

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

DEC. 23, '39

10¢

WEEKLY

DECEMBER
23, 1939



CHRISTMAS SIX-GUNS

A "CIRCLE J" NOVELETTE By CLEVE ENDICOTT



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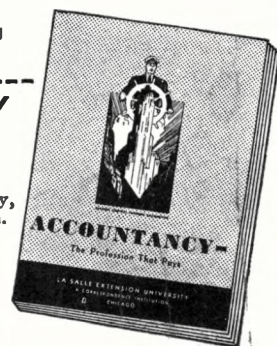
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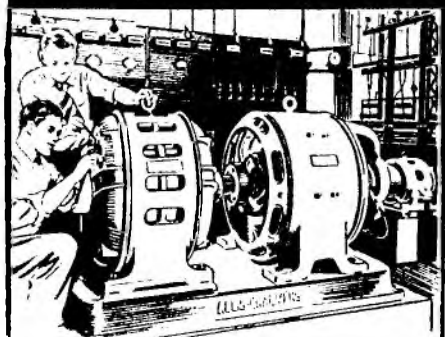
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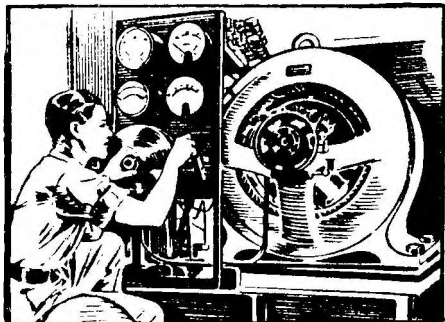
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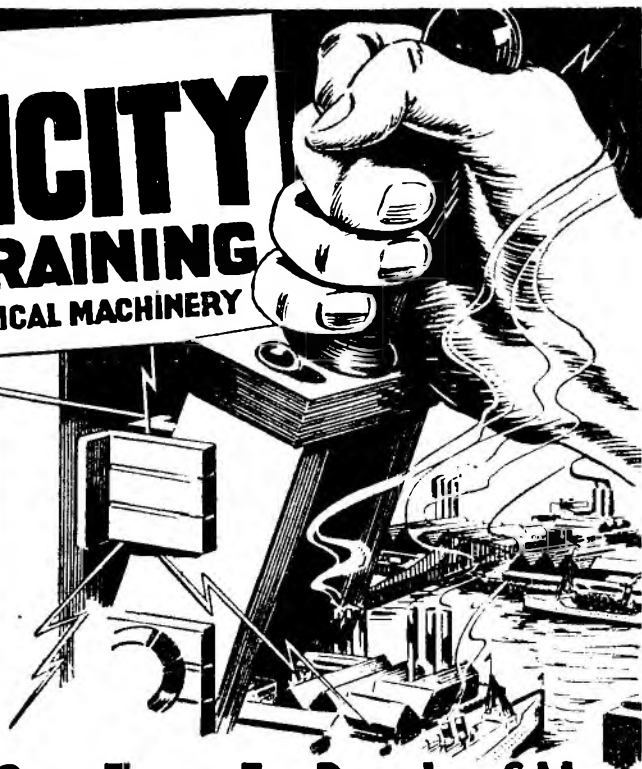
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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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COVER BY ROBERT STANLEY

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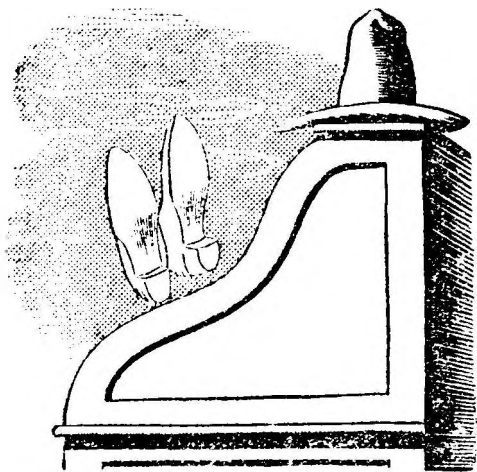


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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

About the time you get ahold of this issue, old Kriss Kringle will be ridin' down yore chimney on a strawberry-roan reindeer. Hope he leaves you a heap of pleasant memories, among other things. In this season of the year even plumb ornery galls sometimes change their ways and side along with Kriss. It's a time when we're supposed to think more about givin', and tryin' to make other citizens feel good, than we do about receivin'. I've seen some coyotelike humans change their ways for a spell at this part of the year. Too bad we all can't feel the spirit all the year around. Be a better world to live in if we could.

We kinda rate this number of Wild West Weekly a Christmas package in itself. But where most packages are labeled "Do not Open Until December 25th," we figure you won't want to wait that long to open this one. For one thing, it ain't glued shut—and you know how

people are about peekin' into Christmas packages.

As I stated last week, we found a special kind of yarn in our sock for this holiday and you won't mind unravelin' it with yore eyes. I didn't mind, at any rate. Here's a note from the author, who's a newcomer to the 3W range:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: About me, as requested:—Born Edgemont, South Dakota, probably in the lee of a sagebrush since there weren't many protective barbed-wire fences around Edgemont in 1897. Earliest recollection: Gran'pa's corrals—eight feet high, with the bottom pole knocked off ever' second panel. This was to leave space for the boys to roll out under the fence in a hurry when such procedure seemed indicated. Gran'pa crossed wiry Texas mares with expensive Hambletonian and Humboldt studs, raising top cow horses with a liberal sprinkling of fields incarnate; some of the boys got to be regular tumbling artists at that rolling act, as I remember it. My dad was killed when a stampeding horse, which considered itself irresistible, met with a practically immovable five-wire fence. They say he was considerably mussed up—I was too young to be let see or know much at the time.

Knocked around over a good deal of the Northwestern outlands, following free grass. As far north as Medicine Hat, south into Utah; farthest east: Omaha, Nebraska (with livestock shipments.) Earned my living in the saddle during most of my working years, both as a wage slave and on my own hook. Made and lost a couple of fair-sized stakes in the stock business.

Present ambition: to write about Westerners I have known. Not so much the professional rowdy or glory-hunter—he done got his name in the papers aplenty—but about the ordinary man who backed away at his little corner without complaint or braggadocio, avoiding trouble so far as possible yet meeting and coping unflinchingly with whatever came up in the course of his day's work. Men who—whether good or bad—chewed away at whatever hunk they bit off, until they swallowed it or strangled on it.

Sincerely,

MARK LISH.

And a good ambition it is, Señor Lish. The quiet hombres were the

ones who did most of the actual hard work of building the West. This fact is sometimes lost to sight in all the whoopin' about the fast gunmen, the colorful lawmen and the owl-hooters. Of course, in a magazine it's necessary to concentrate on the more spectacular and unusual characters.

We're starting a new and better picture story in this issue. The main character wears the handle of Omaha Hooker, and he meets with some right interesting adventures along the old Oregon Trail. Here are a few words from the gent who writes the tale:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: When I got together with the artist, Mr. Timmins, we talked it over and decided to create a hero somewhat different from Bronc Evans. We finally decided that a young man who combined the best qualities of the early pioneers was what we needed. Those people who covered the old trail to Oregon were some of the hardest and stanchest this great nation ever has seen. And, needless to say, a great many exciting things happened to them.

Bill Timmins is a good man to work with. He knows the West and is enthusiastic about its history. Hope you and your readers like Omaha Hooker. His character and adventures are rooted in composite facts.

Sincerely,

WARREN E. CARLETON.

Spent five years up in Oregon when I was in my late teens and early twenties—and I want to say that those pioneers didn't suffer hardship in vain when they ended up in that country of beautiful blue-green hills, wild roaring rivers, and fertile land. Oregon's a State which deserves a heap more publicity than it's ever gotten. There are still a

good many cattle ranches there, in the western half—and there are said to be more wild horses running loose in Oregon than in any other part of America. Thousands upon thousands of 'em.

We're continuing with the holiday spirit in next week's number. Two seasonal stories written especially for us. First off is the complete novel, "White Wolf's Six-Gun New Year," and it stars one of your top favorites. Jim-twin Allen, better known by his pale lobo moniker, gets into his roughest mixup so far and the surprise payoff doesn't come until the fresh year is lopin' in. "Pete Trades the Old Year Out" is a snappy short story that'll take yore eye. As if that isn't a good beginning, we introduce a new writer, Fredric Sinclair. His novelette, "One Pronto Pilgrim," will make you smile plumb deep down between the ribs; and besides its humor it has salty characters and drama. One of our best finds in a good many years. Read it and I bet you won't call me a liar.

There are other stories, a generous portion of Señor Tompkins' fine novel and all the usual features. Looks like a good omen for next year, endin' *this* one with that kind of issue.

Well, here I am at the end of my space. Seems time I said—

Now, what's that phrase? Hm-m-m. Lemme see. (Time out while I scratch my head.) Seems I've heard it. Hm-m-m-m.

Oh, yes. Shore. I remember:

Merry Christmas, all you gals and galoots! *Alegre Navidad!*

THE RANGE BOSS.

BLOCK



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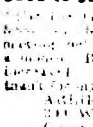
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The AVENGER

10 CENTS—EVERYWHERE



DEACON WILDCAT

by MARK LISH

DEACON WILDCAT

**He was a strange-talking man whose bullets
laughed as they crisscrossed the corners of hell.**

By Mark Lish

CHAPTER I.

BOB MAGUIRE stood for a moment just inside the Buffalo Saloon, letting his eyes grow accustomed to glaring lights after the outer darkness. A big man in Eastern garb at the long bar's near end stared frankly, grinning a little as he shifted his perfecto to avoid its trailing smoke. For Bob Maguire was a foot longer than a rope, and of much the rope's general build. His slim feet were incased in fancy handmade boots that looked scarcely longer than his arched, meandering nose, and a handsome Stetson curled the tops of flaring wings that sprouted from the neighborhood of his eardrums. But between hat and boots were tatters that lent nothing to the beanpole figure, covering it only by grace of a windless atmosphere, much after the fashion of warped and broken shingles.

Keen gray eyes met the big man's slightly prominent blue ones, dropping briefly to admire great muscular shoulders and a shirt-filling chest. Hearty good feeling banished ugliness as the big mouth curled its corners upward to match a sparkle in the gray eyes, and the Easterner's arrogant grin altered itself into a responding smile, friendlier than Plumas had yet seen on the smooth features.

Down the busy room a cowboy half rose from a poker table and

boomed joyous greeting: "Well, Bob Maguire—in person with all his inches and feets and yards. Circle C gone tame on ya, Bob?"

"I got the buck 'n' bawl took outta their rough string, all except old Cannibal Tom, so I just traded for him and come away," the newcomer explained, and unhandsome features disappeared altogether behind a glory of sound. Nature, mistress of the law of compensation, had given this ugly man a voice to tempt the envy of angels. Rich and full-toned and smooth, it fell across the raucous barroom noises like a shaft of melody. Adding some inquiry as to the other's health and latest cussedness, its owner made his way toward the poker table. The Easterner turned a questioning eye upon the bartender.

"Sometimes referred to as Wildcat Maguire," the aproned one vouchsafed. "On account of he's roped a couple, and account of the way he acts in a scrap or any kinda jackpot. Sings like an angel and laughs at the devil."

"Wonderful voice he has," the other agreed, "and that smile might please even the devil."

"The smile and the voice are not all he's got," the bartender enlarged sociably. "He's got a philosophy of life and the heart to carry it through, Bob Maguire has."

"Philosophy of life?" The Easterner hid a grin, wondering if the

other's definition of the phrase would equal in flavor his original pronunciation.

"Describe it," he requested expectantly.

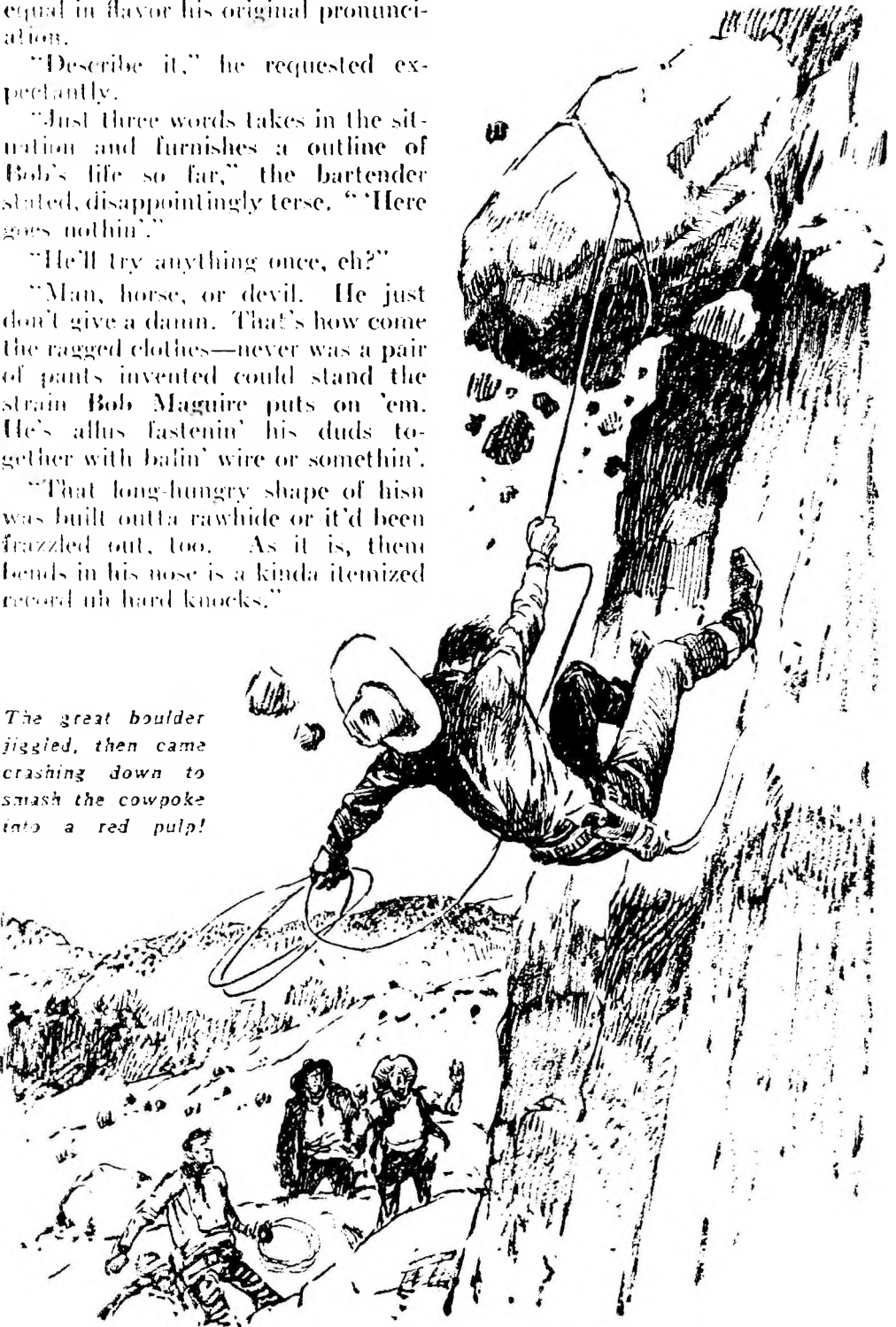
"Just three words takes in the situation and furnishes a outline of Bob's life so far," the bartender stated, disappointingly terse. "'Here goes nothin'."

"He'll try anything once, eh?"

"Man, horse, or devil. He just don't give a damn. That's how come the ragged clothes—never was a pair of pants invented could stand the strain Bob Maguire puts on 'em. He's allus fastenin' his duds together with balin' wire or somethin'.

"That long-hungry shape of hisn was built outta rawhide or it'd been frazzled out, too. As it is, them bends in his nose is a kinda itemized record uh hard knocks."

The great boulder jiggled, then came crashing down to smash the cowpoke into a red pulp!



The big man's eyes narrowed and he regarded their subject with a new and appreciative interest. He knew something of cowboys, of their utter recklessness as a class. A man like this, who stood out even among his fellows, might be worth considering as a possible factor in any game that was played for keeps.

"With a disposition like that, pretty features would have gone to waste all battered and bent," he commented absently, and for the third time that evening tried to draw the other on an excursion into local biography. "Has he ever been tangled up with either side of the law? Served time or sported a star?"

The bartender puckered severe eyebrows. "Not that I know of," he answered curtly, and turned away to polish an imaginary speck on the backbar mirror. Casual discussion was all very well, said eloquent shoulders, but this repeated delving into personal matters was something else again, and not to be encouraged or tolerated. Properly rebuked, the Easterner sauntered nearer the tables and fell to watching the stud-poker game over his shortening cigar.

Bob Maguire gathered the cards and made light conversation as he shuffled them. "Where's our sheriff tonight, with his bright and shining star?" he inquired of Lige Rucker, the cowboy who had greeted him.

"Ain't you heard? Our sheriff rode away nearly a week ago and just didn't ride back. Left no word of rhyme or reason, and nobody can guess why nor where." Rucker's fingers were busy cutting the cards and his tone casual enough. Yet Maguire, knowing him well, sensed a hidden tension.

"The mystery of the missing sheriff, huh? Mebbe he's selling shented she-shells by the silvery she-sore," he commented as he dealt hole cards

'round the table. "How come everybody's so worried about it?"

Rucker shrugged, his next words carrying a faint note of resentment. "No sourcasm, please. We've done what worryin' seemed necessary and in order. Our sheriff, he's a growed-up man and real apt to resent apron strings. No bad actors in the country, far as known, and no saddled horse has turned up to indicate a cripple in the hills. It may be that a new widow has moved in some place.

"Georgie Bent, yonder at the bar; he presumes to attend our morals for the present—and to look very wise and crafty when questioned about the sheriff." Casual derision was noticeable in the jerky nod Lige directed toward the deputy who leaned at the bar with another man, a stranger with one scarred cheek.

"A man of standing would feel put out at having nobody but Georgie on hand to arrest him," Bob Maguire mused as he peered under his hole card, the eight of diamonds. "His record as a hazer is against him, and Johnny Tyner's twisted leg—

"I'll stay to see another card."

"I seen that circumstance take place, and see it clear again every time I notice Johnny Tyner limping to his horse," said Lige Rucker for the benefit of others at the table, yet in tones plainly to be heard by the deputy at the bar. "A good man in that spot could have hazed Johnny's brone into the open and saved him piling up in them rocks. But Georgie was the only one in reach, and he had in mind the fifty-fifty chance of getting his horse knocked down. Pulled up and let Johnny's crazy brute go bucking by. This ace in sight is worth a pair of red ones."

Maguire flicked a glance toward the bar, and grinned at the resentful

flush spreading upward from Bent's shirt collar. The latter's companion grinned crocodile fashion, and leaned to say something in low, urgent tones. Bent's jaws tensed, and he nodded slowly, as if making a favorable decision long withheld. The other plucked him by the sleeve, and together they left the building.

"Plottin' agin' the natives," Maguire told himself absently, and turned his attention to the cards before him. Since stud poker is not a game to be played with wandering mind, the conversation dwindled away to murmurs of "call" or "raise" or "what you got?" Presently Lige Rucker shoved the last of his chips to the table's center in answer to a bet by the man on Bob Maguire's left.

"Queens up," said Lige, and rose to stretch elaborately as the other displayed a third six. "Time for me to hunt the hay—there's no grapes in this game for a common hand."

"I gotta roll bed down to the livery barn, Bob—welcome to roll in with me when you're ready. Me, I'm on the way right now."

With Rucker gone, the game slowed perceptibly. After a dozen unexciting hands the man at Bob Maguire's left glanced to the clock from the towering chips before him and back again, fidgeted in his chair and shoved the chips forward to be cashed.

"A home run with everybody on," Maguire suggested, not unpleasantly. He rather liked this young Birdsal.

"You-all can get a whack at 'em tomorrow night again," the other returned good-naturedly, "Me, I got to work in the mornin'."

He left with a merrily jingling pocket, and by common consent the game broke up. Joker Hansen, the gambler who had banked it, sat shuffling the cards over and over and

over again, his eyes blank and vacant yet missing nothing within the room. The Eastern man came to sit by the table, struck up a desultory conversation with Bob Maguire and Bedwagon Adams, another of the poker players. Lacking an introduction, Adams promptly dubbed the Easterner Chicago, and a passing glint in the man's eyes told Maguire that was his origin.

Georgie Bent re-entered the saloon paused for a moment near the door and approached the group at the table. The man who had left with Bent also came in, to take a post against the bar and stand passively, his left shoulder drooping oddly low and the scarred cheek glistening under overhead lights.

"Lige Rucker gone?" Bent inquired of Joker Hansen.

The gambler nodded. "Turned in, I guess. Said so," he qualified laconically. "Got a roll bed at the barn, I guess."

Bent thanked him with a nod and turned importantly to confer with the stranger at the bar. After a few words in low tones they parted, Bent going outside again while the stranger turned to order a drink. At the poker table Bob Maguire traded curious glances with Bedwagon Adams.

"Must be looking for Lige," the latter stated profoundly.

"I bet you're right," agreed Bob with equal gravity. "Sudden notion. I reckon—Lige was right here 'til mebbe an hour ago."

He shifted in his chair to examine the fellow at the bar with casual interest, turned again to his companion. "No like," he declared briefly.

"Me, too," Adams returned. "Bent seems to, though. Reckon they got somethin' in common."

"Very common," Maguire agreed without interest, and uncoiled his

length to stretch languidly. "Lige's roll bed sounds good to me—guess I'll go crowd him over."

"I'll go along and point out the livery barn," Adams offered. "First we'll cap the evening with a tasty jolt or two or three or four of Kentucky's Best. Then I'll steer you safely through the darksome channels of our city. You country boys must be looked after—an' besides, I'm camped on the flat a ways t'other side of said barn."

All this was clearly spoken, and the scarred man bent an obvious ear to every word. The convivial pair gave him little heed but the bartender, observant at his post, gained an impression of dark malignity out of all proportion with affairs afoot. When Scarface slipped out the door a few seconds behind the two and Chicago heaved his bulky frame erect to follow in turn, the aproned one wagged his head solemnly at an aged swamper and declared: "Somethin's up—you mark my words!"

Which led him to become a nuisance with his bragging of second sight.

CHAPTER II.

PLUMAS is one of those outland towns where distance is seldom reckoned in "blocks;" the buildings are too widely scattered and the pattern too uncertain. Residents are apt to direct strangers with "cut across back of the hotel and swing in past the lumber yard," rather than "two blocks down and a block to the left." Thus the Plumas Livery Stable is three hundred yards northwest of the Buffalo Saloon and can be reached by either of two routes, both of which short cut across vacant lots and between occasional buildings.

Bob Maguire and Bedwagon

Adams walked directly across the street and veered to the left of Simmins' General Store, thereby reaching the livery stable without warning of untoward events afoot. Had they gone the other way as Terry Birdsal of the jingling pocket did—but that would be another story altogether. For certainly Maguire would not have entered the harness room and crawled quietly under the covers with his friend Lige Rucker, nor Bedwagon Adams have whistled his own careless way onward to bed.

Lige was asleep, and wakened only enough to mutter a "that you, Bob?" and roll over to make room. Maguire arranged his vest and trousers for a pillow and within sixty seconds was equally deep in slumber. Neither heard the harness-room door open gently some time later, although both roused at the flare of a match and sat up to face its uncertain gleam with blinking eyelids.

"Set quiet, you boys," a familiar voice admonished them, and added over a dim shoulder: "Fetch on the lantern, Prex."

The lantern's glow, steadier though scarcely brighter than the match light, identified the form as Deputy Sheriff Georgie Bent. His right hand held a rangy .45 with its long barrel slightly tilted, ready for a quick chop in any forward direction. The lantern bearer proved to be his scarred companion of the Buffalo Saloon. Other figures clustered shadowily at the doorway, crowding for a better look.

"What the hell?" Lige Rucker muttered sleepily.

"Steady boys," said Georgie Bent, and shifted the .45 suggestively. "Git to your feet, but keep them hands in front and a little up. Prex, prowl for their guns."

The scarred man handed his lantern to someone at the door, and

thrust an exploring hand among the blankets and clothing at the bed tarp's open end.

"One gun—on Rucker's side," he stated, straightening with the weapon in his hand. "Guess Long-Hungry didn't have any."

"I didn't," Maguire agreed. "Mine's rolled in m' slicker. But don't you call me no more names, nister—my fingernails is good an' long."

"And what's this party all about, Mr. Deputy Sheriff, Georgie Bent—if you please suh?"

The deputy flushed at the easy contempt in words and manner. "I'll—we'll ask the first few questions," he retorted spitefully. "If you fellows have got the right answers, it'll be your turn then—nebbe. How much money you got in your pants, Rucker—and how long you had it?"

Lige Rucker flushed in his turn, waxed profane at such impertinence from the deputy he despised.

"I don't know that it's any of your damn business," he stated flatly. "And if you don't put that gun in your pants and git outta here, right damn now—"

"Easy, Rucker," came from a bulky figure in the doorway. "We know there's hard feelin' between you an' Bent, but for the present we're all backin' his play. You're nebbe in a jam, fella, and gettin' tough won't help ya none a-tall."

Lige Rucker recognized the speaker as the town blacksmith, McNair. A man regarded as honest and capable. His words sobered Lige and impressed him as similar talk from Georgie Bent could never have done.

"Why, as to how much money I got, I don't know exactly." He spoke directly to McNair, ignoring the deputy. "Spent some and

bought several stacks in that poker game without keeping much track. But I reckon there must be around thirty dollars left in m' pants."

He reached downward, but the scarred man beat him to the folded trousers and handed them to the blacksmith. McNair held them near the lantern while he explored the various pockets. Bringing a few carelessly wadded bills into the light he counted them laboriously.

"Twenty-seven bucks in bills," he stated. "And, lemme see—a dollar-sixty in silver— We'll hafta look farther, though."

The scarred man drew to one side, and McNair stepped past him to throw back the blankets of Lige's bed one at a time. Next to the tarp a buckskin sack was revealed, its top closed with puckering strings.

"That's Terry Birdsal's poke all right—I've seen him flash it a dozen times," the blacksmith declared, and picked it up. From it he counted bills to the amount of two hundred sixteen dollars, with a lone silver dollar the only hard money.

Lige Rucker gaped at the display. "Why . . . why—I never seen that before," he stammered. "How come it—"

The blacksmith chuckled dryly, mirthlessly. "I reckon it was purty dark, all right, when ya smacked Terry Birdsal down from behind an' stripped him of his last thin dime. Likely this is the best look you've had at it, sure enough—but you done purty well by feel."

His manner had changed to bitter hostility, and the next words cracked like a bullwhip. "Poor loser, ainch, Rucker? Couldn't stand t' see Terry walk off with his pockets full of poker winnin's, huh? Part of it yours."

"Git into them pants."

Bob Maguire had witnessed developments in dismayed astonish-

ment. He now voiced a question: "I take it the lad that took us in the poker game has got held up and robbed?"

The blacksmith turned a bleak eye upon him. "Held up is puttin' it mild," he stated witheringly. "He's deader'n a pound of blue mud. Somebody—Rucker here—leaned too hard on a gun bar'l in the dark and cracked his skull, 'tween here and the Buffalo.

"You're lucky you was in the saloon from the time Terry left the game until Bent here had found the body and come back to git us fellers together. We checked on that 'fore we come here."

The knot of men at the door formed a guard for Lige Rucker and were gone with the lantern before Maguire had started dressing. After some little difficulty in sifting his vest and trousers from among the disarrayed blankets he yanked on his boots and followed. At the wide front doorway of the livery stable he met with the dim figure of a bulky man, whose identity he recognized by the glowing cigar tip on a level with his own lips.

"You didn't trail along with the pack, huh, Chicago?" he greeted rather bitterly.

"No. None of my affair. Came along this far out of curiosity as to Rucker's guilt."

"So now your curiosity's satisfied and Lige is guilty as hell, huh?" Maguire returned morosely. His sense of haste was fading with realization that little could be done until morning. Even if then. As he stood there, his brain busied itself sorting and classifying certain casual observations made during the past evening; adding them up in search of something to bolster his loyalty for Lige Rucker. His spirit soared a little at memory of Terry Birdsal's

triumphal progress away from the poker table.

"It certainly looks bad for Rucker," the big Easterner commented. He had sensed the other's partisanship and chose his words carefully, adding: "Although I'd not have picked him as a bad loser—or even as that sort of stick-up man. Clubbing from behind, I mean."

"I never figured him thataway either," Bob returned. "But then I never figured him as dumb enough to take that poke straight to bed with him, neither—if he *had* stole it. Nor I don't now.

"I reckon I can spring a joker at his hearing that'll give 'em something to chew over."

The big man puffed hard at his cigar, and by its glow Maguire saw his shrewd eyes pucker with interest.

"You think the man has been framed, I take it," he said softly, interrogatively. "Something you've seen, I suppose—" He let his voice trail off on a subtly inquiring note.

"What I got in mind is not much by itself," Bob admitted. "But if another little item or two fits in—It needs to be sprung as a surprise, kinda, so you'll excuse me for not blabbing it just yet."

"Certainly. But— Listen, Maguire; the whole town is aroused over this man, Birdsal. The . . . er . . . investigating committee had given the matter a good airing before they came out here, with their inquiries.

"And the things may not come to a hearing."

The cowboy flinched a little in the darkness. "A bunch of half drunk, excited damn fools jumping to conclusions, huh? Made talk before they had even *this* much to go on, I take it?"

"Make talk about the quick fate

of *any* guilty party," the Easterner amended. "It seems that Birdsall was very popular. And with all this evidence pointing to Rucker—"

"The village blacksmith will see that Lige reaches the jail, even if Georgie Bent finds himself a hole to crawl into," Bob interrupted musingly. "But the said jail might as well be built of butter."

"Chicago, how do you stand on this—is it in your book that a bunch of boneheads should come unraveled and hang a man without even listening to whatever lies he may have up his sleeve?"

Chicago stood silent for a long moment, obviously measuring in his mind the situation. Maguire, deeply occupied with thoughts of his own, was a little startled when the big Easterner snapped his fingers sharply and declared: "It is not. And I was about to suggest exactly what is in your mind. I'm little known here and unnoticed, and I know a place to go. With Rucker at my side, safe until time for his hearing."

"Your presence in the saloons would be taken as assurance that all is well at the jail, since you are the logical ringleader of any rescue movement. Leaving Rucker and myself a clear field."

"Doggone, you sure think of everything and string it together like a lawyer," Maguire commented admiringly. "You dead certain y' can git Lige outta that jail by yourself?"

"I can," the Easterner stated with an assurance that left nothing to argument, and chuckled merrily as he moved into the darkness of the stable.

"If you'll pick out Rucker's mount, I'll get my own," he added. "That liveryman may come back soon—he was only half dressed when he crawled out of his cubbyhole office to follow the excitement."

"Bent'll be routing old Burgess outta bed to act as jailer, too—soon's he's had time to brag around a little," Maguire remembered, starting for the stall in which he had earlier noticed Lige Rucker's buckskin private horse.

This Easterner was a man and a half, Maguire told himself as he fumbled a stubborn knot. Decided in a hurry what he ought to do, and 'tended to it right now immediately. Between 'em they'd show some would-be lynchers a thing or two.

CHAPTER III.

A **S**IZABLE crowd was gathered at the Buffalo Saloon, in spite of the hour's lateness. Obviously, some had quit their beds in answer to the turmoil following discovery of Terry Birdsall's body. The liveryman was not the only half clad one present who displayed no intention of hurrying back to bed. All were excited, and all were noisy about it; the sudden hostile hush at Maguire's entrance was noticeable only near the door. Facial gymnastics and surreptitious nudging came into play here and there as those facing the front tried to warn others of his presence.

Joker Hansen sat quietly at his poker table, aloof from the conferences around him. Joker, Maguire knew, was not one to be stampeded into deeds that might later prove regrettable; although once committed he was counted a hard man to stop. Bob crooked a finger at the gambler, who rose languidly and came to stand beside the cowboy at the bar.

"Joker," said Bob, "a man in your business gets to be good at noticin' things. Little items. The twitch of an ear or the shine of an eye. The jingle of a pocket or the thinness of a deck. Right?"

The gambler nodded, a little mystified.

"What I'm drivin' at," Maguire went on, "you likely noticed the same things I did tonight, along with plenty more. Prob'ly didn't pay much attention to any of it, not havin' no occasion. But one of them items is an alibi for Lige Rucker.

"You go over in your mind all that happened when Terry Birdsall walked outta here. The things you heard and the things you saw. Big or little. How Birdsall walked, which side of his head his hat was cocked on—everything. Willya do that—right away while it's fresh?"

Again the gambler nodded, his eyes betraying interest now.

"Then you keep in mind those little things, right under your hat. So's you can go over 'em at Lige Rucker's hearing, exact and—"

A derisive snort behind him drowned out the last two words. He stopped talking wheeled to look into the eyes of a chunky sandy-haired man who had just entered the saloon. Slung over the man's left forearm were coils of bright new rope, and his other hand carried a slender package wrapped in stiff brown paper.

"Hearing, huh?" the sandy-haired one sneered. "All legal an' quiet. So's he can wiggle out of it, or spend a few years in the Pen while Terry stays a long time dead.

"You must be Rucker's good-lookin' Wildcat friend, that I heard some of the boys mention. Well, I'm a friend of Terry's. Dead or alive. And I say no buckaroo gets away with killin' him over a few poker winnin's."

A murmur of approval went the rounds. Of those in the room only three frowned or remained neutral: Bob Maguire, the bartender, and Joker Hansen.

"I take it you mean that being a friend of Birdsall's, gives you the right to hang Lige Rucker sight-unseen," Maguire said softly. "Lynch him without a trial and a chance for his white alley—without provin' for sure that he's the one cracked Birdsall's skull?"

"What more do we need, to prove he done it?" flared the sandy one. "McNair found Terry's poke in Rucker's bed 'fore the body was hardly cold. And—"

"Ya can leave McNair out of any lynchin' program, though," a voice stated from the doorway. McNair let the bat-wing doors swish behind him and advanced into the room. After him trailed Georgie Bent and those others who had formed Lige Rucker's escort jailward—but with one exception. The scar-faced stranger was not among them.

"Ya can leave McNair out of it," the blacksmith repeated flatly. "It's a dead cinch Rucker's guilty all right. But any man's entitled to fair trial, and his hearing will likely bring out a few things we don't know."

Disapproval registered plainly on most faces present. The sandy-haired man was particularly impatient with such delay. He slid his slender package carefully into a hip pocket and thrust the free hand toward McNair with its forefinger aimed like a pistol barrel.

"You know damn well—" he began.

What McNair knew was not made clear. Wildcat Bob Maguire was always a man of sudden impulse, and the other's gingerly handling of the brown package had not escaped him. He took a quick stride and grasped Sandy's nearest elbow; spun him to grip the other one.

"I've allus wondered what'd take place if a man was to kick a pants full of dynamite right sudden and

hard," said Maguire, and the musical voice was at its best. "Y' can start 'most anything, any time y' like. But at the first wiggle, I start kicking."

Those well acquainted with Maguire stiffened in their tracks; McNair snapped tensely: "Stand still, Ferguson! If that's jyno! He'll do jest what he says!"

And Sandy stood, although his features worked with passion and his muscles knotted stringily under the grip of Maguire's wiry bronco-buster fingers. Sandy had handled dynamite enough to understand its tricky possibilities, without attaining the fatalistic contempt so common among old miners.

"Three kicks outta four, it would not go boom—but how ya gonna tell which kick to count from?" Maguire inquired conversationally. Above all things he needed to insure time for Chicago to find means of freeing Lige Rucker; if he could find approval in some quarters with argument, so much was clear gain.

"I just wanta make oration about this an' that, and I reckon this way y'll all listen closer," he began cheerfully. "Y' may need this here jyno to get into the jail with, remember—and it nor Sandy is no good if I kick it."

"The' was one mistake made in that harness room tonight. McNair actually found that poke among them blankets of Lige's all right, but another man had prowled 'em first, lookin' for guns. 'Prowl' was the word you used, huh, Georgie? And how many here knows this stranger with the scar and the low shoulder?"

He glanced around, waited momentarily for someone to claim knowledge of the man.

"Just you, Georgie. And I seem to remember you don't like Lige Rucker. He cussed you to a peak

an' slapped the peak off. 'time you let Johnny Tyner pile up in the rocks an' ruin his laig. Would you be above framin' Lige, Georgie? Or at least helpin'?"

Bent's face colored, drained white again; his Adam's apple fluttered. But he was spared the necessity of answering. Running feet clattered on the boardwalk outside, and the scarred stranger burst through the bat-wing doors.

"He's gone, Bent," the scarred man gasped. "Rucker—somebody helped him get out and they left a-horseback!"

Pandemonium broke loose in the saloon, voices rising shrilly in excited senseless comment and query. Maguire released the sandy man's elbows and stepped back to lean against the bar. Sandy hardly noticed; it took more than a threatened explosion to shunt Sandy Ferguson off the main track, and his attention was now on the stranger.

McNair, cooler than the rest, put a question, "How'd ya come t' find out?"

"I . . . I didn't come back here with the rest of you. Went to my room for . . . for something." The man's speech came jerkily, still winded from his run. "Coming back, I saw a light up at the jail. Just a flicker. Made me curious, so I went back up there. Found the doors wide open and Rucker gone. Heard two horses splash across the creek crossing north of town, and break into a gallop up the road."

Sandy wheeled to the bar, thrust his lethal package at the bartender. "You take charge uh this," he snapped. His eyes met those of Maguire, and shot sparks. "I'll see *you* later," he promised grimly, and paused to add: "Wildcat, huh? Y'look more like a backslid deacon to me."

Turning to face the crowd, he raised his voice in a shout: "Who's with me? To take right in after 'em?"

No better method of sorting hot-heads could have been devised. In thirty seconds less than a dozen men remained in the saloon, and one of the bat-wing doors had been smashed from its hinges.

McNair grinned sourly across at Maguire. The latter's implied accusation of Bent had made but little impression on the blacksmith to begin with. In the light of Scarface's announcement he now accepted the cowboy's argument for exactly what it was—a bid for time in support of his friend.

"I reckon you win—one way or another," he grunted, without rancor. For all his dour ways and set convictions, McNair had a true understanding of friendship.

