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WESTERN


STREET
AND
SMITH'S

REG. U.S. PAT. OFFICE

STORY

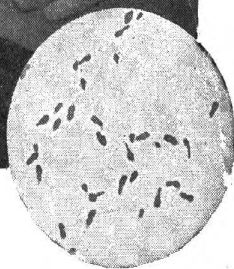
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STAMPS



The "Bottle Bacillus"
Pityrosporum ovale

It may be Infectious Dandruff ...better do something about it NOW!

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LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, Mo.

LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC and Massage

POINTED RHYMES FOR TRYING TIMES

By Berton Braley

*Here is wisdom by the peck
Versified to save your neck!*



DON'T BLOW IT

Oh, workman or scholar,
Hang on to your dollar
And do not spend it soon,
For every cent
Unwisely spent
Inflates the price balloon.

Bonds you buy with payroll earnings,
Help fulfill your future yearnings.

Money in your pocket,
Take it out and sock it
Into War Bonds, which
Help to make you rich.



WHO? ME?



There was a little dope with a fat
pay envelope
And she spent every cent that
was in it.
And she wondered, by-and-by,
why the prices rose so high.
But she didn't blame herself for
a minute.

INFLATIONARY MARY

Inflationary Mary spills
This silly kind of chatter:
"My little teeny-wee bills
And spendings do not matter.
"And if I cheat a little bit
On rationing and ceilings
The Nation's welfare isn't hit
By my small lawless dealings!"

Inflationary Mary's wrong,
For she'd be much to blame
If people in a mighty throng
Should say and do the same.

Small spendings, in the aggregate,
Reach sums extraordinary,
So let's not try to imitate
Inflationary Mary.

ADVERTISERS, PUBLISHERS—NOTE:

You are welcome to use all or
any part of the material on this page to aid
the fight against inflation.



SNAKE IN THE GAS

There was a crooked man and he
lived in crooked style,
He dealt at crooked markets with a
smugly crooked smile.
He viewed himself as clever with
his crooked ration book,
But everybody knew him for a
crooked little crook.

THE GANG'S ALL HERE

You may ask, "Why should *my* spending
Cause inflationary trending
Though I squander every penny I have got?"
—If you're joined by sixty millions
Of civilians blowing billions,
You'll discover that it matters quite a lot!

ONE PERSON CAN START IT!

You give inflation a boost!

- when you buy anything you can do without
- when you buy above ceiling or without giving
up stamps (Black Market!)
- when you ask more money for your services or
the goods you sell.

SAVE YOUR MONEY. Buy and
hold all the War Bonds you
can afford—to pay for the war
and protect your own future.
Keep up your insurance.



A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising
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STREET & SMITH'S WESTERN STORY

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JOHN BURR

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SONS O' TEXANS

by WALT COBURN



Grass Valley was a cowman's paradise but money alone couldn't buy it, Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson discovered, when the wolf pack of Manzanita Springs started bidding against them with snarling lead

I

LEE PICKETT and Bob Culbertson had died fighting back to back against overwhelming, hopeless Mexican odds for the Lone Star freedom of Texas.

Each man had left behind him a motherless son to shift alone. Lee Pickett had named his son Robert Culbertson Pickett. And Bob Culbertson, not to be outdone, had had his only son christened Lee Pickett Culbertson. The boys were about the same age and there were times

Bob Culbertson Pickett and Lee Pickett Culbertson were still in their middle 'teens when they went up the Chisholm Trail with one of the first big cattle drives. Together they ate the drag dust from Texas to Montana.

"With them names," the trail boss had told them when they hired out, "you should be ridin' up on the point. But as it is, you'll slap the drags along. The pay is fifteen dol-



when the similarity of names made for confusion. But these splendid fighting names were about all the two boys had for a heritage. They both considered it a-plenty.

lars a month and you'll earn it the first stormy night you're on third guard. . . . And while we're at it, let's whittle them long handles down to Bob Pickett and Lec Culbertson.

Then mebbysy you kin tell yourselves apart."

Bob Pickett was tall and long-muscled with gray-blue eyes, a short nose and hair the color of new rope.

Lee Culbertson was shorter, with a stocky build and he had coarse black hair, a hawk-beaked nose and eyes that were as opaque black as an Indian's.

They had one bedroll between them and used the same warsack to hold their clothes. And before the trail herd crossed the Red River of the South the grizzled trail boss knew he had hired himself two top hands. But he wasn't going to spoil them with praise or a raise in pay.

Cheated of their boyhood, Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson had the wisdom of old hands. They talked like men and had a man's ways. They smoked and cussed and drank forty-rod likker and they packed guns. Jump one of them for a fight and you had both boys to whip, and that was a chore that took a lot of fighting. But neither Bob Pickett nor Lee Culbertson was ever known to pick a fight deliberately. They never were mouthy even when they'd had a few drinks and they listened as kids were supposed to listen when older men talked. They were about seventeen when they went to Montana but they could have passed for twenty-one.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson got their first taste of forty below zero and blizzards. By the time the warm Chinook wind cut the deep drifts the following spring, they'd had a bellyful of shoveling hay into gaunt longhorns and chopping water-

holes in the ice. They had wintered all right but for fifteen dollars a month they'd had a-plenty. They saddled their private horses and loaded their bed on their pack horse and pulled out for Texas when the grass got green.

Somewhere along the trail they threw in with three drifting cowhands who were headed south. And a week or two later, camped in the badlands at what they called Brown's Hole, these three hard-eyed older cowhands felt out the two young compunchers while the jug of forty-rod passed from hand to hand around the campfire.

Who wanted to work all their life for fifteen a month? Even when you worked your job up to ramrodding some cow outfit you were gray-headed and stove-up by that time. And unless a man owned his own iron this cowpunching was a dog's life.

"Now if you two boys got the guts to go through with . . ."

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson had the guts, all right—and to spare. The whiskey had something to do with it. And by the time the whiskey had died inside them they had given their word and were on the way to town with the three older cowhands. It was too late to back out then so they went through with it.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson sat their saddles outside the bank with their guns in their hands and held the horses while the three men they knew as Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam, their silk neck handkerchiefs pulled up over their faces, went into

the bank with an empty gunny sack and their six-shooters in their hands. They were old hands at this bank-robbing game and it was only a little while, though it seemed a mighty long time to the two boys waiting outside, until they came out of the bank door with the gunny sack bulging and heavy.

They rode out of town with their horses spurred to a run and swapping shots with some citizens who began taking pot shots from windows and doorways. But nobody got hurt.

That night they camped in the badlands. There was another gallon jug and the talk around the camp-fire got tough and ugly when Black Joe shook the gold and banknotes from the gunny sack onto a bed tarp and began dividing it into three piles.

The three bank robbers kept telling how tough they were and how many men they had killed. Meanwhile Black Joe counted the stolen money into three piles.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson watched and kept their mouths shut. They had pretended to drink each time they lifted the gallon jug to their mouths. But they had both decided to stay sober.

Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam kept cutting covert glances at the two boys. They were waiting for Bob and Lee to make a holler for their cut of the bank robbery money. But the two young Texans just sat back on their hunkers and watched and said nothing until the nerves of the three bank robbers got rubbed raw.

They could not tell if the two young cowpunchers were timid and too scared to claim their share, or if they had something of their own planned.

Black Joe was big and swarthy-hided and handled himself as though he was muscle-bound. Whitey was a six-footer, rawboned and lantern-jawed, and he wore clothes that were stiff with sweat and dirt. While Little Sam was shifty-eyed and nervous-acting and had to keep hitting the jug to stay brave.

Black Joe counted the last of the money onto the three sizable piles. Then he sat back on his boot heels and took a drink from the jug. Little Sam reached for it before the big black-browed leader could cork the jug. He was tilting it when Black Joe began cramming his share of the money into a smaller canvas sack.

"Whitey"—Black Joe grinned faintly—"you an' Little Sam kin pay the two buttons five dollars apiece for holdin' your horses. Mine didn't need holdin' because he's broke to stand."

"I ain't got no fives to throw away," leered Whitey. "Why don't you two bald-faced things drag it fer home?"

Little Sam's six-shooter lay on the tarp beside his pile of money. He put down the jug and picked up the gun. A nervous grin was pulling his mouth to one side and there was cold murder in his pale eyes as he thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger.

That was what Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson had been watching and

waiting for. Before Little Sam's gun hammer was full cocked, they were on their feet and the bullet meant for Bob Pickett's belly whined between the two young Texans. They jumped back into the black shadows beyond the light of the campfire and they were shooting to kill by the time Black Joe and Whitey limbered up their guns.

The rocky badlands tossed the gun echoes back and forth and for the space of half a minute the echoed din of six-shooters was deafening. Then the last faint echoes died in the starlit night. Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam sprawled dead in the widening red smear of their own blood.

Bob and Lee stood crouched there in the night, gripping their smoking, empty guns. The blood had drained from their taut young faces.

"Looks to me like they're dead, Lee." Bob's voice had a dry sound.

"They're dead all right, Bob."

"I bet we don't git into no more such scrapes."

"I'll tell a man we won't."

Neither of them had so much as a bullet scratch. They rolled the three dead outlaws over the high bank into the swift deep black water of the river and shivered a little at the sound of the splashes. The dead men's saddles, bedrolls and guns went into the river next. They slipped the hobbles from the outlaws' horses and shoved the stolen bank money into the gunny sack. Then they saddled their own horses, packed their bed horse and headed south in the night.

II

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson decided they'd had enough of outlawry. On the trail back they spent long hours discussing ways and means of returning the stolen money to the bank. But they always decided in the end that the risk was too big. They did not know a safe way of sending back the gold and banknotes. They'd have to wrap it and mail the package at some post office or express office where they might attract attention and be remembered afterwards. The risk was too big. They'd keep it for a while longer.

They had no particular feeling of guilt. They had gotten themselves talked into helping out on a bank robbery. But even with their skins full of forty-rod likker they'd been lukewarm and had no real stomach for the job.

Killing Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam left no red stain on their consciences. Nor did their first killing bother their sleep of a night. Those three renegades had double-crossed them, cheated them. There had been murder in their outlaw hearts. It had been a simple case of kill or be killed.

"Mebbyso we kin o' earned this money, at that, Lee," Bob Pickett said slowly.

"So I bin thinkin', Bob."

So they let it ride like that. They had no real use for all that money. It tallied up to somewhere around twenty-seven thousand dollars—more money than they had ever hoped to handle if they lived to be a hundred years old. Until those three rene-

gades had made them discontented with their big talk, Bob and Lee had been satisfied to draw down fifteen dollars a month and grub. Money was just something to blow in when you got to town once every few months. And you could go on a cowpuncher drunk and ride back to camp with empty pockets and feel content. It was impossible to dream out ways of spending a sackful of money even if it was yours to spend.

They changed their minds about going back to Texas. And when they cut the sign of a trail drive near Fort Sumner they threw in with it. The trail boss was short-handed, it appeared. He was trailing these cattle to Arizona. And he baited his talk with the offer of thirty dollars a month.

"That's big money," he told the boys.

They dared not even look at each other for a minute. They agreed that thirty a month was top wages and that they might as well hire out.

Taking out his little vest pocket tally book where he kept his men's time, the trail boss asked them their names.

"Bob Culbertson Pickett."

"And yourn?" The trail boss wet his stub of pencil.

"Lee Pickett Culbertson."

The trail boss looked at them and grinned faintly.

"Mebbyso we better commence all over. I don't give a hoot about what you give fer a name but make up your minds. And if I was you boys I'd stick to somethin' easy like Jones or Smith. Or I kin put you down as Towhead and Shorty. Like I say.

I don't give a hoot. It's just fer my time book."

"Bob Culbertson Pickett."

"And Lee Pickett Culbertson."

The trail boss wrote down Towhead and Shorty, and put the tally book and stubby pencil back in his pocket.

"Don't do that no more, boys," he said reprovingly. "It's like some tune you pick up and can't git shut of and it goes around inside a man's skull . . . Bob Pickett Culbertson Lee . . ."

He told them which night horses to catch out of the remuda in the rope corral and went off muttering into his heavy drooping mustache.

Bob and Lee swapped wide grins. It had always been like that when they gave their names. And Bob said he bet that trail boss would shore enough be talkin' to hisself if they told him they had twenty-seven thousand dollars cash in their warsack. after his feeding them that talk about thirty a month being big money.

"That's enough to buy this trail herd, Bob."

"It's enough money to buy us an outfit of our own," said Bob Pickett as they rode night guard around the bedded herd.

That was the birth of the idea. They talked it over lots of times on the trail to Arizona while they stood guard at night under the stars.

They could buy a little spread, a few head of cows, a string of good horses. Five thousand dollars would stake them for a start. And when the outfit got to paying, they'd put

back what they "borrowed" from the gunny sack.

The cow country did not bother asking too many questions when a man had money to invest. And Bob and Lee figured they looked average honest.

Bob and Lee worked for wages nearly two years before they ever thought of untying the whang-leather string knotted around the mouth of the gunny sack. They carried the money like they carried their extra shirts and underwear, in their war-sack, rolled in their tarp-covered bed. And there were weeks when they were working from daybreak until dark and weary at night and never gave a thought to all that money or where it came from. It was only when the work slacked up and they lazed around in the evenings that they remembered they were wealthy and were halfway planning on going into the cattle business with their own brand registered. They had figured their brand out long ago. When they were small boys, wind-bellied little range orphans, they had scratched it in the dirt of Texas with a stick and had marked it on everything they owned. It was on their bed tarp now. The brand was Two Crosses connected, the cross bars meeting.

They had taken that brand from the crosses with which the graves of Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson were marked at the little cemetery where the dead Texans had been buried. The two crosses had been placed side by side, so close together that the cross boards touched. The sons of those two men had stood there with

tear-stained faces and choked throats and long after they had gone away they remembered those two crosses touching. It became a sort of splendid symbol to them, something big and brave and close to God to live up to. They would be pardners until they died. And that was their brand.

It had been a wet year in Arizona. The creeks and waterholes were filled and the feed was the answer to a cowman's prayer. When Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson rode into Grass Valley they knew they had found what they had been looking for.

"This is it, Lee."

"Shore is, Bob."

Grass Valley extended as far as the eye could see and spread out to the ragged mountain skyline on all sides. And Lee and Bob had been told that Grass Valley could be bought, providing a man had enough cash money to lay on the barrelhead. And he'd double his money in no time if he had the guts to take his own part and didn't spook easy. You could buy Grass Valley almighty cheap right now—if you didn't mind the range feud that was thrown in, to boot.

The creek that ran the length of Grass Valley had water in it of a wet year like this and was big enough to be called a river here in the Arizona Territory. And the headquarters ranch with its log buildings and corals and a bridge straddling the creek sprawled out like a little town. But when they got closer, the two cow-punchers could tell the place was run-down and neglected. It had an al-

most deserted look and it was almost too quiet. The two young Texans rode with their hands near their guns. The wagon trail passed a little cemetery. A few of the graves weren't old enough for the mounds to be grassed-over. Lee and Bob traded uneasy grins and rode on to the big log barn.

"Set your ponies!" called a hidden voice from the hayloft door above. The voice had the sound of a creaky hinge. "While we look yuh over! What's your names?"

"Bob Culbertson Pickett!" called the lanky tow-headed Bob.

"Lee Pickett Culbertson!" added the short, husky, black-haired Lee.

They cut each other a quick look and were braced for the usual explosion of profanity that always came when they gave their names.

Something like a chuckle came from the hayloft, and what sounded almost like girlish giggling from the heavy brush along the creek bank where they had just crossed the bridge.

"Light," creaked the voice from the hayloft, "and put up your ponies. Bob Culbertson Pickett. And Lee Pickett Culbertson . . . I knowed your daddies in Texas."

His name was Albert Clarey and he was called Ab and he was tough as a boot. No taller than five feet three, he had a face that looked like seamed leather and eyes as black and shiny as some animal's peering from under his bushy gray brows. A drooping mustache came down across the corners of his mouth and there was a battered sweat-marked hat yanked at a fighting angle on his

thatch of coarse gray hair. He was the bowleggedest man, Bob and Lee said later, that they'd ever seen. He stood there in the loft door in faded overalls and blue flannel shirt, a saddle carbine in the crook of his left arm and a white bone-handled six-shooter hung from a sagging cartridge belt around his lean flanks. But they knew he was smiling because his shiny black eyes were puckered to slits.

"Della!" little old Ab Clarey called out. "You and Jessje quit that fool gigglin' and come on out from behind the brush. And let's hope these boys won't git the wrong notions on account of you're wearin' men's duds. My sons and nephews has bin killed off and it throwed me short-handed fer cowhands. So I had to yank my daughters out o' the kitchen an' set 'em a-horseback. It didn't take much coaxin'."

Della was small with a mop of curly chestnut-brown hair and eyes that were almost the same color. She had a short nose and her smile was an impish grin. She was smiling now.

Jessje was taller, with a sort of shy, quiet dignity. Her hair was the same warm reddish-brown as her younger sister's, but her black-fringed eyes were dark-gray and even in her cowpuncher clothes she looked almost beautiful. Both girls carried saddle carbines and handled their guns as though they knew how to use them.

A plump gray-haired woman in clean faded gingham had come to the kitchen doorway. There were flour smudges on her bare arms. She held

a rifle in her work-roughened hands.

"It's all right, Ma!" called Ab Clarey. "Set two extra places fer supper!" He came down the inside ladder and met Bob and Lee as they swung from their saddles.

His hand shake was like a steel claw gripping. And then the two girls shook hands. Ab said Bob and Lee were the spittin' image of Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson. It was going to be confusing on account of their names being swapped around, he declared, and he kept calling Bob Pickett "Lee" and Lee Culbertson "Bob."

That night after supper Ab Clarey told them how he'd been a neighbor of theirs in Texas. He had pointed one of the first trail herds across the Staked Plains and across New Mexico to Grass Valley in Arizona Territory. He'd come to stay and he aimed to die here and nobody was running him out. And whoever said Grass Valley was for sale at any price was a damned liar. He was short-handed, though. He'd put Bob and Lee on and they could name their own wages. But they'd better understand it would be fighting pay.

Bob and Lee explained that they'd figured on buying an outfit of their own. Ab Clarey brought out a jug of corn likker. And later on Bob Pickett fetched in the bulging gunny sack and set it on the table alongside the jug. They had bought a half interest in the Grass Valley Ranch. They shook hands on it. The deal was closed without the scratch of pen and ink on paper. Nor did Ab Clarey ask them any questions about where they got the money.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson figured it was safe to use it all, empty the sack. They'd put it all back some day. Return it to the bank somehow . . .

III

There was a man called Letch Lawton and maybe that was his real name, maybe it wasn't. He rode in and out of Brown's Hole without being bothered. Brown's Hole covered a lot of rough territory where Utah and Colorado join the southern boundary of Wyoming to form a T. It was renegade country, much of it badlands and few honest men rode its dim trails. Law officers of any kind were barred. Any man who rode into Brown's Hole was risking his tough hide. But Letch Lawton knew every twisted trail and hideout pocket and he rode the grub line from one ranch to another. There were half a dozen ranches there, linked together by the dim trails where outlaws of all kinds holed up. Letch Lawton got to know them all, at least by sight. But if Letch Lawton was an outlaw, it had never been proven. There were no reward dodgers with his name on them posted anywhere. He rode into the cow towns and out again, quiet, unobtrusive, never drunk, avoiding all arguments or quarrels.

Letch Lawton had known Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam. He had been in town the day they rode in with a couple of young cowpunchers and held up the bank and rode away in a hail of wild gun lead. Standing at the bar in a saloon almost directly across the wide dusty street from the

bank, a drink in his hand, he had watched the whole show through the open doorway that was only partly blocked by swinging half doors. Letch Lawton had not moved from his place at the bar. And when the bank robbers' dust had settled and the shooting died out, Lawton had gulped down his drink as though he enjoyed the taste of the raw whiskey.

He was a man of medium height, so well built and proportioned that he seemed no more than average size. He dressed as countless common cowhands are dressed in their working clothes. His hair was drab-colored and his lean tanned face bore no distinguishing features until you looked into his eyes. Then you got a sort of chilled shock, because Letch Lawton's pale-gray eyes were as cold and bleak as a winter sky.

In the excitement following the bank robbery nobody noticed Letch Lawton ride out of town.

A few days later Letch Lawton camped with old Speck Williams, sometimes called Speckle Face on account of the black freckles on his sun-browned skin. Speck was camped at the ford across Green River. They were fishing for catfish and Letch Lawton had rigged a trotline across the river. They were out in Speck's rowboat, lifting the trotline to take the night's catch off the string of hooks. The trotline hooks had fouled on something that had drifted down the swift current. The thing that had hung up in the trotline hooks was what was left of Black Joe.

They towed the bloated dead man ashore and Letch Lawton examined the dead carcass of the outlaw. Then

they dug a grave, rolled the bloated corpse into it and covered it. Afterward Lawton got Speck to row him out again and again until he recovered the dead bodies of Whitey and Little Sam.

Speckle Face had no stomach for it, even when Letch Lawton pulled a reward dodger from his chaps pocket and showed Speck where the Law had put a five-hundred-dollar bounty on each of the three outlaws.

Fifteen hundred dollars, he told Speck, was what he called good fishin'. But Speck said he wanted none of that kind of money, regardless.

Perhaps Letch Lawton felt the same way about it, because if he collected any rewards on the three dead outlaws, he did it very quietly and without letting the news leak out. And he kept his mouth shut in the saloons at Rock Spring, Wyoming, Vernal, Utah, and Craig, Colorado. the three cow towns he and others from Brown's Hole visited. Speck Williams was almighty close-mouthed, too, so the law never openly crossed Black Joe, Whitey, and Little Sam off as dead on the book that held the long list of wanted men. The reward dodgers remained posted. And if Speckle Face took time to wonder about it he figured that Letch Lawton was too wise to fetch the law to the ford on Green River to identify three rotting carcasses moldering in their graves.

Lawton had found out from Speck that two young cowpunchers leading a single packed bed horse had crossed Green River at the ford. They called each other Lee and Bob.



Lee was short and stocky, with black hair and eyes. Bob was tall, lanky and towheaded with gray-blue eyes. They were strangers and acted as though they were lost and in a hurry to get out and a long ways gone from Brown's Hole.

Letch Lawton left Brown's Hole and it was weeks before anybody took notice of his absence. A man like that could change his name and drift on and nobody would pay any particular attention to him. He was a good cowhand, fair-to-middling or a shade better if the occasion called for it. The kind of a cowhand who rides the middle swing position on a strung-out trail herd. A forty-a-month cowhand named Jones or Smith or some other common name. He could work through a whole roundup season, draw his time and pull out and be forgotten next week. He was just another drifting cowpuncher.

But that pair of bleak gray eyes missed nothing, ever. And Letch Lawton had a trained memory for detail. He remembered men and horses. And if he had been an artist he could have painted a most accurate picture from memory of the two young cowpunchers and their horses as they sat their saddles, holding the bridle reins of three horses while Black Joe, Whitey and Little

Sam held up the bank across the street.

As it was, Letch Lawton carried that vivid picture in his mind. No detail dimmed with the days and weeks and months as he drifted down the trail, taking his time, camping where he found the dead ashes of the campfires left behind by Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson, cold-trailing them and playing a patient waiting game.

Letch Lawton was not too far distant when Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson bought a half interest in Ab Clarey's Grass Valley Ranch. When the news leaked out of Grass Valley and the cow country learned that old Ab Clarey had got himself a couple of young pardners, Letch Lawton stabled his horse at the feed and livery barn at the nearby cow town of Manzanita Springs and rented a room at the dingy little hotel and began loafing. He drank quietly and never got anywhere near tipsy. He sat in little two-bit poker games, picking up whatever news or gossip passed around but taking no part in the talk.

And there was plenty of talk. Wild talk. Rumors and counter rumors. A few facts, a lot of lies, plenty of wild guesswork voiced in the saloons.

Stirred all together and brought to a boil and then set aside to cool off, it all simmered down to this: Half a dozen little nester outfits back in the mountains that pocketed Grass Valley were trying to run old Ab Clarey off or kill him. Then they'd move down into the fertile valley and split the proceeds among themselves.

It had been going on for a long time. Years. They had killed off Ab Clarey's three sons, a nephew or two and some lesser kin, cousins or something, not to mention a few gun-packing cowhands who had been working for Clarey's outfit. And now there was only Ab himself left and just about the time these nesters were set to ride down into Grass Valley and finish tough old Ab off, this pair of young Texans had thrown in with Ab Clarey. Either they had hired out to Ab or the slick old son had sold them an interest in his outfit—using his two daughters for bait, said the nesters. Otherwise no two men with a lick of sense would hire out at any price or invest a dollar in what was bound to be a total loss.

Ab Clarey was bound to lose, the nesters bragged as they let their spurs out to the town hole. And any two fools that threw in with Old Ab would lose their taw, because the nesters outnumbered Ab Clarey and his two Texans. Outnumbered them ten or a dozen to one. And those hungry-loop nesters had a bitter grudge to pay off, because Ab's sons and nephews and the shirt-tail kin had done a lot of gun damage before they filled graves in the little boothill there at the Grass Valley Ranch. Ab and his outfit had been outnumbered from the very beginning but the Clarey guns had whittled down those odds. The half dozen nester outfits had had to import gunslingers from the outside, and pay them big fighting wages and cash on the barrelhead, to take the places

of their own kin who had died with their boots on.

Letch Lawton knew a few of these imported gun fighters who had drifted down the dim trails, attracted by the news of a big range war and fancy fighting pay. The bleak-eyed Letch looked them over with silent contempt. He knew them for what they actually were—a bragging, whiskey-guzzling, spur-dragging, loud-mouthed coyote pack. They were mongrels and they had been told to get out of Brown's Hole. Four-flushers and petty larceny thieves of that breed were the men who gave real outlaws an evil reputation and those big-caliber outlaws who used Brown's Hole hadn't wanted it spoiled by would-be toughs. So Letch Lawton looked the nesters' gunhands over and tossed them into the discard.

From the half dozen nesters who owned their own irons, he picked four who were really tough and dangerous in any kind of a fight. He sized up the two tall, lean, rawboned Mowbray brothers as actually bad actors. Mack Mowbray was a few years older than his brother Ellis, but they looked enough alike to be twins. Sandy-haired, big-nosed and thin-lipped, they had deep-set small green eyes like the eyes of a rattlesnake. They were all that was left of the Mowbray tribe. The Clareys had killed Old Mowbray and the three other Mowbray boys. Mack and Ellis Mowbray did a lot of drunken, brawling, bullying spur jingling in town but they finished everything they started in the way of a ruckus. They fought as a team

and no holds barred, taking the odds as they came. So Letch Lawton tagged them as dangerous.

IV

The first time Letch Lawton laid eyes on the tinhorn gambler, Harry Templar, he knew he was looking at a killer. Tall, slim, lithe as a black panther, Templar was too handsome and too much of a range dude to like hard work and he wore none of the weatherbeaten earmarks of a hard-riding, loop-swinging, brush-popper cattle rustler. His hands were gloved when he rode. Long-fingered, well-kept gambler hands, they were as swift with a gun as they were with a deck of marked cards or a pair of loaded dice. And Templar spent a lot of his time in town where he owned the biggest saloon and banked a high-stake poker game. His hair was sleek and black, his small black mustache waxed to needle points and a pair of yellow eyes set on either side of a high-bridged nose were shadowed by level black brows. He had an olive skin that never tanned. He hired cowpunchers to handle his cattle but he did his own gun chores. And he was as crooked as a snake track and treacherous as a black leopard.

Handsome Harry Templar had lost no kin in the fighting. But when a couple of nesters were wiped out he claimed their outfits for old gambling debts. And he sent tough cowhands out there to hold what he claimed.

Even then Handsome Harry kept his hands clean of the range war until one night at a dance in town

the Clarey boys had called him outside after he had waltzed too many times with their sister Jessie.

"You dance again with Jessie Clarey, tinhorn"—the youngest Clarey boy had acted as spokesman for the Clarey outfit—"and we'll work that purty hide of yours over till the ugliest woman on earth wouldn't look your way."

Handsome Harry Templar was too slick a gambler to go up against losing odds. He had made a sort of swaggering gesture, though, to save his reputation. He had walked back into the dance hall and over to where Jessie and her sister Della were standing.

"I'm sorry I can't claim another dance with you, Jessie. Your brothers have made some objections. I don't want to have to kill the brothers of the girl I hope to marry. We'll meet again. Good night, Jessie."

The cow country said that Harry Templar and Jessie Clarey had been meeting at night at some secret rendezvous, that two of the Clarey brothers had waylaid the handsome tinhorn one night. But he had been too quick-triggered for them. He had shot and killed them both. It had never been proved, one way or another, though some said that Jessie Clarey still met Harry Templar when the moon was right.

So Letch Lawton marked Handsome Harry Templar down as being a smooth article and dangerous because he was so slick and treacherous.

The fourth man on Letch Lawton's list of dangerous men was the tall rawboned, lantern-jawed, gimlet-

eyed, cattle-rustling nester cowman called Peck. Peck was nearly seven feet tall, long-boned, big-jointed and tough.

"Lemme line my gun sights on Ab Clarey and I'll die happy," said Peck.

If he'd ever had a first name, Peck had lost it or thrown it away. He had pointed a trail herd out of Texas, and Ab Clarey had beat him to Grass Valley by no more than a week. Peck had been forced to turn his longhorns loose in the mountains. He swore that Ab Clarey had tipped off the law back on the Pecos to hold up his herd for inspection.

"Put me to the bother of killin' them smart Alecks when they tried to make a Winchester cut on my cattle," Peck complained. "Delayed me ten days or I'd've beat Ab Clarey to Grass Valley."

Peck never denied he had stolen cattle in his P road iron. Nor did he lay claim to any fatherly love for the several sons who had been killed off in the range war when Peck tried to move his P cattle into Grass Valley.

Peck had a daughter who was younger than his sons. He called her Calamity Jane. She was sixteen now and as untamed as a young wildcat.

"When Calamity Jane was old enough to straddle a pony she stole my top horse out o' the barn and wound up at Clarey's ranch a week later," Peck often said, almost proudly. "Said she'd run off. She ain't bin afoot since. And she's still runnin' off. I don't make a

try no more at keepin' track of the brat. But I'll kill the man that harms a hair of her red head."

No love was lost between any of these men who had sworn to take Grass Valley. They eyed one another covertly and with suspicion and never let down their guard. The two Mowbrays never separated. And that forced Peck and the gambler Templar into pairing off. Each man of them had his own secret plan buried deep. Even Mack and Ellis Mowbray had stood toe to toe one night when they were drunk in town and slugged and gouged and kicked each other into staggering, groggy pulps. They had never shaken hands to call off the fight. Maybe they'd pick it up again some time and finish the job.

Not a man had lifted a hand to interfere in the fight. They had just stood around watching, laying a bet or two on which of the Mowbray boys was the best man. Nobody knew for certain which of Ab Clarey's daughters they had fought over, or if it was Peck's brat who had stirred up jealousy in the hearts of Mack and Ellis Mowbray.

But greed had banded these men together. They wanted Grass Valley. They made no bones about hating one another's guts. They made no secret of their aim to get hold of Grass Valley. Time enough, after they got Ab Clarey's Grass Valley Ranch, to fight over the hogging of it, Harry Templar told them.

That fitted nicely enough into Letch Lawton's silent scheme of things and for a time he passed unnoticed here in town. But there

was a range war going on and all strangers came under suspicion. And Letch Lawton knew that they were watching him and trying to figure him out. He grew uneasy under their cold-eyed scrutiny.

Back at Rock Springs and Vernal and in the forbidden outlaw country called Brown's Hole, Letch Lawton came and went as he pleased. In town he was never flush or never broke. He bought a round of drinks when it was his turn to buy and he never edged into a crowd unless somebody called him to the bar for a drink. And at the ranches inside Brown's Hole he pitched in and worked a week or a month if they were short-handed. He never asked a favor but he'd go out of his way to lend almost anybody a hand.

Here in the little Arizona cow town of Manzanita Springs, however, Letch Lawton was a rank stranger, and strangers weren't welcome. The Mowbrays were in town and Peck was there. Harry Templar had been appointed to do their talking. They were lined up at the bar in Templar's saloon. Letch Lawton sat alone at a card table playing solitaire. He knew they were watching him and he had his back to the wall. There was no kind of fear in him, his hands were steady as he handled the soiled deck of cards but he felt cold annoyance and something like disgust. He wanted no showdown of any kind with these men. To blazes with them and their range war and the sooner they battled it out the better. He had something else in mind.

The something else amounted to

exactly twenty-seven thousand dollars. Manzanita Springs had a little branch bank. Letch Lawton was waiting for Ab Clarey to ride to town to deposit that amount of money in the branch bank. And if Ab Clarey fetched Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson along with him, that was all right with Letch Lawton.

He even had his opening speech down pat, word for word. Quiet and without bluff or bluster.

"I wouldn't bank that twenty-seven thousand if I was you," he would tell Ab Clarey. And when Clarey would ask why the devil not, Letch Lawton had his quiet answer to that one.

"I know where it come from," he would tell Ab Clarey. And he would take it up with Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson from there.

"The wisest thing you fellers kin do is hand that money over to me, then forget you ever had it. My memory is plumb blank. And Black Joe and Whitey and Little Sam can't say a word about it. They wasn't able to do any talkin' when I fished 'em out o' Green River, but the bullet holes showed. I gave 'em a decent plantin'. You kin chalk it up as burial expenses. Mark it off your book as experience."

And to clinch it Letch Lawton had a slip of paper he carried in a vest pocket tally book. He would take it out and read off a list of long numbers.

"Banks keep track of the serial numbers on big currency," Letch Lawton would tell Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson. "These numbers tally with the numbers of some

of your ten, twenty, fifty and hundred dollar bills. Money like that would get gents like you into bad trouble. I'm doin' you boys a favor, takin' it off your hands . . ."

That was how Letch Lawton had planned it if the play came up like that. Now it looked as though he'd have to handle it some other way. He was checking the bet to Harry Templar.

The gambler caught his eye now and nodded. "Have a drink with us, stranger."

Letch Lawton stacked the soiled deck neatly and walked to the bar. This was it. The directions said play it cautious.

He had a drink with them. Nobody offered to shake hands. Their eyes were cold. So were Letch Lawton's eyes. They got a sort of shock when they felt the impact of his bleak stare. And their hands edged towards their guns.

