

STREET & SMITH'S

JULY 17, 1943

WILD WEST

JULY 17, '43
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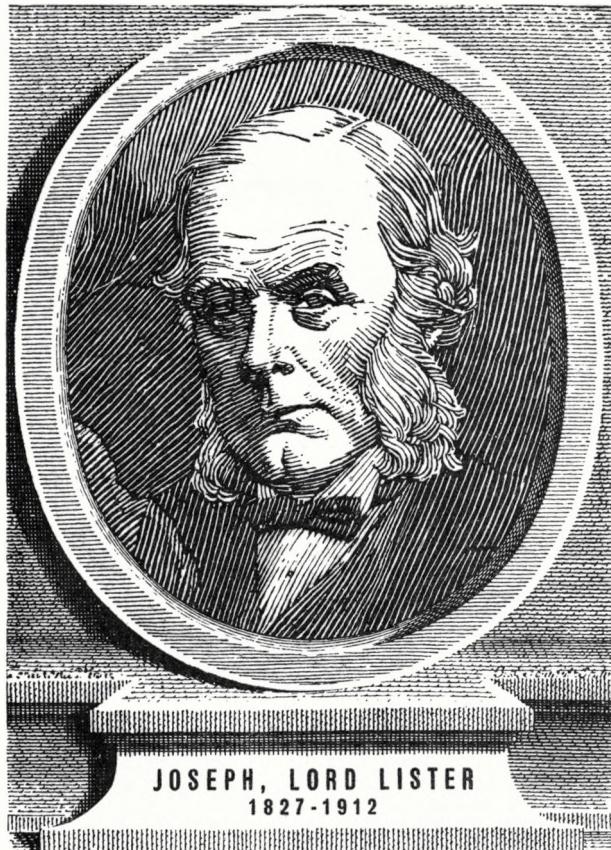
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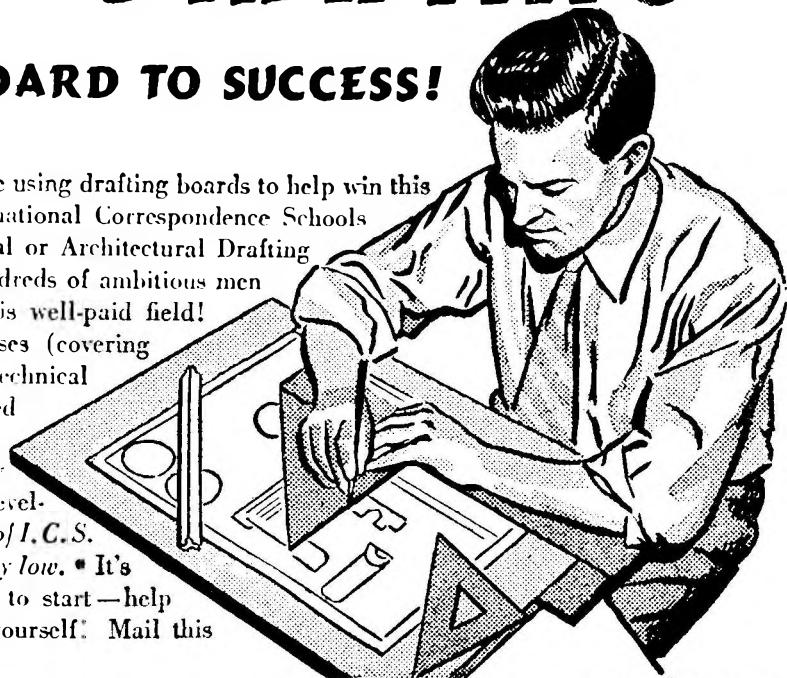


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A true story of the blitz in England as told to a War Correspondent by Arthur Letts and Frederick Rourke, gas repair men for the Thames Estuary District, Greater London.

1. "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job . . .



2. "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay.



OCD approved flashlight regulations stipulate careful shielding of the light from a flashlight during a black-out, as Arthur Letts did. Likewise wartime economy demands strict conservation of both flashlights and batteries. Use your flashlight sparingly—save batteries! Don't buy a new flashlight unless the old one is beyond repair! Don't hoard flashlight batteries! Don't put in a more powerful bulb than your flashlight calls for—it simply wastes power!

3. "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

NOTE: Bomb Squad later dealt with time bomb. The George Medal for "extreme courage and devotion to duty" was awarded to Rourke and Letts.

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STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

FOUNDED 1902

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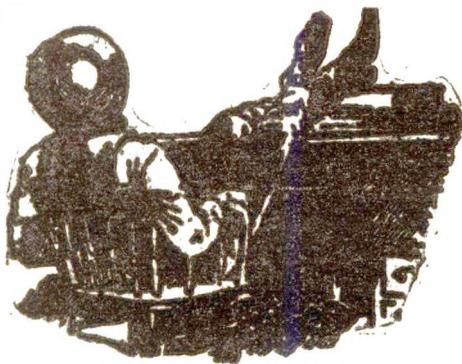
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

ANY of you folks out there ever suffer from illusions or daydreams or just plain hallucinations? Well, if you ever have, you'll get the general idea of what we're going to talk about. But first let's see what a cowgal from Hollywood has to say:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I always read your corner and note especially when some reader says he's been reading Wild West for a year or four years or so, because I think I can lay claim to being one of your oldest and most faithful readers.

One story I liked especially well was the one about the young fellow who always played the piano before he shot anyone. Remember him? I never could figure out how he was always lucky enough to find a piano, but I liked the story just the same.

Now, I have one complaint to make. On page 162 of the issue dated May 8, 1943, you say: "The Whistlin' Kid, about whom you inquire, appears in a novelette in this very issue." Well, I think I read every story backward and still couldn't locate him.

What goes?

A COWGAL FROM HOLLYWOOD.
Los Angeles, California.

Well, Miss Cowgal, this is how it all happened. On the day that issue was scheduled to go to press, we was settin' at our desk listenin' to the jawin' that was goin' on in the office between Sonny Tabor, Rawhide Runyan and the Circle J pards about

what they was gonna do with all the money they'd saved in War Bonds once this war was over. Just then in come the Whistlin' Kid with a big envelope under his arm an' he pitches right into the argerment.

Pretty soon we happen to notice it's gettin' late so, without thinkin', we yell at all those guys to stop the windies and get upstairs to the press-room where they belong or else there wouldn't be no magazine. When they've gone, we pulled our feet offn the desk and started to write that little piece yo're talkin' about.

It wasn't until later, after the presses had begun to roll, that we noticed the Whistlin' Kid back in the office. We asked him what he's doin' there instead of in the magazine, and he gives us a funny look an' says:

"Shucks, I wasn't supposed to be in no magazine this time. The boss just sent me downtown tuh buy some more War Bonds an' so I thought I'd drop in an' see how all the boys was. You won't be seein' me for another couple issues or so."

What's a poor editor gonna do in a case like that?

THE RANGE BOSS.

Speakin' of the Whistlin' Kid, folks, you'll be seein' him in the next action-packed issue in "Spook Ranch Renegades," one of Emery Jackson's best.

There'll be another kid ridin', too—the Oklahoma Kid, who gets all mixed up in "The Doodle Bug Jinx," a whip-doozler of a yarn by Lee Bond.

In addition you'll find "Red Hell Waits for a Lawman," by Charles Heckleman; "Fresh Meat for Boothill," by Shoshone Gwinn, and "Dead Man's Hand," by Brad Buckner.

Git there ahead of the crowd, friends.

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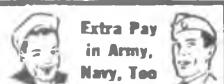
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"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. I am now Radio Service Manager for M—Furniture Co. for their 4 stores." JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.



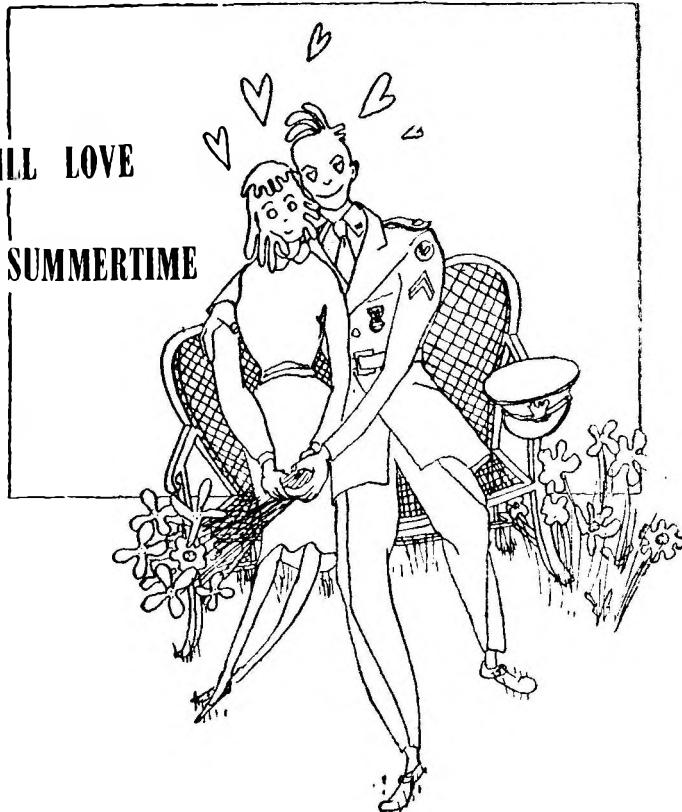
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THE SILVER SKULL

by PHILIP F. DEERE

The Border Eagle didn't believe in superstition—but with Death stalking his footsteps, could he laugh off the curse of that evilly grinning death's-head?

CHAPTER I.

CANYON OF NO RETURN.

A SCREAM of terror rang from the throat of the box canyon where Trigger Trenton was chopping down dwarf piñons to use in constructing a mustang trap. The yell came from Lazy Hawk, the veteran Apache hunter who was scouting out wild fuzz-tail stock for Trenton's expedition into the Sunblaze Mountains.

As the echoes of Lazy Hawk's shout re-echoed between the granite cliffs, the TNT boss dropped his ax and raced over to where his bay saddler, Fleetfoot, was grazing in a patch of toboso grass.

"That redskin must have tangled with a mountain lion," was Trenton's first thought, as he yanked his .30-30 Winchester from its saddle scabbard.

Lazy Hawk came in sight around the sharp bend of the gulch just as Trenton was levering a shell into the carbine breech. The Indian, clad in fringed buckskins and moccasins, and with a single eagle feather jut-



A gun blasted deafeningly from the cliff as the Border Eagle hurtled through space toward the raging waters below.

ting from his grayish scalplock, was crouched low over his pony's withers, lashing the horse with a mesquite switch.

From the stark horror in the Apache's flinty eyes, it seemed that he was fleeing from something scarcely less terrible than the devil himself. Yet it was unlikely that the old warrior, once a scout for Geronimo's band, could have been spooked by a stray varmint. Lazy Hawk's coppery back was criss-crossed with scars he had received in a hand-to-hand assault with a Rocky Mountain grizzly, when the Indian's scalping knife had outmatched the bear's claws and fangs in the encounter.

A grin was on Trenton's lips as he sprang out to seize Lazy Hawk's bit ring and skid the pony to a halt. With his other hand the rancher kept his Winchester in readiness for whatever brand of horror was chasing the red man.

"Señor! Get um on pony and ride!" screeched the veteran 'Pache, whipsawing frantically at his rawhide reins. "This canyon—it is full of ghosts! I have seen the ghost of old Silver Skull, the dead chief of my forefathers. This is Evil Spirit Gulch, Señor Border Eagle!"

THE cowpuncher, who had gained his nickname of the Border Eagle during his years as a United States marshal, released his hold on the Indian's bridle and reached up to seize the panic-stricken red man by one arm, hauling him bodily out of stirrups.

A moment later, trembling like a palsy victim, Lazy Hawk was cringing on his knees, groaning maledictions in his native jargon, his beady eyes staring up the canyon.

"Evil Spirit Gulch, eh?" The waddy chuckled, eying the rock-ribbed defile with new interest. "You're bluffin', amigo. If you'd

known this canyon was Evil Spirit Gulch, you'd never 'a' gone up it to cut brush for our fuzz-tail trap. No Injun livin' would venture into Evil Spirit Gulch, and you know it."

Lazy Hawk got to his feet and stood there shivering, nodding agreement to the TNT rancher's words. Evil Spirit Gulch was a legendary adobe of departed Apache spirits, and Trenton knew it was supposed to be located somewhere in this section of the Sunblazes.

Whether or not the gulch actually existed, Arizona red men avoided this neck of the badlands, and had for generations. It was reputed to be a "canyon of no return," in so far as living men were concerned. None but the dead inhabited its forbidden recesses—dead Indians who, because of their earthly sins, had been expelled from the happy hunting ground.

"This is Evil Spirit Gulch, señor," babbled the Indian. "I have seen the ghost of Chief Silver Skull there. He was an evil Indian. When the white soldiers killed him, Chief Silver Skull had scalps enough to cover the floor of his hogan. This is where Chief Silver Skull's ghost would be banished. I have heard my tribe's medicine man say so. Geronimo himself would not enter this canyon, Señor Eagle!"

Trenton replaced his Winchester in Fleetfoot's scabbard and loosened his bone-stocked Colts in their holsters. The cowman glanced westward, where half a dozen of his punchers would soon arrive, driving before them a herd of wild mustangs into a well-masked corral in Evil Spirit Gulch.

Trenton was depending on their haul to replenish his TNT Ranch cavvy, and unless he and Lazy Hawk got the trap fenced off before the arrival of the hunters, there was a good chance that the assembled fuzz tails would scatter far and wide in

the surrounding waste lands.

"You wait here and chop fence posts, Lazy Hawk," Trenton ordered his scout. "I'll mosey up the draw and lay Chief Silver Skull's ghost by the heels. Will that satisfy you that there's nothing to this 'canyon-of-no-return' business?"

Lazy Hawk reached out and seized the cowboy's arm imploringly.

"No, señor. Do not disturb the ghost of Silver Skull. You will never come back alive! All the wild ponies in these mountains are not worth that, Border Eagle."

Trenton shoved his brush ax into the Indian's hands and headed off up the canyon, cursing inwardly at the enforced delay. But he was indebted to the veteran 'Pache for locating the herd of prime fuzz tails his men were hazing toward the trap, and knew that to an Indian a ghost's stamping ground was very real indeed.

Lazy Hawk babbled prayers to his tribal gods as he watched the TNT boss vanish into the chaparral. Trenton was a rugged young puncher in his early thirties, clad in coffee-brown Stetson, calfskin vest, bull-hide chaps and mule-ear cow boots.

His twin .45s had served the Border Eagle well in his career as a lawman, but the aged Indian knew that bullets were no proof against an Indian's ghost.

PUSHING through the jungle of mesquites and tepula growth, Trenton stepped out into an open clearing between the cliffs—the spot he had chosen as a holding corral for his wild stock.

Evil Spirit Gulch was a blind canyon, floored with sand. As Trenton's agate-brown gaze swept the rock-walled pocket in search of the bush or the fantastic-shaped rock which had conjured itself into the shape of an Indian phantom before Lazy Hawk's eyes, he spotted a glint

of sunlight on a metallic object. He was positive it had not been on the canyon floor the day before when he had reconnoitered the place and selected it as the site of his mustang trap.

Striding forward curiously, the Border Eagle stifled an oath of surprise as he found himself looking at Chief Silver Skull's "ghost." And, stooping to examine the object which had caught his gaze, the rancher had to admit that his Apache trail finder had had ample cause for alarm.

It was a human skull, bleached snow white from long exposure to Arizona suns, winds and sand. A battery of glittering teeth were still intact in the bony jaws, and spiders had spun a curtain of cobweb over the staring, hollow eye sockets.

But the skull was extraordinary, at that; for inlaid in the crown was a disk of sand-burnished silver, about two inches in diameter. Whoever had belonged to this skull had suffered a head injury, and a clever surgeon had trepanned the bone and inserted the disk of silver.

"A Mexican dollar," muttered Trenton, noting that the trepan disk had milled edges and bore Mexico's emblem, an eagle sitting on a cactus with a rattlesnake writhing in its beak, together with the date of minting—the latter more than fifty years old. "No wonder Lazy Hawk got the idea this was old Chief Silver Skull—"

A rumble of hoofbeats snapped Trenton back to reality, and he barely had time to cradle the coin-embedded skull under his arm and leap to safety in a cleft of the nearby cliff when the canyon was blocked with wild-eyed mustangs, fuzzy-tailed and burry-maned, which his yipping TNT waddies were hazing into the box canyon.

The rest of the day was too occupied in holding the captured mustangs for Trenton to give any further

thought to the silver skull. It was not until nightfall, when Lazy Hawk turned up missing at camp, that the Border Eagle realized the terror-stricken Indian had lined out for parts unknown. And Trenton never saw the Indian again, which was ample proof of Lazy Hawk's terror—for the Apache trail finder had a month's wages due him.

"You're a loco fool for takin' that skull back to the ranch, boss," spoke up Curly Doone, the ranch foreman, as he saw the Border Eagle stowing the silver skull in his saddlebags the next day. "It's unlucky, that's what it is. Especially ifn it *should* be Chief Silver Skull's noggin. I've heard tell ever since I was knee-high to a maverick that that Injun packed a curse."

"Get along wid yez, spalpeen!" Trenton chided the Irishman. "Danged if you aren't as superstitious as old Lazy Hawk!"

But a grim destiny was linked with the ownership of the silver skull, and Trig Trenton was to regret bitterly his bantering attitude toward the grisly relic.

CHAPTER II.

KIDNAPERS' GUNS.

IT took two weeks to haze the twenty-odd mustangs back to Suicide Valley and see the fuzz tails safely impounded in a holding corral at the TNT spread. During the winter months to come before spring roundup, Trenton's bronc peelers had a rigorous job cut out for them, breaking the Sunblaze wild ones to saddle leather.

The silver skull, complete with its Mexican-dollar inlay, went on the mantel shelf over the fireplace of Trenton's rambling Spanish-style ranchhouse. Gradually the news of its finding spread to nearby eowtowns, and the legend of old Chief Silver Skull once more became a

topic of discussion along the border, after having been consigned to musty legend for half a century.

Chief Silver Skull, as he was to become known throughout the cactus country, had been born Red Wolf, up in the Painted Desert. One of the first Indians to resist the American army's efforts to make the Western frontier safe for plodding wagon trains and white settlement, Red Wolf had led countless forays against covered-wagon caravans and had garnered over a hundred scalps as a result of the massacres he had participated in with tomahawk and war bow.

It was historical fact that a Hopi arrowhead had landed in Red Wolf's skull, and he owed his life to a delicate operation performed by a Mormon doctor at an early-day Apache reservation up Yavapai way.

Using a cylindrical saw, much as a cook would cut out biscuit dough with a tin can, the medico had trepanned a portion of Red Wolf's skull to remove the arrowhead from his brain tissue, and had inserted a disk of silver. Very conceivably, that silver disk could have been a Mexican peso coin.

Before receiving this wound, Red Wolf had lived in peace on the reservation with his squaws for half a decade. But the Hopi arrow seemed to have damaged his brain, converting him into a fiendish maniac. At any rate, Red Wolf—now nicknamed Chief Silver Skull—had hit the war-path with three hundred younger braves, and for twenty years had spread a reign of terror throughout Arizona Territory.

At the height of his lawless career, the Apache had been seized with an appetite for white man's gold as well as scalps. His last outrage on record was the robbery of a gold-laden wagon train east-bound from the California Mother Lode. According to legend, Tucson cavalry troops had

hit his trail and brought back a report that Chief Silver Skull had died from a hail of Yankee lead.

At any rate, the Indian outlaw vanished from the scene, taking with him to the happy hunting ground the secret of what had happened to the loot of El Dorado gold. A myth had it that the dying Indian had cached the glittering treasure somewhere in the Sunblaze Mountains, where he had made his last stand against overwhelming odds, and many a luckless prospector had left his skeleton to bleach in the remote untamed badlands on futile searches for Chief Silver Skull's *oro*.

On the other hand, rumors cropped up almost yearly to the effect that the El Dorado gold had been discovered accidentally by some wandering desert rat or sheeppman. Trigger Trenton had heard the contradicting narratives, but had given neither version any more credence than he would a fairy story. The West was rife with similar legends of lost mines and mysterious treasure.

ONE fall morning a month after the mustang hunters had returned to Suicide Valley, the Border Eagle found himself alone on the TNT Ranch, his punchers having headed *en masse* to the cowtown of Caprock to attend the annual rodeo and stock show. It was his intention to attend the rodeo the next day and make a bid for some of the bronc-riding and calf-roping prizes himself.

He was seated on his ranchhouse porch, polishing the fancy tie conchas on a pair of spotted calf-hide chaps he was planning to wear in the morrow's rodeo events, when three riders rode up to his tie rack from the north trail.

They were strangers to Suicide Valley. The tallest appeared to be a tinhorn gambler, judging from his black Prince Albert coat, the gaudy jewelry he was sporting, and the fish-

belly pallor of his long, tapering, flexible fingers, elaborately manicured.

One saddle pard was a *mestizo* of indeterminate age, wearing a ball-tassled sombrero and a rainbow-hued serape. The other was a shifty-eyed, yellow-stubbled American with the stamp of an ex-convict all over him—in his close-cropped hair and the ghastly pallor showing under his recent tan.

"Trenton?" greeted the tall man, as the trio trailed their spurs up to the porch. "I'm Ace-high Burnes, at yore service. An' these are Pancho Smith and Fen Krole. We're from Gila Bend."

The Border Eagle stepped aside to motion his guests inside.

"You're a long way from your home range, gentlemen," the cowpuncher said genially. "Find seats and I'll rustle up a bait of grub for you."

Ace-high Burnes exhumed an expensive Cuban cheroot from his gaudy vest and bit off the tip as his bottle-green eyes went unerringly to the fireplace and fixed on the silver skull there.

"That won't be necessary, Trenton," grated the tinhorn. "We won't be stayin' in Suicide Valley long. We heard you'd located Chief Silver Skull's bones."

Trenton shrugged. He had the uneasy hunch that Pancho, the *mestizo*, and Fen Krole were moving to positions where they could hem him in between them.

"*Quien sabe?*" the Eagle countered, walking over to the mantel and taking down the gruesome death's-head. "I found this skull, while hunting mustangs up in the Sunblazes. But no skeleton."

Ace-high Burnes inspected the silver-dollar inlay with keen interest, as he listened to Trenton's description of Evil Spirit Canyon and his

discovery of the odd relic.

"What'll you take for this, amigo?" Burns demanded, when the TNT boss had finished. "I'll lay odds it's Silver Skull's dome."

"Take it along, if you want it so bad," countered the rancher. "If it's any of my business, why this interest in the silver skull—that would bring you all the way from Gila Bend?"

Burnes' eyes flashed. He hesitated a moment before answering.

"My father," he said, "was a bugler in old Company K, United States cavalry, stationed at Tucson before the Civil War. He was one of the troopers who tracked down Chief Silver Skull after that wagon-train massacre. The Injun was never actually captured."

Trenton laughed. "I savvy. Your father gave you the idea that if you could locate the old Indian's remains, you'd locate that California gold loot. Is that it?"

FOR a long minute, Ace-high Burns' hooded orbs appraised the rancher. Over by the door, Pancho Smith was fingering the hilt of his long-bladed *cuchillo*. Wherever Trenton moved in the room, the gunhawk, Fen Krole, managed to get behind him.

"That could be it, Trenton," Burns said finally. "That *oro* was never found. I've got my father's word for that. Where—"

"I want to remind you," the Eagle spoke up, fishing in his vest pocket for Durham and thin husks, "that a dozen prospectors have reported finding Chief Silver Skull's cache. There's even an ugly rumor to the effect . . . er . . . that the cavalrymen who are reported to have shot Chief Silver Skull divvied up that gold among themselves. Did your father ever mention that angle?"

Hostile fires kindled in the gambler's eyes.

"Lies!" he snarled. "All lies. My father gave me his word that Chief Silver Skull, badly wounded, made his escape into the badlands." Burns paused. "Tell me," he added, "where is this Evil Spirit Gulch where you found this skull?"

Trenton appeared absorbed in rolling his quirly. "I don't know," he replied simply. "That is, the country's so rough back in there that I couldn't even draw you a map of how to find the place. It took my drovers thirteen days to get back to Suicide Valley from our mustang trap in Evil Spirit Gulch, so you can get some idea—"

Burnes flashed a glance at Fen Krole and then turned to his host with an affable grin.

"Could you lead us to that gulch—for a fifty-fifty split of any gold we might find with the skeleton this skull came off of?"

The Border Eagle fired his cigarette with studied calm. "I could," he said, blue smoke forking through his nostrils, "when I find the time. Right now, I've got more work around the TNT than I can—"

Trenton broke off, as he felt the pressure of a six-gun barrel prodding his spine, and the hot, whiskey-fouled breath of Fen Krole on his neck.

"You're taking us to Evil Spirit Gulch pronto—today!" snarled the gambler, whipping back his broad-cloth coat to expose a black gun butt. "And whether we find Chief Silver Skull's bones or not, you're taking a one-way pasear to blazes, Border Eagle!"

CHAPTER III.

ONE-WAY PASEAR.

THE ten days which followed their departure from the TNT spread in Suicide Valley were a hellish nightmare for Trenton.

Arms trussed behind his back with rawhide pigging strings, his boots lashed together under Fleetfoot's barrel, the lawman had no chance of making a break for his freedom along some narrow mountain trail or while fording the innumerable Sunblaze creeks.

Always, Ace-high Burnes rode in the lead, getting his directions from the prisoner. Like a gaunt buzzard, the black-coated gambler sat his saddle, spine erect as a snubbing post, his glittering eyes fixed on the ever-remote crags of the Sunblaze divide.

Fen Krole kept at his back like a shadow, a sawed-off shotgun cradled across his pommel. From talk which the Border Eagle had picked up at night camps, he learned that Krole had broken out of Yuma Penitentiary a few months before, where he had been serving a life sentence for a stagecoach holdup.

To the *mestizo*, Pancho Smith, went the job of herding their remuda of extra horses, stolen from the TNT cavvy corral, each of them bearing diamond-hitched packs of supplies for a month-long trek into the malpais.

The supplies, too, had been filched from Trenton's ranch. Only a vicious turn of bad luck had accounted for the hellish trio's having shown up at the Suicide Valley spread on the one day out of the year that Trenton had been alone.

They made camp, the first night out, in a secluded canyon at the north end of Suicide Valley, where Pancho and Krole could take turns guarding their back trail against possible pursuit.

But Trenton realized his abductors' fears were unfounded. It would be three days, perhaps four, before the Caprock rodeo was over and his riders would be returning to the TNT. They had left ample feed

for their livestock, and there was little likelihood of the bunkhouse crew getting worried over Trenton's failure to show up on the second day of the rodeo.

They had lost the second day's traveling time because of a furious norther which ripped out of the Sunblaze uplands, kicking up a sand-storm which forced them to take refuge in a prospector's shack, where they escaped suffocation by breathing through wet bandannas.

The storm had scoured off the last traces of hoof marks left from the wild-mustang trail drive from Evil Spirit Gulch. The tempest had, by the same token, erased the kidnap trail leading across Suicide Valley—and with it went Trenton's last hope of rescue from his ranch hands.

The returning TNT buckaroos, finding their top-string ponies stolen from the cavvy corral, would get up a man hunt to track down the horse thieves. In all probability they would take Trenton's absence as proof that their boss was riding the same trail.

And since most raids on cattle and horses were conducted from south of the border by marauding bands of Mexicans—and the international boundary line cut Suicide Valley's southern extremity less than ten miles from the TNT Ranch—the odds were heavily in favor of Trenton's men wasting valuable time in a useless hunt in Sonora, directly opposite to the direction taken by Ace-high Burnes and his kidnaping henchmen.

At night, Trenton slept fitfully, a closely guarded prisoner. His bonds were checked daily, loosened only at intervals to restore the circulation to his hands. On several occasions he was roped, Indian fashion, to a handy tree while his three abductors slumbered comfortably in their bed-rolls.

THE tenth morning after their one-way pasear to doom had begun found Trenton sizing up familiar landmarks. This was the uncurried region of fantastic lava formations and arid mesas where the Apache scout, Lazy Hawk, had brought his mustang hunters in search of a band of fuzz tails.

Therefore, any of the innumerable canyons might be Evil Spirit Gulch, where Trenton had had the ill fortune to run across the silver-inlaid skull.

"This is where we camped, the day my Injin helper found the skull," Trenton explained, when they forded a tributary of Cartridge Creek and found a litter of dead ashes built against a shale outbank. "Evil Spirit Gulch is west of here, I figger, about five miles."

In reality, the "canyon of no return" lay a mile due north of that. Trenton was positive. But, during the grueling hours of their trail into the untamed wilderness, the Border Eagle's keen brain had been busy contriving some plan of escape.

That plan had come, finally, as a result of his remembering a canyon he had explored with the possibility of building his mustang trap there. It was a rocky ravine which his mustangers had dubbed "Gunsight Draw" from its V-cut walls, and it flanked the deeper gorge of Cartridge Creek.

"We're gittin' close, eh?" grated Ace-high Burnes, a note of excitement animating his flat monotone. "You take the lead, Border Eagle. An' don't get any ideas of spurrin' off up some side wash an' makin' a gitaway. You'll be under a three-way drop, ever' foot o' the way."

After a hurried consultation, the outlaws decided to make a base camp here at the river where the mustang hunters had camped, close to grass and water. Pancho Smith remained behind to picket their

spare broncs, which, as Burnes had stated back in Suicide Valley, would be making the return trip burdened down with Chief Silver Skull's El Dorado gold.

Flanked on either stirrup by Burnes and Krole, Trenton spurred Fleetfoot westward into the forbidding wilds. He was careful to keep the blue-hazed gulf of Cartridge Creek's gorge always on his left, knowing that sooner or later he would stumble across the eroded fissure of Gunsight Draw.

In that rocky defile, his one chance at escape must come. If he failed to locate the Gunsight, then doom was certain.

"All these gulches look the same," Trenton pointed out, his voice husky with fatigue. "It may take days or weeks to locate Evil Spirit Gulch."

Burnes laughed harshly. "'Sta nada," clipped the gambler. "We got plenty of grub. Silver Skull's cache has waited fifty years, so I reckon we ain't in any hurry."

Westering sunlight was burning Trenton's eyes when he called a halt in the narrow entrance of Gunsight Draw. A short time ago he had abandoned the idea of building a mustang trap here because of the house-sized talus boulders which littered the gulch bottom. But his memory of the back reaches of the defile were still vivid in his brain.

A natural tunnel cut through the north shoulder of Gunsight Pass and opened on Cartridge Creek's chasm. Out of curiosity, Trenton had explored the twisting passage the day he and Lazy Hawk had explored Gunsight Draw. That cave was his destination now.

"This *may* be it," commented Trenton. "Like I said, I can't be sure it's Evil Spirit Gulch until we've gone inside it. But from here on, it's on foot, hombres. The brush an' rocks are too thick to make it on hossback."

Ace-high Burnes scowled suspiciously as he saw Fen Krole dismount and untie the ropes which bound Trenton to the saddle.

"If hosses can't get inside, then how'd you make a mustang trap in here?" demanded the gambler warily.

Trenton grinned as he swung stiffly out of stirrups.

"The mustang trap," he lied, "is at the far end of this draw. But we'd have to ride fifteen or twenty miles around to reach it. This way, I can lead you to the spot where I found the silver skull."

Burnes swung out of saddle and hitched his roan gelding to a juniper bush. "*Sta bueno*," he growled dubiously. "But don't untie his hands, Krole. We got to handle this slippery gent careful."

A FEW minutes later Trenton was leading the way into Gunsight's tortuous, boulder-littered bed. An hour of grueling struggle against the spiny cactus and chaparral brought them to a broad ledge which snaked halfway up the northern cliff and ended in a brushy rincon fifty feet below the rim.

"I found the skull up this here ledge," Trenton said. "It's a man-killin' climb. That is, providin' this is the same ledge. One of you gents can make it, but I'm too tuckered out."

Burnes studied the steep ledge with eyes that burned like raw coals with greed. In his mind's eye, the outlaw could see his father and the rest of the long-dead cavalry brigade driving Chief Silver Skull into this forbidding canyon; could see the mortally wounded Indian slogging his way up the narrow ledge in a desperate, despairing attempt to see if the rock shelf led to safety.

"Shall I give Trenton a dose o' buckshot, boss?" demanded Krole, fingering his shotgun hammers nervously. "He's led us to Evil Spirit

Gulch. We can spend weeks huntin' the chief's bones if we have to."

Burnes shook his head. "Don't talk loco, Krole. Didn't you hear the Eagle say he ain't sure this is the right spot? Where'd we be if it wasn't Evil Spirit Gulch? We could spend a lifetime huntin' in these breaks an' never locate it."

Ace-high turned to Trenton. "Get goin', busky!" he ordered, jerking his guns toward the ledge. "You can't get out o' gun range, followin' that shelf. Poke around up there an' see if you can spot the rest of that Injun's skeleton. If you don't, this is the wrong canyon."

Trenton muffled an oath of well-feigned anger and started climbing. It was grueling work, with his arms tied behind him and useless for maintaining his balance.

Yard by yard he climbed, eyes slitted against the blazing sun. Burnes and Krole waited at the foot of the ledge, puffing at cigars, guns handy in case their prisoner attempted to leap off the precipitous shelf in a suicidal bid for escape.

Thus it was, twenty minutes later, that Trenton gained the brushy rincon which, to outward appearances, marked the dead end of the climb.

Sweat was oozing from every pore in the lawman's body as he shouldered his way through the red-barked manzanita growth and sighted the ink-black maw of the twisting tunnel.

His goal was won, though the odds were against surviving the plunge into Cartridge Creek at the far end of the tunnel. Even drowning in a mountain torrent was preferable to taking an outlaw's bullet in the guts without a chance to fight back.

There could be no delay now. Krole and Burnes could climb the ledge in five minutes, whereas his trussed arms had caused him to take four times that long. Summoning

his flagging strength, the Border Eagle headed into the tunnel mouth, his ears registering the dull boom of Cartridge Creek tumbling down its gorge at the far end of the fissure.

CHAPTER IV.

CAMP-SITE SHOWDOWN.

TRENTON had picked his way fifty yards through the winding, slippery-floored tunnel when the blood froze in his veins. Funneling up the natural tunnel at his back came Ace-high Burnes' yell:

"There's a cave behind this brush, Krole! Trenton's give us the slip!"

The yell was followed by slogging boots on rubble, and Fen Krole's triumphant shout:

"Trenton ain't got much of a start. An' he ain't heeled, boss. We got that tin star cornered in a coyote den, looks like."

Fighting his way ahead with redoubled speed, falling again and again and picking himself up to plunge on through the darkness, Trenton kept his body crouched low to avoid smashing his skull on jagged outcrops of granite from the tunnel roof.

Burnes and the escaped convict were cutting down his lead fast. They were less than twenty feet behind him when Trenton staggered around a bend and sighted the end of the tunnel, revealing a sun-gilded patch of cliff on the opposite side of Cartridge Creek's gorge.

Spent and gasping, the Border Eagle raced toward the disk of sun-down glow. Then he halted on the brink, staring down at the rushing waters thirty feet below.

A gun blasted deafeningly behind him and a bullet winged past his cheek.

Bracing himself on the lip of the tunnel mouth, the Border Eagle frog-hopped out into space.

A blizzard of slugs ripped through

the tunnel over him as the lawman's body hurtled through empty space toward the raging white waters of the mountain stream plunging over its rock-studded bed.

Then Trenton's plummeting form hit the water with a geysering splash, and the water closed over his head.

Ripping cross currents buffeted his form in a series of somersaults before his boots hit rock bottom. A nightmare of eddies and millrace currents swept him downstream in a series of dizzy spirals, before his head broke surface.

He had a blurring glimpse of Krole and Burnes kneeling on the canyon tunnel's floor, smoke pluming from their six-guns as they triggered a desperate salvo at the head bobbing in the rapids below.

Bullets plucked the water inches from Trenton's face and ricocheted off protruding rocks with spiteful screams. Then he sluiced out of sight down a series of rocky cascades, as helpless as a chip on the angry flood.

A sheer miracle saved Trenton's skull from being pulped like an eggshell on the spray-dashed rocks which studded the rapids like waiting fangs.

Then his body was funneled into a great whirlpool a quarter of a mile downstream from the spot where he had made his last-chance gamble with doom.

Swimming was impossible, with his arms knotted behind his back. His bullhide chaps and spurred cow-boots were bogging him into bottomless depths.

But savage eddies whirled him toward the north bank, and he felt loose rubble under him. With lungs bursting for air, his head broke surface and the Border Eagle scrambled his way to shallower water.

Covered with foam and spray, Trenton pulled his way out of the tugging current which seemed bent

on seizing him and hurling him back into the maelstrom at the foot of the rapids. Two minutes later he had crawled up on a muddy bank and pitched headlong into a bulwark of water, grass and dead tules. There his senses faded into a black void.

WHEN finally his shocked brain cleared, he found that night had closed in on Cartridge Creek's gorge, and a million stars twinkled in the black strip of sky visible between the lofty rimrocks.

Prolonged immersion in the icy waters had softened the rawhide pigging strings which bound Trenton's wrists behind him. He was surprised at the ease with which he was able to extricate his right hand, and then it was a simple matter to tug the thongs off his other wrist.

Groggily, the U. S. marshal tugged off his boots and emptied the water they contained. Then he shucked his socks and shirt and wrung them dry.

But starlight, shafting into the narrow cleft in the Sunblaze range, revealed that drying his clothes was useless effort. Unbroken cliffs, which a spider would have had difficulty in scaling due to the precipitous overhang, hemmed him in.

"I've got to swim for it," Trenton decided, adjusting the chin strap which had prevented him from losing his brown Stetson. "No use starving to death in this canyon."

He located a rotten log which winter flood waters had thrown high and dry on a strip of foam-crusted gravel bar.

Shoving it out into the stream, Trenton straddled the log and felt it being whirled out into midriver.

Providentially, the river had flattened out, eliminating the peril of more rapids to shoot. The buoyant log hurtled down the icy current at a speed which made the cliffs on

either side blend into a meaningless blur.

The Border Eagle was purple with cold when he finally sighted a break in the south cliff wall, where Cartridge Creek forked, a portion of its waters tumbling southeast into a smaller tributary.

By dint of frantic paddling, he managed to shunt his makeshift boat out of the main current, and a moment later felt it drifting at a slower speed down the side canyon.

For three miles, Trenton clung to the drifting log, until his eyes caught a flickering dot of fire dead ahead, on the right-hand bank. That would be Pancho's campfire.

The Border Eagle slipped off the log and waded ashore, a hundred yards upstream from the outlaw camp. Working his way carefully through the dwarf cottonwoods and heavy willow brake, the lawman reached the edge of the clearing where, a month before, he had camped with his TNT fuzz-tail hunters.

Between Pancho's campfire and the river bank, the TNT pack horses were picketed in a patch of lush bluestem. Counting the horses, Trenton was startled to discover that Fleetfoot and the saddlers ridden by Ace-high Burnes and Fen Krole were not grazing with the other stock.

"That means I wasn't out cold as long as I figgered," Trenton muttered through taut lips. "Krole an' that tinhorn haven't got back from Gunsight Draw yet."

Keeping wide of the circle of firelight, Trenton edged forward on his belly until he made out the serape-draped figure of Pancho Smith. The half-breed was squatting Indian fashion on his soogans, smoking a *papel azul* cigarette and staring moodily into the fire.

From time to time the outlaw peered off to the west, as if anticipating the return of his henchmen.

INCHING his way closer to the camp ground, Trenton approached Pancho from the rear. His goal was a .30-30 rifle which the breed had left leaning across the cantleboard of his saddle, at the base of the low cutbank which protected the camp site from the wind.

Twenty feet from the Winchester, a twig cracked under Trenton's elbow with a snap which was magnified in his ears to the proportions of a gunshot.

Instantly, Pancho Smith was on his feet, a six-gun palmed, his eyes probing the blackness around him.

Trenton's exploring fingers closed on a biscuit-sized rock. Slowly, the lawman raised himself to his knees, confident that the alarmed breed could not spot him against the ebon backdrop of the shale bluff.

Breathing raucously, the *mestizo* stalked forward, instinct heading him toward the spot where he had heard the alien sound. When he was ten feet away, Trenton drew back his arm and hurled the rock with all his strength.

Pancho's ears caught the whistling passage of the rock and swung into a gunhawk's crouch. In so doing, he caught the full brunt of Trenton's hard-flung stone between the eyes.

Without even a moan, the Mexican collapsed like a poleaxed beef, limp fingers still coiled about his unfired Colt.

CHAPTER V.

MESTIZO DISGUISE.

ALERT for treachery, the Border Eagle pounced forward. But Pancho Smith was not playing possum. The half-breed lay sprawled motionless as the lawman stooped to jerk the cocked Peacemaker from his grasp.

"That was a close one," Trenton breathed with relief. "But I was

due for a break of luck—"

A sharp clatter of steel-shod hoofs reached the lawman on the wings of the night breeze which swept down from the direction of Gunsight Draw, even as he was rolling the breed over to inspect the bleeding welt on Pancho's brow.

Burnes and Krole were approaching down the twisting barranca which led from Gunsight Draw. A matter of seconds, and they might round the bend and be in full view of the fire-lighted camp ground.

Thrusting the Mexican's gun under the waistband of his Levis, Trenton grabbed Pancho by the arms and dragged the inert bulk out of range of the fireglow, depositing him in the shadow of the shale cutbank.

There was no time to hunt up a rope to bind the unconscious outlaw. The sound of approaching hoofbeats was drawing closer with each passing clock-tick.

Working swiftly, Trenton unbuckled his chaps and pulled off his beaver Stetson. Stowing them back in the darkness, the lawman removed Pancho's *jiipi*-straw sombrero and donned it. Then he draped the *mestizo*'s gaudy, evil-smelling serape about his shoulders, and flung back the bannered folds of the garment to clear his gun arm, Mexican fashion.

His disguising preparations were in the nick of time. Even as the Border Eagle headed for the campfire to poke the coals, emulating Pancho Smith's peonlike shuffle, a fatigue-hoarsened voice hailed him from the darkness:

"*Hola*, the camp! You better have a bait of grub cooked up for us, Pancho, or we'll larrup the bones off your hide!"

Trenton tugged the Mexican sombrero brim lower to throw his face in shadow, as he straightened and raised an arm in greeting. The voice had belonged to Ace-high Burnes.



Certain death faced the Border Eagle as those wild-eyed mustangs thundered through the canyon—the curse of the silver skull was already at work!

"Por seguro, señores!" he called back, aping Pancho's guttural Chihuahua accents. "Deed you breeng back the *oro*, no?"

Burnes and Krole rode up into the area of firelight, their frames hunched dejectedly in saddles. Trailing Krole by a hackamore was Trenton's bay mustang, Fleetfoot.

"No is right, *compañero!*" admitted the gambler, swinging from stirrups. "An' I got a hunch we'll never locate Chief Silver Skull's bones, or the gold, either. We run into bad luck back in the hills."

Trenton stalled for time, remaining beside the campfire so as to throw himself in black silhouette to the returning outlaws.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Eagle exultantly as Krole dismounted and led

up the empty-saddled Fleetfoot. "Señor Eagle, he deed not come back weeth you, amigos. He ees *muerto*—dead?"

Fen Krole grinned ruefully. "Trenton is probably a drowned rat, about now," growled the escaped convict. "Rattle your hocks, Pancho, an' stake out these *caballos* of oun. We're hongry enough to eat a—"

Ace-high Burnes silenced his henchman with an impatient oath as he led his horse closer to the fire.

"No! We're pullin' out pronto!" rasped the gambler. "As long as we ain't positive the Border Eagle croaked, we're takin' no chances. If he didn't drown in that river, the first thing he'll do after he gets loose from them piggin' strings is head for this camp. We—"

BURNES' voice trailed off, as he saw the hombre he took to be Pancho Smith swing into a gunman's crouch. Jutting from the silhouetted figure's right hand was Pancho's long-barreled Colt, its muzzle weaving at point-blank range between Burnes and the slack-jawed convict.

"Pancho!" snarled the gambler, halting in his tracks. "Have you gone loco? Stop pointin' that smoke-pole at us an'—"

Enjoying his big moment, the Border Eagle swept off the Mexican sombrero with a flourish of his left hand.

"Elevate, *hombres!*" clipped the marshal, in his own hard-lipped voice. "I been waitin' for you buskies to get back to camp."

Burnes' right hand dropped his bridle reins and made a twitching motion toward the gun holstered at his hip. Then he froze, as he heard the ominous triple click of Trenton's .45 coming to full cock.

"He's got us, boss!" groaned Fen Krole, jerking his arms aloft. "Don't prod that salty tin star into shootin' us!"

Water dripping off Trenton's soggy boots made sizzling noises in the hot ashes as he stalked forward, gun weaving between Krole and the paralyzed tinhorn.

And then, from the darkness behind him, the Border Eagle heard a shuffling noise as something moved rapidly across the rubble.

Jerking his head to stare over his shoulder, Trenton's blood froze as he saw the figure of Pancho Smith scuttling on all fours toward the Winchester carbine leaning across his saddle.

In the act of whirling to fling a pot shot at the *mestizo* who had so inopportunely recovered his senses, Trenton caught a blur of motion from the tail of his eye as Fen Krole went into action.

Whipping a big-bored Colt from holster, Krole got off a fast shot from the hip.

Something like a red-hot iron grooved the muscle on the Border Eagle's left shoulder and the impact of the bullet spun him about and dumped him to his knees, sending his own slug high and wide of Pancho.

Fighting back bullet shock, Trenton was vaguely aware of Krole's gun exploding in a long, blended roar, as the convict fanned his gun hammer with the heel of his free hand.

His senses blurring, Trenton saw the half-breed snatch up his rifle and lever a shell into the breech. Firing by instinct, the Eagle sent a bullet slamming into the stock of the Mexican's carbine, knocking the Winchester from Pancho's grip.

Rolling over on his back, Trenton saw Fen Krole bounding up, flame spitting from six-guns in either hand. Dim in the background, Ace-high Burnes was too busy avoiding the stampeding hoofs of the three horses to get his own Peacemakers in action.

Krole's eyes were blinded by the dancing flames of the campfire. Trenton could guess no other reason why the convict's point-blank assault was missing fire.

His own thumb tripped gun hammer, and he saw Krole's lunge checked by the sledge-hammer impact of a close-range bullet drilling his chest.

Dead on his feet, Krole triggered his guns once more before his knees buckled and his head slammed Trenton's boots.

