

the pine stick a moment longer, then lifted to meet Pete's. Now, Pete detected a definite twinkle in those eyes, as the man drawled, "Not yet," and resumed his whittling. After a moment he resumed: "I sort of had hopes a spell back, when Sheriff Perkins was took bad with lumbago, but he recovered, hang the luck." Whittle, whittle. "Me, I'm just a deputy. Name's Homer Pritchard." More whittling, then further talk. "Sheriff Perkins is down to the Lariat Saloon, getting a shot of tonic for his lumbago. Hope it don't cure him. . . . Where and when did the killing take place?"

Piper had started to grin; now he



Traxler went sprawling in the dusty street but the crimson quilt remained right where it had been all along—looped on Pete's wrist.

sobered. "How'd you know there'd been a killing?"

Deputy Sheriff Pritchard spat a long, thin, brown stream out to the roadway and whittled a couple of more shavings from the stick. "You're a stranger in Beauregard," he explained, "therefore you don't run cows around here, so you'd have no rustling to report. If you were looking for a job, you'd be talking to hombres at one of our saloons, 'stead of me. If you were looking for acreage or city lots, you'd be conferrin' at one of our local realtor's. There's not many things brings a man to the sheriff's office, 'ceptin' crime. I figured there must be a killin'."

Pete laughed. "You're not as slow as you look."

The deputy tossed away the pine stick and put the Barlow knife in his pocket. "I couldn't be," he grinned and put out one hand. "Your name's—"

"Pete Piper. I was riding toward town when I saw some buzzards circling around. I went to investigate and found a dead man in a rocking chair."

"Rockin' chair, huh? Folks get queer ideas nowadays. Used to be, they'd bury dead men. Where'd you find him?"

"Just this side of a long hogback, about twelve miles east of here—"

"We call that hogback Elephant Ridge."

"Good name, at that. Anyway, a couple of hombres took shots at me from the top of the ridge. I shot once and got one of 'em plumb in the binoculars—"

"If that's a vital spot, I never heard of it."

"Field glasses. Here, wait, I'll show you." Pete strode out to his horse and got the damaged binoculars and returned to the deputy. "It

was a lucky shot, of course—"

"Wait a minute," Pritchard interposed. "Here comes Sheriff Perkins, now. It'll save telling your story twice."

A bulkily built man with thinning gray hair, wearing corduroys, was approaching the building. When he arrived, the deputy introduced Piper and mentioned the nature of the business that had brought him to the sheriff's office. Piper liked the sheriff's looks and his firm handclasp. After a moment he told his story, leaving out only the part that related to the finding of the crimson-dyed quilt.

WHEN he had finished, Sheriff Ethan Perkins frowned. "Old codger, eh? Queer set-up, ain't it? Rocking chair! How in Tophet did it get out there?"

"Maybe," Homer Pritchard suggested dryly, "it was rocking its way across country and just happened to be convenient."

"Maybe," the sheriff retorted crisply, "you'd better hitch up a wagon, Homer, and go after that body. Get Doc Gillett. You'll find him down to the Lariat Bar, now, if you hurry." Turning to Piper: "He's town coroner. Doc will be right glad you didn't disturb that body. Let me see those field glasses. . . . Hm-m-m! You shore scored a direct hit. These glasses look like a pair I saw Nick Traxler using one time."

"If those are Traxler's glasses," the deputy put in, "there'll be trouble ahead."

"Who is Nick Traxler?" Piper asked.

Pritchard supplied the answer: "Owner of the Diamond T spread. Nick would like to be boss of this country, hereabouts, but so far he ain't convinced me and the sheriff. I

tell you, Piper, the Pritchard & Perkins combination is hard to beat. But Traxler can be rattlesnake mean when he wants to."

"Quit running off at the head, Homer," Perkins ordered. "Go get yourself a wagon, Doc Gillett, and be on your way."

"Maybe you're right, at that," drawled Pritchard. He spat another long brown stream and ambled across the street in the direction of the Blue Star Livery, calling back over his shoulder: "I'll see you later, Piper."

Pete nodded and turned back to Sheriff Perkins. The lawman stood thinking, narrow-eyed. "These may be Traxler's glasses, Piper," he said finally, "but Nick Traxler wasn't using 'em when your shot shattered this glass."

"How do you know?"

"Traxler wouldn't have turned tail and run the way you say those two hombres done. It'd've been just the opposite. Nick Traxler would have been on you like a wild cat, lead spittin' from his gun barrel. Whether you like the man or not, you got to admit he's not yellow." The sheriff considered a moment. "It might have been one of the other two, of course."

"What other two?"

"Nick's brothers—Luke and Ivan. In my estimation, those two are just a couple of handicaps Nick had saddled on him. They're no good . . . not that Nick is either, for that matter. But, like I say, that's only my opinion. . . . I wonder who that dead man is. Only one I know hereabouts that fits the description you give is old Tiger-eye Munson. But Tiger-eye is one of Traxler's men."

"We're not certain Traxler is responsible," Piper reminded.

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"True enough. I was just letting my imagination run away with me. . . . I'm sorry, Piper, but I'll have to ask you to stay in town until this business is cleared up a mite more."

"That's all right with me."

"Mind my asking what you're doing in Beauregard?"

"Nothing in particular. I'm just looking over the country a mite. Got in mind to buy me some acreage and start a small outfit. I was down in Mexico. Just crossed the line this morning, not having found exactly what I wanted down there. The first trail I hit after leaving the border was the one that runs here. I figured to get a bite here and move on. Howsomever, I'm in no hurry."

Sheriff Perkins nodded. "If you're looking for an outfit, we'll be glad to have you cast your eye around this range. As for food, any of the restaurants are pretty good. The hotel dining room is best, but that will be closed now. Kind of late for dinner. The hotel bar is first-rate, too, though I like the Lariat Bar, myself. Where'll I find you?"

"I'll get me a room at the hotel," Pete replied. "This Traxler you mentioned . . . have you seen him around town today?"

"Saw him going into Turk Raven's saloon about two hours back. All the Diamond T outfit hangs around Raven's place. Maybe you'd like it; maybe you wouldn't. I don't. But I've got to admit Raven ain't broke no laws that I know of. . . . That I know of," the sheriff repeated meaningly.

"In other words," Pete grinned, "the raven may be as black as his reputation."

"That's something I've still to learn. Well, I'll see you later, Piper."

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEEN BEE

PETE climbed back into his saddle and turned the roan east on Main Street, until he'd reached the Cowmen's Rest Hotel. Here he arranged for a room on the second floor and evaded the clerk's curiosity regarding the business that had brought him to Beauregard City, with an inquiry regarding dinner.

"Dining room's closed until five thirty," the clerk told him. "However, Mr. Piper, I can recommend the Busy Bee Restaurant. That's just three doors west of here, after you cross Tonto Street. This hotel's right at the corner of Main and Tonto, so you won't have any trouble finding the Busy Bee."

"Thanks," Piper said dryly. "I'll try the Busy Bee and hope I won't get stung. I don't know as I ever yet hit a town that didn't have a Busy Bee eating place. Some of them are certainly honeys!"—sarcastically.

"I'm sure you'll find this is different," the clerk said.

"If it isn't I'll come back and comb your hair," Piper threatened humorously.

With the puzzled gaze of the hotel clerk following him, he strolled out of the lobby, the crimson quirt dangling from his wrist. Getting his horse at the hitch rack, he walked it across the street and entered the wide doorway of the Beauregard Livery. Here he left the animal with instructions concerning its care, then departed and crossed the street in the direction of the Busy Bee Restaurant, which he quickly spotted from the neat blue sign above its entrance.

There wasn't anyone to be seen when he entered the Busy Bee. A

long counter, equipped with stools, ran along one wall. The remainder of the room was given over to a number of oilcloth-covered tables and straight-back chairs. At the rear were a pair of swinging doors leading to the kitchen. Pete seated himself at the counter on the stool nearest the door and waited. He waited for five minutes, ten. No one appeared.

"Must be the drones are in charge today," he laughed to himself. After a moment he rapped on the counter with his knuckles.

The summons brought an instant response. There came the sound of quick light footsteps from the kitchen, then the swinging doors opened and a girl entered.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said contritely in a throaty voice. "I was reading. I didn't know there was anyone in here."

Pete swallowed hard. Here, he told himself, was the queen bee of the hive—of all hives, as far as Pete Piper was concerned. This girl was more than just pretty; she had the sort of beauty that took a man's breath away. Her eyes were deep violet with long black lashes. Her hair, a pale gold, had been plaited into heavy twin braids that encircled her head. She was tall, slim; feminine, but something boyish in her make-up, as well. Her smooth skin was richly tanned, attesting the fact that a lot of her time was spent in the open. The mouth was a trifle too wide to be called beautiful, in the strict sense of the word, but it merely lent emphasis to a firm chin that showed plenty of character. Beneath the neat white apron was a dress of checked gingham.

The girl spoke again. "Food, cowboy?"

"More than that," Pete Piper said

enthusiastically. "Nourishment for the eyes of men—" He broke off suddenly, realizing what he had said. "I beg your pardon. I was thinking of . . . of— Well, you see—" he broke off again, stammering for words.

The girl smiled. "What'll it be, a steak and fried potatoes, coffee, pie?"

"Anything you say," Pete replied. "Whatever is handiest, just so you don't have to be away too long. You don't have to cook it yourself, do you?"

The girl eyed him steadily. "I've never had any complaints on my cooking. The regular cook won't be in for an hour or so yet."

"I . . . I . . . well—" Pete reddened. "I didn't mean your cooking wasn't all right. I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't be away too long. I think we should get acquainted."

The girl eyed him coolly now. "You wouldn't be trying to get fresh, would you, redhead?" she asked.

"Aw, look, don't get me wrong," Pete pleaded. "If you feel that way, I'll leave pronto. It's just that I'm a stranger here and . . . and—" Again he broke off.

HIS manner was so earnest that the girl smiled in spite of herself. "All right, cowboy. And now if the steak is what you'd like I'll get busy."

"Thanks a lot. I'm . . . I'm Pete Piper."

The girl pretended to be impressed. "Not *the* Peter Piper! The one who picked a peck of pickled peppers?"

Pete grinned. He was commencing to regain his balance now. He shook his head. "No, I'm the Peter Piper who pertly pawned a pinkish

pearl of pretty precious pulchritude for a petty pot of phony pesos. Now do you place me?"

The girl looked at him gravely, though Pete could see her eyes were brimming with laughter, and shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't," she told him, "but I'll be thinking it over while I'm getting your steak."

She disappeared into the kitchen from which, in a few moments, came the sound and odor of frying meat. Once she stuck her blond head through the swinging doors to ask if Pete liked his steak rare or well done.

"The rarer the better," Pete replied, adding in an undertone: "It won't take so long thataway." After a few minutes he told himself he must remember to give the hotel clerk a cigar. "After all, he recommended this Queen Bee place. Maybe I'd better make it a box of cigars."

The sound of drumming hoofs sounded in the roadway outside. Through the window of the Busy Bee, Pete saw a rider in cowpuncher togs flash past on a sweat-lathered horse. The puncher looked as though he'd been riding hard and fast. He didn't remain long in Pete's mind: Pete's eyes were concentrated on those swinging doors leading to the kitchen; he was growing more impatient every minute.

His waiting was rewarded at last. The blond-haired girl pushed her way through the swinging doors, bearing a tray heaped with steaming platters of food. Placing them on the counter before Pete, she invited him to: "Pitch in, cowboy."

The food was good and there was plenty of it. The coffee was strong and hot. The girl reached to a back shelf and procured a bowl of sugar which she placed on the counter, close to Pete's hand. Pete grinned

and started to help himself to the sugar.

"Last thing I'd figure was needed around here," he remarked boldly.

"Salt might be more appropriate," retorted the girl, though Pete could see she wasn't angry.

"There seems to be plenty of pepper," Pete laughed. "Gosh, this food is good. I've a notion to start a restaurant myself, if I could get a cook like you. Or maybe I wouldn't need to open a restaurant. Have you ever considered leaving?"

The girl nodded. "I'm leaving tonight."

"Giving up your business?" Pete asked, surprised.

"It's not my business. I'm just substituting for the regular girl while she's away on her honeymoon. She married the man who owns the place, Sam Birch. She's a friend of mine and when she and Sam asked me to help keep the business running, I took the job. They'll be home on the Limited, tonight."

"And then what will you do—" Pete paused. "I hope you don't think I'm inquisitive. I don't mean it that way."

"Of course not," the girl said dryly. "Well, when I get through, tonight, I'll go back to the ranch with dad. We run the C Bar A, twelve miles west of here."

"I had a hunch you were real cow-country stuff, Miss Abbott."

"What gave you the idea my name was Abbott?"

"Didn't think it was," Pete smiled. "Only I figured it started with A, and the only thing to do was go right through the alphabet until I struck the right name."

"Persistent, aren't you?" The girl's smile matched Pete's. "I don't know that I'd want to wait around while you went through the alphabet."

"THERE'RE quicker methods," Pete suggested hopefully. "Course I could go on guessing, if you refuse to help me out. Let me see, there's Adams and Adair and Abercrombie and. . . . Say, your name wouldn't be Alexander, would it?" Mentally he congratulated himself on having gathered, previously, information regarding cattlemen in this district.

"It would . . . and is." The girl eyed him suspiciously. "How did you know?"

"Hit on it by chance, that's all, Miss Alexander," Pete said blandly. "Let's see, C Bar A. Of course, the C would stand for your father's name."

"It would. And mine as well—"

"Caroline, Catherine, Cecilia, Cathleen . . . ring a bell when I make a bull's-eye, will you? . . . Chloe, Clara, Clarabel, Clementine, Constance, Cora, Cynthia—" Pete paused to catch his breath.

"You seem to be much better acquainted with girls' names than surnames," Miss Alexander interposed. "It smacks of a wide experience, Mr. Piper."

"Pure chance," Pete said glibly. "When I was a monitor in school I had charge of the C records. Let's see, there's Carmen, Camilla, Carlotta, Clarissa—"

"It must have been a school for girls," Miss Alexander put in. "I'll reward your curiosity because you'd never guess it in a hundred years. It's Cressida—"

"Cressida! Wait! Shakespeare wrote a book about a girl named Cressida. She was a beautiful Trojan girl. Lady you're well named. Bet your friends call you Cressy, though."

"They do," the girl admitted, laughing.

"Cressy Alexander," Pete said dreamily. "It all fits."

"What does?"

"Had my fortune told a spell back," Pete explained, chewing vigorously on potatoes and steak, to avoid the girl's gaze. "This fortuneteller allowed as I'd shortly meet up with a beautiful maiden who was quitting her job in a restaurant and that I would accompany her home the night she left. Can you imagine anyone hitting it right on the nose that way?"

"I certainly can't," Cressy said flatly. "Go back and tell your fortuneteller he . . . or she . . . has made a very bad guess."

"Aw, Cressy!" Pete protested.

"I said my *friends* called me Cressy. You haven't been here long enough—"

"I'm never going to leave, though. Look, can you imagine me living here the rest of my days and going around with a long white beard when I'm an old man and meeting you on the street and saying: 'Good morning, Miss Alexander? No, you can't! Anyway, by that time you'd be 'Mrs.' In fact, I don't know what's wrong with a town that lets you stay 'Miss.' And I always thought the only pretty girls in Western towns were the school-ma'ams."

"Probably an idea you picked up when you were a monitor in school," Cressy said dryly.

"But you won't let me see you home tonight?"

"I certainly won't."

"How is it women have such hard hearts?" Pete said in melancholy tones. "There's nothing so discouraging—"

He had no time to say more. A couple of men customers entered and

found stools farther along the counter. Cressy served them. Apparently they were friends, for the girl stood talking to them and answering questions relative to the C Bar A Ranch.

Pete finished his dinner in silence. He had no further opportunity to talk to the girl until it came time to pay for his meal, and one of the customers called her away an instant later.

Pete rose from his stool and started toward the door, vowing he'd manage to see Cressy Alexander soon again. The girl had just finished setting second cups of coffee before her customers and was gazing after Pete's broad shoulders as he moved toward the restaurant door. Suddenly, she noticed for the first time the red quilt dangling from his left wrist. For an instant the color left her cheeks, then her lips compressed firmly, parted again.

"Mr. Piper! Pete!" she called. "Wait a moment, please!"

CHAPTER V

"GET THAT QUILT!"

TURK RAVEN'S saloon didn't have a bad name, though it was the sort of place that didn't get the better class of business in Beauregard City. Traxler's Diamond T men brought Raven their custom, which fact might have confirmed certain suspicions in Sheriff Perkins' mind. Aside from the Diamond T, no one brought his trade regularly to Raven. Transients stopped on the way through and occasionally cowboys from other ranches dropped in for a drink if they happened to be in the vicinity of the saloon and the weather was too hot to walk another block or cross the street to the hotel bar, which charged a nickel

extra on all drinks except beer.

At the present moment Raven himself was behind the bar, serving eight or ten customers on the opposite side of the mahogany. The saloon owner was a small man with oily features, furtive eyes and slicked-down black hair. His saloon was typical of its kind: a long bar; a few tables and chairs; pictures of race horses, burlesque actresses and prize fighters on its walls. Light entered, during the daytime, through a window at the rear, and above and below the head-high swinging doors at the entrance.

Foremost among the customers at the bar was Black Nick Traxler, a swarthy-complexioned individual with beady black eyes, thin lips and high cheekbones. Well-built, with wide shoulders and narrow hips, he wore a black sateen shirt and Oregon breeches tucked into boot tops. A roll-brim sombrero was shoved back on a head of curling ebony locks. He carried a well-worn six-shooter low on his right thigh. There was a certain animal magnetism about the man; when he turned at the bar to request another drink from Turk Raven, his voice was soft with a definite purring tone.

With Traxler were three of his men, Nevada Norton, Canary Sloan and Ducky Drake. Drake, dressed in puncher togs, was of medium height, with a barrellike torso. Canary Sloan had yellow hair and a chirping voice. In addition, Canary prided himself on singing sentimental songs in a wheezy tenor; he was the only man in town who took any pride in such an accomplishment.

Nevada Norton was the most important of the three. He possessed a reputation as a two-gun man, though he was packing only one weapon at present, the butt of which

carried several notches. Nevada was thin to the point of emaciation; his eyes were pale blue. He claimed to be a cowpuncher, but no one, not even his employer, had ever witnessed his engagement in such work. There were rumors of bank robbery and stage holdups attached to his name, but that was something else on which Sheriff Perkins had been unable to get proof.

The remaining customers were a miscellaneous lot: A puncher from the Ladder D Ranch, another one from the Rafter H, a whiskey salesman who hoped to sell Turk Raven a bill of goods. The rest of the customers were citizens of Beauregard.

THE Ladder D cowboy, who was known as Bucky Billings, had been the last to enter. He had his drink, then spoke to the room at large: "Anybody heard anything of a killin' over near Elephant Ridge?"

Nobody had, it appeared. Black Nick Traxler and Nevada Norton turned toward the speaker, but neither said anything.

"Where'd you hear that, Bucky?" Turk Raven asked.

"I saw Homer Pritchard and Doc Gillett leaving town in a wagon a spell back. Asked where they were heading, thinking they might be aimin' to pick up a corpse. Homer said a dead man had been found over near Elephant Ridge."

"Murdered, or natural demise?" asked the Rafter H puncher.

Billings shook his head. "You got me. Homer didn't have time to give details."

"Probably a killing. This climate is too good for anybody to die a natural death," Raven said with grim humor. "Any of you Diamond T hombres settled any old scores lately?" He grinned oily.

Nick Traxler eyed Raven coldly. "That," he stated, "is distinctly not funny, Turk." The quiet words seemed to carry a threat.

"Sure, sure, Nick," Raven said quickly. "I didn't mean anything. You know me." His face had turned pale.

"Yes, I know you," Traxler said flatly.

Silence fell over the room for a few moments, broken only by the clink of bottles against glasses. Then Traxler said: "Let me have a cigar, Turk."

Raven quickly reached to his back bar and shoved a box across to Traxler. The latter reached in, drew out a long, thin, black cigar, bit off one end and scratched a match. He blew out a long puff of gray smoke, then said in frigid accents: "I don't know why it is, but every time there's any crime, hereabouts, somebody mentions the Diamond T. I don't like it."

Nevada Norton nodded. "There's only one way to shut up hombres that run off at the head thataway. An ounce of lead in the right place would—"

"Hush up, Nevada," Traxler interrupted. "We're not doing any threatening of anybody. I was just stating a fact. There's a large number of people in Trabadura County, and the Diamond T makes only a mighty small percentage of that number. It's time folks looked other places besides the Diamond T."

"That's so, Nick," Bucky Billings agreed, a bit nervously. "Matter of fact, I saw a stranger ride up to the hotel, just as I was riding in to get the mail."

"What sort of a stranger?" asked Traxler.

Billings was vague. "Oh, I don't know. Redhead. Cow-country stuff,

judging from his legs which had been bronc-molded. Probably wouldn't have noticed him, a-tall, 'ceptin' for the quilt he toted."

"Is that so?" Traxler's eyes had narrowed a trifle. "What sort of a quilt was it?"

"Red. Bright red," Billings replied. "That's what caught my eye right—"

"Did you say this stranger was over to the hotel?" Norton said quickly.

"Will you shut up?" Traxler said sharply. "Nevada, there's no reason for us to be interested in this stranger, just because he has a red quilt. They're plentiful. I remember there was some talk about Hugh Alexander carrying one, before he was murdered. That was a dirty job. I just wish they could catch the hombre that did it."

HOOFs drummed in the street and stopped before the saloon. Running steps clumped across the sidewalk. A man burst abruptly into the barroom. He was slim and somewhat dandified in appearance. In many respects he resembled his brother, Black Nick Traxler, though his characteristics were weak, mentally and physically, where Nick's were strong. He wore a ring on either hand; and there was a beaded Indian band about the crown of his fawn-colored sombrero. His six-shooter, in its hand-tooled holster, had mother-of-pearl stocks. The neckerchief at his throat was of bright-blue silk.

Nick Traxler spoke sharply. "What's up, Ivan?"

Ivan Traxler's face filled with relief at sight of his brother. "Jehoshaphat, I'm glad to find you here, Nick!" he panted. "I nigh killed a bronc—"

"Shut up!" Nick snapped. "Cool down before you start spilling things. Now, what's on your mind?"

He drew his brother off to one side of the room. Nevada Norton followed the two. Words tumbled frantically from Ivan Traxler's lips: "I rode clear to the ranch. You weren't there—"

"Dammit!" Nick Traxler snarled. "Don't talk so loud!"

Thus admonished, Ivan lowered his voice. A frown gathered on Nick's face while he listened. Nevada's features took on a bleak aspect. Finally Nick said disgustedly: "You're a couple of fools. Where's Luke now?"

"He stayed home. His head ached—"

"His head ached!" Nevada Norton grunted disgustedly. "Ain't that sad! Satan's suspenders! If he was my brother I'd make his head ache!"

"I ain't asking your advice, Nevada," Traxler said testily. He glanced toward Canary Sloan and Ducky Drake. "You boys better get along to the ranch, now." They nodded and left the barroom. Nick turned back to Ivan. "Hang it!" he growled. "I don't see how that red-head found it, when you two couldn't."

"It's a mystery to us," Ivan said earnestly. "I would have stayed and taken it away from him, but Luke insisted on leaving."

"Don't try to give me that," Traxler said harshly. "You're both yellow! But we've got to get that quirt. Ivan, that redhead is in town, now, some place. You go locate him, then come back and tell me. Just do as I tell you. He was at the hotel. You can trace him from there. Now get going!"

Ivan Traxler turned and half ran through the swinging doors.

CHAPTER VI

"YOU'RE COVERED, REDHEAD!"

PETE had already emerged from the Busy Bee, when he heard Cressy Alexander call to him. He turned back as the girl quickly rounded the counter end and motioned him to wait where he was. She joined him outside, closing the door behind her.

"Change your mind about me seeing you home tonight?" Pete commenced. "That's might—" He stopped, noting her tense features and excited manner. "Why, what's up, Cressy?"

"Where did you get that red quirt?" the girl asked sharply.

Pete studied her agitated features in perplexity. "Why . . . what's wrong, Cressy?"

"That quirt! Where did you get it?"

"I . . . well, I found it. Why?"

"My brother owned one, exactly like it. He . . . it . . . well, it disappeared. May I examine yours?"

"Help yourself." Quietly Pete slipped the wrist loop over his hand and handed the quirt to the girl. Cressy examined it minutely, eagerly, then disappointment crept into her face.

"I'm sorry, Pete," she said wearily. "I guess I just jumped to conclusions. You see, my brother had a habit of putting his initials on everything he owned. I'd hoped to find . . . well, when you said you found this quirt— It's all very foolish of me, isn't it?" She held the quirt out to him.

Pete slipped the red quirt back on his right wrist. "No, I don't know as it's foolish," he said slowly. "I don't think anything you'd do would be foolish. If you'd like to keep this— No, I'd better not say that. I'll have to keep it for a while."

Cressy smiled faintly. "I'd completely overlooked the fact there could be two quilts, both the same. I hoped that I could get the quilt that belonged to Hugh—"

WHILE they stood there, before the Busy Bee, Ivan Traxler had approached along the sidewalk. He had gone first to the hotel as his brother Nick had suggested. From the hotel clerk he had learned that the red-headed stranger was probably at the Busy Bee Restaurant. Not being any too anxious to contact Pete, Ivan had dropped into the hotel bar for a couple of drinks before proceeding farther, excusing his delayed search on the grounds that the dust from his long ride was affecting his throat, thus necessitating a thorough sluicing of that portion of his anatomy. Finally, he had reluctantly continued his journey to the Busy Bee, arriving there just as Cressy Alexander was returning the quilt to Pete. He heard Cressy say: "—and I hoped I could get the quilt that belonged to Hugh—"

Instantly Ivan jumped into the conversation. "Hi-yuh, Cressy! This stranger got a quilt you want?"

Cressy glanced around. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Traxler. No, this is nothing that concerns you," she said a little curtly.

"Maybe it does, though," Ivan persisted. "If you want that quilt, I reckon this stranger would be willing to sell it."

Pete had waited in silence. When Cressy made no attempt to introduce him, he judged that this Traxler wasn't popular with the girl. She merely repeated: "This doesn't concern you, at all."

"Anything that concerns you, concerns me," Traxler said, leering. "I admire your judgment, Cressy. It's a right nice quilt. If you don't want

it, I do. Maybe you'll change your mind, later. How about it, redhead? What you asking for your quilt?"

"It's not for sale," Pete said quietly.

"Might as well put a price on it," insisted Ivan. "What us Traxlers want, we get. Ain't that so, Cressy?"

"Miss Alexander to you, Mr. Traxler," the girl said shortly. "And please move on. This is none of your affair."

"Maybe I'll make it my affair." An ugly tone had crept into Ivan's voice.

"You heard Miss Alexander, Traxler," Pete said warningly. "Move on. Get! Vamoose!"

Traxler pushed between the girl and Pete. "I ain't leaving without that quilt. I plumb admire it. Either you put a price on it, redhead, or I'll take it away from you and set my own price. Now think fast! What you aimin' to do?"

"If you don't move on, Traxler," Pete said softly, "I'll *give* you this quilt . . . but it will remain in my hand when I do."

"Oh . . . salty hombre, ain't you?" Ivan sneered. Thrown off guard by Pete's quiet manner, he became overbold. "Confound it! Give me that quilt. I'm telling you—"

Without finishing his words he reached out one hand and tried to jerk the quilt from Pete's wrist. Involuntarily, Pete's left arm came up. It was the most natural thing in the world for his hand to knot into a fist—a fist that ended solidly on Ivan Traxler's jaw.

TRAXLER staggered back across the sidewalk, tripped on his own spurs and landed in a sprawling heap beneath the hitch rack at the edge of the roadway.

Behind him, Pete heard Cressy's sudden wail of distress: "Oh, Pete, now you're in for it! Those Traxlers will—"

"I'm not worrying about the whole Traxler crew," Pete said grimly. "Just as soon as this fellow regains a couple of his few senses, he's going to apologize for his language." He moved out toward the hitch rack.

Along the street ran cries of "Fight! Fight!" Men came running to gather into a crowd before the Busy Bee. Somebody yelled: "It's Ivan Traxler. Betcha there'll be some fur flying before long!"

By this time Ivan had grunted and slowly come to a sitting position. His eyes were vague, almost glassy. He shook his head violently, one hand tenderly fingering his jaw. Gradually his head cleared, and he raised an uncertain gaze to encounter Pete's grinning countenance.

A snarl of hate was torn from Ivan's throat as he scrambled up, right hand reaching to his six-shooter. Pete took one swift step forward. His left hand raised, flashed down, and the twin lashes of the crimson quirt slashed cruelly across Ivan's gun hand. With a sudden howl of rage, Ivan released the grip on his gun and staggered back against the hitch rack, both arms lifting in the air now. A sudden laugh went up from the men crowding around.

"I could have shot you, Traxler," Pete said quietly. "Just remember that, next time you reach for your shooting iron."

Ivan stood there, face white, blood

trickling from his slashed hand. "I . . . I—" he stammered, then swallowed hard.

Behind him, Pete heard Cressy's frightened warning: "Look out, Pete!"

Before he could turn, Pete felt something round and hard jabbed against his backbone. A cold voice said: "Raise 'em, feller. Nobody hits a Traxler and gets away with it. Raise 'em fast."

Pete stiffened, started to raise his arms. He felt the gun at his back move away. What happened next was too fast for Black Nick Traxler's comprehension. Pete's right arm came around fast as he whirled to face Traxler. The arm knocked Traxler's gun to one side and Traxler was spun half around, almost off balance. By the time he righted himself, Traxler found himself looking into Pete's gun muzzle. A sudden yell went up from the crowd!

"Better do some reaching yourself, mister," Pete drawled.

Nick Traxler's swarthy features went white with mingled astonishment and anger, then something of grudging admiration entered his face. He said quietly, almost too quietly, raising his arms in the air: "That was neat, hombre. But there's more to it than just this—"

Another voice snarled from Pete's rear: "Claw for the clouds, redhead. You're covered complete. And I'm out of reach of your tricky ways. Raise 'em, pronto!"

Nick Traxler laughed coldly. "I warned you, mister, there was more coming. Plug him, Nevada, if he moves even an eyelash!"

Who murdered the man in the rocking chair? Why are so many people interested in the red quirt? Has Pete got himself into more of a tight than he figured on? The mystery deepens in next week's gripping installment of THE CRIMSON QUIRT.

GUN-SMOKE RECKONING

by Philip Ketchum

TOM LOCKWOOD rode in through Panamint Canyon and then took a roundabout way toward Bristol so that there would be little danger of meeting anyone, and he timed his journey so that he wouldn't reach town until after dark. His father's house was on a side street. He drew up at the barn behind it, tied his horse there, walked through the yard and because the back of the house was dark, moved on around to the front door.

He was more excited than he was willing to admit. The realization

that he was home again and the sight of the house and yard, called up a score of childhood memories. The muscles of his throat thickened and a strange moisture came to his eyes.

He knocked on the door. This wasn't according to any old pattern. It had always been his way to burst into the house and slam the door after him, and he wondered if that wasn't what he ought to do now. But instead he knocked and then stood waiting on the porch, a rather unsteady grin on his lips.



The outlaw near the vault jerked around clawing at his gun as Tom fled twice. He heard the man scream, saw him clutching at his chest as he fell.

Mitch opened the door, peered out out at him and then stiffened, a tight, stern expression settling over his face. Mitch was heavier than he had been a year before when Tom had gone away. His hair was thinner and there were more lines on his face.

"You!" he gasped. "You! I—"

"The black sheep is back," Tom grinned. "Where're the folks, Mitch? I think this calls for a celebration or something."

Mitch backed away from the door and Tom moved on into the house. The smell of the place was as familiar as the worn carpet in the hall, as the heavy, red portière curtains which closed off the dining room.

"What do you want?" Mitch asked suddenly, and the words seemed to jump from his throat. "What do you want? Why have you come back?"

Tom Lockwood scowled. He was almost ten years younger than Mitch, but he was as tall as his brother and as broad-shouldered. There was a sharpness to his features that Mitch didn't have and his eyes were more clear and direct. He looked steadily at Mitch, not liking his brother's questions or tone of voice and showing it.

"Where are the folks?" he asked again.

"Dead!"

Tom straightened a little. That single word had hit him like a blow in the face.

"Dead. Both of them. Six months ago," Mitch said bluntly. "And if you ask me, Tom, it was what you did that was responsible for it. Dad and mother were never the same after you killed George Drake and then escaped from jail. They couldn't hold their heads up any more. They didn't have the

spirit to fight the bad colds that hit them last winter."

TOM moistened his lips. He thought of the paper in his pocket and of the long, hard road he had followed in order to get it and of what that paper would have meant to his folks. The bitterness in his brother's voice hardly touched him. He was too full, just then, of a bitterness of his own.

"What do you want?" Mitch asked again. "Money? If you do, I don't have any."

Tom leaned back against the railing of the stairway that led to the floor above. He looked straight at his brother, finally stirred to an angry resentment.

"It must have hurt you terribly, Mitch, when I was accused of the murder of George Drake," he said slowly. "It must have stabbed straight into the heart of your pride. Why couldn't you believe that I didn't kill Drake? Why couldn't you stand back of me like father did? Like mother? Like Laura Howard?"

Mitch shook his head. "I knew you better than father and mother, and Laura Howard was just a love-sick kid, crazy about you. I knew how irresponsible you were, how quick-tempered. I knew that you killed George Drake."

"But I didn't."

"I don't believe you."

"I have the proof in my pocket."

Mitch wiped a hand over his forehead. "Damn it, Tom. I'd like to believe you, but I still can't."

A woman's voice sounded from the floor above, calling: "Who is it, Mitch? Who's there?"

Mitch looked up the stairs. "Just . . . an old friend, Kerry. Don't bother to come down."

Tom stiffened. "Kerry?" he said.

"My wife, Tom. Kerry Randolph. We were married last winter. Let's see that proof you were talking about."

Tom's hand reached toward his pocket and then fell away. He was a little pale around the mouth. "So you married Kerry Randolph," he said slowly. "Kerry Randolph."

"What's so funny about that?"

"Nothing, only—" Tom's voice trailed off. He bit his lips.

"What about that proof?" Mitch asked stubbornly. "If I was wrong, Tom, I'll be willing to admit it. I'll do everything that I can to make up to you. Let's see what you've got."

Tom scowled. He shook his head. "Not yet, Mitch. There's . . . someone else I've got to show it to first."

Mitch was staring at him and Tom could see the disbelief come into his brother's eyes, could sense the stiffening of his brother's attitude.

"You don't have any proof," Mitch said suddenly. "I knew it, Tom. I wish you did, but—"

Tom jerked around and moved back to the door. He opened it and stepped out on the porch.

"They still want you, Tom," Mitch called after him. "Sam Howard would arrest you in a minute, and if Bill Drake saw you, he'd go for his guns. He's always sworn he would kill you for what you did to his father. Look here. I do have some money. If you want to clear out I'll be glad to give it to you."