"That crick crossin' is nigh a mile from the jail," he went on. "Half an hour's start, an' darker than the inside of a cow. Come mornin', we could mebbe of tracked 'em, but yon gallopin' geese'll have all the tracks stomped out."

Maguire smiled back at him, reached for tobacco and papers. His groping fingers came away empty, and he glanced down at the vest pocket where the little muslin sack should be. It was empty—the vest was not his own. Lige Rucker's of course. He remembered now that Lige had on no vest when he left the harness room with his escort, although like many cowboys he usually wore one for the sake of its numerous pockets.

"He'll come back when his hearin's set and this lynchin' fever has cooled down some," he assured McNair absently. "Lige'll come clear, and he knows it."

McNair glared. "What'll clear him—or who?" he demanded.

"You'll help, for one—an' Bed-wagon Adams an' Joker Hansen an' the barkeep here," Bob declared serenely, and left the room. Oddly, it did not occur to him to buy another sack of tobacco at the bar and postpone changing vests. Later he was glad indeed for having gone back to the harness room after his own.

On his way he heard the sharp thunder of galloping hoofs as the self-appointed posse swept past the jail in headlong fury and pounded on toward the ford north of town. Maguire grinned after them.

"All Lige and Chicago need do is bend some other direction when they hear that racket a-comin'," he muttered, and paused suddenly to swear, for it occurred to him that he knew no more of the pair's destination than did the posse. Both he and Chicago had overlooked the matter in their hasty saddling.

"Oh, well—Chicago will likely get word to me in a day or two," he decided.

The hurried posse had left a lighted lantern hanging in the wide alleyway of the stable, and evidently the livery keeper had ridden along. The harness-room door was open, and Lige's disarranged bed had been trampled under the scuffling heedless feet of many saddle-laden men. Maguire's vest was lying near the threshold, its lining ripped open. Bob remembered that a tally book of his had worked through a pocket and slipped behind the lining. It was gone—and his eyes widened at noticing that the cloth was slashed diagonally across the weave, as if with a sharp knife. A rip would have been apt to follow one set of threads, he reflected. He drew the tobacco sack from its pocket and thoughtfully built a smoke.

"Looks like somebody figured that tally book was hid in the lining on purpose, and wanted a look at it," he was thinking. "Wonder why?"

Of course. His vest, but he was wearing Lige Rucker's—the searcher had supposed. Bob leaned to examine the bedding more closely. Yep. Searched it, too. Somebody was sure curious about Lige Rucker. Who? Well, none of that posse—they'd been too excited and hasty. And they'd all been at the saloon when he'd arrived there straight from this harness room. Including the livery keeper. Not Chicago—he'd had no chance. Uh-oh—the scar-faced stranger of course. He'd come back here instead of going to his room as he'd claimed, arriving just after Bob and Chicago had left. Why? Maybe Lige's vest could tell that.

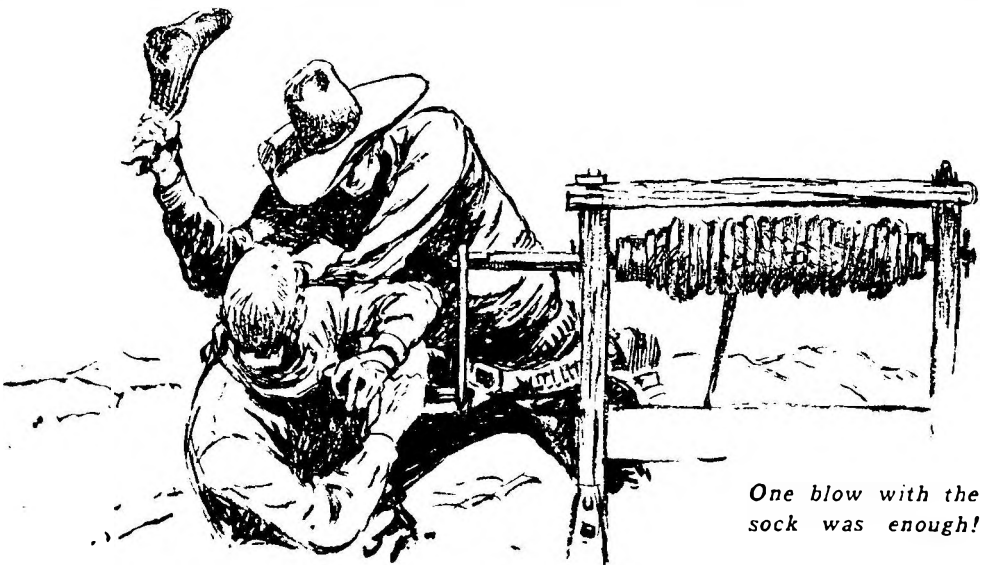
The vest had a roomy inside pocket, fastened at the top with a large safety pin. Bob drew the pin and slid the contents into his hand. A book, not unlike his own missing tally book, and two letters. A hard something still in the pocket, fast-

ened there. Maguire turned the pocket inside out to get at it, and whistled in astonishment. A badge. The stamped shield of a Deputy United States Marshal, its pin gripping the cloth.

"Holy cow! I never knewed Lige was—hm-m-m. He ain't been long. Newly appointed, likely for some special reason. And Scarface, he's connected with that special reason and suspects about Lige."

The book proved to be only an ordinary cowboy's tally book; brands, a few addresses, an itemized account of wages drawn the year before. One envelope contained papers dealing with the appointment of Lige Rucker as deputy marshal on special duty, the date a week old. The other letter—signed by one David Yore—appeared to be instructions to the new marshal, so vaguely worded as to be almost meaningless to one not "in the know." One phrase, however, leaped to meet Bob's gaze: "Get in touch with Terence Birdsall at Plumas, secretly."

Maguire backed a step as if from a blow. Terence Birdsall—Lige



*One blow with the
sock was enough!*

Rucker—Terry Birdsal was dead, and Lige accused of his murder. But Terry Birdsal had been on his way to or from a secret conference with Lige. McNair had said his body lay between here and the Buffalo Saloon. Rucker's casual words as he left the poker game had been a hint, perhaps. And—

The quick clatter of hoofs just outside the big double doors. A horse shied away from the dim circle of lantern light, and its rider cursed in low tones. Maguire drew farther into the harness room, glanced around him and stepped behind a horse blanket hanging from its peg in one corner. That had been the scarred stranger's voice. More searching, maybe, and a chance to check on the man's activities.

But the stranger only crossed the room with quick, hurried steps, plucked a pair of chaps from a peg and buckled them on. That done, he remounted and rode out again through the double doors to turn southward and jog-trot away.

"Ditched the posse, and now he's goin' places in the opposite direction. Bet it's got something to do with Lige and Chicago. Uh-oh!—bet he even lied about them two heading north, and is follerin' 'em now."

At the thought, Maguire cast his torn vest on the harness-room floor and made for his saddle. Lige Rucker's larger garment still flapping loosely against his ribs.

CHAPTER IV.

CANNIBAL TOM of the Circle C had a reputation all his own. Only an expert could get a saddle on his back and cinch it there, much less avoid his wicked hoofs long enough to climb into it. He could cow-kick a man standing opposite his chestnut shoulder; he could handle a forefoot

with the darting speed and deadly precision of a boxer's punch, the other foot still on the ground. Once mounted, his antics were a nightmare of frenzy from the moment he felt weight in the left stirrup until he unloaded the rider or decided it couldn't be done for the present. Only the extraordinary perfection of his eleven hundred pounds—plus the arrival at Circle C of Bob Maguire—had prevented him being converted into coyote bait when first his method of dealing with a thrown rider became known. He was that kind of horse and proud of it.

Yet within five minutes of the scarred stranger's departure, Maguire led out the saddled chestnut, shut the double doors tightly to prevent disastrous re-entrance and swung astride. What followed was a study in blind fury and bland recklessness. The narrow street was cluttered with yard fences, trees, old buggies and what-not scattered around, and lying in wait to trap or trip the plunging horse and spread him unevenly on top of his rider. Cellarlike darkness meant that balance and saddle contact must be maintained by "feel" alone—the instinctive reading of his mount's bunching muscles through Maguire's own. Maguire has never denied—or admitted—that he hung his spurs and pulled leather desperately. But he survived the storm until Cannibal Tom consented to take the scarred man's trail at a swinging lope.

Maguire had one advantage: the stranger's horse was iron-shod and the metal rang on stone, while no hardy soul had yet found a necessity sufficient to call for nailing shoes on the lethal hoofs of Cannibal Tom. After some minutes of steady loping straight down the road, Bob began pulling up at intervals to listen. On his third such halt he was

rewarded by the *clunk* of iron on rock, and set Cannibal Tom to the running walk of which the chestnut was an acknowledged master. He had no difficulty in discerning the point at which the stranger left the road and took to the hills west of Lost Creek.

Seven miles south of Plumas, Lost Creek deserts its wide and fertile bottomland to dip under the horizon and travel in a deep, bleak gorge where thirsty sand soon drinks it up. At the gorge's head the country changes, merging rapidly into desert; you come out of low wooded hills to face flat emptiness, waterless and alkali, hostile to life in any form. Neither cow nor horse nor man frequent that thirty miles of desolation—even the coyotes avoid it. Rains that made of the Plumas district a garden spot, have little effect upon this virtueless soil even when widespread enough to reach it. Which is seldom; the rain belt here follows the hills.

At the desert's edge is Wart Butte, aptly and descriptively named by some cowboy or early adventurer. Its flat top is high enough above the surrounding terrain to be out of sight from all points. Its sides are ugly and almost vertical; rockbound and inaccessible without the aid of ropes or tools. So far as Bob Maguire knew, no man had ever been on top of it; a hard climb with nothing to recommend it except vague desire to view the eighty acres or so of tableland that must be there. It is some fifteen miles from Plumas, isolated in a sparsely watered section where cattle never stay in the summertime; thus few riders are attracted to the neighborhood.

After some hours of steady riding the stranger picked his way across rock-strewn slope to the foot of Wart Butte, halted there and whistled in

fair imitation of meadow lark. His answer came almost immediately; he struck a match and held it momentarily before his tilted face.

"Treadway got here yet?" he called up in guarded tones.

"Yep. Thirty minutes ago. Feller name of Rucker with him," a ready voice answered.

"I figured that—heard Treadway's voice as they left the jail. The boss must of changed his mind—him and I framed a plan this afternoon. Thought I'd beat 'em here, but they must of tied their horses close around 'stead of takin' 'em to the timber."

"They did—down under the big cedar. You can take 'em over along with yourn—that's where I was headed jus' now." There was a complacent note in the reedy voice at having missed a chore, but the scarred man's next words spoiled it all.

"I ain't coming up. Got to be back in Plumas by mornin' or the natives'll get to wondering about me. I'm supposed t' be out with a posse huntin' Rucker, right now. You tell Treadway I didn't find a damn thing in Rucker's vest or bed to show he was any kinda lawman. That note from him that we found in Birdsal's room might of referred to somethin' else, at that."

"I'll tell him. But the damage is done now—Rucker's seen this place and can't be let to leave. You better wait here—I'll bring back word if Treadway sends any."

"A' right, hurry up." Scarface dismounted and squatted on the ground, and a flaring match announced lighting of a cigarette.

At the lower edge of the rocky slope Maguire sat motionless, crooning low to Cannibal Tom and praying inwardly that for once the chestnut would not grow tired of inaction and throw a fit. He knew better

than to attempt dismounting; that would be certain to get plenty of holes kicked in the silence. Luckily the slight breeze was blowing toward them; none of their scent could reach Scarface's mount, and Cannibal Tom was a lone wolf sort of brute that almost never whickered.

The chestnut was beginning to grow restless when the reedy voice caught his attention again and his pointed ears flicked forward to listen.

"Treadway says ya better put 'em in the hideaway and come on up—you can ride in during the day and claim ya got lost huntin' for Rucker. The big feller wants a confab with ya."

The scarred man muttered a curse. "I bet you had plenty t' do with engineerin' that," he accused. "I got a lame ankle—yuh'll hafta take 'em to the hideaway anyhow."

The other chuckled derisively. "Nuh-uh. With a game ankle ya sure can't fly, and I don't drop this elevator 'til I hear ya leave with the nags."

"You know better'n to drop it when I *leave*. But you damn sure want to be right on the job an' drop it when I get *back*."

Another chuckle. "I'll see. G'-by, sweetheart."

Bob Maguire heaved a sigh of relief as the scarred man reined down the slope at an angle and the sounds of his going grew dim. Gingerly he pressed the chestnut's neck with a rein, guiding him at first toward the receding sounds made by the other horse. Thinking he was to follow, Cannibal Tom set off peaceably enough, curiously smothering his usual reactions at being urged from a standing position. Once under way Maguire reined him gradually off the slope into a brushy draw at its foot. Apparently Cannibal Tom

had some idea of submitting to a truce; he kicked only twice when Maguire dismounted at the edge of a clump of cedar, and merely snorted at the saddle's removal.

"Must be learnin' to love me," Bob said whimsically as he tied the hackamore rope securely to a tree. Removing the bridle with wary regard for the range of those front hoofs, he hung the leather goods in a bushy tree. With no saddle or bridle to chafe and irk him, Cannibal Tom would have the comparative comfort of shade during his enforced wait, and a thick tangle of cedar limbs overhead might conceal him from the butte's top even in daylight.

"It's post hay for yours, old-timer," Bob muttered regretfully as he moved away. "No telling how long, neither. But I got to find out about this here. Sounds like I done delivered Lige to the Philistines."

He could make out the dim intermittent glow of a cigarette above; the man with the reedy voice had evidently conquered laziness in favor of waiting up for his scarred confrere. By patiently cautious search Bob found a spot of hard-packed earth, obvious take-off for the upward climb. But here was smooth rock face for as high as he could reach, with not so much as a cranny big enough to insert his fingertip. Likely no guard was kept at night for the simple but highly satisfactory reason that the butte was considered unscalable without the use of rope, he concluded. And ropes cannot be cast upward in utter darkness.

"Can't be done," the cowboy admitted reluctantly, and fell to considering other ways and means. No use looking for an easier climb—these men would, of course, have found it first. Scarface had to be

the answer—Scarface with that harsh and rasping voice that Bob Maguire could never imitate. The impersonation had to be put over without speech then; Scarface must coax that elevator down before Maguire took his place. And he might not crave to trade.

Maguire found a spot of soft earth a few yards from the take-off, sat down and removed his boots and socks. Thanks be, the socks were comparatively new and strong. He put one inside the other and filled the feet to bursting; with the tops knotted closely against the bulge of dirt he had a passable sandbag.

"Quieter'n a gun barrel," he thought, swinging its weight experimentally against the palm of one hand. "Less danger of crackin' his noggin, too—in case he don't deserve it."

From his wide latigo leather belt he cut two strips, made a loop in the end of each and thrust them through the narrowed belt, convenient of access. His neckerchief also he loosened and tucked under the belt.

"Got to set a world's record for noiseless hog-tyin'," he reflected whimsically as he pulled the boots over bare feet. "'Worst of it is nobody'll ever know how slick I do it except Scarface—an' he'll be too mad to gimme credit.'"

A large rock two yards from the take-off provided excellent ambush. He had begun to wish heartily for a cigarette when the sound of stumbling feet and muffled swearing announced the return of Scarface.

"That you, Prex?" The reedy voice hailed guardedly.

"Yeah, damn you. Next time you work me into shin-bustin' through them hills an' rocks in the dark—"

The ritual of the lighted match was evidently hard and fast; the

scarred one did it perfunctorily, as one obeying a rule in which he did not altogether believe. Maguire gave mental thanks; the flaring match outlines the exact position of the man's head, and as its flame died the cowboy removed the slouch hat and swung his sandbag in motions perfectly timed. Scarface slumped without a sound, and the cowboy lowered him to earth as gently as a mother.

Creak of a windlass above gave notice of the descending rope. It reached the ground as Maguire finished his last knot in the neckerchief gag and reached for the slouch hat. The man's light caliber revolver he had already thrust into his own waistband opposite the plowhandle .45 he had taken from his slicker and belted on before leaving the livery stable. His own Stetson he had tucked under a corner of the rock.

The rope's lower end was a great loop with a board seat like a playground swing. Bob's weight announced his readiness and the windlass creaked again. The thick rope's twist gave the makeshift elevator a gentle whirling motion not too pleasant. At the top a couple of logs protruded over the cliff's edge to make landing easy and to support the pulley that kept hemp from scraping rock. Bob scrambled along them to solid footing while the other tied down his windlass handle. The fellow's bent position was ideal for a sandbag target and the light was better here, seventy feet above the surrounding horizon.

Maguire fastened this second victim securely to a scrub cedar among some low brush twenty yards from the windlass, chuckling as he wadded up the man's own filthy bandanna for a gag.

"Bet this learns him to wash 'em once in a while," he muttered, bind-

ing it in place with the other's suspenders. He found no weapons; evidently the mesa's population had learned to feel secure while atop it.

As an afterthought the cowboy unwound the heavy inch rope from the windlass and walked along near the rim until he found a fair-sized bushy cedar, among whose branches he secreted its coils. That done he made for a faint gleam of light farther back on the mesa.

CHAPTER V.

WART BUTTE boasted two points of refuge from the elements. One was natural and permanent, a tunnellike cave in low outcropping of solid rock. To the small entrance opening a heavy pole door had been fitted, making of this an excellent strong room or guardhouse.

The other was man-made and flimsy, a tent of brown canvas with high side walls to give head room. During the daylight hours its neutral coloring blended well with the dried grass and earth of the mesa. At night it afforded shelter and cut off upward reflection from the dim glow of a coal-oil lantern. The lantern was never carried outside; one of the few hard-laid rules governing the mesa's temporary population.

Inside the tent Lige Rucker smoked a cigarette and held conversation with Chicago, whom he had come to know as Harris Treadway on the ride out from Plumas.

"While I couldn't stomach the idea of a lynching, still I can't turn loose a suspected murderer," the big Easterner was explaining suavely, having successfully avoided the subject until now. Harris Treadway could be ferocious under pressure as a tormented grizzly, but when convenient he preferred the smoother route of diplomacy.

"That's why I wouldn't wait for you to find your gun, back there at the jail, and why you'll have to remain here until Plumas cools down and it's safe to take you back for your legal hearing."

"Suits me well enough—main thing I crave is a crack at Mr. Georgie Bent, and there's long years ahead for that," Rucker answered. The other's first sentence had made him boil inwardly, however, and he could not forbear adding: "For a man that picks jail locks as quick and easy as you did back yonder, you seem plenty law-abiding; it's a wonder you'd associated a-tall with a 'suspected murderer' like me or with a jailbird like that squeaky-voiced windlass-cranker you was just whisperin' to."

The big man's eyes puckered and sharpened. "What makes you think Hamp is a jailbird?" he queried softly.

Anger had betrayed Lige Rucker into overreaching. He had been trying to meet Treadway's suave guile with craft of his own, and certainly this was no time or place to admit that he had recently seen a picture of the sharp-featured Hamp Jones in possession of one Terry Birdsal, now deceased. On the picture had been displayed prominently a number, and beneath it certain terse particulars of an unsavory past.

"That pointed face of his belongs on a jailbird if it belongs anywhere," Lige retorted evasively, and changed the subject.

"Sorry if I offended you," he went on apologetically. "Reckon I owe you somethin' pretty with a ribbon on it, for fishin' me out that jail so prompt and efficient. But it riles me to be referred to as a 'suspected murderer,' even if most of Plumas *was* tryin' to say the same thing with a rope necktie."

"Sorry—didn't mean to put it so bluntly. But you understand my position, I hope," the big man muttered in preoccupied tones. Behind his smooth brow a knotty problem was being wrestled. What to do with Lige Rucker. Housing him in the cave with the mesa's other prisoner meant a comparing of notes that might prove detrimental to the Treadway interest. Yet there seemed nothing else to be done. Certainly Rucker could not be let roam at will, for he'd soon find the cave anyway. And two resourceful men, one of them free—The big man snapped his fingers in decision.

"If you'll come with me I'll show you where to sleep," he told Lige smoothly. "Daybreak is almost here."

"Yeah—I reckon this night's sleep has been postponed long enough," Lige agreed, and followed from the tent and across the flat.

In deepest gloom against the low rock ledge Treadway halted and fumbled at the pole door. A padlock clicked and he swung it open.

"Been locking this to keep Hamp out of here," he explained casually, and hoped that the cave's other occupant slept and would remain quiet until Rucker had passed inside. Treadway had no doubt of his ability to handle an unarmed man—two if necessary—but his smooth brain rarely passed the buck to the muscles it controlled, and he accepted such necessity with a sense of defeat.

Lige entered and paused to strike a match. Treadway swung the door shut and closed the padlock. At its click, Lige turned sharply; he had not been altogether unsuspicious, yet had not expected the Easterner to drop his suave pose quite so soon. The latter's chuckle came through the pole door.

"Sleep tight, Mr. Rucker—you're in excellent company and perfectly safe from intrusion," he said, and walked briskly away.

Lige bruised a shoulder against the door, found it solid, and swore softly. Behind him a match flared and was touched to the wick of a two-inch miner's candle.

"Who's there?" a familiar deep voice inquired. Lige leaned to peer into the dim circle of light.

"That you, Sheriff Cobb? I reckon you're why Treadway was so doggone unceremonious about lockin' me in here."

The sheriff chuckled from his seat among disordered blankets, gray-streaked walrus mustache lifting against his great hooked nose. "Welcome to our lodgerino, Lige. How come you to join up?"

"I been fleein' from the wrath of the law, sheriff. With the good and sufficient help of Mr. Harris Treadway who kindly offered to take me under his wing—and aims to keep me there!" Lige grinned ruefully in answer to the other's chuckle, and seated himself on the low box by the candle.

"We-all been wondering about you, disappearing like that and staying away so long—with a brand-new blond waitress just arrived in Plumas. I was kinda in hopes somebody had run yuh outta the country and left me a clear field."

"Wouldn't even *let* me run, after I found this place," the sheriff explained, reddening. "I seen a man come up here on that rope, and rode over to investigate. Up pops a unexpected feller with the most determined-lookin' sawed-off shotgun I ever see, and plumb insists that I try their new elevator. Be'n here ever since—"

He slanted an eyebrow toward the door in faint warning, and added in

lower tones: "Did you hear from Dave Yore?"

"Yeah. I'm now a special deputy marshal on secret duty, all broke out with authority over everything except that fifty-cent padlock yonder. Don't know how it comes I was picked, though—I never *saw* Dave Yore until a week ago."

"Dave had a line on this bunch from the other end, and had narrowed the thing down to this general locality. Wanted a couple of good local men that wouldn't be suspected and watched close like any newcomer or known officer was sure to be. I recommended you and Terry Birdsal. Didja git in touch with Terry?"

"Yeah," Lige told him soberly. "He visited me a few minutes las' night to mix up some powders, and it cost him his life. On his way home somebody cracked his skull with a six-shooter barrel and went through his pockets."

The sheriff swore feelingly and uttered a requiem: "Good man, Terry. We'll all miss him plenty."

"Who done it—Treadway?"

"Nope. I don't think so. I figure a scar-faced gobbler with one low shoulder, and mebbe your new deputy, Mr. Georgie Bent. They managed to lay it onto me—had half of Plumas rearing to hang me 'way up in a tree an' let me wiggle m'self to death. Thought for a while I'd hafta give it away about bein' a deputy marshal, in order to throw a little doubt in their midst and get a few of 'em on my side. But Treadway, he fished me outta jail and brung me here."

"Up 'til the last hour or so that feller has had me guessin'. Terry, too—we couldn't be sure he fitted into this deal a-tall."

"Hm-m-m. The low-shouldered feller would be Prex Styles. He's

their outside man, and the one give me the sawed-off invite. Sorry if young Bent has sunk that low—his daddy was the kind you like to have along if the goin' gits rough. Might be that's where the leak is—Georgie could have got hold of Dave's letter and found out about Terry."

"'S a wonder Treadway didn't jest he'p 'em hang you an' gitcha outa the way."

"Afraid of my mouth, I reckon. And mebbe figured Bob Maguire would scare up enough help to head 'em off 'til I got 'er said. He ain't plumb sure I'm Johnny Law, either—quizzed me all the way out here."

"Which reminds me of one thing in our favor. Bob Maguire made the arrangement with Treadway to pry me outta jail, thinkin' the big devil was just a innocent bystander. That cowboy may get suspicions if he don't hear from me in a day of two—and you know how he's li'ble to act."

As if in answer to the prayerful ring of his speech, the pole door shook and a musical voice penetrated it inquiringly.

"You in there, Lige?" it said.

Lige made the door in two joyful strides. "In person," said he. "Keepin' our shinin' sheriff company. Got a crowbar in your pants pocket?"

"Nope." Mournfully. "I'm careless thataway about tools—allus leavin' 'em home just when I'll need 'em. But I got a very willin' jack-knife here, and this hasp is on'y nailed on."

Tedious work, loosening strong nails driven deep in solid pine. But Maguire went at it manfully and soon had a deep notch cut on one side of the hasp. On the other side a tough pitchy knot refused to be notched out; he put the knife away with its blade broken and inserted

the heavy barrel of his plowhandle .45 behind the strap iron. A tricky task, working the steel into position to give leverage against the rounded surface. It required all his attention and dulled alertness.

For all his bulk, Harris Treadway was a light-footed man. It had occurred to him to return slyly and listen to the conversation between his two prisoners, and Maguire's arrival had found him scarcely twenty feet away. Those few yards were covered in complete silence, with occasional long pauses to listen. The big Easterner was very much puzzled on his own account, and hoped to hear something that might fit Maguire, Lige Rucker, and Terry Birdsall into their proper places. Here he was disappointed; Bob was too busy for speech, and Lige's few words were uttered in tones that barely penetrated the pole door. The scrape of Bob's gun barrel against metal apprised the watcher that in a moment there would be three men to handle instead of one; he covered the last eight feet in a pounce that would have done credit to a bird-hungry cat.

Maguire's reaction was that of a man trained by danger itself; instant and wholesouled. But Treadway knew the exact location of that hasp and therefore of the other's gun barrel; his great hand clamped upon Maguire's wrist at the first grab, and tucked it high between bony shoulder blades with a quick shift and a twisting wrench. The Colt was plucked deftly from agonized fingers and its ready muzzle clapped against the lower edge of the loose-hanging vest.

"No fair," chided Treadway. "Here I rescue a suspected murderer at your behest, and you follow and try to turn him loose upon the suffering public. If you don't stop

struggling, that arm will come right off."

Tortured ligaments attested that Treadway's claim might not be too farfetched. Besides, the other, captured weapon had slipped so far under Bob's waistband that he could not bring it into action. Bob relaxed and stood passive, easing the arm as best he could.

"All right, Bear-trap. What next?" he queried evenly.

Treadway chuckled. "That's better," he approved. "We'll now march to the tent and look you over. How in thunder did you get up here, anyway?"

"These wings on my head is good for something besides holdin' my hat up," Maguire retorted. From that point the trip tentward was made in silence, with Bob momentarily expecting Prex Style's revolver to slide down his pant leg and strike the ground.

Inside Treadway thrust the Colt under his waistband and explored the other's clothing with his free hand, still keeping his grip on the hammer-locked wrist. He found the light revolver at once, and chuckled as he disengaged it and tossed it carelessly into a pack-sack with Bob's gun belt and holster. At the inner vest pocket his fingers paused, probing the outline of the metal shield pinned inside. Making no effort to free it or look further, he released the tortured arm and thrust Maguire to a seat on a wooden block against the tent wall.

"So it was you all the time," he commented musingly. "I had you catalogued as too dumb and head-long to be trusted on an affair like this, but it seems I was wrong.

"Where does Rucker fit into the picture then?"

Maguire grinned up at him impudently, without answering. His

left arm was busy massaging the right; he might need that right arm badly, soon.

"I see—there are three of you instead of only two as our information had it," Treadway murmured, thinking aloud.

"Wrong again—there's five of us. Or was," Maguire retorted, shooting at random on the principle of keep the other fellow guessing.

Treadway eyed him appraisingly, shrugging. "Makes little difference," he assured. "Tomorrow or next day will end our stay here in any event—marshals would be dropping on us from the clouds, next. Oh-h, Hamp!"

At that moment Hamp Jones was struggling to rid himself of the muf-fling neckerchief that had already made him gag unpleasantly. At the call his efforts redoubled in fierceness, but he was still unable to answer. Treadway shouted once more, glanced understandingly at Bob Maguire and changed to "Hi, Pete!"

A sleep-drugged voice answered this time, from somewhere outside. Treadway snapped instructions: "Go to the windlass and see what's happened to Hamp. Go carefully—we've visitors!"

Five minutes later a furious-eyed Hamp entered the tent, followed closely by a big man with piggy eyes and massive chin. Hamp carried a short club in one hand and would have swung it viciously at Bob Maguire's head, but for Treadway's curt gesture.

"Save it," the latter advised contemptuously. "The time for that was at your first meeting. Where's Prex?"

"This bird must of laid him out down below an' come up on the rope in his place. He—"

"I see," Treadway's voice cut into the spiteful whine. "You two get breakfast. By then it will be light

and we can climb down and see about Prex."

"He lugged the windlass rope off some place an' hid it," Hamp blurted.

"So-o." Treadway turned his eyes upon Bob Maguire, and there was nothing of human warmth in them now. Suavity had deserted the big Easterner at Hamp's information, and feral savagery twisted his features.

"We'll have a look at daybreak," he informed Maguire, and his tones were more impressive and threatening for the control that held them even. "But if we don't find that rope quickly then, you're going to have fifteen minutes of very, very hard luck."

He fumbled in a corner and brought out a repeating shotgun that had originally been a fine specimen of the gunmaker's art. Now the barrel had been shortened, destroying the choke bore and making of it that most deadly of close quarters weapons known as a riot gun.

"For the present," he decided grimly, "we'll go back to the cave and put you in escrow with the rest of our fast-growing collection."

CHAPTER VI.

IN all his pursuits Bob Maguire was apt to guard against defeat rather than consequences, and seldom during his life did he experience those unpleasant symptoms which occur to most of us when faced with probability of death or maiming. Nevertheless, he accorded due respect to the efficient finality of a sawed-off scatter-gun, and marched tamely ahead of its authoritative muzzle to the cave's pole door, estimating chances as he went.

A few feet from the door, Treadway snapped a curt order to halt,

circled his prisoner to unlock the padlock with one deft hand and stepped aside again, the lock still in his fingers. The big fellow was fast regaining his suavity of conceit; he bowed slightly in the darkness and invited mockingly: "Enter, thou."

To Bob Maguire that mocking note was like salt in a wound. He thrust one hand in a trousers pocket to clutch the crippled jackknife with some momentary notion of throwing it at Treadway. But that was too much like betting a pair of deuces against pat hands; common sense triumphant and brought with it a better idea. He entered the doorway meekly enough, the knife still held in his fingers.

Treadway fumbled at the hasp, seeking with one hand to fit it over its staple and insert the lock. Somehow the slotted strap refused to slide on far enough to admit the padlock's hooked arm. He shifted the shotgun to the hollow of his elbow, freeing both hands to work in the darkness. On the door's other side Maguire sensed activity of two sets of fingers instead of one. His surge widened the crack made by the knife handle, and his right hand shot through to clutch desperately at Treadway's wrist. The other's backward jerk threw the door wide open and Maguire's left hand found the shotgun barrel.

Only then did the cowboy fully appreciate Treadway's enormous strength; he was whipped about like a shirt tail in a hurricane, until his freckles shook together and his tonsils battered his larynx.

"Lige!" yelled Maguire.

"Pete!" shouted Treadway.

"Bang!" roared the shotgun—straight up.

And the cave door erupted two leaping madmen who swarmed upon the struggling pair with all the joy-

ous abandon of Canadian mosquitoes. Maguire's slender figure was easily distinguished by its whip-cracker gyrations, from the Easterner's bulky frame. Treadway was unable to bring his weapon into play, and his efforts with it left him defenseless against the hail of fists and feet and knees and elbows that showered upon him from all directions. One of Lige's whole-hearted swings found his chin and the great bulk sagged a little. A moment later the abused member met with a second installment in the shape of Sheriff Cobb's bony knee, this time with sleep-producing effect. Maguire's mighty jerk brought away the shotgun; he turned instantly toward the pounding footfalls that heralded Pete's headlong charge, working at the weapon's trombone action as he shouted warning: "Hold up, you! I've got the sawed-off and I'll sure unload it among ya!"

The pounding ceased and a pistol blazed flame in the general direction of the group by the cave entrance, three hasty bullets zinging off rocks behind them.

"Careful, you," Bob reminded, "you're as apt to hit Treadway here as anybody."

The firing ceased while Pete boomed his chief's name experimentally. When Treadway failed to respond, Hamp's reedy voice pierced the night from one side. "He's down—shoot belly-high an' we git nothin' but law meat."

Maguire was still struggling with the trombone action, he now muttered to Lige and the sheriff: "Let's get outta here. This damn gun's jammed an' I can't get it loose. We'll circle in the dark, fix it and jump 'em."

A hot fusillade from Hamp and Pete cured any tendency to lag. The three scooted along the low outcrop,

their stumbles serving only to increase speed as they sprinted to regain balance. At the ledge's end Bob muttered a "this way!" and led toward the tree in which he had hidden the rope. He plucked it forth and thrust its coils upon Lige Rucker.

"Only one they got," he explained hurriedly. "Treadway was mad enough to bite when he learned I'd hid it."

"Good hole card," agreed the sheriff, and helped Lige to adjust it over a shoulder. "I've seen this place in daylight," he added, taking the lead. "There's a bunch of boulders over here on the flat, with brush growin' up between 'em."

The spot proved an ideal fort; here they halted and all lent a hand with the shotgun. Even so, it took half an hour to get it working again, and by now gray dawn was upon them. Bob stood up on a rock to locate their adversaries, and a rifle bullet cut new, twin holes in Prex Styles' old slouch hat.

"Treadway, damn him—good thing I left my hat down below," he grumbled as he dropped hastily into shelter. "Reckon they all got rifles. Outrange us—drop us the minute we try t' come outta here, and buckshot won't reach 'em."

"How many shells we got, sheriff?"

"Four," Cobb replied glumly. "'Bout as useful an' deadly as a handful uh rocks, though—less'n we kin coax 'em in reach. Still, at least they won't dast charge us."

"Nope," Lige Rucker agreed. "But we're gonna get plenty hungry and thirsty, I reckon. Any water supply up here, sheriff?"

"Nope—but they got a bucketful the best of us, I expect," the sheriff answered. "They pack it from a little spring over to the Bar 8 win-

ter line camp, where they keep their horses. Treadway kicked on me usin' so much—I tried t' soften the rocky dirt under that pole door with the first bucket he gimme."

"I reckon their strongest point is Prex Styles, down below. If he c'n git loose he'll likely find some way to git a rope up to 'em."

"I tied that gobbler plenty strict," Maguire claimed. "Course a man with lots of time can accomplish a heap—specially one as mad as Prex prob'ly is." As he spoke, Maguire was worming his way among the rocks toward the highest point of the pile.

"Their messenger may get here from Old Mex, too," Rucker suggested. "He must be about due if Yore had the right dope."

The sheriff shook his head.

"Their messenger's done been an' gone," he explained. "Hamp dropped a hint yesterday that they was about through here. I reckon if they had this rope they'd jist pack up an' shin down it, leavin' us high an' dry an' riskin' other marshals bein' in the neighborhood."

Maguire had worked his way to a position from which he could see the windlass, just in time to observe big Treadway walking toward it. The Easterner's clear voice reached him faintly, calling down to Prex Styles. The latter evidently answered or made some sign, for Treadway strode briskly to the tent and returned carrying something that glittered in the level rays of a rising sun.

"Treadway just throwed Styles a butcher knife," Bob announced to the others, and remained on watch. A few minutes later he exclaimed: "Styles must be loose, and Treadway's spotted where I left ol' Tom las' night—he's pointin' thataway



The horse kicked him plumb in the belly!

and hollerin' something. Damn that pilgrim, if he steals that horse—"

"—he'll get an egg busted in him," Rucker finished. "If Cannibal Tom's been tied up short by the head all night he'll be mad enough to eat pieces out of any stranger that even gets in reach, let alone tryin' to untie an' get on him. Wish we could see it."

"You fellas hold the fort here and I'll slip out onto that narrow point yonder—believe I can see from there, and you'll be between me an' them rifles," Maguire decided. With the word he was gone, keeping the low brush in line behind his crouching figure as long as possible. For the few rods of open ground he sprinted, and Treadway's men demonstrated their alertness and malice by slamming half a dozen rifle bullets at him. He reached the point unhurt, however, and crouched behind a waist-high boulder. The sheriff, watching, saw him rise a moment later to wave his hat and shout something at the man below, defiant or heedless of possible bullets.

A few minutes later he came walk-

ing slowly back, this time without being shot at. Hamp and Pete were at the windlass with Treadway, watching events below with undivided attention and undiluted chagrin.

"Ol' Tom musta had one of his treacherous, deceivin' spells," Bob told his friends soberly. "Styles led him out from under the trees to saddle him, with the saddle in one hand and the bridle reins in the other, plumb careless and easy in his mind. Tom musta let him put the bridle on and untie the hackamore rope without a false move, for the feller'd had no warning; walked back an' swung the saddle up like he was layin' it acrost a corral pole.

"Cannibal Tom took him in the groin with a front hoof, wheeled and kicked him square in the brisket with both hind feet. If that feller's alive he's either almighty lucky or uncommon tough. He's still layin' where Tom left him."

Sheriff Cobb eyed Bob a moment in silence. "You yelled—tried to warn him, huh?"

Maguire nodded, a little sheepish.

But both the others merely grunted approval. Range men, long habit dictated against standing by to see even an enemy killed or injured by a bad horse. Both had found occasion in the past to risk their own necks in rescue of a hated individual from some jackpot with a vicious animal. A common enemy, to be met with concerted front.

"How's that point for a place to climb down?" the sheriff inquired a few minutes later. "Anything handy to the aide, we could tie our rope to?"

"Yeah—they's a scrub cedar that looks plenty solid," Maguire admitted. "Question is, how'd we get the rope down behind us?"

"That's easy," the sheriff declared, patting the shotgun with a big freckled hand. "Me an' Shorty, here, we'll stay camped behind that big rock, droppin' the rope behind you two. I been up here so long now I'd git homesick any place else. Besides, them three yonder is my prisoners as sher'f of Plumas County."

