

STREET
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WESTERN STORY 10

CENTS

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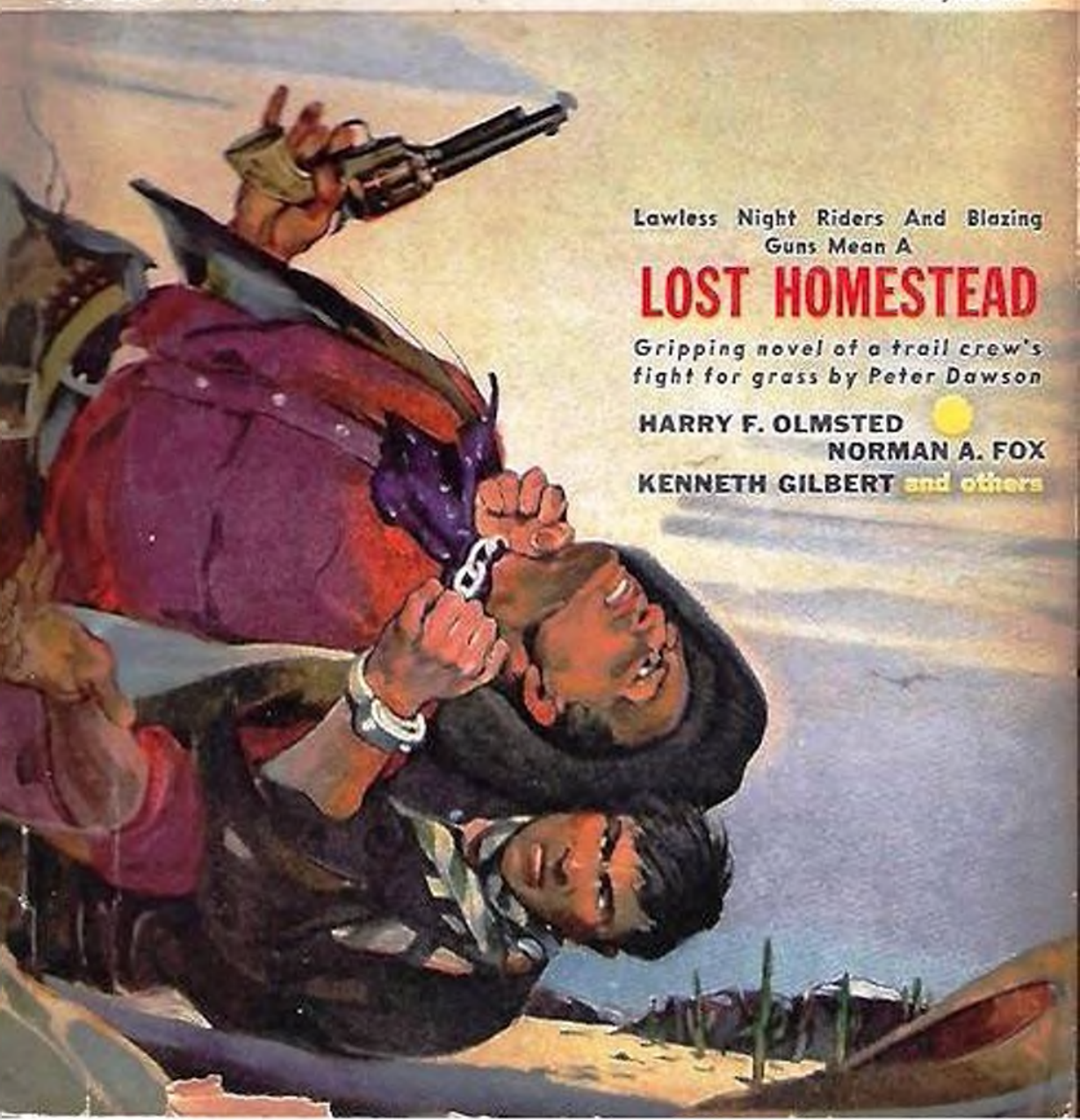
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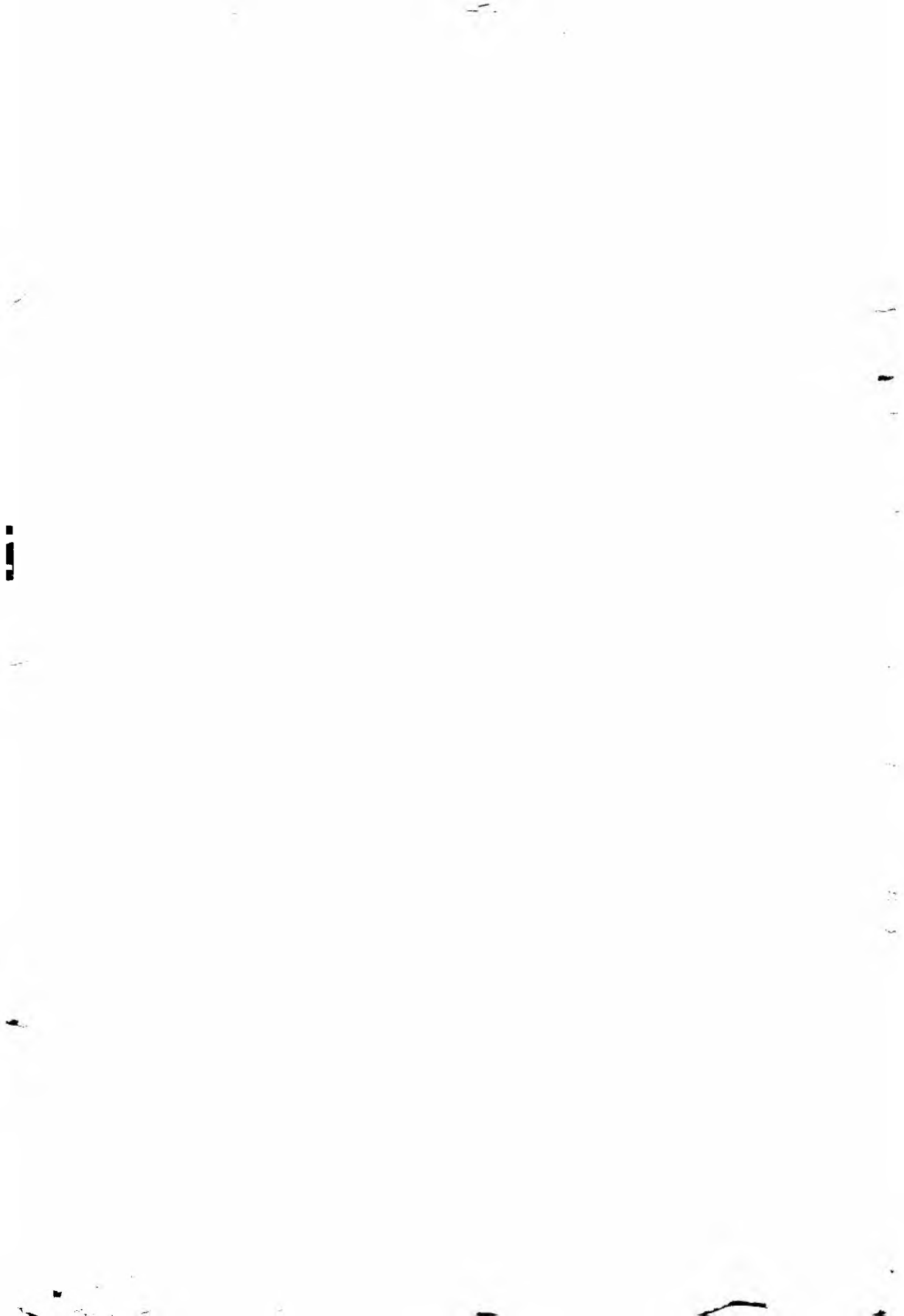
Lawless Night Riders And Blazing
Guns Mean A

LOST HOMESTEAD

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fight for grass by Peter Dawson

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NORMAN A. FOX
KENNETH GILBERT and others







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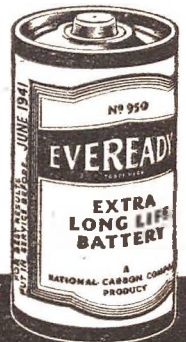
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VOL. CLXC No. 2

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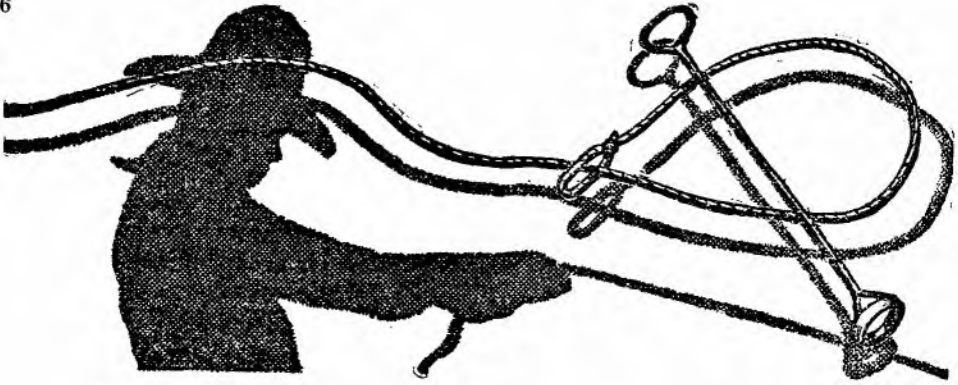
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The Roundup

IN addition to presenting the best Western fiction it is possible to acquire, it is the purpose of Western Story to be of a real and practical help to its readers. Our departments, Guns and Gunners, Where To Go and How To Get There, and Mines and Mining, have a large following from week to week, but every year thousands of readers write to the experts who handle the departments for personal information and help. Evidence that Western Story provides a real, practical service is found in such letters as the following from Miss Flora R. Fix, of Reading, Pennsylvania, addressed to John North:

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about ancient Rome. I spent a few days at Frijoles Canyon Lodge, and saw a Pueblo cliff dwelling. I also visited Carlsbad Caverns.

"The only complaint I have is that I feel that I shall never be satisfied until I can make my home in or near Santa Fe—but probably every other Eastern tenderfoot feels the same way after going there. I read many of your articles in Where To Go and How To Get There, but all other places seem dull after Santa Fe. I hope to read many more articles on New Mexico and Arizona and other desert country.

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Red Knight rode out of the dust to the head of his trail herd to find armed men blocking the way—he would have to turn back or fight through!

Lost Homestead

BY PETER DAWSON

CHAPTER I

GUN-BLOCKADED WATER

LATE afternoon of that still, hot day saw dust hanging lazily at almost the exact center of Los Alamos Basin. Down out of the north, from a jagged line of peaks, wound a stream's silvery ribbon. It was marked by a broad green line of trees and lush grass. Halfway across the

basin, having followed its eastern edge along a maze of drab torn badlands, the stream swung west past the town of Tres Piedras. Beyond, it bisected the grassy lowlands for close to twenty-five miles. A low notch in the heights to the west marked the place where it left the basin and coursed downward to the desert's hazy floor.

The taillike streamer following the

dust cloud deep in the basin pointed east, in the general direction of a trail that would eventually have a man back across Navaho country and into upper New Mexico. For many days now the center of that dust haze had crawled west along the trail, almost from its beginning at Santa Fe. Ten miles a day, occasionally twelve, at rare intervals fifteen, the progress of the four hundred longhorns whose hoofs churned up that visible sign had been a relentless onward surging. This afternoon the herd had slowed for the first time in over sixty days. The reason: Its goal lay in sight.

Red Knight, owner of the herd, was riding drag, a bandanna tied halfway up on his lean face against the dust, when Clem Reynolds, his aging segundo, appeared through the haze to call sharply above the thirst bawling of the cattle:

"Fence ahead, Red! Only way to the river is down a dang lane! Do I go 'round it?"

Red cuffed back his Stetson to send a sifting line of dust down off the hat's back brim onto his wide shoulders. He scrubbed his forehead with his hand, and his gray eyes narrowed in speculation as he listened to the bawling of the herd. His answer was: "Go down it, Clem!"

That reply only hastened a happening that, either way, would have been inevitable. Red's two wing riders pressed in on the flanks and presently, after a perceptible slowing, the thirsty animals were hemmed in on either side by the stout lines of a four-wire fence. Red held his roan back until the dust had settled somewhat, then put him on at a walk between fields of new corn, ankle-high wheat and bright green patches of chili. A low dove appeared out of the dust, an over-

alled figure standing in its shaded yard leaning on a hoe. Red lifted a hand in greeting, got no answer, and rode on, puzzled by the show of unfriendliness that had met his first wordless interchange with a man of this country.

But he had little time to dwell on this puzzle, for the next moment he heard shouting ahead and the drag slowed, the longhorns impatiently milling and bawling. Then Clem Reynolds appeared once more out of the dust fog, quirting his brown gelding, bellowing at a steer that blocked his path. His pony rammed the steer's flank and came on, shying from flying hoofs. Clem, face flushed angrily, pulled rein.

"We're stopped!" he said in a grating voice. "Right at the river! Bunch of jaspers loaded down with artillery! They say we can't go on!"

A ROCK-HARD gravity took Red Knight's ordinarily good-humored face. He eyed his foreman as though wanting to make sure no joke lay behind his words. Then: "Let's go have a look." He started ahead, retracing Clem's route along the crowded fence to the left.

A swing rider appeared out of the fog close at hand, and Red called: "Get back and hold 'em, Ed. Send Tex up front!"

The roan, wise to his business, nicely avoided the arcing horns and the angered rushes of the saltier bulls going along the crowded lane. The smell of water was strong in the air, and the herd, thirst crazy, pressed vainly against the leaders.

Red finally rode clear of that dusty welter of packed animals to find two of his men, Jim Rhodes and Frank Phelan, holding the lead steers at the mouth of the lane that emptied down onto the sands along the river bank. Gathered below, along

the rush of the clear-watered stream, were twelve riders headed by a massively built man mounted on a black stallion. This individual sat with a Winchester sloped across the horn of his saddle. There were more rifles behind him; and not a man of his dozen lacked a thigh holster; a few wore two.

"Keep 'em there!" Red called to Phelan, and put the roan down toward the men who blocked the way.

He was keenly aware of his empty thigh. This morning, on breaking camp, he had ordered all guns checked in with the cook, who had driven his chuck wagon west to cross the river at a different point. Red's motive in taking the guns from his men had been distinctly honorable; it didn't seem friendly to come riding into strange country wearing weapons.

He stopped ten feet above the man on the black. "What's the trouble?" he inquired mildly.

"You don't go across," was the prompt answer. The speaker appeared to be close to Red's age, crowding thirty. He was handsome in a blunt way, his square, good-featured face darkly bronze. Tall, he lacked an inch or so of Red's height, which was six-two. But he was heavier and, in contrast to Red's dusty outfit of worn boots and faded denims, his whipcords, fancy-stitched boots, and blue-and-white checked shirt were glaringly immaculate. One thing more completed the contrast; his hair was black, Red's was a bright sorrel.

"How come?" was Red's steady query.

The man lifted massive shoulders in a shrug. "We say so."

"You're sheriff?"

The man laughed, shook his head. "Just plain Duke Clanton."

There was a touch of arrogance

to Clanton's looks that galled Red. But he didn't give any outward sign of that as he drawled: "These critters haven't tasted water for three days, Clanton. This's about as far as they can go without it."

"Tough," Clanton said, with mock-sorrowful expression. He let it go at that.

THERE was something here Red couldn't understand. He tried to find his answers by saying: "I'm Knight, from Texas. I was in last fall filin' on graze across there." He lifted a hand to indicate the low westward hills. "Had a man on it all winter, workin' on a tank and stringin' wire. Now I'm bringin' in stuff to—"

"You ain't," drawled Clanton. "And Spence left here in March."

At Red's elbow, Clem Reynolds asked sharply: "Why would Ned do that?" Clem counted Spence, the man Red had left on the homestead, his best friend.

"Climate wasn't right for his health," was Clanton's answer.

"Let's get this straight." Red held down his anger. "I'm on my way across the river. I'll water and keep straight on, if that's what's worryin' you."

"Was I worryin'?" came Clanton's smooth drawl. "We say you don't cross the river. You don't even water here."

It was bluntly put, a challenge Red had no way of answering. Once again he was aware of his empty thigh. He was aware also of the bawling, crowding herd behind, of his tired crew.

"You can't deny a man water," was the only reply he could think to give Clanton. "These critters can't go back. They wouldn't live to do it! Then there's the law. What—"

Again that coarse laugh of Clanton's rang out. "What about the law? We make our own! Brother, you got a few things to learn! First off, we don't want cattle north of the river. Stay over here with the nesters if you want, but don't set foot across there." He jerked his head toward the narrow stream's opposite shore.

"We can settle that later," Red said. "Right now you can let me through to water. I'll keep my stuff on this side."

"Danged right you will! All the way. We shoot the first critter that dips snout in this creek!" Clanton's rifle nosed up.

But for the thing that happened then, Red Knight might have led his crew to a disastrous end. A steer broke through the two point riders and charged toward the stream. Lazily, almost, Clanton lifted the Winchester to his shoulder, following the animal's loping charge. The steer waded into the stream and his head dropped to drink. Clanton's rifle spoke sharply. The steer stiffened, lunged a step and fell over on his side, his blood darkly clouding the clear water. Clanton's bullet had smashed his heart.

Then, as Red's boots were swinging out to gouge the roan into a charge at Clanton, a voice called from behind: "Hold it! Knight, come across here!"

Turning, Red caught the nod of a man in bib overalls leaning on the corner post of the nearest fence. The man added: "Don't commit suicide!"

Red gave Clanton a long level glance which also showed him several drawn six-guns in the rank of men behind. He lifted reins and brought the roan wheeling around to the fence.

"MY handle's Jennifer," the man in overalls announced. "Toad Jennifer. I own this farm." With a gesture he included what lay behind the fence he leaned on. He looked up squint-eyed at Red. "Better go easy with Clanton. He's boss on the Circle D."

Red remembered having heard of the outfit. "Tom Dennis'?"

Jennifer nodded. "Was Tom's. But the old man died this last fall, leavin' his daughter owner. Clanton rods for her. Sheepman!" His last word was added scornfully.

"Sheep?" Red's glance went to Clanton again. "I thought Dennis was a big name in cattle."

"It was. But Clanton talked the girl into stockin' the layout with woollies. Ain't you winded the stink yet?"

Red heard someone approaching and turned to see Clanton coming up on them. Clanton eyed Jennifer sourly. "Don't get any ideas, Toad," he drawled. Then, to Red: "And don't pay him to let you water your stuff inside his line. That won't work, either."

Jennifer flared: "I guess I got a right to—"

"To do exactly as we say," Clanton slapped the oiled stock of the rifle. "Knight, turn around and go back! We don't want any more ten-cow outfits in this country!"

Clem Reynolds rode up, saying wrathfully: "Red, we can't hold 'em much longer!" He looked at Clanton, his old face apoplectic. "Shuck them guns and step down, and I'll beat your liver white, mister!"

"Easy, Clem!" Red said quickly. "Better start pushin' 'em back." He saw that his old foreman was on the verge of causing serious trouble. Clem glared a last time at Clanton, then rode back to the head of the lane to give orders to the crew.

"That's showin' sense," Clanton observed suavely.

"I'll repeat that invitation," Red drawled, openly running his hand along his weaponless thigh.

"Another time." Clanton rode down to join his men.

"Callin' that gent a skunk is abusin' the name of a noble animal!" Jennifer muttered. "Well, I tried. Was only goin' to charge you a nickel a head to let you water inside my fence."

"Thanks," was all Red could think of to say. He was about to go across to join Clem and the others when a thought made him say: "We'll be camped out on the flats tonight, Jennifer. I'd appreciate knowin' more about this. The food ain't so fancy, but I'd like to buy you your supper."

"I'll be there," was Jennifer's answer.

CHAPTER II

ADVICE FROM A BASIN MAN

THE lights of Tres Piedras pinpointed the night off to the northwest, seeming, feebly, to mirror the star-sprinkled and vast reach of cobalt sky that was crystal clear except for a long belt of thin clouds in the west. The chuck wagon was a faint grayish blob below the redly glowing fire. The night's stillness was ridden with the plaintive bawling of the thirsty herd. Red, a generous supper under his belt, listened to the off-key chant of a night rider and wondered if those clouds off there meant that it sometimes rained in this dry country. He glanced at Clem, then at Toad Jennifer.

"So we really are licked," he mused. "I thought I'd find a way around it."

Jennifer shook his near-bald head. The three of them had had the fire to themselves these last twenty min-

utes, the others either going back to riding circle over the herd, or to their blankets, for all were worn out by the trying three-hour battle of pushing the stubborn longhorns back up the narrow lane and out across the flats to this spot, three miles from the creek.

"There ain't any way around it," declared Jennifer. "This Clanton has guns to back him. He's sold all them outfits north of the creek to tryin' sheep. They're makin' money and they'll fight."

"But this Dennis girl," Red insisted. "Her old man was half long-horn, if what you say is true. Where's her pride?"

"Burned out, same as old Tom's was. He took a lickin' two years runnin' on a bad drought. It whittled down the outfit some. He left the girl with a loan at the bank and half his range burned out. It must've been easy for Clanton to swing her over. Add to that his courtin' her and her likin' same and you have your answers. There ain't an oversupply of men hereabouts that could fill Duke Clanton's boots."

"Where's your law?" Clem asked, his voice sounding tired and dried up.

Jennifer chuckled softly. "Where it's been for the past ten years. Tom Dennis put Harvey Jenkins in office, and Clanton's bunch will keep him there. Anything the Circle D does is right by Harv. Same as it was before Dennis cashed in. Someone swung a powerful big sticky loop in here last year. Seemed partial to Circle D stuff. When Dennis blamed us small outfits, Jenkins backed him. That's another thing."

"What is?" Red asked, when the basin man hesitated.

"This rustlin'. Dennis' guess was way wide of the mark. I know my neighbors. They're honest. They

didn't have to steal to make a livin'. All the same, we got blamed. It's just one more reason why Gail Dennis let Clanton sell her on sheep. Now she thinks she's gettin' even. They've made the creek a boundary. No cattle north of it. Rammin' it down our throats, so to speak."

THE silence ran out, broken only occasionally now by the bawling of a thirsty, wakeful animal. Red's tanned face was a mask of gravity as he stared into the coals of the fire. Finally he drawled: "And I'm stuck with four hundred critters that'll be four hundred carcasses unless they get water within the next two days, three at the outside! Well, I won't sit here and take it!"

"I've been thinkin'," Jennifer said: "There ain't but two parties in the valley that could help you any. One's Doc Masker, owner of the saloon in town. He might buy up your critters and take a chance on turnin' some money resellin' 'em. He'll drive a hard bargain."

"Who's the other?" Red queried.

"Gail Dennis."

Red sat straighter. He laughed, a laugh that sent Toad Jennifer's eyes down to the gun at his hip. Toad had noticed that the whole crew now wore guns and was privately thankful they hadn't when meeting Clanton's bunch, which outnumbered them.

"That's a hot one!" drawled Red.

Jennifer cocked his head speculatively. "She might buy; I can't get it out of my craw that she don't know how you was treated today. She ain't hard-hearted enough to deny a man water for his animals when they're near dead from thirst. It's an idea, Knight. You might try and see her."

"How would I go about it?"

"See Doc Masker first. Then go

to the girl. Get 'em to biddin' against each other."

"But whichever way it goes, I lose."

Jennifer nodded reluctantly. "Seems like you do."

Red came erect, thumbing alight a match and holding it to a new-rolled cigarette. "Clem," he drawled. "We're takin' a slight pasear around."

"Where to?"

"Down to the river."

Jennifer shook his head. "Not a chance. Clanton's men are ridin' the creek. Poke your head in there and you'll run into the same trouble you did this afternoon. Only more of it."

"That's what I'm after tonight. Trouble!"

"Suit yourself." Jennifer shrugged. Then he looked up at Red. "How come you ain't inquired after Spence?" he asked.

"Too many other things to think about," Red admitted guiltily. Strangely enough, he'd almost forgotten Spence, the man he'd left on the homestead last fall. "What do you know about him?"

"Only that the last time he was seen was in town, at Doc Masker's place. Duke Clanton and four or five of his men cleaned him down to his boots and underwear in a stud game. Next mornin' he'd disappeared. The day after, his jughead was found down on the desert, draggin' the hull under his belly. That was three months ago. No one ever found him."

"Dead?" Clem asked in a hollow voice.

Again Jennifer shrugged. This time he added no word to that gesture.

Clem stood up, looking at Red. "What're we waitin' on?" he said

acidly. "I got to do somethin' to keep from goin' loco!"

As they walked out of the dim circle of firelight, Jennifer called after them: "Mind if I wait here till you get back? I'd sort of like to know how you come out."

"Help yourself to blankets," Red said, waving in the general direction of the chuck wagon. Then, as they went to the rope corral and got their ponies, he forgot about Jennifer, too preoccupied with his other troubles to give the man another thought.

CHAPTER III

THE WOMAN IN THE HOTEL

THE town of Tres Piedras, so named for the three rocky buttes that rose half a mile to the south of the creek behind it, seemed only half alive as Red and Clem rode its street at nine thirty.

"Some dump! Walks rolled up a'ready," Clem observed sourly, as they came between the rows of false-fronted stores. He nodded ahead. "Would that be Masker's joint?"

"Looks like it." Red swung across and they put their ponies in at the saloon's tie rail. A barely discernible painted sign on the face of the broad wooden walk awning read **ROSEBUD BAR** and, below it, **R. J. Masker, Prop.**

"Funny," Clem observed, as they ducked under the tie rail and crossed the walk, "but I hadn't expected ever to hit a town as dry as this and want a drink less."

Red made no reply, but shouldered in through the batwing doors, his eyes squinted against the rude glare of overhead lamps that cut the thin smoke fog of a barnlike room.

The Rosebud was unpretentious, even for so small a town as Tres Piedras. Wider than it was deep,

the bar and a doorway occupied the back wall. To the right were faro and blackjack layouts, to the left two poker tables. Half a dozen men were at the bar, four more seated around one poker layout. Red's glance went to the latter and remained there.

Duke Clanton was one of the four, sitting with his back to the saloon's side wall. As the doors swung shut behind Clem, Clanton's glance lifted and met Red's, and a slow smile broke across his wide face. Seeing that smile, the others turned and looked doorward also.

Sudden decision started Red across there. Under his breath, he warned: "Stay set, Clem!"

He stopped close to the nearest chair at the table, looking at Clanton and drawling: "This is luck!" He was at ease, feeling better than he had any time during the last six hours. Here was his chance to even the score with Clanton. Clem had his back covered and a cool nervelessness was settling through him.

No one at the table made a reply, yet wariness touched the eyes of all four.

"Go for your iron, Clanton!" Red said abruptly, deciding not to waste more words.

Clanton's left hand folded his cards and then lay on the table. "No dice," he said. "I ain't lookin' for trouble, Knight."

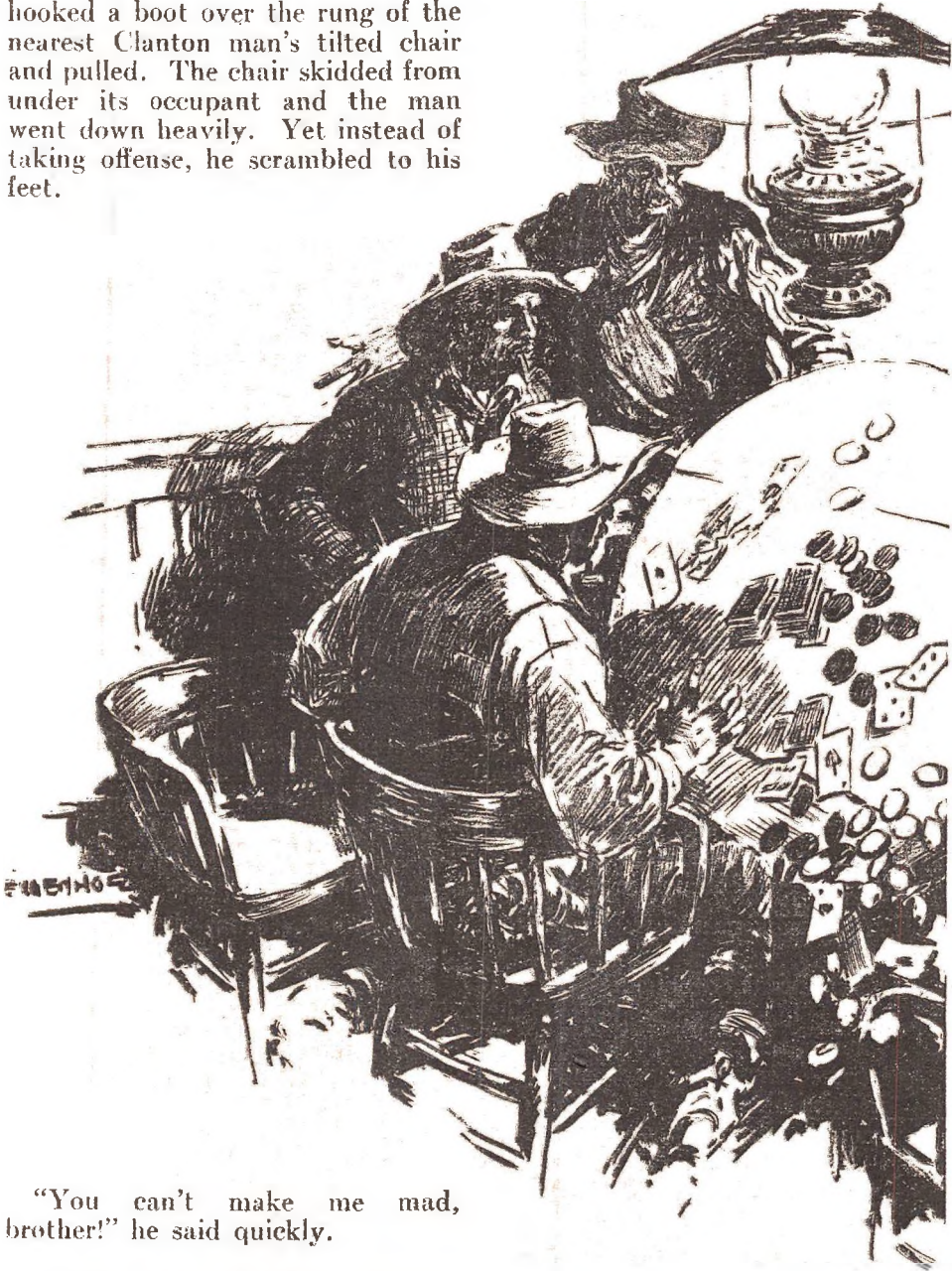
"I am! All you've got!"

"Don't let him rile you, boys!" Clanton said, none too steadily.

Here, sitting calmly before Red, refusing to fight, was the man who was costing him his future in this country. He heard Clem drawl behind him: "Keep your hands in sight, apron!" and was aware of the barkeep raising his hands.

Then, still sure of himself, Red

hooked a boot over the rung of the nearest Clanton man's tilted chair and pulled. The chair skidded from under its occupant and the man went down heavily. Yet instead of taking offense, he scrambled to his feet.



"You can't make me mad, brother!" he said quickly.

ONCE again Red thrust sharply with his boot, this time against the table edge. The table caught Duke Clanton in the stomach and tilted sideways away from him, spilling chips, money and cards onto the floor with a rattling thud

that made the planking tremble.

Still Duke Clanton made no move. His smile returned and he drawled: "We could talk this over, Knight!"

Just then a voice that Red recognized as his foreman's gave a painful



Duke Clanton and his men hardly knew Knight was in the room until he kicked over the poker table and said, "Go for your iron, Clanton!"

grunt. Then Clem was swearing saltily and another voice was saying: "Lift 'em, stranger!"

Red didn't turn until the wary tightness of Clanton's smile relaxed and the Circle D man said blandly: "You've got a gun lined at your spine, Knight!"

Facing about, Red was brought face to face with a man standing close behind him. In one hand the man held a gun lined at him. In the other hung Clem's horn-handled .45. Clem, off to one side now, was pale and holding his right wrist. It was obvious to Red that his foreman had been surprised by the entrance of Clanton's man through the doors behind him.

A chair scraped. Red faced Clanton again. The Circle D foreman pushed the overturned table aside and came close in to Red. "I ought to fix you for a set of store teeth, Knight," he drawled. "Instead, I'm makin' you a proposition."

Red stood there silently, trying to judge where he could hit Clanton to make the most of the one

blow he felt was all he'd be able to throw before getting a bullet in the back.

"You'll like it, too," Clanton said. "I want to buy your herd. Or, rather, Miss Dennis does."

Red shook his head. "No deal."

Clanton's bushy black brows raised slightly in surprise. "Thinkin' of Doc Masker?" he queried. "Because if you are, you're fresh out o' luck. Doc's away. He'll be gone a week."

"It's still no deal."

"Isn't Gail Dennis' money as good as Masker's? I can offer you spot cash within an hour. Within ten minutes, if you'll wait while I go across to the hotel and see if she's available."

"What the devil, boss?" said one of the trio, a dark-faced half-breed, who'd been at the table with Clanton. "She's—"

"Shut up, Pete!" Clanton snapped, in the first show of outright anger Red had seen him display. "Want to see her, Knight?" he queried, pressingly.

Reason was beginning to dissipate Red's anger. Clanton was offering him the only way out of this predicament. It galled him to give in to the man, but after a moment he nodded his answer.

"I'll be right back," Clanton said, and stepped around Red and across through the doors, which swung shut sharply behind him.

Red looked back at Clem and, ignoring the others, said: "How about that drink, partner?"

They stepped unchallenged across to the bar. As the barkeep set the bottle before them, he said in a hoarse whisper: "Stranger, you better make tracks while you got the chance!" He nodded toward the alley door nearby.

Red smiled wryly, poured their

drinks and emptied his glass at a gulp. Ordinarily, he felt no need for whiskey. But the warmth of the liquor seemed to steady his nerves and, Clem's glass also empty, he poured another. He knew that Duke Clanton had level-headedly put aside a personal grudge for some obscure reason. His long acquaintance with trouble and the ways of men in trouble told him that something unexpected was going to happen, something so important that it had made Clanton willing to ignore an insult.

He was draining the last drop of that second drink when Clanton reappeared at the doors. The Circle D foreman said briefly: "She'll see you. Across the street."

"Come along, Clem," Red said, and went out the doors and followed Clanton across the street, aware that Clanton's men were coming along behind him.

Clanton made no pretense at friendliness, but walked up the broad steps of the hotel veranda and into the lobby. He nodded to a door in the right corner of the lobby, saying briefly: "She's in there. Go ahead."

THE room Red entered was small, furnished with cheap deal chairs and tables, a writing room. A woman sat behind one of the tables near a window, and Red's first glimpse of her made him halt in surprise a moment before he came on into the room.

He had expected something different, a woman with more looks, refinement. This woman had a coarse appearance; her face, rouged and powdered, might once have been pretty, but now showed age.

"Miss Dennis," Clanton said, "this is Knight."

The woman nodded. "Sit down," she invited.

Red took a chair, annoyed at the familiarity of the smile that accompanied her words. Clanton came over, carrying another chair, calling back to the door: "It's all right, boys. We don't need company." He gave Clem, who stood leaning against the wall alongside Red, a scowl and sat down. "Better let him have it straight out, Gail," he said.

The woman nodded. "That's the way I do business. Take it or leave it!"

Her manner irritated Red. His opinion of the late Tom Dennis suffered some revision. His opinion of Toad Jennifer changed somewhat, too, for the homesteader had spoken respectfully of Gail Dennis.

"Take what?" he inquired.

"Her offer." Clanton gave the woman a look. "Tell him."

"Twenty-five hundred," she said flatly. "And that's every damn cent you'll get!"

Profanity from the mouth of a woman was something Red had rarely heard outside the walls of a saloon. But he overlooked it as his mind took in the shock of her words. Twenty-five hundred dollars for his herd!

"That's barely six dollars a head," he drawled. "These critters of mine are fat, even if they are thirsty. No old crowbaits, either; most of 'em three-year-olds! They'd bring thirty dollars on the open market."

"This isn't the open market," Clanton reminded him.

In the following silence, a fly buzzed at the hot chimney of the lamp and fell wing-burned to the table top. Streetward sounded the *clop-clop-clop* of a fast-walking horse. Clem shifted his position, his shirt sleeve rubbing audibly

against the wall paper. Red looked up at him.

"Take that or nothin'!" Clanton put in.

"What'll you do with the herd?" Red asked the woman.

She shrugged and her look was undecided. Her hand went up to smooth down a lock of her lusterless mouse-colored hair.

Clanton put in quickly: "Get it on its feet and drive south to Tucson. Make money."

"While I take my lickin'."

Clanton nodded. Red looked at Clem. A barely perceptible lift of the oldster's shoulders told him that Clem was as much at a loss as he was himself.

Abruptly, Red said: "You spoke of payin' cash."

Clanton gave the woman a meaningful glance. She reached down under the table and her hand came up and tossed a tight roll of paper money across the ink-splattered table. "Count it!"

"And give us a bill of sale," Clanton drawled.

Red counted the bills. Twenty-five hundred dollars. He hunched sideward toward Duke Clanton as he pushed the roll deep into a pocket of his Levis.

