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Vol. 66, No. 3—OCTOBER, 1947 A THRILLING PUBLICATION TWENTY-FIRST YEAR

COMPLETE NOVEL

BURY ME NOT

by Allan R. Bosworth

Accused of killing his own father, young Tony Caldwell faces the toughest fight of his life and enlists the aid of Sheriff Sam Karnes, a wily solver of range mysteries, in a six-gun campaign for justice, honor and vindication! **11**

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The new marshal wasn't fast with his guns—but his brains clicked rapidly

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The authentic story of Virginia City's fabulous and famous Comstock Lode

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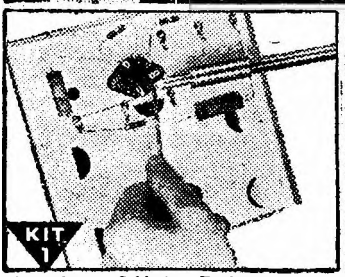

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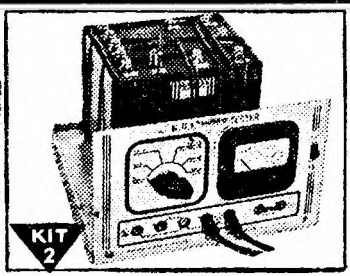

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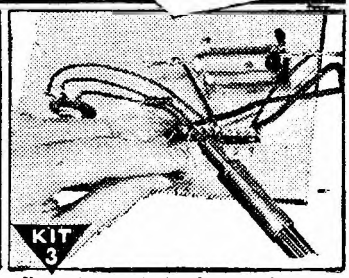

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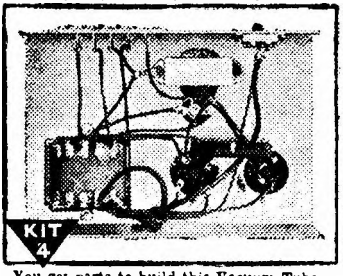

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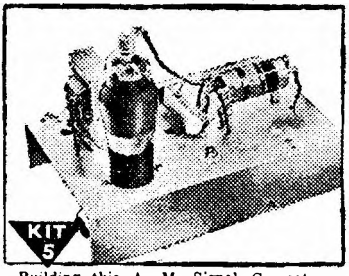

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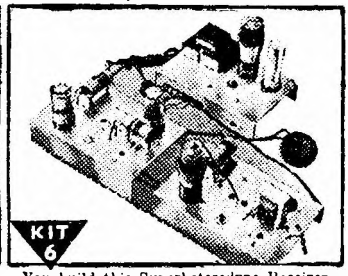

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Conducted By FOGHORN CLANCY

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GREETINGS, waddies, here we are again, at the Chuck Wagon, where we try to dish out the latest in range and rodeo gossip, and you know you are always welcome. As welcome as visitors used to be at any lonely linecamp where perhaps a cowboy had been staying alone for months with nothing to talk to except perhaps a cat or dog and hundreds of head of cattle. It's at times like this that a cowboy gets in the habit of talking to his horse, perhaps confiding in his steed his plans one day to become a cattle king. Sounds more or less silly, but I have known horses that seemed to listen and one would almost believe they understood.

Well, the 1947 rodeo season is nearly half over now and the cowboys are really getting around to a lot of rodeos. It looks like there are more rodeos this season than ever before. Not many people will have to travel a great distance this season to see a rodeo. There is almost sure to be one in your front or back yard.

Cowboy Patrolmen

If you were down on the Rio Grande, the Mexican Border, you would see more than two hundred cowboys, new border patrolmen riding back and forth the full distance of the border from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California, watching the border closely, not for bandits or smugglers but for cattle. That dreaded disease of cattle, the foot and mouth disease, broke out in Mexico last winter and the United States Government is determined that it will not cross the border to affect the cattle on this side if they can prevent it, hence all the cowboy patrolmen.

The U.S. Bureau of Animal Husbandry rushed many of our best veterinarians down to Mexico to help the Mexican government combat the disease. The Mexican government is cooperating with the authorities on this side of the Border in trying to keep it out of this country while they try to stamp it out on that side, and up to this time it has not flared up on this side of the Border, and every cattleman in the country is in hopes that we will not have the disease on this side. Wherever the foot and mouth disease breaks out the government sends in men and buys all cattle that have even in a remote manner been exposed, slaughters them and buries them in vast trenches with quicklime.

All the cattle used in the rodeo at El Paso, Texas were quarantined, and while it was a livestock show no breeding cattle were exhibited, as the owners were warned that their cattle might be quarantined and of course would not ship them in.

A Swell Contest

The El Paso Rodeo was a swell contest and drew good crowds. One feature of the rodeo was the riding of Verne Elliott's noted bucking horse, "Squaw Man." This steed, which for about six months had managed to dump every rider that mounted him, was ridden first by Tom Knight on the first day of the show and by Larry Finley near the close of the show, which again proves that the old verse that has been kicked around the range and rodeo arena for years is still correct. The verse, "There was never a cowboy who couldn't be throwed, an' never a hoss that couldn't be rode."

Verne Elliott was the producer and arena director, Shirley Hussey and Carl Dossey were the judges, the timers were Elmer Hepler and Creta Elliott. Cy Taillon, was the announcer. Among the trick riders were Bernice Dossey, Jean Allen, Buff Brady and

(Continued on page 8)

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

Dick Griffith, John Lindsey, George Mills and Jasbo Fulkerson were the clowns.

Special acts included John Lindsey and his trained bull "Iron Ore," the Moore family with their mule "Beeswax," and Bill Cardwell with his sheep dogs.

Bud Spealman, 1946 bareback bronc riding champion, had little competition on the final day when only two bareback bronc riders out of the ten that were up that day made qualified rides. Toots Mansfield won the calf roping for the third consecutive year, but by a very narrow margin as he was closely followed by that great roper that all rodeo folk are watching closely, Troy Fort, who previously at San Angelo, Texas, lowered the world's calf roping record from 11 seconds to 10.7 seconds.

Hub Whiteman, who was one of America's greatest steer wrestlers before he entered the armed forces, since his release has been slow getting back into best form. He looked like the winner when he set a new wrestling record of four seconds flat, but his final steer got away from him and he lost out in the finals.

Pee Wee Morris, Rodeo Cowboys' Association 1946 bull riding champion, showed that he had championship nerve as well as riding ability. After being carried from the arena unconscious during the saddle bronc riding, he revived and came back thirty minutes later to put up a thrilling ride in the finals of the bull riding and to win the championship of this event.

Final Results

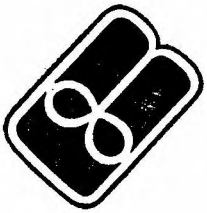
The final results in calf roping were: First, Toots Mansfield; Second, Troy Fort; Third, Walton Poage; Fourth, Buddy Derrick.

Carl Dossey won the steer wrestling, Homer Pettigrew was second, Hank Mills was third and George Mills was fourth. Buster Ivory was best man in saddle bronc riding, Tom Knight was second, Bill Ward was third and Vic Schwarz was fourth.

Pee Wee Morris won the bull riding, Wag Blessing was second, Jack Holder was third and Carl Cornett was fourth.

There were no finals in the bareback bronc riding, there being so many contestants that they could have but two trials or go-rounds.

(Continued on page 104)



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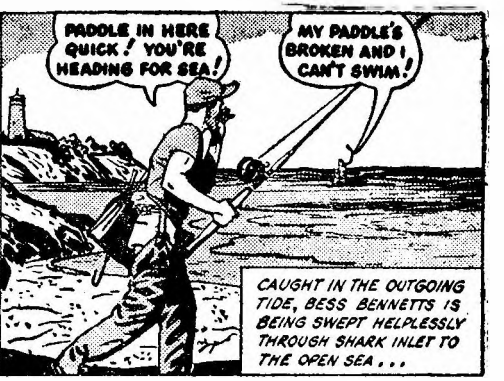
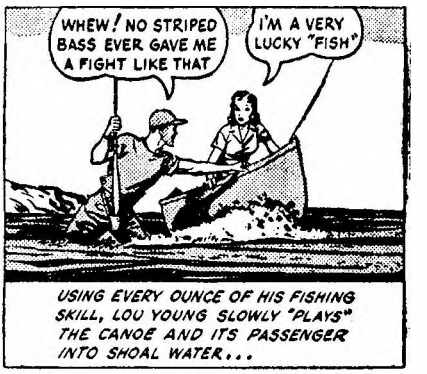




The Sheriff found Jud Caldwell's body lying face-down (CHAPTER V)

BURY ME NOT

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Accused of killing his own father, Tony Caldwell faces the toughest fight of his life—and enlists the aid of Sheriff Sam Karnes, the wily solver of range mysteries!

CHAPTER I

The Bridegroom

TONY CALDWELL'S spurs made music, but his heart was filled with remembered anger and his mind was on the long chance, and he looked not at all like a man going to his own wedding. He had crossed the Rio Grande by moonlight, with Don Enrique's *segundo* watching from the southern shore and swearing he would shoot anybody who challenged him. Nobody had, and it was sunrise now, and Tony was forty miles deeper into Texas, where the cow trails

were evasive, and the thick chaparral high enough to hide a tall man on a horse.

An inner recklessness rode with him, showing in the way he sat his saddle, easy and loose. It might have been mistaken for joy, but it was a part of his nature, and had nothing to do with any mood, past or present. He had ridden that way through this same brush six months before, after Jud Caldwell — his own father — had sworn out a warrant for his arrest as a horse thief.

He was too young for a heavy beard, but what he had was sunburned a reddish mahogany, and he needed a haircut badly. His hat was stained from service as a water bucket for the horse. Brush had snagged the faded ducking jumper he wore, and left its marks on his boots and cowhide leggins.

He drew rein on the top of a rise, and let the horse blow there while he rolled a cigarette and watched the light change over the mesquites. The rim-rocked hills of the Clawhammer range came into view, blued by twenty miles of distance, and he could see Hackberry Gap, where the water-holes were.

The hills ran all of a level toward the southwest like a rock fence between the new and the old, the law and the wild. Closer at hand, a tin roof on the Mariposa store caught the sun.

Tony spat the taste of alkali dust from his mouth, and licked the cigarette paper. The light grew stronger. Other roofs showed dun and gray in the little town, barely topping the infinite sea of the brush, telling him nothing. The gamble was beginning in earnest, now, and the thought of it pleased him almost as much as the knowledge that he would see Mary again in a little while.

He was staking everything on the chance of humbling Jud Caldwell, and he grinned at the idea, because nobody else had ever been able to do it. He smoked the cigarette through while the freshness of the morning softened and mellowed under the sun. He pinched the stub against his saddle-horn, and rode on.

MARIPOSA was a wide spot on the San Antonio-El Paso stage road, and at this hour only a single ranch wagon and two cowhorses graced its dusty street. Tony noted with satisfaction that the barber was sweeping out for the day's business, and that the store was already open. He got down in front of the stage stand, a low, sprawling adobe with brush corrals at the side and rear, and strode into the combination office and lunchroom.

The place appeared deserted, but stomach-searching aromas of fried bacon and boiling coffee came out of the kitchen. Tony rapped on the counter. A short man emerged, sleeves rolled high on his hairy arms. He carried a cup of coffee in one hand, and a saucer in the other.

"Howdy, Jake," Tony said.

Jake regarded him with round blue eyes, and breathed noisily, like a man not yet awake. Then he put the cup and saucer carefully on the counter, and grinned.

"Look like yuh been stayin' out with the dry cattle, Tony," he said. "I figgered things would blow over if yuh gave 'em time."

"They haven't," Tony said briefly. "What time's the west-bound stage?"

"About an hour and a half," said Jake. He poured coffee into the saucer, and blew little ripples across it, studying the younger man through the steam. "Want some breakfast?"

"Not yet. I'm overdue at the barber shop. I'm goin' to Hackberry on the stage, Jake. Can yuh keep my hoss for a while?"

"Long as yuh want," said Jake, and looked out at the animal. "He wearin' a Clawhammer brand?"

Tony flushed darkly. "I raised him, and four or five more, and they're mine! There's a few things—"

"I ain't sayin' a word," Jake put in hastily. "Just wondered if he was the one. Now, listen, Tony, Bart Keyes has been makin' Hackberry his headquarters. He's got ambitions to be sheriff, and he'll need yore pa's backing. Yuh don't want to run into him unless things are fixed up."

"Much obliged," Tony said drily. He went to the door, his head high in the pride of youth and Caldwell blood, and he turned there and grinned at the keeper of the stage stand. "I could use a little of that Jud Caldwell backin' myself," he said.

He left his saddle on the sidewalk, and turned the horse into the corral gate. In

Sam leaped for the horse's reins while the killer's gun flamed (CHAPTER XVII)

the tin-roofed store, he bought clothing from the skin out, and went from there to the barber shop.

"Haircut, shave, shampoo and bath," he told the barber. "See if yuh can make me smell pretty for a change. . . ."

The stage, a three-seated hack drawn by six frisky little Spanish mules, came into Mariposa at a gallop. Tony Caldwell stood by his saddle as Jake ran to open the corral gate. He saw a man on the seat by the driver, and another man—a Mexican—just behind them. His heart sank, and then the team swung wide for the gate, bringing the rear seat into view, showing him the girl in the blue dress.

The driver yelled, "Forty minutes for breakfast!" and jumped down while Jake changed teams.

Tony came smiling through the fogging dust. He held up his arms, and Mary Karnes stepped down into them.

He kissed her as if it had been six years instead of six months, and then held her at arm's length. They looked hungrily at each other; they laughed, and kissed again. Jake came around that way, staring, his arms full of harness, and Tony hurried the girl into the street.

"Haven't got much time, honey," he explained. "I've made a date with the justice of the peace, and he's waitin' at his house. We'll get married, and mebbe we'll have time for a weddin' breakfast before the stage pulls out."

"Before the stage pulls out?" Mary echoed. "But I thought we—that you'd have horses, or a wagon."

"My bride is goin' to travel in style. We'll roll into Hackberry on the stage, and get a livery stable rig there, and drive it to the ranch."

Mary halted, and looked up at him. The first warm flush of excitement was leaving her cheeks, and worry crept deep into her storm-blue eyes.

"Hackberry?" she said. "Oh, Tony, let's don't go back there! Let's don't go to the Clawhammer!"

"Yuh're afraid of Dad!" he accused, and made an angry, impatient gesture. "I can take care of yuh, Mary. And I have to have it out with him, sooner or later!"

THE girl shook her head. "I'm not afraid of Jud Caldwell," she said slowly. "But he'll either hurt you, or you'll hurt him! And you can't stay there, Tony. The last time, you ran with the wrong bunch after you left. If you felt that you were forced to do that again, I couldn't stand it! I've seen men on the dodge, Tony, and I've seen their wives and children come to the jail after they were arrested, and—"

Her voice trailed off, frightened and small. He looked up pleadingly, white-faced, and he saw the sunlight caressing red and gold tints in her brown hair. He laughed, and stooped to kiss her again. His arm went around her waist, and he led her up the street. This was part of his gamble. But the stakes were worth it, and with Mary at his side he couldn't lose.

"It won't come to that, honey," he told her. "I didn't put everything into my letters, but I'm holdin' a trump card, and when I play it, Jud Caldwell will have to call off his dogs. For the first time in his life, he's bit off more'n he can chew."

"How?" Mary challenged.

"His barbed wire. He's gone fence crazy, and sold practically all the Clawhammer stock last fall so he could put the whole ranch under wire. On top of that, he bid on a contract to deliver four thousand head of prime steers in Kansas this summer. That means two trail herds—yuh can't handle more'n a couple of thousand in one bunch—and he's got to throw 'em on the Trail in the next few weeks."

"He can buy the cattle," Mary said. "He could borrow the money, if it comes to that."

"It's not the money. This has been a bad year for Texas cattle—drought, and die-ups everywhere. Cattle are comparatively scarce. But the main thing is the fact that every other ranchman around here is riled up because Dad fenced the Hackberry water-holes, and because he's served notice that their herds can't cross Clawhammer range. He's got a theory that tick-infested cattle carry the Spanish fever. Northern buyers have been raisin' the devil about infected herds, and he thinks he can keep the Clawhammer range clean. Anyway, the other ranchmen have formed a combine. They'll see him in tunket with his back busted before they'll sell him a cow."

"He can get Mexican cattle," Mary pointed out.

Tony laughed. "Mebbe he thinks he can. But Joe Rankin has been down there, linin' up all his friends against him. Joe has practically controlled the Mexican market on this part of the river for years."

The girl looked up at him suspiciously. Tony had worked for Joe Rankin, here in the brush country, before Jud Caldwell set the law on his trail. Rankin had the reputation of dealing in wet stock, and the men who rode for him were wild.

"Joe's all right, honey," Tony said, seeing her glance. "The point is, he's bidding on that beef contract himself—for which I don't blame him. But this time there's one *ranchero* he can't count on. For the last four months, I've been workin' for old Enrique Sepulveda. If he hasn't got four thousand head of beef, he can get 'em, and it seems like he took quite a shine to me. He's—"

"He's also got a beautiful daughter," Mary put in jealously. "Oh, I know her, Tony—she was in the class ahead of me at school."

"Shore." Tony laughed. "Inez. Don Enrique kind of hinted at a match, all right, but I know a girl who's twice as beautiful, and I wasn't interested in anything but his cattle. Yuh see how it is? Joe Rankin can't touch 'em if I talk a deal first. Dad can't touch 'em. Dad's out on a limb. And if he still wants to play rough, I can saw it off!"

She looked up at him again, seeing the bright excitement in his dark eyes, understanding that the desire for revenge against Jud Caldwell ruled him as strongly, perhaps, as his love for her. And she saw, too, that the shadow of the Clawhammer owner's stubborn, unforgiving nature lay across the path of their happiness.

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "But we could go anywhere else and be happy, Tony. Anywhere, where we could live our own lives!"

Tony halted at a ramshackle paling fence, where a house stood behind a cluster of chinaberry trees. He put his hands on her shoulders, and swung her around to face him, and somewhere in the trees a mockingbird was singing.

"Look, honey!" he said almost roughly. "I want to own my share of the Clawhammer some day! I want you to be the richest woman in Hackberry County, as well as the happiest and prettiest! So we're goin' back, and I'll fight it out. . . . And you just come on in here and change yore name to Mrs. Tony Caldwell!"

CHAPTER II

Sheriff of Hackberry

SHERIFF SAM KARNES surveyed that morning from a chair tilted against the front of the Hackberry jail, keeping the peace of a large hunk of Texas after a fashion peculiarly his own.

The vantage point commanded everything that happened around the town square. He could sit here and assay the good and evil of what he saw, and he was that kind of man who looks for good in all works. He abhorred violence in all its forms, basically because the very word suggested physical effort, and he had found that soft talk not only turned away wrath, but also saved him considerable exertion.

The sheriff had ridden hard after cattle thieves in his time, but such excursions were contrary to his nature. He preferred the tactics by which he had rounded up the Jessup boys, heading for the Nueces with two hundred head of Clawhammer steers.

On that occasion, the sheriff simply picked the most likely water-hole along the arid route, circled wide and went to it, and took his ease there in the shade. Sure enough, the slower cattle had finally come up, and the Jessup boys, whose tongues were hanging out, too, were susceptible to gentle argument and the barrel of a saddle gun laid in the crotch of a tree.

Jud Caldwell owned the Clawhammer, and about half the county, and Sam Karnes hoped he would remember those steers when the fall elections came. This time, there would be another candidate.

The sheriff whittled, and gave rein to philosophical thought. A string of freight wagons rolled by, bells on the hame-straps making music. He lost a mental bet on

the outcome of a dog fight in the little park of mulberry trees. It was too soft a day to fight, anyway.

Tom Henry, his bony shoulders bowed under the threat of almost certain bankruptcy, rode in on the creek road, not answering when the sheriff spoke. He turned into the alley beside the High Lonesome Saloon.

Sam Karnes shook his head sympathetically. Just two days before, the Court of Civil Appeals had ruled that Jud Caldwell owned the riparian rights on Hackberry Creek. Jud's wire—it had been cut twice in a month—was therefore legal, and in a dry year this meant ruin for Tom Henry's little Rafter H outfit. And there was no telling what would happen the next time Joe Rankin and his brush country crowd came up with a trail herd, expecting to water at the Hackberry as they had always done.

Things were going that way—open range petering out, barbed wire coming in. The sheriff sighed. He had a vague idea that water was put wherever it was by the Almighty, for everybody to enjoy. But the courts thought otherwise. The court ruling was just another chapter in the growth of the Caldwell cattle kingdom. Tom Henry was only the latest of many smaller operators to be strangled by that growth.

A ranch wagon halted before the Stockman's Bank, across the square. Sam Karnes clicked his knife shut and sat up to watch, suspecting that a beautiful day was going to be spoiled.

That was Jud Caldwell getting out—a heavy, wedge-shaped man who stamped on the earth when he walked, as if he owned all of it instead of only a hundred sections; an unreasonable man, worth a lot of money, good years, and still given to raising unholy ructions over small, picayunish things. He was always wanting the law on somebody, like the time he had sworn out a warrant against his own son when the boy left home after a fight.

You could hear Jud a mile away when he was in a temper, and he was in one now. He shook the bank's front door, but nobody opened it, although the sheriff had seen Troy Holcomb going in there earlier to work on his loan accounts. Jud kicked the door, and then stamped down the street and went into the Hackberry Mercantile store, bellowing something about a carload of barbed wire.

The San Antonio-El Paso stage whirled in to stop at the hotel. Sam Karnes yawned, and checked that off the morning, and gauged the progress of the sun toward his chair. When the shade ran out, it would be dinner time. His wife, Ivy, was the best cook in seven counties. He shut his mind against Jud's sound and fury, and dozed.

Next thing he knew, the sun was warm on his boots, and a girl's voice was calling.

"Dad! Dad—wake up!"

THE sheriff blinked. He got out of his chair with all the ungainly power of a bear, and gave his daughter a bear hug. He was a long-waisted, oversized man, uncommonly tall despite a slouch. A cartridge belt, loops and holster empty, sagged forward from his hips as if its principal function was to support a comfortable paunch. He had a wide and amiable mouth, partly covered by a mustache, and an unruly shock of rough white hair.

And somehow—he never looked at her without mild amazement—Sam Karnes had fathered this slender, spirited girl of nineteen, much too pretty to be any kin. He squeezed her again, and held her off to admire a dark blue dress that came in tight at the waist, making her look about as big around as a cinch ring. And then he saw the fright in her storm-blue eyes.

"Why, Mary!" he said softly. "Anything wrong at school?"

"No, Dad," she said, and her chin came up, quivering. "I quit school. I came out from San Antone on the stage, and got off at Mariposa this morning, and—and got married there. To Tony Caldwell."

The sheriff said, "Tony Caldwell!" and sank back to the chair, needing time to digest all that the name meant.

He put aside the sudden realization that Mary was a woman grown and could marry whom she pleased. He was not thinking of Tony's wildness, or the probability that he would be a rich man some day. Instead, he looked at the store across the square, and thought: "Now here's somethin' Jud will shore enough raise the devil about!"

Then he smiled, because Mary was dangerously near to tears.

"Well, that's fine, honey, just fine!" he said. "Happy?"

"I—I begged Tony not to come back here," Mary faltered. "But he thinks Jud Caldwell needs him bad enough to call it quits, and—and Tony is full of Caldwell stubbornness, too. I'm afraid there'll be a fight. Will you go out to the ranch and stop it, Dad?"

"Where's Tony now?"

"At the livery stable, hiring a rig. Don't tell him I asked you to go. But maybe Jud would listen to you, Dad. I remember his bragging that he put you in office."

The sheriff nodded, and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. There was truth in what Mary had said, and it would be just as easy for Jud Caldwell to nail his official scalp to the Clawhammer barn, too, when election rolled around.

He looked up at the girl under shaggy white brows. She was stubborn, too. It was a trait she had inherited from Ivy. With or without Jud Caldwell's blessing, this marriage likely needed help; sooner or later, it faced a conflict of wills.

"I can ride out that way, casual-like," he said. "But Jud's in town now, Mary, and he's already got his back up a mile. Mebbe it wouldn't be a good idea for 'em to meet here."

Mary shivered. "Oh, no—not in public! If he had just listened to me, if he hadn't come back at all! Is that Ranger around?"

"Bart Keyes? No, he's out of town till tomorrow. But if Jud don't bury the hatchet, Tony will have to keep clear of Keyes. I told Jud a long time back that I wouldn't touch that warrant against Tony. I told him anybody who'd worked on the Clawhammer as long as Tony did, without regular wages, shore ought to have a hoss and saddle comin' to him. But Keyes is different."

"There are five other saddle horses at the ranch," Mary said. "Tony raised them, and he wants to get them. And with all the horses Jud Caldwell's got, he wouldn't miss the five."

"No, but he'll holler his head off and claim they're his, same as he did the one Tony rode off on," Sam sighed. "Go on in back and break the news to yore mother, honey. And then get Tony out of town."

He stayed where he was, so Ivy and Mary could shed a few womanly tears. He saw Jud Caldwell cross the street at

The Sheriff moved swiftly and grasped Tony's arm (CHAPTER XIII)

the far corner, and storm into the boot shop of Fritz-the-Dutchman.

"Look here, yuh cussed four-eyed, bald-headed jackass!" Jud yelled. "How long yuh been makin' my boots? Twenty years! If yuh had the brains promised a half-witted tumblebug, yuh'd know my size! These are too tight!"

Fritz' excited accent rose and was drowned. Jud would have his money back. He'd fire any man of his crew who patronized Fritz. He'd danged well see that the town had a bootmaker who knew his trade!

SHERIFF KARNES was chuckling in spite of himself when Mary came out, hugged him hastily, and hurried across the square. He sat down to dinner in their living quarters back of the jail when she came back, pleased at the moist shine in Ivy's eyes, amused at the boot shop row. Like most men who spend their lives in the saddle, Jud Caldwell was vain about his small feet. He wouldn't admit that he had grown older and heavier, and needed a larger size boot.

"Tight boots." Sam said philosophically, "could have been back of a lot of Jud's meanness. A man just naturally ain't human when his feet hurt."

"Humph!" said Ivy. "Jud Caldwell never was human. I knew that twenty years ago, when he buried his wife in that old horse trough. And when he treated her sister like he has, after bringing her out here to raise his kids."

Sam buttered another biscuit. "Wasn't an old trough, Ivy. It was brand new. Rained so much that fall, the freight wagons couldn't come through. And there wasn't a piece of milled lumber in town, let alone a coffin."

"You always take up for Jud," Ivy accused. "He could have got a decent coffin later—a gold one, with his money! And he ought to have married Miss Callie. If she was good enough to spend twenty years of her life mothering Tony and Betty, and keeping his house—"

There was a roar at the door. "Sam! Sam Karnes!"

"Comin'!" the sheriff called. "Speak of the devil!" he told Ivy softly. "You stay here and finish yore dinner."

He went to the door, suppressing a smile at the secret he knew, respecting the man who stood there, and still dreading to see him. Jud expected loyalty as his due because he was Jud Caldwell. It was the same trait that had made him keep his son working on the Clawhammer for years without paying him wages.

He stood in the sun, a heavy-jowled, dark-faced man wearing an expensive hat, and the forty-dollar boots that pinched his feet, and dressed in between like any of his cowhands. A rusty old black vest sagged unbuttoned from his wide shoulders, the tag of a tobacco sack dangling from an upper pocket. Brown ducking pants were belted low on his waist, and he carried a pearl-handled revolver.

"Come in, Jud," Sam invited. "Yuh're just in time to eat."

"Ain't hungry," Caldwell snapped. His black brows met, and he fidgeted, driven by a restless energy. He said, "Three things, Sam. I'm goin' to Judge Parker to swear out a warrant, and I want you to throw Tom Henry in jail. Then jump out to Hackberry Creek. Joe Rankin's bringin' up a trail herd, and yuh'll have to see that he don't cut my wire and water there. And then I want yuh to be ready to enforce a foreclosure on Wade Magill. By glory, I'll show 'em all who's runnin' this county!"

Sam blinked at the apoplectic color rising in Jud's thick neck.

"Now, wait a minute, Jud," he counseled. "One thing at a time. What's Tom Henry done?"

"Threatened my life—that's what! He's over in the saloon, gettin' tanked up on forty rod, tellin' everybody he ought to kill me for robbin' him and Magill and Joe Rankin of their water rights. Joe Rankin—why, everybody knows he swings a wide loop and packs a runnin' iron! Him talkin' about water rights!"

"Well," Sam said cautiously, "nobody ever caught Joe at it. But I'll drop over and talk to Tom."

"Talk to him?" Caldwell shouted. "*Talk* to him? You do too danged much talkin', and not enough arrestin'!"

"There's other ways of handlin' a man, Jud."

"Yes, and there are other sheriffs, too!" Caldwell glared at him, and breathed hard. "I hear Bart Keyes aims to quit the Ranger service and run for this job. He's

a good man. He's got sand in his craw. And by godfrey, Sam, if yuh don't get off the seat of yore britches and quit bein' so soft-hearted, yuh're plumb liable to find yoreself between a rock and a hard place!"

He jerked the tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. Sam Karnes drew a long breath.

"I kind of like bein' sheriff, Jud," he said softly. "Hate to go back to punchin' cows, at my age. But while I've got the job, I'll run it my way—not yores, or anybody else's. Shore yuh get the warrant, and I'll have to arrest Tom. But he's just blowin' off steam. Now, why don't yuh come in and set for a while? Have a cup of coffee, pull off them tight boots and relax a bit."

CALDWELL looked at him in sudden furious exasperation, as if resenting anybody's knowing that his feet hurt.

"Thunderation!" he exploded, throwing the unlighted cigarette against the wall, and turning to stamp angrily into the street. "I'll get that warrant!" he flung over his shoulder. "And I'll have a little talk with Bart Keyes!"

Ivy came to the door and stood at Sam's side.

She was a pleasingly rounded woman with a young-looking face, and a serenity that was enhanced by the gray in her dark hair, and there were times when it suited her to let Sam think he was the boss.

The sheriff looked at Jud Caldwell's broad back, and shook his head wonderingly.

"There he goes!" he said as if to himself. "Can't set down, can't let people alone. If he ain't workin' on a big deal, he's got his fingers on a dozen little ones. And still, he's a mighty big man, and I reckon there'll be a monument to him in the park, some day. Founder of the town of Hackberry. First man around here to take a herd up the Trail. First man to see that open range is dyin' out, and know what barbed wire meant."

"I heard what he said about Bart Keyes," Ivy answered drily. "If you ask me, the whole county would be better off if that monument was already there—with Jud Caldwell under it!"

CHAPTER III

Uneasy Mission

KARNES pulled down the brim of his battered old white hat, and crossed the little park in the direction of the High Lonesome. It was after one o'clock, and Mary and Tony, he thought, would be out on the road to the Clawhammer. He would go out there himself, in a little while, to face whatever unpleasantness attended Jud's return, although as yet he had no idea how Tony's problem should be handled.

He paused outside the saloon's swinging doors. Inside, Troy Holcomb was talking earnestly. Troy had a deep, friendly voice, and none of the coldness you expected from bankers.

"Cut out the tough talk before the wrong people hear you!" Troy was saying. "There's only one thing you can do, Tom. Get together with Wade Magill and Joe Rankin, and hire a smart lawyer. Take the case to the Supreme Court."

"Court, yore grandmother!" Tom Henry answered thickly. "Got about as much chance in court as a belch in a whirlwind!"

"All right. Gamble on drilling a deep well and putting up a windmill. You mark my words—windmills are going to revolutionize cattle business!"

Tom laughed shortly. "Wade Magill's down three hundred feet. What's he struck? Blue mud! It costs money. And I'd die of thirst drinkin' the water a windmill can pump!"

The sheriff moved inside and saw them—Tom Henry, leaning lank and disconsolate on the bar, hat shoved back so that strands of straight black hair fell over his eyes; Troy Holcomb, the Stockman's Bank land and cattle loan expert, beside him. Holcomb was about forty, a small man who always looked as neat as his ledger figures, wearing a coat and a stand-up collar, and buttoned shoes.

"Listen, Tom," Holcomb said. "Windmills—" He saw the sheriff, and stopped.

"Sam, you try talking to Tom. I've got to get back to the bank. He's been making some pretty rash statements."

"Heard about 'em," said Sam. "So has Jud. Make mine a bottle of beer."

Holcomb looked at his watch and hurried out with a meaning jerk of his head toward Tom Henry. The Rafter H owner glowered at his reflection in the mirror.

"Don't give a hoot who heard me!" he asserted. "Said I ought to blow a hole through Jud, before he busts up any more little chicken-feed outfits like mine. And, by godfrey, mebbe I will!"

The sheriff drank from the bottle. "No," he said softly. "No, yuh ain't that big a fool, Tom. Yuh're goin' back to the ranch, right now."

Tom Henry considered this briefly, and then swung around, his eyes wavering and settling on the sheriff.

"Nobody eats enough beans to tell me what I'm goin' to do!" he said. "Not even you, Sam. You make tracks out of here while yuh can still walk!"

The gun was out of his holster before Sam Karnes pushed himself away from the bar. The sheriff moved fast for so big a man. He came in close, and twisted Tom's wrist gently but firmly, and handed the gun to the bartender.

"Shucks, now, Tom!" he reproved. "That wasn't you talkin'. That was the liquor. You go out home, and lock the door so yuh won't fall off the gallery, and get just as orey-eyed as yuh please. I figger there's times in every man's life when he either has to get drunk, or set down and cry. Things look better afterward."

Tom Henry's face worked with self pity

"I'm a friend of yores, Tom," the sheriff said. "I don't like to arrest anybody. It makes extra work for Ivy, having to cook."

Tom nodded. "That's right," he agreed. "I don't want to make work for Ivy. But things are mighty rocky, Sam."

He put his head down on the bar, and began to cry. The sheriff winked at the bartender.

"Get him on his hoss," he said. "Quicker he leaves town, the better."

When he went out on the street again, he felt a little glow that could hardly have come from one bottle of beer. Jud's team was still switching flies in front of the Stockman's Bank; everything looked peaceful.

THE sheriff killed an hour whittling on the arm of a chair on the shaded hotel gallery, then went to the stable behind the jail, and saddled his horse. Ivy found him there, and her face was no longer serene.

"You ought to have followed Jud Caldwell!" she said. "He ran into Tony at the bank, and there must have been a fight. Jud's got a black eye. And he says—"

"Good for the boy!" Sam grinned. "Mebbe now Jud will know Tony's grown up."

"He wouldn't talk about the fight," Ivy went on angrily. "He said if you wouldn't arrest Tony on that old warrant, he'd find Bart Keyes and see that Bart did it. He said he'd have the marriage annulled. Oh, I was afraid of this when Mary told me she'd married Tony!"

"Perdition's fire!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Tony's twenty-four, and Jud can't annul the marriage. I'll go on out to the ranch and get Tony to leave before anything else happens."

"Yes," Ivy said with a grimace. "And here—here's the warrant for Tom Henry's arrest. . . ."

You put big Sam Karnes into a saddle, and some of the awkwardness left him, and he attained a sort of grace. He still slouched, but his riding was effortless, and showed consideration for his horse.

He traveled southwest on the creek road, going slowly so he wouldn't overtake Tom Henry. When he had crossed the divide and neared the live-oak mottes that shaded the Hackberry water-holes, he felt sure that Tom was safe at the Rafter H.

The road forked here. The left-hand branch crossed the dry creek bed below the water-holes, and just below Jud Caldwell's fence, turning up into the mesquite flat on the farther side. The Rafter H lay over that way, with Wade Magill's four sections adjoining it on the north, and open range and the beginning of the wild brush country to the south and west of both.

Sam Karnes could see that things were rocky, indeed, for the small ranchers. It was only late March, but whirlwinds already twisted slender spirals of dust through the flats, a sure sign of continued

drought. The curly mesquite grass was brown, and crisp enough to shatter under a horse's hoofs. It was the kind of year when even Jud Caldwell would find himself poorer.

The sheriff took the right-hand road, letting himself into the Clawhammer boundary gate just as the sun dropped behind the rim-rocks. He passed Miss Callie Davis' cottage as darkness fell, and then a full moon came up and showed him the Clawhammer corrals a quarter of a mile farther on, and he stepped down and unsaddled there.

The bunkhouse was dark and quiet. "Rocky" Morse was Jud's foreman, and he and the seven or eight men Jud kept at the headquarters ranch would be out with the chuckwagon, starting the round-up on the open range. The western boundary fence had not been completed, and Clawhammer cattle still strayed.

Sam Karnes walked up to the house, and heard angry voices inside as he entered the yard. He hesitated, wondering if Jud had somehow got here first. The gate latch clanged behind him, putting a stop to the argument. He stepped on the long gallery, and Miss Callie came to the door, peering out where the lamplight threw its yellow rectangle.

"That you, Jud?" she asked, and her voice was sharp with fear.

"No—it's me. Sam Karnes."

"Dad!" Mary cried, and ran out on the gallery. "I'm so glad you're here!"

Miss Callie stood aside, looking sourly at the sheriff as she smoothed her apron with bony, nervous hands. She was past fifty, spare and angular, with lank gray hair knotted at the back of her head, and tight lines in her sallow face. Sam Karnes thought he had never seen a woman so severely marked by spinsterhood.

"Well, whose side you taking, Sheriff?" she demanded abruptly.

"Why, I don't exactly like to take sides in a case like this," Sam began. "Mary bein' my daughter, and all, I aim to be neutral."

