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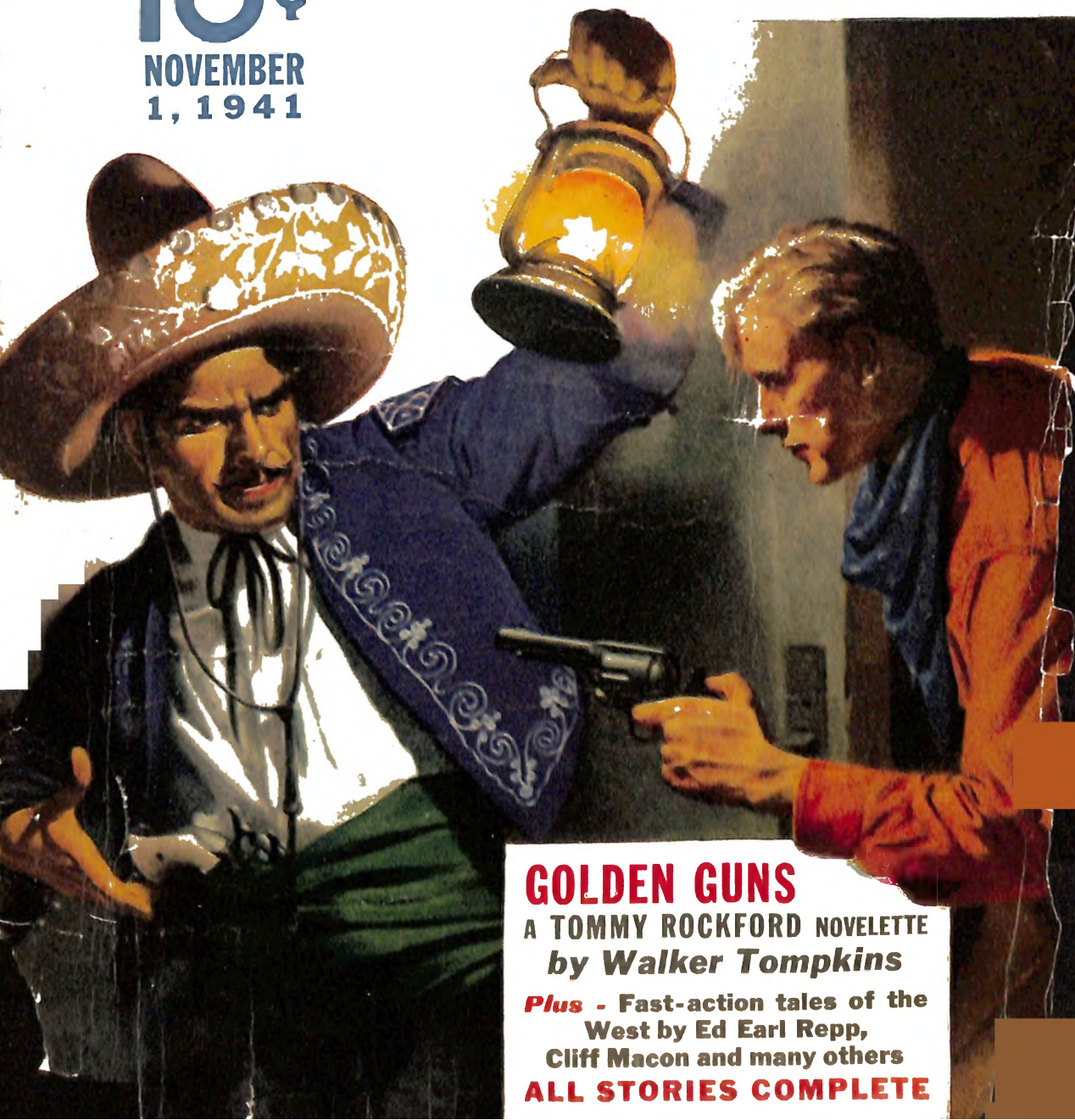
WILD WEST

NOV. 1, '41

10¢

NOVEMBER
1, 1941

WEEKLY



GOLDEN GUNS

A TOMMY ROCKFORD NOVELETTE
by *Walker Tompkins*

Plus - Fast-action tales of the
West by Ed Earl Repp,
Cliff Macon and many others

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

CONTENTS NOVEMBER 1, 1941 VOL. 149, No. 5 Whole No. 2037

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THUNDERING TOMMY ROCKFORD NOVELETTE

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"There ain't an outlaw livin' who wouldn't pawn his soul to get those guns of yores," the murderous convict jeered at helpless Tommy Rockford. The killer didn't know the strange destiny about those Colts!

THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL OF THE RANGE

SIX PACES SOUTH—AND DIE! . . . Ed Earl Repp 45

There were four parts to that map which told where the hidden gold was cached—but the heirs to that strange will found they had to match more than maps . . .

SHORT STORIES

A LETTER FOR DOGIE McGEE . . . Cliff Macan 28

Triple trouble rode with those strange gold pieces—and salty cowpoke McGee didn't know they'd trap him into siding a murderer against the law.

DEVIL'S DINERO Clay Starr 38

"Start smoking when you make your pass!" that husky owl-hooter snarled, but Brone Regan saw he'd have to beat Malone to the draw—or die in a vicious nest of sidewinders!

FOUR SHOTS TO BOOTHILL Anson Hard 77

"All right, kid, you'd better go through with it!" Munger snarled. And young Joe Cathorne reckoned he'd have to help dry-gulch an unsuspecting lawman—or get a two-legged lobo's bullet in his heart.

I'M STILL THE LAW Fredric Sinclair 90

"An old fool like Jeff Kane sent down to arrest a hellion like Gonzales!" Those bitter words seared U. S. Marshal Kane—but they didn't keep that law dog from learning a new trick to use on renegades.

GUN RENDEZVOUS Harvey Maddux 98

Could that ex-lobo marshal silence the loot-hungry guns of an owlhoot pack and stop the dynamite death that was part of a vicious plunder scheme?

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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

HOPE you don't all drown yore-selves bobbin' for apples on Hallowe'en, because yore (hr-r-rumph!) favorite magazine is especially good this week and next. Even the authors are good, several of them having sent me interesting letters to perk up this hyar now department. The printers tell me they're just out of rubber type, so I can't squeeze all the letters in. But here's one from Señor Tompkins in regard to his Tommy Rockford novelette which heads this number.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Chewing the rag with some elk hunters and forest rangers in a lonely log cabin up in the Grand Teton last July, I got the idea for "Golden Guns."

Hanging above the mantel of the rock fireplace of this old prospector's cabin was a rusty bear trap with iron-notched jaws and a wicked-looking pan trigger.

There was a grim mystery back of that trap. An old-timer in the Teton country, eighty-eight-year-old S. N. Leek, had discovered the trap back in the '70s. There was a crushed human skull caught in the jaws of the device, but the ravages of time

had disposed of the rest of the skeleton.

What tragedy of the old days lay back of that trap? No one will ever know. Smoking and reminiscing in front of the crackling flames, with a rain whispering down on the shake roof, the men assembled there had several gruesome explanations to offer. Some had the theory that the skull belonged to an Indian. Others wondered if the owner of the trap had stumbled and fallen headlong into its poised, deadly jaws.

I made a mental note of the trap and its weird history, and when I got back to my own log cabin in Washington State I spun a yarn about Tommy Rockford based on that experience of mine in Wyoming. Here's hoping the readin' hombres like it!

As always,

WALKER TOMPKINS.

While that experience isn't anything to make us beam with rapture, Señor Tompkins, it's sorta suitable to Hallowe'en in the fact that it's slightly shivery.

Next week's lead-off story will be a bang-up Sonny Tabor novelette by Ward M. Stevens—"Guns Across the Border." This time Tabor becomes tangled in a situation which involves the fate of nations, no less! It's a big, sweeping story written across a panorama of mighty, earth-shaking events. You'll like it a heap, unless I've suddenly gone loco.

You'll also like Philip F. Deere's complete novel, "Iron Horse Rustler." This one's a gripping and dramatic yarn of one cowboy's vengeance battle against ruthless rail-rovers who wrecked his life. Not a slow page in the whole story. There'll be short stories by favorite authors and some good features, too.

Here's more good news: That great favorite, Johnny Forty-five, will be back in a long and exciting yarn in an early issue. Watch for Johnny! *Hasta la vista.*

THE RANGE BOSS.

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by
**WALKER
TOMPKINS**



*Rockford's shooting irons
roared, rending flesh and
bone, knocking the con-
vict forward in his saddle.*

Handcuffed with his own manacles, steel jaws of death ready to clamp on his head if he moved, Tommy Rockford knew it was fifty to one he'd never survive or capture that venomous ambusher who'd stolen the border patrolman's

GOLDEN GUNS

DURING the ten bitter, brooding years he had spent behind penitentiary walls, big Clyde Farabee had been thinking and planning for this day.

Chief surveyor of the convict-labor crew which was gouging a stagecoach road into the gold country in the upper Lagallans, the barrel-chested convict saw escape and

vengeance near at hand this morning; death would be the price of failure.

The hope that sooner or later his chance for getaway would come had kept him alive during that seemingly endless decade behind the bars of the Arizona territorial pen.

He was climbing now up the sprawl of talus which blocked Bonepile Gulch. Halting, Farabee shifted the weight of the dynamite sticks and pickax which were strapped to his back.

"They don't suspect nothin'. They couldn't suspect."

A sneer that was half contempt, half exultation curled the owlhooter's red-stubbled lip as he surveyed the scene below him.

Fellow convicts, stripped to the waist and with their prison dungarees grimy with sweat and dust, were strung out along the canyon floor, trundling wheelbarrows and wielding sledge hammers at the stubborn rock with an animallike stolidity. Poor, wretched devils; most of them life-termers, even as Farabee.

"But they ain't got friends on the outside. They ain't got the dinero to keep friends from double-crossin' 'em. They'll rot back in Yuma as soon as this road is put through to the diggin's. But not Clyde Farabee."

The outlaw whispered the words, though he was a good hundred yards from the nearest guard. He knew that the vigilant men with rifles who were posted along Bonepile Gulch would be watching him; knew that whenever he was carrying explosives he was under extra special surveillance.

Somewhere up on the rimrock, Canuck LaToque, the half-breed trapper, would be waiting. And back at Rosebriar Creek, beyond the first ridge, his old pard of the owl-

hoot days, Dade Crandall, would be poised for getaway with a canoe. That had all been carefully worked out during the weeks past. That much news had already been smuggled to him in the prison camp. The actual getaway was up to him; and he felt that his ruthless cunning would more than match the vigilance of the guards.

A month before, he had helped survey the length of Bonepile Gulch, and he had pointed out to the penitentiary foreman the need of blasting the suspended avalanche of talus which had eroded from the cliffs looming behind him.

That was his job this morning; to use his skill with dynamite to clear the rock slide so that the prison laborers would not have to work under its constant menace.

The convicts were building the road back into the Lagallans to open up the gold camps along Nugget Gulch before snow blocked the passes in November. A surveyor for the Union Pacific Railroad before he had turned train robber, fifteen years ago, Clyde Farabee was a logical choice of the prison authorities to put on the Lagallan road job.

Bitter memories crowded Farabee's brain as he resumed his climb toward the crown on the talus slope. They were memories of the June morning when he had wrecked the Arizona Flyer and looted its baggage car of a gold shipment from California.

In his early twenties, possessed of an iron stamina, Farabee had been able to elude pursuing posses for weeks after his partner, Dade Crandall, had been captured. His gold cached away below the Mexican border, Farabee had returned to Arizona to learn that Dade Crandall had drawn a five-year term at Yuma for his part in the outrage.

Then a railway detective named Tommy Rockford had cornered Farabee in a Phoenix saloon, and when the gun smoke cleared, Farabee found his wrists encircled with Rockford's famous gold-plated handcuffs and his body tortured by lead from the lawman's golden six-guns.

Farabee had regained his health behind penitentiary walls. The intervening years had grayed his black hair and further twisted his already vicious soul. At night his dreams had been tortured by Rockford's face, and he had heard over and over again the thunder of Rockford's gold-plated Colts.

There had been born in Farabee's brain a bitter, consuming passion for revenge which surmounted even his desire to regain his freedom. And today, out here in the Lagallan badlands, his first chance to escape had come.

Not until he reached the top of the broken talus slope and was standing under the overhang of the cliff did Farabee look up. His piercing, flint-black eyes flickered over the yucca growth on the granite ledge twenty feet above; and an instant later he spotted Canuck LaToque, waiting with a coil of rawhide rope.

The outlaw dropped his gaze, ostensibly sizing up the rocks for the most advantageous spot to plant his dynamite. Glancing down into the canyon, he saw the guards, armed with Winchester .30-30s, regarding him warily. The foreman had already sent the convict laborers to points of safety, away from the tumbling tons of rock which Farabee would set in motion.

"They're sharpshooters, them guards. I'll be in the open while I'm climbin'. But it's a risk I got to run."

He glanced back, to see that LaToque had paid down the rawhide

lariat so that it was dangling against the fluted cliff face like a tenuous spider web. The rope itself was probably invisible from the view of the guards far below.

Farabee, half-hidden by the rocks through which he was clambering, unbuckled his pack board and laid the dynamite aside.

Sweat polished the outlaw's copper-brown back muscles as he crawled to the base of the cliff and wrapped calloused hands about the rope. LaToque would have the upper end of the rawhide hitched to a rock or tree trunk.

Another instant and Farabee was climbing hand over hand, like a monkey swarming up a circus wire. Up and up he went, desperate in his haste, staking everything on gaining the rim before the guards realized what was happening.

Crrang! A steel-jacketed slug knocked the rock particles in Farabee's eyes before he had climbed a dozen feet. A split instant later the thunderous roar of a guard's carbine broke the sweltering quiet of the canyon.

A dozen feet overhead, Canuck LaToque whipped a .45-70 hunting rifle to his shoulder and opened fire. A yell of pain from the penitentiary guard rewarded the trapper's aim.

Then red hell broke loose in Bonepile Canyon. From a dozen different points, Winchesters started thundering a deadly chorus. Bullets ricocheted from the granite scarp with deafening whines, inches from the desperately climbing Farabee.

Convicts, startled out of their lethargy by the sudden roar of guns, peered up at the antlike, climbing figure and began yelling hysterical encouragement.

Climbing tirelessly, the rawhide burning his palms, big Clyde Farabee grated his teeth and concentrated on

his mad gamble. A slug raked his shoulder, brought a warm gush of blood over his naked chest and back.

He shut his brain to the agony of overtaxed muscles and fought his way to the rim. LaToque, exposing himself to the whining lead, reached down to seize Farabee by the armpits. Skylined against the blue, Farabee crawled to the safety of the ledge and lay gasping.

"Ze canoe ees waiting over the ridge, *m'sieu*!" the trapper gasped and seized the outlaw's blood-slippery arm, helping Farabee to his feet. "Already, ze guards run for ze horses."

The shouting of the guards was in their ears as Farabee and LaToque slogged up a pine-timbered rise and topped the summit to see Rosebriar River sluicing through its bed below them, at the edge of a fertile meadow.

Farabee swore suddenly as he sprinted to the water's edge. Out of a clump of willow and cottonwood came Dade Crandall, shoving a gray canvas canoe through the shallows.

There was no time for salutations or handshakes, though these case-hardened men had not seen each other since Crandall had finished serving his time in Yuma.

Wading through knee-deep water, Farabee sprawled into the middle section of the canoe while his two confederates seized paddles at bow and stern and sent the craft out into the current.

Five minutes later, penitentiary guards mounted on lathered horses stormed up out of a cross canyon and gained the summit in time to see the canoe glide swiftly down the Rosebriar rapids and vanish into the rocky heights which bordered the meadow. Pursuit through that broken wilderness would be impossible on horseback.

Clyde Farabee propped himself up on one elbow and grinned at the red-headed, slimly built Crandall in the stern of the craft.

"Got you away slick as goose grease, pard!" chuckled the ex-convict, dipping his paddle blade deep. "We can hide out a spell at Canuck's cabin up in the Lagallans, before we head for Mexico an' that gold cache you've promised to split with us."

The convict dipped a bandanna overside and bathed his bullet-nicked shoulder in cold water. Grim fires flickered under Farabee's craggy brows as he shook his head.

"That *oro*'s waited ten years, an' it can wait a while more," retorted the outlaw. "I got a little matter to take up with Tommy Rockford before I pay you buskies off."

Crandall's reddish brows drew together.

"Rockford's the tin star who sent you up for life, amigo," reminded Crandall. "You better let well enough alone an' stay out o' range o' his loop. Rockford's a *malo hombre* to buck."

Farabee laughed harshly, his eyes on the blurring banks as the canoe shot down a perilous series of cascades.

"Just thinkin' about gettin' Tommy Rockford has been keepin' me alive for ten years," the convict answered. "He's workin' for the border patrol now. But I know a way to get him set for a showdown, Crandall. An' when the trap springs, Rockford won't be able to use them golden guns he cut me down with."

CHAPTER II.

BORDER PATROLMAN.

TWO weeks later Canuck LaToque rode into the border town of Los Alamos with the sunrise. Trailing his crowbait mare were two burros

laden with pelts and camp equipment. Ostensibly, LaToque was coming out of the Lagallans on his semiannual visit to civilization to sell his furs and stock up with winter provisions.

But an hour later found the French-Canadian knocking at the door of the United States Border Patrol station, situated at the barbed-wire gate which comprised the official port of entry into the Mexican province of Sonora.

He entered the station to find two border patrolmen there, staring at him curiously.

"I weesh to find M'sieu' Tom Rockford," said the trapper.

A border-patrol captain behind the desk jerked a thumb toward a six-foot hombre who was rolling a cigarette over by the window.

"There's Rockford," the captain answered. "What's your business, stranger?"

LaToque removed his battered hat and shifted his feet uncomfortably as he swung his gaze toward the lawman.

Rockford was a husky man in his early thirties, but unlike his fellow patrolmen, he wore the gray Stetson, blue work shirt, batwing chaps and high-heeled kangaroo boots of a cow-puncher. The half-breed's gaze dropped automatically to the double shell belts which girdled Rockford's lean waist, and a chill rippled down the trapper's spine as he saw the gold-plated .45 Peacemakers in the lawman's holsters. Those were the guns which Clyde Farabee had been raving about during the ten days they had holed up in LaToque's cabin at the headwaters of the Rosebriar River.

"You lookin' for me, stranger?" Rockford asked, his voice betraying a Texas drawl which had carried

over from his years of punching in the Panhandle.

LaToque swallowed hard and nodded.

"*Oui, m'sieu'*. I breeng the message from your old frien', Rod Kieth. Kieth say he was a railroad detective with you een the old days, no?"

Rockford's ice-blue eyes lighted up, and he swung down from his perch on the window sill.

"Rod Kieth? Why, I ain't seen Rod in eight, nine years. What's the old yahoo up to now?"

The trapper shrugged.

Kieth, he ees hunting ze elk up een the Lagallans. He camps at my cabin. When I say I go to Los Alamos, Kieth tell me to ask you to come up an' go hunting weeth him."

Rockford grinned broadly and glanced over at the border patrol official behind the desk. The latter, a white-haired oldster with a merry twinkle in his light-blue eyes, teetered back in his swivel chair and hooked thumbs in armpits.

"You haven't had a vacation in the two years you've been with the patrol, Tom," Captain Sam Lodge said. "Some big-game hunting might relieve the monotony. I reckon we can spare you for a couple of weeks."

Rockford struck a match and lit his quiry. Striding over to LaToque, he held out a hand to the trapper.

"I'd give my eyeteeth to see old Rod Kieth again, stranger," he chuckled. "When you headin' back for your cabin?"

"Zis afternoon. You ride back weeth me, yes?"

"You're danged tootin', pard. And I'll bring back the best set of antlers for this office that any of you patrol-ridin' hombres have ever seen."

A few minutes later LaToque departed, having arranged to meet Rockford at the Wild Rose Saloon on

the main street at three o'clock, for their trip back into the elk country.

"Danged if I don't envy you, Tom," Sam Lodge said; "not only for geting to see an old friend of your railroad days again, but for the hunting you'll get and the country you'll be seeing."

The grin faded from Tom Rockford's lips. Seating himself on the edge of Lodge's desk, the border patrolman rummaged in a pocket of his bullhide chaps and drew out a smudged letter.

"Rod Kieth ain't huntin' elk up at this LaToque's cabin, chief," was Rockford's startling announcement. "At this moment, Kieth's laid up in Phoenix with a broken leg."

Lodge jerked erect, scowling puzzledly.

"But this Canuck trapper— Why would he—"

Rockford shrugged.

"I don't know ~~what~~ the breed's game is," Rockford said, pulling open the flap of the envelope and drawing out a sheet of paper to which was affixed a newspaper clipping. "But I got a hunch that this letter I got yesterday from Rod Kieth may have a bearin' on LaToque's visit today."

Taking the letter from Rockford, the old border-patrol chief glanced at the newspaper clipping. The headline read:

**TRAIN ROBBER ESCAPES
FROM CONVICT CAMP
IN LAGALLANS**

The scowl deepened on Lodge's tanned forehead as he read aloud the letter from railway detective Rod Kieth:

"DEAR FRIEND TOMMY:

"I'm laid up in the Phoenix hospital with a busted leg, and the nurse brought me a copy of the morning paper. The attached clipping will be interesting to you, inas-

much as it tells of the getaway of Clyde Farabee from a prison gang over in Bonepile Canyon a week ago. So far, Farabee is still at large.

"You remember you and I trailed Clyde Farabee to Mexico after he held up and robbed the Arizona Flyer ten years back. You recall how Farabee swore, when the judge sentenced him to a life term in Yuma, that some day he'd break out and see you in boothill for capturing him.

"With Farabee on the loose, maybe you had better keep a stirrup eye peeled for trouble, Tommy. Farabee's the stripe who would nurse a grudge over all these years. As you know, he's a crack gunman and pizen mean as they come.

"How're the grizzlies bitin' down along the border, and how do you like your new job toting a star for Uncle Sam?"

"Like always,

"ROD BRENT KIETH."

Captain Lodge looked up to see Tommy Rockford pacing the office floor, his lips pursed thoughtfully.

"LaToque says his cabin is at the headwaters of Rosebriar River," Rockford said. "That's only fifty miles or so from the place where Farabee made his getaway from that prison gang. For all I know, maybe this half-breed is one of Farabee's side-kicks."

Lodge handed back Kieth's letter and nodded soberly.

"This has all the earmarks of a murder trap, Tom," he told the patrolman. "And Kieth's right about Clyde Farabee being as mean as they come. I remember the whole territory breathed easier after you put that hombre behind bars."

Rockford grimly hitched up his cartridge belts.

"I reckon I'll string along with LaToque and go on this elk-huntin' trip to his cabin," the border patrolman said. "It's a matter of pride with me, chief. I wouldn't mind notching my gun sights on that train robber again, if he's waitin' for me at LaToque's cabin. Once I put an

Farabee and Crandall rode off on the two horses, leaving the Federal lawman to a torture-laden death inside the lonely cabin.



hombre where he belongs, I figure on seein' that he stays there—or else."

Sam Lodge nervously picked up an envelope.

"I'm not so keen on sendin' my ace rider into a set-up that smells of skunk oil like this one, Tom," the older man protested. "How about takin' some of the boys along, just to play safe?"

Rockford grinned and slapped his holsters.

"I corralled Farabee once, and I can handle him again, chief. Besides, if LaToque's got a murder trap up his sleeve, I've got to play my

cards close to my chest. No, I reckon I'll spend my vacation on a man hunt, chief—and it may be Larabee's topknot instead of a set of elk horns that I'll be bringin' back."

CHAPTER III.

TRAIL TO DOOM.

THREE days later found Rockford and his French-Canadian guide high on the craggy divide of the Lagellan Range.

Aside from grunted replies to the border patrolman's routine questions, Canuck LaToque had been a

taciturn, sometimes sullen, trail mate.

Regarding Rod Kieth, however, Rockford had been able to draw the half-breed out at considerable length. The trapper was able to describe Rockford's erstwhile partner in a manner which convinced the lawman that LaToque either knew Kieth personally, or had been supplied with a detailed description of the railway detective.

At times, so convincing were LaToque's words, Rockford was inclined to wonder if Kieth had been released from the hospital in Phoenix and was actually in the Lagallans on a hunting expedition to recuperate. Rockford also remembered that big-game hunting was Kieth's main avocation, so that all in all it was logical that he might be camping at LaToque's place.

But during a dozen-odd years of law-enforcement work, Rockford had developed to an uncanny degree his ability to play a hunch. More than once, at a secluded campfire or along the trail, the border patrolman had surprised a furtive look or a leer of outright hostility on the breed's countenance.

As they drew nearer to the headquarters of the Rosebriar, the trapper grew increasingly nervous, especially when Rockford insisted on riding behind his guide and the two heavily laden burros.

It was at high noon on the fourth day out of Los Alamos that Canuck LaToque halted his mare and pointed down toward a cliff-hung pocket in the range. Dimly visible against the background of pines was a squat log cabin, sod-roofed and chinked with moss. A wisp of blue wood smoke spiraled up from the rock-and-mud chimney.

"Kieth is there, yes?" inquired the half-breed, hipping about in saddle

to stare at Rockford. "It is good, Perhap' he might have been far away hunting ze elk."

Rockford nodded, reaching for the high-powered field glasses slung over his pommel. Focusing the instrument on LaToque's cabin, Rockford saw no other sign of life around the place, but a freshly slain bull-elk carcass was slung under a pole between two conifers near the cabin.

"Let's rattle our hocks down there, LaToque," Rockford said. "I've waited a long spell to see ol' Rod again."

Following a ledge trail down off the summit, the pair took half an hour to reach the meadow which faced LaToque's cabin. Rockford meanwhile loosened his gilded Peacemakers in their holsters without being observed by the French-Canadian.

The two dismounted at a hitch rail some fifty yards in front of the shack, and Rockford moved leisurely to put LaToque between himself and the half-open front door of the shack.

A sense of danger was buzzing in the back of the lawman's brain, but he gave no indication of distrust as he saw LaToque turn inquisitive eyes upon him.

"For why you not go to see your good frien' *m'sieu*?" asked the trapper. "I take care of the stock, yes. While you are at LaToque's home, you are my guest."

A crooked grin revealed Rockford's teeth. Dropping a hand casually to his side, the border patrolman eared back the gold-plated hammer of a .45 and slid it from leather.

The half-breed's swarthy visage turned ash-pale as he found himself staring at the bore of Rockford's gun. Sweat burst in cold beads on LaToque's forehead as Rockford said in a crisp whisper:

"I'm playin' it safe, Canuck. Keep

your hands away from that cutter you're packing, until I've made certain Rod Kieth is waitin' for me. Don't it strike you funny that Kieth wouldn't come outdoors, if he's inside the house?"

LaToque groaned as Rockford edged around behind him, his six-gun muzzle prodding the trapper's spine.

Lifting his voice, Rockford shouted:

"You in there, Kieth? If you are, show up an' greet an old amigo like a gentleman!"

There was no answer from the cabin; and Rockford decided to play his bluff for what it was worth.

"Tell Clyde Farabee to come out of there with his arms reachin' for the sky, LaToque. If Farabee ain't showed in a couple of ticks, I'll blast you from hell to breakfast!"

A shudder racked LaToque's frame as he felt the pressure of Rockford's gun against his back. His arms groped shakily aloft as he turned toward the cabin and yelled hoarsely:

"Zee game ees up. Rockford knows that—"

Through the half-breed's words the border patrolman heard a muttered curse from inside the cabin. The lawman's heart slammed his ribs as he realized that his bluff had worked far more successfully than he had dared hope.

"I'm giving you five counts to show in the open, unheeled, Farabee!" Rockford said clearly. "Then I'm letting your pard have it!"

"Come out!" the trapper cried in anguish. "I am keel' eef you do not do as Rockford say."

Muscles tense, the border patrolman stood poised behind the cowering trapper. Then, a moment later, a shadowy figure appeared in the open doorway of the cabin and a

towering man clad in plaid shirt and a pair of LaToque's overalls stepped out into the sunshine.

Rockford's thumb tightened on his gun hammer as he recognized the man. The years in Yuma had put their grim stamp on Clyde Farabee; had harshened the line of his cruel, drooping lips, and put a lethal glint in the train robber's slitted eyes.

"All right, Rockford. Looks like you rake in the pot."

Farabee's voice was a dead monotone as he walked out to meet them, his arms level with the brim of his sombrero. Two holsters were buckled to the outlaw's thighs, but they were empty.

With his free hand, Rockford reached out to lift the .44 Colt from the trapper's scabbard. He tossed it aside into the deep grass, then stepped away from LaToque, his gun leveled at Farabee's chest.

"I hadn't expected it to be this easy, Farabee," the lawman said, removing his famous gold-plated handcuffs from the hip pocket of his Levis. "No moves, now, from either of you."

Farabee's eyes were despairing as he held his hairy wrists down. A moment later the glittering cuffs snapped over them, as they had done in a Phoenix saloon so many years before.

Turning to the quaking half-breed, Farabee snarled viciously:

"If you double-crossed me, you dirty Canuck, for the reward that's posted on my scalp, dead or alive—"

Rockford shook his head.

"LaToque ain't to blame for me figuring out your little set-up, Farabee. You planned it smart enough. You knew Rod Kieth was my old partner; you knew how Kieth looked, so LaToque could give me his description and pretend Kieth was elk hunting here. But it so happens

that my old friend is laid up in a hospital in Phoenix right now, so when LaToque showed up in Los Alamos with a phony invitation to—”

The ear-numbing roar of a .30-30 blasted Rockford's words and something plucked savagely at his hat crown.

Whirling and whipping up his gun, Rockford triggered a fast shot at the rifle barrel he saw protruding from the darkened doorway of LaToque's cabin.

With gun smoke biting his nostrils, Rockford triggered his Colt a second time at the figure of Dade Crandall, dimly outlined against the cabin's dark interior.

But now the two outlaws beside him were in action. Lunging forward, Canuck LaToque seized Rockford's gun arm in a frantic grip, dragging Rockford to his knees.

Pulling savagely away, the lawman yanked his other Colt from leather. He had a fleeting glimpse of Clyde Farabee charging him like a bull moose, fettered arms raised for a clubbing blow.

Then his own golden handcuffs smashed hard against Rockford's temple, and he sprawled in a numb heap on the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

INHUMAN VENGEANCE.

LIKE a man in a stupor, Rockford was aware of the half-breed grabbing the Colts from his fingers. Then a rock-knuckled fist clipped the border patrolman with stunning force under his left ear.

Sunlight glinted on the handcuffs encircling Farabee's wrist as the huge outlaw again clubbed them savagely over Rockford's skull, blinding pain shooting through the lawman as he clung doggedly to consciousness.

Then, coming from a vast distance, he heard Farabee speak:

“Don't shoot the skunk Canuck. I been waitin' too long for my revenge to see you put Rockford out of his sufferin' with a quick slug.”

A hard-driven boot jarred the sprawled lawman. He could feel LaToque's hands exploring his pockets, and he heard a quick exclamation as the trapper located the golden key which fitted the handcuffs.

Opening his eyes, Rockford saw Farabee take the handcuffs from the trapper. A moment later the metal bracelets clicked on Rockford's wrists, and he knew that he was a victim of his own manacles.

Dade Crandall strode out of the cabin, a leering, snag-toothed grin lighting his heavy face as he leaned his smoking rifle against the door jamb and walked out to greet his partners.

“I just aimed to crease the Johnny Law, Clyde,” defended Crandall, as Farabee launched a tirade upon him. “I know Rockford's your meat. I wasn't aimin' to kill the skunk.”

Walking inside the cabin, Farabee returned with a bucket of water. Dousing the contents over Rockford's head, he watched while the handcuffed lawman sputtered back to full consciousness. Then Farabee reached down and yanked Rockford to his feet.

“While I been waitin' for LaToque to come back with you, I've been doin' some tall figurin' on how to take care of you, Rockford!” the convict said ominously. “It was Dade Crandall who got the idea of usin' one o' LaToque's bear traps on you. And before you kick off, I reckon you'll have plenty of time to repent ever havin' sent the two of us to Yuma.”

Rockford struggled against the icy talons of despair which gripped him.

That the escaped criminal planned to torture him, the border patrolman was positive. He found himself wishing that Crandall's slug had been an inch lower.

Gripping their prisoner by the armpits, Crandall and Farabee dragged the limp patrolman into the cabin. An oil lamp revealed the disorder of the shack, as Rockford was shoved down on a split-pole chair beside a table that was covered with empty whiskey bottles and scraps of food from past meals.

Standing spread-legged in front of the fireplace where pine logs crackled, Farabee eyed his prisoner with keen relish.

"For ten long years I sweated on the rock pile inside o' Yuma, Rockford," the outlaw said. "Durin' every minute of that time I been schemin' how to break out and make you pay for takin' that chunk out of my life. And this is where you're goin to play out your string, Rockford—out here in the Lagallans where there ain't a tinstar within a hundred miles."

Rockford felt the terrific hatred in his captor's voice and made no reply. Of all the outlaws he had sent to justice, he remembered Clyde Farabee as being the most diabolical. He knew that a mouse caught in a cat's claws would have enjoyed more mercy than he could expect from this hate-saturated devil.

