

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

JAN. 5, '40

10¢

JANUARY
6th, 1940



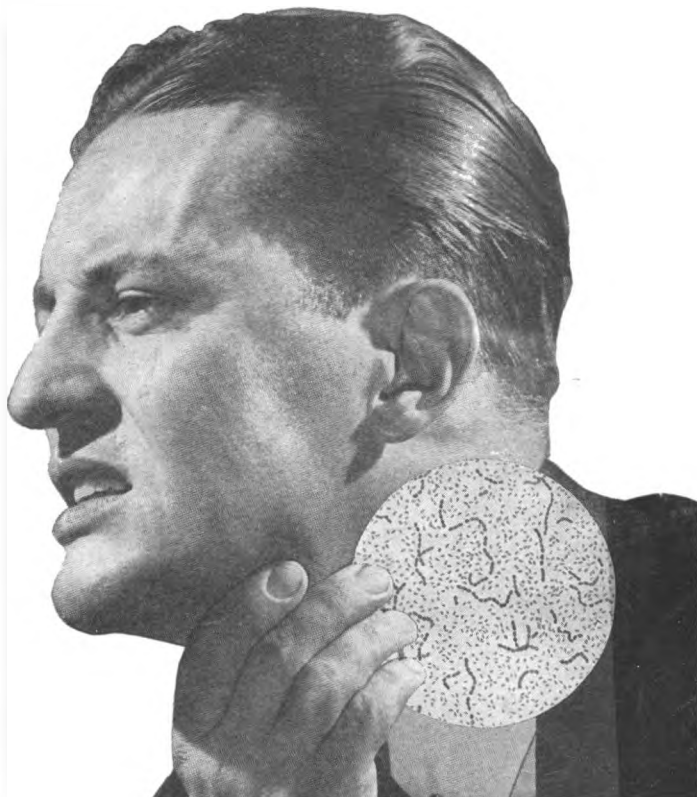
beginning

MASSACRE MINE

by **WILLIAM F. BRAGG**

CHUCK MARTIN-WALKER TOMPKINS

**Better
start
gargling
with
Listerine,
Mister!**



**FOR COLDS
AND
SORE THROAT**

WHEN you've got the sniffles, a chill, and your throat feels irritated, it's a sign that germs are probably at work in mouth and throat.

Sometimes they can be killed in sufficient numbers or kept under control so that Nature can halt the infection . . . throw off the cold.

If you have any symptoms of trouble, start gargling with full strength Listerine Antiseptic and keep it up. Countless people say it's a wonderful first aid and 8 years of scientific research back them up. Tests during this period actually showed fewer and milder colds for Listerine Antiseptic users . . . fewer sore throats, too.

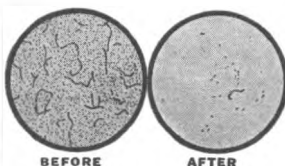
Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on throat surfaces to kill millions of the secondary invaders—germs that many authorities say help to complicate a cold and make it so troublesome.

Actual tests showed germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7% even 15 minutes after the Listerine Antiseptic gargle. Up to 80% one hour later.

In view of this evidence, don't you think it is a wise precaution to use Listerine Antiseptic systematically during fall, winter, and spring months when colds are a constant menace to the health of the entire family?

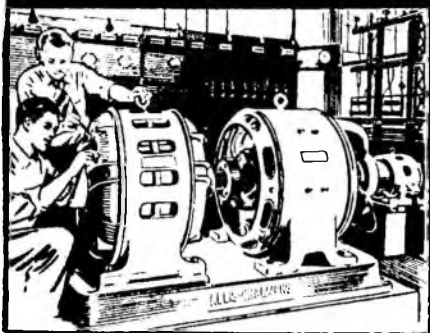
Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Mo.

NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS!

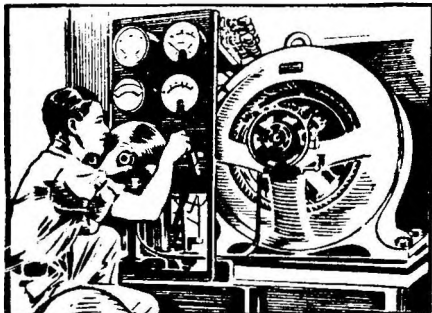


The two drawings at left illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY 12 WEEKS TRAINING ACTUAL WORK ON ELECTRICAL MACHINERY



First you are told and shown what to do and how to do it. Then you do it yourself.



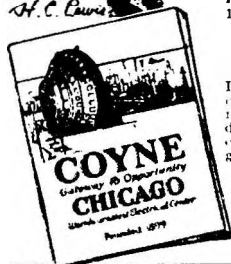
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Don't let lack of money hold you back. If you need part-time work to help out with living expenses while you train, my employment department will help you find it. We also give you valuable lifetime employment service after you graduate. And remember this: If you are short of money you can get this training first and pay for most of it beginning 60 days after you graduate—in 12 monthly payments.

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Electrical
School



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COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
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Please send me your big free Opportunity Book and all the facts about Coyne training, and the place is held a fellow who hasn't a lot of money.

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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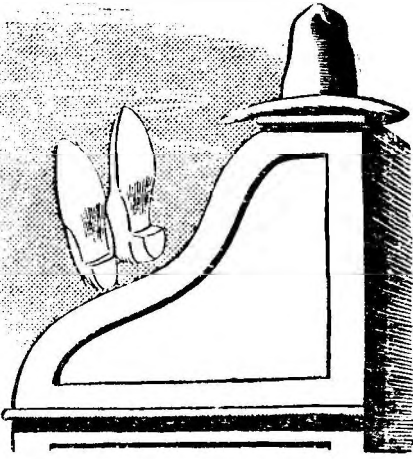
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

It always gives an editor a pleasant glow to find an unusually interesting novel which has a setting closely adhering to facts. And that's the kind we're beginning in this issue: William F. Bragg's "Massacre Mine." Not only is the accompanying map very close to an actual section of Wyoming—the *symbols* on the strange buffalo robe in the story also are for the most part actual Indian symbols. Let's have a look at what the author says about it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: There are many Indian symbols which no man, red or white, can read today. Hunting these paintings is one of my outdoor pursuits. I have sent sketches to Professor E. B. Renaud, Department of Anthropology, University of Denver, and he has sent me his pamphlet prepared after several surveys through the West and Southwest—plus sketches made of cliff signs.

A little imagination has crept into my buffalo robe. But none of the signs is incorrect. I can't give them all away, as some of them provide surprises later in the story. I can mention several now, though: The pyramid form is used often as the mark for a mountain; a moon is a sheep; there are three sun signs—rising,

sinking, and full sun; same for the moon—crescent, half, full; the zigzag marks indicate canyon rims, as do the pine trees which always grow that way along canyon rims.

The most mysterious sign of all is that of the Great Turtle. Especially in view of the fact that turtles are unknown in the regions of Wyoming where these turtle symbols have been found. The Arapahoes, it is true, make use of the turtle as a good luck totem. Why *they* hold the turtle sacred is any man's guess. There is this point: the shape of the turtle roughly is like that of the sun with the four legs, the head, and the tail as rays or points of the compass. It may be the Indians saw this similarity.

It might also interest you to know that the counterpart of my fanciful Ghost Dance Butte really exists in the Big Horn Mountains. Its name is Medicine Mountain Butte. I visited it last August. From its top I could see over hundreds of square miles of the Big Horn Basin clear to the Rockies. Atop this butte is outlined on the ground a huge stone wheel with spokes of stone, and with arbors or altars in the center. It also marks the four major points of the compass. This entire wheel is about one hundred feet in diameter and has about sixty spokes—lines of small boulders. This image is so ancient that the grass has long since grown up around the stones. The government has set it aside as a relic for us all to wonder about. Nobody, not even the Crow Indians who live nearby, know who made this medicine wheel. But the Crows say it was built by people who lived in the Big Horn country when their tribe first arrived centuries ago. People, they say, who "used no iron."

Far to the west near Mectectsee, Wyoming, on the edge of the Rockies, is a stone arrow—or snake—built on the ground. It is almost sixty feet in length. Peculiarly, its point is lined directly at the flat top of Medicine Mountain which, a hundred miles from the arrow, can be seen on a clear day. There is probably some connection between these great mysteries.

I hope this will give SW readers a few pointers. The other signs, including several logical ones created by myself, will be revealed as the story progresses. Good huntin'!

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM F. BRAGG.

Much obliged, Bill. Bet you put in plenty of hard work drawing the

rough drafts of the terrain map and the buffalo robe. Our artist polished 'em up and it took him quite a spell. Only wish that our presses would permit printing your robe in the bright colors you used on your original. I think readers will agree with me that "Massacre Mine" is your best yet.

Here's a note from one of your favorite word wranglers. He tells us about his complete novel in this number:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: One of the grandest old characters the West has ever known still lives in Tombstone, Arizona. He's Colonel Jeff D. Milton, now nearing the fourscore mark and still one of the best six-gun shots in that tough old mining town.

Jeff was a Texas Ranger when he was eighteen. He was the first Immigration Officer and Border Patrolman, away back in the 1880s. He was also a deputy sheriff and a guard for Wells Fargo, at various other times! It was while he was messenger for Wells Fargo that he had the experience from which this story was born.

Young Jeff was in the express car when Three-finger Jack and his gang held up the train at Fairbanks, Arizona, not far from Tombstone. There were seven outlaws in the gang, and Three-finger Jack opened his remarks with a slug from a .45-70 Winchester. The slug hit Jeff in the arm and broke all the bones.

But Jeff threw his keys into the brush, grabbed his six-gun and made his own fight. He wounded three of the bandits and killed Three-finger Jack. All he had against those seven were his *sizes*—which gave me the tag line for this new story, "Deputies Die Hard." He saved his shipment of bullion and spent quite a spell in

the hospital. When the medico wanted to amputate Jeff's arm, Jeff pulled his six-gun from under his pillow and allowed that if he was going to be buried it was going to be all in one piece!

Spent several days with Jeff at Tucson and Tombstone last spring, and the stories he tells in a dry matter-of-fact tone have furnished me a heap of real material. He's still hale and hearty, tall, strong, soft-spoken—and my idea of the bravest peace officer the West ever produced. Last year the government named a new Coast Guard boat after him. This vessel is a little better than three hundred feet long and works out of the Golden Gate at Frisco.

Like always,

CHUCK MARTIN.

And me, I'll never even get a mud scow named in my honor! Reckon I wouldn't rate that much on the strength of my performance as a lawman. A man like Colonel Jeff deserves a battleship.

Takin' a peek at the future, I see that next week's spread provides good sound fodder. Ed Earl Repp gives us "Gun Ghosts of Skeleton Valley," a real snortier of a complete novel. J. Allan Dunn is back with a thrillin' new Bud Jones Story. On top of that there's a right pert tale of Judge Roy Bean and Blackstone Bangs, plus other good readin' material. I'd like to hear of a bigger stack of entertainment for a dime! That much in a book would cost two bucks. Hope yore New Year resolutions haven't acted like that gringo hombre called Humpty Dumpty. Till next week—*adios!*

THE RANGE BOSS.





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The AVENGER

10 CENTS—EVERYWHERE



MASSACRE MINE

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Author of "Murder Range," etc.

DEPT. 1

MASSACRE MINE

*Those hills were laced with ribbons of gold—but guarded
by the mountain justice and dark talons of death!*

By William F. Bragg

CHAPTER I.

DOUBLE HANGING.

A ROARING CHINOOK wind, melting the snowdrifts of the late spring blizzard that for a long week had held the Big Stony Mountains in its icy grip, broke trail for Pat Geary into the storm-lashed mining camp of Bear's Nest on Copperhead Creek.

With a thousand miles of hard and lonely trail behind the heels of his weary gray horse, the young New Mexican faced the chill wind from the snow-capped peaks with courage and strength undimmed.

In his saddle pocket he carried a lump of snowy white bull quartz, laced with wire gold, and two letters, yellowed with age. The mineral, the messages in the letters, Pat hoped would guide him down a vengeance trail through these central Wyoming divides and, at the last, bring him face to face with the false friend, the treacherous murderer of his father.

Raw gold, the stuff that drives men insane with desire and greed lay behind that murder. The darkly timbered ridges that loomed above Bear's Nest held locked in their silent valleys, the secret of that treasure hoard which had lured men to their red deaths.

In Bear's Nest, Pat hoped to meet a man, a pioneer ranger, his father's friend, who would guide him over the killer trail that had its bitter end in the secret Valley of Gold.

The camp buzzed under the warm noon sun like a nest of bald-faced hornets scraped off a rimrock. Bearded miners in their red shirts, woolen pants, and high German socks, tinhorn gamblers and floaters in tawdry garments, milled about in the slushy knee-deep snow.

Looking across the bobbing heads of the crowd, Pat saw two old men standing on kitchen chairs under the overhang of a cabin roof.

A sign, rattling in the brisk wind, informed the world that the cabin housed the Grand Cafay where hungry men could secure good meals at all hours and that Lem Drucker was the proud owner.

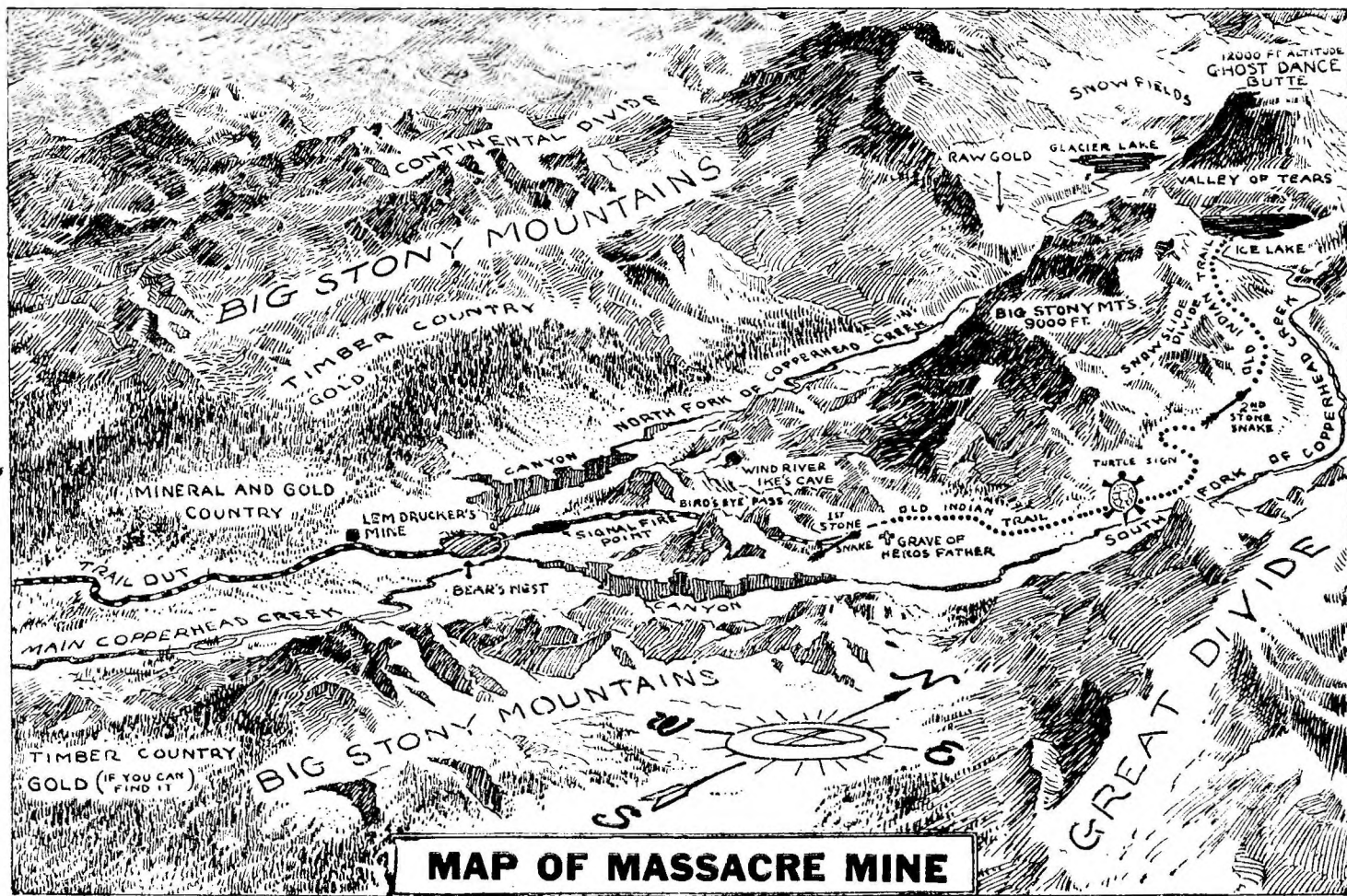
Not far from where Pat had halted his horse to range his keen gray eyes over the crowd, a leathery-faced mountaineer lounged on the humped back of a shaggy pinto Indian pony. Two pack animals stood nearby, kyacks laden down with hindquarters and briskets of frozen game meat.

At his first glance, Pat assumed that he was gazing upon some rough bit of horseplay staged by the miners to relieve the long monotony of a winter spent in snowbound mountains.

Until he saw that the two old men standing on the kitchen chair had ropes twisted around their necks.

"It's a hangin'." Pat gasped.

The mountaineer eased around in his saddle. He ran a pair of beady



brown eyes over the lanky frame, the tanned face of the young New Mexican. A heavy spade beard of sandy-hued hair, flecked with gray, masked lean jaws. A patched coat, apparently home-tailored from a red Hudson Bay blanket, covered a barrel-like chest, a wide spread of shoulders. Elkskin pants, from which greasy fringe fluttered, knee-high moccasins with bullhide soles, adorned the mountaineer's bowed legs.

While he eyed Pat, the mountaineer slowly chewed tobacco. Before he spoke, he deftly lifted one wing of his flaring mustache and spat into the snow. Then he drawled in a husky voice that creaked like a rusty hinge.

"Shore, it's a hangin', son. Ol' Lem Drucker an' his dumb Injun. Reckon the boys got mad about the bad grub he's been dishin' out to 'em all winter."

For the moment, Pat Geary forgot the errand of vengeance that had brought him north, that had been foremost upon his mind, awake or asleep, across burning deserts or beside lonely night fires.

"It's not right," he said hotly, "to hang men because they put out bad grub. And old men at that. Why, that chunky old un is bald as an eagle an' fat an' flabby as a fitch of pore bacon."

The mountaineer shrugged his shoulders.

"An' the other," he explained, "is plumb dumb. Somewhar' he lost his tongue. All he kin do is tuh make signs in this war whoop hand talk. Which dang few of these miners sabe."

Now a burly miner with a coarse red beard mantling his jutting jaw, strode to the front of the cabin. He held up a hand that looked as large to Pat as a picnic ham.

"You've heard the charges, boys!" the miner roared in a bull-like bellow. "That Drucker an' his dumb Injun held out on the camp pertater supply after scurvy had struck us. Hopin' tuh git big money fer the same. That Lame Jimmy died this mornin' after his teeth had fallen out an' his guns turned black as pitch. So what's the verdict?"

With a roar like that from a cage of wild beasts, the crowd answered.

"Hang 'em!"

The red-bearded miner swung about, nodded two henchmen forward. They took station behind the chairs upon which Drucker and the Indian were standing.

"When I say the word," the miner boss explained, "you boys jerk them chairs from under Lem an' the Injun. Git a firm hold an' dig in yore toes fer a good ol' jerk! We'll prove that Bear's Nest don't stand none fer dirty work like holdin' out grub that 'u'd cure scurvy!"

Pat stiffened in his saddle. He was wearing a sheep-lined sourdough coat for he had faced a sharp wind all morning breaking trail up from the sagebrush flats along the Black Fork River. He unbuttoned the coat for it covered the gunbelt buckled around his waist.

The mountaineer, halting for the moment his endless jaw work on his cud of tobacco, marked the unbuttoning of the coat as a hostile action.

"Now, son," he cautioned in his hoarse voice, "don't git overstrained an' figger to jump this hull camp. Jest to save an ol' hawg like Lem Drucker. An' a danged dumb Injun. The boys did find pertaters hidden in the cafay cellar. After Lem had swore that he had plumb run out."

"But to hang men for hidin' pertaters?"

The mountaineer said grimly.

"You didn't see Lame Jimmy die. Nor how the scurvy had turned his mouth black. A few of them 'taters might have saved Jimmy's life. Fresh vittles are prime cures fer the black death. Lem knew it same as the rest of us. But—to make big money—he let a feller human bein' die in agony. So—"

Pat Geary eased back into his saddle. He reflected that the ways of mining camps were strange for he had spent all his life on the New Mexican cattle range where men faced danger but not that of scurvy. Perhaps the miners' court had passed a just verdict. Lem Drucker, and his Indian partner, by hiding potatoes at a critical moment, had as surely caused the death of Lame Jimmy as though they had shot him down from ambush.

Shoving back the battered slouch hat that topped his wiry crop of tawny hair, Pat grinned wryly and allowed to the mountaineer that perhaps it was camp business and none of his own.

"Though I'm frank to state," he ended, "that the sight of a double hangin' turns the pit of my stummick plumb cold."

The mountaineer patted the breech of the long rifle that he carried across his saddle fork.

"If I didn't figger Lem had it comin'," he drawled, "I'd be sittin' in a hull lot with ol' Betsy here. But Lem's been a sharp dealer ever since he hit Bear's Nest last fall in the boom days when the gold was found in gravel bars along Copperhead Crick. I been furnishin' him game meat all winter. He's always out-tradin' me. Besides that—the rum-soaked old galoot—he works that Injun an' the Injun's gal like a couple of work hosses. I told Lem afore this his bad ways with people would creep up on him. An' in that

sad moment, he'd have no friends afore the court. Waal"—the mountaineer pulled a plug of tobacco from the top of his moccasin and gnawed off a fresh chew—"that said moment has come. And is about to have went fer Lem—"

Pat kept his gray eyes upon Lem and the Indian, upon the two men braced behind the chairs, ready to pull them from under the old men's boots at the word of command. All the while he listened to the drawling, tobacco-flavored explanations of the bearded mountaineer, argued against his own heart and conscience that the man was talking horse sense, that he was a stranger in Bear's Nest, that he must not interfere with the stern business of a miners' court.

That such interference further would hamper, perhaps even halt forever, the duty he had undertaken of running down the murderer of his father, or restoring to his widowed mother the riches that for years she had lacked, riches that would give her ease and the comforts of life in her sad old age.

And then—as the big miner flung up his hand a second time, preparing to flash the signal of death—a slim girl raced to the front of the low porch. Apparently she had been held inside the café, for a tall man in dark garments hurried after her. And slung his arms about her lithe form and pressed a hand adorned with a flashing ring over her mouth.

But not in time to restrain the shrill scream that cut above the dull rumbling roar of the mob like the bite of a buzz saw into a tough pine knot.

"Help!" the girl cried.

That was all. But it was enough for Pat Geary.

He drove his spurs into the salt-streaked ribs of his gray horse,

brought that animal to surprised and grunting life.

Straight through the crowd, Pat drove. And as he headed toward the cabin where the girl struggled in the arms of the tall man clad in black, he reached inside his coat and cleared the Colt .45 six-gun from its open-faced holster.

Miners broke away, startled, from the crashing rush of the wall-eyed gray. They hadn't expected attack from the rear. One squat fellow, black-eyed as a crow, who sought to hold his ground, was knocked spinning by a glancing blow of the gray's right foreleg.

Reaching the cabin, Pat swerved his mount. His long gun barrel flashed in the sun as he pitched it down upon the big miner who stood with his hand in the air.

"Don't hang those two men," said Pat Geary. "Don't make nary a move. Not until—"

The lean man in black, who held the girl in his arms, looked across her writhing shoulder and up into the set face of the young New Mexican. He spoke for the miner boss, not roughly, but in a slow firm way that indicated the flash of Pat's gun had not broken down his nerve.

"You're a stranger here," the dark man declared. "Mebbe you don't know it's death to bust up a miners' court? Mebbe you don't know that miners' courts and verdicts are recognized by Federal law? Mebbe you better leather that hawg laig an' drift from this camp before the boys pop your neck?"

Pat answered grimly, well aware all the while that the mob in the street had regained nerve, was slowly edging forward, urged on by the black-eyed man who had been knocked down by the gray horse.

"A lady called for help. Where I hail from, that means somethin'.

Turn her loose! Let her talk before you hang these men. This is a free country! In any court, the evidence should all be in afore the jury passes sentence."

A long moment the man in black held the girl in his arms while his dark eyes questioned the hard resolve mirrored in the gray gaze of the New Mexican. Not once did he look at Pat's gun. Then he smiled slightly, exposing even white teeth beneath his trim black mustache. And removing his arms, he stepped away from the girl, and pushed snowy white cuffs up his sleeves which had become disarranged during the struggle.



"Stranger," he said smoothly, "I see yore point. I honor you for it. Sure as my name's Breck Bardeen, 'This girl will tell you—when she can speak—that the court's already listened to her story. That I tried



"Let go that girl," Pat said ominously. "or you'll get a taste of something unexpected!"

my best to get an easier sentence passed on Lem an' the Injun. The boys wouldn't listen. I—er—was keepin' the girl inside the place so she wouldn't have to watch the dirty work. But she's strong as a young tiger—Injun blood, you know—an' she broke away. Well—there she stands. I've done my good deed for the day. Now, you—whatever yore handle is—take over."

Pat nodded. "I'm *takin' over*," he said swiftly. Then to the big miner. "Tell yore men to step away from the chairs. No false moves either."

At a sullen command, the two hangmen stepped back.

Pat said to the girl who was standing there like a statue of defiance, with long black hair whipping in the wind and garments of blanket cloth and buckskin pressed against the youthful lines of her figure. "Cut those ropes!"

She bent, lifted the hem of her buckskin skirt, whipped a long slim knife from the top of her beaded moccasin.

The steel shimmered in the sun, slashing away ropes that had been tightened to choke out the lives of men. Slashing away while the mob of miners growled throatily and stole nearer the bold rider on the gray horse.

Pat said to Breck Bardeen, "I don't aim to pass under false colors. If anybody wants me fer this, let him look up Pat Geary from the Staked Plains of New Mexico. And sometimes—called 'Sundown' Geary."

The big miner flexed the hands he held above his head. "My name's Sloan," he growled. "I'll take pleasure in huntin' you up when you haven't got a cold drop on me. I'll pop yore neck with my bare hands."

"They're big enough," said Pat.

He saw that the old men were free

from the stranglers' ropes. He nodded to the black-haired girl.

"Take 'em inside the cafay. Then—lock all the doors."

Her slim brown hands flashed in a few gestures of graceful sign talk. The aged Indian, tall and thin as a sand hill crane, swung on his moccasined feet and padded into the building. Lem Drucker, faded blue eyes watery with fear, fat jowls quivering, followed.

Breck Bardeen, lounging gracefully against a porch pillar, nodded laugh. "I reckon you've made a hit with her, pilgrim. After all, it's easy to do that with an Injun—"

Quick as a flash, the slim girl whipped a knife from the top of her beaded knee-high moccasin. The blade hurtled toward Bardeen.

Sloan shouted. "Breck—dodge for yer life!"

Bardeen broke at the knees. The steel, barely clearing his head, drove into the pillar and hung there, quivering.

With his taunting smile frozen on his face, Bardeen glanced up at the steel that had almost cut into his throat. Then with a blur of speed, he raked a deadly little derringer pistol from the wide left sleeve of his long black coat.

The flash of knife startled Pat Geary. He hadn't expected a hostile move from the blanketed girl. For it was an age when Indians took contempt in silence. The paleface cavalry had broken up the fighting red legions of Cheyennes and Crows. Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were dead. Nothing remained for warriors and their women but arid reservations and winters of starvation.

But this slim girl with the shining black hair that hung almost to her slender waist, she was swift to resent any taunt cast upon Indian honor.

Nor did she retreat when Bardeen

cleared his derringer. She stood boldly outlined in the narrow café doorway, eyes blazing in a brown face adorned with vermilion paint, small hands clenched at belt level.



EILEEN HIGH EAGLE

"She won't run from bullets!" Pat breathed. And raking spurs down the gray's withers, he jumped his mount upon the porch.

He heard the deafening roar of Bardoons' derringer, felt the flinch of his horse as the heavy bullet burned past the animal's head.

Swinging for a cross-armed shot at Bardoons crouching on the edge of the porch, Pat exposed himself to attack by Sloan and his two henchmen. Rough hands gripped his right leg, dragged him from leather. As he went down, his six-gun was

wrested away. He rose to his knees, fighting bare-handed.

The mob rushed the porch with a howl. The squat man with the crow-black eyes fashioned a noose in a lariat as he led the charge. With a curse, he shouldered to where Pat was being held down by four men. He thrust the loop over the New Mexican's head, tightened it around a brown and corded throat.

They lifted Pat to one of the chairs. The black-eyed man faced him, hissing through yellowed teeth.

"You try for keel Joe Larbo with yore horse. For that—you pay!"

Sloan thrust Larbo aside. He glowered at the hard-eyed prisoner.

"You turned two prisoners loose because an Injun gal caught yore eyes. Well—you'll hang for 'em. Is that right, boys?"

And the Bear's Nest mob answered with its wild beast roar of assent.

"Hang the pilgrim!"

CHAPTER II.

THE HATRED OF JOE LARBO.

STANDING ON the chair, looking contemptuously into the faces of the mob, Pat set his teeth to meet his finish with courage. He expected nothing but a quick drop within a few seconds. He was a stranger in a wild land. He had interfered with rights that mountain miners valued. So he must die in place of the men he had freed.

He reflected as he stood there, feeling the rough hands of Sloan as the miners' boss knotted a rope about his fists, that hot blood had before this led the Geary family into death. So had his father died, suddenly, after riding headlong into a wild country with all his hard-earned savings to aid a partner in distress. And that partner had later betrayed bold Patrick Henry Geary.

And because of a girl's scream for help, a scream from a scorned Indian girl, Pat had failed in his vow to aid his mother. Some kindly soul in Bear's Nest might send back word that Pat had died as his father had checked out, here in snowbound Bear's Nest. Pat hoped in his heart they wouldn't describe the hanging.

Sloan strode to the front of the porch and addressed the tall young prisoner for the last time.

"Don't think we're locoed up here," he growled. "But cash in knowin' we're honest men. We're forced to draw up our own laws. An' enforce 'em. Otherwise the outlaw element would run us like they lorded it over Virginny City and Bannock in Montana. What we're doin', is fer yore own good, young feller."

That brought a smile to Pat's tight lips.

"Too bad," he drawled, "I can't live long enough to appreciate it. Well—I run my chance. An' the cards come out against me. Cut loose whenever yuh feel lucky."

Then he tightened his whipcord muscles and turned his eyes away from scowling human faces to look his last upon the free hills of Wyoming, the dark pine timber rising in lordly ranks above the snow-drifted course of Copperhead Creek, the drifts heaped up over the gravel bar workings and sluice boxes abandoned by miners the fall before when winter came.

Now Sloan stepped aside and raised his broad hand. He didn't look up again into the gray eyes of Pat Geary. The miner's boss seemed ashamed of his duty. He hesitated, as though he hoped the prisoner would plead for mercy.

But Pat Geary stood there silent, unyielding, a noose cutting into the flesh of his neck, his wrists lashed

behind his back. Never would he pray for mercy from this Bear's Nest mob.

Seconds of time seemed to lengthen into years for Pat. He remembered small details of the scene before him as though they had been etched with acid into his mind. Old soldiers in the southwest had described similar sensations to him when he was a lad on the Geary home ranch, how they became numb and silent in the face of deathly danger, how forever after, so long as they lived, they recalled small things, the set of a comrade's cap, the grim jokes passed about, rather than the roaring guns of the enemy.

Pat Geary never forgot the face of Joe Larbo who stood in the forefront of the crowd in the slushy street snow. The man's coal-black eyes seemed to protrude from his seamed brown face. A coarse tangle of black hair streamed from beneath the dirty patched hat with flat top that Larbo wore. Pat even recalled the spots of bacon grease staining Larbo's buckskin winter pants where presumably the man had dropped grease from a flapjack griddle upon his legs.

But strangest of all was the trace of a smile upon Joe Larbo's face, a smile that appeared to Pat almost one of relief. It was as though Joe had emerged from a black valley of fear and now looked upon a danger thrust from his path.

But after all, Pat reflected, he had never met Larbo until his charging gray horse knocked down the man. Outside of a hot fight to save Drucker and the dumb Indian, he saw no reason why Joe Larbo should so eagerly desire his death.

But now Larbo curled his thick lips in a grin and Pat couldn't forget that Joe had been the first to thrust the noose over his head and call on

the mob for this lynching. No doubt of it. Joe Larbo desired the New Mexican's death for some other reason than the breaking up of a miners' court.

Larbo hissed to Sloan. "What ees it you wait for? Why you not geev sign?"

Sloan frowned, growled. "I'm runnin' this thing, Larbo. Keep yore black mouth shet. I was jest waitin' fer the young feller mebbe tuh say a silent prayer."

Then from the porch of a cabin across the street, a husky voice droned out.

"Time's past fer prayers!"

Pat looked toward the voice. New hope was born in his eyes. There stood his mountaineer friend of the tobacco cud and the heavy spade heard. He had led his three horses up to the cabin and now stood behind his saddle animal with his long old rifle resting across the beast's back and the muzzle covering the knot of executioners around Pat Geary.

Sloan growled and called out. "Ike, you've been years in the mountains. You are old enough to have some hoss sense. Don't go throwin' a gun on a miners' court."

Pat Geary felt the sudden jump of his heart. *Ike*—that was the name signed to one of the letters in his pack saddle, the first name of the man who had stood beside his father when the latter died in an ambush with a bullet through his heart and a knife stuck in his back. To this camp, Pat had come, hunting a pioneer Indian trader and trapper called "Ike."

The old hunter never missed a claw on his cud while he answered Sloan.

"I'm as familiar as you, Rufe, with miners' law. The law of Bear's Nest sez no man can be hanged 'er

put to death except by unanimous vote of all gents in the deestrick."

"You voted to hang Drucker and the Injun, Ike."

"Yeah—because I don't hold none with storin' up food when men are dyin' fer the lack of same. Yeah—I voted tuh hang Drucker an' the Injun. If you can git 'em—pop their necks. But that young galoot you got thar, trussed up like a chicken—you ain't hangin' him none to-day."

"Why not?"

"Because," Ike growled, and as he spoke he cocked the old gun and the harsh click of the hammer sent a chill up the back of every man in the mob. "Because, *I ain't* voted on him. And since I'm a strict believer in my own rights, I hereby vote *no*. Either by a show of my left hand. Or a slug from old Betsy here."

Joe Larbo, facing Ike, thrusting his frowsy head forward like an angry range bull, snarled, "You old fool! You no can hold up whole camp wid wan gun."

"Shut yore dirty loose-lipped mouth, *ladron!*" Ike said calmly. "Or you'll git the fust slug through it."

Then he went on in his easygoing way, talking coolly as though he spoke to a bunch of unruly boys. Beyond the threat addressed to Joe Larbo, he made no further war talk. Rather he appealed to the good hearts of the men who listened.

"The boy thar," he declared, "is a stranger to these parts. A likely lookin' young cuss, too. He lost his wits when the gal screamed bloody murder. He wouldn't be the fust boxhead that had got into trouble account of a woman. Now you boys got no right to hang him fer a fool trick like that. Order be an easier

sorta punishment. Banish him from the hills—somethin' of that sort."

Cool talk calmed hot blood. The miners, after their first burst of rage, began to reflect that Pat had been gallant rather than defiant of their law. And old Ike also spoke the truth. The code ran that a man couldn't be executed except by unanimous vote.

"You drew up the rules, Rufe Sloan," said Ike. "So you orter stand by 'em."

Sloan pawed his roan beard. He frowned. Yet somehow he appeared relieved that Ike had stepped in to prevent the execution of a hard duty.

"What do you propose?" he asked. "We can't let this young fool git away with bustin' up our necktie party."

"Turn him over to me," said Ike. "I'll ride herd on him in this cabin. While you boys hold a meetin' to fix his penalty. But—it's *got* to be somethin' less than death."

Joe Larbo leaped up on the porch and began to protest against Ike's argument in broken English. But now Pat's cause received an unexpected ally. For Breck Bardeen, strolling forward, thrust Joe aside and said smilingly to the Bear's Nest men:

"From the start, boys, I hated to see you hang ol' Lem and the Injun. I can't blame this lad for tryin' to help the Injun girl. I reckon ol' Ike's about called the turn. For one, I vote to turn the kid over to him while we hold another pow-wow."

A man called from the crowd.

"Breck, you wasn't feelin' so nice after the Injun gal throwed her knife. You sorta lost yore temper fast, tried tuh kill her quick."

Breck grinned sheepishly, at the same time holding up the knife

thrown by the girl, which he had extracted from the porch pillar.