"No, of course not!" Miss Callie said tartly. "Jud Caldwell owns the law, like he owns everything else!"

Tony Caldwell came out of the kitchen just then, wearing leggins and spurs, walking curiously like Jud walked.

"You keep quiet, Aunt Callie!" he said, and turned to face Sam.

HIS lips were bruised, but he smiled with that reckless quirk on his mouth, and there was a challenge in his eyes. Sam Karnes put out his hand.

"Well, son," he said, "mebbe yuh don't need any help—unless I have to protect yuh from this daughter of mine. But I had a little business out this way."

"Yuh mean a warrant for Tom Henry?" Tony asked bitterly. "I heard about it in town. Why in tarnation can't Dad leave people alone?"

Miss Callie sniffed. "Because he's a Caldwell, that's why! And you're just as bull-headed. You're as like him as two peas in a pod. You and Mary not married a day, and quarreling already!"

She stalked out to the kitchen, leaving a strained silence. Sam glanced from Tony to Mary, and saw tear stains on his daughter's cheeks.

"Pshaw!" he said softly. "About what?"

"Tony's going to work for Joe Rankin again," Mary said stiffly. "If he runs with

[*Turn page*]

that brush country crowd, he'll land in jail!"

Tony paced the floor restlessly.

"Sam," he said, "there's no use foolin' myself. I thought I had Dad where I wanted him. But he didn't even give me a chance to talk!"

"There are honest outfits," Mary said.

"You've heard the stories Dad spreads," Tony said evenly. "I worked for Joe two months before I went into Mexico, and I never saw anything crooked. He's fixed about like Dad was here, fifteen years ago. All open range. Wild cattle still in the brush, belongin' to anybody who can rope them. Shore, a few unbranded yearlin's drift down there from every ranch west of San Antone, along with the branded strays, and Joe slaps his iron on any he can find. Dad did the same, and so will I. And Joe being close to the river, he gets the blame when stock is rustled.

"Anyway"—Tony faced Sam Karnes, driving a fist into his palm—"if it's got to be war between me and the Clawhammer, I aim to line up with the outfit that can do Jud Caldwell the most harm!"

CHAPTER IV

"My Coffin's Gone!"

THE sheriff rolled a cigarette and considered this, trying not to see the unhappiness in Mary's eyes. He knew, now, that there was more than wildness in Tony's nature. The boy had inherited some of Jud's tenacity, his relentlessness.

The Clawhammer and Joe Rankin had always been at odds—Rankin had beaten Jud in a few Mexican cattle deals, and the sheriff knew that Jud had fenced the water-holes partly in spite. Tom Henry's range lay between the two big outfits like a buffer state, but now Tom would be forced to sell to one or the other, and the trouble would be intensified.

"Well," Sam said finally, "I keep my nose out of another man's business, when I can. But I wouldn't hang around here any longer than I had to, if I was you. Yuh got yore hosses?"

"I'll get 'em tomorrow," Tony said. "But Joe Rankin's camped down the line with a trail herd. I'm ridin' down there now to talk business with him."

He bent over Mary's chair, but she barely allowed his lips to brush her cheek, and he straightened, hesitating. The sheriff gave him an almost imperceptible nod, and led the way outside.

"Wind in the southeast," he observed, stepping off the gallery. "Ring around the moon. Could bring rain." Then, still looking at the stars, he lowered his voice. "Son, I went through the same kind of thing with her mother, twenty years ago. Yuh got to have an understandin'. It may hurt, but yuh got to make it plain who wears the pants. . . ."

Betty Caldwell had been horseback riding, and she came up from the corrals just as Tony left. She was a little older than Mary, with hazel eyes and coppery hair, and a wistful smile, slow and sweet. It wouldn't be long, Sam told himself, before Jud would raise the roof about her choice of a husband, no matter who the man was.

Miss Callie called them in to supper, and although she was a good cook, the meal was not pleasant. Mary had lapsed into a hurt silence, and the whole house seemed gripped by a tenseness against its owner's return. Miss Callie fidgeted from the stove to the door, smoothing her apron and listening for the sound of wagon wheels. At the end of the meal, she lighted a lantern and announced that she was going to her cottage.

"If Jud stays this late," she said, "he usually stays in town. Betty, honey, never mind the dishes. I'll do them in the morning."

The others sat for a while in the living room, but nobody was in a conversational mood. Betty showed the sheriff to a spare room that opened on the gallery, and he went to bed.

It was some time past midnight when he woke with a start. The moonlight was on his pillow, and a woman's voice, high and edged with hysteria, was screaming incomprehensible things. He pulled on trousers and boots, and hurried out on the gallery.

Miss Callie was coming through the yard gate, her lantern making a jerky

circle of light. She collapsed moaning on the gallery steps.

"My coffin—my coffin!" she cried. "Somebody has stolen my coffin!"

Everything about this had the quality of nightmare, and Sam Karnes stared, disbelieving. Betty came out, wearing a robe and carrying a blanket, and the sheriff helped Miss Callie up. The moonlight was on her gaunt shoulders, and she made a sepulchral figure in her nightgown, with blowing strings of gray hair about her face.

"My coffin!" she wailed again. "Everybody knew I set store by it!"

Betty put the blanket around her, and shook her slightly.

"Now, Aunt Callie!" she reasoned. "You just dreamed it."

"No, I didn't! It wasn't a dream. Somebody took it, and me likely to go at any time!"

The sheriff said, "*Coffin*? What on earth was she doin' with a coffin?"

Nobody answered. Betty called for Mary to put a kettle on the stove so they could make Miss Callie a pot of tea.

"I don't want any tea!" Miss Callie said. She drew a shuddering breath, and was suddenly calmer. She faced the sheriff. "Why would anybody steal it? What good is it to anybody but me?"

SAM KARNES shook his head.

"I don't know, Miss Callie. Now where was it, and when did yuh see it last?"

"It was in my parlor. I dusted it today about one o'clock, when I took down the curtains and washed them. Tonight, after I ironed the curtains, I took them in the parlor, and it was gone."

"Come in and drink some tea," Betty urged. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Miss Callie moaned that it made no difference, now, but they went inside. The sheriff followed, and beckoned Betty aside.

"Did she shore enough have a coffin?" he asked incredulously.

The girl hesitated. "Well—yes. She had a spell of sickness five or six years ago, and kept after Dad until he ordered it for her. You see, when my mother—when she died—there wasn't—"

She stopped there, and the sheriff remembered how Jud Caldwell had buried his young wife in a horse trough. He guessed that Miss Callie had neither forgotten that, nor forgiven Jud for it. It was plain that Miss Callie hated Jud Caldwell, and loved his children.

"I know, Betty," he said quickly. "But who'd steal it? I reckon I'll have to go down there and take a look."

"I'll get dressed and go with you," Betty said. "Mary can put Aunt Callie to bed when she has her tea."

Miss Callie's house was a four-room cottage, and Betty explained that it had been built when she came out from East Texas. She was strait-laced, and didn't think it would look right if she lived under the same roof with a widower her own age.

Besides, Jud Caldwell was used to cow camps, and had no patience with the frills a woman liked. There were lace curtains at Miss Callie's windows, and she had planted vines and rose bushes in the yard.

"This is the parlor," Betty said, opening a door off the hall.

The sheriff held up the lantern, and Betty stared at a pair of straight-backed chairs facing each other against the wall.

"Well," she said, "she wasn't dreaming! It's gone."

Sam Karnes looked around a room that smelled of moth balls and furniture polish. It had flowered wallpaper, and a horsehair settee, and a small foot-pedal organ. Everything was stiff, and spotlessly uncomfortable. The only dust in the room lay where Miss Callie's coffin had rested on the chair seats.

"You have to know her, to understand," Betty said apologetically. "She always came in here at night and looked at it before going to bed. She said it comforted her."

"H'm!" said Sam Karnes. "I'd sleep better knowin' it was gone. Now, let's see. Never had to deal with anything like this." He sank heavily to the settee and rubbed his jaw, making a dry, rasping sound in the room. "I always ask myself four questions about a crime. Why, how, when, and who. Yuh get the first three, and yuh'd be surprised how often they answer the last one. But the why in this case just don't make sense!"

Betty shook her head helplessly, and the sheriff rubbed his jaw some more.

"The how," he said. "We'll probably

find wagon tracks when it's light. Yuh can't tote away a coffin on hossback, or afoot. The when—it could have been any time at all before she come back down here after supper. That certainly don't help much."

He got up to move about the room with his bearlike shuffle, white eyebrows pulled together in perplexity.

"The who," he said as if to himself. "Why, blazes! Excuse me, Miss Betty. Let's go back to the house. Can't follow a trail tonight."

LONG after the house was quiet, Sam Karnes lay listening to the sighing of wind along the gallery.

He was puzzling no more over the coffin's strange disappearance than over what Miss Callie's life had been like there on the Clawhammer.

It would take a long and morbid fear to produce a state of mind in which a coffin became a cheering and comforting possession.

He made a cigarette, and smoked it in the darkness, and the words of an old range song ran unbidden through his mind:

> It matters not, I've oft been told,
> Where the body lies when the heart grows cold;
> Yet grant, oh, grant this wish to me:
> Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!

At last he dozed, and there was gray light at the window when the horses nickered at the corrals, and he woke to the sound of gravel crunching under wagon wheels. He rose at once, determined to talk with Jud before Jud could enter the house where Mary was. He closed the door softly, and put on his boots at the steps.

When he reached the corrals, the wagon team stood outside the wide gate, and Jud was nowhere in sight. Sam Karnes went nearer, and saw that the reins were broken and worn from dragging under the horses' hoofs.

He whistled softly as his mind probed into the possibilities indicated here. Jud Caldwell seldom drank. He was no psalm singer, but he scorned the weakness some men had for liquor.

Still, of course, a man driving home late might fall into a doze, and be bounced off the seat.

CHAPTER V

Death in the Motte

RIGHT plain it seemed, it was no use waking the girls, or frightening them when they were up. The sheriff led the team until the wagon was out of sight behind the barn, then he took the harness off the horses and turned them into the horse trap.

The light was growing as he saddled and rode down the road, watching the little furrow left by the dragging reins.

That way, just before sunup, he came to the water-hole mottes. The furrow swung, and fresh wagon tracks turned toward the trees.

Sam drew rein and thought over a cigarette, seeing the morning spill brightness over everything but the somber stretch beneath the live-oaks, noticing that the wind had died without bringing anything more than a few Gulf clouds. Then he sighed, and rode on, and the rising sun threw a long, misshapen shadow before him until he was in the motte.

The first thing he saw there was Miss Callie's coffin. It was black, and dusty, now; its shiny handles caught the light. The lid lay upside down beside it, and just beyond was a pile of fresh earth.

The sheriff got down, leaving his horse ground-reined a few yards away. The earth was hard, here, and brittle dry leaves made crisp sounds under his boots.

By now he suspected what he would find, and still he was unprepared for it—a shallow grave with a spade handle sticking from one corner, and Jud Caldwell's thick body lying face-down, head and arms dangling into the hole. Jud's hands touched the bottom, and one of his legs was drawn up beneath him, as if he had been trying to crawl into the pit with the last of life that was left to him.

The sheriff lifted the dead man's head, and saw the bullet-hole almost squarely between his eyes.

"I ought to have arrested Tom Henry, after all!" he thought sharply, and stepped

back to try bringing this scene into some sort of perspective.

The horror of it crawled slowly into his mind and coiled there, heavy and cold, and he was sweating when he remembered that Tom was not the only man who had been riding this road the previous night.

He shut his eyes, and saw Mary's face, and said aloud: "No—not Tony—not Tony!"

When he looked again, trying to reconstruct the macabre business that had been transacted here, he wondered why the grave had not been finished, and why Jud still lay on the top of the ground. Was it that somebody had scared the killer away?

There was no sign of struggle. Jud's pearl-handled pistol was still in his holster, and when Sam Karnes sniffed the muzzle of the gun, he knew it had not been fired recently. Black mud, not quite dry, caked Jud's boots, and the sheriff made one homely observation and filed it away in his mind. Jud's trousers legs were tucked inside the boots that had hurt his feet yesterday.

The mud meant he had been down by the water-hole, so the sheriff picked up his trail where the creek bank dropped away too steeply for cattle, close against the Clawhammer's southern boundary wire. Three longhorn cattle drinking on the far side of the water-hole threw up their heads, letting water drip silver in the sun, and whirled to crash up the western bank. Two of them, the sheriff saw, wore Rafter H brands.

The boot tracks crossed the creek bed and turned upstream on the western side. Here, near a fallen live-oak trunk, they bunched in a little trampled spot, and went no farther.

Sam Karnes looked up on the bank, and saw the strands of barbed wire sagging between the posts. The fence had been cut again.

Tom Henry's house was over yonder, perhaps two miles away; Wade Magill's was up the creek, not much farther. Sam turned his attention to the trampled mud, reading its record with an ease born of following many trails. Jud had squatted by the fallen log for a considerable time—long enough, at least, to smoke four cigarettes half-way through, and drop their stubs. He had been waiting for somebody to pass along that road, to come, perhaps, to cut his wire.

"And whoever it was saw Jud first, in the moonlight," Sam speculated. "Whoever it was came up through the trees on the east bank, instead. He saw the wagon, and then he saw Jud squattin' here. He threw a gun down on Jud, and made him march back to the wagon. Then—"

AFFAIRS took their macabre turn then. The killer was in no hurry. He made his victim drive to Miss Callie's cottage, and get the coffin. They had come back down here to the somber shadows of the live-oaks, whispering in the lonesome wind.

And Jud Caldwell—the richest, proudest, most powerful man in the county—had been forced to get down from the wagon and dig his own grave!

Sam Karnes' why, how, when and who were not serving him very well as he unrolled the slicker tied behind his saddle, and covered Jud's body with it. He glanced at the tucked-in trouser legs again, and wondered. A man didn't ordinarily dig that way, because it meant the certain discomfort of gravel and dirt falling into his boots.

But Sam couldn't remember how Jud Caldwell usually wore his trousers, whether inside or out of his boots. Besides, Jud might easily forget the minor comforts when he knew he was going to die. The whole observation thus came to nothing.

The sheriff got on his horse. He rode up through the motte a little way, then turned across Hackberry Creek between the two water-holes, crossing the fence where the wire was cut.

Fifty yards farther he came to the wagon road. Dust lay thick in its ruts, but cattle had followed it to water, and any horse tracks made the night before were blotted out.

The "why," Sam told himself, applied strongly enough to Tom Henry. But the "how" didn't. A man in a drunken rage would shoot fast. The killer of Jud Caldwell had taken his time, feeding the cold hunger of his hatred, savoring the taste of revenge. The sheriff could not picture Tom Henry in that diabolical rôle. He liked Tom, and sympathized with him.

He rounded a hill point, and a dog came

barking from the Rafter H yard. But there was no saddle horse in the corral, and he shouted Tom's name at the gallery without getting an answer. He tried the door, and found it locked.

This brought a feeling of relief, because the sheriff wasn't ready to arrest anybody yet. He turned back down the road, and continued along it to Wade Magill's place. Coming up through the mesquites, he heard a pulley creaking, and the measured thump of the driller's bit in the earth. Dust rose where a team circled the rig, powering it, and Wade Magill walked out to meet him.

Wade was in his late twenties, a rangy, sandy-haired man with blue eyes crinkled at their corners by Texas sun. He looked up with an odd tightening of those wrinkles when he saw the sheriff.

"Ain't got a foreclosure order for me, have yuh?" he asked.

"Not yet, Wade," Sam said. "I didn't know yuh owed Jud Caldwell anything."

"I don't. The Stockman's Bank holds a mortgage on my four sections. I borrowed money to drill this well and buy a windmill. But Jud encouraged me to take up this land when I was workin' for him, years ago, and now he claims I agreed to sell it to him when I got title—same as a lot of other people who worked for the Clawhammer and proved up places that adjoined it. I say I didn't make any such agreement. He rode over here day before yesterday, and said he was goin' to put pressure on the bank."

Sam drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. Little things; picayunish things. Jud Caldwell had needed this four sections of dry land about as much as he needed a third thumb.

"If he wants a fight," Magill went on, "he shore as blazes can have it! Four sections ain't much, but it's a start, and if I get water I can spread out to the west. Troy Holcomb promised me the bank would hold off till it sees what a well and windmill can do. If it works, all the dry range is goin' to be worth more. So"—he grinned at the thought—"Jud may be ridin' for a fall."

"Yuh seen Jud since he was over here?" Sam asked.

"No. Why?"

"He's dead, Wade. Somebody put a bullet between his eyes, down by the water-hole."

Wade Magill's mouth opened, and his blue eyes went wide, and then squinted again. "Dead?" he said. "Good glory!"

"I haven't been back to tell the kids, yet. Tony's home—or was. He and Mary got married. I thought mebbe you could ride into town and tell Judge Parker for me. Coroner's inquest ought to be held out here."

"Why, shore," Wade said. He swallowed, and nodded. "Shore, Sam. Godfreys—Jud Caldwell!"

THEY went down by the live-oak motte a little later, and Wade sat for a moment staring at the scene.

"That's Miss Callie's coffin!" he exclaimed. "I helped unload it when Jud bought it for her. Sam, do yuh figger *she* could have hated Jud this much?"

"I haven't got that far in my figgerin'," Sam said.

"Whoever done it was crazy!" the younger man declared, and then added a practical note: "Jud wouldn't fit in that box. His shoulders are too wide!"

Tony's horse, saddle marks fresh on his back, was rolling in the corral dust when the sheriff reached the Clawhammer. He went on up to the yard gate, and Tony and Miss Callie came out on the gallery at the clang of the latch, but neither Mary nor Betty was in sight.

Miss Callie wore one of Betty's calico dresses. It hung on her gauntness, and she twisted her apron as Sam came up the walk.

Then he saw Tony's face, and almost stopped in his tracks. The boy could not have looked more stunned if he had heard the news.

"Whatever's happened to him is the doings of Providence!" Miss Callie said shrilly. "Whatever's happened, he's to blame!"

"Hush, Aunt Callie!" Tony said. He came down the steps, looking tired. He said, "Sam—Mary's left me! She took the livery stable rig before I got back. She and Betty went to town!"

"Pshaw!" said Sam Karnes.

He thought, "Stubborn, like her mother was," and sat down heavily on the steps, wishing he had no worries beyond patching up a young lovers' quarrel. There was no reason why Mary and Tony couldn't

be happy, now. There was some good in everything.

"Did you find Dad?" Tony asked sharply.

The sheriff nodded, and took off his battered hat. Tony read his glance, and went pale.

"I saw the wagon back of the barn," he said. "I—I was just getting ready to start along the road, but Mary—I couldn't think. Is he just hurt, Sam?"

CHAPTER VI

New Boss of the Clawhammer

AS SIMPLY as he could, Sam Karnes told them. Miss Callie heard him with dry eyes and a stony, set look. Tony sat with his head lowered, black eyes fixed on the stitch pattern of his boots. Then he got up, not looking at the sheriff, and went quickly into the house.

"Who did it?" Miss Callie asked harshly.

"Somebody who hated Jud a powerful lot. That's all I know."

"That covers half the county," she said drily. "He was that kind of a man. You either had to hate him or love him."

Sam Karnes shot her a quick glance, but she was looking out over the sun-shimmered mesquites.

"Well, now," he said. "I never knew anybody who actually loved Jud. Respect, yes. But the other's different."

"I loved him once," Miss Callie said slowly. "In spite of what he did to my sister, I— I—" and the tight line in her sallow face went suddenly loose.

She buried her face in the starched apron and went groping into the house, her bony shoulders shaking with sobs.

Tony reappeared. He had a six-shooter belted around his waist, and he stamped on the gallery floor as he walked, his head held high again.

"I reckon Tom Henry wasn't just talkin', after all," he said, and started down the walk.

"Hold on, son!" Sam called. "I've been to Tom Henry's. He ain't home."

"I'll track him down, wherever he is!"

The sheriff caught him at the gate, and whirled him around with a heavy hand on one wide shoulder.

"Listen to me!" he said firmly. "Mebbe Tom did it, and mebbe he didn't. *I'll* handle the law in this case. If yuh want to help, just take off that gun, and cool down. Yuh've got Mary to think about. Yuh got a funeral to arrange. And yuh ain't workin' for Joe Rankin now, no matter what kind of deal yuh made with him last night. Yuh're runnin' the Clawhammer, son. . . ."

Tony and the sheriff unsaddled at the motte to wait for the coroner's party. The sun climbed hot in a windless sky, and it was that sticky kind of day likely to be filled with minor irritations. Clouds of gnats swarmed under the live-oaks, looking for a patch of sweating skin.

Sam Karnes stretched out, using his saddle for a pillow and covering his face with the battered old hat, thinking ironically that he had spent a lot of the county's time waiting at water-holes for one thing and another. Tony Caldwell smoked numerous cigarettes, and paced restlessly where he could watch the road.

In early afternoon, two buggies rattled down from the divide, their teams in a lather, and with half a dozen horsemen following far enough behind to escape the dust. Sam Karnes sat up lazily. That was Judge Parker in the first rig, and the manager of the Mercantile store in the second, each bringing another one of Hackberry's business men. Looking beyond them, the sheriff saw Bart Keyes on a sorrel horse, talking to Wade Magill.

Karnes glanced thoughtfully at Tony, wondering whether the Ranger would choose to execute the old warrant against the boy. With Jud dead, nobody was left to appear against him, but Keyes was an officious sort, and might want to make the sheriff trouble.

Tony saw the look, and shrugged his wide shoulders.

"To thunder with Keyes!" he said in a reckless, bitter tone, and Sam Karnes knew that at the moment Mary was uppermost in his mind, and that only she mattered.

Then Judge Parker got rheumatically down from his buggy, and Sam stepped out to greet him.

The county judge was well along in years, and the juices of life had literally dried up in him, contributing to an appearance of desiccation, and an uncanny ability to chew tobacco for long courtroom hours without ever having to resort to the use of a spittoon. He smelled of whisky and cut plug, wore a stiff collar without a tie, and clothes that looked as if they had been slept in for a week.

"Howdy, Sam," he said, and put on a pair of steel rimmed glasses to peer at the body of Jud Caldwell while he shook his head solemnly.

Bart Keyes dismounted briskly and with importance, loosening the cinch on his horse. He was in his early thirties, a burly man with a well-kept red mustache and hawklike gray eyes. He glanced at Tony without speaking, nodded curtly to the sheriff, and began studying the scene as if it were understood that he was in general charge.

TONY drew Wade Magill to one side. "Did you see Mary?" he asked.

"Yes," Wade said, and his blue eyes crinkled with his grin. "She didn't go far away, Tony. She's at the jail with Betty and Mrs. Karnes, and I figger she'll be waitin' for yuh."

"Much obliged," Tony said, and then Judge Parker walked over to the sheriff, still shaking his head. He said, "Can't get over it, Sam—just can't get over it! Jud was a mighty big man. The whole county will miss him."

"He was too big to fit in this coffin," Bart Keyes announced. He straightened, and eyed Tony. "When did you come back?"

"Yesterday," Tony said.

"Knew Jud would have yuh arrested, didn't yuh? He says yuh stole a hoss and saddle, and then helped rustle Clawhammer stock."

Tony flushed darkly. "I wasn't so shore he'd want to press any charges," he said evenly. "He had a lot of more important things on his mind."

"Mebbe," Keyes said, studying him. "But you were mighty sore at Jud."

"I reckon I was."

There was a silence, broken only by the dry sound of clods falling into the grave when one of the men from Hackberry stepped too close. Then Sam Karnes heard the distant murmur of a trail herd coming up out of the southwest. The Ranger turned on him with an expression of contempt.

"I suppose yuh haven't arrested anybody?"

"Not yet," Sam admitted. He slapped at a gnat stinging his neck, and controlled his temper. "I don't believe in goin' off half-cocked."

"Why, perdition's fire, man!" Keyes exclaimed. "Yuh ought to be charged with dereliction of duty! Who'd try to bury a man in a coffin that wouldn't hold him? Nobody but a drunk man. Who was drunk? Tom Henry. Yuh had a warrant for Tom's arrest, and yuh didn't serve it. If yuh had, this wouldn't have happened. I'm goin' to lay that little piece of negligence before the grand jury, if the judge don't!"

"Go right ahead," Sam said. "Yuh think a drunk man would go to all this trouble? No, sir—he'd shoot, and that's all."

"You been to Tom's place?"

"Yes. He wasn't there."

Keyes sneered. "Of course he wasn't. Yuh gave him time to skip the country. He may be over the Rio Grande by now!" He turned, and picked up the spade from the grave. "Anybody know where this come from? Did Jud carry a spade in his wagon?"

"It's Aunt Callie's," Tony said, after a pause. "She used it around her rose bushes. The killer could have got it at the same time he got the coffin."

Judge Parker had been examining the death wound.

"I figger this was done with a forty-four," he said. "Now, it wasn't close enough to leave any powder burns, and there ain't any way of tellin' whether it was fired from a pistol or a saddle gun. They told me you took Tom's six-shooter away from him yesterday, Sam. Did yuh notice whether he had a Winchester on his saddle?"

"I never noticed," Sam said.

The judge bit another chew of tobacco. "It would have been mighty dark under these trees, even with a full moon," he drawled speculatively. "And that's a dead center shot, if I ever saw one. Yuh think a drunk man could have done it?"

"Cuss it all, Judge, he was standin' right over Jud all the time Jud was diggin' his

grave!" Keyes broke in impatiently. "It ain't your job to solve this crime—that's my business. You just render a coroner's verdict."

Judge Parker called his group to one side, and conferred briefly with them while he chewed. The sound of horses on the road west of the creek came to their ears, and Sam Karnes looked that way to see another buggy swinging down to cross the draw. It was Troy Holcomb, and Joe Rankin was accompanying the bank official on horseback.

Their arrival interrupted proceedings. Holcomb stared at the group, and at the coffin.

"What's this—a funeral?" he called in an awed tone.

Then he came near enough to see whose body lay beside the grave, and the recognition made him recoil in horror. Joe Rankin, a short, bald man with pale eyebrows and a broad face that looked perpetually sunburned, came over with his hat off, wiping his brow with a blue bandanna.

He stared with protruding eyes, and then exclaimed, "Well, I'll be good almighty blasted! Who did that?"

HE LOOKED at Sam Karnes, and the sheriff remembered that all had not been friendship between the brush country ranchman and the Rangers.

"We don't know, yet," the sheriff said.

Rankin looked around, and saw Tony, and eyed him with a significance the sheriff could not fathom.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I deal with you, now, Tony. I want to water my herd here, just like I told yuh last night."

Tony straightened, as if realizing for the first time that the responsibilities of the Clawhammer were now his.

"It's all right this time, Joe," he said. "But the deal we made last night—that's all off."

"What do yuh mean, this time?" Rankin demanded belligerently. "Yuh goin' to be like yore old man? The next herd I bring up out of the brush—"

"The next herd," Tony said slowly, "will have to go around to some other water. I'm goin' to finish that barbed wire."

Rankin glared, his pale eyebrows coming together. He pulled the hat back on his bald head, and walked stockily toward Tony.

"Why, yuh cussed back-biter!" he flared. "Yuh was anxious enough to throw in with me last night. Yuh begged me to help yuh get Jud Caldwell! All right. It looks like you got him!"

"Shut yore mouth, Joe!" Tony Caldwell said, and lashed out with a whiplike right-handed blow that sent Rankin staggering.

The short man tripped on his spurs, and sat down, legs spread wide. He looked at Sam Karnes, and saw no sympathy there, and in the extremity of his rage he turned to Bart Keyes.

"There's the man that killed Jud!" he yelled, pointing at Tony. "He threatened Jud last night. He said he was goin' to get him if it was the last thing he ever done!"

Keyes faced Tony. "Is that true?"

"None of yore cussed business!" Tony snapped.

"I'll make it my business!" the Ranger said. "Yuh're under arrest, Tony. Hand over that gun!"

Sam Karnes moved forward, lifting his hand in protest. But both the sheriff and Bart Keyes were a little too slow. Tony Caldwell had the gun out of his holster, but he reached it toward the Ranger muzzle first, and the hammer was thumbed back.

"I've got things to do," he said, "and nobody's goin' to arrest me right now!"

He moved in so close the gun muzzle touched Keyes' belt-buckle, and the Ranger paled, and left his arms limp at his sides.

"Karnes!" he called. "Make this crazy kid behave!"

"You make him," Sam said drily. "This is a State case yuh opened, Bart!"

"Wade," Tony said, "I'm swappin' hosses with yuh. My saddle's there under the tree."

He lifted Bart Keyes' gun from its holster, and gave it a back-hand flip into the grave. He turned, toed the stirrup of Wade Magill's white-faced sorrel, rode swiftly down across the creek bed, and vanished in the mesquites.

"Hotheaded fool!" swore Keyes. "After I bring Tom Henry in, I'll ride his trail if I have to go all the way to Mexico City!"

Joe Rankin got up, brushed the dirt from his trousers, and wiped blood from

his lips. Sam Karnes assumed a bland, disinterested look. Judge Parker cleared his throat, and chewed rapidly.

"Well," he began solemnly, "the judgment of this here coroner's inquest is that Jud Caldwell come to his death as the result of a gunshot wound inflicted by a person or persons unknown, but said person must have been a blame good shot."

CHAPTER VII

The Mark of Cain

IT WAS late in the evening when the party got back to town, bearing Jud Caldwell's body, and the sheriff had begun to feel the weariness and strain of the last twenty-four hours. He chuckled at Bart Keyes' discomfiture, in spite of his worry over Tony.

Keyes had retrieved his pistol, glaring at Sam Karnes and reiterating his threat to bring a charge of dereliction of duty against him. He had ridden off to find Tom Henry.

Joe Rankin rode to Hackberry with the others. He would stay in town Sunday for the funeral, he said, and then on Monday would complete the arrangements he had been making with Troy Holcomb for a bank loan. Meanwhile, his herd could rest up at the Hackberry water-holes, eating the Clawhammer grass. Rankin was still bitter over Tony's change of heart.

"You goin' before the grand jury and tell 'em about Tony threatenin' to get Jud?" the sheriff asked.

"Why not?" retorted Rankin. "He said it. He was sore enough to kill a man, if I ever seen anybody that mad!"

"Shore," Sam said. "But he didn't mean that he'd get Jud that way. He was goin' to lick him in the cattle business. And this other thing is just somethin' that you and me and a lot of old-timers haven't realized—Jud was the only one who did. Jud knew that ranchin' ain't like it used to be. It's turnin' into a *business*—a cut-throat, competitive business. If yuh realized that like Jud did, and yuh woke up tomorrow and found that you owned the Clawhammer, why, yuh'd fence the water-holes, too."

"Hanged if I would!" Rankin grunted. "I can't stand barbed wire!"

"Neither can I," admitted Sam. "But we'll see the time when it's everywhere."

He left the others at the hotel, and went to the jail. Stabling his horse, he thought about Rankin, who had hated Jud Caldwell like poison, and still had come to town a day earlier than he needed to, to attend the funeral.

It would be that way with many others—Jud Caldwell held their respect, if not their affection. He had been more than the owner of the biggest ranch in the county. He *was* the Clawhammer.

And the sheriff wondered if Tony Caldwell, young and wild and on the dodge, would be able to hold the cattle empire together.

He dreaded facing Mary. She rose to her feet and stood slender and pale when he entered the living room, and Ivy hovered solicitously in the background. But it was Betty Caldwell who came to meet him at the door.

"Bart Keyes?" she asked anxiously. "What did he do? Does he suspect anybody?"

Sam Karnes hung his hat on a nail. "Bart suspects everybody. I reckon," he said. "But he ain't done much of anything—not yet. If yuh're worried about Tony, yuh don't need to. Not right now."

"He asked Wade a lot of questions," Betty said. "He wanted to know about the trouble Wade had with Dad, and where Wade was last night, and—"

She stopped, and colored. The sheriff was smiling at her.

"Wade's at the hotel," he said, "and Bart hasn't got around to him yet. And Tony's all right, Mary, except he's worried about you leavin' like yuh did."

"I'll bet!" Mary said cynically. "If he had cared very much, he wouldn't have gone last night. He had his choice."

"A man can't always choose the way he wants." Sam told her gently. "Anyway, he and Rankin have busted up before they got started. They had a little argument, and Tony knocked Joe down. Then"— and now he was guessing hopefully—"he left for Mexico to see about those cattle. From what he told me this

mornin' there ain't much time."

Mary didn't answer. Betty left for the hotel, where Miss Callie was waiting, and the sheriff ate his supper and went to bed.

It seemed to him that his head had scarcely touched the pillow before somebody was rattling the front door and shouting his name. He went sleepily through the hall, and saw that pale daylight was just breaking over the mulberry trees in the park.

Bart Keyes was standing outside with Tom Henry. The Rafter H owner held unsteadily to the door jamb, and grinned.

"Howdy, yuh old buzzard!" he said thickly. "Fooled yuh. I was in the house when yuh come by, but I couldn't get up. When was it yuh come out there, Sam?"

SAM told him it was yesterday. Tom Henry whooped, and struck at the ground with his hat to show how inebriated he had been at the time. And Keyes pushed him unceremoniously through the doorway.

"Lock him up, Karnes!" he said. "He wasn't too drunk to take to the brush and hide. Yuh could have arrested him yesterday if yuh'd busted in. The way it was, I had to trail him most of the night."

"Tough," the sheriff said heartily. "What's the charge? Threats against Jud's life?"

"Yuh been asleep, as usual, haven't yuh? The grand jury met last night, and voted to indict him for the killin'. They also had a few things to say about the way you run this office. I'll lay yuh a little bet there's a new sheriff by next week!"

"You can go to blazes, Bart," Sam said, and closed the door.

He plied Tom Henry with black coffee, and the Rafter H owner sat on the edge of a cot and looked through the barred window at sunrise over the town square.

"Just let me sleep, Sam!" he pleaded. "Just for a while. So many people kept comin' around, botherin' me!"

"Who?" demanded the sheriff.

"I don't remember. You, and somebody else, and . . . I'm sleepy. I always get sleepy when I drink. Goin' out from town, I had to turn off the road and lie down for a little nap. And then—" he sat up straight for a few seconds—"and then somebody took a shot at me, Sam!"

"After yuh took the nap?" the sheriff pursued.

Tom dropped his head into his hands, and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

"I—I don't know," he said. "It was dark. Somebody shot at me, and I wasn't in any shape to draw a bead on the son-of-a-gun. I couldn't even dodge!"

"Did yuh see who it was?"

Tom Henry shook his head. "Just let me sleep, Sam—just let me alone for a little while."

He rolled over with his face to the wall and his legs still hanging from the edge of the cot, and began snoring. Sam Karnes got up heavily and went back to the kitchen, where he puttered with the coffee pot, hoping that Ivy would hear him and would get breakfast. It looked like a busy day.

He wanted to go back to the water-hole, and to Miss Callie's cottage. Tom Henry's half-remembered story tied in with what the sheriff had suspected—somebody had frightened away the killer before he could finish burying Jud Caldwell, and that somebody might well have been Tom.

[*Turn page*]

"Let's see, now," Sam said aloud. "Tom turned off the road and took a nap. When he woke up, it was dark, and he was still drunker'n a hootowl, with a couple of bottles on him to fall back on. He got back on his hoss and rode by the water-hole, and he rode right up on Jud's killer without knowin' it. The killer took a shot at Tom, and then lit out in a hurry, not knowin' Tom was drunk. Tom rode away fast, because he wasn't in shape to fight, like he said. Now, if he can just remember!"

That reconstruction made sense, but who were the "people" who came around the Rafter H the next day, bothering Tom until he left the house? Who had been there besides Sam Karnes?

The sheriff noisily shook the grate of the wood stove, and Ivy appeared at last. While she was getting breakfast, he stepped out the front door and looked around until he found the unsmoked cigarette Jud Caldwell had hurled against the wall two days before. There could be, the sheriff thought, a great deal of individuality in the rolling of a cigarette. . . .

It was the biggest funeral ever held in Hackberry. The district judge who would preside at Tom Henry's trial, in May, was there, silver maned and pompous in a swallowfork coat. He had brought the district attorney with him.

These guardians of justice over the four sprawling counties stood between Judge Parker and "Few" Smith, the Hackberry county attorney, who had come by his appellation of sparseness through losing a leg and several fingers in the Confederate cause. The three remaining county commissioners—Jud Caldwell had been the senior member of that board—ranged themselves under the mulberry trees with Troy Holcomb, Fritz-the-Dutchman, and other business men.

Bart Keyes stayed close to the district attorney.

IN A group a little apart were a dozen ranchmen. The sheriff studied them, and saw Joe Rankin and a tall, stoop-shouldered man named Carson Tate whispering to each other. There could be some significance in that, he decided. Tate owned the T4 Connected, north of the Clawhammer, and Jud Caldwell's refusal to let trail herds come through his range had caused Tate considerable inconvenience when he had bought Mexican cattle.

But the ranchers, like everybody else, stood bareheaded and solemn as the Reverend Cal Tyree climbed to the bed of the wagon that had been driven into the park, and towered over Jud's coffin.

He was a Methodist circuit rider, a hald-headed, rail-thin man with huge red hands and an odd squint that made him carry his head on one side. He was given to sonorous oratory, and now he eulogized the departed until dry little Judge Parker stopped chewing for once, and turned to Sam Karnes.

"Hey," he whispered hoarsely behind his hand. "Yuh shore that's Jud Caldwell in that coffin?"

Sam Karnes didn't answer. Much of what the preacher was saying was true; you had to take Jud's mean, picayunish traits along with his bold and forceful qualities, and the occasional bursts of generosity he displayed.