"Remember how you and Rod Kieth trailed me down into Mexico, after that Arizona Flyer job?" the convict rasped. "You didn't know that I went out the back door o' the Black Dice Saloon down in that Mex burg below the border, just as you two were comin' in the front door. And I had the bullion off o' the Flyer in my saddlebags then, too."

Rockford listened like a man in a

daze. Faded memories out of the past brought back the picture Farabee was drawing—how the border patrolman and Rod Kieth, following a cold trail, had succeeded in tracing Farabee as far south as Candolero, Mexico. It was a month later before Rockford, working alone, pulled his sensational capture of the outlaw up in Phoenix. The gold which Farabee had looted from the Arizona Flyer had never been found to this day.

"I cached my swag up in the canyons behind Candolero that night, Rockford," Farabee went on. "As soon as I'm through with you, me an' my two pards will be lightin' a shuck down to Sonora to dig up that cache. I reckon it's worth splittin' three ways with them, for gettin' me out of that prison gang."

Greed and avarice were in the eyes of Canuck LaToque and Dade Crandall as they listened to Farabee. It was the first hint either of the outlaws had received, from Farabee's lips, of the location of the hidden train loot. Both men had assumed that Farabee's cache was somewhere in Arizona Territory.

"What are we waitin' for, Clyde?" demanded Crandall. "I move that we take care o' Tom Rockford and vamoose out of here. It went agin' my grain, waitin' around the Lagallans for Canuck to haul Rockford back here."

Reaching down to his holsters, Farabee lifted out the guns which reposed there. Rockford stiffened, wondering if Farabee meant to shoot him in the stomach and leave him here to suffer the tortures of the damned before merciful death came.

Then he saw, by the glare of the fireplace flames, that the guns were his own.

"There ain't an owlhooter livin' who wouldn't pawn his soul to get these gold-plated sixes of yours,

Rockford," Farabee jeered. "You got 'em originally from an owlhooter—Tattoo McGrew. An' he was an old friend of mine from the days when we worked together. I reckon it's fittin' that these .45s stay in my keepin', Rockford. These golden guns sure cost me many a night's sleep—back in Yuma."

Thrusting the weapons back into leather, Clyde Farabee turned to Crandall.

"Bring the trap," he ordered the red-headed killer. "We might as well show Rockford what we got planned for him."

Bleeding from a dozen bruises on the head, Rockford felt too weak and dazed to move. He watched stolidly while Dade Crandall went to a far corner of the cabin and returned with one of the half-breed's giant spring traps—a rusty, spike-jawed affair weighing fifty-odd pounds, intended to trap grizzlies or other big game.

Fascinated, Rockford watched while Crandall drew up a heavy bench in front of the fireplace. On one end of the bench Crandall placed the heavy bear trap. Its twenty-inch jaws had been pried open and set with the pan-shaped trigger, which needed but slight pressure to bring the deadly, steel fangs clamping shut.

"Stretch Rockford out on this bench, boys!" ordered Farabee, a mad glare appearing in his green eyes. "Unlock them fancy bracelets and lock his arms together under the bench. Rope his ankles to the other end so he can't move a muscle."

A frantic instinct to defend himself shot through Rockford as he saw Crandall and the trapper approach his chair, their eyes red-rimmed and glaring like a pair of lobos.

But resistance was impossible.

Rockford's strength had been drained by the brutal beating outside, and he could only struggle weakly as he was dragged over to the bench and stretched upon it.

Crandall unlocked one of the gold-plated handcuffs and the prisoners' arms were fettered together under the half log which formed the bench. At the same time, Canuck LaToque was busy roping Rockford's booted legs to the other end of the bench.

"I'll take over now, amigos." Farabee's whiskey-laden breath was hot on Rockford's face as the outlaw bent over him.

Whipping off Rockford's sombrero, Farabee lifted the lawman's head by the hair. Then the border patrolman went cold as he saw what Farabee was doing.

Sprawled on his back along the bench, Rockford was unable to resist as Farabee pulled viciously at the lawman's hair. The metal grated on wood as the escaped convict, working gingerly, tugged the open-jawed bear trap forward until the flat trigger pan of the trap was squarely beneath Rockford's head.

Sweat burst from the patrolman's pores as he rolled his eyes and caught a glimpse of the great, spike-studded jaws of the trap girdling his temples. As Farabee released his clutch on Rockford's hair, the lawman stiffened his neck muscles instinctively to keep his head from dropping down on the sensitive trigger pan of the trap.

"There!" exulted Farabee, stepping off to stand between his grinning henchmen. "A bear trap makes a good pillow, eh, Rockford? As long as you can keep your neck stiff, your head won't spring that trap. But when you tire out, your head'll sink down on that trigger pan—an' them jaws'll squeeze the brains out o' your

skull like a egg bein' squashed under a boot heel."

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAP SPRINGS.

HORROR flooded Rockford as he crowded his chin close against his throat, to prevent the weight of his head from resting against the hair-trigger pan of the trap.

He could feel the cold metal disk against the short hairs on the base of his neck, and a mad impulse shot through him to relax his taut-corded neck muscles and end his mental and physical suffering immediately. But sheer instinct, the primal urge for self-preservation, kept the border patrolman straining his neck upward.

From the corners of his eyes he saw Clyde Farabee take out one of the gold-plated Peacemakers and heft it experimentally, thumbing back the knurled prong of the gun.

Then, without warning, Farabee swiveled the .45 about and pulled trigger, point-blank in front of Canuck LaToque.

The thunder of the gun inside the cabin drowned out the gagged scream which issued from the half-breed's lips. Hurlled backward by the terrific impact of the bullet which drilled his breastbone, the trapper crashed against the table and upset it, rolling suddenly onto the floor.

"What . . . what in hell's the idea o' murderin' Canuck, Clyde?" gasped out Dade Crandall, a hand coiled about the cedar stock of his own Colt. "You ain't aimin' to welsh on divvyin' up that gold you got cached?"

A savage grin exposed Farabee's teeth as he holstered the smoking six-gun. He shook his head slowly, his eyes fixed on the spreading puddle of blood which was oozing from the

bullet hole in the half-breed's chest.

"Canuck ain't one of us, Crandall," answered the convict. "You an' I held up that train an' got that gold. Half of it's yours, by rights, anyway. I aim to let you have LaToque's share."

Tommy Rockford squirmed helplessly on the bench as he saw Dade Crandall cuff perspiration from his forehead.

"Canuck LaToque's canoe an' his cabin came in damned handy for gettin' you away from that prison gang, though," remarked the red-headed outlaw. "But we'd better get started for Mexico? I don't like the idea of hangin' around these parts." Crandall was plainly in ghastly fear that the convict would suddenly shoot him.

Farabee stepped over to glare down at his helpless prisoner, whose face was a white oval between the poised jaws of the bear trap.

"You won't be able to keep yore neck muscels stiff for long, Rockford," jeered the outlaw. "But you got time to think over what you did to me. Compared to rottin' in Yuma for ten years, you're gettin' off easy."

Farabee turned toward his partner.

"Saddle LaToque's spare mounts, Dade. It'll take us a week to reach Candolero. Some day, maybe, I'll take a *pasear* back to this cabin an' say howdy to Rockford's skeleton, an' Canuck's. We'll leave the door open, so's the coyotes can come in."

Rockford compressed his lips grimly, fighting back a desire to curse the leering outlaw above him. His neck muscles were already beginning to cramp. His one desire now was to keep from springing the trap while Farabee was here. If he could keep from giving Farabee the satisfaction of seeing the trap crush his skull—

Minutes dragged, and the torture

of keeping his head rigid above the trigger pan was rapidly becoming unendurable.

Hoofs clattered on the rubble outside, and by turning his head slightly Rockford could see Dade Crandall leading two saddle horses up to the open cabin door.

With a final tirade of cursing, Farabee turned and strode out to where his partner waited with the horses.

A moment later the drumming hoofbeats died away as the two outlaws headed south across the mountain meadow in the direction of the trail which led toward Mexico and the gold loot of the Arizona Flyer.

Left alone, Rockford released his pent-up breath.

Considering his situation, the doomed lawman found little cause for hope. A matter of a quarter hour, at the outside, and he knew that sheer fatigue would force him to lower his head against the bear trap's trigger. At any rate, death would be mercifully instantaneous.

He recalled from the newspaper clipping which Rod Kieth had mailed him, that Clyde Farabee had escaped from the labor gang in a canoe. Apparently the outlaw and his accomplices had hidden the canoe somewhere along the river and traveled overland to reach LaToque's cabin. This maneuver alone was enough to throw off pursuers; undoubtedly the prison guards had pushed their hunt downstream along the Rosebriar, following the only course which the canoe could have taken.

LaToque's cabin was so well hidden that it was doubtful if any prospector or trapper would find it for years to come. It was at least fifty miles from the spot where Farabee had escaped from Bonepile Canyon,

and in an opposite direction from that which the convict had taken at the time of his escape.

A clock somewhere in the cabin ticked away the agonizing minutes. With desperate effort Tommy Rockford forced his neck muscles to remain rigid, keeping his head upright inside the grim jaws of the trap.

A half hour dragged by like eternity. Flies and mosquitoes were preying on Rockford's perspiring skin. He tried to rear his body upright, but his handcuffed arms prevented him from getting into a position so that he could topple the bench sidewise in an effort to spill the bear trap to the floor.

Breathing heavily, the border patrolman forced himself to relax his tense body. And then, above the pounding in his eardrums, Rockford thought he heard a scrape of horse's hoofs somewhere outside.

"Farabee's comin' back to see if the trap's done its work," the lawman groaned aloud. "An' I won't be able to keep him from havin' the satisfaction of seeing me die, this time."

The hoofbeats came to a halt outside the cabin. Saddle leather creaked, and Rockford heard the jangle of spur chains as a rider hurried up to the open door of LaToque's cabin.

"Rockford! What in blazes—"

The lawman's heart seemed to stop pumping, as he heard his name called by a voice that was not Farabee's or Crandall's.

Forcing his head a half-inch higher, Rockford looked around.

Leaping over the trapper's corpse to reach his side came Captain Sam Lodge of the United States Border Patrol!

"Quick . . . chief . . . I can't hold this pose . . . much longer—"

The words came like a sob from Rockford's lips. This was no time to question the miracle of his superior's opportune arrival at this secluded cabin. Crazily, Tommy wondered if the goateed old patrol chief might dissolve in thin air, to prove that Lodge was but the figment of his overwrought imagination.

Working swiftly, Lodge jumped over to the fireplace and seized a stick of wood.

Then, relieving the strained muscles of the cowboy lawman's head and neck, Lodge supported Rockford's skull with a firm hand while he wedged the thick stick of wood under the trigger pan with his other hand.

"Great Scott, Tom, what kind of a mess did you get yourself in?" As he spoke, the border-patrol captain pulled the bear trap gingerly out from under Rockford's head and let it clatter off the bench.

A sharp clanging sound followed, as the iron-fanged jaws of the trap snapped shut with a splintering crash upon the thick stick of fireplace wood, breaking it like matchwood.

Rockford let his head relax on the bench, and inhaled deeply.

"I was foolish enough to forget that Clyde Farabee, was sided by another man, chief," whispered the border patrolman. He's on his way to Mexico with Dade Crandall now—but how come you're here?"

Busily untying the rope which bound Rockford's legs to the bench, Lodge looked up and grinned.

"After you left Los Alamos, I got to worrying about you, Tom," Lodge answered. "So I started trailing you and the trapper. It looks like Canuck LaToque won't double-cross anybody again."

Five minutes later, with the aid of a spare handcuff key which Rock-

ford kept in the lining of one of his Coffeyville boots, Sam Lodge unlocked the lawman's gold-plated manacles and Rockford stood up, rubbing his chafed wrists.

"I caught sight of your two owl-hoot friends, heading off across the valley toward the south," Lodge went on. "That was just as I had followed your trail up to the rimrock. I sure as hell figured I'd find you were buzzard bait when I got here, Tom."

Rockford adjusted the empty holsters at his thighs and grinned.

"I'd give a heap to rest up after this ordeal, chief," he said, rubbing his strained neck gingerly. "But that sidewinder stole my gold-plated .45s. With luck, maybe I can catch up with Farabee and get 'em back."

Sam Lodge shook his head dubiously.

"They got a long head start on us, Tom, an' this is rough country to do trailin' in," pointed out the border-patrol captain. "Hard tellin' where they'll head."

Rockford stooped to pick up the twin six-guns which Clyde Farabee had placed on the table before the trapper's bullet-riddled body had knocked them to the floor.

"Back in the old days, Farabee used to hang out at the Black Dice Saloon down in Candolero town," Rockford said. "He cached the gold off the Arizona Flyer somewhere in the badlands down near Candolero. I reckon that's where I'd better rattle my hocks now."

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD-PLATED HANDCUFFS.

THE midsummer sun beat down relentlessly on the trail which wound out of the Sierra Caliente range toward Candolero.

But Clyde Farabee and Dade Crandall did not notice the man-killing heat.

Stuffed in the leather *alforja* bags on their saddles was a fortune in bullion, still bearing the Wells Fargo labels it had carried as a shipment in the Arizona Flyer ten years before.

With unerring memory, Clyde Farabee had retraced his steps to the lonely arroyo deep in the Sierra Caliente malpais and to the side of the saguaro cactus where he had buried the ill-gotten loot.

Dade Crandall was breathing easier than he had at any time during the two weeks it had taken them to ride down out of Arizona. At no time during that long trek had the red-headed outlaw dared relax his vigilance while traveling with the outlaw he had helped escape from the prison road gang.

Remembering the ruthless way in which Farabee had eliminated LaToque from his share of the Arizona Flyer loot, Crandall knew that the moment he turned his back to his erstwhile partner in outlawry, he himself might fall victim to a traitorous shot.

Arriving in the Mexican town of Candolero the night before, Crandall had brought things to a show-down.

They had gone to their old hang-out, the Black Dice Saloon.

Times had changed in Candolero, and all customers at the Black Dice were required to check their guns with the bartender. When they had finished an evening of poker playing and were preparing to leave the barroom, Dade Crandall had made a suggestion to the convict.

"We won't need any shootin' irons where we're goin' tomorrow, Clyde. Supposin' we leave our smoke poles

in cold storage here at the Black Dice—an' pick 'em up after we've got the oro?"

For a long moment, Farabee had locked glances with his old partner of the long trails. Then he threw back his head and gave vent to his old-time booming laugh.

"Don't trust your old side-kick, eh, Crandall? Well, that set-up suits me. All we'll be needin' in the way of hardware tomorrow will be a shovel. Let the guns stay with the barkeep."

Now, riding through the outskirts of the dobe-shacked town Crandall felt sheepish at having mistrusted his old friend. Clyde Farabee had insisted on turning over LaToque's third of the train loot to Crandall.

Drawing rein in front of the Black Dice, the two owlhooters dismounted.

"We got close to fifty thousand bucks worth o' gold in these saddle-bags, Dade," Farabee whispered. "It wouldn't do to leave it out here with all these greasers around while we go into the saloon for our guns. What'll we do about it?"

Crandall grinned and shrugged.

"Give me your claim check," he said. "I don't reckon you'll double-cross me at this stage of the game. You'd know I'd trail you to hell and back if you did."

Farabee grinned and reached in his pocket for the saloon's claim check. Handing it to Crandall, the outlaw reached in his pocket again and drew out a small four-barreled derringer with a revolving firing pin. In each of the barrel breeches was a .41 cartridge.

"If I'd aimed to double-cross you, old amigo, I could have done it up in the canyon when we were diggin' up my cache," Farabee said. "After all, those gold-plated guns of Tommy

Rockford's are worth somethin' to me. I won't dust out of here an' leave you holdin' these claim checks."

Crandall gulped hard as he saw his partner pocket the derringer. He remembered that the tiny sleeve gun had belonged to Canuck LaToque. He was glad, now, that he had given Farabee no chance for a bushwhack, even after they had left their weapons in the saloon.

Truning on his heel, Dade Crandall strode through the slatted batwing doors of the Black Dice Saloon and presented his claim checks at the bar.

A mestizo bartender rummaged under the counter and brought forth the key to a glass-doored case behind the bar, in which was a veritable arsenal of guns which had been taken from cutomers now lining the bar or occupying the gambling tables in an adjoining room of the saloon. Prominent among the guns were a pair of shimmering, yellow-plated Colt Peacemakers which had already aroused considerable interest among the Black Dice patrons.

Holstering his own guns, Dade Crandall picked up Rockford's golden .45s and strode back outside. As he did so, one of the men standing at the bar with his back toward Crandall stepped over to the bartender and claimed his own .45s.

Going back to the street, Dade Crandall headed toward the hitch rack where he had left Clyde Farabee and their horses.

Then the red-headed outlaw halted in his tracks, his eyes bulging.

Farabee and both gold-laden saddle horses were gone.

Crandall purpled, an oath choking from his lips as he stared up and down the main street of Candolero.

He was in time to see Clyde Farabee dwindling in the distance toward the Arizona border, Crandall's horse in tow.

"The dirty skunk! The dirty—"

Crandall's voice died out in his throat as he heard the batwing doors creak open and shut behind him, and a cool, familiar voice called him by name.

"I think your partner got itchy feet and left just now, Dade. I got a fresh horse at the hitch rack yonder. Maybe I—"

Dade Crandall whirled, and at sight of the speaker his congested face turned to the color of alkali dust.

"Rockford! How in—"

For a berserk moment, Crandall believed that he was seeing a ghost returned from the dead. Tommy Rockford, a week's growth of beard on his sun-tanned face, was standing in front of the saloon doors.

And then something snapped inside Crandall's fiendish brain. With Rockford's gold-plated .45s already in his hands, the outlaw thumbed back the knurled hammers and swung into a gun hawk's crouch, Colts lifted at point-blank range.

Rockford moved fast, then. His splayed fingers plummeted to the ivory stocks of the .45s swinging low at his own belts, and in the fraction of a second that it took Crandall to bring his borrowed guns to a level, Rockford accomplished his lightning draw.

Simultaneously, the two men triggered. But Rockford, breaking a long-standing rule and firing from the hip at arm's-length range, drove his slugs unerringly into Crandall's belly.

Bullets, knocked off aim, slammed the door jambs on either side of Rockford as the red-headed outlaw

fired. Then, through a smudge of gun smoke, the border patrolman saw his adversary buckle at the knees and collapse against a saloon-porch pillar.

A startled silence followed the thunderous exchange of shots, but Tommy Rockford did not wait for the exodus of men from the Black Dice.

Dropping Farabee's smoking .45s and leaping to scoop his own golden six-guns from Crandall's dead fingers, the lawman headed at a crouched run for his waiting horse.

A moment later he was wheeling the fast thoroughbred out into the rutted street. By the time the Black Dice Saloon patrons had flooded out to gather about Crandall's twitching corpse, Rockford was off up the main street in a cloud of yellow dust.

With wind tearing at his Stetson brim, Rockford sent his Kentucky saddler racing through the outskirts of Candolero and hammering up the ridge.

Gaining the summit, he caught sight of Clyde Farabee, galloping along the winding road which led toward the Arizona border.

Farabee, secure in the belief that he had delayed his partner's pursuit by stealing Crandall's horse, was not even watching his back trail.

Crouched low over saddlehorn like a jockey on the homestretch, Rockford hurtled down the slope in breakneck pursuit. Not until he was within fifty yards of Farabee did the double-crossing outlaw twist about in saddle at the sound of hammering hoofs.

A yell of hatred came from Farabee as he recognized his pursuer as the man he had left to die, hundreds of miles to the north.

Then, wheeling his horse about,

the escaped convict dug the four-barreled derringer from his pocket and brought it up spitting flame.

A slug burned the air inches from Rockford's cheek, but the border patrolman did not check his roan's skyrocketing gait until he was almost up to Farabee.

Across a gulf of six feet of space, lawman and outlaw faced each other across leveled guns, the tiny derringer in Farabee's fist a deadly menace at such short range.

Twice in rapid succession the convict triggered the stub-nosed .41. But Rockford dove from saddle and landed unhurt.

The gold-plated Colts bucked and roared in Tommy Rockford's fists as he saw Farabee lift his derringer for his last shot. Then streaking lead butchered Farabee's arms, rending flesh, smashing bone, and knocking the convict forward in his saddle.

Numb with bullet shock, Clyde Farabee slid dizzily out of saddle, blood staining his bullet-riddled sleeves. The train bandit's face was gray with pain and his eyes wore a hopeless look as he saw Tommy Rockford whip his gold-plated bracelets from his Levis' pocket and stride forward, his .45s smoking in their holsters.

"I should have blasted you to hell, maybe," Rockford said, snapping the handcuffs over Farabee's bloody wrists. "But I reckon I'll send you back to Yuma for the rest of that stretch you were serving. This time you won't be getting any jobs surveying with the penitentiary road crews."

A mixture of hatred and despair was in Farabee's eyes as he regarded his grim-faced captor, for the third time a victim of Rockford's handcuffs.

"How . . . how come you—were waitin' in Candolero?"

Rockford grinned crookedly.

"These golden guns o' mine spelled your finish, Farabee," the border-patrol rider answered. "I might never have located you in Candolero, when I inquired at the Black Dice an' the barkeep said he'd never seen or heard of you. Then I spotted my Colts in that glass case, and I knew you'd be back for 'em."

Rockford turned to survey the bulging saddlebags on the two horses.

"An' much obliged," added the lawman, "for recoverin' the loot of the Arizona Flyer for me. Not gettin' that swag back has always been a blot on my records as a railway detective. This sort of squares my accounts for me."

There's another adventure-packed Tommy Rockford story coming in an early issue of Wild West Weekly. Order your copies from your own news-dealer now, and don't miss this thrilling tale of the border country.

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *What obstacles did ranchers have to overcome in replacing herds of longhorn cattle with shorthorns?*
2. *How did trail bosses know which way to drive herds if they had no compasses?*
3. *How did longhorns keep from dying of thirst in waterless brush country?*
4. *How and when was the water problem solved on dry ranches?*
5. *When was the end of the Western frontier? What ended it?*
6. *When were the last buffalo hides shipped East?*
7. *Why were Texas cattle barred from Northern trails?*
8. *How was Texas fever spread? How is it controlled today?*
9. *What was the origin of the saying "in spite of hell and high water"?*
10. *How many buffalo did a good hunter kill in a day?*

Answers on page 111

A LETTER FOR DOGIE MCGEE

by CLIFF MACON



Dogie McGee couldn't read. If he'd been able to puzzle out that letter, he probably wouldn't have headed into a jail house—and a gun-blazing battle with the law!

**Triple trouble rode with those strange gold pieces—
and that salty cowpoke didn't know that they'd
trap him into siding a murderer against the law!**

THE Mexican horse wrangler of the Pothook came riding up to the corral, dragging his pinto to a sliding halt amid a cloud of alkali dust. Dogie McGee paused in the act of fixing a broken post and began to sputter and cough. He spat out a mouthful of grit, wiped the back of his hand across his sorrel-colored mustache, and turned to the Mex.

"What th' hell you think you are, Pedro—the pony express?" he demanded.

Pedro showed his white teeth in a smile of apology, while he fumbled in his belt. "Sorry, Señor Mac-Gee," he murmured. "But I breeng a letter for you!"

From the folds of his red sash, under his braided jacket, he pro-

duced a crumpled letter and handed it to Dogie.

The latter took it and stared at the address for a few moments. A puzzled frown made a deep line between his brows, and his blue eyes narrowed to tiny slits, as he studied the missive. The flat, tomato-hued nose that splayed across the middle of McGee's face twitched slightly at the nostrils, as if he were a suspicious hound sniffing at an unknown scent.

Getting a letter was an unusual experience for Dogie McGee, for he wasn't a hombre who was handy at writing letters—or at reading them, either.

Nobody was more conscious than Dogie himself of the shortcomings of the education that had been picked up or hammered into him in the cow camps and tough towns along the border and on the trails. But Dogie had grown up the hard way from a skinny, bullied, carrot-haired kid into a big-shouldered, strong-muscled man with plenty of cow savvy. He had quite an unusual gift for making and blotting cattle brands. In fact, his nickname, Dogie, came from a special skill he had developed in running off dogies and dabbing his own iron on them before their rightful owners got around to the branding job. He had plenty of horse and gun sense, too. But he was plumb short on book learning, and just a mite sensitive about the fact. Which was maybe the reason why he took a quick step forward, clutched Pedro by the arm, and held him in an iron grip.

"You ain't pullin' a windy on me, huh?" he demanded. "You're plumb sure and certain that letter's for me?"

Pedro's olive-skinned face took on an ashen tingle. "Si, Señor MacGee! Thee postmaster he ask me: 'You 'ave a Señor MacGee on your

rancho?' I tell heem: 'Si, señor,' and he geeve me thees letter for you!"

Dogie grunted and released the little Mexican.

"Who in blazes," he muttered, "would be writin' a letter to *me*?"

He tore the envelope open and looked at the letter. The lines of scrawly handwriting didn't make any sense at all to him. But inside the envelope were two pieces of thin cardboard pasted together.

Dogie took them, pried them apart with a blunt thumbnail, and his red eyebrows arched high on his forehead with surprise as two gold coins rolled into his calloused palm.

At once he decided. "All right, Pedro," he told the little Mex. "The letter's for me all right! Thanks!"

McGee slipped the letter into the pocket of his shirt, and dropped the two gold coins into his pants pocket, but the whole business had him puzzled.

Why should some one write *him* a letter and send *him* two five-dollar gold pieces? He sat down, with his back resting against the corral post he'd been mending and rolled himself a quirky while he racked his brain for an explanation.

In his past life, Dogie McGee hadn't been the kind of hombre who'd gone around helping others. Life had been a little too mean and tough with him to enable him to be generous—even if he'd wanted to.

He smoked his cigarette until it burned his fingers, then threw it away and got to his feet, shaking his big head slowly and muttering under his breath.

"Only human I know owes me anything is that cockeyed squaw man, Dogface Sauers, 'cause I staked him two winters ago, when him and his squaw and his five Injun brats were starvin'. But that ongrateful

coyote wouldn't pay back a debt like that nohow!"

Dogie went ahead with his work, but all through the rest of the day, he was in something like a trance. He had something on his mind—something he hadn't figured out to his entire satisfaction.

That night, amid the snoring of the Pothook bunkhouse, Dogie couldn't sleep for a long time. Something seemed to be burning him alongside of his leg where the two gold pieces had rested in his pocket.

Those two gold coins were craving for action. They must be lucky! McGee was a drifting cowpoke who'd come to the Pothook to help out on the spring roundup. He was a good cowhand—none better! But when gold dropped from the skies right into his pocket this way—well there was nothing else for him to do but ride his luck!

So first thing in the morning, he asked for his time, and took his leave of the Pothook.

THE Longhorn Saloon, in Pentecost, was ablaze with light. Dogie McGee felt a tingle of anticipation as he pushed through the swing doors and dragged his spurs across the sawdust-strewn floor. The rumble of loud voices and hoarse laughter, mingling with the clink of glasses and bottles, was music to his ears. He could almost hear the gurgle of liquor as it coursed down the throats of the men at the bar.

Then he was with them, elbowing a place for himself, calling for a drink.

Happy Joe, the bartender—known all over these parts for his good humor and his fondness for practical joking—grinned and shoved the bottle and glass toward him. His friendly face moved Dogie to confide in him.

"Hi, Happy!" Dogie thrust his big chin forward and talked into the man's ear. "I got a letter here I'd like you to read for me!"

Happy Joe nodded, reached for a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles that lay on the shelf behind the bar, and put them on. He took the note and studied it.

"Here's what it says," he told Dogie: "That polecat you shot croaked last night. The law's on your trail. Better vamoose pronto. Your friend, Jim."

"He don't say nethin' about sendin' dinero?" McGee asked anxiously.

Happy Joe shook his round head. "Not a word!"

Dogie took the letter back and thrust it into his pocket. "Thanks, Happy!"

He downed his liquor and began to think.

Jim? Dogie knew a lot of hombres named Jim—maybe eight or nine—but not one of them'd be likely to send him ten bucks this way.

About two months previously, he recalled he *had* a little gun brawl with a gent named Tompkins, and he *had* put a bullet through Tompkins' liver, or some equally hardened portion of said Tompkins' anatomy. But *that* couldn't have been fatal. In fact, he recalled distinctly that he'd shook hands with Tompkins' afterward, and the local doctor had said for sure and certain that Tompkins would recover.

Anyhow, this was the only shooting the letter could refer to. It was also true that Dogie had been plumb friendly with a rancher named Jim Somebody-or-other, down there in Sandoval County—so friendly, in fact, that Dogie had filed on a sweet little quarter section of grazing land adjoining Jim's place and had planned to start himself a spread of his own there.

Yeah, it must've been this Jim down in Sandoval County who'd sent him the warning and the money.

Happy's voice brought Dogie out of his reverie. "That drink wasn't on the house," the bartender reminded him.

"Excuse *me!*" Dogie said, and thrust his hand into the pocket where his two gold coins mingled with the flock of cartwheels the Pot-hook had paid him off with. He picked out one of the gold pieces and slid it across the bar to Happy Joe.

The bartender took it, rang it on the counter, squinted at it suspiciously, then bit it. Finally, he went to his cash drawer, produced another gold coin of the same size and compared the two. On completing his comparison, he shoved the coin back to Dogie.

"That ain't no good," he said.

McGee picked up his coin, boiling with indignation inside. It had sounded good when Happy Joe had flung it on the bar. Dogie rang it on the wood himself, and listened with satisfaction to the musical golden tone that followed.

"Hear that?" he demanded, thrusting his face close to Happy Joe's. "That thar's the ring of genu-wine minted gold. You got to take it!"

A stubborn gleam showed in Happy Joe's pale eyes, and he continued to shake his head. "'Tain't from the United States mint. It's some sort o' foreign money, and we got orders not to take no foreign money. Savvy? We been gypped with them foreign coins before."

That stuck in Dogie's craw. His anger reached the boiling point—and bubbled over.

"That thar's genu-wine gold!" He rang it on the bar again. It wouldn't sound thataway if it wasn't!"

"I ain't takin' it!" Happy Joe insisted. "Orders—"

Dogie had other money—the remains of his half-month's pay—in his jeans; but there was a point of right and justice involved here, and he wasn't going to back down.

"Listen, friend," Dogie said, in a soft drawling voice that spelled danger. "Your refusin' to take that gold coin to pay for my drink is the same as callin' me a thief—a passer o' bad money—which same no man calls me onless he's lookin' for fight!"

Happy Joe's jaw set stubbornly. His fat thumbs were hooked onto the edge of the bar, hands hanging down, out of sight. "That gold piece is foreign money. It ain't good *here!*"

McGee's hand darted to the leather on his hip, his fingers closing about the smooth butt of his much-used Colt. Too bad, he thought, he had to run a gun bluff on this Happy Joe gent to make him act decent, but—

As Dogie's hand moved to his side, Happy Joe's fat thumbs also disappeared, dived down below the bar, and both hands came up, holding a pair of guns that began to spit lead the moment they cleared the edge of the counter.

The surprise move unnerved Dogie a little, spoiled his aim; and when he triggered, his bullets shattered the glassware at the rear of the bar—and missed Happy Joe, who had ducked for safety after his first volley. He too had aimed high, and the lead had gone into the overhead roof timbers, splintering and scarring them, but doing no damage to the person of one Dogie McGee.

But the shooting ruckus brought a crowd flocking around Dogie. The boss of the Longhorn, himself a handy gent with a six-gun, objected to having his bar glasses and his woodwork shattered by hot lead;

and, besides, good bartenders like Happy Joe were hard to replace.

So the next thing Dogie knew, he was surrounded by half a dozen tough-looking hombres whose guns were prodding him in the ribs. Then Dogie's Colt was being wrenched out of his hand by main force.

Soon the sheriff, a hard-faced gent with a dyed handlebar mustache, known as Ornerly Yates, was listening to the story told by Happy Joe, who had reappeared when all danger was past. And the owner of the Loughorn and his hangers-on also put in their two cents' worth—with the result that Dogie found himself being herded into a cell in the bad-smelling Pentecost calaboose on a charge of being drunk and disorderly.

AT first, Dogie McGee thought he was alone in the cell. It was a mass of black shadows, which the jailer's lantern had not penetrated, broken only by a gray patch of night sky showing against the window bars.

He sat on the edge of the cot, his head in his hands, thinking over his situation, and it was while in this position of meditation that he noticed a slight movement in the cell.

By this time, Dogies' eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and they could distinguish objects more clearly. He saw that there was another cot in the cell, and that a figure was crouched under the window, as if trying to get as much fresh air as possible from outside.

"Hi, you thar!" McGee called out softly, making his voice friendly. "I see I got company. I'm in for drunk and disorderly. What you in for, amigo?"

The figure at the window straightened. By the faint light from the night sky, he could make out a clear-cut boyish profile, hair that curled

slightly, and narrow, immature shoulders. The voice, too, was immature, a voice, Dogie suspected, that had but recently emerged from the soprano of boyhood.

"I—I'm in for murder!" the other occupant of the cell said.

Dogie gave a gasp of surprise. He felt in his pockets for matches. "Murder!" he repeated. "Why, you don't sound old enough to—" He found a match, struck it. "Let's take a look-see!"

By the flickering yellow flame, Dogie found himself gazing into the face of a youth of perhaps fourteen or fifteen, with a mop of curly brown hair framing a smooth, high forehead, and a freckled button of a nose, set between a pair of frightened brown eyes. A curved, sensitive mouth and a round, almost feminine, chin completed the picture.