Tom shook his head. "No thanks, Mitch."

"But look here—"

Mitch had come to the doorway and was still arguing, but Tom didn't wait to hear any more. He moved down the front walk and headed for town and his brother's voice faded out behind him.

BEHIND the Rainbow Saloon, Tom stopped. He looked gravely over at the window to the saloon's back room through which had come the shot that had ended George Drake's life. There was usually a poker game in that back room and on the night of George Drake's death, Tom had been sitting in that game and had had a row with Drake. Hotheaded and angry, he had struck at the man and when other players had separated them, Tom had sworn to carry on the fight later and had left and started home, circling around behind the saloon on his way.

He had heard the roar of a shot when he stood just about where he was standing now, had seen a vague shadow fleeing away, had hurried after the man he was sure had fired the shot and had caught a good glimpse of his face. He had even seen the killer toss his gun away and had picked it up to throw a shot after the man. But the murderer of George Drake had escaped while Tom, with a hot gun in his hand, had run full tilt into a crowd of men hurrying around from the main street.

His possession of the gun and the threat he had made had been enough to convict him, and his story of the man who had escaped had seemed a desperate attempt to cover himself. But Tom hadn't stayed in jail. He had managed an escape and for a year he had hunted for the man he had seen back of the Rainbow Saloon. A scarred chin had been his only clue to the man's identity, but that had been enough, and finally, in a dive in Nogales, he had shot it out with the murderer and had forced a confession from his lips as the man lay dying.

It wasn't the kind of confession Tom had expected, however, for it

had involved another man, too. The fellow with the scarred chin, Hondo Sears, had insisted that he had been hired to kill George Drake, and had written that in his confession. He had named the man who had hired him for the job and had told why this man had wanted Drake killed. John Randolph, the father of Kerry Randolph, the girl Tom's brother had married, was the man Sears had named.

Tom pulled the confession from his pocket, stared at it and then put it away. It was complete enough, he knew, to place the blame for Drake's death just where it belonged. It had been witnessed by Mexican officials in Nogales and an American customs' officer, and attached to it was a letter from Randolph to Hondo Sears, which, in the light of the confession, was completely damning.

A tight, thin smile came to Tom's lips. He wondered how Mitch would take it if he used this confession to clear his own name and to brand the father of Mitch's wife as a man who had bought a murder. Mitch, as far back as Tom could remember, had leaned over backward in all matters of personal honor. His sense of right and wrong was so strong that it almost warped his life. Nothing could wreck him any more than something which would cast a shadow on his wife's name.

Standing there, back of the saloon, Tom realized that he could never use this confession in his pocket. No matter how Mitch had failed him, how much Mitch might deserve it, Tom knew that he couldn't make public the papers he carried. Mitch wouldn't be strong enough to face it, to live it down, and Mitch was still his brother. But while he might have to destroy the confession, Tom could still have the

personal satisfaction of showing it to John Randolph and watching Randolph squirm. That much he owed to himself, to his own self-respect.

Tom nodded. He moved on through the darkness, parallel to the main street, and turned finally at the hotel corner and stopped on the walk across from the bank. Lights showed through the bank windows and on the glass pane, under the name, Bristol State Bank, was the name, John Randolph, president.

This was at the far end of the main street. The saloons, shops and restaurants which were still open were some distance away. Tom glanced up the street. There were people moving about up there, people whom he probably knew. He could catch the faint murmur of voices, the sound of an occasional laugh or cheerful greeting or farewell. A few saddled horses and several buggies and a wagon were on the street, and a storekeeper was carrying a load of supplies out to the wagon.

Tom frowned. He was suddenly hungry for the companionship of people he knew. There would be a crowd in the Rainbow Saloon, a crowd of men from the range. There would be talk of cattle prices and politics and water rights, and of the little individual problems men faced, the problems that made up their lives.

THE sound of footsteps on the boardwalk behind him was suddenly startling. Tom stiffened and turned his head. A man and a girl were coming up the walk, straight toward him. The man was short and heavy and somehow familiar. The girl was Laura Howard. Tom recognized her the minute he saw her. She seemed taller than he re-

membered her, more grown up, but her walk and the proud way she held her head were still the same.

He had no chance at all to back out of the way, to turn and avoid discovery. The man at Laura's side was already staring at him, and Laura's start of recognition had been almost as quick as his.

The man came to an abrupt stop. "You!" he called thickly. "Tom Lockwood!"

Tom knew the man, then. A cold chill ran over his frame and his brother's warning rang in his ears. He watched Bill Drake closely.

Drake took a step forward, both of his fists tightly clenched. "If I had a gun," he grated, "I'd shoot you down! I'd shoot you down just like I would a dog."

Tom moistened his lips. "It's too bad you haven't got a gun."

"I can get one . . . if you'll wait."

"Wait for the men you'd call, huh?"

"No. Wait for me."

Tom could read the hot anger in Drake's face. He was sure, suddenly, that Drake meant just what he said. He would call no one. He would just arm himself and come back, ready to shoot it out.

"All right," Tom agreed. "Go

and get your gun. I'll be waiting for you at the end of the bridge over Bristol creek."

"No!"

The cry came from Laura's throat. She hadn't said a word while Drake and Tom were talking. She had just stood there at Drake's side, rigid, a little pale. But now she reached out and caught Drake's arm and tried to hold him back.

Bill pulled away from her. "At the bridge over Bristol creek," he said grimly. "I'll be there."

He started back down the street, running.

Tom Lockwood wiped a hand over his face. He stared at Laura, wondering why it hurt him so just to look at her. A lovesick kid, Mitch had called her, but there couldn't have been any truth in that. He had been crazy about Laura, of course, but the affair had been all one-sided. She had never let him get serious. She had been just a friend and after his arrest she had stood back of him because she was too loyal to believe what her own good judgment must have told her was true.

"You're not going to meet him," Laura said abruptly. "Tom, you're not going to meet him."

Tom couldn't stand the look in



with meals...or snacks



her eyes. He stared at the ground, wondering if there was any possible truth in what Mitch had said, if Laura had really been in love with him, if she still believed in him. And because he knew that he could never come back here again, could never now clear his name, he could see only one possible course that he could follow.

"You're not going out there to meet him, Tom," the girl repeated. "You couldn't do a thing like that."

"Why not?" Tom asked flatly. "Why couldn't I?"

There was no answer from the girl. Tom looked up. Laura's eyes were wide, shocked. Her breath was coming fast.

"Why couldn't I?" Tom said again. "What do you really know about me, Laura? I reckon maybe you'd better go on home."

If he had slapped her, Laura could have shown no more astonishment. Her face lost all its color. She drew back from him, shuddered, then turned quickly and started hurrying away.

Tom's laughter was harsh and bitter. For a moment he wondered what would have happened if he had told Laura the truth, that he had proof of his innocence which he couldn't use and that he had no intention at all of meeting Bill Drake. Then he shoved all that out of his mind, stared over at the dim lights burning in the bank and at the name on the door, and started walking that way.

TOM started to knock on the bank's front door, then changed his mind and walked around to the side. The light in the building seemed to come from Randolph's office into which a side door opened. Tom tried the knob and found the

door unlocked. He was a little surprised, but he forgot all about that as he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Randolph was seated at his desk. He was a large man, broad-shouldered, bald. He looked over at Tom, scowling and said: "Where are the —" Then sudden recognition showed in his face and he bit off the rest of his sentence and came half to his feet.

"Good evening, Randolph," Tom said quietly. "Nice of you to leave the door open for me."

Randolph swallowed. He sank back in his chair and stared at Tom, a hint of fear showing in his round, dark eyes. "When . . . when did you get back?" he managed. "What do you want, Lockwood?"

As he spoke, the banker's eyes dropped to the gun holstered at Tom's side.

"Don't worry," Tom shrugged. "I just came here to talk to you, Randolph. To tell you a story and show you something."

"I— Can't you do it tomorrow? I'm busy. I—"

"This is something that can't wait." Tom leaned forward. "Randolph, do you remember Hondo Sears?"

The banker jerked as though he had been suddenly jabbed with a pin. He sucked in a long, shuddering breath.

"Hondo Sears is dead," Tom continued. "He died in a cantina in Nogales. He still had some of the money you had sent him in his pockets."

"That's a lie! A lie!" Randolph's voice was hoarse, desperate. The man was starting to perspire.

"No, Randolph. It wasn't a lie. Hondo died suddenly, but not so suddenly that he didn't have a

chance to talk. And he didn't just talk. He gave me the letter you wrote him and he signed a confession. A confession that told just how he killed George Drake and who had hired him for the job and why. It wasn't a very nice story. It was the story of two men who jointly owned most of the stock in a certain bank, of how one of the men gambled with the bank's funds and lost quite an amount of money, of how this was discovered by the other man who gave his partner a certain amount of time to sell his personal holdings and make good the shortage. Only you wouldn't do that. Instead you hired a gunman to murder George Drake. But you shouldn't have told the whole story to Hondo Sears. Didn't you know that he would only have used it to blackmail you in the future?"

Randolph was twisting his hands together. They were plump, soft hands, very well cared for. His face was haggard as he glanced nervously at the door through which Tom had entered. "I . . . I had to tell Sears why I wanted him," he muttered. "I— What do you want me to do, Lockwood?"

Tom Lockwood hardly heard the question. He was straining his ears to catch some sound from outside. Only a moment before he thought he had heard something. There was a window near the door and it was open several inches. Tom moved that way, closed the window and then moved back across the room.

"What do you want me to do, Lockwood?" the banker asked again.

Tom stared at the man. Right now, Randolph was completely broken. He looked a dozen years older than he had when Tom had come into the room. His body was sagging in the chair.

WS—3C

FOR a minute Tom just looked at the man, realizing that this was all the satisfaction he would ever get. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"What do I want you to do?" he repeated. "Nothing, Lockwood. Nothing except this: I want you to remember what I might have done and I want you to know that if you ever in your life do anything crooked again, I'll come after you even if I have to follow you to hell."

Randolph blinked his eyes. "You . . . you mean—"

"I mean this," Tom answered.

He took from his pocket the confession Sears had signed and the attached letter, glanced at them briefly and then tore them in half. He tore the papers again, stepped over and dropped them into the wastebasket at the side of the banker's desk and then moved back. "I'm probably a fool to think that this will mean much to you, Randolph," he said "but it will mean a lot to your daughter. It's for her that I'm doing this."

Randolph gulped. He wiped a hand over his face. "I— You may not believe it, Lockwood, but I would never have let you stay in jail for Drake's death. In some way I would have managed to get you out. I— If money will help you now—"

Tom shook his head. He turned toward the door.

"Wait, Lockwood! Wait!" Randolph called. "I . . . I've got to talk to you."

The man's voice was desperate. He was standing up again.

Tom stopped, turned and waited. "What is it, Randolph?"

"Come back and sit down. I . . . I want you to understand things better."

"What's the point in that now?"

Randolph was looking past Tom,

looking at the door. He came around the desk and, catching Tom's arm, pulled him toward a chair. He went on talking about how he would never have let Tom stay in jail but Tom got the impression that the banker was hardly aware of his own words, that he was only talking against time. Then he recalled that strangely unlocked side door and the sound he thought he had heard outside, and he remembered the way Randolph kept looking at the door.

"Sit down, Lockwood. Sit down," Randolph was insisting.

Tom shook his head but he backed over to the wall and leaned against it. Near him was a tall, wooden filing case. One step would bring him up against it and shield him from the door.

Randolph looked around toward the door. "Lockwood, I wish—" he said. And then he broke off, his whole body going rigid.

There was a sound at the door, the click of the latch as the knob turned. Tom stepped swiftly over to the filing case and crouched down. He drew his gun and held it so that it covered the banker.

"Hey, what the devil's the matter with you, Randolph?" called a gruff voice from the doorway. "Things are all set, aren't they?"

Randolph swallowed. He looked toward the door. "I . . . I—"

"He's just scared to death, Red. That's all," said another voice. "Come on, let's get this finished. Is that the vault over there?"

"Reckon it is," said the first man. "I'll tie Randolph up while you clean it out. We're supposed to make this look right."

Tom's hand tightened on his gun. If he had listened to an hour's discussion it couldn't have told him any more than these few words he

had heard. Once again, apparently, Randolph was in trouble, and to cover his own shortage, he had arranged this bank robbery, even to the point of leaving an open door for the outlaws. If there was five thousand dollars in the bank and they took it, and his own shortage was five thousand, he could claim that the robbers had taken ten thousand. The vault was open, but Randolph could insist that he had had it open to work on the records he kept there. The lock on the side door could be fixed so that it would look faulty and explain how the outlaws had managed to get in. Once more, just as when he had hired Hondo Sears, John Randolph was reaching for help to men who lived outside the law.

ONE of the men who had come into the bank moved into the range of Tom's vision as he headed for the vault and the other loomed up suddenly at Randolph's side. Tom straightened up. He didn't know either of these two men, but they were of Sears' type, hard-featured, sharp-eyed and dangerous. Tom's gun covered them and his voice, when he spoke, was edged with steel.

"Stand just where you are! All of you! And reach—"

He didn't get to finish that order, but he should have known that he wouldn't. The man near the vault jerked around, clawing at his gun. Tom fired at him twice. He heard the man scream, saw him clutching at his chest as he fell. Then he turned his gun on the other outlaw who stood near Randolph.

A cold, blinding rage showed in the face of this other man. He was screaming curses at Randolph, sure that Randolph had double-crossed him. His gun was out and before

Tom could get him, the man had pumped four bullets into Randolph's body. Too late, then, he jerked his gun toward Tom, but he didn't have a chance. Tom's bullet caught him in the throat.

As suddenly as that, the fight started and was over. Tom lowered his gun. Three men lay on the floor and all three were dead. He knew that, for he knew where his own shots had gone and he knew that Randolph couldn't possibly have survived the shots in his chest. Tom wiped a hand over his face. It came away moist with perspiration. He stepped forward, bent over John Randolph, and put his gun in the dead banker's hand.

"There," he said bitterly. "That'll make a hero of you, Randolph. You shot a couple bandits who tried to hold up the bank. You gave up your life to protect the money people had trusted you with. If there's any money missing from the vault, maybe there was a third bandit who got away. The town will honor you for what you did. Your daughter, Kerry, will cry a little, but she'll be proud. And Mitch will be proud of you, too."

There was no sound in the room as Tom finished speaking but from outside and up the street came cries of alarm. Tom moved quickly to the door. He opened it and stepped outside, knowing that he had to hurry, that pursuit would be swift. But from every side, it seemed, men were charging toward him. He lunged at those who were nearest, smashing out with his fists, fighting with all the force that he could summon. For a while he thought that he was going to get away, for he tore through that first ring of men and gained the alley and started running.

He never knew what it was that

tripped him, but something got in the way of his feet. A box, probably. He went down and before he could get up those who were following him had caught him. A heavy blow smashed down on his head and everything went black.

THE jail cell in which Tom Lockwood was held wasn't the one from which he had escaped. It was a cell in a new jail, and the thick iron bars over the window were set in concrete. The door was barred, too, and was double locked.

Sheriff Sam Howard brought Tom his breakfast the morning after his arrest and waited until he had eaten it before he spoke.

"What happened there in the bank, Tom?" he said then. "What's your story?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Couldn't you figure things out yourself?"

"The way it looks," the sheriff said slowly, "you an' two other fellows came in to hold up John Randolph, but Randolph pulled a gun. He got the two men who were with you, but one of 'em got him. You tried to run away, but we caught you."

"I guess that's it," Tom said flatly.

The sheriff scowled. "Maybe so, but there're two things I can't understand. First of all there's some money missin' from the vault. You didn't have it and we didn't find it anywhere around."

"Maybe there was a fourth man who got away," suggested Tom.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. An' here's the other thing I can't figure out: That gun Randolph was holdin' wasn't his own. I wonder where he got it."

Tom frowned. "It was mine. He grabbed it out of my holster an' started shooting."

Sam Howard's eyes were a mild blue. They looked searchingly at Tom, and Tom met the look squarely. After a moment the sheriff turned away.

Mitch came in later and talked to Sam through the barred door. Mitch seemed awfully pale and worried when the sheriff brought him to his brother's cell.

"I've hired the best lawyer in the State for you, Tom," he said slowly. "I . . . I don't know what he can do, but I want you to know I'm back of you. Back of you to the last cent I've got."

Tom was surprised. He had never expected anything like this. "Forget it, Mitch," he said gruffly.

"Forget it, hell!" Mitch answered. "You're my brother, aren't you?"

They talked a little more and then Mitch went away, but he left Tom feeling a whole lot better. A lawyer couldn't help him, he knew, but just the fact that Mitch had come to see him made him feel better. After all, underneath, Mitch was all right. From somewhere he had gained the strength to face the fact that his brother was an outlaw and a murderer. He might even have faced the truth about his wife's father, but that would have been harder because his future happiness depended more on his wife than on his brother.

THE day passed slowly and just at dusk Sam Howard came for Tom and led him into the front office. The blinds were all drawn and the lamp had been lighted and Laura was there. She was smiling and that struck Tom as strange.

"There's something there on the desk you might like to see, Tom," the sheriff suggested.

Tom moved up to the desk. He stared at the papers lying there and

then caught his breath. The sheriff had found Hondo Sears' confession and had pasted the pieces together.

"The other night after my daughter left you," Howard went on, "she turned back, saw you go in the bank an' crossed over that way. A window was open an' she heard all that you an' Randolph had to say. When you shut the window she hurried to find me an' I reckon it was while she was gone that those two bandits walked in. You asked me this mornin' if I couldn't figure things out. I can, Tom. You're the man who killed those bandits. They had come there to stage a robbery Randolph thought was necessary to hide the fact that about half of the bank's money was mysteriously missing."

Tom straightened up. "No. You're wrong. That confession on the table is a lie."

"And Kerry, Randolph's daughter, is your brother's wife."

"That has nothing to do with it."

The sheriff looked over at his daughter. "What'll we do with him?" he asked. "He's as stubborn as a mule. Maybe he likes it in jail."

Laura's eyes were like stars. Her face was flushed. "You can't have any doubts about him any more, father," she said softly. "He's all that I said he was, isn't he?"

Sam Howard grunted. He said: "Sure, Laura, but what can I do? I know what I know, but if he calls it a lie, I'm stumped."

Tom's face was very hot. He didn't know what to say, what he could say. Then his eyes fell again on the confession on the desk. He picked it up and jerked toward the door. Howard made no attempt to stop him, even stepped back to get out of his way.

There was a saddled horse in front of the jail and the jail was set far

back from the main street. No one was in sight. Tom swung aboard the horse, jabbed it to a gallop and rode north. Howard was letting him escape. He knew that and regretted what the sheriff would have to face when the escape became known. But Tom had started out now and there was nothing to do but ride on. And, after all, flight was the only course left open to him.

Tom hadn't expected any pursuit at all, but he was hardly clear of the town before he heard someone tearing after him and looking around he made out a mounted figure close behind, a figure too slender to be that of the sheriff. After a minute he pulled up and in another minute, Laura had joined him. Her hair had come down and in the faint half light from the sky, she looked beautiful.

"I was afraid you wouldn't wait," she told him. "Where are we going?"

"We!" Tom asked.

The girl nodded. "Do you think I'd let you run off from me a sec-

ond time, Tom Lockwood? If you do you're badly mistaken."

Tom bit his lips. "It's no life for a girl, the life that's facing me. I—"

"The West is big, Tom. There's a place for us somewhere."

"What'll your father do?"

"Why, I guess he'll first have to saw out the bars of your cell so it'll look like a real escape. Then I guess maybe he'll explain that I've gone to visit an aunt somewhere, and later on he'll probably announce that I went and got married." Her voice was low as she said: "We are going to get married, aren't we, Tom?"

All the strain that Tom Lockwood had been feeling slid away from him. He reached out his arms to Laura. There might be trouble ahead, he knew, but he wasn't much worried about it. With a girl like Laura a man would have more than a wife. He'd have a partner.

"Sure we're going to get married," he agreed. "I guess I couldn't get out of it if I wanted to."

Laura shook her head. "And you'd better not want to."

THE END

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RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

During a *fiesta*, a great event among the young bloods of the early California Spanish gentry was called *correr el gallo*—the cock race. A gamecock was tied by the legs to a stake driven into the ground. At a distance a group of eager horsemen awaited the starter's signal. When it was given, the group raced down upon the



imprisoned fowl whose dodging, darting head and neck furnish an elusive mark for reaching hands, as horsemen bent low from the saddles of their racing horses. Although the Californian was numbered among the world's best horsemen, capturing the chicken was no mean feat, and the successful rider was awarded the honor of being *muy caballero*.

A description of the pioneer West would be incomplete without the mention of the Chinese—John Chinaman, or Chink, to all Westerners. Almost every cow town or mining camp had its Chi-



nese restaurants and laundries, and inscrutable, pig-tailed Celestials performed much of the housework in the womanless country. The Chinamen's virtues were many, but above all, he was honest and faithful. While they never worked underground as hard-rock miners, the Chi-

nese were known as skilled placer workers. After a placer field was completely exhausted, as judged by the American placer man's standards, the Chinese would take over the "leavings," work the ground for years, and sometimes amass snug fortunes, due to their standards of living which permitted them to save any amount earned above a few pennies a day. The name "Chink" probably came from the pidgin English "chin-chin," a corruption of the Chinese *ching-ching*, which meant "to salute or greet ceremoniously."

The wagon masters in charge of the great wagon trains that swept across the wilderness during the gold rush days of '49, were extremely exacting in maneuvering wagons into formation for encampment. A



corralling train was an impressive sight to behold, and was done with armylike precision. The wagons traveled four abreast; when corralling, the two outside columns circled a required distance, until the lead wagons of the circling columns met. Each wagon that followed closed up on the one ahead, locking its inside front wheels with the outside rear wheels of the wagon in front. This maneuver placed the teams on the outside. Then all animals were driven into the inclosure, if Indians were in the vicinity. A strong caravan had little to fear from Indians, once it was maneuvered into this corral formation.

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.

MEDICO MIRACLE

by Wayne D. Overholser

WHEN young Doc Mack Hinson came out of his office that cloudy, September afternoon, and saw that he was going to meet Kurt Rayburn, he had an impulse to turn down the side street. He hated Rayburn, and Rayburn hated him. Then the medico's shoulders straightened. He had never dodged an issue in his life, and he didn't dodge this one. He kept straight on toward the post office. As he passed Rayburn he nodded, and said coolly: "Morning, Rayburn."

The cattleman nodded back, and his tone was as cool as Hinson's as he said, "Good mawnin'," in the slow drawl that was his.

Hinson passed on and went into the post office, his cheeks a dull red with the anger that the sight of Rayburn had raised in him. He mailed his letter, went back to his office, and sat down to wait for the call that wouldn't come. No, the business Doc Mack Hinson would get in Sharpsville, or in Owyhee County for that matter, wouldn't keep a humming bird alive, and Hinson's appetite had always been good.

Kurt Rayburn was to blame for it. Staring at the bag on his desk, the half-filled whiskey bottle and the long-barreled Colt beside it, Hinson let his mind take the full impact of the hatred he felt for Kurt Rayburn.

It had started two months ago when Hinson had been in Sharpsville a little over a week. He had just returned from attending a typhoid case in what the folks of Owyhee County called The Hole. It was four miles from Sharpsville the way the



Sliding down into what seemed like a bottomless abyss, Doc Hinson realized he was likely to reach his patient dead.

crow flies, but to get there a crow would have to fly over Three Hell Canyon, and that was something no medico could do. The canyon was more than one hundred feet deep, a sheer rock wall on each side, and White Devil River in the bottom, a foam-frothed torrent of a stream. To get to The Hole, Hinson had been forced to follow the old wagon road forty miles downstream to where the canyon walls were less precipitous. A narrow trail went down to the bottom in switchbacks, and up the other side.

Mack Hinson had traveled eighty miles to get four, and another eighty miles back, and when he rode into Sharpsville he was hot, dusty, tired, and angry. He had stomped into the Pastime Saloon, splashed a drink into a glass, and drank it down fast. He had pounded the bar with his fist, and glared at the apron, Frosty Blue.

"We call this a modern age," Hinson had thundered. "Trains. Phonographs. Electric lights. Telephones. But there's one thing that's hell sure: Owyhee County isn't living in no modern age. Folks over there in The Hole are in Owyhee County, four miles from the county seat, but you've got to travel twenty times that distance to get there. Why hasn't a bridge been built over Three Hell Canyon?"

NOBODY had answered Hinson's outburst. Frosty Blue hastily began to wipe glasses. Only a sultry silence followed the medico's words. The sort of silence, as Frosty said afterward, you could slice with a knife and lay on the bar, one tier on top of another. Hinson hadn't been in Sharpsville long enough to know Owyhee County politics, and it probably wouldn't have made any difference if he had. Mack Hinson was the kind of man to talk his mind

when and where he wanted to.

"Well, why doesn't somebody answer me?" Hinson bellowed.

Still no one spoke, nor did anyone until Kurt Rayburn set his beer on the bar and walked up to Hinson.

"You're new here, doc," he said tolerantly, "and you're young. After you're here a spell, you'll know why we don't have a bridge over Three Hell Canyon."

Hinson eyed Rayburn from the brim of his expensive tan Stetson to the toes of his equally expensive high-heeled black boots. He was an average-sized man, this Kurt Rayburn, with a square chin and a pair of gray eyes that he never let show the feelings that were in him. He was the power in Owyhee County. He owned the southern half of the county, and the rest of it, including the town of Sharpsville, was run in accordance with his desires.

At the time Hinson didn't know all this, but he did sense the indefinable something that set Kurt Rayburn apart in the crowded saloon. No matter where he was or how he was clothed, Rayburn had a way of looking like a leader of men.

"It doesn't make any difference how young I am," Hinson said doggedly, "or how new. Any fool can see what a bridge over Three Hell Canyon would do for the folks in The Hole. They have to pay taxes, and what do they get from the county? Not a damned thing. There'll be a day when an emergency call will come for me or some other medico, and somebody'll die because it takes all day to get there."

Still Rayburn didn't appear ruffled. "It would take a lot of tax money to build a bridge over Three Hell Canyon. Nobody lives over there but a few families of nesters. It's a hang out for long riders who hole up there when it's too hot for

them outside. We don't have anything to do with them, and they have nothing to do with us except when they need a sawbones."

Then Hinson exploded, and what he said was to put him apart from the folks of Owyhee County as definitely as if he'd built a cabin in the bottom of Three Hell Canyon and stayed there.

"I get it," he said tightly. "It boils down to a matter of hard cash. You don't want to pay any more tax money than you can help, so you and the rest of the county fathers turn thumbs down on something that should have been done years ago. You're so damned stingy, Rayburn, you won't let that bridge be built, but let me tell you this: If somebody dies in The Hole because I can't get there quick enough, you can take the blame for that death when you face the devil in hell."

Rayburn heard him through, and when Hinson stopped, there was no sound but the heavy intake of men's breaths. Never, in the memory of anyone in the saloon, had Kurt Rayburn been talked to like this. But, when Rayburn spoke, there was no sign of the black anger within him but two little red spots high on his cheeks.

"It would be well, Hinson, if you'd take the evening stage out of Sharpsville. From now on there will be very little business for you in Owyhee County."

Rayburn turned, and walked back to where he had been standing. Hinson stared after him, took another drink, paid for his liquor, and walked out.

HINSON hadn't taken the evening stage. Most of the two months since then he'd sat here behind his desk, just as he was now,

staring at his bag, the long-barreled Colt and the ever-present bottle of whiskey that was empty more times than it was full.

It wasn't that Owyhee County didn't need him. There was only one other medico in Sharpsville, an old man who'd told Hinson he hoped he could retire, and spend his time running the drugstore which he owned. But old Doc Baker hadn't retired. Every day Hinson saw him making his calls, or driving down Sharpsville's main street in his buggy, heading for the country.

Once when Hinson had dropped into the drugstore, the old doctor had said: "You're a damned fool, Hinson. Everything was set for you here till you talked back to Kurt Rayburn."

"I didn't tell Rayburn anything that wasn't true," Hinson said hotly.

"That might be." Baker shook his head. "The thing is that you made an enemy out of Kurt Rayburn, and Kurt don't forget. He's just made that way. He owns a dozen ranches, stretched all the way from Black Butte clean down to the Nevada line. Nobody does anything around here without knowing it's all right with Kurt. When he sends out the word that you're poison, you're just naturally poison, that's all."

Every passing day told Hinson that the old doctor had spoken the truth. Folks had suffered, and some had died who might have been saved if they'd had a doctor, but Mack Hinson hadn't been called except for a couple trips into The Hole, and one into the Songbird Mountains near the head of White Devil River to attend a sheepherder who had a case of ptomaine poisoning.

That was the way it stood on this September afternoon when a Rafter L puncher thundered into town from the direction of Three

Hell Canyon, and jerked his lathered bronc to a stop in front of Hinson's office.

"Hey, doc," the puncher bawled, "they want you over in The Hole. Old Mike Lufkin's got an appendix that's about to pop. His boy Sid says he ain't gonna live if you don't get there."

Hinson knew about Mike Lufkin. The old fellow's appendix had been bothering him for a long time. Mike would die if his appendix broke, and the chances were ten to one that there wouldn't be time for the long, eighty-mile ride into The Hole.

Hinson came out of the office. "How did you hear about Mike?" he asked the puncher.

"I was riding along this side of Three Hell Canyon, and I saw Sid on The Hole side, jumping up and down, and shooting into the air like he was loco. I yelled across at him, and asked him with what was biting him. He said to get you and tell you to come like hell. He said he'd stay there till I came back and told him you'd start."

THERE was an idea in Hinson's mind as he eyed the puncher. The idea had come to him weeks ago as he'd sat staring blankly at the four walls of his room. It might show stubborn Kurt Rayburn and the rest of Owyhee County how much that bridge was needed. This was the time to try it.

"I'd be too late if I rode eighty miles to get to Mike," he said tersely. "I'm going to cross the canyon. Get two or three boys to help, will you, Todd?"

"You can't git across Three Hell Canyon!" the puncher shouted. "It ain't never been done."

"It's gonna be done now," Hinson said. "You can let me down with

ropes on this side, and Sid can pull me up on the other."

Todd shook his head. "Sure, I'll get some boys to help, but you're loco to try it, doc . . . just plain loco."

"All right," Hinson said patiently, "I'm loco. Get some help, and round up a bronc for me."

Hinson went back into his office and packed his bag. Maybe he was crazy, but he wasn't far from crazy just sitting here, hating Kurt Rayburn. A man might as well die as to sit and rot. Of course he might have pulled out of Sharpsville as Rayburn had suggested, but that wasn't Mack Hinson's way.

In less than five minutes a half dozen horsemen were gathered in front of Hinson's office, the Rafter L puncher leading a livery stable bronc. Without a word, Hinson climbed into the hull, and they headed for the canyon. Nobody spoke during the short ride, but Hinson felt the men's eyes upon him, and he smiled a little to himself. He knew what they were thinking. Well, he told himself, if he killed himself, they'd know he was loco, and if he didn't, he'd be a hero. But Mack Hinson wasn't fooling himself on his chances of coming out of this a hero.

Sid Lufkin was still on the other side. It was late afternoon now, and the heavy banks of clouds made the light thin. At first he didn't see Hinson as the cavalcade rode up to the rim of the canyon. "Hey, Todd," he yelled, "did you get him?" Then Hinson stepped into view from behind one of the horses, and young Lufkin saw him. "Doc, why ain't you started," he screamed frantically. "Pap's in mighty bad shape."

"I am started," Hinson yelled back. "I'm coming across. You get enough rope to reach the bottom,

and when I give it a jerk, pull me up."

For a moment Sid Lufkin sat his saddle staring across the chasm as the medico's words soaked into his amazed brain. "Doc, don't try it. No use killing yourself. Pap wouldn't want you to do that."

"You get enough stout rope and tie some knots that won't come loose when I'm halfway up, and I won't kill myself. Get a move on now."

Young Lufkin whirled his horse and headed for his house on a dead run.

While the doctor had been shouting at Sid, Todd and the rest of the men with him had been tying their ropes together.

"You got two things in your favor, doc," Todd was saying. "The river's so low I reckon you can wade across it, and you ain't a big man. It's purty tough pulling a dead weight up a cliff that size, but that roan of Sid's is a big walloper, and I reckon he might do it."

Hinson tied his bag around his neck, and let it rest against his back. Todd looped the rope around Hinson's body, and tied it under his arms. He placed another rope in the medico's hands.

"We'll get you down all right," he said, "but Sid'll have the devil of a time pulling you up. If you get stuck, and want to come back up, give this other rope a jerk."

"Tell Rayburn Owyhee County still needs a bridge here," Hinson said ironically. "Let her go, boys," he called and slid off into what seemed a bottomless abyss.

Down, foot by foot, as the men above slowly played the rope out. The walls of the canyon closed over him until only a slit of cloud-gray sky showed above. It seemed an eternity, hanging there with only black emptiness below him. Some-

times Hinson had to kick his body away from the cliff as he brushed against a ledge of rock. He tried not to let himself think of what would happen if one of those knife-like edges sawed through that tightly drawn rope.

THEN the boulders of the canyon floor were under Hinson's feet, and the medico stripped the rope from him. Stepping into the foam-laced water, he braced himself against the tug of the swift current. As Todd had said, the river was low. Crossing it would have been impossible if it had been a foot higher. Even low as it was, it was touch and go a time or two with Hinson wondering if he were going to have his feet swept out from under him. Somehow he kept his footing, and waded into the slow-moving water of the other side. Then he stepped up on a narrow ledge, wrung what water he could from his pants legs, and waited.

There was nothing to do in those long moments that he waited in the eerie gloom of the canyon depth, nothing but to lean against the rock wall and give his hatred of Kurt Rayburn full play. Even a foot bridge swung from two cables would have removed the necessity of the risks Mack Hinson was taking.

Then Hinson glimpsed the rope Sid Lufkin was dropping for him. It was a little upstream, and Hinson moved up the ledge and caught it. He tied it under his armpits as Todd had done before, gave the rope a jerk and felt it tighten. Then he was being pulled upward on the last half of his fantastic and perilous journey.

As long as Mack Hinson lived, he was never to forget those agelong moments that it took Sid Lufkin to pull him to the top. A thousand times he swore this was something

he'd never do again. Twice his breath stopped when he saw a sharp edge of rock bite into the rope before he could swing himself clear. Then the sky was opening above him. Seconds later he was scrambling up and over the last slope.

Hinson heard Todd and the others cheer as his body showed above the rim. He waved to them, and jerked off the rope. Sid had brought another mount from the ranch. Hinson stepped into the saddle as Sid turned his roan and galloped back to the rim.

"By thunder," Sid said hoarsely, "I was sure afeared you wasn't goin' to make it, doc!"

The middle of Hinson's body felt as if it were crushed. Every muscle he had was bruised and sore. A dozen scratches had brought blood on his face and hands, but he didn't let Sid know how he felt.