"Y' needn't grin, damn ya—they's my prisoners whether they know it yet or not, and I don't aim to lose track of 'em."

He turned his head to glare at the brown tent, as if remembering certain indignities, and presently added: "Anyway, all the real evidence we got is in that tent yonder. If Treadway decided he's trapped, he'll hide it some place—and it'll be a lot easier found if I'm here watchin'. According to Dave Yore, they's been enough opium and diamonds brought here from Ole Mex, to convict a dozen smugglers or make 'em rich."

"So that's what this here fuss is all about," Bob Maguire said innocently. "I been wonderin' some when I had time, but seemed like I never had a chance to inquire."

Lige Rucker burst into storms of uncontrolled laughter, Sheriff Cobb joining in to put his walrus mustache through an unbelievable series of antics.

"Fo-for a man that d-didn't know wha-what it was all about, you shu-sure done noble," Rucker gasped presently. "Rescued two bold lawmen—one of 'em twice—stole their rope and marooned the biggest, slick-est smugglin' gang in years along with the evidence to convict 'em on, all by accident. Couple more accidents like that—"

"All I done was read a little sign and act according. I hadn't lost no smuggler's," Maguire retorted, reddening. He added largely: "Anyway, it was you led the way out here."

"Yeah—like the feller that led the bear into camp," Lige agreed dryly. "Reckon Treadway would trade you for a bear, at that. Most any kinda bear."

"Waal, we ain't outta them bear woods yet ourselves," Sheriff Cobb reminded gruffly, having gained control of his hilarity and mustache. "As I was sayin', you two kin climb down, takin' the rope with you. Once down you kin sneak along them brushy draws 'til you git outta rifle shot, and go git their horses. They're kept in the little wrangle pasture at the old Bar 8 winter line camp. Couple miles south—jist over that notch you kin see in the ridge yonder. The horses is gentle—these pilgrims ketch 'em easy enough afoot. Once mounted y' lead the ex-tries along an' hightail it into Plumas after help—anyway some guns an' light rope. Four-five hours oughta fetch you back here loaded f'r bear."

"That way, our friends would be afoot—even if they find a place to climb down," Lige agreed soberly. "Thing is, I hate to leave you here

alone agin' the whole three of 'em—"

"One man—one shotgun," the sheriff pointed out. "Unarmed men is jest so many targets. An' y' needn't worry none about me—Shorty here has got four belches left in his system, which is one extry. Besides, I'll holler an' tell 'em about the rope bein' down below outta reach—which'll give 'em less reason for tacklin' me hard."

"Let's git goin'."

Twenty minutes later the pair were hurrying along a brushy draw-bottom a quarter mile from Wart Butte, having left the rope hanging conspicuously to a bare limb so the sheriff could point it out from above if necessary. Maguire, glancing over his shoulder as they crossed an open space, suddenly halted and clutched his companion's sleeve.

"The sheriff, he's a-wavin' his hat—"

A bullet whined between them, up-set after passing through thin foliage nearer the butte. Evidently one of their enemies had gained a point of vantage along the rim at one side of the sheriff's position. Both dived for shelter, Maguire poking his head between two rocks for a clear view of the point.

"Cobb's still a-wavin' his hat and pointin' toward Plumas, hollerin' something," he informed Lige who had not yet found a loophole. "I can't make out the words—something about dust. Reckon we better get outta gunshot an' then work around where we can see in that direction, huh?"

CHAPTER VII.

LAST night's "posse" had returned in the small hours, weary and thwarted, to rout a bartender out of bed and spend the remaining dark-

ness in drinking bar whiskey and giving each other detailed and vivid accounts of the things they would do to one Lige Rucker if and when they succeeded in laying hands upon his person.

By daybreak many of them were maudlin or worse, and when word drifted into the Buffalo that McNair had found fresh horse tracks leading south and meant to follow them, these blinked owlishly and guessed they didn't believe a word of it and was tired of wild goose chases anyway. Only Sandy Ferguson and a dozen of the hardest—or perhaps lightest drinkers—were willing and able to respond by going in search of fresh horses. Equipped with a flat bottle of joy water apiece to sustain their spirits over a possible long hard ride, they joined McNair, Georgie Bent and Bedwagon Adams at the edge of town. McNair regarded them dourly but said nothing except "keep back outta the way now and don't mess up these tracks."

Georgie Bent added importantly: "We'll poke along slow to one side of the road 'til Whaley gits here—I done sent a man after him."

They had proceeded a half mile down the road when Joker Hansen overtook them on a dancing sorrel horse and joined the group with no comment beyond a casual "Good morning, gents." With him was Tucker Whaley, of whom it was said that he could trail a coyote across dry country from the back of a trotting horse, and that he averaged eleven words a day when afflicted with human companionship.

Thus it was that Bob Maguire and Lige Rucker came face to face with eighteen mounted men, a mile north of Wart Butte. Having gained high ground in response to the sheriff's urgent hat, they had spied dust ap-

proaching and had hastened toward it. For the moment both confidently expected Lige's predicament to be forgotten in the light of recent events, but glowering unshaved visages prompted doubt. The posse spurred to meet them, separating automatically into two groups with Georgie Bent slightly in the lead.

The latter checked his horse with jerked bridle reins, 45 in hand. "So we meet again, Mr. Rucker," he chortled. "This time, you'll *stay* arrested. Just keep them hands level with your ears, both of you."

Bob and Lige obeyed meekly enough as Sandy's contingent pulled up alongside the deputy; McNair, Hansen, and Adams ranging themselves a little apart. Tucker Whaley, having fulfilled his purpose, drew to one side and sat smoking with no apparent interest in proceedings.

"Where you fellers been?" McNair demanded. "How come you're afoot, after leavin' town on horseback?"

Bob Maguire drew a long breath and plunged into an account of the night's affairs, realizing as he did so that their recital would sound far-fetched and thin unless these men could be persuaded to ride on to the butte. Half finished, he was halted by growls of disbelief from the hot-heads flanking Sandy Ferguson.

"What's all this dime-novel stuff about smugglers and Wart Butte, got to do with Rucker crackin' Terry Birdsal's skull in Plumas las' night?" Sandy demanded impatiently, backed by a chorus of approval. Even Bedwagon Adams wore a dubious expression and eyed Bob Maguire in disgust that a top cowboy should be able to concoct no better yarn.

Maguire grinned ruefully at Lige, who shrugged and grinned back, his cheeks a little white but his lips firm and his eyes steady.

"Wish somebody back yonder would pop a shot or two," said Lige. "Can't even see the dern butte from here—I looked while you was talkin'. Timber hides it."

One of Sandy's cohorts began unbuckling last night's new rope from his saddle fork. Three others edged between McNair's group and the men on the ground, as if to prevent possible interference with their plans. McNair sat his horse stolidly, undecided as to the course he should pursue. He detested lynching on principle, yet believing Rucker guilty, hesitated to take a stand that was pretty certain to mean trouble. Bad trouble for these men—never a tame lot—were on edge after a night of impotent anger and potent whiskey. Several of the freest imbibers already fondled gun butts, though as yet only Georgie Bent had unsheathed his weapon.

Here, the weakest of those present might strike the spark that would father a holocaust; for an angry mob, like a chain, is no better than the least of its members.

Only Joker Hansen remained unaffected by the tense situation; meeting Bob Maguire's gaze, he winked solemnly and jingled a few coins in his pocket. And Bob, remembering, winked back in joyous relief and addressed McNair. He had a hole card now—if it stood up, he might convince even this hard-headed Scotchman. In turn, the blacksmith's opinion would sway these men as nothing else could do, since he had been first to declare Rucker's guilt and had been actual leader of the investigating committee.

"How much silver did Lige have on him last night?" Bob asked quietly. "And what kinda pieces?"

The blacksmith considered, impressed by the other's earnestness.

"A dollar sixty in his pants and

a dollar in Terry's poke," he said slowly. "Two cartwheels, a four-bit piece an' a dime. Why?"

Bob turned to Joker Hansen. "Y' remembered what Terry Birdsall was doing with his right hand when he left the poker game last night?"

"He had it in his pants pocket, jingling a lot of silver," Hansen answered promptly. "Good heavy jingle—musta had a big handful of coins in there, all sizes. I remember givin' him nineteen stove lids and some chicken feed when I cashed his chips, too."

Bedwagon Adams spoke up clearly. "I remember that, too—him jinglin' the coins," he declared. Several other voices were raised in rather bewildered agreement, with a sprinkling of so-whats.

Bob turned again to McNair. "Any silver left on Birdsall when you fellas looked him over?"

McNair shook his head, comprehension dawning clearly if late.

"He was stripped clean," he admitted, and the man's caliber was measured in his even, ungrudging tones. He lifted a hand for attention and addressed the others.

"Looks like we mighta been barkin' at the wrong tomat, boys. Somebody else musta got them coins, for 'tain't likely Rucker would ditch 'em and keep the poke. And the man that got 'em nearly had to be in on the killin'."

"There wasn't room in Terry's poke, and loose coins would of jingled if a certain man tried to plant 'em in Rucker's blankets right in front of McNair and the investigatin' committee," Joker Hansen contributed unemotionally.

"Least we kin do," McNair went on, "is to go back with these boys to the butte. Mebbeso Bob was tellin' the truth, after all, just now, and Sheriff Cobb is reely there. Anyways,

them two afoot sure can't git away from eighteen of us mounted."

Tribute here to Sandy Ferguson, who raised his voice in agreement and quelled the few dissenters with a look.

"As for you, Mr. Bent—you be very, very careful," Bedwagon Adams advised in fatherly tones. "For I'll be riding behind you with a hand pettin' iron, 'til we understand you a little better. I don't jest like the way your face acted a minnit ago."

Since three men awkwardly manrooned are apt to be a bit bashful about opening hostilities with eighteen who are armed, on horseback and free of limitations, no over-act delayed the party's progress in rounding the butte to a point directly below the sheriff's position. Treadway, watching them pass from above, remained in concealment and set his fertile brain to seeking the least disastrous way out a bad situation.

Sheriff Cobb's presence and his eagerly shouted corroboration served to remove lingering doubts. Menacing scowls turned from Lige Rucker to center upon the deputy, whose eyes foretold the confession that his cowardice was later to prompt in a vain effort to shift the major blame onto Prex Styles.

"Subtract Mr. Bent's gun, Bob—and that star," the sheriff directed from above. "He ain't no deputy uh mine no more. Better bundle 'im up some place outta mischief 'til we git the rest of our chores 'tended to."

"An' I wish y'd tie that star onta yore own brisket—for the present anyway. You kin quit tomorra if it gits too tame."

Bob Maguire sprang to mix duty with pleasure, sliding the ex-deputy's Colt into his own waistband and plucking away the star with a

sizable fragment of cloth still fastened to its pin. Bedwagon and a couple of Sandy's cohorts made short work of roping the cringing man to a tree. Curiously, no suggestions were made about the immediate shortening of Bent's future. Lige Rucker later explained this in his own fashion, to the satisfaction of most concerned.

Said Lige: "Nobody had respect enough for Georgie even to hang him."

However, Georgie Bent was later to pay for the murder of Terry Birdsal—alone, since Cannibal Tom had been very rough indeed with Prex Styles and Prex could not be revived for trial and hanging.

Of those present, Sandy Ferguson alone remained unsatisfied with developments. Too single-minded to admit of leaving any issue unsettled, with Sandy a change of policy must bubble from within after due fermentation. He dismounted and edged closer to Bob Maguire, blue eyes shooting sparks.

"I give you the right about Lige Rucker, and I reckon maybe I'm glad you headed us off," he admitted evenly. "But I still doubt if you qualify when it comes to kickin' my pants bosom like you offered to las' night, Mr. Deacon Wildcat. How about a demonstration, soon as we've helped the sheriff make his authority stick?"

"Remind me if I forget," retorted Bob, gray eyes glinting above a tight grin of anticipation.

"Seems to me I got first call," Lige Rucker interrupted. "The minute we git Treadway and company under control, Ferguson."

"Hey, you fellers—quit that jangling and figger out a way to git up here, if you aim to be such a big help," the sheriff called down. "I crave breakfast, an' them prisoners

uh mine has still got charge of all the noticeable grub."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE promontory on which Sheriff Cobb had taken his stand jutted from the butte at an angle, like the thumb on a mitten. Its sides were mostly solid rock, vertical and smooth. But within the angle of mitten and thumb layers of dirt stood between rock ledges in the wall of the butte proper. Bushes and several small twisted cedars had found root here, their trunks bent sharply upward as if straining to cling against the sheer face. Erosion had swept the dirt from occasional ledges to form precarious footing for a man if—as Bedwagon Adams dryly opined—his feet were not too big and his belt buckle not too far from his backbone.

"A man wants t' resemble a sheet of tanglefoot flypaper," Bedwagon stated, and found no contradiction.

The sheriff, having had ample time to study the situation, was able to point out a route which might be negotiated by an active man with scant respect for the law of gravity. Zigzag up the wall from ledge to ledge and bush to tree, each vantage point calling for a man to cling with one hand while his free arm cast a loop upward to the next. At the top directly opposite Sheriff Cobb's position, several tall boulders would afford protection to a man clambering over the edge, concealing him from Treadway's reception party. Provided, the sheriff admitted grimly, that anybody was able to climb that far.

"Which ain't likely," he admitted dubiously. "Some uh them bushes may not be rooted any solider'n they look, which would be plumb disastrous. And she's a good eighty feet

straight up an' down. I guess we better jist wait and starve them fellers out."

The latter suggestion found scant consideration among the men below, since the sheriff himself must enter any such starvation Marathan with a handicap of whatever supplies the smugglers might have on hand.

"You're skinny enough as it is," Bob Maguire assured him, and turned to unbuckle a rope from the nearest saddle. "With a couple of throw ropes and some trust in the Maguire luck, I kin mount that dinky butte like Jacob climbin' his ladder."

"Me first," declared Sandy Ferguson. "I heap-savvy climbin'. Spent las' summer over in Arizony, helpin' a spindle-shanked bug hunter poke around them Injun cliff dwellings."

Lige Rucker was not to be outdone, especially by the man who so recently had knotted a hangman's noose.

"We'll draw straws," said he, and plucked three from the grass at his feet. "Longest takes the lead, but all three of us will go up. String the ropes together as we climb."

Ferguson drew the long straw and promptly scrambled toward the first ledge twenty feet above his head, which could be reached without benefit of lariat. Maguire, a disgruntled third, went to fetch the heavy windlass rope while the other two climbed out of his way. Lige Rucker tossed a couple of coiled saddle ropes to Sandy on his ledge, and began climbing while the other still balanced precariously to cast loops at the first scrub cedar. The fourth cast fell true and Sandy tested gingerly with his weight.

"She'll hold—I hope," said Sandy, and swung clear of his ledge to bring up directly below the cedar. The little tree sagged perceptibly and its

disturbed roots sent dry dirt rattling down the wall into Sandy's shirt collar. But it held, and Sandy hoisted himself awkwardly hand over hand until he was able to hook one knee across the twisted trunk and maneuver himself into position astride it.

Here was choice of two possible anchors within throwing distance above him: a protruding rock eight or ten feet to his left, over the ledge he had just quitted, and a sagebrush the same distance to his right. The sagebrush grew straight up from a tiny flat, but the dirt under it looked crumbly and insecure.

"Reckon the rock is solidest, if I can make a loop stick onto it," Sandy decided aloud. His third gripped and held. A glance downward showed Lige Rucker halfway up to the first ledge, climbing industriously.

"Better hold up a minnit, Rucker," he advised. "If that rock is loose she may roll right atcha."

"Let 'er roll," Lige retorted grimly, and kept coming. Lige was in no mood to take safety measures upon advice from this man he disliked.

"Suit yoreself," snapped Sandy, and launched himself from the cedar without waiting to test his new anchor's solidity. Above, the sheriff shouted belated warning as Sandy's weight scraped along the wall. A small avalanche of dirt and gravel came cascading noisily down. The rock settled forward in its bed, like an animal crouching to spring. Sandy, feeling it give, let go his hold to chance dropping back on the ledge below him. But the slack of his lariat had wrapped once around a leg during the short swing, and its grip was enough to jerk him head downward and to bring the rock leaping hungrily after him. To-

gether they struck the ledge, and went on to bounce and roll down the more sloping lower wall to level ground and out upon the level. Sandy's body still hopelessly entangled with rope and boulder, a crushed and broken pitiful thing.

Bob Maguire, returning with his windlass rope, was in line with the freighted boulder's path; it rolled to a stop almost at his very feet, and he leaped to grip it and arch his back in a mighty heave. Reluctantly the boulder slid from its victim, and Maguire bent to straighten mangled limbs. Other men came rushing, to read finality in the bleak eyes he raised to theirs.

"A man's entitled to a few mistakes," said Maguire, as if speaking to himself. "Sandy thought that Lige had murdered his friend last night. But Treadway—"

He broke off, strode to where Lige Rucker had sat up nursing a badly twisted ankle. Lige had leaped aside in the nick of time, with no consideration for his landing. His features now were a study in woe; the eyes he lifted to meet Maguire's were pools of misery.

"Oh—I'm all right except for this damn ankle," he assured. "But it was my fault Sandy swung under that rock without testing it—me snapping at him kid fashion like I done. I reckon you shoulda let 'im hung me."

"Don't blame yourself—blame Treadway an' his damn dope smugglin'," said Maguire bleakly. "Hadn't been for Treadway, none of this would of happened."

He picked up the three lariats that Bedwagon Adams had coiled neatly in readiness for tossing to the climbers, and arranged them across his shoulders. A short scramble enabled him to reach the rope that Sandy Ferguson had left dangling

from the little cedar—the latter's altercation with Rucker having made him forget flipping it's slack back to rest on the ledge for Rucker to use.

Paying no more heed to protests from behind him and above than he did to creaking of the weakened tree, Maguire went up hand over hand, taking advantage of every possible foothold to ease the strain on his arms. His movements had the methodical rhythm of a settled determination that took no account of failure; accurate and sure as if they had been rehearsed for weeks.

At the cedar his first deft flip noosed the sagebrush above and to his right; he paused only long enough to cut the first rope loose and knot it to the second. The sagebrush stood upon a tiny earthen flat whose edge the hard rope worried and rubbed, the dirt tumbling down until Maguire was forced to keep his eyes tight shut as he climbed to it.

From here there was only one possible target for his rope. A protruding rock that closely resembled Sandy Ferguson's betrayer, directly above Maguire's position. Testing it was pointless, since any jerk severe enough to loosen the rock must bring it down upon him. He yanked tight his first successful loop and started up without hesitation, matter-of-fact as a fireman mounting his ladder.

Above, Sheriff Cobb gripped the shotgun until his muscles ached, all thought of his duties as "jailer" forgotten. He had long since forsaken the safety of his shielding boulder to stand at the promontory's very edge.

Below, Bedwagon Adams muttered in awed tones, unable to shift his gaze from Maguire's clinging figure and the rock above it. "How

c'n he go at it so dang cold-blooded, after just watchin' Sandy? My innards is plumb gone numb if that rock gives an inch m' legs'll turn to robber."

But this one was more securely belted, and in a moment Maguire's fingers left the rope to clutch its rough edges. Surmounting it was a desperate struggle that brought gasps from the watchers. It gave a little under the leverage of his squirming body, loosening dirt and gravel in a nerve-cracking rattle. But behind it was a ledge of dirt and solid rock, nearly four feet in depth. Thankfully Maguire rolled to this security and lay for a moment breathing heavily, as thoroughly shaken as he could ever remember having been.

This was the zigzag ladder's last rung; ten feet above him the jagged end of a dead tree, broken in falling, protruded over the butte's edge. From this ledge it was scarcely twenty feet across the angle of mitten and thumb to the sheriff's position, including additional height.

His breath and composure regained, Maguire scrambled erect and straightened the coils of his third and last lariat, shaking out his usual tiny loop. "This'll be pickings," he commented, glancing across toward Sheriff Cobb. "That log—"

He broke off, ice water flooding every vein. For the sheriff sprawled motionless on the rocky surface of the narrow promontory, and over him crouched Harris Treadway. The latter was pocketing a blackjack with one hand while the other reached to scoop up the fallen shotgun. In the same motion the great head was turning to face Maguire, arrogant features triumphant.

"Thanks for the ropes, cowboy," said Treadway. "If you drop that one now you die, of course."

The shotgun was swinging into line in the big man's left hand, his finger already inside the trigger guard, his thumb lifting the hammer. No time for Maguire to drop his rope and fish out the .45 he had tucked so carefully and securely under his waistband. And standing as he was, back from the edge, the big Easterner could not be seen by the group close against the butte's foot below. In a moment he'd have possession of those ropes, so laboriously strung together at peril of Maguire's life, and be waiting only for darkness to climb down at some unexpected spot and disappear with his sleeve full of laughter. All that hard climbing, Sandy's death and Lige's crippled ankle—

"Here goes nothin'" said Bob Maguire, and launched his throat-latch loop with a snap of wrist and forearm. The hard-driven rope literally screamed as it whipped through the air. So swiftly it sped that Treadway, caught in an awkward position, had no time to dodge or fend. An excitable, less controlled man might have pulled trigger at the instant the noose jerked snug around his thick neck. But Treadway's quick eye saw Maguire's left hand wrap itself in slack at the rope's other end, and cool wit stayed his trigger finger. At his feet the sheriff stirred, groaned and lifted himself on one elbow.

Deliberately Maguire stepped upon the big rock at the ledge's outer edge, contemptuous now of its slight trembling under his weight. Treadway glimpsed the rock's movement, and his breath caught sharply at throat level.

"You kin fire when ready, Gridley," Maguire misquoted, the musical voice steady and even and entirely untroubled. "We'll both tumble to hell together.

"Or you can let the sheriff have

that sawed-off, butt first and slow, and tell your men to walk out on the point with their hands up an' empty."

Treadway was a brave man, ready to risk any dangerous course that might seem necessary or profitable. But he was also a cool-witted opportunist, with ever a thought to the main chance. His eyes now were on the steady trickle of loosened dirt at the settling boulder's lower edge. No telling at what instant that boulder would let go and plummet downward, taking Maguire along. Maguire, in turn, would jerk Treadway after him; in his present awkward position even such mighty thews as Treadway's could never withstand the shock of the other's plummeting weight. And, if he tried to straighten, dragging Maguire forward the required six inches—Treadway's mind reverted to his conversation with the bartender, less than twenty hours ago.

"He just don't give a damn," the bartender had said. And Treadway, taking in the cowboy's carelessly tranquil pose on the settling boulder, was ready to believe. Even to salute mentally the bartender's talent for understatement.

A hatful of dirt and one large pebble slid away from under the boulder, the pebble striking with sickening suggestiveness far below. The boulder tilted forward a full two

inches, Maguire's limbs adjusting themselves to maintain balance but homely features remaining changeless and serene. Maguire had made his decision when he voiced his battle cry of "Here goes nothing!" it was Treadway's move if any.

"He—just—dont," Treadway said aloud, as if in pious agreement with another's spoken statement. "And what can you do with a man like that?"

The sheriff was sitting up groggily now, slowly gathering his bruised wits. Treadway poked the shotgun gently toward him, careful not to shift his weight against the taut rope, and spread his hands in a gesture of defeat.

"All right. I'll give Pete and Hamp their orders," he capitulated. "But for God's sake step back off that rock, Maguire. It's ready to go any instant."

Leisurely, Maguire shifted one foot to solid ground and rested most of his weight on it, the other remaining lightly on the tilted boulder. He grinned across at Treadway, the same engaging grin the Easterner remembered from their first meeting, plus a slight flush of victory—or relief.

"Glad you see it my way, Chicago," he said lazily. "I was kinda scairt you was gonna be stubborn. And Sandy Ferguson was an awful mess, down yonder."





SANTA RIDES SOUTH

They were rival Santa Clauses, burdened with gifts, and Death lurked in the tinsel wrappings!

By Dean McKinley

GUN-ROARING danger rode stirrup-close along the Rio Grande trail as twilight came. It was Christmas Eve, and the first star over Texas shone as brightly as ever a star gleamed above Judea, but the two men who traveled the twisting trail did not talk of peace, or even of good will toward men.

They were tight-lipped men who talked, when they spoke at all, of murder.

For the most part they rode warily, keen eyes challenging every wind-twisted cedar, each cactus that reared a sinister shape against the fading sky. They had been on the trail overlong; their horses were tired, and the nerves of the riders were trigger-taut.

Judge Roy Bean—"Law West of the Pecos"—to thousands of square miles of gun-ruled wasteland—shifted his generous bulk in the sad-

dle and sighed gustily. From the top of the rise he could make out the distant scatter of lights that marked Langtry, the wild little cow and railroad town over which he ruled as duly elected justice of the peace.

"I hate to go back empty handed, by gobs!" the old lawman growled. "If we just had some clue to go on—or a trail to follow! All we know is that them buzzards wore buckskin masks!"

Blackstone Bangs nodded. He was as rangy as Roy Bean was stout—a rawboned redhead of more than six feet. He looked like a hard-riding, two-fisted cowpuncher instead of what he really was, a rising young attorney, unusually well versed in legal lore.

"What strikes me as strange, judge," he said in an easy drawl, "is this. Why should anybody want to rob the Sheffield stage in the first place? It never carries anything of value."

"It never carries anything!" Old Roy snorted. "Let's see—the first time, when they killed Joe Evers, it was plumb empty except for a mail sack. And they didn't touch that. The second time, when they wounded Shorty Gaines, they didn't bother the express box. And yesterday—"

The judge didn't finish. He didn't need to remind Blackstone what had happened yesterday. The same buckskin-masked gang that had wounded Shorty Gaines came back. They had unloosed a deadly blast of lead from ambush, riddling the latest driver, Comanche Garrett. They had kidnaped his only passenger, Ranse Howard, a mining engineer from over Terlingua way where the quicksilver mines were.

Only Garrett hadn't died as quickly as the Buckskin Mask gang apparently thought. He had lived

long enough to reach Langtry and tell of the masks, the kidnaping, and how he had shot a .45 out of one hombre's hand.

For a few minutes, both the lawmen from Langtry were silent, and there was only the monotonous creak of saddle leather and a faint jingle of spurs above the dull shuffle of the horses' hoofs on the rocky trail. That was the trouble with this trail and all the others in this part of the country, Blackstone Bangs thought. Too rocky. The Buckskin Mask gang struck and rode away, and left nothing to tell whether they had gone east or west, north or south.

"I reckon the State will be sendin' a Ranger," Roy Bean said bitterly, after a time. "Maybe two Rangers, even."

"Maybe not yet," the gun-carrying lawyer answered hopefully. Since hanging out his shingle in Langtry, where Old Roy ran the Jersey Lily Saloon and dispensed redeye and a colorful brand of frontier justice with equal aplomb, Blackstone Bangs had learned that nothing hurt the judge so much as a blow to his pride. And it would be a severe blow, indeed, if the State had to send Rangers to round up the Buckskin Mask gang.

"Well, let 'em!" Old Roy growled with sudden fierceness. "They'll learn how tough it is to corral them buzzards. Only thing I hate about it is them Howard kids." His voice softened, and he looked toward the sprinkle of lights. "And Miz Howard. It's kinda hard on that family, not knowin' whether Ranse Howard's dead or alive—and here it is Christmas Eve. By gobs, Blackstone—I plumb forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

"I plumb forgot it was Christmas Eve! And the town will be figgerin' on me puttin' on a Santy Claus rig

and handin' out gifts! We'd better ride up!"

Blackstone Bangs chuckled as they spurred the tired horses. Even without a Santa Claus rig, Old Roy greatly resembled the jolly saint. His circumference at the point where the cartridge belt of his walnut-butted .45 circled his waist was such that he needed no pillow for a padding. He had apple cheeks and a fringe of closely trimmed white whiskers, and his blue eyes were mild and merry. But there had been times when the gun-lawyer saw mildness swept from those eyes by storm and steel—

And now, when they had scarcely begun the faster pace toward Langtry, Roy Bean jerked rein on his sorrel horse and clapped his hand to his holster. Blackstone saw it at the same instant—a blur of movement in the trail ahead. A horseman, riding toward them.

The tall redhead pulled his own horse to a halt, frowning into the thickening gloom. There seemed to be only one rider approaching, but there might be others hidden in the rocks and brush of the low hills. And something was strange about the man. He appeared to be queerly deformed, with a crooked hump on his shoulders which gave him a sinister aspect.

The rifle cracked without warning. It came from the right, where cedar clumps straggled up to the ragged rimrock, and its echoes whipped away and died on the crisp north wind. Now there was only a strangled, wordless cry, a clatter in the trail, and the thud of a body falling.

Hump and all, the lone horseman melted into the blackness that lay underfoot. Roy Bean whisked his gun out of leather and whirled toward the sound of the shot. The gun

lawyer swung his roan cow pony sidewise, ready to give chase.

But they heard a horse's hoofs hammering over the rimrock and beyond, making time too fast for their own tired mounts. And a shout rode tauntingly down the night wind:

"That squares us, Turner—and that's my last job!"

Roy Bean sucked in a deep breath. "By gobs!" he exclaimed, "maybe this is more of that outfit's work! The Buckskin Mask gang! Come on, Blackstone!"

They leaped from their horses at the side of the pitiful huddle in the trail. A large canvas saddlebag lay near the wounded man; both the Langtry riders knew this was what they had seen over his shoulder to give him the appearance of being deformed. The horse with an empty saddle was threshing through the greasewood, stirrups rattling.

Old Roy bent over the sniper's victim and heard the gurgle that came with each breath.

"He's done for!" growled the judge. He lifted the man's head and shoulders. "Never seen him before. Who are you, hombre? Who shot you, and what for?"

"I . . . I . . . it was Beckett!" the dying rider whispered. "Beckett. Tell them. Tell—"

The words died in a moan. Roy Bean shook his head. "Where?" he demanded. "Tell them where? Where was you headed?"

There was no answer. Blackstone lifted the canvas bag. It was heavy with a rectangular package which nearly filled it. They saw the bullet victim's eyes flick toward the bag, and then close as if in weariness.

"What's in here?" Blackstone asked softly. "Money?"

"No!" whispered the dying man. A grim smile split his ashen lips. "No . . . presents. Christmas presents

for the twins. The Ketchum twins . . . down . . . at Rincon! You—"

That was all. His body stiffened with a convulsive spasm of pain, and then went limp. His head rolled to one side in the judge's arms. Roy Bean let him down gently to the trail dust.

"Cashed in!" he said harshly. "Dry-gulched on Christmas Eve. And down across the Rio, at Rincon, there's a couple of kids waitin' for him to come with Christmas. Twins—waitin' for their presents!"

Blackstone Bangs nodded, his mouth a hard, bleak line. Christmas for the Ketchum twins would be like Christmas for the Howard family in Langtry, he thought. Not a day of joy.

"We've got to get on to town!" Old Roy declared. He was breathing hard as he shoved the big .45 back into his holster. "They'll be waitin' for me to play Santy Claus, Blackstone. Hoist that sack up on your saddle, and let's ride."

They swung down the trail toward the lights of Langtry. Roy Bean shifted restlessly in his saddle. "The poor little kids!" he muttered, as if talking to himself. "By gobs, them poor little kids!"

II.

The Jersey Lily Saloon was unaccountably deserted, with only one coal oil lamp burning behind the bar. Bart Gobble, tall, stringbean deputy of the Law West of the Pecos, leaned his elbows disconsolately on the bar as Old Roy and Blackstone entered. "You didn't find nothin'?" he asked pessimistically. "Which way did you go?"

"Along the Rio," grunted the judge. He slapped dust from his chaps and reached for two bottles of beer. The cold wind had made his

nose and cheeks glow; he looked more like Santa Claus than ever.

Bart Gobble shook his head. "They wouldn't head for Mexico, Roy," he said. "If they was in Mexico, why would they bother to hold up a little two-bit stage line like the one between here and Sheffield? Why would they come that far?"

"Don't ask me," grunted the judge. He straightened and frowned toward the door. "Where's all the kids? It's time for me to get into my Santy Claus suit. It's time the kids was all here. Last Christmas, they was here at sundown!"

Gobble looked away, and Blackstone Bangs heard a distant chorus of childish laughter. The sound came drifting up across the railroad tracks. From the rival Prairie Belle Saloon—

Roy Bean heard it, too. "By gobs!" he bristled. "They went down there! They went to that den of iniquity! How come, Bart?"

"Tony Ramos has been tellin' it around that you probably wouldn't get back in time, if you got back at all," Gobble growled. "He got a Santy Claus suit of his own. He talked the crowd into bringin' the presents down to his place, and he fixed up a cedar tree—"

Old Roy's fist banged the bar. "The dirty crook! He's just out for more liquor trade, that's all!"

"That ain't all," Bart Gobble corrected. "He's talkin' about runnin' for the justice of the peace job. He's out to corral votes."

Roy Bean snorted, and hurried heavily into the back room of the Jersey Lily. They could hear him puffing and grumbling over a trunk. "I been Santy Claus to this town for six years!" he called out to them. "And I ain't resignin' for no saddle-colored greaser like Tony Ramos!"

"Tony's already passin' out the gifts," said Bart Gobble.

"I got an argument he'll listen to!" growled Roy Bean, significantly. He emerged, wearing a red cotton jacket trimmed with soiled, moth-eaten cotton, and baggy red trousers that were wrinkled with long storage. He jammed a peaked Santa Claus hat on his closely cropped white hair, and buckled the gun belt around his waist, patting the .45 as it snuggled against his thigh.

"Saddle two fresh hosses for me and Blackstone," he told the deputy, and then looked at the gun lawyer. "That is, if you want to go to Rincon with me after we've finished playin' Santy Claus here!"

Blackstone Bangs grinned. Rincon was only a few miles across the Rio Grande, but it might have been leagues away even in comparison with the pretense Langtry made at abiding by the law. Rincon, a huddle of adobe and *sacaguista*-topped huts sprawled in the greasewood flat, did not even make a pretense.

"Count me in," drawled the gun lawyer. "The Ketchum twins are going to have their Christmas, too!"

He lifted the heavy sack the rifle victim had carried. Bart Gobble muttered something about them being plumb loco if they went to Rincon at night, and shambled out to saddle the horses. Old Roy finished his beer.

A few minutes later, they rode down across the railroads tracks and swung down at the rear of the Prairie Belle. Another shout of laughter drifted out as Old Roy cautiously opened the back door. There was a tinkle of glasses, too. Tony Ramos catered to the lawless element in Langtry, just as previous owners of the saloon had done, and now the two lawmen saw that the riffraff was at the bar, as usual. But the back end of the Prairie Belle had been cleared of its tables, and filled with

rows of borrowed chairs. Here the audience sat, facing a candle-lighted Christmas tree.

"Billy Stevens!"

Tony Ramos, a squat, long-armed Santa in a makeshift suit, called the name. Young Billy Stevens answered excitedly, and came forward. He was freckled, towheaded, and about ten years old.

Ramos patted the lad's shoulder benevolently enough. "You have been a good boy, Billy?" he asked, and there was a roar of coarse laughter at the bar. "All right. Here is your present. And now remember one thing, Billy. Tell your parents to vote for Tony Ramos for justice of the peace. You understand?"

"Sure, Santy!" the boy shrilled, clutching the package. "You bet!"

Roy Bean growled under his breath. Tony Ramos came around the tree, reaching for another package. For a space, the big cedar was between him and the audience.

In that space, Roy Bean moved forward silently, cautiously, walking on the balls of his feet. His gun came out, its chill steel reflecting the candle gleam.

"Just keep 'em up!" the judge advised, and the muzzle dug into Tony's side. "And don't move. There can't be two Santy Clauses, you know!"

Blackstone Bangs saw Ramos' eyes narrow behind the mask. The Mexican stiffened. "Keep out of this, Bean!" he snarled. "Get out of my place, or—"

Old Roy was in a mood for oratory. Nobody could hear him in the audience, but his words came plainly to the gun lawyer:

"Two Santy Clauses, seen at the same time, would shake the faith of trusting little children, Ramos! The sight of two Santy Clauses would cause old and hardened guzzlers of

buzzard sweat, of which the variety you sell is the vilest known, to throw away their bottles. You don't want that to happen, Ramos!"

"Get out!" repeated the squat man. "I—"

"You get out!" chuckled Roy Bean. "You've been fired. I'm Santy Claus tonight in two places. When I finish here, I'm drivin' my reindeer down to Rincon to be Santy there. I'm takin' a present to two little boys—the Ketchum twins. Now, move!"

The muzzle dug deeper. Tony Ramos backed toward the door, keeping the lighted tree between him and the crowd. He was muttering imprecations under his breath.

"I'll . . . I'll—"

Blackstone reached out and caught the Mexican from behind. In one swift move, the gun lawyer took Ramos' six-gun, and yanked him out the door.

"The judge means business," drawled the redhead. "If I were you, I'd come back some time after midnight. Maybe the spirit of Christmas will be in the air by then?"

Ramos ripped the mask from his swarthy face and flung it on the ground with an oath. He eyed Blackstone's gun, and shrugged his shoulders as the muzzle motioned him away from the door.

"All right!" the Mexican said between his teeth. "But you will see. Roy Bean will see, too! You wait!"

"We'll wait," grunted the gun lawyer. "But *you* don't wait, savvy? You travel—and don't go around to the front. I'll be watching."

Inside, Roy Bean was making a little speech: ". . . and so Santy Claus—the real Santy Claus—got delayed while he was out lookin' for a bunch of skunks. But now he's back. And you folks don't pay any attention to what was said about votin' for Tony Ramos. You just go

on votin' for Roy Bean, same as usual. And next year, when you hang up your stockings—"

"How about talkin' less, and doin' somethin' about that Buckskin Mask gang?" demanded a man in the audience. "Then we'll see about the votes, Bean!"

"Yeah!" another agreed. "You're Law West of the Pecos! How about Ranse Howard? Where's he? What kind of Christmas is it for his kids?"

"We want Rangers here to get them hombres!"

"Just a minute!" Roy Bean pleaded. "This is Christmas Eve. Let's don't think of violence now, my friends. In a little while Santy has to ride south to take Christmas to a couple of little twins who would be forgot, otherwise. After that's done, it'll be time to start huntin' for them buzzards again!"

"Little twins—bah!" spat Tony Ramos. He turned swiftly and walked to the corral behind the Prairie Belle. Blackstone Bangs, chuckling over Old Roy's flight of oratory, watched the Mexican melt into the shadows. And then his chuckle died.