Dogie smiled. "You don't look like a murderer, son. Care to talk about it? Maybe tellin' me might make you feel better. I ain't no John Law!"

McGee was aware that the boy was studying his face. The match burned out. Dogie lit another and remained still, while the other looked him over.

Finally, the youngster held out his hand and said, in a solemn voice: "I'm sure you ain't a lawman. I can trust you!"

"Much obliged," Dogie murmured. "Suppose we sit here on the cot together and talk?"

The boy seemed to gain confidence and told his story, while Dogie threw in an occasional question.

His name, the boy said, was Billy—and didn't add his last name. He'd had a job as wrangler on a ranch—the Flying W—over in the Lupeccitos, a low desert mountain range some distance west of Pentecost; and the foreman had been the bully-

ing kind, who'd take pleasure in thrashing a kid with quirt or whip handle out of pure meanness.

Well, one day, the beating business had gone too far. Billy had taken it till his skinny body was a mass of bloody welts, and his whole tortured being was shrieking out with rebellion. Then he had suddenly seen red, picked up a stone, and flung it with all his wiry strength, straight at the foreman's head.

The stone had been sharp-edged, and it had struck the bully on the temple. He had gone down, bleeding, his skull crushed in, and had never recovered consciousness. Now Billy had to face trial for his murder!

"The dirty varmint!" Dogie exclaimed, as Billy concluded his tale. "He only got what was comin' to him!"

"I reckon I won't hang!" Billy said. "There's a lawyer in town—he's the justice of the peace—says he can git me off. He'll charge me ten dollars!"

Dogie snorted indignantly and began to roll himself a cigarette. He handed Billy the makin's, and the kid started to build himself a quirly, but Dogie could see that the boy's hands were shaking, and that he spilled most of the tobacco.

"You ain't scared, are you, son?" McGee asked. "Why, all you got to do is tell your story in court, and they'll let you go. You don't need to pay ten dollars to a dirty shyster."

"I dunno," Billy said. "He claims I've got to. It's always necessary for a murderer—an accused—to have a lawyer, he tells me!"

"He's a damn liar!" Dodge McGee stated emphatically. "But don't you worry none. I'll see you through this. I've got off scot free on killin' charges that was a heap closer to

being murder than this one. Good self-defense killin's, but, like I said, plumb close-to-the-border ones. Brace up, kid!"

"The only thing troubles me," Billy said, "is I ain't heard from my maw. I wrote tellin' her about this thing, and she ain't wrote back!"

"Who'd you ask to mail the letter, Billy?"

"The sheriff."

"Most likely that skunk of a sheriff never mailed your letter," Dogie said. "I wouldn't put nothin' past a jasper that keeps his jail smellin' as bad as this one!"

Billy's voice shook a little. "You don't trust—" he began.

"I don't trust the coyotes that's runnin' the law in this town no further'n I kin spit!" Dogie said. He got to his feet, went to the window and began examining the cell bars.

"Then what'll you do?" Billy asked.

"We'll bust out o' this jail—you an' me," Dogie told him. "The cell bars ain't put in good. The dobe at the base of 'em's as soft as putty. A couple of hours' work, and we can pry enough of 'em loose to get through. What's the matter?" he asked, as he felt the boy was trembling. "You afraid?"

"No," Billy said. "Just excited some, I reckon!"

McGee patted him on the shoulder. "You'll do, son!" he said in a gentle voice.

DOGIE wrenched a leg off his cot and used it as a prying tool to work on the crumbling adobe at the top and base of each cell bar. It was hard work and needed time and patience, but the bars finally came loose.

Dogie climbed through first, then helped Billy out.

"You got a hoss anywheres

around?" Dogie asked.

"I *should* have," Billy said; "a nice little pinto, name o' Sandy. Tom Dillon, one of the hands on Flyin' W, said he'd look after it for me. He was in to see me a couple days ago, and said Sandy was fine. He was keepin' him at the livery stable, 'cause he thought he'd be safer there."

They climbed the wall of the jail yard, avoiding the ugly spikes of broken glass on top of it, as well as they could, though Billy got a jagged gash on his forearm, and Dogie cut his thumb, in the course of the climb.

McGee's horse was still at the hitch rail of the Longhorn Saloon. Things had quieted down, and no one was paying attention to the animals.

Dogie slipped through the alley between the saloon and the adjoining building, and got to his horse without attracting any notice. He led the bronc, a big blue roan, back through the alley, and then to the livery stable.

There, he talked the proprietor into letting him have the boy's pinto by paying the bill for its feed and keep, saying that Tom Dillon had sent him.

McGee had a spare gun and some cartridges in his saddle pockets, so all that remained was to get a gun belt from the livery-stable man, who was glad to sell him an old one that he had lying around.

Dogie led the pinto to the clump of mesquites where he had left Billy. The two mounted and rode away from town.

Dogie said: "We'll hit a long trail, son, git far away from this Pentecost. I *could* take you down to Sandoval County, where I got a nice little place for a rancho, and we could start a little spread together. But a gent named Tompkins I had a gun ruckus

with a while back up and died on me, and the law wants me down there. So we can't go to Sandoval County. You got any ideas?"

Billy thought for a moment. "My maw's stayin' at a mining camp, up in the Lodestone Mountains. She does washin' since paw cashed in his chips. It's way off from nowhere. A good place to lay low for a spell."

"Sounds *bueno* to me," Dogie said. "We'll try an' make it. I reckon your maw'll be glad to see you!"

"I reckon so," Billy agreed. He turned and looked back quickly. "Say, I think we're being followed!"

Dogie's ears, too, caught the thud of distant hoofbeats; and he saw the cloud of dust that eddied up where the main street of Pentecost merged with the trail leading out across the desert flats.

An oath ripped from McGee's lips. "That son at the livery must 'a' told the sheriff I took your hoss. Just wait till I git my hands on the dirty double-crosser!"

"Maybe the sheriff just happened to look in our cell," Billy suggested.

Dogie spurred toward an outcropping of sandstone that reared up a short distance to his right. "I'll learn these shorthorns a lesson! I'll show 'em they can't git away with the kind o' justice they hand out in this town!"

With the pinto galloping at his heels, Dogie McGee reached the sandstone barrier, dismounted, and flung himself behind the rock. "You keep ridin', kid," he told Billy.

The boy's jaw set stubbornly. "I'm stayin' with you, pardner!"

Looking at the firm set of his companion's head, catching the note of determination in his voice, Dogie felt a bit queer inside, strangely moved by Billy's courage and loyalty.

"All right. I can use you!" he said.

He took half a dozen cartridges from his belt and gave them to the youngster, adding a few whispered instructions; and Billy rode off on the pinto, leading Dogie's blue roan.

Then Dogie turned his attention to the approaching posse. There were half a dozen riders, and even in the dim light, Dogie could identify the bulky form and the handlebar mustache of Sheriff Orney Yates.

They came at a gallop, intent on their pursuit. When they were within fifty feet of his hiding place, Dogie sent a bullet into the dirt in front of the sheriff's mount. The slug hit a rock, ricocheted across one of the animal's hocks—and the horse reared, hurling its rider out of the saddle.

Dogie sent another bullet whistling between the two riders behind the sheriff. A couple of inches one way or the other, and it would have scrambled a posseman's brains.

Then McGee whipped out a stern command. "Git off your hosses and come forward ten paces with your hands in the air—or you'll be blown out o' your saddles afore you can say 'Pentecost'!"

The sheriff tried to rally his wavering followers. "It's only that maverick McGee and the kid who broke jail with him. Shoot them down if they resist!"

Dogie raised his voice to its loudest pitch. "I got plenty o' gun hands to back my play, gents. And they're all in position to blow your posse to perdition!"

There was muttering among the sheriff's men. From a barranca about a hundred feet to the right of Dogie McGee's position, came the flash and roar of an exploding gun.

A few seconds later, there was an-

other shot—from a point to the rear of the posse.

Then Dogie was charging out from his hiding place, gun in hand, a weaving, shifting figure in the dim light. His gun began to spit lead; and bullets were whistling about the heads of the sheriff's men as more gunfire came from their rear.

Then deputies were climbing out of their saddles, dropping their guns and raising their hands above their heads. They came forward and stood in a line, looking like whipped dogs.

Dogie stepped up to Sheriff Orner Yates, and his voice was bitter. "I was chucked into your dirty jail for trying to pass honest money in the Longhorn. The kid with me was held on a murder charge, because he defended his life by throwin' a stone at a polecat who was beatin' him to death!"

With a quick movement of his left hand, Dogie tore the sheriff's star off Yates' shirt. "Yo're a disgrace to your office, Yates. There!" He ground the badge into the sand with his foot.

While he spoke, Dogie McGee watched Billy, who had emerged from his hiding place and was now collecting the guns of the deputies and tying them with piggin' strings to the saddlehorns of the lawmen's ground-tied horses.

When he had finished, Billy tied the reins over the animals' necks and sent them galloping back to town with smart slaps across their rumps. Then he came and stood by Dogie.

"Gents," the latter said, his voice dripping sarcasm, "it ain't much of a walk back to town—and it'll do you good!"

Dogie McGee turned then and ran at full speed toward a dry wash, masked by a growth of mesquite,

where Billy had taken their own horses.

Together, the two jail breakers climbed into their saddles and rode away, leaving the disarmed posse to walk back to Pentecost.

"That was neat, Dogie," Billy said, "your idea of havin' me explode those cartridges at different points by hammering them with a piece of iron from the jail cot!"

Dogie grinned in the darkness. "You learn a lot o' tricks like that, son, when you've lived on the dodge as much as I have."

TWO dusty, travel-stained riders on fagged-out horses crawled into the mountain mining camp just before sundown. One was a red-headed, blue-eyed cowpuncher with a flat nose sunburned to the hue of a ripe tomato and a seamed face that showed the effects of many years of exposure to summer drouths and winter blizzards. The other was a slim, brown-eyed kid, whom his companion called Billy.

"Maw's place is over that way," Billy said, pointing.

Dogie looked at his own bedraggled clothing, and passed his hand over his red-stubbled chin. "Maybe you better go see her alone," he suggested.

"You come right along, Dogie," Billy urged. "She'll want to thank you for what you done for me! She'll be sore at me if I don't bring you to see her!"

Dogie McGee grunted and followed the youngster to the little cabin, which Billy had pointed out on the scarred hillside. But he made Billy go inside and greet his mother alone. Dogie didn't like sloppy, sentimental scenes anyhow. He'd rather wait till the reunion between mother and son was over with, and the tears had ceased.

After a few minutes, the door of the cabin was opened, and Billy beckoned Dogie to come in.

McGee obeyed, and found himself in a barely furnished living room, being introduced to Billy's mother. She had large brown eyes, like Billy's, he noticed, and dark hair which showed glints of gold in the lamplight. Her hands were red and work-hardened.

"I'm sure grateful to you, Mr. McGee, for what you've done for Billy," she said, and her voice was soft and pleasant.

"It was nothin' at all, ma'am!" Dogie assured her.

"You can wash up in the kitchen," she said. "I'll fix dinner for you in the living room. Both of you must be starved!"

She showed him into the kitchen, where baskets of wash were piled, and gave him a basin of water, a bar of soap and a towel.

She went back into the living room, and he could hear her laying out plates and knives and forks—sweet music to his ears!

Dogie peeled off his shirt and went to work washing the grit and dust of three days of travel across desert flats out of his skin and hair and mustache. Then, as he was toweling himself, he heard Billy talking to his mother.

"Say, maw!"

"What is it, Billy?"

"Did you get my letter—the one where I told you I was in jail charged with murder?"

"Yes, I got it, Billy, and I answered it right away. I told you I was sure you'd be proved innocent, and I sent you two gold pieces I'd brought with me when I came over from the Old Country—two English guineas my father gave me for luck. Didn't you receive the letter?"

"No, I got no letter from you,

maw," Dogie heard Billy say.

"I addressed it to William McKee, General Delivery, Pentecost," the mother said. "It must've been stolen."

In the adjoining room, Dogie McGee finished toweling his face and torso, then put on his shirt and pulled out of his pocket the letter that had been delivered to him by the Pothook wrangler Pedro.

Things began to piece themselves together in Dogie's mind, to take on different shapes. Of course, nobody had sent *him* two gold pieces through the mail. It was the letter intended for Billy McKee he had received. His inability to read had done the rest.

Dogie swore softly. "That double-crossin' so-and-so Happy Joe!" he muttered. "Readin' me that fake letter musta been his idea of a joke. It sure fits almost any hombre with an itchin' trigger finger, and everybody has a friend named Jim!"

Through the curtained doorway between kitchen and living room, Dogie could see Mrs. McKee bustling about with her preparations for the meal. She was carving off healthy-sized slices from a joint of roast beef; and Billy was piling wood into the stove, to make a fire that would keep out the chill of the night mountain air.

"Reckon I'll pull my freight come

mornin'," Dogie McGee told himself. "That quarter section of mine on the Sandoval can be built into a plumb nice little spread. And mebbe if I got a home to offer a woman—and found the right woman—I might settle down and—"

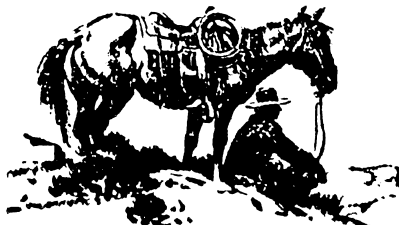
Dogie lit a cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke in the air, and watched it curl toward the roof, drift along, then dissolve. There was a dreamy expression in his blue eyes.

"That young maverick Billy sure does need someone to make a good cowhand of him," he continued his musing. "It'd be kinda comfy, I reckon, to have him do the wranglin' and the chores, and his maw cook and keep house."

IN the morning, Dogie McGee took his leave of the McKees, and started on his journey south toward the Sandoval country. Before departing, he returned the letter and the two English guineas, but he never even mentioned the ideas that had been buzzing around in his head the previous evening.

He was a plumb bashful hombre where women were concerned, was Dogie. But ideas of that kind are hard to get rid of. They have a habit of cropping up again and making a nuisance of themselves until a gent does something about them. Maybe some day Dogie would.

THE END.



There didn't seem to be a way for that bronc stamper to regain his stolen mounts or convince the law he hadn't been taking the

DEVIL'S DINERO

by CLAY STARR



Regan stopped short when he heard the challenging voice of the guard. Not to have done so would have meant instant death.

BRONC REGAN was working in the breaking pen on his one-man horse ranch, and he did not see the four men coming down the steep red hill a mile from his north boundary. Regan was an old man to be breaking out the big, tough horses in the first rough string, but horse breaking was his job, and he told himself that forty wasn't so old.

The big roan under him was al-

most worn down and now Regan spoke in a soothing voice. The horse stood quietly when Regan swung down and pulled off his heavy saddle, and he was twitching the hackamore from the roan's head when a harsh voice spoke from the sliding bars at the front of the pen.

"Drop that saddle and come a-running, Bronc. Me and the boys are making a hoss trade, and we

don't have too much time!"

Bronc Regan turned slowly with his right hand inching down to the shine on his overalls where his six-gun usually rode. A bearded giant was staring at him over the barrel of a cocked .45. Everyone along the Apache Trail knew of Devil Malone, a killer outlaw who led a bunch of cutthroats of his own stripe.

Bronc Regan glanced from face to face, and his lips tightened as he recognized each man. Jumpy Carr was a peyote fiend with twitching hands and shoulders. Red Swanson was a big, red-bearded Swede who could break an ax handle with his two big hands. Sawed-off Flynn was a runty bandit who carried a sawed-off scattergun strapped over his left shoulder under his faded coat, and the four-man crew were straddling jaded horses covered with lather.

"I got no hosses to trade, Malone," Regan said firmly. "I've never had any truck with you owlhooters either way, and I don't want any now!"

"You'll swap our way and like it," Devil Malone said in a quiet, heavy voice. "We'll trade you four hosses, and give you a hundred dollars a head to boot, leaving our critters right here. That's more'n fair. Swing yore ropes, men!"

Bronc Regan stared sullenly as the three men roped hosses from his saddle stack. They took the best in his cavy, while Devil Malone held the old mustanger under the muzzle of his notched six-gun. Malone called for Swanson to rope a big black gelding for him, and ordered the Swede to change the saddle on Malone's horse to the black. When the saddles were changed, Malone wet a thumb and slicked off eight fifty-dollar bills from a thick roll.

"Keep your dirty money," snarled Regan. "And take those crow baits with you!"

"Dirty money gets clean when it changes hands one time," Malone said with a grin. "About these other hosses we rode in, they stay right here on the B Bar E. Turn 'em out in pasture, boys."

Regan was saddling a fresh horse to round up the unwanted horses when another man clattered into the yard at a dead run. He rode up to the pasture fence and watched Bronc Regan for a moment. Then a gun leaped to his hand as he called the old horse breaker.

"Drag your rope and come a-riding, Bronc. The law speaking, and don't make a pass for your gun!"

Bronc Regan let his loop fall, and his hand slapped for the gun belt he had strapped around his lean hips. He sucked in a deep breath when he saw Sheriff Joe Scudder sitting his saddle near the fence, and the sheriff was holding his gun in a steady hand.

"I tracked Devil Malone and his gang to the top of the ridge," the sheriff began in a crisp voice. "My posse is fanned out to make a circle, and now they've made a getaway. You furnished them with fresh horses."

"I didn't, sher'ff," Regan denied hotly. "They stuck me up at gun point, and roped out four of my best brones!"

"Hands high, Regan!" the sheriff barked and rode closer. "What's this sticking out of the top pocket of your vest?" and he pulled the eight fifty-dollar bills from Regan's pocket. "These bills were stolen from the Drovers' Bank over in Wilcox, which makes you an accessory after the fact!"

"Devil Malone stuck them in my pocket," Regan protested. "I'd forgot all about them, because I wanted to turn out those crow baits before the law rode in."

"So you've finally took to riding the owlhoot trail," the sheriff said quietly. "You couldn't make enough money breaking out the wild ones for the cattle ranches, so you decide to throw in with the Malone bunch. You're under arrest, Bronc Regan."

The horse breaker's tanned features whitened as the sheriff's words seared his brain. He was bogged down by circumstantial evidence, and he'd probably get ten years down at the Yuma prison. He had seen the barred open cells where hard men cooked in their own steam from the merciless heat. Now he felt that he'd rather be dead than locked up like that.

Bronc Regan jerked suddenly in his saddle and snapped the small loop from his right hand. The rope circled the sheriff's wrist, and the heavy gun exploded with a deafening roar as it leaped from the sheriff's hand. Regan whipped out his own pistol before the sheriff could reach for the second gun under his left arm.

"Now you listen to me, Joe Scudder," he told the sheriff grimly. "You know damn well I didn't sell those hosses to Devil Malone and his gang. I'd rather be dead than go to jail, and like as not, I will be. I'm leaving here pronto, and you won't see me again until I've proved my innocence!"

Sheriff Scudder shook the loop from his wrist and studied Regan's hard face. It looked bad for the bronc stomper, and Scudder was paid to enforce the law.

"What you aim to do, Bronc?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"I'm going where the law ain't had the guts to ride," Regan barked. "Back in the badlands where Devil Malone and his gang have their hide-out!"

"No." The sheriff contradicted

gruffly. "That's the red road to hell, and you wouldn't have a chance!"

"What chance would I have over in Yuma prison?" Regan countered acidly. "You've found Malone's horses in my pasture, and his dirty money in my pocket. I'd rather go to hell in my bare feet than do a stretch of time in that misery hole down there on the Colorado River. Now you open that gate, or I'll turn my gun loose!"

Scudder knew the horse breaker, and the sheriff slowly slid from his saddle and swung the gate wide. Joe Scudder was also old for his job, but his sixty years rode lightly on his square shoulders. He had never lost a prisoner in his long term of office. Right now he had his own plans for taking Regan—and Devil Malone.

Regan rode through the gate and hit his dun with the spurs. Sheriff Scudder smiled and took down the rope from his scarred saddle. He roped out a fresh horse from the mustanger's cavy, and Regan was just topping the red Apache Trail when the sheriff took up the pursuit.

BRONC REGAN rode lightly in the saddle, and it was said that he could ride a horse farther, and bring it in fresher than any man in high Arizona. He had a way of distributing his weight to help the horse on a long ride, and it was fifty miles back to the outlaw hide-out deep in the badlands.

Regan's face was set and stern as he turned into a gash cut deep in the red hills. It was only a cow path at best, winding through the wasteland, where vegetation was scant. The horse breaker drew his neck bandanna up over his mouth against the stifling dust, while his slate-gray eyes fixed on a notch between two distant mountains.

He told himself that he had little

chance in the camp that went by the name of Hell. Devil Malone was the boss there, and he ran a tar-shack saloon and gambling room where his followers could get action for their ill-gotten gains. It was hell all right, but better than a stone-floored cell in Yuma prison.

Regan turned in his saddle and squinted down the back trail. He smiled grimly when he saw Sheriff Joe Scudder starting to climb the Apache Trail, and then his face clouded as the sheriff sent a rifle slug from a heavy Winchester whistling after him.

"The damn fool," Regan grunted. "He's going to try to keep his record clean. Law lead or outlaw bullets; it's all one to me."

Bronc knew that a sentry would be posted to guard the pass between the two high mountain walls that formed the entrance to Hell. He stopped obediently when he recognized the voice of Red Swanson challenging him from a shelf above the pass.

"Stand your horse and elevate, bronc stomper. It ain't so easy to get into Hell!" The man half chuckled over his own joke, but his gun was in his hand, ready for instant use.

Bronc Regan waited for the big Swede to come down from his rocky perch, but his eyes narrowed when Jumpy Carr came up behind him from the off side.

"I got to have it," the little outlaw whined. "You got any of the stuff?"

"Pay him no mind," Swanson cut in harshly. "He's been chewing peyote, but he's just fresh out. What do you want back here in the badlands?"

"Take a look at that dust cloud yonder," and Regan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The law rode

in right after you owlhooters high-tailed. Said it meant ten years in Yuma for me for helping the Malone gang, and I did the next best thing. Where at's Devil?"

Swanson rubbed his red beard thoughtfully. He raised a pair of field glasses to his eyes, squinted for a moment, and spoke sharply to Jumpy Carr.

"Take Bronc up to see Devil, and tell him the law is knocking at our door again."

"This way, cowboy," Carr growled, and led one of the stolen B Bar E horses from the brush. "Mebbeso the boss can use you, but I'm warning you right now that Devil is mighty jumpy on the trigger lately."

Bronc followed the little outlaw through the twisting pass, up a steep narrow gulch, to a clearing under a spread of oaks. The first thing he saw was the tent saloon under the trees, with a crudely painted sign over the opening:

THE OLD OAKEN BUCKET.

Several men were lounging under the trees, and they drew their belt guns when they saw Regan. Jumpy Carr quartered his horse in front of the bronc stomper and enjoyed a brief moment of superiority when he waved the gunmen back.

"Friend of the boss," he told the gang, most of whom were strangers to Regan. "Where's Devil?"

Devil Malone ducked his head as he came through the pinned-back flaps of the big tent. His black beard seemed to bristle when he saw the horse breaker, and his black eyes narrowed to pin points.

"How'd you get in Hell?" he demanded bluntly.

"The law ran me in," Regan answered in the same tone, and then he told his story. "You drove me

to riding the owlhoot trail, and I figgered I might as well have some protection."

A rifle barked faintly, and Jumpy Carr spoke to Malone. "That'd be Red Swanson knocking off the law, Devil. Can I have some of the stuff?"

"Some day I'm going to kill you, Jumpy," Devil Malone said very softly. "You can't be trusted unless you are full of peyote, and that's the only time you'll fight. Get inside and tell Baldy to give you a bracer."

"I don't want rotgut," Carr whined. "I need something to chew!"

"You'll take whiskey and like it," Malone answered quietly, but his voice was thin with warning.

Jumpy Carr was twitching like a man with the buck fever. His hands jerked, and his scuffed boots kept up an incessant shuffle. He licked his twitching lips with a dry tongue.

Buck Regan forgot his own danger as he leaned forward in the saddle to watch. He could read sign with the best, and he knew that Jumpy Carr was going to make fight. An unequal fight, perhaps, but the little outlaw was like a man dying of thirst in the desert.

Devil Malone read the sign, too, and he shifted his fifty-dollar Stetson to the back of his curly head. Both hands were hooked in his shell-studded belt above his open holsters, and he was smiling without mirth.

"No peyote," he said quietly. "What you going to do about it?"

Jumpy Carr did the unexpected. Instead of going for his six-shooter, he made a sudden leap at Devil Malone. His left hand gripped Malone's leaping gun, and then Carr hit the big outlaw across the throat with the edge of his right hand.

Malone fell back with a rasping cough shaking his whole body.

Jumpy Carr shifted Malone's gun to his right hand, but a tremendous explosion blasted from the tent before Carr could ear back the hammer.

Jumpy Carr's slight body was smashed by the tearing lead, and he was hurled against a tree. He was like a bloody rag when he wilted to the ground; a man without a face.

Sawed-off Flynn walked out of the tent saloon, blowing down the barrels of his deadly shotgun. He sneered as Carr's boots stopped drumming in the red dust, thumbed another pair of shells into the murder gun, and turned to Bronc Regan.

"Old Sally runs nine buckshot to the barrel, and you've heard her sing her hymn. Next to Devil, I'm high man here in Hell, so don't get any ideas."

"Don't tell it scary on my account," the stomper grunted, but his tanned face was pale. "I might join up, but I won't shoot a man when he ain't looking."

Sawed-off Flynn swiveled the shotgun in his hand with rage distorting his brutal face. He cocked both hammers with the gun at his hip, but Regan had seen the play coming. The horse breaker's six-gun whipped to his hand, and his rasping voice dared the murderer to make it a draw.

"Touch off your powder, you sneaking bushwhacker," he challenged Flynn. "I'll take you with me, and you never was known to take an even chance!"

Devil Malone had recovered from the blow on his Adam's apple, and he was watching the duel with interest. Bronc was facing Sawed-off Flynn and showing no fear. The bronc stomper was playing for keeps, and it was Flynn who slowly lowered his scattergun.

"I've got no trouble with you," he

grumbled, and turned to Malone. "What about this saddle bum?"

"He's got cold nerve, and we can use him," Malone answered evenly. "He read your ticket from top to bottom, made his medicine, and you didn't like his war talk. The drinks are on you, Sawed-off."

FLYNN shifted the riot gun under his faded coat and led the way to the bar. A short, bald-headed bartender was setting out bottles as Regan slid from his saddle and followed Flynn inside the tent. Eight men lined up at the short mahogany bar, and Regan clicked his teeth when he saw an old man in one corner, leaning on a whispy broom.

He had seen the type often down at Tucson and Tempe. The oldster was a broken-down cowboy who had outlived his usefulness, and now he was swamping in an outlaw camp for his meals, and a place to sleep.

"Step up and wet your whistle, old feller," Regan told the swamper.

"Keep leaning on that broom, Whiskey Johnson," Flynn barked. "You can empty what's left in the glasses after men have had their liquor!"

"He can have what I have right now," Regan interrupted. "I never use the stuff."

His face hardened as his memory ran down the back trail to forgotten years. Whiskey Johnson had once been the best bronc stomper in Arizona Territory, and the old swamper was at least seventy-five years of age. Now his blue eyes were bleary. And he trembled as he started to sweep a pile of dirty sawdust into a worn shovel.

Bronc picked up his whiskey and carried the glass to the old swamper. Whiskey Johnson took the glass with a trembling hand, downed it with one gulp, and wiped his white mus-

tache with the back of his hand.

"Thanks, cowboy," he whispered huskily. "I'm with forty-rod like Jumpy was with the peyote. Watch yourself, Bronc!"

Regan whipped around like a cat with his hand on his gun. Sawed-off Flynn was shedding leather from his six-gun, stark murder in his little eyes. The gaping muzzle was just tilting over the lip of his holster when Bronc struck.

Regan's right hand jerked up with his Peacemaker Colt as he went into a crouch. Pale-yellow flame winked from the old .45, followed by a tight cloud of black powder smoke which snuffed out the fire. Sawed-off Flynn triggered a slug into the floor when a bullet tunneled his heart, and he broke at the knees to slide down the bar front to the sawdust.

Bronc Regan crouched across his smoking gun, with the muzzle tilted down. His head raised slowly as he spoke to Devil Malone.

"Was it a fair shake?"

"Fair enough, and I didn't trust Flynn any more than I did Jumpy Carr," Malone answered quietly. "You're in the bunch, and you'll get the same cut as the rest."

Regan holstered his gun and shook his head from side to side. The men filed out of the tent, leaving Bronc alone with Malone, the bartender, and the old swamper.

"I don't want any," the horse breaker said quietly. "You put me on the owlhoot, Devil Malone. I only had one thing in mind when I came hightailing down here."

The big outlaw stiffened and turned slowly until his back rested against the bar. His eyes glowed like red coals, and his black beard bristled with anger.

"You had a reason for coming," he repeated. "Name it!"

"You took my hossflesh for your

bunch, and I see my B Bar E critters all over this cursed canyon. I'm going to drive them back home."

"Over my dead body," Malone said with a wintry smile. "You're asking for showdown, and I noticed that you were fast. Start smoking when you make your pass!"

Bronc Regan shifted his boots and cuffed back his ragged old hat. He knew that he would never get out of Hell with his horses, but he'd die to wipe out the only stain against his honesty. He didn't give a damn one way or another, which made him even-up with Devil Malone.

The big outlaw stared at the horse breaker, and his beady black eyes never wavered. Most men wilted under that hypnotic glare, but Bronc stared right back. He locked glances with Devil Malone, and silently dared him to make the first move.

Malone suddenly waved his left hand to draw attention. His right slapped down at the same time, but Regan had made a move of his own. He shifted to the right just as Malone moved his left hand, and two guns spoke without the space of an eye wink between them.

Malone's bullet thudded into the wall behind Bronc, plucking at the bronc stomper's vest. Regan's slug found its mark between those beady, staring eyes, and Regan whirled when he detected a movement behind the bar. Baldy was coming up with a scattergun.

The stomper flipped his supple wrist, and the shotgun clattered to the top of the bar as Baldy was battered against the back bar with a slug through his thick chest.

Bronc holstered his Colt and grabbed up the shotgun as pounding boots rang outside the tent saloon. Whiskey Johnson beat him to the door flaps, and Bronc saw that the

old swamper had taken the riot gun from the body of Sawed-off Flynn.

"Turn 'em out and let 'em buck," the old swamper yelled the bronc stompers' battle cry, and he swiveled the scattergun as he tripped one trigger at a time.

Old Whiskey fell backward when a bullet hit him high in the shoulder, and Regan took his place, firing both barrels of his captured scattergun into the rushing crowd. Then he threw the smoking weapon aside and reached for his six-shooter.

Red Swanson was coming at a dead gallop up the gulch, firing his pistol between jumps of his horse. Bronc Regan took careful aim and slowly squeezed trigger. The bullet jerked Swanson back over his cattle, and a husky frightened voice yelled when Regan lowered his six-gun to face the rest of the gang.

Only two men remained on their feet, and both of them were wounded by buckshot. The rattle of hoofs roared up the gulch from the pass where Red Swanson had stood guard, and Sheriff Joe Scudder rounded the bend at the head of his posse.

"Hold your fire, Bronc!" he shouted. "We saw the whole thing, and you shore gave these owlhooters merry hell. You hurt any?"

"Didn't get a scratch," Bronc growled, and now he was trembling with the reaction. "Take a look at old Whiskey Johnson," he said to the sheriff. "Whiskey helped me considerable, and there's a steady job for him on the B Bar E. You get your posse to round up this stolen hossflesh, and drive them back to my hoss spread."

"I'm sorry for my mistake, Bronc," the sheriff said earnestly. "I didn't have sand enough to ride it myself, but I drove you up the red road to Hell!"

THE END.

SIX PACES SOUTH—AND DIE!

by Ed Earl Repp



As the big rifle roared at him through the open doorway, the man reeled. The crush of lead against his ribs was a force that hammered him savagely against the wall.

Greed ran rampant to rawhide those four heirs to that dead rancher's hidden fortune in gold—and strange deviltry was to blast the lives and plans of just and unjust alike!

PROLOGUE.

UNDER the spurred boots of the three hunkered men the ground was like black cinders, grinding noisily

with each shift of their vigilant bodies. Their muscles ached as they sent probing glances through the darkness blanketing Potrillo Mesa.

The mesa's palisades formed an ominous barrier of volcanic rock in contrast to the fertility of the Rio Grande bosque below and to the south. Unreadable in the gloom, the trail snaked down from the tableland, crossed the river and led into the blotch of trees and lights that was Mesilla town.

On the treeless lava flats shelter was scarce. A gully hid the horses of the watchers. A low hump of rocks, still warm from the day's scorching sun, curtained the glint of cocked rifles from the approaching rider.

A hundred yards away, sparks scuffed up from his mount's steel shoes. In the faint starlight, horse and rider were a vague, oncoming shape. At a hundred feet they came into sharper focus and then a muttered curse came from the lips of the man hunkered at the elbow of the rocks.

"He's got his rifle acrost his lap," the man rasped hoarsely. "Make your first shots count. I ain't foot-in' undertaker's fees on neither of you hombres."

The men behind him were Mexicans. Hard-eyed, they nodded. Then suddenly a horse in the gully caught the newcomer's scent. Its shrill whinny sliced the silence like a knife.