"We've been trying to size you up." Harry Templar smiled thinly. "The Mowbray boys think you might have a law badge pinned to your undershirt."

Letch Lawton grinned faintly and shook his head. "The Mowbray boys got me sized up wrong."

"Peck," the gambler went on, "figures you're a renegade on the dodge and maybe your gun services might be for hire. Peck is short-handed."

Letch Lawton shook his head again. "I'm not wanted anywhere for any crime."

"You bin seen," said Peck, "around Brown's Hole."

Letch Lawton had to tilt his head to give the tall Peck the full benefit of his bleak stare.

"I've stayed at all the ranches at Brown's Hole."

That was all he was going to say about it. And it stopped Peck. There was an uneasy silence.

"I'm reserving my own opinion," said Harry Templar.

"No gambler ever turns up his hole card," said Letch Lawton quietly, "till all the chips are down."

"Meaning," smiled Harry Templar thinly, "you have a few white chips in the game?"

Letch Lawton looked straight into the yellow eyes of the gambler. For the fraction of a moment each man read something in the eyes of the other. Then that brief second was gone. Templar let his question remain unanswered and he voiced the opinion of the Mowbrays and Peck and the other nesters.

"It's past sundown here at Manzanita Springs, stranger," Harry Templar's voice was toneless. "Don't let the sun rise on you here."

It was what Letch Lawton had figured was coming and he was prepared to take it. He put down his empty whiskey glass and his bleak eyes swept them all. Then he walked away from the bar and out through the swinging half doors and onto the street. It was getting dark. The stars were just beginning to show when he rode out of town half an hour later, leading his packed bed horse.

V

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson vaguely remembered seeing the man somewhere before. Little old Ab Clarey eyed him with a hostile glare.

"I figured," said Letch Lawton, "you might be short-handed."

"You figgered wrong." Ab's voice was cranky.

"Harry Templar," said Lawton, "and the two Mowbrays and Peck gave me till sunrise to quit Manzanita Springs. That left me nowhere to go but here."

"The hell it didn't!" Ab Clarey's voice cracked like a whip. "It's a big country. Use the rest of it."

Letch Lawton sat his sweat-streaked horse. Reaching for tobacco and papers, he turned his bleak-eyed stare on Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson.

"I heard in town that you gents had bought a half interest in the Grass Valley Ranch." His voice was casual.

"You heard right," Ab Clarey said curtly.

"Cash on the barrelhead." Letch Lawton smiled.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson cut each other a swift look. They knew Letch Lawton had seen it and they both tensed.

"I used to know Black Joe." Letch Lawton spilled flaky tobacco in a thin brown paper. "And Whitey." He twisted the cigarette into shape and licked it. "And Little Sam." He pulled the head of a match across his leather chaps, cupped the flame and lit the cigarette. The smoke drifted from his nostrils. The cigarette was

held in a corner of a flat mirthless grin and through the tobacco smoke his eyes were as bleak and cold as a winter sky.

"You're hired!" Ab Clarey's voice sounded like a pistol shot that shattered a tense silence.

Bob and Lee stared at Ab Clarey slack-jawed. The little cowman turned abruptly and headed for the house.

Letch Lawton swung from his saddle. He was grinning faintly as he reached for the latigo strap and began unsaddling. Bob and Lee watched blankly.

"Whoever you are, mister," Bob Pickett spoke first, "you better commence talkin'."

Letch Lawton pulled off his saddle, then slid the headstall from his horse's ears. Walking over to his pack horse, he reached for the end of the rope that fastened his tarp-covered bed, jerked it and undid the diamond hitch. After he had slid the sweaty tarp-covered bed onto the ground, he pulled off the pack horse's hackamore.

Jessie and Della Clarey had been helping their mother with a big laundry and they were hanging damp clothes on the line. While his two horses rolled, Letch Lawton watched the two girls in their gingham house dresses. Then he turned to Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson.

"This Grass Valley Ranch," he said quietly, "stocked as it is with cattle, is worth a pile of dough. A hundred thousand dollars would be dirt cheap for even a half interest." His eyes cut a look at Ab Clarey's

two daughters. Then his grin twisted as he looked at Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson again.

"For twenty-seven thousand dollars," said Letch Lawton, "you two gents bought a hell of a lot."

"I reckon"—Lee Culbertson's gun was in his hand—"you've talked all you need to, mister." His black eyes glittered.

"There's no need for a gun play," said Lawton. "Put it away. You might need me later on. Templar and the Mowbrays and Peck are playin' for keeps. Ab Clarey hired me. I'm willin' to earn fightin' wages. You gents will find me easy to git along with."

"You're after better than fightin' wages, mister," said Bob Pickett.

Letch Lawton nodded. "We kin make a dicker afterwards. I was across the street while you two boys held the horses and your three pardners done the bank chores. Later I drug three carcasses out o' Green River. That's between the three of us. And unless you told Ab Clarey, nobody on earth knows any more. Except Speckle Face at the ford acrost Green River. He helped me fish Black Joe, Whitey and Little Sam out. He recollects you two fellers crossin' the river at the ford. But the Speckle Face don't talk. And there's no need for me to ever open my mouth. If you've told Ab Clarey, that's your fault and none of mine."

"We never told Ab Clarey anything," said Bob Pickett.

"Mebbyso he's a mind reader, then. You ain't got that ol' cowman fooled. He ain't banked the money.

And he'd better not, for your sakes. The law has the serial numbers of a lot of that currency. You put it into circulation all at once, at one place, and you'll be in jail almighty sudden."

"What do you want out of the deal, anyhow?" asked Lee. He had shoved his gun back into his holster but his right hand still rested on its butt.

"Right now," Letch Lawton grinned, "I don't think I could give you an honest answer to that. I had in mind collectin' twenty-seven thousand dollars from you boys and ridin' away with it and that'd close the deal—"

"And what changed your mind?" Lee cut a swift look towards where Jessie and Della were hanging up the wet clothes.

"I don't like bein' shoved around, for one thing," said Letch Lawton, "by a fancy tinhorn. There's nothin' at Manzanita Springs I hated to leave or care about goin' back to. But a man don't like to be run out o' town. That could be reason enough for me to discard that twenty-seven thousand dollars for a while until I lend Ab Clarey a hand. I kin pick up the money later."

"We don't aim to give you that money, mister," said Bob, "now or later. It goes back to the bank where it come from."

"We'll git it back from Ab Clarey right now," said Lee Culbertson.

"Don't go off half-cocked, boys. Tell Ab Clarey all about it. Or say nothin'. Let it ride. You've packed that money a long time without diggin' into it. Now let it stay

wherever Ab Clarey put it. There's always the chance I'll stop the bullet with my name on it before this ruckus is over. You tell Ab Clarey to keep that money salted down. It's so much dynamite. Handle it gentle or it'll blow you boys plumb into the big pen. And I'll tell you one thing now that you kin gamble all that twenty-seven thousand dollars on: Dead or alive, I'll never talk about it. You're safe with Letch Lawton."

Ab Clarey had gone into the house. He came out now, the bulky gunny sack slung over his shoulder, and walked up to where they were standing.

"I reckon," Ab's voice creaked, as he dropped the gunny sack at Lawton's feet, "this is what you come fer, mister. Take it. But you bother these boys and I'll kill yuh."

Letch Lawton picked up the gunny sack with its money. As he hefted it his bleak eyes lighted up. Then he carried it into the barn. The barn doors were wide open and they watched him paw some hay out of a manger, toss the sack in and then cover it with hay. He was grinning faintly when he walked out again.

"You know where it is," he said quietly, "in case my luck runs out."

"You got what you come after," rapped Ab Clarey. "I'll stake you to a fresh horse and pack mule. The trail out o' Grass Valley is open."

Letch Lawton shook his head. "You hired me, Mr. Clarey. I'm stayin' hired."

Old Ab Clarey's hard little black eyes glinted. He looked like he was

going to blow up as he sometimes did and yank off his old hat and tromp up and down on it. Then he sort of relaxed slowly.

"By Jehosaphat, you might do to take along. You shore as hell ain't yellin'. But I still hate a damned lowdown sneak that wears a law badge hid under his shirt."

Letch Lawton grinned. "So do I, Mr. Clarey."

Old Ab stiffened. His grizzled head thrust forward. "You mean you ain't a range detective that cold-trailed these boys to my place?"

"I never wore a law badge of any kind, inside my shirt or shinin' and polished in the open."

"But you trailed Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson here."

"I cold-trailed Bob Culbertson Pickett and Lee Pickett Culbertson," admitted Letch. "You just handed me all I wanted from them. But I'm not reppin' for John Law. I'm playin' a lone hand."

Ab Clarey eyed him shrewdly, his black eyes puckering to tiny slits.

"You got guts, all right. You kin stay hired. But I don't trust you a damn bit. You make one wrong move and I'll gut-shoot yuh."

"That's fair enough."

"And don't git idees in your head about my two daughters. They're spoke fer!" Old Ab Clarey's voice creaked loudly.

Over at the clothes line laughter sounded, clear as a tinkling bell. Jessie's face flushed and her voice carried above Della's laugh.

"You're a doggoned liar, papa."

VI

Supper that evening was a tense sort of meal. Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson were glad to push back their chairs.

For one thing they were expecting trouble and were keyed up, waiting for warning news of some kind. Because Letch Lawton, once Ab Clarey and the two young Texans had accepted him on trial, had given them the news from town. How the Mowbrays and Peck and a bunch of their lukewarm neighbors and hired gunslingers had gathered at Manzanita Springs. And it looked as though they were getting set for some kind of a raid on Ab Clarey's ranch.

Ab Clarey said they'd be warned in time. All he hoped was that they wouldn't be short-handed when they got here because he wanted to wipe 'em out down to the last son of a snake. And if Harry Templar didn't have the guts to ride into Grass Valley and fight like a man for what he wanted, then he, Ab Clarey, would ride to town and smoke him out of his snake hole.

"Templar," said Letch Lawton, who seemed to enjoy his supper, "is my meat, Mr. Clarey." And he looked across the supper table and straight into the deep dark-gray eyes of Jessie Clarey.

Della Clarey was as easy to meet and understand as a boy. She and Lee Culbertson were already quarreling as though they'd known one another always.

But Jessie, as Bob Pickett told Lee Culbertson, just never got well acquainted. She kept a man at arm's

length with those steady gray-black eyes and made you feel awkward.

Now this rank stranger, Letch Lawton, showed up and Jessie's cheeks were flushed and the dark shadow was gone from her eyes. She actually smiled and once or twice she laughed softly at something Letch Lawton said. And it worked double because by some miracle or another that bleakness was gone from his eyes. His flat-toned voice took on life and he looked like a man who has just been let out of prison. Letch Lawton and Jessie Clarey acted as though they were alone and nobody else existed.

Supper over, the men went outside to smoke. The girls helped their mother in the kitchen. Ma Clarey was plump and gray-haired and rosy-cheeked and there were tears in her eyes when her older daughter gave her a hug and kiss as they were clearing the supper table.

"I do declare, Jessie, you act like a girl in love."

"You mean an old maid, mamma. I'm thirty. I waited a long time. But when he rode up, I knew him. And he knew me . . . And we'd never seen each other before in our lives. I've never known what love is—only hate and a sort of loathing. No room for love. Maybe his life's been like that, too . . ."

Ab Clarey kept watching as though he was expecting somebody. And when a rider showed up in the distance the grizzled cowman got up from where he squatted on his boot-heels.

"That'll be Jane Peck. Peck's Calamity Jane. Best cowhand in the

country. I bin kind o' worried about her."

Bob Pickett, Lee Culbertson and Letch Lawton had heard about Calamity Jane Peck. They had expected to see a homely tough little brat. But at sixteen Jane Peck had outgrown all that. And they got to their feet, their hats off, and stared a little slack-jawed, because Calamity Jane Peck, afoot or on horseback, was something to quicken a cowboy's pulse.

She was tall and slim as a boy and her heavy hair was dark tawny gold with reddish tints. Her skin was tanned and soft and her eyes were a dark gray-green color, set under almost heavy black brows with long black lashes that were thick as fringe. Her quick smile showed a set of very white teeth. She was dressed like a brush-popper cowhand and the way she sat a horse was really something.

"They're coming, Uncle Ab . . ." She looked at Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson. They shifted uneasily under the level appraisal of her gray-green eyes. Then she looked at Letch Lawton, long and hard, unsmiling.

"We're ready, Jane," said Ab Clarey. "Step down and shake hands with Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson. The other feller is Letch Lawton."

"I'm Bob Pickett." Bob grinned, reaching out to take Jane Peck's slim tanned hand. "Lee Culbertson is my pardner. Our dads was Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson. Ab knew 'em down in Texas. Our dads named us

Lee Pickett Culbertson and Bob Culbertson Pickett. Maybe you better not try to figger it out. Just call me Bob. And I don't care what you call Lee. You're the only girl I ever saw forkin' a horse who didn't set a saddle like she belonged back in the kitchen wearin' an apron."

Lee Culbertson had held out his hand. He looked down at it, grinned, then shoved it at Letch Lawton.

"Might as well shake hands with somebody," he said, "now I got it shoved out yonder like a wagon tongue. When Bob Pickett gets done runnin' off at the head like a magpie with a split tongue—"

Jane Peck gave Lee a quick smile. Then she shook hands with him. After a moment's hesitation, she shoved out her hand at Letch Lawton.

"I heard Harry Templar telling the Mowbrays and Peck," she said, "that Letch Lawton would be hard to kill. I know now what he meant."

Ab Clarey took her horse and Calamity Jane Peck went on to the house.

"Peck started to raise her like he raised his boys," explained Ab Clarey. "Her mother died when she was a little thing. First time Peck taken a quirt to her, she swiped his top horse and run off. She was lost a week when she showed up here, starved, all eyes and tangled hair. But nary a tear from her. My missus fed her up. I rode up in the mountains to Peck's place. I told him we had his little girl and we aimed to keep her. And I'd kill him if ever he come after her. For a time

the ground was left crusted, hard and bare.

Starting across it were men on horseback, heavily armed. There must have been twenty men. Some of them were drunk and noisy, riding with their saddle guns out of the scabbards and telling how tough they were. Whiskey-brave, they were the hired gun-slingers. And for all their big-mouthed talk and gun waving, they were letting the Mowbray brothers, Peck and Harry Templar ride up in the lead.

Old Ab Clarey sighted them first and motioned the others back into the brush. At first it seemed as though Ab was going to bush up here and let his enemies ride into a bushwhacker trap because he let them get out in the broad middle of the black alkali lake bed and within a hundred yards. Peck, Harry Templar and the two Mowbrays, up in the lead, were setting the gait at a long trot, the lanky Peck standing in his stirrups. Then Ab Clarey's voice creaked.

"Let's take 'em on now!"

They spurred out of the brush. Their saddle guns lifted. And at the first sight of them coming, their horses spurred to a run, the hired gun fighters yelped and bunched and some guns blasted wildly.

Four men charged five times their number, without warning, without a shout or yell. Only the swift hard pounding of shod hoofs on the black ground as they charged like Death coming out of the gray twilight.

Peck, Templar and the two Mowbrays reined to a halt and stood their ground. But the other nesters and their hired gun fighters milled and

shouted panicky orders at each other and they were snarled up in a tangle of rearing, lunging horses.

VII

Nobody wanted to fire the first shot. They were holding their fire and then no more than a hundred-foot strip of the black ground separated them and gun barrels swung down or lifted up to level and they were all shooting at the same time.

Peck spurred out to meet Ab Clarey and they were shooting at each other as their gun-broke horses loped without slacking pace or swerving. They were shooting to kill, but Peck made the bigger target and Ab Clarey's first bullet hit Peck in the midriff. Peck's aim wasn't good after that but he kept shooting and his horse kept coming on and Ab Clarey's gun spat fire. The horses almost collided, stirrups locked. Then Peck's lanky rawboned body slumped sideways and Ab shot him through the head as he fell.

Harry Templar and Letch Lawton matched their gun duel with cold-blooded swiftness, holding their fire until they got within six-shooter distance. Then they slid their carbines into saddle scabbards and drew their six-shooters and neither gun lifted higher than belt level when they cut loose. And as fast as Templar was with a gun, Letch Lawton was a split-second quicker. It was that fraction of a second that tallied the difference between life and death. Lawton's bullet hit first and it tore through Templar's ribs and into his

lungs. And then a .45 slug from the gambler's gun hit Lawton in the left shoulder. The impact jerked him sideways in his saddle and he shot low and the bullet ripped through Harry Templar. The gambler was dying but he was dying hard. His next shot raked Lawton's ribs. Then Letch Lawton rode him down and shot him again and Harry Templar was dead before he pitched headlong to the ground.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson charged the big Mowbray brothers, straight into a level hail of bullets, their horses spurred to a run and their saddle guns spewing streaks of flame. Standing in their stirrups, tied bridle reins dropped over their saddlehorns, they were shooting fast and straight.

Mack Mowbray shouted something and he and his brother Ellis whirled their horses and jumped them into the milling bunch of nesters and hired gun fighters. Bob and Lee rode in at their horses' rumps and then the two young Texans were in the middle of a wild mêlée with cursing, shouting, shooting men and lunging, rearing horses all around them. The horses Ab Clarey had told them were gun-broke proved it now because they were jammed rump to rump. Bob and Lee dropped their saddle guns and jerked six-shooters, making the same kind of a desperate stand against big fighting odds that their Texan fathers had made against Santa Ana's Mexicans. Both bleeding from flesh wounds, teeth bared, their guns spitting and roaring, they were asking no quarter, showing no mercy to their enemies.

They saw Mack Mowbray jerk, then slump limply like an empty sack across his saddlehorn. Ellis Mowbray pitched backwards, a hole drilled in his forehead.

They were fighting a panicky fear-crazed, whiskey-locoed mob now. And there was some semblance of order in the chaos, for a number of the hired gun fighters fought with the desperation of cornered coyotes.

Then off at the edge of the milling mob a saddle carbine began crackling. Every time it cracked a man was hit and it was firing rapidly like an automatic. Mortally wounded men screamed and their horrible death cries and groans added to the din of gunfire. Some of them broke and ran for it, spurring their spooked horses for the safety of the brush. One or two of them made it but the others were shot out of their saddles.

Then one of the gun fighters was shouting loud for the shooting to stop, that they'd had a bellyful. They were throwing away their guns and hoisting empty clawing hands as high as their arms would reach.

Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson had empty guns in their hands and were reloading as fast as they could when the shooting all around them stopped. Then there were only the moans and groans of wounded men and the snorting and stirring of horses and the dying echoes of gunfire in the gathering dusk.

Letch Lawton sat his horse, his smoking saddle gun tilted, his teeth bared in a flat grin.

"Throw away your guns. Take care of your wounded. Then quit

the country. We're hangin' every man we find tomorrow. Git gone!"

There were four of them too badly wounded to travel. Letch Lawton told the others to tie the wounded in their saddles. If they died, that was their hard luck.

Letch himself was wounded and losing blood. But he rode back to where Ab Clarey lay on the ground and when Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson, both bleeding from flesh wounds, rode up and swung to the ground, the man from Brown's Hole said to see what they could do for Mr. Clarey.

"He looks dead, boys."

Ab Clarey's thick gray hair was blood matted, his eyes closed. He lay on his back as motionless as a corpse. But even as they bent over him, the tough little old cowman's beady black eyes opened and he began cussing in a creaky voice.

"Where's my pony? If they shot that pony of mine, by hell—"

"Your horse is all right. You're hurt. Lay still. Your head—"

"That damn Peck never could shoot. Nothin' wrong with my skull. One parted my hair in the middle, is all . . . Where's that Letch Lawton feller? He yanked me off my horse and dropped me on the ground. And the last I sighted of him he was settin' his horse and poppin' at 'em fer all the world like he's at a shootin' gallery. Then I kind of went out . . ."

They got Letch Lawton's bullet-torn shoulder bandaged and his creased ribs tied up and Bob and Lee's wounds bandaged. The moon was rising when they rode slowly

back to the home ranch. Leaving the dead, Letch Lawton said, to bury the dead until a burial crew could be sent out from Manzanita Springs.

Mrs. Clarey proved to be as good as any doctor when it came to tending bullet wounds. And 'Ab Clarey said they sure wasn't afoot for purty nurses.

Their wounds healed and the dead were buried in Manzanita Springs' boothill cemetery. Peace settled over Grass Valley.

A sheriff and a couple of deputies rode into the valley from the county seat. They shook hands with Ab Clarey and Ab told them to shake hands with Lee Pickett and Bob Culbertson. Only that wasn't their names but their daddies' names, and Bob and Lee would have to tell 'em which was which.

"And meet Letch Lawton," he went on. "Neither of 'em has said so but the way I read the sign Letch is fixin' to marry my oldest daughter Jessie."

Letch's face colored. He swallowed a time or two and shook hands with the lawmen.

After the sheriff and his deputies had told Ab Clarey he'd done a first-rate job of it, they rode on out of Grass Valley and back to the county seat. And that was the end of that. Ab said.

Letch Lawton had walked to the barn with the sheriff. He dug in under the hay in a manger and brought out a bulky gunny sack.

"There's twenty-seven thousand dollars in this sack, sheriff," he explained. "It was kickin' around and

I picked it up. It comes from the bank at Rock Springs, Wyoming. How it got to Grass Valley, Arizona, will always be a mystery. There should be a reward for its return. Buy a drink with the reward money."

Letch Lawton told Ab Clarey he reckoned his shoulder was all right now for traveling so he was hitting the trail. He had cold-trailed Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson. He had aimed on taking that stolen money away from them, kill them for it if they wouldn't give it up without a fight. And he had figured on going on to Mexico or South America and using the money to start himself in the cattle business.

"That's the kind of a man I am, Mr. Clarey. So the sooner I drift yonderly, the better for everybody."

"What about you and Jessie, son?"

"Nothing. I've kept away from her. I'm a blackleg. I don't know who my folks was. I don't know where I got my name. I grew up around cow outfits and made wages and drifted into Brown's Hole. I got along all right with renegades. I never sold 'em out. I never amounted to much one way or another. But back in my skull was the notion of gettin' a South America stake. So when the sign looked right I tried for it."

"And you got it," said Ab Clarey. "Nothin' to keep you from ridin' away with it. Nobody here is ever goin' to mention it."

"I gave it to that sheriff." Letch Lawton grinned faintly. "Told him to send it back to the bank. That's

what Bob Pickett and Lee Culbertson always aimed to do with it. Nobody'll know how it got here. That sheriff is a square-shooter."

"Ever hear tell of a shotgun weddin', son? There'll be one here about tomorrow. I told the sheriff to send a parson out when he got back to town. Grass Valley is big, and there's them nester outfits back in the mountains. I'm gittin' along in years. You three boys orter be able to handle it while I set back an' whittle a stick. You and Lee Pickett an' Bob Culbertson bought a third int'rest each when you sided me in a tight and I won't have it no other way." Old Ab Clarey lifted his voice to a creaky shout.

"Come here, Jessie! Letch Lawton just asked fer your hand in marriage, as the sayin' goes! Git over here to the barn an' take him off my back!"

Letch Lawton reached out and gripped Ab Clarey's gnarled hand. He tried to say something but the words choked in his throat. When he met Jessie out at the corral and took her in his arms, his eyes were no longer bleak and cold.

Lee Culbertson was helping Della do the dishes. There was a big gingham apron tied around his middle. Every time he dried a cup or plate he claimed a kiss. He said it was the first time he ever realized the good points of kitchen work. It sawed his long horns to the nubbin but it was shore painless. Just the same he'd as soon Bob Pickett didn't walk in and ketch him at it.

But Bob Pickett was a long ways

off. He was riding up Grass Valley to get an idea of the work that had to be done before long. Beef to gather, calves to brand.

He wasn't riding alone. Jane Peck rode with him. Somebody had to show him the range, she said.

Just now they weren't getting much work done. They rode side by side, holding hands, their stirrups touching. Their horses had slowed to a walk and when Bob leaned from his saddle and kissed Jane and she kissed him back, the horses stopped, and it was quite a while before those two well-broken cow horses untracked themselves.

A week later there were three weddings at the Grass Valley Ranch. The circuit rider preacher was a little bewildered.

For one thing he wasn't a drinking man and Ab Clarey's corn likker had made him a little dizzy.

"Do you, Robert Culbertson Pickett, take this woman Jane Peck . . ."

And a little later: "Do you, Lee Pickett Culbertson, take this woman Della Clarey . . .?"

He hoped he hadn't made a mis-

take. He thought he had it straight. He united Letch Lawton and Jessie Clarey in marriage and sipped his third toddy.

Ab Clarey was a little tipsy. It wasn't every day in the year a man gave three girls away in marriage. He slapped the parson on the back and told him to drink hearty.

"That fixed up Letch an' Jessie, parson. Work's all done now. You kin git tight as a drum. And it's a job off my hands. Letch Lawton is a man to take along, mister. As fer Lee Pickett an' Bob Culbertson . . ."

The circuit rider downed his toddy at a gulp. Bob Culbertson Lee Pickett Culbertson Pickett Lee . . .

"Named," explained Ab Clarey, "for General Robert E. Lee, their daddies was. One called Robert and the other un Lee . . . If you kin foller me back that far, parson . . ."

The circuit rider preacher neither nodded nor shook his head. He just shoved out an empty glass towards Ab Clarey's jug.

"We're drinkin'," said Ab, filling two glasses, "to the new iron here—called the Two Crosses. Here's how!"

THE END

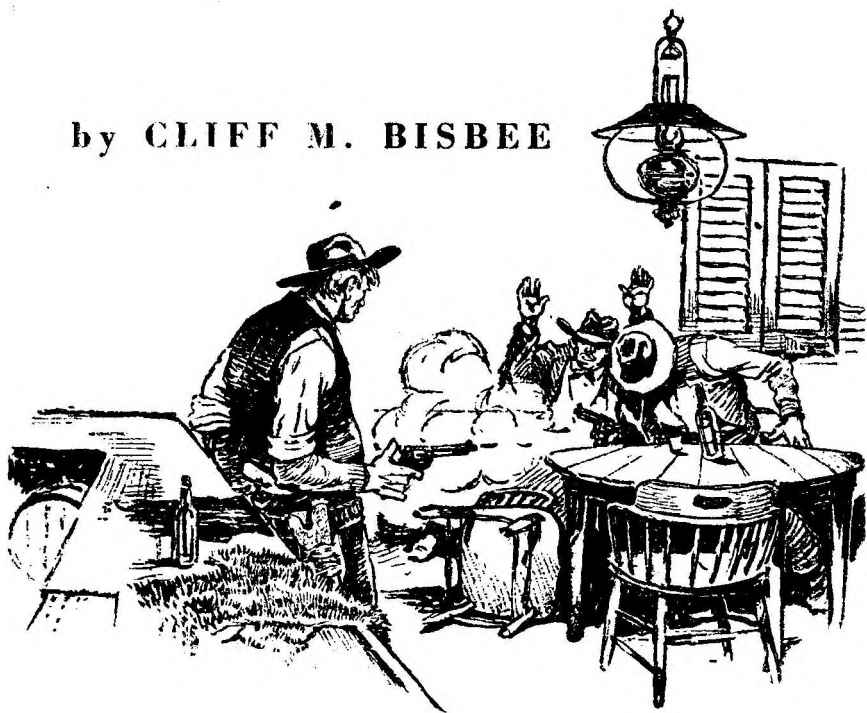


Support your local paper salvage drive. Your scrap paper can help finish up the scrap over there.

The hoof-and-mouth disease was just about licked on the range but Big Carl Jenson's new spread would never prosper until he helped the law put a quarantine on renegade beef thieves

NO ROOM FOR A PILGRIM

by CLIFF M. BISBEE



BIG CARL JENSON lay in his bunk, wondering if it was the distant creak of wagon wheels that had awakened him. Twice before at night he had heard the sounds, probably drifting across the hills from the county road.

"A little axle grease," he mumbled,

"it wouldn't hurt that feller to use."

He stretched and rolled over, lids drooping. There was a pale glimmer of moonlight on the floor. By its faint glow he could make out the handmade table, two broken chairs and a dusty clutter of odds and ends.

Big Carl settled back with a good-natured grin. Uncle Olaf Jenson must have been a slipshod housekeeper. Give Big Carl a chance and he'd have things tight and neat around the homestead.

Abruptly the big Swede jerked up to a sitting posture. He stared at the ghostly patch of light. Yiminy Yupiter! The moon was *dark* now! Only today Big Carl had put off planting corn in his garden, because he wanted to drop the seed when the moon was in its light phase.

Now the pale splash on the floor brightened and faded fitfully. Big Carl tossed off the covers and piled from the bunk. His stolid heart was thudding as he flung open the door. Yellow tongues of fire licked up weirdly out there in the darkness, near the wood lot.

His tier of newly cut fence posts was burning!

Big Carl methodically lit a smoky lantern, then pulled on pants and boots. Picking up the empty water bucket, he hurried out into the yard. He ran to the brook, scooped up a pail of water and, rushing to the fire, sloshed the water on. As he hurried back for more his brain searched ploddingly among the possibilities of this thing.

Somebody had set the fire purposely. There had been other strange happenings since Big Carl took over the homestead he'd inherited from Uncle Olaf. Too many things. They couldn't all be freak accidents. He fumbled in a pocket for his plug of tobacco, gnawed off a chew and tongued it back into his cheek, where

it made a comfortable bulge. It helped make his thoughts clear.

"Yah, by golly, Uncle Olaf wrote to me how he fights for ten years with old Rawhide Pike on that big Frying Pan outfit," he mused. "Now it's me . . ."

The fire was getting away from him. It was eating hungrily into the long pile of split fence posts and a circle of flame spread out in the dry chips that littered the ground. Big Carl threw away his bucket and grabbed a shovel that was sticking up in the dirt. He began clearing a wide path around the circle of flame, going clear around from one side of the piled posts to the other, tossing the dirt onto the fire as he went. Pretty soon he had an effective firebreak, but meanwhile the tier of posts was blazing higher.

Blinking slowly, Big Carl peeled off his shirt and climbed up on the pile from the opposite end, where there was no fire. Working as close to the flames as he could, he began tossing posts to the ground. The heat blistered his skin and every few minutes he had to stop to mop sweat from his eyes. He flung the posts as far as he could with a rhythmic, swinging motion he had learned on the end of a drag saw.

Without rest he worked until the tier was divided into two sections. Staggering, barrel chest heaving, he grabbed the shovel again and cleaned off weeds and chips between the two piles. At last, having done all he could, he sagged onto a stump, wiping sweat and ashes from his eyes. There was nothing to do now but watch the fire consume the remainder

of one stack. He had saved about half his posts.

Across the creek the shadowy figure of a horse and rider came slanting down the bank. Big Carl peered, then called out a greeting.

"Hullo, Toler. I got myself more trouble, by golly!"

"I seen the fire," Bode Toler said. "Thought I'd ride over and give a hand."

Toler was a thin, stringy man, with a crooked nose jutting over a bulging upper lip. He owned the next section, all rocky hills. Without free range a man couldn't grub a living on such land. Uncle Olaf had home-steaded the best section.

"I got her licked already," Big Carl said. Then he asked curiously: "In your house by the hollow, how could you see the fire?"

"Had a mare foalin'," Toler explained readily. "Had to get up with her and seen the glow. What started it, Jenson?"

"I'm thinking somebody don't like to see Uncle Olaf's place lived on yet," Big Carl growled.

Toler's thin lips drew down. "Old Rawhide Pike, huh? Him and your uncle never did hit it off."

"Yah," Big Carl said. "I like this place. I stay." He looked up at the sky. "Most daybreak already. Come, I make coffee."

On the way to the shack Toler said carelessly: "Ain't six foot kind o' long for cordwood?"

"That's no cordwood," Big Carl told him. "It's fence posts. Keep my stock on my own grass, by golly. Uncle Olaf said in the old country

is not free range. I figure the same here. Maybe I run less stock, but keep them bred up clean. Look at now. Yiminy Yupiter! Nobody can ship from this county, because it's some hoof-and-mouth sickness on the range. And neither we can't butcher for meat till maybe next spring."

In the shack, over scalding black coffee, Bode Toler said: "Takes a long time to build the kind of independent spread you're talkin' about. This ain't the right country for it. Look, Jenson, I offered to buy your place at two dollars an acre. I'll make it two-fifty."

Big Carl's eyes blinked mildly over his cup. He shook his head.

"It's still way too cheap, and besides I don't sell. Last week I told you. Today it is the same, and tomorrow."

Anger flared in Toler's narrow eyes, but he controlled it quickly. "I'd like your place for home pasture. You're crazy not to sell, with old Rawhide Pike buckin' you. Pretty soon he'll quit these little stunts like burnin' your posts. He'll start playin' for keeps. You wouldn't stand a chance against his big outfit. Rawhide hated your uncle's guts, and he hates you."

"I think I stay," Big Carl repeated stolidly.

Toler shrugged, changed the subject. "You seen that meat buyer again—Cash Granger? The one wanted to buy quarantined beef off this range to peddle at the railroad camps over in Kern County?"

This time it was Big Carl Jenson's face that kindled in slow anger. He set down his cup hard on the table.

"I don't see him again," he growled. "And I better not. Just that once in town he bought me a drink and talked slyly of buying beef for meat. That is not honest, to take the quarantined beef from this county for men to eat."

Then he asked curiously: "Has this Granger tried to buy your beef?"

Toler shook his head and dipped his long nose down into his cup, supping noisily. "Nope, he knows better. I figure like you, Jenson. That's dirty business. I bet old Rawhide Pike ain't as choosy as you and me, though."

Again Big Carl growled deep in his throat. "By golly, maybe you're right. Sometimes at night I hear wagons. A feller who will burn a man's posts will sell meat that is not legal, sure. And maybe not always his own stuff!"

The big pilgrim's blue eyes had grown hard. "Today I will see this Mr. Rawhide Pike."

Big Carl finished the morning's chores around the barn. By this time the sun was high and heat waves fanned out of the brushy ridges, making sweat pour down the pilgrim's round face. He returned to the shack and took down a half gallon jug from the window ledge. It was wrapped in a wet cloth that dipped into a tin pan underneath. Big Carl drank thirstily of the cool water. It was better this way, than drawn straight and tepid from the sun-warmed well outside.