Ramos was riding south. Toward the Rio Grande—toward Rincon.

III.

The last package came down from the tree an hour later. It was a pop-gun, and the youngster who received it was making the Prairie Belle sound like a range war as the crowd thinned. Somebody was still trying to heckle Roy Bean about his failure to corral the Buckskin Mask gang.

"Shh!" the judge cautioned. "You want the kids to know that me and Santy Claus are the same person?"

He hurried out the back way, then, and motioned the gun lawyer toward their horses. The judge's shoulders

were drooping wearily, and Blackstone knew his pride had been hurt. They thought he couldn't handle the law west of the Pecos. They thought the Buckskin Mask gang was too much for him.

"By gobs!" Old Roy growled fiercely as he swung a leg over his saddle. "I'll show 'em. I'll find that outfit, somehow. Maybe I ought to drive the Sheffield stage myself!"

"And get shot from ambush?" Blackstone shook his head. "No. Put a guard inside the stage. Let word get around that it's hauling a money box."

Old Roy turned his horse toward the Rio Grande. "Poor little kids!" he said huskily. "Hangin' up their stockings. Waitin' for Santy. And maybe that was their daddy who got shot!"

"The hombre who pulled the trigger called him Turner," Blackstone recalled. "So I guess he wouldn't be the father of twins named Ketchum."

Old Roy considered this for a time. A cold half moon was up, laying an eerie half light over the gray ghosts of the mesquites. The norther had died, and there was a frosty tang to the air. Somewhere out in the night a coyote yapped—the sound had a brittle, lingering quality.

"Well, then," amended the judge, "maybe Turner was their uncle. I can't get them kids out of my mind."

They came to the canyon of the Rio Grande, and took a twisting trail down the bank. The stream spread wide and dark and placid, making a little swishing murmur like a breeze through the willows. And there was the moon streak, painting a shimmer halfway across.

"The kids will probably be in bed, now," Old Roy said as he put his horse into the water. "But anyway,

when they wake up, they'll know Santy Claus has come!"

Mexico looked like some more of Texas—with low, rimrocked hills and alkali flats dotted with greasewood and stunted mesquite. The lawmen from Langtry emptied the chill water of the Rio from their boots and rode on south. Two miles beyond the border river, and they saw Rincon.

"Maybe we ain't too late!" Old Roy said hopefully. "There's a light in that big cantina. And listen!"

Blackstone Bangs nodded. Guitar music. It sounded like a *baile* was in progress. Roy Bean rode his horse close to the gun lawyer's side.

"I'll take that saddlebag, now, Blackstone!" he said. "I figger we ought to ride right up, and maybe into the *cantina*. Let 'em know Santy Claus has come!"

The red-headed attorney opened his mouth to protest. Tony Ramos had come this way, with murder black in his heart. There was no telling what Ramos would do—what sort of reception he had arranged for Old Roy.

But the judge was pressing on eagerly, and Blackstone Bangs said nothing. He knew Roy Bean's flair for showmanship—nothing would stop the lovable old duffer now, when there was a chance to make a spectacular entry.

"I wish we had some sleigh bells!" Old Roy called back over his shoulder. "Come on—ride up!"

Blackstone loosened his gun in its holster, and rode. They passed the first straggle of *sacaguista*-thatched roofs. The music was clearer, closer. Their spurs jingled faintly, and the gun lawyer thought that a man might close his eyes and imagine he was hearing Kris Kringle's swift reindeer from far away—

"They got a Christmas tree!" ex-

ulted the judge. "We're in time, all right! Hooray for Santy Claus!"

Now the music stopped, and the rolling thunder of their horses' hoofs echoed from the adobe walls on both sides of the street. All at once doors jerked open in the cantina, and a crowd was pouring out.

"*Viva!*" they shouted. "*Viva Navidad! Viva Noche Buena!*"

"Listen to 'em," laughed Roy Bean. "*Navidad* is Christmas, and *Noche Buena* is Christmas Eve. They—"

"It's Santy Claus!" boomed an American voice. "Hooray!"

A gun roared, spouting flame skyward, and another and a third took up the rolling clamor. Blackstone Bangs saw men lurching from the doorways, yelling in maudlin joy. He thought grimly that Rincon had begun its celebration early, and in earnest, and he reflected that many a man wanted by Texas law had drifted to this side of the Rio Grande—

But Old Roy was swinging down from his saddle, and the cantina lights splashed over his Santa Claus suit. He waved the sack.

"Here I am, Santy Claus on hoss-back!" he yelled. "Where can I find them little twins—the Ketchum boys? I got presents for 'em!"

A ripple of mirth went through the crowd. A big man whose yellowish whiskers proclaimed him as a gringo pressed forward and removed his battered Stetson.

"Right this way, Santy!" he belowed. "Right inside. The Ketchum twins is waitin', and we didn't know what to do. There wasn't no presents on the tree for the twins. Come in and meet the other Santy Claus!"

Blackstone Bangs crowded close to Roy Bean's side. "Keep your eyes peeled!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. "Ramos—"

Then the gun lawyer bit off his words in a sudden click of his jaw. There was Santa Claus, standing before them, his legs planted wide. Tony Ramos, wearing the same costume he had worn in the Prairie Belle Saloon, except for the mask.

The mask Ramos wore now only covered half of his swarthy face—and it was made of buckskin!

IV.

Blackstone Bangs heard the judge's one startled grunt, and whipped a glance over the big room. There was the Christmas tree. The bar, and a few men coming from it, glasses in hand. There were women herding children toward the door—getting out before the guns started blazing. And closer at hand were the mocking faces of a dozen tough-looking hombres, Mexican and American renegades.

He saw three windows on the side, all barred, and a single door at the rear, beyond the Christmas tree. There seemed to be no way out.

"Well, well!" Ramos' voice was a dagger wrapped in silk. "It is the so-good judge, come to play Santa Claus again! First he is Santa Claus in my Langtry saloon. And now in my cantina in Rincon!"

Roy Bean grunted again. There was an easy smile on the judge's face, but the storm blue had come into his eyes.

"We're plumb glad to be here, Ramos!" he drawled coolly. "And that mask looks plumb natural on you. Wear it often?"

Ramos shrugged. "As I choose."

A silence fell, tense, electric. The storm could break at any instant, now. And both the Texans knew they would be shot down if they laid hand to their guns.

"I'm lookin' for the Ketchum

twins," Roy Bean said. He swung the sack to his shoulder, and looked after the dwindling group of children. "If they'll come forward, I'll deliver the presents."

Ramos nodded. "They'll take the presents. Come up by the tree. And you'd better hand over your guns—it is not in the spirit of Christmas for the good Santa Claus to be carrying a gun!"

Roy Bean's eye flicked around him and caught the glint of lights on half a dozen unsheathed barrels. He nodded, and the smile was still on his face, but his lips were taut. The yellow-bearded man, a mocking grin on his lips, shambled in close and lifted Old Roy's walnut-butted .45 from its holster.

"Ain't no use, Blackstone," the judge warned. "Let 'em take it."

The redhead nodded. This was Tony Ramos' gun trap—whether it was purely in revenge for the humiliation the Mexican had suffered in Langtry, neither could say. Perhaps Ramos wore a buckskin mask merely because he had discarded his own back there behind the Prairie Belle. But the very fact that such a mask was to be found in Rincon indicated that the murder gang had its headquarters there.

They moved toward the candle-spangled tree. Ramos gestured for Roy Bean to speak.

"What's them Ketchum boys' first names?" the judge asked.

"One is Henry," Ramos said, smiling. "The other is *Estevan*—Steve."

Old Roy lifted his voice. "Henry Ketchum! Steve Ketchum!"

Then he stopped. The yellow-bearded man was shuffling forward, walking as a bear walks, with slow, powerful steps. He had shoved Roy Bean's gun into his holster. Now he held out his hand. Looking beyond him, the Texas lawmen saw another

hombre—a big, slovenly man who was clean shaven, but whose walk was the same!

"By gobs!" exclaimed Roy Bean.

The second man lifted a hand that was bandaged. "I'm Steve!" he grinned without mirth, and Blackstone Bangs' mind flashed back to the last holdup, and Comanche Garrett shooting a gun out of an outlaw's hand.

"Come on!" Henry Ketchum snarled. "If this is a joke, spring it and laugh, because we'll be changin' your tune mighty pronto! And if you're packin' a warrant for our arrest, we're goin' to make you eat it!"

Roy Bean eyed them for a few seconds. When he spoke, there was a mild reproof in his soft drawl.

"Well, boys," he began, "you sure have growed! Here I been thinkin' how you hung up your socks tonight and knelt to say your prayers! And, by gobs, I'll bet it's been years since you said any prayers, and weeks since you changed your socks! In fact, I don't figger you've been very good boys. You ain't helped your maw with the dishes, and you ain't chopped any wood—"

"If that sack's for us, hand it over!" growled Steve Ketchum. "But first, talk up! Where'd you get it?"

Roy Bean's voice went steely. "An hombre named Turner was bringin' it. And another hombre named Beckett killed him!"

"Beckett!" exclaimed the man with the bandaged hand. "The dirty double-crossin' skunk! He quit us, Ramos. He—"

"Here's your present!" said Roy Bean, and started to swing the sack down. As he moved to do this, his eyes caught Blackstone's and flashed a signal. The signal for action.

The sack did not touch the floor. Instead, it swung in a sudden smashing half-circle, with all the strength

in Roy Bean's powerful shoulders behind it. There was a warning cry, a crash, and Steve Ketchum went sprawling sidewise as the box inside the canvas caught him heavily behind the ear.

At the same instant, Blackstone Bangs knotted his fists and leaped for the yellow-bearded man. His knuckles drove hard against the tangle of whiskers; he saw Tony Ramos staggering as Steve Ketchum's bulk hurtled against his knees, and a bright stab of gun flame paled the candlelight.

"This way, Blackstone!" bawled Old Roy. The gun lawyer slammed a fist into a snarling, swarthy face and felt the searing breath of a flaming muzzle hard by his cheek. He grabbed for the gun, but the Mexican went down and out of reach.

Then he whirled to look for Roy Bean. The judge was swinging the sack shoulder high. It struck the Christmas tree and toppled it from its flimsy base.

All of a sudden the cantina was loud and lurid. Candle flame caught the inflammable green cedar at a hundred points and the crackling blaze leaped high and mushroomed on the ceiling.

"This way!" the judge yelled again. Blackstone followed him around behind the tree. Bullets sang through the curtain of flame and drummed against the wall, and little spurts of adobe dust pelted the floor. The Texans ran for the rear door and drove their shoulders against it; a slug came between them and split the paneling. And now men were skirting the spreading flame in twos and threes, shouting and triggering.

From the other side of the door came a hammering. Roy Bean heard it and grunted as he swung the sack once more. This time the wooden box split the canvas as it smashed

against the door panel. The box fell to the floor—and Blackstone Bangs let out a joyous shout and dived for Old Roy's feet. He came up with a gun in each hand.

"Here's your twins' Christmas presents!" the gun lawyer shouted, thrusting one of the weapons into the judge's grasp. "A brace of .45's!"

There was ammunition on the floor, too, scattered from a dozen broken cardboard boxes. Roy Bean thumbed back the hammer of his gun and let it fall; a charging Mexican crumpled and rolled into the edge of the widening flame. The Texans backed against the wall and began a steady firing. Neither heard the hammering at the splintered door until it gave way and a tall man leaped into the smoke-filled main room.

The newcomer yelled: "Give me a gun!" and then realized there was but one weapon for each of his rescuers. Then Tony Ramos, his squat figure stooped in a dwarfish crouch, came sidling along the left wall behind a thundering .45.

"You will see, Bean!" he screamed. "You will see—"

The tall man yelled and dived for Ramos' legs. Roy Bean felt a bullet rip through his Santa Claus suit and burn his ribs. He grunted and brought the gun barrel down to spout flame. The slug went just over the tall man's head and caught Ramos at the base of his neck.

There was a gurgling climax to the Mexican's scream, and the tall American was up with a gun in his hand. Blackstone Bangs dropped another man who came from the right side of the blaze, and, as if the shock of his falling body had been too much for the cantina's joists, a large section of the flaming roof crashed in a brilliant shower. Roy Bean roared

and beat out sparks that fell on the cotton trimming of his Santa Claus suit—and all at once there were no more guns hammering in the place.

The three made a run for it, leaping over a hedge of licking flame. Behind them, more of the roof crashed. They saw a scatter of men fleeing through the door, and they came out behind a triple blast of guns to find the street clear for a block in either direction. The horses were still at the hitching rack—and two spare mounts, besides.

Three or four guns winked from the shadows as they left Rincon on a dead run, but the bullets went wild. Halfway up to the Rio Grande and Texas, Old Roy drew rein.

"No use gettin' these hosses so hot they'll die when they swim the Rio!" he declared. "We got out. I reckon we busted up that Buckskin Mask gang, too. My name's Bean, stranger—Judge Roy Bean, Law West of the Pecos and Santy Claus for Langtry. This here's Blackstone Bangs."

"I'm Ranse Howard," the tall man said, and Old Roy jumped.

"Ranse Howard? You're the min-in' man that outfit kidnaped! Maybe you can tell us what they was after when they kept holdin' up that Sheffield stage and killin' the drivers! And maybe you can tell us who the ringleaders was!"

Howard drew a deep breath and looked at the half-moon in the manner of a man who is glad to see the sky again. He nodded.

"They were after me," he said simply. "I did a little prospecting in Mexico, and word got around that I struck it rich. They missed capturing me over by Terlingua, and I came to Langtry in a roundabout way to fool them. In the meantime, they learned the route I was taking—so they went after the Sheffield stage twice before I got there. You know what happened."

"Yes," said Roy Bean. "We know. Joe Evers, and Shorty Gaines—and then Garrett."

"Tony Ramos was the real leader," Ranse Howard went on. "The Ketchum boys did most of the work. There was another hombre named Turner, and another Mexican. And then there was a man named Beckett who quarreled with Turner and deserted the gang. Turner went away and didn't come back. That's all I know."

They reined their horses at the Rio Grande. Roy Bean looked across at Texas, and then up at the sky. He drew a shiny watch from his pants pocket and held it for a long time, squinting at the dial in the thin moonlight.

"By gobs!" he finally exclaimed. "It's five minutes after twelve. It's Christmas! And I know a couple of kids and a lady who are goin' to think this here is one of the merriest Christmases they ever saw! If you don't mind, Ranse, I'd kinda like to deliver you to your family. It's part of my job as Santy Claus for Langtry!"





IT PAYS TO BE AN OWL-HOOTER

Red hair is a plumb unlucky color—it can be woven into a hangman's noose unexpectedlike!

By Andrew A. Griffin

LEAD from a dozen or more guns zipped geysers of sand from the rim of the flood-cut arroyo. Smoky Jones ducked and slipped from the saddle of his bay gelding. Big Jake Loder tumbled clumsily to the ground. He dragged his .45 and aimed at the rocks from which a sudden and unexpected attack had come.

Smoky lunged forward, striking Big Jake's arm. The iron blasted upward into the blue dusk of the Utah Basin sky.

"Smoke 'em out!" cracked a com-

mand from the rocks a hundred yards from the arroyo, too far for short gun accuracy. "Get Big Red, dead or alive! The reward stands either way!"

"Comes to me it's you they ain't likin', Jake," said Smoky. "You told me you'd never been in Utah. So it must be what you tote around for a face."

"Aw-rr!" protested Big Jake, with the bewilderment of an hombre whose mind is all stopped up. "You know I ain't this Big Red they're gunnin' for! The hellions're loco, an'

"I'll bet you they're figurin' on our gold pokes! You let me hold 'em off, and you ride out down the arroyo!"

"We'll make it down the arroyo together," said Smoky. "It's comin' on dark, an' we're not shooting at the law. I spotted two deputy sheriff stars when they jumped us. This arroyo twists, so we can cross up our trail. I'm still thinking it's that red mop you call hair and the downright disfigurement you use for a face that brought them hell-hootin' down upon us."

"Aw-rr!" repeated Big Jake plaintively. "I ain't ever been in Utah before this time, an' I ain't Big Red! Can I help it if I don't look like Apollo on account of too much ruckusin' in my younger days?"

"No living hombre would look like you, Jake, if he had any choice," said Smoky sadly. "We'll start movin' down the draw while they think we're waitin' for them to bust out into the open."

The sharply cut arroyo was deep enough to conceal them and their horses when they were dismounted. Still grumbling, Big Jake followed Smoky's lead. Bullets whined over them with the vicious buzzing of a nest of mad hornets.

Smoky's opinion of Big Jake's scrambled countenance was fully justified. Under a flaming tangle of red hair, Big Jake presented to the world what might have been human features many years before. A crooked lower jaw and a dozen scars attested to his "ruckusing in his younger days."

Big Jake moved with a lumbering gait. His eyes were mild and light blue, and always looked puzzled because of his slow thinking. He had not troubled to use his brain much since partnering up with Smoky Jones. Smoky was fast on the draw,

a top hand with a lass rope, and equally quick with ideas, which sometimes worked.

They had ridden up into Utah, hearing there was still open range with good grass land. Their two leather pokes contained some twenty-five hundred in gold. They hoped to stock a small spread in the basin region.

This peaceful afternoon, close to the town of their destination, Black Eagle, had been rudely interrupted by the arrival of the mysterious posse. They might have talked their way out, but the apparently law-abiding citizens seemed hell-bent upon having their hides first and arguing afterward.

"It would seem this Big Red must be something of a heller," commented Smoky. "It's a plain case of mistaken identity."

"But I ain't Big Red, an' I'm thinkin' I oughta go back an' point out their mistakes," offered Big Jake hopefully.

"And find yourself planted on the wrong side of boothill while they figure it out," snapped Smoky. "Here's a side gap an' there's not light enough to pick up our signs over the rocks. The promiscuous lead slingers are still holed up in the rocks. Looks as if the reputation of this Big Red has saved our skins for tonight, anyway."

"I've been tellin' you I ain't this Big Red," grumbled Jake, sticking like a cacklebur to his idea.

Having eluded the posse under cover of darkness, leaving too crooked a trail to be picked up, the queerly matched pardners ventured to build a small cooking fire in a triangle of rocks.

"If they'd only asked me, I could have told 'em I wasn't this Big Red," he complained. "They could have asked me, couldn't they?"

Then, for him, Jake had a brilliant thought.

"Sa-ay, Smoky!" he ejaculated. "You don't suppose them rannies might be owl-hooters after our stake, an' wearin' law badges to delude and deceive us?"

"You'll make out best, Jake, keepin' your mind on that bacon," grunted Smoky. "It's burnin'. Hell, Jake! We've only got twenty-five hundred in the pokes. That's not enough to roust out a whole gang of owl-hooters."

It was not Jake who replied. A muffled, heavy voice spoke from the rocks only a few yards away.

"But it's enough for a lone hand! Grab for the sky! Don't make the fatal mistake of goin' for your irons!"

Smoky and Jake had laid their belts and holstered .45s aside. Jake roared out an oath, and plunged toward the weapons.

A rifle cranged with a whiplike report. Jake howled and doubled over, grabbing for his right shin-bone.

"The next one will be ventilatin'!" barked the concealed gunman. "This is a repeatin' Winchester! The little fellow can get the gold pokes he mentioned out of the saddlebags an' toss 'em over here!"

The rifle cranged again. Embers sprayed from the cooking fire. Smoky swore under his breath. Jake and he were hopelessly trapped in the light of the blaze. Jake was sitting down, nursing his nicked shin-bone and groaning.

Smoky knew when he was licked. He obeyed the hidden bandit and tossed over the gold pokes. Jake showed evidence of foaming at the mouth.

"We'll getcha!" he bellowed. "We'll run you down! I'll take you apart personally, an' I'll—"

"On your feet, horseface!" commanded the gunman, as Smoky saw the firelight glinting upon a rifle barrel. "Keep your paws lifted an' start walkin' to your horses! I'm doing you a favor by permittin' you to keep your beasts! But I'll be collectin' your hardware while you're roundin' up the cayuses!"

Jake limped alongside Smoky over to the grassy spot where their horses were staked. With their money and their guns taken, Smoky was trying desperately to figure a way out. It didn't add up to anything worth while, especially with his pardner being hunted as this mysterious Big Red.

Their .45s, their gold pokes and their visitor had vanished when they brought the horses to the fire. They saddled in mournful silence.

Except for an occasional jackrabbit, no life showed on the narrow trail the disgruntled pardners were riding when the sun came up. The brilliant reds and yellows and browns of the painted rocks mocked them. Jake's spirits were so low his crooked chin reposed upon the thickly matted red hair in his open shirt collar. He was some two hundred and forty pounds of downright dejection. Smoky slapped viciously at a deer fly biting his neck.

"Dammit, Jake!" he flared. "If it wasn't for needin' grub and guns, we'd light a shuck back to Arizona were we belong! I'll ride alone into Black Eagle! You'll be safer holed up outside!"

"Aw-rr!" rumbled Jake. "I ain't this Big Red, an' I've danged nigh made up my mind to ride into town an' tell 'em so!"

Smoky mustered a grin. Once Jake had an idea, he never let it get away. Then Smoky's grin faded.

A white cardboard was pegged to a flat rock beside the trail.

Smoky pulled up sharply. He got down and went over to the rock. His snapping black eyes took in the posted notice quickly.

\$2,500.00 REWARD
WILL BE PAID FOR
BIG RED, OUTLAW!

Wanted For Murder!

Payable Dead or Alive.

Smoky perused the description that followed. All at once he whistled softly. His gaze went to the scarred features of Jake, under his flaming mop of red hair.

"Light down, Jake," said Smoky suddenly. "Listen to this."

Smoky read:

"Six feet three or four inches in height. Weight around two hundred and fifty pounds. More than a dozen knife and bottle scars on his face. Bright red hair. Believed to hail from Arizona and talks with slow drawl. Shot stage driver and messenger in holdup four years ago. Disappeared, but is reported to have returned to Utah Basin only a few days ago. Notify Sheriff Callahan at Black Eagle."

Red hair, facial scars, including size and weight, and drawling speech, the notice fitted Jake. Jake's mouth sagged open before Smoky had finished reading. His thick forefinger touched the scars that misadorned his countenance.

When Smoky finished, Jake's mouth was still open and his mild eyes stared. That was bad. Jake's mind was all stopped up again.

"Great horned toads!" exclaimed Smoky. "I know you're not this Big Red, on account of you bein' range pards with me for the past six years! An' you can bring enough witnesses from Arizona to prove it! All the same, I've roped a bright idea!"

"Aw-rr!" rumbled Jake. "You know I ain't this Big Red."

"That's just who you are, Jake," announced Smoky. "It's only a couple of miles to Black Eagle. Listen, you climb into the hull. I'm usin' a rope to tie you up."

"Sa-ay!" blurted Jake. "I ain't killed anybody, an' I ain't ever took a penny, an'—"

"We need twenty-five hundred for a cow stake, don't we?" cut in Smoky. "An' they'll pay twenty-five hundred for this Big Red. You know you're not Big Red, an' I know you're not. But great Jehoshaphat, Jake! You'll do until Big Red comes along."

"You ain't makin' an owl-hooter out've me!" gulped Jake. "Supposin' they're lynch-minded, an'—"

"I'll do the worrying about that," promised Smoky cheerfully. "I'll deliver you safe enough right into jail. Then I'll collect and hightail it for the next town. I'll telegraph old John Landers you're in trouble, an' he'll send a message informin' the sheriff he's made a mistake. Then you'll meet me, an' we'll pick out a propitious spot for startin' a spread."

Jake pondered this argument deeply. His mind was too blocked off to think up a contrary reply. Smoky Jones always could get him confused that way, and by the time he could scrape up a new idea, anything that might have been proposed by the versatile Smoky was all over, win, lose or draw.

The trail remained deserted. Smoky would have been less sure of the success of his dubious idea, if he had seen a hidden hombre with a pair of glittering eyes. This individual was watching from rocks close by when Smoky read the reward notice and made his momentous decision.

Smoky rode on, and now he was

close-herding the hogtied Jake on the horse ahead of him. The solitary watcher eased back to a plot of grass beside a spring. He saddled quickly and rode among the rocks, keeping off the trail, but staying close to it.

"I ain't likin' this any more than I did at first," grumbled Jake. "I'm thinkin' of the way that posse was gunnin' for this Big Red yesterday. It might be they're still on the prod."

"Don't you clutter up your mind pondering on it," advised Smoky with airy confidence. "You let me do the worryin'. Don't I have to take care of the reward money? And if anything goes wrong, I'll feel awful."

"That's so," agreed Jake, thinking hard. "I hadn't thought how bad you'd feel, Smoky. Maybe we—"

"Hold it!" barked a voice. "Pull up, pilgrim! So you're surmisin' you can play a lone hand bringin' in Big Red?"

A huge black-bearded rider forged from behind a rock shoulder. He was holding a six-gun easily at his thigh. Smoky had heard that voice before. It had neatly separated Jake and him from their gold pokes and their guns beside their night fire.

"Sa-ay!" broke out Jake. "You've got us all wrong, stranger! We're just funnin'! I ain't this Big Red, an'—"

"An' so this little hombre comes along and ties you up?" supplied Black Beard. "It won't hold water, mister. I've read the reward notices, an' so has every mother's son in Black Eagle County. But I ain't aimin' to go whole hog. I'll split half and half on the reward, otherwise I'll have to report there's somethin' loco in all this, besides the big hombre being Big Red himself."

Ignoring Jake's rumbling oaths, Smoky nodded grimly.

"You have the drop, you thievin' coyote," he said quietly. "So I won't argue the point."

Black Beard rode closer, peered at Smoky's empty holsters.

"You seem to have dispensed with your hardware," he said jeeringly. "How come?"

"Ran out of shells and threw the guns at a jackrabbit!" was Smoky's snapped reply. "A'right! I'll go you on splittin' the reward for Big Red here!"

"Sensible," grinned Black Beard. "So ride ahead."

Smoky looked into the beady blue eyes that bored into him from the thick brush of black beard that covered the face of the sudden and unwanted pardner in his nefarious enterprise. The hombre had tousled black hair that fell over a low forehead.

The glimpse was not reassuring. Smoky surmised that Black Beard would have no compunction if it came to a slight case of murder. He nodded to Jake, and said, "Ride on, Big Red."

Jake sputtered, but found no words. His mild eyes took on the hurt look of an hombre who feels he has been basely betrayed by his best friend.

From some storm in the mountains above, yellow flood water was pouring through a wide, shallow arroyo crossing the trail. Jake's horse was the first into the flood.

Smoky observed that Jake's beast went into the water only to his knees. Smoky did not glance around at his captor as his gelding plunged into the water. But from the tail of his eye he saw that Black Beard had confidently replaced his .45 in its holster. No doubt he saw little reason from keeping one bound man and one unarmed man covered.

Black Beard's beast splashed

closely behind Smoky. Smoky's hand tightened on the reins. His steel dug into the ribs of his gelding. The horse snorted and reared. Smoky's tight rein whirled the animal onto its hind feet, and the biting rowels crashed him directly into Black Beard's beast.

Black Beard was making a frantic grab at both reins and guns when the horses went down together. Smoky was prepared and landed on both feet. He threw himself forward, driving a pair of bony fists into Black Beard's face, and a hard knee into his stomach.

In less than a minute, Jake was protesting, "Smoky! You ain't meanin' to drown 'im, are you?"

"It would pleasure me a heap!" replied Smoky. "But I reckon he's salted enough to keep now!"

Black Beard's head had been under water, with Smoky sitting on it. Smoky removed his weight and pulled the dripping hombre to the surface. He stood there holding him, staring.

"Howlin' catamounts, Jake!" he exploded. "Wouldja lookit?"

Black Beard's short, wiry whiskers and his tousled hair had undergone a remarkable transformation. Where they had been black as midnight, there were only dark streaks. The hair and the beard showed a brilliant, unmistakable red.

Jake was choking over his attempted speech. Life had suddenly become too complicated for his clogged-up mind.

"You ain't thinkin', Smoky, *he* might be—"

Smoky wasn't wasting time, and he wasn't talking. But his next move sent a shiver over Big Jake and brought a protest.

"Great gravy, Smoky!" gulped Big Jake. "You can't cut even a

polecat's throat in cold blood! Smoky!"

Smoky was smoothing the razor-like edge of his skinning knife on the leather of his boot. Ignoring Jake's gasping protest, he took a firm grip in the unconscious hombre's long hair. Then he wielded the knife with a direct and purposeful stroke.

A patch of the black beard was sheered from the victim's cheek. Another stroke, and more beard with some skin was removed. Smoky's knife swept on. As the last tuft of beard came off, the hombre opened his eyes and tried to climb to his feet.

Smoky jammed one of the guns into his midriff.

"You can get on your pins, now, Big Red!" he commanded grimly. "It seems that bear grease mixed with lampblack won't stay put in water. You had a right smart idea, hombre, hornin' in on our play. You'd have collected the reward for yourself, and put my pardner in your place. Like as not I'd have been drilled afterward, and you would have added all the reward money to that twenty-five hundred you took last night. But now—"

Big Red bore a remarkable resemblance to Jake. Looking at him, Jake seemed to have his mind unclogged for the moment.

"I'm thinkin', Smoky," he said, "I'll hole up outside of Black Eagle until you collect the reward money. If the law hombres see Big Red and me together, they might make a serious mistake when it comes to the hangin' part."

They rode on toward Black Eagle. The outlaw known as Big Red was hogtied on the leading horse. Jake brought up the rear guard, and at a discreet distance.

Christmas at the Bar Z

by ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Our Bar Z Ranch was sold last week
 To a tight ol' bird named Reed.
 An' his wife, who jest blowed in last night,
 Is fixin' their Christmas feed.

So we've figgered our bunkhouse Christmas grub
 Ain't goin' to be nuthin' swell,
 An' we're plannin' a meal an' a jamboree
 At the Commonwealth Hotel.

Big Ed, the range boss, ambles in
 An' says: "Git movin', now.
 They want us up to the big shebang
 Afore they has their chow."

We straggle in real awkwardlike,
 An' tryin' to make no noise;
 Then Reed an' his little gray-haired wife
 Yells: "Merry Christmas, boys!"

Then the wife smiles: "Dinner's pipin' hot;
 Jest pick out any seat."
 An' the table's piled with Christmas stuff,
 So we set right down to eat.

She flutters an' fusses round about
 Like a little mother hen,
 An' when a plate gits kinder low
 It's piled right up again.

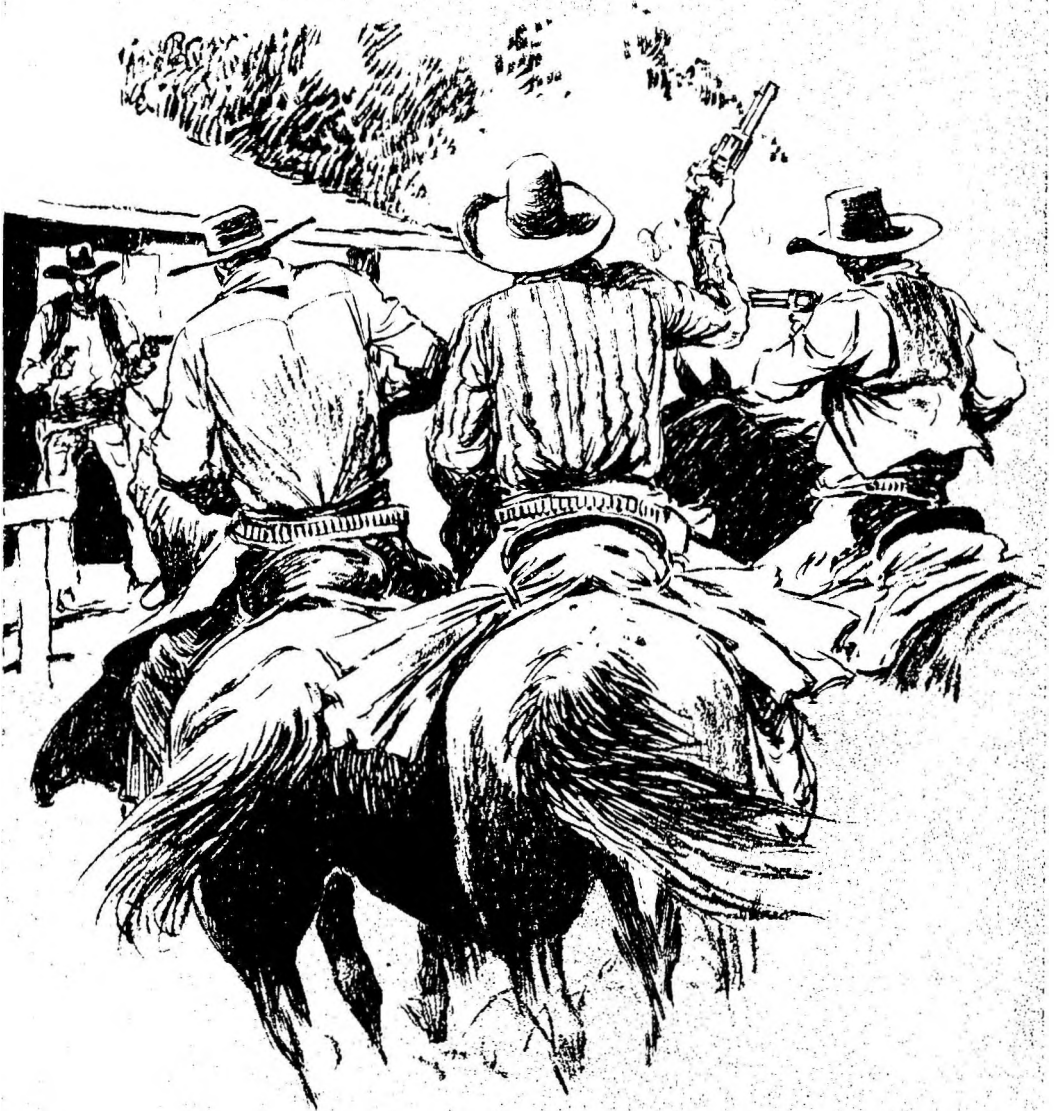
After we've et, the Bar-Z band,
 A fiddle an' two guitars,
 Plays tunes that we never knowed they knowed,
 An' we smoke big fat cigars.

Then Reddy does his tricks with cards,
 An' Buck an' Lew crack jokes.
 The Ol' Man tells some funny yarns,
 An' we find he's regular folks.

Young Swede, who oncet was a choir boy,
 Starts singin' "Holy Night,"
 An' the boss' wife sets listenin'
 With eyes all big an' bright.

When we leave at midnight, she up an' says
 She had the time of her life—
 An' we got a date next Christmas Day
 With the boss an' the boss's wife.

CHRISTMAS SIX-GUNS



by CLEVE ENDICOTT

Author of "The Circle J Stories," etc.

CHRISTMAS SIX-GUNS

Pronto poison, dance music, six-gun leaden rain, and Christmas Eve, add up to a strange victory for Buck Foster.

By Cleve Endicott

CHAPTER I.

SHOWDOWN IN THE BUFFALO.

THE STRANGER had been waiting in the Buffalo Saloon for nearly three hours, and he was beginning to show signs of impatience. He had lounged at the bar for a while, downing a couple of drinks, acting like a gent who isn't in a hurry.

Then he sat at a table and appeared to be playing solitaire. But all the time, his eyes were alert, watching every newcomer who entered through the swing doors of the saloon.

Once the bartender—a big blotchy-faced fellow known to the patrons of the Buffalo as Bottlenose—asked him: "Are you waitin' for someone, friend?"

The stranger nodded, his hard face breaking into a grin. "Yeah. I'm lookin' for a couple of rannies that were to meet me here. Mebbe you've seen somethin' of them."

"What was they like?" Bottlenose wanted to know.

The stranger's grin widened. "One of them's an old mossyhorn—kind of long and lanky—with a mustache like a rat's nest. And he wears a bearskin vest that stinks terrible. And he's a loud-mouthed old windbag. You couldn't miss him once you saw him!"

The bartender shook his head. "No. I ain't seen him—ever. What's the other gent like?"

"Kind of young," the stranger said, "with red hair and a nose like an eagle's beak sprinkled with coffee beans—same bein' his freckles."

Bottleneck shook his head again. "I ain't seen neither of them hairpins. Friends of yours, huh?"

The stranger nodded and turned back to his cards. He didn't seem to want to do any more talking. So the bartender took the hint and buttoned his lip. It looked to him like this gent was a lawman of some sort, on the trail of a couple of hombres on the dodge.

Looking at the stranger from under lowered lids as he went about polishing the bar glasses, Bottlenose sized him up as a plumb tough citizen. Those gray eyes of his were pleasant when he smiled. But when he was serious, they were hard and cold and bleak—the eyes of a gunfighter. And his wedge-shaped chin was the kind that goes with a lot of bulldog courage.

Bottlenose had heard rumors that a Ranger was coming that way on account of the trouble between nesters and cowmen. It wouldn't surprise him if this hard-jawed customer turned out to be a Ranger.

Outside, the dusk was gathering. Heavy black clouds hastened the approach of the winter twilight—clouds that foretold the coming of a Texas norther to sweep the flat prairies of the Panhandle country.

Bottlenose lighted the big lamps

and went back to his work behind the bar. Customers were beginning to drift in—chiefly cowpunchers from the nearby ranches. Many of these were from the Flying T, the big spread bossed by Cal Truxton, and among them, Bottlenose noticed the man named Driggs.

Being a friendly sort of gent, with a weakness for minding other people's business, Bottlenose decided to tell Driggs his suspicions. True, Driggs didn't fit the description of either of the two gents the stranger was seeking. Driggs was of medium height and good-looking—a dandified kid full of loud talk and bravado, and fast as hell with his gun.

Bottlenose knew that Driggs had shot and killed the nester known as Heinie the Dutchman, after the latter had cut through a Flying T fence, in the face of a warning that such wire-cutting would be punished.

"See that gent at the table," Bottlenose said to Driggs, as he slid a bottle and glass toward the Flying T hand.

Driggs nodded.

"I think he's a Ranger," Bottlenose warned. "Mebbe you—"

Driggs was feeling reckless. This wasn't his first stop in a saloon today. He already had several drinks under his belt, and they gave him the kind of Dutch courage that will make a rabbit spit in the eye of a coyote, or a runt call a six-footer a dirty name and tell him to go to hell. Rangers were his meat, the way he felt now. He was ready to buck the whole organization.