Instantly the rider jerked rein, his gun leaping to ready. His voice came sharp and explosive:

"Who's there?"

Silence mocked back at him as the leader of the hidden trio, an American, held his left hand up cautioning his companions to remain quiet. His right held a .44-60 Spencer against his shoulder.

Again the stranger called out, this time in Spanish. "*Quién es?*"

Among the watchers there was a cinching of frayed nerves. Slowly

the American slid his left hand back under the Spencer's barrel and took aim. Then things happened in a burst of dizzying action.

Another whinny came from the gully. Overlapping the echoes of the equine call, the rider's gun smashed out a burst of scarlet. Lava grit blasted from the rocks protecting the trio. Wheeling sharply, the rider roweled his horse wildly across the mesa.

Simultaneously the American bounced from the rocks. Flame began to gush from the Spencer as he triggered rapidly. Whirling off into the night, the bullets whined high over the fleeing man's head.

Angrily, the leader spun on the Mexicans. "Shoot! You paralyzed?"

The fat Mexican in greasy leather jacket and conchoed pantalonones smiled.

"What's you hurry, *compadre*? Excitement makes for ver' poor ee-shooting."

The Mexican's gun was an old army Springfield with the barrel whacked off short. But he revealed that between himself and the rifle there was complete understanding in the way his chunky brown hands fitted it against his shoulder; in the way he absorbed the crashing recoil as he squeezed trigger.

A single, trailing cry came back out of the gray gloom. Relief went through the American as the rider screwed agonizedly in the saddle. Another slug from the Mexican's smoking gun knocked him to the ground.

"Drag him into the arroyo," the leader ordered, and his voice quivered.

Fetching the horses, the other border man rode off, returning shortly with his maguey rope dallied to the gigantic rawhide-covered horn of his kak and something bouncing

limply over the lava rock behind him.

The American took the rope from the dead man's ankle. Before rolling the body into the gully he inspected it by the light of a sulphur match.

"Wiped his face off on the rocks," he announced cruelly. "We won't have to worry about the coyotes diggin' him up too soon." With his boot toe he crowded the body over the edge of the mesa and sent it bounding to the bottom. "Get these top boulders rolling and the slide will do the rest."

The Mexicans stirred up a small avalanche from the loose, black rubble. As the body went out of sight, drifting dust and shale veiled the grave. The tightness went out of the leader's shoulders. A fine film of sweat clung to his broad jaws and flat forehead. "There's the end of Dirk Magoffin," he murmured. "He wasn't worth anything to anybody, and a coyote hole is all he deserved for a grave."

CHAPTER II.

LEAD LEGACY.

YOUNG DONIPHAN didn't know whether the girl in the coach opposite him was haughty or frightened. He reasoned that after five hours in a four-up stagecoach with any other girl, he'd have been on speaking terms with her, at least. But this one remained aloof. She was a creamy-skinned, black-eyed Southern girl who had boarded the Mesilla stage at El Paso, unemotionally thanking him when he helped her up and answering all his ensuing remarks with cool indifference.

The afternoon had declined in a succession of tiny valley pueblos passed, teams switched and mail bags tossed into or out of the boot.

They had forded the shallow Rio and now the eager pull of the mules told that Mesilla was close ahead. Through the gloaming, Young Doniphan watched early lamps twinkle through the Arizona Territory capital's dusty trees. But his gaze kept going back to the oval face of the girl.

Her long, tapering fingers fumbled inside a knitted bag and she slipped out a letter. A sudden lurch of the coach threw it to the floor. Glad for an opportunity to speak to her again Doniphan reached his long arm for it before hers did.

"Permit me the pleasure, ma'am." His smile was bold and it colored her cheeks.

Miss Susan Melville, Rue Pontchartrain, New Orleans.

Young's eyes flashed over the inscription. It was the printed legend in the upper left-hand corner that widened them: *Jeremy Fountain, Att'y at Law, Mesilla.*

"Thank you." The girl gave him a brittle half-smile as he handed her the letter. He leaned his hatless, dark head against the leather cushion. His long legs braced against the road shocks as the chinaberry trees and low mud houses of Mesilla's outskirts flashed by. Dreamily he regarded the girl.

There was warm beauty aplenty in this sleepy borderland. But Susan Melville's was of a delicate, less vigorous type. The gentleness of Southern suns was in her skin, the flashing darkness of moonless nights in her eyes. The style of her traveling dress was unfamiliar to him, but Doniphan liked the way it framed her throat and face.

The coach swung a corner, scattering dogs and chickens. Mesilla began to look like a territory capital. The houses were plastered white now

and evenly spaced trees lined the dirt sidewalks.

From the inside pocket of his coat, he took a letter and laid it on his knee. In the corner of it was the same block of Gothic type: *Jeremy Fountain, Att'y at Law.*

Susan Melville's dark eyes strayed curiously to the letter. A dozen times during the afternoon she had glanced covertly at the big, sun-blackened young man opposite her. He looked cramped in his black store suit. The ranginess of his long body cried for room—a soft shirt to flutter against lean ribs and comfortable old Levis that never got out of press, a neckerchief slouching about his muscular throat instead of a black stock that eternally choked. His tan half-boots were stirrup-marked and a Colt shaped a telltale bulge underneath the coat.

Now, Susan Melville suddenly pressed forward. "You're one of the Magoffin heirs!" she said almost accusingly in her surprise.

"That's right," Young said. "And by your letter, I judge *you* are too."

For the first time a warmth of friendliness sparkled into her eyes. "I'm his niece, from New Orleans," she offered. "Sam Magoffin was my mother's brother. Then, if you're in the will, we must be related!"

"No, ma'am." He smiled. "I was just a friend of his. I reckon that sort of makes us friends, too, doesn't it?"

Susan Melville's lips pressed together. She took her gaze hastily from Doniphan's friendly brown eyes. As the coach took another turn and slowed, she looked out, grateful for a change of subject. Doniphan reckoned she'd been thoroughly warned against strange men.

"I believe we're there!"

Before a long white adobe building, fronting cornerwise on a plaza,

the big red wheels ground to a stop in a swirl of dust. Young helped Susan Melville down and guided her to the building, La Posta Café, headquarters for stage travelers. Among the many dark faces watching them, he looked for the American, Jeremy Fountain.

Activity churned in the evening air. From a small bandstand in the plaza drifted the lively music of a *típica* band. Strains from cantinas clashed with this. Perched along the roof tops were small, twinkling lights.

Crowds of cowboys, Mexican and American, wagered on rooster fights. An appetizing mixture in the crisp winter air, the odors of mesquite-root fires, tangy food, and tobacco came to their nostrils. Doniphan remembered, then, that it was the time of fiesta, in honor of the town's patron saint.

Someone called his name, and he followed the voice to where a man waited just inside La Posta. Doniphan's first impression had been that of a rumbling, deep voice and a massive face the color of mocha. Now, as they went into the café, he saw the full figure of a half-breed Mexican. Surprise dragged at his muscles.

The man was a mountain of greasy fat. His stomach was so tremendous he could not have seen his feet in years. His neck was like the thick middle section of a ham, and his arms were great, slow-moving, meaty logs. Though larded lavishly with layers of grease, his shoulders and chest were gigantic, and Doniphan gulped as he reckoned the brutish strength of this monstrous body. The man's sleeves were folded back to the elbows, showing brown, hairy forearms that gleamed with sweat. A gun was shoved under the waistband of his black pants and he had a greasy dish towel tucked

through his belt as an apron.

"Mr. Doniphan? My name's Webb — Hannibal Webb." He smiled with his big, loose lips and gold teeth as he grasped Young's hand with a warm paw. His eyes were like marbles of brown obsidian.

"Mr. Fountain's waiting for you. This way." He turned with a grunt. Short legs pumped him through the tables at a swift waddle.

Doniphan batted his eyes against the bite of the warm air. Smoke of tobacco and a faulty fireplace brought the tears, but the odors of chili and coffee worked quickly on his appetite. Within the white-washed, high-beamed room every table was taken. Hannibal Webb conducted them to a smaller, almost empty dining room back of a sliding door.

At a long table by the round mud fireplace in the corner sat three men. One of them rose quickly to greet Doniphan and the girl. Webb introduced him. Short and sprucely built, with wide shoulders and narrow hips, he was Jeremy Fountain.

Fountain's eyes goggled pleasantly through thick, square glasses. "Glad to make your acquaintance. Mr. Tom Bull and Mr. Mark Tilford, here, are your co-heirs."

Bull, Fountain explained briefly, was from Dallas, where he had a harness shop. He wore a dusty brown coat and battered riding boots which came to his knees. His hair was thick and brown, flattened in front. A full cartridge belt made a flash of brass beneath his coat, the heavy Colt he wore jutting its blue nose below the skirts.

Mark Tilford shook Doniphan's hand. Tilford smelled powerfully of benzine and whiskey. Single-handed, he ran the town's twice-weekly paper. That accounted for both odors. He was a tall, rawboned man

with a long, grim jaw and sunken blue eyes.

"You'll want to wash up," the lawyer assumed. "I've taken rooms for you in the hotel. After dinner I'll read the will."

An hour later, the dishes removed by puffing Hannibal Webb, Jeremy Fountain opened a tin strong box and adjusted his spectacles over the will.

Bull's interest during the formal section of the testament was slight. There was a careless grace to his thick frame, like the seeming laziness of a sunning puma. Tilford's lank body slumped in a bull-hide chair. Noisily, he nursed an old calabash pipe. He lowered it from his lips as Fountain reached the specific bequests.

"—and I devise that all my effects, real and personal, shall be divided equally among my niece, Susan Melville; my old friend, Mark Tilford; my cousin, Thomas Bull, of Dallas; and my good friend, Young Doniphan. To my brother, Dirk Magoffin, I leave the sum of one dollar, and direct that he shall not receive a penny more except in the event that none of the aforementioned persons shall be living to claim my estate. In life he had no love for me, and I have none for him now."

Tom Bull got straight to the kernel of the matter. "How much," he asked, "did he leave?"

Fountain removed his silver-rimmed spectacles and wiped his eyes with a handkerchief. The air was heavy with smoke from the corner fireplace; from its small red mouth drifted the biting gray fumes of mesquite coals.

"Mr. Magoffin left the Frying Pan Ranch, including twenty thousand steers. There is also the Corn Exchange Hotel, in which three of you are staying. This also includes the

café, of course, run in conjunction with the hotel."

"And no cash?" Mark Tilford's voice grated across the silence that followed.

Fountain closed the will. "And no cash!"

CHAPTER III.

A MAN IN THE NIGHT.

TILFORD growled: "I was under the impression that he died a wealthy man."

"Wealthy? The Frying Pan will bring at least fifty thousand dollars, and the hotel and café another ten."

"Yes, but cash! Sam remarked to me only a short time ago that he could lose the ranch and hotel and still be counted well-to-do."

Young Doniphan sat back, watching the newspaper man try to keep the varnish of greed from shining too garishly in his eyes.

"An executor," round-headed, myopic Jeremy Fountain finally offered, "must not arouse too much hope in the minds of the heirs. For that reason I dislike to mention this . . . legend."

His glance strayed through a window into the dark patio inclosed by two wings of the hotel and the café itself. "Mr. Magoffin always sold his beef for gold. He distrusted banks; said he'd rather bury his money in the ground. He made that remark to a number of people. The story got around that he was doing just that."

"Four months ago, Sam Magoffin learned that he had not long to live. He came to town one day and ordered everyone out of the hotel and restaurant. He was heard digging in the patio. The assumption was that he had brought his gold in from some other hiding place and buried

it where it would be more accessible after his death."

Mark Tilford bounced to his feet. His shadow fell down the table like the shadow of a vulture.

"That's it! He always did hate a bank. We'll get shovels. We can dig the whole patio up in two hours!"

"But we aren't going to!" Young Doniphan leaned back, his thumbs caught under the heavy gun belt. He sat at ease, a big-shouldered, big-fisted man. He grinned brassily as Tilford whirled on him.

"Why not?"

"If there is any money, the middle of the night's no time to dig for it," Doniphan told him. "The bank is closed tomorrow for the fiesta. We'd have it on our hands. Fiesta time is no time to be freighting a fortune."

Susan Melville nodded firmly. "Besides, if the town got wind of our digging, vandals would tear the hotel to pieces for treasure. Isn't it better to wait and do it quietly?"

"And let somebody else get it first?" That was Tom Bull's deep voice. He stood backed up to the fireplace, the rosy glow outlining his thick, booted legs. "If you're nervous, Doniphan, I'll take responsibility for the money until the bank opens."

"I've got a safe in my shop," Tilford broke in. "This is foolishness! Every minute we wait—" He stared down at the attorney. "You've been over this layout. Where do they keep the tools?"

Fountain tapped a pencil against his teeth. "If the others object, you'll have to wait. You can't tear up jointly owned property. Perhaps, however—" From a tin strong box he took four parchment envelopes. "Perhaps these may remove the necessity for blind digging! There is one for each."

Wolfishly, Tilford ripped into his

envelope, his lips tight across his teeth. "It's a map! Part of one anyway. Listen: *Your back to the old chinaberry, take twelve paces—But it doesn't say in which direction!*"

"Here it is! On mine!" Susan Melville's cheeks showed spots of color. "*—north. Fourteen paces west, then, and stop, facing the stables.*"

Bull's words were breathy, clipped. "*Then six paces south.*" His big, shaggy head snapped up. "Doniphan! Read yours!"

There was a gasp followed by a curse as the balled paper Young Doniphan had tossed onto the blazing hearth flared briefly and guttered up the flue!

"Not tonight, gentlemen. I repeat, the money's safer in the ground than anywhere else. Maybe I figure like Sam Magoffin did."

Tilford snarled: "That was smart! You let us read ours, knowing you had the last. But you won't hog that money alone!"

"I don't intend to. Neither do I aim to be left holding the bag myself."

Tilford flushed, his fingers working. Tom Bull's blunt, stolid features quirked curiously. "I'm wondering where you cut in on this will."

"Reckon Magoffin thought his

neck was worth a quarter of his fortune." Doniphan drawled. "I got him out of jail in Chihuahua after he celebrated a big cattle deal down there. I run freight between Chihuahua and El Paso. Magoffin got mixed up in a cantina brawl, and when the smoke cleared some Mex had been stabbed and they were holding the old man for murder. He didn't know anybody to pull strings. Happened I did. He was plumb grateful when I got him out."

Jeremy Fountain's fingers collected his papers and he stood up. "We'll go over things in detail tomorrow. If there's anything I can do for you, Miss Melville—"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Good night."

"Just for luck"—Mark Tilford smiled brittlely—"I'm taking a room here myself. On the patio, where I can see that there's no ground broken tonight by anybody."

IN the cold little bedroom, thoughts churned in Young Doniphan's brain, keeping his nerves humming long after the Corn Exchange was in silent darkness. A late moon filtered silver-black mist into the patio. Through the open window he could see a breeze stir the frost-killed leaves of grapevines and rose-



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bushes; he heard it shake the dead foliage of a chinaberry brooding in a far corner.

Tilford had taken the room down the wing from him. Across the patio was another wing, and at the east end of the garden a high, plastered wall with a gate that opened onto the carriage yard and stables of the Overland Line.

Lulled by the far-off noises, he dozed. Disjointedly the fabric of this strange set-up, the strangest he had ever been in, wheeled through his mind.

Five blazing summers and five chilly winters Young Doniphan had operated a small freight line, bartering Mexican ponies and wagon loads of chili beans in El Paso, fifty miles down the valley; selling manufactured goods in the lusty Mexican mining and cattle town of Chihuahua. He remembered the old cattleman he'd bailed out of jail. A warm-hearted, grateful old-timer, insistent that he wouldn't forget the favor.

Doniphan had thought he had. Then the letter came, informing the freighter that he was an heir to the big Frying Pan estate, and he knew he had made his last almost-bootless trip through the perilous, Yaqui-ridden prairies and canyon passes below the border.

He thought of Susan Melville, with a warming of his blood at the picture of her sultry beauty, and a tug of sympathy for her, alone in this vast, hard country. He wondered how she would make out.

A hinge rasped somewhere. All those vague thoughts went scurrying. Young levered up on one elbow. Footfalls measured a deliberate, cautious meter down the tile path outside his window. A shadow moved past his window. This man was making for the street, intending to cut through the dark café.

Doniphan donned pants and boots, stuck the gun under his belt, and swung across the low window sill into the garden.

Looking through the door of the dining room he saw, on the white-washed wall, the silhouette of the man as he went through the front door into the street. The high-shouldered form might have been Tilford's. Again, the shadow might have been that of another, twisted by unnatural refraction.

With long strides, Young threaded the tables and chairs. His gun was steady in his fist as he went out onto the tree-lined dirt walk. Then, with a rush that caught him in midstep, men came sliding in from both sides and in back!

The chop of a gun barrel on his wrist sent his .45 spinning down into the dirt. Another short gun was laid alongside his ear.

The dizzying concussions of cannons and church bells rang in his ears. Hatless, the left side of his face buried in the loose earth, he was aware of boots shifting about him. Out of the roaring chasm of pain a voice resolved itself like a mutter. It had a familiar timbre, but the words were Spanish, making it hard for him to determine the owner of the voice.

"You know what to do. Make it a good, quick job, bring back the good word and you get half his share."

"You got to know tonight?"

"After tonight what he knows won't do me any good! Tomorrow they may dig up the patio. The gold's got to be out by then if they do, and I can't spade the whole garden tonight looking for it."

"What do I do with him afterwards?"

"There's a nice, big river out there just itchin' to take him down to

some hole where the channel cat'll pick him clean. Take him into the trees close to the river. Save the risk of freightin' him."

"'Sta bueno!"

Doniphan was loaded aboard a horse and his hands tied behind him. Chin on chest, he drove a swift glance at the man slipping back into La Posta. Then, again the freighter's tousled, blond head was slammed into waves of hurting dizziness by a swift blow.

CHAPTER IV.

DEVIL'S CROSSING.

THE cavalcade jogged off into the night. When consciousness drove back to Doniphan with a jolt of agony, the cold moist smell of the river was in the air. A stocky man in a great floppy sombrero rode ahead of him, leading his horse. Behind, two other riders walked their ponies.

The Mexican in front whetted a skinning knife on the pie-plate horn of his rawhide saddle. In juicy language, he told his partners how he was going to pry the secret of the fourth envelope from this cocky gringo. From the sound of it, Young guessed he'd learned torture in the Yaqui school.

A clammy chill went along his veins. He was not a coward. He could stand pain. But he couldn't long bear the horror of Yaqui torture.

Doniphan worked at his ropes and ground his teeth as the flesh was torn. He had seen the surly faces of the Mexicans in the rear, but their leader showed him only his back. On the low bank of the river they halted. The murmur of the shallow stream was shot through with the tinkle of thin ice breaking as fast as it formed. The best shelter on

this side consisted of low stands of salt bush and *huisache*. Across the river were denser growths of mesquite.

"We'll cross. Too open here." The chunky one grunted that as he urged his horse down the bank.

Doniphan's heart wrenched as his horse slid down the bank. The forward lurch was the added impetus he needed to loosen his bonds. One hand scraped through the pigging string and he was free!

Caution stayed his impulse to jump the leader. There were vigilant guns aimed at his spine. Sinews bunched, nerves like hot wires, he slumped against the cantle as they moved out into the stream.

Suddenly the squat gunman swore, as his horse lost its footing in soft sand. Lunging forward, the animal sought a more solid bottom. In three bucking jumps, it had the stirrups scraping water.

"Quicksand!" One of the men vented a high yell and spurred by Young, shaking out a grass rope. He had a snarled warning for the prisoner as he passed "A slug in your belly if you try to get away!"

Doniphan's shoulders rocked and his fist came around like a rock swung on a cord. The blow splattered the Mexican's nose all over his face, dragging him from the saddle as if he had run into a low branch. He landed on the back of his head in the river. Unconscious, he sprawled away on the sluggish tide, his guns dragging him under.

Young Doniphan's rush of motion did not end until he had jerked the man's saddle gun from the boot. Flame reddened the water; lead gashed the air close to his head. The other guard had opened up on him in a burst of wild shots.

Ahead, the leader's mired horse flung itself on its side. River-wise,

it sought safety in floating. The Mexican's big sombrero came down over his shoulders like a poncha. Chest-deep, sheltered by his pony, he, too, began to punch blazing lead at Doniphan.

The Spencer at Young's hip crashed. From the mouth of it, big as a man's finger, belched a cloud of wadding and burning gases that surrounded a ball of soft lead. Under the slug's moaning drive, the second guard's chest caved. His mount's side jump dumped him headfirst.

Wheeling, Doniphan fired again, taking off the remaining Mexican's hat. Without a sound, the gunman sank down behind his horse. That he had tunneled the man's skull, Young was satisfied. But he could not wait to see. Already the hoofs of his pony were feeling the grip of fine silt.

With a vigilant eye for the downed man, Doniphan swung the animal. He gained the bank to see a third body go slipping off to find a deep hole beside a bend.

Short of the hotel, Doniphan dismounted and hung to the shadows. His gun lay sparkling in the dust where it had fallen. Vengeance burned in him with a cold flame. He circled the hotel to enter by the rear gate of the patio. The dead winter garden was empty and still.

Doniphan moved to Mark Tilford's window and listened. A deep snore floated out at him. He found Bull quietly asleep as well. Puzzled and resentful, he returned to his own bed.

AFTER the clammy cold of the unheated bedroom, the café's warm pungence was welcome next morning. Jeremy Fountain was in the dining room when they assembled for breakfast. Fat, leering Hannibal

Webb lumbered in with steaming food.

There was unnatural color under Tilford's sallow cheeks. He pulled a scowling silence about himself until suddenly he shoved back his plate and began to stuff shaggy tobacco into his big calabash.

"I say it's pigheadedness!" he rapped angrily. "You're afraid of thieves stealing the gold after we find it. All right; We'll put it in my safe. Vandals won't need to know we've done any digging. The place will be deserted from ten to twelve, during the bullfight. We'll cut the turf back and replace it when we're done."

"No dice," Doniphan said. His face looked harder than it had by the friendly firelight of the night before. His beard had cropped out stiff and blue and there was a hard, impatient thrust in his eyes. He was at no pains to conceal his distrust of the jaundiced printer.

"Slow an' easy, eh?" Tom Bull remarked. "Look here, Fountain. Is there any legal objection to dividing the patio up right now? Let each man take his share and dig or not, as he pleases."

Young glanced sharply at the attorney. Bull was blocking the very purpose of his objection.

"None whatever!" Was that a trenchant twinkle behind Fountain's glasses? "The move appears quite in order."

Tilford was on his feet, grinning cockily. "First sense I ever heard out of a lawyer! See you in the patio at ten."

Doniphan had a shave and took a long pasear that kept him on the sunny side of the street. It was the middle of March, and the night's freeze hung damply in the shadows, so that it was chilly on one side of

the street while it was sunny and warm on the other.

Fiesta spirit ruled Mesilla. Street games raised dust and noise, and rooster fights drew scores of young Mexicans. They were decorating the courthouse for the grand ball tonight that would end the three-day fiesta.

Young turned back.

The Corn Exchange was gutted of life when he returned. Susan Melville, Tilford, Bull, the lawyer and Hannibal Webb were in the patio waiting for him. The fat hotel man was in on the secret because it would have been impossible to keep him out. He was delegated the job of pacing the garden off into four equal parcels.

Doniphan drew a straw, his nerves taut. He alone knew where the treasure, or whatever Magoffin had buried, lay. Relief worked in him as Susan Melville drew the lucky straw. A grin easing his wide mouth, he lounged on a window sill, watching the two gold-greedy men fall to work.

Bull's oxlike shoulders swung tirelessly through the job. Tilford occasionally dropped to the grass and panted, his whiskey-soaked frame rebellious. In an hour the work was done.

The newspaper man's finds numbered a musket and a bullet pouch that harked back to the days when Confederate soldiers had been quartered in the Posta. Bull was now the possessor of some old stew bones a former cook had thrown out the kitchen window years before.

Tilford threw his shovel aside with an oath. Stolidly, Bull mopped sweat from his flushed face and slung his coat over his shoulder. Together, the pair headed for the café. Doniphan helped Susan Melville over the broken ground.

"Do you *baile*, Miss Susan?" he asked.

"Do I what?"

He had another look into the slumbrous darkness of her eyes as she turned. Then for the first time she smiled at him; and some laughing quality in the gesture shook him loose of his almost arrogant confidence.

"*Baile*—dance," he answered her question. "The fiesta's ending with a ball at the courthouse. It may be a long shout from the kind of dance you're used to in New Orleans, but you won't lack for willing partners."

"Will the others be going?"

"I reckon."

"I was thinking what a shame it would be to have our part of the patio dug up."

Doniphan smiled faintly. "I'll get Webb to watch it."

"*Señores!*"

He stopped suddenly, as a voice came with a deep, hard bite from the gate behind them. Tilford and Bull turned back. Susan Melville lifted a querulous glance over her shoulder. Then the patio echoed to the slow jangle of heavy silver spurs and the leathery scuff of chaps.

Young Doniphan's reflexes had jammed. For a moment he could not turn. The voice belonged to a man who should be dead—the squat gunman he had shot last night!

CHAPTER V.

THE DEVIL'S CHOIRBOYS.

IT was Lawyer Fountain whose voice smoothed the ragged edge of the broken action trend. "Hello, Pete. This is Pete Trinidad, folks, Mr. Magoffin's foreman. He'll take any of you out to the ranch that want to go. You might like to check things over. Business keeps me in

town, but Pete'll take care of you."

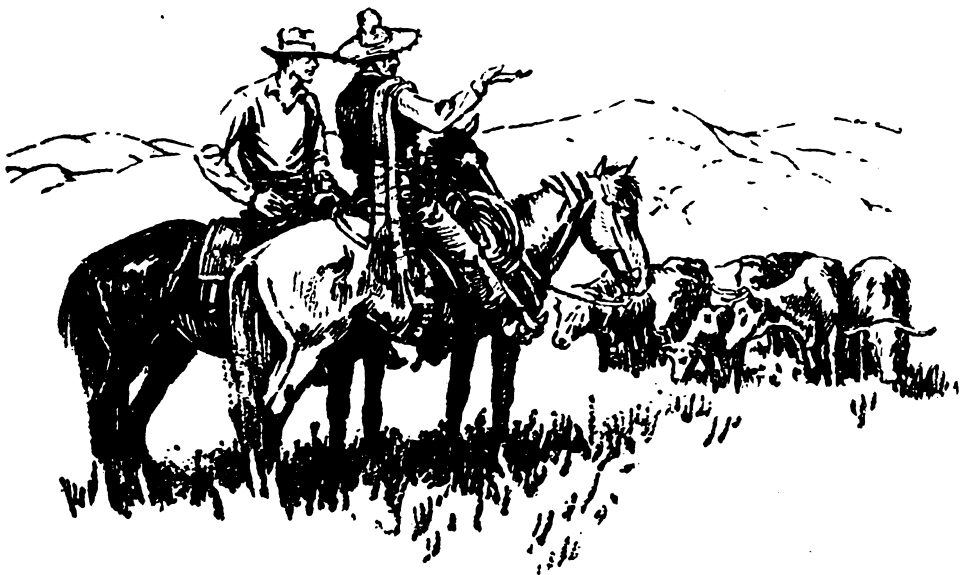
Pete Trinidad met Doniphan's stare. Then his gaze passed on, and no flicker of nervousness ruffled his hard, brown features. He was wide in the shoulders and short-coupled, as hard as a chunk of gristle. Tight-fitting *charro* chaps emphasized the bow of his short legs. His jacket

brand of chivalry, snorted a little.

Susan Melville's eyes were on the slim-waisted girl who stood in the gateway behind the Frying Pan foreman. "She's lovely, isn't she?"

"His daughter, I reckon," Doniphan murmured.

The girl was as pretty, in her way, as Susan. Her way meant darker



Doniphan saw signs of slovenly management sticking out everywhere on the ranch. He said to the half-breed foreman: "Pete, you lie in your crawl"

and sombrero were ornamented with polished dobe dollars.

Young was almost certain that this was the Mexican who had boasted of his bloody torture savvy. Yet Doniphan had not seen his face, could not swear to it; and for that reason he kept his silence.

Trinidad fetched a grin that acknowledged the introduction. He swept his hand at the gate.

"I bring horses. When you are wanting to go—"

The soul of courtesy, he stepped back and awaited their pleasure. Young Doniphan, who knew his

lips and coal-black hair, the warm coloring of the borderlands. She was looking at Tom Bull, and some quality in the glance puzzled Doniphan.

Tilford turned back to the café. "Count me out. I've got a paper to run off this afternoon."

Doniphan considered. "We can get back in time for the ball," he told Susan. "But it's a hard ride, and I'm not sure—"

The girl flushed, knowing the objection in his mind. "That I won't hold you back?" she finished. "I won't be a liability on your hands.

I've ridden since I could walk."

"You won't find a sidesaddle this side of the Mississippi" Doniphan grinned.

"And I don't ask for one. You choose a horse for me and I'll be ready."

WHEN Young brought the horses around to La Posta, the girl was waiting in a doeskin riding habit and soft woolen shirt. Her hair was caught back with a red ribbon. By the smooth, swift rise she made to the saddle, he knew her riding had been done on plain old cow horses. She went up prepared for the worst. Whichever side of the Mississippi she hailed from, she rode Western style.

Before they had been riding long, Bull began to thrust his bluff, overbearing personality upon Susan Melville. Susan appeared to enjoy him. Doniphan missed the little teasing glances she tossed his way and judged her enjoyment genuine. Petria, the little Mexican girl, rode near Young.

"They are *muy amigos*," she murmured.

Doniphan growled disgustedly: "Seems like." Glancing down, then, he was surprised to read jealousy in the eager flash of her white teeth. "Known him long? I heard Bull was from Dallas."

"I meet him in the cantina a week ago. Since then—"

Doniphan wondered a lot about it as they rode on.

A giant red horseshoe slowly rose about them. Acons ago the hills of the Coro del Diablo range—the Devil's Choir—had clawed painfully from the yellow grass in a bitter effort to become mountains. Broken, twisted, riven by winding gashes, they lay now a sprawled dump heap of lava. At night, when the breeze

came up from Mexico, wind caves played soft, enchanting tunes in Music Box Canyon.

Punchers were scarce about the Frying Pan when they jogged into the yard. Sam Magoffin had been dead but a few weeks, yet the signs of slovenly management stuck out everywhere. Plaster, knocked off the big U-shaped house by a wagon, had not been replaced. Bluebottle flies floated on air polluted by beef carcasses. The Frying Pan was eating choice cuts these days and leaving the big part of butchered beeves to the coyotes. Trinidad artfully directed curiosity into harmless channels.

"Next month we make roundup. Maybe twenty-two thousand head. Looks like big spring increase."

"Big spring for rustlers, too?" Doniphan's eyes were ready when the foreman's glance flared up questioningly. "If there's over fifteen thousand beeves out there, I'll bet I can eat the overage between two hunks of bread."

Trinidad's back stiffened. "Señor! For five years I am ramrod this ranch. Always, Magoffin say, 'Pete, I trost you. I trost you like my own son.' I hope I never betray him that trost."

"Pete, you lie in your craw!" Doniphan grinned. "After that time in Chihuahua, the Mex didn't live that Sam Magoffin trusted. And I'll lay odds you didn't carry tenderloin steaks in your belly when the old man was alive."

Trinidad's black eyes were like puddles of corrosive flux. "Since the señor does not like my methods—"

Tom Bull slapped him on the back. "Doniphan's kiddin'." He smiled. "Calm down, Pete."

Stiffly, the chunky foreman stalked to the bunkhouse.

Tom Bull had been out here a few days before, he said. Self-appointed guide, he wanted to take them first through the huge kitchen. Doniphan turned on his heel and sought his own way through the place.

Everywhere he found reminders of Magoffin, and he recalled the glum, shaggy-haired old cowman he had known for a few days, with a little ache in his heart that he should be dead and not able to enjoy the fruits of his toil. He was everywhere in the great old adobe house; his spur marks were on the rungs of chairs and the low mud sills of the fireplaces, where he'd toasted his breeches on cold nights. His hats hung on antlers or stuffed cata-mounds through the galleries. Back copies of the *Breeder's Gazette* and the *Chicago Tribune*, open to the stock market, were on tables and in corners.

Old Magoffin had gathered about him, in his deathbed room, things from the lusty days of his prime. Doniphan stood in the big sunlit bedroom, a sharp hurting in his throat. Here was a bayoneted Springfield the old-timer totted at Bull Run and Appomattox; crusty old Apache scalps tied together by the braids; a navy pistol with a split barrel kept its story behind cold lips.

Young's fingers turned the pages of a photograph album: Reddish daguerrotypes of long-horn-mustached men and shapeless women in black; inscriptions in white ink. Where a picture had been torn out, the name remained: "Brother Dirk. 1868." Magoffin had severed relations to the point of tearing out even his brother's picture.

Pete Trinidad, on a scrubby mountain pony, rode past the window and into the trees, heading toward Music Box Canyon. Young

tossed the album on the bed. A private interview with the Frying Pan foreman was what he'd wanted!

He let Trinidad pull out a fair lead before he swung into the canyon notch where dust hung on the still air. A few hundred yards up the twisting dip that zigzagged through the hills, the rattle of following hoofs arrested Doniphan. Tom Bull and the girl broke ground around a bend.