"I'll get on to the house," he said, and put his horse to a gallop.

Sid had told his mother what Hinson was doing, and she was profuse in her thanks for this impossible thing he had done.

"I'm here now," Hinson said briefly. "I'd like to clean up, and get at the job I'm here for. Have Sid come in as soon as he gets here. I'll need your help, too. Have plenty of hot water and clean clothes."

The light was thin now, and it was beginning to rain. Hinson operated by the light of the kerosene lamp held in Sid's hands, and when it was over he fell into bed and slept the sleep of a man utterly exhausted. He stayed three days until he felt that Mike Lufkin was out of danger. When he was ready to leave, Mike held out a skinny hand.

"I don't know how I'll ever pay you, doc," he whispered.

"Forget it," Hinson grinned.

"Doc, I want you to know that

I've got some idea what you went through to get here. 'Tain't many sawbones that would do that just to save an old has-been like me."

"Maybe it won't be necessary again if we ever get that bridge over the canyon."

"If we ever do," Lufkin said glumly. "Persuading Kurt Rayburn to loosen up Owyhee County's purse strings is next to impossible."

"If it's only next to impossible," Sid put in, "I reckon it can be done. I'd have said doc coming over was impossible, but by hokey he did it."

Hinson turned away quickly to hide the twitching of his mouth. Whatever risks he had taken were well repaid by the way these simple folks regarded him. Ever since Mack Hinson had been a boy, he had felt a driving urge to be a doctor, to make sick people well. That urge had almost died under the boycott Kurt Rayburn had put upon him. Now it was born again, and with it was a resolve that he'd go back and keep on fighting.

"I guess I'd better hit the trail," he said.

"Take that roan of Sid's," Lufkin ordered. "Leave him in the stable in Sharpsville. Sid'll get him one of these days."

IT was close to midnight when Hinson turned the roan over to the hostler. He stepped into the Pastime for a drink, and found it empty. Frosty Blue poured his drink, and stared at the medico admiringly.

"You're a marked man now, doc," Frosty said. "Took a lot of guts to do what you did."

Hinson stared down at the liquor. "I'm hoping it'll change people's minds about that bridge," he said slowly.

"It's changed a lot of minds," admitted Frosty.

"But not Rayburn's, I suppose."

"Kurt's powerful stubborn, and right now he's got plenty of trouble of his own."

"What trouble?"

"I reckon you ain't had a chance to hear," Frosty said. "Last night a gang of long riders hit Rayburn's Pothook spread like they was making a play for that bunch of palominos he's so proud of. While the shooting was going on, one of the hellers sneaked into the house and got away with Kurt's kid. They left a note saying they wanted twenty-five thousand dollars. The whole country's been out looking for the kid all day, but the last I heard they hadn't found him. Kurt's a damned fool. He won't get that boy back alive if he don't look out."

Hinson stared at Frosty. It didn't seem possible that a big man like Kurt Rayburn would be on the receiving end of anything like this. Hinson had seen Rayburn's boy, Benny. A blond-haired eight-year-old that Kurt Rayburn worshiped.

"I always thought he'd do anything for the boy," Hinson said.

"Yeah." Frosty nodded. "So did the rest of us, but Kurt figures he wouldn't get the kid alive if he did pay, so he's got his hands and everybody else that can ride out looking."

Hinson had another drink and walked across the street to his office. He slept in the back room. Right now he felt as if he needed sleep more than anything else in the world. He opened the door, stepped inside, and as he fumbled for a match, a voice cut through the darkness:

"Easy, doc. Don't make no light."

Hinson's eyes searched the darkness. He could make out the vague shadows of two men. There was just enough light from the street to catch the outline of the guns in their hands.

"What's the deal?" he asked.

"You're coming with us. We've got the Rayburn kid, and he's hurt. Likewise a couple of our men. We need you bad. Come quiet like, and you'll be all right."

"I won't argue," Hinson said. "Wait till I get my slicker."

"It ain't raining."

"It rained three days ago." Hinson remembered he'd left his Colt on the top of his desk, and he fumbled for the gun as he talked. "If I've got a kid and two men to work on, I may be gone a long time."

"Yeah, you might be," the outlaw said dryly, "and if you're hunting around for your hog leg, you're wasting your time. I've took care of that already."

There was nothing to do then but obey orders. Hinson went ahead of the outlaws around the little office building, down the alley, and mounted the extra bronc they had brought with them. They followed a side street out of town, and kept off the road as they headed north toward the canyon-shredded Songbird Mountains. It was an ironic situation, Hinson thought. Kurt Rayburn had ruined him as far as his medical practice in Owyhee County was concerned, and now he was being kidnaped to doctor Rayburn's boy.

HINSON had little notion of the time or the distance they were covering as they sloged through the mud the recent rain had left. They climbed out of the sagebrush and into the pines. It was about an hour after the first gray of dawn had come that they turned into a cluster of jack pines and Hinson saw the log cabin that lay close against the canyon wall.

The man who had done the talking back in Hinson's office was

plainly the leader. A tall, dour-visaged man, he had spoken hardly a dozen words since they'd left Sharpsville. Now he said: "Take the brones, Curly. This is it, doc. Just remember this: Do right by us, and you'll get paid and you won't get hurt. Try pulling a sandy, and you'll get a slug where it hurts. Savvy?"

Hinson took his bag from where it had been tied behind the saddle, and nodded. The tall man opened the door and Hinson went in.

The cabin had one big room. A fireplace was at one end. There was a table, a half dozen rawhide bottom chairs, and some bunks built against the wall. A buck-toothed man was sitting in front of the fireplace, a Winchester across his knees.

"Any visitors?" the tall man asked.

"Nary a one, Slim," answered the buck-toothed outlaw. "Better let the doc get busy. Sawtelle's in bad shape."

"If it's a bullet wound, I'll need hot water," Hinson told them, "and bandages."

"Luke will get 'em," Slim said. "Over here, doc."

Hinson followed Slim toward the bunks, and saw that three of them were occupied. One had Rayburn's boy, Benny, in it. The boy's left arm was in a bloody sling. Anger burned hotly through Mack Hinson when he saw that. He had more respect for a train robber or a horse thief than he did for men who tried to make their haul from a helpless kid.

"Better get at Sawtelle first," Slim said.

The outlaw Slim called Sawtelle was a chunky man with a death pallor on his face. Hinson threw back the blanket and made a quick examination. The outlaw had a bul-

let wound in his chest. The slug had split and made two holes in his back where the pieces of lead had come through.

Hinson worked for an hour, cleaning and dressing Sawtelle's wounds. Turning to the second wounded outlaw, he found that the man had an ugly bullet tear in his thigh. He cleaned and dressed it, and turned to Benny.

"Let's have a look at that arm, son," he said.

Benny tried to grin. "'Tain't bad, doc. That Slim gent there got me out of the house and some of the Pothook boys shot a little too straight. Reckon they didn't know Slim had me."

The bullet had laid the boy's left arm open just above the wrist. It wasn't a bad wound, but it already showed signs of infection. Hinson fixed it up the best he could.

"You better get some sleep, Benny," he said then.

"Sure, doc." The boy nodded.

Hinson walked to the fireplace to where Slim and the buck-toothed man were sitting. He said: "The boy's in worse shape than you figured. It isn't a bad wound, but he's suffered a good deal of shock."

Slim nodded. "We aim to play fair. If Rayburn kicks through, I want his boy to go back."

The buck-toothed man shrugged. "I can't see that makes a hell of a lot of difference, Slim. What I'm interested in is Rayburn kicking through."

HOT words were on Hinson's lips, but he didn't say them. One thing he knew: If he and Benny were to get out of this alive, it meant some good breaks and fast shooting. Sawtelle and the other wounded man both had guns on their hips. Somehow Mack Hinson had to get

hold of those guns, and he had an idea how it might be done.

Hinson ate breakfast with Slim and Curly, and lay down on one of the bunks. He went to sleep instantly. Slim woke him at noon.

"Looks like Sawtelle's dying," Slim said. "Wish you'd take a look."

Hinson rolled out of the bunk and examined Sawtelle. The outlaw died a few minutes later. It was a wonder he'd ever got this far alive. Hinson straightened up and shook his head. He stepped away from the bunk and motioned for Slim to follow him.

"There wasn't much I could do for him. That bullet wound might not have killed him, but lobelia set in. Sometimes that's catching. If the other wounded man gets it, he'll cash in, too."

It was a monstrous lie that anybody who knew anything about medicine would have seen through instantly, but Hinson had pegged these men right. The mention of any kind of a disease frightened them into a panic where no amount of humming lead and burned powder would have scared them.

"Lobelia?" Slim stared at Hinson. "I never heard of it."

"Don't make no difference whether you ever heard of it or not," the buck-toothed man quavered. "How about the rest of us, doc?"

"You might get it, too," Hinson answered. "Or me even."

"Ain't there nothing you can do?" asked Slim.

"I don't want to cash in now," the buck-toothed man wiped his forehead.

"Where's Curly?"

"He's outside saddling a bronc," Slim said. "He's going down to see if Rayburn's followed orders."

Hinson frowned. This was the time to make his play, but it was

no good if one of the outlaws was outside.

"Call him in," Hinson said. "I'd better dope you all up. This stuff tastes mighty bad, but it's the best I've got to stop lobelia."

"Sure," Slim nodded and stepped to the door.

Hinson dipped a cup of water out of the bucket and busied himself over his bag. That he was playing a wild and desperate game he well knew. If it didn't work, he'd be a dead man. But if he didn't do something, he'd be dead anyhow. These men would never let him go back to Sharpsville alive.

Hinson carried the dose he'd fixed up to the wounded man, and saw that Curly hadn't come back. He'd played for all the time he thought he dared. Throwing the blanket off the wounded man, Hinson bent over him.

"This tastes like hell," he said, "but try to get it down."

The man drank it and the result that Hinson expected didn't take long in coming. The wounded man let out a horrible howl, twisted his head over and began to reach. The second he started to move, Hinson snatched his gun from leather and whirled to face Slim and the buck-toothed outlaw. Slim was the first to see the medico's game. His hand blurred for his Colt, and came up with it as Hinson dropped hammer for his first shot. The buck-toothed man got the drift then and jerked his .45.

AFTERWARD Hinson had only a faint memory of what happened. He knew he stepped to the side so he'd be out of the way of the man on the bunk. He remembered the chop of the Colt in his hand, the hammer of gun thunder against his eardrums, the fog of powder smoke

that spilled into the room. There was the bite of a slug into the log behind Hinson, the burn of another along his ribs, but then he had Slim down in front of the fireplace. His third shot spun Buck Tooth around. The fourth shot knocked his legs out from under him as if he'd been hit on the ankles by a club.

The man on the bunk pulled himself up on his good leg, and lashed out a fist at Hinson's head. It had all the power that a full-grown mosquito would put into a kick, but it would have been fatal if Hinson hadn't sensed it coming, for just then Curly stepped into the open doorway, his gun palmed. Hinson ducked the blow and pitched one quick shot at Curly. Then the hammer fell on an empty.

Hinson shoved the wounded man back on the bunk, jumped toward Sawtelle, pulled the dead outlaw's gun and straightened up to face Curly. But there was no more fight in that long rider. Hinson's bullet had grazed his scalp and knocked him cold.

That was all there was to it. Slim and Buck Tooth were dead. The wounded man on the bunk had fainted. Hinson tied Curly up and turned to Benny.

"You sure got 'em, doc!" the kid shrieked jubilantly. "Wait till I tell dad about this."

It was then Hinson remembered that this boy was Kurt Rayburn's son. He grinned wryly as he wondered what the cattleman would say when the boy did tell him.

"It's a long ride back to the Pothook, button," Hinson said, "but I think you'd be better off there than lying here."

"Sure, doc." Benny nodded quickly. "Let's get to riding."

Halfway back to Sharpsville Hin-

son saw a group of riders and fired his gun. As they galloped up, Benny said: "They're some of the Pothook hands, doc. They'll take me home."

The punchers rode up and stared in blank amazement at the boy and then at Hinson.

"Get this younker home to bed," the medico said. "He's not hurt bad, but he needs rest."

Hinson went on to town, turning once to wave as Benny called: "So long, doc."

After Hinson rode back into Sharpsville and turned the outlaw's horse over to the hostler, he went to bed. It seemed to him that he'd just dropped off when a tremendous hammering on his door brought him back to life. He pulled on his pants, lighted a lamp and opened his door. Before him were most of the male inhabitants of Owyhee County.

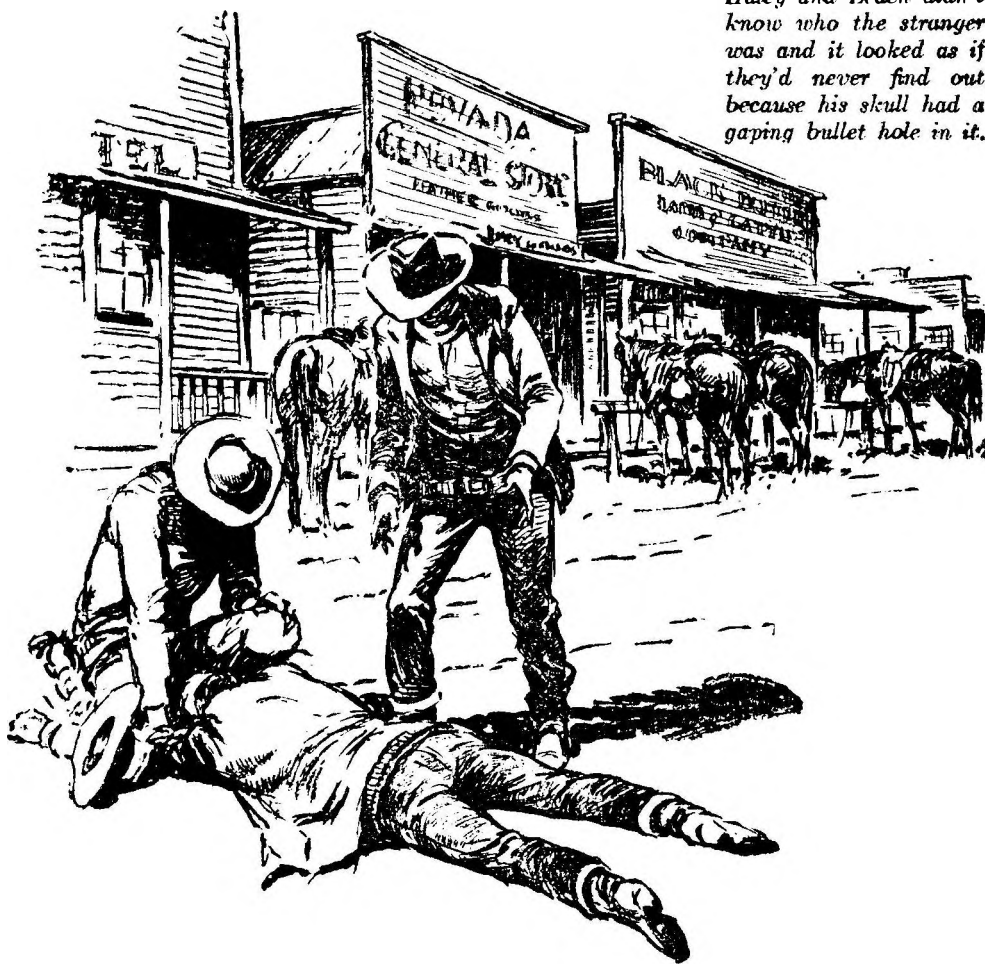
"Come on, doc," Kurt Rayburn shouted. "We rounded up all that was left of them hellers on Grizzly Creek. Now we're aiming to celebrate, and we sure need your help."

Fifteen minutes later after three rounds of drinks, Rayburn pounded on the bar for attention.

"Boys, I'm gonna eat my share of crow right here and now. I'm not just certain yet how much of a medico this Mack Hinson is, but he's sure all man. And, doc, you convinced me of one thing. Owyhee County needs a bridge over Three Hell Canyon. And say, doc," he lowered his voice, "want you to come out to the Pothook in the morning. Benny thinks you'd better look at that arm some more."

Mack Hinson grinned. "I'll be there, Rayburn," he said, and he knew that he was going to have all the practice in Owyhee County he could handle. Doc Baker could retire now.

Haley and Leach didn't know who the stranger was and it looked as if they'd never find out because his skull had a gaping bullet hole in it.



THE STRAY by Eli Colter

CHAPTER I

MAN OF MYSTERY

He came riding into Black Butte at sunset, sitting erect on an iron-gray horse and looking neither to the right nor the left. He seemed not to see the Saturday night crowds of ranchmen and cowboys and hangers-on already thronging the few dusty streets. A tall, lean, tow-headed young man, he had a good-

natured open countenance, which at the moment wore a blank, expressionless stare. He seemed not to notice Marr Haley and Jack Leach standing at the edge of the sidewalk, as he drew his mount to a halt in front of them.

Getting stiffly down from the lathered weary horse, he started toward the sidewalk, walking stiff-legged and stumbling slightly as he moved.

Haley glanced at him sharply, wondering with some amusement if here were a Saturday night celebrant already three sheets to the wind. Then deciding instantly that the blond young fellow was the sort of man you instinctively liked, he said in a friendly voice:

"Evenin', stranger. Welcome to Black Butte."

"Looks like you been ridin' hard enough to git a dry throat," Jack Leach remarked. "Come on in and tilt one with us." He gestured toward the entranceway of the Blue Barrel Saloon behind him.

The stranger did not look. His young face was drained and colorless, and his clear gray eyes held a glazed, staring look. He said thickly, "I'm shot," and, stumbling again, fell flat on his face in the dust.

Leach and Haley looked at the prone motionless man, then at each other, for an instant paralyzed into immobility by blank amazement. Abruptly they both leaped off the sidewalk and started toward the stranger. His hat had fallen from his head as he fell, and Haley caught a sharp breath as he saw the bloodstained blond head lying there in the dust.

"Shot, hell!" Marr exclaimed with regret. "He's dead. Bullet's gone right through his skull."

Leach nodded. "Dead's a mackerel. Damned shame. Nice-appearin' hombre. But I reckon nobody could live very long with a wound like that in him, Marr. I wonder who he is and where he come from?"

"And who plugged him," added Marr. "Too late to do anything for him, but you better go across the street and git Doc Hughes."

Leach turned away in silent acquiescence. Doc Hughes was across the street in the back room of the Cowboy's Rest, playing poker

with old Hilary Queen, who owned the B Bar Q Ranch out in the Jordan Hills north of town. Leach and Haley had left Queen and the medico there less than a half-hour ago.

BEFORE Leach was across the street, a crowd began gathering around Marr Haley and the motionless body in the dust, and Marr motioned the men back with a wave of the hand.

"Jest let him alone and keep your hair on," he commanded. "Jack's gone after Doc Hughes."

"Dead?" asked somebody in the crowd.

"Stranger ain't he?" another wanted to know.

"I reckon so," Marr answered the first question. "When doc turns him over, you can see if any of you knows him. I don't think you do. I don't think anybody in this town ever seen him before."

"Don't look familiar to me none," said somebody else. "What I kin see of him."

The growing crowd of men moved back out of the way as Doc Hughes came hurrying across the street with Leach and Hilary Queen close behind. Hughes knelt by the fallen stranger, and reached for the wrist of one of the outflung hands. Then he gave an astonished exclamation, and leaned closer to examine the wounded head.

"What's the matter, doc?" Marr Haley edged close.

Hughes looked up with a puzzled frown. "The man ain't dead! I don't see how he can be alive with a hole like that in him, but he is. Git a holt on him, Marr, and help me carry him into the Blue Barrel. Some of you other do nothing's go git something ready to lay him out on in the back room."

By the time they had him laid on

a cot somebody had rustled up, every man in the crowd had gotten a look at the drained young face. Doc Hughes glanced around. "Anybody know who he is?" Nobody did. Marr Haley was right; no one in Black Butte had ever seen the wounded man before.

"He cain't live, kin he, doc?" asked Hilary Queen.

Hughes shook his head and pursed his lips. "He can live till he dies, Hil. Bullets does funny things, and men take some ungodly wounds and live through 'em. I heard of one fella had a crowbar drove through his head, and lived. Another one lived after a hot rivet went clean through his skull. I've read of several freak cases like that in the medical journal. But I never seen nothin' like it with my own eyes before."

"You goin' to leave him here?" Marr put in.

"Well, we ain't goin' to move him another foot till he comes out of it or dies, that's certain," answered the doctor. "And all of you boys clear out of here, now, and leave him alone. I'll keep an eye on him. Minute there's any change I'll let you know. I reckon you're all as much intested as I am."

The others all thronged out of the room, with Hughes and Hilary Queen bringing up the rear. Queen turned his head to glance back at the motionless figure. "Makes you think a little bit of Kurt, don't he?" he said in a lowered voice. "Maybe it's jest because he's blond, the way Kurt was, and about the same age. I reckon he don't really look none like him."

Hughes gave the rancher a side-long pitying glance. Poor Hil. Likely, for a long time to come, every good-looking blond youngster Hilary saw was going to make him

think of his son. Couldn't expect him to get over it this quick, anyway, with Kurt less than two months in his grave.

"Don't know as I agree with you entirely there, Hil," Hughes said. "'Tain't your imagination. He does remind you a lot of Kurt. Same sort of complexion, same general build. Resembles him a good bit around the mouth and eyes, too."

"That's what I thought." Queen brightened. The habitual sadness that had grown on his face of late, lifted a shade. "You let me know how he comes along, if he lives, doc. I'm right interested in that boy."

HUGHES nodded a mute promise, and the rancher went on into the main room of the Blue Barrel Saloon. Marr Haley, lingering a little, stepped nearer the open door of the back room, where Hughes stood looking after Queen.

"Poor old Hil think he's found somebody else that looks like Kurt?" asked Marr soberly.

Hughes brought his glance back, to rest on Haley. "Well, the hombre does look a lot like Kurt, at that, Marr. I noticed it the minute I seen him."

"Yeah, so did I," agreed Marr. "Reckon that was one reason I kind of took to him. I sure thought a lot of Kurt."

"Everybody liked Kurt Queen," said Doc Hughes, and his voice was faintly savage. "It's a damn shame that clean-cut young fellers like Kurt has to git killed off ridin' the world of such scum as the Arapahoe Kid and his gang. But that's the way life goes, and we have to take it."

"Well, Queen can remember that his boy done a big service to the range, helpin' to clear the Jordan Hills of that thievin', robbin' out-

fit." Marr paused an instant as he started to turn away. "Let me know if the stranger comes out of it, doc. So long."

"So long, Marr." Hughes turned back into the rear room to see whether there was any change in his patient. There was not.

There was no change in the stranger for five days. He lay like the dead, barely breathing from the tops of his lungs, breath so light that it scarcely made a noticeable movement of his chest. On the morning of the fifth day, he opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. He lay still for a moment, then he sat up and looked around the room, at the cot on which he had lain, at the boxes and barrels and jugs stacked along the wall. Frowning, he rubbed his eyes, and looked again. Then he twisted about and was swinging his feet to the floor when Doc Hughes opened the connecting door and came into the room.

"Well!" the medico exclaimed. "You're awake, eh? How do you feel?"

The stranger blinked and grinned. "All right, I guess. One thing I sure know, I'm hungry as hell."

"You should be," said Hughes dryly. "How's the head?"

"Head? Hm-m-m. Does kind of ache a little, now I'm reminded of it." He raised a hand, and his fingers touched the bandage Hughes had bound around his wound. Holy smokes! My head's tied up! Say, that's funny. What am I doin' here? How'd I git my head hurt?"

"Don't you know?" asked Hughes.

"I don't seem to. I don't seem to remember—" He hesitated, and an expression of alarm sobered his face. "I don't seem to remember nothin'! My name, or where I come from, or nothin' else. Not right this

minute, anyway. What place is this? Maybe that'll remind me."

A QUEER expression had begun to grow in the physician's eyes. He said: "It might, but I doubt it. Because none of us here ever seen you before or has any idea where you come from, either. This is the back room of the Blue Barrel Saloon in the town of Black Butte. Mean anything to you?"

The stranger shook his head helplessly. "Not a danged thing. I never heard them names before. *Sa-a-ay!* I don't like this!" The alarm in his gray eyes became almost a mild panic. "I don't remember *nothin'*! What happened to me? Who hit me in the head?"

"Sorry I can't tell you, son. I don't know what kind of ruckus you got into. But you wasn't hit in the head; you was shot."

"Shot!" He stared at the doctor in astonishment. "Who'd want to shoot me and what for? I never bothered nobody. Confound it, we got to get to the bottom of this some way. How'd I come to be here?"

"Marr Haley and I carried you in here," answered Hughes, and he related in detail what had happened. He finished: "And you been lyin' there like a dead man for five days. And that's every dang thing any of us knows about you, son."

"Well, I'll be hung for singin' hymns!" Then a sudden thought struck the injured man. "Maybe there's somethin' in my pocket—"

"We thought of that," said Hughes. "I looked thoroughly. There isn't a thing on you or your horse to give the faintest clue to your identity. Unless—"

"Yeah? Unless what?"

"There was a ragged old envelope in your pocket, empty, with some meaningless lines scribbled on the

back of it. It was addressed to Arthur Beale, down in Texas. Think that might be you? You don't talk none like a Texan."

"Beale . . . Arthur Beale? No, it don't mean nothin' to me. Where'd you put the envelope, doc . . . or ain't you a doctor?"

"I'm Dr. Hughes, yes. The envelope is in the safe out in the front room of the Blue Barrel. If it means nothing to you now, I'd suggest you leave it there for safekeeping. No pun intended." The medico smiled. "And, if my memory is correct, you said something about bein' hungry. Reckon we'll get you a meal and then move you over to my house for a few days until you're feeling up to scratch again. Do you think you can walk a bit?"

"Why, sure. Why shouldn't I be able to walk all right?" the stranger asked. But when he rose he was so unsteady on his feet, Hughes had to support him.

"Take it easy, boy," the medico said. "Remember you were pretty badly shot up. Now come along, and we'll go over to the Chop House and fill that empty stomach of yours."

"Sounds good to me. I could eat a stuffed cattymount. But soon as I can, I've got to scout around and find out where I belong, and jar myself out o' this. I can't go on all the rest of my life not even knowin' my own name!"

CHAPTER II

"WHAT'S A MAVERICK?"

IT was Marr Haley, standing in the doorway of the Cowboy's Rest across the street, who saw the stranger, supported by Doc Hughes, emerge from the Blue Barrel and start for Chuck's Chop House. Marr whirled and called back into the

room behind him: "Hey! Jack! Hilary! Fellers! He's up! He's walkin'!"

If Marr had said that the dead were walking, he couldn't have created more excitement. The man who had lain so still and lifeless in the back room of the Blue Barrel had become practically the sole topic of conversation in Black Butte. Jack Leach sprang out of his chair so abruptly that the chair went clattering over backward. Hilary Queen, who usually came to town only three or four times a year, and who had come in three times in the last five days, shoved back his glass not half emptied and hurried toward Marr. Before the latter could reach the street, seven men were ganged at his heels and more were coming from the Blue Barrel, the Cowboy's Rest, Cark's General Store and the livery stable.

Before Doc Hughes and the stranger could arrive at the Chop House, an excited eager crowd was close behind them, to follow them in through Chuck's open door and gather around the table where the medico and his companion sat down.

Marr grinned at the blond young fellow with the bandaged head. "Hi yah, brother! Feel like takin' on a little fodder, eh?"

The stranger smiled. But as he glanced from one face to another, his smile turned a little wry. "Looks like I must've got to be a sort of curiosity around here."

Jack Leach laughed, and his face beamed good humor. "Feller, you ain't lyin'. There ain't a man in Black Butte that hasn't been in to have a look at you while you was layin' there. I'm Jack Leach." He thrust out a friendly hand. "Sure am glad to see you up again."

"And I'm Marr Haley," said Marr. "And this is Hilary Queen,

Jack's and my boss out to the B Bar Q Ranch."

The stranger's smile faded. Distress shadowed his clear gray eyes. "I'm sure glad to meet up with all of you. But I . . . I—"

Hughes cut in with a sharp, significant glance at the eager ring of interested faces. "His memory is a complete blank. He'd tell you his name if he could, but he can't, so stop fishin'."

An appalled silence greeted that announcement, and men looked at one another with helpless embarrassment until Hilary Queen said to Hughes: "So, that's what it done to him."

The physician nodded. "Yeah. That's what it done to him. And if that's all it done to him, he's the luckiest feller I've seen in many a long day."

THE stranger leaned back in his chair, frowning in perplexity. "I don't get this. You all act— Say, am I somethin' out of a circus, or what?"

"The bullet went clean through your head, my boy," Hughes explained. "It's a miracle you're alive. You'll likely never know any more about the past than you know right now, and you might as well be told, so you can sort of get your bearin's. But you've got no call to get all hot and bothered. You're among friends, and you can stay right here and make yourself at home till you do remember somethin' that'd make you want to go away, or till somebody comes lookin' for you."

Hilary Queen edged forward. "I'd be glad to give you a job on my ranch, till you kin locate somethin' better, son. Me 'n' the boys'd plumb admire to have you out on the B Bar Q."

Cark put in: "I could use you

over to the store, if you'd like that kind of a job." And Boles said he could use a man that was good with horses, over to the livery stable; Rainey offered to put him on at the Cowboy's Rest, and two other ranchers needed an extra man on their crews.

The stranger looked around at all of them, gratitude warming his young face. They were all looking back at him, interested, half smiling, waiting. And to a man, they thought how much he reminded them of Kurt Queen. Not that he was any spit and image of Kurt: yet the resemblance was too strong to be missed: that sort of general similarity of color and build and line, called family resemblance, so often seen in people of the same breed and blood. And the men were all conscious of Hilary's strained intent gaze fixed on the young face. No one was surprised when the stranger looked at Queen, as if the rancher's gaze had impelled him beyond his own volition. No one was surprised when he said:

"You're bein' mighty white, all of you, to a lone stray. I sure am obliged to you. But I . . . I reckon I'd kind of like to go out and work for Mr. Queen here."

Queen beamed, and the rest of the men voiced their approval of the stranger's choice, and they pulled out chairs and sat down to the long plank table, and ordered a bite of something or other to be sociable. Chuck rushed around, serving and jollying everybody, and in short time the scene looked like the homecoming reunion staged for a long absent prodigal son. And it was Marr Haley who said suddenly:

"But look, feller: You got to have a name. You're goin' to be workin' with us out to the B Bar Q. We can't jest go on callin' you 'hey

there,' you know. You got to have a handle of some kind."

"Well, there's a lot of names to choose from," Leach said. "Tom, Dick, Joe, Jim, Harry, Barry—"

Cark put in: "Bart, Mart."

"Ray, Jay—" Marr said.

The stranger grinned. "Phidias, hideous."

Everybody laughed, and Queen said approvingly: "You got the right spirit, son: kiddin' about it instead of bellerin' like a stray maverick that don't know where his next meal's comin' from."

The stranger sobered abruptly, and turned his gaze on Queen. "Huh. Maverick. What's a maverick?"

Queen looked astonished. "Why, jest a lone stray that don't wear nobody's brand, and ain't got no home range till somebody ropes him in and slaps an iron on him. Ain't you never heard of a maverick, son?"

"I guess I must have. It sounds familiar. But I couldn't seem to remember just what it meant. Maverick. I sure like the sound of it. Plumb fits me, too, don't it? I reckon that's the name I'm goin' to take. Yeah, that's it. That's what you kin call me. I'm Maverick."

BUT Maverick is a bit long on the tongue, and before the stranger had been on the B Bar Q a month, the name was shortened to Rick. And before he had been on the ranch two months, he and Marr Haley and Jack Leach formed an inseparable trio, and Rick held a place unique in the regard of Black Butte and the Jordan range. He seemed to slip somehow into the place left empty when Kurt Queen had been killed, yet he distinctly had a place of his own. Everybody liked him, as they had liked Kurt, partly because he was a lot like Kurt, and partly because he was such a likable kid on

his own hook. And everybody felt a kind of proprietary interest in him and what he did. He had come to them in such a strange manner, almost like a man out of the grave, a man out of nowhere.

But though he was content, and went his way with hearty will, good-humored and holding his own with the best of them, Rick carried always a secret unrest, a nagging worry, an intense longing to know who he really was, and where he had come from, and what he had ever done to make anybody want to shoot him down.

And by the time the young stranger had been on the B Bar Q six months, the men of Black Butte and the Jordan range had become grimly aware of a harsh fact: they hadn't gotten rid of the Arapahoe Kid and his gang. Within six months more, the Jordan range was stunned by the wave of terrorism that descended upon it without warning.

Hilary Queen came into the bunkhouse where the men were gathered after the day's work, each amusing himself in his own fashion. Rick and Jack Leach were playing rummy with some of the other hands. Marr Haley was sitting on his bunk, whittling a howling coyote out of a piece of soft pine. The boys all looked up as Queen came in the door, but their greetings died on their tongues at sight of the look on his face. The rancher said bluntly:

"Boys, this has got to stop. We got to do somethin' and do it quick."

Nobody asked what he meant. They knew he referred to the depredations of the Arapahoe Kid and his gang. Marr Haley carved a point on the coyote's left ear, and said without looking up:

"The law ag'in, Hilary?"

"I don't see nothin' else to do," Queen answered. "That bunch was

had enough before, when they did nothin' worse than thievin' and robbin' and makin' general pests of themselves, but now they've took to killin' right and left, we got to clean 'em out, or there won't be a live man left on the Jordan range come this time next year."

Rick laid down his rummy hand and looked up at Queen with a frown. "Who is this Arapahoe Kid, anyhow, boss?"

Queen advanced a few feet and dropped onto the edge of a bunk. "Nobody knows, Rick. He's been dang slick, and kept hisself behind cover. Nobody knows which one of them he is, only his own gang and

a lawman or two. I reckon it's plumb easy to see what's happened, though."

"Meanin' that we jest didn't git 'em all last year when we thought we did?" Jack Leach said.

Queen scowled and shoved his hat onto the back of his head. "And meanin' that them that got away from us is gittin' back at us now. Afore that, they was content to rustle a few critters and rob a few stray riders to live easy. Now they're usin' their guns an' they're really on the prod."

Marr snapped his jackknife shut and tossed the coyote onto the table. "Present for you, Rick." Then he



Looking down at the Bar B Q spread, Marshal Beale realized he was at the end of a long and bloodstained trail.

turned his gaze on Queen. "You think they got mad and went hog wild when we killed most of 'em off, and now they're payin' us back by tryin' to settle the score three to one."

"Correct. This time we got to clean 'em to the last man. And we got to be sure we down the Arapahoe Kid. He's the worst, and the brains of the lot. If we let him git away ag'in, he'll only shag a new gang together and start his raidin' and killin' worse than ever. I'm ridin' in to see Doc Hughes tonight. Any of you boys wants to go along for company, go git saddled up." Queen rose from the bunk and turned toward the door. "I'll be with you in about fifteen minutes."