"Like hell he's a Ranger!" Driggs muttered under his breath. "I don't care if he's a whole Ranger company. Rangers don't scare *me* none!"

"O. K., buddy," Bottlenose said in a soothing voice, raising a pudgy

hand in a calming gesture. "It's your funeral! Keep your shirt on! I just thought I'd tell you!"

But Driggs wasn't pacified by Bottlenose's gentle words. "I'm goin' to have a talk with your Ranger," he decided, shaking his head stubbornly. "I'll tell him what!"

He went over to the table at which the stranger was still playing solitaire, pulled out a chair roughly, and sat down.

"You wantin' somebody, hombre?" Driggs asked, his eyes searching the other man's face.

The stranger looked up from his cards and met the Flying T gunman's gaze. "You makin' a mistake, friend?" he asked, in a quiet voice.

"Someone was tellin' me you're a Ranger," Driggs went on. "If that's so, what's your business here?"



BILLY WEST

The stranger's jaw tightened, the hard muscles standing out in bronzed ridges. "Rangers don't tell their business," he said, his voice still low, unhurried.

"Well, *you'll* tell *yours*!" Driggs retorted harshly.

The stranger's eyes widened in surprise. "I'm not—" he began.

But Driggs hurried on, a torrent of angry words pouring from his lips. "If you're here to make a stink about that damned Dutchman, we'll settle the business right now. I ain't runnin' away from no two-bit law dog that's been sent for by some blasted nester. So there's your chance—if you want fight!"

With the words, Driggs' left hand swept out in an arc and caught the stranger a stinging slap on the cheek.

The hard-faced raunny was on his feet in an instant, kicking back his chair, knocking over the table. His gray eyes held little flecks of light that danced with excitement. His lips drew back in a snarl, showing strong white teeth. If this Driggs jasper wanted fight, he'd found what he was looking for!

Driggs' right hand was clawed and darting down toward the holster thonged low on his right thigh. He'd started something, and he was going to finish it.

The stranger went for his gun, too, doubling over for a lightning-fast buckle draw—to overcome Driggs' split-second advantage. His right hand slapped his oiled holster and came whipping up with the shooting iron.

Both guns roared in the same fraction of time. The stranger's gray Stetson went flying off his head, a hole from Driggs' bullet appearing in its crown.

But Driggs crashed suddenly to the floor, his Colt dropping from his twitching fingers, a great gush of crimson coming from the wound in the left side of his chest, a bloody froth gathering on his lips.

Driggs had picked his last gunfight!

A Flying T cowboy came forward,

hand extended to the stranger. "I seen Driggs go for his gun first," he said, "after he'd forced a fight on you. If you're needin' a witness—"

"Thanks, cowboy," the stranger said. "I never saw the jasper in my life before. I dunno why he acted so hostile!"

Other Flying T punchers came and shook hands with the stranger, telling him the same thing.

"We're drawin' pay from the Flyin' T," one of them explained. "But we don't hold with this business of shootin' down nesters from under cover—like Driggs done with Heinie the Dutchman!"

"Thanks, gents," the stranger said, with a wry smile. "I'm not in favor of farmin' on cow range, either. But if any of you hombres'd like to irrigate your throats, step up to the bar and name your pizen!"

The Flying T punchers needed no urging. They bellied up to the bar with the stranger and accepted his invitation with pleasure. And while they drank together, they told him of the trouble in this part of the Panhandle between the cowmen and the nesters.

It was a matter of common knowledge that Driggs had shot the nester known as Heinie the Dutchman. The Flying T had fenced in a big tract of leased school lands, some thirty miles square, disregarding the fact that a few men with families had taken up small farm tracts and built homes on them, and that the wire fences often cut off the settlers' roads to town or to their favorite places for hunting and fishing and cutting timber.

The Flying T fence cut Heinie off from his favorite hunting ground, so he cut the wire and went on through. The fence was mended, and Heinie was warned. And the next time he went hunting, there was

a Flying T man waiting, under cover, with a Winchester!

It was tough on Heinie, but it was tougher still on his plump, beady-eyed squaw Timid Fawn, and also on Heinie's eight tow-headed, beady-eyed kids, who ranged in ages from three to fifteen.

The Flying T cowhands didn't like their boss' idea of hiring gunmen like Driggs to shoot down nesters from under cover. A fair-and-square fight with nesters or a bit of damage to their property was one thing. But dry-gulching a Dutchman with eight children kind of stuck in the craw of these Flying T waddies. It was plumb hard to swallow. And they expressed their opinions freely, while the body of Driggs lay in the back office, with a bar towel over his face, waiting for the undertaker to remove it.

Gradually, a beautiful friendship sprang up between the Flying T hands and the stranger, and he grew confidential and told them about himself.

"No, I'm not a Ranger," he said, in answer to a question from one of them. "I'm just a driftin' cowpoke—doin' a little saddle-bummin' during the winter, sometimes makin' a deal for feeders to ship north for fattenin' come spring. My home range's in Montana, and my brand up there's the Circle J. But down here, I'm a maverick—runnin' no brand a-tall!"

The listening punchers nodded gravely and swallowed their liquor. At the stranger's invite, they had their glasses refilled.

"Sometimes," he went on, his tongue loosening with the warming influence of the drinks and the company, "I'll take a turn at helpin' the law—when it's in a bad way. And sometimes, I'm ridin' the owl-hoot for a spell—all dependin' on whether

the owl-hoot has more justice on its side than the law."

"A great life you lead, huh, fella?" said a big waddy named Jim Bones, who was foreman of the Flying T.

"It's not so bad," the stranger admitted. "But if you don't mind, I'd rather you'd call me Bill or Billy, instead of 'fella.' The full handle's Billy West!"

Just then the sheriff came in, drawn by the report that a murder had been committed in the Buffalo. But after having a couple of drinks with Billy West and the Flying T punchers, and hearing their story of how Driggs met his death, the lawman went away, satisfied that it was a case of self-defense.

Sheriff Jack Lawrence, an easy-going, middle-aged, portly gent, owed his job to the Flying T boss, Cal Truxton, and what the Flying T men said generally went with him.

After he had gone, the talk turned to Christmas, and some of the Flying T punchers began grumbling over the fact that the shipment of turkeys which the ranch cook had ordered hadn't arrived.

Then some one suggested raiding a local tightwad nester named McTavish, who was known to raise turkeys, so that the Flying T would be sure of its Christmas supply. The idea caught on like a prairie fire, and the Flying T waddies were full of enthusiasm.

"How about you, West?" Foreman Bones asked. "Will you come turkey-huntin'—down to McTavish's?"

Billy West shook his head. "I got to stay in town, in case those two pard of mine turn up," he told the big foreman.

When the Flying T cowboys had gone off on their expedition, Billy asked Bottlenose to let him take a

look at the dead man, who still lay in the back office.

"I can't understand why the gent should want to pick a fight with me," he explained. "I'd like to take another look at him and see if I can recognize him—as maybe some jasper who had a grudge against me."

Bottlenose took Billy into the darkened rear room and lighted a lamp. Then he went out.

Alone with the body, Billy studied the contorted dead face, but he shook his head as he failed to recognize the man. Then he made a quick search of Driggs' pockets, in the hope of finding a clue to the mystery. But there was nothing that helped make things any clearer.

"I reckon he must've got the idea I was a Ranger, and his guilty conscience did the rest," Billy murmured, as he replaced the contents of the dead man's pockets.

Then he slipped his hand into the inside vest pocket, which he had not searched before. His fingers came in contact with metal—smooth and hard. He drew it out, a low gasp of surprise escaping him.

It was a Texas Ranger's badge.

Billy put it into his own pocket, doused the lamp, and went out of the room.

CHAPTER II.

BARBED WIRE AND PRAIRIE DAWGS.

HUDDLED in the saddle of a limping cayuse, with his bearskin vest buttoned tightly around his lean body, Buck Foster faced the blast of cold wind that foretold the coming of a Texas norther and rode grimly on into the gathering darkness. Buck's bashed nose was purple with the cold, and every now and then he puffed out his leathery cheeks, exhaling his breath violently so that the ends of his grizzled cowhorn mus-

tache fluttered like tumbleweeds in the icy wind.

Buck was lost. And so was his saddle mate, red-headed Joe Scott. Mile after mile of treeless, gopher-torn prairie lay behind the two waddies, and mile after mile of the same kind of country lay ahead of them, in every direction, as far as the eye could reach.

Buck and Joe were heading for the town of O'Brien, where they were to meet their boss, Billy West, in the Buffalo Saloon. Billy had sent the two rannies to look over a bunch of feeder beeves—which proved to be a false alarm. The critters Buck and Joe saw were a n. g. bunch of culls, and they wouldn't have them as a gift.

Some miles back, they had cut a wire fence. So they judged that they were inside the boundaries of a big ranch that had been fenced around, but there was no sign of a ranchhouse.

"By ganny!" Buck exclaimed, after another half hour of riding. "I never seen sich a country fer gophers. They wasn't like this when I was roddin' the old Turkey Track down here in the Panhandle nigh on twenty year— Ouch!"

Buck's lamed cayuse had shied at something that loomed ahead of it in the darkness. Then, with a quick burst of energy, it stiffened its forelegs, bogged its head and hunched up its rump.

The quick motion of the cayuse saved it from plunging into a wire fence, but Buck wasn't so lucky. Caught unawares by the sudden outburst of action on the animal's part, Buck was hurled out of the saddle, flying over the bronc's head and landing head foremost in the barbed-wire fence.

The sharp spikes tore the veteran cowpuncher's leathery cheeks and



BUCK FOSTER

calloused hands, causing him to burst forth into a volley of profanity that turned the air blue.

"Of all the damn country I ever was in," he roared, adding a few violent cusswords, "this's the worst. Billy must be loco to be bringin' us up this way—and with Chrissimus comin' on, too! It's a hell of a place to be spendin' Chrissimus!"

A dog began to bark, somewhere. Then a light showed. A man with a lantern was coming.

Joe got off his horse and pulled his saddle mate out of the mess of barbed wire in which he'd got himself entangled.

Buck emerged, cussing and fingering the cuts on his face tenderly, putting the torn skin back in place, trying to soothe the sting of the wounds.

The lantern came closer. The person holding it could finally be seen: a tall, black-bearded man, with a ruddy face, bright glittering eyes and high cheekbones, and big red hands. The left one held the lantern high, so that its rays fell on the two cowpunchers, while his right gripped a big horse pistol, pointing it at them.

WW—5D

When he spoke, the sounds were like nothing Buck and Joe had ever heard before. They could understand him, but it was like listening to a foreign language.

"I'll gi' ye to the count o' three to get yerselves awa from my fence!" he roared in a husky voice.

"I don't want your damn fence!" Buck Foster shouted back, shaking his fist at the man. "What in hell kind of cow country is this—when you can't ride a hoss no distance a-tall, without bustin' into a bolt-wire fence or a prairie-dawg village. My hoss' lame from steppin' in one of your damn dog holes, and so's my pard Joe Scott's—"

The man broke in, and, to Buck's surprise, his tone was friendly. "Joe Scott, eh? Ay, mon, and that's a guid name! I didna know there was the like of it in these parts. Let's take a look at ye, Joe Scott!"

He held the lantern higher and moved closer to the fence.

Joe Scott, grinning to himself, pushed back the battered gray Stetson off his freckled face and allowed the settler to inspect him.

For a full minute, the man studied Joe's features—chief among which was a large beak nose, covered with freckles, a mouth that was inclined to quirk up at the corners in an impish grin at any odd moment, and a pair of wide bat ears that stood out at right angles to a head covered with a thick mop of carrotly red hair. Adding to these features, a pair of clear, honest blue eyes, the result was about as homely a young cowpuncher as you'd meet in a day's ride, and yet those blue eyes of Joe's kind of took the curse off the rest of his features.

"Joe Scott, hey? Ye've a guid Scotch name, and a guid Scotch face, wi' guid Scotch lugs!" the settler remarked, with a final glance at Joe's

big ears, as he finished his inspection. "Will ye light and bide a wee?"

Joe understood that he and Buck were being invited to stay, so he thanked the man.

Following the guidance of the lantern, Buck and Joe led their limping horses for a couple of hundred yards, until they came to a gate in the barbed-wire fence, which their new friend opened for them.

He shook hands with them cordially, as he admitted them, and Joe introduced Buck Foster.

"My name's MacTavish," the settler said. "And ye're both welcome to bide under my roof, till ye're ready to ride on."

McTavish led them farther on—to where the ground sloped gently down toward the banks of a creek. And here a small house and outbuildings stood.

As he came closer to these buildings, a suspicion which had been smoldering in Buck Foster's mind burst into flame.

"Say," he muttered to Joe Scott, "I ain't stayin' at this shack. This jasper's some kind of foreigner, and he's a nester, or I'll eat my shirt. I kin smell chicken manure, and this ground's all been plowed up some time or other!"

Joe put a calloused paw over his saddle pard's mouth.

"Shut up, numskull," he whispered. "This gent's took a shine to us, and he's offerin' us grub and a bed and a place to rest our lame hosses, and—"

The door of the house opened, showing a tall woman standing in the doorway of a kitchen. The smell of rich, roasting meat came wafting out on the chill night air, and it was stronger than any argument Joe Scott could offer in favor of accepting the McTavish hospitality.

Still muttering under his breath,

Buck put up his horse in the stable, and followed Joe and McTavish inside.

And there, after washing up, they sat down to dinner, with the McTavish family, consisting of the man, his wife, and their three children, Donald, Duncan, and Jeanie, and the grub was just what was needed to fill out the belly-wrinkles of a pair of ga'nted cowpokes who'd lost their way in strange country.



McTAVISH

When the children were sent off to bed and Mrs. McTavish was doing the dishes in the kitchen, McTavish settled down in the living room with the two waddies and put in front of them a bottle of fiery, light-colored liquor which he called "whusky." It was stronger than the liquor served in cow-town saloons, but it had the same effect of warming their innards. And after a while, they found themselves singing with McTavish and imitating his Scotch accent.

Buck Foster, in fact, made a very good job of singing a song which ended every verse with the words "Auld Lang Syne." The liquor in the bottle was going down rapidly,

and Buck and McTavish were just starting in for about the thirtieth time on

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to min'—"

when the dog chained up in the yard broke out into a violent barking.

McTavish, sobering suddenly, rushed to the window and looked out.

"There's thieves out there! They're after me turkeys!" he shouted.

As he spoke, he picked up a shotgun which stood in a corner of the room and hurried out to the rear door. Buck and Joe buckled on their gun belts and hurried after him.

The roar of the heavy shotgun thundered in their ears as they crossed the kitchen. Outside, in the yard, they could see a huddle of figures around a small building, the one where McTavish's turkeys were kept.

Then Buck and Joe cut loose with their guns. They aimed high, and their lead rattled against the tin roof of the shack. They had a sneaking suspicion that this was a bunch of skylarking cowboys out for a bit of fun at a nester's expense, and they weren't going to injure their own kind—just scare them off.

But McTavish was shooting in dead earnest, even though he was a bit uncertain in his aim, as a result of his large consumption of whiskey. And one of the raiders yelled with pain, as the Scotchman's lead found its mark somewhere on his anatomy. There was a sudden panic among the raiding party. They hadn't expected to be greeted by so much gunfire. The huddle of bodies around the turkey coop suddenly scattered.

McTavish and his two cowboy pardners held their fire and listened. A creaking of saddle leather told

them that the thieves were mounting their horses, and a moment later, the thud of hoofbeats announced that they were in retreat.

When all was quiet again, McTavish insisted on taking the lantern, to see what damage—if any—had been done to his flock of turkeys.

Buck and Joe went with him. Everything seemed all right. None of the big birds was missing, and, apart from being scared by the noise, none of them was harmed.

Then McTavish led the way around to the far side of the shack, swinging his lantern as he went.

A loud, hoarse cry from him brought Buck and Joe to his side. They found McTavish holding the lantern high in his left hand and pointing to something that lay on the ground—behind the coop.

It was the body of a man—in black shirt and muddy black boots, with double cartridge belts, and twin six-guns, and a bowie knife in a sheath at his waist. At his side was a black Stetson. The man's head was slumped forward on his chest, so that the back of the skull showed. He had a small bald spot, and beneath it, the lantern light revealed a place where the hair was wet and sticky and stained a dark red.

Kneeling, Joe Scott examined the back of the man's head closely. Then he felt the wrist and let it drop.

"This hombre's dead," Joe said, horror showing plainly in his blue eyes. "Half the back of his head's been blowed off! He's all cold and stiff. He's been dead a long time!"

Buck Foster stared at the corpse, his brown eyes bulging under their shaggy gray brows. "Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he muttered. "How did he—"

Footsteps sounded in the yard. The three looked at one another and hurried to see who was there. But

before they could get around the coop, they found themselves confronted by a burly man, wearing a sheriff's star. In his hands, he held a pair of Colts, and behind him, four stern-faced deputies, also with their hands filled, were ready to back his play.

"Put up your hands, McTavish!" Sheriff Jack Lawrence barked. "I got tipped off you'd dry-gulched an hombre and got his body hid out here."

Buck Foster pushed his way forward and faced the sheriff, his brown eyes blazing with anger.

"My pard McTavish never dry-gulched nobody in his life!" he shouted. "Yo're a liar when you—"

"We been with McTavish all evenin'," Joe Scott put in, also coming forward and thrusting his jaw out. "He ain't—"

"Well, mebbe you know somethin' about this killin' yourselves," Sheriff Jack Lawrence cut Joe short. "I'm arrestin' the three of you! Get your hands up!"

Buck and Joe were caught with their guns in the leather, and the sheriff's four deputies had them covered. It would have been just plain suicide for the two drifting cowpokes to make a move for their own shooting irons.

So they put up their hands.

CHAPTER III.

A RAID ON THE DUTCHMAN'S.

THIS business of being mistook for a Ranger and forced into a killing by a gent he'd never seen before had Billy West treed. He couldn't figure it out—even the next morning, when his head was quite clear. And, being a man who liked to get at the bottom of things, he made up his mind to find out what the business was all about. He suspicioned that the kill-

ing of the nester known as Heinie the Dutchman had something to do with his shooting ruckus with Driggs in the Buffalo Saloon last night, because everybody knew Driggs had done that killing.

So, as his saddle pardners, Buck Foster and Joe Scott, hadn't showed up at the Buffalo, Billy got his big chestnut bronc Danger out of the livery and, following directions, set out for the Dutchman's homestead. He left word where he was going, both at the livery and with Bottlenose, the bartender at the Buffalo.

The Dutchman's homestead was on the banks of a creek that wound its way across the prairie. When Billy got to it, he saw a group of unpainted wooden buildings, with the land all around, showing signs of a plow, and with a chicken house and barn, where all sorts of animals were kept—chickens and geese, and a couple of cows, and rabbits in a hutch. There were plenty of dogs around the place, too.

As Billy rode into the fenced inclosure, three kids came running up to him. Two of them looked like twins—about eight years old. The third boy was probably six. All of them were tow-headed—no doubt taking after their German father. But their faces were flat, and their eyes were dark and beady—showing the strain of their Indian mother in their blood.

"Cowboy—come to kill us?" one of them asked, looking up into the Montana cowpuncher's bronzed face and studying his hard features and clear gray eyes.

Billy gave the youngers a friendly smile and found some silver coins in the pocket of his vest.

"Here! Catch!" he called out, and threw the coins to them.

They scrambled after the silver

and then gathered around him, with more confidence in their faces.

"No," Billy told them, in answer to their question, "this cowboy hasn't come to kill anybody! All cowboys aren't like that!"

"Nice horse!" the six-year-old youngster said, reaching up and stroking Danger's velvety muzzle.

"None better," Billy told him. "You can pet him. His name's Danger, but he don't hurt kids."

He dismounted and led Danger to the creek for a drink. More children came to look at the horse—blond-haired children, with Indian eyes and features. There were two girls among them, one four, one ten, Billy judged, their tow hair done up in braids.

He felt a queer tugging at his heart as he looked at these youngsters, who had been made fatherless by the gunman Driggs. The cruelty of these range wars struck home to him. As a cowman, he didn't like nesters. But this business of hiring gunmen to shoot them down and leave a bunch of kids like this to shift for themselves—well, there was something wrong about it!

He threw Danger's reins over his head and walked to the low house of unpainted board and shingle.

On a bench in front of the house, an Indian man sat, smoking a pipe. Over in the barn, a boy of about fifteen—probably the Dutchman's eldest—was raking out hay for a pair of healthy-looking cows.

A round-faced fat Indian woman came waddling out to see the visitor, wiping her wet hands on her skirt. This, Billy guessed, was Timid Fawn, the Dutchman's squaw.

"How!" she greeted him, and invited him to come in.

The interior of the house was untidy. Billy had to chase a dog off a chair before he could sit down.

He questioned Timid Fawn, but learned little more than the Flying T cowboys had told him the night before. He judged that Timid Fawn wouldn't mourn very long over her murdered spouse, for the Indian outside on the bench with his pipe seemed to be a fixture there.

Timid Fawn had the stoic disposition of the Indian. Her man Heinie was dead. Timid Fawn was still alive. She had her children, and she had her new man, Sitting Wolf. She shrugged her fat shoulders and shook her head stolidly when Billy asked her if she knew anything about a Ranger coming to bring her husband's murderer to justice.

"No sent for Ranger," she answered. "No want Ranger. Him do no good!"

Hoofbeats thudded on the hard-packed earth out in the yard. The younger children came running inside with cries of fear.

"Sheriff's men coming," they told their mother. "We're afraid!"

Billy was curious. From what he'd been told, the sheriff was a bit indifferent about the murder of Heinie the Dutchman, who was just another nester wiped off the range—one less warring factor for the sheriff to worry about, in the ancient feud between settler and cowman! Why should he be sending men to the Dutchman's homestead now?

Billy soon had the answer to that one. With Timid Fawn following him, he went out to meet the visitors—a trio of tough-looking jaspers wearing deputy-sheriff badges, and riding horses with the Flying T brand.

Their leader, a big man with a scar at the side of his mouth, and a heavy, curling black mustache, introduced himself.

"Deputy Sam Lowe speakin'," he said, "with Deputy Clay and Deputy

"Lanning as witnesses!" He flourished a legal-looking paper in his hand as he finished.

Then he began to read aloud, addressing the Indian woman.

"Timid Fawn, you are hereby ordered to remove yourself and your goods and chattels and your family from the property you now occupy, same being under lease from the State of Texas to Calvin Truxton, of the Flyin' T Ranch—"

As Deputy Sam Lowe read on, Billy began to smell a wolf. The situation became clearer to him. Timid Fawn stood staring blankly at the deputy as he finished.

"That means we got to go?" she asked.

"That's exactly what it means, Timid Fawn," the deputy answered. "And we're here to git you started on your way!"

"Just a minute!" Billy West stepped forward and stood close to Sam Lowe. "Let's take a look at that paper!" he said, and snatched it out of the man's hand without waiting for a reply. He studied it carefully, then took and tore it into small pieces. "That document's not worth the paper it's written on!" he declared, his eyes meeting those of the deputy boldly.

"I don't care what it's worth," Sam Lowe retorted, his face flushing with anger. "You ain't got a right to tear it up. It's legal. These half-breed Dutch-Injuns has got to go! I'm seein' they git started pronto!"

Billy's voice was edged with menace. His hand hovered close to the Colt holstered on his right thigh.

"You turn your hosses about and hightail it—right now!" he barked at the three lawmen, and his hand swooped down, bringing the Colt up with it.

He triggered it, immediately it cleared the leather, sending a bullet

kicking up dust under the feet of the nearest horse. The animal, frightened, reared and started to buck. The other horses, panicked, began cavorting and skittering about, while their riders tried to get their guns out.

"I said get out of here! Now, vamose—pronto, all three of you!" Billy shouted.

He was facing the three deputies single-handed. Timid Fawn and the kids were under shelter, in the cabin. Sitting Wolf, too, had discreetly gone indoors.

With the odds three to one in their favor, the deputies made a break for their guns, got them clear, and started blazing away at the lone man who had defied them and their boss.

Their guns blasted at him, filling the air with lead. But shooting from the backs of their restive horses made their aim uncertain. The bullets kicked up dust all over the yard, and splintered the wood of the nester's cabin, thirty feet off.



SAM LOWE

Billy triggered his Colt again. Sam Lowe let out a yell, as the slug cut into the flesh of his upper arm. Another horse, ridden by the big

pock-faced deputy named Lanning, started to buck, as a bullet burned across its rump. Its rider went shooting out of the saddle, falling in a stunned heap on the ground. Billy then sent a couple of whistlers past the ear of the third deputy—the black-mustached jasper named Clay—and that seemed to take the courage out of him.

Billy reloaded swiftly and faced his foes. "I said get out!" he shouted at them. "I'm not aimin' to make buzzard bait of a bunch of fools wearin' tin stars. But my next bullets'll drill yore carcasses!"

He stood with his big Colt covering the two deputies who remained in their saddles. Their horses were still nervous, prancing, crow-hopping—making it hard for them to shoot straight.

Finally, the leading deputy, Sam Lowe, quieted his brone and spoke:

"All right, cowboy! We'll be on our way. But you'd better light a shuck out of this part of the country, 'cause when it gits around that you're sidin' with these damn nesters, your life won't be worth a hoot in hell—"

"Yeah!" Billy interrupted. "No more'n Heinie the Dutchman's was. Well now, you listen to me. I said get out of here, and I'm still sayin' it. *Get!*"

Deputy Lowe shuddered before the cold fury he saw in the Montanan man's eyes.

"All . . . all right, stranger," he murmured, backing his horse and turning it about, "you win this time. But—"

He dug the spurs into the brone's flanks and called to his fellow lawmen. The big Deputy Lanning, who had been thrown, came to and climbed into his saddle, aided by the skinny hombre named Clay. Glad to imitate the example of their

leader, they rode after Deputy Lowe.

Billy watched the three disappear in a cloud of dust out on the prairie. Then he turned back to the house. The children came out to thank him for taking their part. Timid Fawn's face was frightened, and Sitting Wolf's beady eyes showed that he, too, had had a good scare.

"Maybe best we go away," Timid Fawn said to Billy.

"Just bide your time," the Montanan told her, "till I get a chance to straighten things out. I want to think this business over!"

CHAPTER IV.

ORNERY JAIL BIRDS.

BEING in jail was no new experience for Buck Foster, but he never took kindly to it. He'd been in better jails than this one of Sheriff Jack Lawrence's, and he'd been in worse ones. He had slept soundly through the night, his senses numbed by McTavish's "whusky." But in the morning, as soon as citizens began to appear on the main street of O'Brien, Buck began to roar and shout through the bars of his window in his loudest voice.

A curious crowd of onlookers gathered outside. Some of them jeered the old buckaroo, while others sympathized with him.

And then, as the morning wore on, Buck, looking at the knot of townsfolk outside the jail, caught sight of a familiar face.

It was a round, flat, yellow face, with slant eyes and a bland, innocent expression—the face of the Circle J camp cook, Sing Lo! He just stood there, with his hands tucked in the sleeves of his shiny black coat, and stared at Buck.

Buck was surprised to see Sing Lo. He knew that the little China-

man had been sent ahead with the camp stuff and the extra horses, and that he wasn't supposed to be here in O'Brien. Buck suspected that Sing Lo had sneaked back to town for liquor—or tanglefoot, as he always called it—one of the chink's chief weaknesses.

As he watched the little Chinaman, Buck saw the lid of one slant eye droop in a swift wink. Then Sing Lo went through a series of gestures, which Buck gradually came to understand. The byplay went on unnoticed by the other people in the crowd. They were too busy watching Buck to pay any attention to the harmless-looking Chinaman.

Buck now raised his voice in a new line of talk, for the benefit of the crowd. "They're starvin' me to death in this dirty jail!" he roared. "The grub they give me ain't fit to eat. My stummick won't hold it! I'm starvin'!"

This caused a couple of sympathetic citizens to go into the sheriff's office and ask questions, and as a result, Sheriff Jack Lawrence presently came stomping down the corridor that separated the two rows of cells.

"Say, you loud-mouthed old badger, what d'you mean tellin' people you ain't fed right in this jail?"

Buck Foster strode to the door and glared back at Sheriff Jack Lawrence out of bulging brown eyes. His leathery face twisted in an angry snarl as he thrust his chin out, breathing defiance and a strong smell of Scotch whiskey through the cell bars at the lawman.

"Waal, no more I am!" he shouted. "The grub I was offered wasn't fit to eat. I had to spit it out. I want some decent grub, and I'm goin' to holler till I get it!"

"What's your idea of good grub?" the sheriff asked.

"It ain't sour beans, with worms

in 'em, and stinkin' coffec, like I got this mornin'," Buck complained, holding his hands over his lean middle. "I got a weak stummick I have, and if I starve to death in this rotten jail of yours—"

"I'm callin' your bluff, cowboy!" Sheriff Jack Lawrence said, eying Buck suspiciously. "If I treat you to a square meal, will you keep your lip buttoned and stop this damn noise you been makin' all mornin'?"

"I'll do anything for a decent meal," Buck said, and looked as if he meant it. "I like the way the chinks cook up grub."

"What d'you want to eat?" the sheriff asked.

Buck fingered his stomach gently. "I reckon a nice hot chicken pie'd set good in my innards right now, and coffee, and mebbe some canned peaches."

"All right," the sheriff said. "I'll send a boy over to the chink's and I'll expect nothin' but silence from you for the rest o' the day—lots of it!"

After what seemed like a long delay, Sing Lo finally appeared at the jail, carrying a tray with the meal Buck had ordered. The jailer let the little Chinaman take the food in to Buck's cell, but made him leave at once.

Buck didn't like this jailer. He was a long-nosed gawky younker, with small, suspicious, red-rimmed eyes, and a big Adam's apple, sticking out of a skinny throat. But he was tall and rawboned and of wiry strength. He watched through the bars of the cell door, while Buck ate.

Buck went to work on the chicken pie with a gusto of a starving coyote. There was good white and dark meat in it, and plenty of gravy. And down in the bottom of the dish, there was a stone-chisel, and a hammer



Buck roared and shouted through the window bars.

with the handle sawn off short, so that it would fit in the dish.

By turning his back to the cell door, Buck was able to slip these tools into the inner pocket of his bearskin vest, without being noticed by the vigilant jailer.

Then he tackled the coffee, and

finished off the meal with the canned peaches.

When he had finished, the jailer, who had watched him with the eye of a hawk throughout the meal, called out: "Gimme that tray!"

Buck took it over and passed it to him through the cell bars. The

coffeccup, plate, pie dish and eating tools followed. But the hammer and chisel reposed snugly inside Buck's shaggy old vest.

The kid jailer took the tray away, but returned immediately.

"The sheriff's told me to keep an eye on you, me ol' buckaroo," he said, in a hard tone. "He don't trust you no farther than he kin see you!"

"I still think the sheriff's tryin' to pizen me. That chicken pie tasted durned funny," Buck complained. "He knows I ain't guilty of this murder, but he wants to get rid of me, 'cause I know too much!"

Buck sat down on the hard cot, which was the only furniture in his cell. He remained there for some time in silence. Then, after about an hour, he began to groan and hold his hands over his lean stomach.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! I'm pizened! I'm dyin'!" he groaned. "The sheriff's killed me! Oh, my stummick! Oh! Oh! Oh—"

Buck rolled on the floor and began to writhe about, all the time making horrible faces and moaning that he had been poisoned.

Buck was just a dumb old cowpoke, but there was a lot of the ham actor in him. He liked to show off, and this was a time when his talent for clowning came in useful, and anyway, Buck wasn't always as dumb as a lot of folks thought.

His acting now brought results, for the gawky kid jailer came to the cell door, fumbling with his keys and unlocking it hastily. There was alarm in his face, as he dropped on one knee at Buck's side, his red-rimmed eyes studying the old cowpoke's face closely.

"What's ailin' you, old-timer?" he asked. "Ain't you—"

And then, the lanky jailer suddenly realized that his suspicions of this tricky old mossyhorn had been

justified. For he found himself in the grip of a pair of wiry arms, with rawhide-tough muscles that held him powerless.

The jailer tried to yell for help, but one of Buck's calloused hands clamped over his mouth, shutting off all sound with two fingers, while the thumb and the other two fingers dug into the jailer's skinny throat like iron claws.

The younger man was game and strong, and he fought furiously. He kicked and gouged and clawed, but Buck hung on, his bowed legs clamping around the lawman's body, crushing his ribs, driving the breath out of his lungs.

Buck Foster had been in many a barroom brawl—in all sorts of tough joints, from the Mexican border to the Canadian line, where everything went, and no kind of foul or dirty fighting was barred. His bashed nose, broken in three places, was mute evidence of these battles. So was the nick in his left ear—a chunk bitten out in a fierce scrap by a half-breed in a Mexican *cantina*. And there were plenty more souvenirs of such combat on Buck's scarred face and body. Experience had made him a rough-and-tumble fighter, with the cunning of a wise old timber wolf, the courage of a pit bulldog, and the ferocity of a wolverine.

The kid jailer he was fighting now had plenty of guts. He rocked Buck's head with savage punches. He tried to get his gun out, but it was knocked out of his grasp and sent sliding under the cot.

Finally, the kid lay, spent and panting, with Buck's legs still crushing his ribs, and Buck's iron fingers still digging into his throat.

"D'you give up, younker?" Buck asked.

The jailer nodded, his red-rimmed eyes filling with tears.

"Sorry, kid," the old waddy panted, a sly grin twisting the corners of his mouth under his grizzled mustache. "But that bad stummick of mine was somethin' I invented, just to git you where I got you now! So—"

Buck's hand reached inside his bearskin vest and came out with the short hammer, which had been hidden in Sing Lo's chicken pie. He slugged the jailer on the head with stunning force. The fellow went limp, but Buck was taking no chances. He got hold of the blanket from the cot, tore it into strips, and gagged the youngster, then tied his hands and feet and threw his limp body on the cot.

Next, he took the jailer's keys and went to Joe's cell and released the redhead. McTavish's cell was at the rear of the jail. Buck and Joe found the Scotchman sitting on his cot, his head resting on his hands, a glum expression on his face.

Buck opened his cell and went inside, followed by Joe. Then they took turns working with the hammer and chisel, prying out the window bars.

When they were all removed, Joe Scott looked out through the space, then turned back to his jail mates.

"Everything's clear," he announced. "Looks like the sheriff thinks keepin' a deputy guardin' the prisoners in the cells is enough to prevent anyone from breakin' out. Well, here's a tender, tearful goodbye, sheriff!"

Joe crawled through the opening, hung by his hands for a moment, and dropped to the ground outside. McTavish followed him, and Buck came last.

"By ganny!" he muttered, as he joined the others. "That was about the easiest jail I ever broke out of!"

CHAPTER V.

GUN WOLVES ON THE FLYING T.

CAL TRUXTON, boss of the syndicate-owned Flying T, was angry, as he strode toward the bunkhouse. His big square chin was thrust out, and fire smoldered in his dark eyes. He flung the door open and stepped inside—to find three men playing cards at a table, sharing a bottle of whiskey.

One was his chief hired gunman, Sam Lowe, Truxton was particularly angry with Lowe, for it was this big hombre with the knife-scarred mouth half hidden by his curling black mustache, who had failed to make good on the job of serving the sheriff's order to move the family of Heinie the Dutchman off their claim.

Lowe and his two deputized gunmen, Clay and Lanning, had come back like whipped dogs, to admit their failure. And they had told Truxton the story of the hard-faced cowpuncher who had routed them with his swift gunplay.

Playing cards with Lowe now were the lean, dark-mustached Clay, and another of Flying T's hired gunmen, a youngster known only as Dirk. Hardly out of his teens, Dirk, a ruffian with a hatchet face, thin, bloodless lips, pale, cruel eyes, and quick, nervous hands, was the killer type. Given the chance, he might turn out to be another Billy the Kid.

Truxton strode toward the table, and kicked it over, spilling the whiskey bottle and sending the cards flying in all directions.

"This is no time for loafin' and card-playin'!" he shouted. "Where's the rest of you gun tramps that's drawin' good wages from Flyin' T for clearin' the nesters off the range? Where's Lanning? And Jones? And Pedro?"

"Lanning and Jones are gettin' chuck," Lowe said. "Pedro's out back, cleanin' his guns, I think."

"Huh! The Mex's the only one shows any interest in his job!" Truxton growled. "Go and bring 'em all in here. I want to talk to them!"

Sam Lowe went out and presently returned with three more men—the remainder of Truxton's crew of hired gun-slingers.

One of them was limping. This was the big pock-faced hombre named Lanning, who had been thrown from his horse during the shooting ruckus with Billy West at the Dutchman's place.

Then there was a gunman named Jones—a fat little fellow, with small eyes half buried by his pudgy cheeks, and an unshaven growth of blond stubble on his chin and jaws; harmless-looking, but lightning-fast with his Colts.

Finally, Pedro came in—small and lithe in his Mexican garb, still holding in his hand the oily rag with which he had been cleaning his guns.

When they were all gathered, Cal Truxton stood facing them and spoke what was on his mind.

"Now, men," he began, "I want to make it clear that you've got to do the work I'm payin' you to do, or you're all fired!"

"We done our best, boss," Sam Lowe tried to explain.

"It was a damn poor best!" Cal Truxton cut him short, with a sneer. "You missed out on that job of gettin' rid of them nester brats yesterday. Yore pard Driggs got hisself killed, instead of gunning down that interferin' saddle tramp West—"

Sam Lowe's scarred mouth twisted in a crooked smile. "That hombre West's bad medicine, boss. Some say he's a Ranger—"

"Now listen to me, Lowe!" Truxton interrupted, pointing a thick fin-

ger at his chief gunman. "I want this maverick West wiped out. I'm sure he ain't a Ranger!"

"You want him dry-gulched?" Lowe asked.

"Kill him off any way you like. Get him into a fight, if any one of you got the nerve and guts to outshoot him. If not, gang up on him. Then I want you to go right ahead with clearin' them nesters off my range, till the job's finished—and I want it finished pronto!"

"I'll do my best, boss," Sam Lowe said meekly.

"I want results!" Cal Truxton shouted, scowling at the hangdog bunch of hired ruffians. "Now, get t'hell out o' here!"