The Eagle propped himself up on one elbow and twisted around to face the menace of Pancho Smith. But the *mestizo*, after recovering his fallen rifle, was sprinting desperately toward the river in an effort to get out of the line of fire.

HIS senses clearing, Trenton regained his feet as he saw Pancho reach the edge of the creek ford and drop to one knee, whipping gun stock to shoulder and drawing a slow bead on the lawman.

Before Pancho had a chance to trigger the carbine, Trenton's gun blazed. Almost at the extreme range of the short gun, a zipping bullet caught Pancho high on the shoulder and knocked him sprawling, the Winchester flying through space to land in the creek with a splash.

Hard hit, the *mestizo* scrambled to his feet and started reeling out into the water, in a desperate attempt to ford the stream and gain the sheltering darkness on the north bank.

But there was danger closer to hand, and Trigger Trenton whirled to meet it. He saw Ace-high Burnes, dazed by a blow from a stampeding horse's hoof, climbing to his feet with a Peacemaker in either hand.

"Hold it, busky!" yelled the Border Eagle. "You're covered!"

His senses reeling, the gambler stumbled backward before Trenton's advance. Then his guns hit the dirt and he lifted his arms. Not until he saw Trenton toss aside Pancho's gun and leap to snatch up the fallen Colts did the tinhorn realize that he had been bluffed with an empty gun!

Ramming a Colt muzzle into Burnes' side, the Border Eagle stared off toward the star-twinkling creek, to see Pancho Smith halt in mid-stream, the water foaming about his knees.

He opened his mouth to bawl out an order for the *mestizo* to return to camp, but he was too late.

Clawing at his sides with a peculiar hugging gesture, the wounded half-breed lost his footing on the slippery creek bed and pitched face forward into the water.

The current rolled Pancho's limp form over and over, off the shallow

gravel bar into deep water.

A gagged scream came from the agony-stricken breed, and then he rolled out of sight under the flowing black waters. A long minute passed, and the *mestizo*'s corpse did not break the surface again.

"Your Mexican pard is catfish bait, Burnes!" rasped the U. S. marshal, frisking the gambler for concealed weapons. "It's just you an' me, now, at the finish. Put your arms behind you."

The whole grim shoot-out had lasted less than twenty seconds by the clock, and the last vestige of fight had drained from Ace-high Burnes. The tinhorn stood in numb resignation as his captor picked up a coiled riata near the *mestizo*'s bedroll and trussed his prisoner's wrists behind him.

Blood was trickling in a warm flood down Trenton's sleeve, from the bullet nick on his left shoulder. Otherwise, the Eagle had emerged unscathed from the three-to-one shoot-out.

"We're campin' here for the night, Burnes," Trenton said evenly. "Then I reckon we'll be takin' a pasear back to civilization. I aim to give you a chance at stretchin' legal hang rope—which is a danged sight better chance than you aimed to give me."

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD OF EL DORADO.

ACE-HIGH BURNES spent the night between his own blankets, but roped up like a maverick fair-grounded for the branding iron.

As dawn was breaking over the Arizona badlands, Trenton rustled up firewood and cooked a breakfast from supplies stolen from his TNT pantry.

Fleetfoot and the two runaway horses belonging to the dead convict and Ace-high Burnes were grazing with the rest of the cavvy.

Obtaining a shovel from one of the packs, the Border Eagle dug a grave under the shale cutbank and deposited Fen Krole's corpse, wrapped in a tarpaulin, in the bottom of the pit. He had dug the grave deep enough for two men, hoping to locate Pancho Smith's waterlogged corpse.

But a careful patrol of the swift-running creek for a quarter of a mile down either bank failed to bring the *mestizo*'s remains to light. Except for one of Pancho's basket-woven *zapato* sandals, washed ashore on a jutting sandbar, there was no trace of the drowned outlaw.

"The catfish are prob'ly nibblin' him in some deep pool," Trenton decided, trudging back to the camp where he had left his securely bound prisoner. "Leastwise, I did my best to keep him from bein' coyote bait."

Several gaunt *zapilote* buzzards were wheeling in the brassy sky when the Border Eagle finished shaping Krole's grave mound. That done, the lawman turned to his prisoner.

"As long as I'm out in this neck o' the woods, I might as well satisfy my own curiosity about locatin' the skeleton that that Silver Skull came off of, Burnes," said the lawman. "It might make you stretch hemp a little easier-minded to know whether that skull belonged to that old Injun chief your father helped track down fifty years ago."

Ace-high Burnes regarded his captor in sullen silence, as Trenton knelt to untie his leg bonds.

"You ain't goin' with me, Burnes," the lawman said, helping the gambler to his feet. "It happens that Evil Spirit Gulch is really less than a mile north of this camp. But if there's any gold up there, I'll fetch it back for you to see."

Leading Burnes over to a handy jackpine, Trenton ordered the outlaw to place his back against the tree trunk, whereupon the marshal roped

the prisoner securely in a standing position.

"I wouldn't want you to slip your hobbles an' drift off while I'm out gold huntin'," Trenton told his prisoner. "I reckon I'll be back here to untie you before the sun swings around and hits you in the face."

A growled oath was the gambler's only retort as the Border Eagle trailed his spurs over to the cavy grazing ground and caught up Fleetfoot's reins.

Hooking stirrup over saddlehorn, Trenton tightened the latigo. A few minutes later Ace-high Burnes saw the lawman splash over the shallow ford and vanish into the lava formations to the north.

Twenty minutes' easy riding brought the Border Eagle to the mouth of Evil Spirit Gulch, where he and Lazy Hawk had been engaged in building a mustang trap a few weeks earlier.

Leaving Fleetfoot at the gulch entrance, Trenton made his way back to the dead end of the box canyon and halted at the spot where he had discovered the silver-inlaid skull which had been the source of Lazy Hawk's ghost scare and all the mad events leading up to the present.

"The skull wasn't lyin' on the ground here when I first visited this gulch an' decided to run our mustang herd in here," Trenton recalled. "Which means that the wind either uncovered a grave, or else a coyote or a buzzard carried it away from the rest of the skeleton an' dropped it here. Which ain't likely, seein' that Chief Silver Skull was killed fifty years ago."

A few minutes scratching around in the loose blow sand where he had found the silver skull netted Trenton the information that the long-dead Indian had not been lying in the floor of the gulch, at least at this spot. Six inches below the surface

of the sand were unyielding stratas of bedrock.

STARING around him, the Border Eagle directed his attention to the overhanging cliff directly overhead. The rimrock was a tangle of ocotillo cactus and wild tobacco bushes, and was about fifty feet above the gulch floor.

"Now, that Injun could have died on the rimrock up there," the Eagle mused, heading out of the gulch. "That would account for some armadillo or jackrabbit rollin' his skull over the edge."

Working on that assumption, Trenton spent an hour picking his way up the south shoulder of Evil Spirit Gulch, until he gained the brushy rimrock.

It was hard going through the cactus, but the Eagle's labors were rewarded. Glaring sunlight, pouring through a hedge of spiny chaparral, picked up a gleam of time-whitened bones sprawled on a shelf of rock which overhung the canyon.

A moment later Trenton was staring down at the skeleton of a horse, its skull still incased in a squaw-hitch bridle such as Apache warriors used for their fleet Spanish ponies.

The off front foreleg of the horse had been snapped in two, where the Indian pony had wedged its hoof into a crack in the rock.

A grim, tragic drama of the pioneer days was plain to read in these littered bones.

Falling, the crippled horse had pinned its rider to the earth—for the coyote-scattered bones of a human skeleton were mingled with the spinal column and ribs of the pony bones.

The skull was missing from the human remains. Some scurrying animal, or perhaps a gust of wind from a dust-devil, had rolled the rider's skull over the rimrock.

The rider had been an Indian, as

evidenced by the bear-claw necklace girding the neck bones. And then, pulling aside knee-high grass, Trenton made another discovery.

Chief Silver Skull—if these were his remains—had been carrying a pair of antique Dragoon pistols at the time he met his death here on the brink of Evil Spirit Gulch.

Time and the elements had tarnished the clumsy cap-and-ball guns, but their cylinders still revolved as Trenton lifted them from their stiff leathern holsters. The guns were of a model common on the Arizona frontier during the covered-wagon period.

Out of idle curiosity, the Border Eagle pulled the trigger of one of the Dragoons. A jarring explosion met his ears, and the recoil of the big-ealibered weapon, plus his own involuntary start of surprise, sent the cap-and-ball revolver spinning into the dead grass which grew up through the horse's ribs.

It seemed fantastically incredible that fifty years in the open could not have damaged the gun powder and percussion caps of the Indian's guns, but Trenton realized that this section of Arizona was high and dry. It was entirely possible that not a drop of rain had fallen in the intervening decades, to destroy the priming charges in the Dragoons.

A few minutes' rummaging through the grisly bone pile revealed a corroded copper powder flask. Twisting the lever which dealt out a correctly weighed charge of powder, Trenton was amazed to find that it was as dry as the day it had been put in the flask.

Then, in the act of sticking his arm through the lattice work of horse ribs to recover the smoking Dragoon pistol which lay there, Trenton's eye was attracted to a moldy canvas saddlebag which had been lying unnoticed in the dead grass.

As the Border Eagle gripped the

leather handle of the pocket, the time-rotted fabric ripped away, revealing the dazzling yellow glint of powdered gold.

"I'll be teetotally damned," Trenton breathed, as he ran his fingers into the heavy metallic flakes and picked out a nugget as large as a beech nut. "Those legends about Chief Silver Skull were right as rain, after all. This must be part o' the loot of that California wagon train his Injuns massacred!"

AMATE to the ruptured saddlebag lay buried under a light film of drifted sand, beneath the other one. All told, Trenton estimated that the golden treasure weighed close to a hundred pounds! A fortune which Chief Silver Skull had never lived to convert into fire water and muskets for his tribal braves.

"It's a cinch I can't carry that gold back to camp in these *alforjas*," Trenton mused, getting to his feet. "But Ace-high Burns owns a nice set o' saddlebags that ought to just about hold this *oro*."

Slipping the El Dorado nugget into his watch pocket, the Border Eagle made his way back to the entrance of Evil Spirit Gulch and remounted Fleetfoot, his heart pounding with boyish excitement.

Thinking back on it, Trenton had reason to believe that no mere chance had brought Chief Silver Skull to Evil Spirit Gulch. History had painted the Apache renegade as a case-hardened outlaw with little regard for medicine men or witch doctors, and a hearty contempt of their tribal superstitions.

What better place, then, for a wounded chief to hole up and recuperate from the hurts he had suffered at the hands of American cavalry riders, than a canyon which was shunned by all men as being an abode of evil spirits?

Perhaps, in his last delirium, Chief

Silver Skull had sought out the haunted canyon as a place of sanctuary, believing he would be guarded by ancestors as cruel as himself, doomed souls expelled from the happy hunting ground to spend eternity between the frowning walls of Evil Spirit Gulch.

The sun had reached the noon position in the Arizona sky by the time Fleetfoot was watering at the branch of Cartridge Creek. Across the ford, Trenton saw his TNT remuda resting in their shady grazing ground.

Ace-high Burns was twisting uncomfortably in his bonds, lashed to the jackpine at the edge of the camp. He hurled curses at the Border Eagle as he crossed the stream and dismounted alongside the tree.

"I'll have to keep you hogtied here a while longer, amigo," chuckled the lawman, hitching his gun belts. "I got to take a pair of saddlebags over to Evil Spirit Gulch and bring back a load of gold that would break a mule's back."

Some of the hatred died in the gambler's eyes as he saw Trenton rummage in his watch pocket and draw out the glittering lump of gold.

"You . . . you found Chief Silver Skull's bones?" gasped the outlaw, his face suffusing with color. "The gold . . . was there?"

Trenton nodded, extending his palm under Burns' nose and admiring the play of dazzling light on the lemon-yellow nugget.

"There's plenty more where this come from, too," he went on. "If you hadn't got ringy back in Suicide Valley, Burns, you an' your compadres would have split Chief Silver Skull's loot with me, share an' share alike. But—"

A gun blasted from the prickly-pear growth on the rim of the cut-bank at that instant, and a bullet kicked sand over Trig Trenton's boots.

The nugget went flying as the Bor-

der Eagle's hand plummeted to gun butt.

With Colt half drawn from leather, Trenton froze as he stared up at the disheveled figure emerging from the cactus.

He was staring into the red-shot, beady eyes of Pancho Smith, standing spread-legged on the edge of the cutbank. A smoking rifle was hugged to the *mestizo*'s ribs, and the front of his muddied shirt was caked with dried blood.

By some impossible miracle, the half-breed had survived his plunge into the creek the night before. And, with Mexican cunning, he had lain in wait for Trenton's return.

"You might as well reach for a cloud, Border Eagle!" came Ace-high Burnes' taunting voice at Trenton's side. "A word from me, an' Pancho will blast the brains from your head."

CHAPTER VII.

GUNPOWDER PAYOFF.

IMPOTENT rage shot through the Border Eagle in a consuming flood. Letting the half-drawn Peacemaker slide back into holster, the bayed lawman raised his arms aloft before the menace of Pancho Smith's Winchester.

"*Bueno!*" chuckled the *mestizo*, his bare feet skidding down the face of the cutbank in a miniature avalanche of dirt. "We let Señor Trenton take us to thees Evil Speerit Gulch before we keel heem, *no es verdad?*"

The Border Eagle stepped back a pace before the half-breed's advance. Once he had been disarmed, the lawman knew his number was up. He could not be sure if Pancho had cranked another cartridge into the firing chamber of the carbine. If not, there was a thousand-to-one chance he could get his own guns from leather before—

"The Eagle's fixin' to draw,

Pancho!" warned Ace-high Burnes sharply. "If he lowers his hands, gut-shoot him. We can't take any chances."

It was too late for the Eagle to put his half-formed notion into action. Reaching out with his rifle muzzle, Pancho hooked the front sight under the curved stock of the waddy's gun and flipped it deftly from holster.

Then, remaining at arm's length, Pancho emptied Trenton's other scabbard.

"Back up, *señor!*" snarled the *mestizo*. "Eet ees better that I do not have to tote thees *carbina*."

The Border Eagle moved back, his jaw clamping grimly as he watched the half-breed lay aside the rifle and pick up one of the Colt .45s.

Then, never taking his eyes off his prisoner, Pancho sidled over to the jackpine where Ace-high Burnes was watching the drama, and tugged his Mexican *cuchillo* from its sheath.

A quick slash of the razor-edged knife severed the lariat which bound the tinhorn against the pine bole. Then, turning his back to Pancho, Burnes waited until the blade had cut the knots which pinioned his wrists.

A cruel gleam kindled in Burnes' red-shot eyes as he chafed the circulation back into his numb fingers.

"Sort o' takes the marrow out o' yore backbone, don't it, Trenton?" taunted the outlaw, stooping to recover the other six-gun. "Pancho had sense enough last night to know you could pot-shoot him while he was wadin' the crick. So he swum under water long enough to get out o' range."

Pancho laughed harshly as he picked up the bits of rope which he had cut from his chief's wrists.

"When I got out of thos' creek, I bandaged myself up," explained the *mestizo*. "An' then, *caramba!* I fall asleep. When I wake up, the sun

she ees high. I sneak back to camp an' find you are gone, Border Eagle. That ees when we lay our trap—weeth Señor Burns for bait. Eet worked *muy bien*, eh?"

ACHE-HIGH BURNES leaped over to snatch up the glittering gold nugget which Trenton had brought back from Evil Spirit Gulch as proof of his discovery of Chief Silver Skull's bones.

"This nugget is lucky, Pancho!" gloated the outlaw. "It goes on my watch chain."

Burnes thrust the nugget into a pocket of his frock coat and then quickly leveled his Colt at the Border Eagle.

"Tie his hands ag'in, Pancho!" ordered the gambler. "Trenton just got through sayin' he was intendin' to ride back to Evil Spirit Gulch and fill my saddle pockets with gold dust. I reckon he'll guide us to Chief Silver Skull's carcass—an' this time he'll pull no tricks!"

The Border Eagle lowered his arms and put his wrists together. Pancho, letting Burnes keep a gun drop on the prisoner, busied himself knotting Trenton's hands together, drawing the bit of riata so tight it made the lawman wince inwardly with pain.

Ten minutes later they were splashing across the creek once more, with the two outlaws flanking Trenton.

The Eagle tried to marshal his thoughts, but his brain refused to function. The bitterness of utter defeat gripped him with a cold, numbing paralysis. It was foolish to attempt drawing his two captors away from Evil Spirit Gulch; that would only goad them into putting a bullet in his belly and staking him out, helpless, on some handy ant hill to die.

On his round trip to Evil Spirit Gulch, Trenton's pony had left an

easily read trail which the outlaws could have followed without him. But Ace-high Burnes, with four aces in his hand and a fat pot at stake, was determined to play his hand eagily. There was time enough to blast a slug into Trenton's heart, after the El Dorado gold was actually in his possession.

The sun beat down pitilessly on the three riders, but the Border Eagle's back felt like an icicle. Fleetfoot's hackamore was dallied to Burnes' saddlehorn, preventing any chance of spurring for a getaway where the trail narrowed and forced them to ride single file.

Then the rocky mouth of Evil Spirit Gulch came into view, and Fleetfoot, seeming to sense that this was their destination, came to a halt.

"The skeleton and the gold are up on the right-hand rim," the Border Eagle said. "From here on you have to hoof it."

Burnes' eyes flashed malevolently as he swung out of stirrups and gestured for Trenton to do likewise.

"You're takin' us there, busky," he repeated. "You tricked us yesterday. You might try it ag'in. Only this time, I doubt if you got a handy getaway cave to rabbit into."

Prodded along by a gun muzzle in his spine, the Border Eagle started up the rocky, cactus-dotted shoulder of Evil Spirit Gulch, Burnes and the half-breed close at his heels.

The gunhawks remained close at his back as Trenton pushed his way into the ocotillos which hedged in the bones of Chief Silver Skull and his pony.

Trenton suffered the agonizing sensations of a condemned prisoner mounting the steps of a hangman's scaffold, as he burrowed his way into the rimrock clearing and poked a boot toe at the horse's skeleton.



"O. K.—there you are," the Eagle said heavily. "The gold is in them canvas sacks there."

Ace-high Burnes and Pancho Smith bounded like cougars to stand in front of Trenton, staring down at the little cascade of glittering golden grains which spilled from the torn saddlebag.

Then Burnes was on his knees, plunging his left hand into the El Dorado treasure, sifting the heavy golden dust through his fingers.

"Gold!" the gambler cried. "Old Silver Skull's loot, just like my dad used to tell me about when I was a button!"

FOR the moment, Ace-high Burnes' attention was shut out to his surroundings, his eyes riveted on the fabulous treasure sifting under his fingers.

And it was the one moment that Trig Trenton could strike with any hope of success. The Border Eagle's arms were tied in front of him, his holsters empty. But a well-placed kick to the gambler's temple, then a desperate lunge at Pancho Smith before the half-breed could get his six-gun into the clear—

In the act of bracing his muscles for the lunge, the Eagle saw that he was not alone in plotting Burnes' destruction.

Bending over the gambler's back

like some predatory animal, Pancho Smith's right hand stole to the hilt of his Mexican knife and slid the ten-inch blade noiselessly out of its sheath.

The half-breed's face had frozen into the mask of an incarnate devil, his eyes glittering with murder lust. Written there was all the hate and loathing which Pancho Smith had long held against the dominating man whose pay he drew.

One stabbing thrust in the back arced so inviting under his knife, and the *mestizo* would not have to take a paltry share of Chief Silver Skull's gold.

The Border Eagle's throat twisted in an involuntary effort to cry out, as he saw the sun flash blindingly on Pancho's uplifted blade. But no sound came.

A sixth-sense instinct warned Ace-high Burnes of peril behind him, or else he saw the shadow of Pancho's knife arm poised for the death stroke.

Whirling on his heels, Burnes lunged sidewise to escape the down-stabbing thrust. At the same instant, the gambler jabbed his Colt into Pancho's stomach and jerked trigger.

Caught off balance, the *mestizo* was knocked reeling into the spiny ocotillos by the impact of the bullet which smashed his spine.

Uttering a string of oaths, Ace-high Burnes bounced to his feet and lunged after the staggering breed, triggering point-blank slugs into Pancho's head and chest.

Simultaneously, the Border Eagle went into action. A kicking boot plowed through the skeleton ribs of Chief Silver Skull's horse, sending curved bones flying in all directions.

Then his trussed arms were plummeting down to close on the curved stock of the dead Indian chief's ancient cap-and-ball Dragoon revolver, lying in the grass.

As Pancho fell dead at Burnes' feet, the tinhorn spun about to face his prisoner, forgotten in the brief melee.

For a spine-tingling instant, Burnes stared at the round black bore of the gun which had appeared magically in Trenton's trussed hands. The Eagle's thumb was earring the big gun hammer to full cock, and Burnes knew shoot-sign when he saw it. The fuming Colt dropped from his grasp and he shot his arms aloft as he choked out:

"You win, Trenton. I don't know where you cached a hide-out gun, but you—"

Then a queer grin twisted the gambler's lips as his eyes darted from the Dragoon pistol in the Eagle's hand to its mate in the time-stiffened holsters girdling Chief Silver Skull's skeleton. And in that instant, Burnes knew the truth.

"You're bliffin' me with a horse pistol!" sneered the outlaw. "You grabbed that old blunderbuss out o' Silver Skull's holster!"

With a triumphant laugh, the gambler stooped to grab the loaded Colt in the dead *mestizo*'s belt.

TRIG TRENTON squeezed trigger then, but his ears were stunned by the hollow click of a firing pin hitting a time-ruined cap.

In the split instant it took Ace-high Burnes to straighten up and whip his own gun out, the Border Eagle hurled the useless Dragoon at Burnes' darting arm.

The tinhorn fell back with a bawl of agony as the ancient gun rapped his breastbone, but he maintained his grip on Pancho's .45.

Charging like a wild Brahma steer, Trenton sent a spike-heeled boot crashing into Burnes' midriff.

The air exploded from the gambler's lungs, and he reeled back in a frantic effort to escape the bayed lawman's desperate onslaught.

Lifting his trussed arms like a bludgeon, the Border Eagle clubbed his knotted fists down in a last-chance blow which pulped Ace-high Burnes' hawkbeak nose and carried him off balance.

The tinhorn's gun sent a bullet streaking toward the sky as his heels teetered on the rimrock of the gulch. Then he lost balance and hurtled outward into the chasm, the scream of a doomed soul echoing as his body plummeted toward the bedrock fifty feet below.

The Border Eagle sagged to his knees to keep from pitching over the brink of the cliff himself. A shudder ran through him as he saw Ace-high Burnes land on his head on the sand-screened granite floor of Evil Spirit Gulch, cracking open his head.

Burnes' boots beat a tattoo on the sand at the exact spot where the Border Eagle had found the Silver Skull, and then he lay still, sightless eyes staring up into an empty sky—empty, save for a lone buzzard which soared on motionless wings, high in the zenith. That buzzard would feast well this day.

The Border Eagle got slowly to his feet and swung his gaze toward the sharp-bladed knife which Pancho Smith had dropped. That *cuchillo* would sever his own bonds.

The cowboy lawman's eyes softened as he stared at the Indian's headless skeleton. He could almost feel old Silver Skull's spectral presence, hear his voice in the breeze which soothed through the spike-leaved ocotillos overhanging the gold cache.

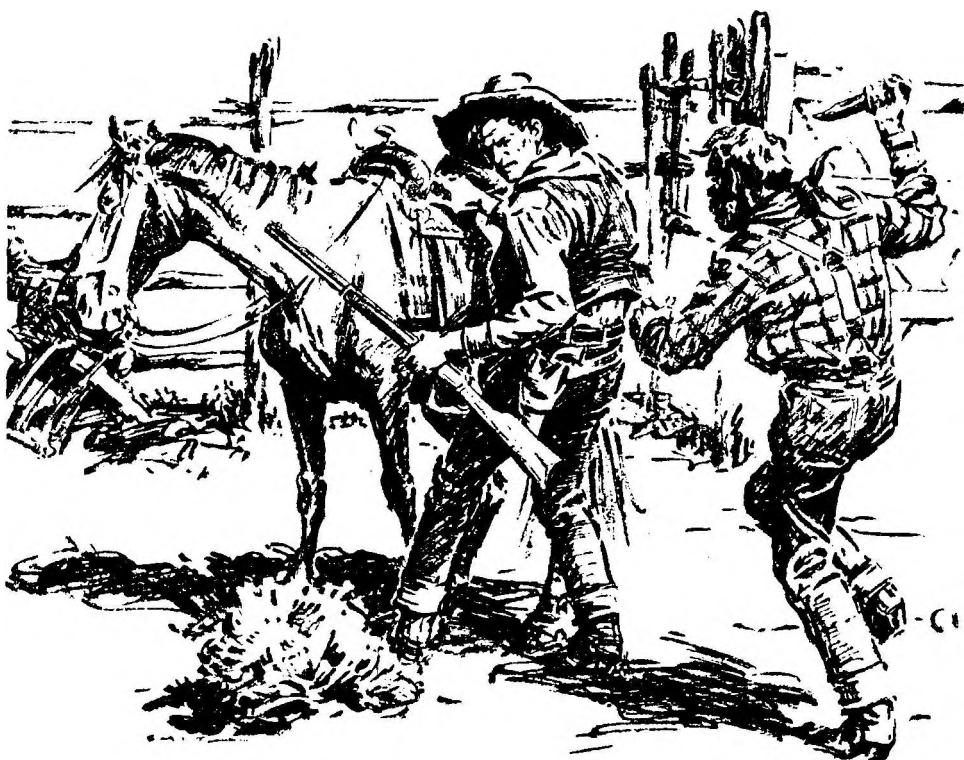
"Thanks, old redskin!" The Border Eagle chuckled. "Thanks for obeyin' the No. 1 rule of the old West. You kept your powder dry!"

Ride the adventure trail with the Border Eagle again in a future issue of Wild West.

RED ROWELS

by CLIFF WALTERS

Clay Sutherland got off on the wrong foot at the Triangle Z, but he never expected to end up wearing one of the worst brands with which the cow country can earmark a man!



Surprised by the unexpected attack, Clay jerked his rifle upward to fend off the knife thrust.

THE two riders were about to round the base of a little knoll and come into sight of the range camp at Jackpine Springs when Rex Fletcher, the stocky, broad-shouldered foreman of the Triangle Z, jerked his horse to a sudden halt.

"Now what?" asked Clay Sutherland. A tall, sandy-haired cowpuncher, he was a stranger to this northern Wyoming range and had hired out to the Triangle Z only yesterday.

"A nice two-point buck just trotted around that clump of pines up there," Fletcher was gazing intently up the steep slope warmed by the noonday sun. "I've got him spotted. You slip down to the cabin—it's just around the bend there—and fetch Deafy Galt's rifle back with you. Hurry up! We'll have some fresh meat in camp."

Responding quickly to the order, Clay rode down the trail, stopped at the old dirt-roofed cabin which was

supposed to be his new home, and went inside. He expected to find the man they called Deafy Galt there. But, although a fire was burning briskly in the stove, no one was in evidence.

Clay didn't waste time. He picked up a rifle standing in the corner of the cabin, a fine-looking rifle with an intricately carved stock, then hurried out to his horse.

He was just putting his foot in the stirrup when he heard a movement behind him. Instead of swinging to his saddle, he withdrew his foot from the stirrup and turned. He was just in time to see the sunlight glint on an upraised knife held in the hand of a gangling, bearded man who, dark eyes burning with rage, was rushing toward him.

More surprised than afraid, Clay jerked the rifle around and upward, to fend off the knife thrust which, it appeared, would soon be coming in his direction. Then the gangling man halted and said: "You blasted young—"

That was all he said. That was all there was time for. A six-shooter roared from the brush-crowded trail that Clay had just ridden and a bullet whistled not far from Clay. A bullet that tore through the chest of the gangling man who rocked back against the cabin wall, and then slumped down, the knife still clutched in his long, clawlike fingers.

CLAY stared at the fallen man, then turned slowly to look at Rex Fletcher who, still holding his smoking gun ready for any emergency, rode on down to the cabin.

"Confounded, half-witted maniac!" Fletcher growled. "What happened?"

"Well, I . . . I didn't see anybody around," responded Clay. "But I knew that deer might be gone any minute, so I just took the first rifle

I seen and started back to—"

Rex Fletcher shook his head regretfully. "I didn't mean to shoot him where I did. But there wasn't much time. He was all set to put that knife in you! He must've thought you was some stranger tryin' to steal his rifle. Well, it's lucky for you, Sutherland, that that buck deer pulled his freight right after you left. Otherwise, I wouldn't've been on hand to save your scalp."

"Maybe he wouldn't've stuck that knife in me," Clay answered. "He was kind o' hesitatin'—he'd started to say something when you shot."

"Maybe I shouldn't've interfered." Fletcher's brown eyes flashed a little. "Maybe I should've waited till *after* he ripped that knife into you before I done any shootin'! I happen to know that you wouldn't be the first man Deafy Galt had killed. Not that he's killed any lately."

"If he's got a reputation like that, how come he's ridin' for the Triangle Z?"

"I don't know the history of every man I hire," was the tart reply. "I didn't ask your history, did I? Not that I'd ever hired you at all if Galt hadn't go so deaf he couldn't hear what a person was saying. You couldn't even write things down for him because he couldn't read. Poor devil! I wish that somebody else's bullet had put him out of his misery!"

"It's a tough deal," Clay answered soberly. "But you only done what you thought was right, Fletcher. You tried to save my life, and maybe you did. That's why I'm thankin' you from the bottom of my heart. If there's anything I can ever do for you—"

"You can help me load Deafy on a horse. Then you can ride back to the ranch with me and tell what

happened. Confound it! I wish I'd never seen that buck deer."

It was a long, somber trip, that twenty miles down the slope of the Tip Rim Mountains, and down to the Triangle Z Ranch, which occupied the broadest valley in those rolling foothills.

Nor was there much comfort in the reception that old Flint Mitchell, the Triangle Z's gray-eyed, stern-jawed owner gave Fletcher and Clay. Having listened to the details of the tragedy enacted at the most remote of his cow camps, Mitchell growled:

"Whatever Deafy Galt might've been in his younger days, he's been as straight as a string durin' the three years he's worked for us, Rex. He stayed out on the range summer and winter and done his work. Maybe he was deaf and a little peculiar, but he was a cowhand."

"He sure was good help," Rex Fletcher agreed ruefully. "Anyhow, up till the time he started gettin' so deaf—"

"I'd have kept him on, deaf or not," Mitchell cut in. "He'd probably be worth two of these range drifters you pick up around town." The cowman looked hard at Clay, then addressed himself to the new puncher. "You'd ought to had better sense to walk, a plumb stranger, into a man's cabin and take his gun."

"That was my fault," said Fletcher. "I told Clay here to get me a rifle. He was only doin' what he was told, and that's what you expect of a hand, ain't it, Flint? Blame me for what happened. Maybe the law will, too. I'll know more about that after I haul Deafy Galt to town."

"I'll go with you," Mitchell said. "After the deal came up the way it did, they can't throw you in jail for savin' a man's life. Let's get started.

You come along with us, Sutherland." Irascibly, he added: "That'll be an easy way for you to earn wages. Ridin' to town on a buckboard!"

Nettled by the brusque attitude of the hard-eyed cowman, Clay said: "I'm not askin' for wages till I get to work on the range, Mitchell. If you think I'm a no-good drifter, which you seem to think, I don't give a hoot if I never go to work for you."

"We've got to have a man for the Jackpine Springs range," Fletcher reminded his boss.

Mitchell shrugged. "All right. If you think this feller can handle it, take him up there—at least, till we can put one of our regular riders at that camp."

Irked by this further brusqueness, Clay said curtly, "I didn't hire out for a temporary job. It was to be steady."

"It might be steady," Fletcher told him. "Anyhow, you'd be willin' to help me out a little, wouldn't you, Clay?"

"Sure," said the puncher, suddenly realizing what the foreman had done for him today. "Sorry I spoke out o' turn, Rex."

AFTER a hearing in the nearest town, Crestville, Rex Fletcher was released with a clean slate. During that hearing Clay Sutherland learned something of Deafy Galt's background.

"Two or three times I've rode past the Jackpine Springs cabin, but I never seen anybody around there," old Sheriff Henshaw told Mitchell. "Maybe that's 'cause Tom—Deafy—Galt seen me comin' first. I never seen him in town, either. I didn't even know you had a man by that name workin' for you, Flint."

"I didn't advertise it," the cowman answered. "Not after I heard that a pair of gun-slingers—Joe and

Tom Galt—had a pretty bad reputation down in the southern part of the State. And that they'd busted out o' jail. After all, this Tom Galt was workin' hard, tryin' to go straight."

"Guess I can't blame you much, Flint," said Henshaw. "Live and let live, eh? Besides, this Deafy Galt wasn't the bad one his brother Joe was. You ever see Joe?"

"Nope," said Mitchell, "but two or three times I've had a hunch Deafy might've had company at Jackpine Springs for short visits. Not that I ever seen the company around there."

"Well, I guess the world ain't lost much by this killin'," was Henshaw's opinion. "We'll dig a hole and plant this ex-badman."

Clay Sutherland felt his hackles rise at the officer's callousness. Reaching in his pocket, he took out a fifty-dollar bill and tossed it on the sheriff's desk. "Buy him a decent box for me, will you, sheriff?" he said.

All eyes turned toward Clay. Flint Mitchell said: "That's fifty dollars more'n I thought you had, Sutherland. You figger you owe Deafy Galt something?"

"A halfway decent burial—yes," was the puncher's reply. "After all, he wouldn't be dead if he hadn't thought I was stealin' a rifle from him." Clay turned and walked out to the Triangle Z buckboard. He had intended to buy some extra clothes today. But he wasn't sorry he had spent his money for what it was going to buy.

FARLY the next morning, Clay and the Triangle Z foreman headed again for the cow camp at Jackpine Springs. After his introduction to the place, Clay didn't relish the idea of living there, but he had promised Rex Fletcher he would. And, besides, he was flat broke now.

"You'll get along all right," the foreman told the new hand, after they had ridden over the Jackpine range together. "The main thing is to see that no Triangle Z cattle work up too high on the mountain and drift across."

"I'll watch 'em," Clay promised, looking at the pasture below the cabin where the few good saddle horses that had been in Deafy Galt's string grazed. "And I'll keep plenty of salt scattered on the licks you pointed out to me."

"Good," said Fletcher, mounting his horse. "Well, I'll make the rounds of the other camps. Probably see you again in about a week."

The foreman kept his word. It was just a week later that he rode up to the cabin leading a grub-laden pack horse. Clay was cooking a belated dinner.

"Seen the boss?" asked Fletcher, dismounting from his pinto, a frisky, high-stepping animal.

"Nope," Clay answered. "Was he supposed to be up this way?"

"Oh, he's lookin' over the range and cattle, somewhere," said Fletcher. "He left the ranch two-three days ago, they said."

Clay grinned. "Then I'd better ride up along the Slope Trail and pick up a busted pack saddle I left there yesterday. If Mitchell happens to see it while he's out checkin' up, he'll accuse me of neglecting his property and jump on me roughshod."

"You can ride along with me," said Fletcher. "I'll be takin' that trail when I leave here."

About an hour later, the two men were riding the trail when the pack horse Fletcher led stumbled on a rock and nearly went down, jerking the lead rope under the tail of the foreman's pinto.

The pinto snorted, threw down his head and made a high, crooked jump that caught his rider off

guard. To save himself, Fletcher grabbed for the saddlehorn. But he was already too far off balance and he was thrown hard on his head and shoulders.

Clay dismounted quickly. "You hurt?" he said. "Here! Let me help you—"

"Not hurt half as much as that blasted pinto'll be!" Fletcher stormed, rising. "Give me that horse you're ridin'!"

Angrily, he jumped to Clay's saddle and roweled the little roan horse that had once been in Deafy Galt's string. The roan was a chunky little horse, good around cattle, but not very fleet in a race. And it was soon a race between the fleeing pinto and the roan.

WATCHING that race as he caught the dragging rope of the gentle pack horse, Clay winced inwardly at the way Rex Fletcher was spurring the little roan—the sharp, impatient spurs of an angry man. That race, one that went up and down the big slope, lasted quite awhile. Then, finally, Fletcher got close enough to rope the pinto and choke him with that ever-tightening noose until the spotted horse was wheezing for breath and his legs were wabbling.

Clay led the pack horse toward the scene and was glad to see that Fletcher eased up on the rope before he choked the pinto to death.

"Busted my bridle rein, confound him!" growled Fletcher. "Well, I'll have to fix that 'fore I can get on him and give *him* a taste of spur rowels. And what a taste it's goin'—" He stopped abruptly, turned to face Clay and said: "Uh—will you ride back and get my jackknife, down there where I got busted? I must've lost it when I fell."

"Sure," Clay mounted the roan again. The little horse was puffing

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and badly sweated and his belly and flanks were bleeding.

Clay hadn't gone far, however, when another rider, Flint Mitchell, came riding around a patch of jackpines just above the trail.

"Hey, you!" Mitchell barked. "What the devil have you been doin' to that horse?" Jaw set, gray eyes blazing, the owner of the Triangle Z drew nearer.

"Hold on, Mitchell," Clay began. "Don't start—"

"The devil I won't start—and finish, too! You no-good horse-butcherin' buzzard! Mighty tender-hearted, wasn't you, about forkin' out money to bury a man? But you'd punish a poor horse—" Mitchell turned, shouted at Fletcher. "Have you fired this buzzard for this?"

"Well, not yet, Flint," Fletcher answered hesitantly. "I . . . I—"

"Why not?" yelled his irate boss. "You know I don't stand for spur butcherin' on *my* horses!" He ranted on with increasing wrath.

Every moment Clay expected Rex Fletcher to interrupt the tirade and tell Mitchell that Sutherland wasn't to blame for the blood dripping from the roan's flanks. But Fletcher spoke no word in behalf of the silent cowpuncher. And, angry as he was, Clay remembered that *he* had no right to speak, lay the blame where it belonged. After all, Fletcher had saved his life.

Finally Mitchell yelled: "You're fired, Sutherland. Put your saddle on your own horse and get out. Me 'n' Rex'll be down to pay you off 'fore you go."

CLAY rode on past the barren spot where Fletcher had been thrown. From there he detoured off the trail and rode across a series of other large barren spots strung among the jackpines on the steep slope above camp. Then he rode on down to camp,

rounded up the horses in the little pasture and corralled them so he could catch his own horse.

He was closing the corral gate when Rex Fletcher walked down from the cabin a short distance above.

"Sorry that the boss is up in the air, Clay," the foreman said.

"I don't blame him," Clay answered bluntly, watching Fletcher pick up a piece of old gunny sack and begin rubbing his spur rowels with it. "Lucky for you old Mitchell's eyes ain't quite as sharp as they was once or you'd be gettin' fired, instead of me. Lucky, too, that you can lie faster'n anybody I ever saw. You didn't lose your jack-knife where you got throwed. It was in your pocket all the time, wasn't it?"

"What of it?" Fletcher countered quickly, impatiently. "You ought to be willin' to give up a forty-dollar job after all I've done for you!"

"You lied about seein' a buck deer that first day we rode up here, too," Clay answered levelly. "It had rained the night before, but there ain't been *one* deer track on them barren spots on that slope."

Fletcher's lips twitched. "You're lyin' now, you low-down ingrate!"

"I'm not lyin'," was Clay's stony answer. "For some reason you wanted to kill Deafy Galt. You knew he'd hide when he seen a stranger comin' to his camp, a stranger who was fool enough to grab that rifle—which you're packin' on your saddle now."

"If you ride down to Crestville an' start tellin' a lot of lies about that killin'," Fletcher rasped, "I'll beat the hell out o' you!"

"Why not start now, you lyin' murderer?" Clay's eyes were blazing a challenge.

Fletcher accepted that challenge by rushing at the cowpuncher and throwing a savage right swing which raked at Clay's ear. Then Clay Sutherland's right fist lashed out, popped solidly against Fletcher's nose, while a short, jolting left caught the foreman hard in the ribs.

Fletcher was as furious as he had been while rope-choking the pinto a little while ago. He launched a vicious attack that carried Clay back against the corral poles, but he could land no victorious punch during that hectic moment when the puncher was partially trapped. And Clay was too cool, too agile. He moved in one direction to escape Fletcher's punishment, then quickly reversed and threw a smashing blow to the foreman's mouth.

Fletcher's head snapped back, and Clay, after planting another blow to the same spot, circled away from the corral. Fletcher whirled with him, lashed out with a hard right that barely missed—and took a stunning blow over his heart.

"Murderer!" Clay taunted, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

That taunt goaded Fletcher to recklessness, fury that was disastrous for him. Clay, cool and unruffled, pumped blow after blow to face and body. He staggered the foreman, rushed him back against the corral fence, and beat him down to the ground.

"That last punch was for spurrin' that roan horse!" Clay growled. "A roan that's standin' there lookin' at the color of *your* blood now, Mr. Fletcher. Well, get up and I'll—"

"I think he's had enough, Sutherland."

CLAY whirled, saw Flint Mitchell standing there at the corner of the little barn which adjoined the corral.

"I thought I seen a little blood on Fletcher's spurs when him and me was ridin' back to camp," Mitchell said. "When I followed him down here from the cabin an' seen him wipin' his spurs off, I knew he'd been ridin' that roan."

"Yeah, I was," Fletcher admitted, getting up now to recover his fallen six-shooter and replace it in the holster. "I kind o' lost my temper up there on the slope, Flint, but I won't do it no more."

"You're danged right you won't!" snapped old Mitchell. "I'll bet you won't lost your temper no more on Sutherland, either! Nor you won't be off gamblin' no more, up at the little minin' town on top of the mountain, when you're s'posed to be out ridin' Triangle Z range."

"Gamblin'?"

"Yeah, gamblin'. I happened to run into a feller that seen you up there, three-four nights ago. He tells me you're one of their best customers. If I'd known that I'd never trusted you to handle no Triangle Z money. Which you won't handle no more."

"Somebody's been lyin' about me, Flint," Fletcher said. "I swear I ain't—" He stopped, his face blanching as he watched a gangling, bearded man emerge from the little clump of jackpine above the corral.

And as Clay Sutherland looked at that advancing stranger, he felt as if he were seeing a ghost. The ghost of Deafy Galt. Judging from Rex Fletcher's expression, it appeared that he, too, was looking at a ghost.

Silently, leisurely, the gangling man approached. Then, stopping a few yards away, he eyed Fletcher and said evenly: "Maybe you can tell by lookin' at me that I'm Tom Galt's brother. Deafy, you called him."

"Yuh—yeah," Fletcher said,

speaking with difficulty.

"I've been at this camp before," said Joe Galt in that flat, toneless voice of his. "But I knew I wouldn't find my brother here this trip. When I was in Crestville the other day I heard all about Deafy's killin'. How you, Fletcher, saved a cowpuncher from Deafy's knife. This cowpuncher here, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Fletcher moistened his lips.

"Well," said Joe Galt, "you can pay me all the back wages Deafy had comin', Mr. Fletcher. Two years, ain't it?"

"What?" cut in Flint Mitchell. "You always brought Deafy's money out on the range and gave it to him, Fletcher!"

"Did you give it to him?" asked Galt, his dark eyes burning steadily, accusingly at the foreman.

"Why . . . why, sure!"

"You lie," said Joe Galt. "You told my brother that Mitchell was holdin' his money for him. You took that money—stole it—and gambled it away, didn't you? That's why you stacked a crooked deck, Fletcher, and murdered my brother. When Clay Sutherland here accused you of murder a little while ago—before he give you the beatin' I wish my brother could've seen—he wasn't talkin' through his hat."

"I ain't a murderer!" Fletcher croaked. "But you're a thievin' owlhooter tryin' to collect some easy loot—wages that your dead brother already received, and spent."

"Is that the truth?" Joe Galt moved a step nearer.

REX FLETCHER cracked under the strain. "No," he admitted hoarsely. "I took Deafy's money, all right. But I'll pay you—"

"You'll pay, all right," said the bearded man. "You'll pay in the

same coin you made my brother pay in. You tried fists and failed, Fletcher. Now you can try that gun you're wearin'! Here's your chance to kill another Galt—"

Clay saw Fletcher snag down at his hip, jerk free of leather the gun that had killed Deafy Galt. Yet, if Fletcher was handy with that old black six-shooter, he could not quite match the speed and skill with which Joe Galt drew and shot.

Only one wild, harmless shot roared from the gun in Fletcher's trembling hand. Then, with four bullets tearing through him, the foreman fell and lay still against the bottom pole of the corral.

Joe Galt holstered his gun and looked at Flint Mitchell. "Any objection, Mitchell?" he asked quietly.

"Not under the circumstances, no," replied the cowman, regarding with flinty gray eyes the man who had been his foreman. "Maybe it ain't accordin' to law, but murderers deserve death, don't they? About the wages Deafy had comin', and never got—"

"You paid 'em," Galt said, holstering his gun. He turned to Clay. "It was white of you to fork over your hard-earned money to bury my brother, Sutherland."

"I thought the same thing, Galt," said Flint Mitchell. "But I'm payin' that money to Clay here. I can afford it better'n he can. Say! Didn't Fletcher pass along that fifty to you yet, Clay?"

"Nope. He didn't mention it."

Mitchell strode forward, thrust his hand in the dead man's pocket, and came up with a fifty-dollar bill.

"That was Fletcher for you," said Galt. "Well, you two fellers can tell the law what's happened. They'll believe you. I told my friend in Crestville that I was goin' to kill

Fletcher. So now I'll take my brother's rifle off Fletcher's saddle there and drift. Good luck, Sutherland. If Mitchell needs a real man to take Fletcher's job, maybe he'll take you." He thrust out a grimy hand which Clay gripped. Then Galt turned, slid the rifle out of Fletcher's scabbard and disappeared among the same jackpines from which he had emerged a little while ago.

"Here's that fifty-dollar bill, Clay." Flint Mitchell proffered it. "And maybe Joe Galt was right. Maybe you *will* be foreman of the Triangle Z some day. That is, if you can forget that cussin' I handed you this afternoon. Fletcher must've seen me comin', and then got you to straddle that roan in time to let me make a damned fool of myself. Knowin' what I do now, I think it's a wonder you didn't cut loose and give me a dose of knuckle medicine like you give Fletcher."

"Nope," Clay answered. "You was too mad up there to notice that *my* spur rowels wasn't red. And any man that'll rake a horse like that little roan was spur-raked deserves the kind of cussin' you gave me."

"Thanks for lookin' at it that way. And you'll stay?"

"Why not?"

