

STREET & SMITH'S

OCTOBER, 1943

WILD WEST

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ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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TEXAS GUNS ROAR!

A RED-BLOODED KID WOLF NOVEL

BY WARD M. STEVENS

BLACKY SOLONE • DAPPER DONNELLY

PLUS MANY SHORT STORIES
AND FEATURES



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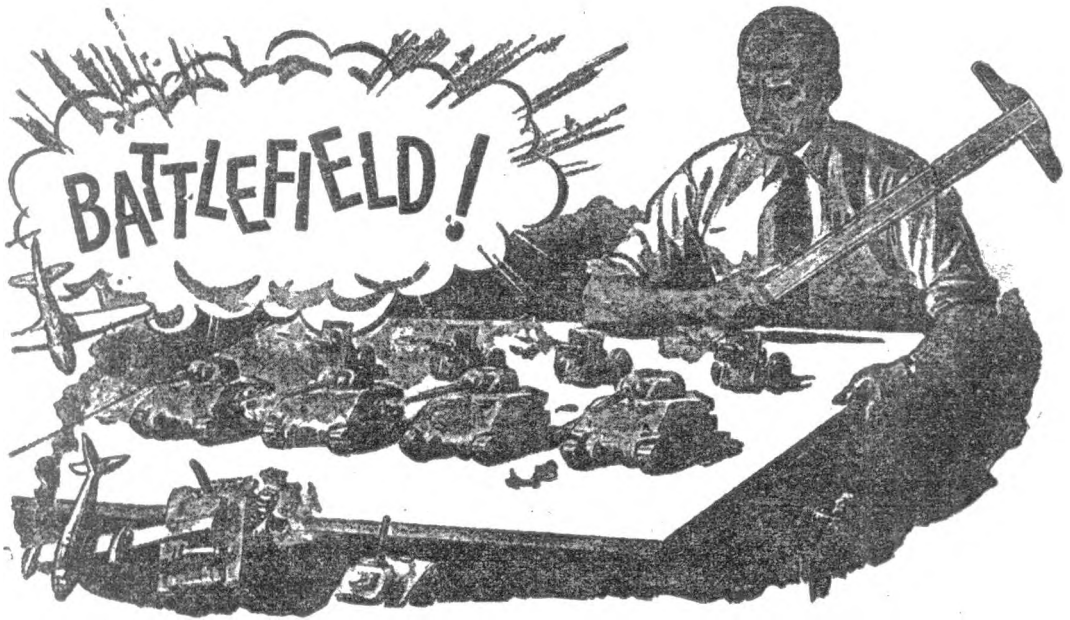
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STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

FOUNDED 1902

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VOL. 163, No. 1

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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SECONDS LATER THE BIG ONE CAME!

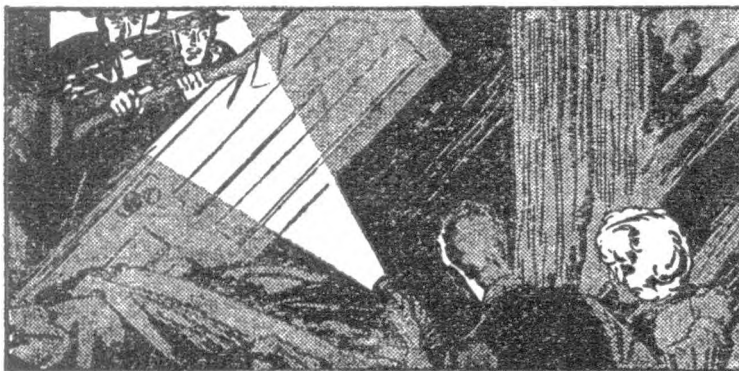
A true experience of Mr. and Mrs. James Sproston, of Cheshire, during the big air blitz over England.



1 Night after night they heard the great German Heinkel bombers roaring directly overhead, Liverpool-bound and loaded with bombs. Then one night Jerry was late. Feeling safe, the elderly English couple prepared to retire. Suddenly the sirens began to shriek...



2 Came the rumble of jettisoned bombs. Sproston grabbed up his flashlight. He and his wife hurried downstairs to black out the windows. The next moment an explosion shook the house. Seconds later the big one came...



3... Half demolished the house and threw its stunned occupants violently to the floor... Some time after, two passing air wardens saw a light shining out of the wreckage. It was the beam from Sproston's faithful flashlight—a beam that directed the rescue of two more victims of the Luftwaffe's ruthlessness.

SPARE YOUR FLASHLIGHT BATTERIES!

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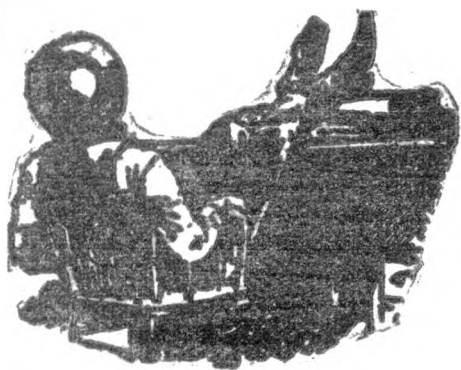


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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

LONG about this time of year seems like even talk about the war gets a mite crowded while the old-timers get into a huddle about tricks they pulled when they was buttons. Somehow the old West was sort of made for Halloween tricks. Not that the range was so lonesome as it sometimes seemed to Easterners who took a pasear out that way. You could ride a good many miles and never cut sign on another hombre, but there was plenty of animal life. Up in the hills antelope would cut across the trail, their white tails a-jumping, and everywhere you rode ground squirrels would pop up out of their burrows to chirrup at you.

But Halloween . . . pardner, just listen sometime when a circle of coyotes gang up on a hill, point their noses at the stars and cut loose. The tumbleweed rolls and whispers along the wall of the bunkhouse, and the jackrabbits leaping out of purple shadows to race across dead-white moon-washed draws are a darn sight spookier than any rabbit's got any call to be. The tall tales that went with the Halloween shivers are part of the whole shebang.

We've had a lot of discussion lately about whether Tombstone, Arizona, is a ghost town. A letter from Joseph D. MacLaughlin, which appeared in

the June 5th issue of WW started the whole business. He said that Tombstone was as lively as ever. He was sided a few issues later by Chuck Martin, who ought to know. Now along comes a letter from an hombre who has just the opposite opinion.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I read "Strong Medicine for Outlaws," by Clay Starr, in your June 5th issue and enjoyed it very much, particularly since I visited Tombstone last summer. While there I saw the Bird Cage Theater, the Crystal Palace Bar, the old O. K. Corral, Boothill and other famous places.

However, I disagree with Mr. MacLaughlin. Tombstone sure is a ghost town, and from what they tell me, has been one for quite a few years. The only people living there now are those who keep the place going for the tourist trade, or the few who like it so much they'd never move.

Tombstone sure was a tough town in its day, but its day is long past unless the government decides to use the water from the silver mines to help Tucson, where water is badly needed. If they ever do drain the shafts, Tombstone might boom again. But never unless they do.

WILLIAM DOHERTY.

U. S. Navy.

Waal, Chuck and Joe, mebbe you can set Sailor Bill right about Tombstone—or mebbe he can set you right.

Go to it, boys.

THE RANGE BOSS.

The Fightin' Three return to the old spread in a smashing full-length novel of quick-trigger adventure—"Death Blots the Brands," by Paul S. Powers, and the November issue also brings back that daring ramrod of the law, Johnny Forty-five for an action-packed role in a fast-moving yarn by Andrew A. Griffin. Don't miss the fun when Marshal Johnny deals out "Hog Legs for Range Hogs," and be on hand, too, to meet "The Ghost Town Ghost," a rapid-fire Oklahoma Kid novelette by Lee Bond.

Also down on the tally sheet will be a full string of smashing Western shorts and features, so be sure to reserve a copy of this big issue.

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Lieutenant in Signal Corps
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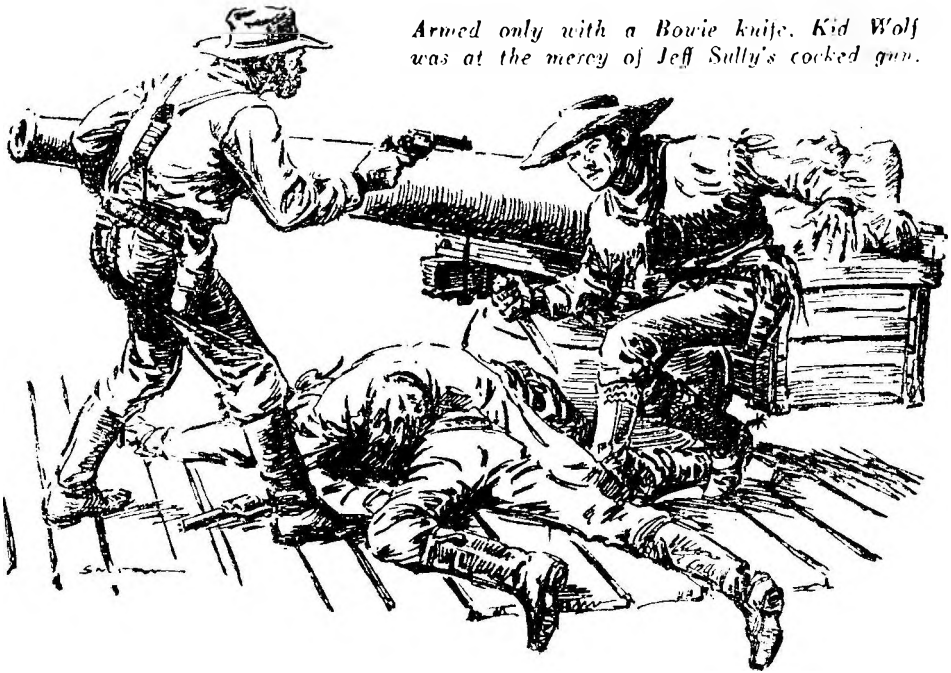
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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

Armed only with a Bowie knife, Kid Wolf was at the mercy of Jeff Sully's cocked gun.



Kid Wolf found there was only one way to help those struggling placer miners buck treacherous Lance Redholt—let his

TEXAS GUNS ROAR

by WARD M. STEVENS

COMING suddenly upon the little cemetery high on the river bank, Kid Wolf's first thought was that he was interrupting a burial party. But a different rite was in progress. Instead of doffing his wide Stetson in respect for the mourners, he came near baring his Colt six-guns. Grave robbers, he decided. The two men had emptied one grave of its mouldering pine coffin, and had dug down into an adjoining plot to get their ropes around another one. They were too busy to see the Kid, even when he pulled his huge white cayuse to a halt alongside the spot where they were working.

The warm California sunlight filtered through the pine and white-

thorn trees that walled the grass-choked clearing, throwing shifting designs on the warped headboards. The old burial ground was on the rim of the bluff that overlooked Hell's River, and the sullen, rushing sound of the water could be heard distinctly. There was another noise, too, a peculiar rumbling like distant, continuous thunder. Kid Wolf had been hearing this pounding roar for the past ten minutes, and had been trying to follow it to its source when he came upon the grave diggers.

"You'd better get goin', mister," advised a voice from behind the Kid. To his surprise, it was the voice of a woman, and with it came the clacking of a rifle's mechanism.

Turning in his saddle, Kid Wolf saw that a team and wagon had just emerged from the thicket on a weed-grown road that he hadn't noticed before. The throbbing and mysterious thunder in the distance had prevented the Kid from hearing the turning of the wheels and the thumping of the horses' feet.

On the seat of the wagon was a determined but very personable young woman with a repeating rifle across her lap. Its long, browned barrel was leveled in his general direction, close enough, at least, to make him a bit uncomfortable.

"This time the Kid doffed his hat. 'I beg your pardon, miss,' he said in his easy Texas drawl, 'but I just got here.'"

The girl was an Irish type, blue-eyed and dark-haired, and evidently immunized to Blarney in all its forms. The rifle didn't waver, nor did her contemptuous glance. What she said next was mystifying.

"You can go tell your friends, those other scoundrels, we're seein' to it that there'll be some bones, anyway, they won't wash away."

Hearing the voices, the two men came clambering out of the grave where they had been toiling. They were husky young men in their twenties, wearing the red flannel shirts of miners. The resemblance between these hombres and the girl was so obvious that Kid Wolf guessed they were of the same family, in spite of their difference in coloring. The older-looking of the two men had a thatch of dark-red hair, the other was a rugged blond.

"Who in blazes is this, Sue? And what's he doin' here?" demanded the older one, belligerently, his dark-red hair bristling, heavy jaw outthrust. "Is it trouble with the Mallorys he's a-wantin'?"

Kid Wolf's eye had fallen on the crookedly leaning headboard of the grave they had been excavating. The hand-carved lettering was still legible. There were two dates, some fifty years

apart, and the name "Patrick Mallory." The just-emptied grave adjoining had no board or stone, but was marked instead by a glassed-over black box. Inside were faded paper flowers on yellow satin in which the word "Mother" had been worked in old-fashioned embroidered letters. Great Scott, these people were digging up their parents! was the Kid's thought. The red-haired brother saw the look on the Kid's face and laughed bitterly.

"Yes, it's the old folks we're takin' from here, bad 'cess to you and to the rest of Lance Redholt's greedy outfit!" he stormed.

"Yo' got me wrong," explained the Kid courteously. "I don't know this Redholt yo' mention. Me and my horse Blizzard are new here from Texas."

The Kid was proud of his Lone Star origin, and it seemed there was a sort of magic in the word Texan, for some of the anger and suspicion faded from the faces of the men and the girl lowered her rifle to an easier position.

It was true that there was little of the *Californio* about Kid Wolf or his outfit. The saddle on the magnificent, snow-white cayuse was rigged Brazos fashion, and the lariat was rope and not the rawhide of the vaqueros. As for the tall, slim-waisted Texan himself, he was wearing buckskins, pants and fringed shirt that fitted his powerful form like tan silk. His coffee-colored Stetson was of a type seldom seen west of the Sierras, and on his feet were high-heeled, silver-spurred boots ornamented with the solitary star of the Rio Grande country. Low-holstered on each of the Kid's thighs was a gun that the Mexicans had originally made famous, a Colt single-action. These were .45 caliber, their handles as satiny as the wood of violins.

"Come to think of it, you don't look like a Redholt man," the younger brother admitted. "What is your name?"

"Wolf," was the reply. "That's what my enemies call me; my friends call me Kid, and I hope you people will. Is there anything I can do here to help?"

The brothers were silent for a while, but the girl had answered the Texan's smile. Intuitively, she had been the first to recognize the Kid's sincerity.

"I'm Chris Mallory, and this is Jack, my brother. My sister, here, is Sue Mallory," the redhead explained. "You don't understand why we're digging up the coffins of our mother and father, do you?"

The Kid shook his head in the negative.

"I'll show you," Chris said.

The Kid had dismounted and the redhead took him by the arm, leading him to the river bank, and along it to a curve in the bluff. Jack and the girl followed.

The distant roaring had become louder, nearer, and now the very earth trembled underfoot. Then, the Kid saw the cause of the mighty disturbance. It was a monitor in action.

Although Kid Wolf had been traveling all that day in order to see this spectacle, he was astonished at the fury and power of harnessed water. It was his first glimpse of hydraulic mining, the new method of tearing gold from the earth. On the opposite side of the river a stream of water under enormous pressure was being thrown against the bluffs. With a noise greater than ocean surf it tore into the solid earth, ripping out stones and boulders weighing hundred of pounds and undermining the cliff like a thing of magic.

Clouds of mist and spray hung over the monitor like steamy smoke, and sand, gravel and water fell in a perpetual rain. The liquid power was carried to the mighty nozzle by a system of great flumes which ended in iron pipes larger than a man's body. Although two score of high-booted workers were handling the washed-down material, the tremendous monitor itself was being controlled by one man.

He stood on a platform beside the nozzle, from this distance looking no larger than an ant.

"That's what ruined the minin' in this valley for men like us," Jack Mallory growled. "How can our picks and shovels buck a thing like that?"

"Tomorrow they're goin' to shift the monitor to this side of the stream," Chris told the Texan. "That means this little graveyard will be washed to smithereens. I wish we had time to take all these buried folks to another sleepin' place. They was Forty-niners, the pioneers that built this Californy country! And Redholt and his monitor will rip their bodies to pieces like they was dogs—and all for a little gold! Redholt is rich already, worth more'n a million, they say. It's an outrage, that's what it is!"

Kid Wolf agreed. He was still looking downstream at the amazing man-made waterspout when the crunching of feet was heard along the path that bordered the bluff. The trampling of heavy boots and the snapping of twigs could be distinguished even above the roar of the monitor. Sue Mallory was at a vantage point a little above the Texan and her brothers and she called out a terse warning.

"Here comes some of Redholt's men. His foreman Jeff Sully is with them. Now, boys, don't start an argument," she pleaded. "This isn't the time and place for it."

THE bushes parted and a huge, wide-shouldered hombre loomed up at the edge of the cemetery. The Kid guessed that this was Sully, for the two men who followed him were insignificant in comparison. He was wearing knee-high laced boots, a wide gun belt, canvas pants and flannel shirt. The other pair were carrying surveyor's equipment.

"What's goin' on here, you Mallorys?" Sully rumbled. "Don't you know you're trespassin'? We own the minin' rights through here along with water rights."

"Haven't you or Redholt ever heard

of such a thing as human rights?" Sue Mallory flashed.

The monitor foreman leered at her, then saw the newly opened graves and chuckled. "Minin' for coffins, hey? You won't get rich thataway." He turned to the Kid, seeming to see him for the first time. "Well, who in the devil are you, Buckskins?" he asked insultingly.

"My name's Wolf, suh," the Texan drawled, his gray-blue eyes on Sully's slitted black ones.

"I'll bet a double eagle against two bits that you're a hired spy for them Orchard Lake sod busters," Jeff Sully sneered. "Interested in our hydraulickin', are you, Wolf?"

"Very much interested, suh," the Kid replied.

Like many another, the foreman made the error of thinking that Kid Wolf's soft speech and courteous manner were an expression of weakness.

"We don't like strangers in this country. Specially we don't like snoopers," the big foreman bullied. "If you know what's good for you, pretty boy, you'll hightail outa here. I wouldn't wanta have to wipe up the ground with you and dirty those fancy buckskins you're wearin'." The sneering words had hardly left Sully's thick lips before Kid Wolf's hard fist lashed out with rapierlike swiftness.

The straight, lightning-fast punch landed squarely on the foreman's mouth. It seemed impossible that so swift and graceful a blow could carry power, but the compact muscles of the Kid's shoulder were behind the follow-through and his knuckles fairly exploded in Sully's face like a grenade. The secret of its force was that the Kid had struck not only at the target, but at a point beyond the target. The extra few inches his fist traveled meant the difference between just a heavy blow and a clean knockout, and Sully's head almost bounced from his shoulders. He teetered back on his heels, then fell forward at the Kid's feet, his two-hundred-odd pounds of

beef and tallow landing with a jarring thud.

The foreman's two companions blinked at the Kid in unbelief. One of them made a half-hearted motion toward his holstered gun, but something in the expression on the Texan's bronzed face caused him to change his mind.

"Pick him up and drag him out of here," Kid Wolf ordered icily.

Prodded by the menace in the Kid's tone, the two men quickly hoisted the unconscious Sully between them and left without any further argument.

CHAPTER II

A BRIBE

AFTER Redholt's men had gone, the Texan helped the Mallory brothers finish their dismal job, and the two coffins were loaded into the wagon that the family had hired for the occasion. The Kid's liking for the Mallorys grew. His sympathies were always stirred by the troubles of the underdogs in life's struggle, and his fiery Southern temper saw to it that he did more than sympathize. That was why Kid Wolf was often referred to as the Soldier of Misfortune.

The Mallorys lived in the nearby settlement of Red Mule, a town that had existed since the earliest California gold discoveries. Their small cabin was on the outskirts, near one of the little creeks that fed Hell's River, where the Mallory boys made a fair living by working over the waste and tailings of an old stamp-mill site. New graves had already been prepared for the disinterred coffins and that afternoon they were reburied in a spot where they would be safe until the Day of Judgment.

The Kid's new friends insisted upon making him their guest, and after he had sampled some of Sue's cooking that evening it didn't take much persuasion.

He met some of their neighbors who "batched" in a nearby cabin: a young hombre named Jimmy Goodring and

his old-timer uncle, Sam Goodring. The Kid had a hunch that Jimmy was more than a little interested in Sue. And he didn't blame him!

"You've shore made a plumb dangerous enemy, Kid," old Sam Goodring said when he heard of the Texan's tangle with the monitor foreman. "He's a killer and he'll do his dangedest to get more than even. Watch yore step!"

Like all miners who worked with their hands, Sam Goodring hated the hydraulickers. To him there was something immoral in this big-scale robbery of Mother Nature's treasure. In the vicinity of Red Mule the feeling against Lance Redholt and his crew was bitter and intense. Unfortunately, however, Redholt had the power that vast sums of money bring, and he used it ruthlessly. Numbered among his men, the Kid learned, were some of the most dangerous gunmen in the West, recruited from every State and territory. Against such a set-up the ordinary placer and hard-rock miners were helpless.

Early the next morning, when Chris and Jack went to work at their claim, Kid Wolf swung aboard his horse, Blizzard, for a look at the nearby town. The neighbor youth, Jimmy Goodring, went along, straddling an oversized gray burro.

"You'll find this country rougher and tougher than anything you ever saw in Texas," Goodring growled, and the Kid had noticed that the youth seemed suspicious of him, less friendly than the other.

"It will have to go some," he drawled as they entered the camp of Red Mule.

THE town couldn't have changed much since its heyday in the 1850s, the Kid thought as he surveyed it. Down the center of its narrow, single street rushed the white water of the creek, boarded over at several points, so that by doing some zigzagging a horseman could ride through. On both side were stores and saloons, some of them on stilts against the steep sides of the mountain. The men who swarmed

through this gulch were practically all mining men, and from the attention he and his snowy cayuse attracted, Kid Wolf realized that a ranny from the cow country was a rarity here.

Goodring gruffly told the Texan that he had an errand to attend to, and after the Kid had tossed the reins over one of the crazily-leaning hitch rails they parted company.

"There he is! That's Wolf!" the tall Texan heard someone shout as he was passing the entrance of a combination saloon and gambling hall.

From experience, the Kid's right hand automatically swung toward the butt of his starboard .45 as he nonchalantly turned to see who had called his name.

It was one of the two men who had been with Redholt's big foreman the day before. This hombre, runty and with stooped shoulders, didn't look hostile. Several others in red shirts and the high boots of hydraulickers stood with him, staring curiously.

"Say, Wolf, wait a minute, will you? No hard feelin's, is there?" grinned the warped-chested man. "I was tellin' the boss—Mr. Redholt—about you and what happened. He wants to see you. You'll find him in the Argo Bar. He's in the back room."

"That so, amigo?" the Kid drawled as he carefully laced a brown cigarette. "I'm not sure that I want to see *him*. I'm afraid the lack of pleasant things to talk about would prove embarrassin' for us both."

"Of course, if you're afraid. I see your point," the stooped hombre said. "But Redholt ain't riled at you, I don't reckon. He just wants to see the whaloper that could lay Jeff Sully out."

It was the man's first remark that decided the Kid. Although he sensed this might be a trap, he didn't intend to allow any Californian to form any wrong opinions about gents from the Rio Grande. Besides, he was curious—and spoiling for a little excitement.

"I reckon I'll hold all the palaver with Señor Redholt that he wants,"

he agreed, and the runty hombre led him in through the saloon to the room at the rear.

Seated around a table in a haze of cigar smoke were five of six earnestly conversing men, but Kid Wolf was able to pick out Redholt at a glance. In his own way, he was as picturesque a character as the Texan.

He was a slender, dark man of about forty. Good-looking and arrogantly well aware of it.

Lance Redholt was dressed in the California style of earlier days, an affectation, but he carried it off swaggingly well. Cocked over one eye was a tall, stovepipe hat—not black but white! His long-tailed coat was of a bright blue, with brass buttons—at least, at first glance, the Kid took them for brass, but they were gold ones, the size and value of double eagles. His frilled shirt was immaculate and glittered with a square-cut diamond, and belted high on Redholt's waspish waist was a jeweled and plated revolver.

"So you're Wolf," Redholt beamed, rising and extending his hand. "I've been wanting to meet you. These men are my associates, Wolf. Will you join us in a drink?"

"Thank you, suh," said the Texan, taking the proffered hand for a moment. He could be as courteous as Redholt, but he wasn't fooled by this hombre.

THE Kid wasn't impressed, either, by the men who were introduced to him—Devrin, Bill Keys, Kurt Hawes, Morphy and a Spaniard named Lopez. They were all of a type. Unusually prosperous cutthroats, but cutthroats.

"Jeff Sully isn't in town today or at work, either," Redholt chortled. "He isn't able yet. I haven't had such a laugh in a long time. You swing a wicked bunch of knuckles, Wolf, from all accounts."

The Texan took the place that had been made for him opposite Redholt, tasting the whiskey that had been set before him.

"I understand, suh, that you wanted to see me. May I ask why?"

Redholt flicked some cigar ashes from his fancy trousers. They were tight fitting, and had a strap that fitted under the instep of his polished boots.

"Did you see my monitor at work? I call it the Little Giant. Quite a sight, isn't it? It's the most powerful thing on earth. In a few hours it can tear out more dirt than a hundred Chinamen used to in a month. And I don't mind telling you that it's making us rich." Redholt complacently blew a smoke cloud toward the ceiling.

"And lots of people poorer," the Kid reminded him quietly.

There was a sniggering laugh from black-browed Bill Keys. "A lot we care for that," he jeered. But Lance Redholt weighed the Kid's remark carefully.

"You came up here by way of Orchard Lake, didn't you, Wolf?" he asked blandly.

"That's so. Yes, suh," drawled the Soldier of Misfortune."

"And you talked to Don Luis Ortega? You needn't answer, Wolf, because I know you did," Redholt laughed, not unpleasantly. "I'm kept pretty well informed, you see."

The Kid's level gray eyes were on him as he reached into the capacious side pocket of his tailed blue coat, bringing out a buckskin bag with leather drawstrings. With a careless gesture, Redholt emptied in onto the table top.

"Here's two thousand dollars, Wolf, all for you," Redholt said genially, as all eyes were focused on the glittering pile. The money was in the large, octagonal gold pieces known as "slugs," and worth fifty dollars apiece.

"I was advised," Redholt said, glancing around at the circle of faces, "to pay off in lead chunks instead of gold slugs, but I'm a reasonable man. You won't get the lead unless this gold fails to work. You can use this money, can't you, Wolf?"

The Texan's white teeth flashed in a smile as he gathered up the yellow

horde of octagons. "I'll put it to good use, suh," he promised.

AN hour later, Jimmy Goodring, alone, rode up to the Mallory cabin and scrambled off his mule. Chris and Jack had just knocked off work for lunch and were washing up on the bench outside.

"Where's the Kid?" Chris asked wonderingly as Goodring approached, out of breath. Sue had opened the door and was listening. Goodring noticed her and his voice took on a bitter edge.

"You might well ask," he growled. "I kinda suspicioned that Texas man from the first, in spite of the way he took you folks in."

Jack Mallory spat deliberately. "What you talkin' about, Jim?"

"I mean that Kid Wolf met Lance Redholt in the Argo Bar this mornin'—and he took a bribe!" Goodring shrilled. "I watched through a back window an'—"

"A little sneaky of you, seems to me, James Goodring," flashed Sue Mallory.

Goodring turned red, then paled with anger. Or possibly it was another emotion that made him lower his eyes. "Who's the sneak, me or Wolf?" he muttered. "He took the big pile of gold money that Redholt gave him. Then he skipped out."

The Mallory brothers looked at each other, then at Sue. "Skipped out?"

"That's it," Goodring told them. "Your knight in buckskin jumped on his white hoss and hightailed it south. And that's the last you'll ever see of him."

CHAPTER III

MURDER BY WATER

MEN were gathering at the valley hacienda of Don Luis Ortega, near Orchard Lake, for news had got about that Kid Wolf had just arrived. Lance Redholt had been perfectly right. The Kid had stopped at this rancho a few days before, on his way into the Hell's River country.

It was during this visit that he had

first seen the ruinous results of hydraulic mining. The lands about Orchard Lake had once been a rich garden spot, lush with grain, fruit trees and vineyards, but now everything was becoming a sandy wilderness, due to the monitor.

The havoc that it was causing the ranchers was inconceivable. The once clear waters of the rivers were heavy with swirling mud. The beds of the rivers, choked with debris, were rising and changing their courses. Levees and dikes had been washed away and crops destroyed. After seeing all this, the Soldier of Misfortune had agreed to help, and it was this business that had taken him to Hell's River and the town of Red Mule.

"You saw for yourself, Kid, what the hydraulic monitor is doing to this beautiful land?" asked Don Luis, as the meeting of neighbor ranchmen was getting under way.

The don had once been wealthy, but his property was being destroyed by the ruthless greed of Lance Redholt, as were the smaller estates of the other Californians who had assembled in the Ortega ranchhouse to hear the Texan's report. They were a downcast, almost hopeless group of men, and some had even made plans to abandon their lands and leave the district.

"I saw the monitor, gentlemen, and I saw the man who operates it," the Kid told the settlers.

"Well, now that you've seen the set-up, you can savvy what we're up against," said a big rancher named Homer Jones. "The law, unless we can change it, seems to be on Redholt's side. He's bought the minin' rights along Hell's River. We ain't protestin' that, but what we are fightin' is Redholt's ruining of the ranch land below."

Don Luis nodded. He was a tall, slender man of past middle age, white at the temples and with a face full of character. "Since the first discovery of gold in California," he said, "it has been illegal for a miner to throw the tailings of his claim onto the one be-

low. But the hydraulickers are doing exactly that, and on a great scale."

"The pick and shovel miners around Red Mule hate them as bad as you do," Kid Wolf told them. "They'll be behind us at the showdown."

"The legislature is still in session," Don Luis sighed. "There's still a chance for us to have protecting laws passed. But it has been a long fight, and it takes money. We have hardly any left, Kid."

"One of the prominent citizens of Red Mule made you a donation, a contribution that will help you carry on your legal fight, gentlemen," said the Kid gravely, and on a round table in the shady patio he emptied out the buckskin bag.

Don Luis and his friends blinked incredulously.

"But who is this person with so generous a heart?" gasped the bewildered don.

"Lance Redholt," chuckled the Texan. He told them of the meeting in the Argo Bar. "He insisted on subscribing to our fund, so I couldn't very well refuse his offering. I have an idea, though, *caballeros*, that not even his Little Giant monitor could wash the red off his face if he could see what I'm doing with his bribe."

"You'd better not risk goin' back to Red Mule again," advised Jones in alarm. "You don't know Redholt—he's a devil, and a terrible enemy. You shouldn't have done this, Kid."

But the Kid was more pleased than ever for having invested the bribe in the future of the Orchard Lake ranchers. He expected to invest more before this trouble was settled, and not merely money.

"Who's this coming?" one of the ranchmen asked nervously, as the sound of wheels and jingling harness was heard beyond the thick patio walls. One of Don Luis' Mexican servants awoke momentarily from his *siesta* and opened the gate, admitting a horse and buggy.

"It is the senator," beamed Don Luis. "I was speaking to you of him,

Kid. It is indeed well that he has come at such an opportune time."

THE Texan watched the approach of Senator Tippen and quickly made up his mind about him. Although not now a member of the legislature, he was said to have great influence with that body, and it was for this reason that the Orchard Lake men had hired him as their attorney. By all accounts, he was a very expensive one.

He was a little man, short and plump, with a round, cherubic face, pink from a fresh scraping with the razor. He wore a frock coat and a fawn-colored vest draped with watch chains. As he came strutting across the courtyard he reminded the Kid of a bantam rooster—and of something else not so harmless. The Texan was a shrewd judge of people and there was something about the expression in Tippen's pale little eyes that he didn't fancy.

"Senator, I want you to meet Kid Wolf, of Texas," said Don Luis after a stately greeting. "He is doing what he can to help us in the fight against the hydraulickers."

The senator gave the Kid an appraising glance, as one expert poker player sizing up another. "Glad to meet you, Texan," he said affably. He was about to say more, but his roving eyes had caught the yellow glitter of the heap of gold octagons and his nostrils dilated with greed. "Ah!" he said expansively. "Ah, I see that you've made a raise. And a most fortunate thing, too, most fortunate. The funds you placed in my hands were exhausted more than a week ago. Things are now reaching a favorable turn at the State capital, and with this additional sum—"

"Now just hold your hosses, suh," Kid Wolf drawled as Tippen reached toward the money with eager hands. "I'm not quite sure that Mistah Redholt would want you to have charge of his little philanthropy.

"Redholt? What's he got to do with this?" the Senator snorted.

"He tried to bribe the Kid with it," grinned Homer Jones, who seemed to share the Texan's distrust of the senator. "I reckon the Kid's got a right, too, to say how this dinero is to be used."

Tippen protested shrilly. "How can I continue helping you people without money? It takes money and lots of it to swing votes. I was just about to put the new law through—"

The Kid turned to Don Luis, interrupting Tippen's tirade. "I hope you won't think I'm interferin' too much, suh, but I have a suggestion to make."

"Blast your suggestions!" the senator put in venomously. "We don't need any Texans hornin' in on affairs they know nothing about!"

"Go ahead, Kid, and let's hear what's on your mind," Jones grunted. "Seems to me we've paid out too much dinero already for the results we've got."

"My plan is this," said the Texan. "Why don't you go to Sacramento, Don Luis, and put this before the legislature yourself? You're in the right, so why should you have Tippen buy votes? Why do you need him at all? Go to the capital, suh, and go right today. I think you'll be listened to with respect."

The others, except the senator, who became apoplectic with rage, agreed enthusiastically with Kid Wolf's opinion. The don thought over the matter and decided to carry out the suggested plan. After all, it was not such a long journey to Sacramento and the law makers were in session.

"I guess we won't need you any more, senator," Homer Jones announced cheerfully.

The politician raged and fumed but made no impression on the Orchard Lake men, for the Kid had only crystallized a sentiment that several had held against Tippen for a long time. Livid with fury, the senator climbed back into his buggy.

"You'll be sorry for butting in, Wolf, before this is over!" he shouted as he lashed his horse. "You don't know what you've got yourself into!"

DON LUIS left the hacienda a few hours later headed for Sacramento. He had begged the Kid to make the Ortega ranch his headquarters until his return, but the Texan was anxious to get back to Red Mule and rode Blizzard northward that same evening. He wanted to explain his absence to his friends, the Mallory's. Before leaving Red Mule Kid Wolf had looked in vain for Jimmy Goodring, so he could tell him of his plans. Now, on his return, the Kid would have to straighten out matters himself.

He camped that night at the north rim of Orchard Lake, then rose at dawn to ride up the devastated valley. Hell's River had certainly lived up to its name, thanks to the hydraulickers. Sand, stones, and what the ranchers called "slickens" had made a wasteland of what had once been gardens and fields of grain. At some places the debris was a dozen feet deep.

"It's just another case, Blizzard," the Kid told his cayuse, "of one man gettin' rich at the expense of thousands of his fellows. One way or another, we're goin' to put a stop to it. What's needed seems to be a little law of the Rio Grande variety."

As the Kid rode northward into the first blue spurs of the Sierras, threading his way through the thickets of madrone and manzanita, he was thinking of the great sweeping, broken plains that were his own stamping grounds. California was a lovelier land, but Texas, like the men it bred, had a vigor and a fire unmatched. To the rhythm of Blizzard's steady hoofs, the Kid sang a stanza of his favorite tune:

"She's a half mile wide and a half inch deep,
the Rio!

On her banks a thousand heroes sleep;
And this is the Code of the Rio road:

"If death you sow, then death you'll reap."

Reaching the point where Hell's River emptied into the Feather and Sacramento river system, the Texan continued along the former. Its swirling, roaring water, yellow with mud, was evidence that Redholt's Little Giant was going full blast. Before he

had gone three miles he could hear the sullen thunder of it.

Then he emerged from a belt of forest and had a close-up view of the monitor. Almost deafened by the noise and overwhelmed at the spectacle, he pulled Blizzard to a halt.

In the bed of the diverted river scores of men were working feverishly in the perpetual rain and mist of the Little Giant, operating the undercurrents where the precious gold was caught. Above the ground sluices, on a platform of heavy beams, stood Jeff Sully. By means of levers, he was operating the great brass and iron nozzle of the monitor.

The water, under enormous pressure, was carried from the mountains above through an immense iron pipe. The stream from the nozzle was being played high on the bank opposite. The force was so great that boulders were tossed about like pebbles, and the sky drift hung overhead in a never-dissolving cloud.

Watching the activity, the Kid saw Bill Keys, Morphy, and several of the other men who had been with Redholt in the Argo Bar. They were evidently straw bosses. Redholt himself didn't seem to be present.

Then, at the top of the distant bank, a tiny figure appeared. The Kid's eyes were keen and he immediately recognized the man as old Sam Goodring. He stood some fifty yards from the point where the crashing water of the monitor was concentrated, and the Kid saw him shaking his fist across at Redholt's crew.

What happened then was horrible. It was done before the Texan could make any move to prevent it.

Kid Wolf had thought the nozzle of the Little Giant too ponderous to move quickly, but it swung as easily as a toy with the big hands of Jeff Sully at the levers. With murderous intent, Redholt's foreman was turning the roaring stream toward the little figure on the far bank!

Old Sam saw it coming, this white and thundering death, and he turned

to run, but it was too late! Kid Wolf saw him throw up his hands as if to ward off the inevitable, and then the watery thunderbolt struck him.

The impact must have shattered every bone in his body. For several seconds he was pinned against a protruding tongue of rock, then the sweep of the water lifted him into the air, whirling him skyward like a leaf in a gale. He shot upward for at least a hundred feet and then went down in a smother of snowy fog.

Every member of the hydraulic crew was watching—and laughing! The Kid couldn't hear the mirth in that thunder of harnessed water, but he could see the grins on their coarse, unfeeling faces.

"You'll all pay for this," the Kid muttered as he gathered up the reins. There was nothing now that he could do, not against half a hundred men. He turned Blizzard's head toward the town of Red Mule.

CHAPTER IV

ONCE A TEXAN

ENTERING the canyon-sided main street of Red Mule from the south, Kid Wolf came face to face with Sue Mallory who was just leaving one of the stores. Swerving his white horse, he rode close to the plank sidewalk with a friendly greeting.

The girl's answer was a frosty stare that hurt as much as it bewildered him. He knew how rambunctious Irishmen could be when they were on the prod, and it seemed that the female of the species could be even more devastating.

"I'm sorry if it looked as if I'd run out on my friends," he said as he quickly dismounted. "But if you'll let me explain, I'll—"

"You needn't," she flashed at him. "As for running out—maybe it would have been best if you'd stayed out. We can't afford to pay for your friendship like others can."

The Kid began to understand, though he still couldn't fathom how

Sue had learned of the session he had held with Redholt in the back room of the Argo. But this wasn't the time or place for arguments; he had too much to do.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to take some bad news to Jimmy Goodring," the Texan said, as the girl started to pass on. "It's about his uncle. The hydraulickers killed him this morning. His body was washed down somewhere below the monitor."

The angry flush left Sue's cheeks and her face became whiter than Blizzard's coat. "Oh!" she exclaimed. Then she turned and ran like a deer in the direction of the mining claims above the town.

The Kid hesitated, then decided not to follow her. Tossing the reins over the tie rack, he left Blizzard in front of the store and went in search of the local representative of the law.

He found Clay Crowfoot, the town marshal, alone in a small barroom that adjoined the assay office. He was a big man about sixty years old, but his once powerful frame had been weakened by easy living and excessive drinking. He was paunchy and his bloated face was covered with a network of red and purple veins. His eyes, however, still showed strength of character, and the straggling white mustache did not hide the straightness of his uncompromising mouth. The moment he opened it to speak, the Kid knew that he was a fellow Texan. There was no mistaking his drawl, it was very like the Kid's own.

"You say you have just witnessed a murder?" he growled, after the Soldier of Misfortune had introduced himself and got to the point.

"Exactly, suh," nodded the buckskin-clad youth. "Redholt's foreman on the monitor killed the man deliberately." Briefly, he told Crowfoot what he had seen.

The marshal didn't comment immediately. He beckoned to the bartender. "Have a drink," he advised. "You from Texas? Thought so. So am I, ten years ago. San Antone." He filled

a whiskey glass for the Kid, then replenished his own from the bottle that had been set before them.

"If you need help in arresting Sully," said the Kid, "you can count on me."

"Anybody else witness Goodring's death?"

"Redholt's laborers and straw bosses. They seemed to enjoy it," Kid Wolf replied.

Crowfoot spun a dollar on the bar. "Just your word against all of theirs, eh? Listen, Wolf, I can't arrest Sully. What would be the use? Redholt is all-powerful hereabouts."

"How much does Redholt pay you?" the Kid drawled.

Fighting words. But the marshal lowered his eyes. Slowly refilling his glass before speaking, he said, "Red Mule can't afford to pay much for its law and order. I get sixty a month from the town, and big-hearted Redholt antes enough to bring my salary to two hundred. What you got to say about it?" Crowfoot demanded, his voice taking on an angry inflection.

"Nothing. Redholt should contribute to the town's government," said the Kid. "He's a generous man, he even shelled out two thousand dollars to the Orchard Lake ranchers. But you're not the kind of hombre to cover up a murder for Redholt, are you?"

"I was a Texan once," Crowfoot evaded. "And now I'm a Californian."

"Once a Texican, always a Texican," the Kid smiled.

"You want me to be a dead Texan?"

"Just an honest one," said the Soldier of Misfortune as he rolled a tanpaper quirly. "What do you say, amigo?"

Crowfoot threw his drink, glass and all, into the spittoon. "Let's go get Sully," he rasped. "I've been takin' it easy too long around here. To blazes with Californians, and hoorah for Texas!"

WITH Marshal Crowfoot riding a livery-stable horse, they cantered along the river road toward the Little Giant. They could see and hear the

great sky plume long before they reached it.

They approached from the mountainside behind the monitor, just in case Sully took a notion to make another murderous play with the nozzle. The burly foreman was still on the platform, and not until he happened to turn and see Crowfoot and the Kid within a few paces of him did he realize what was about to happen. As it was impossible to hear anything above the booming water, the marshal signaled him to shut it off.

"What do you want, marshal?" Sully demanded as he closed the valve. His look passed from Crowfoot to Kid Wolf and his beefy face darkened with rage. The Kid noted that his lower lip was cut and swollen and his chin bruised, souvenirs that gave him plenty of reason to remember the Soldier of Misfortune.

"You're under arrest, Jeff," Crowfoot said, his voice cutting through the silence that, after the thunder of the monitor, was almost painful.

"What for?" snarled the giant foreman. The swarm of men continued to work down in the sluices, but Kurt Hawes, Keys, and the other straw bosses were taking it all in. They looked hostile. Still, it seemed to the Texan, the Redholt outfit could hardly resist the duly elected law. They were making too much money and had too much at stake. But the Kid kept his eyes open and his hands close to his holstered Colts, even though the odds were about fifty to two if the hydraulickers decided to make a fight of it.

"Wolf says he witnessed the murder of Sam Goodring this mornin', and he's chargin' you with the crime, Sully," Crowfoot snapped. "You comin' along?"