Big Carl had counted on this day to clean out the shack, a job he had

so far neglected for the more important ones demanding attention outside.

"Now, by golly," he muttered, "it's more posts to cut. But today I take time to ride to that Frying Pan Ranch."

After saddling a sturdy roan mare, he headed out over the open range. He had gone only a mile or so when a rider came up out of a brushy draw and cut over so as to intercept him. Big Carl pulled his mare to a stop, frowning. The man was Cash Granger, supplier of meats to the railroad camps in the next county. Fat and sleepy-eyed, Granger looked as though he ate up a good share of his profits.

"Hah! Good morning, friend," Granger called out, smiling. "Looking over your stock, eh? Or is it just a ride for pleasure?"

"Please, I have no time to waste." Big Carl said coldly. "You want to see me?"

Granger shrugged lazily, his thick torso slumped in the saddle. "Oh, well, I just thought maybe you'd be ready to talk business. You know the little matter we were discussing in town the other day? The railroad camps are clamoring for meat, Jenson. It doesn't seem right that working men must go hungry, just because foolish county officials over here have quarantined the range. The hoof-and-mouth is licked here and it isn't spreading. Now why not sell a little meat on the side? Furthermore, Jenson," he added slyly, "the price is high!"

Big Carl looked steadily at Granger. "You have other ranchers

selling you stock here, Mr. Granger?" he asked slowly.

The meat buyer's eyes gleamed faintly in their folds of flesh. "We-el, now, that would be telling, Jenson. Any deal I'd make with you would be strictly private. How about it?"

Big Carl shook his head. "I make no deal of such kind. It is true that such disease as there was has been checked quickly, even before I came here last month. But the law is the law. For the sake of safety we are not to take stock from this county now. Maybe I should take you in to the sheriff, Mr. Granger. He would know how to deal with such as you!"

Cash Granger's oily friendliness vanished. He reached under his coat and pulled a shoulder gun half out, where Big Carl could see it.

"You damn thick-headed Swede!" he grunted. "You haven't even a gun on you. Go easy on that law talk. Now then to hell with you—"

He yanked his horse cruelly around and spurred back toward the brushy draw. At the rim he swung around and shook his fist at Big Carl. "There's other ways of getting the meat I need, square-head!" he bawled hoarsely.

Big Carl blinked stolidly, watching until Granger's white hat disappeared over the rim. Then he swung his own mount and rode on toward the Frying Pan. He didn't look back, but his lips were tight pressed with his anger. "Somewhere that fat one is getting beef," he told himself.

Big Carl did not look back and therefore did not see the white hat of the meat buyer again appear at the

gulch's rim and hang there for a long minute. Another hat was beside it and the faces underneath watched Big Carl Jenson ride over the next ridge. Then the two men came up out of the draw and headed their mounts toward Jenson's homestead.

Rawhide Pike's tall body leaned against the corral gate. The rancher's keen eyes burned out at Big Carl Jenson from a face that reminded the pilgrim of worn boot leather.

"So you're Olaf Jenson's nephew, eh?" The voice came out soft and young from the old man's lips. There was the faintest trace of amusement in the depths of those piercing eyes.

"Scratched gravel with Olaf for ten years, over one thing and another. Damndest most cantankerous, bull-headedest Scandahoovian that ever drawed breath, your uncle was." Pike cocked his head on one side and squinted one eye. "Ye look a mite like him. And it's fight you're honin' for too, eh?"

Big Carl stared, his round face blank, his eyes opening and closing slowly. He couldn't fathom this strange, lean rancher. There was malice in the words he spoke, insult even. Yet in the tone and in that flicker of something deep in the eyes there was something entirely different.

"It's no fight I want," Carl declared doggedly. "Only to be left alone. Uncle Olaf warned me about you for a hard neighbor. Before he died he wrote me that there was nothing to be expected from you but

trouble. Like a mule with a gray nose and rings around the eyes, he said you were."

Rawhide Pike's leathery face grew red, as if his collar was suddenly too tight. "He said that, did he!" the rancher roared. "Why, dog-blast that Olaf Jenson—I'll ride over there an' . . ."

The old man's hot words choked off abruptly. His rage wilted and suddenly he looked even older in years.

"Son," he said softly, "for just a minute I forgot Olaf's dead. Fight? Shucks, yes! We tied into it every chance we got. But son, when your Uncle Olaf died of the stomach misery over there in his shack I lost the best friend a man ever had."

"Friend? I don't understand . . ." Big Carl was bewildered.

Rawhide Pike wiped his eyes and blew his nose hard. "I'd never have admitted it to Olaf, and he'd have bit off his own tongue before he'd have said as much of me. And now let me tell you something. I heard you'd moved in, but I've been too busy with my own worries to even go near the place, and my riders the same. So if somebody's been pesterin' ye, you've somewhere else to look. It's never been my way to go at a fight underhanded, and, damn it, I'm too old to change, if I wanted to. Which I don't. So there it is, son, and you can take my word, or go to the devil."

The rancher squatted down, pulled up a saddle he'd been working on and began rubbing soap into it. Big Carl sat there for a long time on his horse, his mind working things over.

While he thought, his jaws moved slowly on the cud of tobacco.

"Yah," he said finally. "I take your word."

He swung the roan mare and rode out of the ranch yard.

Big Carl decided to eat cold biscuit and beans for lunch and then ride on into town. He needed supplies. He let the roan mare stand in front of the shack, first unbuckling her bit and drawing a pail of water for her from the well. Then he went inside and poured himself a long drink from his nice cool jug in the window.

While he ate, he pondered. To Rawhide Pike he had said nothing about this thing of Cash Granger and the taking of quarantined beef from the county. Such a man as Pike would not be dealing with Granger, any more than Big Carl would. So that left Bode Toler.

"A stupid pilgrim like me," he muttered. "How could I understand such a strange friendship as that of my Uncle Olaf and Rawhide Pike? Because of those things in the uncle's letters, I was blind. But I am not blind any more, by golly! Another chance to make trouble on my homestead this Toler will not get, just so he can discourage me into selling out cheap."

Suddenly there came a heavy scuffling outside. It was followed by a long, groaning sigh. Startled, Big Carl plunged out the door. He halted in his tracks, amazement sweeping over him.

The mare was lying on her side, feebly kicking. The eyes protruded, already glassy. Even as Big Carl

leaned over her, the animal gave a final kick and the head abruptly lolled.

"Dead!" Big Carl muttered the word stupidly.

His gaze fell on the water bucket, laying there, empty. Woodenly, he pumped out a little more water from the well. He smelled it, tasted it cautiously and spit it out. He looked again at the dead horse, and then at the tracks of two other horses there on the ground, plain to see. Blue eyes narrowed now, he fumbled for his plug and took a chew.

Slowly his eyes swept toward the rocky ridges that came between his place and that of his neighbor, Bode Toler. For a long minute he stood in that one spot. His palms were clammy with sweat as he thought of the closeness of his call. But for his habit of keeping water in that cool jar in the house, he would himself be lying there, dead.

Just as Uncle Olaf died, by golly!

Twenty minutes later Big Carl topped the hot ridge above Toler's shack. He rode down into the yard. The place was littered with broken-down equipment, junk and refuse. There was no one around. But near the door and also at the barn Big Carl found the tracks of those two horses. With a shrug, he turned his gelding toward town.

He rode about a mile, then stopped abruptly. Here were the plain tracks of wagon wheels! Narrow iron rims had cut deep ruts in the softer spots of ground. Big Carl's eyes were like blue ice as he swung to follow the ruts, not toward the county road, but

into the rough jumble of gullies and tangled brush that comprised the rear half of Toler's homestead.

In one of the deeper washes the wagon tracks came to an end. Here, well-hidden in the high, dense brush, was a small corral made of poles. Big Carl counted thirty-seven cow-hides drying on the fence. One or two bore Toler's brand, a few had Olaf Jenson's sprawled, plain J, and the rest were hides of Frying Pan steers. A block and tackle hung on the limb of a stunted tree, and the ground underneath was black with dried blood and swarming with flies. A deep pit half filled with earth showed where entrails and other leavings had been buried, layer on layer, as they accumulated.

When Big Carl turned once more toward town, there were tight, bunchy muscles along his jaws, and his round face was hard.

The first place he stopped in town was the office of the local doctor. He spent ten minutes in plodding conversation with the dour little medico and when he left, the doctor stared after him with respect.

Next Big Carl dropped in at the sheriff's office. His brief account of what he knew and what he suspected, as well as what he planned to do about it, brought the grizzled lawman to his feet, cursing. But Big Carl argued his point, and finally the sheriff nodded slowly. He too, looked after the big Swede with respect.

Big Carl had better luck than he really expected. As he pushed past the swinging doors of the saloon, his gaze went swiftly to the two men

who sat at a table against a back wall. Bode Toler and Cash Granger had their heads together, but Toler's thin laugh jerked to silence as Big Carl came in. Granger's flabby face paled.

But Big Carl only walked to the bar. He took two objects from his pockets and tossed them on the counter, in plain sight. One was a small bottle filled with water, the other a smelly roll of cowskin. Ordering a drink from the staring bartender, he drank with slow relish, his broad back to the room.

Big Carl appeared indifferent to those behind him, but over the rim of his glass he observed the two men at the back table, as reflected in the back-bar mirror. The eyes of those two burned toward the things on the counter at Big Carl's elbow. Others in the room also stared curiously. Now slowly the meat buyer and Bode Toler came to their feet.

Big Carl set down his glass and picked up the little bottle. He held it up and called loudly to the bartender.

"This water from my well, it's no good. I like to tell everybody it's better they do not stop by my place and drink from that well."

"Whatsa matter with it?" the bartender questioned blankly, gazing at the bottle.

Big Carl shrugged. "This doctor down the street makes a test already. Arsenic, he say's the water is full of!" The pilgrim shook his head as if the whole thing was too puzzling for him. He set down the bottle and picked up the roll of skin. He flipped

it open to display several square patches of dirty hide.

"Look at this—something else I find out in those crazy hills where everything don't make sense."

The bartender stared, and other men crowded up. "Brands!" somebody grunted. "Cut out of dried hides. There's the Swede's J iron, and old Rawhide Pike's Frying Pan. Where'd you get 'em, Jenson, and what's it mean?"

Big Carl gazed questioningly at the speaker. His round face was blank, the blue eyes now mild. "The sheriff knows where I found those skins and already his deputies are riding there, to look around."

There was a choking sound over near the rear table. Cash Granger was gripping the table with a fat hand, and Bode Toler yelled out hoarsely.

"Just what the hell you tryin' to prove, square-head?"

Big Carl turned toward the pair almost lazily. "You don't know? With this quarantine on our range, a man could make nice money with meat for those railroad camps in Kern County. Or even two men. Unless there was a stupid one with his land right in the way, making it hard to steal and butcher and haul unseen. If this one was too stupid to discourage and sell out cheap, then it would pay even to put poison in his water. But who knows what a square-head Swede will do? He waters his horse from the well, and takes his own drink from a jug in the house!"

Cash Granger's flabby lips moved

and a harsh whisper came out. "Damn it, Toler! I told you we ought to—"

But Bode didn't wait. His right hand flashed toward his gun. Men bawled hoarsely in fear and spilled backward out of the way. And then Big Carl Jenson surprised them all. His own hand went down and up in a blur of motion. Flame stabbed from the barrel even as Toler's gun left the holster. Bode Toler lurched, jerked his gun up close to his chest, then dropped it from limp fingers. He went down heavily, face forward.

The grizzled sheriff was there in the saloon doorway as Big Carl swung toward Granger. But the meat buyer had no fight in him at all. His arms were flailing the air above his head and the noises he uttered were like the bleating of a sheep.

"Be quiet!" Big Carl ordered roughly. "It might be if you talk to the sheriff, a year or two in jail is all you will get. I suppose we can prove nothing now about Uncle Olaf. But I will make a guess. That stomach of his could have been made

sick by the same kind of poison in the well. For me, it was lucky I cleaned it when first I moved in."

"Looks to me like you been lucky all the way around, for a pilgrim," the sheriff said, grinning. "Gents, I'm settin' up the drinks, to toast one dumb Swede that's dumb like a fox."

But Big Carl Jenson shook his head.

"Too much time this takes already yet. It's supplies to buy at the store, then my well to be cleaned again. And on top of this maybe one hundred new posts to cut."

The big pilgrim started toward the door, then halted to call back, in that slow voice.

"Yah. Out in this Nevada it's a man's friends who are his enemies, and his foes his friends. This Bode Toler had no blood in his veins but maybe coyote blood. But that Rawhide Pike—Yiminy Yupiter! There's a man I like! I bet you my shirt there's maybe a drop or two of Swede in that Pike feller!"

And Big Carl went out into the street, wagging his head and chuckling.

THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Are your spare dollars earnin' fightin' wages in this here ruckus? They can if yuh turn 'em into

WAR BONDS AN' STAMPS

SIX-GUNS IN HELL TOWN

by WILLIAM HEUMAN



I

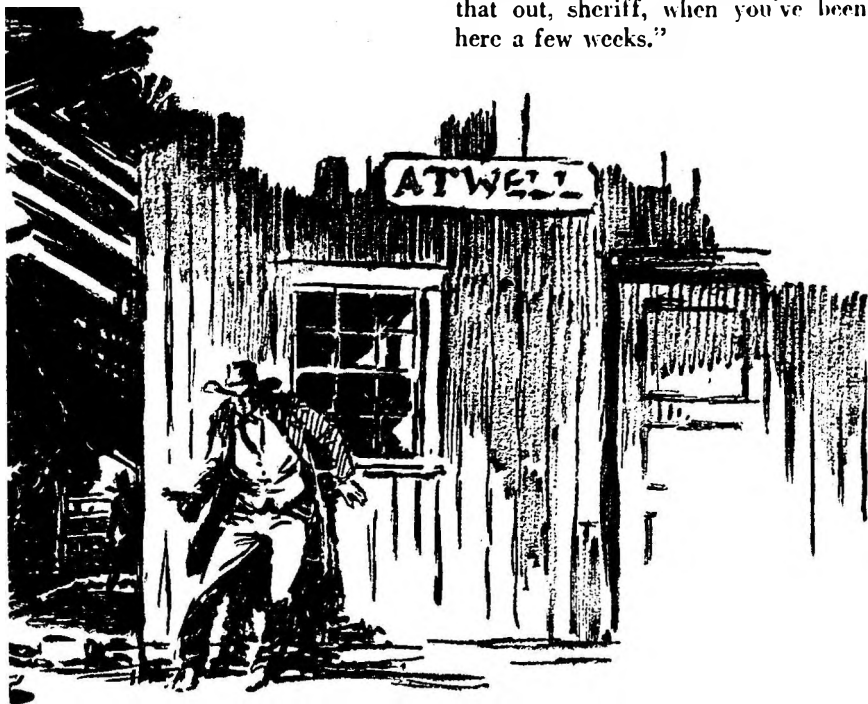
He didn't like this town; he didn't like the smell of it. Sulphur and arsenic fumes were worse than the cattle pens of Dodge City or Hays.

"It smells," Bart Hamlin murmured, "like hell." He stood on the porch of the Lincoln Hotel, a long black cigar between his jaws, a tall man in a black frock coat that made

him look more slender than he was.

The gambler, Clive Mason, small, immaculate, pale-faced, stood with him on the porch, two manicured hands resting in his vest pockets, staring into this brown, stinking pall which hung over the sprawling copper town of Atwell.

"This town," Mason said softly, "not only looks like hell, but it's a piece of hell on earth. You'll find that out, sheriff, when you've been here a few weeks."



When Bart Hamlin found that his new law badge made him a charter member of Lacey Breen's claim-jumping clan he decided to trade it in for a pair of town-taming Colts

Bart grinned and tapped gray ash from the cigar. He'd been here two days, coming up from the cow town of Manfield after he'd received the telegram from Judge Hathaway of Atwell. They were paying four hundred dollars a month here in Atwell for maintaining law and order. Bart had been receiving one hundred and fifty in Manfield.

"The Committee of Honest Citizens," Hathaway had stated when Bart called on him the first day in town, "considers four hundred dollars a small remuneration for upholding the law in this town."

"Reckon I wouldn't argue with the Honest Citizens," Bart had said. He knew they'd heard about his work in Dodge, in Manfield, and in the tough silver town of Utopia. He knew silver and he knew cattle, but copper was something else. The noise was somewhat the same as the stamp mills in Utopia, but this stinking brown concoction of sulphur and arsenic, blowing off the open-hearth smelting furnaces, was something else. It killed all the vegetation for miles around the city; it made Atwell a ghost town but with eight thousand inhabitants moving under that brown cloud.

"Last sheriff in this town," Mason was saying, "walked out of the job."

"Why?" Bart asked pointedly.

The gambler shrugged thin shoulders. "In every town, Hamlin," he smiled, "there are two factions. If you're with the strong side you stay. If you make the mistake of siding with the other party—"

"You walk out," finished Bart with a grin, "or are carried out feet first."

He puffed on the cigar coolly. "I reckon there's another faction this town hasn't thought about."

"What's that?" Mason asked curiously.

"The law," Bart smiled. "I represent it." The coldness came into his slate-gray eyes. He had Indian black hair beneath a flat-crowned Stetson.

Clive Mason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Judge Hathaway, of the District Court, appointed you sheriff," he stated. "to fill out ex-Sheriff Wade's term of office. Now you represent a third faction?"

"That's right," Bart Hamlin murmured.

Mason smiled. "It's to be regretted," he said softly, "that Hathaway isn't on your side." With that he sauntered across the street, stepping around a drunk on the sidewalk, and entered the Montana Rose Saloon.

Bart watched him, no emotion showing on his face. In every town he'd found different problems, and Atwell was proving to be no exception. He felt the earth tremble slightly beneath him as an underground explosion shook it. Beneath him was a honeycomb of tunnels, cross cuts, and winzes, with thousands of men boring deeper and deeper into the earth, following the elusive copper veins.

The "Honest Citizens Committee" contained none of these men. It had been made up of mine owners—the big men of the town, well-fed, bloated with wealth. Bart had watched them as they spoke with Judge Hathaway the previous day,

These men ruled the town with hands of iron.

Staring up the street, Bart saw one of them coming out of Hathaway's office, adjourning the court house. He recognized the man as Lacey Breen, owner of the Salamander Mine.

Breen a big man with a round head set on square-shaped shoulders, moved down the walk a little faster than Bart had seen him walk before. He was flanked as usual by Ed Sortell, a diminutive shifty-eyed, dark-haired chap with a perpetual grin on his sallow-complexioned face.

Swinging up the hotel steps, Breen stopped before the new sheriff. He was puffing a little, color in his fat cheeks, greenish eyes gleaming with suppressed enjoyment. Looking at him, Bart thought of a pig.

"I have a little job cut out for you, sheriff," Breen chuckled. He waved a batch of papers. "Court order from Judge Hathaway empowering me to clear miners from the North Star Company boring into my claim."

Bart nodded. He took the papers and glanced through them mechanically. Hathaway's signature was at the bottom.

"The North Star adjourns my claim," Breen explained smoothly. "The robbers have taken a fortune from my mine already. We're bringing Jack Hallman to jail for contempt of court if he refuses to clear out."

"Why shouldn't he get out," asked Bart, "if he lost the case in court?"

Breen grinned. "Hallman is one

of those small operators who have tried to chisel in on our claims, sheriff. They have no respect for law and order."

"Maybe," Bart said, "we can give them respect." He knew why the Honest Citizens had called him in. He had a reputation for toughness, and they needed someone who could be tough when the occasion demanded it. With the big operators taking huge fortunes out of their mines, the four hundred dollars a month they paid him was nothing.

"I have a dozen men waiting for you down on the fifth level in the Salamander," Breen told him. "They're all armed."

Bart smiled. "You expect a fight?"

"There've been fights before," Breen said sharply, "and Hallman doesn't seem to take the court orders seriously."

Bart Hamlin shoved his hands in his pockets, gave Sortell a searching glance, and then went down the steps, Breen at his side, still talking.

"We broke through a wall two weeks ago," Breen explained, "and found the North Star miners taking pure copper out of a thirty-foot vein which ran directly through Salamander territory."

"The vein begin in the North Star?" Bart asked cautiously.

Breen gave him a swift look. "You understand mining laws?" he asked cautiously.

"I spent two years in Virginia City," Bart told him. He knew the fundamentals of mining laws—that a mine operator was entitled to follow a vein of ore he'd struck in his own

claim—follow it underground into another mine if he could prove that the vein originated in his claim.

"There's no connection," Breen scowled, "with the copper vein in the North Star and the ore I'm taking out of the Salamander. We've had geologists and surveyors prove that fact to the satisfaction of the Atwell Court."

II

Bart Hamlin stood in the cage with the two men as it was lowered to the Fifth Level. Flickering candles and oil lamps lit up the passageways, reflecting on the heavy cross beams timbering the tunnels. A dozen men squatted around, backs against the tunnel walls. They were all armed with rifles and revolvers, and they didn't look like miners.

"All right, men," Breen said curtly.

The group gave Bart a sour stare as he studied them. He'd run across toughs before in Virginia City. Breen had probably hired these men for ten or fifteen dollars each to help clear out his mine.

A squat little miner led the group down the passageway, heading off to the right when he'd gone fifty yards or so. From then on, Bart lost his way as they twisted and turned five hundred feet below the earth.

Then, very suddenly, they came upon the break in the wall. A rude wood' barrier had been erected here, and Bart caught a glimpse of rifle barrels protruding through the cracks.

"They're gonna fight," Ed Sortell chuckled. "Ain't that nice?"

"Hallman!" Breen called sharply.

Bart heard the North Star mine owner call back derisively: "Crawl back to your hole, Breen."

The new sheriff grinned, but Lacey Breen's face went a dull red, and he drew back his lips in a snarl.

"All right, sheriff," he rasped. "Go to work."

Bart lit a cigarette and studied the barricade. He could hear men working on the other side. A little ore car rattled down a set of small-gauge tracks.

The dozen toughs with Breen stared at Bart, and the mine owner demanded: "What are you waiting for?"

"You want to walk into those guns, mister?" asked Bart softly.

"You're getting paid," Breen told him, "and damned well."

"But not to die so quickly," Bart countered, "when there might be another way." He didn't think the men in the North Star would try to kill anyone unless it got too hot for them.

"We're clearing those skunks out of there," Breen growled. "and if you're afraid to do it, I'll get a man who will."

"If any force is used in this town," Bart said flatly, "I'll use it. Remember that, Breen."

The mine operator stared at him, open-mouthed, and Bart knew he wasn't accustomed to being spoken to like that. Breen usually gave the orders and had them obeyed.

"Hallman," Bart called sharply. He couldn't see into the other tunnel, and he'd never met the owner of the North Star Mine.

"What's on your mind, sheriff?" Hallman called cheerfully.

"I have a court order," said Bart.

"The devil with it," Hallman came back. "I'm appealing the case in the State court, and I'm staying in this tunnel till we get it cleaned out."

"Get him out," Lacey Breen grated. "He's taken a hundred thousand dollars' worth of ore out of my mine already." The big man turned to his toughs. "Go in, boys," he commanded.

One of them started forward, and a rifle cracked from the barricade, the slug slamming into the rock wall behind them, and ricocheting down the tunnel.

Bart smiled. "If we work that way," he told Breen, "you'll have a dozen dead men in an hour."

"All right," Breen flared, "work it your way."

"You bribed witnesses," Hallman yelled. "You bought out Judge Hathaway and you hired a crooked sheriff, but I'm staying here, Breen, until Hathaway's decision is reversed."

Bart Hamlin pulled his black hat over his eyes to hide the laughter in them. He saw the nozzle of a power hose suddenly protrude over the barricade, and then Hallman's yell: "Let it go, boys!"

A stream of water suddenly shot toward them, catching one of the toughs full in the chest, and knocking him down. Bart leaped around the corner of the tunnel, but Breen was a little late, the stream catching him in the pants and nearly knocking him down, wetting him through.

Again Bart heard Jack Hallman's high-pitched yell, and he liked the man for it. The picks and shovels were still going on the other side of the barricade, and Bart heard a small dynamite charge go off farther down along the tunnel.

"What happens now?" growled Lacey Breen.

"Keep your men here," Bart said quietly. "I'll see if I can work something out." He got the miner guide to lead him back to the cage and he went up to the street. "Where's the entrance to the North Star?" he asked the man.

The miner grinned. "You'll never get down there, mister," he said.

"I can try," Bart murmured. He located the shaft entrance a half block off the main street. A man stood in the doorway, rifle in his hands. There were two others directly behind him, grinning.

"I reckon that's far enough, sheriff," one of them called softly, lifting his rifle.

Bart stopped. "You boys are crossing the law," he stated. "That means trouble."

"Come an' make it for us," invited one of the men.

Bart smiled. He lifted his shoulders in a gesture of resignation, and then started away.

"This town a little too tough for you, sheriff?" a voice drifted after him. Hamlin's smile broadened.

Back on the main street, he walked leisurely up to the Atwell fire house and found John Macon, the fire chief.

"Mind ringing the bell, mister?" Bart asked.

Macon, a rolypoly man with red hair, gulped and stared around. "Where in hell's the fire?" he gasped.

"No fire," Bart assured him. "Just give it a ring and forget about it."

Macon looked dubious and scratched his head.

"Shall I get a court order?" asked Bart. "This is part of my job. Judge Hathaway will back me up."

The fire chief blinked and then went back inside. Bart strolled past the Lincoln Hotel, nodding to Clive Mason, who was just emerging from the Montana Rose. As he came up to High Street he heard the fire bell begin to clang.

Men tumbled out of the saloons; windows shot open, and a man on horseback kicked his mount, and raced past, the horse's shoulder grazing Bart's arm.

Carefully Bart picked his way through the crowd, and then started to run up High Street. He came out behind the entrance to the North Star Mine.

The three men who had been inside had run out and were looking down the street toward the fire house. Bart Hamlin slid inside the door and waited. When they came back again, he took a .45 Colt from the holster under his coat and leveled it at them.

"Reckon you boys can drop the guns," he said easily.

The man in the lead made a motion to lift the rifle and Bart placed a shot inches to the left of his boot heel. The rifle fell to the ground.

"Come walking," Bart said when all the guns were on the ground. He stepped aside to let them walk into

the shed. Then he herded the three men into the cage.

"You'll never come out of there, brother," one of them said. The cage started to drop, and again Bart felt that sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He'd never liked mines, and this drop into the earth invariably made him a little sick.

They stopped at the Fifth Level and Bart motioned for them to step out. He noticed that none of the North Star ore was going to the surface, Hallman being content with digging it out of the vein and piling it near the cage.

Several workmen stared at them as they came out of the cage. Grimy-faced men with picks, stripped to the waist, turned to look as Bart Hamlin herded his three prisoners along the tunnel. No one made a move to interfere. They saw the star on Bart's coat, and the six-gun in his hand.

"We'll go up to the barricade," Bart said softly, "and no noise till we get there."

"You're runnin' into trouble, friend," one of the North Star men warned. "Why not get on the honest side?"

"I'm on the side of the law," Bart observed. "That's enough for me."

"The law in this town," he was told, "is as crooked as a corkscrew."

Bart grinned at that one. He heard Jack Hallman's voice up ahead, and he stepped behind his prisoners. Then a slim chap came running up, dressed in battered blue denim trousers and blue shirt.

"Sam!" the newcomer called sharply, and Bart Hamlin blinked.

The young fellow was a girl—dark-haired, brown-eyed, face dirty, but the voice was definitely a woman's voice. "Why are you down here, Sam?" she accused the man in the lead. "You were supposed to guard the shaft entrance."

Sam, a gimlet-eyed man with bleached blond hair, looked sheepish and glanced back at Bart. It was then that the girl saw the gun. She came up without hesitation and Bart stepped back a few paces.

"So you got down here, sheriff?" she murmured. "You're cleverer than we thought."

Bart sought for the proper words. This was supposed to be a man's fight, and a woman was coming toward him, making him retreat. He knew that he couldn't shoot her, and there was no way of stopping her. She was smiling at him, extending a slim hand for the gun.

"I'll take it," she said, "it won't do you any good down here, sheriff."

"Easy, lady," mumbled Bart. "This thing might go off." He continued to back up, still covering the three men in front of him. Again he heard Jack Hallman's taunting voice, daring Lacey Breen and his mob to come forward.

III

Bart took one more step backward with the girl a yard away from him, and it was at that moment that the world caved in, coming down on his head. He thought he heard a step on the rock floor behind him, and he was coming around with the gun when something exploded inside his



"Danged fast on the draw, ain't he?"

head. He knew he'd been struck from behind, and as he fell he saw the girl smiling at him.

There were voices after that, and then a deep silence. Bart was aware of the fact that he was being carried, and then a wave of blackness swept over him again, and he went down into a gulf.

Then other men were talking and he opened his eyes. Clive Mason was sitting by his bed, bathing his face with a wet towel. Bart lifted his head. He saw Lacey Breen and Ed Sortell in the room, Sortell grinning as if he enjoyed the sheriff's discomfiture, Breen talking loudly, face red.

"How's it feel, Bart?" Mason asked. "You took a bad bump."

Bart managed to sit up in the bed. He noticed that he was in his own room at the hotel, and that a bandage was around his head. His head began to throb again and Clive Mason's

face seemed to shift back and forth. After awhile that stopped.

"How did I get here?" Bart wanted to know.

"Two North Star men carried you to the hotel," explained Mason, "and then sent for the doctor. It seems you were slugged from behind."

"It was a great idea," Lacey Breen was growling. "We're still up here on the surface and Hallman is still taking out my ore."

"You can afford it," Mason remarked blankly.

"All right, tinhorn," warned Sortell.

Mason gave him a long look, and then turned to Bart. "Better stay in bed till morning," he said. "There's nothing you can do now."

"There was a girl," Bart murmured, "down in the North Star mine."

"Hallman's kid sister," Mason said. "She's tougher than the crew her brother hires to work his ore."

Bart started to smile. "She kind of pulled a fast one on me—backed me right up into another chap waiting with a club or something."

"A tough town," commented Mason.

"Too tough for you, sheriff," Sortell stated. The contempt showed in his eyes now. Before he had been unsure of himself, knowing Bart's reputation. Now he was itching for trouble.

Bart put his feet on the floor and stood up. He looked for his gun belt and discovered that he didn't have it.

"Any more bright ideas, sheriff?" Breen asked sarcastically.

"Just one," drawled Bart. "Get out of this room."

Lacey Breen's jaw protruded, and his green eyes narrowed. "We thought you were tough," the big mine operator stated flatly. "I'm thinking these cow towns you bullied must've been populated by a lot of women in ckaps and sombreros."

"He's the big wind from the South," Sortell chuckled. "A lot of talk and no action." The little man was walking around the room, his checkered coat open, a Remington revolver protruding from the holster.

Bart smiled. "You want action, friend?" he asked softly.

Sortell stopped walking. He was two yards away, hands on his hips.

"Ed," Breen called sharply.

"I'll take what you got, hombre," Sortell said to Bart, "and plenty more besides."

Bart crossed the intervening distance in one leap. Grasping Sortell's gun hand as he dipped for the weapon, he hurled the man back against the wall. Twisting the gun from Sortell's hand, he got his left forearm underneath the little man's throat and shoved hard, at the same time hitting three times to the body with his right fist. Sortell's strength left him, and his face turned green.

Bart kicked the gun away, grabbed Sortell by the back of the collar and pitched him from the room. He turned to Breen.

"You want some of that, friend?" he asked calmly.

"No," Lacey Breen stated, "but you're through in this town, Hamlin. You can crawl out now."

"You speak for the 'Honest Citizens'?" Bart asked with a grin.

"I do," Breen told him. "You'll find before you're through with us that those cow towns were kindergartens."

"I'll see that day," said Bart. He watched the door close behind Lacey Breen's broad back.

"A bad man to cross," observed Mason. "He speaks for the big operators in this town, as against the small men like Jack Hallman."

"What's the set-up down there?" Bart wanted to know. "Who's in the right—North Star or Salamander?"

"Salamander won the court decision," Mason explained, "but Salamander owns Judge Hathaway body and soul. Young Hallman has a fighting chance if he can hold the mine until the State court reverses Hathaway's decision. Possession is nine-tenths of the law in this town, Hamlin."

"What are the chances of the State court reversing the decision?"

"Lawyers around here," Mason stated, "think Hallman's case is strong. He struck the vein in the North Star and he followed it down. Breen knew that they were taking the best grade ore in town out of the North Star, and that the North Star adjourned his washed-up Salamander diggings. He started proceedings, trying to prove that Hallman was working Salamander dirt, and he won in Hathaway's court."

"Then why all the fighting?" Bart wanted to know. "If Hallman's case is good and he's sure of winning in the State court, why not let Breen have his way until then?"

"If Breen gets down there," Mason explained, "they'll never get him out until he's stripped the vein which may be worth a half million dollars. Breen will contest the State decision and go to a higher court. He'll make appeal after appeal which may take years to settle, and all the while he'll be getting rich at Hallman's expense. The young fellow is wise enough to know that."

"Give him credit," Bart said.

"Another thing," Mason added with a grin, "I'm laying five to one you're no longer sheriff of Atwell after tomorrow."

"At those odds," Bart told him, "you're not a gambler, Mason."

In the morning a messenger knocked on Bart's door with a summons to appear before Judge Hathaway. Bart tipped the boy and then shaved leisurely. He still had the bump on his head, reminding him of Jack Hallman's sister. He wondered what her name was.

Going down the hotel steps an hour later he spotted the girl crossing the street. She was still dressed in the denim trousers and she wore a leather jacket.

Bart paused, and then tipped his hat politely. She kept walking, but Hamlin saw the cold smile on her face and the contempt in her eyes.

Deliberately he followed, catching up in a few steps. She heard him coming and turned around.

"I should arrest you," Bart smiled, "for contempt of the law."

"The contempt," she said flatly, "is deserved." Bart had a better look at her this time, and she was slightly taller than he'd imagined, and her

hair was copper-colored, not black as it had appeared in the mine.

"That was a pretty clever stunt you pulled on me," Bart admitted. "I'll be more careful the next time I'm handling wildcats."

"Only a hick would fall for something like that," Hallman's sister observed. "You'd better run back home, sonny, before you get hurt."

Bart Hamlin's eyes flickered. Twice within twenty-four hours he'd been made to look ridiculous and it was beginning to annoy him.

