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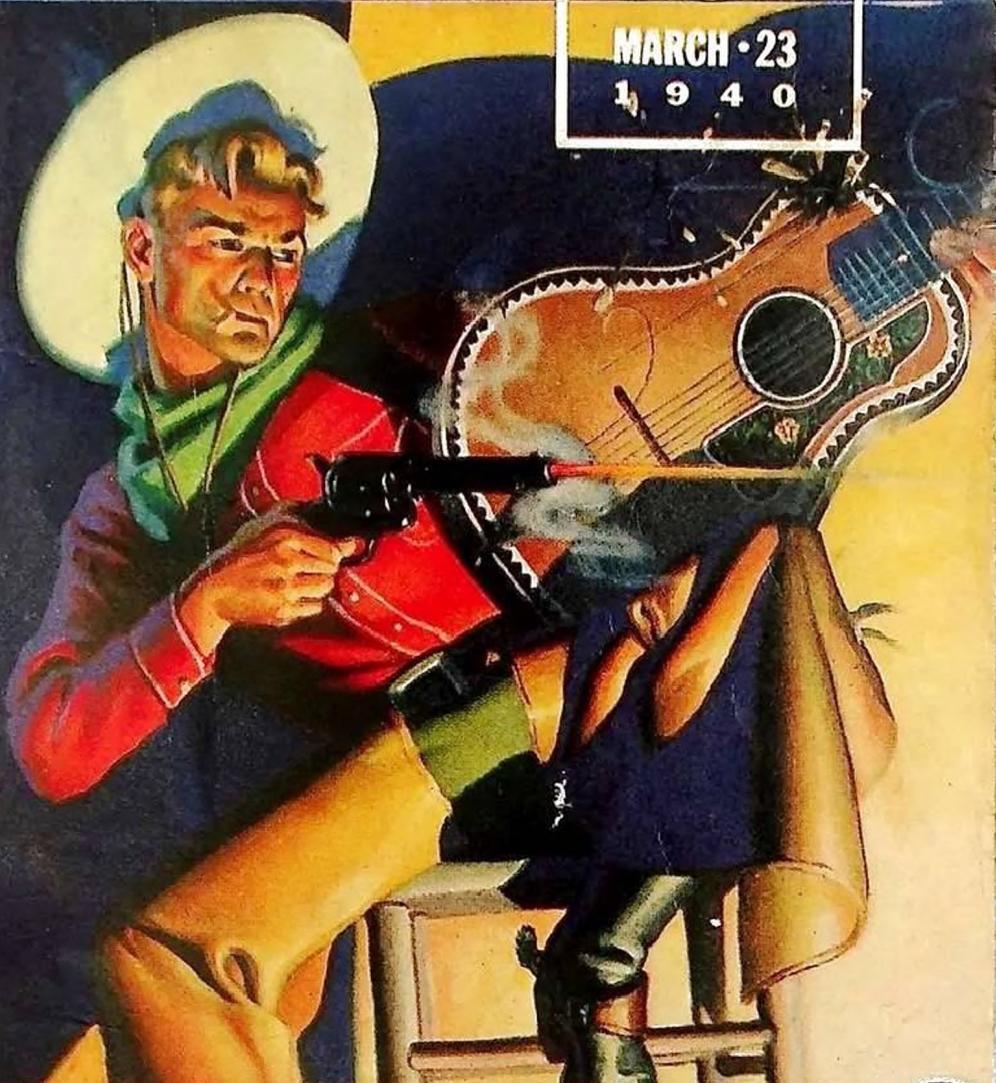
WILD WEST

WEEKLY

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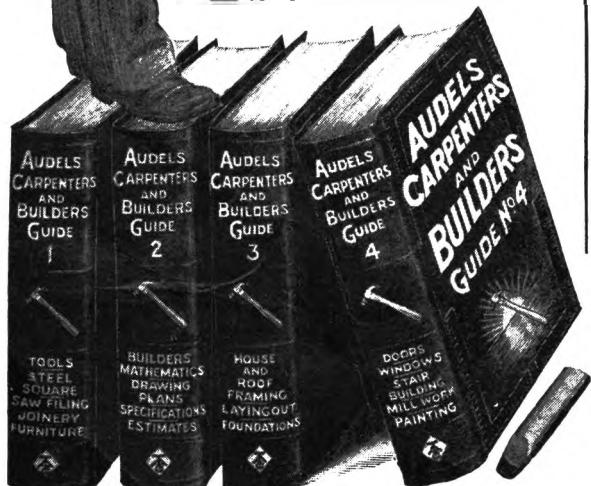
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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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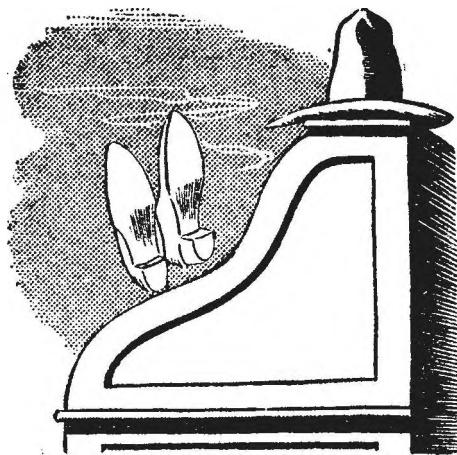
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

THE day you buy this issue, if you buy it on time, is the day spring has its official opening—and that's a day our hopes are automatically renewed for most of us. The chief reason I harp lyrically about spring is this: At a time when mankind is becoming more kill-crazy each day, with masses of humans slaughtering other masses for no sane reason, it's comforting to realize that old Ma Nature pursues her routine in the old steadfast manner—usually serene in her course, never going completely berserk.

Of course, nature is always the enemy of man to some extent—but when it acts up and takes a poke at humans there's always a sound reason for it. When there's cold and blizzards it's because the sun can't be shining hotly every place at once—that's the unavoidable nature of the solar system. When volcanoes spout, it's because the earth, which was once a molten mass, hasn't cooled inside yet. For every other

cantankerous action it displays there's also a scientific reason.

In general, nature treats mankind a heap better than mankind treats itself.

Except for the greed, treachery, cowardice and foolishness of men, the West would have developed more rapidly and more pleasantly for all concerned. Its history wouldn't have been so colorful and dramatic, perhaps, but the settlers would have been much better off.

Serenity is too much to expect of any frontier country, however. A big percentage of humans since the beginning of time have had wide streaks of coyote, polecat and rattlesnake in 'em, and frontiers—new territory opening up to settlement—inevitably attract the biggest percentage of the bad stock. This stock takes advantage of the confusion, the lack of regular law and the weakness of those who are peaceable by nature, or who are in the minority and not well organized to fight back.

Even the prehistoric animals, though they fought other kinds at times, seldom fought their own kind. As a matter of fact, the only two living species which gang together in packs and fight their own kind are—men and rats. Scientifically proven.

Speakin' of prehistoric animals—I'm reminded that a poem we published awhile back caused some activity between a couple of our readers, one of whom passed the correspondence along to me.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: In the December 16th issue of Wild West Weekly your exceptional bard, E. A. Brininstool, was perplexed at the forthcoming status of the folks at Steerville since they became confused over the finding of a prehistoric tooth.

I, too, am concerned, as I have been a reader of Wild West for more than twenty years and really want to know what sort

of critter the Steerville hombres might uncover to match the tooth they found.

In an effort to aid Poet Brininstool and lessen the anxiety of your faithful readers, I asked the help of Bob Christy of Lamar, Colorado. He has a hand in assembling some ancient bones from which he hopes to frame a dinosaur. Inclosed are my note to him (which was sent to him with a copy of the poem) and his reply to me—which is his personal determination of the source of the tooth that Smoky Thompson found (in the poem).

Cordially,
WARREN ANDERSON.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Here's the note Mr. Anderson sent to the scientist:

DEAR CHRISTY: What's become of your dinosaur?

Here's another mystery! What prehistoric beast was it Smoky found?

Curiously, ANDERSON.

And here's the scientist's reply to the question:

DEAR ANDERSON:
In considerin' the matter of the tooth that Smoky found,
We been snoopin' and a-sneakin' quite a little bit around;
And our ultimate conclusion, based on facts that are before us,
Is: The beast that owned this toothache was our friend Tyrannosaurus.
Scientifically, CHRISTY.

Lamar, Colorado.

Much obliged, gents. We'll take your word for it. Fact is, bones of long-extinct prehistoric animals have been found in several parts of the West and are helping trace the history of that section clear back to days before man ever had set foot on this continent. A mighty interesting subject. Archaeologists, biologists and other scientists do a heap of important work which isn't heard of much, because they're modest men who don't seek the spotlight.

I notice on yore letterhead that you publish a flour-and-feed magazine, Señor Anderson. Speaks well

for the quality of the 3W contents when a rival publisher chooses our magazine over others for twenty years.

Here's a note from the author of "Branded For Boothill," our complete novel in this issue:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I'm glad that several of the angles I incorporated with "Branded For Boothill" are of a sort you never saw before in any Western story. They're well founded in fact and are legitimate flavor, deriving as they do from one of the chief factors in the West's developments. I sincerely hope none of your readers will cheat himself by looking ahead for the mystery's answer.

Glad you considered it my best story to date. I aim to make each better than the last. But authors, being human, can't *always* do a better job than last time. If we can do it *most* of the time, we're lucky. Besides, if we reached perfection, there'd be nothing left for which to strive. (I never saw one, or heard of one, who approached perfection!)

Sincerely,
WILLIAM A. TODD.

Lookin' into my crystal ball, I see that next week we're presenting a great favorite of yours in a bang-up long complete story—"White Wolf's Snake-fang Clue," by Hal Dunning. White Wolf always comes through in a rousing pulse-pounder with a good plot. The Circle J boys are back in a seasonal story called "Smart Guns And An April Fool." Comical old Buck Foster gets tangled up in an April Fool prank that leads to strange and exciting doin's. The readin' hombre who misses this yarn is a kind of April Fool himself, take it from me. Also, we give you fine stories by such old favorites as Nelse Anderson, Andrew A. Griffin, Chuck Martin and others.

Keep yore necks out of hangnooses till after next week at least. It's a plumb bright issue and they don't sell WWW on Satan's spread. *Hasta la vista.* THE RANGE BOSS.

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CENTS



by WILLIAM A. TODD
Author of "Crimson Gangs," etc.

**What evil curse lay in the clay of that rusty can—what
weird power made Rainy Dey the unluckiest and most
hounded puncher on that whole greed-maddened range?**

THE dead man had slumped from his chair onto the table, like one who had tired at his task of writing and had gone to sleep.

In the snowbound altitude of the Rainbow Mountains he had frozen into a grotesque sculpture. His wrinkled face was blue as glacial ice.

Stiff strands of gray hair hung like stalactites over sightless eyes. Beside his cramped right fingers lay a lead-nosed bullet that had served as a pencil, while his left hand was reaching toward a can filled with dry red clay.

That can, according to a message scrawled on brown store paper, was worth ten thousand dollars to the finder.

The three riders who had sought shelter in the abandoned trapper's cabin, stirred restlessly from the spell of their discovery.

"He was loco when he wrote that," said the tallest man with sudden annoyance. "The joke ain't funny."

"The can don't weigh enough to be full of that much gold," the second put in bluntly.

The third took up a notch in the belt of his leather chaps.

"Gold isn't the only thing worth money," he remarked. "You boys didn't get the full drift of the letter. I'll read it again."

Of the trio, he alone could have passed the close scrutiny of the law without chill alarm. His name was Rainy Dey, and throughout cattle country he was famous for hard luck. No rancher or rodeo ringmaster wanted any part of the hard-muscled young man with the tow hair and cold blue eyes. Stories about him were fast becoming legend.

He had been born the night of a chinook that sent rivers flooding their banks and wiping out valley ranches and caving mines. As a school kid, he had been first to take down with scarlet fever, and the town blamed him for starting a plague that swept two States. Later his father had sent him up the market trail with a spooky herd that stampeded and killed nearly a dozen

riders. If a prairie fire colored the night sky, grangers bet money that Rainy Dey was in the neighborhood.

It was just one bad break after another all his young life, so that now Rainy was hard up and desperate about his lot, on the verge of outlawry and riding the back trails with two outcasts who did not know his true identity.

As he read the corpse's letter, a dread feeling swept him that fate once again was dealing from the bottom of the pack. The message ran:

To Whom It May Concern:

I don't think my heart is going to hold out for the rest of the trip down. You will find an old tomato can in my coat pocket. Handle it with utmost care. By no means try to dig out the clay, or a horrible misfortune will befall you. Take this can to Dr. Rawlings in Center City, Arizona, and you will be rewarded to the extent of ten thousand dollars. Again I warn you not to tamper with the clay. The can is valuable to only Dr. Rawlings, who is a square-shooter. Best of luck.

CHARLES BRADLEY.

Finished with the reading, Rainy Dey lifted his eyes to the two men whom he had met at a whiskey peddler's shack at the Arizona-Utah border.

"You see," Rainy said pointedly, "it doesn't say what's in the can. We just have to take his word about the reward."

The taller of the pair, Loop Edwards, scowled darkly. Wanted for killing a puncher in a saloon brawl, he trusted no man. A gambler by profession, his hard life had left indelible prints in his long, thin face. He was unshaven and caked with mud from a long week of dodging a posse. His fine black broadcloth suit was ruined.

The other man, Chicago, was obviously the gambler's stooge. Small, bowlegged, with a tight little twisted

face, he had been an Eastern jockey in his time, and had drifted West in empty cattle cars. His checkered pants tucked into embossed cow boots, his beaded buckskin coat and ten-gallon sombrero with a fancy rattlesnake band were muddy but still flashy enough to frighten a team into bolting.

It was plain to Rainy what was passing through their minds. Ten thousand dollars was not chicken feed. So why split it three ways? And what was inside that rusty can to make it so valuable to the Dr. Rawlings in Center City? Perhaps the map of a new gold strike worth millions. Perhaps a thick roll of currency.

Loop Edwards drew his thin lips down in a hard grin.

"If the can is worth anything," he said, "it's the same opened or unopened. Dig out the clay and we'll find if the stranger's lying."

"You've got a head on your shoulders," Chicago chuckled. "There's something inside the can that he don't want us to know. How can we be sure the Rawlings gent will pay us in Center City?"

Rainy was no tenderfoot. He had been cleaned out in too many poker games not to know when a deal was crooked, and now he felt a certain signal pass between Loop and Chicago. His cut in the reward would be more than three thousand dollars, money that might put him back on his feet again to lick the jinx that followed him. He couldn't trust his present luck in a wild gamble to win more than the dead man promised him.

"I'm in favor of carrying out the instructions," Rainy argued. "That man wasn't the kind who would let a lie live after him. Look at the way he wrote, like a smart schoolteacher. He's paying off for more

than the job is worth. Even a hundred bucks would be enough for delivering that can."

Loop Edwards flashed a tawny glance at Chicago, who drew the makings from his pocket and then fumbled for a match.

"You're outvoted two to one, partner," Loop said to Rainey, as Chicago turned to the cold fireplace in pretended search of matches for his smoke. "But we'll play square with you. We open the can. You get your third split, no matter what happens. I've got some money cached farther down south. How does that suit you?"



RAINY DEY

Rainy saw that he was being jockeyed into a position where he'd be caught between the crossfire of the two men. Chicago was moving around behind him. Loop's promise of payment was worthless. The pair would just as soon murder him as not. No matter what decision he made, his life was threatened. It was the same old story to him.

A wild rebellion surged through Rainy Dey. Suddenly he was fed up with everything—with being the goat in every tragedy, with being broke, down and out, with stumbling

from one bog of hard luck to another. He hated his existence. He hated this cunning pair in the worm-eaten cabin. He was better off dead than alive. But he wasn't going to cash his chips without making the dealers pay the full price.

With a burst of rage he leaped back.

"Don't try to sneak a gun, Chicago!" he cried. "I don't trust you, Loop. You've got no money cached down—"

There was no time to finish his accusation.

Loop Edwards had ducked low to the floor. He started to dodge behind the frozen corpse at the table. His long right arm was whipping under the left lapel of his coat, where a hide-out holster held a .45-caliber six-gun. He was no man to argue, or to give a sucker an even break. Loop was the kind who killed without warning.

"Take him, Chicago!" Loop called for aid as Rainy dodged.

But things were happening too swiftly for the flashily dressed runt. Chicago was caught in the open. The heavy gun beat about his hips and the weighted holster were more for show than service. He made an awkward stab to draw, sucking in his breath with a gasp of fear.

Rainy's hand was trained to find his weapon even in the dark. Years of range experience came to his aid. His fingers snatched at the walnut butt of the six-gun he had carried since he was old enough to herd stock. He darted to the left to get out of the line of fire of Loop, hiding behind the table and the dead man. With a twist of his wrist he triggered at the awkward Chicago, and Chicago screamed in agony, his right arm gouged by hot lead.

Rainy was not through. Like a whirling longhorn maverick, he hit

the table, catching the rim with a free hand and hurling it over with the dead man. The chair, corpse, and table fell down on Loop Edwards. Caught like a rat in a trap, the gambler shouted in panic:

"Hold it, cowboy! Don't shoot!"

Rainy's smoking weapon was waiting for him to crawl out.

"Toss the hardware clear, Loop," he instructed breathlessly. "That's it. Now stay where you are." He glanced at Chicago, who was on the floor, doubled up with pain. "Crawl into the corner," Rainy ordered harshly. "You're lucky I didn't put that bullet through your brisket."

"Listen, cowboy," Loop called. "We got no fight with you. I would split you into the deal."

Rainy bent to pick up the guns on the floor.

"Sure, you would have split me in," he said harshly. "But you forget about the share of another hand in this game. The dead hombre. So I'm going to deal from now on."

Chicago groaned. "My arm's busted! I'm dying!"

Rainy moved to the clay-filled tomato can, lifted it from the floor, weighing it in his hand.

"I'll leave your guns with your horses down the trail below the snow," he said. "If you want your cut in the reward, Dr. Rawlings will be keeping it in Center City. But don't ever cross my trail again, boys. You might be curious about who you ran into. Well, the name is Rainy Dey, and it sure turned out to be hard luck for you both."

"What?" Loop Edwards shouted. "You mean the jinxed saddle tramp?"

Rainy had backed out the door. He pulled it shut, locked it with a wooden pin and turned to the three saddle broncs standing in the snow. Swinging to the pinto, he hazed the

roan and sorrel ahead of him, striking down the wide white shelf where a trail was blazed on the scrub pine trees.

CHAPTER II.

OUTLAWED.

It was two nights and two days of hard riding, changing horses at ranches and small towns, before Rainy trotted through the noonday sun into Center City. He had left Loop's and Chicago's broncs below the snow line in order to give himself a good six-hour start on them; so Rainy was confident that he had a clear field for action. He had traded his soogans for a meal at one place; his watch and extra cartridge had gone in a horse swap at another.

Pinched with hunger and gaunt from lack of rest, the puncher turned into the main street of the railroad-junction town. His red-rimmed eyes searched the signs painted on the false fronts of the buildings. He halted before the plank sidewalk in front of a saloon, where a group of men stood talking.

"Can any of you tell me where to find Dr. Rawlings?"

They eyed him suspiciously. Unshaven, covered with dust, riding a mud-caked mustang, Rainy could be only a messenger of trouble. Men came in a hurry to find doctors to cure bullet wounds, to save the sick, and help the injured. He was a stranger, and yet he knew the name of a man who practiced medicine in Center City.

A gangly loafer with a jaw warped from a tobacco chaw cuffed back his floppy-brimmed hat.

"Rawlings is in jail," he told Rainy.

"Jail!" the puncher exclaimed.

The sidewalk group offered noth-

ing further. After he was gone, they would chuckle over his surprise. His business was not theirs.

Rainy drew his mustang away from the gutter, spurred it down the street, deeply worried. A block away stood a square cement building that could not be mistaken, and its barred windows made Rainy remember that more than one sheriff had ordered him to leave town on penalty of arrest for vagrancy. With misgivings, he pulled up to the hitching post and swung down.

"I'll give the law a fake name," he told himself. "Then he won't know me. It's my only bet."



LOOP EDWARDS

Bracing his shoulders for confidence, Rainy pushed through the jail door into a small room furnished with bench, chair and desk. Behind the desk sat a bald-headed man with a hard, flat face. If he had heard Rainy dismount outside, he was waiting grimly, as if expecting bad news.

"I'm looking for a gent called Rawlings," Rainy said boldly.

The sheriff judged him with cold gray eyes. "Are you a lawyer?"

"No," Rainy replied. "Do you mean he's locked up on some charge?"

"Murder," the lawman said in a brittle tone.

Rainy caught his breath. "Murder? I thought he was a doctor."

The sheriff's lips twisted in a hard grin.

"That's what a lot of folks thought," he said. "But he turned out to be a fake—just a double-crossing horse doctor who tried practicing on human beings. You couldn't have been one of them, could you, stranger?"

The question was harmless enough, but the way the lawman said it told Rainy that a clever cross-examination had begun. The puncher would have a tough time proving himself innocent of any crime. His only alibis were Loop Edwards and Chicago, who certainly would not face a sheriff. Broke, friendless, Rainy decided it best to retreat.

"No, there's nothing wrong with me," he said nervously. "I'm acting as a sort of messenger for somebody else. Perhaps there's another doctor in town who will do?" he suggested. "Who did Rawlings kill?"

The sheriff's eyes were as sharp as a lynx.

"Fellow called Charles Bradley," he replied slowly. "Know him?"

"Bradley?" Rainy gulped. "Can't say I ever knew him. Does he live in town?"

"You're pretty curious, ain't you, stranger?" the lawman inquired. "I reckon I'll let you talk to Rawlings. He's waiting for a waddy of your description to turn up with a rusty tomato can full of— Don't try to draw!"

The sheriff's hand came up from his lap as Rainy stepped back in alarm. A cocked .45 covered the cowboy. He was caught, and he knew it. Through his mind flashed a vision of Loop and Chicago. They couldn't have beaten him to Center City. But they had other means. They evidently knew the country. They could have cut down from the Rainbow Mountains to a closer town, where a telegraph tapped a warning to Center City's sheriff.

Rainy's arms lifted slowly.

"Yes, I've got the can," the cowboy said with hard anger, "but I've also got a letter from Charles Bradley that will clear Rawlings of any charge against him. Bradley died of heart failure. His body is frozen in a cabin atop the Rainbow Mountains. I don't know anything about Rawlings being a fake doctor. You've been bluffed into a fake murder, sheriff."

The law of Center City rose from the chair behind the desk.

"We'll see about that, Rainy," he chuckled. "Turn around and unbuckle your hardware. You can't ride with a man called Loop Edwards and change your luck. Step lively. I'll also take that rusty can and the letter you forced Charles Bradley to write before you froze him in a snowslide. Keep those arms up."

The sheriff's manner boasted that he knew his prisoner's reputation, that there was no hope for the puncher, that acquaintance with Loop Edwards was sufficient evidence to convict him of any crime.

Rainy Dey tensed like a bronc about to feel the drop of a saddle to its back. This was the end of the trail for him—the last trick that fate could play. The jinx that dogged him would not be content until it sent him to the gallows. He had al-

ways gambled fair and square with his fellow men, but they constantly cheated him, just as the hard-boiled sheriff of Center City was cheating him now.

"I can't keep my arms up and unbuckle my gun belt at the same time, sheriff," Rainy said harshly. "Make up your mind. You seem to know my reputation. What makes you so worried about a prisoner with my hard luck?"

The lawman came closer, his cocked weapon aimed for the cowboy's belly.

"I ain't taking chances ever," the sheriff growled. "You've got a way of talking that I don't like. Turn around and move to the wall. I'll pull your stinger from the holster myself."

"As you say," Rainy chuckled. "I never froze the Bradley man in any snowslide. I got nothing to worry about."

He started to turn, his feet shifting. But he was quick. His right boot came up from the floor with the speed of a steel trap. The toe struck the sheriff's gun, knocking it upward as it crashed a shot into the ceiling. The lawman leaped back. But Rainy sprang at him, ducking under the down-chop of the sheriff's smoking weapon. Rainy sent two jolting blows into the man's brisket. The sheriff's cry of pain was choked off as the wind went out of him. Rainy smashed him across the jaw, hurling him senseless to the planks.

The action was so swift that Rainy was acting more by impulse than planned thought. It was like the swift excitement of a rodeo when a bucking bronc goes mad and tries to kill its fallen rider and every other man in the ring. Rainy wasn't thinking of consequences, but only the job in hand.

He was at the sheriff's desk in a

leap, jerked a drawer open, then another, and found a bunch of keys. His ears caught the echo of a shout outside the calaboose down the main street. He went through the door to the cell block. Time was at a premium.

"Dr. Rawlings!" he shouted.

A lean, sallow-faced man stood gripping the bars of the nearest cell.

"Who are you?" he asked fearfully. "I'm Rawlings."

Rainy thrust a key in the cell door.

"You've got to be quick," he ejaculated. "There's a crowd coming. I've got a message from Bradley. He's dead. Men are framing us for murder. We've got to run for it."



DR. RAWLINGS

Dr. Rawlings burst out of his cell. His ragged black coat and trousers did not indicate wealth, but Rainy couldn't think of his reward now. He had to judge Rawlings for what he was worth in a running fight with a posse. The mark of the hunted seemed to be written deep in the man's lean white face. Gray-haired,

as thin as a sapling, he appeared to be in terror of his life.

"Which way can we go?" he asked Rainy breathlessly. "If Brad is dead they'll hang me. Did you kill the sheriff?"

"Come on," the cowboy ordered, turning back to the jail-office door.

The sheriff still lay on the floor, eyes closed, breathing heavily. Rainy could hear boots pounding the plank sidewalk outside. He pointed to an open side window, and Rawlings made for it with a run. When he went over the sill, Rainy followed him quickly. Outside, they ran to the back of the jail, fast. Their escape had been undetected, but Rainy knew that it wouldn't be long before the town would be after them.

"We've got to find horses," he advised Rawlings as they fled for the brush behind a shed.

"Not enough time," the lean fugitive gasped. "There's a river about a mile through the brush. We might find a boat there. It's our only chance."

Inside the sheriff's office as he waited after Rawlings along a narrow path that led through the scrub oak and greasewoods. It was hard to keep up with the doctor, for Rawlings was fleeing in abject terror. But soon his age began to tell. His wind grew labored, and he slowed down. Rainy was right behind him, listening intently for sound of pursuit.

There was time now to think about what he had done and to weigh the consequences of his act. If Rainy had seriously planned turning maverick with Loop and Chicago, now he was an outlawed man on his own hook. Freeing a man charged with murder from a jail was a serious offense. He could expect to meet with law bullets in every

county he entered. It wasn't wise to stop running away. Arizona was too small a State for him.

The path ended at a narrow but deep stream, and Rainy watched Rawlings clamber into a flat-bottom catfishing boat.

"Shove off and get in the back!" Rawlings cried, taking the middle seat and thrusting oars into the locks. "They can't beat us through the brush."

Rainy shoved off and settled himself in the back seat. He stared at Rawlings as the man rowed furiously with the current. For the first time the puncher had a good study of the doctor's face. Doubt took hold of Rainy about ever getting the ten-thousand-dollar reward promised him in the dead man's letter. For Rawlings looked like anything but a trusted medico whose life was dedicated to the saving of the sick.

As he pulled on the oars, sending the small boat down the winding stream between dense brush, grimy rivulets of sweat ran down his slanting brow. His green eyes held a haunted look. He had a thin hooked nose, and beneath it a weak mouth and receding chin. His sallow complexion was unhealthy, and it reminded Rainy of a man he'd known who was addicted to smoking marijuana.

Rawlings puffed from his exertion. But he was not as terrified now that the boat was out of sight of the path. He forced a grin.

"We'll make it," he said to Rainy. "I know where we can get horses. Where did you say Brad died?"

"In a trapper's cabin atop the Rainbows," the puncher replied. "He left a letter saying it was heart failure."

"I warned him about his pump,"

Rawlings interrupted. "What else did the letter say?"

Rainy eyed him carefully. "That you'd pay me ten thousand bucks for a can full of red clay."

Rawlings stopped rowing.

"Ten thousand bucks?" he gasped. "For a can of clay! He must have been crazy!"

Rainy's jaw went hard. For a long moment, he stared at Rawlings, trying to read the man's mind. And Rawlings twitched nervously. He began rowing again, as if once more reminded of danger, but it seemed to Rainy that the fellow was trying to mask his true feelings.

Ten thousand dollars was big money for delivering a rusty can to a stranger. Rainy himself could hardly believe that the reward was on the level. Yet a dead man would not leave a lie behind him. Rainy wasn't the only one who trusted in Charles Bradley's written words. Loop and Chicago were so certain that a fortune lay within the rusty can that they had even called in the law to stop Rainy from his mission.

"No pay, no can, hombre," Rainy said bluntly. "I've put my neck in a noose for you, Rawlings. You know I didn't murder Bradley, and I know you didn't. But there's a heap more that I don't know."

Rawlings was sending the boat to the western bank where a clump of willows grew thickly.

"We'll talk about it later, partner," Rawlings spoke, turning to catch the willow branches. "I'm thanking you for getting me out of jail. If you don't trust me, keep the can. But I'll show you where we can find horses."

Grim suspicion shot through Rainy; and as he stood up in the boat to help the fake doctor pull into the bank his hand tapped the can

in his coat pocket, and then loosened the gun in his holster. He expected treachery. He was wondering why the sheriff had accused Rawlings of being a fake, and why the man had been jailed so quickly. There was evidently something sinister about his reputation in Center City, and that meant his dealings with Charles Bradley were not aboveboard.

CHAPTER III.

THE VIOLET GLASS VIAL.

RAWLINGS was first to crawl up the bank in the willow thicket. He turned as if to give Rainy a helping hand, but the puncher grinned knowingly. He didn't mean to be jerked off his feet, then struck ~~the~~ the jaw.

"Keep back," Rainy said. "I know that trick."

Rawlings stepped away. "You don't trust me," he said. "But I assure you, my friend, that after what you did for me—"

"I know all about it," Rainy chuckled, crawling up the bank and getting to his feet. "Find those brones, doctor. Then we'll call quits. If the can is worthless, I'll keep it. But try to fool me and I'll shoot you quicker than you can bat an eye. Get going."

Rawlings gritted his teeth, turned, and started thrashing through the brush. He protested as he moved ahead.

"You misjudge me, stranger. Bradley was my friend. I took care of him. I warned him about his heart. But nothing would stop him from taking those trips to the high altitudes. I don't know why I was put in jail. The sheriff said I had murdered him. It is all a mistake. Why Brad ever sent me a rusty can of clay I don't know."

Far behind on the other side of the river, Rainy heard shots echo. A posse led by the sheriff was evidently searching the scrub oaks. Perhaps a deer had drawn their fire.

The puncher kept behind Rawlings until they stumbled out of the brush into a wide clearing planted with corn. Ahead of them stood a shack. A corral was beside it, holding several horses that were plainly too fine for a river nester to own. The cornfield explained the mystery to Rainy immediately. Here was a whiskey peddler of the sort that had introduced him to Loop and Chicago miles north of the Arizona State line. The very fact that Rawlings knew where this moonshiner lived was evidence that the fake doctor traded "h owl-hooters.

"Tony Cardenas farms this atch," Rawlings explained as they passed the young green corn. "I cured him of a busted leg once. He'll be glad to help." He halted. "There he is now."

Rainy saw a dark-skinned man move out the door of the shack, a rifle cradled in his arm. Hatless, he stood blinking in the sunlight, the breeze fluttering his flannel shirt and khaki trousers. He recognized Rawlings, and his teeth flashed.

"Long time no see, doctor," Tony called with a Mexican accent.

Rawlings hurried along. "The sheriff had me in the hoosegow, Tony, for a fake murder. He got a telegram from Foothill. I don't know who sent it, but I'm going to find out. Lend us some broncs."

"For your friend, too?" Tony questioned, glancing at Rainy.

"Both of us, Tony," Rawlings said nervously. "He helped spring me. I'll get the saddles. Are they inside?"

"I get the horses," Tony said, turning away.

Rainy tensed as Rawlings started into the shack. If the fake doctor found a gun, there would be trouble. Rainy had to keep the upper hand, so he pressed after Rawlings, who turned at the jingle of his spurs.

"You help Tony," Rawlings said angrily.

The Mexican had halted, eyes narrowing, as if trying to figure out the meaning of the doctor's words.

"I haven't eaten in days," Rainy argued. "Maybe Tony has something on the stove."

"I got stew cooking," Tony said.

Rawlings turned into the shack, with Rainy behind him.

"We can't waste any time," the doctor was saying. "Grab some canned stuff. That posse will be on our trail any second."

Suddenly the man halted. Rainy almost bumped into him just inside the shack. The shadows prevented the puncher from seeing everything at a glance. His hand dropped to a gun butt, for he thought Rawlings was going to whirl on him. But Rawlings froze like a rabbit, speechless, as if seeing death waiting for him.

A familiar voice called from somewhere in the shack.

"Don't try to draw, Rainy, unless you want a bullet in the back from Tony outside."

Rainy was protected by Rawlings in front of him, but his back was targeted in the open doorway. If he dodged to the right or the left, he'd place himself within range of Loop Edwards, whose voice it was speaking within the shack: Rainy's head whipped around. He found Tony outside in the sunlight drawing a bead on him with the rifle.

"Get out of the way, Rawlings," another man—Chicago—spoke from within the shack. "If anybody

wants to drill that double-crosser, it's me."

Rawlings leaped to the left, throwing his arms up, leaving Rainy a full view of the shack's interior. His eyes focused on a grinning Loop Edwards half concealed by a corner of a bunk. Behind a table in the back of the room, Chicago kneeled with a six-gun in his left hand, his right arm resting in a black sling.

"Just reach for the ceiling, Rainy," Loop chuckled. "We wasn't figurin' that you'd spring Rawlings so soon. But it only makes things easier."

A fierce anger surged through Rainy. Every way he turned his luck clabbered. He had his hand on the butt of his six-gun, but the odds were high. Fate was urging him to the fatal move. Twice before it had thrust him into action, allowed him to win the pot for a brief time, only to spring another trap on him. He could read death in the eyes of his two foes. They would welcome an excuse to shoot.

Grimly, Rainy fought back the reckless urge to fight. He had to use his head. He had to see this mysterious game through to the end. He couldn't cast away his life for nothing.

His arms raised upward, and he forced a hard laugh.

"How did you boys get here so soon?" he asked.

Loop slid out from behind the bunk. "No tricks, Rainy," the gambler warned. "You gave me a decent break up in the Rainbows. I'll give you the same if you play fair. Maybe you would have cut me and Chicago in on the reward. Maybe you wouldn't have done it. We couldn't take the chance. I figured you and Rawlings safer off in jail."

Chicago refused to leave his protection behind the table. "I'll keep

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Rawlings covered, Loop," he sneered. "But watch out for the jinxed wolf."

Behind Rainy, Tony's rifle barrel stabbed him in the spine. He let Loop take his six-gun.

"I asked how you got here so fast," Rainy repeated hotly.

Loop grinned. "You forgot to look in the cave back of the cabin," he answered. "The dead gent had a horse and mule cached there. We rode down the mountain on them. Then we traded horses for better flesh than you got, Rainy. We arrived last night."

Rawlings broke in excitedly. "It was you who told the sheriff I was a fake doctor. You told him I had murdered Bradley. He arrested me."

"No, we sent a telegram from Foothill, Rawlings," Loop replied in a sneering tone. "We figured that Rainy would try to blame me for everything. So the telegram said that me and Rainy were partners. I reckon the sheriff has a 'wanted' poster for me. I was only stopping Rainy from trying to talk his way out of the calaboose. But it looks like he broke his way out. When we contacted Tony, he told us about you, Rawlings."

Rainy lowered his arms. "The joke's on you, Loop," he retorted. "A posse will be here any minute. And Rawlings says that he hasn't got a dime. The can is worthless. We're all suckers."

Loop's thin face tightened, and a glint sprang into his tawny eyes.

"That's what Rawlings says, is it?" he demanded. "We'll see what's in the can. Both of you belly the floor. Quick about it."

Rainy kneeled to the planks and spread out. Rawlings hit the floor beside him. Rainy took the can from his pocket, held it up for Loop,

who grabbed it. As Tony stood guard over the prisoners, Loop set the can on the table, grumbling under his breath.

"Listen to me, men," Rawlings called. "I had nothing to do with this. I can't help it if Bradley fooled you. He just wanted to let me know he was dead. That's all the can means. Nothing is in it."

"Shut up," the gambler retorted as he drove the point of a knife into the dry clay. "Tony has told us about you, Rawlings. You're a fake if there ever was one. You used to be a horse doctor until you started selling snake oil to white people, like the Bradley hombre. I'm not blaming you for that." He dug out more hunks of clay. "It's you eating dope that sets me against you. Never was a hophead yet that told the truth."

Rawlings tensed. He glanced at Rainy, whose fists doubled.