"You hear that, Hawes? Morphy? I'm accused of killin' a man a-purpose, when all of you saw he accidentally stepped in the way of the pressure." Sully gave Kid Wolf a poisonous glance, then he unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it to Bill Keys. The Kid

wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a significant glance pass between them. "All right, Crowfoot. I'll come with you," grunted the foreman.

There were horses and mules around the workings, but Jeff Sully insisted upon walking to town, lazy and slow-moving though he was. It should have forewarned his captors.

The way back led through a forest of dogwood and evergreens, and Sully ambled between the two mounted men, profane and abusive, especially toward the Kid. He refused to hurry, and stalled whenever possible.

"You're makin' a big mistake, Crowfoot," he sneered.

"I've made mistakes, but I don't think this is one of 'em," said the marshal gruffly. "I've knowed Sam Goodring for ten years and he was a man that never harmed anyone. The camp won't take it, Jeff. If the miners think you purposely turned the monitor on him—"

"The hydraulickers can handle the fool miners," Sully boasted. "As for you, Wolf, you've already been given your chance. You signed your death warrant by comin' back to Red Mule."

They had reached a part of the trail where the woods came down close on either side in tangled thickets of dark pine. Sully stumbled, swore, then knelt down to tie the dragging lace of his high boot.

"Get your hands up, you two!" came the sudden command as several men charged out onto the trail. They had the drop, and at deadly range. Seeing Crowfoot's arms go skyward, the Kid likewise lifted. He recognized the attackers as Keys, Lopez, Morphy and Devrin, and a moment later Kurt Hawes emerged from the brush.

It was a crazy thing, the Kid thought. If they meant to resist this arrest, why hadn't they done it back at the monitor? That was why he had been taken off guard.

"Good work!" Jeff Sully chortled. He rushed the Kid, his big hands closing over the butts of Kid Wolf's hol-

stered .45s, and whirling him to the ground.

Clay Crowfoot was struck down by the heavy barrel of a revolver. Then the attackers smashed out his life, battering his skull to pieces with thudding, skull-splintering blows, pounding until his head and face were sodden and unrecognizable.

Knowing now what he was in for, Kid Wolf fought with desperate fury. He tore partially loose from Sully's grip, but as he was pulling free something descended up on his own head. It was like a black thunderbolt ripping through his consciousness, and the sunlight was instantly extinguished.

CHAPTER V

BOSS OF HELL'S RIVER

WHEN the Soldier of Misfortune recovered his senses, after what seemed a lapse of hours, he was in new surroundings. Although he didn't seem to be bound, his nerves and muscles were still in the grip of paralysis, and

waves of pain surged from one temple to the other. He was on his back, and judging from the canvas overhead, was in a tent. Soon he became aware of men moving in and out through the opened flap. The Kid could see other makeshift shelters, evidently this was the work camp of the hydraulickers.

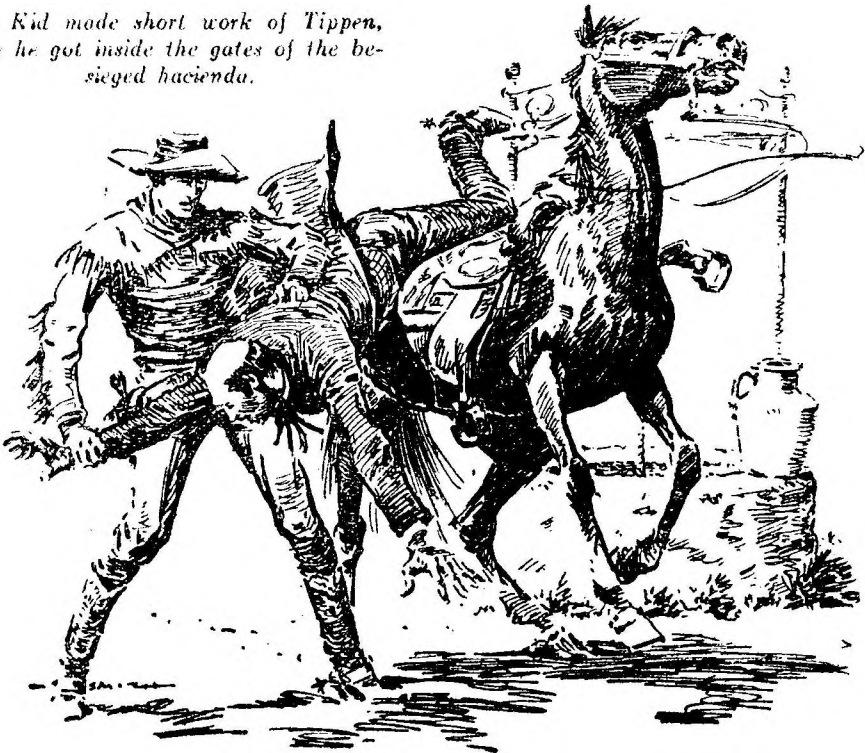
"Well, Wolf, I see your eyes are open. Maybe they'll be open now in more ways than one. Now you know, don't you, who's the boss of Hell's River?"

The Texan managed to turn his head a little, nauseated by the rank smell of cigar smoke. Standing over him in his gold-buttoned blue coat, with his white topper cocked arrogantly over one arched brow, was Lance Redholt, smiling sardonically.

"I'm glad my men had enough sense to bring you here alive," Redholt said, when the Kid made no attempt to answer. "What that loco marshal got was too quick and easy. Besides, I want to talk to you."

"I'm listening," said the Kid through

The Kid made short work of Tippen, once he got inside the gates of the besieged hacienda.



bruised lips. He could tell by his injuries that he had been given a terrific beating after having been knocked senseless. Sully had done it, probably. The thought of what had happened to Crowfoot came flooding into his mind in a red tide of anger.

"It's time you learned, Wolf, that I make my own rules," Redholt rasped. "I want my own way, and I get it!"

"You're going to get something else, suh, before this is over," the Kid promised coldly. His hurt brain was clearing rapidly, and he could feel the strength flowing back into his limbs.

"Time's growing short for you, Señor Lobo," Lance Redholt sneered. "I paid you two thousand dollars in hard money, and you double-crossed me with it. You thought you were making a fool out of me, didn't you, when you turned the money over to Don Luis Ortega? I know all about it. Come in, senator!"

Tippen waddled in. There was a self-satisfied smirk on his round face as he gloated over the Texan.

"I thought so," the Kid said grimly. "You've been takin' the hard-earned money of those ranchers while playing against them all the time."

"You've guessed it, Wolf. I'm on the winning side, always," Tippen sniggered. "I warned you what would happen to you when you persuaded Don Luis to go to Sacramento, didn't I?"

"That was bad. It might ruin me," Lance Redholt frowned. "We've got to do something right away to counteract that move. Send Keys and Kurt Hawes in here, senator. I want to talk to 'em."

With Keys and Hawes came Morphy and Jeff Sully. A council of war was held, the men speaking freely before the Texan, as though he was already dead. The men agreed with Redholt that a blow must be struck immediately.

"We'll have to put the fear of the devil into those blasted ranchers," grunted Kurt Hawes. "The miners

around here are about to get out of hand, too."

Lance Redholt lighted a fresh cigar. "Tell the men they'll be laid off a couple of days, at double pay, plus a bonus if my plans work out."

"What are you planning, Lance?" asked Tippen. "You can count on my help, whatever it is."

"I'm going to raid Orchard Lake, in force," Redholt barked. "If there's any resistance, we'll do some killing. Our men will outnumber 'em about five to one, and after we're through, those prune growers will think twice about getting laws passed against the hydraulickers! There's a moon, so we might as well start tonight. We can strike them first thing tomorrow. We'll smash those ranches one at a time, beginning with Ortega's."

"Good head work, boss," leered Jeff Sully. "Not all our men have got guns, but what they'll do to them hoe-men will be plenty." His piggish little eyes fell upon the Texan. "What you goin' to do with Wolf?" he demanded. "I told you how I'd fix him if I had my way."

"All right, you can have your way, Jeff," Redholt laughed evilly. "A nice interestin' way, too, and very appropriate. Take a couple of men along to help you. In the meantime, I'll be heading south with my larrupin' hydraulickers. On your feet, Wolf! Or do you want Sully to drag you by the heels?"

THE sun had sunk into the distant Pacific, and a somber twilight was creeping along the river when Kid Wolf was put aboard Blizzard for his last ride. Just what kind of a death had been planned for him he didn't yet know, but he guessed that if Sully had his way it would be a horrible one. Besides the big foreman, Morphy and Lopez were along to assist with the execution. The trio of desperadoes were mounted on three California ponies, and they rode close herd, watching the Texan's every move. They were heavily armed, and the Kid's

chances seemed hopelessly slim.

But the Soldier of Misfortune wasn't quite as impotent as his captors thought. Although his gun holsters were empty, he was not without a weapon: he still had an ace in the hole.

Hidden inside the collar of his fringed buckskin jacket was Kid Wolf's throwing knife, a bowie made of the finest Green River steel. More than once this "Arkansas toothpick" had slashed the Kid out of a desperately tight spot, for he was as expert with it as with his .45s. Still, against three men, the bowie was a poor bet.

"I'll try and take Sully with me, anyhow, if I've got to die," the Kid thought grimly. "Not that I like his company!"

The camp was located several miles from the present site of the monitor, and the Kid soon guessed that it was to be their destination. Sully enlightened him further.

"You're going to get what Sam Goodring got, only at closer range," the foreman said brutally.

The Texan smiled sardonically. "You like to use that plaything, don't you, Sully? You're inventive, too. Until today I never heard of water pressure being used as a murder weapon. The devil ought to reward you well, hombre, and soon."

"Shut up, Wolf," Morphy growled. "Better save the few breaths you got left. Here we are now."

They had reached the scene of the hydraulic operations, but the thunder of the turned-off Little Giant was silent now, the only sound the quiet ripple of the water. The murder party crossed the mud flats, approaching the platform that had been built around the gigantic nozzle of the monitor. It glistened brassily in the gathering twilight and seemed to tremble with the might of the pent-up force behind it. Blizzard, who seemed to be able to scent trouble, gave an uneasy snort as they halted.

"Get off your hoss, Wolf," Sully grinned savagely. "This is the pay-

off, the water cure. I'm anxious to see what you'll look like turned wrong side out."

"It's gettin' dark. Let's hurry it," Lopez said, grasping the Texan by the left arm as he dismounted on the river bank.

"We'll tie him right on the end of the Little Giant," Sully guffawed, "and watch the water bore a hole right through his middle!"

It was the first time the Kid had seen a monitor at close range. The platform, which had to be moved from time to time as the hydraulicking progressed along the river banks, supported the ten-foot nozzle and also its counterweight, which was hundreds of pounds of rocks in a wooden bin. This balanced the heavy nozzle so delicately that one man could control the enormous force with ease. A long, steel rod was bent back from the mouth of the nozzle and provided for adjustment.

While Lopez and Morphy forced the Texan out to the end of the platform, which towered over the near bank of the river, Sully produced a rope and threw a slip noose around the lip of the tapered spout.

"And now, Wolf man," grinned the big foreman.

But it was Kid Wolf who furnished the surprise! He had waited until he saw an opening, and now his right hand flashed behind his ear and streaked down again holding glittering steel. Morphy was nearest him, and was the first to taste the bowie's cold bitterness. The knife came slashing downward through Morphy's chest with terrific force. It was no time for half measures! As Morphy's lifeless body thudded to the planks, the Kid twisted free his bowie and lashed out at Lopez.

Lopez saw death coming. His swarthy face blanched and he opened his mustached mouth to yell, but the Kid was working with blinding speed and perfect co-ordination of force and skill. Before Lopez could trigger his

drawn gun, the Texan had nailed him and killed him. One lightninglike pass with the blade severed the desperado's jugular vein and he sprawled down across the body of Morphy.

"Why, you damned—" Jeff Sully leaped out of range of the swing of the Kid's knife. He was on the outward end of the monitor platform, as far as he could go, and he thought he had the Texan at his mercy, for his thick forefinger was already squeezing the trigger.

"Let go that knife and come crawlin' to me on your knees, Wolf! I'm still goin' to kill you with the Little Giant. First, I'll shoot to cripple you—"

His gun spat redly, sending echoes crashing up and down Hell's River Canyon.

But the Kid had let go the knife a split instant earlier, and the bullet droned into the darkening sky. The Soldier of Misfortune had thrown the bowie with a quick and deceptive underhand motion, and it had gone to its mark with the accuracy of a bullet and with something of a bullet's speed. The humming sound of the flying knife ended in a br-r-r-ring twang as it buried itself in the vertebrae of Sully's thick neck, first having winged through the throat.

With a hideous, strangled cry, the murderous foreman pitched off the platform and fell to the river bed below. He squealed again like a stuck pig as his massive body crashed against the rocks.

Then all was quiet except the serene ripple of the water.

CHAPTER VI

MINERS' MEETING

THE moon was climbing above the High Sierras when Kid Wolf cantered into the mining settlement astride his big white cayuse. Even before he reached Main Street he sensed that something unusual was taking place; he could see the reflected red glow of a bonfire, and the upraised and angry voices of men. Swinging

into the business section of Red Mule, he saw that an open-air meeting of miners was in progress. A tall hombre, built like the hammer-swinging member of a double-jacking team, was haranguing the crowd.

"It's time we was takin' the law into our own hands and puttin' a stop to Redholt's dirty work!" he was shouting as the Texan rode up to the edge of the excited gathering.

"Amen!" the Kid sang up cheerfully.

Heads turned, and a suspicious silence fell. It lasted until Jimmy Goodring's voice broke it with an accusing yell.

"It's Wolf! Here's one of Redholt's hired gunnies, men! He's a sneakin' spy!"

"If I'm a spy, Jimmy, I'm doing my sneakin' in a mighty conspicuous way," laughed the man on the snow-white horse.

The body of Sam Goodring had been recovered. It lay on a packing box near the fire, and the leaders of the miners were using it as an exhibit to arouse the throng. The miners were wrought up to a fever pitch.

"May I say a few words, amigos?" the Kid requested as the men fell back to make a lane for the big cayuse.

"String him up!" somebody shouted. "Young Goodring says he's a Redholt man."

"He's no Redholt man! I still don't believe he is!" roared a voice nearby, and the Kid recognized Chris Mallory. "Let him speak."

Jack and Sue stood near him. They didn't seem to share their brother's confidence, but some of the distrust left their strained faces when the Texan began to speak.

"Do you know that Marshal Crowfoot has been murdered?" he called out by way of preamble. "He was killed today by Redholt's straw bosses."

The angry murmur became a roar. "I witnessed his death, and the murder of Sam Goodring," continued the Soldier of Misfortune.

"You help do it?" heckled a man at the edge of the crowd.

"Let him talk!" shouted Chris Mallory. "I thought Wolf was all right from the start, and now I know it! What happened, Kid?"

"Thanks, *amigo mio*," said the Texan, dominating the mob from his vantage point astride Blizzard. Then he began his story of what had happened, speaking simply and with a sincerity that carried conviction. The miners hung on his words, breathless and intent. There were hoots and cat-calls when Senator Tippen's name was mentioned, but no other interruptions until the Kid had finished.

"Jeff Sully is dead and so are Lopez and Morphy," the Texan concluded laconically. "But Redholt and the others are alive and out for murder. I believe as you men do—if the hydraulickers put organized law out of the way, it's time we used the vigilante brand. Are you with me?"

The Kid smiled as a deep-throated roar from the miners told him that he had an army. Even Jimmy Goodring seemed convinced, and while still not friendly, he was willing to take the Texan as a leader.

"Let's make a march on Redholt's camp. We can take 'em by surprise tonight!" cried the miner who had been in charge of the meeting until the Kid's arrival. "You'll be in command, Wolf. What do you say?"

"They're not in camp," said the Soldier of Misfortune. "They're on their way to the Orchard Lake district to wipe out the settlers there. Those ranchers are your allies—they've suffered, too, from the hydraulickers. Are you willing to help them?"

The shout that went up could have been heard a mile, and the miners scattered to obtain weapons. The local hardware store was quickly cleaned out of guns and ammunition, and some was furnished by friendly saloonkeepers. Those who couldn't provide themselves with more lethal weapons were quickly armed with picks, crowbars, and steel drills.

The Mallorys sought out the Kid, all a little embarrassed for having doubted him, but the Texan's smile put them at their ease.

"I'm going, too," Sue Mallory insisted.

"No, you're not," chuckled the Kid. "Your job is to stay home and get bandages and court-plaster ready. This is going to be a knock-down and drag-out affair. Great fun for your Irish brothers, but no place for a girl, not even for a colleen. Oh, hello, Jimmy," he said as young Goodring came up. The Texan extended his hand. Jimmy hesitated, then took it rather grudgingly. The Kid also met Long Mike, as the tall miner leader was called.

"We're ready to go, friend," he grinned at Kid Wolf. "The men agree that you're in command. Shall we start?"

There weren't many horses in the town, but they had commandeered the few that were available, and mounts were provided for Jimmy Goodring, Chris and Jack Mallory, Long Mike, and a grim little hombre named Salverson.

Long Mike, who knew the country in minute detail, sketched out a shorter route to Orchard Lake. Instead of following the windings of Hell's River Canyon they would cut across country through Joaquin Pass.

"We who have horses will drive on ahead," Kid Wolf announced. "That way, we can warn the ranchers of what's coming. The rest of you head for the Ortega rancho—that's where Redholt aims to strike first. We'll meet there. Good luck, and good fighting!"

CHAPTER VII

MORNING OF VENGEANCE

THE star-sprinkled eastern sky was turning a frosty gray with approaching dawn when Kid Wolf and his five mounted companions hammered out into the level country that rimmed the lake. When they came within sight of the dark huddle of adobes that marked the Ortega hacienda they

knew that they were ahead of Redholt's forces.

The mud-rained land was quiet and empty of life. As they approached the high walls of the patio, a rooster awoke within the inclosure and crowed a greeting. Until they started hammering at the gate there was no other stirrings. Finally, when the Kid remembered the major-domo's name and shouted: "José!" they heard the pattering of bare feet and the barrier was cautiously opened a little.

Don Luis has not returned señores. What do you want?" the old servant mumbled.

"It's me—Kid Wolf," answered the Soldier of Misfortune. "There's danger, and we're here to help you if you'll let us in."

"Ah, *que alegría!* It is good to see you, Señor Lobo. Come inside, and welcome! I will have *tazas de café* prepared," said the Spanish Californian.

"Never mind the Java just yet," said the Kid as they rode into the paved courtyard. "Is there somebody here you can send to the neighbor ranches? I want Homer Jones and the others notified pronto. Tell them to fort up with us here for the showdown against Redholt and his muckers."

Old José hurried to rouse a slim Indian youth, who scampered away like a jackrabbit with his message. It was broad daylight now, with the rim of the sun shining through a notch in the mountains.

Grimly waiting, the Kid and his Red Mule friends sipped coffee in the patio.

Although there were few guns and very little ammunition in the Ortega house, the place was a natural fortress, and if the raiders held off long enough the defenders would have the advantage. There was still no sign of the miners, however, and Long Mike began to fume impatiently.

"I should've stayed with our bunch, I reckon, and hazed 'em along! Why don't those lazy devils hurry?"

"Here comes somebody now," Salverson exclaimed. "But on hossback!

It's not our crowd—must be Redholt."

"You're as right as rain," Jack Malory growled.

"Look at 'em," Chris laughed mirthlessly. "They're up to somethin'. They figger to surprise this place, the cowards!"

"The surprise is apt to cut backwards," the Kid said laconically. "They're sendin' Senator Tippen on ahead. He's supposed to be a friend of Don Luis, and I guess his job is to see that the gate is opened for the others. Now keep out of sight, *caballeros*, while I let him in."

Lance Redholt, mounted on a big black horse, and several of his straw bosses had drawn back into cover a couple of furlongs from the Ortega house, concealing themselves behind a hedge of trees. Tippen, clumsily astraddle a fat gray mare, was jogging toward the house.

KID WOLF awaited him at the solid timber gate, smiling bleakly. Tippen's fancy clothes were a bit crumpled after his long ride, but his top hat was still perched on his bullet-shaped head, and his watch chains and heavy seals jingled across the wide expanse of his waistcoat in rhythm with the mare's jolting trot. On his pink face was a gleeful smirk. He rode right up to the gate before calling out to José.

"Open the gate, José! It's Senator Tippen!"

The Kid let him wait a minute, then said something in crooning Spanish and opened the gate enough to admit the mare and her rider. Then he closed the barrier and turned about.

"Good morning suh," drawled the buckskin-clad gate keeper. "This is indeed a pleasure."

The politician turned in his saddle with the reins dropping from his nerveless hands. The look of bewilderment and terror on his puttylike features was ludicrous, so comical that the Soldier of Misfortune couldn't help laughing. But there was no humor in that laugh. Reaching out with one steely hand, Kid Wolf grasped Tippen by the

slack of his coat and yanked him out of his seat, shaking the man until his teeth chattered.

Tippen screamed like a trampled tomcat. The Kid hadn't dreamed that so insignificant a runt could make such an ear-shattering commotion. He silenced him quickly, with one open-handed crack of his hand, but the alarm had been given. Unless they were deaf, Redholt and his pards had heard Tippen's yowling. Kid Wolf seized the wobbly-headed politician by the scruff of his flabby neck and pushed him toward the broadly smiling José.

"Stand dayherd on this skunk. Put him somewhere where we can't see or smell him."

"*'Sta Bien,*" tittered the old servant as he hustled the dazed schemer away. "For the last time, I think, he has robbed the good Don Luis."

Chris Mallory, who had been keeping an intent watch, sang out that men were in sight. "They're on foot, swarms of 'em. It's the hydraulickers!"

Redholt and a few picked men had pushed on ahead of their main force. They were now forming for the attack. Although they had heard Tippen's screech and had probably guessed that something had gone wrong, they had no inkling of the set-up they were facing. The high patio walls prevented them from seeing in.

"Well, fifty to six isn't such bad odds," the Kid said cheerily. "I guess I don't need to tell you when you shoot, shoot for keeps!"

Somebody touched his arm and he turned to see Jimmy Goodring smiling wryly. "Just wanted you to know, Kid—in case I don't come out of this—that I'm sorry I acted the fool."

"Forget it, Jimmy. Now, heads up! Here they come."

THE hydraulickers were advancing in close formation, most of them with guns but others brandishing clubs. At their head were Bill Keys, Devrin, and Kurt Hawes, all mounted, their horses being held at a walk so that the ones

on foot behind them would not be out-distanced. It was their intention, the Kid saw, to break down the gate by sheer weight of horseflesh; then the others would rush in for the kill. He smiled coldly as he noted that Lance Redholt wasn't riding in the forefront, but at the flank and behind the others. Like all the other arrogant bullies the Kid had met, Redholt had a coward's love for his own skin.

Even now, Kid Wolf wanted to avoid outright slaughter if possible, for these men were only carrying out their employer's orders. So when the gang was within a hundred yards, he showed himself momentarily at the gate and called out a warning.

"If you come any closer, you coyotes, we'll shoot to kill!"

To the hydraulickers it was a voice from the grave. The riders in the lead pulled up their horses, staring incredulously at the youth they believed to be dead. The attack wavered in confusion.

Redholt was as astounded as his henchmen, but he recovered first and egged on the raiders with hysterical oaths.

"It's the Wolf! Sully must have slipped up, but we'll finish the job on him! A thousand blasted dollars to the man who brings me his ears! Rush that gate!"

Some of the defenders had dismounted, and the rest, like Kid Wolf, were still in their saddles, but all had guns in their hands. The Texan had armed himself with a brace of revolvers taken from the men he had been forced to kill at the monitor the evening before, and he hadn't neglected to recover that bowie knife!

The monitor men had started toward the patio again, but Long Mike was looking at something beyond them. His leathery face split in a thin-lipped grin.

"You see what I see, Kid?"

"It's our bunch," nodded the Texan.

Redholt's men hadn't seen them yet, but the avenging horde from Red Mule had just hove into view on the low

ridge half a mile to the rear of the hydraulickers. The raiders were caught between the jaws of a pincers now! Failing to see it, they charged at the patio gate.

The Kid whistled a bar of "The Rio," then gave the order to fire when the riders were within thirty yards. There were no loopholes in the thick adobe walls, but its top was pierced by niches, and those on foot had climbed up at those vantage points. Salverson and Jack Mallory fired through narrow chinks in the gate. As the Kid's own guns roared, the weapons of his fighting friends joined in the thundering chorus. The patio became fogged with swirling gunsmoke.

The attack faltered, then came on like an avalanche.

CHAPTER VIII

COLT ACCOUNTING

THE monitor men answered the gunfire, and it seemed that every man who had a gun blasted at the courtyard gate. Jagged splinters were spewed in all directions and dobe dust flew in angry puffs from the buildings within the inclosure. Salverson was killed, dying instantly from a slug that smashed him between the eyes, and Long Mike received a flesh wound in the leg.

But the defenders had taken, and continued to take, a frightful toll. Reamed by several shots, Devrin had toppled from his horse, and Kurt Hawes shared his fate at almost the same instant. With one of the Kid's bullets through his chest, he went down under the frantically plunging hoofs of his mount. Bill Keys was also picked off, falling limply forward over his bronc's neck.

Other hydraulickers piled onto the horses before the animals could break away, and backed up by scores of pushing, yelling men, they struck the gate and smashed through and over it.

It was at this critical moment that the Red Mule placer miners fell upon Redholt's men from behind! They

took the monitor men by surprise, immediately demoralizing the rear guard and fighting their way toward the center with guns, picks and fists! It was a free-for-all now, and the space in front of the Ortega patio became a wild mass of yelling, struggling men. Like the ranchers, the placer miners had a long and bitter score to settle, and they fought like infuriated demons.

Meanwhile, the Kid and his pards were desperately fighting the vanguard. It was almost hand to hand from the very first, for when guns were emptied there was no time to reload. Five or six of the attackers went down at once, almost blocking the gateway after the horses had plunged through, but others came swarming over the bodies, striking wildly with clubbed guns.

In spite of his leg wound, Long Mike was bowling men down like tenpins, and the Mallorys were slugging as only Irishmen can slug in a rough and tumble. Jimmy Goodring had closed in with two burly hydraulickers; he knocked their heads together, yanked a pick handle from one, and stunned them both with it. The Kid himself, still on horseback, smashed through the mass of men again and again, cutting them down in swathes. Blizard's mighty hoofs did as much damage as his master's Colt six-guns.

Suddenly, mad panic overwhelmed Redholt's bruisers. They realized now that they were being attacked from behind, and that they were in a trap. They were actually outnumbered, and that was something they hadn't foreseen.

"Run for it, men!" yowled one of the raiders, and his yell set off the stampede. The men inside the patio turned to fight their way out, and the others scattered like blackbirds. They had enough, and more than enough. Escaping, though, wasn't so easy, for the Red Mule men pursued them singly and in groups of two and three, clubbing and pounding ferociously. The monitor crew was getting an everlasting drubbing. As hydraulickers they

were through; they would never defile another graveyard nor ruin another grove of fruit.

KID WOLF came charging out of the courtyard on his white cayuse. It was Lance Redholt he had business with. The blue-coated schemer had been one of the first to beat a retreat, but he was still in sight, and the Kid took up the chase. Redholt was roweling and lashing his black horse in a frenzy, but Blizzard slowly but surely closed in.

Redholt twisted about in his saddle when his pursuer was within forty yards, and his expensively plated gun glittered in the sunlight.

A bullet droned wickedly over the Soldier of Misfortune as he ducked low along Blizzard's neck. Another slug kicked up an exploding sand mine a dozen yards from him. Grimly he slid a cartridge into his empty, right-hand Colt six-shooter.

Redholt was almost within a rope's length when he made his final effort to kill this terrible nemesis from the Rio Grande.

"This time I pay you in lead, Wolf!" he screeched, as he rocked sideways in his saddle and straightened his gun hand.

A flash and a roar from the Texan, and a pale gray wisp of smoke whipped out behind him in the wind. Redholt's sporty white top-hat sailed upward as if caught in a whirling dust devil. For several seconds he wobbled from side to side in his seat, his handsome but vicious face gone pasty white. Then he went sprawling near the river's edge, threshing like a jumping jack, mottling the ground with scarlet.

He was dead when the dismounted Texan reached him. The Kid left him, first cutting off those six golden buttons as souvenirs for his fighting partners.

On his way back to the Ortega house he met a group of the Orchard Lake ranchers, led by Homer Jones. They had hurried as fast as possible, but

hadn't quite made it in time for the ruckus, and they were a bit disappointed.

"Looks like we missed out on the fun, Kid," Jones grinned. "Whew! What a mess you made of 'em. What a beaut-i-ful mess!"

No prisoners had been taken among the monitor men. Those who were still able to walk were allowed to escape for they had learned their bloody lesson. Besides Salverson, only one of the Red Mule contingent had been killed, though there were many bruises and cracked heads. All in all, the battle could hardly have been more successful from the ranchers' and placer miners' point of view.



The Kid was helping Long Mike bind up his wounded leg when a horseman jogged up to the smashed gate. It was Don Luis Ortega.

"*Valgame Dios!*" the courtly Californian ejaculated piously. "There has been great trouble here, Kid? Are many hurt?"

"The trouble's all over, suh," the Texan smiled. "You have just returned from Sacramento?"

"Yes, amigo. And I met with extreme success there. The legislature heard my plea and were good enough to pass the law we have long wanted. Señor Redholt can no longer destroy our lands with his water-mining machine."

"I should say he can't!" whooped Homer Jones. "The Kid saw to that for us! But it's great news you've brought, Don Luis. It means that nobody else can start in where he left off."

"We took one prisoner, Don Luis, who will interest you," the Kid drawled. "Senator Tippen, as he called himself."

"Tippen! But he—"

"He had been robbing you and your ranchers' association for a long time," the Texan replied. "He was working hand in glove with Lance Redholt. Shall we go see him?"

On their way to the house they were met by the excited José. "Something strange has happened!" he quavered. "I had locked Señor Tippen in a room but forgot the window. He crawled through—"

"You mean he escaped, José?" Kid Wolf demanded.

"In the small, back patio— Come and look," José said, leading them around to the other side of the low-roofed adobe house.

The deceitful little politician had hanged himself. He had made a slip noose in a twisted blanket, and his livid, bloated body was suspended from a queer-looking tree that grew near the window.

The Texan and his friends stood staring for a full minute. Then the Kid broke the silence. It was a grotesque and evil-appearing tree, he thought, and one certainly not native to this part of California. He asked Don Luis about it.

"I brought it here from the desert," murmured the old Spanish-Californian. "It is a Judas tree. Appropriate, is it not?"

THERE was another arrival. Riding a gray burro and carrying the first-aid materials that the Kid had suggested, Sue Mallory presented herself. A great yell of approval went up from

the Red Mule miners, one in which the Texan heartily joined. The Irish girl was a favorite with the placer miners, and a glimpse of her was all the medicine the battered men needed.

"When all this dead, this carrion, is cleared away, we shall have a feast, a *fiesta*," beamed Don Luis Ortega.

Sue was a bit pale and anxious at first, but when she found her loved ones safe the color returned to her piquant face again. Jimmy Goodring watched her hungrily as she went about dispensing cheer. Then he turned to the Texan, his lean face working.

"I'm glad it's *you*, anyhow, Kid," he choked. "I'll try to be a good loser."

"What do you mean, amigo?" the Texan asked, startled.

"I mean that you and Sue will make a fine pair, and a . . . I hope you'll be happy, Kid."

A light dawned upon the Kid and he broke out laughing. "Did you think that I was in love with Sue, or she with me?"

"Of course," gulped young Goodring.

"So that's why you've been so plumb cultus toward me," the Kid chuckled, and then he clapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "Why, it's you she's interested in. Not me. Look at her, and you'll read it in her eyes. I've known it all along."

"Gee!" gasped Goodring. "Gosh!" And he awkwardly rushed over to discover if it was really so.

The Soldier of Misfortune, who led too dangerous a life to think of falling in love, liked to see it happen to others. He laughed again as he laced a brown cigarette. And then he sang a bit of his favorite tune:

"Oh, I'll soon ride back to the Rio Grande,
the Rio!

Where justice is still alive,
Where there's no appeal from the honest deal
Of the law of the forty-five!"

SHERIFF SIZE

by CLINT McLEOD

Deputy Stub McLaren had inherited a rigid code from the sheriff of Threedot—but would Square John Slattery have lived up to his own code when the life of his son was at stake?

They buried Sheriff John Slattery on a blazing afternoon, Threedot's populace and the flar-flung citizenry of the range beyond crowing the cemetery to do him honor. When the clods began to fall, Deputy Stub McLaren made a great business of blowing his nose and reflected that a legend had just been laid away. Also he reflected bitterly that his own career had come to as abrupt a termination. The talk of the cow town had it that Stub Mc-

Laren wasn't big enough to fill the boots of Square John Slattery.

Kendall Masters had started that talk. Kendall Masters owned a hill ranch and had been county commissioner as long as Stub could remember. Masters was here at the funeral, a big, bluff, silver-haired figure, and he had Jimmy Slattery, the orphaned ten-year-old grandson of Square John by the hand. The day the sheriff had taken sick, Masters had remarked that

Low branches threatened to sweep them from their saddles, and deadfall logs were a hazard, but they had to be in town by noon.



Jimmy Slattery would never know want. That part of it was to Stub's liking, but Masters had also said that the commissioners would have to appoint a new sheriff to finish out Square John's term.

The other commissioners were here at the sheriff's new grave, too—rotund Vic Applegate who owned the livery stable and Julian Carse who divided his time between his Melodian Saloon in town and his ranch out in the hills. Stub meant to have a word with them: Square John had taught him to never give up a fight. But this wasn't the time or place to call a show-down.

Sighing, Stub elbowed toward the cemetery gate and found Julian Carse at his side. "You look like you could use a drink," Carse said. "Come on up to the Melodian and we'll have one."

Puckering an eyebrow, Stub gave Carse a surprised look. "Thanks," he said and tried to match the commissioner's stride. But Carse was tall and bony and long in the legs, while Stub stood only five feet five, so it kept him hustling to pace the man. Thus, they walked along together to the main street and the ornate false front of the Melodian. Brushing through the batwings, Carse led the way upstairs to his office at the front of the building. "What'll it be?" he asked, waving Stub to a chair. "I keep a private stock up here."

Again Stub gave him a puzzled look. Carse's long face had been schooled at a poker table and there was no reading it. But Carse had always been the least affable of the three commissioners and this show of friendliness was odd. One of Square John's preachments had been, "It's the little things that count." Here was a little thing beyond Stub's understanding. "Anything will do," he said and reached for the makings.

Carse reached into a desk drawer for a cigar box. "Try one," he offered. "These are imported and too good

to leave laying within anybody's reach."

"Thanks," Stub said again and gave the weed an appreciative sniff before lighting it. Carse was fumbling at a liquor cabinet when Stub said pointedly: "What's on your mind, Carse?"

Carse straightened, bottle in hand. "You'd like to be sheriff, eh, Stub?"

"It's custom for a deputy to finish out his sheriff's term," Stub said. "But I know the talk. Kendall Masters doesn't think I'm sheriff size."

"And what Masters says goes. There's three of us to decide the matter, but Applegate will vote like Masters. He always does. But I'm going to buck them—hard. I'm backing you to keep that badge, Stub."

"Why?" Stub asked bluntly.

"Masters and John Slattery were old friends. Masters made the rules for this county; Slattery saw that they were kept. They were a hard combination to buck. Masters and I have opposed each other ever since I got to be commissioner last election. I want a sheriff who'll string along with me instead of Masters."

STUB saw it all then, and he came up out of the chair and crossed to a window. He could see the top of the Melodian's porch and a stretch of street. Corralled beef were bawling plaintively down at the railroad loading pens. Stub turned from the window.

"Carse, I drifted in here eight years ago," he said. "I was a kid, and Square John gave me a job and made me a deputy when I got old enough. All I know about lawing, I learned from him. We've heard whispers about you, Carse; talk that you aim on spreading out. Some say you'll be heavy bidder when the V Cross spread goes up for sheriff's sale tomorrow for taxes. That's fair enough, if you keep your cards on the table. But get one thing straight. If I stay on as sheriff, I'll be the kind of sheriff John Slattery was. I don't want your support if there's strings tied to it!"

Crossing to the desk, he crushed out the cigar. "I'm beholden to you for half a cigar," he added. "I reckon a fancy smoke like this would cost a buck. Here." Planking a fifty-cent piece on the desk, the deputy strode toward the door.

"Better think twice, Stub," Carse cautioned. "I'm the gent to help you get that badge." There was color in his long face now and smoldering anger in his eyes.

"I don't want your kind of badge," Stub said and closed the door behind him.

Yet as he went downstairs and out of the Melodian, he knew a certain regret—not for the stand he'd taken, but for the way the cards had fallen. He needed the commissioners as friends if he were to keep Square John's badge. Kendall Masters wanted a lawman who sat tall in the saddle. And Stub McLaren had just made an enemy out of the one commissioner who was willing to back him against Masters.

But Stub had spoken as Square John Slattery would have spoken, and there was that to remember. Striding along, he passed Vic Applegate's stable, but he didn't turn inside. Applegate wasn't important. Stub headed toward Kendall Masters' town house: there had to be a showdown between them, and now was the time for it.

Masters had built on the crest of a hill overlooking Threedot, his house standing alone, remote and aloof. The day was getting on toward its close as Stub came toiling up the trail. And he was bent to the task when he heard the hammering of a gun, the thunder of hoofs.

Startled, Stub lifted his eyes. The gun was speaking from the broad gallery running the width of Masters' house, and Kendall Masters was triggering it, standing spread-legged. Two riders were galloping down the trail, straight toward Stub—masked riders, one holding a squirming bundle in his arms. That bundle was young Jimmy Slattery. In the instant that Stub

understood, he was dragging at his gun, but the masked riders were almost upon him now, one leaning from his saddle to strike at Stub with a gun barrel. Lights exploding before his eyes, the little deputy went down stunned, narrowly missing being trampled as the horses roared on past him.

Struggling against unconsciousness, Stub managed to get to one knee. Kendall Masters was coming on the run, reaching Stub just as the two masked horsemen disappeared into a clump of trees at the edge of town. "Jimmy—" Stub cried.

"Kidnaped!" Masters barked, his arm around Stub to support him.

The silver-haired cattleman half carrying him, they got to the gallery of the house. Masters explained. "Jimmy was plumb tuckered after the funeral. I put him in a ground-floor bedroom for a snooze. Those galoots came through a window and were toting him to their horses when I saw 'em. Here. They left this on the bedroom floor."

Stub managed to focus his eyes on the scrawled note. It read: "If you want the kid back alive, bring fifty thousand dollars to Halfway House before noon tomorrow. Come alone."

"They picked a good place," Stub said, handing back the note. "That old stage station hasn't been used since the railroad came in. I didn't get much of a look at them two, but I'd bet money they were Trig Truxton and Red LaBarr. Those saddle bums drifted in here a month ago and have been hanging around the saloons ever since." He shook off Masters' hand. "I'll be hitting the trail," he added.

EASY living had marked Kendall Masters, but when you took a good look at his square jaw you could tell that he belonged to the whang-leather breed that had blazed a trail north from Texas.

"Nothing doing, Stub!" he said. "You forgetting Jimmy? They'll kill him if we don't string along. I

wouldn't have shot at them if I'd took time to think!"

"Jimmy means something to me, too," Stub said. "You know that. But there's more to think about than him."

"John Slattery was my best friend," Masters countered. "We had an understanding that if he died, I'd take care of Jimmy. I've figgered on buying that V Cross property when it goes up for tax sale tomorrow. It'll be a fine spread for Jimmy when he gets man size. But he'll never reach man size if you go trying to tangle the twine of those two skunks."

"Square John was my friend, too," Stub said, stubbornly. "On top of that he was a lawman, first and last. One thing he taught me was that if you let an owlhoot pull a deal and get away with it, he'll try it again and again. I'm sheriff till a new one's appointed. Sorry, Masters, but I'm playing this hand the law's way."

His stubbornness matched Masters', and the cattleman gave him a long look. "I never favored John's having you as a deputy," he said. "I've figgered a lawman should be big enough to look the part. But there's one thing in your favor, you were trained by Square John, himself. Maybe if he were here he'd feel the same as you do about this kidnaping. I don't know. But me, I'm thinking of the boy, Stub. Let me handle this my way, and there won't be a new sheriff appointed. The job will be yours."

Thus did Stub McLaren have the badge he wanted so badly offered to him, but once again there was a string attached. True, there was a difference between Kendall Masters' proposed deal and the one Julian Carse had had in mind. Masters was motivated by a sincere interest in Jimmy's safety. Yet here was irony beyond irony, for Stub McLaren could have John Slattery's badge if he closed his eyes to the code John Slattery had taught him. Without answering Masters, he

stumbled down the steps and headed back toward town.

Coming to the sheriff's office in the courthouse, he tried to fight the matter out in solitude, but there was no solitude since each familiar thing reminded him of the man who'd been buried today. Square John had sat in the same chair and crossed his legs on this same desk and said: "Let a man steal a dime today and he'll steal a dollar tomorrow. An owlhoot's an owlhoot, and our job's to stop 'em. Don't ever forget that, Stub!"

THAT and a dozen other preachments of Square John's came back to Stub, and after a while he looked to the loads in his gun and set his sombrero a little firmer on his head—his choice was made.

Striding out of the courthouse, he saw Kendall Masters across the street, the cattleman hurrying along in the gathering dusk with the town banker. The two turned into the bank, Stub watching and waiting. Fifteen minutes later they reappeared, Masters now holding a black valise in his hand. Stub could guess what was in that valise and where Kendall Masters was going with it.

Then Masters was moving down the street alone. To Stub's astonishment, the man stepped into the Melodian Saloon. That made no sense, for Kendall Masters and Julian Carse were open enemies. The window of Carse's office glowed with light a few minutes later, and Stub made another decision. Hurrying toward the Melodian, he paused beneath the porch.

At this early evening hour the street was almost deserted. Later it would be teeming and the batwings of the Melodian would have no rest, but just now there was nobody to see Stub shin up one of the posts that supported the porch. Gripping the roof, he eased himself to a prone position, moving slowly and quietly. Then he inched along until he was under Julian Carse's window. The sash was up an inch or two, and he could hear the

voice of Kendall Masters.

"McLaren figgers they're a couple of saddle bums. Anyway, they don't savvy that a man can't always lay his hands on big money real quick. The bank had twenty thousand to spare. They've got a currency shipment coming in, but not for a few days. That's the size of it, Carse. If it was my own affair, I wouldn't be asking your help. But I've got the kid to think about. Everybody knows you keep your money here in the Melodian. Will you help me raise that fifty thousand?"

A short laugh. "I'm sorry about the kid," Carse said. "But the V Cross is being sold on the courthouse steps tomorrow noon. County law says a tax sale is a cash sale. I need all the dinero I've got handy. It's no deal."

Stub edged back across the porch. Masters was talking again, pleading, and it wasn't to Stub's liking to listen to it. Sliding over the edge, he swung outward and dropped. When Masters came out of the Melodian, Stub had taken an unobtrusive stand across the street.