Suddenly, his shoulder close to Clanton's, he threw his body to the side and up in a swift lunge. His shoulder caught Clanton on the jaw, throwing him off balance as he tried to dodge. Then Red was on his feet.

Braced that way, he put all the drive of his tall frame behind the swing of his right fist. The woman screamed. Clanton's hand dipped toward his thigh. His big fist was closing on gun butt as Red's knuckles slammed his jaw.

The blow lifted Clanton's heavy frame half up out of the chair. His

body went loose, his eyes rolled to the whites and he sagged down and sprawled at full length on the floor. Before he had straightened out, Red had stooped to snatch his heavy .45 from holster.

RED pivoted toward the door in time to catch a Clanton man coming through it. The woman, on her feet and cringing back to the wall, screamed again as the .45 in Red's hand exploded. The man in the doorway choked out a startled groan and his right arm hung limp. He lunged back out of the door, colliding with a second man as Red sent another bullet after him.

"The window, Clem!" Red said. Picking up the chair he'd been sitting on, he hurled it through the lower sash of the nearby window.

Clem climbed through the jagged opening. Red followed feet first, pausing astride the sill to shoot again into the lobby. Then he jumped, his legs took up the drive of his six-foot fall, and the two of them ran down the passageway between the hotel and the adjoining building. Coming onto the street two buildings below and across from the saloon, they chose a pair of horses at the nearest tie rail and pounded out of town before the first shouts announcing their flight echoed along the street.

A mile from town, Clem drew close to Red's pony to say: "Did you bust his neck?"

Red grinned broadly at his foreman. "He'll live." Then he asked, shouting above the pound of their ponies' hoofs: "Did Jennifer say what color Gail Dennis' hair was?"

Clem looked puzzled. "No. Why?"

"Want to make me a bet?"

"Depends."

"That the woman back there was not Gail Dennis!"

"I'll be hornswoggled!" was all Clem Reynolds could think to answer.

Twenty minutes later, when they had pulled Toad Jennifer out of his blankets, Red was asking: "What does Gail Dennis look like, Toad? What color's her hair?"

Toad frowned, muttering under his breath at the rough handling the last few seconds had given him. "Who in tarnation cares? It's light, corn-colored."

"And this woman could have been mated to a mouse." Red laughed long and loud.

"What woman? What's so funny?" demanded Jennifer.

"Tell you later. Right now we've got to move."

"Where to?" Jennifer was reaching down to pull on his boots.

"Anywhere but here. We're movin' the herd. On west. I've got an idea."

"It'd better be good!" drawled Clem, leaving to rout the four sleeping members of the crew from their blankets.

Red was looking toward the west, where what looked like a high bank of hills now blotted out the stars. Those dark masses hadn't been there, backing the hills that edged the desert, an hour ago.

They were clouds. Red Knight was gambling on them.

CHAPTER IV

RED'S GAMBLE

CLEM, get the herd movin'!" Red told his old foreman, as soon as the crew was gathered at the now near-dead fire. "Push west, fast as you can. Nels," he spoke to the cook, "hitch your team. I'm going with you. Tex, your job's the horses.

Every man take a rifle. If you're stopped—" He hesitated a moment, then added: "But you won't be. It'll take 'em a while to find the camp. By then we'll be gone."

"What's all this addin' up to?" Clem asked.

"Water," was Red's cryptic answer. "When you get out a ways turn those two horses loose. The ones we came out on."

"How about me?" Jennifer asked. "Ain't you got another job?"

Red's glance went to the basin man gratefully. "I want to move the herd five miles, better seven," he explained. "Is there a wash off there you're sure will run water if it rains?"

"Why, sure, Red," Jennifer said, "they all run—if it rains. But it ain't goin' to. These clouds don't mean a thing."

"Maybe not. But you ride the chuck wagon with Nels and me. And if your back's strong enough to heave some dirt, you can help us throw an earth dam across a wash and catch the run, if there's rain."

"You're doin' this for nothin', Red," was Clem's gloomy reminder. "You sold these critters."

"Clanton can't produce a bill of sale," Red said.

"But there's still the sheriff," Jennifer reminded him.

"And there's Gail Dennis," was Red's reply.

"What about her?" This from Clem.

"I don't know yet. But I do know I won't let these critters dry up and blow away. Get goin'! If the law stops us, we've tried anyway."

The next hour seemed interminable to Red Knight. Sitting the jolting swaying seat of the chuck wagon between Nels Hansen and Toad Jennifer, he studied the dark

cloud bank to the west until his eyes ached. He vainly tried to catch the taint of rain riding the cool night air but only the tang of dust and the smell of horses and harness leather blended with its freshness.

"It never rains this late in spring," Jennifer said once.

"But it's going to tonight."

After that they sat in silence, the cook following Jennifer's brief instructions. The miles fell behind. They climbed to more broken country where the hills were bare and treeless under the starlight.

Finally Jennifer said, "This ought to do," as they brought the dark gash of a deep wash in sight. "This thing'll run water if she rains a drop south of the creek."

Red swung aground from a wheel hub as the team came to a stand. "Drag out the shovels, Nels," he ordered. "Then take a horse and go find Tex and have him bring his bunch across here." The cook would have little difficulty in finding the wrangler, for they had come directly west since leaving the camp ground.

WORK was the only thing that seemed to ease Red's mind, and work he did, bending over a shovel at the bottom of the high-banked wash. He channeled out a shallow trough across the bed of the arroyo, marking the line of a dam to be thrown up. Jennifer also began to work. For an hour and a half they shoveled in silence. Red paused only twice and both times climbed the far bank to stand on the wash's rim and peer upward at the sky. The last time, he saw the clouds climbing darkly, their upper reaches almost directly overhead.

"Want to lay money on it, Jennifer?" he called. But the only reply that came up to him was a solid

grunt as the basin man strained against the weight of his shovel.

Shortly after that Nels Hansen slid down the bank and spelled Jennifer. In ten more minutes Tex Olds was there with another shovel from the chuck wagon. No one spoke.

They heard the herd moving up out of the east a long time later. By then the bank of dirt and gravel running across the wash had risen knee-high. And only then did Red surrender his shovel and, calling, "Keep at it!" climb the east bank.

Weariness was cutting him bone deep. His shirt clung to his back wetly and his curly red hair was sweat plastered as he took off his Stetson to blot his forehead. In the saddle of Tex's pony, swinging out from the chuck wagon in the direction of the sound made by the herd, he felt a splashing drop of rain strike his left hand. He reined in quickly. A fitful gust of wind whipped another drop in at his face, then another struck his right shoulder with a weighty drive.

All the weariness went out of him as he touched Tex's gray with a light spur. He felt like shouting, singing, riding fast to feel the whip of the now strengthening breeze cut his face. But he took his time, his thankfulness a sobering thing. Then, gradually, his elation was wiped away by the knowledge that he'd gained only a temporary victory. The pressing bulge of the money roll in his right pants pocket was a grim reminder of things to come.

When he had found the herd and his old foreman, Clem said: "You must've brought along one o' them crystal balls to gaze into, fella. What do we do now?" They both wore ponchos now against the gusty flurries of rain.

Red took him on ahead, pointing out the wash at a place where it widened and the bank sloped less steeply. "Hold 'em here till it runs, Clem, then let 'em work down. Not too far, or they'll tramp down the dam. Send a man to help us throw up more dirt when you've got 'em settled."

The rain was coming in fitful wind-driven squalls when Red got back to the chuck wagon. He slid down the bank to take Jennifer's shovel and worked with a new strength, ignoring a broken blister on his hand. Frank Phelan appeared to announce that the herd was being held in the wash. Frank got to work with a shovel and from then on the earth-work dam grew fast.

Red was thankful that lightning and thunder didn't come as the storm hit. A driving, straight-down rain settled in at last. He stood up, leaned on his shovel and called: "That's all! Now all we have to do is wait."

He looked with satisfaction at the four-foot slanting wall of earth that crossed the wash. There was no trickle of water behind it yet, for the hungry soil in the uplands was soaking in the rain as fast as it fell. But soon now there would come a trickle, then a rush of water. Then, if the herd was placed right, if the dam held half an hour, better forty minutes, the animals would be watered and safe on the unstaked graze of this open country.

As they wearily climbed the bank of the wash they saw a glow shining through the gray curtain of the rain. Coming up on it, Red saw that the cook had built a cedar fire under the wagon. A piece of sheet iron wired below the wooden bed protected the dry planking.

"Got a head on his shoulders, that

grub slinger," Jennifer commented admiringly as they lined up to take steaming-hot tin cups of coffee.

The wash began running after the rain had stopped, as the first hint of the false dawn was graying the far horizon. They were all there to see the herd moved slowly down. Up the wash sounded a low roar. Then, around a bend above, came a foot-high and foaming wall of water rushing slowly down, filling the wash from bank to bank.

"Held 'em!" Red called, and spurred his pony down the four hundred yards to the dam. There he worked feverishly with a shovel for five minutes, gouging a notch into the dam. Minutes later, when the foaming, debris-strewn water dropped slowly into sight, his effort was rewarded. The water hit the dam, filled in behind it quickly and would have overflowed and washed it away but for the notch that let the overflow escape. Even with the notch, a pool some sixty feet broad was gradually filling in behind.

CLEM and his men let the herd drift down to the pool. Soon they stood heads down to the muddy water. Presently, Red saw the flow slackening, and used his shovel again and filled in the notch. The water rose slowly and in another hour, when the sun's disk edged over the eastern flats, the pool was full to within a foot of the top of the dam.

Jennifer, who had stood on the bank above, called suddenly: "Trouble comin', Red!" There was an edge to his voice that made Red climb quickly up the bank to stand beside him.

Jennifer pointed valleyward. Red saw a knot of riders topping a rise three miles away, in the direction of the town.

"Clanton and the sheriff, I reckon," Jennifer commented.

"You'd better hit for home and stay clear of this, Jennifer," Red said hurriedly. "Thanks for all you've done. I'll drop around the first chance I get."

Then he was off at a run for the chuck wagon, where a black gelding was tied.

"Clem, get up here!" he called sharply.

He was swinging into the saddle when Clem rode up over the bank. Red pointed at the oncoming horsemen. "Better tell the boys not to get proddy," he said. "If Clanton wants the herd, let him have it. If he's got a warrant for me, tell him anything you want. Tell him I've started south for Tucson. Remember, we don't know a thing about those two jugheads someone stole in town last night."

"Where you goin' if it ain't to Tucson?"

"Across to pay a call on Gail Dennis."

Clem whistled. "Askin' for trouble, ain't you?"

"Clanton's crew will be with him. That means I shouldn't have any trouble getting in to see her."

"When you see her, then what?"

"I don't know." Red turned the black away toward the nearest rise that would conceal him from the advancing posse. Then he paused to add: "Better get yourself some extra tobacco, Clem. You're liable to run short in jail."

"Hey!" Clem called as he went away. "You can't let 'em lock me up!" But as Red skirted the rise and rode out of sight, a wide smile broke the severe planes of the old man's mustached face. "Like Hades he don't know what he's doin'!" He turned to the cook. "Nels, you got any extra makin's?"

CHAPTER V

QUICK SALE

RED crossed the river west of Tres Piedras, close in to the low hills that edged the desert. Once beyond the stream the look of the country changed indefinitely, although it had the same rolling, grassy, tree-dotted outline as that to the south. All at once Red realized what it was that was different. Bunches of sheep grazed in the distance. The white cones of herders' tents showed here and there. Occasionally Red glimpsed a herder and his dog. It was strange not to see cattle grazing a vast, rich stretch of country like this. Something seemed to be lacking, and an impatient anger gradually took Red. Cattle-bred, he couldn't admire a man—or a woman!—who would sell out a range like this to sheep.

With two things to judge by, her foreman and her business, Red could feel little respect for Gail Dennis. The fact that she had let Clanton talk her into forsaking cattle for sheep convinced him that the girl must be weak-willed at best. He was convinced, too, that this errand would be a fruitless one. He tried to think why he had left the chuck wagon, left Clem to the mercy of the posse, and couldn't. He had acted on impulse alone, curious over the girl.

It didn't dawn on him that there was little point in seeing Tom Dennis' daughter, until he had already asked a herder the way to the Circle D. Then, because he would have had to ride ten miles back to the chuck wagon and only three more to the ranch, he went on.

Circle D's headquarters bore the unmistakable signs of good living as Red first looked down on it from half a mile's distance. The house was

built of rock, slate-roofed, shaped like a crude U. A quadrangle line of cottonwoods bordered a grassy yard. Outbuildings lay at a generous distance below the house, which crested a long slope.

Red came in along a lane between whitewashed pasture fences. A big buckskin stallion was the lone occupant of a small meadow on his right. Across the lane, two fine mares and their foals raised heads to watch him pass. Once again he had a moment of strange anger; fine horses and sheep didn't seem to go together.

Closer in, the layout had a deserted look. Red came in warily. Not until he'd left the head of the lane and was passing the biggest of the corrals did he see anyone. The man was evidently the cook, for he came out of a small dobe hut and emptied a bucket into a shallow ditch nearby. He paused a moment to look at Red, then disappeared through the door. Red's appearance seemed to have caused no more than casual interest.

Climbing the slope from the outbuildings to the house, Red rode a graveled path to the tie rail outside a picket fence that inclosed a patio. He sat the saddle stiffly a moment, wondering if he was being observed. Then he swung aground and went through the gate and up to the broad white-painted door that was shaded by a wide *portal*.

His knock went unanswered a long moment. Then the door swung open on a broadly smiling Chinese who tilted his head graciously and waited for Red to speak.

"Miss Dennis in?" Red asked.

"I see. You come in?"

"I'll wait here."

The door swung shut. Red sauntered over and leaned against a roof post. He built a smoke, feeling the

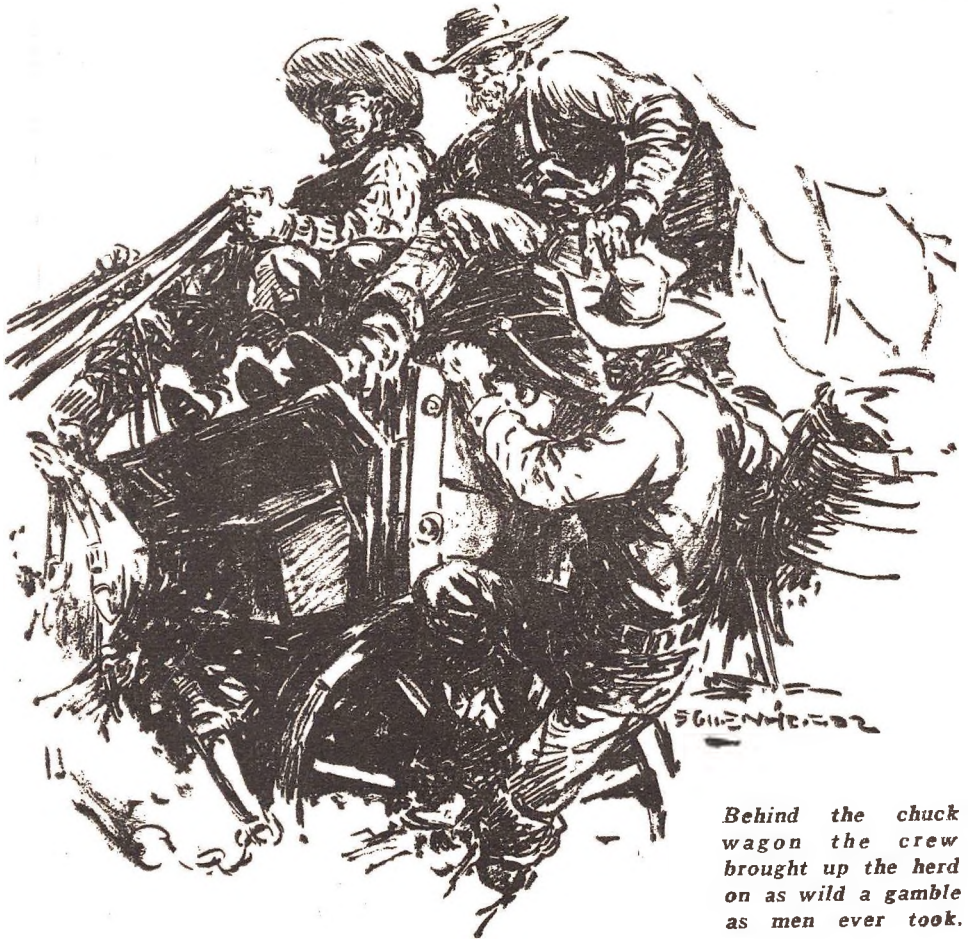
tautness of nerve strain ease out of him. It was pleasant here, cool, the fragrance of flowers filling the air. He revised his opinion of Gail Dennis somewhat. Every sheepman he had known had lived in near squalor, close to his pens, his outfit pervaded by the stench all cattlemen recognized as part of the business. The contrast between what he now found and what he'd expected brought a slow smile to Red's bronzed face.

THE door opened abruptly again and the girl who appeared in it caught a trace of that smile. Later, Red was to be thankful for that good

beginning, for Gail Dennis in turn smiled and her "Good morning," was as pleasant as though she was speaking to an old acquaintance.

His "Mornin', ma'am," was a trifle slow in coming. This girl had a freshness and a look of vivaciousness so foreign to his expectation that he stood a moment in awe of her.

Tall, her figure willowy and with a trace of boyish angularity, Gail Dennis' laughing blue eyes seemed to mock all his former certainties of her. She wore a light-blue percale dress, tight-waisted, sprigged with a yellow daisy pattern. And her hair was a golden blond, not



Behind the chuck wagon the crew brought up the herd on as wild a gamble as men ever took.

corn-colored. It was brushed back in a sweeping pompadour gathered in a knot at the nape of her slender neck.

Red's first impression was of a beautiful face. Then he decided that there was more character than beauty in it; the girl's generous mouth lacked the shallow rosebud quality of surface prettiness and the sun had tanned her skin a deeper olive than he knew was considered fashionable.

As he hesitated, a slight flush rode into her face. "You wanted to see me?" Her voice had a lilting musical quality that made him eager to hear it again.

"I was told you were the person to see about a certain matter. Fact is, I'm new here and not acquainted with the rules. It's about—"

"You must be Knight, the man who took out the homestead north of here," she said, as he stumbled for an explanation.

Red nodded, puzzled by her continued cordiality.

She went on: "Duke—Mr. Clanton; my foreman—mentioned you."

"He did?" Red's puzzlement was mounting. "Tell you anything in particular?"

"Only that he'd persuaded you not to bring your herd across the river. I suppose that's why you're here, to discuss the sale."

Sheer astonishment held Red speechless a longer moment than was necessary. There was something he wanted to know and his next question sought that answer: "What if I've decided not to sell?"

The girl's head tilted gravely as she met his glance. "In that case there's nothing I can do about it. But we'd hoped to keep the river a boundary between the sheep and cattle. Mr. Clanton says they don't mix."

Red stifled his amusement. Clanton had obviously omitted details in telling Gail Dennis of their meeting. "So they say," he drawled. "I've been wonderin', ma'am, just why you gave up your father's business."

Her laugh rippled pleasantly. "Wasn't his a rather old-fashioned theory? There's more money in sheep. Dad tried for years to lift his debts by raising cattle. I'm giving sheep a trial."

Red digested her explanation in the sudden knowledge that Clanton was playing a game of his own. He felt the urge to mention exactly what had happened, but ruled that out for a selfish reason. Clanton had evidently been ordered to make the attempt to buy up Red's herd rather than let the newcomer take up his homestead. Red intended now to find out what kind of a deal Clanton had been ordered to make.

"I might sell," he said slowly, "but I have a crew to take care of and—"

"I'll be fair with you," the girl put in quickly. "What's your price?"

"Twenty a head. Let's see"—Red made a mental calculation—"that comes to an even eight thousand. You'll be able to sell for thirty a head this fall, providin' you graze 'em right."

Gail Dennis smiled and a small sigh escaped her. "I was afraid you'd ask more." Abruptly she held out her hand. "It's a bargain, then! Eight thousand. Would you rather see Mr. Clanton again or will my check do?"

RED swallowed with difficulty and met the firm clasp of her hand. He got out: "Your check's good, ma'am. If you've got pen and ink, I'll write out the bill of sale."

At that moment she looked beyond him, out the lane and the trail

that led southward toward Tres Piedras. "Here comes Duke now," she announced.

Red turned, saw a line of riders in the distance. He did some quick thinking that made him say: "Might be a good joke on Clanton to have everything signed, sealed and delivered before he gets here. I'll leave without him seein' me and you can have it as sort of a surprise."

The girl frowned. Red added quickly: "You might as well know the truth, ma'am. Clanton's offer last night was lower than yours by a good bit."

He had guessed shrewdly. This time the color that mounted to the girl's face was brought on by anger. A bright emotion Red couldn't fathom was mirrored in her eyes.

"Sometimes I don't quite know Duke," she murmured, then gave Red a look of guilt, as though she'd spoken out of turn.

"You can't blame him for tryin', can you?" he said. "Nor me for turnin' down his offer. Shall we sign the papers now?" He didn't want Clanton to interrupt the completion of this transaction.

The girl turned and went in the door. She was gone less than a minute, returning with a pen and ink, a box of letter paper and a check book. They sat down at a table alongside a broad window. Red wrote out his bill of sale, she a check for eight thousand dollars on the Tres Piedras bank.

Folding the check, Red thought of something else. "There's a story goin' the rounds that you're on the outs with your neighbors across the river," he said. "It isn't any of my business but I wondered why."

"When dad was alive, he had enemies," the girl told him, willingly enough. "He claimed that the ranchers across there stole cattle

from him. But that's all over now. Duke has persuaded the ones who hated dad to bury the hatchet."

With this added proof that Duke Clanton was nicely concealing his dealings with the small ranchers from the girl, Red said good-by, went out to the tie rail and untied the black. Swinging out from the picket fence, he called: "I'm headin' out the back way so Clanton won't see me." Gail Dennis laughed and waved to him.

CHAPTER VI

CLANTON BACK-TRACKS

AN hour and a half later Red was riding Tres Piedras' street, turning in to the walk awning that fronted the bank. Crossing the the walk, he saw a man wearing a pearl-gray Stetson whose dark face was vaguely familiar straighten from his slouch against an awning post and turn to hurry away down the walk. Sure that he had been recognized, Red went in the bank and presented Gail Dennis' check to the cashier. The man examined the check with a frown, said, "Excuse me a moment," and walked over to go in a door with a frosted glass panel lettered "President."

He reappeared in a few moments with a banded sheaf of paper money. "I didn't have this much on hand," he explained. He counted out eight thousand dollars and pushed the bills through his wicket.

Red said, "Thanks," and went to the entrance. He glanced down along the walk. Far down he sighted the man with the light Stetson who had reacted so strangely to his appearance. Accompanying this individual was another, from whose shirt front metal glinted brightly in the sunlight.

"Better make tracks, fella!" Red mused aloud, but thought of some-

thing else. He stepped past his gelding into the street and continued obliquely on across to the hotel. Short of the steps, he turned aside to the passageway he and Clem had used in escaping last night.

As he'd expected, the broken window was unrepaired. He looked through it into the empty room. Voices came from the lobby beyond the door. The chair he had thrown through the window last night leaned brokenly against the near wall. The table was pushed out from the wall. Near its outside edge stood a wastebasket Clanton had somehow missed overturning in his fall.

Red took from his pocket the rolled bills Clanton's woman friend had given him last night. He tossed the money in through the window. It struck the edge of the wastebasket, hung there a moment and fell down out of sight inside.

Recrossing the street, he was lifting a boot to stirrup a quarter minute later when a gruff voice from behind on the walk called: "You, Knight!"

Red turned. The man who had spotted him less than five minutes ago stood closest, his dark half-breed's face set in a sneer. Beyond him was a spare oldster, grizzled, hawkish of face and with pale-blue eyes now stony of look but giving a hint of shiftiness. This one wore a sheriff's silver star.

As Red turned, the lawman stepped slowly forward. "I'll handle this!" he said flatly to his companion. Then: "Goin' some place, Knight?"

"I thought I was," Red drawled.

"You are. Only it ain't where you think! You're under arrest!"

"What for?"

"Robbery, horse stealin', at-

tempted murder!" The sheriff's gun rocked suddenly up at Red. "Get his hogleg, Pete!"

The half-breed eased around Red and took his gun. Then he planted his hand in the middle of Red's back and roughly pushed him toward the walk.

Red caught himself, stiffened, and was wheeling on the man when the sheriff said sharply: "Hold it! No rough stuff, amigo! There's Duke down at the office. Come along, Knight!"

RED gave the half-breed a brief, unreadable look before he stepped onto the walk. The sheriff seemed momentarily puzzled over his docile acceptance of his arrest and growled a warning as they started on, side by side: "We're goin' to make this stick, Knight!"

Red shrugged, more interested in Pete, who flanked him on the other side, walking even with him. The half-breed swaggered, his manner arrogant after his rough handling of the prisoner.

Their passage along the walk occasioned some interest. Passing the saddle shop, they had to walk close together to edge through a group that eyed them curiously. Red suddenly slowed his stride. Then, too quick for Pete to anticipate it, he thrust his leg out and tripped the man with a hard blow at his swinging knee.

Pete stumbled and fell. Red's hand flashed down and recovered his gun thrust through the half-breed's belt. He swung on the sheriff to catch him flat-footed, his hand barely raising toward his now-holstered gun.

Red dropped his own .45 into leather and drawled, "You two go on ahead!" as Pete, his face black

with anger, picked himself up off the planking.

For a brief moment, all three stood without moving. "Want to make a try for it?" Red invited.

All the lawman said was: "Don't be so doggone proddy, Pete!" And to Red: "You comin' or ain't you?"

"Think I will," Red said. "But after you!"

Laughs came from the group nearby as Sheriff Harvey turned and, with the Clanton man, preceded his prisoner. In them, Red had his first hint of the lawman's unpopularity. It brought him a little relief to think that thus the odds against his getting out of this spot were lessened.

Before the sheriff's office, a plain board shack built onto the near end of a substantial stone jail, Red saw Duke Clanton's sleek black stallion standing hip shot at the hitch rail. He smiled faintly as Jenkins opened the screen door, and called, "No side-steppin', gents!" His warning made the half-breed, following Jenkins in through the door, wince visibly.

DUKE CLANTON'S big frame was slouched in a swivel chair behind the small room's roll-top desk.

"Where the devil you been, Harv?" he said querulously. Then, seeing Red coming through the door, he stiffened.

Without preliminary, Red said: "Tell him why I'm not under arrest, Clanton!"

Duke Clanton's broad face took on an angry color as his eyes fastened on Red's holstered gun. He gave the lawman, then Pete, a questioning look.

"Had some trouble with him," Jenkins muttered.

Clanton's manner abruptly changed. He smiled openly. "Now

don't get us wrong, Knight," he began suavely.

"He's trumped up some charges against me." Red nodded to the sheriff, having noticed the swollen lump on Clanton's jaw where his fist had connected last night. "Supposin' you explain 'em."

"You'll admit we could make those charges stick," Clanton said.

"How? When did I steal a horse? And what's this about robbery?"

"You headed out last night with twenty-five hundred bucks of my—of that lady's money," Clanton corrected himself quickly. "You swiped a couple of jugheads to make your getaway. "You—"

"Didn't you find the money?" Red asked blandly. "I tossed it into the wastebasket. Or maybe you weren't seein' much right then!" The taunting remark brought instant anger to the Circle D man's face. "As for the two horses, you didn't find 'em at our camp this mornin', did you?"

"Then how the devil did you get out of town?" Jenkins flared.

"We could've walked. You can't prove we didn't. We weren't in possession of those horses this morning."

"Turned 'em loose, that's what you did!" the sheriff grumbled.

"Pete, go look for that money in the wastebasket in the hotel writin' room," Clanton said tersely. "If it's there, I want it all. Understand?"

Red leaned against the wall by the door as the half-breed went out. "Now how about this attempted murder?" he said.

Jenkins started to say something when Clanton waved him to silence. "Skip it, Harv! We're too late. He's seen Gail Dennis." There was a hint of grudging admiration in the glance he fixed on Red. "Well,

what happens now, Knight? You leavin'?"

"I may, or I may hang around. I'd sort of like to know what happened to Spence."

He was watching Clanton closely as he mentioned the man he'd left on the homestead last fall. He could not be sure of Clanton's reaction, except that one moment the man's glance was open and unguarded and the next inscrutable with wariness.

"Spence?" Clanton's expression went pious. "Tough luck about him. He was a good man."

"You said yesterday the climate didn't agree with him."

Clanton shrugged. "I was talkin' through my hat. Don't know what happened to him."

"You can forget I mentioned it. Only I won't." Red eased out from the wall as the door opened and Pete re-entered the room.

The half-breed handed Clanton the roll of bills. Clanton counted it and thrust it in his pocket. "Withdraw the charges, Harv," he told the sheriff. "It was a misunderstanding all around." He gave Red a shrewd look. "You played it smooth, Knight. How much did you tell her?"

"Enough." The eagerness Red detected in Clanton's casually put question convinced him that Gail Dennis had given her foreman some uneasy moments out at the Circle D.

Clanton shrugged. "Let that old duffer out of there, Harv," he said.

Puzzled, Red watched the sheriff reach for a bunch of keys and unlock the padlock on the solid steel-paneled jail door. The lawman opened the door and disappeared into the half-lit interior of his jail. In there, unoiled hinges squeaked and the sheriff's voice sounded in some unintelligible remark.

Then Clem Reynold's querulous tones shuttled out to Red: "Maybe I've been in a worse jail but I'll be hanged if I know where!" He came out the door, blinking against the stronger light. Then he saw Red and his old seamed face took on a broad grin. "You didn't forget me after all?" When he spotted Clanton the smile vanished. "How come you're shinin' up to this polecat?" he asked Red.

"We've been talkin' over a few things. Among them, Ned Spence."

"What about Ned?" Clem barked.

"Clanton can't seem to make up his mind."

THE oldster wheeled on Clanton so abruptly that the Circle D ramrod edged back in his chair. "Your bunch was the last to see Spence alive," he drawled tonelessly. "What happened to him?"

"I wouldn't know," Clanton's face even bore a trace of regret, "except that we saw him ride away that night."

"The devil you don't!"

"Easy, Clem," Red cut in. "We'll find out sooner or later." He nodded to the sheriff. "Give him his gun."

At a nod from Clanton, Jenkins reached to a shelf over his desk to take down and hand across Clem's full-looped shell belt and holstered gun.

"Let's be goin'," Red said.

The oldster took his time cinching the gun about his flat waist, all the while eying Clanton darkly. Before he followed Red out the door, he drawled: "Somethin' tells me I'm one day havin' to even things with you for Ned, Clanton! When that day comes, you'd better have your joints oiled for some sudden shootin'!"

CHAPTER VII

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

OUTSIDE, on the walk, Clem asked Red: "Get anything out of Clanton?"

"Not much. What happened this mornin'?"

"Clanton took the herd. The boys were headed for Jennifer's the last I saw of 'em."

They walked on, Red acquainting his foreman with developments since their parting at dawn. When he mentioned Gail Dennis buying the herd, and the price she'd paid for it, Clem gave an astonished whistle. "Not bad!" he conceded, then went on to post Red on what had happened with the arrival of the posse. "Clanton was cocked for trouble, ravin' mad when he found you'd hightailed! Madder when he saw our critters had had water. Threatened us with everything from a bull whip to hangin'. But I took it and let 'em put the handcuffs on me and told 'em to take the herd. That got Clanton's goat. They brought me in and locked me up. Wouldn't even buy me any breakfast. I'd give a month's pay for a big steak right now!"

"Let's get one," Red suggested, and they turned in to a restaurant.

Finished with a good meal, Red asked: "What happened to the horses we left here last night?"

"Feed barn. I'll take 'em out to Toad's directly."

Red reached into his pocket and brought out his money. He thumbed four hundred dollars from the roll of bills and gave it to Clem. "Here's enough to last you and the others until tonight," he said. "I'll be back by dark."

"Where you goin'?"

"Across to the homestead. Maybe

I can run onto something that'll tell us what happened to Ned."

Clem looked at the bills, a slow smile breaking across his face. "We're liable to give this town's tail a mighty good twist with this much to go on."

"Twist it all you want," Red grinned. "You're due a good bust."

They parted at the entrance to the Rosebud, Clem saying: "I'm goin' to have one before I go out after the boys."

"Only one, though," Red warned him good-naturedly, as he left.

He was to remember his remark later. He would have found it even more significant had he noticed the man who stood nearby along the walk and witnessed the exchange of money and overheard what he said. That individual hurried down to the jail where he spent some moments in earnest conversation with Duke Clanton. Presently he was back again, shouldering his way into the Rosebud.

CLEM found Toad Jennifer belied up to the saloon's bar. Relief was plain in the basin man's glance when he saw the other.

"Am I seein' right?" he demanded. "It ain't you, packin' an iron, free as the breeze! What happened?"

Clem ordered whiskey. Over three drinks he posted Jennifer on what had happened since early morning.

"Reckon we ought to go out and collect your side-kicks to start the celebratin'?" Jennifer said finally.

Clem never answered that question. For at that moment a lanky, range-outfitted puncher sauntered up to the bar and called loudly for whiskey, adding just as loudly: "—to get the stink o' sheep out o' my craw! Who's the two-legged polecat that sold out this country?"

My last trip it was run by white men!"

"Which sentiments are mine exactly!" drawled Clem, pushing away from the counter and thrusting out a gnarled hand. "Shake, partner! We're drinkin' for the same reason."

The stranger shook. Presently, after the proper introductions and much talk, the stranger, whose name was Reese, said: "How about me buyin' this round?"

He bought. Clem bought, then it was Toad's turn. Two more congenial souls joined the trio, both agreeing readily to the now belligerent belittling of the business engaged in by all outfits north of the creek. And, after Clem's sixth drink, when talk got around to the merits of stud as against draw poker, Reese's suggestion that they settle the argument by a friendly small-stake game met with complete agreement.

The barkeep accordingly lit the lamp over the nearest table, broke out a new deck of cards and a rack of not-so-clean chips and all five men took chairs. The game started at a two-bit limit. Clem won. The limit was raised to a dollar. Then, finally, as Toad began to win his share and Clem's luck was holding, Reese plunked a fat wad of bills on the felt and drawled: "The devil with this penny-ante stuff! Any reason why the sky ain't the limit?"

Clem smacked his roll down alongside his hefty stacks of chips. "No reason at all!"

So the limit was forgotten. Also forgotten was Clem's luck. It didn't desert him swiftly; but as the afternoon dragged on his chip stacks dwindled. To counterbalance this, Toad Jennifer's luck started running high along about dark. Once he leaned over and whispered to Clem: "Don't let this bother you. I'll make

it good if you'll stick and help me make a cleanin'!"

So Clem's conscience, badly troubled, eased somewhat. He told himself that he'd get the rest of his pay from Red and easily pay the crew. Besides, he'd owned two dozen head of the herd Red had sold this morning.

THEY sent a swamper out for sandwiches at supper time, ordered another quart, and kept the game going. At nine, Toad Jennifer was amazed to find that he'd won slightly more than two thousand dollars. At that point Reese and the other pair tossed in their cards, and Reese expressed the sentiments of all three when he said: "Fun's fun, gents, but it's got to stop sometime and mine stops before I have to throw in my boots to cover a bet. That agreeable with you, Jennifer?"

"Sure is." Toad let out a long, relieved sigh.

The stranger rose and stretched and yawned, noting the empty table in front of Clem. "About busted you, didn't it, old-timer?"

"Just about." Clem was cashing in thirty-four dollars in chips, all that remained of his four hundred. He said ruefully: "Let's be travelin', Toad."

They all had a last drink and left. Clem parted company from Toad, whose horse was at the livery corral; they agreed to meet on the way out of town. Down the street, Clem was about to climb into the saddle when Reese came along and called: "How about a night cap, partner? Got a bottle in m' room 'cross at the hotel."

"Hunh-uh!" Clem shook his head. "Got to be gettin' out to meet Toad."

"Wha's matter?" The stranger's tongue was thick after his day-long

bout with the bottle. "Ain' my liquor good 'nuff?"

"Sure. But—"

"No buts 'bout it!" The stranger threw an arm about Clem's shoulders. "Drown our sorrows, that's what we will! We're sure a couple pikers to let that dang sheepman clean us out."

"Toad ain't a sheepman!" Clem protested. On their way across to the hotel, he carefully explained just who Jennifer was. Presently, with a couple more drinks, he forgot all about meeting Toad.

He was in the hotel forty minutes. Those forty minutes were all that were necessary to decide a certain something the Clanton man wanted to make sure of. Toad Jennifer started home alone.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

FOURTEEN miles across the valley was the shack Ned Spence had lived in the past winter. Going through it for some hint as to Spence's disappearance and then calling on the nearest neighbor, a sheepman, took Red until dark. He couldn't turn down the sheepman's invitation to stay for supper and it was eight before he started back to town, expecting to find Clem and the crew well on the way to a memorial celebration after sixty days on the drive.

But the more he thought about it, the less he wanted to join in the fun tonight. He was dog-tired, he was uncertain of the future and he wanted to be alone to think things out. Should he break his unworded bargain with Gail Dennis and buy another bunch of cattle and stock the homestead? Or should he forget it entirely, homestead in another part of the country and take his crew

with him? After all, he'd promised them jobs.

