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Long John Latham's

WESTERN FICTION MAGAZINE

AUG. 1970

50c

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IN THIS ISSUE

Special True Feature

(From the forthcoming book, **"Famous Lost Mines of the Old West"**)

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Ridin' the top rail . . .

With the Editor-Publisher

When I was a patch-seated kid, it was my job to go to a pasture about a mile from the house, round-up our little bunch of horses, and fetch them back to the corral.

Usually I'd catch Bay or Jim and ride them to herd the other horses. Both ponies were so gentle I could walk right up to them anywhere in the pasture—although I had to be careful about walking up on Jim's right side. He was blind in that eye.

Sometimes I'd take along a bridle, but as often as not I'd just use my belt for a hackamore—and therein lies a tale. If you rode Jim with a bridle, he acted fine. But when I rode him with just my belt looped around his buttermilk-colored nose, he'd always fight the rein and try to run.

Usually, I'd pull him in and cuss him a little. But one day I got mad and just let him go.

Jim tore off lickety-split down the lane. I forgot all about him being blind in his right eye, and when we came to the wire gate leading into the horse trap I didn't bother to check him. I reckoned he'd see the gate and stop.

But he didn't!

The gate was on his blind side and so he slammed into it at full speed. Since I was riding bareback, I went flying over his head, over the gate, and over a half-grown mesquite tree. But I'll swear that even while I was up in the air, I was twisting to take a scared look at Jim. I had the panicky feeling the little cow-pony had cut himself all to pieces on that barbed wire, and. . . .

To tell the truth, I get almost as jittery thinking about this new wester fiction "rag" you're holding in your hands.

Maybe it's because of the way I used to make a living.

For I'm not a big shot editor from the wilds of Manhattan. I'm an old country boy who has chopped cotton for fifty cents a day, pulled bollies for two-bits a hundred (that's cotton bolls, if you've never done it), and figured I was making big money when Uncle Em paid me a dollar a day to rassle yearling calves up to the branding fire.

I've rode and patched fence, pulled sucker rods on a lot of West Texas windmills, driven four-mule teams to fresnos, go-devils, sod-busters and middle-busters, and cooked one summer for a tank crew on the big Connell Ranch near Post, Texas. The cooking was done out of an old-fashioned chuck box, too.

Can you imagine a western editor who claims to have been a camp cook—and not a cowboy?

But the point is, I could have chopped cotton for a flat 100 years, or baked Dutch oven biscuits on the Connell spread for about 50 years, and not made as much money as it costs to put out just one issue of this one-man, one-horse, spavined, four-bit western with my brand on it—and my lean gut squeezes up to a size that would thread a No. 4 needle when I think that you folks might not like either the brand or the product!

What do you do if you've been hankerin' all of your life to publish a first class (?) western magazine, and you folks shut the gate on it?

Well, I was reading in the paper the other day where this old high school friend had been forced to close his cafe in Spur, Texas, and was now cooking for the Pitchfork.

Maybe if I show him my recipe for Dutch oven biscuits. . . .

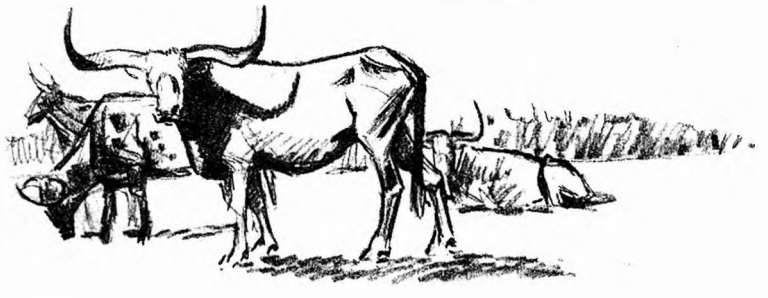
But while I've got the uneasy feeling that I've ridden Western Fiction Magazine into a barbed wire gate, and that I'll be left up in the air until I learn whether you folks like it or not, maybe it'll turn out like the time I rode Jim into a sure-enough wire gate.

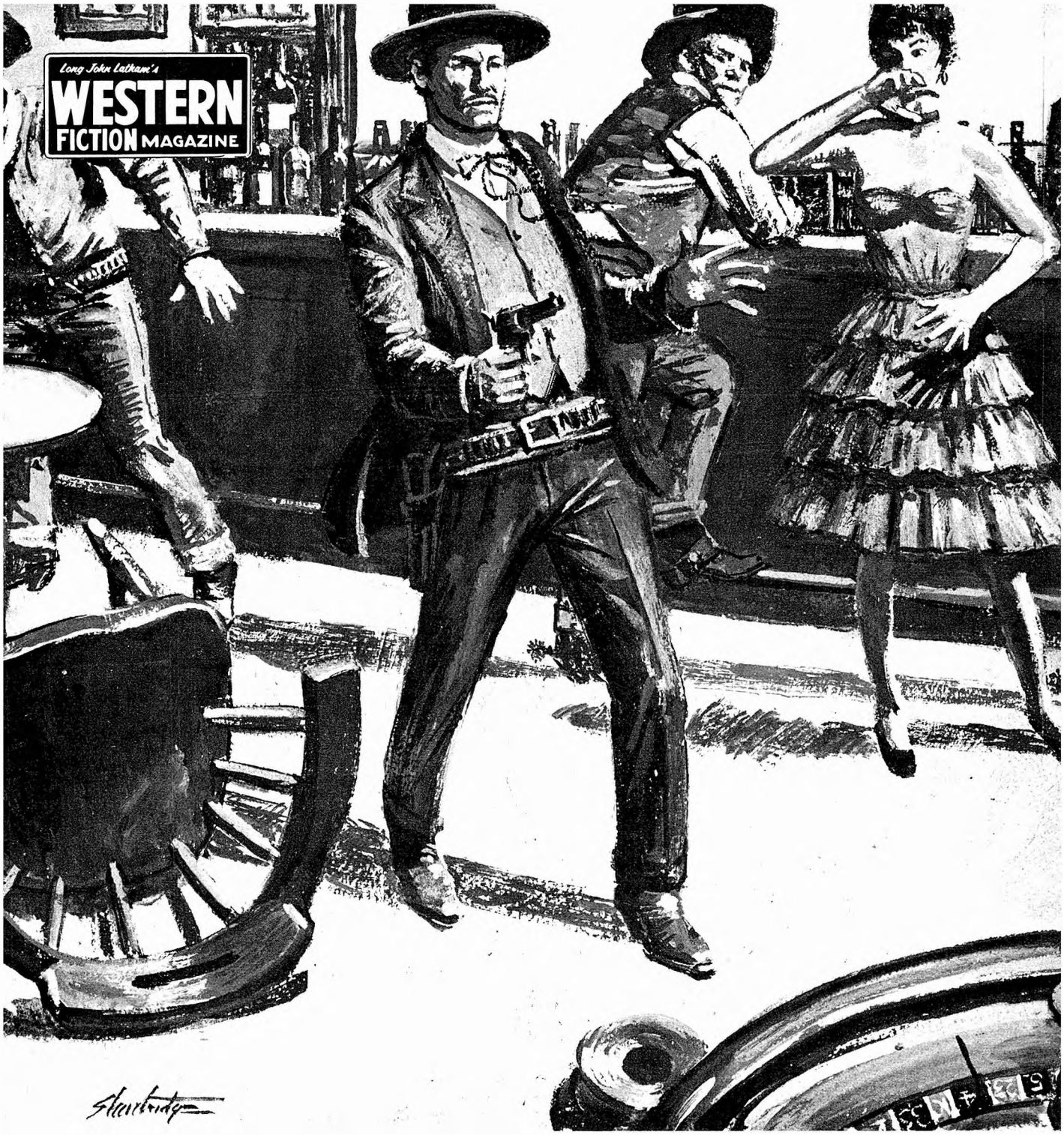
In those days, we lost a lot of horses that'd been cut up by barbed wire, and I was scared to death for Jim. But when I flew over the gate and landed and looked back, he was just standing there spraddle-legged, shaking his head. All of the wind had been knocked out of him, but that barbed wire hadn't left a scratch on him!

I was in a lot worse shape. The hide was all gone from my knees and nose, both wrists were sprained so bad I couldn't even open the gate (Mama had to come and do that), and I'd somehow wound up with a cactus pad pinned to one leg. But as bad as I was hurt, I thought Jim and I were lucky and still do—and maybe Western Fiction Magazine won't treat me much worse.

See you next issue!

Long John Latham



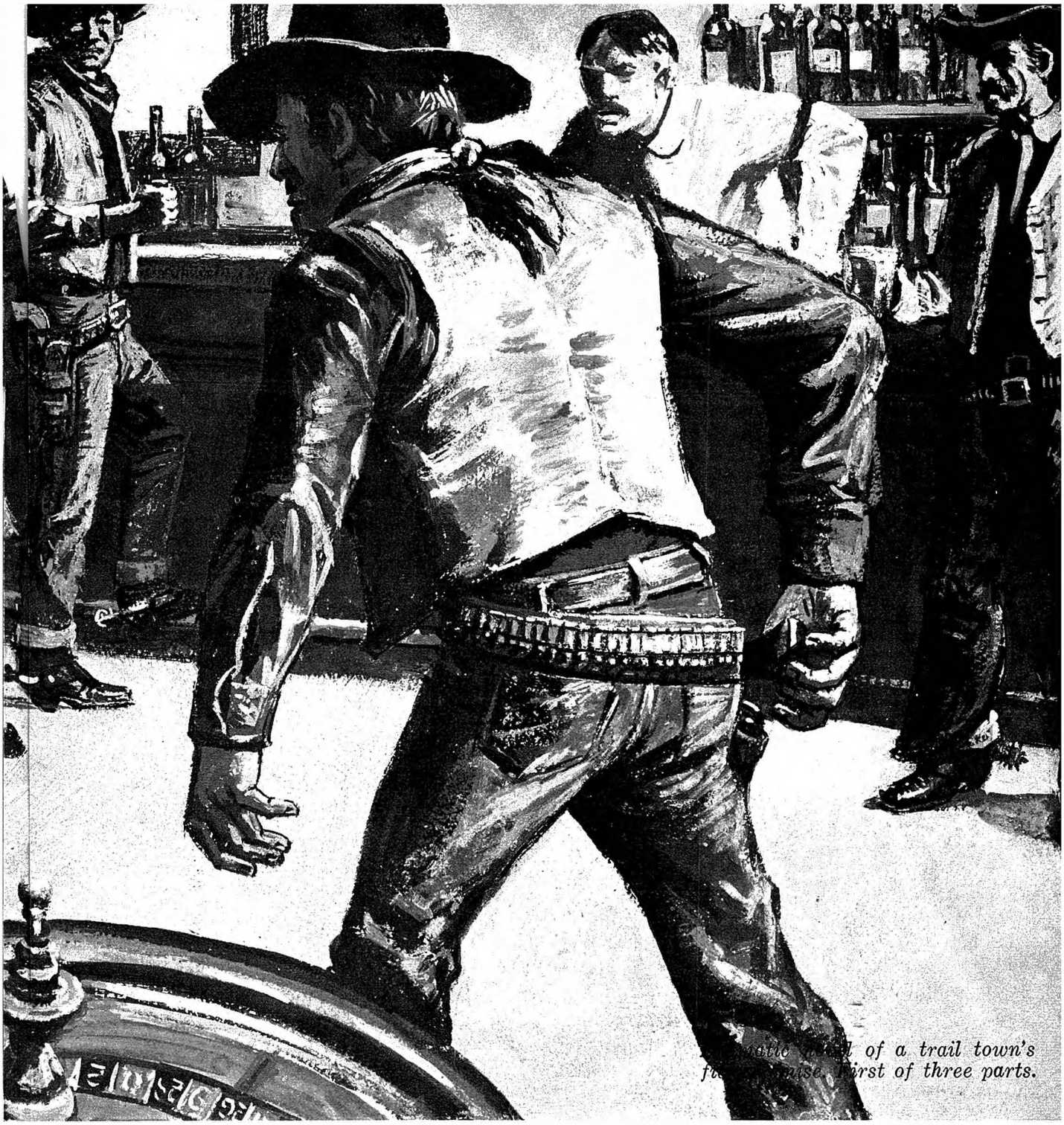


Johnny-Behind-The-Gun

Nobody knew his real name, nor why he had come to Trail City But when Denver Plummer wanted somebody beaten up, put out of business, or run out of town—he always called on Johnny!

By TOM BRAND

Illustrated by Eugene Shortridge



of a trail town's
fo[illegible]mise. First of three parts.

Johnny had his gun out almost before the other's draw started.

ON THE FLAT Kansas plains the lights of Trail City could be seen from twenty miles away. In the surrounding darkness were half a dozen campfires, like pinpoints of flame, marking the bed-grounds of as many herds of longhorns that had "walked with the grass" all the way from Texas.

Another herd occupied the whitewashed cattle-pens that sprawled beside the railroad tracks. By the light of kerosene lanterns, dusty, sweating men prodded bawling cattle into slatted cars that would haul them east to St. Louis and Memphis and Chicago.

Trail crews dressed in their Sunday best swaggered along the boardwalks of the town's "Flesh Pot." Riders raced along the street in a flurry of disturbed dust, and occasional rebel yells and pistol-shots punctuated the noisy, cheerful confusion. A man lay in the gutter in front of Bay Stamm's Kansas Emporium, and passersby stepped over him and went on across the street without showing the least concern as to whether he was drunk or hurt or dead.

The *Follies Bergere* was quieter, although men stood two deep at the bar and were banked solidly around the gambling tables. Lanterns blazed from wagon wheel chandeliers. The long room smelled of sawdust and spilled whiskey and stale tobacco smoke. Kate Dalton was doing her specialty number for the evening. Through her thin, rather sweet voice, singing a lilting Irish ballad, could be heard the croupier's monotone, the click of chips and silver dollars, and the rattle of dice as a player shook them in his hand before rolling them across a green-topped table.

The spotter at the second table made a covert signal

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun jumped back from the body as if it had been a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike.

Johnny-Behind-the-Gun continued

to Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

Johnny said to Sugar Blair, "Wait a minute," and went over to the table. He used his hands and his elbows to make his way through the crowd.

The man handling the dice was short, bow-legged and beefy, but his shoulders were wide as a freighter's singletree. His eyes were small and black. His dark, unkempt hair, under the brim of a disreputable old hat, grew low on his forehead. He had a chest like a bull. Long arms dangled almost to his knees. He was toothless and his gums looked raw red as he talked to the dice.

"You crooked sons of Satan," he said to the dice. "You crap just one more time and I'm going to tear this place apart."

He threw the dice. They rolled across the green table, struck the rim, and bounced back. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun watched the dice. The dice were white and one stopped short to show two green spots on the upper side. The other tumbled on and came to rest with a single green spot on top. The beefy man glared around him.

"It's robbery!" he snarled, in a voice so loud that Kate Dalton stopped singing.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun put his hand on the beefy man's arm. "How much did you lose?" he asked in a conversational tone.

"Look, Bub—" The beefy man's face was distorted with anger. "Them damned cubes is crooked. I dropped two hundred and didn't even—"

The stick man shook his head. Johnny tightened his grip on the man's arm and said quietly: "Our games aren't crooked and you didn't lose that much. Don't start trouble. Come with me."

He pulled at the beefy man's arm.

The man didn't budge. His red gums showed in a wider grin, but his little pig eyes were wicked and dangerous. "Look—are you calling me a liar?"

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun's face went white. His lips were pale and stiff. He said between his clenched teeth: "Get out of here!"

"So you're my pal," grinned the beefy man. "You love me because I'm a sucker."

"*Get out!*" It was a low gasp wrenched from Johnny-Behind-The-Gun's waterless mouth.

"So we're buddies," said the beefy man, still grinning. "But I'll tell you something, pally. Nobody's going to trim me with crooked dice—not even you! I'll wreck your lousy joint. I'll—"

Johnny's face had gone bone-white. He slapped the beefy man viciously across the mouth.

The man spat blood. His grin got wider, and suddenly, without any warning, his hand stabbed at his hip. Johnny had his gun out almost before the other's draw started. There was only one way to stop the man. He let the weight of the gun swing it on up, then chopped with the barrel at the apish forehead.

The hat cushioned the blow, but the beefy man went to his knees. He came up, shaking his head from side to

side like a wounded grizzly. He grinned at Johnny through the smear of blood that ran down his face, and the grin was as idiotic as his little eyes were mean.

"All right, Bub," he said, wiping at the blood with a knuckle-scarred hand, "—all right." He started for the door. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

"I like you, Bub," he said jovially. "You're fast and you're fancy. But don't send flowers. I'll see you ag'in. I never forget a friend!"

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun turned back to the bar. His hands were still trembling a little, but his eyes had lost their glazed look of shock. The men at the bar made room for him. He ordered straight whiskey without looking at any of them. Sugar Blair came over to him and said, "About that little matter we were discussing, Johnny—"

"Not now, Sugar," said Johnny, and downed the whiskey. He shivered a little. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and started for the stairs.

Kate Dalton called to him. Johnny gave her an uncertain glance and crossed to her table. The two men who had been drinking with her got up and left. Johnny waited politely for her to ask him to sit down.

"Denver wants to see you" she said.

"I know. I'm on my way up to his office now."

She put her hand on his sleeve. On one of her fingers a huge diamond flashed redly in the overhead light.

"Johnny, why does he keep avoiding me?"

Kate Dalton was billed as the "Irish Thrush." She was a bosomy woman in her middle-twenties. She was handsome in a red-haired, opulent way. Her dress was cut low and short, so that when she walked, it swished about her full hips. Her bare shoulders and shapely arms were powdered almost white. Her mouth was a red smear. Her dark eyes looked sullen.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun avoided her glance. "I don't know," he said coldly. "Perhaps he's busy."

"He was never too busy to see me before that hussy came to town!" Kate flashed.

"I wouldn't know about that," said Johnny indifferently. He looked at the stairs to indicate politely that he had to go.

"Do you know what he's doing tonight?"

Johnny's lips pulled down and pulled the ends of his thin mustache down. He said: "No," curtly.

"I suppose you'd tell me if you knew," said Kate sullenly.

Now he smiled at her warmly. "You know I like you, Kate. I'd do anything for you I could."

Kate looked at him thoughtfully. "I really believe you would, Johnny," she said. "You're the only man I know in this crummy town who would give a girl a square deal."

Johnny continued to smile at her. He got up from the chair, inclined his head in what passed for a bow, and went on up the stairs. Once on the stairs, he quit smiling. It was like a mark on a slate erased by a single stroke of the hand.

DENVER Plummer stopped pacing up and down his office when Johnny-Behind-The-Gun opened the door. He said, "Come in! Come in!" and stepped behind his desk.

He was as tall as Johnny, but ten years older and at least fifty pounds heavier. His wide shoulders strained at a barber-pole shirt. His neatly trimmed hair, the yellow color of new hemp rope, was parted in the middle and combed back in two duck wings over either ear. His ears were rather large. He wore a diamond stickpin and razor-creased striped pants stuffed in the tops of polished boots. A pearl-handled gun, clipped in a shoulder holster under his left arm, twinkled in the light of a desk lamp.

Denver Plummer was big and blonde. Handsome, some people said. But his eyes were cold and hard, and, at the moment, his mouth was sullen under a heavy waxed mustache.

"You send for me?" Johnny asked.

"Look at this!" Denver Plummer spread the latest edition of the *Trail City Press* on his desk. "Look how Abe Maverick is roasting me! I can't put up with that, Johnny. With elections coming on, I can't have him smearing me in that stinking yellow sheet of his."

"What does he say?" Johnny did not even glance at the paper.

"Say!" Denver echoed, explosively. He struck the desk so hard that the lamp jumped.

"Why, that son of a printer's devil really rakes me over the coals. He says Trail City is the worst den of iniquity Kansas has ever known. He says present conditions are a disgrace to every decent man, woman and child living here. He claims that I handle the reins on the city government, and that my hired political hacks allow crooked gamblers and con men and prostitutes to operate openly in the Flesh Pot—providing they pay me a part of their take! He says there's a killing or a shooting scrape here every night. He even proposes a public inquiry into the murder of that young cowman who was killed here six months ago."

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun was lighting a cigar. If Denver had been watching, he would have noticed that Johnny's fingers were suddenly so unsteady that he almost dropped the match. A feeling as tight as piano-wire jerked at Johnny's throat. But when he exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke and asked from behind it: "You mean—Dan Parker?" his voice indicated only casual interest.

"I think that was his name," said Denver impatiently.

Johnny looked pale, almost sickly, in the lamplight, but spots of color appeared in his lean cheeks. He said in the same careful voice: "Parker was killed and robbed of forty thousand dollars."

Denver made a pushing gesture with his big hand, as if thrusting the subject aside. "I told you it didn't matter. It's a dead issue. Those things are bound to happen. What you don't see, and what no one else in town seems to see, is that what we're doing benefits everybody. It's for the common good of the community."

"I know that," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun, and now there was a trace of sullenness in his tone.

"Sure, some of the things pulled here are crooked," went on Denver. "But we're giving the boys from Texas what they want. They're paying for it. They're spending ten thousand dollars a night on Trail Street. That kind of money is bound to attract a lot of riff-raff. But the *Follies Bergere* runs a clean house, and I try to keep the city government as clean as possible without interfering with the boys' fun. After four or five months on the trail, they like to let their spurs out to the town notch. Kick up their heels."

Johnny took the cigar out of his mouth and looked at it. He frowned in distaste when he saw that he had bitten the end into a shredded ruin.

"Maybe it would be better if you didn't try to cover up this thing, Denver," he said. "You should find out who killed Parker. You oughtn't to allow that kind of business, anyway."

Denver Plummer's eyes were veiled. "Who said I was covering up anything?"

"The *Trail City Press*," Johnny-Behind-The-Gun smiled.

"I want you to shut him up," said Plummer savagely. "Run him out of town. Wreck his press. Why, he even intimates that the reform party candidate for sheriff is my tool!"

Johnny laughed. "Well, haven't you made a deal with Dave Weston?" he asked.

Denver Plummer averted his eyes. "What if I have?" Then he glowered at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun. "There's one thing you keep forgetting," he snapped. "As long as I stay in power, Texas cattle will keep trailin' here. The money will keep pouring in because I give those wild cowpunchers what they want. But they won't trail-drive to a town that's a ladies' seminary. Close up the Flesh Pot and within a week they'll be pointing their herds somewhere else."

"You don't have to tell me that," said Johnny. "You know I'm on your side."

Denver Plummer grinned at him in mingled exasperation and affection. "I guess you're right. I guess I am preaching. But handle Maverick, will you?"

"All right,' said Johnny, and got up to go. "There's one other thing."

"What is it?"

"A bull-necked jigger tried to get rough downstairs. I think I've seen him hanging around Bay Stamm's."

Denver scowled. "Bay is getting too big for his britches. He'd like to run the town."

"You want me to talk to him?"

"You might as well."

Johnny pulled his hat to just the right angle. He was a tall, slim man, always immaculate in his dress. He never wore flashy clothes, like Denver Plummer. At the moment his face looked a little sallow and tired. His mouth was dissatisfied under his thin brown mustache. He patted his gun before opening the door.

Denver Plummer saw the gesture and smiled. "Remember how I met you?" he laughed. "You crossed me and I told you to get out of my way. When you didn't, I slapped you. You had a gun in your hand so fast the boys have been calling you Johnny-Behind-The-Gun ever since."

Johnny's face had gone white. He stood perfectly still. The big blonde man pushed his shoulder.

"Why are you always getting on a high horse?" he complained. "Hell, you know we're pals!"

The tension went out of Johnny-Behind-The-Gun, and he relaxed. But his face still looked sullen.

As he started out, there was a knock at the door. He opened the door. Cynthia Weston came in.

"Oh," she said to Denver Plummer, "you're busy." But she did not look at Denver, she looked at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

She was a very pretty girl. Her skin was the color of almond honey and her hair was a rich, burnished gold. Her mouth was fresh-colored and sweetly shaped. When she smiled, she showed even white teeth between moist lips, and the tip of a pink tongue that was somehow exciting. Her eyes were a very deep brown.

Her smile was directed at Johnny. "I came up the back stairs," she said, as if that explained something. "I have a message for Mr. Plummer. I didn't know he was busy."

Although she had not even glanced at him, Denver Plummer's face lost its peevish hardness. He smiled hugely.

"Not busy at all, Miss Cynthia," he boomed. "Won't you come in? Johnny, you'll take care of that little matter for me, won't you?"

It was a meaningless phrase of dismissal. Johnny said, "I will,'" and bowed to Cynthia Weston. He left the room. Only then did Cynthia turn and look at Denver Plummer.

OUTSIDE THE ROOM, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun leaned against the door. He looked, for a moment, as if he wanted to be sick. The whites of his eyes were seared with yellow. His hands were shaking. His face had a sweaty pallor and his mustache jerked as the corners of his mouth twitched up and down.

"I may never know," he thought, and the taste of failure was as bitter on his tongue as creosote and ashes. . . .

He leaned against the door for a little interval, until he had regained his composure, then went along the hall and down the stairs.

Kate Dalton beckoned to him, but Johnny elected not to see her. He went through the long, crowded room and pushed open the swinging doors. He stepped out on the broadwalk that ran in front of the *Follies Bergere*. He moved quickly to one side and stood in the shadows, breathing deeply of the dust-tainted night air.

It was around ten o'clock, and the "Flesh Pot" was going full blast. Half a dozen riders swept along the street, yelling at the top of their lungs. Johnny nimbly dodged them and crossed the street and went along the opposite walk toward Bay Stamm's Kansas Emporium. When he saw a man with a shine of metal on his vest, he said low-toned: "Come with me, Sugar. We've got work to do."

Sugar Blair fell into step with him. Sugar was a tall, compact, tough-looking young man. He was Trail City's deputy sheriff. For reasons of his own, Denver Plummer had dismissed the incumbent in the sheriff's office. The city marshal had been killed in a fight with a drunken cowpuncher. That left Sugar as the only law enforcement officer in a wide-open trail town.

"What's on the ticket, Johnny?"

"You'll see."

They walked in silence to the middle of the next block. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun kept looking up. He screwed up his eyes to read the unlighted signs. One of them was emblazoned: *Trail City Press.*

Johnny stopped.

"I'll stay here," he said to Sugar. "Can you get a couple of axes at the fire station?"

Sugar nodded.

"Get them," said Johnny, and Sugar left.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun stood staring at the building. After a moment he pounded on the door. No one answered. He walked around to the side of the building. There was a little space between the *Trail City Press* building and the Trail City Trading Post. Johnny walked between the two buildings, picking his feet up and putting them down carefully so as not to stumble over anything in the dark. When he came to the rear of the building, he kicked the door until the lock broke and it swung open. He went inside and struck a match, holding it over his head.