"Good! Well, I guess we'd better start takin' another dead man to town. But we won't hurry too fast. We'll give Deafy Galt's brother time to put some distance behind him." Mitchell pointed to a rider who, riding a black horse out of the clump of jackpines and to the top of the little ridge beyond, paused a moment to wave to them.

Clay waved back and said to his boss: "Yeah. That's what I was thinkin', Flint."



Keeping White at a hard run, Blacky rode recklessly down the steep slope. To carry out his plan, he had to reach the stage station before that coach!

Danger was the spice of life to Blacky Solone—but it looked like a mighty short life when he started probing into the intrigue behind that mysterious band of gold thieves who called themselves the

GHOST RIDERS OF PINE RIVER

by JAMES P. WEBB

CHAPTER I.

SHORT-CUT TRAIL.

THE trail along which Blacky Solone was riding was a narrow and precipitous track across a brushy Arizona mountainside. A Wells Fargo agent at a stage station a few miles east, telling Blacky about this little-used trail, had described it as a short cut into Milltown, which was on the eastern edge of Pine River Valley. Blacky was

working for Wells Fargo as an undercover detective, and he hoped to enter the sawmill town without attracting too much attention.

When he saw the gleam of sunlight on metal, in the brush about fifty yards above the trail, Blacky had only time enough to lean forward in the saddle before the shot came.

The report of a rifle whipped out sharply and the detective felt the drive of a bullet against the upper

part of his right arm. Thinking fast, Blacky pretended that the slug had killed him.

He reeled in the saddle. Then tumbled off the horse and rolled over the edge of the narrow trail. His big body made a crashing sound in the lower brush. His black horse ran a few yards farther along the trail and stopped.

BLACKY, scarcely hurt, grabbed the slender trunk of a stunted yellow pine and broke his plunging fall down the steep slope. He lay still for a few minutes and his black eyes searched the brush above the trail where a drift of powder smoke was dissolving slowly into the thin air. From his prone position, nearly seventy-five yards below the spot from which the shot had come, he could detect no movement in the brush.

After five minutes of waiting, Blacky heard the voices of two men on the pathlike trail directly above him. One of them was saying: "Ain't no doubt that was him, is there?"

The other voice sounded scornful. "Of course it was him. Big hombre, ridin' a black hoss and wearin' black duds mostly. Ain't many strangers rides this trail."

"Any use to go down and see if he's dead?"

"Naw. I've seen too many of 'em fall. He's dead. Come on."

After another minute or two, Blacky's ears caught the faint, receding pound of hoofs beyond the first curve to the north.

The undercover man sat up. Blood had soaked through the upper part of his shirt sleeve, where there was a bullet hole. Some of the blood, running down his arm, appeared on the back of his big, blunt-fingered hand. A quick examination showed Blacky that the rifle slug had ripped through the skin and

flesh at the back of his upper arm, missing the bone and making a bloody but shallow wound.

Well, Blacky thought with a grin, it was lucky he carried that turpentine and clean cloth for bandages in his saddlebag.

He climbed back to the trail, picking up his hat on the way, and whistled for his horse. When the big black horse, whimsically named White, had answered the call, Blacky changed his mind about mounting, and climbed up to where the bushwhackers had lain in wait for him.

Blacky Solone was a big man, upward of six feet four, with a deep chest and vast shoulders. His eyebrows and curly hair were black, and his lean, strong face swarthy. He wore black chaps, black hat, black boots; and even his shirt was dark gray. The only touches of contrast except for the brassy gleam of the cartridges in his belt loops, were the beaded buckskin vest, the silver spurs, and his white teeth.

Blacky's skill at reading sign was unequaled by any other white man in the Southwest, and he learned several things now by a brief study of the trampled ground where the bushwhackers had stood. Two men had been here for quite a while, probably two or three hours. One of them smoked cigarettes rolled in brown paper; the other chewed tobacco. One was a heavy man; the other was slighter in build. The smaller man had fired the shot with a .30-30 carbine.

Had the bushwhackers mistaken him for someone else? Blacky wondered. Apparently they hadn't, for they had mentioned that the man they were after rode a black horse and wore dark clothes. Had somebody warned the bushwhackers, then, that a Wells Fargo detective was on the way to Milltown to find out what was happening to the

money shipped out by the big mill owners? Blacky frowned at this thought and went down to the trail.

PINE RIVER was shallow and, at the point where the trail crossed, not wide. Blacky dismounted at the edge of the water, removed his vest and shirt, and bathed his wound. He had just finished bandaging it and had mounted again when the soft fall of hoofs on the trail behind him caught his attention. He reined White around and waited.

A rider came around the curve in the trail and halted abruptly. For a moment the two men stared at each other in silence.

The stranger was at least six feet tall. He had a hard face with pale eyes as sharp as gimlets in the shadow of his black hat. He wore a black suit and rode a black horse. There was a gun holstered under the long tail of his coat.

Blacky grinned. "Don't reckon we need to glare at each other. My name's Blacky Solone, and I'm headed for Milltown."

The stranger's eyes did not change expression, but a faint smile tugged at his thin lips. He touched his black horse lightly with spurs and moved up. "I'm Bone Eccles. I hear they've got some good games runnin' in Milltown."

Blacky chuckled. "Bone?" He turned his horse and rode beside the stranger.

They splashed across the ford and swung to the left toward the town of the big sawmills.

"Name's Bonaparte," Eccles said shortly—"but don't laugh!"

Blacky eyed his companion obliquely. This hombre answered the description of the man the bushwhackers had been waiting for quite as well as Blacky did. Though their clothing looked nothing alike, both were dressed in black.

Eccles, apparently a professional gambler, stared at Blacky's shirt sleeve intently. "None of my business, of course," he said at last, "but that blood looks kinda fresh."

"Not an hour old," Blacky answered. He told Eccles about the shot from the brush and mentioned the bushwhacker's remark about the black horse and the black clothes. He added slyly: "Thought I was you, I reckon."

Eccles' eyes narrowed. "Nobody knows I'm around here. Nobody knew I was coming here. I aim to buy chips and see if I can get some of the money that's floating around Milltown." He paused, then added casually: "You're here on business, I reckon?"

"I'm goin' to Milltown to see if I can find a new shirt big enough for me," Blacky drawled.

THE trail led away from the river in a long, leftward curve through thickets of pine. Blacky and Eccles forded a tributary stream, which was deep but narrow. Beyond the creek the undergrowth thinned out and, abruptly, the two riders found themselves at the edge of the town.

Along the creek, for as far as Blacky could see, were rough sheds—mostly open roofs supported by posts—which sheltered milling machinery. Beyond the sheds were great piles of logs, mostly yellow pine and white fir, both of which grew abundantly nearby. Great stacks of lumber, neat structures taller than the sheds, were everywhere.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, but Milltown was still as busy as a colony of ants. Some of the mills were running, and Blacky could hear a nearby saw cutting lustily through a long pine log. Dozens of men were at work under and around the mill sheds.

People were hurrying along the

streets beyond the mills. Heavy wagons, some of them with two trailers, were being loaded with lumber. Other wagons, bearing machinery, supplies or merchandise, were being unloaded. These freight wagons were everywhere; some of them, the lighter ones, were drawn by four or six horses; the heavier ones with trailers had sixteen, even twenty, horses or mules.

A few hundred yards from where Blacky and Eccles watched, a long line of freight wagons rolled along the main road, and a stagecoach moved briskly out of town.

Blacky looked at his companion obliquely. Which one of them had those bushwhackers intended to kill? If the clever thieves of Pine River Valley knew that Blacky Solone was a Wells Fargo man, the danger of his job here would be greatly increased. And if they knew, how did they find out?

He said casually: "Did you ever hear of the Ghost Riders, Bone?"

Eccles started almost imperceptibly. He jerked his head to look at Blacky, but instantly his poker face became expressionless again. When he spoke, his words were clipped, laconic, indifferent:

"I don't believe in ghosts."

Blacky chuckled, and his inky eyes gleamed. "Neither do I, but there's some hombres in this valley who call themselves the ghost riders because they can steal without bein' seen or leavin' tracks. Don't let 'em haunt you, pard."

Bone Eccles' eyes became sharp and narrow. "I'm not interested in ghost riders—unless they try to steal the jackpot." He touched his horse with spurs and moved on. "Maybe we'd better not ride in together," he added gruffly over his shoulder. "I've got no confidence in a ghost's ability to shoot straight."

Blacky laughed softly, reined to the right, and skirted the huge lum-

ber yard. Bone Eccles rode straight on toward the main street.

CHAPTER II.

HOST RIDERS.

After buying a new dark-gray shirt and putting it on at the store, Blacky had his bullet-punctured arm dressed by a doctor. The wound was slightly painful and threatened to be sore, but Blacky paid little attention to that. It would not hamper his movements much.

Leaving the doctor's house, Blacky put his horse in a nearby livery stable and went back toward the eastern edge of town. He passed two large saloons which were filled with noisy mill hands. The buildings were mainly of pine lumber, and there were a few painted houses. The main street was wide, and the stagecoach and wagon road was wide enough for two-way traffic. Beyond the edge of town a heavy-timbered bridge spanned Pine River on this road.

Blacky had known something about the town before he ever saw it—things which the division superintendent of Wells Fargo had told him. He knew that there was no bank in Milltown, and much money. Profits from the mills were shipped out in the Wells Fargo strong boxes, with a shotgun messenger riding beside the driver on every trip across the rough, mountainous country.

Wells Fargo's best Milltown customer was Grant Remsley, owner of the biggest mill outfit in the valley. Remsley's property was at the end of the line of mills, near the trail by which Blacky and Eccles had entered town. Blacky wanted to talk with Remsley and he started toward the man's office.

The Remsley Milling Co. had steam engines, a stave mill, and even a planer. It was nearly dark now,

and the mill workers had finished their day. Blacky, standing under the edge of the shelter, stared at Remsley's equipment. He whistled softly as he tried to estimate how much money Remsley had paid some freighter to transport all this machinery, part by part, and assemble it here.

Blacky knew little about saw-mills; he didn't even know the names of some of these pieces of equipment, but he could see that they were heavy and expensive. Doubly costly when they had to be freighted hundreds of miles over desert and mountain to the scene of operations. Remsley's business would need to be good.

It was no wonder that the so-called Ghost Riders had seen fit to steal Remsley's money. But how had they accomplished it? Blacky knew that there had been several stage holdups by masked men. There was no mystery about that, except the identity of the robbers.

But on two occasions a locked strong box had left Milltown with a shotgun messenger practically sitting on top of it. There had been no holdup either time. Yet when the box was unlocked at its destination, it was found to contain nothing but ordinary desert rocks. The first time this happened, both the driver and the guard had been accused and fired. Then the same thing happened a second time.

Blacky had learned that Wells Fargo had been using a special padlock on all their strong boxes for some time. The same key would unlock all the locks, but the company controlled all the available keys. Keys were possessed only by the agents at points where consignments might need to be opened, and all keys had been carefully accounted for. The agent at Milltown had one. Tenders at way stations along the road did not. And neither

the drivers nor the guards had been given keys.

Yet, on two occasions, money had been replaced by worthless rock, and the shotgun messengers swore that it simply couldn't have happened. It was the work of the Ghost Riders.

Wells Fargo had lately hired Blacky Solone. For a brief time, Blacky had once been a Texas Ranger, but his turbulent spirit had chafed under discipline. He had wandered over Texas and New Mexico and into Arizona, working at one dangerous job after another. He called himself a trouble hunter, and his present job promised plenty of it.

REMSLEY'S office was a pine board shack. The door was not locked, but there was nobody inside. Evening shadows made twilight in the room, but Blacky was able to see fairly well yet. The office contained a desk, an unpainted pine table on which were three ledgers, a lamp, and a white envelope. There were two chairs, one at the desk and the other near the table.

Blacky stepped to the table and glanced at the envelope. This action was casual, but his interest quickened as soon as he saw the writing on the envelope. Grant Remsley's name; no address. The Ghost Riders had a habit of leaving letters around, boasting that they could rob without being seen or leaving tracks.

Blacky picked up the unsealed envelope and drew out a small sheet of paper. The message was carefully lettered in pencil:

REMSLEY: You can find the man you sent for in the brush across the river. Don't send for any more detectives. You can't catch us, anyway. We don't leave tracks and can't be seen.

THE GHOST RIDERS.

Blacky frowned as he put the paper back into the envelope and

dropped it on the table. Those bushwhackers who had tried to kill him were Ghost Riders—but they had left tracks this time!

Somebody, in the past two hours, had left this message here in Remsley's office. The Ghost Riders thought that Blacky had been hired by Remsley. They had watched for a big man dressed in black and mounted on a black horse, and Blacky had answered the description. But Bonaparte Eccles was Remsley's detective.

Even though the outlaws didn't know that Blacky was a Wells Fargo man, the fact that they thought him a detective working for Remsley would make his position just as precarious as if they knew the truth. When the renegades found out that Blacky was still alive they would be shooting at him again.

This might give Bone Eccles a free hand; but was Eccles capable of ferreting out "ghost" riders and finding out how money had been stolen from locked and guarded strong boxes? Blacky wished to do that job himself, and it was unfortunate that Remsley should have hired a detective just at this time.

LOST in thought, Blacky was slow in hearing the door open. He turned with a slight start when a voice asked sharply: "What you doing in here?"

The man in the doorway was a lithe hombre, neat in leather jacket, gray pants and low-heel laced boots. His face was bronzed, his blue eyes sharp, and his mouth and chin strong. Behind him, just outside the doorway where the light was a little better, were two rough-looking men in range clothes.

"I want to see Remsley," Blacky drawled. "This is his office, ain't it?"

"Yes, and I'm his superintendent, Vincent Dawson. What's your

business with Remsley?" The blue-eyed man moved forward a little. "You can talk to me."

Blacky's eyes ranged past Dawson to the two other men who had come to the doorway. One of these was a big hombre whose right cheek bulged with a quid of tobacco. The other was smaller, slimmer, and a brown-paper cigarette was hanging loosely at one corner of his weak mouth. Both wore riders' boots and gun belts.

Blacky brought his gaze back to the superintendent. "Glad to meet you, Dawson. I'm Blacky Solone, lookin' for a job."

Dawson stared. "Blacky Solone?" His gaze took in Blacky's appearance from black hat to black boots. "Never heard of you," he said after a moment. "What can you do?"

"Ought to be something around a mill I could do," Blacky said, his glance going to the two men behind Dawson again.

Both of these men were staring open-mouthed at Blacky. And, although it was now too dark to be certain, Blacky thought they turned pale. They answered the descriptions Blacky had built up while he was studying the sign left on the mountainside by the bushwhackers.

"What's that behind you?" Blacky asked.

Dawson indicated first the big man, then the smaller one. "Steve Finke and Lon Gorgan. Roustabouts."

Blacky grinned. "They look like cowpunchers. If they can be roustabouts, I reckon I can handle the job, too."

Big Steve Finke turned his head and spat a brown stream. He scowled, and his voice had a growling sound: "What's it your business what we look like?"

Dawson said sharply: "Shut up, Steve," and continued to stare at Blacky. "There aren't any openings

here just now, Solone. Sorry."

Blacky nodded. "I might as well be goin', then."

He started toward the door, but stopped when footsteps sounded outside. Steve Finke and Lon Gorgan stood aside to allow a heavy-set, dark, strong-jawed man in a brown suit to enter the shack.

Dawson said: "This hombre asked for a job, Mr. Remsley, but he doesn't seem to know anything about the work, so I didn't hire him. Says his name's Blacky Solone."

GRANT REMSLEY, about forty-five years of age, was well-groomed, and he had a slightly arrogant manner. He chewed at the stub of a cigar and looked at Blacky in the half light. Then he moved forward and sat down behind the desk, from which point he looked at Blacky again.

"All right, Dawson," he said shortly. "I'll talk with him a minute."

Thus dismissed, the superintendent shrugged and turned toward the door. Blacky heard him going away with Gorgan and Finke.

"Did you really want a job here?" Remsley asked, low-voiced.

Blacky grinned at the mill owner. Then he stepped sidewise, picked the envelope off the pine table and dropped it on the desk in front of Remsley.

"Happened to see this warnin' from the Ghost Riders," he drawled. "They say you'll find your detective in the brush across the river, but don't go over there lookin' for him. The man you're lookin' for is in town now, and I reckon he'll be in to see you when he's ready."

Remsley chewed his cigar. "I thought maybe you were the man I expected. Who are you?"

"Just a Texan out of a job. How many people know you sent for a detective?"

"Nobody was supposed to know it but Dawson and me," Remsley said gruffly. "But it seems as if—"

Blacky turned quickly as the door opened. "Here's your man now, so I'll be goin'."

Bone Eecles, in the doorway, stared at Blacky in the gloom. "You here?"

"Just leavin'," the big Texan drawled. "Maybe you hombres better not light the lamp."

When neither of the men spoke, Blacky went outside into the gathering darkness and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER III.

FLAMING GUNS.

BLACKY did not move away from the shadow of the office wall at once. His inky eyes roved across the dark bulk of the log piles to his left and the lumber stacks to his right. His careful gaze searched slowly among the shadows.

Closer together than the houses of Milltown, these lumber stacks, and more likely to hide an enemy with a gun. Blacky was remembering that the two men who had tried to kill him on the mountainside still thought that he was Remsley's detective; and, although he couldn't have sworn to it in a law court, Blacky was certain that he knew who those two bushwhackers were.

The shadows among the lumber stacks were growing darker by the minute. If anybody lurked there, Blacky's sharp eyes could not detect them.

The big man moved quickly to the nearest stack of lumber, put his back against it, and stared at the bulk of the log piles. The steam engine fires were banked, the saws were motionless, and the tangy odor of fresh-cut pine was heavy in the air. The silence was so intense that Blacky could hear the faint rumble

of a heavy wagon in Milltown's main street.

Everything here seemed quiet. It was a time of rest, a breathing spell for industry, and peace. But the danger-trained rider of trouble trails was not deceived by this atmosphere. Blacky was uneasy. He knew that even a bogus ghost wouldn't make much noise.

A dark figure came around the far corner of Remsley's office. It was Vince Dawson, the mill superintendent. Blacky stood very still, watching. The door opened and the man stepped inside. The door closed. There was no light inside the office.

Blacky stepped past the edge of the lumber stack and, with a sudden gathering of muscles, he lunged for the next stack. A bullet whispered past his face, and off to the right a six-gun blasted the silence.

The trouble hunter landed in a crouch and his heavy double-action Colt seemed to rip the night apart with three roaring shots.

He caught a glimpse of a dark figure ducking behind a lumber stack; a smallish man who seemed to stumble and fall as he disappeared. But Blacky couldn't be sure that any one of his bullets had found the mark, or even that the man he had glimpsed was the same size as Lon Gorgan. It was merely an impression.

The door of Remsley's office flew open. Vince Dawson, followed more cautiously by Eccles and Remsley, ran out. The mill superintendent had a gun his hand.

Blacky called out: "Somebody shot at me, Dawson."

Dawson stopped at the sound of Blacky's voice. "But didn't hit you, eh? Who was it?"

"Don't know," Blacky replied. "Acted like a ghost."

"Ghost!" Dawson said scornfully.

"Come on, let's see what we can find."

With Dawson in the lead, all four of the men started around the lumber stack. The mill foreman strode off into the darkness, directly toward the stack beside which the hidden gunman had been standing. Then he stopped abruptly and looked around.

"Shot sounded like it came from in here somewhere," he said vaguely, "but there are so darned many of these stacks."

Blacky pointed a blunt forefinger. "Straight ahead."

THERE was nobody behind the lumber stack now. Blacky struck a match and held it close to the ground. Three drops of blood were visible on a short piece of board, and a few feet away Blacky found another crimson splotch. Somebody had gone away from here wounded, but it was obvious that there hadn't been enough blood lost to make a trail that could be followed in the dark.

Bone Eccles said, low-voiced: "Look here, Solone. You told Mr. Remsley that I was the man he'd sent for. How'd you get that idea?"

Blacky chuckled. "Those bushwhackers left a letter in Remsley's office, sayin' that they'd shot the man he sent for. I heard one of 'em say they were layin' for a big man in black clothes, ridin' a black horse. Well, they shot at me, and I wasn't workin' for Remsley. That's how I got the idea, pard."

"Yes," Vince Dawson said. "You'd think of that, of course. But Eccles isn't a detective." He turned and peered at Blacky narrowly. "Just who are you, anyway?"

"Nobody much," Blacky said softly.

Remsley, Dawson and Eccles started back toward the office, and Blacky walked over to Main Street

alone. Dr. Gamble, who had treated the bullet wound, lived past the center of town toward the west, and Blacky hurried along the crowded street. Suspecting that whoever had shot at him would be needing a doctor, he stood in the shadow of a pine tree beside a closed store, across the street from the doctor's house.

The big Texan had not waited long when he saw Steve Finke walking along the opposite sidewalk. Finke was in a hurry, and his high-heeled boots thudded on the planks. He turned in at Dr. Gamble's and knocked on the front door.

Blacky stood motionless in the shadow of the tree, his inky eyes watchful. Gamble came to the door and Finke said something in a low, swift voice, after which Gamble turned back into the house. He reappeared with a black bag and hurried away with Finke.

Staying on the opposite side of the street and keeping close to the building fronts, Blacky followed them. When the doctor and Finke turned into a side street and entered a shack, Blacky crossed over and stepped into the yard. Toward the rear of the house, and well off to one side, he crouched in the shadow of a patch of young pine which hadn't been cleared away yet. There was a lighted window on this side of the house.

Maybe, Blacky thought grimly, more than one of his three bullets had hit Gorgan. If the little bushwhacker wasn't able to go to the doctor's house, he must be pretty seriously hurt.

BLACKY was about to move from his crouched position when his searching glance caught a dark figure lurking in the shadows across the street. The Wells Fargo detective loosened his gun in its holster and waited.

Soon the dark figure moved across the street toward the shack. Blacky drew a quick breath of surprise as he recognized the black-coated Bonaparte Eccles.

Bone darted across the yard and paused at the front corner of the shack. Blacky stood up, lifted his gun out of the holster and moved forward on his toes. Eccles was creeping toward the dimly lit window at the side, and he seemed intent upon possible danger from inside the shack. He did not see Blacky.

The big Texan realized that both he and Eccles must have formed the same plan when they had seen the drops of blood back there in the lumber yard. Watch the doctor's house! Eccles must have known that the bushwhackers were after Blacky by mistake, and that they were tied up with the mysterious outlaw gang.

The front door of the shack opened, and Steve Finke ran out. Blacky was close to Eccles now, and even in the darkness he could see the detective stiffen and twist around. Then, before Blacky could warn Eccles to keep still, the black-coated man had jumped to his feet and was running past the front corner.

Steve Finke wheeled, clawing for his gun as he heard Eccles' running footsteps.

"What the—" Finke's harsh voice was drowned in the roar of his gun.

Instantly, Eccles' gun was blasting, and the weapons of the two men made stabbing lances of flame in the darkness. The crashing roar of the fast shots sounded as if half a dozen guns were in action. Then Steve Finke fell; his six-gun was silent.

Blacky had run to the wall of the house and, as the shooting stopped, he darted around the corner. The door of the shack came open again,

and the bald-headed doctor peered out. Dr. Gamble started violently as Blacky suddenly sprang in front of him.

"W-what—"

"Finke shot at an hombre and got the worst of the deal!" Blacky said, aware that Bone Eccles had wheeled toward him. "How's your patient?"

Dr. Gamble shook his head. "No chance. I told Finke so, and he ran out of the house like a crazy man."

Voices floated along the street and men could be seen running. Blacky pushed Dr. Gamble out of the doorway and went inside. He heard Eccles coming in behind him.

Lon Gorgan lay in a bunk, his slight body covered by a soiled blanket. His mouth was open and his breathing loud. He opened his eyes when Blacky stopped beside him.

"Reckon . . . you . . . got me," he whispered.

Blacky prompted the man with a leading question: "Want to talk, Gorgan—about the Ghost Riders?"

"We was at Brushy Bend . . . when word come . . . Telegraph. We done what . . . we was told . . . Tried—" Gorgan's whispering voice faded, and his eyes closed.

DR. GAMBLE had come back to the bunk, and Eccles was listening intently at Blacky's side.

"He's about gone," the doctor said. "I don't know anything more to do."

Blacky leaned down and called: "Gorgan." And when Gorgan opened his eyes again, Blacky asked: "Who left that letter in Remsley's office?"

Gorgan whispered: "The boss. He . . . done that . . . himself—"

"The boss of the Ghost Riders?" Eccles asked quickly.

Gorgan's eyelids fluttered. His breath bubbled in his throat, and a froth of bloody foam appeared on his lips.

Blacky said: "Gorgan, who are the Ghost Riders?"

Something like a shadow passed over Gorgan's pallid face. His whisper was barely audible: "Don't know . . . about . . . ghosts . . . yet—"

Eccles leaned forward. "Gorgan!"

"He won't tell you anything now," Dr. Gamble said quietly. "He's dead."

Blacky had been aware of excited voices in the yard, and he knew that several men were gathered around the body of Finke in front of the house. Now a voice from the doorway said heavily: "Somebody better be tellin' me somethin'!"

Blacky turned away from the bunk. The man in the doorway was a thick-waisted, beefy-faced man with small, sharp eyes and a tobacco-stained mustache. A badge was pinned to his soiled vest.

"You're the sheriff?" Blacky asked. "Well, there's a dead man here."

Without turning his head, the sheriff spat a stream of tobacco juice. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah, and there's a dead man out there. Who shot 'im?"

"I heard some shootin'," Blacky said, "but it was too dark to see much."

Dr. Gamble spoke quickly. "Sheriff Colston, this man in the bunk is Lon Gorgan. The man outside is Steve Finke. Why don't you go on back to your office and forget it?"

Sheriff Colston removed his hat and scratched his head. "I reckon it is good riddance, at that, doc. Anyhow, I don't figure I'll find out anything." He put the hat back on his bullet head, jerked it vigorously over his forehead, and stepped backward into the darkness.

"Slim Colston means well," Dr. Gamble remarked, "but that's the best that can be said for him. While

he's in office, honest men would do well to do their own fighting against such as these two."

CHAPTER IV. SUSPICIONS.

THE next morning Blacky entered the Milltown stage office while a coach was being loaded for the long trip to Whitewater. Tom Quenton, the Wells Fargo agent, was a serious young fellow, and he was talking earnestly to Grant Remsley when Blacky stepped into the office.

"I want you to see this box locked, Mr. Remsley," Quenton was saying. "I want you to know that the money's in the box when it leaves my hands."

Grant Remsley looked around at the other men in the room. He said grimly: "I hope it'll still be there when the box gets to Whitewater."

Sheriff Colston was there. Bone Eccles leaned against a side wall and tried to appear disinterested in the proceedings. Vincent Dawson, the Remsley mill foreman, stood at the counter beside his employer. A shotgun messenger sat on his heels in a corner, his sawed-off gun beside him.

Blacky crossed the room and stood beside Eccles, who looked at the big man with a faint smile.

"Did you get that list?" Blacky asked.

Eccles nodded. "I got here ahead of the others, and Quenton wrote all the names down for me." He shoved a hand into his coat pocket and came out with a slip of paper. "I made a copy for you—though I don't see why you're interested."

Blacky took the slip of paper. He grinned. "I'm always gettin' into trouble, pard."

He glanced at the writing on the paper, which contained a list of all the stations and all the attendants and agents along the road between

Milltown and Whitewater, as fully as Tom Quenton had been able to supply them.

"I'm riding the stage through today," Eccles said. "If the Ghost Riders pull off an invisible holdup I—" He did not finish the sentence, but left it hanging in the air with a hint of threat against the robbers who left no tracks and couldn't be seen.

Blacky nodded. "Anyhow, Finke and Gorgan won't be hidin' in the brush any more."

Blacky studied the list of names. One of two items on the paper were familiar to him. The station at Brushy Bend—that was where Blacky had stopped on his way to Milltown. The agent there, a stocky man named Mark Anderson, had given Blacky careful instructions about how to find the short-cut trail. A stable attendant named Harve Jilson had been talkative and friendly. There was a large dining room at Brushy Bend where beans, bacon and coffee were served plentifully, and the stages stopped there long enough for the passengers to eat.

Tom Quenton locked the strong box and helped a hostler carry it out and deposit it in the forward boot, where the guard could rest his feet upon it. Four passengers were already aboard the coach.

Eccles strolled outside and watched the strong box while it was being hoisted up; then he got inside the stage. The shotgun guard went out. The driver strolled around a nearby corner, drawing on a pair of buckskin gloves. Grant Remsley and Vince Dawson walked to the door and stood there, watching. When the strong box was in the boot, they went outside.

The agent, Tom Quenton, came in again. Blacky, who had been leaning idly against the wall, stepped over to the counter.

"There's an hombre named Mark Anderson at Brushy Bend," Blacky said casually. "Know much about him?"

"Not a great deal," Quenton said. "He used to be agent here, but didn't like it. About a year ago he made arrangements to take over the Brushy Bend place, and the company sent me here."

"What about Remsley's foreman?"

"Dawson? I don't know. Seems to know his business. He's been with Remsley since the mill started."

"Got many friends?" Blacky asked.

Quenton spread his hands. "In a way. Not exactly popular, I guess. Anderson liked him when he was agent here."

BLACKY went outside and looked toward the bridge beyond the edge of town. The stage was already out of sight, and Blacky knew that he had no time to lose. He walked to the nearest corner, turned into a cross street, and hurried to the livery where he had left White. In five minutes Blacky was riding out of town in the wake of the stage-coach.

The big Texan was putting two and two together, trying to get four for an answer. Remsley had told him that only the mill superintendent, Vince Dawson, was supposed to know that Bonaparte Eccles was coming to investigate the mysterious disappearance of the money from the locked strong boxes. Gorgan, dying, had told Blacky that the letter from the Ghost Riders had been left on Remsley's table by the boss. Had Gorgan meant the boss of the outlaws? Or had he meant his boss at the mill?

Of course, Gorgan and Finke could have overheard talk about the coming of Eccles. Gorgan had said that he and Finke had been at

Brushy Bend station before Blacky arrived there, and had been sent ahead to ambush him after a telegraphed description had been received there. Who had sent Gorgan and Finke?

Mark Anderson, of Brushy Bend station, had once been Wells Fargo's agent at Milltown. But he had turned in his strong-box key, and Brushy Bend was not an "unlocking" station. Wells Fargo had not furnished Brushy Bend with a key. Yet Blacky had a persistent notion that the money had disappeared from the boxes at that station. How?

Blacky disliked to ride a horse hard for nothing, but White could eat up the miles when necessary, and Blacky was in a hurry now. The big horse crossed the wooden bridge fast and went on at a run.

When he sighted the stage, Blacky turned off the trail and rode recklessly down a steep slope. Brush tore at his clothing, but his chaps and buckskin vest protected him. The footing was rough and uncertain, but White raced on.

Blacky was hiding in the thick brush seventy-five yards up the slope on the opposite side of the road when the stage pulled in at Brushy Bend station.

THE buildings at Brushy Bend were arranged in the shape of a square with one end open. Near the road was the office, and the living quarters of Mark Anderson. Twenty yards to one side was the house used as dining room and kitchen. Across the rear was the long, low stable.

The stage came to a halt in front of the dining room. All passengers alighted, and all except Bone Eccles went into the dining room. Eccles stepped out and leaned his black-garbed figure against the front wall.

Mark Anderson came out of the office and hurried across to the coach, said something to the driver

and then stood aside while the driver tooled the coach around the corner and stopped in the shade of the dining room. Eccles moved to the corner and kept his eyes on the stage.

A hostler came from the stable driving six harnessed horses ahead of him. Blacky recognized the long, lanky stable attendant as Harve Jilson, the friendly man with whom he had talked the day before. Blacky realized now that both Anderson and Jilson had seemed eager to persuade him to use the short-cut trail across the mountainside.

The driver climbed down and went into the dining room. The shotgun messenger got down from the high seat, said something to the agent, and followed the driver. Eccles stayed where he was.

Jilson came up with the fresh horses, but he didn't hook them in immediately. He stood beside the coach and rolled a cigarette, while Anderson walked to the corner and began talking with Bone Eccles. Blacky could see Eccles shaking his head.

Jilson, having lit his cigarette, unhooked the tired horses, hooked in the fresh ones, and drove the jaded six to the stable.

Blacky frowned. Bonaparte Eccles acted more like a guard than a detective. Obviously, Eccles was bent upon finding out how the money got out of the box—if it *did* get out. Blacky wished again that Remsley hadn't hired a detective. It looked as if Eccles wasn't going to give Anderson and Jilson an opportunity to make a try for the money this trip.

Blacky decided that he might as well go down to the station and eat. He rode straight down the slope through the brush, crossed the road directly in front of the dining room and dismounted.

Mark Anderson looked at him in

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surprise. "Hello. Find that trail all right?"

Blacky nodded, eying Anderson's blunt features covertly. "It's a nice short cut. Bullets won't fly straight on that trail." He slapped his left hand against the upper part of his right arm and wince. Then he grinned. "Well, not very straight."

Anderson looked startled; his brown eyes widened and then narrowed. He didn't ask any more questions. Mumbling something about a chore, he walked across in front of the dining room and went toward the stable.

Blacky looked at Eccles. "Seen any ghosts?"

Eccles shook his head. "Not yet. If they get the money out of the box this trip I'll know how they did it. I don't believe in ghosts."

"I'll bet anything you want," Blacky drawled, "that they don't get it this time."

Eccles said crisply: "I'll be on the stage every time Remsley sends out money—till some of it disappears. Then I'll know where it went and who got it. They'll try it again some time."

Blacky's swart face looked grim. "If I know what I'm talkin' about, they know you're workin' for Remsley now, pard. You better keep your eyes peeled. They'll be wantin' you out of the way."

CHAPTER V.

WARNINGS.

THE morning air, laden with the scent of pine, was cool and pleasant when Blacky emerged from the Milltown Hotel and paused on the sidewalk to watch the people hurrying along. The drone of the saws along the creek came faintly to his ears. Whole trains of wagons were groaning past, loaded with everything from logs to machinery. Milltown was busy as a beehive, and

there seemed to be no loafers.

Unlike most of the mining camps and cow towns Blacky had visited, the mill town seemed to have few professional gamblers, and he had seen nobody who looked like hired gunmen—except Lon Gorgan and Steve Finke, and they were not there any more.

Blacky crossed the street, walked between a saloon and a store, and strode toward the creek and the mills. This time he did not turn eastward toward the mills owned by Grant Remsley, but headed for one of the smaller outfits. There was a crude sign over the office door:

HAGEN MILLING COMPANY

Blacky opened the door and entered. Hagen's one steam engine was snorting and puffing beyond the rear wall of the office, and a busy

saw buzzed faintly. Here, as nearly everywhere in Milltown, the pungent odor of fresh-cut pine was strong.

A small man with graying hair and deep-set eyes sat behind a home-made desk. He glanced up quickly as Blacky entered.

"I'm lookin' for the owner," Blacky said.

"That's me, Dave Hagen." The man arose, bracing his hands on the flat top of the desk. "What can I do for you?"

Blacky grinned amiably. "I thought maybe you could tell me why the Ghost Riders hit Grant Remsley so hard, and don't bother the other millers? You, for instance?"

Hagen stared. His jaw was set, and his face seemed to grow pale. "They bother us all. Remsley's got the only big outfit here, and he ships

"Put up your hands!" Blacky ordered. "You're under arrest!" But the man wasn't surrendering without a fight—his hand streaked for his gun!



more money, but those thieves get our money, too."

Blacky hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and lifted an eyebrow. "Remsley hired a detective. He's been getting letters from the Ghost Riders. I've heard a heap about how much money he loses, but there's no talk about what others lose."

"We lose," Hagen said, "but Wells Fargo stands good for it. As for letters"—he picked up a folded paper—"what do you call this?"

Blacky unfolded the paper, looked at it and whistled softly. The paper contained neat pencil lettering:

Hagen, you've been making threats. We give you just ten days to get out of Pine River Valley.

THE GHOST RIDERS.

"What are you goin' to do about this?" Blacky asked.

Hagen tossed his head. "Not a thing. They can't bluff me."

"You couldn't sell out in ten days, anyway," Blacky said.

"Grant Remsley would buy," Hagen disagreed. "He'd like to own all our equipment and contracts, so he'd be the only mill man here." He looked at Blacky sharply. "Who are you?"

"Blacky Solone. These Ghost Riders have sort of stirred up my curiosity."

Hagen's deep-set eyes were narrow and steady. "Better let your curiosity settle down then—before you get a bullet in the back."

The Wells Fargo detective chuckled. "Maybe you're right, Mr. Hagen. Thanks."

BLACKY was leaning against the wall of the Wells Fargo office at four o'clock that afternoon when Bonaparte Eccles climbed wearily out of an inbound coach. Blacky fell into step with the black-coated detective.

Workers, coming up from the mill

sheds, were streaming past them toward a nearby saloon. Smoke from the steam engines down by the creek were thinning away into the afternoon air. The day's work was nearly done.

"The money was still in the box when we got to Whitewater," Eccles said, without looking at Blacky.

"Thought it would be," the big Texan said softly. "You rode herd on that box too close, Bone. If you keep it up, the renegades are goin' to get mad at you." He added: "They're clever, but they can't steal the money if it's really watched."

Bone Eccles stopped in his tracks. His pale, narrowed eyes gleamed with suspicion.

"I'm puzzled about you, Solone," he said in a clipped voice. "Part of what you just said sounded like a threat."

Blacky watched Eccles' right hand. "A warnin', Bone. Sometimes a warnin' sounds like a threat. I ain't a ghost, but there's some around, and they know you're on their trail."

Eccles did not relax. He said coldly: "You rode into the station at Brushy Bend at an odd time, Solone. Maybe if I hadn't been watching so closely—"

"Maybe something would have happened," Blacky cut in.

Eccles' pale eyes flickered. "You think the money's been disappearing at Brushy Bend station?"

Blacky grinned. "How could it? Maybe the money don't get out of Milltown."

Eccles' tense muscles relaxed. "Maybe you're right," he conceded. "But my opinion is different. I aim to keep on riding the stage whenever Remsley sends money."

They walked on toward the hotel.

"What about the other mill men?" Blacky asked.

"I'm hired by Remsley," Eccles said.

"Sure," Blacky drawled, "but you might be smart to think about those others, too. I've found out that all the small owners hate Remsley."

Eccles stopped again. "You think some of the small mill owners organized the Ghost Riders to strike at Remsley?" He was frankly skeptical.

"It's an idea," Blacky said. "I got one of those warnings that sound like a threat from Dave Hagen."

They went into the hotel.

THE corner of a white envelope showed under the door of Blacky's room and he slid it out into the open. His name was lettered neatly on the envelope with a lead pencil.

With the envelope in his left hand, Blacky grasped the doorknob with his right, turned it carefully, threw his weight forward and went into the room fast.

Nobody was there.

Smiling faintly, the big trouble hunter drew a folded sheet from the envelope and read the neat lettering. The Ghost Riders were giving him until midnight to be out of Milltown forever!

Blacky tore the warning into small pieces and dropped the fragments on the floor. His inky eyes were thoughtful. Why had this warning been sent to him? Had the outlaws found out that he was a Wells Fargo man? Had he been asking questions of the wrong persons? Or had he showed up at Brushy Bend station at the wrong time? Blacky would have liked to know which of these questions was headed in the right direction, but he knew that he would have to wait a little for the answer.

Somebody knocked loudly on the closed door. Blacky's thoughtful expression faded, and his eyes became watchful and intent. He moved to one side and invited the knocker to enter.

The door opened and revealed Bonaparte Eccles, who stared at Blacky coldly. "Did you do that?"

Blacky lifted an eyebrow. "Do what?"

With his left hand, Eccles drew a white envelope from his coat pocket and flipped it toward Blacky. The detective kept his right hand close to his gun, and his pale eyes never wavered from Blacky's face. The envelope fell to the floor between the two men.

"Read that," Eccles said.

Blacky grinned. He made no move to pick up the envelope. In an unhurried, pleasant voice he inquired: "How long did they give you to get out of town?"

Eccles moved a step forward and shut the door, but his gaze never wavered from Blacky's face. "How do you know who it's from?"

Blacky chuckled. "I got one, too. They gave *me* till midnight."

"That's my deadline, too." The steely edge was gone from Eccles' voice and he seemed less wary now. "I wish I knew who—"

"We might as well work together," Blacky suggested. "Did you know Remsley claims nobody but his mill superintendent knew you'd been sent for?"

Eccles leaned back against the closed door. He nodded. "I've been thinking about that, Solone. Somebody is tipping the robbers off about those money shipments, too. And if you were shot at, in my place, because you wore black clothes, somebody knew Remsley had hired an investigator. But if Dawson's the man it'll be hard to prove on him."

"I doubt if he's the man," Blacky said. "Finke and Gorgan worked around the mill sometimes. Maybe they listened." He picked up Eccles' warning letter and tore it to pieces. "Come on, Bone, let's find some

grub. Then maybe we'll go and talk to Remsley."

CHAPTER VI.

A TRAP IS SET.

BY the time Blacky and Eccles finished eating at a restaurant near the hotel, night had come again. They went out the back door of the restaurant and walked silently through the shadows toward Remsley's office. Both men were tense and watchful, and Blacky knew that his companion was still vaguely suspicious of him. Eccles was watching Blacky as well as the patches of black shadow they passed.

Nothing happened on the way to the mill office, and when they slipped quietly out from among the lumber stacks, they saw a light burning inside Remsley's shack. Neither of them spoke as they approached the door, and Blacky entered ahead of Eccles.

Remsley was alone at his desk and he looked up quickly as the two men entered.

"What do you want now?" he asked gruffly. He took a cigar from his vest pocket, thrust it between his strong teeth and looked at Eccles. "Found out anything?"

"We've got a plan worked out," Blacky said. "We want you to ship money again tomorrow and be sure and tell Dawson about it."

Grant Remsley, leaning back in his chair, looked from Blacky to Eccles and back again to Blacky. He said uncertainly: "I hired Eccles. I don't understand your interest in this. Men don't usually catch robbers for nothing."

"I'm helpin' Bone," the big Texan drawled. "We think maybe your money shipment gets stolen before the stage is out of town."

"You do," Eccles snapped. "I didn't say I thought so."

"Anyhow," Blacky said, grinning

at the scowling mill owner, "we want to catch the thief tomorrow."

Grant Remsley, staring at Blacky intently, leaned forward in his chair and took the cigar from between his lips. "Why, certainly, Solone. I'll send out a money shipment tomorrow, but if you think Vince Dawson—"

Blacky made a deprecatory gesture with his left hand. "That's just an idea. We'll know tomorrow. Eccles will ride on the stage again and I'll be here in town." He looked at Remsley and lifted his left eyebrow. "Some of the other mill men don't like you, Mr. Remsley."

Remsley started. He frowned, staring down at the desk. "That sounds like the most sensible idea I've heard," he said at last. "Some of those fellows might be pulling this Ghost Rider stunt. They may be trying to ruin me."

"Ruin you?" Blacky grinned. "Wells Fargo makes good your losses. And I suppose the small mills are afraid of the Ghost Riders, too."

"They're trying to scare me with threats." Remsley drummed on the desk with his fingertips. "The whole thing is absurd—ghosts, money stolen from a locked box without breaking the lock, everything. It's all done to throw a scare into me. I hadn't thought of the small mills before, but I see it now."

Eccles was staring hard at Blacky. "You mentioned that very thing to me, Solone. Now, you act like you don't believe in it."

Blacky shrugged. "I'm just waitin', pard." He turned toward the door. "Be sure to tell Dawson about the shipment tomorrow."

"If we don't keep our eyes peeled tonight," Eccles warned, "we may be dead in the morning."

"They're just tryin' to scare us," Blacky drawled. "I'm goin' to sleep sound."

Remsley looked from one to the other. "I want to see you a minute, Eccles—alone."

Blacky left them at once and went back to the hotel.

THE hotel clerk gave Blacky four old newspapers which had been gathering dust under the counter. In his room, Blacky dropped the papers on the floor and sat down on the edge of the bed to smoke and think. He did not read the newspapers. He didn't even light the lamp.

One of the things that had made Blacky valuable to the Texas Rangers was his knack for collecting odd facts and assembling them in definite order. He was piecing together some odd facts now, and he believed that he was getting the answer to the Milltown puzzle. Ghost Riders, written threats, disappearing money, shots in the dark—all these things began to make sense to Blacky.

He reviewed the events of the past two days, recalling the shot from the brush on the mountainside, the coming of Bone Eccles, the Ghost Riders' letter which Blacky had found in Remsley's office, the attempt of Finke and Gorgan to kill Blacky among the lumber stacks, the shooting of Finke by Eccles, what Gorgan had said about a telegraphed warning, the dinner stop of the stagecoach at Brushy Bend, the present veiled hostility of Eccles.

Blacky judged that it was midnight when at last he stood up in the darkness. He had heard Bone Eccles go to his room about an hour ago. Faint moonlight filtered through the window near the foot of the bed, and Blacky drew the blind down all the way.

Then he picked up the newspapers, separated the sheets and crumpled them loosely in his hands. He spread three of the crumpled

sheets on the floor under the window. Then he put three in front of the door, where the panel would strike them when it had opened about three inches.

The room doors of the Milltown Hotel had not been furnished with keys, but Blacky knew that he would hear the newspaper rustle if an intruder tried to enter his room.

The Texan's preparations for bed were simple. He removed his boots, put his hat on a chair, hung his buckskin vest and his gun belt on the bedpost, drew the double-action Colt and put it on the bed so that it would be close to his right hand while he slept. Then he lay down.

WHEN the newspapers rustled as the door was pushed against them, Blacky was instantly awake. His big right hand reached unerringly for his gun and he rolled over with lightning quickness. The drawn blind on the window made the room very dark, but Blacky could see a movement at the slightly open door.

Blacky's gun roared twice and the bursts of muzzle flame stabbed the darkness. The room door slammed shut and running footsteps raced toward the rear of the hotel. Blacky was out of bed before the livid flashes from his gun had disappeared. He leaped across the room, kicking the crumpled newspapers out of the way. Down the hallway, a six-gun blasted once as Blacky jerked open the door.

Gun lifted, the Wells Fargo detective stepped out into the dark hallway. Somebody ran toward him, and Bone Eccles' voice rapped sharply: "What's goin' on?"

"Somebody tried to get in my room," Blacky said. "Who shot out here?"

"I did," Eccles said. "Heard shots. When I ran out of my room, saw somebody lunging back through

the hall. Tried my luck, but reckon I missed."

A man in pants and undershirt emerged from the room opposite Blacky's with a lighted candle in his hand and a frightened look in his eyes.

"What's the shootin'?" he demanded.