He chose to wrestle with his knotty problem rather than join the crew in town and swung off the town trail and headed for the river, intending to find where Jennifer lived and spend the night there. In the bright starlight, he studied the dark horizon and tried to strike the creek at the point the herd had yesterday, at Jennifer's fence. He rode slowly, enjoying the night's peaceful stillness and the crisp, bracing air. In the next hour the only foreign sound to break the stillness was what sounded like a faint far-off shot; he forgot it a moment after he heard it.

Red felt a small regret over the decision he finally reached—to leave the basin. The past years of foot-loose wandering made him yearn to settle down somewhere; that had been his reason for coming here. In only two days he'd grown to like the country. Yet, common sense told him that this pleasant hill-bordered valley wasn't to become his home. Sooner or later he'd have another run-in with Duke Clanton. Sooner or later he'd follow the impulse to see more of Gail Dennis, to get to know her.

This girl had attracted him strangely. There weren't many like her, he reflected, then bitterly remembered Jennifer's statement that Gail Dennis and Duke Clanton would one day be married. It galled him to realize that Clanton was deceiving the girl. Yet it wasn't his place to inform her of her foreman's deceit. That would be someone else's task; she probably wouldn't know the real Clanton until it was too late, and then would begin years of bitter disillusionment for her.

Well, he'd had his share of trouble here and enough luck to counter-



Toad Jennifer was down in the trail with a bullet hole in him and the evidence pointed to Clem.

balance it. He'd met a girl he liked uncommonly well. He'd forget her. He'd make some money. If he didn't waste time, he could put a second herd on another range before the end of summer.

He put his roan across the creek toward a high sandy spur he thought close to the place where the herd had tried to cross yesterday. Once on the other side, the look of the night-shadowed land was unfamiliar. There was no lane where the lane should have been. Irritated, Red rode south, knowing he'd come to the road running toward town.

At the road, he made his guess on which way Jennifer's place lay and turned east, riding leisurely, glad that this star-studded, bracing night was one that would cleanse a man's thinking.

ALL at once Red heard a sound close ahead, one he couldn't identify. He was riding the line of a fence and decided it might be the gentle swing of a loose wire against a post.

But suddenly an elongated shadow showed on the trail ahead. Instantly he recognized it as the outstretched figure of a man.

He vaulted from the saddle, dropping the roan's reins. As he was kneeling alongside the man, the sound came again. It was the racking indrawing of breath into choked lungs.

Turning the man over, Red looked down into the face of Toad Jennifer. Blood made a glistening line at one corner of the basin man's mouth. Toad's eyes were closed. In this new position, his breathing

came easier. Tearing open his shirt, Red saw the small dark blotch of a wound high on the left side of his chest.

"All right, Toad?" he asked when Jennifer's eyes opened briefly. His answer was a vacant stare. Jennifer was unconscious.

Tying his bandanna over the wound, Red was thinking of getting Jennifer quickly in to town when the muted hoof thud of a trotting pony shuttled down along the trail. He stiffened, came erect and drew his gun. His glance went quickly to a stunted piñon that grew close to the trail. Quickly he led the roan behind the tree. There he stood, wariness high in him, for he knew now that someone had tried to murder Toad Jennifer tonight.

The sound of the oncoming pony strengthened quickly. Then came something else, a high thin voice crooning the strains of "Red River Valley." Red knew that voice. It was Clem Reynolds! Instantly he was reassured and stepped out from the concealment of the tree.

Clem was drunk; not roaring drunk but pleasingly so. He was within ten feet of Red before he saw him and even then found nothing strange in a lone dismounted rider blocking the trail, for he called heartily: "Evenin', stranger. Got a drink handy?"

"It's me, Clem. Better get down and help."

Somewhat sobered by the flat tones of Red's voice, Clem obeyed quickly. "Who's that with you?" he asked as he came up.

"Toad."

Clem chuckled. "Passed out, eh?"

"No. He's been shot."

"Shot!" Clem was really sober now. He stared down helplessly at Jennifer, trying to explain: "Him and me met up with some regular

gents and had the best game—"

"Tell me about it later," Red cut in, trying to keep down his anger. He knew that somehow Clem had failed to keep his promise of the morning. "The thing now is to get Toad in to a doctor. He's hurt bad! Here, give me a hand!"

As gently as they could, they lifted Jennifer's loose bulk so that he straddled the roan's withers. Red, in the saddle behind him, held him erect.

"You go on ahead and be sure there's a doctor ready," he ordered Clem. "I'll stop at the first house and get a rig to carry him in. Hurry!"

Clem went up into the saddle and was wheeling his pony around when Red felt a light blow strike his left cheek. An instant later the sharp *crack!* of a rifle cut across the stillness and he knew that the blow on his face had been the air impact of a passing bullet. Instinctively, he put spurs to the roan, calling: "Run, Clem!"

The roan's lunge carried him on past the other man. Suddenly, creekward, sounded the explosions of two more guns. Red swung away from them, hearing the pound of Clem's pony behind. With the roan at a run it was hard steadying Jennifer's loose bulk. He covered a hundred yards before more shots sounded, this time the lower-toned blasting of a .45 fired four times. And now he couldn't any longer hear Clem's horse.

He looked back over his shoulder to see Clem's dim shape streaking along the line of the trail that he had angled out from. Far behind Clem the red stab of powder flame cut the night's blackness, and Red made out vague hurrying shapes back there. Clem, realizing the predicament of Red's roan caught

carrying a double load, had evidently decided to decoy the killers away. He would make out all right. He'd had a good start on his pursuers.

RED swung even more sharply away from the trail, riding the abrupt-sloping bottom of a deep gully for a good half-mile. He had circled, starting back this way intending to take Jennifer to his ranch. Then suddenly he reasoned that whoever had tried to kill the basin man would doubtless be watching the lay-out. That thought brought him up out of the gully to strike a straight line to the river. Crossing it twenty minutes ago he'd seen a light a mile or so away on the north side. He should be nearly on a line with that place now. It was important to get help for Jennifer.

He thought once that Jennifer's spare frame straightened under his hold. That was shortly after the roan crossed the stream and headed out across the flats beyond, going toward the light, now in sight. But when he spoke to Jennifer there was no answer and the man's weight was as limp as it had been before.

The light shone from a shack, a sheepman's. Below the shack was a roofless barn, a corral, pens and a windmill whose spidery bulk towered blackly against the heavens. Red drew his Colt and held it in his rein hand as he walked the roan in across the barn lot. Then a dog barked savagely and dashed out of the nearest pen, snarling at the roan's heels.

The roan shied and narrowly missed unseating Red. Red was swinging his gun around to shoot and frighten off the dog when a voice called sharply from the direction of the windmill, "Down, Mike!" Immediately the dog quieted and slunk away in the darkness.

"Lift 'em, stranger!" came the voice again, its note ominous.

Red tossed his gun to the ground but didn't lift his hands, since he had to hold Jennifer erect. "Can't," he drawled. "He'd fall off if I did."

"Who you got there?" came the voice again, and now Red could see the speaker standing a few feet from the windmill's nearest leg.

"Toad Jennifer."

The man breathed an oath of surprise. "Toad! What's wrong with him? What was all that shootin' across the creek?" He advanced toward Red slowly.

"It was meant for us. I got away with Toad. He's shot."

"The devil he is! Why didn't you say so? Here, let me lift him down!"

The man rocked a rifle down from the crook of his arm, laid it on the ground and reached up to catch Jennifer's weight as Red let him go. Red came aground. The man called sharply, "Jim, open up!" and the shack door opened on a boy's slender figure, a feeble wash of lamplight coming out across the littered yard.

The man looked at Red and gave a visible start. "You're Knight, ain't you?" he queried, and Red nodded and said: "Let's get Toad in a bed."

The shack was a single room, poorly furnished, lacking any feminine touch. Double bunks ranged one wall, a stove and packing-box cupboards the one opposite. There were a table, two chairs and a crude plain chest. Nothing else.

"Get a fire goin', Jim," the man said as he and Red laid Jennifer on the bunk. He pulled Jennifer's shirt aside, saw the bullet hole, and looked questioningly at Red. Red told him briefly what had happened.

"I'm Sewell. This is my kid Jim." The sheepman nodded to the gangling youth laying fire in the stove.

The hint of a smile broke the gravity of his long face. "Maybe you've heard o' me?"

Red shook his head.

"Toad and me is friends, even if I do live the wrong side of the line," Sewell explained. "I was at Mas-ker's place last night when you called Clanton's bluff. Your talk sure did me good. That highbinder needed takin' down!"

"Hadn't one of us better get to town for the doctor?" Red put in impatiently.

Sewell looked down at Jennifer. He shook his head. "No can do. The sawbones left for the Wells to-day to help a woman with a baby. Won't be back till toward mornin'."

"But we can't let Jennifer die!" Red flared. "He's bad hurt. There must be someone else."

Sewell's look was thoughtful. He turned to his son. "Jim, get a bridle on Bessie! You're goin' for help."

"Where?" the boy asked, already on the way to the door.

"Tell you later," Sewell said. As the door swung shut on the youngster, he turned on Red again. "You wouldn't like what I'm doin', so I'll keep it to myself. Now what about that scrap across the river?"

RED told him of his sale of the herd, of leaving Clem in town this morning. Sewell interrupted at that point to say: "I can tell you part of what happened. Three of Clanton's men were in a poker game with your side-kick and Jennifer at supper time tonight. Toad's luck was goin' strong. Your man's was not."

In a few more moments, as Red finished, Sewell said: "You'll want to go back, won't you, and see what happened to Reynolds? Go ahead. The boy'll bring help and I'll look after Toad."

Then, when Red hesitated, he added: "Don't think I'd give Toad away. I hate Duke Clanton's guts as much as I like the girl he works for."

In these few words Sewell did much to ease Red's worry over leaving Jennifer in unfriendly hands. Sewell was to be trusted. He had also hinted that Clanton was responsible for the ambush across the river.

Red went out into the yard, found his .45, and mounted the roan again. Leaving, he saw the boy lead a hackamored mare up to the shack and stand talking with his father. Before the darkness hid them, the boy had climbed onto the mare and was headed out in the direction opposite the one Red was taking, riding fast.

Back across the river, Red was undecided what to do. Finally he turned upstream again, this time following the creek bank, determined to find Jennifer's layout and see if his men were still there.

He came to the Jennifer lane, followed the fence on and found a gate. Beyond it, a faintly marked trail led in through a dense cottonwood grove, then climbed steeply to a knoll on which stood a pole cabin, barn and corrals. The gray outline of his chuck wagon showing in the deeper shadow of the barn convinced him that this was Jennifer's place.

There was no light in the cabin. Red approached warily, keeping to the cover of the small trees.

He was within fifty yards of the cabin when a gruff voice, off to his left, said mildly: "That you, Red?"

"Nels?" Red answered, recognizing the cook's voice. He reined the roan off there and saw the cook's heavy shape come out of a nearby tree's dense shadow. "How come you're roamin' around out here?"

"Trouble, boss," Nels told him. "Bad trouble! Awhile ago we heard shootin' off toward town. We'd been in Toad's kitchen, tryin' to work up some fever over a stud game, waitin' for Toad to come home. That shootin' sounded suspicious, so the boys went out to saddle up and go see what the ruckus was about. They was all crowded in the corral when half a dozen jaspers rode out of the trees and threw down on 'em. Caught 'em cold! I was still in the kitchen and managed to duck out the front door and get away."

"What happened to the others?"

"Gone!" was the cook's ominous answer. "They lined 'em up and headed out the road. I heard one jasper say they'd have a hard time findin' enough cots in the jail to go around."

CHAPTER IX

LYNCH FEVER

RED'S astonishment prevented his immediately taking in the full significance of Hansen's words. "Jail!" he echoed.

"That's what he said. It don't make sense, unless they're tryin' to even it up with all of us for the rumpus you and Clem raised in town last night."

Red's thinking was coming a little clearer now. "That isn't it," he said, and sat considering a long moment, having to make a choice between two decisions. He was't quite sure that Toad Jennifer was in safe hands and was already blaming himself for having left the basin man. Then there was the crew. And Clem! He didn't know what luck Clem had had in getting away. Nor what Clanton hoped to accomplish by having the crew jailed. He wanted to get to town and get the answer

to this mysterious and unexpected development.

He had a thought that made him ask: "Has anyone had a good look at you, Nels? Any of Clanton's bunch, I mean? You weren't there yesterday when they stopped the herd. How about this mornin'?"

Nels frowned thoughtfully. "I was at the wagon the whole time," he answered. "They wasn't close enough to see me."

"And they didn't get a look at you tonight?"

The cook shook his head.

"Then get a hull on a horse and head for town. Go straight on in and see if you can pick up anything on Clem or the rest. They'll—"

"Clem?" Nels cut in. "What about him? Ain't he in jail?"

"No. Tell you about it later. Right now I need information. You're the only one who can get it. I'm meeting Jennifer across the river in a few minutes." To save time, Red was going to wait and tell Nels about Jennifer and Clem later. He glanced up at the wheeling stars. "It's close to eleven now. At midnight I'll be waiting for you half a mile this side of town near that old barn with the caved-in roof. You can't miss it."

"There's an awful lot here I don't understand, boss!" Nels protested. "Why—"

"Later, Nels!" Red interrupted. "We've got a whale of a lot of work to do. See you in an hour." He reined the roan around and went back down toward the river through the trees.

A quarter-hour later he was riding in on Sewell's place. The dog again barked savagely but seemed to remember the roan and after a few last half-hearted yips stopped worrying the animal.

The shack door opened as Red dis-

mounted close in to the small roofed stoop. Sewell stood in the doorway and beyond him his son crossed the room carrying a steaming basin of water.

"How is he?" Red's query was urgent.

"Doin' all right." The sheepman stepped aside to let him enter.

THE light of the unshaded lamp, sitting on the table alongside the bunk where Jennifer lay, blinded Red for a moment. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the glare, he made out a figure kneeling by the bunk beyond the table.

At the instant he knew who it was, Gail Dennis turned and looked at him. The lamplight edged her head with spun gold. Her prettiness was breath-taking, color heightening the olive hue of her cheeks. In spite of her clothes, a pair of waist overalls and a dark-red cotton shirt open at the throat, and her wind-blown hair, she was still utterly feminine.

"He's going to be all right," she said softly, and her smile was a reminder of this morning's meeting.

Red knew now why Sewell hadn't warned him of whom he was to find. It was natural that the sheepman would believe his antagonism toward Circle D's foreman would carry over to its owner. As evidence of this, Sewell said questioningly: "You ain't sore, Knight?"

Red shook his head in a brief negative. He crossed the room to stand at the head of the bunk, looking down at Jennifer. Toad now lay propped up on folded blankets and a pillow. Gone from his face was the deathly pallor of an hour ago. His breathing was even.

"He's asleep," Gail Dennis said in a hushed voice. She nodded to a bottle of whiskey on the table. "He

took a good drink of that. It'll keep him quiet, stop the chance of a hemorrhage. If he rests, he has a good chance." She gave Red a look of near pleading. "Sewell's told me some things I didn't know. About Duke. I . . . I didn't realize what kind of a man he was. He did this to Jennifer, didn't he?"

Red was uncertain, half-embarrassed. "Let's wait'll we find out," was all he could think to say.

"You don't have to try to cover up for Duke!" Gail told him. "I can see things now I couldn't before. You were kind not to tell me. Is there anything I can do now to help?"

"Not a thing except to look after Toad. We're pullin' out as soon as we can," Red lied. "I reckon when we leave, things will go back to normal."

The girl's glance clung to him, seeming to see beneath his mask of indifference. "I want you to know I'm sorry, very sorry for the way this has turned out," she said finally. "You should be taking up your homestead. I shouldn't be running sheep." She shrugged restlessly. "You have my promise that things will be different from now on. I'm having it out with Duke."

"Better go easy on him. You wouldn't want trouble."

Gail's smile was enigmatic, somehow lacking in amusement. "I still have a few friends I can call on," she said.

Red held out his hand. "I'll be leavin'."

The pressure of her fingers tried to make up for the things she was leaving unsaid. She breathed. "Good-by," and then he left her.

Sewell followed him out into the yard. "I couldn't help tellin' her, Knight! Someone maybe ought to take a hefty kick at the seat o' my

pants, but I'm glad I did it."

"That doesn't matter now. What does is that she has some friends to count on."

"Don't think she ain't! Maybe we're makin' money at this stinkin' business! But, for me, I'll take cattle and starve if I have to. There's a few besides me thinkin' the same way. We all knew old Tom Dennis and we'll stick by his girl."

"Well, here's wishin' you luck." Red went astride the roan and out into the night.

Once again weariness settled upon him. But it was a different feeling now; his wind was played out and a heavy depression was settling on him. He had said farewell to the one girl who, in contrast to all others he had known, had prompted in him a feeling deeper than reverence. He was riding out of her life because he saw no possible way of their ever becoming more to each other than they were now, mere casual acquaintances. Perhaps she hated him for having exposed the man of her choice. It had seemed inevitable since their meeting that this should happen, inevitable because all Red's hopes in coming to this country had been blasted in the space of two days.

He forcibly put her from his mind, looking ahead to his meeting with Nels Hansen. His lean face sobered to a stern, rocklike gravity as he grimly faced the only answer to tonight's trouble. There was more trouble ahead. He was almost glad to be riding into it.

THEY'VE got the whole dang bunch locked up!" were Hansen's first words after meeting Red. "You didn't tell me they let Clem go this mornin'. He got tangled up with three Clanton men in a no-limit game at the saloon an' they took him

to the cleaner's while Toad was the heavy winner. Now they're sayin' that Clem shot Toad for his winnin's. Claim they found Toad's money in Clem's pocket after they'd shot Clem's horse out from under him in that fight down the road tonight. They're makin' lynch talk and they've got a reward out for you! You're supposed to have got away with Toad's carcass." Hansen paused, out of breath, having put together more words in one piece than Red had ever thought possible for the ordinarily untalkative man.

"What about the crew?" Red asked. "Why are they holdin' them?"

"Rustlin'!" Nels said harshly. "They tried to run off the herd tonight, accordin' to the story. And I dang well know they weren't within ten miles of where Clanton was holdin' those critters!"

"It's beginnin' to make sense now," Red breathed.

"What is?" Nels demanded testily. "Clanton's taken over the saloon, set up a second bar. Does that make sense? Drinks are sellin' at half-price, for nothin' to them that can't buy! The town's wild! If they don't bend a good cottonwood limb with Clem at the end of a rope before mornin', I'm a coal-black Swede!"

"We'd better get in and see what we can do." Red's tall body was erect in the saddle as he stared off toward the winking lights of the town.

"What good'll it do us? We're two against half a thousand! And that bunch o' drunks ain't foolin'!"

Red shrugged. "We'll see. How about the jail?"

"Guarded front and back. What really happened to Toad?" Nels had almost forgotten the basin man.

Red told him. Then: "We'll work

down along the alley across the street from the jail."

It wasn't difficult to reach the dark alley; the few men they met had indulged too heavily of Clanton's free liquor and were probably on the way home to sleep it off, for they paid no attention to Red and Nels. But, at the head of a narrow passageway between two stores, as Red looked out onto the street, he saw that Clanton's whiskey was having a different effect on nine-tenths of the town, most of whose citizens seemed to have forgotten their beds for the duration of the night.

TWO crowds were massed along the street's broad length. One centered on the front of the Rosebud. The other, the biggest, completely filled the street in front of the jail. This last was the most noisy and ominous-looking. The walk and the hitch rail in front of the sheriff's office were clear, being paced by two deputies armed with sawed-off shotguns. They ignored the taunting jeers and mocking laughter of the onlookers. But it didn't take much imagination for Red to see that the mob, restless and still undecided, would in the end take the chance on rushing the jail to lay hands on a man they considered a murderer, Clem Reynolds. And, unless Red's hunch was wrong, the deputies would offer little resistance.

He and Nels stood for minutes in the shadowed entryway to the passage, watching the traffic that moved along under the walk awnings. Red was trying to think of a way to get Clem and the others out of the jail. He recognized the sobering fact that nothing less than dynamite would clear the street or sway the crowd from its grim purpose.

Nels finally broke the silence, voic-

ing Red's worry: "We ain't got a Chinaman's chance, boss! I once heard of a cashier firin' a house at the edge of a town to draw away a mob makin' a run on his bank. But even that wouldn't work here. These jaspers got their hearts in their work. And don't figure to stick your neck out by walkin' across there with a gun. You wouldn't live to pull a trigger twice!"

"Not a chance," Red agreed, and in that moment hope nearly left him.

Clanton's reason for this iron-bound frame-up was obscure. But Red had no doubts that this was Clanton's doing. The fact remained that the Circle D foreman had laid the groundwork for a revenge that was out of all proportion to Red's having come off best in the sale of the herd. Clanton evidently took Red's small success as a personal affront. He'd framed Clem with murder and come close to taking Jennifer's life; he had saddled Red's crew with a charge of rustling that would be almost impossible to prove false; lastly, he had put out a reward on Red, to make sure that he couldn't help his men.

There weren't any loopholes for Red to work through. He was outlawed. Clem would probably die at the end of a rope, even though Jennifer lived to tell his story, for the truth would come too late. Red considered for a moment the possibility of forcibly taking several townsmen out to see Jennifer on the possibility that the wounded man might have regained consciousness. But there was no assurance that Jennifer could talk, that he wasn't dead by now. And, even if Jennifer could speak, Red couldn't be sure of getting back to town to rescue Clem before the hangman got him.

Sheer desperation turned his mind to another possibility. "Nels," he

said gravely, "we've got only one chance. Here it is." And he stepped back into the passageway and spoke to his crewman earnestly for long moments.

When he had put his last question, Nels' answer came on the heels of a long-drawn gusty sigh. "I reckon it's better than standin' here watchin' it happen. Sure I'll help. But we may be too late."

HIS words added to Red's urgency as they rode out the alley at the west limits of town. Red pushed the roan hard along the trail, irritated at having to hold the animal in so that Nels, on a slower

horse, could keep abreast. The three-mile ride that brought them within sight of a redly glowing light in the distance seemed an eternity. But at last they were close enough to make out that light as a big campfire, the dark sprawling shadow of bunched cattle beyond it telling Red he had guessed correctly on this being Clanton's herd camp.

"Remember, we ride straight in." He added a last warning word to



Nels. They were close enough now to see a man's shape momentarily outlined against the big blaze. The man's walk was uncertain and Red thought he saw a bottle in his hand. He drew his Colt and held it in his

free hand, cushioned in his lap behind the generous swell of his saddle. Nels, seeing his move, did likewise.

They were within a hundred yards of the fire, Red going on with the



Red Knight started the showdown by driving his herd in a wild stampede straight through the middle of town!

roan at a trot. Here, close at hand, was his one chance of saving his men, the one wild gamble left him.

Thinking that, he rode boldly in. He and Nels were well within the range of the fire's broad circle of light before they were hailed by one of three men lying or sitting on blankets close to the blaze. The man who gruffly called to them merely rolled over onto his elbow and looked in their direction, his shout more a greeting than a challenge. His voice was whiskey-thickened, his words hardly intelligible.

Red answered that hail with, "Who's got a drink?" and kept coming on.

He had now spotted the fourth man, the one he'd seen cross before the blaze a moment ago. This one was now approaching the fire from the far side with an armload of dead cedar.

"Tarnation, it ain't—" began one man as he recognized Red.

His hand stab toward the gun at his thigh was a full second too late. For Red rocked his weapon up from his lap, drawing: "No, it ain't!" His .45 arced around then in time to catch the man on the other side of the fire as he dropped his armload of wood to draw.

Nels, alongside Red, said flatly: "Go ahead! Make a try for it!" His hard-set face and the .45 in his hand were compelling enough to make the trio on the blankets lift their hands.

Red swung to the ground and sauntered over there to relieve the three of their weapons. One wore a pair of .38s, making the count of surrendered pistols four. Two rifles lay against a saddle nearby. Red took them. Then he went around the far side of the fire and took from the fourth Clanton man a pair of silver-mounted .44s.

"Where'd you pick these up—at

a circus?" Red drawled as he thrust the weapons with the others through his belt.

A growl of impotent rage was his only answer. Red motioned his prisoner across with the others. "Hunt up some rope," he told Nels.

The cook, gone a brief moment beyond the wide circle of the blaze's light, reappeared with three coiled riatas.

"There's a buckboard off there," he told Red. "We could tie 'em to the wheels."

Less than five minutes later, the four Clanton men, gagged with their own bandannas, sat each at the foot of a wheel, arms extended and roped to spokes, legs tightly wound with many turnings of the manila.

Red gave them a last inspecting glance, told them, "Someone'll be out in the mornin' to cut you loose," and gave Nels a nod that took them both hurrying back to their horses. There, Red handed Nels the half-dozen six-guns and the rifles.

There was no need for them to speak as they set about their work. They rode out to the margin of the herd and circled it to the point farthest from the fire. Outflanking the last bald-faced steer, Red cautioned Nels only once, saying: "Not too fast!" Then both of them shouted, spurring their mounts at the nearest sleeping animals.

Wakefulness ran through the herd. Down animals lunged to their feet, those standing shied away from the pair of riders and drifted off into the night. Townward, a lead bull shook his shaggy long-horned head and plodded straight for the lights of Tres Piedras. The animals nearest him followed in a long thick line. Soon the others, urged from behind, got into motion. Within five minutes the whole herd was on the move.

"Easy!" Red cautioned once as Nels' horse swung suddenly aside to cut back a steer that broke from line. "Let the salty ones go. We don't need 'em."

"What happens when we get close in, Red? How're we goin' to put 'em where we want 'em?"

"Fences," Red answered. "It was fences that helped Clanton make his play yesterday and they'll help us make ours tonight. All that land this side of town is under wire."

"Ought to be a cinch," Nels' momentary skepticism was forgotten.

"If we work it right," was Red's reservation.

CHAPTER X

CATTLE DRIVE DOWN MAIN STREET

DUKE CLANTON had just finished a long talk with Tres Piedras' mayor, Tom Higgins. Several minutes ago he'd taken the mayor, full of dubious misgivings, into Doc Masker's office. Over a drink and much persuasion, he'd convinced Higgins that the course the mob was taking tonight was the right one. This stranger, Clem Reynolds, had killed one of the basin's most upstanding citizens. Furthermore, Knight's crew had had the gall to try and steal the herd Knight had this morning sold to Gail Dennis. It was obvious that the normal workings of the law weren't fast enough to take care of a situation like this.

"To blazes with the courts!" Clanton had finally worked up the boldness to say. "In the old days they didn't wait on the courts to condemn a killer, did they, Tom? We ain't waitin' tonight!"

Higgins was convinced in the end. So convinced that just now he stood on a chair, under the big chandelier at the center of the Rosebud's main

room, addressing the crowd. He was a trifle drunk but his words came loud and clear. Instead of constraining the mob, his speech was to do more than any one thing so far to spur it on. He was privately a little concerned over having sent a man out to the Circle D an hour ago to inform Gail Dennis of the treachery of her foreman, for Clanton's maneuvers now seemed honest and aboveboard. Higgins was trying to make up for his lack of faith in Clanton, who last year had helped vote him into office.

As his stentorian voice rolled on, holding the attention of the crowd, a brief inscrutable smile played across Duke Clanton's face.

He saw Pete Hernandez on the edge of the crowd and sauntered over behind the half-breed, touched him lightly on the shoulder and just as casually sauntered back to his place at the office door again. Presently, Pete was standing beside him.

"Go tell Jenkins to get ready." Clanton's voice was barely audible over the bellow of the mayor's. "It's comin' any minute now. Tell him he's to throw up his hands and give in. We don't want no one hurt."

Pete's head tilted down in a brief affirmative. He left Clanton's side, working his way inconspicuously toward the swing doors up front. Out on the walk, he unobtrusively pushed his way through the crowd listening to the mayor's harangue. When he was in the clear, his stride lengthened and he started for the jail.

He had taken only a dozen steps when he saw a rider break through the outskirts of the crowd in front of the jail and come streaking down the street, recklessly threatening to overrun anyone who got in his way.

Pete recognized the rider as a Clanton man and hailed him.

"Find the boss, quick!" the rider said breathlessly, as he drew his nervous pony to a stand beside the half-breed. "Hell's busted loose! It's the herd!"

"Forget the herd," Pete drawled. "We got somethin' else to think—"

"Forget 'em! When they're headed down the street? There!" He raised a hand and pointed. Pete, looking toward the jail, saw the crowd beginning to break into wild flight. Beyond, in a dark oncoming mass topped by rocking, glistening horns, the street was jammed, walk to walk, with cattle whose lumbering gait seemed like the onrush of a tremendous slow flood along a dry river bed.

Pete turned and ran. Behind him shouts and curses and cries of terror struck over the undertone of low-thundering hoofs. Far down the street, beyond the mass of cattle, a six-gun exploded. The lead steers broke into clumsy lope. Pete tried to claw his way into the crowd in front of the Rosebud. But others were doing the same thing.

RED KNIGHT had a moment ago lifted his Colt and fired it over his head in a blasting crescendo of sound that struck terror through the herd lined down the street. Luck had been with him and Nels. The fenced pastures out beyond the street's far limit had formed a perfect aisle down which to drive the four hundred animals. Now, in full flight along the main street, the herd was like a ramrod thrust down the choked barrel of a muddied shotgun. Up ahead, the two separate crowds were fast melting off the street. Saddle horses and teams, terrorized, lunged and broke out from the tie rails, threatening to run down pedestrians.

The crowd caught first, in front

of the jail, was in the greatest danger. For along those two rows of facing buildings nearest them there were no passageways and few inset doors offering shelter. Tres Piedras citizens, ranchers and sheepmen alike, turned and ran for their lives.

Through the dust Red made out Nels Hansen's blocky shape. He reined over there, close to his cook and shouted: "Make it fast, Nels!"

Nels needed no urging. As Red reloaded his Colt, the cook was already spurring his horse in through the animals of the drag, pushing on up deep into the main body of the herd. He was risking being thrown and trampled, but he rode solidly, the extra guns thrust through his belt glistening in the reflected light of a store window he passed, the two rifles cradled across the swell of his saddle. He struck out viciously with rein ends to prod animals out of his way and shot once or twice when some unruly steer jammed his horse against another.

All at once, Red looked up the street to see it clear ahead of the leaders of the herd. Miraculously, the crowd in front of the Rosebud had melted in through the doors. The alley out behind the saloon must be jammed. The jail crowd had somehow managed to find cover, too. There wasn't a man in sight ahead of the long line of the charging cattle, now loping in terror-stricken flight down the long straight aisle between the buildings.

Red saw Nels, up ahead, charge in front of the door to the sheriff's office. An instant later the cook was out of the saddle, kicking in the flimsy screen door, his horse left to his own devices. Seeing the cook safe, Red sighed in keen relief. As the first muted blast of gunfire sounded from inside the jail, he set about the accomplishing of his own

job. Nels would have Clem and the crew out of their lock-blown cells in another thirty seconds.

It was Red's turn to push up into the herd, past the scattered animals of the drag. No prodding was needed now to keep the steers on the run. They had stampeded and would run until in the clear beyond the far limits of the town.

He used his gun twice, reloading each time. The roan worked tirelessly, nimbly, as a good cutting horse will when in danger of being pushed off his feet. Once he would have gone down but for Red's lifting his head so that he could find his footing again. Red shot through the head the steer blocking the way and the roan jumped the falling carcass and was clear of the death-slashing hoofs the next instant.

Slowly, the roan crowded his way toward the street's south walk. Under firm rein, he lunged up onto the walk and in under the awning. Ahead and opposite, a steer crashed into an awning post, broke it, and a thirty-foot stretch of awning sagged down and was splintered to kindling as the herd hit it. Red, riding the other walk, felt the hackles rise along his back at the thought that he might be caught under a like obstruction.

The saloon windows lit the backs of the animals twenty yards ahead. The roan had nearly stopped; cattle jammed the walk where the wall of the building beyond the Rosebud jutted out to make an impassable pocket. Red lifted his Colt, aimed at the up-curving horn of a steer caught in that pocket, and squeezed the trigger. The steer's head tossed violently. Then, with a bellow of pain and rage, the animal charged out from the wall. The ones packed behind charged also. The jam melted away and Red rode in to-

ward the light of the Rosebud's doors.

Thirty feet short of them, he stood in the stirrups and reached above to catch a hold on an awning joist. The roan went on, pushed from behind by the relentless surge of the herd. Red swung up until he lay flat across the joist, his body in the shallow opening made by that joist and the smaller up-slanting roof support that gave the awning its slope. He wormed his way across and on to the next and lay there so that one joist supported his thighs, the other his chest. There, gun in hand, looking down and in through the small open rectangle over the saloon's swing doors, he waited while the frenzied cattle lunged past below him.

He could see a narrow wedge of the Rosebud's room packed with men's bodies clear to the doors. Below him the last animals moved past and up ahead. The thunderous volley of their hoofs striking the thick walk planks gradually faded as the street and walks cleared of animals. Red tensed, watching the saloon doors.

FROM up-street came the sound of voices, the slam of a screen door. Red leaned down and looked back and out to see a group of shadows moving across from the jail toward him along the hoof-churned dust. Except for the slurring sound of boots, an ominous silence seemed to follow in the wake of the herd's receding tumult. Those men would be his crew, Nels, Clem, Ed, Tex, Frank and Jim. Counting himself, they were seven against whatever guns the Rosebud would shortly discharge.

Lying there across the awning joists, Red thought back over his plan. He had risked much in this

attempt at freeing his crew from jail: Now he was risking even more in stepping into a shoot-out with Clanton and his men. His hunch had been that the men responsible for tonight's mob violence would be the first to set foot on the street again after the herd's passage. He was gambling on that hunch, and on the presence of his own men on the street as a surprise.

But still he was confronted with the responsibility for the lives of his men. Here he was, leading them into danger when he, and they, could have ridden straight out of the country and had satisfaction in looking back on having got the best of Clanton. But in this moment Red knew that neither he nor his men would turn tail to run from what they now faced. Clanton had thrown down the gantlet of a challenge. Not one of his men would have wanted to let pass this chance.

"Spread out!"

That hushed word, drifting across the street's gathering silence, was uttered by Clem Reynolds. Red heard it, and the touch of sheer confidence in it did more to wipe out his doubts than anything.

Hardly had that group of shadows fanned out to cover a fifty-foot wedge of the street's width, before another voice, this one from the saloon, spoke out sharply:

"Ben, Sid, Pete! All of you! Get up here!"

It was Clanton who gave that curt order. Looking down over the doors, Red saw men shifting aside, others taking their places. As he had foreseen, Clanton was accepting the responsibility of making the first appearance on the street.

Someone said: "Duke, there was shots across at the jail."

"I know," Clanton snapped. "It's Knight, tryin' to break his bunch

out. *Pete!*" He was having trouble marshaling his men.

But the next moment Duke Clanton's sudden appearance out of the swing doors belied this last. The big man threw the doors wide in a solid thrust. Before the doors had swung shut again, he was through them, a six-gun in each hand, stepping warily aside and out of the light. Following him came nine others who likewise stepped out of the lamp glow that flushed across the walk and into the street.

It must have taken Clanton a few seconds to see into the darkness, for in the following brief interval no word was spoken. Then suddenly, his voice grated out: "Who's that? Sing out or we shoot!"

He was standing less than ten feet from the spot below which Red lay. Red sensed immediately that his men were in plain sight and in danger of being cut down.

So he drawled flatly, "Up here, Clanton!" to give his men the time they needed to meet this threat.

On the heel of his words a man on the opposite side of the doors fired suddenly. Two shots of his .45 had blasted the stillness when a gun from the street answered. Its lone reply brought the Clanton man pitching outward and sprawling in a broken fall to the walk. Clanton, who had a moment ago looked upward, wheeled quickly away and out of line. His gun lifted. Its lancing flame licked upward in the direction of Red's voice.

Red had had his Colt lined down at Clanton, the hammer thumbed back, trigger finger tightening. But all at once, even with the odds against him, shooting Clanton cold-bloodedly seemed like murder. He had an advantage up here, having chosen it to get clear of the herd more than for the reason of surpris-

ing the Circle D crew. As he was thinking this, Clanton put the line of a joist between himself and Red's gun, and Red had lost his edge.

ONCE again Clanton's gun exploded awningward, his bullet flickering a splinter from the roof that gouged Red's forehead. Red was suddenly impatient at being robbed of a target as other guns cut loose. He reached out, lifted his legs off the joist, and swung down. Letting go his hold, he hit the walk in a crouch. Clanton, seeing his shape suddenly appear out of the shadows, whirled and threw three thought-quick shots at him.

The first bullet took Red in the left shoulder. It spun him halfway around, put his side to Clanton's gun. The next tore the sleeve of his left arm. The third went wide of its mark, for a reason.

For, as Red's body turned, his gun arced down at Clanton. His gun beat Clanton's last shot. He saw the big man's stooped body straighten rigid as his gun fired. A man behind Clanton went down, stopping a slug from the street. Another beyond staggered drunkenly to the side to grasp the support of an awning post. Another ran in through the doors, two more down the walk. Red thought he heard the pound of hoofs down the street blended with the guns. The acrid stench of powder smoke was strong in the air as his men blasted home their small advantage of surprise.