The back of the building had been partitioned off and made into living quarters. There was a litter of junk, and a table and stove and a cot in one corner where Abe Maverick slept.

The newspaperman's startled face lifted from the pillow. He swung his short, thick legs over the edge of the cot and sat up, pulling his night shirt down. He was a thick-built, paunchy man, running to fat, with watery eyes and a long nose. He looked scared.

The match burned down to Johnny's fingers. He struck another match on his gun butt and lit a lamp on a table by the stove. He did not look at Abe Maverick after that one raking glance.

"We're closing you out, Abe," he said coldly. "Wrecking your shop. Denver don't like the way you've been gouging him in the back."

"A-all right, Johnny," answered Abe Maverick. His teeth were chattering. When he spoke, a fine spray of saliva blew out from between his trembling lips. "I—I been expecting it, Johnny."

"You might have known you'd get your head knocked in," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun savagely. He still wouldn't look at Abe Maverick. "What do you know about Dan Parker's murder?"

Abe Maverick's breathing sounded ragged. "N-nothing." he gasped out.

"You must know something. You've been harping about it in the paper.'"

"H-honest, I don't know a thing about it," said Abe Maverick, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. "So help me, Jesus, I don't Johnny. It was j-just an i-isue to stir up the people. I-it was something I could a-ask embarrassing q-questions about."

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun did not say anything.

"So he-help me God, that's the truth, J-Johnny," said Abe Maverick. "I haven't got a-anything on Denver. It was just politics."

Johnny pursed his lips. The dissatisfaction spread from his mouth to his whole face. He said without looking at Abe Maverick: "Put on your pants."

A kind of gray doom squeezed Abe Maverick's puffy face. He got up and pulled his pants on over his night shirt. His hands shook so that he could hardly buckle his belt. He kept licking his ashen lips.

"Johnny—"

"Yes?"

"I got f-friends, here, J-Johnny. They w-wouldn't want to see me—h-hurt."

"You mean the reform party?" Johnny smiled without mirth. When Abe Maverick didn't answer, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun's eyes grew suddenly thoughtful. He was frowning when Sugar Blair came in through the back door with just one axe.

"It was the only one I could get," Sugar explained to Johnny. "Somebody borrowed the other un' to chop wood and forgot to bring it back."

"That's all right. I didn't want to work anyway. It's easier to watch you. Bring that lamp and come in here."

"They should return the other axe," complained Sugar. "We'd sure need it if we had a fire." He picked up the lamp and carried it into the print shop.

"Don't set it there," said Johnny. "You'll have to bust that up."

Sugar placed the lamp on the floor. There was a flatbed press, a case of type, and a small foot press that Abe used to run off posters. The deputy hefted the axe and went to work on the big press, using the butt to smash the heavy machinery and the blade to chop the heavy wooden frame.

Abe Maverick had followed them into the shop. He winced at each blow, as if Sugar were striking him.

Sugar wrecked the press and the type boxes and smashed the lead mould. He chopped up the two work tables and counter. By then he was beginning to sweat. He looked at Johnny and wiped his steaming face with his sleeve.

"Is that all?"

The only sound in the room then was Abe Maverick's stricken breathing. Johnny looked at Abe Maverick out of the ends of his eyes. Johnny's face had lost most of its color.

"I—reckon," he said after a moment.

Abe Maverick's breathing quit altogether. When it did start again, it came in a choked sob of relief. In the last ten minutes he seemed to have sweated off twenty pounds in his voluminous night shirt and baggy trousers stained with printer's ink. He looked wilted.

The deputy gave Johnny a puzzled glance. Johnny said without looking at Abe Maverick: "You've got until sunup to get out of town."

Abe Maverick nodded his head vigorously. He crumpled into a chair that Sugar Blair hadn't wrecked, and watched the two men leave.

Outside on the boardwalk, Sugar Blair watched Johnny bite the end off a cigar and light it. Johnny's hands were shaking. In the quick flare of the match, his face was still a little pale.

"Why didn't you rough him up?" the deputy asked.

"It wasn't necessary," answered Johnny, and knew by Sugar's silence that the deputy accepted the statement with reservations. "Besides," he added, "somebody was watching us through the window."

Sugar jerked up his head. "You see who it was?"

"No."

Sugar swore under his breath.

"But I can make a good guess," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun after a moment.

"Who?"

"I'll tell you if it pans out."

"All right. Where you going now?"

"For a walk."

"Want me to go along?"

"No, you'd better get back to Trail Street. I'll see you later."

The deputy shrugged and turned back up the street, his boots drawing hollow echoes out of the boardwalk.

Johnny stood on the boardwalk and puffed his cigar while he studied the front of the *Trail City Press*. Like most of the other ramshackle structures along the street, the windows in the *Press* building were boarded up. That was cheaper than replacing glass after rollicking cowhands shot them out almost nightly.

The face Johnny had seen had been peering through the window in the alley.

He took a knife from his pocket and neatly clipped the lighted end from his cigar. He didn't want to be an easy target. He started to put the cigar back in his mouth, then stared at the shredded end distastefully. He threw the cigar away. He patted his gun and went around the building into the alley. He was whistling soundlessly as he walked.

JOHNNY-BEHIND-THE-GUN jumped back from the body as if it had been a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. He whirled and sprang into the shadow of the nearest building and his glance raked the alley to see if his movements had been observed. His breath pushed the thin fabric of his shirt rapidly in and out. It was a warm night, but he was shivering with cold.

The dead man lay on his back, his head twisted to one side. There was blood all over the back of his head. The gray cowhorn mustaches were stiffly erect, as if in outrage against what had happened. Johnny noticed that the shirt, at the belt, had been ripped open. A pair of shiny black boots on the ends of skinny legs caught what little light there was streaking under a drawn blind in an upstairs window of the *Follies Bergere*.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun kept taking quick bird-like glances along the alley. But there was no light of any kind, besides the sliver above him, and no sound or movement. He began to breathe easier. He knelt by the body and took a good look at the face.

When he entered the *Follies Bergere* by the back way a few minutes later, his eyes were still dilated by what he had seen. A startled expression was frozen on his face. He said to the bald man sitting tilted back in a cane-bottomed chair with a shotgun across his lap: "Is Denver in?" and went on into Denver Plummer's office without knocking.

The big man glanced up with a frown. But when he saw who it was, his face cleared.

"Well, Johnny?" he sounded cheerful.

Johnny said, "It went all right, Denver," while shutting the door behind him. When he had the door closed, he ripped out:

"There's a body down in the alley!"

Denver Plummer sat back in his chair. The gold nugget on his watch chain caught yellow light from the lamp. He took an expensive-looking ivory holder from his vest, pocket, removed an ivory toothpick from the holder, and picked his teeth while he stared at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

"All right," he said finally. "So there's a body in the alley. I take it the man has been killed. Why didn't you look up Sugar? Why come to me?"

Johnny's eyes had gone flat. His voice came out without any expression at all. "It's a plant," he said. He added a significant fact in the same dead tone: "He wasn't killed here. He was brought here."

"What makes you think that?"

"He doesn't have a hat."

"No hat?"

"No."

Denver Plummer said, "Oh," as if that explained everything. He leaned forward in his chair. He was no longer picking his teeth.

"Do you know him?"

"I don't know him personally," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun as if reciting something. "But I know who he is. He sold a herd of cattle here today. They're loading them down at the stock pens now. He had around twenty thousand dollars on him. I saw him go into the trading post and come out with a new pair of boots and a new hat."

"So that's how you knew he had a hat," said Denver Plummer a little scornfully.

"Yes. I'm sure the money's gone, too. It was too late for him to bank it. His shirt was open in front. It looks like whoever killed him stripped him of a money belt."

"You're quite a detective."

When Denver Plummer said that, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun's nostrils distended. His eyes, which until then had been empty of expression, became cold and hard. They no longer focused on Denver Plummer's face, but stared angrily at a spot somewhere behind him on the wall.

"You crazy fool!" he said in a hard, savage voice. "Don't

you realize they're after *you*?"

Denver Plummer made a helpless gesture with his hand, and grinned sheepishly. "Cut it out, Johnny," he said in a more conciliatory tone. "But I still don't get it. Why didn't you just move the body?"

"It doesn't matter where it's found."

"It doesn't?" Denver Plummer's eyes had narrowed again.

"Look at it this way," said Johnny. "There was a young cowman murdered and robbed just before I came here—Dan Parker. The *Trail City Press* harped on that a lot. It isn't like a shooting scrape where one drunken cowpuncher kills another. And now it's happened again. On the very night that it happens, we wreck the newspaper's printing equipment and run the editor out of town!

"It was the worst thing we could have done, Denver. Only we didn't know."

"By hell, I guess you're right! It'll look like we knew about this in advance and wrecked Maverick's press to keep him from telling folks about it."

"Exactly," Johnny agreed. "What's more, Abe dropped something I didn't like. Rather, he clammed up after starting to say something. Are you sure you can trust Dave Weston?"

"I can handle Weston," said Denver flatly.

Blue Strange belonged to a race apart. He was cut from a different pattern and the pattern had been thrown away.

"Of course you can now," said Johnny impatiently. "He's trying to get elected to the sheriff's office. But what about after he's elected? He cleaned up Rail's End, you know. I think the reform crowd had him make a deal with you. I think they mean to cut your throat as soon as the ballots are in."

Denver Plummer flushed.

"I said I could handle Dave Weston."

"You don't mean Cynthia Weston by any chance?" Johnny asked insinuatingly. He was mad and he didn't care if Denver Plummer knew it. "Why do you think she's being nice to you? Why do you think she condescends to come here and see you in this—this *bordello?* Have you ever gotten anywhere with her? Has she ever kissed you? Have you ever been invited to dinner at that little ivy-clad white house out on the edge of town?"

"No," said Denver. He was breathing heavily. "You've said enough, Johnny."

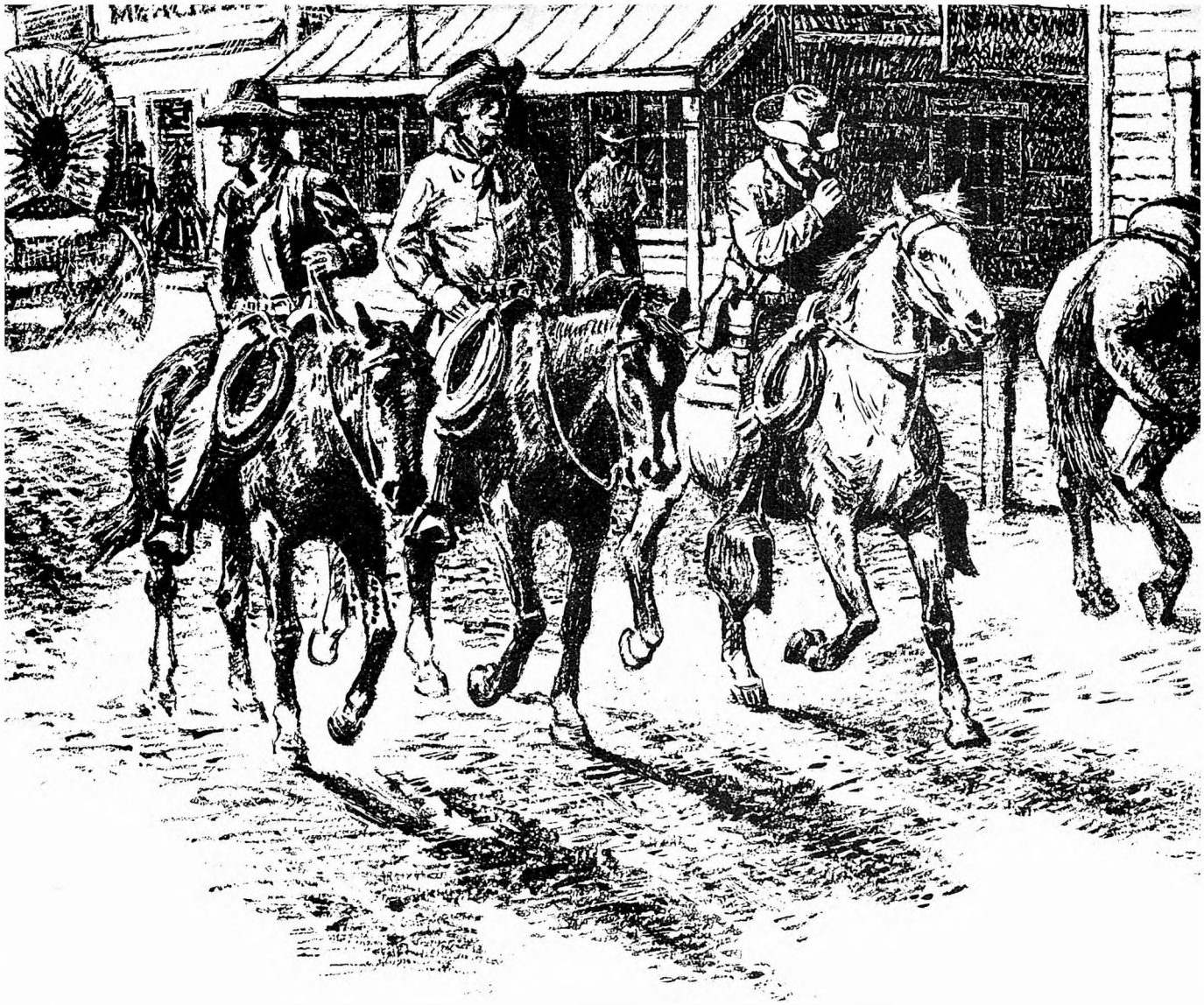
"*Drop them!*" Johhny ground out. "Give them the boot before they give it to you! Drop them—both of them!"

Denver Plummer laid his big hands flat on the desk. The fingers were thick and strong-looking, with fine black hair growing to the first knuckles. For a moment he seemed intent on leaping across the desk at Johnny.

But he leaned back in his chair. A gusty sigh came out of his massive chest.

"I don't know what's the matter with you," he complained. "You go along fine and then all of a sudden you get on your high horse."

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun wasn't through with him. "Look," he said. "The Westons consider themselves genteel. The aristocracy of Trail City. Dave Weston isn't just



Those who did put in an appearance were mostly grim, silent, tight-lipped men who rode directly to Si Higgins' Tonsorial & Undertaking Parlour.

a run-of-the-brush peace officer. He's like a minister of the gospel with a gun on. It's his mission in life. And Cynthia Weston was raised in a convent to be a lady.

"When you eat, you wipe your mouth with your sleeve instead of a napkin. A finger bowl to you is something to drink out of. You wear clothes louder than a turkey-holler. You chew tobacco and smoke cigars at the same time. The Westons would as soon invite a wrinkle-horned bull into their parlor."

"Then I'll quit smoking cigars," said Denver Plummer promptly. "I'd rather chew tobacco, anyway."

He got up and paced up and down the office.

"Johnny, I intend to marry Cynthia Weston. A match like that would be a real feather in my cap."

He stopped to stare at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun. "Look, I know what I am. I came up the hard way. I used to shine shoes in the St. Louis red light district. I worked in a Nevada City saloon—and not as a bouncer or faro dealer or anything fancy like that. I was a swamper and cleaned out the spittoons. Hell, I know I'm not genteel! I'm as rough and ready as they come. But I've pulled myself this far by my boot-straps, and I intend to keep on climbing.

"This boom won't last. Dodge and Ellsworth have had their day, and they're done. Trail City won't last long. They're already stringing barbed wire across part of the trail. But when it's over, I'll have my pile. I mean to turn respectable. And the easiest way to do that is to marry Cynthia Weston. She's the finest lady I've ever known!"

His ruddy face positively glowed as he made the statement. He looked at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

"You see what I mean?" he asked anxiously.

Johnny's smile was wan, but it was friendly again.

"Yeah, Denver—I see."

"Maybe I dont know too much about eti—table manners and such things," said Denver Plummer earnestly. "But I can learn from you, Johnny. The girls here in the house all say you're a real gentleman. They think you're the best guy in pants that's hit this town."

He sat down in his chair and leaned back as if the matter was finished.

"Now, about this other thing. What do we do about it?"

"We've got to find out who killed him. You can't cover it up the way you did Dan Parker's murder."

"I told you I didn't cover that up.

"All right."

Denver Plummer put his elbows on the desk. He put the tips of his fingers together and frowned over them at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

"None of our boys did this killing. I told them I wouldn't stand for it. That leaves Bay Stamm's bunch, or maybe a trail hand."

"I'd pick Bay. He doesn't like the way you've been holding him down. It might be a way of hitting back at you."

Denver scowled. "If it is, he's cutting his own throat. I'll close him out so quick he'll think a cyclone hit him." He said to Johnny-Behind-The-Gun: "Look into it, will you?"

Johnny said, "All right," and got up and left.

When Johnny got downstairs, Sugar Blair was having trouble. Sugar had arrested a trail hand for trying to shoot out the upstairs windows in the *Follies Bergere.* The man was drunk, and claimed he'd only been doing it to amuse the girls. He said he was shooting high so he wouldn't hurt anyone.

Johnny-Behind-the-Gun continued

Sugar was trying to drag the trail hand off to jail. Some of the man's friends had gathered around, and started kidding Sugar about stopping the fun. The girls leaned out of the windows and added their excited cries and laughter to the general confusion.

Sugar was on the spot. It was all fun and laughter, for the moment. But he couldn't use his gun to cold-cock the man without having the whole bunch on his neck. And the trail hand, finding himself in the limelight for probably the first time in his life, was enjoying himself immensely. He was clowning and putting up just enough of a struggle so the deputy couldn't drag him out of view of the girls.

The shouted remarks were growing more ribald with each passing second. Scuffing boots had kicked up a cloud of dust that looked silvery in the lamplight pouring out of the *Follies Bergere*. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun listened to the noise for a moment, then moved in.

"All right, break it up."

A cowhand was reluctant to get out of the way. Johnny hit him behind the ear with his fist and knocked him down.

"Say—"

A lank, bearded Texan stood in front of Johnny. His eyes were cold under the wide brim of his hat.

"Say it," snapped Johnny.

He didn't look at the man. He looked at a spot just over his shoulder. But the Texan looked at Johnny's tense, pallid face and shrugged and stepped out of the way.

"Get him out of here," Johnny said to Sugar.

"With pleasure," said the sweating deputy, and cocked a big fist and slammed it against the trail hand's jaw. He swung the suddenly limp figure over his shoulder and stalked off down the street.

Johnny stood in his tracks without looking at anybody, and after a moment the crowd broke up.

When Sugar came back from the jail, he was wiping blood from a scratch on his cheek with his handkerchief. "He woke up," he said, and grinned. "I finished the job with my gun." He put the handkerchief back in his pocket and said, "Thanks."

"Listen," said Johnny. "We're going to have to do something. We're going to have to make those boys check their guns when they come into town."

"Why?"

"Because we're going to have trouble," said Johnny. He explained in a low voice. "A cowman was killed and robbed of something like twenty thousand dollars tonight."

Sugar whistled between his teeth. "That bunch ain't going to like it. I thought they were going to tear the town apart when that Dan Parker was killed."

"That's why I want them to check their guns," said Johnny. He started off.

"Where you going?" asked Sugar.

"To Bay Stamm's. You got something else on your mind?"

Sugar scratched behind his ear. "Yeah, I want to talk."

"What about?"

"About Dan Parker. Why are you so interested in that old case?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I been thinking—"

"Don't think."

Sugar thought that over. "All right. But it seems to me—"

Johnny had taken a cigar from his pocket. His hands were trembling a little as he clipped the end from it with his knife. He said in a tight voice: "Listen, are you tired of taking orders?"

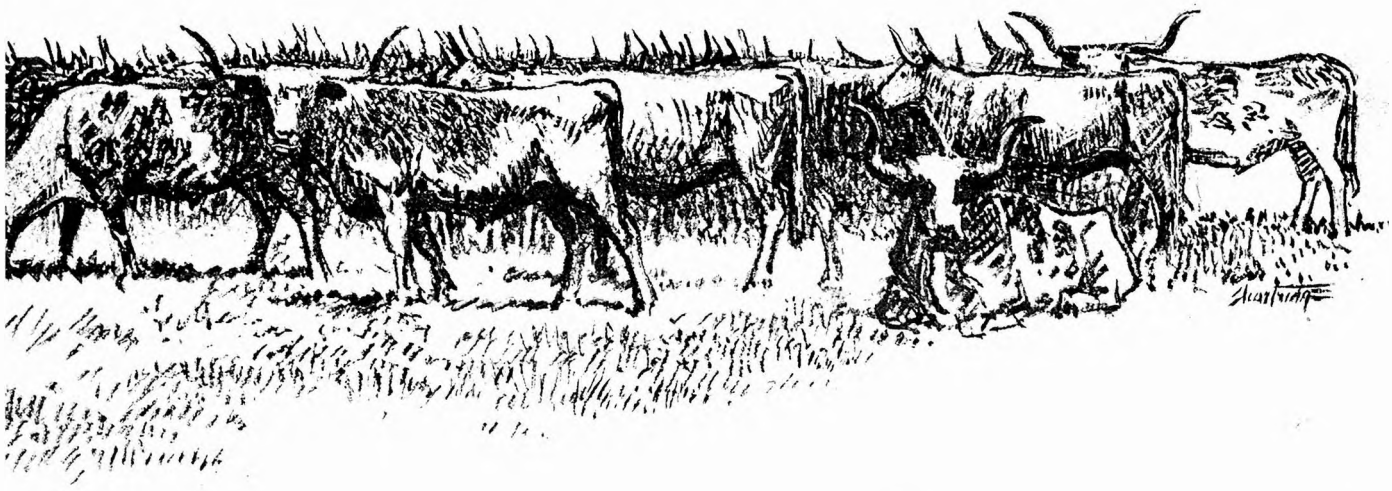
"No," said Sugar.

"Then quit crowding me."

"All right."

The deputy's tone held no interest at all. Johnny left him and crossed the street.

THE KANSAS EMPORIUM had none of the elegance of the more sumptuous *Follies Bergere*. The two saloons split the town's liquor business, and the Emporium got the rougher half of the trade.



Trail outfits usually camped below the creek. Four herds were being held there now.

It was a high, windowless barn with smoky kerosene lanterns slung from sagging rafters and a bar running the entire length of one wall. Over the bar was the sprawled, badly-painted nude you saw over every bar in the west. Cigar stubs and cigarette butts were trampled into the mess of filth and sawdust that littered the floor. Few of the tobacco-chewers even tried to hit a spittoon. The swamper was asleep in the back corner, his mouth sagging open as he snored.

The Emporium smelled of horse and human sweat that clung to seldom-changed clothes, and of stale beer and spilled whiskey and a rank, damp odor that came in through the open door leading into the alley. The slop behind the bar was seldom scrubbed out. A pile of empty beer barrels in one corner made a nest for cockroaches. A cross-eyed bartender kept a small caliber pistol behind the bar, and frequently won bets by apparently looking off in another direction while shooting cockroaches as they climbed the wall. The wall above the barrels was peppered with splintered bullet holes, some of them with bits of dried wing stuck to the edges.

Dice rattled on bare wooden tables. Through the solid racket made by the crowd could be heard the little, hollow bouncing sound of the white ball circling the roulette wheel before it came to rest on a number that the croupier called out in mechanical tones. When Johnny-Behind-The-Gun entered the Emporium, half a dozen poker games were in progress. The blackjack and faro dealers were surrounded by players bucking their games.

The smoke-laden atmosphere of the place made Johnny screw up his eyes and blink them rapidly. He held his breath for a moment before inhaling the sweat and stale-whisky stench that pinched his nostrils.

A heavy, bald man near the door, wearing a flowered vest and with a bulge of scar tissue over his eyes, half turned toward the back of the room.

"Never mind," said Johnny. "I'll tell him I'm here."

The man stared at him. Johnny walked on down the room, pushing his way through the crowd. A hand reached out and gripped his shoulder.

"Well, Bub!"

It was the beefy man he had chopped with his gun in the *Follies Bergere*. He looked at the man's flat, grinning face and then looked over his shoulder.

"Take your hand off me."

"Now wait a minute, Bub—"

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun said: "Let go." His eyes had gone flat and glassy.

The beefy man took his hand off Johnny's shoulder. He was grinning wickedly.

"You know, Bub—I really like you. You're fancy. You're a stepper. But don't think I'll forget you. I never forget a friend."

Johnny went on to the rear of the room and climbed some rickety stairs. There was a shedroom overlooking the alley. He went into the shedroom without knocking.

"Make yourself at home!" said Bay Stamm, and put aside a ledger in which he had been entering figures with a whittled quill.

"I will," said Johnny, and sat on the edge of Bay's desk.

Bay Stamm was a small, wiry, roan-haired man who tried to make up for his lack of stature by wearing spike-heeled boots and a black Stetson with the crown undented. He wore the hat whether he was in his office or on the street. His small, tight-skinned head was set at an odd angle on his shoulders, and carried the little marks and scars of a tough life. There was a bitter truculence about him that shaped his narrow, bony face and danced wicked lights in his pale eyes. An unlighted cheroot was clamped in his mouth. He spoke softly around the cheroot at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

"What the hell do you mean bustin' into my private office?"

"I want to ask you some questions."

"Like what?"

"Like a cowman who was killed about an hour ago. Maybe longer."

"I don't know a damned thing about it."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Listen, Bay—nothing goes on in this town that you don't know about. Denver sent me over here. You'd better play it straight if you don't want trouble."

Bay Stamm returned his steady gaze defiantly for a moment, and then his eyes wavered. "All right," he said in a surly tone. "I know he's dead. But that's all I know."

"Are you sure?"

"Hell, yes, I'm sure!" Bay Stamm exploded. "Listen, you can't come in here and shove me around. You ain't the sheriff. You—"

"Shut up," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

Bay Stamm chopped the words off with lips as thin as a razor. He gave Johnny a look that was so outraged it was almost wild.

Johnny stabbed a finger at his chest.

"I'll tell you plenty. That cow crowd isn't going to like this. We're in for trouble. We've got to find that killer and find him quick. We know none of our boys did it. Can you say the same for yours?"

Stamm took the cheroot from his mouth and glared at it. He started to throw it away, with a violent motion, and then changed his mind and gripped it between his teeth. He said one word, hoarsely:

"*Yes!*"

"Are you sure?"

"By God—" Stamm's eyes opened wide in a shocked look. He swept them unsteadily about the room, as if searching for some release for his unstable temper.

"Listen, Johnny—" He was breathing hard and holding himself under tight control. "Don't crowd me, Johnny. By God, don't crowd me! I don't like to be crowded, Johnny. I want you to keep off my toes."