"I reckon I'll stick around, lady," he murmured.

IV

Judge Hathaway, a bony, pinch-faced man with a tremendous dome-like forehead, sat behind his desk, skeleton-thin fingers toying with a pencil as Bart came in. The judge had small, burning blue eyes, staring out of his parchment face. His hair was thin, lank, ash-colored.

"What happened at the Salamander Mine?" Hathaway asked in a rasping voice.

"We couldn't get Hallman out," Bart admitted mildly. "He's dug in strong."

"You're the sheriff in this town," reminded Hathaway. "You had the right to organize a squad of deputies to enforce the law."

Bart shrugged. "I wasn't anxious to see anyone killed."

Hathaway stared at him, lips curling. "Mr. Breen informs me that you threw his man out of your room, and that you insulted him, sheriff."

"He was lucky," Bart retorted, "that I didn't throw him out also."

"I'm beginning to think that we picked the wrong man for this job, Hamlin," Hathaway said severely.

Bart unpinning the badge from his vest and dropped it on the desk.

"Next time you hire a man," he stated, "tell him the kind of dirty work you want done."

Judge Hathaway's face cracked into a smile. "My advice to you, young man," he murmured, "is to get out of Atwell on the next train."

"My advice to you," countered Bart, "is to go plumb to hell." He went out into the street, brushing the spot on his coat where the badge had hung.

In the Montana Rose he found Clive Mason just getting up from a table where he'd been playing solitaire. It was still early morning and there were few customers in the saloon.

The gambler looked at him closely, and then said: "I won the bet."

"You lost," retorted Bart. "I quit before he could fire me."

"There's a train going through at one forty-five," Mason drawled, "and the next in three days. I'd advise you to grab that one forty-five."

"Why?" Bart asked.

"I'm thinking Hathaway will pin that badge on Ed Sortell," Mason said, "and that Sortell will hire some boys who are very fast with six-guns as his deputies. Sortell doesn't like you, Bart."

"I don't like him," Bart observed, "Which makes us even."

"With a badge on his chest," said Mason, "I would think that Sortell had the edge, my friend. He can

kill you legally, but you can't do the same to him."

"I figured on sticking around," Bart explained, "to see the fun."

"It won't be much fun for young Hallman," Mason told him.

That night in the Montana Rose, Ed Sortell came in wearing the sheriff's badge. Bart Hamlin was at the bar with Mason when the little man stepped through the door, walking like a bantam rooster.

Sortell glanced around the room and then walked deliberately toward the ex-sheriff.

"You got an invitation to leave town, Hamlin," he said coldly.

"For what?" Bart wanted to know.

"Maybe bein' an undesirable character," Sortell grinned. "This town ain't good for you."

Bart saw two men come through the doors, and he recognized the type. Sortell had already hired his deputies to help him enforce the law. The two newcomers were small men, shifty-eyed, and both had bulges underneath their coats.

Clive Mason moved back a few paces and unbuttoned his coat.

"Count me in on this, Ed," he said to the sheriff.

Sortell's expression changed. "You're a damned fool, Mason," he growled, "an' you'll be a dead one before you know it."

"Ill take that chance," Mason said pleasantly.

Bart Hamlin watched the two deputies take their places across the room, and then Sortell walked away, flashing them a signal.

"It's off for now," Mason mur-

mured. "He'll try to set you up another night, Bart."

"You didn't have to walk in there," observed Bart. "It was my fight, kid."

"There were three," the gambler explained. "I figured Sortell would back water when the odds were shortened."

"Watch where you walk at night," warned Bart. He watched Lacey Breen come into the place later in the evening and take a seat at one of the card tables.

Smiling, Bart walked over to him and bent down. "Just a word, Mr. Breen," he said easily. "If Ed Sortell does for Clive Mason, I'm coming for you."

Breen gulped, but before he could make an answer Bart was moving back to the bar. He saw Breen chewing on a cigar, face going red and then pale with anger.

Two days later Bart met Peggy Hallman on the street. Clive Mason had given him more information about the brother and sister. Jack had come into the diggings early, staking his claim when they were taking silver out of the mines. When the copper veins were uncovered Hallman tried to stick to his claim while the big operators bought out or robbed legally the small men like himself.

"The Hallmans have guts," Mason admitted. "They're the only ones who will attempt to buck the big men and the courts. Hallman has sunk every last cent he's made into the court battle. He's hired a staff of lawyers to fight for him. If he goes down he'll be a pauper."

"I see they took your star away," smiled Peg Hallman as Bart tipped his hat. "You just weren't strong enough to do Breen's dirty work."

"That might be," Bart admitted. "How's the fight going in the North Star?"

"We're still there," the girl said grimly, "and we intend to stay." She added: "All the crooked sheriffs in the world won't get us out."

Bart heard more about that from Clive Mason this afternoon.

"Young Hallman sneaked out of his mine two days ago," the gambler said. "He went up the shaft of the Honkyatonk Mine which touches on part of his claim. It looks like hot doings for tonight, Bart."

"What do you mean?" the ex-sheriff wanted to know.

"Hallman had to chase over to the capital for a conference with his lawyers," explained Mason. "He'll try to sneak back into Atwell without it being known."

"And it's known?" Bart asked.

Mason nodded. "Sortell is setting him up tonight at the station when he gets off the train. Tim Barton, a drunk in the Montana Rose, overheard one of the boys talking about it."

Bart Hamlin grimaced. "You think Breen would go as far as to kill Hallman?" he asked.

"That's his best bet," Mason said. "With Hallman out of the way, Breen will make another raid on the North Star Mine and take it over." He smiled coldly. "That means the court battle will stop and Lacey

Breen cleans up a cool half million or more."

"When does Hallman's train get in?" Bart murmured.

Clive Mason's eyes flickered. "Why stick your neck out, friend?" he asked. "It's not your fight."

Bart shrugged. "Maybe I don't like Breen," he stated.

"The train is due at seven five," the gambler told him. "Watch that putty-faced chap with Sortell. He's bad."

"Who is he?" Bart asked. He'd noticed the man in the saloon with Ed Sortell. He was Sortell's size, with a peculiar waxen face and staring blue eyes.

"Carl Slavin," answered Mason. "He's from Tombstone."

"I'll watch him," Bart stated. He had his supper at the hotel at six o'clock, and then at five minutes to seven strolled leisurely toward the railroad station. He came up at the rear of the station instead of walking directly toward it from the town.

V

There was a little shed at the far end of the station and it was used by the express company. Bart Hamlin stepped into the shadows and leaned back against the wall. Four passengers were waiting to get on the train, and then two more came up.

Bart recognized Ed Sortell and the dangerous Slavin. Another man came out of the station, puffing on a cigarette. He glanced at Sortell, nodded his head, and then strolled up toward the shed where Bart was waiting in the shadows.

He came on till he was less than fifteen feet away and he still had not seen the ex-sheriff. Bart stirred, opening his coat. His right hand slipped to the butt of the six-gun and he began to lift it out.

Far up the track a train whistle blew, and the third man stopped and turned around. It was then that Bart spotted Lacey Breen hurrying down the main street. Breen waved to Sortell and took a position at the far end of the station. Bart Hamlin moistened his lips. He hadn't counted on Breen getting in the fight.

A light started to roll down the track and Bart pushed himself away from the wall. He took the gun from the holster and buttoned his coat again. The first Sortell deputy was still lounging fifteen feet away, making a cigarette and watching the approaching train.

Sortell and Slavin edged back so that they could command a better view of the passengers as they got off. The locomotive rattled past and Bart caught a glimpse of faces at the windows.

Sortell and Slavin were watching the windows also, and they didn't see Hamlin move up behind the second deputy and slap the barrel of his gun across the man's skull.

The man moaned slightly and Bart caught him before he fell, dragging him back into the shadows. The train stopped and passengers started to come down. Bart moved back to the position which was supposed to be taken by the second deputy. It was dark with the only light coming from the train windows.

About thirty feet away from Bart

a young, light-haired man stepped to the cinders. He was carrying a leather brief case.

Ed Sortell called sharply: "Joe!"

The man with the brief case heard the call and recognized the danger immediately. Bart saw him drop the case and fumble inside his coat for a gun.

"The other way," Bart yelled. "Get down!"

Young Hallman spun around in time to see Ed Sortell drawing a gun on him. Bart Hamlin let his first shot go at Sortell. He threw it high purposely, intending to draw Sortell's fire.

The sheriff of Atwell whirled, the light highlighting his tense face for an instant. Recognizing Bart, he fired twice. The first slug was inches wide, and the second went up into the air because Sortell was falling when the gun went off.

Bart Hamlin fired at the echo of Sortell's first shot. The distance was fifty feet, but Bart could see the man cringe as the slug struck him in the chest. Sortell's gun went off again as he hit the ground.

Bart stepped to the right, hearing Hallman gasp as a bullet from Slavin's gun knocked him to the ground. Then the gunman from Tombstone turned his deadly weapon on Hamlin. He was standing very still as though he were in a shooting gallery.

Bart fired twice, missing the first shot completely but catching Slavin in the left arm with the other and spinning him around. Slavin

dropped to one knee and his six-gun flared in the night.

Bart felt something burn his left side. He aimed deliberately, seeing Lacey Breen running up behind Slavin, gun in hand. His shot took effect as Slavin started to rock on his knee, his gun wavering.

Breen opened fire, shooting wildly twice. Hamlin made the man stumble with his fourth shot. He fired again, the last slug in the cylinder, but Breen, falling forward on his face, was not hit.

Calmly Bart started to flip out fresh cartridges from the belt, telling himself he was a fool in this instance for keeping the hammer on an empty chamber, but he hadn't figured on Breen being in the fight. That was the joker.

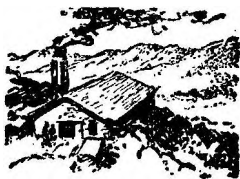
The big mine operator was lying face forward on the ground, steadying his gun for the finish shot. The few passengers who had gotten off the train before Hallman had scattered in terror.

Bart could see Breen's tense face as the man leaned over the gun. His weapon cracked, the slug smashing through Bart's left shoulder, nearly knocking the gun from his hands.

Breen was grinning now, the triumph showing clearly in his eyes. He was lying in a patch of light from the train window. Carl Slavin lay on his face a yard away, his body shivering.

"All right, Lacey," a man called softly.

Breen's mouth opened. He switched his gun, firing at a slim shape moving toward him. Bart



was trying to close his gun, but there was no strength in his left hand.

He saw flame dart from the newcomer's gun. Lacey Breen scrambled to his feet, lurched forward two steps, and then pitched headlong to the ground.

Bart watched Clive Mason step into the light.

"Take a look at Hallman," the ex-sheriff murmured. "He's down."

The gambler bent over the young mine owner, and then Bart heard a woman's quick, agonized cry. He saw Peggy Hallman running toward them, hatless.

"Jack!" she cried.

"He's all right," Mason said reassuringly. "Just nicked on the temple—knocked out." He walked over to where Hamlin was standing, clutching his left arm. He'd slid the gun back into the holster and he could feel the blood dripping from his fingers. "You did pretty good," Mason grinned. "You had two of them down before I could get my gun out."

"Lucky thing you showed up," Bart smiled. "Breen had his sights on me."

"Funny," murmured Mason, "he should take a part in this fight. These big men usually leave the dirty work to their hired help."

Bart walked over to where Peggy

Hallman was kneeling down over her brother. Young Jack had his eyes open now, and he was staring around. Seeing Bart, he grinned.

"You change sides mighty sudden, mister."

"My privilege." Bart told him. "Hurt bad?"

"I'll be taking ore out of the North Star tomorrow," Hallman said. "The State court is reversing Judge Hathaway's decision, and is also starting an investigation into his conduct in Atwell. He's about through in this town."

Clive Mason whistled. "No wonder Breen took a personal hand in this fight. He must have received a wire telling him of the court's decision."

Hallman nodded grimly. "He had to stop me today or never. Thanks to you, Hamlin, he failed."

Peggy Hallman helped her brother to his feet. She looked at Bart, her face still white.

"I'm sorry," the girl said humbly.

"No harm done." Bart grinned. He was still clutching his arm.

"Better get you to a doctor," Clive Mason was saying. "You need a little patching, Bart."

"Stick around this town, feller," Jack Hallman said. "I'm organizing all the small mine operators for the next election. We'd like to run you for sheriff—this time as the people's candidate."

Bart shrugged. "I figured on moving out," he admitted.

Peg Hallman spoke up. "This town needs a man like you, Bart—Mr. Hamlin," she told him. "Wait around."

Bart looked at her. He thought he saw something else in her eyes.

"Maybe," the ex-sheriff murmured, "it's worth waiting for." He saw the sudden flood of color in Peggy's face and he had his answer. "Yeah. I reckon it is."

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.



1. reddof

2. flerl

3. tingalemar

4. sesmolas

5. cool

6. headbonk

7. roaf

8. regnarg

9. lute

10. vyvac

11. lachol

12. derrob

13. therag

14. lublgod

15. reebomaj

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



Bone meal fed to cattle in phosphorus-deficient areas in the Western range country produces better beef and better calf crops. About ten years ago a member of the U. S. Bureau of Animal Industry visiting Africa noticed that cattle there made bigger gains and produced bigger calf crops than did Texas cattle. Range conditions seemed identical, except that cattlemen in South Africa made a practice of feeding bone meal on range pastures. This fact was later passed on to Texas, New Mexico and other cattle experiment stations. Bone meal was tried in the West, as was adding phosphate to the range land itself. It worked. The discovery is said to have been worth millions of dollars a year to Southwest ranchers.



There are tricks to all trades, including rodeos. The position in which a saddle is placed on the back of a contest bucking horse can well be a deciding factor in determining whether or not a contestant can ride that particular horse. Reason: The further forward a saddle is placed, the easier the bronc is to ride, as a forward saddle cuts down the leverage a buckler can exert in going through his bag of tricks. Conversely, the further back the saddle, the more leverage the horse can exert in his attempts to unseat the rider.



Though most Western Indians were avid hunters and sportsmen, fishing was accounted neither a sport nor a feat of skill. Buffalo hunting tribes such as the Blackfeet scorned the Columbia River fishing Indians, contending that fish was food only for children and toothless old women. Fish was certainly an unpalatable dish as most Indians prepared it. They boiled the fish whole, skin, scales and all, making the unsavory mess into a thick porridge by the addition of meal. Even in the case of the Columbia River Indians who were adept at spear-
ing salmon, most fishing was done with drop nets.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

TROUBLE CACHE

by HAPSBURG LIEBE

It looked like that bonanza might prove a deadly boomerang



He was a lean and wiry man, as rawboned as an Indian and almost as dark from sunburn. Dismounting in a nest of boulders, he dropped rein, moving silently on foot until his eyes had a fair sweep of the desert valley ahead. Some two hundred yards westward there was a seep spring and enough grass to keep one horse, with a sun-blasted old cabin of peeled logs just beyond.

The door was closed. No smoke came from the rust-brown pipe that jugged through the roof. So nobody was there. He eased the gunbelt on his lean hip, and ran to the cabin.

A heavy padlock held the door. He had expected that. It came to his mind to shoot the lock open. But that would make noise, and sound carried far in the desert silence. He turned to look for something, an ax

or a pick, to use in prying off the hasp. The cabin was clear on two sides; the other two were smothered in scrub and pear. Under the floor he found a worn pick without a handle.

It served. He threw the pick into the scrub and hurried across the threshold. Shelf, table and home-made chair, built-in bunk and blankets, wired-up old castiron stove, cooking utensils, odds and ends of things—this was the home of an average desert-rat prospector. The intruder began a search of the place.

At the end of half an hour he swore because he hadn't found anything that interested him. Suddenly a creaky voice sounded from the open doorway.

"Roby Nash. I'll be danged! And I fed you mor'n once when you was prac'kly starvin'. What you mean, Roby, bustin' into my cabin this-away?"

Nash had wheeled, snaking out a handful of black walnut and steel. He looked squarely into the barrel of an ancient dragoon Colt six-shooter, a weapon that looked very big in the grip of the wizened, scraggly-bearded little old-timer. Nash forced a grin to his thin lips and shrugged.

"I was passin', Tennessee," he lied, "and was plumb starvin'. Jest plumb had to have a bite to eat. I didn't think you'd mind."

There was a flinty light in the squinted eyes of old Tennessee Tolliver.

"Didn't expect to find grub in my bunk there, or in the box I keep my

clothes in, did you?" he said. "You pine-blank didn't. I'll tell you what you was doin' here, Roby: I been foolish enough to talk it that when I'd cleaned up enough o' the yaller I was goin' back to Tennessee, and last week in town I was astin' how much the railroad charged. You heard about that, and figgered I had me a big poke saved up, and you figgered to steal it from me. That's 'zackly what you was doin' here, Roby, and I ought to shoot you!"

Roby Nash forced a laugh. Ignoring the big six-shooter, he walked to the stove and uncovered a pot. Tennessee followed him. Then Nash turned with lightning swiftness—and in that same split second the dragoon Colt changed hands.

"Plumb simple," Nash said.

Tennessee blinked, stared, and shrugged lightly. "And so you got my gun. You'd ought to feel mighty proud o' that. Atter I'd fed you a heap o' times when you was hongry. Yeah, you ort to feel proud!"

"I do, yeah," Nash leered. "But you ain't so harmless. I better tie you up and keep you out o' mischief, you old coot."

He stepped to the doorway and tossed the old dragoon into the scrub. Tolliver must have known that he would be as helpless as a child in the hickory-strong, quick hands of Roby Nash, for he did not struggle while he was being placed in the homemade chair and tied there with a hackamore rope.

"I got a friend," he creaked, when

the job was finished. "A strange friend, and he will make you smoke. No—wuss than smoke. a sight wuss. You wait and see."

Again Nash laughed. It was in his nature to enjoy this. There seemed no especial need of haste. "A strange friend, huh? Wouldn't be some other old-timer. now would it?"

"No old-timer, anything but," Tennessee threw back. "He ain't fur away right now. I can tell you that. You know where the Sister Peaks is. Well, I fust seen him over there. He's all o' six feet and—"

Nash cut in. "Tell me where your poke is, and I'll only take half of it. Give you my word, honest to gosh. Me, I ain't afraid o' your strange friend, Tennessee. I'll either see or hear him comin'."

"Might be, Roby," Tennessee Tolliver said, "you'll not neither see ner hear him when he comes."

In the creaking voice there was quiet confidence and a queer threat. A man who spends half a long life in the desert is not like other men. For one thing, he will garner much of the wisdom that a million years of survival among enemies have given to the birds, animals and reptiles. Roby Nash might have realized something of this: for he became quite sober.

"Sister Peaks, did you say, Tennessee? I rickollect they was a lunger from the East had a camp over there. Your strange friend, it's him, ain't it?"

Tolliver did not answer the question. He just stared at Nash.

"You'll talk before I'm through with you, old coot," Nash said threateningly. "As well do it now."

"Looks like," Tennessee said, "you could've tied me up safe without tyin' me so tight, Roby. Looks like you could've confiscated my poke without hurtin' me so much. I'm afeared you'll wish you hadn't treated me thisaway. Took me a heap o' years to gether up that yeller. I had my heart set on goin' back home to Tennessee on it."

"Talkin' to gain time," Nash flared, "or jest talkin'?"

He swore, and resumed his search of the cabin.

"Under the floor, I'll bet," he told himself.

He went to his hands and knees and began feeling for a loose hoard. These boards were old; had been in use elsewhere, and were full of rusted old nails sticking point downward. Presently Nash found a loose short one in a corner. He opened his knife and pried it out. A backward glance, and he knew he'd found the Tolliver nuggets and dust. The



eyes of the desert man were not squinted now, but round and staring.

"Don't you do that, Roby!" he barked.

Nash grinned, closed and pocketed his knife. He bent again to thrust his hand down through the aperture and rake sand off a buried heavy buckskin bag. Instantly from under the floor, from a point less than a yard away, there came a spine-chilling sound:

Z-z-z-z-z-z! Z-z-z-z-z-z!

Roby caught his breath in sheer horror, jerked his hand a few inches and stopped it just clear of the ground. He sank a little and peered under the floor. A great rattler was coiled there, angry eyes glowing in primordial anger mixed with cold fear, tail still whizzing—Z-z-z-z!

"Don't move," Tennessee was saying. "Don't move a hair. It's your only chanst, Roby, and slim at that. Don't move."

"I—I couldn't move if I wanted to," Nash breathed in hoarse tones, between stiff lips. "A old floor nail ketched my coat sleeve when I jerked, and if I pull my hand any further, I'll pull that nail into my arm!"

With a supreme effort he stilled a violent trembling, then spoke again, whispering:

"Sneak around behind me, Tennessee, and sneak my gun and shoot that big sidewinder. Shoot his head off! For gosh sakes hurry, Tennessee!"

Tolliver squirmed in his tight bonds, and chuckled queerly.

"And me tied up thisaway? You done it, Roby. Told you I was

afear'd you'd wish you hadn't, didn't I? Ain't you in a purty pickle, though! Keerful you don't move a hair, Roby, because that snake will hit you if you do!"

Nash began muttering. "Mebbe . . . mebbe this is your strange friend. It's a strange friend, all right. That nail is diggin' into my arm, or I'd—"

"Rats come under the floor," Tennessee said, "to pick up crumbs o' grub that drops through the cracks. That sidewinder was atter the rats, and mindin' his own business. All any sidewinder wants is to be let alone. That un was gentleman enough to give you warnin', Roby, and you ought to give him credit for that. Don't move a hair."

"But . . . but I cain't stay here forever! For gosh sakes, Tennessee, do somethin'!"

"What?"

The buzzing had stopped. There was a silence that quickly turned thick and terrible. The angry eyes held upon Roby Nash as though mocking his helplessness; the great, flat, wide-jawed head remained poised and ready to strike.

"You got any permanganate?" breathed Nash.

"Yeah," Tolliver answered, "if it ain't too old to be any good. Lots o' veins in your hand and arm, though, and if he hit you in a vein, why, not even good permanganate would help. But if I did save you, Roby, you'd rob me jest the same and I wouldn't git to go back to Tennessee nohow.

"But in spite o' that, Roby," the

wizened, scraggly-bearded little old prospector went on, "I'd be sorry for you. I seen a fella die o' snake pizen once, and he suffered a heap, begged us to shoot him and put him out o' his mis'ry. And so, if I wasn't tied up the way I am, I think I'd risk helpin' you."

Very slowly Nash eased back until he was sitting on his heels, with his knees cradling his chin. Relaxed in this position, the strain on his muscles was less, though he couldn't see the rattler now. His lean face became more than ever drained of blood, sickly ashen under its coppery sunburn. Now and then his thin lips twitched.

The desert silence was almost worse than the buzz of the rattler. It was broken by the frightened chirp of a tiny bird, a cactus wren, in the pear and scrub outside. Roby Nash was so nearly paralyzed with fear that his words were barely audible to the ears of Tennessee Tolliver:

"Any sidewinder . . . allus has a mate. That bird . . . they's two big sidewinders now, Tennessee. Please . . . try to git loose and help me!"

"It jest ain't possible, Roby. You done it all yourself, tryin' to rob a pore old lone hombre, and got only yourself to blame. Don't move."

Time passed, age-long minutes that ran into hours, each an eternity to both men. Nash had twice broken into low, cowardly whimpering. Tight as the hackamore rope was, Tolliver was able to move his limbs enough to keep his circulation up.

Then there was the soft clop-clop of hoofs in the sand outside. A tall young man in city clothes that showed much wear dismounted and dropped rein at the doorstep.

"Hello, Tennessee!" he greeted cheerfully. "Told you I'd be over to see you today, and I brought you a pair of little nuggets. What the devil—who tied you?"

It was the lunger from Sister Peaks. The erstwhile lunger, that is, since his health was fair now. He disarmed Roby Nash and freed Tolliver, and while he was doing it, old Tennessee explained the situation to him.

"So that's what you're doing there at that hole," the newcomer said sharply, and dropped near the aperture to peer under the floor. "Unhook yourself from that nail and get up, you skunk!"

Nash saw that the muzzle of his own six-shooter threatened him and he obeyed without question. His joints were so stiff now that he couldn't have put up the weakest kind of fight. Tennessee Tolliver, on his feet and rubbing legs and arms, observed: "Sheriff'd be glad to see that jigger, I happen to know."

"Then we'll take the jigger in, tied on his horse."

Old Tennessee laughed happily. "Funny part of it, friend," he said, "is that Nash could've been gone with my poke two hours ago. He'd heard a skeered bird chirp and thought it was another sidewinder, when it was only the fust one had got sick o' his comp'ny and was leavin'!"

*If a double-crosser holds all the aces, only
six-gun bullets can take a jackpot when*

A TINHORN STRINGS TALKING WIRES



by
NORMAN A. FOX

I

SOMETIMES it seemed to young Dan Carrigan that there was no end to waiting, and even the practiced patience of the gambling man he was couldn't ease the secret worry that constantly rode him. Tonight he leaned against the bar in McCord's Casino, tall and somber in the black of his profession, oblivious to his garish surroundings, oblivious to his own lean-faced, gray-eyed reflection in the mirror across from

him. There was that satchel of money in his room in the Eureka Hotel, that pitiful sum he'd gathered against another man's need. He'd taken to counting the money frequently of late. It wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

Frowning, Carrigan considered moving on. Yet this Bearcreek town was booming now; the take from the casino's tables was bringing a greater joviality to Cash McCord, the owner.

Across the prairies a telegraph line was building, a precise row of poles and a strand of wire linking the horizons. Bearcreek was the telegraph company's goal, and already it was using the town as a base for supplies. Freight wagons rumbled along the false-fronted street that once had known only drowsy quiet, and money clinked across the gaming tables. But a straight gambler lost as often as he won.

Carrigan had to fill that money satchel, and he had to fill it fast, and for a reason that only one man in Bearcreek knew. He had waited for

the stroke of luck that would fatten his meager hoard; he had grown tired of waiting. Such was his mood when Cash McCord approached him.

"Evening, Dan," McCord said. "I've been hunting you. A stranger's showed up looking for a poker game with no ceiling on it, and Pete Rapp's offered to oblige him. But the stranger says it's no dice unless you sit in. Interested?"

He was an immense man, this Cash McCord, big of body and broad of face, and he would have been vacuous-looking except for the shrewdness of his little eyes.



Tailored broadcloth and a show of jewelry gave him a certain elegance, but there was something eternally primitive about him too.

Carrigan smiled and all his despondency was sheared from him with the gesture. "Lead me to it," he said.

McCord aimed a stubby forefinger. "Yonder," he said.

Striking the faro bank, Carrigan threaded among the tables to one that stood in the corner, and here he found the two men waiting. Pete Rapp he knew slightly, a stubby, heavy-boned man who wore range garb and a brace of tied-down .45's. A recent comer to Bearcreek, Rapp's calling had remained nameless, but he was a man given to surliness and the possessor of an explosive temper, if Carrigan was any judge. Eying Carrigan truculently, Rapp said: "Getting you into this wasn't my idea. We ain't gonna play penny ante."

Beneath his black coat Carrigan packed a .45 in a shoulder holster, and he was suddenly conscious of its weight and found its heaviness comforting. "Would a hundred dollars a chip suit you gentlemen?" he asked, and his eyes flicked to the stranger who'd insisted on his being in the game.

He was no one who'd ever graced McCord's Casino before, this stranger. Of that Carrigan was sure. A tall, lean man of fifty or so, the stranger had an ashy, bloodless look about him, yet his skin showed the rough massaging of snow and wind and rain. His garb might have been a rancher's, yet his hands weren't

those of a horse-and-rope man. With a certain dignity, he said: "Good evening, Mr. Carrigan. My name is Ben Breckenridge. I'm here to play cards, but not for pleasure. Our game will mean a great deal to me, and I want it to be honest. You have a reputation for straight playing, and it has reached my ears. I appreciate your joining us."

Again Carrigan felt the weight of the .45 and found it reassuring, for he knew now that this Ben Breckenridge placed no trust in Pete Rapp and was depending upon him, Carrigan, to keep the game straight. That name, Ben Breckenridge, stirred some faint recollection in the mind of Dan Carrigan, but he didn't place it. Not then.

Calling for cards and chips, Carrigan peeled the wrapper from a deck, and the game started fast.

Breckenridge lost with the first hand, and lost again and again. He'd put a thousand dollars on the table, and it was gone within forty minutes. He drew another thousand from a pocket wallet then, being very slow and careful about it. After that his luck began changing, and it was Rapp who was the loser with Carrigan holding even but gradually winning a little, too.

Rapp took his losses with poor grace; he was constantly signaling the bar for drinks and now perspiration trickled down his face and profanity punctuated his every ejaculation. Once he said, "This kind of luck ain't human!" and Carrigan stiffened, sensing the insinuation and realizing what it might portend, but

Rapp didn't enlarge upon the remark, and the man's luck began to change for the better.

Now it was Breckenridge who was the loser, the piles of chips beside Rapp and Carrigan growing steadily as the cards fell. Once again Breckenridge painstakingly delved into his wallet, and another thousand dollars lay upon the table. To Carrigan, playing a patient, careful game, the world had narrowed to this green-topped table and the cone of light flooding from an overhanging lamp, but more than once he found his eyes on Ben Breckenridge when they should have been upon the cards.

There was something queer about this stranger — something mighty queer. Viewed through the swirling tobacco smoke of Rapp's making, Breckenridge looked like a death's head. Only his eyes were alive, and in them was a fierce hope and a grim desperation, yet the man was playing as though he were in a trance. It took him an inordinately long time to get the cards around when the deal came his way, and sometimes he seemed almost to fall asleep over his hand. And he was continuing to lose.

The deal came to Rapp, and it was he who scooped in the chips when the play was finished. Carrigan had been watching the surly man, and Rapp had dealt the cards as they came, so far as Carrigan could see. But now Breckenridge said: "That finishes me, gentlemen. I'm carrying no more money. But I'll sign at the bar for a round of drinks."

With avid eagerness Rapp said, "If you reckon your credit's good at the bar, I reckon it's good at this table!"

The flame burning in Breckenridge's eyes flared brighter, and it came to Carrigan that there was a sinister undercurrent to this game that he'd instinctively felt all along. Breckenridge was a man playing for greater stakes than any that had crossed this table, and now the man said: "You've heard of Independent Telegraph Company, I'm sure. I happen to be its president and construction chief. Two-thirds of the company is backed by my own money—every cent I own. The other third is owned by a group of Dakota men who bought in as a gamble. Will you give me a chance to recoup my losses? I'm willing to put up half my interest—a third interest in the company—against what's on the table. One cut of the cards all around, and the winner takes everything!"

Carrigan's stabbing thought was: *The man is crazy! Loco crazy!* But he only said: "Are you sure you're well, Breckenridge? A third interest in a telegraph company against a few thousand dollars!"

Rapp laughed. "He isn't playing Santa Claus, Carrigan. If you got your nose outside this Casino once in a while you'd know that Independent Telegraph is a losing deal. A bunch of rotting telegraph poles and some junk equipment is what he's bidding against our hard coin. But I'm just crazy enough to take him on. Write up an assignment, Breckenridge!"

The bar was signaled and paper and pen were fetched, and also a fresh deck of cards. Breckenridge toiled laboriously with the pen, and when the scratching was finished he shoved the assignment to the center of the table. Rapp gave the paper a glance and peeled the wrapper from the new deck.

"Here goes, boys!" he said.

But now Carrigan was on his feet, stiff with anger and quickened to a sense of danger, for he'd seen something—a surreptitious movement of Rapp's, the scraping of the man's thumb nail across the bottom of the deck. It was an old trick, deliberately creasing an unused deck in which the cards were stacked in an orderly sequence, and it meant that Rapp had marked an ace so that he might easily find it when the deck was shuffled and a cut was made.

"That's all, Rapp," Carrigan said icily. "I saw what you did! Cash your winnings and get out of this Casino as fast as you can go!"

He knew he was asking for gunplay when he made his challenge; he knew that in a moment the overhanging lamp would be shuddering to the concussion of bullets and somebody would die. He knew all these things and he was ready, and, seeing the look in Pete Rapp's eyes he realized that this had been more than an ordinary game for Rapp as well as for Breckenridge. And because Dan Carrigan was like a tightly-drawn spring, awaiting the inevitable release, he turned almost weak when Rapp scooped up his chips and silently shouldered away

from the table, heading toward the cashier's cage.

"Thank you, sir," Breckenridge said simply. "Whatever it was you saw him do. He was pointed out when I came in here asking for a man willing to play a quick game for sizable stakes. I didn't trust his looks, and I'd heard your name and reputation from freighters who fetch our supplies. That's why I asked you to sit in. Shall we make the cut now?"

"We'll need another deck," Carrigan pointed out.

Yet even as he peeled the wrapper from it, he wondered why he was continuing this play now that Rapp was out of it. From Rapp he might have won chips that had a cash value, and cash was what he needed to swell that satchel in the Eureka. A piece of paper worth a third interest in a telegraph line might not be readily negotiable. Yet Ben Breckenridge still wanted his chance to recoup, and a straight gambler always gave the other man an even break.

The cards shuffled. Carrigan fanned them out face down on the table, and Breckenridge drew one—the seven of spades. Carrigan flipped over the queen of diamonds. "That's it," he said, and at that moment Breckenridge crumpled to the floor.

For a fraction of a second Carrigan could only stare, not quite understanding. His thought was that the shock of losing had made Breckenridge faint, yet that didn't seem in keeping with the man. But now Breckenridge was down upon

the floor, and men were crowding from other tables, and somebody was shouting: "Where's Doc Sawyer? He was drinking at the bar. There's a man here needs him!"

Already a fussy little medico was elbowing ruthlessly through the crowd, and Doc Sawyer knelt beside the fallen man, making a hurried examination. Men were barking questions and Carrigan was answering them, and some of that talk must have penetrated to Doc Sawyer for the medico looked up unbelievably.

"See this?" he said and they all saw then that there was blood on Breckenridge's shirt, a widening stain that had been hidden by his coat.

"This man's been shot," Doc Sawyer said. "Hours ago, I'd judge. He made a pad out of his own undershirt and tied it in place, but it wasn't good enough. What's that you were saying, Carrigan? He played cards with you for over an hour? Then he must have been gritting his teeth to hold onto consciousness. Blazes, boy, he was bleeding to death before your very eyes!"