Clanton's stiffening was brief. The next moment he was again crouching, right arm limp at his side, left hand blurring up. Red thumbed the hammer of his weapon again. It exploded in unison with Clanton's. Red went down to his knees under the numbing wrench of a blow at his right thigh. Clanton, as though

caught in the stomach by the hoof of a kicking bronc, bent double and fell face downward on the walk.

But some mighty inexhaustible force seemed to possess the Circle D man. He straightened his bent body, lifted head and gun arm and laid his sights on Red again. Red slumped sideward and Clanton's bullet stirred a breath past his head. He fired then, taking time to look across his sights. Before his gun had bucked up out of line he saw the hole that dead-centered Clanton's forehead and brought the big man's frame flat to the planking in sure death.

It was over then, over but for the snap shots from the street that lent speed to the heels of the last three Clanton men left standing. As the boot pound of their hurried flight faded into the after echo of the guns, two things happened almost simultaneously.

Harvey Jenkins, the sheriff, called loudly from behind the saloon doors, "Duke, you there?" As he spoke two riders appeared out of the obscurity on the far side of the street.

The leader of this pair, small-bodied, reined in suddenly as Clem's voice called: "Lift your hands, you two! Who are you?"

"Gail Dennis. Is Red Knight with you?"

Red felt weakness go through him as the girl spoke. His shoulder stabbed with pain as he pushed himself up on elbow, trying to stand. But his bad leg buckled under him and he fell again, trying to call out to her.

Weariness and loss of blood dulled his mind as he lay back on the walk. He was vaguely aware of the crowd spilling from the saloon and gathering about him. Dimly, too, his eyes made out Gail Dennis' face looking down into his. That was the last

he remembered as he struggled to try and find the strength to speak to her.

THE room was airy, light, and it hurt Red's eyes to open them. For long minutes he stared upward at the whitewashed ceiling. Then, curious, he turned his head and looked toward the wall with the window in it. The walls were clean and light, too. Near the window was a light steel table covered with a white cloth. Bottles and an enamelled basin sat on it.

"Hospital!" he breathed. The feebleness of his voice made him smile.

"Yes, Red," came a voice that made him turn quickly. It was Gail.

She was wearing the dress she'd worn that first day at the ranch, the blue one. Her hair was done the same way, too, only more loosely now than then. And, looking into her face, he was instantly worried at the tiredness he saw there.

"You've been very sick, Red," she said. "Try not to talk."

"Then you'd better," he said, and she smiled.

"Don't worry. Clem and the others are all right. Jim Rhodes came out of it with a broken arm. It's mending nicely. You see," she added, "You've been here three days now."

"How about Toad?"

"The doctor doesn't know why, but Toad's going to live." Gravity touched her glance. "Toad remembers. Duke Clanton shot him, then left him lying in the road while he waited for Clem. And something else about Duke. Pete Hernandez, one of his men, talked before he died that night. Duke had hired him to steal cattle from dad two years ago. It was Pete who hunted down Ned

Spence and turned his horse loose on the desert. At the end, Pete said something about Duke wanting to marry me and afterward take over the whole basin." She tried to smile again but the expression was lost against the soberness in her eyes.

He lay looking up at her, not wanting anything to change. For the moment there was nothing more he desired. Gail was looking down at him with a tenderness that could mean only one thing. He loved this girl and she might some day love him.

But there was something more she had to say. "I . . . I've had your men take the herd across the river and put it on my graze." She hesitated, as though making up her mind to something. "I don't know how you'll take this, Red. But I've offered them jobs until you're on your feet again. I want to offer you one, too."

Red did his best to nod. He wanted to say something but was afraid to.

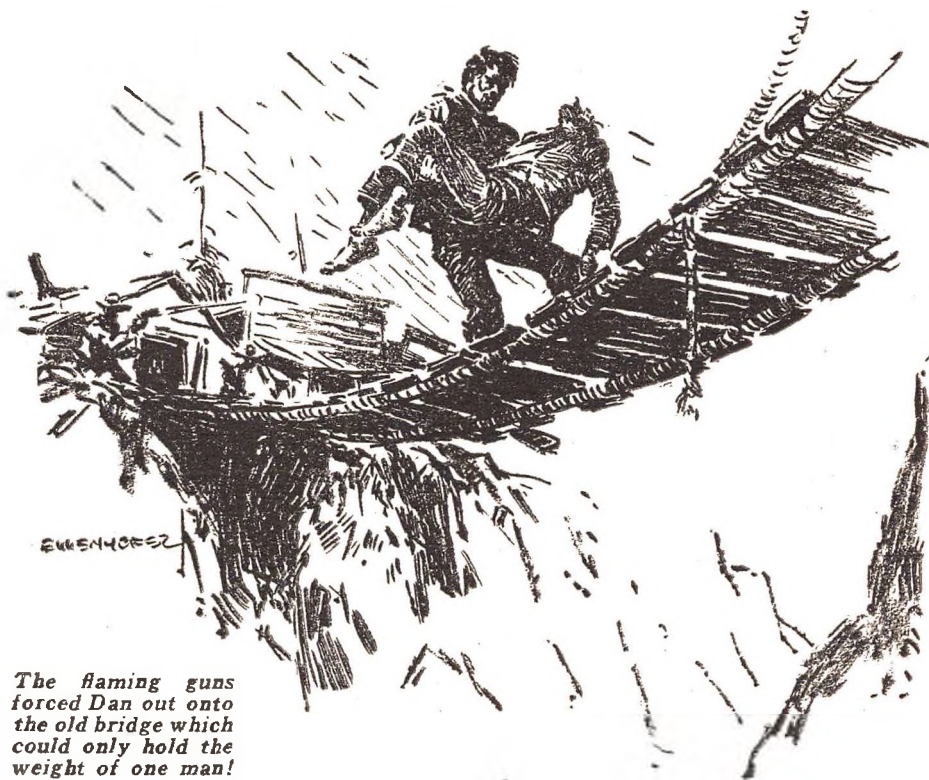
Gail's glance didn't meet his now. Then she was saying: "I need a foreman and a crew that knows cattle. All dad's men quit when I brought in sheep. Now I want to go back to cattle. Could you stay on and . . . and would you help me get started again, started the right way?"

Then she was looking at him, a pleading in her eyes. Red lifted his hand and held it out to her. Sudden thankfulness brought her smile back again. Her hand met his.

"We'll get along, Red!" she murmured.

This time his voice was firm. "Not unless you'll say yes to something I'm askin' you when I get up off my back."

What he saw in her eyes told him she would.



The flaming guns forced Dan out onto the old bridge which could only hold the weight of one man!

GHOST-TOWN GUNSMOKE

BY NORMAN A. FOX

AND then the rain come. Heralded by fish-tailing lightning and exploding thunder that seemed to shake Skeleton Mountain to its wooded base, the torrent unleashed itself and the descending darkness—deep, dead-black darkness—made the hazardous slope thrice hazardous for horse and man. But there could be no turning back for Dan Madden.

Danger ahead—and danger of another sort behind. Somewhere up yonder slope was Rufe Dormer who'd escaped Deer Lodge pen by breaking a guard's head, and Silent Sam Slade who'd escaped by break-

ing a solemn promise, and five-year-old Jimmy Doyle, the warden's boy, taken along as hostage. Dan Madden was closing in on them. But far below the tiny pin points of posse fires told of a human chain stretched across Stillwater Basin, Dan's own range, a slowly tightening chain that would ensnare all within it—including Dan himself.

The telegraph had been faster than Dormer and Slade, and faster than Dan Madden who'd hugged the convicts' trail from the first. The telegraph had warned Stillwater, so John Masters, proud old John Masters, would be directing

the posse. And just what would Masters think when he found his prospective son-in-law inside the net?

"I was to Deer Lodge on business," Dan would have to say. "When the siren sounded I hit the saddle while the guards were still running around asking questions. I just had to get hold of Silent Sam Slade."

"And what," stiff-backed John Masters would ask, "is Silent Sam to you?"

A pretty kettle of fish! John Masters had never seemed to think much of Dan. When the truth came out he'd forbid his daughter Rose ever to see Dan again. It would be the end of all Dan's dreams.

His long, lithe body slicker-incased, his friendly face grim, a lock of yellow hair rain-plastered to his forehead, Dan Madden cursed this trail and the destiny that had put him on it. But mostly he cursed Silent Sam Slade, a boy-snatching skunk, a trustee who'd worked as gardener for Warden Doyle only to betray his trust and throw in with a killer like Rufe Dormer.

But still Dan moved through the sloppy darkness, acutely aware that death might be yawning ahead. A twisting gorge gashed the face of Skeleton Mountain. Dan guessed he couldn't be over a mile from the gorge or from crumbling Nugget City, the ghost town that huddled on a shelflike ledge across the gorge, relic of a short-lived gold strike of yesteryear.

THEN the lightning was a lashing tongue, flicking across the blackened sky and suddenly men, a half dozen of them, were swarming out of nowhere, pulling Dan from his

saddle, launching themselves upon him. He had no chance to reach the gun leathered against his lean hip. He could only strike out frantically, send slogging blows into the darkness, blows that were futile in this blind murk.

"Take him alive!" a heavy voice was bellowing. "He can tell us if that blasted posse—"

Crashing thunder drowned the rest of it. And in the deeper darkness after the livid lightning, Dan, still fighting, was pressed backward and downward to the soggy ground. Then his arms were lashed and he was jerked to his feet.

"March!" that same heavy voice ordered.

Dan, pushed roughly, could only take the indicated direction. What a fool he'd been! Dormer and Slade were here, of course. But Dan should have expected others. Dormer's escape, at least, had been engineered by outside help. And the convicts had headed for Skeleton Mountain because that was where their friends had their hide-out. Dan walked right into the bunch of them!

Now, it seemed, they were taking him to Nugget City. And on the lip of the gorge that isolated the ghost town, another lightning flash gave Dan one breathtaking glimpse of the only means of reaching that forgotten camp.

Once a wagon road had snaked along the ledge to Nugget City. But a landslide had blocked that road and nobody had reopened it, for only ghosts inhabited Nugget City and ghosts need no roads. But a suspension bridge of rope and board had been strung across the gorge in the old days, a foot bridge affording a short cut to the scattered diggings on this side of the gorge.

Far below, the rain-swollen river

muttered as it lashed along its boulder-studded way. Thirty years ago that bridge had been good enough, but thirty years can play a lot of havoc with the stoutest hemp.

"We bin leavin' the hosses on this side, Rufe," Heavy-voice explained. "And we cross the bridge one at a time. Any greater weight would be too risky an' we ain't had time or equipment to strengthen the span."

Dan heard boot heels clump on the boards, the sound dissolving to nothing in the downpour. Then Dan was shoved onto the bridge. He inched his way cautiously, wishing his hands were free to clutch those rotting rope guard rails. One by one the others followed until a low-voiced tally in the Stygian gloom accounted for everybody.

Heavy-voice had gone ahead. A rectangle of light blossomed in a window and soon Dan was shoved through a sagging doorway to blink in lantern light. The place had been a barroom and though the mammoth mirror had been removed, the bar itself still stood and there was a scattering of chairs and tables, dust-shrouded and cobweb-festooned.

But it was not the room that interested Dan but the men within it—and one in particular. The cowpoke had his first look at his captors now—the four in range garb, all with a common stamp of cruelty; and the two in prison garb. One of these—the short, stocky, loose-lipped one—he guessed was Rufe Dormer. The other, the one holding the blanketed sleeping boy, had to be Silent Sam Slade.

HE was totally bald, was Silent Sam, and almost toothless. No prison pallor grayed his seamed face for he had worked outside the walls,

but prison years had stooped his tall, stringy body. He looked worn, dejected, and he returned Dan's stare without curiosity. Then Dan was jerked violently from his scrutiny by Heavy-voice who slammed him backward against the bar, jabbed a pistol into his stomach.

"They's just one reason you're alive," Heavy-voice snarled. "We crave to know how soon that posse will get here. Give head, law dog!"

"I wasn't with the posse," Dan retorted. "But if old John Masters is leading it, it'll work the slow but sure way. He'll draw his men closer every hour, making sure you don't break through meantime. He'll have you by noon tomorrow."

As soon as he'd said it, he wished he'd lied, told them the posse was riding hell-for-leather, closing in on them this very minute. But old Huck Madden had taught Dan to honor truth and he did so instinctively. The satisfaction in Heavy-voice's face made him regret it.

"Time aplenty," the outlaw grinned. "We can get the gold old Sam hid here, get out. Then—"

"Jist a minute, Flagg," a stubble-faced man spoke up. "I've seed this hairpin before. When I was hangin' around Deer Lodge, plantin' the hosses while Rufe was usin' that gun we smuggled to him, I saw this gent go into the warden's office. He trailed Rufe and Sam here, I tell you!"

At that moment Dan realized he was nearer to death than he'd ever been in his life. He could almost feel the silent menace that manifested itself in glaring eyes, tightening jaws. Heavy-voice—Flagg—pivoted.

"This the truth?" he demanded. "What's your game, hombre?"

And Dan, sucking in his breath, knew he had to play the one ace

he held. "Me, I was visitin' at the pen," he said. "But I come too late to see the gent. *I'm Silent Sam's son.*"

He spoke casually enough but it might have been a gun he had fired in their faces. There was thunderous silence with the rain drumming on the roof like leaden pellets, the river rumbling in the nearby gorge. Most of them stared slack-jawed. Rufe Dormer grinned. But it was Silent Sam who seemed the most surprised. He almost dropped young Jimmy Doyle.

"It's true," Dan went on. "I call myself Madden after Huck Madden, the gent that raised me. Last week I had what I always figured was my twenty-first birthday. Maybe it was because I was man age, maybe because I was keepin' company with a mighty fine girl—I dunno—but Huck told me Silent Sam left me at his place when I was a button, left me the same night the law got him and sent him to Deer Lodge for a killin'. I told my girl I maybe had killer blood in me. It made no never mind to her though she was some worried about how her dad would take it. I come to Deer Lodge to see Sam, ask him if I'm his kid. *And I'm askin' him now!*"

BUT Silent Sam seemed too stunned for speech. Rufe Dormer, that wolfish grin growing, spoke. "Sam's kid, eh?" he said. "Sam, did you turn family man in that five years after you killed your partner here in Nugget and run out? Huh?"

"No!" Sam suddenly exploded. "He's no kid o' mine. The law chased me back this way. I picked him up in a Wyoming town, fetched him along in case a posse crowded me too close. But I thought I was

safe in the basin so I dumped him at the first place I saw—Huck Madden's."

So that was the size of it! Silent Sam had taken young Dan as a hostage, even as he'd taken Jimmy Doyle when he fled Deer Lodge. A dead end to a time-misted trail. But at least, Dan reflected, he wasn't kin to this killer, a man who'd murdered his own partner, it seemed. Dan hadn't known Silent Sam's twisted trail began in Nugget City. Not that it mattered.

"Thanks," he told Silent Sam grimly. "Thanks for telling me I'm no kin of yours. While you was loping away with Dormer, I was listening to the warden rave what a model prisoner you were, how his kid, there, dang near worshiped you. You're a pretty low sort of snake, Slade!"

Silent Sam shifted the sleeping boy, bony fists knotting. "Takin' this kid weren't no idea o' mine—" he began, but Flagg cut him short.

"The devil with this talk," Flagg growled. "We got more important things to think about. You savvy why Rufe headed you this way, Sam? Forget about yon loud-mouthed galoot. We'll heave him into the gorge for you. But first we'd like a look at the gold you cached here years back."

Silent Sam swung his watery eyes to Flagg. "There's no gold," he said.

Flagg grinned but there was no humor in it. "Now, Sam," he said soothingly, "you ain't holdin' out on the gents that got you out of prison, are you? Don't stall. I wasn't around here when this was a real town, but Rufe was. Didn't you beat his ears off right here in this saloon? But I reckon Rufe won't pack no grudge—especially was you to give him a cut of that

gold. You and your pardner had a mighty rich claim, so the yarn goes. You killed your pard but you left too fast to take the gold along. Now where'd you hide it, Sam?"

There was menace beneath Flagg's casual tone and a certain stubbornness in Sam's eyes that told of antagonism about to flare openly. Dan, almost forgotten, read the signs with bated breath. Virtually under sentence of death, he could only hope that an altercation among these hellions might give him some ebulous advantage. But Silent Sam hedged.

"You willin' to bargain, Flagg?" he asked.

"Bargain? Why the devil should I?"

"Turn this kid loose," Silent Sam said. "Hang it, he's just like kin o' mine, me practically livin' at Doyle's house. I've knowed the button since the day he was born. Let him go and I'll lead you to that gold cache."

Flagg eyed him narrowly. "Show us the gold first. Once we get it, we're pullin' out pronto. We'll leave the kid behind and the posse will find him."

But Silent Sam shook his head stubbornly. "Rufe, here, hates me," he pointed out. "He's hated me ever since that beatin'. Likewise he hates Warden Doyle seein' as his own orneriness kept him in solitary often. Reckon you gents wouldn't stop Rufe was he to take his spite out on young Jimmy once you had your paws on that gold. Turn the button loose first. And maybe you better turn this mouthy hairpin loose, too, so's he can see the kid don't get lost on the mountainside."

"Aw, boss, we don't have to listen to this guff," Rufe Dormer interjected. "Fire on the old gent's bare feet'll make him cough up that gold.

What're we dickerin' for?"

But Flagg was lost in thought, greed flaring to replace the suspicion in his eyes. And there was fear, too, and Dan knew the cause of it. Wasted minutes might bring the posse to hem them in.

But Dan, weighing these factors, had another thought as well. This Silent Sam wasn't completely bad after all. Killer and promise breaker he might be, yet within his leathery old carcass was one spark of decency—his concern for little Jimmy Doyle, youthful pawn in a deadly game. Dan sort of wished he hadn't been so rough on the oldster.

"It's a deal," Flagg said grudgingly. "Me, I'd rather do business Rufe's way but time's a-burnin'. The mouthy gent and the button go free."

He slashed the ropes that bound Dan. "Come on," he ordered while Dan flexed his arms. "The sooner you get out, the sooner this mule-headed coot'll lead us to what we want."

THE rain still lashed down in fury as they stepped outside. At the gorge Silent Sam passed the bundled boy to Dan. Young Jimmy Doyle opened big eyes, shuddered at a lightning flash.

"Get goin'," Flagg said savagely. "And you, Kells, get across the bridge first and make sure he don't come back for a hoss. We don't want him reachin' that posse too soon."

Kells, a runty little man, scurried across the bridge and hollered from the other side. Then Dan was edging over that muttering torrent, young Jimmy in his arms.

"You don't weigh more'n a fistful of feathers, button," he said aloud. "Hope it don't take a straw to bust a bridge's back!"

Across the bridge, Dan's back muscles tightened as he passed Kells. But Kells lost the opportunity to trigger a treacherous gun and Dan was soon into the dripping bushes beyond. He was glad to find a trail of sorts, glad that intermittent lightning showed the way. And glad for other things besides.

This adventure was to have its happy ending after all! He was no kin of Silent Sam's. And he was going to restore Jimmy Doyle to his anxious father's arms. He'd be the hero of the Stillwater Basin man hunt. Even crusty old John Masters would have to acknowledge that fact.

And so he trudged contentedly along. After a half-hour the rain subsided, the thunder dying to distant grumbling and moonlight began to pierce the milling clouds. Dan paused for breath beneath a dripping tree, hunkering there while Jimmy, awake now, pawed at the blanket with chubby fists.

"Where's Sam?" the button demanded suddenly.

"Hush," Dan said. "We're goin' to find your daddy, sabe? Sam's with those other men."

Jimmy began to cry. "Those are bad mans," he insisted. "They'll hurt Sam. We got to go find Sam."

"Now don't you take on," Dan said soothingly. "Those men are Sam's friends. They won't hurt him."

"Yes, they will," Jimmy wailed. "They said they'd fix Sam. I'm Sam's boy, I am. First I'm mommy's boy, then daddy's boy, then Sam's boy. He said he used to have a little boy like me. With hair like mine, he said."

A vagrant moonbeam touched the corn-colored head of Jimmy Doyle and suddenly Dan Madden was staring, his fingers straying to a lock

of his own yellow hair. But this was loco! Silent Sam had denied their relationship. Silent Sam must have told this kid a windy.

"You go find Sam, mister," Jimmy was begging. "Please!"

Go find Sam! A fine how-do-you-do that would be! His job was to deliver Jimmy to safety. He wasn't supposed to buck that crew of killers, unarmed and alone. Hang it, Sam could take care of himself! Sam was in no danger!

Yet Rufe Dormer hated Sam. And according to this kid, Sam had been threatened. Suddenly Dan was remembering Silent Sam bargaining to save a boy from Rufe Dormer's spite. Of all that tough crew only Sam had a spark of decency and even now he might be at the mercy of Dormer who packed an ancient grudge. And Silent Sam claimed he'd once had a tow-headed kid.

Dan pulled himself erect. That chain of fires below seemed nearer, as though the posse had moved considerably.

"See those fires, button?" he said. "Wait here a spell for me. If I don't show back, walk toward those fires, sabe? Now I'll just borrow one of your blankets while I go for Sam."

TAKING the blanket, Dan scooped damp twigs from the ground, stuffed the folded blanket until it had the semblance of a bundled child. With the bundle cradled in his arms he strode back up the muddy slope to the gorge.

Maybe the precaution he planned was wasted effort, he reflected. Maybe Nugget City would be deserted, reconsigned to the ghosts who'd claimed it so long. Maybe the outlaw crew had already killed Sam and fled with Sam's gold. But, no, a light still burned in the distant

saloon and Kells lurked at this end of the bridge, nervous as a skittish colt.

"What goes on?" the man demanded and palmed his gun as Dan strode forward.

"This kid here," Dan mumbled, striding closer. "He's—"

Suddenly he flung the bundle at Kells, flung it so it unfolded, the twigs showering into Kells' face. Kells' gun roared once, a wild, blind shot. Then Dan was upon him, his fingers closing on Kells' wrist, twisting. The gun arced, winked in the moonlight, disappeared into the dark gorge below. The two men were perilously near the rim as they threshed about. But Dan's free fist, finding Kells' chin, put an end to the fight.

He'd wanted Kells' gun but it was gone. Panting, Dan searched the unconscious man for another, found only a knife. Cutting the blanket into strips, he bound and gagged Kells. Then he glanced across the canyon again. Obviously the thunder of the river below had drowned the sound of the gun shot for there was no sign of alarm yonder.

But the very fact that the outlaw crew was still here argued that things were not as they should be.

Alarmed, Dan crossed the swaying bridge again, finding this passage more spine-tingling than the others for the moonlight gave him a glimpse of white-crested waters and dark, jagged boulders far below.

Across, he snaked toward that lighted window and cautiously eased his head above the crumbling sill to peer inside. Then his blood was running cold.

They were all there—Silent Sam, Rufe Dormer, big Flagg and the other two. But Silent Sam was spread-eagled upon the floor, held down by Flagg and the others while Dormer, knife in hand, its blade glowing cherry red, crouched before the seared, naked feet of the captive.

"Talk, blast you!" Dormer was growling. "Spit out where that gold is or I'll burn plumb down to your ankle bones this time!"

"There ain't no gold," Sam gritted. "Do I have to keep tellin' you? My pard had stole my share o' the gold and spent it, along with his own, over the gamin' tables. That's why we quarreled and he went for his gun and I had to kill him. But there was no witnesses, so I loped. And there weren't no use arguin' at the trial."

Dan Madden was away from the



window and heading for the door, wild-eyed. Silent Sam had bargained with non-existent gold, had run a bluff to save Jimmy Doyle! Dan had to save Silent Sam from those torturers. But even as he dashed toward the door, he knew he was heading for suicide without helping Sam any. He couldn't rush in there without a gun. He paused, his gaze desperate, frantic, as it roved in search of some weapon.

This saloon building was backed against the slope. And upon that slope were boulders, dozens of them. Suddenly Dan, inspiration-spurred, was clawing up the slope, dislodging the biggest boulder he saw, sending it careening down the slope loosening shale and lesser boulders as it rolled. And with that miniature avalanche descending upon the rotting roof of the old saloon, Dan was right behind it.

"Holy mackerel!" Flagg's heavy voice boomed. "The rain's started a slide like it did when the road got buried! Let me out o' here!"

He came out of the doorway as though he'd been catapulted, and Dormer and the others were right behind him. Dan darted inside unnoticed. The biggest boulder had crashed through the roof, smashing a table to kindling. And Silent Sam, forgotten, was painfully pulling himself toward the doorway. Scooping the oldster into his arms, Dan was out of the building and stumbling toward the bridge.

THE moon had hidden its face behind a cloud bank again. Dan was thankful even though dirt piles of ancient diggings and discarded sluice boxes were hazards in the dark. Flagg's men were trying to locate each other, their first panic passing with the realization that the avalanche, such as it was, was over.

He was almost to the bridge when suddenly the tricky moon broke from its cloudy prison again and he and Silent Sam were plainly etched in its revealing light. Converging shadow shapes had marked them, for guns began to spit.

"There's your avalanche maker, boys," Flagg boomed. "Head 'em off from the bridge!"

At that moment Dan would have swapped his stake in the hereafter for a gun. Without a smoke pole he could only run, the moaning oldster in his arms, zigzagging while lead sought him, hurtling toward the bridge, now a golden thread in the moonlight. And he reached it, setting Sam upon his feet at the rim.

"Get across!" Dan ordered. "It ain't safe for more'n one at a time. Hurry! I'll be right after you."

But Silent Sam had crumpled to the ground. "My feet," he murmured.

His feet! That heartless crew had tortured him for nearly an hour, crippled him so he couldn't walk. Dan groaned. Sam might be able to crawl across the bridge but there wasn't time for crawling.

And there wasn't time to make a decision. There was only time to scoop Silent Sam into his arms again. Then Dan Madden was out upon the bridge, stumbling across that shaking, swaying contraption of age-weakened rope and boards, hurrying along with Sam's weight in his arms.

Behind Dan the four outlaws clustered on the ghost-town side. They couldn't reach the two fugitives for they didn't dare add their own weight to the weakened structure. But their bullets had long arms and those bullets zipped about Dan. Yet though lead droned dangerously close, Dan's real worry was the bridge.

There was the river, seemingly miles below, white foam dashing upward like clawing hands to claim its prey. There was the distant rim, seemingly miles away, and this bridge teetering and swaying so Dan could hardly keep his balance. And then, with the rim almost within reach, the bridge gave! Dan heard the first rope snap a second ahead of the other. With a mighty heave he hurled Silent Sam to the rim, diving forward at the same time. And then, oblivious to the bullets that still spattered about him, Dan was clawing at the rim, hanging halfway over eternity, his own weight dragging him to doom. But Sam was tugging at him and Dan, face knotted with strain, was hauled to safety.

He rolled Sam toward the bushes, tumbling after him until, when they were safe from those questing guns, they both lay panting.

"You come back," Silent Sam gasped. "Dang it, you was supposed to take the button—"

"He made me come," Dan explained. "And . . . and he give me the idea you lied back there—"

"I left you at Madden's because your ma was dead and the law was yappin' at my heels," Sam explained. "I had to lie tonight. You notice how interested Dormer was? He hates my guts and he's stir-crazy enough to have killed you if he was sure you was kin o' mine. I had to lie and to bargain to get you out of there."

SO that was it! Silent Sam had made his bluff not only to save Jimmy Doyle but to save his own son as well. There were a lot of things Dan wanted to say, things choking inside his throat. But suddenly lanterns were bobbing about

them and men were here—Stillwater Basin men with old John Masters leading them and Warden Doyle striding along, Jimmy in his arms.

"You were right in urging me to push on, warden," John Masters was saying. "Look yonder at Dormer and his friends, penned like they're in prison till we dig out the old road and get to them. And here's Silent Sam. And Dan Madden! What you doing here with Slade?"

"Sidin' him," Dan answered promptly. And because Silent Sam had proved himself a man in anybody's language, even if he had broken his word as a trustee, there was pride in Dan's voice. "He's my father."

"And a good man," said Warden Doyle. "The pardon board will do some acting mighty pronto. What are you looking so puzzled about, young man? Don't you understand? Slade didn't escape. Dormer forced him to come along for some reason, just as he took Jimmy. There's no black mark against Silent Sam's record."

But the most amazing thing was that John Masters was extending his hand to Dan, and there was no doubting the heartiness of his smile.

"I never catered to you much, Dan," the old gent was saying. "Always figgered you were too easy-going. I don't rightly savvy how you changed from a Madden to a Slade so quick, but the sign says you've got sand enough to be a son-in-law o' mine whatever your name is. Shake?"

It came to Dan Madden that he was almighty tired. But he had strength enough to take that proffered hand, and afterward he sank back, a vast content flooding him. Even the sodden ground was a comforting bed after this night's work.

RANGE SAVVY

by **CARL RAHT**

The buckskin-clad professional hunter, usually a sharpshooter of perfect skill, played an important part in the early days of the West. The wide-open ranges and mountains abounded in game, feathered, four-footed and finny. Wagon trains, pack outfits, army and trading parties—anywhere men were grouped together in large numbers—the professional hunter stood between them and famine. When the railroads began pushing westward, with their large crews of surveyors, grader men and track layers,



the commissary heads hired hunters to provide meat for the hungry laborers. Such items as mountain trout, venison, turkey and quail appeared on the commis-

sary reports. Eastern stockholders set up a howl over this sumptuous fare for common laborers; they wanted to know why the workers couldn't eat bacon and beans. The commissary officials patiently explained that the day's hire for a hunter was the price of such table delicacies while bacon and beans would be worth a dollar a pound in hauling fees by the time a freighter got them across hundreds of miles of Indian-infested country—if he did get them across.

Buffalo are still being hunted in Arizona! In January of each year in White Rock Valley the participants gather for the unusual hunt. The fortunate hunters are selected in a drawing of names from license numbers issued to hunters throughout the last season. No hunter

may participate who has previously been successful in a drawing. The buffalo hunted are the culls and aged animals which the State fish and game commission in charge of the State-owned buffalo



herd has decided must go. The exact date of the hunt is set by the State game warden in charge of the buffalo herd. Although the fortunate hunter whose name is drawn may live thousands of miles away, if possible he hurries back to take part in a hunt enjoyed by very few people since the passing of the great buffalo herds.

At last the kingly and deadly reptile, His Majesty the Rattlesnake, has been turned to some good and useful purpose—of a sort. Canned rattlesnake meat may be found on the shelves of many food stores in the Southwest. The titbit



commands a price equal to caviar and is paid for willingly by lovers of the delicacy. Rattlesnake-steak dinners are not unheard of, being considered both

swanky and unusual. Still another commercial use is made of the snakes' delicate vertebrate bones. They are polished, colored and strung, to encircle the modern woman's neck as unusual and extremely attractive costume jewelry.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

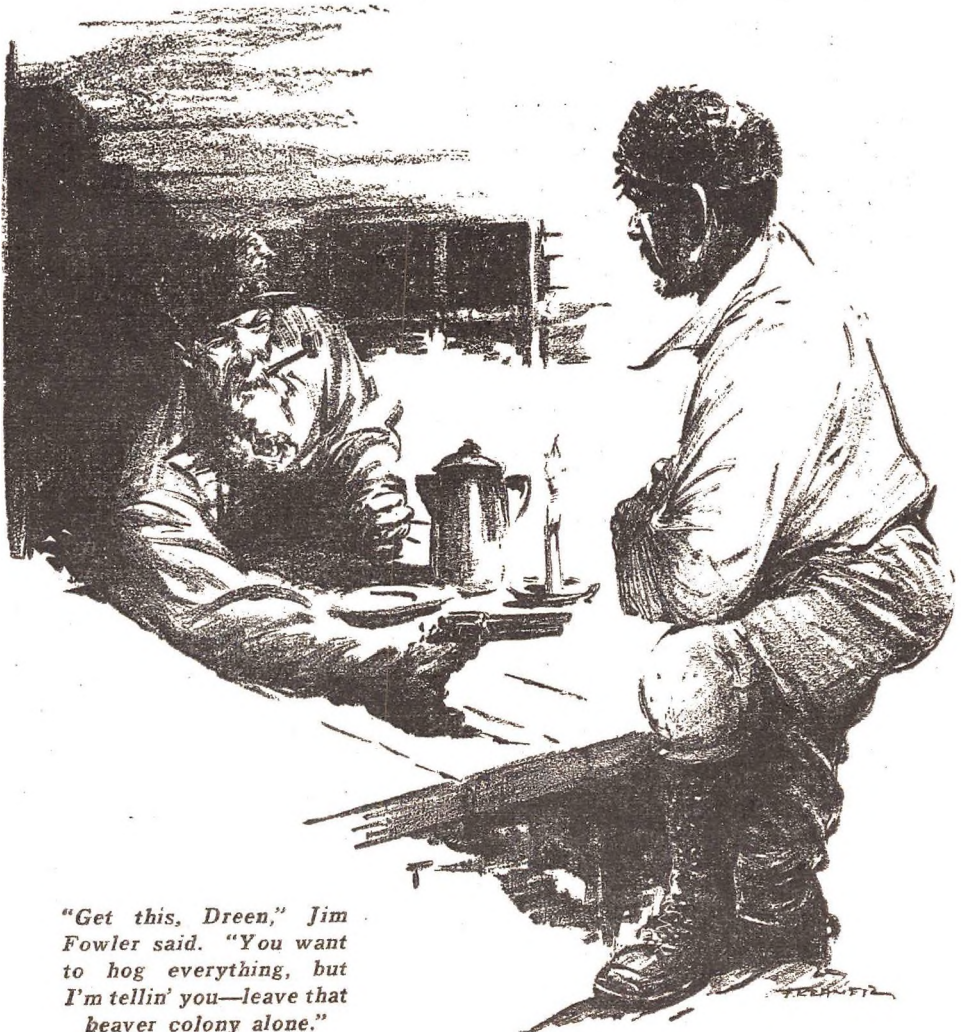
GRUBSTAKE OF DEATH

BY KENNETH GILBERT

ECHOES of the gunshot went chasing over the poplar flat which was still covered with snow, although spring had come to the higher ranges. The dog team, hauling a heavily laden sled, had come to an abrupt stop and now stood uncertainly, sniffing, for the taint of death was in

the air. Old Jim Fowler had also come to a stop and was regarding his new partner with growing doubt. After a moment Pete Dreen, his seamed face alight with satisfaction, thrust his six-gun back into its holster under his parka.

"You hadn't ought to have done



"Get this, Dreen," Jim Fowler said. "You want to hog everything, but I'm tellin' you—leave that beaver colony alone."

that," Fowler protested. He indicated the porcupine twitching convulsively on the snow, its upended quills sinking and changing its color to a darker hue. "What good is the critter to us, Pete? If we was starvin', it might have saved our lives. But we got plenty grub and—"

Dreen grunted scornfully. "Sez you? That porky'll be grub for the dogs. Save us from feedin' 'em frozen fish!"

"But we got plenty of frozen fish for 'em," Fowler protested. "Enough to last until the snow goes, and then some! It's bad luck to kill a porky unless you're in real need!"

Dreen made no reply. Drawing his hunting knife, he stepped forward, turned the porcupine on its back in preparation for skinning it from its unprotected side. But apparently he changed his mind, for he stood up and slid the knife back into its sheath.

"That's *your* job," he told Fowler flatly. "They're your dogs!"

Fowler's cheeks reddened above his grizzled beard. "If it's my job," he retorted, "then we go on! My dogs don't like porky as long as they know we've got frozen fish!" He swung around and faced the team. "H'ya, Smoke!" he barked at the leader. "*Mush!*"

Obediently the team started off again, Fowler breaking trail ahead of them while Dreen followed. Nothing more was said as they moved off through the spare stands of trees, but Fowler was still troubled. Behind them a pair of gray jays, camp robbers, fluttered among the trees and stared down curiously at the body of the porcupine. The meat birds were frankly puzzled. They understood that here was food, that the strange human beings had killed it by means of a mysterious thing

which gave off smoke and a loud report. What they could not understand was that the humans had gone off and left the food after getting it.

But they were no more puzzled than was Jim Fowler. He had met Pete Dreen at the settlement of Birch Flat and, needing a partner, had accepted the man's offer to grubstake an outfit on a prospecting trip to Snow Creek, where Fowler had discovered signs of pay dirt the previous fall. They wanted to sink their prospect holes, build their sluice boxes and get out gravel in readiness to shovel-in as soon as melting snows gave them plenty of water in the creek to wash out gold. Fowler had supplied the dogs and sled while Dreen furnished the grub and remainder of the outfit.

AT the beginning Fowler had congratulated himself on acquiring a partner who knew the ropes. Dreen was silent and businesslike. He figured the grub requirements for themselves and the dogs to the last ounce, and bought no more. He saved in every way possible, declaring they could "live off the country," if necessary. The easy-going Fowler did not object, telling himself that Dreen was a good manager. But if Dreen was penurious in some ways, he was profligate in others. The wilderness and the wild creatures therein, on whom Jim Fowler had learned to depend in order to sustain life, seemed to have been created so Pete Dreen could waste them.

Killing and leaving the porcupine was only the latest example. Fowler had seen his partner cut down large spruce for no other purpose than to get a few twigs at their tops for his bed. Once Dreen came on a covey of willow grouse in a thicket and calmly killed eight of

them, although he and Fowler were full-fed. The dogs ate the birds.