For a moment Masters stood hesitant; then, squaring his shoulders, he headed toward Applegate's livery. Soon Stub saw him up on a horse and trotting out of town, the valise tied at his saddlehorn. Masters was taking the trail to Halfway House, and Stub knew the cattleman was riding in hopes of making a dicker with the kidnapers with the money he had.

Angling obliquely across the street to the stable, Stub spoke to Applegate. "I come to get my cayuse, Vic. Got to take a little pasear. And, Vic, if I shouldn't be back by noon tomorrow, I'd like you to do a chore for me. That V Cross tax sale has been advertised for noon. Will you handle it?"

"Sure," Applegate promised. "Where you going?"

But Stub made no answer, stepping up into the saddle and heading out of town at a high gallop. He had no

plan, but the matter was simple enough from a badge toter's viewpoint. Masters intended turning money over to the kidnapers. Stub's first job was to keep him from doing it.

FOR a mile he held to the old abandoned stage road, but when he came into a tangle of timbered hills, he drew upon his knowledge of this country, gleaned from a hundred trips with Square John Slattery, and he took to the brush, short-cutting across a hog-back ridge and coming again to the stage road a few miles farther on. Making a reckoning of time and distance, he sat his saddle, waiting. Before a quarter of an hour ran out, he heard the *clip-clop* of hoofs.

There'd be a moon a little later, but now there was only its faint promise over the eastern hills, and the shadows lay thick along the road. From the depth of them Stub barked: "Hoist 'em!" as a rider shaped in the gloom. Kendall Masters muttered a curse, but he obeyed. "Untie that valise and drop 'er to the ground," Stub ordered in a deep, unnatural voice. "That's fine. Now turn and lope!"

"Who the devil are you?" Masters demanded, peering hard. "Mister, if you'd let me tell you how important that valise—"

Stub gestured with his gun, and Masters, seeing the belligerent movement, cursed again, wheeled his horse and headed along the back trail. Stub stooped and hoisted the valise to his own saddlehorn and fading into the timber, he let the shadows claim him.

Now he was veering toward Halfway House again, but he was taking a circuitous route, for he'd shaped the next step of his plan and it called for equipment he wasn't carrying. Back here in the hills was the tiny spread of old Pop Weadick. It was nearly midnight, the moon bright and high, when Stub reached the place. A light glowed in Pop's little cabin and when Stub thumped upon the door Weadick appeared. They were old friends and spoke a common tongue.

"Danged if it ain't the runt!" Pop observed. "What brings you galivantin'?"

"Howdy, Pop," Stub said. "I need the loan of your scissors and an old mail-order catalog."

Pop Weadick let his glasses slip to the end of his nose. "You're loco," he decided. "Come on in, dang it. There's a pile of old catalogs on the shelf, and I'll find the shears for you."

Stub set the valise on a table, snapped it open and spilled out a pile of packaged bank notes. Pop's eyes widened, but they widened more as Stub went to work. Using a hundred-dollar bill for size, he proceeded to cut up catalog pages to the dimensions of the currency. Watching in open-mouthed astonishment for a while, Pop said: "There's another scissors around some place. I'll lend a hand."

It was a job that kept them busy, and when it was finished the valise was full again. The difference was that this time the packages were catalogue paper with a genuine bill at front and back so that the valise appeared to be stuffed with currency. The money was still heaped on Pop Weadick's table.

"Should be close to twenty thousand dollars there, old-timer," Stub said. "I'll probably be back tomorrow to get it. If I don't show up, take it to Kendall Masters in Threedot and tell him what you know about this."

"Which is danged little," Weadick grumbled. But Stub was striding for the door and was into the saddle again.

THIS time he headed directly toward Halfway House, coming back to the stage road in the last of the moonlight, the night nearly gone. The old stage station squatted in a broad and treeless valley, and from its glassless windows a man could have a view in every direction. Truxton and LaBarr, or whoever the kidnapers were, could be into saddles and well on their way into the surrounding hills if a posse showed up. There was no approaching this rendezvous undetected, so

Stub rode boldly toward the ancient building.

From the blackness of its porch, a voice said: "That's just about far enough, mister. What fetches you?"

Stub reined to a halt. "I've got the ransom money," he said. "Where's the kid?"

"Say, you're that runt badge toter from town!"

"Sure. The note said to come alone, but it didn't say who. Masters asked me to deliver the dinero."

Two men stood on the porch now. Stub could see them vaguely silhouetted. Square John Slattery had trained him to keep an eye out for detail, and he was more convinced than ever, as he studied the slope of their shoulders and their general build, that they were Trig Truxton and Red LaBarr.

Stub said: "The bank couldn't raise all the money on such short notice, but you'll find most of it there. Maybe you'd better count it." And he held his breath as he tossed the valise to them.

"A few hundred dollars one way or another makes no never mind," the bigger of the two said. That would be Trig Truxton. He snapped open the valise, caught a glimpse of the green of currency and sucked in his breath.

"How about the kid?" Stub asked.

"He's inside. We've had to keep him tied up. You'd better come in and carry him."

"Sure," Stub said and slipped from his horse to climb the sagging steps of the porch. This was the moment of reckoning. This was all as he'd planned it. First there'd been the delivery of the valise, an act calculated to make them think he was stringing along. Next there'd be the little matter of getting them under his gun, now that they thought he was interested in nothing but Jimmy Slattery. And if any part of his plan miscarried, there was that dummy money in place of the currency. Thus had he planned, and it was working as he'd hoped.

And then one of them struck at him with a gun barrel.

He was on the porch when it happened, his first intimation that anything was wrong coming with the realization that the two were not standing as before, close together and peering into the valise. They'd moved a few paces apart so that he had to walk between them, and from the corner of his eye he saw the attack, but it was too late then. He could only lurch to one side, the arcing gun barrel glancing along his shoulder. Then the two were upon him, bearing him down, snatching his gun away, hammering at his face and body and pinioning his arms. He felt the bite of hemp as his wrists were lashed behind him, then he was hauled to his feet and sent lurching into the building.

"You've got the ransom," he choked. "What's the idea?"

"Maybe we're just suspicious," one said. "When a man shows up saying that he started out with dinero for us and got held up along the road, then asks us to wait a few days till the bank gets in a currency shipment, we start wonderin' if he's tellin' it straight. Naturally we're plumb surprised when a second jigger comes along with that same money.

"Since everybody in Threedot knows you'd bust your britches to get the sheriff's badge, runt, it ain't hard to see your scheme. Masters would 'a' delivered the dinero, took the kid and called it quits. But you were makin' a play to get us. You aimed to come back to town with the kid, the money, and the kidnapers. You'd be the town hero and a cinch for the badge. It was a good scheme, but it didn't work!"

A MATCH scraped and was touched to a lantern. Stub McLaren knew who he'd see in that blossoming light. Trig Truxton and Red LaBarr had drawn neckerchiefs up over their noses, but it wasn't at them Stub looked, but at the bound and gagged figures sprawled upon the floor. One was Jimmy Slattery. Stub had ex-

pected him to be here. The other was Kendall Masters, glaring at him wild-eyed.

LaBarr stooped and jerked the gag from Masters' mouth. "Wish we could stick around and hear you cuss out the runt," he said. "It ought to be purty!"

Laughing, the two strode out of the room, taking the valise with them, and shortly Stub heard the rising hoofbeats that marked their departure. He looked at Masters. "So you came here anyway!" Stub said. "I hadn't counted on that."

"Of course I came!" Masters snapped. "I had to ask for more time to ransom Jimmy, didn't I? So you're the jigger who took the money away from me! You locoed, short-sighted, glory-hunting excuse for a lawman! And *you* figgered on filling Square John Slattery's boots! If we get out of this, you'll never hold another job in Threedot. I'll chase you plumb to the Mex border, you knot-headed, slow-witted, bugling fool! Gonna be a hero, were you! Bah!"

That was the start. A man had to live a long and varied lifetime to pick up the ability to cuss out another as Kendall Masters cussed out Stub McLaren. And Stub took it in silence, for the names that Masters laid on him were true—all of them except glory hunter. He hadn't schemed to make himself a hero. He'd schemed to uphold the law, just as Square John would have upheld it. His scheme had failed and he was through now. Kendall Masters would see to that. And meanwhile they were trussed up here, while the kidnapers rode away free.

"Roll this way," Stub said wearily. "I want to get my teeth into the ropes at your wrists."

Masters paused in his tirade long enough to obey, the two squirming until they were in position where Stub could work on the rope. It was slow going, the knots were tight, and for a long time he made no noticeable progress. The lantern burned out, dawn came, and then full daylight.

Stub's jaws were aching, but Masters' bonds were a little looser, and at last the commissioner was able to wrench free. Unlashing his ankles, Masters freed Jimmy Slattery, chaffing the boy's wrists and glaring at Stub. "By rights I ought to leave you here for the coyotes to eat," Masters said, "but at least you got me out of the ropes."

He untied Stub, and while the deputy was coming to his feet, Masters left the house, coming back a few minutes later. "My horse is out in the stable," he reported. "So is yours. They must have wanted to make sure those cayuses didn't wander back to town and get folks worrying about us. What the devil is that you've got in your hand?"

"A cigar butt!" Stub said, triumph in his voice. "A butt I picked off the floor a moment ago. Look, the band is still on it. Don't you savvy? This is an imported cigar, the kind that Julian Carse smokes! He's been here—and not so long ago! Don't you see what it means?"

"No," said Masters. "I don't."

"Last night you said that the one thing in my favor was that I'd been trained by Square John. That was right as rain, Masters. And one of the things he taught me was that it was the little things that counted, the small details that add up. And a lot of little things have been wrong about this kidnaping all along.

"First off, you were to bring the money before noon tomorrow—which is today. Why before noon? And even a couple of tramps like Truxton and LaBarr would know that you couldn't raise that much money that quick. When you came without the money, why didn't they send you back to Threedot to try raising it again? Why keep you here? And when I came with the valise, they didn't give a whoop whether it was the full amount or not. Then they left us here, tied up. They had the valise. Why didn't

they turn us loose and give us Jimmy? Now do you see it?"

"I'm listening," Masters said stonily.

"The kidnaping wasn't the number one idea at all! The scheme was to get you out of town *and keep you out*. They could have kidnaped you instead of Jimmy, but that would have been harder to do, and it might have been too obvious. It was slicker to tote Jimmy away and use him as bait to lure you. And to be on the safe side, they were making sure you'd bring all the money you could lay your hands on. It was Julian Carse's scheme. Carse was out here palavering with Truxton and LaBarr. This cigar butt is the proof—and the last piece in the puzzle!"

"You're loco!" Masters decided. "You're good at jumping at crazy conclusions. First you claimed that Truxton and LaBarr were the kidnapers. Maybe so. But they were always masked. You couldn't identify them in any court in the land. And now you're trying to drag Carse into it on account of a cigar butt! Bah! Imported cigar or not, he might have given one to anybody. McLaren, you can't get back into my good graces with this kind of hogwash!"

"To blazes with your good graces!" Stub shouted. "We've got riding to do. We've got to be in town by high noon!"

It was a ride all three of them were to remember. Kendall Masters carried young Jimmy in his arms, Stub McLaren leading the way, finding a dozen short cuts through wild, tangled country where low branches threatened to sweep them from their saddles and deadfall logs, strewing the path, were a constant hazard.

They passed within a few miles of Pop Weadick's place, but Stub didn't turn aside. They came straight overland, came in record time, and when they thundered into Threedot the sun was barely past zenith and a crowd was gathered before the courthouse.

Rotund Vic Applegate was up on the steps.

"Ten thousand," he shouted. "Mr. Carse has bid ten thousand. Am I offered more? Ten thousand for the V Cross Ranch. Will somebody make it ten thousand, five hundred?"

Stub was sliding off his horse, Masters piling down too, their appearance making a quick flurry of excitement. "Bid!" Stub hissed in Masters' ear. "Bid, and I think I'll know what I want to know!"

Masters frowned at him, but raised his voice. "Twelve thousand dollars!"

Julian Carse was to the front of the crowd. "Just a minute, Masters," he said. "County law insists that only cold cash be accepted at a tax sale. Last night you were at my place trying to float a loan. That's why I'd like to know if you're able to produce the backing for your bid."

"What about yourself?" Stub cried. "You just bid ten thousand. Have you got it?"

Carse hoisted a canvas money sack. "And more," he said.

"Let's see it," Stub insisted.

CARSE obligingly dug a handful of greenbacks out of the sack. "That isn't money!" Stub said. "Most of it's clippings from a mail-order catalogue. I know, because I done the clipping. Your scheme's backfired, Carse. You wanted Masters out of town today so he couldn't bid against you. And you wanted him short of cash in case he did get to town. When your boys brought you a valise full of money, you never even looked at it before you dumped it into that canvas sack. You didn't think you had to. You knew Masters had gotten that money from the bank last night, so you never dreamed that it was anything but real money!"

Carse stared at the paper he held, stared at it with widening eyes. Then, with an oath, he let it go and went for his gun.

The crowd saw that movement, men falling over backward to get out of the line of fire. Stub saw the movement, too, and he reached, wrenching a gun from the nearest holster. Triggering, he felt the burn of a bullet along his cheek, and he swung to see Red LaBarr and Trig Truxton firing from the fringe of the crowd, taking cards to side Carse. Stub got Truxton with one shot; it was the kind of shooting Square John had taught him. LaBarr tagged Stub high in the shoulder before the deputy caught the outlaw in his sights, and Carse had got in a lick or two meanwhile. Stub's gun felt heavy as an anvil by then, but he hoisted it for one last shot and Julian Carse went down in the dust.

"Catch him!" men chorused, and Stub wondered who they were talking about. Kendall Masters had his arms out when Stub's legs crumbled beneath him.

And Kendall Masters was there when a medico finished working on Stub and the little deputy was loaded into the doctor's bed. Stub had done a lot of talking, Masters listening with the light of understanding growing in his eyes. "The sale of the V Cross has been postponed, Stub," the commissioner said afterward. "By the time you're able to hold it, I'll have the money here to bid it in for Jimmy Slattery."

"You mean I'll hold the sale—" Stub began.

Masters nodded. "Look out the window. Yonder comes Pop Weadick riding with a gunny sack at his saddlehorn. We've got Jimmy safe and sound, and we've got the money, and you've made Threedot a safer place by wiping out three sidewinders. I'm not too stubborn to change my mind. You see, I'm just beginning to savvy what Square John meant when he said it was the little things that counted. For my money, you're sheriff size, Stub. Will you shake on it?"

"Sure," said Sheriff Stub McLaren. "I sure will!"

DANGER-BLAZED TRAIL

by JAMES P. WEBB

"If I don't get some makin's," Blacky roared, making a grab for Reinley, "I'm goin' to take this store apart and scatter the pieces!"



That mysterious envelope secreted in Blacky Solone's boot carried treasure . . . but it also carried dynamite to renegades . . .

CHAPTER I

BRAWL

BLACKY SOLONE came out of the Golden Eagle Saloon at Bow Rock, Arizona, after having spent an hour in the barroom, where he had poured drink after drink into the wide, tobacco-fouled mouth of a battered brass spittoon.

Blacky's hat was on the back of his head, showing tousled black curly hair, and on his swarthy face he wore a reckless grin. His inky eyes were half veiled, sleepy-looking. His wide shoulders drooped a little, and his big, lithe body moved through the batwing half doors with a rolling, staggering

gait. Blacky Solone looked and acted like a drunken man, and he was inwardly proud of the fact—since he had hadn't taken a drink for a week.

Blacky Solone, a one-time Texas Ranger with a penchant for trouble, was working now for Wells Fargo. He was to find out what had become of the loot which Bat Mallory had taken from a Wells Fargo strong box nearly a month ago.

After the stage robbery, Cleve Ross-moyne, the sheriff of Bow Rock, had tracked Bat Mallory down and killed him. Some of Mallory's gang had been captured, tried and sentenced to prison by Judge Henry Long, who

lived twenty miles away at Silver Bend. But the loot hadn't turned up, and the loot was of main interest to Wells Fargo.

Blacky stood on the sidewalk for a moment, grinning into the afternoon sunlight. He was six feet four; his chest was deep, his waist lean. A beaded buckskin vest gave the only touch of color to his dark appearance, and the flaring black leather chaps concealed some of the trim quickness of his long legs. He wore a heavy double-action Colt holstered on his right thigh, and the brass shells in his belt loops gleamed in the sun.

Blacky's big coal-black horse, named White, was hitched at the rail, but Blacky did not mount. Instead he stepped off the sidewalk and started diagonally across the street toward Reinley's store, his feet weaving erratically, and his shuffling Coffeyville boots lifting a trail of dust.

Still grinning, Blacky blundered against the hitch rail on the opposite side of the street, made his way uncertainly around it, and staggered to the sidewalk. His sharp, veiled eyes noted that his movements were attracting attention.

BLACKY stopped in the doorway of Reinley's big store and his sleepy-looking eyes surveyed the cool interior. Reinley, a middle-aged man with puffy eyes and a thick waist, was behind the counter on the left, and there were five other men in the store—a couple of young cowpunchers and three town loafers.

The cowpunchers were sun-bronzed, rawhide-tough hombres, both above average size. The town loafers were paler, softer, but there was indication of plenty of toughness in their faces.

All five of the men were armed and Reinley probably had a gun within reach somewhere. Blacky, behind his feigned drunkenness, was thinking that these six men would be hard to handle; but after all he didn't have to handle them and the more men there were engaged in the brawl the more

noise there would be. Blacky wanted enough noise to bring the sheriff before these tough hombres had time to hang his scalp on the fence!

Walking unsteadily, Blacky moved forward through the doorway. He stopped opposite Reinley, leaning his two hundred forty pounds against the counter and said in a slightly thickened voice, broken at intervals by convincing hiccups:

"Mister, I'm a curly, howlin' wolf from the Brazos. My pappy lives at the head of Bitter Creek, and nobody talks above a whisper when he's around. I've done spent all my dinero for liquor, and I'm out of makin's. If I don't get some makin's pronto, I'm goin' to take this store apart and there ain't enough men in sight to stop me!"

One of the town loafers swore softly. The two cowpunchers grinned. Reinley's puffy eyes lifted briefly for a contemptuous glance, then shifted back to the counter. "I ain't givin' no credit to a howlin' wolf I never seen before," he said dourly.

Blacky's grin vanished. His swart face became grim, and a beady light grew in his black eyes.

"Oh, you ain't, ain't you?" he growled, reaching across the counter.

Gripping Reinley's soiled white shirt with strong fingers, the big Texan heaved. Reinley's thick body lifted, started across the counter; then there was a ripping sound, and a piece of the shirt came away in Blacky's hands. Reinley yelled in startled fright.

One of the cowpunchers, ever ready for a brawl, lunged at Blacky from the right. Blacky wheeled. Ducking the puncher's swinging arms, he caught the man with his hands and made an upward heave which flung the cowpuncher sprawling on top of the counter. The other puncher lunged forward, and the three loafers closed in.

Blacky—more like a maddened bull than a man far gone from liquor—plunged to meet the charge. He saw the enraged Reinley surging around the end of the counter with a bung

starter in his right hand and the first cowpuncher, having rolled unhurt from the counter, was swinging back into action with fresh gusto.

Blacky picked up a keg of nails and hurled it, with purposeful inaccuracy, at one of the town loafers. The next instant Blacky had closed with the man, and they were rolling over and over on the floor. Shouts and curses ripped the afternoon silence to shreds, and the rapid thud of booted feet on the wooden floor made a thunderous undertone of sound.

Blacky, yelling like a madman, flung the town loafer off and reeled to his feet. One of the fight-loving punchers slammed a fist against Blacky's cheek and he went tumbling backward heels over head, just in time to avoid a vicious blow from the bung starter in the hand of the indignant storekeeper.

Reinley wanted revenge for his torn shirt and he jumped at Blacky as the big man was getting up. The bung starter swept down. Blacky ducked away from it, catching Reinley by an ankle, upsetting him with a quick jerk. The storekeeper lost the bung starter and Blacky kicked it out of sight behind a sack of feed.

THE two cowpunchers closed in on Blacky from one side at the same moment that the three town loafers landed on him from the other. All six men went down in a tangle of arms and legs, and the shouts, curses and sounds of combat swelled into a confused roar as they threshed and tumbled around the room, knocking over chairs, kitchenware, dry goods, hardware, and winding up at last in a rear corner on top of some baled sacks.

Blacky, with his lower lip split and a streak of blood on his cheek, came charging out of the melee. Reinley was running down behind the counter, swearing and yelling something about a shotgun. Blacky, with savage howls worthy of a dozen hungry wolves, vaulted the counter and came down, an eighth of a ton of reckless,

flying weight, on the unfortunate storekeeper's back.

For long seconds, Blacky had been aware of spectators crowding the sidewalk close to the door. Now, as he vaulted the counter again to meet the renewed attack of the two punchers and the three loafers, the crowd outside split apart as if a battering-ram had been hurled through it, and two men came tearing into the store with drawn guns.

Blacky leaned back against the counter as he saw his enthusiastic foes come to a stop. He grinned, wiped the blood off his cheek with a big hand, and hiccuped with convincing violence.

One of the newcomers was a grim man with thick jowls and heavy-lidded dark eyes. The badge on his vest told Blacky that this was Sheriff Cleve Rossmoyne—the man with whom Blacky wanted to do business. The other man was younger and thinner than the sheriff, and more handsome. He wore a deputy's badge, and Blacky guessed him to be Bob Shelby, the sheriff's chief assistant.

"What goes on?" Rossmoyne growled, eying the men with a slow-shifting, humorless stare.

Behind Blacky, the disgruntled Reinley said savagely: "This man tried to wreck my store. He tore my shirt. He—"

Blacky got off another careful hiccup and sagged against the counter. He spoke thickly, sleepily: "Called me a curly, howlin' wolf, he did. Won't take that off nobody."

Reinley's fat face reddened with choking rage. "He called hisself that!" he gasped. "He's drunk. He called hisself that."

One of the cowpunchers, grinning faintly behind the fingers which caressed his sore nose, drawled admiringly: "And if you ask me, sheriff, he wasn't lyin' none."

Rossmoyne did not grin. He stepped in front of Solone and rammed his gun against the Texan's flat stomach. The sheriff's left hand moved

out and lifted Blacky's double-action Colt. "What's your name?"

"Sam Houston," Blacky said.

Rossmoyne grunted. "Heard of you," he said with heavy humor. "You was president of Texas about forty or fifty years ago. Well, you ain't got any authority in Arizona. You goin' along peaceful, or do you want the bracelets?"

"I'll go peaceful," Blacky drawled, and chuckled with a semblance of maudlin levity. "Jus' like a little lamb, gents."

CHAPTER II

SECRET MISSION

AT the jail, Bob Shelby stopped in the sheriff's office while Rossmoyne took Blacky back to the corridor where there were four cells, none of which was occupied. Blacky realized that Shelby had been eying him narrowly ever since the arrest, and there was a gleam in the deputy's eyes which Blacky did not like.

The cell door closed behind Blacky and the key turned. Blacky grinned at Rossmoyne through the small barred window in the heavy door.

"Get rid of that deputy and come back here, sheriff," Blacky said softly. All semblance of drunkenness was gone now.

Rossmoyne stared. "Huh?"

"Judge Long sent me," Blacky said, low-voiced. "I had to get thrown in jail so nobody'd know what I was here for."

Rossmoyne eyed Blacky sharply; nodded and turned on his heel. He closed the door between jail and sheriff's office, and Blacky was left alone.

In ten minutes Rossmoyne was back. "I sent my deputy out," he said. "What do you want?"

Blacky drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it through the bars to the sheriff, who removed a sheet of paper, unfolded it and read what was written there. Finished, he looked at Blacky intently.

"Judge Long says your name's

Blacky Solone and he used to know you over in Texas. Claims you'll take a sealed envelope to Silver Bend. You still want to try it?"

Blacky nodded. "That's what I'm here for."

The sheriff glanced at Judge Long's letter again. "How long did you know the judge, over in Texas?"

"A couple of years."

Rossmoyne frowned. "I reckon it's all right." He stared between the bars at Blacky's swarthy face. "The envelope's full of evidence the judge needs. Somebody's watchin' me all the time. I tried to take the thing to Silver Bend and was jumped by some renegades. I got away, but I had to come back this way to do it. The judge started over here once to get the envelope, and was stopped by masked men and warned to go back."

Blacky stared. "Can't you ride to Silver Bend if you want to?"

Rossmoyne said, "When I ain't got the envelope with me, nobody tries to stop me. They always know, seems like."

"Who are these renegades?"

"I think it's Jim Trimble and some of his gang," Rossmoyne answered. "But somebody here in Bow Rock must be workin' with Trimble. They know every move we make." He stared hard at Blacky again. "The judge says in this letter that you used to be a Texas Ranger, and he figures you'll work out some scheme to fool the renegades. How you goin' to do it, Solone?"

Blacky chuckled. "Why do you think I got in jail?"

Rossmoyne tore the judge's letter into small pieces and crumpled them in his hand. He grunted.

"Reckon I'm kind of dumb sometimes," he rumbled. "It's took me till now to realize you ain't drunk. You let on to be full of fightin' liquor just to get yourself locked up." His trap-like mouth relaxed in a smile of appreciation. "Nobody'll expect a drunk I've got in the cooler to be a messenger from Judge Long. Pretty slick."

Rossmoyne's smile faded, some thought darkening his eyes. "But what do we do now?"

"You slip me the envelope," Blacky said. "In the mornin', you put me on my horse, lead me to the edge of town, and make me a speech about how Bow Rock don't tolerate my kind. There'll be a lot of people to listen to the speech, and whoever's keepin' an eye on that envelope for Trimble's gang won't be likely to think I've got it."

Rossmoyne slapped his thigh. "By golly! That'll work slick as a whistle."

"Unless somebody finds out you gave it to me," Blacky said thoughtfully. "How do they keep track of you? Where have you got the envelope hid?"

"It's hid well enough," Rossmoyne said. "They can't find it, but they always know when I try to get it to Silver Bend."

"Bring it here," Blacky suggested, "and hand it to me tonight, not too late."

Rossmoyne nodded and turned away. Blacky added: "And don't tell anybody—not *anybody*."

WHEN Bob Shelby came into the corridor half an hour later, Blacky was stretched out on the narrow cot under the window. He was snoring heavily, apparently deep in slumber. But he was really awake, and through half-closed lids he saw the deputy peering in at him through the barred window in the door.

When the deputy went out, Blacky sat up. The light at the window above the cot faded into dusk while the big Texan smoked a cigarette thoughtfully. Presently, hearing faint voices in the office, he dropped the cigarette and lay down again. He began to snore wheezily, an instant before the office door opened.

It was Sheriff Rossmoyne who entered the corridor. Blacky sat up, and moved softly across the cell as the sheriff's face appeared at the window. Rossmoyne thrust something between

the bars and let it fall on the inside.

"There it is," the sheriff whispered. "Get it?"

Blacky picked up a brown envelope which was heavy with sealing wax. "Got it."

After the sheriff had gone away, Blacky sat down on the cot again, and turned the brown envelope over in his big hands. The envelope was not bulky, except for the wax, and it couldn't contain much evidence. Blacky did not believe the story he had been told.

When Wells Fargo had assigned him to the task of finding Bat Mallory's missing loot, Blacky had ridden to Silver Bend. Inquiries had revealed that the captured members of the Mallory gang had been sentenced by Judge Henry Long, who lived at Silver Bend. One of the imprisoned outlaws had told officers that Mallory had made a map showing the location of the loot, and that the road agent had carried the map on his person. Mallory had been cornered and killed by Sheriff Rossmoyne, but the map hadn't come to light.

Blacky remembered Henry Long from Texas days, and on a hunch he had visited the judge. Long had welcomed him, and pretty soon he was telling Blacky about the evidence which the sheriff was having so much trouble transmitting to Silver Bend. Blacky volunteered to go to Bow Rock and bring the envelope to the judge.

If the envelope contained evidence against Jim Trimble, there was little sense in Trimble's trying to get possession of it, or trying to prevent its reaching Judge Long. There was enough evidence just floating around to hang the outlaw and all his gang half a dozen times over—if they were captured and tried.

But if the envelope contained Mallory's map, then Trimble would want it. And there was one man in Bow Rock who was in a position to keep a close check on the movements of the sheriff, and who might even be told enough to make it easy for him to

figure out the rest. That man was Deputy Bob Shelby. Shelby had a shrewd look, and he had studied Blacky very intently through the barred window while Blacky pretended to be asleep. The man would bear watching.

Blacky tried to remember everything he had heard about the outlaw, Jim Trimble. Three of the gang were notorious. Trimble's right-hand man went by the name of Fant Wheeler, and the other two were known as Tom Shark and Hub Utter. These men, if encountered, would make Blacky's brawl in the store seem like play. And from his point of view—and also, Blacky thought with a grin, from the point of view of the two cowpunchers—that was what it had been.

Blacky's immediate task was to find Mallory's loot, which meant finding the diagram the outlaw had made. In this, Blacky was not working alone. A Wells Fargo special agent named Oliver Hellman was registered at the Silver Bend Hotel, ready to lend a hand if needed. But Hellman, being widely known, was keeping under cover.

Blacky weighed the thin brown envelope in his hand. Was the sheet of paper on which Mallory had drawn his crude markings contained in that envelope—guarded only by red sealing wax?

CHAPTER III

AMBUSH

THE sun was up when Sheriff Ross-moyne unlocked Blacky's cell and said gruffly: "Come on, you."

Blacky stepped out into the corridor and followed the sheriff into the office. Through the open doorway, the big Texan could see his black horse standing at the hitch rail with a dozen other animals. A crowd had gathered in the street.

The sheriff muttered: "I spread the word around, casual, that I was warnin' you out of town, and all those hombres are here to see you off."

Blacky grinned, nodded. "Where's Bob Shelby?"

"Pulled out last night for Craterville on business," Ross-moyne said. "Why?"

"Nothing," Blacky said, and walked out of the office ahead of the sheriff. He grinned at the crowd. "Sure nice of you boys to come out and see me off."

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Several grinned at Blacky. Most of the men had no rancor against Blacky, because he had done nothing but get drunk, as they thought, and start a fight. But Blacky spotted four grim-faced men in the crowd. Reinley, the storekeeper, and the three town loafers.

"Get on your hoss," Ross-moyne snapped. He waited until Blacky was in the saddle, then he mounted his own horse, and they rode side by side eastward along Main Street. The crowd followed.

At the edge of town, the sheriff called a halt. He looked around upon the men who had followed; then eyed Blacky sternly.

"A man that feels like he wants to bust up stores," he said, "ain't wanted in this town, mister. From what I can find out, you rode in from this direction, so we're sendin' you back to where you came from. Maybe you got friends there, and maybe they cotton to citizens like you. Bow Rock don't. Make tracks now, and don't show up around here again. If you try to come back, it'll go hard with you next time."

The sheriff handed Blacky his gun, saying loudly: "That gun ain't loaded, so don't try to get salty. Sock in them spurs and make tracks."

Blacky took the gun and pushed it into the holster. He cocked a black eyebrow at the sheriff quizzically. "You folks," he drawled, "sure are friendly. I'm right glad to get away from a town that throws visitors into the jug for nothin'."

Touching his horse lightly with the spurs, Blacky jogged away along the trail and he did not look back. He was wondering if Bob Shelby really

had gone to Craterville on business; or had he gone to tell Jim Trimble that the envelope might be coming through? Maybe the outlaws wouldn't take any chances at all. Maybe they would stop him just to make sure that he *didn't* have what they wanted.

Perhaps Bob Shelby had been shrewd enough to see through Blacky's play acting. Blacky had a strong hunch that the deputy was Trimble's Bow Rock spy because Shelby had a chance to keep in touch with Rossmoyne.

Dropping over the first rising ground, Blacky drew his gun and reloaded it while the horse ambled on. It was twenty miles to Silver Bend. Wells Fargo did not operate between the two towns, which could account for the fact that the sheriff and the judge had not availed themselves of the express. Or perhaps they were squeamish about trusting this bit of treasure in the hands of Wells Fargo.

AFTER three hours of travel, Blacky rode down a slope and drew rein at a spot where boulders lay thick on either side of the road. If he opened the envelope, he would be taking a chance of betraying the judge's trust unjustly—if it really contained evidence of crime.

But if the contents showed the present location of the Mallory loot, as a Wells Fargo detective, Blacky would feel justified.

He took the envelope out of his boot top and turned it over in his hands. If it turned out that the contents was as the judge and Rossmoyne had represented, Blacky could turn it over to the judge and forget it. There wouldn't be any double cross about that. But it was necessary for him to know whether he was merely doing an odd job as a six-gun messenger, or whether the envelope was connected with the bigger job for Wells Fargo.

Blacky dismounted with the brown envelope in his hand. Squatting on his heels beside the trail, he drew his

knife, opened it, and began working at the mass of sealing wax. He worked carefully with the blade, and gradually the wax released its grip, taking some of the paper with it.

There was only one sheet of paper inside, containing a penciled diagram and some crude lettering. The diagram did not indicate plainly where the loot was hidden, but it did make clear that huge boulders had been rolled down upon the spot. Money would be required to recover the loot, and Mallory had paused in his flight long enough to make sure that the treasure wouldn't be found by unguided searchers. Maybe the outlaw had had a premonition that he himself would never come back, and had tried to make trouble for whoever should attempt to get possession of the loot.

Blacky folded the sheet of paper, shoved it down into his left boot top, and stared at the empty envelope, the flap of which was heavy with the lump of wax. He grinned suddenly and reached for a match.

Holding the flame of the match carefully against the under side of the wax, he watched it soften as the heat bit in. The fuzzy bits of paper on the wax burned away, and the wax began to grow sticky. Blacky dropped the match and pressed the flap of the envelope down until the wax began to take hold. Rising, he found a flat rock, laid the envelope face downward on it and looked around for some object to use as a stamp.

Chuckling to himself, he drew from a pocket of his black chaps a silver badge of the Texas Rangers which he had carried away when he had deserted from that body of lawmen. He laid the insignia of the badge against the softened wax and pressed down hard with his strong hand. When he pocketed the badge and picked up the envelope, the flap was sealed and a portion of the Texas Ranger badge had left its imprint clearly in the wax.

The envelope was still in Blacky's left hand when a sharp voice behind

him brought the big Texan slowly around.

"Hands up! Quick!"

Blacky grinned, his inky eyes gleaming, as he looked at the gunman who had slipped out from among the boulders. Blacky's mind was marshaling the descriptions of members of Jim Trimble's gang, about whom Blacky had made inquiries.

THE man before him, holding a six-gun leveled from the hip while its mate hung in its holster on the man's left thigh, was a small man, slight of build, rat-faced, his eyes a yellowish hue. He looked like Hub Utter, one of the meanest, if not the toughest, of Trimble's wolves. Blacky took a chance.

"Howdy, Hub," he drawled softly. "Ain't you a long ways from home—alone?"

Hub Utter lifted a thin lip in a snarl. "How'd you know me?"

"It isn't a pleasure," Blacky said. "Where's the rest of the boys?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Utter bluffed. "What boys?"

"Jim and Tom and Fant."

Hub Utter's eyes narrowed to gleaming points, and his thin face hardened. He was through with idle talk, and the muzzle of his gun lifted slightly. "I said get yore hands up."

Blacky lifted his hands to the level of his shoulders. At such close range, and motionless, his big frame would make an easy target for a gunman of Hub Utter's skill.

Utter said: "Turn loose of that envelope you're holdin'."

"So you want that?"

"I want that"—Utter's voice was quick and sharp—"now!"

Blacky knew then that the Trimble gun-slinger hadn't seen him open the envelope and stow the contents in his boot. The big Texan, grinning amiably, opened his fingers and let the envelope fall to the ground. Then without waiting to be told to do so, he backed away. His big black horse stood quietly at the edge of the trail,

and the envelope, weighted by the wax, had dropped within a few feet of the animal's heels.

Watching Blacky intently, with an unwinking, murderous stare, Hub Utter advanced with slow, stiff-legged strides. The gun in his hand, braced against his narrow hip, was steady.

Without shifting his glance Hub Utter bent his knees and reached down with his left hand to pick up the prize he had been waiting for.

At that instant, Blacky's lips drew back, and a shrill whistle came out between his teeth. In almost the same instant, the one-man horse came to life like a volcano. The black ears flattened, and the shod rear hoofs lashed out.

Quick as a startled cat, Utter's slight body lunged sideward and down on his left hand, and the slashing hoofs missed him. The gunman swung his right arm around and pulled trigger even before his slight body hit the ground.

Blacky was jerking his gun from the holster. He side-stepped fast, and Utter's difficult shot missed. Blacky's double-action Colt lifted and two bursts of smoke leaped from the muzzle. Utter's gun blasted its final shot into the ground as the little gunman was flattened by the heavy slugs.

Blacky's ebony-hued eyes were unhappy as he dragged Utter's body off the trail and composed it on its back. Then, putting the envelope into a hip pocket, he mounted White. But by the time he'd jogged a mile or so along the trail, Blacky's spirits were high and he sang softly to himself:

"Oh, when you leave Missouri, boys, this wicked world to see,
Remember my sad story, boys, and take advice
from me. . . ."

DURING the next two hours, nothing happened. Blacky stopped frequently for a frowning scrutiny of his back trail and the surrounding country. A strange, heavy uneasiness grew in him, and he had stopped his low-voiced singing.

Another five miles and Blacky caught a glimpse of a rider on the trail behind him. It might be an innocent traveler, or it might be another member of the Trimble gang. Blacky pulled into the shadow of a big boulder beside the road and waited to see which it was.

The approaching horseman came along quietly, the hoofs of his mount making a dull, unhurried sound in the silence. Blacky, holding White out of view behind the boulder, waited until the hoofbeats told him that the rider was almost alongside the rock; then, with gun lifted, the big Texan stepped out into the trail.

Sheriff Cleve Rossmoyne pulled his horse to a halt with a startled jerk of the reins. His heavy-lidded eyes widened.

"Sheriff," Blacky drawled softly, "why are you trailin' me?"

The sheriff stuttered momentarily as he tried to form words, his gaze clinging to the gun in Blacky's big fist. Then he said in a rush: "I just thought I'd drift along, so's to be handy if anything happened."

Blacky stared at the sheriff for a moment before he holstered his gun. Then, he stepped back behind the boulder, mounted his horse and rode out.

"Let's go," he said.

The chaparral grew close to the road where the trail dropped down to Silver Creek about three miles west of Silver Bend. Blacky was riding to the right of Rossmoyne, and his black eyes were alert in the shadow of his hat brim. The sheriff's heavy-lidded eyes, too, were roving restlessly.

A rifle shot made a sharp sound in the morning air, and Rossmoyne's horse lunged as if stung by a wasp. Blacky spurred White and whipped out his gun, his eyes scanning the south slope as the big horse plunged down toward the creek ford. A thinning wisp of smoke hung over a clump of brush fifty yards away.

"That's Trimble!" Rossmoyne cried.

The sheriff's six-gun roared and sud-

denly there were pistols barking all around the two riders. Somewhere in the chaparral, a horse screamed. A slug bit through a loose wing of Blacky's open vest, and he fired quickly at a man who bobbed up in the brush.

White gained fast on Rossmoyne's horse, which had slowed after its first wild lunge. Blacky was too busy to think of this fact at the time. There were at least two men on either side of the trail, and though both Blacky and the sheriff were still firing fast, the ambushers made elusive targets in the brush.

Blacky bent low over the saddle-horn as the two horses took the steep, short slope to the ford. Rossmoyne and Blacky were side by side for an instant, one firing to one side, one to the other, and neither hitting anybody.

Then White took the lead. Bullets made spurts of dust under the animal's belly and around his flying hoofs.

Rossmoyne's voice, sharp and full of fear, cut through the bedlam of shots and hoofs:

"Solone! My hoss! He's hit!"

BLACKY pulled his horse to its haunches at the water's edge. Rossmoyne's mount was already down, the sheriff had jumped clear. Bullets from the bushwhackers' guns were singing around them as Blacky wheeled White around; but the sudden down tilt of the trail, and the thick brush above, made straight shooting difficult for the attackers.

Rossmoyne's horse was stretched in the road. White pranced under the bit. Blacky fired two shots into the brush as the sheriff sprang up behind the saddle. And then, his gun empty, Blacky pointed White's nose at the stream and gave the animal its head.

"Maybe they wouldn't have jumped me if I'd been alone," Blacky said. "You ought to have stayed in Bow Rock."

But he doubted that the sheriff's presence had made much difference. Hub Utter had been posted back you-

der among the boulders to lay for Blacky. If Utter knew or suspected that Blacky had the coveted envelope containing the Mallory map, then Jim Trimble must know it, too. And this was no time to talk the matter over!

The black horse hit the shallow water and splashed across, while the guns of the outlaws pounded with new fury. Bullets knocked little geysers from the surface of the water, and then the hoofs of the big black dug at the bank of the creek.

Blacky heard Rossmoyne's gasp of pain, felt the convulsive clutch of the sheriff's hands, and knew that Rossmoyne had been hit. The Texan half turned in the saddle and caught the sheriff's sagging body as White gained the solid trail and raced on.

With his empty gun in the holster, Blacky eased the wounded sheriff around to the front of the saddle without slackening the hard run of the black horse. Angry, disappointed shouts carried from the brush on the west side of the creek, but there were no more shots.

Most of Trimble's gang, apparently, had been at the creek; and Hub Utter had been sent a few miles toward Bow Rock to try his luck. That way, the outlaws had made a double attempt to kill or capture Blacky, but both attempts had failed. Blacky felt sure that Trimble would try again if he could.

It was afternoon when White, sweaty from a long run, entered the main street of Silver Bend at a walk. A lounge in front of a saloon pointed out the house of Dr. Odett, and Blacky left the wounded sheriff in the physician's care. Odett thought Rossmoyne probably would recover, with luck.

Blacky was hungry and the odors from a restaurant tempted him. He decided to eat before he went to see Judge Henry Long. As the big Texan stepped into the restaurant, he glanced along the street and saw Deputy Sheriff Bob Shelby riding into town on the Bow Rock trail.

Blacky's eyes gleamed as he watched the lean deputy dismount in front of a saloon. Evidently Shelby hadn't gone to Craterville on business—Craterville was in the opposite direction from Silver Bend! Blacky hadn't seen Shelby at the creek, but he had a hunch the deputy had been there with Trimble's men. The big Texan had sized Shelby up as a gun-slinger, and a man without conscience. But Blacky knew that he *could* be mistaken.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRIMBLE GANG

JUDGE HENRY LONG was a tall, thin, dignified man, whose stern face was made to look even more dignified by the white imperial and neat mustache. The living room to which he admitted Blacky was pleasant and roomy.

The Wells Fargo detective noted a gleam of excitement in the judge's deep-set eyes, but the big Texan sat down and rolled a cigarette before he brought out the brown envelope. Long stood in front of him.

At last the judge said: "Have you got it?"

Blacky nodded. "I brought it through, all right," he said quietly, drawing the slightly wrinkled envelope from his hip pocket, "but the sheriff took a notion to chase after me, and he didn't come out so well. Somebody jumped us at Silver Creek and I had to take Rossmoyne to the doctor."

Judge Long's eyes narrowed. He stared at the envelope, but did not reach for it. "Shot? Is he seriously wounded?"

"The doc thinks he'll pull through, but it's too soon to say for sure." Blacky thrust the envelope toward Long. "Rossmoyne said it was Jim Trimble who jumped us."