"I thought you had the earmarks," Rainy growled. "No wonder the law jugged you so quick."

"Fools!" Rawlings shouted. "All of you! The law will hang you! There's nothing in that can! Bradley was crazy!"

"Crazy like a fox," Loop Edwards chuckled, digging into the dry clay. "Tony tells us he was a smart mining engineer from the East. If this can don't give us a map—" Loop stopped speaking.

Rainy reared up to watch him dump the contents of the rusty can on the table. Within the broken chunks of clay there was a smashed violet glass vial of the size of a shotgun shell, which had contained something that looked like a brownish sand. Loop took the handle of his knife and cracked the larger chunks of clay. He used his fingers to hunt through the broken glass, brown

sand, and clay for a piece of paper that was not there.

Rawlings spoke wildly. "You'll suffer for framing me! Mark my words! You'll regret it!"

Loop Edwards whirled upon him, jerking a gun from his holster.

"I told you to shut your face!" the gambler raged. "That can was a trick. What did it mean, Rawlings? Bradley was sending you some message. What's the stuff in that glass thing?"

Rainy held his breath. He expected any minute to hear the beat of hoofs outside the shack. The posse should be due.

"Bradley was crazy, I tell you," Rawlings whined. "He was always sending me that brown sand. He thought it was gold. It's worthless. It isn't my fault. He was full of dope all the time. He smoked marijuanna."

Chicago had come from his corner, and he searched through the clay, broken glass, and brown sand on the table.

"Don't let him get away with that story, Loop," Chicago sneered. "Mebbe this brown stuff is sample ore from a mine. It might be gold. And Bradley wanted it assayed by Rawlings. It was his way of telling Rawlings that he had struck it rich."

Loop Edwards cocked his six-gun. "What about it, Rawlings?" he demanded. "Where is Bradley's gold mine?"

The Mexican stepped near. "The posse must be across the river, Loop," he said. "You better go."

Loop's eyes focused on Rainy.

"We won't need you, cowboy," the gambler said coldly.

"I reckon not," Rainy replied. "But if you ask me, I think Bradley was loco. We should have opened the can in the Rainbows." A sheepish grin twisted his lips. "My fault,



He pitched, headfirst, over the railing!

Loop. Sorry I caused you all this trouble. Go ahead and shoot. You'll swing for murder in some State. Why not Arizona, where the buzzards are hungry?"

Loop's face twisted with deadly hatred.

"You'll live to swallow that, Rainy!" the gambler cried. "Tie him up, Chicago. Leave him for the posse. Tony, you get horses ready. We're taking Rawlings with us. If

the buzzards eat anybody, it'll be the tow-headed tenderfoot. He talks too much for his own good."

Rainy held his words as Chicago kneeled on his back to jerk his wrists together. Out of the corner of an eye, Rainy was watching Rawlings, whose sallow face was wet with perspiration. Loop jerked Rawlings to his feet, and for a moment Rainy thought the fake doctor was going to faint. He swayed toward the ta-

ble, threw out an arm to catch himself, but halted, jerking back his hand from the table as if in terror of touching the broken clay, the shattered glass, and the brown sand.

It was a strange action that Rainy never forgot.

CHAPTER IV.

BROKEN JINX.

WHEN Chicago had bound Rainy hand and foot, the horses were ready outside the cabin, and Loop pushed Rawlings through the door with the barrel of his gun. Flat on the floor, Rainy listened to the three men ride off. For the first time he felt the great strain that he had been under for days, and his muscles began to ache. A great sigh of relief went through him. He still had his life. And the jinx that dogged his trail had given him one more moment of liberty.

Rainy's eyes closed. His adventures of the past few days ran through his mind like sheep jumping a fence. There was the meeting with Loop and Chicago in a whiskey peddler's shack along the outlaw trail. He had been on the verge of selling his birthright and taking his vengeance against law and order for all the wrongs done him. But the finding of Charles Bradley had halted that. And in the fight with Loop and Chicago, Rainy had won hands down. Again, in Center City, he had bested the sheriff, escaped, only to walk into a trap set by his old foes. Now, once more, he had won his life through a revengeful quirk in Loop's make-up.

"Unlucky?" Rainy suddenly questioned, eyes flicking open. "You couldn't call me unlucky. Not by a long shot!"

He reared up from the floor. His wrists were fastened behind him, and

his ankles were bound. The fatigue seemed to roll off him like a heavy blanket. A wild exultation swept him. Again he went over his adventures in the last few days, and again he found that luck had favored him at every sharp turn. Suppose he hadn't beaten Chicago to the trigger, suppose the sheriff had shot him, suppose Loop had murdered him in cold blood instead of leaving him for the posse? Why, Rainy had won every hand in the game.

"It was Bradley's letter!" he exclaimed. "I bet on a dead man! I broke my losing streak! I can't quit the game now!"

Hardly had he finished than he heard a shout outside the cabin. Horses were coming. It could be only the posse, making for the one place where the fugitives might have tried to find broncs for escape.

Rainy's pulses swelled. He couldn't let the law take him. They might hang him in rage over the escape of Rawlings.

Rainy rolled over and over away from the open door. His mind was working fast. He had one chance. That they wouldn't discover him. The hammering of hoofs was drawing closer, but the riders seemed to be making for the corral. Rainy reached the back of the room. He squirmed under the low bunk, rolled into a dark corner, possum fashion, and waited with heart pounding hard at his ribs.

There was more shouting outside the shack. A rider halted at the front door, swung down from the saddle, entered the room.

"They're gone, sheriff!" the rider shouted. "They didn't even wait to eat! Tony is with them!"

Rainy listened to the fellow retreat. Voices echoed from the corral. Horses squealed at the bite of

spurs. And the posse was riding away.

"Luck," Rainy breathed. "Call it whatever you want. I'm running into pay dirt for the first time—"

He broke off short as hoofs sounded again. A saddle creaked outside the shack. Spurs jingled. A rider stepped into the room and halted.

Rainy could see only the polished boots of the person standing just within the doorway. When a voice spoke, a shock of surprise went through him, for it was a girl.

"A can of clay!" she cried.

Rainy saw her boots step to the table. She was silent. Then she drew back, went to the door, and stood looking out. In a moment she returned to the table. Rainy could hear her voice, questioning herself, groping for plans.

"They didn't know what it was. What shall I do? I can't leave it there, but Uncle Brad said—"

Not only her tone aroused Rainy's curiosity to see her, but her words made him think of Dr. Rawlings.

She had spoken of Bradley as her uncle. Rainy could explain her presence without much trouble. Perhaps she had followed the posse to determine the fate of Dr. Rawlings. One thing stood out. She knew the secret of Charles Bradley's letter.

As Rainy listened to her scraping the clay, glass, and brown sand from the table with a cardboard scoop, he could not resist a desire to catch a glimpse of her. Slowly he wormed out of his corner to the under edge of the bunk. His eyes were on her polished boots. They were the kind sported by dudes from the East. He saw that she was wearing tan whipcord breeches, and then he caught the color of her yellow silk shirt. Her back was toward him as she

scraped the clay with her cardboard scoop into a large empty mason fruit jar. She was wearing gloves. The light from the doorway made tiny red flames in her copper hair.

Finished with her task, she turned away from the table, and Rainy took in her deeply tanned boyish features. She was pretty. Her pert nose and gray eyes brought a grin to Rainy's lips, and he drew back to prevent being discovered.

One of his spur spikes caught in the floor crack. There was a sharp ring. Rainy stiffened. He could see only the girl's polished boots now. She had halted swiftly, stood poised, and the sound of her breathing was loud in the deep silence. Then, strangely, she began to whistle. Perhaps to keep up her courage. Rainy knew he had been detected as she strolled out of the cabin.

"She's going for the posse," he told himself in alarm. "I've got to get a knife to cut the ropes."

He rolled out from under the bunk, twisted about and reared to a sitting position. A shadow fell in the doorway. Turning his head, Rainy found the girl covering him with a shiny, nickel-plated revolver. There was no fear in her eyes. Her tanned face was grim.

"Well," Rainy ejaculated, trying to break the tension, "won't you come in, stranger? I was just about to eat. I reckon there's enough for us both."

A frown stole across her brow and she stepped into the cabin, as if better to see his bound wrists and ankles. His humor had fallen flat.

"That's a bad habit of mine, talking to myself," she said in an annoyed tone. "Who are you?" Determination had drawn her cheeks taut.

"Just a passing cowboy with no place to hang his saddle, miss,"

Rainy said lightly, but he knew that he was not fooling her.

"You might be the man who freed Dr. Rawlings," the girl muttered. "But why did he leave you—" Her eyes opened wide. "It was *you* who brought the rusty can!"

"There's a letter in my shirt pocket, lady," the puncher said. "It might interest you."

"A letter?"

"From Charles Bradley."

She came forward cautiously, bent down, fingers feeling into the buttoned pocket of his red silk shirt. Drawing out the brown paper, she retreated to the doorway, where she read Charles Bradley's last words. Finished, she looked at Rainy questioningly.

"You didn't murder him, did you?" Her voice was firm, devoid of feeling.

"Found him dead. Two other fellows with me. They sent that fake wire to the sheriff," he replied. "If you ask me, miss, that Dr. Rawlings is just as crooked as a corkscrew. He'd double-cross his own dog."

"You came for the reward," she suggested.

Rainy nodded. "Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"You'll be paid," she said, thrusting the letter into a pocket.

"What?" Rainy felt himself slipping. She was clever.

"Every cent of it," she said seriously. "Uncle Brad was a fool when it came to money, but his word is mine."

"You mean that rusty can full of clay meant something!" Rainy exclaimed. "Look here, lady; all I want now is my freedom. I'll make a deal with you. Untie me. Give me a bronc. We'll call everything square. Even if that clay was solid gold, it wouldn't be worth ten thousand bucks. Your uncle Bradley

must have kidded you and Rawlings into believing he was an Injun medicine man. I've heard of people putting a jinx on things and stopping anybody from touching them. But this is the first time I've ever seen it. I want out in this game. I've done my job. Untie me."

As he spoke, her eyes studied him intently. A strange smile turned her lips. She thrust the shiny revolver into a hip pocket with the gesture of a man. She was no fool.

"You tell it well, cowboy," the girl said. "I know Rawlings is no good. But Brad wouldn't listen to me. If Rawlings and the moonshiner ran away from the posse, it's none of my affair. I'll pay the ten thousand dollars. You're better off in jail than chasing after him. He won't get far. The court can't convict you for a murder you never did."

She started to leave, but Rainy halted her.

"Listen to me, miss," he pleaded. "Rawlings isn't alone. He's a prisoner. There are two sidewinders taking him to find your uncle's mine."

She stood in indecision.

"I thought you didn't know what was in the can?" she inquired.

Rainy bit his lips. "You're no match for Loop and Chicago," he said. "I've got to handle them. You don't understand what it means to me. That letter from Bradley changed my luck. They call me Rainy Dey, because I'm jinxed. I honestly don't know the truth about the can."

"Why did you try to trick me?" she demanded angrily, stepping toward him. "Why are you so afraid of going to jail?"

Rainy made a wry face. "Because you can't make the grade alone, lady. You're dealing with men much smarter than you. Those

fellows are headed back to the Rainbow Mountains. They're sure to back-trail Bradley. Rawlings will cross you at the first chance. Loop and Chicago don't know what they're looking for. I'm honest about not wanting the money. There's plenty more where Bradley was getting it. But not with Loop and Chicago on the hunting ground. They'll murder Rawlings, and they'll try to frame me."

She listened intently, weighing his words, trying to find something in them to reassure her.

"What do those men think they're looking for?" she asked quietly. "What do you think you can find?"

Rainy bit his lips. She had him there. He didn't know what the can contained. Perhaps gold ore. But it was valuable.

"The thing is to find Bradley's mine first," Rainy grinned.

Her mood changed swiftly.

"You're better off in jail until I've finished," she said angrily. "Ten thousand dollars is my price to keep silent. And don't forget," she warned him, "that one word from me to a judge will hang you. One word! That's all, you faker!"

"Wait!" Rainy called.

But she fled out the doorway. He heard the jingle of her bridle bit as she swung to the saddle. Her galloping bronc sounded for a while, and then its hoofbeats played out. She had headed off in the direction taken by the posse, but she had made a mistake in leaving Rainy.

If his luck held, there was a means of quick escape. Not in the cabin, but outside. He rolled to the doorway, threw himself over the sill.

On the earth outside he began his journey around the shack, bent on finding a dump behind the moonshiner's hovel, where there would be broken bottles and sharp-edged tins.

He might have time to beat the return of the posse, time to cut his ankle and wrist bonds.

CHAPTER V.

MURDER FOR PROFIT.

MISFORTUNE was following Loop Edwards and his party like a gaunt gray wolf. Two days it took them to lose the posse. Two days without much rest, always fleeing, snatching grub from shady men who made their living off fugitives along the owl-hoot trail. Then there were forty-eight hours of hard rain while they holed up in a dismal cave, and Dr. Rawlings took ill, tormented by a racking cough and delirium.

The Mexican, Tony Cardenas, was losing heart in the trip. He constantly briefed about their lot, and he wanted to quit. If Rawlings wouldn't come clean with information about Bradley, why not shoot him, the Mexican argued. He almost won Chicago over. But Loop Edwards pushed on toward the Rainbows, his temper growing as sharp as a skinning knife, his orders threatening death for any who disobeyed.

A blizzard held them below the snow line for another two days.

"I've told you all I know about Bradley," Rawlings whined. "You can torture me with hot irons. You can kill me. But I'm warning you that Bradley was crazy. That brown sand inside the can wasn't worth a cent. I can't go on. I'm dying."

"You're dying for a smoke of dope," Loop Edwards snarled at him. "We're curing you of being a dirty sneak and a hophead, Rawlings. You'll talk before we're through with you."

The fake doctor was a living skeleton, horrible to look upon. His cheeks were gray hollows, his eyes

like dead-fire coals. He rode huddled in a blanket, coughing miserably, at times jabbering to himself like a madman. If pressed too hard, he would start to shriek and grow delirious.

Up through the snow-covered heights, Loop followed the trail blazed on the pines, cursing all delay, keeping a watchful eye out for pursuit.

"I'm sure we're being followed," Chicago told him. "I can feel it in my bones. Maybe Rainy told the posse where the cabin lay. We should have beefed him, Loop. That hombre ain't unlucky."

"No posse would buck this weather like us," Loop replied. "We stand to make a fortune. Keep riding."

The horses were staggering when they halted in a howling wind high on the ridge where but the upper half of the old trapper's cabin showed above the snowdrifts. They had to dig out the doorway. There was a cave back of the cabin, where the broncs were stabled, and a small supply of hay. Breast-deep in the snow, they carried wood into the cabin, and Loop built a fire.

"Dig out the corpse where we hid it, Chicago," the gambler ordered. "Maybe Bradley has a map sewn in his clothing. Rawlings might like to take a look."

Rawlings had drawn into a corner, where he stood chattering with cold.

"I don't want to see him!" he cried out.

"My fingers have a funny feeling, Loop," Chicago argued. "Maybe they're frost-bitten. They're almost numb, and yet I can feel them tingle at times. I want to warm up before doing any more chores."

"Stop your bellyaching," Loop snapped. "Drag the coyote bait in

here. We'll give Rawlings one more chance to talk."

Tony Cardenas crossed himself, but he followed Chicago out into the wind to find the dead body.

This was Loop's party, and he was using every trick in the bag to break down Rawlings. The gambler hadn't much hope of finding a map or any other information in the dead man's garments. He and Chicago had searched Bradley thoroughly, and they also went through his duffel and packs, learning nothing. Loop was afraid that Rawlings might die if he pushed him too far with torture. But there were other ways of treating a man who took dope.

Chicago and Tony soon appeared, dragging a snow-covered body as heavy as lead. Bradley was still doubled over, as he had been found at the table. He was not a pleasant sight, and Rawlings let out a shriek of horror.

"Put him before the fireplace," Loop ordered. "We better melt him down a bit."

Even Chicago shuddered at the way the gambler spoke of the dead. And Tony Cardenas shook with fear, refusing to touch the body further. Loop dragged the dead man before the flames. He stepped back, rubbing his hands, which seemed to have gone numb from their contact with the corpse.

"Crack out some grub, boys," Loop laughed harshly. "We're here for the night. I've got some liquor. We might hold a regular wake." His tawny eyes focused on the cringing Rawlings. "What's the matter, doctor. You didn't kill him. He was your friend. Ain't scared of him, are you?"

Rawlings collapsed in the corner in a fit of weeping.

"You'll suffer for this," he sobbed. "Mark my words." He leaped up

suddenly, thrust a trembling finger at the gambler. "You fiend of hell!" he shrieked. "You'll be punished for touching the dead! A curse on you! Shoot me! I'll kill you, and everybody!"

With a leap, Rawlings was at the door, jerked it open, and dived into the snow outside. The wind tore at his ragged hair and black coat. He stumbled as Loop and Chicago sprang after him. Rawlings was on his feet, struggling through the drifts, shouting hysterically, a man half out of his mind. Whirling, he clawed Chicago and the gambler like a cat, and slipped out of their fingers.

"I'll shoot him!" Chicago yelled.

"Keep that gun where it belongs!" Loop ordered, racing after the fleeing doctor. "He won't go far."

But Rawlings was following the trail broken by the horses. He was faster on his feet than Loop had supposed. The shelf slanted downward, giving Rawlings momentum. And as he went on, the gambler stumbled and pitched into the snow. Behind him, Chicago fell.

"Come back, Rawlings!" Loop shouted. "I'll put a bullet in you."

But Rawlings sped on through the drifts. The pine trees would hide him for a few moments as Loop and Chicago raced on. Then they would see him again, gaining ground on them. The gambler jerked a six-gun loose, fired over the doctor's head. It sent Rawlings bounding off the beaten trail toward a cliff.

"Stop him!" Chicago yelled.

With a cry of triumph, Rawlings leaped over the cliff rim, shot downward out of sight.

It was a moment before Loop arrived at the small precipice. Below him, the doctor had struck in a drift, crawled out, and slid floundering down the side of the mountain, leav-

ing plain tracks. But Loop couldn't see him in the heavy pine forest below.

"We better get the broncs," Loop said. "He can't go far on foot."

"The hell he can't!" Chicago exclaimed wrathfully. "If he keeps to rock and timber, he'll beat us on the broncs. And I ain't going to chase him on my poor legs."

Loop gritted his teeth.

"I'll go for him myself," he snarled. "You and Tony wait here."

The gambler jumped from the cliff rim as Chicago yelled a warning.

The leap was not thirty feet; the landing was in a deep drift that would break the fall and throw a man forward into a steep slide. But Loop's mistake was in taking the doctor's course, so that the gambler struck in the hollow made by Rawlings in the drift. The snow was packed. Instead of a soft cushion, Loop found a hard-packed landing that jarred his teeth. His ankle turned under him as he was pitched forward.

A cry of agony escaped his lips.

Like a toboggan, the gambler sped face forward down the steep slant, snow in his face. He knew his ankle was sprained, so he did not try to prevent himself from rolling when he ended up in the branches of the first pine trees. Racked with pain, shivering from the wet that had melted under his collar, he lay for a moment, looking up at Chicago on the cliff above.

"Are you hurt?" the ex-jockey called.

"Get a horse," Loop shouted. "Be quick about it. My ankle twisted."

Slowly he got to his knees and stood waist-deep in the snow on one leg. He could see through the pines now, in the direction of the fugitive doctor. And he caught a glimpse of

Rawlings struggling through the drifts about half a mile beyond.

And to Loop's surprise, Rawlings was trying to reach another person, who was half concealed by an upcropping of rock. The gambler ducked low. He saw the sunlight glint on a rifle barrel in the stranger's hand. A half mile was not too far for a bullet to carry.

"Rainy!" Loop ejaculated. "Trailing us! But it don't look like him!"

When a bullet didn't come, Loop drew himself up from the snow. He saw that Rawlings had almost reached the person who wore a flat-brimmed tan hat and a green Mackinaw. In the high, clear altitude, voices carried far, and the gambler heard Rawlings yell.

"Doris! Shoot him!"

It was a woman's clear tone that answered him.

"Hurry, doctor! I've got horses down the mountain."

Loop stood up on his one good leg, forgetting the pain of his sprain. His six-gun was in his hand, the butt as cold as an icicle. To shoot meant to draw the fire of the girl's rifle. And the gambler had the disadvantage at such a range. He watched Doris Bradley reach out to help the struggling Rawlings. They ducked around the granite crags and were gone.

It meant the loss of a possible fortune to Loop Edwards. Gambler, he had seen his luck change at the flip of a card, and he watched the pot he played for raked from the table by another. Instead of rage, Loop stood as still as death, his face a cruel mask, but a poisonous revenge creeping through his veins. A hoarse chuckle shook him. He spat contemptuously at the snow.

"Chicago!" he yelled. "Where's that horse?"

It was a full hour before the Mexi-

can Tony brought a bronc by a side route down the cliff. To the man's questions, Loop said nothing. He climbed the saddle. Tony started the journey back to the cabin. The gambler knew that it would be impossible to overtake Rawlings and the girl on the exhausted horse under him. He had but one hope.

"Rawlings won't live the day and night out," Loop growled. "He ain't got the strength. He hasn't a coat. He's dying of pneumonia right now. Let him go on. We'll find what we want on the dead man."

Tony Cardenas scowled in disgust as he breasted the deep drifts in leading the bronc across the mountain shelf to the cabin where Chicago was trying to rub warmth into his body.

As the Mexican helped Loop into the cabin, Chicago carried a pail of hot water to a chair.

"I figured it better to get ready for you," the ex-jockey explained. "We'll fix that ankle in no time. Rawlings won't get far."

Loop's eyes were bitter, but he said nothing about Chicago sending the Mexican to aid him. In the chair, he drew off his boot and sock. His ankle was swollen, but the cold had numbed the pain. And when he thrust his foot into the hot water a gasp escaped his lips.

Chicago stood back.

"I got some good news for you, Loop," he chuckled.

"Well, keep it to yourself!" the gambler suddenly shouted. "Don't stand there gaping at me. Fetch what's left of the liquor. Then start to work going through the lining of Bradley's clothes."

He pointed at the body of Charles Bradley lying near the fireplace in a pool of wet. Chicago had shifted the corpse to work. And he had

thrown a dirty newspaper over the dead man's face.

"I already found what we need," Chicago said, grinning. "Look at this, partner," he added, holding out a thin packet of waterproof silk. "It was sewn in the lining of his coat."

"You searched him!" Loop exclaimed, bending forward.

"I figured you might have a beef for me, not going with the bronc," Chicago explained. "So this makes us even."

Loop snatched the packet, opened it, and extracted a folded letter.

"What luck!" he ejaculated. "But I figured him right. He knew if that can was delivered, Rawlings would learn where he had died. They must have had a bargain between them—wait!" the gambler exclaimed. "This ain't addressed to Rawlings."

The letter read as follows:

MY DEAR DORIS:

I have been living for the last year in fear of a heart attack, and if my death comes on the trail from Hopeless Gulch to Center City, may this be my last will and testament. I leave all my worldly possessions to you, including all money now deposited in the bank at Phoenix. Because you are a young woman and not experienced, I am asking you to form a partnership with Dr. Sylvester Rawlings, who has helped me as a physician and loyal friend for the last two years. He is fully aware of my business in Hopeless Gulch, where I have contracts to reduce all the ore taken from the old shafts, giving the owners of those mines all gold and silver extracted, and keeping for myself any other metal found in the slag. My advice is for you and Dr. Rawlings to hire expert mining engineers to continue my work. Lately, a rough element has appeared in Hopeless Gulch, and started gambling and selling liquor to the miners. The leader of the group, one Rowdy Quinn, still has not guessed my great secret, which you must keep a secret with Dr. Rawlings, because of its value to humanity and its frightful danger to men without proper training. I fear to mention it in this letter, which I hope you never have to read. But one never knows what may happen in this ex-

citing world. I wish you my dearest love and the prayer that some day you will find a man worthy of you. May your future be blessed by happiness.

Your uncle,

CHARLES BRADLEY.

Finished with the reading, Loop Edwards lifted his eyes to Chicago.

"Rowdy Quinn," the gambler breathed. "Hopeless Gulch."

"You know him?" Chicago questioned.

Loop chuckled. "Know him?" he inquired. "We served time in Deer Lodge together. Short on brains, but long on brawn. That's Rowdy." He tucked the letter into a pocket. "And Hopeless Gulch is an abandoned mining camp not fifty miles on the other side of the Rainbows."

Tony Cardenas moved forward.

"The secret!" he exclaimed. "What is it? This Bradley man takes the dirt and gives back the miners all the gold and silver. He was crazy. Why should he do that, amigo?"

Loop flicked a glance at Chicago, who fumbled in his pocket for a smoke. Chicago turned to the fireplace, as if searching for a light. Loop's hand stole to a gun butt.

"Is the door shut tight, Tony?" the gambler asked coolly.

Tony Cardenas turned his back to look at the door that rattled under the buffeting of the wind.

Two guns crashed, lighting up the cabin shadows with dancing crimson flame, sending echoes out to the Rainbow Mountains, snuffing out a life.

CHAPTER VI.

QUEER BRAND OF TROUBADOUR.

DAWN the next day found a heavy leaden sky threatening another fall of snow, but the wind had died away, leaving an ominous silence in the Rainbows. The tracks made by

Loop Edwards on his trek to the trapper's cabin were almost covered with the blown crests of drifts. In some places they were difficult to follow, and Rainy Dey, in a sheepskin coat and ears muffled below his tan ten-gallon hat, was forced to keep an eye on the blazed pine trees.

-A mile below the cabin he pulled into the lee of a granite cliff and swung down from the saddle. His horse was one borrowed from Tony the Mexican's corral near Center City. There was a blanket roll behind his saddle, holding canned goods from Tony's larder, and his saddlebags were filled with grain.

Rainy had broken into a ranch line shack to steal the sheepskin coat, rifle and cartridges. The theft had worried him for several days, although he had promised himself to pay it back. He was a hunted man, and had taken no chances in trying to swap broncs. His delay in reaching the Rainbows had been due to the inability of the sorrel to make any better time.

"I figured them right," the puncher said to himself, levering a cartridge into the chamber of his Winchester. "Bradley's mine must be somewhere back in the mountains. If Loop isn't in the trapper's cabin, he's gone on. But I'm watching my step."

He set out on foot, winding through the pines, ducking from one outcropping of granite to another to approach the cabin. Rainy's mind was made up to kill Loop Edwards and Chicago. If Tony and Rawlings showed fight, they'd have to take what they got. It was the code of the outlaw trail. Wolf eat wolf.

As Rainy circled to the rear of the old trapper's cabin, his ears were alert for the echo of voices. He noted that no smoke curled from the chimney. For a swift moment,

doubt assailed him that Loop had gone on. The silence could be a trap. With a chuckle over his fears, Rainy slipped toward the cave where horses were penned for warmth.

He halted before the tracks of four broncs which led on up the ridge and vanished. Tracks made fresh that morning. Four horses. Evidence that Loop, Chicago, Tony Cardenas, and Rawlings had left.

"Rawlings talked," Rainy gritted. "I knew he would. He's double-crossed Bradley's niece. I warned her about him."

Frowning at the memory of his adventure with the girl, Rainy plowed back through the drifts to recover his horse.

For some mysterious reason, Rainy hadn't been able to get the picture of Doris Bradley out of his mind. All the way from Center City, he had remembered how the sunlight struck copper flames in her hair. He could recall the melody of her voice, the flash of her eyes, the tilt of her chin. She had condemned him to jail by leaving him. She had called him a faker. Rainy was bitter as a rejected suitor.

"She owes me ten thousand bucks," he growled. "I'm no tenderfoot. A fat chance I had of getting it by sitting in jail. I'll show Rawlings up for a belly-crawling rattler. Next time I run into that dude filly she'll sing a different tune."

Mounting his bronc, he rode back to the cabin and stepped inside. There was evidence that Loop had spent the night. An empty whiskey bottle stood on the table. There was a pan of water on the floor, crusted with ice. Otherwise the cabin was as Rainy had left it days before. He stood checking everything over, wondering what Loop and Chicago had done in returning to the Rainbows. They

might have been searching for more evidence of Bradley's secret.

Rainy himself went over the cabin in hope of finding something that they might have overlooked. The mantel was bare, the shelves empty of canned goods. There was still a small supply of firewood, and in looking it over, the cowboy discovered a book kicked into a corner. He picked it up, read the title, "Geological Faults," a book that only an educated engineer might read.

"Bradley's," Rainy said to himself. "Perhaps he was reading it before the light of the fire."

As he held it, the book cracked open to the spot where it had been read the most. There the pages were slightly discolored. Rainy looked at the subject, and he caught his breath. He drew back to the doorway where the light was better, stood reading for several moments. The subject matter was a severe test for his knowledge. Much of it was illustrated by trigonometrical formulas, about which Rainy knew nothing. But he got the main part of the story.

"Loop missed it!" Rainy exclaimed.

He turned out the door, wondering if Charles Bradley's corpse still was hidden in a snowbank. Footprints led him to a deep drift. Rainy dug down, touched a frozen object, and drew the body to light. It was not what remained of Charles Bradley. The face was olive-skinned.

"Tony Cardenas!" the cowboy gasped. "They shot him!"

He dug deeper and found Charles Bradley, Mackinaw ripped by a knife. Rainy stood back, face taut. He remembered the time ten days before, when Loop had tried to kill him. It was after the discovery of the rusty can. Now it came to Rainy that Loop and Chicago had

murdered the Mexican Tony for such a purpose—to cut him out of the profits of their future theft.

"Rawlings told them about Bradley," Rainy said aloud. "No doubt about it. They murdered Tony so they wouldn't have to divide."

Returning to the cabin, Rainy mounted the sorrel, never imagining that Dr. Rawlings might have escaped and met Doris Bradley. The puncher thought he had three men to hunt now instead of two. The tracks of their broncs followed the trail blazed on the pines, back up the ridge. It was hard climbing, but Rainy forgot the biting cold and the slippery footing for his horse.

There was need for speed. He knew Bradley's secret. Perhaps Loop knew it. The gambler had to be stopped before it was too late. Although Loop's hoofprints were not many hours old, the dark-gray sky threatened another fall of snow, and Rainy had to beat it over the high ridge.

A wind stirred from the north before the puncher had reached the top of the ridge. Clouds moved over the mountains, hiding the peaks, settling lower, and there was a growing dampness in the air. Now, when Rainy found himself climbing into the dark-gray mists, he felt snow brush his face. He could see nothing, and would halt, until the cloud drifted away.

Old fears and superstitions assailed him. He wanted to cry out to Lady Luck to help him, but to mention her name might make matters worse. When the sorrel faltered, the puncher dismounted and broke the trail up the last hundred feet, slipping on the hard-packed crust, his breath white vapor before his eyes.

With a shout, he reached the crown of the ridge, but his triumph

was short-lived, for the sky released its whitened burden. Whirling, drifting, dancing, the feathery flakes came down. Vision was blindfolded as by a white curtain, so that Rainy could not see the surrounding peaks, the crags at hand, nor the pine trees below. The hoofprints of Loop's horses began to fade.

"We've got to hurry, partner," he said excitedly to the sorrel.

Still leading it, the puncher started down the steep trail, eyes glued to the markings that were fast vanishing. In a few minutes he could hardly see the print. It was treacherous traveling. He slipped and skidded like a drunken man, and the bronc behind him was having just as bad a time.

A last plan came to him. Removing his bronc's bridle, he built a strong noose around its neck with the end of his lariat; then, taking the other end, he walked thirty feet ahead of the bronc. At first the animal refused to budge, for it could not see Rainy. He called, tugged, and the foundering animal began to plod.

It was work short of pulling the beast along. But both of them wouldn't go over a cliff now. Only Rainy. He was a blind man groping in the dark, always waiting for an updraft of wind that told of a precipice. Twice he felt the snow give way under him, and he saved himself from a steep fall by the rope from the bronc behind him.

But he was on the downward journey again. More pines confronted him. But the drifts were not as deep. He was getting down to the snow line. The flakes whirling before him were smaller. Sleet set in; a hard, driving wet that made the going as slippery as wet soap. But his vision increased. He was floundering into brush when the sleet be-

came rain, and then he could see a hundred feet.

"I've licked it!" he cried.

Too exhausted to continue, he drew his mount under a big cedar tree for shelter. The snow underfoot was not three inches deep. He broke dead branches from trees. It was tough work to start a fire. But when he fanned the flames to life with the aid of a newspaper and shavings, the blaze ate readily into pine boughs. Rainy and his horse crowded close to thaw out.

Confidence in the future flowed back with warmth in his body. He chuckled, winked at the sorrel that stood with drooping head. The animal was rewarded with grain. The cowboy opened a can of beans. It didn't seem to matter that he had lost track of his foes. He was glad that he had his life. It had been a close call.

"Nothing can lick me," he told himself. "I'm sitting on top of the world—"

Rainy broke off short, his blue eyes sharp, his tanned face thrown up. It seemed that his senses were playing him false. He heard music. The sound of a guitar came with the wind and rain, a faint strumming of silver strings. And then a tenor voice joined the music. It was a pleasing voice, although that of an oldster, singing because he was happy.

"Thunder and lightning!" Rainy exclaimed. "I must have gone loco. Nobody can be serenading himself on a day like this."

Picking his rifle from the saddle scabbard, he started through the brush toward the music. In fifty yards he saw a cabin not much larger than a stall for a bronc. There was smoke curling from its chimney. The door was closed, but the song

of the cabin owner drifted through the logs to the outside.

Cautiously Rainy advanced, rifle at his hip. He wasn't sure but that the small cabin, the song, and the sleet-covered pines were part of a dream, from which he would soon awaken. His adventures for the last ten days had been short of fantastic. This experience was the final one.

At the door he turned the knob, kicked the entrance in. Rifle cocked and ready, he leaped into the tiny cabin, the strumming of the guitar loud in his ears. He saw a crackling fireplace at the farther end of the room. A man with a wrinkled face and long white hair sat on a bunk. His hand poised as he saw Rainy Dey. He set aside his guitar slowly, eyes wide, mouth open, song cut off in mid-stanza.

Rainy eased the hammer to uncock on his rifle. He bit his lips. He was angry at himself. Embarrassed, he managed a greeting.

"Howdy. Reckon I made a mistake. Thought you might be a bit ornery about visitors."

The white-haired fellow climbed to his feet from the bunk.

"No harm in me, younker," he drawled, shaking his head. "You ain't the first hombre what's wanted to shoot me for all my singing and geetaring. There just ain't no peace nowhere for a troubadour like me. But guests is guests, young feller. Come warm your hide by my fire."

Rainy shifted uneasily, trying to determine if the man were loco or not.

"I got lost coming over the mountain," the puncher explained. "There's a blizzard up yonder."

"Sure, and I know all about it," the oldster said seriously. "No need to be scared of me. I'm Singing Jack, what hunts deer meat for the mining camp in Hopeless Gulch.

Awful place, that. Got to come clear up here to the mountains to do my singing. Feller called Rowdy Quinn down in Hopeless Gulch is plumb fed up with it."

Rainy cradled his rifle in his arm. "Hopeless Gulch," he echoed. "Not far from here, is it?"

"Depends on how far you count far, stranger," Singing Jack replied. "I knew a man once who didn't call it far to the Rio Grande, and that's more'n five hundred miles. I wrote a song about him."

Rainy eased to a seat on the bunk in the cramped quarters.

"Let's hear the song, pop," he suggested, a slow grin curling his lips. "I once tried to learn how to play one of those banjo things. We ought to get on fine."

"Ain't no banjo, but a geetar," Singing Jack said seriously. "But here's the song, if you want to suffer some."

Rainy set aside his rifle. He listened to the old-timer break forth into a favorite old range ditty, which he hadn't written by a long shot. Rainy had often sung "Sam Bass of Indiana" himself while driving steers. But his weather-beaten features showed no signs of his thoughts. He was a careful gambler once again, waiting for his play to come, with the knowledge that old Singing Jack was packed with information about the Rainbows.

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH WATCH.

L OOP EDWARDS sat across a green baize table from a big red-headed bruiser with cauliflower ears, a bulbous nose, and small, pinkish eyes. The man, Rowdy Quinn, was a graduate of lumber and mining-camp brawls, a two-fisted drinker, ex-convict, and general scoundrel.

His newly found fortune in Hopeless Gulch was reflected in a gray derby hat, checkered vest, and brown suit. His outfit made Chicago, standing behind Loop, green with jealousy.

Rowdy had been listening to Loop for long, and now it was his turn to talk. He poured himself a drink of whiskey.

"To call a spade a spade, Loop," the bruiser chuckled huskily, and tossed off his liquor, "I don't trust you farther than I can throw a mule. It ain't that I don't think Bradley is dead. This camp is built for just one boss, and that's me. It don't include you, Loop. Any scheme you got up your sleeve to make more money than I'm already making only means that I lose out in the end. I ain't no fool, boys. It was nice talking to an old friend from Deer Lodge. If you're broke, I'll stake you. But you best be moving on to other parts."