Blacky grinned at Eccles. The Remsley detective was not wearing his long black coat and gun belt, but otherwise he was fully dressed.

"Don't look like you've been sleepin' much, Bone," Blacky drawled.

Eccles' lean face was grim and hard. "I haven't been sleeping at all. I've been sitting in there with this gun in my hand, waiting." His cold eyes slid over Blacky. "Looks like you've been waiting, too."

Blacky chuckled. "Yes, but I was asleep. If I'd stayed awake, I reckon I'd have tallied a ghost this time."

CHAPTER VII.

BRUSHY BEND.

BLACKY was up early next morning, and an hour before stage time he was at the Wells Fargo office talking with Tom Quenton.

As before, Remsley, Dawson, Eccles and the sheriff were on hand in time to see the strong box locked before it was loaded into the forward boot. This time Dave Hagen was sending a bag of money in the same box, so he was there, too.

Eccles, preparing to board the coach, drew Blacky to one side. "What are you going to do while I'm gone?"

"Stay here." Blacky grinned. "I've got business with the boss of the Ghost Riders. Keep your eyes on that box."

Eccles gave Blacky a straight hard stare. "You know who the leader is?"

"I've got a notion," Blacky drawled. "Hurry back."

Eccles climbed into the coach, the guard and the driver mounted to the box and the stage rolled away. Blacky, smoking a cigarette thoughtfully, stood on the sidewalk till the coach was out of sight.

Then the big Texan moved fast. He got his horse from the livery stable, mounted and rode out of town at a gallop. He did not follow the stage road at all, but headed out through the brush.

When Blacky arrived at Brushy Bend station, well ahead of the stagecoach, White's black hide was streaked with sweat. Blacky dismounted on the slope behind the station, about forty yards from the stable and off to one side where he could see the side of the dining room. He loosened the cinches and crouched in the brush to wait.

The stage rolled in shortly before noon. As before, all passengers, the driver and the guard went into the dining room to eat; and as before the driver moved the coach and horses around to the side where there was a little shade.

Blacky watched closely. Bone Eccles wasn't on the stage. Blacky was not surprised at this. Eccles' absence was just another piece of the puzzle falling into place. When Blacky had remarked that he had business in town with the boss of the Ghost Riders, he had fully expected Eccles to abandon the stage at the edge of town and go back.

The hostler, Harve Jilson, came up with fresh horses, tied the animals to the near front wheel, and went around to the other side, close to the dining-room wall.

Mark Anderson climbed over the wheel and began fumbling in the boot. He tossed something down to Jilson, who grabbed the objects and shoved them into an open space under the dining-room floor. Then

Jilson drew something out, heaved it up to Anderson, and went around the stage to change the horses. Anderson climbed down and strolled around to the front of the dining room and out of Blacky's sight.

BLACKY waited until Jilson had changed the horses and started back to the stable. Then he led White down the slope through the brush to a point only thirty feet from the rear wall of the stable.

The stagecoach pulled out—with rocks in the strong box—and Blacky, leaving his horse in the brush, worked his way cautiously to the stable wall. The spaces at the ends of the long stable were clear of brush, and Blacky couldn't go around to the front of the barn without risk of being seen, but there was a small back door fastened on the inside with a wooden latch. Blacky drew his gun and rapped on the wall.

Boots crunched on straw inside the barn, and Harve Jilson said cautiously: "Who's there?"

"I want to buy some hay for my horse," Blacky said.

After a pause, during which the stable tender must have been considering, the wooden latch lifted. Blacky shoved the door back against Jilson and jumped inside with his gun leveled.

"Don't move or make a sound, Jilson," Blacky said softly. "I happen to know that Anderson thought he didn't need more than one man at the stable. You've been paid plenty for it."

Jilson was scared. One of his eyes was slightly walled, and it was difficult to know where he was looking. He stuttered when he tried to talk: "Wh-what you w-want?"

"The telegraph line the company put out through here was handy for you Ghost Riders," Blacky said. "Somebody knew I was a Wells

Fargo man. He telegraphed here to Anderson. Steve Finke and Lou Gorgan were here, so Anderson gave them my description and told 'em to lay for me on the short-cut trail. Don't pull anything and you won't get hurt, Jilson."

Jilson had nothing to say. He made no protest when Blacky tied him up, gagged him and dumped him into the harness room. The Texan carefully searched the barn, just to make certain that nobody else was there.

BLACKY had to cross the open space between the buildings to get from the stable to the kitchen door. He walked warily, and his sharp black eyes roved watchfully, but nobody shot at him or challenged him. Blacky knew, from inquiries he had made, that the cook here was an old ranch cook. The man's daughter waited on tables and helped with the dish washing.

Both the cook and his daughter were busy in the kitchen when Blacky stepped into the back doorway. They turned, startled, and looked at him. Blacky grinned at them.

"Howdy," he drawled. "Mark Anderson around?"

"Somewheres," the old cook answered indifferently.

The girl, about sixteen, added: "Was in the dining room a minute or two ago."

Blacky crossed the kitchen. He paused, alert and tense, in the doorway which led into the dining room. The big room was empty of everything but the tables and chairs. Anderson was not in sight.

Blacky moved across the dining room with as little noise as possible, paused in the front doorway for a sweeping glance at the open space and the road beyond, then walked softly toward the shadier side of the house.

He paused at the corner, his black eyes narrowed and gleaming. There was a faint smile on his lips, and his big right hand hung near his walnut-stocked gun.

Mark Anderson was down on his knees at the side of the house. He had dragged a heavy canvas bag from under the floor and was reaching for another.

"Just leave 'em there and put up your hands," Blacky said. "You're under arrest, Ghost Rider!"

Mark Anderson's blocky figure jerked violently, and he twisted around to look at Blacky. The station tender's face paled.

"What you mean?" he snarled.

"I mean you and Jilson stole the money out of the strong box," Blacky said.

"You're crazy!" Anderson snapped. "How could I open the box?"

"How could anybody open it?" Blacky retorted. "You're the one that could, and I saw you do it. Get your hands up, quick!"

Anderson, still on his knees, moved around till he was facing Blacky. He said sneeringly:

"You can't prove anything on me. Where'd I get a key?"

"You used to be the agent at Milltown," Blacky said, watching Anderson narrowly. "You had a duplicate key made somewhere. It had to be like that, Anderson. The game's up."

Anderson did not try to rise to his feet. His right arm bent at the elbow and he looked at Blacky steadily. The Texan knew that Anderson was about to go for his gun. Blacky didn't want it that way, but you have to give the other man his choice.

Anderson suddenly dipped his left shoulder and reached for his gun, but he was on his knees and at a disadvantage. Blacky shot twice as Anderson's gun cleared leather.

CHAPTER VIII.

HANDCUFFS AND BULLETS.

WHEN Blacky arrived in Milltown, late in the afternoon, Harve Jilson, lashed to a saddle, rode ahead of him. Blacky stopped in front of the Wells Fargo office and yelled for the agent. When Tom Quenton appeared, Blacky took a gunny sack off the cantle of his saddle and tossed it to the sidewalk.

"There's the money, Tom," he said. "Anderson's dead, and I'm turnin' Jilson over to the sheriff." He drew a padlock key from a pocket of his vest and flipped it to Quenton. "Here's the duplicate key Anderson had made while he was agent here. Better turn it in to the company."

Blacky took Jilson on up the street to the sheriff's office, saw the hostler locked up, and then talked



earnestly for ten minutes with the bullet-headed Colston. The sheriff became mildly excited.

"Hey!" Colston exclaimed. "Why would Remsley start this Ghost Rider business?"

Blacky chuckled. "He wanted to scare the other mill owners, so he could buy 'em out, cheap. He thought it would be smart to start by scarin' himself, and gradually work around to the others. Anderson had a duplicate key to Wells Fargo's padlocks, so Remsley could rob himself and then make Wells Fargo stand good for the loss. Profit in that, sheriff, and he could afford to split with Anderson. But mainly, Remsley wanted to scare the little mill men into sellin' out to him cheap, so he'd own all the lumber business in the valley."

Sheriff Colston scratched his head. "You mean Remsley's been writin' all them Ghost Rider threats?"

"Sure. After Finke and Gorgan shot at me, Remsley wrote a letter to himself and left it on the table. He aimed to come back and find it, and spread the news around that I was a detective he'd hired, and that the Ghost Riders had got me. He'd show the letter to prove it."

Colston hitched up his gun belt. His mustache bristled. "All right, mister. Let's go get him."

THE mills had stopped running when Blacky and the sheriff rode up to Remsley's office, but there was still enough light for them to see fairly well. Blacky opened the door and walked in, with Colston close behind him. The big Texan grinned at Remsley, Dawson and Eccles.

"Stand to one side, Dawson," Blacky drawled. "Remsley's boss of the Ghost Riders, and he may want to shoot it out."

Remsley surged up from his chair. "What do you mean?"

Dawson, mystified, backed away from the desk. Eccles, standing beside the pine table, did not move. His cold eyes watched Blacky narrowly.

"Are you accusin' Remsley, Solone?" Eccles asked crisply.

"What's it sound like?" Blacky drawled softly. "After I had to shoot Anderson, Jilson was ready to talk. We can prove it now."

Remsley's face was pale, and he gripped a cigar butt tightly between his teeth. Sheriff Colston moved forward with handcuffs.

"Don't make no resistance," Colston warned. "Stick your hands out."

Remsley spat out his cigar and said sharply: "Absurd!" He ignored the handcuffs and glared at Blacky. "Why would I hire a detective if I—"

Blacky watched Eccles. The big Texan was smiling faintly, and his voice sounded amused and amiable: "Eccles isn't exactly a detective. He works for you, all right. Has been for a long time, I reckon. He was watchin' the division superintendent's office, and he guessed I was a Wells Fargo man when he saw me there. So he telegraphed Anderson and then followed me."

Eccles had grown tense and wary, but he hadn't moved. He said sharply: "If we both wore black clothes, how could I—"

"You knew they wouldn't shoot you, Bone," Blacky said. "They'd seen you before."

Eccles took his hands off the table and let them dangle at his sides. "You can't prove I'm in it," he said coldly. "I killed Steve Finke, didn't I?"

Blacky's voice was still amused and pleasant: "I thought if you'd followed Finke and the doctor to the shack, it was mighty funny you hadn't seen me doin' the same thing. But you didn't follow 'em, Bone.

You knew where to go. Remsley sent you there to kill Finke. He knew that if Gorgan died I'd know Finke and Gorgan were the men who'd been tryin' to bushwhack me. Finke might be made to talk. Remsley didn't want that."

Eccles stepped away from the table, moving on the balls of his feet.

Blacky went on: "I reckon those newspapers scared you a little, Bone, when you opened my door last night."

A harsh oath ripped from Eccles' lips. Both he and Remsley, moving at the same instant with quick, deadly purpose, went for their guns.

Blacky sprang sidewise as he pulled his own gun. His two fast shots seemed to rock the flimsy office, and one of the bullets hit Bone Eccles full in the chest. Eccles got off one wild shot as he lurched against the table and slid down to the floor.

One other shot had blasted into the bedlam of sound. It had been fired by Sheriff Colston, who had dropped the handcuffs and yanked his six-gun with dazzling speed.

Remsley fell across the desk, coughing, with his drawn gun dangling from his right hand. Then the coughing stopped, the pistol fell from the mill man's loosening fingers, and Remsley's thick body slid off the desk.

Vince Dawson, pale and shaken in a corner of the office, had his hands high above his head. He said defensively: "I wasn't in on that. Didn't know anything about it. I thought—"

Blacky, staring grimly down at the black-coated body of Bone Eccles, was stuffing fresh shells into his smoking gun. Without looking up, he said: "I know, Dawson. You're clear."

Sheriff Colston's beefy face wore an unhappy expression. He stooped, picked up the handcuffs he had dropped, and looked at them intently.

"Never did me no good," he said mournfully, "to pack handcuffs around."

Blacky Solone will ride the danger trail •
soon again in another Wild West adventure—watch for it!

JACKKNIFING A TEAM

The novice in handling four horses often found himself unable to keep the lead team out of the way of the wheelers. If he happened to pull the wrong rein, the teams would go in opposite directions and if the lead team was strong enough the tongue was broken and a dangerous accident occurred. Even an experienced driver sometimes had a team jackknife on him when a rein broke or got tangled in some way over the hames of one of the wheelers. The name was given to such an incident because of the position of the horses when the accident occurred. When the horses were finally stopped and untangled, the lead team would be facing in the opposite direction from the wheelers, and all four horses closed up in the position of a jackknife.

The danger of such an accident occurring could be avoided if the driver was quick-witted enough to lock the hind wheels with his brake, jump off and catch the lead team by the head before the tongue snapped.

A Lobo Comes To Big Springs

by J. F. HOUGHTON

A parley with that gun ghost from his owlhoot past could only end one way, Matt Thorne knew—in a blazing powder-smoke payoff!

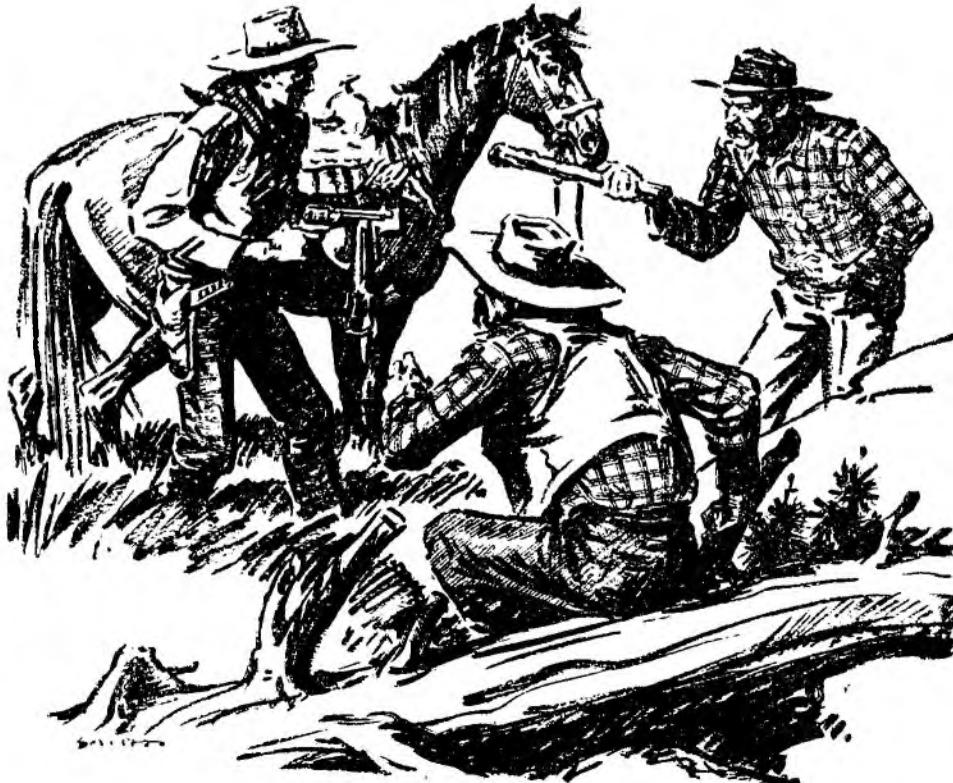
MATT THORNE glanced out the window of the Big Springs Stage and Freight office. The stage from Flat Rock was in. Passengers were getting out, and Bill Parrow, the husky stage driver, was heading toward the office to make his report.

Parrow came in with a rush. Judging by the expression on his face, the stage driver was mad,

furiously mad. And he was hard put to hold his anger in cheek. His rush through the door brought him to Matt's desk in three long strides. He threw an envelope onto the desk in front of Matt.

"A ranney on hossback stopped the stage this side of Beaver Creek Crossin' and give me that," Parrow said through grim, set lips. "Said to

There were killer lights in Lem's eyes as he leveled the gun at his brother.



bring it in to you. Said to be sure you got it and no one else."

Thorne's steady gray eyes surveyed the stage driver questioningly. Parrow hadn't told everything. Something besides the stopping of his stage must have happened to ruffle his temper. The rest of the story was blurted out in an angry rush of breath.

"That ranney had his face covered, Matt," he exclaimed, "and he kept his hand on his gun all the time he was talkin'. Asked a lot of questions about you; how long you been runnin' this line, where you came from, and how old you was. I didn't like the way he was actin', so I told him to see you if he wanted your history. Then he gave me that letter.

"That blamed coyote busted out of the brush right in front of the stage," Parrow went on, "and I had to brake hard to keep from runnin' him down. Blame it, Matt, I've been runnin' that stage for ten years now, and that's the first time I've been stopped by a masked man. I don't like it."

"Did he take anything from the stage?" asked Matt.

"No," Parrow admitted. "He didn't try. Reckon he knew we wasn't carryin' anything worth stealin'."

THORNE tore open the envelope and drew out the inclosure. Parrow was getting excited over nothing, he thought. Then his lean, muscular body tensed, for the sheet of brown wrapping paper he took from the envelope carried a message that tightened his nerves with dread.

Was rampagin' across the country and heard you was running a stage and freight line here, Matt, so I figured we ought to get together again. I can't come in to see you because your sheriff likely has my face on a dodger and he might not want to let me leave.

But we can do business, you and me,

Matt. Since I can't come in to you, you got to come out to me. Maybe your sheriff don't know you like I do and maybe you don't want him to. So be a good ranney and head out to this Beaver Creek tomorrow and ride up the cow trail running along the creek bank. You'll find me up there somewhere. Come early and bring some cooked grub. I'm plumb out.

LEM THACKER.

Beads of sweat broke out on Thorne's body. It was an effort for him to glance up at the stage driver.

"I'm reportin' this to Sheriff Cagle, Matt," Parrow growled. "They ain't anybody with his face hid goin' to stop my stage and get away with it, even if he didn't try to steal anything. You know that ranney?"

"Yes, I know him," admitted Thorne. "But you better let me explain this to Cagle, Bill."

"You can explain who that ranney is, if you want to," Parrow snorted, "but I'm tellin' Cagle my ownself."

When Parrow left the office, Thorne slumped in his chair. Fifteen long years! Thorne had tried to forget during those years, but memory of that wild fight and the wilder, reckless flight could not be erased. He had been driving a freight wagon for Maney & Hunt. Lem Thacker had charge of the office. Joe Thacker, Lem's older brother, was wagon boss. The three were pals, and when Lem suggested that there were easier ways of making a living than by working for others, Thorne and Joe agreed.

Soon Lem came to them with a proposition. The stage would bring eight thousand dollars to the bank at Mustang the following day. They could hold it up, get the money, and live easy for a long time.

It seemed a sure job. The stage halted when the three, with handkerchiefs over their faces, rode out of the brush onto the trail. The guard, his shotgun half-raised, slumped in his seat with a bullet

from Lem Thacker's gun in his head. But they had not counted on the four deputy sheriffs who were riding in the stage, and the hail of bullets which swept from the stage windows came as a shock.

Joe Thacker fell from his saddle at the first volley. Lem's horse went down. With slugs from the lawmen's guns flying about him, Thorne leaped to the ground and pulled Lem out from under the dying animal.

Then he was thrown backward as a bullet tore into his left shoulder. Lem, without a glance at his two partners, sprang onto Thorne's horse and spurred away.

The shock from the heavy slug left Thorne half blind, but he answered the deputies' shots as he backed into the brush. The lawmen followed, but they were also afoot and, by dropping into a gully and crouching in a clump of jack oak, Thorne managed to evade capture.

THE lawmen returned with horses and took up the trail. Then began a chase which ranged over a hundred miles of wild country. It was a nightmare to Thorne who, burning with fever from his undressed wound, pounded doggedly on after taking a horse and saddle from a ranch he passed.

The lawmen at last gave up the chase, but Thorne was only half alive when he was found by a prospector who cared for him. When he finally recovered, Thorne left the country, and after roaming for seven years he came to Big Springs. Here he found steady work, stanch friends, and a woman to love; and when the man who ran the Big Springs Stage and Freighting Co. was injured and had to retire from business, Thorne bought him out.

Now, after fifteen years, Lem Thacker had found him. Lem wanted money to keep his mouth shut. That was his only reason for

getting in touch with Thorne.

Thorne rose from his chair and walked out into the street. This town had been good to him and his. The people were friendly. He didn't want to leave now, to start drifting again, always fearing the law.

"What's the matter, Matt? You seem mad enough to bite a nail in two. Can't you speak to a feller when you meet him?"

Thorne was jerked back to his surroundings. He was passing the stage barn, and, standing in the wide doors peering at him from watery blue eyes, was Joe Thacker.

"You got something on your mind, Matt," Joe went on. "What's botherin' you?"

Thorne dropped onto the bench beside the door. He motioned Joe to the seat beside him. Joe Thacker's pale eyes blinked rapidly as he sat down. He was a broken man now. Nothing but a shattered body was left of the wild hellion who had been blasted down by lawmen's guns fifteen years before. Joe Thacker had survived his wounds, but the ten years he had spent in the penitentiary for his part in the attempted stage holdup had killed his spirit. Soon after his release from prison, Matt Thorne found him and brought him to Big Springs. Now Joe had charge of the stage barn, an easy, peaceful job for his tired body.

Without a word, Thorne passed over the note from Lem. Joe read it with increasing bewilderment.

"What does this mean, Matt?" he asked finally. "Does it mean that my brother Lem's comin' around here to pester us again?"

"It looks that way, Joe," Thorne answered.

"Why, doggone his ornery hide!" A little of the old-time fighting spirit flashed in Joe Thacker's eyes. He crushed the note in his thin hands. "That feller never was worth a cuss, but I didn't think he'd do anything

that ornery. What are you aimin' to do about it, Matt?"

"I'm going out to meet him, Joe," Thorne replied slowly. "He probably wants money. I'll give it to him if he'll go away and forget us."

"Don't you go being that foolish," exclaimed Joe. "If you give that feller money to go away, he'll just hang around till he gets more. You let me ride out there and meet him, Matt. I'll settle with him mighty quick."

Thorne shook his head. "No, Joe," he replied. "Lem doesn't know you're here. He might shoot you if you came onto him sudden."

"Not if I saw him first, he wouldn't," Joe protested. Then a frightened expression came into his pale eyes, and his gaunt body seemed to shrink. "Here comes Bill Parrow and the sheriff, Matt," he whispered.

THORNE eyed the two approaching men grimly. The law came first with Sheriff Ed Cagle. Outlaws feigned shy of Black Rock County, knowing that if they tried any of their tricks there, Cagle would get them.

Cagle halted in front of the bench and looked down at Matt.

"Bill tells me a masked man stopped the stage today," he began. "You got anything to add to that, Matt?"

"Not a thing, Ed," Thorne replied. "You read the letter he gave Bill. You know that ranny?"

"Yes, I know him."

"Mind telling me his name?"

"Wouldn't care to right now, Ed. Later I might."

"Humph!" Cagle grunted. "Well, that's your business. There ain't no law I know about to keep a man from covering his face if he feels that way. Only damage done that I can see was the scare he threw into Bill. And Bill will get over that."

"That hombre didn't scare me one bit," Parrow protested angrily. "I'd sure salivated him if he'd made a move to pull his hogleg."

Cagle grinned and moved away. Parrow scowled at the retreating sheriff's back.

"Tryin' to be funny," he growled. "It wouldn't be funny to him if he was held up." Angrily indignant, he stalked across the street toward the hotel.

Thorne rose from the bench. Ed Cagle was nobody's fool. Though no law had been broken, the sheriff knew that the masked man who had stopped the stage was no honest citizen. Cagle might wait until Thorne was ready to make an explanation, or he might take it into his head to investigate at once.

"Have my horse ready at daylight, Joe," Thorne ordered tersely. "I'm riding to meet Lem."

MATT THORNE rode slowly up the twisting cow trail along the bank of Beaver Creek. The main street of Big Springs was deserted when he left town, and he warned Joe Thacker to tell no one where he was going. He intended to have this out with Lem Thacker himself.

A mile above the stage road, Thorne rounded a clump of aspens and came to a small clearing. Here a fallen tree blocked the trail, and as Thorne started to guide his horse around it, a harsh voice ordered him to halt.

"Careful, Matt, I've got you covered," the voice warned. "Let your gun stay where it is."

Thorne turned toward the voice. Then Lem Thacker came slouching out of the aspens, the .45 in his hand pointed straight at Thorne's body. The outlaw's lean face was covered with a stubble of beard, and his crafty eyes watched Thorne closely.

"All right, Matt," he ordered. "Get off your horse. Easy now.

Drop your gun belt. Maybe I seem kind of scary, but I'm taking no chances with you till I know how you stand."

Thorne dismounted. He unbuckled his gun belt and let it drop to the ground. He had been caught, and there was nothing he could do but obey Lem. At a further order from the outlaw, he backed away from his horse and dropped down onto the trunk of the fallen tree.

"You got sense not trying to make trouble, Matt," Lem Thacker said when Thorne was seated. "Did you bring out any grub?"

"It's tied on the saddle," Thorne answered.

Lem sidled over to Thorne's horse and untied the bundle of food from the saddle. Seating himself on a rock a few yards from Thorne, he unfastened the wrapper and started to eat.

"Good grub you got here, Matt," he remarked between bites. "You cook it yourself?"

"No, my wife cooked it," Thorne answered shortly.

Lem looked up quickly. A thin smile came to his lips.

"So you're married now?" He chuckled. "Got any kids?"

"Two." The hard look in Thorne's eyes should have warned Lem Thacker away from that subject. But the outlaw's grin only grew wider.

"You've been doing pretty good for yourself," he said easily. "You got a good business, a wife and a couple of kids, and neighbors who figure you're all straight. That'll make it easier for me and you to do business, Matt. I reckon you wouldn't want to go away and leave that family of yours."

Thorne did not reply. The heavy *chuck-chuck* of wagon wheels and the rattle of chains drifted up the creek from the road. That would be Bob Morrison with a freight

wagon and trailer, heading for Flat Rock. The stage would be along in about an hour.

"What are you after, Lem?" Thorne asked abruptly. "Money?"

"Yeah, money and plenty of it," Lem answered harshly. "Money enough to live on the rest of my life, Matt. And you're going to show me the way to get it."

"I've got five thousand dollars in the bank," Thorne stated grimly, "and I might borrow a couple of thousand more. I'll give you that if you'll leave here and never come back."

LEM snorted and shook his head. "Not near enough, Matt," he said. "Besides, I don't want any of your money. In fact, if you'll throw in with me, you'll be making more money than you do with your stage line. And you'll be taking no risk. I'll do all the dirty work. How does that sound to you?"

"What's on your mind, Lem?" demanded Thorne.

"Well, here it is, Matt. People around here trust you. They wouldn't figure for a minute that you had a hand in the deal if your stages were held up."

"Easy, feller. Don't get excited," he exclaimed as Thorne rose to his feet. "You use your head and listen to me. Would people around here be trusting you if they knew the law wanted you? They wouldn't, and you know it."

"Now here's my proposition, Matt: You'll know when the stage is carrying anything worth the risk. We'll figure out a way so you can let me know about it pronto. I'll stop the stage and get the stuff, and we'll split. That ought to be fair enough."

Thorne nodded grimly as he dropped back onto the tree trunk. "Fair enough," he answered, "but you can count me out of it."

"Now don't you be hasty, Matt," advised Thacker, his lips drawing back with a twisted grin. "I got you, and it won't pay you to be too hasty. All I need to do is to drop a note to your sheriff or the judge of your court. Maybe they wouldn't believe me, but I'll bet they'd be curious enough to investigate. And how would that family of yours take it, Matt? Think it over."

Thorne was thinking, hard. He loved his wife and children. He would do almost anything to avoid bringing trouble and grief to them.

"Lem," he said quietly, "even if I accepted your proposition, I couldn't trust you. I can't forget that time you took my horse and ran to save your own hide. If it suited you, you'd turn me in to the law, anyway. But I think the best thing you can do is to take my money and get out of this country as quick as you can. And stay out."

Lem Thacker rose slowly to his feet.

"Sure I tried to save my own hide," he admitted. "Who wouldn't? Joe was gone, and I figured you didn't have a chance after you got plugged. Now you look here, Matt. What's gone is gone. This is something else. I've worked this out, and you're going to throw in with me. If you don't, I'll turn you in to the law."

In the dead silence that followed Lem's ultimatum, a twig snapped in the aspens. Lem's head jerked toward the sound. Then Joe Thacker came slouching out of the thicket.

"You put that gun up, Lem Thacker," Joe cried angrily. "You ain't goin' to turn anyone in to the law."

His brother's sudden appearance seemed to fluster Lem. His gun arm started to sink. Then he caught himself. With a swift movement he

shifted his position until he could cover both Joe and Thorne with the gun.

Thorne's eyes swept over Joe Thacker. Joe was unarmed except for a short stick of wood.

"You got no call comin' around here botherin' me and Matt," Joe flared angrily. "You got us into that mess down at Mustang, but you ain't goin' to get us into another one up here now, I'm tellin' you. You put up that gun, or, by thunder, I'll whale the livin' daylights out of you with this stick. I ain't foolin', Lem."

He took a step toward his brother, stick upraised as though to strike. Lem jumped back.

"You keep away from me, Joe," he shouted. "Keep away, or I'll shoot you sure."

Thorne watched the two brothers closely. Joe Thacker was in great danger. Thorne could read death in Lem's eyes. The outlaw had gone too far to back up, even for his brother. Thorne leaped to his feet.

"Keep back, Joe," he warned. But Joe continued to advance, his stick rising higher.

Lem's thumb pulled back on the hammer of his gun. Thorne leaped toward him, crashed into him as the weapon exploded. He caught a look of surprise and pain on Joe's face; saw the gaunt man begin to sag. Then Thorne's fist smashed into Lem's jaw.

Lem staggered backward, twisted and fell. But he held onto his gun, and as he hit the ground, he snapped a shot toward Thorne. Thorne felt a sudden numbness in his side. His left leg wouldn't bear his weight. He fell on top of Lem, and his reaching hands found the outlaw's throat.

Lem soon ceased to struggle. Panting from pain and exertion, Thorne rose to his feet and took the gun from Lem's hand. A clatter of

hoofs caused him to turn his head quickly. Several horsemen were riding rapidly along the road.

Thorne looked down at Lem Thacker. The outlaw's mouth was open. He was dragging in air in great gasps. The clatter of hoofs were muffled now, as though the horsemen had turned off the road onto the softer ground of the cow trail.

Thorne gripped Lem's weapon tighter in his hand. Likely the approaching riders would be Sheriff Cagle and a posse. Lem would be alive when the sheriff came, and would denounce him. There was but one way to silence Lem's tongue.

He raised the weapon and pointed it at the outlaw's head. One bullet between Lem's eyes would free Thorne and would rid the country of an unwanted man. Thorne's thumb drew back on the hammer.

Then he shook his head and tossed the gun aside. He was no butcher. He couldn't kill a man who wasn't able to defend himself. He limped over to Joe Thacker. Joe opened his eyes as Thorne dropped down beside him.

"Maybe I done wrong in comin' out, Matt," Joe said, "but I knew Lem would try to kill you if you didn't do like he wanted. I didn't think he'd shoot me, though. Is he dead?"

Thorne shook his head. "No, Joe," he answered. "Lem's not dead."

"He ought to be," Joe snapped.

Thorne bared Joe's wound. The bullet from Lem's gun had passed through Joe's shoulder. Not dangerous, except for the blood which was flowing freely. The shock and surprise of being shot by his own brother had knocked the gaunt man out. Thorne was trying to stop the flow of blood when Sheriff Cagle rode into the clearing followed by Bill

Parrow and a posse of Big Springs citizens.

"Been having a little trouble, Matt?" the sheriff asked as he dismounted.

Thorne nodded. He felt tired. Perhaps he would feel better when it was all over and he was headed for the pen. He started to rise, then keeled over and lay still. He heard Bill Parrow's voice.

"We better get them down to the stage, sheriff. Doc Horner ought to look at them. They're all shot up."

BILL PARROW couldn't find **Joe** when he went to the stable for his hitch yesterday morning," Sheriff Cagle explained to Thorne the following day, "but he did find a note on brown wrapping paper signed by Lem Thacker in the room where Joe slept. He brought it to me. Said it looked like the one that masked ranny sent in to you. I'd heard of Lem Thacker, and I figured you'd need some help if you met up with him. So I got a posse and came out."

"How is Joe?" Thorne asked.

"Joe's all right this morning," the sheriff replied. "Lost a little blood, but doc says he'll come out of it in good shape."

"You brought Lem in?"

"Sure did. We got him in jail. He sure put out a wild yarn about you, Matt, but we got plenty of salt in Big Springs."

Thorne stared at the sheriff with a puzzled expression. Cagle's eyes were inscrutable.

"People here figure Lem's out of his head," Cagle went on. "Joe's been talking a lot about Lem's craziness, and I reckon being as he's Lem's brother, folks figure he ought to know. Now you take it easy and get well, Matt. We need men like you in this town."



There was no mistaking the menace in Sing Lee's tone or in the gun he held. Clip had to think fast or be salivated.

The one spark needed to set off the powder keg of treachery and sinister intrigue that had turned the Turkey Track into a gun-torn terror range was the

RETURN OF THE RIMFIRE KID

by NORMAN A. FOX

CHAPTER I. HOUR OF RECKONING.

THE last posse had long since been shaken off when Clip Denney, sometimes called the Rimfire Kid, hit the horse-killing slant of the Tumble-rocks, three hours short of trail's end. Behind him lay a maze of timbered, tangled country where

Montana crowded up under the bellying border of Canada. Behind him, too, lay Deer Lodge penitentiary from which the Kid had departed to the tune of raucous sirens and roaring guns, departed without the benison of the warden. It had been a long trail to a showdown three years deferred, but nothing could stop Clip Denney now. Or so he

thought until he rounded a turn and saw what sprawled there.

A man lay face down in the trail, dropped by a bullet and left to die. Clip Denney had expected to meet men on Tumblorock range—men with guns and an avid eagerness to use them on him. But this fellow was harmless as a hoofprint, the Kid discovered as he slid warily from his saddle. The man was almost dead and the Kid fought an impulse to ride on and ignore him. But that would have been equivalent to finishing what a bullet had started. The Kid hadn't turned killer—yet.

Soft-heartedness was a trait the Kid had thought he'd shed. But he couldn't be cold to this man's need, and he cursed softly and had a look at the surrounding shrubbery, acutely aware that whoever had dropped the man might be nearby. A hawk wheeled slowly in a silent sky, the wind sighed fretfully in the pine tops, Nugget Creek brawled down the slant to the north, and peace reigned here where powder smoke had burned.

The Kid was recognizing landmarks now. About two miles to his right lay the ghost town of Nugget where once, in happier days, the Kid had planned to spend a winter and try his hand at trapping. Below stretched the far-flung acres of the Turkey Track where the Kid had been briefly employed as bronc peeler. Yonder— But the Kid snatched himself from reverie and turned the fallen man over on his back.

The fellow wore dusty, nondescript range garb, not unlike the Kid's, and he had Clip Denney's wedge-shaped build and was about as tall as the Kid, who just topped six feet. The two of them were beard-stubbled, and both had a shock of dark-brown hair. They wouldn't have passed for twins, or even for brothers, but there was a

resemblance. The Kid had the uncomfortable thought that the talking wires had probably carried word of his coming, and that some bounty hunter had made a mistake when he'd notched his sights.

Even now that bounty hunter might be quirting a horse toward Shoshone town on the flats to the south, hurrying to fetch the law and claim a reward. The very thought whetted the Kid's desire to be gone from here, but still he lingered. The fallen man had been creased along the ribs, and the Kid got him into his arms and toted him to the bank of Nugget Creek. Here he washed the wound, used the fellow's undershirt for pads and bandages, then bathed the man's face.

THE cool touch of water did the trick. The wounded man opened his eyes, gazed blankly for a moment, his fingers straying to the bandage. "For a guardian angel," he said finally, "you're the hardest-looking hombre I've ever seen!"

"I'm wondering," said the Kid, "if the gent who burned you down thought he was shooting at somebody else."

"No; I reckon he knew me all right. Is that your horse I see yonder through the trees? Mine spooked, and I'll be obliged for a lift into Shoshone."

It was the Kid's thought that a horse double-burdened makes a mighty poor show if there's a need for speed. But all he said was: "No go, mister. You'll have to get to town on your own."

The other frowned, tried to come erect and grimaced with pain. "My ankle!" he said. "I twisted it making a quick jump for the bushes when some sneakin' son come Injunin' up on me. I can't even walk."

"Then you'll have to sit," the Kid told him dryly. "Somebody's bound

to find you before you get very hungry. And you've got a gun if your bushwhacker comes back."

"Will you pack a message to Shoshone?"

"If I happen to head that way."

"There's a Chinese restaurant in town called the Mandarin Café, run by a fellow named Sing Lee. Tell him that Tom Farrell's in trouble, and describe where you left me so's he can fetch a horse. But don't say a word to anybody but Sing Lee, savvy. Will you do that?"

"Maybe," said the Kid. "If I go through Shoshone, though, I'll probably be going too fast to make any social calls."

Anger laid its red hand upon Tom Farrell. "I said you were the hardest-looking hombre I'd ever seen," he declared. "You also stack up as the hardest-hearted. I suppose I should be obliged for this bandage, but to blazes with you!"

"And to blazes with *you*!" said the Kid and stalked stiffly toward his horse.

THE crowding dusk was defying the misty outlines of an anæmic moon when the Kid came cautiously toward the sprawled buildings of the Turkey Track Ranch. His horse was hidden in a coulee behind him, his gun in his hand, and a thousand memories were thronging as he looked upon this place he hadn't seen for three long prison years.

Yonder was the bunkhouse, aglow with light, and in its doorway stood big Sol Pennipher, one of the Turkey Track owners, a bulking figure in black, silver-trimmed regalia, his sombrero, held by the throat latch, dangling down his back, his shirt open at the neck to reveal a V of matted hair. The Kid had taken his orders from Pennipher when he'd worked for this outfit, and he'd had little liking for the burly rancher. But the Kid's business to-

night was with Mark McCune, the other owner.

The Kid's glance flicked to the cook shack, and through its window he glimpsed the Chinaman who held sway there. The same cook as of yesteryear? The Kid wasn't sure; all Chinamen looked alike to him and the Kid hadn't seen much of the cook in the old days. A flunkie had done the serving. And the Kid didn't much more than glance at the cook now. Another man was inside the cook shack, seated at a table and busily wolfig down food, and that man was ponderous Sheriff Jim Wintergreen from Shoshone.

The law here! The Kid hadn't expected that. Drawing in his breath, he speculated upon the difference that Wintergreen's presence might make to his plans. Then his jaw set stubbornly, and he knew that he was going to do what he'd come here to do. For the sight of the law had brought a poignant reminder of the wrong he'd suffered on this ranch.

Yonder were the corrals where he'd been busy mending gear all of one day—the very day that Sheriff Jim Wintergreen had come riding to arrest him for armed robbery of a stagecoach out of Shoshone. Sure, Wintergreen had had a case, for a jackknife had been found at the scene of the holdup, and Clip hadn't been able to deny in court that the knife was his. And his story that he'd been at the ranch all day had had no substantiation, for the other riders had been out on the range.

True, Mark McCune had been in his office in the ranchhouse. Mark McCune had been able to see Clip Denney from his window. But when they'd put McCune on the stand, he'd placed his hand on the Bible, then solemnly testified that he'd seen the Kid saddle up in midmorning, ride away from the ranch and return hours later!

The jury hadn't wasted any time after that. They were out less than ten minutes before returning with a verdict of guilty, and the judge had said five years. Five years for a robbery that had netted somebody only a pair of cheap watches and a few skimpy wallets! But Clip Denney was a drifter, a stranger on Tumble-rock range, and that had counted against him, too.

It was a tight frame-up, and the Kid had had three long years to think about it. Somebody else had robbed the stage, of course, but why had he, the Kid, been framed? Not so that somebody else could spend rich loot in safety. There hadn't been any rich loot. Much was beyond the Kid's understanding, but one thing was certain. Mark McCune had lied on the stand—lied Clip Denney into stony lonesome.

But now Clip was back, and the hour of reckoning was at hand. He had planned this from the moment that escape had first seemed possible. He had built upon his plan during the days when he'd dodged from ranch to ranch, earned enough money to buy a horse and a gun. Then he'd made the long ride into the northwest, dodging posses every step of the way. He'd fought his way back to the Turkey Track, and tonight he'd wring the truth from Mark McCune.

A dim light burned in McCune's office window—that same window from which the man had watched Clip mend gear that day three years ago. McCune, then, had been working over his ledgers. McCune handled the business end of the partnership; Pennipher, the range work.

It took the Rimfire Kid many minutes to reach the ranchhouse gallery, and twice in that trip he froze motionless as mounted shadow shapes crossed his path, riders who'd just loped in and were heading for

the bunkhouse. But at last the Kid made it to the front door, and here he paused, drawing upon his memory for the plan of this house. And when he entered, the hall was where it should be, the doors studding it were each as he'd recalled them, and he turned the knob of the one leading into McCune's office.

A lamp burned low on McCune's paper-littered desk, the fancy furniture threw elongated shadows, and the oak-paneled walls, dark and indistinct, gave the room a somber air. On the wall hung a handsomely framed photograph of a girl—Mark McCune's daughter. Her eyes seemed to look reproachfully at the Kid, and for a moment that sensation was so strong that the Kid felt a touch of irritation. McCune, a slender, gray-haired man, sat bolt upright in a chair back of his desk, his eyes wide and horror-stricken.

"So you remember me, McCune!" said the Kid, closing the door and putting his back to it. "Raise a holler and—"

Then he realized that Mark McCune wasn't going to make any outcry. That amazed, glassy-eyed look of the man's hadn't been caused by the Kid's sudden entry. McCune's features were as fixed as the peaks of the Tumblrocks, and a quick stride to the man's side told the Kid the reason. The haft of a knife protruded from Mark McCune's ribs, and the rancher was as dead as he was ever going to be!

That much the Kid saw, and at the same time he became aware that the office door was slowly opening behind him.

CHAPTER II.

SING LEE SPEAKS

SPINNING about, the Kid eared back the hammer of his gun, every nerve in him taunt and tingling, and then he saw who stood

framed in the doorway—a girl with hair amazingly black and eyes amazingly big.

She was slim-ankled and shapely, this girl, a pretty picture in her wine-colored riding blouse and pleated corduroy saddle skirt and half boots. She stood paralyzed, her eyes on Mark McCune, a low cry of anguish bursting from her, and then she darted to the dead man's side. She'd burst into hysterical screaming in a moment, Clip was sure. But when she swung her eyes to the Kid, she backed toward the door, her voice dull and lifeless.

"You've killed him!" she said dazedly. "You've come back and killed him!"

The Kid recognized her then. She was Claire McCune, Mark's daughter, but Clip knew her only because her picture had given him a clue. Sol Pennipher he'd remembered from the old days, and Sheriff Wintergreen, and McCune. But in all the weeks he'd worked for this spread, he had seen Claire just once.

She'd been in her late teens, then, and, according to bunkhouse talk, she was a sickly sort, a semi-invalid

kept confined to her room upstairs in the ranchhouse. She had never appeared out of doors, but Clip had glimpsed her at her window one day—her white face framed by that flowing black hair. Just for an instant she'd stood, then whisked herself away, and though her beauty had struck him breathless, there had been something nightmarish about that fleeting glimpse.

Now he was seeing her again, but if she'd been sickly before, she showed no sign of it now. Another mystery on this range of riddles.

All these things flashed through the mind of the Rimfire Kid in the split part of a second while Claire McCune's words of accusation pounded at him in the hush of this death-haunted room. He ran his tongue along lips gone dry and said, "You think *I* did it?" and knew how silly the question sounded.

"Aren't you the Rimfire Kid?" she demanded in that same lifeless voice. "Sheriff Wintergreen rode out here this afternoon. He told us he'd been wired that you were heading this way. We could guess why you were coming. And now you've murdered

YOU'RE SMOOTH
ENOUGH
IN A BLACKOUT!

YES, IN DAYLIGHT
TOO. I USE
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



my father—killed the one man on all this range who might have been your friend!"

That didn't make sense, either. But the girl's voice was rising now, and suddenly the Kid realized that she was coming out of the stunned lethargy that had gripped her when she had seen the dead man in the chair. In another second she'd be screaming, calling for help, bringing the Turkey Track crew stampeding here. The Kid couldn't afford to wait for that.

The door was the quickest way out, but Claire blocked it. Across the room was the window, its shade drawn, and the Kid reached it in a single leap. Wrenching the shade away, he hoisted the sash and went through the opening headfirst, lighting on his shoulder on the soft ground beneath, somersaulting, coming to his feet and dashing into the darkness.

BUT Claire McCune hadn't wasted any time either. She'd thrust her head through the window, was shouting incoherent words. And they were equivalent to kicking over a hornets' nest.

Men came boiling out of the bunkhouse, burly Sol Pennipher at their head, the silver trimmings of his regalia winking in the faint moonlight. Clip was sprinting desperately, running toward the coulee where he had left his horse. And if Pennipher and his men hadn't yet grasped the full significance of the girl's frantic cries, at least they understood that a man was fleeing the ranch and that there was a need to stop him. Guns began to yammer, lead peppering about the Kid.

Clip Denney tossed a little lead in return, taking no time to aim, but noting with savage satisfaction that his bullets slowed the onrushing Turkey Trackers. Ponderous Sheriff Wintergreen had materialized

in the cook-shack door, a slab of pie in one hand, a six-shooter in the other. The Kid had a fleeting glimpse of him. And then the Kid dived into the deeper shadows, stumbling onward to the coulee and comparative safety.

He hit his saddle Pony Express style, and his fierce, exulting thought was: "Let 'em catch me now!" He'd selected this horse with an eye to speed and bottom. He was quirting toward the shadowy bulk of the Tumblrocks when he heard the drumming of hoofs behind him. They were coming, those Turkey Track men, but he had a start on them, and he knew how to use that slight advantage.

Not for nothing had he worked on this Tumblrock range. He'd liked the lonely grandeur of the timbered border country, and he'd explored many miles of it in the old days. Now he pointed his saddler toward the distant ghost town of Nugget, but his flight was not like an arrow's. Circling, back-tracking, zigzagging, he reached the fringe of the hills, splashed along Nugget Creek for a half mile, then drew rein in a clump of trees, confident that he'd shaken off pursuit.

But it was a shallow victory, now that there was time for thinking, time to give an unhurried consideration to all that had happened. He had gambled everything on forcing the truth out of Mark McCune, and he'd lost that gamble. Mark McCune was dead, and the payoff was that every sign was going to say that Clip Denney, alias the Rimfire Kid, had killed him!