Jud had given this park to the town. He had built a church for Cal Tyree, a structure too small for this occasion, but a church, nevertheless. He had not been a stingy man, despite his treatment of Tony.

The sheriff squirmed in his unaccustomed broadcloth coat, and pondered all these things while Cal Tyree went on and on in tribute to the cow country Caesar he had come both to bury and to praise.

Perhaps the explanation lay in Jud's blind possessiveness—in the highly-developed property sense that had made him the first to fence his land. He had considered that he owned this town. It had pleased him to do things for it, so long as the town paid him homage. He had expected that same sort of unasking fealty from Tony.

But he had not reckoned with Tony's own proud, independent spirit, and today there was one thing missing. Betty sat with Miss Callie and Mary, her eyes downcast, Wade Magill at her side. The boy who had to take Jud Caldwell's place was absent, and with him the show of solidarity that Joe Rankin and Carson Tate and the other ranchers might need to see.

"Jud Caldwell" Tyree declared solemnly, "was a strong man. He carved an empire from the wilderness of rim-rock and mesquite, and pioneered more than

one trail for others to follow. He had the courage to fight for things he believed right, to fight for forms of progress as yet unpopular with his fellowmen."

The heat of the sun was upon him, and he paused to wipe his bald head with a bandanna, and to drink from a tin dipper. He put his head farther on the side, and waved a large red hand toward the group of cattlemen.

"Jud Caldwell has been struck down by someone who bears the curse of Cain. As a man, I count that a personal loss; as a minister of the Gospel, I know that vengeance belongs to God. But as both, I plead most earnestly with you who knew Jud Caldwell to go your ways in peace. Let not his passing be the signal for new strife, nor the revival of old. Say, rather, as the children of Israel said to Edom: 'We will go by the high way; and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it. . . .'"

The sheriff blinked and listened, surprised to hear that water-hole disputes went back that far. He saw Joe Rankin standing stockily, boots wide apart, eyes malevolent beneath his pale brows. If there ever had been any religion in the rancher's makeup, twenty years of chousing *ladino* cattle through the thorny brush had worn it thin.

CHAPTER VIII

A Shot in the Jail

OLD Sam Karnes was neither irreligious, nor lacking in respect for the dead, but he tiptoed quietly out of the park during the closing prayer, and went back to the jail to saddle his horse. For one thing, he had no desire to hear whatever criticism the grand jury reportedly had in store for him, and for another, it disgusted him to see the way Bart Keyes tried to curry favor with the visiting officials.

He reached the Hackberry water-holes at about four o'clock. Joe Rankin's crew was holding the trail herd loosely on the west side of the creek, and enjoying a restful Sunday in camp.

The sheriff studied the shallow grave, noticing for the first time that it was in a direct line between the two biggest live-oaks in the motte, and equally distant from each. Then he shrugged that off as a coincidence. Nobody who appreciated the tangled toughness of live-oak roots would have tried to dig close to any tree.

He went slowly down into the creek bed, studying the tracks Jud Caldwell had made here, going and coming. His own boot tracks of yesterday morning were beside Jud's, and the two days of sun and the shrinkage of the pool due to the watering of Rankin's cattle had contributed to the hardening of the mud into a record that would last until the next rain.

Sam followed the trail to the fallen live-oak, and sat on the log for a while, looking at the spot where the footprints bunched. He picked up Jud's cigarette stubs, and wrapped them carefully in a bandanna, stowing them in his jumper pocket.

Then, retracing his steps to the east bank, he stopped abruptly and wondered what Jud Caldwell had weighed. His own tracks in the mud were considerably deeper than those of the Clawhammer owner.

"Funny," the sheriff mused. "He was a mighty solid man, and he ought to have come close to a hundred and ninety-five pounds. Besides, the way he always walked . . . But I reckon when he made these tracks, he was pussyfootin' across here in the hope of surprisin' somebody cuttin' his wire."

Miss Callie's coffin was still at the graveside. The sheriff stooped and lifted it, just to see whether one man could carry it or not. Then he climbed back on his horse and went up to her cottage.

The way things had happened, this was the first time he had been here in daylight. The wagon tracks came right up to the yard gate, as he had expected they would. But there was a hard gravel walk to the little gallery, and no footprints showed.

He stood off and sized up the house from the viewpoint of a man who planned to remove a coffin from the parlor. He decided he would have ordered Jud to slide it out through the parlor window.

This opened on the gallery, behind a tangle of morning glory vines. A couple of hide-bottomed chairs stood outside the window, and there was a man's buckskin gauntlet lying carelessly between them. Sam Karnes stooped and picked this up.

He turned it over in his hand, and whistled softly. The glove had a wide flaring cuff, designed to protect the wrist of a man using a rope when working cattle. It was one of those fancier items often sported by cowboys, along with ornate hatbands and silver mounted "gal-leg" spurs. And embroidered on the cuff in turkey-red thread were the initials "W. M."

Wade Magill had said Jud could have a fight if he wanted one. He could have cut the Clawhammer wire, and he had at least been handy to the water-hole on the night of the killing. But the sheriff kept his mind free from dark suspicions, and hoped Wade would be able to explain how the gauntlet had come to be on Miss Callie's gallery.

Sam wanted solitude, and a chance to think things out, so he killed time by getting the ranch wagon and driving down to the motte to bring Miss Callie's coffin back to her parlor. One profit accrued from this charitable deed. He was able to compare the wagon tracks with those already in front of the spinster's gate. The tire of the off front wheel had a brad missing, and the mark it left proved conclusively that Jud's wagon had been used to haul away the coffin.

Sam Karnes got back to town after dark, and Joe Rankin hailed him from the hotel gallery. The brush-country rancher was sitting with Carson Tate, his face heavy and truculent in the shadows.

"Yuh seen Tony?" he demanded.

THE sheriff said he hadn't, and Rankin and Tate exchanged glances. Tate shrugged his stooped shoulders.

"We ain't spyin' for Bart Keyes, Sam," he said. "But if yuh see Tony, tell him we want to talk to him—before he does anything rash."

"Such as what?" Sam parried.

"Such as tryin' to bring any cattle out of Mexico—if he can find any in the first place!" Rankin said. He made an impatient gesture. "I'll put our cards on the table, Sam. Jud Caldwell was in a lot worse shape than anybody knew. If yuh don't believe me, ask the Mercantile store how much he owed 'em for wire. It's like I always said about ownin' land in the cattle business—yuh can get land-poor plumb quick, in a bad year."

"If yuh got land, yuh got credit," Sam objected. "I don't see what yuh're drivin' at."

"Just this. Mebbe Jud could have pulled through, but a kid can't. Everybody's against him. Now, Carson and I are willin' to buy him out, if he's reasonable. It would give us both water, and a short route for Mexican cattle like we used to have, before Jud fenced. We'd divide the range. And"—his voice rose and hardened—"if Tony ain't smart enough to get out from under, we'll make him wish he had! He'd have to bring Mexican cattle through both our places, or go the devil of a way around!"

The sheriff pulled out his tobacco sack and rolled a smoke. Remembering that Joe Rankin was here to see Troy Holcomb about a loan, he was wondering if this plan were as new as Rankin tried to make it sound.

"Trespass laws say yuh've got to have a fence," he said mildly. "Otherwise, yuh can't stop a man from goin' through yore range. Yuh can't post unfenced property."

Rankin laughed mirthlessly. "You just tell him what I said," he retorted.

"The heck I will!" said Sam Karnes. "I'm keepin' my nose out of Tony's business. But I can tell both of yuh one thing. He's a lot more like Jud Caldwell than yuh ever suspected. And mebbe he'll surprise yuh."

Rankin made a jeering reply, but the sheriff didn't wait to hear it. He rode on around the shadowy park, and turned in at the corral behind the jail, feeling the weight of another problem on his shoulders.

In spite of what he had just told Rankin and Tate, Tony Caldwell's business *was* his own, so long as Mary's happiness was involved. Somehow, he had to devise means of helping the Clawhammer. Especially, he had to see that his hot-headed son-in-law was neither hurt nor baited into further trouble with the law.

He got down, and unsaddled wearily. In all his easy-going years, things had never piled up so formidably as they had

piled up now. There was a killing to solve, and Tom Henry's life depending on the correct solution; Jud Caldwell's old enemies conspiring to smash the Clawhammer in its moment of crisis, and Bart Keyes doing his utmost to ruin the sheriff officially.

Jud Caldwell, he thought, could have kept those last two things in hand. Jud's death seemed to have loosed the forces of evil in Hackberry County, bringing out the worst in men.

He pitched the horse a chip of hay, and stopped in the corral to look at the stars. There were no clouds anywhere, and no prospect of rain to break the drought. He heard Ivy rattling dishes in the kitchen, and the savory smell of frying meat drifted out to him, stirring a sudden hunger.

And then a single shot exploded against the quiet of the evening, making a strangely hollow and muffled sound, as if it had been fired in a cistern.

The sheriff whirled, trying to locate the noise of the gun. Ivy dropped a plate, and ran toward the front of the jail, and Sam Karnes knew then that something had happened inside. He hurried through the living quarters from the kitchen, and Mary's frightened scream guided him to the cells at the right front of the building.

Ivy was standing transfixed in the first of these, an oil lamp in her shaking hand, and horror twisting the accustomed serenity of her face. Mary knelt on the floor beside the body of Tom Henry.

"He—he's dead!" she exclaimed, looking up with wild eyes. "He's been killed!"

GET out of here, honey—both of you get out of here!" Sam Karnes said. He took the lamp from Ivy's hand, and set it on the table by Tom Henry's cot. The light glittered on the blue steel barrel of a six-shooter lying on the floor, only a few inches from the Rafter H owner's hand.

Tom lay sprawled grotesquely, as if he had been trying to turn away from the window when he fell. And when the sheriff turned his body over, he saw that the pistol flame had scorched Tom's blue work shirt, directly over the heart.

Ivy was still looking white-faced through the cell door. The sheriff pushed her gently aside, and went out the front door and looked up and down the street in the moonlight. There was nobody in sight. But the mulberry trees made a splotch of midnight shadow in the middle of the square. Anybody could have reached the park in a matter of seconds, and emerged from it later on any of its three sides. The shot would not have been heard far away.

He came back into Tom Henry's cell, and picked up the gun. It was a .44 Colt's revolver with a white bone handle. Half the men in Southwest Texas carried guns like it.

"Sam," Ivy said, "did anyone search Tom when he was brought in here? Do you think he sobered up enough to—to—"

"To shoot himself?" Sam shook his head. "No. He sobered up enough, mebbe, to remember what he saw out at the water-hole when Jud was killed. That's what Jud's killer was afraid of, anyway. He called Tom to the window, and then reached in and shot him. Mebbe he dropped the gun accidental. Mebbe he wanted to make it look like suicide. Anyway, I figger this is the gun that killed Jud Caldwell!"

He put the pistol on the table, and straightened with a sigh, shaking his head sadly as he looked down at the dead man. Things had been rockier than Tom Henry knew.

CHAPTER IX

"It's Free Range—and I'll Cross It!"

JUDGE PARKER would have to be called in to officiate as coroner, so the sheriff pulled on his hat and went out on the town. He shambled along the wooden sidewalks in a seemingly aimless manner, glad of the night wind on his cheeks, his mind restless and confused. He thought, "Tom would still be alive if Bart Keyes hadn't brought him in to jail," and then, trying to be fair even with Keyes, he doubted that. Somebody had been prowling around the Rafter H on the day after Jud's death.

Chances were it had been the killer, worrying about how much Tom had seen, looking for a chance to shoot Tom even then.

Locusts fiddled in the mulberry trees, and the little town lay quiet, dark for the most part, and seemingly far removed from violence of any kind.

An industrious hammering came from the boot shop as the sheriff passed. He looked in the window and saw Fritz-the-Dutchman at work on a boot sole, his mouth filled with tacks and the light of two oil lamps gleaming on his bald head. Fritz was a lonely man who had lived here twenty years and never quite adjusted himself. He worked on most Sundays as he worked on any other day.

The sheriff went on. He saw only a Mexican at the counter of the Lone Star Chili Parlor. He passed the dark, two-storied frame courthouse, where a sagging window shutter creaked and banged in the wind. A young couple sparking on the shadowy front steps drew apart guiltily, and the sheriff turned quickly away.

The chairs on the hotel gallery were deserted. Sam Karnes stopped there to make cigarette, wondering whether Rankin and Tate had gone peacefully to bed, or were up in a room with a bottle, making their plans to ruin Tony Caldwell.

He turned down the square on that side, and as he reached the High Lonesome Saloon, a bareheaded man came hurrying out of the alley, breathing hard. It was Wade Magill.

The sheriff threw away his cigarette. Wade halted abruptly. Lamplight streaming over the tops of the swinging doors touched his sandy hair, and showed the odd little sun crinkles around his eyes.

"Fire somewheres, Wade?" the sheriff asked softly.

"I been over to the livery stable," Wade said. "Miss Callie ain't to be found anywhere, Sam. She just up and disappeared. Her hoss is gone, too. Betty's worried about her."

"Why?" Sam asked. "She probably went back to the ranch."

He pushed open one of the swinging doors, and let his eyes adjust themselves to the light. Four of the stockmen who had come to town for Jud's funeral stood at the bar with Troy Holcomb, talking drought and cattle prices and hard times, lapsing occasionally into little stunned silences. Few Smith and old Judge Parker were playing dominoes at a table in the back.

The sheriff entered, and Wade came behind him.

"Why would she want to go back to the ranch?" he pursued. "There ain't anybody out there, and a scary old maid like her wouldn't do that."

"Never mind Miss Callie!" the sheriff snapped with a show of irritation. "I got more important things to 'tend to. Listen to what I tell the judge."

Troy Holcomb joined them, straightening his tie with a glance in the bar mirror, looking neat and cool. Wade listened, his face growing pale and intent, his breathing still labored.

Judge Parker slowly pushed back his chair, chewing a little faster on the tobacco that bulged his cavernous cheek. When Sam had finished, he ran a finger around the inside of his tieless collar, as if it choked him.

Few Smith, pot-bellied and pasty of face from lack of exercise, lifted his liquor glass, and set it down untasted. He reached his good hand for his crutch.

"Goshamighty, Sam!" he exclaimed. "Now we *will* have the district attorney camping here, telling us what to do before the case ever comes to trial!"

"Got to find somebody to try, first," Sam reminded him.

Judge Parker filled his glass, and drank the whisky with the tobacco still in his mouth. He wiped his lips thoughtfully on the back of his hand.

"We'll have a covey of Rangers, too, if they get the idea that we can't keep law and order in Hackberry County," he predicted. "First Jud, and now Tom Henry. Sam, yuh'd better organize a posse. Tom's killer couldn't be so far out of town."

WADE MAGILL and Troy Holcomb said, "I'll go," almost in unison, and the sheriff glanced from one to the other, and made a weary gesture.

"He probably ain't left town at all," he said. "Why should he? If he was smart—and I think he's plenty smart—he'd have stayed right here."

"Miss Callie left," Wade said quietly.

Sam Karnes shot him a sharp glance, but there was no guile in Magill's blue

eyes, and the sheriff decided he was merely trying to be helpful. But this was the second time he had dropped a hint as to the spinster's guilt, and now Sam pulled the initialed glove from his pocket.

"Speakin' of Miss Callie, Wade," he drawled, "mebbe yuh can tell me how come this was on her front gallery."

Wade flushed, and his eyes crinkled and narrowed. "Well, no—I can't," he said.

"Yuh mean yuh don't know?"

"I can't tell yuh," Wade said hesitatingly.

"Well, we'll talk about it later," the sheriff said, and pocketed the gauntlet again. "No . . . A posse ain't the answer. It'll take some smart detective work. Now, just ask yoreself four questions—why, how, when and who. If yuh can answer the first three, yuh can usually answer the who."

"Seems to me the first three are plain enough, in Tom's case," Holcomb observed. "Either Jud's killer wanted to get rid of him, or he committed suicide. You remember how he talked here in the saloon that day."

Sam Karnes shook his head. "I still say Jud's killin' wasn't the work of a drunk man."

"Well, yuh'd better get busy mighty fast, Sam!" Judge Parker said dryly. He pushed back his chair and got up, looking at the sheriff over the top rims of his glasses. "Bart Keyes has been workin' on the grand jury. Few and me stayed out of it, but last night they raked you over the coals for the way yuh run the sheriff's office. And when they hear about Tom bein' killed right in the jail, where a man ought to be safe if he's safe anywhere, no tellin' what they will say."

"All right, then, build me a two-story jail with some inside cells!" Sam Karnes broke in angrily. "And right now, come on over and hold an inquest!"

All of them went to the jail.

It was Few Smith's expressed opinion, as he hobbled outside an hour later, that Tom Henry had committed suicide in the remorseful realization of the fact that he had killed Jud Caldwell while drunk. Troy Holcomb and Wade Magill leaned toward this theory.

But Judge Parker was doubtful, and Sam Karnes knew that Few was indulging in a little wishful thought. He dreaded having the district attorney around. He would have preferred that the case be closed.

The sheriff stood at the door and watched them cross the street and disappear into the park, then he stepped outside for another look at the weather signs before going to bed. The sky was clear, and the moon was still nearly full.

The wind came out of the east, bringing the sound of singing from Cal Tyree's little church, down the street from the courthouse. This was the closing hymn, and tomorrow Cal would have another funeral service to preach.

Sam sighed, and started to go back in. Then a rider rounded the corner of the park with his horse in a fast trot, and pulled up in front of the jail to jump down there. It was Tony Caldwell.

That was Wade Magill's apron-faced sorrel Tony was riding. The sheriff saw him pull the reins over the horse's head, and drop them to the ground, and he thought sharply, "Yuh couldn't have picked a worse time to come back! If Bart Keyes hears yuh were anywhere near town when Tom was killed yuh're in for it!"

He tried to put that worry out of a mind already overcrowded with worries, and called:

"Howdy, son! Didn't expect yuh back so soon."

Tony strode up the walk in that proud, reckless way. The brim of his hat shadowed his eyes, but his teeth gleamed in a smile.

"Mary home?" he asked eagerly. "She still mad at me?"

"Yuh'll have to ask her that. Come inside before somebody sees yuh."

"I'm not hidin' from Keyes, or anybody else!" Tony said. "I just got work to do." He stepped into the hallway, and called, "Mary! Mary, honey!"

The sheriff heard a rush of flying feet, and guessed that the quarrel had been forgotten. He gave them a minute, and then went inside, and the shine in Mary's eyes was worth the risk Tony had taken.

THEY went on into the living room, and Tony heard about Tom Henry. He looked down at his boots for a minute, and the sheriff saw his knuckles whiten as he held Mary's hand and sat

close beside her on the couch. Then he raised his head, and said:

"I was sorry I couldn't get here in time for the funeral. But I'm not sorry any longer. If Dad had let Tom Henry alone—"

"I ain't so shore about that," Sam said. "Tom had a streak of bad luck. It happened he surprised the killer at the motte, the way I've got it figgered out." And he told Tony about Tom's complaint that people had come around his house the next day, looking for him.

"Joe Rankin!" Tony exclaimed. "Yes, and there's a good chance Joe was up there on the night of the killin'. Mebbe he's yore man. Joe told Rocky Morse that he was goin' to cut that wire and take his cattle through the Clawhammer, come Hades or high water. Well, the wire was cut. Yuh ought to arrest Joe Rankin for the killin'!"

Sam Karnes rubbed his jaw. Tony was like Jud Caldwell in this, too. He wanted somebody arrested. The sheriff preferred to reason things out. He wanted to be sure of his suspect's guilt before taking so drastic a step.

"Well," he said, "that ain't anything but hearsay, son. But I'll have a talk with Joe. Yuh didn't go down to Mexico this time, did yuh?"

"I just went to the roundup camp," Tony said, and now the press of Clawhammer responsibilities crowded other thoughts out of his mind, and he got up to pace the floor. He said, "I figger we might find between a thousand and fifteen hundred Clawhammer steers down there in the brush—no more. I sent Rocky across the river with a note to Don Enrique, askin' him to round up three thousand head for me, pronto. Then I high-tailed back here to see if you could handle a couple of things at this end."

"What?" Sam asked.

"I wish yuh'd go to the banks tomorrow—both banks—and see how much money Dad had on deposit. I'll probably have to pay Don Enrique nine dollars a head, delivered at the river. That'll be twenty-seven thousand dollars. The Kansas market price is going to go up, cattle bein' scarce as they are, and I ought to be able to count on fifteen or sixteen dollars a head there. If I can get 'em there in time, that is."

He stopped in the middle of the room, and grinned at Ivy in a way that made her beam. He looked at Mary, switching back easily to a possessiveness that had nothing to do with land or cattle. Mary smiled at him.

This was the new Tony—the man of business, his wildness submerged by the satisfying excitement of getting Clawhammer trail herds headed north. But neither Mary nor Tony knew of the threats Rankin and Tate had made. And Sam Karnes remembered that Bart Keyes was somewhere down in the brush, determined to bring Tony Caldwell to jail on one charge or another.

"Now," Tony went on suddenly, "in case there ain't twenty-seven thousand on deposit after the way Dad bought wire, tell Troy Holcomb I'll sign a note to cover the difference. I'll send Rocky up in a couple of days to bring the money down. It'll take Don Enrique a little time to gather the cattle. And meanwhile, we'll be gettin' all the Clawhammer stock out of the brush."

"I'll go to the banks," Sam said. "What else?"

"See if yuh can hire me about a dozen more hands, riders who'll be willin' to go up the Trail."

The sheriff diplomatically suggested that the womenfolk ought to make some coffee, and fix Tony a little snack. When they had gone to the kitchen, he motioned the younger man to sit down.

"Two things, son," he began. "I know yuh ain't afraid of Keyes, but this time it ain't a matter of bein' brave, but smart. If yuh want to put over this cattle deal, yuh'd better keep low. I know the way his mind works. He could ruin everything for yuh by throwin' yuh in jail for a couple of weeks, right now, either on the old warrant, or on suspicion of killin'."

Tony's jaw tightened. "All right," he said. "I'll stay in the brush. That's why I sent Rocky into Mexico. I figgered Keyes would be watchin' for me at the river. But while I'm here, Sam, I'm goin' to return Wade's hoss and get mine, and I don't care who sees me. What else?"

"Rankin and Tate. They won't take kindly to a Clawhammer crew drivin' cattle up through their range. Yuh might save time by goin' around."

"Goin' around?" Tony echoed angrily.

"I'll be hanged if I will! That's where Joe Rankin made a mistake by not ownin' more'n four sections of land. He can claim the rest of it, but it's still free range, and I'll cross it! And the Tate land's not fenced. They're both welcome to cut my herds to see that there ain't any Triangle R or T Four Connected cattle in 'em. But if they try holdin' me up in any way, they'll have to fight!"

CHAPTER X

Every Hand Against Him

YOUNG Caldwell left Hackberry before daylight, riding his own horse, and Sam Karnes saw the recklessness that always sat with him in the saddle. One way or another, there was trouble ahead. Jud Caldwell's feuds lived on, and Tate and Rankin were not likely to forget.

The sheriff sighed. He could see their side of things. A man hated to drive cattle the long way around, over a dry trail, if there was a direct route and a water-hole available.

But things were changing, and barbed wire and windmills were a part of the changes. Sam Karnes went to bed, troubled, and slept late when he finally closed his eyes.

He was at the door of the Stockman's Bank when it opened for the day's business, and inquiring through one of the wickets as to the status of the Caldwell account. The clerk went back to examine a ledger, and returned with a strange expression on his face.

"Mr. Caldwell," he said, "drew out his entire account the other afternoon—the day before he was found dead."

Sam stared. "What?"

"Yes, sir. He had nearly forty thousand dollars on deposit, but he wrote a check for the whole amount. He was—well, a little bit peeved at the bank, because he demanded that we foreclose on Wade Magill, and Mr. Holcomb refused to do that."

"Troy!" the sheriff called. "Come here and tell me about this!"

Troy Holcomb left his desk. As usual, he was neatly dressed, wearing a coat and a white collar, and looking cool despite the day's advancing heat. But there was worry in his eyes.

"That's all I know about it, Sam," he protested. "In the first place, it wasn't unusual. Jud was always having a fit of temper, and shuttling his account from here to the First National, and back again. You know how he was."

"Shore," Sam said, and studied Holcomb. "But why didn't yuh tell me this out by the water-hole, or when I talked to yuh last night?"

The bank official squirmed. "Look, Sam," he said in a lower tone. "The fact is, a withdrawal that big left us in a tight place. I mean if we caught a Federal bank examiner before we can get some more cash, it would raise trouble with us. We've sent a man over to the First National to get some cash, just in case one comes today."

"Tell me what happened," the sheriff said.

"Well, Jud had that fist fight with Tony, right at the door of the bank. That didn't improve his temper any, and he came on in here bellering like a beefed steer, wanting us to foreclose on Wade. I tried to explain to him that we're interested in backing Wade's well-drilling, but he wouldn't listen. He said he'd see us in perdition before he'd do business with this bank, and wrote out a check for his money. That's all."

"Anybody see him take the money?"

"A few, maybe. But we had him drive around to the side door, because we had to give him about ten thousand dollars in silver, and that weighed nearly six hundred pounds. There was still time for him to get over to the First National and deposit it there."

"Did he?"

Holcomb looked startled. "Why, I guess he did. But I had to leave right then. I had to ride out to meet Joe Rankin's outfit coming up with the cattle."

Sam Karnes strode across the town square, and checked with the First National. He came out of that bank a few minutes later, his head whirling with the significance of this new discovery.

Jud Caldwell had been peeved at the

First National, too, over something that had happened several months before. He had made no deposit there. That meant that Jud had had nearly forty thousand dollars in his wagon when he had started for the Clawhammer!

The sheriff returned to his chair in the shade of the jail, and sank perspiring into it, thinking hard. There was the chance, he told himself, that robbery was the real motive for the killing. But would a robber have gone to all the elaborate details of the coffin and the grave? No, it still looked like a killing that stemmed from hatred and a desire for revenge. The killer had found the money later, and had counted himself that much to the good.

"Six hundred pounds of silver!" Sam muttered. "One thing's certain, one thing that Magill don't know. Miss Callie would have had a pretty hard time handling money that heavy!"

AFTER a time he got up heavily, and set about trying to clear up other angles of the case. He went to the Hackberry Mercantile store, and ascertained that Joe Rankin was right. Jud owed the store nearly fifteen thousand dollars for barbed wire.

He had paid none of the bill when he had withdrawn his money.

"But we ain't worried about that," the store manager said. "We still got a carload of wire to deliver to the Clawhammer, and you know how it is with the wholesale houses. When rocky times hit the cattle business, we have to carry the ranchers, and the wholesalers have to carry us. And one of the first things the wholesale drummers always ask me is whether or not we've still got the Clawhammer on our books. A man owns his land, why he's good for credit."

Sam Karnes went back into the sunlight. *Why*, *how*, *when* and *who*, he thought, and nothing made sense. He had a feeling that he was getting nowhere. He strode past the courthouse, and crossed over to the boot shop. Fritz-the-Dutchman was hammering away at a last held between his knees. and Sam sauntered into the shop.

"Howdy, Fritz," he said.

"Py golly, you got plenty to do, eh?" Fritz said over a mouthful of brass tacks. "First Jud Caldwell, and then Tom Henry. Py golly, it's a schame, a schame!"

"It's worse than that," Sam said, and picked up one of the finished boots to admire Fritz's stitch-pattern. He said, "What was Jud raisin' such a ruckus about when he was in here the other day? I could hear him all the way down the block!"

Fritz spat the tacks into the palm of his calloused hand, and the memory of his argument with Jud sent a flush all the way up on his bald head.

"He was a fool!" he declared. "I haf tried to tell him that his boots should be vun half-size larger. He vould not lissen. Und then he comes in mine shop, yellin' because the boots are too tight. *Ach*, such a *dumkopf*—like a mule!"

"He didn't say anything here—I mean anything that might be a clue to what happened later?"

The bootmaker peered through his glasses. "Py golly, no!" he said positively. "I told him to get out of mine schop, und bring another bootmaker to Hackberry if he vants to! I told him to go soak his feet!"

"Soak his feet?" echoed Sam Karnes.

"Py golly, yes! I told him to valk in the creek mit the boots on, und let them dry on his feet. That vay, they stretch."

THE sheriff scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"He walked in the creek, all right, Fritz," he said. "He went across the muddy edge of the water-hole, just before somebody killed him. But surely he wasn't stoppin' out there just to do that—not with forty thousand dollars in his wagon!"

None of Sam Karnes' observations led anywhere, that day, and he found new worries. The banks were not inclined to lend young Tony Caldwell the twenty-seven thousand dollars he wanted to use in buying Mexican cattle. It wasn't that the Clawhammer credit wasn't good, they explained; it was because the hand of every other ranchman was against Tony, and the shadow of the law was hanging over him.

It became plain to the sheriff that a large number of the citizens of Hackberry considered Tony guilty. and Karnes began to feel the pressure. The real killer

had to be found, and quickly.

Next morning, the sheriff took the bone-handled gun that had killed Tom Henry to the Hackberry Mercantile store, and left it there on the chance that its ownership could be checked through its serial number.

Leaving the place, he encountered Judge Parker.

"Lookin' for yuh, Sam," the judge said, shifting his tobacco in his cavernous cheek. "Betty Caldwell wants to go back to the Clawhammer. I figgered I'd drive her out in my buggy, and I figgered you ought to go along."

"I don't mind going along," Sam said. "But why?"

"Talk to Miss Callie—if she's there," the judge said. "More I got to thinkin' about Tom Henry's shootin', more I wondered how she come up and drifted about that time. Oh, yuh don't need to look that way, Sam! I tell yuh a woman is capable of anything, if she's riled. It says somethin' in a book about the hot place not bein' able to hold a candle to the fury of a woman that's been given the go-by. Well, Jud Caldwell did that, years ago. I know."

"I don't believe she killed Jud, or Tom either," the sheriff said.

JUDGE PARKER spat out his tobacco, and dug into his wrinkled clothes for more. "Sam," he said, "yuh'd better do somethin', pronto! The grand jury's meetin' tonight to consider an indictment against Tony—for both killin's!"

Sam Karnes paced the judge's buggy on his horse. When they passed Tom Henry's range, he saw that the Rankin herd was still there, as if Joe Rankin took delight in having his cattle water at the very place that had been forbidden to them.

He opened the gate near the motte, and the buggy rolled through, and they could hear the distant *thum-thump* of the well drilling on Wade Magill's land.

Privately, the sheriff thought he knew why Betty had wanted to come back to the ranch.

They turned on up the slope and neared Miss Callie's house. Judge Parker pulled rein suddenly as they approached her gate, and shouted a warning to Sam.

"Look out!" he yelled. "She's got a gun! She's goin' to shoot!"

CHAPTER XI

Trouble Aflame

EVEN before Sam saw Miss Callie, who was half hidden by a rose-bush at the side of her house, the rifle cracked. But the gun was pointed upward, and a large hawk came plummeting down to crash against the paling fence.

"There!" Miss Callie exclaimed triumphantly, throwing the shell out of the rifle. "He's been after my chickens, just when I got some coming on to frying size!"

Judge Parker produced a bandanna, and wiped sweat from the inside of his tieless collar. "Yuh see that, Sam?" he said. "That was crack shootin', if I ever seen any!"

Betty climbed down from the buggy, and Miss Callie gave her a hug. Sam dismounted, taking off his hat awkwardly.

"Yuh kind of had us worried, Miss Callie," he observed. "We didn't know what happened to yuh, runnin' off like yuh did. That same night there was other trouble, too."

"I came home to water my rosebushes," she said tartly. "Anything wrong in that?"

"Well, no. But a lot of things have happened."

He told her about Tom Henry's death. She heard that with no great outward show of emotion, but when he mentioned Tony's visit and hinted at his financial difficulties, the spinster looked agitated.

"I can help him," she announced. "I can lend Tony a few thousand dollars, if it will help!"

Judge Parker threw a significant glance toward Sam, but the sheriff shook his head. Betty went up on the porch, and sat down there on one of the two hide-bottomed chairs. Sam Karnes remembered something, then.

He shambled up the porch steps, and leaned against one of the pillars, where the morning glory vines climbed, watching the girl's coppery hair change color as it caught sunshine and leaf shadow.

"I want to ask yuh somethin', Betty," he said in a kindly tone. "About this. I found it here, right by that chair, the day of the funeral."

Betty looked at Wade Magill's gauntlet, and flushed, and glanced out over the shimmering mesquite flat toward Wade's place. She knew who had dropped it there.

"Wade refused to explain," Sam went on. "I thought mebbe you'd know somethin'."

"I'll explain!" the girl said defiantly. "Wade dropped it here that evening when I met him, when I was supposed to be out horseback riding. Aunt Callie knew where I was."

"You didn't have to tell him!" Miss Callie put in shrilly. "You don't have to tell him anything!"

Betty's chin came up proudly. "But there's nothing to hide," she said calmly. "I want to tell him. There's no reason why Wade and I shouldn't get married, now—a decent time after the funeral, that is. We're in love, Sam. We've been in love a long time. But we knew that Dad would raise the roof if he found out, so I had to meet Wade secretly."

Sam Karnes smiled, and drew a deep breath. It always pleased him to find out the good things, to bolster his faith in the innate virtues of human beings. What she had told him was logical enough, and he had suspected as much.

But there was a faintly disturbing thought to be put out of the back of his mind. Betty Caldwell would lie to protect Wade, to cover up for him. And Miss Callie Davis would swear to that lie.

And then there was no further time for consideration of the gauntlet, and how it got by the window through which Miss Callie's stolen coffin had been taken. Somewhere down by the motte, by the water-hole where the Triangle R cattle grazed, guns opened up in a quick, slamming burst of fire.

Judge Parker's jaw fell agape, and Betty Caldwell leaped to her feet in quick alarm. Miss Callie stiffened. The sheriff got down off the gallery, moving fast for a man his size, and threw the reins over his horse's neck.

"Wait, Sam!" yelled the judge. "Yuh ain't got a gun! Take Miss Callie's rifle!"

Sam Karnes paid no attention. He toed his stirrup, and put the horse into a lope down the road. He knew instinctively that the long-smoldering dispute between Joe Rankin's brush country crowd and the Clawhammer had broken into flame!

THERE was a silence, then two more shots hammering into the hot air of mid-afternoon, and Sam Karnes heard horses' hoofs drumming against the sun-baked ground. This sound died, and the drowsy stillness came again, and the locusts took up their interrupted shrilling in the mesquites.

He swung off the wagon road, taking a short cut toward the motte. He ducked a threatening limb, and his passing roused a rangy longhorn cow that was chewing her cud in the chaparral, and sent her hightailing for the draw.

The sheriff suddenly remembered the Reverend Cal Tyree's words from the Bible: "We will go by the high way; and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it . . ."

Then he saw two riders pulling rein in the mesquites. One of them jumped from his saddle and cursed steadily in a monotonous undertone as he held the other man, and lowered him gently to the ground. Sam Karnes recognized the wounded man as Rocky Morse, the Clawhammer foreman, and knew that Joe Rankin had paid for his water in powder and lead.

The younger man stood over Rocky, still cursing. He was Henry Ott, a raw-boned youth with fuzz still white on his cheeks. His gun holster was empty, and his hands were shaking.

"Rankin!" he said bitterly as the sheriff rode up. "Joe Rankin, curse him! He's killed Rocky!"

Rocky Morse opened his eyes. They wavered, and blinked at the bright sky, and focused on Sam Karnes' face. Sweat ran cold through a stubble of sandy whiskers on Rocky's angular jaw.

"Like sin he has!" he gritted. He made an effort to sit up, and glared at the sheriff. "You leave him alone, Sam—you leave him alone! He's my meat!"

"Take it easy, Rocky!" Sam said, and bent to examine the wound.

Rankin's bullet had entered Rocky's chest high, apparently ranging upward and lodging somewhere in the shoulder.

"This is between me and Rankin!" Rocky insisted. "I don't want him arrested. I won't swear to no complaint against him!"

The sheriff ripped off a portion of the foreman's shirt, and applied a bandage to the wound. People were strange. Some of them were eternally after him to arrest somebody and here was a man who wanted to square his own accounts.

Sam Karnes guessed that loyalty to the Clawhammer and to young Tony Caldwell lay behind the shooting.

"Put his saddle under his head, and hang the saddle blanket on this mesquite to give him some shade," Karnes told Henry Ott. "Then ride up to Miss Callie's house and get Judge Parker. The judge can take him into town in his buggy."

"Yuh hear me, Sam?" Rocky said.

"I heard yuh. But it's up to me to keep the peace in this county, and I reckon this is just the start of a lot of trouble unless I get to the bottom of it right now. What happened?"

Rocky opened his lips, then closed them against a spasm of pain.

"Why, we rode up and told them boogers to bust up camp and make tracks away from the water-hole," Henry Ott said. "We was talkin' to the *segundo* and the cook, settin' on our horses, plumb peaceful. All of a sudden Rankin throwed his gun up over the draw bank, and opened the dance. He got Rocky the first shot. My hoss tried to join the birds, and he missed me, and I couldn't shoot straight, either. Then the *segundo* grabbed my arm, and twisted the gun out of my hand, and they run us out of there. They shot at us a couple of times as we left."

Rocky Morse lay with his eyes closed.

"Sam," he said, "would yuh roll me a smoke?"

Sam Karnes complied, and held the cigarette for a moment, looking at it, before he put it between the foreman's lips. He made one for himself then, and turned to pick up his horse's reins.