Billy West slowed his pace, as he jingled his spurs along the wooden sidewalk of O'Brien's main street. That soft, shuffling footsteps behind him was familiar. A moment later, he felt a tug at his shirtsleeve, and, turning around, found himself looking down into the flat, yellow face of his camp cook Sing Lo.

In spite of the fact that Sing Lo had no business being here in town at this time, Billy was glad to see him.

"Hello, chink," he greeted. "You seen anything of those two mavericks Buck and Joe?"

Sing Lo looked very mysterious. "Yes, boss. Me know where Buck and Joe be. You wantee see 'em?"

"I'd sure like to see those two sage hounds and find out what they been up to," Billy told the little Chinaman.

"Come lis way," Sing Lo said, and led the way along the main street.

Billy followed him, until he turned in at a Chinese restaurant, and here, at a table in the back, with a screen drawn around it, Billy found his two missing cowpunchers.

He sat down with them and listened while Buck and Joe told him of their adventures—of losing their way, of the Scoten nester McTavish, of the dead man, for whose murder all three of them had been arrested, and of their jail-break. Sing Lo, they said, had taken McTavish back to his home, hiding him in a small wagon borrowed from the Chinese restaurant owner.



JOE SCOTT

SING LO

The voices of Buck and Joe went on and on, in an endless argument about different details of their story, while Billy sat, deep in thought, trying to puzzle out the mystery of the dead man and his possible connection with the gunman Driggs.

Finally, he looked up and said: "Well, you two sage hounds, with Christmas not far away, I think it'd be plumb nice to do somethin' for some kids I know of that's been left without their dad."

Buck Foster was heartily in favor of his boss's suggestion. "That's sure tough fer them poor kids," he agreed, "losin' their paw right around Chrissimus. You kin take five dollars out o' this month's pay an'—"

"Who are the kids?" Joe Scott wanted to know.

Billy told him of the murder of

Heinie the Dutchman, and of the family the slain nester had left.

Buck Foster at once changed his tune. "What?" he shouted. "You expect me to plunk out five dollars of me hard-earned mazuma for a bunch of nester's brats—and him a squaw man, too! By ganny! That ain't my idear of a merry Chrissimus for yours truly, Buck Foster!"

"They're nice kids," Billy argued. "I'm goin' down to their place. Suppose you come along and see them for yourself."

Buck grumbled some more, but finally went along, when he saw that

Billy and Joe were intent on going. The man at the livery stable asked no questions when Buck and Joe took their horses out of the corral. Being a wise hombre, he took it for granted that they had been properly released from jail, or else he figured it wasn't his business anyway.

Before leaving, Billy gave Sing Lo some money and told him to borrow his Chinese friend's wagon again and drive to the nearest large town for some Christmas doodads to make things enjoyable for the kids.

The three Montana cowpunchers rode out of town in the face of a bitter gale. The norther was sweeping across the prairie, bringing the first flurries of snow, the beginnings of a white Christmas. The wind was purpling Buck Foster's bashed nose and leathery cheeks, as he shuddered inside his shaggy old bearskin vest.

It was a long ride to the Dutchman's homestead, and the shadows of approaching dusk were gathering over the western rim of the prairie, as the three Montana punchers came in sight of the little group of unpainted buildings by the creek.

As they came closer, the sound of loud voices and the frightened

screams of the children showed that something was wrong.

The three put spurs to their broncs and came galloping into the yard—in time to see the oldest of Heinie the Dutchman's kids—a strong, wiry boy of fifteen—struggling with the burly Sam Lowe, the chief of the Flying T gunmen.

At the door of the nester's cabin, the pale, hatchet-faced gunny known as Dirk and the Mexican Pedro were beating up the lazy Indian, Sitting Wolf, who was protecting himself from the blows they were raining on him with their gun barrels.

From inside the cabin came the screams of Timid Fawn and the younger children.

Billy West's face flamed with sudden anger, tiny flecks of light shone in his gray eyes, and his jaw tightened into a knot of hard muscle. "Fightin' women and kids, you pole-cats!" he challenged in a loud voice.

"Yeah!" Buck Foster roared, dragging his horse to a sudden stop. "Come on and fight agin' men, you sneakin' badgers! Lay off the kids!"

And Joe Scott cut loose with a wild cowboy yell, as he slid out of his saddle and drew his smooth-handled six-gun out of its holster.

Sam Lowe released the boy he had been trying to subdue and shouted an order to his men out of one side of his scarred mouth.

Pedro and Dirk let go of Sitting Wolf—who at once disappeared—and turned to face the Montana punchers. At the same time, the other three Flying T gunnies came crowding out of the house. In the lead, was the little fat-faced Jones, a Colt held in each pudgy hand. Behind him came Clay, gaunt and lanky, a flush on his thin cheeks, the long ends of his stringy black mustache blowing about in the icy wind.

Last to emerge was big pock-faced Lanning, still limping from the fall from his horse the day before.

They spread out in a wide half-circle, facing the Montana cowboys, with murder in their eyes.

There was a moment of silence—an atom of time in which death seemed to be catching a breath, to prepare for the carnage that was to follow.

Then a gun barked, and in the next seconds, the air was filled with the roar of exploding Colts, the reek of burning powder, and the cries of men gripped by the hate and agony of primitive gun fighting.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEAL WITH TRUXTON.

THE SNOW was coming down thicker and faster now. The cold was less biting. The norther was swirling and drifting a fleecy blanket of whiteness across the prairie.

Billy West gave a sharp order to his saddle mates and made for the shelter of the barn, shooting as he went. To the left of him, he saw Joe Scott taking to cover behind a pile of firewood logs. Buck Foster, no longer reckless and hotheaded, but gun-wise and cautious, had shinned to the top of a low shack with a sloping roof, and was opening fire on his foes from that vantage point.

Meanwhile, the Flying T gunmen had spread out, taking advantage of similar cover, from which to carry on the battle. One of them was behind a water barrel. This was the hatchet-faced, pale-eyed killer Dirk, whom Billy had marked as the worst in the gang. He was taking care of this murderous young gun whelp himself.

Crouching close beside the barn, Billy watched his chance. Dirk's

gun flamed, and as it did so, the killer kid showed himself for an instant. Billy's gun roared—and a shrill scream and the thrashing about of a body behind the barrel showed that his lead had found its mark.

And now the bullets of the Flying T gunmen were splintering the wood of the barn, stinging Billy with wounds that burned and tore his flesh. He pressed close to the side of the flimsy shack, giving them as little target as possible, and triggered furiously at his foes.

He heard Buck Foster's gun barking from atop the adjoining shack, and the veteran's voice roaring a string of curses and insults at his enemies. From behind the woodpile, Joe Scott was shooting away, uttering no word, shifting position every few seconds to fool the Flying T men.

Then Billy noticed that Joe was in trouble. The Mexican Pedro had spotted the redhead's exact position and was making things hot for him. Joe's forehead was streaming blood. Then Billy caught the Mexican in his gunsight—and squeezed the trigger of his left-hand gun.

Pedro howled, threw his hands high in air, and fell face downward, crimsoning the snow with his lifeblood.

A moment later, Billy saw that Joe had got his second man—the little fat gunny, with the swift-moving hands and pudgy cheeks.

Then came a roar of pain from Buck Foster, and Billy saw the veteran's lanky form go rolling down the slope of the roof, to drop off at the rear.

At once, Billy and Joe centered the fire of their Colts on the two gunnies who had been fighting Buck, and they made it so hot for this pair that, in less than a minute, there was a loud shout of surrender, and the

last two Flying T men came out, with hands held high in the air.

These were the leader of the crew, Sam Lowe, and the other big fellow, Lanning, who had been thrown from his horse in the previous day's ruckus. Billy had suspected a yellow streak in these two, and it did not surprise him to see them give up.

The two eldest nester boys and the Indian Sitting Wolf came out of their hiding places as soon as the shooting was over and helped round up the dead and the injured.

Two of the Flying T gunmen, Dirk and Pedro, had been killed outright. Two others—short, pudgy-faced Jones and lanky, black-mustached Clay—were suffering from bad wounds that would keep them on their backs for a couple of weeks. Lowe and Lanning, who had surrendered to save their skins, were unharmed, save for a few slight bullet gashes.

Billy left the two nester kids and Sitting Wolf to patch up the wounds of the surviving gunmen, while Joe Scott took charge of their guns and made sure they weren't packing any hide-outs.

The Circle J boss was kind of worried about Buck Foster. He walked around to the rear of the shack, from the roof of which Buck had fallen, and, guided by the sounds of loud groaning and cursing, he finally found the grizzled cowpuncher.

In the gathering darkness, Billy made out Buck's lanky form, lying face down behind the shack. Buck was moaning and groaning and uttering strange oaths, and in between times, sputtering and spitting as if he'd swallowed something that tasted bad.

Knowing the old ranny as he did, Billy's anxiety was relieved, for he felt sure that Buck couldn't be hurt too seriously, when he packed so

much vile temper and bad language in his carcass.

Going down on one knee in the snow, Billy helped the veteran to his feet and looked him over. Buck's left leg was limp and numb from a flesh wound in his thigh, and a bullet gash along his ribs on the right side was making a gory mess of his shirt and bearskin vest and running down his pants. But Billy knew that Buck's tough old hide had stood worse lead-blisterings than this.

Then with Buck throwing his weight on Billy's shoulder, the younger ranny helped him get across the yard to the house.

Inside, the air was steaming hot. Timid Fawn had a big fire going. Buck was placed on a cot, where he lay, still sputtering and spitting, and plucking little particles of something out of his mustache and hair and eyebrows.

Cal Truxton had a bad half hour, when Billy West called at the Flying T that night. The Montana man minced no words in talking to the ranch boss, who represented the Eastern syndicate owning the Flying T. Sitting in the ranch office, he laid the law down to Truxton in no uncertain terms, and the big square-chinned hombre just took it and swallowed it, with a wry face.

"You an' me, Truxton," Billy said, "are both cowmen. We both got the same interests, but I'm not the same breed of cowman you are!"

"What d'you mean?" Truxton demanded, bristling under the Circle J boss's rough speech.

"I mean, Truxton," Billy went on, "that I don't hold with fencin' in open range, like you're doin'."

There was a puzzled look on Truxton's broad face. Hired by Eastern cattle interests, he didn't understand the viewpoint of the cow country.

"But the range belongs to us," he argued. "We got that right—"

"Maybe you got the right to the land," Billy went on. "But you haven't got the right to cut another man off from his waterin' places or keep him from travelin' the shortest way across open range. Savvy?"

Truxton shook his head. He still didn't savvy. "Are you standin' up for them nesters?" he asked, with a sneer.

"I'm not takin' the part of nesters, as against cowmen," Billy said. "But they got their rights. And you hirin' gunmen like Driggs to shoot down a man like Heinie the Dutchman, with a family of eight kids, don't sit right in the craw of any cowman. Even your own hands—like Jim Bones—are against you on that score. I've talked with them, and I know!"

Truxton's rudy face had paled a little. He was regarding this hard-faced Montana cowman in a new light now. "I . . . I didn't mean they should kill Heinie," he murmured.

"Another thing, Truxton," Billy continued. "I've had a talk with the sheriff, and he tells me it was your gunman Driggs who tipped him off that McTavish had murdered a man and hid the body behind his barn. Now McTavish isn't the murderin' kind, but Driggs was, and Driggs thought I was a Ranger. And there was a Ranger's badge found in Driggs' pocket after he was dead. Now, add that up and tell me what you get."

Truxton stared blankly at his visitor without speaking.

"The answer is," Billy said, "that the dead man found at McTavish's was a Ranger, who'd been murdered by Driggs and placed there to get the nester in bad with the law. The sheriff let me look at the body, and

there's a place on his shirt where the Ranger badge was pinned. It'll be easy to send to headquarters and get him identified. You can't afford to get the Rangers lined up against you, Truxton!"

There was real fear in Truxton's eyes now, but he made a last attempt to bluster. "You got proof of what you say?" he asked.

"Yeah. I got proof," Billy told him, and showed the Ranger badge he had taken from Driggs' body. He also showed Truxton his own card in the Montana Cattlemen's Association. "My word would stand up against yours, Truxton," he added, "any time, any place!"



CAL TRUXTON

Truxton slumped in his chair beside the desk, a defeated man. His voice was different. All the fight and bluster had gone out of him when he spoke again. "Well, what d'you want me to do, West?" he asked.

The tenseness of the Montanan's face relaxed for the first time during his talk with the Flying T boss.

"Now, you're talkin', hombre," he said, in a more agreeable tone. "First off, let me tell you I've run four of your gunnies out of the country—the four that was left alive after they'd tried to gun me and a couple

of my pards down at the Dutchman's place. And if I ever hear of you hirin' gunmen on this spread again, I'll report your part in the killin' of that Ranger to Ranger headquarters!"

"I didn't know," Truxton protested. "It wasn't my orders—"

"And then," Billy cut him short, "there's the matter of those nester kids. I want them paid for the land their father settled on. They got relatives who'll take care of 'em better than if they're left with those two Injuns Timid Fawn and Sittin' Wolf, who went and got themselves hitched up before the poor Dutchman was in his grave more'n a couple of weeks. What d'you say, Truxton?"

"I'll do it! You can trust me. I just didn't understand!" Truxton said, and held out his hand. "You've showed me a lot—thanks, West!"

Billy took the Flying T man's hand and gripped it.

"I'm preparin' a little Christmas party for the kids tomorrow night. It's Christmas Eve. My chink cook's gone for a tree and trimmings and some presents for them. Maybe you—"

"What's the matter with holdin' the Christmas party here on Flyin' T?" Truxton asked, a new note of enthusiasm in his voice. "We'll clear out the big barn and have it decorated, and I'll get a fiddler, and we'll give them kids a good time! How about it, West?"

The norther swooped down in full fury. All through the next day, before Christmas Eve, it brought a steady fall of snow from the gray skies, to cover the prairie with its white mantle. Toward nightfall it stopped, leaving the land agleam with myriad snow crystals under the moonlight.

Cal Truxton made good his promise. The floor of the big barn on the Flying T was swept and sprinkled with corn meal. A pair of fiddlers were brought in, to make music for dancing. From the neighboring ranches, cowboys came, and ranch owners with their wives and daughters. Two big bowls of punch were prepared—one loaded with plenty of redevye for thirsty cowpunchers; the other a plain punch for the women and kids.

And there was a Christmas tree, which Sing Lo had driven forty miles in a buckboard to buy, and a lot of toys and candy and other presents for the kids. Then the eight children of Heinie the Dutchman, their beady eyes wide with wonder, came, and McTavish, the Scotch nester, brought his tall wife and their three children, and sang "Auld Lang Syne" till he was hoarse. Sheriff Jack Lawrence was among those present, with his wife, and Sitting Wolf and his squaw, Timid Fawn, also came, and drank liberally from the loaded punch bowl.

Buck Foster, too, was there, in all his glory. He had left off his shaggy old bearskin vest and woolly chaps, and was wearing a suit of black broadcloth, now turning green with age, with a long-tailed coat, which he liked to wear on occasions of great elegance. Buck's hard linen collar cut his neck painfully and made him hold his head high. His mustache

ends had been carefully curled by the town barber, and his grizzled hair was slicked down with bear's grease, with some sort of fancy-smelling perfume added.

When it came time for the square dances, Buck couldn't take part in them, because of his gimpy leg, where a gunman's bullet had gouged him the day before. But he hobbled up alongside the fiddlers' stand and bawled out the dance calls in his loudest, and everybody thought he did a good job of it, as he chanted:

"Chase that rabbit, chase that squirrel,
Chase that pretty gal round the world!

Promenade!

All hands up and circle round!

Don't let the pretty heifers git out of town!

Everybody dance!

Swing your pardners, swing 'em one an' all!
Corral them pretty mavericks up and down
the hall!

Whoop-ee! Everybody prance!"

The only sour note was Joe Scott, who pretended not to like Buck's finery and his perfume. He pulled a wry face and held his nose whenever he went near the older waddy.

"Hey, mossyhorn!" he called out to Buck, during a lull in the music. "I wish you'd git back into your old duds, 'cause you smell more like a he-man cowpoke thataway. That damn barber's scented you up like a gal in a dance hall!"

And that made Buck Foster so mad, he didn't speak to Joe Scott again till after New Year's.

ONE PRONTO PILGRIM

by FREDRIC SINCLAIR

The funniest, fastest, fury-filled story yet to thunder from the West!

COMING NEXT WEEK!

FEARLESS SCOUT HELPED WIN BATTLE

THE man who piloted Dewitt's colony into Texas, Erastus Smith, became known by a nickname that was later given to a county in north-west Texas in honor of the scout. When Smith was barely twenty he left home in search of adventure. He went to Texas and joined up with a group of men in Nacogdoches whose object was to free Texas from Mexico and make it a free and independent republic. But the scheme was a failure. It came too soon. But ten years later it was accomplished by Sam Houston and his brave fighters at San Jacinto.

One day Erastus, accompanied by his dog, was hunting near the Guadalupe River. He laid his gun on the bank and it slipped into the water. He was determined not to lose that gun. He had not seen it disappear, and knew it would take some time to find it, so he made sure of safety by tying a rope to a nearby tree and lowering himself into the water. He had to walk about for some time under water. He recovered the gun, but the water pressure on his eardrums deprived him of his hearing, and from that day he was deaf. He was known thereafter as Deaf Smith.

Deaf Smith was with Ben Milam at the storming of Bexar when three hundred Texans captured the city and forced the surrender of fourteen hundred Mexican soldiers under General Cos. Five days fighting followed in the streets of the city, in which Deaf Smith was severely wounded, and the brave Milam lost his life.

The fall of the Alamo followed,

and the brutal slaughter of every brave defender of that fort was ordered by Santa Ana. By this time Deaf Smith was known to the entire Texas army as the most efficient scout and spy in all Texas. When Houston reorganized his army in March, 1836, Deaf Smith was made commander of scouts.

On the morning of April 21st, Deaf Smith, while out on scout duty, saw General Cos cross Vince's Bridge with recruits for Santa Ana. He rushed to General Houston with the news, and the general detailed him at once to go and destroy that bridge, which he did. Returning in time for the battle, Smith announced to the army in a loud voice that the bridge had been cut down.

He then plunged into the fight. After breaking his sword in combat he seized that of a Mexican soldier whom he had just killed, and continued fighting until victory was assured.

Had it not been for the prompt destruction of Vince's Bridge, Santa Ana would have made his escape. Then he would have returned with a re-organized army, and the result might have been different, with victory delayed.

After the end of the war, Deaf Smith became a Texas Ranger, but his health began to fail and he retired from active service, weakened by the scars of battle and a hard, strenuous life. He died in Richmond, Texas, November 30, 1837, but he still lives in the hearts of all Texans as one of their greatest and most beloved heroes.

OMAHA HOOKER

ON THE OREGON TRAIL

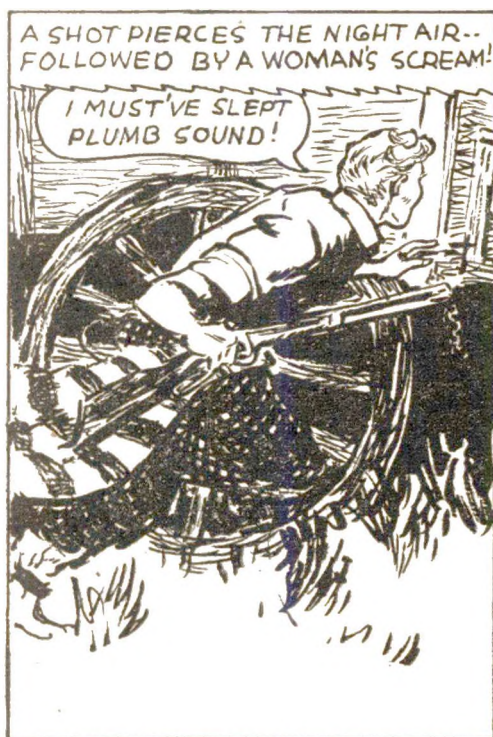


BY WARREN E. CARLTON

DRAWINGS BY BILL TIMMINS







A CLEVER JAIL-BREAK

ONE day when a man was seen riding leisurely across the Tennessee River bridge no one stared at him. It was nothing unusual to see a man taking a quiet ride. Few noticed that he was mounted on a beautiful thoroughbred Kentucky mare.

But the man was Harvey Logan, a member of Butch Cassidy's "Wild Bunch" who had just escaped from a prison cell of the Knox County jail, without a gun being fired. He had landed in jail two years before and was now on his way to freedom.

The jail overlooked the Tennessee River, and Harvey, with his constant guard, Irwin, spent a lot of time watching the boats as they passed. They got to know the various river packets, and could spot a strange craft at a glance. About an hour before he began his ride, Harvey had called Irwin's attention to a new boat that had appeared on the river and asked him if he could make out the name painted on it. Irwin backed against the steel lattice of the cell to get a better look when a wire noose, made from the springs of the prisoner's cot, dropped over his head. In an instant the wire was twisted tight, Irwin's head jerked back, and his hands were wired behind him. Helpless and choking, he was fastened to the bars of the cell.

Harvey then secured the guard's gun, with which he covered the other guard in the corridor, and made him unlock the cell door. They went down the stairs, Logan pushing the guard in front of him and keeping the gun pressed against his back.

On the first floor a Negro trusty approached. Harvey waved the gun at him and commanded him to saddle the sheriff's mare, which he knew was kept in the jail yard. The Negro hurried out and brought the mare at once. The yard gate opened on the street and was guarded by a white trusty, who was ordered to open it. As Harvey leaped into the saddle he called out to the guard whom he had just left: "Good-by, Tom. I'm glad I didn't have to kill you. Go and loosen Irwin before he chokes to death."

Harvey Logan waved a joyous farewell to the gaping prisoners and rode gaily out to freedom. Some days later the sheriff's mare was found grazing by the roadside in the foothills and was returned to him. Three months later the bridle and saddle were sent to Sheriff Fox by express prepaid from Kansas City.

From that time on Harvey Logan was never jailed again. He rejoined the Wild Bunch and was in many train robberies, and other adventures with the gang but was never captured. When Texas became too overpopulated for outlaws the Wild Bunch broke up. Butch Cassidy, Harry Lonabaugh and Harvey Logan went to the Argentine, where they raised cattle and were doing well. But the call of the outlaw trail was too strong, and they took to rustling. Soldiers surrounded their place, and Lonabaugh was killed. Butch Cassidy ended his life with his last bullet rather than surrender. Harvey Logan disappeared and was never seen again.

TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

Part IV



by WALKER TOMPKINS
Author of "Señor Desperado," etc.

TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

***The six-gun snapped into the base of Preston's spine
—and law-sure death coiled snakelike on his neck!***

By Walker Tompkins

The Story So Far:

QUENT PRESTON, young cowpoke, and his father,

PANHANDLE PRESTON, have come from Texas to Wyoming where they build up a ranch in lonely Tomahawk Pass. On a ride to Wagonwheel Springs they are amazed and disgusted to see a roaring end-of-track railroad camp mushroomed overnight. The Union Pacific Railroad is cutting through the country, intruding on their lonely wilderness.

In an altercation over a watering charge for their horses a frontier renegade is accidentally killed by Quent. A bloodthirsty mob starts to lynch him when

BOONE DELIVAN, a debonair, though hard-bitten speculator in railway land, intercedes and saves young Preston. Delivan then casually offers to buy the Prestons' ranch, wanting it much more than he pretends. Delivan is sided in this offer by

ELLIS BAYARD, a crafty and unscrupulous lawyer and real-estate operator. The Prestons refuse to sell and thank Delivan for his aid.

The next day Quent, attacked by an enraged cougar on the ranch is saved by the straight shooting of

HELEN GORINE, daughter of Major Gorine, the U. P.'s chief surveyor who has run a survey through Tomahawk Pass. Quent returns to the ranchhouse and discovers

LINN DePERREN, a Delivan henchman, trying to persuade Panhandle to sell the ranch. When Panhandle refuses, DePerren slays him. Quent pursues DePerren and kills him. It looks like murder to Major Gorine who has seen the murder. He arrests Quent but Quent escapes, returns to the ranch and buries his father there. A few days later he is set upon by Delivan's paid killers who burn down the corrals and house and drive the cattle off. They attempt to kill Quent, but he captures one of the owl-hooters. Returning to town with his captive, he encounters Major

Gorine and a surveying party. The major is convinced of Quent's innocence by the story. But just then the gunny is killed by a mysterious rifle bullet. The only witness against Delivan has died!

Foolishly Quent proceeds to Wagonwheel and retains Delivan's lawyer, Ellis Bayard. Quent reveals that the papers to the Preston homestead are buried under the ruins of the ranchhouse. Ellis tricks him into the back room and Delivan smashes Quent over the head.

Events follow rapidly. Quent becomes accused of two murders which he did not commit, and Major Gorine, who was going to testify to Quent's innocence at his court-martial, is himself murdered. Helen Gorine suspects Delivan of murdering her father and breaks off her engagement to him. Quent is sentenced to death by the court-martial, but is saved from the death train by Helen who holds up the engineer. They escape from the train only to fall prey to a band of murderous Indians.

To save Helen from the horror of capture by the Indians, Quent raises his six-gun and presses it to the girl's heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

SCALPING KNIFE.

THE hollow click of a firing pin striking a shell which had already been fired met Preston's ears. A shock of nausea went through the Texan, as he realized that in twirling the gun's cylinder when he thrust it back into its frame, he had accidentally put a used shell under the hammer.

Before he could cock the single-action weapon again, he was struck heavily by a naked warrior who had dived off his horse in passing. Copper-skinned arms locked in a stran-

gle hold about his neck. Two more warriors pounced off their horses to seize Helen Gorine before she could get the Colt out of Preston's hand.

A rifle butt lifted and fell, striking Preston's head with a grisly thud. He went limp. The paint-smeared Indian who had jumped upon him relaxed his strangling grip and gave vent to a soul-curdling yell of triumph.

Dizzily, Preston looked about him. His blurred gaze found Helen just as he was hoisted to his feet by powerful arms. Then he was dragged bodily to the spot where fifteen or more of the Indians had gathered about the body of their slain chief.

The air was a din of sound as a sub-chief confirmed the fact of their leader's death. Then, simultaneously the mourning cries of the Sioux gave way to a ghastly hush.

A battery of eyes swung to cover the white captives under a withering glare.

Helen and Preston were dragged forward. The cowboy knew the meaning of this ominous silence. Their doom had been irrevocably sealed when he had shot the war-bonneted chief of the band.

Helen would undoubtedly be taken captive to a Sioux camp, there to meet an unthinkable fate with eventual torture and death. Preston would be butchered on the spot, scalped, and his corpse left on this desolate hillside to be mutilated by coyotes.

A Sioux with white and yellow ochre smeared on his hawklike nose and protruding cheekbones was hunkered over the dead chief, chanting a husky Indian death ritual. From the three feathers stuck in his black topknot, Preston knew this was a secondary chieftain, but now in full command of the war party.

The assembled warriors growled

with the guttural accents of wild beasts as the kneeling Indian gently removed the eagle-feathered bonnet from the chief's head, and placed it on his own in token of his new authority.

Then, with eyes flashing like twin pools of fire, the new chief stood up. One coppery fist closed over the hilt of a bowie knife in his rawhide-thonged belt. The belt was festooned with grisly hanks of varicolored hair. Human scalps! The scalps of white victims.

Helen Gorine cried out in horror as she saw the Sioux turn slowly to impale Quent Preston with his glare.

As the Sioux chief put one moccasined foot forward, Preston's two captors dropped his limp body to the ground. In falling the Texan's eyes met Helen's, his vision still dimmed by the stunning blow he had received a moment before.

With an inhuman screech, the Sioux pounced like a cougar upon the fallen white. The splayed fingers of his left hand clamped into the Texan's hair, and Preston's head was lifted off the ground.

Helen went faint as she saw that Quent was to die the most horrible death a white man could know here on the plains: that of being scalped alive. Preston's eyes and tongue would follow, trophies of the infuriated Sioux's butcher knife.

Preston was powerless to move a muscle, paralyzed by the fatal blaze in the Indian's slitted eyes.

The scalper's foul breath was hot on his face. The Indian's teeth ground together in the passion of his rage, as he thrust his scalping knife against the flesh of Preston's brow, a quarter inch below the hairline.

The razor-honed knife sliced through the skin of his forehead and

hit bone with the scalding agony of a naked flame.

And then the Sioux snatched back his knife and dropped his grip on Preston's hair, as a frantic yell of warning came from one of the circling warriors.

Helen Gorine stared past the heads about her and saw the reason for the scalper's sudden halt.

Pounding over the top of the hill above them came twelve uniformed members of the Army firing squad, riding in pursuit—as they thought—of Helen Gorine and their escaped prisoner, Quent Preston.

The U. S. cavalymen halted in dismay as they saw the Indians on the slope below them. Then Colonel Sires shouted a harsh command, and the mounted troops opened fire on the Indians grouped on the hillside.

Quent Preston's veins were charged with sudden vitality, as new hope flashed through his mind.

He drew back his legs and kicked violently upward, his high-heeled cowboots catching the Indian chief in the stomach even as the Sioux chief leaned down to hack off another scalp trophy before joining his braves in flight.

With a grunt of pain, the Sioux staggered backward, the scalping knife flashing in the sun. A curtain of blood threaded down over Preston's eyes from the cut in his scalp, so that he did not get the satisfaction of seeing a cavalryman's bullet chug into the Indian's heart and drop him in his tracks.

Helen Gorine's captors had released the girl and were running for their horses.

With high-pitched yells of baffled rage, the score of surviving Indians headed down the ravine on their ponies. Preston saw three more Indians pitch from their horses'

backs before the last of the Sioux melted into a coulee and were gone.

Preston was helped to his feet by Helen Gorine. He swabbed blood out of his eyelashes and grinned as the two clung to each other, shutting their eyes against the ghastly shambles about them.

"Helen, you weren't born to cash in your chips today," panted the cowboy finally, as they looked up the hill where the victorious troops were riding down to meet them. "You . . . you understood why I was going to . . . to shoot—"

"Yes, Quent," whispered the girl, her head close against his shoulder. "Both of us brushed mighty close, then—"

Colonel Sires and his firing-squad riders reined up beside them. The hard-faced old army man stared about at the grim evidence of the *mêlée*—red-skinned corpses sprawled grotesquely amid the rocks and sagebrush, arrows and guns and a broken hatchet littering the foot-trampled scene.

"We've no time to wait here!" cried the army commander. "Those Indians had us outnumbered two to one as it was—they thought we were just the forerunners of a big detachment, or they would have stood us off."

Preston caught Alamo and helped Helen into the saddle, then mounted behind the cantle.

Colonel Sires, wise in the way of Indian war tactics, knew that Helen and Preston had run afoul of a mere scouting party. Undoubtedly there was a big concentration of warriors out in the hills not far away.

"We've got to hurry back and board the train," ordered Sires, as they headed back toward the hill crest. "I haven't the slightest doubt but that those Injuns will bring back

the rest of their war party, on the double."

Preston noticed that the cavalrymen ringed their horses about his in a tight convoy as they left the bloody scene. He knew that both he and Helen, though they were being rescued by these men, were, nevertheless, military prisoners.

Cold sweat beaded the cowboy's forehead as he felt the girl's soft hair blow back against his grimy face. It made him sick at the stomach when he realized that only scant minutes before he had pressed a gun against Helen's heart and pulled trigger.

CHAPTER XXII.

FLIGHT ON THE IRON HORSE.

THE cavalcade finally reached the jail-car train just as the sheepish engineer and fireman returned to duty in their cab.

"We'll have to leave our horses here!" said Colonel Sires briskly, as they dismounted in the shadow of the engine. "We're sure to be attacked by Indians before we can get back to Wagonwheel City, if I'm any judge of Sioux tricks. We haven't time to load our mounts on the railway car here."

Preston downed a hard lump in his throat as he dismounted from Alamo for the last time. He had raised the claybank from a colt, trained it as if it were a human partner. Now it would be turned loose on the open range, possibly to become the property of some cruel Indian.

"Adios, Alamo pard!" whispered the cowboy, lifting his saddle skirt to untie the latigo.

Then, before he could slip bridle and saddle from the pony, Colonel Sires was ordering him inside the jail car.

The soldiers, with anxious glances

up at the northern ridge behind him, clambered into the car after Helen and Preston were aboard. Then the sliding door was shut, the engineer threw his reverse lever and whistled twice, and the train headed back toward the east.

Preston shuddered as he saw the open cell doors. No prisoners cowered there now. He sat down on one of the sentry's chairs, while Helen Gorine bent over him and set to work to extract the Sioux arrowhead from the flesh of his back.

"A narrow escape, that one," commented Colonel Sires, swaying on outspread feet to the jouncing of the car. "I've seen a Sioux arrow completely impale a man."

Preston grinned wryly.

"You saved my hair, colonel," he gritted through the pain, "but the way things stack up, you saved me from the frying pan to . . . to put me in the fire."

Sires coughed, swallowing hard.

"Duty is duty," he said. "I'm not going to push any charge against Miss Gorine, here. Her prank of kidnaping this train was wild and absurd, but she did it out of a woman's love for you, no doubt. We will consider her punished enough by the fact that her foolish escapade to save you from the firing squad has . . . er. . . ended in a failure."

Helen shuddered as she finished worming the Sioux arrowhead out of Preston's lacerated flesh. But it had been the colonel's oblique way of repeating Quent's death sentence that occasioned the involuntary shudder.

"The execution will be postponed until tomorrow," went on the colonel. "We have to get back to Wagonwheel City—to clear the tracks for the workers and the troop train headed for railhead, as well as to escape another Sioux attack."

Preston nodded his thanks for the brief reprieve. He was likewise grateful for the fact that Sires had not handcuffed him again. At least, during the brief five-mile ride back to the construction camp, he would be with Helen. The warmth of her presence made him forget the pain of his wounds.

The train made a brief halt at Bitterroot Cut, to pick up the soldier whose horse Colonel Sires had appropriated for the chase, and the other jail-car guard.

Both men tossed shovels into the car ahead of them. As the train got under way once more, Preston counted three shallow mounds over by the cutbank.

Seiden, Bates, Leacock—three more graves in the long, long chain of mounds along the Union Pacific line to Omaha. He wondered if his own grave would be here at Bitterroot Cut within another twenty-four hours.

His grisly thought was interrupted by a piercing shriek of the locomotive whistle, and a lurch of the jail car as the engineer opened his throttle wider.

Soldiers rushed to the barred windows of the jail car, and Quent Preston saw the cause for their blanched faces and chorus of oaths as he and Helen looked out on the Wyoming landscape.

A tremendous Sioux war party, numbering over two hundred, swept out of a brush-flanked canyon bordering the tracks and closed in toward the train, guns flashing, lungs whooping.

Every rider was plastered against the outside of his pony's body in the trick of horsemanship mastered by the plains Indians, offering only one foot and an arm to shoot at.

Above the snorting of the locomotive and the rattle of cars over

the unleveled tracks came the thunderous concussion of rifle fire, and bullets peppered the wooden walls of the car.

"We're in for it!" shouted Colonel Sires. "They've probably set fire to that three-mile trestle. Choose windows and return their fire, men—shoot their horses!"

The uniformed soldiers leaped to the tiny barred windows, thrust rifles outside, and began shooting.

Preston's hands itched for a gun as he saw that the soldiers were seemingly unable to hit the flying targets alongside the laboring train.

Gradually the Sioux dropped back as the train outraced the fleet ponies on the uneven ground. The savages began concentrating their attack on the engineer's cab.

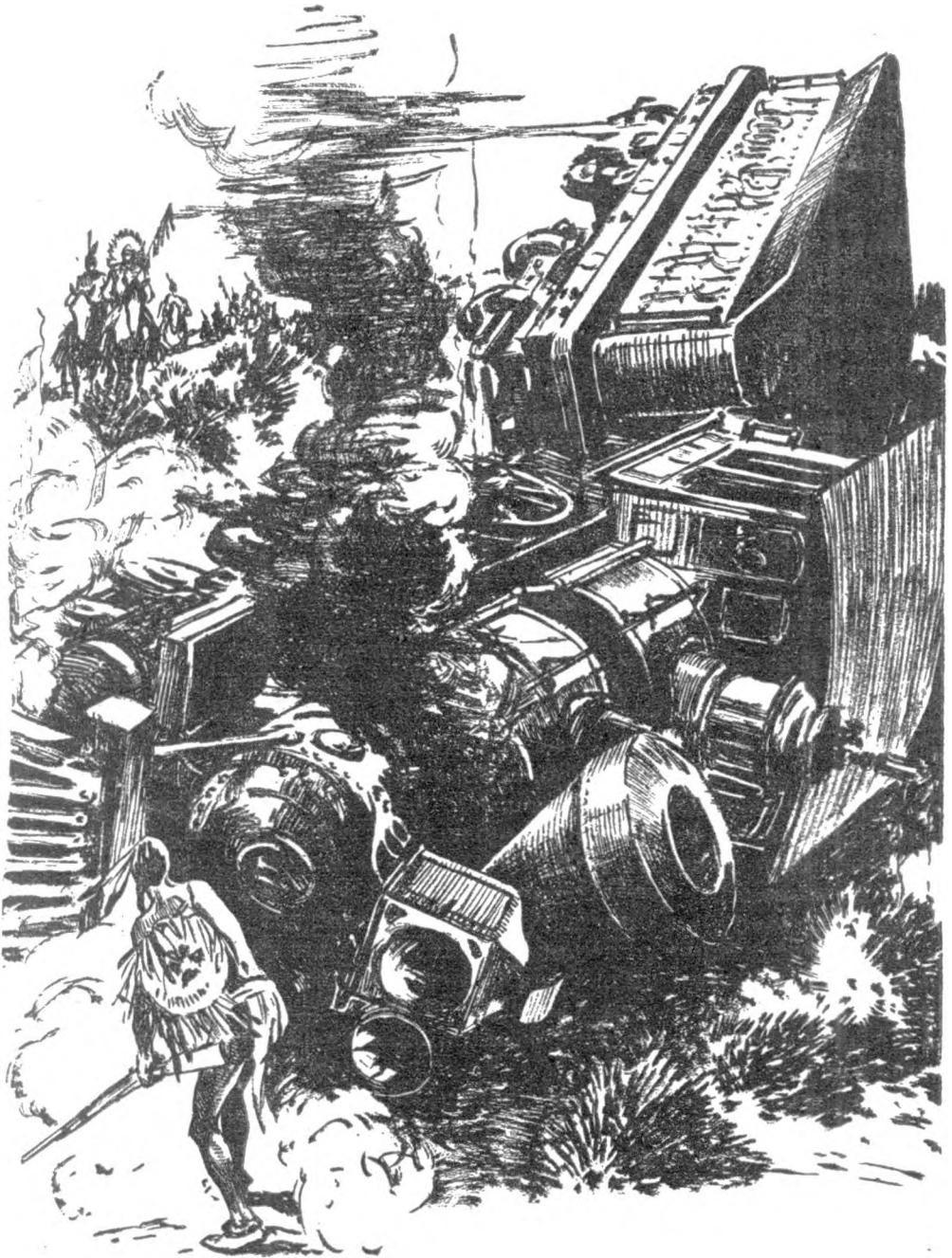
Quent seized Helen's arm and raced with her to the forward end of the lurching jail car. There were two windows there overlooking the flat car outside and the long V of the unblasted railroad tracks, curving in graceful S's through the hills. Soon the construction town at Wagonwheel Springs would swing in view, two miles in the distance.