II

They moved Ben Breckenridge to Carrigan's own room in the Eureka. That was the gambler's idea, and when they got the telegraph owner stretched upon the bed, Carrigan shoed men from the place and gave Doc Sawyer room to work. A fresh and tidy bandage in place and a stimulant administered, Breckenridge's eyes fluttered opened. At first he looked around blankly.

"I remember now," he said weakly. "I lost, didn't I?"

"You nearly lost your life, you brainless fool!" Doc Sawyer snorted with no real rancor. "Now stay in bed. That's what I'm prescribing for you. I'll look in on him tomorrow, Dan. Good night."

He went bustling out of the room, leaving the door open behind him, and Carrigan was moving to close it when he saw the girl framed in the entrance. She was dark-haired and red-lipped, and even in riding garb she was mighty easy on the eyes, though fear had put a tight hold on her.

"Dad!" she cried, and brushed past Carrigan to the bedside. "I've been right behind you since you left camp, but when I hit Bearcreek I had to try all the gambling places before I found the right one. They told me you'd been fetched here."

"You shouldn't have come, Sharon," Ben Breckenridge told her. "And I shouldn't have, either. It was a fool notion I had. You told me so, but I thought it was worth a try. Now the money's gone, and half my interest in the line as well."

She turned on Carrigan, her dark eyes blazing. "What sort of tinhorn trick did you pull on him?" she cried. "And what cause did you have for putting a bullet in him? They told me at the casino that he'd been wounded!"

"Easy, Sharon," Breckenridge said. "I collected the bullet from the brush before I ever hit Bearcreek. It was only a flesh wound and I bandaged it myself and thought that that would do till I'd finished my

business here. Time was precious, you know. We owe this man nothing but thanks. He kept the game straight."

Carrigan saw contrition flood the girl's eyes, and he said gently: "The doc ordered rest for your father. We'd better see that he gets it. You can talk in the morning. Come, I'll find a room for you here."

She kissed her father and followed obediently after Carrigan, but out into the carpeted hallway and with the door closed behind them, she stopped the gambler by a quick tug at his elbow. "That interest in the line you won tonight?" she said. "What are you going to do with it?"

He shrugged. "Sell it, I suppose. If I can find a bidder."

"You'll find a bidder," she said. "There'll be men anxious enough to buy if for no other reason than to ruin Independent Telegraph. Could you hold your share just for a while—for a month, say? We'll have reached Bearcreek then and completed the line, if we're ever going to. Is that asking too much?"

There was much that Dan Carrigan didn't understand, but he had to smile now. "And if you don't complete, then the interest I hold will be worth nothing? Right?"

Her lashes dropped. "I wasn't being very fair to you, was I?" she said. "Maybe I should tell it to you from the first. Interested?"

At his nod she said: "When Union Telegraph was built across the continent years ago, the government subsidized the road. Dad worked on that job and it gave him his first

interest in the telegraph. He made some money at freighting and more at mining, and all of it went toward his dream—an independent telegraph outfit to string wire into the forgotten corners of the range. This section could use a line. Stockmen need it to keep in quick touch with Eastern cattle markets and for many other reasons. But dad's had to build on a shoestring."

"No federal backing?"

She shook her head. "You can't blame the government for lacking faith in an unproved outfit. They've merely put us on trial. If we can reach Bearcreek on a certain date, we'll have shown that we're worth backing. But there's a big outfit—Continental Telegraph—that's bucking us. They wouldn't bother with an unsubsidized job, but they'll be in a position to holler for what they want if they can have our failure to point to when they demand backing. And they've fought us in many ways."

"That bullet your dad picked up outside Bearcreek?"

She nodded. "They've temporarily hamstrung us as far as money is concerned. We were making good headway, but the last payroll never showed up for our workers. It was sent out of Fargo by the men who put up a third interest to back dad. It was even marked, that money, so that if it fell into outlaw hands it would do the thieves no good. Yet it was lifted from a stagecoach and has vanished. Continental's men don't need to worry about ever using that money; they've dealt us a hard blow even if they take that currency

and burn it. With our men grumbling and threatening to quit if they're not paid, we're licked."

A pattern had begun shaping itself for Dan Carrigan as she talked, and now he said: "So that's why your father was so desperately intent to win tonight! He wanted payroll money."

"He talked of such a fool try," said Sharon. "That's why I guessed where he'd gone when he disappeared from camp. He had three thousand dollars—just about half what he needed. To have given the men only part of their pay would have been to admit that we were on shaky footing. Dad chose instead to try to double his money over a card table. It was foolish, but it was rather magnificent just the same. So that's the size of the situation. If you sell that assignment to someone who'll back us with money or guts, I'll have no fear. But those who'll bid for it will be Continental men who'll buy it just to keep it from anyone who might help."

He looked down at her, and something moved him to place his hands upon her shoulders. "You've made that scrap of paper look different to me than it did," he told her. "Still I haven't much choice but to sell it. You've told me how it is with you; now I've got to tell you my side of it. You see, I've got my dream, too."

"A bigger dream than Ben Breckenridge's?" she asked. "I don't think so."

"There's a man named Buzz Carrigan," he explained. "He took up

a chunk of land in Dakota, and he found himself in a big fight with a land combine. But he was a fighting man, this Buzz Carrigan, and he held his own against all the odds—held his own so well that the only way they could eliminate him was to frame him into Bismarck's stony lonesome for twenty years on a rustling charge. That was three years ago. Buzz Carrigan is my older brother, miss."

He had her instant sympathy; he could tell that, but she said: "I don't see—"

"What that has to do with the assignment? I tried turning that case upside down in Dakota those three years ago. There were plenty of loopholes, but it was going to take money to fight the combine—big money. Ten thousand dollars might be a starter. I've tried to stack up that ten thousand, by the only way I know. It's been slow, mighty slow—so slow that I've thought of moving on to greener fields. Tonight I won a piece of paper. If that paper means money in my pocket, I've got to remember Buzz Carrigan. Buzz is all the folks I've got."

She was silent before his rush of words, and silent for a long moment afterwards. Then she said: "Whatever you do, I think I'll understand. But have you considered this: a month from now Independent may have completed which means we'll have our subsidy and offers of a dozen more jobs and other subsidies. We'll win big or we'll lose completely, but if we win, you'll have a third of all we win. And dad has friends in Dakota, influential friends

whose influence will be even greater if they've backed a winner. Maybe they can do something for your brother."

"And meanwhile — tonight — you can't even meet a six thousand dollar payroll," Carrigan commented.

She lowered her eyes again. "Is that your answer?"

"I don't know!" he cried. "It isn't a matter for a simple yes or no. Let me sleep on it. I won't sell before morning."

She gave him her hand, her grip firm and mannish. "That's good enough, Mr. Carrigan. Will you see about a room for me now?"

He left her in the lobby in the care of a sleepy-eyed clerk, but for him there could be no rest, not when he had his problem to wrestle with; and he went out into the night, hoping it would clear his head. Midnight was past and the hitchrails were emptying before the saloons as cowboys rode out to their distant ranches; and the last of the freight wagons had now ceased its rumbling. Lighting a cigar but finding no wisdom in the weed, Carrigan began an aimless tramping down the boardwalks, and as he passed a shadowy slot between two buildings, someone called his name.

He knew that voice, did Carrigan, and it brought him around with his hand going to his gun, but Pete Rapp laughed softly and said: "Hoped you'd show up on the street, Carrigan. No hard feelings about tonight, if you haven't got any."

"You mean nothing to me one way or the other, Rapp," Carrigan

told him. "But keep away from my table in the Casino."

Rapp shrugged. "I've bigger fish to fry," he said. "And I want to talk business. They say you won a third interest in Independent Telegraph from Breckenridge after I quit the game. What's your price, Carrigan?"

A pattern had shaped itself for Dan Carrigan tonight; now another piece was falling into place. "Representing Continental Telegraph. Rapp?" he asked.

"The only thing we have to talk about," retorted Rapp, "is price."

"Now I understand," Carrigan said. "There was murder in your eye when I caught you marking that deck, Rapp. Yet you didn't try for your gun. That didn't make sense — then. Now it does. If you'd killed me, Breckenridge would have refused to cut cards with you, since I'd accused you of trying to cheat. So your only bet was to walk out in the hope that I'd win the assignment so you could buy it from me later. Right?"

"It had to be something like that," admitted Rapp. "Yes, you stood mighty close to death tonight, mister. I hope you're remembering that."

Carrigan hit him then, striking at Rapp with all the force he could put behind bunched knuckles. His fist, caroming off Rapp's truculent jaw, flattened the man; and instantly Carrigan was upon him, wrenching the guns from Rapp's holsters and flinging them off into the darkness.

"There's your answer!" Carrigan panted as he came to a stand. "And

the answer to any other Continental man who uses a bushwhack gun or a marked deck!"

A vagrant moonbeam touched Rapp's hate-distorted face, and something in the man's eyes warned Carrigan in time, sending the gambler swerving sideways. A bullet breathed hotly past his cheek as he spun to see a gun blossoming across the street, and his own gun came into his hand as he fell to one knee and began triggering. Boots beat along the opposite boardwalk as Rapp's hide-out man made a quick retreat. Anger riding him, Carrigan went running after that vanishing man. Behind him Rapp was cursing in the darkness, threshing about in a wild search for his guns. That left it a man-to-man deal.

But there was no sign of the would-

be bushwhacker when Carrigan reached the far boardwalk. Cutting between two buildings, the gambler went stumbling over the debris of an alleyway, floundering in the darkness until he realized the hopelessness of such a search.

His man had escaped, yet certain facts were now within Carrigan's grasp, and, summing them up, he suddenly found that a decision had been made for him. Someone wanted that scrap of paper so badly that he'd made a bullet bid for it. That someone had tried to kill Dan Carrigan, and that made it personal. He'd gambled with cards tonight, and he'd gambled with his life, had Carrigan, and he'd won. Maybe that was a sign for him. Maybe he could gamble with a back-to-the-wall telegraph line and win the needings of Buzz

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Carrigan who waited in Bismarck for the help that never came.

III

Carrigan came into McCord's Casino within the hour, a man hugging the shadows and mindful that at least two killers were seeking him this night. The batwings gave to his shouldering, but the lamps were dimmed, and a solitary swamper stacked chairs upon the tables. The place was officially closed for the night, but Cash McCord would be checking the take in his upstairs office.

Carrigan found the big man behind an elaborate desk in an over-elaborately furnished room giving off the balcony above, and McCord appraised him with that bland and vacuous look that was the Casino owner's stock in trade.

"Well, Dan?" he said questioningly.

"I'm quitting tonight, Cash," Carrigan told him. "And I've come on a matter of business, too. I need six thousand dollars, and I've got only half of that put away, plus a thousand or so I won tonight. I want to borrow two thousand. I can give you a thirty-day note."

McCord rolled a cigar the width of his mouth. "I heard about that little deal at your table, Dan. Going into the telegraph business?"

"Something like that."

"I do a little investing once in a while, Dan—a ranch here, a mine there. Might be interested in that assignment, if you care to sell."

Carrigan shook his head. "I'm

gambling for a bigger stake. How about that loan, Cash?"

McCord heaved himself out of his chair, crossed to a wall safe and fished neat packages from it. These he passed to Carrigan, and then the Casino owner drew a blank form from his desk, filled it out, and Carrigan scratched his name on the note. McCord extended his hand.

"Good luck, boy," he said. "I'll miss you. You haven't gotten fat here, and your percentage hasn't helped the house much, but you've given my place a better name than it had. Your table will be waiting if you ever want to come back to it. But tell me, Dan; what's made you think a telegraph line's a good gamble?"

Tell him? There were things a man couldn't put into words because they made no coherent impression upon his consciousness. The anger that came when he'd found himself bucking shoot-in-the-back killers—the courage he'd found in the shining example of a man like Ben Breckenridge who'd bet his last dollar on another man's game and played that game with his life oozing out of him—the undaunted faith of a girl like Sharon Breckenridge who believed in her father's dream and had somehow made Dan Carrigan believe in it. . .

"I don't know, Cash," Carrigan said. "Thanks for the loan. I'll be seeing you when the line builds into Bearcreek. Good night."

Thus it came about that Dan Carrigan and Sharon Breckenridge rode stirrup to stirrup across a dawn-bewjeweled range, facing eastward to

where the telegraph line ended its march, and with them went the money that was needed to meet an overdue payroll. They were all of the day on that ride; they slept in a deserted line shack that night and reached Independent's camp late the next evening. Ben Breckenridge had been left in Bearcreek under the careful eye of Doc Sawyer, and it was Sharon who called the crew together, introduced Carrigan and made the long-awaited payoff.

The next day Carrigan came out of his tent to find the line marching forward. Here was something new in his experience, and he watched with interest as the post-hole diggers, ten of them, strung out along the line, each digging a four-foot hole. The last man, finishing his posthole, walked to the front about a third of a mile and commenced another. With the digging line moving quickly forward, two teams distributed wire and insulators and a half-dozen men nailed the brackets on the poles and raised and set them. Other men with a team of horses strung the wire.

Sharon, who'd been helping the cook, joined Carrigan, and Dan said: "They move like clockwork, don't they?"

"Thanks to you," she declared. "There's new spirit in them. They've got their pay, and that's put faith in their hearts."

Through the day Carrigan toiled wherever he could, his black garb swapped for a working man's rough clothes, and there were many more days like this. Sometimes he was on the line, sometimes he helped the teamsters move the camp to the fur-

thermost point where the men would quit for the day. They put the miles behind them, and Carrigan, counting the days that remained until the deadline and estimating the progress already made, grew light of heart. But he soon learned that there was more than distance to conquer.

Transporting the building materials was the most difficult task in building any telegraph line. Here on this treeless prairie that problem became gargantuan; timber for poles had to be hauled from the hills that lay hazily on the far northern horizon, and there came a day when all save the post-hole diggers stood morosely idle because the freighters had not arrived with more poles. That was a lost day, and when the poles did arrive there were other problems.

At this far end of the line was a transmitting station known as an "outer station" and from it went frantic messages back to Fargo for wire that failed to arrive on time. The forces of the powerful Continental outfit were at work; there were delays that could be laid at no man's door, but they were delays just the same. Money came through by stage-coach, arriving safely this time, and that heartened the partners. But Dan Carrigan could see now that it might be touch and go to reach Bearcreek by the finishing date.

One afternoon Ben Breckenridge rode into camp; Doc Sawyer had sworn that he would keep the Independent chief in bed a month, even if a rope were required, but Breckenridge had decided otherwise. He was wan and weary-looking, but the camp

ran more efficiently for his coming. He called Dan and Sharon into his tent the first evening, and when a report was made, Breckenridge sucked on his pipe in silence for a while.

"There's been no trouble that we can put our finger on," he decided. "Just little things that all add up to delay. But we'll have to watch our step. Somebody threw a bullet at me on the way to Bearcreek, remember. And somebody tried to kill you, Carrigan, that same night. It could happen again."

"Pete Rapp or his hide-out friend used a gun on you, Breckenridge," Dan declared. "They didn't know what was bringing you to Bearcreek, of course, but they saw a chance to dust the man who was putting the wire through, and they grabbed that chance. When they failed and you showed up at McCord's, Rapp was quick to oblige you at the poker table. Where a gun hadn't worked, a marked deck might. And Rapp just the same as admitted he was working for Continental when he tried to buy that assignment from me after the game."

"Rapp's a killer," Breckenridge conceded. "And probably a good man for taking orders. But there's a shrewder brain than his behind the deviltry. Some day we'll smoke out the kingpin."

"And meanwhile we'll watch," said Carrigan. "I think we'll be seeing Pete Rapp again."

And that very night Pete Rapp came.

Weary from a hard day's work, Carrigan lay soaked in sleep in his

tent when the staccato barking of guns dragged him reluctantly from slumber. Fumbling into his clothes, he heard the wild shouts of men, the thudding of boots, the ragged beat of gunfire, and with his own gun belted in place he burst from the tent to find two of the freight wagons afire. Only kerosene, liberally sloshed, could make a blaze as bright as that, and he stood for a moment, stunned and uncomprehending, knowing only that disaster had struck again at Independent, struck in a new and violent form.

Ben Breckenridge raced past him, hurling orders at the men who were spilling from tents in various stages of dress. "Raiders!" he shouted at Dan. "Horsemen rode in and set our wagons afire. Now they're off yonder in the darkness throwing lead to keep us from fighting the fire."

Carrigan saw them then; no more than half a dozen riders, but they were circling the camp Indian fashion and throwing a steady stream of bullets. There was a bit of a moon tonight, riding high in a cloud-mottled sky, and he got one glimpse of the truculent face of Pete Rapp. Dan fired and, firing, knew that he had missed, for a fury was upon him and it didn't make for straight shooting.

But already the raiders were turning tail and scattering to the four winds. The Independent crew had gotten guns in their hands, and some cooler heads were throwing gear onto horses. Rapp's men had seen that the tide could now turn. Having done their damage, they were streaking into the night, but Carrigan

wasn't of a mind to let them go. Rushing to where the horses milled, squealing and rearing and made panicky by the fire, he vaulted into a saddle and lined out into the night. At an angle another rider came roaring to join him, and before he could raise his gun he saw that it was Sharon.

"Get back to camp!" Dan shouted. "This is no place for you. I'm collecting me some renegade scalps for this night's work!"

Sharon patted the rifle she carried. "It takes men to wheel water barrels to put out the fire," she cried. "But this rifle's light enough for me to handle. Come on!"

He gave her no argument; there wasn't time for that if he was to overtake any of those fleeing raiders, and, besides, he'd come to learn that this girl could do a man's chores when the need arose. They lined out together, riding hard, and it was Sharon who spied a figure ahead.

"Look!" she cried. "There goes one, all by his lonesome!"

The moon edged into a cloud bank as Carrigan fired, and a pitching saddle didn't help make steady shooting, either. Ahead of them the man turned, and a gun flowered redly in his hand, the lead whistling high above Carrigan's head. Perhaps that shot was meant to be a warning, but there was no stopping Dan now. He fired again and again, and suddenly the man ahead catapulted from his saddle and went sprawling in a shapeless tangle of legs and arms.

"Got him!" Carrigan cried as he and Sharon came slithering to a stop beside the fallen man dust-churning.

"Careful!" Sharon urged. He may be playing possum!"

But Dan was already out of his saddle and turning the man over, and as he thumbed a match aglow the savage hope in his heart was that it would be Pete Rapp's face he'd see. Then the light had blossomed and all of Dan Carrigan's world collapsed beneath him. It had been three years since he'd seen the face of Buzz Carrigan, his brother, and three years in Bismarck's prison had made their difference. Yet this was Buzz Carrigan who was sprawled here on the prairie, blood on his face and the consciousness and perhaps the life gone out of him; and the match burned down to Dan Carrigan's fingers and winked out unheeded.

IV

Buzz Carrigan was still alive. A quick examination showed that Dan's bullet had raked along his brother's ribs, the impact tearing him from the saddle, and Buzz had hurt his head in falling. By matchlight Dan bandaged his brother as best he could, using strips torn from Buzz's shirt for the job, and while he was working at this, Sharon helping him, Dan said: "This is my brother." It was all he could say, and it was all Sharon needed to know, for she laid a sympathetic hand upon Dan's arm.

"We'd better get him under cover," she said.

Buzz's horse, which had bolted, had fallen to cropping grass not very far away, and when Sharon fetched the mount, they managed to boost

Buzz into the saddle and tie him in place.

"Remember that line shack where we spent the night when we rode out from Bearcreek?" Dan said. "It's not far from here."

She nodded and they went silently riding, flanking Buzz Carrigan and supporting him as he sagged to one side and the other. It was a ride that Dan Carrigan was to remember, for a dozen thronging questions kept him disquieting company. To have found Buzz Carrigan in this vicinity was staggering enough, for Buzz was supposed to be in Bismarck, and obviously he'd left the penitentiary without the Godspeed of the warden. But it was the realization that Buzz had been riding for Pete Rapp that really kept Dan's mind whirling. Buzz, who'd fought an idealistic, uphill fight against a grasping land combine, consorting with a renegade like Rapp! It took something out of the heart of Dan Carrigan.

They came to the line shack in deep darkness, and they got Buzz inside and onto a bunk. A lamp was lighted and they bathed the wounded man's face, and soon Buzz's eyes flickered open.

"Dan!" he gasped when he recognized his brother. "Danny! Headed toward Bearcreek looking for you. . ."

"So you busted jail, eh, Buzz?" Dan said tonelessly.

"A guard got careless," Buzz explained. "So careless that he left me the kind of opportunity some prisoners scheme twenty years to get.

I only had to walk out, Dan. Getting this far toward Bearcreek was another story. Don't look at me like that, old son. After three years in the pen I'd have sold my soul for God's own elbow room!"

"I can understand *that*," Dan said, low-voiced. "You counted on me helping you from the outside, and three years can strain a man's patience. But how did you get tied up with Pete Rapp?"

"I hit a stagecoach way station east of here about a week ago," Buzz said. "I was tired and hungry and desperate enough to show my face if it meant getting a square meal. A couple of loiterers in the station kept eying me. One was Pete Rapp. After he'd sized me up, he must have guessed that I was on the dodge, for he made me a proposition. He was looking for men who were willing to earn an easy dollar without being too choosy about how."

"Did you tell him your name, Buzz? That would have given Rapp a laugh."

Buzz feebly shook his head. "I gave the first name that crossed my mind. And I took him up on his proposition. I see that look in your eyes, kid. But there's an end to every man's rope, and I'd reached mine. They'd given me the name, and I was out to have the game. I earned my first pay tonight, Dan, by a little raid. If it's any consolation to you, I sent all my bullets high."

"I know," Dan said. "It was me that chased you and knocked you out of your saddle, not knowing. Me and Miss Breckenridge, here."

Buzz turned his head and saw Sharon now for the first time; she'd been standing back from the bunk. His eyes more puzzled than ever, he said: "I guess I just don't savvy, kid. How did my trail come to cross with yours?"

Dan told him then, told him everything, and when the yarn of Independent Telegraph's gamble was spun and Dan had said what he hoped that gamble might have meant to Buzz Carrigan, his older brother had grown tight-lipped.

"I couldn't have made a bigger mess of things if I'd schemed hard at it, eh, kid?" Buzz said. "I was blind and mixed up for a while. That's finished and done with. How do I square up with you?"

"By going back to Bismarck, Buzz. By going back and turning yourself in."

Buzz winced. "You're setting a high price, kid!"

Dan fell to pacing. "Some things come and go in this world," he said at last. "A man's health, his looks, the state of his bankroll. But no matter how the cards fall, a Carrigan sticks to his code. Funny, Buzz, but I learned that from you—from the big brother who played 'er square. And now I'm remembering what you've forgotten."

"Getting back to Bismarck won't be easy," Buzz pointed out. "Those that are looking for me will still be prowling around the Dakota side of the line. If they bag me they'll never believe I was coming back to surrender."

"I've thought of that," said Dan. "Do you think you can sit a saddle?"

Buzz swung his long legs to the floor; they were built alike, these brothers. "I reckon," he answered. "I'm a little dizzy, but a few hours rest will fix that."

"Ride into Bearcreek tomorrow night," Dan told him. "I've nobody there I can really call friend, but there're two people I think I can trust. One is Doc Sawyer; you'll find his shingle easily enough. Tell him who you are and that I sent you, and have him do a proper patching job on your wounds. Then go to McCord's Casino and see Cash McCord in private. I told him about you when I went to work for him, so tell him the whole truth, too. He'll keep you under cover till you're well enough to start back to Bismarck. We've got to trust somebody."

"We could telegraph back to Bismarck. . . ." Sharon began.

"That won't do," Dan said. "When Buzz rides back it's got to look like the idea was all his own. Meanwhile I'll be putting a telegraph line through. And when it's finished, I'll be in a position to turn Dakota upside down to free you—legally."

Buzz extended his hand. "It's a deal, kid. I'm glad one of us kept his head." He looked at Sharon. "I helped Pete Rapp strike a blow at your outfit tonight, miss. I hope you'll be able to remember me kindly in spite of that."

At the door Dan paused. "Your boss on the deal was Rapp?"

"Yeah, Rapp," Buzz said. "Good-by now—and good luck!"

Riding back to the construction camp, Dan said, out of a long silence:

"If it's all the same, Sharon, we won't trouble your dad with this. Not now. He's got enough on his mind. We can just say we gave the raiders a run, but they got away."

"I think I understand," she said. "The less who know, the better. You want the world to believe that when Buzz shows up at Bismarck he comes without anybody's pushing."

"That's true," admitted Dan. "Yet I don't mean to be disloyal to Independent. If it were safe, I'd have Buzz go back to Pete Rapp and pretend to carry on. Having a man on the inside of that renegade outfit would be a big advantage. But the law might dab a loop on Buzz meanwhile. The sooner he's headed for Dakota, the better."

"You're right," said Sharon. "And, Dan, there's a lot of good in that Buzz Carrigan of yours. He made a mistake; now he'll make it right. I'm sure of that."

They found the camp in some semblance of order; the fires had finally been extinguished, but two wagon loads of poles had been ruined beyond any practical use. That meant more delay, and thereby Pete Rapp had accomplished his marauding purpose. But by another day the line was moving forward again, and Dan worked happy in the thought that Buzz was now likely safe in Bearcreek.

A few more days and a few more miles were behind them, and Dan once again measured time against distance and there was precious little of each. He saw the high good spirits of Sharon and her father and he knew that they too realized the truth.

"We're going to cross that deadline on time, just as sure as shooting!" he declared happily.

"But with few hours to spare," predicted Breckenridge.

"Just how does a telegraph line officially complete?" Dan asked. "Break a tape, like a race horse?"

"When we get into Bearcreek, we'll flash an official message back to Fargo," explained Breckenridge. "That will signify that we're through and on time."

Carrigan frowned. "Then all Rapp would have to do is lie low meanwhile and cut our wire somewhere at the last minute. While we spent hours looking for the break, our time would be up and we'd have lost even if the poles had come into town."

Breckenridge hammered his pipe against the heel of one hand. "It would be as simple as that," he said. "Let's hope the same thought hasn't crossed Rapp's mind."

"It will," Carrigan said morosely and was galvanized by an idea. "Look! We've got money to spare since that last currency consignment came through. Let me ride into Bearcreek, and I'll hire every man that's loitering around the saloons. We'll string out gunguards to patrol the wire. Then let Rapp come riding if he likes!"

Breckenridge considered this for a thoughtful moment. "Guns against guns," he said at last. "A bit of Rapp's own medicine. It's a splendid idea, boy. Hop to it!"

A half hour later found Dan Carrigan riding toward town, and the distance to Bearcreek had greatly dwindled since last he'd covered this

trail. Reaching the town in the early evening, he went from saloon to saloon, and shortly many men were riding out, singly and in groups, toward the construction camp. Independent Telegraph was hiring gun guards tonight, getting ready for whatever showdown shaped.

In McCord's Casino, Dan talked four loiterers into going to work. McCord himself was not around, and, though Carrigan wondered if Buzz were somewhere in the building, he didn't dare question any of the help. But en route to the next saloon he encountered Doc Sawyer on the sidewalk. That cantankerous old medico gave him a dour greeting, but, in passing, winked broadly and held up his hand in a gesture of joined forefinger and thumb that plainly said: "O.K.!" With that encouraging signal Dan grew lighter of heart.

But that mood was no more than upon him when he saw a rider lashing a horse down the street to a dust-spurting stop before him, and Sharon came spilling out of the saddle. She was breathless, and she had an air of desperate urgency about her that stiffened Dan, making him wonder what new disaster had struck at Independent Telegraph in these, the last hours of its race.

"Dan!" Sharon cried. "I'm glad I found you so quickly! Look!" She thrust a twenty dollar bill at him.

Still he didn't understand, and because he could only stare she explained: "One of the post-hole diggers turns part of his pay over to me. I put it away for him, and later I send it to his family back in

Dakota. This bill was one that was given him that day you first came to camp. I didn't examine it then, but I was putting it into an envelope today, and I happened to notice it. It's marked, Dan. See? It's part of the shipment of currency that was stolen from a stagecoach and never reached us. Also it's part of the currency you fetched to camp. Where did you get it, Dan?"

Carrigan studied the bill. It was crisp and new and unsoiled, and he judged that it had never crossed a gaming table. Then his fingers bit deeply into Sharon's arms. "Get yourself a fresh horse, Sharon," he said. "And get back to camp as quickly as you can. I've already sent men to report to your father. Tell Ben Breckenridge to put those men into saddles and on guard at once. Don't you savvy? We're up against a man that's smart enough to know a cut wire will stop us, even if Pete Rapp doesn't figure that out!"

"And you, Dan—"

Already he was striding away. "I've got a bit of business to take care of here in Bearcreek," he said. "For Independent!"

For now he knew who the all-powerful Continental Telegraph had hired as the head man in these parts, the brains behind Pete Rapp. Cash McCord! McCord who had loaned Carrigan that currency that had been stolen before it could reach Independent. And there was a chill in the heart of Dan Carrigan, for, unwittingly, he'd delivered Buzz into the hands of the kingpin himself.

V

McCord was behind his elaborate desk in the elaborately furnished upstairs office when Dan entered the room, and as Dan closed the door and put his back to it, McCord's broad face broke into an expansive smile, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his shrewd little eyes.

"Hello, Dan," he said. "What fetches you into town? A visit with that brother of yours you sent to me?"

"No, McCord," Dan said and was amazed at the evenness of his own voice. "I'm here to ask you why you loaned me money to help Independent Telegraph when all the while you've been taking Continental's pay to see that we didn't reach Bearcreek on time. That stolen money was marked, mister. You didn't notice that, I reckon."

McCord carefully stubbed out his eternal cigar. "So you found out," he said. "I didn't think I could fool you forever, but it wasn't the time to show my hand that night. You knew I had money and could make the loan; you'd have been suspicious if I'd refused."

"So you played the friend in need," Dan said bitterly. "Even though you'd just sneaked back here after having tried to bushwhack me from the shadows after I'd roughed up Pete Rapp that night. It must have been Rapp who tried killing Ben Breckenridge on the trail into town earlier that same evening; you were in the Casino at that time. But it was you who steered Breckenridge to the same Pete Rapp when Brecken-

ridge wanted a game. You've got a lot to answer for, Cash!"

"Business is business, Dan," McCord said with a shrug. "And Continental's money is as good as anybody's. Look at it this way; you joined up on the losing side of a fight; I got lined with the winner. That's past and done with, and I've no hard feelings."

"It's not finished yet, Cash. Independent is completing its line on time. I'm glad to be the one to tell you that."

Again the shrug. "I haven't been unaware of what business has occupied you since you hit town this evening, Dan. Gun guards, eh? That means that you've anticipated our last move, but it isn't going to do you any good. Pete Rapp and the boys are already riding to cut your precious line. And I picked the proper spot for them. You know the cluster of rocks called the Devil's Pulpit? It's almost a natural fortress, and, once the wire is cut, the boys can hole up there and keep Independent's men from getting close enough to repair the break. You're surprised that I'm telling you this, eh? You see, you're not going to do anything about it, Dan. You know why? Because Buzz Carrigan is riding with Pete Rapp once more—riding as a prisoner this time. That's my hole card. Make trouble for Rapp and the boys, Dan, and Buzz Carrigan dies!"

"There'll be a time to settle with you, Cash, when the minutes aren't so precious!" Dan rasped, and, turning, he wrenched at the door.

McCord came to his feet, his hand pawing into a desk drawer. "You fool! You blasted fool!" A gun came into his hand and he fired once, but Dan was already through the doorway and vaulting the railing of the balcony that ran around this second story. Hitting the floor below, he frantically elbowed his way toward the batwings, oblivious to wild shouts and profane questions, and he got out of the building and into the saddle of the first hitched horse he saw that looked long on speed and bottom. Then he was wheeling the mount and beelining out of town toward that distant landmark that was called the Devil's Pulpit.

He was on his way to stop Pete Rapp, and thereby he had taken Cash McCord by surprise. Dan Carrigan had come to Bearcreek to raise money to get Buzz a re-trial in Dakota. He'd even told McCord so. Dan Carrigan had thrown in with Independent for Buzz's sake. Dan, therefore, was supposed to place his brother above all else, and Buzz's danger was to have tied his hands. Yet Dan, riding now, was putting Buzz's life in jeopardy. But there was that one thing Cash McCord hadn't known, the thing Dan had put into words when he'd told Buzz: "No matter how the cards fall, a Carrigan sticks to his code. . ."

That was the lesson Dan had learned long ago from Buzz. Because Buzz had forgotten, he'd walked out of Bismarck to join up with Pete Rapp, and because Buzz had afterwards remembered he'd agreed to go back to Dakota's penitentiary. They were built alike, these brothers. That

was why Buzz, given the choice, would want Dan to ride like this tonight. And that was why Dan was now throwing caution to the winds.

And so he spurred frantically. Somewhere on the trail ahead Sharon Breckenridge was also riding, but she had an edge of time on him and he didn't overtake her until he reached the telegraph camp. Long before he saw the line, stately against the stars, he noticed the fire glow washing the sky, and his mouth grew dry with a new fear. Had Pete Rapp changed his plans and attacked the camp again? But no, those fires were made of brush, combed from the coulees, and by the light of them Independent's men were putting in a night shift and stringing wire once more.

Dan found Ben Breckenridge up front, and the gaunt man said: "Sharon's back. And there's been more trouble. One of the freighters came limping in after you'd left. He said that Rapp and his men took his wagon away from him this afternoon and dumped a load of poles in a deep coulee. It smells like a show-down's shaping, so we're working tonight. But we'll need those poles before we're finished, I'm afraid."

"Those gun guards I sent out?" Carrigan cried.

"I headed them to where the freight wagon was attacked. If Rapp's still around, they'll nail him for us."

"Send someone to fetch them back!" Dan urged. "Then have them ride to the Devil's Pulpit. Rapp's striking there!"

Then he was spurring on into the night, racing along the telegraph line,

heedless of the questions Breckenridge barked after him. He put a mile behind him and another, and when he had to pause to blow his lathered horse, he made a swift estimate of distance and knew there was little left. The Devil's Pulpit was a familiar landmark which the line had passed some days ago, but a horse moves faster than a slowly constructed telegraph line, and soon Dan was nearing his destination.