Truly, the Kid was in a tight. Up till now he'd owed the State two years in stony lonesome—plus whatever they'd tack on for his little jail-busting spree. But murder was another matter. They hunted you down like a ravening wolf for a killing, and they stretched your neck

when they caught you. The Kid felt his throat gingerly, and knew that the game was up for him on this range. His cue was to cover miles—and fast.

He had planned on hiding in the old ghost town, but the law would be combing this country fine-toothed before long. And the law, long-armed and relentless, would reach wherever a horse could carry him. He glanced at the stars, made his decision. It was around ten o'clock, he judged. If trains still ran on their old schedule, a westbound freight would be going through Shoshone in a few hours. And the Rimfire Kid would be on it. Spokane—Seattle—a ship sailing anywhere—that would be the Kid's course. Prodding his horse into motion, he began riding warily to the south.

MIDNIGHT was past when the Rimfire Kid eased into the outskirts of Shoshone and sought the darker alleys, for his very first moment in the town filled him with a grave apprehension. This was a week day and, considering the hour, Shoshone should have long since rolled up its sidewalks, blown out its lights, wound its collective alarm clock and gone to bed. But the main street was astir with riders. Light splashed from the Sunflower, largest of the saloons, and the hitch rail before it was thronged with horses, most of them bearing the Turkey Track brand.

His horse left behind, the Kid had wormed between two buildings for a glimpse of the street—and one glimpse was all he needed. The Turkey Track crew here! The Turkey Track was supposed to be out in the hills, hunting for him! And the Kid knew a gnawing desire to know why they weren't.

It would be half an hour before the freight was due. Tugging his sombrero low, the Kid stepped

boldly into the street and strode along the boardwalk past the Sunflower Saloon. A half dozen men loitered beneath its wooden awning, and the Kid didn't break stride, for fear he might be recognized. But through an expanse of unwashed window he had a glimpse of Sol Penninger bellied to the bar, Sheriff Jim Wintergreen beside him, the two gesticulating and arguing. Then the Kid was past the saloon, little wiser than he'd been before.

Across the street was the stone jail house where the Kid had awaited trial three years before. A dim light burned in the office to the front of the building; a deputy sat slouched at the sheriff's desk. A few doors beyond, on the Kid's side of the street, was a restaurant, its weather-beaten shingle, emblazoned with a faded, toothy dragon, proclaiming that this was the "Mandarin Café, Sing Lee, Prop."

Up until that moment, Tom Farrell hadn't crossed the busy mind of the Rimfire Kid. He had saved that mysterious man from bleeding to death, saved him at the risk of tarrying on a trail where trouble might have come riding at any moment. More than that the Kid had refused to do, putting his own urgent needs above the comfort of Farrell.

But now the Kid stood before Sing Lee's café, a mute reminder of a message undelivered. And because the Kid wanted to know why the Turkey Track was in town, it came to him that here was a means of exchanging information for information at slight risk.

Thus it was more than impulse that sent him around to the alley again, and to the back door of the Mandarin. He tapped lightly, but for a long time before the door opened an inch. Then he said: "Sing Lee? I've got a message for you."

The door opened wider. "Come

in, please," he was invited and he stepped into a kitchen, rancid with the odors of much cooking, yet shiningly clean and orderly.

SING LEE stood appraising him, and though most Chinese looked alike to Clip, he knew he'd remember Sing Lee whenever they met. True, the Chinaman wore the conventional shapeless black alpaca of his people, and doubtless his pigtail was coiled beneath his wide-brimmed black hat in the manner of every other Chinese Clip had known. But Sing Lee's face was one to remember, for though it was round as the moon, bland and benign, his slanted eyes were sharp as knives. The Kid felt naked before the Chinaman's unwinking gaze.

"I ran into Tom Farrell on the trail down the Tumblrocks this afternoon," the Kid said without prelude. "He'd stopped a bullet, and I patched him up. Likewise he'd twisted his ankle and couldn't walk. I was too busy to tote him to town, but I said I'd carry word to you if I come this way."

Sing Lee smiled, put himself on the other side of an oilcloth-covered table and adjusted the wick of the kerosene lamp standing upon it. "You Limfire Kid?" he asked.

The Kid stiffened. "How in blazes—" he began.

"I remember you at trial, three years ago," Sing Lee said. "You return to Turkey Tlack, eh? You stickee knife in McCune?"

"Now just a minute!" the Kid said sharply. "Who told *you* that Mark McCune was killed? What the devil are you and Tom Farrell mixed into together? Start talking!"

"I talk," Sing Lee said imperturbably. "Turkey Tlack boys come town half-hour ago; bling Tom Farrell tied to horse. Him unconscious.

They say him Limfire Kid; he killee McCune. Shelliif Wintergreen not so sure—he only see Limfire Kid at trial. Shelliif's eyes gettee old. Sol Pennipher say he sure Tom Limfire Kid. Turkey Tlack boys make talk lynch Tom!"

At first the Kid couldn't follow the chattering of Sing Lee, and then he understood. Fleeing from the Turkey Track, the Kid had headed toward the Tumblrocks, Pennipher's crew hard after him. They hadn't caught him, but they'd stumbled onto Tom Farrell. Now they'd jailed Farrell and were talking of lynching him. Yet Sol Pennipher knew full well that Farrell wasn't Clip Denney! Sheriff Wintergreen's memory of the Kid might be hazy, but Pennipher's wasn't. Which meant that Sol Pennipher was playing some sort of shady game—with death as the payoff for Tom Farrell.

And then the Kid was snatched from his thoughts by the sudden movement of Sing Lee's yellow hand. It snaked into a table drawer, and a tiny gun was in it as he faced the Kid.

"Tom Farrell velly fine feller," said Sing Lee. "You save him, savvy. Sing Lee say Tom Farrell isn't Limfire Kid, Turkey Tlack men just laugh. But *real* Limfire Kid sullenders to shelliif, everything all the samee fine. Now we hurry, fland. Time short!"

CHAPTER III.

STRANGE SADDLE MATES.

THE Kid's first impulse was to laugh. He had known many Chinese, those strange, adopted citizens of the West, and, without being overly conscious of it, he had admired many of their traits—their loyalty and honesty and capacity for hard work. But he had found them a quiet people, minding their own business and walking wide of

the white man. A belligerent Chinaman was something new in the Kid's experience, yet there was no mistaking the menace in Sing Lee's tone, or in the toylike gun he held. It wasn't the time for laughing, the Kid decided.

Instead, he lunged against the table, spilling it over, and the lamp crashed to the floor and blotted out. At the same time the Kid was

so unexpected as to catch Sing Lee unprepared.

"Now we can talk business man to man," the Kid panted. "You've told it that Tom Farrell's unconscious in yonder jail, and that Sol Pennipher's crew aims to lynch him. I'm supposed to save him by stepping into his boots and having my own neck stretched. Was that your idea?"



In a blinding rage, the Kid charged toward Pennipher. "You kill-crazy son!" he shouted. "Here's the payoff!" But Pennipher was already triggering.

swerving sideward in the darkness, and he felt the tug of lead along his sleeve as Sing Lee's gun spat waspishly. But the Chinaman now had the disadvantage of being in the path of the moonlight shafting through the kitchen's single window, while the Kid was back in the shadows. Then Clip leaped upon the Chinaman, wrenching the gun away, hurling it into a corner, his attack

"Velly good idea," Sing Lee said blandly.

"I'm not that big a fool," said the Kid. "But I'm going to get your Tom Farrell out of this mess—my own way. Maybe I'm loco, but I don't like the notion of somebody being strung up because he's been mistaken for me—intentional or otherwise. And I know that Tom Farrell's the one man on this range

who couldn't have beefed Mark McCune. Adios, China boy. See you in Hades!"

Then the Rimfire Kid was slipping out of the kitchen and sprinting down the alley. But once on the street, he headed at a more leisurely pace toward the jail building. And as he strode up its steps, he branded himself several kinds of idiots and wondered at his own queer code that sent him into danger at a time when he should be putting this range behind him.

But now he was into the jail, and the chance to turn back was lost, for he was facing the seated deputy, a vacuous-faced, weak-chinned fellow whom the Kid couldn't remember ever having seen before.

"Howdy, feller," the Kid said pleasantly. "Sheriff around?"

"You'll find him over at the Sunflower," said the deputy. "But I reckon you'd better not bother him, stranger, unless you got something mighty important on your chest. He's tryin' to stave off a lynch mob."

The Kid whistled. "A lynch mob! This looked like a peaceable town when I rode in," he said. "Maybe I ain't so anxious to get a job hereabouts as I was!"

"She *was* a peaceable town," the deputy complained, "until that blasted Rimfire Kid returned. We've got him locked up back here—or at least Sol Pennipher of the Turkey Track says he's the Kid. The sheriff ain't so sure, but Pennipher ought to know, seein' as the Kid once worked for him. Me, I dunno. I wasn't here when the Kid was tried a few years back. But in any case, I'd feel a heap happier if somebody else was guardin' the prisoner."

"Then you can quit your worryin' right now," said the Kid, his gun flowing into his hand. "You ain't got no prisoner from here on

out. Don't you savvy? *Get 'em up!*"

His jaw dropping, the deputy came to his feet, spilling his chair backward as he stretched his hands high. Prodded by the Kid's gun, he was urged through the rear door and down the cell corridor to the only occupied cell. And here, at the Kid's insistence, the deputy produced a key and unlocked the door.

TOM FARRELL sat on the bunk, conscious now, but obviously groggy, for his head was buried in his hands. He looked up, a startled light in his eyes as he recognized his rescuer. But the Kid said: "No time now for fool questions! I'm getting you out of here, savvy. Hurry!"

Farrell came to his feet, took a step, winced. "My ankle!" he muttered.

The Kid crossed over to him. "You'd think I had nothing to do but spend my time toting you around," he said with exasperation. "Here, hang yourself across my shoulder."

Staggering under the weight of Farrell, he backed out of the cell, locked the door, tossed the key aside and glared at the speechless deputy who now occupied the cell.

"Start hollerin' before we're clear of here," warned the Kid, "and I'll come back and hang you with your own suspenders!"

Then the Kid was lurching up the corridor and into the office, and a few more steps would take him out of the jail building with Tom Farrell. The escape was going to be as simple as that, but in the midst of his elation, the Kid stepped to the jail porch and stiffened. For headed obliquely across the street toward him came half a dozen Turkey Track men, Sol Pennipher leading them, a rope coiled over his arm, while Sheriff Jim Wintergreen puffed along

beside him, still protesting. Then the group sighted the Kid and stopped in midstride, riveted by astonishment.

"Blast it!" said Sol Pennipher, and dropped his hand to his gun.

If Tom Farrell hadn't been draped over his shoulder, the Kid might have stood a chance. As it was, he was in no position either to fight or run, and he was cold with the consciousness that he was trapped. But in that moment of black despair, a voice shrilled over yonder in the direction of the Mandarin Café. "Make one move, Turkey Track, and you'll be all the samee solly!" it announced. And the Kid saw the double barrels of a shotgun nosed around a corner of the café, and above them the moon-like yellow face of Sing Lee.

Sol Pennipher and his Turkey Track crew saw that same sight, and Pennipher's movement toward his gun suddenly ceased. Smiling benignly, Sing Lee came across the street, the shotgun cradled against his hip, his finger on the trigger, while three horses trailed behind him, their reins in his left hand. That those horses bore the Turkey Track brand and had obviously been appropriated from the hitch rack before the Sunflower, lessened the Kid's elation not one whit. At that moment he'd have swapped his soul for any kind of cayuse.

"We lide!" said Sing Lee, and Clip boosted Tom Farrell into one of the saddles.

"Claw leather till your head clears," Clip advised the man and piled aboard one of the other horses. His hands free, the Kid then swung his gun in an all-embracing arc, his eyes on the sullen, angry Turkey Trackers. "Up with you, China boy," the Kid said. "You bet your life we 'lide'!"

Wheeling his horse, the Kid sent the animal plunging into the shad-

owy slot between two buildings, Tom Farrell and Sing Lee close at his heels. Instantly guns were blaring on the street behind them as the Turkey Track, released from the menace of Sing Lee's shotgun, went into action. Somewhere in the distance a train whistled mournfully, and the Kid remembered the west-bound freight and knew he wouldn't be catching it this night.

"Come on!" he yelled and lifted his horse to a fast run as they headed north. "Those galoots'll be hot on our trail!"

"After while, maybe," said Sing Lee with his benevolent smile. "Saddle girths all cut on other Turkey Track horses."

"You schemin', pigtailed heathen!" the Kid cried jubilantly. "Danged if you won't do to take along!"

THUS they fogged out of Shoshone town, a strange trio of saddle mates—a Chinese named Sing Lee, a man of mystery known as Tom Farrell, and that trouble-dodging tumbleweed, the Rimfire Kid. Within an hour they had put the flat country behind them and were deep into the tangle of timber. And now, because it would be no great trouble to outfox pursuit when it came, they rested their blowing horses and regarded each other, and Tom Farrell said: "I'm indebted to both of you, seems like. And to you twice, stranger. Who are you, anyway?"

"If I don't tell you, Sing Lee will," Clip decided. "I'm the Rimfire Kid."

Farrell's brows arched. "The Rimfire Kid?" he ejaculated. "I should have guessed when I met you this afternoon up in the Tumblerricks! So that's why you didn't want to pack double on your horse! You were afraid the law was on your trail."

"More than that," said the Kid.

"I had business of my own at the Turkey Track—business that had waited three years. You seem to recognize my name; maybe you know my story. Mark McCune framed me into stony lonesome, and I meant to get the truth out of him. But McCune was dead—murdered—when I reached him."

"McCune dead!" Farrell exclaimed. "You see, I'm behind on the news. I was hunkered where you'd left me when the Turkey Track boys and Jim Wintergreen found me tonight. They swarmed all over me, and when I came awake again, I was in jail with you grinning at the door."

"Sol Pennipher claimed you were the Rimfire Kid," explained Clip. "They were getting set to lynch you, those Turkey Trackers, when I took cards. Something's rotten on this range, Farrell. Pennipher knows darn well that you're not me. Why does he want you dead?"

"For a good reason," said Farrell. "It was him or one of his crew that had shot me down today, when you found me. They must have thought I was dead or dying when they rode off and left me. I'm beginning to see it all, now. When they stumbled onto me again tonight, they figgered on finishing the job. But they couldn't beef me—not with Jim Wintergreen along. He's an honest lawman. So they told it that I was the Rimfire Kid and had Wintergreen jail me. Then they planned on lynching me before I came conscious and tipped off the sheriff as to who I really am."

"Meaning?" the Kid queried.

FARRELL fished into his boot top, produced a shield-shaped badge. "Take a look," he invited.

"*Jehoshaphat!*" shrilled the Kid. "A U. S. marshal! I dodge lawmen all the way from Deer Lodge to Shoshone, stick my head into a bear

trap to save a galoot from doing an air dance—and he turns out to be a United States marshal!"

"It makes no never mind," Farrell grinned. "You're penny-ante as far as I'm concerned, Kid, unless you killed Mark McCune—and I don't think you did. Alive, he could clear you. Dead, he's no good to anybody. It's Sol Pennipher I'm after, and he knows it. That's why he wants me six feet under."

"Pennipher? What's Federal law got against him?"

"He's smuggling alien Chinese across the Canadian border," Farrell explained. "The McCune-Pennipher ranch is a way station for the China boys. I'm here to bust up the Montana end of the smuggling ring. Sing Lee's helping me."

"Him! But he's a chink himself!"

"All the more reason," declared Farrell. "So many Chinese are allowed into the country each year, according to immigration quotas. Those who are smuggled in, in violation of the law, are victimized by the smugglers. Don't you savvy? They pay a king's ransom to get across the border, and once they're over, they're just as apt to be arrested and sent back. They're out their money, but the smugglers lose nothing. No law-abiding Chinese like Sing, here, wants to see his countrymen gypped."

The Kid turned all this over in his mind. Then: "I'm pleased to have met you," he said. "If you don't figger on slappin' a pair of handcuffs on me, I'll be going my way."

"Wait!" Farrell said. "I need you, Kid. Help me do my chores, and I'll try to get you out of the frame-up the Turkey Track fastened onto you. Somehow or other, I can't help feeling that there's a tie-up between the two deals. You got anything on Sol Pennipher?"

The Kid shrugged. "I spent three

years trying to figger the answers," he said. "McCune was my bear meat, not Pennipher. Yeah, me'n' Pennipher had our run-ins, but they weren't serious enough for him to have wanted me jugged. That old ghost town of Nugget used to fascinate me, and Sol kicked because I spent so much time around those diggings. I aimed on putting in a winter up there, doing some trapping, once I drew my time at the Turkey Track. When Pennipher got mouthy about it, I told him plain that all my trips to Nugget was took on my own time, not the spread's."

"Anything else?"

The Kid scratched his head. "Well, we wrangled once about the chink cook. That galoot would dish out a meal fit for a king one week, and the eats would be plumb poison the next. I got tired of never knowing what kind of grub was gonna be served."

Farrell jigged his mount. "Let's be riding," he said. "Coming, Kid?"

"You're forgetting something," the Kid countered. "We're trying to *dodge* Pennipher and his gun-handly crew, aren't we? Shucks, man, you're pointing your cayuse straight for the Turkey Track."

"I know it," Farrell said, his face bleak. "Pennipher doesn't count just now. It's Claire McCune I'm thinking about. You told me her father was murdered tonight. If I've figgered things straight, that girl's as good as dead herself, right now!"

CHAPTER IV.

CHINAMAN'S CHANCE.

THEY reached the Turkey Track in that hour of deep darkness that heralds the dawn. There were a lot of questions the Rimfire Kid had wanted to ask, but in the wild rush of the ride there'd been no time for

talk. They'd come across the miles unchallenged, and when the three of them sat their saddles near the ranch buildings, the spread lay before them, silent and dark and seemingly deserted. But Marshal Tom Farrell frowned and said:

"Reckon it won't be as easy as it looks. Friend Pennipher hasn't gotten back, I guess, but somebody must be on guard. Kid, this was your stamping grounds once. Where would they likely hold the girl?"

Clip shrugged. "Hard telling," he said. "In the old days she had a room on the second floor. I saw her through the window once. I could lead you to that room."

"Lead away," said the lawman.

They crept to the porch like so many shadows, Farrell hobbling painfully along, and here the Kid and the marshal removed their boots. Sing Lee, wearing slippers that made no sound, didn't need to take this precaution. The Kid put his hand to the door and pushed into the dim hallway, his saddle groping behind him.

When he passed McCune's office, the Kid saw that the door was open and that the rancher's body had been lifted from his chair and stretched out upon a sofa in the corner, a coat thrown over his face. Then the Kid found the stairs leading to the second story and began a cautious ascent.

Another hallway ran the length of the upper floor. At the head of the stairs, the Kid paused, for a cigarette glowed down yonder near the door that opened into Claire's room, proof that at least one man was here. Testing each footfall gingerly, Clip moved forward again, moved half the length of the hall before the cigarette winked out and a harsh voice said: "Who's there? Speak up, confound it!"

The Kid risked everything on a sudden lunge then. He came down

that hall like something shot out of a cannon, and gun flame blossomed before his face, a bullet winging close to his cheek. He might have reached for his own gun, but he didn't take the time. He was almost upon the gunman, and his fist lashed out, his knuckles connecting with something solid, and the man went down.

"Tie him up!" the Kid shouted over his shoulder as he tried the door of Claire's room. It was locked, so he stepped back a pace, rammed his shoulder hard against the door. The lock snapped and he sprawled inside. A dim light burned in this room, and Claire McCune stood against the wall, her eyes widening as she recognized him. Then she shrank back, her hands raised protestingly. That hit the Kid hard until he remembered that to her he was the murderer of Mark McCune.

THEN Tom Farrell limped into the room, minus his neckerchief and belt which had been hastily used to truss the unconscious Turkey Tracker. Sing Lee was at the marshal's heels, carrying the boots the two men had discarded. As Farrell reached for his, he said: "There's nothing to worry about, miss. You mailed a letter to the United States marshal at Helena. I'm him."

Claire went limp with relief, sagging into the handiest chair. "You've gotten here!" she cried. "I've wondered so often if that letter was ever mailed. But you've gotten here!"

"Your letter said that Sol Pennipher was holding you and your father virtual prisoners here," Farrell went on. "I gathered that he kept either one of you from breaking free of the ranch by threatening to kill the other. The minute I heard that Mark McCune was dead, I knew you were in danger. Pennipher could keep you quiet as long as your father was alive, but with

Mark McCune gone he had no club over you. But you're safe now. Your letter told a lot, but the gaps need filling."

"Pennipher handled the range end of the partnership," the girl explained. "The crew was his own, hand-picked, and a hard-ease lot they've always been. Dad and I were here months before we suspected that Pennipher was using this ranch for a way station for smuggled Chinese, just as I told you in my letter."

"What began to put you wise?"

"Pennipher brings the Chinese to the Turkey Track," the girl went on. "He keeps each alien in the cook shack until the sign is right to send him on to Helena or Butte. We had a different cook each week, but we saw very little of them. To some people, most Chinese look alike, but actually they vary greatly. Some are short, some tall, and they come lean and fat. Eventually we had enough glimpses of the different cooks to begin to understand."

The Kid, who had been stamping into his boots, looked up hastily. "Now I savvy!" he cried. "No wonder the grub was good one week, fair to middlin' another, and plumb bad the next! Different cooks!"

C LAIRE gave Clip a look of loathing, and Farrell must have interpreted it, for he said: "Never mind about the Kid, Miss McCune. I think you're mistaken about him, but we'll go into that later. I want the rest of your story."

"Dad accused Sol of smuggling," she said. "From then on, Pennipher kept us prisoners here. For weeks he never let me out of my room, and his story was that I was sickly and confined to bed. He'd probably have killed dad and me, but Sheriff Wintergreen's suspicions might have been aroused if we turned up missing. Pennipher finally

allowed me the freedom of the ranch premises. But you can see how he kept us in line. One of us was hostage for the other."

"I see," Farrell nodded soberly. "He had you in a split stick, all right. You couldn't buck him."

"Dad tried once. That was the time the Rimfire Kid was framed. Sol usually never hired any outside help, but he kept up the pretense of running a regular ranch, and we needed the kinks taken out of some horses. The Kid drifted in and was hired for the job. One day Sol told dad that the Kid had been jailed for robbery, and insisted that dad testify in court. That testimony would send the Kid to prison for sure. When dad rebelled, one of Sol's men was sent to my room with orders to keep me lined in his gun sight till the trial was over.

"The Kid went to the pen, and that hit dad hard. When we got word last afternoon that the Kid had broken out of prison and was headed this way, dad told me that, regardless of consequences, he was going to tell the Kid the straight of it, if the Kid showed up here." She shot a glance at Clip. "I told you that my father was the one man on this range who might have been your friend!"

"And I spent three years hating him!" the Kid said humbly, and all the old bitterness was washed out

of him in that moment. "But why was I framed?" he demanded. "Why did Sol Pennipher want me out of the way?"

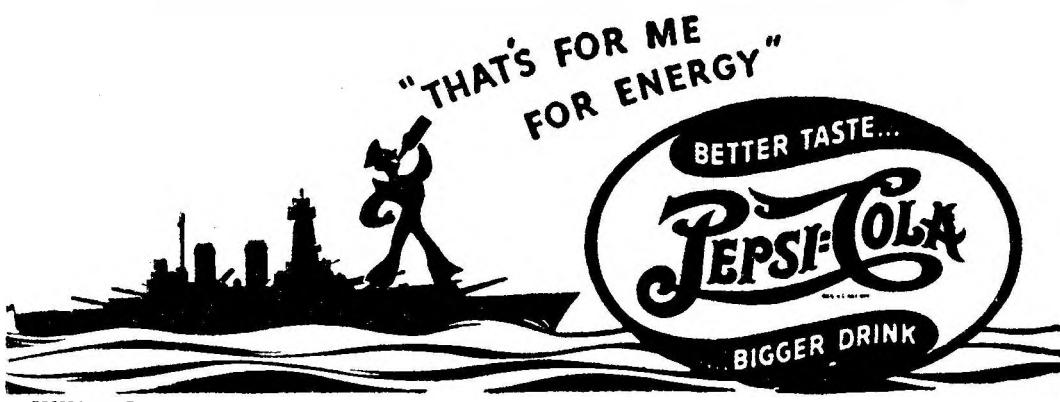
"You were complaining about the cooks!" Farrell cried. "Pennipher thought you were getting wise to what was going on hereabouts!"

"But he could have fired me, sent me packin'," protested the Kid. "He didn't need to put me away in stony lonesome!"

Farrell frowned. "That's right," he agreed. "It doesn't make sense." He glanced at Claire, but she only shrugged.

"Pennipher never said why he wanted the Kid framed," she added. "I've told you all I know. You're wondering how I got that letter out, I suppose. I sent it by one of our many Chinese cooks. The fellow couldn't understand much of what I tried to tell him, but he could savvy the clink of silver. And now you're here. I'm only sorry that you came too late to save my father's life."

"I'm wondering if Pennipher murdered Mark McCune," Farrell mused. "But that doesn't add up, either. I still don't believe the Kid did it. I owe him my life twice over, and I think he's a straight-shooter. I'm hoping to clear him, but that may be the hardest job of all. Your story frees him of that old robbery charge, but any jury in



the world would figger that he came back after Mark McCune with blood in his eye, and killed him when McCune refused to talk."

"Maybe we can have a little palaver with Sol Pennipher," the Kid said darkly, "once we dab a loop on him."

"Maybe," Farrell agreed. "I'll soon be set to arrest him. You see, we've known for some time that aliens were being smuggled by way of Tumblorock range. Sing Lee, here, was doing undercover work, and your letter, Miss McCune, gave us most of the missing pieces. The Chinese come by way of Vancouver in British Columbia, and Canadian officials are ready to clamp down on that end of the smuggling ring. They've held off at our request, so's we could get evidence against the Montana smugglers. I've been snoopin' around the Turkey Track ever since I got your letter, but Pennipher's wise to me, I know. He's tried twice to kill me. But I've still got to get something to show a jury. But wait! Is there an alien cook on the ranch right now?"

Claire shook her head. "Just before Pennipher went chasing the Rimfire Kid last evening, he ordered one of his crew to take the cook some place. I suppose he didn't want anybody incriminating around here while the crew was gone. Jim Wintergreen didn't hear that order, but I did."

THE Rimfire Kid glanced up. He'd been doing a heap of thinking, had the Kid, and the light of inspiration glowed brightly in his eyes.

"I've got it!" he announced jubilantly. "I know where Pennipher sent that cook! And I know why Pennipher framed me, instead of just firing me! *Nugget!*"

"Nugget?" Farrell echoed blankly.

"The old ghost town!" the Kid cried. "Don't you remember? I

told you about Pennipher and me wrangling because I was so interested in that place. I figgered on going up there and trapping soon as my work for the Turkey Track was finished. Farrell, don't you savvy? If Pennipher had fired me, I wouldn't have left the range. I'd have gone to Nugget to hole up—and he knew it! And he couldn't risk raving me *there!*"

Comprehension dawned upon Farrell. "Nugget!" he exclaimed. "What a fool I've been! Mister, you've just given me the last piece to the puzzle. That's where Pennipher keeps his smuggled Chinese hidden! He brings them across in bunches, hides them in Nugget, fetches them to the ranch one by one, then sends them along. I was getting too close to Nugget today when he shot me down. He thought I knew! And when you snatched me out of the Shoshone jail tonight, he must have thought I'd head straight for Nugget. And that's where he's gone!"

"I see what you mean," said the Kid. "He's afraid you'll find the Chinamen he's got up there, get the evidence you need to jail him."

"You're right!" Farrell declared. "And I'm not trying to be funny when I say that if there's any Chinese in Nugget, they won't have a Chinaman's chance of being alive tomorrow. With me on the loose, Pennipher's got to get rid of them—and by the fastest way possible! But maybe we won't be too far behind him if we hit the trail!"

"We'd better lide!" shrilled Sing Lee. "And lide fast!"

CHAPTER V. GHOST-TOWN SHOWDOWN.

A SHORT-LIVED gold strike of yesteryear had given Nugget its birth; the town had had its brief day in the sun, then been aban-

doned to the ghosts of the past and the myriad scurrying creatures of the Tumblerocks. The buildings stood as they'd been left, but the weather and the pacing years had worked their way with them, leaving them glassless and warped and windy. To this deserted city of long-gone hopes came Marshal Tom Farrell, Sing Lee and the Rimfire Kid. And with them rode Claire McCune.

Before leaving the Turkey Track, they had found a rope, and the man whom the Kid had knocked unconscious in the ranchhouse hallway had been more tightly bound, then gagged and deposited in an upstairs room. Since there was no knowing when Sol Pennipher and his crew might return, Farrell and the Kid had decided the safest place for Claire was with the men who had rescued her.

Thus Claire had come on that long ride into the spreading dawn, and now they were following brawling Nugget Creek up a narrow canyon that was the back door to the ghost town. The morning sun had scarcely made itself felt, and so far they'd seen no sign of riders. But now they heard the distant ring of shod hoofs against rock, and they jerked their horses to a halt.

"Riders!" the Kid whispered. "Coming down the canyon from Nugget!"

"Into the bushes!" Farrell ordered, and they spilled out of saddles, hauling their horses to the concealment of the shrubbery lining the trail and clamping hands over the cayuses' nostrils.

They were this way when a dozen riders loped into view, all of them men of the Turkey Track. It was a neat place for a trap, and when Tom Farrell jack-in-the-boxed out of the bushes, a gun he'd picked up at the Turkey Track in his hand, his barked "Hoist 'em!" won instant obedience. A rider to the rear

risked a quick movement toward his holster, but, across the canyon, in the bushes lining Nugget Creek, Sing Lee, the sunlight glinting on his shotgun, said, "You'll be solly!" so emphatically as to paralyze the man.

The Kid stepped into view then, gun in hand, and in less than a minute he and Farrell had the Turkey Trackers off their horses and were disarming them. But Clip's quick eye had taken inventory, and he said angrily: "Pennipher! He isn't here! Give head, one of you galoots. Where's that double-dealin' boss of yours?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" a Turkey Tracker jeered. "He's finishin' a little piece of business, mister. But where and how is something you ain't findin' out from us!"

That was when the dynamite exploded.

THE boom of it was so muffled and remote that the Kid had a hard time placing it. "Nugget!" he decided finally. "Somebody's doing some blasting in the town." And then, his attention drawn by a startled gasp from Claire, he saw Nugget Creek begin to lower before his bewildered eyes, the water inching downward between the banks. And the Kid drew upon his memory of the ghost town and its surroundings, and suddenly understood where Sol Pennipher was—and what he'd done.

"Keep these galoots under your gun!" he shouted at Farrell. "Me, I've got business up the canyon. Sol Pennipher's my bear meat!"

"Kid, come back here!" Farrell shouted, but Clip Denney was already sprinting away, running desperately up the canyon, fearful lest Sol Pennipher had already accomplished his purpose. Soon he rounded a turn, burst into the town of Nugget. And because he knew where to look, he saw Sol Pennipher at once.

Prospectors had mined in many ways in Nugget in the old days, panning along the creek and using sluice boxes as well. But one ancient Argonaut, more enterprising than others, had sunk a shaft in a hillside and dug a tunnel out from the bottom of it, a fruitless attempt to find the mother lode. Clip had explored that tunnel one afternoon, finding the end of it dripping wet. He'd been hard put to understand why, until he'd remembered that Nugget Creek curved erratically near here, tumbling down the *other* side of the slope. Which meant that the tunnel's end wasn't many feet under the creek. And today a charge of dynamite, properly placed, had broken through that thin shell, letting in the creek to flood the tunnel.

There had been no Chinese in that old mine the day the Kid had explored it. But Clip knew there were Chinese in it today. For Pennipher was standing near the mouth of the shaft, and Pennipher had fired off that dynamite, and there could be only one reason why he'd done it. Thus was the evidence to be destroyed that might otherwise have convicted him.

All these facts the Kid recognized, because they fitted inexorably into peace. And a blinding red rage was upon him as he charged toward Pennipher.

"You kill-crazy son!" he shouted. "Here's the payoff!"

Up to the moment Sol Pennipher had been standing there lost in thought, obviously unaware that his men had ridden into a trap below. He made a black, bulking figure as he spun about, and he fired without lifting his gun from leather, twisting the holster and loosing his lead. That first bullet broke the skin over the Kid's ribs, but Clip was firing, too, aiming blindly at one of those silver doojiggers on Pennipher's

black garb. He saw the man reel, clutch at his thigh, and then the Kid was upon him, wrenching Pennipher's gun away, hurling it aside, closing with the man.

PENNIPHER outweighed Clip by many pounds, and the savage fury of the Turkey Track man's resistance was proof that the Kid's slug had done him no real harm. For a minute they were toe-to-toe, slugging ruthlessly, and it was anybody's fight. But an insane fury and a desperate need gave Clip Denney a strength beyond his own. He leveled Pennipher with a bone-jarring right, stood over the man panting, then clawed at Pennipher's collar, jerking him to his feet.

"Get up!" the Kid wheezed. "Get up, and start down that shaft, savvy! We're going into that mine, and you're showin' me where you've penned up those poor devils! Hurry, man!"

The swarthiness of Sol Pennipher was erased by the livid white of fear, but his mumbled protests were lost upon Clip, for the Kid was half dragging, half carrying the man to the mouth of the shaft. Shoving Pennipher ahead of him onto the rusty iron ladder, the Kid followed after Pennipher, forcing him to descend. Down they went—fifteen feet, twenty, twenty-five. And when they reached the tunnel at the shaft's bottom, the rising water, pouring into the mine, was up to their knees.

"Lead the way!" the Kid ordered relentlessly, prodding the Turkey Track man ahead of him.

If Sol Pennipher hadn't intended to co-operate at first, he'd apparently decided otherwise, sensing, perhaps, that his only hope of getting out of this flooded tunnel was to bow to the will of the Kid.

Together they floundered along, splashing in the gurgling, roaring, death-freighted darkness until Pen-

nipher choked out: "Here it is!" Clip felt the rough outlines of an iron door set into the side of the tunnel, and he remembered it as the entrance to a room that must have been used to store explosives in the old days. A padlock held it shut, and above the roar of the water, up to their hips now, he could hear a frantic babbling in an alien tongue. The Chinese were in that room!

Pennipher probably had the key, but the Kid didn't waste time getting it. He put his gun against the lock, fired once, twice, three times, and the door burst outward.

"This way!" the Kid shouted at the first bolting Chinaman, and if the man didn't understand his words, he comprehended when the Kid shoved him violently in the direction of the ladder at the tunnel's end.

THERE were an even dozen Chinese, and they went splashing up the tunnel, the Kid and Pennipher floundering along behind them. And when they reached the bottom of the shaft, the Kid heard Farrell's excited voice up above.

"Kid, what the devil are you doing?" the marshal cried. "I left Sing and the girl guarding the prisoners and came after you. Saw you and Pennipher piling into the shaft just as I rounded the turn. But I've had to inch along with this dратted ankle!"

"Get out of the way, Farrell," the Kid shouted. "Here comes your evidence a-piling up the ladder!"

For now the Chinese were swarming upward. And when the last one had made the ascent, the rising water was almost to the Kid's armpits, and Pennipher was making a lunge for the ladder.

"No, you don't!" the Kid cried. "Me and you have got something to settle, and we're settling it before we leave here. I want to know

who killed Mark McCune, and why, and I think you know. Talk, mister—and fast!"

"To blazes with you!" Pennipher roared. "You're not pinning that on me! You and that snoopin' lawman up above have got me sewed up tight for smuggling aliens, and I'll be behind bars for a long time. But it's the rope for a killing!"

Grasping Pennipher by the collar, the Kid plunged the man's head under the rising water. For many seconds he kept Pennipher submerged before he let him up for air.

"Talk!" the Kid thundered.

"I ain't talking—" Pennipher choked, and that was all Clip waited to hear. Under the water went Pennipher once more, then up again, while Farrell shouted frantically down the shaft. "Kid!" he cried. "Get out of there before the water sweeps away the supports and that tunnel caves in on you. What in thunder are you doing?"

"Baptizing a sinner," answered the Kid and shook Pennipher violently. "You're staying here till you talk, or we both drown," he warned. "Spit out the water you've swallowed and get ready for another dose!"

Dirt cracked ominously far down the tunnel, and Pennipher lurched toward the ladder. "Let me out of here!" he babbled. "I've had enough. I killed Mark McCune! Wintergreen rode out to the ranch yesterday and said you were headed this way. I overheard Mark tell his girl that he was going to spill the truth about the frame-up if you came after him. I knew he meant it, knew that he'd talk in spite of my hold over him and Claire. So I killed him. I couldn't risk having my game blown sky-high!"

"Hear that, Farrell?" called the Kid.

"You bet!" Tom Farrell replied. "It's all we need, Kid. You've finished the chores."

"Start climbing, Pennipher," said the Kid. And he placed his knee in the seat of Pennipher's pants to give impetus to the man's ascent.

DOWN out of the Tumblrocks they came, and they made quite a sight as they headed toward Shoshone. To the front rode Sol Pennipher and his men, roped to their saddles, and at their heels rode Sing Lee, cocking and uncocking his shotgun, grimacing fiercely at the prisoners and having a barrel of fun for himself. Marshal Tom Farrell rode at his right, and the dozen Chinese trotted along briskly, chattering in their native tongue. The Kid and Claire brought up the rear. This was the way they were all strung out when they met ponderous Sheriff Wintergreen, riding from the direction of town.

Farrell, spurring up front to meet the sheriff, palmed his badge and said: "Before you start slapping the cuffs on anybody, Wintergreen, take a look at this."

"A marshal!" the lawman gasped and ran his eyes over the oddly assorted group behind Farrell. "Would you mind explaining what's been going on? After that galoot that's riding to the rear packed you out of jail and the two of you rode off with Sing Lee, Pennipher's bunch loped out of Shoshone in this direc-

tion. Once I got my deputy out of your cell, I tried cutting sign on the Turkey Trackers. I aimed to find out what had Sol Pennipher in such a lynch-crazy lather. What's the answer?"

"It's a long story," Farrell said. "Ride along with us, and I'll tell you all about it."

Thus the group wended onward, and the Kid and Claire fell farther to the rear, for they, too, found much to talk about.

"The Turkey Track's all mine now," Claire said. "I'll have to hire a new crew to replace those boys up ahead. Tom Farrell says your pardon will be only a matter of routine, Clip. You worked for the spread once; how would you like to work for it again? As foreman this time."

"I'd like it fine," said the Kid. "Mighty fine."

He stole a sidelong glance at her and was warmed by the thought that he had won her respect in the brief hours since he had returned to Tumblrocks range. Given time and opportunity, a greater chance to prove himself, and perhaps he'd fashion a future she'd be proud to share. But that dream belonged to the tomorrows. Today was here, holding far more than the Rimfire Kid had dared to hope for.

THE END.

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"Strawn," the sheriff said menacingly, "you'd better talk fast—and straight. Where's my boy?"

LAWMAN'S CHOICE

by GUNNISON STEELE

Sheriff Jard Farrell was unadulterated hell on outlaws, but could he refuse to play the cards that Silk Strawn, bandit killer, dealt?

SHERIFF JARD FARRELL sat in his office in Smoky Bend and watched the rider on the big steeldust coming slowly along the street, and he knew instantly that here was a bad one, a killer. The rider was slender, dark, expensively dressed, reminding Farrell of a sleek black cat. There was a certain jaunty arrogance to the tilt of his cigarette, in the graceful slouch of his lithe body in the saddle.

Farrell's mind probed quickly among the reward fliers in a desk

drawer—and came up with the answer. The rider was Silk Strawn, leader of an outlaw gang, wanted for a dozen crimes in half as many States. A man had to be smart to get away with the things Silk Strawn had done; and certainly he had to have cold nerve, to ride into town in broad daylight like this.

Sheriff Farrell, a tall, strong-bodied man, had started to get up, but suddenly he sat back in his chair. Strawn had swerved his horse and was heading directly toward the

tie-bar in front of the sheriff's office. He was looking at the sign over the door, smiling a little. He was still smiling as he stepped lightly across the boardwalk and entered Farrell's office.

For a moment Silk Strawn stood there looking at the sheriff, his hand well away from the pearl-handled gun he wore. And Farrell sat still, not touching his own weapon. Then Strawn dropped into a chair and put his hand-tooled boots on the desk.

"You're Sheriff Farrell, aren't you?"

Farrell nodded curtly. "And you're Silk Strawn."

"That saves talk and time. You here alone?"

"My deputy, old Charley Trigg, is out of town. Why?"

"Because we won't need any help on this little deal."

"That's right," Farrell said. "I'll take you alone, Strawn. I don't know why you were fool enough to come here, but now that you have, you won't leave again."

Tauntingly, Strawn asked, "What makes you think you could take me, lawman?"

With amazing swiftness, Farrell's old staghorn six-shooter was in his hand.

"*This* makes me think it!"

Silk Strawn hadn't moved, and he didn't seem worried. He didn't take his fancy boots off the desk.

"You won't need the gun. There's a big bounty on my head, but you won't be collecting that, either."

"Why won't I collect it?"

"Because of this deal I mentioned. I know all about you, Farrell. This is your third term as sheriff here and folks think you're just about what the doctor ordered. You've got a reputation for honesty and square-dealing, and you're unadulterated hell on outlaws. Ain't that right?"

Jard Farrell was quiet a moment. Something, he sensed, was haywire. A hangnoose waited for Silk Strawn —yet he had nerve enough to walk calmly into a sheriff's office. It didn't make sense. Farrell held his gun steadily on the dark outlaw. That sneering grin still curled Strawn's thin lips as he looked at the sheriff.

"That's right," Farrell said. "What about this deal you mentioned?"

SPEAKING slowly, Strawn said, "I'm not alone, sheriff, you know that. You know I've got three boys who ride with me—Rhett Ivor, Dutch Red and Lynx Verne. They're not too far off. But what I started to tell is this: This morning, while we were riding along the edge of the hills over yonder, we saw a rider coming toward us. We saw that it was a kid, a tow-headed button of about ten or eleven, ridin' a spotted pony. Interested, Farrell?"

Jard Farrell's eyes were suddenly pools of tawny ice. "What else?" he asked.

"Why, we got to talkin' to this kid. He said his name was Tommy, and that he was the sheriff's son. He said he was on his way to visit his uncle, over at Indian Springs, and he'd taken a short cut through the hills. Well, we'd been aimin' to bust the bank here in town wide open, so you can see how that would give us ideas, can't you?"

"Strawn," Farrell said, very slowly, "you'd better talk fast and straight. Where's my boy?"

"He's safe, don't worry—but he won't be if you don't put up that gun and cool off."

"How do I know you're not lyin'?"

"You don't know. You'll just have to take my word for it."

"Was the button scared?"

"No, he wasn't. When he found out we aimed to hold him, he said,

'It won't work. My daddy's a sheriff, and he wouldn't do anything crooked no matter what happened. But I reckon he was wrong, wasn't he?"

"What else did he say?" Farrell countered.

"He said, 'You're outlaws, which means you're dumb. When I grow up I aim to be a sheriff, like my daddy, and this'll give me a chance to prove I'm smart.'" Strawn paused a moment, then said: If that don't convince you, here's somethin' else."

Taking a tiny, silver-handled .22 revolver from his pocket, Strawn placed it on the desk.

Jard Farrell holstered his gun, feeling suddenly hot, then cold. Now he knew beyond doubt that his son was in the clutches of Silk Strawn's renegades. Those were the things Tommy would have said. And here was the tiny gun Farrell had given Tommy on his tenth birthday.

Tautly, Farrell said, "Where's the boy?"

SILK STRAWN gestured with a slender hand toward the gaunt, bare ridges that rose tier on tier behind the town. "Off there, with the other boys. Get this, Farrell: The kid's safe enough, if you do what I say. I hear you're quite a man, and I'm willin' to believe it, but don't get the idea you can pull this through. You couldn't ever find the hide-out—not in time, anyway. For if I don't show up by the time I said I would, it'll be just too bad. You'd better get that straight in your mind, right now."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Not much of anything. Tomorrow, me and the boys aim to clean out the bank here. It'd make it a lot easier if you and your deputy was to be out of town at the time.

You could manage that, couldn't you?"

Farrell was looking at Silk Strawn's dark throat. He wanted to wrap his big fingers about that throat and tear and squeeze. But he said quietly, "Yes, I could manage that—if I was skunk enough to do it. But if I done that I wouldn't be fit to wear this badge. I'd be just as guilty as you and the others."

"But your boy would be alive and safe," Strawn said. "Just three of us will ride into town tomorrow. The other will stay with the button. If everything don't go off smooth—Well, what do you say?"

"I say you're a slimy, filthy rat! I ought to kill you, Strawn, and if that boy's harmed I'll—"

"You won't do a damn thing!" Strawn snapped coldly. He got to his feet. "Big talk won't get you anywhere, Farrell. Get this straight: Do like I said or you won't ever see the boy again. Go along with me and he'll be turned loose—safe—after a couple of days, after we've got a good start. We'll ride into town at straight-up noon, tomorrow, and we'd better not have any trouble!"

Silk Strawn turned abruptly, strode from the office, mounted the steeldust and rode unhurriedly out of Smoky Bend. And Sheriff Jard Farrell let him go.

FARRELL sat there, staring through the window. He'd never thought to see the time when he would let a dirty killer like Strawn walk into his office and walk out again, free. But it had been as if he were bound to the chair. Because he knew that Strawn had told the truth, that Strawn wasn't bluffing.

Tommy had left early that morning for Indian Springs, to visit his Uncle Jim. He always took that short cut along the edge of the hills. Usually, Tommy could take care of

himself, but now he was up against something too big for him.

Old Charley Trigg, Farrell's deputy, rode into town at a gallop, dismounted and came into the office. Charley was a tough, wiry little man.

"I just met a gent out on the trail," Charley said. A slim, dark-faced hombre. He looked familiar. Let me see them notices in that drawer—mebbe he's an owlhooter."

"Forget it," Farrell said bluntly. "He was in here to see me. His name's Dave Raton and he's lookin' for a cow outfit to buy. He's O. K."

Old Charley grunted, looked puzzledly at Farrell, then went outside and led his horse away. Farrell sat there till the sun went down, then he got up and went along the street to the cottage on the edge of town where he knew that his slim, dark-eyed wife, Mary, would have supper ready. Above all, Mary must not know of what had happened.

He was silent as he tried to force himself to eat. It was hard for him to realize that this was any different from the other nights he'd sat here, thinking about how lucky he was to have a wife like Mary and a son like laughing, plucky Tommy.

"You seem worried, Jard. Is something wrong?"

Farrell started, smiled. "What could be wrong?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe it was Tommy. You think he'll make it to Indian Springs all right?"