SINGING JACK

Loop Edwards grinned as if Rowdy was joking. The gambler poured himself a drink. Setting the bottle down, he glanced at the palm of his hand, which was as red as fire.

"Must have got frost-nipped up in the mountains," Loop said, flexing

his fingers. "But it'll wear off." He drank as Rowdy's eyes studied him. "Now about you thinking me and Chicago are not on the level, partner," Loop continued, shaking his head slowly, "you're all wrong. We don't ask for a cut in your saloon profits. I only aim to take over Bradley's contracts with the miners. We need a good word from you, Rowdy, just to convince the miners that we bought Bradley out. You can't object to us going into an honest business. I've given up playing cards."

Rowdy made an ugly face. "Just like a wolf gives up killing sheep," the redhead growled. "Ain't no use in arguing, Loop. I know you too well. Them miners are my bread and butter. They spend what money they earn in my Roaring Bonanza Bar. There ain't one of them what isn't in debt to me right now. I ain't cutting you into no profits."

Loop rolled a cigarette with stiff fingers, his eyes wandering around the ornate room that had been built for private poker parties fifty years before. Time had taken its toll since Hopeless Gulch had been abandoned as a dead camp. There were timber-rat holes in the floor of the room. The gilt paint had peeled and cracked. New panes had been put in the windows that overlooked the rutted main street. Rowdy Quinn had brought new furniture, but it only made the room shabbier.

Downstairs in the big gambling and barroom, Loop had seen sights that belonged to another age. Once more men were sitting around the poker tables, standing before the brass rail, talking about gold in corners under clouds of smoke. They could have been the ghosts of the men who struck it rich in Hopeless Gulch. They were finding fortune again in a ghost town. Instead of

digging new shafts they were screening the old dumpings from the mines and carting the result to a small but very modern smelter and sluice works built by Charles Bradley, who had been giving them back the gold and silver that the old-timers had been unable to extract with their crude methods. Some of the newcomers who had restaked the old claims were averaging as much as fifty dollars a day for their manual labor of screening old dumpings and letting Bradley extract the profit for them.

Loop considered this story that Rowdy Quinn had told him. Loop hadn't told Rowdy that Bradley made an enormous profit. For Loop didn't know what Bradley found for himself in the screened dumpings. The gambler was taking a long shot in the dark that he soon would find out. He let Rowdy Quinn go on believing that Bradley's search was for such less valuable metals as lead, nitrate of silver, zinc and perhaps tin.

"But who is going to run Bradley's machinery now that he's gone, Rowdy?" Loop argued. "You don't know anything about mining. These are modern times, partner. You can't let that drunken riffraff in the saloon downstairs take over. Somebody has got to do it for them."

Rowdy's eyes sharpened.

"I'll get some experts from Denver," he growled. "It won't be you, Loop. No use in trying to convince me. I learned too much about you in the Montana pen."

Loop's face tightened. He glanced at Chicago, who fumbled for a cigarette, without finding a match. Loop bent over the table. His left lapel brushed open, revealing the dark butt of a .45 in a shoulder holster. His voice was as hard as steel.

"That goes both ways, Rowdy,"

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the gambler said. "When we bunked in the same cell you did a lot of boasting. I never forgot it. I got it all written down, with names and places."

Rowdy Quinn's fists bunched. His jaw squared, face flushing red with anger.

"What do you mean by *that*, Loop?" he demanded.

Chicago was moving around behind him.

"Just that you wouldn't be hard to hang, Rowdy," Loop sneered. "You served time for a rustling job. That was small change compared with what the law would like to send you up for, if they had the evidence."

"Why, you dirty double-crossing —" Rowdy yelled, lunging across the table.

But Loop reared back, snaking the Colt from his shoulder holster. Rowdy's fist slapped the barrel of the weapon down. He would have struck Loop if Chicago had not shouted a warning.

"Easy, Rowdy!" the ex-jockey cried out. "Unless you want a slug of lead in the back of the neck."

Trembling with rage, Rowdy Quinn's right fist did not swing for Loop's jaw. The bruiser turned his head slowly to find Chicago covering him. Breathing heavily, Rowdy settled back in his chair.

"You two tinhorns won't ever get out of this saloon if you beef me," he threatened. "I can break every bone in your skinny hides."

Loop eased his weapon back into his shoulder holster. He had not drawn as fast as he had counted on. His hand had slipped on the butt. His fingers were stiff.

"You talk too big for your brains, Rowdy," Loop growled. "You haven't heard my entire story. I said I had all your ancient deeds

written down with names and places. The paper is all stamped and ready to be mailed to Mr. John Law if I don't turn up at a certain place to stop it. Try any funny business with me and Chicago and a friend of mine will send the letter. Your business in Hopeless Gulch won't last very long. You don't trust me, Rowdy. I wouldn't trust you farther than I could throw two mules."

Rowdy Quinn's face was twisted with hatred. Once a man who acted on impulse, he had learned things as he began to make money. He was using his wits instead of his brawn.

"Suppose I don't believe you, Loop?" he demanded. "What do you know about me?"

The gambler chuckled. "There was the Union Pacific holdup fifteen years ago, when the fireman and brakemen were killed," he said. "There was a puncher killed in a fist fight in Virginia City by a drunken bum. More than that, Rowdy. You used to travel under the name of Red Tanner, and Wyoming still wants a gent by that name for killing a sheriff."

Rowdy's cheeks paled. He drew in his breath, stole another glance at Chicago. He got to his feet.

An evil laugh came from his throat.

"I reckon we can do business, Loop," Rowdy sneered. "I was only kidding you. Have a drink." He paused. "But stay away from my saloon. Try to cut into my profits and you won't live to see the sun go down."

Loop got up. "It's a deal, but don't forget that if anything happens to me that a letter is going to be posted by a friend of mine who lives somewhere you won't find out."

"Pour the drinks, Loop," Rowdy invited, his pink eyes watching the gambler's sore palm reach for the

bottle. "You must be anxious to go have a look at that smelter. But don't go fooling around with any of the acid that Bradley used. The stuff burns like fire. You better hire somebody who knows something about assay."

"Acid, did you say?" Loop questioned, glancing at his palms.

Rowdy did not reply. They drank, not in friendship binding a bargain, but two enemies making a truce that couldn't last. With a grin, Loop Edwards turned to the door, nodding to Chicago. They gave Rowdy their backs as they went out.

The big redhead's hand dropped to a gun butt, but he did not draw. Rowdy didn't know if Loop had a letter written for the law or not. As their footsteps sounded on the rickety stairs, the saloon owner doubled his fists. He turned to a back door of the private room, opened it, and called into a corridor.

"Rawlings!"

Another door creaked, and through the dim corridor a lean figure slinked toward Rowdy Quinn. Dr. Rawlings was a pasty-faced cadaver, trembling with terror, a strange, feverish glow in his yellow eyes. He followed Rowdy back into the private room and waited for the man to speak.

"You're right, Rawlings," Rowdy Quinn chuckled. "Loop and Chicago are losing their hands. You and me can do business."

Rawlings felt at his throat. "What did you tell them?" he asked in terror. "They'll murder me if they find out I know about Bradley's secret. My life isn't safe. Did you send them away?"

Rowdy's lips curled in contempt.

"They've got to stay in Hopeless Gulch until their fists drop off," he sneered. "They won't find out what

Bradley was after. They got the drop on me, but not for long, Rawlings. We hold the upper hand. You say there's no cure?"

"No cure," the fake doctor mumbled. "But if they see me—"

"Keep under cover," Rowdy instructed. "Stay with the girl up in Singing Jack's shack. He's out hunting deer for me. He was a great friend of Bradley's. He won't squeal on you. If he acts queer, shoot him, but don't let the girl know."

Rawlings felt his hot brow. He had been living for a week on his nerves, and now they were fast going. He had pretended sickness and pain that he didn't feel in the hope of staving off torture. But now Rawlings was desperately ill. He was in a dangerous corner. It was the reason why he had come to Rowdy Quinn for help.

"I can't leave here, Rowdy," Rawlings whined. "I don't trust Doris Bradley. She saved me from Loop, but it was only to keep Bradley's secret. She thinks I murdered her uncle." He grew as white as death. "But I didn't. He died of a bad heart. She's questioned me about it, Rowdy. The sheriff in Center City is hunting for me now. Loop will kill me if he finds me. I've got to stay here."

Rowdy Quinn's eyes narrowed. "How could you have murdered Bradley when you were in Center City when he died? The girl is just as loco as her fool uncle. You go spy on her, Rawlings. She might try to round up the miners and hold them to the contracts they made with Bradley. We've got to watch her. Tell her you've seen Loop. She's got to lay low until we find a way to get rid of her."

The fake doctor sank into a chair.

"She's right smart, Rowdy," he groaned. "She's waiting for Singing Jack to help her out. You've got to kill Singing Jack. Listen to me, Rowdy," he pleaded with the saloon owner. "I've got a scheme. That girl is rich. She ain't hard to look at. Why don't you marry her, Rowdy? She's got money in the bank."

Rowdy Quinn reared back as if bitten by a rat.

"Me get married!" he exclaimed. "Nothing doing. I already got three wives lost around the country."

"If you got a fellow dressed up like a traveling judge, Rowdy," Rawlings said excitedly, "he could do the ceremony. She'd think she was married." He trembled with eagerness. "You'd own the contracts with the miners. When Loop and Chicago lose their hands, they won't stay here long. They won't live long. You can clean up, Rowdy. I'll run the mines and smelter for you. You could train that girl like a bad bronc."

Rowdy's face was twisted with disgust.

"Clear out of here, you stinking snake!" he snarled. "Go watch that girl. I'll think the marriage thing over. But you make even *me* sick by thinking it up."

Rawlings drew his ragged coat around him. He got up from the chair, swayed on his feet, then stumbled out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUSHWHACKER BAIT.

WITH the light of a pale-yellow moon, two riders trotted down a back trail through the timber into Hopeless Gulch. Each horse carried a deer slung behind the saddle.

The leading rider was white-haired, and he fondled a guitar. The man behind him rode with a rifle balanced across his saddle pommel.

Rainy Dey had one glimpse of the mining camp in the moonlight. Looking over the tops of trees from a high ledge, he remarked that but few lights glowed in the windows of the old cabins. The biggest building, a saloon, was ablaze with kerosene lamps. But the shafts in the mountain back of the camp were dark.

"Ain't like old times, when I was a kid here," Singing Jack replied. "I seen it when the mines worked day and night. That town down there was like rodeo time every night. You could hear the shouting and hollering for fifty miles around. But now it's just a ghost rattling in its coffin. Ain't but a score of cabins occupied. Gives you the shivers. That's why I stay here. I like the shivers."

Rainy grinned. He was getting used to the queer old fellow who told tall tales. Some of the stories were about Charles Bradley, who was Singing Jack's friend. Rainy had learned things. He and Singing Jack had struck it off fine at the very start. Singing Jack was bent on making a troubadour like himself out of Rainy Dey. The white-haired eccentric allowed as how Rainy had the makings of a musician.

Down the moonlit trail, the puncher followed Bradley's friend. Rainy had learned all about the dead man's business in Hopeless Gulch, for Singing Jack was no man to stop talking once he got started. But the deer hunter had said nothing about Bradley's secret. Perhaps Bradley had feared trusting the gossipy old-timer with such valuable

information. But Singing Jack had told about Rowdy Quinn, how the miners worked, how they spent their money, and everything else.

"There's my home," the deer hunter called. "Ain't nothing like the hunting cabin I built in the Rainbows. I moved in here when a millionaire moved out. His mine had no more gold. It cost him plenty in wages to build my home, because nobody wanted to drive nails when they could dig for gold. I got six bedrooms, running water piped from a spring, and a parlor with a regular bar in it to entertain guests. See it?"

Rainy's eyes found a large, dark building almost hidden in the tall pines and boulders just ahead.

A strange wariness gripped Rainy, for the place Singing Jack called home looked more like a haunted rookery than a place to live. If the deer hunter's cabin back in the Rainbow Mountains was queer because of its tiny quarters, the unpainted board structure ahead was a monstrosity. Most of its windows were shuttered, and there were smashed panes in the remainder. The wind shook the roof, and the building creaked. Perhaps a man who found gold had built it years and years ago, spending a fortune on it, but now the structure was ready to collapse.

Rainy drew bridle rein, wondering if Singing Jack were really not crazy after all. But it was no time to quit now. The puncher had to go on. He followed the deer hunter through the dark pines to a creaking porch and dismounted, while Singing Jack laid his guitar on the ground.

"First we light up," the white-haired eccentric chuckled. "I got to take the deer down to Rowdy Quinn.

But you can make yourself at home. I'll find out all the news in town." He halted at the steps. "Watch out you don't fall in a rotten hole. I plumb forgot to mend this porch for the last ten years."

As he spoke, Singing Jack was mounting the steps. Without warning, a rotten board gave way under him. He pitched forward, a sharp cry of alarm on his lips. At the same time there was the crash of a rifle not more than twenty yards behind Rainy Dey. It was almost as if the old fellow had been hit by a bullet. The fall through the porch saved his life, but Singing Jack evidently didn't hear the shot because of the breaking wood, and he yelled again in fear.

Rainy had whirled too late to see the tongue of flame from the bushwhacker's weapon. His own rifle chamber was empty. Outlined in the moonlight, he ducked as he worked the Winchester lever to draw a cartridge from the magazine. He thought he saw a shadow darting through the pines. The weapon came to his shoulder, and he fired with deadly intent. But the shadow was gone with the flash of his gun.

"Partner, help me!" Singing Jack called miserably. "There's a skunk lives under my palace, and he might think I'm spying on his private affairs."

Rainy paid no heed. With a leap he raced into the pines, levering a fresh cartridge into his rifle. The ground sloped downward, giving him too much speed. He crashed into a patch of brush, tripped, and fell headlong. As he scrambled to his knees he thought he heard the pound of running feet, but the sound was farther off to the left. He listened intently.

Singing Jack was shouting at the

top of his lungs. "Where did you go, Rainy? Did you fall through a hole, too? Where are you?"

Scowling, the puncher turned back through the trees until he saw Singing Jack crawling out from under the porch. Rainy helped him to his feet. The oldster was more concerned with brushing himself off and apologizing for the condition of his home than to let Rainy speak.

"That's the sixth time it's happened in four years," he said. "One of these days I'm going to mend my planking."

"Didn't you hear a shot?" Rainy asked.

"What shot?"

"Have you got any enemies in Hopeless Gulch?" the cowboy inquired. "Somebody who might want to kill you?"

"Plenty of them."

"Who?" Rainy asked.

"Hombres what don't like my singing and geetaring."

"Nobody else?" Rainy pushed the question. "Think hard. Some fellow took a shot at you as you fell through the porch. You're cursed with luck. He would have killed you."

In the moonlight, Singing Jack's eyes went wide.

"You ain't kidding, are you? Gosh! I better quit playing my music. Nobody would shoot me for anything else. Are you sure about that, Rainy?"

"Let's go inside," Rainy suggested. "I've got a hunch that might work out. This all connects up with Bradley. You were a friend of his. Some of my old pards must be learning things fast in Hopeless Gulch. I reckon they didn't recognize me in the dark."

Singing Jack squinted at the puncher suspiciously. Then he

picked his way carefully across the porch to the front door, extracted a key from his Mackinaw pocket and turned the lock. As he went into the house a match flared in his hand.

Rainy held back, rifle cocked. A glance at the timber and he followed his host into the building, kicking the door closed behind him. A kerosene lamp took flame on the table, throwing a light about a big living room. It was furnished with moth-eaten bearskin rugs, rickety homemade tables and chairs. Ragged Indian blankets hung from the walls. There were dust and cobwebs everywhere, and various tools for mining, cutting timber, and carpentry were scattered around.

Rainy turned to the wall, took an Indian rug and carried it to a window, while Singing Jack stood sniffing like a hungry hound.

"We don't want another shot coming in here," the puncher said.

"Smell anything wrong?" Singing Jack asked angrily.

Rainy glanced at him suspiciously.

"Didn't tangle with the skunk, did you?" he asked.

"Ain't skunk?" the deer hunter snapped. "It's women. Paint and powder."

Rainy drew through his nostrils. He caught a faint perfume in the air.

"You aren't going to tell me that you're married now, are you?" he demanded.

"Got turned down when I was a younker," Singing Jack growled. "Never tried again. But that don't explain what ornery women are doing in my home." He paused. "Unless it's Bradley's niece. By golly, that's who it must be! She come to find out why Brad didn't turn up." He scuttled to a staircase at the end of the living room. "Doris!" he

yelled. "Is that you perfuming up my house?" He started up the stairs. "Where are you, girl?" His manner had changed from annoyance to hope.

Rainy stood silent, his face tense, measuring his next play. If there was one person he didn't want to run into, it was Bradley's niece. She could spike his plans before he even got started. He could fight Loop, Chicago, and Rawlings, but not a woman. He didn't doubt that Doris Bradley might be the woman who had left her scent in this room, and if his senses were not playing him false, he recalled the perfume from Tony the Mexican's shack near Center City.



DORIS BRADLEY

Upstairs, Singing Jack's footsteps echoed hollowly. Doors slammed. Soon the deer hunter was coming back. A lantern light flooded the stairs. Singing Jack descended.

"She was here, but she's gone," the eccentric said fearfully. "I found some cussed hairpins. She cleared out." He stared hard at Rainy. "Was you sure about somebody trying to shoot me?" he asked.

"Lower the wick in that lantern," Rainy replied, turning to the table to blow out the lamp. "If you hadn't fallen through the porch you'd be dead now, hombre. Somebody is gunning for you."

Singing Jack turned to an old chest without a word. He drew up the lid, reached down, and fished a gun belt with two holstered .45s from the depths of the chest. His old face was grim. In the lantern light, his gray eyes flashed.

"Some folks call me a romantic old fool," he growled, "but I don't take anything laying down. I'm going after that varmint. I'm going to find out what happened to Doris Bradley. Her uncle was my friend. Nobody is going to harm a hair on her head."

Rainy held up a warning hand. "Just a minute," he advised. "Don't go off half-cocked. I can tell you a lot you don't know, partner. It's time we had a parley."

Singing Jack's lips drew back, revealing missing front teeth. He finished buckling his gun belt.

"You don't have to tell me anything," he said bitterly. "I know all about you, stranger. I've been studying you. But you can't help me none. You stay here. I can slip through the woods like a deer hunter. I got friends all over this camp. They know about Doris Bradley. They'll tell me things. You stay right here and play my geetar. That'll make our enemies think I'm in my home all snug."

Rainy stepped in front of the door to bar the way.

"I'm going with you," he announced. "I didn't tell you everything about myself, Singing Jack. I just told you that I found Bradley dead and buried him in a snowdrift. There was more to it. I'm coming

clean. There were two hombres with me when we found—"

Singing Jack's hand dropped to a gun butt. "Out of my way, younker," he snapped. "I can't listen to none of your highfalutin adventures now. Bradley's dead and buried in a snowdrift, but little Doris has got herself tangled up with some of those scoundrels who hang out in Rowdy Quinn's saloon. Those coyotes are just faunching to get their hooks on her uncle's business. I'm rounding up my friends to put a stop to it."

"Listen, you thick-headed bronc!" Rainy cried in exasperation.

"Out of my way!" Singing Jack shouted, jerking a six-gun and aiming it at the puncher's belly. "I'll shoot you dead. I'm going. You ain't coming with me."

Rainy shifted uneasily to the side. He didn't doubt now but that the old fellow was completely daffy. The fool was completely incapable of understanding anything told him when his own mind was trapped with a single idea. To attempt to stop him might drive him raving mad, and he'd shoot. Fight him and Rainy would lose Singing Jack for a friend.

Rainy was in Hopeless Gulch for profit. Not to find stray women. Doris Bradley alone could stop him making contracts with the miners to reduce ore to gold and silver, taking for himself the treasure that Charles Bradley gleaned from the mine dumpings. Rainy could fight Loop, Chicago, and Rawlings. Not a woman. If Doris Bradley was gone, he was better off.

But something was wrong with that kind of reasoning. And as Singing Jack went out the door, Rainy followed him. The eccentric holstered his six-gun to cross the

rotten porch. The puncher could easily have clouted him over the head with his rifle barrel. Rainy didn't. In the light of the moon he suddenly thought of the bushwhacker, and his weapon swung toward the pines.

Descending the steps without accident, Singing Jack bent over like an Indian scout and sneaked past the two broncs carrying the deer. He halted, head turned back over his shoulder.

"Don't try to follow me," the white-haired man warned in a low tone. "I'll shoot you."

Rainy stood watching him, tight-lipped, gripping his rifle. He watched the man fade into the timber without making a sound. Singing Jack was gone suddenly in the shadows. For long, the puncher waited to hear the smash of a gun telling of the death of his friend. There was only the moan of the big pines.

"Now what?" the cowboy asked himself angrily. "If he thinks I'm going to hole up here and play his guitar—"

Rainy caught his words. He was torn between following Singing Jack and riding down to Hopeless Gulch to seek out Loop Edwards. But the thought of the bushwhacker held his mind. He didn't doubt that the skulker would try again. That coyote had to be put out of the picture before anything else happened. There was much wrong with the plan to seek out Loop. If Rainy didn't find him, spies might warn the gambler.

"Play his guitar," Rainy said again.

He moved to the broncs, stripped them of the deer and saddles, which he laid on the porch. Picking up Singing Jack's musical instrument,

Rainy led the animals behind the rickety house and found a stable, where the mounts were stalled. Taking the opposite side of the house back to the front, the puncher stood listening.

He kneeled to the earth, laid the rifle cocked beside him, and stroked his fingers across the guitar. The music went far, arousing an echo. Rainy lifted his voice in a few bars of a range ditty, halted, and listened to the song come back.

"If that bushwhacker is Rawlings or Loop, they'll know I'm here," he chuckled.

Turning, he picked his way across the porch and into the big living room, closing the door behind him. With Indian blankets, he covered the windows. There was one with a pane out, and Rainy let the blanket hang in the breeze coming through the hole. Drawing back to a wall, he set the lantern down in front of him. With the base of the guitar in his lap, knee hooked on a rung of the chair to hold it, he slipped a cocked six-gun behind the musical instrument.

"We'll see what happens," he thought coldly. "Maybe Singing Jack hasn't got such bad ideas, after all."

Rainy's voice lifted in song to the chords of the silver strings. The first verse of "Sam Bass of Indiana" went floating through the dismal rooms of the old rookery. He was nervous. He stopped, listened intently, but there was no sound except the creaking of the old house. Rainy rolled a cigarette, lighted it, eyes on the swaying Indian rug covering the window. A shiver went down his spine. Blowing smoke through his nostrils, he started to play again, humming softly, watching the window.

Minutes passed. Rainy tried several more songs until he ran out. He smoked again. He thought of Singing Jack's comment about how a man called Rowdy Quinn hated the guitar music. Rainy strummed again, forcing himself to the task, watching the window like a hawk.

The roof of the old house shook under a gust of wind. The Indian blanket swayed. Rainy's song broke off. It seemed that the ragged blanket moved too far. Its folds pinched. He forced himself to start again.

"Oh, Sam Bass was born in Indiana;
It was his native home—"

The lantern light glinted on the barrel of a six-gun that poked into the room as the blanket was flicked aside. Rainy leaned to the right, his hand catching up the .45 in his lap. He didn't have to cock the weapon. He fired as the weapon across the room flamed, driving a bullet that shattered the top of his guitar. It was a bad shot. But Rainy struck pay dirt.

A scream rang out as glass shattered.

Rainy was on his feet, racing for the front door. Jerking it open, he leaped into the moonlight, sprang across the rotten porch. A board gave way under him, and he pitched down the steps. His finger was on the trigger of his weapon. The .45 exploded in the night.

CHAPTER IX.

DOUBLE DOUBLE-CROSSERS.

THE crash of Rainy's six-gun was followed by the thunder of another weapon so closely that it sounded like an echo. He felt a bullet go through his hair. Twisting

on the earth like a cat, he came to his knees, swerving his weapon toward the corner of the old house, where he spied a runted figure swaying from side to side. In the pale moonlight it was easy to recognize Chicago, gun held in two hands. His lips were drawn back over white teeth. He was trying to cock and shoot again.

Rainy fired hard and fast. His bullet hurled Chicago back with a gasp. The ex-jockey fell. He was trying to call out for help.

"Loop!" His sharp voice croaked. "Loop!"

Rainy dodged close to the porch steps. He could hear the pounding of a brone in the timber. At the corner of the building, Chicago was gasping for breath. Rainy sneaked toward him. The ex-jockey lay on his back, eyes wide open, crimson trickling from his lips.

"Shoot him quick, Loop," Chicago groaned. "He got me!"

Rainy kneeled beside him. He couldn't figure out how the man had missed killing him twice. Then Rainy remembered and looked at Chicago's palms turned upward to the moon. They were covered with broken blisters. It was no wonder he had used two hands to try to cock his gun. No wonder his marksmanship through the window had been bad. And if the burns had at last appeared on Chicago's hands, Loop Edwards was in a similar fix.

"You're dying fast, Chicago," Rainy said in a low tone. "Loop has run out on you. You've bushwhacked your last game, hombre. Where do you want to be buried?"

Chicago choked. "You got me, Rainy," he moaned. "You ain't unlucky. But Loop will pay off for me."

"No, not Loop," Rainy growled.

"He's a double-crosser. He's paying nobody's bills. Do you know what's wrong with your hands? Ask Rawlings. That stuff in the rusty tomato can burned you. Rawlings knew it. He didn't tell you, did he?"

"It was acid, like Rowdy told us about!" Chicago gasped.

"Rowdy Quinn, eh?" Rainy questioned. "I'm learning things. So you tied up with him? Where's Rawlings? Look here, Chicago, you haven't got long. I'll pay off a debt for you. I'll nail Rawlings. Make it a bargain. He tricked you. He gave you those burns on your hands. It was the stuff in the tomato can that he didn't tell you about. Think hard, Chicago. You don't want Rawlings to get away with the trick, do you?"

Chicago was sinking fast. As death approached, his sharp face twisted with hatred.

"Pay off for me," he gasped. "Rawlings is with the girl. She's turning the miners against me and Loop. Find him, Rainy. I never did anything—" There was a rattle in his throat.

Chicago was dead.

Rainy drew back, as if the air were poisoned about the corpse. He got to his feet, listening. But there was no sound except the wind in the pines. He didn't fear Loop Edwards, for the man's marksmanship would be as bad as, if not worse than, Chicago's.

Rainy made a quick decision. He turned around the corner of the house to the stable. The mystery of Doris Bradley's disappearance was solving itself in his mind. It had been a surprise to learn that Rawlings was not with Loop and Chicago, but had joined the girl, and she was turning the miners against

Loop and Chicago. As Rainy led his sorrel back to the front of the house he figured out the way the double-crossers were gambling.

"Not hard now," Rainy chuckled coldly. "Rowdy told Loop and Chicago that acid had burned them. That's interesting. So Rowdy was in cahoots with the coyotes. But if Rowdy's so smart, why did he say acid? Because he wanted to keep the truth from them, to wait until they were helpless. And who would have told Rowdy but that skunk of a Rawlings? The girl is with Rawlings, so that means old Singing Jack ain't such a complete fool, after all. Rowdy's got the girl."

Rainy swung aboard the sorrel, gave it his spurs.

He couldn't have explained why he was riding to Hopeless Gulch to pull a girl's chestnuts out of the fire. He hated women, just the way Singing Jack did. Cussed women, Rainy called them, just like Singing Jack. But there was a difference about Doris Bradley. Rainy couldn't forget her. She had courage. Plenty. She was trying to take over her uncle's business. She was fighting Rowdy, Loop, Chicago, Rawlings—the entire lot of them. She had talked to the miners, and because she was doing that the wolves were after her. They wanted all the profits.

By the light of the moon, Rainy pounded down the slope of the mountain through the timber. There was no time to lose. Loop was far ahead of him, fleeing for protection. And Singing Jack was rounding up a lynching party. Rainy didn't want to be left out of the kill. His spurs raked the sorrel, and the horse started eating distance.

In a mile, he was out of the heavy timber and riding a trail through

boulders and brush. Below him, the lights of the mining camp twinkled in the darkness, showing the one main street of ghostly cabins and frame dwellings built many years before. There were not many two-story ones. So it was easy to spot the saloon operated by Rowdy Quinn.

Rainy's sorrel struck the bottom of the long grade where a road ran left through the gulch into the town. He drew bridle rein quickly. A rider was not far ahead of him, racing through the darkness, bent over the pommel, streaking into Hopeless Gulch.

"Loop!" Rainy exclaimed. "He had a start on me, but he took the woods and it slowed him up."

Rainy threw his brone to the chase, although he knew he wouldn't catch up with the gambler. Loop was already passing cabins and shacks. A light from a window flashed over him. Rainy recognized his flat-brimmed black hat and broadcloth suit. He saw Loop drag his brone to a halt at a hitch rail before the plank sidewalk in front of the saloon. Loop didn't waste time to tie up. He sprang to the sidewalk, passed through the swinging doors of the barroom.

Rainy drew his pony to a skidding halt. He was out of the saddle, over the sidewalk, and at the swinging doors. The light from the saloon dazzled his eyes. He blinked at the tobacco fog, aware of a line of men at the bar, miners huddle over poker tables. A piano jangled.

Then he saw Loop making to the rear, where a stairway ran up to a balcony. Two men swung in front of the gambler. There was an argument.

Rainy stepped through the doors, his right hand hanging loose by his

side. All eyes in the barroom were on the argument between Loop Edwards and two barroom bouncers. They were stopping him from mounting the stairs. The play at the tables halted. Men held silent as Loop's voice lifted in white-hot rage.

"Out of my way! I've got to see Rowdy!"

Rainy listened.

A beefy-faced bouncer dropped a hand to a gun butt. "You can't go up, Edwards, because Rowdy is busy. He left orders. Wait down here."

"I won't wait!" Loop shouted. "Rowdy will see me any time! Get out of my way before I—" He halted, for he was looking up at the balcony, where a door sprang open.

Rainy saw Rawlings leap onto the balcony. The fake doctor was a trembling skeleton, his face a white skull. There was a six-gun in his hand. A cry of triumph echoed from his throat.

"Loop!" Rawlings shouted. "I'm not scared of you any longer. I've been waiting! Draw your gun!"

Rainy went for his weapon fast. "Rawlings!" he cried. "You can't murder him! His gun hand's useless!"

Even as Rainy spoke, he saw another man come bounding out of the door back of Rawlings. It was a big red-headed fellow with a six-gun in his hand. He was dressed in checkered vest and brown suit. It was Rowdy Quinn, who yelled fearfully for Rawlings to come back to the room.

"Don't kill Edwards, you fool!" Rowdy shouted. "I can't let him die on me."

But Rawlings already had his gun in aim at the helpless Loop Edwards. The doctor would have fired. But Rowdy Quinn stopped him with a

blow on the head with a gun barrel. It was a sickening clout that sent Rawlings pitching forward. Rawlings went over the balcony railing, turned a somersault, and fell whirling to the floor below, landing hard on his back.

"I told you not to try to kill Loop!" Rowdy yelled at Rawlings.

Rainy Dey's attention was now on Rowdy Quinn, whom he recognized by description. The puncher's fight was with that man. Loop was out of the picture, unable to fight. Rainy heard Rawlings speaking up from the floor.

"You'll die!" Rawlings gasped, and a mocking laugh rattled in his throat. "You'll follow Bradley, Rowdy Quinn. You'll never live to tell how you cheated me. You'll die before the night is—"

A crash from Rowdy Quinn's six-gun silenced the last words of Dr. Rawlings.

Rainy could hold himself no longer.

"Quinn!" he shouted. "Where's Doris Bradley! You've got her! Shoot!"

Rainy threw himself to the side as Rowdy Quinn's weapon whipped up. Rainy could see the saloon owner's bony thumb drawing back the gun hammer. Rainy whipped his own weapon into aim, thumbing down on his Colt hammer and letting it fall. He was moving fast, toward the bar, counting on every play in the room, testing his luck to the finish.

Rainy's gun blasted and kicked. He knew he was hitting Rowdy as the big bruiser's six-gun flashed. Rowdy staggered back, his massive red face filled with surprise. He coughed, swayed, dropping his six-gun. He tried to catch the railing of the balcony, then pitched over it, and fell, whirling.

Rainy was not idle. His eyes were now on the two bouncers who had blocked the stairway to Loop Edwards. Their guns were out, throwing into aim at Rainy. He fired swiftly at one as he ducked behind the corner of the bar. A scream lifted. But the second bouncer was shooting, his bullet smashing the corner of the bar behind which Rainy ducked. Rainy came up, shooting at the second bouncer. He saw Loop Edwards fleeing out the back door, but the gambler was not Rainy's concern now.

In a glance he saw that the saloon was in turmoil. Miners were diving out windows. Others had gone for their weapons. Rainy ducked as men fired at him. The fusillade of lead almost knocked the bar over on top of him. Two bullets smashed through, sliced his right arm and cut his right side.

The lights went out.

In the darkness, Rainy scuttled along the floor behind the bar. The shouting of men deafened his ears. But there was noise outside the saloon. Horses were squealing. Men were coming into the barroom as well as leaving. A cry from a cracked throat lifted:

"Where's Rowdy Quinn? He's trying to spark Doris Bradley."

"Singing Jack," Rainy said.

Raising up in the darkness, he slid over the bar and slipped toward the stairway. He stumbled against a body. Now, around him, men were calling for lights. Rainy started up the stairs. He could hear Singing Jack yelling to the miners that Rowdy Quinn needed lynching.

Rainy was on the balcony above. He reached the door out of which Rowdy had come. There was a sliver of light in the crack. Rainy moved into the room, kicked the

door shut as a chorus of yells shook the barroom below.

He went through Rowdy Quinn's private poker room. The stairs behind him trembled under the weight of men mounting to the balcony. Rainy passed through a back door into a corridor.

"Doris!" he called.

A thumping came against a wall.

Rainy put his shoulders to a locked door. He drove his weight hard. The door gave way, and he was in a back room. He could hear a fist thumping a wall not far away.

Rainy struck a match.

The light awakened tiny copper flames in the hair of the girl who sat gagged and bound to a chair near a wall. Her eyes widened as she saw him. Rainy grinned, found a lamp on a table and lighted it. He could hear men searching the private poker room. Rainy chuckled. He took a seat on another chair.

"You know," he said to the helpless girl, "you wouldn't make a bad boss for a poor lonesome cowboy that's looking for a job. Of course, I don't usually work for women. And mining is a bit out of my line. But I learn awful fast."

The girl's eyes flashed angrily.

Singing Jack burst into the room, two guns in his hands. He threw down on Rainy.

"You beat me to it!" Singing Jack raged. "I ought to shoot you!"

"Better not," Rainy laughed. "Women don't like bloodshed. We're trying to strike off a bargain."

"What bargain?" Singing Jack demanded. "She don't make no deals without I know about it." He whirled at the sound of steps behind him. "Get out of here!" the oldster roared at the pressing group of miners. "Clear out before I shoot somebody, if it ain't myself."

Rainy stepped to Doris Bradley. He removed the gag from her mouth. She drew breath quickly. About to speak, she held her words.

"Go ahead and say it," Rainy invited. "Call me a faker again. I warned you not to trust Rawlings. I told you that you'd find out about him. Now what were you going to say?"

Doris Bradley's anger melted.

"Thank you, Rainy," she said. "Where is Rawlings?"

"In hell, along with Rowdy Quinn and Chicago," Rainy replied. "Loop will soon join them down there."

"Did he get away?" the girl asked fearfully.

"Won't get far," Rainy said seriously. "He's a man living on borrowed time. He's as good as dead."

Singing Jack interrupted. "Did you shoot him?"

"He's burned," Rainy answered, looking keenly at Doris Bradley. "It's the kind of a burn that will eat his hand off and sap his strength. I read about it in a book left up in a cabin up in the Rainbow Mountains. When he and Chicago touched the salt in that glass vial that Charles Bradley sent to Center City, their doom was sealed. Wasn't it, Miss Bradley?"

Doris Bradley nodded. "You know then, don't you, Rainy?" she asked.

"What your uncle was mining?" Rainy said. "Radium!"

"What did you say?" Singing Jack demanded. "Never heard of no such stuff."

"Yes, radium," Doris Bradley said. "But that wasn't the only secret that Dr. Rawlings knew. Didn't he confess before he died?"

"To what?" Rainy asked.

"To tying her up," Singing Jack snapped. "Ain't you going to let

her loose? Are you afraid to touch her?"

"No," Doris said, "not to tying me up. To what Dr. Rawlings did to Rowdy Quinn, and also to my uncle."

Rainey's eyes narrowed. "He said something about Rowdy not living much longer before he died."

"I knew it, but I couldn't prove it," the girl said in a low tone. "I smelled the poison in the water that he left for me to drink. He said Rowdy drank out of the same pitcher."