He heard the gunfire then, on up ahead, and his first thought was that some of his hired gun guards had stumbled into Rapp. But when he humped over a low rise, he knew differently. Dark against the starlighted prairie was the cluster of rocks known as the Devil's Pulpit, and from this shelter a man was pouring a random fire at other dark shapes which hunkered below, swapping lead for lead. It was a one-sided fight, and though two dead men strewed the ground, there were at least three others triggering at that lone defender, and the outcome of this gun duel was inevitable.

"*Buzz!*" Dan cried in sudden understanding, and his own gun was in his hand as he flung himself from the saddle to the shelter of a low bush. Now the Carrigans had Pete Rapp's men caught in a crossfire. Rapp himself was still standing, and as the man turned to fire at this new menace Dan's first bullet caught him high in the chest and sent him kicking out his life upon the ground. Then Dan was upon his feet and charging forward, and those that were left took one look at Rapp and one look at

Dan, then turned and bolted for their horses.

Buzz came clambering out of that rocky nest, crawling painfully down toward his brother, and Dan ran to help him. "Fight's over, Buzz!" Dan cried. "Those last two boys must have thought the full force of Independent Telegraph was upon them. Look at them go! This range will never see them again!"

"They fetched me here unarmed," Buzz explained. "But they didn't tie me. I acted fagged all the way, pretended to almost fall out of my saddle, and, since they knew I'd been wounded not long ago, I guess they figured I didn't need much watching. Soon as I saw these rocks, I realized that if they got holed up here, it would take a lot of lead to drive them out. So I snatched a gun from the handiest holster, made a run for it and whittled down the odds. But I'm mighty glad you came, Dan. They were ready for a rush that would have smoked me out."

"Quiet!" Dan whispered. "Someone's coming!"

A rider was briefly skylined atop the same rise Dan had recently humped, and then the horseman had dipped down and was spilling from his saddle to peer frantically as he cried: "Rapp! Pete Rapp!"

"Rapp's dead, McCord," Dan called. "And I'm not surprised to find you here. So you came riding to tell Rapp that Buzz Carrigan might not make as good a hostage as you thought!"

"Carrigan!" McCord rasped out in recognition, and his gun came up

and flared redly. Dan felt the bullet burn along the hard flesh armoring his ribs. Then he was triggering in turn, and McCord seemed to waver before him.

"This settles Independent's account with you, Cash," Dan said. "The money I borrowed was money your men stole from the company, so there's nothing due you there. And this little piece of lead balances up for everything else."

He fired again, and McCord buckled at the knees and went down. Dan turned to Buzz then and said: "Let's be riding. There's a telegraph line to finish tonight."

Thus they went facing into the west, these Carrigan brothers, but it was a slow and painful trail they took, for the blood of brave fighting was upon both of them, and they had to stop often and look to their makeshift bandages. It seemed an eternity later when horsemen loomed out of the night and they found themselves surrounded by the gun guards Dan had hired, the men who'd ridden to find a fight already finished; and with such an escort they came directly into Bearcreek town. Only then did it penetrate into Dan's pain-fogged mind that they hadn't passed the telegraph camp, and he couldn't understand why a crowd was milling before a little lamp-lighted building that had long stood empty on Bearcreek's street.

"This is Independent's terminus of-fice," someone said.

Someone else was urging that Dan go directly to Doc Sawyer's cottage, but he brushed them all aside, and

together he and Buzz shouldered into the little office. Here they found the Breckenridges, father and daughter, and others of the telegraph outfit, and Dan stared in astonishment.

"So you've completed!" he said at last.

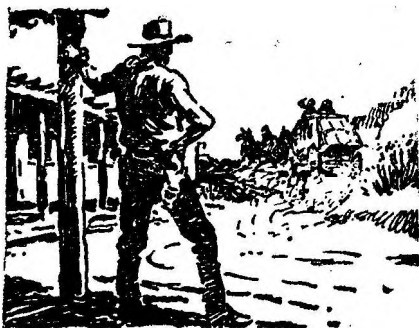
"Faster than we thought," Ben Breckenridge told him. "We ran out of poles as I feared, so we strung the last mile or two on fence poles. We'll remedy that later, but officially we're here. All we've got to do is send the confirmation message."

Dan saw the table and the telegraph instrument and the operator hovering over it.

"You mean you haven't sent it yet?" he said incredulously.

Breckenridge shook his head. "One of the gun guards rode on in ahead to tell us you were coming. Both Sharon and I agreed that we'd wait until you were here. We've time to spare now, you see. And you had to be in on the finish."

Dan's head was whirling again. "Send 'er through!" he urged. "And while you're at it, tell Fargo that it took *two* Carrigans to finish the job. It was Buzz and I siding each other



tonight that ruined Continental's chances on this range forever. Ben, I want you to meet my brother."

Breckenridge smilingly extended his hand. "I know all about Buzz Carrigan. Sharon told me tonight, after we'd completed the line. I wish I'd known before. Shucks, boys, the governor of Dakota is a good friend of mine; he tried hard to whip the legislature into helping subsidize the line, and now he's backing a winner. He'll have a pardon through pronto when I lay the facts before him. And I'll bet a certain land combine will be hunting cover before this is finished!"

Sharon was at Dan's side, and she said: "Look at you! Standing here talking when a doctor should be working on you! Whatever else you've got to tell us can keep. For a tinhorn you've been quite a telegraph stringer, but you need somebody else to look after you otherwise!"

Buzz Carrigan grinned a wan grin. "I wish you two would hold up awhile on your plans to make *that* officially complete," he said. "Me, I want to be back from Dakota in time for the wedding."

"You will be," said Dan. "We'll see to that, won't we, Sharon?"

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Joe Rodríguez

not only writes feelingly of the Old West but illustrates his work with drawings of distinction. Coming from a long line of miners and cattle folk, Joe was born in Yuma, Arizona, and raised in the northern part of that state where the bright galaxy of colorful ranches, unrivaled scenic wonder, picturesque Navajos and sturdy cow-punchers couldn't help but bring out the

artist in him. "So," he says, "I worked hard and grabbed all the schooling I could get—the most important thing being, of course, learning to draw and paint. I've punched cows, wrangled dudes in the Pike's Peak country of Colorado, and ridden many a trail with the rawhide reata vaqueros in California." At present, however, Joe is wrangling Japs in the South Pacific and here's hoping he never gets his spurs tangled!

He writes that the two things he wants most, outside of continuing his career, are to get back to the little shop at home where he can pursue his hobbies of making silver mountings for saddles and bridles, and leather work, and enjoy some of friend wife's very superior cooking which will be more than welcome after several years of K rations.

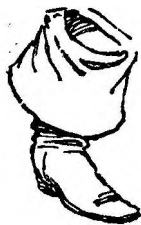
Next month's issue will feature some of this promising young artist's work along with breathtaking tales of adventure in the West by Walt Coburn, L. L. Foreman, Tom W. Blackburn, Giff Cheshire, M. L. DeVries and many others.



BOOTS

MARK THE PUNCHER

by NAT W. McKELVEY



WHEN a cowboy plunks down \$100—over two months' pay—for a pair of handmade working boots, his willingness to do so indicates far more than vanity. He is buying one of his most important tools. Wrongly designed or of inferior workmanship, boots could cost a puncher his life.

Specialists in the Western boot turn out over 100,000,000 pairs annually. To please the exacting range man, bootmakers have developed a multi-million dollar industry. And why not? More than anything else, the boot is the mark of the riding man. In the West, the booted man is presumed to be a horseman. Woe to the booted tenderfoot who swaggers up to the corral on a real cattle spread. He either rides the worst bronc in the remuda or is "hoorawed" out of his boots.

Cowboys place so much importance on the calibre of the man who wears boots that in one notable instance their feeling caused a major change in boot styles.

Into Old Sol's Lone Wolf Saloon at Carlsbad, N. Mex., in 1906, swaggered as crusty a bunch of cowpokes as ever threw a steer. Not the least outstanding feature about these saddle-bowed punchers was their boots. Never before had the local cowmen seen Western boots with short tops.

"Where'd you git such funny boots?" they demanded.

Indignantly, the newcomers snapped a simple

reply. "Them's the style," they announced. With those few words the "peewee", or short-topped boot, came into popular repute wherever men worked cattle. But creation of the short-topped boot came about by accident.

In 1905, the story runs, a group of the most expert riders and ropers from Uncle Sam's cattle country hit the ocean trails for South America. These world champion cowboys invaded Argentina. Immediately, they undertook roping contests with the native *gaucho*. At dabbing a fast, accurate loop, those *pampas* notables proved no match for the Yankee cowboys. Accustomed to dropping running animals with the *boleador*, a gadget consisting of weighted thongs, the *gaucho* didn't pretend to be a roper. But neither did he intend to let the visiting punchers go home with their winnings. Strangely, the Americans always ran afoul of some local law which required them to disgorge all they had earned by their skill.

Their incomes confiscated, the American cowpokes couldn't maintain proper wardrobes. And their boots suffered most. In demonstrating their method of throwing a yearling, the American cowboys discovered that the Argentine animals were wilder and stronger than those of the United States. Leaping at the end of a lariat, those *pampas* yearlings didn't always throw on the first bounce. Pitching, they would often run a hoof down a cowboy's high-top boot. Under pressure, the fancy stitching gave way. In that instant, a well-dressed cowboy became a bum.

Far from home, with scarcely any money, the punchers couldn't replace the damaged footwear. Neither could they make a triumphant return to America, looking like the "frazzled end of a misspent life." Ingenuity saved the day. The boys simply slashed off the torn boot tops, lacing them over with rawhide or shoemaker's twine.

When they lined up at the Lone Wolf's brass rail, the wandering top-hands showed their short boots. But the local punchers who first called the short boots "funny" changed their tune. If those rootin', tootin' rannys who had bested the famous *gauchos* said the "peewee" was the style, then, by grab, it would be the style! And so it is, even today.

For his boots the cowboy spends more than for any other part of his gear with the exception of his saddle. He wants high-heeled boots with thin soles, made of excellent leather. He demands lightweight tops, worked over with quantities of fancy stitching. Not merely decoration, the stitching serves to stiffen the boot tops, keeping them from wrinkling at the ankles where the spurs touch. A boot that wrinkles at the point of contact with the spur is a difficult boot on which to fasten spurs.

It is the high heels of cowboy boots that have saved the life of many a puncher. With his bowed legs, a waddy off the hurricane deck of a bronc may walk with a ludicrous roll. He doesn't mind. Mounted, his high heels keep his foot from slipping through the stirrup. Occasionally, when making a fast mount,

a cowboy will spook his horse. Before the puncher can hit leather, the animal is plunging away. But the rider's high heels have kept him from thrusting his foot all the way through the stirrup and hanging there to be dragged to death by the startled bronc.

When roping on foot, the puncher uses his high heels to dig into the ground for a firm stand. Here again, they may save him from death. Bulldogging cowboys have been known to snap a heel at the instant of twisting the steer's neck to throw him. This sudden loss of traction throws the dogger off balance. If he can avoid the horns of the frightened critter, he is extremely lucky. Apart from practical considerations, the high heel is a cowboy tradition. The wearer is a riding man, a kind of knight in rangeland garb, outranking the commoner who works and goes on foot.

The evolution of the Western boot allies itself closely with the development of footwear in general. In the days when men lived as savages in caves arose the first desire to cover the feet. The caveman's efforts to guard his feet from the harsh, stone-crusted trails culminated in the sandal. From sandals to shoes to boots, man struggled to protect his feet. Early records in the ancient city of Thebes show that the Egyptians had explored the possibilities of footwear. Elegance and richness of the shoe or boot indicated the wearer's rank.

Although the Greeks get credit for adding the first uppers to footwear, Caligula, Emperor of Rome, extended the shoe top until the first boot

sprang to life. Not to be outdone, the Greeks came back by adding a heel.

Under Edward IV of England, half-boots entered court circles and became the mark of a knight. Kings and emperors in France and Spain encouraged the development of the boot by subsidizing royal bootmakers, and even American presidents have placed great importance on the bootmaker.

Working to obtain a medium of fine texture and great pliability, the Spanish produced Cordovan leather. Inspired by its softness, Spanish bootmakers created the wide-mouthed boot. Of bright yellow, highly decorated, its gargantuan top fell in fantastic folds around the calf of the wearer's leg.

In rapid succession came the English "Jack-boot", the Hessian boot, and the Wellington boot. No less a person than the Duke of Wellington himself, conqueror of Napoleon, designed the military boot that bears his name. Succeeding the "Iron Duke's" creation, the Blucher half-boot gained prominence. Even today, woodsmen of America use this boot. Modified to fit his needs, it became the cowboy's work boot.

The modern puncher will probably snort in surprise to learn that riding men of earlier days wore boots that made no distinction between right and left foot. Not until 1785 did bootmakers begin to produce boots that recognized a difference between man's two feet.

Boot making came to America on the storied "Mayflower" along with

numerous other crafts and traditions. Equipped with supplies, materials, and the tools of his trade, Thomas Beard established his shop in the New World. For \$50 a year and title to fifty acres of land, Beard became bootmaker to the Pilgrims. From Beard's beginning sprang the billion-dollar boot-and-shoe industry of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

In addition to the puncher's personal need for the best in working boots, he has another, though less direct, interest in the bootmaker's art. Most of the raw materials for this billion dollar business are byproducts of the cattle industry.

A cowman's boots are handmade to order. No self-respecting puncher will wear shopmade gear. For the cowhand who will wear ready-mades, the true son of the West has nothing but contempt. Factory-made boots may be all right for the dude or the farmer, but, like the early Egyptians, the riding man wants his boots to be his trademark, a sign of distinction.

In 1879 Joe Justin brought his tools and equipment to the old Spanish fort on the Texas side of the Red River. From his shop came the best cowboy boots to be had in all the hard-bitten West. From the beginning Justin boots set the style in cowboy footwear. Today his three sons carry on with a huge modern factory in Fort Worth, Texas. So famous is the Justin boot that cowboys everywhere frequently call any ranch boot a "Justin".

Joe Justin knew exactly what the

cowboy would require in a boot. Joe knew it because he knew the cowboy and his work from firsthand experience. By riding, Justin discovered the value of a point-toed cowboy boot. On a rapidly wheeling horse, the puncher can use this pointed toe to help him pick up the stirrup easily.

Justin knew also that cowboys would demand a thin-soled boot. Any riding man knows that much of the control over his horse comes through his legs and feet. A thick sole deadens his feel of the stirrup. Finally, he wants a boot with a soft vamp, light in weight, with wide, loose tops so that air can circulate around his legs.

Nearly every puncher boasts at least two pairs of "custom makes," one pair for work, another for "goin' to town." In dress boots, the "hand" lets his imagination run riot. Colored tops of inlaid leather may carry designs such as steer heads, stars, diamonds, ranch brands, nicknames, eagles, spurs and horse heads. In addition to regulation cowhide or calf skin leather in dress boots may be alligator, crocodile, kangaroo or buckskin. One Arizona puncher outdid the field by having boots made of rattlesnake skin.

But, whether he wears "peewees" or long-topped "mule ears", the cowpoke demands top quality in his footgear. Boots mark the puncher. Only a prideless, worthless saddle tramp would be caught sporting boots "so frazzled he can't strike a match on 'em without burnin' his feet."



Could Arnie Lane keep Lige Eubanks' lobos from taking hot-lead inventory of his new store until he filled an order of

GUN GOODS FOR CRAZY CREEK

by GIFF CHESHIRE

THE man across the counter from Arnie Lane, like all the Crazy Creek settlers, was spare of body and word and movement. His wife, who held a fist-sucking baby, had the blankness of expression so typical of their

women, the same stark eyes, grimruled mouth and unconscious stoop of shoulders. They all got that way in time, these patient, plodding nesters trying to dry-farm the baking flats south of Three Corners. Russ

Slade and his wife, now looking so earnestly at old Jace Jepson, had special reason for despair, as did half a dozen other families on the creek. Slade took up the thought, his sunken, bloodshot eyes beseeching Jepson.

"It isn't like we was just shiftless, Mr. Jepson. You know about the grass fire Eubank let get away that wiped out us and the Agnews and the others slicker'n a whistle. They were good crops that burned, fust-rate wheat. We're getting to know that land. It's just hard luck that keeps doggin' us, and that cuss Lige Eubank. We'll get in fall wheat and next year we'll have good crops. But you won't have to wait until then for your money. There's road work down 'tother end of the country. All we ask is that you carry us until we can get some wages in."

Arnie Lane clerked for old Jace Jepson in the store that constituted the town of Three Corners, where the Squaw Creek road met the county road between Waverly and Brighton. Much against his wishes he had been obliged to call the old man out of his cubby office when Russ Slade asked him about credit. But Arnie had known in advance what the answer would be, and now he saw it coming.

Jepson was a tall, gaunt man, lean-faced and white-thatched. No slightest feeling had shown in his cold blue eyes as he listened to the nester's argument. His answer came quickly and bluntly.

"The rules of this store're the same as they always was, Slade. I don't know how many times I've told you

people up on Crazy Creek that I can't afford to carry you. Now it's a grass fire and before that it was a drought and before that the poor seed that was shipped you. It's always a whinin' case of hard luck!"

For the first time Arnie saw the fire smoldering in the nester, which likely had been there all along but was just now burning to the surface. "You trust the cowmen, Jepson. Maybe it's your business, but I don't call it fair, making one rule for some and a different rule for others!"

Jace Jepson's eyes went deeply glacial. "The cow people were here a good many years before you sod-busters came. The ones I carry on the books've given me their trade all those years, and I can rely on 'em! But I ain't openin' any new accounts!" With that he turned and stomped back into his cubby and the case was closed.

The nester didn't look at Arnie, or even at his wife, as he turned and walked toward the door. The woman fell patiently into place behind him, her eyes also avoiding the young clerk's. The slight was unintentional, Arnie knew, coming out of their blind despair and disillusion and desperation, but it hurt him. Before she married Russ, a couple of years before, Esther Slade had been an Agnew, Lola Agnew's older sister, and Arnie Lane was in love with Lola. He and the Slades had been good friends.

As soon as they were gone, Jepson came out of his office again and gave Arnie a flat-lipped grin. "That ought to save the others comin' in,

Arnie, but if they do, you give 'em that same answer!"

It was on Arnie's lips to tell the old man he could do his own penny-mean refusing, but the impulse quickly took its place among countless others concerning the store owner that he had restrained in the past. Yet this time he was closer to open rebellion than he had ever been before.

Arnie had worked for Jepson for eight years, starting as a drifting, range-orphan kid, and now he had just turned twenty. For the last two or three years, as maturity of vision developed, he had realized the old man had always exacted the output of two men, and paid skimpy board and a mere pittance in return. Only two things had kept Arnie working for Jepson. He really liked the store business, and for years had been saving all his wages toward owning one of his own some day. Then these nesters had come to settle on Crazy Creek, with Lola Agnew among them.

Arnie Lane had notions of his own about a storekeeper's responsibility to the community that supported him, and they were a far cry from Jace Jepson's. Jepson had sold to the nesters readily enough when they brought a little cash in their work-worn fists, so it wasn't loyalty to the dominant cow element in the country that prompted him to deny them credit. And it wasn't entirely concern as to the soundness of such credit. Arnie knew something that Jace Jepson did not realize he knew about.

The evening before, Lige Eubank,

who grazed the desert around the Crazy Creek colony, had sat in the cubby office and talked a long time with Jepson. No customers had been in at that hour, and Arnie had been trundling items from the ware-room to restock his shelves. Without paying much attention at first, he knew the pair had been discussing the grass fire that had got away from Eubank and wiped out buildings and crops of half a dozen settlers. Yet one unexplained remark Eubank made, as he left, reached Arnie's ears and now stuck in his mind:

"There'll be a thousand dollars in it for you, Jepson!"

Now Arnie Lane understood that Jepson had been bribed by Eubank to deny credit to the unlucky nesters. Slicked out of crops and buildings, the unfortunates would be likely to quit the colony. There was no other store in Three Corners, and if they could not wring credit from Jepson they had even less chance of finding it with the merchants or banks of more distant towns, where they were not even known. The rest of the colony was too close to the ragged edge itself to be able to winter the half a dozen families, even if the fire victims would allow that.

Suspicion was mounting in Arnie's mind. Lige Eubank hated the colonists, not so much for the small parcels of land they occupied but because they were strung along the creek and were diverting water for irrigation. The grass fire had probably ruined a good quarter of them.

If the nesters knew Eubank was conniving with Jepson, there would

be the devil to pay. When the colony first started drifting in to take up the open land, Lige Eubank had resorted to more open tactics, which had been violent and dirty. Old Ezra Agnew, Lola's father and the colony leader, had restrained the more hot-headed farmers and had gone to law. After Eubank got his fingers badly burned in a damage suit, he dropped the open warfare and took to slyness and cunning. So far the farmers had accepted Eubank's explanation that he had started to burn a patch of loco weed on his graze and the flames had got away on the brisk breeze, ending in the grass fire. But it wouldn't take much to set them to thinking.

Still looking at his gaunt, tight-fisted employer, Arnie realized he had best keep his knowledge to himself. If Eubank was running a shindy, he'd be wanting the hide of anybody who tried to snarl it up. And if Jepson had been brought into it, he was a man who would go to considerable trouble to protect himself. Yet Arnie could not forget the bleak despair in the eyes of Russ and Esther Slade, and he did not like the odor of things.

"By Jehoshaphat, Jace!" he grated, on a quick upbeat of anger, "Lige Eubank's bought you up!"

He could see Jepson's long body jerk as the words hit him. The storekeeper's small blue eyes went murderous. "What're you driving at, you impertinent pup?"

"I heard Eubank offer you a thousand dollars for somethin'! I reckon I know what for! If I was to tell Ezra Agnew what I heard, he'd have

the law on Eubank in a minute and you'd be smack in the middle of the mess!"

For a moment Jepson seemed about to voice a denial. Abruptly changing his mind, he devoted a long moment to cursing the clerk out, coldly and foully, as he had so often done in the past. He wound up by grating: "You take a hand in this and you'll be the sorriest sprout in the country! Lige Eubank's got men on his payroll who wouldn't scruple to gut-drill you if he dropped a nod! You tend to the work I'm payin' you for and keep your blasted trap shut!"

Arnie Lane was trembling by now with his rage. "I used to take that kind of talk because I thought it was my lot, Jepson! But the only reason I ain't driving your teeth down your skinny throat now is that you're an old coot! I've stood enough! You'd better fan your tail for the Rocking E fast to tell Lige Eubank I'm takin' chips in his rotten game!"

He stripped off his leather cuffs and hurled them across the room, his apron following. Turning, he stalked toward the back room where he had slept. For lack of a valise, he began pitching his sparse belongings into an empty potato sack. He pulled a strong box out from under his mattress and dropped it into the sack. It contained eight years' savings.

He knew he was doing a reckless, foolhardy thing. Gone was his dream of saving the money to buy the old man out. In its place he had accepted the prospect of sudden

death, for the threat Jepson had made had not been idle.

And probably the thing he proposed to do would involve the entire nester colony and half the cow country in bloody strife. Yet he had taken all he could take, and it seemed he had to do it.

When Arnie went back out into the storeroom, his scant sackful of possessions slung over a skinny shoulder, Jace Jepson was still standing there, lost in study.

"I still got some wages coming, Jepson!" Arnie said curtly. "I'll thank you for them!"

The old man wet his lips. "Listen, Arnie. I shouldn't have spoke so hasty. You better think it over before you go on the rampage. I reckon I had no cause to go cussin' you like I did, and I take it back."

The clerk looked at him through narrowed eyes. Old Jepson was changing his tune a little! Just as he could be tough and ruthless when he held the whip hand, Jace Jepson could fawn and wheedle when he doubted his position.

"Unless you're lucky enough to find another clerk who'll take your cussedness!" Arnie told him, grinning coldly, "you're going to have a fix on your hands. I've run this store for the past five years, with you complainin' about your rheumatism and roundsidin' in your office. Get a wiggle on! You owe me a month's pay, thirty measly dollars, and I'm waitin' for it!"

Jepson had started to turn toward his office when the *clop-clop* of hoofs out in the road turned both pairs of

eyes toward the front window. A prickle flushed Arnie's skin. Lige Eubank and a couple of his riders had pulled up at the hitchrack and were swinging down. The old man couldn't have got word to Eubank so soon. It dawned on Arnie that Eubank had only ridden in to see how Jepson had made out with the nesters and to make sure his wishes were being followed.

Arnie realized he was trapped. A quick grin of triumph had formed on Jace Jepson's lips. Flanked by two hard-faced cowpokes, Eubank clumped across the porch and into the store.

The cowman was big and shaggy and cruel-faced, and he immediately sensed the tension between Jepson and Lane. His eyes searched both faces, then Jepson said:

"You got here just in time, Lige, The sprout's fixing to go to the nesters with a story how you burned them out deliberately and bought me off from giving them store credit."

Lige Eubank whirled, his yellow eyes raking Arnie Lane. "He is?" After a moment's reflection, he added: "I see. He's sweet on that girl of Agnew's."

"I am. But it wouldn't make any difference who it was!" Arnie returned hotly. "I ain't made so I can see underhanded work like that and keep shut about it!"

Eubank removed his gloves and slowly made himself a cigarette. "What makes you so sure there was any dirty work? Only damned fools make charges they can't prove, sprout!"

Arnie swallowed. He was scared,

but some solid resolution compelled him to plunge ahead.

"Russ Slade was telling me how the fire started on your graze, Eubank, and burned downwind across Slade's and Agnew's and three-four others, wiping 'em out. He figures the loss in crops and buildings would amount to about eight thousand dollars. Them nesters are fair, no matter what you think of 'em, and they accepted your story, even if some of them don't believe it. But you mind the time Ezra Agnew stuck you in the damage suit, don't you? Simply because your punchers had been in the habit of target-practicing on nester stock!" He saw the cowman flinch a little, his saddle-brown skin paling.

"Sure the fire started on my land," Eubank admitted, after a little. "I didn't deny it and the char shows it. But we was burning over some loco weed, and the fire got away from us. That's all and it was perfectly innocent."

Arnie grinned thinly, grateful suddenly for the little education he had tried to give himself, studying at nights in his room. "There doesn't have to be criminal intention to make a man liable for the damage he does!" he announced. "Negligence is enough. You can't erase the char that'll show the course that burn took. You can't erase that other time the nesters stuck you for damages. You can't erase the fact you offered Jace Jepson a thousand dollars to refuse them credit. I'm not so sure you're safe from criminal proceedings, but even if you are, you

sure stand to get stuck about eight thousand dollars plus court costs."

He was feeling good suddenly. He had got in some telling blows and he knew it. A sudden, daring new plan had formed, one that might save involving the nesters in violence.

Eubank looked at Jepson, who seemed worried, then back to Arnie. "All right, sprout. You're a pretty smart button, at that. What's your price for keeping shut about what you know and not sicking Ezra Agnew onto that angle?"

"Jepson's store," Arnie announced flatly. It created a shock that gave him keen relish. He turned his eyes toward Jace Jepson. "Every time I've propositioned you, mister, you've held out for six thousand dollars. The whole thing's not worth more than four, and you claim that the rest is for good will. That's a joke, Jepson. Who built what little good will you've got? If it wasn't for me you'd have to knock off a couple of thousand for bad will instead of tackin' it on!"

"My price is six thousand!" Jepson snapped. "And if you think I'm going to be shook down one cent you're crazy!"

"I ain't after crooked money!" Arnie returned. "But I'm asking you to accept a fair price. I've saved a couple of thousand dollars out o' your skinflint wages. So I can give you half down and a first mortgage for the difference. You're too old to run the store yourself, and you know it. And that's a fair deal."

Lige Eubank had wrinkled his forehead. "Looks like it to me, Jace. You're too danged stove-up

to run the store. all right. If that's all the kid wants to keep his trap shut, I say give it to him!"

The old man whirled around, eyes blazing. "I should give it to him! To save your mangy hide?" The look between the two men held for a long moment, then Jepson was plainly wavering. "Well . . . if he quits me, I'll be in a fix. all right. I . . . I can't do the work with my rheumatism like it is. All right. Arnie. If that's the way you want it."

Arnie Lane would have been feeling pretty elated about this sudden surrender had he not noticed the quick wink Eubank had given Jepson. It meant a trick was being rigged, and Jepson was going along with it. It suited Eubank's purpose to seem to give in so as to keep Arnie Lane mollified. And Arnie thought he saw what the trick involved, for the only alternate way Eubank could cover up his tracks was to kill the man who could expose him.

It was a chance he would have to take, Arnie decided. Jepson understood the situation, too, and was almost cheerful when he handed over a bill of sale an hour later and accepted the money from Arnie's strong box and mortgage, witnessed by Eubank and his two riders. When Eubank left, Jepson slung together his own few belongings and went with him.

This realization of a dream of many years brought Arnie little satisfaction. When the others had cleared out, he went into the rear

quarters to fix his supper. He had made an impulsive, desperate play, feeling his way as he went. He could not yet see the end. But he had gained one important point by coming into possession of the store. In exchange he had tacitly agreed to condone and swallow what he knew about the Crazy Creek grass fire. Doubtless Eubank and Jepson had assumed he would also continue to deny the nesters credit.

But Eubank and Jepson had entered into the agreement as the initial step in some trick. Arnie strongly sensed that sudden violent action was in the offing. He was willing to meet it alone, and if he survived he would not feel himself bound by any "agreement" made with those planning treachery and he might have avoided bringing on a bloody war.

He was certain the blow would fall soon, for if Lige Eubank meant to murder him he would try it soon and destroy the bill of sale before word got out that the Three Corners store had changed hands.

Arnie fixed his supper and ate it. Then through the long twilight he sat in the store, smoking and planning the things he would do should he win the tussle. A store, he figured, was a community institution, profiting when its patrons prospered, helping to tide them over when the going was tough. There were many other services a merchant could furnish that Jace Jepson had frowned upon because the immediate and tangible return was scant. Things that built a man and his store into the very heart of a community.

All these things Arnie would see to if—

Nerve tension built up in Arnie as night fell, and it began to wear at him. He locked up carefully and he did not light a lamp that might highlight him dangerously at one of the many windows. Yet midnight came with nothing disturbing the even tenor of the night, and fatigue and drowsiness began to work at him.

Then he heard the sound that told him it had come, a grating noise at one of the windows out in the store. Arnie had removed his boots, and he climbed to his feet. He owned no weapon, and Jace Jepson had taken the old Peacemaker that served as the store's one defense against burglary. Arnie picked up the hickory ax handle he had taken out of stock earlier and crept forward silently.

The action was at the window between the hardware and dry goods counters. Cat-footing into the store, Arnie could see a figure there, outlined by the faint moon. The man would be armed, he knew, bent on murder. Arnie pressed back into the alcove outside Jepson's office. The man would have to pass there, and that would be the spot for the show-down.

The intruder was apparently working with a small crowbar. In a moment Arnie heard the soft sound of splintering wood, then of the window rustling up. There came the creak of floor boards as weight rested on them. The man was coming toward him. Arnie sprang.

He swung the ax handle, hearing a grunt of surprise as the intruder

ducked instinctively. Light glinted dimly on a gun barrel. Arnie swung again and the handle connected. The man went down, a groan accompanying the heavy thud. Arnie surged forward, then there was an explosion and he went down, blackness engulfing him.

He struggled up through dizziness and head-splitting pain, surprised that he was still alive. He heard voices, and after a moment of painful concentration discovered he had not been out long. The voices were close, and some instinct warned him against moving.

"Fill a couple of gunny sacks with groceries, Curly!" Lige Eubank's voice was saying. "Scatter stuff around. It's got to look right, in the morning. Guess we'll have to tote Pete home. Lane sure connected with that ax handle."

"You sure Lane's finished?" Jace Jepson's voice asked nervously.

"I think so, but we'll make sure before we go. Hang it, Jepson, get a grip on yourself. You've got to be smooth tomorrow when you get the sheriff out here. Don't get yourself crossed up. All you know is a scuffle woke you up, and by the time you could get into the store Lane was layin' there shot, with a couple of jiggers pullin' gunny sacks through the window. You recognized 'em—Russ Slade and Ezra Agnew. You figure they got sore because you wouldn't give 'em jaw-bone and come back to rob you. Lane surprised 'em at it and they plugged him. You wasn't away

from the store, remember. Keep that much straight and claim you don't know anything else, and you'll be all right."

There was more confidence in Jepson's voice when he spoke again. "Just make sure Lane's fixed before you go! He's likely got that bill of sale on him, and I want to tend to burning that personal!" He chuckled. "I'm rid of the pesky coot, and I got back every cent of wages I ever paid him! And don't forget, Eubank, I got another thousand coming from you!"

Arnie Lane's flesh was crawling. If Pete was out, there would be Lige Eubank, the man Curly and old Jepson to contend with. Eubank and Curly were certainly armed, and likely Jepson was packing the old Peacemaker. Arnie's only advantage lay in the fact that they thought he was already dead. He understood now that Curly had appeared at the window, following Pete in, in time to blaze away point-blank while Arnie tussled with Pete. From the head pain and wetness of his scalp, Arnie knew the slug had creased him, giving him a slight concussion.

Arnie was lying face down on the floor. He risked rolling his head ever so slightly and opening one eye. They had not dared to strike a light, but in the dim moonlight he could see Curly, working over in the grocery section, selecting canned goods and creating disorder to make the burglary look genuine. Eubank and Jepson were near him, lending their own touches, about twenty feet from Arnie.

He was lying in front of the hard-

ware counter, where he had fallen, and four or five feet from the end. He knew every inch of that counter and the goods stacked on the floor in front of it, and he pictured it to himself. There would be some splitting wedges on the floor directly abreast of him.

Knowing that if anyone detected his movement he would be subjected to immediate gunfire, Arnie began to slide an arm along the floor, keeping his eyes glued to his three enemies. Knowing he had been unarmed and believing him dead, they were not watching too closely. Arnie's heart began to hammer as a slight hope kindled in him. His groping fingers closed over a steel wedge.

He did not move again until he had pictured every detail of his proposal clearly in his mind. Then he sat up, as quietly as he could, and hurled the wedge with all his strength at one of the big front windows.