"Why shouldn't he? It's only twenty miles, and he's ridden it before. Sure, he's all right."

After supper, he said, "I have to be gone a little while, Mary. I'll get back soon as I can."

Mary was a sheriff's wife, and she didn't ask what business took him away into the night. Farrell rode slowly toward the black, rocky ridges that loomed so close in the moonlight. Often, through a pair

of binoculars from his office window, Farrell saw smoke curling from hidden crevices, saw men riding those serrated ridges. Wanted men, usually. But up there they were in a world apart—close, yet safe from pursuit.

And now, up there somewhere, Silk Strawn's bunch held Tommy prisoner. Tommy wouldn't be afraid. And not for a moment would he entertain the possibility that his daddy might play the outlaws' crooked game, just to save him. Tommy would make a kind of game of it, a test, to prove he had the stuff that would one day make him a lawman.

Only Silk Strawn wasn't playing a game.

Farrell didn't ride among the ridges. He hadn't meant to. He'd wanted only to get away from Mary, to get into the open where he could think. But now he saw that thinking didn't do any good. It was like butting his head against a mountain. And everywhere he turned, the mountain was there: Play Strawn's game, or—"Get this straight," Strawn had warned. "Do like I said, or you won't ever see the boy again. Go along with me and—"

It was late when Farrell returned home, and Mary was asleep. He was up again at dawn, without having slept any, and slipped out without awakening Mary. He wasn't any nearer to the solution of his problem than he'd been the day before.

Charley Trigg came in about mid-morning.

"You saddle up and ride over to Bill Carver's place on Badger Creek," Farrell told him. "See if you can find any sign of the rustlers that've been stealin' his cows."

It was an all-day ride to Badger Creek and back. "I was over there

three days ago," Charley protested. "I couldn't find hide nor hock of any rustlers. I think Carver was dreamin'."

"Go and have another look-see," Farrell ordered.

Old Charley opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, went out and legged it toward the livery stable. A while later he rode out of town. Farrell felt cold and heavy inside. He hated this deception, and what it was leading up to. It made him see that he'd made up his mind without knowing it.

After Charley Trigg had gone, Farrell just sat there in the office. Men came in, tried to talk to him, but found him moody, almost sullen, and soon left. Jard Farrell had been fiercely proud of the badge he wore, of what it stood for. But, in just a little while, he wouldn't have anything to be proud of.

He took a pair of powerful binoculars from the desk drawer and focused them on the spiny ridges behind the town. He had seen the same scene hundreds of times—a weird, hostile world of ravines, tablelands and fantastic red walls. Finally, the glasses riveted on a thin spiral of smoke.

He looked at the smoke a long while, wondering. It might be a prospector's campfire—or it might be the campsite of Silk Strawn's gang. Tommy might lay there beside the fire, bound and helpless, confident of rescue.

The glasses shifted slightly, fastened on a spot just below the smoke. Three riders were moving along a bare ridge, riding toward the lowlands. The distance was too great for him to make out their features, but in Farrell's mind there was no doubt of their identity: Silk Strawn and two of his henchmen. The fourth renegade had been left behind with Tommy.

Gray-faced, Sheriff Jard Farrell

watched the riders. They were riding to rob the bank, arrogantly confident that they would meet no opposition from the law. They were gambling that Farrell would put the safety of his son above duty.

Farrell lowered the glasses. Smoky Bend lay quiet and drowsy in the warm sunshine. It lacked an hour till noon. Old Sam Caleb would be alone in the bank. Nobody would be expecting a raid. Strawn's gang would have no trouble cleaning out the vault down to the floor. It would be a hard, maybe ruinous blow to the basin.

Still, nobody could blame the sheriff if both he and his deputy were out of town on business at the time. He'd never been suspected of dishonesty. He wouldn't be now.

Farrell got up, went out and along the street to the livery stable where he kept his horse. "I'm ridin' over to Red Ledge, to look into the holdup they had there a couple of nights ago," he told old Quinn, the liveryman. "I'll be back before night."

He saddled his sorrel and rode slowly out of town, thankful he didn't have to pass the house where Mary would see him. He angled slowly toward the hills. He'd made his decision. There was no turning back.

FROM the shelter of a lodepole thicket, Farrell saw the three outlaws leave the rough country and head toward Smoky Bend. They passed within two hundred yards of him, unaware of his presence. With Silk Strawn were Rhett Ivor, a fat, scar-faced man, and Lynx Verne, a lanky hombre with thin, cruel features. Dutch Red, then, had stayed behind to guard Tommy Farrell.

Farrell watched them out of sight, then went slowly on. His face was gray and haggard from the struggle

within him. He counted the minutes. Now the three had about reached Wolf Creek—now they were just about riding into Smoky Bend.

He unslung the binoculars and studied the gaunt ridges above. The spiral of smoke had vanished. Farrell shifted the glasses, tracing with his eyes the course of a ridge that pointed like a warty finger down into the valley. Then, very slowly, he lowered the glasses, feeling for the first time the utter incongruity of the thing he had been about to do.

The sun gleamed brightly on his badge as he whirled the sorrel and rode furiously back toward Smoky Bend.

The big sorrel took Wolf Creek at one prodigious leap, the wind roared in his ears, but to Farrell it seemed ages before his straining eyes saw Smoky Bend on the prairie ahead. He spurred wildly through the outskirts of the town and into the lower end of Main Street. And then relief surged over him.

The town was still quiet and drowsy, which meant that the raiders had not yet struck. Farrell slowed the sorrel. The street had seemed deserted, but now he saw a figure leaning against a striped barber post fifty feet from the bank. The man was fat, scar-faced, and he was looking at Farrell.

Farrell's eyes narrowed on Rhett Ivor, but he didn't stop his slow advance. Ivor had stepped out onto the boardwalk, his suspicions aroused. Then he saw the badge gleaming on Farrell's chest. He yelled a warning, grabbed for his gun.

Farrell had expected that, was ahead of the fat outlaw. His own gunshot made a flat, jarring sound in the silence. Surprise slapped at Rhett Ivor's fat face. He looked down at the gun in his hand, took three forward steps, and then fell to

the ground and lay there like an enormous hog.

Farrell glimpsed the outlaws' three horses in an alley alongside the bank. And at that instant Strawn and Verne, alarmed by the gunshot and Ivor's yell, came suddenly from the bank-building doorway. Each had a gun in his hand, and in Strawn's left hand was a bulging gunny sack. They paused just outside, on the board walk, their alarmed eyes probing each way in swift search of their lookout.

First, they saw Ivor, sprawled there on the ground. And then their gaze shifted to Jard Farrell, and their guns snaked up to cover him.

But Farrell was on the ground now, standing strongly on widespread legs, and his old gun was talking again. Talking the kind of language these two understood, in deep-throated tones, punctuated with orange stabs of licking flame. And by now the town was awake. Men ran from doorways, then jumped back. A rifle opened up from a window half a block away.

THE battle there in the street was short and fierce, with Farrell's gun doing the most damage. Silk Strawn went down first, sprawled half on the walk and half in the dusty street, and lay still. Then Lynx Verne, wounded, threw down his gun and quit.

Jard Farrell, blood staining his shirt from a nicked shoulder, strode forward. Men gathered about him, some silent, some talking, but all awed because such a strange, violent thing had jarred them so suddenly from their drowsiness.

"But the sheriff wasn't asleep," somebody said. "He was on the job, as usual. If he hadn't been, these skunks would have cleaned the bank from rafters to floor."

Farrell said nothing. He started along the street with Verne toward

the jail. But just then there was a quick flurry of sound and movement, and a horse and rider tore into the lower end of the street. The rider, a freckled, tow-headed boy, rode straight for Farrell and jerked his sweating, spotted pony to a halt. Tommy Farrell tumbled excitedly to the ground.

"Howdy, son," the sheriff said gravely. "I see you made it back all right."

Tommy tried to speak, gulped with excitement and stammered: "Y-yeah—and I see you corralled them sidewinders. I knew you would. I tried to get here in time to help but I had a little trouble. They said you wouldn't be here to stop 'em—but I knew that was a lie, too. Now they—the ones that are alive—can see what it means to be a sheriff."

Farrell tried to speak calmly. "What happened up there?"

"Why, they left Dutch Red, the dumbest one, to guard me," Tommy said, pride in his eyes. "The others left soon after sunup, and Dutch Red started drinkin' from a jug of whiskey. So I started workin' on him. I told him my daddy could drink that whole jugful of whiskey

in half a day, and still walk, but couldn't no dumb outlaw do it. He slapped me about some but he drunk the whiskey, and went out cold. When I'd seen they aimed to hold me, yesterday, I slipped my pocket knife into one of my boots. Good thing I did, too."

"It took a long time to get it outta my boot, me tied like I was, and cut the ropes—but I done it. I *had* to, because I knew you wouldn't be along to turn me loose—not for a long time, anyway. I knew you'd have to stay here in town to fight the others when they showed up to rob the bank."

Jard Farrell wanted to tell his son how wrong he was. How he, Farrell, had ridden out of town, giving the outlaws a free hand, gambling desperately for a boy's life. And how, at the last moment, through the binoculars, he had seen a slender, free figure spurring his spotted pony along a gaunt ridge in a wild ride for the lowlands.

"You'll be a sheriff in no time, boy," was all Farrell said.

Walking on along the street beside his son, Farrell knew that this other was a thing the boy should never know.

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *How did the cottonwood tree get its name?*
2. *What are the State names of the following former Territories: Jefferson, Rough and Ready, Deseret, Franklin, Bear Republic?*
3. *Do Indians and white men mount horses on the same side?*
4. *Why are harmless snakes mistaken for rattlesnakes?*
5. *How much of a steer is meat after it is "dressed down"?*
6. *What was a Cheyennes' charm against thunder?*
7. *Did the Cheyennes hold funerals for their dead braves who died in battle?*
8. *Did the Cheyennes ever resort to surgery?*
9. *What is the "medicine" animal of the Cheyennes?*
10. *Which river has the largest drainage basin, the Mississippi or the Arkansas?*

Answers on page 146

JUSTICE OF



The Rocking T's roundup was a failure, so the Fightin' Three decided it was time to take a gun-smoke tally of the murdering brand changers who were prowling their range!

CHAPTER I. HALF-PINT HORSE THIEF.

The eyes of Toot Smith bulged in their sockets like brown marbles as they took in the incredible thing that was happening. Somebody was stealing his own personal horse in broad daylight right on his home ranch! It was not only an injury; it was the most humiliating of in-

sults. Toot's massive, bulldog jaw sagged, but the only sound that came was a rumble deep down in his thick throat.

For a long moment the huge Rocking T waddy stood as motionless as a cigar-store Indian. Then he threw down his tools—he had been inserting a section of iron pipe in a spring that had shown a tendency to dry up—and with a mighty

QUICK-TRIGGER RANGE

by PAUL S. POWERS

"How's this for a pacifier?" Toot Smith roared as he leaped upon the jeering Luker with the ferocity of an enraged lion.



roar, clawed out his Colt .45. But he couldn't shoot as yet; the range was too great for a short gun, and he didn't want to risk killing his horse by mistake. So Toot began running toward the scene of the outrage, crashing through the brush with all the speed and grace of a locomotive under full throttle. With his big legs, clad in white Angora chaps, pumping like pistons, he charged

down the slope yelling like a calliope. Toot had left *Sail Away*, his oversized buckskin cayuse, to enjoy a particularly appetizing patch of grass while he attended to the spring, and the grazing animal had strayed several hundred yards from the trail. Toot hadn't been watching the brone. Ordinarily *Sail Away* would have come in answer to his call, and the thought that anyone would be

bold enough to steal the bronc had never entered Toot's mind.

"Hey, you!" Toot yelled in a voice that would have carried two miles. "Lay off that bronc or I'll tear you limb from limb! You'll have nothin' to sit in a saddle *with* if you don't get out of that one! By ganny, I'll—I'll—" Toot was puffing now, for he was more at home on horseback than afoot, but he was on a downhill grade and if anything he was gaining speed.

He would have been too late, probably, if *Sail Away* hadn't co-operated by bucking off his unwanted rider. The powerful buckskin sunfished viciously, coming down with a jolt on its forelegs, and the would-be horse thief, who seemed a very small, wiry fellow, went to the ground on his hands and knees.

THAT should have been enough, but it wasn't. The hombre's own scrawny crowbait stood nearby, but instead of trying to make a getaway on his own horse he made another desperate attempt to fork *Sail Away*. Probably he knew that he could never hope to escape on his bony old cayuse if Toot chased him on the buckskin. At any rate, he was game enough, or brazen enough! Catching up expertly, he scrambled onto *Sail Away* for the second time and managed to cinch in one spur.

He hugged the horn frantically, but *Sail Away*, nearly as angry as his master at all this tomfoolery, was too much for him. The buckskin went snapping upward, shaking itself in midair like a wet hound and the rider went sprawling, losing a boot in the process. Before he could try again, Toot charged him like an enraged grizzly.

"Now here's where I skin me a live skunk!" thundered the huge Rocking T ranny as he closed in. "I'm goin' to beat the livin' tar— Huh!" he

snorted, using his boot heels for brakes and plowing to a halt. "Why, it's a boy! Nothin' but a kid!"

The horse thief couldn't have been more than fourteen, and he looked even younger. He had a peaked, hunger-sharpened face, and his teeth were bared like a cornered animal's. His patched denims were faded to a pale blue, his shirt was a torn and disreputable rag, and his boots were shabby and scuffed. Never in all his life had Toot seen a more miserable-looking waif. He was too wrathful, however, to feel sympathetic. Whoever he was, this younker needed a lesson and Toot fully intended to dish one out.

"Stand back, big feller!" the kid warned shrilly, and the sunlight glittered on the nickel steel of a gun. "You come a step closer an I'll drill you! Don't try to lay your paws on me!"

"Drop that durned pop gun!" Toot thundered, seeing that the young thief was armed only with a cheap .22 revolver. He had holstered his own big cailber Colt, and now he advanced upon the youthful gunman with his big hands extended menacingly. "You young, pint-sized horse thief! I'll warm your saddle paddin'— Hey!"

The light-calibered gun cracked like the snap of a bull whip, and Toot felt a twinge in the calf of his left leg as a wisp of white fur flew from his Angoras.

"You, loco half pint!" Toot yelped. Fortunately he got his mighty fingers on the gun before it could be triggered again, and he hurled it disgustedly into a nearby clump of cedar. "Don't you know you could almost put out a feller's eye with that thing?"

The youngster weighed less than a hundred pounds, and Toot tipped the beam at twice that, but the big waddy wasn't finding it any too easy to handle his prisoner. He

howled as the kid kicked out violently with his booted foot. The blow on the shin was much more painful than the sting of the .22 pellet had been and Toot released his grasp on the boy for a moment. The thief squirmed almost free and landed a popping punch on Smith's broad nose. Bleating with pain and rage, Toot finally pinned his slippery opponent and sat on him. He could have crushed the kid's skull with one blow of his hamlike fist, but angry as he was, he scorned to use that tactic against such small fry.

"What do you mean by tryin' to swipe my cayuse?" he lectured. "Don't you know we hang hoss thieves on this here range? What's your name, button? And what are you doin' here on the Rockin' T—of which I am part owner," Toot added proudly.

"Lemme go! You'll be sorry if you don't, you big ox!" the youngster cried defiantly.

"I'll let you go—after I've paddled your crupper," promised the big ranney grimly. Holding the kid down with one mighty hand, he prepared to administer a spanking with the other. But there was an interruption. Toot Smith turned his head at the sound of drumming hoofs.

AT first Toot thought the sound came from the wagon road that threaded its way through the nearby canyon toward Spruce City, the county seat. But the stretch of trail that was within his range of vision remained empty. Someone was approaching from across country and in a moment Toot saw a rider on a steel-dust horse emerging from the pines. It was Curly Steve Tustin, one of Toot's two partners in the ownership of the Rocking T Ranch.

"What's goin' on?" Steve asked, as he swung to the ground and strode

forward. Little crinkles of laughter formed at the corners of his eyes as he took in the queer situation. "Why don't you sit on somebody your own size, Toot?"

Steve Tustin was smallish and slender, though his shoulders under his gray and black silk shirt were compact and powerful. His chaps were of pearl-gray leather and the only touch of color in his costume was a carefully knotted crimson neckerchief. Curly Steve was as quiet in manner as Toot was noisy.

"Howdy, Steve," Toot grunted. "This here doorknob tried to make off with Sail Away. I aim to give him a chappin' he'll remember. Why, he even *shot* me—dang bust his ornery soul!"

Curly Steve chuckled. "Let him up; I want a look at him," he said, and when Toot reluctantly released the prisoner, Tustin laughed even louder. "So you tried to steal the biggest horse from the biggest man in the county, eh? What's your name, son?"

The kid mutteringly told Tustin where he could go, but there was something so genuinely friendly in Curly Steve's eyes that he answered the question.

"They call me Corky."

Toot guffawed. "You ain't even a half-pint. You're just the cork," he brayed. "What'll we do with him, Steve? If he was a little older, I'm danged if I wouldn't turn him over to the sheriff—as much as I hate sheriffs."

"Corky, why did you try to take Toot's horse?" Steve asked the sultry-eyed youngster.

Corky hesitated. "Well, it was better than the one I was ridin', and I took a notion to trade, that's all." He was looking around uneasily, evading Steve's level glance. Tustin's next question made him straighten in surprise.

"How'd you like to work for us,

here on the Rockin' T?"

Corky's sharp face flushed, then whitened. "You makin' game of me?"

"No, I mean it. I think we can use you, if you'll promise to think twice before taking other people's property," Steve said with a grin. "If you can ride, you can do a man's work."

The boy swallowed hard. "Are you really offerin' me a range job? An honest job doin' ranch work, mister?"

TOOT SMITH had listened with open mouth, even more amazed than Corky at Steve's offer. Now he protested in foghorn tones. "You crazy, Steve? Offerin' this boss thief a job, when there's already a swarm of rustlers in this here neck of the woods? I say he don't work for the Rockin' T and, by hoptoads, I'm one-third owner of the spread!" He was nursing the tiny flesh nip in his leg.

"And I own another third," Curly Steve said good-humoredly. "I say he gets a job. That is, if he wants it."

Corky's weazened face lighted up with a pathetic eagerness. "Do I? Shucks! This is the first time anybody ever offered me a real ridin' job. I'll shore work hard and do my best."

But Toot's jaw was still stubbornly outthrust. "There's three of us pard's, and we've each got an equal say-so. You've voted for this —this brone nabber, and I've voted *against*. Our other pardner's vote will decide it, one way or another. It's up to Beautiful Bill."

"That suits me, Toot," Steve smiled. "We'll leave it to Bill. He ought to be comin' along the road from town any minute now. I hope he succeeded in getting some men."

The big roundup was due in a few days, and the Rocking T was

badly in need of cowhands, as the three pards had been working the spread alone. Beautiful Bill Barbee had gone to Spruce City that morning to see if he could hire an extra puncher or two. If Toot hadn't been prejudiced he would have admitted that even Corky would be useful, short-handed as they were.

Toot was still glowering at the youngster when something came ripping through the quiet air with a venomous *whoosh*. Ghost, Steve's steel-dust cayuse, nickered and shied as a hatful of sand and gravel was upflung in a yellow geyser. Somebody was sniping with a heavy-caliber rifle!

"It's the Kattoons!" Corky cried shrilly. "They're goin' to kill you fellers!"

CHAPTER II.

NO COWHANDS FOR HIRE.

SHOULDERING his way into the Cascade Bar, the largest saloon and gambling house in Spruce City, Bill Barbee strode toward the bar, attracting every eye in the place. Not because he was handsome, in spite of his moniker of "Beautiful," but because he was the ugliest, orneriest-looking hombre, probably, in all Wyoming. There was something so appallingly startling about this Rocking T partner's homeliness that men paused, in the act of bending an elbow to take a drink or light a cigarette, to stare in amazement. And it might not be healthy to gawk overmuch at an hombre so ferocious-appearing as Bill Barbee.

But Bill didn't mind it. It was his sense of humor that had inspired him to name his handsome strawberry roan Ugly. The animal, as beautiful and splendid as Barbee was ill-favored, was pawing at the hitch rack outside the Cascade now. Bill thought it was all quite a joke, though he had the kind of face that was never brightened by a laugh.

Its grin was mirthless.

It was a face that once seen could never be forgotten. Its battered features were all awry. Freckles covered the lean cheeks and flat nose; the eyes were as hard and steady as gimlets, but the lid of the left one drooped until it was nearly closed. The eyebrows, of a dull red color like the hair of the bullet-shaped head, grew together in the center, so that Bill appeared to be scowling fiercely while actually he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Howdy, gents," Bill said, greeting one and all in a voice that was as raspy as a rusted hinge.

Barbee's figure, as he cocked one run-over boot onto the brass rail, was nearly as grotesque as his face, and he seemed careless about his clothes, even for a hard-working puncher. His saddle-warped legs were clad in worn and patched Levis; his flannel shirt lacked a couple of buttons, and his Stetson looked as if it had been slept on and then stepped on. But Bill's twin six-shooters were extremely well-cared for. The stag-handled weapons, worn in low, thonged-down holsters, glistened like radiant blue satin, and the cartridges in his belt loops shone like polished brass. Barbee's negligence in dress didn't seem to extend to his armament.

"Hello, Barbee," a tall, beer-drinking rancher said uneasily as Bill nodded his way. Bill knew him as Fred Fields; ordinarily very friendly toward the Rocking T. But now everything had changed—thanks to two men who were playing poker at one of the round, felt-covered tables nearby.

These were Haze Joyce and Hank Schuman, owner and foreman, respectively, of the big Twisted Sevens spread north of town. Joyce had bought the huge cattle ranch recently and had already decided that,

as far as relations with the Rocking T went, the two spreads were enemies.

And it made a difference, as Beautiful Bill Barbee was finding out. As a rule, men were neighborly on this range, and were especially so at spring or fall roundup time, chipping in to help each other whenever possible. Then, more than at any other time, the ranchers forgot their grudges in order to co-operate for the good of all, for it took the combined efforts of all the ranches to comb the strays from the badlands, tally them and brand the new calves.

But after the Rocking T pards had turned down Haze Joyce's ridiculously low offer to buy them out, some weeks before, the Twisted Sevens had declared war, a particularly underhanded variety of it.

In spite of every effort, Barbee had been unable to hire any extra help for the forthcoming roundup. The Rocking T pards, who had owned their spread for less than a year, had thus far managed to do all their own work, but their herd was increasing in size and it would be extremely difficult to take care of their interests this time with just the three of them to do the riding and branding. Barbee would have liked to hire at least three reliable rannies, for now more than ever they needed to protect their interests. But the Twisted Sevens owner, backed by money—and gunmen—had blocked Beautiful Bill on every side. It seemed that nobody dared run the risk of offending the powerful ranchman by throwing in with the Rocking T pards, even for the few days of the roundup.

"What chances, Fred, of you lendin' me a puncher or two?" Bill asked, as he signaled the bartender to fill up Field's glass. He knew that Fred Field's ranch lay far to the

south and that the spring work down there had just been finished.

"Sorry, but I ain't got anyone I can spare right now, Barbee," Fields muttered with a sidelong look at the men at the poker table.

Bill followed his glance, noting that another hombre belonging to the Twisted Sevens had just come out of the back room and was watching the card game. This was Swifty Plank, one of the numerous gun artists in Joyce's employ and probably the most dangerous. He was a spidery hombre of about thirty, quick and catlike in his movements and with eyes as cold and unwinking as those of a fish. He bent down to whisper something in his employer's ear—first giving Barbee a contemptuous stare—and Haze Joyce nodded and grinned in Barbee's direction.

"Havin' trouble in hirin' help, Beautiful?" Haze taunted.

There was little of the cattleman stamp about Haze Joyce; he looked more like a professional faro dealer than the operator of a forty-thousand-acre spread. His complexion was pasty, except for a spot of color over each rugged cheekbone, and his soft, tapering fingers seemed more acquainted with a card deck than with a lass rope or branding iron. Haze's thin mouth, slanted in a continuous sneer, was as ruthless as the jaws of a steel trap.

"I'm havin' some difficulty, yeah," drawled Beautiful Bill, his left eyelid drooping another eighth of an inch. "Maybe you'll let me have a few men, eh, Joyce?"

The Twisted Sevens owner laughed boisterously, yet there was a sinister meaning in his chuckling retort: "I might let you have 'em all some fine night, Beautiful Bill."

"Fine," said Barbee pleasantly. "But bein' as the Rockin' T's short of cash, we'd just have to pay 'em off in ammunition. That suit 'em?"

"You're quite a joker, Beautiful." Haze Joyce guffawed. "How about joinin' us in this little game of draw? I've heard tell that you consider yourself a right good poker player."

"I reckon Barbee's afraid to sit in. We're playin' dollar ante, and he's used to two-bit games," sneered Hank Schuman, the Sevens foreman.

"I'll play a few hands," said Bill Barbee. "Thank you kindly for the invite."

BEAUTIFUL BILL would have played poker with the devil himself. The game was Bill's weakness, or rather his strength, for at this battle of wits and pasteboards he was a past master, as even Toot Smith would admit. Certainly no one could read Bill's face and guess whether he held good or bad cards. That queer jumble of features always remained the same, a decided asset in poker. Bill had another proficiency, also. He was a sleight-of-hand performer, with guns or cards! He never used his "magic" until his opponent tried to use such tactics against *him*. But when that happened, Bill really sparkled.

The little crowd in the Cascade had been on tenterhooks at first, expecting that there might be trouble between the Twisted Sevens and the hard-cased Rocking T men. They had relaxed again to resume their drinking and talking, but now their curiosity was stirred once more, and many of the customers came to stand around the poker table. They had heard something of Bill Barbee's expertness with a card deck, and most of them were hoping that Haze Joyce and Schuman would lose aplenty. Neither man was popular. If Haze controlled Spruce City it was through fear and not through any respect anyone had for him. And Schuman, who was a big, blustering hombre, was cordially hated.

"It seems to me, Beautiful, that

there's already too many men on the Rockin' T Ranch," Haze Joyce said as he dealt out the cards. "Three too many, if you savvy what I mean."

"Mebbeso," admitted Bill Barbee, examining his pasteboards by riffling them as they lay flat on the table. He stayed out of the first jackpot, which Schuman won by showing openers. "Mebbeso; that is, I savvy what you mean. I'll open it this time for five," he said as the cards were dealt out again.

Besides the Sevens men, there were two other players opposing Bill—Sam Fletcher, house man for the Cascade, and Judge Eli Polderseed, the irritable, gray-haired judge of the county court. Polderseed threw down his hand in disgust, but the other three men stayed, Haze Joyce raising it to twenty dollars before the draw. The house man dropped out at this point, but Bill threw in additional bank notes and took two cards. He eventually won the pot of nearly two hundred dollars, forcing Schuman to throw in the better hand—a small straight against Bill's three treys. Schuman looked foolish and pretty mad.

"You try runnin' a sandy again, that's all I got to say!" the Twisted Sevens foreman rasped.

"It ain't no sandy when an hombre's got threes," Bill Barbee observed, truthfully enough. "Me, I sort o' like threes. There's the Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T, for instance."

"Take care you don't turn out to be the *runnin' three*," Schuman muttered under his breath. "And get this: We ain't havin' trouble in hirin' help. We just signed on some new men yesterday. Ever hear of the Kattoons?" he asked, his loose lips expanding in a slow, triumphant smile. "Well, they're on our pay roll."

"Yeah?" drawled Beautiful Bill,

not showing any of the anger or surprise he felt. The Kattoons were an outlaw family whose stamping grounds had been up in Montana, and by all reports they were a vicious, murderous outfit. There was a depraved father and several gunmen sons. If the Twisted Sevens had imported these mad dogs, the law-abiding ranchers were in for more trouble than ever. The country around Spruce City had once been peaceful and prosperous, but it was rapidly earning the name that had been recently given it—Quick-trigger Range.

"Go ahead with the game," Judge Polderseed insisted testily. "I'm plenty behind in this session. Hello, sheriff," he greeted a newcomer who had just joined the curious crowd around the table.

SHERIFF LEWISON, a grim-faced law hawk of the old school, nodded at Haze Joyce, gave Bill Barbee a curt look, then spoke jestingly to Polderseed. "A good thing court's not in session, judge. With you in this mood, I'd shore hate to be in the boots of a prisoner you were sentencin'. Nope, I won't take a hand this time, boys," he said when the house man invited him to join the contest. "I'd rather watch." And he fastened his steely eyes on Beautiful Bill Barbee.

The next half dozen hands passed uneventfully, the judge and the Cascade man making small winnings. Then, with Polderseed dealing, things began to liven up. Bill Barbee, leaning carelessly back in his chair, watched the play with increased interest. Even though his left eyelid hung nearly closed, he was missing nothing.

Haze Joyce opened the sizable pot for twenty dollars. Hank Schuman passed, but did not immediately throw down his cards. He was sitting next to Joyce, and Bill noted

that Hank allowed his employer to see his hand before he finally dropped the pasteboards. Well, there was no harm in that—if Schuman was out of it.

Bill Barbee stayed, as did the judge and the house man. Polderseed even raised it twenty before the draw.

Beautiful Bill, who drew two cards to his original three eights, then saw Haze Joyce pull a very clever stunt. Joyce, too, called for two cards. But instead of taking them both, he took but one. The other came from the hand that Hank Schuman had discarded. It was swiftly and dexterously done, and Bill was the only man who saw the deception.

"I'll call that bet and raise you another hundred, Beautiful," Haze said tensely when Barbee had wagered a cool hundred dollars before examining the cards that he had drawn.

Beautiful Bill slowly shuffled his five cards before he looked, then discovered that he had drawn a four spot—and a *fourth eight*. There was a slight murmur from the men who stood behind Bill, then a taut silence that became electric.

"And a hundred," Bill drawled.

There was no "table-stakes" rules in this session, nor was there any limit except the size of a man's bank roll. Bill always carried quite a sum with him, but he was almost down to bedrock. This wasn't exactly small change, even for as rich a man as the owner of the Twisted Sevens. The judge had groaningly thrown down his hand long before, and he had had a small full—three fives on deuces. Polderseed might have been strong on the judicial bench, but he was too timid for such poker as this!

Haze's thin nostrils dilated like those of a triumphant bloodhound. "I think I'll just tap you, Beautiful

Bill," he crowed, throwing a sheaf of hundred-dollar bank notes onto the already big pile in the center of the green table.

"I'll—" Bill hesitated, then addressed a crisp remark to a man who was standing uncomfortably close behind him. It was Haze's gunster, Swifty Plank. He was either intensely interested in the game or, more likely, he was trying to rattle the Rocking T waddy. "Move back, will you?" Barbee requested pointedly. "And get your foot off my chair!"

"Think it's bad luck, do you, havin' someone put his foot on your chair?" smirked Plank.

"It's bad luck," said Beautiful Bill, "for the hombre who puts his foot there!"

As Plank moved back hastily, Haze Joyce rapped impatiently. "Well, what you goin' to do, Beautiful?" he sneered. "Put up, or fold up."

THERE was a breathless hush that Bill Barbee broke cheerily. "Call for all the dinero I've got on me. Which," he announced, "is an even hundred. Now drag back the rest of what you just throwed in. It's the showdown."

Exposing his hand for them all to see, Haze started to rake in the entire pot. "There they are—four aces," he jubilated. "Had three before the draw and caught the other one."

"Caught it from where?" said Bill. "But never mind, Haze. You don't win, anyhow. I've got you bested."

Quickly he lay five cards face up on the cloth in a neat row. The nine, ten, jack, queen and king of hearts. A straight flush! A gasp of surprise went up from the assembly, especially from those who had stood close behind Bill's chair. But the expression on the homely face of Beautiful Bill never altered as he

rose deliberately and took possession of the stacked hundreds on the table. It made a huge roll, and he deftly tied a bit of twine around it.

"Well, thanks for the entertainment," he said pleasantly as he sauntered nonchalantly toward the swing doors of the Cascade.

White with rage, Haze Joyce was turning over the cards that Bill had spread out on the table. "Hold on, you!" he bleated. "We were playin' with a blue-backed deck, and the backs of these cards are red! How do you explain that, you blasted—"

"They probably," said Beautiful Bill calmly, "turned red with embarrassment in findin' themselves in such a crooked poker game."

"Get him, Swifty!" Hank Schuman yelled at Plank, at the same time digging for his own gun. "Cut him down!"

The crowd in the Cascade scattered in panic, some of the men diving beneath tables and chairs. Even Sheriff Lewison forgot the dignity of his office and ducked instinctively. They had every reason to hunt cover, for in an instant the long room was jarring from the mighty concussion of .45-caliber shots.

But the lead storm didn't come from the guns of the Twisted Sevens men; it was donated by Beautiful Bill Barbee, who had pivoted on his boot toes in the doorway. Through the swirl of powder smoke that darkened the Cascade two flashes had scintillated for a brief moment like the trails left by falling stars.

Schuman's hand never dragged out his gun, for just as it had touched the butt, one of Bill's slugs went spinning through the Sevens foreman's fingers. Swifty Plank had succeeded in unshucking his Colt, but he didn't hold it long. Before he could trigger it, the weapon was spinning in an arc. Struck by another of Beautiful's bullets, it skittered across the top of the bar and

crashed into a row of liquor bottles on the other side.

"If you-all hadn't furnished me with so much fun," said Beautiful Bill Barbee, "I'd have killed the two of you. Adios! And I'll see you at the roundup."

CHAPTER III. THE KATTOONS.

BILL BARBEE, astride Ugly, his magnificent white-stockinged roan, drummed out of Spruce City unmolested. None of the Twisted Sevens men who were in town cared to risk following him after Bill's exhibition in the Cascade Bar. The Rocking T ranny had taken his time, too, before pulling out, making a last, ineffectual effort to hire a cowhand or two.

Passing the stockyards and the railroad track, Beautiful Bill took a familiar trail out of the settlement



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and soon he was deep in the wilderness, following a lonely canyon where a white-rushing mountain stream boomed amid the black rocks, filling the air with spray and fury. A few miles farther on, the beetling walls of the gulch towered even higher; then, at a fork in the creek, Bill turned and came out on a high pass where a grove of quaking asp flashed green and silver in the wind. Taking a short cut, he swung around the shoulder of a mountain and into a parklike meadow. Already he was on Rocking T home range.

He rode for another mile, seeing several scattered bunches of grazing cattle, then struck the wagon road. Just as he did so he heard the sharp, ringing report of a Winchester, probably a .44 or .45-70.

"What in thunder—" Bill ejaculated, touching Ugly with his spurs.

Not fifty yards from him, a little off the road, a group of four men were gathered, three of them mounted on rather mangy-looking broncs. The fourth hombre was afoot and had taken a position behind a boulder. It was he who had just fired, and Bill saw him lever in a fresh cartridge for a second try at his target.

When Bill saw what that target was, his hand swept one of his big .45s from the leather. A little less than a quarter of a mile to the left were three figures, one of which he recognized—by the white Angora chaps—as that of his huge pard, Toot Smith. Another looked like Steve Tustin; the third person seemed absurdly small, and Bill couldn't identify him. But he had seen more than enough, and he sent Ugly tearing forward like a juggernaut. The fact that these dry-gulchers outnumbered him four to one made no difference to Bill Barbee.

The quartet of ambushers now saw and heard Bill for the first time. He was coming exactly as if he had a

dozen men behind him, and perhaps they thought he had. Or it might have been that the sight of Beautiful's frightful face unnerved them. At any rate, they roweled their horses in panic, and the hombre with the Winchester made a mad scramble to get into his stirrups again.

"You smelly woodticks! Stop and fight!" shouted Bill.

HE got a good look at the men before the dust of their horses' hoofs blotted them out. There was a marked family resemblance between them, and it flashed over Barbee who they were. The younger hombres ranged in age from twenty to thirty, and all had the same vicious cast of features and lanky, angular build. All wore hats with flattened crowns, and the sort of tight-fitting buckskin chaps known in that country as "shotguns." The oldest was in his fifties, a man with a brown, bloated face that resembled the skin of a cold baked potato, with warts where the potato's "eyes" should be. Bill Barbee had never seen a more malevolent look than the one the old man gave him before he turned to crouch over his saddle pommel.

Bill had to let them go, for he didn't relish shooting men in the back, even such a crew of cutthroats as this.

"We'll see 'em later, Ug," he told his cayuse as he turned him off the road toward his waiting partners up the flats. "We will, or I miss my guess. But who's this with Toot and Steve—a kid? Hey, Steve!" he sang out as his racing roan carried him up to the trio. "What's been happenin'?"

Steve laughed. "I guess Corky here can tell you better than we can," he said as Beautiful Bill dismounted.

Corky looked uncertainly at Barbee, evidently amazed and a little scared at this newcomer's homeli-

ness. "It was the Kattoons who was shootin' just now," he piped up.

"Who in the devil's name is Kattoons? Or *what* is Kattoons? And what do *you* know about 'em?" Toot Smith roared at the waif.

"I can answer that," Bill Barbee said. "They're a plumb *cultus* family from up Montana way, and Haze Joyce has put 'em on his pay roll."

Steve Tustin's clean-cut face tightened grimly at this piece of news, but Toot was too enraged to get its full impact. Violently and with much fist flourishing, he told Bill of Corky's brazen attempt to steal his horse.

"And by jings, he even shot me!" the huge Rocking T rannihan snorted indignantly.

"Shot? You don't look shot."

Toot kicked out of his shaggy Angoras and indignantly exposed the spot where the flesh had been lightly grooved by the .22 pellet. "Worse'n a bee sting," he complained. "I got to go and put some bakin' sody on it. And now, would you believe it, Steve wants to give this gunman horse thief a job here on the Rockin' T!"

"The voting makes it up to you, Bill," Steve smiled. "You didn't succeed in getting anyone in town, did you?"

Beautiful's shaggy eyebrows gave his face a scowling expression, but he was grinning widely. "I got Haze Joyce for about seven hundred dollars, and bein' as I was usin' some of the ranch capital, it gets split three ways." He turned to stare bleakly at Corky. "Were you with them Kattoons, son?" he asked sternly.

"Yeah, I was with 'em," the boy admitted.

"Is your name Kattoon? You're the youngest of the family, are you?" Bill Barbee grilled.

Corky's thin face flushed. "I'm

not a Kattoon; I dunno *what* my name is. They raised me up, since I was a baby."

"And they raised you to be a rattlesnake, just like they are, eh?" Toot thundered. "Wasn't you just fakin' to steal *Sail Away* so's to coax me out in the open where your friends could pick me off?"

"I dunno what the Kattoons was up to," Corky admitted. "All I know is, they made me do what I done. You can have me jailed now, if you want," he said resignedly.

Beautiful Bill studied Corky for a minute. "I believe you're tellin' the truth. If we give you a job on the Rockin' T, will you play square?"

The kid's peaked face lighted up as if the gates of paradise had been opened for him. "I'll be true blue," he quavered.

Toot Smith, who was buckling on his chaps again, emitted a howl of protest. "He'll cut our throats while we're asleep in our bunks!" he raged. "I've a notion to sell out my interest in this here spread."

"We'll buy you out," said Bill, with a twinkle in his more-open right eye. His other one was winking at Steve Tustin.

"Just like you, wantin' to cheat me out of my share in the best ranch in Wyomin'!" Toot stormed. "Well, I won't let you do it! And as for that young hellion, if he don't watch his p's and q's, I'll kick his crupper clear up around his neck! Now that's final!"

CHAPTER IV.

GUNMEN'S ROUNDUP.

THE Rocking T's new cowhand proved to be a willing worker; he was handy with a rope for a lad of his age, and was anxious to learn more. He was given a better horse than his old crowbait, and Bill Barbee presented him with his second-best saddle and bridle. It was only a few days until the start of the big

cattle push, and the Rocking T waddies kept busy from before dawn until after sundown.

Bill and Steve enjoyed having the kid around, but Toot Smith still showed no signs of thawing toward Corky. Toot continued to grumble and mutter his objections to the new set-up, now and then giving the kid a foghorn blast that would have paralyzed a youth less game. But Corky took all that Toot could hand out, and made renewed efforts to prove himself worthy of a "ridin' job on the Rockin' T."

One evening the orphan told them all he knew about the Kattoon family gang. He recounted enough of their activities to hang them several times over. The old man's name was Charley, and the sons were called Asher, Mike and Toad. The latter was the most vicious, though there was no crime that any one of the family was not capable of. They had treated Corky with extreme brutality from the first, but it was the only life he knew, and until now he had never dared tear himself away.

"The Kattoons is mighty slick," Corky said. "They've never served time in jail since I been with 'em, though I think the old man was in the pen when he was younger. Seems like they allus manage to stay just inside the law on stuff that's knowed about 'em. They was never caught at any of their murders."

"Well, being that you don't know your own last name, Corky, we ought to make one up for you," Steve said as he stretched himself out on his bunk and rolled a brown-paper cigarette. "It ought to be something with *our* names in it. Like—let's see now—Corky Tusbar? Corky Barsmithin? How's that sound?"

"How about Corky Beatin?" suggested Beautiful Bill, scratching his head.

The gloomy-faced Toot was making a pretense of rubbing medicine on his wounded leg, though it had completely healed. He gave a disgusted snort. "Durn fools," he mumbled.

"Listen to this one, Corky," said Bill. "Corky Tusbeesmith! How's that strike you?"

Corky glanced up from the raw-hide strands he was braiding. "If it's the same to you," he said seriously, "I'd like to be just plain Corky Smith. It's easier to say."

Toot dropped his bottle of liniment, his eyes widening. He gulped emptily a couple of times, looking at the youngster who had just said so astonishing a thing. Gradually a smile formed around the big fellow's truculent mouth.

"Smith, did you say?"

"Yessir," the kid said warily, getting ready to dodge anything that might start to fly.

"Well, I'd be right willin' for you to take that name," Toot said, his voice warming. "It's a kind of unusual name, Smith is, and it's mighty seldom you hear it. But it's a famous name that lots of mighty important hombres have been proud to carry—Cap'n John Smith, f'instance, who cut off the head of Chief Pocahontas, if I remember the story right. Anyway, you're Corky Smith from now on. You hear that, fellers?" he roared at his grinning pards.

"That's all right by us, Toot," Steve chuckled, exchanging a meaningful glance with Beautiful Bill. They knew that their pard's heart had melted at last. And it was a big heart, too, as everything about Toot was big. From now on Corky would have not just two friends at the Rockin' T, but three.

ON the eve of the roundup, the Rockin' T pards started for the holding ground, some fifteen miles to the eastward, with Corky "Smith"

driving the wagon. In addition to their pet broncs, which they rode, they were leading the working string, the pick of the cavvy. It was a good-looking saddle band, but the pards wished they had more men to ride those horses.

"It's a cinch," Steve had said, "that any of our calves we miss brandin' will soon be wearin' the Twisted Sevens burn. Our only hope is in Sandy MacIntosh. He's to be roundup captain, superintending the whole business, and they say he's honest."

"He owns the X Bar Q, don't he?" Toot grunted. "Well, if his name's Sandy, I hope he's got enough sand in his craw to put a crimp in Haze Joyce's dirty work."

It was a moonlit journey, and the air was balmy under the canopy of stars. From time to time they heard the mournful dirge of coyotes and the freezing challenge of a lone timber wolf, and they answered this night music with a song of their own. Corky's thin voice joined in, for he already knew the words by heart:

"We're the Fightin' Three from the Rockin' T.
Our names they are Steve and Toot and Barbee!
We bit when we shoot and we scratch when we bite,
And there's nothin' we crave so much as a fight!
Ki-yay, ki-yay! Yi-yippy, ki-yay!
There's nothin' we crave as much as a fight!"

Corky hoped that some day—when he was big enough to hold his own in battle—there would be a Fightin' Four!

THEY reached the site of the gathering point at about midnight, and made camp. The fires of other outfits could be seen here and there, where men were sleeping or preparing for the morrow's work. The

place was in a natural basin, the logical center for the drive.

"I think this is MacIntosh a-comin' this way now," Bill Barbee observed, pausing in the act of unrolling a tarp.

A tall but stooped figure loomed out of the gloom, the fire in his pipe glowing like a red eye. "This is the Rockin' T bunch?" he greeted in a Scottish burr. "MacIntosh is my name. I'm to be roundup boss this year."

Beautiful Bill introduced himself and the others, including Corky. Toot Smith shook hands, but suspiciously, and he growlingly asked the whereabouts of the Twisted Sevens outfit.

"Joyce's men are yonder," the Scotchman said, pointing with the stem of his pipe. "Now, men," he said gravely, "I hope there willna be any trouble. I shall try and see that fair play goes here."

"Well, there'll be trouble if it don't!" Toot roared out in a voice that must have carried to the other camps. "If you're smart, you'll be watchin' your own beef, too."

MacIntosh spoke in almost a whisper. "I ken well what you mean. My men will have their eyes open, and don't you doot it. We dinna like the Joyce men any more than you do yourselves."

"I think it's us that Haze and his crowd are after, and not you," said Bill Barbee.

"I've heard there's bad blood between ye." The Scot nodded. "Twould be best if none of ye rode alone."

"That won't work for us: we're too short-handed as it is," said Curly Steve. "But don't worry, MacIntosh. I think we can take care of ourselves. See you in the mornin'."

Shortly after the X Bar Q owner had bade them "Gude nicht," the Rocking T hands were slumbering under their soogans.

BEFORE dawn the roundup camp was stirring, and Bill, Steve, Toot and Corky were up before most of the others. Corky was cook, in addition to his other chores, and his java and sizzling bacon would have been a credit to a veteran coosie of three times his years.

"It's just as I thought," Toot grunted as soon as it began to get a little light. "Look over there at the Twisted Sevens camp; they've got nearly a dozen punchers. Or, rather, gunmen. This here's a gunmen's roundup, not a cowhand's."

Curly Steve laughed softly as he lit his morning cigarette. "Well, what are you, Toot?"

"By gravies, I'm a gunman if I have to be!" growled the huge Rocking T pard.

The unlovely face of Beautiful Bill was more formidably bleak than ever as he squinted toward the four-wagon, hundred-horse outfit across the flats. "I don't see the Kattoons," he remarked.

Corky, too, was anxiously watching the enemy camp. "They ain't there. Leastways, I don't spot 'em," he said with relief.

"I don't like the looks of it," said Bill Barbee as he went out to saddle up. "If Joyce has hired those buzzards, why aren't they here with the rest of the flock?"

Toot put his huge hand on Corky's thin shoulder. "Don't you be skeered, Corky. You're a Smith, remember. You'll be here in camp, leastwise today, and there'll be plenty men around to protect you. Joyce ain't the whole show here."