"I'll crowd you right out of town if I find out you're lying to me," said Johhny, throwing his fight talk in the other's teeth. "And I'm telling you what to do. Look into this. Whoever did it lifted twenty thousand dollars, and that's a hard sum to conceal. See if any of the boys are suddenly flush. If you catch one burning money, find out where he got it. It'll go hard on you, Bay, if you're holding out on us."

Bay Stamm did not say anything. He couldn't. He had bitten the cheroot completely in two, his teeth clenched so tightly that his eyes were rigid, and the severed end of the cheroot fell in his lap.

Johnny slid off the desk and turned and walked unhurriedly to the door. He swung back and said, "Get busy, Bay," and went out and closed the door.

Only then did Bay Stamm move. Still gritting his teeth, he lifted his clenched fists toward the ceiling as if beseeching the angry gods of heaven for surcease before his volatile temper exploded inside him.

On Sunday morning, Trail City presented at least an outward show of decorum. The saloons did not open until after two o'clock. The hitch-racks were deserted. Settlers came in from the surrounding plains on horseback, in buggies, buckboards, hacks and rattletrap wagons, to congregate around a brush arbor on the outskirts of town. There, the blacksmith laid aside his leather apron and hammered at the devil as vigorously as he pounded an anvil the other six days in the week.

But although the sound of revival-singing made all seem serene, a cynic—and Trail City boasted many—would have pointed out that the Sabbatical air was like the dust: it was only surface-deep. One did not have to wander far along Trail Street to witness that this abstinence from the follies of the primrose path was, at its best, only temporary. The jail was still crowded with Saturday night revelers, disheveled and slightly the worse for whiskey and wear, that Sugar Blair had locked up for J.P. court. A workman was busy replacing windows shot out of the *Follies Bergere.* Both it and the Kansas Emporium were being swamped out in preparation for the usual two o'clock rush. And Denver Plummer's bevy of *filles de joie,* who always went en masse to church like a bunch of giggling convent girls, were usurping the occasion to show off their accumulated finery before the male half of Trail City's population and even to carry on a few flirtations that would be resumed after curfew.

If this Sunday morning was notable in any way, it was because few riders had drifted in from the trail camps below town. Those who did put in an appearance were mostly grim, silent, tight-lipped men who rode directly to Si Higgins' *Tonsorial & Undertaking Parolur.*

There, in a bare back room, the body of a gray-haired old cowman was laid out on a board stretched across two sawhorses.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun didn't know what had awakened him. He was aware of muted sound drifting up from the street through the shaded window that shut light out of the room. He lay for a moment without opening his eyes. His eyes felt sticky. After a while he threw off the cover and jerked the shade, letting it roll up with a bang. He staggered to a wash stand in the corner.

This was a hotel room, and the only furniture was the wash stand, a cracked mirror, a chair and a bed. Some wag had penciled a verse near the mirror: *As sorry a hole as I ever slept in. The smell reminds me of a dirty pig-pen.*

With a grimace, he bent and washed his face. He shaved, meanwhile chewing some little peppermint candies to get a better taste in his mouth. He didn't have much of a beard, so chewing didn't interfere with using a razor.

He neatly combed his hair. He took a rag from under the mattress and polished his brown boots. He brushed off his brown hat and put it on his head, pulling the brim carefully to just the right angle. He put on a clean white shirt, struggling with the button at the collar. The exertion brought bright spots of color to his cheeks that remained there as he knotted a red string tie about his neck.

A dark suit hung from a coat hanger on a nail driven in the wall. Johnny put on the pants to the suit, buckled on his gun and patted it, and then pulled on the coat. He would stop at Ma Tanner's and pick a flower for his buttonhole.

He felt dizzy. He sat down on the bed again until the feeling had passed, then went down to the hotel cafe. He sat slumped on a stool and drank four cups of black coffee as fast as he could get them down. He hoped they would stay down. His face was still waxen and sweating when he left the cafe and started up the street.

The bright sun made him screw up his eyes and bat them rapidly. Anyone watching him walk would have thought he was suffering from a hangover.

"Johnny!"

A shiny new red buggy drew in to the walk, pulled by two matched bays wearing red harness. Each horse had four white stockings and a white blaze on his forehead, and white tassels decorated the harness. Johhny tipped his hat and gave a half bow to Cynthia Weston.

"That's a nice rig."

"Isn't it? It exactly matches your tie."

Johnny knew the horses and knew where the buggy had come from, but he said guilelessly: "It must be new. I haven's seen you in it before."

A little frown of annoyance crossed Cynthia Weston's face. "It really belongs to Denver," she explained. "He wanted me to use it until after elections. He said I could haul dad around to see the voters."

"Is that right?"

"Yes." She was still frowning.

Johnny put his foot on the step and leaned forward, his eyes shiny with sudden malice. His mustache twitched as he asked: "Isn't this a bit showy for a candidate for the sheriff's office?"

Cynthia Weston bit her lip. "Well," she said reluctantly, "if you must know, it was really intended as a gift. But I couldn't accept it, Johnny. I only agreed to keep it until after the elections because I didn't want to hurt Denver's feelings."

The malice had deepened in Johnny-Behind-The-Gun's eyes. "You mean you didn't want to hurt your dad's chances of election."

"Oh, you're impossible!" cried Cynthia Weston.

Johnny immediately bowed and started to turn away.

"No, wait," she said, and when he turned back, she looked at him searchingly. "You really don't like me, do you, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun?"

She was a beautiful woman, and knew it. Her hair, so yellow gold, made a perfect frame for the flamboyant loveliness of her face. Her brown eyes were in striking contrast to her almond-honey skin. Her lips were slightly parted, holding at all times the promise of the sweetest kind of smile. She was wearing a green dress extravagant in its simplicity, pinched at the waist and flaring over shapely hips. A small green hat with a bright red feather tilted at a rakish angle on her golden head, and on her, the hat was perfect.

After that one quick glance, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun did not look at her again. He said between stiff lips: "I didn't say that."

"But you don't like me."

"You're only saying it."

"Then why can't we be friends?"

"I don't know. Why can't we?"

She said exasperatedly, "Must you always be difficult?"

He said, "Am I being difficult?" and then added politely: "We'll be late for church."

She was frowning again. "I don't want to go to church. I want to talk to you."

Johnny did not say anything. He climbed into the buggy. Cynthia Weston started the buggy by slapping the lines lightly against each horse in turn. They drove a block in silence. Then she gave Johnny a slanting, mischievous glance, and laughed. "You're a strange man, Johnny-Behind-The-Gun. The kind of life you lead, and yet—you go to church."

"What kind of life do I lead?"

She made a helpless gesture. "Well, I don't exactly know how to—it's hard to put in words—" It was plain that she wished she had never broached the subject.

Johnny's face was pale and his voice sounded strained. "You mean I live in sin six days a week, and so by my very presence in church, desecrate the Sabbath?" It was put as a question, yet it wasn't a question.

Cynthia Weston flushed. "I didn't mean that."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know." She sounded angry. "You always confuse me."

Johnny leaned back in the seat. "A little confusion is good for the soul," he said piously, and this time they both laughed.

They passed the girls from the *Follies Bergere*, parading gaily toward the brush arbor where the singing had already commenced. The girls fell silent, watching them, and Cynthia Weston held her head a little higher. There was more color in her cheeks.

Kate Dalton was leading the *Follies Bergere* cortege. She flashed her rival a vindictive glance. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun saw it and let a smile tug briefly at the corners of his thin mouth.

BEYOND THE town the plain had the drab look of a shaggy buffalo hide in winter, and very nearly the same tawny smell. It ran away from the town on three sides to a farther flatness lost to the eye, where dun-colored grass blended with a dust haze that hung always in the sky.

Wind blew across the plain out of wild places man had never seen. The wind never stopped—it blew out of all eternity. It was a dry, moaning sound, as lonely as the coyote's cry, and with the smell of wildness in it.

To the west of Trail City, low broken hills rose in shadowy outline. These were the Dead Horse Hills, and the rails of the Kansas & Great Western ran flatly across the plain and lifted toward Dead Saddle Pass. Fingers of brush reached down from the hills into dry ravines and arroyos. A creek twisted away from the hills and a line of cottonwoods marked its line of progress across the plain and around Trail City.

Trail outfits usually camped below the creek. Four herds were being held there now, and the plain beyond was littered with acres of dried cow-chips. Wagons often drove out from town and hauled in a load of chips for fuel.

The smell of Trail City in the winter was the smell of cow-chips burning in half a hundred stoves.

Cynthia Weston drove along the twin ruts of a wagon road toward the creek.

They rode in silence for perhaps a mile. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun leaned back in the seat, his face prespiring. His eyes were closed and his mouth shut tight. Little muscular spasms, like grimaces of pain, jerked across his face at the buggy's motion.

Cynthia Weston was the first to break the long silence. "Johnny, why do you work for Denver Plummer?"

He opened his eyes very wide, but all he said was: "It's a job."

"I know—but wouldn't you like to do something else? Something better?"

"I like what I'm doing."

"But you could do something better," she said insistently. "You're smart, Johnny. You don't have to be just a hired gun for a penny-ante politician. You weren't cut out for that kind of life."

She said it so violently that Johnny's eyes went even wider as he watched her. Then he smiled at her. The smile did something to his face. He seemed, at the moment, very young and almost shy, and his voice was shy as he asked, "Do you really think so?" And when she nodded, he went on in a burst of boyish enthusiasm:

"You know, you're the second woman who's told me that. My mother said I could be president."

"*Damn you!*" cried Cynthia Weston in a hurt, choked voice.

"It's the truth," said Johnny-Behind-The-Gun earnestly.

Nothing more was said until they reached the creek and she stopped the buggy. She wrapped the lines around the whip socket. She turned to face him, almost defiantly.

"Johnny, I suppose you and Denver are very good friends?"

"I suppose so."

"And I guess that anything you thought he ought to know, you'd tell him, even though it were told you in secret?"

"Not necessarily," said Johnny. "But if you mean that Dave and the reform party plan to doublecross him after elections, I've already told him that. I warned him to drop Dave—and you, too. I said he ought to give you both the boot before you gave it to him." He smiled at her engagingly.

Cynthia Weston caught her breath.

"Don't worry," said Johnny. "He wouldn't believe me. He's sucker enough to think that he can handle you—both of you. In some ways, Denver isn't very smart. I've told him that, too."

Cynthia Weston breathed again, but her face had lost its color.

"You make it sound so brutal."

"Isn't it?" he agreed, smiling.

"You really don't like me."

"I rather think I do. You run true to type. You consider Denver Plummer some lower form of animal life, so the rules of society don't apply to your relations with him. Instead of showing your teeth in a snarl, you show them in a polite smile."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. She looked down at her hands in her lap. Her face was white and earnestly set. "Johnny, Dad thought at first he could go along with Denver. He thought Denver was serious about making Trail City a clean town. Dad is a very honest man. He's—

"Like a minister of the gospel with a gun on," Johnny finished for her, remembering what he had told Denver.

"Yes. I suppose that's true. But things have been happening to make him see Denver in his true light. Like that murder last night, and the fact that the *Trail City Press* was run out of town right afterwards. Denver must have been afraid the paper would involve him—just as it did with the murder of that other cowman six months ago."

"It was a mistake all right," said Johnny, his mustache twitching. "But I can assure you that we didn't know about the murder until after I'd given Abe Maverick his walking papers."

"You mean *you* did *that?*"

He nodded.

She seized both of his hands. "Quit it, Johnny," she pleaded. "Give it up! What could you have against that harmless little printer?"

"I rather liked Abe," said Johnny. "He was just printing the wrong things in his paper."

"So Denver sent you to wreck his plant and run him out of town. Johnny, he's making a kind of gun-quick monster out of you. He counts on you for everything. I don't believe he could stay in power if he didn't have you to tell him what to do, then do it for him."

"He was doing all right before I came here," Johnny was quick to point out. He sounded surly. He sounded as if he didn't care to have her call him a monster.

"Leave him, Johnny!"

"Why this sudden interest in me?"

"I like you," she said simply.

"It sounds more like you'd like to see Denver without my—gun-quick services," he got out jerkily.

"Oh, no! I really like you!"

His face went bone-hard. His nostrils distened to a more furious breathing. "Is that why you're making such a big play for Denver?"

She drew back from him. "I'm not making any kind of play for Denver?"

"This—" He contemptuously indicated the new red buggy. "Are you really going to return it?"

She did not look at him. She said, "Yes," very faintly.

"And the flowers and other things he's sent you—have you been sending them back?"

"No." She added with more spirit, "But I couldn't very well refuse them. After all, he would probably show the same courtesies and attention to the daughter of any man who was running for sheriff."

"Just politics, huh?" His eyes were as wicked as his

smile.

"Yes."

"Is that why you visit him at night in his office in the *Follies Bergere?*"

She flashed him a quick helpless look of appeal. "Johnny, if I go there at all, it isn't to see Denver. It's to see—someone else."

She swayed toward him. Her eyes closed. For a moment her lips were against his, a warm oval hungry for a caress. Then Johnny-Behind-The-Gun tore his mouth from hers. His eyes looked stricken. His lips were ashen and stiff.

"We'd better go back," he said tightly.

"Johnny—"

"Please, Cynthia!" A kind of sick frenzy had come into his glance. He leaned back against the seat with his eyes tightly closed.

Cynthia Weston started the team. They drove in silence all the way to town.

When Johnny got back to this room, he pulled off his coat and his gun and lay down on the bed. He stared at the ceiling. The stricken look had left his eyes but his mouth was still pinched as if what had happened had left a bad taste. The more he thought about it, the more dissatisfied his whole face became. Then he thought of something else and got up and pulled down the window shade and lit the lamp.

He didn't like the half-darkness of the room without the lamp. It was too murky and close—too much like that gray and uneasy shadow that always skirted the edge of his mind. But he didn't like the open window, either. Anyone on a roof across the street could look right into the room, and Johnny-Behind-The-Gun couldn't afford to be spied on.

He smiled wanly at the thought.

He lay down on the bed again. But a restlessness had come over him. He got up and prowled the room. His face was sallow and becoming more and more dissatisfied. He suddenly crossed the room to his coat and reached into the pocket for a cigar.

It was then that a tinkle of glass sounded behind him. The window shade bellied violently out as if struck by some invisible hand. Falling glass shattered on the floor and the hole left by the glass let in the flat, brittle crack of a rifle somewhere across the street. The bullet slapped through the far wall with a splintering sound.

The noises, while separate, were sucked into the room in one quick blast. Johnny stood perfectly still in his tracks, his shoulders hunched up as if to ward off a blow. His eyes were suddenly wide and startled. His mouth hung open under his mustache.

When he moved, it was to lean against the wall as if his legs were suddenly too weak to support him. He was breathing harshly through his mouth. His face, which had been sickly before, now looked positively ill.

A man's racing boots pounded the stairs. A voice chopped through the door.

"*Johnny!*"

Johnny pushed himself away from the wall. He clipped the end from the cigar in his hand and put it in his mouth. The shakiness of his hands was incongruous with the steadiness of his voice when he said, "Come on in, Sugar."

Sugar Blair was already at the door and swinging it open. He looked at the window and he looked at Johnny. He said: "By God! They tried to get you!"

"No," said Johnny.

Sugar looked startled.

"It was a clean miss," said Johnny. "You can't hit a man by shooting at his shadow on a window shade."

"The hell you can't!

Johnny shook his head. "It was a message, I think."

"Who from?"

"Bay Stamm."

"Oh."

Sugar leaned in the door. His smooth, tough young face was a study in reflection. The fingers of one hand thoughtfully stroked his jaw.

Johnny said in sudden anger: "Get out of here! Wait for me downstairs."

"All right," said Sugar. He turned immediately and went along the hallway. Johnny heard the creak of the stairs under his weight.

Johnny sat down on the edge of the bed until the little muscles at the corners of his mouth stopped twitching. He got up and buckled on his gun, jerking the belt savagely into place when he saw that his fingers were still shaking. He looked surly as he slipped into his coat and slanted his hat at the proper angle. He gave a last glance at the window, then went out of the room and down the stairs.

Sugar was waiting on the porch. He fell into step with Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

"I saw you with the boss's girl," he said, grinning.

"Forget it," said Johnny.

"All right," said Sugar, still grinning.

"I told you to forget it," snapped Johnny.

"All right," said Sugar again, but this time his face was without any expression whatsoever.

They crossed the street. Johnny-Behind-The-Gun did not even look up to see if he could spot the roof from which the shot had come. They went along the boardwalk and under the swinging sign that said: *Trail City Press.* At the entrance to the Kansas Emporium, Johnny glanced at Sugar Blair and found the deputy's face flat and expressionless. His own lean face was drained of color.

He patted his gun and led the way into the saloon.

The Emporium wouldn't open until two, but the swamper had propped the doors open to sweep out the previous night's filth. One of the bartenders polished glasses behind the bar and the bald man with the bulge of scar tissue over his eyes was playing solitaire at a table near the front of the room. He looked at them and then looked back at his cards.

Sugar paused long enough to say, "The red ten on the black jack," then followed Johnny down the room.

They went up the stairs side by side, feeling each step give a little under their combined weight. Johnny moved ahead to open the door. He pulled the knob toward him and stepped on through as the door swung open. Sugar entered behind him.

Bay Stamm was seated at his desk. There were half a dozen other men in the room—saddle-tough Texans from the trail camps. Bay Stamm looked at Johnny from under the brim of his undented black hat, and said in huge satisfaction:

"Now—by God!"

Johnny stopped so suddenly that Sugar walked into him. There was a dead silence in the room while Johnny looked carefully from one man to the other.

ONE OF THEM was long and whip-lean, with the mark of command on him as plain as the Running-W brand on his brush-scarred batwing chaps. His face had a thin toughness. His eyes were pale and piercing—holding a rough challenge for anybody or anything that tried to stand in his way. A drooping mustache choppped off the corners of his hard mouth. He wore two guns and to Johnny's practiced eye, he looked like he knew how to use them—fast.

"Cal Pierce," chuckled Stamm, following Johnny's glance. "He's trail boss of the Running-W—owned by Jim Wheel, that cowman who was murdered and robbed behind the *Follies Bergere* last night."

He placed deliberate emphasis on *'Follies Bergere.'* His round, flinty eyes held the shine of eager brutality. It was apparent that he was deriving a wicked satisfaction from the scene.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun took the cigar out of his mouth. He did not say a word.

"These other men are owners—" Stamm waved a limp hand at the group behind Pierce. "They have herds waiting to be shipped. And this—" Stamm breathed the name almost reverently, "This is *Blue Strange.*"

He didn't elaborate on that. He didn't have to. Blue Strange stood a little apart from the other men, and away from Stamm's desk. He belonged to a race apart. He was cut from a different pattern and the pattern had been thrown away. It had to be. He was that dangerous.

"They tell me you're tough," said Strange.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun said nothing. He was politely attentive.

"I like to meet a tough man," said Strange. "I like to try my luck."

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun smiled. He made narrow ovals out of his eyes and stared at Strange through the ovals as he smiled.

"They told me you were tough," said Strange. "They said you were always wanting trouble and cocked like a pistol to meet it."

The silence was like a match about to be touched to a powder keg. It was growing eagerness in Bay Stamm's eyes. Sugar Blair made a little scuffling noise with his boots as he inched away from Johnny along the wall. Blue Strange said, "All right," and the deputy stopped moving his feet. The silence grew thin and ragged as Johnny-Behind-The-Gun smiled at Blue Strange. Johnny was placidly puffing his cigar.

"Look," said Strange. "Make your play. Show us whether you're tough or not."

His chin had dropped lower on his chest. One hand was held away from his side like a snake about to strike.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun suddenly quit smiling. He took the cigar out of his mouth. He pointed the hand holding the cigar at Strange.

"After you," he said coldly.

Strange immediately lifted his chin. His voice hit at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun like a fist. "I said make your draw, damn you!"

"You want to know if I'm tough," said Johnny, putting the cigar back in his mouth. "All right, I am." His eyes, behind the curl of cigar smoke, held a glint of icy amusement. "I'm waiting for you to find out for yourself."

Blue Strange was balanced on his feet like a cat. "*Draw!*" he cried frenziedly at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun.

Johnny shook his head. "I'm not even curious," he said coldly. "I know how tough I am. It was your idea to try me out."

For a moment, the gunman was as near the breaking point as Bay Stamm had been the previous evening. His eyes were wild. He opened his mouth to say something. Then he chopped his teeth trap-tight and walked toward Johnny. He walked past Johnny and out of the room.

Johnny took the cigar out of his mouth. "All right, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "What's on your mind?"

Bay Stamm was still staring incredulously at the door through which Blue Strange had vanished. Sugar Blair moved his feet again and a little sigh came out of him. Cal Pierce looked at Johnny-Behind-The-Gun. The Running-W trail boss had a slow Texas drawl.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Where?"

"The *Brasada*, maybe. Or the Panhandle?"

"I've never been in Texas," said Johnny. "Hear it's a great country."

"New Mexico?'

"Never been there either."

"Have you ever been in Kansas?" Cal Pierce asked.

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun looked him straight in the eye. "No," he smiled.

"I'm sure I've seen you someplace," said Cal Pierce. "But it doesn't matter." His eyes were cold as he added, "You know why we're here."

"Yes," said Johnny. "Your boss was killed."

"Know anything about it?"

"I found the body."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh."

Cal Pierce stared at him steadily. "What are you holding back?"

"Nothing," said Johnny. "I was going to make a private report to Denver Plummer. I always use the back stairs. I came along the alley and almost stepped on this man. I bent over him. He was already dead. It looked like the whole back of his head had been caved-in."

"And that's all you know?"

"That's all I know."

"You didn't report it?"

"I sent a man after Sugar Blair. This is him with me. He's the town law."

"He was layin' on his back," said Sugar. "His head was twisted to one side. He didn't have no hat."

"I'm not worrying about his hat," said Cal Pierce. "He had around twenty thousand dollars on him. I want that. I want the man who killed him."

"Look at it this way," said Sugar. "The town likes your business. It pays us to give you a square deal. A little rough stuff is all right, but murder and robbery is going too far. It gives the town a black eye. It drives away business. We want that fellow as bad as you do."

"Do you think you'll get him?"

"We'll try."

"It stacks up like this," said Pierce, slowly. "I left him around ten o'clock. I went down to see how the loading was coming. Jim said he was going to the *Follies Bergere* for a drink. Maybe watch the girls a while. He said he was too old to do anything except watch. The next time he's seen, he's dead in the alley behind the *Follies Bergere*. They've got rooms upstairs. It looks to me like he was killed up there and pushed out in the alley. If you went through that place real good, you might even find his hat."

"If he was an old man—" Sugar started to say.

"Even old ones get young ideas," Cal Pierce broke in. "You see if you can find that hat."

"We'll try," Sugar promised.

"You'd better do more than try," said Pierce ominously. "If you don't turn up something, and turn it up quick, we're going to take matters in our own hands. We'll go through this town like a cyclone. We'll burn the *Follies Bergere* to the ground. It's a damned trap for anyobdy with money, anyway. Jim ain't the first cowman that went in there with a bankroll strapped to his belly and came out feet first. It happened about six months ago—to a young drover named Parker—Dan Parker, from Uvalde County. I'm from right across the line in Frio. I knew most of his family and I knew Dan well.

"They tell me you're Denver Plummer's trigger man. You can pass the word along to your boss. He can either put up or we'll shut him up. And I'm not right sure yet that you didn't do the killing yourself. Maybe you did. If I find out you're lying, you'll stretch rope!"

Johnny took the cigar out of his mouth. "Is that all?" he asked quietly.

"That's all for now," snapped Pierce.

Johnny and Sugar left the room. Bay Stamm was grinning broadly.

In the street, Sugar took off his hat and wiped sweat from his forehead with a shaking hand. He wiped the sweatband dry and put the hat back on his head. They walked half a block before he could trust his voice.

"So that was Blue Strange!" he said in awe, and looked at Johnny out of the ends of his eyes. His eyes were still showing some of the whites. "How the hell did you know he wouldn't draw on you?"

"I just knew," Johnny smiled.

"Lord!" Sugar ripped out. "When you pointed that cigar at him—*with your right hand*—I liked to passed out in my boots. You never would have gotten your gun out if he'd drawed on you then!"

"I knew he wasn't going to draw," said Johnny.

"How?"

"The man has a rep," said Johnny. "Everybody knows about Blue Strange. It keeps him jumping to live up to the legend that's been built around his name."

"Sure," said Sugar scornfully. "But he got that way by making boothill bait out of about twenty men! So why didn't he just drill you and get it over with?"

"His pride wouldn't let him," said Johnny. "He'd called my hand. That meant he had to give me first draw and still beat me to the trigger."

"I still don't get it."

"I just told you—it's a matter of pride. He couldn't call a man's hand and then draw on him. If he did, he wouldn't be Blue Strange."

Sugar stopped still in the street while he thought that over.

"You mean if I went up against him, I couldn't crowd him into going for his gun first?"

"Don't be a damned fool," snapped Johnny. "He'd kill you in a minute."

"Why me and not you?"

"I caught him off balance. He wasn't expecting me to throw his gunman's etiquette back in his face."

"Quit using them four-bit words," Sugar complained.

"All right. He thought I was a punk who'd be eager to take up his challenge. Gunning down Blue Strange would be a feather in any two-bit badman's hat. An easy way to make a reputation. The one thing he didn't expect was for me to use my head. It caught him off guard. He's off somewhere brooding about that now. When he comes up with an answer, he'll be back."

Sugar's eyes showed more of their whites. "You mean he'll be back gunnin' for you?"

"I think so—yes."

"Holy hell!"

They were at the door of the *Follies Bergere*. Johnny left the deputy and went inside. Sugar called after him: "Where you want to be buried?"

Johnny-Behind-The-Gun stopped in his tracks, his shoulders hunched up as if Sugar had hit at him. He swung around, with his face pale and the corners of his mouth twisting.

"Don't ever say that again," he rasped at Sugar. "I don't like that kind of joke."

"I wasn't joking," said Sugar Blair earnestly. "Hell, you know I wouldn't joke about a thing like that, Johnny."

(Continued in the next issue)

DODGE THE WILD BUNCH!

By FRED GROVE

Young Danny Reed had over $6,000 in gold in his saddlebags —the payoff for a whole season of taking buffalo hides on the high plains. But Morg Queen knew he had the money, and the security of Fort Richardson lay one hundred miles away

A scream tore and all he saw was Queen's outthrown shape going down and spinning away.