"Go on up and get the judge," he told Henry Ott, and mounted to ride down toward the water-hole.

ALL along he was telling himself that he had bigger fish to fry. This shooting scrape was only significant in that it had blown the lid off the tension between the Clawhammer and Rankin's crowd, and future events in Hackberry County would shape their course to the pattern of violence.

It probably had nothing at all to do with the killings. The sheriff was reasonably sure that Joe Rankin had acted hastily, and would not be around when he reached the Triangle R camp.

He was right. He skirted the water-hole, and crossed the draw, coming out to the broken wire and the road that led to Tom Henry's place. The chuckwagon stood there, and two men came out to meet him.

"Where's Rankin?" he asked.

"Gone," the taller man said briefly.

"Gone where?"

"I didn't ask him. He's the boss, not me."

Sam Karnes eased sideward in his saddle, and listened to the scattered bawling of Rankin's trail herd. It was being held loosely on Tom Henry's range. He could see a couple of riders moving around its edges, in the mesquites.

There was a point of law here. Rankin was guilty of trespassing on the Clawhammer only when his cattle watered, only when they crossed that cut barbed wire. And the sheriff would have hated to see stock go thirsty.

"I could make yuh talk, quick enough," he said gently. "I've seen Rocky Morse. I could take you two hombres into town as accessories to the fact, unless yuh want to tell me which way Joe Rankin headed."

The tall man spat sullenly. "He lit out for the Border, same as anybody else would do. Yuh'll have the devil of a time catchin' up. Besides, Rocky pulled his gun first."

"I heard different," the sheriff said. "But I'm not goin' to kill my hoss, chasin' Joe Rankin—not with a couple of killin's on my hands. He'll have to come back to this water-hole, sooner or later. By the time he does, he may find the Rangers have taken over law and order in this county, and a patrol on the wire, and his cows gettin' mighty thirsty."

The *segundo's* eyes held a faint flicker of amusement.

"I reckon the Clawhammer's already got a patrol, Sheriff," he said. "You come down here any night, and I'll show yuh

Jud Caldwell's housekeeper, hangin' around this live-oak motte with a gun!"

CHAPTER XII

Double Killer?

BETWEEN the Hackberry water-hole and town somewhere, the sheriff presumably sprained his right arm. He arrived with it in a sling made from a bandanna handkerchief and a buckskin string, and went to the High Lonesome for a bottle of beer while the doctor was working on Rocky Morse.

Few Smith sat morosely at a table in the saloon, his crutch held across his lap as if it were the rifle he had carried for the Confederacy, an untasted glass of whisky before him. He shook his head at Sam.

"Like I told you," he said. "I told you Webster would be on our necks, and he is. He's with the grand jury right now, asking for an indictment against Tony. What's more, he brought a couple of Rangers to town with him. You can blame Bart Keyes for that!"

The sheriff sat down heavily. Webster was the district attorney, and Sam understood Few Smith's resentment. It was like his own against the Rangers. Outsiders coming in, telling you how to run things in your own bailiwick.

Few tasted his glass wryly.

"I got out," he said. "I left the courtroom. If they want to elect another county attorney in the fall, let 'em."

"Keyes come back?" Sam asked.

"No. He's still down in the brush, looking for Tony with that old warrant. You know what I'm afraid of, Sam? I'm afraid Tony will lose that Caldwell temper, and shoot it out!"

Sam was afraid of that, too. He drank his beer, and the friendly atmosphere of the High Lonesome, with its oil lamps reflected on the bar, seemed changed and alien. He thought of Mary, waiting for Tony to come back so they could start their life together.

He thought, "One way or another, Tony might not come back," and had to fight down a quick panic that surged through him.

Wade Magill entered the saloon then, looking lonely. He came over to their table.

"I heard the grand jury's meetin'," he told Few Smith. "I had to come in. If they indict Tony, Betty's goin' to be all busted up."

"Betty won't be the only one," Sam said grimly. He displayed his arm sling, and took tobacco and papers from his vest pocket. "Here, Wade, fix me a cigarette. I never could learn to roll one of the blamed things left-handed!"

Wade made him a smoke, but the sheriff didn't light it. He sat looking at it, lost in thought, coming to the final realization of what had to be done. He got up after a moment, and went to the doctor's office, which was above the First National Bank. The light was still on in the courthouse, across the square.

The bullet had been extracted, and Rocky Morse lay pale and quiet. Sam Karnes sat down at the side of his bed.

"Yuh'll have to tell me where I can find Tony," he said. "Time's runnin' out."

"So yuh can arrest him?" Rocky asked. "To thunder with that!"

"I feel the same way, Rocky, but it's either me or Keyes. If Keyes finds him, there might be a shootin'. He'd be better off in jail."

Rocky was silent for a little while. Then he said:

"All right, Sam. You know where Huisache Draw makes that big bend, about twenty miles from where it runs into the Rio Grande? The chuckwagon's out there in the brush, about a mile to the west, unless they've moved. If they have, yuh'll have to follow the tracks. Tony will be workin' down toward the river, so he can get ready to take delivery on Don Enrique's cattle."

"If he can raise the money somewheres. If he can't, and there's not enough Clawhammer cattle, he's land poor this year and busted the next," Sam thought.

"I reckon I kind of busted things up, tvin' into Rankin's crowd like I did," Rocky went on. "But you know how things have been. It had to come, sooner or later, and it's too bad things didn't pop

while Jud was still alive." He sighed, and turned to ease the pain in his shoulder. "Tony sent me up here to get that money, Sam. I told Henry Ott to go on back down tonight and tell him what happened. Henry is too much of a kid to pack all that *dinero*."

"I'll see what I can do," Sam said evasively, and straightened, listening.

Boot heels were going by on the wooden sidewalk, as if a group of men had been let loose. He went to the window, and saw several straggling down across the little park, and the light was out in the courthouse.

TWO men moved into the illumination from the window of the Lone Star Chili Parlor, next door, and the sheriff recognized Troy Holcomb, talking earnestly to a large and portly man. Troy was a member of the grand jury, and the bigger man was Webster, the district attorney.

A rider Sam didn't know came down from the direction of the livery stable, turning out on the creek road and traveling swiftly and with purpose. He guessed that this was one of the Rangers who had been brought to town, and it wasn't hard to divine the man's mission.

Sam leaned from the window to hail Holcomb and ask what action the grand jury had taken.

It was Webster who answered, peering up with the chili parlor's light in his eyes, not seeing Sam Karnes.

"Indicted Tony Caldwell," he said in a tone that implied satisfaction, and great self-importance. "Indicted him for both the killings!"

Sam closed the window against that, but Rocky Morse had heard, and the news brought him up on an elbow.

"Why, curse them!" he said bitterly. "*Both* killin's! I half expected them to accuse him of killin' Jud, the way things turned between them. But Tom Henry!" He shook his head, and said, after a time, "Who do you figger done it, Sam?"

"I don't know, yet," the sheriff confessed. "If they'd leave me alone, and let me work on it my way, I could find out. But the grand jury figgers like I do—the man who killed Jud shot Tom to cover up. Tony was in town that night. I tried to get him to lay low, but he was proud, and bull-headed, and a lot of folks saw him. Anyway, they can't hang a man twice. Well . . . I reckon I'd better be ridin'. . . ."

Karnes had hunted cattle in this brush that stretched like a pale and limitless sea under the moon. He knew its twisting trails as well as most men, and where the infrequent and undependable watering places lay, nearly all of them far down toward the Border river.

He rode all night, with scrub mesquite scratching across his chaps and *tapaderos*, and plucking a jingled music from the rowels of his spurs, until the moon dropped, and the sky turned pale in the east.

The bitter memory of a quarrel with his own daughter rode with him. It was not so much what he was going to do when he went by the jail to get his canteen and a coffee pot, and a few hard biscuits tied in a flour sack. It was what he had failed to do, thus far, that had unleashed Mary's tongue. She blamed him for not having found the real killer, and he had seen the same accusation, silent but strong, in Ivy's eyes.

He thought back on this, and sighed with something more than saddle weariness. Women could sometimes be unreasonable creatures, expecting the impossible, losing their patience too quickly. Things like killings took time to figure out.

Sunrise threw slanting light along the chaparral, and Sam Karnes came to the rocky bed of Huisache Draw, lying dry and bone-bleached where it made the big bend. He crossed this to the westward, pulling rein there to scan the brush, and seeing nothing. Then the first faint breeze of morning brought him the scent of mesquite wood smoke from a campfire.

He rode on, dreading the meeting. Now there were a few cattle in the brush, half-wild, wearing the Clawhammer brand. Not enough of them to do Tony any good; not nearly enough to pay that bill Jud Caldwell had left for his barbed wire.

A little rain-washed gully twisted this way from the Huisache, and Sam followed it. He guessed that Tony would have the chuckwagon in a low place for concealment.

He came quite suddenly upon the roundup camp. Two of the Clawhammer

riders were hunkered by the fire, and they dropped their tin breakfast plates and sprang to their feet, ready to go for their guns.

Sam Karnes pulled rein, and flicked his gaze across the camp, seeing Tony Caldwell turn quickly from where he bent over the wagon tongue, washing his face in a tin basin. Tony dashed the water from his eyes, and grinned with recognition, but Sam had seen the trigger sharp awareness that gripped him.

"Howdy, Sam," the boy called. "Just in time for breakfast. Light and sun yore saddle."

SAM swung down, the aroma of coffee making his big stomach rumble with a hunger he didn't feel. The two riders squatted again, and Tony came toward him.

"Yuh see Rocky and Henry Ott?" he asked. "I sent 'em up to get the money, and they ought to have reported to you. Don Enrique will have the cattle ready in a few days."

"I—I saw them," the sheriff said. "Look, Tony, Rocky ran into a little trouble. He found Rankin's outfit still camped at the water-hole, and I reckon there's no reason for that unless Rankin's waitin' to give yuh all the trouble he can when yuh start yore drive. Anyway, Rocky ordered the Triangle R to clear out, and Rankin pulled his gun."

Tony drew a sharp breath. "Rocky's not —not dead?"

"No. He got shot up a little, though, and he'll be laid up for a while. Joe Rankin headed back somewheres down this way."

"I'll find him," Tony said. "I'll kill that blasted lobo, and then I'll run his outfit so far away from the Clawhammer their folks won't know 'em when they get home!"

"Yeah," the sheriff said, studying him. "You ain't got trouble enough, without goin' on the shoot for Joe Rankin! Set down, son, and listen to me. In the first place, there ain't any money in either bank. Yore dad drew all of it out the day before we found him. That means whoever killed him also robbed him—of just about forty thousand dollars."

The color went out of Tony's dark face, leaving it set, and older. He sat down on a bedding roll, as if his knees had suddenly turned weak.

"Go on," he said harshly.

"Last night, the grand jury indicted yuh, Tony. That's why I'm here."

Tony said nothing, and Sam Karnes watched him again, and drew out his tobacco sack.

"I'd be much obliged if yuh'd make me a smoke," he said, and passed over the "makin's." "Now, there's no use arguin', son. Yuh'll have to go in for trial. I'd like it if yuh'd go in with me, and not wait."

CHAPTER XIII

Prisoner in His Own Jail

MECHANICALLY Tony's fingers fashioned the cigarette, and he pulled the drawstring of the tobacco sack tight with clenched teeth. The sheriff could not tell what his final reaction was going to be.

He never had a chance to find out. Tony stood up and handed him the smoke. There was a sudden movement in the brush at the gully's rim, and Henry Ott's voice crying:

"Look out, Tony! Look out!"

Tony whirled. The sheriff looked that way and saw the raw-boned Clawhammer rider with his hands in the air, risking a shot by shouting that warning. Bart Keyes was just behind him, grinning down over the barrel of a Winchester. A little to one side was the Ranger Sam had seen riding out of town the night before.

Then the sheriff made a quick move and caught Tony's wrist.

"Take it easy—take it easy, son!" he counseled. "One way or another, I reckon it makes no difference who arrests yuh!"

The two Clawhammer hands were caught under the other Ranger's gun, and they slowly reached skyward, glancing toward Tony for leadership. Henry Ott's boyish face was working.

"I reckon they follered me, Tony," he said. "I didn't see 'em until I turned off

from the Huisache, and then they had me."

"Never mind," Tony said, and the sheriff kept that grasp on his wrist.

Bart Keyes slid out of his saddle.

"Back up against the wagon—all of yuh!" he ordered, moving the barrel of the thirty-gun. "Take their guns, Pete. Yuh'll notice the sheriff don't pack one. He's too proud, and too gentle, and he don't believe in 'em!"

Sam Karnes swallowed a hot, angry feeling. Temper would do no good, now. He stayed where he was until Keyes poked his ribs with the Winchester.

"I said all of yuh! And for yore information, Karnes, it makes a lot of difference who arrests Tony. As a matter of fact"—he grinned malevolently—"you ain't got the authority to arrest him, or anybody else. Yuh've been suspended from office, and I'm actin' sheriff of Hackberry County. I'm arrestin' you, too!"

Sam wondered how it would feel to plant his fist in the middle of Keyes' well-groomed red mustache. Mildly enough, he said:

"On what kind of charge?"

"Several," Keyes retorted. "Malfeasance in office. Obstruction of justice. Harborin' a fugitive from justice. Yuh had Tony Caldwell in jail the other night, the night Tom Henry was killed. Tony was a wanted man then, and yuh knew it. Yuh made no attempt to keep him there."

"Shucks, no," Sam said in disgust.

Pete dropped the Clawhammer guns into a *morral*, and slung it over his shoulder.

"That's where yuh made yore big mistake, Karnes," Bart Keyes said. "Yuh could have saved a lot of trouble, and mebbe yore job. It's too late, now."

Tony pulled his black brows together, a steadiness coming over him.

"Keyes," he said, "I'll come in later and give myself up, if they're bound to try me. But if I go to jail now, I'll lose everything. I've got a deal on for some Mexican cattle. Nobody else can handle it."

"That's tough," Keyes said without sympathy, and turned toward the campfire. "If anybody wants any breakfast, he'd better pitch in. The four of us are ridin' for Hackberry, right away. Pete, pour me a cup of that coffee."

Tony Caldwell looked longingly out over the brush, and the sheriff followed his glance, and knew what he was hoping. There would be two or three Clawhammer men out there, but they had left early to hunt cattle, and their return was not likely. At any rate, Sam reflected, resistance would only make larger troubles.

He squatted by the fire, and drank coffee from a tin cup, and felt a great weariness descend upon his heavy shoulders. Most of this was nothing but political maneuvering on the part of Bart Keyes. A prompt arrest of Tony, immediately after the indictment, would look good to the district attorney and the district judge, and whatever voters of the county who might be dissatisfied with Sam Karnes' easy-going ways.

The Ranger was out to show up Sam, and make a name for efficiency before the fall elections. If he hanged a man, meanwhile, it meant nothing to him. Just now, there was nothing the sheriff could do but bide his time.

THEY started the long ride back to Hackberry a little later, with Sam and Tony riding in the middle, between the two officers. Tony looked back from the gully rim, and saw the Clawhammer hands standing helplessly, watching his departure, and the misery in Henry Ott's eyes.

"Keep on with the gather, boys!" Tony called. "And tell Don Enrique the deal is still on. I'll be back down here in a few days, to take delivery."

"Oh, shore yuh will!" Bart Keyes laughed. "Yuh'll be lucky if yuh don't stretch a rope!"

The sun climbed, and the day's first heat waves moved over the brush, but there was no wind. The air was uncommonly sticky, Sam thought, and the gnats were bad. He saw clouds making up down in the southwest. It looked a little like rain, and the sheriff had an idea that a rain might help him find the solution to the two killings. . . .

That day, he came back at sundown to his own jail, a prisoner. Ivy, seeing the cell door swing shut and confine him in the place where Tom Henry had been mysteriously killed, burst suddenly into tears.

Sam stared at her, unable to comprehend the outburst. He was home, wasn't he? He felt no disgrace, and, as a matter of fact, things might be working out to the best advantage. There was nothing he needed at the moment more than rest and quiet, and some of Ivy's cooking, and a chance to think things out until he knew who the killer was.

Mary cried, too, and Bart Keyes almost had to pry her out of Tony's arms. He put Tony in the cell farthest from Sam, and turned to Ivy.

"Pete Sellers will be the jailer here, Mrs. Karnes," he said. "But I reckon we'll have to trust you some. I figure yuh're smart enough to know that if either of these prisoners gets out, he runs a chance of bein' shot down, so things could be worse. Yuh'll have to do the cookin', and Pete will give yuh the run of the jail."

"I live here," Ivy retorted, with something of her old spirit. "And so does Sam. If you think—"

"I'll be out around the county a lot," Keyes went on. "But don't forget this. I'm the actin' sheriff."

Ivy turned away from him. "Sam," she said loyally, "there's something you ought to know. The Mercantile store checked up on that white-handled gun, the one that killed Tom Henry. It belonged to Wade Magill!"

"Wade Magill?" the sheriff echoed.

Bart Keyes flushed and gnawed at the edge of his red mustache. Sam was remembering those occasions when Wade had seemed bent on throwing suspicion toward Miss Callie Davis.

"Don't try throwin' me off the track!" Bart Keyes said sharply. "I don't ever remember seein' Wade pack that gun, and Tony could have taken it out of Wade's house, easy as not. I don't think Wade had anything to do with either killin'."

"Yuh know blasted well he didn't!" Tony blazed from his cell down the hall. "Yuh may as well admit that yuh haven't got any idea *who* did it. Just as long as there's a trial, and somebody to be the goat while you play politics, yuh're satisfied!"

Keyes looked back over his shoulder.

"The district attorney thinks he knows who's guilty," he said significantly. "That's good enough for me. If yuh want to blame anybody for bein' where yuh are, blame Karnes. He had his chance, and he bungled the whole deal from the start!"

Sam Karnes watched the sundown fade behind a bank of threatening clouds, but the rain didn't come. From his cell window, he saw Troy Holcomb cross the square and turn toward the jail, picking up his buttoned shoes carefully in the dusty street. The word had got around, Sam told himself, and a minute later he heard Ivy letting the bank official in.

Holcomb stood in the shadowy hallway, and looked embarrassed.

"Sam," he said, "I sure hated to hear about this. Maybe if you could get them to fix you a bail bond, and it wasn't too high, I could do something about it."

"Much obliged, Troy," the sheriff said, and was cheered by the knowledge that he still had friends. "But I reckon I ought to let my chips ride for a while. I've been thinkin' about somethin' Bart Keyes said a little while ago. The important thing is to get this case solved, and mebbe I bungled it. If Bart would get out and work, and clear it up proper, I'd be the first one to give him three cheers."

HOLCOMB shook his head.

"I haven't got too much hope of Keyes' ability to do anything but round up votes for himself," he admitted. "But I came over here for some other business, too. I want to talk to Tony."

"Go ahead," Tony said.

Holcomb moved a little way down the hall, clearing his throat.

"Well, the fact is," he said, "Joe Rankin and Carson Tate dropped in on me a couple of days ago, and asked me if I'd help. Understand, now, I have no personal interest in this, Tony. I'm just a sort of mediator."

"Go on," Tony said.

"Rankin and Tate want to buy the Clawhammer. They're willing to make you a reasonable offer."

Tony laughed coldly. "I'd see them both in perdition with their backs broke before I'd sell 'em an inch!" he declared. "And if yuh see Rankin, tell him that when I get out of here, he'd better be scarce and hard to find. I'll make him wish he'd shot himself, instead of Rocky Morse!"

Holcomb hesitated, and Sam Karnes got the banker to roll him a cigarette.

"There's something you don't know about, Tony," Holcomb went on. "They struck water in Wade Magill's well today —good water. You know what that means? If they can find it there, they ought to be able to drill almost anywhere in this part of Texas. In other words, all dry range is going to be worth more, and watered range will drop, in comparison. A man won't have to own a water-hole any more. The Clawhammer might take a drop in value."

"I don't give a hang if the bottom drops out!" Tony said emphatically. "It belongs to Betty and me. I know she'll want to hold onto it, and that's what I aim to do!"

CHAPTER XIV

Lawman's Daughter

FOR Ivy Karnes, those next two days were trying ones. Pete Sellers, the Ranger Keyes had made jailer, ate as much as three men, and was always hanging around the kitchen door.

The talk of the forthcoming trial went around the town for Mary to hear, and she needed cheering up. And there was big, lazy Sam Karnes, taking his ease in a cell, more like a hotel guest than a prisoner.

Sam demanded a lot of attention. He was always calling Ivy to bring him this, and that, and a cup of coffee. At night before he blew out the oil lamp, he wanted her to step out into the yard and see what the weather looked like.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "I figger it's goin' to rain."

Ivy put her hands on her hips, and regarded him with something approaching exasperation.

"What if it is?" she demanded. "*You* won't be out in it! I declare to goodness, Sam Karnes, sometimes I think you're the laziest white man I ever saw!"

But she went out, and took a cursory glance at the heavens, and came back to report that there were no stars. Sam lay down on his cot, and let his mind go back over the observations he had made at the motte, and at Miss Callie's. Women were like that—Ivy couldn't understand that he was working hard on the killer mystery.

He called for a pencil the next day, and when she brought it, impatiently, he remembered that he had forgotten to ask her to supply him with writing paper. She hurried back to the kitchen, and it was plain she wasn't in too good a humor.

Sam sighed, and rolled over to face the white plaster wall. He began putting names down there. Tony Caldwell's, with certain observations after it, and the names of Tom Henry and Wade Magill, Joe Rankin and Miss Callie Davis. He added Carson Tate's, and then drew a line through it. He knew nothing about Carson Tate's movements on the night of either killing.

And everything ended in a question mark, no matter how his mind probed. They all had reasons to kill Jud Caldwell; they all had had the opportunity.

When everything was summed up, he saw how black the future looked for Tony. Tom Henry had threatened Jud, but Tom was dead. Tony had told Joe Rankin that he was going to get even with his father, Tony had even gone so far as to form an alliance with Joe, that night of the killing.

Everything came back to the money, and that ended in a question mark, too. But the forty thousand dollars Jud Caldwell carried in his wagon was at least something tangible, if it could be found.

Troy Holcomb had said there was about six hundred pounds of silver. Some of the rest of the money was bound to have been in gold. The *vaqueros* who worked on the ranches didn't trust paper money, and neither did a lot of the old-timers who remembered sad experience with Confederate currency.

"More than six hundred pounds," the sheriff muttered. "Too heavy to pack on a saddle hoss, in one trip. And the only wagon tracks at the motte were made by Jud's wagon."

He could trace Jud's wagon. It had been to Miss Callie's to get the coffin. It had come later, empty and driverless, to the Clawhammer headquarters.

He rolled over to the wall again, and

wrote after Miss Callie's name:

Could have unloaded money at house & hid it there when she drove wagon there for coffin.

Then he got up, and paced thoughtfully for a time, and looked out the window. Pete Sellers was out there in the office, sitting in Sam's favorite chair, like he owned it. Up the street, he could hear Fritz-the-Dutchman tapping away industriously.

He called Ivy again.

"I'd shore be much obliged if yuh'd do somethin' for me," he said. "Go up and ask Fritz-the-Dutchman if he can give yuh a list of all his customers, with the sizes of boots he's made for 'em. Mebbe he ain't got exact sizes, bein' as how every pair is made special. But tell him it's important that I get a list showin' sizes as near as he can come to 'em."

Ivy stared. "Anything else you want, Mr. Karnes?" she asked sarcastically. "I ain't got anything to do, you know, aside from waiting on you hand and foot!"

"Well," Sam said, "I'd kind of like to have my chair inside here with me. It don't look right, Sellers settin' in it that way. It looks like he's tryin' to take over the job of keepin' the peace in this here county. . . ."

THAT next morning, a slow drizzle descended over the mulberry trees in the little park, and water ran musically from the eaves of the county jail. Miss Callie drove in with the wagon, wearing a man's slicker, and held a whispered conference with Tony and Mary down the hall.

Sam Karnes knew that their secretiveness was for the benefit of Pete Sellers and not himself, but he felt a little hurt by it, just the same. Later, Mary put on his old slicker, and went out with Miss Callie. They didn't come back.

The drizzle kept up all day, but it was nothing that would set the dry draws running, and Sam didn't get excited about it. He pulled his chair up to face the white plaster wall, and studied a new list he had written there, a list that would have made sense to nobody else but Fritz-the-Dutchman.

He was still doing this when Bart Keyes returned to the jail in the late afternoon. Sam hastily spread a newspaper over an array of cigarettes he had lying on his table, and asked Keyes to come into the cell.

Sellers unlocked the door, and the mustached Ranger entered suspiciously, then stared at the writing on the wall.

"What the devil's all that?" he demanded.

"Not so loud!" Sam warned. "Ivy wouldn't like it, mebbe. But I want to show yuh somethin'. I want to explain my theory of the killin's to yuh. Yuh see them names?"

Keyes snorted derisively. "Yuh can cross out all of 'em but Tony's!" he declared. "No use bein' a stubborn fool about it, Karnes. I've been goin' over the evidence with the district attorney this afternoon, and if he don't convict Tony, nobody will ever be convicted!"

"Not necessarily," Sam said patiently. "I can show yuh—"

"Yuh can't show me anything. It's simple. If Tony didn't kill Jud Caldwell, who did?"

"Well, I got it whittled down to several candidates," Sam said, pointing to the list. "Yuh see here? I scratched Tom Henry's name. Tony is out of the runnin', and so is Carson Tate. But Wade Magill and Miss Callie are still on the list. As far as that's concerned, here's yore name."

"*My* name?" echoed Keyes. "Why?"

"Because yuh take the same size boots as Jud Caldwell wore. Now, Tony wears—"

"Are yuh loco?" Keyes demanded, his eyes bulging. "Look, Karnes, nobody else had as many reasons to kill Jud Caldwell as Tony had. Can yuh understand that?"

"Yes, but it don't prove anything," Sam sighed. "I've got more reasons for killin' *you* than anybody else might have. But I haven't killed yuh, have I? As a matter of fact, I don't aim to. What I aim to do" —and now he was out of his chair and shuffling toward Keyes with that bearlike gait—"what I aim to do one of these days, is to whip the everlasting tar out of yuh!"

"Set down!" Keyes said. "Open this door, Sellers! Karnes has gone crazy!"

Sam laughed, and sat down. The burly Ranger stopped outside in the hall, and looked in at him.

"Yuh'll have more'n an arm in a sling if yuh ever are so misguided as to try

whippin' me!" he warned. "I can beat yuh any way yuh want—with fists, or guns, or votes. Yuh know where I'm headin' tonight. Karnes? I'm ridin' down to San Antone, to turn my resignation in to my Ranger captain and let him send it to Austin. That's how shore I am that I can lick yuh next month when the elections roll around!"

"Better just ask him for a furlough," Sam advised. "There's a lot of good men out of work."

But that night he lay long awake, worrying over the things Keyes had said. He hadn't realized the election was so near. Time was running out in more ways than one. . . .

A CONFERENCE with Few Smith, the next day, didn't help Sam's mental attitude. As Few pointed out, nobody could ever tell what a jury was going to do. Webster and Keyes might easily hang Tony Caldwell, just by harping on that simple argument that if Tony hadn't killed Jud, who had?

Sam was too easy-going, too naturally lazy, to be active in seeking either glory or votes. He had been willing to explain his theories to Bart Keyes; he would have willingly let Keyes take over the assignment of actually going out to round up the killer. But Keyes wouldn't listen.

Sam sighed, and moped on his cot most of the day, and annoyed Ivy with a dozen small errands aimed at his comfort. Pete Sellers spent his time hanging around the kitchen door, and getting underfoot when Ivy cleaned house. Mary hadn't returned.

It must have been nearly midnight when the front door rattled, and Ivy got up to light the lamp in her room. Sam Karnes saw its brightness spill into the hallway. He heard Ivy calling to Pete Sellers to come with the keys, and Sellers stamped into his boots and emerged sleepily down the hall.

The keys rattled as Pete went by. He stood at the door, and called:

"Who's there?"

"Mary. Mary Caldwell."

It was the first time, the sheriff thought, that he had heard her use that name, and he noted a certain curious pride in the way she said it. He heard the drizzle fluting from the eaves, and then Pete Sellers opened the door, and Mary came in with water dripping from the slicker.

Sellers started back down the hall yawning. Then the light from Ivy's room glistened on the wet slicker Mary wore, and fell on her face.

The sheriff jerked upright at what he saw there. He started to call to Mary, but it was too late. Her hand came out from under the folds of the oversized slicker, and the light struck a blue glint from the barrel of a pistol. She thrust this suddenly against Pete Seller's ribs.

"Put up your hands!" she ordered.

[*Turn page*]

"Turn around—and keep them up, or I'll shoot you! Now back up to the door of Tony's cell!"

Sellers gasped, and slowly raised his arms. There was a six-gun in his holster, and anger was wiping the first surprise out of his eyes. Sam Karnes knew he would use the gun if he had a chance!

Sam came hastily out of bed, grabbing his trousers.

"Wait a minute, Mary!" he said. "Don't make things worse! Put down that gun!"

"Keep out of this, Sam!" Tony interrupted, and there was a fierce, proud possessiveness in his voice. "Leave her alone. She knows what she's doin'!"

It appeared that she did, for when Pete Sellers slowly turned around to face her, she was back out of the possible reach of his arms, and her gun was still steady upon him. Sam Karnes could not help feeling a little pride himself.

Her eyes flashed, and her chin was high.

"Things couldn't be any worse, Dad," she said. "And they'll get no better as long as you lie around, doing nothing to clear Tony! Back up there, Mr. Sellers!"

The Ranger hesitated, and glanced toward Sam Karnes. Sam shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Sellers backed up, his boot heels scraping the floor, until he was against the cell door. The butt of his gun rattled against a bar there, and Tony Caldwell reached out and lifted it out of his holster.

The sheriff saw Ivy standing across the hall, her face tense and pale with this new worry, her hands twisting nervously at the front of her night robe.

"All right, Sellers!" Tony said exultantly. "Unlock this door! . . . Have yuh got the hosses, honey?"

"They're outside," Mary said. "I've got everything."

Tony strode into the hall. He hugged her briefly, not taking his eyes off Sellers. He walked as Jud Caldwell had walked, with a little bit of an arrogance, toward Sam's door.

"We're ridin' for the Border," he said briefly. "Sellers is goin' with us, far enough so he won't do any harm, anyway. I'll come back and stand trial, Sam, but not until I've got the cattle from Don Enrique! Not until there are two Clawhammer herds on the trail!"

CHAPTER XV

A Promise Kept

PETE SELLERS was allowed to get his hat and jumper. He came by Sam's cell with the anger and amazement still on his face. He looked at the sheriff, and licked his lips nervously.

"Sam, yuh'd better stop this!" he warned. "You know what Bart Keyes will do when he comes back. He'll hunt Tony down if it takes him a year."

"Get movin'," Tony said. "Come on, honey."

They were gone, then, for better or worse, and there was a brief sound of horses' hoofs moving out on the creek road, and then only the soft music of water dripping from the roof. Sam Karnes sat down on the edge of his cot, and scratched his head in bewilderment.

"I can't figger what good bustin' out of jail is goin' to do," he complained. "I don't figger Tony stands a chance of talkin' Don Enrique out of them steers on credit, so leavin' this way just makes things worse. And Mary—"

"Mary's sick and tired of seeing you lie around this way, doing nothing!" Ivy snapped. She brought a lamp to the cell door, and looked at him, and for the first time she saw how he had been writing on the wall by his cot. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "Sam Karnes, I won't have you in here another minute, messing up my nice white walls that way! You get out. Do you hear me? Get out and *do* something!"

Sam stared. "But I can't get out, honey," he pointed out mildly.

"I'll fix that!" Ivy retorted.

She strode angrily to the door of the cell where Tony had been, and came back with the keys rattling.

"The whole thing is your fault!" she said. "You and your easy-going ways! You and your idea that a sheriff don't need to pack a gun!"

"But, listen, honey—"

"Don't honey me!" Ivy blazed. "Look

at what's happened! Your own daughter breaking the law, holding up a Ranger and getting her husband out of jail! It's like she said. Things couldn't be any worse. Now get out of here and find the man who killed Jud Caldwell and Tom Henry! And don't come back till you do!"

Sam Karnes gulped. She was bustling into another room, coming back with the pistol he hadn't carried for several years, bringing a box of cartridges with it. She thrust these into his hands, unlocked the cell door, and faced him angrily.

"Get out!" she said.

Sam went out, and felt the drizzle on his face, and stood for a moment in front of the place, thinking. Things had come to a fine pass when a man got thrown out of his own jail. It just showed that you would never understand a woman, or know what one was going to do. They were unpredictable, unreasonable.

He looked up at the sky, and decided it wasn't going to rain any harder that night, and that it was too late to start working on the case, anyway. He tried the door knob tentatively, but Ivy had locked him out. It wouldn't do to be seen around the hotel, or any other place in town, because this was something he couldn't explain.

The drizzle was wetting him. He wandered disconsolately around the jail, and into the stable at the rear, feeling a little sorry for himself. His horse whickered softly, and he rubbed the animal's nose and sighed.

He crawled into the soft, loose hay in the loft, and tried to go back to sleep. But sleep wouldn't come easily. Thoughts chased themselves around his mind like squirrels in a cage, and he came to the conclusion that he ought not to blame Ivy. She was tired out, and having to put up with a lot, and he guessed she was right.

If he hadn't been so soft-hearted, a lot of things could have been prevented. . . .

HE AWOKE to sunlight streaming through chinks in the wall of the loft, making little shafts of silver where the dust motes swam. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, remembering what had happened. And then he heard Bart Keyes' voice.

"I don't give a hoot for any excuses!" the Ranger was shouting. "All of yuh can be held to answer for this! Jail delivery! Lettin' a killer loose again!"

"Tony Caldwell is no killer!" Ivy's voice said.

"The devil he's not!" Keyes flared. His boots clicked on the back steps, and Sam heard his horse in the yard. Keyes said, "Yuh want me to tell yuh what happened last night, Mrs. Karnes? Yuh want to know what Tony did after yuh turned him loose? He killed Joe Rankin, that's all!"

"Joe Rankin?" Ivy faltered.

"That's what I said. I rode back by way of Hackberry water-hole. I got there before daylight. The Triangle R outfit had just found Joe with a bullet in his back, down by the water-hole. Joe had been in town. They heard a shot at the water-hole, and his hoss come into camp with an empty saddle. They looked, and found his body."

"Tony didn't do it," Ivy said, and Sam Karnes knew she was crying.

He put his eye to a crack and saw her at the back door, wringing her apron in her hands, and Bart Keyes shaking his fist at her.

"Tony shore as guns did do it—and he'll hang higher than a kite, this time!" he yelled. "And you and yore daughter and yore worthless husband will all be prosecuted for helpin' him get away!"

He turned angrily on his heel, and picked up his horse's reins. He was cursing out loud as he led the horse toward the barn. And Sam Karnes heard his own voice swearing softly as he slid quickly down out of the loft.

Nobody could talk to Ivy like that! Nobody was going to make her cry!

The sheriff jerked that bandanna sling from his neck, and stood just aside from the door. Bart Keyes came striding through, his eyes straight ahead. Sam Karnes reached out and grabbed him.

Keyes ripped out an oath of surprise, and tried to turn in Sam's grasp. The sheriff brought his forearm up under Keyes' chin, and held him with that grip while he reached down and yanked at the Ranger's belt buckle. Gun and belt fell to the ground, and Sam Karnes kicked them out of the way.

Then he turned Keyes loose. Over the Ranger's shoulder, he saw the back door of the jail close. Ivy had gone inside, weeping.

Keyes faced him, breathing hard, his gray eyes turning small with rage.

"So yuh still think yuh can whip me, eh?" he said. "I'll give yuh a chance to crawl, Karnes. Walk back into that jail cell while yuh can still stand up!"

The sheriff unbuckled his own gun-belt, and hung it on a nail. He moved deliberately, with the slow, shuffling gait of a dancing bear. He circled once around Keyes, put his back to the door, and reached out behind him to close it.

Then Keyes grunted, and moved in behind a flailing fist that grazed along Sam's jaw. Sam gave ground. He lashed out, and missed, and saw the Ranger boring in again through a haze of dust that rose from the hay that sprinkled the hard-packed ground—dust that swirled up, and turned unaccountably red.

That was Keyes' fist driving into his stomach, hurting him, slamming out the wind he needed. That was the kind of punch he had to avoid. He gasped, and swung a hard right hand around, more from pure instinct than from any skill at boxing. It jarred against the side of the Ranger's head and sent him crashing back into the barn wall.

The sheriff drew in a great gulp of air. Bart Keyes bounced back, but he was more wary this time. He aimed a couple of short, choppy blows, trying to knock down Sam's guard, trying to get in another body punch, and when he failed in that, he looped his left fist up and drove it against the sheriff's mouth.

Sam's head snapped back. He tasted blood, warm and salty, from a split in his lower lip. He saw Keyes coming in joyously, sure of himself now, panting curses as he slammed furiously at Sam's guard. Keyes had forgotten the deadliness of Sam's body punch. He was driving a right uppercut toward the sheriff's jaw.

SAM KARNES gave ground again. He took a jab that would have floored a smaller man. He fed the Ranger's eagerness by backing up, by shuffling sideward, until he felt the wall against his shoulders, the planks shaking under the impact. He gambled, then, shoving Keyes back with his left elbow, bringing his right arm around in a sweep that could have broken Keyes' neck if it had landed.

It missed. Keyes rushed in closer than he had been before, and jarred one chopping hook against the sheriff's jaw. At that instant, Sam Karnes changed his tactics and became a wrestler instead of a fist fighter.