As the door closed behind the cowman, Rick shoved back from the table. "We goin' in, Jack?"

"Surest thing you know. Me, I ain't missin' a little change in the monotony. Shake a leg, Marr."

WHEN Queen came out of the house to get his horse, he found his whole crew waiting for him. It was only a two-hour ride into Black Butte, so the town was still wide awake when they got there, and the boys poured into the Blue Barrel to hoist one, while Queen went over to Hughes' little office a few blocks on down the main street.

Answering Queen's knock, Doc Hughes met the rancher's gaze with a level intent look. "I reckon I've got you before you start, Hil," he said quietly. "You want me to write for the marshal again?"

Queen dropped wearily into a chair. "You see anythin' else to do, doc?"

"No, no, I don't, Hilary. Any man would have to admit we've done our damndest to settle our troubles ourselves, and what have we

got for it? Nine good men killed off the Jordan range, and six more so bad shot up they won't be fit to go back to work for weeks. We can't blind ourselves to the truth no longer. We're bein' pestered by the most vicious killers ever let loose on a peaceful range. I'll write to the marshal right away tonight, Hil."

"Good!" Queen got to his feet.

"What's your hurry?" Hughes asked. "Stick around a while."

Queen's eyes looked haggard and tired. "Oh, I'll roll along over and have one or two with the boys, doc. Probably do me good. I was wonderin' if you'd thought lately of what the marshal told me 'n' you in that letter he writ you after he went back to Texas?"

"About him trailin' Arapahoe for six weeks, and shootin' the Kid down himself, and guaranteein' the Kid wouldn't bother us no more?" Hughes asked grimly.

"Yeah. You never showed me that letter for months. When did it come?"

"The day before Rick come to again. Look, Hil: If you're thinkin' what I'm thinkin', it could be, and it well may be. But don't you go crossin' bridges before you get to 'em. It just as well may not be. Stick that in the ice box till the marshal gets here. Remember, the marshal is the one lawman that knows who the Arapahoe Kid really is. That's why we sent for him in the first place, ain't it?"

Queen smiled wryly. "I'm rememberin' it. That's what's eatin' on me. That kid's so much like Kurt, doc, seems like it would knock me plumb galley west if—"

"You can stick that in the ice box, too, Hil," Hughes cut in. "That's why I held off on showin' you that letter for so long, I was hopin' you wouldn't make the connection. Go

on over and drink up with the boys, and forget it till you have to face it."

Queen went on over to the Blue Barrel. Jack Leach moved down the bar to join the cowman, and a small man with a mild childlike face stepped up by Leach and ordered a drink. The small man was a stranger, but the only stranger who'd ever caused a stir in Black Butte was Maverick.

Neither Leach nor Queen noticed the small man. Consequently they failed to see his expression when Rick suddenly moved into sight along the bar.

THE stranger's wide eyes were a sort of mild blue, and his face had the guileless ingratiating innocence of a baby. But it changed with startling abruptness when his gaze lighted on the Maverick. His eyes dilated to a stare, the natural flush on his cheeks paled, and his mouth dropped half open. In the next instant he caught himself and he closed his mouth with a snap. His eyes narrowed to their normal width. Picking up his drink, he sipped at it, but he kept a covert eye on Rick.

Rick, suddenly aware of Queen's arrival, leaned forward and grinned down the bar at his boss. His gaze passed impersonally over the baby-faced stranger, and he grinned amiably at Jack Leach also, and turned his attention back to Marr Haley.

The small man glanced up at Leach. "Howdy," he said sociably.

Leach answered with the easy affability of the range. "Howdy, stranger. Nice night, if I do say it, as shouldn't."

"Shore is." The mild eyes beamed good humor. "I'm Dill Hammond. Jest moved into your territory 'bout a month ago. Bought me a ranch over tother side of the Jordan Hills."

"Welcome to our midst, Dill," Jack returned heartily. "Looks like you sort of sot yourself down in a kind of hot spot, though."

Hammond nodded. "If you mean them cutthroat killers worryin' the hell out o' us, I shore have. Only I didn't know it till too late. Say, you seem to know that tall blond feller down the bar, I'd take it."

Jack laughed. "I oughta. We work on the same ranch together. This is our boss here, Hilary Queen. He owns the B Bar Q spread."

"Pleased to meet up with you," Queen said. "Why, do you know that boy, Hammond?"

Hammond's baby face wrinkled in a distressed frown. "I . . . well, I wouldn't want to say, till I git a chancet to talk to him. He looks a lot like a feller I used to know. Didn't know him well, just to see him and pass the time of day, you might say."

Leach and Queen glanced at each other, and Queen said with seemingly casual interest: "Mind lettin' us know if he's who you think he is, when you're sure yourself?"

Hammond's baby-blue eyes widened a little. "Mean to say he works for you, and you don't know who he is?"

Queen frowned and hesitated, then answered candidly. "Well, I don't see no reason for suppressin' the truth, Hammond. He don't know who he is, hisself. He got shot in the head and lost his memory." And he recounted briefly the strange advent of the Maverick into Black Butte.

Hammond looked blank. "Well, ain't that somethin'! Never heard of nothin' like it. I'll jest shove on down the bar and talk to him a mite."

Leach and Queen watched with

veiled suspense as Hammond moved through the small crowd at the bar and gained a place beside Rick. They saw him speak to Rick, and saw the latter smile down at Hammond with impersonal good humor.

"Edge along," said Queen in a low voice. "I want to hear this." He and Leach elbowed their way closer, just in time to hear Hammond saying:

"Have one with me, brother. Name of Dill Hammond. Jest bought me a ranch over to the Jordan Hills, and tryin' to git acquainted with my neighbors and be sociable."

"Why, sure!" Rick accepted without hesitation. "Don't mind if I do."

The two drank and talked together for perhaps ten minutes, then Hammond said he had a ride ahead of him and had better be getting along. He turned away from the bar and Queen followed him to the sidewalk outside.

"Well, is he who you thought he is?" Queen asked tightly.

Hammond shook his head. "Nope, I'm plumb sure he ain't. He's a stranger to me. Does look somethin' like the feller I was thinkin' of, though; enough to fool me for a minute. Well, be seein' you ag'in, Queen."

Queen turned back into the Blue Barrel, feeling relieved and disappointed at the same time. As he went in through the swing doors, he noted with a backward glance that Doc Hughes' light was still on. Likely, the doc was writing that letter to the marshal.

Hughes was. He was just setting these words down on paper:

DEAR MARSHAL BEALE:

I hate to bother you again so soon, but we've got to have help on the Jordan range—

CHAPTER III

THE WOLVES OF THE HILLS

SOME fifteen miles north of the Jordan Hills, in a deep-wooded gully, four men lounged in the shade of thick-growing pines, before a log shack hidden so effectively by the trees that it couldn't be seen till you were virtually on top of it. Four more vicious-looking thugs couldn't have been found together in a dozen States. One of them, a burly powerful man with a tobacco-stained sandy beard, winked at a gaunt heavy-jowled man lying on the pine needles facing him. The burly man with the sandy beard grinned evilly as he spoke:

"Marijuana Joe's hittin' it up ag'in. Reckon that means we're tak-

NO FINER DRINK... At home or on the go

PURITY—

PEPSI-COLA

... in the big big bottle!



in' another little trip pronto. Which don't make me sore. I'm gittin' tired layin' around doin' nothin'."

"Well, keep your shirt on and don't lose no sleep over it." A voice answered gruffly, and Marijuana Joe himself appeared in the cabin door. His black hair was disheveled, his black eyes were protruding slightly, and his swarthy evil face was darkened by a scowl. "We ain't makin' a move till Baby-face gits back. What in blazes we got a spy for, if we don't make some use of him? He said he'd— Hell, there he comes now."

The burly sandy-bearded man turned his head to look, and the gaunt heavy-jowled man raised himself to an elbow. Astride a small, wiry pinto, Baby-face Hammond was threading his way between the trees only a few yards away. As Hammond came up, loosened his feet from the stirrups and swung lightly to the ground, Marijuana Joe advanced a few feet from the cabin, weaving like a man slightly drunk, and stepping high.

All the innocent guile was gone from Hammond's childlike visage now, and there wasn't a harder or more vicious countenance in the lot. A heavy black gun was strapped down to his thigh. His baby-blue eyes were as hard as chilled steel, and his voice cracked like the snap of a whip.

"Watch your step, Joe! You been hittin' the weed too damn much lately. Slow down, or I'll take it away from you, the way the Kid used to do."

Marijuana Joe's swarthy face tightened with sullen anger. "Yeah, and then who'd do the sluggin' for you? Keep your shirt on. I know when I—"

"Shut up!" snapped Baby-face. "We'll admit that you're hell on

wheels, and too fast to *ketch*, when you're hopped up. And you kin hit 'er on high, and do the lion's share of the killin', and welcome, since you're so damned good at it. But I'm roddin' this outfit, and takin' no back talk from any of you, and don't forgit it."

"Oh, cut the raggin', Baby-face," the sandy-bearded man drawled. "Joe's all right. He's jest feelin' his oats because he's got a snoot full. You git a line on a good haul somewhere?"

HAMMOND shot a last angry glance at Joe, before he bestowed his attention on the sandy-bearded outlaw. "You'd be surprised what I got a line on, Boost. You know, sometimes I wonder if we've been so smart, after all."

"Huh?" Boost stared. "What's the matter now? Ain't gittin' cold feet, are you?"

"Maybe I am," answered Baby-face levelly. "And maybe I'm jest gittin' some sense into my head. Maybe we didn't have quite so much excitement when the Kid was runnin' things, but we was a damn sight safer. And we still would've been safe, if you and Joe hadn't defied the Kid and raided the Jordan range so bad they went and called in the law."

"Aw, the Kid was a lily-livered sissy," sneered Boost. "So damn afraid he'd hurt somebody, things was too tame for any man with guts."

"Yeah, and what's it got us bustin' loose and runnin' wild and killin' for the fun of it since we've had things our own way?" snapped Baby-face. "We've played out our string, hombres. The Jordan range is ringin' in a lawman ag'in."

"Hell!" Boost swore luridly. "The same one?"

"The same one. And we're goin' to be gone from here before he kin hit the Jordan range. Beale is the fastest-shootin', straightest-shootin' law dog from hell to breakfast. He played the devil with the gang last time, and there wouldn't be enough of us left to salt for supper, if we was fool enough to stick around here and try to shoot it out with him this time. We're gittin' out quick, and we're goin' a long way. As soon as we bait our back trail."

"Bait our back trail?" echoed Marijuana Joe. "You wouldn't be springin' no riddles, would you, Baby-face?"

Hammond's hard blue eyes traveled around the interested circle of his five men. "If it sounds like a riddle, listen close and I'll give you the answer. You ever hear of people on the plains tryin' to git away from the wolves howlin' at their heels and like to make cat meat of 'em any minute?"

"Don't make sense yet," Boost said curtly. "Go on."

"And the fellas tryin' to make a gitaway figures the best way to stop the wolves, givin' theirselves time to git clear in safety, is to give the wolves somethin' to chaw on."

Marijuana Joe's protruding black eyes glared. "So they conks one of their own men on the head and heaves 'im to the wolves, huh? Jist what you aimin' to bait that back trail with, Baby-face?"

THERE was a moment of taut, ugly silence, pulsing with suspicion and sudden flaming anger. Hammond let it hang in suspense for a long breath, then he said levelly:

"I seen Arapahoe."

The tone of the silence turned to blank incredulity. The men looked at each other, then they looked at

Hammond, the same dazed expressions on all their faces.

Then Boost said with harsh derision: "You're crazy! You're nuts! The Arapahoe Kid is dead."

"He's about as dead as you are," contradicted Hammond. "And he didn't just run out on us and ditch us, as we thought at first, neither. I stood there looking at him and talking to him for about ten minutes, and he didn't know me from Adam's off ox. The Arapahoe Kid has lost his memory." And he told his dumfounded group of thugs the story of the Maverick's advent into Black Butte. "Which ain't nothin' in our young lives," he finished meaningly. "The Arapahoe Kid would still be wanted by the law, bad . . . if the law knowed he was alive."

Boost whistled. "Phew! If that ain't made to order, nothin' ever was! But how you goin' to work it, unless he's pullin' a slick stall?"

"You leave it to me," said Hammond. "It's no stall. He ain't got no more idea who he is than a dog has about heaven. And I can be sure of that, because I can be sure of what I seen in his face, when he should've knowed me like his own brother."

"But the law don't know it, eh?" said Marijuana Joe slyly.

Baby-face Hammond's laugh was the essence of evil. "And ain't that sweet! But the law's goin' to find it out, bucko. And by the time the law gits through provin' that the Arapahoe Kid has been pullin' a fast one on 'em, and finishes tyin' a nice tight noose around Arapahoe's neck, we'll be gone so far that all hell couldn't ketch us."

"But how—" Boost began again.

Baby-face cut him short. "Leave that to me, I said! The wolves are sure goin' to find prime bait on our back trail, fella."

"But what's the lay?" demanded Boost beligerently. "We got a right to know. What's the lay?"

Hammond's voice turned as soft as music. "If the law finds out that Arapahoe has been squattin' on the B Bar Q, hidin' behind the slickest blind anybody ever figured out, directin' every move of his gang and collectin' the best of the loot and cachin' it, is the law goin' to run itself ragged chasin' the gang when it's already got the brains of the bunch?"

"But if Arapahoe keeps swearin' he don't know nothin' about it," protested Marijuana Joe, "and there ain't no loot for the law to find—"

"Many a man kept swearin' he was innocent till the noose broke his neck, when he was guilty as hell and the law knowed it," leered Baby-face. "And there'll be a nice sack of loot for the law to find where the law comes lookin', because we'll put it there. We can afford to pay that much for a clean gitaway. And now shut up. I got some fast thinkin' to do."

CHAPTER IV

WOLF BAIT

MARSHAL ARTHUR BEALE sat in his office talking with Sheriff Lowe and Deputy Marshal Trine, when a fourth man tapped on the door, stepped in, and laid two letters on the desk, with the apologetic remark:

"Excuse the interruption. Mail for you, marshal."

He went out as briskly as he had come in, and Beale said, "Thanks," and glanced down at the envelopes. One was thumbed and dirty and bore no return address. The other showed a neatly printed "L. B. Hughes, M. D., Black Butte, Nevada," in the upper left-hand corner.

Frowning, Beale picked up the second envelope. "Excuse me a minute," he said, with a glance at Lowe and Trine. "Something here looks interesting." He ripped open Hughes' letter, then opened and read the other one. He sat for a moment staring at the two letters, his rugged, stern face gone pasty gray. Then he got slowly to his feet. He glanced again at Lowe and Trine, who had withdrawn to the other side of the room and were conversing in low tones, and when he spoke, his voice had the hard, tight ring of a man fighting grimly for self-control and achieving it fully by the mere width of a hair.

"There's a couple of documents here worth looking into, Sherman," he said. "I've some small arrangements to make. I have to hit the trail pronto."

Trine turned quickly. "O. K., Art. I'll be holding the fort till you get back, as usual. Good hunting." But he looked at Sheriff Lowe with a puzzled frown, as Beale went out and shut the door solidly behind him. "Hell! What's made him get the wind up like that? Let's take a look." Trine went over to Beale's desk, picked up the two letters and read them through. He sucked in his breath with a curse. By Satan, Lowe! That's too much to sock at any man, let alone a guy as white as Art Beale. Twice in the same place. Read that!"

HE laid in Sheriff Lowe's hand the opened letter both he and Beale had read first. Lowe looked down at it in puzzled inquiry and read:

DEAR MARSHAL BEALE:

I hate to bother you again so soon, but we've got to have help on the Jordan range. We didn't clean out the gang of the Arapahoe Kid when you was here before, and certainly we didn't get the Kid him-

self. They're at it worse than ever, killing and stopping at nothing this time. I know you said you downed the Kid yourself, and I reckon you thought you did. But the deviltry that's going on here now, marshal, is so merciless and so clever, it's got to be planned by somebody as slick as the devil himself; which the Kid must always have been. to keep his identity secret and never let anybody get a look at him, as he done in the past. And you yourself admitted he was as smooth as they come.

There's a young fellow come here about a year ago, shot through the head. How he lived through it I don't know, but he did, and when he come to again, he pretended to have lost his memory. He had in his pocket the envelope of the letter I wrote you before, but he pretended not to know nothing about anybody named Beale. There was a lot of funny scribbling on the other side of the envelope; might have been directions of some kind. I later destroyed the envelope. I never mentioned it to nobody else, and I privately advised him never to mention it. He seemed like such a honest, well-meaning youngster, we all liked him and we took him in and made him one of us. We're keeping a weather eye on him, though he don't know it, because we're beginning to believe that the lost-memory business may be nothing but a smart trick. He went to work on the B Bar Q when he first come. I thought then, and I think now, he may be the Arapahoe Kid.

Very truly yours,

L. B. HUGHES, M. D.

As Lowe finished reading the doctor's letter, Trine shoved the other one into his fingers. This letter was as straight to the point; the same point:

MARSHAL ARTHUR BEALE
DEAR SIR:

I hate the idea of selling out, but I don't like the idea of being somebody else's goat no better, and I got to think of my own hide. When you plugged Arapahoe when you was up here before, you didn't kill him, you just made him mad as hell. He come back to camp frothing at the mouth, and swearing he was going to make the Jordan range pay through the nose for what you done to his gang. He sure cooked up a slick scheme. He said he'd slip down into Black Butte, and put on a act; he'd make everybody think he didn't remember

who he was or nothing he'd ever done, and git a job there on a ranch where he could know all that was going on and tell us just how and when to turn loose. He said we'd rob the range blind and plug a dozen for every one of us you fellers had mowed down, before we lit out for parts unknown.

Well, it worked all right, and I'd meet him out in the hills for orders, and we kind of evened the score up and got a pretty good cache laid away. But it ain't working out so good for the rest of us. Arapahoe is the only one that's sitting pretty. He's figuring on being just a little too damn slick, and we don't figure to stand for it. I come in town to git orders, and he met me and acted like he didn't know me, as we'd agreed he'd do when there was anybody else around. But I hung around in the saloon for a while, and listened to the ranchers and cow nurses talking, and I got a earful. And I didn't like it none. Arapahoe is figuring on a dirty trick. The ranchers are going to send for you, but Arapahoe thinks he's going to squat right there on the B Bar Q, acting as innocent as all hell, and that you'll swallow his lost-memory gag. He thinks we don't know nothing about you going to come up here again. He thinks he'll help you lead a posse, and just sort of stumble onto our hide-out when we ain't suspecting nothing and kill off all six of us, leaving him in the clear with all the coin we got cached away.

Well, we ain't having any. We're willing to admit that we done a lot of things we shouldn't, but Arapahoe was rodding the gang and he drove us to it. Sure, we could just sneak out and be gone when you git here. Maybe. And maybe Arapahoe would trail us and shoot us down from ambush, if we tried it. That's his speed. We got to admit we're leery of him. So we're doing the only thing we can see to do. I'm offering to hand over the cache and turn State's evidence. If you'll promise to git me off with a light sentence, and let the rest of the boys go free, I'll guarantee that the boys'll go a long way from here and turn over a new leaf and not do no law breaking again. I'll meet you in Black Butte, and point out Arapahoe to you; all you got to do is drop me a card to Dill Hammond, Black Butte, Nevada, and I'll be here waiting for you.

The letter was unsigned, and written entirely in a nondescript block print that was sloppy but legible. Sheriff Ben Lowe read it through

to the last word, then raised his gaze to Deputy Marshal Trine, the look of puzzled inquiry still on his grizzled face.

"Well? Looks to me like the end or a pretty smooth desperado, Sherman. What's so hard on Art about it? I know, it's a damn nuisance to have to cut the same job twice, but why—"

YOU wouldn't know, being new in the district, Ben," Trine interrupted. "Mighty few know it, anyhow: it isn't one of the things you do much talking about. You know, Ben, different men take to the law for different reasons: some because they like the idea of excitement and action, some because they honestly want to uphold law and order . . . and some because they've got a bitter score to settle with the breakers of law and order. That last reason is why Art Beale is about the hardest and grimmest marshal that ever wore a shield."

"So?" Sheriff Lowe wore a slightly startled expression.

"Yeah. The Beale family used to own one of the finest ranches in Arizona, but you know what a hotbed of outlaws used to run wild in that neck of the woods. A crew of cut-throats raided the Beale ranch, burned the buildings, ran off the cattle, and killed every soul on the place but Art and his kid brother. It turned Art into a law dog that'll get his man or die trying. But it had just the opposite effect on the kid. He said the law wasn't any help when a man needed it, and no one was going to look out for an hombre if he didn't look out for himself. He hit the owlhoot before he was sixteen, but you got to say one thing for him: He never stole from anyone who didn't have plenty, and un-

til that clean-up in the Jordan Hills, he and his gang never killed anyone."

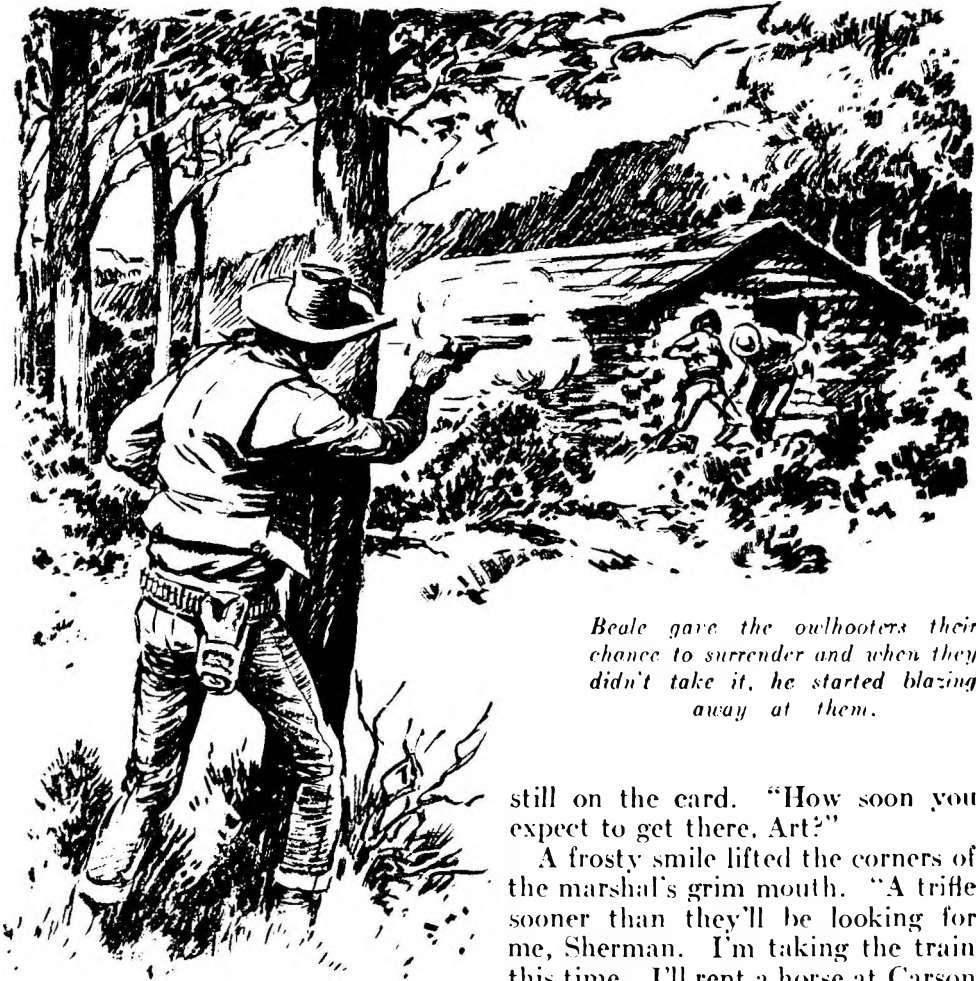
Dismay blanked Lowe's grizzled face. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, man! You aren't sayin' that this Arapahoe Kid—"

"I don't mean anything else." Trine folded the two letters and laid them on the marshal's desk. "The Arapahoe Kid is Art's kid brother. I offered to go handle the job for him last time, but he turned me down, cold as ice. He said if a man had a pet dog that went mad, he reckoned he'd rather it'd die by his hand than any other. He'd know at least that the death would be quick and merciful. He said the Kid was already a wanted man for rustling and robbing, and if he was let go on, the next thing anybody knew he'd be killing, too, and hit the toboggan all the way down: and he'd rather see him dead any day than see him come to that."

"And that's just what's happened," said Lowe. "Too bad he didn't get him the first time."

"It is, that," Trine agreed grimly. "Well, Art'll get him this time, and he'll make damn sure he does get him. He's not to be blamed for feeling sure he got him before. He took him right through the head. And Art Beale don't miss. Who'd ever think of any such wild freak of chance as the Kid living through it? Art'll fill him so full of lead he'd sink a battleship, this time, or break his neck: no slick stuff that kid can pull is going to fool Art for a minute. He knows him too well, and he—Stow it! Here comes Art now."

A solid tread sounded outside the door, and Marshal Beale stepped into the room. His stern face, set in lines of an old ineradicable sadness, was still ashy. His eyes looked



Beale gave the owlhooters their chance to surrender and when they didn't take it, he started blazing away at them.

like gray ice. Yet, for all of that, he smiled pleasantly at the sheriff and the deputy, and his voice was even and casual.

"Well, I'm off, Sherman. Will you just dash off a card for me, and slip it in the mail right away?"

"Why, sure." Trine reached for a post card and picked up a pencil.

"Address it to Dill Hammond, Black Butte, Nevada," directed the marshal quietly. "Just say: 'Received your letter. Will see you as per agreement.' Sign it simply 'A. B.'"

Trine looked up, his pencil
WS—5C

still on the card. "How soon you expect to get there, Art?"

A frosty smile lifted the corners of the marshal's grim mouth. "A trifle sooner than they'll be looking for me, Sherman. I'm taking the train this time. I'll rent a horse at Carson City. The best way to outwit a devil too slick to live, is to think a shade faster than he does. I'll walk in on the B Bar Q when they think I'm about pounding leather across Arizona. And I'll . . . make sure, this time, Sherman."

"Right. I already knew that, Art. I'll have this card in the mail before you reach the depot."

"Thanks." The marshal gestured a faint salute of farewell. "Hold the fort, and don't take any wooden money."

As the door closed behind Beale, Trine said tersely: "And that ends the career of the Arapahoe Kid."

CHAPTER V

LAWMAN'S TASK

A STERN-FACED man, mounted on a black horse, rode out of Carson City as the dawn was streaking the sky. He rode steadily, and before the sun was high he had become lost in the hills. A few hours out, he turned due south. He camped for a short sleep that night, in the fastness of the forest, and was up and on the way again with the break of another day. By midmorning he came to a ranch some twenty miles north of the Jordan Hills. Turning in, he dismounted from the black horse in the lane and started across the yard.

A lean, genial-eyed man emerged from the barn, started toward the small unpainted ranchhouse, caught sight of the other man, and stopped.

"Howdy, friend," he said. "Lookin' for some . . . Why, Marshal Beale! Shore am glad to see you. What you doin' up in this neck of the woods ag'in?"

"Good morning, Greene." The marshal paused, his ice-gray eyes searching the rancher's face. "So you remember my last trip up this way, do you?"

"Sure do! Couldn't forgit that very soon, I reckon."

The marshal's penetrating gaze held intent on Jed Greene. "Then you can recall clearly that I asked you to do a little chore, and paid you well for it, because it was a real favor to me."

Green nodded vehemently. "Why, of course I remember it, marshal. And I went right up the next mornin' early, to attend to it. But there wasn't no dead man there, marshal! I looked high and low, and I couldn't find no hide ner hair of a dead man anywheres, or I'd have buried him

right off, like I done agreed on."

"You're sure you found the right place?"

"Well, I shore thought I did. I went by that little map thing you drawed out for me, and I don't see how I could've missed. I sort o' figured later that's what I must've done, though. I'm plumb sorry, but I reckon the coyotes and buzzards must've got your dead man, marshal. I'll give you back the money—"

"No, no, keep it," Beale interrupted. "I wasn't concerned about that. I was merely wondering if you'd attended to the burial, and thought I'd stop and ask."

"I'm plumb sorry!" Greene was miserably contrite. "But I was so dang sure then I had the right spot. I even run across a young feller up there, and asked him, and he said he hadn't seen no dead man around neither, and—"

"What young fellow?" Beale asked quickly. "What did he look like? What was he doing up there?"

"Jehoshaphat, marshal! I wouldn't know. I couldn't ask him nothin' like that. Them's free hills. He was jist sittin' there, shiverin', so cold he was blue in the face from sleepin' out in the open all night. All wet with dew, too. No wonder he was cold. Them mountains ain't no place to sleep out without a blanket. Nice-lookin' young feller with yaller hair. Had a dang good horse, too. No brand on it, though. He was so dang stiff with cold I had to help him onto his horse, and I—"

Beale interrupted the garrulous rancher again. "What did you do with the envelope I drew the map on, Jed?"

"Why, I had it in my jumper pocket, marshal, so I'd be sure to go the right way. But that pore kid was so dang cold I felt sorry

for him, and I lent him my jumper, and told him he could jist drop it off here next time he was around this way. The envelope was still in the jumper pocket when he rid off, and I ain't seen him since. Was it important, marshal? Did you want it back?"

"Oh, no. Well, I'm on business, Jed. Have to be moving. Take care of yourself."

"Shore. You bet. Drop in ag'in when you kin sit a spell, marshal."

The lawman didn't look back as he remounted the black horse and rode out the lane, and as he swung south again toward the Jordan range, he muttered under his breath:

"I don't know whether to thank my stars or curse my luck that that was one time I let sentiment get the best of me, and couldn't bear to bury him myself or even go up and look at him to make sure he was dead. But even to have buried him alive would have been better than to let him go on to a killer's grave."

The marshal's jaw squared, and his stern face set in the cold, inexorable lines many a condemned slayer forgot only when the noose snapped his neck bones in two. His voice took on the tone that spelled doom for whatever law breaker he followed: "But there'll be no weak-kneed sentiment this time. I take my oath on that. This time, not for a split second, will there be Art Beale looking at his kid brother. There will be only Marshal Beale and the Arapahoe Kid and the duty of the law. And I'll spade the dirt over his face with my own hand."

And he sat a little straighter, a little more proud, in the saddle. A man can feel a justifiable pride when he has set himself to redeem an error with new iron in his soul.

IT was early morning of the next day when the black horse carried his rider onto the B Bar Q range. But the guide of the rein didn't take horse and rider down to the ranch buildings. The marshal halted in the concealing shade of a spreading tree that overlooked the ranch yard, and set himself to wait patiently until the man he wanted came into sight. If he wondered still whether there could be some miraculous solution to this mystery, some reprieve from the ordeal he dreaded, like the wild beasts dispatching the still body he had left lying under the trees, as Jed Greene had suggested, and this strange hand on the B Bar Q being somebody else altogether, all hope of it died when Jack Leach, Rick and Marr Haley rode out of the barn lot and headed across the west field.

The marshal swung back into cover of the trees, described a wide half circle and halted again directly in front of the three oncoming riders. He waited till they were no more than fifty feet away, before he nudged the black horse out of the trees and stopped squarely in their path. All three of the punchers looked at him, and instantly pleased recognition lighted the faces of Jack Leach and Marr Haley.

"Hi, marshal," Jack said. "This is a sure enough surprise!"

"Sure is," Marr Haley agreed. "We wasn't expectin' you for nigh onto a week yet. This is one of the boys, marshal: jest call him Rick. How'd you git here so fast?"

"I took the train to Carson City, Haley." But the marshal's gaze was intent on Rick. "In a hurry to get back, too. Plenty busy down at my end of the line."

Rick had been looking admiringly at the black horse, and now he raised his gaze to the marshal, and the admiring look was still in his gray eyes,

only it was transferred from horse to man. A look that was purely impersonal, touched a little by curious inquiry. But there was nothing in his face to tell whether there was anything more familiar to him about the man than there was about the horse.

"Pleased to meet up with you, marshal," he said. "Sure glad you could git here so quick. Anything any of us can do, just sing out."

"The first thing any of you can do," Beale said, "is tell me if you've heard of or seen anybody around this territory named Dill Hammond. Any of you know him?"

"Hammond?" answered Jack Leach. "Can't say as we rightly know him, marshal. Seen him in town a time or two. You remember him, Rick . . . that little baby-faced gent that asked you to have a drink with him in the Blue Barrel."

"Sure, I remember him," Rick said readily. "You want to see him, marshal? Don't know just where his ranch is, but I reckon we could find it. Up north of here in the hills somewhere."

"I want to see Hammond before I see anybody else. He might be hanging around town." The marshal glanced at Rick. "Want to ride in to Black Butte with me and see if we can locate him?"

"Why, sure, marshal. Sure. You figure on goin' right now?"

"Oh, I might stop by the house and see Queen, first," Beale answered. "I've already had something of a ride, and I could do with a cup of coffee and a snack before I move on."

"We'll all go with you," Haley offered.

Beale shook his head. "No, thanks, Marr. I don't want too many along this trip. I'll just take Rick. There may be something the

rest of you can do later. Come along, Rick. I want to have a word with Queen, then we'll be off."

AT about the same hour, in the clearing in front of the log shack in the gulch, Baby-face Hammond was just mounting his tough little pinto. Boost stood leaning in the doorway, watching.

"Goin' in again to see if there's an answer from the damn marshal yet, huh?" Boost said sourly. "I don't like this whole lay, Baby-face. I don't like that letter you wrote. Not none. It stunk of double-crossin' to me."

"Can it!" snapped Baby-face. "It was nothin' but sucker bait from start to finish. You didn't think I meant a word of it, did you?"

"What makes you think Beale will answer it, anyway?"

Baby-face swung into the saddle. "He'll take me up on my proposition, don't worry. Think he's goin' to turn down a chance of layin' hands on that cache?"

"That's somethin' else that stinks." Marijuana Joe sat up, under the tree where he had been stretched on the pine needles. "We oughta move that cache while the movin's good or—"

"You leave that coin right there under the floor till I say move it!" snarled Baby-face.

"And I don't swallow that gag about you takin' any rap, even for a day," Boost went on belligerently, "to let the rest of us go scot-free. Any time you—"

Hammond's face showed rage and exasperation. "Dammit, that's only more sucker bait for the law dog. If I'm goin' to sick him onto Arapahoe, I got to make it look good, don't I? You don't think Beale's goin' to git within miles of that cache or us, either, do you?"

"You said there'd be a cache for the law to find, and we'd put it there," began Marijuana Joe.

"That was before I had a better idea," Baby-face cut in. "Look, you dumb wits: we got plenty of time. The marshal's got a long ride ahead of him. He can't git here for five-six days yet. If he takes me up, I'll know he's swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker, and the Kid's due to stretch hemp. We ain't goin' to feel easy as long as Arapahoe's above ground. Have you wild-haired sons forgot so quick that he said the first one done any killin' he'd plug 'im himself?"