"I'm savin' this as a little souvenir," he admitted. "I did lose my temper. Who wouldn't? I was near scairt to death. If Rufe Sloan hadn't yelped, she'd have plumb cut my gullet. With this pretty little thing."

Pat saw that the knife held by Breck was not so pretty. It had an eight-inch blade and the point was sharp and the edge keen as that of any razor.

But Breck's smooth explanation that he had lost his temper and tried to shoot a girl, turned the tide in Pat's favor. Sloan seemed ready enough to turn the prisoner over to Ike. The crowd opened an aisle. Pat was prodded across the street, turned over to the mountaineer.

Sloan turned to his men. "Next job is to root Lem and the Injun outa that calay."

But a miner shook his head. "Some of us boys run around the place while back," he explained. "Back door's open. The gal, Lem, and the Injun have got away."

Old Ike frowned. "In this wet snow with most of the game driv' down to the flats by the storm, the three of 'em will starve."

CHAPTER III.

SIGN OF THE KNIFE.

THE locked cabin in which Ike guarded Pat while the mob considered the New Mexican's punishment was gloomy as high-wooded hills cast afternoon shadows over the single window cut in the rear wall. By the light of a smoky lantern placed on a rough table in front of the fireplace, Ike frowningly considered his prisoner while he meditatively chewed his cud.

"All that saved you," he growled,

"was when you told 'em yore name. I been expectin' somebody of that name to ride in."

Pat nodded briefly. "I figured you out when they called you Ike. From what my mother told me, you were my father's good friend. So you know what I'm north for. To find," he spoke between his teeth, "the coyote that killed him."

Ike jerked a saddle pocket off a wall peg and placed it on the table.

"You didn't show much wisdom in bustin' up a miners' court because an Injun gal yelped," he said. "You got to remember every step of the way that we're up against dangerous men and the stakes are big. Not only revenge upon yore father's killer. But"—his hard eyes gleamed in the lantern light—"a fortune in raw gold and other treasure."

"Where'd you git my pack?"

"Yore hoss run off when Sloan and his friends pulled you outa the saddle. I had heard you call out yore name. I rounded up the gray while the mob was lookin' the other way. I found this packet with yore name scrawled on the outside. So—then I stepped in, and used my brains instead of a bullet to save yore fool neck."

Silently Pat opened the parcel which was covered with oilskin. He yearned to question Ike regarding the strange new twists of this trail he had taken. But first he must establish his good faith with the suspicious old mountaineer.

"Here's a letter signed by Ike Huff, commonly known as Wind River Ike," he said. "My mother gave it to me three months ago when I became of age. She had just heard from you that you had picked up another clue that might lead to my father's killer."

With calloused fingers, old Ike spread out the yellowed letter. Pat

ran his eyes over scrawled misspelt words, written over twenty years before, that had broken his mother's heart, brought poverty to the Geary outfit.

The letter ran:

Dere Miz Geery,

Yur husben lyer me in Chian to show tryl to Bear's Nest. Sez he's gone meet his pard Terence Doran. Big gold mine found. Well, Miz Geery, I hate to tel yu we run into dry gulch. They wing me. I taik to brush. That nite I find yur husben. They kilt him with bullit in hart then stick long nife in his back. Injuns are bad up ther. They mite hav dun it. But I dont think so. Fer pack muel was kilt, too. An yur husben's cash stol. Im keepin' nife. Mebe some day I kin find who stabbed him. Luks like TD markt on blaid. I will keep you posted. Yur husben was fine homber. Yurs trooly,

Wind River Ike Huff.

"I writ is," growled Ike. "Hardest job I ever undertook. But yore maw *had* to know." He went on musingly: "About once a year I would drop her a line. But it wasn't until a few months back I stumbled into somethin' that seemed like a real clue to the owner of that TD knife. Reckon that's what brought you ridin'."

"Yeah," Pat whispered harshly, "that's what brought me ridin'. I had to force the story from my mother. I knew—when she got your last letter—that she was sufferin' over somethin'. Grievin'. Well—finally she told me about my dad and his partner, this *Terence Doran*."

He laid another old letter beneath Ike's gaze.

"This is one," he explained, "that you never before read."

This message also bore a date of over twenty years before, but three weeks earlier in date than the death scrawl penned by Ike. The lantern gleam revealed the words that had

lured Pat's father to ambush death on Bear's Nest Crossing. It ran:

Dear Pard,

I didn't blame you for not helping to grubstake me when I drove north with my wife and friends to find gold in Wyoming. You had a ranch, a wife, and a baby son to look after. But old pard, I've found trace of a rich mine way back in the Injun country. I got some cash and treasure in the old Spanish chest. But it'll take more. I need your help. You can't lose. Sell what you can in a hurry and join me in the hunt for the gold. I'll meet you in three weeks at Bear's Nest, a crossing on Copperhead Creek. I inclose a sample of float rock from this mine. My own tests show it will assay around \$3,000 per ton. I'm cuttin' you in for a half interest in what we find this day.

Your partner,

Terry Doran.

When Ike had completed his reading of the letter, Pat replaced it in the pack sack. Then he laid before the mountaineer a chunk of pure white bull quartz the size of an apple. Through it ran strands of heavy wire gold that gleamed and winked under the lantern light.

"Three thousand bucks a ton," old Ike whispered hoarsely. And his gnarled hands crept toward the bit of white ore that indicated untold wealth in the grim hills around Bear's Nest.

"It got my dad the same way," Pat groaned. "That winkin', blinkin' gold caused him to sell out his cattle and put a mortgage on the ranch. He went north with what cash he could raise. He *never* came back. Maw lost the ranch a year later. She took in washin', wore herself out to give me schoolin' an' proper raisin'. Never once did she let on how your letter had broken her heart. Not until a few weeks ago when I came of age. Then—then she told me. And I . . . I swore I'd *never quit ridin'* until I cleared up the mystery of my father's death."

Wind River Ike growled. "Well—if you hope to win out—you got to go slower next time a gal lets out a yell."

Pat nodded. "Mebbe yo're right." Then as he returned the float rock to the saddle punch, "What's this clue *you* picked up?"

Old Ike opened his blanket coat and took out a bundle tied in the middle with a rawhide thong. He unrolled it across the table. It was a strip of tanned hide about four feet square. On it were scrawled many queer symbols in red, black, and green paint.

"Injun sign paintin'." Ike explained. "Three months ago just before I wrote yore maw, I got this from old Lem Drucker by tradin' him two hindquarters of bull elk. He didn't set much value by it. But I did. It's pictures painted by some Injun on a section of tanned buffalo robe. And though no white man can read *all* those signs, thar's certain marks there that even *you* would take interest in."

Pat bent over this mysterious bit of painted buffalo robe which by its strange and ghostly symbols might reveal the secret of his father's death, also the lost mine far back in the hills which Terence Doran had found and from which he had plucked the bit of gold-filled quartz that had driven Geary mad with the lust for treasure.

But after he had studied it, inspected green crescents that he felt certain indicated the moon, red circles from which spokes protruded as emblems of the sun, arrowlike figures which perhaps were trail blazers pointing toward some hidden Indian rendezvous, he shook his head.

"I can't spot any connection between this," he declared, "and the mine that was a murder bait for my dad."

Ike frowned. "I've put in my life," he said, "studyin' the ways of redskins. In other years I did it mostly to save my skelp. An Injun *never* wastes time drawin' pitchers *fer* fun."

He laid his horny trigger finger on a symbol painted in red that stood about in the map's center. From it the arrow markers pointed toward a green circle with the outline of an Indian drum or tom-tom in the center and tiny moccasin prints encircling the instrument.

"That red mark," Ike said grimly, "is the sign of a scalpin' knife. And if you'll look closely—fer the light's bad here—you'll see that there's a TD marked on the blade. Whatever Injun painted this, he had seen the same knife that killed yore father—or one like it. And the symbol of that knife stands right where the arrow blazes start. So I figure that—"

"An Injun ambush caused my dad's death?"

"I don't know. All I'm sayin' is that whoever painted this map scrawled a knife that was red with blood. And on it the paleface signs of TD."

Rising, he whipped a knife from inside his coat and cast it down atop the map. It was long and slim and with point sharp as a needle, and blade, razor keen. Near the haft, tiny letters, TD, had been etched into the steel with acid.

"That's the knife," Ike said slowly, "that I pulled outa yore dad's back. And whoever painted this map, he saw that knife twenty years ago and knew that it had killed yore dad. So—I hold this map as the main clue to the killer and the lost gold mine."

While Pat studied the weapon of death with tragic eyes, there came a scratching at the rear window as though a bird was seeking shelter

from the evening cold creeping down from the snow-bound hills.

Ike leaped to his feet, seizing the knife as he kicked back his chair. He hid it away inside his coat. He reached for the long rifle which he had leaned against the edge of the table.

"Somebody wantin' to git in," he whispered harshly to Pat. "Might be Joe Larbo or some of his bunch after you. I'll hold a bead on the window. You slip over an' take a look-see."

Pat, also upon his feet, eyed the window. Dust and soot of the long winter covered the glass. Afternoon shadows also obscured the dim outlines of whoever stood outside attempting to enter.

While Ike stood on guard, ready to throw a bullet, Pat tiptoed over to the window. Flat against the frame to protect himself from hot lead, he rubbed a peep-hole with one corner of his red silk neck scarf. He risked an eye to inspect the mysterious caller.

He heard old Ike's harsh whisper. "Who is it?"

Pat turned and he grinned faintly as he answered.

"Ike—you may be a woman hater. But *one's* callin' on you. An' *secretly*. You must have a romance with her."

"Quit yore funnin'. Who's outside? Whut female would be huntin' me up. Dod rat 'em, they orter know better."

Pat said. "It's the Injun gal. The gal you said would starve if she took to the woods with Lem and the dumb Injun."

"Come back to beg grub, I reckon," growled Ike. "Waal, she's a fool. I got no grub in here. This ain't my cabin. An' my meat's outside on the pack hosses."

"I'll open the window and tell her

to hit back into the woods. That you got no use fer women. And red or white, they can all starve to death."

And Pat laid sinewy hands upon the window sill. It required all his strength to open it, for winter had warped the edges. But as it arose creakingly, he heard old Ike.

"Now, you boxheaded young galoot. Don't go to talkin' too swift. That's yore trouble. Yo're *too damn swift*. Let her come on in. We'll see what she has to say."

"She can't say much. Bein' an Injun."

Ike growled. "Somewhere she went to a mission school and the good nuns taught her a fair grade of English. Reckon they pinned a whiteface name on her too, for I hear old Lem Drucker often call her Eileen."

"Eileen. Funny name for an Injun girl."

"Oh, in these reservation schools, they put queer names on the red-skin kids. I got a Shoshone friend over on Wind River was named Paul Revere. So Eileen ain't so strange. Mebbe an *Irish* sister named her."

"Wonder what her last name is?"

Ike grinned faintly. "High Eagle. That's the monnicker of that dumb Injun who seems to be some relative of hers. Eileen High Eagle. Ain't that a dandy cognomen!"

Pat laughed and thrust his arm through the window.

"Glad to meet you, Eileen High Eagle," he said cheerfully.

He felt the warmth of a strong little hand in his own for a brief moment. Then with a flurry of buckskin skirt, Eileen High Eagle swung over the windowsill and slapped her dainty moccasins upon the rough plank floor of the cabin.

A long moment she stood there, staring from Pat by the window to

bearded Ike behind the long rifle. She had drawn her red blanket up over her black braids in true Indian hood fashion and deep shadows obscured the lines of her face.

Then in a low throaty voice that sent a curious thrill through Pat Geary's heart, she spoke. And as she spoke, she touched with the fingertips of her right hand, her lips, and her breast.

"You are good man," whispered Eileen High Eagle. "You speak straight. Your heart is good. You are my friend. I greet you."

And she laid her little hand a second time in Pat's brown paw.

As he stood there, striving to pierce the shadows that hid the lines of the girl's face, wondering if her features would thrill him as had her voice and lithe grace, he heard the gruff cough of old Wind River Ike.

"Enough dang lally-gaggin'. You two ferget that the hull camp's down on yuh. Come over here, gal, an' tell me why yuh run a risk to come here. Was you after grub?"

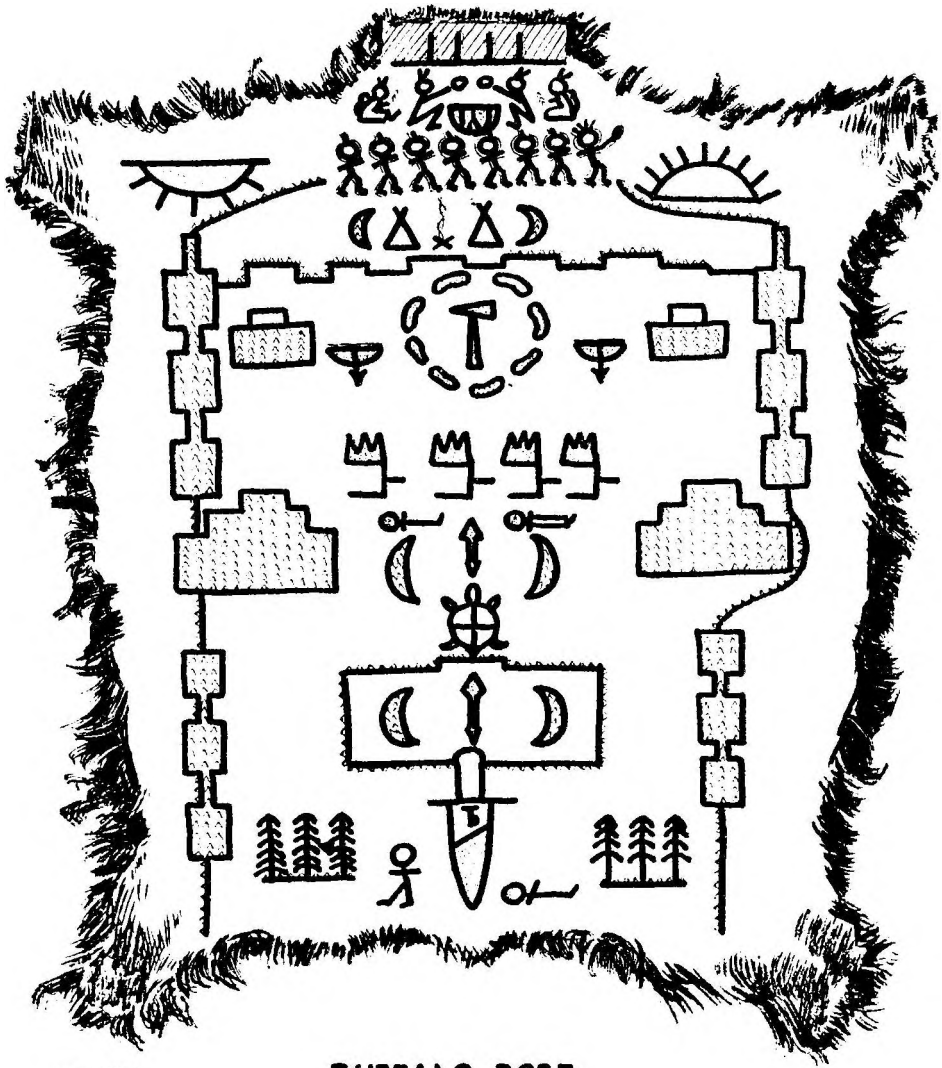
Proud as a princess, she walked to the table. She pointed straight down at the buffalo robe map outlined on the table by the lantern's ruddy light.

"High Eagle will not let me starve," she said haughtily. "But he has lost his big medicine. He mourns. The old one—the one who hid the potatoes and caused a man's death—he told us that you had High Eagle's medicine. I've come for it."

Ike thrust his shaggy head forward. He laid a hard hand upon the map.

"This is mine," he rasped. "I got it in fair trade from Len."

"It was not his. It is High Eagle's. He mourns for it. He believes that when he lost it, then his moccasins pointed down black trails. He believes that he almost died to-



**BUFFALO ROBE
MAP TO
GHOST DANCE BUTTE**

day because he had lost his big medicine."

Pat Geary, coming to the table's end, peered into the Indian girl's deeply-set eyes. Her disclosure that the map bearing the murder symbol belonged to High Eagle, amazed him.

"Did High Eagle *paint* this?" he cried out.

She tossed her head. "I do not know. High Eagle cannot speak. He talks only with the hands. He has signed that his medicine has gone, that his heart is broken. He

must have this back. If you have the good hearts, you will give it to me."

Old Ike snarled. "No," and swept the buffalo robe off the table.

The girl flung her slim body across the top, quick in her action as a mountain lioness. She moved so swiftly that old Ike almost lost his balance. His opened coat swayed aside revealing the haft of the knife that he had just thrust back of his belt.

Eileen High Eagle's slim fingers closed instantly upon the buckhorn handle. She plucked forth the blade with the same dazzling speed she had used to hurl a length of steel straight at Breck Bardeen's throat.

Pat Geary, diving desperately across the table top, grasped Eileen's wrist as she sought to drive the knife point into old Ike's middle. He tilted the girl's arm enough to save the hunter's life but the sharp blade ripped open Ike's heavy flannel shirt.

Then as the table crashed over, and the girl fought furiously in Pat's arms, striving again to use the knife on whoever resisted her attempt to regain the buffalo robe, there came a knocking at the barred door of the cabin.

Instantly the girl ceased struggling and lay tensely in Pat's arms. He felt the quivering of her body, the quick hot breath that fanned his cheek.

Ike panted. "Who's there?"

A man whispered softly. "Me—Breck Bardeen. I got word from the miners' committee. Open the door."

Ike was hurriedly rolling up the buffalo robe. He glanced desperately toward Pat.

"If Breck finds the gal in here, he may turn in a general alarm."

Pat said grimly. "Let her hit for the woods," and bearing Eileen to

the window, he lowered her across the sill. Then he lowered the window. But the rotten frame gave way and it fell with a crash.

Covered by Ike's rifle, Pat then opened the door. He stepped aside as Breck Bardeen sauntered into the dim room. Breck's gaze fell first upon the overturned table. He bent and retrieved the lantern from the floor. He relit the smoking wick. All the while old Ike stood beside the fireplace, strictly on guard with old Betsy, the gun.

Breck laughed. "I come as a friend," he drawled. "I said earlier that I lost my temper when the Injun gal tried to knife me. It wasn't much of a man's trick to pull a gun on a woman. The kid there, young Geary, he showed spunk in buckin' the camp for her even if she is a redskin. So—I've been doin' a heap of talkin' for Geary before Sloan and the miners' committee. Joe Larbo wants 'em to hang Pat. But since some of the boys owe me plenty grubstake money, they finally let me have my way."

"What's the way?" Pat asked.

Breck was looking about the room, holding high the lantern. Before he answered, he strolled toward the window. He pointed toward the floor, then turned with a laugh.

"You've had visitors recent." He shook his finger reprovingly at old Ike. "You old woman-hater, you've had a lady callin' upon you."

"Damn you, Breck," roared Ike. "Quit yore funnin'. What did the committee say about Pat Geary?"

Breck swung fully about to face his questioner. The lantern light outlined his bold, sharply-cut face.

"They said," he explained carelessly, "that he could take to the woods with the squaw. Without grub or gun. And afoot. *Starvation Trail*. It should be easy to find her."

He laughed and pointed again toward the floor. "I heard the window go down as I stood outside the door. And here's the plain prints of two dang small but mighty wet mocca-sins."

CHAPTER IV.

FLIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE PENALTY of a starvation trail through winter woods did not at first impress Pat Geary. He had come from a sunlit land and his knowledge of gloomy pine timber, from whence all game animals had fled or taken to dens for warmth, was limited. But he heard old Ike draw in his breath sharply as Breck named the sentence set by the miners' court. And swinging about, he saw that the mountaineer's craggy face was sternly set, his eyes almost hidden beneath wiry brows as he stared at Breck Bardoon.

"You're right smart," Ike breathed harshly, and for once he forgot to chew his cud. "What's *yore* interest in this game? Why did *you* hurry over to warn me? An' then—use *yore* bright eyes to figure out the Injun gal was here?"

Breck answered sharply. "You old fool! I've got no interest in that Injun gal except friendly-like. You heard me say, Ike, when she busted out on the porch, that I had tried to befriend her—even though she was Injun. I wanted to save her from watchin' the hangin' of her only two friends in the world. So—to save Geary from starvin' to death—I rushed right over here to let you know what's in the cards."

Pat cut in. "Thanks, Bardoon. But I'm not worryin' much about starvin'. I've been in the woods before. I can kill rabbits and squirrels for meat until I get down to the flats along the Black Fork River where there's ranches. I can—"

Ike swung with a roar. "You young boxhead, the rabbits are all gone. And how would you ketch a squirrel up a tall tree without a gun? Yuh might run across a porkypine. But even *that's* a question. And remember too—this is a big snow country. Away from the trail down the creek, it 'ud take even a well-fed man all day to cover three or four miles. No—if they send you down the Starvation Trail—you'll be a dead one inside of three or four days."

Bardoon nodded. "Geary—the old fellow tells the straight goods. Probably you'd be far better off to take a quick death at the end of a rope than die slowly in the woods."

"But that Eileen High Eagle—she's out there. And not worryin'."

"She's got an old Injun with her. The Injuns can live in the woods when white men die," Ike put in. "There's roots they eat that we don't know about. They can unearth the runways of mice beneath the snow, the dens from which bear are comin' out after the winter sleep. But you—yo're a cowpoke—you don't know those things."

Pat didn't.

Bardoon glanced toward the window significantly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the door.

"Yore time is short," he said before he took the bolt from its wooden slot. "You better hurry afore the committee arrives to take Geary afore the court. Work *yore* wits. But—*work 'em fast*." Then the door closed upon him.

Pat gazed frowningly at the door. "That tall galoot puzzles me," he began.

But old Ike whispered. "Open that window. In a hurry!"

"What's *yore* plan?"

"I know somethin' about the tim-

ber. I got a rifle. I'm goin' with you. No chance to go for our hosses. They'd spot us. Mebbe put hot lead through our ornery carcasses. Grab that saddle pack. I got the buffalo robe and the knife"—he felt beneath his coat. Then he looked at Pat with startled eyes. "The knife's gone! Say! That *Indian* girl took it with her when you lifted her out the winder. The knife that's a clue to whoever murdered yore father!"

Pat seized the window. It was wedged tightly and resisted his strength. Old Ike raised his rifle and crashed out the glass panes with the butt of his rifle.

"Out," he panted. "We'll trail her! She's not far ahead. We'll get back that knife."

"How can we trail her?"

"She'll need to stick to a broken trail. High snow in the woods would stop her—"

Followed by Pat, the mountaineer crawled through the opening in the shattered window. The deep prints left by the girl as she hurried down toward a tongue of dark pines in the creek valley were at first easy to follow.

Wind River Ike floundered through the deep drifts, gasping like a wind-broken horse. Pat, trailing closely, feeling the cold snow fall into the tops of his knee-high boots, began to realize what the starvation trail would mean to a cowpuncher, unaccustomed to forests, not clad for such experience, unarmed to provide food.

The murmur of Copperhead Creek where it ran in ripples between blue stretches of ice, now reached Pat's ears. The Indian girl, he perceived, had quartered down a steep slope below the camp, and entered a deep trail used during the winter by miners visiting their claims.

Here and there he saw black holes where miners who were sinking drifts to find ore ledges, could work during the frozen months.

But in this deep trail, the girl's tracks blended with those of the miners, many of whom wore shoe-packs and moccasins for winter warmth.

Pat decided that Ike would never overtake Eileen High Eagle. Suddenly too another danger menaced the fugitives.

A shot rang out from the direction of Bear's Nest.

Pat checked as he saw a bullet plunge into the side of the trail where the snow had piled up.

Old Ike whirled in his tracks. He flung the old rifle to his shoulder.

"Hit the grit!" he shouted to Pat. "Somebody in camp seen us runnin'!"

The heavy roar of old Betsy cut short Ike's warning. Pat was unarmed. He couldn't fight back. He obeyed the mountaineer. Down on hands and knees, he squirmed around and looked back toward the camp located on high ground above the creek.

The red glare of rays from the sun sinking behind the front range of the Big Stonys outlined the black figures of miners grouped at the lower end of the camps' street.

The distance was at least three hundred yards but Pat felt certain he could see big Rufe Sloan among the gunmen who flourished weapons from which the light flashed.

There came another echoing gun report. A nearer bullet whined past Wind River Ike's shaggy head as the old fellow stood braced defiantly, rifle stock against his curved shoulder for a dead shot.

"You brave old fool!" shouted Pat. "You'll stand there and let 'em shoot you."

"The coyotes!" snarled Ike. "Shootin' from behind without hollerin' fer us to put up our hands! I'll show 'em!" And as he tightened his trigger finger, he spat over his shoulder into the white snow.

Pat left the ground in a low dive. He struck Ike below the knees with braced shoulders. The mountaineer tumbled over. The rifle flew from his gnarled hands that now were stiff and red from the sharp mountain chill.

"Damn!" he sputtered. "Damn you! What . . . what yuh aimin' to do?"

Pat snapped the rifle to his shoulder. He covered the lead man of the party of miners floundering down the trail. They had watched Ike fall. Perhaps they believed that a bullet had gone home and were now risking a charge.

"I don't figure to lay on my stummick while you git killed," he rapped out.

Then he tightened the trigger and the old rifle clanged its iron song. The lead man jumped high in the air like a buck deer hit behind the front quarter. Then he flopped down into the snow and squirmed about, cursing shrilly, gripping his right leg with both hands.

"I can't walk or run fast," panted Pat. "But, still—I can ride and shoot straight. But—this gun shore kicks like a bay mule."

Old Ike thundered as he regained his feet. "Yuh don't sabe Betsy. She throws low. You orter got that hombre through the heart at sich range. Hold high! Here"—he reached for the gun.

But dismayed by the fall of their leader, the bold possemen had scuttled like rats into cover.

"About the way a bunch of lynch-ers would perform," Pat said scornfully.

Ike cried. "No use layin' here! They've give us time fer a getaway! Let's gallop!"

"Where to?"

"Foller me, boy. An', dod rat yuh, don't take away my gun no more."

Hurrying down the packed trail, they rounded a low ridge where the creek made a bend. This hid them from the eyes of the camp scouts. Above them were more of the tunnel mouths where prospectors had spent long winter months, thawing out the gravel, driving deeper the shafts they hoped would touch the main body of the Copperhead Creek gold ledge.

Ike swung up a narrow path that ran toward one of these shaft entrances.

"Hadn't we better keep in the clear?" Pat shouted.

"Night's comin' on! Freezin' cold! We can stand 'em off from the shaft if they find us. Furthermore—"

"Yeah!"

Ike stopped at the tunnel mouth. He frowned into Pat's red face.

"This is the tunnel driven durin' the winter by Lem Drucker. I been figurin' all the time he might find cover here with the gal and the dumb Injun. It's warm inside. An' mebbe they got giant powder in there, too, to drive off any attackers. Anyway—it's wuth holin' up in—"

Pat was of the free range, the open air. He hated to be penned up in a black hole. But Ike knew this strange mountain country of hunters and prospectors. His life, it appeared, depended upon Ike's guidance. Obediently he ducked his head and followed the mountaineer.

It was warm inside. His cold fingers relaxed and he no longer felt the sharp tear of the frosty air in his lungs and at his nostrils.

But the darkness, once they had crawled a few yards inside the heart of the hill, was soft and thick and black as velvet.

He halted, a shiver running up his backbone, as a hand touched his face. Then he heard the low whisper of Ike.

"This deestriet," Ike said, "has been mined for years. These old tunnels run every which way. They lost the Copperhead lode twenty years ago and they've been huntin' it ever since. We may be in a tunnel a few yards deep or a mile. We won't know until we piroot through it. But go slow. If that dumb Injun's in here, he may jump us quick with that knife the gal stole. Never forget that I'm carryin' the buffalo robe which is his big medicine."

Ike's voice died away. Pat, standing tautly in the pitch blackness, heard the soft thud of the old fellow's elk-soled moccasins. Then the faint command, "Come on!"

Pat trailed his right hand along the stony wall of the tunnel as a guide. He marked that the shaft made several turns. It was also pitching downward. And far ahead he heard the faint gurgling of water. Something brushed his face. He flinched sharply.

"Ike," he whispered loudly. "Somethin' just passed me."

"A bat," answered Ike. "Thousands of 'em down in these old holes. Plumb mysterious critters—"

Pat shivered. He didn't know much about bats, didn't like them. Flying mice. He felt in his pocket for a match.

"We need a light," he called to Ike.

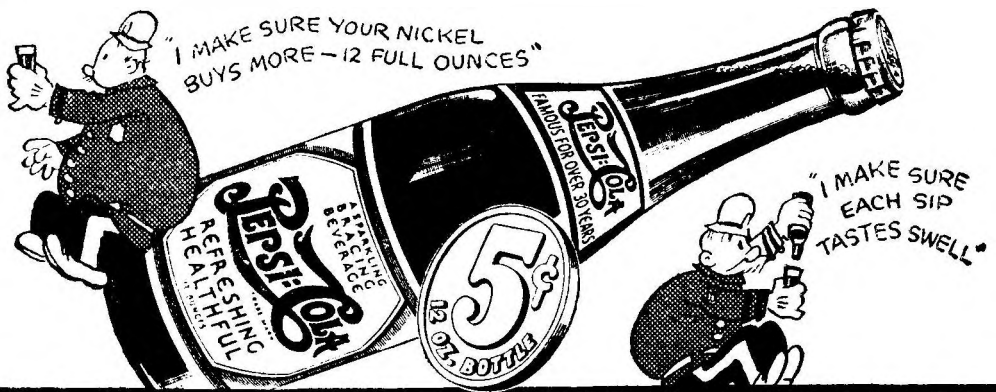
"Shut up, you boxhead," came the thrilling reply. "Shut up for yore life. I smell smoke. And—and *what's that?*"

Pat felt the drumming of blood in his ears as he listened. He heard the thunder, too, of his rapidly beating heart. He wasn't afraid. But this old mine was a weird and eerie place. And the sound he heard just ahead resembled the choked groans of a human being.

He forced his unwilling body ahead, striving with mind and nerve to overcome fear that now chilled his limbs. All the while he relied on Ike to guide him.

So he came suddenly around a corner of the shaft and saw before him a small fire built of pine stubs which had died down to a bed of red embers.

A man lay stretched beside the fire. He was squirming. The front



of his buckskin shirt was red as the fire's glow. It was Lem Drucker. And he was groaning.

Pat looked hurriedly around for Ike. But the hunter had disappeared, apparently passing deeper into the tunnel. So Pat flung himself down beside Lem Drucker, beside the man who had traded High Eagle's buffalo robe medicine to Ike for two quarters of elk meat.

Drucker looked up into Pat's face.

"Stabbed!" he choked out. "He—help me—"

Pat bent and ripped open Drucker's shirt revealing a wound high up at the base of Drucker's throat where a keen blade had entered. He couldn't help but think then of a knife branded TD which had been stolen by the Indian girl.

As his strong fingers probed the wound, seeking to check the swift flow of life from Lem's veins, he

heard far down the mine tunnel, a faint shout.

"Pat—help!"

It was the voice of Wind River Ike. Perhaps High Eagle and the girl had stabbed Lem, revengeful because he had stolen the buffalo-robe medicine. Then attacked Ike as he ranged alone through the black mine shaft.

Pat lunged away from the light of the fire and dived into the pit of darkness, hurrying unarmed to aid a friend in need. Clawlike hands closed suddenly on his throat. He was forced to his knees. He began to fight for his life against the talons of the ghostly stranger who spoke no word as he sank his thumbs deeply into Pat's neck.

Those sinewy fingers closing tightly on his throat in the pitch darkness leave Pat no choice but to claw madly at the assassin. Will he win out? Read next week's *Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly*.

A PRAIRIE EXPERIENCE

A PARTY of explorers under the leadership of Robert Stuart of the Astor Fur Co., had made camp one evening near a stream, when one of the men, named Crooks, decided to take a short walk. He climbed a small hill from which he could get a fine view of the river and the wide stretch of prairie. He was enjoying the unusual scenery when he saw an object below moving toward him.

Intending to stay out only a short time, he had neglected to take his rifle, so with some anxiety he watched the moving object. As it drew nearer, he saw to his dismay, that it was an enormous she grizzly, with two cubs. There was no tree, or protection of any kind in which he could hide, and he did not dare run, as that would invite pursuit.

He threw himself flat on the ground and remained motionless,

watching the movements of the animal with some anxiety, mingled with the fear that she might catch sight of him. She advanced as far as the foot of the hill, where she paused as if uncertain what to do next. But in a little while she turned and walked slowly away, followed closely by her two fat cubs.

The explorers had killed some young buffalo earlier in the day, and the bear had probably enjoyed a good meal on the unwanted portions that had been left after the hunters had taken the choice morsels to the camp. Mr. Crooks was mighty glad to see the trio depart, and this adventure was a lesson to him never to leave camp again unarmed. In these wild regions it was common to meet up with a wild animal, or perhaps a wilder Indian, even when not very far from camp.



GUN CALL FOR THE BAR U TWINS

*When gun-trappers get trapped, the Bar U
Twins are apt to be in there, shooting!*

By Charles E. Barnes

Two riders, identical in size, dress, and appearance, drew rein on the crest of a sage-dotted ridge. Their wide blue eyes met, and some deep emotion showed in each smooth, sun-stained face. Strong brown fingers met in a firm handclasp.

"So long, Tom," said Jerry Carter.
"Good luck, Jerry," Tom Carter replied somberly.

He watched his twin brother Jerry turn his sorrel toward the east. A broad, rolling mesa stretched away far in that direction, saluting at

the foot of snow-draped peaks. That was the land of cattle barons, championed by Cardwell Vane and his V Arrow.

Tom kneed his own sorrel down the opposite side of the ridge. Under the setting sun, tiny building clusters spotted the green flats, marking small ranches that ran only a few head. The whole of the Chemawa Basin looked peaceful enough, drowsing in the late afternoon. Yet the Chemawa was stained with the blood of the two warring factions.

The words of Ike Carver, sheriff at Tomahawk, echoed back to Tom: "They've got me handcuffed here in the Chemawa. Everybody accuses the law of favoring the other side. If you boys can dig up evidence to prove who's at the bottom of it, I'll squash this range war in short order."

In the Eagle River country of Wyoming, where their father owned the Bar U cattle ranch, Tom and Jerry Carter were known as the Bar U Twins. Their reputation for handling difficult situations had come to the ears of the Tomahawk sheriff. At his request, they had consented to take a hand in an unofficial capacity.

Splitting their trails had seemed the logical thing to do. But now Tom was feeling an undercurrent of doubt he couldn't explain.

Shadows were stealing silently across the grassy plains when he turned into a narrow lane that led to squat, unpainted ranch buildings fronting a dense jackpine grove. A lanky, gimlet-eyed oldster with gray longhorn mustache shuffled out of the barn, tagging up at the stone fence that inclosed the one-room shack.

"This the Winking Eye ranch?" Tom asked politely.

"Sho' nuff."

"You're Ira Wight, then?"

"Reckon I am. What's your business, stranger?"

"I'm Sam Carter's boy, from up Eagle River way. I heard you needed some gun help."

The old ranchman's shrewd eyes bored into the young cowboy. Then his grizzled paw went out. "Peel your kak, cowboy. I didn't know Sam had any kids. Me and him busted mule trail together thirty y'ars ago."

Tom turned his sorrel into the nearest corral.

Wight hadn't stopped talking a second. "Just what we're lookin' for. Somebody we kin trust. We—"

He broke off abruptly. His gaze darted past Tom, down the dusty wagon road.

Five horsemen, spurring lathered mounts, were leading a storm of yellow dust to the Winking Eye lane—turning in!

Troubled lines formed on Wight's leathery face. "Part of our Flats bunch—the small ranchers. Something's popped."

A squat, sandy-haired man with red nose and aggressive chin led the group. His brown eyes, flashing hot with anger, passed Tom briefly and settled on Wight. "We found Dan Marburg an hour ago—murdered! Shot in the back by a bushwhacker over in Horse Tail Gully!"

Ira Wight's face turned gray. "Dan killed? Why, Dan was our leader. He was tryin' to settle this thing peaceable. No call for—"

"Sure! That's it!" the red-faced man stormed. "Them Mesa land hogs don't want it settled—not till they drive us out of here. We got to fight, and lose no time about it. The quicker this thing comes to a pitched battle the better."

"Hold on, Reb," Wight said

shakily. "You got proof them Mesa landlords gunned Dan?"

The enraged Reb turned purple. "There wasn't no proof Bill Smithers and Charley Lynch didn't shoot theirselves in the back, neither. But everybody knows some of Cardwell Vane's cronies dry-gulched 'em. This makes three. It's got to stop."