"We're safe!" cried Preston in relief, his lips against Helen's ear. "Unless that trestle's been fired—"

"For once," laughed Helen Gorine, "you must be glad you're riding an Iron Horse, Quent. It's the only thing I know of that could outrun an Injun pony!"

But Preston, unlike Colonel Sires, had not figured on the ruthless cunning of the red men. Even as he stared out at the curving tracks ahead, he caught sight of four feathered Sioux grouped on a sharp curve dead ahead.

The Indians were heaping a barricade of cull railroad cross-ties across the rails. As they saw the train



The redskins warily approached the hissing wreck!

thundering down upon them from westward, they leaped off the road-bed and vanished into screening chaparral.

Preston spun to yell a warning at the soldiers in the car:

"Look out—we're going off the tracks—"

The cowboy grabbed Helen and swung her in front of him so that her body would be shielded by his when the crash came. Glancing out the end window, the wind whipping his eyes, Preston saw the end of the flat car hit the pile of ties.

There was a thunderous crash as the flat car bounded skyward. One set of wheel trucks bounded off to the north while the flat car careened and gouged a corner into the cut-bank.

The jail car reared aloft like a ship in a heavy tempest. Too late, the engineer had jammed on his puny brakes.

For an instant there was chaos as the jail car capsized and struck the smooth dirt of the sloping bank. Preston got a kaleidoscopic glimpse of soldiers being flung like straw dummies about the overturning car.

His ears registered the appalling crash of wood, the din of metal on rock, exploding steam, men screaming, all rising in a curdling crescendo of catastrophe.

Then all was blotted out as momentum crushed Helen Gorine against his chest.

Hot sunlight was in Preston's eyes as he shook himself dazedly back to his senses.

He was lying on the splintered remains of what had been the varnished ceiling panels of the jail car.

Blue sky was a canopy above him. He was staring upward at a great hole which a boulder had torn out of the floor of the car. That meant the jail car was resting upside down on its roof—

"Helen! Helen, are you—"

Then Preston caught sight of the girl, her body crisscrossing his numb legs. She was unconscious, but a strong pulse throbbed along her neck and Preston sobbed with relief as a

quick inspection revealed no visible injury.

The pain in his own chest, where ribs had been cracked by the pressure, gave the Texan the reassurance that Helen's life had probably been saved by the fact that the impact of the train smashup had been cushioned on his own body, instead of against the unyielding wood and iron of the car's end.

The triumphant whoops of Sioux warriors roused Preston to more immediate peril than their hurts.

He got to his feet, and stared along the broken interior of the jail car. Shafts of sunlight poured through cracks and gaping holes in roof and walls, revealing a ghastly carnage.

Soldiers were sprawled here and there through the wreckage. The one nearest Preston had died of a broken neck. Another was horribly mangled where a fanglike boulder had smashed through the roof of the car to crush him.

Colonel Sires lay groaning with a broken arm a few feet away. Dust and smoke filled the car with a smudge which hid from Preston's view the dead or dying farther back.

The twisted door of a cell made a natural ladder up to the hole in the floor plankings, and Preston climbed up the steel latticework to stick his head outside.

The locomotive lay on its side, its boiler as crinkled as a stovepipe elbow. A geyser of steam erupted through an unriveted seam; the scalded corpse of the engineer hung jackknifed over the matchwood that had been the windowsill of his cab.

Coals from the broken grates had been scattered here and there and had ignited Russian thistle and sagebrush along the right-of-way. Flames were crackling ominously and lifting a thin haze of smoke to blend with the dense white clouds of steam.

Then Preston stiffened as he saw four Sioux warriors skulking along the drivewheels of the demolished engine, knives in hand, hunting in the tangled debris for victims to scalp. They were working toward the shattered jail car where the bulk of their prey would be found.

Preston ducked back inside the wrecked car and crawled through splintered timbers and twisted iron until he came to a dead soldier, grasping a rifle.

Unprying the gun from taut fingers, Preston turned back toward the gaping hole overhead.

Then he gasped as the feathered shadow of an Indian fell like a blot of doom upon Helen Gorine's insensible form.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PARTNERS OF THE WILDS

FIRING almost straight up, Quent Preston drove a bullet through the warrior's skull even as the Sioux braced himself to jump down into the car.

With a gagged cry, the Indian toppled down through the gaping hole in the car's floor and landed with a sodden thud at Preston's feet.

The concussion of the rifle shot inside the car brought a series of wild yells from the other three savages who were exploring the wrecked train.

Levering another shell into the army gun, Preston climbed up the slanting cell door once more and peered outside.

Spang! He ducked as a bullet made a long, smoking furrow through the wood—*inches* from his head.

Then the cowboy shoved his rifle barrel over the selfsame bullet groove and caught sight of a Sioux back desperately reloading his one-

shot rifle, behind the still-spinning wheels at the back of the car.

Preston fired, saw the Indian sag back with a bullet-smashed shoulder. Before the warrior could crawl out of sight Preston finished the job with another slug.

Then the cowboy's veins congealed with dread as wind whipped aside the pall of smoke and steam, to reveal the main Sioux war party galloping up from the west toward the wreckage.

Preston knew it would be hopeless for a lone man to stand off the onslaught of that mighty band of Sioux. It was doubtful if he would get any assistance from soldiers in the car; they had not had enough warning before the crash to brace themselves.

Bracing his rifle across a twisted brake rod, Preston drew long and careful bead on the foremost of the oncoming Indian horde, a painted chief with a billowing spread of feathers tailing out from behind his war bonnet.

When the Texan calculated the Indian was inside the range of the carbine, he squeezed trigger.

An exultant cry blew from his lips as he saw the Sioux's horse lurch and go down, throwing its rider. Preston's bullet, intended for the chief's breast, had gone low and drilled the galloping pony in the skull.

But the chief was killed instantly as he was catapulted on his head against the U. P. rail. His corpse and the floundering carcass of his horse were trampled under the oncoming tidal wave of mounted Indians.

The war party split, avoiding the open V of the tracks when they were within a hundred yards of the wrecked train. As yet they could not see the lone sharpshooter whose head was protruding above the floor of the upside-down jail car.

The dense mass of drifting steam from the ruptured engine boiler might be hiding any number of defenders, for all the Indians knew.

Preston twisted his neck to eastward, and a low oath of thanksgiving burst from him as he saw a train pounding at full speed up the rails from Wagonwheel City!

"The troop train!" gasped the cowboy, his eyes slitted against the smoke from burning brush that was enveloping everything. "They'll scatter those damned Injuns double quick—"

A war whoop down inside the jail car behind him made Preston drop hastily inside, his boots cushioned against the inert corpse of the brave he had shot.

A naked savage had crawled through the splintered door of the car and had seized Colonel Sires by the hair. The army man was just returning to consciousness, but offered no resistance as the Indian poised a scalping knife over his face.

Whipping rifle stock to cheek, Preston sent a bullet into the Indian's head at close range. The mushrooming slug nearly tore the Sioux's head from his body.

Preston's blood-smeared face relaxed in an ironic grin, as he saw the Indian collapse on top of the colonel. Preston had saved the life of the very man who would be giving the order to execute him on the morrow!

The strident whistle of the approaching army train from Wagonwheel City blended with the yells of the encircling Indians.

Thudding hoofs rattled on the ground outside; the crackling of the

flames through the brush added a sullen undertone to the babble of confusion.

Again Preston clambered up the cell-door ladder and looked outside. The troop train was slowing to a stop nearby; puffs of smoke and the crackle of gunnery came from the flat cars behind the locomotive, as blue-uniformed troops opened a deadly fusillade on the dismayed Indians.

The Sioux, however, had no intention of bucking an entire detachment of soldiery. They were already scattering into the hills, out of range.

The entire south slope of the right-of-way was ablaze now, from the brush which had been set afire by the coals flung out of the ruined fire-box of the wrecked locomotive.

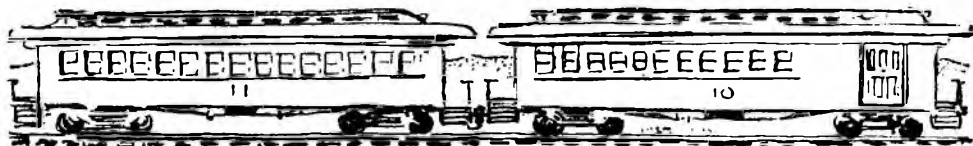
Smoke was beating over the wreck; Preston could not see fifty yards in any direction.

The troop train grated to a halt and hundreds of soldiers swarmed off the flat cars, dropping to their knees and blasting a terrific salvo toward the fleeing Sioux.

A moment later the entire band of Indians had vanished into the countless gullies and valleys, without appreciable losses.

Behind the troop train came the U. P. work train, laden with hundreds of iron-muscled Irish paddies headed for end-of-track. In a few moments, they would be adding to the crowds of men who would be picking through the wreckage of the jail car.

They would find Preston among the others, would know from his cowboy costume that he was one of the



four men slated to die before the firing squad at Bitterroot Cut. He would be promptly taken into custody again—

"No, damn it! I can vamose—"

Now that he had a moment's respite in which to think, Preston saw his chance at escape.

He took a quick glance about the jail car. Colonel Sires was getting to his feet, his body drenched by the blood of the Indian who had so nearly scalped him as he lay helpless.

Sires would never know who had saved his life. Even if he was told that Preston had done just that, it would have been difficult for the stern old army man to believe.

The Texan's gaze flitted back to Helen Gorine. The girl still lay in the swath of smoke-dimmed sunlight, her flowing chestnut hair spread out over the shattered wooden panels.

Her eyelids were still shut, but a healthy glow of color was returning to her relaxed features, indicating that she would be conscious again before very long.

"*Hasta la vista, Helen!*" whispered Quent Preston, gripping one of her limp hands in his own. "I got to be movin' now, but I'll see you again—someday—"

On a sudden impulse he stooped to kiss the girl lightly on the lips. Then he climbed up out onto the floor of the overturned jail car, a floor which was now a roof.

The soldiers from the troop train were climbing the wreckage on three sides, now. But not one of them

caught a glimpse of Preston's fitting figure as the cowboy jumped down off the car and darted into the heart of the flaming chaparral along the south side of the tracks.

He gulped lungfuls of clean air as he burrowed his way out of the blazing weeds and scrambled up the hill. There, under a sheltering outcrop of granite a good fifty feet above the roadbed, Preston lay on his stomach and peered down on the scene, safe from discovery.

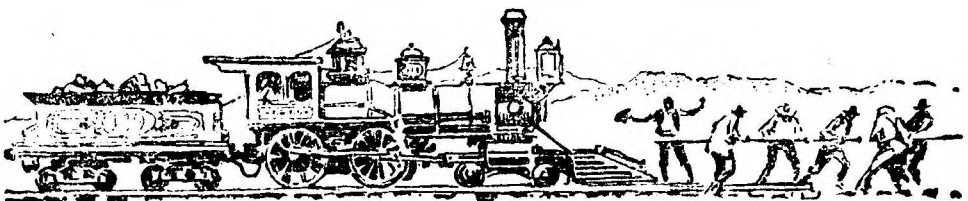
Hundreds of Irishmen from the track gang were swarming amid the soldiers now. Shovels made short work of putting out the brush fire which threatened the wreckage. Then army officers were taking charge, their orders cracking like whips.

Colonel Sires was the first to be assisted out of the wreckage. The grizzled old war dog was still too dazed to explain the circumstances of the Indian attack.

Excited yells came from the rescue squads as Helen Gorine, conscious now, was lifted tenderly out of the debris and carried toward the troop train.

Before she was out of the range of Preston's sight, he saw her set to her feet. She was wobbly-kneed, but able to walk.

For twenty minutes, confusion reigned on the roadbed below Preston's hide-out. Brawny Irish pad-dies bent their shoulders to the task of carrying obstacles off the track. Luckily the bulky engine had hurtled itself completely clear of the rails.



Inside of half an hour the track was cleared and the troops began heading back for their train. A bell clanged; the troop-train engine gave two short blasts of its whistle; and the cars began rolling westward again. Train wrecks or Sioux attacks could not hinder the inexorable march of the U. P. toward the Pacific!

As Quent Preston lay in his ambush and watched the soldier-packed train move on by, the germ of an idea soared into his brain. Following the troop train would be the work train, laden with throngs of red-shirted and blue-shirted Irish paddies. On the rear of that train were a dozen flat cars loaded with rails and ties and machinery.

Preston crawled on hands and knees down the smoking hillside until he was once more to the jail car. He made his way through the littered wreckage until he came to the overturned engine.

There he crouched, watching as the locomotive of the work train snorted past, not six feet from where he was hidden.

One by one he counted the flat cars, loaded to capacity with singing Irishmen.

Finally the flats gave way to cars stacked high with fresh ties for end-of-track, and back of them three cars loaded with steel rails and scores of kegs filled with spikes, fishplates and other equipment necessary for bridging a continent with steel.

When the front wheels of the tail-end car rolled past him, Preston stepped into the open, his body hidden from possible eyes by the clouds of steam which still billowed from the smashed engine.

Running along the roadbed, Preston grabbed hold of a hand bar and swung himself catlike aboard the footrail at the end of the train.

He clung there, wind whipping his hair and cooling his face, out of sight of the workmen on the cars up front.

Miles ticked by, as the work train added its smoke to the black feather of smudge left by the troop train ahead. Bitterroot Cut swung out behind, its three grave mounds casting shadows on the sand.

Not until he saw the clump of lodgepole pines where Helen Gorine had halted the jail train did Preston prepare to leave the train on which he had stolen a ride.

Picking out a soft pile of dirt shoveled away to level the roadbed, the cowboy jumped. He landed rolling to come up short against a cushioning bed of sage.

He lay panting a few minutes, until the train had vanished in the distance. Then he got shakily to his feet, swatting dust from his bat-wing chaps and buckskin shirt.

The leap off the train had not injured him. Now his only concern was to locate a horse among the thirteen mustangs which Colonel Sires had abandoned at this place. But that would not be difficult. Even as he walked out toward the pine grove, he saw Alamo grazing in a patch of bluestem there.

"Alamo, old pardner! Come along here, boy!"

The horse pranced with excitement, as it recognized its master. Grazing here and there about the plain were the army horses, still bridled and saddled. Of Indians Preston saw no trace; he doubted if they dared show up again in the vicinity during that day, at least.

Ten minutes later, Preston was aboard his Texas pony once more and headed northwestward toward Tomahawk Pass.

A consummate sense of victory overcame the throb of his broken ribs and the arrow wound in his

back. For he was free—reunited with his four-footed partner of the wilds. No enemy could overtake him now, be it a Wagonwheel soldier or a Sioux!

With a gay Texas range melody on his lips, his heart welling with joy and a will to live for the first time in the bitter weeks since the U. P. R. had come to rob him of peace and elbow room, Quent Preston headed out on a long lope across the hills toward his Lone Star Ranch in the rugged Sioux Bonnets.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOMESTEAD PAPERS.

THAT afternoon a U. P. locomotive returned to Wagonwheel City bringing with it Colonel Sires and Helen Gorine. And inside the hour a full account of the Indian attack on the jail train was rolling off the press of the Wagonwheel City *Gazette*, a weekly paper published by a tramp printer who followed the westering rails with his hand press and other equipment. The sheet had been variously known, back along the U. P. R., as the *Gazette* of Laramie, Cheyenne, North Platte, and Kearney.

The newspaper story was greeted by the construction town in various ways ranging from rank indifference to feverish excitement. And it caused Boone Delivan to look up a pair of buffalo-coated gunhawks and make his way down the main street with grim purpose behind his swift strides.

Delivan swung off the street and entered Ellis Bayard's Land Office without knocking. The front room was deserted; a gunnysack rug had been tacked on the floor to hide the black stains of Lige Morton's blood.

Delivan jerked open the partition door to find Ellis Bayard on his

knees before a half-packed carpet-bag. The speculator's lips curled in a sneer of contempt as he barked out:

"I thought so, Bayard. Leaving town, eh?"

The bald-headed attorney looked up with his pendant jowls trembling under brown muttonchop whiskers. His gaze widened with concern as he saw the two rock-eyed bodyguards behind Delivan.

"You're damned right I'm getting out, Boone. You should be heading out of Wagonwheel City yourself. Haven't you read this afternoon's copy of the *Gazette*?"

Boone Delivan jabbed a hand into his frock coat and drew out a rumpled copy of the paper.

"Hell, yes. Interesting wasn't it? All about Colonel Sires breaking an arm when the Sioux ditched his jail train. I also see an item about the mysterious knifing of Major John Gorine. But why should you get in a lather and start packing?"

Bayard heaved his corpulent bulk erect with a grunt of effort, and snatched the paper from Delivan's hands. The lawyer pointed an ague-stricken finger to a news item on the front page and read a paragraph therefrom in a tremulous voice:

"—one of the peculiar sidelights to this mornin's train wreck is the fact that the escaped prisoner, Quentin Preston, was nowhere to be found in the wreckage. Officers say it is doubtful that the Sioux took him captive, as the prompt arrival of the U. P. troop train prevented any looting or scalping."

Raw fear was in Bayard's eyes as he shoved the *Gazette* back into the speculator's hand.

"You see what that means, don't you?" moaned the lawyer, his moon-like face sticky with sweat. "*It means Preston escaped.*"

"Preston escaped!" echoed Delivan nastily. "Thanks to Helen Gorine! O. K.—why should Preston's getaway agitate *you*?"

Bayard caught the menace in Delivan's tone, and his voice changed to a whine:

"Boone—the first thing that Texas hellion will do will be to come back to Wagonwheel City—and go gunning for you and me! He knows we framed Morton's killing onto him and he'll chase us to the brink of hell to get revenge!"

Evil lights flickered in Delivan's eyes. He turned to Jeb Franklin, a coarse-featured owl-hooter from the Mexican-border country who had come to the U. P. to rent his six-guns.

"There's a train leaving Wagonwheel City for Omaha today, Franklin. Make sure Bayard isn't aboard it."

The lawyer groaned with panic.

"What . . . what do you intend to do, Boone?"

Delivan jerked a thumb toward his other bodyguard.

"Jim Randle and I are riding out to Tomahawk Pass after those home-stead papers of Preston's. We'll dig them up first thing in the morning, before Preston beats us to it. And you, my dear Bayard, are the shyster who is going to forge those deeds over to me, understand?"

Bayard tried to swallow his terror. He smirked in a ghastly way and rubbed his moist palms greedily.

"Of course, of course. I hadn't forgotten our . . . deal. The U. P. will pay us fifty thousand for the right-of-way through Tomahawk Pass, rather than fight us in the courts and tie up their construction gangs before they get a condemnation order. We'll make a fortune, Boone."

Delivan turned on his heel and

brushed past Franklin, who sat down on Bayard's cot and calmly helped himself to a bottle of the lawyer's imported bourbon.

Leaving the land office, Delivan and his gun-hung henchman went to the Overland Livery Barn, where hostlers saddled mustangs for them.

Leaving Wagonwheel City behind, the two riders followed the Union Pacific rails until midafternoon. Then they veered off to the north, taking the trail which Delivan had often traveled on his visits to Major John Gorine's survey camp.

Indian sign was numerous, and the white puffs of Sioux signal fires on hill crags to the northward made them leave the traveled trail and keep out of sight in the valleys. Night overtook them twenty miles from Gorine's camp.

"What if we cross trails with that Preston hombre, boss?" inquired Jim Randle, as they were saddling up next morning at dawn.

Delivan's nostrils flared. He was thinking of Helen Gorine at the moment, and his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

"I'll take care of Preston. No man ever dared steal a girl from Boone Delivan, but Preston stole mine—without knowing he did. That's why I'll put a bullet in Preston's guts—myself."

The sun was three hours high by the time Delivan and Randle halted at the tents belonging to Major Gorine's survey camp. They found Henderson and Fischer, two of the engineers, busy drafting.

"Howdy, Delivan!" greeted Henderson. "We just heard about Gorine's murder. It was hell—the major just at the climax of his greatest triumph. Know any of the details?"

Delivan shook his head, then inquired anxiously:

"How'd you hear about Gorine's death so soon?"

"Quent Preston spent the night in our camp. The cowboy was pretty well spent—had a brush with the Injuns yesterday."

Delivan and Randle exchanged sharp glances.

"Where's Preston now?"

Henderson pointed up the trail.

"Left for his ranch an hour ago."

Without further talk, Delivan spurred on through the camp and headed off past Linn DePerren's grave at trailside, going at a gallop. Jim Randle was following at his heels. Soon they were emerging out onto the level rangeland of the Lone Star Ranch. Only then did Boone Delivan realize the overwhelming damage which his raiders, under Bob Averill, had done to Preston's spread.

The ruffian at his stirrup, Jim Randle, was one of the three men who had returned from that raid alive. It had been Randle's .30-30 that had downed Weldon, the traitor whose testimony against Delivan had so nearly ended the latter's career.

"Did a thorough job—outside of nailing Preston for me," grunted the speculator, shielding his eyes against the sun and scanning the fire-blackened range. "Come on."

Delivan's mouth twitched with pent-up rage as they headed toward the ash heaps which had been Preston's homestead buildings. If a man wanted a thing done up right, Delivan was thinking, he must do it himself. That was why he was attending to the job of filching Preston's homestead papers personally.

Between them and the site of Preston's ranchhouse was a thick copse of box elder trees, now black skeletons as a result of the fire which had ravaged Tomahawk Pass.

As the two crooks emerged from the trees, they caught sight of a lone man digging amid the ruins of the log cabin, his back to them. Hitched to the gaunt fireplace chimney was a familiar claybank pony.

"That's Preston!" snarled Delivan, snaking a Winchester saddle gun from its scabbard under his right knee. "A hundred bucks to you, Randle, if you tally him!"

Even as they halted their horses and lifted rifles to shoulders, Quent Preston paused in his work and looked around.

Crrrrash! The rifles thundered in the silence of the devastated valley. Bullets kicked up spurts of dry ashes about Quent Preston's boots, as he stood stockstill amid the ruins of his home.

Preston took one look at the two horsemen firing at him from a hundred-yard range, and knew he was trapped in the open with no available shelter closer than the north river bank.

With a low cry of anger, the Texan headed for his horse, bullets humming about him as the two killers pumped their rifle levers and fired savage bursts in his direction.

Vaulting into Alamo's saddle, Quent Preston headed down the slope to the river, sped down its shallow bank and splashed across.

"He hasn't a rifle, or he'd have gotten behind the chimney and used it!" yelled Boone Delivan, spurring his mount into a gallop. "You keep him at bay, Randle—I know what Preston was doing in those ashes!"

Quent Preston gained the north bank of Beavertail River, with Jim Randle peppering his back trail with .30-30 slugs. He was ducking into thick willow growth just as Delivan leaped off his horse beside the ruined cabin.

A yell of triumph came from the

speculator's lips as he saw that Quent Preston had been in the act of prying up a flat granite slab from the fireplace hearth.

"He told Bayard he'd cached his valuable papers under the house—damned if that isn't where—"

Running forward, Delivan pried down the fire-blackened crowbar which Preston had dropped at the moment of his attack.

The flat chunk of granite pried upward under the leverage, to reveal a hollowed-out place under the hearth.

An oblong tin box, undamaged by the conflagration which had razed the cabin, lay in the exposed cavity. Even as he snatched up the box and broke it open against the sooty mantel, Boone Delivan knew his victory was won.

Inside a thick paper envelope was a document heavy with seals and bearing the signature of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America. That paper was the sole proof which Quent Preston possessed to the ownership of his homestead here in Tomahawk Pass.

Stuffing the precious deed in his frock-coat pocket, Boone Delivan raced back to his horse and mounted.

Across the river, Quent Preston was still hidden in a brake of willows, unable to fight back against Jim Randle's fusillade.

"Come on, Randle!" shouted the U. P. speculator, spurring toward the east again. "I've got what I came for. Now it doesn't matter if Preston is alive or in hell! He won't dare come back to Wagonwheel City!"

CHAPTER XXV.

REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE.

DELIVAN'S gleeful, mocking words rang in Preston's ears as the despairful cowboy watched the speculator and his bodyguard dwindle in

the distance toward the east end of the pass.

"There goes Delivan and my ace in the hole—"

Preston knew, without riding back to the site of his destroyed cabin, that the homestead documents he had been in the act of digging out of their cache were gone.

There was nothing he could do to prevent their theft, not so long as Delivan and his partner were armed with long-range rifles. To buck them with the six-guns he had borrowed at the survey camp would be suicidal.

Sick at heart, the Texan emerged from hiding and rode Alamo back across the river. Once more he stood beside the blue gypsum boulder which was Panhandle Preston's tombstone. His eyes filled as he addressed the oblong mound:

"Delivan ain't got us licked, dad. He thinks I dassn't show up in Wagonwheel City, now that I'm a wanted hombre. But that's where Delivan's wrong."

He headed back toward the forest-choked end of Tomahawk Pass at a ground-covering lope that would spare himself and horse. There was no use trying to overtake Delivan; showdown must come at Wagonwheel City.

He avoided Gorine's camp by taking the north trail where a few days before the boss surveyor had captured him with Weldon. Delivan had no doubt tipped off the surveyors that he, Preston, was an escaped fugitive from military justice. While Preston had reason to believe the engineers were friendly, it would not pay to take chances on their seeing their duty and arresting him.

The surveyors, the night before, had dressed his wounds and given him supper and breakfast this morn-

ing. His weariness had been wiped out by the long sleep he had enjoyed in Gorine's tent. He had informed them of the major's death, giving them what scant details Helen had told him; but regarding his own court-martial he had remained prudently silent.

The forty-mile ride across the open plains east of the Sioux Bonnets was packed with suspense for the cowboy. He dared not take the easy route and follow the U. P. tracks to town, for fear of being sighted by soldiers or Irish track workers.

The northerly route was dangerous because of the Sioux he knew to be infesting the region, concentrating for one last desperate offensive against the encroaching Iron Horse.

Preston, a man of the wilds himself, did not blame the Indians for their warfare. The coming of the railroad meant the end of the red man's hunting ground; already the vast buffalo herds were being depleted by the hunters supplying the U. P. R. contractors with meat for their crews.

He saw plenty of Indian sign, but had enough savvy to keep from being seen himself. He saw lone scouts on hill crests, looking out over the trail of the Iron Horse; once, far in the distance, he sighted the tepees of a big Sioux camp.

But nightfall found Preston sitting his horse on the ridge overlooking Wagonwheel Springs once more, at the selfsame spot where he and his father—was it an eternity ago?—had first glimpsed the teeming confusion below.

The town had diminished appreciably in size, since that morning; the cavalry barracks were more than half dismantled, to be moved thirty miles westward to end-of-track. But somewhere down there would be Boone Delivan, smug in the belief

that he had cheated Preston out of his Tomahawk Pass right-of-way.

Preston knew, with a bitter despair in his heart, that he could never claim the Lone Star Ranch again as long as the taint of murder was on his good name. But his flaming six-guns would make sure that Boone Delivan did not harvest his ill-gotten gains, before another sun had risen.

Somewhere down there, too, would be Helen Gorine; and Quent was conscious of an overpowering desire to see the girl again, and make sure that she had suffered no serious hurts from yesterday morning's train wreck.

He waited in the undergrowth until darkness had deepened into indigo over the flats. Then he rode down the slope and tied Alamo to a fence rail, making his way on foot toward the main street.

In the shelter of a black alleyway alongside the Red Tent Saloon he stripped off his telltale Texas chaps and stuffed them under the barroom foundations. There was no use advertising the fact he was a cow-puncher.

A quarter-inch growth of black stubble disguised his face.

Adjusting the bulk of his thonged-down Colts, Quent Preston emerged into the lamplighted main stem. He saw a light in Ellis Bayard's office, and the blood raced hotly within him.

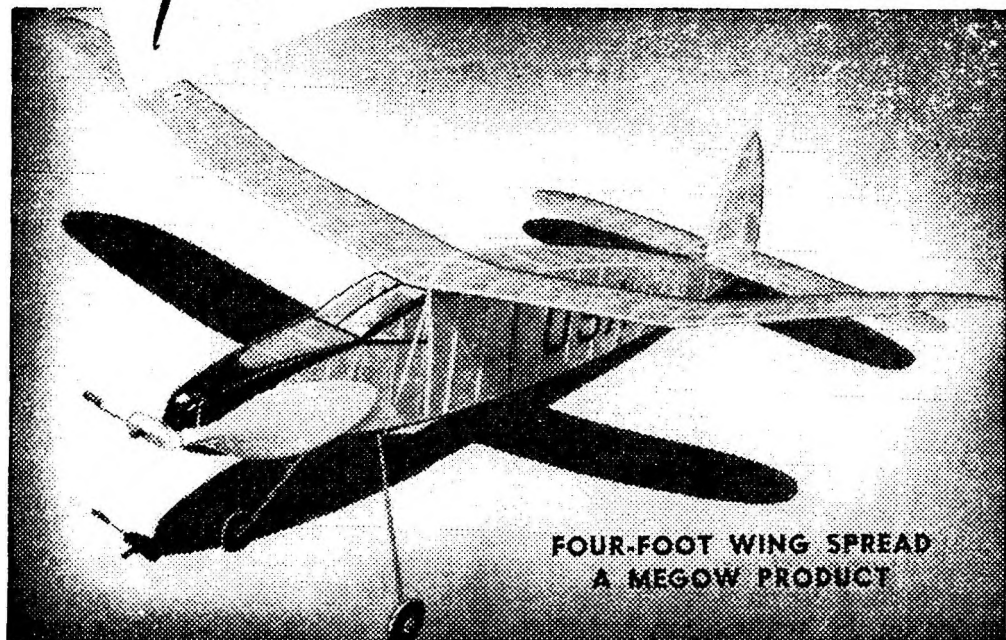
After his showdown with Boone Delivan, Preston would pay a lethal visit to the lawyer's shack, also. It had been Bayard's perjured evidence at the court-martial that had convicted Preston of the murder of Lige Morton. Bayard, before he died, would cast some light on the true facts about the marshal's death.

The revenge-lusting heart of a

Continued on page 110

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DICK KORDA and his famous Wakefield Winner.

Continued from page 107

ruthless killer throbbed within Preston as he followed the foot traffic, eyes shuttling from face to face, hunting Delivan's.

A uniformed aid-de-camp from Colonel Sires' headquarters brushed past Preston, a sheaf of cardboard placards under one elbow. He tacked one of the signs to the supporting post of a wooden awning in front of a gambling den, and went on.

Light from the lobby windows of the big End-of-Track Hotel illuminated the sign. Quent Preston stiffened as he saw his own name glaring at him from big red letters:

\$1,000 REWARD. DEAD OR ALIVE

will be paid for the capture of a fugitive from military prison known as

QUENT PRESTON

Convicted of murder; escaped from U. P. jail train wrecked west of here by the Indians!

There followed, in smaller type, a fairly complete description of himself and of Alamo, his claybank mount.

Men crowded about him to read the sign. The cowboy's neck nape prickled as he heard the reaction of the uncouth spectators:

"That thousand simoleons would come in handy, eh, Tom?"

"Preston won't hang around these parts, though."

"Hell, no. If the Injuns don't ketch him he'll light a shuck for 'Californy, prob'ly."

Preston elbowed his way into darker shadows, keeping his Stetson brim pulled low to shield his face from the scrutiny of passers-by. Then he heard a familiar voice above the din of traffic:

"This way, Helen. We'll take a

short cut to the house. Keep as close to Mrs. Sires as you can."

Preston's heart bounded within him as he caught sight of three mounted riders turning off the main street into an alley.

Colonel Sires, one arm in a sling, rode ahead. Close behind were two women—the colonel's wife, the other Helen Gorine!

Except that her face was paler than usual, the girl showed no signs of injury. Her face was impassive, expressionless as she rode within a dozen feet of the spot where Preston stood in the shadows, shoulder-blades pressed against a blacksmith-shop wall.

A wild desire to rush out and greet the girl surged through Preston's veins, but he restrained his feelings until they had passed. Then he skulked after them, jostling men who were heading for the main street.

He saw Colonel Sires and the two women cross the Union Pacific tracks and head for a frame dwelling house near the cavalry grounds. A uniformed attendant took the reins of their horses, and then Colonel Sires escorted the women inside.

"Helen's stopping with Colonel Sires' family, I reckon," concluded the Texan, a surge of relief going through his being. "Leastwise, I'll know she's in good hands."

His jaw hardened as he turned back toward town, his hands coiled about the stocks of his Colt .45s. Then an impulse stronger than his primitive hate and desire for revenge impelled him to turn back toward Sires' home.

Lamplight glowed from the windows of the house. Helen was inside. Doubtlessly she would be wondering if he were alive or dead, a victim of the Indians or of injuries from the train wreck.

"I've got to let her know—some way—"

His better sense told him to beware, but Preston headed over the railroad yards in the darkness and circled about to approach Colonel Sires' home from the rear.

A sentry was pacing up and down the colonel's front porch, a rifle on his shoulder. But the rear of the house was unguarded.

Preston crawled up to a lighted window. The sash was up, and from within came the sound of women's voices:

"We'll do our best to make you comfortable, Miss Gorine. Feel welcome to remain with us until you are ready to go East."

"How can I thank you, Mrs. Sires? But I . . . I cannot go East. I have no one back there—I have no one—anywhere."

"But, my dear, poor girl—you cannot remain here on the frontier, now that your father is gone. End-of-track is no place for a sweet girl to be."

Preston's pulses hammered his eardrums as he rested his fingertips on the window ledge and peered through gauze curtains. It was a bedroom, and Helen Gorine was brushing her hair before a dresser mirror. Mrs. Sires hovered at her side, her motherly face lined with anxiety.

"I am a frontier girl, Mrs. Sires," Helen replied listlessly. "But—if you will excuse me now—my father's funeral put me so on edge—perhaps tomorrow I can make some plans—"

"Of course, darling. Good night!"

Mrs. Sires kissed her and left the room. Helen Gorine turned back to her mirror—and then stiffened in alarm as she caught sight of a face in the window behind her.

She whirled about with a low cry

—and then rushed to the window as she recognized Quent Preston's gaunt face.

"Oh, Quent, Quent—I'm so glad to know you're alive—"

Their hands met and clung, as Preston glanced apprehensively up and down the wall of the house. In the soft glow of lamplight he stood revealed to any possible watcher from the grounds.

"I can't stay—but I had to see you—before I leave Wagonwheel City, Helen," he whispered emotionally. "I had to see for myself—that you got out of that wreck O. K."

"But—where are you going, Quent?" Her voice was tragic.

Preston shrugged bitterly.

"*Quién sabe?* I can use a gun and ride average well. I can get a job hunting buffalo for the U. P. track gangs, maybe."

"But they've got out a reward for you, Quent—"

"I know. But out on the far ranges, in a hunting camp, I wouldn't be known. I'll change my name. I'll get another horse, different clothes."

The girl turned from the window to blow out her lamp. Then she returned to Preston, and in the darkness she heard him gasp and circle her with buckskin-clad arms, drawing her lips to his.

"I love you, Helen," he whispered above the tom-tomming of his heart, releasing her. "Reckon—I'm a fool to be making this kind of talk, seeing as how I'm a hunted man now—but—"

Her lips found his, sending an electric thrill through him, making him forgetful of all else about him.

"Quent, dear," she breathed, her cheeks wet as she pressed her head against his. "We're both alone now

—my heart will break if you leave me here. Can't we go away somewhere—away from the U. P.—and—"

Slogging boots on the hard earth along the house wall made the two break apart, Preston plummeting a hand to his Colt stock. Then he froze, as he saw the army sentinel holding him under the drop of his rifle.

"Hands up!" snarled the soldier as Helen Gorine drew back in horror. "Miss, if this drunken barfly is molesting you, I'll have him clapped in the calaboose—"

Swallowing her fear, Helen Gorine leaned from the window and said reassuringly, her voice steady:

"This isn't a drunk, Mr. Jennings. He . . . he is a friend of my father's—who attended the funeral to-day. He just wanted to see—if I needed anything. That was all! You may go."

The guard lowered his rifle and saluted, an apologetic smile making his teeth flash in the starlight.

"Beg pardon, miss," said the soldier, clicking his heels together and shouldering his carbine. "But when I saw a man at your window, naturally I—well, I apologize to you, sir."

Quent Preston closed his eyes in profound relief.

"That . . . that's all right, feller," he managed to say. "You were just doing your duty. I reckon I'll take a pascar over to camp now, Miss Gorine. *Buenos noches*—"

As Preston stepped away he felt a six-gun jam against his spine and a harsh voice said against his ear:

"I'm sorry, Preston. I'm sorry for you, too, Helen. But I had rather expected Preston might be foolhardy enough to try to visit you, instead of leaving Wyoming."

The startled guard saw Quent Preston turn about, to face the silhouetted figure of Colonel Sires, who had approached from around the corner of the house.

Starlight glittered on the military pistol which the army man held against the cowboy's ribs.

"This time, Helen will not rescue you from the firing squad," clipped Sires in a steely voice. "Private Jennings, disarm this man and conduct him to jail. Put him under *triple* guard!"

This time will there be an escape for Quent Preston? Will there be anyone to break through a triple guard to aid him? Read next week's Wild West Weekly for an amazing development!