Danny Reed, in the cook wagon's shade, was frowning over the frayed cinch on his saddle when he saw his two friends returning from town. By their sidelong wariness he knew they'd received top prices for the hides. He stood up and then his grin of anticipation gradually faded, replaced by the perception that something good and memorable in his life was about to end. Soon the three of them would be breaking up after a season on the buffalo range, and he wouldn't see Todd Holloway or Sam Braden again.

Holloway seemed to hesitate, which wasn't like him.

"Well, Danny, we came out fine," he finally said. "Sold everything but our saddlehorses." His voice trailed off, and his expression, which Danny thought should be pleased, instead bore a thoughtful uneasiness "Totals up better'n six thousand dollars, after we paid off the skinners. Your wages figure out about six hundred dollars. How's that?"

Danny felt a little dizzy. He whistled softly and shook his head.

"'Pears to me you tallied up twice!"

"It's all right here in my memorandum book—" Holloway slapped his breast pocket. "You earned every cent."

"I'm sure obliged to you both," Danny said.

To hide his feelings, he turned to the cracked mirror hanging on the wagon's upper sideboard, above the wash pan on its box. Exploring his smooth chin in contemplation, he

reckoned that before long he'd have to buy himself a razor.

The sunburned face he saw was slim and blue-eyed, with a shuck of yellow hair struggling out from under his flop-brimmed hat—a face that looked older than it was.

"Not yet, Danny," mocked Sam Braden, who was the joker of the two. "It'll be another spring 'fore your whisker crop comes up."

"There's one big rub," Holloway went on gravely, ignoring the byplay. "Morg Queen's bunch. Whenever an outfit gets paid or sells out here on The Flat, he knows. We're watched, you can be sure."

"Us?" Danny protested, turning around. "A little crew like us?"

"Just makes pickin's all the easier. I'd give a heap to have our money in the paymaster's safe at Fort Richardson. You bet!" Holloway took a tin cup from the chuck box and helped himself to leftover coffee. Braden filled his pipe.

Danny regarded them worriedly, with unspoken liking. Todd Holloway was around fifty. Sand-colored whiskers laced his cheeks and chin, framing his pleasant features in a bristly crescent. A sturdy man, he still had the look of a farmer about him after a year on the Texas frontier, still favoring his funny-looking wool hat with the chimney-pot crown, and suspenders and heavy shoes instead of boots.

Sam Braden was another farmer. Some ten years younger than Todd, he looked as old because of his sunken, high-boned face and the fixed stoop of his worked-down shoulders. He had the clomping stride of a man more accustomed to plowed ground than short-grass prairie.

Both men had known nothing but constant toil. That was why they had left their families in Missouri to make grubstakes hunting buffalo. Danny remembered seeing a tintype of the Holloway family. Ever since, Kathy Holloway's large eyes and soft brown hair, curling along the temples, had remained a vivid picture in his mind. Some day he would like to meet a girl like that—perhaps Kathy herself. And suddenly it angered him that some outlaw like Morg Queen, who hung around the settlement, would take what Todd and Sam had earned on the buffalo range.

"I can fetch that money to Fort Richardson," Danny heard his tight voice saying.

Holloway gave him a sharp look.

"Aim to get yourself killed?"

"Didn't you and Sam take care of me last year when you found me down with fever at Red River Station? Didn't you feed me good? Didn't you give me work?" There was more he could say, for he owed these generous men—these Yankees!—a mighty heap.

"We'll just camp here a spell," Holloway said patiently.

"Stay," countered Danny,"—lose the farm your missus wrote you is just up for sale? The one you always wanted? You've got to move fast. You can't wait. I figure I can get through."

He sounded confident now, more than he felt, and he placed his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth on his boot heels and jutted out his chin.

Braden had to smile. He shook his head. "Too risky alone. Maybe the three of us can try it together."

"We'd never make it," Danny said flatly, and saw the truth strike across their faces.

"Your horses would play out. Man needs Spanish blood under him for a long ride like this. My Blue Dog is no bolt of lightning, but he can go all day . . . An' I know this country. Remember, my folks ranched on the Salt Fork of the Brazos."

As he said the last, Danny realized he'd grown up these past months. He was getting so he could talk without choking up about what had happened to his people that time on the road to Fort Belknap, in the buggy, when the Comanches came. In some ways he felt wiser and older than his friends, as if he must protect them from their peaceful selves.

"There's hard sense to what he says," Braden told his partner. "But I don't like it."

"Sure, he knows the country," Holloway agreed, scowling. "But so does Morg Queen. And so did the Hart brothers. Remember, they started east two months ago and never even reached Fort Belknap. Rode good horses, too."

Danny started drifting off. "Believe I'll take me a little stroll up town."

"What for?" Holloway wanted to know.

"Need a new cinch."

As Danny headed toward town, noon-time cooking fires whetted the warm southwest wind on the crowded Flat below Fort Griffin, crouched on a high bluff overlooking the broad valley of the Clear Fork. He could see tents and picketed horses and mules and the gray canvas of wagons everywhere. Onward the noisy settlement bunched along Collin Creek—frame and log buildings, shacks, corrals and mounds of buffalo hides whose smell wrinkled his nostrils as he approached Morg Queen's camp.

Danny slacked step. He knew Morg Queen by sight only. Yet he wanted one good look to see what he was up against, for Todd and Sam had to let him go. There was no other way, unless they aimed to camp here all winter.

Five men squatted down over tin plates. If they figured they fooled a body by posing as hunters, Danny thought, they were dead wrong. Something marked them—their clothes, their somewhat pale, hardcast faces. Perhaps Danny stared too long.

"Lost something, kid?"

Danny gave a slight start. Watching him was a broken-nosed man wearing a new black suit and string tie and a light tan planter's hat. He recognized Morg Queen.

"Just lookin' for the Hart brothers' camp." Danny didn't know why the name slipped out. Certainly it was the last thing he should have said.

All eating sounds ceased. Morg Queen put down his plate and stood up. The dark suit seemed to make his loom broader and taller than he really was. He spoke between square, yellow teeth.

"Never heard of 'em," he said.

Danny nodded and moved on, holding himself carefully. It was a relief to reach the noisy street, to dodge wagons and riders and wind through the milling crowd to Swanson's Saddle Shop.

A sudden chill overtook him as he paid for the new horsehair cinch. Half turning, he saw a hat brim drawing back from the doorway. Deliberately, he kept his back turned to the street while he stuffed the scratchy cinch inside his shirt. Then he went outside to drift among the hunters and skinners and cowboys.

It took an hour's steady talking, back and forth, before Danny won his way after supper.

"There's just one way we can do it," he said. "You-all go to town. Stay till good dark. When you come by Morg Queen's camp, whoop an' holler—fire your pistols. Make him think it's a frolic after the big hide sale. I'll saddle up. Be a man on watch by the ford, only I'll cross below." He paused, trying to grin away their frowning concern.

"Promise us you'll drop that money belt in the trail if it means your life," Holloway said. "They'll kill you for it, Danny. We'll follow at daybreak."

Purple twilight seemed to linger endlessly over the valley after Todd and Sam left, having said brief, awkward farewells of admonition.

Nothing happened for a long while. Danny remembered to remove his spurs. He began to fidget.

He jerked when a shot broke. Another one exploded, followed by a chorus of yells, all in the direction of Morg Queen's camp. The yelling and whooping grew louder. Somebody was singing. It sounded like Sam's hilarious voice. Danny could hear men running back there.

He moved on that signal, flung blanket and saddle on the blue roan horse, cinched up and led off, holding his spurs and skirting the camps. Out a way he swung to the saddle and felt Blue Dog strike into a running walk.

The Clear Fork was low this late in June and his horse scarcely slowed as they splashed across, half a mile below the ford. Danny checked up, buckled on his spur leathers, and turned to listen. All he heard was the muted hum of the wild settlement. Dismounting to cinch tighter, he thought of the hundred miles of broken country between him and Fort Richardson with a sense of dread.

He was riding onto the trail when he stiffened to a distant horse racket behind him. He cut away, wheeling into the timber, to slip down and hold his hands over Blue Dog's nostrils. Soon a rider galloped past. Danny followed at a listening walk, now and then stopping dead. In a brief time he picked up what he expected—the noise of a horse coming toward him. Once more he quit the road.

"That's the ford lookout doublin' back," he told himself as the horseman drummed by. "They sure smelled it out quick."

Well, he hadn't figured to fool Morg Queen's bunch very long. Not after the two fool mistakes he'd made—that slip about the Hart boys, which

"Outside," Danny ordered, wondering what he would do if the stationkeeper went for the rifle.

sounded suspicious, and buying a new cinch, which meant travel.

A kind of instinct turned him off the trail, upon rougher footing, which would delay him but keep his scalp on longer. A soft wind wandered with him, bringing the loneliness of open country, laden with the dry-sweet scents of the short grasses. He scared up a little bunch of black shapes that went grunting off into the dark.

Buffalo. Seeing them reminded him of hunting with Todd and Sam, and his loneliness struck him like a sharp pain.

The first streaky grayness of dawn found Danny crouched on a post-oak ridge which looked down on the main trail. He rubbed his eyes and ran fingers over his smooth chin, watching the raw light grow and sketch the dark creek, the stage station beyond it, and the corral full of horses.

Now he led the gelding back into the covering of woods. At first glance there was little to distinguish the blue roan. He resembled a pony instead of a full-grown horse. But his short back was stout, his fox ears alert, and he had intelligent eyes and a well-formed head. He could travel over rocks like a mountain goat, and his running walk, which he could hold for hours, made riding a comfort. Most important, he had the toughness of mustang or mesteno blood.

Danny loosened the new cinch, took the morral off the saddlehorn, and fitted it over the roan's head so the horse could munch oats. For himself there was jerky and cold biscuits.

When daylight lay full and early warm, when he could scan up and down the trail and see it empty—not a sign of dust toward the Clear Fork country—he took his horse down the slope to water. He had decided to ride around the stage stop.

Just then he drew in the arresting aroma of coffee making. It rubbed up his hunger all over again, and he hesitated, thinking, considering.

"The trail's clear," he decided. "I saw that. I won't stop long."

So he rode across.

A man came to the door of the picket house as Danny halted. A bony, bushy-whiskered man, his dirty blue shirt bore fresh grease stains. His angular jaws still worked on his breakfast. His piercing stare was openly hostile. Then Danny saw a trace of a fixed smile.

"Had yer breakfast yet, boy?"

Danny nodded. "But I sure could use a little of that coffee."

"Step down. There's plenty. Ever'body's welcome here."

Danny followed him into the single room which reeked of grease and unwashed clothing and bedding. Sam Braden's heavy six-shooter, wobbling on his hip, gave him assurance. The station-keeper filled a tin cup and gestured to a chair. Danny declined and sipped the strong, mud-colored brew.

"Where you headed, boy?"

"Fort Belknap. On the lookout for work."

"I see. Better have some breakfast. Take a chair."

"I'll stand. Thanks."

Time began to drag. A closed-in feeling started up in Danny. Suddenly a tiny bell of warning sounded within him, ringing wildly as the man slid across to block the doorway. His welcome smile was gone. The hard-set eyes flicked to a rifle leaning aginst the wall.

Danny, trembling, held the tin cup in his left hand. He flung its contents and drew his handgun in the same motion. Too late, the fending arm shot up. There was a sputtering.

"You dang fool kid!"

"Outside," Danny ordered, wondering what he would do if the stationkeeper went for the rifle.

Danny saw him estimate his chances, watched his glance swivel to the rifle and back to Danny. At last the man turned and stepped out. Danny, at his heels but not too close, snatched up the rifle and mounted fast.

"Here I feed you an' you rob me!" came the furious snarl.

"I'll drop it down the road apiece, but the stock'll be busted," Danny swore. He saw now. He saw everything. "Reckon the poor Hart boys ate breakfast here, too, didn't they? Because they never got to Belknap."

He stared accusingly at the man, then heeled Blue Dog away at a pounding run.

Some hard distance on, when he looked back from a ridge, a feather of gray-black smoke was beckoning above the broken remoteness where the stage station lay. Like a signal, he thought, for all the world to see.

Around ten o'clock by the sun he recognized the humping ridge that guarded the Salt Fork of the Brazos. Off the main trail a dim, grass-grown trail bent away to lose identity in the undulating folds of prairie and wooded hills. Old feelings rushed upon him and turned him weak.

North of here, on Six-Mile Creek, he and his folks had lived. It all seemed long ago. For a time he gave in, and then it stirred in him that he wasn't a boy any more. No longer could he yield to a boy's moods.

He returned the blue horse to the running walk and presently they rode up to the copper-colored river. On the other side he could see Fort Belknap's huddle of stone buildings and the little settlement nearby. He put his horse over below the fort. By now he trusted no one.

Circling while he worked eastward, he felt his first real confidence on the ride. Fort Belknap was about halfway. Ahead heat haze glittered over the yellow plain like broken glass. He caught himself nodding.

An hour must have passed when he noticed the ruffle of dust to the rear. Watching it build like a rushing brown whirlwind, he spurred to a lope, his eyes considering the knot of scrub-timbered hills across the plain. When he looked again, the pointing finger of dust seemed closer.

Danny grasped a sharp insight. They'd changed to fresh horses at the stage station and maybe again at the river settlement. Meantime, Blue Dog had covered some sixty miles of rough country.

A bullet whistled and he ducked down, hearing the faint pop of a rifle. Todd Holloway's old converted single-shot Burnside carbine bumped under Danny's left leg. He slid it out of the scabbard, eared back the hammer, twisted in the saddle and fired.

That sent them fanning out—three riders now. Danny, chewing his lip, reloaded and took worried note of his horse. Blue Dog still had some bottom left, but he couldn't outrun fresh horses.

Ahead, the trail wound into the wooded hills. When hidden from the rear, Danny took the cat-footed Spanish horse up the rugged hillside at a clattering rush. He tied up on the crest, ran back and got down behind a pile of loose sandstone, waiting, his chest pounding and sweat making rivulets down his face. A hot wind, moaning suddenly through the post-oaks and blackjacks, startled him.

He forced himself to settle down, to wait, to watch. Gradually, the stupor of weariness caught him.

The clack of hoofs shook him alert. Below on the trail, one rider walked his horse while he searched left and right, rifle swinging. Danny's breath seemed to stop, but he waited, wanting all three of them within range before he fired. He tensed as the horseman halted and stared off, as if wondering about the trail looping ahead which he couldn't see.

Another horseman rode up and halted. Danny stared hard. Where was Morg Queen?

In his intentness to see, Danny shifted his position and felt a rock give under his boots. Before he could grab it, it slid away, making a tiny but distinct *thinkk* in the stillness.

Both riders wheeled their horses swiftly, rushing back.

Danny's hands were shaking. He'd never shot at a man before. His hurried bullet drew a spurt of dust on the far side of the nearest rider. In another moment they vanished behind the shoulder of the hill.

Nothing changed for a space. Only the thud of running horses reached Danny, and those sounds settled and faded, and he felt the grip of complete stillness.

He went rigid when a rough voice, sounding almost genial, called, "You

Illustrated by Eugene Shortridge

The clamp of fear and a cold certainty chilled him. They were going to shoot him down, even if he gave them the money.

up there—hey, kid! Come on down with the money. We'll let you ride on without harm."

Danny couldn't spot him, and he was thinking, *Just like you did the Hart boys.* He knew then he'd never surrender. He was a goner both ways, if he did or didn't. And that was Morg Queen down there talking so rattlesnake nice.

"Listen, kid," the voice called again, a purring quality in it this time. "We won't hurt you none. I give you my word."

Danny's throat dried. His thinking was getting all mixed up about Todd and Sam and that Missouri farm. The clamp of fear and a cold certainty chilled him. They were going to shoot him down, even if he gave them the money. He scrubbed a hand across his mouth, straining to think. Sweat dripped off the end of his nose.

That pause—and then the voice resumed, without pretense this time.

"Kid, bring the money down—else we're comin' up after it!"

Danny squeezed his mouth into a grim line. That was more like it. Already he felt better. Rising, he drifted back to his horse. It was good, having your horse close. Except he couldn't see from here. Going at a crouch, he climbed higher up the hill's spine and became still.

Somewhere north of him, unseen, a man stumbled over rocks and cursed. Danny whirled in that direction, froze, and then took two cautious steps that way.

He was advancing into a pressing silence that held, unbroken. Moments passed and he spotted armed figures slipping from tree to tree. One man raised his rifle, peering off where Danny had crouched on the hillside. Then Danny was struck still as the man turned and stared straight at him and brought the rifle around.

Danny was steadier now, and he was defending himself. He eared and fired, the old carbine kicking like a spring colt. He saw the outlay clap a hand to his upper left arm and dive behind a tree.

As Danny reloaded and raised up, something plucked off his hat, sailing it away, and he heard the roar of a rifle. Two shapes came dodging up the west slope. He snapped a shot and got back a sharp cry. Both figures flattened out.

Danny's heart was pumping madly. He whirled, legging across to his wall-eyed horse, untying and scrambling up so quickly that Blue Dog was clattering down the rocky slant before Danny had a firm seat.

He saw the water-scoured gully just an instant before he felt the blue horse spring to clear it. Danny wasn't ready. Off balance, loose in the saddle, he sensed himself falling. Frantic, he was grabbing for the saddlehorn, missing and grabbing again, and clutching it when his carbine fell to strike clacking on rocks. Across, Blue Dog grunted and broke to his knees, but humped up and, catlike, found footing again.

There wasn't time to stop for the carbine. They were going hard, the small horse jumping rocks, swerving, cutting, when Danny heard the fry-

ing sound of bullets. In moments the little gelding reached the level ground of the trail, stretching out and hitting a dead run. Danny hung low across the withers. Some sense guided him north, away from the trail, placing the hill between him and the rifle fire.

Some distance on, he drew up for the blue horse to blow. The silence back there was so deep and unreal it seemed he might have imagined the violence. No one followed. Nothing moved. Had Morg Queen given up? Danny could only wonder, and he experienced a deep exhaustion as he commenced a circling ride.

The day was well burned out by the time he angled in on the trail not far from Jacksboro, the village across the creek from Fort Richardson. His anticipation quickened when, topping a rise, he glimpsed the roofs of houses under the dropping sun. Even his horse seemed to know the end of the hard ride was near, for he stepped up his running walk.

It wasn't long until Danny was passing the first scattered houses. His feeling kindled with an immense surge of relief, and his nose told him it was supper time. Turning south, he left the settlement and its hungering smells. Across the creek, he could see the fort's buildings in the distance. Sundown was close. The lonely notes of a bugle sounded, as clear as a dove's call.

Danny was whistling when Blue Dog's hoofs drummed the plank bridge and they took the wide road which curved with the creek and passed the ruins of a picket house before turning toward the fort.

A shrill nickering from the creek's timber caused Danny to check up. Blue Dog nickered back. Yet Danny couldn't locate the other horse.

And suddenly, quite suddenly, a man so large he had to stoop filled the doorway of the old picket house—a broken-nosed man in a black suit and planter's hat. It was Morg Queen. His six-shooter was centered on Danny's chest.

"You're late, kid," Queen said, amused. "Why, I been here an hour or more. Now throw down the money."

Danny was too sick to argue, but he didn't obey.

"Hand it over!" Queen commanded, and stepped forward. Danny read a tell-tale glitter. Queen was going to shoot if Danny refused.

On instinct, Danny plunged spurs into the roan and threw himself low, feeling the Spanish horse bolt forward. Queen's startled, crooked-nosed face loomed menacingly near an instant ahead of the dull roar of Queen's revolver. Danny heard and felt a solid jar, but it wasn't a bullet. A scream tore and all he saw was Queen's outthrown shape going down and spinning away.

Tearing down the hard-packed road, Danny squeezed lower in the saddle. He stole a backward look—and held that look.

Morg Queen lay like a thick log across the road. He didn't get up....

Danny awakened to voices. It was strong daylight. He sat up on the cot, blinking about at the storeroom where the quartermaster had bedded him down last evening. Someone shoved the door open and he was looking up at his two partners.

Dust powdered their face and clothing. Their eyes looked hollow-rimmed. They made a rush for him and started pounding his back and mussing his hair. His throat filled.

Todd Holloway said, finally, "Understand Morg Queen's all busted up. Seems he got in front of a horse."

"Not just a horse," Danny corrected, feigning an injured look. "A *Spanish horse*. Makes a big difference."

"Listen to him brag," Sam Braden spoke up. "We brought in two of Morg Queen's bunch ourselves. Course they couldn't put up much of a fight." He and Todd traded meaningful glances. "Uh—we stopped by the sutler's. Brought you something, Danny. It's man-size."

Bowing mockingly, he handed Danny a new razor.

Danny's jaw fell. He ran a tentative forefinger over the keen edge and next explored the slopes of his chin, trying not to show what he thought of these two Yankee farmers. Come to think of it, he might just need a good shave sooner than anybody figured—if he went a-visiting back to Missouri, and met Kathy Holloway, and that seemed kind of likely now!

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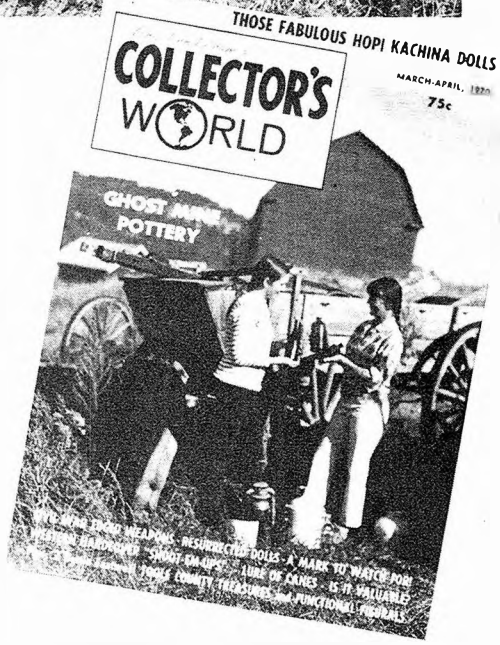

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"You're wrong—you're wrong about Jack!" she cried. "You didn't know him at all! He was bad and cruel!"

RELUCTANT KILLER

A life for a life, that was what Jack had drilled into him. Now Jack was dead and Boyd Tripp had no choice but to gun down the man who had killed him

By CLAY RINGOLD

Illustrated by Eugene Shortridge

On the crest of the last rise, Boyd Tripp drew rein and looked out over the vast spread of country unfurling below in an endless sea of tan and green. This was Idaho, lying peacefully in the broad shadows of the brooding Seven Devils Hills; this was the southern lip of Ten Mile Valley, sprawling warm and rich under a summer sun; and this was the end of a long trail—the homeland of Tom Nickerson, a man he'd traveled two thousand miles to kill.

A river's bright slash traced across the valley's floor, meandering through thick willows, in and out among the trees, and Boyd Tripp's mind went back to his boyhood, to the words of an old spiritual he had heard his Ma sing countless times: "One more river, one more river to cross," it went.

Funny thing, he thought, that he should remember that old song just then. But it certainly was appropriate. Tom Nickerson lived somewhere across that small stream.

Boyd swung stiffly down from the saddle. He was weary and his muscles and joints ached from the endless hours on the trail. Cheyenne had been a long ride and the gauntness lying upon his lean young face was like a stiff mask, giving him the appearance of being much older than his nineteen years.

After tying the bay horse to a clump of brush, he stretched, squared his wide shoulders and sauntered to the slanted side of a low butte. He leaned back against its cool surface. A sigh came from him as a vagrant breeze, drifting down from the knobs and high canyons, riffled over him, touching him and turning him languorous and at ease. And for a time he was a young boy again and not a man bent to grim purpose.

His Ma's song rocked gently through his mind again and he shrugged impatiently, wanting to cast it off. He needed no reminder of what lay ahead. Jack's pistol, holstered on his hip and thonged snugly to his leg, never allowed him to forget it. Its weight was a sullen, intangible force that had pushed and prodded him relentlessly along the desolate, dusty byroads of the territories for nearly two years now, never letting him rest, binding him to a search that had led from town to town, from ranch to ranch.

His sole purpose during those two years—to kill Tom Nickerson. Thinking about it, he shuddered involuntarily.

To kill anything, much less another human being, was against his nature. He liked to see things grow, to put seed in the moist earth and watch a young plant spring forth to face the sun. It pleasured him to coax a spindly-legged calf into a husky, shaggy-coated steer, and he wished mightily that he was back on their little ranch in New Mexico right at that moment—his ranch now—tending the garden, and looking after the few head of cattle they had acquired. He reckoned now he wouldnt' even mind the chore of hauling water for the trees he'd planted.

But a man had obligations. Jack had drilled that into him. You looked after your own kith and kin, and you righted any wrongs done them without crying to somebody else. That's the way Jack said a man lived, and Jack knew. He was a wise one, that Jack—a man among men. Thus, when a bullet from the gun of some cowboy named Tom Nickerson had felled him, Boyd Tripp recognized his duty and saw clearly what had to be done.

He had to find Nickerson and kill him.

He stirred, turned restless by the thought of what was ahead. At that moment he saw movement far below, near the water. A girl emerged from the thicket and plunged into the river. She began to frolic and swim. Caught up between curiosity and a vague feeling of embarrassment, he watched.

It was too great a distance to tell much about her, other than the fact that she was young and well-finished, and when she had completed her swim and ducked back into the willows, he mounted the bay and drifted down the long slope to her. She had finished dressing and was winding the glinting damp folds of her hair into a bun when he pulled up.

Touching the brim of his cow country hat, he said, "Afternoon, ma'am. Name's Boyd Tripp. You live around here?"

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, having her wonderment at his sudden appearance. He met her gaze, his eyes telling her nothing of the things he knew she would like to know. But, then, he had never paid much attention to girls. The ones he had known back home, the Dollarhide twins who were neighbors ten miles to the south, were both spindly, knobby little creatures who always re-

"Women liked him too, I reckon, because he was big and tall and always dressed fine. And he rode a coal-black horse with a silver-trimmed saddle."

Reluctant Killer continued

minded him of freshly foaled colts, and he hadn't troubled to look at them twice.

And during the past two years, on the trail, he was too busy with his quest.

But this girl moved him strangely. She had the deepest blue eyes he had ever seen, almost black. She was slim but well curved, and her skin was the color of rich cream. She had a wide, full mouth and her dark hair glistened in the sunlight like the bangles cut from tin cans and hung on a Christmas tree.

He heard her say in answer to his question, "Yes, up the valley a way."

He pulled his gaze aside, shifting to the distance beyond the river. Almost reluctantly, he asked: "Know a man named Tom Nickerson?"

She nodded at once.

"Are you a friend of his?" she wanted to know.

"Not exactly," he finally said. "I've never met the man myself."

The girl was surveying him with frank interest.

"You'll like Tom," she told him, "—and his wife, Nan. They have a little daughter."