"Yeah, it's got to stop," one of the men said.

"They're goin' to squeeze us out or kill us off," declared another.

"We got to beat 'em at their own game," a third voice snapped.

Ira Wight said glumly, "I reckon you're right. What you aim to do first?"

"The Mesa cattlemen are holdin' a business meetin' tonight at the U. P. warehouse," the fiery Reb announced. "They'll all be there. We'll bottle 'em up and keep 'em in there until they turn over the men that murdered Dan and Bill and Charley."

Ira Wight looked doubtful. "And if they don't turn 'em over?"

Reb's eyes were like red coals. "We'll fire the buildin' and plug every head that sticks out. What say, men?"

"That's the dope!"

"To hell with 'em!"

"Wipe 'em out!"

Ira Wight saw that he was outvoted. He shrugged dejectedly. "Maybe you're right. Reb Gato, meet young Carter here. He wants to ride with us."

"You'll vouch for him?"

"Sure thing. I knew his dad when."

Reb Gato was obviously assuming leadership of the small ranch forces. "The bunch will meet at Kingfisher Falls at nine o'clock with hardware oiled."

When the five riders had scattered, Ira Wight packed his corncob

pipe thoughtfully. "The lid's blown off, Tom. With that fire-eater, Reb Gato, rodding the bunch, it'll be blood and bullets from now on."

The oldster had voiced Tom's thoughts. He'd reached here in the nick of time, Tom was telling himself. He'd have to think up a way to warn the big ranchmen, and lose no time about it. Once the two groups clashed, the sheriff or no one else could stop the slaughter of a score of cowmen's lives.

Ira Wight waved him toward the log shack. "Make yourself to home. I'll scrape up some grub."

Tom's mind was racing. "Don't think I better eat anything. I feel sort of sick to my stomach. I'll snooze a couple of hours before that ride tonight."

"Shecks, now. There ain't no call for you to go along. Tain't none of your scrap, nohow. Sleep all night if you're under the weather."

Tom mustered a wry grimace. "Well, maybe you're right. It must have been them green plums I et. I'll flop in the barn." He knew there wasn't much chance that Wight kept an extra bunk in his tiny cabin.

The oldster grunted approval, and Tom packed his blankets into the sizable barn. He poked them under a pile of alfalfa and waited until he saw smoke curling from the cabin chimney.

Quietly he slid through the back window with an old dusty saddle over his shoulder. Roping a Winking Eye piebald from the back corral, he cinched the kak, mounted, and eased into the grove unobserved.

To avoid suspicion, he'd left his own horse in the corral. Unless Wight deliberately searched the place, he could sneak out and back again on the sly.

A rising moon was thinning the

darkness on the mesa when he came to the tall poplar triangle, the white house and red windmill that marked the V Arrow, as the sheriff had described the place.

When he knocked on the door of the dimly lighted ranch house, a stringy-haired, horse-faced man opened it. He peered suspiciously at Tom, his right hand close to his six-gun.

A voice from inside the room spoke up, "Come in, Carter."

The horse-faced man stepped aside and Tom entered hesitantly. His sweeping gaze centered on the speaker, a mild-looking gent with steady gray eyes. He got up and laid a hand on Tom's shoulder.

"This is Jerry Carter, Vane. He signed on with me today at the Teacup."

Tom was so accustomed to being mistaken for Jerry that he only smiled and said nothing. The mild-looking man must be Ben Rossman, whom Jerry was to have contacted first.

Cardwell Vane grunted and thumbed a third man seated in the corner. "Hondo Blem, my foreman."

Blem raised catlike green eyes under beetle brows. He nodded briefly and shifted his gaze to the blue-barreled Colt he was cleaning.

"Listen here, fellows," Tom snapped. "There's no time to lose. I just got wind that Marburg of the Flats has been bushwhacked. They are—"

Cardwell Vane suddenly stabbed a question at Ben Rossman. "You sure about Carter?"

Rossman blinked. "He's got good references."

Vane grunted again, indicating that Tom might continue.

"A gent named Reb Gato has boiled up the Flats ranchers. They're

heading for your meeting at the warehouse tonight with fire in their eyes. Ready for hell or high water."

His murky eyes squinted, Cardwell Vane looked queerly at Tom. Neither he, Rossman, nor Blem seemed to be much surprised. Tom couldn't sabel that.

Vane asked guardedly, "That all you got to say?"

Tom's tone was a warning. "You'll be caught with your neck out if you don't call off that meeting pronto."

Vane scratched his bony nose. "Keep your shirt on, Carter. The meeting's already been called off. We got a reception committee for them two-bit chisellers."

"Didn't my foreman give you orders, Carter?" Rossman demanded. "Vane got wind of this raid an hour ago. You're supposed to be down in Screech Owl Canyon helping fix a trap for those ory-eyed saddle bums to ride into."

Tom shook his head. "Didn't know," he muttered.

He was catching the drift now. The Mesa cattlemen had a spy planted among the small rancher ranks. Already warned, they were planning an ambush in retaliation.

"That'll be a massacre!" he snapped. "Is that the way you rod things in this country?"

"It was their own idea," Rossman defended. "All we're doing is turning the tables. Besides, the only language that wild-eyed bunch sabel is gun lingo. We'll never have peace in the Chemawa until they are driven out or wiped out. They plug one another, and they blame us. They make their living sleepiering our calves and slow-elking our beef. The minute we try to protect our property, they raise a squawk about us trying to hog the country."

"Our money keeps cattle fever out

of here. It keeps out nesters and sheep. We protect the small owner when we protect ourselves. But what thanks do we get? The kind they planned on giving us tonight."

Abruptly, Rossman got up and went outside. He mounted his horse and rode away toward Screech Owl Canyon.

"I get the idea," Tom muttered. "I'll follow him."

His one idea was to get away from there and warn the little ranchers of the awaiting ambush. He stepped toward the door, then froze, as Vane stepped into his path, a .45 leveled at his midsection.

"Steady," Vane warned, a chill in his nasal voice. "I'm taking no chances on you, Carter. It won't hurt nothing to keep you on cold storage the rest of the night. Blem, hook his smokers."

Tom's mind was active, but the ominous gun in Vane's hand cut short all his ideas of escape. He felt his guns slide from their holsters. Then Vane was motioning him toward a tiny black closet.

"This ain't necessary, Vane," he protested. "I—"

"Inside, Carter. We'll open up when we get back."

There was nothing Tom could do but obey. The beetle-browed foreman slammed the heavy door shut. A lock clicked, and the blackness of the stuffy room pressed over him like an intangible blanket.

As soon as Vane and Hondo Blem clumped from the house, Tom struck a match and examined door and walls. They were built of thick oak. The lock was a simple device, but too stanch to be jarred loose by the force of his shoulder. Through the slit between door and casing, he could see the steel pin that latched the door to the notched wall. A grim smile creased his sweaty face.

"Lucky they didn't swipe my jack-knife," he told himself.

His long stockman's knife carried, among its weird assortment of blades, a tiny hacksaw. He set to work, calmly but swiftly, on the hardened metal. A slow, methodical process, for the blade dulled rapidly. But at last he sawed through far enough so that a terrific drive of his shoulder sheered it off.

The door crashed outward. Tom raced to the window and peered out. The V Arrow apparently was deserted.

Failing to find a gun, he helped himself to a horse from the moon-rinsed corral, mounted and streaked off in the direction of Screech Owl Canyon.

He'd covered only a couple of miles when the distant thunder of guns made him stiffen in the kak. With a swift pang of dismay, he realized he was too late. The trap was sprung!

Suddenly the rolling echoes faded and all was deathly quiet. Tom passed a hand wearily across his forehead. He'd botched the job, right off the bat.

The sound of the battle had been so brief that it led him to believe at least part of the small rancher force must have escaped. They couldn't all have been wiped out in a single volley.

"I'd better make time to the Winking Eye," he murmured. "If I'm not there when they get back, they'll lift my scalp."

He raked his brone's ribs with dulled rowels. The sleek horse lengthened out in a smooth, flowing gallop over the rough terrain.

A cloud rolled over the moon, and the mesa was suddenly shadowed. Tom didn't see the honeycomb of prairie dog holes ahead. But the instant he heard the sickening crack

of breaking bone, he knew what happened. The horse bogged down, groaning. Tom sailed through the air, landing in a rolling somersault.

Bruised and dizzy, he climbed to his feet and hunted until he found a heavy limb with a knot on the end of it. With his jackknife, he fashioned it into a club. His father had shown him the exact spot on a horse's head where a hard blow will kill it.

He swung the club with all the power of his wide shoulders. The horse slogged down heavily and never moved again.

II.

The sun was blazing far above the eastern peaks when Tom Carter trudged wearily to the shade of the jackpine grove back of the Winking Eye buildings. He sighed gratefully when he saw his sorrel horse standing inside the corral gazing out across the meadow. Had it not been for the horse he loved, he might never have risked returning to the Winking Eye. His absence was bound to be discovered by now.

Clinging to cover, he reached the corral unaccosted. He led the horse deep into the grove, then returned for his saddle.

He was at the edge of the grove, the saddle under his arm, when he saw a body of horsemen pounding pell-mell across the Flats. His curiosity aroused, he crouched there, watching them wheel to a halt in front of the cabin. Reb Gato was leading them, his nose a flaming beacon.

The small rancher group was sprinkled with bandages, but Tom was relieved to see so many in the saddle. Maybe Vane and the cattlemen, despite their threats, really hadn't intended to kill.

Ira Wight came out of his shack and conferred with his associates. His shoulders drooped morosely.

Reb Gato was shaking his fists, arguing vehemently.

The clop of horses' hoofs grew loud, and a rider on a foaming sorrel rounded a bend in the road. A hostile howl went up from the assembled group. Guns flashed in the bright sunlight.

The rider pulled in, but made no movement toward the two six-guns at his thighs. Plainly he was surprised.

No more surprised than Tom, who was staring grimly, doubting his eyes.

The rider was Jerry Carter, and he had delved straight into a hornets' nest. Angry ranchers pressed in from all sides, stripped him of his guns, and now were leading his horse toward the grove where Tom crouched.

Jerry was protesting hotly, trying to talk; but they were hooting him down, cursing and waving their guns.

Their actions told a plain story. They thought it was Tom they had captured, the one who had sneaked off and reported to Vane in time to have the ambush arranged. Even old Ira Wight's leathery face was grimly set. They'd waste no mercy on Jerry.

Tom retreated behind the brushy undergrowth. The group halted under the first tree with a convenient limb.

"Let him sqawk before we hang him!" somebody bellowed.

"Sure. Give him a chance to come clean!"

While two of the group sweated industriously fashioning a hang noose, the others quieted, putting up their guns but holding to their black looks.

Pale but calm, Jerry sat unflinch-

ing, his shoulders squared. His voice was clear, distinct. "You've got plenty to be sore about. I don't blame you. But I risked my neck—was lucky to check out alive—to warn you to scatter clear of the Flats. Or else get ready for a battle. Cardwell Vane, Rossman, and all the others are on their way here with a big gun crew. They figure to catch you bunched up and not suspectin' a raid. They—"

"Hot air!" Gato snorted. "A lousy tale to scare us out while the rich sons tear up our ranches. We know you're Vane's spy. We know you squealed to Vane so that he could hatch that gun trap. If somebody hadn't got careless and lit a match there in Screech Owl Canyon, we'd have lost half our men."

"I lighted that match to warn you," Jerry snapped. "I couldn't break away to ride ahead. I found out on the sly that Vane is the nigger in the woodpile. He bushwhacked your men. He planted evidence of dirty work on both sides. He's tryin' to stir up a bitter range war that'll wipe out both the big and little cowmen. Or cripple them so the big money syndicate he's tied up with can buy them out cheap. If you let things go the way they are, Vane and the syndicate will gobble all of the Chemawa, and you'll be pushin' up tumbleweeds."

"Hogwash!" Reb Gato roared. "A fat yarn. A cock-and-bull tale to euchre your neck out of a noose. But it don't work with us. We ain't got much dinero. But we got more brains than you and your range-hog bosses figure."

A thunder of approval echoed him. From the bushes, Tom saw a riata loop the limb above Jerry's head. Something must be done in a hurry. If he only had a gun in his fist.

Keeping behind cover, he raced

back to fork his horse. If he could befuddle the group long enough—

They didn't see him coming until he was at the barn's edge.

"Hold it!" he yelled. "You're stringin' up the wrong man. I'm the black-hearted cuss you want."

Necks swiveled. Amazed eyes bulged. The Flats bunch stared at Tom with an intensity that would have been ludicrous any other time. Reb Gato recovered fastest.

"Twins!" he bellowed.

"Right!" Tom snapped. "The Bar U Twins. We're tryin' to bust up this crazy fool war. If you wasn't so blasted bullheaded, you'd let us prove it."

The Flats bunch gawked at Tom and Jerry, then looked at each other in sheer bafflement. Quick to seize that advantage, Tom pressed forward, explaining his actions as rapidly as his tongue could form words.

"Lies!" Gato fired. "I remember it now. When Dan Marburg was murdered, I was down that same gully huntin' strays. I heard the shot. Then I spotted one of these here Bar U sorrels splittin' the wind up on the rimrock. One of these Bar U jiggers was forkin' that horse. The one that bushwhacked Dan. To play safe, we're hangin' 'em both."

Ira Wight's voice lifted in feeble protest. "Wait. What does that—"

"Nail him!" somebody bawled.

"Twin traitors!"

Tom heard the snarl of the angered mob, saw them drive toward him. Gun hands streaked. In the background he saw Jerry, unwatched for an instant, suddenly break loose. The sorrel leaped against the next horse, spilling the rider. Then the sorrel was under full steam, heading straight for the nearest thicket.

Startled yells mingled with the cry

of pain from the fallen rider. The ranchers whirled in their kaks. Guns flamed, their booming thunder adding to the uproar. Tom saw Jerry rock in the saddle. Then he vanished into the thicket as lead slapped a lethal pattern among the branches.

Half the riders fed spur steel in Jerry's direction, cursing and firing wildly. Tom ducked low over the sorrel, raking the sleek ribs with rarely-used spurs. The sorrel shot forward like a cannonball.

A bullet tore the shirt top from his shoulder. A second nicked the flesh of his elbow. Then the barn blotted out the leaden hail.

The next moment a hysterical screech told Tom they'd sighted him again. Bullets kicked up the dust beside him as he rode. He was too far in the lead for six-guns.

The firing ceased. It settled down to a grim race.

Mile after mile, Tom kept a safe lead, chuckling to himself that he was drawing them farther and farther from the threat of Vane's artillery.

But when his thoughts turned to Jerry, he sobered instantly. Jerry might have been hit hard, maybe even killed.

It was close to noon when Tom pulled in on the brow of a jutting headland. He watched his pursuers turn back dejectedly, their played-out steeds plodding with drooped heads.

For the first time, he saw the column of black smoke spiraling skyward far back in the distance.

"The Winking Eye," Tom murmured. "Finding no one there, Vane has fired it. A tough blow for Ira Wight."

A fine mess he was making, he told himself. Here he was, without a gun, a hunted fugitive from both

factions, all of his plans completely haywire.

When he finished a quirly, he spotted a large body of horsemen, moving like black ants across the horizon toward the mesa center.

"Vane and the mesa bunch whack-in' for home."

He saw two black dots veer off from the main group. They were headed toward him, moving at a leisurely pace.

They were going to pass close under the headland, he judged; and he angled around out of sight, dropping until he was concealed a scant hundred yards from their path.

They came into sight abruptly. Tom stiffened, the blue of his eyes suddenly diamond hard.

The rawboned figure of Cardwell Vane swayed easily in the saddle. His horselike face was lifted toward the vanishing smoke billows. His laugh was a harsh discord on the clear mesa air.

Beside him, Hondo Blem, the V Arrow ramrod, humped like a giant bug, his black Stetson pulled low over his jutting forehead.

They jogged on, entering a wide stretch of jackpine a short distance beyond.

Tom scratched his head. "Funny."

Warily, he circled to the timber edge, struck their tracks, and trailed them down the green aisles between the patchwork of thickets.

When he heard voices ahead, he concealed his horse and continued on foot. Through screening branches, he saw them both. Blem was down on his knees, lifting a heavy stone from a rockpile in the center of a tiny clearing. Vane stuffed something in the hole, and Blem lowered the stone.

Vane's nasal voice carried clearly to Tom's ears. "This will be the clincher, Hondo. Inside of three

days, buzzards will be thick as sage ticks in the basin. And none will fly away with empty bellies."

Hondo Blem grinned crookedly as they swung to leather. "You're a slick one, Vane. You got a combination that's hard to beat."

"You said it. I'd like to know what become of that nosy Carter kid, though. Must tote wings, the way he gets around. First he busted out of that closet. Then he turns up in Screech Owl Canyon ahead of us. Now he's plumb—" Their voices dwindled off as they vanished back the trail they had come.

Ten minutes later, Tom was dragging aside the heavy boulder. A neatly folded slip of paper reposed beneath it. When he opened it, the pencil scrawl met his eyes:

MEET YOU HERE AT SUNDOWN

Tom's lips pressed to a tight line. He dropped the note back in the hole and carefully replaced the boulder.

"I'll be here," he said, with a grin.

When he reached his sorrel, he fingered the lariat coiled over the pommel. Then he smiled slowly and murmured: "Dad once said a rope in the right man's hands is as good as a gun in any man's hands. I wonder."

III.

From a juniper clump in the Flats, Jerry Carter shielded his eyes against the late sun's slanting glare and gazed steadily at the ramshackle structures a short distance away. A saddled horse dozed near the flat-roofed shack that faced the winding road. Smoke curled lazily from the chimney.

Jerry shifted muscles irked by an hour's inactivity. Long ago, he had outdistanced the division of irate

small ranchers that had chased him. A painful thigh wound was constant reminder of that feverish ride.

He'd seen nothing of Tom, a fact which caused worried lines to cross on his forehead. He couldn't forget that there were a lot of men running loose in the Chemawa who itched for a chance to shoot either of the twins on sight.

The door to the shack ahead banged open. A squat, sandy-haired man with a fiery beak stomped off the porch. He topped the sleepy horse and loped away toward the mesa rim.

Jerry's lips pursed into a soft whistle. "Maybe my hunch was right."

He was thinking about Reb Gato's words back there at the thwarted hang party that morning. Gato claimed he'd seen a Bar U sorrel near where Dan Marburg was bush-whacked. Why should Gato lie?

Jerry had spent most of the afternoon trying to find out. He'd dodged among the junipers in the flats, giving a wide berth to the charred ruins of the Winking Eye, until he found Lazy Anchor cattle grazing near those decrepit shacks just ahead. The Lazy Anchor was Reb Gato's brand.

Jerry got his horse and followed Gato at a distance, careful to keep out of sight. Finally he saw Gato skirt a protruding headland and vanish into a green belt of jackpine.

The sun dipped behind hazy hills. Dusk thickened the heavy shadows in the timber. Jerry advanced cautiously. He followed Gato's tracks until they joined a trampled path. Dismounting, he took his lariat and continued on foot.

"I'd feel a sight safer if I had a gun," he told himself. "But even a rope might come in handy. I recall dad sayin'—"

Voices warned him of danger ahead. He left the trail, soft-footing under the low-hanging branches until he reached the edge of a tiny clearing.

Three men lounged on the rock pile near the middle, and Jerry recognized them all. Cardwell Vane, Hondo Blem, and Reb Gato!

In the background, two swarthy, ape-limbed gunhawks puffed cigarettes, cocking an ear from time to time, as if tuning for danger signals.

Vane was complaining in his nasal whine. "A sloppy job, letting those twin meddlers slip through your fingers, Gato. I ought to—"

"Don't fret none about them coyotes," Gato broke in harshly. "Their tombstone is already marked. The first time one of 'em sticks his head up, somebody will blow it off. Let's get down to real beef about this next job."

A wicked laugh rumbled out of Vane's throat. "It's a daisy. Ben Rossman is the next to walk the plank. Hondo will drill him just like he did Dan Marburg. Your job, Gato, is to swipe some of Tra Wight's junk that we can plant near Rossman's corpse."

Laughter brayed from Reb Gato. "I get it, Vane. It'll look like Wight was hog-wild about his place bein' burnt, and went out to rake in some revenge."

"Exactly. My bunch will tear after Wight, and the fur will fly on both sides. The sooner they butcher one another off, the sooner you and me and Hondo cash in on the deal. We—"

A strangled sound, somewhat like a muffled curse, sliced off Vane's words. Quick suspicion chased the gleam from his murky eyes.

"What's that?" he whispered.

The gunhawks, peering intently into the bush opposite Jerry,

abruptly spread, hands flashing thighward.

A familiar voice blazed a clear command. "Freeze, you side-winders!"

The bushes parted, and Tom Carter stepped into full view, two six-guns leveled at his chest.

Jerry's jaw sagged in sheer amazement. But it didn't slow his brain action. He darted free of the screening branches. The rope in his hand writhed like a living thing.

He saw guns glint. The swart hardcases packed plenty of swift.

Tom's right gun coughed. The nearest gunhawk crumpled. Tom rocked backward as the other gunhawk fired. His weapon spat once more as he fell heavily. Dimly, Jerry saw both of Vane's trigger men sinking to the ground.

His eyes focused on the trio by the rock pile. Closely-bunched, they were leaping up, reefing at their guns. Vane's curse snarled with the echoes of the shots.

Jerry's right arm flicked forward. The wide loop hissed out above them, settled, and suddenly snapped taut as Jerry's weight drove against the end he held in his hands.

Colts bellowed, but the bullets peppered the earth as the rope slapped down on gun arms. Clamping tight to the rope, Jerry swung in a wide circle. He knew he couldn't hold them pinned together. Their combined strength could loosen the loop in a second. Reaching down, he scooped a smoking weapon from the nearest gun slick's lax fingers.

The rope wrenched sharply out of his left hand. He saw Hondo Blem whirling free of the tangle, the gun in his hairy fist flaring.

Jerry felt his short sleeve jerk as the slug ripped through the slack near his elbow. He squeezed the trigger and saw the beetle-browed

foreman fling his arms high and pitch forward on his face.

Red-hot pain seared his ribs. Smoke dimmed his vision. The booming thunder of guns speaking in unison quivered his eardrums.

He was firing as fast as he could force the trigger. It seemed like a gun was crashing off to his right at the clearing edge. He wondered if another of Vane's gunmen was on the prowl.

The lanky, horse-faced Vane and Reb Gato's squat hulk swam dizzily before his eyes. Smoke clouded up and blotted them out.

Wavering on his feet, the echoes ringing in his ears, Jerry sensed, rather than heard, the hollow clicking that told him his gun was empty. Smoke drifted clear, disclosing three motionless shapes draped over the rock pile.

Holding himself up with an effort, Jerry swayed to face a grinning young cowboy with blood-streaked blond hair.

"Tom, you old brush rabbit, I thought you was—"

"Yeah. If that gun tough had been an eye wink quicker, I'd been out of the fight for good instead of just bein' knocked woozy for a minute."

Jerry sat down. His side was throbbing like sixty, but he could feel that the wound was not deep.

"We got plenty of buzzard meat, but nothin' to prove it stinks. Who knows but what that Tomahawk sheriff will hang us for murder?"

Tom grinned. "I'm not scared."

He disappeared among the bushes

and came out dragging two undignified cowmen, securely bound and gagged.

"Jerry," he said, "meet Ben Rossman and Ira Wight. When I found Vane's note, I was plumb sure it was written for the Flats bunch traitor. And that their meeting to-night would wake up these hard-headed old longhorns if they could only see it.

"As long as both of 'em craved to plant a slug in my gizzard, I couldn't persuade 'em any too gentle. I found Ira prowlin' around the ashes of his ranch. It was no trick to las-soo him from the stone fence and haul him over here. Once I wrapped my claws around Ira's gun, Ben Rossman was just as easy, his punchers all bein' out on the range. It was Ben that gave the play away tonight. When he got so mad hearin' his bushwhack planned, he couldn't keep from cussin'."

Tom whipped out a knife and released his prisoners. Wight sat up and looked sheepishly at Rossman. Then they both turned to the Bar U Twins.

"Unless the sheriff calls us all liars, I reckon you got double proof," Wight said.

"That's right," Rossman agreed. "And, after all, I reckon there's room enough in the Chemawa for both big and little ranches."

Tom grinned. "I reckon that's all we want to know. Get your cayuse, Jerry. We report to the sheriff. Then it's back to mixin' dust with sweat at the peaceable old Bar U."



DEPUTIES DIE HARD

by CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Obey The Law," etc.

DEPUTIES DIE HARD

Lone Star Smith was smiling—and that was the time for owl-hooters to beware!

By Chuck Martin

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW DEPUTY OF GRANADA.

WHEN he entered the little cattle town of Granada and rode up the dusty main street, Lone Star Smith was smiling. He was coming back to his old home town after four months of trail-driving to Montana, and Law Smith would be glad to know that his only son had decided to help him handle things.

Lone Star stood up in his stirrups. He saw a group of men gathered in front of the sheriff's office halfway down the street. A low growl welled up in the cowboy's throat as he recognized Buck Perry and his son, Colt. Perry owned the Three Sevens outfit, and he was making war talk to Sheriff Law Smith while his son held a warp-legged old cowman under his cocked six-gun.

"Jail that old rustler, or I'll give Colt the go ahead," Buck Perry warned hoarsely. "Me and Colt found him with two Sevens calves, and his Rafter F brand run on both critters. It's about time we had some new law here in Granada!"

Lone Star Smith stopped smiling, checked his trail-weary horse at the edge of the group. His left hand reached for the rope on his saddle-horn, and he flipped a small loop that hissed through the air like a whirring snake. Lone Star sat his horse back, jerked the gun from Colt Perry's hand. Lone Star spoke in a

soft drawing voice to echo the explosion of young Perry's six-gun:

"Granada will *get* some new law, gents. Turn slow and take a good look at Law Smith's new deputy!"

Buck Perry slapped for his belt gun while he was whirling to face the speaker. His mouth flew open. He saw Lone Star Smith smiling coldly over the sights of his .45 six-gun, and the wide-shouldered cattleman dropped his hand away from his holster.

"You ain't no deputy," he shouted angrily, when he had recovered from his surprise. "The cattlemen want Pecos Langtry for that job, and there's enough of us to see that he gets it!"

Law Smith hid the surprise and happiness that filled his tough old heart when he recognized the voice of his son. Lone Star had promised to think about signing on as deputy sheriff of Border County, and now he was back home with his decision. Law Smith dipped his right hand swiftly and filled it, just to make things legal.

"Stand hitched, you Sevens," he said sternly. "As sheriff of this county, I pick my own deputies. Hold up yore right hand and take the oath, Lone Star!"

Lone Star shifted his gun and held up his right hand. His steady blue eyes were watching young Colt Perry while he repeated the oath of office. He saw Colt Perry take a

quick breath and raise his greenish eyes to look past the crowd, but something round and hard pressed against Lone Star's spine before he could turn.

"Drop that cutter and slide offn that brone," a flat deadly voice warned. "The new depitty talkin', and only talkin' one time!"

Lone Star Smith dropped his hand and holstered his six-gun. That voice belonged to Pecos Langtry, who served as lookout for Cory Matthews in the Two Flags Saloon and gambling house. Any sudden move would start six-guns roaring. Lone Star sat his saddle motionless while he watched the face of his father.



LONE STAR

Old Law Smith was standing with boots spread wide, but his long white cow-horn mustaches were trembling with anger. His gray eyes were smoldering between slitted lids, and

his deep chest was rising and falling with the effort he was making to hold back the hammer under his calloused thumb. Then he moved his hand slightly and covered a tall man who had followed Pecos Langtry from the Two Flags Saloon.

"Step back and circle off, Pecos," he barked. "I ramrod the law here in Granada, and you've got yore gun leveled on part of that same law. I'll crack down on yore boss if you bust a cap!"

Cory Matthews stared at the gun in the sheriff's steady hand. He was a big man in his early thirties, dark of skin, and undeniably handsome. Piercing black eyes read Law Smith's face at a glance, and Matthews raised a long-fingered hand and tugged at a tiny black mustache under his finely chiseled nose.

"Circle off, Pecos," he ordered quietly, but his voice indicated that he was accustomed to obedience. "It isn't our time to deal."

Pecos Langtry lowered his gun, but he hesitated for a moment before stepping back. He held the advantage, and Lone Star Smith was between himself and the sheriff's gun. It came suddenly to the waspish gunman that his boss was hostage for his own surrender, and he muttered to himself while he pouched the heavy gun in the open holster on his right leg.

Colt Perry was leaning toward Lone Star Smith with no trace of fear in his bold greenish eyes. There was little difference in their ages, and both were cowboys from scuffed boots to high-peaked Texas Stetsons. Now he stared at the six-gun in Lone Star's hand and spoke his feelings.

"You won't be the law down here for long, saddle tramp," he sneered. "You ner yore old man either one!"

The old man who had been the

cause of the dispute spoke up softly. "You and yours won't be no part of the law, Colt Perry. Now I'd like to know where you got my Rafter F iron you used to brand those two Sevens critters of yours. The Freemans ain't ever vented a brand."

"This is one time you can't wriggle out, Freeman," Buck Perry shouted. "Me and Colt caught you red-handed, and if that new gun-slappin' deputy is worth his salt, he'll throw you in the jug while he rides out to read the sign. I'm talking to you, Lone Star Smith!"

The new deputy turned to Vin Freeman with a hard smile curling his lips. He had known Freeman ever since he first began to straddle a horse, and that had been most of his life. A cowboy learns to ride before he can walk steady, and the Rafter F man had given Lone Star his first job.

"You're under arrest, Vin," Lone Star said quietly. "But the sheriff and me will release you on your promise to show up for trial."

Vin Freeman cracked his weathered face in a wide grin, and his deep voice cackled derisively when Buck Perry scowled. The Perrys glanced at each other uncertainly, but a clatter of boots across the boardwalk stopped whatever comment the Sevens owner was about to make.

A young girl jumped lightly to the street with her black Stetson caught on the back of her head by the throat latch. Curly blond hair framed a pretty oval face that was now clouded with anger. Connie Freeman ran straight to her father and faced the new deputy with blue eyes flashing.

"I might have known you were back, Lone Star Smith," she began bitterly. "Wherever you ride, trouble follows you!"

"Hush yore fuss, Connie," her fa-

ther said sharply. "Lone Star's the new deputy here in Granada, and his first job was to place me under arrest. Them Perrys claim that I've been venting the brand on some of their Sevens stock."

Connie Freeman gasped and glanced around the ring of faces. Her eyes widened when she saw Cory Matthews and Pecos Langtry. Lone Star Smith spoke quietly while the girl was trying to connect the gambler with her father's trouble.

"Matthews wanted his trouble-shooter to be the new deputy, Connie," he explained. "I just got back from Montana, and I'm home to stay. Now you better ride out to the Rafter F with your dad, and I'll ride along to take a look at that evidence these Sevens hombres are talking about."

"Putting it thataway, me and Colt will join the party," Buck Perry spoke up quickly. "We've been losing a heap of stock."

A tall old man came out of the sheriff's office with a heavy rifle in the crook of his left arm. His gray hair hung almost to his shoulders under the floppy Stetson that shaded his squinting gray eyes. He was dressed in greasy buckskin, and he walked like an Indian with his toes turned in when he stalked up and touched Law Smith on the shoulder.

"You stay here and run the law from the office," he muttered softly. "I'll ride with Lone Star just to see that them Sevens fellers don't try to run a blazer. Glad yo're back again, deputy."

Lone Star smiled and shook hands with Gard Hutchins, his father's jailer. The old Indian fighter could follow a trail like an Apache, and he had taught Lone Star many Indian tricks. Law Smith sighed with relief and nodded approval.

"This charge against Vin Free-

man is serious, Lone Star," he said slowly. "You and Gard run down all the sign, and I'll be waiting here for your report."

He turned to watch the gambler when Cory Matthews whispered to Pecos Langtry. The slender gun fighter nodded his head and walked away hurriedly. The sheriff frowned and spoke gruffly to his son.

"Get on out there, Lone Star. Don't take any chances if you run across Solo Frane and his border hoppers!"

The Perrys were walking up the street to get their horses, and they did not hear the sheriff's instructions. Vin Freeman twitched his shoulders and turned to his daughter.



CONNIE FREEMAN

"You better stay here in town, Connie," he said gruffly. "I forgot about Solo Frane, but it looks like the sheriff made a good guess."

Connie Freeman threw back her head defiantly. "I'm going with you," she declared firmly. "It's the least I can do, after what I said to Lone Star."

"Forget it," the young deputy answered with a shrug. "It did look like I brought trouble to town, but the ruckus was under way when I rode in. You better do what old Vin suggested, Connie. If Solo Frane is mixed up in this trouble, the law will have plenty to do."

"Meaning that I'd only be in the way," the girl retorted angrily, and tossed her head while she glared at Lone Star.

"That's just what I mean," the deputy answered quietly. "If Frane is at the bottom of this rustling business, it means that Loop McGuire and Vinceragone will be siding any play he makes."

"I'm not afraid of that handsome Mexican," the girl answered lightly. "And I never have believed the stories they tell about him."

"You can take my word for it, missy," the old Indian fighter interrupted roughly. "I've never seen that Mex carry a gun, but he's as lousy with throwing knives as a steer is full of ticks. Carries one on each side of his belt, and two at his back, not to mention one between his shoulder blades, and another in his boot."

"And Loop McGuire can do things with a rope that never was done before," Vin Freeman interrupted quickly. "He can rope a man and throw running hitches all over him before the feller can shake loose."

"Just where do Cory Matthews and Pecos Langtry fit in with Solo Frane and his riders?" Lone Star asked thoughtfully.

"Frane aims to be boss of Granada," the old Indian fighter answered promptly. "And if my guess

is worth anything, both of them Perrys're in the scheme hand and glove."

Lone Star was making a tally on the fingers of his left hand. Solo Frane and his two henchmen; Cory Matthews and Pecos Langtry made five; and if the Perrys were included, the count would be seven against the forces of the law. Old Gard Hutchins nodded gravely and read the deputy's thoughts.

"Yeah, they make seven all told," he said quietly. "And every one of them a cold killer if you ask my opinion."

"Looks like you came home just in time, Lone Star," Vin Freeman muttered. "Quiet now; here comes Buck Perry and that gun-hung chip of his."

"I don't believe all this," Connie Freeman said coldly. "The Perrys own the Sevens spread, and it's one of the largest in the Big Bend."

"It would be bigger if they owned the Rafter F.," Gard Hutchins answered dryly. "Now you keep a bridle on yore jaw, young woman. What you think don't count for much in a game like this one."

Connie Freeman tossed her head angrily and scowled at the old Indian fighter. The Sevens men rode up before she could answer, and young Colt Perry ignored Lone Star and sidled up to the girl.

"I'll ride along with you, Connie," he said with a smile. "I know things look bad for old Vin, but it might be that we made a mistake. I hear that Solo Frane is working down this way again, and I wouldn't trust that outlaw as far as I could see him."

Connie Freeman turned her head and smiled meaningly at Lone Star Smith. The deputy was watching Colt Perry's bold face, trying to read what was going on in the cowboy's

mind. Gard Hutchins was smiling grimly, and slowly nodding his head. He turned and winked solemnly at Lone Star, and then the old Indian fighter giggled his horse with a spur and rode up to take the lead.

"I ain't taking any chances if Solo Frane is riding the border," Hutchins said quietly. "This old Henry rifle throws an ounce of lead every time she barks, and I just want to get Frane or one of his pards under my sights."

CHAPTER II.

OUTLAW HOSTAGE.

LONE STAR SMITH dropped back where he could watch the two Perrys when Gard Hutchins rode out in the lead. He knew that the old Indian fighter was as cunning as he was fearless, and Hutchins depended on the deputy to guard his back. Otherwise he would never have allowed Colt Perry to get behind him.

They were riding through desert grazing land, studded with prickly pear and barrel cactus. Cattle were grazing on the buffalo and grama grass in the deep wallows, and the old Indian fighter spurred his horse and rode into a deep wash. He topped the bank on the other side and shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun, and once he half raised the heavy rifle to his shoulder when a black sombrero bobbed into view on a distant rise.

"I better wait," he growled under his breath, and lowered the buffalo gun.

He was riding with a squaw bridle around the lower jaw of his horse, and the pinto turned swiftly when Hutchins neck-reined and rode back through the wash. Colt Perry watched suspiciously when the old Indian fighter passed him and rode back to speak to Lone Star Smith.

Perry glanced at the girl and turned his horse to listen.

"A gent just rode on ahead, deputy," Hutchins reported quietly. "That far ridge just ahead marks the boundary of Mexico, and the hossbacker was Pecos Langtry."

"She's a free country," Buck Perry growled, but he exchanged glances with his son. "These two Sevens critters are off down this wallow if they haven't been moved."