"What do you mean?" Rainy inquired.

"Arsenic," Doris Bradley answered. "He gave it to my uncle in small doses, telling him it was heart medicine. It finally killed Uncle Brad. But it was a big dose that he left for Rowdy and me. I knew something was wrong with Rawlings when he was afraid to go to jail. When he ran away, I suspected it. I wanted to see Uncle Brad again. The sheriff told me that Rawlings was a fake doctor who smoked drugs. Only a man like that would have harmed dear Uncle Brad."

Rainy stood back as the girl was released from her bonds by Singing Jack.

"I reckon I was plenty scared about going to jail," Rainy confessed. "Does that make me a poisoner?"

"Not on your tintype," Singing Jack broke in. "You're a regular troubadour. Doris, if you like him, so do I. It just came over me that he ain't so bad. When I was rounding up the miners I could hear him caterwauling up at my home. How do you feel, cowgirl?"

Doris Bradley smiled at Rainy Dey.

"Like hiring a man to run the smelter," she said. "Do you know of anybody?"

"I can find somebody right quick," Rainy said.

"Not me," Singing Jack said quickly. "I'm a deer hunter. I got to take trips back into the Rainbows to play my geetar. Nobody likes it around here. I can't figure out why nobody shot you, Rainy. You better not take no jobs running a smelter. It will set you in one spot for life. No time for troubadouring."

"Yes, there will be," Doris Bradley argued. "That is, if he wants to be a real troubadour."

"That's me," Rainy chuckled. "I'll show you."

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PAYOUT IN RINCON

Shorty Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver) passes for a medico—and almost passes out for keeps!

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

THEY came down from the sandstone hills at the north of town in the heat of midmorning—the two men with the dust-burned eyes, blackened lips and a ten days' growth of whiskers. The short one drove a six-mule freight team with stubby fingers curled expertly around the

leather ribbons; the other sat tall, for all of his weariness, on a rangy sorrel.

At the first straggle of unpainted frame shacks, the mule driver pulled rein and halted his wagons while he squinted down the sun-blazed street, and the cowboy rode slowly back to his partner's side.

This was Rincon. A cow town set in the bend of the Rio Grande. Of Rincon it had been said there was always a man for breakfast.

Shorty Masters and the Soñora Kid were not concerned over the town's reputation. The important thing was that they had reached it at all.

The trail had been a thin thread of torture twisted through endless miles of parched rangeland, over hills and down, through the white, blinding glare of alkali flats where shrieveled mesquites drooped under a pitiless sun. Ten days of the trail, and not a cloud in the sky: only the dust. It was everywhere. It rose in little whirling spirals, sucked into the blue vastness by hot, eddying gusts of wind. It powdered under the slow shuffle of the mules, swirling back into Shorty's face and sifting, finer than flour, into every inch of the three wagons. And it coated the Soñora Kid's lean face and grayed his dark whiskers until he looked like a gaunt, aged man.

That eighth day, they had heard the water keg, strapped on the side of the lead wagon, collapse with an empty rattle of its dry ribs. That evening, they came to Buckhorn waterhole and found it like a buffalo wallow—a shrinking puddle of mud, sun-cracked around the edges and fouled by a drought-starved cow that had bogged and died.

They had pushed on, a night and a day, and another night. Until the mules could scarcely drag their feet, and the proud head of Tumbleweed, the sorrel horse, was drooping. Until Rincon blossomed below the sandstone hills in the garish morning light, like an unlovely flower.

They had pushed on because there was no telling how badly Dr. Dillon needed the little black bag.

Shorty Masters' voice rasped from

his dust-sore throat. "I can see the wagon yard, down yonder. That's where the load of feed goes. I'll drive there and see that the mules and Tumbleweed don't founder themselves on water. You drop off and get us a room at the Empire Hotel."

The Soñora Kid nodded, and licked his split lips with a tongue that was hardly more moist than they. "Ain't you goin' to look up Dr. Dillon first thing?" he asked.

Shorty shook his head. "Dillon's letter to the store in Tarantula said he'd meet me at the Empire Hotel this evening. He wrote kind of mysterious. And we're here ahead of time. Maybe he figured on being out making his calls to ranches, day-time. And, anyway, maybe he don't need his knives and pills half as much as we need a shave!"

The Soñora Kid eyed the forlorn sprawl of the town. A doctor just settling in a place like this wouldn't have much call for pills, he thought. Bullet forceps would be more in his line.

"Maybe they got a bathtub in that hotel!" he said wistfully, as Shorty shook rein leather over the mules.

The main street was deserted except for a few cow horses that switched flies at the hitching racks. Dust lay in little serrated drifts against the wooden sidewalks. This part of Texas had been in the grip of drought for more than a year, and back at Tarantula, from which the partners had come with Dr. Dillon's bag and a load of pressed cotton-seed cake, they heard that Rincon ranchers were fighting with their backs to the wall. Shorty and the Soñora Kid could believe this; they had seen the sun-bleached bones of many a steer along the trail.

They reached the hotel, a two-story, slab-sided structure with grimy windows. The Soñora Kid slid

wearily from his saddle and handed Shorty the end of a lead rope he had tied around Tumbleweed's neck. Shorty handed down the dusty black bag.

"Handle this easy," he warned. "Might have some bottles in it. Look—yonder's a barber shop down that side street. Meet you there after I unhitch."

The tall puncher hitched up the .45 snugged low against his dusty chaps, and jingled his spurs across the wooden sidewalk. Shorty Masters drove on to the feed yard, unhitched the mules with expert swiftness, and watered them sparingly, a span at a time. Not until they had been put in stalls with chips of hay did he cut the dust from his own throat.

"Feed 'em light today," he instructed the man at the yard. "And I'll want to soak my water keg in your trough. It's dryer than the belly of a horned toad."

He met the Soñora Kid on the corner, and they turned down toward the barber shop. And at that instant, guns cut loose with a short, furious rattle somewhere on the main street.

The Soñora Kid grabbed at his holster and leaped back toward the corner. But Shorty caught his arm.

"Never mind!" he cautioned. "Just some drunks, more'n likely. This is a tough town. Let's get that shave before somebody else beats us to the barber chairs."

Hoofs drummed suddenly into the hot stillness that followed the rattle of shots. A group of riders fogged past on the main street—three—six—seven of them. One man was sagging in his saddle. Guns blasted somewhere ahead of the group, and they whirled, veering down the side street and raising a choking cloud

that drifted over the two men on the sidewalk.

"Drunks, my eye!" the Soñora Kid began. "They—"

Shorty pulled him to the door of the barber shop. "Well, if it is a scrap, it ain't ours!" he retorted. "Gimme a shave—and see if you can scrape some of the dust off my hide!"

There were two barbers, and the Soñora Kid snak grumblingly into the other chair. A minute later the partners were lathered and drifting into drowsiness under the steaming hot towels. And then boots clumped loudly above the gentle *whip-whop* of razors on the straps—

"Who yuh got there? Up on your feet, hombres, and let's have a look at you!"

Somebody snatched Shorty's towel away. The freighter blinked and sat up.

He saw a dozen men, guns in hand, crowding into the place. A star on the vest of the burly figure who stood menacingly, before his chair.

"Stranger, eh?" growled the sheriff. "Smart trick to help a bank holdup and plug a man, and then sneak into a barber shop to get your whiskers shaved off so nobody could identify you!"

"Wait a minute!" flared the Soñora Kid. He was trying to go for his gun, but the apron the barber had tied around his neck was in the way.

"Hold it!" Shorty said sharply. There was no chance, anyway, against these drawn guns. He looked at the sheriff and grinned through the lather. "You're barkin' up the wrong tree. Me and my pard just hit town. The hombres you want, rode out this street like the heel flies was after 'em."

"Yeah," drawled the Soñora Kid. "And they're gettin' farther away every time you open your gab!"

The sheriff glared at the tall puncher. "It happens, two of 'em didn't ride out of town!" he said. "Jumped off their hosses somewhere down this block, and scooted for cover under the cloud of dust. Look here, Buck. You was on the corner when the robbers busted out of the bank. See these *hombres*?"

A gaunt man with a red mustache and piercing eyes, moved forward and looked at Shorty and Willie. Then he shook his head.

"I couldn't say for shore, Akers. They all had bandannas pulled up over their faces. And they was travelin' fast. How about the hosses they left?"

"No brands," Sheriff Akers grunted. "Scrub stock, too—could have been picked up anywhere. Look here, you two! I got a posse tailin' them others, but I figure a bird in the hand is worth six out in them sandhills. You better talk up. Who are you?"

"My name's Masters," Shorty said. "And this—"

He was interrupted by a tall, pale-faced man in shirt sleeves. There was a pencil over this man's ear; he pressed through the crowd and removed the pencil to point it at Willie Wetherbee.

"He couldn't have been in on it, Akers," he said. "Because he was signin' the hotel register at the time they went into the bank. Name of Wetherbee. And he registered for Dr. Masters, too—said Dr. Masters was down at the feed yard."

"Dr. Masters?" Shorty repeated sharply. Then he heard the Soñora Kid chuckle, and all at once he understood.

Shorty, sometimes humorously, referred to himself as an "M. D." explaining that the initials stood for Mule Driver. Now in Rincon to keep an appointment with a real doc-

tor, Willie had thought it would be funny to sign the initials after Shorty's name. And the black bag he had carried into the hotel made the joke all the more plausible.

The sheriff grunted. "Well, Buck Willits says he can't be shore. I'll tell you how we can find out, pronto. Pete, jump down to the feed yard and bring Parsons up here. If he can identify the doctor, all well and good."

A man departed. Buck Willits squinted at Shorty again. "I wouldn't say," he declared, tugging at the red mustache. "There was one of the *hombres* that short, maybe. But I'd hate to tag a man wrong. Especially a doctor."

Shorty grinned. "You made a mistake all around," he began. "You see—"

"Look, doctor," said the barber. "This is Saturday, and we're goin' to be mighty busy. Couldn't we be gettin' on with this shave?" He pushed Shorty gently but firmly, back into the chair. "You want all the beard off?"

Shorty heard the Soñora Kid chuckle again, and his own grin widened as a thought struck him.

"No," he said. "Trim it up. Leave me a Vandyke—you know, like a doctor wears!"

A minute later, Parsons hurried in from the wagon yard. He peered at Shorty's lathered face, and snorted.

"Gosh no, sheriff," he said. "That ain't no *bandido*—leastwise, he come into town on a freight outfit, and that'd be a hell of a way for a robber to travel. Besides, he was down at the wagon yard at the time they went into the bank and plugged Dr. Dillon."

Shorty heard the name and tried to sit up, but the razor was scraping crisply over his cheek and he could neither move nor talk. Dr. Dillon—

the man to whom he was to deliver the black pill bag!

As if far away, he heard Sheriff Akers apologizing.

"Plumb sorry, doctor," the lawman said. "I reckon it's a good thing you hit town. Dillon's shot up pretty bad, and there ain't another doctor in ninety miles."

II.

Shorty inquired the way to Dr. Dillon's home, where the wounded man had been taken. It was only a block from the barber shop, and he and the Soñora Kid went there immediately upon leaving the chairs. Willie Wetherbee broke into laughter every time he saw Shorty's reddish-blond Vandyke, but the freighter was wearing a countenance serious enough to go with the professional beard.

A red-eyed woman of past middle age opened the door. She said: "I'm sorry, but the doctor—he can't see anybody. He—"

"I know, ma'am," Shorty nodded. "But this is mighty important. Would you tell him that Masters is here—from Tarantula?"

This made a strange difference. Mrs. Dillon gasped: "Oh, I'm so glad! Wait just a minute."

"Probably," said the Soñora Kid after she had gone, "the doctor needs the tools out of that bag to work on his own self!"

"Maybe," Shorty answered, and Mrs. Dillon came back.

"The doctor can see you for just a minute," she said. "He has to remain very quiet."

The hallway was dim and cool. She led them into a room where a small man lay in a big bed, his gray-whiskered face almost as white as the sheet. He breathed hoarsely, and his eyes were bright with pain.

"Dr. Dillon," Shorty began, "we

are mighty sorry to find you like this. The bag—I've got it over at the hotel. I'll bring it right over."

Dillon shook his head ever so gently. "No," he breathed, and looked steadily at Shorty for a long interval. "No—I think it would be better if you keep it while you're here. Just—just be very careful with it, Masters."

His voice and the wan smile trailed away together. Mrs. Dillon adjusted the pillow under his shoulder. Shorty and Willie tiptoed out, and the freighter shook his head.

"That's mighty funny!" he said. "I can't figure why he wants me to hold on to it."

"I can!" retorted the Soñora Kid. "He or Mrs. Dillon heard that you're a doctor, and they think maybe you can use it! I shore did start something, with that joke!"

Shorty ignored his pard's rueful tone. "You shore did!" he said. "I ought to find some horse pills in that bag, and make you take 'em! Beside, they know I ain't no doctor."

There were a few men in the lobby of the hotel; it was one of the coolest spots in Rincon. Outside, the wind came up as if it were blowing out of a blast furnace, and the dust swished against walls and windows. Shorty and Willie took turns in the bathtub, and came to the lobby feeling much better.

The pale-faced clerk greeted them respectfully, and Shorty asked casual questions—wondering if suspicion had been lifted from them entirely. Sheriff Akers was slouched in a chair near the door, watching Shorty and Willie closely.

It seemed that Dr. Dillon had been principal stockholder and president of the Rincon Bank, and, the clerk said, the bank was in as bad a way as Dr. Dillon was, himself.

"I ain't sayin' nothing against

doc," the clerk said hastily. "But he was a mite too good-hearted, maybe. He loaned money to all the cattle-men to pull them through this drought. Took mortgages on their land. First thing everybody knew, the bank was insolvent—capital, savings accounts—everything tied up in land. Oh, it'll be good, some day, but right now that land ain't worth a dollar a section."

"If there wasn't any money in the bank, why would anybody want to rob it?" Shorty asked.

The clerk shook his head slowly. "You got me there, doc. Some people figure it was the Shugrue outfit—bunch of rustlers and outlaws that hole up just over the Rio. Some say no, because Shugrue wouldn't tackle the job unless he figured there was dinero in it. Me, I think maybe it was revenge."

The Soñora Kid leaned on the desk. "How do you mean?"

"I know a half a dozen ranchmen that are mighty sore at Dr. Dillon, because their savings are gone. Can't blame 'em, I reckon. There are a few outfits scattered around here that have waterholes or creeks that lasted, and they was pullin' through in pretty good shape. Then—boom—savings gone. Busted, like the rest."

III.

As the clerk stopped talking, the posse came back to stamp into the lobby, dust fogging from their clothes, disgust on their faces. The sandstorm, they said, blotted out every track in a hundred miles. And there were a hundred wild canyons in the hills where the robbers might have turned.

"We don't know whether they went five miles out of town, or forty!" the deputy told Sheriff Akers. "All we know is, they're gone."

The burly law officer grunted, and pulled his Stetson brim down. He glared in the direction of the partners, and growled in a dejected tone: "Well, that's all we can do, I reckon! Ten to one it was the Shugrue outfit. Anyway, they didn't get nothing!"

Shoulders sagging, he went out into the wind, and the posse followed. It was sundown, now, and a queer, coppery light came dimly through the windows. The Soñora Kid pulled his long frame out of his chair and stretched.

"I'm goin' to take a look at Tumbleweed," he said. "Want me to feed the mules for you, Shorty?"

"I reckon they can have a full ration of oats now," answered the freighter. "Me, I'm goin' to hit the hay. It's been a couple of weeks, seems like, since I had any sleep!"

He went upstairs. The hall was in deep shadow; the kerosene lamps had not been lighted. Shorty groped his way past three doors and came to their room.

When he turned the knob and opened the door, he knew he was not alone. There was an odor of cigarette smoke in the air.

Shorty's muscles tensed. He heard only the soft swish of the sand against the window, and the shrieking of the wind. He laid his hand over the butt of his .45 and strained his eyes into the darkness.

"You'd better reach, doc," a muffled voice said. "There are three of us, and we've all got you covered. And keep quiet, too!"

Above the leaping hammer of his heart, Shorty made his voice calm.

"What's the idea? You're makin' a mistake. I—"

"Not us!" retorted the man. There was no humor in his dry chuckle. "And you'd better not make one, either, doc. Just back into the hall

—and keep your hands up. Slim, bring the bag."

There was a movement in the shadows. Shorty caught the dim, coppery glint of the last light on gun steel, and knew that it would be suicide to try to draw. He lifted his hands slowly; a hard muzzle bored into his stomach, and he smelled liquor on the breath of the man who took his gun.

"Into the hall!" the latter repeated. The muzzle pressed harder. "Down the back way. We've got a little job for you, doc. Do it without askin' any questions, and you won't be hurt. Move along, now!"

The gun prodded his ribs again. "This way, doc!" ordered the muffled voice. "Now—stand here a minute. We got to blindfold you."

Somebody knotted a bandanna tightly across his eyes. He was turned around several times, and then two men had his arms in a secure grasp. He heard a horse nicker softly, and he made up his mind to remember that the sand was stinging the back of his neck.

But when he had been helped into a saddle, and was riding close-herded by the others, the gritty fragments blew almost squarely into his face for a time, and then struck his right cheek. They made another turn and another. Shorty knew, now, that they were riding in something like a circle, to give him the impression of distance.

He could see nothing; the blindfold was so tight it made his eyeballs ache.

"All right!" said the muffled voice. "Help him down!"

Shorty heard a gate creak on its hinges. There was the rustle of trees in the wind, and the sound of a shutter banging somewhere close at hand.

The men had his arms again. His

boot toe struck a step, and the men half-lifted him. He heard a door opened; he was inside, now, and the door was being shut against the wind.

"Let him see!"

The yellow lamp light was like a sunburst in the first few seconds. Shorty looked around him. The three men all wore bandannas pulled high over their faces. Their Stetsons were slouched low; he could see only slitted, dust-reddened eyes.

Two of the men were tall; the third was not much higher than Shorty. Now a door opened in the room, and two others entered.

"How is he?" asked the man who had spoken before.

The newcomers were masked, too. They shook their heads.

"Still sufferin' a lot," said one. "He claims he can feel that slug. Says it's pressin' right against his backbone."

"All right, doc," ordered the man with the muffled voice. "Here's your tool kit. Get in there and get to work."

"Wait a minute!" Shorty protested. "I tell you, you're makin' a mistake. I ain't a doctor!"

"No?" snarled the tall man. "You can't lie out of it like that. I told you nothin's goin' to happen to you, if you do the job and don't ask too many questions. We might even pay you—eh, boys?"

The others laughed. Once more a gun muzzle gouged Shorty, and there was the black bag thrust into his hand. He went through the door and saw the swarthy, pain-drawn face of the man who lay on a tarp-covered bed.

I'd know him again! Shorty thought. And then, seeing the splotch of dark wetness that stained the man's right chest, he wondered if it would do any good to remember the swarthy features. The man's

teeth were clenched; a moan came with each breath. Probably dying, Shorty told himself.

"If you keep stallin', doc," warned the tall man, "you're goin' to find yourself in the same fix. Get busy. We'll help you any way you say. Want hot water?"

Anything to stall for time, Shorty thought. He nodded. "Yes—a pan of hot water. And anything clean you've got for bandages."

He didn't gain any time. They had water already heated; the short man came with it from another room. And another brought a bed sheet that looked passably clean.

Shorty wondered if there could be any hope of help from the *Sonora Kid*, and decided there couldn't. He might stall through this—might do the best he could in the way of cleansing and bandaging the wound—and the masked gang would be none the wiser. They'd take him back to the hotel, blindfolded again.

And then he'd never know who robbed the bank and shot kindly little Dr. Dillon. Because this was, without a doubt, the man who had been wounded in the holdup.

IV.

"What are you waitin' for?" demanded the tall man sharply. "I've warned you for the last time!"

Shorty took the basin of water, and motioned to a rickety table that stood against the wall. The tall man grunted, and lifted it to the bedside. Shorty set the water down carefully, placed the black bag on the bed, and turned down the stained sheet.

There was a tense quietness in the room. Only the moaning of the man, only the thin whine of the wind outside. Shorty could feel five pairs of eyes on him.

He said: "The patient needs air. Will you all kindly leave the room?"

We can't open a window with all this dust."

"I'll stay here!" retorted the tall man at his elbow. "And I'll have a gun on you, doc. The rest of you go into the other room and shut the door. I can handle this, all right."

They moved out. Shorty sighed, and tore a strip off the sheet. When he dipped this into the basin, the water scalded his fingertips and made him jump.

"Get hold of yourself, doc!" urged the tall man. "I told you we ain't goin' to hurt you if you get that bullet out of this boy. Get your tools out and start proddin' for it. I'll hold him down!"

Shorty nodded. He looked up professionally at the lamp that was in a wall bracket. Then he closed his fingers on the clasp of Dr. Dillon's bag.

The tall man was moving around the end of the bed, getting in position to hold his wounded comrade against the pain of probing for the bullet. He didn't see the inside of the bag as it came open.

But Shorty Masters saw, in one swift glance, why Dr. Dillon had wanted him to keep the bag that day—why Dillon had commented upon his honest appearance.

The surgeon's bag was crammed with money! Greenbacks. Gold coins that glinted with a rich luster under the lamp. A few silver dollars.

And not an instrument, not a bottle of pills in the lot.

Shorty looked up at the tall, masked man, and knew what he had to do. The odds would be five to one, but that didn't change things. In this bag was the money that would save Dr. Dillon from disgrace, and perhaps prison. It would save many a ranchman's herd until the rain finally came.

Shorty said: "All right. Take hold

of his legs so he won't kick up. Ready?"

"I've got him!" answered the other.

Shorty clicked the bag shut and reached swiftly toward the basin of scalding water, the pad of wet bandage in his hand. He caught the rim of the basin tightly between thumb and fingers, and brought it up swiftly from the table.

There was one angry yell that turned to a howl of pain before it had fairly escaped the masked man's bandanna-shrouded lips. The steaming water struck him fully in the face, blinding him, causing him to jerk his hands up to his eyes. And the next instant, Shorty Masters' compact body shot across the bed, driving behind a hard-knuckled right fist that slammed the tall man's jaw.

He crumpled beside the bed. The blow had torn away the bandanna. There was a half-second before the other men came charging through the door, and in that split tick of time, Shorty recognized Buck Willits's red mustache, and gaunt features. And he grabbed Buck Willits' gun.

Then he leaped sidewise and brought the water-soaked bandage down on the bracketed lamp. The chimney cracked and broke, and the bandage snuffed out the yellow light. The darkness that winked into the room was loud, and split with streaks of gun flame.

Shorty triggered back at the mass in the doorway, and it was almost impossible to miss in that first shot. He heard a cough, and a thump on the floor; then the other three men were scattering, and throwing lead in his direction. He twisted around and groped for the precious black bag, and as his hand closed on its handle, Buck Willits revived and

yelled for his men to: "Cut him down! Cut him down!"

Shorty dropped behind the bed. A blast of lead raked over it. Willits was crawling back toward the other wall, demanding that somebody give him a gun.

There was a space of silence in the smoke-filled room. Shorty heard the heavy breathing of the men who were waiting for him to make a move that would betray his position. But he didn't hear the wounded man's moaning, any more.

"Shoot under the bed!" Willits ordered. "Shoot low—you'll get him!"

Shorty edged toward the foot of the bed. Three guns clamored; splinters furrowed from the floor and struck the wall behind the ricochet of bullets. He thumbed his hammer back and let it fall with the gun turned inches to the right of a powder flash, and he heard the man's boots slide out from under him as the slug smashed him back against the wall.

And then Buck Willits had a gun again, and it was still three to one. Somewhere along this wall, there had been a window. Shorty triggered and jumped and triggered again; the lead crashed into the spot where he had been, and he heard glass tinkle and fall outside. Here was the window—he could feel the dusty wind as it blew into the smoke-fogged room. With luck, he might jump through it and land safely outside. He remembered there were horses somewhere out beyond that creaking gate.

The door from the other room opened so suddenly, its knob banged the wall. The *Soñora* Kid's tall figure was silhouetted against the dim lamp light shinging beyond the door—and there was a gun in his hand.

He yelled: "Shorty! Where are

you?" And the three guns that went off in concert just then, showed him that Shorty couldn't be on that side of the room.

Shorty's gun clicked on an empty shell, but Willie Wetherbee's roared loudly, rolling the shots so closely together, it sounded like a continuous blast. It stopped, and Buck Willits was tottering out from the wall alone, one arm hanging limp, the other raised high.

"Stop!" he screamed hoarsely. "Don't shoot me—I surrender!"

V.

The dust was thinning as they walked out of the house, and Shorty made out the dim lights of Rincon's main street only a short distance away. Now he knew where the man had gone when they leaped from their horses that morning. Willits had come back into town to join the sheriff. And the wounded man had been left in the house until the others could join him.

Shouts and the sound of running boots drifted down the sidewalk. A lantern swung into view. It was Sheriff Akers and a handful of men. The sheriff took one look at Willits and whirled on Shorty.

"Say, doc! Are you crazy? Do you know who that is?"

Shorty nodded. "Sure—ask him! He's the hombre who headed that bank robbery. Him and two others

kidnapped me tonight to make me treat the wounded buzzard!"

Akers looked at the ranchman again. Buck Willits' mustache twitched.

"He robbed *me!*" he said hoarsely. "Dillon robbed me. More'n a thousand dollars, I lost. Can you blame me for tryin' to get it back?"

Shorty shook the bag. "I guess you'll get it—and you'll need it to fight a murder trial, if Dr. Dillon dies. Because Dillon raised the money somewhere—I've got it right here!"

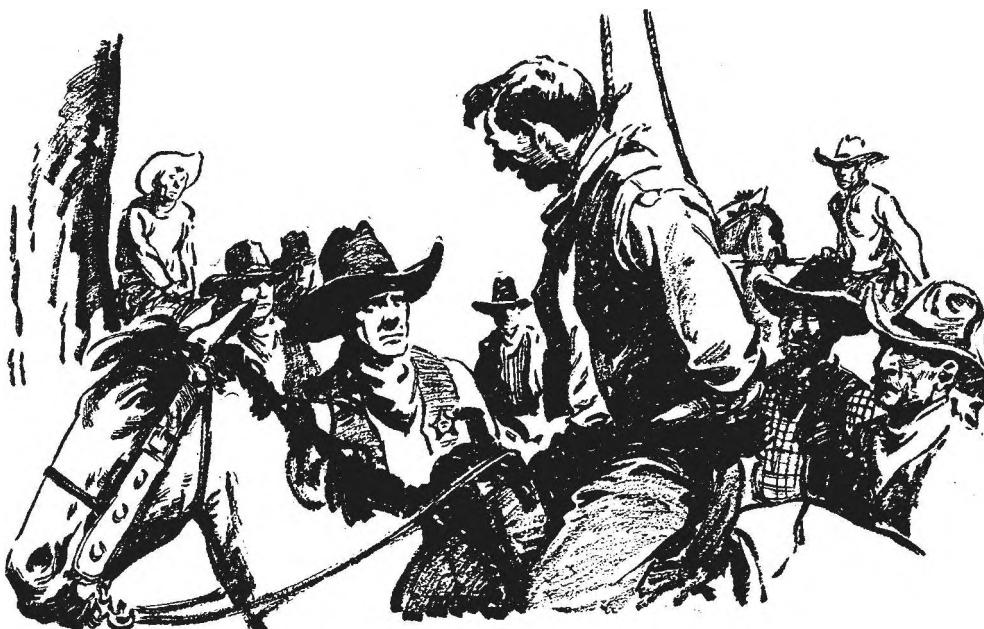
The Soñora Kid nodded. "The doc got a loan from a bank in Stockton, through a doctor friend of his. Told me about it tonight—I went by there and found him doin' right well. He ain't goin' to die. He was afraid the Shugrue gang would rob the stage and get the dinero if it was sent down in the strong box, so he had his doctor friend put it in that little black bag, and send it down by mule team. By Shorty Masters, M. D."

"I ain't a doctor, sheriff," Shorty protested. "That 'M. D.' means somethin' else. It mean—"

"I reckon," drawled Sheriff Akers, "that you'll do till a doctor comes along, Doc Masters!"

Shorty Masters and his six-mule team are heading our way again soon. Look for another Shorty Masters story in Wild West Weekly.





NECKTIE PARTY

*It was the end of the trail—
strange, gripping and unreal.*

by HARLAN GRAVES

THE trial lasted no longer than ten minutes. In those days, Texas justice was swift and summary, and there was no appeal. The judge peered down at the outlaw coldly, and he wasted no words.

"Rustlin' is a hanging offense in this State," he said. "On top of that, you shot a posseman. I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead. Sentence will be executed at sunrise on the morning of—"

One of jurymen interrupted. "Sunrise, hell!" he broke in. "Let's hang him now!"

A murmur of approval swept through the courtroom. The judge lifted his gavel and brought it down sharply. Quiet restored, he turned

to a tall, lean man standing next to the outlaw.

"That's up to the sheriff," the judge declared. "So long as justice is done, I don't care when you do it. You can hang this man now, if the sheriff has no objection."

All eyes moved to the tall man. He spoke for the first time; "I have no objection."

It was only a short distance to the big cottonwood at the edge of town. On the way there, some one knotted a rope and dropped a loop over the outlaw's head. A horseman rode ahead and had his mount waiting under a suitable limb. The outlaw was pushed up into the saddle, and the loose end of the rope was tossed

over the limb and made fast. The sheriff, his face an inscrutable mask, stepped forward.

"You've been sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. As sheriff of this county, it's my duty to carry out your sentence. Before we proceed, is there anything you want to say?"

The outlaw's face blanched at the nearness of death. It seemed to those who watched, that he would meet his Maker with tightly pressed lips. Then his eyes turned slowly, and he looked down at the sheriff with the faintest hint of a smile.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "There is something I want to say. It won't take too long to say it, and it'll sorta ease my way into hell to get it off my chest. For ten years, I been wantin' to say it—to the right gent."

He looked around the circle of faces. Cold silence and straining impatience met his glance.

"Ten years ago, I held up a stage," the outlaw went on. "I was a green kid then—eighteen, maybe—and it was the first crooked thing I'd ever done. As it happened, the driver was carrying a lot of money that day, and he handed it over. I didn't know what to do with it, so I took it home and hid it in the room where Jim and me slept. Jim was my foster brother. But we was almost like real brothers. My father found Jim in the ruins of a wagon train after Injuns had burned it. We was raised together."

The outlaw's voice became husky as he spoke. He swallowed, and the rope about his neck rose an inch and fell.

"My father found the money where I'd hid it," he resumed. "He'd heard about the stage robbery, and he put two and two together. He was standin' in our room one day when Jim and me came in. He asked which one of us held up the stage. I can see him now, standin' there,

looking first at me and then at Jim. Neither one of us said anything. After a while, my father picked up the money and walked out of the room. He said he was going for the sheriff."

Not a man stirred around the close-packed circle. Reluctant interest replaced the impatience of a moment before. The outlaw's voice went on again, flatly:

"I remember the way Jim looked at me then. I couldn't look back at him. Jim didn't say anything at all. He just walked out of the room and on to the barn. He saddled his horse and rode away, and we never heard from him again. I knew why he did that. He figured it would be easier for my father and mother if they thought he was a thief, instead of their own son. Maybe it was easier for them, but it wasn't easier for me. I stood it as long as I could, and then I wrote a letter explaining the whole thing. I rode away, too. Almost ten years I been ridin' the dark trails, thinkin' that was where I'd find Jim, sooner or later."

The outlaw swallowed again, and that hint of a smile came back to his lips. He twisted his neck around and looked down at the sheriff:

"Maybe some day, you'll run across Jim Watson, sheriff," he said. "If you do, tell him he ain't wanted up in Montana. Tell him how I been tryin' to find him to let him know. Maybe if he knew that, he wouldn't think so hard—"

The outlaw didn't finish. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. The sheriff took his hat from his head and held it limply at his side.

"Is that all?" the sheriff asked.

"No, there's one thing more," the outlaw added. "If you do find this Jim Watson, you can tell him there's a girl waitin' for him up there in

Montana. He'll know who it is. It's the same girl he was gonna marry ten years ago. She never did think he held up the stage. She's been waitin' for him to come back all this time." The outlaw paused, let a lot of air from his lungs. Then he straightened in the saddle and looked around the circle of faces again. "All right, boys. I'm ready now," he said. "Let's get this thing over with."

The sheriff stood there for a long time, his face expressionless, his hat held loosely in his hand. Then his fingers tightened on its wide brim, and he brought his hand back slowly for the slap across the animal's rump. Just before the blow struck, he looked up into the outlaw's face. He saw the words clearly formed on the man's lips, yet not spoken:

"So long, Jim?"



¿QUIEN SABE?

(Who Knows?)

1. *If you had a mecate, would you plant it, drink it, or catch an animal with it?*
2. *Where did Custer make his last stand, and what State is it in?*
3. *What were the last two States to enter the Union, and when did they do it?*
4. *What President was a cowboy, and what Vice President was of part Indian descent?*
5. *Why is Mexico called the "land of mañana"?*
6. *Who discovered gold in California? When?*
7. *If you were told that you had bluejoint, would you go to a doctor, rub on liniment, or let animals play on it?*
8. *What were the real names of Billy the Kid, Buffalo Bill, Chief Yellow Hair, and Wild Bill Hickok?*
9. *What governor of what Territory offered to pardon a famous outlaw, and what outlaw refused him?*
10. *What was the Lincoln County War?*

Answers on Page 105

45

Friendship



by JACK STERRETT

Author of "Killer King," etc.

**Liano Jones trapped a killer—and
mercy roweled him on the lead of time.**

DOGLEG DOZIER was excited, his round, red face screwed up with protest and consternation. The little, bandy-legged mayor of the roaring,

bawling, railhead cow town of Jessup was about to lose the lawman who had changed the place from the wildest and barggingest hell hole in

the West, into a town where the ordinances were respectfully obeyed with the strictest of care. He didn't want to lose him. He jumped up from his desk and raved around his office, pumping his stubby arms wildly.

"Llano, by heaven, you can't do it! Jessup needs you!" He tore at his scanty hair in frustration. "That lousy, dirty town of Ketchum has bought you away from me, that's what they've done. They can't keep order for themselves so they've hired you to prod their law for 'em!" He fumed useless curses.

Llano Jones grinned his appreciation of the show Dogleg was putting on. Llano was barely twenty, a tall and stripling youth in a wide black hat, a gleaming white shirt, black tie, black trousers and boots. A single .45 hung at his lank right thigh, a gun with a fantastically long barrel—a Buntline Special. It was incredible that such a youth had tamed and tied down the howling, red-eyed lawlessness that had once ruled Jessup. But that was the fact. He had done it almost single-handed and it was understandable only in the look of calm quiet that sat on his lean, tanned face, in the grave and steady scrutiny of gray eyes that revealed the man's complete confidence in his own power and ability. Not a boastful and arrogant look—merely a calm and sure one.

Llano grinned and shrugged his shoulders at Dogleg's imminence to apoplexy. He was unpinning the badge that gleamed on his white shirtfront. "Well, Dogleg," he said quietly, "I've made up my mind. They're offering me good money to go to Ketchum. But it isn't just that. I guess I hanker to stretch my hosses' legs and leave Jessup behind for a spell. There's nothing

needs doing here, now, that any good lawman can't do."

Dogleg gave in with a gusty sigh of resignation. "Well, Llano, I couldn't hate this partin' worse, if you was my own son!"

"Thanks," Llano said gravely as he laid the badge on Dogleg's desk. "Now, is that cowboy still in jail that tried to run me into a gun argument last night? Seems like somebody said he was from Ketchum and I'd like to talk to him."

Dogleg called the jailer and ordered the cowboy brought in. He was produced with the promptness and smoothness with which the law now moved in a once lawless town.

He was a young man. A year or two older than Llano, perhaps. In the lank, black hair on the side of his long and lean skull he still bore evidence of the lump that had been raised by the long barrel of Llano's gun the night before. His battered hat was gingerly perched on the back of his head. But there was no animosity in his blue eyes as he turned to meet Llano's examination. A shamefaced, thin grin twitched at his lips.

Llano studied him interestedly. The cowboy was under the average in height and thin to the point of emaciation. He was cadaverous, a walking skeleton almost. There were deep hollows in his pale cheeks and there was a queer, haunting look in his motionless blue stare. Only that twitching, faint grin gave his features expression.

Llano nodded as though satisfied at something his probing gray stare had seen. "You're from Ketchum," he said abruptly. "What's your name?"

There was an instant wariness in the cowboy's strange eyes. He hesitated. "My name's Howard. Mostly, I'm called Bones." He

coughed heavily and two red spots glowed with sudden heat on his high cheekbones.

Llano's eyes narrowed. The man was tubercular. And in that fact, perhaps, was explanation of why he should be penniless and without a job in a cattle country that was roaring with boom-time activity, explanation of the hunger and desperation that had driven him to attempt the life of Llano Jones. He had been bribed and his need had forced him to the senseless act.