His powerful right arm closed around the other man, and yanked him in close. He threw his left around Keyes' neck, and squeezed, and the Ranger's fists were powerless. Keyes gasped, trying hard to get the older man in his own embrace, but Sam Karnes let his grip slide down a little, and pinned one of Keyes' arms.

It took only a little while, after that. It was like a bear's hug, a deflating, bone-crushing, numbing force that could take the life out of whatever it held. The sheriff squeezed until he saw Keyes' eyes bulge, and heard his breath wheeze and stop.

Then he lifted the Ranger off his feet, and slammed him down on the hard-packed dirt floor. He tied him there, with all the skill of years at handling a pigging string, and thoughtfully knotted a piece of short rope across his mouth.

No use having him make a noise, and disturb Ivy. She was upset enough, already.

He put Keyes on his shoulder, and eyed the loft ladder speculatively. He was strong enough to carry the burly man up there, but the ladder rungs probably wouldn't stand the strain. He compromised by dumping the trussed man unceremoniously into the far corner of an empty stall, then set about the leisurely business of currying and saddling his horse.

One more thing was important. The weather. Big Sam Karnes stepped outside and looked at the sky, and grunted his pleasure at what he saw there—thunderheads making up this early in the day, climbing dark and threatening into the southeast. If they broke, it would be more than a drizzle.

The range country was still parched. It needed rain. And Sam Karnes needed at least the threat of a good rain, to throw his loop on the killer.

Keyes was conscious when Karnes went back in. Sam stood over him and looked into his baleful eyes.

"Bart," he said softly, "time yuh're a little older, yuh'll learn that a man can be crowded just so far. After that, he just

naturally up and kicks the bark off the brandin' chute, same as a wall-eyed steer. Like me. I never done you any harm. You come into this town, all full of vinegar and ambition, and yuh decided I was an easy mark. Yuh made a mistake, there."

Bart Keyes squirmed, and made a choking noise, and his eyes said he would kill Sam Karnes if he could get on his feet. He strained against his bonds, and got nowhere.

"Yuh might as well take it easy, Bart," Sam said. "Yuh might be here quite a spell." He picked up Keyes' gun-belt, crossed it over his own, and grinned. "*Two* guns! I reckon yuh was right about one thing. Mebbe I ought to have been tougher. But I like to do things my way, and mebbe I got tough in time. Take it easy, Bart."

He led his horse out of the stall, and put the Ranger's mount in its place, stripping off the saddle and bridle, and tossing the animal a chip of hay. He swung into saddle, barring the stable door behind him, and rode by Ivy's window.

She came there, her eyes red from crying, when he tapped on the glass. He didn't give her a chance to speak.

"They'll be around here before long, honey," he said. "Some of Rankin's men must have come to town with Keyes. I reckon Webster and the others will be here, and they'll find out about the jail break. They'll be askin' where Bart Keyes went. You don't know. Far as you know, he lit out to try bringin' Tony back."

Then he rode out under the threatening sky, and turned down the creek road. Nobody, so far as he knew, saw him leaving town.

CHAPTER XVI

"Yuh Got To Be Tough!"

NOW Sam Karnes had finally been stung into action, and brought to the unwelcome realization that he had to be tough. But what he did subsequently was more characteristic of him as a man, and entirely in keeping with his record as a law-enforcement officer.

He had caught the Jessup boys, that time, by waiting at a water-hole on the Nueces trail. He was gambling, now, that he could catch the killer of Jud Caldwell—*and*, he thought sharply, the killer of Tom Henry and Joe Rankin!—in the same way.

So he rode to the Hackberry motte, proceeding cautiously along the last few miles, and leaving the road for the cover of the mesquites. He did not want to meet up with anybody and he could learn nothing by studying the road for tracks, because last night's drizzle had wiped them out.

He unsaddled and tethered his horse in a thick clump of live-oak and hackberry trees, a little way up the creek from the mound of dirt that still marked Jud Caldwell's unfinished grave. The thicket gave concealment, and he could still observe what went on yonder on the farther bank, near the Triangle R camp.

There would be a bit of business to handle with Rankin's *segundo*, but it had to wait.

The sheriff spread his saddle blanket, and took his ease on it, smoking and fanning at the gnats that swarmed around as a further promise that rain was coming. After a couple of hours, horsemen and Judge Parker's buggy came out from town, and Sam saw that Webster, the district attorney, was with the judge.

He heard most of the proceedings in the inquest for Joe Rankin. The Triangle R *segundo* led the party to a spot just above the fallen live-oak that lay under the creek bank, and showed them where Joe Rankin had been shot from his horse. His voice turned loud and angry, and he

coupled an oath to the name of Tony Caldwell.

"I knew he had busted out of jail!" the *segundo* declared. "I knew he was loose, the minute we found Joe. He threatened to get Joe when Rocky Morse got shot, didn't he? Well, a jury trial's too good for him! He ought to be lynched, and I'll throw the rope over the limb if any of yuh will go with me!"

There was a stir in the gathering, and more loud voices, and Sam Karnes saw that the temper of Hackberry would not need much to turn the town toward mob violence. But Judge Parker threw away a cud of tobacco and started to remonstrate against this, and Webster interrupted him.

Webster made what really amounted to a campaign speech for Bart Keyes. He was bareheaded, and his silver mane gleamed, and he orated pompously on letting the law take its course.

"I can promise you that Tony Caldwell will get a quick trial, and I can promise you a certain conviction!" he declared. "He'll hang for these three killings. But let the law hang him, and not a lynch mob!"

"After he's killed somebody else!" sneered the *segundo*. "The law let him get loose, didn't it?"

"Sam Karnes did that," Webster retorted. "You can put the blame for all three killings at the door of Sam Karnes, and his laxity. Fortunately, Karnes is out, and Bart Keyes is handling the sheriff's office. Keyes is a good man. You can be sure that he'll round up Tony Caldwell."

Sam grinned, thinking of Keyes lying hogtied in the hay. He saw Wade Magill listening to Webster with what looked like an expression of disgust, and Troy Holcomb edged around the group—a small man wanting to be heard, and commanding respect because of the credit he controlled.

"Joe Rankin was my friend," Troy declared. "But he was wrong in one thing. The courts upheld Jud Caldwell's water rights here, and Joe should have respected that ruling. I'm not saying that Joe cut the wire, but somebody did, and he should have driven this herd on up the trail instead of letting it water here!"

There was argument about that, and Sam fidgeted. It had nothing to do with the inquest, and he wanted the inquest over with. He charitably allowed that he might have misjudged Holcomb's intercession for Rankin and Tate. Perhaps, after all, the bank official had been acting in strict neutrality.

WHEN Judge Parker rendered his verdict, and Sam could not hear it. The *segundo* was still advocating a lynching party to comb the brush for Tony Caldwell. Carson Tate conferred with Holcomb, and then Holcomb climbed into the buggy with the judge and Webster, and the party started back for town.

Wade Magill was still there. Sam Karnes watched narrowly for a little while, then got up and put the saddle back on his horse. He swung astride, grunting with grim amusement when the unaccustomed two guns got in his way, and rode wide into the mesquites to come down from the north on the other side of the water-hole.

There were six men to watch him when he came suddenly out of the chaparral, and got heavily down from the horse a few yards from the chuckwagon. Carson Tate's stooped shoulders lifted slightly as he stared at the sheriff. Wade Magill grinned, as if glad to see him. But Rankin's *segundo* stepped forward, glaring, and the other three were Triangle R hands.

"Yuh're feedin' off yore range, Karnes!" the *segundo* said. "You ain't a lawdog no more, and this time I ain't takin' any of yore lip!"

"And you ain't givin' me any, either," Sam retorted. "I didn't come over here to talk. Get this herd together, and string it out on the trail. Hitch up this chuckwagon. In other words, hightail out of here pronto!"

Surprise was on his side, cutting down the odds. The *segundo's* jaw sagged, and by the time he snapped it shut over an oath and reached for his holster, Sam Karnes had both guns out in a double draw that made Wade Magill think of lazy lightning.

One of them cracked, and the *segundo* yelped and grabbed his right arm. Sam swung the smoking muzzle toward the other Triangle R hands, and froze them where they stood. Carson Tate started to

say something, but changed his mind. After all, he was something of an outsider in the camp, and now he was glad of it.

"Pick up that pistol for me, Wade," the sheriff said softly. "And take the guns off the others. And while we're on the subject of shootin' irons, I want to ask yuh somethin'. That bone-handled forty-four that killed Tom Henry belonged to you. What about it?"

Wade straightened, with the *segundo's* weapon in his hand. The little sun wrinkles around his eyes tightened curiously.

"Why then, it looks like Tom's death *was* a suicide!" he said slowly. "I sold Tom Henry that gun six months ago. You know I never packed it."

"Got any kind of receipt?"

"No. But I sold it to him, like I said."

The sheriff sighed. Another blind trail. But he remembered how things were between Wade and Betty Caldwell, and he wanted to believe Wade. He turned his attention to the Triangle R *segundo* who stood grimacing with pain, blood trickling between the fingers that gripped his forearm.

"Get yore men workin'!" he ordered. "I want chuckwagon, cattle and all gone from this motte inside an hour . . . Wade, I probably ain't got the legal right to do it, but I'm swearin' you in as deputy to ride herd on this outfit till it's on Tate's range. Will yuh take the job?"

Wade Magill grinned. "Yuh blame right, I will!" he said.

The Triangle R strung out to the northward a little later, with the *segundo* driving the wagon with his one good arm, and the cook taking his place in the saddle. There had been no further argument, and Sam Karnes told himself that there might be no more trouble between Rankin's old crowd and the Clawhammer.

But he went back to the other side of the water-hole with no feeling of triumph. It had been too late. Too late to save Joe Rankin's life, or the pain of Rocky Morse's wound.

In spite of his conversion to toughness, the sheriff still believed, at heart, in the efficacy of soft-spoken, persuasive words.

He had driven away the Triangle R from no more lofty a motive than to clear the motte for action, to have it all to himself. He took the coffee pot from his saddle, built a small fire in the thicket, and had coffee with the hard biscuits he had brought back, untouched, from the excursion after Tony. Then he sprawled on the saddle blanket again and waited for darkness to come.

FINALLY the sun dropped behind towering clouds. There was an intermittent play of summer lightning in the east, and the moon came late and was hidden. The black clouds moved overhead, sullenly refusing to give rain, and the lightning came with them, showing everything in a fitful, split-second brilliance, leaving the world darker than before.

Frogs chortled at the edge of the water-hole. The locusts shrilled, and were awed into silence by the rumble of thunder. Somewhere toward the hills, a coyote yapped.

Then Sam Karnes heard a noise nearer at hand, a rustling of the dry leaves toward the grave that had been dug for Jud Caldwell. He got to his feet and went stealthily that way, taking concealment behind the trunks of the larger trees.

Lightning came again, but the thick branches overhead shut out most of its short glimmer. He caught the faint outline of a figure against the bole of the tree that shaded the grave. He saw a glint on gun steel, then everything was dark again.

He waited, holding his breath against a tension, feeling that he was near the end of a long trail. Thunder boomed in a long, deep roll, drowning all other sounds. The sheriff sprang forward in that instant, and grabbed in the blackness. His hands closed on the slippery feel of a slicker.

He yanked this toward him. There was a soft collision against his big body, and his arms closed around the prowler. He heard a half-strangled gasp, then suddenly was fighting a furious, almost feline resistance that amounted to an attack.

"Miss Callie, sure enough!" he thought.

The memory of her name still on the wall of the cell flashed into his mind, and what Rankin's *segundo* had said about her patrolling the motte.

He dragged her toward the open, surprised at her savage strength. Nails ripped at his face. He shielded it as best he could with one arm, and held her with the other. She kicked his shins.

"Settle down, yuh blamed wildcat!" he

panted. "I ain't goin' to hurt yuh!"

The attack ceased suddenly.

"Oh—Sam Karnes!" his prisoner said, and it wasn't Miss Callie, after all. It was Betty Caldwell.

CHAPTER XVII

When and How—

WEAKNESS born of bewilderment passed over the sheriff. He shook his head, and took Betty's arm, leading her to the cover of the thicker trees before lightning came again. He sat down there on a fallen log.

"Well, it beats me!" he said. "How come *you're* prowlin' around down here? This ain't a safe place. There's been two killin's here already, and mebbe there'll be another one, tonight. You get home where yuh belong!"

Betty hesitated. "I—I'm not afraid for myself!" she said, and the Caldwell pride was strong in her voice.

"Well, who are yuh worried about, then? Wade Magill? I sent him up to the T-Four Connected. He's safe enough."

"It's Aunt Callie," the girl said slowly. "Sam, she took Dad's death a lot harder than anybody knows. She—was in love with him, once, and I reckon she never got over it. I'm afraid her mind has been affected, Sam! She's been coming down here for the last several nights, carrying a gun. Don't you see why I'm worried? It may have been Aunt Callie who killed Joe Rankin!"

"Mebbe," Sam said. "I hope not, Betty. Because I figger that whoever it was that killed Rankin also done the other killin's. I'd hate to think of her doin' that. Besides, it never has seemed to me like a woman's job."

"Oh, she *couldn't* have!" Betty said fiercely. "Not—not Dad, anyway!"

Sam Karnes was silent for a space, thinking of what Judge Parker had said about a woman who has been given the go-by, knowing that love sometimes turns, all too easily, into hate.

"Anything else she's done that might be a clue?" he finally said. "Did yuh ask her why she prowled around down here?"

"She said a killer always comes back to the scene of the crime," Betty answered, and the sheriff almost smiled to himself in the darkness.

He knew that the old saying was far from being true in the majority of cases. But it happened to be exactly what he was counting on, here at the motte where two men had been killed.

"And then there was the money," Betty went on. "She wouldn't say where she got it."

Sam jumped. "What money?"

"Why, all that money she gave Mary to take to Tony, yesterday. It was enough to pay for the cattle he wants to buy from Don Enrique. It filled a couple of big saddle-bags."

"That settles it!" thought Sam Karnes.

He got up slowly, his mind picking up the scattered pieces of this puzzle, and fitting them together to make a picture. But when the picture was made, one piece was missing, and the sheriff did not like what he saw.

He shook his head.

"No," he said as if to himself. "It don't make sense. If it had been Miss Callie, she could have unloaded the money at her house. Then there wouldn't have been any reason for her hangin' around the water-hole, worryin' about the weather. There wouldn't have been any reason for her to kill Joe Rankin. I can't figger—"

Betty Caldwell grabbed his arm. Lightning laid its dazzle on the trees, and the shadows leaped and fled into nothingness. A rumble of thunder began in the east and rolled through the sky.

And yonder toward the mesquite flat, where Betty pointed, the sheriff had an instantaneous glimpse of a man riding a barebacked horse and carrying a spade on his shoulder!

Blackness swam across the motte in a tidal wave, engulfing everything, leaving only the lurid memory of that image lingering on the sheriff's retinas. His ears were ringing from the burst of thunder. He could hear nothing, now, and the rider who carried a spade might have been an apparition, a ghost coming back here to finish Jud Caldwell's shallow grave.

The weirdness of all this brought gooseflesh rising on his arms, but his heart pounded exultantly. This was the end of the trail that had had so many false windings. The theory he had worked out there in the peace and quiet of the Hackberry jail was right, after all!

He put down an impulse to hurry in the direction the rider was taking, toward the grave and the water-hole. There was no hurry. In fact, Sam Karnes reminded himself, there would be heavy work to be done. The big, lazy sheriff had no liking for the weightier forms of manual labor.

"Who was it?" Betty whispered excitedly. "What would anybody be riding bareback for, when there are so many saddles?"

THE sheriff shook himself.

"I couldn't see his face. He had on a slicker, and his hat was pulled down. But I know why he's here, and the reason he ain't got a saddle is that he came out here in a wagon or somethin'."

He gripped Betty's arms to impress her with what he was going to say.

"You stay put—understand? Stay right here, and keep down low. There might be a little lead flyin' around here!"

She nodded. Sam Karnes began moving a step at a time, feeling his way from tree to tree, straining his eyes against the almost impenetrable dark. Now, when he needed a glimmer of lightning to show him what the man was doing, it did not come.

He covered another few yards, then halted abruptly, listening to a horse blowing, and rolling a bit over his tongue.

The sound was close at hand. It came from directly under the tree that had shaded Jud Caldwell's killing. Sam Karnes knew that the mysterious rider had stopped there to reconnoiter as best he could in the darkness, to make certain nobody was around.

The sheriff held his breath, marveling that the sound his heart made against his ribs did not carry to the rider's ears. After a little while, the horse moved on, and went straight down the steep bank of the draw. Loose earth made a little sliding sound there, then Sam Karnes heard the suction of mud, hock deep around the horse's hoofs. After that, there was the cool, musical splash of water.

He grunted his satisfaction. Everything tied in, and so far there were no missing parts to the puzzle that was falling into place.

A small flash of lightning streaked the dark water with brilliance. He saw horse and rider in a black silhouette against the gleam, and saw that the man was riding straight across. Toward that fallen tree, and the spot where Jud Caldwell's boots had trampled the muddy ground, the spot where the sheriff had picked up those half-smoked cigarettes.

The splashing ceased. There was silence, then the scraping bite of the spade into the earth. Sam Karnes turned away from the tree, knowing that his quarry would be occupied for a little while. He walked out toward the mesquites, and it was so dark that he tripped over the shafts of the buggy where they slanted emptily to the ground, before he saw the vehicle.

He prowled around in search of a clue, but there was nothing to tell him the buggy's ownership. Judge Parker had one about this new, but the livery stable kept several of them for hire.

Then he had to take cover in the chaparral. The bareback rider was returning.

Once more the sheriff made himself wait. One trip wouldn't handle anything like six hundred pounds of silver dollars. It remained dark, and he heard the rider grunt and lower his burden into the buggy's rear compartment. There was a chinking sound.

The horse turned back toward the water-hole. Sam Karnes came out of the thorny concealment, and felt the sack. It was burlap, an ordinary feed sack, and it weighed something over a hundred pounds.

"Man without a saddle is kind of handicapped at carryin' a load," the sheriff told himself. "Let's see—about four trips. No use of me havin' to dig, or tote that money. Let him do the work."

He stayed hidden by the tree while the shadowy horseman completed two more journeys. The sheriff was grinning to himself, thinking that in the long run there was nothing to compare with waiting by a water-hole to catch your man, thinking about those cigarettes.

Practically everybody but Miss Callie had rolled him a smoke while he had gone around with his arm in a sling. He

had been proud of that trick—it was the nearest thing to actual detective work he had ever done.

But not one of the cigarettes matched the exact twist of those he had picked up across the water-hole. Neither did the one Jud Caldwell had flung angrily against the wall of the jail, that day.

The horse rattled his hocks, over yonder, and Sam Karnes straightened expectantly. This was the last trip. It was time to spring the trap.

A LITTLE wave of excitement passed through the sheriff's big body, and left him easy and cool. He listened to the splash of the horse's wading. There was a thin blade of lightning, slicing the sky; it showed the horse coming up the steep draw bank, looming large, but the animal's head concealed that of the rider

The sheriff gathered his muscles for a spring that he never made. The brief illumination vanished, and the thunder was dying to a growling mutter in the western sky.

Somewhere behind and to his left, the flat crack of a gun punctuated the thunder, and a woman was screaming.

"Aunt Callie! Don't!—For heaven's sake, don't shoot! That's Sam Karnes by the tree!"

The bullet went past Sam's ear with a high, insistent whine, and fragments of bark from the live-oak stung his face, half-blinding him. He jumped sideward, and another shot ripped the night. The bullet struck where he had been. The horse snorted and shied.

Sam Karnes leaped in the direction of that sound. His hand touched bridle reins, only to have them jerked out of his grasp, and that was the sack of money making a bright, musical jingle as it struck the ground near the sheriff's feet. Then gun flame leaped from the hand of the killer, so close Sam felt its hot blast against his cheek.

He forgot his two guns: he forgot everything but a desire to get his hands on this rider of the shadows. He grabbed wildly, and caught the man's foot. The gun roared again, but the horse was plunging wildly, and the shot went wide with a slap against the live-oak leaves.

Sam Karnes jerked with all his ponderous strength. Horse and rider came apart, and the man lurched hard against Sam's body, gasping as the impact knocked the breath out of him.

The six-shooter fell on the sheriff's boot. He kicked it aside, and toppled over on his prisoner, squeezing hard.

He heard Betty and Miss Callie come running through the darkness, and remembered Miss Callie's rifle.

"I've got him!" Sam called cautiously. "Yuh can put away that squirrel gun, Miss Callie, before yuh hurt somebody. Yuh nearly got me, while ago!"

Miss Callie came to a panting stop nearby.

"Brought it on yourself, Sam Karnes!" she said tartly. "If you'd got busy like this a week ago, instead of tryin' to be a friend to all mankind, lots of things wouldn't have happened. You could have caught him then!"

"Who is it, Sam?" Betty broke in on a frightened note.

The killer gasped, and went limp. Sam Karnes realized then that he had been exerting a little too much pressure in that bear hug. He shook the man, but there was no response.

"Blamed if I know!" Sam admitted. Then there was a flashback of memory, a swift and sure recollection of his grip around the man's ankle. He yelled, "Yes, I do, too, by golly!" and ran one big hand down the man's leg just to make sure.

No boot. A pair of high-topped shoes with buttons on them.

"Troy Holcomb!" the sheriff said.

The bank official came alive, just then, as if in answer to his name. He struggled feebly in Sam's grasp.

"Turn loose of me!" he choked. "Let me up, Sam! I haven't done anything to be treated like this!"

"Nothin' but three killin's and a robbery," drawled the sheriff. "I figger yuh've kind of strained yore credit, Troy. Know where yuh made yore first mistake? Yuh made it when yuh put on Jud Caldwell's boots, and walked across the mud. Yuh ain't near as hefty as Jud was, Troy, and yuh didn't leave a deep enough track."

Troy Holcomb only moaned. The lightning came in a long, straggling brightness, and his face was as white as the collars he ordinarily wore.

"Anything yuh want to say, while we're

still out here?" Sam asked gently.

"I—I was just trying to recover the money the killer buried!" Holcomb said. His voice grew strong again. "You let me up, Sam! I don't know who the killer was, but I found the money. Most of it's still there!"

"I figger that's where yuh're wrong," Sam corrected. "Somebody else found it, first. You just dug up the heavy stuff. Ain't I right, Miss Callie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sheriff," she said stiffly.

Sam Karnes laughed.

"Well, I'll tell yuh when we get to town," he said, and yanked Troy Holcomb to his feet. "Betty, you and Miss Callie drive the buggy. I reckon my hoss can carry double that far. Troy ain't a very big man."

CHAPTER XVIII

—*Who and Why*

HOLCOMB looked even smaller in the gathering that jammed Sam's jail cell, two days later. The sheriff had his own reasons for requesting a delay after he had locked the bank official in jail, and reported to Judge Parker, and turned the discomfited Bart Keyes loose. He wanted Tony and Mary there.

But he did not want to ride after Tony. It seemed like the strain of the past few days had tired him out. Besides, Tony was out of jail on a sort of parole as far as the sheriff was concerned. Sam Karnes insisted that Tony would come back of his own accord.

He was right. Tony came into town on horseback, with Mary riding proudly at his side. There was the old recklessness sitting the saddle with him, and the memory of Jud Caldwell's arrogance in the way he walked after dismounting.

"Well, Sam," he said, "I reckon they can try me, now. I got the cattle. I got two Clawhammer herds started up the trail, and I reckon they'll get there in time, whether I'm along or not!"

Sam Karnes grinned, clicked his whittling knife shut, and went out on the town to call the meeting.

They sat, now, in the cell where his pencil scribbling was still on the white plaster wall. Webster was there, an embarrassed look on his florid face, and Bart Keyes was fidgeting nervously with his mustache. Judge Parker bit a fresh chew of tobacco. Few Smith leaned his crutch against the bars, and watched Sam Karnes hopefully.

"Well," Sam began, "I reckon the county is goin' to be saved a lot of expense, and the services of high-priced people like district attorneys and Rangers. Troy says he's ready to confess. That right, Troy?"

Troy Holcomb nodded. He was sitting on the cot beside Tony Caldwell. He wore a clean collar again, and his buttoned shoes were polished.

"Before he does, though," Sam went on, "I figgered yuh might want to know how I solved this case. Now, I've got a system. Yuh take any crime, and yuh ask yoreself four questions—why, how, when and who. And sometimes one of them will answer the others.

"But this time it was kind of tough. Everybody naturally thought the killer had made Jud Caldwell dig that grave and tote his coffin there, and that somebody had scared the killer away before he could bury Jud. I figgered that way, myself, except that I noticed Jud's pants was tucked inside his boots."

He paused, and looked at that list on the wall, and grinned at Ivy.

"A man don't dig with his pants inside his boots," he said. "And then Jud's boot tracks in the mud wasn't as deep as mine, although he weighed nearly as much as I do. I got to figgerin' that the killer had put on Jud's boots and walked over there to make that trail.

"I couldn't tie things together at first. Not until Troy told me about the money. Now, if I had forty thousand dollars, and was sore at both banks, what would I do with it? I'd bury it. Jud figgered to do the same thing. He had a couple of drinks here in town, and he got out on the road and got to thinkin' about the bulk and weight of the money, and wonderin' what he ought to cache it in. Then he thought of Miss Callie's coffin."

Miss Callie sniffed. Sam Karnes looked

around over his audience, and ignored the sneer on Bart Keyes' face.

"Miss Callie's coffin," Sam went on, "was always a kind of joke to Jud, and he figgered there was nothin' like a coffin to bury anything in—even money. So he drove up to Miss Callie's house and got the coffin. He picked out a spot on a line between two trees, and took Miss Callie's spade, and began to dig.

"Now Troy"—the sheriff waved toward him—"had seen the fight with Tony. He had heard Tom Henry's threats. He knew about Jud tryin' to force the foreclosure on Wade Magill, and he saw Jud leave town with the money. Am I right, Troy?"

TROY HOLCOMB sighed, and nodded, looking down at his shoes.

"Well, Troy knew that if he went out there and cut the wire by the water-hole, he'd have all the elements to make it look like a feud killin'. Cuttin' the wire, he'd even ring Joe Rankin in on it. So he followed Jud, either watchin' him, or catchin' up with him later, when Jud was digging.

"He shot Jud Caldwell there in the moonlight, and I reckon Jud never knew what hit him. Then Troy put on Jud's boots—there ain't many of us here who can wear that small a size—and made the tracks, and smoked cigarettes over there to make it look like Jud had waited there tryin' to ambush somebody.

"I didn't know until the other night just how Troy handled the buryin' of the money. But I found out then. He carried it across the water-hole on his hoss, and put it in a spot where it was easy to dig, the spot he trampled down in Jud's boots. When he put the boots back on Jud, he got a little too neat—just like he always has been—and tucked Jud's pants inside. Like I told him, that was a mistake."

"How about Tom Henry?" asked Few Smith. "He come in along there, somewhere!"

Sam nodded. "Tom was somewheres out in the brush, havin' a nap, about the time Jud was killed. He woke up, still pretty drunk, and started home. Just as he came out of the brush, Troy saw him and was afraid he'd been watchin'. Troy was mighty jumpy at that point. He took a shot at Tom, and Tom's hoss lit out for home.

"Troy was through with the work, anyway. He rode on down to meet Joe Rankin's trail herd, but later he got to worryin' about what Tom might have seen, and what he'd remember when he sobered up. What did yuh do then, Troy?"

"I came back up by the Rafter H that day, when the inquest was being held at the water-hole," Holcomb said slowly "I would have shot Tom then, I guess. But I couldn't find him. I found his gun there."

"That helps clear up what Tom Henry said about people comin' around and botherin' him, while he was drunk," the sheriff said. "Well, then Troy used Tom's own gun to kill him with here in this cell, hopin' to make it look like suicide. He came pretty near throwin' us off the track, too—but, then, I got back on the idea of boots, and I knew Tom couldn't have worn Jud's boots.

"Now we come to Joe Rankin. Joe just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was camped close to the water-hole, and he kept comin' and goin'. About that time, Troy was gettin' worried about the weather."

"The weather?" asked the district attorney, startled.

"That's what I said. Weather. If it come a good gully-washer and cow-chip floater of a rain, it could have washed that money down the draw and scattered it from here to Nueces. Troy went out a couple of times, after he thought it was safe to dig, and tried to recover the *dinero*. He got scared off both times. Know who that was, Troy?"

The killer shook his head.

"That was Miss Callie," Sam told him. "She was actin' on the theory that a killer always comes back to the scene of his crime. But she saw yuh with a spade, and she saw yuh was lookin' at that spot. That's how come she dug there later, herself, and packed away the greenbacks and most of the gold."

"I got *all* the gold!" Miss Callie put in. "I gave it to Tony. It belonged to him, didn't it?"

"Well," Sam Karnes said hastily, "it looked like rain, and Troy got scared, and went out there again to dig. That time Joe Rankin blundered into him. He shot Joe, and had to get away in a hurry. He still hadn't got the money.

"I just about had things figgered out then, except I still had two or three candidates for the killer—like Bart Keyes can tell yuh. I had to argue considerable with Bart before he'd let me go out there to work on the case."

SHERIFF KARNES paused and grinned at Keyes, and the Ranger flushed and dropped a cigarette he had just rolled. Sam Karnes picked it up.

"I reckon that's about all," he said. "You know the rest. But here's a funny thing. Look at this cigarette!"

"What about it?" Keyes demanded surlily.

"Well, compare it with these others, here on the table. Now this is one Troy Holcomb rolled at the water-hole, after he'd killed Jud, and here's another he rolled for me here in jail. They ain't alike. But yores, Bart, is a dead ringer for them Troy made at the water-hole! It beats me! It just goes to show yuh that some things don't prove anything—not at all!"

He opened the cell door then, and the crowd filed out, with Few Smith and Judge Parker slapping him on the shoulder, and the district attorney and Bart Keyes going off with a defeated air. Tony and Mary were still sitting there on the cot, arms around each other.

"Hey!" Sam Karnes called. "Come out of there, or I'll shore enough lock yuh up!"

He saw that they wouldn't have minded being locked in a cell of their own, and he saw Ivy smile at him as she started back to the kitchen. Something she was cooking smelled mighty good.

The sheriff went outside and tilted his chair in the shade. He reckoned there wouldn't be any need to get out and kill his horse, riding around the county after votes. If a man did his job, the votes came to him. He could sit right here and watch the square, and ride out to a water-hole now and then. That way, he could keep peace in Hackberry County.

Shorty sidestepped Joe's vicious swing

CURTAINS FOR A KILLER

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

The new marshal wasn't too fast with his guns—but his brains sure clicked rapidly when a showdown was called!

SHORTY WILCOX had been city marshal of Army Lode less than a week, and he was sick of the job already. A small, red-haired, impetuous man with a certain deadly skill with his fists, he had been elected by acclamation. Looking back, it was hard to say why he had accepted. He had come to California to mine gold, same as everybody else. He realized now that he had been overcome by the sound of his own name being roared by two thousand enthusiastic miners.

And today it seemed to him that his resignation would be accepted with the

same happy unanimity. Except for the stubborn streak in him, he would have found out.

Shorty was Army Lode's first taste of Law, and the truth was that they did not not like its flavor, now that the novelty had worn off. Last week there had been three killings, several sneak-thief robberies, one bold stickup, and a dozen bloody fights. A little bit of Law looked pretty good then. It still looked good the day after Shorty took office, when he requisitioned the old Army survey office—the only stone building in town—as his jail, and began filling it with chronic drunks, habitual troublemakers and pilfering Indians.

It was when he began discussing the question of how to keep the peace with Joe Whittaker, the next day, that the town's righteous anger began to give way to doubt. Joe was six feet, three. He claimed allegiance of at least a hundred rowdies, some of them owners of the best claims in Army Ravine. A solid citizen, Joe, but he would get tanked up now and then.

"You're fixin' to breach the peace, Joe," Shorty had said. "Get back to yore claim and make a little, before yuh spend any more on liquor." He turned to Neil Guthrie, the bartender, and said, "Neil, our friend here gets no more to drink until he's been sober three days and trenched back to that big blue-tip pine above his shack. That's an order."

NEIL'S jaw fell, and his eyes glazed with astonishment. Joe straightened.

"Little man," he said, "it seems to me you're takin' yore marshal job plumb serious."

"Maybe I am," said Shorty, "and maybe I ain't."

"Little man," Joe rumbled, "I was the triple-plated, case-hardened, hundred-and-fifty-proof idiot son of a Sierra Nevada jackass that r'ared up and nominated you to be marshal. Now you air tellin' me I can't have a civil drink."

"They ain't civil after the third day, Joe," Shorty had said, patiently. "By tonight you'll be wantin' to prove how yuh can shoot out candles, and come midnight you'll be tryin' to show how many you can whup, and tomorrow fifty men will be nursin' sores and carryin' grudges at each other.

"Joe," he went on, "you're bigger'n me, but your soused to where I can whup yuh, and that's what I'm goin' to do if you don't go back to yore shack and go to work. It's fellers like you that should be supportin' the law, and when these wuthless gents see you take on so, why yuh can't blame 'em for tryin' their luck."

Joe laughed.

"Little man," he said, "dogged ef I don't do jest as you say! And here's my hand to show you how I appreciate the interest yuh take."

He swung a drunkenly vicious blow, which Shorty sidestepped easily. Joe reeled against the bar and felt for his guns, but he had left them at his shack.

"I'll be back," he said, thickly, as he staggered out the door. "I'm fixin' to make trouble, yuh say. All right, Shorty, I'll make you a passel!"

But of course he had fallen into his bunk and slept around the clock, as Shorty knew he would. And of course when he sobered up he could not remember enough of the incident to make him feel it was necessary to take up its ragged ends. He had been working hard for several days now, sticking close to his claim. When he came into Neil's he did not wear his guns, and he did not drink.

What he did—twice—was to stand at the door and whet his finger at the crowd at the bar.

"Oh, shamie, shamie!" he cried, in a high falsetto. "Nasty, nasty old whiskey you're drinkin'. You better watch out, or Shorty Wilcox'll put yuh in his nasty old jail."

The spirit of rebellion burned deep in him. He was a violent man, a hard fighter with his fists, and so accurate with the two guns he usually wore that he had few challengers for either style of combat. He had killed one man.

"He knows the town ain't mad enough at me to line up behind him—yet," Shorty thought morosely. "But they's others that don't like law and order either, at least when it's applied to them. Maybe we ain't ready fer it at all. Maybe I'll just haul off and quit. Maybe—whoa! There's the Eldorado stage!"

He stood to watch the stage pull up in front of Neil Guthrie's saloon. Army Lode

no longer drew daily hundreds of passengers, since the Ravine had been staked out to the spring at its mouth. On several recent trips, the stage had come in empty of fares.

Today, Shorty's face reddened with incredulous amazement as he saw four passengers get off. One of them, the second to descend, was a woman!

"Good lord, as though we ain't got trouble enough! When the fellers even fight over Auntie Ferguson, what'll they do now?" he groaned.

First out of the stage was a tall man in a frock coat, furry Homburg hat, and buttoned shoes instead of boots. He turned and offered his hand with a flourishing bow to the woman, who appeared in reality to be little more than a girl. She tripped down and stood beside the tall man.

Neither paid any attention to the two men who followed. They, too, were dressed stylishly, in the eastern fashion, but not quite so dashingly as the man in the furry hat. One of them was fat and white-haired the other had the sleek, sly, susupicious look of a gambler.

SHORTY was out of the office in a bound. Already a crowd had gathered around the newcomers. The grinning stage driver had pointed out their luggage, and three Washoes were helping get it down. There were six big trunks and an endless stream of small satchels and suitcases. The only other baggage carried by the stage was a small mail sack—indeed, it was hard to believe there had been room even for it.

"I wish you-all a merry time, my friends!" the driver called gaily, with a crack of his whip.

"Thank you, thank you, sir!" the man in the furry hat cried, as the stage rumbled away. Shorty shouted, but the driver either did not hear or pretended not to.

"He's in a devil of a hurry to get away," Shorty murmured, wondering what had inspired the driver's grin and his haste. He shouldered his way through the crowd and touched Furry-hat on the shoulder.

"Tulsy" MacFadden, one of Joe Whittaker's cronies, was already edging up to the girl. Se was not as girlish as she had looked from Shorty's office window—as a matter of fact, she looked well able to take care of herself in ordinary circumstances. Trouble was, Shorty reflected, Tulsy was a very extraordinary circumstance at best.

"Anything I can do for you," the lawman said. "I'm Shorty Wilcox, marshal here."

"How do you do!" Furry-hat responded, in a curiously clipped voice, seizing Shorty's hand and wringing it. "I'm so glad to know you! I wish to be taken to your mayor. I'm Samuel Lockie, sir, star, manager and sole proprietor of Lockie's Art Players.

"An actor, sir, if you please, a Thespian, an humble devotee of Momus, come with my cohorts to fill the aching void in your fair city with the highest gifts of culture. The mayor, my dear sir, if you will be so kind as to lead the way!"

Shorty caught his breath and wondered why Samuel Lockie did not do the same. He saw Tulsy's face grow purple with amazement. Tulsy was so fascinated by Samuel Lockie's flow of words that he quite forgot the girl.

"I'm plumb sorry, Mr. Lockie, but Army Lode hasn't got around to electin' a mayor yet," he said. "I'm the only public official we can brag about, I reckon. Now if I can do anything—"

"But the mayor!" Lockie cried, bewildered. "I have his official invitation! They told me in Eldorado that a handsome bounty was being offered here for stage attractions. My dear young man, you must be joking! No mayor? Why sir, I don't even see your theater!"