"Seeing that I'm tagged rustler, I'll take the lead from here," Vin Freeman said slowly, and started his horse into a deep wallow. "We'll ride slow so as not to cloud the sign."

Gard Hutchins nodded and rode up to join the old cattleman. Lone Star Smith followed with Buck Perry, and Connie Freeman brought up the rear with Colt Perry. Vin Freeman pointed to a pair of yearling calves close to a growth of brush, and Gard Hutchins emptied his saddle like a relay rider.

"Stay where you are, all of you," he ordered. "While I take a look around."

Buck Perry muttered angrily and started to ride after Hutchins. Lone Star swung his horse to block the way, and Vin Freeman swung in when Colt Perry tried to pass.

"Stand your horses," Lone Star said sternly. "You gents seem mighty anxious to tromp down any evidence."

"We got a right to look at our own stock," Colt Perry shouted. "Clear the way before I ride you down!"

His hand whipped down to his holster as he poised his spurs. Vin Freeman hunched his wide shoulders when a gun leaped to the cowboy's hand. Then the crackling voice of Gard Hutchins interrupted to break the deadlock.

"Pouch that six-gun before I knock you out of yore saddle, Colt. And make it mighty sudden!"

Colt Perry holstered his gun when the Indian fighter notched back the hammer of his heavy rifle. Vin Freeman palmed his gun and held the drop, and Hutchins grunted and lowered his rifle.

"Vin can hold 'em, Lone Star," he said quietly. "Slide down and I'll show you a few things that mebbeso them Perrys didn't want us to see."

The new deputy dismounted and anchored his roan with trailing reins. Hutchins was sitting on his heels studying the two calves, and he reached out a gnarled hand and flipped one of the animals over. Then he picked up a worn skin glove and turned to stare at Colt Perry.

"I noticed that you were shy a glove," he told the Sevens cowboy. "And the hand that wore this glove used a running-iron to vent the brand on these critters."

"Yo're a liar, you old pelican!" Colt Perry roared, and poised his hand above his holster.

"Easy, feller," Vin Freeman warned coldly. "I'm dropping hammer the minute you touch wood!"

Gard Hutchins straightened up and walked around the patch of brush. He kicked with one of his sharp-pointed boots, and Lone Star picked up a piece of burned iron and turned to face Buck Perry.

"This is your running-iron, Perry," he said quietly. "And I've worked long enough with Colt on roundup to know how he braids his pigging strongs. Your tracks are all over this wallow, and that glove belongs to your chip. Mebbe you want to talk some."

Buck Perry tightened his square jaw while his face turned a dull brick-red. Then he spurred his horse

straight at the deputy with a roar of rage bellowing from his writhing lips.

Lone Star side-stepped right over the tied calves, and his gun leaped to his hand when Perry's horse lunged to the side. Gard Hutchins stooped swiftly to pick up his rifle, and he screamed like an Indian when a knife flashed through the sunlight and stuck in the ground in front of the buffalo gun.

"Elevate, gents," a purring voice whispered softly. "Solo Frane would speak with the law!"

Lone Star Smith turned swiftly to face the thicket of prickly pear behind Vin Freeman. The six-gun dropped from the deputy's hand when he recognized the swarthy face of Solo Frane. A tall slender Mexican was watching Gard Hutchins at the outlaw's left, holding a thin-bladed throwing knife in his right hand. On the right stood a long-legged cowboy with a six-gun in one hand, a coiled rope in the other.



LOOP MCGUIRE

"That's Loop McGuire," Solo Frane explained mockingly. "This other hombre is *Vinegarone*, and you might have heard of him. He is as fast as the whip scorpion for whom he is named."

"Glad to know you gents," Lone Star said quietly. "Like as not you know the Perrys who run the Sevens outfit, and my long-haired pard is Gard Hutchins. To my right is Vin Freeman of the Rafter F, and his daughter Connie."

The slender Mexican moved like a shadow and flashed his knife when he leaned over the tied calves. The ropes were severed before anyone could speak, and Solo Frane grinned when the frightened animals lurched to their feet and raced for the brush.

"There has been a mistake," he said carelessly. "Me and Loop roped those critters and vented the brands. We knew it would keep you all busy while we moved some cattle we needed across the border."

Buck Perry was staring at the outlaw, half turned in his saddle. Lone Star Smith watched the Sevens owner for a moment, and then turned to see how Colt Perry was taking Solo Frane's admission. Both Sevens men were evidently surprised, but old Buck was the first to speak.

"You ran my cattle across the line?" he asked slowly.

Solo Frane showed white teeth in a smile of enjoyment. His hands were long and supple, and tanned a deep mahogany. He was dressed in the tight pantaloons and bolero jacket of the Mexican dandy, but every move he made emphasized the smooth flowing muscles of his powerful body.

"Your cattle, and also some fat beeves branded with the Rafter F," he answered mockingly. "After all, am I not a robber?"

"For one time you spoke the

truth," Gard Hutchins growled thickly. "Now you better slide across that ridge yonder on yore own side of the line."

"Watch that old one, *Vinegarone*," Frane said to the Mexican. "Kiss him with your knife if he makes a move."

His voice was soft and careless as he gave the order without looking at the old Indian fighter. His dark eyes watched Lone Star Smith with a glittering intensity, and the deputy frowned and shifted his boots.

"You said you wanted to talk to the law," he growled. "I'm part of the law."

"So I heard," Frane answered lightly. "But you will not be for long. You will hand in your star, and perhaps you can persuade your father that it is time for him to retire."

Lone Star stared for a moment, stunned with surprise. He could hear Gard Hutchins humming under his breath, and he saw the Mexican raise his right hand holding the gleaming knife. For a moment he forgot about Loop McGuire, but a gasp from Connie Freeman jerked him around to face the girl.

Loop McGuire had holstered his gun, and now he was holding a rope with the loop around the girl's arms. McGuire flipped the rope twice, and running half hitches leaped through the air and tightened around Connie's shrinking body.

Lone Star started forward when Loop McGuire tripped the girl to the ground. His right leg was kicked from under him when the gun roared in Solo Frane's right hand. The deputy fell heavily, and he was staring at his boot where Frane's bullet had cut off the high heel when he heard the outlaw's voice bark a sharp command.

"Lift that hand, empty, Colt!"

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Lone Star rolled up in time to see Colt Perry loosen the fingers that were gripping his six-gun. Solo Frane was smiling coldly, and watching the Sevens cowboy across his smoking gun. Colt Perry scowled and slowly raised both hands.



VINEGARONE

"That's better," Frane said quietly. "Put the girl back on her horse, Loop. We'll just take her along with us until the law decides to hand in their stars."

"I'll get you for this one, Frane," Colt Perry said slowly, and Lone Star braced himself with his hands on the ground while he studied Perry's angry face.

He told himself that something had gone wrong. He and Gard Hutchins had found proof that the Perrys had vented their own brand,

and had used a running-iron to make Vin Freeman look like a rustler. Then Cory Matthews and Pecos Langtry had backed up the Perrys, and Langtry had ridden out ahead to warn Solo Frane.

Now Frane had taken the blame for the brand-blotting, and he had threatened to kill young Perry when the latter had tried to help Connie Freeman. The deputy pushed slowly to his feet facing the outlaw, and he was just in time to see Vin Freeman slap for his gun.

A whirring noise whined shrilly just before the Rafter F owner's fingers touched the gun handles. Vin Freeman clawed air several times before something struck his foot, and he looked down stupidly and stared at his holster that had been severed at the belt.

Vinegarone was leaning forward with a sneering grin on his dark face. His right hand was reaching behind his belt, and another knife cuddled in his palm with the point against his slender fingers.

"The next time I will not cut the leather, señor," the Mexican warned softly.

Gard Hutchins growled softly until the Mexican turned to face him. The old Indian fighter was leaning forward in a crouch, and his squinting gray eyes were burning savagely.

"You like the knife, eh, Mex?" he asked harshly.

"Sí, señor," *Vinegarone* answered eagerly. "For why you ask, old one?"

"I know an old Injun trick," Hutchins answered promptly. "Me and you ties our left wrists together with a bandanna, and then we each take a knife in our right hands. The feller who wins cuts himself loose from a dead man!"

The Mexican snarled and drew back his arm. Gard Hutchins faced

him without winking an eye, and the voices of Solo Frane barked sharply to stop the angry Mexican.

"Hold your hand, *hombrecito!* He will wait for another time. Now we have work to do."

Vinegarone sighed and slowly lowered his arm. He had cut the holster from Vin Freeman's belt at twenty feet, and his dark face was savage with hatred as he glared at Gard Hutchins.

"Another time, *amigo*," he promised. "I will stick the knives in your thick skin like the thorns of the cactus!"

"After you stop kicking, I mean to raise yore hair," the old Indian fighter retorted with a snort. "And I'll do the trick with yore own knife!"

"Take their weapons, *Vinegarone*," Solo Frane told the Mexican. "I'll shoot the first man who wants to argue."

The Mexican circled quickly and lifted Colt Perry's gun from the cowboy's holster. Then he turned and stared at Hutchins, but a sharp word from Solo Frane whirled him around to face the outlaw.

"Bring the horses," Frane said quietly.

Lone Star Smith kept his eyes turned away from Connie Freeman when the Mexican walked back into the brush. His voice was harsh and edgy with strain when he spoke to Frane.

"You mean to take the girl across the line?"

"That's right, my young friend," Frane answered with a smile. "We will release her after you and your father have turned in your stars."

"You don't know old Law Smith," Lone Star muttered.

"I know him," the outlaw answered smoothly. "He'll quit in a minute to save the girl. You can



The renegades lashed their mounts to a frenzy.

send the stars over to Dark Canyon by our young friend Colt Perry."

Lone Star caught his breath and turned to stare at the Sevens cowboy. Colt Perry was watching Solo Frane, and he nodded his head slowly.

"I'll bring them," he promised hoarsely. "And you better not hurt Connie in any way."

"You would do something to me?" Solo Frane taunted softly. "Is that what you mean, Colt Perry?"

"I'll kill you if you lay a hand on her," Perry growled.

"And if he can't do it, I will," Lone Star added quietly.



SOLO FRANE

Solo Frane smiled and mounted his horse when the Mexican led the three animals from the brush. He waited until his companions were mounted, and Loop McGuire took

the bridle reins to lead Connie Freeman's gray.

"You mean you will *try*," Frane corrected the deputy. "Send those stars over before daylight, or I'm sending the señorita away on a long trip!"

CHAPTER III.

SELF-DEFENSE.

FOR a full minute after the three outlaws had disappeared in the brush, the four men waited in the clearing, staring uncertainly at each other. It was Gard Hutchins who broke the long silence when he picked up his old buffalo rifle.

"I'd take out after those long riders if I had fodder for my old gun," he muttered fiercely, and turned to the young deputy. "Are you going to turn in yore star?" he demanded bluntly.

Lone Star Smith nodded slowly, watching the face of Colt Perry. He saw the Sevens cowboy jerk around with a peculiar expression on his beld face, and then Colt Perry came forward and offered his right hand.

"Yo're a man for my money, Lone Star," he said huskily. "I'd give my share of the Sevens to save Connie, and I know what this means to you."

Vin Freeman raised his head and watched for the outlaw party to come out of the brush. Connie was his only child, and the square-shouldered cattleman turned to Smith when he finally could trust himself to speak.

"Old Law Smith yore dad," he said hoarsely. "Do you think he'll knuckle?"

"He won't," Hutchins broke in gruffly. "Old Law will get him up a posse and run them owl-hooters down before dark!"

Vin Freeman shook his head slowly. "They're in Mexico now," he said hopelessly. "And there's little law in this part of Sonora."

"Let's ride," Lone Star said harshly. "We can mill around after I talk to the sheriff. Solo Frane read old Law correct, and it's my guess that the sheriff will send his badge."

Buck Perry remained silent during the short ride back to Granada. Lone Star was in the lead when the four men roared into the little cattle town at a dead run. Men came running when the new deputy slid his horse to a stop in front of the jail where Law Smith was waiting with a Winchester rifle in his strong brown hands.

"Where's Connie?" the sheriff asked abruptly, and then he saw Vin Freeman's face.

"Solo Frane," the Rafter F owner managed to say. "We saw him down there near the border."

"They slipped through the brush and got the drop on us, sheriff," Lone Star reported stiffly. "Loop McGuire flipped a rope around Connie, and Solo Frane took her to their hide-out in Dark Canyon. He'll trade her to us, providing you and me take off our stars and send them to him before midnight. Colt was named to ride back with the badges."

Law Smith spread his boots and lowered the rifle in his hands. His jaw dropped open, and then his white mustache began to quiver with anger.

"We'll pry up hell and put a chunk under it!" he rapped out, and glared at his son. "You mean you thought I'd step back for that owl-hoot crowd?" he asked incredulously.

"Pecos Langtry rode out and warned Solo Frane," Gard Hutchins interrupted to tell the sheriff. "Take it easy, boss. Yonder comes Cory Matthews from the Two Flags!"

Law Smith turned slowly when the tall gambler came briskly down the boardwalk from the saloon. Matthews wore a long-tailed coat of ex-

pensive broadcloth, with trousers of the same material. He also wore twin .45s strapped around his lean hips below an embroidered silk vest, and he was smiling when men made way for him. He stopped a few feet from Law Smith and tilted his black Stetson to the back of his head.

"I heard all about it," he began in his low purring voice. "You've got to hand in your star now, Smith!"

The sheriff bristled and tilted the rifle in his hands. His gray eyes were cold and steady while he looked the gambler over, and then Lone Star touched his father on the arm and jerked his head toward the office. Law Smith hesitated before following his son.

"We've got it to do, dad," Lone Star began in a low voice. "You've wanted to get Solo Frane for several years, and you couldn't follow him into Mexico while you wore your badge of office."

"You can send yours," Law Smith growled. "You've only worn it a few hours, but with me it's different. I'm the law here in Granada, and there's a gent waiting to take over if we hand in our stars. Yeah, I mean Cory Matthews."

"Maybe not, sheriff," Lone Star answered quietly. "You forget about Gard Hutchins. He's a sworn deputy, and nothing was said about him. He could rod the law here in Granada while you and me worked on the outside where border lines don't make any difference. If we don't send our badges to Solo Frane—"

"I know," Law Smith finished the sentence. "He'll hold Connie Freeman down there in that hide-out, and I reckon we both know outlaws."

He sighed gustily when he reached to his worn vest and slowly unfastened his badge of office. Lone Star removed his new badge and handed

it over without meeting the sheriff's eyes. He followed his father when Law Smith walked slowly from the office.

Lone Star stopped abruptly when he saw Pecos Langtry talking to Cory Matthews. The waspish gunman was watching Colt Perry with a sneer curling his lips, and making his little eyes narrow. He stopped talking and faced around when Law Smith came out of the office.

"Connie Freeman is a prisoner over in Mexico," the old sheriff told the crowd quietly, with a terrible repression in his hushed tones. "He demands the badge I have worn for twenty years as the price of her freedom, and also the badge of my new deputy. The man can't win who hides behind a woman, but me and Lone Star haven't any choice. We're sending our stars."

Vin Freeman took a deep breath that swelled his chest. His eyes misted when he stepped up and gripped hands with Law Smith.

"I won't forget this, Law," he promised hoarsely. "And I'll back up any play you make after Connie comes home."

"That goes for me and Colt," and Buck Perry glared at Cory Matthews when he announced his stand. "If Colt gets back alive," he added.

Law Smith studied Colt Perry's bold face when the Sevens cowboy stepped up and waited for the sheriff to speak. He was the same age as Lone Star Smith, twenty-three years old. His courage was unquestioned in a country where men learned to read character at a glance, and Law Smith placed the two badges in Colt Perry's left hand.

"Take them and ride, cowboy," the sheriff said quietly. "Hold your temper down, and keep your mouth shut. Bring Connie back to Gra-

nada, and then we can figure what steps to take."

Pecos Langtry started to edge away from the crowd. Lone Star had taken a spare gun from the sheriff's desk, and he twined the weapon as he called to Langtry.

"Just a minute, Pecos. Colt Perry gets a fair chance to make the trade, and this is one time you don't ride ahead!"

The slender gunman whirled on his heel with an oath snarling from his thin lips. Both hands were poised above the twin guns on his thin legs, and his little eyes were glowing redly between slitted lids.

"Try to stop me," he sneered softly. "You ain't the law!"

"That's why I'm stopping you," Lone Star answered without raising his voice. "You baited a trap for the law not long ago, but you don't bait another one. Now you either play on one side of the law, or take your stand with the owl-hooters."

"Make it the law side," Cory Matthews interrupted softly. "Border County has to have an acting sheriff until we can elect one, and I'm taking over the job. I'm appointing Pecos Langtry as my deputy, and I'll just take those law badges!"

Lone Star Smith wasted no time in argument, nor did he give any warning that would have resulted in a free-for-all gun fight. His right hand swept down and drew his .45, and he covered the gambler and Pecos Langtry with the hammer cared back.

"This is one time you don't take what you want, gambling man," he told Matthews. "I'm holding you and your lookout right here until Colt Perry crosses the border. Connie Freeman is worth more than all your crowd, and you can make your play after she comes home. Ride down

below, Colt," he told the Sevens cowboy.

Colt Perry jumped his saddle and headed out of town in a cloud of billowing dust. Law Smith made a smooth pass and filled his hand to back up his son. Vin Freeman and Buck Perry drew their guns to make it four of a kind, and only the baleful gleam in the gambler's dark eyes told anything of the seething anger that flooded his powerful body.

Pecos Langtry was different. His lips curled back to show yellow teeth tightly clenched. The fingers of both his hands were trembling for the feel of his guns, and his voice was thick with passion when he growled at Lone Star Smith.

"I'll get you under a gun before the sun sets," he ground out. "I'll trip the trigger until the gun runs dry, and you don't pack the sand to give me showdown!"

Gard Hutchins came around from his quarters behind the jail. The old Indian fighter had found fodder for his buffalo gun, and the pockets of his buckskin jacket bulged with the big one-ounce shells. He stopped between Lone Star and Langtry with his head cocked to the side.

"Accommodate that killer, Lone Star," he advised slowly. "You ain't packing the law badge, and he's served notice that he'll smoke you down the minute you give up the drop. Give him showdown right here where his boss can't frame up a crooked excuse!"

"He's yellow clear down to his heels," Pecos Langtry taunted viciously. "He let Solo Franc take his gal, and then he hands in his star. He never was nothing but a saddle tramp, and he never will be!"

Lone Star Smith could feel his toes gripping inside his boots. Swift blinding anger surged through his muscular body, and for a moment he

could see nothing except a blinding curtain of red that filmed his eyes. His finger trembled on the trigger, and then he heard the voice of his father speaking as from a great distance.

"The law says that every man is entitled to defend himself, Lone Star. You don't have any choice in the matter, and you can't hold the drop all day. Holster yore hogleg and give that mouthy killer a chance to back up his talk with smoke!"

Lone Star widened his eyes and turned his head slightly to listen. His father had been the law in Granada ever since he could remember. It was Law Smith's duty to preserve the peace, and now he was giving the go ahead for a gun fight right in front of his old office. Then Lone Star remembered that the Smiths were no longer the law.

"You asked for it, Langtry," he heard himself saying, and he did not recognize his own voice. Low and deadly like the buzzing warning of the deadly diamond-back rattler.

Pecos Langtry opened his thin lips, and then his mean face split in a smile that was more like a scowl than an expression of mirth. His eyes stared while Lone Star flipped his right hand and holstered the gun in his low-slung scabbard.

"I'm going to keep squeezing the trigger until the gun runs dry," he repeated hoarsely. "Drop yore hat, boss!"

Cory Matthews raised his left hand and swept the black Stetson from his head. His black curly hair glistened in the sunlight, and the gambler's eyes twinkled with an inner excitement when he held the hat at arm's length.

"Get set," he said softly.

Pecos Langtry waited for no further orders. He moved like a man

who has practiced a routine, and his right hand whipped down without warning.

Law Smith gasped when he saw the trap. Lone Star had been expecting the gambler to pause before giving the final word. Any other man would have paused before saying "Go!"

But Lone Star had been watching Langtry's slitted eyes. He saw the telltale lines that flagged out from the corners just before the waspish gunman jumped the signal.

Lone Star twitched the powerful roping muscles in his right shoulder when he caught the telegraphic warning. His hand slapped wood and swiveled up with flame spouting from the muzzle, and Pecos Langtry triggered a shot into the ground before he could whip up his leaping 45.

For a moment Langtry swayed with a stunned helpless look frozen on his mean face. Then he sagged at the knees and pitched to the ground, and Cory Matthews waited until the thudding boots had stopped rattling a message all could understand.

"He's dead," Matthews said without emotion, and replaced his hat as he turned to face Lone Star Smith. "You're fairly rapid, cowboy," he said quietly. "But there are some who are faster."

"Meaning yourself?" Lone Star hummed softly.

"For one, and then there's Solo Franc," the gambler answered with a grim smile.

"Speaking about you," Lone Star almost whispered. "Now, or later?"

Cory Matthews waited a long moment before he answered. Then he sighed and turned toward the Two Flags Saloon.

"Later," he murmured and walked slowly up the street.

CHAPTER IV.

GUN SMOKE NOTICE.

GUARD HUTCHINS protested volubly when Law Smith called the old Indian fighter into the office and ordered him to guard the jail. Hutchins shook his head until his long gray hair stood out to make a curtain from his droopy hat to his stooped shoulders.

"I'm a tracker from away back, sheriff," he argued. "I can smell out sign where they ain't none, and you fellers will need me down there across the line."

"Who said we were going into Mexico?" Law Smith growled. "And you might remember that I'm not the sheriff right now."

"Just taking off that badge don't make you stop drawing law pay," Hutchins answered shrewdly. "You're the sheriff of Border County until a successor is appointed."

"I'm forgetting about that, you old savage," Law Smith whispered, with a glance at the open door. "This gives me a chance to forget boundaries, but you've got to stay here and represent the law until me and Lone Star gets back."

"I get you, Law," Hutchins answered with a nod. "I didn't hand in my badge, and I'd like to see the color of the hombre who could make me do it!"

"Then keep your eyes skinned for Cory Matthews," Law Smith warned. "Colt Perry should be riding back with Connie by the time we reach that wallow where he cornered you men. What do you make of Colt Perry?" he asked in a guarded tone.

"He's a brash yearlin', but he don't lack for nerve," Hutchins answered without hesitation. "And he's in love with Vin Freeman's gal. The way I read the sign, there's some

kind of an understanding between Cory Matthews and Solo Frane, but it looks like Frane decided to play on his own."

"Then you think Matthews tried to make trouble between Vin Freeman and Buck Perry," the sheriff said thoughtfully.

"And he made plenty," the old Indian fighter agreed. "Then Perry jumped Freeman and accused him of venting brands on their stock. I found one of Colt Perry's gloves down there, and likewise a running iron, and Lone Star recognized Colt's piggin' strings. We was augerin' about it when Solo Frane snuck through the brush, and that's how come him to get Connie."

"And Frane admitted venting those brands," the sheriff murmured. "After which he demanded that Lone Star and me send him our badges, and we know he had some kind of a deal with Matthews. I wonder just what it means?"

"It don't lack much until beef roundup," Hutchins said, and puckered his lips to spit through the door. "I've got it, sher'ff," he whispered, and his eyes gleamed with discovery. "There'll be lots of cash money in town to pay off the hands, and to buy prime beef. Granada would be wide open for holdups if there wasn't any law here during roundup!"

"You're the law," the sheriff said quietly. "If you need any help, you can pick out some men you can trust, and swear them in as deputies. Think it over until we get back."

Vin Freeman and Buck Perry were waiting with fresh horses when he joined them in the street. Cory Matthews had given orders to Formaldehyde Thompson for the removal of Langtry's body, and the solemn-faced undertaker was driving away in his covered wagon when

Lone Star Smith rode out of the jail corral on a big bay horse.

"Formaldehyde ought to have considerable business during the next few days," Freeman told Buck Perry coldly, and his eyes were frosty as he stared toward the Two Flags Saloon.

Buck Perry nodded and then thrust out his right hand. "I know you didn't brand my critters, Vin," he said earnestly. "I'm saying I'm sorry I even thought so."

"Make mine some of the same," Vin Freeman answered heartily, and gripped his old neighbor's hand. "When Gard found Colt's glove and piggin' strings down there in the wallow, I got to fighting my head. We both lost cattle while we were fighting each other, and we'll lose more unless we stand together. Yonder comes Law Smith, and this is the first time I remember ever seeing him without his badge."

The sheriff mounted his horse and led the way out of town without speaking. He stopped when they were deep in the desert grazing land, and for a moment his eyes met the glance of his stalwart son.

"It'll be dark soon," he began tersely. "Colt ought to be riding out with Connie."

Vin Freeman and Buck Perry turned to exchange glances. Would Solo Frane keep his promise to release the girl in exchange for the law stars?

"Frane will turn the girl loose," Lone Star said positively. "I was thinking about Colt. He told Solo Frane that all he wanted was a fair chance to face him with a gun in his hand."

Buck Perry gripped his saddlehorn until his knuckles turned white. Some of the color drained from his weathered face, and his voice was husky with emotion when he spoke.

"Colt ain't afraid of nothing that walks, but the man don't live who can match Solo Franc with a hand gun. What are we waiting for when Colt needs all the help we can give him?"

He whirled his horse toward a low ridge of hills, and then pulled the leaping animal to its haunches when a rider came racing toward them. Lone Star stood up in his stirrups, and a low growl burst from his lips.

"It's Connie, and she's alone!"

The girl saw them and spurred her horse through a long, dry wash. Her face was stained with tears when she slid to a stop that threw gravel over the four men, and she panted for breath with her hand pressed against her heart.

"Colt!" she whispered shakily. "Solo Franc shot him through both arms!"

Buck Perry tried to talk and could only growl deep in his chest. Vin Freeman rode up to his daughter and took the girl in his arms. Lone Star glanced at his father and slowly rubbed the grip of his gun, but Law Smith shook his head vigorously and touched Connie Freeman gently on the shoulder.

"Pull yourself together, Connie," he said quietly. "Tell us what happened, and tell it fast."

Connie Freeman dried her eyes and bit her lips. She closed her eyes when she saw Buck Perry's strained face, and then she squared her shoulders bravely.

"Colt rode into Dark Canyon about two hours ago," she began jerkily, and then steadied herself when her father pressed her hand. "Loop McGuire was guarding the bottleneck that leads to the canyon, and he brought Colt in under his gun, and with a rope around Colt's arms."

"Solo Franc," Law Smith

prompted, when the girl hesitated. "What did he do?"

"He just stood there smiling," the girl continued. "Colt shook off the rope and reached to his vest pocket. He handed two badges to Franc, and then he lashed out and slapped Franc's face when the outlaw took the badges!"

"The young fool," Buck Perry muttered, and bit his tongue. "Is Colt dead?" he asked quietly.

Connie Freeman shook her head before she answered. "He's alive," she whispered. "Solo Franc stepped back without a word, and then he smiled like a devil while he rubbed his cheek with his left hand. His eyes were like glowing rubies, and his voice was a rustling whisper when he told Colt that he would never slap another man."

Lone Star Smith squirmed in the saddle with his fingers gripping his gun. For a moment he forgot the girl while he put himself in Colt Perry's place. He could almost see the smile on the bold face of the Sevens cowboy, and then Connie went on with her story.

"That *Vinegarone* was standing there with a knife in his hand," she said with a shudder. "Then Solo Franc stepped back and told Colt to go for his gun."

"Did Colt nick that killer?" Buck Perry asked hoarsely.

The girl shook her head. "Colt made a slap for his gun, but it never cleared leather," she said faintly. "I didn't see Franc's hand move at all, but there he stood with a smoking gun in his hand. He shot twice, but you could only hear one explosion, and there was Colt on the ground. Both arms were bleeding when Colt sat up, and Solo Franc was still smiling like some terrible devil!"

She threw herself in her father's arms and burst into a storm of weep-

ing, and Vin Freeman held her close and rumbled in his throat. Buck Perry was trembling like a man with the buck ague, and Lone Star sidled his horse close to the older man and bit off his words through clenched teeth.

"I'll square for Colt," he promised. "Like I promised Solo Frane this afternoon."

"I'll square it myself," Buck Perry answered slowly, but the light had gone from his fierce gray eyes.

Connie Freeman recovered her composure and dabbed at her eyes with her neckerchief. She rode over to Lone Star and faced him with a glitter in her blue eyes.

"This afternoon," she began harshly. "You told Solo Frane you would get him if he was faster than Colt. Did you mean what you said?"

"I never meant anything so much in all my life," Lone Star answered, and his deep voice vibrated like a bell. "I'm not the law any more, and I mean to ride right into Dark Canyon!"

"You've got to save Colt," the girl said shakily. "They held me there until they had bandaged his arms. All the time that knife-throwing Mexican was staring at me while he pitched his knives into the ground. He said that he was practicing for old Gard Hutchins!"

Lone Star raised his head suddenly and stared at a distant ridge, then he hit his horse with the spurs and thundered up the dry wash at a break-neck speed. Law Smith stared for a moment, and put out a hand to stop Buck Perry.

"Stay here, Buck," he urged firmly. "Lone Star saw Colt coming, and he'll bring him in. Now you get a grip on yourself, and don't let Colt see you in this shape."

Buck Perry swallowed noisily and turned to Connie Freeman. "Colt

will need some nursing," he said hoarsely. "He can't feed himself. Will you look after my chip?"

"I'll take care of him on the Rafter F," the girl promised earnestly. "It's my fault that he's crippled."

"It ain't your fault," the old cattleman contradicted honestly. "Colt meant to take it to Solo Frane regardless, but I won't take any rest until that killer gets his needings!"

He turned slowly when Lone Star Smith rode down the wash, leading Colt Perry's horse. The Sevens cowboy was sagging in the saddle with both arms bound tightly at his sides. His face was white from pain and loss of blood, but he smiled crookedly when the horse stopped near his father.

"I delivered the stars," he said gamely. "And I met a faster man. He could have killed me just as easy, and it was on the level!"

Buck Perry stared for a moment, and tears streaked down his bronzed cheeks when he turned his face away. Lone Star touched Colt on the knee and leaned closer.

"I've taken seconds on that killer, Colt," he said quietly. "Now you ride back to the Rafter F with Connie, and heal up your hurts."

"Don't do it, Lone Star," the Sevens cowboy muttered hoarsely. "His hand don't even move when he makes his pass. He said he'd kill you the next time he cut your sign!"

Lone Star Smith smiled and sucked in a deep breath. Then he turned to the girl and handed her the lead reins.

"Take good care of Colt," he said softly. "We just want to ride around and look things over."

Connie Freeman took the reins and caught Lone Star's hand. "Please be careful," she pleaded.

"I'll be careful," Lone Star prom-

ised, and turned away when he caught the puzzled expression in Colt Perry's eyes.

Connie turned her horse and started across the desert toward the Rafter F. The four men watched until the pair was hidden behind a low hill, and then Buck Perry tightened his belt and turned to Law Smith.

"Mexico," he said quietly. "We're going into Dark Canyon before the sun comes up on another day."

Law Smith only nodded his head. Hands moved down and tested six-guns, and then Lone Star took the lead and started for the distant hills. He had made a double promise, and Solo Frane had sent him gun-smoke notice.

Buck Perry rode with Vin Freeman like a man who has just returned from a funeral. Deep lines of grief were etched in his ruddy weathered face, and he stared straight ahead in stony silence while Lone Star Smith pointed his horse toward a notch in the range of low hills.

Lone Star glanced back and spoke softly to his father. "I'd have changed places with Colt, and counted it a favor," he said without boasting.

Law Smith tugged on his flowing white mustache and pondered somberly. He wondered just what Lone Star meant. Few men could handle a six-gun with as much speed or accuracy. Colt Perry was also in the care of a pretty nurse, and sympathy is akin to love. He glanced carelessly at his son, but could read nothing in Lone Star's face, or in the stare of his smoky blue eyes.

Twilight dropped over the desert suddenly. Silence fell upon the little group of grim riders, broken only by the clink of horseshoes on the rocks

of the trail. Now the brush was growing thicker, and Lone Star stopped his horse and pointed to a narrow opening leading into a twisting canyon.

"Yonder's Dark Canyon," the cowboy murmured. "I wonder if Loop McGuire is standing guard?"

Buck Perry growled and drew his .45. Then he spurred ahead and raced through the bottleneck, riding low in the saddle while his savage gray eyes searched the brush.

Lone Star grunted and followed in close pursuit. He expected to hear the snarling bark of a rifle, but Perry reached the little valley without challenge. He was sitting his horse near a stunted blackjack tree when Lone Star caught up with him.

A stiff piece of cardboard was fastened to the tree, with a knife holding it to the rough bark. Lone Star rode under and pulled the knife loose, and there was just enough light to show some writing in a fine flowing hand when he examined the card. Law Smith and Vin Freeman rode close when Lone Star spelled out the message:

Thanks for the badges. We've just changed places.
FRANE.

Law Smith tugged on his mustache and tried to piece out the puzzle. Could Solo Frane mean that he had taken over the law? The sheriff shook his head from side to side. Then he straightened up and spoke jerkily.

"Frane knew we'd come here," he began hoarsely. "If he's changed places with us, it means they've rode into Granada!"

"Gard Hutchins will give him a warm reception," Lone Star said confidently, but Law Smith contradicted him.

"Gard will be kept busy," he rea-

soned. "Hit out for Granada, and head straight for the Drovers Bank!"

CHAPTER V.

BANK ROBBERY.

BACK in Granada, the old Indian fighter had just finished supper at the lunchroom across from the jail. He stalked back to the sheriff's office with his old buffalo gun in the crook of his elbow, and his eyes squinted to tiny slits when he saw Cory Matthews walking toward the jail.

Hutchins quickened his pace and reached the office first. He was waiting with his back against the wall when the gambler stepped into the room. The desk was between the two men, and Matthews smiled and puffed on a long thin cigar.

"You and me ought to get together Hutchins," he began pleasantly. "The town is without protection, and the boys don't like it. I'll make you my deputy, and we might stop trouble if we work fast."

"You're wasting yore time, tin-horn," Hutchins answered bluntly. "I'm the law right now, and I don't need yore kind of help."

"Granada needs my help," Matthews answered quietly. "Old Law Smith turned in his badge and rode out of town. That leaves you and me to handle the law in case of emergency."

"Counting you out, it leaves me," Hutchins corrected, and he made no attempt to hide his contempt. "Now you better get on back to your crooked game up there in the Two Flags."

A pistol shot roared suddenly before Cory Matthews could answer. The sound was muffled, had been fired inside a building. Then two more explosions sent Gard Hutchins racing to the door with the heavy

rifle in his hands and ready for battle.

He brushed past Cory Matthews with his long gray hair streaming behind him. The gambler also started for the door, and his right boot shot out and tripped Hutchins just as the old Indian fighter was bringing the rifle to his shoulder. Hutchins pitched through the doorway with the gun spilling from his hands, and three horses galloped right in front of the sheriff's office in a cloud of swirling dust.

Cory Matthews recovered his balance and leaped to the boardwalk with an oath of anger twisting his lips. His hands whipped down and came up spitting flame, and he emptied both guns at the racing horsemen, who were now at the far end of the street.

Gard Hutchins hit the ground on hands and knees and rolled like a cat. He scrambled to his feet and made a dive for the gambler's long legs, but Cory Matthews sidestepped and pressed the trigger of his right-hand gun.

He cursed softly when a sharp click told him that the gun was empty. Hutchins was carried against the adobe jail by the force of his rush, but he caught his balance and renewed the attack, screaming like an Indian brave.

Cory Matthews stepped in to meet the charge, swinging a blow at the old Indian fighter's head. Hutchins ducked and caught the blow on his left shoulder, and his right hand raked across the gambler's cheek like a claw.

Matthews leaped back with crimson streaming from the scratches on his swarthy face. Gard Hutchins stooped swiftly and caught up his rifle. He was gibbering with anger when he notched back the heavy hammer and stepped up with the

muzzle almost touching the gambler's chest.

"Pull that hide-out gun!" he dared Matthews. "I'll blow a hole through you big enough to bury a dog!"

Cory Matthews slowly withdrew the hand that had darted to the lower left pocket of his embroidered vest. Blood welled out from the deep scratches on his cheek and dripped from his square chin. He settled his boots and waited for the old jailer to control his raging anger.

A crowd of men came running down the street from the Two Flags Saloon. Most of them were cowboys waiting for roundup to start, and one of them yelled the news when he saw Gard Hutchins.

"The bank's been robbed! Solo Frane and his gang killed the old watchman!"

Hutchins stepped back and lowered his rifle. The vaults of the Drovers Bank had been bulging with cash to meet the needs of the cattlemen, and the old Indian fighter forgot his anger when he realized what Matthews' interference had done.

"You tripped me when I had them bank robbers under my sights!" he accused hoarsely. "Wait until Law Smith hears about this!"