"Why," asked Llano, "did you try to kill me last night? Did somebody in Ketchum send you?"

Bones Howard looked away from the quiet gray eyes. He did not reply to Llano's questions. "They're asking you to serve as marshal in Ketchum?" he asked. "Don't go there!" he grated with sudden, harsh tensity.

"Why not?" Llano asked gravely.

Howard's remote blue gaze was fixed on nothing. His words slid between his lips in a monotone. "Because," he said flatly, "your life wouldn't be worth a buffalo chip in Ketchum. That town is owned by the Garcell gang. They've spent blood and money to own it and they don't figure to let it go without a fight. The name of Llano Jones don't scare 'em. They couldn't keep Mayor Goss and old Judge Woods from sending for you but they figure, by hell, to keep you from ever arriving!"

There was an odd, pantherish smoothness to Llano's stride as he moved across the room, gazed into the street for a moment and came back. "Why have you said so much?"

And still, Bones Howard's eyes stayed turned away. "Because, when you had the chance last night, you didn't kill me as I plumb de-

served." There was a sudden, savage fury in his eyes as he whipped around to glare bitterly into Llano's face. "Not that I've got a damn thing to live for—or care!"

Llano nodded. "Well," he said slowly, "I'm leaving Jessup in the morning. Come the end of the week, I'll reach Ketchum. Here's a wad of folding money I found in your pockets last night. Close to a hundred dollars." He thrust the money swiftly into Howard's hands and turned sharply on Dogleg, who knew damned well that there had not been a cent on the cowboy last night. "Dogleg, you turn Bones loose, now. I'm failing to prefer any charges against him and there's no legal way you can hold him."

Dogleg sputtered. The face of Bones Howard, as he held Llano's money, had turned a ghastly white. Llano smiled, turned on his heel and left the office. He was fully aware that he had left an astonished and completely unnerved cowboy behind him. He could imagine the words that would pass between Bones Howard and Dogleg Dozier, and a smile thinned his lips again.

"Well," and Howard would be slowly thrusting the money into his trousers, "you going to gimme back my gun and let me go?"

"What the hell else can I do?" Dogleg would yell furiously. "That Llano is as crazy as a tick!"

Well, Llano thought soberly, maybe not. Time alone would tell. Ketchum had hired a lawman.

CHAPTER II.

GUN-LAW GREETING.

It was Llano's wise choice to camp out instead of entering Ketchum by night. He figured that the little he knew about the roaring, wide-open town was not enough. A day-

light entry was plainly on the side of discretion, it being his judgment that his first move should be to hunt up Mayor Goss and Judge Woods, the men who had hired him, and have a long day to lay any plans which might need to be made. And it was precisely this type of thinking, sober generalship, that had given him success before. He never did anything on impulse alone.

Ketchum lay high in the hills at the head of a giant, grassy valley. The cause of its mushroom growth and, so far, uncontrolled and boisterous activity, was the astonishing and seemingly unlimited quantities of virgin silver that had been discovered in those hills, just below the roots of the grass. From a population of a half a dozen prospectors a year ago, the town had jumped almost immediately to a howling and boiling three thousand. In an area as remote as this, that fact alone, meant that there was a gigantic food problem to solve. It meant profiteering, speculation, and almost unbridled outlawry. Fancy ladies, gamblers, thieves, gunmen and killers not safe elsewhere, were a buzzing fly-swarm over the burly and lusty new camp. And their chosen leaders were an ugly trio of brothers known as the red Garcells.

Llano knew that, already, men from Texas were moving giant herds of longhorns into the big valley and setting up ranches. Ketchum's avid appetite for beef offered big and easy profits for which there was bound to be a high-pitched rivalry. And Texans two thousand miles from home, had never been noted for easy-going and calm discretion.

Yes, there was bound to be activity in Ketchum. Why else had Llano Jones been offered a whacking salary to bring in the law? Llano mulled such thoughts soberly as he

removed saddle and pack saddle from his fine pair of black horses and hobbled them to graze in deep grass. Purple dusk was swiftly filling the gigantic bowl of the valley as he made his tiny fire. The towering peaks of the surrounding mountains were tipped by flaming gold.

Ketchum, five miles away, was a necklace of glittering diamonds tossed carelessly against the side of a hill—the flaring lights of tented gambling halls, saloons and honk-a-tonks as they began a feverish gaiety that would continue until dawn. Llano reflected upon Ketchum's booothill and the increase to its death-stilled population that would likely be ready when the sun arose once more. And what hand would the murderous Garcells have had in that?

Sour dough and sowbelly were sizzling in the spider when Llano heard a thump of hoofs not made by his own horses. With lithe, swift grace, he moved out of the circle of the firelight and faced the sound. The shape of a man on a horse moved out of the dark and the hunched rider stared down at him without speaking.

Llano's hands hung loosely at his sides as he peered up at the man. His ears were alert for the sound of other riders and heard none. The man was alone.

"Howdy, stranger," said Llano in friendly fashion. "Step down. I'm about to spread a banquet and I'd admire to have company."

The shadowy rider was a long time in answering and, or so it seemed to Llano, there was furtiveness to the gesture with which he shrugged his jacket around to conceal the gun thrust into his belt. He was staring down with hard intentness. Suddenly, he swung from the saddle with a grunt. "Well, don't mind if I do,"

The stranger tied his horse simply

by dropping his bridle to the ground. The night air had a nip and he warmed his fingers over Llano's fire and pushed back his hat. He was young, heavy set and thick through his shoulders. Even though he was smiling genially, now, under Llano's inspection, his lips were thick and cruel and his blank yellow eyes expressionless. And, Llano saw, his tightly curling hair was a flaming red.

As they ate, few words passed between them, and those only idle comments on the state of the weather, the condition of the range and the chances for an early snowfall. The burly, young stranger wiped his mouth on the back of a red-haired paw and rolled a cigarette. And suddenly, his shifting eyes were still. "How come," he asked, "you ain't ridin' into Ketchum tonight?"

Llano shrugged. "It's likely my hosses will dine on feed-corral hay for quite a spell. I'm in no hurry. They can fill their bellies plumb full of grass tonight."

The redhead grunted and picked his teeth with a twig. No exchange of names had passed between them, but Llano knew that those blank and expressionless yellow eyes had missed nothing. He knew that the man had drawn his own conclusions. The stranger rose abruptly now. "Well," with an ugly grin, "there's softer beds in Ketchum than out here—an' not lonely ones, either. I reckon I'll mosey along."

Llano stood up as the man climbed heavily into his saddle and looked down. "So long," the redhead said, "and thanks for the grub." He hesitated for a moment and, although Llano could not see, he had the feeling that the yellow eyes were no longer blank but suddenly harsh. "It's plumb likely that we'll meet in town."

Llano lifted his hand as the man

turned and rode away into the dark. He moved quickly from the light of the fire and stood still until the fading hoofbeats had died into nothing. There was a thoughtful look in his gray eyes as he stood there. Suddenly, he whistled to his horses. Returning to the fire, he smothered it with earth and began to pack his bedroll.

It was a rim-fire cinch, Llano mused, that the man who had just departed was one of the red Garcells. It was also a certainty that, since he had tried to circle and take a pot shot at Llano, he was heading for town on the run. He would be carrying the warning that Llano Jones, the new lawman from Jessup, was due to hit town with the dawn.

Well! Such a possibility called for a change in his own plans. He would not wait for morning. He, too, would head for town right now.

Riding in quietly an hour later, Llano avoided Arizona Street. This was a bawling thoroughfare optimistically named after a commonwealth that had not yet come into existence. By way of dark and littered alleys and vacant lots, he rode around the street's boiling stream of sin and song until he found the livery stable he was seeking. There he methodically unsaddled and rubbed down his horses and made cash arrangements for their care. Carefully dusting off clothes, he tipped his wide-brimmed black hat forward and strolled lazily toward the pit of fun. The Buntline was settled snugly against his thigh.

With whiskey bottles or white shirt fronts for targets, Llano had yet to meet the man who could beat him at draw and shoot. He was quietly confident as he slipped into the throng on Arizona Street. But he reckoned without fate.

Mingling unobtrusively with the surging mob that shouted, catcalled

and milled cheerfully and boisterously down the sidewalks, Llano was a stranger among thousands of strangers from every point in the West. The only thing that set him apart was his grave and calm-faced sobriety in contrast to the whiskey fever that inflamed all other cheeks.

He paused idly at the open doors of a giddy dance hall with a flamboyant boarded front and tented rear. His back to the place, his eyes were amused and remote as he watched the crowd flow by. Painted girls on teetering heels who clutched the wool-shirted arms of bearded miners whose pockets bulged with money. Drovers, bullwhackers, strong-armed teamsters. Maudlin cowboys in groups, big six-guns prominent, jingling their spurs as they staggered by in cowhide boots. Rebel yells of sheer steam and animal carelessness.

As his gaze flickered over them, he was ever alert for sight of a thick-shouldered man with cruel lips, blank eyes and red hair. Then, without warning, a shattering gun storm roared through the din of the dance hall behind him. He whirled lithely on his heels, but not swiftly enough. A wild stampede of escaping dancers almost swept him from his feet.

For a mad few seconds, Llano was tossed like a horse trapped in the forefront of a longhorn charge. His hat was trampled underfoot, one sleeve of his shirt yanked loose. Fighting with the weaving grace of a panther, he kept his feet. And then, suddenly, the dance hall was cleared of all its frantic customers and, legs planted wide, Llano was standing over the body of a man who was riddled with bullet holes and who was groping unpleasantly in the last throes of death.

For a split second, the crowd in the street was hushed. Then, suddenly,

WW—SE

a bull-like voice was bawling and a threatening and angry roar arose. Llano whirled about, his right hand close to the Buntline Special.

There were fifty men in the crowd who had their six-guns out and who surged furiously forward, then halted uncertainly at something in Llano's cold and steady gray stare. Then a trio of burly figures came lunging and smashing their way through to the front rank of the massed mob and Llano met the blank, merciless stare of the man who had shared his campfire meal. As at a signal, the crowd grew silent.

Llano did not move. Straight, tall and calm-faced, his lips twitched to a slight smile. "Well," he said quietly, "the red Garcells—I'm sure."

The burly redhead stood straight in front of him, a leveled .45 in his hairy fist. On his left stood one who was, obviously, a younger brother—with yellow eyes as deadly, lips as ugly and curling hair as fiery red, but with cheeks as smooth and pink as the blush on a peach. On his right was an older man, and also plainly a brother, and this one's deep-seamed and bonier face was so brutal that Llano barely checked a grunt of surprise. The glare in this man's yellow eyes was that of some hell-driven beast.

"Yeh"—Llano nodded soberly—"the red Garcells." It was as though he did not acknowledge the tense deadliness of the moment and his helplessness under the muzzles of fifty guns. It was as though he filed them firmly in his mind for future references. "You, in the middle, you're Tom Garcell. The kid is Billy." His eyes rested quietly on the oldest one. "And you—you're Killer Garcell. It's just been plain impossible to find another name that would fit you."

An ugly growl gathered deep in Killer Garcell's throat as he stepped forward, his huge shoulders hunched. "Look out!" Tom warned sharply. "I been tellin' you—this is the new lawman from Jessup! It's Llano Jones!"

Killer Garcell sneered and spat on Llano's boots. "Your first hour in Ketchum, Llano Jones—an' you've killed a man. Law or no law, we won't allow that!"

Llano did not twitch a muscle. His hands still hung loosely at his sides. "With fifty guns at your back, you feel plumb safe with your lying, don't you, Killer?"

Killer's horrible glare bored into Llano's cool stare for an instant. Then, with a roar, he turned his back and faced the crowd. He swore savagely. "You rannies—push away your smoke poles, all of you. I'll handle this alone. He's askin' for it!"

His brothers protested, but Killer quelled them with a furious howl and, following their lead, the crowd shoved away its weapons. They began, slowly, to melt away from behind Killer as he turned back. There was something in the look of this slim Llano Jones that gained their respect and held them expectantly silent.

Killer Garcell again spat at Llano's boots and sneered. He shoved his .45 into its holster with a show of careless bravado. "You've named this play," he snarled. "You're a yellow skunk, if it ain't draw an' shoot right now!"

Llano's eyes were cool and steady. "You call the count," he said calmly. "We go to shooting when you say three."

"One!" Killer roared instantly and hunched to a deadly crouch. "Two!" Murderously, his right hand began to shoot downward a split instant before the hoarse yell of Three!" His

big weapon cleared leather, came upward with blinding speed.

Llano did not seem to hurry. His body flicked sideways, offering its slimmest and narrowest target, and in the same gesture the long-barreled Buntline was up and mingling its roar with Killer's. It was a cool draw, so cool and steady that, although it did not beat Killer's, its aim was better. Killer's gun roared the once and missed in its savage hurry. Then the giant was howling and hugging a pierced right hand from which his gun had been smashed.

Killer's brothers screamed rage and dived for their own guns. There were others in the crowd, in sympathy with the Garcells, who yanked murderously at holstered weapons.

"Hold it!" It was a high-pitched scream of warning that came from the doorway directly to Llano's rear. "The man that shoots—I'll blow 'em clear to hell!"

Llano saw the crowd in front of him freeze into a rigid tableau, guns half drawn, eyes fixed in horror. Stepping calmly to one side, a flicker of his eyes showed him a skinny and white-faced man who was weaving a murderous, sawed-off shotgun in white-knuckled fists. Apparently, he was the only occupant of the deserted tent. Obviously, he had watched the whole show outside and had chosen this one perfect moment for his paralyzing action. Swiftly, Llano faded back into the doorway beside him. For an instant more, they held the crowd frozen under the menace of their weapons, then turned and ran swiftly back through the canvas hall.

Llano grunted his thanks as they lunged out into the dark alley at the rear and separated. "Well, thanks, Bones Howard," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER III.

HOGTYING KETCHUM WITH LAW.

MAJOR FRANK GOSS was a talker. Llano found that out within the first three minutes following his entrance into the fat man's office over the jail, next morning. Setting aside the new, black hat with the flat crown and wide brim which had been his first purchase of the day, Llano sat in a chair opposite the roll-top desk and watched the pompous, strutting figure of the official with lazy eyes as the man wore a path from desk to window and back. He sighed and submitted to the round, booming flow of oratory.



LLANO JONES

"The fair name of our community—civil rights—lives and honor of citizens—must be upheld—must be cherished—foul crime must depart beneath the sway of law and or-

der—" On and on. Ad infinitum. The man was a windbag.

Llano was fingering the silver badge Goss had pinned on his shirt with a flowery gesture. He managed to slip a word in edgeways as the mayor paused for breath and mopped his crimson brow with a silk handkerchief.

"Well," Llano said quietly, "about all that—I'll do my best. But how about cases? There was a man murdered at the Paradise Dance Hall last night. It's my idea that the first thing this town needs is to stamp out careless killing. I'll sure jug the man who did that one at the Paradise, if I can learn who he was."

The fat mayor stumped to his desk and sat down abruptly. His eyes shifted beadily under lowered eyelids as he fingered his flowered vest with puffy fingers. "This office has heard nothing," he said shortly. "Nothing."

Llano eyed him quietly. He was thinking that he would just as soon take no orders from this man. "Well," he said, "sooner or later, we'll learn something and can take action."

"We shall hope so," the mayor said piously. He arose as though to embark upon another sea of oratory, but Llano cut in sharply.

"How about the Red Garcells? You want them cleaned out? Have you any evidence of their lawlessness that will stand in court?"

Goss sat down again. "The Garcells," he mused heavily. "Ah, yes, the Garcells." His beady eyes flickered over Llano's face and away, and he cleared his throat loudly. "Of course, you're a complete stranger. You've heard stories. The fact is, I suspect that the Garcells have been much maligned. Hotheaded men, no doubt, and quick to resent aspersions on their honor. But not

criminals. No. Nobody has ever accused them of wrong—openly."

Well, Llano thought, the Garcells always made sure that nobody lived to accuse them openly. A strangling fear, he had heard, was a large part of their power over Ketchum. With sudden impatience for the fat man behind the desk, he stood up and reached for his hat. "Well, I'll drift around some. I'll get to know the town."

Goss arose quickly to open the door for him. "May I wish you the best of fortune?" he asked effusively.

Llano nodded gravely and walked out. Outside, Bones Howard, who had been slouched against a hitch rack, fell into step beside him and they moved down the street together. "How come," Llano asked quietly, "that Judge Woods don't have his office in the same building with Goss?" From the corner of his eye he could see and recognize the bulge under Howard's coat. The sawed-off shotgun, hung from a shoulder sling.

Bones coughed violently for a moment. The fever faded slowly from his cheekbones before he answered and his deep-set, sick eyes were filled with contempt. "Hell, the judge won't be seen in the same end of town as that fat toad! The judge is a man."

"Goss," Llano mused, "sent a letter on the heels of the judge's, asking me to come here to prod the law."

"Goss'd do anything," Bones replied, "that'd make 'em seem honest. He has a hard time tryin'." His lips writhed. "Believe me—I know 'em!"

Llano nodded slowly. He had not been surprised to find Bones waiting for him outside the mayor's office. Judging his man correctly, he had half expected him. He had no intention of asking the fellow's mo-

tives. He could feel that, come good or evil, Bones had attached himself to him as an ally. "Well," he said softly, "you can be valuable to me, Bones. I've a mind to make you my deputy."

Just for an instant, Howard's face was white with emotion. His eyes flared. Then his features were mask-like again.

Llano nodded. "We'll go on down to see Judge Woods now."

Judge Woods had the look of an old, lone wolf. His shaggy, white eyebrows shaded stabbing and truculent brown eyes. "Why," he barked at Llano, "didn't you come to see me first?" He was glaring at the badge on the slim youngster's white shirt. "You've already been to see that fat fool, Goss!"

Llano apologized soberly. "I sure made a mistake," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

The lean old barrister stared fiercely at him. Then, suddenly, a smile was twitching at his lips and he thrust a bony hand forward. "Well, you look like a man to me." He carelessly kicked chairs forward. "Set!" He looked at Bones Howard and nodded. "You, too." Slumping shapelessly into the chair behind his littered desk, he stared at Llano again. "Well, go ahead. Tell me what you think of Ketchum. What're you going to do about it?"

Llano's eyes were calm as he collected his thoughts. Bones Howard, recovering from a cough, broke in before he could speak. "Twig Unger, a hired Garcell gunman, back-shot Barney Rowe, boss of the Paradise, last night. I saw 'em!" Bones rasped.

Llano looked at Bones reflectively, then met the appraising stare of the judge's brown eyes. He grinned. "Well," he said quietly, "the first thing I'll do is make Bones Howard



The giant was howling and holding a pierced right hand.

my deputy. Then we'll arrest Twig Unger and jail him. I want his bail fixed so high that it'll break the red Garcells to gain his release."

Judge Woods swore delightedly. "Don't!" he barged. His fierce, old eyes glared savagely at Bones. "What's your game?" he demanded without sparring. "So far as I can remember, you've never amounted to a damn in Ketchum. A saloon bar fly. A free lunch moocher!"

For a moment, Howard's eyes were ugly. He shrugged his thin shoulders, then, with a twisted grin of self-contempt. "You read a brand plumb correct," he grunted. "But you've missed out on a thing or two. I'm also a hired killer, sent to Jessup to keep Llano Jones from ever reachin' the town of Ketchum."

"You failed!" Judge Woods snorted. "Who sent you?"

Bones' deep-set eyes were blank.

"As to who sent me—that's my own business, to be settled in my own way. As to the failin'—thank God that I did!" His voice shook for an instant. "Llano—should've killed me. He didn't! He should've had me hung. He turned me loose of his own free will! He gimme money out of his own pocket!"

"He was buyin' you?" the judge shot.

"Hell, no! He did it because he wanted to—because he's nothin' but man!"

Llano was deeply embarrassed. "Well, hell!" he murmured.

Bones was glaring, his eyes clashing with the judge's. "You gonna gimme a deputy badge or do I have to go to Goss?"

Woods ripped open a drawer of his desk. "Hell," he roared, "you go to Goss and I'll shoot you myself!" He flung the glittering badge into Bones' lap. "Now, you two get on out of here and arrest Twig Unger. I'll meet you at the jail in an hour."

As they walked out of the office, Llano's eyes met Bones'. They grinned.

At the Paradise, it looked almost as though they were expected. Since it was daytime, there was no dancing going on, and no girls were in evidence; but the bar that stretched the length of one side of the tent was busy. It was thronged with sullen, darkly scowling men who were deep in discussion, men who continually twitched restless eyes to watch the entrance. And, just outside that door, were two slouching individuals, heavily armed, who were slit-eyed with watchfulness as they scanned the sidewalks both ways.

Approaching the place with Bones, Llano saw these two slip furtively inside after a hard look in his direction. The expression on Llano's face

did not change. "Well, Bones," he said quietly, "here's where you leave me."

Without a word, Bones turned aside and slipped down an alley. Calmly and without hurry, Llano continued his even stride toward the dance hall. The Buntline Special was shrugged around where he could reach it in a hurry, but his hands hung loosely at his sides. During the walk down, Bones had told him the story. The red Garcells had long wanted the Paradise. Barney Rowe had refused to sell. Thus, last night, Twig Unger had shot Rowe in the back. It was as simple as that. There was a good chance that Twig Unger, and other Garcell men, were in the place now, serving notice of the new ownership.

Without halting outside, Llano stepped through the door. Against the change of light, his gray eyes narrowed and he saw the line of hard-faced men at the bar. They were all facing him. They were all hunched in attitudes of unspeaking and murderous readiness. Hard palms, here and there, already rested on half-drawn guns.

Llano looked them over calmly. Under the steady probe of his cool eyes, a pallid bartender stopped reaching for the shotgun under his counter and stepped back to take up towel and wet whiskey glass with trembling, fat hands.

"If there's a gent here known as Twig Unger," Llano announced. "I'd like to talk to him."

Teeth were bared as a sullen snarl arose from the men. "Llano, that's him with the purple bandanna," a harsh voice called loudly from the rear.

Spurs whined as booted men whirled. Hooked fingers clawed fiercely toward holstered guns, then stiffened and froze. Standing in the

rear door of the tent, sunken eyes glowing with deadly light, Bones Howard was crouched behind his sawed-off shotgun. The yawning muzzles of that gun weaved slowly, like the head of a poised snake. Somebody cursed with raging fury, but nobody moved.

Bones nodded. "It's awright, Llano. Make the arrest. Skunks like these don't fight unless the cards is shuffled *their* way."

Smiling thinly, Llano stepped toward toward the yellow-haired, mouthing gun fighter who wore the purple bandanna around his throat. "You, Twig Unger," he said quietly, "I'm arresting you for the murder of Barney Rowe. Shed your guns."

Froth showed at the corners of the gun fighter's twitching, gashed mouth. With a hoarse bawl, he shot his hooked hands suddenly downward. Llano's right hand twitched upward from his thigh. The long barrel of the Buntline flashed and was laid neatly across Unger's skull an inch above his left ear. Llano caught his sagging body in his waiting left arm, dragged him toward the entrance. His big gun was covering the stunned and white-faced crowd as he looked at Bones and nodded.

Bones was coughing as he shuffled through the room to join Llano at the front, but his eyes were flickering and alert. "Hell," he growled at flaming, ugly faces, "you're all plumb saving of your lead. Must be your granddaddies were Scotch." As Llano shouldered the unconscious outlaw and they moved into the street, his shotgun was raised.

CHAPTER IV.

KETCHUM CHOOSES SIDES.

FOLLOWING the dramatic arrest, Ketchum sprang into roaring life from its early-morning quiet. Within an hour, the square in front of the

two-storyed jail was thronged with three hundred howling men, and Mayor Goss appeared at an upper window and timidly waved his plump hands. He was sweating and his face was pale. He tried oratory and was roared down. His round voice cracked to a shrill pipe.

"Gentlemen," the mayor pleaded, "we must have order!"

"Where's Llano Jones?" "We want Jones!" "He's afraid to show himself!" "We'll bust down the jail!" "You gonna turn Twig Unger loose?"

The mayor sweated and flapped his fat hands helplessly, beady eyes darting and frightened.

"Shut up!" other voices roared. "Let the mayor speak!" "By hell, there ain't gonna be any jail break!"

There were others in the milling, jamming crowd, besides outlaws and rowdies—grim-lipped citizens, honest cattlemen and miners who were exulting because something like law had at last come to Ketchum. Thus made aware of this element and surprised by the strength of its numbers, the crowd grew gradually silent. Plucking up his flabby courage, Mayor Goss recovered his normal voice and began to speak. "A new era has begun in Ketchum—law and order—the forces of decency and righteousness—justice must prevail—you will please disperse and return to your businesses—as good citizens."

Slowly, the crowd began to break up. As the square cleared, it was as though the mob divided itself, each half closely watching the other as it moved away. Ketchum was choosing sides.

Inside the jail, in the court Judge Woods had declared in an unused office, Llano submitted calmly to the boiling curses and terrible, yellow glare of a frothing Killer Garcell.

Judge Woods sat behind a dusty desk. Bones Howard sat on a chair just inside the door and his shotgun was across his knees.

"Yes, by hell," Garcell howled madly, "Twig Unger is my man! Everybody knows it. What the hell you gonna do about it?"

Llano glanced quietly at the judge and the old man cleared his throat noisily. "The charge against Twig," he barked, "is murder. He can stay in jail until he's tried or, if you care that much, you can gain his release and guarantee his appearance on the trial date, by postin' a bail of twenty-thousand dollars—cash money."

Killer roared. He switched his yellow glare from the judge to Llano. "By Heaven," he raved in a choked voice, "I'd like to run into you once without that damned shotgun body-guard you're so careful to keep!"

Bones clattered his shotgun to the floor and shoved it out of his reach with his foot. "Call your cards, Mr. Killer Garcell," he growled throatily. "The judge ain't armed."

For an instant, Killer hesitated. Murder hung heavy in the air, but Llano showed no sign of it. He was straddling a chair, his elbows resting on its back and his chin in his hands, his hat pushed back. His eyes were motionless under Killer's wild glare. Slowly, he pushed the chair from beneath him and straightened up, and his right hand dropped loosely to his side. Killer looked away. "Hell," he muttered, "I've got a sore arm. I'll settle with Jones later." His face flamed savagely as Bones cackled and recovered his shotgun. "Well, hell," he roared, "I'll be back in an hour with the money. You be ready to turn Twig loose!" He whirled and burst from the room like a maddened bull.

Bones stuck his head out the door

to watch the furious outlaw go. After a moment, he looked back and his face was masklike. "He ain't left the buildin'. He went upstairs."

Llano looked at Woods and the judge nodded sourly. "Mayor Frank Goss is the richest man in town. I reckon he'll lend Killer the money. Hell, it's a cinch Killer earned the most of it for him, anyway."

Llano's face was sober. "Bones," he said, "you stay and see that the judge gets that money." Tugging his hat toward his eyes, he turned on his heel and left the room.

As he moved down the outside steps of the building, he was deep in thought. His supreme confidence in his ability to deal with Ketchum was still unshaken, but he was realizing that he had a vastly different problem here than he had faced in Jessup. For here, outlawry was an organized and banded force. Back-shooting murder was just one of the things it cold-bloodedly hired done. And, plainly, the red Garcells would have plenty of money backing their every play.

Llano was so deep in such thoughts that he did not see Tom Garcell until he had reached the bottom of the steps and stood in the dust of the square. The heavy set figure of the young outlaw he had first encountered at his campfire, was now suddenly thrust before him. The action was so deliberate that Llano actually ran into him.

Tom Garcell pretended to be upset. Staggering for balance, he whirled and his hand shot down to his gun. "Why the hell don't you look where you're goin'?" he snarled.

Llano looked at him quietly. "I didn't see you, Tom," he admitted mildly.

Tom's thick lips writhed and his blank eyes were ugly. "Lawman,"

he snapped, "you're a damned liar! You done it a-purpose!"

There were bystanders who were witness to Tom's deliberate maneuvering to get Llano in this position. They gasped as they saw that, in anticipation of an explosion from Llano at the name of liar, Tom was already yanking his gun from its holster. But Llano's eyes barely flickered at the deadly insult. Faster than thought, he slammed Tom across the face with his open, left palm. As the outlaw staggered, Llano's Buntline flashed. With deadly precision, he stretched Tom his length in the gutter before the outlaw's finger could twitch trigger. The long barrel of Llano's gun had nearly laid a dent in Tom's skull.

A group of men ran excitedly forward as Llano bent to heave Tom to his back. "By hell, sheriff, don't dirty your hands. We'll tote 'em in for you an' be proud to!"

Llano grinned. He shook his head. "I'm no sheriff—just town marshal, boys."

"Well, hell—you're all the law there is in this end of Arizona! You need any help, you call on us. This here's Tom, Bill, Jake—" They gave him their names and they shook hands all around.

Following him into Judge Woods' office, they were all witness to the blinding fury with which Killer Garcell received the news a few minutes later, that his own brother was in jail, too, and that more bail would need to be raised—a lot more. At a quiet nod from Llano, old Judge Woods had declared that it would take ten thousand, cash, to release Tom, pending trial—on the mere charge of disturbing the peace! Killer had been speechless with rage. The delighted citizens had scattered to spread the news.

And, eager personally, to eyewitness the results, all Ketchum thronged the streets that night. This was more than news. It was history in the making.

Ineffectually, Bones tried to protest as, following a leisurely supper in his hotel dining room, Llano retired to his own room and dressed up in a clean, white shirt, polished his badge and pinned it on and stood ready to appear on Arizona Street, his black hat tugged slightly forward.

"Well, but hell, Llano, it ain't as if a man of the Garcell gang dared meet you, face to face. Somebody'll try an' shoot you from behind a rain barrel!"

Llano nodded. "Maybe you're right. I'll aim to keep my eye peeled every corner I pass."

Bones gave up. Staring up into Llano's smooth, calm face, he realized that Llano was actually younger than he was, yet many years older in cool and dogged courage. He understood the thought in Llano's mind, that his failure to show himself along the street after dark would straightway be set down as cowardice. He groaned.

"But, look, Llano, let me go with you."

Llano shook his head. "Bones, you sabe a heap that I've got to do this alone. Maybe there's three thousand folks in this town. Two thousand or more are plumb honest and they're only waiting to be shown that there's law here that's worth their support." His lips tightened slightly. "I figure to show 'em."

Bones sagged back in his chair and gloomily dropped his chin on his chest. "If anything happens to you," he muttered, "I'll personally, place the Howard brand on all three Garcell hides—buckshot brand."

Llano grinned. "Amigo—I'm betting they all realize that. I feel safe." He turned on his heel and left the room.

As he stepped out to the wooden sidewalk in the kerosene glare of the torchlit street, Llano was aware that, instantly, he was the target for all eyes that had seen him. Many were friendly, some merely curious. A few were ugly and hard.

Shoulders erect and confident, he moved down the sidewalk at an easy stroll. There were those who observed the lithe and silken smoothness of his stride, the disarming looseness with which his strong, brown hands hung at his sides. Nobody could miss the grave remoteness and steady watchfulness of his gray stare. The very fact that he was abroad at all, set him up a dozen notches in the estimation of every man who saw him—friend or enemy.

Several times, as he moved slowly along, men spoke to him. "Howdy, marshal!" Each time, he returned the greeting quietly. "Howdy," or "Good evening." But at no time did he indicate that he would welcome company and nobody tried to fall into step with him.

He grew aware that a growing crowd followed him and that people ahead stepped aside to follow, too, as soon as he moved by. Also, he realized that a crowd of another sort was thickening on the other side of the street. There were men there who snickered or jeered occasionally, or passed remarks they were quick to cover if he glanced in their direction. He paid no attention.

Saloons and dance halls passed in a dreary succession. Blear-eyed faces, or painted ones, were pressed against the panes to stare at him, and he understood that the news of his progress was passing ahead of

him. He was nearing the Paradise, which was ominously, dark.

Strangely, none of the red Garcells were on the street and Llano was to learn later that they had not dreamed he would dare to show himself. Killer and Tom had, therefore, ridden out of town with half a dozen of their coldest killers to make plans for Llano's early demise and the recovery of the bail money they had been forced to turn over to Judge Woods. Billy Garcell was the only one of the three in town and, as Llano approached the Paradise, the peach-faced youngster now suddenly showed himself in front of the darkened building.

It was obvious, immediately, that Billy was drunk—dangerously and wildly drunk. His voice was lifted in a long howl of curses and promises of what he intended to do to Llano Jones the first moment he laid eyes on that lawman! He punctuated his remarks with flaming .45 slugs that were aimed with sneering carelessness, in almost any direction that struck his fancy, and he had a large space of empty sidewalk in which to enjoy his whiskey courage, all by himself.

He had a gun in each hand and was beginning the third or fourth of his bellowed orations when he suddenly discovered that there was a large crowd downstreet and that a tall, slim figure in a white shirt had emerged from that crowd and was slowly approaching him. He cut off his bellowing, planted his stocky legs wide and thrust forward his head to peer owlishly at the approaching figure.

Llano was within four paces before Billy saw clearly enough to recognize him. The burly youngster's mouth dropped open and the peach-blush fled his face, leaving him

chalky white. Llano had made no move for his own gun. He made no move now as he halted to stare into Billy's bleared eyes.

"Well, Billy," Llano said quietly, "you're pretty drunk. Better put away your guns, fork your hoss there and ride on out of town until you've cleared your head."

Sudden fury flamed the color back into the reckless youngster's face. "By hell, you're the so-and-so I been lookin' for!" he yelped. He fumbled to jerk up his guns.

Llano stepped in with a lithe motion, slapped him soundly across the face and swept his hands downward, jerking the big guns from his fists. For an instant, he stood there, cold gray gaze stabbing and cowing the youngster. Then, to the gasping astonishment of the crowded spectators, he thrust the big .45 back into Billy's holsters and gave him a shove that sent him skidding toward the horse tied at the rack. "Now, you do what I said," he admonished sternly. "Get on out of town and don't come back until you're sober enough to behave yourself."

Billy choked. Then, blindly, he yanked his bridle from the hitch rail and swung drunkenly into the saddle. He careened down the street at a break-neck run.

Llano took a deep breath. He could sense that this scene had broken the tension that had been growing between the rival crowds on each side of the street. He crossed over deliberately and strolled back toward his hotel. And there was nobody who so much as lifted a hand to stay his progress.

Well, hell! Any hombre who could take guns away from a Garcell and then hand them back as though he had spanked a naughty child!

CHAPTER V.

THE GARCELLS GANG UP.

A WEEK passed. Throughout that time, Ketchum witnessed the astonishing spectacle of a slim and white-shirted young lawman who took his steady way through town with the inexorable certainty of fate itself. Llano Jones posted an ordinance against the wearing of firearms within the limits of the town's boundaries. And, despite the growl that went up, he proceeded to enforce that ordinance to the hilt. The jail filled to overflowing. Judge Woods was forced, by sheer pressure of business, to move his office to the same building as the mayor's.

The fines that were collected threatened to burst the city's safe open. Inaugurated by the militant wives of decent miners and cattlemen, a clean-up campaign was started and, almost daily, a stage-load of painted hussies departed for towns less cursed by the blight of law and order.

There was opposition. A half a dozen times, Llano was shot at from behind water barrels or the slatted concealment of saloon swing doors. But he was never hit and, in most of these cases, only his own swift intervention saved the murderous cowards from instant lynching by furious crowds of honest citizens. No man, sober, dared face him openly, for the simple reason that there was nobody who figured that he was faster on the draw and shoot than the terrible Garcells whom Llano had so calmly disarmed and humiliated. Vicious drunks hardly counted. A dozen or so of these were nursing broken heads that Llano's Buntline had massaged and, sobering up, were grateful they were not dead. And in all that astonishing week not one man rode the long, last mile that

led to boothill. The town was suddenly so peaceful and quiet, that even honest folk felt a certain wistfulness for departed excitement.

Throughout this week, the red Garcells were conspicuous by their complete absence from town. All sorts of rumors arose. The Garcells had left the country, it was said. Instead of that, it was mysteriously affirmed, they were hiding out at a cattle camp, a dozen miles down the valley. There were wild tales of roaring orgies held nightly at that camp, of the furious quarrels and almost nightly killings that took place. This much was probably fact. The Garcells had not left the valley, but had gathered a band about them of the six or seven worst hellions in the West. They were laying plans for a murderous foray on Ketchum when they were drunk enough or felt the time was ripe. Killer wanted to be sure that his right arm was completely healed, for he would be satisfied with nothing less than the killing of Llano Jones by his own hand.

Then, suddenly, the city safe was robbed one night of its store of nearly sixty thousand in cash—and Mayor Frank Goss found tightly gagged and bound to a chair, next morning, by its yawning doors.

"By Heaven," Judge Woods roared at the frightened and sweating fat man, "there's only me and you in all this town that knows the combination to that safe! You opened it for 'em! Who were they—the red Garcells?"

Goss tried a speech of stuttered explanation that died in his throat under the old man's terrible glare.