Long took the sealed envelope and turned it over in his hands. He didn't open it.

"Judge," Blacky said, "back in Texas, I didn't think you'd get mixed

up in any crooked deals, and I thought you knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't have anything to do with such a deal."

As Judge Long's gaze lifted to Blacky's swarthy face, a touch of color came into his gray cheeks. "I know you wouldn't, Solone," he said evenly. "That's why I trusted you with this. As for the first part of your remark, I believe it merits a little explanation on your part."

Blacky's eyes met the judge's half-angry gaze. "Not on my part, judge. On yours."

"What do you mean?"

Blacky said: "What's in that envelope? What's *really* in it, I mean?"

The judge's gaze did not waver; but after a moment he slipped the envelope into a pocket of his long coat and walked aimlessly about the room, as if he were considering Blacky's question before answering. Blacky waited, leaning a little forward in his chair, a gleam in his black eyes.

There was a massive bookcase, filled with thick volumes in one corner of the room. The judge's pacing carried him to it and he stopped there. With his back toward Blacky, Long pulled open the glass doors and took out a thick book.

When the judge turned away from the bookcase, there was a gun in his hand. His eyes gleamed cruelly as he pointed the weapon at Blacky.

"Perhaps I've misjudged you, young man," Long said.

Blacky smiled. "If you think that gun's goin' to do you any good, you sure have," he drawled. "Better put it up, judge."

"Not yet," Judge Long snapped. "Not till we reach an understanding. It seems that you've learned what this envelope contains, and I'm not just sure what you expect to gain from the knowledge. Until I know that, I shall keep you covered."

Blacky did not move from his easy, forward-leaning position on the chair. The cigarette between his lips drooped and smoldered. He said softly:

"What is in the envelope?"

Obviously, Judge Long felt more confident of his ability to cope with the situation now that he had a gun in his hand. His answer came promptly: "The key to a buried treasure."

Blacky grinned. "A buried treasure? Why not call it holdup loot, judge?"

"Because," Long said in a brisk voice, "it isn't customary to refer to treasure as loot after it has been buried away so long that all knowledge of its origin has been lost."

"This treasure has been buried about a month," Blacky said amiably.

JUDGE LONG, obviously, was startled. Blacky recognized Long's surprise as genuine. He saw the gun muzzle sag toward the floor, but still Blacky did not move.

"W-what's that?" Long gasped. "About a month?"

"More or less," Blacky said. "It's the loot Bat Mallory took from a stage-coach a few weeks ago. Rossmoyne shot Bat and found the map on him."

The judge's face flushed. "I had no idea of that," he said quickly, "or I wouldn't have touched the proposition. Rossmoyne told me he had discovered the key to a buried treasure which couldn't be taken out without a certain amount of expense. He asked me to think over the proposition of furnishing the capital for a fifty-fifty split of the treasure. He further told me that Jim Trimble was watching him, trying to find out where the key was hidden. I told Rossmoyne I'd have to look at the map he had before I could come to any decision, so—"

He thrust his left hand into his pocket and brought out the brown envelope.

"No need to open that," Blacky said, standing up. "I've got the thing in my boot." Stooping, he removed the paper from the top of his boot and held it out. "Look at it, but don't forget it belongs to Wells Fargo."

Long stared at Blacky for a mo-

ment before he stepped forward and took the paper. "Are you a Wells Fargo man?"

Blacky nodded. "Even though we couldn't prove just now that you knowingly conspired to obtain possession of stolen property, Wells Fargo could make things sort of hot for you, judge."

Long's gaze jumped back to Blacky's face, and his own face paled a little. He said: "Great Scott!"

"But I've always thought pretty well of you, judge," Blacky went on imperturbably. "I wouldn't want to do that to you, if you really didn't know about the loot. But there are some things I want to know."

"Name them."

"Why was it so hard to get this map to you?"

The judge's brows drew together, and he stared down at the unfolded paper. "Jim Trimble knows the sheriff had this. Somebody in Bow Rock has been keeping an eye on Rossmoyne."

Blacky put his cigarette on an ash tray and leaned back against the table. "Rossmoyne hasn't been smart, judge. He's been *tellin'* the spy too much. Not everything, of course, but too much."

Long glanced up. "Who?"

"Bob Shelby."

Judge Long's frown deepened, and for a moment he studied the paper in silence. "This doesn't indicate that it's Mallory's loot."

Blacky chuckled. "I noticed that.

I noticed some other things, too. That paper doesn't show exactly where the loot is."

Long muttered under his breath as he studied the paper again. "That's so. It doesn't."

"That's because it isn't the map Mallory made," Blacky said. "It's a copy Rossmoyne made for you to look at. He's keeping his hole card out of sight, and anyway he didn't want you to know it was the Mallory loot."

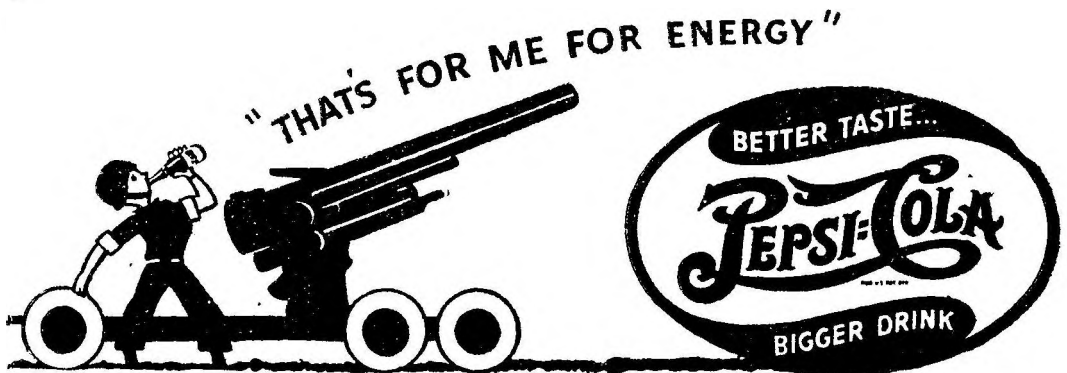
JUDGE LONG bit his lip. "Perhaps you're right." He folded the paper and handed it back to Blacky. "At any rate, I don't want anything to do with it. I trust—"

A furtive boot scraped on wood in the hallway. Blacky stooped and stuffed the folded sheet into the top of his boot an instant before two men appeared in the doorway.

One was a tall spare man with cold eyes and a hooked nose which gave his hard face a predatory look. He wore two guns, but now one of them was in his right hand. His companion was a short, thick man with a rolling gait, a cruel mouth and blunt features.

Judge Long paled a little as he turned to face the intruders. The gun slipped from his fingers, and he slid a sidelong glance at Blacky. "Jim Trimble," he muttered.

Blacky had no difficulty in picking the tall, cold-eyed two-gun man as Trimble. It was easy to see that this hombre would be the leader. It was plain, too, that Trimble meant



business, and Blacky knew that the next few minutes might prove to be unpleasant. So he grinned and began rolling a cigarette.

Trimble and his thick-set companion stepped into the room and pushed the door shut.

"Tom," Trimble said, watching Blacky and the judge narrowly, "get that gun off the floor, and then lift that big hombre's hardware." He shifted the muzzle of his gun slightly, so that it bore directly on Blacky. "Get your hands up—high," he ordered.

Blacky lifted his hands. The outlaw named Tom picked up the weapon which Judge Long had dropped.

"Tom?" Blacky drawled. "Tom Shark, I reckon."

"Go ahead and reckon," Trimble growled. "Get his gun, Tom."

Tom Shark circled around behind Blacky and lifted the Texan's double-action Colt from the holster. He backed away with the two guns in his hands.

"Now," Trimble went on, "we'll take that map."

Blacky grinned. "What map?"

"The one you brought here," Trimble snapped. "Tom, see which one's got it."

Tom Shark stuck Blacky's gun under his waistband. Holding the judge's weapon in his right hand, he stepped close to Blacky again. The Wells Fargo man did not move while he was being searched, but he continued to grin sardonically at the outlaw leader.

In one of the pockets of Blacky's leather chaps, Shark found the silver badge of the Texas Rangers. He looked at it and muttered an oath.

"Look, boss," he said. "A Texas Ranger."

Trimble started. "Texas Ranger? What's he doin' in Arizona?"

Shark wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Don't they leave Texas sometimes?"

"That's an old badge," Blacky

drawled. "I use it for a good-luck piece."

"It could bring you bad luck, hombre," Shark growled, and continued his search. But he didn't find the folded paper in the top of Blacky's boot, though the legs of the black chaps were open at the back. "He ain't got it, boss."

"Try the judge," Trimble snapped.

Shark started to search Long; and, as it happened, he thrust his hand first into the pocket which contained the brown envelope.

"Here it is," Shark said, holding up his find. "Still sealed tight."

"Good!" Trimble still watched Blacky and the judge narrowly. "Rip it open. We want to make sure."

SHARK stared at the wax. "This wax has got part of a Texas Ranger badge printed on it." He tore the envelope open, saw that there was nothing inside, wadded the envelope and flung it down angrily. "Empty!"

For an instant, Jim Trimble's gaze shifted toward his henchman. Blacky's grin faded, and he moved ever so slightly. A voice from the window behind him caused him to relax and turn his head.

At the window, which was open, were two faces. One of the faces was bearded and grimy, and below the face was a long-barreled six-gun. There was no mistaking the wolfish-looking head. The man was Fant Wheeler, Trimble's right-hand man.

The second face at the window was pinched, cruel and mean, but Blacky could not identify it from his recollection of descriptions of the Trimble gang.

"Who's your friend, Fant?" Blacky asked. "There's a heap of strangers in town today."

Fant wheeler grinned, but it was not an expression of friendliness. "You stand right still and don't worry about who folks are—eh, Clipper?"

"Clipper'll do for a name for your henchman, I reckon," Blacky drawled. Shark searched the judge thoroughly,

but he did not find what he sought. Then he searched Blacky again, but still did not think to look in the big man's boots.

"We fooled you, boys," Blacky said. "Rossmyrne sent an empty envelope over here. The map's still hid in Bow Rock."

Blacky hoped they wouldn't find the copy he had in his boot. The copy probably wouldn't be enough to enable the outlaws to find the loot, but it would show them the general location. Nothing was lacking but a mark of some kind to indicate the exact spot. Blacky knew that he didn't have the original map because the convict who had given the officers their information had said that Bat Mallory wrote his name below the diagram. Nobody's name was on the paper which Blacky was carrying in his boot.

Jim Trimble advanced a little, his gun steady in his fist. The gunman's cold gray eyes gleamed between narrowed lids, and his thin lips were drawn straight.

"Rossmyrne wouldn't have sent an empty envelope," the outlaw snapped. "Maybe he's got the paper himself. He was with you when we—"

"When you tried to ambush us," Blacky drawled. "I thought that was you, Jim."

Trimble moved suddenly. He slashed at Blacky's head with his gun barrel, but with the startling quickness of a released coil spring, Blacky stepped aside, and the blow missed.

TTRIMBLE'S vicious swing threw him off balance. Before the outlaw could recover, Blacky had whirled behind Trimble and pinned his arms in a mighty hug which lifted the tall outlaw off his feet. With a grunt of pain, Trimble let his gun fall to the floor.

Tom Shark was in front of Trimble and Blacky. Startled by the sudden development, Shark shouted hoarsely and circled in an effort to get behind Blacky. His gun was lifted,

but he couldn't fire without great risk of hitting his boss.

Beyond Shark, at the window, Fant Wheeler and the man called Clipper stared for a moment in bewilderment. Then they disappeared from the window. If they had stayed there, Blacky told himself, it would have made things tough when Shark succeeded in getting behind him; but it would be tough, anyway, when Wheeler and Clipper barged in at the door.

Shark moved sidewise, keepings his gun up and his eyes centered on the big Texan and the struggling Trimble. Blacky turned, swinging Trimble around, so that Shark was always in front of him.

Judge Long, with sudden spots of color in his gray cheeks, seemed to be forgotten or ignored by Tom Shark. The judge set himself and swung his right fist. The blow hit Shark behind the right ear and he staggered. His gun muzzle sank.

Blacky turned Trimble loose and struck with his fist. Trimble fell on his face, and Blacky jumped at Shark. He hit the stocky outlaw just as Shark's gun went off. The bullet bored into the wall behind Blacky, but Shark didn't know it. He was lying on his side in front of the bookcase.

Blacky sprang to Shark's side and jerked his own double-action gun out of the unconscious man's waistband. He wheeled, gun lifted, to face the door.

But something had warned Fant Wheeler and Clipper that this was no time to enter the room. Fast hoofbeats clattered away from the front of the house. Blacky moved quickly to the window and saw the two outlaws riding as if for their lives.

Blacky looked down at Jim Trimble and Tom Shark, both of whom were beginning to stir. "You got a jail in Silver Bend?" he asked the judge.

"Of a sort, yes." Judge Long was a trifle shaken and excited, but visibly proud of his part in the little battle.

"We've got a deputy sheriff here, and a small lock-up."

"We'll put these hombres in it," Blacky said.

CHAPTER V

ONE MAN AGAINST MANY

SHADOWS of evening lay on the broken lands when Blacky and Oliver Hellman rode out of Silver Bend. The Wells Fargo special agent, Hellman, was a big, rock-faced man who seemed almost small by comparison as he rode beside Blacky.

"We'll have to find the map Mallory made," Blacky said. "We won't get anywhere with this copy. Rossmoyne's at Doc Odett's. This will be a good time to search the sheriff's house. Nobody to bother us."

Oliver Hellman frowned. He had been working for Wells Fargo a long time, and he was given to doubt. "How do you know the paper you've got is really a copy of the Mallory diagram? Maybe it's what Rossmoyne told the judge it was, a bona fide buried treasure."

Blacky shook his head. "No. The directions on the paper I've got aren't complete. And it isn't likely the sheriff would run across two maps like that at the same time. Mallory must have had the paper on him when he was killed, and Rossmoyne must have got it."

"Seems likely enough," Hellman admitted. "But how are we going to find the original?"

"That's something else I didn't tell you," Blacky said. "I went to see Rossmoyne a few minutes ago. He was conscious, so I talked to him and explained that the jig was up. Rossmoyne decided he'd better get out from under if he could, so he told me where to look."

They rode in silence for a moment before Blacky added: "The sheriff claims that all he was after was the ten percent reward Wells Fargo offers for recovered loot. He figured he'd

get the loot and collect ten percent of it."

Hellman grunted. "The company would have paid the ten percent for Mallory's paper."

"Maybe the sheriff didn't know that," Blacky said. "Anyhow, it looks as if we can't prove much on him, except his holdin' out on us."

"Let's get the loot back," Hellman agreed, "and we won't give the judge and Rossmoyne any trouble this time."

The body of Hub Utter had been moved from beside the trail. Whether by some of the Trimble gang or somebody else, Blacky did not know, but he was glad that the body was gone.

Hellman and Blacky rode in silence for the last few miles, and it was well into the night when they rode unobtrusively into Bow Rock.

The two Wells Fargo men tied up in front of a restaurant and went inside for a late supper. Their hunger satisfied, they mounted again and rode into a side street toward the sheriff's house. Blacky counted the buildings, beginning at a street corner, and so located the sheriff's house without trouble.

Blacky and Hellman dismounted in the black shadow of a paloverde near one of the rear corners of the house.

"You stay here with the horses," Blacky said. "I've got Rossmoyne's key, and it shouldn't take me long to find the Mallory paper, if it's where the sheriff said it was."

BLACKY moved cautiously toward the kitchen door. There didn't seem to be anybody about, but Blacky didn't want to take unnecessary chances. If some of the townspeople saw him entering the absent sheriff's house, there might be unpleasant complications.

The key which the sheriff had given him opened the kitchen door. Blacky stepped inside—and knew instantly that somebody was there ahead of him. He ducked instinctively as his

ears caught a shuffling sound to his left.

Something raked the side of his head, knocked his hat off, and made his head reel for a moment. As the big man moved quickly forward, he heard somebody lunge along the wall behind him.

Blacky wheeled and gave chase; his hands closed on cloth, and he struck with a quick fist. He felt the shock of the blow in his forearm, and heard his opponent fall.

Then, without warning, men seemed to swarm over the big Texan from every direction, and he was borne to the floor.

But he regained his feet, flinging his opponents off as if they were pygmies, and began lashing out in the darkness with his fists. Two or three times he struck solid flesh, but he couldn't determine how much damage the blows were doing. The kitchen was as black as a cave.

Somebody jumped on Blacky's back and knocked the big man to his knees, but the Texan flung his assailant over his head and heard a clatter of tinware as the man hit the table. A chair turned over, and Blacky jumped toward the sound, caught the blunderer and battered the unseen body with quick blows.

Something struck Blacky's head, and lights pinwheeled through the darkness, but he kept his feet. A match flared suddenly, and the Texan caught a glimpse of Jim Trimble's hard face, with the shaggy-headed Fant Wheeler nearby. Blacky lunged at the outlaws.

The match in Trimble's hand went out; and from the blackness, a gun barrel slashing from one side caught Blacky forcefully on the head. As he went to his knees, it seemed to him that a dozen men jumped on his back. Dazed by the blow, he was aware of being jammed down on the floor under a tangle of hostile men. Blows rained on him.

When Blacky recovered consciousness, he found that he had been

dragged into a bedroom. He was lying on a mattress, on his left side; his wrists lashed together and tied to the bed. His gun was gone from the holster, he discovered. His head ached.

Blacky wondered how Jim Trimble had managed to escape from the jail in time to get to Bow Rock so early. The outlaws must have left Silver Bend ahead of Blacky and Hellman. Blacky reasoned that Bob Shelby must have obtained their release shortly after the fight at Judge Long's.

Blacky hadn't expected any of the Trimble gang to be inside the sheriff's house. Finding the envelope empty, Trimble had evidently decided that Rossmoyne really had withheld the Mallory paper, and had come here to look for it.

Blacky had expected to come here and get the hidden map without any more trouble. His disappointment, plus the soreness of his head and the fact that he was tied to the bed, lighted a blaze of anger in the big man.

Lifting his head, Blacky could see a streak of light under the door of the room, and he knew that the outlaws had lighted a lamp somewhere in the house. They were searching.

BLACKY worked his body to the edge of the bed and rolled off to the floor. He gained his feet, but found that he couldn't stand upright because of the shortness of the cord which held his wrists close to the bedpost. That is, he couldn't stand upright without lifting one corner of the bed off the floor.

Blacky found that the cord had been carried down below the end of the mattress and tied to a crosspiece, where he couldn't reach the knot. He grinned wryly as he noticed this. Trimble's outfit had been fairly clever with his tying job. It was simple, effective and quick.

Blacky heard voices beyond the door. With a sudden surge of his board shoulders, he dragged the bed out into the middle of the floor, mak-

ing the iron rollers rasp across the boards.

The door opened, and Jim Trimble's pale eyes took in the scene. Behind the outlaw leader, Blacky could see the bearded face of Fant Wheeler. There was a light in that room.

Trimble looked at the moved bed. "Look here, mister, where's that paper we want?"

"I don't know," Blacky said.

Fant Wheeler grinned wolfishly and pressed past Trimble.

"Maybe you better think, friend," Wheeler said softly. "Where is it?"

Blacky grinned, though it hurt his split lip to do so, and measured the distance with his eyes.

"Fant," he drawled, "I don't like you."

Wheeler said snarlingly: "Now, ain't that too bad?" The outlaw, crouching a little, moved toward Blacky. "Tell us where that map is, or I'll show you how strong these hands is."

Blacky jerked the head of the bed a little more toward the door, so that he could face Wheeler. Then, without warning or preliminary, he leaned his shoulders back and kicked hard, high and fast with his left foot. The outlaw didn't have time to duck, and the toe of Blacky's big boot smashed up under Wheeler's outthrust chin with a sickening thud.

Wheeler's head snapped back sharply and his booted feet left the floor. His flying body crashed into Jim Trimble and knocked him down. Then, Wheeler's limp body rolled aside and lay still, with the head askew on a broken neck.

Footsteps sounded in the other room, and Tom Shark's excited voice cut through the brief silence. Shark and Clipper came into the range of Blacky's vision. Looking at the big Texan narrowly, they bent over their chief, who had the breath knocked out of him.

Clipper looked at the body of Wheeler as the gasping Trimble sat up. "Fant's dead," Clipper growled. "What happened?"

Trimble pointed at Blacky and banted: "He kicked 'im."

Blacky put his knees on the edge of the mattress, leaned forward and thrust his bound wrists between two of the upright rods of the iron bedstead. But his fingers wouldn't reach down to the knot below. There wasn't enough slack in the cord. If he couldn't untie the rope, maybe he could break it.

BLACKY took a half hitch around his big right hand and got a firm grip. The lower end of the cord being tied to a cross brace of the bed, instead of to his own flesh, he could pull hard without pain.

Tom Shark and Clipper moved toward Blacky. Shark was drawing his gun.

Blacky braced his knees and heaved against the cord, holding the bed legs on the floor with his own weight. He said in a savage tone: "Stay away from me."

Clipper grabbed at Shark. "Let me handle him," the mean-faced man snarled. "A knife's better than a gun. We don't want much noise in here."

The cross brace to which the end of the cord was tied was flat, thin metal, and the edges were only about ten times as dull as a rusty knife blade. Blacky put his great weight into the pull, hoping to part the strands of the thin rope.

Tom Shark jumped forward and whipped out his gun. He struck at Blacky's head, and the big man jerked sideways, catching the blow on his left shoulder. Pain shot through his arm. He saw Clipper coming at him warily with an open, long-bladed knife. There was something like a smirk on the man's cruel, pinched face. The big Texan, still pulling and sawing at the cord, turned his swarthy face, gleaming with sweat, toward the crouching knife wielder.

"Keep away from me, Clipper," Blacky said sharply.

But Clipper continued to weave to-

ward the bed, his knife uplifted, his knees bent, his smirking face thrust forward. Behind him, Shark had stopped, and behind Shark, Jim Trimble was watching the circling catlike movements of Clipper.

Suddenly Clipper lunged. The lamplight, falling through the doorway from the other room, was strong enough to throw a gleam from the knife blade as it flashed up.

Blacky's head and shoulders went down against the pillow, and one of his long legs swept around like a scythe. It caught the slight, lunging form of the knife man, and Clipper slammed against the wall beside the bed. His descending knife slashed with a ringing sound against the iron bedstead.

Blacky came up with one foot on the floor. His other knee was braced against the mattress. He heaved his shoulders back, throwing his weight against the cord with all the desperate, lunging violence of a wild stallion fighting a lariat.

Shark moved closer, still holding his gun, and Clipper bounded back from the wall, snarling and vicious. Blacky's backward surge cut the cord, and it slipped loose from the bedpost, throwing him down.

Shark's lashing blow with the gun barrel missed, and Blacky caught the gunman by an ankle and flung him down. Shark lost his gun, and then Blacky's darting hands, still bound together, jerked his own double-action Colt, for the second time in a few hours, from under Shark's belt.

Clipper lunged with his knife as Blacky came to his knees. Blacky swung the gun around and fired, but Shark grabbed the trailing ends of the cord which held Blacky's hands together and jerked the muzzle out of line as the hammer fell. The shot missed, and Blacky ducked the slashing blade of the knife.

The Texan freed the ends of the cord with a vicious jerk which threw Shark forward on his face, and then

Blacky struck at Clipper with the gun barrel. The blow missed, and Clipper's knife slashed through the sleeve of Blacky's shirt, drawing blood.

Blacky fired as the knife leaped at him again, and this time he didn't miss. Clipper dropped the knife, cried out in a sharp, shrill voice and grabbed his middle with both hands. Blacky gained his feet and struck with the gun barrel at Shark's head as the stocky outlaw tried to rise from the floor. Shark fell across the dead Clip-



per, and Blacky leaped over the two bodies.

Aware of the sudden, belated pounding of Trimble's six-gun, the big Texan turned catlike in the air and landed facing the door. Before his boots hit the floor, his finger was pulling the trigger of the heavy Colt. He felt the burn of one of Trimble's bullets across his ribs, and then Blacky's own gun roared—once, twice.

Trimble lurched back against the door frame, dropped his gun and slid down on his back, with his head in the other room and his face bathed in yellow lamplight.

CHAPTER VI

GUNSMOKE AND LOOT

BLACKY was panting and sweat streamed down his swarthy face, but he did not stop to rest. He tossed his gun on the bed and, picking up the knife which Clipper had used, went to the window near the foot of the bed. Lifting the lower sash a little, he inserted the handle of the knife in the crack. Then he pushed the sash down tight against the knife handle, so that the edge of the blade was held upward and began sawing at the cord which bound his wrists together.

The knife turned and had to be replaced. This happened twice before the cord parted. Blacky worked feverishly. Shark might come to at any moment, and Bob Shelby was still to be accounted for—unless Blacky's suspicions were entirely unfounded. He wondered, too, where Oliver Hellman was.

His hands free, Blacky picked up his gun and reloaded it swiftly, watching Tom Shark all the while. Shark was coming to, and by the time Blacky had holstered his gun, the stocky outlaw was trying to get up.

"Where's Bob Shelby?" Blacky asked.

Shark, weaving groggily to his feet, cursed hoarsely. "I dunno."

"He let you out of jail," Blacky said. "What happened to the man I left with the horses?"

Shark continued to curse Blacky in a low, dull monotone. Then he made an unexpected lunge at Blacky's holstered gun. With a quick drive of his fist, Blacky knocked Shark flat. He left the outlaw where he fell and went out into the other room where the lamp was burning.

The outlaws had been searching this room. The furniture was overturned and the drawers of a small desk were open. This was the right room, but the outlaws hadn't known where to look for the Mallory paper. Across the room from the door was a stone fireplace. Blacky stared at it intently.

Between two large stones near the top, he spotted a smaller, oblong stone.

Blacky crossed to the fireplace. The stone looked to be solidly held in place, but a slight pull revealed that it was loose, easily removed. Blacky pulled it out, thrust his free hand into the opening, and drew out a brown envelope which was folded across the middle. He replaced the stone.

Blacky opened the envelope and drew out a sheet of paper. A quick glance showed that it was the original Mallory map, with the dead outlaw's name at the bottom, and a spot marked with an X. Otherwise it was little different from the diagram which Blacky was carrying in his boot.

The Wells Fargo detective drew Rossmoyne's copy from the top of his boot, put the original in its place, and lighted a match to burn the copy. He fired the paper, held it in his hand until only one corner remained, then threw it into the fireplace.

Thinking the matter over, Blacky decided that Judge Long probably had told the truth; the judge hadn't known what the buried treasure was. Rossmoyne had hoped to get financial backing from the judge, after which Rossmoyne himself would handle the recovery of the loot, merely giving Long his share afterward.

But Blacky knew that Wells Fargo wouldn't try to prove criminal intention against the sheriff. It was even possible that the sheriff had been telling the truth, too, though he had failed to convince Blacky. At any rate, it would be hard to convict Rossmoyne of crime in this case, and Blacky's job was nearly finished now.

The door from the kitchen creaked a little as it opened.

Hearing the sound, Blacky moved fast, wheeling to the right along the wall beside the fireplace. He slid his gun from the holster.

The door opened slowly, inch by inch, until it was pointed straight out into the room. Blacky couldn't see who was there, because the door concealed the visitor, but the big Texan

knew that Jim Trimble's body sprawled in the bedroom doorway should be plainly visible to the wary intruder.

A GUN and the hand holding it moved forward into view past the edge of the half-open door. Blacky tipped his Colt slightly upward, and his finger took up the slack of the trigger. He waited in silence, and a hard, beady light grew in his watchful eyes.

The door was pushed a little farther open. Then for a long moment, there was no sound, no movement. The intruder's gun stood out past the edge of the door as if suspended in mid-air.

Blacky waited, aware that his muscles and nerves were more tense than usual. His face was grim and frozen, and a film of sweat gleamed on his forehead. Unless there were other members of Trimble's gang around, this intruder would be Bob Shelby. Blacky had heard reports of Bob Shelby, and he had sized the man up. Shelby had been a deputy sheriff for years, but Blacky thought he had seen through the lawman's pose. Shelby, if he were after the Mallory loot, might prove to be more dangerous than any two of Trimble's men—tougher than Fant Wheeler, as venomous as Clipper, more ruthless than Trimble or Shark, and as deadly with his guns as the ill-fated Hub Utter had been.

Blacky could fire through the door now or he could take a snap shot at the protruding wrist. But he did neither of these things. He waited.

Suddenly, there was a sound from the bedroom, and an instant later Tom Shark, with a streak of blood on his pale, blocky face and a gun in his right hand, sprang into the doorway beside the dead body of Trimble.

Shark cut a quick glance at the kitchen doorway, then shifted his gaze toward Blacky. His features writhed with hatred.

"Get him, Bob!" Shark yelled, and jerked his gun up.

Blacky pulled the trigger of his Colt twice, and the shots blended in a crashing roar. Tom Shark wilted and Blacky sprang sideways toward the corner of the room.

The kitchen door banged against the wall as Bob Shelby flung it wide open, and then the deputy, crouched and deadly, was shooting. He threw his first shot by sound, at the spot from which he had heard Blacky's gun, but the big Texan had moved.

Shelby's darting eyes found Blacky, and his smoking weapon whipped around as the renegade deputy thumbed the hammer back.

Blacky's heavy gun roared another double blast, the two shots making a single long crash of sound. Bob Shelby dropped his gun, clutched convulsively at his chest, then reeled halfway across the room and went down slowly, stretching out on his face in front of the fireplace.

Blacky looked down at the dead deputy and his mouth was a thin, grim line as he stuffed fresh shells into his smoking gun.

THE horses were where Blacky had left them with Hellman, but the Wells Fargo man was not in sight. Leaving the horses where they stood under the paloverde, Blacky began circling around the yard in the darkness.

A faint, threshing sound in a lean-to shed attracted his attention and he went inside. Oliver Hellman, bound and gagged, was struggling desperately with the ropes which held him. Blacky pulled away the gag and cut Hellman's bonds. The man sat up on the ground, rubbing his arms and legs and muttering curses.

"Did you get the map?" Hellman asked at last.

"I've got it," Blacky said, "but I had to do a lot of fightin' for it. If Trimble's outfit had been smart, and all waded into me at once in there, I wouldn't have had a chance, pard."

Hellman stood up, peering at Blacky

in the darkness. "You sound gloomy. I thought you liked fighting."

Blacky said: "The only thing I regret is Bob Shelby. He started shootin' at me, and I had to shoot back, but I haven't any good proof that he was in with Trimble. Maybe he just heard the noise an—"

Hellman spat. "If that's all that's worrying you, forget it," he said gruffly. "That blasted renegade slipped up behind me and rammed a gun in my back. Tied me up here and then listened to the sounds of combat from the house till he thought it was time for him to go in and see how dead you were. Shelby was in it just the way you thought he was."

Blacky chuckled. "I'm turnin' this Mallory paper over to you, Oliver. And I hope the next job Wells Fargo puts me on won't be quite so rough. I feel kind of bruised up."

Hellman made a growling sound in his throat. "I told 'em to hand you the tough jobs. Just as sure as they put you on as many as two tame assignments in a row, you'd quit 'em cold and start looking for wilder country. Hand me that blasted map."

Be sure to follow Blacky Solone in his next danger-packed assignment for Wells Fargo. This character appears only in Street & Smith's Wild West.



¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *Where and what was Lake Lehanton?*
2. *What are the Dakotas?*
3. *Were North and South Dakota in the Oregon Territory?*
4. *What issue nearly kept Nevada from being a State?*
5. *What is the annual loss to stock raisers by poisonous plants?*
6. *Why was the California bounty on coyotes discontinued?*
7. *What are unfailing symptoms that a horse has eaten loco weed?*
8. *Are bears sheep killers?*
9. *Why are wolves hard to trap?*
10. *If animals have a "sixth sense," why do they eat poisonous plants?*

Answers on page 88

GUN-SMOKE VERDICT

by DEAN OWEN

Granite Creek was at the mercy of the ruthless gun law of Vince Hallcorn—unless Andy Colter could step into Lawyer Thyssen's shoes and balance the scales of justice



A brownish stain was spreading over the front of the driver's shirt, and as a crowd gathered around the stage he suddenly slumped and fell off the seat.

ANDY COLTER awoke abruptly, conscious of streamers of yellow dust whipping through the open window above the Granite Creek general store. It was late afternoon and he had only been asleep two hours in his small room adjoining Lawyer Morg Thyssen's office.

Andy swung long legs off the cot and stared out the window into the blinding sunlight. He had worked all night as barkeep at the Happy Hour Bar and studied most of the morning

in the law office. His brain was drugged with sleep, but he snapped wide awake when he saw the stage from Tucson in the street below. The coach was dusty, the team standing straddle-legged, coats gleaming with sweat and white with lather.

Andy got to his feet, his mop of yellow hair straggling over a tanned forehead. A man's strident yell shocked the stillness.

"The stage! Somethin's wrong!"

That shout brought a chorus of

voices from other men, who were now streaming out of doorways along the dusty main street of Granite Creek. The burning heat had kept most of them indoors, but thoughts of the temperature were driven from their minds now.

A sudden, hollow, empty feeling gripped Andy Colter's stomach. His blue eyes held a light of fear. Not fear for himself, but fear for the man he worshiped, Morg Thyssen, Granite Creek's lawyer. Thyssen was due on that stage, but no passenger had made a move to alight from the coach.

Then Andy saw a movement on the driver's seat. Ben Phills, the driver, sat upright, making feeble motions at the crowd approaching the stage, as if telling them to hurry up. Phills' right hand was held tightly to his side, and a brownish stain showed on his shirt.

Andy was pulling on his pants now, and as he watched, he saw Phills go limp and fall off the seat. A couple of white-aproned clerks from the general store caught him and eased him to the dusty street.

Andy Colter's fear for Morg Thyssen was replaced with sudden burning anger.

"I told him not to go," he said savagely. "Vince Hallcorn or one of his killers is responsible for this."

At that moment Andy caught sight of big Vince Hallcorn, who owned the Bridle Bit Ranch, leaning against a building, chewing on a piece of straw. By his side was his foreman, thin, dark Fred Ducor. And above the two men was a white banner stretched across the street, hung by a rope between two buildings. It read: "Fred Ducor for Mayor."

TOM KNIGHT, the little, gray-haired marshal, was bending over the stage driver.

"He's dead as he'll ever be," the marshal announced.

And it seemed to Andy Colter, looking out the window of his room, that he saw Vince Hallcorn and Fred Ducor smile.

There was a crowd around the stage-coach now and Tom Knight, his marshal's star catching the rays of the hot sun, was looking in through a window of the coach. He shook his head as if unable to understand all this.

Andy Colter turned his back to the window as he heard somebody climb the stairs that ran up the outside of the building and open the door to Morg Thyssen's office. Sweat made a bright sheen across Andy's forehead as he stepped out of his room into the law office.

Little Joe Clampett, who ran the livery, was standing there awkwardly. At sight of Andy Colter's tall, rangy figure, he took off his hat.

"Knight sent me to tell you, Andy—"

"Yes, I know. Morg Thyssen's dead." Andy's voice was hollow and his eyes stared beyond Joe Clampett to the roll-top desk and the battered swivel chair. It seemed that he could see Morg Thyssen's big frame in that chair and hear his booming voice.

Joe Clampett cleared his throat. "I thought a heap of Morg Thyssen, Andy. I used to give his hoss extra curryin' and grain." The little man fumbled with his hat nervously. "You reckon Fred Ducor goin' to trial tomorrow jist before the election has got anything to do with what happened?"

Andy Colter's big hands were knotted into fists. "I reckon that has a lot to do with it."

He could have told Joe Clampett how Morg Thyssen had gone to Tucson three days before to try and find out why Vince Hallcorn of the Bridle Bit was so anxious to control Granite Creek politics that he would run his foreman for mayor. Knowing that the lawyer was out to smash Hallcorn's attempt, Ducor had taken a shot at him a week before. Thyssen had Ducor arrested for assault, but insisted that Andy defend the man.

"Every man has a right to a trial and the right to be defended," Thyssen had said in his booming voice

when Andy had wanted to take a gun and kill Ducor for this murderous attempt on the life of the man he worshipped.

But the lawyer had said: "Guns are for fools who haven't the strength to use the brains they've been born with."

But today in the hot, stuffy confines of Morg Thyssen's office, Andy knew he would need a gun.

Joe Clampett's voice yanked him rudely away from his thoughts.

"You ain't still goin' to defend Fred Ducor, are yuh, Andy?"

Andy nodded. "The circuit judge will be here tomorrow. Trial will go ahead just like nothing had happened."

Andy took his hat off a peg on the wall, clapped it on his head and went down the long flight of stairs to the street below. He walked with a stiff-legged stride, his big hands clenched at his sides. Joe Clampett left him, heading for his livery stable at the other end of town.

TOM KNIGHT was giving a couple of men orders to carry the stage driver's body across the street. The marshal straightened his bent old body when he saw Andy. His face was pale, matching the color of the sweeping

gray mustache which covered his upper lip. He pointed at the stagecoach in the center of the dusty street.

"Better not look in there, Andy. You thought a lot of Morg Thyssen and there ain't nothin' you can do for him now."

Andy Colter's grim face gave no outward sign of the emotion that was tearing at his heart. He only nodded and stepped to the coach, gripping the hot window frames, his knuckles turning white. For a long moment he stared and as he saw the crumpled body of Morg Thyssen, he wondered what bungle fate had made in taking the life of a man as great as this.

Then his eyes began to focus and his mind registered the physical details of the killing. Thyssen had been shot twice through the left side. His long, gray hair was neatly combed and his mustache trimmed as if he had just stepped from Peppo's barber shop.

Andy Colter felt someone tap him on the shoulder and he turned. Big Vince Hallcorn stood there, his red face sweat-marked and stained with dust.

"Too bad about Thyssen, kid," he said, shrugging heavy shoulders. "Guess we all gotta go sometime."

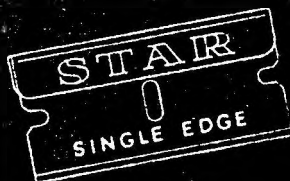
Andy's lips thinned out. "But this

*I NEVER MET A
MAN WITH SO
SMOOTH A CHIN!*

*YOUR FRIENDS
DON'T USE STAR
BLADES, HONEY!*



4 for 10¢



wasn't Morg Thyssen's time to go."

For long seconds the two men stared at each other, and in the hidden depths of Vince Hallcorn's muddy eyes, Andy caught sight of a flame, a flame that increased in brilliance, showing the greed and hatred that had warped the brain of this rancher.

Andy rubbed a big hand over his jaw and let his eyes lower to Hallcorn's matched .41s reposing snugly in cutaway holsters. Then he saw that the man's Levis were sweat-stained, damp, as if he had ridden far and fast in this desert heat. Andy noted this and filed it away in his mind.

Hallcorn's muddy eyes held a strange light when he said: "Hope you make a good job of defendin' Ducor at the trial tomorrow." He smiled then, wiping his forehead with a bandanna. "Glad he got out on bail. Too hot for our future mayor to be cooped up in the calaboose."

With that he turned on his heel and walked off. Andy stared after the rancher for a moment. Then he turned back to the coach, reached in through the window and pulled a long box from the seat beside the dead lawyer. It was then that he noted that Thyssen's pockets were turned inside out.

Andy felt shaken, cold, but he did not allow his feelings to show. He turned to the marshal.

"I'm taking this box. Morg always brought me something when he went to Tucson. I reckon this is it."

With the long box under his arm, Andy walked away from the coach, leaving the townsfolk who were still stunned by the sudden death of their lawyer, Morg Thyssen.

Most of the citizens were men who had come West with their wives to make a new home. And men like Morg Thyssen were the bulwark between them and the lawless guns of Vince Hallcorn and his kind.

BACK in the law office above the general store, Andy Colter untied the cord that held the box together, the one Morg Thyssen had brought from

Tucson. He took off the lid and saw a folded coat inside. Reverently he unfolded the rich, green cloth, noted the fine tailoring, for he had learned to appreciate these things since his association with Morg Thyssen. And as he lifted the coat, something fell to the floor and made a hollow sound as it hit the boards.

A puzzled frown wrinkled Andy's forehead as he laid the coat aside and picked up the object from the floor. It was a piece of lead, distorted and misshapen. He clenched it in his hand tightly and sweat broke out on his forehead, for he realized that this must be one of the slugs that had killed the lawyer.

Andy picked up the coat again, turning it around to the light. There was a bullet hole in the new cloth. Then he put the coat down and for the first time noticed the hole in the box. The slug had evidently entered the box, where it spent its shocking power in the coat after it passed through the lawyer's body.

Andy got to his feet, his tanned face grim and determined. He weighed that bullet carefully in the palm of his hand, noted the lightness of the lead chunk. Then he put it in his pocket and his thoughts went back to Vince Hallcorn and his .41s. The slug from a .41 would weigh just about the same as that pellet of lead in Andy's pocket.

Andy recalled Morg Thyssen's words just before he had boarded the stage for Tucson. "I'm bringing you a coat like mine, Andy. Your first day in court, defending Fred Ducor, you'll have to look like a lawyer as well as act like one."

Now Morg Thyssen was gone and this rich green coat was left as a reminder of the man's greatness.

It was sundown when Andy Colter went downstairs and ate his breakfast at the A-1 Café. Then he stepped into the Happy Hour Bar, took off his coat and tied a white apron around his middle, just below the protruding butt of a Colt .45.

Jim Danver, who ran the bar, stepped up as Andy got ready to get things set for the evening. Danver was a little man with a long, curling brown mustache.

"You figgerin' to keep on tendin' bar for me now that . . . er . . . Morg Thyssen is dead?"

Andy looked down at the little man, his blue eyes inscrutable.

"A lawyer's got to eat, Jim. That is till things break right for him."

Danver nodded, a worried look on his face. "Mebbe you oughta have a change of pasture, Andy. Why don't you head out of here now that Thyssen's dead? A young feller like you ought to move around and see things."

"Vince Hallcorn has been talking, hasn't he?"

Jim Danver's face reddened and he nodded. "I hate to see a nice young feller like you get a ride to boothill. That's what'll happen if Fred Ducor don't go free on that gun charge at the trial tomorrow."

Andy made no comment but set about getting glasses and bottles ready for the after-dinner rush. Jim Danver shrugged his shoulders with resignation and went into the back room.

THE Happy Hour was a big barnlike place with a bar that ran down one side of the room. The opposite side of the place was taken up with poker tables, a faro layout and a chuck-a-luck cage.

The place started filling up early, and as Andy passed out drinks, he wondered what was bringing ranchers into town on a weekday night. He saw Bill Andrews of the Rocking Chair, Mike Halligan from the Shovel Handle and a dozen more of the prominent ranchers of the basin. The men kept together in a little knot at one end of the bar, drinking in silence, their faces strained.

About seven o'clock several of the townspeople began dropping in. Jones of the general store and Charley Mitchell who ran the town's other saloon.

Then Sol Bendix of the Granite Creek bank came in.

Andy knew that something was up then, because Sol Bendix did not drink and this was the first time he could ever recall having seen the man in a saloon.

Joe Clampett walked in through the swing doors then and shuffled up to the bar. The little hostler was plainly worried. It seemed to Andy that his wrinkles were deeper and his hair grayer. Clampett came down to where Andy stood.

"Gimme a double shot, Andy. I'm goin' to need it."