"Don't be a fool," the gambler answered quietly. "I had ten thousand in the Drovers Bank, and I offered to help you rod the law. - You allowed you didn't need help, and you see what happened!"

Gard Hutchins jerked around when the sound of hoofs clattered down the street from the north. The bandits had made their escape toward the south, and all eyes turned when four horses loomed up in the darkness. The voice of Law Smith barked a gruff question.

"What's going on here?"

"The bank's been robbed, Law," Hutchins shouted. "Solo Frane and

his gang killed the watchman while I was arguing in the office with that tinhorn yonder!"

Law Smith dismounted and walked up to Matthews. The gambler holstered his empty weapons, and he smiled mockingly when he met the sheriff's stern eyes.

"You can go now, Matthews," Law Smith said quietly. "I'll know where to find you if I need your help."

Cory Matthews stiffened and stared for a long moment. He had expected recriminations, but the sheriff walked into his office and struck a match to light the lamp. Matthews turned without a word and walked toward the saloon, and Hutchins waved his hand to scatter the crowd.

Lone Star came into the office with Vin Freeman and Buck Perry. The four men listened in silence while Gard Hutchins told his story, and then Lone Star stepped forward with an eager light in his eyes.

"This robbery was planned carefully, Law," he began confidently. "Solo Frane knew we'd ride down to Dark Canyon, and Cory Matthews was part of the plan. He came down here to keep old Gard interested, and he tripped Gard to let his pards escape."

"And they did escape," Buck Perry ground out savagely. "Every dollar I had was in the Drovers Bank, and Vin Freeman is in the same fix. I'm for going up there and squaring with Matthews!"

A cowboy came running down the boardwalk, and he slid his boots to a stop and leaped through the open doorway. He panted for breath while the four men watched him, and then he found his tongue.

"*Vinegarone!*" he almost shouted. "He just walked into the Two Flags!"

"I'm the law," Hutchins announced grimly. "I'll get that knife-slugin' Mex before he can swallow his second drink!"

"Just a minute," Law Smith said quietly. "Did you recognize him after the bank holdup?"

Gard Hutchins rubbed his chin and slowly shook his head. "I didn't," he admitted, and then he squared his shoulders. "But he was in that gang," he insisted harshly.

Lone Star cleared his throat and touched Hutchins on the arm. Law Smith glanced up with a frown, but he waited for his son to speak.

"Get on up there to the Two Flags," Lone Star told Hutchins. "I'll come in the side door to copper your play, and don't take any chances on that Mex. He can throw a knife so fast that you can't see his hand move, and *Vinegarone* seldom misses!"

"You mean I'm to arrest him?" Hutchins growled with a puzzled gleam in his squinting eyes.

"Let him start trouble," Lone Star advised. "I've got an idea he rode back just to bait you into a fight. Solo Franc knows that you're the law, but he also knows that you've got no real proof against *Vinegarone*."

"I don't like it," Law Smith declared flatly, and then he sighed

when his left hand wandered up to his vest where his badge had been. "Like Lone Star said, but watch yourself," he growled at Hutchins.

The old Indian fighter drew his six-gun and checked the loads. Then he loosened the skinning knife at the back of his belt, cuffed the battered Stetson low over his eyes, and stepped into the darkened street.

Lone Star dropped a hand to his belt and drew a keen-bladed knife. He balanced the weapon in the palm of his right hand while the three older men watched in curious silence.

"That's the blade I found holding Solo Franc's message to that tree down in Dark Canyon," the cowboy said quietly. "I might give it back to the owner."

"He don't need it," Vin Freeman growled. "That Mex is lousy with steel, so let's all get up there to give old Gard a hand."

"I'll go alone," Lone Star answered quickly. "Like Law pointed out, we know *Vinegarone* had a hand in that bank holdup, but we haven't any proof. Franc figures on riding back here, but he wants Gard Hutchins out of the way first. I'll be seeing you."

Law Smith held up a hand when Vin Freeman opened his mouth to argue. Then he turned the lamp

QUESTION ANSWER

**Which are the
only cough drops
containing
Vitamin A?
(CAROTENE)**



low and jerked his head toward the back door.

"Lone Star has something on his mind," he whispered when they were outside. "Let him play out his hunch, but we'll be close in case he needs help."

"That back door leading into the card room," Vin Freeman said in a whisper. "If we can get in there without being seen, we can keep an eye on Cory Matthews."

Law Smith nodded and led the way across back lots. His jaw tightened when he remembered the taunts of Cory Matthews. He had always been a man of action, but he admitted that he was at a loss for ideas. More than once he had waited for the other man to make the first move, and he stopped at the back door of the gambling saloon to listen.

He tried the doorknob carefully when he failed to hear the click of the roulette wheel or the soft slap of cards. Then he slowly pushed the door open and stepped inside with Freeman and Perry at his heels. A step put him behind the faro layout, where he crouched low and motioned for his companions to do likewise.

"It's *Vinegarone*," he whispered. "Letting on like he don't see old Gard Hutchins!"

CHAPTER VI.

COLD STEEL.

GARD HUTCHINS was standing at the end of the bar with his back to the cardroom. Lone Star Smith leaned against the wall near the side door. Cory Matthews was behind the bar, and he spoke softly to the bartender. He smiled when the latter pulled a sawed-off shotgun closer to the edge of the shelf under the bar.

Vinegarone was sipping tequila where the bar curved near the swing-

ing front doors. The slender hafts of two knives showed under his short bolero jacket at the back of his belt. He carried no gun in sight, but a knife hung on each side of his silver-studded belt.

The Mexican looked over the rim of his glass and stared straight at Gard Hutchins. Then he spoke to a man at his left side.

"There is no law in Granada, Loop. Bandits ride into town and rob the bank, and then they ride out again."

Lone Star leaned forward to stare at the man beside the Mexican. The fellow was drinking straight whiskey, and a coiled catch rope dangled from his left hand. Lone Star recognized Loop McGuire, and sudden anger swept across the cowboy's tanned face.

Gard Hutchins leaned against the bar and drew his six-gun with a tigerish smile on his lean, wrinkled face. Then he pushed away from the bar, and his voice cracked with authority when he answered the taunting Mexican.

"You're looking at the law, you saddle-colored son of sin," he told the grinning Mexican. "I'm taking you down to the calabozo, so keep both hands where I can see them!"

Lone Star drew swiftly when Loop McGuire stepped away from the bar. The hammer curled back under his thumb. He spoke softly to the tricky roper.

"Stand hitched, McGuire. And drop that rope on the floor!"

Loop McGuire turned slowly and saw the cowboy for the first time. He stared at Lone Star's .45, and then the rope dropped to the sawdust when he slowly raised both hands level with his shoulders.

"You ain't the law," he sneered. "I just signed on as a deputy sher-

iff, and I'm wearing the star on my vest!"

Lone Star jerked forward when McGuire flipped the edge of his vest. A five-pointed star winked back at him just above McGuire's heart, and the purring voice of Cory Matthews added another surprise from behind the bar.

"I'm acting sheriff of Granada, Smith. If you start anything, I'll have to do my duty!"

Lone Star gripped his gun with stunned surprise. Colt Perry had delivered the badges to Solo Frane, and now Matthews was wearing the star Law Smith had carried for more than twenty years. Gard Hutchins spoke before Lone Star could frame an answer.

"You ain't took the oath yet, Matthews. I'm the only part of the law that could swear you in, and that badge on yore fancy vest don't mean a thing!"

"Drop that gun easy, Lone Star," the gambler warned quietly. "Oath or no oath, I'm talking for the law, and standing behind a full house!"

Lone Star opened his fingers and dropped his gun between his wide-spread boots. His right hand went to his vest pocket and closed on the knife he had taken from the tree back in Dark Canyon. He caught his breath when he saw Gard Hutchins go into a crouch while the old jailer's eyes watched the Mexican.

Vinegarone had both hands above his head, close to the curled brim of his heavy sombrero. His right hand swept down without warning, and he side-stepped just as Gard Hutchins pressed trigger. Something flashed through the air and struck Hutchins in the left arm, and the Mexican caught another knife from his vest and drew back his arm for a throw.

Lone Star took a chance and threw

the captured knife with all his weight behind his arm. He followed through and dived to the floor, and the hat was whipped from his head when Cory Matthews chopped a shot across the bar.

Law Smith growled savagely and shot out the hanging lamp in the middle of the saloon. Vin Freeman and Buck Perry crouched at his side with weapons ready. They held their fire for fear of hitting Lone Star or Gard Hutchins in the darkened saloon, and men began to rush for the front door.

Lone Star snatched up his gun and crawled out the side door. He had one glimpse of a racing horse with a rider stretched out along its neck, but the horse turned a corner before the cowboy could fire a shot. The swinging doors burst open under the rush of shouting men, and Lone Star ducked back to the alley and darted into a door standing ajar.

He was breathing heavily when his hand touched a rough piece of canvas on a low table. Something tinkled metallically when he shook the canvas sack, and Lone Star slung it over his left shoulder and stepped out into the darkness.

A light showed against a side window, and Lone Star hid the sack under a bush and ran back to the front door. Not until then did he realize that he had invaded Cory Matthews' private office, and he stepped through the swinging doors behind his gun.

The bartender had lighted a candle, and he was just touching his match to another one at the end of the bar. Law Smith was facing Matthews, with Vin Freeman and Buck Perry on each side. All three had their guns trained on the gambler, and Matthews shrugged and dropped his own weapon to the floor.

Gard Hutchins was crouching be-

low the level of the bar, and he grinned when Lone Star came through the front door. The old Indian fighter holstered his gun and tugged at something sticking in his left shoulder. He grimaced with pain when he pulled a thin knife from the muscles of his arm, and then he stiffened and pointed to the floor at the curve of the bar.

"Look, Lone Star!" he whispered hoarsely. "It's *Vinegarone* with a knife plumb through his ticker!"

Lone Star turned and stared at the Mexican. *Vinegarone* was lying flat on his back, and the handle of a throwing knife gleamed whitely against his red silk shirt. The Mexican's mouth was open, and his eyes stared glassily at the ceiling.

Lone Star felt a sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach as he stared at the dead bandit. He turned when a boot scraped on the floor, and he flung out an arm to stop Gard Hutchins, who was creeping toward the dead man with his old skinning knife in his hand.

"I promised to raise his hair," Hutchins growled.

Lone Star wrenched the old fighter back. Then he stepped in front of the body with a scowl on his face.

"Yo're the law, Gard. Put up that knife before I slap you to sleep with the barrel of my gun!"

Gard Hutchins stopped and straightened up with a sigh. He replaced the knife in the sheath behind his belt, and then he hunkered on his boot heels to make an examination of the body.

Lone Star watched with a frown of repugnance when Hutchins took a light-handed throwing knife from the Mexican's boot. He leaned forward when the old Indian fighter felt *Vinegarone's* left wrist, and then pulled the sleeve up to show another

knife strapped to the muscular brown arm with a thick rubber band.

"He came near getting me with that trick," Hutchins growled. "He had both hands above his head, but all he had to do was shake his arm and whip it down at the same time."

The forefinger of his left hand caught a string at the dead Mexican's neck and tugged lightly. A sheath slipped out from the bandit's collar between the shoulder blades; old Gard sighed and laid still another knife beside the body.

"That feller sheds steel like a steer sheds Texas ticks," he muttered, and then he raised his head and stared at Lone Star. "You threw this knife that got him," he accused.

Lone Star shuddered and turned toward the cardroom, where his father was holding Cory Matthews. Vin Freeman growled something to Smith, and the old sheriff reached across the bar and spiked Matthews on the muzzle of his gun. Then his left hand reached across and tore the law badge from the gambler's white linen shirt.

"So you figured that just pinning my badge on yore shirt made you sheriff," he said slowly, and clipped the words from between anger-clenched teeth. "Now I want to know where you got this bit of metal."

"That's for you to find out," Matthews answered coolly. "Yon lost title to it when you took it off and resigned."

"Would you stop being a gambler if you shed that long-tailed coat and fancy vest?" Law Smith asked softly.

"Walk that trouble-making son up to the jug and throw him in," Buck Perry suggested. "We know he was in with Solo Franc, and that outlaw crippled Colt so's he won't ever trigger his gun again!"

"On what charge?" Matthews

asked coolly. "You've got to have a charge to hold a man!"

"Impersonating a law officer," Vin Freeman cut in harshly. "Loop McGuire was wearing a deputy's star, and it was him that brought you Law Smith's sheriff badge!"

"He won't run away," the sheriff said quietly, and tucked his badge down in a vest pocket. "Let's hear what Lone Star has to say." He turned as his son came along the bar.

"*Vinegarone* is dead," Lone Star reported briefly. "Loop McGuire made his getaway when you gents shot out the light, and it's my guess that he knows where to meet the man who bossed that bank holdup. Yeah, I mean Solo Frane," he told Matthews when the gambler smiled mockingly.

Law Smith glanced at the body of the Mexican near the front door. Gard Hutchins was gathering up the collection of throwing knives, and he joined the group in front of the bar.

"That's one more job for Formaldehyde," the old jailer announced coldly, and stared at the gambler with a grin splitting his wrinkled face. "Matthews can pay the bill, or let him lay there to draw flies."

Cory Matthews shrugged carelessly and slowly lowered his hands. Gard Hutchins watched with an eager light in his squinting eyes, and he sighed when the gambler made no move toward his holster.

"You taking this tinhorn to jail, sheriff?" he asked Law Smith.

The sheriff shook his head and holstered his gun. Then he stepped back with a little smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Not yet," he told Hutchins. "Let's get along and leave him with his troubles."

He turned to the spot where Lone Star had stood. The cowboy was just disappearing through the back

door, and the sheriff jerked his head at Freeman and Perry and stared for the front. Lone Star was waiting when the four men walked into the office of the jail.

"Close the door and draw the shade, Gard," he told the old jailer. "I found something that might bear looking into."

Gard Hutchins grumbled and kicked the door shut. Then he pulled the shade and turned to Law Smith's old spur-scarred desk. Lone Star reached under the desk and lifted a heavy canvas sack, and the four men crowded close when they heard the chink of coins.

"That's the bank loot!" Buck Perry burst out. "Where'd you get it, Lone Star?"

"I found it in that private office behind the bar," Lone Star answered quietly. "When Loop McGuire hightailed after you gents shot out the light I had a hunch that Solo Frane might be somewhere close. This is only part of the loot," he explained. "Frane must have the rest of it, so figure it out for yourselves."

"Matthews was in cahoots with Frane on that holdup," Law Smith declared positively. "This would be his end of the cut."

Lone Star slowly shook his head. "Maybe not," he argued. "Let's look at it this way: Solo Frane figured that old Gard was still part of the law. He sent *Vinegarone* back here to kill Gard, and Loop McGuire rode in to side the play. They hid this money back in Matthews' office, figuring to pick it up when they left town. Let's make a count and see if I'm right."

Vin Freeman was shuffling through the banded sheaths of paper money, marked plainly with the name of the Drovers Bank, and the amount each pack contained. Buck Perry was stacking gold coins, and

Law Smith took a pencil and made the tally.

"There's seventy thousand here," he said in a hushed tone. "Enough to save the cattlemen from certain ruin."

Buck Perry sighed with relief and straightened up. He stared at Lone Star when the cowboy smiled thoughtfully, but it was Gard Hutchins who growled a question at the lean cowboy.

"Something funny?" he demanded, and stripped off his greasy buckskin jacket to bandage the wound in his upper arm.

"Funny as a funeral, when the right man is in the coffin," Lone Star answered grimly. "What do you reckon Cory Matthews will tell Solo Frane when that outlaw rides in to get this share of the loot from Matthews?"

Vin Freeman stared at Lone Star while he rubbed his stubbled chin with his left hand. A vague feeling of uneasiness crept over the cattleman and was reflected in his face.

"Solo Frane won't ride into Granada," he said finally. "It'll be more likely Cory Matthews to ride out and meet that owl-hooter."

"Back in Dark Canyon?" Buck Perry asked with a frown.

Lone Star jerked up and answered the question. "Not in Dark Canyon," he said positively. "Solo Frane and Matthews meant to cripple the law, and they'd meet where they had a common interest. Connie is taking care of Colt out on the Rafter F, and they'll head there when Loop McGuire tells Frane what happened in the Two Flags!"

"That's just a guess, Lone Star," Law Smith said slowly, but without conviction. "We can't all ride out of town and leave Gard alone like before."

He opened a heavy safe and began

to stow the bank money away with his back to the other men. He knew his son, and the way Lone Star's mind worked. Gard Hutchins also knew, and the old Indian fighter began to growl when Lone Star made his suggestion.

"I'll ride to the Rafter F with Vin and Buck," the cowboy began. "That will leave Gard and Law to keep an eye on the Two Flags just in case we guessed wrong."

"Let Buck Perry stay here," Hutchins argued. "I taught you how to follow sign and how to handle a knife or gun. We ought to work together, you and me."

"Guess again, you old savage," Buck Perry told Hutchins. "If Colt is in trouble again, I'm going to give him a hand. Maybe Vin Freeman will trade places with you."

"Connie is the only kin I've got," Vin Freeman said in a low, husky voice. "I'm riding out to the Rafter F regardless!"

"That's settled, then," Lone Star said, and turned to the door. "We'll be back before sunup!"

Gard Hutchins scowled when the three men mounted their horses and rode into the night. He turned to listen when some vagrant sound caught his attention, and then he threw himself down and pressed his ear to the ground.

"A hoss is running like hell, sheriff," he told Law Smith. "And it's close on to midnight."

"It might be anybody," the sheriff muttered. "Get back inside here out of the light, and if you're so wide awake I'll catch up on a little sleep."

The old Indian fighter scowled and slipped into the office like a shadow. Then he turned down the lamp and picked up his old buffalo gun while the sheriff went back to a cell and stretched out on a cot.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN THIEVES FALL OUT.

AT the edge of town, Vin Freeman checked his horse and spoke softly to Lone Star.

"I've only got two boys on the Rafter F right now," he began, but his voice told of his worry. "What's the play if Solo Frane is out on my place?"

"I thought about that," Lone Star answered quietly. "You ride in as usual and Buck and me will stay out of sight. You wouldn't have a chance if you made a pass at your gun, so don't try it. Now lead out and burn the wind."

The Rafter F was seven miles from town, and only two miles from the Mexican border. A sickle moon cast a faint yellow glow over cactus and sage, and the three men rode in silence until Vin Freeman slowed his horse and pointed to a group of buildings.

"I'll ride in alone," he whispered, although the Rafter F was still more than a quarter of a mile away. "There's a light in the front room, but the bunkhouse is dark."

"Keep yore head up, pard," Buck Perry growled softly, and pressed his neighbor's hand. "Me and Lone Star won't be far behind, and I'll make more work for Formaldehyde if we find either one of those owl-hooters!"

Vin Freeman swallowed noisily and bobbed his head. Then he clucked to his sweating horse and rode on alone. His eyes searched a clump of trees near the big ranch-house when he rode into the yard. If Solo Frane was in the house he had taken the precaution of hiding his horse, and Freeman stopped at the tie-rail and swung down from the saddle.

He clumped up the steps and

crossed the porch with no pretense of stealth. His big hand turned the doorknob, and his face lighted up when he saw Connie Freeman sitting on a chair drawn up close to a leather couch. He stopped abruptly when he caught the drawn expression on her pretty face, and then a voice purred softly from the corner behind him.

"Raise your hands slow, Freeman. Solo Frane giving the orders?"

Vin Freeman raised both hands before he turned. Solo Frane was leaning against the wall, smiling across the six-gun in his lean right hand. The Rafter F owner caught his breath sharply when he saw Cory Matthews in the other corner, and the gambler was watching Frane like a hawk.

"How's things back in town?" Frane asked softly.

"Quiet," Vin Freeman answered gruffly. "The sheriff expected you to ride back, so I came on home to be with Connie."

"There's no place like home," the bandit agreed pleasantly. "And I might ride back to Granada to finish a little business."

He stepped across the room and plucked the gun from Freeman's holster, and the cattleman walked to the couch and stood looking down at Colt Perry. The wounded Sevens cowboy was asleep, and Connie spoke in a whisper.

"The doctor was here, dad. He dressed Colt's wounds and then he gave him something to make him sleep. Colt will be able to use his arms again when the wounds have healed."

Vin Freeman nodded, and then he turned slowly when Solo Frane spoke to Cory Matthews. The outlaw's voice was a humming whisper that was edgy to tell of his carefully hidden anger.

"I don't trust you, gambling man," he told Matthews. "Loop turned that sack of money over to you, and you better come clean!"

"The money was in my office behind the bar," Matthews explained. "The money was gone when I went back there after the fight in the Two Flags, and I reasoned that McGuire had taken it when he made his getaway."

"I've known Loop McGuire for ten years," Frane answered coldly. "What did you do with that loot?"

"Say!" the gambler burst out. "Lone Star Smith ran outside when the lights were shot out. That's why they're expecting you to ride back to Granada!"

"You had that cowboy under your gun," Frane said slowly. "You let him kill *Vinegarone*, and McGuire only made his escape by the skin of his teeth. You've been wanting to boss Granada for quite a while, and you figured to have a clear track if I was out of the way."

"Take it easy, Solo," the gambler answered sharply. "I needed you just as much as you needed my help."

"But you don't need me any more," the outlaw said bluntly. "Now you come clean and own up that you hid that loot. We'll let

the whole thing pass like it never happened."

"That money was stolen from my office," Matthews murmured, and he squared back his shoulders and faced the lean outlaw with a glitter in his dark eyes.

"So you want it that way?" Frane answered in the same tone, and holstered his gun.

Connie Freeman caught her father's hand and held it tightly. Vin Freeman was watching Solo Frane, and he saw the outlaw's thin lips tighten. Cory Matthews was a gambler, and he would take a gambler's chance.

"You're fast, Matthews," Solo Frane said quietly. "I've seen you skin an ace off the bottom of a deck while a dozen men were watching your hands. I thought we could work together until this job was finished, but it looks like one of us will have to be top man."

"Count me out on the bank loot," Matthews offered as a last desperate resort to avert a showdown. "You've got part of the money, and you'll have more when you sell those cattle you've got back in Dark Canyon!"

Solo Frane slowly shook his dark head. "I don't play that way, Matthews," he answered quietly. "I

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either ramrod the layout or I give the other gent a chance to be top man. Make your pass!"

Cory Matthews struck at his gun like a cat slapping at a mouse. His hand blurred under the yellow light with the speed of his draw, and Vin Freeman gasped when orange flame winked from Frane's hand just as the gambler's gun was tilting across the lip of his molded holster.

The cattleman had been watching Solo Frane, and he would have sworn that the outlaw's hand had not moved. But now he was smiling coldly above the smoking gun in his right hand, watching Cory Matthews trying to raise his weapon.

The gambler coughed dryly and pitched to the floor. His polished boots rattled for a moment. Solo Frane jacked the spent shell from his gun and plucked a cartridge from his belt, and he started to turn when the door behind him creaked on a hinge.

"Drop that gun, Frane," a stern voice whispered in his ear. "I've got the hammer under my thumb, and I'll drop it if you make a funny move!"

Solo Frane dropped his gun and turned slowly to face Lone Star Smith. His dark eyes were smiling from under the brim of his black Stetson, and his hands were steady when he raised them level with his shoulders.

"I figured you wrong, cowboy," he said evenly. "You made me a promise back in that wallow where we first met. You said you'd take up where your pard left off," and he gestured to the wounded man on the couch.

Lone Star gritted his teeth and fought back the impulse to holster his gun. He had not seen the outlaw beat Cory Matthews to the

draw, and Frane read the indecision in his eyes and added fuel to the fire.

"You're not the law," he pointed out. "I'd give you a chance if I was standing in your boots!"

"Don't you do it, Lone Star," a hoarse voice interrupted, and Buck Perry came in from the porch with a cocked gun in his fist. "I'm going to kill you, Frane," he said thickly. "For what you did to Colt!"

Lone Star stepped quickly in front of Buck Perry and pushed the cattleman's gun aside. Something hissed from the open door leading to another room at the back, and the gun exploded in Smith's hand when a snaky loop snared his wrist.

Solo Frane lashed out and hit the cowboy behind the ear and knocked him against Buck Perry. The two men went down in a heap, and the door slammed before Vin Freeman could tug the gun from his holster. He sent three shots roaring into the kitchen, and then the thud of pounding hoofs rang out from the yard.

Lone Star Smith struggled to his feet and caught up the gun Solo Frane had dropped to the floor. The cowboy's head was buzzing from the blow that had floored him, but he tore the door open and leaped out on the porch. Buck Perry was right behind him, and the Sevens owner was cursing softly when only the faint thud of hoofs floated back to them on the night wind.

"You stopped me from killing him," he accused Lone Star harshly. "Don't ever step in front of my gun again!"

Lone Star flushed and walked back into the room. Connie Freeman came to him and took both his hands.

"I knew Loop McGuire was back there, but I couldn't warn you," she said in a hushed, strained voice.

Continued on page 106

OMAHA HOOKER

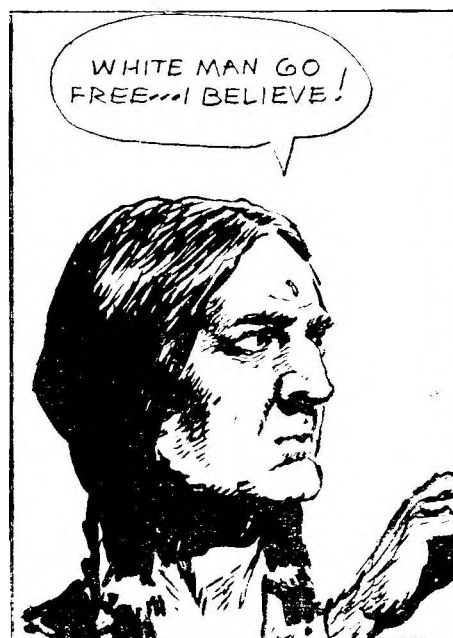
ON THE OREGON TRAIL



BY WARREN E. CARLTON

DRAWINGS BY BILL TIMMINS









UNWANTED BY THE LAW

Jeff on' Bugeye are self-respectin' detectives—and no matter what they solve, they can't have dealin's with a jokeless hombre!

By Frank J. Litchfield

RIMROCK, Texas—The notorious Black Mask gang of rustlers struck again in this vicinity Monday night, taking more than two hundred beef steers from the Double X Ranch. Jed Crawford, owner of the adjoining Spur spread, also reported loss of more than one hundred head.

The Black Mask gang, so called because its members conceal their features behind black silk handkerchiefs, has successfully eluded Sheriff E. K. Joke Smith for over a year.

WELL, there was 2 A No. 1 Detectives and top hand cowpokes drifted into Rimrock last week to offer their services to the law. This was me and my pard, the which is Bugeye Martin, and it would have been a hole lot better if Bugeye had stayed some wheres elts, and I will tell you why.

It was on acct. of about 2 hours later there was a couple of hard ridin' houbres hightailed it out of Rimrock throwin' dust in the face of the law. This all so was me and my pard Bugeye, who can get the both of us into trouble quicker than he can say "J-j-j-j-jack R-r-r-robinson."

Bugeye seen the news item in the Del Rio Dot, which is a weakly news paper, whilst we was lookin' for Bugeye a job in Del Rio.

"L-l-l-look, J-J-J-Jeff," shouted Bugeye, because I am Jefferson Hokit the 3rd and all so due to the fact that Bugeye stutters mitey bad when he is exsited. "Here is a c-c-c-chanst for us t-t-to d-d-do s-s-s-some d-d-d-detective works!" Bugeye said.

Bugeye was not gettin' a job fast and we onley had 6 bits between us. I said all rite, we would go to Rimrock. But Bugeye can not say I didnt warn him it was a tuff job.

"The paper says the Black Mask gang has eluded the sheriff for over a year," I told Bugeye.

He said he new that, but of coarse the sheriff mite not have had detective trainin' like us. "I wonder w-w-w-why t-t-they c-c-call him J-J-J-Joke?" Bugeye ast.

Well, Bugeye found out why, the 1st minuit we was in Rimrock. The town is bilt across some gullies that run high water when it rains, and on acct. of this there are wooden sidewalks that are high in some spots. Me and Bugeye rode into town and tied our horses by the public windmill and looked around. Across the street there was a couple of signs, 1 of which said Pool Hall, and the other 1 said Sheriff's Office.

In front of the pool hall, enjoyin' the shade of some cotton wood trees, 5 or 6 men was settin' with their chairs tilted back against the wall.

"Y-y-y-yonder is our m-m-m-man!" Bugeye said, referrin' to a skinney houbre sportin' a sorrel mustache and a star. "We w-w-will h-h-h-have to m-m-m-make a good impression, J-J-J-Jeff," Bugeye said.



They was enjoyin' the shade.

We crosst over the street. Rite there I made my 1st mistake, by lettin' Bugeye start tryin' to talk.

"H-h-h-howdy, s-s-s-sheriff," Bugeye said. "C-c-c-could you use a p-p-p-pair of A No. 1 d-d-d-detectives?" he ast.

The sheriff winked at the other men. "Have you seen any?" he ast Bugeye.

"Any what?" Bugeye ast him.

At this point Bugeye stepped up on the side walk, and when he put his foot on 1 end of a plank, the other end flew up in the air and batted Bugeye rite between the horns, nockin' him down. The sheriff and the other houbres fell out of their chairs laffin.

I reckon it was plumb funny, all rite, but not to Bugeye. Finely the sheriff got a strate face on him and said it was too bad and that some day they would have to fix that plank.

"Hit you kinda hard, didnt it?" ast the sheriff, but I seen him wink again. "Step into my office and we will talk things over."

Bugeye was a little bit mad, but I told him not to pay no attention to it. "Heck, G-whiz, Bugeye," I told him. "You have got to learn to take a joke. You will feel better when you have cooled off," I told Bugeye.

Just then Bugeye got cooled off plumb suddint. When he opened the door to the sheriffs office, a bucket fell down and hung over Bugeyes head, and this wasent all. The bucket contained about 3 gallons of water.

Well, Joke Smith roared and slapped his leg, but Bugeye roared and slapped his gun holster and I was just in time to grab Bugeyes 45 before he ventilated his self a sheriff.



The bucket contained 3 gallons.

"Take it easy, Bugeye," I adviced him. "You have got to learn to take a joke. Ha ha!" I said.

Bugeye said "Ha ha, h-h-h-heck!" and spit out 2 quarts of water and give the sheriff a mitey dirty look.

"Ha ha!" said the sheriff. "Well, this is all in fun, boys. Did you say you are detectives?"

I told him yes, and that we had

come to offer our servises in helpin him catch the Black Mask gang. He laffed a little more, like he was thinkin of how funny Bugeye looked, and then he got searious once more.

"This is mitey nice of you boys," he said. "Set down. I will ring for my deputy so we can talk this over and lay our plans."

He pointed to a couple of chairs and reached for a bell cord at the same time, and give it a pull. Rite then somethin new happened, and I will tell you what it was.

In the 1st place, that wasent no bell cord, but just a rope that run over some pulleys. And in the 2nd place, it was tied to the chair I was goin to set in in the 1st place.

I set down plumb hard on the floor. Joke Smith thought this was mitey funny, and he leaned against the wall so he could laff and not fall down. But things didnt work out like he figgered, on acct. of I was still holdin Bugeyes 45 in my hand and when I set down so hard the gun went off.

The bullet nocked a picture off the wall and hung the frame over Joke Smiths head, bustin the glass. The sheriff let out a beller.

"What in the Sam Hill are you tryin to do?" he ast, spittin out glass and combin it out of his mustache.

Me and Bugeye couldent keep from laffin. "It is all in fun, sheriff," I said. "You have got to learn to take a joke, you no," I told him.

But instead of takin a joke, he yanked out a pair of horse pistols. "Git out of my office, pronto!" he hollered.

Well, me and Bugeye wasent afrade, but there seamed to be nothin elts to do but to leave gracefully, which we done. Bugeye tried to tell Joke Smith that he would be sorry some day, but by the time Bugeye was 1 1/2 through sayin this, he was 2

blocks away whilst the sheriff pruned the cottonwoods on that side of the street with lead.

Me and Bugeye went into a general store to talk things over. We ast the store keeper if he new any body who wanted to hire a couple of 1st string cow pokes, which he dident. After we had et 2 cans of sardines and a box of soda crackers, we felt better, onley mitey dry. So then we looked out and not seein the sheriff or nobody, we headed down the side walk, meanin to go to the town winduill for a drink.

It was at this point that Bugeye seen the Stetson hat on the side walk nearly in front of Joke Smiths office.

Bugeye got all exsited, because it was the sheriffs hat. "L-l-l-look, J-J-J-Jeff," Bugeye said. "I am g-g-g-goin to k-k-kick that h-h-h-hat into the m-m-m-middle of n-n-n-next week!"

But I said no, and grabbed Bugeye. "If you do, you will probly bust a toe," I warned him. "On acct. of that is 1 of the oldest tricks in the world. Without no doubt," I explained, "there is a rock or a flat iron under that hat."

With this, I yanked out my 6 gun and winked at Bugeye, and Bugeye grinned and winked back at me and yanked his own 45. We looked up and down the street, but there wasent nobody in site.

"They are watchin and waitin to see 1 of us bust a toe," I said. "We will show them. 1 for the money, 2 for the show, 3 to get ready and 4 to go!"

We pulled triggers together. The hat bounced about 40 ft. in the air, and Bugeye let out a hoop and plugged it twice before it hit the ground. But I didnt hear Bugeye yell, and I will tell you why.

It was on acct. of at this point some body elts let out a bigger hol-

ler, and this was Sheriff Joke Smith, and I looked down and there was Jokes head showin just on a level with the side walk, and it seams like Joke was down under the high side walk lookin for a 1/2 dollar that had rolled through a crack, and he had took up 1 of them loose boards.



I set down plumb hard on the floor.

Well, it is not ever body who can shoot the hat rite off of the head of an arm of the law and get away with it, but me and Bugeye done it. On acct. of Bugeye grabbed my arm and jerked me out into the street and hollered somethin about we had bet-ter hightail it out of town, which we done.

Just as we jumped into the saddles with Joke Smith hoopin murder and slingin lead all around us, another hombre busted out of the pool hall and hollered: "Horse theaves! Sheriff! Sheriff! Them 2 buzzards are stealin' my horses!"

Joke Smith didnt pay much attention to this. He yelled: "Horse theaves, heck, G-whiz! They are assassins. They tried to kill me," Joke hooped. "I am goin to arrest them for attemp to murder."

Another hombre run into the street and said in a mitey loud voice:

"Come on, boys! Them 2 coyotes that said they was detectives have shot the sheriff and stole 2 Double X horses to boot!"

So you can see why me and Bug-eye hightailed it out of Rimrock without stoppin, especially when I tell you that at this point me and Bug-eye looked down and seen that we had shore enuff made a mistake. We had took 2 strange horses, whilst our own was tied a little farther up the street. Only there wasent no time to explane.

Well, me and Bug-eye rode mitey hard toward the Rio Grande, with a posse about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile behind, shootin and hoopin and hollerin. But the sun went down and it got dark and me and Bug-eye pulled up in a clump of live oaks and let the posse go by.

"See what you have done, Bug-eye," I told him. "Yon have got us into a fine mess. We will have to sneak back and return these Double X horses. If you will remember," I said, "the Double X is the outfit which lost all them steers to the Black Mask gang."

Bug-eye didnt say nothin, but the both of us new that the Double X probly would string us up to a tree if they could pile the twine on us.

We started back in a round about way, stoppin now and then to lissen. All we could hear was some cattle and a bell that was ringin in the brush. Then, all of a suddint, we heard somethin elts, and I will tell you what.

It was an hombre hollerin for us to grab our selves a handful of sky before he blew 14 holes in us, and when he jumped out into the traile, we done like he said.

Some more men showed up and I figgered this was the posse and ever thing was up. So Bug-eye said:

"L-l-l-lissen, w-w-w-we can explane. We didnt m-m-m-mean to s-s-s-shoot the s-s-s-sheriff," Bug-eye said. "An w-w-w-we s-s-s-stole these h-h-h-horses by m-m-mistake."

Well, at this point I seen that the men was wearin black masks and I new they wasent the posse at all, but the rustlers. Then 1 of them come closer and laffed and said so we was the 2 jaspers they seen hightailin it from the posse, and we was wanted by the law. I said yes, but I didnt tell him that we all so had been unwanted by the law when we offered Joke Smith our servises.



We grabbed handful of sky.

"I reckon maybe we can use a couple of nerry jaspers like you 2," the leader said, not ever showin his face. "Do you want to join up?" he ast.

Bug-eye said "N-n-n-no," but I nudged Bug-eye and he said "Y-y-y-yes," and the leader said to make up his mind.

"Lead on," I told him. "We are wanted men and we mite as well be wanted some more."

That is how me and Bug-eye joined the notorious Black Mask gang of rustlers.