And, the very next night, Bones Howard was shot in the back by a man who had fired at him through the rear window of an Arizona Street saloon. Two men who had tried to stop the rider who had careened out

of town, were shot down in their tracks. Fought over by the town's best doctors, Bones hung for hours between life and death, unable to speak a word concerning an assassin he had not even seen.

Llano's face turned grim and a little white after visiting his friend and meeting the haunting, pleading look in his deep-set blue eyes. Bones had tried desperately to tell him something, but had slumped into a coma from which he might never recover. A cold and bitter fury built up in Llano's brain. The red Garcells were striking. They were ganging up, and the lid was about to blow from Ketchum. Well—let them come!

The next morning, the Garcells rode openly into town. Their saddled horses were left standing in a vacant lot next to the Mirror Opera House. Accompanied by two swaggering, lean-hipped men with the ugly look of professional gun fighters, they began a tour of Ketchum's saloons and gambling halls. They were spending money, the rumor spread like flame, as though it was river water. Was that money from the town's robbed safe?

Llano buckled the big Buntline to his thigh and started downstream. He ran into the ugly five as they emerged from the Flytrap Saloon, faces flushed with heavy drinking. They whirled to face him, crouched like banded wolves, a yellow glare in the eyes of the three brothers.

Llano's gray stare probed them. He saw, instantly, that they were unarmed. At any rate, the holsters at their hips were empty. There was the distinct possibility that the bulges beneath their vests were more deadly than tobacco pouches. But Llano was no fool. There was no charge on which he could arrest these men. There was no use in his ex-



ploding their flaming tempers. Their eagerness to have him do so, was too plain on their murderous faces. His voice was quiet as he addressed them.

"Howdy, boys. I reckon you know the laws. See that you obey them."

Killer Garell's eyes were afame with hatred as he thrust his ugly chin forward. "You can see for yourself," he yelled, "that we ain't armed. As for anything else—we'll do what we damn please in this town! Understand?"

"I understand plenty," Llano nodded coolly. "I've heard that you've got a lot of spending money."

"If it's any of your-damn business," Killer howled, "we been sellin' out some of our interests here. Also, we made a cattle deal down country."

"I didn't ask." Llano smiled thinly and nodded as he turned his back on them. "Enjoy yourself," he said over his shoulder, "but take it easy."

As he walked away, Llano could hear Killer's harsh, almost asthmatic breathing behind him. He saw from

the corner of his eye, that Killer was pulling up beside him, his brutal features savagely working, his nostrils flaring. "The Paradise has been closed," Killer snarled harshly in his ear. "The doors of the Crystal Palace have been nailed shut, so's the Curly Wolf. Those places are all mine! How come?"

"Their license fees need paying," Llano said shortly.

Killer's voice was strangled. "How much?"

Llano's voice dropped a note and was smooth and soft. "Sixty thousand dollars."

"Holy hell!" Killer screamed with rage.

Llano turned abruptly into the entrance of a store, leaving the frothing man rooted to the sidewalk. An instant later, he emerged from the rear entrance and moved swiftly toward the city jail.

Judge Woods looked up sharply as the young lawman entered his office a few minutes later. Llano's face was still and stiff. He said nothing. He slumped down in a

chair and pushed back his hat. He stared at nothing. He seemed entirely unaware that the old barrister was there behind his desk. Once, his lips moved softly, and it looked as though they shaped themselves around the name of Bones Howard.

"The Garcells are in town!" the old judge barked suddenly.

Llano's eyes slid toward him sightlessly. He nodded.

Judge Woods shivered. "Well," he muttered, "what're you going to do?"

Llano did not move. "I'm waiting," he said softly, "just waiting."

Again, under the sightless thrust of those still, gray eyes, the old man shivered. He stood up quickly and began to pace the room. He did not speak again. His bony, old hands trembled. He turned abruptly to the big safe, at last, and whirled its combination. Fumbling in its interior, he brought out a huge pistol, an old cap-and-ball Colt with a bore as big as his thumb.

"What're you doing?" Llano asked softly.

The old man swore and thrust the gun away. He slumped down in his chair and his bony chin sagged down on his chest.

An hour wore away, an hour in which neither man spoke nor scarcely moved. Then, suddenly, an outer door slammed and a boy appeared an instant later, a hatless and sweating youngster with a crumpled message in his hand.

Llano took the paper silently. His eyes took in the words with one glance.

We're waiting in the vacant lot next the Opery House. If you're a man you'll meet me alone. This is the showdown.

KILLER GARCCELL.

Llano nodded at the hard-breathing boy. "Tell him, I'm on my way." He stood up, adjusted the

Buntline firmly against his slim thigh, pulled his hat forward.

Judge Woods' anxiety boiled over and exploded. "What is it? Where you going?"

Llano smiled at him reassuringly. His face was smooth and untroubled. "Just a little business," he said. "I won't be long." The strange look of death that had been in his eyes was no longer there. He nodded and stepped through the door, closing it firmly behind him. The lock clicked.

The judge sprang to his feet. He pounced on the note that had fluttered to the floor from Llano's fingers and his face went chalky white. He cursed and leaped to the safe for his old gun. He found the door locked when he tried to leave the room. Swearing wildly, he turned toward the window.

The hot sun of high noon was on Llano's white-shirted shoulders as he moved slowly down the middle of Arizona Street. He wondered idly, if he would feel that warm caress to-morrow noon, or any noon after this. He shrugged the thought from his mind. Well, he was in for this now. There was no turning back nor running away. No man could do that. He was not walking to a fight with Killer Garcell, but with Tom Garcell, too, and Billy, and the two men with them. Well, but hell! Again, his mind shrugged thought away.

He saw Mayor Frank Goss running up the street toward him. The fat man was panting and the sweat was streaming from his forehead. He was wringing his flabby hands.

"Llano!" Goss panted. "You can't go down there! They're waiting for you—the Garcells. You'll—they'll kill you!"

"You afraid for me—or them?" Llano eyed the man quietly, pushed him out of his way and went on.

He had gone another block when

he heard the rush of stumbling footsteps behind him and turned to look back. Judge Woods! The old man was limping on a lamed ankle. He had jumped from his window! The tails of his frock coat were sailing behind him like the flapping wings of a crow. His savage, old eyes were flaming and his big gun was in his fist. Llano scowled.

"Llano," the judge barked, "don't say a word. Listen," and he grinned crookedly, "you talk back to me and I'll jail you for contempt of court. Boy—I'm in this with you, and you can't stop me!"

There was a strange light in Llano's eyes. He was thinking what a wonderful thing it was—this strange, powerful .45 friendship that held some men together, in spite of hell and death. "Judge, I wish you wouldn't," he said quietly, "but, if you insist—well, you're in."

"I knew you had sense," the old man snorted and limped along beside him. "Damn you, for lockin' me up!" he fumed.

The vacant lot was little more than a block away now. Llano could see that a considerable crowd had gathered, and that an argument was going on, but that nobody was daring to make a move against the armed array of the three Garcells and their two allies. Steadily, he moved down the street and the old man beside him stanchly kept pace.

They were within half a block of their rendezvous and had been discovered by the crowd when Llano suddenly halted dead in his tracks. He swore softly and his face was white. Out of the building directly across the street from the vacant lot, a skinny and white-robed figure had suddenly leaped and was running toward him. Bones Howard, looking like burning, grinning death in his

nightgown, staggering and tottering, but staying grimly erect as his bare feet plunged into the dust of the street. Bones, who had been in a coma from loss of blood, no later than the night before!

Bones' eyes were feverish and glowing with a ghastly light. "I been watchin' 'em from my bed in the hotel for the last hour!" he gasped. "Llano, I been waitin' for you to show! I'm ready!"

Llano's eyes struck the judge's, and the old man nodded. "He's in!"

There was a soft smile on Llano's lips as he turned and walked slowly ahead.

There was a sudden hush over the crowd as it parted and made way for the astonishing trio of friends. No man could find a word to say. Nothing like this had ever been in the experience of any one of them and they were stunned to speechlessness and inactivity. Llano—tall and slim, black hat, white shirt, black trousers and boots, his hands swinging loosely at his sides as he stared straight ahead from quiet, gray eyes. Judge Woods—a white-haired old lobo in flapping frock coat, a massive pistol clutched firmly in his fist. Bones Howard—a white-robed death's head with his sawed-off shotgun hugged to his skinny chest.

Hell!

CHAPTER VI.

KETCHUM WRITES AN EPITAPH.

As the parting of the crowd dispersed this ungodly spectacle to the blustering outlaws who waited, those five men suddenly crouched in attitudes of paralyzed astonishment and fear. Killer Garcell's brute face whitened and his mouth dropped open.

"Stop!" he screamed suddenly.

"By hell—wasn't you man enough to come alone?"

Llano did not halt. His steady stride carried him straight ahead. There was a slight smile on his lips. "Killer, I had no choice about these friends coming along. Look. You can pour all of your lead at me, if you like. Why aren't you shooting? Scared?"

The crowd had scattered to points of safety. Llano was still walking straight ahead, talking softly. He had made no move for his gun. His partners were sticking along grimly beside him. Ten yards, eight, five yards alone finally separated the two forces. Then, suddenly, Killer exploded with tension. He screamed. His hands shot down toward his loaded thighs.

Llano's body flicked sideways, The Buntline flamed up, mingled its roar with Killer's weapons. Killer staggered, a sudden gush of blood at his mouth. He tried to keep his weapons up, keep them roaring. Their slugs drummed into hard ground. Billy Garcell swept into action. Bones' scatter gun blasted him to horrible oblivion. Tom Garcell was down on one knee and fighting savagely until the judge's cap-and-ball smashed him backward in a kicking frenzy. The hired gun fighters threw away their weapons and scrambled for their horses in terror. Bones' scatter gun blasted again and one cartwheeled in agony, the other spun around and around, clutching at the shoulder in which Llano's Buntline had planted hot lead.

Blood streaming from his forehead, Llano whirled anxiously to look at his friends. The judge was all right, though pinked in one skinny thigh and wobbling, swearing wholeheartedly. But Bones was down and

there was a bubbling froth of blood at his lips. He was staring up at Llano anxiously and trying to speak. With a groan, Llano dropped to his knees beside him.

"Llano," Bones whispered, "I'm dyin'. I got somethin' to say." He gasped for breath for a few seconds. "Mayor Goss," Bones muttered, "is my brother. He made me change my name from Goss, swore he'd never let me stay in Ketchum 'less I did. He was ashamed of me. Hell . . . I been plumb ashamed of him, too!"

Bones struggled frantically to stay alive a few instants more. "Llano," he begged, "don't tell nobody. It was Frank sent me to Jessup to kill you. Don't tell. I've wiped that out . . . haven't I?"

Llano had had to bend his head low to catch the tiny whisper of Bones' words. He was glad that nobody else could have heard. He knew that he had only to say a word to Frank Goss and the little mayor would leave Ketchum forever. "Sure, Bones, everything's O. K. by me. Now, take it easy. You'll live—"

But Bones was already dead.

When Llano looked up at last, the crowd had already rushed to jail those who were still living among the outlaws. A little knot stood around with bared heads, looking down at Bones. They turned their eyes away from Llano's look.

Somebody was clearing his throat loudly. "Hell," he rumbled, "we'll sure give Bones a funeral. We gotta write a epitaph for him that'll stick."

"Epitaph!" Judge Woods snorted. "That's an idea. By Heaven, we'll change the name of Ketchum to—Epitaph! The town that's a monument to a real man's death!"

Llano smiled and nodded. That was his notion of an idea, too.



SNAKE BRAND

by J. ALLAN DUNN

Snake-branded at birth, the sinister fangs of a serpent ruled his life—and death!

THE eyes of the old man were as steady as mica flakes in a rock. The upper lids were puckered in the center, the lower ones made straight lines, so that he gazed through triangular hoods of flesh. The steady gaze gripped that of the younger man.

The eyes of the latter had the pupils dilated so the iris was blacked out to narrow rims, like hoops of tarnished brass. Reptilian orbs, murky with cruelty and anger.

The old man sat on the steps of his porch, gnarled hands on rheumatic knees. Wrinkled hands, corded with slack veins, spotted with age-freckles; but they had not lost their usefulness.

WW—6E

His holstered gun; a Colt .45 with a bone handle, old and worn, but still efficient, angled awkwardly on the edge of one wooden tread.

The old man and that gun had a joint reputation for speed and accuracy. The younger man knew it.

“Don’t make a move, Waco! Or thet snake’ll git you. Right on the rock by your knee. Waitin’!”

Into the black eyes there came panic. They fumed with sudden terror. Waco was tall and spare, his head was plated in flat angles by the prominent bones. A large head, cheeks wide, nose crooked, hooked and thin, neck lean and leathery.

An artery ticked at his temple. Beads of sweat gathered and rolled over it as he squinted down, sighting over the bent nose-bridge; only the eyes in motion. Now the pupils had contracted, revealing more of

the catlike iris. The whites were muddy, flicked with broken veins.

His voice rasped in relief.

"You're a damn liar, Hank! That ain't no snake. Thar never was none. Fer two—"

"You *thought* thar was, Waco. An' you took your own snake eyes offn me. Long enough. Mebbe that snake was jest my thought. Times' when thoughts is deadly as sidewinders. You're snake-branded, Waco. Snake-minded! Your maw was bit by a big rattler jest afore you was born. Heart wouldn't stand up, an' it killed her. Left you with snake pizen in your veins."

Waco's bronzed features were cinder-gray, filmed with a patina of superstition-ridden fear. He was Mexican-Indian, more Pima than Spanish, savage and shallow minded. The old man went on.

"Some says you was birth-marked with a snake on the inside of your thigh. Nita give that out. She was the only woman they could git to help your maw. She couldn't save your maw, but she told, you was snake-branded at birth, an' that you'd be snake-marked at death.

"You kin figger that out to suit yourself, Waco. Mebbe old Nita didn't figger you was born to be hanged. They'd hang *me*, fer what I've got in my mind right now if I turned loose. Like they would if you did the same to me, like *you're* thinkin'."

"You ruined my sister's boy. He was a decent enough lad before he trailed with you. You made a rustler out of him. Now he's in jail, like to be hanged fer killin' a night guard. You killed that guard, Waco. You can't lie to me an' git away with it. Them black pupils of your'n quiver when you lie, like all Injun greasers. Quiverin' now, like the fawked end of a snake's tongue quivers.

"Ned didn't kill that guard. I've talked with him, in jail. *You* ain't fitten to live, Waco. You ain't *goir'* to live if Ned gits sentenced. Now git, climb your hull an' don't drag your rope. I've told you. *Vaya!*"

Mica-gray eyes and gun muzzle were alike unwavering. Waco backed down the path to where his cayuse stood in the scant shade of a tree. He trod warily, stepping high, glancing all about him.

At the tree he whirled, snatched the reins, vaulted into the saddle. He waled the pony with his quirt, raked its flanks with sharpened rowels, tearing across the flat, lifting the dust high to every leap.

Now the pent wrath came out, his face was vile, convulsed with hate, but all the fear was not out of his eyes. He larded his words with obscenity:

"The old buzzard! Tryin' to pin a hoodoo on me! Think I'm goin' to put myse'f in the place of that loco fool, Ned? To hell with 'em!"

He crossed himself superstitiously, spat between his crossed fingers of both hands to avert the *hechiza*—the enchantment—twitching with nervous fear as, for a moment, it seemed to him that the serpentine birthmark inside his thigh had come to life—was crawling.

Suddenly his mount leaped high and aside, shying, snorting. A diamondback rattler basked on a flat outcrop where prickly pear thrust through the weathered seams of stone. Its eye glittered. It lifted a flat head, and the musky smell that had scared the pony came to Waco.

He spurred deep, plying his quirt, cursing as the horse raced on with bloody flanks and blood-red distended nostrils.

Waco had not been to the courthouse. He stayed *perdido* in the cantina of José Perez, drinking Pisco

brandy until the news came that Ned Horn was to hang.

Waco bought another flask of Pisco, and headed for his adobe cabáña, fire in his veins, drunk but saddle-sober. The hovel was in a side gulch off the canyon through which the highway ran. It was the mail route. Waco had a box nailed to a tree beside the road for his infrequent letters and frequent circulars. Like all his kind, he was avid for advertising of that sort.

He lifted the lid, that closed with hasp and staple, fumbled in the box, from the saddle. For once the box was empty. Waco rolled out of the saddle, stripped the rigging from the pony. It rolled in the dust, then started to forage.

Waco glanced with a leer at the side of the gulch. Up there, at the bottom of a narrow but deep rift, and covered with débris, was an important bit of evidence the defense attorney had sought in vain.

The lawyer had made the most out of the fact that the bullet was missing, that Ned Horn's gun was clean, the cylinder filled. But there was proof enough that he had been on the spot. A killer could always clean and reload his weapon. The murdered puncher had worked for a powerful and prominent outfit. Somebody had to be hanged.

Waco reeled into the adobe shack, flung himself on his bunk, swigged from the flask of potent Pisco.

"To hell with Hank Rivers!" he muttered. "To hell with Nita!" Go-in' to die, was he, because Ned was sentenced to swing? Not him. Tomorrow he'd be across the border.

II.

The mail carrier stopped his buckboard at Waco's box, put in three wrapped circulars. He left the latch free, the lid closed.

That was quite early, long before Waco ever thought of stirring, drunk or sober.

A few riders passed through the canyon at intervals. One of them stopped at the mailbox. When he left it, the latch was hasped and fastened by the nail attached to a string for that purpose.

The sun mounted above the canyon cliff and beat down fiercely on the box. Cicadas whirred. Now and then it seemed as if some of them had gotten into the mailbox.

Waco sat on the edge of his bunk at noon. There was intense pain in the left lobe of his brain. The rest of his skull seemed stuffed with cotton. He finished his aguardiente without relief. He staggered to the little spring, and drank deeply. His horse had strayed. He stumbled over the rigging on his way to the mailbox, damning the caballo.

The box was shoulder high, convenient to reach from the saddle. Waco did not remember setting the nail. He did not remember anything much about yesterday save that Ned Horn was going to be hanged, that he, Waco, was in the clear, off for Mexico. There was money waiting for him there from the steers Ned Horn had helped to rustle.

Then he remembered Hank Rivers' words. The spring water had seemed to revive him; now it seemed to rouse the alcohol that fumed in his brain. The terrific pain returned, dizzied him for a moment, so that he leaned against the tree.

Then he fumbled in the box, lifting the lid.

There was the swift and strong strike of a coiled body that had been maddened by the sun beating down on its prison. The living cable was about as big as a man's forearm, a mass of muscle. The rhombic pattern

proclaimed the diamondback rattlesnake. It had fifteen rattles, some of them broken trying to escape.

The flat head smote like a battering-ram. The fangs rose vertical, slightly curving, the tubes charged with concentrated venom.

Twice it struck, then closed its mouth upon Waco's wrist. He screamed as the snake dangled, writhing, relaxed its grip, fell to the ground, slithered away.

Waco looked at the marks where the fangs had gone into the blue surface veins of his inner wrist, making marks of a deeper blue. No blood showed. The poison was already in the blood, coagulating it, jelling it. Already the wrist was swelling, as Waco gazed at it.

Snake-branded!

He could feel the venom creeping up his arm. Hank had said he would die. Nita had prophesied this—the *bruja maldita!*

He was going to die! He was going to die!

And he was already dying. His arm was twice its normal size. So it looked to him.

Ned Horn had been sentenced to die—by the rope. He was sentenced to die by a far more horrible death. Waco had seen people die from rattler venom. It was a horrible sight.

Hank Rivers had sentenced him.

As in a vision, he saw a rider coming along.

Sobbing, trying to cross himself with his left hand, backward, in a devil's signature, Waco staggered, slobbering to meet the horseman.

"Sam Slade found him," the sheriff told Hank Rivers. "He was in bad shape. Arm swole up mighty big, ol'ar up to the armpit. Sam slashed the bites—two of 'em, thar was—but

he didn't feel like suckin' blood from no greaser, least of all this hombre. He got the blood to flowin', an' put on a turnikay. Eased it up once in a while. Brung him in jest livin'.

"Doc did the best he could. This Waco wanted a priest. An' after the priest was through, an' he knowed he was a goner, he wanted me. Knowed he was bound fer hell if he didn't come clean. He'd confessed to the padre, an' he did likewise to me, an' two good witnesses. Ned is free of the killin'. Reckon he'll have to face the rustlin' charge."

"Give him time to think," said Hank. "Waco sure got his comeuppance. Still livin'?"

"Died jest afore I rid over here. It's damn cur'ous, how he died. He seemed to think you'd sot a hechiza on him, Hank."

"Not me. It was sot long ago. Ask Nita. Thet canyon is a great place fer rattlers. I saw one last time I come through thar that sure looked like the gran'pap of all culebras to me. Might even have been the same one bit Waco."

"Never heard of a snake climbin' trees," the sheriff said, "or gettin' into a closed mailbox. Thar's something blamed peculiar about it."

"Sure looks like thet snake knowed Waco's ways. I reckon it might have knowed how he liked them advertisin' books the mail order houses send out. All Mexies do. Sheriff, I reckon thet snake was plumb eddicated."

"I wouldn't wonder, Hank; I wouldn't wonder."

"You ain't worryin' none about it?"

"None whatever."

"In that case, we might h'ist a li'l redeye. Congratulations to Ned, as it were."

The sheriff raised his glass.

"The same to you," he said.

TOUGHS QUELLED BY BRAVE SCOUT

A FAMOUS trapper, scout and guide, George Belden, was on duty at Fort Cottonwood, Nebraska. The scarcity of officers at the post, made it necessary for the commander to detail Belden, with thirty Indian soldiers, to garrison the ranch of an absent owner, Jack Morrow. On arriving at the ranch, twelve miles west of the fort, Belden found a party of tough characters encamped in front of the house. The Indian soldiers were asleep in the big wagons, so, after telling the drivers to halt their teams, he awoke the Indians quietly. He told them that there might be trouble, and to be ready to rush out if he should give the signal.

Three fires were burning and the intruders were seated around them. Each one was provided with a pair of revolvers and a knife, and all were enjoying a supper of bacon, flapjacks, and coffee. Belden rode forward and hailed them. Dismounting, he asked what party they were. They said they were wood haulers, taking building logs down the road. Then Belden told them who he was, and said that this was the end of his journey, and he would stay there.

The toughs muttered that they had no room for any men, or for stock. That they had come here to stay, and no one could put them out. They warned him that he and his two drivers had better move on, or they would soon make them. At this, Belden ordered his men to unharness the wagons, and put their teams in the stable.

This was met with a profane protest. A bunch of the wood haulers rushed to the stable and blocked the door, and one of them shouted, "The first man that tries to put a mule in this stable, will be fixed for good." The other men began milling around and muttering threats. Suddenly, the one who seemed to be the leader, drew his gun. At this, Belden shouted in the Indian language, "Turn out! Turn out!"

The soldiers jumped from the canvas-covered wagons, yelling like demons, and brandishing their carbines and revolvers. The wood haulers stopped in their tracks for a few seconds; then, thinking the Indian soldiers were hostile savages, all set ready to scalp them, they started to run. But Belden called them back, assuring them that they wouldn't be hurt, provided they behaved themselves. Not another word was spoken while the Indians led the mules into the stable.

Then the roughs changed their tune, and tried to laugh off the whole matter as a good joke. They said they knew all the time that the wagons were filled with soldiers, and they only wanted to find out if the officer had nerve.

The following morning at day-break, they went off, but not before Belden had secured the names of the leaders of the gang. An examination of the ranchhouse showed that, during their stay there, it had been damaged as much as if an army had occupied it for six months.

OMAHA WEEPS

ON THE OREGON TRAIL

WHILE OMAHA WAS BROUGHT INTO THE INDIAN CAMP, JOANNA AND ABIGAIL ESCAPED FROM THERE--AT PRESENT THEY ARE BEING PURSUED BY A BAND OF THE INDIANS--

THEY'VE GOT OMAHA - IF I'D KNOWN THAT---



SUDDENLY A MOUNTED MAN BLOCKED THEIR WAY--

HALT SENORITAS!



"CHEROKEE!" GASPED JOANNA.

ONCE MORE THE GIRLS ARE FORCED BACK TO THE INDIAN VILLAGE.

ME SEE YOUR CHIEF-

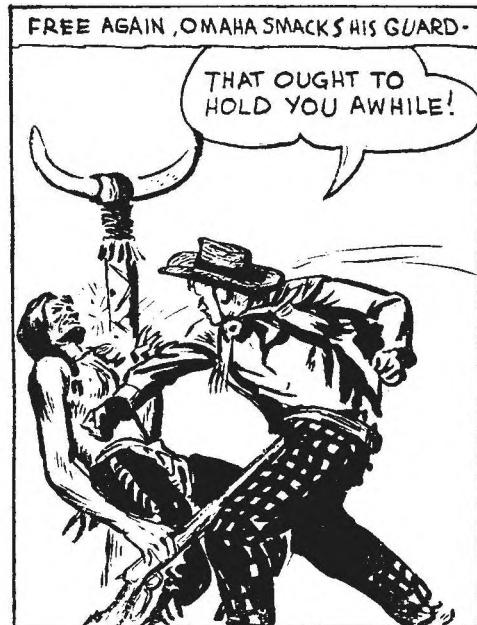


IN THE CAMP .. OLD SUN-DRIED RAWHIDE DIDN'T HOLD OMAHA LONG



BY WARREN E. CARLETON

DRAWINGS BY BILL TIMMINS







CONTINUED - NEXT WEEK -

What Buck Was Needin'

by ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Deer Boss: Out here on the mesa range,
 It's peaceful an' awful still.
 I'm sendin' a note like yuh told me to,
 By the Forest Ranger that passes through;
 An' he's jest come over the hill.

Right after I come, a grizzly bear
 Busts into the hut one night.
 He stood 'twixt me an' the cabin door,
 But I had good luck with my .44,
 An' killed him after a fight.

The greaser waddy was scairt to death.
 Nex' day he took him wings,
 With my one good rifle an' things to smoke,
 An' duds an' money, an' left me broke,
 So I'm needin' all them things.

I ain't been usin' my bunk at all,
 Got no more guts than a sheep.
 I tie myself high up in a tree,
 For fear the mate will come lookin' for me,
 An' I'm needin' a pile of sleep.

If I won't be leavin' till late nex' fall,
 'Fore snow blocks up the trails,
 I got to be makin' the shanty strong,
 For I can't be roostin' in trees too long,
 So I'm needin' a ax an' nails.

The top got broke on the sugar tin,
 An' it's full of bugs an' ants.
 I'm needin' that, an' another suit,
 Since mine got tore when I fit that brute,
 But mostly I'm needin' pants.

The hoss yuh give me was old an' sick,
 An' the pore old crowbait died.
 I ain't no hand for walkin', boss,
 An' I shore am needin' another hoss,
 Yore's trooly, Buck McBride.

P. S.—I nearly forgot it, boss,
 An' I'm thinkin' yuh'll want to know.
 The cows lit out when they smelt that bear,
 An' I ain't seen none of them, hide nor hair,
 So I'm needin' another herd.

STEPSON OF SATAN



PART II

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Author of "Heir to the Hangnose," etc.

**Unknown to one another, each seething with hatred
—Death hovering harshly—brother faces brother!**

The Story So Far:

In the blasting heat of the Whetstones BOSS LINSTROM and his killer band wait for news of the Hurley's wagon train. Boss Linstrom has information that the Hurleys are transporting a load of gold back East with them. With Linstrom are:

HACK DONNELL, his right-hand man, STUD WORDENE, a gambler and vicious killer, and

CUFF MURMAN, a hard-mouthed gunman who plans to buy out a cattle outfit he has already partially despoiled.

As they wait, each man plans how further to enrich himself with the gold they are determined to take from the Hurleys. Their thoughts are broken by the arrival of

JIM CARNEY, the scout whom Linstrom has sent to town and who warns them that the Hurleys are already almost abreast of the band. Linstrom instructs his gunnies to kill the entire family in cold blood.

This cold-blooded plan is too brutal for Carney who revolts against it. Linstrom shoots him down, and the killers take up vantage points from which to watch the trail.

The Hurleys arrive, find Carney bleeding to death. They attempt to save him, but he dies as he tries to warn them of Linstrom's plot.

Linstrom and his gang descend on the Hurleys. Without mercy they kill Tom Hurley, the father, and Martha Hurley, the mother of

BLAIZE HURLEY, and his younger brother

CUB HURLEY, who is more puzzled and frightened than aware of the great tragedy that has befallen the family.

Thinking the entire company slain, Linstrom and his killers start a search through the wagons for the hidden gold. Stud Wordene climbs over a wagon tail gate, only to be shot in the hand by young Blaize, who runs to the hills, but who is shot down by Boss Linstrom.

The gang then search furiously for the bullion when the baby, Cub Hurley, climbs in view and asks for his dead mother and father. Linstrom tries to kill the infant, but Wordene stops him. The latter plans to bring up the child himself and make him pay for Blaize's crippling shot that has ruined Wordene's right hand.

Meanwhile, Blaize, old enough to know the vastness of the tragedy, has recovered consciousness and vowed to chase down

the slayers of his family, slayers of whom he has heard only one called by name. This is Stud Wordene.

As he makes this vow, a band of Apaches swoop down on him, and Blaize is captured by the leading horseman,

CHIEF TAMANMO. The Indians return to inspect the wagon train when soldiers appear and shoot at the redskins despite Blaize's shouted pleas that bad whites were responsible. Tamanno directs his warriors to flee, which they do, taking Blaize with them—but not before the Indians have realized that whoever killed the Hurleys have planted *Apache arrows*, in the pitiful bodies.

CHAPTER VI.

FLIGHT TO NOWHERE.

THE minutes that followed were like hours to Blaize Hurley's tortured brain. The jarring thud of the horse's hoofs sent blinding waves of pain through his head. He tried to hang onto his flagging senses, but it seemed the pounding hoofs loosed a curtain that tumbled like a red mist over his eyes.

After that, things were blurry and unreal, a jumble of drumming hoofs, crashing guns, and yelling voices. Once he heard an Indian's shrill scream that seemed to pierce his ear-drums, then that sound was lost to him. He knew fear; it was a cold, gnawing, deep-set something that intermingled with the black clouds of hatred that neither pain nor anguish could blot from his brain.

Hazy pictures flickered across his mind with poignant clearness, bringing a sob that racked his slender body—his father's blood-flecked lips working as he sank to the floor of the wagon—his mother's ashes face as leaden death tore through her breast, the terror in her low cry, "My sons! Oh, my sons!"—little Cub, not understanding, whimpering as he tugged at the skirts of his mother who no longer could answer his cry.

And through all this, Blaize knew

that the rattle of gunfire behind them had gradually dwindling off into the distance. But the speed of the horse that carried him didn't lessen. It seemed to increase, to his feverish brain. Arid stretches of cactus and sage flashed by, dimmed and distorted by his blurry vision. The heat of the air was choking to his lungs. Then came fields of sun-bleached boulders, looming gray cliff walls. In time the air thinned, taking on a chill that seemed to dull somewhat the pain inside his head.

Then, almost abruptly, the rocking motion that had jarred him, ended, and he knew the horse that carried him had halted its wild run. Silence came. He pried his aching eyes open, looked up to see the blurry image of Tamanmo's impassive face close before him. He looked around dazedly, saw upflung, craggy peaks on all sides of him. The trail swooped sickeningly from the feet of the blowing horse, pitching downward to the floor of a narrow, rock-walled canyon that gave dim view to the gray of sage and the green stretches of grasses along a slender ribbon of water the high sun changed to molten silver. The chief's finger pointed into the depths of the canyon, and Blaize heard the rumble of his voice.

"Here we will hide and make our village, my son."

Blaize's eyes drifted back to the chief's. "The soldiers will never find your people now—not here," he said weakly.

Tamanmo spoke wearily. "My son does not know the white soldier. Some day they will find us. Always the white man comes to drive the Indian from his home."

"But your men," Blaize said haltingly. "Your warriors, they're gone!"

Tamanmo nodded, bitterness crossing his stern face. "Some have

gone ahead to warn our women and bring them here. Others have gone back to take the war trail. Many of my people will die, for the white soldiers are many. Tamanmo has lived long, and he has seen the white men grow from few to many. It is bad for Tamanmo's people. Bad."

"But it's not right," Blaize cried out. "You didn't do it. I tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen!"

A slow, patient smile creased the old chief's dark face. It was like a mask of bronze, his face, brooding, bitter. "Many things the white men have done to the Indian have not been right. They have taken our hunting grounds, killed our women and children. For many moons this has happened. Today again they have brought us war, and we want only peace."

That black, blinding wave of hatred rushed like liquid flame through young Blaize Hurley's veins. Four white men had done this to these Indians; the same four men had done even more to him. He hadn't got a clear view of them, but he had heard one of them named. "Wordene!" And that name had been etched in his memory by the red fires of murder.

"They killed my mother and father and brother," he said in a broken whisper. Sobs rose in his throat, but he bit them back. "Four men—white men—did that. But some day I'll find them. Some day—"

The chief nodded slowly, his dark eyes mirroring the bitterness that brooded within him. "My people will hide here, and the white boy will be my son. He will make a great chief, a great warrior among Tamanmo's people. Tamanmo has lived long, and he sees many moons ahead. Tamanmo's people cannot fight the white man. But my son is white. Tamanmo will teach his

white son the war trails of the Indian. He will get his white friends to teach him of guns. Yes, some day my son will find the men who did this. And then he will fight."

CHAPTER VII.

COLT EMPIRE.

THE passing of five years had made many changes in the town of Brasher. Boss Linstrom rocked back in his chair on the porch of his office, and surveyed them with grim satisfaction. Directly across the wide, rutty street was the Brasher bank. He smiled faintly—his bank! His glance traveled down the street from the bank to Stud Wordene's Gold Spot Emporium, a huge, false-fronted building that even at this afternoon hour showed signs of a thriving business. And Stud Wordene took his orders.

At the far end of town the shipping pens were clogged with bawling cattle Cuff Murman had driven in from his giant Circle CM spread. Linstrom's smile broadened. His fourth interest in Murman's spread was a small fortune in itself.

Nearer at hand, his attention was caught by three men stepping from the squat, dobe-walled jail office. Cuff Murman strode in the lead, a thickset, stolid man, with pale, shifty eyes and twitching lips. At one side, Stud Wordene paced in long, smooth strides, his narrow features as blank of expression as his dark eyes.

The third man was Hack Donnell, moving across the street with the other two in jerky, uneven strides. Linstrom reflected that even the sheriff's badge pinned on Donnell's shirt front had failed to rob the runty gunman of his habitual wariness. And as Linstrom watched the sun glinting from the polished sur-

face of the badge, a chuckle rumbled in his throat. Even the law here in Brasher belonged to him.

Linstrom shoved out of his chair, as the three men strode up the porch steps. He motioned toward the open door behind him, then followed them into the room, closing the door behind him. He crossed the room to his desk and dropped heavily into his swivel chair, the satisfied grin still clinging to his thick lips, as his glance ran over the three men.

"I reckon you-all know what day this is," he said at length.

Cuff Murman's pale eyes blinked nervously, and his lips tightened. Hack Donnell chuckled and said nothing. Only in the burning glance Stud Wordene cast toward his bullet-twisted left hand, did the gambler show that he had heard.

"I reckon," he answered tonelessly. He lifted his left hand. A bullet scar ranged along its back, and his fingers were stiff, bony talons. "Five years ago today that damned Hurley kid—" He broke off abruptly. "I reckon we know, Boss."