Again, Dreen discovered a bull moose "yarded" in a swamp, and shot the huge beast. The dogs had a feast, but neither man attempted to eat any of the meat, made stringy and tough by a winter diet of bark. Hundreds of pounds of meat were left behind for brush wolves and other prowlers to feed upon.

"Goes agin' my grain to kill a porky unless I'm starvin'," Jim Fowler reflected. "What in blazes is wrong with the man?"

Old Jim Fowler had lived so long in the wilds that he believed the ways of nature and life were all part of a plan set by Providence. He believed that there was such a thing as just retribution; that punishment invariably fitted the crime. There was even Biblical precept for it. "Waste not, want not," said the Book. Jim Fowler wagged his head and trudged on ahead of the dogs, wondering where it would end and whether Pete Dreen would ever realize that he was violating rules laid down even in prehistoric days when men lived from day to day by luck and skill with weapons of the chase. It was on the last day before they reached Snow Creek that it happened again.

Skirting the edge of a swamp, the dogs suddenly betrayed excitement. Pete Dreen, the killing urge in his face, slipped out his gun.

"Wait!" begged Fowler. "Like as not there's a band of woodland caribou yarded up in the swamp yonder. We don't need 'em for grub *now*, Pete! Won't be much good to eat, anyway. Chances are they'll come in right handy later on." But Dreen, ignoring him, pushed on and into the swamp.

Presently Fowler heard the sharp clatter of gunshots. There was a

pause. Then more shots. When he finally reached the place he found Dreen standing in the center of a ring of dead and dying caribou. Cows, yearling calves, young bulls—even the old herdmaster who ruled the band—were down in the snow about him.

"What in thunder did you do *that* for?" Fowler demanded disgustedly.

Dreen stood there for a long moment without replying. He seemed unable to explain. All he had known was that he felt the killing urge.

"Well," he answered defensively at last, "we can use some of 'em for dog food, can't we? Besides, I'd like a taste of fresh meat myself!"

"You know danged well that the lot of us couldn't eat all that meat in six months!" retorted Fowler. "Dreen, if you don't quit this useless killin', we're goin' to split up!"

Dreen swung around on him sharply. "Split up?" he repeated derisively. "That would be a pleasure, Fowler! Only we don't split up until you've gone through with your bargain. I agreed to outfit us because you told me there was gold on Snow Creek. After we get that gold—well, *I'll* be the one who wants to split up!"

Fowler regarded him with mild astonishment. Dreen still had the six-shooter in his hand, and that killing light was still in his eyes. Suddenly Fowler remembered stories he had heard about Pete Dreen. He had a terrific temper, they said; he had killed men, but always, so the accounts ran, in self-defense. Maybe that was so, and yet Jim Fowler had an odd, shivery feeling of dread. It came to him now that it might be a smart thing to keep his eyes open and watch Dreen a little more carefully. Dreen was greedy—the greediest man Jim Fowler had ever seen.

Likewise he was ruthless. Killing meant nothing to him save a grim sort of satisfaction. Once they got the gold—and Fowler was sure they would find it—Dreen's greediness might carry him to further extremes. Fowler closed his lips and said nothing more, but turned and went back to where the dogs were waiting. Dreen came along, silent, too. There was no mention of the dead caribou, of what use they might be to the two men and the dog team. Fowler yelled at the team, and they pushed on.

NEXT day they were at Snow Creek. The incident of the caribou slaughter—and other incidents, for that matter—seemed forgotten. There was a tiny cabin on Snow Creek which Jim Fowler had built the previous year, and at first they busied themselves in putting this into shape. Thereafter, while the sun strengthened and the shell ice began to melt and fall into the creek, they started driving the first prospect hole. A sample of gravel taken while the hole was still some distance from bedrock showed the telltale yellow flecks of gold. They had riches in their grasp!

Driven by excitement, Dreen worked at top speed and Fowler, no laggard himself, found it hard to keep up with the other's demands. Pete Dreen wanted gold and he wanted it fast. Day by day, the pile of gravel grew beside the sluice boxes which they had whipsawed out of nearby spruce trees and nailed together in crude yet effective fashion. Within a few days now the first flood waters would come and they could begin shoveling-in. After the last of the gravel was washed and the cunningly contrived riffles, nailed crosswise in the bottom of the flume, were cleaned of their golden deposit, they would

divide up their yellow hoard. Then the partnership would end, for Jim Fowler had determined that he and Pete Dreen were through.

It was a week before the clean-up that Dreen discovered there were beavers in the wide and shallow pond above the point where they had built their sluices.

"Look!" he told Fowler excitedly. "Here's a chance for us to clean up a catch of fur, as well as all this gold. Bet we can take a hundred prime pelts out of that colony. That's a thousand or maybe two thousand more for us!"

Again Jim Fowler shook his head. He had long known of the beaver colony and, because he was a prospector rather than a trapper, had let it alone. During the summer which he had spent prospecting Snow Creek, he had grown fond of the harmless and intelligent denizens of the pond. He had watched them at their work the previous fall, when they had strengthened their dam and had stored vast quantities of poplar logs in the pond to supply them with food during the winter. Often it seemed to him that these brown-furred amphibians had an intelligence which came mighty close to reaching human standards.

They knew how to fell trees in the most advantageous way, how to dig canals to float the trees to the pond, how to build a dam which would withstand even the flood waters of Snow Creek, when the latter was on a rampage. Many a summer evening Jim Fowler had enjoyed himself by sitting in a thicket and watching the busy artisans, ruled by a huge old beaver king, at work on their community enterprise. Never had it occurred to him that their pelts were valuable, and that he might make enough for a grubstake

if he were to wipe out the colony; rather he thought of them as friendly neighbors, to be encouraged and protected. When Pete Dreen suggested trapping out the colony, old Jim Fowler at first could not find words adequate to express himself.

"Pete," he said plaintively at last, "we're goin' to have more gold than we know what to do with! Let's be reasonable. What's the use of killin' them poor beavers? We're rich already. I've seen the time when I didn't have much grub and no more dust with which to buy it, yet I made out, somehow, without trappin' that colony. Thunderation! You can't take *everything* you find in this world! Gotta leave some of it for the next feller!"

Dreen sneered his contempt for such a code. "Back in Birch Flat, you told me you were broke," he pointed out. "Who was it that furnished your grubstake? Pete Dreen! And why? Because I was smart enough to take things as I find 'em—and keep 'em. That's why you've been a busted prospector all your life, and always will be. You're always tryin' to mix sentiment and business, and it won't work!"

They were in the cabin when the clash occurred and, lying on the rude table next to his hand, was Jim Fowler's own gun. Now his hand moved toward it ominously as he replied, "Get this, Dreen, and get it straight! *You leave that beaver colony alone!* I've brought you in here and shared my gold because I needed a pardner to grubstake me. But I didn't promise anything but gold—not any beaver pelts whatsoever! You keep clear of that pond, or me and you are goin' to tangle! Why, dang your hide, you're a worse glutton than a wolverine—and glutton is one of his names! You want *every-*

thing! You don't want to leave a blasted scrap of anything that you can use—and whether you use it or not isn't important. You've killed more wild critters on this trip than I've killed in three-four years. But no more! You're leavin' them beavers alone!"

FOR a long moment Dreen stared at him through narrowed eyes. It was the first time that old Jim Fowler had been really aroused. Dreen was a little astonished, but likewise filled with cold anger. Yet he was too cunning to make an issue of it now. There would be plenty of time later for that. He even forced a smile.

"Why," he said almost humbly, "if I'd known that such things stirred you up that way, I'd have been more careful. No use of us gettin' into a row, Jim. We've got work to do. If you say so, we'll forget the beavers. We've still got a pile of gravel to shovel in, and the riffles to clean. That agreeable with you?"

His smile was so disarming that old Jim Fowler was taken aback. He felt a little confused and even contrite. He shook his head and sighed.

"Sorry I sounded off like that," he apologized. "No cause for it. But, 'somehow, them beavers mean more to me than they would to the average man. Got so I know 'em right well. That old beaver king—I give him the Injun name of Ahmik—is smart as paint. Friend of mine, you might say. I'd hate like blazes to see anything happen to him. You understand, Pete?"

Dreen nodded, his eyes veiled by his lids. "Sure!" he agreed. "Now that we understand each other better, I reckon we'll get along. I hate to see a mess of good fur like that go to waste, you might say, but if it's

a personal matter with you, Jim, why, I'm for it!"

So the quarrel ended peacefully. Jim Fowler was infinitely pleased that Pete Dreen understood at last. Now, he told himself, there would be no more trouble. He went about his work more briskly than ever, and at last the job was done.

They sat one spring night in the cabin, and by the light of a candle on the table feasted their eyes upon a pile of flaky nuggets, some large, some no bigger than pin heads.

"Waal," declared Fowler finally, "that's a right nice haul. And it's all clean, Pete! Clean as a hound's tooth. Didn't take no killin' to get it—and it's all ours!"

Pete Dreen did not reply, but sat there fascinated as Fowler set about making the division. The old man produced a small set of gold scales and began weighing out the haul. When the task was finished at last, each man had eleven moosehide pokes heavy with gold. For convenience in carrying, these were secured to belts which each man would strap about his waist.

Dreen strapped on his belt first and stood up with a sigh of satisfaction. The weight of the gold was astounding.

"Bet we've each got close to thirty thousand," Fowler declared proudly. "Figurin' at thirty-five dollars an ounce, twelve troy ounces to the pound, four hundred and twenty dollars to the pound, we got nigh onto seventy-two pounds of gold each to pack! Thunderation, that's a load!" He chuckled. "Don't you go step-pin' on no shell ice that may be left in the creeks when we start out! You'll sink like a stone!"

Dreen eyed him curiously. Fowler, unsuspecting, hurried on. "Waal, now," he asked confidently, "you

still in mind about splittin' up, Pete?"

Dreen straightened. "Split up?" he repeated softly. "Yeah, that's been in my mind for a long while! But the way we'll spit up is like *this!*" As he bit off the last words, he whipped out his gun. Before the astonished old prospector could move, Dreen fired once. The gust of the blast doused the candle instantly, but Fowler's body crashed heavily in the darkness.

WITH a grunt of satisfaction, Dreen stood up. His first impulse was to light the candle, to make certain that Fowler was dead. He wanted the gold that Fowler had crammed into the pouched belt but which he had not had time to strap on. Still, that could wait. As to what had happened to Fowler, there could be no doubt. Dreen regarded himself as an expert shot with a six-gun, and the range had been close.

At the moment he had another urge, and accomplishment of it would seem like further defiance of the partner he had grown to hate. Out there in the pond were perhaps a hundred beavers, and it would be easy for him to get all or most of them. All he needed to do was to cut the dam and, when the water drained away, kill them with a club as they waddled about frantically in the wreckage of their community home. "Means a thousand dollars' worth of fur at least," he told himself. "And it's what *you*"—he grimaced in the direction of the man he had shot down—"told me I couldn't do!" The temptation was too strong to resist. Holstering his six-gun and picking up an ax which stood beside the door, he started out.

There was still ice in the pond but not much of it. The water flowed

black and smoothly over the lip of the dam, a good six feet in height and perhaps two hundred feet in length. Here and there above it Dreen could make out the dark shapes of beaver lodges, each occupied by a family. Once the dam was cut, the beavers would rush out to repair the damage, and in their anxiety they would be easy prey. Those remaining in the lodges could be killed later. Down by the cleaned-out sluice boxes Dreen selected a short length of sapling which would serve as a club. Then, boldly, he started out on the dam, carrying the ax.

It was treacherous and slippery going, yet he was sure-footed enough. Halfway out, he stuck the club into a hole between two sticks and attacked the dam with his ax. At the first blow, terror spread through the colony.

Immediately Dreen saw brown, furry heads appear on the surface, which still held light from starshine above. Probably the beavers had never regarded man as their enemy. Old Jim Fowler, the only man they had ever seen, had never attempted to harm them. But this strange creature who was hacking away at their precious dam spread consternation among them.

There were loud slaps of warning as beavers smote their flat tails on the surface of the water, but Pete Dreen worked on. Bit by bit, he managed to loosen the closely woven structure of the dam, and now the water began pouring through the opening with increasing volume. Always he kept the club handy for the moment when the water would grow shallow and he could turn and spread death among the colonists. But he did not reckon with the truculence of old Ahmik.

The veteran beaver king rose suddenly only a few feet away from Dreen and snapped defiance at the man, at the same time slapping his tail so hard on the water that it sounded like a pistol shot. The loudness and nearness of it startled Dreen and he cursed in nervousness and stopped chopping long enough to draw his gun. But old Ahmik was gone before the man could fire. After a moment Dreen went back to work, but hardly had he started when it happened again.

The tail slap was a challenge which Dreen seemed unable to ignore. At the same time he realized that if he could kill the beaver king the other colonists might be thrown into confusion through the loss of their leader. He drew his gun once more, shifted the ax to his left hand and struck one more blow at the weakened dam. But the awkwardness of the movement was his undoing. The keen blade missed the dam for which it was intended, and gashed his foot.

The sudden pain and unexpectedness of it threw him off balance and he wavered on his uncertain footing. As the sleek, rounded head of Ahmik appeared less than twenty feet away, Pete Dreen cried out and tried to save himself. But he could not do it. Into the deep water above the dam he went with a splash.

He thrashed around, trying to swim. But something was wrong. There was a numbing, helpless pain in his injured foot which made it almost useless for swimming. More important was the fact that unseen hands appeared to be dragging him down. Struggle as he would against the current sucking through the opening he had cut in the dam, he could not keep his nose above water for more than a second at a time. Too late, then, he remembered the

heavy gold belt sagging at his waist. Strangely, too, he recalled old Jim Fowler's words in appraising its weight. "Nigh onto seventy-two pounds," Fowler had said. That weight now was enormous, more than the efforts of his feet and arms could keep above water. Nor could he climb up the inside face of the dam because of the drag of the water where he had cut the structure. In terror-stricken panic he sought to unfasten the belt.

But it was too late. His fingers seemed all thumbs, and they were picking at the belt in futile fashion when the struggling of his body ceased and he let himself be drawn into the peace of black oblivion.

DAYLIGHT had touched the eastern peaks as old Jim Fowler, weak from loss of blood but still alive, dragged himself to the door of the cabin and peered out. He knew what had happened, so he was surprised to see that the dogs were still tethered in their usual places among stumps out in front. More than that, his share of the gold was still in its belt lying on the table where he had laid it just before Pete Dreen shot him down. This was mystery. If Dreen had attempted to kill him to get the gold, why hadn't he taken it? And where had Dreen gone? Jim Fowler mulled these questions over in his mind.

By and by, as Fowler stared through the dawn that was rapidly growing stronger on the smooth waters of the pond, the answer came to him. He saw the ax handle sticking out of the top of the dam where Dreen had left it, and marked the spot where the dam had been cut. But of Dreen himself there was no trace.

That unsolved mystery was not made less poignant by the fact that Jim Fowler was still alive, and knew he would recover from the bullet which had torn through the flesh over his left ribs; and that he had his own share of the gold. These things were lucky breaks which he felt he did not deserve. What puzzled him most was the matter of Pete Dreen's disappearance after attempting to cut the beaver dam. For a long while old Jim Fowler stared at the structure before the solution of the problem came to him.

Perhaps it was old Ahmik himself who suggested it. For, the furry head of the beaver king rose to the surface just back of where the break in the dam occurred. There was a look strangely like that of triumphant satisfaction on Ahmik's smooth visage. And suddenly Jim Fowler grinned in understanding, although at the same time he felt a prickly sensation along his spine.

The dam had been nearly cut through. It would be difficult for the beavers to plug the break again unless they had some particularly large object with which to do it. No tree in their pond would be big enough to do the job effectively. Yet the break *had* been plugged, for the water in the pond was at its normal level.

Old Ahmik, staring across the pond with his beady eyes, seemed to know the answer. He was accustomed to using such materials as came to hand, without questioning the nature of them. The body of a killer, weighted with seventy-two pounds of gold, plastered with mud and held fast in place by the current, suited Ahmik very well as a stop gap for his precious dam!



OLD FENCE RIDER

BY S. OMAR BARKER

I AIN'T no king of saddle
 An' I ain't no ridin' fool,
 Jest jog along a-straddle
 Of a little spotted mule.
 A-follerin' the fences
 An' a-mendin' wire an' such,
 I don't see what the sense is
 In a-worryin' so much
 About the price of cattle
 Like the owners always does.
 This life may be a battle,
 But it ain't for me becuz
 I've got no use for money,
 More than jest my board an' keep.
 Some thinks I'm kinder funny,
 But I never lose no sleep
 A-frettin' over troubles
 An' expectin' of the wust.
 Don't never blow no bubbles,
 So I ain't afeerd they'll bust!
 Don't study none on women,
 Nor politics nor strife.
 My eyesight's kinder dimmin',
 But that's jest part of life.
 I used to ride the ranges
 Silver-trimmed an' mighty bold.
 I've saw a heap of changes
 While I've been gittin' old.
 But me, I ain't a-pinin'
 For them sprouty days of yore—
 The sun keeps right on shinin',
 An' I cain't ask no more.

 I ain't no king of saddle,
 But I neither ain't no fool,
 A-ridin' fence a-straddle
 Of my little spotted mule!

GUN LORD OF THE PAPAGO TRAIL

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

It took a particular breed of cowman to bunch a thousand head of wild Mexican yaks and drive them north from the Altar. And it took a particular breed of fighting man to take such a herd out by way of the Desierto Desolado instead of by the longer, safer way through Magdalena and Nogales. There were few to dispute the obvious fact that Jeff Hallett was that kind of a cowman and that kind of a fighter. And maybe that is why he alone, of all the men who had tried it, was successful in moving the cheap Altar cattle across the two-hundred-mile Papago Trail, as it came to be called, to the new loading point at Casa Grande.

The secret of his success—and it did not make it easy—was Ojos Conejos—literally Rabbit Eyes, actually Rabbit Springs. These springs, a series of open pools, a bit brackish but bordered with wire grass and desert willow browse, were the only break in a four-day waterless drive. They lay in one of a maze of malpais-capped arroyos which made up a badlands at the edge of the fierce Desierto Desolado. Slitted eyes of blue, reflecting the turquoise of the desert sky and attracting all manner of God's creatures to their life-giving flow.

Here came the coyote, the lobo, the bobcat and the hardy desert bighorn. Here also had stopped the nomadic Papago, marauding Yaqui and Apache, outlaw whites and

mixed breeds who found it convenient to haunt the Papagueria. Here, too, came Don Mariano Cordoba, driving his Altar cattle in a mad gamble to meet the demand for breeding stock in the untouched grazing lands of Arizona. And out of that grand old *hacendado's* failures came one of the most successful drovers the Southwest was ever to know—Jeff Hallett, that picturesque, ramrod-straight Texan with the ruddy mane, the icy-blue eyes and a forthrightness that scorned all dissemblance. Jeff Hallett, only a kid puncher working for Cordoba, yet one whose advice could have saved the don if he had deigned to accept it. Ten years later Jeff had proved the wisdom of that advice by successfully cutting off a hundred and fifty miles from the longer route—the difference between profit and loss if one could get away with it.

Jeff's secret lay in his pacing of the drive, both before and after hitting Ojos Conejos. That, and his choice of a crew. The desert country has spawned countless hard-riding, straight-shooting men, some good, some bad and still others whatever they had to be at the moment. It was the latter type Hallett had outriding his herd as it wound like a serpent up the wide, straight-sided arroyo in a choking pillar of dust. Those men rode wide, close to the canyon wall, their eyes bright with expectancy, their hands held near to



Jeff Hallett was set to pump bullets into the helpless men when Tug spurred over and knocked the cattleman's gun up.

their guns. For the sands of the Papageria had whispered of lurking trouble at Ojos Conejos. Details were lacking, but trouble can mean most anything in that forsaken des-

ert of fire. And that was what the outfit whose road brand was XSX were ready for—anything.

The cruel sun beat fiercely into the depression. Sweat ran unnoticed

from the faces of Jeff Hallett and Concho Slattery, his segundo, where they rode at point. On the swings were Owey Trudgins, Randy Sper, Dell Kinney and Tug Saunders—the Kid. At the drag rode crotchety Gallinipper Smith. All were on edge as the thirsty cattle, catching the first faint hint of water, lifted the note of their plaint and their dejected pace at one and the same time.

THE point swung around a bend at a fast walk bawl. And suddenly Jeff Hallett and Concho Slattery were loping ahead. Before them stretched a double thickness of five-strand wire, from canyon wall to canyon wall. Behind that wire the verdance of Rabbit Springs stretched up the arroyo. And between, each with a rifle in his hands, stood six scowling, hard-bitten men.

The halting rippled back through the herd as the leaders crowded the fence. Pressure from behind hemmed in the two staring XSX riders. And from the swing came Tug Saunders, a slim-waisted kid of sixteen, with a wide, thin-lipped mouth and devil-may-care eyes. Swinging his coiled rope, he shouldered the cattle aside as he made his way to the side of the boss and his segundo. Jeff Hallett's voice rang out:

"What's the meaning of this fence, boys?"

The six men stirred, came side-winding toward the barrier, five of them deferring to the sixth, a big, scowling hardcase. "The meanin', neighbor," he drawled, "is that the trail is closed. Me an' my pardners, we've took up this spring ground an' puppose to establish our iron here. All legal, you understand, an' we don't want no trouble. But when you chouse yore cows through us it makes us trouble an' it orta be worth

payin' fer. A peso a head, cash if you got 'er an' cattle if you ain't. Fork over or turn 'em back; the choice ain't worth two-bits to us."

Jeff Hallett's pale-blue eyes went icy. The cattle could be turned in this narrow trough, but the two-day drive back to water would see most of them lost. And such as were left would be almost back where they started. Jeff met the chill glance of Concho Slattery and saw the fierce smile that spread outward from the flaring nostrils of the boy, Tug Saunders. Owey Trudgins and Randy Sper were fighting their way to the fence.

"There's a rule of this trail," Jeff said tonelessly, "that's gotta be proved one way or another, an' right now. Too bad that somebody's gotta die to prove it."

The leader of the fence crew triggered without shouldering his gun. But his bullet went wide, Jeff's slug taking him in the throat. Concho's draw was a thing of rhythmical beauty, his weapon spitting as it cleared the holster lip. It shifted and spewed forth another death slug, and three of the fence men were down. Owey and Randy were shooting. Tug Saunders, grinning recklessly, was firing with unconscious aim, black smoke jetting from the barrel of his piece. For one hell-spawned moment the canyon walls hurled back the echoes of gunfire. Then, quickly as it had begun, it was over. The alarmed cattle were trying vainly to break back, riding one another. Of the six renegades, alive and deadly only seconds before, all were dead except one who moaned on the ground. And Tug Saunders would have finished him except that Jeff shouldered his pony into the boy's mount, striking up his arm.

"None of that, Kid. Texans never kill wimmen, kids or helpless

men. Better anyhow if this un lives to spread the word of what happens to gents who try to block a cow trail. Here's wire cutters; get that fence down."

Gallinipper Smith came fighting through the cattle, bitterly lamenting the fact that he had been too late to participate in the gunplay. Randy Sper was binding an arm wound that must have pained Owney Trudgins terribly, though Owney's bronzed face gave no hint of pain. The fence came down and the cattle strung out to the spring. Jeff bandaged up the shoulder hurt of the pain-racked renegade, put him on his horse with a pointed warning.

And so Jeff Hallett's reputation grew. From the Altar to the Gila; from the Colorado to the Pecos, men hashed over the yarn. And out of their yarning came a new name for Jeff Hallett—All-the-way Hallett, the man who finished what he started, the man who went all the way, come hell, barbed wire, sheriffs or outlaws.

Funny thing about the Papago Trail. Old Mariano Cordoba, living with his dreams in his rambling adobe at Caborca, used to shake his head and say: "*Por diablos*, that accursed Desierto Desolado! And its Ojos Conejos—monuments to broken men. The weak it grinds under its cruel heel. The strong—well, it has its own way of smashing those proud of their strength."

The don used many homely philosophies like that; so many that few paid heed to his words. But the time came when men remembered his appraisal of the Papago Trail, and marveled at its correctness.

JEFF HALLETT smiled when he heard what they were calling him. "All-the-way Hallett." He was patently pleased. And it was remarked

that shortly after the shooting affair at Ojos Conejos he had adopted the sobriquet and made it his gospel. And little by little he expanded it to include the very last shading of meaning.

Concho and Tug, Owney Trudgins and Gallinipper Smith, the boys who worked for Jeff, came to see a great change building in him after the adoption of his new handle. Outwardly he looked the same, tall, straight, lean as a panther and oozing courage. He had always been like that. But inside him a yeast was fermenting, and they were the first to feel it. He began to hold aloof from them, saving his camaraderie for those of political or strategic importance to him in his business.

"Danged warthog," complained Gallinipper, parting his doleful mustaches. "He's gettin' too good for us."

"It ain't that," Concho said sourly. "It's all part of that All-the-way Hallett business. It's fetchin' out some ornery streak in him. He's building an all-the-way outfit, and that never has meant anything but trouble. If he don't change, he'll pay me gun wages or I'll bunch it."

"What you-all bellyachin' about?" demanded Tug Saunders. "Do your own work as well as Jeff does his an' you won't have time to worry about him. Jeff's all right for my money, and all the way suits me down to the ground."

The boy's eyes were bright as he said it, just as they were bright every time they fell upon Jeff. It was no secret with the crew that the boy worshiped the ground Jeff walked on. They were cut the same way of the leather. It was no secret to Jeff, either. It wasn't long since he had ignored the boy, but now he seemed to crave the adulation he

read in Tug. On the drives he would send Concho back and let Tug ride with him at point. And thus the boy came to know all the ins and outs of that all-the-way business, together with almost everything else Jeff Hallett had on his mind.

The next spring was dry. The Papagos said no rain had fallen in Desierto Desolado, that Ojos Conejos was low—very low. But there was water, and that was all Jeff wanted to know. He had two thousand head of steers lined up at five pesos per head—a nice little profit of twenty-five thousand at the rails. It was the way he had been operating, and it was rumored that Jeff had better than a hundred thousand dollars on deposit in the Bank of Casa Grande. That rumor was what caused his boys to hit him up that night.

"I can think of a lot easier way of makin' forty a month an' beans, boss," said Gallinipper Smith, who spoke for them. "We've been together for a long time now, burnin' up in that doggoned desert sun, eatin' sand, rustin' out our guts with gyp water an' ridin' gun when the play come up thataway. We sorta think it's time you showed us you appreciated what we've done for you."

The blue eyes of Jeff Hallett turned the color of clear ice. "You've started something," he said brusquely, running his glance over each in turn. "Go all the way with your beef. What you tryin' to say?"

"We want gun wages," blurted Gallinipper. "Hundred a month an' all expenses paid. That'll cost you about fifteen cents a cow more'n you've been paying. It won't bust you up, an' it'll give us something beside tobacco money."

"You all feel the same way about it?" There was a chill in Jeff's voice

as he looked them over. Their heads bobbed in the affirmative. Even Tug Saunders nodded.

"I ain't been kickin', boss," Tug said quickly. "But it sounds fair to me. I agreed to stand with the boys, if that's the way they all wanted it. Come on, be a good sport, boss. You got a good crew an' these Mex vaqueros won't make you no money."

Jeff surprised them then by letting the ghost of a smile ease the severity of his gaunt face. "I'd tell you all to go to the devil," he declared frankly, "if it wasn't for the Kid. He's got a head on his shoulders, an' if he's for it, I am. That boy's got the makin's of a cowman, and better yet, he's like me—all the way. He'd never give me a minute's rest if I didn't give in to you. So you get the raise, but don't start pawin' dirt an' bellerin' when I make you earn it."

THEY knew what he meant next morning when he led them out to where the Altar ranchers were holding their drives against his purchases. But instead of the two thousand head Jeff had expected, there was only a few more than a thousand. One big *hacendado* was missing.

"Hold 'em," Jeff snapped, nettled. "I'm doing no business until you're all here together. My business is trailing beef, not nursing 'em on a bed ground. When Estrada gets here let me know."

"But Estrada," protested one of the disappointed cattlemen, "he is gone, señor. He leave this morning before the sun. He say tell you he drive his own cattle north."

"Yeah?" Jeff turned back, surprised and interested. "What gave him that idea?"

"One gringo who have work for Estrada," he was told. "He tell Estrada he is a fool to sell to you for five pesos when he can get thirty pesos at the railroad. So Estrada decide to drive, with this gringo helping. He knows all about the Papago Trail and the Desierto Desolado."

"Who is this gringo?"

"His name is McIver," one of the Mexicans told Jeff. "He call himself Wasp."

"Wasp McIver." Jeff frowned. The name meant nothing to him. Nor could he think of any man who knew the short trail that well. "Somebody running a sandy on Juan Estrada." His eyes blazed. "Estrada needs a little lesson in how to keep agreements, amigos. He promised me a thousand head of steers

today. He fails me, putting his trust in some liar who'll only lead him into trouble. Trot out your herds and we'll tally. I'll drive what you have."

It was a little strange to see Jeff Hallett starting north with half a drive. He did not explain why he didn't wait a few days until he could have lined up more cattle from neighboring ranches. And the nearest his crew could come to guessing was at supper, at the end of the first day's drive, when Jeff suddenly lifted his head from his brooding and said:

"Here's where you boys start earning that raise. You've learned my way of driving beef, an' that's your way now. You're learning another way, starting at daylight tomorrow. Dawn till dark, pushin'

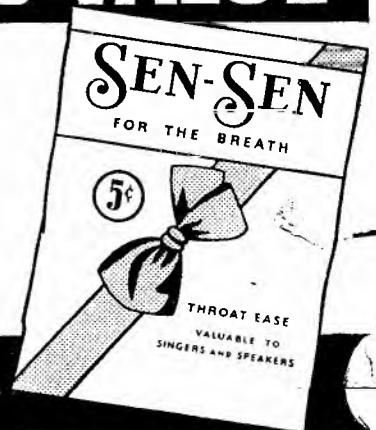


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the critters to the very limit, short of killin' 'em."

"What's the idea?" rumbled Concho Slattery.

"Water!" snapped Jeff. "We're getting to the springs before Estrada. If we don't, we'll find only mud holes an' we'll never get so much as a head through. It's me or him. One of us goes all the way; the other loses his law."

Tight-lipped, cold-eyed, he left them in no doubt of his intent to break the man who had failed him at Caborca. But, plain as he made his position, none of them could then have guessed the full measure of his determination. That remained for them to learn three days later, at the end of their first day's dry trek after leaving last water on the North Fork of the Altar, near Sasabe. Driving the complaining cattle hard, Jeff had spent all that day straining his eyes into the north. Not a glimpse did he get of the outfit they were trying to overtake. Estrada, too, was pushing his horned charges.

Dusk came, then the fall of night. And still Jeff withheld the word to mill the herd and make camp. The cattle were moaning piteously, weaving and stumbling. The horses traveled dejectedly, with lowered heads. The hungry, weary trail crew muttered and cursed. Was Hallett going to drive all night?

A full hour after the coming of darkness, Jeff rode around the herd, giving the order to mill. Later, at the wagon, Gallinipper was gathering the dry skeletons of dead cholla to make a fire when Jeff rode up.

"No fire," he barked. "Estrada's got enough for both outfits." They looked in the direction he indicated, saw the far glimmer of a campfire. "The fool," Jeff said tartly, "has bedded his herd at the mouth of Lagarto Canyon. Ten short miles from

the springs. A mighty slim margin between him and a winnin'."

"If he gets into that arroyo," said Concho, "you'll never pass him."

"He won't get in," Jeff retorted. "Saddle new broncs. We're takin' a ride."

A HALF-HOUR later the men squatted about Estrada's fire came to their feet and laid their hands on their guns as the XSX outfit roared into their camp. Eight alkali-bathed men, red-eyed, whiskered and grim. Eleven men faced them, openly expectant and ready. Juan Estrada, rotund and nervous, forced a grotesque smile.

"Ah-h-h," he hummed. "My amigo, Señor Hallett. When you did not come to buy my poor cattle, señor, what was there for me to do but to drive them myself?"

"My business with you can wait, Estrada," said Jeff coldly, and his eyes were on the one white man among Estrada's drovers. A gaunt, villainous-looking fellow with dark, curly whiskers and small, heavy-browed eyes that burned. For a long minute he and Jeff matched glances. Then the XSX boss was speaking: "So you're Wasp McIver," he mused. "I've been puzzled as to who you could be, who knew all about this trail, never thinking of the gent I spared at Ojos Conejos. I gave you your chance to go decent after that little ruckus, McIver, but you plainly don't learn very fast. Most of all, you didn't learn that when you start something with me you better go all the way."

"I ain't started nothin' with you," growled Wasp, and every line of him indicated his readiness for war. "I've steered plumb clear of you, Hallett."

"You don't know this trail, McIver," continued Jeff, as if he hadn't

heard. "If you had, you'd have kept on till you hit that water. Low as it is, I'd have been left your mud an' the coyotes would have fed on my beef. That's where you lost your taw, feller, though it would have all added up to the same thing in the end. Steered clear of me, eh? Yeah, such as getting Estrada to bust his word to me, starting him up the trail and leaving me short of the herd I'd planned on—"

"But, señor—" protested Estrada.

"Shut up!" barked Jeff. "Till I get through with McIver. All right, Wasp, your number is up. Or mine. When you fool with Jeff Hallett, you can't go part way. Fill your hand!"

The command stunned Jeff's own followers as surely as it did the men of Estrada's outfit. It froze them all, with the one exception of Wasp McIver, whose violent calling was stamped upon every line of him. Schooled to gunplay and, like all gunmen, confident of his magic, he drove his hand to holster, brought it up gun filled. He was fast, no gain-saying that, but not fast enough. He was up against a man who seemed to hold his life less dear than his pride of living up to his "all-the-way" reputation.

Jeff's gun was first to break the desert stillness. And after that it was kill or be killed. Pistols flashed out and flamed. The Estrada outfit scattered, firing, and the XSX horse-men spurred after them, blasting them down. It didn't last long. McIver, the only real gunnie in the Mexican outfit, had been first to fall, and Jeff now stood over him, pumping bullets into his writhing body. Tug spurred over, knocked the cattlemen's gun up.

"Texans don't shoot wimmen, children, or helpless men," he reminded.

Jeff turned red eyes to him. "Go

to the devil!" he said gruffly, and swung his pony. "To the camp, all of you. These tired cattle will stay put for the night. Tomorrow we'll throw 'em into my herd."

THINGS were markedly different between Jeff and his crew when they reached Casa Grande. A stiffness rode each man, and their fine camaraderie was ended. The change was particularly apparent in Tug Saunders. For days he had remained thoughtful, strangely silent. And when Jeff paid the crew, after the cattle were loaded, the Kid got it off his chest.

"Boss," he said, "I'm quittin' you."

Jeff started. "Quittin'? What's wrong, kid? Ain't I done everything you asked me?"

"It's not that," murmured Tug. "Me an' Concho—we've been savin' our money, as you know. We're buyin' the old Rivas place, north of Tibutama. We're runnin' cattle."

Cold rage touched Jeff, then he was smiling, shaking their hands. "Well, I'm hornswoggled. Goin' into business, eh? That's fine. Naturally, I hate to lose you, but what can I do but wish you luck?" His glance fastened Tug, and grim soberness was on him. "I have always held that you'd go places, son, an' I still believe it. Don't forget what I've taught you. Stand up for your rights, 'cause nobody will do that for you. An' when you start something, go all the way in spite of hell. Don't let nothing stop you. It may be hard going for a while, but if you fight hard you can't lose. Hard an' without any fool sentiment. If they crowd you too hard, call on me."

The two thanked him, took their leave of the rest of the crew. Owney, Randy, Gallinipper and the ot-

stared after them with looks of open envy. What Tug and Concho were doing was every cowboy's dream.

IT was a struggle for Concho and Tug. The cost was high to any man when it comes to building an Iron. To men without money it calls out all the best—or the worst. That first year it was a scramble to put their brand on every maverick they could find. Chousing wild cattle from the cholla, mesquite and chapparero thickets, working the rear-back-and-fall-down slants for the big red critters which the native vaqueros were too indolent and careless to snake out, building up the rag-tag herd they had inherited through purchase of the defunct Rivas Rancho. Knowing no relaxations, no pleasures, wasting little daylight, hardly taking enough time to keep properly fed. Fixing their sights only on the day when they could throw a herd of their own on the trail and return with money that would really put them on their feet.

During that time Jeff Hallett heard nothing about them. Each passing month saw the XSX owner a little more arrogant, a little more grasping, a little more intolerant of others. Jeff, it was said, was growing rich. He had been heard to boast that in five years he would have his million, after which he would retire to his far-flung range holdings in the Queen Creek section of Arizona.

Time and a slogan had changed Jeff Hallett tremendously, but it had not dulled his ambition nor his zest to lead his own enterprises personally. He still rodded his herds across the brooding Papagueria, spending the time between drives in attending the thousand and one details of his growing interests.

"Trouble with you, Jeff," he was

told by the banker at Casa Grande, "is your unwillingness to trust small matters to men in your hire. If you could learn that lesson, you would become a very rich man."

"That's not my way," argued Jeff. "When I start a thing, I know I'll go all the way. That's what they call me—All-the-way Hallett. What another man will do for me, I'd hate to bet on. Don't worry, I'll make enough for me. An' when I get it made I'll lay it at the feet of some woman worthy to bear my name; then I'll settle down an' raise my sons to follow in my steps. I've got it all figured out."