Andy poured the drink and asked what was up.

"Didn't want to worry you this afternoon, with Thyssen gittin' killed and all. But I got a note shoved under my door last night, tellin' me to show up here if I wanted to keep my business. It's some sort of a meetin', but it smells bad to me."

Andy Colter's face was grim as his eyes took in the bitter faces of the men who were gathered in the Happy Hour. And somehow he knew that this tied up with Morg Thyssen's visit to Tucson.

Andy went into the back room for more liquor stock. The rear door was open and at that moment he saw a familiar figure come down the main street, heading for the Mansion House. Andy got an idea and he hastily scribbled a note. When he reached the barroom again, he handed the note to Joe Clampett with a few hasty words of instruction. Clampett grinned and stepped outside. In a few moments he was back and a nod of his head told Andy that the mission was a success.

Marshal Tom Knight came in then. He spotted Andy and told the young lawyer how he had back-tracked the stage road and found sign where two horsemen had stopped the coach.

Andy thought of those bullet wounds in Morg Thyssen's left side.

"Maybe sign showed that only one man was in the saddle when the stage

was stopped," he told the marshal. "Could somebody have gotten out of the stage after the shooting and ridden off with a pard who had waited at the spot with an extra saddle horse?"

Tom Knight scratched his head. "Fact is it did look kinda like that." Then the light of understanding dawned in Tom Knight's faded eyes. "You mean the feller that killed Morg Thyssen could've been ridin' in the stage with him."

The other men in the barroom looked up, for the marshal's last words were loud enough for all to hear. Bill Andrews, of the Rocking Chair, spoke up.

"Too bad Ben Phills didn't live long enough to tell us who was ridin' with Morg Thyssen—"

THE batwings rattled on their loose hinges and the rancher's words were chopped off by the sudden appearance of Vince Hallcorn. He came in with Fred Ducor at his side. The two men didn't come to the bar, but went to one of the poker tables. Ducor sat down, but Hallcorn remained standing.

The Bridle Bit owner's beefy face was red as usual, but there was a confident smile on his lips. The ranchers and townspeople showed their dislike for the two men by not speaking. But that didn't seem to bother Hallcorn.

"Ain't somebody goin' to ask if I got one of them notices to show up here tonight?"

Little Joe Clampett said: "Nobody gives a hoot." Then his face whitened as if realizing he had spit in the devil's face by defying Hallcorn, the most powerful rancher in the basin.

But Vince Hallcorn laughed and Fred Ducor's dark face showed a touch of mirth. Then Hallcorn's lips thinned.

"I didn't get a notice, 'cause it was me that sent for you all."

Andy Colter, standing behind the bar, watched the faces of the ranch-

ers and townspeople. He saw the look of shocked surprise on their faces.

Hallcorn went on talking. "We'll make this short. Every gent here owes money to the bank." He turned to Sol Bendix, the banker, who stood nervously first on one foot, then on the other. "Tell 'em, Bendix," Hallcorn snapped.

The banker spread his hands, misery showing on his face. "Hallcorn has bought up every note from the bank."

Bill Andrews took a threatening step toward the banker.

"Damn you. You sold us out, Bendix!"

The banker stood his ground. "No. Money has been tight. A syndicate in Tucson bought the notes. I didn't know till today that it was a blind, owned by Vince Hallcorn."

There was a moment of stunned silence. Jim Danver appeared in the doorway that led to the back room. Hallcorn pointed a long, bony finger at him.

"Come on in here, Danver. This concerns you, too. There's plenty of bank paper on this place." Then when Danver shuffled into the bar, Hallcorn turned to the ranchers and townspeople. "Two years ago, the drought put most of you down. Everybody in the basin borrowed money to keep goin'. Well, I didn't have to."

Bill Andrews stepped away from the other men, his face white with rage. Andy Colter knew what was coming. He yelled at Andrews, but too late, the man's strident voice was throwing words that could only mean death.

"You got by, Hallcorn, 'cause you rustled our stock. Morg Thyssen was onto you, that's why Ducor took that shot at him."

Hallcorn's lips went flat against his teeth. He ignored the reference to Morg Thyssen. "You callin' me a wide-looper, Andrews—"

Andrews made a desperate grab for his gun and Hallcorn shot him twice in the chest. The tall rancher straight-

ened up on his toes, then fell with a sodden thump to the floor, even before the gun echoes had died.

Hallcorn holstered his smoking gun, looking at Marshal Tom Knight. "You seen it. Self-defense, wasn't it?"

TOM KNIGHT nodded and suddenly **Andy Colter** realized what the death of one man like Morg Thyssen could mean. Thyssen had been the power behind men like Tom Knight, giving them their strength to carry on a thankless job. But now Morg Thyssen was gone and there was no law here in Granite Creek.

Slowly Andy Colter untied his apron and laid it on the bar. Then he stepped out so that he faced Vince Hallcorn. He was strangely calm and even though he knew he might be shot down, he spoke his mind to the men who crowded the Happy Hour Bar in Granite Creek.

Deliberately, he looked down at the body of Bill Andrews sprawled on the sawdust-strewn floor. Then, he met Hallcorn's flat gaze, saw the set, determined look on Fred Ducor's dark face. Turning to the men at the bar, shocked to silence by the sudden death of one of their number, he said:

"Vince Hallcorn has the upper hand now, so there's no use in having another killing or two by bucking him now. There's one thing that men like Vince Hallcorn are afraid of. That's the law. They know that sooner or later it will catch up with them, because the law is right here *now*. I sent for it.

Andy turned toward the back room. "Come on out, judge."

Vince Hallcorn's eyes narrowed as he saw old Judge Clem Beavey step out into the barroom, followed by a tall, thin man in a plug hat. There was a mutter of surprise from the ranchers and townspeople. Fred Ducor got out of his chair, then sank back, his face gray in the lamplight.

Judge Beavey stepped across the room, and taking out a long-barreled

six-shooter, he banged on a poker table.

"Court's in session, gents. We'll start with takin' a jury. Get busy, Rand," he snapped to the man in the plug hat.

Carl Rand, the county prosecutor from Tucson, turned to the men at the bar, but Vince Hallcorn's words stopped him before he could get started. The rancher stepped away from the table, his face white with anger.

"What're you pullin' off here, judge? You ain't due in town till tomorrow."

"Shut up, you," was the judge's cool reply. "You ain't on trial, it's Fred Ducor who'll git a dose of justice. And if I hear any more out of you, I'll get you for contempt of court."

Vince Hallcorn looked as if he was about to strangle with rage. His face grew puffy and two veins stood out on his forehead. He glared at Andy Colter.

"This is your doin's." He dropped a hand to his gun, but Andy shook his head.

"You might kill me, Hallcorn, but the law will get you. Your kind can't win out against law and decency. Now if you'll pardon me, I'll start defending my client, Fred Ducor."

Andy reached behind the bar, took out a long green coat and put it on. It gave him a measure of dignity, but he saw more than one eye on the bullet hole that showed in the back.

VINCE HALLCORN saw that hole, too, and it seemed to Andy that some new fear took hold of the man for he began to splutter again. He turned to the judge.

"You can't hold court in a saloon, judge. It ain't dignified—"

Old Judge Beavey rapped on the table with his gun butt. "Go over and set, Hallcorn. I'm circuit judge of this here county and by grab I'll hold court wherever I feel like."

Vince Hallcorn stood for a moment,

as if undecided, then he shrugged his shoulders, a crafty light in his eyes.

"Guess we might as well get on with the trial." He let his gaze sweep over the men at the bar, honest men, ranchers and townspeople with families, who loathed the gun law of Vince Hallcorn. "We got to have law and order in Granite Creek."

Fred Ducor got up out of his chair, his fists clenched, but Hallcorn went over to him, pushed him back into his seat and laid a hand on his shoulder. Ducor nodded as Hallcorn whispered in his ear.

Two of the men lugged Bill Andrews' body outside. By the time a jury was selected and seated in twelve chairs near Judge Beavey's table, the whole town knew was what going on. Men who had not been invited to Hallcorn's meeting showed up and began crowding into the place.

The prosecutor began reading off the charges against Fred Ducor. The Bridle Bit foreman, and would-be mayor of Granite Creek, squirmed in his chair when he heard himself accused of attempting to murder Morg Thyssen.

When Carl Rand had finished, Andy Colter stepped in front of the twelve jurymen. He felt his heart pounding his ribs and realized that sweat was breaking out on his forehead.

Joe Clampett, who was on the jury, whispered: "Easy does it, Andy. You'll do all right."

Andy looked at the little stable owner and smiled grimly. He got a grip on himself and addressed the jury.

"Morg Thyssen brought law and order to Granite Creek. He was my friend—my best friend. He gave me a chance to study law and I appreciate the privilege. I don't want to let him down now."

The prosecutor got to his feet and turned to Judge Beavey. "We're not interested in Mr. Colter's past life, your honor. We're trying a man."

There was a twinkle in Judge Beavey's eyes. "Confine your remarks to the case, young man," he told Andy.

There wasn't a sound in the barroom as Andy began again. "My client, Fred Ducor, is accused of attempting to murder a citizen of this town, Morg Thyssen." He turned to Ducor, who sat straight and tense in his chair.

"You carry a .45, don't you, Ducor?" The man nodded.

Andy Colter let his eyes sweep over the faces of the men in the barroom. He saw Jim Danver, rubbing his hands on his white apron nervously. The marshal was leaning forward. Vince Hallcorn stood at the bar, alone, a half-filled glass in his hand.

ANDY dug into his pocket and brought out a slug, laying it on the table before old Judge Beavey. "Weigh that slug in your hand, your honor. I think you'll find that it comes from a .41 and not a .45."

The judge picked up the piece of lead as Vince Hallcorn slammed his whiskey glass on the bar. Sweat made a wet streak across his forehead and his voice shook.

"What's all this got to do with tryin' Fred Ducor?"

Judge Beavey hammered on the table with his gun butt.

"Shut up, Hallcorn. I ain't puttin' up with you much longer." Hallcorn was silent then, as Judge Beavey carefully weighed the lead slug in the palm of his hand. He passed it over to the prosecutor.

Rand said: "It's from a .41, I think. That proves nothing, however."

But Andy Colter was looking at Vince Hallcorn, as was every man in the place. For Hallcorn was trying to back up against the bar, pulling his long coat over his guns. Every man in Granite Creek knew that Hallcorn carried .41s. He had often bragged that he could kill a man quicker with a smaller bore gun than with a .45. The balance was better, he had argued.

Now he showed his nervousness because he gulped down the raw whiskey in his glass, staring defiantly at the

men in the barroom. Andy Colter continued, turning his back on Hallcorn.

"Fred Ducor is accused of shooting Morg Thyssen. I am trying to prove his innocence. Ducor uses a .45. The slug I just showed you was one which passed through Morg Thyssen's body and put a hole in this coat I am wearing."

Then he went on to tell how the coat had been in a box beside Morg Thyssen and how he, Andy, had found the slug when he unfolded the coat. As he talked, Andy tried to remember all the things Morg Thyssen had taught him. He was doing what Morg Thyssen wanted. He was defending Fred Ducor. For it was Thyssen's belief that no man should be without the benefit of legal counsel. When Thyssen had suggested that Andy defend Ducor, Hallcorn and his foreman had laughed. Then they apparently realized it would be to their advantage, so they took up the lawyer on the deal.

Andy finished with: "There was more than one man out to kill Morg Thyssen. The man who actually did snuff the life from this great lawyer was afraid of him—afraid that he might upset well-oiled plans."

Carl Rand got to his feet. "We're not trying the killer of Morg Thyssen. The man has not even been arrested yet. We're trying Fred Ducor."

It was then that Vince Hallcorn started to move toward the batwings. Andy Colter's voice made him turn.

"I suggest, your honor, that Hallcorn be restrained from going outside. Chances are he'll round up some of his Bridle Bit hands and try to get Ducor out of this."

Hallcorn started to splutter, but the judge pounded on the table. "You stick around, Hallcorn. Mebbe you got ideas of gittin' your foreman away from the law."

The Bridle Bit owner saw the hateful looks thrown his way by the men he had only a short time before tried

to push to the wall. He had tried to hold a club over their heads by buying up their notes from the bank. The first step would have been to have citizens and ranchers vote Fred Ducor into office as mayor.

BUT now Vince Hallcorn realized the sand was running out of his hourglass. He straightened, and sudden resolution gave a set look to his features. He pointed a long finger at Andy Colter.

"Somebody hit you in the pants with a law book and now you think you're good as Morg Thyssen. Why, he was my friend."

Andy saw that Hallcorn was backing slowly to the door. The marshal seemed in no hurry to carry out the judge's orders to keep the rancher inside.

It was then that Andy put in his final word. "We're not trying you, Hallcorn. You killed Morg Thyssen, but your trial will come later. You rode in the stage with Thyssen from Tucson, then at a given point, you killed him. Ducor had a horse staked out and you rode into town. Ben Phills, the driver, wasn't dead and you had to hurry up to town to kill him if he talked. But Phills died after bringing the stage in and out-running you and Ducor."

Men began to shout at once and several made a grab for Vince Hallcorn. But the Bridle Bit owner jumped back, pulling both .41s from cutaway holsters.

Andy Colter was no gun hand, but at the instant he saw Hallcorn's paws go for his weapons, he yanked at the .45 stuck in his belt.

Only a fleeting part of a second had elapsed since Andy had made the accusation of murder. Judge Beavey was on his feet. Fred Ducor tried to run out the back door, but someone tripped him.

Then gunsmoke and thunder rocked the barroom. Andy knew that one of the slugs from Hallcorn's guns had

found its mark. He went to his knees, the image of Vince Hallcorn swimming before his eyes.

Then he rolled over on the sawdust as Hallcorn fired a slug into the floor by his head. Men were shoving, pushing and yelling. Andy dropped the hammer of his gun. He fired from a cramped position, but the bullet split the distance between Hallcorn's eyes. The man dropped as if slugged on the head.

Andy was helped to his feet. Blood ran down his leg, but he was not conscious of the pain. He stared at the body of Vince Hallcorn, then looked over to where Tom Knight and Carl Rand had hold of Fred Ducor. The jurymen had left their chairs when the shooting had started, and stood in various parts of the barroom. Some were just coming out from under tables when Andy said: "I've made my final plea for my client, Fred Ducor."

Then Judge Beavey hammered on the table. "Where's the jury? I want to know whether Ducor is guilty or not guilty."

"He's guilty as hell!" shouted little

Joe Clampett. And the other eleven jurymen echoed his verdict.

They laid Andy out on the bar and cut away his pants leg. The wound was not serious, but pain was beginning to make his head swim. Judge Beavey's words helped clear his head.

"For a lawyer who lost his first case, I'd say you sure got a future, young feller."

Andy propped himself up on his elbow, running his hand over the smooth green cloth of the coat had had been his last present from Morg Thyssen.

"Fred Ducor oughta pay up because I defended him. Maybe Vince Hallcorn's estate can contribute a bit, too."

"What's on your mind, son," asked old Judge Beavey.

"I want to buy Morg Thyssen the best tombstone that Granite Creek has ever seen. I want folks around here to remember that it was him that helped bring law to the West. Maybe some day kids will be reading about him in school."

Old Judge Beavey nodded. "Yep, as long as there are men like Morg Thyssen bein' born, I reckon the scales of justice will be pretty well balanced."

THE END.



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HOT-LEAD DECISION

by CLAY STARR

Dapper Donnelly had taken lead chips in that cutthroat game of range poker—and he was waiting for the powder-smoke payoff to prove that the hand is quicker than the eye

CHAPTER I

THE BANK ROBBERY

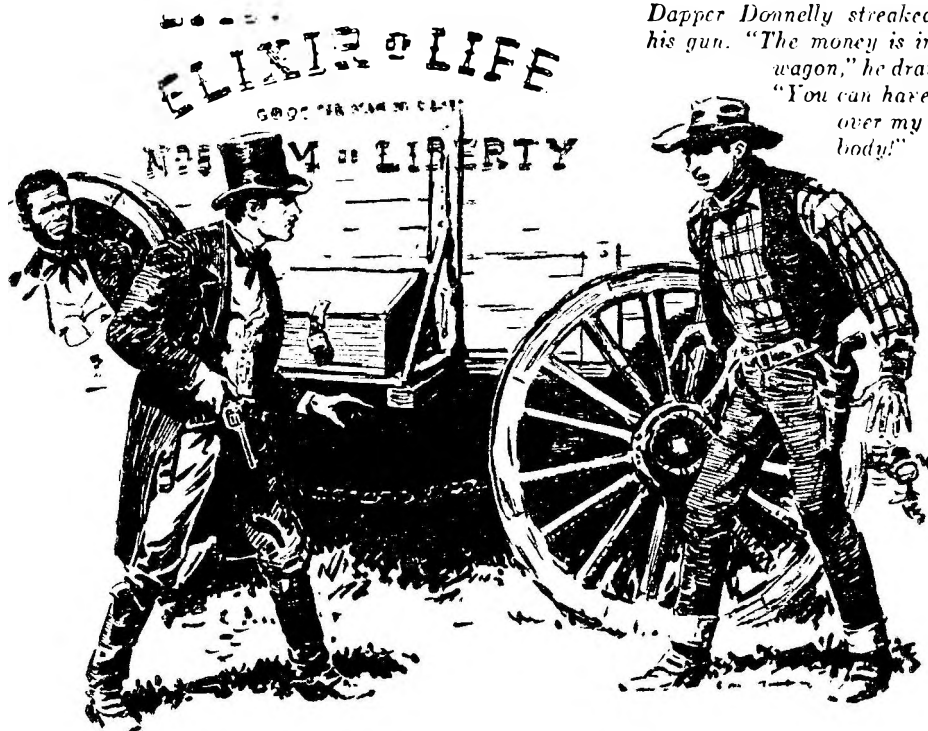
THE clear mellow notes of a distant bugle interrupted the noonday fiesta of Fortuna which was drowsing in the warm Texas sun. Lazy cow ponies tugged at tie rails as a bright-red wagon, drawn by four big horses, rolled down the main street.

Napoleon Calhoun handled the leather ribbons expertly, sitting up straight and proud in the driver's seat.

Dr. Dapper Donnelly sat beside the weazened little colored man, clad as usual in his immaculate suit of black broadcloth. Painted in big gold letters on the huge wagon was a message of hope for the afflicted and the infirm.

It announced that Dr. Dapper Donnelly's Elixir of Life was good for man and beast, and that his Nostrum of Liberty would work wonders for the lame and the halt. The four big horses tossed their plumes of pampas

Dapper Donnelly streaked for his gun. "The money is in the wagon," he drawled. "You can have it—over my dead body!"



grass proudly, and the two little men on the seat of the big red wagon looked the picture of perfect health.

As the wagon passed the Drover's Bank, two men ran from the building, mounted their horses, which were ground-tied at the rail, and spurred away in a cloud of dust.

Napoleon tooled his horses into a vacant lot across the street from the bank between the jail and the Longhorn Hotel. The brass-railed vestibule on the back of the wagon faced the street without obstructing traffic, and a big man stepped forward to shake hands with the dapper doctor as he opened the doors to the vestibule from the inside.

"Howdy, doc," the big man welcomed Donnelly. "I haven't seen you since the year of the big wind."

"Sheriff Don Brenton," Donnelly said heartily, and gripped the peace officer's hand. But the little doctor's face wore a more serious expression as he asked in a low voice: "Who were those two gents who hightailed away from the bank just now?"

Before the sheriff could answer, a slightly built man ran across the street, calling excitedly. His snow-white hair was disheveled, and a trickle of blood was seeping down on his pink, smooth-shaven face.

"The bank has been robbed, Sheriff Brenton! The two bandits both wore masks, but the big one looked like Notch Buell. They got away with twenty thousand in paper and gold!"

"He's crazy, sher'ff," a deep voice answered behind Brenton. "I've been here all the time, looking over these big horses. I might buy them from that runt in gambler's rigging."

DAPPER DONNELLY faced about with his right elbow throwing the long tail of his coat aside. He was five feet four in his high-heeled boots, weighed a hundred and twenty-five pounds, but he carried the difference in the holster belted around his slim hips.

"Were you referring to me, you suspected robber?" he asked. His tone was polite, but his black eyes were pin points of warning.

"Eat crow, you blasted quack!" the big man said hoarsely. "I'm Notch Buell, and I never shot a man in the back. Tread water, or fill your hand!"

Dapper Donnelly waved his left hand carelessly as though brushing a fly from his coat. His right hand darted down and came up filled with gun metal to catch Buell flat-footed. Buell stared at the balanced .45 Colt Peacemaker in Donnelly's hand, then burst into a forced, rollicking laugh.

"Salty little galoot, ain't he, sher'ff?" he remarked to Don Brenton. "Did it occur to you that the two robbers might have been pals of his? The bank was robbed while everybody in town was watching him and his red wagon."

A roaring gust of smoke plumed from Dapper Donnelly's six-shooter to jerk the gray Stetson from Buell's shaggy head. The big man gulped and appealed to the sheriff.

"Yo're the law here, Don. Arrest this hairpin for discharging firearms within the city limits!"

"I'll plead guilty, and pay my fine," Donnelly told the sheriff.

"And I'll release you on your own promised word," the sheriff answered. He turned to Buell. "The big hombre who robbed Banker Crowley looked like you, Notch," he said meaningly. "I'm the law like you mentioned, but mebbe you can prove an alibi."

"Of course, of course, my lawful colleague," a smooth voice spoke unctuously. "I, Legal Vinson, attorney at law, can vouch for the whereabouts of my client, Notch Buell. He was in my office until this medicine-show man rolled into our fair town with his gaudy conveyance. It is your duty to arrest this little man who broke our laws. I insist that you do your duty, and that he be confined until his trial."

Dapper Donnelly looked the lawyer over from boots to wide-brimmed Stetson. Legal Vinson was a big man who

had gone fat with easy living. He wore a winged collar, a black string tie and a gray frock coat with striped trousers. A .45 six-shooter hung on his right thigh.

"The fine is twenty-five dollars and costs," Donnelly said. "I'll pay it to the sheriff, and if I have any legal work to do, I'll know whom to stay away from. I don't see how you stand the heat with all that lard you carry around, law shark!"

Dapper Donnelly was usually calm and composed, but right now he was thoroughly aroused. Holstering his pistol, he reached for his wallet and handed the sheriff three ten-dollar bills.

"I'll be right here for several days if you want me, sheriff," he said, with a little ringing hum in his deep voice. "Now if you will excuse me, gentlemen, and what the law didn't catch, I will retire for my daily siesta. The show starts at three o'clock this afternoon."

NAPOLEON had unhitched the horses, and was fitting feed bags in place. There were two pure-white and two coal-black horses, each of which weighed a ton. When he had finished, Napoleon came forward with a smile that showed his strong white teeth, and took off his hat to the crowd.

"The doctah has spoken with the voice of wisdom, folks," he said in a pleasant mellow voice. "We will entertain you-all with music and song, with feats of legerdemain and prestidi-

gitation. After the show I gives hair-cuts and shaves for a nominal fee, and the doctah will pull teeth for a slightly higher remuneration. Yas, sah, and we bids you one and all a polite good afternoon until the big show starts at three o'clock sharp!"

Dapper Donnelly had walked back inside the wagon while Napoleon was talking. Notch Buell glared at the colored man and slapped for his belt gun.

"Naw, yuh don't, jockey," he growled. "That quack doc can't walk out on me this way. He's under arrest!"

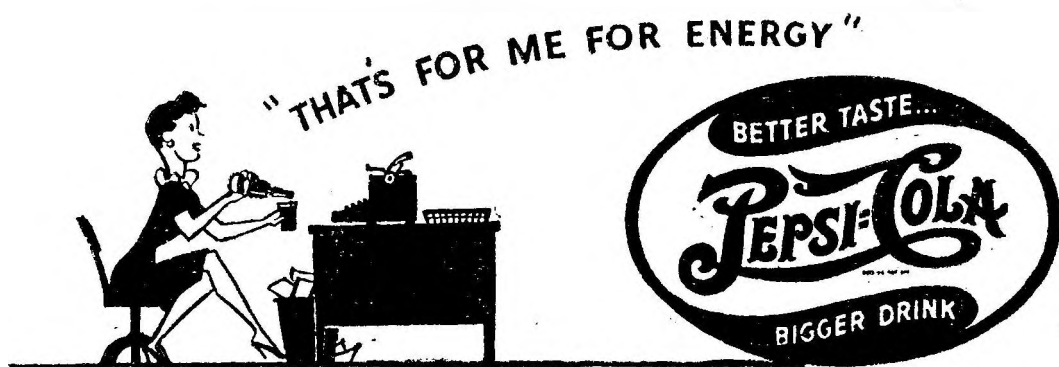
"Says who?" Sheriff Brenton asked sharply. "Since when are you any part of the law, my notch-whittlin' friend?"

Turning his head, Buell stared into the muzzle of the sheriff's gun. Buell's own gun was in his hand, but he was facing toward the wagon away from Brenton. He acknowledged defeat with a shrug as he holstered his weapon.

"Mebbe you and the doc is pards," he sneered.

"Mebbe we are," snapped the sheriff. "I'd rather have Dapper Donnelly for a pard than the shady characters you associate with. Lay your hackles, Legal," he said to the lawyer. "If you ain't satisfied, I'll name a few names. I'll be watching you, Notch Buell!"

"Now you lishen to me, shur'ff," a drunken voice interrupted, and a whiskered saloon bum staggered across the lot. "I seen Notch and Legal in



the lawyer's offish, and I'll swear to same on the witness stand!"

Sheriff Brenton turned to stare at the speaker. Whiskey Walters was the town bum. He swamped in the Longhorn Saloon for his meals and slept in the livery barn. He was tall and lanky, dressed in mismatched cast-off clothing, and his age might have been around fifty.

"Where was Jim Jackson of the Two J's back to back?" Walters demanded. "I heard him making threats yesterday in the saloon after Banker Crowley had refused to renew his loan. Said he'd get the money if he had to steal it, thash what he said."

"You're a drunken old liar, Walters," the sheriff accused bluntly. "You'd rather lie for credit than tell the truth for cash. Gwan away, you draw flies."

"I know what I know," Walters insisted drunkenly. "I was swamping out Legal Vinson's offish, and him and Notch were talking business when the bank was held up and robbed. You can't push me around this town like you been a-doin' 'er."

"I'll buy you a drink for that, Whiskey," Notch Buell said with a grin. "Join us, Legal?"

DAPPER DONNELLY came to the door of the vestibule as the three men walked away. He touched the sheriff on the shoulder, and Don Brenton turned slowly.

"Jim Jackson is an old friend of mine, sheriff," Donnelly said. "Is he pressed for ready cash?"

"He owes three thousand at the bank, and he can't raise the money," Brenton answered sadly. "Jim lost his wife last year, and she'd been sick a long time. Took every dollar Jim could earn or borrow to pay the bills."

Dapper Donnelly nodded and walked across the street to the bank. He had a talk with Banker Crowley, some money was passed, after which Donnelly tucked a legal paper in the inside pocket of his coat.

As he was leaving the bank, Donnelly almost collided with Legal Vin-

son, who was coming through the front door. Both men side-stepped, elbowing coat tails away from their holstered guns. Vinson shrugged and walked on into the bank, and Donnelly returned to his wagon.

Napoleon Calhoun stood just inside the door with a double-barreled shotgun in his wrinkled black hands. Donnelly raised his eyebrows, and the colored man explained.

"That Whiskey bum walked in here right after you left, boss. He didn't say nuthin', and I said the same thing, but he lit a shuck when he see old Betsy in my hands. What you reckon he wanted, boss?"

"Whiskey," Donnelly answered with a smile. "I've seen that hombre before, but I can't place him behind all that brush he wears on his face. Perhaps he wanted a shave."

"Nah suh, doctah," Napoleon said positively. "When I reached for my razor, he took out on a dead run. Didn't seem a bit drunk the way he picked 'em up and laid 'em down making tracks back to the Longhorn Saloon."

Donnelly yawned. "Call me in an hour," he told Napoleon. "I'm taking a nap before the show opens."

CHAPTER II

PARTNERS

DAPPER DONNELLY was not asleep as he rested on the comfortable bunk behind the driver's seat in the big red wagon. It was five years since he had last been in Fortuna, and he remembered that there had been trouble in the little cow town then.

Now the bank had been robbed, several of the cowmen were in financial difficulties, and Sheriff Brenton had mentioned that cattle had been rustled. As Donnelly thought of his old friend, Jim Jackson, he sat up on the bunk and called to Napoleon.

"Bolt my saddle on Blanco," he told the little colored man. "It is only four miles to the Two J's back to back, and I'm riding out to see Jim Jack-

son. You stay here and look after things. I'll be back before the show starts."

"Yas, suh, boss," Napoleon answered politely. "But keep yore hand right close to your shootin' pistol, doc-tah."

A few minutes later Donnelly rode away on the big white horse. A black Stetson was pulled low over his eyes. The open range started in at the end of the one dusty street, and the big horse swung into an easy lope which he maintained for half an hour.

Up ahead through a break in the brush, Donnelly could see the gate posts which marked the front entrance into the 2J ranchyard. Two men were facing each other with hands on their guns, a third man was lying on the ground under a tie rail.

Dapper Donnelly pulled the white to a sliding stop, and stepped down a-running. One of the men was old Jim Jackson, the other a tall brawny stranger who wore the rigging of a cowboy.

"Howdy, Jim!" Donnelly greeted his old friend. "Is this a private fight, or can anyone get in?"

"Dapper Donnelly!" the old cattle-man shouted. His wind-roughened voice carried a note of relief. "In case you don't know this buscadero who just knocked young Jack from under his hat, meet Ramrod Farley. He's Legal Vinson's segundo, and he lets on that his boss owns the Two J spread."

"Howdy, Farley," Dapper Donnelly said to the big stranger. "What's this about Vinson owning the Two J spread?"

"Not that it's any of yore business, but Legal bought up the mortgage on this run-down outfit," Farley answered. "I'd advise you not to buy chips in a game that's already sewed up tight."

Dapper Donnelly leaned forward a trifle, looking Farley squarely in the eyes. The 2J was run down, and old Jim Jackson had aged since Donnelly had last seen him. Young Jack had

been sixteen then, which would make him a grown man now.

"The game ain't sewed up," Donnelly remarked coldly. "Even if your boss bought Jim's paper, he has to serve an eviction notice, and allow a reasonable length of time for Jim to either pay up, or move out."

"Sez you," Farley sneered. "You ain't wide enough across the britches to tell me anything, and I never did cotton to pilgrims. Get on your horse and ride off, little man, before I come apart and do you a meanness!"

"Come apart whenever the spirit moves you," Dapper Donnelly invited coolly. "I've made my ante in this game, and I'll play out my hand. I didn't see the fight, but I'm betting my Stetson you hit young Jack on a sneak."

"Why, you half-pint dude," Farley sneered. "You're heeled, so make your pass!"

Donnelly's right hand flashed down just as Farley started to draw his gun. Pale flame winked out from Dapper Donnelly's hand, and Farley's gun went spinning across the yard.

Ramrod Farley's right arm jerked back and sent the big man into a half turn. He stared at his numbed hand, sighed with relief when he saw that it was not injured.

Jack Jackson had crawled out from under the tie rail and ducked his head in the horse trough. Now he was staring at the smoking gun in Dapper Donnelly's hand. Old Jim whispered to his son. Jack shook his head vigorously as he started across the dusty yard.

"You hit me while you had a cocked gun in your hand, Farley," young Jackson muttered thickly, as he moved in on Farley. "I'll bet my horse and saddle agin' yours that you can't do it again!"

Ramrod Farley backed up with a scowl on his craggy face. Dapper Donnelly holstered his gun and spoke softly.

"Let's you and Jack fight, Ramrod. I knew you had pulled a sneak."

THERE was little physical difference between Ramrod Farley and young Jack Jackson. Both were six feet tall, saddle lean, and weighed around a hundred and seventy pounds. Farley was ten years older, with that much more experience, but young Jackson had youth on his side, and was Texas born.

Ramrod Farley leaped in, swinging both big fists. Jack ducked under the blows, jabbed to the body with his left fist, and brought a swinging uppercut from his boots. The blow caught Farley under the chin and knocked him to the seat of his pants, but he rolled like a cat and came up swinging.

Jack Jackson stepped inside the swing, chopping short-armed blows at Farley's face. He drove Farley back under an incessant hammering which cut the man's face to ribbons.

Ramrod Farley bobbed his head and lashed out suddenly with his right boot. Young Jackson caught the boot and spilled Farley to the ground. He was all set for the kill when his opponent rolled up.

As Farley got to his feet, Jack gave him no time to catch his balance. A left jab turned Farley just so, and Jack put all his weight behind the straight right which crashed against the older man's rugged jaw.

Legal Vinson's segundo grunted and sagged forward like a worn rope, measuring his length face down in the dust. Young Jack scuffed his worn boots. Farley deserved a taste of the boots, but Jack controlled his impulse to kick the downed man and lowered his foot with a shake of his tousled head.

"Thanks for giving me a fighting chance, Dapper," he said quietly, offering his big hand. "Looks like me and old Jim are starting all over again."

"You called the turn, yearlin'," a rough voice interrupted, and Notch Buell rode into the yard with a cocked gun in his hand. "Me and Ramrod are taking over the Two J. The rest of you saddle tramps are trespassing!"

Dapper Donnelly turned slowly to face Buell. Jim Jackson's shoulders

drooped dejectedly, but young Jack was going to make a fight of it.

"Hold it, Jack!" Donnelly spoke sharply. "That big gun swift is itching to whittle your notch on his meat gun. He can't get us both, and he won't take a chance unless he knows he's betting on a sure thing!"

"So I'll clip your wings first," Buell answered, and turned his gun on Donnelly. "Make your pass!"

Dapper Donnelly knew that he could never finish his draw against Buell's drop. Jack Jackson was unarmed, and Notch Buell was coppering his bet. The doctor smiled as another rider appeared under the big gate rafter.

"Don't burn powder, Notch," a lazy voice drawled. "I've got my cutter centered on your back and the hammer eared back. Sid Colter speaking!"

Notch Buell hastily holstered his .45 six-shooter. Sid Colter owned the S Bar C and was Jackson's neighbor to the south. Buell swung around to face the man as he rode into the yard.

"You're a pauper, Colter," the gunman said bluntly. "We bought the mortgage on your spread. You've got until sundown to get off the property!"

"I've got thirty days to pay up, or get off," Colter corrected. "Glad to see you, doc."

"The same, Sid," Dapper Donnelly answered warmly, and turned to Jack Jackson. "Throw Buell off the place for trespassing without due processes of law," he told the eager cowboy.

Young Jackson made a leap and tore Notch Buell from the saddle. Buell hit the ground, rolling over and pawing for the gun in his holster. Jack measured his man and drove a crashing right to the jaw. The gun flew from Notch's right hand.

"What d'you mean, Buell's trespassing?" the youngster asked. "Spell it out, Dapper."

"If you and your pa owed me three thousand with interest, would you pay it off in time?" Donnelly asked.

"I'd pass my word, and I ain't never broke it up to now," Jim Jackson growled.

"Here's the mortgage on your spread," Donnelly said, and handed a stiff paper to Jim Jackson. "Legal Vinson went to Banker Crowley to buy the mortgage, but I beat him to it. These two sleepers think that Vinson made the deal knowing that Crowley is broke and needs ready cash to stay in business."

Jim Jackson took the paper and offered his gnarled right hand. He tried to speak, but there was a lump in his throat. He turned his face to hide the scalding mist which threatened to spill from his gray eyes.

"Me and Jim won't forget, Dapper," young Jack promised earnestly. "We will either pay you back, or count you in as partner in the Two J outfit."

"Time will tell," Donnelly answered with a smile. "Which just reminds me that my show opens at three o'clock. I'll be seeing you."

CHAPTER III

BOOMERANG

DAPPER DONNELLY rode back to town at a leisurely pace. Napoleon could not open the show and keep the crowd interested. Dapper was trying to work out a mental problem.

It was no longer a secret that Legal Vinson had formed a partnership with Notch Buell and Ramrod Farley. A ramrod was always the foreman of a cattle outfit. Sid Colter and Jim Jackson had both been in debt to the Drover's Bank. After the robbery, Banker Crowley was broke.

Dapper Donnelly had his suspicions, but it took more than suspicion to convict a man in court. Donnelly's face changed as he thought of the town bum, Whiskey Walters, and then he shrugged. Walters was a slave to strong drink, would do anything to assure himself of a steady supply.

Napoleon was playing a cornet solo when Dapper Donnelly rode into town. The doctor cut around to a back street and rode up behind the big red wagon without attracting attention.

Napoleon saw his boss coming and

repeated the last chorus of his solo. He finished on a high note and took his bows, flashing a smile at the crowd of men who had gathered to see the show.

"There is one man in the world which has no peer in the art of sleight of hand, gentlemen," Napoleon began in his mellow voice. "He is the non parallel of magicians who has traveled in far-off countries to learn his art. Gives me great pleasure to introduce—*Dr. Dapper Donnelly!*"

Donnelly stepped out on the little vestibule with a guitar in his small white hands. The instrument was held by a silken cord tied at the back of his neck. Donnelly acknowledged the applause with a bow as he swept the gut strings in a series of chromatic chords.

"Greetings, my friends," Donnelly said with a smile. "It seems fitting and proper that I should sing you a song of troublesome times. In my song, I will touch briefly upon the highlights in the life of Sam Bass, the outlaw."

The cowboys moved closer with interest. Sam Bass had been a top-hand cowboy before a life of crime had lured him away from the straight and narrow, but the law had finally caught up with him. It was an old story, but the doctor had a pleasing baritone voice, and the music from his Spanish guitar was flawless.

Dapper Donnelly laid the guitar aside when he finished the song and plucked a big silk handkerchief from the air. His nimble fingers performed the usual routine while he studied the faces of the men who watched his hands.

Legal Vinson was standing at the outer fringes of the crowd, watching with amused contempt. Donnelly saw the sneering smile as he waved his hands across a tall silk hat resting on a little table.

"There is a viper among us, gentlemen," Donnelly announced in a low voice. "He steals from the poor and the oppressed, and he strikes with-

out warning. Watch me closely, my friends, and I will try to produce the symbol of his treachery!"

A hush fell over the crowd as Dapper Donnelly made several passes across the silk hat. Men gasped when Donnelly reached quickly inside the hat and held up a wriggling snake. They recognized it at once as a deadly rattlesnake, the sidewinder of the Southwest desert country.

"Bah!" Legal Vinson said mockingly. "That varmint has his stinger pulled, and his boss won't be any different!"

"Are you sure of your statement, counselor?" Dapper Donnelly asked with a disarming smile. "Will you prove your testimony by letting the harmless reptile strike you."

A scream rose from the front ranks, and Whiskey Walters broke from the crowd. Dapper Donnelly watched the barfly with no change of expression, as he invited Legal Vinson to make the test, holding the wriggling snake toward the lawyer.

"That's one time old Whiskey really saw a snake," a cowboy said with a chuckle. "Back up your spiel, shyster, or bridle your loose jaw. You said he was harmless."

"I have no time for such buffoonery," Vinson answered.

"Take the gentleman's brother away, Napoleon," Dapper Donnelly said with a shrug, dropping the snake into a little wire cage.

LEGAL VINSON sputtered and elbowed back the tail of his gray frock coat. Napoleon threw a glass ball high into the air and flame erupted from the striking hand of Dapper Donnelly. The glass ball broke into a shower of fragments before the explosion was heard, and Vinson hastily dropped his clawed hand to his side.

"The hand is quicker than the eye, my friends," Donnelly's smooth voice broke the startled silence. "My Nostrum of Liberty works upon the aches and miseries of the flesh with equal suddenness, and Dapper Don-

nelly's Elixir of Life will cause you to stop searching for the fountain of youth."

The crowd listened attentively as Dapper Donnelly told them of the distant lands he had visited while collecting rare herbs and oils for his curative medicines.

"Two dollars a bottle, three for five," Donnelly warmed up to his work. "Good for man and beast, and the supply is unlimited while it lasts. Three bottles to the handsome cowboy on my left!"

Napoleon helped make sales while Dapper Donnelly took in the money and made change. The crowd clamored for more entertainment, but Donnelly told them that there would be another show at eight o'clock that evening.

Two men rode into town on sweating horses, and headed straight for Legal Vinson. The lawyer frowned as he stared at the battered face of Ramrod Farley who leaned down to whisper from his saddle. Notch Buell was watching the crowd which had turned to stare at Farley.

Legal Vinson listened with a scowl of anger darkening his round, fat face. When Farley straightened up in the saddle, Vinson strode forward toward the railed vestibule.

"So it was you who bought the paper on the Two J outfit," he snarled at Dapper Donnelly. "You seek to take advantage of an old man who has known only misery and misfortune!"

Every man in the crowd knew Jim Jackson and his son, and the troubles of the pair. Angry murmurs began to grow louder, and there were mutters about a new rope and a tall tree.

Dapper Donnelly watched the crowd with no outward sign of fear, because he felt none. He was a man of iron nerves, a man who had witnessed the horrors of war between the States. He placed the tall silk hat on his black head, his dark glittering eyes daring Vinson and his henchman to make a fight out of the issue.

"I was going to help old Jim Jackson," Legal Vinson said in a tear-jerking voice. "I was going to buy up his mortgage and give it to old Jim as a present. But this stranger creeps among us like a thief in the night, buys up the paper, and leaves Jim and his son without a home!"

Dapper Donnelly made no answer. Only the corners of his thin lips curled slightly, and the smile infuriated Notch Buell.

"You ain't fitten to live, Donnelly! Get yourself ready to die!"

Buell shouted the challenge with his right hand gripping his gun. His battered face twisted with vicious anger, but Dapper Donnelly made no move. His black eyes widened a trifle as a square-shouldered man moved up behind Notch Buell.

Dapper Donnelly recognized Sid Colter, and he could see the expression of determination on the cattleman's face. Colter was fifty-odd, but young enough to settle his own scores. His voice was like a bull fiddle as he gave Notch Buell the lie.

"Yo're a contaminated liar, you killing son! Light down off that cayuse and face a man you and yore pards have made a pauper!"

AS Notch Buell swung his horse around, Ranrod Farley used the cover to reach for his gun. He stopped the move when Dapper Donnelly coughed softly. Donnelly had his coat tail elbowed back, and Farley had already seen a demonstration of the doctor's skill.

"You and the law sharp stay out of this," Donnelly said without raising his voice. "Vinson bought up Sid Colter's mortgage, and he's feeling big-hearted today. Sid Colter has had rustler trouble, and Legal Vinson wants mebbe to help him."

"That fat shyster sent his two killers out to run me off my own ranch," Sid Colter shouted. "They tried the same thing on old Jim Jackson and his boy. Farley knocked young Jack cold when the yearlin' wasn't looking.

Dapper Donnelly bought up old Jim's mortgage and gave it back to Jim, but I've got some snake killin' of my own to do. Start pitchin' smoke, Notch Buell!"

"I don't want to kill you, Colter," Buell said smoothly. "Why don't you and Legal talk things over? He might give you some time to pay off what you owe. How about it, Legal?"

Legal Vinson was in a tight, and he knew it. The boomerang he had thrown at Dapper Donnelly had returned to him, and only quick thinking could save him from the anger of the crowd.