"And he could git his memory back, I reckon," muttered Joe. "And if he did, and found out what we been—"

Baby-face laughed. "Now you're usin' your head. I ain't havin' any, thanks. We're makin' sure we're rid of Arapahoe before we hit the trail. The minute I get a answer from Beale, we dig up the cache and hightail for the tall timber. And I expect to find that answer waitin' at the post office when I get to Black Butte. So hold your horses till I get back. We ain't got a thing to worry about." He turned his horse and started to ride away.

Boost suddenly moved forward and shouted: "Hey, wait a minute!"

Baby-face reined in the pinto. "Yeah?"

Boost came running toward him. "I just thought of a coupla angles, Baby-face. If we can't get Arapahoe no other way, we could shoot Joe full of hop and send him down to the B Bar Q to polish the Kid off. It ain't the best way, but it'd work."

Baby-face frowned. "I'd rather play safe and leave him to the law. In case the marshal don't answer, though, it might do."

"And on the other hand," Boost's

evil grin spread over his face. "You might pull a real fast one. Just go right ahead and meet the marshal, see? And trail him right up here and show him the cache in the shack. And all five of us'll be waitin' under cover, and fill him so full of lead he'd go clean through to China."

Baby-face stared. "Well, well! Not bad, not bad! That's worth thinkin' over! Especially if we could get him and Arapahoe to come up here together, and mow 'em both down. Then we shore would be in the clear. Didn't know you was so smart, Boost. Why the hell couldn't I have thought of that?"

Boost's evil grin lingered. "Skip it. Two heads is better'n one. Think you kin swing it?"

"Damn right I kin swing it . . . some way. It's better'n anything else we thought of yet. And seein' that's the new lay, I might's well hang around town until the marshal shows up. You boys take it easy and keep an eye open. I'll get the marshal and Arapahoe together some way. When you see us comin', you know what to do."

"Unless the marshal don't answer," said Boost.

"Yeah." Baby-face nudged the pinto into motion again. "Unless the marshal don't answer. But he'll answer, bucko. All you got to do is watch till you see us comin'. Take it easy."

DOWN on the B Bar Q, Marshal Beale was just finishing a breakfast of steak, fried potatoes, pancakes and coffee in the chuck house, with Queen sitting across the long table from him. The rancher ate in the chuck house with the boys, himself, since the death of his wife a few years ago. Rick had gone to the barn to saddle a fresh horse for

the marshal and turn the tired black into the corral.

Queen suppressed the question that was burning his tongue. He couldn't tell from the way Beale acted whether the marshal had ever seen Rick before or not. Still, if the marshal recognized Rick for the Arapahoe Kid, and believed the Kid had honestly lost his memory, would he still consider the Kid's life forfeit to the law? And if he figured Rick was just putting up a slick stall, would he say so right out? Hilary reckoned not. Maybe the marshal would come back a couple of days hence, alone, and say Rick had got killed helping him hunt down the rest of the gang, or something like that, to save the feelings of the men who had come to think so much of Rick, and make it easy on them. Maybe, Queen thought somberly, he wouldn't ever see Rick again.

Queen's nerves were so tight they ached, as he stood in the yard and watched Rick and the marshal ride away side by side. He said under his breath: "Well, good-by, son . . . if that's the way it's got to be. I reckon you're the Arapahoe Kid, all right. If you hadn't been, that's one thing the marshal *would've* said right off. But I ain't tellin' nobody, no more'n I told 'em about that letter doc got so long ago. The marshal's jest lookin' fer the kindest way out, and I'll string along. But . . . good-by and good luck. I hope your next trail's a happier one."

Rick suddenly turned in the saddle, and waved a farewell salute, then turned around again and faced ahead. "Sure is a swell old gent, Queen is," he said to Beale. "Sure has treated me swell. Couldn't have treated his own son no better."

"Queen's one of those fellows we call the salt of the earth." The marshal's ice-gray eyes slid covertly over

Rick's blond young face. "You like it here on the B Bar Q, Dicky?"

"Sure do! I like it swell. I . . . Dicky!" Rick frowned and stared in puzzlement. "What'd you call me that for? My name's Rick."

"I supposed your name must be Richard, and Dicky's as good a nickname as Rick," the marshal said smoothly.

"Oh." Rick's face cleared. "Nope. Jest plain Rick." He wondered if he'd better tell the marshal how he didn't remember anything about the past, then decided against it. His personal affairs wouldn't interest the marshal.

They rode on, talking of one thing and another, and just before they entered the town of Black Butte, the marshal said: "We'll cache ourselves where we can watch the post office, Rick. I'll drop in first and see whether there's any mail waiting for Hammond."

RICK waited across the street, while the marshal went into the post office. Beale was smiling thinly when he returned to join Rick. "There's a card there for him, Rick, so he hasn't been in yet today. But he's likely to show up any minute, so we'll just leave our horses down at the hitching rack in front of the Blue Barrel, and wait over here in the general store."

They had waited a little over a half-hour, when Rick said: "Maybe he ain't goin' to show up today, marshal."

"Then we'll keep an eye on the post office every hour it's open, till he does come," replied Beale. "I want to take him as quietly as possible. You see, Rick, Hammond is one of the Arapahoe Kid's gang."

Rick started, and blinked. "No! Is that so! Here we been talkin' to him like anybody, and all the time

he's one of them robbin', killin' sons we're after! He wouldn't be the Arapahoe Kid hisself, would he?"

"No, he isn't. . . . Look over there, Rick. Is that Hammond coming down the street?"

Rick stepped closer to the door behind which they were standing. "Wait till I get a good look at him. Yeah. That's him all right; that's Dill Hammond. And he's headed for the post office, too."

"Wait till he gets inside," said Beale. "Then you follow me, and keep a sharp lookout. He's a treacherous son." The instant Hammond disappeared inside the little post office building, the lawman stepped out onto the sidewalk and started across the street, Rick close at his elbow. They walked into the post office to see Hammond standing there grinning at the card Sherman Trine had mailed. The marshal whipped up his gun, covering Hammond.

"All right, Hammond, up with 'em," the marshal said tersely. "Frisk him, Rick."

Baby-face looked up from the card, and for one split second his start and dismay was evident, then he covered it with that guileless air of innocence that had made him a smooth and daring spy. Slowly, he raised his hands above his head.

"I thought I'd just slip in before you had a chance to skip the country," Beale said. "Be sure you don't leave any weapons on him, Rick."

Baby-face stood there motionless, while Rick went over him and took the black gun out of the holster, and removed the knife from his belt. Hammond seemed as docile as a day-old lamb, but his brain was racing with the speed of a trip hammer. The card was still gripped in his hand. Rick extended the knife and gun toward Beale.

"Put 'em in my right-hand pocket for the moment," said the marshal. He slipped his left hand into his pocket, and brought out a pair of handcuffs. "Then slap these on Hammond, and we'll stick him in the cooler."

Hammond barely saved himself from showing on his face the sweep of panic that struck him. "You can't do that, marshal!" he protested. "You promised to meet me and take me up on my agreement. It says so on this card here."

"Sorry. I never wrote any such card," said the marshal truthfully. "Snap on the bracelets, Rick."

Rick jerked Hammond's wrists down and locked them into the cuffs. The card fell to the floor and no one attempted to pick it up. Nobody else was in the post office, save the goggling postmaster behind the grated window. The marshal glanced at him; smiled faintly, and waved toward the door with his drawn gun.

"Get along, Hammond. Over to the pokey with you. I've got other business to attend to."

FEAR began to show in Hammond's baby face now. He knew he was trapped. He was going to have to talk fast if he was to get himself out of it. He shot a glance at the marshal, then at Rick. If they got him behind bars once, he'd never get out again. Beale knew he had Arapahoe there, and the marshal must be convinced from Hammond's letter that Arapahoe's lost memory was a stall. Then what was the marshal playing along with the stall for? Hammond couldn't figure it out, but if he hoped to get out of this jackpot he'd better not turn a hair to antagonize Beale. He'd better keep playing right along with the marshal's lead.

He said in badly concealed desperation: "Look, marshal. You got my letter, didn't you?"

"I did," said Beale grimly. "And a more treacherous sell out I never read in my life. You had no more intention of meeting me here than you had of going to hell in the morning, and you know it. When I have to meet low cunning with cunning, I can do it. Get along!"

"But, marshal, you got me all wrong!" Baby-face pleaded, his voice beginning to sound frantic. "I sure did intend to meet you. And I'm all ready to lead you right up there to the cache and turn it over to you. We'll start now, if you say so."

Beale hesitated. He pursed his lips and raised his brows, and his expression said that he was half-persuaded. "We-e-ell, I suppose I could have misjudged you," he said finally. "I'm not so sure, though. How far is it? Where do we have to go to get this cache?"

Hammond's near panic turned to wild eagerness. "It ain't far, marshal. Jest about fifteen miles t'other side of the Jordans. We can get there while it's still daylight, if we start right away. It's under the floor of the shack, up to the head of a big gulch. It won't take long to dig it up."

The marshal appeared to be considering seriously. "Hm-m-m. I don't know. If I thought you could be trusted—"

Hammond felt almost sick for an instant. It was almost too good to be true, Beale and Arapahoe right here to be towed to the slaughter. The gang wouldn't be expecting him back so soon, but they'd be on the watch. You wouldn't take those babies off guard. For once in his life, Dill Hammond's baby face wore an expression of honesty that was

genuine. And there is something about genuine honesty that brands it as no counterfeit.

"Listen, marshal," Hammond said earnestly. "I ain't lyin'! That's where the loot is, and that's where the shack is. And I'll lead you straight to 'em, and no monkey business. If I never told the truth in my life, I'm tellin' it now."

"Yes, I believe you are," Beale replied. "I've learned to read faces pretty well. You can guide us up there. But I'm going to leave the bracelets on you, to make sure you don't change your mind and try to pull something tricky. After we've dug up the cache, I'll take off the irons and you can go. All right, Rick. Go fetch the horses. Where's yours, Hammond?"

"Up at the livery stable. We can get him as we go by."

A FEW moments later, having caused as little stir as possible, Marshal Arthur Beale and the Maverick rode out of town with Hammond between them on his tough little pinto.

From then on, it was a business of getting there, and few words were wasted between them. The sun was hanging low in the sky, and the Jordan Hills were far behind when Hammond said abruptly:

"Well, we're gittin' there. I'll shore be glad to get rid of these irons. They're makin' my hands sore."

Beale said, with a casual glance at him: "When we get within sight of your shack, I'll take them off. You can't very well dig up a cache with your hands tied."

Hammond grinned. "Damned white of you, marshal. See that ridge just ahead: the one with the big rocks on it? You can see the shack plain from there. Ain't only a few

hundred yards to go from there."

Beale nodded, but made no answer. He glanced covertly at Rick who was studying the terrain ahead.

"Look familiar to you, Rick?" the marshal asked. "Ever been up here before?"

Rick turned his head. "Nope. I never been this far north of the hills before, marshal. Won't be long now, will it?"

"No," said the marshal oddly. "It won't be long."

They topped the rocky ridge and drew rein in a grove of trees. Hammond gestured with his head toward the gulch below. "You see somethin' that looks like the side of a box hung up in one of the trees? That's the roof of the shack. And that's all you can see till you get right up to it. It's dang well hid."

"But I suppose if I were down there at the shack, I could see you up here on the ridge, couldn't I?" Beale asked.

"Well, not from here in the trees, you couldn't see me. But if I was to ride out here, say, like this—" Hammond poked the pinto with his heel, and guided it with his knees, into a barren space to the right of the grove. He squeezed his knees in tight, and the pinto halted. "You could see me easy from here." He nudged the pinto into motion again, and rode back nearer the grove. "You goin' to take these damn irons off, now, marshal?"

"Oh, yes. I almost forgot." Beale shoved his hand into his pocket for the key. "Come on over here and I'll remove them."

Hammond eagerly herded the



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pinto back into the grove, and halted the horse as the marshal slid from the saddle to the ground. Jumping down, he held his wrists out. Beale unlocked the cuffs, swung them free and thrust them into his pocket. Hammond grinned, and rubbed his wrists with his fingers.

I SAID I'd take them off," Beale remarked casually. "But I didn't say I wouldn't put them on again. And I'm squeamish about hitting a man with his hands tied, even if he is a double-crossing traitor."

Hammond gulped and stared. In the same instant Beale's bone-hard doubled fist came slashing in an uppercut that started from the ground. It landed flush on Hammond's chin. The baby face went blank and Hammond measured his length on the ground, out cold. Beale looked up at Rick.

"Smooth work, marshal," Rick said.

"You have to be smooth when you're dealing with his kind." Beale took the handcuffs out of his pocket again, and another pair with them. "Come over here and help me lock his arms around this tree. I didn't want him yelling any signals to his men below, and I want to be sure he'll be waiting when I come for him."

Rick looked surprised as he dismounted and came toward Beale. "You think there's somebody down there?"

Beale laughed shortly. "Of course they're down there, all five of them. He was leading us into an ambush, didn't you know that? He gave it away when he was so earnest about telling the truth in regard to the cache and the shack. Do you think for a minute he'd ever have led us to this spot and the real location of the shack, if he ever expected us

to live ten minutes afterward?" Beale picked up the limp body and shoved Hammond's face up against a straight-boled tree. "Hold his head in place, will you?"

Rick reached around the tree and started to take hold of Hammond's head, one hand on either side. Swift as light, Beale dropped the unconscious outlaw, caught Rick's wrists in an iron-hard grip and snapped the cuffs shut around them. He had Hammond locked with his arms around another tree nearby, before the dumfounded Rick realized just what had happened to him. Then all he could do was stare at the marshal, speechless with amazement.

"Thanks, Dicky," Beale said wearily. "That made it easy. I want to be sure I'll find you here waiting, too, when I come for you. I have an old score to wipe clean, Dicky, and I do my own dirty work. I'll be back when I've cleaned up this nest of skunks." He turned away, and went striding swiftly out of sight into the trees.

He did not look back. Reaching the down slope, he threaded his way in caution, moving almost soundlessly, watching the gulch below with eyes narrowed to slits against the late sun. Five of them, he thought grimly, and they'd have seen Hammond ride out into sight, and be on the alert. But they wouldn't know Hammond had anybody with him, and they'd be watching for him to come into view again and descend to the shack. The regular trail by which the men entered and left the gulch was clear to be seen, but Beale kept away from it and stayed well under the cover of tree.

HE reached the bed of the gulch, and came within seventy feet of the shack before the building and the clearing were distinguishable.

The gulch was already in shadow from the sinking sun, but the light was still fairly good. Three men were standing at one corner of the cabin, looking toward the rear, and the sandy-bearded one at the edge of the small group called in a subdued voice:

"See anything more of him, Joe?"

"Not yet." Marijuana Joe's voice replied.

"Are you sure you seen him at all?" Boost growled.

Joe's answer was a snarl. "I said I did, didn't I? Think I'm blind? He ain't come back out o' the trees yet. What in thunder he hangin' around up there for?"

During that interchange of impatient conversation, Beale had shifted forward a good thirty feet. Three of the five were here, and two at the back of the shack somewhere. If he could take these three now, it would simplify his task considerably.

"Throw down your guns!" he rapped, his voice loud in the silence. "I've got the drop on you!"

The surprise that must have gripped the outlaws did not slow their reactions. Immediately Boost whirled and flame blazed from his gun. Beale triggered a shot that went through the bandit's temple. Boost crashed down like a rock, and his two companions, cursing madly, reached for their guns and began shooting. Beale drilled one of them through the heart, just as a whining bullet slashed bark from the tree that partly shielded his body. The marshal's next shot took the third outlaw with a slug through the right eye.

From the other side of the shack, Marijuana Joe's sharp command grated. "Come back here, you fool! Want to get yourself slugged?"

"He sold us out!" panted the heavy-jowled man furiously. "I'm

goin' up there after him! Damn him! Sold us out!"

Beale went along the near side of the shack like a streak, and reached the rear of the shack just in time to see Marijuana Joe starting up the slope, the heavy-jowled man close behind. Beale got the second man through the side of the head, and the thug swayed over and rolled to a stop against the rear shack wall. Marijuana Joe dashed straight up the slope, out of range and sight between the trees. Swinging into the



open trail, Beale went up the slope like a squirrel.

He reached the top just in time to see Marijuana Joe crash into the grove, where the patched hide of the pinto showed. He heard Hammond scream: "Joe! No. . . don't do it!" "Sold us out!" Joe snarled. "Damn you! Take that!" Hammond gave a wail that ended in a gurgling gasp, and Joe snarled again, even more savagely: "And you, too, Mr. Smart Guy. You were in on it—"

Beale reached the edge of the grove just in time to see Marijuana

Joe standing over Rick and raising a bloody knife. The marshal's gun barked twice and the drug-maddened Joe reeled back, his head blasted at close range by two tearing slugs.

Rick looked over at Hammond, slumped, dying, on the ground, his throat sliced into ribbons by Joe's incredibly fast knife. He looked up at Beale, and his blond face was bleached white. But there was a grin on his boyish mouth, and his clear-gray eyes held no deceit in their depths.

"Old Just-in-time Beale!" he said with a shaky laugh. "Pretty fair shootin', marshal!"

Beale's stern face was gray as he looked down at Marijuana Joe, and the traitor Hammond breathing his last. "Good work," he said heavily. "And the whole score clean. You're the only one I wanted to take back, anyhow, Dicky."

MIDMORNING of the day Marshal Beale and Rick rode into the B Bar Q ranch yard as they had left it, side by side. Hilary Queen came rushing out of the house, Doc Hughes close behind, and the boys hurried from the barn, corral and bunkhouse.

"Looks like I wasted time sendin' for you, doc," Queen said over his shoulder. "You ain't goin' to be needed, after all." The whole crew drew up in an excited crowd behind him, and he spoke to Beale as the two came to a halt. "Got anything lined up? Goin' to need a posse, marshal?"

Beale shoved his hat back on his head. "I think not, Queen." He glanced at Rick. "I promised I'd tell you when we got here, Rick. No use telling it twice, and all these

boys want to know." He looked down at Queen. "You see, Rick's been worrying again about who he is. I can set his mind at rest on that score. I happen to know who he is. His folks used to live down my way, when he was a kid."

Queen looked blank and caught his breath. "Yeah?" he said tautly, "yeah?"

"Don't just recall the name," Beale went on smoothly. "But I recognized Dicky the minute I saw him. His name must be Richard, because they always called him Dicky. And his folks have been dead for years, so he has nothing to go back there for. He can stay right here on the B Bar Q and be happy. As for that gang of killers . . . you can forget them. They're under the dirt, to the last man."

"And the Kid?" asked Doc Hughes, his gaze boring into the marshal's. "The Arapahoe Kid?"

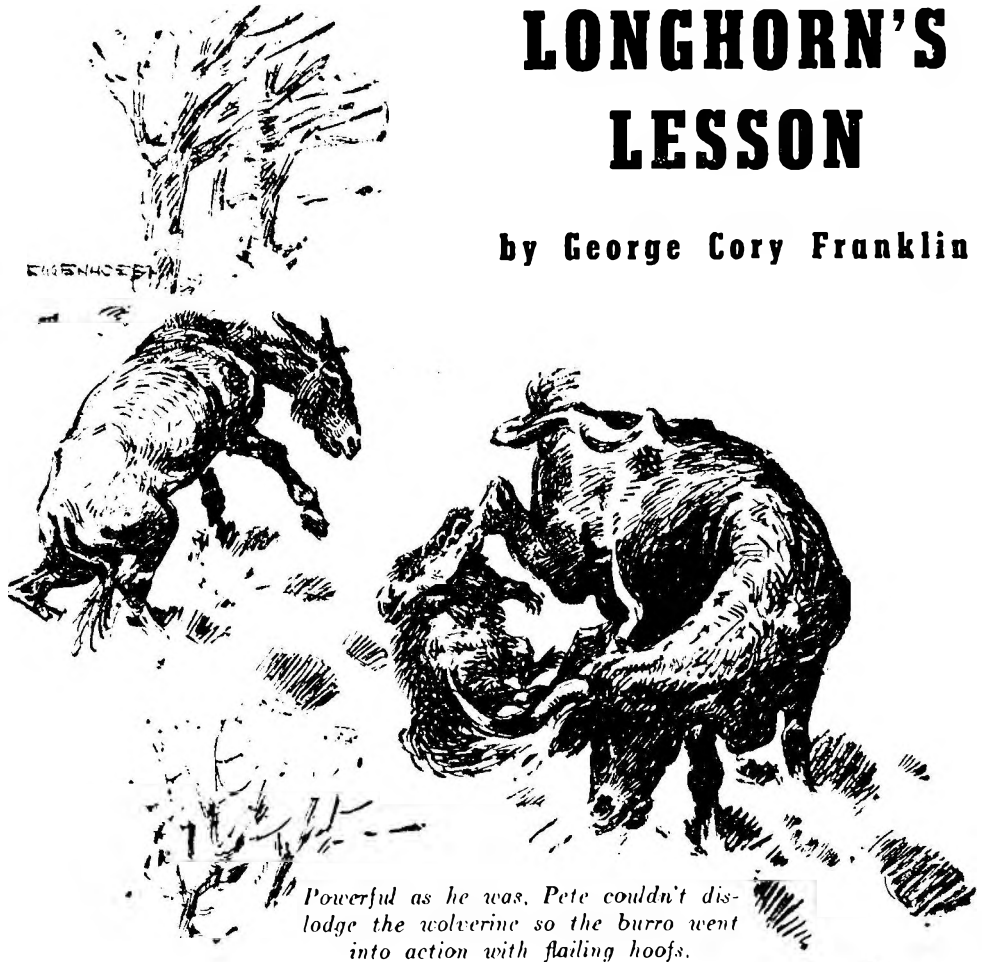
The marshal returned Hughes' gaze levelly. Then he lifted his eyes, and his own gaze slowly traveled from right to left, toward the buildings, the range and the hills that would be his brother's home; toward the group of men who would be Dicky's companions and friends; toward Hilary Queen who had an empty room in his heart for Dicky to move in; and lastly toward Dicky himself—frank, open-faced, all trace of the owlhoot stamped out of him. If the marshal's stern face was a shade white, nobody noticed it. If there was in him the pain of a great renunciation, no one could see it. And in his gray eyes there was a peace that had been lacking for many years.

"The Arapahoe Kid?" questioned Marshal Arthur Beale. "Why, I told you a year ago . . . the Arapahoe Kid is dead."

THE END

LONGHORN'S LESSON

by George Cory Franklin



Powerful as he was, Pete couldn't dislodge the wolverine so the burro went into action with flailing hoofs.

THE set-up pleased Pete, the longhorn trail leader, immensely. By hiding all day in an aspen thicket, he had managed to avoid the two cowboys Dale Carter had sent to bring him into the Circle C. Once Bart Tracy, foreman for the outfit, had ridden within fifty feet of the old reprobate, who had frozen every muscle and hardly breathed during the few seconds the scent of Bart's sweaty horse had shut out all other smells.

Now the sun had dropped behind the snow-covered back ridge, and in half an hour darkness would clamp down over the valleys and gulches,

leaving only the ridges showing against the cold starlight of the November sky.

Pete intended to start as soon as he dared to walk in the open. He would leave the protection of the aspen thickets and go up the ravine to where it opened out onto a rocky ridge where the wind had swept off most of the snow. This ridge led straight to Hunchback Pass, above timber line. If he could buck through the drifts on the other side and get down into the spruce, the rest of the trip he wanted to make would be easy.

Every fall Pete attempted to

avoid the very thing that domestic cattle crave—a warm place to sleep and an abundance of feed, without having to work for it. The passion for freedom in the blood of the Texas longhorn had not been weakened by scientific breeding, and Pete was as much a wild animal as were the mountain sheep that defied the snow and blizzards in order to stay among the crags of the back range, and only came down into the parks below timber line when the snow froze over the ground and they were unable to paw holes through to the grass.

Pete had a home that had been especially prepared for him by Dale Carter; a shed of logs with a dirt roof. There was a manger filled with timothy, a bed of clean straw and running water. Pete was at liberty to go there whenever he wanted to; in fact, the cowboys were instructed by Carter to keep a sharp lookout for him any time after the first of September and bring him in to spend the winter in peace and comfort.

Last fall Pete had been caught unawares and taken in at the time of the calf roundup, but this year he had managed to avoid the cowboys, and now he intended to cinch his freedom by crossing the pass and going far down the Vallecito River Valley into the San Juan Basin. He sniffed the breeze, turned his big ears back and forward and bored through the protecting saplings to the edge of a small park. Something moved near a rotting log, under the branches of a spruce. At first Pete thought it was a young mule deer, but memory reminded him that all the deer and elk had gone down into the piñons before the roundup began.

He took a good whiff of the scent. It certainly wasn't that of any wild creature Pete had ever known, and

it was not that of a horse or a cow; but it did make Pete remember the scent of the mules that had pulled the chuck wagons on the trail the time he had piloted the herd of white faces from Maxwell, New Mexico.

Snorting loudly, Pete stepped closer. The little animal came out to meet him, stamping small black hoofs on the frozen ground. His long red ears, with the black tips, laid back on his neck, in the gesture that is the universal warning of burros—meaning, a fight is coming.

The small brown creature with gray legs was putting up such a terrific bluff, that the big steer stepped back, grunted and shook his four-foot horns menacingly.

BECAUSE of his quick wits, nimble legs and keen senses, Jack had managed to live six months in a country infested by wild cats, lobo wolves and mountain lions. His nose was as sensitive as that of any deer, and his hearing even sharper. His small black eyes were capable of seeing details at a much greater distance than either a horse or a mule, and he was blessed with a strong instinct for self-preservation, and something that few animals possess to so great a degree, a strain of mischievous humor. In fact Jack was attempting to make a playmate of the most dangerous animal on the Upper Rio Grande range, when he rushed toward him, ears back and tail sticking straight out behind.

It was a desperate play for the young burro, for if Pete failed to be impressed by Jack's bluff, and lowered his huge head with the speed he used in defending himself from bear and wolves, one of his sharp-pointed horns would impale Jack as easily as a cactus spine could puncture the skin on the burro's nose.

Perhaps Pete was a little puzzled. He couldn't quite classify Jack as an enemy. The burro certainly did not belong to any of the families of flesh eaters. If there had been the slightest question about that, Pete would have killed the little burro without a moment's hesitation.

The impetus of his rush carried Jack against Pete's big fat body. The warmth and clean odors gave the lonely burro a feeling of security that he had not known since lions had killed his mother a month before. He leaned close to Pete and made the pitiful sucking sound with which his kind plead for mercy. Pete had never heard it before and only partly understood it now. More from curiosity than with any idea of friendliness, he turned his head and touched Jack with his nose. The burro was quick to take advantage of the slightest encouragement. He rubbed his head against Pete's cheek and sighed contentedly.

Pete's mind was too full of his plan to cross the range to be diverted by anything so slight as the meeting with another animal. He gave a muffled "Moo," and started up the ravine, walking slowly because of the heavy weight of tallow he had put under his skin to protect him from the severe cold of the place he was heading for. Jack followed unhesitatingly. Pete was the first animal that the orphaned burro had been able to approach; none of the deer or elk would make friends with him.

The scent of a flesh eater was certain to start him running, and Jack could really run. No other animal on the range could show the flashing speed and sure-footedness of the little brown-and-gray burro. His short dainty steps contrasted strikingly with the lumbering walk of

the hog-fat steer; his breathing was easy, hardly noticeable, while Pete puffed, grunted and at times sighed deeply under the effort of climbing.

A hundred yards up the ravine from where the two animals had met, Pete stopped at the edge of a deep drift and turned his head to look back. Jack was a few yards behind, but coming on determinedly. The steer resented the idea of being tagged. He could see how the little burro might become a decided liability, and he was in no mood to take on any additional load. He shook his horns menacingly, but without results. Half turning around, he opened his mouth and a great roaring bellow rumbled from his chest. Jack's tail wagged approvingly, very much as a pleased pup would have shown his satisfaction on discovering the ability of a newly found friend to make such an unearthly racket.

PETE turned away in disgust and wallowed a path through the snow that was like a graded trail to Jack. When Pete reached the bare ground on the other side of the cross gulch he turned around, as if determined to settle this matter once and for all; but when he looked down the trench he had made in the snow it was empty. During the time Pete had taken to turn his bulk about, Jack had quietly stepped past him and walked up the slope a dozen steps.

Again Pete sent forth a war whoop that made the hair raise on the neck of old Whisperfoot, the mountain lion, who was just starting out on his evening's hunt, and was at the moment crossing the ravine, two hundred yards away. Whisperfoot had fought Pete two years before, and the memory of the stab in his

chest, that had driven him to hole up for the greater part of the winter was very clear. His lips drew back in a hateful snarl, showing white fangs, capable of crushing the thigh-bone of an elk. His short stubby ears lay back and his eyes flashed green.

If the mountain breeze had been coming down the gulch at that moment, the strange partnership between Pete and Jack would have come to an abrupt end. One whiff of the dreaded cat smell would have sent Jack dodging and sprinting back to the safety of the aspen thicket that had been his favorite refuge. But because Whisperfoot was hunting upwind, and his movements were as noiseless as the creeping shadows of the spruce, Jack knew nothing of his danger.

Pete, thoroughly disgusted by his failure to scare the burro, took a short cut up the slope to the ridge leading into Hunchback Pass, and if Jack had not been with him the steer would undoubtedly have made good his attempt to leave the Circle C range and the protection of the men who sought his comfort and safety.

By going up the slope, Pete avoided crossing the row of round tracks left by the mountain lion, and Jack had not scented the big cat. The two animals stood on top of the ridge. Pete, sizing up the job of climbing the pass, the burro, looking longingly back toward the country where the snow was not as deep and the cold less severe.

Whisperfoot had detoured so as to come up behind them in the ravine. He had no intention of tackling the longhorn on even terms, but if he saw a chance to spring into the overhanging branches, drop on Pete's neck and rip his jugular vein open with one swift blow, he would

risk being tossed in the air; otherwise Whisperfoot would sneak on down to the cedars and kill a deer. The mountain lion had not as yet scented Jack, and supposed Pete to be alone.

Pete took a long look at the slope above him. Halfway up he saw a dark object, shaped very much like Shep, the dog that followed Dale Carter around the Circle C. It was coming directly toward Pete, and while the steer didn't believe that Shep would come up there alone, still it was possible. These Circle C men had a habit of showing up just when Pete was on the verge of a successful adventure onto some other range, and of course if that were Shep, then either Carter or some of his cowboys had come here to block Pete's plans for a winter on the other side of the range.

Pete's eyes were good. His nose was not as sensitive as Jack's, nor his hearing quite as acute, but his sight was better than that of any other domestic animal. He shifted his body slightly so that he could watch the object shuffle over the crusted snow. The stranger was too short for a wolf and had not the creeping motion of any of the cats. It was more like a bear, but a bear this late in the season was as unlikely as a snowbird in July. Perhaps Pete did not reason this out logically, but by whatever method he reached a decision, the result was the same. It was not a bear, and it was coming straight for where Pete stood.

The longhorn switched his tail and looked back at the burro, whose attention was still centered on the slopes below. Pete grunted, as if to say: "A fine partner you've turned out to be." When he looked back the creature was within fifty feet. He was about the ugliest customer

Pete had ever seen in the woods, and there was no doubt whatever but that he had smelled beef and burro, either of which would suit him equally well.

WITH a bellow, Pete walked out to meet the wolverine, expecting an easy victory. This creature was not as tall as Shep and not nearly so quick in his movements. He came on silently, shuffling carelessly, making no attempt to run or dodge. Pete lowered his head and charged. The wolverine flattened out on the ground and let the steer slide over him, then coolly and with no great speed he raised up and sank his teeth in the steer's hind leg, striking for the vital hamstring, a favorite hold of all members of the wolf and skunk families. Had his grip been three inches higher Pete would have been done for, because the wolverine's jaws were capable of cutting the main tendon of a cow or horse. But the merciless little killer had visualized the length of the longhorn's leg, and his teeth had sunk into the smaller muscles below the hock. And once having shut down on his jaws the wolverine would not give up until his grip was loosened by death.

In vain Pete whirled, plunged and kicked. Nothing could jar loose the leverage of those short, heavy jaws. Pete tried to reach back and stab the beast with one horn, but only succeeded in cutting the skin on the back of the wolverine, doing very little damage.

At first Jack had been paralyzed with fear. His muscles had reacted in one terrified leap, then refused to function. He stood braced to keep from falling, his mouth opening and closing in nervous anticipation. The bawling of the angry steer and the undertone of growls from the wol-

verine kept his attention centered on the fight.

When the burro saw that Pete was unable to shake the creature loose, he made a timid effort to help. At the first opportunity he ran toward the whirling fighters and landed a quick, sharp kick in the side of the wolverine, then sprang away, expecting to be chased. The wolverine paid no attention to the burro but held tenaciously to his grip on the leg of the steer.

Pete was tiring. The violent action combined with the pain was weakening him. His plunges became shorter and his kicks were not coming so fast. Suddenly he stopped entirely and stood puffing and snorting, while the blood from his wound crimsoned the snow.

Jack's first success had been encouraging. He walked forward cautiously, as if calculating the exact distance he was from the wolverine, then whirled and put all he had into a mighty kick. Both hoofs landed on the ribs of the killer and cracked two of them, but failed to jar him loose.

Pete saw where the unexpected help was coming from and did not move. Again and again Jack kicked viciously, his courage increasing under his rage until at last he rushed in, struck down with his front feet and broke the back of the wolverine. Pete felt the jaws loosen, and shifting his weight to the injured leg, he landed a side kick that sent the wolverine high into the branches of a tree, where it clung for a moment with its front feet, tried to bite the wood, slipped and fell directly onto the horns of the steer. Pete tossed his helpless enemy high, caught him again and then finally ground his lifeless body beneath his hoofs.

Jack came up close, shivering with

a nervous chill, begging for the comfort of Pete's body. The two animals leaned against each other, resting until they breathed more easily. Then Jack seemed to take the leadership. He started down the path Pete had broken through the snow, and for the first time in his life, Pete accepted the leadership of another animal. His leg hurt. He was tired, almost to death. He wanted to find a dry, warm place where he could rest. The desire to cross the range and seek new adventures had been satisfied for the moment. If it had not been so far back to the Circle C he would have started home.

He was interested in finding out what the burro had on his mind; Jack seemed to know exactly where he was heading for. He was on his way to the one place where he felt secure. It was a shallow cave eroded by the wind out of the soft, sand rock at the base of a cliff. The distance was not more than a mile, but by the time they got there, Pete was about all in.

The air in the cave was much warmer. The burro scent was comforting. Pete lay down with a great sigh of relief. Jack drank from a spring near the cave and then came back to cuddle up close to the huge body of the only friend he had known since old Whisperfoot killed his mother.

IN the morning the sun shone brightly in the cave, driving the frosty patches away. Pete stood up and limped to the spring. He was stiff and sore from last night's fight. Jack was already out on the hillside below the cave, filling his belly from the wild oat patch. He looked up at Pete and made the strange sucking noise that was burro language for: "Come on and have some

oats; they're good."