But if he wasn't the whole show, Haze Joyce seemed to be most of it. This was supposed to be a "pool" roundup, with all ranchers sharing men and resources, but Joyce and his ramrod, Hank Schuman, had willed it otherwise. Every outfit worked for itself and was on its own except that each drove toward the

same focal point. Although Sandy MacIntosh was nominally the roundup captain, he only mapped out the campaign and assigned the districts. The Rocking T was to scour the canyons toward the northeast; the X Bar Q rannies were told off for the western side; and the other territory was likewise apportioned. There would be a good three day's work, with plenty of branding to do at the wind-up. The calf crop was big this year.

Toot, Bill and Curly Steve were to do all the riding that day; Corky could lend a hand later, especially at the branding, and meanwhile he could keep "tally," do the cooking chores, and act as horse wrangler.

Leaving the boy to hold things down, the three Rocking T pards rode off together, soon to split up to ride three separate canyons. Just as they were pulling away they met Haze Joyce and Hank Schuman, the latter astride a bay mare, the ranch owner topping a powerful black. The trimmings of Joyce's saddle and bridle gleamed with solid silver.

"Why, if it ain't the Rockin' T parade!" Schuman sang out mockingly. "Here's a little tip for you: Every Twisted Sevens cow has got twins this spring."

Toot's face went purple. He would have whipped loose his 45 if Curly Steve hadn't adroitly maneuvered his horse next to Sail Away and between Toot and the Sevens men. Steve could handle Toot, and was probably the one man in the world capable of doing it.

"Where's the Kattoons?" Bill Barbee asked Haze Joyce.

A queer look replaced Schuman's leer. "Kattoons? Why, I was just foolin' that day in the Cascade, Barbee. We never hired no such hombres."

"Me, I've never heard of 'em." Haze Joyce smiled sardonically as they rode off at an angle toward the

southeast. "Some day, Beautiful," he called back, "I'm goin' to get even with you for that game of poker!"

CHAPTER V.

BIRTHDAY.

THE first day's work progressed without a flare-up, though the tension, the growing feeling that something was about to happen, had become painful. Numbered among the hundreds of head that Steve, Toot and Bill brought in were many Twisted Sevens animals. Some Rocking T stock, too, was mixed in with the herds Joyce's men dutifully brought in, but there was a strange lack of mother-calf combinations. Many Rocking T cows seemed to take an undue interest in Twisted Sevens offspring! According to rules, the Twisted Sevens riders were supposed to do their branding only at holding-point headquarters, but they were marking calves where they found them. And, it seemed to the Rocking T pards, they were slapping on their own brand regardless of rightful ownership.

That night Steve and Bill Barbee took turns at "singin' to 'em"—helping to guard the great cattle herd that was being held about a mile below. From now on, the tempo of the work would increase.

Since Corky was anxious to do some riding, the pards decided to let him take part in some of the circling, and he was detailed to comb a nearby coulee for stock that the first riders might have missed.

"Toot, you'd better return through Moon Canyon when you're circling back," Steve told the big ranney. "It's narrow, and one rider can handle it. Meet Bill and me at Blue Forks Creek with anything you've rounded up."

Toot Smith was in a furious mood. The dirty work that was going on almost under their eyes was madden-

ing to them all, but particularly so to the hot-tempered Rocking T giant. When he was ready to ride, Toot strode over to the MacIntosh campfire, leading Sail Away.

"This here ain't no roundup; it's a rustler's convention!" Toot roared at the Scotchman.

"I wouldna say that," the Scot protested. "I have been doing all I can, mon."

"MacIntosh is your name, is it?" Toot said scathingly. "What's a MacIntosh? It's a raincoat. And what's a raincoat? It's a slicker. And, by jinks, I think you're a slicker!"

"Hoot, mon!" The ranchman clacked his tongue. "Hoot, toot!"

"My name's Toot—not Hoot, you loocoed owl!" raged the big Rocking T waddy. "If I was cap'n of this here roundup, I'd soon fix—"

Curly Steve came up to ride herd on his belligerent pard. "Things would be a whole lot worse if it wasn't for Mr. MacIntosh, Toot, and you know it. Better get started, amigo," he reminded the giant in the white Angoras.

Grumbling to himself, Toot mounted and cantered off in his swing toward the north. It was another glorious day, with the air scented with pine and wild flowers and a tender blue sky where great white clouds were rolling. In spite of himself, Toot couldn't stay mad, not even at the Twisted Sevens, and before he had gone five miles his spirits were soaring.

Just at the point where he made the turn into Moon Canyon, stood a little crossroads store of logs and clapboard. Struck by an idea, Toot went inside and made some purchases, coming out with a package which he fastened to the cantle of his saddle. Then he began his clean-up of the stock in Moon Canyon.

It was about noon when Toot Smith met Bill Barbee and Steve Tustin at the Blue Forks and joined his couple of dozen head of cattle with the hundred-odd they had collected in the adjacent country, practically all of this stock being Rocking T stuff, with a scattering of other brands.

"What you got tied behind your kak, Toot?" ribbed Bill Barbee. "You still deliverin' for that Chinese laundry?"

"Go jump in the Powder," Toot suggested, but his disposition had changed since early morning. He was in a mellow frame of mind now, and he wanted to share his elation with his pards.

"Today is Corky Smith's birthday." He beamed. "So I stopped in at the roadside store and bought him some presents. They didn't have much, but it's the spirit of the thing that counts. Now don't look at me like that, Bill—it's from all of us; I ain't tryin' to be hoggish about it."

"But how do you know this is Corky's birthday?" asked Curly Steve in perplexity. "He doesn't know himself, when his birthday is."

"Well, he's got to have a birthday sometime, ain't he? And I've decided this is the day," Toot affirmed with considerable force. "He's either thirteen or fourteen years old today, I dunno which, but it's his birthday."

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Beautiful Bill.

They hazed their contingent of cattle down to the holding grounds, then started toward the Rocking T wagon. Before they reached it, Toot met with a slight mishap. The string on his parcel became undone, and the contents went tumbling. Red of face, the big fellow dismounted to retrieve a pair of fancy spurs, a gaudily striped shirt, a small

suit of red flannel underwear and a bag of stick candy.

Striding by on foot at the moment were two members of the Twisted Sevens outfit. One was a slinking hombre named Chadron, who was carrying a long stamp iron; the other was a powerful, thick-necked gunman known as Bat Luker. Both of them made the same mistake—they laughed loudly.

"You lose your lollipops, Smith?" Luker jeered. "Now you'll have to suck your thumb. Hey! What th—"

Toot Smith wasted no time; he was upon Luker with the speed of a lion and the weighty power of a rhinoceros, and his attack was as sudden and devastating as the advent of a cyclone. He took only one punch, because no more was needed. Had Luker's neck been less thick, his head would probably have been snapped from his spinal column. As it was, the muscular Mr. Luker hit the ground with the small of his back in a cloud of dust, arms and legs pawing empty air.

"How's that for a pacifier, baby mine?" roared Toot.

Bat Luker was stunned and unable to tell him, but Chadron took a vicious swing at Toot's head with the formidable weapon he already had in his hand, the heavy stamp iron.

Toot Smith, without blinking, caught the iron in his two enormous hands, twisted it into the general shape of a pretzel, and flung it from him. Chadron, forgetting about his gun or not daring to remember it, was already making tracks. Toot bellowed after him his opinions of the Twisted Sevens, its owner and men who worked for him. He was still raging when he picked up and gently dusted off the things that had caused the argument.

"And you can tell Haze Joyce," Toot flung at the rapidly dwindling

figure of Chadron, "that the Rockin' T is ready for war any time he says the word!"

"Come on, you mild-mannered galoot," grinned Beautiful Bill, "before you get what you asked for."

EAVING Luker still insensible, but beginning to groan and stir a little, they cantered on to their camp, Steve Tustin doing his best to quiet his pard, for this wasn't the time and place to look for trouble.

To their surprise, they found their little camp empty. There was no response to their call, and after waiting a few minutes they went to look up Sandy MacIntosh.

"I have na seen the bairn since he rode away early this morn," the Scotchman told them.

"He should have been back hours ago," said Curly Steve, his tone anxious. "It wouldn't have taken him long to comb that coulee. Come on, boys."

Mounting again, they set out in search. They tried to take it lightly, but the jokes they tried to make fell flat and for a while they rode in silence. In just one short week, the little waif that they had taken in had grown to mean much to them. Now they were beginning to understand just *how* much.

"He don't know this country extra good," Toot said in what he tried to make a cheery, hopeful tone. "He's probly just got hisself lost."

"He's lost on foot, then," Bill said suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

Bill pointed to a horse that was grazing on a little patch of grass at the edge of a cedar clump. It was the bronc they had given Corky; the saddle was empty, the reins dangling, and there was no sign of the animal's owner. From then on, it was simply a matter of back-tracking, and they pushed on with an increasing fear

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that none dared put into words. There had been drops of scarlet on the vacant saddle and the pony's mane was stained with the same ominous hue.

Two miles farther up, they found Corky. He lay on a carpet of blue wild flowers, his frail body shattered by heavy-caliber bullets. He was still alive and conscious, but drowsy with the approach of the last, merciful sleep.

"Who did this, Corky?" asked Toot Smith, on his knees beside the half-smiling waif. Never, since they had known him, had Bill and Steve heard his gruff voice so gentle.

"It . . . was the . . . Kattoons," Corky murmured. Then he really smiled. "They shore . . . shot the daylights out of me, didn't they? But don't you mind, Toot. I'm . . . a Smith—"

After a while his small hand grew limp in Toot's big one, and he seemed to take a longer breath than usual. A cloud drifted from overhead, but Corky's wide-opened eyes remained looking into the sun. Then they knew that the work of Haze Joyce's Kattoons had been fully accomplished.

CHAPTER VI.

LAW, ORDER—OR ELSE!

LEAVING Ghost and Ugly at the tie rack, Curly Steve and Beautiful Bill Barbee strode down the board sidewalk of Spruce City's Main Street and entered a saloon to make an inquiry. Learning that Sheriff Lewison hadn't been seen downtown that morning, they crossed to the courthouse.

"If he isn't at the jail office we'll go to his house," Steve said, and Bill Barbee nodded gloomily.

On the loneliest, wildest hilltop on the Rocking T was a mound of fresh earth. Its headboard had been roughly but painstakingly carved

with Toot Smith's stock knife, so that the inscription read:

CORKY SMITH

Age 13 Or 14

Murdered
On His Birthday

He Was True Blue

Steve and Bill found the sheriff in his sanctum in the courthouse basement. Deputy Clay, Lewison's second in command was also present.

"'Mornin', Tustin—Barbee," the sheriff said without rising. He stared hard at Barbee, for he had never quite become accustomed to looking at Beautiful's fascinatingly distorted countenance. "Roundup all over up your way?" he asked, just to make conversation. For Lewison guessed the nature of his visitors' mission, and it gave him a feeling of helplessness.

"It was over for us on the second day, as you already know, sheriff," said Steve Tustin. "Now, we've already talked to you, but we want to know what you're going to do about arresting the Kattoons, the father and the sons."

"Smith is asleep at the Cowboy's Rest lodging house," said Beautiful Bill. "It took nearly a gallon of whiskey to get him that way, but maybe it's a good thing for you, sheriff, that he's passed out."

Lewison winced. He had had dealings with Toot Smith before—to his perplexity and sorrow.

"That pard of yours is a mighty hard hombre to handle," he said, which wasn't exactly an original observation, it seemed to Bill and Steve.

"Toot has been pretty hard hit, and so have we," Steve said, refusing the cigar Lewison offered him and making a brown-paper cigarette. "Sheriff, we demand that those murderers be arrested and brought to trial."

Deputy Clay spoke up morosely. "No case against 'em. There was no witnesses; no circumstantial evidence that we could find to hold 'em on."

"Corky made a dying statement," Steve insisted. "Before three of us he told who his killers were. Think he would have lied at a time like that?"

"Maybe the sheriff thinks *we're lyin'*," suggested Beautiful Bill. He spoke quietly, but there was a ring in his voice that added to Lewison's uneasiness.

"Not at all," the sheriff said hastily. "But this is how it is: the laws of this county ought to be brought more up to date. We need a grand-jury system, or something. As it stands, you can swear out a complaint and I can arrest those men, if I can find 'em, but I don't think there's a chance in a hundred of them being convicted. They'll have an alibi, and it will simply be your word against theirs. Why, they could even sue you for false arrest after they're acquitted."

"You want law and order in your bailiwick, don't you, Lewison?" Barbee asked flatly.

"Of course. It's my duty to preserve it," the officer admitted, shifting his feet.

"Well," Bill said coldly, "if you don't arrest the Kattoon tribe, my pards and me will take the law into our own hands and kill those men like the dogs they are; The only way we could keep Toot Smith from doing it was by letting him stay drunk. Unless you act, Lewison, there's going to be a war on Quick-trigger Range that all hades can't stop. MacIntosh and every decent cattleman in the district think as we do, and they'll be behind us against the Sevens when the time comes. Now what'll it be?"

Lewison got up and put on his Stetson. "You win," he said, "but remember, you asked for it. Clay,

you organize a posse of about twelve men. I'm sorry I can't ask you and Tustin to join it, Barbee, but it wouldn't look right. We'll get started before noon. You sure those Kattoon men are still at the Twisted Sevens?"

"We made sure of it," Steve said grimly.

The Rocking T rannies accompanied the officers as far as the street, and as they parted, Sheriff Lewison touched Bill Barbee's shoulder.

"Will you do me a favor? There's somethin' that I want to ask you. It's not about this business, but . . . well, I'm curious about that poker game in the Cascade a couple weeks ago, Barbee."

"I'll be glad to put your mind at rest on any point, sheriff," drawled Beautiful Bill.

"Well, if you don't mind explain-ing," Lewison said in an awed tone. "I was standin' behind your chair. How did you change your four eights to that queer straight flush? I was watchin' you all the time, and so was everybody else."

Beautiful Bill gently corrected him. "Not all the time, you weren't. Remember when I told Swifty Plank to get his foot off my chair? Well, just for a second then you and everybody else were lookin' at Plank. That second was all the time I needed. Good-by, sheriff. See you later."

CHAPTER VII.

TRIAL—AND ERROR.

SPRUCE CITY was thronged the day of the Kattoon trial, for not in years had a criminal case attracted so much interest. Saddle horses were lined at the hitch rails, and buggies and rigs of every description clogged the streets of all sides of the courthouse. The afternoon session was just beginning now, and the ten-

sion had increased as the time of the decision approached. During the morning a jury had been selected and much of the evidence given. A verdict was expected before evening.

Sheriff Lewison's posse had made the arrests without difficulty; Charley Kattoon and his sons had made no resistance, but had avowed their innocence and expressed their willingness to face the Rocking T charges. Their employer, Haze Joyce, was attending the trial and was backing the Kattoons to the limit.

"Well, I reckon we'll soon know," muttered Beautiful Bill, as he seated himself with Curly Steve and Toot Smith on a bench at the front of the big, dingy room. "I wonder what kind of a defense they'll put up."

The pards had already given their testimony, and it was time for the Kattoons to clear themselves, if they could. Judge Polderseed was presiding, and now his gavel rapped sharply for order.

The Rocking T pards felt strangely undressed without their guns and cartridge belts, for the armament of all, with the exception of the law officers, had been checked with the bailiffs at the door. The spectators had even been patted for concealed weapons. Now the room was crowded to its capacity, with men standing at the rear and along the walls.

"Now, Mr. Kattoon," the high-priced defense lawyer that Joyce had imported began questioning the father, "tell us the relationship between yourself and the boy you are accused of having murdered."

"He was my youngest son," replied the old scoundrel, pretending to wipe his eyes with his bandanna.

Ordinarily, Toot Smith would have leaped shouting to his feet at this infamous lie, but Toot was not quite himself. Steve, sitting next to

the big ranny, saw his pard's jaw harden and felt his body grow tense, but strangely enough there was no outburst.

"Naturally, Mr. Kattoon, you loved your child, did you not?" the attorney questioned cleverly.

"He was my favorite, li'l Corky was," whined the warty, potato-faced criminal. "He was a good son to me—took a job at the Rockin' T to help me out in my old age. I never knowed it would end like this." And again the old faker performed his bandanna-handkerchief trick.

AFTER more questioning along this sickening line, Toad Kattoon was called to testify. He was more repulsive, if possible, than his brothers. With his abnormally wide and lipless mouth and his spasmodic throat jerking that seemed to be a habit, he resembled his namesake. But his degenerate eyes were crafty, and he answered exactly as the lawyer wanted him to answer.

"You were fond of your young brother Corky?"

"I shore was. I want to see his killer brought to justice."

"Your accusers tried to insinuate that Corky wasn't your brother at all, but had been adopted by your family, that he was, to all extents and purposes, practically a prisoner of the Kattoon family. Is that true?"

Toad Kattoon pretended indignation. "O' course, it warn't true. My pore maw, she died when the li'l feller was born." And Toad imitated his father's bandanna stunt.

Curly Steve squirmed in his seat, and Bill Barbee's body was as rigid as iron. Only Toot Smith seemed calm. Swiftly, Plank and two other members of the Twisted Sevens spread were being called to the stand now. It was plain now that the

Joyce men were going to swear to an alibi.

Sandy MacIntosh's name had been drawn for the jury, but he was not among the twelve. The shrewd defense lawyer had accused the Scotchman, and several other selections, of being too "friendly toward the Rocking T Ranch," and their names had been withdrawn. As it was, the pards couldn't accuse the jury of being "packed"—it was made up of townsmen for the most part—but it certainly leaned toward the Twisted Sevens side. Joyce's big ranch was hated, but feared, too. And fear was the stronger. Even while trying to be fair and impartial, the jurymen would be afraid of reprisals. Curly Steve caught Lewison's eye and nodded slightly. The sheriff hadn't been so far wrong, after all.

"Your name is Arthur Plank, and you are employed by the Twisted Sevens ranch?" the lawyer was questioning.

"That's right." Swiftly smirked.

"Where were you on the day of the murder?"

"At ranch headquarters. Mr. Joyce gave us orders to hold down the spread."

"And by 'us' you mean these other witnesses?"

"Yes, and the Kattoons. Old Charley, and Toad, and Mike and Asher was with us the whole time—wasn't away from the house or out of our sight for a minute," Plank testified brazenly.

The others were questioned in turn, and echoed Plank's story. The lawyer for the prosecution seemed weak and ineffectual compared with the out-of-town legal light. His cross-examination was unable to shake the alibi, and shortly afterward the case went to the jury. Curly Steve had a hunch that the "twelve good men and true" would soon be back with a verdict, and that

the Rocking T's struggle to obtain justice had been in vain.

While the arguments went on behind the jury room's closed doors, Steve watched the principals in the case. Old Man Kattoon was dozing, sleeping the sleep of the innocent; Toad Kattoon's wide mouth was expanded in an evil smile; Asher and Mike seemed as confident as their brother, and were whispering together, glancing occasionally toward the Rocking T pards.

In a corner of the room near the front sat Haze Joyce and his foreman, Hank Schuman. The latter was grinning triumphantly, but the owner of the Sevens was regarding the ceiling with a thoughtful frown. As usual, Haze was immaculately dressed, and a diamond glittered in the front of his shirt. He had prospered hugely, of late, in a financial way. After the second day of the Quick-trigger roundup, he had done practically as he pleased.

The jury came filing back into the courtroom. They took their seats awkwardly in the box, avoiding the eyes of the Rocking T pards. When asked if they had agreed upon a verdict, the tall jury foreman nodded.

"We have, your honor. We find Charley, Toad, Mike and Asher Kattoon not guilty of murder."

THAT should have been the end of it, but it was not. Haze Joyce was on his feet, one of his well-cared-for hands upraised.

"Your honor, I wish to present some evidence," he cried sharply, and the shuffling of feet and the clearing of throats ceased abruptly as a tense, surprised silence gripped the spectators.

"This is highly irregular," Judge Polderseed protested. "The case seems closed."

The Kattoon's lawyer smiled sarcastically. "My clients have been

acquitted, and rightly so. But, your honor, this case is far from closed, and if your honor will kindly acquiesce, Mr. Joyce will throw some light into the darkness of this strange crime."

"Acquiesce" was a new word to Polderseed, and he looked as bewildered as he had in the Cascade poker game. "If you had additional evidence, I don't see why it wasn't brought out in the course of the trial," he said testily. "But go on. Swear Mr. Joyce in, bailiff."

After the Twisted Sevens owner had taken the oath, the lawyer asked him a dramatic question. "Mr. Joyce, where were you on the day of the murder? Yes, I know, it's been brought out that you were at the roundup. But be more explicit."

Haze Joyce seemed to hesitate. "What I've got to tell is going to hurt the feelings of Tustin and Barbee, my range neighbors—"

"In a court of justice one can't ignore the sensibilities of others, Mr. Joyce, though we appreciate your disinclination to give painful testimony," was the flowery way the lawyer put it. "Please go on, Mr. Joyce."

Steve Tustin and Beautiful Bill exchanged puzzled glances, and even the apathetic Toot Smith sat up to take notice.

"Well, Hank Schuman and I were riding in the vicinity of Crawford's store at the crossroads that day," Haze testified. "That is, we were there at nine in the forenoon. We saw a lone rider stop at the crossroads, and then ride away. Hank and I thought there was something suspicious in the man's actions, so we followed him. To our surprise, we soon recognized him as Toot Smith, one of the Rocking T owners."

Toot's unnaturally pale face had darkened to a dusky red, and his

pards could hear his breathing; it was as if his throat were swelling shut.

"Then what happened, Mr. Joyce?" the lawyer encouraged smoothly.

"He circled quite a long ways, and then he met the deceased—the Kattoon boy," Joyce stated. "We were on the side hill above the coulee and could see everything. Smith started cursing the boy for not doing his work right, then there was a struggle and we saw Smith shoot the boy four or five times."

"Then what happened, Mr. Joyce?"

"Smith rode away pretty fast, and it was all Hank and I could do to keep him in sight," the raspy voice continued. "He back-trailed away round to Moon Canyon, and drove down a few head of stock to Blue Forks, where he met Tustin and Barbee. Then the three of 'em rode to the holdin' grounds together." Haze Joyce paused, then pointed a manicured forefinger at Toot Smith. "Sheriff," he cried, "I demand that you arrest that man for murder!"

The sound of Toot's breathing became a rumble, a noise like the growling of approaching thunder. Then, with a roar that rattled the courtroom windows, he leaped from his seat and charged toward Haze Joyce, trampling everyone in his way. A dozen hands tried to seize him, but they might just as well have attempted to halt a locomotive under full steam. Steve Tustin, too, had made an effort to hold back his huge partner, but Toot hadn't recognized him and had nearly caved in Steve's ribs by a punch with his elbow.

NOBODY was armed but the officers, and they were unable to use their guns for fear of killing the packed bystanders. Many Twisted Sevens men were in court, however,

and they hurled themselves on Toot, striking at him viciously.

"Order! Order!" shrilled Judge Polderseed, but his voice was drowned by Toot's yells, which were hoarser than a foghorn and louder than a steam calliope. He was bowling men down like ten-pins, paying no more heed to the blows that were showered on him than a bull attacked by a mosquito swarm. Toot Smith was his old self again, and madder than he had ever been in his life!

"I'll fine you for contempt! I'll fine everybody for contempt!" shrieked Judge Polderseed, as a Twisted Sevens man went down with a smashed nose, and another hombre with a crying need for dentistry.

"Smith has gone crazy! Or crazier," panted the sheriff, just before an unaimed swing from one of Toot's arms pameaked him.

Toot found that he couldn't reach Joyce; there was too thick a jam of men between, nor would the press of bodies enable him to escape by way of the doors. So, with a louder bellow than ever, he lunged toward the nearest window. The hombre closest to him at the moment was the Sevens gunman, Bat Luker, and Toot dragged him with him.

He used Luker to smash the window with! The courtroom was half a story above the street, and Luker, who had already had a taste of Smith's strength, went crashing through it like a projectile and thudded to the ground below.

With a final, defiant yell, the huge Rocking T waddy leaped through the opening that the man had made for him, then jumped, using Luker's sprawled form as a human mattress. Landing with an impact that buckled Luker's ribs, Toot staggered, kept his balance, then sprinted toward the north-side hitch rail where Sail Away was waiting. Scrambling aboard, he spun the buckskin on its

hind legs and sent him pounding up the street at a gallop.

Meanwhile, Beautiful Bill Barbee had fought his way into the hallway, for even though Toot was gone, everything was a wild and deafening bedlam of excited, jostling men. Steve was close behind him.

"No, you don't, Swifty!" Bill said grimly.

Swifty Plank had snatched a gun from one of the numerous belts that were hanging from the long row of hooks. He was turned half away from Bill and taking careful aim at Toot Smith and Sail Away, who were just reaching the corner of Main Street.

Before Plank could squeeze the trigger, Bill Barbee hit him. It was a graceful blow, as quick as a whip stroke and apparently lacking in power. It carried nothing of the mighty force of Toot Smith's swings, but it was deceptive, timed perfectly, surgically clean. Struck beneath the ear, Plank slumped senseless to the floor.

BEFORE leaving Spruce City, Bill and Steve shook hands with Sandy MacIntosh and several of the X Bar 2 owner's friends. They were shocked and upset at the terrible accusation that Joyce had made.

"That big, daft mon has a kind heart, and he wouldna do anything like that," said MacIntosh sympathetically. He lowered his voice. "I have talked with some of the ranchers and they have no doots about it any more than I mysel'. 'Tis time for a showdown with those Twisted Sevens de'il's. Say the wor-r-rd, and we'll all be with ye in a range war. 'Tis high time."

"Thanks, Sandy amigo," Steve said quietly. "It's mighty good to know that we have friends like you. But this is something that the Rock-

in' T has got to work out for itself."

"A-weel, let us know if we can do anything. Guid luck!" MacIntosh called after them as the two pards rode away from Main Street and turned northward across the railroad. For a mile or so neither of them said anything.

Toot Smith had been swinging around toward the south of Spruce City in a great circle. At Joyce's insistence, the sheriff had organized a posse for pursuit, but Lewison's heart didn't seem to be in it; he didn't seem as anxious as he might have been to make the capture.

"I'm glad you told Mac what you did, Steve," said Bill Barbee. "We don't want a general range war on Quick-trigger range, with the killin' of innocent people and all that goes with it. This is strictly between us and the Sevens."

"Toot needn't have run," Tustin said, scratching his head in perplexity. "He couldn't be convicted of that crazy charge, any more than the Kattoons were, and *they* were guilty. What I can't savvy, is why Joyce laid himself wide open with such dang-fool perjury. He got the Kattoons freed, wasn't that enough for him?"

Beautiful Bill made a cigarette with his free hand as they swung their horses onto the road that led to the Rocking T.

"No. What he wants more than anything else in the world is to ruin us, separately or one at a time, and he'll take any risks to do it," Bill said. "I've played poker with him, and I think I savvy how his crooked mind works."

Steve was trying hard to look at the cheerful side. "I'm glad of one thing, anyhow, Bill. Toot is through mopein'. For a while I thought he'd lost his interest in life."

"He's better than ever." Bill grinned.

The shadows were long and blue when they turned into the Rocking T driveway. The lurid fire of the sunset still glowed above the western peaks, but in the east the sky was already somber with the creeping night, and over a lonely grave on a hill to the northward a single pale star was burning like a candle.

Not unsaddling, they dismounted and climbed the steps to the gallery and entered the kitchen. In the mark a white square of paper gleamed on the oilcloth-covered table.

"It's just as I thought. He's been here," Steve said, while Beautiful Bill lighted the kerosene lamp.

BILL'S face was more haggardly ugly than ever as the yellow light fell upon it. "Why didn't the locoed ox stick around?" he asked with pretended fury. "Well, what's the note say?"

Steve read it slowly:

"DEAR STEVE & BILL:

"Came here to get gun & shelt. & stuff I might need. Don't you buzzards do no worryin' about yrs. truly. I'm sorry I cut such a big gut in Spruce ety, but I got so ringy I couldn't see straight. My share of the Rockin belongs to you two, and I hope you make enough money to burn a wet mule. I am pulling my stakes for Idaho. Good luck to you buzzards.

"Yrs. Respect,

"Toot."

Beautiful Bill gave a brief but uproarious laugh. "Does that luuk-head think we'd fall for a letter like that?"

"You mean he's not skippin' the country?"

"He's skippin' as far as the Twisted Sevens; that's where he's skippin' to," Bill chortled. "That's just like Toot. He prob'ly honestly thinks he's doin' this to keep us out of trouble, but it's really because he

wants to hog all the fun for himself."

Steve smiled meaningly. "He's goin' to tackle fifteen-twenty men, includin' the Kattoons, all by his little lonesome?"

Bill Barbee seated himself at the lamp and unholstered his twin Colt .45s. Punching the shells from the cylinders, he took a swab at each of the barrels and wiped the glistening blue weapons lovingly with an oily cloth.

"That's what *he* thinks," Bill drawled as he reloaded the revolvers and broke out a fresh box of ammunition for his belt loops. He began to sing tunelessly:

"Oh, we're fightin' fools from the Rockin' T,
We are Curly, and Toot, and Bill Barbee."

CHAPTER VIII. TROUBLE OR NOTHING.

TOOT SMITH had never been at the Twisted Sevens headquarters before, so he tied *Sail Away* in the trees along a creek bank more than a quarter of a mile from the twinkle of lights, and advanced carefully to get the lay of the land. Toot's berserk excitement had quieted, and his fury had given place to an icy rage that at least enabled him to think fairly clearly. But he still had no exact plan. All he knew was that justice must somehow be dealt out to these killers and perjurors. Toot knew well enough that the odds were overwhelmingly against him, and that he would almost certainly be killed, but he was past caring. One thing he was sure of—if he went to booothill, he would take some guilty men along with him.

"Now what goes?" Toot muttered, hearing the unmistakable rattle and thud of a vehicle moving along the darkened road toward the big, brilliantly lighted ranchhouse. He jogged forward to get closer and dis-

covered that a buggy was turning in at the lower yard near the stables. A man on horseback was riding alongside.

"Now who'd be comin' here in a buggy?" Toot wondered.

The thought came to him that this was his chance to knock off at least two of his enemies. If he could do it without shooting, and thereby giving the alarm to those in the house, so much the better. Toot knew the enormity of his task, and it would certainly help if he could get his men a few at a time.

Conscious that his white Angoras could be seen even in the dimmest of light, Toot stepped out of them and edged his way rapidly along the fence toward the barn, moving with a speed surprising in so enormous a man. Nor did he make much noise as he wriggled through the bars of a gate and entered the lot where the buggy had halted. The house was nearly a hundred yards distant, and, unless there was gunplay, out of hearing. Toot could see a little better now, for the clouds had rolled away from the thin, pale rind of moon. Joyce certainly had a big barn, he noted; there must have been at least six big sliding doors at this one end.

"—good thing I could rent this rig. I'm surely not at home in the saddle," the man in the buggy was saying, and Toot pricked up his ears. He'd heard that voice before. But where? He raked his brain trying to think of anyone in Spruce City dumb, or soft, enough to prefer jiggling along in a buggy when he could have had a horse between his knees.

Then it came to him. It was the high-powered lawyer that Haze Joyce had imported from Cheyenne, or some place. In the darkness a slow, sweet smile of satisfaction dawned on Toot's heavily muscled

face, and he murmured a little paean of thanksgiving.

"I'll unhitch and put up the hoss along with mine," said the lawyer's traveling companion as he dismounted. "You wouldn't know how, I reckon."

Toot was a little disappointed that this second hombre wasn't Haze Joyce, or one of the Kattoons. What a windfall that would have been! But he recognized Chadron, the ranny who had tried to hit him with a stamp iron on that fatal roundup day.

"The medico says Bat Luker's in bad shape," Chadron grunted as he fumbled with the harness and dropped the buggy shafts. "About every rib he's got is busted. That Smith, he's a reg'lar terror, but *I* ain't afeared of him."

"I wanted to stay in town as long as I could, to see if the sheriff would succeed in capturing that monster, but there was still no news," the attorney said nervously. "It's terrible to have a creature like that loose on the countryside. I'm glad I'm at Mr. Joyce's ranch now where I'll be safe."

"I'll take you in as soon as I've put away the hosses," Chadron said, as he led the animals toward the barn. He slid open the nearest of the doors and disappeared with the horses. Toot blinked at the barn for a moment; he thought he had seen a crack of light beneath one of the other doors, but decided it must have been a trick of moonlight.

THE lawyer started to get out of the buggy, his foot extending gingerly in search of the iron step. Toot took him gently by the ankle and guided his foot to the proper place, then assisted him to the ground.

"Thank you," laughed the lawyer, and then, as he saw Toot's gigantic form looming above him, he queried thinly: "Who are you?"

"Don't you know?" Toot chortled.

Then the shyster *did* know, and his face went ivory-white with fear. With the moon glittering on his glasses he looked like the pitiful caricature of a man. He opened his mouth to scream, but one of Toot's gigantic hands had already closed around his soft, plump throat.

"And now, if you will acquiesce, I'll proceed to knock you cold," Toot crooned. "There! I reckon *that'll* acquiesce you!" And he brought his closed fist down, like a mallet, onto the top of the attorney's head.

The shyster was jarred into instant unconsciousness, but he did not fall: Toot still held him by the neck so that he stood upright with his toes barely touching the ground. At that moment Chadron came out of the barn and Toot crouched low behind the senseless lawyer, still holding him up. Chadron came toward him, peering in the gloom.

"You drunk, lawyer? What makes you stand so funnylike?" the Seven-rider grunted. "Hey, lawyer! What th—"

Chadron must have thought, for a split instant, that the attorney had gone crazy and taken a leap at him. After that, he didn't have much time for thinking! Toot had hurled the lawyer at him like a stone from a catapult, and Chadron went tumbling. Entangled with the lawyer's legs and arms, Chadron rolled over and over, making an effort to draw his gun. Finally he *did* draw it, but by that time the great bulk of Toot Smith was bending over him.

Toot twisted the revolver out of the man's hand, and he was about to straighten up when he felt something hard and cold being pressed against his neck.

"Don't budge, Smith! I'll kill you before you can even think about it. Put your hands up slow and empty, and don't try to turn around."

It was the voice of Haze Joyce! Toot felt like kicking himself. The crack of light that he had seen under that other barn door had really been the glow of a lantern. But, furious as he was, Toot didn't want to commit suicide just yet. He raised his hands.

CHAPTER IX.

SPRING HOUSE CLEANING.

JOYCE was as pleased as a bear with a pot of honey at this fortunate capture and, while disarming his victim, he continued his triumphant chuckling.

"Every night, Smith, I attend to my horse personally—won't let anyone else touch him. A good thing, eh?" He laughed. "I was just finishing the grooming when the buggy drove up. I kind of thought you'd be here, anyhow. I knew you didn't have any more sense."

Toot's spirits had sunk too low for him to make any reply to Joyce's taunting. As usual, he seemed to have bungled things. He would be killed, of course; Joyce could hatch up any story he pleased to explain his death; the Twisted Sevens man could simply say that he had killed a fugitive from justice. Toot didn't mind death so much; it was the thought of what he was leaving undone that infuriated him. He would die without settling even a fraction of Corky's accounts.

"Want me to help, boss?" Chadron asked, as he lurched to his feet. "The big son—"

"No, you take care of the tongue wrangler. He ain't dead, is he?"

"Nope. He's breathin' all right," said Chadron, investigating.

"I'll march Smith into the house myself," laughed the owner of the Twisted Sevens. "All right, big feller, walk, and not too fast."

As ponderous and pathetic as an elephant being prodded along by its

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trainer, Toot ambled out of the barn lot and up the walk toward the big ranchhouse. They passed several outbuildings, then came abreast of the long, low-roofed bunkhouse where Haze Joyce paused to call out a jovial invitation:

"Everybody to the ranchhouse, men, to see what *I've* caught!"

By the time Toot had been herded into the house, the whole place was in a howling uproar. Toot would probably have been torn to pieces immediately if Joyce hadn't held back his wolf pack, for more than one of the big assembly of gunmen had felt the mighty impact of the Rocking T waddy's fists, and several of them had battered features and blackened eyes.

"Well, if it ain't Smith!" Swift Plank jeered. "Shore nice of him to call! We'll have to fix up some kind of entertainment for our guest, won't we, boss?"

"Entertainment—with curtains," Joyce laughed. "All right, Smith, into the big room yonder."

DAZZLED by the brightness of several lamps, the prisoner found himself being thrust into the main room of Joyce's luxuriously furnished ranchhouse. There was a fireplace at one end, deer heads and other trophies above it, and on the floor were skins and Indian rugs. One entire wall was taken up by a collection of weapons of all types: ancient flintlock pistols; knives and swords of foreign workmanship; matchlock guns, and a collection of rifles both ancient and modern. But Toot hadn't time to observe much of this; there were too many faces around him, all of them filled with hate and menace.

"Up to his old tricks again, was he?" growled Foreman Hank Schuman, as Chadron came in with the half-conscious lawyer. Some whiskey was poured down the shyster's

throat and he sputtered awake.

"I'm glad you came, Smith." Joyce grinned at Toot as the latter turned slowly like a caged animal. "Of course, I would rather have that poker-playing pard of yours with the lovely mug, but one at a time is my motto."

Toot spoke for the first time. "Maybe you've got *me*," he rumbled, "but I got a hunch that when you die, Haze, you're goin' to be lookin' at something Beautiful."

"I'll take my chance on that," Joyce sneered. "I'm the fastest gunman in a nest of fast gunmen, and I'll tackle Beautiful Bill or Steve Tustin at any time or place. As for you—"

Toot lost his head again, for the loathsome and evil Kattoon family had come into the room. Heedless of the guns that were turned his way, the Rocking T waddy hurled himself violently in their direction.

"You stinkin' murderers!"

Toot was overpowered, but it took half a dozen men a good five minutes to do it, and the big rannihan added to his score of sore jaws and flattened noses. Finally, however, he was pinned to the floor and held there, while Toot unlimbered his extensive vocabulary of cuss words, telling all the "base-begotten sons" all about their parentage and where he hoped they would wind up.

"This will hold his hands long enough for me to do what I'm plannin'," Haze Joyce rasped, as he knotted his foreman's big neckerchief around the captive's wrists, thus securing his arms behind his back.

Old Charley Kattoon groaned as he dabbed at his potatolike face, nursing a bruise left in the wake of one of Toot's mighty swings. "Ain't nothin' to do with an hombre like that but kill him!" he piped venomously.

"That's what I aim to do right

now, and I don't care what happens to the rugs," Joyce said harshly. "I've fooled with him about long enough."

Toad Kattoon blinked down at Toot Smith. "Shootin' wouldn't be what I'd do to him," he told his brothers, as he bit off a chew of plug tobacco. "Shootin' is too quick and easy a way."

Haze Joyce was at the north wall, surveying his big collection of weapons, and now he took one of the most impressive items from its fastenings. It was a huge, two-barreled rifle, its stock trimmed with silver.

"You know what this is, Toot?" the Twisted Sevens owner grinned sardonically. "It's an elephant gun, with a five-eighth-inch bore. I've never tried it out, and I'd like to see what it can do. There's no game big enough for it around here, but for an overgrown galoot like you, it ought to do fine."

DELIBERATELY he leveled the heavy weapon at Toot, and to the Rocking T ranny, the openings of the twin barrels seemed as large around as nail kegs. He didn't flinch, though he could tell by Joyce's poisonous eyes that the time had come for dying.

"Go ahead and be blasted!" Toot bellowed.

"Here's where you get—" Joyce suddenly swerved, lowering the big rifle. There had been a crash somewhere in the rear of the house. "Cut out the horseplay!" Joyce yelled. "I want you all in here to see this. You out there, Lloyd?"

There were a couple of ringing shots, and from out of the kitchen came Lloyd, one of the Twisted Sevens' crack gunmen. He was staggering as if drunk, and his calfskin vest was mottled with wet scarlet. Suddenly, he fell as if chopped at the ankles.

"What the—" Haze Joyce snarled, throwing down the clumsy rifle to reach for his holstered Colt. "Who's out there?"

The answer came in a blending of two almost musical voices, accompanied by the trample of boots and the sharp ringing of spurs:

"Oh, we're fightin' fools from the Rock-in' T—"

Then in the doorway appeared two familiar figures. Steve Tustin was holding a smoking .44 at the level of his hip, and his dark eyes were like avenging stars. The .45-caliber guns of Beautiful Bill were still holstered, but over the butts his magically gifted hands were hovering like eagles about to pounce. Beautiful's weird jumble of features was as savagely ugly as a double-bitted ax, but to Toot Smith that face was beautiful; it was the loveliest picture on earth!

"We're cleanin' out this skunk den," Bill Barbee announced icily. "Do you want to be swept out lyin' down or standin' up? We'll try to accommodate you, one and all."

"Let 'em have it!" yammered the Twisted Sevens owner. "Curl 'em up!"

The lawyer squeaked piteously and dived under a couch, probably wondering why he had ever sought the "safety" of the Twisted Sevens Ranch. And he was just in time!

The guns of the Rocking T struck swiftly and with terrible effectiveness. The double draw of Bill Barbee had been accomplished with such blinding speed that no eye caught the motion, and the big .45s were blasting flame and lead the instant they left leather. Beautiful had skittered at a crouch to one side of the door, and as if by prearrangement Curly Steve came weaving along the opposite wall. It was a huge room, but the Sevens men soon found that

there was no refuge in it, no spot where the searching guns of the Rocking T men could not hunt them out.

"Yippy-yay!" yelled Toot Smith, in a voice that could be heard above the gunfire. With one mighty wrench, he freed his hands from their makeshift bonds and, grabbing up the elephant gun, he clambered to his feet.

TWO of the Kattoon men, Asher and Mike, had been the first to taste the bitter heat of Steve's and Bill's gunfire. They had yanked out their guns with the practiced speed of professionals, but were no match for the Rocking T fighters. Mike stumbled forward and fell face down as Curly Steve's bullet ripped through his lungs, and Asher sank down with blood spurting through his fingers as he clawed his midriff.

Shaken by the clamor of many big-caliber guns, the house shook and swayed like a ship in a rough sea. Bullets pocked the walls all about Bill and Steve, showering them with aster dust as they pressed forward into their enemies like the jaws of a pair of pincers. Their guns were synchronized in a deadly crossfire that swept the room with screaming lead.

"Drop those devils, for the love o'—" shouted Joyce, before his words were drowned in thunder. He himself didn't seem anxious to close in with his fast-shooting guests; instead, he was edging toward a doorway at the other end of the room.

Toot had found the triggers of the huge elephant gun with two fingers, and the oversized rifle crashed once and then again, painting the swirls of powder smoke a lurid red. Hank Schuman, in the act of dropping his gun hammer on Toot, got both the artillery-style slugs squarely in the chest, and he spun around twice before he crashed backward into a

table. He bounced to the floor, dead before he hit it.

"And now *you!*" Toot trumpeted. "This is for Corky!"

Old Charley Kattoon had tried to sneak up behind Toot and get him in the back with a derringer. A good trick, if it had worked! But Toot had seen him out of the corner of his eye, and he swung the smoking and empty rifle in a side-arm arc, putting all his power behind the smash.

The impact ruined the rifle, splitting the stock and bending the barrels; but much worse was done to the evil breeder of thieves and murderers. With his brain a mangled pulp, he rolled back into the empty fireplace, his warty, yellowed face still frozen in a snarl of devilish hate.

Toad Kattoon was down, his body supported by one elbow and forearm, but he continued to shoot until a second slug from Curly Steve plowed into him. He and Bill Barbee had fought their way to the center of the room, and the place had become a smoking shambles. Swift Plank had been killed, and the few survivors were clambering through the windows.

"Let 'em go," said Beautiful Bill, whose upper arm had been grooved by a bullet. "But wait—where's our host? Where's Haze Joyce?"

"He just ducked through the door down there!" Toot yelped, and he started for it at a lumbering run.

"You leave him to me, Toot," said Bill Barbee, seeing that his big pard was armed only with the wreck of a rifle.

BILL sent the closed door crashing with a ramming thrust of his uninjured shoulder, not pausing to see whether or not it had been locked. He found himself in a narrow passageway. It was dark, but he could see a crack of light at the end.

A few quick strides and he reached



a second door and flung it wide. "Hello, Haze," he said grimly. "You shouldn't have stopped to pack."

The small, richly furnished room was evidently Joyce's sleeping quarters, for there was a bed on the other side. Bill's nose wrinkled slightly as he noted its silken covering. Joyce would sleep well enough this night, probably, without all those luxurious trappings.

"Barbee!" panted the ranchman. "Can't we . . . we make some kind of a deal! You boys"—he tried to smile jokingly, but his lips were too stiff with fear—"you boys have ruined me plenty already. What's the terms?"

"Terms?" Bill's scowling brows and crookedly grinning mouth were adding to Joyce's terror. He noted that the *Sevens* owner had holstered his gun. He had done it hoping that Bill wouldn't shoot in such a case. And he was right. Bill also tucked his .45s into their leather cases, and Haze Joyce breathed easier. Joyce had been collecting his jewels and money, and a diamond ring rolled across the floor and stopped at Bill's boot toe. He glanced at it, but didn't stoop to pick it up. A glass lamp burned dimly on the chest of drawers that Joyce had been searching, and a

moth was fluttering about the hot chimney, hitting it occasionally with a faint *plink*.

"What kind of terms did you give that kid, Corky?" Bill asked gently.

"Now listen, Barbee," Joyce spoke rapidly. "That was the doing of those crazy Kattoons. I didn't know about it until afterward. I was shocked, horrified. I—"

Bill leisurely laced and lighted a brown-paper quirly. "Yes, you showed us how shocked you were. You're a gambler, Haze, or you think you are, and I'm going to give you a gambler's chance. Do you see that moth?"

"Moth?" quavered Joyce, his face damp with cold sweat.

"Yes, that moth that's walkin' on the table now, around the bottom of that lamp," Bill said. "Keep your eyes on it; watch it close."

"What you drivin' at, Barbee?"

"You're not only a gambler, Haze, but you're supposed to be fast with your gun," Bill grinned mirthlessly. "So we'll watch that moth, both of us, until it gives the signal. When it flies—the second it takes wing—I'm going to draw on you and shoo' to kill. You do the same, and may the best man win. Savvy?"

"You . . . you ain't human, Barbee!" Joyce stammered.

"You'd better be watchin' that moth, because I sure am," Bill reminded him softly.

Joyce stared at it, filled with fascinated horror. The insect remained quiet for a moment, then it moved and the *Sevens* owner took a sharp breath. But instead of taking to the air, the moth resumed its blind circling around the base of the lamp. For at least a dozen times it went around and around. Then it suddenly fluttered upward.