"Exactly my intention," he said, with a patronizing smile. "You owe me four thousand dollars, and I will give you three days in which to raise the cash, old friend."

"I'm no friend of yours," Sid Colter contradicted the lawyer. "My outfit is worth all of twenty thousand, and you know I can't raise the cash now that the bank has been robbed!"

"It might be possible," a hesitant voice interrupted, and Banker Crowley stepped out of the crowd. "I have some funds coming on the night stage. I'll lend you enough to meet your mortgage until you sell your shipping beef."

Sid Colter forgot about Notch Buell as he received the new lease on life. He turned to the banker, shook hands silently, and mounted his horse.

"You've been a good friend to us cattlemen, Crowley," he said from the saddle. "We won't be forgetting."

"The evening show starts at eight sharp," Dapper Donnelly announced, as the crowd was drifting away. "Napoleon and I will entertain you with music and song, and with magic from faraway Hindustan. Until then, we bid you all a cordial farewell."

CHAPTER IV

SNAKE POISON

SHERIFF BRENTON came to the medicine-show wagon as the long shadows of summer twilight began to darken. Dapper Donnelly was smok-

ing an after-supper stogie, drawing on the fragrant weed with evident enjoyment.

Donnelly glanced up and flicked the ash from the end of his cheroot. His thin face was smooth and unlined, a decided contrast to the worried countenance of the law.

"I wish you could help me, doc," the sheriff half mumbled. "I've been trying for more than a year to pin something on Notch Buell and Ramrod Farley. They always have plenty of money, but they don't work for it."

Dapper Donnelly stopped smiling and a thoughtful look narrowed his eyes. He knew what was worrying the sheriff.

"It was unwise of Banker Crowley to announce publicly that he was expecting money on the night stage," Donnelly murmured. "But it might give you the chance you've been waiting for, Don."

"Yeah," the sheriff admitted with a gusty sigh. "The stage had always been held up at the same place. The driver has to blow his teams at the top of the Coyote Pass grade."

"Get up a cowboy posse and hide out near the top of the grade," Donnelly suggested.

The sheriff sighed. "I tried that once, and three cowboys were killed," he answered. "Now they all say they didn't lose any road agents, and that they don't have a dollar on the stage. My deputy was killed last month, and none of these young huskies wants the job."

"Sorry I can't ride with you tonight, sheriff," Donnelly voiced his regrets. "My show opens at eight o'clock and runs for at least two hours."

"The stage tops the grade just about nine thirty," Brenton murmured, as though he were talking to himself. "I'll stake out in the brush. If I'm not back by eleven, ride out and take a look for me."

"Keep your powder dry, sheriff," Donnelly said with a smile. "It might work out all right. I'll watch the crowd to see who isn't there, and I'll

come a-riding if you don't show at eleven."

Dapper Donnelly smoked slowly, turning the stogies in his long tapering fingers. He saw the sheriff ride down the dusty street, carrying a rifle in the saddle boot on the left side.

Donnelly got up from his chair, walked inside the wagon and took a light fowling piece from brackets over his bunk. He used it to bag quail and doves when the hunting was good, and the shotgun was a dangerous weapon in the hands of an expert.

Napoleon came in and watched with curiosity widening his eyes. Without speaking, he went to his own bunk and came back with his sawed-off shotgun.

"What time we riding, boss?" Napoleon inquired carelessly, as his big black hands caressed the deadly scattergun.

"We are not riding," Donnelly answered flatly. "You stay here to guard our outfit. Have Midnight saddled and ready to go right after the show, and put my shotgun in the saddle scabbard. Now you better get into your fancy duds to open the show."

"Yas, suh, boss," Napoleon answered, trying to keep the disappointment from his voice. "The show must go on, doctah!"

NAPOLÉON lighted the coal-oil lamps which stood in brass stands at each corner of the brass-railed vestibule. He was dressed in his plum-colored uniform with gleaming buttons which shone like gold. As he placed the little table on the vestibule, Napoleon muttered to himself.

"Snakes," he mumbled. "This yere old town of Bailey is plumb crawling with the varmints."

"What did you say?" Dapper Donnelly asked, as he caught part of Napoleon's words. "This town is Fortuna."

"Yas, suh, boss," Napoleon answered glumly. "But was a time mebbe ten years back when she was called Bailey. It war named after an old miser by

the name of Tom Bailey, but they changed the name when he up and died after getting bit by a sidewinder."

"Put my mouth organ and the wire frame out," Donnelly said carelessly. "I'll open with a song of our homeland, after which we will sing a duet together. Then you play a trumpet solo and double on the banjo, and I'll come in with my guitar."

"Like you said, boss," Napoleon agreed, and pointed to the crowd which was beginning to gather. "We ought to do a right smart business tonight, doctah."

"Did you mix plenty of the Nostrum of Liberty?" Donnelly asked.

"Most a barrellful, and it's bottled," Napoleon answered with a grin. "It'll build them cow waddies up where they is all tore down."

Dapper Donnelly fitted the wire frame under his coat collar, adjusted the silk cord on the guitar, and stepped to the vestibule. After greeting the crowd while softly strumming the gut strings, he threw back his head and began to sing "Carry Me Back to Ol' Virginny."

"Thash a right good idea," a drunken voice said loudly. "How about that one called 'In The Baggage Car Ahead?'"

"Or I could sing that one about 'Pickle My Bones in Alcohol,' my inebriated heel fly," Donnelly retorted, as he stared at Whiskey Walters. "You want to watch out for snakes."

Before Walters could think of an answer, Napoleon lifted his trumpet to his lips and began to play. Dapper Donnelly stepped back into the wagon, and a moment later he was among the horses. A few steps took him to the livery barn where he disappeared in the darkness, but he was back in time to sing a duet with Napoleon.

The crowd watched while Donnelly went through his routine of magic tricks. When Napoleon brought out the tall silk hat, Whiskey Walters backed away hastily.

"I am a man of peace," Dapper Don-

nelly announced with a friendly smile, and waved his hands over the hat.

Taking the corner of a silk handkerchief which covered the hat, Donnelly removed it with a jerk. A pair of snow-white doves flew from the hat, circled the crowd, and alighted on a perch above the vestibule.

DAPPER DONNELLY was a "pitch man" of ability, and he told the crowd of the curative properties of his medicines. Napoleon passed out bottles while Donnelly made change. Suddenly, a piercing scream shrilled out from the livery barn.

Whiskey Walters came running across the lot, yelling at the top of his voice. The crowd separated to let him come to the vestibule, and the town drunk jibbered as he held up his right hand.

"Snake bite!" Walters screamed. "I've been bit by a sidewinder!"

Seeing a snake dangling from the screaming man's right hand, a cowboy started to draw his gun. Dapper Donnelly held up a warning hand to stop a hail of careless bullets. He reached out his right hand and caught the snake by the head, removing it from the hand of Whiskey Walters.

"What's this?" Dapper Donnelly asked in a voice of stunned surprise. "There is a practical joker running loose, my friends. This is a snake made of rubber, with a mouse trap fastened to its head!"

Whiskey Walters hung his head as the crowd roared with laughter. At a nod from Donnelly, Napoleon handed a special bottle to the frightened man.

"Drink some of this yere nauseatin' vomicka," Napoleon told Walters importantly. "We done closin' up for the night, so drink hearty of that there tin roof. We call it that because it's on the house. Let yore conscience be yore guide, stout feller!"

Whiskey Walters grabbed the bottle and measured with a grimy finger. He drank down to the mark, closed his eyes, and emptied the bottle. Then, wiping his lips with the back of a

trembling hand, he ran for the street.

"Boy, look at him tie the calf," a cowboy whispered, and touched Napoleon on the arm. "What did you call that drinkin' likker?"

"Nauseatin' vomicka—and it shore is!" Napoleon answered with a chuckle. "In cases of poison, the fust thing to do is empty the stummick." He handed the cowboy a mirror. "Could you do with a quality haircut for one dollar cash, my handsome young cow feller?"

"Bring on your shears and get to work," the cowboy answered with a hearty laugh. "I got a date to take a purty little filly to the dance tomorrow night, so do a good job."

No one had noticed that Dapper Donnelly had disappeared. Donnelly was retracing his steps to a little room over the stalls in the barn. He had noticed some excelsior on Walters' coat, the kind used to stuff cheap mattresses.

Placing his boots carefully on the planking, Dapper Donnelly crept into the filthy room, where Walters slept. The blankets on a cot were thrown back, and the end of a canvas sack was sticking out from under the mattress.

Dapper Donnelly took the bag, tucked it under his coat, and returned to the red wagon. After a hasty glance inside the canvas sack, Donnelly hid it in a catch box under the driver's seat. He was wearing his black Stetson hat when he stopped to speak to Napoleon.

"I'll be back shortly, Napoleon. I might get a snack of grub before I turn in."

Napoleon kept right on snipping the cowboy's hair. He nodded his kinky gray head, but his eyes narrowed wistfully when he heard the sounds of a horse's hoofs over near the barn.

CHAPTER V

ROAD AGENTS

DAPPER DONNELLY walked the big black horse which answered to the name of Midnight. Horse and rider blended perfectly with the moon-

less night. Reaching the end of the street, Donnelly urged the big horse to a faster pace.

He had seen nothing of Legal Vinson, but a light had been burning in the lawyer's office in a two-storied building next to the bank. Notch Buell and Ramrod Farley had also been absent. A frown of worry creased Donnelly's brow.

Coyote Pass was a good eight miles from Fortuna, in wild brushy country used mostly for grazing. The 2J outfit and Sid Colter's S Bar C ran no fences between their ranches, working together on roundups to brand calves and cut out their shipping beef.

Without knowing why he did so, Dapper Donnelly left the stage road and cut across the S Bar C toward Sid Colter's comfortable ranchhouse. He was frankly concerned about Sheriff Don Brenton, and Sid Colter knew every foot of the wild country.

Dapper Donnelly checked the big black as the sounds of gunfire came down the wind. He recognized the flat bark of rifles and the more thunderous roar of six-shooters. The answer came to Donnelly with startling clearness.

Sid Colter had promised to repay Banker Crowley *after* he had sold his shipping beef. If he had no beef to sell, Legal Vinson could foreclose on the S Bar C. The battle ahead could only mean that rustlers were riding.

Dapper Donnelly put his horse to a lope and rode closer to the scene of the midnight battle. Ramrod Farley would be leading the rustler crew, and if the sheriff were still alive, the shooting would draw him to the S Bar C like a magnet.

Dapper Donnelly reined behind a cluster of rocks as a murmuring roar sounded above the explosions of guns. Cattle were stampeding and coming closer. Donnelly tilted his head as the tattoo of a horse's hoofs told of a rider racing ahead of the herd.

Standing up in his stirrups, Dapper Donnelly saw the rider coming down

a cattle trail through the brush. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and Donnelly recognized the swaggering swing of young Jack Jackson's wide shoulders.

"Jack!" Donnelly shouted between his cupped palms. "Slow down for Dapper Donnelly!"

Young Jackson heard the call and slid his lathered horse to a stop. Without greeting of any kind, he began to shout orders.

"Help me turn the herd at the forks up above! We can mill them back onto 2J range. Rustlers behind me!"

Dapper Donnelly giggered the big black and back-tracked to the forks he had just passed. Jackson was right behind Donnelly, whirling his horse to face the oncoming herd.

A big roan steer was leading the rush, running with head high to show a magnificent spread of horns. Jackson sent a shot from his six-shooter whistling above the roan steer's head, yelling at the top of his voice.

Dapper Donnelly spaced two shots of his own as the steer faltered in stride. The big black horse blocked the south trail with its bulk, and the roan steer swung wide and raced down the trail on 2J range.

Five minutes later the stampeding herd was back on familiar range. Young Jackson wiped sweat from his face. As he reloaded his gun, he told Dapper Donnelly the details.

"The sheriff and old Jim are back at the S Bar C with Sid Colter, Dapper.

The stage was held up, and the sheriff came hightailing it to our place. Seems like he heard the road agents making plans to run off our shipping steers, but Ramrod Farley and several of his men were already at work. The sheriff was shot up some. He wants to see you."

"You didn't expect to find me out here in the dark in this brush trap, did you, Jack?" Donnelly asked.

"Yeah, I did," the cowboy answered honestly. "Don Brenton was sure you'd take a short cut when you heard the shooting, and aside from the stage road, this is the only way you could get to our place."

"Hit your horse with the hooks and let's get to the S Bar C," Donnelly said brusquely. "I've got news for the sheriff."

JACKSON spurred his horse and headed for home, closely followed by Donnelly on his big black. A sickle moon slanted over the peak above Coyote Pass, casting an eerie light over the brush land.

"We might be riding into an ambush," Jackson warned, as he reined his horse to a walk. "The house is just ahead. We can tie our horses back in the brush at the north end of the yard."

Dapper Donnelly grunted and followed the cowboy through the brush. He slid from the saddle when Jackson stopped, and the two tied up their horses. A rifle barked at the edge of

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

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the yard not more than fifty yards ahead.

Jack Jackson stopped and put out a big arm. He whispered as Dapper Donnelly stepped up behind him.

"I've got a hunch that bushwhacker is Ramrod Farley. I'm too big to sneak through the brush, but you could do it easy. Want to give it a try?"

Dapper Donnelly stepped around the big cowboy and started through the brush. Jackson leaned forward to listen when Donnelly disappeared, but he could hear no sound.

Donnelly was using the skill he had acquired in the war between the States, squirming through the brush like a shadow. Placing his small boots carefully to avoid crackling twigs as he advanced without waving the brush tops to betray his progress.

The rifle barked again ahead of him, and was answered by two shots from the S Bar C house. Leaning forward, Dapper Donnelly could make out the form of a big man stretched out on his belly.

Dapper Donnelly drew his gun and began to inch his way forward. He stopped in a crouch ten paces behind the rifleman with a grim smile on his thin fighting face. When the rifle cracked again, Donnelly recognized the craggy face of Ramrod Farley.

Donnelly could have killed Farley without taking any risk, but he shrugged angrily at the thought. An answering shot from the house whizzed over Donnelly's head. Dapper poised on the balls of his feet.

Ramrod Farley shot at the flash from the house, and Dapper Donnelly made his leap like a great black cat. His six-shooter thudded down to swipe Farley behind the left ear. The burly rustler grunted and went limp.

Donnelly flattened out as two shots from the house came uncomfortably close. "Hold your fire, sheriff," he called across the yard. "We're coming in with a prisoner!"

Jack Jackson came running through the brush when he heard the call. Seeing Farley lying still on the ground, he

asked if the rustler was dead.

"I never shoot a man in the back," Donnelly answered with dignity. "Pick him up and we'll take him to the house."

Young Jackson picked the unconscious man up in his arms and started across the yard. Sid Colter opened the front door a crack and threw it wide when he recognized Jackson and Dapper Donnelly.

Colter slammed the door behind the two men and took his position again at a front window. Dapper Donnelly turned and saw the sheriff lying on a couch. Brenton smiled grimly, pointing to his left arm which hung limp and bloodstained at his side.

"Notch Buell winged me, Dapper," the sheriff explained. "He thinks he got away with the loot, but I'm using the mail sack for a pillow."

DONNELLY listened as the sheriff told his story. Don Brenton had met the stage at the foot of the grade, and had traded sacks with the old stage driver. Then he had followed at a distance to the top of the grade where the road wound through Coyote Pass.

"I wanted to make sure about Notch Buell this time," Brenton said dryly. "It was him all right, but he shot first. He yelled for Farley to light out for the S Bar C, so I cut through the brush. I'd like to see Buell's face when he opens the mail sack he took from the stage."

"Where's old Jim?" young Jackson asked.

The sheriff swallowed and cleared his throat. "Your pa was shot above the heart, Jack," he said, forcing out the words. "He ain't come around since we dragged him into the house, but doc will fix him up."

Dapper Donnelly holstered his gun and walked into the bedroom. A quick examination of the wounded man brought a sigh of relief to Donnelly's lips. He gave orders to young Jackson to bring hot water and a lamp.

Taking a thin leather case of instruments from the tail of his long

coat, Dapper Donnelly began his work. He had studied two years in medical school before the war had interrupted.

"Old Jim will live to be a hundred," he told the old cattleman's son. "The bullet didn't penetrate deep, and I'll have it out in a jiffy. Hold the lamp so, and look away if you can't stand the sight of a little blood."

Old Jim Jackson opened his eyes as Donnelly finished the bandaging. He smiled contentedly when he saw Dapper Donnelly bending over him and tried to sit up.

"Let's get on with our snake killing," he said in a husky voice. "Sid Colter is ruined unless he gets back his shipping beef?"

"The beef is safe, Jim," Donnelly assured the wounded man. "We caught Ramrod Farley, and he'll stretch a new rope. Now you lie still until you get back your strength. I've got to look after the sheriff."

Don Brenton was weak from the loss of blood, but a quick examination showed only a deep flesh wound. Dapper Donnelly cleansed the wound and made a sling bandage. Only his black eyes expressed surprise when he turned and discovered that Farley's wrists had been handcuffed behind the rustler's back.

"I'm riding back to town," Donnelly announced suddenly. "Napoleon might need me. I'll see you in Fortuna in the morning."

"I'll ride with you," Jack Jackson offered eagerly, but Donnelly shook his head.

"You ride in with the sheriff and his prisoner in the morning, Jack," he said firmly. "We all need some sleep, and the world wasn't made in a day. I'll be seeing you."

CHAPTER VI

THREE KINDS OF LAW

DAPPER DONNELLY stopped three times crossing the big ranch yard. Old Jim Jackson and Sid Colter had called their shots, and three dead rustlers had gone to their last roundup.

Notch Buell was on the loose, and there was no direct evidence against Legal Vinson. Whiskey Walters fitted somewhere in the picture, but Donnelly dismissed the thought with an impatient shrug. Walters had been used as a dupe by Buell.

Dapper Donnelly sat up straight in the saddle as he came to the edge of town. The natural place for Notch Buell to go would be where the bank loot had been hidden. That place was Whiskey Walters' room over the livery barn.

Napoleon greeted Donnelly at the door of the wagon, and came out with his double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun in his gnarled black hands. He took the big horse back to its mates, whispering to Donnelly as he stripped the riding gear.

"Notch Buell rode in a while back, boss. He stabled his horse, and I hears augerments in the barn. After a while Buell come out dragging that Whiskey bum, and he taken him over to the lawyer's office. They there right now, boss."

Dapper Donnelly stood near the big red wagon in the pale moonlight. He was trying to solve the mystery of Whiskey Walters as he stared at the square blotch of light coming from the window in Legal Vinson's office.

A big man stepped into the street under the lighted window. Donnelly recognized the arrogant swing to Notch Buell's wide shoulders, and he waved Napoleon inside the wagon as he balanced on the thin soles of his riding boots, waiting for Buell.

Notch Buell circled the wagon to keep Donnelly in sight as he left the street and came back on the lot. He did not speak until he was facing Donnelly five paces away.

"Little bitty boots," Buell said, with a sneering smile. "I found prints from those boots in the dust up there in Whiskey's room. You took something, and I want it back pronto!"

"Would it be the bank loot?" Donnelly asked, keeping his voice low.

"You tipped your hand with that snake trick," Buell answered harshly. "The sheriff won't be riding in, and you won't be riding out unless you hand over that dinero sudden!"

"The money is in the wagon," Dapper Donnelly drawled softly. "You can have it—over my dead body!"

Notch Buell grinned like a wolf as he turned his body to thin the target he made against the sickle moon behind him. His right hand struck down for his notched six-shooter, concealed in the shadow of his bulky frame.

Dapper Donnelly elbowed the tail of his coat aside as his hand dipped down and up in one swift move. Orange flame stabbed out from his leaping six-shooter just as Buell's heavy weapon cleared leather.

Notch Buell spun around with the gun flying from his shattered hand. Like an echo of Donnelly's shot, a hollow report bellowed from across the street.

"Watch this one, Napoleon," Donnelly barked at the little colored man. "That second shot came from Legal Vinson's office. Whiskey Walters might need some help!"

Napoleon Calhoun stepped from the wagon with his sawed-off gun cradled against his bony hip. Notch Buell was groveling on his knees, holding his shattered hand against his broad chest.

Dapper Donnelly ran across the street. He heard racing hoof beats in the distance as he started up the rickety flight of steps to the lawyer's office. His smoke-grimed gun was in his hand as he cautiously approached a door at the head of the stairs.

DONNELLY was too old a hand to go leaping into a room against an armed killer. He stood to one side as he kicked the door open with a polished boot. Then he whisked the black Stetson from his head and tossed it into the room.

A six-shooter exploded, and the hat slammed across the room under a leaden slug. Dapper Donnelly fol-

lowed the hat right through the doorway to get the drop before the killer could ear back his hammer for a second shot.

"Drop that gun!"

Dapper Donnelly barked the order as a man whirled to face the door. The coal-oil lamp was turned low, and Donnelly tripped his trigger when the gun swift threw down with his bucking gun.

The man screamed and was battered against the back wall under the impact of the .45 slug. His smoking gun flew from his hand and banged against the wall.

Donnelly stood motionless, staring like a man who has seen a ghost. A tall, lean stranger was swaying back and forth, resting on his knees, a man dressed in a disreputable collection of hand-me-down clothing.

A quick glance showed Legal Vinson lying on the floor behind his desk. The wounded stranger wore Whiskey Walters' clothes, but Walters wore a full beard, and the stranger was freshly shaven.

"Don't shoot," the wounded man gasped out. "I'm shot up bad, but I thought you was Notch Buell coming back to finish me off!"

"Is the lawyer dead, stranger?" Donnelly asked, and his black eyes were glowing like smoldering coals.

"It was me or him, and I shot high," the stranger answered through clenched teeth. "My hand jerked some when I heard that shot from across the street. You're a sawbones. You gotta do something to keep me from bleeding out!"

Dapper Donnelly paused as boots thudded up the splintered steps from the street. Jack Jackson raced into the room behind a cocked pistol. He lowered the weapon when he saw Donnelly covering the wounded man.

"Sid and me came on in to help," the cowboy panted. "The sheriff figured it out that Legal Vinson was in cahoots with Ramrod Farley and Notch Buell, and Farley talked some

with his mouth wide open. Who's the hombre with the busted wing?"

The wounded man moaned softly and slumped over on his back. Dapper Donnelly holstered his six-shooter as he went to his knees beside the unconscious man. After a quick examination, Donnelly stretched to his feet.

"My slug went all the way through, but it broke a bone," he told young Jackson without emotion. "I'll stop the bleeding, and set his arm in the morning. Now for a look at Legal Vinson."

Vinson groaned as Donnelly leaned over and opened the lawyer's coat. A dark-brown splotch was spreading across Vinson's white shirt. His eyes opened slowly to stare at Dapper Donnelly.

"So Notch shot second," he murmured, and closed his eyes again.

Dapper Donnelly poured water into a glass from a pitcher on the lawyer's desk. He added some spirits of ammonia from a bottle taken from his little leather case. Raising Vinson's head, he placed the glass to the pallid lips.

Legal Vinson drank slowly, and when the lawyer tried to sit up, Donnelly held him down.

"Take it easy, lawyer-man," Donnelly cautioned. "You might live, but it's your turn to talk now. Buell said you took the bank loot."

"Whiskey Walters took the loot," Vinson answered weakly.

"You're a liar," a husky voice contradicted, and the wounded stranger sat up. "You and Farley were going to run out on me after taking all the money I paid you!"

"Say!" Jack Jackson shouted. "This hombre is Whiskey Walters! He shaved off his whiskers, but I know his voice, and those old rags he's wearing!"

"He fooled me," Dapper Donnelly admitted, as he walked over and stared at Walters.

"I'm Tom Bailey," the lathy man

grunted. "This town of Fortuna was named after my father, but they changed it while I was doing time."

JACKSON leaned forward and stared at the wounded man's clean-shaven face. He nodded his head slowly as he turned to Donnelly.

"It's Tom Bailey all right," he verified the identification. "His old man sent him to prison for stealing a thousand dollars from him to pay a gambling debt. I was just a kid button at the time, but I remember him now."

"Come clean, Bailey," Dapper Donnelly said to the scowling prisoner. "Why did you come back here disguised by that beard, and how did Vinson and Buell get in the deal?"

"I'll talk. The dirty buzzards," Bailey growled hoarsely, forgetting the pain of his shattered hand for the moment. "I wanted this town to carry the name of Bailey. I inherited my old man's money when he died without a will. I was going to buy up mortgages and hold them until the time was right, but Legal Vinson came here and recognized me. He brought Notch Buell and Ramrod Farley, and they rustled cattle and robbed stages!"

"You had the bank loot hidden under your mattress," Donnelly prompted. "How come?"

"What could I do?" Bailey almost shouted, and then he gripped his wounded hand. "Vinson agreed to help me get the mortgages, and they were three to one. I didn't drink much to speak of, but I played along to keep my eye on the ranches, and the stores here in town. I own most of them, but all I wanted was to get enough power to change the name of the town back to Bailey!"

"Did you buy the mortgage on Sid Colter's place?" Donnelly asked carelessly, but he was watching Tom Bailey closely.

"Vinson bought the mortgage with part of the money they stole from the bank," Bailey answered without hesitation. "Buell and Farley robbed the bank, and they robbed the stages. I'll

take my oath and testify against them on the witness stand."

"Looks to me like you helped the law in a roundabout way," Dapper Donnelly said judiciously. "All the loot is recovered, and all three robbers are captured. I've come to a decision, Bailey."

Tom Bailey looked up with a question in his gray eyes. No longer was he a saloon bunt, and he had paid his debt to society.

"You're a wealthy man, Bailey," Dapper Donnelly said thoughtfully. "Give the ranchers and storekeepers time enough to repay their loans, and

I won't turn you over to the sheriff."

"Count it done," Bailey agreed instantly. "Do you reckon they will change the name back to Bailey?"

"That part is up to you," Donnelly answered with a smile. "But with your money, and a new suit of clothes, I think you can arrange it. Talk to the boys about it after the trial. Now come over to the wagon so I can dress your arm. I've decided you're worth saving!"

Dapper Donnelly will be back with another powder-smoke prescription in a future issue. Watch for him!

¿QUIEN SABE?

Continued from page 60

Answers

1. It was a prehistoric lake which formed almost all of western Nevada. The lake bed and its formations are the source of the vast store of minerals found in this portion of the State.
2. They are the States of North and South Dakota and the Sioux Indian tribes living together. The Sioux were originally called the Dakotas.
3. No. They were acquired in the Louisiana Purchase.
4. At the time when it was sponsored for Statehood, it lacked the population that would entitle it to one seat in Congress. All opposition, however, was downed by strong advocates of Statehood.
5. It is estimated that the loss to cattlemen is twenty million dollars for this reason alone. Larkspur rates as highest in this race.
6. Because the coyote being killed off left their enemy and prey, the jackrabbit, at large to do his own equally and tediously unwholesome work.
7. It will not walk over a piece of rope on the ground, it will shy at a small stick, and on the range will refuse to be ridden over a small crack in the ground which it has visualized to be mammoth.
8. They will occasionally kill sheep. In herds the casualties usually come from the bears scaring the animals, they in turn stampeding, thus smothering and trampling themselves.
9. Because it is ingenious in evading traps and, also, because it will not touch poisoned meat which has the faintest trace of the "man smell," to which the wolf is highly sensitive.
10. It has been proved that animals do not have any such thing as a sixth sense. They will eat anything from sheer hunger.

While shock held the astonished men motionless, Dale whipped out his gun and vaulted through the window.



When Leo Daggett offered Dale Barland fighting wages, he should have considered his six-gun savvy sided by some

TOP-HAND TACTICS

by RAY PALMER TRACY

THE worn clothing and equipment, and the shaggy wreck of an old pony Dale Barland rode, indicated that the big cowboy was down on his luck, but he rode into the headquarters of the late Luke Turner's Spearhead cow outfit with complete assurance.

A saddled horse was ground-hitched in one leg of the horseshoe driveway which cut an arc in the yard of the big ranchhouse. At the foot of the house steps a tall, hard-lined man with a predatory nose and a thin-lipped mouth was in a heated argument with a slender girl.

Dale Barland hesitated. It was not his policy to horn into other people's business, but there was something in

the overbearing manner of this man that annoyed Dale. He wheeled his ambling mount into the curved driveway and brought it to a shuffling halt a few yards from the pair.

The man turned a pair of pale eyes toward Dale, scowling at the interruption. "What'cher want?" he demanded belligerently.

"You the boss here?" inquired Dale genially. "I'm Dale Barland, tophand, lookin' for a job."

The tall man's eyes roved over Dale and his sorry mount. "We ain't takin' on no drifting saddlebums," he said contemptuously. "On your way."

"Just a minute, Mr. Daggett!" inter-

posed the girl. "I give the orders around here."

"Don't go to splittin' hairs, Harriet." Daggett's tone carried the patience of a martyr suffering the antics of a backward child. "You don't seem to realize your pa, and I may say my good friend, was murdered and robbed of the money he owed me. Of course I'd like to be able to say: 'Harriet, just let it go. I'll pack the Spearhead in my bank account till it pays out.' Unfortunately, I can't afford the luxury. I'm going to have to take the ranch over next week."

"Next week isn't here yet," was the girl's tart answer. "Before that time the sheriff may get the man who murdered and robbed my father, and get the money back."

Daggett shook his head. "I know your pa got in one shot at his attacker, downed his hoss and put him afoot. Of course that makes the murderer a marked man. But no one will ever get that jasper."

"What makes you so sure he won't be caught?" Harriet asked quickly.

"There's a chance," corrected Daggett smoothly. "But it's been three days since he was set afoot and the country has been scoured. Chances are gettin' slimmer all the time." His eyes went to Dale. "You still here?" he demanded of Dale.

"I'm waiting to talk to the boss," Dale said pointedly. "Need a hand ma'am?" His gaze met her blue eyes with polite inquiry.

"Yes. You're hired. You can report to my foreman, Jess Hart," the girl replied, facing Daggett defiantly.

"Harriet!" snapped Daggett. "I ain't going to let you throw away what few dollars you have left hirin' range bums!" His thumb slid down to hook in the belt above his gun butt as he faced Dale again. "Git!" he ordered.

Dale grinned engagingly. "Mr. Daggett," he protested, "by your own say-so, you're buttin' into business that ain't none of your put in. Ain't you gettin' into a terrible wail over it?"

Harriet uttered a little cry of warning as Daggett's hand flashed down. But Daggett did not draw. He froze with his gun still half leathered. He was looking into the barrel of the gun in the hand of Dale Barland.

THE surprise, that flashed over Daggett's face was swiftly replaced by a crafty smile that left Dale doubly watchful, but he was thrown a little off guard when Daggett dropped his gun back in its holster, tilted back his head and laughed loudly. "Good work, Barland," he approved. "I was beginning to doubt that you are the range bum you look. I was just trying you out. There's a place on my pay roll at double wages for a man who can handle a gun like you." He paused and then added impressively, "Cash on the barrel head."

Dale holstered his weapon but did not take his eyes off Daggett. "Well," he hesitated, "you see I've already hired out to Miss Turner. I can't take on two jobs at once."

Daggett smiled maliciously at Harriet. "When Harriet explains about pay, you'll think different. You'll find me at the Tensleep Bar in Paintrock. As for you, Harriet, you think over my proposition. I'll come for my answer—next week."

"The answer is *no* without even waiting until next week," responded Harriet with finality.

"I'll come for my answer next week," repeated Daggett as though she had not answered. He went to his horse, mounted and rode away without looking back. But somehow he left the impression that he had spun a web about the Spearhead and was only retiring to the edge of it to wait until he was hungry enough to gobble it up.

"That hombre figgers he holds all the aces, I bet you," remarked Dale.

"He couldn't let me alone even on the day I buried father," the girl said tremulously. "Maybe you better work for Daggett. It's as he says. He can pay and I can't."

"I think I'll stick here," said Dale. His eyes were so admiring as they played over Harriet's lovely hair with its golden lights and her creamy, sun-tanned features, that rich red tinged the girl's cheeks before Dale realized he was staring and turned his eyes away. "Where'd this Daggett party hail from and how'd he come by what I gather is a strangle hold on the Spearhead?" he asked.

"I don't know where Leo Daggett came from," said Harriet. "He arrived in Paintrock more than a year ago, right after the three-year drought. He bought the Tensleep Bar in Paintrock. Then, with the bank in a bad way, staggering under the load of the drought, Daggett bought up mortgages on a whole string of ranches and foreclosed. Dad's was among them, although he didn't foreclose on it."

Dale's eyes went over the fine fields and well-kept buildings and fences. Nothing could look more solid and prosperous than the Spearhead.

"Couldn't your father have raised money somewhere else on a place like this?" he asked.

"Dad had enough cattle free and clear to lift the mortgage. Daggett made him believe till the last minute that he was going to extend his time. Then dad had to rush around and sell on a falling market. Coming home with the money, he was murdered and robbed. Now there's nothing left to raise money on."

"You figger Daggett had a hand in your fathers . . . er . . . final hard luck?"

"I'd be sure of it, if it wasn't for one thing. There was someone with dad and the evidence showed they had a fight. Dad shot his horse. He's the man the sheriff is hunting now."

"Maybe he's a hired hand of Daggett's."

"I thought of that. So did a lot of others. But not a soul around here ever saw that chestnut horse before. If there'd been a horse like that around here, everyone would have known it. So you see it couldn't have been rid-

den by one of Daggett's men.

"Then you think the only chance is to locate the man your father set afoot?" inquired Dale.

"It's the only chance of finding out just what happened and where the money went."

DALE'S eyes went again over the wide fields and to the dark range of mountains beyond, standing clear-cut as jade against the opalescent background of a fading sunset. The picture looked too solid to fade and dissolve because of a mortgage, a murder and a robbery. It was the kind of a place that he had always wanted for himself. And here was the kind of a girl he wanted, as well. His eyes came back to the girl who was watching him hopefully.

"What kind of a man is the sheriff?" Dale asked.

"Jim Sado came from the East with my folks in the early days. He's a fine man and a good friend. But it was Daggett who elected him sheriff. He thinks Daggett made the world and put the lid on."

Dale gave no sign that he considered this bad news and that the beginning of a plan to take the sheriff into his confidence had passed away. He swung his leg and stepped down from his horse.

"I'll put my horse in the corral," he said, "and report to Jess Hart when he comes in."

"Then you're going to stay and help me?" Harriet's eyes were shining.

"Don't expect too much of me," advised Dale. Then he went right ahead and made an extravagant promise. "But you can bank on it that we'll find that man on foot and learn what his story is." Tugging at the reins, he led his horse toward the corral.

Harriet watched him go. She had never met anyone who affected her like this cowboy. She wanted to laugh at herself. Here was a cowhand obviously down on his luck, in a land where there was opportunity for all with a spark of enterprise. Maybe he

was just one of those striking personalities with nothing back of it. She eyed his walk critically. He was tall and well knit—a big man, and it seemed as though some of his bigness radiated from within. There must be some good reason for his being down on his luck—an honest reason.

"Harriet!" The insistent voice came from the vine-clad porch.

"Mother. I forgot you were there." Contritely Harriet hurried up the steps. Her cheeks burned as she wondered if her mother had noticed the way she had been staring after the new hand. She turned around the bower and stopped, her eyes opening wide. "Mother! What are you doing with daddy's gun?"

Maggie Turner had always been active until late years when she impressed her daughter as just a gentle, white-haired old lady taking a well-earned rest. Her mother looked anything but gentle now as she stood behind the vines. The sweet curve of her lips, which Harriet had inherited, was grim. The twinkle in her eyes that had always made her seem youthful had turned into a determined spark. In her hands she was expertly handling her late husband's old bone-handled .45.

"This?" Mrs. Turner inquired, glancing down. "Listen, Harriet. Your father and I fought for this ranch. I made a hand with a rope and a gun when it was touch and go whether the Butch Peeler gang or Luke and I was going to own this place!"

"But that doesn't explain—" began Harriet.

"Doesn't it?" Maggie interrupted. "It looked to me as though you were weakening when that Paintrock crook, Daggett, was offering to let us stay here if you'd marry him. So I went and got your father's gun. If you'd agreed, you'd be minus a future husband about now!"

"Mother! You wouldn't have!" protested Harriet.

"Wouldn't I, though! Your father and I came here on two old ponies.

If I've got to, I'll take you and leave the same way. I'll tell you right now, no misbegotten buzzard like Leo Daggett is going to marry my flesh and blood! I warned you of that first off!"

"Mother, I didn't realize you felt so strongly."

"My feelings ain't out of practice, even if I am old," came her mother's tart answer.

"I'm glad Dale showed up when he did," commented Harriet.

"Dale, eh?" her mother snapped up the familiar address. "Calling the new hand by his first name this quick?" She parted the vines with the six-gun and looked down toward the corral. "He's rubbing down that shaggy old wreck of a hoss like he was Nancy Hanks. Looks good so far for a hand down on his luck. Why, Harriet!" She looked steadily into her daughter's shining eyes. "You can't possibly be deeply interested in the man this quick. You don't know a thing about him!"

"I know, mother, but I can't help it. No one ever affected me this way before."

Maggie Turner took her daughter in her arms, her hard shell melting. "I can fight a man like Daggett at the drop of the hat," she said, "but I can't do a thing about this other than hope for the best."

DOWN at the corral Dale was exasperatingly trying to find out by simple addition and subtraction—he had always been able to find correct answers that way—what had possessed him to make a promise to Harriet Turner that might upset his apple cart.

"And I'm the guy," he muttered, "who's landed important jobs because of my ability to keep my mouth shut." He scowled as he thought of his promise to produce the man who had been with Luke Turner when he had been murdered and robbed.

Dale could indeed produce that man—*he* was the man.

Meeting Luke Turner and riding the mountain trail with him had been purely accidental. Dale had had no idea that the old, ornate saddlebags hung over Turner's saddlehorn contained a small fortune. If Dale had suspected such a thing, the sudden ambush and gunfire would not have come as a complete surprise—and the results might have been far different.

Dale's big chestnut had thrown up his head, just in time to take the bullet meant for him. Then, already spinning around under Dale's urge, the animal had fallen and thrown the cowboy over the bluff that dropped to the foaming torrent of Opal Canyon, which nothing but fish ever came out of alive.

Dale had grasped a root which had held long enough for him to swing to a ledge shelf under the overhanging lip of the bluff. There he had lain with the wind knocked out of him.

Above, two men—Dale had heard two voices—peered over the edge to the torrent below. Common sense settled the fate of the man who had fallen over. "The brand on the chestnut says he was from our country," remarked one. "His going over here might be better luck for us than we know."

"Anyway, he's gone for good," said the other voice. "And what a swell goat to lay this on. It's him who killed and robbed old Luke Turner, who set him afoot. Let the sheriff hunt for him. This ought to please the boss."

Nothing but extraordinary strength and agility had enabled Dale to escape from the ledge. It took him so long, he feared the sheriff might come looking for Turner before he could get off the ledge, along which the trail had run for the past mile.

Dale thought he heard someone coming from the direction in which they had been headed, but he remained undetected.

It was pure luck that Dale had stumbled on an old barn on the other side of the mountain. There was a fenced

meadow about the barn and an old horse roamed on it. Also, there was a sorry wreck of a saddle in the barn, not worth stealing.

Dale had borrowed the horse and saddle. The sheriff would be looking for a man on foot and questioning people about a man trying to buy a horse. Of course there was a chance the old horse might be recognized, but Dale had to take that chance.

He had ridden directly to Luke Turner's ranch; that was the point where he would get the most information. And he had been more interested in the man who had recognized his chestnut as being "from our country" than in the murder of Luke Turner. He also had an idea the two might be closely linked.

Daggett's slip today that the man on foot would never be caught had not escaped Dale. He thought of it now and smiled. Sure. There it was, just simple addition and subtraction. Daggett knew who had killed and robbed Turner. But Daggett's voice was not one of the two Dale had heard as he crouched on the ledge. Daggett could easily be the "boss" one of the men had mentioned.

DALE had settled into his usual easy-going self by the time Jess Hart and the other Spearhead riders came in for the night. The minute he looked at Jess and heard him speak, he knew the foreman was not implicated in the crime.

Jess Hart was square built and square souled. It showed in every move. He lived and worked for the ranch where he had been for years. Dale listened to the voices of the riders. None of them resembled the tones he rehearsed over and over in his mind to keep them fresh.

This conclusion arrived at, Dale's work was done at the Spearhead, yet he could not leave. But he had to hurry or time would run out on him; the way Jess Hart had studied the borrowed horse made him jittery. The horse might be known this side of the

mountain range, even though Dale hadn't thought it likely.

Dale did not believe Daggett was suspicious of him. The man was smart enough to recognize that the cowboy might prove a formidable obstruction to his taking over the Spearhead. He was taking the easiest way to get rid of him. Yet Daggett's smoothness gave Dale an opening he was needing badly.

Shortly after supper, Dale left the bunkhouse and wandered in the dark toward the corral. Then he began to hurry. He threw the old saddle on the borrowed horse and led him well beyond the barn before he mounted and started for Paintrock.

Jess Hart had not only been puzzled, he had been resentful of the hiring of Dale by Harriet without consulting him, especially when there was not a thing for the new man to do. It made him critical. He was unwilling to accept the cowboy at Harriet's valuation and he had watched the new hand closely.

When Dale left the bunkhouse and did not return within a reasonable time, Jess got up and went down to the corral. He was in time to see a horse and rider silhouetted against the sky as they passed over the valley rim on the way to town.

Jess ran into the corral to check up and make sure. The old horse and saddle were gone. Then something familiar about the horse that had been struggling with his memory suddenly stood out clearly. He turned and hurried to the house.

"Harriet," he said, confronting the girl and her mother in the living room, "that new man you just hired sneaked away and hit for Paintrock. No wonder Daggett offered him a job. I'll bet it was a put-up affair. They're in this together."

"I don't believe it!" Harriet was on her feet. "Dale wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"He wouldn't, hey!" stormed Jess with no idea how his words were hurting Harriet. "You know where he

got that hoss he's riding? I thought that critter looked familiar. That's Joe Crombie's old Thunderbolt he used to win so many races with years ago. Joe had him pensioned out in a pasture on the other side of the range. I even remember that old saddle."

"It isn't so!" contradicted Harriet, looking pleadingly at her mother for support.

But memory had also come to Maggie Turner. "Yes," she said as though the words were wrung from her. "I'm sorry, Harriet, but Jess is right. That's Joe Crombie's Thunderbolt."

HARRIET stood there while her heart died and drained the blood from her cheeks. "So," she said in a lifeless tone, "Dale Barland was the man who rode the chestnut my father shot, and he stole another horse so he wouldn't be caught afoot. He had the money with him right here. Of course he knew Daggett was going to be here to give him an excuse to get to town and give the money to him."

"Maybe not, Harriet," interposed her mother quickly. "Perhaps—"

"What's the use pretending!" cut in Harriet furiously. "I was just taken in like a silly fool. But he isn't going to get away with it! Jess, saddle my horse. We're going to town and get Sheriff Sado. Sado will arrest Leo Daggett, if I have to hold a gun in his back while he does it!"

"Harriet, wait!" argued her mother. "You don't want to be—"

The slamming of the door cut short her speech. "You can't put a cool head on hot shoulders," opined Maggie. She went to her room and got her husband's gun. Then, soon as she heard Harriet and Jess leave, she went to the corral and saddled her own horse. "If they knew what I was doing, they'd come drag me back," she smiled.