Pete was not hungry. His body was feverish and he craved water. The warm spring that fed the little stream had not been frozen over, and he drank deeply, then went back to lie in the cave. During the day the temperature rose and filmy clouds gathered over the back range. Pete saw and understood that the pass would soon be closed, and somehow he didn't care. He wanted to stay in Jack's cave until the storm was over. Then he would go back to the Circle C.

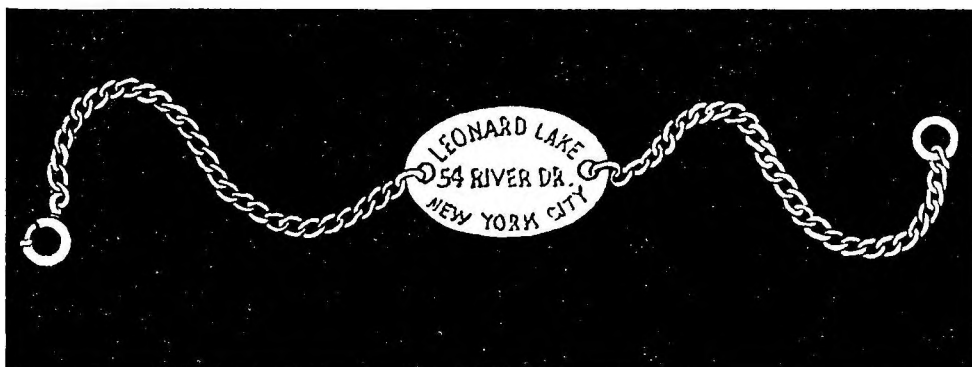
The burro stuffed his body until past midday, then as the wind increased and snow began to fall, he came back to the cave and stood inside the entrance guarding against any of the flesh eaters that might seek refuge from the blizzard.

Pete was quite comfortable. The fat he had stored up against just such an emergency would last him a long time. He chewed his cud and flopped his big ears approvingly at Jack's alertness. By nightfall the storm was in full swing. Pete could see the tops of the trees bending under the wind, which roared on the mountainside, while snow piled up in the gulches. Once a snowslide crashed through the aspen thicket, and rumbled into the canyon below, making the ground tremble.

Inside the cave the air was warm. Jack came and laid down close, puffing over his hearty meal. Pete had never felt more contented. For the first time he had a feeling of comradeship with another animal. He had always held aloof from the gentle Herefords at the Circle C. He had tolerated Shep and felt a strong affection for Dale Carter, but he was making a lowly burro his only pal. How much of this was due to

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the brave fight Jack had put up against the wolverine, we cannot know, but subsequent events show that the longhorn had not forgotten Jack's courage and support.

The storm lasted five days during which time neither of the animals ventured farther than the spring. The morning of the sixth day the temperature was far below zero and the sun put up a losing fight against the low-pressure area of the mountains. Jack bucked a trail to the aspen thicket and ate strips of the dry bark from the trees broken down by the slide. Pete had a drink and stood for a while watching the burro stripping off the dry, tasteless bark. Recalling the racks of timothy at the Circle C, he decided to go there. He bugled the loud signal with which he had led the trail herds, as an invitation to Jack to follow him.

The burro did not understand that Pete was about to desert the cave so he went on rustling chuck. Pete switched his tail, bawled angrily and wallowed through the drift below the cave. He walked along a ridge where the wind had swept away the snow, and had reached the edge of the spruce forest before he turned to look back. He could see the burro working beaverlike to satisfy his hunger with the aspen bark. Again Pete bugled the summons he had taught the Circle C cattle to obey. Jack merely turned as if to inquire why the steer didn't help himself to the abundant food, and went on eating.

Pete turned around and looked more closely at a long tawny body stretched out on a shelf a short distance above the trail Jack had made to his feeding grounds. Whisperfoot had been holed up in a nearby cave since the night he had been

frightened off by the racket of the fight. The entire cat tribe would be out today, digging snowshoe rabbits out of the holes they had made for themselves, and the lion intended to get his meal of coveted burro flesh before he had any competition. He had slipped noiselessly onto the shelf, from which he could spring to the back of the burro as it came toward the cave.

Pete was wise to this manner of attack. He saw at a glance what Whisperfoot planned to do, and deliberately turned and walked back. The cat had not foreseen any such action. Leaping on the back of a defenseless burro was one thing, tackling the salty old longhorn was something decidedly different.

THE longhorn was about a hundred yards from the spot Whisperfoot had chosen for his attack; Jack less than half that. The lion made his decision with catlike treachery. He attempted to cover the distance to the thicket and kill the burro before Pete could get there. One gash in the burro's throat would be enough to finish him, then the lion intended to spring into the branches of a nearby spruce, high above Pete's best efforts to reach him.

The instant Whisperfoot realized that the steer was coming, he leaped from the shelf, dropping as noiselessly as a snowflake.

Any other animal but a burro would have fallen prey to the lion's strategy. Jack's long ears caught the swish of Whisperfoot's body through the snow. He didn't stop to confirm the message with a backward glance, but sprinted through the shallow snow below the drift and ran straight for Pete. The lion jackknifed to cut the burro off before he could escape, and in so doing

made a fatal miscalculation. The burro, whose subtlety was greater than that of any deer, was running at an angle, slightly to the left of the steer, so that when Whisperfoot was forced to change direction he would have to run directly in front of Pete.

Such teamwork was a surprise to Whisperfoot. He put all he had into an effort to head Jack off, and in so doing ran so close to the steer that Pete, lunging ahead with head almost touching the snow, was able to thrust his horns upward beneath the lion, catching him in midair and tossing him snarling and screeching, high above his head.

Jack did not wait to see the finish. Having reached the trail that Pete had broken across the open to the edge of the forest, he kept on to the protection of the trees. The lion, badly wounded by a horn thrust through his body, managed to get in among the aspens where Pete could not reach him. The steer did not attempt to follow, but turned back stubbornly to follow out his first plan of going to the Circle C. He found Jack shaking with terror under the branches of a silver-tipped spruce. Again the burro's mouth was opening and closing expectantly, as if he were utterly helpless as to what to do. Pete pushed him gently with his nose, as much as to say: "Come on, let's get out of this country."

Jack was undecided. Always before, the cave had afforded him protection, but now the cat smell came strong from the cliff. He didn't dare go back there. Pete had proven his worth as a protector, and he acted friendly. Jack decided to throw in with the longhorn.

Pete wallowed paths through the drifts and broke his way through down timber. The burro followed closely behind, turning his head frequently to make sure that the lion was not following. The strange pair of range pals came out into the open ground of the Circle C about noon. All the cattle had been driven into the shelters around the ranchhouse, so the gates were open.

By this time Jack had put his entire confidence in Pete. He walked closely behind the steer, sniffing at the strange smells, and scared almost into fits as Pete led the way past the barns and toward his own private corral.

Dale Carter had been sitting by the fireplace reading. He heard a familiar "*Baw.*" and got up to look out the window. Pete was just turning the corner, a great tawny brindle creature, and just behind him, dodging the strange sights and sounds was a little spider-legged burro. Carter rubbed his eyes, looked again and then yelled:

"Bart, shut the gate to the trail leader's corral. Pete has done gone and had a calf!"

THE END.



GALLOWS GHOST

by Edwin K. Sloat

At the bottom of the low ridge were giant cottonwoods towering nakedly against the cold gray autumn sky. They formed a natural background for the little waterhole about which stood a score or so of lean, bawling cows. The trees, the waterhole and the cows made the only break in the whole, vast wind-swept range with its dead grass riffing and the dead tumbleweeds rolling and bouncing along like endless, hurrying people intent only on getting from one bleak horizon to the other.

The sight of the cows puzzled Grant Turner, for in the last ten miles of his southward trek through this Montana country he had seen no herd nor even strays from which this handful might have come. He glanced again at the trees, and caught sight of a lean-to among them. Beyond the lean-to seemed to be a natural clearing in which one might have expected to see a house. Grant urged his horse forward.

Presently he saw why the cows were bawling. They were thirsty, and there was no water in the hole. It was only a sort of sink filled with the dry muck of dead weeds that ages ago had thrived when there was water here. Grant shook his head, and turned his eyes toward the lean-to.

It was made simply, a tarpaulin fastened to a lass' rope stretched between two trees, drawn tight and staked to the ground to form a leaning canvas shelter against the wind. In a makeshift stable of cottonwood branches close by was a horse.

Dismounting, Grant approached the lean-to. As he stepped around the canvas, he halted in midstride, staring in wide-eyed amazement at a man lying under a buffalo skin on a mattress of dead branches and twigs.

"Henry!" he cried, and his mouth widened in a huge grin. "Henry Bennett. Well, I'll be!"

He started forward with hand outstretched. The man on the bed half rose, his mouth opening eagerly. Then his lips clamped shut and the glad light in his eyes died.

"So you've showed up again," he said bitterly, lying down again.

"But I didn't know you were here," protested Grant. "I thought that you were still back in Oklahoma on the spread—"

"Yeah, *our* spread!" Henry Bennett flung at him harshly. "Equal partners, you and me. You remember? Sure, we'd make a go of it with the sweat of our brows and the blisters of our hands—back to back we'd show the world. You bet I remember! I remember till I couldn't sleep after that night when you got drunk in the Stockman's Bar and gambled away everything we owned, then sneaked out and left me to face the music. Well, I made it good, mister. Every dime of our money you threw to those tindhorn gamblers I made good. It took every acre of our spread and every cow and horse to do it. After that I went out and got a job punching cows at forty and found. If you hadn't dug out like a coward that night you'd learned about it a long time ago."



For an instant everything was blotted out in a blinding flash of light—then Grant saw the bodies of men and horses flung into space.

"But . . . I—" floundered Grant, his face white. He paused, swallowing heavily. "I don't reckon it's any use to tell you that I didn't run out on you that night, Henry, I just tried to run out on myself and found

that I couldn't. I just couldn't face you, or myself, either. But, Henry, I haven't gambled a cent since, nor touched a drink. And I've worked like a horse all up and down this country earning back that money I

squandered—not my share, but yours. In my money belt under my shirt right now I've got more than four hundred bucks saved up for that. And right now I'm on my way down to Sonora to take a job as gun guard for a mine. With that job I'll save it faster than ever—"

"I want none of your money," said Bennett harshly. "We're through, washed up, finished! I've flied on this land and I've scraped together a few cows, and I'm starting over again—by myself this time. Do you understand? I want no more of you, or anything of yours!"

With that Henry Bennett turned his face toward the slanting canvas away from his former partner, and said no more.

GRANT stood there stiff and white. Through his mind burned torturing memories of the stormy, cold nights when he and Henry were trail pards, shared the makin's with each other, and every day counted their money and dreamed of the time when they'd have enough to make the down payment on the old, run-down Star M spread, telling each other that some day they'd make it the biggest outfit on the Cimarron. How long ago that all seemed now, and how broken and dead!

A heavy gust of wind rattled the canvas lean-to and sent the dead leaves flying. Henry's horse, nearly hidden in its makeshift stable, shivered. Even the thirsty cows out by the dry sink momentarily ceased their bawling. Grant stared dismally about the little camp.

A huge, brown and yellow earthenware bean pot stood beside the gray ashes of the dead fire. At the sight of it a fresh pang struck through Grant, for it must have been the one possession that Henry—big, steady-

going, honest Henry—had kept out of the breakup of the Star M venture. Henry was as proud of his baked beans as a boy—"cook 'em just like ma used to," he'd brag. And he did, too, Grant remembered. His mouth had often watered for just a taste of the succulent brown contents of that big jar. Ruthlessly, he thrust the thought from him.

"How come you're in bed?" he demanded.

"Busted leg," replied Henry, facing him once more. "Started to blast out the sink to find the spring, but the first charge of blasting powder threw a rock that rolled against my leg. But don't get the idea that you're horning in on this claim. It's mine; nobody else's, just mine. You understand? No drunken weakling is going to gamble this out from under me."

Grant flinched. It was a full moment before he could trust himself to speak.

"I'm not asking for any part of it," he said hoarsely. "You couldn't make me a present of it on a silver platter. I was only thinking of you as I'd think of any stranger I found like this with a broken leg. How are you going to make it through till you get on your feet again?"

"I'll make it," replied Henry heavily. "The medico happened to pass an hour or two after it happened and he set my leg. He'll be back."

"But you can't live in a lean-to this winter. Why, it gets forty below—" Grant began to protest.

"Listen, you!" roared Henry, struggling up to a sitting position. "I don't want anything of you! Get out of here! Go on down to your gun-slick job in Sonora and make yourself a thousand bucks a month. It won't do you any good. The first

tinhorn gambler that finds out you've got it will trim you for the whole roll."

"I'm going!" shouted Grant savagely. "I wouldn't even scrape my feet on you or anything of yours! Let your handful of crow baits out there die of thirst! Freeze to death yourself in the first blizzard, for all I care! I'm done with you!"

Angrily he tramped away from the lean-to.

The cows staggered out of Grant's way as he neared his horse. He hesitated, foot in stirrup, staring at their hollow flanks and pleading eyes. It tore at his heart strings to see them suffering, for like a true cowman, he felt almost as deeply for the welfare and comfort of cattle as he did for man.

Nearby on the dry, spongy muck lay Henry's spade, and beyond it was the ragged hole torn in the surface of the sink by the charge of blasting powder. A rock, doubtless, the one that had broken Henry's leg, lay nearby. The whole set-up was plain. Those giant trees could never have flourished like this without an ample supply of water for their roots, and that was strong proof that the spring that once fed this waterhole was still somewhere under the ground.

The nearest cow bawled again at Grant. He shook his head in helpless surrender, removed his toe from the stirrup, and shed his heavy sheep-lined coat. Picking up the spade, he attacked the dry spongy surface. The spongy mass came loose in great chunks as he drove a trench across the sink. When that trench was done, he paced off a couple of steps and started another. It began to look like a month-long job, crisscrossing the sink with trenches in his search for the spring.

ABOUT two hours later, Grant's spade picked up mud near the center of the sink. He worked like a madman, throwing out the mud which became sloppier and sloppier with each spadeful as he excavated down over three feet. Now from the seepage flowing into the excavation it became evident that this was the drain that was emptying the sink and Grant dug deeper to find where it was going down beneath his feet.

The widened pit proved to be walled in with natural rock all about him. At four feet the mud gave way to sand underfoot. Grant cleaned the mud away, and paused a moment to grin and unconsciously wipe his face with a muddy hand while he watched the trickling water all about him sink down into the mud.

Then he got out of the hole and brought the rock that had broken Henry's leg, plumping it down into the sand at the bottom of the hole. He had to fight the cows away now, for the scent of water brought them baying excitedly to the hole. After driving them away with the flat of the spade, he got more rocks till he covered the sand with them.

Then he coated rocks with branches and twigs from the trees, and tamped fresh sod into it till he had an almost leak-proof floor in the pit. At once it began to fill with water.

Grinning triumphantly, Grant stood by till the hole was full enough for the bawling, crowding cattle to reach, then went back to the lean-to, shivering now in the chill wind.

As Grant piled dry wood and grass on the dead fire, Henry turned his head and looked at him.

"Where'd you get that mud on your face?" he asked sullenly. "I thought you had gone."

"I found that spring in the sink you tried to blast loose, and fixed

the leak that was letting the water get away," retorted Grant, putting water on to boil. "But don't get any fancy notion that I did it to help you out. Not on your life. I just couldn't stand to listen to those cows bawl for water any longer."

Henry turned silently over to face the canvas again. Grant waited till the water was warm, then washed his face and hands. Henry spoke again without turning.

"Better fix yourself something hot to eat, and there's plenty of beans in the big pot yonder. And this is no handout," he added surlily. "It's the only pay I can offer to a hand who's done work for me."

Grant whirled, a retort hot on his tongue, but abruptly clamped his lips together. Angrily he poked up the fire and set about making sour dough. Later when the bacon was crisp and hot, the beans warmed and sour-dough bread and coffee steaming, he carried a heaped plate of food to Henry. The latter accepted it silently, but wolfed down the last morsel like a starving man. Mumbling his thanks, he turned his face to the canvas again.

Grant wondered how long Henry's leg had been broken and how long it had been since the homesteader had had a decent meal, but he was too angry to ask, and Henry was too proud to offer the information.

After washing the dishes, and putting more wood on the fire, Grant sat down for a cigarette. Suddenly he broke the awkward silence to announce:

"I'll stay tonight. After all, you've got a fire and water, and there's no other suitable place hereabouts."

Henry made no comment. Grant rolled into his blankets beside the blaze. A couple of times during the

night the cold roused him, and he heaped more wood on the fire.

MORNING dawned cold and gray. Grant got up, stretched and stared about him. Henry was still snoring under his blankets and buffalo hide. Grant yawned and started the fire for breakfast. As he reached for the coffeepot, a sound of hoofs jerked his head up.

A rider was approaching the sink where half a dozen cows stood at the edge of the water which now covered the whole sink and soon would begin to drain off along the base of the ridge past the trees. The rider halted and stared a long time at the water, then glanced up and, seeing Grant watching him, rode away. His horse bore an L-Up brand.

"Who was that?" asked Henry from the bed.

"He rode an L-Up horse," replied Grant, staring after the dwindling rider.

"The L-Up?" Henry's voice held a faint note of anxiety. "That's the biggest outfit in these parts. Lies over to the east of me. Hombre named Boegger owns it. People hereabouts call it the Gallows Brand instead of the L-Up, and they got reason to. Oh, well, Boegger doesn't own this land. I looked that up before I filed on it. I reckon he never thought it worth while."

"He may now," remarked Grant, "since there's water here."

"Maybe," Henry admitted heavily, turning toward the canvas again.

Grant scowled, then shrugged. After all, it was Bennett's funeral and not his. Henry should have thought of all these things when he staked his claim on this patch of range.

But the memory of that rider kept bothering Grant as he silently sad-

dlled his horse and got ready to leave. Then he remembered the natural clearing beyond the lean-to and went to look it over.

Henry had driven stakes to mark out a sizable square in the center of the clearing; and against a nearby tree, protected by dead branches, were a couple of windows with the glass already puttied in them. Close by was a door frame and door with the hinges partly attached. Grant's eyes widened.

"A sod house!" he muttered. "And a big one, too. Bet he's figuring on four rooms."

He found himself thinking of the sod home he'd known as a child, its soothing coolness in the heat of summer, and the comforting warmth of its thick, windproof walls in winter when the blizzards lashed and howled at it in thirty-below weather. It was the finest home a man could have, Grant thought, even if the snakes liked it, too, and had a habit of moving in on you, and the roof leaked when it rained too hard. The one at home, he recalled, always turned green in the spring when the grass grew, and late in the summer the grass and weeds on the roof, which was of sod, too, grew so tall the house looked as though it needed a haircut.

Grant had always had some ideas of his own about how a sod house should be properly built. This one had an ideal location. A natural opening in the trees made a pathway that would lead up to the front door, and the yard would be shaded by a monster cottonwood that stood there.

Grant found himself walking back to the lean-to for the spade.

"When are you pulling out?" asked Henry, without turning his face from the canvas.

"In a little while," answered

Grant, then added: "I . . . uh . . . I want to wait and see that the waterhole don't leak. But don't flatter yourself that I'm doing it for you. I'm thinking of the cows."

Henry made no answer, and Grant hurried back to the clearing.

There was suitable sod north of the trees at the foot of the gentle ridge. Grant measured a strip about fifteen inches wide and ten or twelve feet long. It was about three inches deep when he spaded it free and rolled it up. Carrying it to the site of the wall facing the pathway through the natural opening in the trees to the east, he unrolled the sod on the ground and went back for another strip which he added to the first, then began laying strips one on top of the other.

The wall was nearly waist-high when he knocked off, humming to himself, and went to the lean-to to get dinner.

"I see you haven't left yet," Henry said. "Is the waterhole leaking?"

"I'm going to give it a fair test," replied Grant irritably, as he spooned baked beans for them both out of the big bean pot.

Henry made no other comment.

IT was late in the afternoon and the wall was nearly shoulder-high when a couple of men came riding up the natural trail through the trees and halted under the monster cottonwood before the house. Grant, his gun buckled on and tied down to his leg, stepped out to meet them.

One rider was a tall, thin man with close-set eyes that looked hard enough to cut glass. His gun handle stood out on his lanky thigh so as to meet exactly the sweep of his gun hand. If he had worn a placard bearing the word, "gun fighter," he could have identified himself no better. The other man was short and

wide across the shoulders, with a stubble of beard that made his face look dirty. His blue eyes were narrow and hard. He did the talking while the lanky gunman listened.

"Well, Bennett, I see you're starting a house," observed the stocky man. "Too bad since you're squatting on L-Up land."

So they thought he was Henry, thought Grant. That meant they believed him to be alone.

"Boegger doesn't own this land," he said evenly, stepping casually to one side so that both riders were bunched and nearly in line. He shuffled his feet slightly so that his high heels were firmly placed in the ground to balance him against the slap of his hand on the familiar gun handle on his thigh, and the swift draw of iron. "This claim is filed legally. The only trouble is that your outfit has just discovered there's water here and wants to hog it."

"Water or not, you'd better pull stakes," warned the stocky man tonelessly. "We ain't called the Gallows Brand for nothing."

"Mister," Grant drawled, "you're trespassing. Tell your boss I said so, and tell him if he's got the guts to come and see me personally instead of sending a couple of saddle bums, I've got something important to say to him."

The stocky man grinned thinly. Grant half expected him to go for his gun, but instead the L-Up man rested both hands on the pommel of his saddle and indicated the nearby cottonwoods with a jerk of his head.

"The boss said to pick out a good tree," he remarked. "I'll tell him personally what you said. Come on, Moke," he added to the lanky gunman, and they rode off.

Grant started after another roll of sod.

"Grant, come here." It was Henry calling from the lean-to.

Grant went to him.

"You fool," burst out Henry angrily. "They'll ride in here, a whole passel of 'em—gun fighters are all Boegger keeps on his string. Then they'll hold a kangaroo court and string you by the neck from the highest limb they can throw a lass' rope over. More than one nester around here has kicked his life out at the end of Boegger's lass ropes."

"I reckon I owe you an apology, Henry," said Grant. "I forgot that I was speaking for you out there. I just said what I felt—or would have felt if it had been my place. I'm sorry. I'll help get you away from here."

"You'll go to blazes!" roared Henry, his face reddening. "You nor any other ranny is going to shove me off this claim. It's mine, I tell you! You're the one that's got to pull out."

A FLEETING grin touched Grant's lean face. "And what will you do? Get the sheriff?" he asked.

"Sheriff!" spat Henry. "He's Boegger's man and he stays right in his office at Wagon Wheel when there's any trouble like this. Besides, it's nearly forty miles to town, and word that you'd gone there would reach the Gallows ranchhouse and you'd be dry-gulched long before you got back here. Why didn't you pull out like I told you to? I don't want you around here anyhow. You just make me trouble."

"Maybe I only brought the trouble to a head a little quicker," said Grant mildly. "Anyway, you're the one who's leaving if you can ride. No use having two of us draped from a limb. Now shut up. I'm the one to stay. You're already crippled and

worse than no help at all in a fight. I'm supposed to be a little slick with a six-shooter myself, you know, or they wouldn't be offering me top wages to come to Sonora. So you can make ready to drift pronto now while there's still daylight."

"Me drift out?" Henry roared. "Why, you cheap, miserable trouble maker! You'd make me a coward, too, would you?"

"You listen to me!" shouted Grant savagely. "I got you into this trouble all by myself by shooting off my mouth. You're crippled and didn't have anything to do with it, so you can just haul your freight out of here. I may have lost my head and gambled away our ranch and our savings, but nobody is ever going to say I left you to swing from a cottonwood limb because I wouldn't face my own music. You'll leave here and leave here pronto if I have to tie you onto your bronc, to make you go. Is that clear?"

Henry glared at him, and at last nodded reluctantly.

"That's better," said Grant. "I'd say if you know anybody you could ride to for help, go to it. It might be even worth while to try the sheriff."

"It might," agreed Henry heavily. "But I won't leave till morning."

"All right," said Grant, relieved to have the thing settled.

GRANT slept uneasily. Once or twice he thought he heard prowlers around the camp, but after straining his ears breathlessly for minutes to catch some sound, he decided he'd been mistaken and returned to his trouble slumber. When dawn awakened him he sat upright in his blankets unable to shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

His eyes sought Henry's bed, and

widened in alarm. Henry was gone! The bed was vacant. Grant leaped up, staring around. The makeshift stable was empty, too.

Grant shrugged and forced a grin. The stubborn fool had ridden away in the night, unwilling to face his old partner for the farewell in the morning light. But in spite of Grant's effort to keep it, his grin faded, and his shoulders slumped wearily. He told himself that now he was getting a taste of what Henry must have felt after his partner had gambled away the ranch and pulled out on him without saying good-by.

The blazes with it! Grant straightened his shoulders savagely. He wouldn't have to worry about it much longer, anyway. Boegger and his gunmen would be here before long, and at least they'd know they'd tied into something before they strung him up. He hoped fervently that Boegger wouldn't fail to show up. That range-grabbing son was the one man he wanted to pay off in hot lead.

Meantime Grant told himself that he'd merely go on building the sod house as though nothing had happened. It was his way to go on doing just what was at hand in other times of crisis and this was no different. But first he'd have a good breakfast—and a good plateful of Henry's baked beans.

He turned to the bean pot and halted to stare. The pot was gone. He shrugged. After all, it had contained the only cooked food in camp and Henry would need food on that forty-mile trip for the sheriff. Glumly, Grant cooked himself some breakfast.

THE Gallows Brand crew arrived about midmorning. Grant saw them riding into the natural drive through the trees that led up to the

house, and cast a frantic glance at the horizon, but in vain, for there was no hint of Henry or the sheriff. Then he stared hopelessly at the on-coming riders.

They were headed by a massive, black-browed man, with Moke, the lanky gunman, riding at his side. From Moke's saddle a long, looped lariat dangled conspicuously. There was no hesitancy nor trickery about the way they approached. They merely came in a body, insolent of the lone man behind the sod wall and careless of any danger he could offer them.

Again Grant's eyes sought the horizon and his heart sank in hopeless despair. There was no sign of any riders out there. Henry had failed—no, maybe not that. First he'd have to get to the sheriff, then he'd have to convince the lawman that he had to come. It wasn't humanly possible to get a posse back here so early in the day, even though Henry had started before dawn. Grant abandoned all hope and looked back at the riders.

They had hauled up under the giant cottonwood that was to have shaded the yard of the house. Grant saw that he had a decision to make at once, either to fight from behind his sod wall, or to step out and try to bluff them. If he remained back here, they'd scatter and cut him down from all sides. If he stepped out, they'd remain together, and at least they'd make a larger target for his bullets when the shooting began.

He drew a long breath and stepped casually round the end of the sod wall. Then he saw his mistake. Three men already had drawn their guns and were covering him. They'd shoot him before he could get his iron free. Now he might not be able

to kill Boegger, after all. If he had remained behind his sod wall, he could at least have accomplished that aim.

The owner of the L-Up rested hamlike fists on his thighs and bent his cold eyes upon Grant, standing lean and alert before him.

"You sent word you had something to tell me, Bennett," he rumbled. "Get it said mighty quick. You've refused to get off my land. Soon as you've had your say, the boys will pick out a likely limb and we'll hold the trial."

Grant still managed to grin, but his lips were dry and his mouth tasted like cotton. His eyes darted a final, despairing glance at the empty horizon, and all hope died. But a savage, ruthless determination welled up within him. He was going to kill that big sidewinder on the horse. They just couldn't pour bullets into him fast enough to keep him from doing that.

"So you've got nothing to say?" rumbled Boegger. "Just as I thought. You tried to run a sandy on me. Well, my fine buckaroo, I'm not running any sandy on you. I'm going to stretch your neck plenty."

The gunman, Moke, began to lift the coiled lariat. Through Grant's despairing mind flashed a sudden feeling of thankfulness that at least Henry was safe. At least this would pay off some of the debt that was owed Henry.

Moke lifted the lariat. Somewhere among the men the sound of a cocking gun clicked loud in the unearthly stillness. Grant felt the muscles of his gun arm tighten. Then something fell out of the giant cottonwood, something brown and yellow that made Grant think of Henry Bennett's huge bean pot. A wisp of smoke trailed it down. A startled

rider yelled. Next instant the whole world was blotted out in a blinding flash of light and a hideous blast of thunder.

Grant felt himself hurled backward a dozen feet, and he came up staggering. The massive Boegger and his horse flew through the air and smashed into the sod wall of the house. Wall, horse and Boegger came down, with the big cowman crushed underneath. Other men and horses were flung into space.

Moke was writhing on the ground a dozen feet away. He came up, twisting, gun in hand. The gun blazed and Grant felt the searing lead along his thigh. Then his own gun bucked in his fist, and Moke went over backward in a sprawling, motionless heap.

Two other men were shooting up into the giant cottonwood. Grant, reeling on his feet, managed to put a slug through one man as he levered his carbine for a second shot. The other turned on Grant and their guns blazed together. Grant's bullet missed. He had no idea where the L-Up rider's slug went. As the man frantically jacked in a fresh cartridge, Grant fired again, and the gunny's head jerked crazily from the sledge-hammer slap of a bullet against his skull.

Grant stared about dazedly over the smoking muzzle of his .45. There was no movement among the sprawling men, and only an occasional horse kicked. A sound in the tree jerked his head up. A man was sliding painfully down a thick limb, holding his white bandaged leg out carefully to avoid contact with the tree trunk.

"Henry!" bellowed Grant wildly. "What the—how the—"

"Help me on that last drop," gasped Henry. "I'm so stiff and cold I nearly fell out of the tree before they showed up."

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THERE was more than enough blasting powder to fill the bean-pot," Henry explained later while Grant tried to hurry the warming coffee. "But I left room enough to shove in a couple of sticks of dynamite I had. You were so restless you nearly caught me sneaking out of camp. I took the horse over the ridge and staked him out. Then I climbed the tree and pulled the bean pot up to me with my lass rope.

"I was afraid to tell you about my plan for fear you'd get bull-headed and wouldn't let me go through with it," he went on. "It was a pretty skinny chance at best, but the only thing I could figure out. I'd heard that Boegger always came busting in like this with a whole bunch. If a nester went for his gun, a couple or three Gallows men, who had their

irons ready when they rode up, shot him through the arms and wrists so he'd be harmless and yet alive for the trial and the hanging. Boegger always insisted on a trial. It was a kind of a hobby with him. It's a dirty shame, though, that he and his horse had to ruin our sod house."

"Did you say *our* sod house?" asked Grant, scarcely believing his ears.

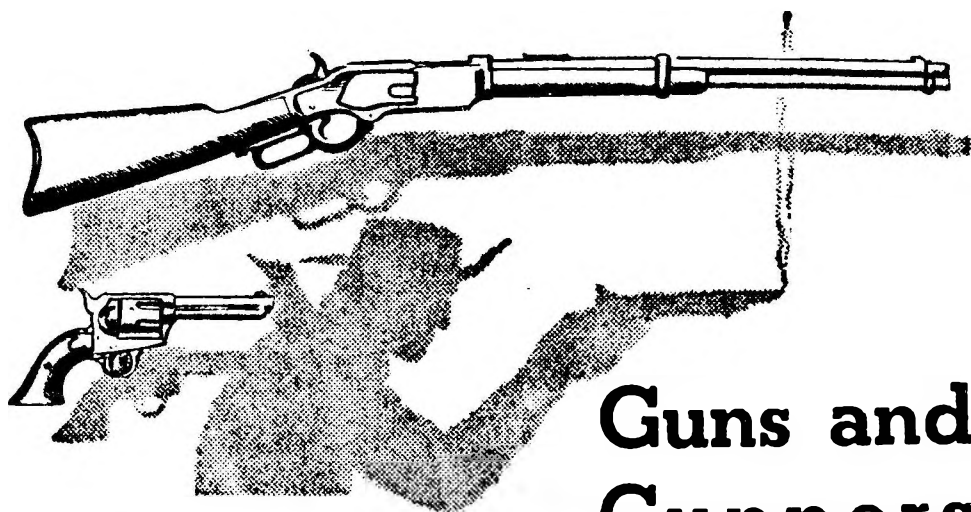
"That's what I said, if you want it that way," replied Henry. "This spread will be plenty big enough for both of us. And it sure gets lonesome here by myself."

"Do I want it that way?" shouted Grant. "I'll say I do! And, Henry, don't you ever worry about me again. I learned my gambling lesson the hard way. Let's shake on it, pard. That's right. Ouch!"

THE END

LOADING CATTLE

The narrow-gauge railroads that penetrated the rich valleys between the mountain ranges brought a new problem to the early cattlemen, who were quick to see the advantage of delivering fat cattle to the Nebraska feed lots, instead of trailing them several hundred miles to market. Poles suitable for stout corrals were scarce in the valleys. The mining camps were taking the lumber from the few sawmills as fast as it could be cut. Timber for extensive stockyards was out of the question, so the strongest of the slabs were hauled from the mills and made into a chute leading from a small pen to the door of the cattle car. A few gentle cows were mixed in with the wild range steers that were to be shipped, and the herd was held on the smooth ground near the loading chute. Experienced cowboys, mounted on their top cutting horses, worked to put the number of steers required to fill a car into the little pen. It was wild and exciting work, calling for the best the men and horses could give. When, after several minutes of racing, dodging and pushing, enough steers for a carload were penned, then the job of forcing the wild animals to walk up the shaky floor began. Sometimes the heavy weight of the terrified cattle ripped a panel out of the fence and the whole lot went scampering back to the herd. This condition of affairs could not last long. When the time for the next year's shipment arrived, small but fairly convenient loading corrals had been built by the railroads in one of the larger valleys, and another of the cowboy's exciting experiences had vanished.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

We warned a lot of the boys, but, as usual, many of them thought it was a bluff. There would be plenty of guns available whenever they wanted to step into a store and buy them. Try to get your favorite gun now! Most factories have almost completely stopped the manufacture of sporting guns.

But don't be downhearted. There are still millions of used guns available, and lots of the boys are offering these for sale. Prices are higher because of the demand, but if you buy a used gun, get a modern type; you'll be stuck if you buy an old gun.

There is much interest in gun repairs at this time, the boys have decided to see that what guns they have are in proper operating condition. Here is another warning: If your gun needs repair work, have it done *now!* Don't wait until fall. Every day you delay will make it just that much more difficult.

Many of our readers are writing this department for information con-

cerning the refinishing of metal parts of a gun. Yes, this can be done, but unless you have lots of time and lots of patience, better not tackle it. The job isn't easy.

Don't fall for certain preparations advertised as "quick" which you just "apply and let dry." These are just blue lacquer finishes painted on—and they peel right off, making the gun look worse than ever. They will not stand the "fingernail test." Such finishes are made to take your money—not refinish your gun.