Bull's hard face wore a grin. "Tryin' to shake somebody, neighbor?"

Doniphan retorted curtly: "Tryin' to get a line on the Mex who rods this outfit. He's not huntin' calves."

Bull's brown eyes pondered. "Let's go see."

There was a loneliness about the Devil's Choir Hills that made itself felt as an eerie pressure. An unfelt breeze coaxed ghostly sighings from the high spires that shot up like a jumble of organ pipes from Music Box Canyon. Invisible galleries whispered and laughed behind their backs. Turn after turn wound them deeper into the red maze.

Suddenly Susan pointed. "Look! On that ledge!"

Like a fat brown fly, Pete Trinidad was working along a ledge that gave into a black-mouthed cave. His horse waited on the trail fifty feet below. Abruptly, he ducked into a hole.

"I'd like to know what the Mex has got stashed in that there hole." Bull pulled thoughtfully at his long, cleft chin.

"I'll go you further than that," Young amended. "I'm going to find out."

But when they started up the cliff-side trail Susan Melville was behind them. Doniphan's big hand gripped her wrist. "Stay here! That crazy breed may make trouble."

Susan's round chin thrust itself out, petulantly. "If there's trouble, I have a twenty-five percent interest in it."

Still stinging with jealousy Doniphan was angry enough to let her have her way. "I'm not your boss. But if your legacy turns out to be a lead nugget instead of a golden egg, remember who warned you."

Increasingly wary, they closed on the high, yawning hole in the cliff's face. Bull hugged the wall, thumbing his gun hammer back over a shell. Swiftly, then, he jumped into the opening.

In a moment he grunted an oath. He could be seen to duck his head this way and that, stabbing glances into the gloom. Young dropped beside him.

"He's run through our loop," Bull growled. "Now where in—"

CHAPTER VI.

WHILE FIDDLES SCRAPE.

THE jangling crash of a high-velocity rifle shivered the hush as a rock smashes a mirror. A chunk of lead screamed down off the cave

ceiling, to kick wickedly along the floor. With the echoes rumbling through the canyon, three more shots spaced their blasting thunder roar upon roar. Whistling lead ricocheted madly in the cavern. Pete Trinidad, down in the canyon, roared with laughter.

Susan stood with her back to the cliff, white-faced, stunned. The yank Young Doniphan gave her arm loosened the bone in the shoulder socket. But when the next bullet chewed a hole in the porous rock where she had stood, she was lying on the floor of the cave.

For three minutes, while the Devil's choirboys chanted dismally in the red towers, that raging, roaring, merciless barrage kept their hearts pounding. It broke only when the rifles of the cut-bank brigade below had heated beyond accuracy. Rock powder covered the clothing of those in the cave.

Bull reared to his knees, throwing down, throwing down, until his hammer fell twice on empty shells. The madness of demoniac fury was in his flame-washed face. He sobbed, each

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word riding a gun concussion: "The . . . lousy . . . hyena!"

The girl was silent. She showed her courage by quietly taking Bull's extra gun and reloading it while he emptied the other.

For targets they had only tumble-weeding puffs of smoke. A man with a regard for the top of his head couldn't risk taking aim. They were in a rat trap. Nobody but the buzzards knew three lives were teetering on the edge in Music Box Canyon. The buzzards and at least one man stood to profit by their death.

"It's no way for the gal to go." Tom Bull said grimly. "Starved out or shot out. It ain't much of a choice."

Doniphan saw the girl's eyes squeeze shut. White teeth bit her lip.

Shells were exploding from the guns down in the canyon again, but the freighter's thoughts crawled along a steady channel. Was the Mexican lone-wolfing it? Or did somebody else own his guns? Somebody, for instance, who had promised him a cut to procure the secret of the fourth envelope last night!

There was Mark Tilford and there was Tom Bull. Both would profit by a decimation of Magoffin heirs. Bull was obviously not in cahoots with Pete Trinidad. Not by a handful of .45-70 slugs! That left Tilford.

Recollection plucked a string in his mind. Dirk Magoffin, old Sam's brother, would be the fair-haired boy if all four of them died. But where was he? No one he'd talked to knew Dirk or of him. Past bitter-nesses between him and his brother had kept him from ever visiting Mesilla.

"If Pete Trinidad got out of here, there must be a way." Susan was staring big-eyed down the long shelf that slid back into the hill.

"I've seen these caverns before," Doniphan growled. "You can crawl until doomsday if you don't know the passage. But he may have left marks. Keep 'em busy."

Forty feet back, ceiling and floor vised almost together. Doniphan wriggled into a big, hollow-booming room that had a dozen exits. Choosing one, he inched along for a hundred feet, passing many cut-offs. The air grew hot and stagnant. Long before he struck the end of it he knew it was a blind alley.

With difficulty, he squirmed around and started back. He had counted one hundred and twelve crawling steps from the big room. When he reached that number again, he lighted a match and searched for the hole. Faintly worried, he pressed along, wondering if he had miscounted. Twenty-five steps more and truth avalanched upon him with a suffocating rush of panic.

He had got off the main tunnel. He was lost!

DONIPHAN sat back against the stone wall, his fingers unconsciously clawing at the floor, perspiration gouting from his pores and sliding down the back of his neck. As consciously as he had ever fought any man, he battled now against madness.

When the first surge of terror passed, he began to shout. The sounds fell back on him with dead, flat closeness. His throat constricted. Shaking nerves caught in his two fists, he crawled back along the corridor.

The blackness was complete. It was like burrowing through a mountain of soot. He had no bearings to go by, and when he lighted a match there were only the cave slanting deeper into the mountain and tanta-

lizing offshoots breaking away on each side.

There was a fierce doggedness a man could hold to at a time like this that would carry him a while.

In that sort of grim callousness Young Doniphan fought the caverns. Yet even this strength was seeping from him when suddenly he heard the sound of something along a nearby tunnel wall. Now a candle was thrust into the aperture and a girl's face seemed to float eerily in the blackness behind it.

Relief welled in him. "Petria!" he gasped.

Pete Trinidad's daughter showed amazement. "You try to escape? But where is the señorita, and Señor Bool?"

"In the cave, holding the bush-whackers while I tried to find the way out. That hydrophobia-bit skunk of a ramrod—" Suspicion put an edge through his words. His hand seized the girl's wrist and the barrel of his .45 touched her throat while he tried to peer beyond her. "If you're leadin' them in—"

"No!" Petria's teeth glistened like stiletto points. "Pete Trinidad ees a wolf! He ees my father—si! But he hates me, and he knows I hate him. When he rode out here I knew why. Sometimes after a big cattle deal Sam Magoffin hid the money here for a while. Pete knew it. I think he came today to see if the gold is buried in the cave. When I see you follow, I know what will happen. Pete ees smart. He had other men follow you. I know thees cave and I come to lead you out."

Doniphan's grip slipped away from her wrist. "We won't forget this, kid! Go get your compadre—and don't forget his lady friend. I'll wait here."

In five minutes she was back with

them, Bull eager to get out, Susan grateful. Petria's candle bobbed ahead, and the trio hastened behind. Time was still precious. If Trinidad caught on before they made good their escape, he would bottle them up in the tunnels where they would die like rats in a lidded bucket!

Daylight streamed past a bend. A moment later they emerged into a clump of sotol at the bottom of Music Box Canyon. Tom Bull gave a chuckle that carried a savage relish. His big guns jutted before him as he stepped out and headed up-canyon. Doniphan stopped him with a yank at his shoulder.

"What's the matter with you? You'll only get yourself killed, and the women as well. They've got rifles to our six-guns. They're holed up and we'd be caught in the open. And they're four to our two."

Bull, red-faced and dogged, shook him off. But as the logic of Doniphan's words went home, he turned sullenly. "What's your idea? Start walkin' back and get rode down?"

Petria tugged at his arm. "I leave two horses down the canyon. We ride double."

Pete Trinidad did not try to follow them. They reached the ranch in safety, and Bull gave the other Frying Pan punchers their instructions before they pulled out for Mesilla.

Night was a somber threat in the sky when they reached the hotel. Petria stayed with friends in town, afraid of running into her father at the ranch. When Doniphan walked to the door with Susan Melville, she looked dead-tired.

"Reckon you'd rather forget the *baile* tonight," he assumed.

"I wouldn't miss it." She was smiling a little, and looked far from penitent. "Some food and rest is

all I need. The ride did me good."

Doniphan's big shoulders made a hopeless shrug. A spirited filly! he was thinking as he left.

GRAND ball!

Every Mexican and American who was able to walk helped swell the colorful jam in the big courthouse hall. The savor of it swirled about Young and the girl as they stood in the doorway.

Dazzling flashes of color; piquant smells and a confusing medley of sound. Officers from Fort Selden in army blue, sabers clanking against their legs. Señoritas in bright dresses, laughing in the arms of their partners. The spurred clank of cowboy boots, and the soft shuffle of girl's slippers on the sanded floor. The territorial governor was there, and the mayor, and their ladies.

Doniphan had not fully reckoned the popularity of his partner. He had the first dance with her; then Tom Bull took her away, others got dances, and he hardly saw her for an hour.

When he found her again, she was with Bull once more. Jealousy smoldered copper-green in his eyes, but he crowded a smile upon his unwilling lips. "Some punch, Miss Susan?"

Her frown was teasing. "What a shame you didn't ask me sooner! I just promised Tom—"

Tom! Doniphan watched them move off. Then he saw Petria, and almost roughly he swept her into his arms.

The little Mexican girl's eyes were lacking their usual fire. Her glances were for Tom Bull. Doniphan wondered—

It occurred to him after a while to wonder what had become of Mark Tilford. The printer had earlier been dancing with Susan. Doni-

phan's questing gaze did not find him now. When he remarked about it to Petria, she looked up quickly.

"Señor Tilford? I see him leave, long time ago."

Shock stopped Doniphan like a slap in the face. He hovered in mid-step. The anger came beating up through him, coloring the hard angles of his face. An eagerness for action thrummed along the tight muscles of his body and settled in his fists. "With nobody to watch the patio but Hannibal Webb, and him freightin' a pint of corn when I left!"

Nearby was the side door. He hurried the girl out onto the dark, empty sidewalk. Freezing night air pressed upon her bare arms and bosom, so that she hugged herself, shivering. Doniphan shucked his coat and draped it about her.

"Let them think we've gone for a walk," he clipped. "I won't be long. You'll tell them I was with you, if I need an alibi?"

"Si!"

The Posta and the Corn Exchange bulked across the street. The dance had emptied the hotel building once more. Shirt-sleeved, Doniphan eased himself into the small south dining room. Mesquite-root coals surged crimson on the hearth, melting the darkness a degree.

Only the toes of his boots touched the worn tile floor as he crossed to the patio door. His hand gripped the bone grip of his single-action Colt. Blocking the portal, he watched a lean figure stumble across the broken ground, along the rear wall toward the open door of Mark Tilford's room. The man carried a spade over his shoulder.

Something touched Doniphan's foot. With a whispered oath, he jumped sideways.

CHAPTER VII.

"ON THIS SPOT DIG!"

FOR a quivering second, the freighter's trigger finger trembled. Then the outlines of a great mountain of flesh became clear. Struggling against ropes that sank inches into his lard-muscled body, stinking of cheap cactus brandy, Hannibal Webb wallowed on the floor.

"Fine guard you were!" Doniphan grunted. Disgustedly he went around the hulking form. Then he was stepping into the yard, his gun shining. "*All right, Tilford!*"

The long shape pivoted, a thin shadow against the white mud wall. Not dropping the shovel, he seemed to brace himself. Without warning, gun flame gashed from his right side in two roaring explosions.

The slugs' hot wind lash burned Doniphan's eye. They thunked heavily into the door panel at his back. With the echoes still rumbling through the courtyard, he triggered back.

Stiffened as he was against the mule-heel buck of the gun, his whole frame went off balance, as the hammer snapped on the dead metal of the breech! Shaken, he thumbed the hammer again and again.

The other's hand jumped and once

more burning lead streaked across the patio. Wood splintered above Young's head and shreds sprinkled him. Inside, Hannibal Webb threshed on the floor.

Now, through the sound-torn air, another gun banged—in the sharper voice of a .41. From the door of Mark Tilford's bedroom powder flame spurted. The flash pointed up twisted features.

Lead pounded a choked cry from the chest of the man who had fired on Young. The man fell. From somewhere came the thud of hurrying boots.

The other door of Tilford's room, that opened on an alley, slammed shut. Doniphan stepped back in the café. It was in his mind to dart across the dining room and race back to the dance. His plans did not embrace being tagged for murder! But the pound of boots was approaching from the hall. He would be limned against the light from the fireplace as he ran.

Darting into the patio again, he lunged over the moist black earth of the courtyard and reached the east wall, where the dead man lay across his shovel. Here Doniphan was forced to stop, warned by the flash of metal in the doorway he had just quit. Into the deeply recessed



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gate he ducked, and held his breath.

Cautiously, a stubby figure stepped into the patio. Doniphan's eyes, now accustomed to the dark, made him wonder what Lawyer Jeremy Fountain was doing abroad in the café at night.

Fifteen feet away, Fountain knelt on one knee beside the dead man. With his left hand he hauled the corpse over on its back. The flat-fleshed, sharp features of Fountain's face jerked as Young watched.

"Tilford!" the lawyer muttered.

Doniphan's elbow, brushing the gate latch, raised a jingle of sound.

Fountain's tough, undersized body screwed about and he jabbed the barrel of a revolver from under his left armpit. A red burst of fire blinded Doniphan; his elbow throbbed where a bullet nicked him. The latch on the gate was shot to pieces and he fell backward into the stable yard.

He came up running. Ducking through the corral, he dodged around the east end of the hotel, gained Front Street, and doubled back toward the plaza. One moment he stopped in the black shadow that hung from the branches of a dusty cedar.

His good hand cuffed dust from his clothes. Pain had his arm in a vise-like grip. His sleeve was splashed with blood. The bullet had broken the skin of his elbow and grazed the bone. He twisted a handkerchief about the wound and hurried across the street.

A great sigh of relief went through him as Petria slipped from the shadows. Her eyes were big and dark.

"There were shots!"

Doniphan's jaw cramped so that his words came out clipped and dry. "Someone's been killed. Not by me! I almost stopped lead myself. Listen, girl! You were dancing with

me, if anyone asks. I'll make it worth your time to stick by me."

The girl was out of his coat and helping him on with it. "I know nothing. Except that the music was nice—and that it was so very cold waiting!"

Doniphan edged the door open and they slipped inside, into the smoke and light and music. Among the gay crowd dancing under the warm, golden flood of the lamps, there was none to notice when they merged back into the throng. Thomas Bull was drinking, by the punch table. And Susan Melville was in the arms of another army officer.

It was twenty minutes later when Young Doniphan saw Marshal Bill Hannum come into the doorway with Jeremy Fountain and quietly look over the assemblage. He singled out Bull and had him wait by the door. Fountain summoned Susan Melville.

Hannum came up behind Doniphan and gripped his bicep. "Are you Doniphan? How long you been dancing with this girl?"

"Maybe forty-five minutes."

"Get your hat and the gal's wrap. Been a shootin' scrape at the Corn Exchange."

MARSHAL HANNUM sat at the table and ticked off the points on his fingers. "Now, then, Petria claims she was dancin' with Doniphan. So that lets him out. Temporarily. She also says she saw Bull about ten thirty, so he looks to be clean. Also temporarily. Now . . . er . . . Miss Melville—"

"We can leave Miss Melville out of this," Bull rapped. "She don't look like the type to be freightin' a six-gun under her dress."

Lamps were burning in La Posta again, one of them sitting on the

table where Doc Woods, Mesilla Valley coroner, was probing Mark Tilford's body for the bullet that had killed him. The fireplace was again cheerily filling the room with more smoke than heat. Susan was seated with her back to the table. Her eyes and lips were splotches of color against her chalky skin. Petria huddled on a low stool beside the fireplace.

Hannum nodded an affirmative to Bull's objection. "There's one thing I don't savvy. How'd you happen to be around here, Fountain?"

With a big, colored handkerchief, the attorney cleaned his glasses. "Frankly, I didn't consider Webb a reliable guard. It turns out I was right."

Hannibal Webb nursed a lump on his gigantic head. His mouth was tipped down, sullenly. "Meanin' I was drunk. I had a pint or so after the bullfight; that was all. I tell you this walloper snuck up on me from the kitchen. I never had a chance!"

Fountain's blue eyes were cold. "You might have had, had you been halfway sober. I came over from the dance about ten thirty. Just as I let myself in I heard shots. Tilford was dead when I reached him. The murderer tried to jump me and I fired. Knowing it was useless to follow, I went for you, marshal."

Marshal Hannum, a stout, gray-haired man, tugged at the sunburned folds of skin under his jaws. Curiosity worked strongly in him.

"Had Tilford . . . er . . . dug anything up?"

Fountain replaced his spectacles and glanced about the room. "Nothing!"

By an effort, Doniphan avoided Fountain's face. He didn't know whether Fountain suspected him or not. He looked, instead, at Thomas Bull, and saw a strange light mix

into the deep brown of his eyes. Bull's heavy mouth flexed, stiffly, as Doc Woods spoke.

"A .41 slug!" The coroner held the bullet up in a pair of forceps. The nose of it was mashed, white particles of bone embedded in the soft metal.

Marshal Hannum reached over and tugged Doniphan's gun from its holster. He made sure it was a .45 and handed it back. Young looked and saw the cylinder was full. He knew, then, that someone had gone to the trouble of filing one firing pin a fraction of an inch short, so that it would not detonate the shells. He had left it hanging on a chair in his room while he had a bath before the dance.

When all the guns in the room had been checked, Marshal Hannum stood wondering what move to make next. Doniphan chose that moment to speak.

"There's been enough trouble over whatever's buried in that patio. I'm a mind to put an end to it. We'll dig right now!"

Excitement went through that room. Bull was the man who grabbed up two lamps and strode into the patio. Doniphan found the shovel Tilford had died with, wiped blood from the handle, and waited for Tom Bull to pace off the course.

Bull went as far as he could with the directions he already knew. All eyes impinged on Young Doniphan as Bull stopped by the wall, near the hole Tilford had dug. Young spoke, his voice almost casual:

"My envelope said: *And on this spot dig.* So go ahead and dig! You're standin' right on top of it!"

Tom Bull looked startled. Then he grabbed the shovel and went to digging furiously. Very soon his spade ground on something hard. He pulled up a piece of red-brown pot-

tery. Disgustedly he flung it away. "Injun stuff!"

But it was not Indian stuff. A few more spadefuls revealed a great crock of Mexican manufacture buried in the ground. Bull had knocked a piece off the mouth of it. He gave an exclamation and hunkered down, slanting the lamp's rays into the hole.

His hand reached down and he groped inside. He brought up a clutch of dirt; that was all. He stood up slowly, his face stricken clean of expression. And suddenly he slammed the lamp against the wall.

"You wanted to wait! Got your belly full of it, Doniphan? Somebody's beat us out of the fortune!"

Young was conscious of the watching eyes of the group. A dumb sickness began to rise inside him. He had not reckoned, before, that he cared a great deal what they found. He was not greedy; they had the ranch and thousands of hooped nuggets. But it was the thought of Pete Trinidad, squandering Magoffin's hard-won gold in Mexican whiskey dives, that ground on his nerves!

Those who watched saw a frown pinch his eyes. His glance was beyond them. Suddenly he ducked out of the group and sprinted for his room window.

Doniphan chopped glass from the window with his gun and was piling through it before the last sliver had tinkled on the floor. The candle he had spotted from the patio now thumped on the floor. Doniphan hurled himself upon someone who slid toward the door.

His big arm cinched a struggling form against him and he buried the gun against someone's belly. A girl screamed shrilly. Surprise gave his muscles a yank, but he held on until Hannum thrust a lamp and a gun through the window. Seeing whom

Doniphan had captured, the marshal relaxed and climbed into the room. "Petria! What the tarnation heck you doin' here?"

The girl tore loose and faced Young like an angry she-cat. "Thees . . . thees *puerco*! It was him, marshal—he killed Tilford!"

"I don't savvy. You already alibied him!"

The others had come into the room. Doniphan stood impotently with his useless gun dangling from his fingers. Petria's eyes were lambent flames. Her fingers moved like claws, and she held out to the lawman a .41 derringer.

"He make me promise before you take us from the dance: 'Tell them what I say and I make eet right with you.' I was afraid of him. I lied when I said I danced with him. He saw Tilford leave and he followed. While I wait outside, I hear shots. Doniphan ran back and we slip inside."

Hannum growled: "Where'd you find this gun?"

"Under his mattress. He shot Tilford from the window. Then he hid the gun and ran back."

"How about that, Doniphan?"

Fury lashed inside Young. Not entirely at her treachery. It was her ringing the .41 in on him that made his lips stretch hard and pale as strips of rawhide and put arrow tips in his eyes.

"She's lyin'. I never saw that belly gun before."

The girl stood with the backs of her hands on her hips. "Take off his coat, marshal. You'll see where Tilford wounded him when he shot back."

Doniphan knew he was licked. He tossed the gun on the bed and breathed: "All right, marshal. Here it is, on the level. I followed Tilford, knowing he aimed to slug Webb and

dig for the gold. Webb was tied up when I got here. Tilford shot at me when I warned him to stop. I aimed at him, but my gun had been worked on and failed to shoot. Somebody potted him, then, from his own room. It's my guess the killer was working with Tilford and took that chance to cut down the split of the estate. I don't know who it was, but I might mention that Petria's broken down Bull's alibi by spoiling mine. If she wasn't at the dance, she can't alibi him.

Hannum's long jaw was dogged. "She don't have to. We didn't find the murder gun in his bed. Pack your war sack, mister. You're changin' hotels. Our jail doesn't offer much in the way of comfort, but it's real substantial."

The marshal's office was behind a plain front, diagonally across the plaza from La Posta. Young Doniphan had a cramped, freezing little cell in the rear, with barred window overlooking a trash heap and a high adobe wall. Next door, *tequila* was beginning to bubble through the arteries of a cantina, as the *baile* crows dispersed.

Doniphan had an hour of wanting to tear the bars from the windows with his bare hands; of a fierce lust to kill the man who had put him here. When he thought about it—he, the one who hadn't given a hoot for the gold, in jail for a murder prompted by gold greed! Bitterness boiled up in his heart like heartburn.

He lay on his bunk and burned cigarettes with short, nervous draws. He slammed the butts against the wall.

Dawn came before the tangle of his thoughts began to sort out.

It bore home then that he didn't know just whom he did suspect. All he had against Bull was that Petria loved Bull. The girl had deliber-

ately turned on Young Doniphan without apparent reason. Was that reason a desire to protect Bull? Or was she merely thicker with her father than she pretended? For Pete Trinidad could have fired the gun which killed the printer.

You couldn't pin much suspicion on Fountain, even if he hadn't satisfactorily explained his presence in La Posta at the time of Tilford's death. Likewise, Hannibal Webb was hard to suspect. Too fat and dumb to have the get-up to frame a man.

Young thought of Dirk Magoffin. He would give a lot to see the picture Sam Magoffin had torn out of the album. When he thought about it, fear stabbed him sharply—fear for Susan Melville. Because if Dirk were here in Mesilla, industriously cutting down his brother's heirs to deal himself into a fortune, Susan was in danger of her life.

Last of all, he thought about the empty crock in the patio. Sam Magoffin had played a weird trick on his heirs if he'd buried an empty crock just to make them scramble. He'd played a trick that had cost a man's life.

Some time after this Young fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRIGGER JUSTICE.

AT noon, while Doniphan was eating an uninspired lunch of greasy victuals, Marshal Hannum came and thumped on the warped wooden door. "Visitor, Doniphan." To someone else he growled, "Five minutes." Then he went away, and when Young looked up, Susan Melville's face was framed in the small grilled window.

Doniphan put his plate aside and his lips twisted in a grin. "How's the

estate makin' out with only two heirs?"

The girl ignored his bitterness. Her eyes were sober and intent, her mouth set. "Did the money mean that much to you, Young?" she asked him.

"Mean how much?" Doniphan snapped. "You heard what I told Hannum. I'll say it again. I don't know where that gun came from!"

"I heard that, yes. I heard you lie to him, too. How much can I believe from you, Young? They're all saying you dug the money up before you let Bull dig last night. And yet—"

"Money! All the gold in this estate is in the cavities of old man Magoffin's teeth. If ever you want some profit out of it, run the Frying Pan right and make it."

"It looks as if we won't be doing that either. Not, at least, for some time. Fountain won't make any division of property until—" Confused, she broke off.

"Until I'm cold fruit on a cottonwood," was the way Young finished it for her.

"I wasn't going to say that. There will be a fair trial and . . . perhaps you'll be exonerated. Naturally, you'll appeal if the decision is against you. And if the ranch has to stay in probate all that time, the way it's been running downhill there may not be anything left."

Young worried his unappetizing food again. "Excuse me if I don't break out in a cold sweat over your worries. At present my prospects don't include ranching."

Susan's eyes softened, and there was sympathy in the quick change of her face. "You didn't kill Tilford for gold, Young. Why don't you tell us the truth? If you'll do that, I'll do anything I can to help you."

Her stubborn refusal to believe

whipped angry resentment into his face. "All right, here's the truth! I trusted a woman too far. That's all there is. With deference to your purrin', sharp-clawed sex, Miss Susan, I won't be making that mistake again."

Looking away, he let her go, not knowing he would be giving his words the lie before another sun rose.

THE day wore to a rind, and with the coming of early darkness there was a sinking of his spirits. The fears crowded upon him in his gloomy, unplastered cell: the fear of death; of hanging at the end of a rope—the fears that strong men laugh at, but feel as sharply as the craven.

The day had been monotonous, Mesilla slept off a post-fiesta hang-over. Butchers had bid for the bulls killed in yesterday's fights. The bunting was torn off the courthouse walls. San Albino demanded of his worshipers more sober duties than wine-bibbing and dancing. Just now the old cracked bells in the church tower were banging out the call to rosary: six o'clock.

Through the evening quiet he heard hinges squall. Marshal Hannum had a caller. In a moment, a key grated and the lawman preceded someone down the hall. Young peered through the window.

"Petria!" His bared teeth released the name in a hiss.

Hannum jerked a thumb at the cell door. "Here he be, gal. Though how come you to want to bring him grub—"

The girl wore a black reboso over her head and shoulders, and she was carrying a tray covered with a cloth. Her face was blurred in the shadows. As Hannum turned to unlock the door, she flung the cloth aside. Her

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left hand supported a wooden tray, which she now dropped. In her right hand she gripped a big .44 Colt. Her softness vanished like a puff of smoke and in the shadows her black eyes blazed. She cried an order, shrilly, that spun Hannum around.

"Don't touch your gun! Give me the keys!"

Hannum's face flooded scarlet, making his gray stubble of whiskers seem white. "The law will hang you for this" he choked. "Aidin' and abettin' the escape of a prisoner—"

"Nobody is going to escape, marshal. My father, he's hold a trial here. *Papa!*" Her voice, rising, brought the running pound of boots from the street. Pete Trinidad and one of his men hurried down the dusky corridor.

Doniphan understood now why Petria had tricked the lawman. Trinidad was a marked man; Hannum would have gone for a gun the minute he tried to enter the office.

The ex-foreman's face was hidden in the shadow of his big cone-shaped hat. Yanking the keys from Marshal Hannum, he bit out: "Lay down! On your face!"

Hannum, knowing the fear of capture roweled Pete, hastened to obey. Trinidad let him go to his knees. Then Pete gripped his gun by the middle, like a rock, and hit the marshal behind the ear. Sighing wheezily, Hannum sprawled across the dirt floor.

Trinidad blocked the door of Doniphan's cell. He lighted a candle on a shelf. Bandy-legged, big-shouldered, he swaggered over and jammed the barrel of his pistol up under Young's chin. There was a catty liteness to his movements.

"Now we make talk. You deeg up the gold. Where you put it?"

"Where no Mexican's fingers will

ever touch it," Doniphan replied, and he waited for that cold little steel crater under his chin to spout fire. He looked across Pete at the girl. "So you and your old man have patched things up. Last I knew, you were callin' him a bloody wolf. And I say you were right."

Pete gave a snorting laugh. "Sure we patch up! For a hundred thousand dollar I make up with anybody. Señor Bool say to her, 'Thees fellow know where gold is. Don' be fool!' Petria say to me, 'Oh, *mi papa*, if this gringo die without talking, nobody ever find gold. You make him talk, no? *Si!* Thees time I theenk you talk!"

"I'll tell you who's being a fool, Pete." Doniphan grinned. "Petria and Tom Bull are hand-in-glove. But Bull couldn't risk trying to make me talk so he got her to help. Anything I tell you she'll tell him. Since the gold is in the hotel, Bull can get it before you do."

Trinidad hit Doniphan's cheek with the gun barrel. "Dirty gringo liar!" he spat. Dizziness assailed Young Doniphan like swarming bees, and he grabbed at the window to keep from falling. Trinidad charged after him, gun upraised to cut his face. "Now you gonna talk. *Sabe?*"

Petria moved forward with the candle, while the other Mexican slid in to help. Suddenly the prisoner's hand shot out to clamp on the barrel of Pete's gun. Doniphan rocked forward, throwing him off balance. Pete reeled backward. With Trinidad still stumbling back on his high-heel boots, Doniphan kicked him in the stomach so hard that he sank to the floor with a moan of agony.

A flip of the gun put the butt of it into the prisoner's hands. Petria opened up on him with a round of terrified, crashing shots that shook the walls. A slug from the other

Mexican outlaw's gun grooved Young's shoulder. The man's face dissolved into a puddle of red, as Young split it open with two shots.

Then he was on top of Petria, smashing an open palm across her face so hard she slewed into the wall and slumped down, dazed. He kicked the gun from her fingers. Pete Trinidad had his other gun out, now. On his knees, holding the weapon in both hands, he threw two shots in Young's direction.

One of the bullets burrowed up Doniphan's sleeve and ripped at his ribs with force that knocked the wind out of him. The other whined off a window bar and over the plaza.

The Mexican was a squatty hulk in the sights of Doniphan's gun. A mushroom of flame obscured him from Doniphan's sight as the Colt bucked against his hand. When it cleared, Pete Trinidad was clawing at his throat, his body seeming to melt down into the limbo from which he had been shaped.

In the darkness, Petria was on her feet again. Young faced her, his teeth glistening in a savage grin.

"Thanks for peelin' the jail off me, señorita. I'll be back, to pry three words out of somebody: 'I killed Tilford!' Then I'm going to cut the kicking heart out of him. Pray to your saints it's not Tom Bull—because he's gonna come clean if he's the one!"

There was movement in the hall. Hannum was coming awake!

Haste tore at Young, sent him driving through the door to charge toward the street. A yell sounded behind him as Hannum sat up. A streak of fire split a hole the length of the dark hall, but its terminus was just above the running man's head.

Out in the street the hubbub of general alarm was rising. Young blasted the glass from both front

windows. With the sudden halt of the comers, he plunged outside and vaulted to the back of one of the Mexicans' waiting ponies. He charged across the street and over the dead grass of the plaza, hearing behind him the uproar of shouting men and exploding guns, and Marshal Hannum's shout ringing high above it all:

"After him, men! Shoot to kill!"

CHAPTER IX.

MESSAGE IN THE SMOKE.

IT was miraculous how the drowsing town could come awake. The cantinas belched excited men of both races, who were mounted and spurring after him in a short swing of seconds. The bulk of them fused into a solid, hard-pounding front that came down the tree-lined street like a head of mud in a barranca.

Guns stuttered, pounding whistling lead after him. He bent low, the great rawhide horn socking into his stomach with each lunge of the horse. Twisting, he emptied his gun into the pack, firing low, to hit horses rather than men. Three animals went down. A pile-up ensued, but the following riders skirted or jumped the mass.

Doniphan sliced into an alley between two low-roofed blocks of mud houses. An instant later he found his mistake. The pursuers, bottlenecked into a closer press than ever, sent a hail of lead down that choked alley that was like a blizzard. Death's bony finger punched holes in his hat, puffed against his cheek, stung his mount to sideward jumps. He counted himself lucky to slew into another street alive.

His horse was giving its best, but speed was not in those stubby legs adapted to mountain cow work. Faster horses were bringing Win-

chesters and eager-faced men closer with every powerful jump. With the beat of the cold wind against his face, Young snapped his glance everywhere as he rode, seeking an out.

He saw it, then, in the jutting *vigas* of a row of houses. In a moment the posse would spew from the alley. Slowing beneath the short cedar poles that bristled from the roof of the house, he grabbed one and swung up. As the same time he raked a spur across the pony's back. Relieved of a hundred and eighty pounds of weight, the horse shot ahead like a scared doe.

Doniphan scrambled onto the mud-and-brush roof. Flat on his belly, he watched the gun crowd bulge from the alley and sweep beneath him. In their wake, startled householders flung doors open and stared into the night after them. Doniphan's fingers, forced to steadiness, plunked shiny new shells into his gun.

So for twenty minutes he lay there. Then the posse came trickling back. Two men, leading a horse, stopped underneath him.

"He could have piled off right about here, while we were in the alley," Marshal Hannum's voice growled. "Maybe he busted into a house and out the back."

"He'd have to be greased lightnin' to've done that. Besides, any Mex whose house he busted into would have raised the devil."