Boyd Tripp shrugged, the gesture an unconscious answer to his own thoughts rather than to her words. He had not known that Tom Nickerson was a family man. That was too bad. But it did not alter the fact that Jack was dead.

She asked: "You from cattle country?"

He nodded.

"Down New Mexico way. Have my own spread. Haven't seen much of it lately, though. Been on the move a couple of years."

She studied him closely. "Drifter," she murmured finally, expressing in that one word a vast amount of womanly scorn for imperfection.

Boyd Tripp smiled grimly.

"Maybe not after today," he said.

In the silence that followed, she swung onto her pony and began smoothing first the wrinkles from her corduroy skirt and then straightening the cuffs of her white shirtwaist.

"There a town some'eres?"

She nodded.

"Muleshoe's down the road a piece. I'm riding that way if you'd care to come along."

He wheeled the bay in beside her and they rode in quiet across the narrow bridge and along the willows until at last they broke into the open and a scatter of sun-grayed buildings lay before them. A few stores, a saloon or two, a livery barn and blacksmith shop and a two-storied hotel bearing the faded sign THE NORTHWEST comprised Muleshoe.

They came to a halt and she asked, "Are you staying here?"

Boyd said, "I'll put up at the hotel." He paused, eyeing her with a half smile. "I don't recollect you telling me your name."

"It's Margaret—Margaret Grant. We'll meet again if you plan to see the Nickersons. I go there often. Good-bye."

He touched the brim of his hat and watched her ride off. Sober, bitter thoughts suddenly moved in to crowd out the lightheartedness he had felt while they were together. What would she think of him if she knew his business with her friend Tom Nickerson?

When Margaret Grant had turned the corner from sight, Boyd Tripp rode to the hotel, dismounted and tied the bay. Crossing the pine-floored porch where half a dozen old men sat in tipped-back chairs, enjoying their tobacco and memories, he entered the dusty lobby of the Northwest. A bald-headed clerk watched him approach the desk with round, expressionless eyes. Without speaking, the clerk pushed forward a pencil and dog-eared register.

Tripp wrote Boyd Tripp, Quemado, New Mexico in a hard, slanting hand, and asked: "How do I get to the Nickerson place?"

The clerk, glancing first at the book, gave him directions and then slid a key across the counter.

Tripp murmured, "Later," and recrossed the lobby to the street. Stepping to the saddle of the bay, he rode off in an easterly direction, filled suddenly with a pressing urgency to get the chore over with. He wanted to be done with it, to fulfill his obligation to Jack, and then perhaps he could think of other things—such as Margaret Grant, and picking up the loose threads of his own life.

After he had left the town he drew his pistol, checked its cylinder for loads, and tested its action. Satisfied, he returned the gun to its holster and rode on. A short time later he came into the Nickersons' yard and drew rein before a low, rambling structure of hewn logs. Keeping a tight grip on his nerves, stifling the sickness he felt for what he had to do, he dismounted, walked quickly to the door and knocked.

The door was opened by a woman of perhaps thirty. Blonde hair spilled down about the cameo-clean features of her face, and her eyes were soft and dark. Ann Nickerson had been a beauty once, but the hardships of frontier life were having their way, were leaving their definite mark.

A tot of a girl tugged at her calico skirt, looking up at Boyd Tripp with mild interest.

The woman smiled at Tripp.

"Yes?"

"Looking for Tom Nickerson," Tripp stated bluntly. "Does he live here?"

Something very like fear erased the smile from the woman's face. A ragged sort of anxiety appeared as if she might be recognizing danger in the presence of the tall young stranger. For a long moment, she hesitated.

"He lives here," she said, finally. "But he's not home today. He's away."

'Will he be back today?"

"I—I don't know. I'm not sure."

He felt the steady pressure of her gaze, searching, probing, seeking an answer to some question she alone knew. A slight break in her voice betrayed her feelings.

"Who shall I say wanted to see him?"

Boyd Tripp shook his head. "Never mind. I'll come back another time."

He saw then that she was really afraid. She was guessing his purpose and he felt sorry for her. A woman's intuition was a wondorous thing, and it would be sad for her and the child. But it had to be done. A life for a life, that's what Jack had drilled into him, and that was the way it would be—Tom Nickerson's life in payment for that of Jack. But it was too bad the woman and little girl would have to suffer.

Abruptly, he swung about, mounted the bay, and rode back to Muleshoe.

Stabling his horse and leaving instructions for his care, Tripp went to his room in the Northwest. It was little different from hundreds of others he had paused in briefly during his wanderings—dirty, ill-furnished, ill-kept and depressing. He sank down on the protesting iron bedstead, stretching out full length and giving way at last to weariness.

He lay motionless, not fully asleep or awake, but drifting in that inbetween void where background and demands were old and familiar, but where Margaret Grant was a new figure. She watched him with sad, troubled eyes that held no understanding for him as he walked down the dusty street of Muleshoe, gun in hand, to kill Tom Nickerson.

But she must understand!

That conclusion brought him bolt upright, and fully awake. He must make her see what he had to do, that it was his duty and he could not shirk it. Surely she could see his side of it!

He would make her see, he thought. He rose at once, stripped off and scrubbed down from the china bowl and pitcher. After shaving, he donned clean clothes and went downstairs to the dining room where he was a lone customer. He ate slowly, enjoying his food, and when he had finished he got up, passed through the lobby under the curious eyes of the clerk, and headed for the stable.

Picking up the bay and getting directions from the hosteler, he rode off through the cool twilight toward the Grant homestead. A breeze had sprung up from the nearby hills and already the stars were beginning to show, faint specks of light in the darkening sky now, but soon to be definite and exceptionally low-hanging.

The Grant place, he found, lay east of the settlement in a slashed-out clearing. The buildings were all bright and sharp in a new coat of white paint, outlined distinctly against the crowding circle of green growth beyond them. He paused at the gate in the rail fence, having a lonely man's appreciation for the scene. The fields were lush and a soft, sweet freshness hung in the air like a heady perfume. Somewhere a man pounded on an anvil and overhead a straggle of noisy crows were etched in blackness against the clouds, bound for their roost for the night.

A door slammed and Margaret Grant came out on the full-length porch that spanned the building. She stood watching him. He rode down the lane and halted, awaiting her invitation.

"Hello," she said. "Won't you get down?"

He hesitated a moment, studying her smile, looking at the way the cotton dress moulded her figure, and the way the last spray of sunlight glanced from her hair and put a sparkle in it. He nodded and dismounted, tethering the bay at the rail.

"Find the Nickerson place?"

"Yes," replied Trip. "But he wasn't at home."

He moved up to stand before her, a tall, lean young man with wide shoulders. Removing his hat, he said, "Will you talk a spell with me?"

"Of course," she replied at once. "Let's sit on the edge of the porch."

When they were comfortable, sitting side by side, Boyd Tripp, ever direct and to the point, said, "Figured I'd better be telling you why I'm here. Like as not you won't be caring to see me again after you know."

"Oh?" she said, looking sideways at him.

He waited a long, dragging moment, then turned to face her. "I'm going to kill Tom Nickerson."

He heard the sharp intake of her breath, saw her eyes widen in shocked surprise. He waited out her breathless pause, wondering what her next words would be, if there would be any words at all.

In a shaken, outraged voice, she asked, "Why—why do you want to do that?"

Tripp's answer was flat, toneless.

"He killed my brother, Jack. Shot him down. I've been two years tracking him and now I've caught up with him."

She still sat beside him, looking straight ahead. But he felt her draw away from him.

"It's hard to believe," she said in a low voice. "I don't see how Tom Nickerson could ever hurt anybody. And you—you don't seem like a killer."

"A man doesn't always have a choice. Sometimes he has to do what he hates."

She faced him. "I don't understand that! If you don't want to do it—why are you?"

"Jack was all of the family I had left," he replied, remembering, "After the folks were killed by Indians, we were left to run the ranch together. He was ten years older than me but we got along fine. It was a good life. Hard but good. Maybe Jack didn't like to work the place too much, but that was all right with me. When he would all of a sudden get restless and ride off, I knew he'd be back. He always returned, always bringing me something I'd wanted and having a new story to tell about his trip.

"Jack was a good man and nobody ever said he wasn't. Everybody liked

him. Women, too, I reckon, because he was big and tall and always dressed fine. And he rode a coal-black horse with a silver-trimmed saddle. Then one day he left and didn't come back. Instead, a marshal from the next town brought me his horse and gun. Told me a man named Tom Nickerson had killed my brother. I raised what money I could and started looking for this Nickerson. Now, I've found him."

Tripp paused and after what seemed a long time, Margaret Grant said wearily, "And to right one wrong, you are going to commit another terrible wrong."

"I have to," Tripp said doggedly. "He killed Jack. Now he will have to face up to me."

She got slowly to her feet. He followed suit and stood with his hat in his hand. "I was hoping you could understand what I've got to do," he said.

She shook her head. "Never! Never could I understand it. You idolized your brother, I can see that. But I can't see why you must become a killer for him."

"Tom Nickerson has to pay for what he did."

She whirled to him. "Why must he? Why must you take vengance into your own hands?"

He shrugged, suddenly helpless before her question. "Because that's the way it is," he answered, lamely. "A man has to look after his own people."

She stared at him, angry tears brightening her eyes. Some inward struggle was tearing at her, striving to make itself heard, but the words would not come to her lips. She uttered, "Oh!" and turning about, hurried across the gallery into the house.

Silently, Boyd Tripp moved to the bay. He swung up and rode from the yard. He did not feel like sleep and an hour or so later he drew up on the southern rim of Ten Mile Valley, near the point where he had halted earlier in the day.

Indecision was pressing him cruelly and the first doubt as to the right and wrong of things was gnawing at his mind, placed there by Margaret Grant. But that was only a woman's way of thinking, he assured himself. A man would think as Jack did—and demand the penalty from Nickerson that he was demanding.

Looking out over the vast bowl that was Ten Mile Valley, he watched the yellow squares of light wink out, one by one, as the minutes passed and it grew later. Most men took for granted the fine things of life they possessed such as those homes, small and large, scattered out beneath the star-broken sky. Only a few realized what it was like to sit alone on a hilltop and gaze out across an endless prairie, watching the friendly lights go out in another man's castle.

How many knew what it was like to live on the outer fringe, never fully beyond yet never actually within a world of people and activities and commonplace happenings? Only a few knew the summer-baked stuffiness of a cheap hotel room, or had lain awake listening to a bitter wind shouldering it unfriendliness against a ramshackle building in the dead of bleak winter. Many men, possessing the good and full things of life, lived and died without ever becoming aware of that void in which others existed.

Boyd Tripp knew. From the day Jack was killed there had been nothing else. It had been as if he were born anew to foresake the things he loved and become a lonely, wandering shadow, troubled and weary in a friendless universe.

It was close to midnight when he returned to the hotel and entered the lobby. The clerk, observing his arrival, glanced up.

"Evenin', Mr. Tripp," he said in a carrying tone.

At once a tall, gray man rose from a chair in the lobby and crossed to meet Boyd.

"I'm Tom Nickerson," he said. "I understand you've been looking for me."

Tripp became a rigid figure. His jaw hardened into a sharp angle and light spilling from the overhead lamp struck against his cheekbones, mirroring off the tight skin. He stared at the man who had murdered his brother—the man he had hunted so long.

Nickerson surprised him. He was no cold-faced gunman, no dangerous looking killer. From all indications, he was just another man, ordinary, average, with an air of friendliness about him.

Doubt again assailed Tripp's mind, and he remembered how violently opposed Margaret Grant had been to this. Could he be wrong in demanding this man's life in payment for his brother's, he wondered? Could he be wrong and could Margaret Grant be right?

Into his mind's eye appeared a vision of Jack as he had last seen him—handsome Jack Tripp, sitting proud and straight in that devil-may-care way of his on the black stallion, with the sun shining on the sliver mountings of his saddle. Indecision faded from Boyd's mind before that cherished memory.

"I've been looking for you," he stated, harshly. "And you know why."

Nickerson did not flinch. "I suppose. Any use telling my side of the story?"

"None whatever," Tripp snapped. "You killed my brother. I'm here to square that or get killed trying."

Near complete silence lay across the hotel's lobby, the only sound being the clerk's strained, raspy breathing.

"You armed?"

Nickerson shook his head. "Don't wear one nowadays."

"Then put one on. We'll settle this in the morning."

The tall man nodded and Tripp swung by him, closing him out. He heard the wind go out of Nickerson in a long, despairing sigh and passed on up the stairway to his room. He entered, locked the door and remained standing near it, momentarily held by his own reaction.

Often he had considered this very moment, wondering how he would feel when the time came to kill Tom Nickerson. He was not nervous and there was no fear raking through him, and for that he was thankful. He knew that he was better than average with a gun, for Jack had taught him the tricks of a quick, sure draw. Nickerson was undoubtedly good, but Boyd did not think the man would be better. No, it was not that he questioned his ability to stand against Tom Nickerson, nor was there any doubt he would emerge from the affair alive. It was simply the problem of whether he was right or wrong, a matter he had never considered until Margaret Grant placed it in his head.

Until then, he had known he was right. Now he was unsure.

Moving away from the door, he sat down on the edge of the bed, all at once very tired. He lay back, not bothering to remove his clothing, while he struggled to clear his mind of all the conflicting thoughts.

A knocking brought him up and he was amazed to see sunlight streaming through the window. His first guess was that Tom Nickerson stood outside, that he had perhaps brought the law with him to halt the gunplay. But he dismissed that thought at once. Nickerson was not the sort of man who would run for help.

Boyd got to his feet, drew his gun, and turned the key in the lock.

"Come in," he directed, stepping back.

It was Margaret Grant who entered. Her eyes ran over his tense figure, grasping the coiled readiness of his tall body, and recognizing the dark threat. Closing the door, she placed her shoulders against it, her face going tired and hopeless.

"This is the way it will always be," she said in dead voice. "Always facing the door with a gun in your hand—always wondering who will come through it."

Tripp holstered his pistol.

"No," he said. "I didn't expect you. I did him. There'll be no others after Tom Nickerson."

"You think it will end there?" she cried. "You believe you can take a man's life and just forget it—that others will forget, too?"

"There won't be any others," he repeated, doggedly. "This is between Nickerson and me. When it's done with and settled, it's ended."

She was a small, definite shape standing against the door. Her eyes were bright with worry and her voice carried a strong urgency. "It will never end, Boyd! Can't you see? You kill Tom and somebody else will come looking to kill you—somebody with revenge in his heart, or just some man wanting to build his reputation. It never stops!"

His shoulders slumped a little, but he said, "No, it won't be that way."

"It's not in you to kill," she hurried on, pressing the point. "Why must you turn yourself into a killer just because of some foolish sense of duty to your brother?"

Tripp stared at her. "There's nothing foolish about it. It's something I have to do. There's no way out for me."

"There is a way out," she said. "Just don't go out in that street and meet Tom Nickerson. He will be glad if you don't—and so will many others, including me." She hesitated, then added, "It—it means everything to me, Boyd. Just—just as you do. Tell me you will give it up."

He could only marvel at all the wondorous promise of her thus revealed. But the image of Jack Tripp

stood beyond her, and he knew there could be no compromise.

"I'm sorry, Margaret," he said in an empty voice, dead hollow with regret.

A small cry of despair escaped her lips, but he dropped his head and did not look up. He heard the slight feminine rustle of her as she turned and opened the door. He heard her whisper, "Good-bye," with utter finality, in a voice as faint as willow dust, and then she was gone. Gone forever, he knew.

Muleshoe lay hushed and tense under the slowly climbing sun. Boyd guessed, at once, that Nickerson had already put in an appearance, that he was somewhere close by. Checking his gun, he stepped off the hotel porch and started for the stable at the far end of the street. Somewhere in between he would find Nickerson.

He moved at a slow, deliberate pace. Sweat began to build up under his hatband, gathering on his forehead, but he did not scrub it away. Jack had once told him, in such a situation, to let nothing distract him. "Keep your mind on your business," Jack had warned. Only vaguely did Boyd hear the muted, suppressed sounds that hung in the throttled air —the ragged sobbing of a child somewhere, the stamp of a restless horse, the far distant barking of a dog.

But even as he paced slowly up the street, he could not keep Margaret Grant from his thoughts. Her words kept stabbing at him, jarring, setting up their questions and their doubts. How could he be wrong? A man had a right to settle such things in the way all other men considered right. Jack had always said a man did such things as a matter of honor, of principle. Then how could he be wrong?

A thought came to him suddenly. Perhaps he should have let Nickerson talk last night in the hotel lobby. Maybe he ought to hear his side of the story. Margaret might even feel differently about it if all of the facts were known. He halted. There was still time for it. He would tell Nickerson to go ahead and—

Tom Nickerson came out of the stable and advanced to meet him. The man's hands were lifted well away from his body and he came to a stop some fifteen yards from Boyd. His face was frozen, a long, melancholy mask of gray, and his eyes, squinted against the sun, were steady and direct.

"I'm ready," he said through the laden hush.

Tripp watched him closely, alert for any tricks. Tom Nickerson was good, no doubt about that. He would have to be to shoot down Jack. Jack was one of the best.

"You had in mind doing some talking last night—" he began.

A shrill cry at the edge of the street sliced through his words. Nan Nickerson broke suddenly from a doorway and came running to her husband.

"Tom! I won't let him do it!" She was near screaming. "I won't let him kill you!"

Nickerson took her gently by the shoulders and tried to put her aside. She broke free and started running toward Boyd Tripp, her blonde hair disarranged and streaming down her back. Halfway, she stumbled and fell. She struggled up and came on.

"You're wrong—you're wrong about Jack!" she cried. "You didn't know him at all! He was bad and cruel!"

Tripp stiffened as the words beat against him. He had a fleeting vision of his brother astride the great black stallion, riding off like a shining knight in one of the story books at home. And then, unaccountably, the picture began to blur, to tarnish and fade.

"He promised to marry me but he went off and left me," Nan Nickerson sobbed, crying out her secret for all to hear. "He never came back. He didn't even send word, or write. Tom married me to give my baby a name and give us a home. Do you hear, Boyd Tripp? Your brother was bad! When he did return, he wouldn't leave me alone. He tried to make me run off with him and leave my husband and baby—but I wouldn't go. Then when he still wouldn't leave me alone, Tom killed him."

Boyd Tripp watched the woman sink exhaustedly into the street's dust. He looked at her for a moment and in that moment something deep inside him, something cold and brutal, died. And a vision, long-cherished, was shattered in his mind's eye like a pebble breaking the surface of a pool of calm water.

He turned away. A tremendous load had lifted from his shoulders. He was a free man once again, and to the free belong the future. He scanned the street, searching for Margaret Grant. And he saw her, waiting on the porch of the hotel.

THE LAST SLEEP

The end of the Apache nation was at hand. But Yanosha knew the killing would go on, for Geronimo had the look of eagles in his eyes....

By H. A. DeROSSO

Illustrated by Eugene Shortridge

A voice said, "Wake, Yanosha. Geronimo comes."

Yanosha rose from his blanket and looked at Gato. His eyes told Yanosha nothing but then an Apache's eyes seldom tell anything and they were Chiricahuas, hated and feared even by all the other Apaches.

"Geronimo?" Yanosha said. "And Whoa?"

"I saw only Geronimo," Gato said. "Whoa is not with them."

All at once Yanosha felt strange inside, tight and excited, like that day in the spring when he had found the butterfly in his blanket and something told him that Kootanahay had put it there. Every Apache knows that a butterfly is the most powerful of love charms and so when Whoa and Geronimo took their families and left the San Carlos reservation, Yanosha stayed behind and in time took Kootanahay as his wife.

Gato, his best friend, was looking hard at Yanosha and he knew what Gato was thinking. If something had happened to Whoa then another chief of the Chiricahuas would be chosen. Cochise had had two sons but Tahza, the eldest, was dead and Naitche was too young and did not want to be chief. That was why the Chiricahuas chose Whoa as chief when Cochise died. Whoa was a Nedni Apache whose place was in the Sierra Madre in northern Mexico. He ranged far over the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. Whoa had great power and had taught Geronimo. They were both medicine men. They could see into the future and heal sickness with herbs and songs. They knew every trail, every waterhole, every hiding place. They could outwit the White Eye soldiers. But not every one trusted Geronimo.

Yanosha went outside and Gato followed him. Kootanahay was baking bread in a **horno.** She gave Yanosha a look and he went over and put a hand on her shoulder. He thought she shivered and it made him wonder for women can sense things that men can not. Kootanahay was still very pretty. Her hair was like the wings of a crow, shining blue-black in the sun, and she smelled of wind and smoke and earth, good smells to an Apache. Yanosha smiled at her and she smiled back. The butterfly love charm still held them in its power. But there was a darkness in Kootanahay's eyes and Yanosha knew that

The Apaches shot some and took the rest captive.

They stole away in the dusk. Their loose horses followed them.

The Last Sleep continued

somehow she had learned of Geronimo's coming.

Whoa and Geronimo always came and went, taking their families with them. In the fall they came to the San Carlos and got their rations and blankets and stayed over the winter. In the spring they left for the mountains where there was water and grass and deer. Yanosha had always gone with them except this last time, when the love charm had held him back, because there was nothing good here on the San Carlos reservation. It was hot and dry in the summer, cold and miserable in the winter.

He could see the dust of Geronimo's coming, a great cloud of it. Geronimo must be bringing horses or cattle with him and that was good. They would feast and fill their bellies. The winter had been long and hard. The agent kept telling them the government was not sending very many supplies. The children were small and thin. There was not a fat Apache on the San Carlos in the summer of 1885.

Geronimo rode up to Yanosha's tepee and got off his pony. The horse was breathing hard and was all but done for. So they would slit its throat and drink its blood and eat it. The Apaches never wasted anything.

Geronimo's eagle eyes were very bright. He did not try to hide the contempt in them as he looked at Yanosha.

"How goes it, Yanosha?" he asked.

Yanosha looked to where the women were putting up Geronimo's tepees. The warriors came and stood behind Geronimo. They looked well as if they had full bellies.

"You have eyes," Yanosha told Geronimo.

Geronimo laughed. "You still think it is good to stay on the San Carlos? You still think Cochise was right?"

Yanosha did not answer that.

"Where is Whoa?" he asked.

Geronimo's eyes became Apache eyes now, telling nothing.

"Whoa is dead."

Kootanahay began to mourn, singing the song of the dead, and the other women who had come up to watch Geronimo joined with her. Yanosha had a feeling, like a cold wind on his neck, a feeling like the old people get when the gods call to them and they take a blanket and go out into the desert by themselves and lie down and die.

"How did Whoa die?" Yanosha asked.

"He drowned," Geronimo said. "At Casas Grandes. We pulled him out of the river but it was too late." He looked at Yanosha with the eagle look.

"We have no chief . . ."

They sat in a circle in Yanosha's tepee, the leaders and the old men of the Chiricahuas. They passed the pipe around and in all their minds and hearts there was the one thought—who will be our next chief? Gato's eyes were on Yanosha. He was proud of Yanosha. He would follow Yanosha wherever he led and so would some of the others but Yanosha had no medicine, none as great and powerful as Geronimo's.

"There is Naitche," Yanosha said, "the son of Cochise."

"Where is Tahza?" Geronimo asked. "He is the eldest."

"Tahza is dead."

There was a long silence. Geronimo sat with his thoughts. His eyes and face did not reveal what they were. After a long time Naitche spoke.

"They took my brother away."

"The White Eyes?" Geronimo asked.

Naitche nodded. "Mr. Clum. He picked Tahza first of all. Then several other warriors. He told them to take their ceremonial robes and bows and arrows and shields and spears and all their jewelry. They were going to a great meeting, Mr. Clum said, many sleeps away, to show their ways and customs to the white man. They were not to fight but only to sing and dance."

Naitche paused. The others were silent, many of them remembering. After a while Naitche spoke again.

"We did not expect to see any of them again. Others have been taken from us and never returned. But after a long time they came back. I watched as they stepped down from the wagon. They had all returned, all but Tahza."

"I went to see the agent. For three days I stood outside his door before he would see me. He told me my brother had died of pneumonia in Washington. He said Tahza died in a good hospital with the best doctors and nurses to care for him. He is buried in Arlington Cemetery. That is what the agent told me but I do not believe him. Until the day I die I will always believe that the White Eyes poisoned Tahza."

They were silent again. It seemed to Yanosha that all the gods came into the tepee and mourned for Tahza. The wind wept outside.

After a while Geronimo said, "Whoa is dead. We are without a chief."

Gato's eyes were on Yanosha again and the eyes of several others. "Naitche is the son of Cochise," Yanosha said.

"I am too young," Naitche said, and hung his head. "I do not have any medicine. I do not want to be chief."

"There is Yanosha," Gato said.

Geronimo laughed. "How much medicine has he? Can he outwit the White Eye soldiers? Does he know all the waterholes, the hiding places? How well can he lead you in battle?"

Yanosha looked Geronimo in the eyes. "There is no need for war," Yanosha said. "The White Eyes are too many. Cochise knew that. He would not have advised us to come to San Carlos and stay if he thought we had a chance."

"Cochise is dead," Geronimo said, "and the Chiricahuas starve and freeze in the winter on the San Carlos and thirst and roast in the summer. I can lead you to green grass and cold water and fat deer. I know where there are many cows and horses to be had just for the taking. I have talked with the gods and they have told me Geronimo will never be captured by the White Eyes. Geronimo will never surrender. His medicine is great and powerful, the most powerful of any Apache's. Whose medicine will you follow?"

"Geronimo!" one of them cried. "Geronimo!" another cried. And, "Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo!"

Geronimo rose to his feet and folded his arms across his chest. He looked down at Yanosha with the contempt shining in his eyes.

"Very well," he said. "It is done. We leave the San Carlos at dusk."

They left the tepee, all but Gato. He looked at Yanosha with a question in his eyes. Yanosha thought of the San Carlos, of the bitter, hungry winters, the dry, hungry summers. He thought of how he had been born as free as the wind, how he yearned when he looked at a mountain far away. He thought of how he was a Chiricahua and a brother to all the other Chiricahuas. Among Apaches blood ties are very strong. Yanosha rose and put an arm on Gato's shoulders.

"We go," he said. "We ride with Geronimo."

They stole away in the dusk. Their loose horses followed them. The horses were used to traveling together in a remuda and so there was no need to drive them. The Chiricahuas rode hard all night and it is said they traveled ninety miles that night. They had to get as far away from the San Carlos as they could so they might hide safely.

Geronimo showed no surprise when he saw Yanosha and Gato. Geronimo showed no feeling at all. He spoke not a word to them. Kootanahay was with Yanosha and he worried about her because she carried their child in her.