To blue a gun it is necessary first to disassemble it and handle each part separately. Parts to be blued must have all of the old finish removed. If it has been nickel plated, don't touch it. If blued, use very fine emery cloth and finally crocus cloth. It will take a lot of elbow grease and time, but those parts to be blued must be polished as brightly

● Next week's issue will contain formulas and instructions for completing the refinishing of your gun. Watch for it, and save this issue for reference.

as though they were chrome-plated. Don't attempt to blue until you have them so prepared.

Never blue a barrel and frame or receiver until you have practiced a bit with small parts. Better still, use scrap steel to practice. If you spoil this, you still have your gun.

To the average home mechanic I greatly dislike recommending the bluing of guns and parts. Too many people seem to think it a very simple process, hence the suggested practice. Small parts are easier to handle than a barrel and receiver. One learns quickly that it is easy to turn out a barrel badly streaked with different tones of blue—and very difficult to avoid.

You still want to try it?

O. K. Let's assume that you have polished the metal to a mirror finish. Check it carefully to see that there are no scratches. Take the scrap steel you have so polished and deliberately make a few scratches at one point—with a light touch of sandpaper. The idea is to determine the result of those scratches on the finished job.

Now clean the work. Hands must *never* touch the metal. Scrub with clean rags and gasoline. Remember that a barrel must be coated inside with light grease and both ends tightly plugged with wood. Make these plugs long enough to be used as handles during the finishing. The parts must then be boiled to remove all traces of oil. A tank, large enough to hold them, must be made and so designed that heat may be applied to the tank to boil the water inside.

Small parts may be cleaned and refinished in small metal tanks, but don't try it in any of the wife's cooking dishes of aluminum or other materials. If you do, the effect on those dishes will be such that friend wife will be greatly displeased and you may have to hibernate some place until *she* cools off.

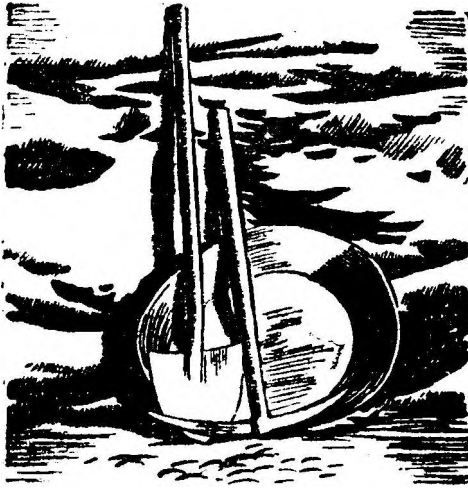
Locate some stiff iron wire. Make a batch of holders to support the parts in your tank so they can be submerged and still kept away from the bottom. At the same time, attach wire to the parts so they may be easily removed without touching with the hands. Remember that these parts will be hot during the finishing operation.

Roughly measure the water you put into the tank and add a heaping teaspoonful of lye to each gallon of water. Put the tank over the fire and let the solution boil furiously for about fifteen minutes. The lye solution will remove all traces of grease. Just a word of caution. Do not put parts into the tank until the lye is dissolved or you may ruin that mirror finish you have worked so hard to achieve.

To tell when they are clean, lift the parts out quickly and see if they are wet. If any grease remains, return and keep boiling. Don't hold the parts out of the water more than a few seconds or they will rust.

When you are sure they are clean, run clear water on them, empty and rinse your tank, and boil again in clean water to remove all traces of lye. You are now ready to start the finishing process.

● This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil 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.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

DRAGLINE dredges, sometimes called "doodlebugs," are a fairly new means of handling large quantities of placer-gold gravel. In suitable ground such outfits are both efficient and economical. Dirt that holds as little as ten cents' worth of recoverable gold in a cubic yard can be mined profitably under favorable conditions with a dragline dredge. Twenty-five and fifty-cent-a-yard stuff workable by this method may prove a regular little bonanza for the placer miner.

In California alone dragline dredges have been responsible for about eight million dollars' worth of placer gold annually during the last few years. That is a lot of gold for a recovery system that was virtually unknown and in the experimental stage ten years ago. It demonstrates in the surest way possible the soundness of the method. In addition dragline operators in other placer fields in Arizona, Nevada, Idaho,

Oregon and so forth have paralleled the California successes.

S. W., of Phoenix, Arizona, brought up the subject of doodlebug placer-gold handling this week. His letter says: "I am interested in dragline methods of placering. What are the essential features of these outfits? In what sort of ground do they work best?"

There are several types of dragline dredges in operation, S. W. Briefly the typical plant is mounted on a floating barge (though some are dry-land dredges) and consists of a hopper into which the gravel is dumped, a long, heavy, revolving screen or trommel to receive the gravel and a belt conveyor to stack the coarse tailings behind the barge.

In operation large streams of water are pumped into both hopper and trommel. Stones and rocks are carried out to the stacker while the gold-carrying finer sands and gravel are washed through the screen holes in the trommel either to a series of regular sluice boxes in which the gold is recovered, or in another popular type, into Ainalay bowls which wash the sand by whirling, centrifugal force, leaving the gold in the bottom of the bowl.

Smaller units are frequently powered by a Diesel engine directly belted to a jack shaft to which the various components of the machine are connected. In many of the larger plants a Diesel power unit is used which drives an electric generator, and operation of the various units is by separate motors, controlled through a central switchboard.

Other essential items are of course the dragline itself, and a caterpillar type tractor, or bulldozer. The latter is needed to clear land of brush, small trees and so forth, to remove waste overburden, to form the neces-

sary dredges ponds and for a host of other incidental uses around the dragline camp.

Like all other specific methods of placer mining, dragline dredging has its limitations. It is not a cure all for any extensive deposit of sand and gravel that happens to contain gold. In the first place accurate and extensive preliminary prospecting must be done to determine first the average recoverable gold content of the ground intended to be worked, and secondly whether there is sufficient yardage of such gravel available to undertake profitably its exploitation by a method requiring a sizable outlay in money and machinery. And it must be demonstrated that the ground in question can be worked efficiently by dragline methods.

One of the first things to check, assuming the yardage and gold content are present in a deposit, is its depth. Dragline placer mining usually is only adaptable where the bed-rock is fairly shallow, say fifteen to twenty feet. A general rule to follow is that the depth of the ground mined should not exceed one third the length of the dragline boom. Large plants have and are excavating from fifty to seventy feet deep. These are exceptional. The shallower depth first mentioned is a more practical limit for small and medium-sized dragline operations.

Aside from the depth of the gravel, the type of the material to be washed

is important. Loose gravel with nearly half-clean sand is the dragline operator's dream. Clayey stuff, or hard, cemented gravel, is a nightmare. Clay won't disintegrate fast enough in the ordinary trommel to release its gold values. And a dragline scoop has difficulty in digging into hard, cemented gravel.

Another important item is water supply. Again the necessary supply depends on the condition of the material and other operating conditions. Thus in arid country where the material excavated is dry, water in appreciable amounts over ordinary needs is required to saturate the gravel. As a rule the actual amount of water necessary is governed mainly by the amount of clay present and the relative coarseness of the material. The range is probably from 450 gallons a minute up.

The digging and washing capacity of dragline dredges depends both on the size of the plant and the conditions under which it operates. In suitable ground the plants will make pay dirt fly. An outfit using a dragline dipper of one or one and a quarter cubic yard capacity should be able to handle anywhere from fifty to well over a hundred yards of gravel an hour.

To C. T., Montclair, New Jersey: Pure platinum is a white metal with a slight, grayish tinge. Its electric conductivity is relatively low.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Our first letter this week is from Mrs. Alma McGowan, and all we can say is this Pen Pal sure doesn't believe in sparing our feelings any! It's natural when you're being criticized to look around for an alibi, so if we plead "not guilty" to her charge that it takes forever for a letter to get printed in the Hollow Tree, on the ground that it's not our fault that Western Story goes to press long before its date of issue, and that the space allotted to us for printing your letters doesn't enable us to keep abreast of the tremendous correspondence we receive here at the post office—you can't blame us, can you? But I guess we need more than an alibi to get us out of this tight, so rally 'round, members of the Tree, will you? If you answer Mrs. McGowan's plea pronto—before she's "gone or forgotten"—that ought to be proof enough that her experience in getting replies to pleas printed here isn't the general outcome. So while we hang and rattle, how about coming to the rescue?

Dear Miss Rivers:

Long ago I sent you a request to put my lonely name in your Hollow Tree department, but have never seen it appear. Won't you please do so now? I have been reading Western Story for seven years, that's how much I like it. I am a divorcee, forty-nine years old. My only child is in the draft and I expect some lonely hours in future. Therefore I would so appreciate a few Pen Pals near my own age. My one criticism of your department is the almost impossibility of getting your name in it and the requests you do print are so old by the time they appear, the writer is either dead, gone or forgotten. I wrote to several and that has been my experience, though I did find one pleasant correspondent recently.—Mrs. Alma McGowan, 556 C North Commonwealth Avenue, Los Angeles, California

Western Story is tops with Lionel—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am only a boy of fourteen, but would be glad to have my letter posted in the Hollow Tree. I've discovered that Western Story is really the tops. I'd like to hear from Pen Pals—I don't care how old they are—living near or far. I've some swell snapshots of the East to trade, too. My favorite sports are Ping-pong, football, basketball and baseball.—Lionel Scott, 1708 E. 84th Street, Chicago, Illinois

Some cheery letters needed here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Were any of you friends of the Hollow Tree ever in a big city lonely and homesick? That is how I feel just now. I've been in Philadelphia only a short time—I was sent here on government work—and being a very quiet person I find it hard to make friends. I lost my husband and beloved parents recently and suddenly, and the top of the world seems to have fallen on me. I'm just an ordinary person, have a high-school and business-college education. I am very fond of tennis and baseball, love to dance and enjoy a good movie. My favorite hobby is music, especially the piano. Won't some of you nice folks who, at some time have perhaps been as lonely as I am, write to me?—Mrs. Janice Owen, 52nd Street Station, P. O. Box 9323, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Dorothy is a statuesque farmerette—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May a lonely farm girl from Oklahoma join the Hollow Tree? I am eighteen years old and have long brown curly hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. My height is five feet ten, and I weigh one hundred forty pounds. I would like to correspond with Pen Pals from far and near. Some of my hobbies are writing letters and collecting recipes and picture post cards from each State. I love all sports, especially basketball, baseball and football. I will exchange snapshots with all who care to and will answer each and every letter that I receive. I will be looking for those letters, Pen Pals, so please don't disappoint me.—Dorothy Berry, Rt. No. 2, Ada, Oklahoma

Don't overlook this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if you would be so kind as to drop this letter in the Hollow Tree from a lad twenty-two years old who is a shut-in. My hobbies are collecting snapshots and writing letters, and one of my favorite pastimes is reading. I would like to hear from girls between sixteen and twenty-five years of age and will do my best to answer all letters. I will gladly exchange snapshots, too.—Edward A. Revine, Darlingford, Manitoba, Canada

Hitch your wagon to Bernice's—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here comes a small-town girl who wants to be a Pen Pal to all between the ages of twelve and twenty, especially high-school boys and girls. Would you like a thumbnail description of yours truly? I'm fifteen years old, five feet five inches tall and weigh one hundred ten pounds. I have brown curly hair and dark-brown eyes. At present I'm an ardent dancer and play the Spanish guitar, harmonica, alto sax and accordion. I love good music, but am not a "hep cat." My favorite sport is horseback riding, and I also love all ball sports. I have "hitched my wagon to a star" and want to be a doctor, or—second best—an author. I will answer all letters as quickly as possible, even if only by a post card. I already have quite a few Pen Pals and love to write to them, so here's hoping I'm lucky enough to get quite a few more.—Bernice Shackelford, Route 1, Gordo, Alabama

How about an Indian powwow?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'll give my letter a flip and hope it doesn't miss your Hollow Tree. I am sixteen years old and have black eyes and hair and a dark complexion. I'm a three-quarter Sioux Indian and would like to hold a powwow with girls and boys between fifteen and twenty years of age. I will exchange snapshots with everyone, so come on, girls and boys, and fill my mailbox.—Tom Howell, Caraway, Arkansas

This plea comes from Missouri, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely grass widow (thirty-four years old and am very much in need of Pen Pals. I am five feet one, weigh one hundred eighty pounds and have dark hair. I live in and own my own home in a small town and would like to hear from anyone around my age. I love all sports and dancing very much. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.—Mrs. Mary Throckmorton, Barnard, Missouri

Girls have the edge here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a newcomer to the ranks of Western Story magazine, but like it very much, particularly the Hollow Tree. Could I persuade you to print a letter from me in your Pen Pal corner? I am all alone here in this city and certainly would appreciate it if I could come home at night and find a nice bunch of letters waiting for me. I'd like to hear from everyone from six to ninety, the world over, but would particularly like to hear from your feminine readers. Girls are unquestionably the better letter writers while most men haven't the time to write; that is the reason I express this preference. I was

born in Bombay, India, and brought to the United States at the tender age of two. I am six feet six inches tall, and have blue eyes and dark-brown hair. I have traveled quite extensively and visited twelve foreign countries. I like to write and receive letters and will answer all, regardless of cost. All who send a photo in their first letter will receive one of mine in return. The others will come later. (Cheerio.—Richard (Dixie) Baisley, 1316 Troost Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri)

Richard has varied interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a boy fourteen years old and would like some Pen Pals between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, interested in aviation, ranching and basketball. I would especially like Pen Pals from Texas and New Mexico, but I want others to write, too. I will answer all letters.—Richard Anderson, Maloneton, Kentucky

Jeanne sounds like a glamour girl—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm longing to write letters to boys and girls between sixteen and twenty-eight years of age. I'm seventeen, and love to dance and sing. I'm in my first year of college and drive a '41 Packard twelve. I've traveled all over from coast to coast and border to border, and have visited all the South Sea Islands. I love to write letters and will answer everyone, although I'd prefer to hear from the male members of the Tree, so come on and sling some ink my way, please.—Jeanne Thrane, Weston, Nebraska

Louise should go places—

Dear Miss Rivers:

If you don't mind, a lonesome Texas girl would like to take up a small place in the Hollow Tree. I am full of ambition and dreams. I play a guitar, sing, write songs and poetry, and am now writing a novel. I am sixteen years old and have brown eyes and hair. I would like to hear from boys and girls around my age.—Louise Gross, General Delivery, Harlingen, Texas

Got any troubles today?

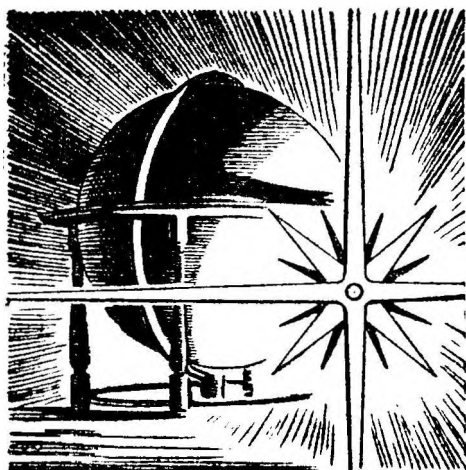
Dear Miss Rivers:

May I join the Hollow Tree? I'm nineteen years old and just clamoring for Pen Pals. I promise to answer all letters—and that's a promise I'm going to keep. If you care to write me about your troubles, I will be a very sympathetic reader and will help you all I can.—Patsy Pastavit, Box 301, White Earth, North Dakota

Elaine's had lots of practice—

Dear Miss Rivers:

As long as I have tried to get a letter printed in your section, I have never succeeded. Won't you please find just a little room in a far corner of the page and print my plea? I am seventeen years old and have black hair and eyes. I love to write letters and have been doing so since I was about eight years old. They'll be an answer for everyone, girls as well as boys of any age, so write, all of you. My hobbies are collecting post cards and writing letters. I'm a hard-working girl for good old Uncle Sam.—Elaine Cook, 26 Twiss Street, Meriden, Connecticut



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

COLD-WEATHER camping can be a thoroughly enjoyable experience. It does not necessarily have to be the endurance contest of shivers, shakes and frozen toes that many people envision. A man can back-pack adequate equipment into almost any winter camp site, if he chooses wisely what he takes along. And he can keep warm in freezing, or even zero, temperatures.

Judging from his recent letter, C. W., of Hammond, Indiana, seems to have his doubts about this. "I am fond of outdoors in all seasons," he wrote. "Especially when the woods are blanketed with snow. But I have yet to find a really comfortable method of winter woods cruising that doesn't turn into a test to see just how much freezing an enthusiastic camper can stand, and still get back to civilization alive. This may seem like a strange time of the year to be asking about cold-weather

camping, but I believe in being forehanded and want to be better prepared next winter. The clothes problem does not bother me, but I would appreciate any suggestions you have to offer regarding shelter, bedding, and winter night campfires."

Those are the three main considerations, C. W., assuming that virtually anyone who tackles the woods in winter knows how to clothe himself properly. The first principle of winter clothing, of course, is to have it warm, yet not too bulky.

For hikers there are light shelter tents that come in halves, each half weighing about four pounds. The individual halves are essentially lean-tos, protected on three sides, open in front. Joined, two of them form a tent. For the lone winter camper on short trips or the one who is not established in a permanent tent camp or cabin, one of these halves makes an excellent night shelter. The kind with a foot or foot and a half wall gives more space for your bed.

Such open-front shelters are really windbreaks more than anything else. They are on the general order of a Baker type tent, but without the latter's roof awning over the open front. Such canvas, nearly-level front awnings may cause trouble in a snowfall, and on a clear day they simply shut out welcome winter sun. So for cold-weather camping the full Baker tent, aside from being a heavier pack load, has little to recommend it over the simple shelter half.

The shelter half can be erected on shears, or on a pole fastened from one convenient tree to another, or in a variety of ways according to the location and kind of country you are in.

For outdoor sleeping in cold weather it is hard to beat a good quality sleeping bag plus a strong, protective ground cloth. If possible, build yourself a thick, springy browse bed inside your three-sided shelter. Set the ground cloth and sleeping bag on top of the browse. Follow that prescription and you should sleep like a log, warm and comfortable in practically any kind of winter weather. Especially if you have had the foresight to build yourself a glowing, heat-throwing reflector fire in front of your canvas lean-to.

Though meat can be spit-roasted in front of a reflecting fire, such campfires are not meant primarily for cooking. They are designed to throw heat into an open tent front or outdoor shelter and for use only in cold weather.

A good way to make one is to drive two stout green stakes into the ground about four feet apart. Have them slanting slightly backward, and sticking out of the ground about four or five feet. Next cut about five or six green logs five feet long. The logs should be about ten inches in diameter. Lay the heaviest log on the ground against the stakes. Then pile two or three more on top of it, resting them against the stakes for support and forming a solid back wall for your fire.

Now take two more of the logs and set them about three feet apart at right angles to the back wall, one end of them resting against the bot-

tom back-wall log. Start your fire with small stuff between the out-jutting logs. After it is going well and embers have been formed, pile heavier wood across the two "and-iron" logs. By making your fire in this manner instead of putting the heavy wood directly on the ground, air and draft space is provided, making the fire draw and burn better.

As it gets going the waves of heat from it will be reflected from the green log back wall into your shelter and sleeping quarters. The fire should be set up so that it faces the open front of your lean-to, and built on the slanting backward side of the back wall. Never build it on the side on which the supporting stakes are exposed.

Sometimes, depending on the terrain and locality, a big, flat-sided boulder, or rock face may be used against which your fire can be built. If such a rock has a fairly level top, it makes a handy warming shelf for camp cooking utensils and so forth.

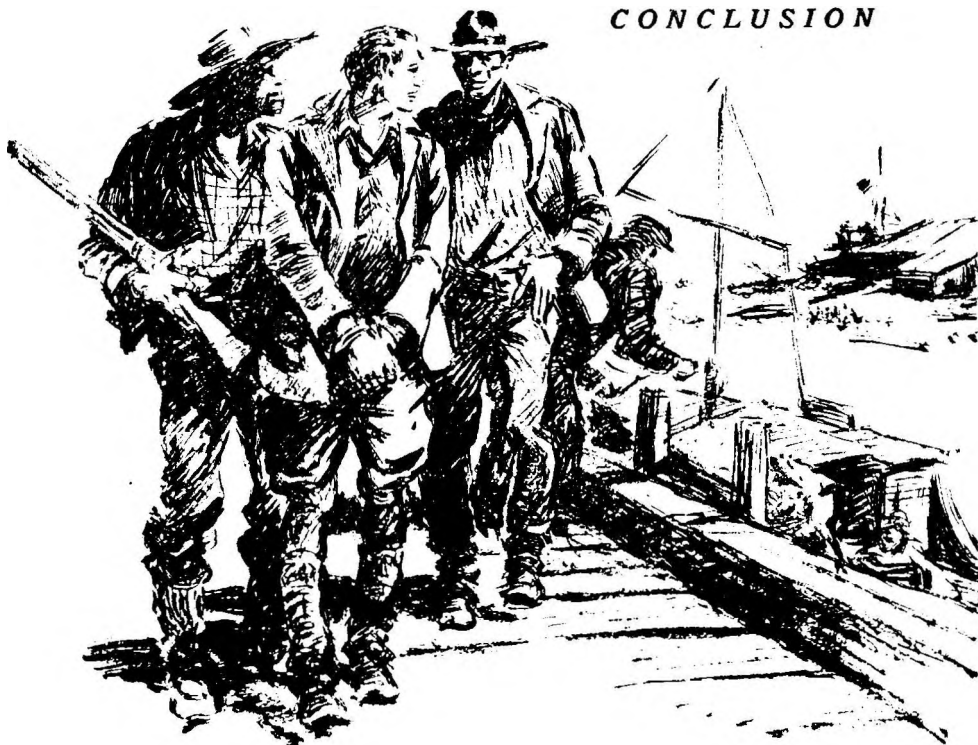
The foregoing, of course, applies to temporary cold-weather outdoor camping, and short hiking trips or other forays into the winter woods. For a permanent winter camp a weather-tight cabin, equipped with a stove or fireplace is needed.

To S. D., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Polar-bear meat has a strong, fishy taste. It could hardly be called "palatable," but can be eaten in an emergency—if it is available.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

CONCLUSION



BRAND OF THE NORTH

by Frank Richardson Pierce

The Story So Far:

The death of his uncle, Tip Vance, a pioneering lumberman, brings Red Vance back to the little Puget Sound logging town of Mill City. He learns that for the last few years of his life, Tip had been fighting a losing battle with a man named Lincoln Darby who, under the guise of being a public benefactor, had gradually gotten a strangle hold on Mill City by buying up mortgages and taking over bankrupt businesses. Red determines to take up his uncle's fight but is ruined when Darby's hard-case crew destroys a trestle he built across Hurricane Gulch to log a new stand of timber.

Wiped out in Mill City, Red learns that forty years before, Tip Vance, anticipating the building of a town on Terminal Bay, in Alaska, had planted a stand of trees

in that area. The town had never been built, but Red learns that it is once more under consideration, and that Darby is interested. Working quietly, Red ships a tractor and supplies to Terminal Bay and builds a wharf on the proposed town site. Learning that Darby has sent a crew to stake homestead claims on the timberland Tip Vance planted, Red and his men follow the hard cases. In the fight that follows, gunfire dislodges a hanging glacier, and the Darby men are buried under it.

When, sometime later, the bodies of the dead men are excavated, their hands and feet are found bound together, and Red and his men are arrested for murder. They escape from jail, and Red gets to work operating a floating sawmill and helping in the construction of the new town. Once again Darby men strike at him, cutting

loose the floating sawmill. Risking their lives, Red and his men go down the river in rafts, board the barge containing the sawmill, and take her to Terminal City. There, certain that he will now be able to prove his innocence of the murder of which he had been accused, Red forces Link Darby, who has had himself appointed a deputy marshal, to arrest him and his companions. This move, Red well knows, will make Darby look ridiculous in the eyes of the sourdoughs of Terminal City.

CHAPTER XXI

"POSSE'S" RETURN

LINK DARBY's fear aroused nothing but disgust in Red and his men. Obviously the man was certain they would murder him and sink his body in some deep channel.

"It's like this, Darby," Bruiser said happily. "You wouldn't hesitate to bump us off, tie a bag of rocks around our necks and heave us over the side. Naturally knowin' what you'd do to us, you figger we'll treat you the same way. And the more I think of it, the better the idea sounds. Still, I've got a code, and it's too late for me to change it. So I guess you'll live."

Darby didn't believe it. He sat in the cabin, cold sweat pouring from him, eyes constantly searching for an avenue of escape. He was the most amazed man in the world when the boat rounded a point and Terminal Bay lay ahead of them. Gradually something of his old arrogance returned.

"Thinking about that deputy marshal's star you're wearing under your coat?" Red suggested. "Well, polish it off. You'll have a chance to flash it. Still, on second thought, I doubt if you will."

"Where do you want to dock, Red?" one of the men asked.

"At the Vance Wharf," answered Red. "I haven't seen it yet, but I understand the boys did a fine job."

They came up to a ladder, and a man on the wharf took the line. Red climbed up and looked around, then Bruiser joined him. Darby followed. His hands were still tied together.

"Say, aren't you going to cut the lashings on my wrists?" he demanded.

"No," Red answered. "You're great on telling a good story. I don't want you posing as a hero at our expense. This camp is going to know exactly what happened."

"This is humiliating!" Darby cried furiously.

"You haven't hesitated to display me in public, wearing handcuffs," Red said. "Come along."

AS they moved slowly up the street, men stared, then began to follow them.

"I've spent a lifetime on the frontier," one old-timer chuckled, "but never before have I seen five wanted men bring in a deputy marshal. I'd sure like a picture of it."

"You could call it 'Posse's Return,'" Red said.

On the steps of the new jail, Red paused and turned to the gathering of men. "In case you boys are interested, we'll have a sawmill here, cutting lumber to order."

"Where is it?" one of the men asked.

"Getting out lumber for a cannery," answered Red. "When the job's done we'll tow it over."

"What's the price?"

"Puget Sound prices, plus freight. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough?" A man echoed the words. "After the prices we've been charged? You let me order, and I'll go right on living in a tent until you can deliver."

The jailer opened the door and grinned. Good for you, Mr. Darby!"

he yelled. "You brought 'em in . . . single-handed!" Then he saw the bindings on Darby's wrists. "Hey, what's going on?" he demanded.

"Book us," Red said. He and his companions followed the jailer into the building, and lined up before the marshal's desk. The jailer cut the thongs from Darby's wrists. Darby rubbed them, glaring at Red.

"Circulation comes back more slowly . . . and painfully . . . when they've been frozen," remarked Red.

"Damn you, Vance!" Darby snarled. He ordered the prisoners booked, and then had them searched—an afterthought that brought a grin to Red's face.

The jailer returned after putting the prisoners in a cell. "What happened, Mr. Darby?" he asked curiously.

"We won't go into it," Darby snapped. "Get Kuhn and Hathaway." Kuhn was the deputy marshal in charge of Terminal City, Hathaway, a deputy district attorney.

The former was up the coast investigating the selling of liquor to natives, but Hathaway appeared promptly. He was a thin, sallow young fellow of twenty-five. Red, studying the man through the cell bars was impressed. Here was a man with brains and courage. Red got the idea that he had been an honor man at law school and was now getting experience on the frontier. Probably he would deal with the frontier, its people and problems, with the same thoroughness given his law books when at school.

"Hathaway," Darby said, "these men were locked up at Portage Landing. A young district attorney had his big chance, but wasn't inclined to prosecute."

HATHAWAY'S brows lifted in surprise. They were very black and stood out sharply against his pale skin. "Lack of evidence?" he asked.

"He was working up the case," Darby explained lamely. "And the men broke jail." He opened a safe and handed the district attorney a bundle of papers. "Here's everything we have on the Red Vance gang. The crime they committed was particularly revolting to the general public. News services gave it quite a play. A conviction in a case like this will *make* you."

"Very interesting." Mr. Hathaway's face almost brightened. "Naturally a young lawyer wishes to establish himself." He sighed. "The law! Justice to all. Injustice to none. What a goal for any man."

"Are you nuts?" Darby looked puzzled. He had been told this young man had a profound knowledge of the law and was an up and coming attorney. It was said that Hathaway attacked like a hungry shark when the opposition weakened. Now Darby began to wonder. Certainly Hathaway's head was in the clouds.

The young deputy district attorney called on Red and his companions several days later.

"I have had an opportunity to examine the evidence and to talk to men who dug out the bodies of Hammer and the others," he told them. He shuddered. "Fiendish!"

"We were framed!" roared Bruiser. Then when Red started to speak the big fellow silenced him. "The trouble with you, Red, is you don't blow your own horn. O. K., I'm goin' to blow it for you."

"I'm listening," Hathaway said quietly.

"This is a fight between two kinds of men," explained Bruiser. "Darby

gets ahead by tearin' down. That's his code. We don't need to go back beyond Terminal City. He's holdin' up the boys who want to build homes. He tried to shake down the cannery for a big piece of dough. Red stopped that with his floatin' sawmill. Now Darby knows Red's comin' here with the sawmill, so prices will drop. Fact is, everybody's waitin' for Red to come. That's why Darby's tryin' to railroad us to jail."

"I have very good evidence—" Hathaway began.

"Them buzzards caught in that ice fall had it comin' to them," Bruiser cut in. "They'd killed a couple of their own crowd on Darby's orders. There weren't no thongs on hands and feet when I crawled under the ice and saw Hammer."

"Tell me about it."

"Shall I, Red?" Bruiser asked. "You know what they tell you when they make a pinch: 'Anything you say will be used agin' you.'"

"Tell him everything," Red directed.

Bruiser told the story, leaving out nothing of importance. "And so," he concluded, "Darby tears down to line his pockets. But Red believes there's more prosperity for him if everybody's makin' money, so he builds up. And he'd build up even if he didn't make any dough. He's just a natural builder."

"Very interesting," Mr. Hathaway said.

When the district attorney left the cell, Bruiser turned to the others. "What kind of a guy is he? Can't he say anything besides: 'Very interestin'?' " He snorted his disgust. "I think he's plain dead from the neck up."

"I don't," Red said slowly. "I think Hathaway's one smooth young fellow."

"We'll find out as soon as him and Judge Donner start tradin' punches in court," Bruiser predicted. "Say, I wonder how old Luke's gettin' along with the sawmill?"

"He's pushing the lumber through," Red answered confidently.

CHAPTER XXII

OWNER ABOARD

LUKE BROWN and his men watched the last board come from the saws. Carpenters picked it up, and with sap still dripping from opened pockets, nailed it in place. Inside the buildings—so recently standing trees—cannery machinery was humming. Tugs, towing scows deep with salmon, were moving toward the repaired wharf.

Busy as he was, Gill-net Crowell came down and thanked Luke. "You made a record," the cannery owner said, "and beat the fish by a safe margin. I'll never forget it. My regards to Red Vance, and if he needs anything I've got, he can have it."

"I can use several men on the *Water Beetle*," Luke replied. "As soon as I get the mill to Terminal City I'll send 'em back."

"Take whatever ones you want," Crowell said.

Luke had made some repairs on the barge, but it still leaked. But for the empty fuel drums, it wouldn't have floated for long. The drums kept the worst cracks above the water line. Luke had nailed boards over the cracks, but doubted that they would take much of a beating without opening again.

Luke checked on the tides, and when he found a favorable one, he headed for Terminal City. A following wind had blown up a heavy rain, and visibility was poor, but

Continued on page 113



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Continued from page 110

Luke wasn't worried. No big steamers were due, and any tugs that might be using the channel would probably be hauling scows, which would cut down their speed. He yanked the barge along, sounding his whistle occasionally, and listening to the echo run along the mountains.

The shore was sometimes a mile away, then again it was a matter of a couple of hundred yards. Luke kept a short towline to prevent a trick in the tide carrying the barge to nearby reefs, and two men were keeping it almost dry with constant pumping. The barge handled easily enough. If she got waterlogged again, Luke would have to lash a tug to her and handle her that way. With luck, he calculated, they would be in the bay shortly after daybreak.

He was leaning in the wheelhouse window, smoking his pipe, one hand on the wheel, when he heard signals astern. He answered. An overtaking vessel was passing on the *Water Beetle's* starboard side. He looked back.

"The *Abbie Vance*!" Luke exclaimed. "And loaded to the guards with lumber." He edged a little bit toward the mainland shore to give the steam schooner more room. The channel was narrow at this point. "Mighty funny she had to pass in this particular stretch," he growled. "Sure, it *could* happen that way, but I'm suspicious of anything connected with Darby. And if the *Abbie* should sink our floating sawmill, why—"

He dismissed the idea. No ship's officer would risk losing his ticket by running down a barge. The *Abbie* would pass the barge, then the *Water Beetle*, and drive on to Terminal Bay, and that would be that.

But she didn't!

A short distance astern of the

barge, the schooner's bows swung toward the mainland, and Luke grabbed his binoculars to get a better picture of what was taking place on her. He saw a frantic deck officer, helping a desperate helmsman with the wheel. The steering gear was jammed.

White water piled up high astern as the steam schooner's engine was reversed. Luke knew there was too much dead weight to stop the *Abbie*. She was slowing down, but her bows came nearer and nearer the barge. Two men aboard, helping to steer with an improvised rudder, tried to swing the barge's stern clear. Now they had to run forward to escape injury. They were halfway to the bow when the *Abbie* struck a glancing blow. Bits of guard rail and deck planking flew high in the air. The smokestack crashed to the deck, and the boiler, knocked from its bed, rolled to the barge's edge, then stopped against a snubbing post.

LUKE put down the binoculars, then grabbed them again, as he saw a man tumble headlong from the *Abbie's* stern. The man disappeared in the foam, evidently sucked down by the reversed propeller. Luke ordered the towline cut, and as the *Abbie* moved ponderously past him, he turned back and got a line onto the sinking barge. Lashed tightly, the *Water Beetle* shoved the barge onto the nearest beach.

"That was close," a man exclaimed. "If it hadn't been for them drums, we'd have gone down like a hunk of lead."

"The drums have saved her before," Luke answered.

Casting off the lines, he took after the *Abbie*. Usually he was a calm man who accepted the unusual in stride. But if the *Abbie's* steering gear was gone, she was helpless, in

danger of piling up on a reef. It would be a salvage job, and the cost might be great enough to force a sale. Red would get her back. Luke had heard of poetic justice. He didn't know exactly what it was, but this looked like it.

As he came alongside the *Abbie Vance*, Luke noticed the engine was stopped and she was drifting.

"Want a line?" he asked.

Darby appeared on deck. "We don't want any line," he shouted, before the captain could answer.

"Owner aboard, eh?" Luke said. He knew the sea and its ways. "But the captain's boss." He looked at the captain, who was purple with rage. "Do you want a line, sir?"

"Not yet," replied the captain. "Our steering gear jammed. Piece of timber fell into one of the main cog wheels. We couldn't turn to hand steering in time to avoid the collision. Any people hurt?"

"Nobody hurt, and the barge is on the beach. She didn't sink, which must surprise Mr. Darby . . . plenty," Luke observed.

He waited, fairly burning up in his eagerness to send a line aboard. Darby paced the deck, warning everyone not to take a line. He knew well that the acceptance of a rope meant a claim for salvage.