The men got their horses out of a

thicket and we rode down into a canyon and found some others drivin a herd of about 400 steers which was moseyin rite along without hardly nobody havin to prod them, and I will tell you why.

It was on acct. of in the lead was a big red rangey steer with a bell on him. They said this was Old Slewfoot and he was the best trale leader this side of the Gulf of Mexico. Ever herd the gang rustled, they traned mitey quick to foller Old Slewfoot, day or nite, when they heard his bell.

The leader called out that it was time to make camps, and I of the men roped Old Slewfoot and stuffed grass in the bell so it wouldnt ring, and Old Slewfoot laid down rite away and went to sleep.

The men done the same, bein mitey tired, exept I of them. He stayed on guard, ridin around the herd and singin to the steers in a soft voice. Me and Bugeye laid down on our saddle blankets, but when ever body elts was snorin, I was whisperin to Bugeye to get up and saddle the horses because I had a plan.

Bugeye done this. Mean while, I snuck out to the point of the herd and took the bell off of Old Slewfoot. Bugeye come up with the horses, then, and at the same time along come the sentry, stoppin singin all of a sudint and callin out: "Who is there?"

Bugeye started to say: "N-n-n-no-body," but I clapped my hand over Bugeyes mouth. We was rite under a tree and I reached up and caught a limb.

The rider come a little closer, squintin at the horses and pullin out his 6 gun.

"Somebody is there," he said, "and I am goin to start throwin lead at the count of 3. Here goes—1—2—"

WW—6F

Well, just before he said 3, I let him have both boots rite in the face and he rolled off his horse without a sound, and me and Bugeye headed around the herd.

"W-w-w-what are you g-g-g-goin to d-d-d-do?" Bugeye ast.

"We are goin to turn the herd north," I told Bugeye grimly. "Here," I said. "We will buckle Old Slewfoots bell on yore horse."

I done this, and pulled the grass out of the bell. Then I hit Bugeyes horse with a quirt and let out 2 hoops and a holler and it sounded like all heck and 2 Santy Clauses was busted loose in the canyon.

"Ride, Bugeye," I told him, and about that time the 6 guns opened up and Bugeye rode, mitey fast. I turned my horse through the herd, quirtin and yellin, and shore enuff, the steers jumped up and begin to tail out after that bell.

"Stop them, boys!" hollered the leader. "Stop Old Slewfoot! He has gone crazy from eatin loco weed," he said. "He is headin north and rite toward the Double X corrals!"

Well, I was glad to hear this, on acct. of I didnt no what me and Bugeye was goin to do with 400 head of stampedin steers until I heard him say we was headed for the Double X corrals. I rode around the herd hollerin "Stop! Turn back!" and etc., but all the time I was quirtin the cattle on the rumps and drivin them faster:

Then I caught up with Bugeye. "If you see them corrals," I adviced him, "open the gate and ride in and ring the bell!"

Bugeye ansered that he savvied, and about that time the both of us had our hands full on acct. of a big red steer come up by Bugeye and begin bellerin and hookin at Bugeyes horse, and it was Old Slewfoot. I reckon he was a mitey smart steer,

all rite, because he wanted his bell back.

"Go away!" I hollered, and hit Old Slewfoot with the quirt. "Ride faster, Bugeye," I told him.

Bugeye poured the rowels to his horse and we went over the rim of the canyon and when we done that the leader of the rustlers skylighted us and new that we had double crossed him. So he started shootin at us and vice versa. Bugeye nocked 1 hombre out of his saddle and I hit another 1, and then we looked down in the flat, and the moonlite was shinin on a set of stone corrals.

Well, Bugeye rode rite into an open gate with his bell jinglin, and I was rite after him. Old Slewfoot was rite after us, and behind him come the 400 steers and the 8 rustlers that was left. Onley now the rustlers fell back in a little not to deside what to do.

They desided pronto. All 400 steers was in the 1st corral and me and Bugeye belled old Slewfoot and chased him into the 2nd corral and left the gate open. When the rustlers come poundin up with their 6 guns blazin, we was just closin that gate and openin another 1. We run through this and climed over a fense and poured the lead back at them.

And then somethin happened, and I will tell you what it was because me and Bugeye had it figgered out in advance.

Them rustlers come tearin into the gate and through a little pen and into a chute. The 1st thing they new they was slidin down a slippery slant into a dippin vat that was full of nicoteen dip, the which is mitey hard on the eyes and makes a man purty sick if he swallers a mouthful of it.

I reckon all of them swallered at least 2 mouth fulls and the fite was all out of them in no time, especially

when me and Bugeye grabbed forked sticks and shoved their heads under a couple of times apeace. But it seamed like there was more rustlers than ever, on acct. of there was still shootin goin on down in the flat and more riders come tearin up.

The 1st I went rite into the vat and Bugeye got him back of the ears with the forked stick the minnit he rased his head to holler and spit, and shoved him down again. The others pulled leather and hollered for us to surrender in the name of the law.

Well, I looked at the hombre Bugeye was holdin down when I heard this. I couldnt see the man at all, but his hat was floatin on the surface and it was a Stetson full of bullet holes.

"Hay, Bugeye," I told him. "Let him up. That is the sheriff you are duckin in that dip, Bugeye."

At this point 1 of the posse walked over and kicked the leader of the rustlers and yanked off his mask, and then he let out a hoop of surprise.

"This is Jed Crawford, the skunk!" the posse member said. "And him clamein that the Black Mask gang stole his steers!"

Well, Crawford was too sick to answer or do any thing. But Sheriff E. K. Joke Smith wasnt too sick to up with his 6 gun and take 2 pot shots at me and Bugeye, onley he missed on acct. of the dip was in his eyes in the 1st place, and me and Bugeye wasnt there in the 2nd place. Me and Bugeye was hightailin it back to Rimrock to get our own horses.

What is more, we have not been back sinse, but the Live Stock Assn. is sendin a reward to us by mail. We will not have nothin to do with an hombre who can not take a joke.

Jeff and Bugeye get that reward, too—and what they do with it is plumb silly. Coming soon in Wild West Weekly.





TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

by WALKER TOMPKINS Part VI

Author of "Señor Desperado," etc.

TRAIL OF THE IRON HORSE

It was the end of the trail—and steam welded a continent while Quent Preston battled for his life!

By Walker Tompkins

The Story So Far:

QUENT PRESTON, young cowpoke, and his father,

PANHANDLE PRESTON, have come from Texas to Wyoming where they build up a ranch in lonely Tomahawk Pass. On a ride to Wagonwheel Springs they are amazed and disgusted to see a roaring end-of-track railroad camp mushroomed overnight. The Union Pacific Railroad is cutting through the country, intruding on their lonely wilderness.

In an altercation over a watering charge for their horses, a frontier renegade is accidentally killed by Quent. A bloodthirsty mob starts to lynch him when

BOONE DELIVAN, a debonair, though hard-bitten, speculator in railway land intercedes and saves young Preston. Delivan then casually offers to buy the Prestons' ranch, wanting it much more than he pretends. Delivan is sided in this offer by

ELLIS BAYARD, a crafty and unscrupulous lawyer and real-estate operator. The Prestons refuse to sell and thank Delivan for his aid.

The next day, Quent, attacked by an enraged cougar on the ranch, is saved by the straight shooting of

HELEN GORINE, Delivan's fiancé and daughter of Major Gorine, the U. P.'s chief surveyor, who has run a survey through Tomahawk Pass. Quent returns to the ranchhouse and discovers

LINN DEPERREN, a Delivan henchman, trying to persuade Panhandle to sell the ranch. When Panhandle refuses, DePerren slays him. Quent pursues DePerren and kills him. It looks like murder to Major Gorine, who has seen the killing. He arrests Quent, but Quent escapes, returns to the ranch and buries his father there. A few days later he is set upon by Delivan's paid killers, who burn down the corrals and house and drive the cattle off. They attempt to kill Quent, but he captures one of the owl-hooters. Returning to town with his captive, he encounters Major Gorine and a surveying party. The

major is convinced of Quent's innocence by the captive's story. But just then the gunnie is killed by a mysterious rifle bullet. The only witness against Delivan has died!

Foolishly, Quent proceeds to Wagonwheel and retains Delivan's lawyer, Ellis Bayard. Quent reveals that the papers to the Preston homestead are buried under the ruins of the ranchhouse. Ellis tricks him into the back room, and Delivan smashes Quent over the head.

Events culminate rapidly. Quent becomes accused of two murders which he did not commit, and Major Gorine, who was going to testify to Quent's innocence at his court-martial, is himself murdered. Helen Gorine suspects Delivan of murdering her father and breaks off her engagement to him. Quent is sentenced to death by the court-martial, but is saved from the death train by Helen, who holds up the engineer. They escape from the train only to fall prey to a band of murderous Indians. Quent saves Helen from the Indians and fights them off long enough to allow the very cavalry which has been hunting him down to arrive. They beat off the redskins and retake young Preston prisoner. Finally, after many perilous escapes and a reunion with Helen, Quent confronts Delivan in the office of General Dodge.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIX-GUN ACQUITTAL.

IN a movement incredibly swift, Boone Delivan kicked back his chair and stabbed a hand to the armpit-holstered .45 he habitually carried.

Before General Dodge or Ellis Bayard could move a muscle, they found themselves in the meshes of a shoot-out between two desperate men.

Quent Preston's six-gun flashed from leather simultaneously with the whipping motion of Delivan's gun arm, as the speculator cleared his Colt muzzle from behind his coat lapel.

In the same motion, Delivan hurled his body behind General Dodge and dropped to a squatting position behind the chief engineer's chair.

Too late, Preston threw down his Colt .45 in a chopping motion at his ducking target. Then he held his fire as he realized that a shot at Delivan would probably mean the death of the U. P.'s chief engineer.

Delivan's gun roared thunderously in the confines of the tent, and flame scared Dodge's coat as the frantic speculator triggered his Colt toward the door of the tent.

But Quent Preston had not been idle during the split heartbeat of time that his adversary was getting behind cover. The Texan hurled himself to the floor of the tent, one shoulder knocking Ellis Bayard out of the line of fire as he did so.

The tent rocked to the deafening crashes of gunfire. Daylight showed through bullet holes that peppered the canvas fly behind Quent Preston as the cowboy charged forward on hands and knees, crawling to get Delivan's range.

With a roar like the old war dog he was, General Dodge shoved the big table to one side and sprang at Preston. Boone Delivan's bullets splintered through the table top, but in the next instant, General Dodge had hurled himself upon the prostrate cowboy and was wrenching at the gun in Preston's hand.

Delivan, rising to a crouch, had one slug left in his Colt. He threw down the gun in a pot shot directed at his erstwhile business partner,

Ellis Bayard, and flame and smoke spat from the heavy weapon.

Quent Preston, rearing into a grapple with the wiry old army general, saw a burst of blood gush from the fat lawyer's throat, saw Ellis Bayard collapse like a pricked balloon.

Then, while the cowboy fought desperately to throw off General Dodge, Boone Delivan leaped for the rear of the tent. A knife glittered in his fist and he made a slashing rent down the canvas wall, ducked through the opening and disappeared.

Preston's fist slammed hard up under Dodge's chin, and the fiery-tempered old war general relaxed his husky grip on the cowboy.

Rearing to his feet, Preston dived for the opening in the tent where Boone Delivan had made his escape.

He was in time to see the frock-coated speculator sprinting like an athlete toward the railroad siding that had been built alongside the grave of Panhandle Preston.

A smoking work locomotive was on the siding, its crew busy loading the tender with cordwood from big stacks of pine fuel ricked along the right of way.

With grim purpose, Boone Delivan sped for the locomotive, leaped up into the cab. Preston caught a glimpse of the land buyer's white face as Delivan yanked back the throttle bar.

Desperately punching fired shells from his own Colt, Preston raced toward the track as he saw the locomotive get under way with black smoke belching from its funnel-shaped stack and the drive wheels shedding sparks from steel rails as they whirled under the steam pressure.

A gunshot rang out behind Preston, and a heavy rifle slug zipped inches from Preston's ear to carom

off the steel sides of the locomotive beyond.



The cowboy whirled, to see a pair of uniformed soldiers bearing down upon him, one with a naked saber glittering in the sunlight, the other pumping shots at him from a carbine.

Sick with despair, the cowboy from Texas threw up his arms in surrender.

Over his shoulder, he saw the locomotive with Boone Delivan in the cab, crash over the side-track frogs on the main U. P. line and head off toward the east, rapidly gathering speed and leaving a dense fog of blue-black smoke behind.

Out of the headquarters tent came General Dodge, bruised and shaken, but with fiery lights glinting in his eyes.

"Arrest that crazy demon!" shouted the chief engineer, as the two soldiers bore down on Quent Preston. "He's a wanted outlaw—Colonel Sires has a reward outstanding against him!"

Rough hands seized Quent Preston, but there was no despair in the cowboy's eyes as he looked off beyond General Dodge to see Bayard

Ellis, the wounded lawyer, staggering out of the tent.

"Bring him inside!" ordered Dodge, his voice shaking. "And what in hell became of Mr. Delivan?"

Preston jerked his head in the direction of the east end of Tomahawk Pass. Already a half mile distant down the tracks, the fugitive locomotive was dwindling in the distance, as Boone Delivan opened the throttle wide.

"Your friend Delivan stole an engine to escape justice, General Dodge," panted Quent Preston, as his soldier guard dragged him up before the chief engineer.

"Delivan—escaping justice?"

"Certainly. Otherwise, why did he attempt to murder Ellis Bayard, yonder—and cut a hole in your tent, and then steal a locomotive to make his getaway in?"

Dodge looked around, to see Ellis Bayard swaying in the doorway of the tent, both hands clutching his blood-spurting neck. For once, Bayard's double chins had served him in good stead; for Delivan's bullet had merely pierced layers of fat, touching no vital artery or muscle.

"This is all very confusing," panted General Dodge, "but one thing is certain—you are in custody, Preston. I have heard of your reputation for being a killer, but I little dreamed you would attempt to commit a murder in my own tent, before my eyes."

Men from surrounding tents were hurrying toward the scene, including the engineer and fireman of the stolen locomotive. General Dodge hurried back inside his tent, ordering one of Preston's captors to stand watch outside to keep curious on-lookers away.

"You'd better telegraph to Wagon-wheel City for soldiers to capture

"Delivan, General Dodge!" cried Preston, as he was shoved inside the tent along with Bayard. "Delivan is a killer—and I can prove it, given a few minutes of your time. In the meantime, Delivan's making his getaway—on one of your own Union Pacific engines!"

General Dodge dragged a shaking hand across his eyes, unable to comprehend the tangled events of the past few minutes.

"The engine—yes, yes. I cannot comprehend Mr. Delivan's actions. Orderly! *Orderly!*"

A wide-eyed youth in a blue uniform ducked into the tent and saluted stiffly.

"Orderly, hurry over to the telegraph tent and send a message to the operator at Wagonwheel City to throw open the switch on the siding there. Have an armed guard ready to take Boone Delivan into custody for questioning when he arrives!"

The orderly saluted and ducked from sight.

Then General Dodge stepped over to where Bayard Ellis had sunk down on a camp stool, still clutching bloody fingers to his bullet-pierced double chin.

"You are Mr. Bayard, the attorney?" asked General Dodge. "Can you shed any light on this peculiar situation, Mr. Bayard?"

The lawyer's eyes were wide-rimmed with terror as he looked up at the chief engineer, then over to where Quent Preston stood, a soldier's gun in his back.

"You'd better come clean, Bayard," rasped the cowboy, seeing the lawyer waver. "Boone Delivan tried to murder you, and your life won't be safe if you continue to be on his side. Delivan shot you to keep you from talking."

General Dodge threw up both arms in utter confusion.

"What is this?" groaned the engineer. "Here I am talking routine business with Boone Delivan, and a wanted outlaw comes charging into my tent like a wild bull and a gun fight starts. What's at the bottom of this?"

Ellis Bayard, measuring his own chances of escaping punishment as a crook in league with Boone Delivan, weighed the trend of events and realized that Delivan, and not Quent Preston, was now the fugitive from justice.

Wincing from the pain of his bullet-nicked throat, the lawyer gasped out:

"Preston—is right. Preston's innocent—he's been railroaded into being a criminal. Boone Delivan's the killer you want, general. He's a madman—a fiend."

General Dodge's jaw dropped on an oath of astonishment as information tormented from Ellis Bayard's lips.

Swiftly, desperately, the wounded lawyer poured forth the whole grim story of Boone Delivan's diabolical career—the countless murders he had engineered to further his selfish ambitions, his double cross of Quent Preston in the matter of Lige Morton's death and the military court-martial which had placed Preston outside the law.

"This Tomahawk Pass—it belongs to Preston!" cried the lawyer, borrowing assurance from the pleased grin on the cowboy's face. "The right of way is his—Delivan forced me at gun's point to forge title papers! I haven't dared to sleep nights or to draw a free breath for months—for fear of being killed by Boone Delivan!"

When the lawyer's babbling recital was finished, Quent Preston stood squitted of the owl-hoot record against his name.

"That's why I came into the open and declared myself, General Dodge," explained Quent Preston, when Bayard had finished. "I hadn't figured on Delivan beating me to the drop and making a clean getaway so quickly. I knew Bayard could prove my innocence—but I wanted him to talk in front of Delivan and you."

General Dodge sat down on the edge of the upset table and mopped his face with a handkerchief. Then he measured the cowboy with a long, penetrating look, and his grim features softened.

"If what you tell me is the truth, Preston, your innocence can be established by investigating the facts," panted the chief engineer, at last. "And if so, I will arrange your immediate release and the U. P.'s thousand-dollar reward will be canceled."

Excited voices came from outdoors, and a moment later the sentry admitted Lieutenant Colonel Frank Sires, commanding the battalion of United States troops who guarded the railroad against Indian outbreaks.

A glad cry came from Quent Preston as he saw that the army commander was accompanied by Helen Gorine.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRACKING A KILLER.

WITHOUT speaking, the girl disengaged herself from Colonel Sires and flung herself into Preston's arms.

General Dodge turned away with an embarrassed cough as he saw the cowboy take Helen Gorine's lips to his own, his eyes misting with pent-up emotions.

Dodge and the army commander saluted, and the chief engineer swiftly outlined the amazing facts of Preston's innocence of the charges

brought against the cowboy at Sires' court-martial.

"I am inclined to believe Preston is innocent of the many wrongs attributed to him, General Dodge," was Colonel Sires' statement. "Miss Gorine, here, has acquainted me with several phases of the matter which did not come to light at the court-martial—both as regards Boone Delivan's character, and the facts surrounding the murder of her father and our good friend, Major Gorine. Miss Helen is positive that her father was murdered by or because of Delivan, to keep Major Gorine from testifying to Preston's innocence at the trial."

Ellis Bayard, his courage returned now that he was aware of the slightness of his neck wound and the fact that he was clearing himself of any complicity with Delivan, spoke up:

"Delivan's opening fire on Mr. Preston, and his subsequent escape on the stolen locomotive, would be considered *prima facie* evidence of Delivan's guilt in a court of law, general."

At that moment they were interrupted by the arrival of an aid, bearing a telegraphic message from a point just outside of Tomahawk Pass. Dodge's face clouded as he read the missive, then looked up at Quent Preston and Colonel Sires.

"Delivan is a clever one," he said. "Listen to this:

"RUNAWAY LOCOMOTIVE WITH NO CREW ABOARD CRASHED HEAD-ON INTO SUPPLY TRAIN WEST-BOUND FROM WAGONWHEEL CITY. WRECKING CREW REQUIRED TO CLEAR TRACKS. WIRE INSTRUCTIONS."

"The message is signed by the engineer of the supply train."

Colonel Sires swore fluently.

"That means Delivan jumped off

the engine somewhere in the mountains and let it run wild."

Quent Preston, realizing for the first time that the armed soldier behind him had withdrawn the gun from his back, stepped forward eagerly.

"Reckon this is where I come in, General Dodge. I got a fast horse outside, and I can read sign as good as an Injun. If Boone Delivan is runnin' loose in Tomahawk Pass, I can find out where he jumped the engine and I can track him down."

Dodge smiled at the eagerness in the cowboy's voice, and turned to Sires, who nodded.

"Very well, Preston. You are free to go. My only stipulation is that you bring Delivan in alive, if possible. Kill him only if forced to do so in self-defense."

A pulse throbbed in the Texan's neck as he looked down into Helen Gorine's troubled eyes. As yet, the lovers had not had a chance to speak of the thousand things that clamored in their hearts for expression.

"Don't worry about me, Helen. I'll be back, pronto—draggin' Boone Delivan by the heels."

"But he might ambush you, Quent—there's so much at stake—"

Gently, Preston disengaged himself from the girl's clinging arms. He loosened the six-guns in his holsters with grim resolution.

"I got a job to do, Helen. I've always been at a disadvantage, fightin' Delivan. He's got education and polish. But they won't do him no good if he's afoot out here in the wilds. This is my country, not his."

With a final pressure of his hand and a word of thanks to the military men about him, Quent Preston ducked out of the tent.

A few yards away, Alamo awaited him, having followed him back to the camp. Once in saddle, Preston

waved his sombrero in farewell to Helen and the men grouped about her at the door of General Dodge's tent, and spurred off down the U. P. tracks toward the mouth of Tomahawk Pass.

Riding the right of way, he followed the curving tracks through the forests where he had once seen Major Gorine running the survey that was to make the martyred engineer famous in the annals of the Union Pacific.

Westering sunlight was at his back when he emerged from Tomahawk Pass, his eyes studying every inch of the soft shale roadbed which flanked the tracks.

Two miles out of the pass, he caught sight of the wrecked supply train to the eastward. Somewhere between the spot where he now rode and the train wreck, Boone Delivan had quit his runaway locomotive.

Not a hundred yards farther on, the cowboy's alert eyes caught sight of deep gouges in the roadbed, where a pair of boots had dug into the soft earth.

Plainly visible in the soil were the marks of hand prints, where Boone Delivan had sprawled after his leap from the locomotive he had commandeered.

Delivan's tracks led away from the right of way and into the sage-dotted flats, a trail easy to follow, even for a tenderfoot.

The surrounding terrain offered no refuge for an ambusher. Therefore, the cowboy spurred Alamo into a trot, following the path taken by the escaping speculator.

He had traveled less than half a mile on Delivan's trail when sundown overtook him, followed swiftly by nightfall.

"Nothing I can do but camp here and pick up the tracks with daylight," decided Preston, dismount-

ing. "It's a cinch Delivan won't get far, on foot."

He made a dry camp a quarter of a mile distant from the outlaw's trail, on the summit of a small knoll. He could take no chances on Delivan doubling back and gunning him as he slept.

The night passed uneventfully, and the first ruddy streaks of daylight found Preston in the saddle and riding back to where Delivan's trail showed plainly in the sagebrush.

Following it, Preston saw that Delivan had turned due east, in the direction of Wagonwheel City. The country remained open, and no glimpse of the fugitive could the sharp-eyed cowboy discern ahead of him.

During the night, wrecking crews had cleared the track where Delivan's engine had smashed into the supply train, and the train had been hauled by a reserve engine to end-of-track.

Two hours later, Preston caught sight of another train puffing its way toward Wagonwheel City, from Tomahawk Pass. Delivan's tracks were paralleling the railroad, heading without a stop, toward the construction camp.

"The loco fool must be getting back to town, walking all night!" grunted Preston, a tinge of admiration in his voice—admiration for the fierce will and iron stamina of the speculator.

A night wind had scoured the flats, wiping out Delivan's trail and forcing Preston to ride in wide circles before picking it up at occasional points.

Delivan's shoes were dragging the dirt, but his trail was still pointing toward Wagonwheel City. It seemed incredible that the speculator could have covered the forty-odd miles during the night, but as Pres-

ton rode in sight of the boom camp at Wagonwheel Springs he still had seen no trace of the fugitive.

As he approached the boom town, Preston was surprised to see scores of creaking wagons plodding westward along the ruts flanking the U. P. R. The wagons were laden with lumber, folded tents, and the knocked-down sections of saloons and dance halls.

As Preston passed some of the wagons, he could even read painted signs on some of the boards carried by the wagons, signs which he and Panhandle had read the first minute they had stumbled across the railroad town: End-of-track Hotel; Red Tent Saloon; Shamrock Livery Stables.

"Looks like it's *adios* to Wagonwheel City," grunted Preston, as he neared the outskirts of the town. "And I can't say as I'm sorry."

It was true. Wagonwheel City, like the dozens of flourishing construction towns before it, was dying. Already multitudes of individual tents had been taken down and carted on railroad cars and freight wagons westward.

As he rode up the main street toward the willow-rimmed waterhole, he saw that the big saloons and dance halls had been taken down. There was feverish activity there yet, but not the maudlin type of action Preston had seen on previous visits to the mushroom city.

The army barracks were gone; the great End-of-track Hotel was a thing of the past. Soon all that would be left of Wagonwheel City would be mounds of rubbish, tin cans, littered boards, and the grim cemetery with its unmarked graves up on the stump-dotted hillside.

The eternal rocks and the sage flats would be there for all time to come, and Wagonwheel Springs; but

the scars made by man would be covered by winter snows, and gradually erased by nature's blowing sand and sprouting grass.

Somehow, the sight brought solace to Quent Preston, as he passed Wagonwheel Springs and threaded his horse through the milling wagon teams and horse herds and the shouting, restless folk who had populated Wagonwheel City in its wicked hey-day.

A voice hailed Preston excitedly by name, as the cowboy passed the vacant lot that had been occupied by the Union Pacific office. He reined over, to see Ellis Bayard standing beside the steps of his tiny canvas-roofed Land Office.

Bayard had come back to Wagonwheel City on the eastbound train Preston had seen earlier that morning. The lawyer's neck was girdled with bandages. Bayard was talking excitedly with a lanky individual dressed in the woolen Mackinaw and warped boots of a mule-skinner.

"Preston, I've got word of Delivan's whereabouts here!" shouted the lawyer excitedly, as the cowboy swung from saddle before them. "Delivan's sent me a message! Look!"

The Texan started. Delivan had indeed accomplished the impossible, if he had beaten Preston to town. Only sheer desperation could have driven the speculator across the badlands through the night, on foot and without pausing for rest.

Ellis Bayard thrust a sheet of notebook paper into Quent's grasp. Squinting his eyes against the glare of Wyoming sunlight on the white paper, the cowboy read a hastily-scribbled message:

Bayard: I'm laying low until May 10th. You know where to be on that date. If you aren't there with the money, you won't

live long enough to double-cross anybody again.

BOONE DELIVAN.

Preston looked up, scanning the flabby-jowled lawyer intently, not knowing if this was a ruse or not.

"Did Delivan give you this, Bayard?"

The lawyer jerked his head toward the crudely-dressed mule-skinner beside him.

"No. Delivan ran across this man's camp on Bitterroot Ridge late last night. He paid this man fifty dollars for a horse, twenty dollars for a saddle, and ten dollars to look me up here in Wagonwheel and deliver this message."



Cold dread gripped Preston's heart as he absorbed this crushing knowledge. Delivan, caught at a hopeless disadvantage out in the wilds, had outwitted the cowboy by bribing a plains man to sell him a horse.

"What time of night did Delivan

buy your brone, feller?" demanded Preston, turning to the mule-skinner.

"I'd already turned in. Reckon, judgin' from where the stars was, it was midnight."

"What did Delivan do after you'd sold him a horse?"

"Lit a shuck toward the railroad track, after he'd writ that note an' told me that this lawyer feller would pay me another twenty bucks fer deliverin' it. I walked to town an' found Ells Bayard an' give him this feller's note."

Preston glanced down at the paper, rereading Delivan's threat to violence.

"You savvy this message, Bayard?" he asked.

The muttonchopped lawyer nodded excitedly, his eyes mirroring the fear in Bayard's heart.

"Yes. The money for the Tomahawk Pass right of way is due May tenth. Boone Delivan was to meet me at my office in Ogden, Utah, and get the money."

Preston was silent a long while, pondering. He realized the uselessness of trying to track Boone Delivan; the speculator's head start was too much, and the wind had doubtlessly erased his tracks. Nor was there any way of guessing where Delivan would go to hole up until May tenth.

"Bayard, your life won't be worth a white chip so long as Delivan is on the loose. You realize that?"

"Yes." Bayard gulped. "Delivan's after me."

"Then you have that right-of-way money ready for him in Ogden on May tenth, Bayard. That's only two weeks off. I'll see to it that Boone Delivan doesn't collect it. The only thing he'll collect will be a hangman's knot—or a bullet."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DELIVAN PLAYS HIS ACE.

EXCITEMENT reigned throughout Utah as May ninth dawned. The event which America, and the entire world, had awaited for so many years was due to materialize on the morrow—the joining of the Union Pacific rails with those of the Central Pacific, built eastward from the California gold country.

Promontory Point, a bleak, wind-swept desert stretching out into the blue platter that was Great Salt Lake, had been chosen by destiny as the point where rails would meet and America would be linked by steel, a continent conquered by man's might.

Ogden was jammed to overflowing with cowboys and miners, prospectors and Indian fighters, covered-wagon drivers. The riffraff who had peopled the end-of-track towns for over a thousand miles out from Omaha were there, too, adding a tawdry splash to the riot of color—gamblers and professional gunmen, painted hussies from the dance halls, saloonmen and freighters, barflies and blacksmiths.

Sombreroed outlaws rubbed shoulders with silk-hatted businessmen out from the East to see the momentous "wedding of the rails"; in the air was a din of Chinese voices from the vast army of coolies who had built the Central Pacific tracks across the Western desert malpais; while mingled with the newcomers were the dark-bearded, solemn-faced Mormons, case-hardened men who had originally won this sun-parched land for their home, setting up a city beside the great inland sea whose waters were tinctured with bitter chemicals.

Quent Preston, once more dressed in the gray Stetson, blue shirt and

brass-studded bat-wing chaps of the Texas plains, rode his claybank pony through the jammed streets, enjoying the bustle and excitement attending the completion of the U. P. R.

Heavy six-guns were at his thighs, sagging the cartridge-studded gun belts which looped his flanks; a new .30-30 Winchester carbine reposed in the boot under Alamo's saddle. The weapons seemed in keeping with the brittle gleam of the cowboy's eyes, as they swept the teeming throngs of humanity.

He threaded his horse through the polished buggies and heavy-wheeled freight wagons and dust-grimed prairie schooners which jammed Ogden's principal street, and found space for his cow pony at a crowded hitch rack in front of a saloon.

The second story of the saloon was given over to offices, and painted on the glass window of one of the rooms was a sign which had been his goal:

ELLIS BAYARD, LAWYER
LAND TITLES—R. R. STOCK

Across the street, in the Brigham Young Hotel, Preston knew that Helen Gorine would be awaiting his arrival in the Utah town. The daughter of the U. P.'s courageous survey chief had been the first white woman to make the train journey across the Wyoming-Utah boundary, over the new railroad through Tomahawk Pass.

Hitching his gun belts into a more comfortable position, Preston made his way into the Brigham Young. He had hardly entered the lobby before a glad cry rang out through the hubbub and he was holding out his arms to Helen Gorine, now clad in a cool white frock and looking daintily feminine, with her chestnut hair held in place by a ribbon of orange silk.

"Some different from the girl in pants who saved my life from a panther in Tomahawk Pass, eh, Helen?" laughed the cowboy, glancing behind Helen to see General Dodge and Ellis Bayard, the land-office attorney. "But you'll always look like a gold nugget to me, I reckon."

General Dodge extended a hand in greeting to the cowboy.

"You'll be glad to know, Mr. Preston, that the Tomahawk Pass right of way has been transferred back to you," smiled the Union Pacific chief. "Mr. Bayard tells me that during the past week he has received a telegram from Washington to the effect that your homestead rights have been restored."

A vast contentment filled Preston's heart as he saw the look on Ellis Bayard's beaming face, and in that moment the Texan forgave the corpulent lawyer for all his illegal work as Boone Delivan's partner.

"That means the Lone Star Ranch is yours again, Preston," chuckled the lawyer. "If you'll come up to my office, we'll fix up the final details. And in view of circumstances, I won't be charging you any fee."

General Dodge moved away, summoned by important-looking personages from the big cities in the East who were making the hotel their headquarters.

"Helen, suppose you excuse me and Mr. Bayard, will you?" said the cowboy, turning to the girl at his side. "I won't be seeing you until the golden spike ceremonies out at Promontory Point tomorrow. Me and Bayard got a business deal on that'll occupy all of my attention."

The girl's eyes clouded with disappointment, but she nodded. As yet, Bayard or Preston had not informed her of the trap they were laying for Boone Delivan.

"All right, Quent. But don't fail to be on the U. P. passenger train tomorrow. This—this means an awful lot to me, this wedding of the rails. It's the day my father prayed he would be able to see—and I want you to take his place by my side when we see the last spike driven."

After the girl had lost herself in the crowded lobby, making her way back toward her hotel room, Preston and Bayard headed for the street.

"It'll be a good idea if I hide myself in your office today, Bayard," said the cowboy. "We can't take any chances of Boone Delivan seeing me, and flying the coop."

Perspiration oozed from Bayard's pores, and a shiver of apprehension went through the fat lawyer as he contemplated his part in springing the trap that would put the crooked speculator in the grip of justice.

"It's in the bag, Preston," reassured the lawyer. "Delivan won't miss trying to collect the forty thousand dollars for that right of way through the pass. He's sure to show up."

Preston grinned with suppressed excitement.

"And I'll be waiting for the skunk," muttered the Texan.

At that moment, Helen Gorine was climbing the stairway to the upper floor of the frontier hotel. She unlocked the door to the room she had engaged, and entered.

Even as she shut the door behind her, Helen caught sight of the curtained door of her clothes closet stirring—yet no wind was stirring the curtains of the open window overlooking the roofs of adjoining Ogden buildings.

A swift foreboding filled the girl. Before she could move in the direction of the dresser where she had left a Colt six-gun, the closet curtains parted.

There, crouching not five feet away, stood Boone Delivan.

A leveled .45 was in the speculator's hand, the bore aimed at Helen's heart. The outlaw's face, burned a deep tan by his week of hiding out in the desert, was twisted into a mask of hate as he stalked forward.

"Not a sound, Helen!" warned Delivan, his teeth glinting behind slitted lips. "I won't kill you if you obey orders."

The girl cringed in horror as Delivan shot out an arm and clamped viselike fingers about her elbow. Whiskey was thick on the land-buyer's breath as he drew her to him.

"I spotted Quent Preston in town just now," whispered the crooked speculator venomously. "And that means some double cross is in the wind. So I intend to have an ace in the hole—and you're that card!"

Helen Gorine recovered herself, wrenched sharply at Delivan's clamping fingers.

"You're a coward, Delivan. You wouldn't dare harm me—"

Fiendish lights glittered in Delivan's slotted eyes.

"No? You still think me the polished gentlemen, eh? I wasn't above stabbing your father in his sleep, was I? Does that sound as if I wouldn't dare harm you—"

Delivan's brutal confession of slaying Major John Gorine in Wagonwheel City, the night before Preston's court-martial, had its intended effect on the steel-nerved girl.

She wilted in his crushing grasp, momentarily overcome by the shocking truth of her own suspicions—that the murderer of her adored father had indeed been the suave, smooth-tongued Boone Delivan who had once courted her and asked her to be his wife.

Before she could recover from the mental shock of Delivan's words, the

outlaw holstered his gun and whipped a silken scarf from the pocket of his frock coat.

Swiftly Delivan wedged the scarf between Helen's jaws and knotted it tightly behind her neck, gagging her so that no outcry was possible.

Then, whipping a coil of light rope from his pocket, Delivan knotted her wrists tightly behind her back.

Hurling her roughly to the floor, Delivan bound the girl's ankles in similar fashion. Then he made his way to the closet and dragged out Helen's big trunk, filled with personal belongings of herself and her murdered father.

Swiftly emptying the trunk of its contents, Delivan lifted the dazed girl and wedged her inside. Clamping down and locking the lid clasps, Delivan then took a heavy bowie knife from a concealed sheath at his belt and with hard stabbing motions, made a pair of ventilating holes in the trunk's cowhide lid.

That done, the speculator calmly wiped his face and hands with a breast pocket handkerchief. He paused a moment to shove the contents of the trunk under the bed, and then made his way to the window overlooking a back alley of the hotel.

Below, his henchman Jeb Franklin waited with an empty-saddled horse. A ladder extended from Helen's window to the ground, the ladder by which Delivan had gained entry to the girl's room a scant twenty minutes before.

There was no one to see the frock-coated outlaw as he hurried down the ladder, lifted it aside and thrust it under the foundation timbers of the hotel floor. Then he put foot to stirrup and swung aboard the horse, accepting the reins which Franklin passed him.

"Everything ready, boss?" questioned the gunhawk.

Delivan nodded.