At dawn they stopped on a high ridge from where they could see a long way and there they stayed all day, hiding, not moving, giving no sign of their presence. No one spoke unless it was necessary and then only in whispers. Mothers held fingers on their babies' noses so they could not cry. Guards were posted. They could not risk fires and ate meat raw.

They rested all day and then in the dusk moved on. That is how it was, resting by day, riding by night. They picked up cattle and horses from ranches on their way to Mexico. They ate well. Their bellies began to lose their wrinkles. The men joked and the women smiled and the children laughd and played games.

It was good there in Mexico. They raided ranches and ambushed some of the Mexican soldiers and tortured the captives they took. Geronimo hated the Mexican soldiers most of all because they had killed his mother and wife and three children when he was young. Now he had several wives but he still remembered his first and killed all the Mexican soldiers he could find.

On one raid the warriors brought back a large herd of cattle, enough to feed all the Chiricahuas over the winter. They remembered their brothers and cousins on the San Carlos and so they headed north again. They had not yet reached the border when their scouts brought in Lieutenant Britton Davis.

The Lieutenant was a good man. He was not like most White Eyes. Had he been the Chiricahuas would have tortured him to death. Instead Geronimo listened to him.

"I have come to take you back," the Lieutenant told the Apaches. "You can not last forever. General Crook is preparing to march against you. The Mexicans have an army moving against you. It would be wise to return to the San Carlos before you are destroyed."

They all knew that the Lieutenant always spoke the truth. Geronimo looked at him with his eagle's eyes.

"We will not be separated from our families," Geronimo told Davis. "If we are sent east we want our families to go with us, and we will stay away for no more than two years. Those are my terms."

"I know General Crook will agree," the Lieutenant said.

So the Chiricahuas went north with him, across the border into Arizona, taking the cattle with them. The cattle needed water and grass and rest. So when they came to a ranch Geronimo told the Lieutenant they would stay there three days to rest the cattle, and then go on to the San Carlos. The Lieutenant agreed.

One day two men came. They talked to the Lieutenant a while and then all three came over to Geronimo. Yanosha could tell that the Lieutenant was bothered by something he did not like.

"These are tax men," the Lieutenant said to Geronimo. "One is from the Customs. They say you have to pay taxes on these cattle."

"Taxes?" Geronimo said. "I know nothing of taxes."

"You have crossed the border," the Lieutenant said. "You are now in the United States. When you bring goods from Mexico into the United States you have to pay tax money. That is what these men want."

Geronimo fixed the Lieutenant with that eagle's look. "This is our nation, the Apache nation. I know of no other. Our country runs from the Colorado River to the west all the way east to the plains of Texas. That has always been our nation. For many, many years the Mexicans and you White Eyes have used our land without paying us for it, or for using our grass and water and killing our deer. So we take horses and cattle to feed ourselves. Why should we pay money for what is ours?"

"These men can make trouble for you," the Lieutenant said.

An angry murmur rose from the warriors. Yanosha fingered his knife and saw that Gato beside him was doing the same. Yanosha could tell that Geronimo was laughing inside. He was very dangerous when he was like that.

"Make trouble?" Geronimo said.

The Last Sleep continued

"The two of them make trouble for all of us?"

The Lieutenant's face grew tight. He knew Geronimo well.

"Sleep on it," he said. "Tell your people to sleep. Tomorrow things will be different. Trust me."

The Apaches trusted Lieutenant Davis. If all the White Eyes had been like him there would have been no trouble. They trusted him and so they did not kill the tax men. They went to their tepees and the only ones who did not sleep were the guards. And Geronimo.

Yanosha saw the other officer come. He talked a while with Lieutenant Davis and then this officer got a bottle. He and Lieutenant Davis got the tax men drunk. When the tax men were drunk and asleep, the Lieutenant came to Geronimo.

"Get your people and your cattle and horses," the Lieutenant said, "and head for San Carlos. Be very quiet so you will not wake those who sleep."

Apaches can be very quiet. No one heard them as they left. But it was hard for them to keep from laughing when they thought of the trick Lieutenant Davis had played on the tax men. They were very tired but they traveled all night. They tied the children's feet under the horses so they would not fall off. The cattle moved slowly but by morning the Chiricahuas were twenty miles away. They laughed aloud then about what the Lieutenant had done. They liked him. He was their friend.

But when they reached the San Carlos the White Eyes took the cattle away from them. They learned from Lieutenant Davis that General Crook was very angry because they took the cattle and would not honor the terms Geronimo had demanded. So General Crook resigned his command and another general named Miles came. This was in April of 1886.

The Apaches could not understand the strange ways of the White Eyes. They were not sure what would happen to them. So once again they took their families and horses and headed south.

Now it became a matter of running and hiding, feasting and starving. Geronimo found water where no one would think there was any. He knew hiding places that the White Eyes and Mexicans never came close to. The Chiricahuas lived like animals, stealing from the mountains, raiding ranches and towns, burning, looting, killing. It was a hard life and told on them and on their women and children but they had freedom.

One night the Mexican soldiers fell upon them. They caught the Apaches through a trick. They sent some traders in among the Chiricahuas with the strong drink they call mescal. Only the Apaches did not know that the traders had been sent by the soldiers. They drank the mescal and got drunk.

Yanosha did not remember too well. Certain things stood out in his mind, blazing like bright torches in a dark night. He remembered feeling the demons inside him, the shouting and laughing and shrieking inside him, the strange and happy and miserable crazy man who had taken over inside him. He remembered the falling down and the rising again, and the feeling that he was the most powerful man in the world. Even the gods quailed before him.

Then the Mexican soldiers came. Yanosha did not remember them coming. All at once they were there, shooting, knifing, killing. Yanosha seemed to awake in a world running with screams and blood. He saw his friend Gato fall. A soldier with a knife grabbed Gato by the hair and started to cut his head off. Yanosha went at the soldier with a knife and slit his belly open and as the soldier screamed and fell away Yanosha slashed his throat. He turned on another and plunged his knife to the hilt in the soldier's back. He had to pull with all his strength to get the knife out.

Then, somehow, Geronimo was there beside Yanosha, saying something to him, making him understand how hopeless it was, how the need was to run away and hide before the soldiers killed them all.

"Kootanahay," Yanosha cried. "My son."

But Geronimo grabbed Yanosha's arm and made him go away. They slipped into the darkness and soon the screams and shouts and then the shooting were all gone. From far away they could see the fires still burning.

The Apaches always agreed on a rendezvous in case something went wrong. It was there that Yanosha and Geronimo waited.

Their people straggled in. The warriors were few, very few. Even the women and children were not many. To each of them Yanosha asked his question.

"Kootanahay? My son?"

It was Massai who told Yanosha. He was the one who had teased Yanosha more than anyone else because Yanosha was so gentle with his wife. Massai hung his head as he spoke.

"Dead," he said.

"Both of them?"

"Yes, Yanosha."

Yanosha went off by himself and looked at the sky beyond the mountains. He listened hard to see if he could hear the voices of the gods but the wind told of other things, strange things which he could not understand, none of the things he wanted to hear. Geronimo came and stood beside Yanosha without speaking.

After a long time Geronimo said, "Yanosha, you will be avenged. All of us will be avenged."

"You speak empty words," Yanosha told him in anger. "There is no such thing as vengeance for Apaches any more."

"Do you despair? Are you so small an Apache that you despair?"

"I know only the truth," Yanosha said. "The gods have turned their backs upon us. When we pray to them they block their ears and look the other way. We keep getting fewer and fewer but the gods no longer care. They have found other people to look after. They no longer see or hear the Chiricahuas."

"You are the best warrior I have left, Yanosha," Geronimo said. "I need you. We are not many now but we are not yet all dead. But we are almost without horses, almost without guns. We need weapons and ammunition and blankets and food. We are small but we shall grow big again. Mangus and Chihuahua have gone their separate ways. We are alone, cousin, but we are not through. Will you deny your blood, Yanosha?"

Yanosha looked at Geronimo. The eagle glint was bright and strong in his eyes. His face was proud and harsh. Yanosha knew the hate and thirst that ran inside Geronimo because they were running inside him, too.

"Lead," Yanosha said. "I will follow."

The ranch was off by itself at the foot of a mountain. The Apaches stole in at the break of dawn. They made no noise. The first people they roused they killed silently with their knives. Then as the others awakened and the Apaches now had guns taken from the slain there was no more need for silence. They shot some and took the rest captive.

The women they tortured along with the men. Some they bound in strips of rawhide with sharp, pointed sticks between the hide and their flesh. As the hide dried and shrank in the sun it tightened and drove the sticks into their bodies. Others were staked out beside ant hills, their mouths pried open with sharp sticks so the ants could enter. Some were burned alive.

Now the Apaches had horses and cattle and weapons and blankets again. They took them and headed up into the Sierra Madre, to the stronghold that had been Whoa's.

Now a feeling came over Yanosha that the last days of the Apache nation were at hand. He did not know how the feeling came. Perhaps the gods had whispered it to him while he was asleep.

It was beautiful here in the Sierra Madre. Water and grass and food were plentiful. There was peace. Yanosha was weary of fighting. Most of them were weary of running and fighting. Only Geronimo never tired of killing. That was his only thought. He was always planning another raid, another war, but he let the warriors alone now because he knew they were tired and wanted to rest. Yanosha began to be sorry that he had left the San Carlos that time to ride with Geronimo.

They were few, very few. They were only thirty-seven. Only fourteen warriors. There was Naitche and Perico and Massai and Kanseah and Fun and Eye-Lash and Chappo and some others. The rest were women and children.

They waited for Mangus and Chihuahua to come with their bands but they did not appear and as each day passed they knew more and more that they were the last. Even Geronimo knew though he did not speak of it. He would stand on the edge of the rimrock and look out into the distance and Yanosha knew he was

Geronimo found water where no one would think there was any.

thinking what Yanosha was thinking, that their days were numbered, that their nation was dead.

One day Kanseah who was their youngest warrior was on guard on the rimrock. They took turns there, watching the valley far below with field glasses. Kanseah called out in excitement and the warriors went running there. Kanseah was pointing down at the valley.

Yanosha saw them, two specks there below. Now and then they merged into one as they drew close together, then they would separate again. They moved slowly but they came on and the Apaches watched from high on the rimrock, watched until they saw that the specks were two men, one riding, the other walking ahead carrying a stick with a white rag tied to it.

The day Yanosha had first heard that the White Eyes had put Apache scouts on their trail he knew it would not be long. The White Eyes they could fool. It took an Apache to trail another Apache. Now they were there, two Apache scouts, and Yanosha knew them. They were close relatives of his.

"It's Kayitah and Martine," Kanseah said.

"Shoot them," Geronimo said. "Wait until they come in range and then shoot them."

"They carry a white flag," Massai said. "They come to talk with us."

"Shoot them," Geronimo said.

"They are our own people," Yanosha said.

Geronimo looked at Yanosha with his eyes hating Yanosha and everybody and everything. "They have betrayed us. They have betrayed the Apache nation. They take pay from the White Eyes. I say kill them."

Yanosha put his hand on his knife. "I say spare them. There has been enough killing, enough fighting. We are weary of that, Geronimo. If any fighting is done it will be between you and I."

Geronimo looked at Yanosha a long time. The warriors stood silent, watching them. Yanosha knew that Geronimo had begun to notice the change in them, the way the warriors listened more and more to Yanosha. They knew that if Yanosha's wishes had been heeded there would not be so few of them now. They would not have left the San Carlos, but would have stayed and done what Cochise had wanted them to do, learn to live in peace with the white man.

After a long time Geronimo spoke. "Let them come."

Kayitah and Martine climbed the last cliff and stood before the warriors. Kayitah was holding the stick with a white flour sack tied to it. Kayitah spoke to Geronimo.

"Surrender, Geronimo. That is what Lieutenant Gatewood told me to tell you. There is no more hope for you. There are no more places for you to hide. The white soldiers are waiting for you. The Mexican soldiers are hunting you. You have few guns, little ammunition. There is nothing you can do but surrender."

"I will never surrender," Geronimo said. "An Apache does not surrender."

"Mangus has surrendered," Kayitah said. "Chihuahua has surrendered. You are the last."

His words struck sadness in them all.

"The soldiers will kill us," Geronimo said.

"No," Kayitah said. "Lieutenant Gatewood has given his word that you will not be harmed. He will take you to General Miles. You will be safe. You will be taken back to San Carlos. I know San Carlos is not good, but it is better than nothing, better than what you have here. Here you have only death."

Geronimo was silent, thinking.

"You have women and children with you," Kayitah went on. "Your warriors are few. When they are dead the Mexican soldiers will get your women and children. You know what they will do to them."

After a long time Geronimo spoke. "I will surrender, but only on my terms. I do not care what they do to me. They can kill me if they want to but I want my people spared. If they send the men away, to Florida, then I want them to send their women and children with them. I will not have

The Last Sleep continued

the men separated from their families. That is what I demand."

"General Miles is a good man," Kayitah said. "He will agree. He wants to end the war. He will keep his word. Not all white men are liars, Geronimo. Some of them are good men. Come with me and Martine. We will take you to Lieutenant Gatewood and he will take you to the white soldiers."

They talked it over, a day and a night. They were all tired of running and fighting. If there had been hope it would have been different. But they were the last. For them there was nothing but death.

They did not give up their arms. It was well that they kept them and that the white troops were there. The Mexican soldiers wanted to fall upon the Apaches and massacre them. The white soldiers would not let them.

In Skeleton Canyon in Arizona the Apaches surrendered to General Miles. It was the third of September, 1886.

But the White Eyes on the San Carlos were different from General Miles and Lieutenant Gatewood. They took the men and put them on a train and sent them to Florida. The women and children were left behind. To these White Eyes an Apache was an Apache. They saw no difference. They even took some of the Apache scouts who had helped their soldiers track down and capture Geronimo and sent them with the others into exile. The Chiricahuas made fun of these unfortunate scouts but it was sad fun. Still it was the only fun they had.

They lived in Florida a while and then they were sent to Oklahoma. Geronimo grew old. He always thought he would be allowed to return home and see his deserts and mountains once more before he died. He changed as he grew old. He was still proud. He still hated the White Eyes. But he began to see things the way Yanosha had always seen them.

One day at Fort Sill Geronimo pointed to the west and said to Yanosha, "The sun rises and shines for a time and then it goes down, sinks, and is lost. So it will be with the Indian. When I was a boy my father told me that the Indians were as many as the leaves on the trees, and that in the north they had many horses and furs. I never saw them but I know if they were once there they have gone. The white man has taken all they had. It will be only a few years when the Indians will be heard of only in the books which the white man writes."

When Geronimo died the others were released. After twenty-seven years they finally returned home.

Now Yanosha, too, grew old. He had a long way to look back and only a short way to look ahead. Some day, when the gods called to him, he would take up his blanket and walk up into the mountains, all alone. In the custom of his people he would lay his blanket on the ground and there, with his gods to welcome him, he would lie down and sleep the last sleep.

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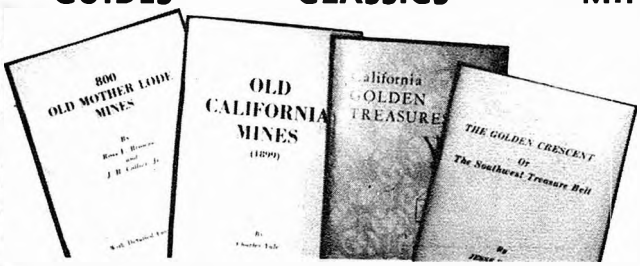

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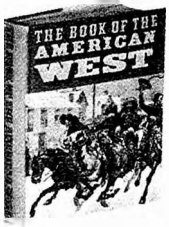

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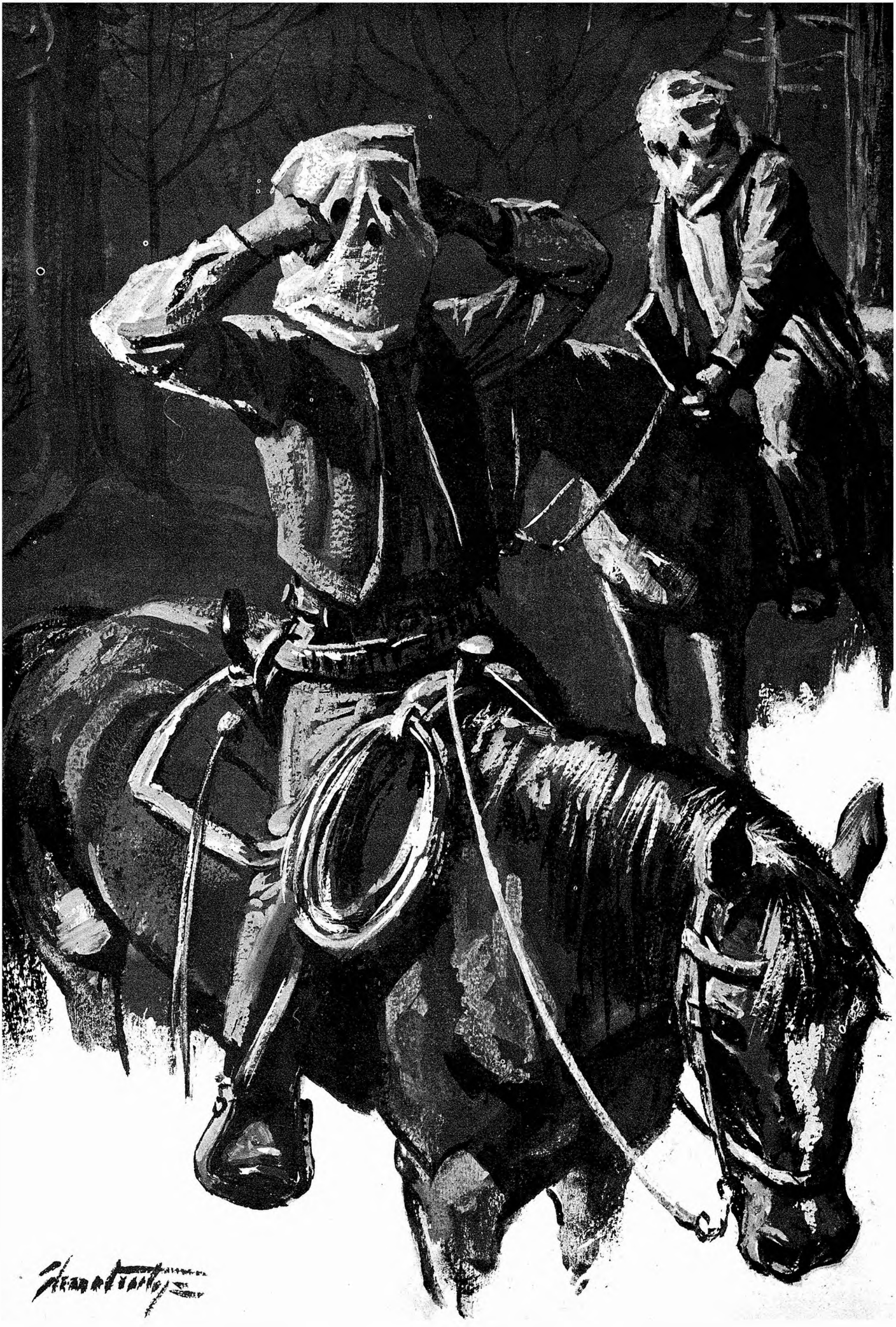

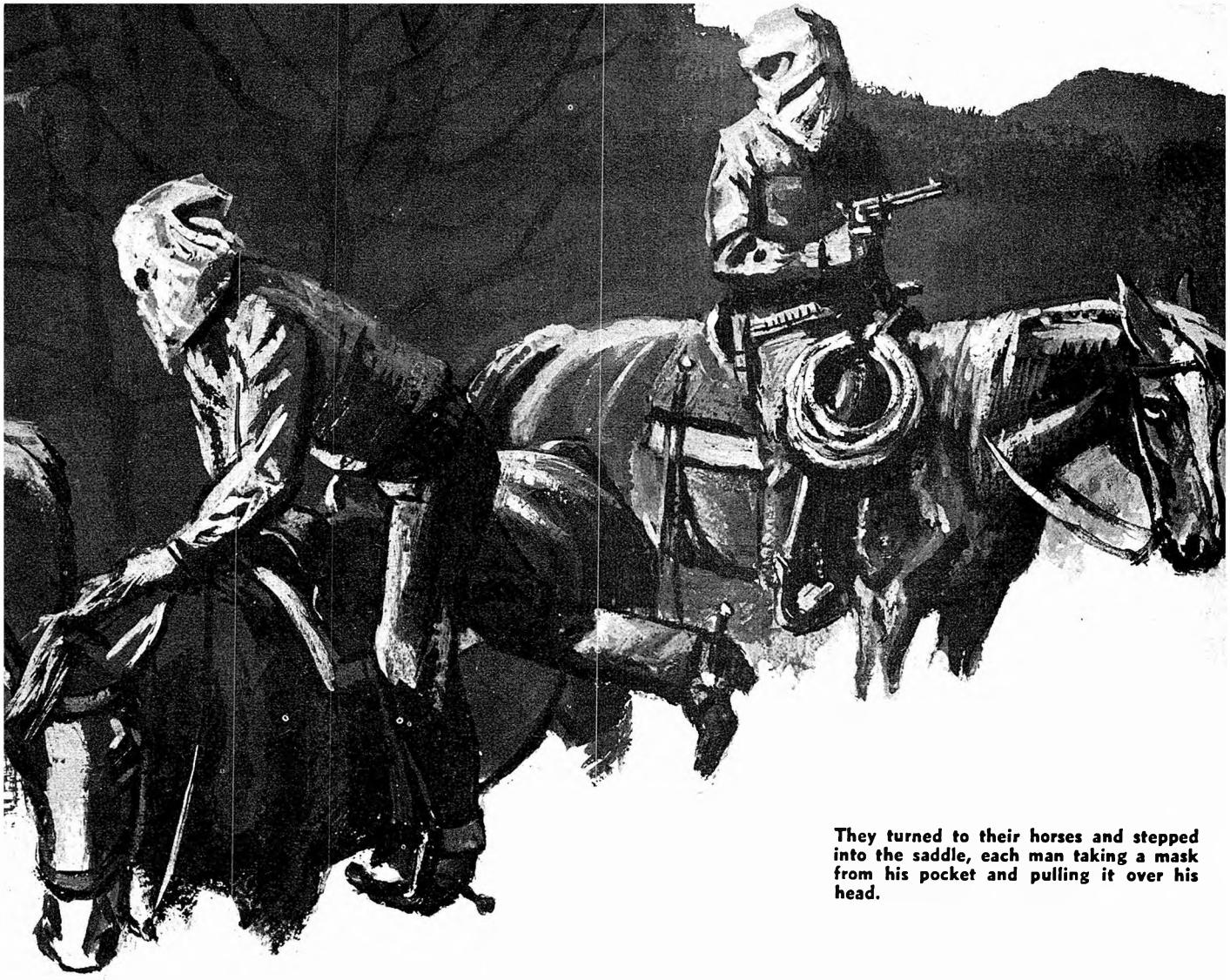

They turned to their horses and stepped into the saddle, each man taking a mask from his pocket and pulling it over his head.

The ranchers did not think the valley was ready for Clee Endicott's brand of one-man law—until they learned the

TRUTH AT GUNPOINT

By RAY HOGAN

Illustrated by Eugene Shortridge

Rome Bellman stood quietly in the darkness of the oak thicket. The others had not come yet, and except for his bay horse, he was completely alone as he waited, absently listening to the muted, mysterious noises of the night that were all around him.

A lean and angular man, his face bore a studied gravity, as if his eyes had seen far too much of life's bitter side and too little of its kindness. As he stood still in the shadowy depth of the trees, feeble starlight touched him gently, lending an unreal quality to his being.

But such was a false impression. Rome Bellman was a hard, practical man, burnished and browned by the endless hours of working his range, nursing a herd of cattle that increased with aggravating slowness, and protecting it while still coping with the everyday problems of life.

Somewhere, far down the valley that spread out below him like a vast, deep-shaded carpet, a dog barked. He stirred, turning that way. The sound had reached into him, brought his thoughts into motion, and took him back to his own ranch beyond the ridge, to what it represented—and to his wife, Sara.

A sigh slipped from him as he ran his fingers through his thick hair. Women sometimes just couldn't understand. Like this matter tonight. But maybe, after it was all over, he would be able to make her see that he was right. After all, a man had obligations and had to live with his conscience—and do what he thought right and best.

He felt in his shirt pocket, dug out the thick, nickeled watch that had been his father's, and held it near his face to see the time. The others—small ranchers like himself—should be showing up. He mentally ran down the list—Charlie Dearing, who always came first, Ben Stanhope, whose place was near the creek, Courtney Swayne, Branch McAuliffe and Pearl Middlemarch from the valley to the north, and Tennessee Jordan, whose spread adjoined his.

Shortly he heard the humus-deadened approach of a horse coming in on the north edge of the grove and turned that way. The rider came into

view, swung in and halted. Rome saw that it was Tennessee Jordan, and he had a moment's wonder about Dearing.

Jordan, accent blurring the edges of his words, asked: "Am I late?"

Bellman struck a match which flared yellow against the taut skin of his face as he lit the smoke he had just rolled. He shook his head.

"I thought you were Dearing," he said.

"He not here yet? Odd...."

"That's what I was thinking."

The two fell silent for a time and then Tennessee Jordan spoke again. "Could be he's sick—or maybe he's having himself a bit of wife trouble. Old woman of mine's sure on the warpath."

"I know what you mean," Rome said, not smiling, and remembered Sara's words and the stiff, still way she had looked when she said them.

"Yours, too?" Jordan asked, in seeming surprise.

The tall rancher sighed, nodded. "Some things you just can't make a woman understand—like the importance of only two or three steers to a man when he's getting started."

"That's a fact. I tried to tell my old woman that this was something we had to do. She kept throwing it up to me that we've got a sheriff in town now, and it was his job and we ought to be letting him do it."

Rome Bellman nodded again. He blew a thin cloud of smoke into the cool night, hearing familiar things. He started to make some reply, then hesitated as the sound of more riders came to them.

A bit later, Middlemarch and Ben Stanhope rode in. Before they could dismount, McAuliffe and Swayne arrived. They all swung down and stood about in a quiet, subdued circle, exchanging their greetings, making brief comments, and having their wonder about Charlie Dearing, too.

At half past eight o'clock, Rome Bellman said: "No use waiting. He won't be coming."

They turned to their horses and stepped into the saddle, each man taking a mask from his pocket and pulling it over his head.

"You reckon this'll be the last time?" McAuliffe asked Bellman, his voice somewhat blurred by the mask.