"Brother, he *is* greased lightnin'!" said Hannum, reluctant admiration in his voice. "Pete Trinidad didn't move slow with the trigger finger, and him and his side-kick are stretched out like cold mackerels. Far as the Mexicans' raising a fuss goes, Doniphan's got Mex friends all up and down this valley, families that he helped out of Mexico during the revolution. Any one of them

would cut off his leg to help him. Our bird has flew the cage, Mike. By now he's likely ten miles across the mesa to'ards the border. I'll get off wires to El Paso and Lordsburg. Then we'll grab some grub and try to quarter down on him before he hits Mexico."

THE nose-tickling reek of dinner odors rose to torment Young. In the woods, lanterns winked like fireflies. Again the streets were empty. He got cautiously to his feet and made his way across the dirt roofs to an alley before he dropped down. Now he went with painful care through the streets, knowing his life balanced on a pin point and nothing but stealth and luck could keep it there. He stood at the top of the dark trail to nowhere. Tonight he would make his last bid for the chance to turn back. If that failed, the path into the future was plain.

Only a man unfairly trapped could have the drive that pushed Doniphan along. When he neared the Overland stables behind the Corn Exchange, he stopped. Not until he had searched every tree, every lumpy stack of adobe bricks or pile of boards in the vacant lot beyond, did he stir.

He went through the gate, crossed the torn patio, and stopped where he could look into the café. His heart lurched as he saw them around the table in the private dining room: Fountain and Bull and Susan Melville.

His fingers tested the long window. It was unlatched, and a gentle push opened it inward. Doniphan, gripping Pete Trinidad's gun, stepped inside. Over the weaving gun barrel he said softly:

"Sit right where you are. Drop your forks and raise your hands. A

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man that's saddled with one murder won't balk at another."

Bull, his back to him, did not show surprise. His thick neck reddened and his ponderous shoulders lifted on a slow breath. Then he raised his hands. Fountain stared at him over the tops of his glasses.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought!" he bit out. "What brings you back here?"

Instead of answering, Young said to Susan: "You too, ma'am. I was shot at by a woman just about an hour ago. I don't trust velvet any more. Sometimes it hides steel."

Susan's eyes, searching his face, were worried. "I was glad you escaped," she admitted. "But why did you come back? Don't you know—"

Heavy footfalls jarred the floor. Doniphan backed swiftly to the wall. "Start eatin'. Don't even look at that door when it opens."

An instant later Hannibal Webb's lard-barrel form shoved through the portal. He bore a steaming tray of food on the flats of his pudgy hands. Young put the barrel of a gun against his neck. The freighter said:

"Lay it down and grab a seat. We're having us a powwow, just the five of us. Somebody here knows who killed Mark Tilford, and he's going to put it down in writing."

He closed and locked the door. Drawing the curtains, then, he spun a chair and straddled it. Webb's great moonface broke into greasy globules of sweat. Fountain held his fear behind hard, sallow features. Bull was contemptuous:

"Kind of fancy yourself a detective?"

"All the same like Pete Trinidad," Doniphan clipped. "I figure if I cut up enough faces with the barrel of my gun I'll finally get a confession."

"You can't really believe that!" Susan gasped. "A man would confess anything under torture."

"There won't be any guesswork to this. I'll check his story. He's going to tell us whether Petria was hiding that gun in my room, or whether she found it there. He's going to show us where he got the key to my room, because it was locked and the window was latched.

"Bull, you're first. I don't like cutting your face to pieces any more than you'll enjoy having it done. But I figure you'll get over it a lot sooner than I would being hung. Stand up."

Tom Bull put his palms on his thick thighs and shoved himself up. Doniphan took his gun, and blinked, as a smarting bit his eyes. That abominable corner fireplace was pouring clouds of smoke into the room until a man's eyes streamed. Suddenly Young caught a breath.

He stared at the small mouth of the Indian-type fireplace. He looked at the damper rod protruding from the tapering chimney a few feet above the floor. He knew something, then, that he should have known a long time ago.

Knuckles rapped briskly on the street door. The gun jerked in Doniphan's hand. For a moment, panic made him think of ducking out through the patio. If Hannum had come back— But his stubborn resolve to finish what he had started caused him to check the thought.

Relieving Webb and Fountain of their weapons, he backed to the door. The desperation in his eyes was warning enough against gun moves. Again the knock was repeated. Young threw back the bolt.

At first he saw nothing but the night's black wall. Opening the door wider, he caught a flash of blued steel. An oath ripped through his

lips. In the next moment he was driving back, spinning out of line as a gun coughed.

Behind him another pistol blasted. Susan Melville screamed, and Hannibal Webb made a ludicrous effort to crawl under the table. The table went over, to the thunder of breaking dishes. Twice more Tom Bull fired the small bulldog pistol he had yanked from a shoulder holster, the bullets clipping plaster beside Young's head. The lamp flame dimmed with each concussion.

A third bullet gouged the muscles of Young's shoulder. He felt the gun slide from his grip. Now, in the spill of lamplight through the door, he saw Petria Trinidad holding a big rifle. He heard it roar again, and the lead left a trail of cordite as it smashed by him.

Tom Bull reeled. The crush of lead against his ribs was a force that hammered him savagely against the wall. Like an injured fox, he turned with a snarl on the thing that had hurt him. He couldn't see Petria. His eyes, already filmed with the glaze of death, saw only a figure on the dirt walk, aiming a gun at Young Doniphan.

Bull's .32 cracked. Petria cried out sharply. A moment later she fell against the door jamb, slid away, and was caught by Doniphan.

Silence embraced the room, smoke coiling against the ceiling. Tom Bull was sitting at the base of the wall, blood trickling from his lips; his eyes were on the girl Young had placed on the floor.

She turned her face toward Bull as Young gently raised her head. Only he could hear her whispered words: "Señor Bull! I try . . . to help you—"

Doniphan felt her tremble and go rigid. He let her head rest gently on

the tiles. Then Thomas Bull's horrified voice:

"I killed her!"

Faintness made Young sway as he went toward Bull. Young Doniphan stopped blood dripping from the fingers of his wounded arm. His lips barely moved in a face that was like a wax mask, as he said:

"You're done—Magoffin! Why not come clean before you go?"

Bull's beefy lips twisted. "Magoffin, eh? You get things, don't you, mister? Sure, I'm Dirk Magoffin. You'll find Tom Bull in a gully up on the mesa, near the trail. Bull was playing safe by riding in alone. Bury him . . . decent. Never saw much sense in it . . . till now. Bury the gal too, will you? She had courage, if she didn't have much judgment in picking her friends."

"Magoffin, you didn't really think you could put this over, did you?" Young asked softly. "It'd have been bound to come out that Bull was dead, when his family never heard from him."

"I didn't want the ranch. Didn't aim to hang around long. That yarn about the gold was what got under my hide." Sweat poured down the man's face. His words were coming painfully through the blood that blocked his throat. "And now I'm goin' without even seeing it!"

Young picked up Dirk Magoffin's .44 in his left hand, cocked it with difficulty. "No, you aren't." He shook his head.

The gun roared. The slug slammed the damper rod of the fireplace back into the chimney. Something moved inside the bricks, metal scraping on metal. Then all were jumping back from the hearth, as a Mexican water jug crashed upon the coals and scattered burning embers.

Pottery flew into sooty pieces. With the breaking of the crock, a bright yellow cascade poured across the coals, over the sill, and onto the floor. Gold coins, ringing like small bells as they spun on the tiles, scattered the lamp's rays through the room.

Magoffin had rocked forward with the exploding of the shell, but now he sank back. "The times I've cussed that smokin' fireplace! So *that's* why she didn't draw! Count on that brother of mine—" A cough doubled him up. When the spasm released him, he signaled the lawyer. "Gotta go clean. I killed Tilford. We planned to split. He knew about me. I knew he'd squeal. So I . . . done for him. Does that . . . clear Doniphan?"

Jeremy Fountain nodded. "That clears him. Anything else you want to tell us?"

The other's eyes were closed and his hands had slipped from his lap onto the floor. Dirk Magoffin had not waited for an answer.

IN the morning when Doniphan had been cleared of Tilford's death, he and Susan rode out to the Frying Pan. It was good to be out in the clean air again, out of the city where greed and intrigue had spun webs on every side to trip a man.

But there was some things Susan did not understand. "Why did Sam Magoffin leave us those envelopes in the first place?" she asked Young.

"Because he originally planned to leave the gold in the patio where he'd buried it. He made his will out a year ago. Then he heard those stories going around, that he'd buried his money in the garden. To protect our interests, he decided to move it. That was the day he ordered

everybody out of the hotel. When they heard him digging, he was really digging it up. He put the money in the crock and suspended it by a heavy wire from the damper rod. Knowing the fireplace would smoke, he probably figured we'd find the gold sooner or later."

"Why did Petria try to kill you?"

"Well, I guess I set the stage for that. Last thing I said when I left the jail was that I'd be back to get a confession of Tilford's murder from somebody. Petria knew it was Bull. The poor kid was trying to protect him. But when I saw her I jumped; she took Bull's lead and he took hers. Maybe they're both better off."

The morning sun spattered brightly against the hills and infrequent cottonwoods. The air had a clean, sharp tang. It put ambition into a man, so that Young suddenly said:

"Susan, there's going to be all kinds of trouble cleanin' this estate up if we have to make a two-way split. I'm a galoot who don't like delays. Suppose we come to some kind of an agreement ourselves—out of court!"

"Out of court?" The girl's eyes were wide, but in them there was a little teasing sparkle.

"Well, not exactly out of court. But a justice of the peace could take care of it. I . . . if you—"

Susan pulled her horse in close, her stirrup against his. "I'm a galootess who doesn't like delays either," she said soberly. "There's something you've been putting off ever since we left town. Even a justice can't help us unless *you* take care of it first!"

Doniphan, his neck and ears red, lifted her off her horse into his arms and took care of it right then.

FOUR SHOTS TO BOOTHILL

by ANSON HARD



There was deadly menace in the hombre as he lounged motionless against a porch upright, his steel-gray eyes fixed upon those of the Kid.

The vengeance-bent young rider was prodded by two different impulses—should he dry-gulch the lawman he had every reason to hate, or should he follow an even more dangerous course?

THERE was a deep silence in the little jail office as the Kid stood before the sheriff's desk. Even the lazy droning of the bottle flies, diving at the dusty windows, had ceased. The peculiar quiet pressed upon Joe

Cathorne, known as the Kid, and made him deeply conscious of humiliation.

The quiet was broken by Link Hassler, the sheriff, tugging at a desk drawer. "Here's your gun, Kid, and

your belongin's. I'm advisin' you to take 'em and start goin,' an' don't come back to Prosser Junction."

The slender Kid stood very straight, his eyes pinned unbelievably upon the officer. He had always thought a lot of Link Hassler and had even imitated him in a lot of ways; but now he felt his admiration turning to hate. The Kid had pride—and to be treated like a common criminal was bitter.

"You're turning me loose?"

"You heard me."

Cole Jessup, the deputy, who had followed Joe in from the cell corridor, hung his ring of keys on a nail and strode around to the outer door. He stood leaning against the jamb, a sneer on his heavy face.

The Kid was not satisfied. "You threw me in jail because you thought I tipped off Rhett Munger in the bank robbery. If you still think so, why turn me loose?"

Jessup spat through the street door, his lips screwing in disgust. "You better be damn glad to get loose and not ask questions."

Joe Cathorne went a trifle harder around the lips and a little stiffer in the back, but he didn't answer Cole Jessup. He waited with rising rancor for Link Hassler to speak.

"It isn't a matter of what I think, Kid. It's what I know. You're Munger's brother-in-law. That's enough. If I had definite evidence, I'd hold you for trial. Since I haven't, I'm letting you go. Only don't be back here a second time. You understand me."

The Kid pocketed his few belongings, threw his gun belt around his hips and deftly buckled it. The temper that was part of his nature was rising to a heat. "I reckon I understand you, Hassler. You're brandin' me in the bad bunch. All because my sister Jenny made a mis-

take in her marryin'. I won't argue—because maybe the next time we meet, you'll be right."

Joe turned on his heel and strode for the door. His tan Stetson was faded to a grayish hue and his garments were worn and in part ragged; but there was pride and independence in the way he bore himself.

Jessup's lounging figure blocked the door. The deputy did not step aside. His lips curled to expose yellow teeth. "If I had my way you wouldn't be walkin' outa here. I'd wring your damned neck until you told us where Rhett Munger is!"

The Kid's temper had reached the edge of control. Cole Jessup had always irritated him. "If I had my way you'd step into the street and answer me like a man. You ordinary skunk, you haven't got the guts!"

"Why, you—"

Jessup made a pass at the Kid with his open hand, but the Kid's supple body swayed out of reach. The next instant Joe's hand was on his gun.

"Hey, you!"

Link Hassler leaped across the room between the two. He crowded Jessup back and pointed out the door. "Git!" he ordered, and the tone of his voice sliced like a knife.

Joe Cathorne went out the door and down the street without looking back. At that moment he hated Cole Jessup and Link Hassler and everything related to the law.

The Kid found a place behind the blacksmith shop and sat down. His thoughts were dull and black and bitter. He felt himself an outcast. He had been ordered from town by the one man he thought to be square-shooting and honest. Decent people didn't want him. Well, there were folks on the other side of the line. If people thought him a crook already, he might as well go the whole

way. He hadn't the slightest notion where Rhett Munger was, but that didn't matter. He'd find a way to get along. If Cole Jessup represented law and order and decency, then he, the Kid, wanted no more of it.

The Kid got to his feet. He had made the one big decision of his life—or so it seemed to him. Acting on the strength of it, he used the last of his money for a sack of provisions and rode west into the hills.

Hours later he was deep in the malpais, a broken country, untenanted, forbidding. He knew that by following some of the main trails he would arrive eventually at a settlement; but he shrank from meeting people. Better to stay in the hills for a while. His provisions would last for a week.

He pondered considerably about his brother-in-law. He hadn't seen Munger for more than a year. Rhett was an outlaw to be sure; but the Kid knew that Rhett had not gone entirely bad until after Jenny, his wife, had died. That Rhett and his gun partners might have robbed the Cattleman's Bank was possible, but Joe had no more connection with his owlhoot brother-in-law than Sheriff Link Hassler did.

Munger quite possibly had a hide-out in these very hills. Joe knew better than to look for it. The broken country was long and deep, and even a crow might overlook a shack buried in the timber. If he met with the gang, it would be sheer accident. He wondered if Munger would welcome him if they did meet. No matter. He'd play his cards in his own way from now on.

THE Kid was jerked from reflection by the unexpected report of a six-gun. He went bolt upright in the saddle; but no whining bullet

came near him. He twisted in the kak, trying to locate the sound.

Suddenly there was another shot, and the Kid pulled his horse to a complete halt. There was something in the space interval between those two shots that warned him there would be a third report. Even as he thought this, the gun was fired again.

Cathorne went rigid in the saddle. Three shots at ten-second intervals! The call for help! Someone was down, someone was hurt, someone needed help and needed it quickly. It was the universal summons for help in the West; and no man ever disregarded it.

The Kid never paused for thought. The sounds had come from the left. He set spurs to the pony's flanks and tore through the brush in that direction.

He was over the first ridge and down into a hollow. There was no sign of human kind. The brushy draw opened into a larger valley, and the Kid headed for the opening. The distressed gunman couldn't be much farther away. Joe circled a rocky spur and pulled to a halt. On the trail were fresh hoofprints.

"Jest grab the sky, hombre, an' no funny business. Hold it!"

The Kid didn't see the speaker, but the voice had the gruff belligerence of a bear's growl. He could almost feel a gun boring at his back. He lifted his hands, while the heat of anger coursed through him. Someone rode in beside the Kid and lifted his gun.

He turned to see a grinning hawkish face. Thirty feet away at the edge of the brush another rider covered him with a Winchester. The rifleman wasn't exactly grinning, but there was a hard, smug expression on his countenance. He had a mean, ringy look, and his uncut hair,

curling in greasy hanks about his collar, added to his repulsiveness.

The Kid's eyes shot back and forth between the two as his hands came down to rest on the saddlehorn.

"What's the idea? Of all the scurvy tricks! To give the help signal and then ambush a hombre."

"Shore, why not? It's a smart idea. Funny we never thought of it before." The man with the Winchester was speaking. "We wanted to question you, and it brought you right in. Saved us the trouble of runnin' you down."

The other hombre laughed crudely. He was a squat dirty man with pig-gish eyes. He stuck Joe's Colt into his waistband and rubbed his heavy chin. "Yuh oughta be thankful. We mighta rode herd on yuh with rifle bullets 'stead o' bringin' yuh in peaceful."

Both of the men laughed, but the Kid knew better than to trust outward appearances. At any move by himself, these two would shoot without question. Joe wasn't a coward, but he had a creepy feeling of disquiet in his spine.

"Well, now that you've called me in, what about it?" he questioned.

"That depends." The rifleman laid the carbine across the pommel and reached for his makings. His eyes bored Cathorne. "What you doin' in these hills anyway? We really hadn't figured on such a younker."

"I'm ridin'," answered the Kid. "Don't ask me where I'm ridin'. I don't know. Jest ridin'."

The questioner's eyes narrowed. He crimped the cigarette and seemed almost to hook it in the corner of his mouth. "That don't make sense." Behind the match flame his eyes glinted, tawny as a panther's. "Riders ain't welcome in this country."

The Kid hated questioning; but he

was helpless as a roped steer. "Sense or no sense, I'm jest ridin'. Back yonder a John Law told me I wasn't fit to live in the town, so I'm ridin'."

The captors glanced at one another. Their faces gave no indication of belief or disbelief. The Kid's story sounded sketchy at best.

The rifleman snapped away his match. "Jest ridin', huh? Well, you're still ridin'—right behind Hatch there. You understand? All right, git goin'. But, remember, I'm trailin' right behind you."

The squat man swung into the lead even before the rifleman had finished talking. He headed out into the broader valley and Joe followed. The hawk-eyed rifleman kept an easy distance behind the two, and the Kid felt the menace of the hombre's presence as they rode slowly ahead.

The trio kept to the hollows, twisting about in the narrow draws and canyons until the Kid ceased to remember the windings of the trail. He guessed they were purposefully making the path difficult, confusing him so that he couldn't find his way back. In an hour's time Joe was hopelessly lost.

At length they came to a defile more precipitous and rugged than previous ones. The squat man plunged ahead for a hundred yards, then stopped and spoke. He did not raise his voice, but the tones carried along the rocky defile as though shouted. After a minute a faint, echoing shout came back to them. The squat man spurred ahead. The Kid had no recourse but to ride on. Always the saturnine rifleman followed, eyes bleak and unfriendly as a bird of prey.

The trio continued on a narrow trail between great cliffs, which almost closed like a roof above them. Soon the narrow aperture above

widened, and they rode up a steep incline to discover a walled-in valley. A trail led down between stunted pine and wild sumac, with patches of aspens quivering in the breeze. Wild honeysuckle and Indian paint brush splashed the scene with color, and chipmunks and ground squirrels scurried across the path.

A Winchester barrel poked outward from the brush. Behind it appeared a shock of grayish hair and an evil face. The squat man reined in, and the Kid's pony crowded against the leader's mount. A scrawny, slightly humped figure stepped into the trail. His eyes bored hard upon the trio while his jaw worked unceasingly upon a chew of tobacco.

"What's eatin' yuh, Boggs?" the squat man growled. "It's us."

The guard spat tobacco juice into the dirt. Broken teeth increased the viciousness of his appearance. "Yeah, I know you, Hatch, an' Crosley there, but who's this third hombre?"

"That's what we're aimin' to find out," explained the long-haired rifleman.

"He claims he was jest ridin'," added Hatch. "We reckoned it best to fetch him to the boss."

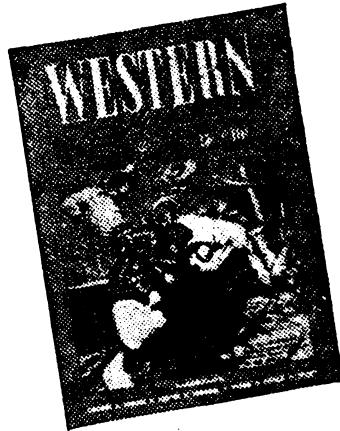
Boggs was not satisfied. "I'm agin' strangers. It always leads to trouble."

Hatch was irked by the delay. "Standin' here won't settle nothin', Boggs. Git goin' or do I hafta ride on yore corns to wake yuh up?"

The trail guard cursed, but turned, cradling the Winchester in the crook of his arm. He went down the path ahead of the horsemen, mumbling to himself.

THEY followed the man, crossed a creek bordered with willows, and rode onto a bench well sprinkled with pines. Here stood a crude log hut, its walls blending with the trunks of

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the standing trees so that the cabin was scarcely visible at fifty yards.

A man appeared at the door. He was not old, but he had hard, set features that made it difficult to guess his age. He might have been anywhere between thirty and forty. He wore a gun low, the holster tied to his thigh.

This hombre lounged against a porch upright, motionless, his gray eyes never leaving the Kid. Hatch and Crosley said nothing as they pulled their horses to a stop. Even Boggs was silenced by the strange look on the man's face.

The Kid tried to force a grin, but the muscles of his face were stiff, rebellious. "Hello, Rhett," he ventured, but his voice was spiritless.

Rhett Munger did not reply at once. He straightened slowly, his tall form almost filling the doorway, and he strode toward the arrivals, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"What's the meaning of this, Kid?" There was no welcome, rather a hostility bred of acquaintance.

Joe plucked up his drooping spirits. After all this man was his brother-in-law. "Ask them." He indicated Hatch and Crosley. "They brought me in."

Munger's eyes narrowed. "That's not the point. They wouldn't have brought you in unless you were wandering mighty close to this place. What are you doing here?"

The Kid ventured a bold reply. Though he feared Munger, he was not daunted by him. "Link Hassler sent me."

The effect on the quartet of listeners was like a dropping bomb. Boggs swore. Hatch grabbed at his Colt. Crosley's lips spread to a thin-lipped, merciless grin. Munger alone held tight control of himself.

"You're in a tight hole if that's so, Kid," replied Munger.

"Damned spy!" cackled Boggs.

The Kid's heart was pounding, but he kept his voice calm. "Yeah, he sent me, but not to you. He told me to get outa the country and stay out. I was gettin'."

Munger took a step nearer. His eyes were murderous. "Why?"

"He claimed I was your lookout man on the bank job. He threw me in jail, but let me go for lack of evidence. Told me to get clean out of the country."

"Did Hassler do this or was it Jessup?"

"Hassler."

Rhett Munger's voice didn't change. His features became more set, forbidding. "All right, Kid, get down. There's grub in the shack, but you'll have to cook it."

The Kid felt strangely weak-kneed as he slid to the ground. Hatch made no move to return his gun. They were not accepting his story without reservations. Munger strode to the corner of the shack and squatted there upon his heels. Boggs went to him, and the pair talked in low tones.

Following the example of Crosley and Hatch, the Kid unsaddled and hobbled his pony. There was sufficient grass and forage at the creek. He returned to the cabin and, almost wordlessly, he and Hatch prepared a meal. Crosley joined in the eating but had little to say. Later the gaunt rifleman joined Munger and Boggs. The content of their words was inaudible, but the three were arguing heatedly.

A change came over Hatch. His flat face puffed and swelled like a growing moon. His lips pursed; his small eyes glittered. He sidled toward Joe.

"They'll finish yuh, Kid," he whispered. "Yuh ain't got a Chinaman's chance."

"Huh?"

"That's right. Boggs is death on all strangers, and Munger's ringy as a mountain lion. Crosley never figured on lettin' yuh out alive, but he didn't know yuh was Rhett's wife's brother."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"He's afraid it'll soften Rhett. Yore story about Link Hassler don't click, that's all. Boggs'll never stop till he finishes yuh." Hatch cocked his ear toward the corner of the cabin. Beyond the logs the low hum of conversation went on. Hatch bent nearer the Kid. "Yuh ain't got no chance but one. How'd yuh like to play along with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Munger wouldn't deal square with his own mother. He ain't split the bank money, see? I figger he don't aim to. He'll freeze me out or kill me. I'm not goin' to be cheated. Lissen!" Hatch bent closer, his hot breath in the Kid's ear. "Yuh kin ambush Boggs when he goes back up the trail. I'll drop Crosley through the window of the cabin. We'll both turn on Munger. One or both is bound to git him. Then we drift north into Canada with all the money."

A wave of nausea swept through the Kid. Treachery and back stabbing on all sides. Was this the way it was on the other side of the line, beyond the pale of the law? He turned away to keep Hatch from reading his face.

There was a sudden breaking up of the conference outside. Boggs stumped up the trail with his Winchester. Munger called to Hatch. The squat man gave the Kid a knowing look, whispered, "Wait," and went out.

The cabin was lacking in chairs, and the Kid remained hunkered by the fireplace, trying to get his

thoughts in order. When he finally ventured to the door, it was to meet the hard, questioning gaze of Crosley. The lank rider was never without his Winchester, and he squatted now under a tree, the weapon across his knees. Munger was standing some twenty feet to the right. The Kid saw from their positions that they had the door and the single window of the cabin under constant surveillance. They were not trusting him for one instant.

The Kid sat down on the doorstep. If this was the carefree abandon of the wild bunch, he'd had enough of it. The three of them sat until half an hour ticked by, and no word passed between them. At length Crosley got to his feet, flipped away a cigarette stub, and cradled his weapon. He started for the trail.

"I'll be takin' a look-see at Boggs," he stated briefly and stalked across the creek.

Rhett Munger didn't rise. He didn't even look toward Joe Cathorne, but his voice commanded ominously:

"Come here, Kid."

It never occurred to Joe to disobey. He walked slowly toward the older man. Rhett looked up at him with fathomless eyes. "Did Hatch try to proposition you?" he questioned.

The Kid tried to evade. "What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean! I don't trust that jasper. He's been acting queer ever since that bank job." Munger's lean jaw thrust out. "If any one of 'em double-crosses me, I'll blast his heart out! And that goes for you too, Kid."

There was a sudden shout from across the creek. Both whirled in that direction. Crosley was motioning frantically. "Somethin's up with Boggs," he called.



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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

Munger broke into a run and Joe followed. The Kid wondered for a moment where Hatch was. Had the squat man tried his own suggestion of dry-gulching the trail guard? Probably not—or there would have been a gun report. From the way Crosley and Munger were speeding up the trail, something serious must be wrong.

Crosley left the trail and began to ascend the left-hand cliff. It was not until this moment that the Kid spotted Boggs. He was crouched among boulders at the top of a rocky spur, and he was motioning to them excitedly.

Crosley and Munger were ascending rapidly. The Kid slowed down. The trail that entered this hidden valley was well to the right of this rocky spur; and the path itself was hidden from the top of the spur by the sharp cut of a narrow bench. Only in a few places would a rider be exposed until he was well out of the canyon. Was it worth a risk? Could he get his horse? The Kid came to a complete stop. Rhett and Crosley were now fifty yards ahead.

A hard muzzle poked him in the back. "Git goin'!" Hatch ordered. The squat man was blowing hard. He had been exerting himself to overtake the other three; but he had guessed why the Kid delayed. "Yuh don't cut an' run! I saw yuh connivin' with Munger back there at the cabin. I'm keepin' my eye on yuh till I know what's up."

The Kid continued to climb. There was no trail. By the time he came near the top, Boggs was cursing and gesturing frantically. His baleful glance fell upon Joe.

"There's the young buzzard! I knowed I shoulda salivated him when I first seen him. Leadin' the sheriff square to the hideout—"

Death blazed in the little man's eyes.

Rhett Munger reached out, and

his fingers closed like a vise on the Kid's shoulder. "Three riders pulled into the big valley. They're still a half mile off. It looked like Hassler and a couple possemen."

"Damn right it was Hassler," howled Boggs. "I know his paint boss a mile off. He's followin' the Kid's tracks. It's all been a trick to lead to you, Rhett."

Munger's fingers clamped tighter. "Are you in a deal with the sheriff, Kid?"

"I'm not!"

"How do we know he ain't lyin'?" growled Hatch, who had now joined the others.

Crosley appeared the calmest of the group. "They're bound to follow the tracks into the hide-out now. I know a better place to ambush 'em. They're only three. None of 'em will ride back."

Hatch was dubious. "They'll keep followin' the tracks."

Crosley chuckled mirthlessly. "The trick worked on the Kid here, didn't it? It'll work on that fool sheriff."

Hatch almost doubled in a silent guffaw. "The three-shot signal trick, haw! It'll bring the fools on the run. An' us layin' hid to mow 'em down. Come on."

The other outlaws understood without further words. Crosley led the way across the spur and down into a stony draw off the main valley. Here concealment was ample for a company of militia. If Hassler and his men could be tricked up this draw, they would be perfect targets.

Munger whirled suddenly on Hatch. "Gimme the Kid's gun." Then he held the weapon out to Joe. "If you're shootin' square with us, you'll give the signal. Savvy? Three shots at ten-second intervals."

Joe felt the blood drain from his face. "Me?"

"You heard me. It'll prove whether you're playin' square or not. If you've been lyin'—" He left the remainder of the threat unsaid.

Joe took the gun. It felt heavy and cumbersome in his hand. He was confused and lost by the turn of events. To follow Rhett's command would result in a triple dry-gulching. It would be cold-blooded murder! And he—



"Get down on the ground like your leg was broke," ordered Rhett. "That will put Hassler off his guard. When he starts to dismount, we'll pour it on. They won't have a chance to grab." A vicious grin drew back his lips. "In your places, men. They ought to be pulling even with the draw by now. All right, Kid, and you'd better go through with it."

Joe, sprawled upon the ground, lifted the gun. He knew the very

simplicity of the trick would make it perfect. Hassler, like himself, would spur without question to give help.

"Get started!" commanded Rhett.

The Kid squeezed trigger. The shot seemed to tear at his eardrums. He began slowly to count. There was a queer haze before his eyes. "Nine, ten!" The second report followed flatly after the first. The next shot would be an invitation to murder. His finger felt stiff and numb upon the trigger. Yet his mind counted automatically. "Seven, eight, nine!" What now? Failure to fire would bring the vengeful bullets of the gang. Must he sacrifice himself for Link Hassler? Didn't he hate Hassler and all the law implied? Why dally? His finger tightened and the third shot timed itself after the other two. There was a quick expulsion of breath, like a gasp of relief, from the men behind the rocks.

The Kid heard the drum of hoofs before he saw the horsemen. The hard earth carried the sound like a taut membrane. Sprawled in the middle of the draw he could see the entrance into the larger valley. He saw Hassler swing his horse and come spurring in. Behind him the other two horsemen trailed close.

Time and motion seemed to stop for the Kid. He had never experienced anything like this before. All things seemed held, arrested by an invisible force. The sheriff and his posse were a still picture, coming no closer. Link Hassler! Joe had always thought a lot of Hassler. He admired the way the sheriff sat a horse and rolled a gun, the way he was always respected, dominant, in a group of men. At least Hassler met a man face to face and spoke his piece. He wasn't a back stabber

like this Munger bunch. Maybe he had been hard with the Kid; maybe the Kid did think he hated him—but Link Hassler was a man.

The sheriff was acting the man now, spurring to help, thinking the Kid was hurt and down. In a moment the lawman would be knocked from the saddle, cut down by dry-gulchers' bullets, murdered by men who had no conception of honor.

Not while Joe lived! His course of action was suddenly clear in the Kid's mind. Damn Rhett Munger and his coyote gang. They wouldn't get by with this. Whatever the consequences, they mustn't surprise Hassler.

The Kid's finger squeezed the trigger hard!

That fourth shot tore loose pandemonium in the little valley. The Kid saw Link Hassler rein in, comprehension glinting in his eyes. He saw the sheriff's hand drop toward his gun as he realized this was not a help signal. He heard the howling curse of Boggs, and the rising and shifting of men behind the rocks.

Desperately, the Kid hurled himself sideways and rolled. Dirt and gravel smacked his face as a bullet thudded into the ground. Gunfire rolled out behind him, around him, reverberating in the little valley. He rolled to a stop, flat upon his elbows now. He saw Hassler and his deputies charge straight into the ambush. Guns were blazing in staccato report. A horse snorted and plunged. The Kid saw Crosley half rise from his hiding place, the rifle leaping to his shoulder. He could see the tenseness on the outlaw's face, the sure expectancy of a perfect hit. For one split second weapon and man were a thing of stone. "Hassler!" the man muttered.

The Kid's eyes centered on the

crook of Crosley's elbow; then Joe squeezed trigger. Crosley jerked upward as his Winchester recoiled; the shot spoiled by Cathorne's bullet.

Then the pound of hoofbeats was like thunder in the Kid's ears. The small cavalcade seemed to be leaping at him. Sounds of individual shots were lost in the reverberating gun thunder. He saw Rhett Munger turn toward him, his face blazoned with livid hate. He read his brother-in-law's eyes before he saw the movement of Rhett's gun arm. The tall leader's figure was a silhouette against the gray-green of the gully side. The Kid saw this and nothing more as Rhett's Colt came level. The six-gun jerked like a thing alive in Munger's hand.

Joe felt his head wrenched away. His brain was seared by fire. The world was a dazzle of light—and then darkness.

The Kid recovered to a confusion of sounds and with a head that was a terrible ache. He could feel a coarse bandage around his temple. The confusion became sounds and the sounds voices. Cole Jessup was growling.