"She's in the trunk. She won't smother, and she's gagged so she can't make an outcry. When night comes, lower her out the window, trunk and all. Make sure the trunk is aboard the night train running over to Promontory Point. Take her from there by horseback out to our hideaway. I will meet you there around midnight."

"I get you, boss."

"And don't fail, Franklin. You don't get paid for this one last job for me—if I don't collect that Tomahawk Pass money from Bayard tomorrow. And us having Helen Gorine will make sure we get that money, if trouble comes!"

Delivan's accomplice in his bold kidnaping scheme, grinned and winked. A moment later the speculator was spurring off down the hotel alleyway, to lose himself in the bustling beehive that was the Utah desert city.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

KIDNAPER'S PAYOFF.

QUENT PRESTON crouched in a stuffy office adjoining that of Ellis Bayard, the attorney. He was peering through a keyhole into Bayard's office, keeping an eye on the bald-headed lawyer as the latter pretended to be concentrating on the papers at his desk.

The Texas cowboy had spent the past night keeping sleepless vigil beside Ellis Bayard's office, which was to be Boone Delivan's rendezvous with his erstwhile partner in outlawry.

Morning light now streamed in through the open window behind Bayard. On the desk at the lawyer's elbow was a thick envelope, filled with greenbacks—a fortune in cash,

representing the staggering sum which the U. P. R. had paid for the right of way through the Lone Star ranch in Tomahawk Pass.

Preston's heart slammed with suspense. He had inspected his six-guns a dozen times since sunup that morning. Yet Boone Delivan had not yet appeared, and it was past nine o'clock.

Outside, Ogden was humming with excitement. Trains were leaving frequently, puffing out across the trestlework which spanned a narrow arm of Salt Lake to westward. Great men, officers of the U. P. and the Central Pacific railroads, were assembling at bleak Promontory Point for that afternoon's epochal ceremonies, celebrating the joining of the Atlantic and the Pacific by rail.

And then, as a clock somewhere was booming the quarter hour, a knock came on Ellis Bayard's door. Preston saw the lawyer turn a shade whiter, as he called out in a trembling voice for the knocker to come in.

Shifting his position at the key-hole, Preston saw the door open and Boone Delivan entered. A bulge at the speculator's armpit told of the Colt six-gun which nestled there. Delivan's handsome face was taut and strained, but a triumphant gleam was in the land-buyer's eyes as he crossed the floor and stood in front of Bayard.

"So, my good friend Bayard—you did not turn yellow and try to run out on me? You have the money?"

Bayard thrust the fat envelope filled with money across the table.

His voice was a creaky squawk as he answered the leering speculator:

"There it is—less my commission. Take it and get out, Delivan. This is our last business deal—and I'm lucky I didn't get my neck stretched, teaming up with you!"

The cowboy hidden in the next room saw Delivan's eyes flash with greed as he seized the envelope, tore it open and riffled swiftly through the bundle of currency.

"You see, I don't trust you—to the end!" whispered Boone Delivan, thrusting the money into an inner pocket. "And now, I have one last present for you—as a token of my deep regard for you, my fat pig friend—"

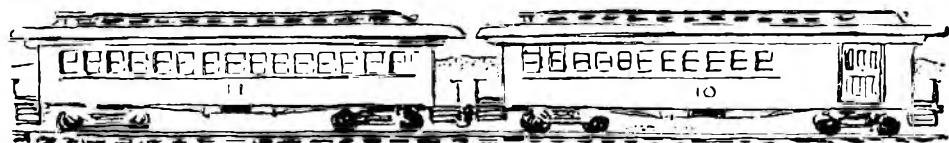
Quent Preston was not prepared for what happened next. He saw Delivan's hand emerge from his coat, after putting the money for the Tomahawk Pass right of way into his pocket.

But as Delivan's hand came into the open, it clutched a razor-edged bowie knife, the blade of which dazzled Preston's eyes in the bright sunlight.

In a motion that caught Bayard in the act of leaning forward to accept Delivan's parting gift, the speculator thrust the knife blade foremost across the table.

There was a grisly sound, like a knife sinking into a slab of butter. When Delivan released the haft, six inches of keen-whetted steel were embedded in the lawyer's heart.

Even as Ellis Bayard sagged in his chair in death, Boone Delivan spun about and took a step forward toward the door.



Then the killer halted stock-still, as the door in the side wall swung open to reveal Quent Preston on the threshold, a Colt .45 in his right hand, thumb earing the knurled hammer to full cock.

"You damned—" panted the cowboy, as he stalked forward, eyes blazing with hatred. "You put one over on me, murdering Bayard—"

The floor shook as the murdered lawyer's corpse toppled from the swivel chair to sprawl behind the desk. But neither man heard it, as they faced each other across the death-hushed office.

Boone Delivan's flushed face had gone oyster-gray, as he stared at death down the bore of Preston's gun. He saw the cowboy's knuckle whiten under pressure at the Colt's trigger.

Then, with a supreme effort, Delivan got control of himself and was once more the smiling, cold-eyed gentleman who had cowed gunmen more than once in his tempestuous past.

"If you shoot me, Preston, you are signing Helen Gorine's death warrant."

Preston's jaw dropped. Something in the grim assurance of Delivan's voice told the cowboy that this was no desperate bluff on the speculator's part. Delivan held a surprise card in the hole, and he had played it with the masterful calm of a gambler playing for high stakes.

"At this minute," went on Delivan, his eyes still fixed to the muzzle of the six-gun aimed at his midriff,

"Helen Gorine is my prisoner. One of my men is guarding her, with orders to put a bullet in her head if I am not back by noon."

The gun in Preston's hand quivered ever so slightly. The seething rage in the cowboy's heart turned to cold despair, leaving him gaunt and spent.

"You're lying, Delivan. You're bluffing. Trying to keep me from gunning you to hell."

Delivan shrugged, started to reach in his pocket, then halted as he saw Preston whip up his gun, crouching defensively.

"I'm not reaching for a gun, Preston. I have proof in my pocket that Helen is in my keeping."

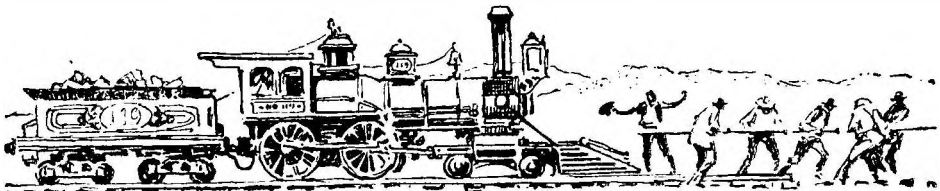
Preston, seeing that Delivan's coat pocket held no telltale bulge of knife or derringer, relaxed.

"Hand it over."

Delivan reached in his pocket and produced a band of orange-colored silk ribbon. He handed it to Preston, who went white as he recognized it as the ribbon, bearing Helen Gorine's monogram, which she had worn on her head the afternoon before.

"I had a hunch Ellis Bayard might be scheming some sort of double cross, trying to trap me," taunted the speculator. "That was why—as always—I came prepared for any eventuality. Did you think I was such a stupid fool as to trust Bayard—when I tried to kill him back in Tomahawk Pass and failed?"

Preston's head spun as he clenched the ribbon in his fist, remembering



how Helen Gorine had pressed that ribbon against his breast in the hotel lobby only a few hours before.

"I'll kill you for this, Delivan—where before I was planning to turn you over to the law." Preston's voice was dead.

"And make no effort to save Helen's life?"

The Texan's hand went limp, dropping Helen Gorine's ribbon to the floor. He knelt to recover it, and in that instant Boone Delivan leaped like a berserk animal upon the crouching man.

Spang! The heavy Colt in Preston's hand exploded deafeningly as Preston fired instinctively, not intending to do so.

Delivan's leap was checked in mid-air. A ghastly look crossed the speculator's face, and his eyes glazed over like unpolished marbles in their sockets.

Then, with a shudder, Boone Delivan collapsed at Preston's feet and lay motionless.

"What have I done? I've killed him without knowing where Helen is being held prisoner—"

In an agony of despair, Preston turned over Delivan's body with the toe of his boot. The speculator's black frock coat fell open, exposing

Preston's bullet hole in his waist-coat.

At the same instant, the cowboy saw a pulse throbbing on Delivan's neck, proving that the point-blank shot had not killed him instantly.

Holstering his fuming Colt, Preston stooped, felt of the thick bulge in the waistcoat pocket immediately beneath the bullet hole in the fabric.

A moment later he was pulling out the thick sheaf of United States currency which Boone Delivan had thrust into the pocket. Most of the bills were perforated by the tunneling .45 slug. But inside the thick sheaf of greenbacks was the misshapen lump of lead which was Preston's bullet.

A rush of thanksgiving coursed through the cowboy's being as he realized that the bullet, hitting Delivan at an oblique angle, had spent its force in the thick wad of paper. The money for Preston's Tomahawk Pass homestead right of way had been a shield to keep the slug from penetrating Delivan's heart!

Pocketing the money with its embedded slug, Preston stooped and lifted Boone Delivan, carrying him over to Bayard's desk. The lawyer kept a pitcher of water filled with floating chunks of ice, and now Preston dumped the contents of the



pitcher over Delivan's unconscious head and neck.

Even as the knocked-out speculator began blinking himself back to his senses, Preston frisked him swiftly, removing a heavy Frontier Model Colt from Preston's armpit holster and a pair of deadly single-shot derringers from the sleeves of the gambler's coat which the speculator wore.

As Delivan came back to consciousness, Preston reamed the barrel of his Colt into the land buyer's midriff and, seizing him by the front of the collar, jerked him into a sitting position.

"You're taking me to Helen Gorine, Delivan—or I'll kill you before we leave this room!"

Delivan shook his head to clear it. He knew that the cowboy held him at his mercy; knew that Quent Preston had been goaded to the limit of his endurance.

For the first time in his criminal career, Delivan felt the icy fingers of terror clutching him. He recoiled from the gun jammed against his body, and nervous sweat dripped from his pores as he struggled to speak.

"O. K. . . . Preston. You win. All I ask . . . is a chance to make my getaway . . . after I turn . . . Helen over to you!"

Preston swallowed his rage at Delivan's having the gall to demand a compromise, here in the very shadow of eternity. But to the Texan, the life of Helen Gorine meant vastly more than the pleasure of satisfying his revenge against the snake who was now crawling before him in surrender.

"All right, Delivan. I'll bargain with you. I'll turn you loose—the minute I have Helen safe beside me. Where is she?"

Delivan passed a shaking hand

over his chest, where flesh was bruised and throbbing from the terrific impact of the bullet which had so miraculously been turned aside.

"One of my men—Jeb Franklin—keeping her prisoner in a sheepherder's shack—north of Promontory Point. Took her there—on last night's train—then to the sheepherder's shack by pack horse."

Preston groaned. Promontory Point, where the rail-joining rites were to be held that afternoon, was a full thirty miles away. He had no way of knowing how much farther Helen Gorine's kidnap shack would be from U. P. tracks. And at noon, Helen was to be put to death by Jeb Franklin.

"I'll get General Dodge to rush us out to the Point on a special car, Delivan. And remember—I'm desperate. If I find Helen dead—or if you're trying a double cross—I'll shoot you down like a sidewinder."

CHAPTER XXXV.

DEATH IN THE DESERT.

HELEN GORINE struggled in her bonds, staring wildly through disheveled strands of hair about the stuffy confines of the rock cabin in which she had been kept prisoner since midnight.

Jeb Franklin, the coarse-visaged gunhawk who had transported her from the U. P. tracks at Promontory Point by means of a pack horse, had removed her from the trunk in which she had been taken on the railroad train the night before, and had lashed her securely to a broken-down chair in the middle of the room.

"It's five minutes to twelve," growled Franklin, consulting a gold watch which he had filched from the corpse of a gun-fight victim in a saloon back in Wagonwheel City months before. "The chief told me

to put a slug in your noggin' an' make my own gitaway, if he wasn't back here by noon."

The girl swallowed back the panic which filled her being. She had been tied too tightly to the chair to have any chance at escape. And she knew the hairy ruffian would make good his orders, the instant his watch hands pointed to twelve o'clock.

From what view she had through the broken windows of the abandoned shack, Helen Gorine knew that she had been spirited away to a remote spot in the desert. It had taken two hours for Franklin to transport her by horseback to this place, from the railroad.

"Somethin's happened to Delivan, or he'd be here," panted the outlaw nervously, going to the door of the shack and peering off down a rock-littered slope toward the south. "He was figgerin' on maybe arguin' you into marryin' him, once he got back here with the dinero he was aimin' to collect in Ogden—"

Helen Gorine cried out in alarm as she saw Franklin pocket his watch and turn to face her, murder blazing in his red-rimmed orbs. Slowly, the killer slipped a long-barreled Colt from its holster at his thigh.

"Time's up," panted Franklin hoarsely. "I ain't hankerin' to kill a woman, miss, but orders is orders, an' I got my own hide to think about!"

The girl froze in her bonds as she saw Franklin level the gun at her head. Then, through the window behind him, she caught sight of two riders appearing around a heavy rock outcrop down the hillside below the shepherd's shack.

"Wait—wait! There's Delivan—"

Franklin whirled about, jumped to the window. Then he stiffened as he saw that Boone Delivan was not alone.

Riding alongside the frock-coated speculator's stirrup was a lanky rider on a claybank pony, his Stetson shoved back from a dust-grimed face, a gun flashing in the sunlight from the rider's hand.

"Delivan's been took prisoner!"

Helen Gorine gasped in mingled joy and alarm as she, too, recognized the cowpuncher who was spurring up the slope alongside Boone Delivan. Even at this distance, she recognized that lanky horseman as Quent Preston, not some other henchman of Delivan's.

With a foul oath, Jeb Franklin leaped to the wall where he had leaned a Winchester rifle.

Thursting the barrel over the weather-beaten window sill, Franklin notched the sights on Quent Preston's chest.

Then, before he could pull trigger, Boone Delivan's yell came up the hillside to check him:

"Franklin! Franklin! Don't do any shooting—I'm in a tight spot!"

At the same moment, Helen Gorine saw Quent Preston spur over behind Delivan's horse, so as to put the speculator between him and the scowling killer inside the shack.

"Come outside, Franklin!" yelled Boone Delivan, his voice harsh and cracked. "If you don't, I'll be blasted off this horse sure as hell!"

Franklin withdrew his rifle, cursing under his breath. With a quick glance at the helpless girl tied to the chair, the killer went to the door and stepped out into the hot sunshine.

Boone Delivan drew rein not fifty feet from the cabin, and Helen Gorine got a clear view of Quent Preston as the Texas cowboy spurred Alamo close in behind Delivan, wary of any ambush fire from the shack.

"You all right, Helen?" came the Texan's anxious yell.

Tears flooding her eyes in the

ecstasy of her relief, the imprisoned girl shouted back:

"Yes, yes! But be careful, Quent. Very—"

Wary as a stalking cougar, Preston swung out of saddle. Both six-guns were in his hands, as he halted alongside Delivan's horse and clipped through the corner of his mouth:

"Tell your sidewinder pard to drop that rifle and come out here with his hands up, Delivan!"

His words carried to Jeb Franklin, who was torn between a desire to leap back into the shelter of the rock-walled cabin, and the necessity of obeying Delivan's orders.

Accordingly, Franklin tossed aside his 30-30 and walked down the slope toward them, his hands above the level of his Stetson brim.

"All right, Delivan," snarled Preston. "I'm keeping my side of the bargain. Soon as I make sure Helen's safe, I'm letting you and your paid killer vamose. But make sure you kep travelin'—because if our trails ever cross again, I start foggin' my guns!"

Franklin halted a few feet away from them, and a swift message flashed from his eyes to Delivan's. The speculator, without weapons, was not tied up, nor had he been since they had boarded their horses at Promontory Point for the ten-mile ride into the northern desert.

"Step over here, Franklin!" ordered Quent Preston, as the hair-jowled ruffian hesitated. "I'm taking your guns. Then I'm herding you and Delivan inside that shack, to untie Helen. Once I'm sure she's *lucio*, I'll let you two skunks loose. But not till then!"

Franklin halted at arm's length from Preston. The cowboy holstered his left-hand gun, and reached for-

ward to unbuckle Franklin's cartridge belts.

In that instant, Boone Delivan swung out of saddle and dropped, both hands outstretched, to block an upward movement of Quent Preston's gun arm.

With a fiendish roar, Jeb Franklin stabbed both hands to his own guns, then buckled in the middle as Preston's gun bucked and spat flame, the bullet slamming Franklin in the pit of the stomach.

Before he could leap aside, Boone Delivan's crushing weight knocked Preston to the ground. Strangling fingers closed about Preston's throat, choking the breath from his lungs as Delivan pinned the cowboy's gun wrist into the dirt.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GOLDEN SPIKE.

PRESTON released his grip on the Colt as he felt his senses fading. Desperately, he rolled over on his back and clawed both hands at the throttling fingers which Boone Delivan had clamped about his wind-pipe.

The sheer ferocity of his defense tore the choking fist from his neck. Delivan drove skin-crushing blows with his other fist into Preston's jaw and eyes and mouth, the rocky earth, making it impossible for the cowboy to roll his head from under the damaging punches.

With frantic strength, Preston clamped one hand about the wrist of Delivan's pommeling-arm, halted the terrific onslaught of blows.

Then Delivan jumped to his feet and backed away, launching an agonizing kick to Preston's short ribs that broke bone and drove the breath from his lungs.

Dazed and bleeding, Preston rolled to one side and reared to his feet as

he saw Delivan stooping to reach for the six-gun which Preston had dropped underfoot.

Summoning his flagging senses, Preston launched himself at the stooping outlaw, rocked Delivan's head on his shoulders with a smoking haymaker.

Off balance, Delivan's back struck hard against the withers of the horse standing behind him. Rebounding like a rubber ball, the speculator smashed into the groggy cowboy before Preston could claw out the second six-gun in the holster at his side.

Toe to toe the two men stood, exchanging uppercuts and lightning jabs. Evenly matched as to weight and reach, the two were met in primitive combat, each questing for the other's life, each knowing the fray could end only in death for one or both.

Preston was knocked spinning as a terrific blow landed on his jaw, stunning him. Screaming like a maniac, Boone Delivan charged in with flailing boots and outstretched hands to press his advantage and deliver the knockout blow that would enable him to blow out Preston's brain when he could get a gun in hand.

Through clouding dust, Preston saw the outlaw's charge, cranked up his knees and lashed out with both high-heeled boots to catch Delivan squarely in the chest.

As the outlaw staggered backward under the countermove, Preston gained a precious second of time in which to regain his feet.

Wiping sweat and blood from his eyes, the cowboy saw Boone Delivan stumble to his knees, then saw sunlight glitter blindingly as the speculator snatched up Preston's fallen Colt.

With automatic motion of his left arm, the cowboy seized the rubber stock of his own holstered .45. There was no time to draw and cock the weapon; already, Delivan's gun was thundering.

Preston squeezed trigger, felt the tug of the holster against his shell belt as the bullet ripped through the end of the scabbard.

He felt a bullet smash through the muscles of his right thigh, as Delivan's second shot struck home. He triggered his holstered gun again, firing blindly at the berserk devil before him.

Then Boone Delivan's gun ceased bucking and roaring. The speculator tried to pull himself to his feet,

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

but his knees had unhinged and he pitched, face forward, on the dirt.

Pulling his hot-barreled six-gun out of leather, Quent Preston lurched forward, ready to trigger a final bullet into Delivan's skull.

Then he relaxed, as he saw the speculator roll over on his back, legs and arms threshing in death agony. A bubbling bullet hole disfigured the outlaw's face, where a slug had smashed through Delivan's left cheekbone to lodge in his brain.

Suddenly sick with bullet shock and relief, Preston turned away from the dead outlaw and staggered toward the sheepherder's cabin, and Helen.

Two hours later, Quent Preston and Helen Gorine arrived back at Promontory Point, to see the thrilling spectacle of a Union Pacific locomotive puffing impatiently, a few yards to the west of a Central Pacific engine.

Flags flew everywhere; a brass band from California had just finished the national anthem; and as the trail-dusty man and girl dismounted from their horses at the outskirts of the throng, an orator who was one of the greatest men of his age, was shouting to the assembled multitude:

"In precisely one more minute, ladies and gentlemen, the single word '*Done!*' will be flashed by telegraph to waiting people throughout America."

A cry rang out from the dignitaries grouped between the waiting locomotives on the track, and the voice of General Dodge interrupted the orator:

"One moment, if you will! We must add to the list of the great men and humble, who have built this road across a continent, we must pay

honor to one who cannot be with us—Major John Gorine, whose engineering genius made it possible for the Union Pacific to reach this spot—I see his daughter among us, even now—"

Quent Preston was at Helen Gorine's side as they were escorted through the cheering throngs, to a point of honor alongside the tracks.

Arm and arm, they watched while a spike of shimmering solid gold was placed in position alongside the rail, and honored men of the day were allowed one stroke of the sledge each.

And, as the golden spike was hammered home to bridge a nation, one corner of the soft yellow metal gouged against the iron rail to form a curled shaving of pure California gold.

It was General Dodge who stooped to pick up the sliver of gold and press it into Quent Preston's hand. His word of thanks was lost in the roar of acclaim which went up as the two Iron Horses touched noses at the end of the trail.

Helen Gorine, looking up into the eyes of the Texas cowboy at her side, saw him stoop to whisper against her ear:

"This piece of golden spike will make a fine wedding ring, Helen, for you to wear when you're the mistress of our Lone Star ranch," Quent said. And they held each other in close embrace as the locomotive whistles blasted the day and men celebrated a wedding already achieved.

Did you like the "Trail of the Iron Horse"? Did you hold your breath when you thought Delivan would win out, when it seemed as though Preston would be shot, when Helen was lost to blood-thirsty Indians? If you did, don't miss a single installment of William F. Bragg's magnificent continued novel, "Massacre Mine." It starts in this very issue of Wild West Weekly. Turn to it now!



Continued from page 73

"He threatened to kill Colt if I opened my mouth."

"How's Colt making it?" Lone Star asked, and released his hands.

"He won't be crippled permanently," the girl murmured, and Lone Star turned his face when he saw the change in Connie's blue eyes. "He did it to save me, and I won't ever forget," she finished earnestly.

Vin Freeman got up and followed Lone Star to the door. Buck Perry was watching the face of his son, and Freeman glanced back and then nodded for Lone Star to follow him to the porch.

"Buck wants to stay here with Colt," Freeman said quietly. "Connie will look after him when he wakes up, and we ain't needed. We better hit out for Granada to warn the sheriff."

"Solo Frane," Lone Star answered quickly. "He'll head right for the Two Flags to hunt for that bank loot. Hit your saddle and let's go!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOT IRON.

FORMALDEHYDE THOMPSON
 I was closing his black-covered wagon in front of the Two Flags when Gard Hutchins looked out

from the door of the sheriff's office. The old jailer squinted in the waning moonlight, tucked the heavy rifle in the crook of his elbow and started for the saloon.

The town was quiet, and Law Smith was snoring back in one of the cells. Something was drawing the old Indian fighter toward the saloon, and the lights went out just as he reached the long building.

Hutchins stepped back into a shadow and waited until the bartender locked the front door. He watched until the man tried the doors and walked up the street, and then the old jailer kept to the shadows and made his way around the building to the room Cory Matthews used for an office.

The knob turned under his fingers when he tried the door, and Hutchins slipped inside and struck a match. He pulled a blind over the single window and raised the chimney of a lamp to light the wick.

A row of handmade boots stood on a shelf in a small closet, and Hutchins' eyes wandered to the floor. He leaned forward when he noticed marks in the dust, and then he moved to the closet and studied the interior. His hand reached out and drew some papers from the pocket of a long-tailed coat, and Hutchins grunted and carried them closer to the light.

One paper contained the names of Law Smith, Buck and Colt Perry, Vin Freeman, and Gard Hutchins. Under it was written Solo Frane, Loop McGuire, and *Vinegarone*. Dark Canyon and the Drovers Bank were also mentioned, and the old jailer knew that he was seeing the beginning of a carefully laid plan. The names of Pecos Langtry and Connie Freeman had been crossed out, and Lone Star Smith's had been added as an afterthought.

Hutchins studied the list and nodded his head until his long hair moved like a curtain. Cory Matthews had meant to have himself appointed acting sheriff of Border County, with Langtry as his deputy. Lone Star had spoiled this plan when the cowboy had returned from Montana.

The old jailer laid the paper aside and pulled out the drawer of an oak desk. His eyes narrowed when he saw several bank books, but they widened when he read the name on the cover: *Cory Frane*.

"Frane?" Hutchins muttered. "I wonder if he was any kin to Solo Frane?"

He examined the books and whistled softly when he saw that they were from banks located in El Paso. The old jailer did some mental arithmetic and totaled the deposits in the three books.

"Sixty-two thousand dollars," he whispered. "Cory Matthews would have been a rich man with his share of loot from the Drovers Bank."

He raised his head when a slight noise came from the door. Solo Frane was standing in the doorway, smiling coldly over the barrel of his six-gun.

"Looking for something?" he asked quietly.

Gard Hutchins sighed and glanced at his old rifle leaning against the desk. The outlaw chuckled and came into the room, closing the door with one boot.

"I'll take those bank books," he said softly. "That brother of mine won't be needing them any more."

"That's the way I had it figured," the old jailer answered slowly. "You and Matthews were brothers."

"We were," Solo Frane agreed. "He tried to deal me one off the bottom of the deck, but I called his hand."

He came closer and took the bank books from the jailer's hand. Then he motioned for Hutchins to get to his feet and jerked his head toward the door.

"Loop ought to be finished with his job by now," he said, and stepped aside for the jailer to pass him.

Gard Hutchins walked outside before the outlaw's meaning came to him. He stopped suddenly, and Frane's gun touched his spine.

"What job?" he demanded harshly, but he already knew the answer.

"I sent Loop down to throw a rope on that salty old sheriff," Frane answered quietly. "There's just a chance that Cory might have been telling the truth, and the sheriff might want to talk."

Gard Hutchins made no answer. There wasn't anything to say, and he strained his ears toward the jail, hoping to hear a shot that would tell him that Law Smith had awakened in time. Solo Frane sneered softly behind him.

"He didn't wake up," he said quietly. "And Loop never misses with his twine."

A shadow moved slightly when Hutchins stopped in front of the sheriff's office. Loop McGuire came out behind his gun, and Frane prodded the old jailer into the room. He closed the door behind him, and Loop McGuire walked back to the cell where Law Smith had been sleeping.

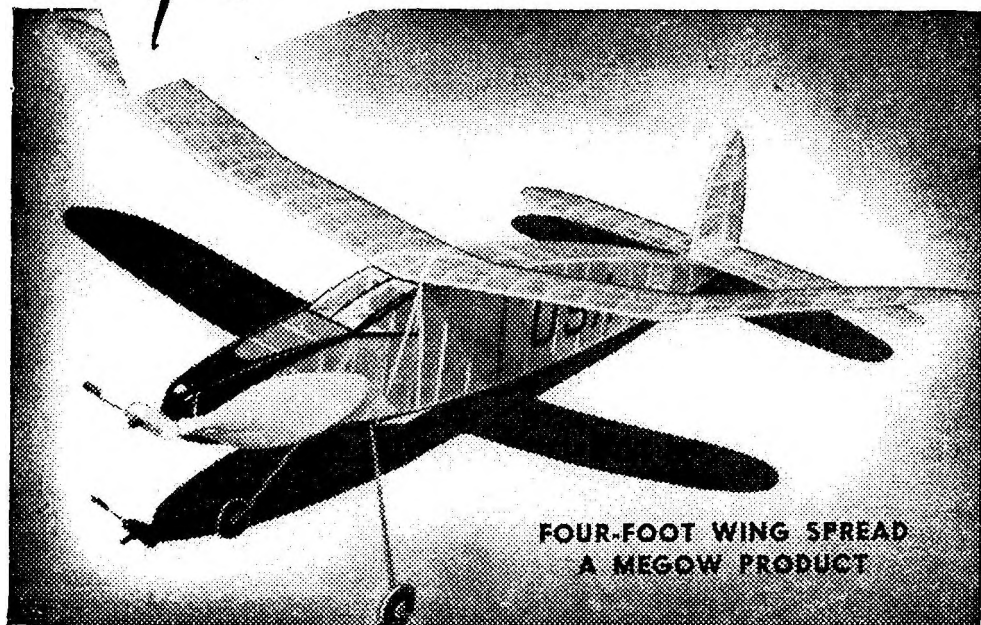
Gard Hutchins blinked when Law Smith appeared in the corridor with his hands behind his broad back. The loop of rope was tight around his brown arms, and the sheriff was sputtering angrily behind the bandanna gag in his mouth.

"Let him talk, Loop," Solo Frane

Continued on page 110

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Continued from page 147

said quietly. "I'll shut him up soon enough if he lets on to yell!"

Law Smith glared at Gard Hutchins when McGuire jerked the gag from his mouth. His long mustache twitched with anger when he began a scathing denunciation.

"You'll stand guard," he sneered. "You can read sign like an Injun, and you got ears like a bat. You tell me to get some sleep, and then you wander away like a calf hunting grass!"

"I went up to look things over at the Two Flags," Hutchins muttered. "Meet Cory Matthews' brother."

Solo Frane stood back and listened with a smile. Law Smith glared at his jailer, and then he turned to study the outlaw's face.

"Meaning who?" he barked.

"Meaning me," Solo Frane answered quietly. "Cory's right name was Frane, the same as mine."

"I think he killed that tinhorn, boss," Hutchins said venomously. "He let on that Matthews tried to deal him one from a crooked deck."

"That's right," Frane answered readily. "Cory tried to tell me that somebody stole a bag of money from his office. I figured he was lying, and me and him never did hit it off. He's down there on the Rafter F with a bullet through his crooked heart!"

"That saves the law a heap of trouble," Law Smith said coldly. "I'm still the law," he told the smiling bandit.

"Sit him down there in that chair and pull his boots off," Frane said to McGuire. "I'll bend a gun barrel over his skull if he goes on the prod!"

Loop McGuire caught the end of his rope and jerked the sheriff to a heavy chair. Then he turned his back and lifted Law Smith's boot between his knees. The sheriff started

to kick with his left boot, and thought better of it, and McGuire tugged the boot loose and dropped it on the floor.

"I think I made a little error," Solo Frane said thoughtfully. "Cory claimed that he was robbed, and he said he saw that son of yours slip out the side door. How about it, sheriff?"

"You made several mistakes," Law Smith said slowly. "One was when you pinned your note to a tree with one of *Vinegarone's* throwing knives."

Anger stained the outlaw's swarthy face, and he leaned forward to stare at Law Smith with glittering eyes. Then he controlled himself and spoke softly.

"I'd like to know if you want to talk."

"Lone Star had that knife in his vest pocket," the sheriff answered. "He threw it into *Vinegarone's* heart clear up to the hilt!"

"A man can't live forever, but I'll remember what you said," Solo Frane murmured. "It seems to me that Lone Star has more brains than all the rest of this outfit put together. He would be the only one to think about that money. Did he bring it here?"

Law Smith leaned back in his chair and smiled frostily. "You know most of the answers," he drawled. "What's your guess?"

"My guess is that the money is in that safe yonder," Frane answered without hesitation. "Do you want to tell me the combination, or will we have to toast the soles of your feet?"

Law Smith drew up his feet unconsciously. He glared at the smiling outlaw, and he turned his head when Loop McGuire went to the stove and removed a lid.

"Better tell him, boss," Gard

Hutchins muttered under his breath. "That's an old Injun trick, and a man can't hold out for long."

Law Smith raised his head and tightened his square jaw. The ropes cut into the muscles of his powerful chest, and his voice was a savage growl when he cursed Solo Franc.

"I won't talk," he ended up defiantly.

Loop McGuire struck a match and started some papers and kindling burning in the stove. Then he lifted the big poker and hefted it in front of the sheriff. After which he placed it in the stove and sat on his heels to roll a cigarette.

Gard Hutchins twisted uneasily and wished for the old buffalo gun he had left back in the Two Flags. Solo Franc holstered his six-gun and stood at ease, while Law Smith

clenched his teeth and stared at the stove.

"I'm going to give that son of yours a chance," the outlaw said quietly after a long silence. "I've heard he's fast, and he kept Buck Perry from shooting me tonight. Not that it will make any difference, but he's earned a chance for his law."

Law Smith tore his eyes away from the stove and took a deep breath. He could hear the wood crackling, but he began to talk to keep his mind away from the threatened torture.

"You think you're fast," he taunted. "Alongside of Lone Star you ain't nothing but a creeping snail. That cowboy moves so fast you'd think he shook a hide-out down from his sleeve."

Solo Franc's eyes began to glow

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with a reddish light. His thin nostrils began to flare, and the fingers of his right hand began to flex rapidly.

"Cory thought he was fast," he said in a low voice. "He did better than most, because his gun cleared leather. But he never got the muzzle up, or the hammer notched back," he boasted proudly.

The heat from the stove brought the sweat out on Law Smith's forehead. Loop McGuire pulled out the poker and pushed it back in the fire. The iron was beginning to get red, and Gard Hutchins lowered his head when some sound came to his keen ears.

He heard the clop of hoofs for a moment, and he turned to watch Solo Franc when the sound stopped. The outlaw was smiling and watching the stove, and the old jailer shifted his position closer to McGuire.

Loop McGuire pulled the poker from the coals and glanced at Franc. The outlaw nodded slightly, and McGuire walked up to Law Smith and caught up one of the sheriff's feet.

"Better start talking now, old man," he warned, and held the glowing poker close to the bare foot.

Gard Hutchins screamed like a panther and hurled his lean body at Loop McGuire. The poker flew through the window when Hutchins carried McGuire right into the chair that held Law Smith, and tumbled it to the floor.

The sheriff's legs shot out and overturned the table, and Solo Franc triggered a shot when the room was plunged in darkness. Two guns began roaring from outside, and Gard Hutchins was trampled when he tried to crawl to his feet.

He yelled hoarsely when he heard the back door slam, and then he

crouched low when the front door was burst open.

"Hold yore fire, Lone Star!" he bellowed. "The sheriff is down with his head under him!"

"Yo're a liar," a hoarse voice contradicted. "Make a light and cut me loose from these ropes!"

Lone Star struck a match when he recognized the voice of his father. He found the stub of a candle on a shelf, and he turned, after making a light, when Law Smith struggled to his feet. Gard Hutchins drew his skinning knife and severed the sheriff's bonds as Vin Freeman came in the front door.

"Two hossbackers just left town on a dead run, Lone Star," the cattleman shouted. "Was that Solo Franc and Loop McGuire?"

"That's right," Law Smith panted. "They meant to scorch the bottoms of my feet, but old Gard lit into McGuire barehanded, and him with that knife wound in his arm."

Lone Star walked to the door and stared at the low ridge of hills to the south. Then he shook his head, and he listened attentively while Gard Hutchins told of his discoveries.

"I'm going into Dark Canyon at daybreak," Lone Star said quietly. "But first I'm going to get some grub and a little shut-eye. I want one more look at Loop McGuire!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN OUNCE OF LEAD.

LONE STAR SMITH was dreaming that he was making a trail drive when a hand gripped his shoulder. The chuck-wagon cook usually roused up the men who were to ride the early relief while the night herders came in to get breakfast. He shed the sleep from his eyes when old Gard Hutchins made himself known with a whispered warning.

"Quiet, deputy. The rest are still sleepin', and it's coming sunup!"

Lone Star stifled a yawn and pulled on his boots. He wondered if the old jailer had gone to bed as Hutchins led the way to the kitchen behind the jail. Two plates with ham and eggs were waiting on the table, and the soft champing of bits in the corral told Lone Star that old Gard had saddled a pair of horses.

They ate in silence and drank steaming cowboy coffee from a blackened pot. The old jailer moved his left arm stiffly, but Lone Star noticed that he did move the arm in spite of the knife wound through the upper muscles. Old Gard's buffalo gun was standing in a corner, and he smiled when he saw Lone Star eying the big rifle.

"I slipped up to the Two Flags and got it," he explained, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You ready to ride?"

Lone Star nodded and pushed his chair back. They made little sound when they walked to the corral and mounted the saddled horses. Hutchins led the way until they reached the end of the street, and then Lone Star reined toward the south and mended the pace.

"Dark Canyon," he told his companion. "They ought to be moving those cattle they rustled, and don't forget they are already in Mexico. They've got as much law as we have down there," and he tapped the handle of his gun significantly.

Gard Hutchins nodded. He was riding his pinto horse with a squaw bridle around the lower jaw. He carried the heavy buffalo gun across his knees, and he squinted his eyes and spoke thoughtfully.

"Solo Frane took those bank books last night, Lone Star. He's got part of the bank loot, but he won't leave until he gets the rest of

it. Thought I'd remind you in case you got an idea to take any fool chances."