The glass went out of the frame with a tremendous clatter. The three men whirled toward the front, guns coming out, doubtless thinking a surprise attack had developed from outside. Arnie picked Jace Jepson as the weakest, scrambled to his feet and hurtled toward him. Jepson had unlimbered the Peacemaker, but he dropped it as Arnie's body hit him. Arnie grabbed the gun and scrambled to his knees just as Eubank and Curly, finally judging the situation correctly, spun toward him, surprise making their movements clumsy.

Curly keeled over as the Peacemaker barked, and Arnie spurted

behind a counter as Eubank's gun roared. He aimed carefully and fired again and saw the cowman fold over.

It was around eight the next morning when Ezra Agnew and Russ Slade reached the Three Corners store. Arnie Lane had been obliged to sit guard over his prisoners all through the long night, waiting for the day's first customer to show up. Then he had dispatched that worthy to Crazy Creek to bring the nester leaders. The puncher called Curly was dead, with a bullet hole in his skull, but Lige Eubank had been shot through the shoulder and by morning was lively and cursing. Arnie had tied him and Jepson and the man named Pete, now recovered, with pigging string, and he had bandaged Eubank's wound. But he kept a gun on them, just the same.

When the Crazy Creek men arrived, Arnie told them all about it. "Ezra, you can stay here and help

me watch these polecats," he wound up, "while Russ rides into Waverly for the sheriff. These jiggers've got burglary and attempted murder to answer for so I don't reckon you'll have much trouble collecting damages for what the fire done."

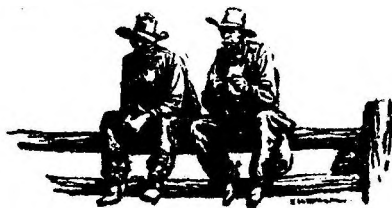
It gave him the willies now to think of all that had taken place in the past twelve hours, yet the new light of hope and courage flaring in the colonists' eyes made it mighty worthwhile.

Russ Slade was actually smiling. "It'll be different with you in the Three Corners store, Arnie. The cowmen'll like the change, as well as us sodbusters."

"But I'm going to be busy," Arnie reminded, grinning back. "You better tell that sister-in-law of yours I'll be riding out one of these days to bring her in to help, permanent."

Ezra Agnew spoke for his daughter. "And I reckon it'll be the best news she's heard in a coon's age. Arnie!"

THE END



COWBOY SAYIN'

With these two rules to live by,
You have purt' near got it skinned:
Don't never whittle towards you,
An' don't spit ag'inst the wind!

S. OMAR BARKER

OWLHOOT HERITAGE

by GUNNISON STEELE

"A lawman has to be a good judge of men, or he doesn't last long," claimed Sheriff Jackson—but he never expected that his life would depend on a renegade-spawned button



A SHERIFF has to be a good judge of men, or he don't last long. He's got to be able to judge whether a man's good or bad, just by lookin' at him, or hearin' him talk, or by the kind of company he keeps. If a man's got **bad** blood in him it'll al-

ways show, one way or another. Now, take this Pinto Strawn kid . . .

Besides being sheriff, I own the big JC outfit, and I was there, watching Ed Hurley and Sam Trapp bust some broomtails, when Pinto Strawn rode up on his skinny old roan one

day. The kid sat there awhile, a leg hooked over the saddlehorn, his pale eyes kind of shiny and eager as he watched the mustangs. He was maybe seventeen, red-haired, and kind of thin like he maybe hadn't had enough to eat lately.

Now, I certainly didn't want anybody by the name of Strawn on my ranch. Only a couple of months before, I'd had to arrest the kid's brother Jo-Ben and their daddy, old Bart Strawn, for holdin' up the stage over in Owl Canyon. At their trial, what I'd suspected all along had proved true: They'd been tied in with Nick Baron's renegade bunch up in the Foxtails. They'd had a rundown little outfit over in the foothills, but Pinto had sold it and spent every cent of the money trying to keep his daddy and older brother out of the pen.

Pinto wasn't mixed up in the stage robbery, and there wasn't any proof he'd ever done anything crooked. But he was a Strawn.

So when I turned and saw him, I asked: "What you want here, kid?"

He swallowed hard, then swung to the ground. "I'm lookin' for a job," he said, bold as brass.

"Where?"

"Why, right here on the JC."

That made some of the boys guffaw, but I didn't think it was funny. He had gall, comin' to me for a job, when I'd just sent his no-good daddy and brother to the pen for robbery. But bein' a sheriff had taught me to hold my temper.

"Why don't you try some of the other outfits?" I asked.

"I have." He made rings in the dust with his scuffed boot. "But I didn't have any luck. They was all full-handed."

"Well, so am I!" I grunted.

He looked up at me then, and there was pain in his eyes, but there was anger, too. "I know why you won't give me a job," he blurted. "The same reason the others wouldn't—because my daddy and brother was crooks. But that don't make me one! I never done anything crooked in my life!" Some of the fire left his eyes. "Look, Mr. Jackson . . . I'm awful good with horses. I could bust them fantails for you in no time. And I'd work for almost nothing, if you'd just trust me!"

Trust a Strawn. That was a joke.

"No dice, kid," I said. "Go to the kitchen and fill your belly with grub, then ride on. If I was you I'd get clean out of the country to where I wasn't known. Then maybe you could get a job."

The kid whirled and jumped into the saddle, and I could see he was fighting mad.

"I'll get a job," he yelled, "and I won't have to leave the country to do it, either! You and all the rest can take your jobs and go to blazes with 'em. I wouldn't take one now if it was offered me!"

He whirled the skinny old roan, his face white and still, and rode away fast. I watched him out of sight, then whirled back to Ed Hurley and Sam Trapp.

"Get on with that bronc bustin'!" I hollered. "What you think this is, a circus?"

After that I forgot all about Pinto Strawn, for Nick Baron's riders were raising Cain again. One night they raided the little settlement of Gateway, twenty miles south of the county seat, cleaning it out down to the floor. I raised a big posse and trailed them into the Foxtail Hills, but as usual we lost their trail in the Big Lavas along French Creek.

There was a lot of talk, and I knew Nick Baron's owlhooters had to be cleaned out or there would be a new sheriff next election. I decided to play a lone hand. So one night I saddled my buckskin and headed into the Foxtails, alone. Besides their main hideout, I was pretty sure that Baron's gang had campsites and caches all through the hills.

What I meant to do was prowl through the hills and locate these caches, maybe the main hideout, then come back to Doan's Ferry and get help to make a clean sweep of everything. I camped late that night at Salt Springs, and by the second night was deep in the Foxtails in the general vicinity of where I figured Nick Baron's hideout was. I didn't make a fire that night nor the next.

I found a couple of their caches,

containing mostly supplies. I kept a sharp look-out for the bandits all the time. But I didn't find them—they found me. Sometime in the third night, in a dark ravine where I'd spread my blankets, something jabbing me in the stomach woke me.

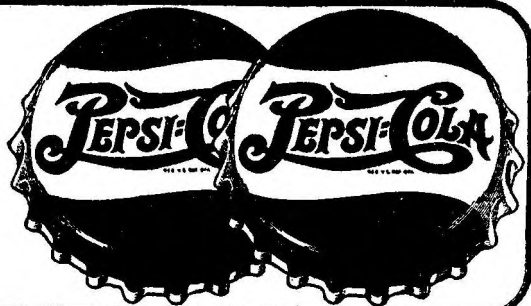
I sat up, grabbing for my gun on the ground beside me where I'd left it. But it wasn't there. The gun muzzle gouged deeper into my stomach, and a rough voice snarled: "Take it easy, sheriff, or I'll make little red holes in you!"

I didn't move. I knew I'd let some of Nick Baron's gang sneak up on me, knew they'd probably been trailing me through the hills, watching their chance to get me cold. Now they had me.

A match flared, and then I saw there were two of them—whiskery, hard-faced hombres. I recognized them as two of Baron's killers. They got my guns and punched me to my feet. One of them lit my lantern. They were even tougher-lookin' than I'd thought. They seemed to think capturing me was a good joke.

After they'd had a good laugh, the fat, scar-faced hombre said: "Sheriff, you shore done the boss a big favor.

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



He's been wantin' to see yuh a long time, but he never could get you up here—alone. He'll be plumb glad to see you."

I figured Nick would be glad to see me, all right; I knew he'd sworn to get me. But there wasn't anything I could do about it. They made me saddle my buckskin, and we set off through the dark hills. And pretty soon I saw that I'd nearly stumbled over the renegades' hideout half a dozen times during the last two days.

It was a low, four-room log house back under the overhanging walls of a little valley—or maybe it was a wide canyon—with neither the walls nor pole corrals visible from the rim. I didn't see the cabin till we almost bumped into it. Then a door opened, and light streamed out, and a gruff voice called:

"That you, Curly?"

One of the outlaws said: "Yeah, me and Jake—and the sheriff. Pile off, lawdog, and get into that cabin!"

I done so.

Besides the two who'd brought me in, there were three men in the cabin: Nick Baron, a slender, dark hombre with the meanest black eyes I ever saw; a blocky, buck-toothed gent; and Pinto Strawn. Pinto looked kind of pale when he saw me.

Nick Baron grinned. "Howdy, sheriff," he said. "I been hopin' you'd pay us a visit. Set down and make yourself comfortable."

I sat down on a box, trying not to show I was scared. I could see I was in a bad jam.

"We slow-trailed him all afternoon," said the fat bandit. "We

could have just knocked him out o' the saddle, but we figured you'd want him alive."

"Why, sure," Nick drawled. "We don't want to hurt anybody. Sheriff, was you lookin' for somethin' up here?"

"A bunch of skunks," I said. "And I've found 'em."

Baron kept on grinning, but wicked little fires stirred in his eyes. "I reckon you meant that for a joke, sheriff." He looked at Pinto Strawn. "Kid, here's the gent you been cussin'. He's the one who refused you a job, ain't he?"

The kid nodded, tight-lipped. "Just one of 'em."

"So you decided to turn bad, huh?" I said.

"What'd you expect? I tried to get an honest job, but nobody'd have me. I tried ever' outfit in the basin. But, no; I was a Strawn, I had snake blood in me! I just got tired whinin' and beggin' and lickin' boots!"

I looked at Nick Baron. "Well, why don't you get on with it?"

He looked surprised. "With what?"

"You know what. You didn't bring me here just to give me a cup of tea! So get on with your dirty work!"

Baron quit grinning. He got up and came toward me, walking like a big black cat, and he slapped me hard in the face. I rolled off the box. When I came up I had the box in my hand, and I smashed it over Baron's head. He tumbled to the floor, squalling like a turpentine cat.

That started it. The others piled

into me, all but Pinto Strawn; he stood back against the wall, pale and still, watching. Nick Baron got up and joined the others. They could have shot me, but they aimed to just beat me up first and tromp on me some when they got me on the floor.

I done the best I could, which wasn't good enough. I was down on the floor, trying to keep my head out of the way of their boots, when I heard Pinto Strawn yell out:

"That's enough, blast you! Get away from him and let him up!"

The four renegades got still after movin' back from me. I rose groggily to my knees. Pinto still stood against the wall, but now there was a gun in his hand, and his thin face was white and still.

"What you mean, kid?" Nick Baron purred.

"I mean," the button said hoarsely, "I don't aim to stand by and let you treat the sheriff like that. I ain't no dirty, yellow killer!"

"You gone loco?"

"Mebbyso! A n y w a y, you're turnin' him loose."

The fat bandit spat out a curse and grabbed for his gun. Pinto shot him through the shoulder, and Nick sat down on the floor, looking dazed and scared. Like a lever had been pulled, the others snatched at their six-shooters.

But I was ahead of the hook-nosed hombre who'd been closest to me. As I came up I snaked his pistol from its holster and slammed it against his head. He grunted and went down quick. I whirled and jumped over beside the kid. I could

see Baron on the floor, and I knew that Pinto Strawn had killed him.

The fourth outlaw, a wiry, bald hombre, quit cold. It had all started and stopped in less than ten seconds.

I looked at Pinto Strawn. "That was smart work, kid."

"So what?"

"Why, so we've cleaned out Nick Baron's gang."

"Not quite. There's one left."

"Who?"

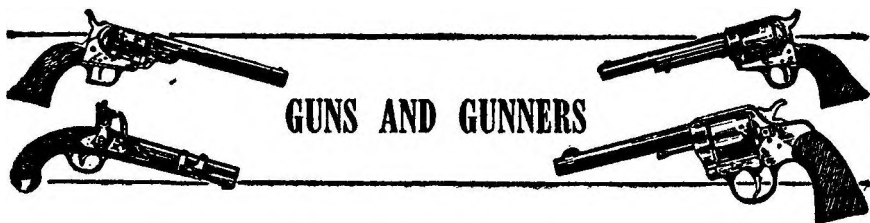
"Me!" He held out his old gun to me. "When you refused me a job, Mr. Jackson, I decided to turn outlaw. I rode up here and talked Nick Baron into takin' me into his gang. That wasn't hard, my daddy and brother was in with him, you know. In that Gateway raid the other night, I held the gang's horses in an alley, and that makes me just as guilty as they are. But somehow, just now, I decided I didn't want to be an outlaw, ever. I decided I'd rather be in jail. So here's my gun, and I'm ready to be locked up."

It was a minute before I could speak, and then I didn't say what I'd meant to. What I said was: "I don't know what you're talking about, kid. But if you want a job on my spread, it's yours, startin' right now!"

He swallowed hard. "You mean it?"

I said I did. "A lawman has to be a good judge of men, or he doesn't last long."

His eyes lighted up like maybe the sun was shining inside him. "I'm pretty good with horses," he said, his voice husky and eager. "I never saw a bronc I couldn't bust!"



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE—Last month we told you a little of the history of the big French plant, *Société Française des Munitions*. Here is a bit more about the several visits I have made to the plant.

For generations the S.F.M. plant has been recognized as the symbol of ammunition manufacture in France. Although it is a private establishment, like Winchester and Remington, it has long been one of the keys to French government ammunition development. At S.F.M. all sizes of metallic ammunition from little .22 rimfire cartridges to the 25 mm. (about one inch) Hotchkiss anti-tank and anti-aircraft ammunition is produced. In addition, I have watched the manufacture of various detonators, electric primers, and special railroad signal detonators. The firm, in normal times, produces all kinds of detonators for blasting explosives, as well as tracer and incendiary military ammunition.

In days of peace, S.F.M. produced military ammunition for many foreign governments. Much of the early ammunition for the famous 11 mm. Dutch Beaumont was developed and produced at this plant.

Back in 1940, when the Germans

moved into Paris and the surrounding countryside, S.F.M. was producing only military ammunition at top speed. They were working around the clock and employing about 3,500 people. War was upon France, and it soon reached Paris. When it did, S.F.M. closed its doors for the first time in 120 years. Production ceased. They refused to produce ammunition for the Germans.

As I wandered through the plant, I saw tons of brass for ammunition manufacture. I saw hundreds of thousands of finished bullets for military ammunition. Yet the plant was then employing less than three hundred people for there was no coal available to operate the machinery. I asked one of the plant managers the reason for these supplies. Germany usually stripped countries of such critical materials as brass. The reply, translated, was very interesting.

"The Germans were not very intelligent. We told them that we had nothing. They believed it."

As I wandered through the plant, I was greatly impressed by the manufacturing methods of the French. Although their machinery is that of the 1910 period in the United States, they make very good ammunition.

Generally speaking, metallic ammunition is made the same as in the United States, except that more operations are employed. A cartridge case begins life as a sheet of brass. From this is punched a blank, or slug, like a coin. The slug is then cupped and pushed through a series of dies to draw it into a shape resembling a finished case. The machining operations are slow and many. I've visited many an American plant and watched machines do a certain draw operation automatically at the timed rate of 72 per minute. I've seen the French machines do the same job at a rate of 17 per minute.

If I went into detail on manufacture, it would probably be classified as a "military secret," so we'll step into the sporting field.

In shot shells, the popular favorites of France match those of the U.S.A.—12, 16 and 20 gauge. Where we offer a few types of cases, S.F.M. offers many. My notes indicate ten different cases in each gauge: There is the solid brass. Then comes a case of two-piece brass, lined with paper almost to the mouth—just enough paper for a good crimp. Length of this case is 65 mm.—which in the United States means 2.56 inches.

From that point on, comes a variety of assorted shot shells with brass heads of miscellaneous lengths to satisfy sportsmen.

Yes, ammunition of the Lefau-

cheux pin-fire variety, was being made in 1940. Any gun that has a hammer spring that works, and a hole through the barrel, is still a gun in France.

French ammunition of the shotgun variety is packed in little boxes of 10 cartridges. Recall that type of shot shell used by All American shot shell makers for skeet and trap loads—the full crimp without a top wad? S.F.M. uses it—and has for many years. I find this information in a 1938 catalogue.

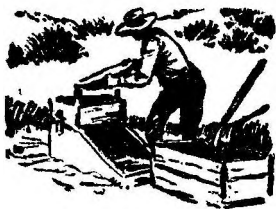
Here in France, the boys like to reload their ammunition. The shotgun user gets a break. They sell empty primed shells, primers, wads and shots. You are on your own when it comes to powder. That is a French government monopoly. The ammunition makers take what is given them and try to make it work. There is no DuPont, Hercules, or Western.

Shot shells in France, in normal times, cost about the same, retail, as in the U.S.A. Only, where they produce a million, we produce more than ten million.

Perhaps you should know more. Let's leave the shotgun field in favor of the boys who don't care for the scatter gun but in general prefer the rifle.

The smallest cartridge produced in the metallic field is the popular U. S. favorite, the .22 rimfire. Only in France it is called the 5.6 mm.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. Although he will still answer letters from readers, we ask your indulgence, as the war emergency will naturally cause some delay. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, 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 JOHN A. THOMPSON

IN the early days of lode-gold mining in the West most free-milling ores were crushed by gravity stamps preliminary to recovering the gold on mercury-coated, copper amalgam plates. Stamp mills were a symbol of the mining country. The roar and clank of their ponderous machinery, the titan cadence of the heavy stamps pounding rock into powder formed the ceaseless symphony on which the gold camps thrived.

The stamp mills ran day and night. Only individual batteries were shut down at regular intervals to remove the accumulated gold amalgam, and redress the plates with mercury. It was thrilling business.

The process of recovering gold by this method consisted of four essential steps. (1) Crushing the ore in water until the rock particles were small enough to pass a 16 or 20-mesh screen. Sometimes finer crushing was resorted to. (2) Passing the crushed, gold-carrying ore as a thin pulp over the amalgam plates. (3) The removal of the gray, pastelike gold amalgam. (4) Distillation of the amalgam to recover the gold, and at the same time save the mercury for reuse on the amalgam plates.

It took skill and experience, and

a definite amount of know-how to become a good mill man, or a plate dresser in the pioneer gold camps. Yet there was nothing very intricate about a stamp mill, or the way it worked.

Reader A. C., writing from Savannah, Georgia, says: "Maybe a lot of other fellows are like myself. Interested in prospecting and mining, but in the dark about many phases of it. I have read a lot about stamp mills, particularly in mining stories of the early West. Can you describe them for me, and explain how they worked? As they still used to any extent?"

Glad to help you out, A. C. The general setup of a stamp mill followed a pretty definite pattern, though the mills, and the stamps themselves, differed considerably in detail. Fundamentally it consisted of a solid framework of heavy timbers housing the upright iron stamps. The stamps were made to rise and drop by means of cams attached to a horizontal drive shaft. A large pulley or flywheel was attached to one end of the drive shaft. In the early days at least, power to operate the stamps was usually supplied by a steam boiler and engine.

Where sufficient water power was available, this was sometimes used.

The weight of the individual stamps ran anywhere from 300 pounds in the smaller installations up to 800 pounds and over in the larger mills. The number of stamps used likewise depended on the size of the operation. Small mines often ran only a single battery of either three or five stamps. Bigger mills usually utilized some multiple of the five-stamp battery—say twenty, twenty-five, fifty or even hundreds of stamps in the really big gold mines. The more stamps, the more ore that could be crushed in a given period and consequently the more gold that could be recovered.

The rate at which the stamps were lifted and dropped, and the height of the lift and consequent drop were likewise subject to a great deal of variation. Much depended on the type of ore, fineness of crushing desired, size of the operation, current practice at the time, and the mill man's own experience concerning the best combination for the best results.

In some mills each stamp in a battery was set to lift and fall only thirty times a minute. In others the rate was faster than a drop a second for the individual stamps. The height of the drop averaged about eleven or twelve inches. Some stamps rose eighteen inches at each stroke, others only nine. Generally speaking, the faster the stamps op-

erated, the less the lift.

The iron stamps rose and fell in large, heavy iron mortars, or troughs into which the ore and water were fed in carefully regulated quantities. As the stamps crashed away at their job of pulverizing the gold ore, thus releasing the tiny particles of free gold enclosed in the solid rock, the resultant pulp—water and ground ore—flowed through screens and over the amalgam plates in a continuous thin film. The mercury on the plates picked up the gold, or most of it, and the waste material passed on, either for further treatment in settling tanks or ultimate disposal on the tailing pile.

Mercury was also placed in the mortars of the stamp batteries where some of the gold was picked up before it reached the amalgam plates. At cleanup time the batteries were stopped. Ore feed and water flow were shut off. The amalgam in the mortars was recovered and sent along for retorting together with the gold-rich mercury scraped off the copper plates.

Stamp mills still exist. They are scattered in mines and mining camps throughout the West, but they stand mostly as a monument to pioneer gold recovery. The modern trend is to use crushers of the jaw or gyratory type, and a ball or rod mill for final reduction of the ore to the mesh required under present-day milling practice.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, 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; please keep them as brief as possible.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

TANNING skins is properly a job for a professional tanner. Yet there are times when it is useful for a farmer, rancher, or any all-around outdoorsman to know how hides can be worked up into finished leather.

Recently several readers have queried us on the business of making leather from raw hides. Particularly anxious for information on the subject were W. F. of Davenport, Iowa, and J. C. of Van Hook, North Dakota.

For the home tanner, a cellar moderately warm in winter, cool in summer is a good place to work—particularly if an ample supply of fresh water is handy. The job should be done in tight, clean wooden barrels of the forty- to sixty-gallon size. Never use iron containers.

After the hide has been cleaned, soaked to soften it, and split down the back into halves or “sides” for easier handling, it should be limed until the hair can be rubbed off with the hand. This takes from seven to ten days in summer, and about fifteen days in winter.

The limewater solution can be made by dissolving from eight to ten pounds of fresh hydrated lime—not air-slaked lime—in four or five gallons of water, then adding the

solution to a fifty-gallon barrel nearly full of cool, clean water. The hide halves are hung in the barrel over sticks across the top. While the “sides” are soaking they should be lifted out of the lime water three or four times a day, and the solution stirred.

Once liming has been completed, the hair should be scraped off, the skin turned over and the other side well fleshed. That means shaving down all flesh, fat and tissue, leaving only the actual hide.

The dehaired and fleshed “sides” should then be rinsed with clean water, and soaked in cool water for about six hours, changing the water several times. Following this soaking add a gallon of vinegar to a barrel of water and allow the “sides” to soak in this for twenty-four hours. Finally wash the hide, hang it in a barrel of fresh, cold water, and rinse in several changes of water. Leave the skin in the last change of clean water overnight—then it is ready for tanning.

The actual tanning mixture should be started from two to three weeks before it will be needed. One formula calls for from thirty to forty pounds of good-quality, finely ground oak or hemlock bark over which twen-

ty gallons of boiling water is poured. If you have that much rain water available, use it. Otherwise use the purest water you can obtain.

Use a wooden container for the mixture, and be sure the bark is really finely ground up. Let the bark and water mixture stand in a covered container until you are ready to use it. Stir it every day or so to extract as much tannin as possible. When you have your hide ready to tan, strain the bark liquor through a coarse sack into the tanning barrel. Then fill the barrel between a half and three-quarters full of clean water, add two quarters of vinegar and stir.

Next take the delimited "sides", hang them over sticks with as few wrinkles in the skins as possible and set them in the tanning bath. Move the "sides" around from time to time, and change their position over the sticks so that all parts of the skin will get an even tan.

As soon as the "sides" have been hung in the tanning mixture make up another similar batch of bark liquor—thirty to forty pounds of ground bark in twenty gallons of water. After about ten to fifteen days of soaking, the "sides" should be fairly evenly colored, or "tanned." Remove five gallons of liquor from the barrel, replacing it with the same amount of the new, or second batch of tanning mixture. Add two more quarts of vinegar.

Repeat this substitution at regular

five-day intervals until the second batch of bark liquor is used up. However, except for the first time don't add any more vinegar.

Some time between four and five weeks after the tanning has been started a small sliver cut from the edge of the hide should show two thin, dark-brown streaks working in from each surface of the skin. When this stage has been reached, moisten about forty pounds of ground bark with hot water, using just enough water to soak the bark.

Take the skins out of the tanning barrel, dump in the moistened bark, retaining as much of the old liquor as the barrel will hold, mix well and set the skins back, burying them in the ground bark. At the end of six weeks another cutting should show the color line thickening and spreading close to the center of the skin.

At this point take the "sides" out again, pour half the liquor out of the barrel, replace the skins and fill the barrel with fresh ground bark. Let the whole thing set for two months, shaking the barrel now and then, and adding, when needed, sufficient bark and water to keep the skins completely covered.

At the end of that time the hide should be evenly tanned all the way through, ready for oiling and finishing and making into harness, strap or belting leather. Sole leather should be left in the barrel two months longer.

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. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

NORTH TO HUNGRY CREEK

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE



With the Molly-O frozen in until the spring breakup, the miners of Hungry Creek faced a winter of starvation unless Pat Carney found a way to outwit both Nature and the rapacious Rugger brothers

I

PAT CARNEY saw the punch coming. His guard came up a split second too late. A stick of dynamite exploded on his chin, and a couple of million stars dropped from the sky and swirled before his eyes. He went down, but got up again, pleased to discover that his knee joints were bone and muscle instead of rubber. His guard was up now and he shook

"Damned lie," Pat muttered thickly, "I haven't had handcuffs on in a year."

"He's really coming out of it," the man said and now Pat identified his voice as Doc Lawson's.

A half hour later Pat sat up with a surprised expression. "What am I doing in bed?" he demanded. He blinked at a pretty girl whose hair was as black as a blackbird's



his head to clear the fog. Then he went down again and he had a vague idea that someone had slugged him from behind.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard a girl's voice say: "He's coming out of it, I believe."

"He's liable to come out fighting, Ann," a man warned. "Watch out that he doesn't clip you. He broke a pair of handcuffs yesterday."

wing and as glossy.

"It was dark," the girl explained. "You were walking up from the river. A man stepped from the shadows and swung at you. He connected with your jaw. You got up, to his surprise, and he set himself for another punch. Then a companion stepped from the shadows and hit you with . . . with . . ."

"A moosehide poke with a pound

of gold in the end," Doc Lawson said. "That was three days ago. You were violent, insisting that you had to get to the *Molly-O*. We'll let the rest pass for the present. What you need now is rest—"

"Rest? Rest! This is no time to rest," Pat yelled. "Don't you realize the freeze-up is right around the corner, and that I've a load of supplies on the *Molly-O* for the new camp up river?"

"I realize that you had one hell of a concussion," Doc Lawson told him, "and that you were lucky not to have picked up a fracture. I don't think your attacker was trying to murder you, only put you out of business a week or so. He succeeded. The situation is beyond your control, Pat. I can't do anything to hurry things along. That's up to nature and nature knows nothing about the *Molly-O* and the need of supplies for the camp up river. Now go to sleep. That's an order."

Pat went to sleep because nature was backing up the doctor's order. The girl, Ann Martin, followed the doctor from Pat's room to his office. She was not a nurse, nor a school-teacher. She was a chechahco girl who had come to Alaska to check up on a brother who had always been a little wild.

She had arrived on the river steamer *Nugashik* which had unloaded several hundred tons of freight at Johns Landing, then sped downstream because the freeze-up was at hand, and the river dangerously low. If the steamer stranded, she would be there for the winter,

with every chance of being destroyed during the spring breakup.

Ann, bags in hand, had been looking for a place to stop when Pat Carney was slugged. The men who attacked him were wearing denim parkas and the fur facing on the hoods had almost completely covered their faces. Ann had surprised herself by dropping her bags and rushing to the rescue. Either because the men were satisfied with their work, or were afraid of her identifying them at a later date, they fled. Ann had made Pat comfortable, then had called to a passerby to get a doctor.

Doc Lawson had put Pat to bed in his seven-bed hospital and, lacking a nurse, had accepted Ann's offer to keep an eye on things. When Pat became somewhat violent, Lawson had handcuffed him, only to have his patient break the cuffs.

Now as Ann found herself alone with the doctor, she asked: "Then you know who attacked Pat Carney?"

"I've an idea, but it's nothing that would stand up in court," Lawson answered. "A doctor can't afford to take sides nor talk too much. He's supposed to be neutral, you know."

"What sort of a man is Pat Carney?" she asked.

"I'll give you a little local history," said Lawson. "You've helped me out and deserve it." There was a note of warning in his voice as he added: "You can also use your knowledge to guide your actions as things develop."

"Oh, then this isn't the end of it?"

"What you saw is only the begin-

ning, Miss Martin," Lawson told her. "You see, for years the Rugger brothers—Lem and Jud—have operated their steamer from Johns Landing, which is a distributing point. They'd circulate false rumors of a strike, then follow the stampede with a load of supplies, which they sold at prices five or ten times their actual worth. It was take it or leave it with them."

"Tough customers," commented the girl.

"That's right," Lawson agreed.

"Well, there was more business than the Rugger brothers could handle, and Pat Carney came in with the *Molly-O*. He had a theory that I liked. Instead of a stampede to rich ground which was worked out in a year or two, why not plan a large-scale, long-time operation on moderate paying ground with universal values?"

"That is a practical idea, isn't it?"

"Yes. But you have to keep living costs down," Doc Lawson explained. "You can lose your shirt if freight rates and the cost of grub start climbing. Pat felt it would give the old-timers a chance to keep going on a small scale. They wouldn't be forever killing themselves off on new stampedes. The young chechahcos could learn the mining game by degrees, instead of trying to learn everything at once on a big stampede and going broke. This country is going to need young fellows."

"Then what happened?"

"Pat learned, through old-timers, that the Hungry Creek country was low-grade ground. He worked out freight costs and agreed to supply

the sourdoughs at that figure for five years," Lawson replied. "Then he loaded the *Molly-O* with old-timers and chechahcos and took them to the mouth of Hungry Creek. They staked the country, and he brought them back to Johns Landing where they filed their claims with the United States commissioner. The first load of supplies arrived with you."

"And should have gone up river immediately," Ann said, quickly grasping the situation, "but the attack on Pat Carney stopped that—which means that the Rugger brothers will sell the miners their winter's grub."

"That's it—and at their own price, too," Lawson added.

"Obviously, then," Ann continued with growing indignation, "the Ruggers attacked Pat Carney."

"As I said earlier, obvious conclusions won't stand up in court," Lawson told her. "If the miners pull out, it wouldn't surprise me if the Ruggers bought their claims for a song, and went in for a long-scale development themselves."

Ann returned to her patient, who was sleeping restlessly. When he awakened and demanded food, she brought in the hot broth the doctor had ordered.

"How about a moose steak an inch thick?" Pat suggested. "I've got to build up my strength."

"That'll come later," Ann promised.

She turned in shortly before midnight, but when she awakened the

next morning Pat's bed was empty. She aroused Doc Lawson.

"I went into his room to check and he's gone," she said excitedly. "I felt the bed, and it was still warm, so he can't have gone far."

Lawson reached for his parka. "Come on! I've an idea I know the answer to this!"

They hurried to the river bank and found Pat Carney gazing moodily at the water. The stream was low, and ice was forming along the edges. Rocks were glazed, where spray had fallen, then frozen.

"Listen, Doc," Pat pleaded before the doctor could protest, "I had to check on the water. If it had been real low, I'd have admitted I was licked, returned to the hospital, and been a good dog. But I still have a fighting chance. If I can get to Moose Slough, the boys will come over the ice this winter for supplies. I'll haul the *Molly-O* into the slough and turn her into a general store. I can make it, Doc. But I've got to start today . . . this morning." When Doc began shaking his head, Pat suggested: "You come along with me. I'll obey orders with you aboard. Besides, you need a vacation."

"I can't leave Johns Landing," Doc replied. "There's no telling when someone will need me. Shucks, when you're the only doctor in hundreds of square miles, you can't think about vacations."

"How about sending your nurse along, then?" Pat urged.

"Miss Martin isn't a trained nurse," Doc explained. "She merely happens to be a sensible young lady

who can follow a doctor's orders to the letter."

"Then give her orders, send her aboard the *Molly-O* and I'll do everything she tells me to," Pat promised. "All I need do is just sit in the wheelhouse and give orders to the crew. It'll be the same as being in bed."

"Yeah," Lawson said dryly. He was thoughtful a moment, then he nodded. "Keeping you here might be worse than sending you up river, at that. You'd stew and fret. What about it, Miss Martin?"

Ann hesitated. "I came up here to look for my brother, Hank. He's probably going under some other name because he doesn't want the family following him."

"Come along," Pat urged, "and I'll help you find Hank, as soon as we've delivered the supplies."

II

The *Molly-O* could almost run on a heavy dew. Her propeller could be lifted slightly, if necessary, to clear a bar or piece of driftwood. Crates, bags and barrels were piled high on her forward and after deck, as well as within the deckhouses. A native boy fed cord wood into a fire-box; a white man was engineer. The deck force consisted of another native boy. In a pinch the fireman helped the deckhand with the lines.

The "steward's department" was composed of an ancient Chinese named Ah Foo who had made his way from California mining camps, through British Columbia, and

thence some years before into Alaska.

The "captain's cabin" was behind the wheelhouse. There were two bunks which were little more than shelves and mattresses. Under the lower bunk were lockers. There was just about room enough to turn around or sit down.

"Tie the safety valve down," Pat Carney told the engineer, "and pour the steam into her." Then to Pete, the deckhand: "Haul in the gang-plank, and let go the lines. Then come up and take the wheel. I'm supposed to be a sick man."

Ann had taken a seat on a shelf behind the wheel. A full length leather cushion served as a mattress. She noticed that Pat's sleeping bag was rolled up and stowed at one end of the deck. This was to be Pat's quarters as long as the girl was aboard.

"Nothing will happen the first day, I hope," Pat told Ann. "Money Creek pours quite a volume of water into the river. Above that, though, the fun will begin."