He pronounced it "thyutuh."

"We've got a saloon," said Shorty, "and a jail, and a dannemite warehouse, and Auntie Ferguson's laundry and boardin' house, and I s'pose Tulsy's barn, where he stables his packmules, is a point of civic interest, due to its size. Tulsy's a freighter, and a solid citizen. But even Tulsy ain't awoke to the need of a theater yet."

He pronounced it "the-ayter."

"But I was told that Army Lode—is this Army Lode?" Lockie cried, suspiciously. "Where have we been stranded, sir? My dear young man—"

"You're in Army Lode," said Shorty, taking him firmly by the arm. "You come with me, before something happens to yuh, Tulsy, you go back to yore rat-

killin', and you other hellions, too. This way, Ma'am."

He led Samuel Lockie as fast as dignity would permit to his office. The girl and the other two men followed. Tulsy stared after them, and then went hot-footing it up the Ravine toward Joe Whittaker's claim.

THE knot in the street dispersed slowly. Shorty knew they would resent his high-handed appropriation of the strange visitors. Well, he couldn't blame them, in a way. A week ago, before he got hazed into the law and order joker, he would have resented anyone interfering with good, clean fun. And Samuel Lockie and his friends were natural targets for good, clean fun if he ever saw them.

"But you wait tel I catch that stage driver!" he said to himself.

"Now what's this all about?" he demanded when he had the four safely in his office.

"Your pardon! In my dismay I failed to introduce my fellow troupers. My daughter, Loretta Lockie, a true child of the art to which I have been four-tenths of a century wedded, the loveliest flower of the—"

"Please, Pop," the girl said, and somehow Shorty thought to himself, *why she's a regular good scout, not prissy, but no old mare-mule either. There'll be killin's over her.*

"Please, Pop," the girl protested. "The officer isn't a booking agent. He doesn't care whether I can act or fly."

"But Loretta, my sweet child!" Lockie cried. Then he subsided at the girl's patiently stern look and went on to introduce the other two. "My stout friend is Mr. H. Agnew Smythe, whose tenderly poignant comedy is—yes, yes, Loretta my dear. And now may I present Mr. Radcliffe Summers, a sterling juvenile."

Shorty shook hands with them. Smythe's nose, he thought, showed that most of his comedy came out of a bottle. Summers still looked more like a tinhorn gambler than a juvenile.

Yet somehow he liked all of them. It might be the girl, who seemed to cast a mellow spell over them all: Shorty could not be sure why he suddenly felt such a deep feeling of responsibility for them.

Lockie produced a long letter, signed "Peter D. Out, Mayor of Army Lode." It told of the burning need for good theatrical presentations and offered a thousand dollars a performance, over and above the price of admissions. It also said Army Lode had a fine playhouse, seating one thousand—the finest in the Mother Lode country.

"I catch on," said Shorty, "and I hope you can. This was writ by Jim Small, I can tell by the curlycues. Jim's an old-timer at Eldorado. Never took our strike seriously here until it was too late for him to file. Been sayin' ever since our vein was petered out.

"That's where he got a name for his 'Mayor of Army Lode.' Look at it. 'Petered Out,' if you read it right. My fine-feathered friend, I'd say you was the victim of a short-card raw dog, or I never seen Jim Small pull a raw dog. Now a raw dog is what we call a practical joke, and—"

But Samuel Lockie had suddenly turned pale. He reeled on his feet and clutched at the wall. With a little cry, the girl sprang to his side, and caught his arm. Shorty was nearer than either Smythe or Summers, and it was he who lowered Lockie into the room's one chair.

The actor's face was gray and haggard. He was not a young man, Shorty realized suddenly, despite his spirit.

"There's a confiscated bottle of rotgut buried in the corner, under the water *olla*, yonder," he snarled at Smythe. "Dig it up, and look lively! It's Indian hooch—kill or cure—took it offen a buck who—*there*, try a drop of this, old-timer."

He dribbled a small stream of the fiery whiskey into Lockie's mouth. It took effect quickly. Lockie's color came back, and he straightened up. The girl's eyes looked her thanks and relief.

"I fear I haven't made myself clear," the old actor said, with quiet desperation, with almost perfect self-control. "Somehow I sensed that we had been hoaxed by the stage driver's attitude as he discharged us from his vehicle.

"I must tell you, sir, that the troupe is broke. Broke, sir! Not a penny, a red, a copper, a groat among us! I—we were unable to secure an engagement in Placerville, and in Markleeville it was, er, the same story, and by the time we reached Eldorado—"

"He means we're hungry," the girl interrupted, in a sharp voice.

IT TOOK a moment for Shorty to understand, and then he shouted indignantly, "Hungry? How in heck can anybody get hungry in—?"

"By not eating!" she broke in. Her voice was harsh with swallowed tears. "The rest of us can stand it, but Pop—but Pop's not strong, and—"

"Shut up," said Shorty, "and let me think." He frowned a moment and then went to the window and shouted at the Indian who kept a station under a tree across the road, ready to run errands. So far, Shorty had had no errands to run.

"Caesar! Hustle over to Auntie Ferguson and tell her I need a big basket of grub, quick. Not prisoner bait, mind you —I'll break yore copper-colored neck if you don't make that old hellion dig up something with sugar in it. And tell yore brother, Tom Jones Owl, to bring his cow down here. I need some fresh milk."

The Indian glided away, already regarding himself as something in the nature of a deputy marshal, his long patience having at last been rewarded. Shorty turned to his four guests.

"I don't know how fur a marshal's power of requisition runs," he said, "but Auntie Ferguson can always use some help, and you can work it out, I reckon. She's had an addition built onto her dinin' room a month now, but cain't set the extra table because she cain't get help. The four of yuh could make twenty, twenty-five dollars a day. Miss Lockie could wait table, and Pop could wash dishes, and H. Agnew Smythe split kindlin', and the other feller—you—can help the Chinese cook—"

"Are you implying we must work in a mining town boarding house?" Smythe spluttered. "We'll starve first."

"*You'll* starve," the girl interrupted fiercely. "I'll wait table."

"I can wash dishes," Lockie said, with a twisted smile, in a flat, meek voice. "I may even claim to be an expert. The theater, my dear young man, is not always a kind-hearted mistress. The jade—but we have forgotten Joseph!"

His voice rose to a wail at the last. Shorty looked at him in astonishment.

"Joseph?"

"My understudy. A very capable actor. He's riding through. There wasn't room on the stage for him, so he spent his last dollar on the rental of a horse. Joseph Storm, his name is. A very capable rider —learned at a Boston theatrical school. He should be coming along soon. Blond chap. Curly hair. Blue eyes. Handsome youth, and very sensitive, very talented."

"Maybe we can stop him before he hits town," Shorty said, in despair, thinking of what Joe Whittaker and Tulsy MacFadden would do to a sensitive, talented youth with blue eyes and curly yellow hair.

"Where's that Indian? Caesar Jones Owl, you son of a gun, where yuh been loafing? I want you to skin out on the Eldorado trail and lay for a feller, and tell him to hole up in Jackson's old test-drift tel I get out there."

The Indian set down his basket of food and ran off on his new errand. Almost at once his brother arrived, flailing his family cow. And soon the four were fed, and Samuel Lockie's color, spirit and ready flow of words returned.

Auntie Ferguson weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, and her hair was redder than Shorty's, and she claimed to have once been the best lady bouncer on the Barbary Coast. But her boarding house was orderly and her status as Army Lode's only woman was spotlessly respectable.

She took the four troupers in thankfully, and she helped Shorty beat down Lockie's suggestion that they stage a performance to earn money to get out of town.

"No, sir!" she cried. "The boys dasn't ever suspect you're show people, for the girl's sake. It's goin' to be hard enough as it is. I reckon you don't know hardrock miners! No, she's got to put on her plainest frock, and tie her hair up in a knot, and if she does any actin' it's got to be when she acts insulted ever time a man looks at her.

"They's two thousand men here. As it is, she'll get fifteen hunnert proposals of marriage and five hunnert of the other kind anyway. All I ask is that bloodshed be kept to a minimum. I don't want people that pay me two dollars a meal cuttin' each other up."

"I understand," said Loretta. "You just watch. Where can I change?"

SHE took her bag and went to the room Auntie Ferguson had assigned to her. In a few moments she came out again, and Shorty hardly recognized her. She seemed to have aged fifteen years, and she wore a fusty, dusty, gray gingham dress and a pinched, frozen expression.

"Dora, in *'The Robber's Bride,'*" cried Smythe. "By George, I catch on! Where's the jeans I wear in *'The Old Homestead?'* And where's that kindling pile?"

"I've never understudied a Chinese star before," Radcliffe Summers sighed. "Where's the kitchen?"

Shorty, much relieved, went after his horse, and shortly after that rode down the Eldorado trail to meet Joseph Storm.

When he returned that evening, Army Lode's single street was packed with men. Every claim was deserted, or so it looked to him. Evidently word of the girl's arrival had spread like wildfire.

He got black looks as he passed among them—and they were the same ones who, only a week before, had whooped his name to the rafters! He said nothing, however. They were an orderly crowd tonight. Like children, they were more curious and mystified than dangerous. The impulse to rough stuff would come later, when the novelty had worn off.

"Little man, is it all right with you if I take a itty-bitty drink?" a challenging voice called, from Neil Guthrie's saloon.

There was deep silence everywhere for a moment. Shorty looked up and saw Joe Whittaker standing in the doorway. Behind him was Tulsy MacFadden, grinning. Neil also seemed to be trying to swallow a smile.

Joe wore both his guns. His eyes were clear, showing he had entirely sobered up after his heroic debauch. His mind had been working too, Shorty saw. A challenge to his authority would not be long in coming.

The arrival of Lockie and his troupe had hurried things, speeding up the reaction of the men, making them impatient with restraint. Shorty hitched at his guns and saw Joe's grin widen. *Pshaw, they should of picked a shooter—I can't shoot a gun for sour apples!* he thought.

To Joe he said, "Why, Joe, it's all right with me if yuh drink. Only remember yore stomach. You can shoot and you can fight, but yuh got a tissue-paper gut. You big stiffs always get tight if the barkeep wipes yore snoot with the bar-rag. Takes a pint size to really holt a pint."

He hitched at his guns again and walked on, feeling the silence bore into his back like a volley of lead.

There was a long line of men waiting their turn at Auntie Ferguson's table. Shorty took his place, and an hour later got to eat. Loretta Lockie was prim and sour-visaged as she waited on him. His heart fell. Seemed to him like she was the natural-born henpeck type, at that. But when he caught her eye privately, a little later, there was a warm twinkle in it.

When he circulated back to Neil's place later on a fight was in progress. He did not try to stop it. He merely covered both men with his guns and made them put down their knives and fight with their fists. Both men seemed relieved to receive his command, and he knew he had made two friends. Law and order could be made to pay off, he saw. Nobody liked to get cut, really.

Auntie Ferguson had bought the carcass of a bear that afternoon, and it vanished at supper, as did the haunches of two deer. Far, far into the night her amateur kitchen chew worked, and at eleven o'clock they were still washing dishes when Shorty dropped around. He cautioned them all to remain indoors, and urged Auntie to load every firearm in the place.

"Air the boys gettin' ugly?" said Auntie.

"Not yet," said Shorty. "I place it about midnight. Give 'em time."

"They don't relish discipline, do they?" Loretta asked. "Isn't it rather dangerous for you?"

She looked tired, but now that the rowdy customers were locked out she had abandoned her prim "Dora" role, and the flushed cheeks inspired by the hot kitchen work made her look girlish again.

"Not as dangerous as riskier jobs." said Shorty, blushing. "I mean, I'll get along all right. I growed up with horny spurs on me. I thrive on fun. I mean, don't you fret yourself about my boys."

"Strong medicine," said Auntie Ferguson, "comes in small packages. If you get by tonight, you can have anything you want in Californy. If you don't—"

"G'night, yuh old red-headed meddler," Shorty interrupted. "How you blab!"

HE RETURNED to Neil Guthrie's place, usual focus of trouble. Another fight was in progress. He drew his guns and made the men put down their knives. They looked at him gratefully and began to thump each other with drunken enthusiasm. He holstered his guns and strolled up to the bar.

"Nice house," he said. "You'll own Army Lode, one drink at a time, Neil. Make mine straight whiskey."

"Policemen drink free," said Neil. with an odd grin, pushing back Shorty's dollar. "Don't yuh know the rules of yore own badge?"

Shorty set down his glass.

"This policeman don't drink nothin' free, my bath-needin' friend," he said. "Put the dollar in yore poke before I cram it down yore gizzard."

Neil took the dollar with a red-faced shrug, and the two men stopped fighting to listen. Shorty drank his whiskey. In the back-bar he saw Tulsy MacFadden come up to him.

"Hello." said Tulsy. "What happened to yore friends."

"Makin' an honest livin'," said Shorty. "What happened to yourn? Bet you can't say the same thing."

He jerked his thumb at the corner of the room, where Joe Whittaker was meeting all comers on Russian-wrestle. One by one the men faced him across the table. clasped hands with him and put their elbows on the table. At a signal, each tried to put the other's arm down, for a ten-dollar bet.

They were afraid to Russian-wrestle with Joe, afraid to tell him no. One by one they stepped up to contribute their ten dollars. It was an old trick of Joe's. his way of levying tribute on his followers, and on other lesser men.

Tulsy turned red and said, "Look, Shorty, a word to the wise. Don't get too high and mighty on this three-bit job of yourn, or the boys may just haul off and douse you in the crick for the fun of it."

"I live to see the day!" said Shorty. "You're just sore because I wouldn't let yuh make sport of them visitors today. And while we're on the subject of them visitors, Tulsy—"

Tulsy clamped his lips shut and strode across the room. He touched Joe Whittaker on the back, and Joe looked up.

"Wait a minute," he said. He pressed his opponet's arm down, snatched at his ten dollars, and stood up. "Yeah?" he said.

"You bet me," Tulsy said clearly, in a voice heard all over the room, "that yuh could make His Nibs, the Honorable Marshal, introduce you to his new girl friend. Now's yore chance, Joe. I call the bet. Fifty dollars."

This is it, Shorty thought. He began rolling a cigaret. He was strongly tempted to reach and hitch at his guns, but he knew it would be a betrayal of nervousness. He licked the cigaret shut, twirled its end, and watched Joe Whittaker hitch at his. It was hard to find the saliva to lick the cigaret.

"Why. that's kind of yuh," Joe rumbled. "Me and the little feller are old friends. Shorty ain't goin' to hold out on his old pal, Joe."

Joe started walking toward him. Shorty reached over and took Neil Guthrie's cigar from his mouth and lit his cigaret. He stuck the cigar back in Neil's mouth and Neil let it drop. His face had grown white. He began wringing his hands and looking at his backbar mirror. It had been shipped in from San Francisco only a month ago. It was his seventh one since starting in business. Mirrors didn't last long here.

Joe was within sixteen feet of Shorty when the outer door opened. It slammed back with such violence that even Joe turned to look.

A little involuntary gasp went around the room, and Joe Whittaker stopped dead in his tracks for a moment. Shorty Wilcox stood up and spat out his cigaret.

A SLIGHT, dark. sallow youth had come in, and had let the door slam shut behind him. He stood just inside the door, looking from face to face with narrowed, dark, reptilian eyes, the corners of his mouth pulled down a little, his narrow face bleak and expressionless.

He needed a shave, but he lacked a manly growth of beard. What wanted cutting was a silky. stunted frowse that dripped down his cheeks to his chin. His dark, lank hair hung down carelessly under a beaten-up old Southwest hat.

He was small, and he was thin, and he was young and stooped-over and some-

how unfinished-looking, but there was something deadly about him. Every man there recognized the type—the renegade youth, not quite bright to begin with, who has cultivated the killer instinct until it is his ruling—his only—passion. Every man stepped back an inch or two, recognizing the innate viciousness in him.

"Who of you is Joe Whittaker?" the youth said, in a flat voice, never altering the cold immobility of his face.

Joe's big arms trembled back from his guns. His face showed his surprise, his terror, his unwillingness to face whatever it was the youth represented. He shuffled clumsily around to face the door, and bit his lips. Joe was tough, but he was not vicious. Mean, but not cruel.

"I'm Joe Whittaker," he said, throwing back his shoulders. "Who wants to know?"

Joe licked his lips again. The youth opened his and the words seemed to slide out. "I thought so. You're the biggest here. Would have the biggest mouth. Been lookin' for yuh some time—since Sausalito. You'll remember."

Joe's haggard face showed that he remembered a drunken spree at Sausalito, but not the particular incident that had stirred the youth's lethal fury. But like a bull his big head came up. He licked his lips sullenly.

"You—you have the advantage of me, stranger," he said.

And in the next moment, they would both draw, and Joe's last words would be that challenging civility. He rocked slowly on his heels, flexing his massive arms for the draw. The youth slanted forward slightly, and his eyes narrowed, but his arms did not curve toward his guns as did Joe's.

It was then that Shorty Wilcox walked across the floor, between the two men, and threw back his vest so the strange youth could see his star. His right hand flicked out like a snake's head and a red imprint of four fingers appeared on the youth's dark cheeks.

The youth's eyes seemed to film over for a moment, but by then Shorty had slapped him again, this time with the heavy flat of his hand. The youth's head went back.

"We don't allow that stuff around here, son," said Shorty, loudly, reaching down to scoop out the youth's guns. "You talk too much. You're one of them smart-aleck drifters that's always causin' trouble. No yuh don't—!"

The youth had suddenly become a furiously fighting, screaming, clawing devil, knife-armed and deadly again. Shorty let the two confiscated guns drop to the dirt floor and struck out with his fist. He missed, but managed to hook his toe behind the crazed youth's leg. He lowered his head and pushed, at the same time driving both fists into the youth's belly. They went over together, but Shorty lighted on his knees and twisted the knife out of the youth's hand. The youth lay still, panting, and glaring upward.

Shorty threw the knife out into the street, stood up, and pulled the youth up with him. It seemed to him that more color than ever had gone out of Joe Whittaker's face. The big man looked stunned.

"Joe," said Shorty, "I told yuh again and again there'll be no more shootin'. Understand? You might of kilt somebody. This is just a punk."

JOE blinked at the cornered, snarling youth and nodded, and Shorty knew he would have no more trouble from Joe Whittaker. And that meant no more trouble from anybody! He wrenched the youth expertly through the door and pushed him through the gathered crowd. They parted for him, and they obeyed when he told them not to follow.

"He's a legal prisoner," he called out, "and he ain't to be teched."

At the jail, before turning the key to the rude cellblock, he stopped to shake his prisoner's hand. The youth had ceased fighting the moment the door closed behind him, although he had struggled all the way down the street.

"You did swell Mr. Storm," said Shorty. "Sam Lockie said you was one bell-ringin', tail-twistin' fool of an actor, and I got to endorse it. Boy, yuh even had me scared! But yore friends are well and hearty, and in four-five days they'll have enough earned to take the next stage out of town.

"Hated to rough yuh up that way, and sure hate to have to lock yuh up that long, but as the feller says, that's just ways and means."

(Concluded on page 113)

Dan Kelly's Shirt

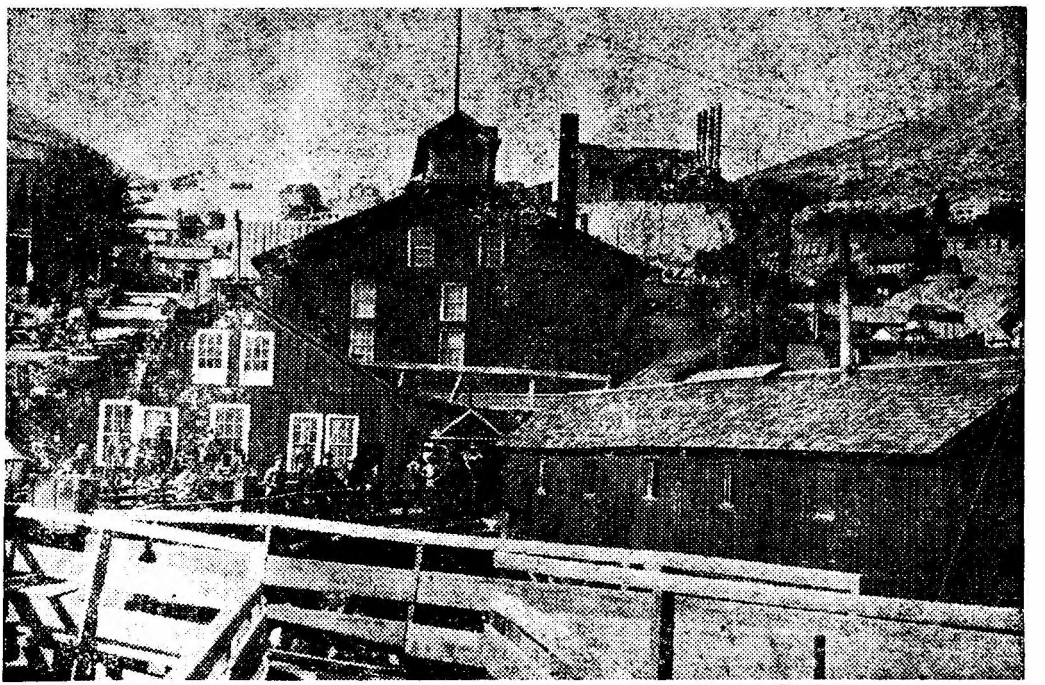
By JOHN A. THOMPSON

The fine, bright-red, long-sleeved garment hangs over the fireplace in Kelly's home, and there's a tale attached to it!

DAN KELLY was small, red-faced, square shouldered and bald as an egg when I knew him because he was well along in years then and on the far side of eighty. He had been a pick-and-shovel miner in one of the greatest bonanza mining camps the world has ever seen—the Comstock Lode at Virginia City, Nevada. Dan liked to talk about the early mining days.

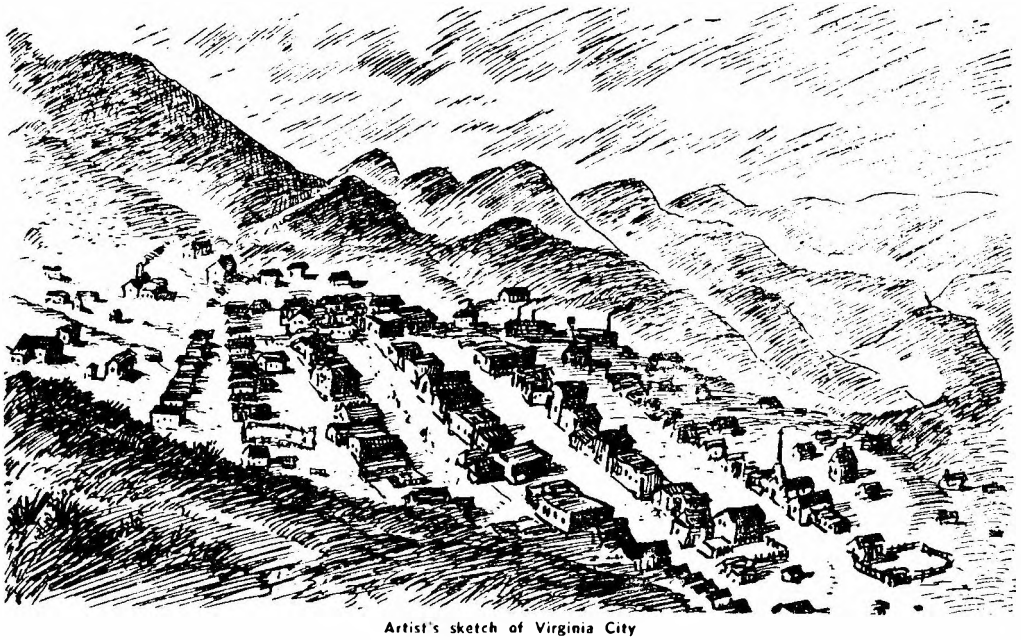
During their heyday, which was in the 1860's, 70's and 80's, the mines of the Comstock produced perhaps $350,000,000 in new wealth for Nevada. A little more than half of this was in rich silver ore, the rest in gold. Dividends paid out to mine owners and stockholders during the same period exceeded the $100,000,000 mark. As a matter of course, hectic stock juggling in properties accompanied and at times almost overshadowed this very real pioneer mining achievement.

It was a period of tremendous gambling for fabulously high stakes. While Dan and thousands of others like him mucked and sweated deep in the earth to bring the rich treasure to the surface, the great tycoons of the Comstock, such as Mackay, Fair, Flood and O'Brien, who controlled the richest mines, made fortunes overnight. At one time in the history of the Lode two mines alone, the Consolidated Virginia and the California, produced $3,000,000 a month and each of the two mining companies paid dividends at the rate of $1,000,000 a month or better.



—Courtesy Nevada State Historical Society

The Yellow Jacket Mine, Gold Hill (Comstock Lode) Nevada, as it looked in 1903



Artist's sketch of Virginia City

That was after the discovery of the Big Bonanza in 1873. Dan was right there when it was brought in on the 1200-foot level of the Consolidated Virginia, virtually a prisoner underground during the tense days of exploratory work that would show to the mine owners and a waiting world whether the Consolidated Virginia was another Comstock marvel of gold and silver riches—or a bust.

At the start and down to the 1200-foot depth the Consolidated had been, by and large, a disappointing property—a weak sister nestling among more favored mines. This was the main reason why Mackay and his associates had been able to corner a two-thirds controlling share of the mine's stock for about $50,000—chicken feed in a Comstock mining deal at that time. It was a gamble on Mackay's part, but a mighty shrewd one.

Though Dan Kelly was just a little fellow, a small cog in the great drama of the Comstock Lode, he learned a lot about John W. Mackay during his days in Virginia City. And Dan had a great deal of admiration for the big mining magnate.

Of Scotch-Irish ancestry and a carpenter by trade, Mackay had come to California to try placer mining in 1851. He worked hard, but his success was indifferent. With the discovery of the Comstock in 1859 Mackay quit California, crossed the High Sierras and went to work in the then new mines at Virginia City. It was a happy move.

Mackay prospered in the bonanza camp. By 1863, having saved his wages and in some instances worked for stock shares in lieu of pay, he owned an interest in several promising properties, and was superintendent of three mines. Two years later the rich Kentuck mine attracted his attention and its bonanza yield, which he took the lead in developing, catapulted him into a sizeable fortune and made him one of the men to be reckoned with in the future history of the Comstock Lode.

"Mackay was a big man to begin with," Dan Kelly always insisted, "and he remained that way all his life. One of the best men perhaps that the bonanza mining era of the West ever produced."

At any rate Mackay was already well up towards the top of the heap when young Kelly, fresh from Ireland and green

as a shamrock in spring, hit Virginia City. Dan had made one brief stop on his way to Nevada, and that was in Montana.

Dan's older brother, Tom, had paid his way over from the old country and got him a job herding cattle on one of the first ranches in Montana, where he was now a foreman. Dan wasn't cut out to be a cowboy. He couldn't stick on the back of a spirited western cow pony.

"The danged critturrs," he told me many years later with a twinkle in his eye, and an Irish brogue only slightly softened by time, "didn't have the dacency of a pig. They wouldn't stand shtill to let a man climb on 'em but they must be buckin' and prancin' like ould Nick himself was inside o' them."

Virginia City for Dan

Leaving Tom and the Montana range country to get along as best they could without him, Dan made his way to Virginia City. The day after his arrival he had a job in one of Mackay's Comstock mines.

"There's jist wan thing I know about minin'," the brash youngster told the foreman. "An' that is underground, above ground, or without any ground at all, the Irishman isn't born yet who can't shwing a pick with the best o' them."

"We'll soon see about that, me lad," snapped the foreman. "Report for wurrk with the marnin' shift."

The foreman's name happened to be Patrick Walsh, which may or may not have had something to do with the speedy hiring.

Danny showed up next morning proudly wearing his first purchase in Virginia City—a fine, bright red, long-sleeved miner's shirt. It was several sizes too big for him and hung loosely on his thin but whipcord-tough frame. Dan didn't care. The shirt was the emblem of his new calling.

"Is it a right- or a left-handed pick ye want, Kelly?" asked the gang boss with a wink at the other miners when the cage had dropped Dan's particular mine crew deep into the earth and the men were getting their tools preparatory to going to work in the stopes.

"Sure it makes no difference, sir," answered Dan soberly. "If it's the wrong one I can aisy turn it around and use it t'other way."

The laugh the gang boss had expected at the green hand's expense roared from the miners' lips. But it was Dan's quick reply that earned it rather than the boss's attempted ribbing.

This Town Was Solid

Virginia City when Dan Kelly reached it in 1870 was no spindly-built, ramshackle helldorado boom town. It was a solid mining city of some 35,000 population set high up along the eastern slope of Mount Davidson.

C street was the main thoroughfare. The busy artery was lined with drygoods stores, barber shops, lawyers' offices, four banks and—just so a fellow going about his business wouldn't get thirsty on his way—approximately one hundred and fifty saloons. Below C street the buildings were largely industrial—repair shops for mine machinery, feed stores and the like. Above C, A and B streets housed the ornate, gingerbread-decorated mansions of the millionaire mine owners, stock operators and bankers.

It has been said that some of the fine ladies on A and B were not above ordering their carriage and pair, complete with coachman, to take them over to leave a calling card at their next door neighbor's. Walking was so plebeian.

Anyhow that was the fashion in those days. And while a lot of the miners like Dan Kelly laughed at the antics of the swanks on the upper avenues, the newrich who lived there loved it.

It didn't take Danny long to become a first class miner. As his bank account grew, the first thing he did was pay back his brother Tom what he owed for his passage to the States. Out of his next savings he sent money to the pretty, blue-eyed, dark-haired colleen he had been engaged to in Ireland, and Kate Murtagh came out to America and all the way across the pioneer West to join Dan in Virginia City.

Marriage and a Home

They were married by Father Manogue in the fine church on Taylor street known at St. Mary's in the Mountains. Only a

few of Dan's special cronies among the men he worked with attended the ceremony, and afterwards Dan picked up his bride in his arms and carried her across the threshold of the little three-room frame cottage he had bought and furnished for her out at the edge of town.

The view from the cottage down past the green fields and the cottonwood trees that lined the Carson river far below, and across to the distant desert was breathtaking. Especially at sunset.

The day would come, Dan used to tell Kate, when he would get a chance to use his head as well as his hands and the mines of Virginia City would bring them wealth and ease.

"That was a bit of youthful exaggeration," Dan told me many years later. "But you know how the Irish are. And danged if it didn't come true."

Planning for Wealth

Dan was working underground for the Consolidated Virginia in 1873. The mine owners were seeking an extension of a rich ore body that had apparently faulted out. If, and it was a highly speculative "if," thy succeeded the Consolidated Virginia was sure to become a richly paying property. Its stock would skyrocket. Failure would mean just so much time and money gambled to no avail.

Dan talked it over with Kate. The pair had a nest egg saved up in the bank. Should he take a chance and buy Consolidated stock, or wait and be sure? If he bought at once his money would buy more shares. There'd be no risk if he waited, but no telling how high shares would climb either. Suddenly Dan slapped his thigh.

"Why, Kate," he said, "t'is a lead pipe cinch. T'is not the owners will know first when we hit bonanza ore but us boys down there in the mine. That night I'll tell you, an' next day you can take the money out of the bank and buy all the Consolidated Virginia stock you can get."

Kate smiled, not mentioning her doubts that even in America where miracles were commonplace it would be that easy to become a millionaire. Nor was she surprised when Dan came home next evening with the usual smile on his face wiped off and only black gloom filling his eyes. Like a dutiful wife she waited through supper, letting Dan approach the subject she knew was on his mind in his own good time.

"Oh, they're smart, thim danged operators," Dan blurted out finally. "You know what? Jist as we came off shift Pat Walsh give us a talk. 'Enjoy yerselves tonight, boys,' he says, 'and take yer fun where ye kin find it. Come tomorrer it'll be a long time 'afore ye lads see daylight again. It's make or break for the Consolidated in a few days now, and the company don't want no prematoor' news leakin' out.'"

"They're going to keep you in the mine for days, maybe weeks, Dan?"

Kate's voice held a faint note of terror in it.

Dan nodded. "There's no harm'll come, Kate," he said softly. "I was talkin' to Big Ed Connell. He says the mines do that when they are clost to a make or break in the rock. The company'll treat us right. Soft cots to sleep on. Seegars and beer, maybe even champagne fer the men off shift. An' I kin send home at night for the fresh clothes I'll be needin'."

Kate came over and sat on Dan's lap, and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Don't take it so hard, Dan," she soothed. "We're doing grand with your wages. Our chance will come."

"Come. It's here now," snapped Dan fiercely, "had I the brains to seize it. Ah, Katey my girl, you've married a half-witted donkey. There must be some way—"

For most of the night Dan tossed restlessly on his pillow. He lingered over breakfast next morning, still trying to figure out some way of getting Kate word when, or if, the Consolidated broke into bonanza ore.

"Dan," said Kate at last, "come now you'll be late for work. And don't forget to send me a list tonight of the clothes you'll be needing."

"Clothes?" Dan began. Then suddenly he jumped up, grabbed Kate and kissed her.

"I've got it," he shouted. "We can't lose. Now listen, Mrs. Kelly."

Kate's eyes glowed as she memorized her instructions. The plan was so simple it could hardly fail. Like many a man

with a brilliant idea before and since, Dan wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner.

Down in the mine Dan discovered the night shift had already broken into twenty-dollar ore. Despite the fact that some of the men were sullen because they were to be kept underground an indefinite period, a general air of tenseness and excitement pervaded the mine. Dan's crew was working at the face, putting their rounds into barren rock and not knowing what the next shot might produce.

Walsh visited them twice during the day. The superintendent himself came down once.

"It's oysters and champagne, boys, if you break into pay rock," he declared. He seemed optimistic. But no more ore was uncovered.

When the shift was over the gang boss passed out slips of paper.

"No notes now," he said, "or Pat Walsh'll never let them through. Just a list of what you'll want for the mornin'."

Dan sent for some clean underthings and a fresh pair of socks. The gang boss collected the slips, read them and sent them up to the shaft house while the men moved to a worked-out section of the mine where cots had been set up for sleeping quarters and a hot supper was served the miners underground.

Next morning Dan's things and the clothes the rest of the men had asked for were brought to the mine by messenger, sent down to the drift and distributed by the gang boss. And so it went day after day. The same routine, night and morning. Except that on the third day the crew struck a stringer of forty-dollar ore.

Big Money at Stake

On the fourth day the stringer seemed to widen. A whole crew of geologists and engineers came down to study the formation, and make notes and recommendations. Dan's shirt, the same one he had worn since his first day as an underground prisoner, was beginning to look dirty and grimy. Some of the men kidded him about it. Even the gang boss noticed it.

"Kelly," he said, "that shirt's a disgrace to the very mules in the Consolidated. Sure, if it's the only one ye have, or ye're too tight to buy another, I'll loan ye one of me own."

Dan colored but attempted to laugh off his sudden nervousness.

"It's a fine red shirt, O'Hallahan. An' good enough fer the company it keeps. It'll do a day or so yet I'm thinkin'."

There was no fresh shirt on Dan's list that night, nor the next. As the stringer widened the excitement deep in the new drift in the Consolidated heightened. Engineers and experts were continually below. The thrill of being on the verge of a possible new bonanza discovery began to be felt by everybody in the mine.

The Bonanza!

Dan worked feverishly, and kept his ears open for every stray morsel of conversation he could catch that was dropped by the geologists. Finally on the third day after O'Hallahan had called attention to his dirty shirt—"An' by that time," Dan said, "the thing was so grimy, I could stand it up forninst the footwall alongside o' my shovel"—Dan headed his evening list. "1 shirt," then added some socks and underwear for good measure.

"I was hopin' my hand wouldn't shake when I wrote it down," he told me. "But just before coming off shift, the superintendent was checking progress. Him and the geologists had their heads together a long time and when they broke up the super was smilin' like a cat that had swallowed a canary. 'This is it,' I heard him say. 'We'll tap the extension twenty-four hours'.

"I took a chance then, and plunged. Sendin' up for a shirt was the signal Kate and I had agreed on. When she got it she was to take our money and turn it into as much Consolidated stock as she could buy.

"My hand must have shook as I passed my slip to O'Hallahan, I was that nervous. But he never suspected a thing. 'Hmm, it's about time, Kelly,' was all he said."

Thirty-six hours later—Dan was wearing his fresh shirt and wondering how Kate had made out in Virginia City—the new drift cut into a rich chamber of ore that ran, according to hurried on-the-spot assays from $50 to $600 a ton. Excavation disclosed the chamber to be 25 feet high, 50 feet wide and 140 feet long. Subse-

quently the ore body was proved to extend from the 1220-foot level where it was found down to 1650-foot level, where it ended abruptly.

The Big Bonanza, as this enormous treasure chest of gold and silver afterwards was called, produced millions and millions of dollars' worth of precious metal. It made the Consolidated Virginia mine one of the big mines of the Comstock, and in fact one of the all-time wonders of the mining world. It also made a lot of people rich, including Dan Kelly.

"As soon as we cut into the bonanza, as neat as you'd slice into a pie," Dan told me, "all of us underground were regaled with a lavish party. It was champagne and lobster, or squab for every man—jack in the drift. An' if I seemed more excited than the rest the oldtimers put it down to the fact that it was my first bonanza.