Lone Star held his horse to a lope and pointed toward the notch in the hills. He knew that Hutchins was thinking of his promise to Solo Franc. Colt Perry had made the same kind of promise, and now the Sevens cowboy was a cripple. He hummed softly in his throat when he remembered what Frane and Loop McGuire had meant to do to Law Smith, his father.

The old Indian fighter smiled contentedly when he heard that murmur of anger. He stared at Lone Star's broad back, tapering like a wedge to lean, flat hips. The flat, roping muscles moved smoothly across the square shoulders and powerful arms every time the cowboy shifted in the saddle.

Neither man was talking now as they rode through the scrubby brush and prickly pear. Gard Hutchins was leaning sideways, with his squinting eyes studying the ground. Finally he edged closer to Lone Star and slowed the pace.

"One man came through here on a shod hoss," he muttered. "He met three other fellers back there a ways, and they were riding little hosses with bare feet. You know what that means?"

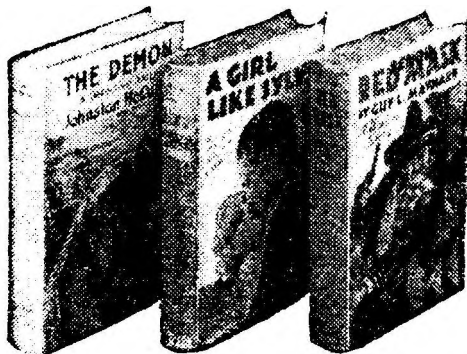
"The last three means Mexican riders," Lone Star answered softly. "The first rider could be either Frane or McGuire, and McGuire would be my guess."

Gard Hutchins nodded and worked a cartridge into the breech of his rifle. He rode like an Indian and guided the paint horse with his knees, while his eyes followed the sign in the grama grass.

"That bottleneck will be dangerous, Lone Star," he said quietly. "It

Continued on page 115

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won't do for us to ride through there together. I'll go first, just in case there's a sentry posted."

He turned his face to hide a grin when Lone Star whipped around in the saddle. The cowboy shook his head.

"I'll ride through first, you old savage. I know what you're thinking, and I'll settle with Loop McGuire for what he tried to do to the old man!"

"Have it yore way," Hutchins muttered, and slowed his horse. "In that case you better ride on, and I'll follow slow to cover yore back!"

Lone Star rode on without looking back. His ears were keyed to catch the slightest sound, and he loosened his six-gun when he came to the narrow bottleneck that led into Dark Canyon. He was watching the brush on both sides of the trail while he guided his horse to avoid the rocks that would warn of his coming, and then he heard the bellowing of cattle in the distance.

The rustled steers were being worked up off bedground. They would have to come through the pass, and Lone Star nodded with a smile of understanding. It would be quite a while before the leaders crossed the long narrow valley.

He rounded a bend in the trail and started for the blackjack tree where he had found Solo Frane's first message. Some instinct warned him just as he reached the tree, and his hand dipped down to his holster when a hissing noise sounded just behind him.

Lone Star's arms were pinned to his sides before he could reach his belt gun. He was jerked backward over the cantle before he could stop his horse, and he landed on his shoulders and rolled to take the sting from his fall.

WW—3F

The rope tightened and jerked him back to his haunches. A running hitch whipped over his head and tightened around his throat before he could catch his balance, and then the rope cut off his wind for a time.

"I figured you'd come," a sneering voice rasped hoarsely. "I'm going to break yore neck before those steers come through!"

The rope jerked slightly when Lone Star tried to turn his head to see Loop McGuire. He could hear the bellowing cattle coming closer, and he thought of the time when a night herder had been caught on foot in front of a stampede on a trail drive to Montana. McGuire laughed mockingly when Lone Star shuddered.

"Say yore prayers," he taunted. "I can see the trail both ways, and I'm jerking the rope down between my legs when I count up to three!"

Lone Star braced himself and tried to catch a quick breath. The rope was a rawhide riata, and the slip-knot of the half hitch was tight under his left ear. He didn't remember any prayers, but he did remember that old Gard Hutchins had promised to cover his back.

He trembled when he felt the rope vibrate against his neck. Loop McGuire could watch the trail both ways, and the cattle were coming closer down the narrow valley. Then he closed his eyes and got ready to roll when Loop McGuire set himself for the hangman's jerk.

A sudden roaring explosion blasted the morning stillness when Lone Star fell on his back. His lungs labored for air, and he did not hear the thud of hoofs when old Gard Hutchins thundered up the narrow pass with his rifle leaving a thin trail of smoke behind him.

The old Indian fighter made a running dismount and twitched the

snaky loop from the strangling man's throat. He pulled Lone Star close to the tree just as the first steers left the valley and clattered through the pass with their heads down.

Lone Star sat up gasping for breath, with his left hand rubbing his throat. He stiffened when he saw Loop McGuire sprawled in the trail face down, still holding the rope in his outstretched hands. Then the rustler was hidden from sight when the bellowing steers stampeded down the narrow bottleneck.

Gard Hutchins was standing behind the tree with his rifle at his shoulder. He shouted in Spanish when three Mexicans rode after the cattle on little mustangs, waving their rawhide ropes.

The three *vaqueros* slid their ponies to a stop when they saw the long-haired old Indian fighter behind the big rifle. One of them came forward and spoke in faltering English.

"Do not shoot, señor. We weel do anything you say!"

Lone Star sucked in a deep breath and stretched to his feet. His horse was grazing off the trail behind the heavy brush, and the cowboy caught the dragging reins and mounted his saddle. Then he turned to Hutchins and spoke softly.

"Like as not these fellers didn't know any better, Gard. Tell them to drive the cattle across the line, where Freeman and Perry can pick them up."

Hutchins began to shout in Spanish, and the three Mexicans nodded eagerly. They rode down through the pass with the two Americans keeping close watch, and the sun was just rising over the hills when Hutchins called to the Mexicans.

"That's far enough, *hombres*. *Vamos!*"

The three herders shouted their thanks and left the herd to wander

across the short bunch grass. They headed their ponies south and disappeared behind a low ridge of hills, and Lone Star rode close and gripped the old jailer's gnarled hand.

"You saved my life, Gard," he murmured huskily. "McGuire was jerking his rope when I heard that old Henry roar like a cannon!"

"I sweated blood back there," Hutchins admitted hoarsely. "I was all of a hundred yards away, and you was right in line with McGuire, but I had to take a chance."

Lone Star Smith asked no questions. An ounce of lead had saved his life, and he remembered that one glimpse of Loop McGuire lying face down in the path of the stampeding steers. The trembling had left his toughened body when he turned to study the back trail.

"Solo Frane," he said quietly. "If you were Frane, where would you be now, Gard?"

"He ain't up Dark Canyon," the old jailer answered positively, and then he slapped his thigh. "The Rafter F," he said slowly. "I'd be there if I was Solo Frane!"

Lone Star turned slowly and stared at Gard Hutchins. Colt Perry was a helpless cripple on the Rafter F. Connie Freeman would be nursing the Sevens cowboy, and Solo Frane would not dare to ride into Granada in broad daylight.

"Frane said he was going to give you a chance," Hutchins interrupted the cowboy's thoughts. "He hates you like wolf poison, but he allowed that you had more brains than any of the law crowd. He won't leave until one of you heads out for the happy hunting grounds."

Lone Star touched the handle of his gun and nodded slowly. His eyes were slitted and hard when he set his jaw and picked up his bridle reins.

"We'll ride to the Rafter F," he

told Gard Hutchins quietly. "I'll take that chance Franc offered to give me!"

"Not if I see him first," the old jailer growled under his breath. "I'm still part of the law, and it's open season on wolves!"

Lone Star frowned and opened his lips to answer. He turned swiftly when the thud of hoofs came across the brush tops, and then he reined his horse into the brush with Hutchins doing the same on the other side.

Both men were crouching forward in their saddles with guns ready when Vin Freeman topped a rise and raced toward them. Lone Star rode out to show himself, and the Rafter F cattleman checked his horse and shouted at the cowboy.

"Solo Franc is waiting down at my spread. He sent me out to get you!"

"Take it easy, Vin," Lone Star murmured quietly. "We knew he was at the Rafter F, and we were just starting over. How's Colt Perry?"

"He's delirious," Freeman answered, and his lips trembled for a moment. "Connie can't leave him for a minute, and Solo Franc will kill them both if you don't show up before noon!"

"It had to come," Lone Star said calmly. "And it lacks several hours until noon. Now get a hold of yourself and tell us just what happened."

"I dragged Cory Matthews outside after you had left last night," Freeman began more quietly, but his big hands were shaking. "Connie was about done in for sleep, and I told her I'd stay with Colt. She curled up in a chair and went to

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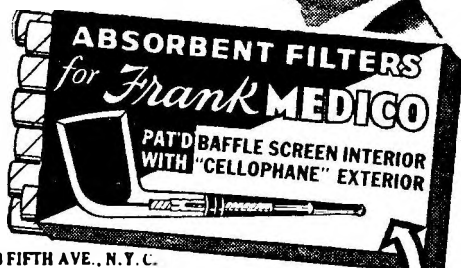
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sleep right away, and I must have dozed some myself."

"And Solo Franc was standing in front of you when you opened yore eyes," Gard Hutchins guessed shrewdly.

Vin Freeman nodded with shame and misery in his gray eyes.

"He had his gun on me, and he was smiling like the devil," he muttered. "He talked low, so as not to wake Connie up, but he won't leave the country until he settles with you, Lone Star!"

"That's what he thinks," Hutchins grunted, and tapped the stock of his rifle.

Vin Freeman groaned and shook his head. "Franc thought about that," he almost shouted. "If any-one rides back with Lone Star, Solo Franc will kill Colt Perry. Then he'll rope Connie on a horse and take her down across the line. Lone Star has to ride back there by himself!"

"That's what I aim to do," the cowboy said quietly, and turned to lock glances with Hutchins. "You know Solo Franc," he reminded the old jailer. "Do you think he was bluffing?"

Gard Hutchins tried to find words and could only shake his head. Finally he thrust out his hand and gripped the cowboy hard.

"He ain't bluffing, and he's fast as lightning. I've seen you work a .45, and I'll let my money ride on you. Ride on down there, Lone Star. You've got to win because of Colt and Connie. Watch his eyes, and remember what he meant to do to old Law Smith!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SHERIFF OF GRANADA.

LONE STAR SMITH rode across the desert grazing land alone, and he was quiet in his mind like a man feels when he has finished a task

that required great muscular effort. The smooth rhythm of his horse relaxed him even more, proving that a change of pace is as good as a rest.

He reined his horse into the brush when the rattle of wheels sounded in the rutted wagon road leading to the Rafter F. He waited until Formaldehyde Thompson had passed with his black covered wagon. Cory Matthews was no longer the boss of Granada, and his reign had been terminated by the man who now waited for Lone Star Smith on the Rafter F.

Lone Star's left hand went to his vest pocket and toyed with a bit of metal. Gard Hutchins had handed it to him just before they rode out of Dark Canyon. The old jailer had taken it from the body of Loop McGuire after the cattle stampede. It was the badge of a deputy sheriff, and Lone Star's horse took him closer to the Rafter F while he turned the problem over in his mind.

Solo Frane was wanted on a dozen different charges. The outlaw was a rustler, bank robber, and a murderer. These crimes had been committed in Texas, and the law said that every man was entitled to a chance. Lone Star smiled grimly and dropped the star back into his pocket. Solo Frane made his own laws, and broke the laws other men made.

Lone Star was a cowboy riding his home range when he topped a rise and saw the Rafter F buildings down on a big flat. He cupped a pair of old field glasses to his eyes when he stopped his horse in a fringe of brush. His eyes narrowed, and his right hand dropped slowly to ease his .45 of crimp after the long ride.

A tall man stood in the open door of the big ranchhouse, watching the road that led to Granada. A lean, muscular figure dressed in tight-fitting black trousers and bolero jacket,

with a black hat pushed well back on his head, held by the throat latch. A lone man who had changed the destinies of many men, and who now waited for the chance to change many more.

Lone Star stared for a moment while he thought of Colt Perry and Connie Freeman. In his moment of defeat, the Sevens cowboy had won a victory. The light in Connie Freeman's eyes had spoken more clearly than words. Some day the Rafter F and the Sevens outfit would be joined to make the largest cattle spread in Border County.

Lone Star cased his glasses and rode out of the brush. He was an easy target for a rifle when he crossed the big flat and headed for the Rafter F house, but he rode without fear. Solo Frane was the fastest gun hawk along the border, but the outlaw asked for no advantage, and he smiled when Lone Star stopped his horse a dozen paces from the big porch and slid to the ground.

Solo Frane walked down the three steps and nodded approval while his glittering black eyes watched Lone Star's face. His right hand was hooked in his shell-studded belt below the tight-fitting jacket, and a smile of genuine pleasure lighted his swarthy, handsome face.

"I knew you'd come alone, amigo," he said softly, and his voice was a low, humming whisper. "You saw Vin Freeman?"

Lone Star nodded while he studied the outlaw's glowing eyes.

"I met Freeman, and I likewise met Loop McGuire!"

The fingers of his left hand moved slowly away from his vest pocket. Solo Frane lowered his eyes when Lone Star opened his hand. The outlaw's white teeth clicked together when he recognized the deputy's badge.

"Loop McGuire's dead," he said quietly, and without emotion. "You beat him to the gun?"

"I didn't clear leather," Lone Star admitted honestly. "McGuire flipped a loop around my throat, but you can't hang a man who was born to be shot. Gard Hutchins tallied for Loop with that old buffalo gun, and those cattle you rustled did the rest when they stampeded down through the pass."

"A man can't live forever," Frane said with a careless shrug. "And now, before we play our little game of draw, I'd like to know about that bank loot Loop hid back there in the Two Flags."

"I might tell you," Lone Star countered. "Did you rob the Drovers Bank?"

"I did," Solo Frane answered without hesitation. "We got better than a hundred thousand dollars, but most of it was in the bag Loop McGuire carried. I was to meet Cory for a split, but I never did trust that tinhorn brother of mine."

"I found the money," Lone Star said simply, and leaned forward when the outlaw's nostrils began to twitch. "The cattlemen will need that money for beef roundup, and it's back in the bank by now."

Solo Frane was balancing easily on the thin soles of his polished boots. He was smiling with his mouth, but his black eyes were glowing with an inner excitement he could not conceal. His shoulders moved slightly, as though he were shrugging away his losses.

"Our plans would have worked without a hitch if you hadn't come back to Granada," he said quietly. "Cory Matthews and Pecos Langtry were going to take over the law. Buck Perry and his chip thought that old Vin Freeman was rustling their Sevens stock, and *Vinegarone*

would have taken care of that old Injun fighter. We had the money from the bank, and Loop McGuire was all set to sell those cattle that tromped him up there in the bottle-neck."

"That leaves you and me," Lone Star said significantly. "This is Texas, and I'm still part of the law. I've got to give you a chance to surrender."

Grudging admiration showed briefly in the outlaw's glittering eyes. For a moment he hesitated, and then he spoke just loud enough for Lone Star to hear. Both men could see the door of the front room, but they knew that the girl inside could not hear them.

"We ought to have some kind of a signal to make it a fair break," Solo Frane murmured. "I'll call the girl, and when she shows herself in the doorway—"

Lone Star frowned and shook his head. "Leave Connie out of it," he growled. "She saw you kill your brother last night, and she saw me tally for Pecos Langtry. Make your pass and I'll be right with you!"

"You'd be right behind me," Frane corrected. "I'm rodding this layout, and I never ask for an edge!"

Lone Star stared and knew that argument was useless. The outlaw was smiling when he parted his lips. Then he called in a sharp, clear voice that was accustomed to instant obedience:

"Connie Freeman! Come to the door for a moment!"

Lone Star heard a chair scrape back in the big front room. He could feel the hot blood coursing through his arms and down to the tips of his tingling fingers. He held his breath when he heard the tap of little boots on the floor, and then Connie Freeman was in the doorway.

Solo Frane flipped his right hand

down like a sidewinder making a strike. Years of constant practice added speed to his trained muscles, and the long-barreled gun seemed to leap up to meet his clawed fingers, while his thumb caught the hammer and curled it back on the draw.

Lone Star was not conscious of his own efforts when he twitched his shoulder muscles down and up. He fanned the hammer with his thumb when he flipped the gun sideways from his holster, and he was hurled to the ground when something knifed his ribs just under his heart.

He rolled over and came to his knees with the smoking gun high in his hand. He had heard only one explosion, but he knew that Solo Frame had triggered a shot. Lone Star held his follow-up when he saw the tall outlaw swaying like a reed in the wind.

The outlaw's gun was hanging in his hand and pointing at the ground. He tried to bring the cocked weapon up, and then his trigger finger tightened to send a shot into the earth between his wide-spaced boots.

The bucking gun provided the little push that rocked Solo Frame off balance and sent him crashing forward on his face. While Lone Star Smith watched like a man coming out of a dream until the polished boots had rattled a message in pantomime.

Lone Star sighed deeply and loos-

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NAME ADDRESS

ened his muscles when a curtain of blackness swept over him. He could hear voices murmuring faintly, and the faint drum of distant hoofs. Then a deep silence when he sank down on his forearms.

Connie Freeman was leaning against the door frame when Law Smith charged across the flat with Gard Hutchins and Vin Freeman. The old sheriff dismounted like a relay rider and slid to a stop on braking bootheels. Then he was kneeling beside the still form of his son.

"Rouse around, Lone Star," he pleaded in a husky voice.

He leaned forward with a sob tearing from his lips when he saw a dull-red stain on the left side of the cowboy's wool shirt. Law Smith ripped the buttons off and stared at the white skin, and then he shouted hoarsely at Gard Hutchins.

"He ain't done for, Gard. Fetch some water and don't stand there like a wooden Injun!"

Gard Hutchins lowered the old rifle that was covering the sprawled form of the outlaw. He reached for a canteen hanging to his saddlehorn, and he whooped like an Apache when he pulled the stopper and sprinkled water in the wounded man's face.

"Take it easy, jailer," Law Smith growled. "The new sheriff might come out of it fighting his head!"

Lone Star sighed and opened his eyes. His gun was still gripped in his hand, and his father caught the weapon when Lone Star jerked up trying to notch back the hammer.

"Easy, Lone Star," the sheriff whispered. "It's only Gard Hutchins and me. Settle back and take a pull on that canteen!"

Lone Star stared at his father and relaxed. He pulled himself to a sitting position, and he drank deeply when Hutchins held the canteen to his lips. Then he pushed the old jailer aside and stared at the body of Solo Franc.

"It was a draw, sheriff," he muttered softly. "I didn't see his hand move, and I didn't know I moved my own. Is he—"

"Deader than four o'clock," Gard Hutchins said thankfully. "And his slug scraped yore short ribs just below the heart. How come you to beat him?"

Lone Star remembered Connie Freeman for the first time since she had appeared in the doorway as the signal for the showdown. The girl had disappeared, but he could hear her talking soothingly to Colt Perry in the big front room. He raised his head to Vin Freeman's face and jerked a thumb toward the house.

"Look after Connie," he said quietly. "Solo Franc called her to the door, and we both come apart when she showed up. That was the signal, and like as not she needs you."

Vin Freeman leaned over and gripped the cowboy's hand. He cleared his throat loudly and walked toward the house, and Lone Star waited until he heard the big cattleman greet his daughter. Then he pulled himself to his feet and turned to his father.

"Was I dreaming, or did I hear you say something about a new sheriff?" he asked.

Law Smith smiled and fumbled with the badge on his faded vest. Then he stepped up and pinned the five-pointed star on Lone Star's call-skin vest.

"You heard me right," he said gruffly. "Yo're the acting sheriff of Border County until the boys can elect you to the office. I turned in my star yesterday, and we won't stand for any arguments. Will we, Gard?"

"That's whatever," Hutchins answered with a grin. "Let's get back to Granada, where we belong. A gent that can handle a six-gun like you is wasting his time herding dogies, and you ain't a cowboy any more!"

Lone Star nodded thoughtfully. He was making a count of the men who had fought on both sides of the law, with the only law they knew. He was talking to himself when he climbed his saddle and spoke softly.

"Yeah, that's what it was," he murmured. "Sixes for seven!"



GUN GHOSTS OF SKELETON VALLEY

By ED EARL REPP

*An Empire hung in balance—and
rode the back of a zigzag nag!*

COMING NEXT WEEK



THE WRANGLERS CORNER

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from amateur writers.

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Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

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Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

SOME of you waddies and stove-up old-timers seem to think that your true Western experiences weren't dramatic enough to interest anybody but yourselves. Now, pardners, if those experiences made inpressions upon you, it's dobe dollars to sour-dough biscuits, they'll interest plenty of other hombres. Remember, you aren't writing fiction stories that have to be built upon plots. Why, durn it, some of the best yarns

told around a camp fire or in a bunk-house are those without plots and fiction technique! Don't you admire to hear some punchers tell stories because they're so plumb natural?

Well, that's what we want from you hombres and gals when you r'ar up to get in on our weekly yarn-spinning fiesta. You can see for yourselves that the range of true Western experiences is as broad as the State of Texas. As for those we've published so far, we're plumb proud of 'em, and your letters tell us you like 'em, too. Keep sending 'em in! You can't lose, and yours may earn you a check.

And, of course, don't forget that we want you to keep sending in your fiction stories and poems. If you can't cash in with a fiction story or poem, maybe you can with a true Western experience; some of you've sold us all three. The point is that our Corner's big enough for you to stand a plumb good chance of sandwiching yourself into it somewhere.

Here's one of those true Western experiences that nobody but an old cowhand could have written:

SOME TRAIL DRIVE!

By Shorty Sutton—Age 44
Washington, Pennsylvania

The fall of 1916, I was riding range in Montana. One day the boss' wife got a letter saying that her father had died in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and that her share of the cattle left would be about eighteen hundred head. As the old ranch would be sold to settle the estate, she would have to move her stock at once.

As we had plenty of range and wild hay on our Montana spread, the boss decided that we would go to roundup and trail the cattle home at once. He told us to draw straws to see who would trail the saddle remuda down, and I happened to be the unlucky one. So I started from the home ranch with seventy-two cow ponies. By changing horses every two and a half hours, I pulled into the ranch,

about thirty-five miles north of Deadwood, or fifty-two hours, with seventy-one horses, one having been lost on the way.

Everything went along O. K. until we started on the trail. We had our own chuckwagon and a cook along. This cook liked his redeye, but nothing went wrong until we got north to Ekalaka, Montana. There, we held the herd on a flat just outside of town.

That night the hands went to town and, while we were there, I found three five-dollar bills. As the cook couldn't go with us on account of having to make coffee for the night herders, I took him a quart bottle of whiskey, and it wasn't long after reaching camp until he was enjoying himself plenty. He was still at it the next morning.

Well, after breakfast the boss said that if we could find a stray in the herd that didn't have a brand on it, we could butcher it. So we found a fine yearling and butchered it. We stayed camped there that day for the meat to cool.

The boss told the cook to take the chuckwagon to town and get supplies until we could get to Cabin Creek trading post. So the cook went to town with money for supplies.

When he returned, he had six cases of canned tomatoes and one tin caddy of sulphur matches. We cut up our beef and started on up the trail.

After three big meals of very fresh beef, with the tomatoes, there was hardly a cowboy who wasn't so sick that he couldn't stay in the saddle long enough to drive cows. By the time we dragged into Cabin Creek trading post, we were feeling as if a change of grub would do us a heap of good.

We made camp, and the boss took three pack horses over to the post for supplies. But it seems that he met some friends and they started buying drinks before they bothered about grub supplies.

We were sitting up in camp, waiting for the boss to return so that we could have the cook fix us something to eat before sleeping. Well, along about midnight, along came the boss, riding, leading the loaded pack horses, singing as happy as a magpie on a dead cayuse.

The cook made a dive for the packs. Then we heard him using an ax to open wooden boxes. Next, we heard some very choice cussing and a big splash in the creek. Thinking the cook had slipped and fallen off the bank into the creek, we all ran to help him. But we found him just standing there, looking at a box floating in the water.

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"What's the matter?" we shouted.

He sort of choked and said: "What do you want for supper?"

"What have you got?" we asked.

"Six more cases of tomatoes!" he roared.

Pat Coyle and I saddled up and took us a ride up a trail. After riding for about an hour and talking about all the restaurants we'd eaten in when we took the beef to Chicago, we found a sheepherder's wagon and rode over to it. We got the herder out of his bunk and told him we were hungry enough to eat shoe leather.

"Well," he said, "all I've got is some sow bosom and cold beans, but I'll warm 'em up for you if you'll wait."

Pat said: "Hell, we'll eat 'em cold! Just show us to 'em, that's all!"

So we rode back to camp, feeling as if we had really had us a meal.

"Damned if I ain't got me a notion to go herding sheep," said Pat. "That's where a feller can get some decent grub."

Well, we got the cattle home O. K. and had a change of chuck while we re-branded and dehorned that herd, but never again did any of us eat tomatoes on that ranch!

So you wondered if anybody but you would see anything funny in your true Western experience, Shorty. Say, amigo, ever since I first read it in manuscript, I've been catching myself getting chuckles out of it. That trail drive was enough to make any loyal cowpoke think seriously of herding woollies. If that yarn doesn't go the rounds in bunk-houses, I sure miss my guess. We're sure glad you sent it in, pard! Reckon most readers'll be, too.

Who's next to get up in meeting and tell his experience? We're all waiting for you.

Here are the fiction stories by the amateurs:

EVIDENCE

By Edwin Mack—Age 26
Sheldon, Wisconsin

Lanky, steely-eyed, straight-shooting Bill Lawton, famous marshal of Powder Gulch, scowled as he listened to the news of the latest murder. Within the past week, this was the third one. If he failed to halt this wanton killing, he was ruined!

Although he knew that it was wasted effort, he started toward the scene of the murder.

As he hit the street, he noticed Sporty Lamp, owner of several gambling houses, and an active politician, pull in at the livery stable across the street. He had just arrived from a horseback ride which he took every day at about sundown.

Sporty wore a black store suit, a white Stetson and hand-stitched boots. A silver-mounted saddle sparkled on his lively sorrel.

During the investigation, Bill discovered that the murdered man had recently quarreled with Sporty. It was only a minor spat, during which no lead had been thrown. It was insufficient motive for murder.

On his way back to his office, Bill stopped at the livery stable. Sporty still was there.

Sporty's thin upper lip curled disdainfully. "Botched the play again," he sneered.

Bill's blue eyes turned glacial. "Yeah," he drawled. "What's it to you?"

"Plenty!" Sporty snapped. "I'm helpin' pay yore wages. I want protection. How do I know the lousy killer ain't fixin' to plug me?"

Several bystanders tittered. Wordlessly, Bill entered the office of the livery stable, where he and his friend, Frank Moor, owner of the establishment, talked awhile.

Again, two days later, the same thing happened. This time, Big Jake, owner of the hotel, was brutally murdered near his home.

Rumors were rampant. Feeling ran high. Whispers hinting that Bill was in cahoots with an outlaw ring planning to loot the neighborhood, were freely circulating.

Those few who still had faith in Bill, gathered in front of his office, awaiting his orders.

But Bill only sent men to bring in the body, and casually strolled across the street to the livery stable.

A while later, when Sporty arrived, Bill was still there.

"Why ain't you at least tryin' to round up the polecat?" Sporty gasped at Bill, after he heard the news.

"Why should I, if he's right here?" Bill asked.

"Yuh ain't hintin' that I done it?" Sporty sneered.

"I ain't hintin'," Bill drawled, "I'm tellin' you. Take a look at the sack tied to your saddle cantle. What oats it contained when it was put there, is scattered along your trail. There's a little hole on the underside. Oats would spill only when

your boss moved. You was in such a hurry to be off about your murderin', you didn't notice the sack was there."

Sporty examined the sack. It still contained some oats that spilled out when he lifted the sack. Even in the thickening gloom, the tail end of his trail was plainly visible. Cursing, he drew his .45.

But Bill's draw was faster. He fired when Sporty's gun was clearing leather. Sporty's gun was torn out of his hand by Bill's slug.

"You'll live to stretch a rope," Bill prophesied. "I knew you was doin' this yourself 'cause you didn't trust your gun hawks. I figured if I gave you 'nough rope, you'd get tangled up in it. You wanted to get yourself elected marshal, or put a dummy in office, so's you could rob the town."

If we'd just eaten a plumb bad meal of victuals, we might find something to go on the prod about in that story. But durned if we can. As we see it, it is well plotted, has good characters, and builds up to a gripping climax with drama and suspense. The author gains his effect by restraint which is plumb close to being real art. Durn it, it seems almost too good for an amateur to write, but some of these amateurs of ours are going places plumb fast, and Señor Mack sure is one of 'em. Keep up the good work, pard!

And here's:

SUBSTITUTE BAD MAN

By David Deane—Age 19

Beaumont, Texas

A man burst into the sheriff's office on a dead run. "Hell's a-poppin' over at the Elk Horn Saloon, Andy. Rufe Williams is takin' the place."

Big Andy Palmer swung his booted feet off the desk and let them hit the floor with a thump. He reached for his Stetson and asked, "How do you know it's Rufe Williams?"

The cowpoke was still breathing heavily. "He claims he's Rufe Williams, and he shore fits all the descriptions I ever heard of him. Better try to git the drop on him, Andy. He's got everybody in the place backed down."

Sheriff Andy Palmer strode through the door of the Elk Horn with his gun in hand. Inside, everything was in confusion. A large, beefy individual was wildly waving a bottle over his head and inviting everybody to have a drink—on the house.

"Drink all yuh want," he howled, "an' if they ain't got enough in here to satisfy yuh, we'll hunt another saloon!"

By this time, the patrons had spied the sheriff. No one moved. "Come and drink, dammit!" The bewhiskered stranger grabbed the nearest man by the arm and began to pull him toward the bar. A gun sounded behind the couple and the bottle shattered into dozens of pieces. With a roar of rage, the bad man whirled and started to reach for the .45 which rode his right thigh.

"I wouldn't try it if I was you, stranger." The sheriff's voice was calm. "I ought to lock you up for creatin' such a ruckus, but we got enough free boarders at the jail. I'm givin' you a chance. Now git on your horse and git out of town pronto."

With a resentful expression on his face, the burly giant stalked from the saloon.

As soon as the door had closed upon his back, men surrounded Big Andy. "Why in hell didn't yuh arrest Williams?" one of them demanded. "He's wanted in Wyoming for bank-robbing."

Big Andy laughed heartily. "That wasn't Rufe Williams, fellows. That was just a substitute bad man!"

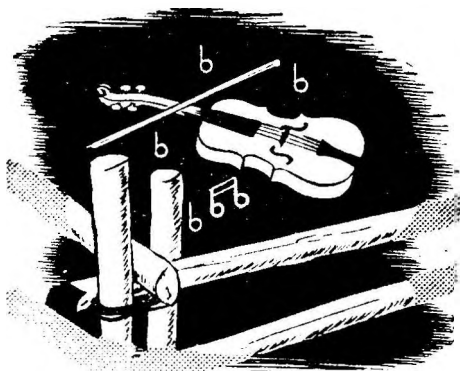
"What're yuh talkin' about?" queried someone.

"Just this," replied the sheriff. "That hombre was simply tryin' to ride on Rufe Williams' reputation. Did you notice that he wore his gun on his right side for a right-handed draw? Well, Rufe Williams handles his Colt left-handed. I know—because I brought him in last night after dark. He's in the jail now."

Well, pards, we'll be mailing more checks to some of you next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

AN EMPIRE HUNG IN THE BALANCE—AND THE COURSE OF DESTINY RODE THE SADDLE OF A ZIGZAG NAG! Don't miss GUN GHOSTS OF SKELETON VALLEY, by Ed Earl Repp, in next week's issue! It's a complete novel that thunders from the West and carries with it the excitement, adventure, danger and courage that beset a man of strong heart in his fight for survival. And there's DEATH WAITS FOR BUCKSKIN WARRIORS, a new novelette by a new author, Harlan Graves. It's a tremendous yarn of buckskin-clad men who roared over California's treachery trails while a señorita and a rancho fell beneath hate-shredding renegade claws! Also, there's THE FORD AT PAINTED GAP, by J. Allan Dunn, a Bud Jones of Texas story that whistles its way into a thunder hell, and a Blackstone Bangs-Judge Roy Bean yarn, ROY BEAN'S ARTILLERY, by Dean McKinley, where the judge uses army cannons and his head to win against overwhelming odds. And we're not forgetting the second installment of MASSACRE MINE where things really get tough for Pat Geary and Eileen High Eagle. Then there's another great episode in the new picture story, OMAHA HOOKER ON THE OREGON TRAIL, by Warren Carleton and Bill Timmins. YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS THIS ISSUE OF WILD WEST WEEKLY! IT'S STILL ONLY 10 CENTS AT YOUR OWN NEWS DEALER'S. ORDER A COPY IN ADVANCE TODAY!



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.

There's another aspect of folklore we could inquire into, and that is tall tales. There are tales that are told from ranch to ranch and there are tall tales that a good "bench-liar" makes up on the spot about an alleged experience of his own or within his ken.

The idea is of course to tell the

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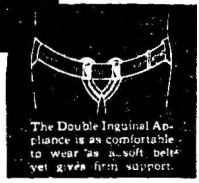
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tale with a straight face and with enough detail to make it sound convincing until you go beneath the trimmings. As J. Frank Dobie relates in his preface to a book of tall tales,* when in the old days two cow outfits met on the range they sometimes arranged what was called an "auguring match." Each outfit would put up its best yarn spinner and a contest of invention and endurance followed. A man would rather swap tales than listen to the preacher; and sometimes he told such convincing lies that he believed them himself.

Many's the night when a tenderfoot listened wide-eyed to such tales, as well as stories about more familiar things, such as rattlesnakes and spiders and wolves. In "Tall Tales" referred to above, for instance, there are a number of stories about the potency of a rattler's poison, such as the story of the man with a wooden leg. The rattlesnake got him in the wooden leg. Naturally the man thought nothing of it, but when he got home he couldn't lift his leg out of the stirrup, for the wood had begun to swell. It swelled and swelled. The cowpuncher's friends did all they could to get it down, hacking away at it with axes and saws for hours and hours till they had enough shavings to last them the whole winter through. But the leg kept getting bigger and bigger until the poor man was smothered by it.

Maybe the tenderfoot began to catch on by that time! But if you were in a tall tale contest, what would you tell about? Maybe we could get up a collection for the old Corral and splice them in with the songs?

Hope I'll get some whoppers from you in the next mail! So long.

* "Tall Tales" from "Texas Cow Camps," by Mody C. Boatright. Published in a special edition for the Texas Folklore Society, with a preface by J. Frank Dobie.

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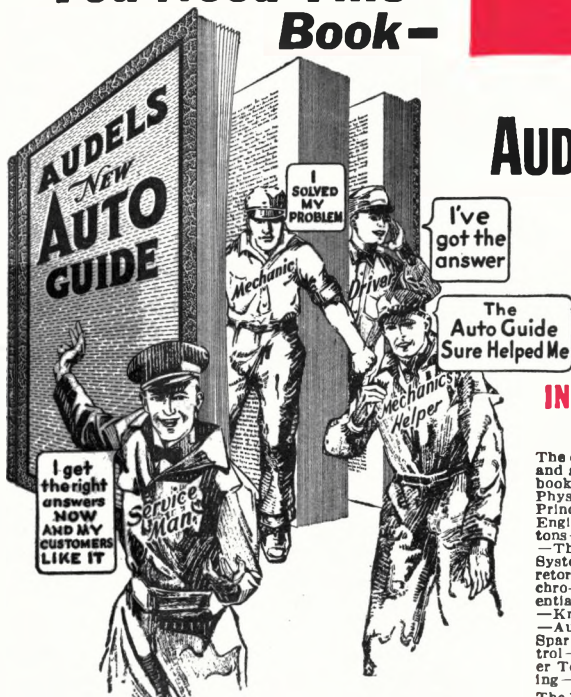
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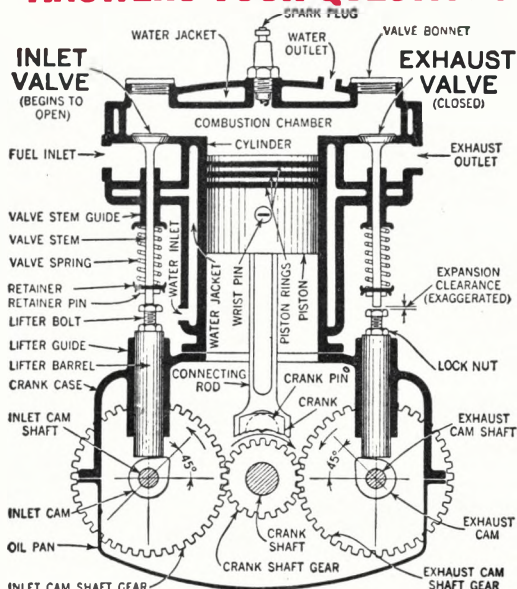
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