"Could be, Henry," Rome answered as they moved out of the trees at a slow walk and headed for town and the saloon where Gar Morgan and his bunch hung out.

As they alternately jogged and loped along the road, Rome Bellman was thinking of Charlie Dearing, and of the things Tennessee Jordan had said. This made him recall the way Sara had looked at him when he left the house, and he remembered how it had started with them—over a week ago—when the new sheriff, Clee Endicott, had paid them a call.

Endicott, a slim, dark man with deliberate ways that matched his cool eyes, came right to the point.

"Bellman, I don't know if you're one of the vigilantes or not. My hunch is you are. But one thing's for sure—you know them. What I want understood is that I'm the law in this country now, and I don't need help. If ever I do, I'll sing out for it."

Rome Bellman shook his head.

"One man can't control this country—and rustling's getting worse."

"I know that, but it's up to the law to stop it—not a bunch of masked riders. If you or anybody else will bring me the proof I'm looking for, I'll put a stop to the thieving."

"Gar Morgan's behind it! You know that!"

"Maybe I do, but I've got to have proof before I can act—"

"That's my point exactly," Bellman had said then. "It's the way the law works—and a man could go broke waiting on the law to do something. It leaves it up to him and his neighbors to do what has to be done, make a stand against the likes of Morgan—"

"Leave Gar Morgan to me," Endicott had cut in. "Just tell the vigilantes to forget their masked riding, and tend to their ranching."

"There's nothing they'd like more—and it's something they'll sure as hell do when the time comes and they can. But the time's not here yet. One man law won't work."

"It's working now—and the vigilantes had best stay out of it," the sheriff had said, turning to his horse. "You pass that warning along to your mask-wearin' friends — they're to leave the law to me."

Afterwards, Sara had said to him: "It is his job, Rome. You will tell the others?"

He shook his head.

"I can't, Sara. The country's not ready for his kind of law yet."

She had drawn away from him and looking at her, he read her thoughts and knew that something dark and strong was rising between them.

"Yon can't," she said quietly. "But you can ride off into the night, leaving me to worry and to wonder if I'll ever see you alive again, while you and the others are going about your vengeance—"

"It is not a matter of vengeance, but of keeping the law—"

"Whatever it is, it is no longer something you must do. I have worried myself sick for the last time, Rome. You—"

"Jordan, McAuliffe, the others—they take their chances, too, knowing it must be done."

"I don't care about the others—only about my own husband," Sara had replied, standing very straight. "You talk of obligations. Have you none to me?"

At once he said, "You know that I do—that you are a part of that obligation."

He had stopped there and stood quiet, letting his gaze drift out over the sun-flooded land. It was a good country, a fine place to build a life. But there was a price, and if a man would stay he must meet that cost.

"Once the Morgan bunch is gone," he told her, "likely there will be no more trouble. We—"

"There will be others!" she said, bitterly. "Rome, if you go I won't be here when you get back—if you do."

That had turned him silent, and then some of his hard pride had boiled to the surface and he had said, in a flat voice: "A wife should try to understand what her husband must do. But if that is the way it is, so be it."

He turned and went out to the corral, where he had work to do. Later, when the appointed time arrived, he strapped on his pistol, mounted the bay gelding, and rode away without looking back.

Now, as he led the little band of riders down the narrow side valley that would take them to the settlement by a round-about route, he was recalling his own words and remembering the stricken look in Sara's eyes when he had voiced them, and there was for him a measure of doubt as to whether being right had such worth.

He wondered, too, if the others were having like thoughts as they followed him, if they, also, had gone through moments of indecision and perhaps had been faced with a problem such as his. If so, then like him they had placed their obligations and duty first, their personal needs second, and were there riding with him. All, that is, except Charlie Dearing, and in that rancher's absence Rome Bellman wondered if he was not reading the signs of what was to come.

As time wore on and the masked committee was required to continue its operation, there likely would be others who would not put in an appearance, influenced by one reason or another, and perhaps, one day, he would stand alone.

It would matter little. He would continue alone if he deemed it necessary, for that was the way Rome Bellman was cut—a man sure of purpose, definite in mind, and ready to face any odds if he knew he was right.

Starshine filled the valley with a dull silver glow and spread out like a pale sheet across the flats. A coyote flung his challenge against them as they topped the last ridge and started down the long grade that led to the settlement, lying in a shallow swale hard by Medicine Creek. When they reached the first of the sun-grayed buildings, Bellman lifted his hand and they halted.

Most of the stores were dark, as they had expected. But at the yonder end of the single street where the Bonanza Saloon sprawled apart and to itself, there was lamplight and the faint tinkle of a piano mixed with the sound of laughter and voices. There was no light in the newly-furnished office of the sheriff, but the door was open and Rome wondered if the lawman was inside, sitting in the darkness.

It did not matter.

"We'll stay to the alley," he said, swinging off the dusty roadway, and the others followed him and the bay at a quiet walk to the rear of the Bonanza. In that interval, each man checked his mask and inspected his weapon while a throbbing tension built itself within them.

Nearing the back of the saloon, Bellman motioned for a halt and slid from the saddle. Excitement raveled

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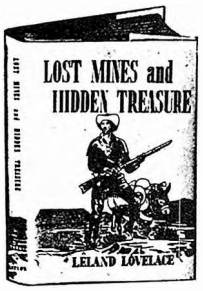

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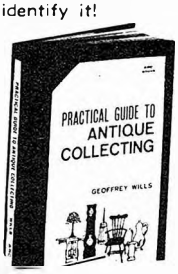

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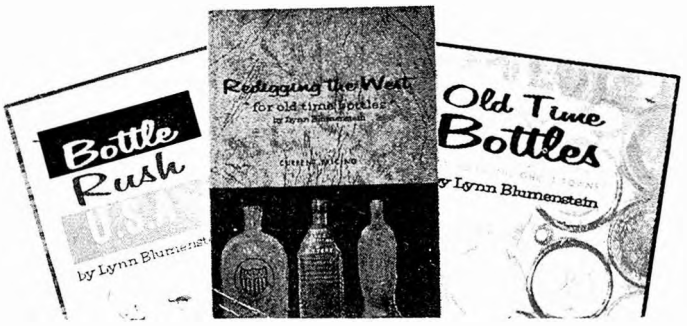

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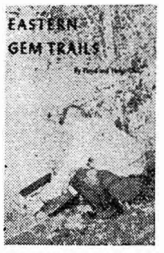

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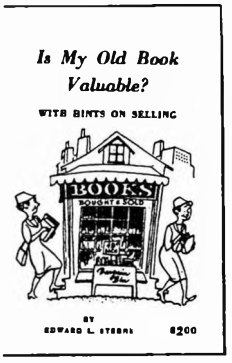

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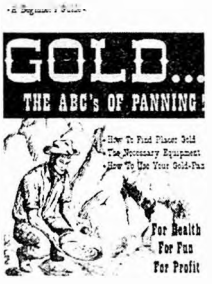

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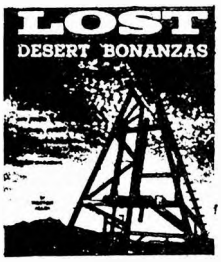

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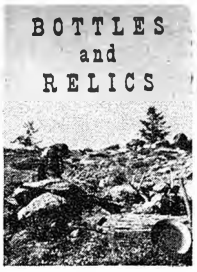

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Excitement raveled his nerves as he moved silently to a side window of the saloon and stood there, his eyes searching the room.

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his nerves as he moved silently to a side window of the saloon and stood there, his eyes searching the room. He noted carefully those who stood at the bar, those who were at the tables, and those who simply lounged against the walls. He went back to his companions.

"There are two missing," he said. "We'll wait."

Wordlessly, they merged back into the shadows some yards distant from the saloon, where they could command a view of the building's front and rear entrances. There they began their vigil, with no man speaking. The minutes dragged by, filled only by the sounds of the off-key piano, the drone of voices inside the building, and the occasional laugh of a woman somewhere back along the street.

A man appeared, emerging from one of the lesser saloons. He made his way to the Bonanza and entered.

"That's one," Tennesse Jordan said, low-toned. "I'm remembering him. Rides a buckskin. . . ."

McAuliffe sighed deeply. "Good," he commented. "Who's still missing, Rome."

"The redheaded one."

"Figure he's important enough to hold back for? They might all take the notion to pull out, and this squatting around is honing my nerves to an edge!"

Bellman considered and said, "All right, let's go then."

He tied his horse to the nearest fence and led off. The others followed, moving in Indian file along the side of the Bonanza to the awning-shaded porch in front. Pausing there, they adjusted their masks and drew their pistols. Bellman glanced about, assured himself that all were ready, and then laid a hand against one of the batwing doors.

"Let's have done with it," he said, and pushed back the door and stepped inside. With the others quickly following, fanning out on either side, he proceeded a quarter of the way into the smoke-filled room.

Talk cut instantly and a dozen faces turned to them in surprise. The bartender set a bottle he was holding down carefully and leaned against the back-bar, a sly, ironic amusement crossing his features.

Bellman, his eyes on Gar Morgan and the men who ran with him, all slouched around a table near the center of the saloon, raised his pistol above his head and waved it for attention.

"All right, if nobody makes a move, then nobody gets hurt," he said harshly. "We're here for one man—Morgan!"

The outlaw rose lazily from his chair, head slung forward as he glanced about the room. He ginned.

"You were a long time coming," he drawled.

"When we do come, we're sure. Put your hands on your hat and walk toward us."

Morgan laughed. "Mister, I ain't about to accommodate you. You want me, you'll just have to walk over and get me—which is sure liable to turn out to be a chore for you."

"Make it easy on yourself," Bellman said. "Shooting you down here's not much different from stringing you up to a tree. Both get done what's needful."

Tension was mounting higher in the murky room. Rome could feel it. He could see it on the faces of the men ranged along the bar and hunched around the tables. It was

Truth At Gunpoint continued

risky to let things ride, he knew. Someone was bound to make a wrong move and some innocent bystander would get hurt.

Morgan's smile was bantering.

"Seems you've had yourself a trial over me and got your verdict in already," he said.

"That's right. We traced twenty head of rustled cattle to you through the man you sold them to. There's been more, but that one time is all we needed. Expect we could prove you had a hand in robbing the Denver stage and burning down the way station, too, was it necessary."

Morgan laughed again, glancing around at the men at the table. "You hear that, boys? Seems we got us somebody who's really keeping track of us. Just didn't come to my mind that we was all that popular!"

Rome Bellman listened to the general laughter, his eyes touching the men around Morgan. There were only four of the regulars with him. Earlier, when he had looked through the window, all had been present except two. Now three were missing and a thread of warning ran through him.

Gar Morgan stood with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Vigilante," he drawled, sardonically. "I'll just save you some bothering. Me and the boys done all of them things you claim, and a few more besides—and we don't give a hoot in hell who knows it! Now, what do you think of that?"

Beneath his mask, Rome felt a rush of anger at the outlaw's brazen admission of his crimes. This was the reason he and men like Jordan and McAuliffe and the others still had to ride the hills and weed out the unwanted. Until all of the Morgans and their kind were wiped out, no man and his family could expect to lead a safe and decent life.

He stared at the outlaw.

"It's your last chance, Morgan. Either you're coming, or—"

"You ain't told us yet," the outlaw cut in, seemingly enjoying the situation greatly, "—what about my boys? You aiming to string them up, too?"

"We'll get to them. You're merely the first on the list. If they're still around when we're done with you, then they can figure on hearing from us, too."

"Well, that's mighty nice of you," responded Morgan. "But it happens that I've got different ideas about things. We're going to try *you*, and —" he paused to sweep the room with his arrogant glance "—anybody who don't exactly agree with what we decide had best keep his trap shut. Is that clear?"

There was no replay from the bystanders. Gar Morgan resumed his easy, bantering manner and turned his attention once more upon Bellman and the men flanking him.

"Now, if you'll just turn around, slow like, maybe you'll see what I'm talking about.

Rome Bellman, suddenly taut as realization came to him, twisted to look over his shoulder. The three missing outlaws were there. They had come in behind and were lined up across the doorway, guns in hand and grinning wickedly.

McAuliffe swore softly. Swayne lowered his weapon and shrugged, as if recognizing a moment that had come at last. The rest remained frozen. Bellman, his nerves stringing out to wire tightness, cursed himself for being careless as he swung back to face the outlaw chieftain. He could blame no one but himself for this. He had allowed his personal problems to fill his mind, and to keep him from thinking clearly.

"You'll not get by with this," he said. "There'll be others who will come, others who will fight—"

"It ain't likely," Morgan said dryly. "There's a lot of sheep in most men, and they won't want trouble from me. Now, you all just stand easy while one of my—my deputies passes among you and collects your hardware. It don't hardly seem right for prisoners about to be hung to have guns in their hands."

Rome Bellman drew himself up stiffly. Here and now, in this smoke-filled saloon, the future of the valley would be settled. There was no choice. If it cost him his life taking that of Gar Morgan, then, at least, he would have paid his dues, and families like his—wives like Sara—would be able to live in peace.

Maybe Tennessee and Stanhope and McAuliffe and Swayne and Middle-

march—and himself—paying with their blood, would establish once and for all the one-man law that Clee Endicott represented. Without turning, he allowed his shoulders to draw back, the long-ago agreed upon signal to the others that the moment of violence was at hand. All would drop to their knees when the fingers of his left hand clenched, and the shooting would begin.

One of Morgan's men pulled away from the table and started toward them, swaggering and grinning. In the absolute hush that lay over the room, the sound of his boot-heels on the plank floor was like a measured drum beat.

Rome, giving Sara a final, regretful thought, steeled himself and allowed his left arm to ease forward. He was on the point of closing his hand when the hard voice of Clee Endicott, rapping across the silence, stopped him.

"That's far enough! Any man that moves is dead!"

Bellman threw a startled glance at the source of the words. The lawman had come in from the rear door, and was standing at the end of the narrow hall that led into the main part of the saloon. A cocked six-gun was in each hand, the muzzles drifting slowly back and forth, covering everyone.

"Morgan, I heard enough to put you and your bunch away for a long spell. I'm arresting all of you. Keep your hands up where I can see them—high!"

Relief running through him, Rome started to move and cross over to the lawman. Endicott's voice slapped at him.

"Don't move, vigilante! As far as I'm concerned, any man wearing a rag over his face is an outlaw, too!"

Bellman settled back on his heels. No one else had stirred. Morgan, the toughs at the table with him, and the three outlaws who had slipped through the batwing doors to spring the trap—all were rooted to the spot, pinned motionless by one man wearing a star.

Suddenly the truth, like a shaft of light, broke through to Rome Bellman. The law, by the very fact that it was the law, had the strength of many.

"Take off them masks!"

Using his free hand, Rome pulled the cloth from his head and dropped it to the floor. Jordan and the others followed his example.

"I told you once," said Endicott, speaking direcly to Rome Bellman, "was I ever to need help doing my job, I'd ask for it. I'm asking now—a lawman calling on decent citizens to step in and uphold the law. Do I make myself clear?"

Rome nodded. Murmurs of agreement came from the men near him as they trained their weapons on the outlaws.

"I'm saying decent citizens, not masked riders," Endicott continued pointedly. "I want that understood now—and from here on."

Rome moved his head slightly. "The meaning's plain, Sheriff," he said, and kicking the pile of masks into a nearby corner, he stepped to the lawman's side. "Call on us any time."

He was sure Sara would approve that sort of arrangement.

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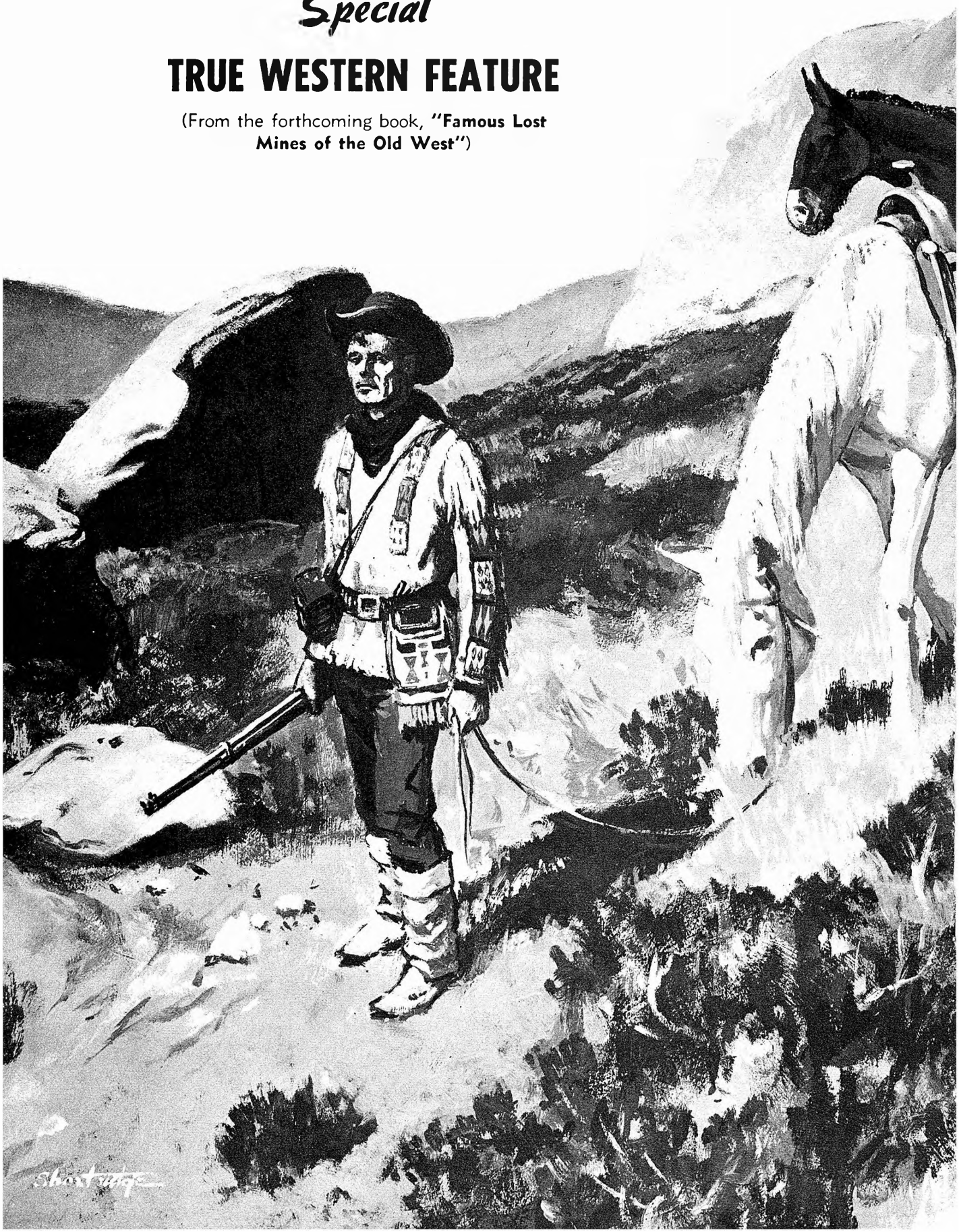
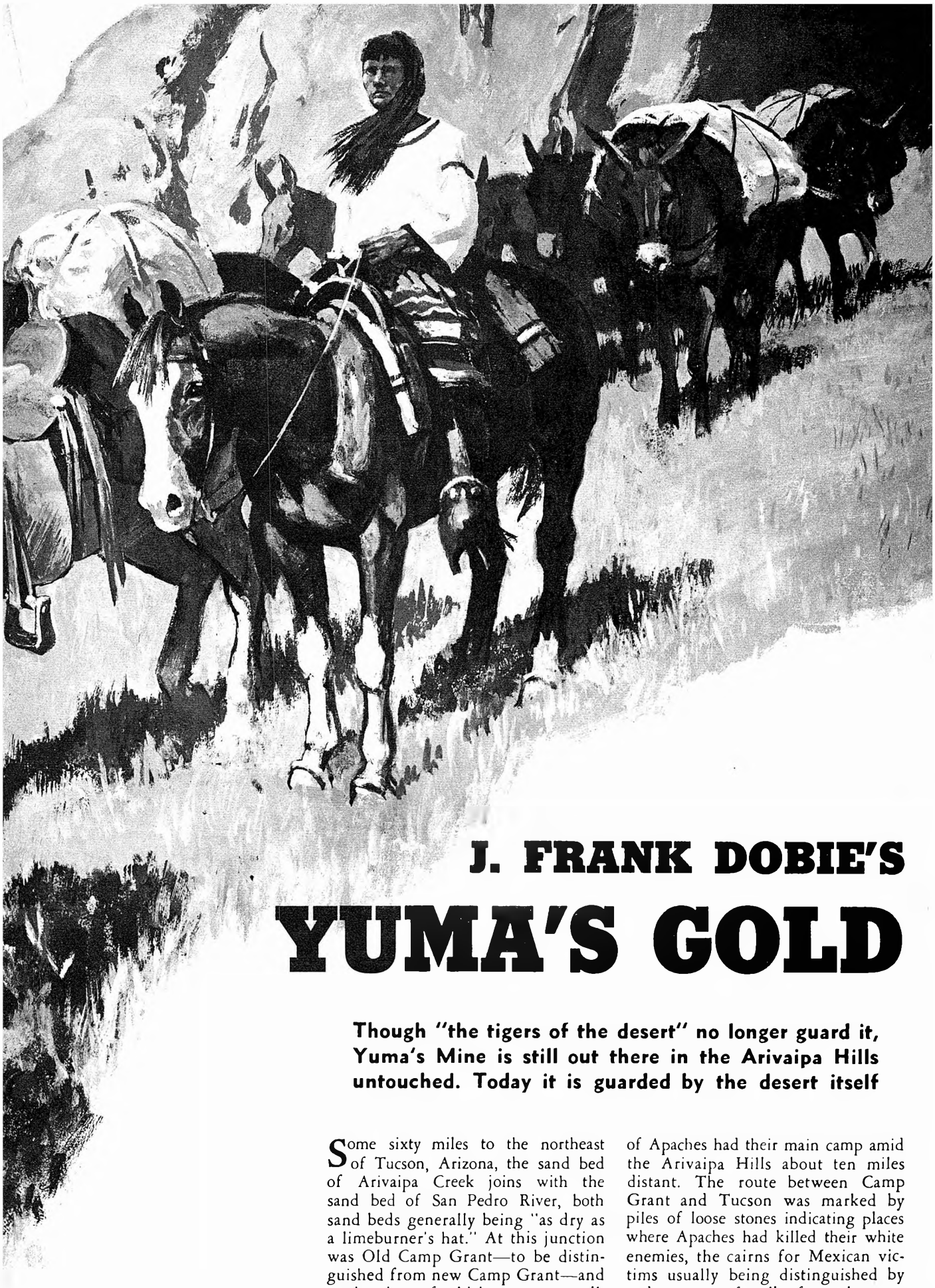
(From the forthcoming book, **"Famous Lost Mines of the Old West"**)





J. FRANK DOBIE'S

YUMA'S GOLD

Though "the tigers of the desert" no longer guard it, Yuma's Mine is still out there in the Arivaipa Hills untouched. Today it is guarded by the desert itself

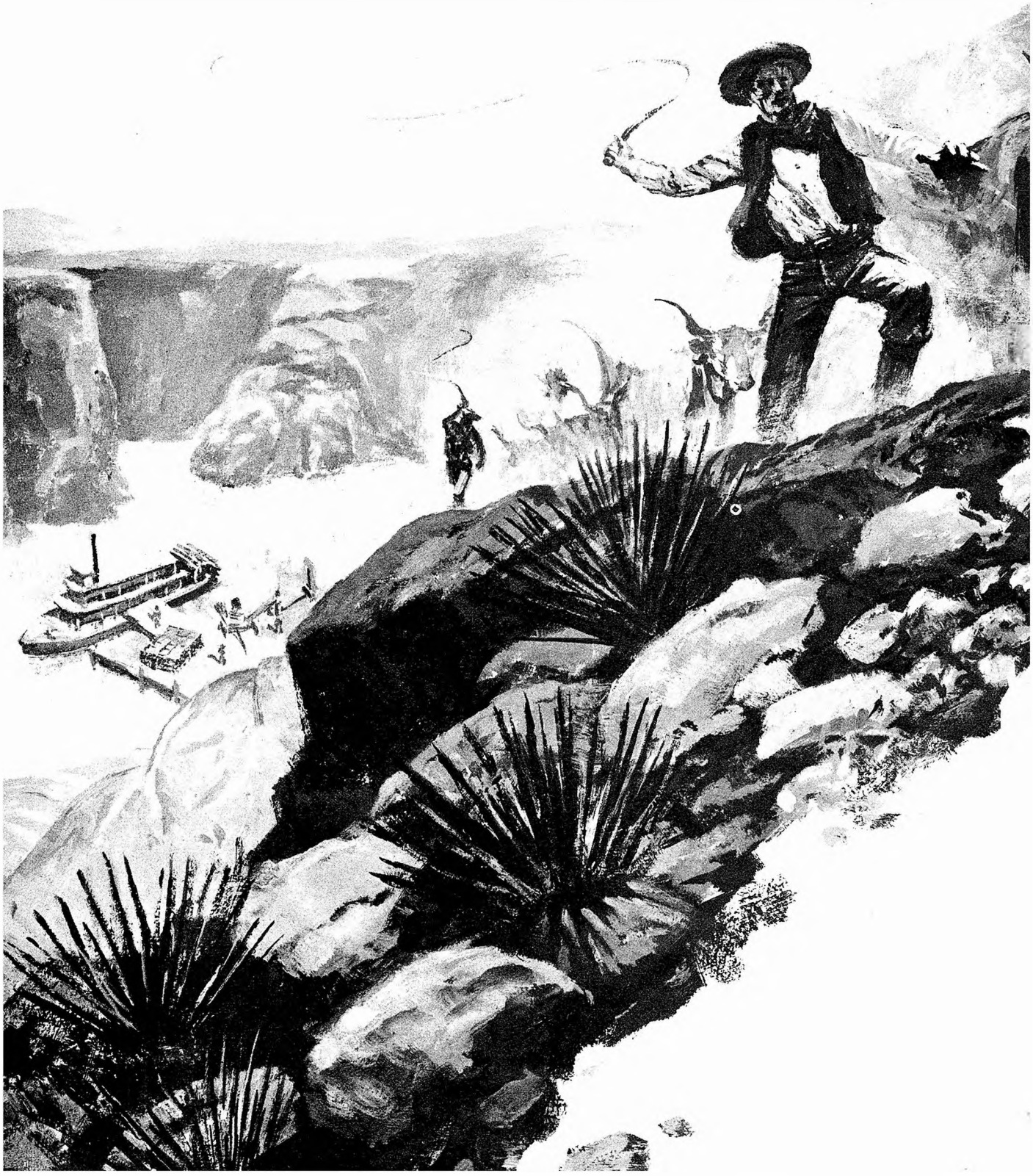
Some sixty miles to the northeast of Tucson, Arizona, the sand bed of Arivaipa Creek joins with the sand bed of San Pedro River, both sand beds generally being "as dry as a limeburner's hat." At this junction was Old Camp Grant—to be distinguished from new Camp Grant—and at the time of which we are to tell, the early seventies, the Arivaipa band of Apaches had their main camp amid the Arivaipa Hills about ten miles distant. The route between Camp Grant and Tucson was marked by piles of loose stones indicating places where Apaches had killed their white enemies, the cairns for Mexican victims usually being distinguished by rude crosses of stalks from the mescal and Spanish dagger plants. Those

Yuma's Gold continued

crosses were unutterably lonely. The Arivaipa Indians wanted to keep their homeland.