Yes, Jeff had it figured. But fate has a way of snarling the plans of men. It is probable that Jeff had forgotten all about Concho and the Kid until he met them on the Papago Trail three years after their parting. This time there was no such water shortage as there had been at the time of the Estrada killing. Otherwise the situation was much the same. Jeff Hallett, moving a herd up from Caborca, found where cattle had come in from the east and taken the trail ahead of him. It was like the proverbial waving of a red flag to a bull. Maybe it was because Jeff had come to think of the Papago Trail as something given him by right of conquest. Or maybe it was only that he had become so intolerant as to resent any success achieved by another. Anyhow, he set out to overhaul the cattle ahead.

As before, he spotted the campfire at the mouth of Canyon Lagarto. And as on that other fateful night, he came riding swiftly into the camp, with his riders at his back. But he was dealing with different leadership, with men he had trained in the hard school of the early days of this trail. Tug Saunders, fully grown now, tall, broad, a little too

grim for a youth of twenty summers, had sensed the approach of the XSX cattle and had remembered. Jeff found the camp empty, the bed ground without a steer on it.

Furious, the XSX boss swept back to his outfit, started the cattle through the night, hazing them mercilessly. It was the act of a man gone a little mad, the way he handled things that night. In the black gloom, between those dark basalt walls of Lagarto Canyon, his leaders found the S Bar T drag. Jeff's orders snapped and crackled. Sixshooters pointed to the sky, and wild coyote yells echoed from the headlands. Cattle, already maddened by the scent of water, broke into a frenzied stampede, mixing indiscriminately, crushing the weaker ones against the canyon walls or trampling them underfoot.

Tug Saunders, caught in that tidal wave of hoof and horn, was buffeted, horned and smashed down on a talus. By the very skin of his teeth, he managed to scramble into a crevice of the malpai, from which vantage he screamed curses into the night and watched that hellish, tossing tide sweep past. It was too dark to see details. Too dusty, too confused, to identify passing mounted figures. When dawn came, the Kid caught a loose saddler that had be-

longed to Concho and rode to take stock.

He and Concho had only hired three vaqueros to help them. All but one was dead, and that one had pulled out. Concho, his body battered out of all semblance to anything human, the Kid buried beneath a pile of rocks near Ojos Conejos. Dead cattle, which he and Concho had worked so hard to turn into their stake, were scattered everywhere. Many had been taken on with the XSX outfit.

Terribly bleak, with the tears of silent man grief scarring his dust-grimed face, Tug turned south and returned to the Altar.

THE next time Jeff Hallett came up the Papago Trail he found a double line of barbed-wire fence across Lagarto Canyon, right where he had cut the renegade fence years before. Jeff came loping ahead, only this time Gallinipper rode beside him instead of the ill-fated Concho. The halting rippled back through the herd as the leaders hit the fence. And from the swing came Owney Trudgins, Randy Sper and a couple of others whose faces were newer to the XSX. Time was turning backward, only this time a lone man stood behind the wire, his long arms hanging at his sides. Tug Saunders,



gray underneath his tan as he eyed Jeff coldly.

"What's the meaning of this fence, feller?" Jeff bawled. It was like an echo out of the past. Then, as he recognized the stalwart figure: "Oh, it's you, Kid. What the devil's the idea? I thought I taught you better than to mess around with wire on this trail."

Easily, with a superior smile upon his face, Jeff dismounted. He swung one look at the grim men sitting their ponies behind him, then he unbuckled a saddle pocket and took out a pair of wire cutters.

"You taught me a lot of things, Jeff," said Tug, his voice edged with ice. "Too well, maybe. Don't use them clippers!"

Jeff Hallett stared. Years of knowing no other code than his own left him nonplused. His brow furrowed as if he were wrestling with a sum too difficult to handle.

"You mean that, Kid?"

"I never meant anything half as much, Jeff."

Jeff tried to smile his scornful smile. "You look like a fool, planted behind this blasted wire, talking big to All-the-way Hallett, son. Why?"

"Trail's closed," announced the youth. "I'm keeping cattle off Concho's grave."

"Concho?" Jeff's eyes went very wide. "You mean—"

"It was him and me you stampered on your last trip up," said Tug, his voice soft and bleak. "I came through; Concho didn't. He's buried yonder." He jerked his head.

Jeff appeared to digest this, and the men behind him squirmed in their saddles. Presently the XSX boss vented a short, unpleasant little laugh. "Too bad," he said carelessly. "I liked Concho. But we've all got to die sometime, don't we?"

"Yeah—sometime, Jeff."

"And cattle have still got to go up the trail, don't they, Tug?"

"Not this trail, Jeff. It's closed."

"Funny," chuckled Jeff, "that you, of all men, would try to stop All-the-way Jeff Hallett. You've run a good bluff, Kid, but I'm calling you."

His wire cutters went out, the jaws biting down on the top strand. He was looking into Tug's eyes with that supercilious scorn on his face. He must have seen death lurking there, for even as the strand sang and parted he dropped the tool and reached for his gun. Tug's weapon seemed to leap to his fingers, blazing as it had from the other side of the fence four years before. Jeff fell full length, raised up on one elbow to look again at that cold, smoke-wreathed face across the wire.

"All-the-way," he mumbled, as if trying out the words that had betrayed him. And then he died.

Some of the punchers who didn't know that statue guarding the trail, nor the things that lay behind, went for their hardware. Gallinipper stopped them.

"No percentage in playin' a dead man's cards, boys," he shouted. "Trail's closed. Turn the cattle loose. Folks will still be workin' cows in Arizona, an' if we ride hard we'll be in time to sign on with outfits that will listen to reason before they go—all the way." He turned back to Tug and said gravely: "Good huntin', Kid."

"Fat meat, Gallinipper." Tug had reached through the wire for the clippers. The wire was clanging as it fell under his strokes. "Might as well put 'em through an' cash 'em in at Casa Grande, boys. You've earned that. Trail was open an' I closed it. Now it's open again—to men who know how to live up to it."

Cisco Haines got off two shots before Jack got his gun clear—then the kid came in shooting fast.



BORDER RAT'S PAYOFF

BY B. BRISTOW GREEN

THE man on the roan horse pulled up at a quarter-acre patch of sand just outside the little Arizona town. A fence of spiny ocatillo served to keep the coyotes out of the inclosure, but did not hide the stark, sun-bleached headboards. The rider stepped from his horse, opened a

gate and went into the tiny cemetery.

There were no mounds. The graves had been excavated with a minimum of labor, and the constant wind had leveled the barren sand. One could discriminate between the newer and older graves by the pro-

gressive weathering of the pine slabs.

The man began at the third row, reading each inscription. They were caustic, humorous, irreverent. Few of the names had ever been pronounced at a baptismal font or inscribed in any family Bible. Near the center of the row the man stopped at a slab weathered to a slate-gray. The inscription, like the others, had been burned into the board with a hot iron. The crudely lettered words read:

He called hisself the Tonto Kid
And with a six-gun made his bid.
The other man was fast as hell
And so that's all there is to tell.

Below the doggerel was a line neatly carved with a knife; a name and a date now two years old. Also, it gave the age of the buried youth—twenty-two years.

Someone had known this boy and thought enough of him to put his name above his grave. Or had the identification a more sinister purpose? One might have judged so by the bleakness that came into the man's face.

Pulling out a pocketknife, he opened the big blade and knelt, apparently with the intention of cutting out the name. He hesitated, frowning, then got up. "No," he murmured. "Let it stand."

He stood for a moment thoughtfully reading the ribald jingle as though it held some meaning deeper than its crude humor. "Fast," he muttered. "Fast as hell, but he had a weak spot."

Heat devils danced above the hock-deep dust and shimmered from the adobe walls of squat buildings as the stranger rode into the north end of the town's main street. Dust lay thick in the creases of his clothes and dulled the tucked-up flanks of the roan horse.

Two men, obscure in the shadows of the deep doorway of a saddle shop, watched him pass. One murmured: "Stranger. Come a long trail, horse and man."

The other, wearing a leather apron, cast an expert's glance at the roan's rigging. "Roll cantle, box stirrups, double-rigged," he said. "Texas, likely."

The first man nodded. "From his look he's been around."

The noon sun had emptied the street, but the *clop-clop* of hoofs brought other men to open doors to watch furtively from the shadows as the rider passed.

TWO men looked over the batwing doors of a gambling saloon. One was handsome, with large, dark eyes in a face that was smooth and only slightly tanned by the sun. A puzzled look came into his eyes and he drew back a little as the rider passed.

His companion stepped out for a better view. He was tall, slim, long-featured, his manner recklessly bold. The brim of his peaked hat was fastened in front with a silver ornament. He wore a black cambric shirt and overalls tucked into high, mule-eared boots with fancy stitching. His crossed belts sagged with the weight of two guns in low-cut holsters.

Had he not been so intent on the rider he would have seen the girl, a young woman, come to the door of a small restaurant to look after the man on the roan horse. When she turned back into the restaurant her face was white, her eyes wide. "No," she murmured, "it couldn't be."

At the end of the street the rider swung to the right along the wreck of a frame building as though he knew what should be there.

The slim man spoke over his shoulder: "He knew where to find

the livery barn. Either that or he guessed that in a town like this it would be at the south end so a man could have a head start for the Mex border." He turned to look at the man inside the door and laughed softly. "Don't look so scared. There ain't no ghosts."

"You're sure you killed him, Cisco?" the man inside asked in a tense voice.

Again the slim man laughed. "Deader'n a poisoned pup, and the Injun buried him. I'll find out who this hombre is. If he stops overnight he'll have to put up at Fatty's place."

The slim man was in the dingy lobby of the hotel, sitting in a chair tilted against the wall, ostensibly reading a month-old paper when the stranger came in. Around the paper, his glance slid to the fat man behind the table that served as a desk, and he gave a barely perceptible nod.

If the newcomer noticed he gave no sign, but when the chair creaked he half turned. He stood that way until the tall man went through the door and the sound of his steps died along the street.

The man behind the desk turned a grimy register without getting out of his chair. "Room?" he asked, and added: "Dollar a night in advance. I've lost money on some that died sudden."

The prospective guest did not answer. He was reading the exposed pages of the register. While he read, the proprietor studied him with stolid, heavy-lidded eyes that missed no detail. They slid over dust-yellowed overalls, sun-faded gray shirt, and lingered on the walnut-butted gun. His gaze lifted and held on the brown-bearded face with its level brows, straight nose and firm lips. The beard, close-cropped, did not soften the bitter tightness of the

mouth corners or the prominence of high cheekbones and square jaws.

The stranger closed the register without signing it. "Waste of ink he said. "Ain't a name there a man own mother would know." He down two dollars. "A room for two nights. I'll gamble on living that long in your town."

"Room 2," the fat man said, and jerked his head toward the stairs.

With his foot on the bottom step the new guest stopped. "I passed a sizable gambling place. Who owns it?"

For a second the heavy-lidded eyes glistened. "Name's Bert For-dyce."

"Good name for a gambler," the newcomer said. He was going up the stairs when the fat man spoke in a slow drawl: "I was you, I wouldn't tromp on his corns."

At the front of the upper hall the man found Room 2. The door of Room 1 on the corner was ajar. Pushing it wider, he looked in. The layer of dust on the floor was unmarked by footprints. The room had not been occupied recently. He crossed softly to the front window and looked down on the main street. Movement in a vacant, windowless building opposite made him whip sideways. A gunshot cracked. The bullet clipped his hat brim and smacked into the rear wall.

FOR a moment the stranger stood listening for steps or voices in the street. There was no sound of movement. Apparently a shot in this town attracted no interest. From his position he had a narrow, oblique view of part of the street. It took in the front of the small restaurant. Abruptly the girl appeared in the doorway, one hand knotted against her breast as she looked toward the hotel.

The man slipped through the hall door and into his own room. He was stripping off his shirt when the hotel man came in without knocking.

"Thought I heard a shot," he said. "Reckon my ears are playin' tricks on me."

The new guest shrugged. "Nothing the matter with your ears." He pointed to a centipede crawling along the baseboard. "It was me taking a shot at him," he said gravely. "Hit the cuss, too, but they grow so tough in this town a .45 slug bounces off their backs."

The fat man's head tilted judicially as he eyed the centipede. "Durn near as tough as some lawmen. Still, I can squash 'em." He set his foot solidly on the centipede. He backed through the door, eyeing his guest with a faint sneer. "There's tougher things in this town than centipedes or law dogs," he said, and pulled the door shut.

The man inside listened to the retreating steps. Had that shot been fired because someone had mistaken him for a lawman—a State ranger, possibly? He stepped to the rickety washstand and lifted the pitcher from the bowl. His lips drew a little tighter. The pitcher was hot, the water steaming. It couldn't have been in the room ten minutes. His coming had been arranged for. That open door to the corner room was a plain invitation to a cautious man. And the rifleman had been waiting.

While he washed and dressed he thought of that shot through the window and the evident preparation of the room. Both might have been due to suspicion and hostility toward strangers in a community held together by fear and hate of the forces of law. The words of the hotel man suggested that.

For him there was a more certain

menace. Two men in this town, if they recognized him, would kill him if possible, yet he could not strike against them until he had settled one thing. One would not hesitate at murder from ambush. The other he had seen in the hotel lobby, Cisco Haines. The gunman had shown no sign of recognition, but there was no assurance of that. He rubbed a hand over his beard. How effectively it had served its purpose he could not tell, but in a few moments he would put it to a test—the beard and the lapse of time.

From his holster, recently oiled, he lifted his gun and examined the mechanism critically for dust. He wiped a spot of oil from the butt, returned the gun to the holster and adjusted the hang of it to suit him. Twice he drew the gun smoothly, swiftly, and shook his head.

"Good," he murmured, "but not good enough for the gent who's 'fast as hell' with a six-gun." He wondered what had held Cisco Haines in this town for two years. That was one danger he hadn't anticipated.

Leaving the room, he went down the stairs. As he walked toward the street door he shot a glance at the man behind the desk. One corner of his mouth lifted in faint humor. If the cards fell wrong the fat man would recoup his losses in the amount of two dollars for a room that would not be occupied.

With the shot that had so narrowly missed him still in mind, he stopped at one side of the door before stepping out to the street. His eyes searched the vacant building opposite. There was no glass in the front to reflect the light and he could see the interior. The rifleman had left. He stepped out into the street, knowing that his caution had deep-

ened the suspicion in the fat man's mind.

At the corner of the hotel he stopped to shape a cigarette. He had no desire to smoke, but cupping the match to the cigarette gave him a chance to look back toward the gambling saloon. That instant there came the blast of a single shot.

Involuntarily he flattened against the hotel, one hand dropping to his gun. No bullet had come at him, and he realized that the gun blast had been muffled by four walls. The shot had been fired inside the saloon. Seemingly, it had nothing to do with his presence in the town.

TO one who did not know this town it would have seemed strange that gunfire should arouse no interest. The man, however, understood. The few struggling cattlemen had lost out in the battle with drought, disease and banditry and had moved on, leaving the town to the border wolves who had contributed to their defeat. The present population did not run to a shooting like small boys to a fire. Again it was only the woman who showed herself at the restaurant door. The man angled across the street toward her. At once she stepped inside. He turned into the restaurant without looking behind, thinking that this second shot did not concern him.

She stood behind the counter, her shoulders pressed against the wall, slim and very straight. There was no one else in the place. He saw that with a quick lift of relief. His glance moved over the girl quietly and saw the tension of her nerves in the white knuckles of clenched hands that hung straight at her sides. She was thinner than when he had last seen her, but still lovely. She was, he knew, not yet twenty-two, though she looked older. He wondered if all the laughter and

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gayety had gone out of her.

He had taken the stool farthest from the door. The girl came to him, her face telling nothing. "What will you have?" she asked.

"Whatever's handy," he said. "When a cowpoke's late for chuck he takes whatever the cook's got."



She started for the kitchen but suddenly swung around and took two steps toward him, her face white. "Jack Terrill, I thought you were dead!" The words seemedrenched from her.

He had been prepared for her recognition, but the abruptness with which it came sent a stab of alarm through him. The girl had recognized him instantly, and one of the men had known him even longer. He managed to keep his voice controlled as he said:

"I take it Bert Fordyce told you that. I'll give him credit for believing he spoke the truth."

She came closer and looked down

at him. "You're older—much older."

"Two years," he said. "I'm still not twenty-five. Some trails age a man. The end of this one is yet to be seen."

"How did you find—"

She stopped, and he saw color flush her cheeks at the admission that she knew he had come seeking her.

"We'll go back to where the trail forked," he said. "Bert Fordyce was supposed to be my friend. He was older, and it flattered me. I didn't know he was just spreading his loop for the girl I was in love with."

She made a gesture as though to stop him. He ignored it. "I was just a thirty-a-month puncher. Fordyce told me of an Arizona ranch he'd inherited from an uncle. It was run down, he said, but two good men could make it pay. He would make me his partner if I'd go with him. The girl promised to wait for me."

"I meant that," she said softly. "Bert came back and told me you had been killed on the ranch by a bad horse."

Jack Terrill nodded. He couldn't blame her for believing that yarn about a ranch when he had been taken in by it himself. She hadn't been much over nineteen, and Bert Fordyce had a way with women.

There had been no ranch. Instead, Fordyce had brought him to this outlaw town, opened a gambling house and made himself boss. It had not been clear to Terrill why Fordyce had brought him along until he found himself framed into a quarrel with a seasoned gun hand.

"I'm wondering if Bert had the nerve to show you my grave," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "How could I doubt that you were buried there?"

He laughed dryly. "Kinda funny, his lyn' even when he figured he was tellin' the truth. But he really believed I was in that grave, and—"

He stopped at the sound of heavy steps scuffing along the street. The girl lifted her head. Then she went quickly into the kitchen. The huge hotel man crowded through the door and labored up to a stool near the center of the counter.

AT the moment, Terrill could not see that the fat man's presence had any significance for him, and he welcomed the interruption. What he had been about to tell the girl was something he had intended to withhold until he knew her feeling toward Fordyce.

It had been Cisco Haines whom Fordyce had run him up against. Not satisfied with the odds of a tested gunman against an untried boy, Fordyce had stacked the cards in that fight. He had found a chance to slip one cartridge from Terrill's gun. So sure of the result had he been that he had an Indian dig the grave beforehand. When the Indian had carried the supposedly dead boy out to the grave he had found some life in him. He had filled up the grave, reported to Fordyce that the body had been buried, and then had taken the wounded boy to a desert hide-out and nursed him back to health. Terrill was not yet ready to tell the girl that part of the story.

She came in presently with a plate of food and set it before Terrill as she would have done for a stranger. Then she went to the hotel man.

"You're late today, Mr. Bronson," she said pleasantly.

He merely pointed to a pie on a shelf. "What kind?" he asked.

"Peach. Dried peaches, of course, but it's good."

"Pie and coffee," he said. "That's all I want."

He devoured the pie noisily and washed it down with the coffee. Leaving a quarter on the counter, he waddled out.

The girl looked after him with a puzzled frown. "That's the first time he ever did that," she said. "He eats twice as much as any man in town."

"Who's this Bronson?" asked Terrill. "He wasn't here two years ago."

"He came about a year ago," the girl said. "No one but Cisco Haines seemed to know him."

Something as near fear as he had ever known ran through Jack Terrill. Cisco Haines had recognized him in the hotel and set Bronson to keep watch on him. Now the fat man was going to report to Haines.

The girl turned to him. "Bert showed me that slab in the cemetery. You weren't killed in that fight. Why didn't I hear from you?"

"It was three months before I could ride," he explained. "I was broke and had to work my way. Even made one trip to Dodge City with a trail herd. Finally I got home, two months ago, and learned that you had married Fordyce. So I came back to this town."

"Why? When you knew I was married, why did you come?"

His eyes probed her face. "I came to ask two or three questions. When you've answered, maybe I'll ride out of this town—if I can." He took off his hat and laid it on the counter.

The girl looked at the hole in the brim. "That should tell you that if you expect to get out alive you had better leave at once."

"Then you know who fired that shot."

She nodded. "I saw Bert leave a vacant building across from the hotel. He was carrying a rifle."

Terrill understood then that Fordyce had seen him ride into town. Even if he had been doubtful of his identity it was not the gambler's way to take any chances.

HE looked up at her searchingly. "You are still married to him, I take it. Otherwise you'd not be here."

Her eyes were averted when she answered: "I am still married to him, but when he told me there was no ranch, that he was running a hangout for outlaws, I told him I would never be his wife."

"Then why have you stayed here?"

She looked at him levelly. "Do you realize that there is no town within two hundred miles of this place? I had no horse, no money. The man who ran this restaurant was shot to death in a quarrel. I took it over, hoping to save enough to get away. Each time I accumulated a little money I was robbed. It was Bert's way to prevent my escape."

"And he has not used force to make you live with him?" Terrill asked.

"Only because he has not dared." The girl's face flushed scarlet. "You see, there's another man—Cisco Haines."

Terrill frowned. "It ain't like Cisco Haines to wait two years for a thing he wants."

The girl's hands clenched. "The man is a devil—a laughing devil. It's his pride that men fear him. He told me he would break Bert's nerve and see him sneak out of this town some night, leaving everything behind him."

Terrill nodded. He knew that streak of cruel, feline patience in Haines. It was an odd thing in a man of his reckless nature. But

there was nothing to restrain the gunmen from immediate and decisive action against him.

Looking up at the girl, he said: "One more question. If none of this had happened, Martha; if, after two years, I had found you back home, would you still have married me?"

She answered simply, directly: "Yes, Jack."

"That," he said, "is all I want to know."

He put on his hat, got up and was turning away when she asked quickly: "Jack, where are you going?"

He looked around at her with bleak eyes. "I'm going to kill Bert Fordyce."

"No!" Martha cried. "Don't you see I couldn't come to you that way?"

He stood for a moment thinking that over. Finally he pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and laid them on the counter.

"I can see how you look at it," he said quietly. "There's about a hundred dollars in that roll. My horse is in the livery barn. A woman can ride him. Put this town behind you while you can." He went out before she could stop him.

Remembering Bronson, Terrill knew that he had waited perilously long. The man would have gotten word to Haines that he was with the girl. He must dodge Cisco long enough to get Fordyce. After that, knowing how Martha felt, it made no difference what happened to him so long as she got safely out of town. He would rather see her tied to Cisco Haines than to a snake like Fordyce. The gunman at least did his own killing, and he didn't get his man from ambush.

Terrill walked up the middle of the street alert, watchful for move-

ment or the glint of sunlight on steel in the dilapidated buildings lining the street. He had no fear of an open meeting with Fordyce, but he was an easy target for anyone concealed behind those crumbling walls.

At every step he expected Cisco Haines to come through some doorway and challenge him. His chances against the gunman were slim enough. True, he was no longer the callow, unseasoned boy who had foolishly called himself the Tonto Kid. He could probably beat Fordyce to a gun, but Haines was something else. The line on the slab in the cemetery ran through his mind: "The other man was fast as hell." That was Cisco Haines.

Terrill had come as far as the hotel when a man came out of the saloon carrying a warbag. He went to a horse tied at the hitch rack and began to lash the bag behind the saddle. The man was tall, slim and wore two guns—Cisco Haines.

Haines looked up, saw the lone figure coming up the street and his hand dropped to a gun. Then he stepped out into the street and came along with easy, swinging strides.

Jack Terrill stopped. His chance to meet Fordyce first was gone, and with it Martha's chance to escape. Even if she had left the restaurant by a back door she would not reach the livery barn in time.

The distance from the hotel to the saloon was some two hundred feet. Cisco Haines came on unhurriedly. To Terrill he seemed to move with the deliberate sureness of a machine. He knew the blazing speed of the man's draw and knew that he could not match it. But for one thin, desperate chance he was as good as dead. His one regret was that he had not gotten to Bert Fordyce before this came. He waited there in the dust of the road, watching the gunman's steady, nerveless advance, each second interminable.

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CISCO HAINES stopped some fifty feet away. Laughter showed in his predatory face. "You saved me some trouble, Kid," he drawled. "I was coming to the restaurant to get you before I picked up the girl and rode out of this."

His voice was cool, utterly casual, but it did not fool Terrill. He read the alertness in the pale eyes and knew that the least movement of his hand would bring this to an end. He knew that his own face was white. Cisco Haines would like that. It fed his vanity to feel that men feared him.

"If it wasn't for the girl yonder I'd let you go, Kid," Haines said, "but I aim to have her. You coming to town sorta forced my play. One thing I want you to know before I kill you. That time I blasted you down I didn't know Fordyce had tampered with your gun. I don't ask that sort of odds against any man."

"Get it over with, Cisco," Terrill said bleakly.

Cisco Haines' right shoulder dropped the fraction of an inch. "Draw, Kid!"

Jack Terrill's hand moved. He hardly saw the flick of Cisco's gun hand. Two shots had come at him before his own gun lifted. Haines' gun was still blasting when Terrill drove one shot at the spot his eyes had never left for a second.

One thing he had remembered with a desperate hope. In that other fight Cisco had emptied his gun across the thirty-foot width of the saloon, and only one bullet had found its mark. Cisco Haines was fast as lightning, but in a gun battle he shot from the hip, slamming his lead recklessly without aim.

The gunman's legs had buckled slowly. He was sitting there in the dust, his hands bracing his body. He was shot through the lungs and dying, but he laughed huskily.

"So the Tonto Kid's grown up," he gasped.

Terrill looked around at the sound of running feet. Martha caught him by the arm.

"Jack, you—" she began.

He pushed her away. "Get out of this, Martha. Get my horse and ride. You've still got time while I go after Fordyce."

"No, Jack, no! You can't. I'd always be seeing him as Cisco is now."

A croaking laugh turned them toward the dying gunman.

"Fordyce! You was going after him? Too late, Kid." A spot of blood showed on the gunman's lips. He laughed again. "I handed Fordyce a one-way ticket to boothhill twenty minutes ago. He stood between me and the girl, so I killed him . . . same as . . . I would have killed you."

Haines lurched a little, braced himself, and with an effort steadied his voice. "Take my horse, Kid, and you two get out of this town." He bent forward slowly, rolled sideways and lay still.

The girl's hand tightened on Terrill's arm. "Oh, Jack, you heard what he said."

He put his arm around her and drew her close. "Yes," he said, "I heard. I reckon now we can go back two years to where the trail forked." He looked down at the gunman's still form. "I wish there had been some other way. Cisco Haines had more good in him than the man I came to kill."



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

ONE of America's most picturesque individuals is the French Canadian. Thousands serve in the deep woods of the United States and Canada as guides. Many lack "book larnin'," and their knowledge of English has usually been picked up only through association with English-speaking people. But any chap who has hunted with a French Canadian guide knows the memories of many a tall evening in camp listening to great and humorous tales unequaled by any other type of woodsman.

And so we give you this letter of typical French Canadian humor on hunting. It runs:

"Deer Pheel:

"Som time nodder ago I rite for you for to tell me wich gun shes best for to shoot fesent. You rite for tell me Canadian postes stamp for wich postes man shes tak from me 3 cents shes no good from United States. How for com you use United States postes stamp on lettre and no use unlick Canadian stamp I spend money for send you? Porhaps you no lak pishur King Georges? She's no pretty lak stamp for pony expresses you send on lettre.

"Yor lettre she say for Joe to buy

for fesent pull-push gun on handel for to load. A trad mush beaver skin for Eethaca shotgun wat stor-keep shes say ees pump gun. She's no good. All week I hunt dos fesent wot fly lak hell wen shes get pooshem out frum grass.

"Thos fesent seesun hunt time she begun com Munday. Thos rain shes begin com Munday. Thos Eethaca shes com for hunt thos fesent com Munday. Thos fesent shes no com Munday. Thos grass shes wet lak for bottum of lake an hes soke my boots. Thos bush hes so wet shes soke my pants. Thos pants shes so wet hes soke me. Thos rane shes com down lak hell, bern hole in sky and por hole lake on Joe. Thos niew red cote I by for hunt with shes get so wet shes leve trail from thos grass jus lak blod run out frum me.

"All day I wade thru thos grass, thos bush, thos brook. She's no good. No dam fesent shes swim lak duck. Thos fesent shes aint thear. Eethaca shotgun no gude.

"Com Toosday. Shes still rain lak

Munday only som mor so. I hunt thos dam fesent som mor. Thos brook what am on bottom cum on top of hill and shes sit down for to rest in beeg puddle. Thos field wat wer plow for to grow corn she get so soft wen Joe walk on him she mak for walk hard. Thos bottom shes com up to top of shoe. Thos grass shes for com up to waste wen dry hes get so wet shes lay down for quit. Thos bush, shes dont for lak that an shes stan up and sqert water in Joes face. I dont for lak that too. Thos fesent shes no lak that too—she hide or drown.

“Com Wensday, com Thersday an Friday. Shes all the same frum the odder. Thos rain shes com all time. Thos fesent shes no com all time. My leetle dog Jacques shes got so wet shes shrink an com dam neer drown. Shes get so mad as Joe shes spit in eye of wild cat.

“Joe shes hunt all time for fesent and no find. Joe shes get wet all time—get to many bath wun week. Thos law sezun for hunt fesent shes end tonite. Saterdag thos sun shes goin shine shure. Thos man whos write piece for paper on weather shes say rain come these week for almos for inch. Joe, shes kno different; only 4 inch. Thos bush shes 4 foot high from bottom and shes get so wet on top shes al-most cant stand it. Thos rain shes com at lees for foot whair fesent aint. Joe shes no find fesent. Joe shes no shoot fesent. Pull-poosh shotgun no good.

“You write noddler letter tell Joe

whair he swap shotgun for mustrat trap, no? JOE.

“P. S. Joe no can get 12 gadge shell in Eethaca 20 gadge anyhow. Shotgun no good.

“JOE.”

We gather Joe didn't get a shot at a pheasant this year. Move over, brother! You've got company! It rained up my way, too!

And that reminds me that we'd like to thank all those friends who wrote in, inclosing clippings of newspaper reports on hunting absurdities. Here's a digest of one clipping:

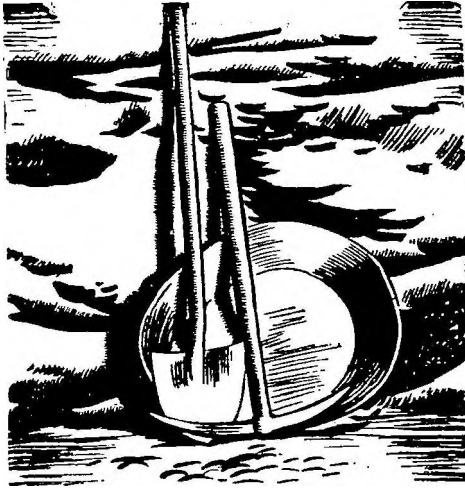
Fifteen-year-old Charlie B— got his first deer. He had an automatic shot gun with four light birdshot loads and three spare shells in a pocket. Around his waist he had a six-foot length of clothesline.

Shortly after entering the woods he saw a young buck and fired. The first shot put out the animal's eyes. Charlie fired the other three at the dazed deer, then quickly reloaded and let that buck have three more doses of birdshot at close range. So the youngster picked up a large rock and heaved it at the still standing but painfully wounded deer. The rock struck a horn, snapping it off and stunning the deer.

Before the deer could get up, Charlie tied a slip knot around the neck and the other end to a nearby tree, pulling it tight to strangle the deer. With his hunting knife he finished the job—

It doesn't seem to me that kill is anything to brag about. What a fine sportsman that lad will be!

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

MANGANESE is a tremendously important metal, vital to the needs of our national defense program. It is one of the prime essentials in the steel industry. In making good steel, about fourteen pounds of manganese are consumed for each ton of the finished product. Of all strategic minerals, manganese ore is required in the largest quantities. In the past most of this country's manganese—up to ninety percent of it—has been obtained from foreign sources.

Add those facts together, and it is easy to understand why prospectors, mining men, scientists and government experts are bending every effort these days to attempting to find sufficient supplies of this metal in the mineralized sections of our own West. It is only high-grade ore suitable for manufacture into ferromanganese, the form in which manganese is usually added in making steel, that is primarily needed. That makes the hunt harder. But not im-

possible as results in certain sections have already shown.

From Long Beach, California, comes H. A. R.'s timely letter on this important subject. "How about the average prospector's chance of finding a workable deposit of manganese, which I understand is urgently needed in this country today? In what States, if any, has such ore been found? I believe some general data on manganese given in your department would be helpful to a lot of prospectors, both professional and amateur, who are not very familiar with the types of manganese ore, what they look like, commercial grade requirements and so forth. Here's hoping you can help us out."

We'll do the best we can, H. A. R. First, taking them alphabetically, some of the States and sections in which high-grade manganese has already been found and shipped are: Alabama, Walnut Grove in Etowah County, also shipments by small operators from mines in Calhoun and Cleburne Counties; Arkansas, Independence County; California, shipments from the Paymaster district in Imperial County; Georgia, Cartersville district in Bartow County; Idaho, Bannock County; Montana, Butte and Phillipsburg vicinities; New Mexico, Luna County; North Carolina, McDowell County; Tennessee, Hamilton, Johnson, Monroe and Unicoi Counties; Utah, Tooele and Grand Counties; Virginia, scattered small shipments from various counties; Washington and West Virginia, also small shipments.

All the deposits referred to are high grade, and they demonstrate how widely scattered and in what a large variety of States and different geographical locations the earnest prospector has a chance of locating manganese ore. Even so they by no means complete the roster of man-

ganese possibilities when lower-grade deposits are considered, and some of these lower-grade deposits, if sufficiently extensive, may be amenable to concentration into ores of shipping quality. Such deposits, therefore, should not be overlooked, or summarily discarded without careful investigation of every chance to develop them ultimately into an additional source of domestic commercial-grade manganese.

There are several types of high-grade manganese ores. In one type a rock or vein containing the metal in small quantities is heavily enriched at and just below the surface by weathering forming a rich, workable top layer. At times the ore occurs in veins associated with other metallic minerals. It may be found in small, hard lumps and bunches in clayey deposits. Lower grade, or ferruginous ores, are those in which the manganese occurs with natural iron ores.

Real high-grade manganese should contain from seventy to ninety percent manganese oxide. Commercial "high grade," the ore used most extensively in the steel industry, should have from thirty-five to forty percent manganese oxide, less than five percent iron, and not more than fifteen percent silica. Even the so-called low-grade ferruginous ores must have from ten to thirty percent manganese, about thirty percent iron and not more than twenty percent silica.

The two most common commer-

cial ores of manganese are both black. Pyrolusite, one of these, contains sixty percent metal. It is very soft and smudges the fingers. It is not very heavy. Its dull-black color becomes brown on intense heating, though the ore itself does not melt. It is usually found as an earthy material, and is the high-grade ore formed by the surface weathering of other manganese minerals.

The other black oxide of manganese, psilomelane, contains about forty percent metal. It is bright, shiny black and so hard it takes a good knife to scratch it. The scratch mark is brown, or brownish black. It won't melt even in the heat of a blowpipe flame.

There are many other minerals, of course, containing some manganese to a greater or lesser extent. They are not, however, as rich as the two minerals described, nor as easily identified, nor for that matter as commercially important as a primary source of manganese.

Meantime the search for more manganese within the continental borders of the United States is in full swing. And it is producing results. We have heard from Salt Lake City, for instance that more than a hundred miners, using diamond drills are working around Drum Mountain in the southern part of Juab County, Utah. They are sampling, testing and developing what is believed to be one of the largest deposits of commercial-grade manganese yet discovered in the State.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

The letter that starts the ball rolling here at the Old Holla this week has left us utterly speechless—we can't think of a thing to say, except lucky, lucky boy! Read it, Pen Pals, and you'll see what we mean!