"You're smart, Link. Turn the Kid loose an' follow him an' he led straight to Rhett."

Hassler's voice crackled with anger. "Another word like that and I'll drive it down your throat. I saw what the Kid did. He saved all of us. He was white all through at the showdown. Furthermore, I wasn't following him to find Rhett Munger."

"Now?"

"I was following him to apologize. I was pretty hasty and acting on suspicion. When he comes to from that bullet crease, I'll do it. I'm telling him we'll be proud and happy to have him stay in Prosser Junction."

The Kid felt warm and happy as he opened his eyes.

THE END.

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COW COUNTRY SPANISH

by S. OMAR BARKER

★ ★ ★

The words, phrases, meanings and pronunciations here given are those in common use by the native Spanish-Americans and Mexicans of the Southwestern range country, particularly New Mexico, Arizona and Texas, rather than pure Castilian Spanish, though in many cases words and phrases are the same.

★ ★ ★

While these are the Spanish names for well-known animals, most any old cowboy knows and uses them almost as readily as he does their English equivalents. Many canyons, mountains, towns, etc., in the Southwest bear the names of animals that the first settlers found plentiful in the vicinity. There are villages called Las Tusas, for instance, all over New Mexico.

Caballo (cah-BAHL-yo; also rather generally cah-VAH-yo): horse.

Yegua (YAY-wah): mare.

Potrillo (po-TREEL-yo): horse colt.

Potranca (po-TRAHN-cah): mare colt.

Mesteño (may-STAIN-yo): mustang.

Bronco (BRONG-co): an untamed or unbroken horse; brone.

Caballada (cah-vahl-YAH-thah): a bunch of horses; from this come the terms "cavvyard" and "cavvy."

Remuda (ray-MOO-thah): the saddle-horse bunch or trail or round-up; "remoother."

Mañada (mahn-YAH-thah): a bunch of mares ruled by a stallion.

Tiro (TEE-ro): team, as of horses, mules, etc. Also a shot.

Ganado (gah-NAH-tho): livestock; a herd of sheep.

Reces (RAY-sace): cattle.

Ganado y (ee) reces: sheep and cattle.

Vaca (VAH-cah or BAH-cah): cow.

Toro (TOH-ro): bull.

Becerro (bay-SAY-rro): calf.

Ternera (tair-NAY-rah): heifer.

Novillo (no-VEEL-yo or no-VEE-yo): steer. Not to be confused with *novio* (NO-vee-o): sweetheart.

Atajo (ah-TAH-ho): bunch of animals.

Borregas (bore-RAY-gahs): sheep.

Borrego (bore-RAY-go): lamb; also a common surname.

Chivato (chee-VAH-toh): billy goat; buck deer; a mild cussword.

Carnero (car-NAY-ro): ram.

Cabra (CAH-brah): goat.

Chivo (CHEE-vo): kid; also a mild bad name.

Mula (MOO-lah): mule.

Macho (MAH-cho): mule, particularly the small, tough, south-western mule that is sometimes half burro.

Burro (BOO-rroh): donkey. (Roll those "r's"!)

Cíbolo (SEE-bo-lo): buffalo.

Berrendo (bay-RRAIN-doh): pronghorn antelope.

Venado (vay-NAH tho): deer.

Venado alezán (ah-lay-SAHN): elk; sorrel deer.

Conejo (co-NAY-ho): rabbit; cottontail.

Liebre (lee-AY-bray): jackrabbit.

Tusa (TOO-sah): prairie dog.

Ratón (rah-TONE): rat, mouse; ground squirrel.

Zorro (SORE-ro): fox.

Zorilla (sore-REEL-yah): skunk.

Tejón (tay-HONE): badger.

Lobo (LO-boh): wolf; also monkey wrench.

Coyote (co-YOH-tay): a small wolf, sharp-nosed; commonly pronounced KI-ote; also, a half-breed.

Gato (GAH-toh): cat.

Gato montés (mone-TACE): wild cat; bobcat.

León (lay-OWN): mountain lion.

Tigre (TEE-gray): tiger; the spotted Mexican panther or jaguar.

Javelina (hah-vay-LEE-nah):

Texas wild hog; peccary.

Oso (OH-so): bear. Many say HO-so.

Perro (PAY-rro): dog.

Tecolote (tay-co-LO-tay): owl.

Gallina (gahil-YEE-nah or guy-YEE-nah): hen; chicken.

Gallina de la tierra (day lah tee-AY-ra): turkey.

Gallo (GAHL-yo or GUY-yo): rooster.

Gavilán (gah-vee-LAHN): hawk.

Cuervo (KWAYR-vo): crow, raven.

Aguila (AH-gee-lah): eagle.

Paisano (pie-SAH-no): chaparral bird; Mexican road runner, akin to the cuckoo. Long tail. Top-knot. Kills snakes.

Paloma (pah-LO-mah): pigeon; dove: "La Paloma"—famous song).

Cordoniz (core-doh-NEECE): blue quail.

Golondrina (go-lone-DREE-nah): swallow; another song.

Perdiz (PAYR-DEECE): grouse; prairie chicken.

Pájaro (PAH-hah-ro): bird.

Pato (PAH-toh): duck.

Ganso (GAHN-so): goose.

Culebra (COO-LAY-brah): non-poisonous snake.

Vivora (VEE-voh-rah): rattlesnake.

Pescado (pace-CAH-tho or pace-CAOW): fish.

Trucha (TROO-cah): trout.

Guajalote (gwah-hah-LO-tay): water dog; in some parts of old Mexico, a turkey.

Avispa (ah-VEES-pah): wasp; yellowjacket.

Chuparosa (choo-pah-ro-sah): butterfly.

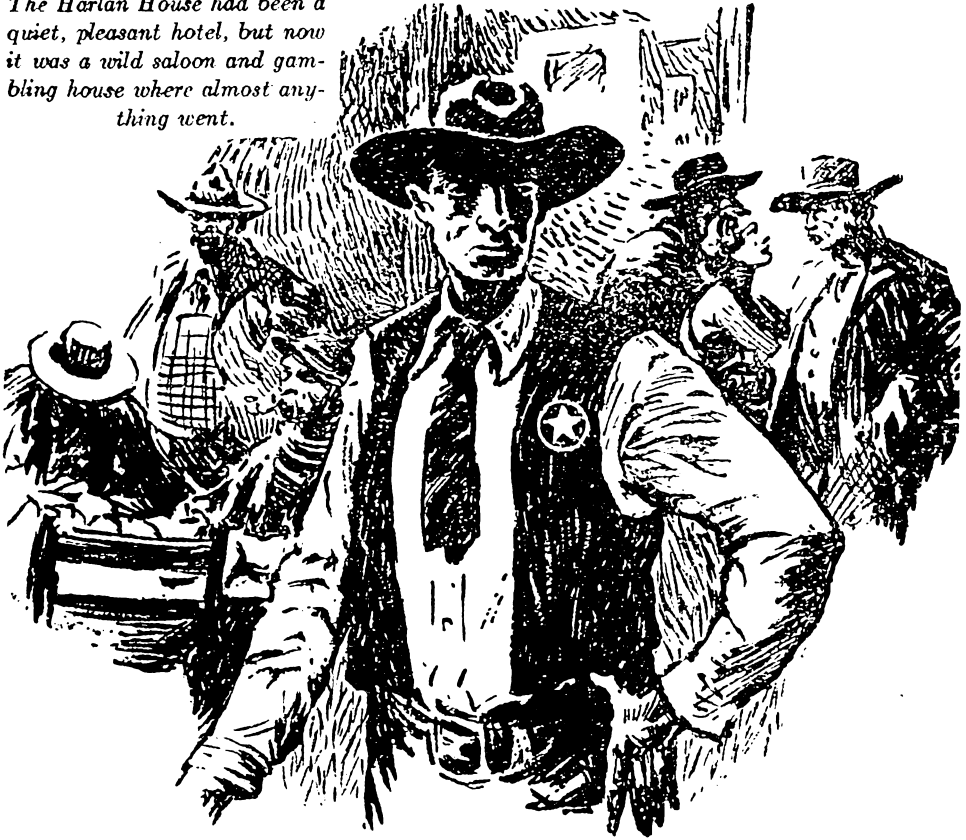
Garapata (gah-rah-PAH): tick.

Pecojo (pay-oh-ho): louse.

Pulgón (pool-GOHN): flea.

Chinche (CHEEN-chay): bedbug.

The Harlan House had been a quiet, pleasant hotel, but now it was a wild saloon and gambling house where almost anything went.



I'M STILL THE LAW!

by FREDRIC SINCLAIR

They said the Federal marshal was too much slowed down by age to handle that arrogant renegade single-handed—but maybe an old law dog can learn new tricks when his life depends on it!

RIDING down from the hills that day, and into the border town of Harla, Jeff Kane felt the ache in his back, down low around his kidneys, and he grinned wryly. Age crept up on a man, he told himself, with little pains and kinks. Saddle cramp, you called it, and took a rest and the

ache went away—for a while. But it always came back, only a man wouldn't admit it. No man likes to admit he's getting old.

Jeff swung his pinto out of the brush and onto the road that cut straight as an arrow across the plain to where the flat-roofed adobe town

of Harla squatted on its greasewood flat. He didn't want to reach Harla before evening. Gonzales wouldn't likely be around the town until after dark. It felt good to slow down now, after that grueling trek across the Big Hump. Jeff reached around, massaging his back with calloused hands. But the dull ache persisted.

He remembered when he'd taken that ride across the Hump in a breeze and wasted no time in getting to Harla. But age brings a certain caution. Jeff sighed. Even the Old Man was getting cautious. He'd wanted to send a couple of the younger U. S. deputy marshals along with Jeff Kane!

"Gonzales' a gun-loco fool. You know how a Mex is when he goes bad. From what I've heard he's just about taken over Harla by himself." The Old Man had avoided Jeff's eyes and growled: "I don't like you riding down there alone. You ain't as young as you once was, Jeff. None of us are! Better let me send a couple of the boys and—"

Jeff had cut him off short. When he needed help to take care of an hombre whose guns were getting too big for him, it was high time he turned in his badge, Jeff told the Old Man furiously. Funny, he mused now, how touchy a man gets about his age. He'd stomped out of the Old Man's office, and the screen door had banged hard behind him.

It was bitter gall, though, to admit the Old Man was right. A man sure didn't grow younger. Jeff reviewed the years that stretched behind him and knew pride in them despite the number. Paced to a fast tempo, those years, perfumed with enough powder smoke to make any old law dog feel content that he'd done a good job. He'd flashed his badge in the faces of plenty of bad ones—and taken them, too!

Old! Bah! There was still plenty of time to get old. But he wasn't old as long as he could fork a horse and yank a gun. For the past twenty years he'd enforced the law in these parts. This was his domain. Didn't that young squirt Gonzales know that?

The lawman fished in his vest and clamped his teeth around a black stogie. He looked forward to seeing Matt Thompson again. Matt owned the Harla House, and Jeff hoped he still had some of that private stock in his safe. Jeff rode on, a spare man, long of face and body, booted and spurred and bent of legs, garbed in wool and leather and a vast hat, the two walnut-handled arbiters of peace low on his legs and tied down.

It was dusk when Jeff swung stiffly out of the saddle and tied his horse to the hitch rack in front of the Harla House. There were a few oldsters sitting on the long porch of the hotel, dozing over their stomachs. As he went up the steps, Jeff wondered if he'd end up like that. He hitched his guns irritably at the disturbing thought.

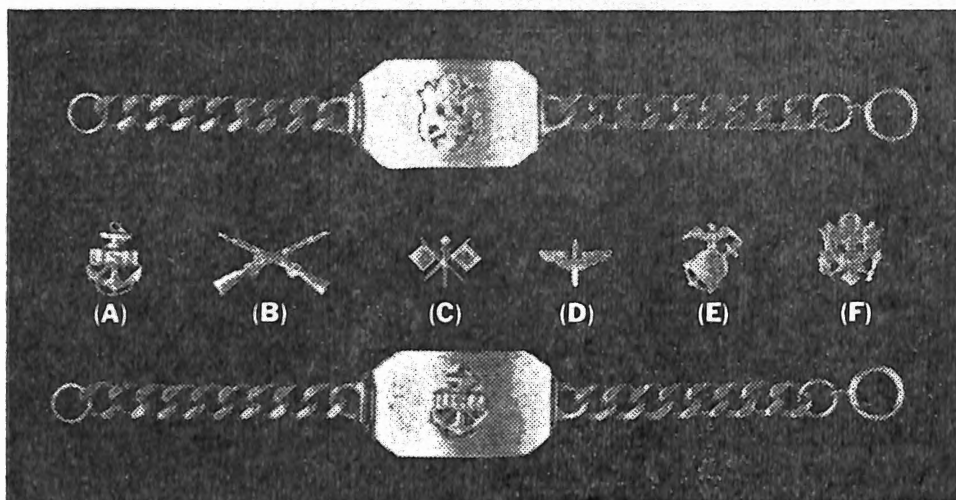
The barroom was empty and Jeff felt relieved. There was time enough to eat. He hoped Matt still served that good stew. Wouldn't the old catamount whoop when he spotted Jeff!

Jeff was halfway across the barroom before he noticed the changes. It had been two years since he'd been here last—that time he'd picked up Snap Peters for wrecking the Wells Fargo stage. The Harla House had been one of those quiet, mellow places where a man could eat and drink and relax. But now—

The place was a honkatonk! The private dining room had been ripped out and a stage reared in its place.

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Continued from page 91

Poker had been the only game played last time Jeff had been here. Now there was a faro layout, a big roulette wheel, a blackjack board, and a green-and-plush dice table.

The bartender was standing behind the counter. He was a big man with slick black hair and a large paste diamond in his tie. He picked his teeth and eyed Jeff without interest.

"What'll it be, hombre?"

Hombre! Jeff's eyes chilled and he knew swift anger. From a bar wiper! He bridled his temper. He had a job to do here and brawling with a bartender would only delay him. Best find Matt and get the lowdown on this Gonzales bad man.

"Is Matt Thompson about?" he asked.

"Thompson? Oh, him! Yeah, he's around somewhere." The barkeep looked under the bar as if expecting to find him down there. "Upstairs, I guess."

"In his office?"

"Office? Him! Hell, no! Say, you want anything to drink, mister?"

"Not now. All right to go up and see him?"

The bartender rubbed his nose. "Who are you, mister? Where you from?"

"Up Jacinto way," Jeff told him, omitting his name. "Just passin' through. Thought I'd look Matt up. Knew him pretty well once."

"Waal now—" The bartender pulled at his lip. "Friend of his, eh? Didn't know the old souse had any friends."

Jeff's fingers whitened around the bar edge. "What room did you say he was in?" His voice was thin.

"Huh?" The bartender had been frowning at Jeff. Now, as the lawman's pale eyes met and held his, the bartender started as he at-

tempted to hide his sudden recognition with a stiff yawn. "Thompson's in the last room at the end of the balcony. Sure, mister; go on up!"

Jeff pivoted without a word and clumped across the bar and up the stairs. His heels rapped an uneven tattoo on the balcony floor, for he limped from an old wound. He passed the room he had known as Matt's office and remembered those last drinks he'd had with Matt in there—fine old whiskey and excellent cigars and the easy familiarity of a man he liked. Seems like the years can change a heap more things than the color of one's hair.

Jeff reached the room at the end of the balcony. He knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Jeff opened the door, grinning.

A slurred voice met him. "Since when d'yuh knock on my door?"

The two men stared at each other. Jeff's grin fading.

"Matt!"

"Jeff!"

MATT THOMPSON slouched at a table, blinking dully at Jeff. The whiskey bottle on the table was an exclamation point that split his face. Jeff went across the room. Matt pushed away from the table, chair scraping. He tried to get up but his hands slipped off the edge of the table and he nearly fell. Jeff's long fingers sank into his old friend's shoulder.

"Steady, Matt. You're loaded." He tried to force a grin but his lips only stretched flatly across his teeth. "What's the celebration, Matt?"

Matt sat heavily in his chair, staring stupidly at Jeff. He was disheveled and his jaw was dirty-gray with beard stubble. It stank here in the untidy room. An oil lamp on the table reeked from a

dirty wick. A plate full of decaying beans was on the window ledge.

Jeff Kane brought his eyes back to Matt. Was this the soft-spoken, immaculate host of two years back, he asked himself? The lawman's gaze hardly touched the dissipated face, the touseled white-streaked hair. But every phase of Matt's condition was like a slap in the face.

"Pretty awful, eh, Jeff?" Matt said thickly.

Jeff pulled up a chair and straddled it. "Anybody can go off on a toot, Matt."

"This one's lasted seven months! Ever since that devil, Gonzales, came. "Matt's eyes steadied on Jeff's face. He clutched the lawman's arm. "Jeff! You still the law?"

"I'm still the law, Matt."

Matt's fingers tightened on his arm. "You've come after Gonzales?"

"Yup." Jeff met Matt's eyes. "Feel like talkin' old war hoss?"

Matt blinked into Jeff's steady eyes. He said dully: "Gonzales came here a year ago. He's a killer. Fastest man I ever saw with a gun. Fast as you were when you were younger." Jeff winced but held the other man's eyes as Matt rambled on. "He's a lone wolf. He posed as a gentleman and we drank together and finally we played cards. I lost! I lost everything, Jeff!"

Matt slumped back in his chair, laughing hoarsely. "One man, they send, to buck Gonzales. An old man! Hell, Jeff, younger men than you have bucked him—but they ain't telling' nobody about it now."

A muscle ridged on Jeff's jaw. He stifled his irritation. "What's happened to the old place, Matt? Last time I was here—"

"Last time you were here Gonzales wasn't!" Matt broke in savagely. "He's taken over everything

I owned—my hotel! He's put in gambling games, dance-hall girls. I'm just a laughing stock. A drunken bum!" Matt's eyes were wild on Jeff now. "I've hung on, knowing they'd send the law down here eventually. Waiting! Waiting! For what? For an old man who should be on pension! A has-been!"

"Easy, Matt!" Jeff's voice was low.

"An old fool named Jeff Kane, sent down to take a hellion like Gonzales!" Matt's mouth was a drunken snarl. "What a joke! What a rotten joke!"

"I think it is very funny. I think we should all laugh together." The voice from the doorway was coolly insolent.

Jeff turned slowly, keeping his hands in sight. Matt pushed the table back, the oil lamp wobbling on its base, as he attempted to pull himself up. He stared at the door, and his voice was a throaty whisper. "Gonzales!"

HE was alone, this Gonzales. Jeff felt the insult even as he cursed himself for being caught flat-footed. Gonzales wanted it known that he needed no help in taking care of this old law dog who sought him. Contempt was on his dark face, in the long indolent length of him, in the fact that he had not even bothered to draw his gun.

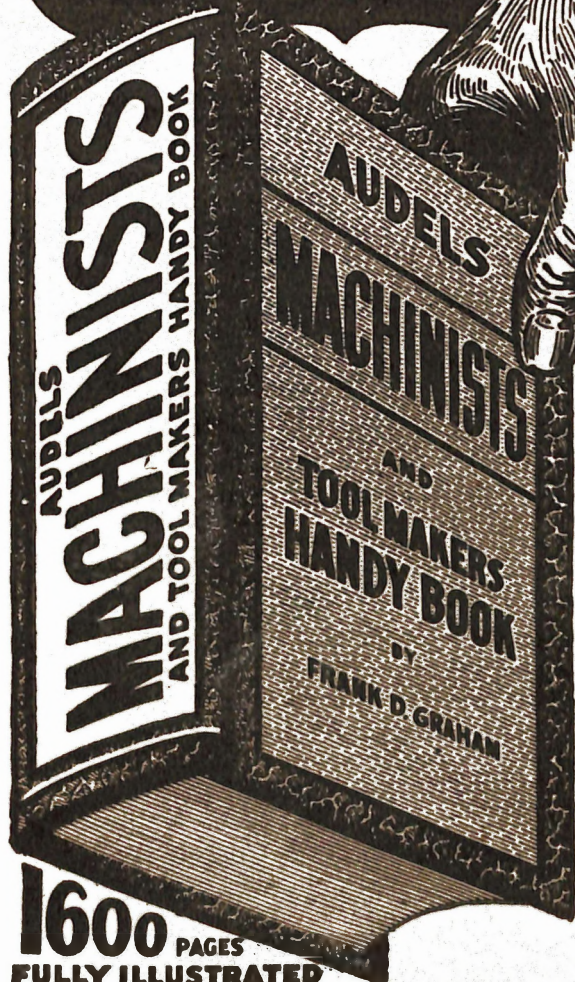
But Jeff noticed that Gonzales watched his hands. Jeff eased his weight down slowly on his feet, pushing his chest away from the chair's back.

"I've heard of you, Jeff Kane." Gonzales' lips curled in against his teeth. "All the old ones gossip of you as they sit in the sun and dream of a past that is gone!"

Matt was on his feet, lurching in

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Continued from page 94

front of Jeff. The lawman cursed silently, eyes turning to Matt and then back, taking a fresh hold on Gonzales.

"Siddown, Matt!" growled Jeff.

Gonzales intercepted Jeff's quick look of concern. His mouth skinned back in a mocking grin. "No! No! Señor Thompson!" he purred. "Stand here, beside your good friend Gonzales. So!" His arm slipped through Matt's, linking them. His hand dropped casually to the silver-plated gun at his hip. "I think you had better go home, grandfather," he said to Jeff.

Jeff's lips whitened. He said evenly: "When I go, you'll go with me."

Gonzales shook his head. "No-o-o, I think not," he said carelessly. "I like it here. Señor Thompson has been kind enough to rent me his fine white house. I am happy. I am surrounded by friends." His arm tightened, pulling the befuddled Matt against him. Gonzales' eyes laughed at Jeff. "You are an old man, gray one. I do not like to shoot old men." Almost gently, without haste, he drew his gun. "But of course if they are old fools—"

Jeff's fingers were cold. He felt Matt's eyes on him, drunkenly contemptuous. Jeff trembled inside, but his face was set in a mold that emotion couldn't touch. He could have drawn swiftly and had it out with Gonzales. He'd gamble that even now, with that gun hanging carelessly in Gonzales' hand, he could whip a shot home. It would be a good way to finish up. A flash of steel, a spurt of flame— Far better than waiting for the years to break you down.

But he was forced to sit there, unmoving, his face masking the turmoil within him. Jeff was help-

less to act because his old friend, Matt, would most certainly go down under a hail of bullets. Even getting Gonzales was not worth such violence. Events and circumstances were against him now, Jeff reasoned. The caution of age ruled him.

Jeff's eyes tightened. Gonzales was playing his hand on the assumption that he was pitted against an old man's caution. An old man afraid and unable to move with deadly speed. Jeff's jaw bunched.

Gonzales waggled the gun at him and triumph laughed in his eyes. "Go back home, grandfather," he said. "Tell them that Gonzales does not want old men bothering him." The gun steadied. Gonzales' face seemed to thin. "Vamoose!"

Jeff pushed himself up from the chair. He took a step around it, as though heading for the door. He used both hands to push the chair aside. Gonzales acted as Jeff had hoped he would. The Mexican stepped out of the doorway, into the room, pulling Matt with him. He was sneering now. Matt eyed Jeff with bleary disgust.

Jeff was swinging the chair out of the way. But instead of letting go of it he side-stepped in a rolling movement of speed, pivoted and swung the chair up from the floor in a vicious uppercut of rough-hewn wood. Gonzales ducked involuntarily, his gun jerking up. But Jeff had not swung the chair at Gonzales. He had swung it at Matt!

THE chair's seat smashed against Matt's head. He slumped heavily against Gonzales, his dead weight nearly toppling both of them to the floor. Gonzales' gun exploded in a blasting report. But Jeff was moving fast, long legs scissoring him across the room.

Gonzales was impeded by Matt's

sagging body. Neither could Jeff fire, for fear of hitting Matt. For that tense heartbeat it was a stalemate. Gonzales freed his arm from Matt, sweeping him out of the way. He spun around, dropping to one knee, gun seeking, just as Jeff threw his big hat at the oil lamp on the table.

The lamp went over with a crash and spilled kerosene. Gonzales' gun punched holes in the sudden darkness. The mirror over the dresser shattered.

Jeff dove for the opposite wall. He brought up flat on his belly against the baseboard, big Peacemakers in his hands. He flattened there, a long shadow, waiting with the patience long years of experience had taught him. Jeff was checkmated again. Gonzales could shoot at him, but Jeff couldn't fire back for fear of hitting Matt. Quietly, he experimented.

He tossed a cartridge across the room. It clattered to the floor near the door. The room quivered under the noise of Gonzales' gun. Jeff placed the powder flash.

"About five feet from the table," he reckoned to himself. "Wonder if I can lure the son closer this way."

He tossed another cartridge. It thumped to the floor near the bed, rolling against a caster with a hollow ping. Jeff grinned into the darkness as he heard Gonzales slew around. Jeff gave him grudging credit for holding his fire. He flipped another cartridge. Gonzales' gun hammered out.

Jeff laughed without sound and snapped another cartridge to the right of the bed. Then he gathered his legs under him. Gonzales' gun stabbed a roaring belch of sound and flame. But Jeff was already moving across the room, silent under

the thunder of Gonzales' gun. The lawman felt the leg of the table and froze, hunkered down on his toes.

On the other side of the table he heard a slight movement. Gonzales' gun clicked as he punched fresh shells into the chambers.

Slowly, an inch at a time, Jeff stood up. Carefully, he sheathed his guns. With infinite patience he extracted a match from his pocket.

"Gonzales," he said calmly, "you're under arrest!"

He heard Gonzales' boots scrunch on the floor. Coolly, he timed the spin of Gonzales' body. His thumbnail scratched across the match.

It flared, sputtered, ignited: In its anemic glow the two men faced each other over the top of the table. Gonzales' dark face ruthless and savage. Jeff's long face stern and relentless.

Gonzales snarled. His gun gleamed. He thrust himself forward, snapping up his arm. Deliberately, Jeff dropped the burning match into the pool of kerosene that had spilled from the overturned lamp!

A sheet of blue flame seemed to explode from the table top, ghastly in the gloom of the room. Gonzales screamed as the flames enveloped his head and hands. His gun clattered to the table. He staggered back, hands pressed to his eyes.

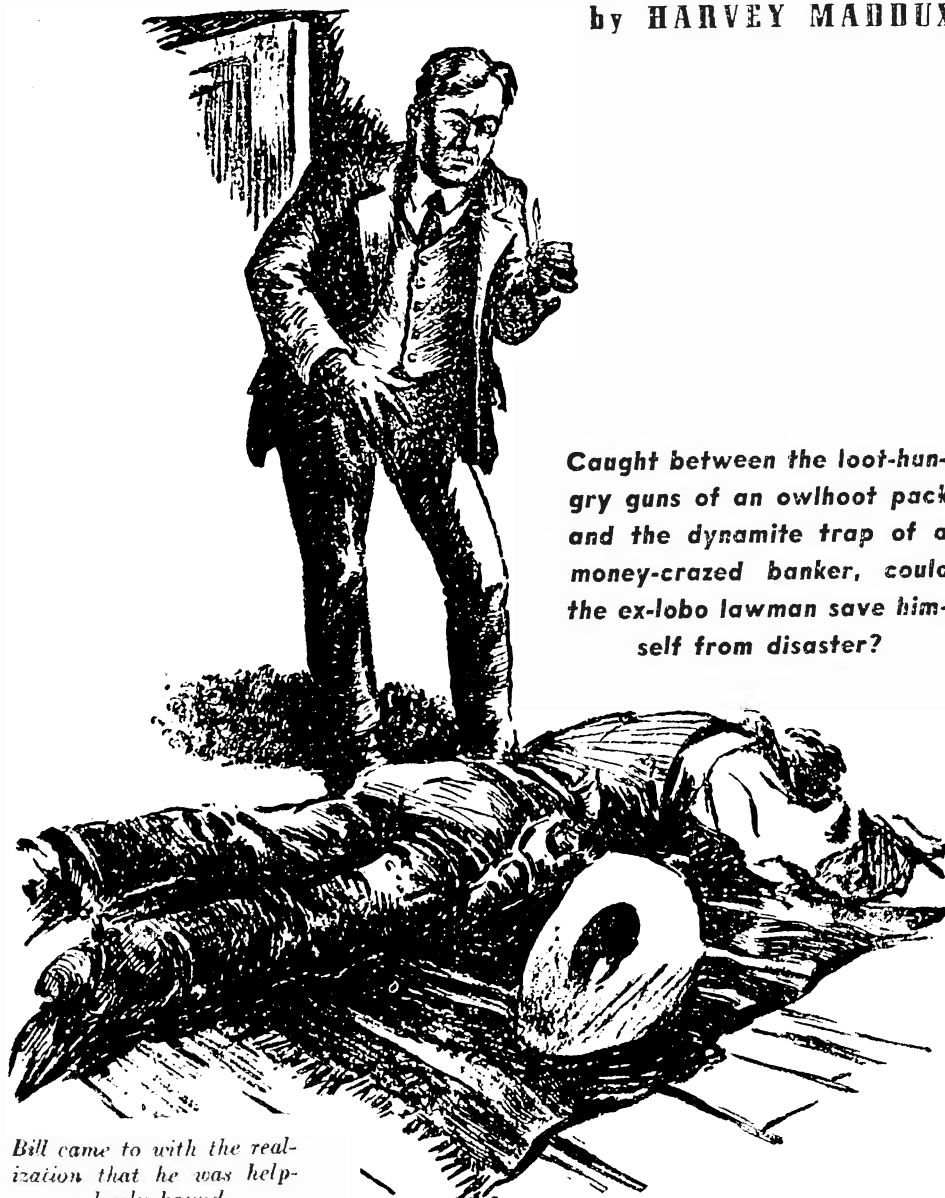
Jeff knifed around the table. His long arm shot out and hauled Gonzales in close. He chopped with satisfaction at Gonzales' chin, caught Gonzales in his arms as the Mexican fell and dexterously snapped the handcuffs on his wrists.

"There's a kiss from grandpaw, you young sprig," growled Jeff. "And I could have used a gun just as easy—only I never shoot youngers in short pants!"

END

GUN RENDEZVOUS

by HARVEY MADDUX



Caught between the loot-hungry guns of an owlhoot pack and the dynamite trap of a money-crazed banker, could the ex-lobo lawman save himself from disaster?

Bill came to with the realization that he was helplessly bound.

FIFTEEN minutes after word came that the Apache Kid's bunch had passed the Bluffs, only one man paced the deserted length of Ridge-

pole's main street. Bill Haywood walked with measured stride, the late sun casting bold shadows across his strong jaw, the marshal's badge over

his heart glinting with the slow rhythm of his walk.

The sound of pounding horses' hoofs at the outskirts of town made the marshal pause. He listened intently and looked at the purple rim of hills. An angle in the street cut off his view. But it would be the Apache Kid's bunch, he guessed, and thought: If Jute, or Pantel, or some of 'em don't go off half-cocked, maybe I can talk some sense into the Kid.

Bill Haywood gave a short, harsh laugh as he pushed back his hat and spat into the dust. Maybe the Kid had gone all bad like folks said. Three years could do a lot to a man.

Bill's narrowed eyes swept the street, and a ripple of surprise crossed his tanned face. From a nearby doorway, Hy Culver, the banker, had popped into sight, and now headed hurriedly in Bill's direction. Bill felt a strong distaste for the man. Culver had enormously long legs that made his roundish body look like a walking toadstool. His face, pushed all up front in a prominent nose and receding chin, scowled at Haywood.

"Haywood, you're a fool!" Banker Culver wheezed the words ahead of him in a high-pitched voice. "You been acting funny ever since word got around that the Apache Kid was headed this way—and I know why, Haywood! *You're afraid something might turn up about your outlaw past!*"

Hy Culver's scowl changed to a malignant grin at the sudden tautness of Bill's face, the quick stiffening of the marshal's body. Bill had never had any use for the banker; if for no other reason than because Sue Donovan worked for him. The man was like a greedy buzzard when there was a nickel in sight for him to fasten his fingers on. But to have

Culver throw it up to him about his past was like lightning from a clear sky to Bill.

Culver pressed his advantage eagerly, stabbing a pudgy finger in Bill's direction. "Kinda hit home, didn't it?" he said. "Get in off the street, and into my office, Haywood! Got a little proposition to make you! It's about the Apache Kid—" And then, as the sound of drumming hoofbeats sounded close, the banker cast a scared look up the street; scuttled into his office without waiting for Bill's reply.

"Hell with you!" Bill muttered. But Culver's hint of a "proposition" had stirred a chill of apprehension in the marshal's mind that stuck with him, even after he'd turned to watch the Apache Kid and his riders come thundering down the street.

Thirty feet away, rearing his horse to a halt in a swirl of dust, the Apache Kid's guns were already in his hands. The outlaw's eyes widened in surprise that first instant. A lean, darkly dressed figure, he sat his saddle tense and straight as an arrow. And then he was lowering his guns, his face settling into that old, mocking smile that Bill Haywood recalled so well. This could have been another meeting, far in the fastness of lonely mountains with Bill facing the bunch across a campfire.

The Kid's surprise had gone from his eyes completely now, leaving them bold and penetrating. He said evenly, "Expectin' company, Bill?"