This was Dale's first trip to Paintrock, but he had heard things about it. After lying dormant for many years and dropping into the category of a sleepy little cow town, it had suddenly

come to life with all the bang it possessed when it had been the headquarters of the Butch Peeler gang.

When Dale reached the outskirts he could hear the rumble of the boom town. Lights flashed from new saloons and dance halls. There were strains of music, yells and a few shots fired by celebrating punchers. The hitch rails were lined with ponies and there seemed to be plenty of life centering around the one business street.

Dale swung around the town and came up in back of a big saloon which he rightly judged to be the Tensleep. He left the old horse behind a shed and slipped up to the building to investigate.

There was a back door which was locked. Circling the building he found a side door, well back from the street and flanked by a window painted white.

This would be the office, Dale judged, with an outside entrance. He looked the window over carefully for paint scraped off so he could peer into the room, but there was nothing so convenient.

Then he noticed a beam of light escaping through a crack in the window casing. He moved to the crack almost knocking over a short length of two-by-four leaning against the building, which he caught just in time. Putting his eye to the crack, Dale could see a little of the room. There was a long desk at the far side and a man, evidently the bookkeeper, in spite of the gun he wore, was working at accounts, and Dale could see one corner of a huge iron safe.

Dale was satisfied that the money stolen from Luke Turner was in that safe. But there seemed no way of either getting into the room or proving anything, even if he did. There had to be a way; there was always a way, just as two and two made four.

Slipping back to his horse, Dale circled and entered town the regular way. He tied his horse to the rack in front of the Tensleep Bar.

As he reached the door, he glanced up the street. Diagonally across, on the other side of the street, halfway up the block, the door of a building opened. For a moment, outlined against the bright rectangle, Dale thought he saw Harriet Turner. The door was quickly closed, leaving him staring.

A swift thought convinced him of the absurdity of Harriet being in Paintrock at this hour. "She's on my mind so much I'm seeing her where she ain't," he jeered at himself as he entered the saloon.

THE big room was gay with lights, loud talk and laughter. Along the back wall were lined many kinds of mechanical gambling devices. The poker tables were well filled, and at the bar there were groups of men talking and drinking.

No one paid Dale any particular attention as he made his way to the bar. "Beer," he ordered and laid a two-bit coin on the counter.

The thin-faced bartender drew a glass and slid it along the counter with a flick of his hand where it stopped right in front of Dale. He glanced up at the bartender who was standing with an expectant smile waiting for Dale's appreciation of his accomplishment.

"Pretty slick," accommodated Dale.

"We keep the best in here," said a familiar voice in his ear.

Dale turned to look into the pale eyes of Leo Daggett. There was no evidence of hostility—only the expansive good nature of a successful leader patting an underling on the head.

"If this is yours, it looks like you're doing well for yourself," flattered Dale.

"It won't be long before I own that whole belt of ranches along the Major Foothills—nice little property," Daggett rose to the bait. "I take it you've decided to climb aboard the express."

"You notice I'm here," evaded Dale. His eyes drifted past Daggett and rested on a man at one of the poker

tables. The unexpectedness of seeing this man made a light leap in Dale's eyes.

Daggett followed Dale's gaze and then he turned back smiling. "You like to play cards?" he asked, concluding the poker game was what had quickened Dale's interest. It was logical, surveyed from the cowboy's down-luck condition.

Dale glanced at the two-bit piece still in front of him, inviting another beer. "Lot of good it does me," he shrugged. "There's the size of my pile."

Daggett reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He peeled off several and handed them to Dale. "I want my men to enjoy themselves, even if I have to give them an advance on their wages." He might have added that he also expected to get every dime back one way or another.

Dale was loud with appreciation. "I do like to try my luck," he beamed. He did his best to look as though he thought Daggett a prince.

The man clapped him on the back. "Go right ahead and enjoy yourself, cowboy," he said. "Later we'll have a little talk." He swaggered away.

Dale sauntered down the room to the table where the man sat who had caught his attention. He veered to the right to get a full-face view.

If the fellow had a mustache, Dale thought to himself, he would look like Nick Brost whose description Dale was carrying in his mind. Five feet nine—Dale couldn't tell that until the man stood up—swarthy complexion, large black eyes, wide nose with pit marks on it, about thirty, given to wearing flashy rings—this man wore four.

Dale wanted to hear the man's voice. He stopped close to the table, but this poker-playing gent only used poker signs, he didn't talk out loud.

A puncher lost a bet and got up, flinging down his cards in disgust. Dale slid into his seat. "All right?" he inquired of the man he was watching across the table.

"All right with me," came the grunted answer, the same voice Dale had heard mention the brand on his slain chestnut.

The other three men in the game gave their consent. None of them had the voice of the second man on the bluff.

DALE'S eyes rested on a little pile of currency among the silver and chips in front of the man he was sure was Brost, but whom he heard a player call Laraby. Then he hunched his shoulders and dug in.

For half an hour he played close to his chest, losing a little before he got Laraby in a spot where the man had to use his currency. A lone ten-dollar bill fluttered into the pot and Dale raked it in.

Dale smoothed the bill and looked it over until he caught Laraby's attention. He brushed his fingers across his lips, rose and retreated to the wall. Laraby followed.

"What's the matter with that bill?" the man began angrily. "I—"

"S-s-sh!" cautioned Dale. "I just hired out to work for Daggett. You work for him, too?"

"What if I do?" came the sullen answer.

"Just this. That ten you just lost to me is marked! Maybe it don't mean anything, but I thought you ought to know."

"Marked!" There was shock and astonishment in the voice.

"Right here," said Dale, showing the spot he had marked himself. "If you've got any more, you better get rid of 'em."

"Thanks, pal," came the grim answer. "I'll sure look into this." He left and went striding down the room, taking the marked bill with him.

Dale went to a slot machine on the wall and fed two-bit pieces into it. All the time he was watching the man known as Laraby. He saw him get hold of Leo Daggett and saw them bend their gaze on him. Methodically he fed two-bit pieces into the machine,

intent only on hitting the jackpot.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the two men heading for the office. In the door of the office, Leo Daggett turned and watched his new hand's absorption in the slot machine, then he closed the door.

Daggert, Dale decided, was suspicious. The door of the office opened suddenly and Daggett stood there peering out at Dale, who kept right on with his play. When he looked again, the office door was closed.

Dale began mentally timing what must be taking place in the office. He left the slot machine, went to the bar



and drank a beer. A man unknown to Dale left the bar.

"Hey, Bert," Dale called, just loud enough for the bartender to hear, as he ran after the departing man. The man, of course, not named Bert, went on about his business. Dale ducked around the corner of the building. As he did so, once again he thought he saw Harriet Turner. She was coming down the street with Jess Hart and several other men.

Dale had no time to deal with hallucinations. Realities claimed him. He dashed around to the crack in the window casing. Three men were at the desk. In front of them lay the old saddlebags Dale had last seen on Luke Turner's saddle. Daggett was

pulling a sheaf of bills from one pocket while Laraby stood watching, the bill Dale had marked in his hand.

There was no time to lose. In a minute they would know they had been tricked. Dale felt for the two-by-four that had almost upset his plans. He swung it high and hard. The glass and window frame shattered.

While shock held the astonished inmates of the office motionless, Dale whipped out his gun and vaulted through the window.

All three men in the office instinctively darted away from each other and went for their weapons. The room rocked with the reports of heavy .43s.

"Get him!" yelled the bookkeeper, his voice was the other one Dale had heard on the bluff.

Dale cut his yell in half with a bullet, and the man fell across a chair. Lead plucked at Dale's sleeve and a bullet singed a track across his cheek. Then men were piling in the window and battering at the door.

A BLOW on the side of Dale's head laid him flat, his senses swimming. He came out of the fog and tried to leap up, only to find that he was handcuffed. His dazed gaze roved around.

Leo Daggett was standing in front of a stocky man with a star on his shirt. He was waving his hands, deep in a loud explanation. At the end of the table among a half dozen armed men stood Harriet Turner.

"We caught him with the money!" shouted Daggett. "There it is!" He waved his hand toward the desk. "It took a fight, but we got it!"

"Grab Daggett!" yelled Dale. "He's the one who murdered and robbed Luke Turner!"

"Don't fret yourself," said the man with the star. "I'm Sheriff Sado and I've already arrested you for the murder and robbery. It's no use for you to accuse a man like Leo Daggett."

"Reach!" came a shrill voice from the window.

Dale turned his head. Framed in the opening was an old lady with gray

hair and bright gray eyes that were looking over a bone-handled .45.

"Mother!" came Harriet's astonished voice. "How did you get here! Put up that gun! We've got the money and the murderer!"

"You got the money but not the murderer," her mother replied. "I'm going to keep you and this fool sheriff from making a mistake. Don't step in front of this gun"

Harriet, sure that her mother was wrong, and also sure that she would not shoot her own daughter, stepped in front of the gun.

But Maggie Turner had lived through an age when quick thinking was the essence of life. She flung the gun straight at Dale's manacled hands.

Dale was not so surprised that he did not catch it. He whipped it around. "A man makes a move," he said, "and down comes Leo Daggett!"

Every man in the place froze helplessly. Then into the hush came a wailing note from the bookkeeper, draped across the chair. "Jack Leland," he accused, "you tried to frame me and Brost with them marked bills! I'm going, but before I go, I'll fix your clock! You had me and Brost murder and rob Luke Turner so you could get his ranch and gal! But you ain't—" The roar of a gun stilled his voice.

The man known to Paintrock as Leo Daggett turned a gun still smoking to take a shot at Dale. Dale was too quick for him and Daggett was felled with a bullet through his chest.

"Didn't I tell you?" demanded Maggie Turner from the window.

Brost realized the game was up. His one chance was flight. He made a dive for the door and the safety of the dark just beyond. A posseman tripped him and fell on him, pinning him solidly.

Dale rose from the floor and held out his hands to the sheriff. "Unlock these!" he ordered, "and you can finger yourself lucky if I don't decide to put 'em on you for giving aid to a criminal wanted by the United States government."

The tone, coupled with the dire threat of government reprisal, shattered the nerve of the sheriff. "United States government? Criminal? What do you mean?" Hastily he unlocked the cuffs.

"I mean I was ordered to shadow this man you know as Laraby. His real name is Brost. He's the intermediary between Jack Leland—known to you as Leo Daggett—and a band of cutthroats across the border that has been smuggling narcotics into the States. Leland was making a fortune in the trade until things got too hot for him. Then he disappeared. We figured Brost would get in touch with him soon as things quieted down. The trail led here where Leland, as Leo Daggett, was buying up your country with narcotic profits and any other cash he could pick up."

"It ain't possible that a fine man like Leo Daggett is a common drug peddler," protested the sheriff.

"He ain't a common peddler," agreed Dale. "He's worse. He's the wholesaler who supplies the peddlers. And he's a murderer."

"Jim, where'd you git the idea in the first place that Leo Daggett was a fine man?" cut in Maggie Turner. "He must have told you himself. It's so easy to put one over on you, it's a crime to do it. Don't you remember when we was kids back in Iowa, you was always the fall guy?"

Sweat popped out on Sado, but he hated to admit he had been taken in so completely. "How do I know you're a government man?" he asked of Dale.

"By this," said Dale, and showed him unmistakable evidence.

TWO hours later, with the bookkeeper in the morgue and Brost and Leland—his wound bandaged—in jail, Dale had fully convinced everyone that Paintrock had been harboring a dangerous man. He got his borrowed old horse and rode out to the Spearhead with Harriet.

"I don't know why you ride home with me unless it's to tell me what a

fool I've made of myself," commented Harriet bitterly.

"Forget it," said Dale. "How was you to know that a cowboy arriving on a broken-down pony was a government agent on a still hunt? In your place I'd probably have arrived at the same conclusions."

"But mother knew," objected Harriet.

"Your mother has lived long enough to know a lot of things that it will take us years to find out," was his sage answer. "She can and does judge. We feel, mostly."

"But you have to go away." There seemed to be no reason for Harriet to say this. Yet it made sense to them both.

"Yes, there's a few more of this gang I've got to round up. But the hard part is over. Then I'll be resigning and coming back here."

Nothing had been said about his ever coming back. That fact suddenly occurred to Dale. "Look here," he said. "I'm talking of coming back when I don't even know if you ever want to see me again. I love you so much, I must have taken it for granted that you love me too. I reckon you think I've got a nerve," he ended sheepishly.

"Of course I love you," said Harriet, filled with wonder that anyone could doubt it. "And I want you to come back quick."

"Whoa!" yelled Dale. He swung down from the old horse and lifted Harriet from her mount, gathering her in his arms. Her horse promptly bolted for the ranch. But Dale's old mount stood.

"One thing," said Dale as he took his lips from Harriet's for a moment, "an old horse stays put. He'll wait for us."

"Yes," agreed Harriet contentedly. "Old horses and old people have the sense that comes with experience." Once again she raised her lips, trusting the plainly marked trail left by her mother.

THE END.

WW-4A

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HANG A MAN

for striking back at a pack of killers," protested young Dave Harton—but Bob Brandon trusted only his trigger finger and a loaded six-gun! Don't miss **GHOSTS OF THE BACK TRAIL**, smashing new book-length novel by Walt Coburn—plus red-blooded yarns by Norman A. Fox, David Lavender, Frank R. Pierce and others, in the big October 2nd issue.

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LAST ROUNDUP

by S. OMAR BARKER



Ol' Texas Charlie lay on his bed,
 His hair plumb white with years,
 A-tallyin' memories through his head
 Like a herd of longhorn steers.
 Recallin' scents an' sights an' sounds
 That a cowhand can't forget:
Cattle asleep on the beddin' grounds. . . .
The smell of a horse's sweat. . . .
The campfire talk of a roundup crew,
With the long day's ridin' done. . . .
Curly mesquite grass pearled with dew
At the dawn of a Texas sun.
 Under the covers, it seemed to him,
 His legs could feel once more
 Saddle and horse, on a mesa's rim

Where eagles lift and soar.
 His time was short, an' friends stood by—
 They spoke of an angel band
 A-waitin' with welcome beyond the sky,
 To take him by the hand.
 But Texas Charlie's eyes was bright
 With a sight *they* couldn't see.
 He said: "Folks, I'll make out all right—
 Don't fret none over me;
 "For instead of angels, taller-skinned,
 A-playin' golden harps,
 I see grass wavin' in the wind,
 An' cowboys sunnin' tarps. . . ."
 His face lit up plumb beautiful—
 An' we knowed he had come to taw,
 A-hearin' some ol' longhorn bull
 A-bellerin' down the draw!

CODE FOR A COWMAN



"Why the hardware?" Jim asked coolly. "Do you always meet a visitor with a six in your clout?"

With a rep that made him a cattle-country outcast, Jim Ranier figured Boothill wouldn't be a bad place to lay his stakes—provided he could take a few of Arno Toivan's gun hellions with him

by RALPH YERGEN

CHAPTER I

SIX-GUN CHALLENGE

THERE were tears in the girl's blue eyes. For an instant Jim Ranier's steel resolve wavered and he looked away beyond the Owl Creek cabin to where bare tree branches shivered in the March wind.

Her voice tugged at him, insistent, pleading. "Don't go up to that house, Jim. Promise me you won't. Iron John just sits and broods, hard

and silent and bitter. Always with that six-gun at his fingertips. I tell you grief has almost driven him out of his mind. When he sees you he won't know what he's doing. He'll . . . he'll try to kill you, Jim. I know he will."

Her eyes searched Ranier for some sign that his will was changing. Stubborn, unbending pride was pronounced in his wide, firm mouth, the lift of his angular chin and the silent strength of his saddle-leaned

frame. Sadness haunted his gray eyes. His voice was slow and deep.

"I must go sometime, Claire. You know that. Waiting won't make it easier."

The cold wind rippled her tumbled blond curls. Her face was upturned, and the redness of her lips was like a blossom bud against her pale ivory skin. Jim Ranier was filling his memory with an indelible picture of her standing before him, beauty in every line of her slender, blue-clad figure.

"But it's not your fault, Jim," she was saying. "Dick was shot by that outlaw Wolverton. It's not fair that



you should have to pay with your life for a renegade's crime."

"But it *is* my fault that I sent Wolverton to Dick," Jim said gently. "That's why I'm going to the house to see Iron John."

Quiet desperation in her eyes, Claire Eden swayed nearer and put her slim hands on his shoulders. "He'll kill you, Jim. And it's all so needless, so inhuman and barbaric. I'll go away with you, Jim, anywhere. A new start . . . a new home—" Her voice choked. She could feel her words bounce futilely off his flinty pride. The chilling realization came to her that no human power could prevent Jim Ranier from climbing that knoll to the big white house and facing the

grief-fueled wrath of Iron John Hodge.

Jim drew her hands from his shoulders and pressed them gently. He knew she couldn't sense her impelling power upon him. He didn't want her to. He knew that she thought of him as a man without emotions. But they were there inside him, crowding and tearing at his will, none the less savage because he was able to mask them.

"I could never forget that I ran away, Claire." He hesitated. He wanted to take her in his arms, to kiss her and to hold her close. But, somehow, the way things lay, it did not seem right.

"Good-by, Claire." He gave her hand a pat. The words he wanted to say eluded him. "If I don't come back, think of me once in a while."

He turned abruptly, and the movement was like the cruel shattering of a dream. Yet he forced a firm briskness into his stride on the winding gravel pathway, and his lean shoulders were straight as a corral bar.

Claire's voice was soft, faltering. "Good-by . . . Jim."

She turned and ran toward the cabin beside the creek alders. Jim heard her sob, and the sound twisted through him like a spinning bayonet.

THE high, white columns of the Hodge ranchhouse atop the knoll were intermittently visible between evergreen shrubs as Jim Ranier climbed the pathway. Above the western rim of Three Creeks Basin the pale sun was drooping into gull-gray clouds folded like a dismal blanket. From the flat grass lands came the lowing of Broadword cattle.

Iron John Hodge would be sitting on the front porch watching the sun go down. Three years ago a saddle girth had broken under his horse, and Iron John Hodge had been spilled into the horns of an angered bull. Since then the old Broad-

sword owner had never taken a step unaided. Every day he sat on the porch, watching his grazing cattle. Claire Eden's widowed mother, a gray-haired woman of fifty, did the housework and cooking for him, while Claire taught school at Mist Valley, a few miles northwest of the Basin rim.

It would be simple enough to keep away from Iron John, if a man so wished. But taking advantage of another's calamity to prevent a reckoning was not Jim Ranier's way. He owed much to the gray-maned rancher. Iron John Hodge had befriended him when he was a wandering, lonesome cowpoke. Upon his forced retirement, Hodge had made Jim foreman of the Broadsword even though his own son, Dick, was about old enough to have assumed the responsibility.

Everything had gone smoothly until the night Silver Wolverton had slunk furtively to the ranch buildings and sought out Jim in secret. Silver Wolverton and Jim Ranier had grown up together in the same California cow town. Once Silver had risked his neck to pull Jim from the heels of a killer horse. Jim hadn't forgotten. But Silver had strayed over into Nevada and begun to run with a wild bunch. He had helped steal some horses. That started his downfall. One bad break after another kept him pounding the dark trails, and Jim hadn't seen him for six years.

That rainy March night Jim had thought of Silver Wolverton as an old amigo and not as a case-hardened bad man. Silver explained that he had been trapped with some wet cattle and forced to run for it. The law was about two jumps behind. His horse was tuckered and he himself hadn't eaten for two days.

Here was a chance to repay Silver for having saved him from the crazed horse's hoofs that long-ago

day, Jim had thought. Unable to conceal the outlaw at headquarters, he wrote a note for Silver to deliver to Dick Hodge who was camped at a brush-hidden line camp under the Basin's south rim. In the note, he asked Dick to hide out the long rider until his horse was rested.

Two days later they found Dick Hodge lying in front of the line-shack door, a .44-caliber revolver bullet in his heart.

No one could have felt worse about Dick Hodge's death than Jim Ranier. But that would not shake Iron John's implacable determination. Hard and unforgiving by nature, Iron John had placed all of his hopes and affection in his son. He had educated Dick according to his cowman creed, overlooking no detail, and he was even more proud of his son than of the Broadsword. It was in full keeping of the ranchman's character that he had sworn vengeance on Jim Ranier as well as Wolverton for the loss of his son and heir. And Iron John Hodge was not given to casting idle threats.

Jim Ranier's thoughts were dwelling on those threats when he met Arno Toivan coming down the path through the shrubs. From the self-satisfied expression on the young waddy's tomato-red face, Jim knew what had happened, even before Toivan spoke.

"Sorry, Ranier. Old Hodge has just made me ramrod in your place."

Jim nodded, hiding the stab of disappointment. He had hoped that loyal and cattle-wise Chub Whitlock would be named. Iron John apparently had judged Chub's friendship with the disgraced Jim Ranier overshadowed the merits of his long service with the Broadsword.

Arno Toivan had signed on only last summer. Iron John had liked him from the start. Toivan was bold of action, aggressive, a hard rider. Jim knew very well that his

own inward antagonism toward the man was caused by the way Toivan looked at Claire Eden.

"Good luck with the job, Toivan," Jim said. "It's enough for any man's shoulders, as you'll find out."

As Jim stepped past the new foreman said in a significant tone: "The old man is waitin' for you, Ranier."

HIS face like a chiseled block of granite, Iron John Hodge sat in a big rawhide chair overlooking the Basin. Although the wind was blade-sharp, he wore only his customary cowman attire—flannel shirt, boots, wide-brimmed hat—and a black-butted six-gun at his thigh. His eyes were bleak and wintry as they settled on Jim Ranier in a harsh stare.

Jim stood silently on the porch, waiting for the ranchman to speak.

Iron John tried, without success, to keep emotion out of his voice. "The other day my boy Dick was found dead—murdered—at the Ouzel Creek line camp. Dishes showed someone had eaten breakfast with him. Doc Walton said he had been dead about two hours when he was found at nine o'clock in the morning. The coroner dug out of his heart a .44 bullet which came from a Smith & Wesson Russian chamber. Deputy Tolcar found a recent-fired Smith & Wesson .44 Russian shell in the grass alongside the downstream trail, and some boot tracks showin' where the killer hid. The only man in these parts who packs an S. & W. .44 Russian model is Silver Wolverton, a known horse thief and killer. A paper signed by you was found sayin' you was sendin' Wolverton to Dick's camp. Is that straight, Ranier?"

"That's right," Jim said, his voice slow, unchanging. "I trusted Wolverton. I knew he was an outlaw but I didn't know he had become a killer."

"Wolverton killed Dick so the law Johnnies behind him wouldn't learn

which trail he was taking. You agree?"

"Looks that way," admitted Jim regretfully.

Iron John's wrath flared abruptly. "You know damned well it's that way! You made the set-up. You didn't have guts enough to shelter the owlhooter yourself so you sent him over for Dick to take care of." His voice went low and flinty. "Or maybe you figured with Dick out of the way, you'd have a better chance with Claire Eden."

Jim's gray eyes chilled. The ranchman liked Claire and had always hoped that she would some day marry his son. But Iron John Hodge could not direct the emotions of others with the stern hand that ruled the Broadsword. Jim and Claire and Dick had been good friends, and there had never been any misunderstanding between them. But Iron John had never savvied.

Jim didn't reply to the veiled accusation. It was beneath argument. Besides, no man's words could shake Iron John's conclusions once they had formed.

The cattleman's voice grew bitter. "For twenty years I worked and fought for my boy. He was as fine and clean a young cowman as you could find in all Oregon. And I would have died a happy man knowin' that the Broadsword would go to him. Now your addle-headed bungling has taken him from me forever. The rest of my life won't be worth livin', but it's not for myself I'm goin' to fight you, Jim Ranier. It's for the memory of the boy your careless blunder killed!"

IRON JOHN pulled a revolver from his hip pocket and tossed it at Jim. "You'll give me the satisfaction of a gun duel, Ranier. The only satisfaction I'll ever have is planting a slug in the middle of your heart."

The pistol clattered at Jim's feet.

He didn't even look at it. He was watching the almost insane play of emotion in the old cattleman's stormy eyes.

"Pick up that gun!" Iron John commanded.

"You're locoed," said Jim. "I've no reason to fight you."

Contempt dripped from John's words. "I didn't expect you to show rotten yellow, Ranier, on top of your other failings. Maybe you figure I won't shoot down an unarmed man. Maybe you think you can save your yellow hide by not touching a gun. Well, you guessed wrong! You'd better use that gun. I'm shooting anyhow!"

The thought crossed Jim's mind that a coward never would have faced Hodge at all. But he knew it was useless to try to reason with the stern, stubborn cowman. Pinned helplessly to his chair, denied the chance to work off his grief in a normal way, Iron John had brooded himself into a half-crazed state that demanded the hot, vengeful satisfaction of a bucking six-gun in his hand.

Iron John Hodge mistook Jim's silence for fear. He opened up and cursed him with all the epithets the range land had ever spawned. Jim understood that the rancher was making a frenzied effort to drive him into a fighting mood, and because of that knowledge the taunts failed to carry their intended sting. When the cattleman paused for breath, Jim shrugged.

"O. K.," he agreed. "If it will make things easier for you, John."

In a seemingly careless movement he picked up the gun, cocked it and fired. The bullet clipped fuzz from Iron John's shirt sleeve. Jim instinctively tightened for the expected shock of lead.

IRON JOHN HODGE'S pistol sights lined point-blank on Jim Ranier's chest, but the hammer didn't fall. A look of agonized de-

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feat was creeping over the cattle-man's face. Jim's act hadn't fooled him. He knew the shot was a deliberate miss. He sat there staring at Jim for a long time, his eyes full of bitterness and hate and defeat.

Suddenly he drew back the pistol. "Get out of my sight, damn you!" he thundered. "Maybe I'm a gutless jellyfish, but I can't shoot a man who won't defend himself. Not today, I can't. But don't depend on it holdin' true tomorrow. Get out of the Basin, blast you, and never come back. For by the gods above, next time I'll blow your yellow innards through your backbone!"

Hodge hurled the pistol, and the whirring weapon slammed Jim full in the face. The front sight carved a long, bloody slice across his cheek, but it didn't shake him.

"I'll go. But I'll come back," he promised steadily. "I'll come back when I've settled with Silver Wolverton."

As Jim turned away, Iron John Hodge was staring vacantly at the western rimrock, his stony face twisted in the throes of unspent rage.

Jim Ranier walked slowly, like a man in a trance, down that familiar bunkhouse path. He was alive and it was more than he had expected. But it brought no feeling of elation nor of victory. He had lost all that he had held worthwhile in life. All but his stubborn pride.

Claire Eden returned to his thoughts and he knew he had lost her, too. True enough, she would gladly ride away with him as she had promised. Loyal. That was the word that best fitted Claire Eden. She would not care what others thought. She would stand with him through the tortures of hell. But it was not within Jim Ranier's code of fair play to drag her fineness down to the level of his disgrace. It was here in this valley that they had desired to live,

and if he could not go to her with honor and respect, he would stay away—far away.

The bunkhouse and the lesser ranch buildings nestled at the foot of the knoll on the opposite side from the Eden cabin. Jim threw a few belongings into a duffel bag, strapped on his gun belt and saddled his paint horse, Rainbow, at the water trough.

A footstep in the dust made him swing around involuntarily. Arno Toivan approached, surprise creased in his sun-reddened face. "You back? I heard a shot. Thought maybe—"

"That Iron John punched my ticket?" Jim finished. He turned back to tighten the cinch. "No. It was just target practice."

Toivan's amber eyes were cloudy and unreadable. "Leaving?"

"That's what."

"Going where?"

"Anywhere and nowhere."

Toivan grunted. Jim's lack of information might have piqued him, for a malicious grin twisted its way across his face. "Don't worry about your girl. I'll take care of her."

If any of the other cowhands had made the remark, Jim would have mustered a good-natured smile. But he suddenly recalled that predatory look in Toivan's eyes every time they dwelt on Claire, and a red flash of rage shot through him.

His right fist snapped out with unleashed ferocity. It thudded like a log butt on Arno Toivan's blunt chin.

A tremor ran through the new foreman. He pitched forward like a board and lay unmoving in the dust.

Jim Ranier swung into the kak and looked down, the quick heat of his anger gone. Maybe he should be sorry he had hit the man. But strangely he wasn't. Lifting his reins, he headed into the windswept reaches, gray in the cloud-plumed dusk.

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE TRAILS A COWPOKE

THE raw winds of an Oregon March were forgotten, and golden June bloomed in the Wasatch when Jim Ranier caught up with Silver Wolverton. The outlaw lived in refuge in a remote hide-out under the rim of the high Rockies. Afternoon heat was hanging in sultry layers over the mountainside when Jim stalked through the cabin door.

Wolverton was playing solitaire. He looked up from the cards and stared.

Except for the ominous old Russian .44 hooking from his holster, one might have thought Silver Wolverton had stepped from a big city office. His hair, so blond it was almost white, was neatly slicked back. His smooth, round face was fresh shaven, and he wore neat-fitting gray saddle togs.

"Cow business go flooey, Jim?" he said finally. "I hope the sheriff ain't swingin' a loop for you, too."

Jim planted his feet wide, standing like a stone man, his hands resting on his gun belt. "Reckon you can guess why I tracked you this far, Silver."

The outlaw looked puzzled. Then he smiled. "I ain't got an idea. Unless you're the answer to my prayers for somebody to play pinochle with. Set down and thaw out, you old fox. How about a drink?"

Jim looked through the front that Silver Wolverton was putting up so cleverly. He recalled that Wolverton's glib tongue and cleverness had pulled him through bad jams before, and that he had succeeded in dodging arrest during all of those six years he had swung a long loop. But Silver wasn't fooling Jim Ranier.

"You always were a good actor, Silver. But you can drop out of that innocent role now. It won't save your hide. You know dang well why I trailed you up here."

As Silver Wolverton read the chill inference in Jim's words, a trace of alarm flashed swiftly across his features. He straightened from the chair. "Something gone wrong, Jim? What is it? I hadn't heard."

"We're wasting time," Jim said curtly. "Drag your cutter, Silver. You smashed our old friendship back there in Three Creeks Basin. It's boothill between us now. If you want to see the sun set, come up smoking!"

THE outlaw's alarmed look intensified. He sucked in a sharp breath and backed away, his sun-ruddied cheeks drawing thin.

"You been chewin' loco weed, Jim. Quiet down a bit. Have a drink. We'll—"

"We'll fight it out now, Silver! Haul your hardware. Or do you want me to blast you like you did young Dick Hodge? He wasn't even wearing a gun."

There was a menace in Jim's eyes that made the man's face whiten like powder snow. He stared, gulped. His voice grew hoarse. "You're crazy! I never shot Dick Hodge. I didn't even know he was dead. Last time I saw him was when I rode away from the line camp that morning. He was standing in the door, puffin' on a quirly, alive as all get-out."

"And you sneaked back and shot him," Jim added grimly. "It had to be you. Dick was shot with an S. & W. Russian .44. And not another man in that Oregon country packs one of those old smokers. You shot him to cover your trail, damn you. And I'm going to shoot you because you deserve it. This is your last chance, Silver. Take it!"

Sweat shone from Silver Wolverton's forehead like dew. He backed to the wall and his fingers trembled as he clutched the logs. "You wouldn't kill me, Jim, your old pal," he whispered. "I'm tellin' the truth,

so help me. I never shot Dick Hodge. I swear it!"

"I'll kill you like I would a snake," Jim gritted.

He was impatient, fed up with those phony protestations of innocence. He had a job to do here, a gun job, and he didn't relish it. Watching a man die was never a pleasant thing for Jim Ranier. He wanted to get it over with and be on his way down the canyon.

Seeming to grasp courage from nowhere, the outlaw yelled suddenly: "Then shoot and be damned! I'll never pull a gun on you, Jim Ranier!"

BOTH men stood straight and tense, their eyes locked in a silent struggle in which neither would give an inch. Finally, Jim Ranier took a swift stride forward. Reaching out, he seized the outlaw's shirt front in a grip of steel.

Like a wolf shaking a rabbit, he rattled Silver's head against the wall logs until the man's eyes began to glaze. Yet he could not beat an ounce of resistance into Wolverton. It was like shaking a sack of straw.

Cold with disgust and disappointment, Jim slammed Silver into a corner, wheeled and walked out to the lazy mountain sunlight. He climbed aboard Rainbow's saddle, cursing himself for a weakling because, like Iron John Hodge, he could not find the guts to kill a man who refused to fight back.

Stripped of all that he had cherished in life and then cheated out of the small solace that vengeance might bring, Jim Ranier rode down the Wasatch valleys, his emotions sealed in a bleak shell. As he struck the western plains, the heat-warped horizon beckoned him, and a week later he was combing the northern Nevada ranches in search of a riding job.

But the story of Dick Hodge's murder had spread far and wide, and no cattleman wanted any dealings

with the friend of the wanton killer. As a matter of habit, Jim kept pushing the paint horse onward, always moving, but not caring much if he worked or not. His money ran out; his clothes grew shabby. Sometimes he ate at the chuck wagons. More often not, for punchers and cooks alike drew behind a silent wall when he mentioned his name.

He had a couple of sheepherding bids but he turned them down. Jim Rainier was a cowman from the cradle.

His face thinned down and his body became wolf-gaunt. He lost his pack when a cloudburst turned the prairie into a mushy sea. His razor went with it, and the shaggy beginnings of a full beard quickly blanketed his face.

He hit the towns—Winnemucca, Reno, Virginia City. But their lure, so magnetic to many, failed to impress him. The broad prairie was his home, and the vague confines of even a Western cow town were like shackles about him. He was propositioned once by outlaws who had heard of his six-gun prowess. But his reply was so sharp and hot that they almost trampled each other trying to get out of his sight.

In order to keep alive, Jim sold everything of any value except his horse and saddle and gun. He would have sold the gun, too, but for a faint hope that sometime he might inveigle Silver Wolverton into a shoot-out.

Roundup time swung in with the early frosts, and Jim tried the spreads again. He landed with the O Bar One, but at the end of two weeks the ramrod gave him his wages and the thumb. Jim didn't even bother to ask why. He knew his reputation had caught up with him. He drifted northward, living mostly on broiled grouse and wild berries like a lone Indian.

Every evening when the campfire burned low and red, the picture of Claire Eden emerged from his

memory and smiled at him from the embers. He thought of the soft green reaches of Three Creeks Basin, the drowsy music of the streams, the dust and sweat of beating the mahogany for the wild ones. Those were the things that put meaning in a cowman's life.

He thought of the little cabin on Owl Creek, beneath its autumn canopy of painted leaves. And of what it would mean to him to have the real Claire by his side for just one fleeting moment at the end of a weary day.

With the cold ashes of his last cigarette, the picture would retreat and fade into the mystic recesses of his memory to live again another night when the stars sparkled overhead. He would roll up in his tattered blanket, a vast loneliness within him, endless and empty.

ALMOST without realizing it, Jim Ranier was wandering northward closer and closer to Three Creeks Basin. He had a vague idea of trying Canada. A new country. Those ranchers up there wanted cow-punchers too urgently to pry into a man's past history.

He passed Alturas. Lakeview slid into the desert horizon, then dissolved in the dust from Rainbow's heels. One sunny afternoon in late October, Jim Ranier awoke to the fact that he was drifting across the central mesa toward the Basin's eastern rim.

He pulled Rainbow to an abrupt halt. For a while he fought with a lonely impulse. Then let the horse continue unguided. From the Basin rim he would take one final view of Broadsword range. It would be a picture to file away with the others. Then on to Canada.

Rainbow's head was raised higher than it had been since that fateful day in March. They dipped over the fault and down to a promontory poking from the pine-tufted slope like a giant's nose.



Jim halted on the point, his eyes growing mellow as he gazed across the great bowl glistening in the autumn sun. The three creeks, Owl, Ouzel, and Kingfisher, were slender silver ribbons, twining westward. Dark dots marked grazing cattle. The Eden cabin was concealed by trees, but atop the knoll in the Basin's center the big Hodge house gleamed like a cow-country Parthenon. A lone rider on a white horse, minute in the distance, was loping off the range toward the sheds and corrals bordering the bunkhouse.

For a long time Jim Ranier sat motionless in the saddle, looking down on the Basin, remembering.

Without sound, without warning, some invisible force clubbed his brain. Sickening shock bolted along his nerves. A rush of crimson seemed to wash away all his strength. He reeled drunkenly, dimly aware of the distant thunder of exploding powder, of making a feeble grab for his gun. And then everything faded.

WHEN Jim Ranier's senses returned, he was staring at a lone cloud castle in the sky's brilliant blue. He rolled over and sat up in the sage.

The lowering sun struck him full

in the eyes, hurting them. Pain thundered through his head, and clotted blood stiffened the skin on one side of his face. His exploring fingertips told him the bullet had ripped open his scalp.

A few yards away, Rainbow was nibbling withered bunch grass. He looked up, wagged his ears, and came sauntering up to Jim. No other movement stirred the lazing slope. A friendly chipmunk chirped from a pine limb, and from some hidden draw a cow bawled.

Jim was puzzled. He was trying to reconstruct what had happened. Someone riding the brush-littered slope had spotted him there on the point painted by the sun's gold. The man had uncorked a long-range rifle. Who in Three Creeks Basin wanted him killed had enough to attempt a bushwhack? And why hadn't the bushwhacker approached and finished the job? The angle of shadow told him he had been unconscious for at least half an hour.

These questions were unanswerable, but they lured Jim's thoughts to a new direction. It could not have been Iron John Hodge, for doctors had been certain Hodge would never fork a saddle again. Someone else in the Basin wanted Jim Ranier dead. Why?

The only possible reason that occurred to him was fear. He recalled the time his punch had put Arno Toivan to sleep, but surely the new foreman would not consider the incident sufficient motive for murder. On the other hand, whoever was afraid of Jim might somehow have been involved in the cause of his disgrace.

The scene in Wolverton's mountain hide-out swam into Jim's mind. He heard again the outlaw's denial of guilt. He hadn't believed Wolverton then. Nor did he change his mind now. But there was only the Russian .44 bullet plus the motive and circumstances as evidence against the man.

Strangely excited, Jim seized the pommel and dragged himself upward. He made it into the saddle. But the effort robbed him of his strength. His brain whirled. He slumped over the pommel, darkness hovering about him like a clinging fog. With the dim, uncertain comprehension of a drugged man he sensed that Rainbow was moving, and it was mostly instinct that kept him balanced in the saddle.

CHAPTER III

HARD CASE ON THE PROD

TIME and direction became meaningless, unjudgable. Jim's senses flickered at a low ebb. Sometimes he felt the jolt of the saddle beneath him. Sometimes he didn't. There were stretches when he slipped over the border line to complete unconsciousness.

It was during such a lapse of consciousness that an icy, drenching shock snapped awareness back to him. Water rushed into his nostrils, and he sputtered it out. Through the dull roaring in his brain he heard the soft laughter of cascading water. As he sat up on a patch of dry sand and looked about him, a familiarity attached itself to the sands and boulders of the willow-fringed stream. He was on Owl Creek, about a half mile downstream from the Eden cabin.

Beside him, Rainbow was sloshing his teeth joyously in the cool, crystal stream. Jim's head and shoulders were soaked, and he realized that he had slipped from the saddle and fallen partly into the creek when the unguided horse halted for a drink on his way to his home corral.

Alarm signals rang through Jim's thoughts. He didn't want to reveal his presence in the Basin until he had made some discreet investigations. He hoped no one had spotted Rainbow heading across the flat toward Owl Creek. It was not likely, for the punchers probably were

working the south range where the herds wintered. But being so near the Broadsword headquarters, he figured it would be wise to wait until darkness to slip away.

He took a long drink from the cool, sweet creek waters, washed his scalp and bound a faded yellow kerchief about the bullet cut. Feeling better, he tethered Rainbow among jungle-thick willows and climbed the slope to a covert in the rocks from which he could watch the Mist Valley trail unobserved.

He had hardly settled when a loping chestnut pony broke out of a coulee and dipped with the trail along the opposite side of Owl Creek. Jim's eyes caught the sparkle of rippling gold under the sun's dying flame, and his heart stopped beating. It was Claire Eden, riding home from the log schoolhouse in Mist Valley. She was wearing a sweater of soft blue that matched the sky, and the natural grace of a range-born girl was in the curving lines of her body.

As Jim Ranier watched her, the lonely months retreated to a forgotten limbo, and for a fleeting instant the segments of a broken dream spliced magically. But the old haunting shadow stole over his thoughts and dulled them. There was still the barrier of his unyielding pride.

He watched her approach the point where Rainbow had crossed the trail on his way to the creek. He hoped she would overlook the tracks. She did. Her sun-tanned face was turned to the blue horizon. The distance was too great for Jim to discern her expression.

She had passed the place where Jim was hunkered and was fringing the stream when he heard a horse crash out of the willows. Above the bush tips he could see Arno Toivan's butter-yellow hair and the bold sway of his stocky body in the saddle as he yanked his rangy bay sidewise to block the trail.

Toivan's voice floated plainly to Jim's ears. "Surprise, girly! I thought you'd be coming home about now."

CLAIRE halted her pony. Jim could see her slim shoulders stiffen. His gray eyes chilled and his lips thinned to a firm straight line.

He heard her say: "You're blocking my way, Toivan."

"What if I am?" Toivan grinned at her but didn't move. Then his grin was gone and his voice took on a harsh note. "It's the only way I get to talk to you, Claire. When are you going to start treating me like something besides a lousy dog?"

"I don't treat you as a dog. I like dogs."

Toivan's red face darkened. "It's high time you were beginning to like me a little. I've been loco about you ever since I hit the Broadsword. If you'd just quit moonin' over that worthless devil Ranier, we could have a lot of fun. How about takin' you to the dance Saturday night?"

"No, thank you. I'm staying home."

"Well, how about me stayin' home with you then?" the foreman persisted.

Jim's body tensed on the rocks. He strove to hold down a rising tide of anger. Butting in now might spoil his chance of unraveling that bushwhack bullet mystery.

Finality sharpened the girl's voice. "Listen, Toivan: It ought to be plain enough to you by now that I don't care to have you too close around. And the same goes for all those new riders you hired. Now if you'll move your horse so I can get past—"

With a cruel jerk of his arm, Toivan swung his horse around beside the chestnut pony. Jim caught the hot flash in the man's eyes, then, and he started out of the rocks in

a quick, pantherish stride.

"Don't be so frosty, honey," Toivan said and reached out an arm.

Claire twisted away, and the foreman's fingers closed on her sweater sleeve and held on.

"Let me go!" she cried sharply.

Toivan laughed. Jim started down the slope, his eyes the color of polished steel. He staggered a little from weakness, but his fingers didn't relax their grip on his pistol butt. He hated to show himself and to start a fight now, but he wasn't going to see Claire annoyed any longer.

Then without further warning, Claire's arm flashed across the pommel, and the sharp crack of a braided leather quirt stung Jim's ears. A white line welted Toivan's beef-red face. He blinked his eyes and cursed. Then Claire had wrenched free, and the pony was carrying her down the trail.

She glanced back at the foreman, a mocking smile on her red lips. "The female of the species can also fight," she called.

Jim flattened among the boulders, glad he had not had to show himself.

Arno Toivan sat his saddle rigidly, squinted eyes watching the girl ride down the trail.

"The little spitfire!" he snarled. "She won't dodge me much longer."