Dear Miss Rivers:

For a fellow of twenty-one I've certainly gotten around. The United States is my stamping ground, with Alaska almost as familiar. I've surfed on the beach at Waikiki, rubbed shoulders with the natives of the Philippines, snapped pictures of the "Coming of Lent" in Panama, enjoyed the ritual initiations of King Neptune while crossing the equator, gazed upon the castles of the infamous pirates Bluebeard and Blackbird in the Virgin Islands, played baseball against the natives of Guam, swapped puns with the natives of Puerto Rico, gotten sick from home-made havanas in Cuba, traveled both coasts of the United States from Boston, Massachusetts, to Seattle, Washington, and last—but not least interesting—I've traveled in thirty-four of the United States of America. You see, I'm in the navy and have been for five years. Having seen all these things mentioned above, I'm stumped—which is why I'm writing. I've seen so many things there seems little left to make my future travels interesting. I thought if you printed this, Miss Rivers, maybe some Pen Pals would write me and suggest new places, new objects of interest that I might look for in the future. Maybe there are some who would like to hear more about the places I've been and the oddities connected with them. With my vast store of information and the aforementioned travels as a background, I couldn't help being a good letter writer, could I? I'll gladly exchange snapshots and answer all letters, so drop a note in the mail buoy, shipmates, with my port as its destination—and don't forget all suggestions will be carefully considered. Can you think of some place I haven't been which might prove exciting?—Roy Burgess, U. S. S. Charleston, Bremerton, Washington

Scenic postcards collected here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my first letter to the Hollow Tree, and I hope it won't take many more to rope me some Pen Pals. I'm twenty-four years old, have not traveled very much so I want Pen Pals

from everywhere to write me a few lines on a picture post card of some scene in their town or city. My hobby, as you may have guessed, is collecting post cards.—Austin Elrod, Cumming, Georgia

Janey would like a snap from each one—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl in my teens and go to high school. I would like to hear from anyone living anywhere. Will answer first those letters having pictures in them. I'll send one of mine in return.—Janey Stillwell, Rt. No. 2, Huntersville, North Carolina

Fill their mailboxes—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonesome girls who would like to correspond with girls and boys between seventeen and twenty-one. We are both seventeen years old and juniors in high school. We are interested in all outdoor sports, especially swimming and horseback riding. Here's hoping we see our plea in print and our mailboxes chuck full. Come on, boys and girls, and sling some ink our way.—Marge Miloni, 333 S. Locust Street, and Marilyn Allen, 1749 E. Sonora Street, Stockton, California

If at first you don't succeed—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my second attempt to crash the Hollow Tree, and I sure hope it is a success. I am fond of all outdoor sports as well as reading and writing, which are my favorite pastimes. I collect photos and stamps as a hobby, so come on, girls and boys from everywhere, and give me a break.—Rufus Williams, Ary, Kentucky

Can anyone help this Pal?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a woman twenty-nine years old with two young children to provide and care for. My hobbies are landscape gardening and interior decorating, and I do practical nursing and many other things to earn a living. I would like a position as caretaker of property where the

owner is absent, or caring for an invalid. I would consider any position that would allow me to keep the children with me. I prefer the State of Kansas, Virginia or the Carolinas. Can anyone in the Hollow Tree help me out?—Pauline Byers, Rt. No. 1, Gentryville, Indiana

And here's an honest-to-goodness cow-puncher—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am writing this letter for two purposes, one to vouch for Western Story, which I have read for eight years, and the other to acquire Pen Pals from all over the world. I am a twenty-two-year-old cowboy and have punched dogies all over the West. I will gladly answer all questions and send snapshots to the first ten who write me.—G. N. Campbell, c/o William Beaumont General Hospital, Ward 5, El Paso, Texas

Lee doesn't demand much—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am in my early twenties and am employed by a real-estate company. As for enjoyment, I'm easily pleased. I like the movies, enjoy reading (the funnies, too), and love music and dancing. I save souvenir cards and hankies. My aim is to get at least one card from every State in the Union and any other countries. If there is anyone who would like to exchange with me, please write.—Lee Trama, 412 W. 117th Street, Chicago, Illinois

This joint plea comes from Montana—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Montana is very seldom represented in your Hollow Tree, so here's a plea from two Montana girls who think the West is the best. We're both sixteen and promise to make our letters as interesting as possible, so come on, kids, and fill up our mailboxes as they've never been filled before!—Dolores Wolf, 714 North Montana Avenue, and Maxine Trafton, R. R. No. 1, Box 260a, Miles City, Montana

Agnes collects poems—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a small-town girl nearly sixteen years old who would like to hear from Pals anywhere and everywhere. I like writing letters and will try to make them as interesting as possible. Collecting and writing poems is my hobby and I also like dancing, basketball and all exciting sports. So, please, boys and girls, won't you heed my plea?—Agnes Roskosky, 84 North Maine Street, Terryville, Connecticut

See that Billy gets lots of mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been reading Western Story for a few years now and never miss a copy. I am an instructor of the new young men coming into the navy. I've been in the service for a few years and have traveled quite a lot to far-off places all over the world. I would like to have my letter published and see if folks all over the world would drop me a line as you sure feel lonesome when mail is given out around here and there's none for you. I'll answer all letters if I have to lose sleep to do it. Here's hoping I get some real soon.—Billy Heffernan, Naval Training Station, Barracks D, Newport, Rhode Island

Write to these two brothers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please print this plea in your Hollow Tree for a pair of rookies far from home? We promise to answer all letters and questions about the CCC, so come on, all you gals and boys, and sling a little ink this way.—Jimmie and David Eveland, CCC Camp, Company 1997—S223, McCall, Idaho

Want some information about Alaska?

Dear Miss Rivers:

You have helped lots of others, so maybe you'll heed my plea. I am a soldier here at Ladd Field in Alaska and it's pretty lonesome. The nights are long here in the heart of the North and I have plenty of time to write letters. I enjoy all winter sports and my hobby is carving in wood.—John Palmquist, Quartermaster Corps, Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska

Dolores writes novels as a hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

For two years I have corresponded with a girl from England, but I have not had any answers to the last six letters I've written her, so I'm hoping someone will write to me and fill the gap the absence of her letters causes in my mailbox. I am nineteen years old and my favorite hobby is writing novels which I bind in book form.—Dolores Castonguay, Hiles, Wisconsin

Interesting letters promised here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have long been a very constant reader of Western Story and it is my favorite magazine. I am a gunner's mate in the U. S. navy and have had a great deal of experience aboard submarines and destroyers. I will gladly welcome mail from anyone and am sure I can write very interesting letters about places I've been and about the navy in general.—Sigmond Budzaj, Sixth Division, U. S. S. *Ceanopus*, Asiatic Station, c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, California

Maxine can tell you about Indians—

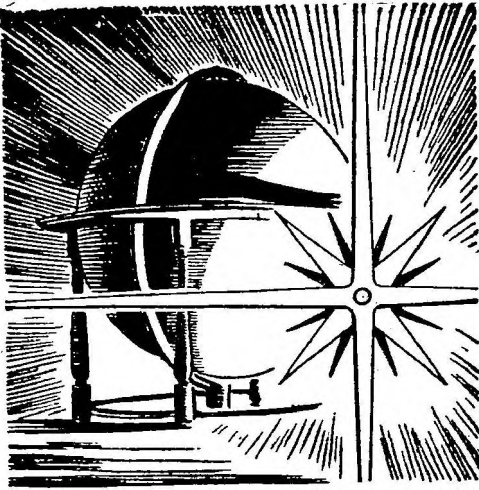
Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is a plea from a twenty-year-old girl. I live in the wide-open spaces of Arizona. I enjoy placer mining, trapping and I am interested in guns and considered a fairly good shot. I would like to hear from Pen Pals of all ages and will answer all letters. I have lived on an Indian reservation, attended their dances and played the Spanish guitar in the Indian orchestra at dances. Here's hoping I get lots of mail.—Maxine Cowell, Quartzsite, Arizona

The West appeals to this New York lad—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a fifteen-year-old boy and am very anxious to make Pen Pals. I would particularly like to correspond with boys and girls around my age who live in the Northwest or in any of our possessions like Alaska, etc. I will answer all letters and sure hope some of you out there will answer the call of one who loves the West.—George Eates, Jr., 4284 Third Avenue, Bronx, New York City, New York



Where to go and how to get there

BY JOHN NORTH

WITH spring at hand more folks than ever are planning some sort of outdoor trip in the coming months. For most of them that means camping out. A large part of the success and enjoyment of such a trip depends on the camper's ability to pick a practical and comfortable camp site out of the many choices afforded him along his route of travel.

This is true whether the prospective camper is traveling by auto, following a pack trail, canoe cruising, or simply hiking into the wilderness with his stripped-to-essential gear stowed in a pack slung across his sturdy shoulders. It is true whether the outdoorsman is picking a place to stop for the night, or choosing camp headquarters for a longer stay.

"What about camp sites?" B. M., of Little Rock, Arkansas, asked us in a recent letter. "My partner and

I wish you would give us some rules for picking them. We have camped before and aren't exactly green, but we feel we have a lot to learn yet about living under the stars."

Glad to give them to you, Bill, and hope they help you on your next trip. One of the first generally accepted rules is that camp should be made an hour before dark to give sufficient time to set up your tent, get supper, eat and clean up the dishes before nightfall. That is time enough if you know where you are going to stop, and are familiar with conditions there such as the availability of water, wood, and perhaps browse for bedding.

In unfamiliar country, particularly in wilder regions that are new and strange, start looking for your camp site *two hours before sunset*, which is a different thing from two hours before *dark*. Even if you find a suitable spot almost immediately, stop rather than attempt to keep going in the hope that another good place will show up farther on. It may, and it may not. There is no point in chancing having to make a dark camp in unknown territory. Such hurried bivouacs are usually miserable makeshifts, sometimes dangerous, and not the part of good camping sense.

Water and wood are prime considerations in making any camp. For drinking purposes natural spring water is safest; with the exception of good wells, it is the only really safe water. Brook, river, and lake water should be boiled before using. In desert country a man either has his drinking water with him, or camps at a known well. Good springs are often found near, or a short way back from the edge of lakes and rivers.

In summer or warm climate camping, the wood supply is not such a

serious consideration. Even in desert areas a few dry sticks, dead greasewood roots, or the stalks of certain dead cacti will make sufficient fire to cook with. In cold weather, or cold country, plenty of sound, dead, dry wood is needed.

As to the camp ground itself, choose, if possible, a slight rise, fairly level, and with just enough slope to afford drainage in case of rain. Stay out of hollows, and dense bottom lands. They are usually damp, clammy, or muggy, according to the season, and insect-infested as well as being flood traps in case of sudden, heavy rains. Deep forests into which little direct sunlight enters are also apt to be damp.

If you camp along rivers or lake shores get back from the immediate water's edge above the high-water flood line. Don't let an inviting stretch of clean, sandy beach and a bit of laziness in the matter of toting cooking water to a farther-removed camp lure you into false security and discomfort. Sand doesn't afford decent holding ground for tent pegs. Moreover, it tracks into your living quarters, gets into your equipment, and invariably some of it percolates into your food.

The ideal lakeside, or river-shore summer camping spot is a small, partially timbered, outjutting promontory, rock-based and grass-covered, standing several feet above the actual water level. Such a site will be well aired, exposed to the open sun at least part of the day, and catch any night breezes that waft

across the lake or up the river. This last is a grateful aid in keeping your camp mosquito free in the evenings.

Steep, high-walled ravines, and deep, narrow gulches are ordinarily not good camping places. They don't get enough sunlight, and they are apt to be early-morning fog centers. In open country, avoid camping directly under the shelter of a large tree. Camp near the tree, if you wish. Under it your tent would catch all the tree's drip of rain and dew. Moreover, such trees might draw lightning in the event of a severe thunderstorm.

Above all, in the semiarid desert country of the Southwest, no matter how tempting the site appears, nor how clear the weather looks, don't ever attempt to camp in the shady, sometimes tree-lined bottom of dry wash, river bed, or dry stream channel. A quick local storm in mountains miles away, may send a treacherous wall of run-off flood waters catapulting down the stream with dangerous ferocity.

Such torrents, the result of cloud-bursts, move with incredible speed. The advancing water front may be five, ten, or even fifteen feet high. It uproots trees in its path, and rolls huge boulders along the channel bottom as easily as if they were pebbles.

To L. P. O., Wheeling, West Virginia: The Rocky Mountain goat is really not a goat at all. It is a member of the antelope family.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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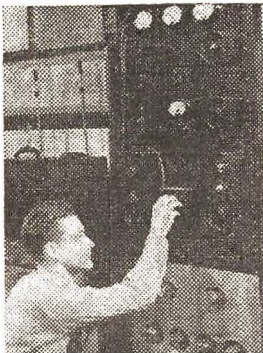
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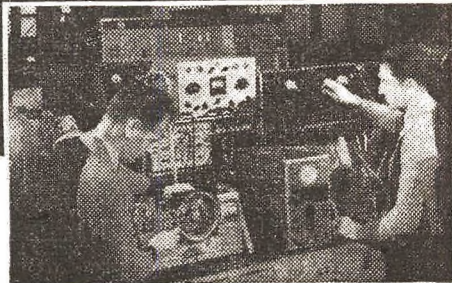
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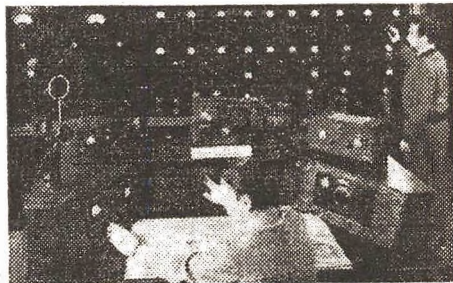
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PART SIX

Don Desperado

BY L. L. FOREMAN

The Story So Far:

Captain Michael Connegan, soldier of fortune, comes to St. Louis hoping to join a caravan of traders about to start for Santa Fe. Also in the city is a delegation of prominent New Mexicans, including General Manuel Rajimo. Since Rajimo regulates trade to Santa Fe, all St. Louis is doing its utmost to fete him and his party. There is great consternation, therefore, when Rajimo accuses Con of insulting his fiancée, Peregrina Chavez, at a ball.

Con has to flee from St. Louis after wounding Rajimo in a duel, and he heads for Galveston. After hiding out there for several weeks, he strikes out for Austin where he joins a trading expedition leaving for Santa Fe where he intends to try to find out what became of his brother Lorin who vanished the year before after selling his trade goods.

Ill-planned, the expedition runs into trouble almost immediately and within a short distance of their destination, the Texans

are captured by General Rajimo's troops and marched to Mexico City where they are thrown into prison.

Peregrina Chavez, who had broken her engagement to Rajimo, helps Con to escape from grim old Santiago Prison, and he is taken to her hacienda at La Caleta. When her uncle and guardian, Don José, discovers what she has done, she explains that Con is her fiancé. Con is as dumfounded as Don José. Though he loves Peregrina, he has no intention of being forced to marry her, and he escapes from the hacienda and heads for the States once again.

Some time later he joins the Texas Avengers, a band of Texans who have vowed to revenge themselves on Rajimo for his treatment of the Austin Expedition. Finding the Avengers little more than bandits, however, Con drops out of the organization after earning enough from the looting of a wagon train owned by Rajimo to buy himself a wagon and some trade goods. Then he joins a caravan that is going to Santa Fe, but once more disaster strikes. The Avengers attack and loot a Mexican wagon train and when news is brought to the Americans, they realize they will be blamed by Rajimo for the incident and will probably not be allowed to sell their trade goods.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEEL TRACKS TO THE CIMARRON

THE boy Vicente was babbling again. His *patron*—the handsome young *caballero* who had hired him as his coachman—he had not escaped. He had snatched the reins and tried to get away, but the terrible *Tejanos* had overhauled him. Vicente sobbed. *Si*, he had seen that. What would they do to his gentle young *patron*? Such a generous and kind young *caballero*, he was, and of the Chavez family.

Con caught the familiar name. "Chavez?"

Vicente nodded vigorously. Of the family of the *muy grande* Don José Chavez, no less. From Spain. His name was Don Patricio, and he had come to surprise Don José with a visit, he had told Vicente. He was

traveling alone. Ah, but Don José would be prostrated with grief over this.

The Americans looked at one another. Burgwin, for once, forgot to curse. "Well," he said heavily, "that settles it! When this news reaches Santa Fe—"

"We better make up a party and go see what's left," put in Con. "Might be some wounded lying around."

He had forgotten his accent for the moment, and became aware of Burgwin's sharp scrutiny. An observant man, Burgwin, at all times. The others hadn't noticed. Men began catching up their horses. Soon the party was made up and moving out of camp, the boy, Vicente, with them.

It was after midnight before they caught sight of glowing ashes and a few dying flames. Here the trail ran along the foot of Spanish Peaks to the swift-running stream of the Rio de las Animas Perdidas, called the Purgatoire by the far-roving French-Canadian trappers, and known as the Picketwire to most Americans. Giant cottonwoods marked the course of it, and the trail approached it over and around a rolling succession of low, shrub-dotted hills.

"Good spot for an ambush, all right," allowed Old Nick, from the depths of his Apache experience.

They rode into the hollow where the smoldering remains of the carts glowed. A few bodies lay here and there. Con rode over to one, and gazed down at powder marks that blackened a hole in the forehead. The fellow had been shot to death as he lay wounded. Merchandise was strewn about, most of it cloth goods. Comanches couldn't have done a more thorough job of annihilation.

CON brought his eyes back from their somber inspection, and met Old Nick's bleak look. "Is this what they've come to—the Avengers?" he muttered. "Shooting a few peons from ambush—murdering the wounded! It's senseless! Damnable! What goods they couldn't carry off on the mules, they ruined, and then set fire to the carts. I swear, Nick, if they were Texans, I'll never again brag I'm a Texan!"

The boy Vicente was running about, searching. He came up to Con, as to one who could understand. "*Mi patron no aqui!*" he cried. "*Cocha no aqui!*" His young *patron* was not here, nor the Jersey wagonette.

They went over the bodies, and studied the charred remains of the carts. Could it be, Vicente asked with plaintive hope, that the terrible *Tejanos* had released young Don Patricio and allowed him to drive on after the other fleeing fugitives of the attacked caravan?

Con, with his mind on the murdered victims, hardly thought so, but said nothing. He and Old Nick scouted for sign, while Burgwin and the rest stood grimly silent. Old Nick was first to halloo a find, and Con joined him.

"Here y'are." Old Nick was on his hands and knees. "They took off east after they finished. Took the mules an' that lil' wagin. Here's the tracks. That wagin's light an' won't slow 'em if they hitched extry mules to it." He ran his gnarled, wise hands into the ruts. "Deep. They loaded it up. I reckon they must've took that young don along."

Con nodded, speculating. "They could see he was a big somebody. Likely they took him along for hostage, just in case they run into trouble. If they were Comanches, now, I'd say they took him for ransom."

"They *was* Comanches—white ones!" grunted Old Nick. "You see what they did to them muleteers they caught? Me, I've did consid'able fightin'. I've fought Injun style an' white-man style, an' killed 'em brown an' white, but I never yet massacred a man when he was down on his back. Ugh!"

Con swung back onto his horse. "I reckon," he said quietly, "I'll go after 'em! You stay with our outfit, Nick. Eh? No, I'm not hunting suicide. If that *boscada* bunch are some of the Avengers, they'll listen to reason when I make myself known to 'em. They all know me."

"What if they ain't Texans?"

"That'll make it tough," Con admitted. "Still, you see how it is. We've got to do something to counteract this dirty business, or our game's blowed up. Rajimo will jump at the chance to accuse all of us of having instigated the raid. He'll confiscate our wagons and run us out of the province. But if I can rescue that young don, it'll give us a clean bill—and Monsieur Nagenoc will be riding high in Santa Fe!"

"Or dead on the Cimarron desert!" growled Old Nick.

Con leaned down and slapped the old renegade on the back. "Lay your bets on the M'sieur, old-timer!"

He heeled off, following the scar of the tracks, knowing they would lead to the river. The raiders would ford the Purgatoire at the nearest point. If they were Texans they would then swing southeast for home, fast, before the chase got started after them. If they were not Texans they would probably strike out for the desert route to the Cimarron. The tracks would tell, later on. In either case they would be in a hurry to quit Mexican territory. The raid had been pulled

daringly close to Santa Fe, and it wouldn't be long before garrison troops took to their trail.

THE raiders were camped by an arroyo when Con rode up within sight of their fires the next night, and it looked as if they had chosen the site with careful regard for secrecy and defense. That meant they had seen Indian sign during the day. Pursuit from the Santa Fe garrison couldn't be expected for a week or more, and by that time they would be well over into Kansas, if night-prowling Indians didn't run off their horses and leave them afoot.

The stream ran low and shallow, little more than a trickle, leaving a wide and level bed exposed, and here they had made camp. They were sheltered by the high banks that had

been cut by seasons of gushing torrents in the long past, their fires hidden and their horses staked out to grass under guard above the lower bank. Off to the south, seen clearly by day, rose the straight-topped mass of a long mesa, high above the surrounding desert plain.

Con thought the arroyo might be the Carrizo, running into the Cimarron which was sixty miles or so farther to the southeast. The mesa, that he had steadily approached during the afternoon, resembled descriptions he had heard of Mesa de Mayo. He drew rein on his tired and drooping horse, and took survey of the situation. From the drift of the trail, the raiders were not lining for Texas, but for the Kansas badlands. Still, that didn't necessarily signify that they weren't Texans. Kansas was a whole lot

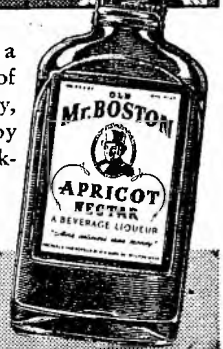
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nearer than Texas, and men on the jump weren't particular.

"Got to get it out of my mind that they're Avengers, though," he mused. "Might be a bunch of the boys gone bad and on the loot. I wonder, now, how edgy on the trigger they might be if a man let out a real polite yell and rode in a-visiting?"

He could see the outline of the Jersey wagon, a square black dot against the campfires and cutting the thin streak of the shrunken stream. It was drawn up on the near bank, its team unhitched and staked out with the other animals, but the mules had been unloaded on the bottomland and the men were using the scattered packs to sit on while they ate. They had had a long day, and camped late.

Con bit his thumb for luck. "Well, there's only one way to find out, and that's to ride on in."

His tired horse, smelling water and its own kind, had been restive at the halt. Con nudged it on, but held it to a walk. That the men were jumpy had to be taken into account, and a proper etiquette had to be observed in approaching them. He put a hand to his mouth and sent out a long halloo, low, so as not to startle too much, but clear enough to be heard. The sitting men had their instant of alert stillness, before they rose and crisscrossed in quiet activity, slipping out of the firelight and easing down behind the piled packs. Yes, they were jumpy, very jumpy. Only one figure remained seated as Con drew closer.

He had covered half the distance and was wondering how many gun sights were seeking him in the darkness, when an answering hail sounded: "Que es?"

"Just one lone white amigo," called back Con, and contrived a short laugh meant for them to hear. "Don't shoot me, boys—I'm too tired to dodge."

He passed by the horses and mules, glanced at the wagon, and reined in on the bank. Here some of the firelight reached him, but still the men stayed in cover. He leaned on his broad-topped saddlehorn, wearily, and ran a pensive eye over the camp.

"Boys, I smell coffee and fried meat. Where's your manners? I'm a hungry man, and if you don't invite me I'll just have to help myself."

A shadow lengthened behind a pile of mule packs, and a man slowly rose, rifle in hand. Others rose with him, and more began drifting silently in from the outer darkness. The seated figure that hadn't stirred remained motionless, its face turned toward Con. The clothes—the voluminous traveling cloak and oversized black fedora pulled down over a kerchief-wrapped head—were those of the youth who had ridden in the wagon, Don Patricio, but the face was dark for one of pure Spanish blood, darker than the shadows warranted.

CON rested his eye on the first man who had showed himself, and leaned more lightly on his saddlehorn. He flicked his lucky thumb with his forefinger, condemning it for letting him down. The man was Yarnell, big and blond, with a twist to his nose and a dented scar in his upper lip, mementos of his fight on the Arkansas. Some of the others Con recognized as Yarnell's rovers, but the rest were strangers, and not all of them white men.

"Who the devil might you be, an' where'd you come from?" Yarnell questioned sharply. His eyes were restless, and he stood with his head cocked, listening. They all were listening, keyed to catch sounds that

might betray the coming of other riders in the night.

Con was thankful for his black eye patch, his French-cut beard and shaved eyebrows. They had got him by Burgwin in daylight for two months, and it seemed reasonable to gamble on them now in this poor light. He eased his horse down the bank. "The name's Nagennoc."

He bared his white teeth in a grin at Yarnell, and dismounted. "I'm with the American caravan. The boys sent me to talk to you. You've put us all in bad with that raid."

Somebody snickered. Yarnell grounded the butt of his rifle and folded his hands over the muzzle.

"That so?" His tone dragged mockery. "We're right busted up about it. Er . . . what name did you say?"

"Nagennoc," Con repeated for him. "Now, there's nothing personal about this. A man's got to make his living the best way he can, and I've made mine in ways I don't talk about in strange company. I trailed you here to talk business. No, there's nobody back of me. I came alone."

"You take a fool's chances!" Yarnell observed.

"Chances, but not a fool's," countered Con equably. "I take you for men of my kind. None of us are fools." He grinned again, his single eye knowing and cynical.

Yarnell seated himself on a pack, and stuck a toe at a fire-blackened pot. "He'p y'self to coffee." The others relaxed and began settling around the fires, their eyes on the newcomer.

CON poured hot black coffee into a tin cup, taking his time, and speared a slab of fried meat from the nearest pan with his knife. He was playing for time while he sought

inspiration for moves ahead. Eating, he let his glance travel to the lone and silent figure in the cloak. He jerked the point of his knife that way.

"What did you aim to do with him?" he asked.

Suspicion reappeared in Yarnell's steady regard. "What's your guess?"

Con shrugged. "Haven't any. I might's well admit he's the reason I'm here. We traders need proof that we didn't set you boys onto that Mex caravan. He'd do, if I took him safe and sound into Santa Fe. *Sabe?*"

He saw Don Patricio look up swiftly and duck his head again, and caught a better glimpse of the face. Its darkness came from smeared dirt and dust, through which the white skin showed pale in places. The shine of the dark eyes under the hat brim held more of anxious urgency than fear. Con, strangely stirred, had to force himself to snatch his attention away and wait patiently for Yarnell's comment.

Yarnell said slowly, "I *sabe*. That's reason'ble. Mebbe I'll 'blige you, if you can foot the price. We didn't trove so much out o' that Mex outfit. Most of it was cloth an' stuff we couldn't haul off on the mules. That's mostly why we brung him along. He looks like he oughta fetch ransom, if I can figger some way o' gettin' it."

"How about five hundred in gold?" Con suggested. He had that much in his money belt, held in reserve for the payment of customs duties on his wagon in Santa Fe.

Yarnell looked interested, but shook his head. "His name's Chavez, he says. I've heard that's a powerful rich family around Santa Fe. They'd pay more, plenty more, if I can get in touch with 'em. Ain't he the lily-fingered young macaroni,

though! Y'oughta see his hands—whiter'n a burro's belly. I done tol' him if he made a move to run off, I'll strip him nekkid an' tie him to my horse's tail. He's been good as a woolly lamb since."

"How are you going to collect ransom on him?" Con asked. "Those Santa Fe folks will cross you up on that and have your hide. Better take my offer."

"No." Yarnell's scarred mouth set stubbornly. "I've got my mind on five thousand. It's that or nothin'. I've got to split with the boys here, y'know, an' five hundred wouldn't spread far. I'll collect, or I'll stake him out for the Comanches to find! Say, can you read Spanish? I want him to write a note to send to Santa Fe, and I want it to read right. Mebbe I ought to stripe his lily-white hide some, first, an' put him in the right mind."

The bowed head of Don Patricio lifted again, and again Con caught the flash of urgency in the dark eyes. He finished his coffee, and rose.

"Might not need to," he remarked. "Is it all right if I go over and talk to him?"

"Sure." Yarnell stared after him. "Say, you got that five hundred on you?"

Con looked back. "No," he lied, and saw disbelief settle in the blue, bloodshot eyes. His back tingled a little as he walked on to the seated Don Patricio.

"I am trying to help you." He spoke in Spanish, pausing over the cloaked prisoner. "Would your relatives in Santa Fe pay five thousand dollars ransom for you? Young fellow, I'm talking to you—look up at me!"

The head rose hesitantly, half defiantly. The kerchief was pulled down low over forehead and ears,

and the brim of the black fedora hat was bent downward all the way around. The cloak was still fastened up to the chin, and what could be seen of the face was as dirty as if deliberately grimed to cover up the fair skin, but Con stood paralyzed as he stared down at close range.

It was the face of Peregrina Chavez!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RANSOM RIDERS

HHEY, Nagennoc, what d'you see so queer about him?" Yarnell called over.

Con straightened up, dove into his chaotic mind for a plausible reply, and failed entirely to find one. He waved a gesture that could have meant anything, and sat down, blinking at the head that now was

bowed again. Like different cards being turned over rapidly, reasons and explanations became plain in his mind. The kerchief and big fedora—to hide her head of hair that her feminine vanity would not allow her to cut short. The voluminous traveling cloak—to hide the curving lines of a body that could never be mistaken for a boy's. The smeared dirt on her face, that she must have done hastily at the last moment when she knew disaster had struck.

Yet, with all that, how had she fooled them this long? Con was amazed. He would have known, himself, that this was a girl. Why, even at a distance he had felt a strange sort of— But, of course, that was because it was she—Peregrina! Something in him had known it was she, dirty face and all.

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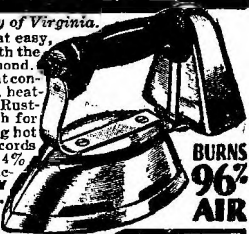
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his crowd much longer. They had been busy today, on the jump and driving the captured pack mules. Con recalled Yarnell's casual threats, and blazing rage crowded out all other emotions. He had to fight it down. He spoke, holding his voice to a low and even pitch, still speaking in Spanish. "You've got to get away from these men!"

"Si, señor," came the whispered agreement.

Her tone, and the term, brought to Con a mingling of surprise, relief and some chagrin. So Peregrina hadn't recognized him through his disguise, though he had recognized her in hers. He had for the moment forgotten his changed appearance. Well, that was a woman for you. A man, now, knew his woman no matter how dressed, or how dirty her face happened to be. But a woman lacked that deep instinct. She did not go beneath externals. He felt disappointed in her, for the first time.

And yet reason told him that it was for the best that she should not recognize him. If and when they both reached Santa Fe, for her to know his identity would be awkward. She had once wrecked his chances of getting there to delve into the matter of Lorin's disappearance. She knew something about that mystery, and might again put a successful spoke in his wheel.

That brought another thought to him. If Peregrina did not know it was he, then she did not know he had detected her as a girl and not a boy. The thing was involved. Here he was, posing as somebody else, fooling her and Yarnell. And here she was, masquerading as a youth and fooling Yarnell at least. And even Yarnell and his renegade bunch were raiding in the guise of Texas Avengers.

"Hang it, we're all sailing under false colors, the whole passel of us!"

he thought. "But we can't last out the night. Got to do something."

He moved closer to Peregrina, so that the left holster under his coat pressed against her. "That's a pistol," he said softly. "Can you take it out without their seeing you? I've got another."

HE felt the movement of her arm, then the sliding touch of her hand. The weight of his left holster lightened. Her hand vanished again under the cloak, with the pistol. Relief ran through him. He didn't know what kind of shot she was, but he knew she'd have the nerve to use the pistol the right way if she had to.

She raised her head a little, and glanced sidelong at him. "*Gracias!*" she whispered. Aloud, she said, as if in reply to a question, "Yes, my name is Don Patricio Chavez. Don José is my uncle."

Con got up. "*Alerta, Don Patricio!*" he murmured, and walked back to Yarnell.

"Five thousand, hm-m-m?" He met the raider's speculative scrutiny. They all were regarding him, and he could guess what they were thinking. "No less?"

"Not a cent less!"

Con spread his hands. "You win. We traders need that youngster to put us in the clear. I'll pay it."

Several men stood up, no longer attempting to hide their intentions. Their eyes were on his hands. "You got that much cash?" Yarnell questioned gently.

Con grinned companionably at him. "A man picks up habits in this country, and one of 'em is to bury your gold before riding on into a strange camp," he derided pleasantly. "Nothing personal, you understand. Just habit."

Yarnell nodded his comprehen-

sion. "I'll go with you to get it." He put on his leather coat.

"Might's well bring the don, too," Con suggested. "It'd save me coming back. I've got to catch up with my caravan, and I'm in as big a rush to finish this business as you are. How about throwing in a horse and saddle for him?" The thing was shaping up very well. Yarnell had taken the bait. With just him, alone, well away from his crowd—

Yarnell quirked his scarred lip in peccant humor. "Why, sure," he agreed readily. "We'll make it a party. Boys, some o' you saddle a horse for our young macaroni an' bring him along!"

IT was dark away from the campfires, and the low moon did not help much. Con's grulla horse, rebellious at leaving the water and grazing, constantly fought the bit and attempted to turn back. Yarnell swore when it bumped against him for the fourth time, and reined his own mount behind.

"I swear, sometimes I think I'll take to riding mules," Con grumbled, yanking his horse's head forward again. "Say, can any of you see the tracks I made coming in? I've lost 'em, fooling with this blasted jughead. I made my cache in the roots of an uncommon big mimosa. No use looking for it yet. It's quite a way on. But I've got to follow my tracks to it, or I never will find it. Maybe we better turn back and wait for daylight."

His suggestion was ignored. Yarnell had brought four of his crowd along. They spread out and began searching for the tracks, bending low from their saddles and peering at the ground. Yarnell turned and beckoned curtly for Peregrina to come on ahead of him where he could keep an eye on her. She had

been riding in the rear with his rovers.

Con circled about, aiding in the search, still having trouble with his stubborn mount. The exasperated horse finally threw a hump in its back and bucked in a tentative attempt to unseat him. Yarnell, twisting around to watch, chuckled as Con loomed up in the darkness with one arm wrapped around the neck of the grulla horse. Con swore, got his seat back, and lashed with his rein ends. The grulla leaped, turned ends, and fetched up heavily against Yarnell.

It had all the appearance of an accident, and it was in the nature of things that Yarnell's horse should promptly spook and go to kicking up its heels in all directions. But Yarnell piled out of his saddle without trying to stay on, and he took his reins with him. He got off on the wrong side, away from Con, with his right hand whisking under his leather coat, and Con knew that the man's instinct for danger had given him sudden warning.

"Who got spilled?" one of the searching men called out.

Con spent two seconds he could not afford, in aiming a kick at Peregrina's mount. The horse quivered, blew a snort, and took off at a run, with its cloaked rider bent over and tugging at the reins. Con brought his heel back against the grulla's ribs, but the animal's temper was up. It went into a dancing spin, and Con dug for his pistol.

Yarnell's gun exploded its brief flash and roar. Hit hard in his middle, Con half whistled an involuntary "Umph!" in an escaping rush of breath, and sick agony interfered in his nerves. At the second jolting whirl of his horse, he fired, and Yarnell's horse broke away, leaving the

outlaw standing with one hand outstretched as if blindly groping.

Con chopped down the Colt pistol and fired again. "Devil take you, there's all the ransom you get from me!" he mumbled, and shifted heavily in his saddle to meet whatever might be coming from the others.

They were heading in, calling through the darkness to Yarnell, who wasn't standing any more, but the next move of the thoroughly panicked grulla put Con's back toward them. Somebody rode up in a stamping smother, shooting, and Con twisted his body again. He brought down the Colt pistol, almost pulled trigger on the nearest halted rider, and changed his aim fast to another who was taking on shape as he came charging in. The halted rider wore a cloak, tangled by the wind, and was not shooting at him.

The oncoming horseman let out a yell, and swerved, and caught two shots broadside. His body lost rhythm with the rise and fall of his horse, bumping, and fell backward while the horse ran on. Two more riders showed up dimly, warily circling, shouting to Yarnell. The darkness made them unsure of anything, until Con got off another shot that turned one of them off in a straight run back for the camp, where commotion sounded faintly.

The grulla took it into its head to follow. Con hauled its head around, slammed its flank with his pistol, and got it straightened out the right way. As he got back to where he had started, somebody rode across his path, and he saw it was Peregrina.

"Get that danged nag going, you!" he called, and pain put savage temper into his voice. "I don't want to pile up on you—I'm having it tough enough as 'tis!"

IN the darkness it was not possible to see much of the terrain, and they had to trust to their horses. Peregrina's mount was fresh and fairly fast, but the grulla wanted to quit now that it had worked off its bad temper.

Con looked back, wincing as he turned, but could see nothing now of the camp. Yarnell's rovers might or might not be pounding along in pursuit. If so, they were too far behind to be heard.

"See if you can find a place to cross the river," Con called to Peregrina. "My horse isn't going to last, and we've got to hide out."

The girl waved a hand back in understanding, and rode on, veering close over to the high bank. Where a cave-in had cut it down she turned and put her horse down the soft-sand slope. Con followed in her tracks. He heard the sand sucking at the grulla's hoofs when he reached the bottoms, and uttered a quick warning, but too late. Here the bottoms were low, and the river spread out in shallow streaks.

He drew up to turn back, recognizing the danger of quicksand. Peregrina had evidently recognized it, too, for she was sawing reins, but her horse was going too fast and the footing was too treacherous. The animal slipped and floundered, went in up to its belly, and plowed headlong into the shallow water. Its rider kicked clear, threw herself backward, and hit the wet sand with a soggy smack.

"Holy smokes—what next!" groaned Con, and began tearing loose the short length of catch rope tied to his saddle. The grulla snorted and backed as it felt itself slowly sinking into the firmer sand, and all Con's kicking couldn't stop its wary retreat.

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reached his side. Silently, they watched the vain struggles of the sinking horse. It squealed its terror, and Con exchanged the rope for his pistol. After the single shot, the horse sank and ceased its fight.

"That," said Con grimly, "leaves the two of us with one played-out horse! Don't you know any better than to barge into a thing like that?"

"I'm . . . sorry," came the halting reply. "You had best ride on and . . . and I'll—"

"Hm-m-m!" Con reached down and hauled her up by the bedraggled cloak, and she took seat behind him. She had lost her hat, and the kerchief was all awry, letting wet hair tumble down, but Con passed no comment on that.

He forced the grulla to climb back up the bank, and pointed it away from the river. "We won't try that again," he remarked. "Better we swing south around that mesa and see if we can strike the desert route to Wagon Mound. Have to chance Indians. Have to do some walking, too. This horse won't go far, carrying double. Don't hold me so tight—I've got a stomach-ache!"

She quickly changed her hold on him for a grip on his coat. "How far are we from Santa Fe?" she asked, and from her movements behind him Con guessed that she was tucking the betraying hair back under the kerchief.