The one white man who became intimate with them and wormed from them the secret their harsh land concealed, thus unwittingly acquiring a fame that will probably last as long as that so striven for by "the poet of the Sierras," is remembered only by the name of Yuma. A graduate of West Point, he had seen several years of border service when, still a lieutenant, he came to Fort Yuma on the Colorado River as acting quartermaster of that post. Ocean steamers in those days brought freight through the Gulf of California to the mouth of the Colorado, where it was transferred to river steamers, which carried it on up to Fort Yuma. Here it was discharged to be hauled by wagons far inland. Thus the acting quartermaster's position gave him supervision over all supplies not only for his own post but for other posts strung across a vast territory. The tonnage he handled was enormous, payment for supplies usually being made by vouchers on the Quartermaster General's office in San Francisco. Such a volume of business in such an isolated region gave opportunity for speculation. The lieutenant fell under the sway of dishonest army contractors, and when official investigation revealed their practices he was courtmartialed and discharged from the army.

A man of gentle breeding and an officer in whom military training had inculcated the highest degree of pride, he felt his disgrace keenly. He



became a pariah from his own people and took refuge among the Yuma Indians, who lived about the fort and among whom he had made many friends. The chief of these Indians was Pascual, grave and gaunt, with leathery wrinkled cheeks and prodigious nose, from which hung an ornament made of white bone embellished by swinging pendants. Few chiefs among American Indians have enjoyed such absolute power as Pascual wielded over the Yumas. His people at this time were living in peace and plenty. Their superior physique struck the eye of every traveler. The women were like noble partridges, and one of these old Pascual gave to the exiled lieutenant, who married her and became an adopted member of the tribe. Thenceforth he was known to white men by no other name than Yuma.

Yuma became an Indian trader. His adopted people were at peace with the various divisions of the Apache tribes, and among these, with his bride as a protective talisman, he was free to travel and traffic. Taking pack mules loaded with rifle ammunition and other goods desired by the Apaches, Yuma and his wife penetrated where no white trader before him had dared intrude. He seems to have been genuinely in love, and he was loved. The life was congenial; profits were satisfactory; he confessed himself happier than he had ever been before in his life.

About a year after his marriage he found himself among the Arivaipa Apaches, who received him well. From his wife and from other sources he had heard that the Arivaipas possessed a deposit of gold from which they had been known to barter rich specimens. This deposit they, of course, guarded with fierce secrecy. Presuming now on his own reputation for being "a good Indian," which to all intents and purposes he was, he took the friendly chief apart, and, displaying before him a fine rifle, a beaded belt full of ammunition, and some curious silver spangles, offered them in exchange for a glimpse of the coveted spot.

The chief parried and debated with Yuma—and no doubt with himself—a long time. It was his office as it was that of no other Apache to keep the traditional secret of the gold. Still, the fact that Yuma was a member of an allied tribe entitled him to certain rights and privileges. Also

Yuma's Gold continued

the fine rifle, the beautiful belt, and the gaudy spangles were powerful orators. Finally the chief acquiesced.

"I will show you tomorrow morning," he said.

Shortly after daybreak the next morning he and Yuma, unaccompanied, left camp afoot, ostensibly to hunt deer. Traveling in a northerly direction, they ascended a long ridge, on which they kept for about three miles. Then they came to the crest of a low but asperous range of mountains overlooking the San Pedro valley to the east. Still pursuing a route generally northward, they continued in this rough country for about six miles.

They were picking their way along the side of a gulch, keeping well up from the bottom, when the chief stopped. He stood beside an inconspicuous crater-like depression, perhaps six feet in diameter at its shallow bottom and rimmed with rock.

"Here," he said, scanning the horizon.

Yuma got inside the depression, and began digging with his hunting knife and hands. A few inches down he struck ore. It was so compact that he could only with great difficulty break off a handful. But that handful, together with the sight of the marvelous vein from which it had been taken, filled him with such joy that he could scarcely keep from shouting to the hilltops. The ore, wonderfully rich in gold, was a rose quartz. It was very beautiful.

After getting the sample, Yuma, aided by the chief, filled in the hole and carefully smoothed it over. Before leaving, he noted the lay of the ground on every side; he noted that the gulch below him headed only a few hundred yards beyond. The terrain, as he later described it, was so exceedingly broken and rocky that no one who had not seen the spot marking the ore would be likely ever to come upon it. The chief told him that, while he had nothing to fear from himself, if any of his braves ever found him in that vicinity they would kill him on sight.

Now, Yuma knew nothing of mining, but from his description of the place from which

Yuma's Gold continued

he took the ore, it must have been at the top of what is technically known as a chimney. Its position assured it against being obliterated by either cloudburst or landslide. A "chimney" of such ore as Yuma showed samples of might well produce a million dollars in gold in a very short time without much expense.

On the way back to camp Yuma and the chief killed a deer. Then to avoid the suspicion that a hasty departure might breed, the trader remained among the Apaches for several days before leaving for Tucson. There he expected to meet a friend whom he wanted for a partner. He found him.

The man was a young freighter named Crittenden, who had several wagons hauling ore from mining camps about Tucson to Fort Yuma for loading on river steamers. He was from Kentucky, a worthy kinsman of the brilliant statesman, John J. Crittenden.

Keeping the secret of the great find to themselves, Yuma and Crittenden prepared to explore the mine at once, it being arranged that the young Indian wife should stay with Mrs. Crittenden.

Leaving Tucson late one afternoon, the two men rode on horseback all night and early next morning reached camp Grant. Here they rested until evening and then, without committing themselves, struck northward down the San Pedro. After they had ridden some ten miles, Yuma said that they were about opposite the mine; accordingly, they unsaddled, picketed their horses, and lay down to await daylight. They did not sleep much.

At daylight they began climbing the range to the west. It was so steep and rough that they were obliged to lead their horses most of the time. Hours of climbing brought them to the gulch up which the Arivaipa chief had led Yuma. They had a pick and shovel. They worked two hours, took out about thirty pounds only of the richest ore, and then, after covering the hole over and burying the pick and shovel, they set out for Tucson. Instead of returning to the valley of the San Pedro and going by way of Old Fort Grant, they coursed down the western slope mountains and then crossed a trackless basin. They traveled at night and arrived in Tucson about daylight.

Immediately they had the ore crushed—and the gold panned out. From less than thirty pounds of ore they recovered $1200 worth of gold. The operation could not well be kept secret; the whole town went wild.

Yuma and Crittenden now decided that it would be wise to allow excitement to subside before attempting development. So Crittenden continued with his freighting business, and Yuma, once more accompanied by his wife, struck out on a trading expedition among the Papago Indians on the Papago Desert, a hundred miles west of Tucson. Never before had this idyllic couple traveled so gleefully, in such gay spirits, with prospects so bright. It was their last journey.

Yuma's Gold continued

The Papagos were ever a gentle people towards the whites. It was the Papagos who under Father Kino built the mission of San Xavier del Bac on the Santa Cruz, nine miles above Tucson, pronounced by competent critics to be the most beautiful example of mission architecture in America. But gentle as they were towards **Cristianos,** toward the Apaches the Papagos were as fierce and relentless as "the tigers of the desert" themselves, and they regarded the Yuma Indians as Apache allies.

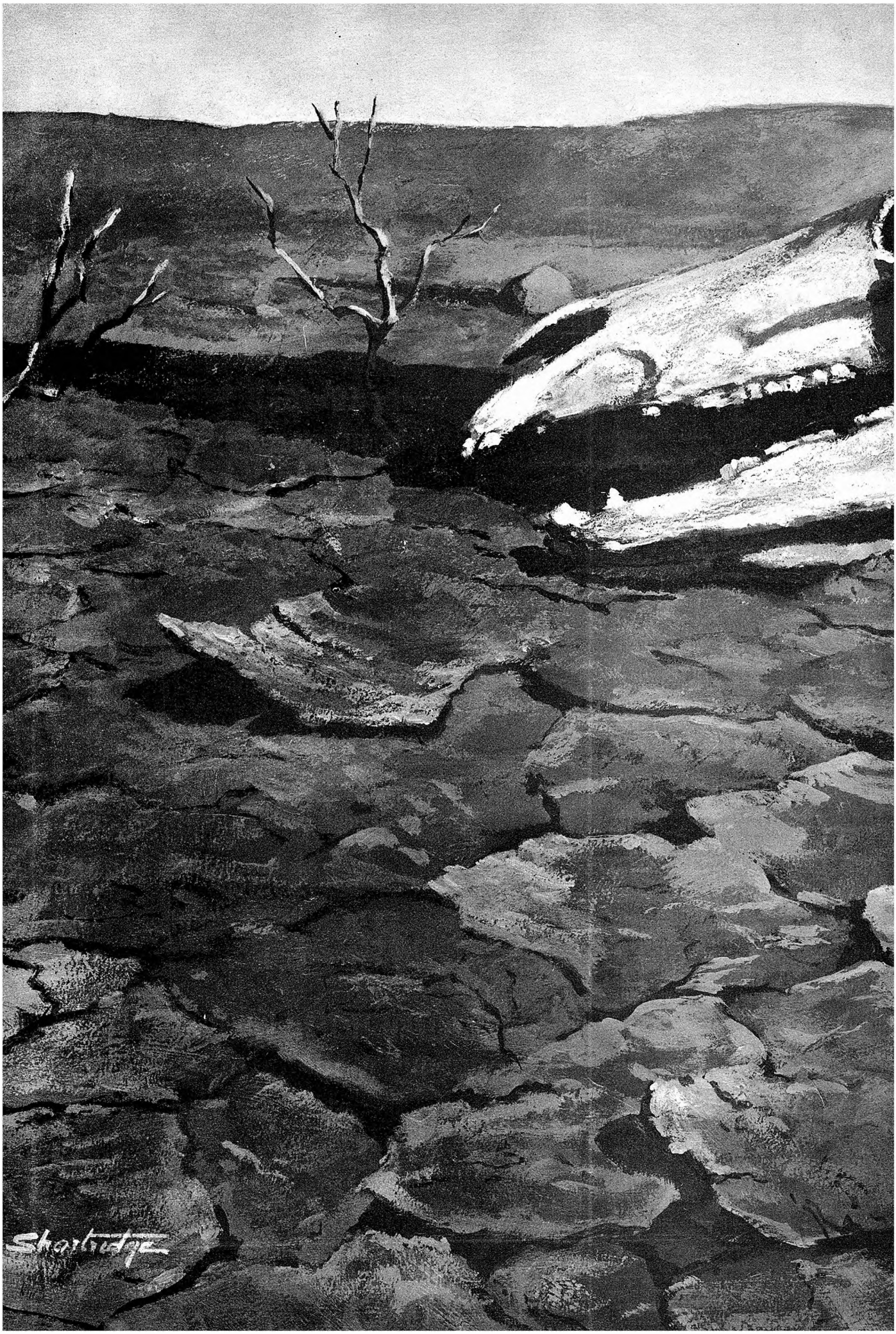
Why Yuma should have taken his wife among them or why she allowed herself to go among them will never be known. She was immediately recognized as belonging to a hostile tribe. The older Indians were consternated. They believed the traders to be spies sent by Apaches to forerun a raid. No details of the fate of the young couple ever reached the outside world, but in Tucson and elsewhere it came to be the general opinion that they had been lured into the vastness of the desert and there destroyed.

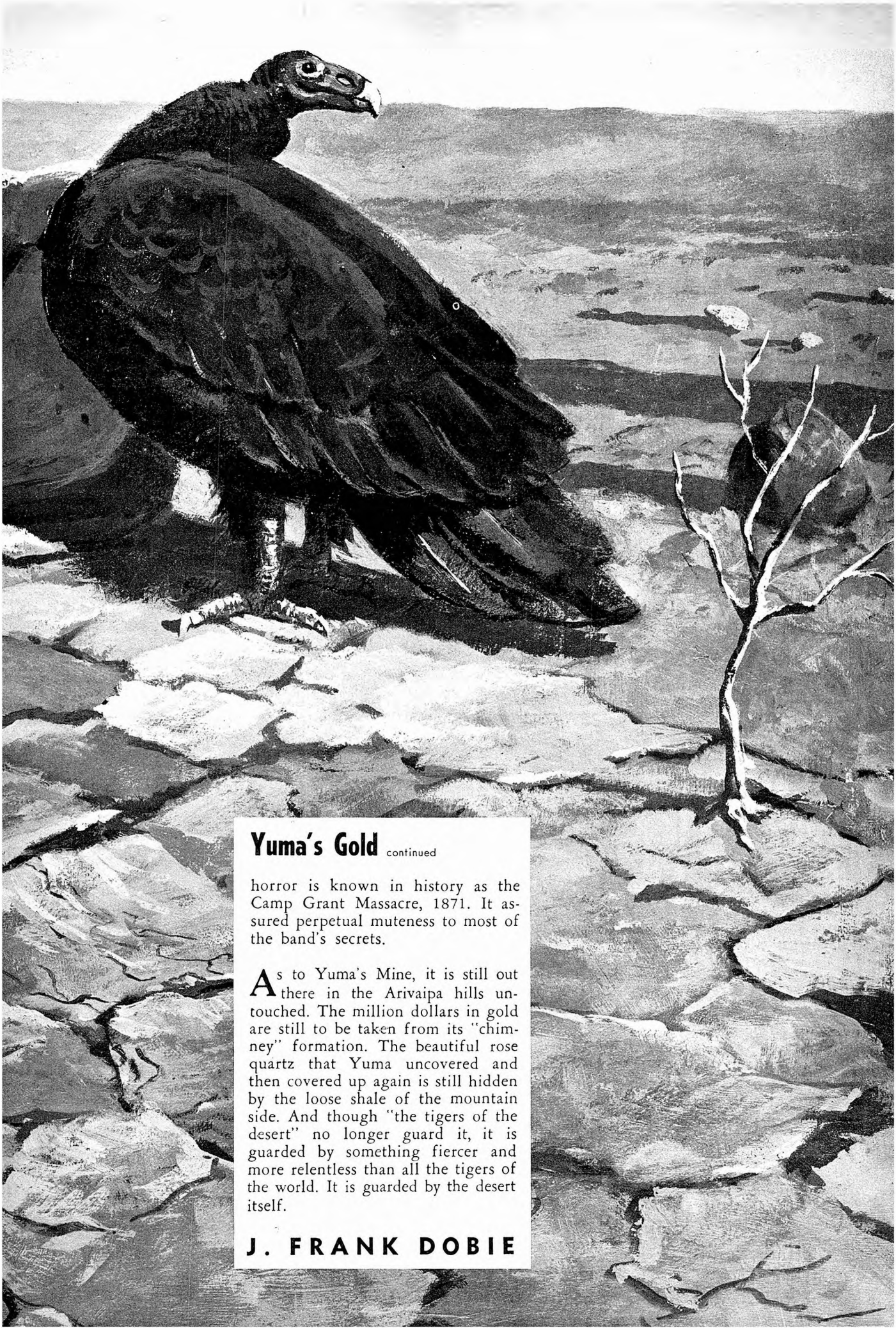
Crittenden knew where his partner had gone. He waited long weeks for his return. Finally he gave up hope and prepared to set out alone for the mine in the Arivaipa country, so that he might there post notice of his discovery and thus legally complete his title. As he and Yuma had traveled before, he now rode to Old Camp Grant. He remained there for two days, and this time he seems to have made no secret of his mission. He rode a particularly fine horse, which the soldiers much admired. Telling them that he would return that evening, he left the camp early one morning.

Crittenden did not come back. Three days later some soldiers who scouted out on his trail found his horse entangled in a picket rope and almost starved for water. He had been picketed on the west side of the San Pedro sand bed about ten miles below (north of) the army post and near the foot of a broken range of mountains. Near by were saddle and bridle untouched. The best trailers in camp scoured the surrounding country for days; they found where Crittenden had climbed the mountain afoot. That was all. He must have taken his rifle with him, but the probability is that he had no chance to use it. Quite likely he was near the mine when the bullet from an ambushed Apache put an end to his life.

It may easily be surmised that Apaches had come upon the sign of horses in their hills and had seen where the forbidden earth had been disturbed. Ever alert, they had then awaited the return of prospectors.

Soon after the disappearance of Crittenden a band of about a hundred Papagos, led by a few Americans and aided by some Mexicans, surprised the Arivaipa Apaches, who were at the time in a condition unwontedly docile, and literally butchered man, woman, and child. This





Yuma's Gold continued

horror is known in history as the Camp Grant Massacre, 1871. It assured perpetual muteness to most of the band's secrets.

As to Yuma's Mine, it is still out there in the Arivaipa hills untouched. The million dollars in gold are still to be taken from its "chimney" formation. The beautiful rose quartz that Yuma uncovered and then covered up again is still hidden by the loose shale of the mountain side. And though "the tigers of the desert" no longer guard it, it is guarded by something fiercer and more relentless than all the tigers of the world. It is guarded by the desert itself.

J. FRANK DOBIE

"Neighbor, HELP . . . !"

In the old days, when a herd went up the trail, it was often months before the folks back home heard from it and knew whether the outfit was safe.

Launching a new magazine is even more risky, it takes a lot longer for word to trickle back—and a nervous editor-publisher can sure do a lot of worrying!

To show you what I mean, this "Neighbor, help . . .!" column is being scribbled in late April for the first issue of a magazine that won't go on sale on the newsstands until July 2. But that's not even half of the story.

The magazine will go "off sale" at the end of August—and it will be six weeks after that before enough reports trickle in so our national distributor can give us even a preliminary opinion as to whether you folks like Western Fiction Magazine or not, and have been buying enough off the newsstands to keep us in business.

It's the gospel truth.

Five and a half months from the time this last bit of copy is being written for the first issue, we'll be given just a sketchy idea as to whether this one-man, one-horse (spavined) western is a success or not—but we won't be real for sure certain for another four months after that!

So what does a worried, apprehensive editor-publisher do in the meantime?

He stays worried and apprehensive, that's what he does. But he also asks questions—and hopes that some of you friendly folks out there will help him come up with the answers. Will you do that for me?

Thanks, neighbor!

Actually, there are so many questions I need answered that I hardly know where to begin. But for a start—

How do you like Western Fiction Magazine?

Do you like the type of western stories we have published in this first issue?

To do some negative selling, I'd like to stress this—if it has the Long John brand on it, it will be clean enough for Grandma (or any of the kids) to read! We've been thinking of coming up with a "Seal of Decent Reading," to try to combat all of that trash you see on the newsstands, and. . . . But you get the notion.

Do you like for us to publish serials—like "Johnny-Behind-The-Gun" which started in this issue?

Would you prefer that we publish our book-length features complete in one issue?

Do you like to see an occasional true western feature in Western Fiction Magazine—like "Yuma's Gold" by the immortal J. Frank Dobie in this issue?

Do you like the kind of illustrations Eugene Shortridge is doing for Western Fiction Magazine? Of course, I'm prejudiced. I think he's the greatest since Russell and Remington, and that one of these days his work will be rated right alongside theirs. But it's you we need to please, so we'd appreciate your opinion.

Do you like our cover painting?

Do you have any particular departments or features you'd like to see included in future issues of Western Fiction Magazine?

Of course, we'd like to see you use the handy pullout subscription envelope between pages 32 and 33, and mail in a subscription. That's the one sure way to express approval. But whether you subscribe or not—write anyway!

After all, it's your magazine. So write and tell me what you'd like to see in it.

To wind this up, back in the days when I wrote western fiction for a living we had a couple of country expressions to denote how apprehensive the hero was. One had him as "jittery as an old settin' hen that's squatted down on a coiled rattlesnake." The other had him as "nervous and scared as an old brush-popper steer with his tail caught in a fence and trying to jerk free."

Now, I'm not all that nervous and jittery. I just look that way. But I sure would like to hear from you, neighbor!

Write—

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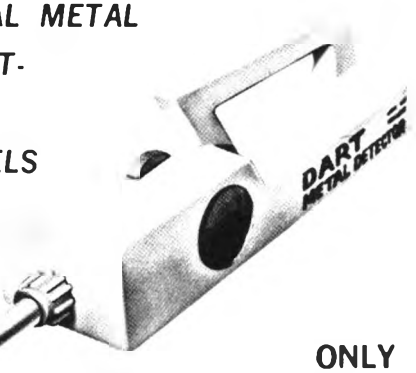

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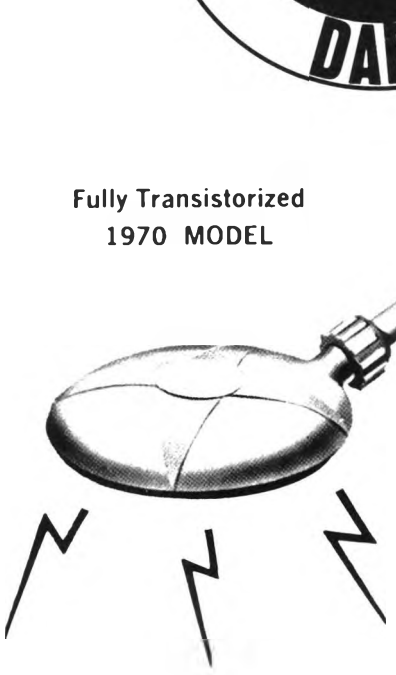

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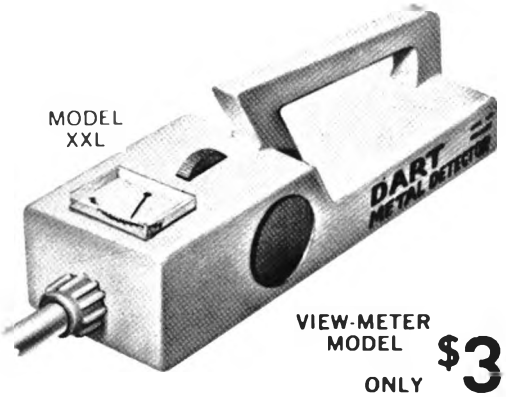

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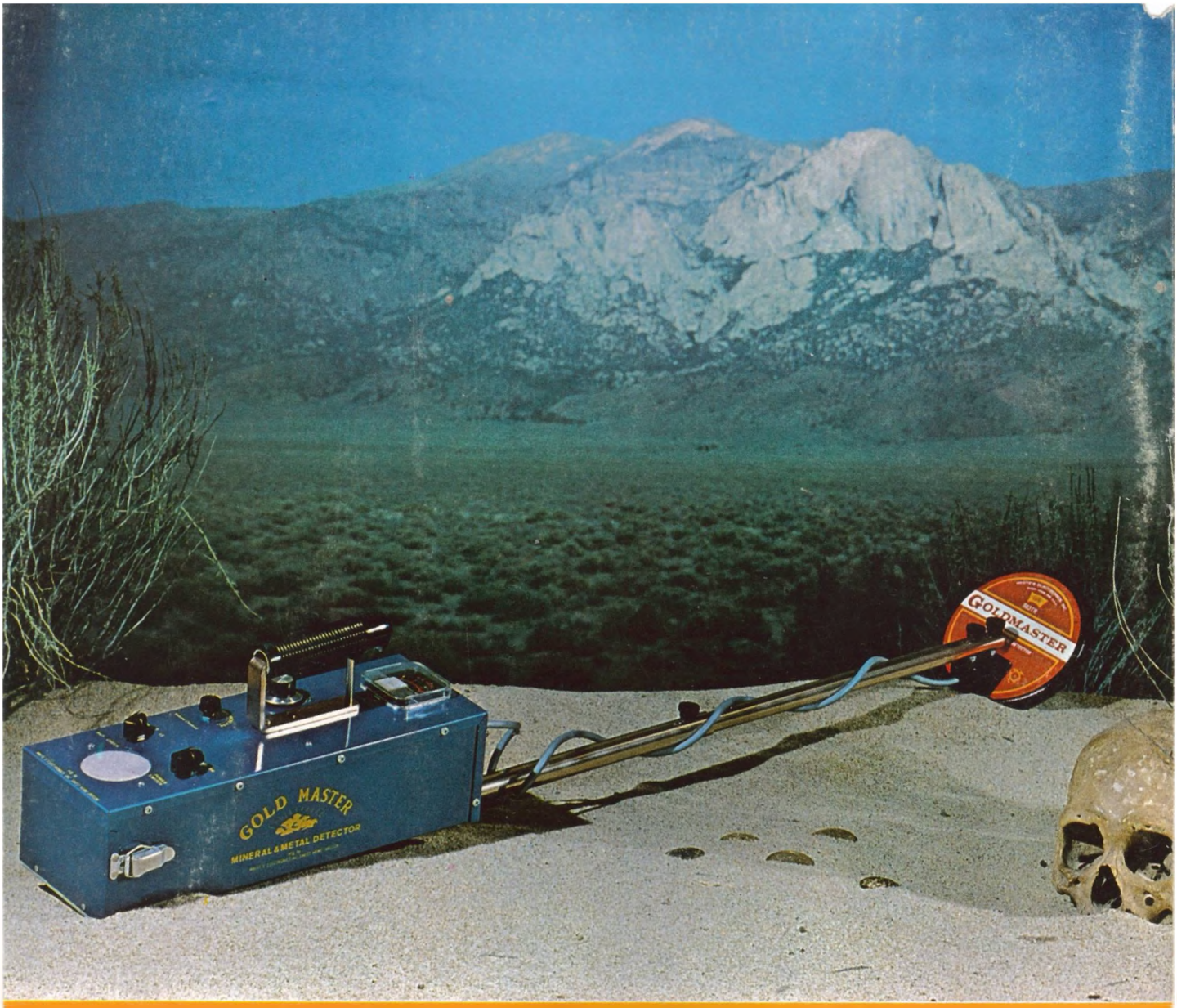

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