Bill Haywood let his breath out, nodded slowly. "Yeah, I was kinda, Kid," he said, his deep-set blue eyes bluntly tallying each outlaw. There sat big Jute Toller, with his bearded jaw sagging in astonishment. And Shorty. And Voss, the thin, scar-lipped killer. Yes, and Pantel the breed, swarthy and smiling as ever,

but deadly as a cobra. Of ten faces, Bill counted five he knew. He could feel the cold hostility in their glances. They'd hated him when he rode with the bunch; Jute and Voss and Pantel, especially. He could almost hear big Jute Toller growling: "You're a bad influence on the Kid, Bill! I got a bellyful hearin' you preach the evils of outlawry to him!"

And it was Jute Toller who recovered from surprise first and bel-lowed: "Bill Haywood turned law-man! Three years we don't hear a word, then we run across you totin' a law badge! How come?"

Looking at the Kid, Bill found himself saying, "You always was good at tricking lawmen—gettin' them out of the way when you wanted to go after some loot. But I don't understand how you worked it to get Sheriff Donovan off on a false scent. I don't savvy it at all."

"Mean to say you didn't send that note that hombre slipped us down in Palo Verde?" Wary suspicion leaped into that Apache Kid's eyes. "You jokin', Bill?"

"I never sent a note, any time! But I did wonder what had fetched you so far from the old stompin' grounds."

Pantel sneered. "Maybe Bill's smart like the fox, no? Maybe he trick us good and plenty, eh?"

"I told you we oughtn't put no trust in that note, Kid!" growled Jute Toller. "But you always was hell for takin' chances!"

Pantel laughed. "Si! Today we live—tomorrow we die! But it's fun being outlaw! We put paint on the town, eh, Keed?" Pantel had tried twice to put a knife in Bill Haywood's back.

"I was coming to that," Bill said. "Any paintin' you do, you'll do it with a blamed soft brush. I'm town marshal—savvy?"

"We ain't blind," the Apache Kid snapped. He added bluntly, "If you knowed we was headed this way, and *didn't* write that note, why the hell didn't you meet us with a blast of lead? That's our general reception from the law. Or is that law badge really on the level?"

Bill Haywood smiled faintly. "It's on the level all right, Kid," he said. "I couldn't see where ridin' with the bunch would get me anything but a hang rope—like I told you a hundred times. So I pulled my freight and put a lot of territory under my heels. Had this job a couple of months. I'm no bounty hunter—just wanted to warn you that Ridgepole hasn't anything to offer but about six feet of sod."

"There's a good, prosperous-look-in' bank," the Apache Kid said, staring hard at Hy Culver's bank across the street. In the Kid's bold blue eyes was the familiar taunting, reckless look that had always stirred quick anger in Bill Haywood. The Kid added: "Besides, I got to look up that hombre who promised me protection from the law if I'd do a job for him!"

Bill studied the Kid, his eyes flinty. There was no doubting the Kid's seriousness, both about the note and his interest in Culver's bank. And Sheriff Donovan *was* in the hills far to the north with a big posse, on a tip that he'd find the Apache Kid. Someone in Ridgepole had gotten rid of the lawman for a purpose! Why?

"You think I'm jokin'?" The Kid had fished a folded slip of paper from his pocket. "Here she is. It's unsigned, but it says:

"Dear Apache Kid, Have a proposition you'd be interested in. Come to Ridgepole, and I'll see Sheriff Donovan don't bother none."

"The hombre that handed it to me said a feller he didn't know paid him fifty dollars to deliver it! Minute I saw you, I figured *you'd* wrote it, Bill."

Haywood said abruptly, "Then it's a trick, Kid! Somebody's baited you into a trap! If you know what's good, you'll hit the grit—and hit it fast!"

But the Apache Kid's mouth was set stubbornly. He laughed; a cool, mocking laugh. Deadly with those guns he packed, the Kid was most dangerous when he laughed. Was he still thinking maybe Bill *had* written that note? Haywood wondered. The Kid's unwinking gaze didn't leave the lawman's face as Bill's glance traveled from one to the other of the outlaws fanned out before him. They were a motley, tough-looking lot. Jute Toller was glaring belliger-

ently, and Voss was sitting his horse motionless, his sphinx-faced, remote gaze fastened on the law badge over Bill Haywood's heart. Pantel was leaning forward a little in the saddle; his fixed smile revealing rows of perfectly white teeth. The smile went no further than the breed's lips, however. His eyes were squinted, deadly. They were weighing Haywood, warily waiting his next move.

Bill's glance completed the circle of renegade faces, and he reflected that he'd known the bunch would happen on him like this some day. He'd told them the plain, simple truth when he'd said he couldn't see where riding the dark trails was getting him any place; and one night he'd pulled stakes quietly. A few months back, after more than two years of aimless drifting, he'd wandered into Ridgepole to have this

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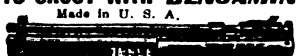
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marshal's job offered him. A slim, sweet-faced girl had helped him in deciding. She was Sue Donovan, Sheriff Donovan's daughter.

"We'll stick around and look things over, Bill," the Kid said. "It wouldn't be the first time we stepped into a tight spot, or tangled with somebody that wanted our scalps or—"

The Kid broke off abruptly. From the corner of his eye, Bill had seen the flicker of a calico dress across by the bank. The marshal's indrawn breath was audible—and it had swung the Kid's glance around. Sue Donovan was crossing the street toward them. From the way Sue walked, there was something pretty urgent on her mind.

Her grace and poise didn't escape the Apache Kid. The outlaw's eyes narrowed and he drove a quick glance at Bill Haywood, standing tense and uncomfortable there in the street.

"So that's the how of it?" murmured the Kid. "You told her anything—about us, I mean, Bill?"

Without looking at the Kid, Bill said, low-voiced: "It wouldn't make any difference with a girl like Sue Donovan. If she cared, she'd go the length of the earth for a man. We plan to get married, right soon now."

The Apache Kid laughed; softly, yet with that queer, strained tightness that now and then crept into

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his voice. He kept watching Sue Donovan with a faintly bitter down pull to his lips as she crossed toward them.

Pantel muttered something, and the breed's eyes glittered in a way that made Bill want to pull him from his saddle.

"Bill," Sue said, coming close, and looking hard at the bunch, "Bill, Mr. Culver's furious, insists he must see you over in the bank right away. Bill, he made a remark I didn't like—I mean, about what you *had* been. *I hate him!*"

Bill threw an angry glance at the bank, half-expecting to see Culver's beak of a face in the window. But the banker was lying low, it seemed.

The Kid had swept off his hat, his smile at Sue disarming. For all his reckless deviltry, there was a certain bold handsomeness to the Kid not apparent at first glance. Fate and bad company could play the devil with a man, Bill Haywood reflected ironically. He wasn't ignoring the powder keg he stood over, though. Sue's coming into the picture had complicated things.

"Anyway, ma'am," the Kid said, "you're wise in gettin' your marshal in off the street before one of my hardcases takes a notion to blow his ears apart. A dead man wouldn't be so good for a husband, I don't reckon."

Sue's eyes flashed. "I . . . I didn't mean it . . . that way!" she stammered, her cheeks coloring. "Bill doesn't have to run from anybody—"

"I'll go in and see Culver," Bill put in suddenly. "And Sue, guess you can fetch me a snack of supper here at the bank. Going to throw an extra guard around the place tonight."

He saw wariness leap again into the Apache Kid's eyes, saw his

guarded glance across the street to the bank. Already, the sun was setting, to throw long shadows across the way. The Kid's glance came back to Bill, and the outlaw exhaled a breath, very softly.

"You ain't bluffin' nobody, Bill," the Kid said. "Bet you couldn't scare up enough men in town to hold my bunch off five minutes! You might as well make up your mind we're going into that bank."

[T happened then, while the Apache Kid's words were still on his tongue—just the thing Bill Haywood had been afraid of. The scar-lipped Voss had remained motionless in his saddle without uttering a word the whole while, his eyes fastened on the badge over Bill Haywood's heart. That emblem of the law seemed to fascinate Voss, tempt his marksmanship. Without the slightest warning, the thin gunman suddenly whipped up his gun—and only the abrupt shying of his mount put the bullet over Haywood's shoulder, instead of into the marshal's heart! The crashing gun echoes rolling along the street muffled Sue Donovan's startled cry.

Bill Haywood seemed hardly to move at all, other than the slightest sagging of his shoulders, the blurring of his right hand. But the bellow and spurt of flame from his gun seemed to smash Voss backward in his saddle, and the thin outlaw's hands clawed aimlessly at the empty air as he lost his balance. Only the quick action of Pantel, just as Voss was toppling, saved the scar-lipped killer from hitting the dust.

With Voss righted in the saddle, pale and grimacing and gripping a bleeding shoulder, the outlaws held motionless, very careful to make no more sudden moves. Bill's Colt, steady as a rock, covered them.

"Haven't changed your stripes a bit, have you, Voss? You and Jute and Pantel," Haywood bit out at them. "Well, now you've had your fun, crate your hardware and move your carcasses. I'm not foolin', Kid. The town won't hold all of us!"

Faint color crossed the Apache Kid's face, to give way to taut paleness. "Ten against one," he said, "and we get caught cold-turkey. I'll be damned! Well—" The Kid shrugged, forced a laugh. "Guess you hold aces, hombre! But could we stop at the saloon to fix Voss up and maybe get a drink?"

"Sure," Bill said quietly. A good gambler knew that sometimes not to force a play kept his luck running smoother. So the marshal added: "I'll give you till sundown—no longer."

The Kid inclined his head. Staring at the marshal's leveled gun, his lips shaped that mocking, reckless grin. "Thanks," he said, and into his eyes crept a strange glint. "I think we can wind 'er up by then, eh, fellers?"

A couple of the outlaws grunted assent; the rest kept sullenly silent. Touching spurs to his mount, the Kid started to lead the way down the street, without turning around to look at Bill. Most of the bunch were past when Pantel, grinning, slapped his mount hard with his quirt, making the animal swing and rear almost in Bill Haywood's face. The marshal's quick leap saved him from pawing, deadly hoofs. Then the bunch was by, the breed looking back, still with swarthy lips pulled away from his teeth in a silent, wolfish grin.

For just an instant Bill was tempted to take a shot at Pantel, but instead he slowly lowered his gun and watched them pass on down the street, dismount, and file into the

nearest saloon, a couple of the outlaws carrying Voss.

Sue Donovan had to shake Bill's arm to rid him of his thoughts.

"Bill! Bill, what's come over you? You've been so . . . so grim since dad and his posse left town. Dad might show up, you know—"

He turned on her, almost roughly. "Sheriff Donovan took supplies to be gone two weeks if necessary. It's hardly likely he'd turn up unless somebody got word to him!" His manner softened suddenly and he added: "I'm sorry, Sue. Guess seeing the Apache Kid kinda rattled me."

"This might be a chance to trap him in the saloon."

Bill shook his head grimly. "I'm here to run the town—not collect bounties! I'll leave that to Sheriff Donovan's head-hunters."

"Bill!" Her hazel eyes regarded him with reproach. "Dad's not that sort—and you know it! How about *your* law badge? Would you turn that down?"

"I'm not turning it down," he argued doggedly. "It's just— Well, it's just that this thing's too big for me to handle maybe."

"You stood alone here in the street and met the bunch, when you could have arranged an ambush for them at the Bluffs! Why *didn't* you, Bill?" Her hazel eyes searched his face closely. "One of them just proved they'd not give *you* a fighting chance! It's something else; what is it, Bill?"

He took a long, deep breath. "Sue," he said slowly, "I told you, when I asked you to marry me, that I'd had a past—beyond the law. Well, it was before the Apache Kid had gotten notorious, but I rode with the same bunch. I . . . I thought I was justified then, but now I—"

"Haywood! Haywood!" It was Hy Culver, his pushed-together face and ungainly figure thrust out of the bank doorway. "Sue, you go on home and let me talk with that hard-headed lawman! Come in here, Haywood!"

"Bill, I—" Sue's small hand pressed against her throat. She added, in a tense whisper; "Bill, don't trust that man! *I hate him!*"

"That's only half of it," Bill replied grimly. He caught her firmly by the shoulders. "Sue, it'll all work out. Now hustle me up something to eat while I go in and have it out with Culver! And Sue, faith is about the mightiest weapon a woman can hand a man."

Abruptly, without saying more, Bill Haywood turned and strode across into the bank. Sue Donovan hurried up the street, remembering the heaviness of his tread, the tautness of his face; and she angrily brushed a tear from her cheek.

Hy Culver had waddled back inside and was waiting for Bill in his small private office much as a spider waits for a fly. The banker's vulturelike face was flushed, his hooded eyes fastening on Bill with ruthless purpose. Culver got to the point at once.

"Haywood, I can ruin you!" the banker stated flatly. "I happened to overhear the Donovan girl telling that stiff-shirted lawman dad of hers about you once. And I found out later that you'd been an outlaw down Arizona way! If I was first against your being made marshal, it was because I figured you'd be a stiff neck like Donovan. I can use a smart man who can keep his mouth shut—a man with a past like yours! If you want to play a game that's got big stakes in it, I can forget about that outlaw business!"

Bill's face was gray, but there was no sign of weakening in his set jaw.

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"That incident's closed," he said. "I was a fool, thinkin' I was doing an outlaw bunch a favor by holdin' in their lust for deviltry. I was wrong. The only man I ever killed was in self-defense."

A shadow of disappointment crossed Culver's face, then quickly faded, and avarice brightened his eyes once more. "But think what we could do, with you working inside the law, Haywood. I hired the Donovan girl just to keep a line on her dad, and it's paid me big. With your help, men with mortgages I hold could—ah, be legally removed. Why, I've got sixty thousand dollars of depositors' money in the hollow of my hand! Think of it, man!"

Greedily, Culver warmed up to his subject, mistaking Bill's silence for interest in his scheme.

"Here would be your first job, Haywood: I hired a fellow to take word for me to the Apache Kid to lure him up here, then arranged a fake message to get Sheriff Donovan out of the way! There's a fat reward on the head of every man in the Apache Kid's bunch amounting to around ten thousand dollars! Why should we let that damned Donovan collect it, when all we've got to do is set a little trap of our own to catch the Kid and his gang right here in the bank! You and Donovan ain't too thick, and I've got it all figured—"

"Culver, you're a sneakin', filthy rat!" The words burst from Bill Haywood explosively, the sudden fierceness of his wrath making the banker draw back in fear. "Hell with your dirty scheme. Even outlaws have got honor—but you wouldn't understand that! I'll tip off the Apache Kid an'—"

"Hold on there, Haywood! You'll take your medicine if you do—and you'll lose the Donovan girl besides! And don't get the idea it would do you any good to repeat what I've

said. People would only laugh; and it *might* start 'em asking embarrassin' questions. They'd remember how you'd come here a stranger and got to hangin' around the Donovan girl; how her dad's influence got you the job; and how you seem plenty handy with your guns! No, you won't hurt *me*, Haywood. But I can put an awful crimp in you!"

Culver laughed gratingly and made a motion that included his office and the outer part of the bank. "I can catch the Apache Kid myself, if I have to! Haywood, under the floor of this bank there's enough dynamite powder to blow up twenty outlaws—had it fixed quite a while! All I've got to do is get the Kid and his crowd inside—which oughtn't to be hard when it gets dark—then lay in wait and set the stuff off! As for you, keep out of my way and don't bungle my plans, or I'll give you some of *this*!" Before Haywood had any suspicion of Culver's intentions, the banker's hand had slid beneath his coat and reappeared with a black, snub-nosed pistol!

Bill made a start for his holster, then stopped as he read danger in Culver's eyes. Thinking of the dynamite Culver had planted under the bank made the marshal's knees feel weak.

Suddenly Culver stuck out a stubby finger to point behind Bill.

"Look who's coming through the door!"

Haywood turned his head. There was no one at the door! Icy premonition sent a chill warning up the marshal's spine. He turned, lashing out at Culver's leering face with one hand, stabbing for the banker's gun with the other. Too late. The last thing he remembered was a shower of sparks and pain, as Hy Culver's gun barrel cracked against his temple.

BILL awoke with a splitting head, the startling realization that it was dark, and the sudden bitter knowledge that his hands were helplessly bound before him and gagged, and lying on his face in Culver's small private office. This he could tell by the moonlight from the little window above his head. The outer office was dark, ominously silent. But even as Bill lay there, bitterly cursing his luck, he heard a door creak stealthily. Shuffling footsteps sounded. A match flared and Culver's face appeared suddenly in the doorway.

Culver bent down, the match cupped in his hands. "Awake, eh? No matter. In a little while you won't ever know what happened. Things are working out fine. I spread word around that you got cold feet, hightailed; so the Apache Kid's bunch is eying the bank. It'll only be a little while now, and then—"

Bill Haywood struggled futilely against his bonds, his muffled breathing against the dirty gag in his mouth fetching a cackle from Culver. The match flickered out, and he could hear the banker stirring.

"Gave you a chance, Haywood," Culver grunted. "All I got to do now is wait for the flies to come to the sugar—then trap 'em! The Kid's wary an' suspicious of our absence all right, but the bunch have enough liquor under their belts to be reckless. And that big outlaw called Jute has ideas about leading them. I've already emptied the bank vault—so when I blow the place up, people will think that some of the Apache Kid's bunch got away with the money! I'll have a fortune, money to burn! You hear that, Haywood? Money to burn."

Bill saw it clearly now; someone to pin a robbery on was what Culver

had had in mind all the time! The reward money was only secondary.

Chuckling, Culver shuffled out of the little office, and Bill could hear him moving around for a moment in the outer room. The marshal listened as the footsteps retreated, fell away to grim, heavy silence.

But only for a moment. Suddenly he sensed, rather than heard, the slight stirring movement in the outer office. Soft, guarded footsteps were moving toward him again. Someone else was in the bank!

"Bill!" His name was breathed in a soft whisper. And then Sue Donovan was at his side, clinging to him desperately, softly sobbing.

"Bill! Oh, Bill. I've been terrified! Until I heard Culver talking to you just now, I didn't even know if you were alive! When I came with your supper at dusk, he told me you'd left and cursed you for walking out on him. But I knew something was wrong. *I just knew it!* After dark I crept back and found him emptying the bank's vault. I . . . I managed to slip inside as he made a trip out. It seems like hours that I've lain behind one of these filing cabinets over there, not daring to move or breathe!"

She removed the gag from his mouth, and he whispered tersely: "My knife—in my pocket, Sue! No time to lose!"

Sweat poured from Bill's face as she worked with his bonds. And then another sound sent a chill through his blood. The muffled *plod-plod* of horses being guardedly led outside along the rear of the bank! A heavy instrument bumped against the back door, hinges creaked.

Free at last, Bill flexed his muscles and caught Sue's arm. "We don't dare make a sound. One move

might make Culver set off that fuse and blow us to bits!"

The bank's rear door gave suddenly with a rending sound. A crowbar thudded to the ground outside, then Jute Toller's deep voice growled: "There she is fellers! Let's go!"

Dark figures surged through the opening that had been a door. Jute growled something, and Pantel laughed. But the Kid— Where was the Apache Kid? Knifed in the back by Pantel?

They were crossing the bank now. A lantern flared, Jute and Pantel shading it with their hatbrims. Light, slanting on their faces, gave them the tense, predatory look of stealthy, crouching wolves. Hell was going to pop in a moment when they found that looted vault. Bill knew it but he didn't dare cry out, or Culver would touch fire to his fuse. Perhaps it was already sputtering its deadly way toward that charge under the floor!

The thought goaded Bill. The only way out was that small window above him and Sue. He had to make it, get through, get outside to Culver! Standing on Culver's private desk, he fumbled in the dark and found he could just reach the catch. Suddenly Sue was gripping his arm, pressing something into his hand.

"Here. It's dad's gun! Culver has another in his desk."

With fear gnawing at his stomach, Bill lifted his weight to the window's small opening, cautiously squirmed his legs through. It was a tight squeeze and for a moment his heart stood still as he hesitated, balanced half in, half out, listening to see if those in the outer office would hear him and take alarm. But Jute Toller and the breed were too greedily intent on getting their hands on gold to notice anything else. In a mo-

ment they'd find that battered vault door and—

A sudden, explosive curse told Bill that they'd found it; but Haywood was already dropping to the ground. A crouched figure at the far end of the building caught his eye—a figure bent intently to some sinister, deadly task!

Hatless, cold fear clutching his heart with concern for Sue, Bill started running just as Culver, with a startled grunt, struck a match. Fire sputtered in the darkness as the fuse took hold! The banker came up, throwing a shot that fanned Bill's face. Then Bill was on his man, tearing wildly at that deadly thread of fire hissing through the darkness. The marshal's fingers found the cordlike thing, gave a desperate tug. The fuse pulled free of the powder, and Culver cursed madly as he fired again.

Bill's lunging bulk hit the man, swept him off his feet and they rolled in the darkness; grunting, clawing, striking. The banker's strength was amazing. Suddenly he wrenched himself free, staggered to his feet, and dashed alongside the wall of the bank building. And in that same moment, Jute Toller and his crowd took the notion to come out through the wrecked door to investigate the commotion! They appeared there abruptly, like grim, dark ghosts, and Culver didn't see them because he was running with his head turned to look at Bill Haywood.

"I'll kill you, Haywood!" the banker was snarling. "Kill you—" Then he rammed into the outlaws, gave a startled yell. "Kill Haywood!" he suddenly whimpered, recognizing Jute. "And I'll show you where the bank gold is! Kill Haywood—"

"Good idee!" barked Jute, and guns suddenly opened up on the marshal from the back doorway. Min-

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gled with gunfire came Culver's gibbering laugh and Pantel's low, vicious chuckle.

Crouched low, Bill found Sheriff Donovan's gun that Sue had shoved into his holster. As bullets seared the air around him, he coolly spaced a shot, danced aside, spaced another. A pained yell told him that each bullet had taken effect. From the high window through which Bill had escaped, another gun suddenly opened up. Sue Donovan had piled a stool on the desk and was shooting through the open window! Then another figure came running around the corner of the bank nearest Bill.

"Bill!" It was the Apache Kid's voice. "Bill, give it to the double-crossin' coyotes! Jute and Pantel tried to nail my hide . . . ugh!" The Kid staggered, then came weaving on to Bill's side, both guns hammering in unison with the marshal's! Bill used that moment, while the Kid's guns were protecting him, to reload his own hot weapon.

Somehow, it all struck Bill as crazy—an outlaw siding a marshal, and a banker siding a cutthroat gang of killers. He could see Culver's shifting figure now and then, urging on the men that a moment ago he would have blown to bits for bounty! Now the banker was bent on wrecking his vengeance on the man who had snipped his ruthless scheme; spoiled his dream of wealth and crooked empire!

Pantel was almost upon Bill and the Kid when Bill's bullet smashed into the breed's swarthy face. And Jute— Jute was coming at them with guns blazing, hat gone, hair blown back like a wild man, deadly hate in his eyes. The big outlaw was hardly a rod away when Bill's gun finally stretched him flat on his face. Culver was still dodging and shooting—and when the Kid's bullet found him, Culver's wailing scream trailed out long into the darkness, fell away to lingering silence.

The fight was over!

Both wounded, Bill and the Apache Kid found themselves staggering along with Sue's help, trying to dodge the crowd of curious that was gathering. And then, suddenly, it was just Bill and Sue walking quietly together. At an alley the Kid had pulled away, flashed them a smile, and his *adios* was floating back to them in the dark. A moment later they could hear his horse's hoofs drumming out across town toward open country, carrying the wounded Kid toward some faraway mountain hide-out where he could rest and allow his injuries to heal.

Sue's hand stole up to caress Bill's cheek. "It's funny!" she said, her

voice soft and husky. "He . . . he couldn't really have been so bad! I've heard so many stories about the Apache Kid. But I think he's rather nice!"

Bill's nod was preoccupied. He was staring after the Kid, and he stood there and listened until the sound of the Kid's horse had drifted away in the distance. And then Bill smiled and swallowed hard to push back the great, throbbing lump which had risen in his throat. Some day, he'd get around to telling Sue that the Apache Kid had had another name. He'd explain to her that the Apache Kid's real name was Don Haywood, Bill Haywood's brother.

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

Continued from page 27

1. Longhorns were tough, adapting themselves to climate and environment without the care of their owners. Shorthorns were expensive pure-breds that required much care and patience before herds of them could be established.
2. Each night before turning in, they pointed the tongue of the chuck wagon at the North Star. In the morning when the drive was resumed, the position of the wagon tongue gave them their bearings.
3. They chewed the stalks of prickly pear and other cactuses, thereby obtaining considerable water and stimulating the flow of digestive juices.
4. In the 1870s, when shallow wells were dug and crude windmills erected over them. The flow of water thus obtained proved that sheets of water are hidden below the surface of dry rangeland at a depth which is easily reached by pump lines.
5. In 1893, when the government announced that it had no more free land to give to homesteaders.
6. In 1884, when two carloads of buffalo hides were shipped East from Dickenson, North Dakota.
7. Because they brought the dreaded Texas or Spanish fever, which was fatal to Northern cattle although Texas cattle were immune from it.
8. By ticks which dropped off Texas cattle on the trail, then crawled up on Northern cattle using the same trail. Today these ticks are killed by bathing cattle in a strong chemical dip.
9. Cowboys on a trail drive likened hot, dry, waterless trails to the infernal regions. "High water" was the flood stream of a river through which they might have to swim the herd.
10. One hundred and fifty to two hundred.



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 Weekly, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



CRIES FOR THE CORNER

DEAR EDITOR: I read the note from Ward M. Stevens, Jr., in a July issue of your magazine. I'll agree with young Stevens on every point. Bring back the Wranglers Corner! I'm a million votes for it. All my friends think it was one of the best departments ever published in any magazine. I hope you other readers of Wild West Weekly will send in your votes; it's otherwise a fine magazine. Let's all get in a huddle and bring back the Corner. How about it, readers?

Give us some more stories by Ward M. Stevens, C. William Harrison, William A. Todd, and Ed Earl Repp. Adios!
Lancaster, Ky. DEWAR STEPHENS.

Nice to know that Stevens and Stephens like the works of Stevens! True patriotism, that's wot it is! We're thinking it over about bringing back the Corner.



OLD FAVORS NEW

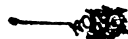
DEAR RANCE BOSS: I have been a reader of 3W for about twelve years. I am eighty years old, and most of my old friends have passed on. So must many of our best-liked story favorites pass on.

My favorites are the Circle J pards, Shorty Masters and his mule sextet—but I like all the others, too, and I think that the new authors have a right to present a good story as well as the old authors.

Yours as long as I have the price of a year's subscription.
ROSE BARTLOW.

Des Moines, Iowa.

Much obliged, ma'am. And I'd like to state that such a tolerant and liberal attitude is unusual in a lady of your years. May you have many more contented ones!



STANCHLY FOR STRATTON

DEAR EDITOR: I have been a reader of 3W for about four years and have watched with interest your Readers' Branding Irons department. I've never written you a letter, although I've taken a keen interest lately—after seeing someone call Johnny Forty-five a "dried-up character," and poor Bob Stratton about to be ambushed over it. And when someone asks "Can Stratton swim?" I say yes, he can—and come out honorably, at that. It was very humiliating to have my favorite character, Johnny Forty-five, called such a disgusting name.

Apart from Johnny, my favorites are King Kolt, Border Eagle, Tommy Rockford, Señor Red Mask, and the Circle J pards. In fact, I like all these so much that when I see none of them is in a particular issue of the 3W, I merely pass on by. But, Boss, when I do see one of my favorites on the cover or in the table of contents, I buy the issue and would buy it if I almost had to steal the dime to do it!

I just couldn't put off writing any longer when I saw poor Bob Stratton about to go down to defeat because he wanted to see Johnny Forty-five appear more often. I think the 3W is losing out badly because of the absence of some of the favorite characters whom I've mentioned above. I do like Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf.

Anyway, here's hoping that Señor Stratton will hold out a little longer, because I think he will come out on top after all. But the old noose is about to strangle me. I can't hold out much longer. If Tommy Rockford and

Johnny Forty-five don't appear pretty soon, I am going to be suffocated to death by these new serials and stories.

So, with malice toward none, with a weakness for old characters, and with charity for Señor Stratton, I remain, yours truly,
Barterville, Ky. B. M. DOTSON.

Waal, now, stranger, we haven't run a serial for months. As for Tommy Rockford, he's in this hyar very issue. As for Johnny Forty-five, he'll be starred in a long lead story in a forthcoming issue—so you and Stratton have won a big part of a victory, don't you think? Rockford, as a matter of fact, has been appearing regularly for more than a year. Where've you been all that time, huh?

Some of the other old favorites will return to these pages within the next few months, also. As I've stated repeatedly, some authors have retired or died, and their characters necessarily retired with 'em. We can't do anything about that, can we? Could you do anything about it? Nope. So we've introduced a few new characters in the past several years—and some of them have been highly popular. I'll bet you'd like some of the new ones, too, if you'd approach 'em with an open mind. Remember that all those old favorite characters of yours were new characters once, likewise—and they had to overcome the prejudice of their newness when first introduced.

We editor gaboots are sincerely doing our dangedest to please the majority of our readers. We'd have to be inhuman geniuses to please you all one hundred percent, though! No magazine ever can manage to do that.

BELLIGERENT SUPPORTERS?

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just read Wallace Boothby's letter in the September 6th issue. I have the following comments to make:

1. Boothby should read Bob Stratton's letters more carefully. Behind them he will discover a staunch supporter of Wild West Weekly. True, Bob's letters are downright belligerent at times, but it's fellas such as Stratton and Benny Schoen, and a few others, who really support the magazine. Bob's letters are written as they are to add a little color to the usual stuff readers send in. He's entitled to his opinions, just as I am entitled to have mine.

2. Boothby should read Street & Smith's *Love Story* magazine exclusively. Well, here's some more of my pet theories:

Why don't you print only letters which offer constructive criticism and unusual news, instead of the usual letters, which run something like this:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Your magazine is swell. My favorite characters are So-and-so, So-and-so, So-and-so, and So-and-so.

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Now, who's interested in that? But, still, we've got to admit that letters from the readers are vital, no matter what their content.

Also, readers who send you letters should include their mailing addresses, so anyone who wants to cuss 'em out can do it personally instead of via the magazine. Personal battles don't interest most readers. (I hope this sinks in!)

And, in closing, I wish you'd leave out all girls. Maybe one in five hundred stories is O. K. But no more. And never, never have a girl on the cover! It will ruin the magazine completely. It's almost ruined anyway, with all those new authors.

3W is just the magazine, that's all. No other can compare even remotely with it. Swell work, and thanks for reading this thing.

San Francisco, Cal. J. P. G. POWERS.

Waal, pard, the way I take it is that you hate us but like us—and more power to you, Señor Powers! It's a neat feat, and I admire you a heap for being able to manage it. I don't reckon there'll be any gals on the cover, so breathe easy.



SAYS WE'RE GETTING BETTER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: It has been more than fifteen years since I first saw *Western Story* and *Wild West Weekly* on our newsstands, and since then I have read hundreds of fine stories in your magazines. And I believe the Western stories are getting better since your magazines have gone in for characterization and some historical background in the serials. Incidentally, I like serials very much.

I was glad to see in this week's *Wild West Weekly* that you're figuring on returning the Wranglers Corner if enough readers are interested. That's the democratic way, boss. Most editors don't give the readers much chance to say what goes into the magazine.

My vote says: Put the Wranglers Corner in again.

Let's have it just as it was before, with true experiences, fiction, poetry, the five-hundred-word limit, and your own helpful comment at the end of each fiction piece.

In the few stories of mine you published in the Corner you pointed out mistakes I never would have discovered if left to myself. I know you helped others as much. The Wranglers Corner is a mighty fine training ground. I'm sure some of today's wranglers, maybe not many, but some, will some day ride the main 3W range.

Most magazines use their Editor-chats-with-readers' space in gassing about the big, established writers they have lined up. *Wild West Weekly* is the only magazine I have read (and I've read most of them) that offered definite help and encouragement to the men and women pushing along behind who will have to fill the saddles when today's top hands are all stove up and can't work any longer.

Sincerely,

Snyder, Texas.

LESLIE KELLEY.



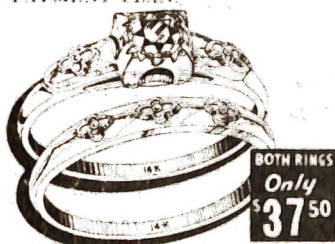
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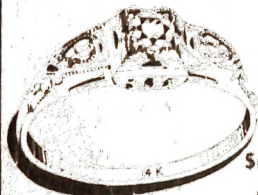
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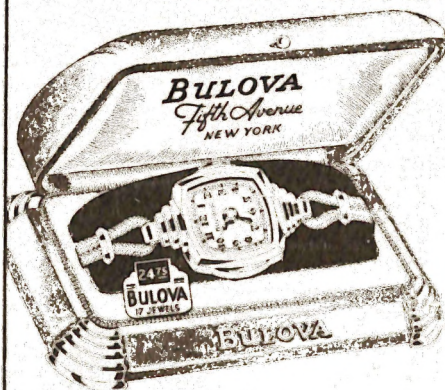
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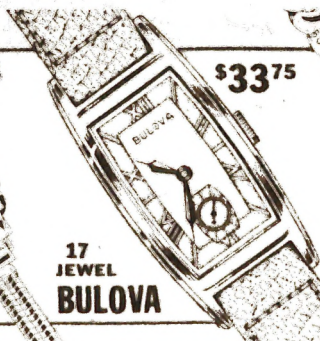
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