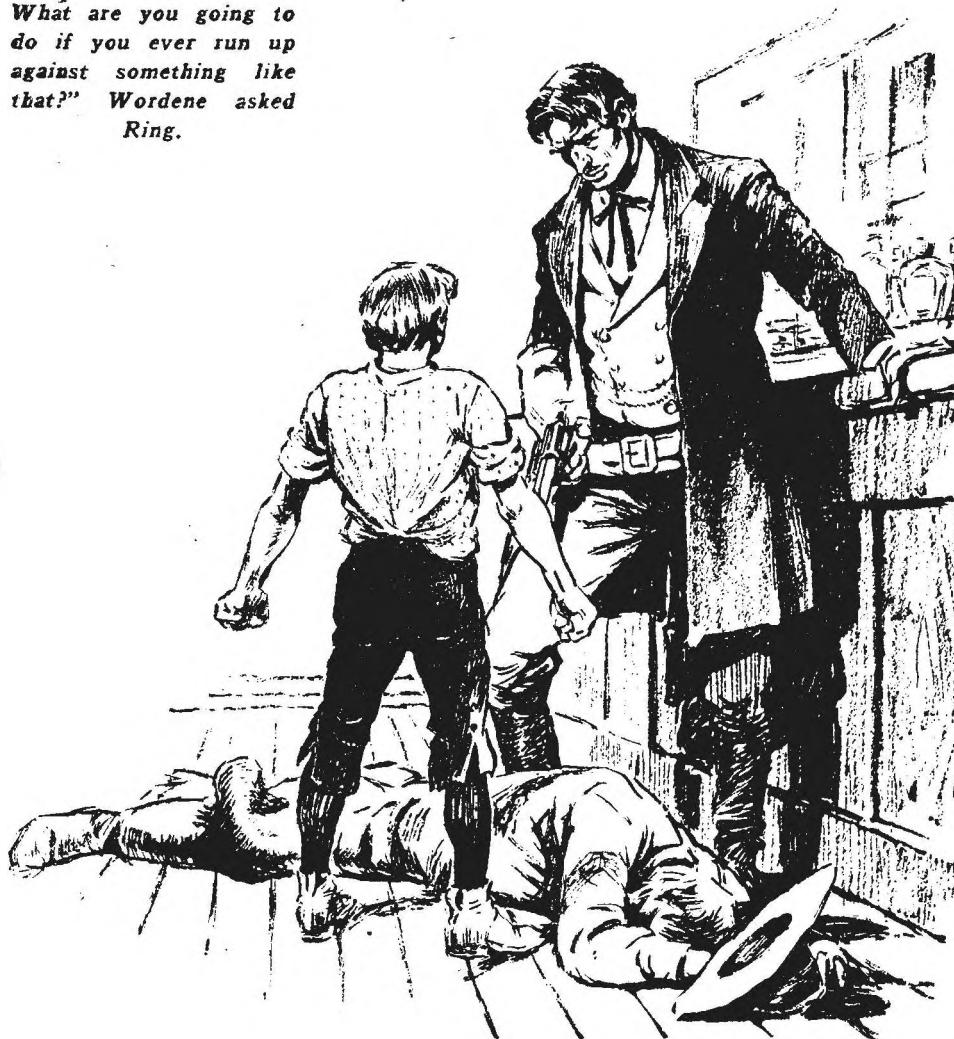
Linstrom laughed shortly. "That gold we got put us a long way," he rumbled, a hard note rising in his voice. "We own the whole blamed county. Murman's got the only cow outfit to speak of. Wordene gets all the saloon business. Donnell is the law, an' I own the bank. But all that is just the start."

The three men leaned forward, faces tensing, eyes going bright and hard. Linstrom picked a paper from the top of his desk, chuckling.

"This came from Washington today. Wordene, how'd yuh like to sell liquor to them Injuns in the reservation the government is settin' up in the Chiricahuas?"

Stud Wordene chuckled tonelessly. "That might mean a nice

What are you going to do if you ever run up against something like that?" Wordene asked Ring.



chunk of cash—if we could get it," he said scratchily.

"We can," Linstrom ripped out. "Murman, how'd you like to sell the government cattle at top price an' then deliver only half of them?"

The cowman's shifty eyes blinked rapidly, his lips twitching into a faint smile. "Boss, that's the way I like to do business," he growled.

Hack Donnell leaned forward in his chair, eagerness in every line of his pinched face. His words came on the heels of a hoarse oath. "Boss,

yuh tryin' to say we could do all that—an' get away with it?"

Boss Linstrom's lips twisted into a broad grin, and he waved the paper in his hand. "With me agent for the reservation, that won't be half of it," he ground out. "An' that's what this paper is—my appointment. Murman, you an' Wordene can do like I said. I'll cut their rations in half an' we'll clean up big. Them Injuns have been gettin' along too damn easy anyhow." He chuckled meaningfully. "They massacred

the Hurley wagon train five years ago, didn't they?"

The nervous twiching returned to Cuff Murman's flat lips. "Boss, that sounds good," he broke in hoarsely. "But we don't want to take no risk."

Linstrom laughed with a harsh lack of humor. "Risk?" he brayed. "Murman, you always did want to crawl around an hour before yuh jumped. This ain't no risk. I'm agent for the reservation, ain't I? An' Hack Donnell is the law. Let them Injuns get proddy, an' Donnell will throw 'em in jail. Shore, an' we'll collect court charges to boot!"

Then from the street outside, came the drumming beat of a horse's hoofs. Boss Linstrom jerked to his feet, sending his chair skidding into the wall behind him as he straightened to stare out the front window. Then his eyes whipped back to fasten on Cuff Murman's square face.

"It's Jake Piell!" he jarred out. "Murman, you been havin' trouble with him again?"

A shadow of gray struck the cowman's blocky face, and he nodded jerkily. "We got to shut him up for good, Boss," he said harshly. "He—"

Then the door of the office banged open, framing a tall, stoop-shouldered man against the glare of the sun outside. He halted there, rocking slightly on wide-spread legs, work-hardened hands clenching and unclenching at his side as his bitter stare flashed over the room. Then his eyes fastened on Cuff Murman, and he cursed hoarsely.

"Murman, I been lookin' for you!" he ground out. "You dirty, rustlin' polecat! Don't you own enough of this county without robbin' us little ranchers? We have hard enough a time lookin' after our families without havin' the few cattle we got rustled from us."

Cuff Murman jerked to his feet as if driven, the gray on his face darkening under the rush of hot blood. His voice came in a roar of flaring anger.



"Piell, you got gall, bracin' me with that kind of talk," he ripped out. "I warned you once, an' I won't tell you twice."

The rancher in the doorway laughed in ringing bitterness. "Shore, yuh warned me!" he lashed back. "Yuh warned me if I ever saw any more of my cattle you'd rustled to keep my mouth shut or yuh'd kill me. Well, kill me, damn yuh! Yuh could do it, you gun slick! You'll have to kill me, polecat, to keep me shut up any longer. You've got forty head of my stock in the shipping pens. I want them back, rustler, or by thunder—"

"Careful, Piell!" The soft, scratchy words came from Hack Donnell, drifting in from one side, both bony hands just above the butts of his guns in deadly poise. "If you've got any bellyache to make, make it to the law."

Jake Piell's pale lips twisted in

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scorn and bitterness. "An' the law is you!" he jerked out. "You're workin' under Linstrom the same as Murman. You an' yore law smell as skuny as the rest of the polecats yuh run with."

The low, purring oath that ripped from Hack Donnell's bloodless lips was deadly, forewarning of what was to come. Jake Piell read the killer sign. His leathery face paled, and fear flooded his eyes, but it was a brave man's fear. He didn't flinch. He knew death was reaching down for him, and he tensed to meet it, gnarled right hand stiffening for the gun grab he knew he would never live to complete.

"Resistin' the law, huh?" Hack Donnell snarled tauntingly. And then his slender hands flashed downward.

Jake Piell tried to claw out his guns, but he didn't have a chance. Nor did Hack Donnell's twin Colts crash in flame and smoke as they scraped clear of leather in blurry speed, for Stud Wordene was already in movement. There was something of a huge cat in his swift, gliding stride that carried him close to the ranchman. His twisted talon of a left hand shot out to gouge viciously into Piell's eyes, and at the same time his right fist clubbed out to land with all the force of his hard-packed body in the rancher's middle. Piell stumbled backward, pain contorting his ashen face, and Wordene followed bleakly, balled right fist hammering, slashing, jabbing.

Then Piell's boots tripped down the porch steps, sending him sprawling into the dust of the street. Somewhere down the street a man yelled excitedly, and boots thudded as townsmen ran up.—Stud Wordene saw them from the corner of his eye, and a thin smile touched his lips.

For a moment Jake Piell only lay where he had fallen, laboring for breath that had been shocked from his body by the gambler's hammering fists. Sight returned to the eyes that had been gouged by Wordene's fingers, as strength filtered back into his body. He climbed slowly to his feet, face the gray of ash, drawn lips working bitterly.

"I'll kill you for that, Wordene," he jerked out hoarsely. "You dirty card slick—"

Then Hack Donnell was striding forward, bony hands brushing holstered guns. "You won't kill nobody, mister," the lawman scratched out. "It's the jail house for you."

Back in Linstrom's office, Stud Wordene stood on wide-planted legs, a brooding light in his dark eyes. Cuff Murman had dropped back into his chair, and was cursing in a low monotone. Boss Linstrom paced the floor in long, stiff strides, then abruptly whipped around to face the gambler.

"Wordene, are you loco?" he growled harshly. "Hack can't keep Piell locked up forever, an' he may raise all hell when he gets out with his loud talk. He knows too much. If you hadn't horned in, Donnell would have—"

Stud Wordene broke in tonelessly, a cold smile on his thin lips. "Gunnin' Jake Piell is a job I want, Boss," he said with dark meaning. "It'll be self-defense, won't it? He threatened me, an' half the town heard."

Cuff Murman pushed half out of his chair, lips going flat and hard. "You?" he jerked out. "You gun Jake Piell? Why?"

Stud Wordene chuckled with bleak humor. "Hack knows why," he drawled broodingly. "He'll turn Piell loose an' I'll do the rest. I got me a kid to bring up, ain't I?" Ugly

lights glinted in his dark eyes as he stared at his talonlike left hand. "I swore I'd twist that kid just like his brother's bullet twisted this hand, an' today Ring Lacey gets his first lesson in killin' a man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MAKING A KILLER.

SOMEWHERE in the depths of Cub Hurley's memory there was the recollection of a mother and father that neither work nor the hard training of Stud Wordene had made him forget. It was like a dream at times, a shadowy picture his young mind could not grasp.

And Stud Wordene had never tried to erase that memory from the boy's mind. Instead he played upon it, using it as a wedge to knot and twist the slender twig he was trying to shape.

"Shore, yuh had a mother an' dad," he had told the boy time and again. "Yore mother gave yuh that locket yuh wear. She was my sister. Everybody sneered at her an' insulted her because she worked in a dance hall an' her husband was a gambler. That's what killed yore mother, Ring."

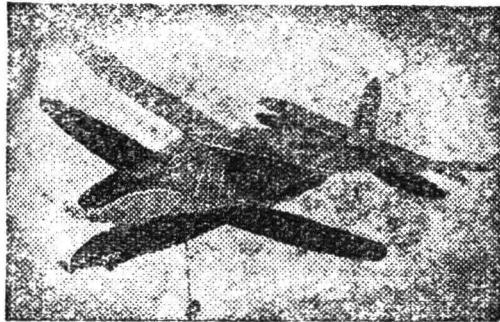
The boy Stud Wordene had named Ring Lacey had found it hard to understand this.

"Yore dad," Stud Wordene had followed up, "was killed by a puncher he'd caught cheating in a card game. He started to walk away, an' the puncher plugged him in the back. Don't ever make the mistake yore dad made, Ring. Throw yore gun first, an' talk later."

Ring Lacey's eyes had widened. "You mean—if a boy said something bad to me I should hit him first?"

"Hit him with anything yuh get yore hands on, a rock, club, anything. He'll do the same to you if yuh don't get him first."

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"But the other boys I see playing together don't fight. You never let me play with them, uncle."

There was a surprising softness in Stud Wordene's voice when he spoke to the boy. He knew it would take more than words to keep the seeds he had planted in Ring Lacey's mind growing.

"I tried to keep this away from yuh," he had said, "but you'll have to see for yoreself. Go on out an' see what happens when yuh try to play with the other boys."

There had been eagerness in Ring Lacey's young face as he ran out of the saloon. And minutes later he had returned, sobbing.

"They wouldn't play with me," he had cried. "They only laughed at me, called me names."

And Stud Wordene, who had seen this coming and had paid the boys in the street for what they had said, smiled inwardly. The seeds he had planted had found root. It would be a long, slow job, but when he was through with Ring Lacey—he glanced at his bullet-twisted left hand. He would make Ring Lacey like that.

Bleak lights were smoldering in Stud Wordene's eyes when he returned to the Gold Spot from Linstrom's office. Boss Linstrom pushed through the bat-wing doors behind him, and they halted just inside the room.

Across the room Ring Lacey worked behind the bar, washing glasses and mugs with slender hands that were red from the heat of the water. He was a stripling youth at ten years, with skin that matched the pallor of the gambler who watched him.

Directly across the bar from the boy, a bleary-eyed, whiskey-flushed puncher was yelling for a drink.

Wordene's eyes narrowed, brightening, as he saw the barkeep slide a bottle toward the puncher. He saw the puncher's hand move out unsteadily toward the bottle. He missed the bottle, knocked a mug of hot water out of the boy's hand. He jerked his hand back, temper blazing.

"Yuh clumsy young squirt!" he yelled. "Knock my hand when I reach for a drink, will yuh? Slush hot water on me, huh?"

He cursed hoarsely, whipped the back of his hand in a vicious slap across the boy's mouth.

For an instant the boy shrank back, the raw red imprints of the puncher's fingers standing out against the white of his face. Then abruptly something snapped within him. He snatched up a heavy mug, jerked it back to hurl it at the drunken puncher.

"You low-down, dirty—" Then as swiftly as his anger had flamed it was gone. He lowered the mug, bruised lips quivering slightly.

"I . . . I'm sorry," he said haltingly.

In three long strides, Stud Wordene was across the room. "Ring!" he yelled, then as the boy looked around, startled, he caught the puncher by the shoulder, jerked him viciously around. His twisted left hand slashed out, raked back savagely, bringing flecks of blood to the puncher's lips. Behind him, Ring Lacey's voice screamed out.

"Don't, uncle! He didn't know. He's drunk!"

But there was no stopping Stud Wordene. Murder lust blazed in his muddy eyes, and the taunt of death was in the curl of his thin lips. Stark realization of what was coming struck deep into the puncher. His flushed face drained to the pale of ash, and fear flooded his bloodshot

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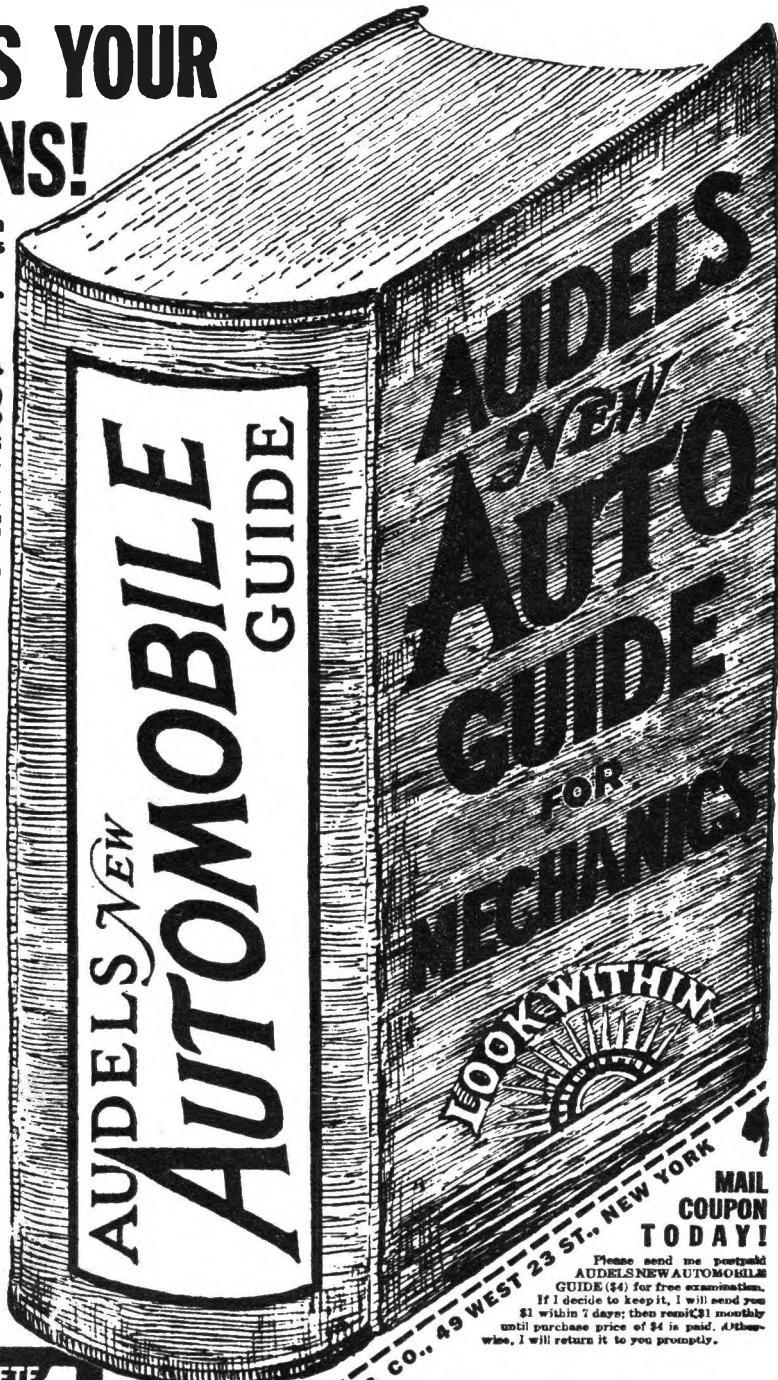
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eyes. He rocked forward, trying to focus bleary eyes.

"I'm goin' to kill you, mister!" Stud Wordene snarled.

The puncher's hand started gunward, but his move was fumbly, awkward. Stud Wordene laughed in piercing fury. Ring Lacey would get his lesson in killing today—not one, but two! Then his right hand slashed downward in smooth, deadly speed. But even as his gun flashed upward, a slender figure hurled through the air between him and the puncher.

"Uncle, don't!"

Ring Lacey's slight body carried the driving impact of his leap from the top of the bar as he struck the puncher. The man stumbled around drunkenly, tripped, then sprawled to the floor in a limp heap. But the boy landed on his feet, facing the drawn gun of the gambler, his small face white and set.

"Don't, uncle!" he cried out. "He didn't hurt me. He was drunk. He didn't know what he was doing. Don't kill him!"

For an instant the full force of Stud Wordene's hatred drove through him like liquid fire. His narrow face darkened, his knuckles went white around the butt of his gun. This twig he had worked five years to twist had snapped straight. An oath snarled upward in his throat, but he locked it behind tight-pressed lips. Then a subtle, even more deadly change swept over him. The twig had snapped straight, but he would twist it, knot it if it took five more years, if it took a lifetime. Then the stiffness left his lips, and he forced the fury out of his eyes.

"He hit yuh, and yuh're ready to let it drop," he said with surprising softness. "If that's the way yuh want it, Ring, O. K. I reckon if a gent tried to plug me in the back

the way yore dad was plugged, yuh'd be willing to forget it just as quick."

The boy's eyes misted, and a beaten, almost hungry light crept into them. "No, uncle," he sobbed out. "If a man did that, I'd . . . I don't know. I don't want to kill. I . . . I just want to be like other boys."



The gambler's dark, burning eyes were on the boy's back, as he went around the end of the bar to the tub of hot water. Boss Linstrom drifted up to Wordene's side, his blocky jaw hard, ugly lights glinting in his pale eyes.

"It'll never work, what yuh're tryin' to do," Linstrom said in low harshness. "We got to get rid of that kid. When he grows up, he could raise all hell with what he'll know about us."

Then the rapid thud of heavy boots sounded along the boardwalk along the front of the saloon. Linstrom's cold eyes narrowed, then he turned and moved swiftly through a doorway into a side room.

Wordene swung back to the bar, a faint smile frozen on his thin lips, as he waited. The boots thudded closer, then he heard the bat-wing

doors slap open behind him. Through the mirror in front of him, he saw Jake Piell just inside the room, his stooped body swaying slightly on wide-spread legs. Then the rancher's harsh voice broke out jarringly.

"Wordene, I'm goin' to kill you!"

The gambler whirled with smooth, catlike speed, his smile changing to the mocking upturn of thinned lips. Jake Piell's leathery face was a mask of bitterness, his hard lips jerking under the lash of violent emotions. He knew he was facing death; he knew he couldn't match the gambler before him in gun speed, but that didn't stop him.

"Hear me, yuh card-slick polecat!" he yelled. "I'm killin' you, or I'll die tryin'. I've had enough raw deals by you an' yore tribe crammed down my throat. I've crawled because I got a wife an' kids to look after, but they'd rather see me dead than yella like every other honest man around here. Pull yore gun, damn yuh!"

Stud Wordene laughed sneeringly. "Yuh're loco!" he said harshly.

"I said draw, damn yuh!"

Wordene's right hand started downward as if toward his gun, then he spun, swinging his back on the rancher. But bitter rage had drawn Jake Piell's nerves beyond control. They snapped. With an oath, he clawed out his gun, swinging it up in savage fury.

Behind the bar, Ring Lacey screamed in shrill terror. "Look out, uncle! Behind yuh—"

Stud Wordene waited until a split second before the roar of the Colt sounded behind him, then he spun on whirling heels. His long-fingered right hand moved downward in a flash of white, caught at his holster, brought up a gun that shunted off dull splinters of light as it blurred level. Then it bounced, crashed, gouting out a jabbing spurt of muzz-

¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers:

Continued from page 61

1. You would probably catch an animal with it. A mecate is a hair rope.
2. General George Custer was killed by the Sioux Indians in the battle of the Little Big Horn, in Montana.
3. New Mexico and Arizona were the last two States to enter the Union. They became States in 1911 and 1912, respectively.
4. Theodore Roosevelt was a cowboy in his youth, and Charles Curtis was the Vice President.
5. The tendency of most Mexicans is not to do today what can be put off till tomorrow. The Spanish word for "tomorrow" is "mañana," so Mexico is known as the "land of tomorrow."
6. James Marshall, a carpenter from New Jersey, accidentally discovered gold in California in 1848. He was employed by John A. Sutter to build the now famous Sutter's Mill.
7. You would probably not interfere with animals playing on it, for bluejoint is a variety of prairie grass.
8. William Bonney, William F. Cody, General George Custer, James Butler Hickok.
9. General Lew Wallace, governor of the Territory of New Mexico. Billy the Kid was offered the pardon, but he refused it, suspicious of a trap to catch him.
10. The Lincoln County War was a bloody feud in New Mexico between rival factions of cattlemen and their paid gunmen. Billy the Kid fought in it when he was at the height of his brief career as bad man and killer. The war started in 1877.

zle flame. Again it roared, stabbing orange fire through the blue of powder smoke, then he leaned forward, tense, deadly, taunting.

Jake Piell rocked backward as if he had been struck by an invisible fist. His leathery cheeks grayed, then puffed out as he sucked in a single hoarse, gasping breath. Pain, horror, then the clouds of death flooded his staring eyes, but consciousness did not leave him. His lips worked, flecking with blood, as he started to fall.

"Yuh murderin' devil!" he croaked hoarsely. "Yuh . . . my gun . . . I—"

Boss Linstrom was at Wordene's side by the time the cowman fell face down to the floor. The gambler read the question in Linstrom's eyes, and chuckled softly.

"Put good shells in Piell's gun," he said thinly. "Hack pulled the lead out of the ones that's in it, an' some nosy gent might catch on."

Then he turned toward the bar, his narrow face blank of any expression. The boy was staring at him, pale and shaken, terror still in his wide eyes.

"I tried to play this yore way, Ring," he said tonelessly. "You saw that, an' yuh saw what happened."

"He tried—to plug you in the back," the boy said faintly.

Stud Wordene hid the smile that came to his lips. "An' missed." Then he leaned across the bar, a hard edge coming to his voice. "I was just lucky, but maybe I wouldn't be if I let it happen that way again. But I won't; I'll shoot first." His tone softened, and his eyes narrowed, searching the boy's white face. "What are you goin' to do if you ever run against something like that?"

Then he saw what he had hoped to see. The boyish, almost wistful

light drained from Ring Lacey's eyes, and was replaced by a glint that was cold, bleak, savage. And the softness of the boy's face changed to a bitter, cynical hardness that was beyond his years.

"I'll kill," Ring Lacey said in a dry, dead voice. "When I grow up, I won't talk if that happens to me. I'll kill, uncle—kill!"

CHAPTER IX.

BOOTHILL SENDS A GUNMAN.

THERE had been times when it seemed to Blaize Hurley that as far back as his memory stretched guns had shadowed his life. Even to those time-faded days in California he could remember the look of fear that had haunted his mother's eyes each time she watched her husband leave the cabin in the morning for the day's work at his gold claim. Blaize Hurley knew that his mother had lived under the fear of killer guns.

And nothing could remove from his memory that red morning fifteen years ago when guns had taken his mother and father and brother away from him. Countless boyhood nights when his sleep should have been sound and peaceful, he had wakened to find his body bathed in cold perspiration, to find his breathing labored and hoarse. Those nights he had lain there in his blankets until dawn, staring up at the star-peppered bowl of the sky and seeing only the body of his father huddled in the bed of the wagon, seeing the stark, bitter picture of his mother sinking in death beside her husband, with little Cub whimpering and sobbing at her skirt.

Nor had these dreams left him with the passing of the years. Time and again in the middle of the night, he would waken to leap out of his

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blankets, sobbing curses, his body taut and alert, hands hooked out over hips that were empty of jutting gun butts.

Guns had shaped Blaize Hurley's destiny. Guns *were* his destiny. And this day as the thought burned across his mind, a bleak, brooding smile touched his thin, hard lips. Tawny flecks crept into his cold, gray eyes, and his big body settled into a loose crouch, hands splaying out just above the butts of the twin Colts tied low on his lean hips. His icy stare fastened on the deer hide stretched out between the two dust-grayed cottonwoods a dozen yards in front of him. To his mind the deer hide became the body of the man who had helped murder his family—the killer he had heard called Wordene. The small cross became a button on the front of Wordene's shirt, and he tensed over his guns, poised, alert, deadly.

"Now!" barked the man behind him.

His hands flashed into movement, catching at the gun butts with smooth, flowing speed, twitching upward with the blue blur of rising Colt metal. Rocking gun hammers, spouting muzzle flame, the crashing beat of the shots. Then just as abruptly as they had roared, the guns clicked empty, and he leaned forward, squinting through rising plumes of powder smoke at the deer hide. The cold smile on his lips deepened slightly. The cross was gone, blotted out by a ragged hole that marked the path of his ripping slugs. Then he turned slowly, blowing smoke from the emptied weapons.

Utah Kells stood close behind him, and only in the grim brightness of his pain-fevered eyes did he show his approval. His face was a dead white, with sunken cheeks, a bony jaw, and thin, bloodless lips.

"Fast!" he hacked out. "I won't say *yuh* ain't. An' *yuh* could cover them slug holes with a half dollar. Yuh're better than I ever was, an' I wasn't the worst."

The smile planed from Blaize Hurley's lips, and he began thumbing fresh shells into the two guns. "Then I'm ready," he asked, a bleak note of eagerness in his tone.

Utah Kells' head shook slowly, and his lips sucked in slightly, as if he fought to stifle some inner paroxysm of pain.

"Not yet. You could beat me easy enough right now. But Hack Donnell beat me sixteen years ago when I was faster. He put the two slugs in me that I'm packin'. That makes you an' Donnell about even. Yuh got to be faster."

Blaize Hurley's jaw hardened, and bunched muscles ran its lean length, pushing streaks of gray through his dark, sun-tanned skin.

"I don't ask to be faster than Hack Donnell. I'll stand by my chance if I have to meet him. All I want is to be able to call that Wordene killer whenever I find him."

Utah Kells turned silently to the horse ground-hitched behind him, and climbed into the saddle. The movement seemed to release a torrent of pain within him. He doubled over, hoarse coughs racking his bony frame. Hurley started toward him, then halted, knowing that the man wouldn't accept what help he might offer. He climbed Indian fashion onto his bronc that bore no saddle, waited quietly until the hacking coughs ceased. When Utah Kells straightened, his lips were flecked with blood, and pain filmed his sun-faded eyes.

"All you know about me is that a gunny named Hack Donnell put me where I am now," he said hoarsely. "I'll tell you the rest, so

listen. Sixteen years ago I was a gun-slinger myself. I rode with the same Boss Linstrom that's agent for this reservation now, only he was a two-bit outlaw then. Hack Donnell rode with him, an' a gent named Cuff Murman. They wanted me to throw in with 'em to raid a widow who ran a little spread up near Tucson. I was bad, but not that rotten, an' I balked."

His voice trained off, as if he were about to be seized by another spasm of coughing. Blaize Hurley leaned forward intently.

He said harshly: "Boss Linstrom did that! An' for ten years he's been robbin' these Indians out of most of the little they get from the government. Kells, you could have stopped all this!"

Utah Kells shook his head wearily. "Don't yuh think I would have if I could?" he rasped bitterly. "Hell, Tamanmo found me all shot up on the desert, didn't he, an' nursed me back to life? I owe him as much as you, but I couldn't do nothin'. Boss Linstrom owns the whole county, from what little I could pick up, an' Hack Donnell is sheriff under him. I wouldn't had a chance, an' I could do some good hidin' out here teachin' you what I knew about guns."

"But, man—"

Kells broke in hoarsely. "Don't talk, dammit! I did the best I could. What I'm tryin' to tell you is yuh got to be able to meet Hack Donnell in a shoot-out. Shore, yuh're after this Stud Wordene jigger an' the three others, but yuh may hunt over the whole country findin' them. You got to help Tamanmo first. His people are bein' starved by Linstrom's dirty work. Someone's been slippin' liquor to the young bucks, an' that'll mean trouble if it keeps up much longer. They're ready for the warpath, an' if you help 'em any,



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yuh got to be able to throw lead with Hack Donnell."

As if in echo to the gunman's words, the distant sound of yelling voices floated over the late afternoon air. Utah Kells' face went taut, and he cursed softly.

"There they go again," he hacked out. "Worse this time, an' I don't blame them much. They won't stand by and see their women and kids starved much longer. Maybe Tamanmo won't be able to hold them this time. We'd better ride back."

Kells turned his horse, and headed it up canyon at a jogging trot that Blaize knew was torture in itself. Blaize swung in at the man's side, riding in grim silence. At the west end of the canyon the murk of evening was thickening, as the sun dropped lower behind the pink-tinted crags of the peaks looming above. The village was a cluster of dilapidated wikiups that brought bitter lights, and in the center of it he could see the leaping flame of a campfire. Indians, the young ones mainly, he noted, were milling around the blaze, waving bows and arrows as their yells floated over the chilling air, and at one side he could see their chieftain standing in stolid silence. Age had filed weight from Tamanmo's frame, but it hadn't stooped his shoulders or lowered the proud set of his head. As he slipped from his saddle and strode forward, Blaize saw Laughing Eyes, Tamanmo's daughter, standing slightly behind her father, her slender body rigid as she watched, her dark eyes catching the leaping flames of the campfire.

But there was only bitterness in the old chief's eyes, as Blaize strode up, and his face was a stern, bronze mask.

"It is good you have come, my

son," he said wearily. "My people are impatient. This time we cannot keep them from taking the war trail."

"We've got to!" Blaize jerked out harshly. Then he spun, raising his voice above the yelling of the Indians. Gradually the warriors silenced, turned to face him, and he spoke to them in their own tongue.

"My brothers, you cannot fight. You have a wise chief, and he has told you that. I tell you that. The white men are too many, and we are too few to fight yet. If you fight now, you will be killed, and there will be no one to look after your women and children. You must hold peace until the time comes when you can fight and win."

Silence met his words, then a warrior stepped forward, his face dark, impassive, bitter. His voice came deep-toned, grim.

"Our white brother speaks good words for the white man, but not for Tamanmo's people. Many winters have passed, and still we do not get food and clothing. The great White Chief promised us this, but his tongue was crooked. Tamanmo is old, but we are young. We will fight for our people."

Blaize Hurley's voice broke out ringingly. "Tamanmo is old, and he is weary of war because he knows the white tide is too great. I am one of you. Let me go to the white chief and tell him how we have been wronged."

The camp flame seemed to strike fire into the warrior's dark eyes. "You are one of us, but you are white," he said bitterly.

Blaize Hurley met this sharply. "I am white, but they will not know. The white men have passed through our village, and thought I was one of you. Let me go to them as Ta-

manino's son before you take the bloody trail."

A murmur ran through the Indians, then the warrior's deep voice rumbled. "Your words are good. We will wait, but if our white brother fails, then we will fight."

Blaize Hurley jerked around, grim purpose riding the lean line of his jaw. Laughing Eyes moved past her father to his side, her dark eyes holding trouble lights.

"You will be careful, my brother?"

Blaize nodded and patted the small hand she placed on his arm, then strode on toward his horse. He was preparing to mount when Utah Kells drifted up to his side, his pallid face a bleak, hard mask.

"I'm riding along, Blaize," he said grimly. "An' I'll trouble yuh for my guns."

Quick words rose in Hurley's throat, but he held his silence as Kells' bony hands reached out and unbuckled the gun belts that girded his hips. The gunman chuckled in a dead, dry tone, as he buckled the heavy weapons on and shifted the holsters in place.

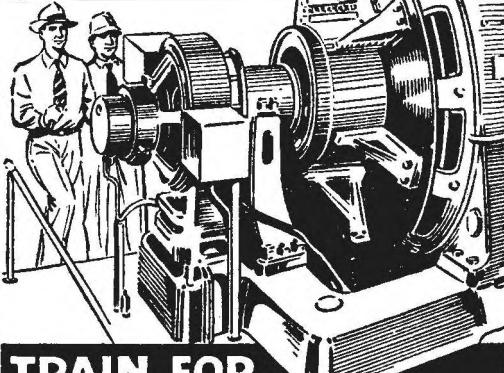
"I know what yuh're thinking, but don't say it. You're supposed to be going to town for peace an' not war. Me, I'm trailin' along just in case. You ain't never been to town. We'll take it slow and get there by sunup. You play Injun, and I'll pack the guns this trip. Besides, throwin' lead at a killer ain't like pluggin' a deer hide, and killers are about all you'll meet up with when you get to Brasher town."

CHAPTER X.

"KILL THE RED DEVIL!"

It struck Blaize Hurley with singular force that in all these years when he had lived within twenty miles of Brasher he had not once seen the town. But then the first years of his life with the Indians had

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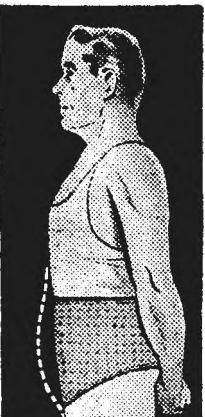
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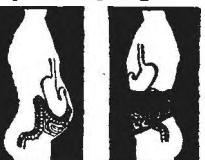
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been spent hiding from the soldiers who hunted them for a crime they had not done. And then as time salved the hatred of the soldiers, the crime had been forgotten, and later the narrow canyon to which Tammmo had led his people was made a part of the reservation.

But years ago Blaize Hurley had heard whispered tales about Brasher—a wild gun town that was the boiling pot for border riffraff and the cold-eyed punchers who drifted down from the north to dodge the arm of the law.

Brasher had been a trail town then, lawless, untamed, brawling. But as he curbed his horse along the rim of the shelf that thrust out near the first cluster of houses, he knew that time had not mellowed the town. Brasher had grown, and the law it claimed was hollow mockery to the already quickening signs of life along the hoof and wheel-tire-gutted street. Cattle bawled in the clogged shipping pens; somewhere he heard the ring of a blacksmith's hammer. Light from the early morning sun shunted from the twin ribbons of steel rails, and almost in the center of the town smoke clouds hung suspended in the heat-stagnant air as a locomotive puffed and grinded to a halt on a stockyard siding.

Cattle and guns had made the town, but the coming of the railroad had added wealth and violence.

Slightly behind Hurley, Utah Kells had watched his first inspection of the town with grim interest.

"Ride on in," the gunman said tonelessly. "From here you can't see half the hell you'll find inside the place. Ride ahead, but keep yore eyes open. I'll drift in after yuh."

Hurley nodded, and prodded his horse into movement with his heels. He knew with grim amusement that except, perhaps, for a close scrutiny, he would never be taken for a white

man. He rode his saddleless horse with the lithe ease of an Indian; his worn, dusty clothing marked him as one of Tamanmo's reservation tribe.

Men cast him only cursory glances as he swung up the dust-layered street. One hard-jawed, hard-eyed individual driving a buckboard headed straight for him with a grim purpose that evidenced he wouldn't swerve his course for the saddleless horseman, but Hurley gave ground. He heard the man's harsh-toned oath as they passed.

"Damn Injun! As if we ain't got enough trouble without them thievin' devils showin' up here."

Hurley dismounted at one of the hitch racks that flanked the street. Tall, lean, bronzed, he stood there a moment beside his horse, taking in the sounds that reached his ears. For an instant its busy clamor brought back memories of the times he and Cub had gone to town with his mother and father, then that memory was blotted from his mind by harsher, more strident noises he had never heard before. The ring of men's coarse voices and the shrill of women's crass laughter came to him from a nearby building that bore the sun-blasted sign, Gold Spot Emporium.

He stepped around the hitch rail, drawn by frank curiosity to a dirt-smudged window near the bat-wing doors. What he saw brought a thin curl to his lips. Utah Kells had not exaggerated in his statement. Even at this early hour the saloon was clogged with carousing punchers and chill-eyed individuals who bore the unmistakable stamp of killer on their hard-set features.