"I don't know exactly," he answered. "Should be more water south of the mesa, and maybe a stray buffalo or two farther down. We'll need to eat, and we've got to keep from ruining this horse. With luck, we might make it to Santa Fe in a week."

"A . . . a week?"

"Maybe more. We'll have to travel nights for a while, and hole up during the day, 'count of Indians and such. Quit wriggling around with your hair—I know you're a

woman! Incidentally, happen the Apaches catch us alive, you're my wife, understand? Apaches have some morals. Sometimes they respect a married woman, I've heard, but they show none at all to an unmarried gal traveling with a man. And what they'd do to a gal wearing man's pants, I swear I can't guess. They'd figure she was a hussy."

"Oh!" Peregrina said faintly.

"Sure do hope we strike water again," pursued Con. "Not that I can't do without drinking for a day or two, but we both need baths—you particularly. Your face was dirty enough to begin with, and then you had to go and fall in that sludge. You're a sight!"

She said nothing, stiff and trembling behind him, and even his pain couldn't keep him from grinning into the darkness, enjoying her speechless wrath.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DON PAT

AT sunup they stumbled upon a spring, south of the mesa. It flowed into a ravine, forming a stream and a natural oasis of green-briar thickets, wild berries and good grass. The grulla, plodding at a walk, halted on the rim and Con slowly and stiffly dismounted after Peregrina got off.

The walls of the canyon were steep, ragged with crevices and spurs, and it took some search to find a path down to the water. Once down on the bottom, they drank, and Con had to drag the grulla away to keep it from foundering itself. He off-saddled and staked the animal to grass, and then lay down with his eyes closed. When he grew aware of silence he opened his unshaded eye and found a very muddy figure sitting wearily on the grass.

"Take your bath," he muttered, and closed his eye again. "You're safe. Right now, I wouldn't look at Cleopatra splashing in the Nile with all her handmaidens! I'm too done up. Better wash the sand out of your clothes, too." He rolled over on his face, struggled out of his coat, and tossed it aside. "You can wear that while they're drying. Wake me if you see sign of anybody coming—but not for anything less than ten Indians or three white men. Less than that you can handle yourself!"

He did not know how long he slept, but when he woke the sun was getting high, and his body felt as if it had been kicked around. His first look was for Peregrina. Her clothes, washed out, hung drying over a wild-currant bush. He turned his head, seeking her, and when he saw her he almost forgot his soreness. She sat huddled in his coat, asleep while sitting up, beside her the pistol he had given her. The coat was big around the shoulders, but she had had to curl her legs under her in order to make it do as a robe.

There she sat, in the only position compatible with modesty, like Buddha turned young and beautiful. Con wondered why she hadn't taken the saddle blanket, until he discovered he had it over himself. He didn't recall taking it. Her face was clean, and she had done something with her hair. Con didn't know just what, but it wasn't in a tangle. It lay spread out over her shoulders, the ends still wet, but the rest in smooth waves.

"Beautiful—yes, beautiful," he mused, and the old strong stir rippled through him. "Never saw anything so perfect. Still the fighter, too. I might've known they could not keep her shut up in any convent! Wonder if she's got any suspicion

of who I am? Hard to fool the minx, so it is, and well I know it!"

He sat up painfully, and looked down at his shirt. Surprisingly, he saw no blood. He peeled off the shirt and a gold piece fell out. The long pouch of his leather money belt, worn next to his body, was burst open as if hit with a hatchet. His right side and part of his stomach were discolored by the spread of an angry bruise.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he said aloud, and looked up as Peregrina moved. "Excuse my undress," he drawled, meeting her startled eyes. "I've just found one more proof of the well-known truth that cash is a man's best friend. I could've sworn I was bleeding to death all night, but Yarnell's bullet only smacked my financial standing. Cold water might help this bruise. A dandy, isn't it?"

Passing her, he tossed her the blanket. "I doubt you're as comfortable as you look. Roll up in this and stretch out. Roll your head up in it, too."

She tried to wither him with a haughty glance. "Why should I?"

"Because," answered Con primly, sitting by the spring and pulling off his boots, "I like privacy in my bath!"

Her head was under the blanket when he got his second boot off, and the gasping sound he heard under it caused him to wonder whether she was shocked, furious, or laughing.

THEY left the ravine at sundown, and pushed on toward the south. "There isn't much nourishment in wild berries, is there?" observed Con, pensively digging a seed out of his teeth. "Tomorrow we'll eat meat if I have to run down a jack rabbit."

He was walking while Peregrina

rode, and he noted that she seemed to be studying him. She was going to start asking questions, he felt, and he decided to beat her to it.

"How did you happen to be with that mule train?" he asked, just as she opened her lips to speak. "And what made you put on pants?"

She flushed a little at his second question, and Con was amused. He had noticed before that there was a natural modesty in her, a modesty that remained unblunted by her poise and independence of action.

"I joined it at Independence," she replied. "No other women were with it, so I joined as a man, traveling privately. Your name is Nagenoc? You are French?"

Con gravely inclined his head. "But why are you traveling alone? The circumstances must be . . . er . . . a little unusual." He fixed her with his eye, smiling gently but not innocently. His narrow mustache and rakishly trimmed beard did not lend themselves to innocence, and his upturned eyebrows and black patch were more sinister than harmless.

"Of course," she agreed. "You see, I ran away from a convent in France. *Votre France, elle est tres belle, M'sieur—n'est-ce pas?*"

That stumped Con for a moment. He knew hardly a word of French, and hadn't the remotest inkling of what she had asked. But he carried it off as best he could.

"You will excuse me if I refrain from conversing in what was once my native tongue," he apologized with cool gravity.

"There is a tragedy in my life," he added after some swift inventive thought, and sighed heavily for her benefit. "Powerful enemies conspired to have me banished from France. They were jealous of my influence, and accused me of high treason. On the day I became a

ruined outcast, I swore an oath that I would never again speak my native tongue. Nor . . . hem . . . do I wish to hear it spoken."

"I am sorry—terribly sorry," murmured Peregrina softly. "It must have been a bitter experience." Her eyes lavished sympathy for him.

Con shrugged tragically. Very. Er . . . your family is in Santa Fe? Won't you be sent back to the convent?"

Peregrina shook her head. "I think not. My uncle and guardian—Don José—will wash his hands of me after this. I am a very bad girl."

"Your true name is?"

"Peregrina."

Con bowed, congratulating himself for having slid by a knotty point very neatly. "A lovely name. But I'll call you Don Pat, and try to think of you as a young man. I confess it will be difficult—but safer. Excuse my bluntness."

"Oh, I feel quite safe, M'sieur," she assured him, a trifle breathlessly. "I still have your pistol."

"Hm-m-m . . . yes, of course." Con sent her a suspicious glance, wondering just how she meant that. "But don't be too ready to use it, please. After all, a loaded pistol can be an . . . er—"

"*Argumentum ad hominem?*" she suggested helpfully.

Con frowned up at her. He had never seen her look so utterly guileless and sweetly naïve, and that should have warned him. "I have already stated, I believe, that I do not desire to converse in French," he reminded her.

She smiled a secret little smile. "That," she murmured demurely, "was Latin—*M'sieur* Nagennoc!"

ON the ninth day, near the end of the Great Missouri Road that had been built by the caravan traders in years past, Con had his first glimpse of Santa Fe. Exhila-

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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

ration raced through him, and he wanted to shout: "Here I am—you couldn't keep me away!"

There it lay, cuddled by the bold and rocky Sangre de Cristo Range, and from up here on the top of the last rise he could overlook it. There it lay—*La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Assisi*—Royal City of the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi—once the Royal City of haughty Spain's Kingdom of New Mexico, now the farthest-flung outpost of the Mexican Republic—the Golden Thebes of the Yankee traders—Santa Fe!

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Westward away from it ran the great plateau, the strong sunlight gilding the pointed hills, the far bottoms purpled by distance and the colors running together to form a thousand delicate hues. The Sangre de Cristos were near and hovering, but the faraway ranges of the Sandia and Jemez Mountains hung blue and mysterious against the sky beyond the plateau.

Con turned his face to Peregrina, and she, who had been watching him, grew still-eyed at his smile. His smile was wicked, predatory, and his eye glimmered like a diamond. For an instant the workings of his mind were flashed on his face. He was thinking: "I've brought you here—but when I've done what I came to do, I'll be taking you away again!" Here, Rajimo ruled and needed killing; Lorin had vanished

and needed avenging; and a fortune in gold needed tracing.

Peregrina said quietly: "That large, long building you see on the plaza is the Palacio, home of General Rajimo. The *Casa de Cabildo*—offices of the civil government—is on the east side of the plaza. My uncle is *Primer* of the *Cabildo*, but he has little real power. Rajimo is the real government. The people, when they speak of Rajimo in whispers, call him 'The Curse of the Cabildo.' He rules New Mexico."

"He surely does," agreed Con grimly. "At least," he added, "that's what I've heard. Where does your uncle live?"

"His house is on the Camino de Chimayo, a little west of the plaza. I should tell you that all foreigners are required to report their presence immediately."

"I see." Con thoughtfully touched his black eye patch and imperial beard. "But first I'll take you to your uncle, hm-m-m? Maybe he can oblige me with some clean clothes."

FOR two days they had been following the regular beaten road, and Con's feet were sore from walking. The road was a fairly well-used thoroughfare, connecting the villages of Pecos and Cañoncito with Santa Fe. Mexicans, riding their little gray burros, had stared curiously at them as they passed. Friendly Pueblo Indians had waved affably on their way to the plains for buffalo. Peon women, bare-legged but amazingly graceful, had eyed them and smiled. Once a small detachment of soldiers passed at a trot, going on toward Santa Fe. Their officer had peered closely at them and kept looking back until out of sight.

Con punched the grulla on, and

they began descending the road into the city.

"Your caravan has not yet arrived," remarked Peregrina. "If it had, we would see the wagons outside the *londiga*—that building on the northeast corner of the plaza. In old times it was used for the storing of corn, but now it is a government warehouse where goods are examined by the custom-house officials. And we would hear the noise. It is always noisy when *los Americanos de la caravana* are here."

She laughed her low, musical laugh. "My uncle always prohibited me from leaving the house except in his company, while the *Americanos* were here. And it always made me very angry."

Con chuckled. "Maybe he used good sense. How do you feel about meeting him, after skipping out of the convent he sent you to? Scared?"

Her firm little chin went up. "I am never scared!"

"I've seen you looking considerably worried at odd times," Con commented dryly, and then could have bitten his tongue for the slip.

Her eyes lowered to him, and her secret little smile returned. "*M'sieur*, one would think that you had known me a longer time than merely a few days."

Con coughed. "I . . . er . . . I feel as if I've known you all your life," he countered gallantly.

They passed down the winding road, passed high adobe walls, behind which were gardens and orchards, and entered a narrow street of flat-roofed houses and walled patios. The street led into the plaza. People were at the doors gazing at them, astounded by the sight of a lone *Americano* escorting a Spanish girl wearing man's garb and riding like a man, both of them dusty and travel-worn.

A trim young Mexican officer met

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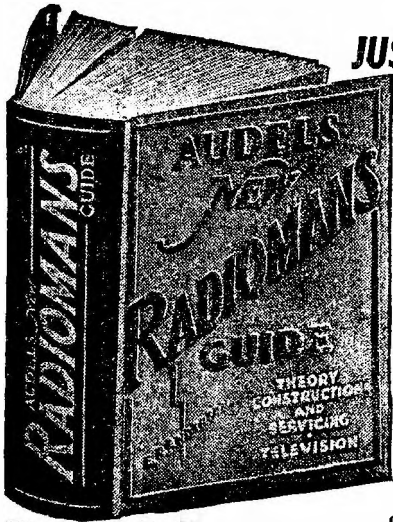
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them as they entered the plaza. He clicked his polished heels, bowed deeply to Peregrina as if recognizing her, and saluted Con. "Señor, it is General Rajimo's urgent wish that you and the Señorita Chavez pay him the honor of calling upon him at the Palacio at once," he reported amiably.

"Our compliments to his excellency, and tell him we will call on him after a while," Con replied formally. "The señorita is tired and must first rest. She has suffered a very shaking experience."

The officer bowed again. When he straightened up, his black eyes had lost their amiability, were cool, but his manner remained scrupulously polite. "Señor, allow me to escort you both to the Palacio at once," he insisted calmly. "It is his excellency's wish."

Con glanced up at Peregrina and caught her slight nod. A wish, it appeared, became a rigid command when voiced by the great Rajimo. "With pleasure, colonel," he drawled.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CURSE OF THE CABILDO

CON felt strange, sitting here in Rajimo's executive chamber, sipping a cool drink while Rajimo played host. Rajimo had risen when Peregrina and Con entered, and since then he had remained standing, his heavy-lidded eyes constantly playing over Peregrina in a way that made Con want to hit him with something.

"We would have preferred changing our clothes before calling on you, your excellency," Con remarked, and set down his glass with a bang. "I am sure Señorita Chavez wishes to don more suitable attire as soon as possible."

He had such a deep-rooted hatred for the man, he could hardly keep his tone civil. Rajimo had grown stouter, but not softer. His swarthy,

heavy-jowled face was as hard and impassive as ever. The bold black eyes were masterful, and had the forceful stare of a man who knew all the tricks of arrogant domination over others. They swung now to Con, showing open displeasure.

"The señorita will be escorted to the house of her uncle in good time, M'sieur Nagennoc," said Rajimo curtly, and seated himself behind his massive desk. "First, I desire to hear the story of what happened on the trail. A Spanish caravan was attacked and plundered. It has been my belief, since hearing of it, that the American traders—"

"You're wrong," interrupted Con. "It was done by a band of outlaws. I belong to the American caravan. I trailed the bunch and took the señorita away from them. Was lucky enough to kill the leader, after he did his best to down me."

"It is true, Don Manuel," broke in Peregrina. "There can be no accusation against the Americans. Where is my uncle? Is he not still here in Santa Fe?"

Rajimo's eyes played over her again. "Yes, Don José is still in Santa Fe. Nor is there any possibility that he may leave. He is under arrest!"

Peregrina rose slowly, her face growing very pale. "Under arrest? My uncle, Don José Chavez—under arrest? You can't mean that! He is *Primer of the Cabildo!*"

Rajimo's face stayed wooden and unmoved. "I dissolved the *Cabildo* two months ago for attempting to oppose me. Don José very foolishly defied me and called the gentlemen of the *Cabildo* together for a meeting of protest. Naturally, I ordered his arrest. He is now a military prisoner in the *presidio!*"

Peregrina took a step forward as if she would strike him, and Con

could well believe that she had never been really afraid of anything or anybody. Her eyes blazed contempt at the military tyrant who held all of New Mexico under his hand.

"Have you lost your senses, Don Manuel?" she flung at him. "You go too far! Some day the Spaniards of the province will rebel—and the *pobres* and Indians will rebel with them—and this country will bleed in revolution as it has done before!"

Rajimo watched her. He even smiled slightly, a twitch of a smile that came and went like a brief shrug. "Treason seems to be a trait of the Chavez family," he observed tonelessly. "I have suspected it in you before, Peregrina. You may go." He slapped the desk.

CON moved swiftly to Peregrina and offered his arm. She took it, her head high and her eyes still sparking fire, and they made to pass out through the wide doorway. The same young officer, with a sergeant and two troopers behind him, barred their way.

"Escort Señorita Chavez to the house of Don José," commanded Rajimo. "See that the house is guarded at all times. No one is to enter or leave, except the servants. M'sieur Nagennoc, you will not be required to escort her. Be pleased to return and sit down!"

Con began sliding his right hand under his coat. Peregrina touched his arm, her eyes signaling urgent warning. She smiled up at his set face, and her air was suddenly that of intimate coquetry, scornful of surroundings. "You have been so kind to me, m'sieur, I shall always think of my kidnaping as a joyous holiday. I can only hope that when next I fall into ruffianly hands, you will appear again to save me."

Her tone was light, laughing, but

the sense of her words was definite enough. "In furtherance of that wish," she added gayly, "I must reward you now for gallantry past, so that the future may tempt you."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, while the young officer looked hastily away and Rajimo rose behind his desk.

"And in case you should ever be inclined to forget me, I give you a keepsake to keep your memory constant." She drew a rolled handkerchief from under her cloak and pressed it into his hand.

There was something wrapped in the handkerchief. Con pushed the small bundle into his coat pocket. He bowed, smiling, matching his manner to hers. "Could I forget? You misjudge me. When you are gone, I shall have eyes and ears only for the future."

She laughed softly, turning to go. "You Frenchmen are so understanding!" she murmured, and left with her military escort.

CON turned back to Rajimo, prepared for trouble, but Rajimo had suddenly about-faced in his attitude and become the bland and friendly host. He gestured for Con to be seated, and actually smiled. A soft-footed Indian servant brought fresh drinks and cigars. It was a little bewildering, and Con took a mental stance, his gambler's instinct on guard.

Rajimo seated himself and rested his hands on the desk, relaxed and informal. "M'sieur, do not take this little incident too seriously," he said suavely. "The young lady has suffered a shock and is excited. It was necessary to act with seeming strictness. In my position I must sometimes bark, but I seldom bite, and least of all would I be harsh with

a charming young lady who is very dear to me."

Now he was the kindly emperor laying aside his majestic manner for a comfortable and confidential talk. Con said nothing, waiting, recalling some of the corrupt anecdotes he had heard concerning Rajimo's private life. The man was a brutal and conscienceless blackguard, utterly without honor or scruples.

"I desire your advice, m'sieur," went on Rajimo flatteringly. "It concerns—" He paused, and asked abruptly: "Have I seen you before? There is something familiar about you."

Con had a tense moment. "I hardly think it very likely, your excellency," he answered calmly. "Since leaving France I have traveled much, but this is my first visit to New Mexico."

Rajimo nodded. "I see. And yet—but of course I must be mistaken. Excuse me. I was about to speak of the American caravan. It should arrive soon, but I have already issued an order prohibiting the Americans from selling their goods here. It was my belief that they instigated the attack upon the Mexican caravan. You have shown me that my belief was incorrect. Also, you have shown yourself to be a man of valor and initiative, two qualities that I admire greatly, possessing them myself as I do. How would you suggest that the Americans be allowed to dispose of their goods?"

Con felt that all this was leading up to something he couldn't see yet. "Why not cancel your order?" he suggested.

Rajimo shook his head. "I never cancel an order after it has been made public. No, I see only one way—and it is a way in which I may reward you for bringing Señorita Chavez safely back to

Santa Fe. I am grateful for that, m'sieur, very grateful indeed."

He leaned a little farther over the desk, smiling again. "You are a Frenchman, therefore you have no foolish ties of loyalty to the Americans, is that not so? And you are a man of the world, as I can see. You, like myself, recognize opportunity when it appears, and you are ready to grasp it. So I shall speak frankly, as one opportunist to another. How many wagons have you in the caravan?"

"One," said Con. "A small one."

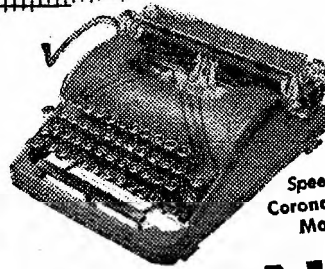
"There is little profit in one small wagon," observed Rajimo. "Now, I shall make it possible for you to reap very large profits—the entire profits of the caravan! My order states that no American trader may sell a single article to any resident of this province, under penalty of total confiscation of his goods. However, you are not an American, therefore you are exempt. You understand?"

"I'm beginning to," acknowledged Con.

"I knew you for a man of perspicacity," Rajimo complimented him. "The Americans, in order to dispose of their goods, will have to turn everything over to you to sell for them. You will be able to sell at your own prices—and deduct the profits for yourself! The Americans will have to accept your terms, or haul everything back to Independence. Your profits should amount to about two hundred thousand dollars. However, you will be required to pay the customs taxes on all that you sell, of course."

He straightened up and became his official self. "The taxes will amount to one hundred thousand dollars—payable to me!"

For the first time, Con found one thing to admire in Rajimo. As a thoroughgoing scoundrel, the man was a master.



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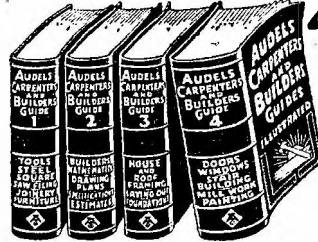
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"In other words," Con stated bluntly, "I'm to corner the market, sting the boys out of their profits, and split the winnings with you, is that it? That's the neatest robbery I ever came across!"

Rajimo's black eyes were cold again. "It is my wish that you follow my suggestions! You may go!"

Out in the plaza, Con took his bearings and struck off across to the Camino de Chimayo, hoping he would be able to secure a lodging of some sort near the Chavez house. He would have to keep constant watch on that house, day and night, until the caravan arrived. After that, in the general noise and excitement of the *grande entrada*, there might be a chance to do something more positive.

As he walked, he pulled out the handkerchief that Peregrina had given him, and unrolled it. Something fell to the ground, a shining little object. He picked it up and held it in his hand. It was the little golden Cupid, broken-winged, scratched and dented, its chubby face wearing a battered leer.

"Minx!" he muttered softly, and carefully wrapped it up again.

THE caravan rolled into Santa Fe with all the shouting tumult of a wild army entering a besieged city. Teamsters popped their long whips, riders emptied their guns into the air and rode whooping around the plaza, and even the animals seemed to share the general abandonment of restraint.

The citizens of Santa Fe, though the scene had become a familiar one to them, wholeheartedly joined in the enthusiasm, as always. The coming of a great American caravan took on the nature of a carnival, and the whole town immediately and happily plunged into a gay period of fiesta. Tonight and every night while the hard-living and tempestuous Americans were here, fandangos and frolic would be the order

of the hour, and lithe young Spaniards would be hard put to hold claim over their dark-eyed belles.

To the Americans of the caravan, made half savage and elemental by their long weeks out of touch with civilization, any town would have looked good, and to spread Santa Fe before them was like serving rich foods and choice wines to starving men who would have appreciated only a stale crust. Here was a town only too ready at all times to spurn workaday humdrum and declare a holiday. Here in this paradise of play a man could find whatever form of pleasurable relaxation he might fancy.

And the women! Exotic, dashing, colorful in the *camisas* and loose skirts that the more prudish foreigners considered shockingly revealing. Blue-black hair; fine, bleached skins; dark eyes that were bright and soft. Graceful, coy, instinctively flirtatious, knowing when to be candidly alluring and when to be haughty, but always warmhearted. They liked the big *Americanos*, and the *Americanos*—particularly the young, free and unattached—promptly dove off the deep end at first breathtaking sight of them.

People raced through the narrow streets and poured into the plaza, all crying welcome. "*Los Americanos! Los extranjeros! La entrada de la caravana!*"

The huge, creaking wagons, heavily laden, scarred by accidents and repairs along the trail, their gay paint now cracked and peeled by sun and rain, trundled ponderously into the plaza and drew up. Until they left, this would be a furiously busy place of barter and trade. Santa Fe merchants would bargain with silver and gold and furs for goods. Ranchers from outlying ranches would buy silks and clothes for their

women, hardware for work, and such luxuries as they could afford for themselves. Citizens would bid against each other for what they fancied. Merchants from San Miguel and other towns and villages would invest in fresh stocks.

Con made his way onto the plaza with the milling crowds. His rescue of Peregrina had become well known, and it appealed strongly to the Spanish love of drama. He was by way of becoming a popular hero. Men bowed and women smiled admiringly whenever he appeared in the streets, tall, dark, his face made intriguingly sinister by the black eye patch, thin cheek scar and up-turned eyebrows. With their knack and love of descriptive nomenclature, they called him *El Corsario de Francia*—the Buccaneer from France. He had heard them whisper it as he passed, and gathered that it was not intended in disrespect.

WITHIN an hour of the caravan's arrival, a raging group of traders headed by Dall Burgwin sought out Con. One look at their faces, and he saw explosions in the near offing. Burgwin leveled a finger, and his roar could be heard all over the noisy plaza.

"Hey, you! What filthy trick is this you've pulled on us? They won't let us take our stuff through the customs—won't even let us unload! They're saying you've tied up the whole market so only you can sell, and we've got to sell through you! You double-crosser, you cooked that up with Rajimo!"

"Hold your head!" Con said sharply. "But for me, none of you would be selling a thing this trip. Rajimo had it all laid out to blame you for that raid—yes, and charge you for it with total confiscation of

your goods. I had nothing to do with—"

A hand tugged at his coat sleeve. He turned and found a shabbily garbed Mexican trying to get his attention. The man's face was thin and bitter and Con recognized him. It was the *teniente* of dragoons who had ridden in command of Rajimo's shipment of silver and furs, and suffered defeat along the bank of the Arkansas last year. He was no longer in uniform, and on him were the signs of a man who had fallen low.

Con had a twinge of conscience. Defeat had brought disgrace to the man, reducing him to beggary. "*Que es?*" he queried, and felt in his pocket for a few coins.

The man came close to him. "I bear a message," he whispered. "There is a certain house on the Camino de Chimayo. The patio door is for the time unguarded. A veiled lady asks that you come to that—"

A curse from Burgwin, and a warning premonition, caused Con to dodge, but the caravan leader's fist scraped over his ear and set bells ringing in his head. Con caught his balance, whirled, and lashed out. His eye patch, the string broken by Burgwin's glancing blow, fell, but he hadn't time to catch it. He struck again, and Burgwin floundered backward into his group. A few of the cooler-headed traders closed around him to stop the fight, but their action wasn't necessary. Burgwin, a hand to his mouth, stood and glared amazedly at Con's face.

"He . . . he's—" He choked on his own words. "Look at that eye—nothing wrong with it! I knew I'd seen him before—I knew it! He's Connegan, the twisty Texan who shot Rajimo in St. Louis that time and nearly wrecked us!"

Con picked up his eye patch, deciding to bluff it out. "The man's an idiot!" he drawled, and turned away.

He noticed the *ex-teniente* slipping away through the crowd. The man looked back at him once, and it seemed to Con that he saw fierce joy on the dark features. He hoped he was mistaken, and followed swiftly after him, but lost the shabby figure before he got to the Camino de Chimayo.

"Con, it looks like we're blowed up, don't it?" The rusty voice of Old Nick sounded behind him.

Con turned. "Maybe so, Nick, maybe so. Burgwin wasn't any too sure, though. Did you see that Mexican behind me? Go and see if you can find him. If he recognized me without my eye patch, I'll be having plenty trouble!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST OF M'SIEUR NAGENNOC

THE patio was entirely shut off from the street, with the house built around three sides of it and a high adobe wall completing the inclosure, but the little gate in the wall was not fastened. Con stepped through into the patio, closing the gate behind him. Several doors, all closed, led from the house onto the patio, overhung by an upstairs gallery. Nobody came out to receive him, so Con began trying the doors.

A plaintive voice sounded just above him. "Alas, they are all locked!"

Con stepped back, looking up, and doffed his hat. "Is this hospitable, after inviting me to call?" he asked pointedly.

Peregrina stood on the upstairs gallery, a chamber door open behind her. Her eyes were very bright, and there was a glow to her face.

"I apologize," she returned with mock humbleness. "But do not blame me. It is Rajimo's order. There is a soldier out front, but he will not hear us, and all the servants are gone to the plaza. Aguirre did not return with you?"

"Aguirre?"

"Our gardener—the man I sent to you with my message," she explained. "He was once an officer, and is not a good worker, but he is intelligent and I told him to bring you here and stand on watch while we talked. But perhaps he is drinking. He drinks a great deal and behaves like a man insane, poor fellow."

Con hoped that was the explanation of the man's wild stare at him, after the eye patch fell away. Perhaps it had not been recognition, after all. In any case, there was nothing much that could be done, except wait and see.

Peregrina leaned lightly over the balustrade. "Let me congratulate you, m'sieur, on recovering the use of your eye!" she offered sweetly. "I like you better without the black patch."

Con accepted the gentle thrust with a solemn bow. "Touche! You beautiful little humbug—when did you guess it was I?"

She flushed, laughing. "From the very first. And you knew me—*n'est-ce pas?*"

"Away with your French and Latin man traps!" Con growled. "Listen, girl, am I expected to stand down here and get a crick in my neck talking up to you?"

She elevated one smoothly rounded shoulder. "It is very proper that I should not entertain gentlemen in the house, without a chaperon."

"That's a matter of opinion," retorted Con, and took a high leap. His fingers got a hold on the balcony's edge. He drew himself up,

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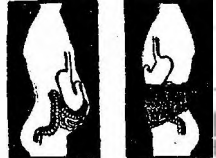
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climbed over the balustrade, and stood before her.

"Hadn't we better go inside, before somebody comes along and sees us?" he suggested calmly.

Peregrina looked somewhat taken aback. "Why . . . yes, I suppose so," she conceded dubiously.

Con followed her into the chamber, and considerately made a long task of closing the balcony door while behind his back she flew around hiding away a few scattered garments. She was quite flushed when he turned, and he was intrigued again by her deliriously inconsistent sense of modesty.

She, who had flirted with him and tricked him outrageously—who had once almost juggled him into marriage—had poured out warm love on dying Rael in the crowded prison cell of the Santiago—had traveled and camped with him for nine days, dressed as a man, hiding a few innocent garments from his male eyes, like any other sheltered and flustered maiden! It was one of her charms. In all that she did, she remained so utterly and unfathomably feminine.

"Peregrina, you're marvelous!" he told her, with sincerity. "Oh, come, don't act as if I'm getting ready to pounce on you, just because we happen to be in your . . . hm-m-m . . . er . . . dressing room. You're marvelous because you're so downright contradictory. I swear I never know what to expect from you—you've surprised me too many times! Don't change when I take you away, will you?"

"No, of course I'll—" She caught herself, and now her color flamed. "What?"

Con grinned knavishly at her. "Now, just go back to your first impulse and be honest. You know very well I'm going to take you off with me!"

PEREGRINA was suddenly haughty and aloof. "Your reaction toward a . . . a certain situation in the past . . . in Mexico, did not lead me to believe that you—" She paused in her painful speech, and bit her lip. "I think, Con, I could have killed you that night!"

Con nodded, uncomfortable. "I don't doubt that. But there were good reasons for what I did—one of them that I prefer catching to being caught. At that, I nearly did turn back. I'm sorry about that, on my oath I am." He scanned her face quickly. "Is it revenge you want on me?"

"I don't know," she confessed frankly. "Please sit down. I sent for you to tell you about your brother Lorin. The opportunity may not come again."

"Why shouldn't it?" Con asked sharply.

She gestured about her. "I am a prisoner," she said simply. "Oh, I could slip out of this house easily enough, yes—but where could I go? Nobody leaves or enters Santa Fe without Rajimo's knowledge. The roads are always watched. My uncle and I have many friends here, but Rajimo has his army. Sooner or later, he— However, I still have your pistol. Let us talk of your brother."

She settled herself in her chair, and gazed down at her small toes. "Your brother Lorin was—impetuous," she began carefully. "He was very romantic. He carried letters to my uncle, and so we met. He . . . he imagined that he was very deeply in love with me. I grew fond of him, but I did not love him and I tried to discourage him for his own safety. You see, my uncle had at that time betrothed me to Rajimo. He—Don José, my uncle—is my guardian, and one of his duties was

to find a suitable husband for me. Rajimo was very pressing, and Don José then thought it would be a very excellent match."

"I reckon he's changed his mind since," commented Con dryly.

Peregrina inclined her head. "I never intended to marry Rajimo, though I pretended to agree. Don José thought him a great and noble man, but I knew him for a rascal. Rajimo was almost as powerful then as he is now. He set spies over me. It grew very dangerous for your brother, but he refused to listen to my warnings. Also, Don José became furious when he learned that everyone was talking about the way the young *Americano* was openly courting me. Finally, I fled to Chihuahua, where we have friends, pretending that I wished to visit them.

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But Lorin followed, as soon as he discovered where I had gone."

"With his gold?" asked Con.

"I don't know. I only know that he was pursued, challenged to a duel—and killed!" Peregrina lifted her eyes to Con's. "Please do not ask me who killed him. The matter was kept secret, because of the man involved—and because it was thought best to save me from a scandal. I do not know where Lorin's body was buried—perhaps on the Chihuahua trail, where the duel took place. I am told that he died quickly. He was a very fine gentleman, but very impetuous, very romantic. He would not listen to my—"

She rose swiftly with Con, as a door slammed open somewhere below. Feet tramped noisily on floors and stairs, coming up to the second floor.

"Servants?" muttered Con.

"No!" Peregrina shook her head. Her face was pale. "They sound like soldiers. You must hide! Quickly, *querido*—hide!"

"No use." Con drew his pistol, watching the inner door. "They're coming right up here." He stepped to the balcony door and peered out. What he saw brought a tightening to his mouth. "Jumping Jehoshaphat, soldiers all over the place! Here—you hide, or your maidenly reputation is done blowed up this time for sure!"

He tried to push her into a closet, but she eluded him. From somewhere in her dress she pulled out the pistol he had given her.

Con drew her to him and kissed her. "Just in case the opportunity might not come again!" he muttered, and both faced the door as it flew open.

The same dapper young colonel, who escorted them into the presence of Rajimo, stood in the door-

way. Back of him the hall was jammed with soldiers. The colonel had his pistol out.

"Señor, on order of his excellency, General Don Manuel Rajimo, I demand your surrender!" he said sternly, and leveled the pistol. "I strongly advise against resistance. The house is surrounded, and my men have their orders. It would be most regrettable, señor, if we caused death or injury to the lady!"

Con slowly lowered his gun and let it fall. "I see your point, Johnny—devil take you!"

THIS time he was not taken to the military governor's executive office in the Palacio. He was marched to Rajimo's military quarters in the gloomy Presidio, north of the town, where the garrison troops were stationed.

The place smelled unclean. Indian blood predominated among the slovenly soldiers who loafed half-dressed in the yard. Only their grease-stained uniforms and beggarly pay saved them from being paupers and petty criminals of the outlying settlements, from which classes most of them had been recruited. Known detestedly as *los Perros de Rajimo*—Rajimo's Dogs—they and their sullen Indian women kept to themselves, despised by the citizens of the town.

The officers, on the other hand, were models of glittering smartness, and their attitude toward the men whom they commanded was that of masters toward serfs. Most of them lived in town in elegant style, and all swore allegiance to Rajimo. It was upon his army officers that Rajimo's power rested, and they in turn owed their well-paid commissions to him.

Rajimo's private military quar-

ters opened Con's eyes to one more side of the man's nature. Heretofore he had seen Rajimo always as the martinet—cruel, cold-blooded, hard as iron—but a gentleman of sorts with a fine choice of language, splendidly groomed and imperious in his bearing. The executive office in the Palacio had reflected his dourly astringent manner, in its bare severity.

But here it was different. The room was littered and dirty, odorous with stale wine and fouler smells—the quarters of a drunken and debauched soldier. From the rafters hung the famous strings of ears that Con had heard of but hardly credited. Other men had their stuffed heads, mounted horns and tusks. Rajimo had his garlands of Indians' ears, trophies of war expeditions against rebellious tribes of the province. Con wondered if there were any white ones among them.

Rajimo, himself, lay sprawled on a couch like a gorged and brutish Caesar, dirty dishes and empty wine bottles on the floor beside him, clad only in trousers and rumpled shirt. Without his uniform, and in this attitude and place, the gross coarseness of the man was so apparent as to be offensive. In a way, it was shocking to see him like this, and Con was sickened at the sight. This was not the majestic military governor, a man worthy of vigorous hatred and warily plotted revenge. This was a fleshy and obscene Indian half-breed,

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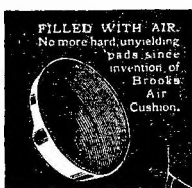


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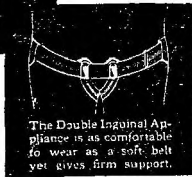
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who had somehow risen to despotic command of a province, but who still contained in him a thick stream of bad and sottish Indian blood.

RAJIMO lolled his head over and stared up at Con. He looked drunk, but not so drunk that he didn't know what he was doing. "Ah!" he breathed, and pushed himself heavily up on his elbow. "Where was he, colonel?"

"In the Chavez house, excellency, as Aguirre said he would be," answered the soldier, with a nod. "In the chamber of a lady," he added meaningly.

It was then that Con noticed Dall Burgwin in the room, glowering triumphantly at him, and the exteniente.

"Ah!" breathed Rajimo again, and fell back tipsily, blinking at the rafters. "In the chamber of a lady!" A slow and deadly rage was mounting in the man, sobering him. It could be seen in the sharpening cast of his face.

"I assure you, excellency, he is the man!" Aguirre started forward, fiercely eager. "He is the man called Don Desperado, the Texan who—"

Rajimo curtly waved him silent. "He is also called Captain Connegan—as Señor Burgwin and I know very well! And to think that I did not suspect—"

He rolled over, snatched up a plate, and flung it full at Con's face. "Texan dog! Aguirre, I give you charge of him! Your commission is restored to you. Take close care of him—take very close care! At my leisure I shall attend to him, and to the lady too! Yes, at my leisure!"

A prisoner of Rajimo once again, Con's chances of leaving Santa Fe alive don't seem worth a plugged peso. What fate has the Mexican tyrant in store for him? Next week brings the smashing conclusion of this colorful story of the old Santa Fe Trail.