There was a crash, a javelin of flame, and the choked cry of a man mortally hit. Haze Joyce's right hand fell limply away from the pol-

ished curve of his gun butt, and he slumped to his knees with a dark blot on the front of his shirt front widening rapidly. He coughed, then thudded forward on his face. He was dead, and the little moth was still fluttering.

A LITTLE before sunup, two riders came cantering into the Twisted Sevens ranch yard. They were Sheriff Lewison and his gloomy deputy, John Clay.

"Mornin'?" Curly Steve Tustin greeted them. "Light down and have some breakfast. Toot will soon have it ready."

The bewildered officers came slowly toward the house, their jaws sagging in helpless astonishment. "Has the Rockin' T made peace with the Twisted Sevens?" Clay asked incredulously.

"Yes, we've *made* peace," Steve said gravely. "There's been a fight here, so you'd better make your investigation."

"A fight" was putting it mildly, the sheriff decided when he had seen the bodies under the tarpaulins. He had seen many a gruesome spectacle in his day, but never one quite like this.

"Now before you do any wholesale arresting, Lewison, I want you to come in here and listen to what Toad Kattoon has to say," Steve Tustin suggested. "He hasn't got much time; he's been shot up pretty bad."

Toad was dying, but the story he had to tell the sheriff was so shocking that no one could feel pity for him. The Rocking T pards had heard it before, but now Toad added details. He admitted that in the murder of Corky, he himself had fired most of the fatal shots, but that the whole family had "helped." And his confession included the story of Haze Joyce's underhand dealings and perjuries. The story of the final

fight was given in detail, and it was factual, not colored much either way. The lawmen listened attentively.

"If I arrest you boys at all, it will only be a technical affair," the sheriff said a little afterward. "If you make bond—and I'll furnish it myself if nobody else will—I won't have to hold you in jail."

"Jail?" Toot snorted, clenching his enormous fists. "You'd better not try—"

Lewison took a hasty step backward. "I wouldn't want you in jail; I'd never have a minute's peace," he growled. "No, I don't think you fellers need to worry any. This whole district is behind you. What's law, anyhow, but public opinion? I think you've brought real justice to Quick-trigger range. And it's high time."

"By the way," put in Deputy Clay. "On the way here, just at daylight, we saw an hombre in town clothes cuttin' through the brush like his pants was afire. He'd lost one shoe, but he was goin' so fast he only hit the ground like a bullet does when it's ricoshawin'. Who was he?"

"That was the lawyer," drawled Beautiful Bill. "Set out plates for Clay and Lewison, Toot. I think they'll eat breakfast with us."

Toot Smith beamed as he greased the frying pan, then broke into a song in which his partners joined:

"Oh, our names they are Curly, and Toot,
and Barbee.
And we've never been curried below the
knee!
Our ways they ain't sweet, and our man-
ners ain't mild.
Ki, yay! Ki, yay! Ki-yippy! Ki-yay!
What makes us so gosh-awful woolly and
wild?
Why, stranger, that is plumb easy to see.
It's because we all hail from the old Rock-
in' T!"

The *Fightin' Three* will be back soon in another powder-packed tangle with range renegades. Watch for them in *Wild West*.



UNCLE SAM'S BRAND

by S. OMAR BARKER

To Hitler & Tojo this letter was wrote
 By an ol' cowhand with time-wattled throat:
 "I see by some papers come recent to hand,
 You aim to foreclose on the USA brand.
 So I thought I would drop you a line of advice,
 To warn you you're skatin' on mighty thin ice.
 For Uncle Sam's Ranch is the kind of a spread
 Where most of us hands, we would rather be dead
 Than yield ary inch of our range to the rule
 Of any 'New Order' devised by a fool.

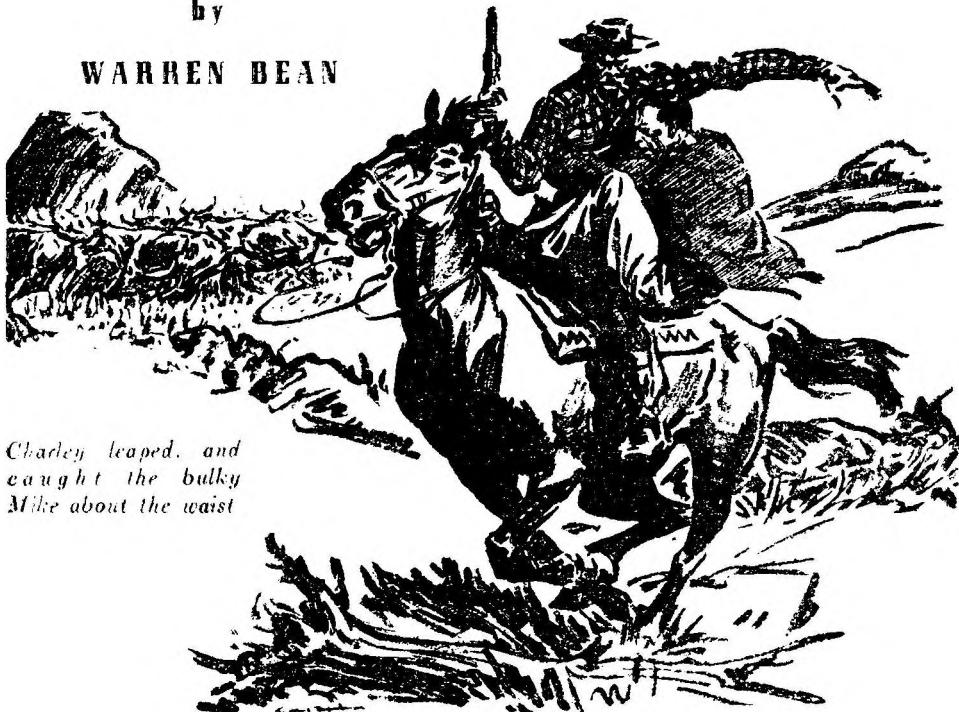
"Now, my Uncle Sam, he ain't rapid to wrath—
 Which may have misled you to take the wrong path;
 But now that you've took it by rustlin' his stock,
 You, Hitler & Tojo, are due for a shock.
 Of course there might be a few headquarters pets,
 But out with the wagon where every man sweats,
 You fellers that figgered ol' Uncle Sam's men
 Was softies, had just as well figger again.
 Already, I reckon, we've bled you enough
 To learn you that USA Ranch boys is tough!

"Well, them's just the samples. From now right on out
 You're both due to learn what I'm talkin' about!
 You've made your big brags—well, this letter is wrote
 To warn you they're goin' to be stuffed down your throat!
 Yep, Hitler & Tojo, you've bit off a chunk
 That won't swaller easy, like maybe you thunk;
 On Uncle Sam's Ranch, you will soon understand,
 We're all of us range hands who ride for the brand—
 For that iron now heatin'—the ol' USA—
 Still stands for liberty won the hard way!"

DON'T SCRATCH A TARTAR

by

WARREN BEAN



Charley leaped, and caught the bulky Mike about the waist

Charley Wong didn't speak much English, but he intended to teach his future boss—and a trio of rustlers—that the expression "top hand" is the same in any man's language

THE thirty Chinese coolies of the railroad construction gang nervously speeded their pace, tamping ties on the roadbed that stretched across the wide, level prairie. For big Mike Cardon, the gun-hung, bullying boss, had ridden up. And Mike was on the prod, as he was on so many of these mornings after a night riding the breaks and hills five miles to the eastward.

But one laborer did not work up a nervous sweat when the boss appeared. Different from these other timid, peace-loving south Chinese, Charley Wong was as bold and fearless as his fighting Mongol ancestors.

He was a Fishskin Tartar from the wild hills and plains of Manchuria, almost white-skinned, huge and raw-boned. Working beside his uncle, Lao Wong, on the railroad here, Charley did the work of two men. For this toil under the broiling sun showed gaunt old Lao's many years, and his short temper.

"Only soil grubbers do this work," Lao was complaining. "We were fools to leave the native land."

Charley noted the hopelessness in his uncle's wrinkled face. After years of rough, outdoor life on horseback, Lao could not accustom his mind and muscles to this back-

breaking drudgery of railroad building. Yet because freedom was in sight, Charley sought to soothe this uncle who had been a father to him.

"We'll soon be off to join these horse-riding herders of cattle," Charley said. "That will be like the old life, eh, Lao?"

"For months we save dollars to buy two horses and two saddles," grumbled the old man. "And still we slave."

"One more pay day," Charley encouraged. "Take a rest now. Go get yourself a drink of water."

Lao threw down his shovel and stomped off toward the water pail where it stood in the shade of a tool box a few yards down the right of way. He leaned against the tool box and drank deep, taking his time about it. And Mike Cardon spotted him as he rode that way.

Mike jerked his horse to a stop beside the old Tartar. The powdery dust settled. Lao still drank.

"You going to loaf over that water bucket all morning?" Mike demanded.

Lao looked over the brim, then lowered the pail. He swished the water around in his mouth before squirting it to the ground from between his yellow teeth. Which only gave draft to the fire in Mike Cardon. He slid from the saddle.

"We wanna get this railroad built," Mike roared. "Get back to work, you lazy son of a dog."

This reference to Lao's revered ancestors was the supreme insult. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Deliberately he chose his words. "Mister boss should push railroad work as hard as he push cattle out of the hills at night."

THE slow-spoken words brought a gasp from the listening coolies. Charley Wong dropped his tools. His uncle was foolish to speak so close to the truth. Among their

own people Lao would have been listened to with respect on account of his years. But Mike Cardon had respect only for might. And Lao Wong was too old to match the hulking boss. Even as Charley Wong ran to side his uncle, Mike leaped for the oldster.

Cardon wrapped his hamlike hand around the old Tartar's throat. "I'll teach you to speak out of turn, chink," he snarled.

Lao had been a fighter all his life. Now his fist shot out to Mike's face. But Lao's age took the drive out of that blow. It held only surprise for Mike Cardon. He let Lao go and swayed back. Lao did not follow up his punch. Then Mike tasted blood. With a growl, he lunged in. His right cracked out like a locomotive piston. It caught Lao square on the chin. Without a cry, the old man stretched full length on the ground. His head struck the protruding corner of a railroad tie. Blood began to trickle slowly from the corners of his mouth.

Mike swung his heavy boot against the limp, dying man. Then Charley Wong reached him. But Mike had a glimpse of Charley coming, and whirling, he dodged the first charge, lashing out with his own left. Charley's arm chopped down to block it, and Mike's right shot in.

The blow that exploded in Charley Wong's face rocked the big Tartar to his heels. He reeled back. The foreman bore in, his face a contorted mask of hate, as his driving fists found their mark against the laborer.

In size and fury, the men were a match. But the months of hard labor made Charley's muscles less supple than when he had ridden his native hills with his fellow warriors. Now, as he took that rain of blows, his blind rage gave way to coolness. Slowly he began to give ground, still

taking punishment but fending off the blows.

Then suddenly he bent double. Mike's fists jabbed air twice before Wong was inside. Then Charley's big, horny hands reached for Mike's bull neck. His muscles tightened and his arms heaved. Mike was hurtled through the air, to land with a dull thud on the edge of the right of way almost ten feet off.

That jolt would have knocked the fight out of an ordinary man. But not Mike. As Wong closed in, the foreman raised to an elbow. His hand blurred toward his hip. There was a flash of orange flame, a roar. Swift searing pain stabbed at Charley's shoulder. Even then it was surprise more than injury that stopped him. The ancient match-lock guns of his native hills never were got into action with the speed of Mike's Colt. Charley gathered himself and came on again.

Once more the gun spoke. Charley was stopped as if a great hand were pushing against his chest. Reeling, he felt the strength drain from his knees. He fell and then his surroundings were blacked out.

DAY after day Charley Wong lay in his tent, feverish and in delirium. Chin Tang, the Chinese medicine man, had to lash his patient down and use his bagful of wily tricks to keep the evil spirits at bay. For Wong, suffering not only from his physical wounds, was tortured because he had failed in the first law, that a man must guard his venerable elder relatives.

He lived again and again the years he and Lao had been together. Lao had taken orphaned Charley into his band of hard-riding *hung hutzes* and fathered him. As Lao had grown old, the younger man's watchful eye became as faithful as Lao's guiding hand had been in Charley's boyhood.

When soldiers had scattered their

band, Charley and Lao had escaped south into China. There they had heard of America. Lao had felt too old to put down roots in a strange land, but Charley, hearing wonderful tales about the new country, had persuaded his uncle to come. Once here, working on the railroad had been hard and dull until they had crossed the tall mountains into this unsettled and rugged land. Here they had found cowboys as reckless and untamed as horsemen of their own land.

Charley Wong had talked in the broken English he soon acquired with these lean riders who now and then brought cattle to the construction camp to sell. And he had hoarded his silver dollars to buy horses and saddles so that he and Lao could join these horse riders.

On the sixth day, Charley Wong returned to the present, much better. He arranged with the faithful Chin Tang to have Lao's body sent back to China so the old man's spirit could join his ancestors. For that purpose, Charley gave Tang all but a few of the hard, round coins he had saved. Those few he kept were to contribute toward the downfall of Mike Cardon, the slayer of Lao Wong.

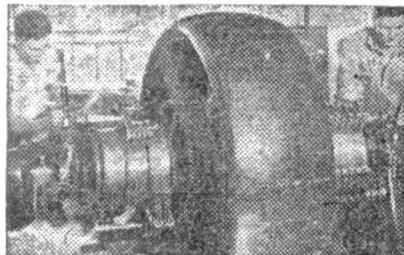
Though on his feet, Charley was not yet strong enough to return to work when one morning he saw Mike ride to camp with a stranger and two dozen steers. They turned the cattle into the pen, and the rider left.

That day at noon, another rider came into camp. He was Luke Benson, a cowboy Charley had talked with many times. Luke had not been here for a long time, not since Mike had been making his night rides. He was alone today and without cattle.

Charley sat in the doorway of his tent and watched Luke in talk with Mike Cardon, his finger jabbing to-

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Continued from page 132

ward the hills now and then. Soon they went across to the cattle pen. There was something about the squat, bowlegged cowboy's effortless movements even off a horse that made the big construction boss, who towered over him, act carefully, without his usual bullying bluster. Maybe it was the twin guns Luke wore around his lean waist.

And from this an idea took shape in Charley Wong's mind. When Chin Tang came by, Charley called him. "Friend Chin, when you see that horse rider leave the boss, ask the rider to come to my tent."

"He may wish to leave in a hurry," objected Chin. "There may be shooting between those two, it is said."

"No," Charley replied. "Mike is not the bully today. Luke will come."

CHIN TANG nodded and shuffled off. Charley went inside the tent. Presently he heard the jingle of purs, then Luke appeared.

"I am humble to have you enter my unworthy tent," Charley greeted him.

"Howdy, feller," Luke said, stepping in. "Say, you been in a scrap?"

Charley evaded the question with one of his own. "You have not been here for many days, Mr. Luke?"

Luke hunkered down on his heels and his eyes took on a dangerous glint. "Someone else is bringing in beef. My own cattle, too, with the brands doctored. Mike ain't saying a thing."

"In time you will learn all," Charley said. He did not intend to reveal how Mike Cardon rode at night and returned with cattle. He would not have Luke cheat him of his revenge. He moved to the subject that lay on his mind. "I have a great desire to own a gun like you carry."

Again Luke's smoky eyes probed

the Tartar, took in the bleached, drawn face, the bandage that showed above Charley's open shirt. But all he asked was: "Ever shoot a gun like it?"

Charley shook his head. "It is different from the long, slow-shooting guns of my country."

"They're easy to handle once you get the hang," Luke went on. "Best gun ever made. Known as an equalizer."

"An equalizer," Charley repeated in a murmur.

"Seems like I recollect a Chinaman killed here a while back," Luke put in softly.

Only in Charley's gray eyes was there a hint of his emotion. "He was an old man," he stated. "And my venerable uncle. One should not scratch a Tartar."

Luke was silent for a moment. Then: "Mike is gun-handy and trigger-fast," he warned. He unbuckled his left gun belt and took the Colt from its holster to demonstrate the loading and action. Wong watched closely, then worked the action himself. After a little while Luke said: "You got the feel already, feller. But here's a belt full of cartridges. You better practice plenty."

Charley reached for his blanket. "How much?" he asked as he cut the stitches around his few remaining dollars.

Luke rolled a smoke and lighted it before he waved his hand carelessly. "Take the works and let me have twelve dollars."

There was just enough. As Charley handed the bills across, he had a suspicion that Luke had counted the money before he spoke. The gun alone would cost twenty dollars new.

"Some day," the Tartar said, "Charley Wong, the best fighter among the *hung hutzes*, will show his humble thanks."

"My Rafter L is twenty miles south on the Salt Fork," Luke told

him. "I have a hunch you won't find it comfortable here after you pin Mike Cardon's ears back."

The thud of Luke's horse had hardly died before Charley saw the big figure of Mike Cardon ride out from the horse corral and head for his tent. Quickly Charley rolled up the left leg of his baggy trousers and carefully strapped the holstered Colt to the inside of his knee. Mike was swinging down to step around his horse as Charley came out.

The boss' face was black and he wasted no words. "What did that rancher want here?" he demanded.

"Private business," Charley responded evenly.

"I'm making it my business," grated Mike.

There would be no time to practice with the gun, Charley knew now. Swiftly he planned his strategy, cool and hard. His harsh laugh cut the hushed noonday air. "Business maybe bothers boss' conscience," he taunted.

"What business, chink?" Mike growled and took a threatening step.

Charley's voice flicked out. "Perhaps he came looking for a cattle thief."

Mike was suddenly tense. "That's how I figured it," he snarled. "You're a spy for that rancher. Well, you're overripe buzzard bait now." The killer light was in his eyes and his hand moved deliberately toward his gun.

Charley felt the blood throb at his temples. He wished he could pound this man to a pulp with his fists, but Mike would not risk that. Mike meant to kill. Charley stood his ground as the gun slowly came up. Then, as it leveled down, Wong dropped and Mike's shot sang overhead. With the speed of a panther, Charley Wong's hands hitched up his pants leg. Out snapped the single-action Colt. Before Mike could trigger again, the Tartar's gun

roared. Mike's fingers relaxed and he sank to the ground. Charley eased down the hammer he had cocked for a second shot. Blood was flowing over Mike Cardon's face.

Jabbering coolies came running. Chin Tang shook Charley's arm. "Flee, Wong. Take his horse."

"He is not dead," Charley said calmly. "My shooting is bad."

"Even now they come to hang you by the neck!" Chin Tang exclaimed. Brawny Irish rail layers were pouring out of the mess tent a hundred yards away. The coolies began to scatter again. Charley remembered Luke's words, remembered the Salt Fork ranch.

"Tang," he said, "my blankets and tent are yours." Then he climbed onto Mike Cardon's horse and headed for the hills. Already men were at the corral catching up mounts. But that didn't dim Charley Wong's joy to be once again astride a horse and running like the wind across this land that was so much like his own.

ALL afternoon Charley Wong kept to the rough country, disguising his trail lest he be followed. He was traveling too far eastward to make Luke's ranchhouse on the Salt Fork that day, but he knew he was on the range of the bowlegged cowman by the occasional cattle he saw with the Rafter L branded on their sides. Tomorrow he could swing south across the open prairie.

Late in the afternoon Wong rode through a pass into a steep-walled, boxed-in valley. Here about a hundred cattle were grazing on the lush grass, and watering in the creek. Charley dismounted just inside the pass, about a mile from the cattle, and made camp where he could see the stock that he soon hoped to be herding for Luke.

With his saddle rope he fashioned

a three-leg hobble for his horse. Turned loose to graze, the bay rolled and kicked in his freedom from saddle and bit. Charley, in spirit, was doing the same in his release from the toil of railroad building. His only wish was that Lao could be here with him.

With the tightness of hunger in his belly, Wong worked upstream in the cover of the alders to where several yearlings were drinking. When he shot one, the other rangy critters flung up their tails and bolted. The echoes of the gunshot rolled thunderously in the high-walled canyon. Rods away, other cattle, already bedded for the night, came nervously to their feet.

Charley whipped out his knife and set to work, and then he discovered what Luke meant by his brands being doctored. On this animal, the L had been boxed on three sides, changing the brand from a Rafter L to L in a House. And the burns were still scabbed. Charley had stumbled onto evidence Luke would be glad to find. This might be the place Mike and his henchmen came to get the cattle.

Wong stripped off the hide, cut out a hunk of meat. He returned to camp where he hung hide and extra meat high in a sapling away from prowling animals. Darkness had come before he got a fire going. He was cooking the juicy meat when he heard his horse nicker. He tensed, listening above the crackle of the fire and the night breeze in the alders.

Then close by Charley caught the unmistakable creak of saddle leather. He dove headlong for the brush. A rope whistled out of the darkness to snare him. Even as he fought free of the first rope, another snaked out from the other side to settle around his neck and tighten.

He heard a growling voice, the dim forms of two men moved into

the light, and a chill ran down his spine. For one of them was a wide-shouldered man with red hair. He was the rider who had brought cattle to the construction camp with Mike Cardon that morning. Wong knew he had walked into the thieves' den.

It was the redhead who took charge. "Look him over for a gun, Hank."

THE rope about Charley's neck loosened as the tall rider came forward to pat Charley's clothes. He found only the knife in Wong's belt. Charley kept the joy off his face when Hank missed the gun holstered inside his baggy pants at his knee.

Then Hank was looking at him closer and exclaiming, "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Red! Red got ourselves a Chinaman."

"From the railroad," Red said. "Mebbe Mike couldn't—" He checked himself as his roving eye saw the steer hide in the tree. "What's this? Hold onto this rope, Hank." Red walked over to take the hide down and inspect it. He saw the brand and whirled back to Charley. "What you doing here, feller?"

His voice was hard and suspicious and Wong knew he was in a tight. These two would kill him if they suspected he understood that worked-over brand. And he couldn't get at his gun while that rope stayed tight around his arms. His only chance lay in playing the ignorant coolie.

He shook his head as if he didn't fully understand and in a pidgin English said: "Me workee railroad. Me hunt, velly bad lost."

"Yeah," Red retorted. "You come hunting and get lost in this particular spot. You kill a steer with this particular brand and save the hide."

Continued on page 138



Which comes first— Your second helping? or our second front?

YOU WANT TO SEE THIS WAR WON—and won quickly. You want to see it carried to the enemy with a vengeance. Okay—so do all of us. But just remember...

A second front takes food...food to feed our allies *in addition to* our own men.

Which do you want—more meat for you, or enough meat for them? An extra cup of coffee on your breakfast table, or a full tin cup of coffee for a fighting soldier?

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Continued from page 136

"Velly fine hide. Makee good shoes," Charley went on, singsong fashion.

"You won't be needing shoes," snapped Red. "You may be dumb, but we ain't taking no chances. One Chinaman less in these parts won't matter." Red took the rope's end from his pardner. "Bring the horses, Hank. There's a big live oak across the valley. I'm aiming to see this chink stretch."

But Hank took only one step before he stopped short and the color drained from his face. For a soft but clear voice cut across the camp. "Yeah, Red, he'll stretch, if he's guilty, along with any others who been rustling my beef." And bow-legged Luke Benson stepped into the firelight.

Even in his joy of relief, Charley didn't miss Red's quick gesture toward his gun, his stumbling voice: "W-what you doing here?"

"Might ask you the same," Luke answered. His own hand stayed close to his low gun.

"Why, we got the rustler, Luke," Hank put in quickly. "Tracked him in here. He's sure been doing some fancy iron work."

"You boys got your sign mixed. This feller ain't no rustler," Luke drawled. "Loosen your rope, Red."

"What's he doing way out here camped atop Rafter L beef?" Red cut in. "I say string him up pronto and make no mistake."

A sharp note took the softness out of Luke's voice. "Right now I'm saying *take off that rope*."

For the space of one long breath Red stood unmoving, staring hard at the Rafter L owner. Then his eyes dropped and he slackened the rope. But as he lifted the loop, Charley saw the black hatred in the man's eyes. He gave swift thanks to the good spirits of his ancestors who had watched over him and allowed

him to keep that gun. For in the battle that was shaping up much would depend on whether Hank had the courage to side Red. If he did, Luke had better have help.

"You do your job, feller?" Luke said to Charley then.

Charley nodded. "I was going to Rafter L."

"You were a long ways off the track."

"I keep to cover in the hills. Others maybe want to chase me."

Luke nodded. "Well, let's get some of that beef to frying."

THE four men ate hungrily and wordlessly. Luke seemed absorbed in his food. Red was openly sullen. Hank's face was noncommittal. And tension grew around the fire. Luke finished first. He wiped his fingers on his chaps then built a smoke. He blew out a white cloud, then remarked casually:

"I can't figure why you two was away out this side of the range, anyhow."

"Why, Red and me figured to track down them rustlers," Hank stated calmly.

But Red jumped to his feet. "You're getting too danged free with your talk, Benson," he snarled. "If you got anything on your mind, spit it out."

Across the dying fire from Red, Luke remained on his heels. Wong approved of that. The rancher made a smaller target that way, and he could move either way easily. Wong palmed a sharp-edged bone in his big hands.

"Why, sure, Red," Luke went on. "This morning I picked up the trail of a bunch of steers. They led to the railroad camp. They was wearing an L-in-a-House brand, powerful like my Rafter L. That boss, Mike Cardon, didn't seem to recollect much, so I back-tracked them steers. Took me over some pretty

rough country, but I finally landed here. There's plenty of cows here with fresh burns on them showing how my Rafter L was worked over.

"Anyway, I figured to hang around. I watched Wong here come in afore sundown, then you gents about dark. So I dropped down for a closer look. I find you gents tracking rustlers." Luke pushed his big hat back and scratched his head. "Funny thing though. Last night I seem to remember I sent you two to round up strays on the Sweetwater twenty miles south of here."

To Charley Wong sitting cross-legged and silent to the left of Luke, those words were hard to follow. But the faces were plain. Red's eyes held fear and guilt. Luke could handle Red. But Wong saw Hank inch back from the fire. He might only be getting out of the way when trouble came. But it was bringing Hank where Luke would be between him and Red. The bone in Charley's fingers moved deftly along the seam of his trousers above the knee.

"So what does that prove?" Red asked tightly.

"I'm giving you the chance to tell me, Red."

An ember snapped in the fire, sounding loud in the tense quiet. Wong saw the swift glance Hank threw at Red. Red suddenly blurted: "Sure, I'll tell you. With hot lead!"

His hand dove for the gun on his hip. Like an uncoiling spring, Luke flung himself to one side and forward, and his hand came up with the gun. They fired together. Even as Luke dove, Wong's attention went to Hank. He saw that rider reach for his gun. There was an explosion at Charley's knee. Dirt spurted in front of Hank to spray his gun hand. Surprise rode his face as his eyes pinned on Wong. As if it was red-hot, Hank dropped

the gun back to leather, and held his hands rigid.

Then abruptly there was silence again. Red was sprawled on the ground, blood staining the neckerchief at his throat. Luke swiveled around to Hank. "You taking cards?"

Hank licked dry lips. "I ain't backing Red's game," he said hoarsely.

"I figure that's how it stands." Luke's glance took in the gaping, powder-burned hole in the left knee of Charley Wong's baggy pants. "I'd sure hate to have you for an enemy, feller."

Wong's eyes met Luke's, a grin crinkling his face. He pulled up his pants leg and took out the gun.

"Mike was much surprised, too," Wong stated.

"That's the medicine for his kind," said Luke. "What say, you want to work for the Rafter L?"

Charley nodded. This was the moment he had built his life for these last months.

"Good," Luke went on. "I reckon we can have a Chinese cook as well as the other outfits in this country."

Cook! Wong fought to keep the smile on his face, not to show his disappointment. It was written that patience is a virtue, but this was almost too much for even his Asiatic calm.

Luke was speaking on: "... we'll get an early start in the morning and head them cows down to the roundup gather."

ROLLED in his blanket that night, Wong didn't see the bright stars overhead, nor did he sleep much. He was thinking that he would get an early start in the morning all right, but it would be away from the Rafter L, toward a riding job. Cook! He, Charley Wong, the best of the *hung hutzes*, a cook!

Long before daybreak, the three

men were up. In the flickering fire-light, Charley finished breakfast first, then spoke to Luke. "Charley Wong is humble for what Mr. Luke has done. Now he will be riding."

Luke's face was a puzzle. "But you're working for me, feller."

Charley knew it would be futile to try to explain. He could not speak well enough to put his meaning into the diplomatic language necessary. Better not lose more face by trying. So Charley merely shook his head, and turned to pick up his saddle.

Then abruptly he halted. For there came a hail from outside of camp, the slow approach of a horse. Charley strained his ears unbelievingly. For that was the familiar, harsh voice of Mike Cardon. But Mike was wounded, at the railroad; he couldn't be out here! Charley saw the tenseness that had gripped Hank. Luke was moving back to the edge of light where he could command the scene.

The hail came again. It was Mike, calling: "That you, Red?"

"Come in, Mike," Luke answered gruffly. His gun lay across his knees now and he said low-voiced to Charley: "It could be you *are* playing a double game, feller. You stay careful now or I'll figure that."

Then Mike was stepping down from his horse. Under the brim of his big hat, the white of a bandage showed. Charley knew then that his bullet had only furrowed the man's scalp, had only knocked Mike out. Hank moved over to throw wood onto the fire. Mike saw him first; then Wong.

"So the Chinaman came here," he said harshly.

"Yeah," Hank answered.

The fresh fuel caught and the flames blazed up, showing Luke. Mike Cardon's hand jerked toward his hip, but stayed as he saw Luke's gun.

"Howdy, Mike," Luke drawled.

"Hunker down and have a bite. Red got poisoned . . . lead poison."

The construction boss' eyes flickered around again. "I'm short on time," he answered. "I'm hunting this here Chinaman. I'll be taking him back now."

"Where you aiming to take him, and why?" Luke asked softly.

"He's wanted for horse stealing. Took that big bay of mine," Mike said. "The railroad has its law."

"This is Rafter L range," retorted Luke. "This feller is a Rafter L hand now. He stays here."

Mike's hard eyes again swung toward Hank as he gauged the play. But Charley could see he got no encouragement there. Still it wasn't like Mike to give in without more of a fight. Charley took warning from that.

"You have the edge now, mister," Mike grated. "But you'll see more of me." With that he swung aboard his horse to spur away.

LUKE didn't move until the hoof-beats had faded. Then he came to his feet. "That jasper will be back with a cutthroat outfit. Hank, we got to get them cows out of here. It ain't the Chinaman that Mike Cardon came out here for."

Yet, even as he caught up his saddle, the first shots boomed from down the valley. Hank dove for cover. Luke ran toward his picketed horse. Charley's foot swung to scatter the campfire. Without the fire, he noticed how the sky was already graying.

There was no whine of bullets around them. But as more shooting opened up, there came the faint, unmistakable rumble of hoofs from where the cattle had bedded.

"He's stampeding the cows," Luke shouted. "C'mon." He swung up his heavy saddle.

Charley Wong was suddenly realizing that he wanted Luke to be-

lieve in him, that he was not going to leave. Here was his chance, in the thick of this stampede, to prove he was a rider. As he likewise headed for his horse, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hank scrambling out from the brush. Hank came to his feet, jerking out his gun to throw down on Luke's dim figure.

Yelling a warning, Charley lunged for the treacherous rider who was at last showing his colors. The orange flame of Hank's gun was in his face. There was a high cry from Luke, then an answering burst of shots. Even as something whanged against his head, Charley heard Hank grunt, saw him topple. Then the ground came up to hit Charley. And in the sudden quiet, the rumble of running cattle seemed loud in his ears.

Though it seemed hours, it could only have been seconds before Charley had fought his way back to full consciousness. A hundred hammers thrashed in his head, and he was

sick in his stomach. He was lying half across Hank, and Hank was dead. Charley raised up to see the two picketed horses jerking at their ropes in a frenzy of fear. Luke was crawling slowly toward them, leaving a bloody path through the grass. And then that pounding in Charley's head resolved itself into the pound of steer hoofs. Mike was hazing the cattle toward the pass, straight through the camp.

WONG got his feet under him and tottered toward Luke. Though blood was flowing from a jagged wound in his thigh, the little cowman was game. He kept croaking: "Got to stop 'em."

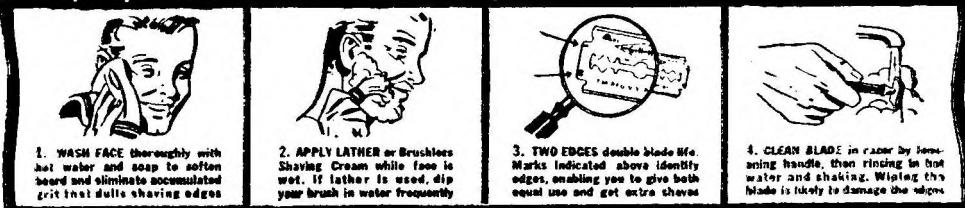
Charley gathered the rancher into his arms and ran for the protection of the boulders that edged the valley. All the time Luke kept cursing and saying: "Got to get me a cayuse."

But the picketed horses had

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broken free and were bolting for the pass. The hobbled bay was hopping slowly after them. The cattle were only a few hundred yards away now, coming with the speed of a tornado with Mike behind them, slashing at the drag. Charley snatched Luke's knife. He ran out from the protecting boulders toward the bay. Catching the animal by its long mane, he bent to slash the hobbles, then pulled himself on top.

Charley Wong was a complete man now, on a horse. That his mount had no saddle, no bridle, must be guided by knee pressure alone, made no difference. He was fighting as his ancestors from the wild, windswept steppes of Asia had fought for hundreds of years. He turned toward the oncoming steers, and the bay responded easily to his confident touch.

But Mike Cardon saw only a Chinaman trying to turn the stampede he had started. He spurred down the flank, pumping lead from his rifle. Reckless of bullets, Charley slanted into the path of the oncoming steers. He raised his six-shooter, drew a bead on the steer on the left point. The animal stumbled, struggled on. Twice more Charley fired before the steer went down. Those behind swung around and Charley was in on them. Emptying his gun, then slapping his hat in their snorting noses, Charley guided his horse in the picket fence of their long, death-dealing horns. Then they were crowding together as the flank was pressed inward. Another fifty feet and the leaders were headed straight across the valley, the herd strung out behind, their tails pointing back to the pass.

Then Mike Cardon's bullets reached their mark. The big bay stopped, went to its knees. Charley slid to the ground as Mike came riding him down, roaring: "You'll go to Hades now, chink!"

With horse and rider almost on him, Charley leaped straight at the man. He caught the bulky boss around the waist. Unable to shoot at such close range, Mike brought the long barrel crashing to Charley's wounded shoulder. And the pain of that blow drove Wong completely mad. He swung up a foot against the saddlehorn. The bitterness of months of drudgery, the hatred of this bullish man who had so ruthlessly killed his uncle were concentrated in the shove against that horn. Mike Cardon was torn from the saddle. And the two men fell from the running horse.

They broke apart and came to their feet. Charley Wong felt the joy of Mike Cardon's flesh yielding under his hammering fists then. Mike slugged back, but his will to fight was gone.

Suddenly he turned to stumble away toward the pass. Dazed, Charley watched him go, then stumbled after him. Mike must not get away this time. At the camp, Mike paused to bend over a huddled form. He straightened, holding up Hank's gun. Still Wong staggered on, unable to stop now. His blurred eyes made out Luke clinging to the top of a boulder beyond. There came the crack of a gun, far-off

sounding. Mike swayed like a huge tree. His hands went up, and he toppled to the ground. Charley Wong gave one wild war cry and sank down.

THE warming sun beat into Wong's face. He opened his eyes, stirred, and a groan escaped his lips. There came a chuckle from beside him, and a voice said: "Feller, I watched it all."

Charley turned. It was not an ancestor, but Luke sitting beside him, pale but grinning.

"I reckon Mike learned you don't scratch a Tartar, eh Charley?" Luke chuckled.

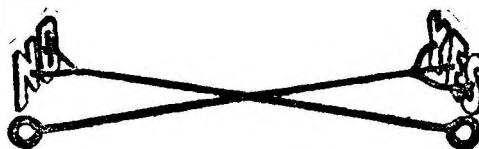
Charley made an effort to grin, too. Luke went on. "And say, we'll get a Chinaman for a cook, but you're a top-hand rider on the Rafter L from now on."

The grin broke through then. Charley struggled to his feet, drew himself erect. His face showed no pain as he quickly brought his right hand up in front of his shoulder. He slapped the back of his left hand into the right palm. Then he dropped both hands smartly to his sides. It was the salute of the *hung hutzes*, given only among fellow warriors.

THE END.

EARLY LAWS

People's courts were maintained in Colorado long before it became a State, and even before Kansas Territory was a recognized authority. They disappeared only when the regular machinery of the law was finally established. They were simply the outgrowth of unusual conditions where a large population had arrived ahead of the law. There are many variations in these district laws, but the general aim was for strict justice. Legal technicalities were avoided and some districts provided that no "lawyer or pettifogger" should be allowed to plead in any case, unless he happened to be one of the parties to the suit. Other districts barred lawyers from pleading in any court. Union District went a step further and provided that if a lawyer practiced in any court in the district, he should be punished by not less than twenty or more than fifty lashes on his back.



READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



DEFENDS GALS

DEAR BOSS: I read my first Wild West in October, 1942, and I haven't missed a copy since. It's such a swell magazine I don't see why I didn't get around to reading it before. Guess I was just too busy at the ranch to think much about reading.

I am just a gal—a cowgal at that—so don't get alarmed if you see me riding through town on a steer. Even if I am a gal, I think those guys who want gals left out of 2W are cracked in the top story, and I don't care if you tell them. If they don't like it, tell them to come down here to Texas and they'll think Johnny Forty-five is after them.

I'm only playing cowgirl until some of the boys get back from the army. Roping steers and tying them down is pretty hard work for a girl, but I can do it, though I wouldn't like to make it a pastime.

Every night after supper I read 2W to the hands—meaning mother, dad and two old Mexicans.

All the boys on your spread are tops with me, and that's no soolin', so I don't think it's necessary to call off their names.

Did Risky McKee's pard, Sufferin' Joe, die from some of his ailments, or what happened? I think it's about time for him to roll around to 2W again.

Yours until I join up with Hungry and Rusty or until Johnny Forty-five puts a slug through my head. But you'd better tell Mister Forty-five that I'm from Texas and not to forget it.

MISS AUDIE A. STILLWELL.

Quemado, Texas.

That's quite a job you taken on, Miss Stillwell. But then it really proves what you girls can do toward helping out in the war effort. Keep up the good work.



NEW READER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This letter is to let you know that I think your magazine is the tops.

I've just read one issue so far, but if the rest are anything like this one, I'm with you for keeps. Tommy Rockford is the best ever, so let's have plenty of him.

Yours truly,
CHARLES RIDDELL.
Aurora, Illinois.

Happy to welcome you to our family, Charlie. We shore hope you find the coming issues of 2W as interesting as the first. But we're afraid you won't be seein' much of Tommy Rockford until the big shindig is over, 'cause author Walker Tompkins is in the army. There'll be a lot of other pals on the old 2W spread you'll want to know, though, so stick around awhile and meet up with 'em.



THE SERGEANT SAYS

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a note from a pal who has always stuck by the old Wild West and who is now sampling the new one. Being in the army isn't too easy these days, but there's one thing that hasn't changed—the real relaxation one gets from reading about our old friends in 2W.

I miss the Ranny Kid—has he appeared recently? Kid Wolf is another of my favorites, and, of course, the Circle J pards.

There are many times I miss an issue, for obvious reasons. But even an occasional glimpse of a copy of Wild West is good for my morale.

Wish I had a platoon of 2W pards.

STAFF SGT. H. DUFFEY.
U. S. army.

Knowin' the Ranny Kid means you've been a 2W reader for a long time, sergeant, 'cause we haven't seen him around our way for a good many years. We're shore sorry you have to miss an issue of Wild West now and then. Maybe if you put in a standing order at the PX you'd be sure to get one.

AGIN' THE GALS

Dear Range Boss: I'm a girl and all that fell what? [ed.], but I'll be doggoned if I don't agree with Senator Boydston about girls. I've been reading Wild West for over six years and I like it O. K., except for the girls. Please leave them out, will yuh? Wild West is supposed to be a *Western* magazine, not a love story book.

Don't get me wrong, I like to read love stories, but not in a Western magazine. Women may have had their part in the building of the West, but they only slow up stories, and I like action. And I do mean action! [Whew!—Ed.]

My favorites are Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Rawhide Runyan and the Fightin' 'Thess of the Rockin' T. Let's have more of them, whatcha say, huh?

Meet you at Hitler's funeral.

Adios,

LEONA COOPER,

Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

We'd sure like to meet you there, Leona—and right soon!

THE BAT'S BACK ABUZZIN'

Dear Range Boss: Good old Wild West doesn't appear so often as it once did, but it's even duller now of the same old action-packed stories than ever. 2W started off with a bang, zapping many of our old hard-ridin' pals that we have rode the danger trails with in the past. Speaking for myself, I am pleased with our new magazine, but some belly-achin' galoot will soon start makin' cracks about it. Mark my words, podner.

The best stories featured in the February and March issues were:

1. "Conquistador Gold," by Cleve Endicott. Buck Foster plays a new role—Horatius at the Bridge."

2. "Blind Trails," by Emery Jackson. The Whistlin' Kid rides hell-bent-for-election into the lair of a scheming land hog.

3. "Collins for Deputies," by Andrew A. Griffin. I don't blame Krumm for fainting this time.

4. "Ghost of the Border Eagle," by Philip F. Dester. The Eagle proves very much alive.

5. "Owlhoot Brand," by James P. Webb. Rowdy Lang wants an unconditional pardner—or none.

There were many other top-notch stories, but these were my favorite five.

Adios,

THE WHITE BAT.

Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Thanks for yore listing, Señor Bat. Come again next month.

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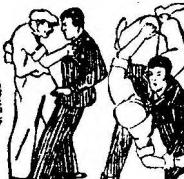
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¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

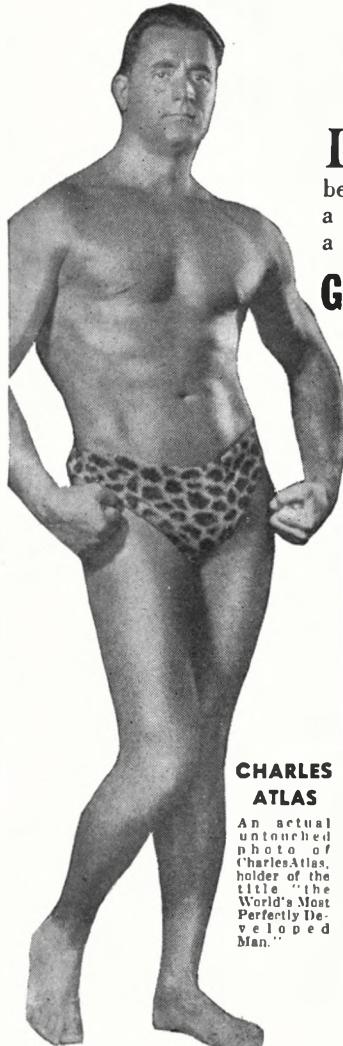
Continued from page 15.

1. It got its name from the cottony coma investing the seeds.
2. In order, they are the States of Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Nebraska, California.
3. Yes, on the left side, excepting the ponies of Navahos, Crows and Comanches, which have been trained to be mounted on the right side.
4. Aside from similarity in coloring, some snakes, particularly blacksnakes, thresh their tails. In dry leaves, the sound resembles that of a "singing rattle."
5. Between fifty and fifty-five percent of the animal's original weight.
6. A bow-lance carried chiefly by the Contraries, a sect in the tribe which had an inordinate fear of thunder.
7. No, they left the bodies on the prairie to be devoured and scattered by coyotes and buzzards. It was considered honorable to have their flesh strewn by these scavengers.
8. Yes, when removing an arrowhead or some other missile; however, they never amputated an arm or a leg, believing it was better to die than to lose these.
9. It is the bear, because he possesses the power to heal himself and also the wounds of other bears.
10. The Arkansas exceeds that of the Mississippi by 185,000 square miles.

*She
SAID: I'm sorry I can't go
with you tonight..*



*But She really
THOUGHT: I'm ashamed to be seen
out with such a
SKINNY WEAKLING!*



**CHARLES
ATLAS**

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authenticated
photo of
Charles Atlas,
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title, "the
World's Most
Perfectly De-
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Man."

DO YOU ever get the "brush-off"? Do girls ever tell YOU "they have a headache"—and then the headache turns out to be another date? Well—girls just seem to prefer going out with a husky, muscular HE-MAN! And if you want to start building a HE-MAN's body for YOURSELF, just listen!

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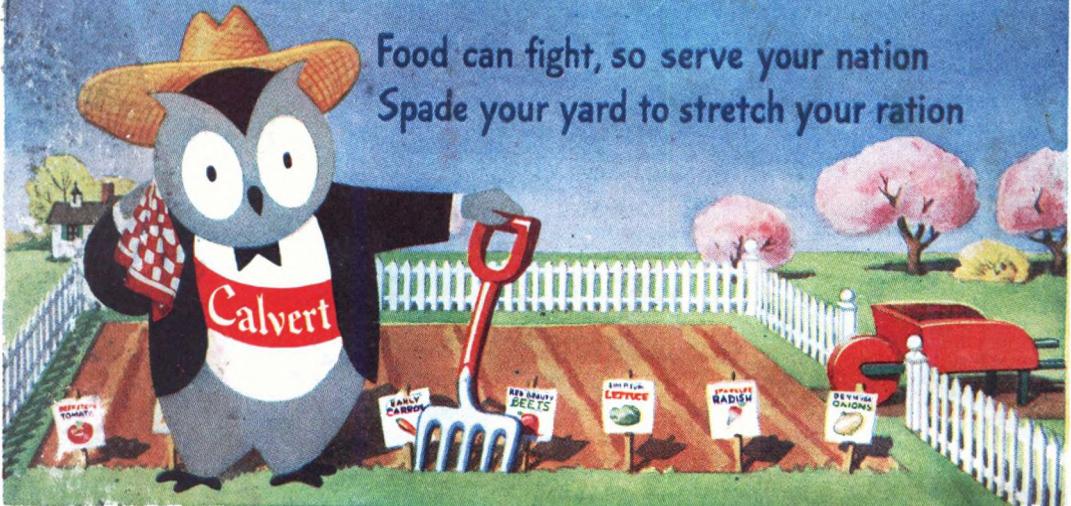
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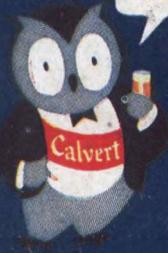


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