The air was clouded with smoke. Overly painted ladies filtered among the men, laughing at the pointed quips aimed at them. At the end of the long bar lounged a tall, lean

man whose pale features and watchful attitude marked him as the owner of the saloon. The gambler's left hand resting on the bar was like a claw, twisted, bony, stiff-fingered. Something cold stirred in Blaize Hurley's mind as his glance fell on the talonlike hand. But his eyes moved on before the thought registered, and the impression was lost to him.

A galling sense of disgust rose within him, and he turned away from the window. The town was everything Utah Kells had said it would be—it was worse. He moved down the plank walk, alert eyes missing nothing. The building he was nearing was a general store, and farther down on the other side of the street he saw the sign that marked the office of the reservation agent. His mind moved from building to building on the far side of the street. Everywhere there were signs of wealth, but he wondered if only one man and his friends profited by it. Utah Kells was on the other side of the street, moving with lazy alertness, and Hurley was looking toward him when it happened.

He caught the low sound of a girl's voice, her light footsteps that were close at hand. He started to turn when something sharp gouged into the back of his neck, and the girl's low words changed to a faint cry of alarm. Paper rustled, as he finished turning, and he knew vaguely that several packages had been spilled from the girl's arms when he had bumped into her.

For an instant he felt powerless to move, his attention held by the beauty of the girl's face. A small, oval, tanned face; firm chin below soft, warm-looking lips; leaf-brown hair the morning sun changed to burnished gold; wide hazel eyes that seemed to hold trouble lights in their

depths. All this his mind registered without conscious thought. And he knew a tall, slender young man with pale, cynical features was at the girl's side, but this was only a vague perception until he heard the man's jarring rasp.

"You clumsy fool! Why don't you watch where you're goin'? By thunder, I'll teach you some manners!"

Something cool, mocking, laid hold on Blaize Hurley as he shifted his glance to the man. "Strikes me you'd best be learnin' some yoreself, friend," he said levelly, "lettin' the lady carry all them packages." Then, without waiting for a reply, his glance shifted back to the girl. "I'm sorry, ma'am. If I'd been looking where I was goin'—"

A smothered oath ripped from the lips of the man beside the girl, and he leaped away from her, landing on the plank walk before Hurley with smooth, catlike speed. He poised there, crouching slightly, sneering.

The girl cried out faintly, "Ring—don't!" but her words were lost in the gunman's grating taunt.

"You loose-lipped fool!" he jerked out. "I'll teach you how to talk to me! I'm Ring Lacey, mister! That mean anything to you?"

Blaize Hurley's lips went flat and hard as he shook his head slowly. "It means you'll get yore jaw busted if you keep fiddlin' around them gun butts. I apologized to the lady, and if that's enough for her, it's enough for you."

Killer lust flamed in Ring Lacey's cold gray eyes at the blunt reply. His slender hands started gunward with deadly speed, then just as abruptly they halted, as for the first time his mind seemed to register the fact that the man before him wore no guns. His lips curled, and his cold stare swept Hurley from head to foot.

"If you had the guts to pack guns—" His words ended on an oath. "You're a damn Indian!" he choked out.

Then the tall, dark-clothed figure of the gambler with the twisted hand—the man Hurley had glimpsed in the saloon—drifted up to Ring Lacey's side. His dark eyes seemed to take in everything at a glance, and his voice came soft, droning.

"Ring, you lettin' that jigger get away with this?" he asked icily.

From the corner of his eye, Hurley saw Utah Kells drifting in from one side, bony, pain-racked body bent slightly in tense alertness. He knew only a spark was needed to bring the crash of guns. Death was in Ring Lacey's stare, it was in the gambler's cold taunt, it was in the movement of Utah Kells' bony frame, as yet unseen by the others.

"Now wait a minute," he drawled coolly. "You gents are prodding on this fight. I shore don't want it." The back of his neck burned where the corner of the girl's package had gouged his flesh, and his right hand started up toward the spot. "Bumping into the girl was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going—" His hand reached the back of his neck, started to rub the burning spot.

"Ring!" the gambler yelled. "He's after a knife! *Kill the red devil!*"

Ring Lacey's slender hands stabbed gunward with the flash of pale skin. Some inner tension snapped in Blaize Hurley. He lurched forward with swift, gliding speed as Lacey's guns scraped clear of leather and started up. His left fist shot out, followed closely by his right. They landed flush on the point of the gunman's jaw. Lacey's head rocked back, eyes rolling, and Hurley slid in closer, the clubbing left he sent to the gunman's jaw car-

rying all the weight of his slab-muscled shoulder.

Lacey stumbled backward under the shock of the blow, spinning slowly as he fell face down on the boards of the walk.

Then, from behind Hurley, came Utah Kells' biting drawl. "Easy with that cutter, mister man! That was their fight, an' it looks like it's over. You want to start one, turn around and say so. Otherwise pick up yore gun-slammer and clear out."

For an instant it looked as if the gambler was going to accept Kells' flat-toned challenge. His tall frame shivered under the lash of inner emotions, and his dark eyes muddied with the clouds of murder lust. Then he relaxed, laughing harshly.

"I don't know who you are, fella," he said in a soft drone, "but stick around town and I'll be looking you up."

"Any time," Utah Kells invited coldly. "Any time, mister!"

The gambler turned stiffly then, dragged Ring Lacey to his feet, and moved off in the direction of the Gold Spot.

The girl's face was pale and shaken when Blaize Hurley turned to her, and fear was bright in her hazel eyes. From either length of the street Hurley knew excited men were running forward, drawn by the fight, but he knew this with only a detached interest as he stared at the girl.

He sensed her confusion, and said coolly: "I'm sorry about all this, ma'am. If I can help you anywhere with yore packages—"

She broke him short nervously. "No, please, thank you. But if you'll help me pick them up—"

He stooped quickly, gathering the fallen packages, and placed them in her arms. He caught her eyes again, as he handed her the last package, held them.

"One thing, ma'am," he said
WW—8E

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quickly. "What yore friend said about me—I'm not an Indian."

She started at this, eyes widening. "But you look—your clothes—" Her voice faltered, and her eyes searched his face. Then, "No, you don't either. You're not an Indian, and I . . . I'm glad." She flushed, suddenly conscious of his direct gaze. "Thanks," she said softly, and turned quickly away.

CHAPTER XI.

GUN-SMOKE BAPTISM.

A WARM glow ran through Blaize Hurley's veins, as he watched the girl move down the plank walk. His eyes followed her until she turned off the walk toward the rear of a squat, dobe-walled building he knew must be the jail, and then he was struck by the sudden realization that not once had he thought to ask her name or to mention his. He had an impulse to call out and run after her, but Utah Kells' dead-toned voice close behind him halted that.

"Gent lookin' like Hack Donnell just went into the Gold Spot. You'd better mosey along while yuh got the chance."

None of the men who had run up offered any resistance as he threaded his way through them toward the reservation agent's office. Several hard-bitten individuals gave him only sneers of open contempt, but guarded admiration was in the faces of a few punchers and townsmen who struck him as honest men, and he gathered grimly from this that,

subjugated though it was by fear, there was some opposition to Boss Linstrom and his gun-slammers.

From the corner of his eye, he saw three bleak-eyed men detach from the crowd, moving without apparent haste in the same direction he was taking. A thin smile touched his stiff lips, and he felt a chill of apprehension race up his spine. The muscles along his tall frame grew taut as he went up the porch steps of the agency office, and he crossed to the door in two long strides. He didn't bother to knock, but lifted the latch and stalked into one room, kicking the door shut behind him.

A big man seated behind a heavy desk looked up sharply as he entered the room. Anger flared in his blocky face, and he started to shove out of his chair.

"What the—" he began harshly, but Hurley, striding forward, broke him off short.

"Sit tight, mister," he said bluntly. "I reckon you're Boss Linstrom?"

The big man dropped back into his chair, a glint coming to his eyes. "By hell!" he said darkly. "You're no Indian!" and the tone of his voice was an answer to Hurley's question.

"You're right on that point, Linstrom," Hurley jerked out. "I'm not an Indian, but I know them. I lived with them for fifteen years, and I know just how much more of yore raw deals they'll take. You're starving them with yore split rations. They don't get decent clothes to wear. They are Indians, Linstrom,



but they're human. They want peace and you're driving them to war."

Linstrom sat red-faced, expressionless through Hurley's bitter outburst, brows lumping in a scowl that only added to the dark fury that glinted in his eyes.

"You got gall, bracin' me like this!" he ripped out finally. "Who in thunder are you?"

Hurley ignored the question. "When I started here I meant to let you think I was an Indian and ask for what Tamanmo's people need. I knew after one look at this town you run, that would be a waste of time. I'm tellin' you now, Linstrom. You've rawhided those Indians long enough. Treat them square, or I'll take this thing to Washington."

Boss Linstrom's heavy face darkened under a rush of hot blood. "So yuh'll take it to Washington, huh?" he breathed. Then his tone changed, sharpened. "Mister, just who are you, jawin' to me like this?"

Hurley's lips stiffened, as he heard the click of the latch being lifted behind him, and the low scuff of boots. He knew that would be the three gunmen entering the room, but he didn't look around. He met Linstrom's hard gaze steadily.

"If you want names," he rapped out, "it's Blaize Hurley. And if you want—"

He didn't get any farther. Boss Linstrom jerked out of his chair, blocky face shading to the gray of ash, fear leaping like red flame into his dark eyes.

"Blaize Hurley!" he breathed croakily, and then his voice silenced, as violent emotions worked the muscles of his face.

Behind Hurley, a voice said thinly, "Yuh want we should take him, Boss?"

He heard the creak of the door being pushed shut, and then the chill



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tone of Utah Kells' voice shattered the instant of stagnant silence.

"Don't close it, polecats! You got company. An' stop fiddlin' around them guns. I play rough, too."

For the second time within the space of minutes, Hurley saw the glimmer of fear strike Boss Linstrom's face, as the man's eyes jerked toward the doorway. Utah Kells met Linstrom's shocked stare with an icy laugh.

"I ain't dead, Linstrom, so don't gawk! Yore gun-slinger should have checked his job when he dropped me." Then Kells' taunting drone quickened. "Blaize, around here! Quick, now! You can't do nothing more in this skunk hole, an' you're leavin'."

Hurley backed away until he felt the door, slightly ajar, press against his shoulders. From the corner of his eye, he saw the three killers drifting to one side with a slow, fanning movement, hands splayed out over their guns, eyes bright with deadly purpose as they faced Utah Kells. Boss Linstrom still stared as if stunned, but another look was crossing his hard face. Without warning, then, as if the storming violence within him had snapped its bonds, he yelled hoarsely:

"Take 'em, boys! Burn down the dirty sons!"

It happened with deadly swiftness, and, gunless, Blaize Hurley could only look on. It was Utah Kells' moment, and he met it with the eagerness of years of pent-up hatred. His bony hands stabbed down with a speed Hurley had never known the man possessed, flashed upward with the blur of gun blue. Muzzle flame crashed, roared. One of the killers, his guns yet in leather, screamed, choked, fell. Another spun slowly, the pain of death on his hard face, as he crumpled to the floor.

Hurley saw Utah Kells rock backward under the shock of lead driv-

ing through his bony frame. He brought up against the wall, coughing blood, gun hammers falling under lax thumbs. He laughed croakingly as the third killer, death-struck on his feet, toppled forward to the floor.

Then Kells swayed forward limply. Hurley caught him as he fell, vaguely conscious that during that instant of roaring guns Boss Linstrom had whirled to dive through a doorway toward the rear of the building. He started to gather Kells into his arms, but the look in the gunman's pain-filmed eyes halted him. He felt the still-smoking guns thrust into his hands, as he lowered the dying man to the floor, heard Kells' faint words.

"They're yores now, Blaize. I'm cashin' . . . Rustle, now, Blaize. The whole pack's . . . comin'." Then a shadow of a smile crossed his pale face, and his words softened to a whisper that was hardly audible.

"Three to one! Hell . . . I didn't do so bad . . . for an old coot—" His head rolled to one side.

Bleak, bitter lights clouded Blaize Hurley's gray eyes, as he straightened, gripping the brace of guns. He paused to unbuckle the gun belts Kells had worn, and strap them around his own waist, then turned grimly to the door. Outside he could hear the hoarse shouts of men, the rapid thud of hard-heeled boots, and through the partly opened door he could see the men running forward, slender Ring Lacey, guns already fisted, the pallid gambler with the twisted left hand, a runty man with a star pinned on his shirt, half a dozen others of the same breed—killer breed.

Then, coldly, he stepped through the doorway to face them.

And next week brother faces brother, each not knowing his kinship, with guns heavy in their hands.

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WHEN we started buying your true Western experiences, we expected that we'd let ourselves in for plenty headaches. We could picture ourselves burning the midnight electricity, gas, oil or candle wax. We had visions of wading through floods of badly spelled and punctuated letters from present-day cowhands and old-timers from way back when. We didn't look forward to the new chore the Big Boss had wished on us. But orders are orders,

so we took 'em and tried to pretend that we liked 'em.

Did we get a surprise! Your letters are often misspelled and badly punctuated, sure, but what you write doesn't have to be changed much. Durn it, we'd spoil the flavor of what you write if we monkeyed with it! You hombres and gals who tell your true Western experiences have the knack of writing 'em in your own distinctive manner. You're proving that you're born story tellers. What changes we make are done with plumb few flourishes of a blue pencil.

That's why your experiences are going to be rehashed around campfires for years to come, or we miss our guess. You old-timers recall the old West that is fast becoming a memory; you waddies of today are only a jump or two ahead of 'em. That's why we urge you to keep sending 'em in. If they make good reading, we'll sure buy 'em.

Of course, that goes for you amateurs' fiction stories, too; as you can see, we're buying stories and poems right along. Here's this week's true Western experience to start the ball rolling:

A LOYAL HORSE

By Frank Blair—Age 22
Brownfield, Texas

On a certain ranch in west Texas there is an old horse that stands day after day in a little pasture lush with grass. He has been there for years, pensioned on this plot of range. Knowing that he had long ago outlived his usefulness, I asked the owner why he kept the horse. This is the story he told me:

"Fifteen years ago I owned a horse named Black Star, the fastest, smartest horse that ever wore a cowboy saddle. He was my personal mount and no one else ever rode him. One of the hands tried it once, but picked himself up so badly shaken that he was unable to work for a week.

Black Star was strictly a one-man horse, and always remained loyal to his master.

"One day I rode to town to transact some business, and started home just about dark with four hundred dollars in my pocket, as it was almost pay day for the ranch hands. I had noticed two strangers in the bank when I drew out the money, but thought nothing of it. I had always taken care of myself and feared no one.

"I had not gone over two miles, however, till I heard the drumming of hoofs behind me. In the semi-darkness I saw two men riding toward me at full speed. One of them yelled for me to stop. I saw him brandish a gun, and I knew I was going to be robbed, maybe murdered. I seldom carried a gun, and now had nothing on me but a knife. I speeded up quickly, determined to outrun them, when suddenly the gunman fired, and the bullet caught me in the shoulder. I turned sick, half blinded with the pain and shock. I knew I was hard hit, so I tied the reins on the saddle-horn with my one good hand, gritted my teeth and told Black Star to go home. It was a winding, tortuous trail, but the big fellow threw back his ears and fairly flew over the ground. It was fifteen miles home, but somehow I got there half delirious and weak from losing blood. The two had chased me a mile or so, then given up the race, for nothing in this part of the country could have stayed up with that horse that night.

"I rode Black Star for a few more years till his joints began to stiffen and the hard life of a cow horse began to tell on him. He's been on a pension for five years, and I guess he'll stay out there the rest of his life. I can catch him in the middle of the pasture and ride him slick. But you better not try it, mister. You see, he is still a one-man horse."

Gosh durn it, the SW top hands and I sure have a weakness for horse and dog stories, be they fact or fancy! But we reckon most of you folks have the same weakness, too, so Señor Blair's true experience is plumb welcome. We know the kind of amigo Black Star must be—to one hombre. We sure aren't hankerin' to get familiar with anyone else's one-man horse!

Gracias, pard. We sure like your experiences on the range in the Lone Star State.

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SWIFT VENGEANCE
 By Chester Reynolds—Age 18
 Girard, Kansas

There was a cold, relentless glint in the steel-gray eyes of old Slim Mason as his usually fiery mustang solemnly awaited the tightening of the cinch in old Slim's weather-beaten, browned hand.

He had a job to do. Across the saddle of another horse slumped the body of a young man—old Slim's only son. His son had been ruthlessly murdered in their cabin in the hills while he was gone to town after grub and supplies. Upon his return, old Slim found his son piled in a lifeless heap on the floor, a bullet hole in his back. Their money had been stolen. Old Slim avowed revenge. His only clue as to the murderer was a piece of the broken bone handle of a gun. Little hope he had of finding a murderer with this as the only evidence.

He mounted Blazer and slowly rode to where he had dug a shallow grave. He took a last look at his son and laid him to rest.

Old Slim solemnly rode away, yet there was a grim, determined look in his steel-gray eyes. He galloped into town and pulled up in front of the Great Day Saloon. There was a far away look in his eyes as he entered the saloon. Ordinarily, he would not touch liquor, but tonight was an exception. He needed something for a bracer. He downed a slug of red eye and then turned to view the hombres gathered in the saloon. A card game was under way in a far corner. Old Slim strode over to that corner. He was a disinterested onlooker, but he saw a crooked move made by one of the players. Immediately, he sized this man up. He was short of stature, heavy set; black eyebrows almost hid thin, greedy, black eyes, and his thin lips held a smirk of triumph. He was neatly dressed. At the same time, another man seemed to have noticed the crooked move. He leaped up shouting, "Rat Garner, you pulled an ace."

Rat Garner went for his gun, but stopped short when he felt the cold muzzle of a .45 in his side. Rat turned quickly and, drawing out old Slim as the owner of the gun, whipped his arm backward, almost knocking the gun from the older man's fingers.

As old Slim was returning his .45 to firing position, Rat's gun leaped from its holster and roared with a defiant *br-rroo-m!* Hot lead tore through old Slim's left shoulder, spinning him slightly, but his gun had

barked out its answer and Rat Garner lay on the floor, dying. Old Slim knelt over him.

"I'm sorry, podner," he said, but at that instant he noticed a missing piece in the bone handle of Rat Garner's idle gun. "Come clean, feller," he said. "Did you murder my son? You're dying. You'll feel better if you spill it."

Rat spoke, but it was in the heavy whisper of death, "Yeah, I shot . . . I . . . shot . . . him."

"Thanks, mister," said the young fellow who had challenged Rat's play.

"Don't mention it, son. He had it comin'," said old Slim.

On his way to see the doctor, he patted Blazer's neck affectionately, softly muttering, "Well, podner, it looks like we go on alone from here. Our job is done."

As we've told you amateurs, you can't go wrong by sticking to the old Western plots. You should give 'em a twist of your own to make them just a little different, but that's up to you. This story is a durned good model for you.

The plot has been popular since the days of Kit Carson because it has conflict and human interest. It is simple, with one problem to be solved and one tangible clue that will solve it. That leaves the author free to let himself go with colorful writing and characterization.

That's the best thing in the story—the writing style. It's plumb colorful, pard! Keep it up; it's a fiction writer's greatest asset.

Now for the next story:

THE KID PLAYS SAFE

By John Lapin—Age 28

Mount Pleasant, Michigan

Kid Riley watched the sheriff draw one card—and fill an inside straight. "That was a risky chance," Riley said as the old tin-badge raked in the pot.

The law dog grunted good-naturedly. "A poker game is no place for hombres afraid tuh take a chance. Save yore dinero for that fancy get up yuh been admirin' in the mail-order catalog. Yuh shore need it."

Riley grinned. He was dressed more like a saddle tramp than a deputy sheriff. "Shucks," he started, but a waddy almost tore the front doors off their swing hinges and yelled:

"Sheriff! Dobe Miller was just held up and murdered. Duke Yancey picked up the stage at Apache Wells and drove it in."

Chips spilled from the overturned table as the players stampeded to the door. "Duke Yancey?" Riley heard the sheriff mutter right behind him.

The fancy-dressed gambler from Lordsburg was climbing from the driver's seat when Riley and the sheriff pushed through the crowd around the stage.

"I was takin' a siesta at Apache Wells when the stage came bustin' down the trail," Yancey told the sheriff. "Old Dobe Miller was sprawled out on the deck, like yuh see him. Pore feller. He must have put up a battle tuh save the mail."

Riley and the sheriff lowered the dead driver to a dozen arms anxious to help.

"If yuh want me, sheriff," the Duke called, unhitching his horse from the back of the stage, "I'll be in the saloon."

The Kid watched the gambler lead his mount to the rail in front of the barroom. His slitted gray eyes seemed to be fascinated by the tin-horn's wine-colored silk shirt. He scanned the rest of the dudish gambler's clothes, from vicuna cloth JB to hand-embroidered Justins. Then quickly, he jumped from the stage and followed Yancey.

The gambler was having a drink at the bar. Several waddies had strayed back in, but the place was still hushed.

"Yancey," the Kid clipped, "sheriff sent me tuh arrest yuh for mail robbery!"

The gambler almost choked on his drink. "Are yuh loco?" he gasped. "Would I drive the stage in if I'd just killed the driver?"

"I didn't say murder. I said mail robbery."

"Then old Dobe ain't dead! I didn't kill him!"

"He's dead enough tuh slap a noose on yore—"

The gambler's arm became a blur, slashing for the butt of his six-gun. The Colt leaped lightning-fast, but the lead that roared from its throat, slivered into the floor. Riley's fist, rope-burned to boulder-hardness, exploded against the tinhorn's chin.

"What the hell?" demanded the sheriff, drawn in by Yancey's shot.

"Yancey just admitted killin' Dobe,"

cried the barkeep. "But why didn't yuh draw iron, Kid?"

"Couldn't risk drillin' the jasper," grinned Riley. "He's wearin' my clothes. They was in the mail and I reckon Yancey couldn't resist them. Can't blame the gent much. They shore are purty."

The sheriff blinked at his deputy. "Huh," he grunted. "And yuh figure poker's too risky."

Here's a plumb good example of what practice does for a writer. This story is durned easy to read. It has a good plot with a wallop on the last page. The characters might have been developed a little more, but still there's enough characterization to make them more than mere names. We sure advise you to keep at it, pard, and study magazine stories to acquaint yourself with the distance to be jumped from amateur to professional ranks. We reckon you're plumb close to trying the leap.

Best of luck to you, hombre! We've got a hunch that you're going to bust into the main part of Western magazines one of these days.

Here's another story:

ALMOST HIGH-GRADED

By Ted Rose—Age 35

Natomas, California

Jim Larson smiled enigmatically as a low rumble came to his ears. That would be the bull-block at the heading of the Seirra Mine. The Seirra—the first and the last mine in which Jim had worked. Deep down in the Seirra shaft he had first learned to cut a fuse for the heavy charges of powder with which to blast the ore from the face of the drift.

Down there, years ago, old Sam Roberts had kept him from cracking up while they waited for a rescue gang to blast its way through tons of rubble to them after the worst cave-in that the Seirra had ever had. Sam had kept him from going stark, raving mad, and since then Jim had felt

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that he owed his reason, as well as his life, to the old man.

Once more on the surface, Jim had quit his job.

Now, Jim was back in Placerton and one of the men at the table with him was old Sam. The other was a Mexican, by name, Pedro.

There was an impatient light in Jim's eyes as he snapped:

"Well, what are we waiting for? I'm buyin' high-grade ore. But I ain't interested in small jags. I got dough behind me. Plenty. If you've got some more of this at a fair price, I want it. But I can't put in all my time on one deal."

Sam Roberts lifted his hand in a placating gesture:

"Take it easy, son," he said. Jim thought his voice sounded tired as he went on. "Pedro, here, has sold more high-grade ore than some of these mines run through their stamp mills. But he has got to be sure that he can trust us."

White teeth flashed in the brown face across the table from them as the Mexican spoke up. "Si, señors. Si, Pedro, he ees convince. For theese one piece of ore I want one hundred dollars. Tomorrow I shall bring here to the Golden Slipper much more of the same. Look señors, ees it not the prettiest piece of ore you have ever seen?"

In his grimy paw lay a piece of gold ore which Jim knew was jewelry fine. Only small threads of quartz showed dully in a golden bed.

Jim Larson counted out the hundred dollars. His eyes searched the Mexican's face as he asked:

"Tomorrow, Pedro? Tomorrow you will bring more?"

Avarice gleamed in Pedro's eyes as he replied:

"Si, señor. Much gold has been what you call high-grade. Tomorrow night I shall show such gold as you have nevair seen."

"Tomorrow night." Jim's voice knifed through the silence of the room. In his hand, somehow, had appeared a gun and there on the table before him lay a silver badge which proclaimed him to be a deputy United States marshal.

"Tomorrow night, my Mexican friend, you'll be in jail. Charged with dealing in high-graded ore which has been stolen from the Sierra Mine. There is only one place where this ore could have come from. I studied pretty hard while I was getting myself through the government school of metallurgy. And as for you, Sam Roberts, you go on home and tell your old lady that you have been having ideas about takin'

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up high-gradin' along with your job at the Seirra. You tell her that you changed your mind."

Here's a story that could be improved by making it longer for the sake of better character development. The plot could be strengthened by working it over so that a plant would be introduced early in the story that would tie up with a stronger ending. You see, pard, all short stories need a surprise at the end, something more than just the rather tame outcome of the conflict.

Remember that in your next, señor. All of us are too apt to start writing before we get the full meat out of our plot situations. You haven't done a bad job on this one, but we've got a hunch it's in you to do better.

Now for a poem:

NATURE'S VENGEANCE

By Robert Dolde—Age 22
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Murde Black rode into Trail Town;
He stopped at the bank's door.
"Hands up," said Murde entering,
"Or your heart with lead I'll bore."

Bespectacled Ross turned pale with fright,
Brave man, tried and true,
He reached for his loaded six-gun,
And was shot through and through.

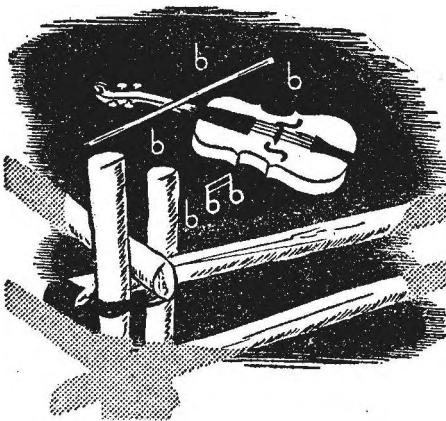
Murde got the cash into a bag;
Went out to his waiting horse,
Rode off with the sheriff followin',
And headed for a hidden course.

The sheriff, sore, lost the trail,
Swore to avenge Ross' death;
Rode to an unused river crossing
And held his gasping breath.

Sinking in the river's quicksand,
Murde's eyes rolled with fear;
The sheriff tossed his rope to him,
Could only watch Murde's head disappear.

Don't forget, amigos, you've got the same chance to cash in that these amateurs had. Why not take it? You can't lose more than time and postage, and you may win.

THE RANGE BOSS.



FIDDLIN' JOE'S SONG CORRAL

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range 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.

Hi, there, friends! I'm glad to say that the postman is bringing me some mighty interesting mail which you will share with me.

Don't forget that I'd like to know what was *your* favorite song when you were a child; and what your children are singing today of the old songs that you taught them.

Here, for instance, is a little ditty that George L. Kay of Louisiana, remembers hearing in the backwoods of eastern Texas when he was a child. He was reminded of it by the verses which we printed in a December issue from an article by John

Craddock, of the Texas Folklore Society. Do you remember them? Here is George Kay's version:

I asked my mother for fifteen cents,
O bye-o-baby-bye
To see the elephant jump the fence,
O bye-o-baby bye.

He jumped so high he touched the sky,
O bye-o-baby bye
He never came down till the Fourth of
July,
O bye-o-baby bye.

I went to the river and I couldn't get
across,
O bye-o-baby bye
So I paid five dollars for an old blind
horse,
O bye-o-baby bye.

I put him in the river and found he couldn't
swim,
O bye-o-baby bye
So I paid five dollars for to get him out
again
O bye-o-baby bye.

Chorus (after each verse)
O bye—o—ba-by b-y-e,
O bye—o—ba-by b-y-e,
O bye—o—ba-by b-y-e,
O bye—o—ba-by b-y-e.

I hope you enjoy adding that to your collections as much as I did adding it to mine!

Sometime ago our old friend Gerald McIntosh, of Arkansas, sent in a couple of poems by Harry Lee Marriner, who used to be staff poet of the Dallas *Morning News*, and we have now been given permission to use them, so here's the first:

PAP MALONEY
By Harry Lee Marriner

Sure, I knowed ol' Pap Maloney—whitest
man you ever saw,
Way out there in Arizonay, where the .45
was law;
Funny how we came to name him, he's been
dead an' gone so long,
But I know the angels claim him, fer he
done nobody wrong.

There was Injuns all aroun' us, when ol' Pap Maloney quit,
They was pretty nigh to down us, an' we'd sorter lost our grit,
Each behin' his dyin' pony with the bullets whinin' past,
An' our guns plum' empty only with the bullets fer the last.

Pap, he sees one chance an' takes it, as a buck comes screechin' by
An' takes his one last shot an' makes it, an' that buck concludes to die;
An' before he hits the clover, Pap, he's got his cartridge belt
An' the fight begins all over like some brand-new hands is dealt.

But ol' Pap, he don't forget us, layin' there with empty guns,
Sure the blessed cuss won't let us, so he doubles up an' runs,
An' as he gits nigh he stumbles, an' we see the dark-red spot
Showin' that when ol' Pap tumbles he's a goner—where he's shot.

"Bill," says he, "I guess he's got me; set me up, I ain't quite through,
I kin see the cuss that shot me; guess he'll have to mosey, too."
An' that buck don't know what hit him when he hit the earth an' died;
"Told ye," grins ol' Pap, "I'd git him," an' lays back, satisfied.

Did you ever know that Indians were afraid of bald-headed men? George W. Bolds, of New York, tells how a friend of his, many years ago, was captured by a roving band of Indians who made a rush for his scalp. But when they jerked his hat off and saw his smooth head they let out a howl and rode away as if the cavalry was after them. For the Indian tradition is that a man can only be scalped once. So even in baldness the pioneers could find something to be thankful for!

Here is an old, old song which, strange to say, the Corral has never sung. I know you'll be glad to have it:

THE HELL-BOUND TRAIN
(Sent to us by Ed Abernethy, of North Carolina)

A Texas cowboy on a barroom floor
Had drunk so much he could hold no more,
So he fell asleep with a troubled brain
To dream that he rode on the hell-bound train.
The engine with murderous blood was damp,
The headlight was a big brimstone lamp,
While an imp, for fuel, was shoveling bones;
The furnace rang with a thousand groans.

The boiler was filled full of lager beer,
And the devil himself was the engineer;
The passengers were a mixed up crew,
Church members, atheists, gentile and jew,
The rich man in broadcloth, the poor in rags,
Handsome girls and wrinkled hags,
While black men, yellow men, red and white
All chained together, a fearful sight.

The train rushed on at an awful pace,
The sulphurous fumes scorched hands and face;
Wilder and wilder the country grew
And faster and faster the engine flew;
Louder and louder the thunder crashed,
And brighter and brighter the lightning flashed.
Hotter and hotter the air became
Till clothes were burned from each shrinking frame.

Then out of the distance there rose a yell
"Ha! ha!" said the devil, "the next stop's hell."
Then, oh, how the passengers shrieked with pain,
And begged the devil to stop the train;
But he capered about and danced with glee
And laughed and mocked at their misery.
"My friends, you paid for your seats on this road,
The train goes through (with) the complete load.

"You've bullied the weak and cheated the poor,
The starving brother turned from your door,
You've laid up gold till your purses burst,
And given free play to your beastly lust.
You've paid full fare and I'll carry you through

For it's only right you should have your due;

The laborer always expects his hire,
So I'll land you safe in the lake of fire.

"Your flesh will scorch in the flames that roar,

And my imps torment you forever more—"

Then the cowboy woke with an anguished cry,

His clothes were wet and his hair stood high.

Then he prayed as he never prayed before,
To be saved from his sins and hell's front door.

His prayers and pleadings were not in vain
For he never rode on the hell-bound train.

And here's an old, old favorite
that is prime beef wherever men toss
chips on a table:

THE GAMBLER'S BALLAD

I've got no use for the women,

A true one may never be found.

They want a man for his money;

When it's gone, they'll turn him down.

They're all alike at the bottom.

Selfish and grasping for all.

They'll stick to a man when he's winning.

And laugh in his face at his fall.

My pal was a straight young puncher,

Honest and upright and square,

Till he turned to a gunman and gambler;

But a woman sent him there.

Swift and sure his gunplay,

Till his heart in his body lay dead.

When a rascal insulted her picture,

He filled him full of lead.

All night in the darkness they trailed him
Through mesquite and chaparral.

And I couldn't but think of the woman,

When I saw him pitch and fall.

If she'd been the pal she should've,

He might have been rearing a son,

Instead of out there on the prairie,

To be falling by a Ranger's gun.

The cowboy was fatally wounded;

His chances for life were too slim,

Where they were putting his body

Was all that worried him.

He raised his head on his elbow,

And the blood from his wound flowed red.

He looked at his pals grouped about him,

And whispered to them and said:



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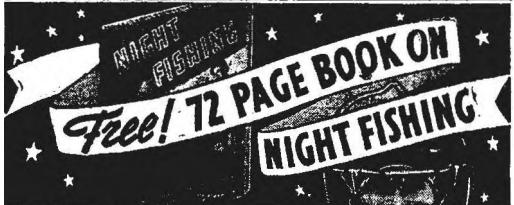
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"Oh, bury me out on the prairie,
Where the coyotes may howl o'er my
grave,
And cover me over with boulders,
That some of my bones be saved.

"Wrap me up in my blankets
And bury me deep 'neath the ground,
And cover me over with boulders
Of granite so huge and round."

They buried him out on the prairie,
And the coyotes may howl o'er his grave;
But his soul is at rest with its Giver
From the unkind cut that she gave.

And many a similar puncher,
As he rides by that pile of stones,
Recalls some similar woman
And is glad that it's not his bones.

Here's a little song that was sent in a long time ago by Jack Adam of North Carolina, with no information as to where he obtained it. I guess it won't do any harm for us to sing it.

HAPPY COWBOY

I'm takin' it good-natured
When they're sprayin' me with lead,
I'm laffin' when I'm findin'
There's cactus in my bed,
But I'm rearin', pard, I'm rearin',
When a bunch of dern galoots
Thinks they're smart, and whilst I'm snorin'
Empty water in muh boots.

I kin grin when I find
There's gravel in muh greens,
An' there's castor oil aplenty
In muh dish of pork an' beans,
But I'm rearin', pard, I'm rearin',
When a bunch of dern galoots
Thinks they're smart, and whilst I'm snorin',
Empty water in muh boots.

An' I don't blame him, either!

I hope that won't give you nightmares, folks! If it does, it's because you've been up to something you wouldn't like to be caught doing. But I guess you all are pretty safe from such terrors.

Hasta la vista!

DIDN'T DREAM HE COULD LEARN MUSIC WITHOUT A TEACHER



Surprised to Find He Could PLAY!

YES, just like thousands of others, who thought music was hard, this man got the surprise of his life when he tried this easy way to learn music at home. And no wonder! Instead of months of tedious study and practice, he found himself actually playing real tunes in the very first few weeks!

But read this unsolicited letter for yourself:

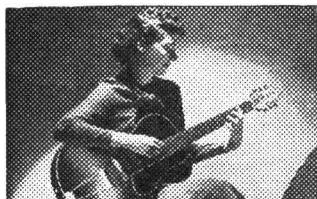
"I didn't even dream that I could actually learn to play without a teacher, because I had always heard that it couldn't be done. I couldn't afford a teacher so I didn't think it would do me any harm to take your course.

"When I received the lessons I took the instantaneous note finder and struck the notes right off. You can imagine my surprise when after three or four weeks I found that I could actually play real tunes.

"Now, when I play for people they will hardly believe that I learned to play so well with just a correspondence course in so short a time. I am getting to the point where even the hardest music holds no terrors for me."

(Signed) * H. C. S., Calif.

Read How Thousands Have Learned to Play Their Favorite Instruments! Free Proof that You Can, Too



Wouldn't Take \$1000 for Course
The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



* Actual pupils' names on request.
Pictures posed by Professional models.

Plays on Radio
I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

* W. H. S., Alabama.



Easy to Understand
The manner in which the various lessons are explained is very helpful as well as interesting. It makes one feel that the explanation is being given in person.
* W. W., Florida.

Which instrument would you like to play? The piano, violin, guitar, saxophone, accordion? Never mind if you don't know one note from another. Don't worry about "talent." And for get all you have ever heard about tedious study and practice. Here's proof you can learn quickly in spare time at home—without a teacher, at amazingly little cost.

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Violin	Saxophone	Banjo	Plain Accordion
Guitar	Clarinet	Ukulele	Hawaiian Guitar
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Name

Street

City

State

Check here for Booklet "A" if under 18 years of age.

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