When the damage was finally repaired, and the *Abbie Vance* was under way once more, Luke headed for Terminal City at full speed.

An Alaskan liner was tied up to Vance Wharf. She was discharging mail and baggage and Luke knew she hadn't been in long. He docked on the opposite side and the first person Luke met was Cherry Sherwin.

"I saw you coming, Luke," she said, "so I waited. What's happened while I've been down south?"

"Plenty, but I'll tell you later. Did Judge Donner come with you?"

"Yes. He's trying to find a place to stop," she answered.

"Good. I need a lawyer pronto." He told her about the collision. "I want to libel the *Abbie Vance* for damage."

They found Judge Donner at Boston Construction Co. headquarters. Butler had offered to share his room, and a man was putting away the judge's bags. Donner listened to Luke's story, then began unpacking a portable typewriter.

"What's your version of the collision, Luke?" he asked.

"Seems mighty queer to me our floating sawmill would be run down just at the time we was takin' it to Terminal City where we'd furnish real competition to the lumber Darby was bringin' north on the *Abbie Vance*," Luke said.

"Strange indeed," agreed Donner, "but in the absence of proof—" He shrugged his shoulders. "There'll be a government hearing, of course."

He took the libel to the deputy commissioner who signed it and gave it to a deputy marshal to serve. The latter, like the deputy commissioner and deputy district attorney, owed his job to Darby's influence. He didn't relish the assignment.

"Can one marshal serve papers on another?" he asked.

"He certainly can," Donner assured him. "And if he doesn't, he's committing a serious offense."

LUKE took the marshal out in the *Water Beetle*. As soon as the *Abbie Vance* dropped anchor, the marshal went aboard. Luke heard him say: "I don't like to do this, Mr. Darby, but it's the law."

Luke hailed the captain. "I think you lost a man during the collision," he said. "I saw something that looked like one drop into the propeller wash."

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The skipper was amazed. "Might've been Loomis," he said finally. "He used to set on the rail, aft, and smoke before he went on watch." He called the mate. "Did Loomis stand watch?" he asked.

"No, sir," the man answered. "I was just going to report. He isn't aboard."

"What's wrong?" demanded Darby.

"A man named Loomis was lost," the skipper answered. "Where were you, Mr. Darby, when we struck?"

Was it his imagination, Luke wondered, or did Darby draw a long breath?

"In the owner's cabin, smoking," Darby answered.

The skipper seemed disappointed. "I thought you might've seen Loomis setting on the rail," he said. "I'll make an entry in the log. Only man I ever lost," he added heavily.

Luke returned to the wharf, and as soon as he tied up the *Water Beetle*, he arranged to send back the men he had borrowed from the cannery. Then he headed for the jail. Judge Donner and Cherry were there talking things over with the prisoners.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you," Red said. "You've done a swell job from what I hear."

"I'd have done a better one if I'd got a line onto the *Abbie*," Luke growled.

"Their hand steering gear was probably O. K.," Red said. "though it might have been jammed. Now, Judge Donner, how soon can we be tried. Cherry brought the envelope from my safe-deposit box. You'd better keep it." He spoke almost in whispers, because he had an idea the jailer wasn't above eavesdropping.

"Cherry gave it to me this morning," the judge answered. "I'll see Hathaway. He should have his case

ready by now. A traveling judge will be here next week, and I don't imagine he has a crowded docket."

"We're ready any time, judge," Red said. "Luke, you get hold of some good men and see what can be done about the floating sawmill. Privately I think Darby tried to sink it. He knew we'd libel the *Abbie* and collect, but if he got rid of the mill it would be cheap at three times what he'll have to pay."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning," Luke promised. "I'm sure lucky . . . out where things are happening, while you boys are cooped up behind bars."

"You put in your stretch behind bars, too," Red reminded him.

"That's why I realize how lucky I am," retorted Luke.

CHAPTER XXIII

DIRECT VERDICT

RED VANCE, Bruiser, Matthew, Mark and John took turns gazing through the jail window at an inspiring sight. The *Water Beetle* was coming slowly up the bay, dragging the floating sawmill behind her.

As Luke started to beach the barge, Darby's men ran down to the water's edge.

"You can't land here," they yelled. "This is private property. Darby has a claim on all the land from Vance Wharf to the town-site limits."

Luke anchored and called to the Borden men who wanted to build houses: "Fix it so I can land, boys, and we'll start cutting lumber for you." He pointed to booms of logs that had come down—a log at a time—from the headwaters of Terminal River.

The Borden men, already smarting under Darby's holdup tactics, grew dangerous at this new move.

Until now they hadn't realized the number of rough-and-tumble fighters Darby had imported to Terminal City. "And every one of 'em will be wearin' a star as soon as trouble starts," a Borden man predicted. "That'll put us agin' the law."

"I'd get tough right now," another said, "but for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Monday Red Vance's trial commences under Judge Finnegan. We don't want to do anything that'll make Red look bad. If we do, Darby will claim we're part of the Vance gang."

"A few days won't make any difference, I guess," another man said. They went down to the Vance Wharf and talked things over with Luke who was docking the *Water Beetle*. "Tell Red we're hangin' around until his trial's over."

Luke was in a cheerful mood as he hurried to the jail. All of the Darby crowd and many newcomers held Red and his men were cold-blooded murderers, but Red had friends among the Borden men. Perhaps there weren't enough of them to stand off a mob. On the other hand they were tough.

Red listened to Luke's report. "I'm glad to know we're gaining friends," he said, "but how did you fix up the sawmill?"

"Rigged block and tackle and got the boiler back on its bed," Luke answered. "We repaired broken steam connections and got the mill running. Then we cut sound planks from dead trees and repaired the shattered planks at low tide. The barge is anchored off the wharf. I'll tie her up there tomorrow and cut lumber and stack it on the wharf until the next steamer arrives. Some of the boys will haul it off with tractors."

"Only three hurdles left," Red

said. "The trial; forcing Darby to give up street ends so that we can beach the mill and cut lumber to order; then cleaning up everything at Mill City, which means putting a trestle across Hurricane Gulch."

Luke left shaking his head. Red's confident tone seemed to suggest that final victory was close, but Luke realized each hurdle might prove high enough to trip them.

He kept the mill going while the jury was being selected, but when the evidence against the prisoners was offered, he let one of the men run the mill and took his place in the courtroom.

DARBY and the men who had removed the bodies from the ice fall testified as to what they had found. Photographs were submitted showing the bodies with their hands and feet tied. These pictures, with the lashings, were admitted as exhibits.

Donner was so mild, so willing to admit the evidence, that Hathaway was inwardly worried. He was afraid of a trap, but search as he might, he couldn't detect it. When he had finished questioning Darby, he said: "Cross examine?"

Since Donner had already waved his hand and declined to cross-examine other witnesses, the spectators were surprised when he said, almost meekly: "Mr. Darby, you removed the bodies as a deputy United States marshal, and yet you frequently spoke of the deceased as *my men*. Will you please explain?"

Darby thought fast, but saw no catch in the question. "I had hired them to make surveys and stake claims," he answered. "They were my men in the capacity of employees."

"Can you prove that they were your men?"

"I object," said Hathaway. "This has no bearing on the case."

"It has a great bearing, your honor," Donner said. "In fact, it's the foundation of our defense. I insist that Mr. Darby submit evidence that Hammer and the others worked for him."

"Objection overruled. You may answer, Mr. Darby."

"Yes, I can prove it," Darby answered. He opened a brief case, fumbled through papers for several moments, then submitted a packet of canceled checks. Here are some endorsed checks in payment of a week's work."

Donner examined the checks and selected one. "Would you say this is Hammer's signature?"

"I know it is," Darby answered.

Taking a piece of paper from his brief case, Donner folded it until only the signature was visible. "And would you say this is Hammer's signature?" he asked.

Darby compared the two signatures, hesitating a long time before he answered. "It's Hammer's signature," he admitted finally, "or else as fine a forgery as I've ever seen."

"Thank you," said Donner. "That's all."

When Darby left the stand, Donner said: "I would like to put Red Vance on the stand. The purpose is to identify this paper." Red was sworn and took the stand.

"Tell in your own words, Mr. Vance, the circumstances surrounding this paper," Donner said.

Red told of the Darby men standing behind the mass of ice and threatening to shoot. "I explained that the vibration might start the ice falling," he said. "But they laughed and one man fired. A few seconds later ice began falling. It caught them all, and I was knocked

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out. Bruiser Bullman later worked his way under the ice mass to Hammer who was pinned down and knew he was doomed. When Bullman came out, I went in, hoping to find some way of helping Hammer. There was none. The man told me he wanted to clear up some things. He was able to write, so I gave him pencil and paper. I now read from the paper:

"I know I'll be dead soon. Our job was to stop Red Vance and his men from coming up the river. He warned us not to shoot, said the ice would fall. We didn't believe him and I shot. The ice fell. All killed. We didn't have time to run. Bruiser and Red risked their lives to try to get me out. Can't be done.

"HAMMER."

DARBY looked dumfounded when Red finished reading. Hathaway examined the papers with profound interest and compared signatures carefully. But though he asked Red numerous questions, he was unable to shake the story. Next he put Bruiser on the stand, with Donner's permission, and examined him.

"We hold, your honor," Donner said, "that this paper clears these defendants of the charge of binding Hammer and his companions and letting the ice kill them. How the men were bound, or when, is something for the marshal's office to investigate, with the learned district attorney's aid." He bowed toward Hathaway who looked annoyed. "Obviously, though, someone tunneled in to the bodies, bound the hands and feet, filled the tunnels with ice and snow and retired. This was done, of course, to lay the foundation for the charge of murder against the defendants. Your honor, I move a directed verdict of not guilty be ordered."

Hathaway made no protest and the motion was granted. Darby was grim and silent. He knew what men were thinking. What would Red Vance do now? What form would his revenge take. Red's score against him was a large one. Well, he was still a deputy marshal, and most of his men wore stars. If Red got tough — His thoughts broke up as Donner began to speak again.

"There's a manslaughter charge against Luke Brown. He is accused of killing two of Link Darby's men, Laws and Squarehead. The case has been transferred to this court. I move it be dismissed both from lack of evidence and because the district attorney has refused to prosecute." Donner removed his glasses and looked at the judge. The latter's glance turned to Hathaway.

"I have examined the evidence," the district attorney admitted, "and find it insufficient. The government withdraws the charge."

When Red and his companions came out of the courthouse, dozens of Borden men rushed up to congratulate them. "You got the heel on the run, Red," a man shouted, "so keep him movin'!"

Red grinned and thanked the man. He knew it was sound advice. As soon as he was able to get away from the men who were anxious to offer their congratulations, he and his companions hurried to the wharf office to make plans for the future.

"What does the treasury look like, Cherry?" Red asked.

"A small but steady stream of money is flowing into it," the girl reported, "but hardly enough to carry the battle to Darby at Mill City."

"I want to be heard at this time," Luke said. "You're free, Red, and you've got plenty of help. Thugs like Bruiser, Matthew, Mark, and

John are right behind you."

"You should know a thug when you see one," drawled Bruiser. "You're the thuggiest-lookin' buz-zard I've ever seen."

"I'm vanishin'," Luke continued. "I'll need five or six hundred bucks. And if everything works out, brother, will you and a lot of other people be surprised!"

"Including Darby?" Red asked.

"Darby will think he's seein' a ghost," declared Luke.

"What's the deal?"

"You're so doggoned law-abidin' and ethical, I don't think I'd better tell you," Luke answered. "You might gum up the works. Now get that look out of your eye, Red. It ain't goin' to disgrace your good name or get anybody in trouble."

"The best way to settle this," Cherry said, "is to give Luke his expense money."

"O. K.," Red agreed.

Judge Donner joined them shortly after Luke had gone his mysterious way.

"The Alaskan liner *Afognak* puts in here next Tuesday," the judge said, "and I might as well be on her. The libel against the *Abbie Vance* can be handled down south. Red, if you collect on that you'll be in good shape."

"I won't be in any kind of shape until I collect the steam schooner herself," Red said. "She belongs to the Vance set-up at Mill City. Darby got her for a song, and that's all he's going to be paid when I take her back."

CHAPTER XXIV

LUKE PLAYS AN ACE

RED and Bruiser Bullman took charge of the sawmill the next day while the others checked on the pond containing the logs. They fol-

lowed the shoreline with the *Water Beetle* and picked up logs which had escaped the boom men as they came down Terminal River. A few logs were still coming, though Red felt he had enough to keep the mill going until snow began to fly. There would be little building during the winter, but considerable freighting over the ice. There was plenty of money to be made in the freight game—not to mention bouts with the ice fall and rival outfits cutting in on the business.

Red had a surveyor run a line along the beach and drive stakes which indicated the property limits of Darby's holdings. In places Darby's line ran to the high-water mark, but there were several points where small areas were beyond his control. Red brought the barge up to the largest of these and began to cut lumber.

As each board came from the saws it was chalked with the name of the man who planned to build nearby. Darby's deputy marshals watched the property line, warning people that they would be arrested if they attempted to get their lumber.

"We'll get it," men yelled back. "Keep cuttin', Red."

In the meantime the *Abbie Vance* was anchored in the bay with her lumber. Darby wasn't going to the expense of lightering it ashore until Red and his floating sawmill were out of business.

As the days passed and the lumber piled up wherever Red could find a spot, the number of deputy marshals increased. Red's men worked with care. First they placed parallel, well-braced logs on the ground. The lumber was piled on the logs.

"This keeps it off the ground where it won't rot," Red explained for the benefit of the Darby men. "It may be months before we have

the right to cross Darby's property."

"That's right," a deputy said. "You'll have to condemn a street across the property to each lumber pile and that takes time and money."

When Red had the beach spots piled high with lumber, Darby played his trump card. One of the Borden men got wind of it and hurried to Red.

"He's going to call a mass meeting," the man explained, "and offer to give his lumber away to any man who asks for it."

"Quite a move," Red said. "The idea is to leave me stuck with my lumber, of course?"

"It's a cinch there isn't a market for both lots," the Borden man said. "It should be quite a meeting."

"Yeah, quite a meeting," Red agreed. "And it gives me an idea. Thanks . . . plenty."

Two days later, small sheets of paper, with heavy black printing on them, appeared on various buildings. One of the sheets had been nailed to Red's own mill. He left it there and presently he heard Bruiser cursing as he read:

FREE LUMBER

Come One! Come All!

A mass meeting will be held in front of the courthouse Wednesday evening at which time Lincoln Darby will offer, with certain restrictions, lumber to home builders absolutely free. Attend. You can't lose.

"I put it up to get your goat," Red confessed.

"You got a funny sense of humor," growled Bruiser. "What're you goin' to do about this? Take it layin' down? If Darby gets away with it it'll shove you back into the red."

"I've been that a long time," Red said jokingly.

"That ain't funny," Bruiser insisted.

"I'm going ashore this afternoon

and talk to Butler and some of the boys," Red said.

His talk with Butler was brief and concerned work with the bulldozers on the outskirts of camp. Somehow the impression circulated that the Vance outfit might attempt to break up the meeting.

WHEN Red and Bruiser walked down to the meeting Wednesday evening, the tractors, with their bulldozer blades, were making quite a racket. Folks at the meeting would hear them, but the snorting of the exhausts wouldn't disturb the speakers.

Link Darby stood on the courthouse steps and repressed a smile. He had heard the rumor that the Vance men might get tough. They were all present, but so were his deputy marshals. Darby turned on the old charm that had served him so well at Mill City.

"No need of me kidding you boys," he said. "You know this is a Darby-Vance fight. You know the battle has reached its peak. I see no reason why you shouldn't benefit by blows that I deliver. So if you'll all agree to leave your lumber where it is . . . on the beach . . . I'll supply you from the Abbie Vance without charge."

"Any strings on it?" Eli Kelso, who asked the question, worked for Borden and was one of the leaders among the men who planned to build homes.

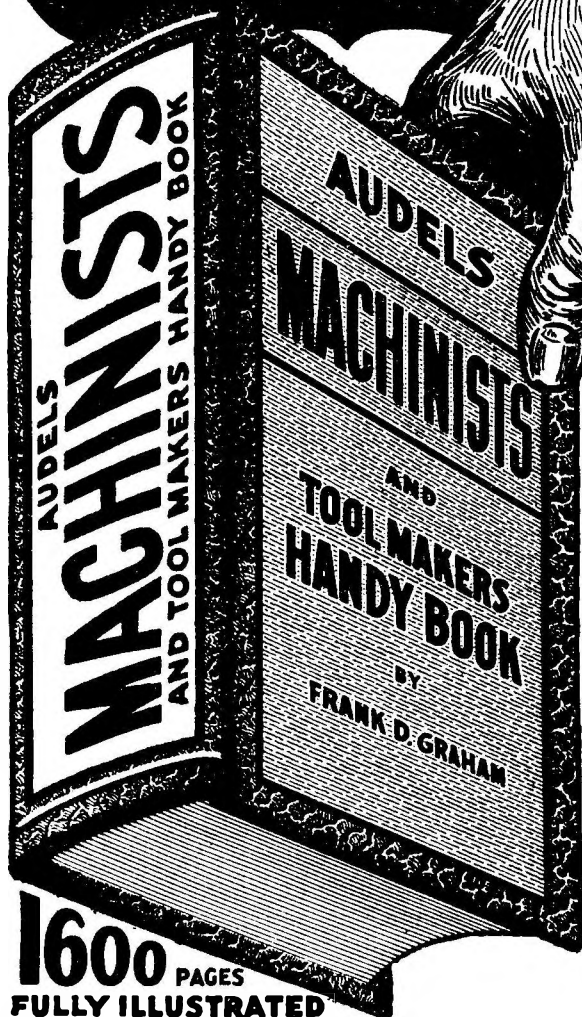
"None at all," Darby answered, "except that you all must agree not to buy Vance lumber. I don't see why you should when you can get what you want without charge."

"It sounds mighty interestin'." Kelso said. "Still, maybe we should hear what Vance has to say."

A murmur of approval swept

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through the crowd. Bruiser got to the steps and faced the crowd. The crowd was quiet and the snorting of tractors came distinctly.

"Everyone couldn't get off for this meetin'," Bruiser explained. "Some of the boys had to work, but eighty percent are here. Why should you take free lumber? It wouldn't be free if Red Vance hadn't come here with his floatin' sawmill. You know it. Darby was all set for a holdup. You know that. Now let me tell you what Red's gone through to bring lumber at fair prices to you."

Bruiser talked nearly an hour, explaining Red's movements and adventures. He even tossed in a few humorous stories to keep the crowd interested.

"Now I'd like to have the Darby bunch answer what I've said," he concluded.

"Fair enough," admitted Kelso. "What Bullman's said has got me thinkin'. Maybe we shouldn't get free lumber. What about it, Darby?"

Darby answered at length, then Bruiser spoke again. The meeting had turned into a debate that seemed likely to go on for hours. It was after midnight when Kelso took charge again.

"We're all fair men," he said. "We stand on our own hind legs an' we want to pay as we go. I move we don't take Darby lumber even as a gift. I'm agin' knifin' a fellow who builds up instead of tearin' down."

"Before you put that to a vote," a Darby man shouted, "when will Vance deliver your lumber?"

"I can answer that," Red said. He mounted the topmost step. "I piled that lumber carefully on logs, as you'll recall. Well, those logs also served as skids. The racket you've heard in the background while we kept this long-winded discussion go-

ing was Borden tractors hauling lumber across Darby property to public street. . . . Yes, Darby, I know you can sue me for trespass and recovery. But your damage is limited to the damage tractor treads and skids did to unimproved property. In this case it's nominal."

Darby's teeth bared in a snarl. "Blast you, Vance," he yelled. "That's why you let it get around you'd break up this meeting. You figured to draw my deputies away from your lumber piles."

"Something like that," Red said. "It looks like we're finished here. I'll see you in Mill City sometime next month—for the last round of a finish fight."

"And I'll take that round," Darby retorted.

MATTHEW, Mark and John met Red in the wharf office. "The Abbie Vance has gone South," Mark said, "and Darby and most of his men are on her. Some of the toughest stayed. They figger to freight over the Terminal River ice this winter. There'll be hell a-poppin' if we move in agin' 'em and that's what we're figgerin' to do. How about payin' us our share as soon as your fight with Darby's finished, and lettin' us back ourselves?"

"I'll do it," Red declared, "and if I get in the clear at Mill City I'll come up here and fight for you for a change."

"And I'll be with him," added Bruiser.

"If you need us down below," Matthew said, "you just say the word an' we'll forget this deal an' string with you."

"If I need you," promised Red, "I'll let you know. Until the freeze up you might as well keep on working for me. Keep the sawmill going. If you run out of work here,

tow it to some Alaskan town and cut lumber."

When Red and his men left several days later half of the town was on hand to see them off. From the wharf, Butler yelled: "Tunnel telephoned a half-hour ago and wanted to know what had become of its mayor."

"Tell everyone I'll mush over the ice this winter," Cherry called, "and make a long visit."

A few minutes later the steamer was leaving Terminal City behind, but as long as she was in sight many stood on the Vance Wharf, waving, and Red and his party clustered astern on the boat deck and waved back.

Just as they were going to their cabins, Theodore Hathaway came up on deck.

"Are you leaving, too?" Red asked.

"In the manner of speaking," Hathaway answered with dignity, "I'm a bloodhound on a fresh scent. I want to know who killed Laws and Squarehead. And did Loomis fall overboard in that collision or . . . was he pushed? There's so much that's queer about this business I'm beginning to be doubtful of myself. But I shall get to the bottom of it, mark you. I'm not going to pursue my career branded as a man who lost his first big case."

"More power to you," Red said. "I hope you aren't after me."

"When things look bad for you," Hathaway observed, "it's been my experience you can take care of yourself very competently."

WHEN the steamer docked five days later, Cherry was the first passenger down the gangplank. She was followed by Red, Bruiser and Theodore Hathaway.

"Just time to catch the boat for Mill City," Red said.

"No, there isn't," a deep voice answered.

"Hello, Renault," exclaimed Red, recognizing a contractor with whom he had once done business. "Long time no see."

"Got an order here for a million feet of lumber," Renault said. "At market price, and a little more. Will you fill it?"

"Before you tie yourself up with that high binder," another voice said, "how about taking an order for two million feet now, and two million more three months from now? I'll pay you a bonus delivered in southern California."

Red threw up his hands. "It breaks my heart to turn you down, Ingerham, and you, too, Renault, but I can't accept until I trestle Hurricane Gulch, and get the *Abbie Vance* back."

"Sign here," both men said in unison. "We'll accept delivery as soon as the mill is cutting Hurricane Ridge lumber."

Red studied the two agreements, then signed. As he was hailing a cab, another came to a stop with grinding brakes. A man popped out.

"I'm Barker," he said hurriedly. "Remember me? Lumber broker. I can use a half million feet a month the next six months. Renault and Ingerham didn't beat me to it, did they?"

"Yes," Red replied. "But I'll sign, if you'll accept the same conditions they did."

As Red helped Cherry into a cab, another car came up. It followed them to the dock where the Mill City steamer waited. "The answer is 'No,'" Red called in to the passenger, "I've already signed with Ingerham, Barker and Renault. I can't take any more. I don't know

when the mill will be running."

"After them . . . me," the man said. "Sign here."

Red signed and hurried onto the steamer. "I can't understand it, Cherry," he declared. "They've got a lot of faith in my building that trestle in a hurry."

"Why shouldn't they have faith?" retorted Cherry. "Everyone who knows you has faith in you."

"If I could build that trestle in thirty days," Red said, "I'd be in the money. I could get the *Abbie Vance* back under our flag, and—" He began to walk the deck, his head full of plans. He was pacing back and forth when the steamer blew the landing whistle at Mill City.

"Cherry!" he exclaimed. "Darby's mill is down. And look, his locomotives are in the roundhouse. His mill pond is empty, too."

There was quite a gathering on the wharf, and suddenly a band composed of a fiddle, a fife, three harmonicas and a drum started up a tune. One of the harmonica players was having something of a time covering up his instrument in order to get the right sound.

"Shingle weaver," Red said. "You can tell 'em every time, because they lose their fingers. And there's Seven-up! Why, they're the boys from the home Uncle Tip built!"

The gangplank dropped and Red hurried down.

"We been hearin' all about you, Red," Seven-up said. "You done all right up there."

"Thanks to your telling me where to drive piling for my wharf, and Uncle Tip planting a forest," Red answered. "Make out a list of your needs at the home, and you'll get 'em."

"Danged tootin' we'll get 'em," Seven-up predicted in a knowing voice.

"What's been going on around here?" demanded Red.

"You'll find out," Seven-up answered. "I'll bet they'll be taking down Darby signs on the park an' hotel an' places, an' puttin' up Vance signs. This town's beginning to wake up."

BANKER SHERWIN was on hand. He kissed his niece and hurried her away. When he had finished shaking hands with all his friends, Red went to his old home. Bruiser trailed along.

"I think I'll get drunk," the big fellow said. "I haven't been on a good bust in months. Oh, I've had a few drinks now and again, and some of that stuff the sourdoughs make from prunes, spud peelin's and old shoes ain't bad, but—"

"Before anybody gets drunk, we're going to build a trestle," Red declared.

They built a log fire in the open fireplace that evening and were relaxing when Cherry unexpectedly called. She seemed as excited as Seven-up had been.

"Red, Darby's in a bad way," she said. "Ethics wouldn't allow my uncle to tell me the man's financial condition, but I picked up gossip here and there. The town feels rather cheap over the way Darby fooled them, and there's talk of taking up a collection and putting up a monument to your Uncle Tip."

"I'll decide on the monument later," Red said. "I know how he'd feel about it."

"Oh, and General Borden is in town," continued Cherry. "He's calling on you tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. He has some kind of a deal to offer."

"I wish he'd offer enough dough to build that trestle," Red said. "The treasury won't quite stand the jolt,

will it? Fighting Darby was expensive, though we made money."

"I'll make a report tomorrow," she promised. "I'll skip now . . . just wanted to let you know about Darby's financial condition and the general's visit. See you in the morning."

Red and Bruiser were just turning in when someone knocked and a voice asked: "Can you put up a couple of bums for the night?"

"Luke!" Red shouted, opening the door. "Come in! Bring your friend along."

The two men came in and Luke said: "Red, meet my friend, Jim Loomis."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Loomis," Red said. Then he started. "Loomis! Not the man who tumbled from the Abbie Vance?"

"Yep. Same gent," Luke declared with pardonable satisfaction.

"I caught Darby jamming a timber into the steering gear," Loomis explained. "I saw he wanted to run down your floating sawmill and tried to stop it. He cracked me over the head and the next thing I knew I was cold, wet and the propeller was sucking me down. I held my breath and was boiled up well astern. I kept almost submerged, and didn't waste any strength trying to swim ashore. I knew the tide set in toward the beach. I landed, more dead than alive. Luke found me on the beach hours later."

"I dried him out, heard the story he had to tell, and . . . well, an old-time poker player like myself knows a ace when he sees one," Luke said. "So I kept him under cover and brought him down here to spring on Darby when the time's ripe."

"You want to see Hathaway," Red said. "He's a serious, funny cuss,

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but he knows his business. Loomis will certainly help fill out his hand."

"I'm way ahead of you," declared Luke. "I heard Hathaway came down with you, so I got hold of him. Told him to be here tomorrow. I'd have told you about Loomis up at Terminal City, but I was afraid you'd feel you was protectin' a criminal—Darby—unless Loomis was turned over to the gov'ment boys right off the bat. Besides, I didn't trust some of them deputies overly much. They might've played Darby's game."

CHAPTER XXV

CONSPIRACY

RED VANCE was up early the following morning. He had a hunch he was in for a big day—and a pleasant one. General Borden dropped around right after breakfast.

"Red," he said, "what will you give me to build that trestle for you?"

"You?" Red stared. "One of the biggest contractors in the country, building a wood trestle over Hurricane Gulch?"

"Why not?"

"It's beyond me," Red muttered.

"I'll build it on this basis," said Borden. He handed Red a slip of paper with a number of items which were totaled.

"That's about what it will cost," Red agreed, "but you won't make any profit on it."

"You shot square with me up North," Borden said. "I can play that game, too. You don't know what you saved me, fighting Darby. If he hadn't fought you, he'd have fought me. I'll build the trestle, and you pay me my figure. Is it a deal?"

"When?"

"It'll be completed in time to fill the contracts you've been getting," Borden promised.

"Shake!"

They shook hands and had a drink on the deal. "Now let's take a walk," Borden said.

They walked along the railroad, leading toward Hurricane Gulch. Suddenly a train whistled and Borden said: "Guess we'd better get off the track."

"What's a train doing up that way?" Red demanded. "These rails lead to Hurricane Gulch. If Darby is—"

The train thundered into view and rolled by them, huge logs moving on groaning trucks.

"Hurricane Bench logs!" Red bel-lowed. "There is a trestle across that gulch! Say, what's coming off here?"

"The trestle is built," Borden explained, grinning. "That's why I wrote for plans and asked for figures from time to time. I had a chance of winning a contract to build a dam if I could figure a way of spanning gulches without using steel bridges. Your Uncle Tip's trestle idea started me thinking. So I built it to test possible weakness . . . and didn't find any." He held out his hand. "Well, I've got to be off. I'm building seven of the Tip Vance type of trestle. Send me a check when you get around to it."

RED walked with him to the steamer landing, then went directly to Darby's office. There were a half dozen tough customers guarding the place.

"Get the hell out, Vance," one of them said. "Darby don't want to see you."

"I think he does. It'll cost him less in the long run," Red said. He spoke loudly, hoping his voice would carry to the inner office. It did.

Darby opened the door. "Come in," he said brusquely. He indicated a chair and added: "Sit down."

Red remained standing. "I'm here

to offer you a proposition," he said. "You tried to steal a timber empire, and things went wrong. Now the Vance name is the one loggers and lumbermen are speaking. I can make out a strong civil conspiracy case against you."

"You're bluffing."

"You know I'm not. We won't go into the tricks you pulled to clean me. I might get mad and forget you're older than I am. I've taken plenty from you, but a man expects that in a finish fight."

"Borden built the trestle, and that means your mills will be running," Darby said heavily. "You're in the money." His thoughts turned to Terminal City and his offer of free lumber. That was where Red had really beaten him. "The fools wouldn't even take it as a gift," he muttered.

"I've figured out what your wrecking my logging train and trestle cost," Red went on. "Here are a few other items, including the *Abbie Vance*, and the damage you did to the floating sawmill."

Darby's face grew savage. "That damned mill was like a left jab . . . always in my face. I knew you'd tow it wherever I tried to sell lumber. I knew—" He broke off suddenly, like a man who has been thinking aloud.

"Here's the bill," Red said. "Give me title to the *Abbie Vance* and we'll call it square. I could be harder on you."

Darby was silent a long time, his active mind groping for means of an eleventh-hour escape. It seemed to him there was a tugboat and a floating sawmill whichever way he turned.

"I could be harder . . . in court," Red added.

Darby picked up the telephone

and called his lawyer, ordering him to come over at once.

A tense silence followed. Darby puffed nervously on a cigarette, finding the smoke distasteful. He threw the cigarette aside, walked to the window and looked at his silent mill and logging locomotives. His creditors were moving in on him. They weren't giving him a chance to raise

probably a more serious charge. I'm confident he's responsible for several deaths."

"So am I," Red answered.

"You . . . got a confession from Hammer that time," Hathaway said. "Did he mention his relationship with Darby?"

"Yes," Red answered, "he did. And he wrote a confession." Red



the money. They were treating him as he had treated Tip, and later Red Vance. "Chickens come home to roost," he thought.

The lawyer came and Darby said: "Deed the *Abbie Vance* to Red Vance. In return he releases all claims against me to date."

"Is that right, Mr. Vance?" asked the lawyer.

"That's my proposition," Red admitted.

"You can sign the papers at his office," Darby said to Red.

RED was glad to leave, but when he came out, Theodore Hathaway was waiting for him.

"My case against Lincoln Darby is about complete," the attorney said. "Criminal conspiracy and

opened a billfold and took out a small envelope. "Break the seal."

In Hammer's now familiar dying scrawl, Hathaway read:

I killed Squarehead. Engle. I think, killed Laws. We done this on Darby's orders. Squarehead and Laws died because they weren't up to killing Red Vance and his men.

"Why didn't you give this to me sooner, Vance?" asked Hathaway. "I'd have arrested Darby up North."

"I knew he wouldn't run away," Red answered. "And I didn't want him behind the bars and unable to hit back when we met in the final battle."

"I picked up Del Bland from your old men's home," Hathaway said. "He confessed that he was planted there to get information on the

Vances. Another piece fitting into the general pattern of my evidence. I'm . . . making the arrest this afternoon. Darby will be taken from Mill City by Federal officers. The place will be cleaner for it."

Red nodded. When he walked down the main street a few minutes later, people avoided him as they had done when he arrived for his Uncle Tip's funeral. But for a different reason. Some avoided him because they had guessed wrong; others because they were ashamed. Whenever Red saw one of the latter, he greeted and talked to him as if nothing had happened. A winner can be forgiving.

His glance fell on the Mill City *Leader's* building. He would have to buy the newspaper and plant and put in a man who was for Mill City and not for either Darby or Vance.

At home Red picked up the telephone and called Cherry.

"If you'll pack a lunch," he said, "I'll bring around a couple of horses. I think I've a few hours' vacation coming."

"You've longer than that," she answered.

Red led the way to the place where water frothing over a rock spread like lace, and the timber swept downward from their feet to the curving salt-water beaches.

"I remember the last time I saw this picture," he said. "The *Abbie*

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Vance was tied up to the Darby wharf. Darby exhaust pipes were sending up plumes of steam; and the Vance exhaust pipes were dead. Now it's different. The *Abbie* is tied up to a Vance wharf and plumes of steam are coming from Vance exhaust pipes. This is the picture I've kept all these long months."

He was silent for a while, but presently he said: "They're talking of monuments because their consciences are bothering them. I told them I'd take care of it. I think it'll take the form of a new home, built on the banks of a stream running through the second-growth timber Uncle Tip planned so long ago. There'll be plenty of bottom land for the old fellows to make their gardens and be happy. Salmon in the stream, too."

"It sounds wonderful, Red," Cherry said excitedly. "That old home is beginning to fall apart. They can use a new building."

"I'll have them make a bronze tablet of Uncle Tip in staggad tin pants, flannel shirt, battered hat, and pipe in his mouth, and a few words explaining that he planted two trees for every one he cut," Red continued. "By the way that's my next job, because I've sure been cutting trees."

"And that about covers it, Red." Cherry's voice was quiet, wistful.

He was silent a long time and there was no sound save the musical note of the water on the boulder, and the deeper note of a lazy wind stirring the tops of thousands of trees.

"Strange, isn't it," he said, turning to Cherry and took her hand in his, "but after all we've been through, it would seem I had a million chances to tell you I love you. But no time seemed the right time until now."

"And no time *was* the right time . . . until now," she answered softly.

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