"What I really wanted, of course, was to get out of that hot, dark hole and see Kate. But we were held below until the full 140 feet of the original bonanza chamber was proved. Then guards were set over the precious find and us lads were turned loose to pile into Virginia city and spread the news of the new strike."

Kate saw Dan coming and ran down the street to meet him.

"Dan!" she cried. "Are you all right?"

"Never felt better," laughed the young miner, dismissing his tired and haggard appearance with a shrug.

"It was a long wait," declared Kate once they were inside the house. "I thought you'd never send for that shirt. But I did like you said when I got the signal. And the stock is already double what I paid for it?"

"Double!" Dan snorted. "Thim stocks'll go to a hundred times the price ye paid. Wait and see."

Playing It Safe

They did as time went by and the Big Bonzana proved richer than even the optimists had at first believed possible. Dan continued to work in the Consolidated while the rich ore was being worked out—and he held onto his stock, pyramiding his gains at shrewd intervals.

"No," he told me, "I never became one o' them multi-millionaires, nor had a house full of gewgaws on A street. Kate and me never hankered after that sort of stuff. I cleared out of the Comstock a few years later when the stock was still high but the mines were beginning to play out. And on the theory that lightning never strikes twice in the same place, I never went back to underground mining either.

"Kate and me had a growing family—we wanted six all told—and Kate had no desire to be a miner's widow, not even a rich one. We moved down here to Southern California. At that time it was mostly ranch land and a man could buy 100-acre tracts for less than the price of a fifty-by-hundred-foot lot today."

Dan and I were seated out on the low Spanish tile porch of the comfortable house he had built himself on a high bluff along the California coast, outside a little town above San Diego. Retired millionaires owned most of the adjoining properties.

Dan's "Coat of Arms"

A mutual acquaintance had told me that if I went out to see Dan I could get a first-hand story of the Comstock and when I phoned him Dan had invited me out with real hospitality. It had been a gorgeous Southern California afternoon and the view from the porch out past the well kept lawn and across the dancing sun-burnished blue waters of the Pacific ocean was something out of this world.

For a time we sat in silence, the old man and I. Then Dan stirred himself out of his chair.

"Come inside," he said, "I want to show you something."

Inside I met Kate, small and thin and gray-haired, but with her blue eyes as bright as they must have been the day she married Dan. A huge fireplace occupied the center of one end of the living room. Over the mantel in a shining glass case hung a red flannel miner's shirt.

It was an expansive, flamboyant garment, roomy enough, I should judge, for a man whose shoulders were broader than Dan's had ever been, even when he was young.

"Kate don't think much of it," chuckled Dan. "But why shouldn't it hang there? That's the very shirt that was my first

purchase in Virginia City. And the one I wore 'til it was black as coal down in the Consolidated Virginia mine when we were bringing in the Big Bonanza."

"I think it's awful hanging over the fireplace like that," said Kate, though her eyes twinkled. "And what's worse Dan insists on showing it to everybody."

"And why shouldn't I?" Dan rose to the bait. "That shirt, Kate, laid the foundation for the house you're living in today. It is, in a manner of speaking, the Kelly coat of arms."

Kate went off to see about getting us some coffee and sandwiches, and Dan and I returned to our chairs overlooking the sea.

"Like as not," said Dan, "that's not the story you wanted about the Comstock Lode. Mostly when a writer says he wants to hear about the early days he only half means it. What he wants is a tale of wild doings, gunfights, blaring saloons and honkytonks, gambling for high stakes and all that. Or maybe of skulduggery and stolen fortunes.

"Virginia City had its share of that, too. But in the main, even when it was at the height of its glory, it was a hard-working man-sized mining town built up in the pioneer West. There were plenty of people—plain people like Kate and me—hundreds, maybe thousands of them who lived and worked as hard and soberly in Virginia City as they would have in any mill town in the East.

"What's more, quite a few of them took advantage one way or another of the opportunities Virgina City offered, made a stake and then moved on elsewhere to engage in business or otherwise profit from the start the riches of the Comstock Lode had dropped in their laps."

The Mines Staked Many

Kate came out with the coffee and sandwiches, and joined us on the porch.

"He'll talk you to death," she said to me. "Here Dan, have a sandwich."

Dan grinned. "In a minute, Kate," he said, then resumed his trend of thought. "Why, I know a man took his profit from a Comstock mine and went up to Oregon. Bought himself an apple orchard and did fine. Another fellow worked in the mines awhile—a lad from Texas—then pulled out with enough to become an Arizona rancher on his own.

"Nobody writes about them. It's the big shots, the multi-millionaires whose stories get hashed over all the time. Or the road agents, or some blamed fool that got himself killed in a shooting fray."

There was more than a little truth in Dan's contention. A lot of stress has been put on the more violent helldorado aspects of the West's spectacular mine discoveries such as the Comstock lode. C street has been played up heavily, while the side of town the Kellys and others like them knew and lived in has been neglected.

From the days of the '49ers in California on up through the bonanza mining strikes that were later made in Nevada, Montana, Arizona, Idaho and Colorado there is no telling just how many thousands of venturesome western pioneers made a comfortably fat stake and hung onto it and lived to enjoy it. They weren't spectacular enough to be set down in history, or known outside their own small circle. But the chances are there have been many more of them than is generally realized.

The early boom camps, the great gold and silver and copper strikes, provided some of the gaudiest and most colorful chapters in the always interesting story of the West. They also added, all told, thousands of millions of dollars' worth of real metal to our national wealth. And not all of it became the sole prerogative of the big shots. A good share of it at least reverted to the shrewder little fellows who, like Dan Kelly, recognized opportunity when they saw it—and didn't wait for a second look.

But I doubt if any of them ever thought of a neater scheme for signalling their way onto a financial rainbow than Dan did with his red flannel miner's shirt.

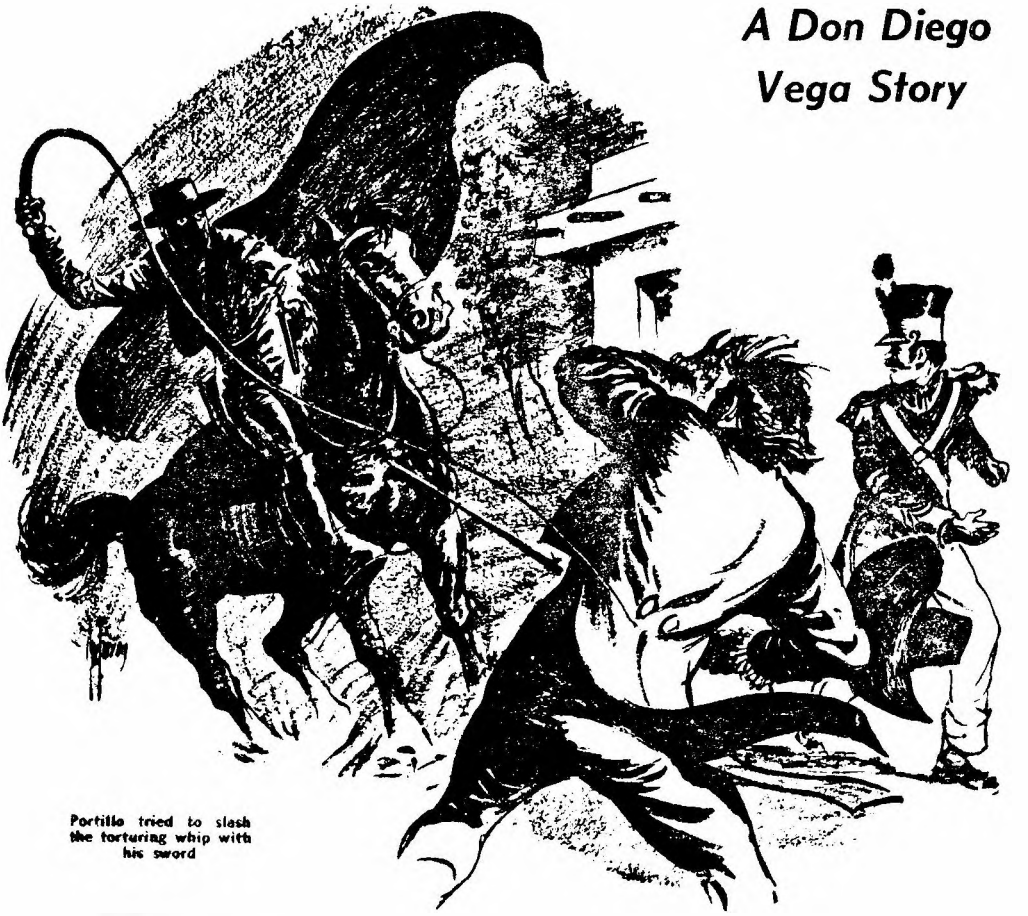
"Oh!" Kate gave a little gasp that nearly upset her coffee cup. "You're not going to put that in about Dan's old shirt, now are you?"

I looked at Dan and he gave me a broad wink.

"Leave the lad alone," he said. "He can write what he likes. And just be thankful, Kate, it wasn't my long underwear I picked for the go-ahead sign."

I thought of the red miner's shirt over the fireplace, and somehow it *did* seem more appropriate.

A Don Diego Vega Story



Portillo tried to slash the torturing whip with his sword

ZORRO MEETS A ROGUE

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

When the blackmailer threatened to reveal the identity of the black-clad avenger, disaster rode the highways!

SHADOWS were starting to lengthen that afternoon as Don Diego Vega strolled across the plaza in Reina de Los Angeles on his way to the tavern. He desired to purchase a pot of crystallized honey, a delicacy the innkeeper made one of his specialities.

Diego observed the thick high fog rolling in from the distant sea. No doubt nightfall would bring a dismal mist, and the thought of it made him shudder. For he was to attend a small *fiesta* that eveing at the home of Don Juan Romo, an old friend of his father's. Magdalena, Don

Juan's eldest daughter, was to be betrothed to a friend of Diego's. And Diego was somewhat interested in Don Juan's youngest, Rosita.

As he neared the tavern, Diego glanced ahead to where some barefooted peons and natives were resting lazily against the front of a vacant building. And he saw, approaching them from the opposite direction, an overdressed, heavyset stranger who had been living in the pueblo at the tavern for several days.

The man had given the name of Carlos Portillo, and he had hinted that he was a man of means traveling leisurely along the highway while recuperating from a wound he had received during a duel with blades in which he had slain his adversary.

The peons and natives scurried away like so many rabbits at sight of Portillo, which indicated that he had treated some of them cruelly and they feared he might do so again. So it happened that Diego and Carlos Portillo met where there was nobody near enough to overhear anything they said.

Portillo bowed and smirked.

"Don Diego Vega, it gives me pleasure to address you," he announced. "I am Carlos Portillo, of Monterey. I desire to have a few words with you."

"If it is a matter of important business, you should address yourself to my father," Diego informed him. "Lesser affairs are handled by the overseer at our rancho. If you wish to speak to me socially, allow me to say I do not think we would be congenial in social intercourse."

ANGER flared in Portillo's face, but he managed to gain control of himself.

"A pretty speech, Don Diego." he complimented. "This is a matter of business of which I would speak to you, and does not concern your father or his rancho overseer, but you personally."

"I cannot imagine what it could be. I never attend to business," Diego informed him. "I do not have the knack of it."

Portillo stepped closer and glanced around furtively to be sure nobody could hear him.

"My business, Don Diego, is this—I know the real identity of the man they call Senor Zorro," he whispered.

By the way of reply, Diego merely gave him a blank stare. He in no way revealed the shock the words had given him. For he, Don Diego Vega, supposed to be a spineless fop and an ache in his father's heart, was also Zorro, the wild masked avenger of the poor and oppressed. And only three persons were supposed to know this, and the man who called himself Carlos Portillo certainly was not one of them.

"You said—?" Diego prompted.

"I said that I know the identity of Zorro."

"And why should that concern me, senor. I'd say that you are a fortunate man. I understand the governor has offered a rich reward for the rascal's capture. Why not report what you know to the soldiery so that you can share in the reward?"

"Why should I share the reward with soldiers who do not have the knowledge I possess?"

"If you do not wish to do that, capture Senor Zorro yourself and claim the entire reward." Diego suggested. He brushed a scented handkerchief lightly across his nostrils in a gesture the meaning of which could not be mistaken.

"Knowing his identity, I might do that," Portillo replied.

"I understand the rogue is handy with a blade," Diego remarked. "It is said he rides like a mad fiend, can shoot a pistol with unusual accuracy, and has a long whip which he wraps painfully around the bodies of such men as deserve punishment."

Portillo smiled slightly. "I also am handy with a blade," he boasted. "In some quarters, I have quite a reputation as a swordsman. Also, Don Diego, I am an excellent shot with a pistol."

"Then you should have a fair chance at wounding the rascal and should be able to capture him."

"I am a practical man, Don Diego, and I judge Zorro to be the same. Perhaps he would give me the amount of the reward secretly to seal my lips. I would go my way, and he could continue frightening the countryside and making fools of the troopers who wear out their horses chasing him."

"And if he should refuse to make such an arrangement?"

"Then, as a last resort, I'll go to the soldiers and tell them what I know, let them make the capture and share in the reward. 'Twould be better than nothing. He would be foolish not to make the deal I suggest."

"But the reward is of large amount, and this Zorro probably is a poor man," Diego judged.

"I happen to know that he is rich in his own right, and his father is rich also. In real life, Zorro is a young caballero, son and heir of a hidalgo of proud lineage."

"A man of my own social class?" Diego asked, his brows lifting. "Perhaps I know him."

"I am sure you do, Don Diego. And you see his face each time you look into a mirror."

"I do not understand your meaning."

"Ah, Don Diego, you are clever! This business of Zorro has puzzled me for some time, and I love to solve puzzles. So, in my spare time I gathered evidence."

"An interesting occupation, no doubt," Diego replied. "You remarked, I believe, that I see Zorro's face each time I look into a mirror. Can you possibly believe I am Zorro?"

"Absolutely!" Portillo declared.

"Ridiculous! Preposterous! I, Diego Vega, ride like a wild man and use blade and pistol defending peons and natives? You say you have evidence, senor. I'd be interested in knowing what it is, how you have been misled."

"I have evidence, Don Diego. Be assured of that. If I had not, I'd not have approached you."

"Pardon, senor, but we have been standing here talking for quite some time, and that may attract attention. Suppose we stroll into the tavern and discover whether the good host has wine fit to drink. We may continue this interesting conversation."

THEY started walking slowly toward the tavern door, and Diego continued.

"As I understand this, senor, you say that I am Zorro, and demand that I pay you a large sum to prevent you giving this information to others."

"That is correct, Don Diego."

"If I were Zorro and did such a thing, what assurance would I have that you would not make further demands upon me, using the same threat?"

"I could only give you my word of honor."

Diego smiled. "A man who takes money to hide another's guilt from the world should not speak of honor, senor."

"I can endure your insults, Don Diego, since I know you are about to pay well for them."

"Let us talk of other things for the moment, senor. We are nearing the tavern door, and ears may be open around us. Talk to me of your travels, in a natural manner."

Portillo talked as they walked on, but Diego heard scarcely a word he said. He was thinking intensely. This was a dangerous moment, he knew. Perhaps this rogue of a Portillo had learned something damaging.

For an instant there flashed through Diego's mind what exposure would mean. Like many grandees, his father was at odds with a rascally governor who sought to humble all men of better birth and character than himself. If caught and condemned, Diego might be hanged. If the governor was afraid to go so far, he at least would exile Diego and his father and confiscate the Vega estates. And his father's proud head would be bent with a weight of shame.

This rogue of a blackmailer must be undone! Not only must other men be convinced that Diego could not be Zorro, but Senor Portillo himself must be convinced that he had made a mistake, regardless of any evidence he had collected.

A plan flashed into Diego's mind even as he entered the tavern with Portillo. The fat innkeeper, bending and bowing, hurried to meet the son of the Vegas. A look of surprise flashed across his face when he saw Diego's companion, but immediately that face became a mask again.

Diego had glanced rapidly around the main room of the tavern. It was the after-siesta hour when men of the town patronized the place. Sergeant Manuel Garcia, of the local barracks, was there with some of his troopers. Men of the town and travelers off the highway were scattered around the room also, eating and drinking, dicing and playing cards.

Diego waved the innkeeper aside and walked the length of the room to stand

in front of the wide fireplace. Portillo followed a step behind him, and seemed surprised when Diego did not go immediately to one of the tables.

Diego faced those in the room and tossed up one arm.

"Ho, Sergeant Garcia! Senores!" he shouted.

He had spoken during a lull in the din, and his voice rang through the room. All turned to look at him, and there was instant silence.

"Ha! 'Tis my friend, Don Diego Vega!" the burly sergeant cried. "A good day to you, Don Diego!"

"I am instructing the innkeeper to serve all here with good wine at my expense," Diego continued.

They shouted at that, and the fat innkeeper clapped his hands for his native servants to begin pouring the wine. Diego Vega, he knew, would pay any bill rendered without glancing at it except to ascertain the amount.

Diego gestured to Portillo, then to a small vacant table at the side of the fireplace. Portillo, basking in this moment of glory, sat on the bench beside the table when Diego motioned for him to do so. The innkeeper himself poured the wine at that table while Diego remained standing at the fireplace, pouring Diego's in his finest goblet. Then he bowed to the scion of the Vegas and handed him the goblet.

"Senores, most of you here know me and my family well," Diego said. He spoke in a lazy sort of voice, his appearance that of a man who disliked exertion of any sort. He held the goblet in his right hand and with his left brushed from his right satin sleeve an imaginary speck of dust. Those in the room were silent out of respect, but hoping Diego's speech would be short so they could drink the good wine he had bought them.

"You all have heard of this rogue, Zorro," Diego continued.

"May the rogue be blasted!" Sergeant Garcia growled. Only that morning he had received by courier from Monterey a written rebuke and threat of reduction in rank because he had not caught the masked rider.

"Sitting here at this table," Diego went on to tell them, "is the stranger who calls himself Carlos Portillo. A short time ago, he accosted me in the plaza. He told me that he had proof that I, Diego Vega, am this rascal of a Zorro. And he demanded that I pay him considerable gold to seal his lips."

A MOMENT of stunned silence followed, then a roar of laughter. Men there could not restrain themselves. The very idea of indolent Diego Vega, who seemed to go around in a fog all the time and was known to read poetry, being Zorro, brought on a fit of merriment.

He groaned whenever he had to get into a saddle, made the journey between the pueblo and the Vega rancho in a carriage with soft cushions at his back, never gave the eye to a senorita, never revealed the caballero spirit in a quarrel, and never had been seen to handle a blade or aim a pistol. That such a man could be the fiery Zorro—the thing was ridiculous!

Diego lifted his hand for silence and got it, and continued:

"I tried to convince Senor Portillo of his error, but he refused to be convinced. Drink your wine, senores—unless you find it distasteful to drink wine bought by a rascal some people call a highwayman."

They laughed again, and drank, and Diego lifted his goblet and took a modest sip. Then, Sergeant Manuel Garcia, looking like a huge avenger, got up from his bench and stalked toward the table where Portillo was sitting. The sergeant's face was like a thundercloud.

"You, Senor Portillo!" he barked. "How dare you think such a thing? And you are a blackmailer, it seems. My good friend, Don Diego Vega, is Zorro? We who know him—well, that is to say, he is scarcely the type."

"Perhaps he has made fools of you all," Portillo suggested. He was furious at the turn events had taken. "I have gathered some evidence—"

"Ridiculous!" the sergeant thundered. "If it comes to that, Senor Portillo, as you name yourself, what do we know about you? Nothing! What if you are this rascal of a Zorro, living here openly in our midst and laughing at us? You might be, and consider it a jest to accuse Don Diego."

"My evidence! Do you, an officer of the soldiery, refuse to consider it? Do Don Diego Vega's wealth and social standing blind you?"

"Ha! What is this? You now accuse me

of dereliction in duty? A little investigation of you and your affairs might not be an official error. What is your evidence? Give me good proof that you had reason to accuse Don Diego, or on his statement that you tried extortion I'll throw you into the barracks jail and have the *magistrado* order you out of town in the morning!"

"I'll give my evidence to you secretly, Senor Sergeant, and all here are my witness that when I have proved my point and you have arrested Don Diego Vega for treason I claim a share of the governor's reward."

"Prove that Don Diego is Zorro and I'll give you the whole reward," Garcia declared. "Speak openly, here and now. Convince me and I'll make an arrest at once, before all this company."

Portillo gulped some of his wine. Diego remained standing at the fireplace, holding the goblet. He had taken only a sip.

"Don Diego Vega, in the first instance, has a powerful black horse he keeps hidden somewhere near the town," Portillo declared.

"Every rancho owner has black horses by the dozen," Garcia replied.

"Why keep this one in secret?"

Diego lifted a hand. "Probably, sergeant," he said, "the man refers to a big black my body servant, Bernardo, is training. Bernardo has a strange way with horses, as you know."

Portillo sprang to his feet.

"So! The way is clear for you, sergeant. Get this Bernardo and interrogate him. Beat the truth out of him!"

Diego smiled slightly. "You seemingly do not know, senor, that Bernardo is a mute peon," he told Portillo. "He can hear and understand. But he cannot speak, and he does not know how to write. It would be difficult to interrogate him."

"Very clever!" Portillo admitted, his lips curling. "Perhaps, Don Diego, you will deny that while you were at school in Spain you received instruction in swordsmanship from a master?"

"I admit it. Every young man in school received such instruction."

"You are proficient in horsemanship, are you not?"

Diego yawned. "I know how to ride," he admitted, "but do not like the exertion."

"You, who pretend to be so ladylike—are you afraid to let the sergeant feel your biceps and find they are those of a man of strength enough to wield a blade?"

"My biceps are very good, I believe," Diego replied. "I wrestle regularly with Bernardo, who is a huge strong man. My father tells me I must at least do that much to keep up manly strength necessary to health. You may ask my man Bernardo—but I forget for a moment that he cannot speak and tell."

SOME man near snickered his amusement. Portillo's face showed his rage.

"Is it not true," he demanded, "that you and your father pet and coddle peons and natives, treat them better than they deserve, and hence it would be natural for you, as Zorro, to attack men who kick and cuff them around?"

"It is true," Diego replied, "that we treat them as men in less fortunate circumstances than ourselves, who are not responsible for their lot in life, and who are to be shown kindness instead of brutality for that reason."

Sergeant Garcia bellowed again. "Enough of this nonsense! Senor Portillo, I am going to incarcerate you for the night and take you before the *magistrado* in the morning."

"Wait, Garcia!" Diego protested. "I want this fellow to be convinced that I am not Zorro. Let him remain free to watch me every hour of day and night—"

"And what of that?" Portillo shouted. "Would Zorro make a move if he knew he was being watched?"

"Not if he has good sense," Diego replied. "But if Zorro did something while I was elsewhere being watched by you, that should be convincing."

Garcia took charge again. "Senor Portillo, I let you retain your liberty for the time being. Watch Don Diego day and night if you wish."

"From the tavern, I am returning to my father's house," Diego explained. "This evening my father and I are guests of Don Juan Romo at the betrothal celebration for one of his daughters. After the *fiesta*, I'll return home and go to bed. My plans for tomorrow are not known yet even to myself."

"And you, Carlos Portillo," Garcia added, "will learn that Don Diego is not

Zorro. After you have learned it, I'll remember you attempted extortion and see you well punished for it. Nor will you run away from the pueblo, senor, for starting this instant, you'll be watched continually by my troopers."

Portillo looked at Diego, and a sneer curled his lips. And Diego, with a quick flick of his right wrist, dashed the contents of his wine goblet into Portillo's face. The extortioner gave a scream of rage and wiped the wine out of his eyes.

"For that, I challenge you, Don Diego Vega!" he cried. "Let us get our blades and have a settlement."

Diego knew he had to avoid that. This fellow might be good with a blade, and Diego dared not expose his skill even to defend his life, with everybody believing he was a man who knew little of swordsmanship.

"Senor Portillo," Diego replied, haughtily, "first convince me that you have blood good enough to entitle you to cross blades with a Vega in an affair of honor. A caballero does not grant a fair and honorable fight to the death to a blackmailer."

Then, Diego bowed to all in the room and walked slowly down the length of it, stopped at the counter to pay the innkeeper for the round of wine, and went on through the door and out into the plaza. He yawned and brushed his nostrils with the scented handkerchief as he started strolling slowly homeward. He had forgotten to buy the crystallized honey.

At home, he told his father, Don Alejandro, all that had occured, and they talked, and Diego made plans. Then he sauntered out of the house and located Bernardo near the servants' huts, and beckoned him.

"Zorro may or may not ride tonight, but everything must be ready," Diego explained. "It is almost sunset. As soon as it is dark enough, take one of the black carriage horses from the stable and lead him to the hidden corral where Zorro's big black is kept.

"Leave him there and bring Zorro's horse to the stable here. Let nobody observe it. At a later hour, take the horse and Zorro's clothes and weapons to the place I shall name, and have them ready. And listen carefully now, to further orders."

Diego gave them in a whisper, and Bernardo's eyes glistened as they reflected the sunset. Strolling back into the house, Diego ate a small meal with his father—for there would be feasting a little later at Don Juan Romo's house—then retired to his own room to put on his most resplendent clothes.

WHEN he met his father again in the main room of the house, Don Alejandro was ready to set out. Don Juan lived but a short distance away, and they would walk, with a servant carrying a burning torch ahead of them to light the way. Diego's fears had been realized—a heavy mist was falling. Where he had not desired it before, he was glad of it now—Zorro could work much better on a dark, misty night.

The servant with the torch walked ahead, and Don Alejandro let his steps lag and talked to Diego in whispers.

"While you were dressing, I overheard some of the servants talking. After you left the tavern this afternoon, that scoundrel Portillo beat two natives unmercifully to work off his rage."

"Zorro will remember that."

"Be cautious, my son. That beating may have been a ruse to draw Zorro out of his shell. And, according to what you told me, Sergeant Garcia will have one of his troopers near the fellow all the time. Do not forget, in your eagerness to settle things with this Portillo, that the soldiers would be delighted to capture Zorro."

They were greeted by Don Juan at the door, and as soon as they had divested themselves of damp ponchos and serapes and taken the drink of welcome with the host, they mingled with the crowd. About a hundred guests, the foremost people of the pueblo, had been invited to Magdalena's betrothal ceremony.

Diego located Rosita Romo and paid her cautious court under the eye of her *duena*. The serious ceremony of betrothal was conducted by old Fray Felipe, and the feast began.

They were long at table, and though Diego posed as the indolent man they thought him to be, inwardly he was seething at the delay. When the feasting ended and musicians played and the dancing began, Diego danced with each of the sisters, and then with another senorita,

and finally joined his father in a corner of the room.

"I contrived to slip out upon the veranda, my son," Don Alejandro whispered. "That rascal of a Portillo was loitering around, a trooper with him. I overheard their conversation."

"Was it interesting?" Diego asked.

"The trooper was grumbling because he had to be out on such a night instead of comfortable at the tavern drinking wine. Portillo agreed that you would be here for hours feasting and dancing, and suggested they return to the tavern for a time to get warm. The trooper was scoffing at the fellow for thinking you could be Zorro."

"It is time for me to become Zorro," Diego said. "My absence must be covered."

"In what manner, my son?"

"I'll dance once more, then complain of a headache. Leave that to me, my father."

He danced with another senorita, spoke to old Fray Felipe, mentioned his headache to everybody who would listen, and finally slipped unnoticed into the patio.

The merriment was at its height. His absence would not be missed unless someone deliberately looked for him. The inclement night was keeping everybody out of the big patio.

Through the darkness, Diego slipped to a couple of dark huts in the rear of the house, and behind them the faithful Bernardo was waiting with Zorro's black horse, costume and weapons.

Working swiftly, Diego pulled on Zorro's attire over his own, put on belt and blade and mask and tucked his pistol into his sash. He mounted and rode away silently through the wet night. Don Diego Vega had disappeared for the time being, and in his stead was Zorro, a man of different manner and voice.

Cautiously, he rode toward the plaza and skirted it toward the tavern. He encountered nobody, nor saw anybody around the buildings. From the tavern came sounds of roistering. At the horse blocks three mounts were tethered, and Zorro identified them by the saddle blankets as the mounts of Sergeant Garcia and two of his troopers. Streaks of light coming through the tavern windows revealed the horses and illuminated the ground in front of the building.

FORTUNE was with Zorro this night. The tavern door was pulled open, and Carlos Portillo emerged, a trooper a step behind him. The trooper closed the door, and they stood in a streak of light from a window, adjusting their ponchos. The wind carried their talk to Zorro's ears as he bent forward in his saddle in the darkness not too far from the corner of the building.

"This is nonsense, Senor Portillo," the trooper was saying. "Don Diego Vega will dance until dawn, then go home to bed. And suppose you did meet Zorro? How do you expect to handle him?"

"I wear my blade and have a pistol handy," Portillo replied. "I beat those natives today to attract Zorro. If we meet, you stand back and allow me to have first chance at him alone. If he beats me, then shoot him down and claim the reward."

Muffled against the swirling mist, they bent their heads and started forward. But they heard a stern voice above the sound of sudden hoofbeats:

"Stand, senores! Trooper, toss your pistol and blade aside! You, Senor Portillo, be cautious in movement if you do not wish to die!"

The trooper squawked his surprise and did as he had been commanded. Portillo gulped. In the streak of light was a black-dressed masked rider on a black horse. He held a pistol that menaced them.

"So!" Portillo cried. "Now we will get at the truth. I'll show the world your identity now, Don Diego Vega."

"I am Zorro, fool. I have come to punish you, Portillo, for beating helpless men."

"Give me time to cast aside this poncho and draw blade," Portillo said. "Dismount and draw your own." Portillo unwrapped and dropped his serape and got off the poncho with a single jerk.

The trooper had stood back a few feet, wondering whether he should shout to Sergeant Garcia and his comrades in the tavern. The wind was drowning ordinary sounds, and nobody was in the vicinity to give an alarm. The trooper decided it would be safer after Zorro and Portillo began fighting.

Zorro did not dismount and draw blade.

Portillo turned to see something swishing through the air, and the next instant he gave a cry of pain as the lash of a long whip struck his side and bit through cloth to the skin.

"Do you think I would stain my blade with blood as foul as yours, scum?" Zorro said in a deep voice. "The whip honors your hide as it is."

He began lashing. Carlos Portillo whipped out his blade and tried to slash at the whip, but always missed. And the lash was torturing him, striking his arms and legs and hips, cutting into his back.

"Help! Help!" he began shouting. "Zorro is here!"

The trooper risked a pistol bullet by taking up the cry, and turned to run, bent almost double, to the door of the tavern and jerk it open, shouting for Garcia.

Zorro struck with the whip again, rode closer and called to the cringing Portillo:

"Get you out of the pueblo at dawn, and never return! It will not be the whip the next time, nor a blade, but a pistol bullet that will end your foul life instantly."

Through the door of the tavern and into the streak of light spewed men. Garcia at their head. Zorro wheeled his horse and fired his pistol into the tavern wall.

"Help!" Portillo was calling, his arms wrapped around his head as he feared another cut of the lash. "Zorro is here!"

Zorro laughed and gave the big black the spurs. Two pistols were discharged behind him, but the slugs went wild. And on the wind he heard Portillo's wild call to Garcia:

"It was Don Diego, I tell you! Sergeant, hurry to the Romo house, and you will find Diego Vega missing. Send men to the little hidden corral and see if the black horse is there. If it is not, you have your answer. If it is, you will find the horse wet, as if recently ridden hard."

GARCIA was shouting orders and his men were running for their mounts. Zorro rode past the end of the plaza, his horse's hoofs pounding to show in what direction he went. Then he began circling toward Don Juan Romo's residence.

He was thanking his fortune that the Zorro costume had kept his *fiesta* clothes dry, and that it had been made so his boots would slip into larger ones fastened to the trouser legs, else he would have wet and muddy boots to explain.

Before Garcia had the chase arranged and was riding to the Romo house himself with one of his men, sending the other two to the corral, Zorro stopped the black behind the huts and sprang out of his saddle.

He stripped off the weapons and black costume and handed them up to Bernardo, who had mounted the black.

"Be careful not to encounter the soldiers," he warned the mute. "Ride slowly toward the hills, then circle back and put the black in the stable stall. Go!"

Darting into the patio, Diego Vega reduced his breathing to normal and strolled into the big main room of the house as another lively dance began. He saw a senorita who was something of a wallflower, approached, and a moment later was delighting her by being her dance partner. And the senorita was delighted also because, whereas Don Diego generally was not animated, now he was laughing. She did not know that he was laughing at how he had fooled everybody again, and not because of his happiness at having her in his arms.

As he danced, he saw Sergeant Garcia standing in the doorway with Don Juan Romo beside him and Carlos Portillo a step in his rear. Diego guided the senorita past them.

"*Buenas noches!*" he greeted the sergeant. "From your clothing, it is damp out. And what has happened to that fellow beside you? He seems to be in a pitiable state." He smiled and danced on. But he heard Garcia's growl at Portillo:

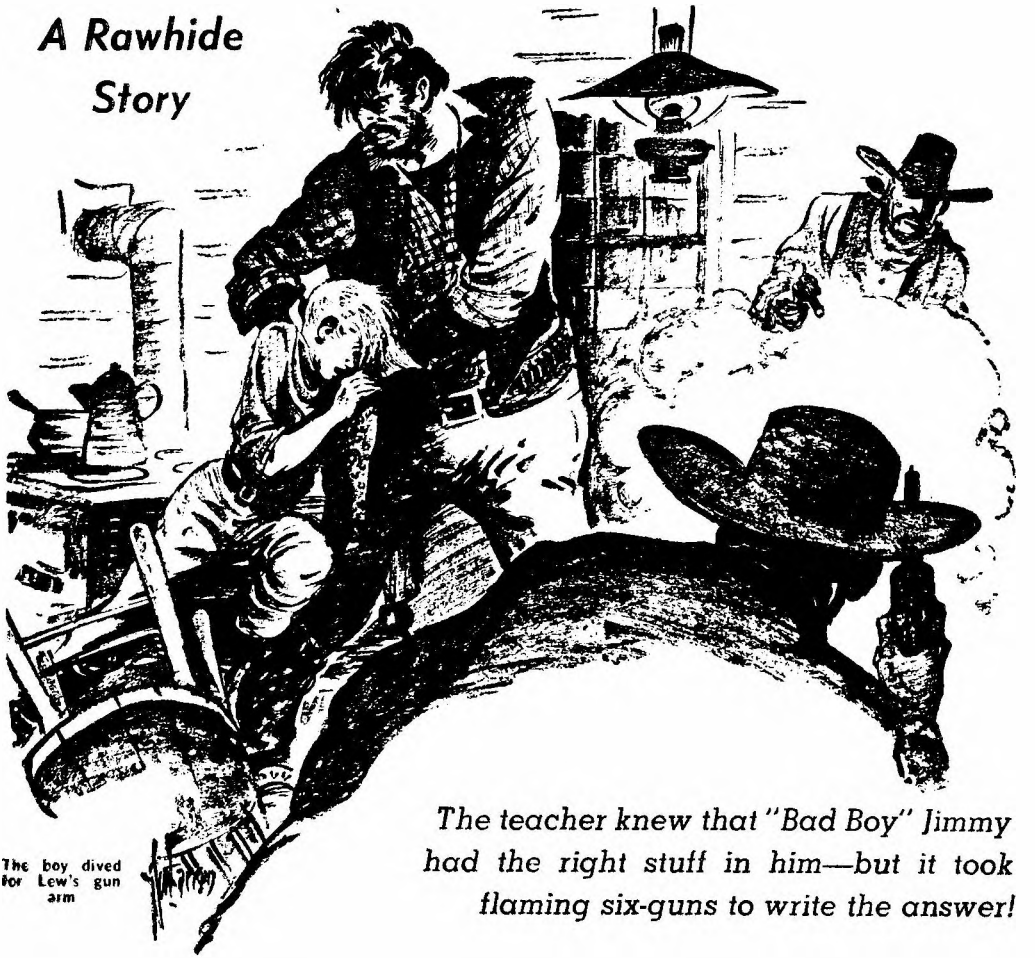
"You see, dolt and ass? Your suspicions were groundless. In the morning, the *magistrado* will deal harshly with you. Come with me!"

Diego laughed happily again and danced on, and mayhap he gave the senorita a little squeeze. He was thinking that when the troopers went to the hidden corral they would find a black horse that was not laboring after a run. And they would not suspect it was one of the Vega carriage horses.

Don Juan Romo greeted him as the dance ended. "You are enjoying yourself, Diego?" he asked.

"More than I have any evening for quite some time," Diego replied.

A Rawhide Story



The boy dived for Lew's gun arm

The teacher knew that "Bad Boy" Jimmy had the right stuff in him—but it took flaming six-guns to write the answer!

THE WILD ONE

By TOM PARSONS

IT WAS the recess period at the Rawhide school and Creighton Randall only half heard the shouts of the kids playing along the banks of Squaw Creek. He had taken this brief opportunity to look over the test papers, having a mind to Jimmy Matson. Crate shuffled through the papers swiftly, glancing only at the scrawled names at the top of the sheets. He pulled out Jimmy's paper and stared at it.

The subject had been American history and the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Crate had spent his enthusiasm and effort for a week trying to get across the basic truths of that great document. He had prepared ten questions and the childrens' answers would tell him whether they had understood. Jimmy Matson had written a single line.

"I ain't caring what dead hombres did before I was borned."