With a wicked slash of the bit, he spun the bay toward the creek. As he jammed spurs deep, the horse squealed and drove itself in a pain-blinded rush through the water and up the rocky slope where mount and rider vanished over a low ridge.

Jim went back to the rock covert. His face was bent into troubled lines. The Broadsword foreman wasn't carrying a rifle on the bay, but maybe he had been earlier in the afternoon. Maybe his interest in Claire alone had prompted that bushwhack bullet. If that was the case, Jim Ranier's lone, slim hope was only a phantom

to be dissolved in the light of the investigation he was going to make.

COLD blue moonglow tinted the Basin distances as Jim Ranier led Rainbow out of the willows. The impatient horse stamped a trim forefoot and rubbed its velvety nose against Jim's shoulder.

"Not yet, you old sage rabbit," Jim murmured as he mounted. "You're thinkin' of your old stall, a lick of salt and some warm, dry straw under your belly. But we're just going up the creek a ways."

He had decided to make a risky attempt to find out more about Arno Toivan and the present situation on the Broadsword. Claire had mentioned new riders. But roundup was over, and the only reason for new punchers would be as replacement for the old faithful ones, most of whom had ridden for the Broadsword for many years.

Jim slipped quietly along the willows which screened him from the Eden cabin and the knoll where the Hodge house stood. At a deserted stretch opposite the dull yellow lights of the Broadsword bunkhouse, he left Rainbow and began to make his way warily through the shadows.

The stars quivered white and close over the broken rimrock. The squall of a bobcat rode the pine-scented wind. As he neared the buildings, Jim heard the bunkhouse door open and slam shut. The boys must be getting ready to hit their blankets. He reached the low-roofed barn and quietly entered a side door.

He was striding past the grain bins when the thump of boots on the bridge outside froze him against the boards. The stable door was open and a dark shape moved into it, cutting a sharp black pattern out of the moon's silver.

Cold needle points touched Jim's spine. His eyes didn't miss the gun butts hooking from the man's thighs.

Continued on page 114

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Continued from page 112

He backed silently to a bin mouth and moved inside. That shape had been too bulky for any Broadsword waddy he knew.

Jim heard the floor boards creak as the man came on toward the bins. Then the clatter as he fumbled among feed pans.

An arm reached into the dark bin beside Jim. The big man grunted like a hog as he bent over to fill the pans. Jim quit breathing. The man scooped oats in the pans and moved away toward the stalls.

"Dang near forgot you hungry sons!" the big man addressed the row of stabled horses.

He returned twice more, but the darkness concealed Jim well, and finally the big fellow lumbered outside and rolled the door shut.

Jim waited a minute, then, crossing the stable floor, peered through a broken windowpane.

He saw Arno Toivan emerge from the dimly lighted bunkhouse and walk to meet the man who had fed the horses. They halted at a pitcher pump and conversed in low tones. Jim tuned every nerve to pick up a few words of their conversation. But even though his hearing was fox-keen, he could separate only one phrase from the mumble.

That was when Toivan said: "Keep your holster greased. He's fast and tricky with a six."

The big man laughed, a confident rumble. And then the two men were moving back to the bunkroom.

Ten long minutes writhed past before the next waddy came outside for a bedtime drink at the well. Jim's spirits lifted as he recognized the squat, black-thatched cowpoke advancing on barrel-stave legs.

"Hey, Chub!" he called softly. "It's Ranier. In the barn."

CHUB WHITLOCK stopped as though he had been shot. He stared uncertainly into the shadows. Jim spoke again, reassuringly.

The squat waddy hurried eagerly to the barn. "Slap me dizzy if it ain't Jim. There's been so many queer goin'-ons around here, I figured maybe this was a sandy."

Chub rolled open the door and clambered inside. The moon poured a silver potion through the windows, bleaching each man's face a ghostly hue. Their hands met. Chub's broad face split into a happy grin.

"Glad to see you, old owl. What you doin' with that jay hawk's nest on your pan? You look like the old man of the mountains. Skinny as a race horse; ain't you? And that rag around your coco. Don't tell me that's a bloodstain?"

"Some bush beater sent his greetings with a long gun," Jim explained. "I want to find out who. Any ideas?"

Chub shook his head slowly. "There's six-gunners aplenty ridin' the Broadsword brand nowadays. But I reckon they never knew you. They say they're from Montana. But I wouldn't be surprised if some of 'em had been roosting in Salem behind a barb-wire fence. I'm the only one of the old gang left."

Jim's eyebrows pinched together. "What happened?"

Chub shrugged. "Toivan is the whole cheese now. Old Iron John just squats in his chair like one of them Hindu idols. He don't give a hang what happens to the Broadsword any more. Lets Toivan run it to suit hisself. And Toivan thumbed out the old waddies. Reckon he would have booted me, too, but was afraid it might wake up the old man. Why did he sign these gun toters, you ask? I'm corn-sozzled if I know. They go on the prowl now and then, but nothin' comes of it. Maybe it's buildin' up to somethin'. Or maybe Toivan just likes to have them tough hands around."

"Iron John still holds me responsible for Dick's death?"

Chub nodded regretfully. "That

old he-coon is worse than he ever was. I believe he's about gone off his nut. He keeps swearin' he'll beef you if you come back, Jim. And I know blamed well he'd go through with it this time. You'd better keep out of his sight. He's thought about it so much he don't know nothin' else. Only one thing might snap him out of it and bring back his reason."

"What's that?"

"For you to fetch him Silver Wolverton's scalp and dump it in his lap."

Jim's hopes crashed. He had tried that and failed miserably.

"Reckon I'll be ridin' on, Chub," he murmured, striving to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "I might hang around the Basin for a few days, though. I'd like to settle with the coyote that clipped my noggin. I've got a hunch Toivan knows who it was."

Chub nodded. "That hombre keeps a sharp eye on this scooped-out chunk of nowhere. Nothin' much goes on without he knows it. Be sure and stop at the cabin to see Claire. She'd feel hurt if she ever found out you were in the Basin and didn't even see her."

Jim sighed heavily and shook his head. "Just don't tell her, Chub. Nothing has changed. Claire ought to forget I ever existed."

"She won't. She's the kind of a gal that sticks to her guns come hell or hullabaloo. She hasn't looked at another man since you dusted out. Toivan keeps draggin' his loop back empty."

As Jim was leaving, Chub uttered a final warning. "Be a bit leery of a skinny Broadsword prodder named Rail Ordway and a fat gunny who calls himself Cracker Zusk. They're the worst of this outfit. They can breeze their smokers in nothing flat and split a small acorn at sixty yards. Bad medicine, those hombres."

Jim went silently back to his

horse, his mind busy. Was Arno Toivan hiring gun hawks because he was afraid? The spark that the bushwhack bullet had ignited inside of Jim began to glow a little brighter.

Frost tinselled the trail north to Blastiron. Jim sent the disappointed paint loping quietly out of the Basin. There were four merchants in Blastiron who sold fire-



arms, and he wanted a quiet word with each of them, and with gunsmiths in other nearby towns.

CHAPTER IV

PISTOL PROBE

FOR two days Jim Ranier wandered from one hardware store and gun shop to the next, gathering nothing but disappointments. Blastiron, Cold Meadows, Gulchville, Prairie Point. Yes, they sold a pistol occasionally, but they hadn't even seen



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an old Russian .44 lately. It wasn't a popular gun in these parts. Everyone wanted a single-action .45 or a .38-40 for an open holster nowadays, and Colt was the big seller. They didn't know of anyone in the area who carried such a gun. Nor did they know where one could be procured except at a San Francisco wholesale house under special order.

Gloom had settled heavily on Jim when at the end of the third day of seemingly hopeless search, he routed a goateed Burns gunsmith out of bed.

The old fellow squinted at him through the lamplight. "A Russian S. & W. .44? Lemme see, lemme see." He stroked his long white goatee thoughtfully. "Yep, I recollect now. I had one layin' around for a coon's age. Give up all hope of sellin' it. But one rainy day a strange jigger come along and asked about one. Said he wanted some parts offn it to fix up one his paw handed down to him when he kicked the bucket. I sold it to him for six clankers cold cash. A right smart bargain he got, I'm tellin' ye. They always was a good weapon. Only folks in these parts never did cotton to 'em. Thirty-some years ago Kansas was lousy with 'em. Did ye say ye wanted one? Sorry I ain't got another'n. But there's a right smart H. & R. nickel-plated .38 out in the shop I'd part with for a ten-spot. Just the kicker for a man of your build. Yes, sir—"

"I just wanted to know if you'd sold one lately. Remember when?"

The gunsmith stroked his goatee again. "'Pears to me it was somewhere in February or March. Ye talk like a law Johnny trailin' some gun snake, feller."

"You're half right. What sort of lookin' hombre bought it?"

"'Pears to me he was a yahoo of middlin' height and age with plenty of beef on his slats. No whiskers, but plenty tomcatt-yaller hair and a

whiskey-red map. Said his name was Johnson, and he lived up Condon way."

Jim hid the elation springing through him. Flipping the gunsmith his last silver cartwheel, which he had been carrying for luck, he thanked him warmly and pointed Rainbow back through the night on the fifty-mile stretch to Three Creeks Basin.

THE blue and gold of late afternoon hazed the mammoth bowl as Jim Ranier rode warily down the pine-clad slopes. The burning flame within him consumed his weariness, and he felt an eager zest for the moment when he would come face to face with Arno Toivan.

Jim had that affair lined up in his own mind, but he would have to carry more than his own thoughts to Iron John. Forcing the truth out of Toivan might be a tough job. But tough jobs had been Jim's province all of his life, and this was one he would sail into with relish.

He recognized the presence of Toivan's gunmen as a dark, perilous cloud in his path. He was anxious to avoid a shooting scrape until he had a chance to work on the yellow-haired foreman in private, but that might not be possible.

Jim crossed the grass land stealthily, keeping within the protection of gullies and ravines most of the distance to Owl Creek. Here he struck the trail along the willows and proceeded on toward the Eden cabin. The area appeared deserted. He guessed that the punchers were working on those winter drift fences in the lee of the south rim. He hoped that Toivan would be loitering around the ranch buildings somewhere minus part of his gun guard.

The Eden cabin roof loomed through the willows across the creek. Falling leaves formed a riotous pool of color about the log building. Magpies flitted among the

high branches, and from a briar thicket a quail whistled its plaintive autumn tune.

Jim passed the cabin, seeing no sign of life about it. Claire was at the schoolhouse, and doubtless Mrs. Eden was still working at Iron John's house. He was appraising the methods of approach to the Broadsword bunkhouse when a slight, rasping sound in the willows twisted him in the saddle.

"Freeze or die, hombre!" a cold voice called.

TWO men plunged out of the brush with leveled pistols. One was tall as a lodge pole, with a goose neck and a head the size of a soda biscuit. The other resembled a gorged grizzly, and Jim recognized him as the gun toter who had come into the Broadsword barn to feed the horses that night he had talked with Chub.

Jim's hand had started toward his six-gun, but he checked the movement. A sickening feeling ran through him. He had been taken completely by surprise and he was silently cursing himself for his unwariness.

The gun hawks had him at cold pistol point. There was nothing he could do but take their orders. He judged the tall man to be Rail Ordway and that huge hombre must be Cracker Zusk. Chub Whitlock had not exaggerated when he said both were killers. Jim had seen plenty of gun-slingers and the brand was written in the hard, soulless stares of this pair.

"You hombres are callin' the dance, I reckon," Jim said coolly. "But why the hardware? I thought this was a cattle ranch. Do you always meet a visitor with a six in your claws?"

The skinny gun hawk was drilling Jim with tiny, snakelike eyes. "You're Jim Ranier, ain't you?"

Cracker Zusk snorted. "Course he's Ranier. Them whiskers ain't

a-foolin' me none. I seen him in Blastiron once when I was pokerin' the yokels out of a few pesos to kill time between gun jobs."

"Then you're comin' with us, Ranier," Ordway announced. "And no monkeyshines unless you crave a .45 slug in your bread basket. The ramrod wants a powwow with you. Leave your nag here. We'll hoof it over to the bunkhouse. Zusk, grab his smoker. He's got a look in his eye that says he might get careless with it."

Cracker Zusk's hand moved with the speed and precision of a hawk. Jim felt his holster lighten magically. He slid to the ground and gave Rainbow a parting slap that meant more than words. He didn't expect to see his four-footed pard of the lonely trails again. There was a deadly finality about these gunmen.

Sandwiching him, they hurried in silence across the stream and up through the sage to the Broadsword bunkhouse. Jim was heaping bitter condemnation upon himself for having blundered into the snare. He had not expected Toivan to keep gun guards posted during daylight hours. It was sure proof that the man was living in constant fear.

The bunkroom door opened as they approached, and Toivan stepped into view, a pleased smirk on his red face. It grew into a triumphant sneer as his eyes drank in the details of Jim's tattered clothing and saddle-tramp appearance.

"So we meet again, friend Ranier."

The old antagonism intensified as Jim confronted the blond foreman. His fists clenched involuntarily. Toivan noted it and stepped back.

"Bring him inside and stand him against the wall," Toivan ordered. "Then keep him covered. If he lifts a finger, plug him in the belly."

Prodded by pistol muzzles, Jim entered the familiar bunkroom with its clothes pegs, littered poker tables and general disorder.

Two more hard cases got up from

corner bunks, brandishing six-guns. They were young, dark-faced, swarthy, and looked like brothers. The tallest displayed a close-cropped head. Both looked as if murdering a man was their idea of a pleasant chore.

Jim wondered if Toivan was going to have him killed here or carry him alive to some remote canyon for the slaughter where only the buzzards would learn of it. He had no illusions of mercy on the foreman's part. Toivan's actions had proved beyond question that it was he and not Silver Wolverton who had shot Dick Hodge.

The idea of pretending total ignorance of Toivan's part in the affair occurred to Jim, but he rejected it. He was certain the foreman would have him killed anyway as a precaution against the future.

Rail Ordway was talking. "We nabbed him lopin' up Owl Creek like you said he likely would be."

Toivan's eyes gleamed. He confronted Jim and placed his hands on his belt in a belligerent attitude.

"I was plumb certain I didn't take you center the other day, Ranier, when I spotted you up near the rim. It was a hell of a long shot. So I knew you'd come sneakin' back sooner or later to see Claire Eden. This is where I get even with you for sockin' me the day you left."

THE foreman drew back his fist and slammed Jim full in the mouth. Pain shot through Jim's lips. He heard the snap of a broken tooth and felt blood stream down his chin and tasted its saltiness in his mouth.

A hot flash of anger split his reason, and his knuckles came up fast. The click of cocking six-guns struck a sharp warning into his mind. The faces of the four gunmen swam through the red mist. He let his arms drop and Toivan laughed.

Jim said through his bruised

mouth: "Brave, ain't you, Toivan? Takes real guts to hit a gun-haltered man. Call off your poodles and let's fight to a finish."

The foreman's eyes went sultry black. He leaned forward and two more heavy blows smashed into Jim's face.

"No more of that lingo, damn you!" Toivan snarled. "I've got you where the hair's short, and I ain't lettin' you soap your way out of it. I hated you since the day I signed on. And that Eden gal was so soft on you. But things has changed now. If you'd had any sense, you'd 've stayed out of Three Creeks Basin. But you was loco enough to come back, so you can take your medicine—lead-flavored or razor-edged."

Jim shook the dizziness from his brain. "If it's all the same to you hombres, I'll take it the way Dick Hodge took his, with a Russian .44 in Arno Toivan's hand."

The foreman's face twisted into a dark scowl. "You're talkin' loco," he blustered. "Silver Wolverton nailed Dick. Everybody knows it."

"Everybody is all wrong, Toivan. You overheard me talking to Silver that rainy night he bobbed up here at the Broadsword with the sheriff on his tail. Somehow you found out what kind of a gun Wolverton carried. You rode up to Burns and bought one like it. I remember now you took a day off, claimin' you had a bad cold and was going to see Doc Walton. Then you watched the line camp until Silver rode away."

Jim paused. Toivan was staring at him, eyes cloudy and unreadable. Suddenly the foreman growled: "Smart, ain't you? Maybe you think you're smart enough to waggle out of swallerin' your medicine."

"You drilled Dick, knowing Silver would get the blame," Jim went on levelly. "You cached the gun and played innocent. But all along, you figured Iron John would hold me to account for sending Silver for Dick

to shelter. That would get rid of me and leave you in line for the foreman job and a clear field with Claire."

Toivan's face split into an evil grin. "And maybe the Broadsword in time. Old John's got no heirs. He'll likely will the spread to me when I team up with Claire. Sorry you won't be around to see that happens, Ranier."

A fresh blast of anger shook Jim. "You scheming, rat-blooded fiend! If you'd give a man a fighting chance—"

"Sure," Toivan agreed with a cunning smile. "Who said I wasn't givin' you a chance? Rail and Cracker and these here somewhat clever Curd brothers are takin' you for a little sashay up the hill. Iron John Hodge will be mighty glad to see you, Ranier. Of course, we can't trust you with a cutter. But you still got a chance. Old John might



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get so mad he'll miss you clean."

The four gun hawks joined in a bray of laughter.

"You rotten, slimy, yellow-livered snake!" Jim burst out hotly.

"Shut up, blast you!" Toivan snarled. He hauled back his boot and kicked Jim brutally in the groin.

Smashing pain doubled Jim up. Face tight, jaws clamped, he fought off the sickening dizzy waves.

"Get goin'!" the foreman spat. "Old Lady Eden must be gone home by now. We got to get this over with before them other punchers come back from the south side for supper."

Rough hands seized Jim, dragging him toward the door. Toivan kicked him again.

"Ain't you comin', boss?" Ordway piped.

"No. It's better if I stay out. No use'n taking chances of John gettin' suspicious. You four take him right up and heave him in Old John's mug. This time that crazy old goat will settle his hash in short order. And our hands will be snow white with the law."

CHAPTER V

GUN SMOKE FOR GUN HAWKS

PAIN gradually lessened in Jim Ranier. When they were halfway up the hill he could straighten up and walk without being dragged. The four gun hawks ringed him. Their sixes were holstered, but their fingers brushed exposed handles, robbing him of any chance of a surprise break.

Toivan had played his crooked cards cleverly. Jim had to admit that. And the foreman was going to get away with it, unless Iron John's reaction was far different than anyone expected. Chub had told Jim that time and grief had brought on a measure of insanity in the rancher which had quashed the fair-play principles that had saved

Jim's life before. Even if John Hodge didn't kill him, the other four gunnies would do the job later, and his lifeless body would be dumped somewhere for the coyotes and buzzards.

The heaviness inside Jim Ranier was like an anchor dragging down his spirit. Once again he was climbing the familiar pathway to the big white porch where Iron John would be sitting in his chair watching the sun dip over the Basin's western rim. If only he had known as much that first time when there had been no gun hawks at Toivan's beck and call.

They rounded a row of shrubs and the high white columns towered above. The gunmen faded aside, leaving Jim alone in the pathway.

He raised his eyes and saw the gray-maned cowman sitting in his chair like a carven image, his face cut deep by bitter, brooding lines.

And then Iron John saw him.

A crackling burst of blasphemy ripped from the old ranchman's tongue. "Ranier! You gall-brained law cheater!" he stormed, his voice quivering with rage. "I swore I'd blow your yellow guts out if you ever set a boot on the Broadsword again. And I'll be eternally damned in hell if I don't!"

The last remnant of hope faded from Jim Ranier. He kept on walking in silence, his stride firm, his chin at a defiant angle. He saw Hodge's right arm dip and spear upward. Gun steel flashed crimson in the sun's rays. Jim Ranier's nerves drew taut, waiting for the smash of lead into his body.

A six-gun's thunder beat harshly against the ranchhouse portals. Jim shook his head, bewildered. He should be feeling the impact of the bullet, but instead he was seeing the sleek-barreled .45 spinning crazily from Iron John's hand.

Through the echoes bouncing back from the Basin walls, Jim heard a sharp voice barking: "Stand

hitched, you gun hellions!"

Jim pressed apart from the two pairs of Toivan hirelings. All of them were frozen in varied postures, but not a finger was touching gun steel. All eyes converged on the thick green shrubs some thirty yards along the knoll's face. From the verdant growth a short, sleek-haired man was emerging.

FLATION surged through Jim's veins as he noted the smooth, blond features of Silver Wolverton. The outlaw looked as if he had just stepped out of a haberdashery instead of a clump of brush. But there was nothing dandified about the grimy old S. & W. Russian leveled unwaveringly from his fist.

His warning was deadily and penetrating. "Back off your claws, you vultures! Get your grabbers over your sombreros or eat my slugs!"

Four pairs of hands hesitated, then crawled skyward.

Jim flung a quick glance at the porch. Iron John was hunched forward in his chair, one hand outstretched, a fierce light in his eagle-like eyes. His gun was lying on the boards several yards beyond his reach.

Wolverton came warily toward them, his narrowed eyes watching all details.

Rail Ordway's voice cracked the tension. "What you want with us, Wolverton?" he asked uneasily.

"I want your paws up and your yaps shut," Silver answered curtly.

The blond horse thief halted about twenty feet away, his voice clear and sharp.

"You, Hodge, up there on the porch, pull in your horns and listen. After Jim accused me of killing young Dick, I kept thinking ever what he had said and how mad he was. When things cooled off enough for me to risk sticking my neck out again, I moseyed out of the hills and drifted this way. I wanted to find out what really happened and

to clear myself with Jim. For nearly a week I've been prowling around this sink hole on the sly. I've uncovered plenty coyote smell.

"I seen Arno Toivan take a long-distance shot at Jim the day he showed up in the Basin. I was too far away to stop Toivan from shooting, but I chased him for an hour trying to get close enough to knock him out of the kak. But he had the fastest horse and got plumb away. When I went back to where



Jim fell. I couldn't find him. I spent two days looking for him to warn him about Toivan. But I never did pick up his trail. So I decided to sneak up here and have a powwow with Hodge, tellin' him what I knew. I was comin' uphill through the brush when Jim and these four hard cases bobbed up. What's the layout, Jim? Did these gun-handly boys persuade Hodge to do their murderin' for 'em?"

WITHOUT answering, Jim faced the porch where Iron John was sitting helplessly in his chair, puzzled lines now chiseled in his granite face.

"There's a lot about Dick's killing you never knew, John Hodge. I don't blame you for what you just tried to do. But Silver Wolverton didn't kill Dick. You might as well get that out of your head, once and forever."

Hodge's voice was harsh, bitter, unbelieving. "Then who did?"

Simply and clearly, Jim told of his search for the gunsmith who had sold a Russian .44 to a man answering the description of Arno Toivan. "But I don't know how Toivan knew Silver toted such a gun," he admitted.

"That's easy," Wolverton broke in. "Toivan and me used to run cattle across the Rio Grande. Only then he called himself Phil Arnold. As double-crossing a skunk as ever walked."

"He never changed," Jim said flatly. "When he had me Colthaltered down there in the bunkhouse he even admitted he killed—"

Something smashed into Jim Ranier with nerve-shocking force, breaking off the words in his throat. The short, savage bark of a pistol rang along the slope. He rocked backward, trying to keep his balance.

As if through a wavering screen, he saw blue-white smoke wreathing from a flat-topped bush down along the pathway, and Arno Toivan's yellow hair gleaming above a poised six-gun. The foreman had secretly followed to make sure there was no slip-up with Hodge.

Toivan's shot was the signal that split Hades down the middle. As Wolverton switched his aim and sent a quick shot at the foreman, Rail Ordway shrilled a command: "Rip 'er loose, ranians!"

The hawklike swoops of spread fingers formed a blur in Jim Ranier's eyes. As he steadied on his feet, he saw smoke clouds boiling from Silver Wolverton's gun. The blare of sound was fast and tangled.

The black-featured gunman near-

est Jim toppled like a storm-broken tree. Before he hit the ground his close-cropped brother was crumpling with a loud, wailing sigh.

Jim flung himself headlong toward the unfired weapon that slipped from the dark-haired Curd's dying fingers. As he grasped the handle he saw bright streaks darting out from the holster tops of Cracker Zusk. The big man could flip those fat hands of his with eye-baffling speed. Then Ordway's gun chimed in.

Silver Wolverton was staggering, trying desperately to keep his pistol from sagging groundward. From the porch came the thunder of Iron John's body hitting the boards as he struggled to reach his gun.

Jim's jaws were clamped like solid rock as he shot from the ground. His bullet plowed through Zusk's massive chest, shaking him like a bowl of jelly. Jim blazed another slug into him, then whipped his aim down slope.

ARNO TOIVAN was crouched over the bush, firing like a wild man. Lead hissed over Jim's head, plowed the grass in front of his face. Vaguely he sensed that death was sandwiching him with inevitable jaws. Wolverton was down. Rail Ordway had spun, and his smoking pistol was bearing down point-blank at Jim's shoulder blades.

With cool deliberation Jim moved his pistol until the front sight notched the center of Toivan's forehead. His main object now was to square the score with that treacherous killer. He pulled the trigger, and the crash of three guns forged together in a splintering blast.

Arno Toivan rolled free of the bush and lay still. Rail Ordway's skinny frame tottered, collapsed abruptly.

Amazed, Jim turned his eyes toward the porch. There Iron John Hodge was propped on one elbow,

Continued on page 124



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Continued from page 122

peering over the leveled Colt which he had finally managed to reach. John let the gun droop and buried his face in his bent elbow.

Jim became aware of a streak of fire in his thigh muscle. Ordway's gun had been jarred out of line by the old cattleman's bullet. Instead of killing Jim as he had first tried to do, the stern old rancher had saved his life. That was the thought echoing through Jim Ranier's mind when the dark, clinging fog of unconsciousness settled over him like a smoky sleep.

HIS senses rushed back abruptly, steadied by time and rest. He was lying on the porch, bandaged so tightly he could hardly draw a breath. He saw gray-haired Mrs. Eden come through the doorway with a pail of water. And there was Chub Whitlock talking to Iron John Hodge.

Jim struggled to sit up. It was tough going. As a slim arm supported him, he turned his head and looked into Claire Eden's white, anxious face. He mustered a smile that was meant for her alone.

Her blue eyes brightened like a summer sky. "Jim, you've come home," she murmured softly.

"You've come home—to me."

"And to the Broadsword!" added the strangely humble voice of Iron John Hodge.

From his chair the old ranchman looked at Jim, the vengeful fire gone from his eyes. "My mind is clear again, Jim, after those long bitter months that I lived with hate. Arno Toivan's shot proved to me that he was the one who killed Dick. And that both you and Silver Wolverton were innocent. It's too bad about Silver. But he died a hero and not a horse thief."

Chub Whitlock puffed joyously on his blackened brier. "It's sure gonna be swell havin' Jim ramrod the Broadsword again."

Claire leaned near. "And riding to town with me on Saturday nights."

With Claire's golden curls brushing his bearded cheek, Jim Ranier gazed between the tall white columns far out to where the Broadsword cattle were drifting toward the shimmering creek waters for an evening drink. Above the western rim a fiery crimson fan signaled the sun's farewell.

They had spoken truly. With honor and respect once again at his command, Jim Ranier had come home.

THE END.





LOST

Where'll I eat? Where'll I sleep? Where's my girl?

Last week on KP I kept thinking, "When I get to New York on my furlough, that'll be the day!"

So here I am, only I don't know my way around any more'n the Man From Mars. Can't even find my girl in this whale of a big and busy station.

Tell me, will you, what's a guy to do?

Listen, soldier, sailor, marine! We'll find a room for you, a good place to eat.

We'll even help you find your girl, who's probably hovering around the station this minute, looking for you.

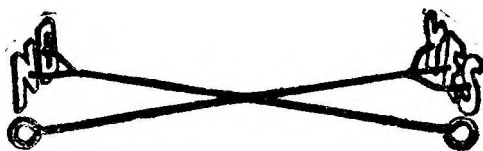
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READERS' BRANDING IRONS

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 11, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



NO QUIZ PROGRAM?

DEAR BOSS: I have been reading Western story books for a number of years now and I do think that the Wild West book is best of them all, but in all my reading there have been some terms I'd like explained. Maybe you can help me as it would make my reading much more interesting.

What is a doogie? What is a maverick? And what is a pinto? Just who shot Jesse James?

Now this is not a quiz, but just a boy who would like to know.

JACK SWARTZ.

Johnstown, Pa.

We take it you mean a dogie, Jack? Waal, it started out meaning an orphan calf whose mammy ran off and left him to get started on grass instead of milk. He was usually a raggedy, bloated, pretty sorry-lookin' critter if he lived long enough to be a yearlin'. But in actual practice, a cowpoke is pretty liable to hang that tag on any cattle. You know the trail song: "Git along, little dogies, git along?"

Any unbranded calf is known as a maverick in the West.

A pinto is a "painted" or calico pony—a spotted Indian hoss. And Robert Ford shot Jesse James. O. K., hombre? Light and rest yore saddle again when you're out this way.



BUT MOSTLY NO

DEAR BOSS: I thought it'd be a good idea to send in my opinions of the July 17th issue. Top favors go to Paul S. Powers for his good work in "Justice of Quick Trigger Range." The Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T are *muy bueno*!

Next is James P. Webb's "Ghost Riders of Pine River," although Blacky Solone isn't as good as he used to be. "The Silver Skull," by Philip F. Deere, rates third place. His descriptions of Silver Skull's remains and belongings were very interesting. It seems to me that Trig Trenton is always being captured and tied up. Pancho Smith's re-

turn from a watery grave was quite a surprise. The other stories, such as: "Red Rowels," "A Lobo Comes to Big Springs," "Return of the Rimfire Kid," "Lawman's Choice," "Don't Scratch a Tartar," weren't worth reading. (Ouch!—Ed.) "Return of the Rimfire Kid" at least had action in it. (Now we feel better, but we'd shore hate to meet you at a necktie party.—Ed.)

I've noticed lately, Boss, that most of the stories had something to do with ghosts and skulls. What struck your writers all of a sudden? (Workin' up a shiver for Halloween, mebbe?—Ed.)

Now for the cover. Although the Circle J pards were not in this issue, Buck Foster in his bearskin vest was on the cover, also Billy West. (Waal, can't a couple of hombres drop around to say howdy without coming in?—Ed.) Foster can never take the place of Beautiful Bill Barbee! Say, boss, I've noticed William Colt MacDonald's stories in *Western Story* and wonder if maybe you wouldn't try to get him to write for Wild West. I've read his books, and he's really good. Well, this is all for now, boss. I will say that I'd like to read a Blacky Solone-Johnny Forty-five adventure.

Yours till—

MARION HENDERSON.

New Bedford, Mass.

Guess yore letter about covers the spread, Marion, and thanks.



NO WOMEN FOR GUN-SLICKS

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to you and I have read Wild West ever since it was a one-story pamphlet of Billy West. I think he was an Indian or had one for a pal. I like all your magazines. They are tops with me, but have the Bar U twins died or what? I have missed a good many of your magazines, but when I buy magazines it is Wild West for me.

I saw in your July issue where some miss down Texas way thinks it no harm to put girls in W. W. Well, I do, and all the rest of us mossy horns do, too (as Buck Foster would say). Girls may do a man's job on the home range. I have seen plenty of them that could, but they can't pull a gun with any of your pards and have a chance. Tell that

miss I said to just keep on reading W. W. and do the work at the range, and leave the fighting to the men. That's a man's job. Most women can only pull hair and babble like Buck Foster when they get mad. Calamity Kate (wasn't it Calamity Jane? - Ed.) is dead, or should be by now.

L. C. DAVIS.

Wilmington, N. C.

Waal, now, pard, seems like you're taking a hand in one of the reg'lar ruckuses that keep on boilin' in W. W. There's Audrey Swain, of Ellsworth, Michigan, liking Wild West because it ain't "got so many gals in it," E. M., of West Palm Beach, Florida, who says the only reason anyone can't savvy why the readers don't like females in the stories is because he ain't got the sense to, and Solomon Cox, of Linn Grove, Iowa, who writes in to beg us "keep the animals and girls out!" (Why, Solomon!) Even Betty Fletcher, of Esparto, California, sides Señor Davis, kind of: she says: "Please bring Sonny Tabor in again, with no mush. I like the rootin', tootin', shootin' hombre he was when Ranger Lowrie and him took care of the cattle and sheepmen feud and in the others that had no mush."



"NEW" IS WHEN IT GETS THERE

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the first letter I have written to you, but today I got Wild West and found on page 138 an article on Tres Piedras

which happens to be my home town. This pleased me very much as anything on a town so small is seldom printed.

As a cowboy I have ridden all over that country and know the history, and I am happy to say you were correct on the date, 1845, that John C. Fremont came through.

Over here I consider May 8, 1943, a new magazine, and I know the boys over here appreciate the few copies of Wild West we get.

Well, so long, and keep printing.

Yours,

PVT. ROBERT HESTON.

North Africa

Thanks, soldier. It makes us feel mighty good to know that our fighting men find their job a little easier because of relaxation in the pages of Wild West.



THE GALS ARE ALL RIGHT

HELLO, BOSS: Every now and then even us soldiers get to take time out to read a little, and I always pick on Wild West for my mag. I read your magazine before I came to the army and I have read it ever since. I enjoy the book because those old-timers had very much the same fight that we have today. I bet some of those old guys would have liked to take a shot at a Jap or Heinie. What do you think?

Keep the gals in the stories for they played a big part in building the West just like they are today in helping to win this war. Let's have plenty

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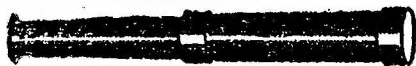


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of old players and new. Just keep Wild West a good magazine like it has been for years.

Adios,

A SERGEANT FROM LOUISIANA DEEP
IN THE HEART OF TEXAS.

U. S. Army

Must be that the gals are all right . . . if you don't have any around for a while, especially! Richard Henderson, also the U. S. army, says he believes there should be girls in some of the stories, "but not very many or they get very gruesome and ruin many otherwise good stories!" Gruesome, Henderson? Miss Beatrice Campbell, of Wind Ridge, Pennsylvania, gets right proddy on the subject. Says she: "If anyone wishes to say something against girls in Wild West, let me know and he can say it to me. It's lonesome enough here in the country!" And Sidney Barker, Aquone, North Carolina, asks for "a few girls in the stories." Looks like some ruckus-a-blowin' up, pard! Let's turn the column over to one of our fighters that cleaned up North Africa:

WE SHOULD PULL OURSELVES TOGETHER?

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading Wild West ever since I was ten years old. I am high onto sixteen now. Your mag is perfect except for a few details. For instance, (1) please bind your mag better. Mine comes to pieces when I fold it a little; (2) Put a few humorous stories in. The West wasn't all work and no play.

This is my first time to write you. Before closing, I will congratulate you again. Sonny Tabor is the best you have. Keep the girls out.

Hasta luego,

DeQuincy, La.

A. D. BRANTLEY, JR.

The army and navy and marines are all yelling for metal these days. You know, that stuff used to stick magazines together tighter. Seems as how they're a mite more important than binding staples, amigo. Si?

ANOTHER SERVICE HEARD FROM

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a steady reader of Wild West when I can get it, and I want to say what a great magazine it is.

My first-rate story is "Boothill for Outlaws," and I think Rowdy Lang is the best. Us parachute troopers think that Wild West is the one and only "morale builder."

Thanks for just reading this,

PVT. ROBERT RICHARDSON.

Parachute infantry.

U. S. Army

Keep an eye on the magazine shelves at your PX, Private Richardson. One of the jobs we're trying to do is to supply the armed forces with munitions, mail, matériel and morale—and Wild West is right proud that it's delivering the morale to a group of men tough

as rawhide and deadly as, well . . . paratroopers! They're mighty proddy hombres, we've heard tell, and any magazine that can keep 'em that way, has got a right to feel good. Anyway, that's how we figger.

Drop in, when you are flyin' by, sometime!

We've heard people in New York palaverin' about their folks "out West" and found as how they meant Pittsburgh, Penn., or Columbus, Ohio, but we figger it might take a right good stretch of imagination even for a dabble-his-spurs-in-the-Atlantic brand of Easterner to think of Florida as a country to be lassoed in a Wild West roundup. Howsomever, it shore is true that there's a good many cowpokes chasin' dogies around there right now on some big spreads with plenty of Wild West flavor. One of our readers down thataway has a suggestion:

FLORIDA HAD ITS STAGECOACHES

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Wonder if you'll admit a woman to your readers' page? I'm thirty-four and live on a small farm with my mother and brother. I like Wild West magazine very much. Perhaps you may say that women should read *Love Story Magazine* or *True Story*, or one of the many other magazines about love. But I, for one, like a good old Western story for a change. Love stories are all right; so is ice cream, cake and candy, but still we want other things to eat besides sweets. It's the same way about reading.

I like the way the authors of Wild West stories twist their stories so that a person thinks they will turn out one way, then end just the opposite. I also enjoy the stories about the old stagecoaches. But why hasn't someone written a story about a stagecoach in Florida?

The story would have all the trimmings for excitement: live oaks covered with Spanish moss, wolves howling, deer running, snakes and frogs underfoot, wild turkeys flying, Indians yelling, stagecoaches traveling through the woods. How about my writing such a story and sending it in? (Why not? Hop to it, pardner! Ed.) Folks would know then that not all stagecoaches wound around some narrow mountain roads or ran through deserts.

About two miles from my home is the stage pond, where the stage coaches used to stop to water their horses. Just below our house is the wolf-pen pond where the people used to make pens to catch wolves. We have large caves in this part of Florida (the Northwestern section) where the Indians used to live. There are many signs of Indian days and the old stagecoach period.

Well, good luck to Wild West.

From a reader.

Grand Ridge, Florida. MYRTLE BUNDRICK.

Must have been some excitement down there. Reckon if a whiffle-tree broke and the driver was set afoot, he'd have to worry about alligators instead of side-winders. An hombre was telling us the other day that alligators don't eat people, but personally we wouldn't

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count on it. At least, a diamondback carries a warning on his tail! We figger it took some red-blooded, he-men to haze the stagecoaches over the early trails whether in Florida or Texas or Arizona. What do the rest of you waddies say?



WHEN YOU SAY THAT, SMILE, PARD!

DEAR SENOR RANCE BOSS: I have been reading the Wild West mag since days when Judge Roy Bean, Blackstone Bangs and Jeff 'n' Bugeye rode the WW range. This is my first attempt to comment on your fine magazine.

Bud, you're slowly changing your mag to appear like Street & Smith's *Western Story*. Your Chat and the Roundup are the same now.

I read your announcement concerning the Wild West circulation. Since it is to appear monthly why not put in some more stories, and, of course, raise the price. For example, I've heard a great deal about the *Western Story Annual*. Why not make a large Wild West like it and charge the W. S. price if you have to?

I am very much interested in S. Omar Barker's verse and short stories. I have yet to read a verse by him that I didn't like. His ability to bring the old West, and new, right into the pages of the magazine is wonderful. I'd like to see a White-Wolf-and-Blacky-Solone adventure. (You shore like dynamite, eh, pard?—Ed.) Yuma Bill Storms is a fine character with Beapole Badger. Another good combination is Johnny Forty-five and George Krumm. Risky McKee and Suffering Joe come up next.

Yours till—

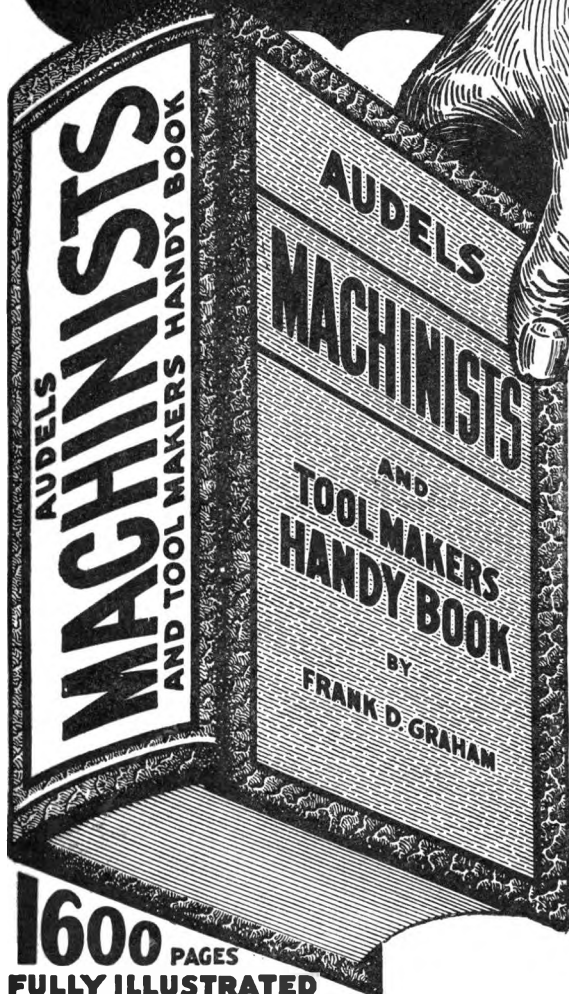
MASSACHUSETTS KID.

Can't figger how you think Wild West is much like *Western Story*, Kid. We shore try to make Wild West in a class by itself. And as for the Chat and Branding Irons being like the Roundup—we can't see that, nohow. For one thing, there's a lot more room to speak yore piece here as we see it. Take another look, pard, and if you don't side us in the augerment, how about another letter to tell us how you'd like the cavy rounded up.

As for the more stories and the annual, seems like Uncle Sam's waddies in uniform need that extra paper right bad. Every shell goes out in a paper cover. A lot of field rations are packed in paper. So are medical supplies the boys carry. Wood is used for PT boats and Mosquito bombers—and paper, and even when the same kind don't go into paper and the boats and planes, there's a powerful mite of switchin' goin' on. Just hold yore horses, pard. When this ruckus gets cleaned up, we'll be back bigger and oftener.

Adios, amigos.

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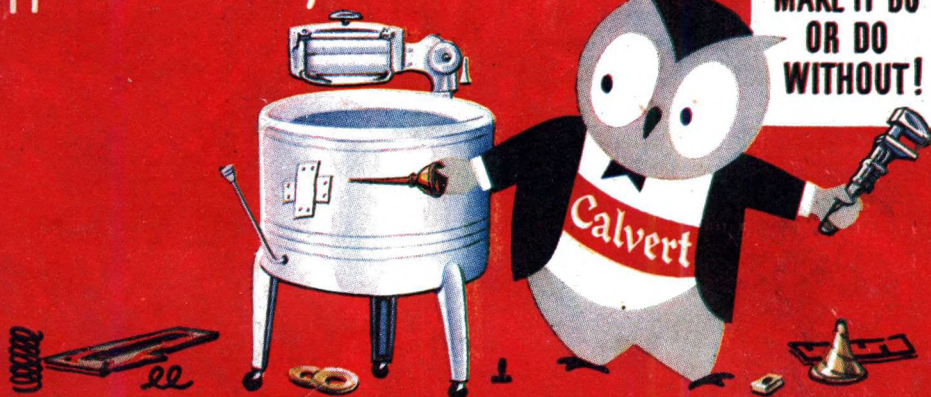
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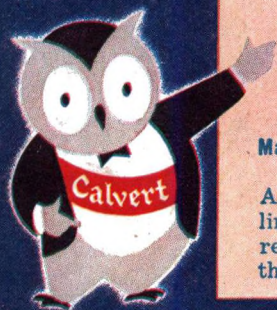


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