"Is there any retreat if you're caught between sloughs?" Ann asked. "Or are you burning your bridges?"

"It's like shaking dice," Pat told her. "I win or I lose everything on a single throw." Ann liked the sparkle in his eyes. Here was a man who was willing to take a chance. Then his eyes were serious. "For myself, it doesn't matter so much. I'm young, I can start again with a pole boat. But the Hungry Creek boys are different. They can't afford my failure."

Hour after hour Ann watched the scenery move slowly astern. They made good time in the slack water, but crawled and almost stopped in the white water stretches.

"How do you know where to go?" she asked Pat. "I'd have sworn you were going to hit those rocks back there."

"We 'read' the water," he explained. "We tell the depth by the color. The smooth stretch was lighter. In fact I could see bars at times. So I kept to the blue water, and the stretches where it was white." He broke off suddenly and took the wheel. "Pete, you'd better take soundings."

Pete went forward with a pole which he thrust downward, calling back: "Six feet, no bottom! Six feet, no bottom! Five feet! Bottom! Four feet! Bottom!" An instant later the *Molly-O* grounded. She pulled off with reversed engine, and tried a different spot. Again her keel found bottom.

"We've got to get over this," Pat said. "Depth of water changes. At night when things freeze up there's less run-off. Result, lower river. It'll be no deeper until the breakup in spring."

He edged toward the bank, and Pete leaped ashore, taking a line with him. He tied up the *Molly-O*, then returned and carried a heavier line to the bank. Ah Foo, the fireman and the engineer left their posts and jumped to the bank. Pat started to follow, but halted when Ann called: "Just a minute! Where are you going?"

"I'm going to give 'em a hand,"

he answered. "We've got to 'line up' this stretch."

"Hauling that rope along the bank comes under the head of heavy labor," Ann said. "I don't think that you'd better do it."

Pat looked at her, started to protest, then changed his mind. She was right. By every rule, he should be a hospital bed patient. He rested his arms on the wheelhouse window sill and watched the men. It was obvious that they were short-handed.

"I'll give 'em a hand," Ann volunteered. She hurried to the bank, caught hold of the rope and began dragging. Her hands began to cramp in a few minutes and it seemed as if her arms would be pulled from their shoulder sockets.

Suddenly pulling was easier. Ann looked back. Pat had thrown his weight onto the rope. His big feet were digging in, and his two hundred-pound body was bent forward.

"Good enough!" he yelled at last.

The deckhand made fast to a boulder and the men trudged heavily over the sand to the *Molly-O*. Pat's face had been purple from the effort. Now it was drained of color and he looked sick. "You shouldn't have done it," Ann scolded. "We'd have managed in time."

"The water was dropping," Pat told her. "I couldn't lose out here. Wait till I meet up with the Rugger brothers." It was the first time he had admitted that he held them responsible.

They took several turns of the rope around a capstan, the engineer turned on the steam, and slowly the rope tightened. With her propeller

driving at full speed, and a maximum of power on the capstan, the *Molly-O* began creaking and groaning. The fireman fed the boiler oil along with the fuel to keep up steam. Suddenly the boat drove ahead.

"We're clear!" Pat yelled. The deckhand coiled the rope as rapidly as it came aboard, jumped to the bank, removed the loop from the boulder and returned, grinning.

Pat threw himself down on the bunk. "Pete, take her," he said wearily. "We'll keep at it until we get to Sam White's. Got drums of fuel for his tractor. If I'm asleep when we get there, wake me up." Then he relaxed, breathing heavily.

Ann watched him anxiously, wishing that she knew more about nursing.

Pete kept the *Molly-O* off rocks and bars until darkness. "I think we tie up for night," he said at last. "Can't see good. Still . . . water, she go down tonight." He looked at Pat, as if half tempted to wake him up, but Ann shook her head. They moved on cautiously, and a half hour later, rounding a curve, they saw a light in a cabin window, and showers of sparks coming from the chimney. Pete blew the whistle, and Pat sat up and yawned. Blinking at the light, he moved like one in a trance to the wheel.

"Throw a line to White, Pete," he said in a tired voice.

"The man is killing himself," Ann thought. "It'd be a shame if he failed to win through now."

White took the line. "The Ruggers

went through several days ago, Pat," he said as he tied up to a tree. "They claimed you was in the hospital and wouldn't come up this year. Wanted to sell me some cat fuel. I told 'em I'd wait for you and they just laughed. Then I laughed."

"What were you laughing at?"

"At what they was asking for fuel, grub and ammunition," White explained. "Pat, you don't figger to make it to Hungry Creek?"

"Yes," Pat answered.

"You can't make it. Better haul up my slough and figger you've done your best. Nobody will blame you if you don't get through. Suppose you do try it? You fail, they don't get their grub any way, and you lose grub and steamer."

It was a sound argument, but Pat shook his head. "I think I'll turn in. I'll see you in the morning, White."

"Ain't feeling well, eh?" White remarked in a low tone to Pete. "My guess is the Ruggers tried to put him out of business. They was a mighty happy pair when they went through here. They claimed there wasn't a chance of Pat gettin' through. And, blast it, they was right. It'd take a miracle—like a warm rain—and miracles don't happen this season of the year."

White was up early the next morning to help roll the drums of fuel up the bank to his log storage shed. He had evidently been thinking about the situation. "Pat, you can't get through Horse Tail Rapids. Your hull won't clear the rocks," he argued.

"I've figured that out," Pat said.

"I'll go along with you," said White. "I want to see it with my own eyes."

III

The *Molly-O* drew less water now that the drums of fuel were ashore, but one glimpse of the rock-studded canyon convinced Ann that Pat's boat could never get through. The waves created by the rapids would lift the hull up and drop it. If it hit a rock, the bottom would be smashed.

Pat tied up and unloaded several cases of dynamite, then he pushed on to the nearest rocks and tied up again. With Pete he returned to the dynamite. Pete dug a hole at the toe of a slide and while he was doing this, Pat was cutting a long fuse and fitting it to a cap.

"Touch her off, Pete, when you're ready," he called.

"I get the idea," White said as they boarded the *Molly-O*. "The slide dams the stream, raises the water level, and you get over the rocks before the dam lets go."

Even as he spoke they saw Pete running along the bank. A shudder ran through the steamer, and the toe was blasted into the stream. Then hundreds of tons of earth blocked the river from bank to bank.

About three hours later the Ruggers' steamer came down the canyon. Empty, with the current behind her, and the water now deeper, she cleared the rocks with a few inches to spare. She tied up opposite the *Molly-O*. Lem Ruggers, a thin man, with sharp features, said to his brother: "You ain't goin' to stand

for this, Jud, are you? Dammin' a navigable stream is agin' the law. If Carney gets away with this, he's goin' to land his supplies."

"Jud does the fighting," Pat explained to Ann. "Lem plans the dirty work, and goads Jud into action. He's mighty careful not to take part in any fighting that develops. He's a coward from head to heels."

Jud wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "You can't do this, Carney," he bellowed.

"It's done," retorted Pat, "and there isn't anything you can do about it."

"The hell there ain't!" Jud roared. "I can take it out of your hide." Fighting words spilled out of the corner of his mouth. "Or I can blow your dam. If I could get my hands on you, I'd show you up for what you are . . . a dirty, low-lived double-crosser!"

"I'll meet you on the river bank," Pat offered. "And right now!"

"Don't be a fool, Pat," Ann said in a low voice. "He's softened you up with a slugging and he knows it. Now he wants to make himself look big by giving you a public beating."

"I've stood all I'm going to from that—"

"It'll take more courage to look him in the eye and say: 'Mister, I'll take care of you when I get around to it,' than to walk into his trap," Ann argued.

"The girl has a head on her shoulders, Pat," White said. "No sense in being a fool. Too much at stake."

"I'll take you on next time I see you, Jud," Pat yelled.

Then Lem's thin lips began moving again, and Pat knew the man's active brain had figured out something else.

"Cast off!" Pat ordered suddenly. "They're loading powder into a skiff." He knew that it could mean but one thing. They were going to blow the dam.

He realized that when the dam let go, the water upstream would start moving, creating a current that no river steamer could buck. Lem had realized this also because his men were putting extra mooring lines to the bank.

The safety valve was lashed down again, and the fireman was using dry wood and oil to keep up a head of steam at a dangerous pressure.

"What's the pounding sound?" Ann asked when they were halfway through the rapids.

"Rocks," Pat answered. "The high water has quieted the rapids some, but I'd like more water under the keel."

Suddenly he headed for the bank, yelling: "Everybody off! Take a line with you." They worked furiously as they tied up the *Molly-O*. They tried to equalize the strain on each line so that the ropes wouldn't part one by one. Downstream there was a sort of grunt as the Ruggers touched off their explosive charge.

Pat and the others stood on the *Molly-O's* wheelhouse and could see a break in the dam. As the water pressure got in its work, the break widened. Now an almost solid wall of water was moving downstream.

The *Molly-O*, feeling the pressure,

began whipping back and forth as the current tried to suck her into the vortex. The lines strained until Pat thought they would snap. He was watching them when White bellowed: "There she goes!"

At first Pat thought White was talking about the *Molly-O*. He turned savagely to protest, then he saw the Ruggers' boat had broken her lines. She was going downstream broadside, and Lem, in the wheelhouse, was striving desperately to straighten her out. A rudder is useless unless a steamer has steerage way. If Lem used power, the boat would have driven into the bank before he could head her downstream.

A rock diverted her course, then on the crest of a wave she smashed against the canyon wall. They could see her drag along the wall, while those below, fearing to be trapped, climbed to the wheelhouse deck.

A break in the wall offered the only escape route. Lem led the way, plunging to his armpits in the icy stream and staggering to the bank. The others followed. Their steamer dragged on, slowly breaking up as submerged rocks shattered the broken hull.

"That certainly happened suddenly!" Ann said. "Well, it should settle the Ruggers for good."

"On the contrary, they'll be tougher than ever," asserted Pat. "They'll have the only grub on Hungry Creek and I'll have the only light steamer on this part of the river. There can't be a draw to this fight."

As soon as Pat felt that the *Molly-O* had enough power to buck the current he sent a line up river and

hauled clear of the rapids. All that night and the following day, they lined up. One hour it seemed as if they were beaten, the next the keel would drag sullenly over sand and gravel to deeper water.

A mile beyond Mallard Slough, slush began running. The hull glazed wherever the slush stuck to it.

"I'm licked," Pat said quietly. "The temperature is dropping too fast. This is the freeze-up!" He turned around and dropped back to Mallard Slough. As the *Molly-O*'s bows broke the ice, slabs went skimming over the surface. It was a dreary spot. Timber shunned the immediate area. On every side lay miles of swamp with frozen ponds, dead, brown tules and swamp grass. But at least when the breakup finally came, the millions of tons of moving ice couldn't get at the steamer.

"What next?" White inquired.

"Pat's going to sleep fifteen hours a day," declared Ann. "He's in worse shape than when we left. I'll bet you've lost twenty-five or thirty pounds, Pat."

"Good thing," Pat growled. "I haven't strength enough to pack it around. I can take a licking if I have to, but damned if I like to take it from the Ruggers. And I haven't --yet! There must be some way out of this."

"You go to bed, young man," Ann ordered. "A man can't think when his brain is filled with the cobwebs of exhaustion."

White remained on the *Molly-O* until he was sure Pat Carney was in

no danger of a relapse. He had wanted to be on hand to get Pat to Doc Lawson if it were necessary. When he was ready to leave, Pat shook hands with him and asked: "How strong will you go in backing me in the next round with the Ruggers?"

"To the limit," White answered readily.

"I may call on you," Pat told him.

When White was gone, Pat sat down with Ann in the galley. Over a cup of coffee he asked: "Do you mind staying here for about ten days. I'm going on a little jaunt. I'll travel light and take things easy."

"I'm anxious to find my brother," Ann said, "but I'm beginning to learn that in this country you can't hurry things." She smiled. "Of course I'll stay. I'm frozen in as tightly as the *Molly-O*. I'd have a fine chance of making my way back alone."

Pat left the next morning, mushing over new ice and watching the river's surface narrowly for air holes or thin ice caused by water from warm springs. Day after day he kept to the river, pondering on ways of beating the Ruggers, and eying with regret the points where the *Molly-O* could have struggled nearer but for the flow of slush.

The short day was almost ended when he sighted the new camp. A lighted candle gave a yellowish tint to a small window. Pat made his way to the door and yelled: "Anybody home?"

The door almost flew off the hinges. "Pat Carney—you damned old harp! Where's the *Molly-O*?"

"Mallard Slough, Jeff," Pat answered. "How's the grub holding out? Who's running the Ruggers' trading post. How do the fellows feel about the whole deal?"

"You've had it on your mind a lot, Pat," Jeff Brandon said shrewdly. He was a big, tired-looking miner. "I've never seen you wound up like this before. You're as nervous as an old maid looking under the bed. First, grub is getting low. We'll be forced to buy some from Ruggers' post. But we're going on short rations. Second, a youngster named Bill Bond is running the business. Third, the miners feel that you've offered them the deal of their lives. If it blows up, it's not your fault and they won't hold it against you. The trouble is, the Ruggers operate inside the law. If a victim gets tough, the law is on their side."

"Yeah, and the law of averages, too," Pat declared. "They blew up a dam I'd made to give the *Molly-O* a little more water and lost their own boat."

Jeff whistled. "Pat, they'll really turn loose on you now. They've got to have the *Molly-O*. How much money have you behind you? What about bills due on the supplies you were bringing in?"

"I haven't anything behind me," Pat answered. "I gave notes for all the supplies. The holders may have to cash in on them because they can't carry me until next summer. That's when the Ruggers will start investing in Pat Carney notes."

"Queer, isn't it," Jeff commented, "that's there are always Ruggers on

the frontier to gum up the machinery. We'd really develop the land if it wasn't for the extra load." He puffed away on a cob pipe. "Still, if you have it soft, you can't lick Nature in the long run. As for you, if you don't pull something out of your hat and beat the game, I'll be surprised."

"Do you suppose a cat train could get through Snow Pass in the dead of winter?" Pat asked him. "Suppose I raised money enough to buy a caterpillar tractor and sleds? Once over Snow Pass I could make it to Mallard Slough, pick up supplies, and freight over lakes and swamps to Hungry Creek."

"Why don't you come up river instead of across country?"

"Cats are heavy equipment, and the ice is pretty thin and the water deep where warm springs feed into the river," Pat replied. "You don't think much of the Snow Pass idea?"

Jeff shook his head dubiously. "A man who hasn't used up all his luck might make it."

"I think I'll have a look at Bill Bond," Pat said. He trudged through the raw wind to the trading post. It was deserted, which indicated the low opinion the miners held of the Rugger brothers, for a trading post is usually a gathering place. He looked through the window and saw a husky young man sitting on a bench, back against the log wall, feet stretched toward the old drum stove. Pat opened the door and called: "Hank Martin! What're you doing up here?"

The result was startling. The young man jumped, looked wildly

about, then regained his composure. "I'm Bill Bond," he said. "I used to . . . to . . . bum around with Hank Martin. Who are you?"

"My name's Carney," Pat replied.

Bond's expression proved that he recognized the name of his employers' chief rival.

"Carney, eh? You figgered that I was Hank Martin, and that I'd double-cross the Ruggers. Let me tell you something. That talk about Hank Martin double-crossing people is a dirty lie."

"The next time I write Hank's sister, Ann," Pat said, "I'll tell her that."

"You know her?" Bill Bond's gaze was interested and critical.

"Yeah," Pat said shortly. "Your employers knocked me in the head. Ann Martin took over the nursing. Did a good job. Well, I'm sorry I made a mistake. S'long . . . Bond." He grinned as he returned to Jeff's cabin. He wasn't particularly surprised to find Ann's brother working for the Ruggers. It had long been their policy to pick up young fellows hiding out, or trying to make a place for themselves in the world, and training them to suit their various purposes. Two of them were now serving prison terms.

The next day Pat made the rounds and called at most of the cabins. When he had finished he had an idea of the grub situation. Flour, sugar, salt, bacon, coffee and similar staples, would be exhausted within two months. Jeff met him on the trail when he was returning.

"You must have thrown a hell of a scare into Bill Bond," Jeff said. "He's skipped out. He left money,

account books and keys with the deputy marshal."

"Huh!" Pat said. "The deputy marshal is a Ruggers' man, so the trading post is safe enough. Wonder if Bond thought of that?" He walked on in silence.

"I think I'll light out for Johns Landing in the morning," he said finally. "When you see me again, I hope it'll be bringing a cat train into Hungry Creek."

IV

Ann Martin's face was clouded with anxiety as Pat Carney came over the ice and stepped aboard the *Molly-O*. There had been a three-day blizzard, with the temperature far below zero. She looked relieved when she realized that Pat seemed to have completely recovered from the slugging.

"You've put on weight, Pat," she said. Then: "Did you find any trace of my brother. I thought since there are so many chechahcos at Hungry Creek . . ."

"The only young chechahco fitting your description was a man named Bill Bond," Pat answered. "Do you feel up to mushing to Johns Landing? The engineer and cook will stay here until the breakup. The others are going out."

"It'll be a new thrill," Ann answered.

She was the first one up the following morning, and for every morning thereafter. No unnecessary stops were made, except to look at pieces of wreckage left by the Rigger brother's demolished steamer.

Doc Lawson met Pat with bad news. "When the freeze-up came," he said, "we knew that the *Molly-O* would never get back this year. Steve Johns was hard pressed for money and he had to sell your notes. You know who bought them, of course. Blast the Ruggers! If they can't get a man one way, they'll get him another."

"I'll tell Steve I don't hold it against him," Pat said. "I wonder if the Bracken people over at Mountain View will sell me their cat? And you might let it be known that I can use five thousand dollars. I'm wondering if there're enough gamblers in this man's camp to take a chance on me?"

Pat looked in on Steve Johns, assured him that there were no hard feelings, then crossed the street to the Ruggers.

"I'll take you on now, Jud," he offered. "We postponed a fight up river, you'll remember. Besides I owe you something for the slugging."

"Not here, Jud," Lem Rigger warned his brother. "Leave it to a cuss like Carney to pick a battle ground among his own friends."

"See you later," Pat said. "If not, you'll be seeing me when the notes are due. By the way, don't think for a minute that you'll get the *Molly-O* for non-payment. I'll lay the money on the line when due." He went to his cabin, built a fire and began getting the dampness out.

Doc Lawson came in at ten o'clock and astonished Pat with a brief: "Here's the money. Cash. All you have to do is sign these notes. You've

got friends in this camp, my boy."

Pat had hoped to raise the money, but not as quickly as this. He read the name on each note until he came to one that was blank. "Hey, this is for twenty-five hundred bucks. That could be filled with dynamite. I want to know who's backing me to that extent."

"It isn't the Ruggers," Lawson assured him. "I'll admit though it could be dynamite. You'll have to gamble on it."

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I've no choice," he said and signed the note.

When Pat arrived at Mountain View, it was blowing a gale, and his appearance surprised Carl Bracken.

"I'd like to beat about the bush, Bracken, and visit a little," Pat said, "but I haven't the time. What do you want for your cat, sleds and all the fuel the outfit will haul?"

"It isn't for sale, Carney," Bracken said. "Shucks, I use that all the time."

"Not in winter you don't. Your mines are shut down then," Pat argued. "It's for a good cause." He explained the situation. "I want to lick the Ruggers."

"That's different," Bracken said. He did a little thinking aloud. "You'll probably lose the outfit in Snow Pass. If you don't, then you'll probably break through some lake or slough. If that doesn't happen, then the *Molly-O* will probably be wrecked during the breakup. If not, then you can probably sell the outfit back to me. I'll . . . do it. You're trying to develop the country and so

am I. But the Ruggers are milking it, putting the milk away in a crock, then skimming the cream."

Now that he was won over, Bracken was willing to go all the way. "I'll loan you a couple of helpers," he offered. "They're doing nothing but hugging the stove these days, and will be glad to get some action. That'll make three of you. You really should have four men. That pass is treacherous. What's your plan?"

"Load the cat to the limit with fuel and enough grub to see us through. The main idea is to get to Mallard Lake," Pat answered.

The helpers, Jim Watson and Whitey Lake, overhauled the cat the next day. Pat checked on the sleds and equipment. The sleds were built for heavy loads and abuse. They were fitted with heavy iron rings, securely bolted. Light chains lashed loads into place.

The day of the start a husky young fellow came to Pat. "Remember me?" he asked. "I'm Bill Bond. I quit the Ruggers for a good reason. I'd like to work for you."

Pat looked at him so intently and for so long a time that the man turned red and squirmed. Then he lashed out hotly: "You think I'm a Ruggers' spy. Well, you can go to blazes." He turned away, struggled a moment with his temper, regained control, and growled: "Sorry. But . . ."

"You're hired," Pat cut in, "if you can drive a cat."

"I can drive a cat," Bill assured him.

When the cat train pulled out Bill Bond was riding the load with the

others. Pat did the driving. He wanted to get the feel of heavy loads before they were in the bad country, and he planned to let the others take over from time to time.

A cat train crawls. It turns aside from objects that it can't flatten. Several days passed before the lower hills grew appreciably nearer and Snow Pass, high among the glaciers, remained forbidding and remote.

The cat train followed the meanderings of a creek for miles. It offered a smooth surface, and the pools were not deep enough to give trouble if the ice gave way. Mostly the creek was frozen down to the gravel.

Trouble started when they left the creek to crawl up a ridge to the pass. It broke Pat's heart to relay the load, but the tractor could pull but one sled at a time. Again and again it bogged down, and the treads vanished in drifts, which sometimes piled up around the cab.

One of the men was always ahead, taking soundings with a pole. When the snow was too deep, they had to detour. It was a grim, raw business, with the wind constantly screaming in their ears.

"What do you think about it, Bond?" Pat asked when they were almost in the pass, and the last sled had been relayed. Wind was funneling through from the Hungry Creek region. The pass was choked with flying snow.

"You can't see where you're going," Bond answered. "Hell, you might go over a cliff. But you can't stay here, either, or you'll be drifted

over. If that happened, we'd never break the sleds clear."

"You fellows walk behind," Pat said. "Put your sleeping bags on the last sled, along with Yukon stove and grub. If the load starts going over a cliff, yank off your stuff quick and—"

"Do what we can for you," Bond said, "which won't be much if the cat train rolls far."

While the men were shifting their outfits to the last sled, snow piled up to the cab. The treads began moving, and Pat could feel the cat sinking. The cat fought its way through the drift and the sleds lumbered behind it. Only one course remained—keep the cat moving. Cab door opened, Pat leaned out, blinking at the snow which was like fine sand. A glimpse, then he pulled his head back and moved ahead a few yards.

There was a sickening moment when the cab lurched violently, tilted at a forty-five degree angle, then slowly straightened up. Pat opened the throttle, hoping to gain momentum enough to keep the sleds clear of the hole. He heard a chain snap and looked back. A drum from the top layer had just broken loose. It hit the snow, rolled, then dropped suddenly as the snow beneath gave way.

He listened. The sound of the impact was long in coming. "It must be hundreds of feet, straight down," he muttered. "If I keep close to the left wall, I should have a fair chance of getting through."

He stopped at last. The sheer

strain was breaking him. "Take it, Bond," he said when the men came up. "I'm jittery."

"You're jittery!" Bond exclaimed. "How about us? Most of the trail you made just dropped out of sight after the last sled bumped over it. I guess I'm yellow, but I'm shaking all over."

Inwardly Pat was disappointed in the man, and yet he couldn't blame him. Pat got hold of his own nerves and started ahead, hugging the left wall so closely that at times the tread climbed it and he had to ease off.

He stopped on a steep slope and shouted: "It'll take a lot of snow to keep us from moving tomorrow. Let's turn in."

The storm slackened next day. The wind was gusty, and clouds tumbled through the pass, spilling snow, but they caught glimpses of the lower country. The lakes were white, although the tundra had a touch of silver where the snow had blown across it.

Bill Bond regarded the descent dubiously. There were pitches that looked bad. Watson and Lake agreed to do anything asked of them, but it was obvious neither wanted the responsibility of driving. And when Pat began the descent, he noticed that they were content to walk behind.

He made the first three pitches without trouble, but the fourth was down glare ice. The weight of the load pushed the tractor down until the treads no longer dug in. The engine began racing at times, then the rear sled whipped around. For a mo-

ment it looked as if the entire cat train would turn over.

"Jump, Pat!" Watson warned. "It's all going to hell!"

It was good advice, but Pat gambled, and a moment later the tractor was going down backwards. The treads caught and held on a frozen slope that was largely wind-swept gravel. Pat went a mile backward, the rear sled pioneering a route over brush and small trees.

"Well, we've made it to the flat country," Pat said when he had straightened things around. "But a lot of our drums are empty. We've got to gamble on the lakes. We'll have to go straight across and not around them, or we'll be out of fuel."

In the next few days they crawled to within twenty miles of Mallard Slough, then a lake stopped them.

"That ice looks thin," Pat said.

"Suppose we scatter and pick a likely route across?"

For a time he saw Bill Bond, then he heard Watson yelling: "It's too thin up here." While he was waving Watson in another direction, the roar of the cat came over the ice. Bill Bond was driving.

The load was moving at top speed in a direct line. "Bond, you fool!" Pat yelled. "Stop or you'll go through."

"He can't hear you," Watson shouted. "Look at that ice."

They could see it bend under the weight. The ice was rubbery enough to follow in a sort of wave. Pat broke into a trot, but Bond crossed the probable point of intersection two hundred yards before Pat got

there. Bond tossed out a coil of rope. His intent was plain: "If the cat goes through, throw me a line."

Pat hardly breathed all the way across, though he was trotting every yard of the way. Every second, he expected to see the ice heave upward, and the cat vanish. Cracks shot in every direction, with a whining sound, and twice water squirted through some distance away due to some trick of the following wave, but at last the cat climbed up the bank and onto solid tundra, and Mallard Slough lay dead ahead.

"You damned fool!" Pat said. "You had me scared green. I want to win this fight, but I don't want to lose any lives doing it."

"I was afraid to take the load through the pass," Bond explained, "and I got to thinking that I was yellow, so I made up my mind to find out. It's the first time in my life I ever made good on anything." His face was bitter. "I always got bum grades in school. The teachers only passed me to get rid of me. The other kids picked on me, and I'd fight back and get licked." He shrugged his shoulders and walked off.

"You're on the right track now," Pat declared. "Tomorrow we drive through to White's instead of Mallard Slough. We need fuel."

V

Sam White had never looked better to Pat as he ran out to meet the cat train.

"I didn't believe it could be done,

Pat!" he exclaimed. "But here you are."

"And with empty tanks," Pat said.

Silence followed. White said finally: "This is bigger than any one man. It means some pretty decent fellows run the country, or the Ruggers do. You've gambled more than any of us. I'll throw in my next season's fuel. The values will still be in the ground a year from now. But I want to see the expressions on the Ruggers' faces when you arrive with your cat train."

"Come along," Pat invited. "We refuel here, proceed to Mallard Slough, load with supplies, and go on to Hungry Creek. Somewhere along the line, the Ruggers should show up."

"They're in the country again," White said. "Their man, Bill Bond, quit 'em."

Pat called Bill over and introduced him and White looked puzzled.

The days following were quiet—too quiet. Something was brewing, Pat knew. Nothing happened at Mallard Slough, nor in the rough stretch of country beyond. Jeff met them thirty miles from Hungry Creek.

"The Ruggers know that you're on the way," he reported. "They wouldn't believe it at first. Then suddenly they dropped their prices, hoping the miners would stock up and leave you holding the sack. That didn't work. Then just as suddenly they upped their prices again, proof that they were sure that you'd never make it. I can't figure it out myself. But they're pulling some trick, you can be mighty sure."

Pat proceeded with caution. Long Lake's fifteen miles looked inviting until he saw several men grouped on the shore. He left the ice and followed the shore. Jud Ruggers, backed by his brother and several strange men of the Ruggers' breed, stepped in front of the cat.

"Private property," Jud said. "You can't go across here. Plenty of lake for you to use! We've just staked this ground."

Pat walked onto the ice. It looked solid. He quartered the immediate area, brushing away the drifting snow with his moccasins and getting down to the actual ice. He returned to the shore, gathered up sticks and marked out a course over the ice.

"Okay, boys," he said. "Let's go!"

He started toward the lake at full speed, then turned suddenly and moved over the Ruggers' ground. As Jud raced to stop him, Pat jumped down and met the man almost half way.

"Kill him, Jud!" Lem yelled. "Kill him!" Pat staggered under a blow and Lem sneered. "Hah! That hurt! And so did that one! Hit him again, Jud. Make him squeal! Hah! That made you sick, didn't it, Carney? You turned green. Your legs wobbled. You're gettin' him, Jud!"

Pat's eyes narrowed. Lem had always done the urging, but never the fighting. Pat shifted, and swung. The blow caught Lem squarely in the face. His nose seemed to explode, and teeth filled the air. As Lem went down, Pat slugged it out with Jud. Both of them were fighting mad and

had cast science to the wind. The opening Pat had waited for came at last. He caught Jud flush on the jaw, and the man's head snapped back and rebounded from his spine. He dropped, completely relaxed.

White, Jeff, Lake, Watson and Bill Bond were fighting it out with Ruggers' men. Bill was getting licked, but suddenly he found an opening and his man went down. Either the blow had plenty of wallop, or the man's heart wasn't in the fight. Bill waited, but the man didn't try to get up. Bill looked amazed, then pleased.

"Come on," Pat yelled. "Hungry Creek is ahead!"

A mile up the lake he turned onto the ice.

"The Ruggers overplayed things when they tried to turn me onto the ice," Pat explained when White questioned him. "But for them, I'd have gone any way. Their presence put me on guard. They'd blown up the ice out there, knowing a new, but much thinner crust would form, and the drifting snow would cover it up. I made a bluff at going out, then cut across their ground because I wanted the cat well ahead of them before the fight started. I didn't want them tossing a stick of powder into the cat."

As the cat train rumbled into Hungry Creek, Doc Lawson led the cheering. And behind him stood Ann. Bill Bond started to leave, but Pat grabbed him.

"You might as well meet her, Hank," he said. "You can't dodge

her forever, and why should you? I've known you were Hank Martin right along, but it seemed best to let you play your hand out in your own way. You've played it well."

"I wanted to see if I was worth a damn," Bill explained, "and I wanted to work it out alone. I knew Ann would be checking on me, and when I went to work for the Ruggers I gave my word I'd stick until she showed up. They promised to let me know if she did, so I'd have a chance to clear out. They knew she had nursed you at Johns Landing, but didn't tip me off. It was the double-cross, so I shut up their trading post. It wasn't just chance that I showed up at Mountain View. I heard Ann and you were hitting it off, and I wanted to find out what kind of a guy you were."

"And?" Pat questioned.

"And I guess the three of us will get along just fine. We like the country, and it has a future."

Pat shoved him off the tractor and watched as Bill yelled: "Hello, Ann!" The girl's face lit up as she came hurrying over to kiss her brother. Pat made no attempt to join them. He'd see Ann later when they could be alone, if he had his way. Just now he was answering questions, and accepting congratulations.

"Just as soon as I get a store building," he yelled, "I'll start selling."

"You won't need a building," a miner answered. "We'll take everything you've got right now."

"Okay," Pat agreed, then to Lawson, "but why're you up here, Doc?"

"I expected some shooting and I came in my professional capacity," explained Doc. "Besides, I wanted to see the finish. It looks good, Pat. You can take the gold you get from the miners and buy the Ruggers' post for a song. That'll just about make up for the losses they've caused you. With them out of the way, you can borrow all the money you need. The bank won't be afraid to loan now that everything is quiet. You'll be able to pay off the notes that the Ruggers' bought from Johns."

"I guess you're right," said Pat, "but that still leaves the twenty-five hundred-dollar note. How long will I have that party in my hair?"

"The rest of your life, I guess," Doc answered with a chuckle. "She sort o' made a permanent investment in the Pat Carney deals. Her name is Ann Martin."

"And did you ever see a prettier investor?" asked Pat, watching Ann as she stood talking to her brother.

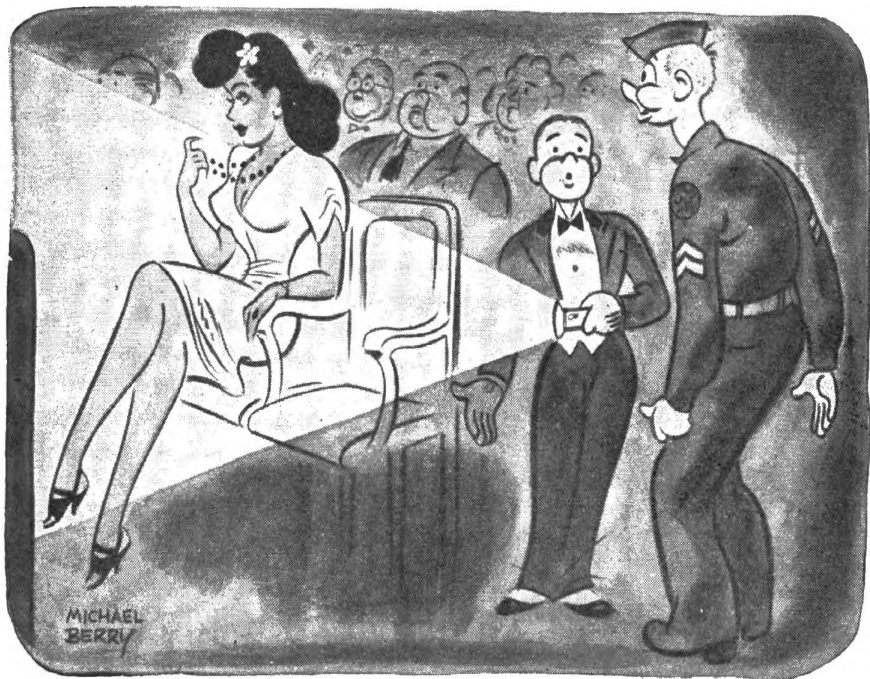
"No . . . nor a happier one," Doc Lawson assured him.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 57.

1. fodder 2. rifle 3. martingale 4. molasses 5. loco 6. knobhead 7. faro 8. granger
9. tule 10. cavy 11. cholla 12. border 13. gather 14. bulldog 15. jamboree

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