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 13 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was! Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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DEAD MAN'S BOOTS

*Those boots held the key to a fortune
—and they were cheap at the price!*

By Nelse Anderson

THE SUN was low when Johnny Miller spied the patchwork shanty on the half-dry creek ahead. It was the home of some old coot prospec-

tor, of course. Johnny smiled a little. After days of riding rocky wastelands without having set eyes on a single human being, any person

at all would be a welcome sight. Besides, the prospector could probably give him directions for finding the F Bar cow outfit.

He saw nobody while he was watering his weary sorrel horse and refilling his canteen. Grounding the sorrel's rein, he walked to the open doorway and called. A wizened old Mexican of the stolid sheepherder type came out, ran his squinted gaze over the slim young cowboy, and mumbled a greeting. Miller spoke cordially:

"So it's you that lives here, *viejo*, eh? I thought—"

"Thees ees the *casa* of the Señor Hardpan Daveeds," interrupted the swarthy one. "Señor Hardpan, he die—*pobrecito!*—and me, Carlos, hees frien', joost today I bury heem."

End of the last trail for some poor old desert rat. Johnny's smile faded. He looked over the Mex's head into the shanty, and saw worn digging tools, a wired-up castiron stove, a built-in bunk. On the bunk lay an almost new pair of flat-heeled, miners' boots. They were tied together securely, at a point just below their tops, with a rawhide thong.

"All but these boots," said Carlos, "everytheeng here ees mine, Señor Hardpan tell me. But these boots, Señor Hardpan say, I am to take them to the Señor Flood, of the beeg rancho. I must not fail, my frien' say. A dozen times he say it. I must not fail!"

Johnny Miller's very blue eyes showed puzzlement. A cattleman would have no more use for miners' boots than a mule would have for a hip pocket.

"You reckon the sun had locoed this Hardpan Davids?" blurted the cowboy.

Old Carlos' laugh was ratchety

and queer. "Loco? Señor Hardpan? Like the fox was he loco!" After an eloquent shrug, the Mexican went on, "And me, I have no *caballo*—no horse to ride down to the home of the Señor Flood. *Pobrecito!*"

"Look, *viejo*," said Miller, instantly. "Happens I'm on my way to see Ben Flood, but I'm a stranger, and I don't know where his outfit is. You give me directions for locating it, and I'll deliver the boots for you. Right?"

"*Gracias*—eef you weel be so kind, Señor!" exclaimed Carlos.

He gave the footwear to Miller, who tied it on his saddle. Then he told Miller how to find the Bar F Ranch. Johnny swung up to the back of his sorrel cow horse, waved a hand and was gone eastward over the scrub-dotted, rocky terrain.

Why, he kept asking himself, would old Hardpan Davids be so keen for Ben Flood to have his boots? Johnny lifted them, and they were not too heavy, he thought. Shaking them, he heard no sound. Yet their being tied so carefully suggested something inside one or both. Curiosity rode him hard for a moment. But it was hardly the decent thing to untie the thong for a look-see. These were a dead man's boots.

The Bar F Range was good range, and there were many, many hundreds of shorthorn cattle in prime condition. Miller could see that even in the thickening dusk. Lighted windows showed him the way on to Flood headquarters. As he reined in before the ranchhouse, the roughest of banter drifted to his ears from the bunkhouse beyond. This was a tough outfit, a womanless outfit. No woman had been here since the passing of Ben Flood's dance-hall-girl wife.

Johnny dismounted at the hitch rail, tossed the reins over a peg, strode toward the gallery steps and hallooed softly. A rock-hard voice came from the living room, ordering him rather than inviting him to enter. He did so. He found Ben Flood sitting beside a table on which an oil lamp burned. A ranch ledger lay open on his knees.

A big man, Flood was, medium dark, with a heavy jaw and eyes set too close together. "Cowboy after a job," he said gruffly. "I've got nothing for you."

"Cowboy after something, but not a job," quietly replied the other. "My name's John Miller. I'm from the Tonto country, and I work on Tom Garland's range over there. Tom sent me to see you on business."

Flood's brows lifted. Then his dark eyes narrowed. "Tom Garland, eh? He used to be here in this county. I bought some shorthorns from him when he was selling out to go to Tonto, I remember."

"That's what I wanted to see you about," Miller said. "Four hundred head of cows at twenty dollars apiece—dirt cheap—eight thousand dollars. And you never would pay it, though you could easy afford to."

"I'm ready to pay the note," Flood said, "any minute."

"You know Garland lost your note, for he told you." In point of fact, Garland had accidentally burned the note, along with some worthless papers. "Don't deny owing the eight thousand, Flood, do you?"

The utterly unscrupulous Ben Flood laughed. It was a mean laugh. "Didn't I say I was ready to pay that note right now, Miller hombre? I don't trust banks, and I've got the money here in the house."

WW—8D

Johnny's anger boiled up. For anybody to take such advantage of as good a man as Tom Garland was unthinkable. But the worst possible thing now was to lose his head, and Johnny realized this. Just as he was valiantly throttling his feelings, a tall, thin rail of a man in range clothing walked into the room and spoke.

"Hiyah, Ben. You got company, I see."

"Yeah, Slim Jim," said Flood. He closed his ledger and put it on the table. "Cowpoke on a wild-goose chase, looks like."

The newcomer, Slim Jim Jimson—this was an alias of his own whimsical choice—had a hooked nose, a slit for a mouth, and the pale eyes of a born killer. His gun he wore on the left, butt foremost, for a cross-body draw. Those who were good at a draw of this kind, Johnny Miller knew, were apt to be the deadliest of fighters.

Jimson's gaze traveled from the old range .45 Colt under Miller's hip up to Miller's perspiration-stained face. Then he turned to Flood:

"This jigger makin' trouble for you, boss?"

It was Johnny who answered. "Well, not yet, anyhow." He decided that this was a fine time for switching the subject. "You, Flood—you know an old coot named Hardpan Davids up in the hills?"

Miller had overlooked the little matter of bringing the boots in. Ben Flood spat: "Know Hardpan Davids? I sure do know the old devil! Why?"

"He cashed. Buried today," Miller said.

"Cashed?" Flood and Jimson looked at each other quickly. It was becoming more and more evident that Slim Jim was deep in his

villainous employer's confidence. Each was taking it for granted that the strange cowboy had been present at old Hardpan Davids' death.

Flood's manner softened at once. Smiling, he turned back to Miller and asked in tones that were almost wheedling, "Did Hardpan say anything about a—er—a gold lode before he passed?"

Johnny's wits were now hard at work. Alone here in the enemy's camp, he would have to be extremely resourceful if he collected Garland's eight thousand without the note. Johnny knew very well that all desert-rat prospectors spent years looking for at least one fabulously rich "lost" gold lode. Most of these were will-o'-the-wisp. But not all.

He was slow with his answer. Slim Jim Jimson spoke to Flood in a voice that betrayed both cupidity and suppressed excitement.

"Hardpan told Sheriff Ad Bright and some other folks weeks ago that he was close to a big strike—Ben, didn't he? He sure did. Had no kin, and, if he found his lode, you'd be the one he'd give it to, now that he can't use it, wouldn't he? You married his daughter—Ben, y'know."

Flood scowled. "Yeah," he admitted, "I married Hardpan's dance-hall-gal daughter, all right. I've wondered, Slim, if he didn't think I was a little careless around the time of her death."

"Bunk!" exclaimed Jimson. "I niver seen sich a fella to find trouble where they ain't none!"

"Well, maybe so." Flood then said to Johnny. "You didn't answer my question, cowboy."

Gold fever is a curious and devastating thing, and both Flood and Jimson had it. Miller decided to make the most of this extraordinary situation. He said:

"Davids sent you something, Flood. I don't know exactly what this is, for I couldn't bring myself to pry. Might be a map showing how to get to the biggest gold find in years—I'm not saying that's the case, but I do say it *might be*. Here in my pocket I've got Tom Garland's signed receipt for eight thousand dollars. I'll swap you what Davids sent you, and the Garland receipt, for the eight thousand cash. How about it?"

"What Davids sent me is mine, ain't it?" snapped Flood.

"Yeah—just like eight thousand dollars of your money belongs to Tom Garland!" flared the Tonto cowboy.

Flood signaled to Slim Jim with his eyes. Johnny Miller got it before Jimson got it. The result was that when Jimson's right hand blurred across his body for his gun, Johnny beat him out.

"Don't try that," the cowboy clipped. The barrel of his old range Colt inclined upward from his hip, pointed straight at the lean and hook-nosed, slit-mouthed face of Slim Jim.

"Easy!" cautioned the gun-hawk's employer.

Jimson's hand dropped away. Out of the tail of his flinty blue eye Miller watched Ben Flood. He felt sure that Flood had shooting material on him somewhere, probably under his coat in an armpit. Then Miller began to back-step toward the front door. Suddenly Flood's voice boomed out, in a yell to his crew in the bunkhouse:

"Here, boys—pronto!"

Tom Garland's youthful emissary had reached the open door. His life depended upon a swift dash to his horse and a swift getaway. Flood and Jimson were shooting toward

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him in the darkness before he made the hitch rail. The lead whistled dangerously close. He flung bullets that sent the pair dodging back inside, then was throwing the rein over the sorrel's head and vaulting into saddle leather. As he rode away he heard shouts that told him he would soon be pursued.

Johnny scarcely minded this. With the start he had, and the night black except for starlight, they'd have a fine time catching him. He rode only half a mile at top speed. When he mercifully slowed his tired mount he reined southward. Down there a few miles he'd find a town, Tom Garland had said. Also, in case of difficulty, he was to communicate with Sheriff Ad Bright, one of Garland's friends.

He thought back, as he rode, over the events of the two or three hours just gone. Not to have delivered the dead man's boots promptly, under ordinary circumstances, would have been bad. He'd only been fighting the devil with fire, as the saying was. Sooner or later he must deliver the boots, of course. But Flood did not know that. Flood had no way of knowing!

The town was little and sun-dried, the average cow town. Elderly Sheriff Ad Bright received the Tonto cowboy civilly in his lamplighted little office, and listened patiently to the unusual story. Then Bright said:

"Miller, I'm afraid you're beat. So many men are afraid to cross Ben Flood that Tom Garland likely won't be able to prove anything if he goes to law about the debt. Too bad he lost the note! These boots, here. I notice they're tied together so tight that the rawhide will have to be cut. I'll admit I'd give a pretty to know what's inside!"

Johnny had brought the footwear in. He grinned wearily:

"Sheriff, you don't know how I was tempted, and am tempted right this minute, to look! But it just don't seem the right thing. Hardpan didn't mean for anybody but Ben Flood to know, or he'd never tied 'em so tight that way."

"You're right, of course," Bright said. "It would be a sort of desecration. We—"

Crash!—a bullet through a window, a thudding explosion, the tinkling of a broken pane and shattered lamp-chimney glass, and darkness in the sheriff's office. Bright and Miller ducked low. Then a swift staccato of iron-shod hoofs down the street, swiftly fading. Bright's voice came:

"A warning for me to keep hands off! And, maybe, to spook you a little, Miller. That was a Flood man, of course. Flood guessed that you'd come to me. I'll ride out there in the morning and read the riot act to the whole bunch!"

The two had risen in the darkness.

Johnny said, "Flood takes the map idea real serious, I see. Gold fever. Well, there's been stranger things than for Old-timer Davids to send somebody a gold-lode map in a boot!"

"But Ben would hardly give you eight thousand dollars for it as long as there was a chance for him to get it by killing you off," Ad Bright replied. "It's too bad, cowboy, but the boots belong to Flood, and you'd as well give them up right off. The longer you hold them, the more danger you'll be in. Better ride out there with me in the morning and deliver them in my presence."

He was now lighting another lamp, farther back on his desk. Johnny blinked in the yellow glare. "Sheriff," he said, "I'm not quite

licked yet on this. But if it don't work, I've got another card up my sleeve. Trouble is, I'd have to make a trip clean to Tonto and back before I played this other card."

It wasn't good policy to explain to the sheriff about that. The idea was simple. Bring the rest of the home cowboy crew, fake an attempt at wide-scale rustling on the Bar F east range to draw Flood's men there, then take four hundred shorthorns from the unguarded Bar F west range for Garland and be long gone with them when Flood discovered the trick.

But, as he had told Bright, he wasn't yet licked on this boot thing! Bright was saying, "You look like you could use a night's sleep, cowboy. Get it, and meet me here early tomorrow."

First Johnny took his worn horse to the liveryman's for feed and rub-down. Then he had supper at a restaurant, went back to the livery stable and bunked up in a haymow in order to save paying fifty cents of Tom Garland's money for a hotel room.

At eight o'clock of the next morning Miller and the sheriff were riding briskly out of town, northward. The passing of an hour found them well into Flood range. Now, in daylight, Johnny saw that a line of tall reta-

mas flanked the Bar F ranchhouse on the near side.

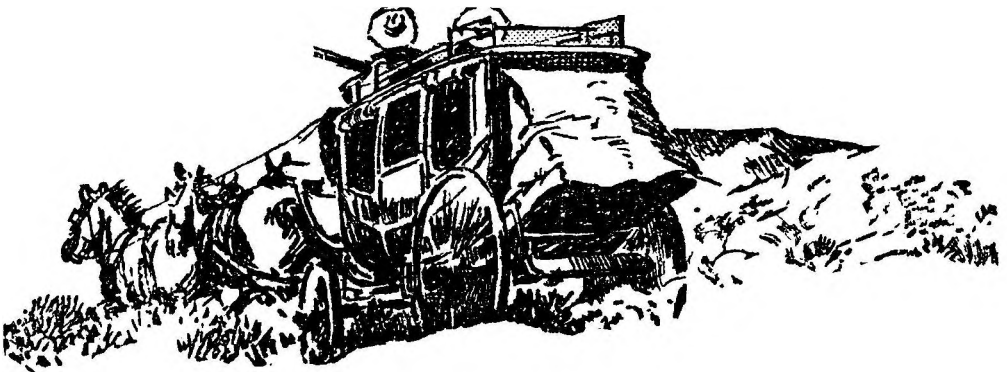
"Sheriff, I want another try at Flood," said Johnny. "Likely his crew is all out and he's there by himself. A man with gold fever is liable to do anything. Suppose you keep hid in the retamas while I see if I can't somehow strike a trade with him?"

Ad Bright didn't like the idea. He saw no chance of success. But finally he gave in and they separated.

Johnny Miller rode boldly to the hitch rail in front of the house, dismounted, dropped rein, took the tied boots off his saddle. His gun was loose in its leather, and his gaze had never been more alert. Carrying the Davids footwear in his left hand, he walked up to the front door and called.

Ben Flood came at once. His smile seemed cordial, but he could not hide the sinister shine of his close-set dark eyes. "Hello, Miller. Come in," he said, and turned toward a chair beside the living-room table. "Why the boots?"

Johnny followed in. He was as wary as though he were entering a den of rattlesnakes. His gun was out and ready. He sat down across the table from Flood, with the boots in his lap. From this chair he had



an easy view of all the living-room doors and windows.

"You take my word for it, Flood," he began, "that you'll pay this debt in one way or in another. It might be taken out o' your hide. Why not save trouble by paying up now?"

"Flat-heeled miner boots," muttered Flood. "Whatever it was that Hardpan Davids sent me is in them boots. I've seen why you didn't look inside, Miller. Couldn't untie that tight rawhide knot, and cutting it would have told on you."

"Wrong," said Johnny. "Who but me knew that the boots were tied?"

Burning curiosity born of gold madness took the place of the sinister shine in Flood's eyes. But there was craft in them, too. Suddenly he sprang to his feet. "All right," he said. "Wait here."

He hurried through the doorway that led into the dining room. After a few minutes he returned with eight thick, banded sheaves of banknotes in his big hands. He dumped the money on the table. Still watching everywhere, Johnny rose. Flood said.

"One thousand dollars in each stack. You can see it marked on the bands there. The ink is not fresh, which you also can see. I didn't have time to fake anything. Now give me the Garland receipt and the Davids boots!"

Miller was holding his old range Colt on a threatening level. With his left hand he tossed both boots and note to the table and hastily crammed the eight sheaves of currency inside his shirt. Then he backed to a wall near an open side window and spoke fast:

"I'm not fooled a bit, Flood. It was too pat. When you went to bring the big dinero you got in touch with somebody—the Slim Jim hom-

bre, I'd bet—and he's right now all set to ambush me when I walk out o' this house and take your money back! Saw enough of me last night to scare you out o' fighting me to my face, didn't you?"

He whipped around and sprang through the window. Under that same window, gun in hand, waited Slim Jim Jimson. Johnny's quick move took him unawares. His gun howled, but the shot was lost for the very good reason that the barrel of Johnny's Colt was even then striking him down unconscious.

Ben Flood shot at the Tonto cowboy as he ran for his horse. The cowboy fired back and showered Flood with broken window glass, then was in his saddle and gone with another bullet whining harmlessly past.

Just out of easy six-gun range, Miller thought of Sheriff Ad Bright, reined down and looked toward the retamas. Bright was galloping after him. In few words, Johnny told about it. The officer was amazed.

"You're a whizzer!" he exclaimed. "Now whiz to town and get that money into the bank. The bank's safe, no matter what Ben Flood thinks. I'll be in later, after I've said what I've got to say to this outfit."

He reined toward the ranchhouse. Miller rode fast to town.

There Johnny deposited the money—exactly eight thousand dollars, since Flood confidently expected to get it back—took a receipt for it and had a certificate mailed to Tom Garland.

He must see Ad Bright before he set out on the long ride over to the Tonto country. He went to the sheriff's office to wait. One fair night of rest notwithstanding, there was still some weariness in Johnny

Miller's bones. He spied an army-style cot in a shadowy corner, piled down on it and went off to sleep.

He slept well. In fact, he slept so well that night had fallen when he woke. Ad Bright had just come in, and was lighting the lamp on his desk. Johnny rose, blinked, walked over to the sheriff. He noted that the sheriff's face wore an odd look.

"Anything wrong?" asked Johnny.

"Nothing wrong," quietly said Bright. He stopped then went on:

"It's what they call poetic justice, Miller. No doctor in this town now, which had a heap to do with it. But there was a doctor here when Ben Flood's dance-hall-girl wife, Hardpan Davids' daughter, passed away. Instead of going for a doctor

to save her life, Flood played poker! He thought old Hardpan didn't know about that. But I found out today that the old coot did know."

"How did she die?" promptly asked Miller.

Bright said, "Bit by a rattlesnake. Oh, cowboy, it's lucky we was decent enough not to prow around trying to find out what was under the old newspapers that was stuffed in the dead man's boots!"

"I get it," Johnny Miller paled in spite of himself. "Davids sent a rattler to Flood in a boot! Did Flood die?"

"Didn't I just tell you," Ad Bright said as though he were a little out of patience, "that there was no doctor in this town now?"

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It sure is a shame to see stories light in the wastebasket for no other reason than that they're too long. Some of you send in letters with the alibi that the story just naturally ran too long and you racked your brain to shorten it, but durned if you could. Our answer to that one is: "If that's your trouble, pard, you'd better learn how to do it."

Say, shortening a story is almost as much a part of an author's job as writing the story itself. When an editor asks for five hundred words

or five thousand, he usually means just what he says, and don't kid yourself that he doesn't. Even if an editor likes your story a heap, remember that he has a boss, and said boss isn't paying him to lay his work aside and lift a few hundred words out of your story.

There seldom has been a story written that couldn't be improved by judicious cutting. When you've finished the first draft, read it over carefully, and it's dollars to doughnuts you'll be surprised to find how you've overwritten it. We'd lay money on our belief that most of you complete your first draft, read it over, then shoot it into the mail. Why, to a conscientious author a first draft is only what a blueprint is to an engineer!

So when your story runs longer than five hundred words, for the love of Pete, shorten it before sending it in; see how much better it is after it's cut. See how some of our amateurs keep their stories within five hundred words and still get in good characterization. It's part of your craft, so learn it now.

Well, here's this week's first story:

NATURE'S DOUBLE CROSS

By Walter Turner—Age 54

Hanston, Kansas

Tex Owen suddenly unfolded his long, slim body from the ground. Standing spraddle-legged, his fingers played nervously over the ivory butts of his six-guns.

Livid fire snaked across the rimrocks, crackling thunder reverberated in the canyon. Tex's taut muscles relaxed; he chuckled softly. His Adam's apple flopping grotesquely between his flaming kerchief and chin. He watched the squat figure of the camp cook, who stood paralyzed with fear as lightning streaked across the heavens. And then he saw the cook race from under the lone cottonwood toward him.

The chuckle died as suddenly as the barbed flash. From the other end of the canyon orange flames cut the inky night. The roar of A's followed the thunder.

Shorty's angry voice suddenly startled him.

"The boss didn't faint," he heard the cook cry. "Lightnin' struck him. It hit that cottonwood, turned them stampedin' steers and stunned Tex."

Tex Owen opened his eyes slowly. He saw the boys crowding over him.

"Them cattle didn't go far," he heard one of them say, "but they shore wiped out that gang. We found 'em up the canyon."

Tex smiled as the boys crowded nearer. "Nature shore double-crossed them sidewinders," he said.

As a rule, we're plumb against stories that hang on an accident or what is legally known as an act of God. We advise you amateurs to cross such plots off your list pronto. In a Western story, though, we see a better excuse for such plot. Ask any waddy who's seen a herd stampeded by thunder, a spread wiped out by a prairie fire, a bad man bitten by a rattler after he'd foxed every sheriff in the State.

Apart from the plot, the way Señor Turner has handled his characters proves that he has taken our advice to heart and followed it. We sure get a kick out of that. Keep at it, pard! Don't let your character work slip, but try to get a stronger plot next time.

The next story:

HIS OWN BRACELETS

By John Lish, Jr.—Age 16

Nashville, Tennessee

Two mounted men rode slowly into the little town of Pineville. One of the two men, Billy Bush, was young and sandy-haired. The other was a middle-aged man of coarse features. As they rode silently side by side, Billy Bush recalled happenings of the past in his mind.

Ten years ago, when he was only a small boy, his father and mother had settled with him on a small ranch just outside of Pineville. Then their cattle had begun to disappear. On a moonlight night when the corral was being raided, his father had identified one of the rustlers as Lopez, a man who was well known in Pineville.

Billy's father had reported the rustling to the sheriff the next day.

"Listen, stranguh," said the sheriff, "if yuh wanta stay healthy around heah, keep yore trap shut and don't complain."

Bush then realized that the sheriff and Lopez were partners in the rustling.

The next day Lopez, angry because the sheriff had told him of Bush complaining about the cattle being stolen, rode to the Bush ranch and shot Bush in the back from a distance. Billy found his father's body and swore to get revenge.

And as the two pards rode through the dusty main street, Billy knew he at last had the opportunity to avenge his father's death.

The two riders reined in at the Silver Spur Saloon and dismounted.

"Lopez hangs out here," Billy told his companion.

The two men entered the saloon and walked to the bar where Lopez stood talking with the red-faced barkeeper.

"I've waited a long time for this chance, Lopez," Billy told the outlaw. "I'm gonna give yuh an even break though, something yuh didn't give mah dad when you plugged him in the back."

Lopez's face colored. "Why, yuh dirty little varmint, I'll—"

Lopez interrupted his threat to make a lightninglike reach for his gun. But Billy's .45 was already out, spitting flame and hot lead into the outlaw's chest. Lopez staggered and then fell in a bloody heap on the floor.

The sheriff came running through the door and, after sizing up the situation, turned upon Billy: "Yer under arrest, Bush, fer the killing uv Lopez." The sheriff took out a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

The stranger, who had accompanied Billy into the saloon, stepped forward with a badge in his hand. "Just a minute, sheriff. I'm the new United States marshal for these parts. It won't be much trouble for me tuh prove yuh was this dead hombre's partner in all his dirty work."

The marshal grabbed the cuffs from the sheriff's hands. "Stick out your paws, sheriff," he commanded. "I'll let yuh wear your own bracelets for a spell."

This story is one of the many that have been built on the rather shopworn idea of an old score settled by a shoot-out. Here is a case of a story that could have been expanded a

little more for the sake of better characterization, and still have stayed within the five-hundred-word limit.

We admit, however, that characterization is a sort of bug of ours, and there are times when we carry it too far. This is true in a very short story like *Señor Lish's*, which has room for only a few flashes of characterization. On the whole, we opine that he managed it quite well.

Try a stronger plot and a more developed story next time, pard.

DEATH ON THE STEEL RAILS

By Sam M. George—Age 23

Westfield, North Carolina

The lone rider on the Red Gulch road heard the ear-splitting crash as the great Iron Horse plowed into the barrier in its path. Heard, also, the staccato fire of rifles and six-guns that followed. Then he was racing madly toward the steel rails.

The rider was tall and well-built. Flittering moonlight showed a clean-cut, tanned countenance, shadowed by a big Stetson. His steel-gray eyes picked up the trail ahead with ease.

He came upon the scene of the catastrophe suddenly, as he topped a hogback. The firing had ceased. The huge engine lay on her side in a cloud of hissing steam. The door of the money car was open. And, as the rider watched, two men appeared, supporting a heavy iron box between them. He saw three more hellions covering their retreat.

The rider dismounted, took his carbine from the saddle scabbard, and crept cautiously down the tree-studded slope. He took up a position beside a tall oak a few paces from the robbers and, covering them, he roared:

"Grab a star, hellions!"

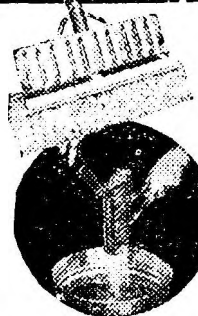
The bandits whirled. The strong box fell from the hands of the two supporting it, as fingers clawed for six-guns.

And the *bang! bang!* of .45s blasted the night, punctuated by the occasional *zing!* of the rider's carbine.

The bandits were plainly visible, outlined by the lights of the train. While the lone fighter was shadowed by the darkness of the trees. The robbers had only the flashes of his gun to shoot at.

One outlaw grunted and plunged to earth.

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Another cried out and fell. And still another was prepared for Boot Hill. The rider's Winchester was taking a heavy toll.

The outlaw's bullets were not in vain, however. The rider's left arm had suddenly gone limp. His hat was gone, and there was a hole in his boot where a little toe was supposed to be. But he fought on, despite the growing pain.

Dropping the rifle, he brought up a worn .45.

"Damn yuh!" shouted a ruffian. "Show yoreself an' I'll blow yuh blamed haid off!"

The lone man's answer was a blast of gunfire. And the outlaw coughed and crashed to lie in unmistakable silence. Then the last of the robbers threw up his hands and pitched on his face.

The crew and passengers were swarming around the dead outlaws. The lone fighter stumbled forward to meet them, sagged, and would have fallen, but for the strong arm of an old cowman.

"That was plumb elegant shootin', son," said the old man.

And the rider stared into the face of old Lem Jenkins, owner of the Box B, over on the Arkansas. He had worked for old Lem for several years before he had taken up his present job which consisted of just such battles as he had now come through.

"Gents," said old Lem, "I want yuh all to meet Jim Bryant, the fightin'est dick thet ever rode fer Uncle Sam."

This story has more sustained action than the previous one, so it required different treatment. Every story, you know, slams the author smack up against a brand-new problem or bunch of problems. That's what makes the game fun—it's never dull when you're a writer.

The mysterious-rider plot is an old Western stand-by, and it's always good if handled properly. Where there are a horse and rider, there's bound to be action, and what would a Western story be without action? Some of you amateurs ought to know; you send in plenty of 'em.

We think Señor George did a good job, and he didn't forget his characters, either; they're decidedly more than mere names. The surprise at

the finish winds the story up with a bang, though how loud a bang depends on whether or not the reader was sort of expecting it.

Now for the poems.

TOUGH GUY

By Margaret Hill—Age 34
Marysville, Washington

'Twas in a little eating house
Down Oklahoma way,
A guy who thought that he was tough,
Did stop to eat, one day.

He slapped his gun upon the bar
And roared his orders quick,
"Give me a slice of rattlesnake
And make 'er good and thick."

The cook walked out behind the shack
Where one was freshly shot.
He quickly cut two slices off;
Then got his skillet hot.

He cooked the snake to golden brown
And set it on the bar.
With six-gun in his hand, he said,
"You'll eat it, too, by gar."

The hombre turned a sickly green,
But how he choked it down!
Without a word he left that place
And hurried out of town.

JUAN THE BANDIT

By Robert Crock—Age 17
Johnstown, Pennsylvania

Way down in old Mexico,
Below the Rio Grande,
Lived a Mexican bandit
Who plundered o'er the land.

The bandit's name was Juan—
Ace-high in a bandit's rank,
But he crowded his luck too often
And stuck-up his last bank.

He walked into the Mescal Bank
And backed out through the door
With a sack of gold in one hand
And in the other, a .44.

He turned and sprinted for his horse
And got there with a bound.
Just then a gun cracked in the bank
And he sank forward on the ground.

Now Juan is dead and gone—
He is buried deep in the sand.
May his soul now rest in peace
Below the Rio Grande.

PEACE COMES TO REDWOOD

By Hallie Carter—Age 22
Leaksville, North Carolina

I've heard them tell the story
Of a bad man named Pardue.
They say he was greased lightnin',
And knew just what to do.

No man had ever faced him
And beat him to the draw.
He ruled the town of Redwood;
His word and gun were law.

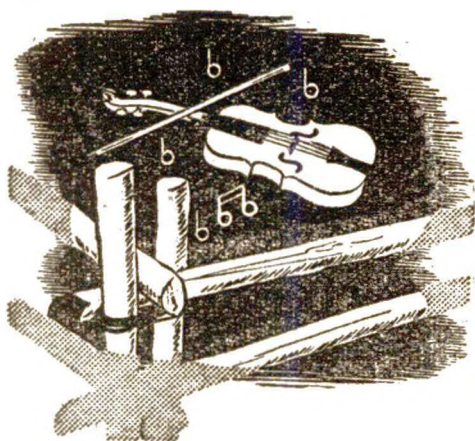
But then there came a stranger
Who was seekin' peace and rest.
Away from the throbbing heartbeat
Of a young and mighty West.

Pardue roared out with laughter;
"This is the place," he replied.
His draw was like the lightnin',
But where he stood he died.

No one had seen the stranger's draw.
But it beat the tick of a clock.
And peace had come to Redwood
Along with Bill Hickok.



There, pards, that sure ought to
be enough to mull over till next
week. See you then!



FIDDLIN' JOE'S SONG CORRAL

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western ronge ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Since you will be reading this around Christmas Day, suppose we have a couple of poems that are full of the Yuletide spirit. They were both sent in by our tophand collector, Gerald McIntosh, of Arkansas. The first goes like this:

A CHRISTMAS CAMP ON THE SAN GABR'EL

By Amelia Barr

Lamar and his Rangers camped at dawn
on the banks of the San Gabriel,
Under the mossy live-oaks in the heart of
a lonely dell;
With the cloudless Texas sky above and
the mesquite grass below,
And the prairie lying still, in a misty,
silvery glow.

The sound of the horses cropping grass, the
fall of a nut, full ripe.
The stir of a weary soldier, or the tap of a
smoked-out pipe,
Fell only as sounds in a dream may fall
upon a drowsy ear,
Till the captain said, " 'Tis Christmas Day,
boys, we'll spend it here.

"For the sake of our homes and our child-
hood, we'll give the day its dues."
Then some leaped up to prepare the feast,
and some sat still to muse,
And some pulled scarlet yupon berries and
wax-white mistletoe,
To garland the standup rifles—for Christ-
mas has no foe.

And every heart had a pleasant thought,
or a tender memory,
Of unforgotten Christmas tides that never-
more might be;
They felt the thrill of a mother's kiss, they
heard the happy psalm,
And the men grew still, and all the camp
was full of a graceful calm.

"Halt!" cried the sentinel; and lo! from out
of the brushwood near
There came, with weary fainting step, a
man in mortal fear—
A brutal man, with a tiger's heart, and yet
he made this plea:
"I am dying of hunger and thirst, so do
what you will with me."

They knew him well. Who did not know
the cruel San Rabatan—
The robber of the Rio Grande, who spared
not any man?
In low, fierce tones they spoke his name,
and looked at a coil of rope;
And the man crouched down in abject fear
—how could he dare to hope?

The captain had just been thinking of the
book his mother read,
Of a Saviour born on Christmas Day, who
bowed on the cross His head;
Blending the thought of his mother's tears
with the holy mother's grief,
And when he saw San Rabatan, he thought
of the dying thief.

He spoke to the men in whispers, and they
heeded the words he said,
And brought to the perishing robber, water
and meat and bread.
He ate and drank like a famished wolf and
then lay down to rest.
And the camp, perchance, had a stiller
feast for its strange Christmas guest.

But before the morning dawned again, the captain touched his hand:
 "Here is a horse and some meat and bread;
 fly on to the Rio Grande!
 Fly for your life! We follow hard; touch
 nothing on your way—
 Your life was only spared because 'twas
 Jesus Christ's birthday."

He watched him ride as the falcon flies,
 then turned to the breaking day;
 The men awoke, the Christmas berries were
 quietly cast away,
 And full of thought, they saddled again,
 and rode off into the west—
 May God be merciful to them, as they were
 merciful to their guest!

A CHRISTMAS LETTER*

By Joseph Mills Hanson

DEAR MISS: For this pink stationery
 Forgive me; it's all I could find
 In Buck Dalton's store at the Ferry,
 So I took it—I hope you won't mind.
 For it's Christmas good wishes I'm sending,
 Though in words not the best ever slung,
 To you where the Tiber is winding,
 From me, on the banks of the Tongue.

Perhaps you've forgotten the morning
 When your car of the Overland Mail
 Broke loose on a curve without warning,
 And was ditched by the spread of a rail?
 I was herding nearby in the valley,
 And I pulled out your father and you,
 And I found that your name, miss, is Sallie,
 And—well, I remember. Do you?

You were there for five hours at least, miss,
 Then the whistle, a smile, a last word.
 And you rolled away to the East, miss,
 While I galloped back to the herd.
 You, back to your world and its beauties,
 New York, Paris, Rome and all those,
 I back to a cowboy's rough duties,
 In sunshine and rainstorm and snows.

* Reprinted by kind permission of the publishers, A. C. McClurg Co., Chicago, Illinois, from Mr. Hanson's book entitled: FRONTIER BALLADS.

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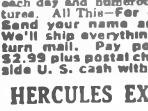
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But tonight I'm alone in the shack here
On my quarter-square government claim,
While coyotes are yelping out back here—
You'd be scared, miss, I guess by the same.
The moonlight is white on the river,
And the long frozen miles of the plain
Seem to shrink in the north wind and shiver
And wish it was summer again.

It's different where you are, I reckon.
Leastways from the books it must be.
Where the green hills of Italy beckon
And the Tiber swings down to the sea.
You like it no doubt, and you'd never
See beauties that nature can hold
Where the snow lies in drifts on the river
And the prairies are empty and cold.

But somehow I wouldn't forego it
For all of those soft Southern lands,
I breathe it, and feel it, and know it:
It grips me as if it had hands.
The stars in the night, how they glisten;
The plains in the day, how they spread!
There's room to stand up in, and listen,
And know there's a God overhead.

And then, when the summer is coming
And the cattle start out on the trails
And you hearken at dawn to the drumming
Of prairie-hens down in the swales,
Why, Italy simply ain't in it!—
But, miss, here I'm talking too free.
Excuse me; my thoughts for a minute
Got sort of the better of me.

It was just about Christmas I started;
To me, it was only a name
Till that day, when we met, talked and
parted.
But since it has not been the same,
For you gave me a new kind of notion
Of the countries and people and such
On the trails that lie over the ocean—
I guess we don't differ so much.

So I want you to know from this letter
That the time by the train wreck with
you
Made me know all humanity better
And like the whole bunch better, too.
You'll forgive me, miss, an uncultured
party.
In the spirit of Christmas, and take
These thanks and good wishes, all hearty,
From
Your most sincere,

CHYENNE JAKE.

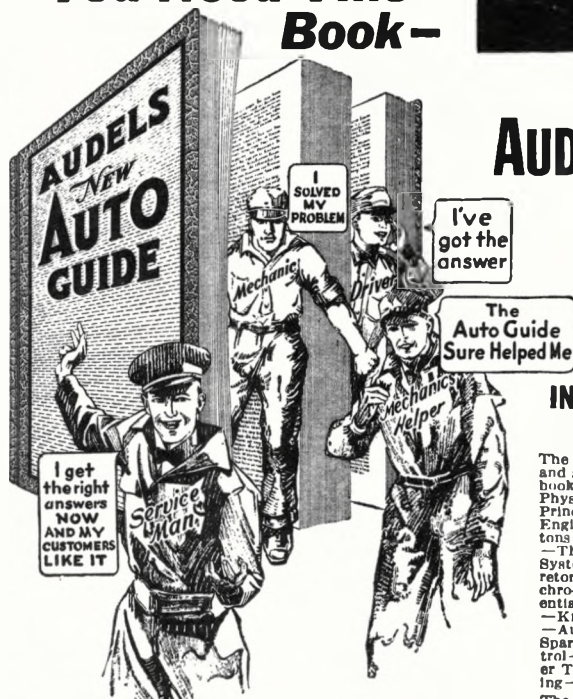
Merry Christmas, Corralers, and
good luck! Don't forget to be on
the lookout for legends about Old
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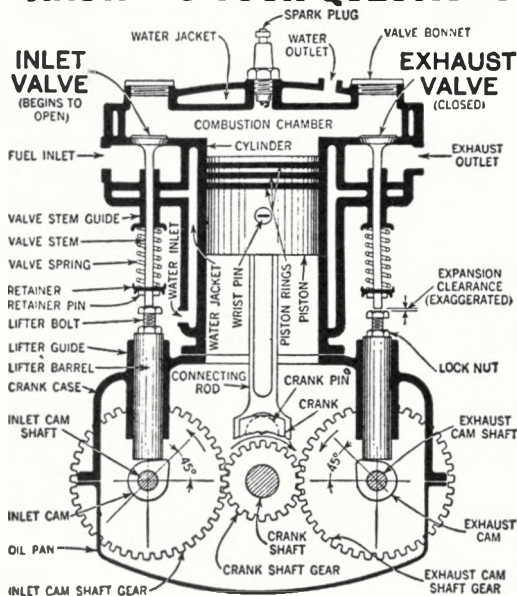
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