Crate's full lips pursed into a soundless whistle and his eyes widened when he read the careless scrawl. He dropped the paper and stared through the open window. He glanced at the rest of the papers. The other pupils had answered the ten questions variously and Crate saw that he had put across some of his ideas about freedom and liberty. But Jimmy Matson—

His head jerked up when he heard a new note in the shouts outside. The sounds had suddenly become higher pitched and savage, then they broke off for a moment. Crate got up and walked to the window.

He saw the girls of the school standing in a tight little group almost directly beneath him. Across the bare yard, the boys had formed a wide circle, leaving two in the center. They circled one another warily, these two, small fists threatening, chins thrust out. Crate saw that one of them was Jimmy Matson, straw-colored hair hanging over his smoldering dark eyes, jaw set at an ugly angle.

"Tie into him, Jimmy!— Knock him down, Red!— Don't let him bluff yuh!" Crate could catch individual shouts now. He started to leave the window and hurry outside to break up the fight. Then he paused. Jimmy's opponent seemed entirely capable of taking care of himself.

"It might happen," Crate said half aloud, "that I can get the 'dead hombres' ideas across to Jimmy after this fight."

HE REMAINED by the window. The two boys circled one another warily feinting, Red confident, Jimmy tense as a bow string. Suddenly Jimmy charged and caught Red unprepared. His fists blurred and Red, abruptly sat down, stunned surprise showing on his freckled face, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

Crate gasped and his gray eyes sparked as Jimmy's foot swung back and he landed a kick squarely on Red's ribs Crate whirled from the window and rushed out into the yard. The circle broke up, leaving Red still scrambling to avoid Jimmy's thick-soled shoes. Crate grabbed Jimmy and jerked him back

The boy turned his attention to the teacher and Crate found that he had a young wildcat to hold. Red took advantage of the diversion, scrambling to his feet and hurrying off to join the rest of the crowd. At last Crate held Jimmy helpless.

"Into the school," Crate ordered. Jimmy glared defiance, then shrugged his [illegible] shoulders. He stalked ahead of Crate into the big room with its rows of new desks and its new blackboards. Some of the children edged close to the door and Crate closed it against them as he entered. He sank behind his desk and looked at Jimmy.

"First," he said, "you might tell me why you and Red Tilson were fighting."

Jimmy passed his grimy hand across his lips. He was about thirteen, a scrawny kid in a faded shirt and worn levis. His straw-colored hair looked as if it had never known a comb and there was a high water mark on his neck. He had a snub nose and red lips that looked as if they should smile. In the weeks he had been at school Jimmy had not once grinned and his bony jaw had been constantly set at a hard, fighting angle. At the moment it was thrust out again and his black eyes spat defiance.

"Ain't no need to auger," he said. "Yuh can switch me and get it over with."

Crate half turned in his chair and looked at the top of the blackboard just behind him. A long rod rested on three pegs, thick with dust. He chuckled.

"That hasn't been touched in a couple of years, Jimmy, not since I took over the school. Now, why did you and Red Tilson tangle?"

Jimmy looked surprised and disconcerted. It was almost as if a whipping had been a part of his plans and now he didn't quite know how to go on without it. Crate waited while Jimmy fidgeted. At last the boy, looking down at the floor, spoke in a muffled voice.

"He claimed my paw was a no-good squatter and that I wasn't any better."

"That is a good reason," Crate said judiciously, "to fight a man. I'd do the same if someone had spoken about my father that way."

"Shucks," Jimmy said, "Red was talking about Lew. He ain't no good. I was mad because he claimed I was the same kind."

Crate jerked upright, eyes wide in surprise. Lew Matson was Jimmy's father, a

big hulking man who had recently come to Rawhide. His cabin was nestled in a small valley in the foothills of the War Bonnets, overlooking the plain and Jed Krannert's big spread. Crate almost sputtered.

"But Lew is your father!"

"No. My paw's dead—and he was a right good rannihan. Lew is my uncle, but he lets on he's my paw." Jimmy looked up and his eyes flashed. "Don't yuh say nothing to these kids. I reckon I'd like to have—a paw just like the rest of 'em. Lew ain't much but he'll have to do."

Crate expelled his breath in a long gusty sigh.

"Lew treats you all right?" he asked watching the boy's face.

"That's my business, I reckon," Jimmy said tightly and his lips clamped shut. Crate saw that the boy would not go any further into the subject. The lad's paper lay atop the pile on Crate's desk and the teacher glanced at the defiant scrawl. Jimmy Matson was rapidly turning into a problem. Crate leaned back and folded his hands on the edge of his desk.

"You kicked Red when he was down Jimmy. I never heard of a fair fighter doing a trick like that. Why did you?"

"Fair!" Jimmy voice held deep scorn. "There ain't no such thing, I reckon. Red would have done the same to me. When yuh got a man down, yuh keep him down. Yuh make sure he ain't getting up and starting trouble all over again."

"Who," Crate demanded, "told you that?"

"Why, I reckon nobody did. I just learned it watching what the big people do. Yuh got to be plumb blind if yuh don't catch on mighty quick."

"Where did you live before you came to Rawhide?" Crate asked, and saw the sudden shadow in the boy's eyes, the tightening of jaw and chin. Jimmy shook his head.

"Reckon that ain't no one's business."

CRATE considered the boy. Jimmy had been in school two weeks now, trudging from the hills each day, walking back at night. In the brief two weeks, he had fought with about half of the boys in the school, though most of those battles had happened somewhere along Squaw Creek road.

In Crate's opinion, Jimmy was not naturally belligerent and he had a lot of good material in him. But something was badly wrong. Crate glanced up at the yellow-faced clock on the rear wall. Recess time was over.

He rose and walked down the aisle to the door. He opened it and the whole student body of Squaw Creek school looked expectantly up at him. Crate disregarded them all but Red Tilson and signalled the boy to come into the room. Crate closed the door on the rest.

Jimmy still remained by the desk. He turned and glared at Red Tilson, his fists doubling at his sides. Crate urged Red forward to the desk and stood between the two boys. He looked from one to the other.

"Red, your tongue ran away with you," he said evenly, "and I don't blame Jimmy for tieing into you. He's smaller, but so were the Thirteen Colonies when a big country made a mistake about them. I want your promise there'll be no more name calling around Jimmy."

Red flushed, scowled, then his face cleared.

"All right, I reckon I was just mad."

Crate turned to the other boy.

"Jimmy, it's your turn. Meet Red half way, and promise you'll fight fair and square if anything like this comes up again. A dirty fighter is a poor sort of a man."

Jimmy stared at Crate and then at Red. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and conflicting emotions passed rapidly over his face. Then his jaw set and his eyes sparked.

"I ain't apologizing to no one! I'll fight like I want to! Yuh can both go to blazes!"

He turned and raced down the aisle before either Crate or Red could move He jerked open the door and thrust through the children who waited outside. Crate reached the door in time to see Jimmy race across Squaw Creek bridge, heading for the hills and the security of the valley farm. Crate watched him go, then slowly stepped aside.

"It's time for classes," he said absently. The children silently filed in to their seats. For the rest of the day there was a subdued tension to the Squaw Creek school.

Crate himself could hardly force his mind to the things he taught.

In mid-afternoon, Crate dismissed school. He gathered up his papers and started down the aisle, eyes clouded and thoughtful. He locked the door and strode out to the road. He could still see Jimmy Matson racing across the bridge and Crates eyes lifted to the War Bonnets. Something was badly wrong up there that would so badly warp a boy like Jimmy.

Crate had an impulse to investigate on his own and then decided against it. He'd work with Jimmy here at school and try to overcome the twisted ideas he had.

That night, after Crate had outlined the work for the next day, he wandered down to the crossroads. There were a few horses before the rail of Dent's New Deck Saloon and the lamps from Lem Adams' General Store cast a cheery glow into the roadway. Crate entered the store and found the usual group gathered around the big rolltop desk in the rear. Lem lolled back in his swivel chair, the Reverend Carter perched on a counter, Tiny Tucker's big bulk overflowed a chair. Peg Strickland and Doc Renford sat on cracker boxes.

"Howdy, Crate," Lem said in a deep friendly voice. The rest nodded. Crate joined them and, for awhile, the conversation was aimless. Then Peg Strickland grinned at Crate.

"Heard yuh had a ruckus over at the school," he said. "Marta, my wife, heard about it from a couple of ladies."

"It wasn't much," Crate shrugged the affair off. "Couple of kids started an argument."

"Heard one of 'em walked out on yuh," Peg added.

"Jimmy Matson," Crate nodded. "I'll be able to handle him. Lem, what do you know about Lew Matson?"

"Not much," Lem answered, "except I don't like the gent to speak of. He's homesteading above Squaw Creek and Jed Krannert ain't happy about it. Lew don't work very hard at farming and Jed's afraid he might use a running iron mighty handy."

"Does he?"

"No proof of it if he does," Lem shook his head. "I saw him go in the New Deck just before sundown. Yuh can take a look at him if yuh want."

THE teacher rose and said goodnight. He left the store, crossed the street and entered the saloon. Dent Strugis gave him a friendly greeting and a drink on the house. The saloonkeeper's son went to the school and Dent himself was one of the board members. Many of the punchers from the surrounding ranches were in the place and Dent was kept busy. At last he came to the end of the bar and asked to fill Crate's glass again. Crate refused.

"Where's Lew Matson?" he asked. Dent gave him a sharp look and then indicated a poker table in the far corner. A man sat there, a nearly empty whiskey bottle close to his hand.

He was smaller than Crate, and heavier. His square face was harsh and grim, the beak of a nose giving it a fierce and ugly quality. The man's eyes were narrow, dark and shifting, his lips thin and almost bloodless. Matson's jowls were covered with a thick, wiry stubble.

Crate carefully sized him up, and he began to understand where Jimmy had received some of his training in dirty fighting. The teacher sighed, regretful that a lad like Jimmy should be under the control of a brute like Lew Matson. He finished his drink, thanked Dent, and went to his room at Mrs. Garver's.

Jimmy did not appear at the school the next day. Crate made no comment but at noon he asked if any of the boys had seen him. None of them had. As soon as he had dismissed school, Crate hurried to the livery stable and rented a horse. In a short time he clattered across Squaw Creek bridge and headed for the hills that rose tier on tier to the high peaks of the mountains.

He came on a road that was little more than two deep ruts worn by the broad iron tires of a wagon. The trail kept to the low ground, finding a pass in the hills and plunging into the broken country beyond. The War Bonnets loomed closer and more grim as Crate followed the meandering trail. He circled a hill and drew rein.

He faced a long and narrow valley that was knee deep in rich grass. The trail cut directly across the valley to a line of cottonwoods about midway across. Lew Matson had built his cabin and barn beneath their shade. The cabin was small, canted slightly, as though Lew had simply

thrown it together.

The barn was no better, built with a minimum of planning and labor. The bare yard, when Crate rode up, proved to be dotted with rusty cans, carelessly pitched from the kitchen door.

Crate watched for a glimpse of Jimmy but did not see the boy. As he drew near the cabin, Lew himself appeared in the doorway. Crate instantly noticed the heavy gunbelt the man wore, and that Lew's hand never strayed far from the heavy Colt thrust into the holster. Crate nodded, spoke, and Lew only grunted as the teacher dismounted.

"What's in yore craw?" Lew demanded.

"I'm the teacher at Rawhide," Crate said. "I thought I'd like to see Jimmy."

"Yuh saw him all day." Lew growled. Crate hesitated a second, then spoke frankly.

"I didn't. Jimmy wasn't at school and I thought something might have happened to him."

"Wasn't in school!" Lew stared at Crate and then his lips twisted in a mocking grin as a pleased light came in his eyes. "So he's causing trouble, huh?"

"No—"

"Jimmy!" Lew's bellow cut short Crate's protest. "Get yoreself out here."

"Look, Matson, I didn't come here to cause trouble for Jimmy."

"Maybe yuh didn't," Lew spat, "but I shore will. Jimmy!"

The boy appeared around the corner of the stable. He hesitated there a moment and then came on, one bare foot dragging after the other. As he approached, he gave Crate a look of hate and misery, and Crate's face turned fiery red under the silent accusation.

"Yore teacher tells me yuh skipped school," Lew growled menacingly when Jimmy at last halted before him.

"Matson," Crate cut in and stepped between Lew and the boy. "I know Jimmy will not miss again. There's no harm done—"

Lew's powerful arm swept Crate to one side. He grabbed Jimmy by the shoulder and jerked him off his feet. His big hand cuffed at the boy's cheeks, first on one side, then on the other. Jimmy's eyes glazed and his mouth began to hang open.

Crate recovered himself. Anger swept over him like a wave, and he jumped forward, his fingers taloning into Lew's shoulders. He swung the man half around.

"Leave the boy alone! That's not called for!"

Lew released Jimmy and the lad sank to the ground. His face was red from the blows he had taken. Lew's fist traveled like a piston, catching Crate in the stomach. The teacher's breath left him and he catapulted backward and down. He struck with a bone-shaking thud that left him dizzy, the houses and trees whirling around like a mad pinwheel.

CRATE could only lie where he had fallen. Then his senses cleared and he rolled over, pushed himself up. Lew had turned to Jimmy again, was beating him with a stick. Crate forgot the blow he had just taken. He rushed in, fists swinging.

Lew turned as Crate attacked. Jimmy scuttled away, glad of the chance to escape. He raced toward the barn, checked his speed and slowly turned. Crate was taking a beating and the hulking Lew Matson was enjoying himself. His thin lips held a cruel smile as he smashed his fists against the teacher's ribs and face.

Crate went down, unable to stand up against the heavier man. Lew pulled back his booted foot and the gesture broke the fascination that held Jimmy. With a choked cry, he bent down and his fingers wrapped around a stick. He threw it as hard as he could. The cast was true and the piece of wood struck Lew in the back of the head.

He whirled, forgetting the man at his feet. He lunged toward Jimmy, who took to his heels and raced around the rickety barn. Lew went after him, cursing at every step. Jimmy raced on, heading directly for the rail fence. He vaulted it and made a beeline for the hills. Lew reached the fence, stopped and shouted curses after the boy.

At last he turned, rubbing his skull where the stick had raised a knot. He stalked back around the barn. Crate had pulled himself to his feet and stood swaying, still dazed. Lew licked his thin lips and walked up to the teacher.

"I learned yuh not to meddle in a family punishment," he said. "If yuh think yuh can keep me from larrupin' my own

son, come around again. Jimmy'll be at school, though I don't think much of the lilly-gent that teaches him. Hit yore saddle and ride out before I get mad all over again."

Dazedly, Crate turned and stumbled to his horse. He pulled himself into the saddle, neck-reined and rode out of the yard, swaying dizzily. He was almost at the edge of the valley when his senses fully returned and he realized that he had unquestioningly obeyed the orders of a bully like Lew Matson.

Crate jerked erect and drew rein. He twisted in the saddle, looking back toward the cabin under the trees. He wanted to go back and show Lew Matson that he was far from beaten. Then Crate thought of Jimmy and the punishment the boy had received. That was bad enough but, worse, Jimmy would blame it on Crate. If Crate went back, probably Lew would make life unbearable for the button. The teacher straightened and slowly rode on out of the valley.

He was stiff and sore by the time he reached Rawhide and one of the boarders at Mrs. Garver's table had more nerve than the rest.

"Yore face looks like yuh tangled with a lion, Crate. If yuh won, I'd sure hate to see the other gent."

"I didn't," Crate said shortly, and hastily excused himself.

He stayed close to his room that night. From time to time he found himself wondering what had happened to Jimmy Matson He could picture the beating the boy would get from the hulking Lew. Crate spent a restless night and he was glad to be hurrying to the school early the next morning.

He waited expectantly for the pupils to come. The first one he saw was Jimmy, limping across the bridge and into the school yard. Crate went to the door and Jimmy stopped when he saw the teacher. Crate smiled, a little uncertainly.

"Jimmy, I—hope you didn't get—too much of a punishment."

"What do *you* care? That's what yuh come out to the house for!"

"It wasn't!" Crate protested.

Jimmy didn't answer but disbelief was eloquent in his eyes. The teacher sighed and rubbed his hand along his jaw. He winched when he touched a bruised spot. Jimmy critically surveyed his face.

"I reckon yuh got worse than I did, though," he said at last. He dug his toe in the ground. "I reckon yuh did stand up for me. That's why I come back instead of running away when Lew sent me to school."

It was Crate's turn to be embarrassed

"Well, we can forget the whole thing, Jimmy, as though it never happened. Just remember, the next time you get in trouble, fight square and fair."

"I ain't promising," Jimmy said slowly. "I didn't do *you* much good when yuh faced Lew."

For over a week, there was no more trouble with Jimmy Matson. Crate gave a good deal of thought and time to the boy and Jimmy responded quickly. It was as though he had desperately needed a friend, someone who would take an interest in him and his problems.

BIT by bit, Crate began to get the background of the boy's life. His father had evidently been an ordinary cowboy, hardworking and honest. Jimmy had never known his mother. Badly hurt by an outlaw horse. Matson had known that he was dying. He had sent Jimmy to Lew, his only brother.

Lew Matson had instantly seen use for the boy. At this point Jimmy grew reticent and it was only bit by bit, in little things that the boy dropped, that Crate began to get the picture. No one paid any particular attention to a button riding over the range. But Jimmy had definite orders to report the position and number of the various herds to Lew. Not long after, rustlers appeared and, for awhile, did a lucrative business

"Then one night Lew came a storming home," Jimmy said. "He was sure scared about something. We packed up and rode out and Lew never did say why. We didn't stop riding until we reached Pinto, and some of Lew's old friends was there."

"The rustlers?" Crate demanded, jerking erect.

"I don't know about that," Jimmy shrugged. "Just some of the gents used to come to Lew's cabin. They had a long talk one night in a saloon while I stayed in the hotel room. Two days later we come down here to Rawhide, Lew and me."

"And the others?"

"Ain't seen 'em once since we got here."

This knowledge worried Crate. He began to see an ugly pattern form with Jimmy Matson in the center of it. If Lew had used the button once as a scout for a band of rustlers, he woud do it again. Crate's anger at the hulking Lew Matson reached a boiling point, but he realized that as yet there was nothing he could do about it. No one liked Lew very much but he had appeared to be honest enough in Rawhide. Krannert was suspicious of the man, but that was all.

Jimmy had said none of the old rustling gang had appeared in Rawhide However, Crate sensed trouble brewing and he was unable to do anything about it. He would not condemn a man to the community solely on his past. A man could change, reform. But the more Crate recalled Lew's twisted, evil face, the more certain he became that Lew would never change.

As for Jimmy himself, he showed a marked change. It was all based on Crate's fight with Lew. The punishment Crate had received at the man's pounding fists now seemed worthwhile. Jimmy took Crate's suggestions without question, as one would from a hero. His schoolwork improved.

Then one day Jimmy didn't appear. Crate was worried and he thought about riding out to the Matson place again. He rejected that. If Jimmy played hookey, then he'd receive a beating. However, Crate didn't fully believe the boy had deliberately stayed away. He might be ill, or Lew might have him at some kind of farm work that needed to be done right away. Crate decided to leave the Matson place alone and await developments. It was hard to stand by this decision when Jimmy was absent the second day. On the third he reappeared.

Something had changed him. There was a hard set to his jaw and chin and the old shadows were back in his eyes. Crate watched the boy all morning. During the recess, Jimmy stayed to himself. His mind did not seem to be on the lessons. Only once did he show a flicker of interest. The history class studied the making of the Constitution and Crate had some things of his own to say on that subject.

"Law is only living and acting fair and square. Some people don't do that, so we have to keep them in line with law. What a man works for and earns is his, and no one else, no matter how strong or how smart, should have the right to take it away from him."

Jimmy's head jerked up and Crate caught the sudden gleam in the dark eyes.

"Each of us has the same right as the other man," Crate went on, "to stand on his own feet, to think and act as he wishes so long as it harms no one else. That's our right and we must give the other fellow the same right. We're not studying a bit of dry history or a musty legal document. The Constitution is something close to every one of us."

Crate continued with the lesson and Jimmy lost his interest. But he seemed to be wrapped up in his own thoughts and, from the way he squirmed and fidgeted, they weren't very pleasant. At last Crate dismissed the school, but called Jimmy back as the boy started toward the door.

"I missed you, Jimmy, the last two days. Sick?"

"Nope," Jimmy said, looking down at his feet. Crate hesitated and his voice dropped.

"Tired of school?"

Jimmy flinched, opened his mouth, then clamped it shut again. He shook his head. "Nope. Lew had work for me to do out home."

"What's bothering you?" Crate asked sharply. Jimmy looked up and swiftly away. He stubbornly shook his head.

"Nothing." He turned and walked down the aisle. He paused at the door and looked back at Crate. "Lew bought me a new pony."

He was gone and the door closed gently behind him. Crate was puzzled, not getting the connection between the pony and the conversation that had gone before.

THE next day Jimmy was at school but, for all the good it seemed to do, he might as well have stayed at home. He avoided Crate and was the first out the door when the pupils were dismissed.

Crate was in the store, in the ring of loafers around the desk, when a breathless, wide-eyed cowboy plunged through the door. Reverend Carter broke off in the middle of a word and the others stared open-mouthed at the man. His eyes swept around the circle, stopped at Breck Long.

"We need yuh out at the Rocking K. Rustlers hit a small herd of beef!"

"Rustlers!" Breck Long jumped to his feet and the lamplight caught the law badge on his shirt. His face tightened. "Got enough men?"

"Jed thinks so. No need for a posse. He'll meet us at the head of Squaw Creek."

Breck nodded and hurried out of the store. Crate crowded with the rest to the canopied porch, watched Breck and the puncher race out of town after the lawman had gone to his office for rifle and ammunition. Later, Crate walked slowly back to his room and his mind kept dwelling on Jimmy Matson. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the road as a thought hit him.

Lew Matson had bought Jimmy a new pony! Crate recalled how the boy had been used to scout range herds once before. Breck had gone to the head of Squaw Creek and that wouldn't be far from the Matson homestead. Crate half turned as though to head back to the store and then he realized that he could do nothing. He had little more than suspicions, though they seemed logical enough.

He slept poorly that night and made inquiry about the rustlers before he went to the school.

Breck had not returned and there was no news. Crate was actually surprised to see Jimmy come trudging across the bridge. Crate met him out in the yard, away from the other pupils. The boy halted and defiantly met the teacher's sharp, searching, look.

"Jimmy," Crate asked in a low voice, "were you riding your pony those days you were away from school?"

The boy's eyes widened. A suggestion of fright swept across his face and was gone in a second. He licked his lips and lowered his head.

"Yes."

"Was Breck Long and a posse up at your place last night?"

"Some men come," Jimmy said very slowly. "I heard 'em talking to Lew and then they rode away. Might have been Breck."

"Lew?"

"He's mending a fence this morning," Jimmy answered. His voice tightened in anger. "Ain't no need to ask more questions."

"I'm not," Crate said. "I want you to remember what I said about the law and other peoples' rights and property. Think it over. If you've got anything more to tell me, see me after class."

Jimmy went out in the yard at the recess period, but he didn't return. Red Tilson told Crate that Jimmy had walked across the bridge and trudged away toward home. Crate could hardly keep his mind on the lessons that afternoon and it was with a feeling of relief that he dismissed the class.

He locked up the school and hurried toward the general store. Lem Adams was alone, looking out the window on the town that he had practically founded. He turned when Crate hurried inside.

"Breck been back?" Crate asked. Lem nodded.

"Lost the trail up in the War Bonnets. There was three rustlers so far as Breck could tell."

"What did Lew Matson have to say?"

"Claimed he was home all the time, and proved it by that button of his. Breck thought the kid was kinda tongue-tied, but he backed Lew's story."

"Thanks. I'd like a box of forty-four shells."

"What's up?" Lem asked shortly.

"Nothing. I'm taking a ride and I thought I might practice with that Colt of mine. I haven't handled it in months."

Lem gave Crate the shells but the old man's sharp eyes were filled with questions. Crate gave him no chance to ask any more questions and, fifteen minutes later, he rode from Rawhide, heading toward the Squaw Creek bridge. He crossed it and took the trail to the Matson place.

HE THOUGHT he knew what bothered Jimmy. The button was torn two ways. Though he didn't like Lew, Jimmy was still loyal and by no direct word would he betray his foster-father. It was the sort of loyalty that, though it shielded a sidewinder and rustler, still made Crate proud of the button.

But Jimmy had also absorbed Crate's teachings as to the rights of others, the protection of their property. Jimmy knew how Crate felt about such things and the

button wanted to go straight himself. He had fled the school in order to avoid telling Crate the truth and thus betraying his uncle.

"The poor kid," Crate breathed. He shifted the unaccustomed weight of the holster on his thigh. "Maybe I can get things straightened out for him."

He came to the mountain valley and struck out across it to the grove of cottonwood trees. As he came closer, he saw the few feet of new fence that Lew had built out near the barn. It looked as though Lew had simply thrown it together. There was no sign of life around the place until Crate pulled up in the yard. Then Lew appeared in the doorway.

Crate tensed, ready for trouble, but Lew surprised him. The man smiled and came out in the yard. His greeting, though not exactly cordial, was polite.

"I reckon I sort of lost my head the other day," he said. "I made a bad mistake and I hope yuh hold no hard feelings."

"No," Crate answered. Something about the man rang false. Crate glanced around the yard. "I'm looking for Jimmy."

"He in trouble again?" Lew demanded. Crate shook his head.

"No. I want to talk to him about some of his lessons."

Lew's eyes narrowed slightly and his smile vanished for an instant. Then his cordiality returned.

"Light and rest yore saddle, Randall. Jimmy ain't around right now, but he should be back. Yuh can wait for him."

Crate hesitated. He sensed that Lew wanted him to refuse the invitation. Crate glanced at the house and caught a flick of movement at one of the windows and his suspicions of Lew Matson flamed anew. He swung out of the saddle. Lew's stubbled face hardened imperceptibly but he led the way into the house.

They entered the kitchen and it was a mess. Dirty dishes were stacked on the table and the floor had not been swept in several days. Lew pulled out a chair for Crate, one for himself. The two men sat down in a strained silence.

Crate glanced out the dusty window. From here, he could see the small corral beyond the barn, invisible from the yard. A shaggy pony stood there, listlessly nuzzling at the bare, packed ground. Lew Matson had lied about Jimmy. He was somewhere about. Crate saw two other horses in the corral before he hastily jerked his eyes from the window. Neither one was the paint that Lew always rode into Rawhide.

Lew talked aimlessly of the weather, of Rawhide, made big plans for the homestead. He was obviously waiting impatiently for Crate to go, though he tried to appear unconcerned. Crate listened, growing more and more impatient himself with this game that they played. Finally he stood up and Lew hastily came to his feet, all smiles. "Sorry yuh can't wait for Jimmy no longer," he said. "I'll tell him yuh was here."

"I want to see Jimmy—now."

Crate pointed out the window. Lew turned, saw the pony. His geniality left him in a second. "As for your friends," Crate went on, "I don't care—"

"Yuh see too much, Randall!" Lew snarled.

Suddenly someone kicked on one of the closed doors. There was an oath and a scuffle. Jimmy's voice sounded, high pitched and desperate. "Get out, Crate! Get out!" the boy screamed.

It cut off abruptly. Crate stood rooted to the spot for a second and then he lunged for the door. Instantly Lew swung at him and Crate saw the blow coming. He dodged and his hand dropped down to his holster. He had the gun out and levelled before Lew could recover his balance.

"Tell your friends to bring Jimmy out, Lew. You've been using the kid in your rustling scheme. That's over. Tell them to come out!"

Lew froze, eyes centered on the gun. He licked his lips, then called:

"Bring the kid out, Tex."

THE door opened and a hard-eyed man appeared. Crate swung his Colt to cover the newcomer and Tex hastily jerked his hand away from his holster. He stepped slowly into the room, and Jimmy darted around him.

"I told Lew I wouldn't ride no more," he said breathlessly. "He tried whuppin' me but I wouldn't give in."

There was a dark bruise on the boy's cheek and Crate's eyes glittered angrily.

He half turned to Lew. "There's another friend here, Lew. I think the sheriff would like to see you boys."

"There ain't no one—"

"He lies, Crate," Jimmy cut in.

From the next room a gun blasted. The bullet whipped by Crate's head. Instinctively, Crate swung and his Colt blasted an answer, lined toward the flash of the other gun. A man choked and something threshed in the dark room.

Tex and Lew Matson flung themselves to either side, both men going for their guns. Jimmy made a dive for Lew, fastening himself on the man's gun arm. Tex cleared his gun and his slug caught Crate in the hip, knocking his leg from under him. Crate fell and Tex' second shot whipped over his shoulder.

Lew tried to fling Jimmy to one side but the button hung on desperately. Crate saw everything in a blur. He struck the floor, managing to hold on to his Colt. He twisted to one side, snapped up the six and blasted three shots at Tex. In a haze of powdersmoke and pain he saw the renegade catapult backward against the wall, slide down it to the floor.

Lew flung Jimmy to one side, whirled to end the fight. Jimmy bounced up and threw himself at Lew's legs and the man crashed down, his gun flying from his hand. He twisted around, kicking savagely. With the last bit of his strength, Crate brought his gun barrel down on the man's head and Lew went limp. Crate hung on to his reeling senses. His left leg was numb and dead, but he knew that the pain would come later. "Better ride for help, Jimmy," he gasped.

Thudding boots sounded outside and the door slammed back on its hinges. Crate turned to face the new menace, his six moving painfully and slowly upward. A man yelled, "Crate!" and someone knocked the Colt from his hand. Crate's eyes focused on Breck Long's anxious face. He smiled and then slipped down into a long tunnel of darkness.

The lamp was lit on the littered table when Crate's consciousness returned. His leg was bandaged and he had been placed on a crude stretcher. Lem Adams and Doc Renford bent over him, smiling. Jimmy stood on the other side.

Crate looked beyond them. Lew Matson and a renegade he had not seen before stood handcuffed by the door at Breck Long's side. Tex still lay by the wall, a blanket over his still form. The renegade beside Lew had a bloody bandage around his shoulder, the shirt ripped away.

"What—?" Crate began. Doc Renford silenced him.

"Looks like you and Jimmy cleaned up a rustling gang, Crate. The dead gent was Tex Becker and the man beside Lew is Jake Lars. Both were wanted just about everywhere in the west for rustling and armed robbery. Lew himself has some things to settle with the law."

"The cattle?" Crate asked.

"Jimmy took us to the hole-in-the-wall where they was held. Lew and his friends had used running irons and was waiting for the brands to heal before they run the beef over the War Bonnets to a crooked dealer who'd buy 'em. Jed Krannert is mighty happy, Crate."

"But how did you know I'd come here?"

"Lem Adams got suspicious when you bought that box of forty-fours and asked questions about Lew Matson. He got Breck and some of the boys and we trailed you. The shooting was over before we could get inside to help you."

"I didn't need any help," Crate said and he looked at Jimmy. "I had a fighting partner. What about Jimmy? This was his home. Now that Lew—"

"Aw, Crate," Jimmy cut in. "This wasn't no home. Yuh made me see that, with yore talk about freedom, and law, and the rights of other folks. That's why I wouldn't ride no more for Lew. I'll get along."

Jed Krannert came up beside Jimmy and dropped his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I reckon there's always a home at the Rafter K for a gent who saved my beef, Jimmy. Yuh can go to Crate's school and we'll teach yuh to be a top-hand puncher. We'll see yuh get this place, too. Reckon that'll work?"

Crate grinned and moved. Pain shot up his leg and he winced, but his smile came back. He extended his hand to Jimmy.

"You'll be a top-hand puncher, all right. But I think I'll teach you more about the Constitution and the things dead hombres did before you were born. There's blamed few Americans take it close to heart like you do, Jimmy."

"Get 'em up, Parker!" Jim rasped

RENDEZVOUS IN REDEYE

By GARDNER F. FOX

There's plenty of excitement in this sleepy little cowtown when a wandering buckaroo rides in—without his sixguns!

NOBODY knew whether Charley Smith was an outlaw, or a sheriff. He came into Redeye from the Gila desert, dusty and sweatstained, walking with that hitching gait that all horsemen have out of the saddle. He didn't look like much in the faded red shirt and worn blue levis, but the combination of yellow hair and brown eyes was very unusual and attracted comment.

He came to a stop in front of us boys on the boardwalk of the Last Chance, where we sat on the cracker barrels and empty whisky kegs that Gus Kieferhof let us use.

"Name's Smith," he said with a nod. "Been walkin' a spell. Anybody join me in a drink?"

"Yaller hair an' brown eyes," Jed Summers growled, sticking out his chin whiskers. "That's an odd combination, stranger. Whisperin' Slim Olivet, the sheriff up Yuma way, has hair an' eyes like that. The only thing is, the killin'est outlaw in Arizony has hair an' eyes the same color. I'm talkin' about Cactus Chan Parker. Which one are you, Smith?"

Smith grinned at old Jed. "Lots of buckaroos with yellow hair an' brown eyes."

With his Stetson pushed back on his head, and the shy grin on his face, he looked like a nice young cowhand off his luck. But we all got a funny impression, looking into them brown eyes. It was like Smith was offering friendship with one hand, while with the other he was going for a gun.

He didn't wear a gun, but he gave us the feeling he was used to one. And the guns he would wear weren't new store guns that a tenderfoot slings around. His guns would have walnut handles, smooth and worn with a lot of using. The grips would be walnut so's the sweat on a man's hand in the Arizona heat wouldn't make them slip when they was being fired.

"Ain't heard of none but them two I mentioned," Jed grumbled. "Now we're peaceable in Redeye, and we don't want—"

Jed never finished. A skinny little button with freckles all over a face that looked like a jack-o-lantern's, with its wide grin and the toothless gaps in his mouth, came pounding down the boardwalk.

"C'mon, Gran'pop," the button called. "Marylou's waitin' supper. Yuh're late."

"Dingbust it!" Jed groused.

Smith laughed and hooked a hand under Jed's elbow. "You kite along, ol' timer. Be glad yuh got somebody to cook yuh a warm meal."

That was a tipoff. Us boys on the cracker barrels and whiskey kegs nudged each other. A longrider like "Cactus Chan" Parker and a sheriff like "Whisperin' Slim" Olivet ain't got time to sit to a meal fixed with home trimmings. Both them buckaroos was the fastest gunslingers in the whole Southwest. Wherever either one of them went, there was trouble.

Then there was the way this feller Smith turned and came back to us, his boots sliding along, both hands hanging close to his thighs where his Colts would bob if he wore them. He was ready for a draw, ready for any kind of trouble. He was almost looking for it.

We were pretty sure of Charley Smith. We had him tabbed.

Later that afternoon, he went down to the livery stable with Matt Kimberley who had the contract with Wells Fargo. Matt put him to work, and the stranger took to it like a calf to the udder. He grabbed a broom and gave the floor the first sweeping it had in five years. He found some busted harness and some thread, set himself in front of the stable and began sewing.

Us boys on the Last Chance boardwalk had a good view of the street in Redeye. We could see away out of town along the rutted road that curved to meet the outskirts of the desert, and we could see near thirty miles in the other direction. But the first thing we saw that next morning was Charley Smith with a saddle on his knee working away, with just as good a view as we had.

He hardly ever left the box in front of Matt's place. He'd go and get whatever work he had to do and bring it out there. And every once in a while he'd lift his head and look toward the Gila, as if expectin' somebody to ride in that knowed him real well.

US BOYS treated him cool. We had him tabbed, but there wasn't anything to be done until we knew for certain who he was. We just sat on our barrels and kegs and kept an eye on him, along with the rest of the town.

The button with the face like a jack-o-lantern made friends with Smith. Taddy was always hangin' around the stable anyhow, to be on hand when the big Concord came swaying in, and with Charley Smith there to tell him stories about Apache raids and men like Bat Masterson and Clay Allison, the button was in heaven.

We could see Smith showing the button how to flip a lariat, using both the underhand and overhand toss. Once Smith braided a bullhide whip and put on a performance that opened the button's eyes. He stayed clear of six-guns, but he didn't fool us.

One day Marylou Summers came down to the stable to fetch Taddy home. If Taddy was a jack-o-lantern, Marylou was a bunny rabbit, soft and white, and with red lips and black hair. We waited for Charley Smith to fall all over himself when Marylou looked at him with her blue eyes, but he fooled us. He stood up right easy, taking off his dusty sombrero, grinning and talking as if he'd known her all his life.

It wasn't long after that that Charley Smith was eating his meals at the Summers' spread a few miles out of town, near Babbly Brook. He'd slick himself up in store gear, tight black trousers and shoelace tie, and a white shirt that made his bronzed face look like an Indian. Whenever anybody went past the Summers house, like as not he'd hear Marylou and Charley playing the piano and singing songs like "The Charming Young Widow I Met on the Train" and "Sweet Marie."

Some of the boys went fishing one night, down to Old Babbly. A couple of us got a little distance from the others, more toward Jed's Walking Box spread. It was mighty quiet under the stars, with only the water gurgling around the rocks to break the night silence, and the hiss of a line going taut when a big trout struck the hook.

We heard Marylou and Charley Smith walking through the alders. We should have moved on upstream, but the fish were biting. We thought they'd keep on walking, but they stopped.

Marylou was saying, "It's a shame, just because a man makes a mistake, people always hound him."

"I guess they got to have the law, Miss Marylou."

"Well, yes. I didn't mean not to have any law. But to hound a man, to chase him so far from his home. I wouldn't blame you if—I mean, I wouldn't blame a so-called outlaw if he did something pretty drastic about it."

We were locked in that stream as if it had frozen solid around our legs. We couldn't have moved if we wanted to. We didn't dare.

Charley Smith laughed softly. "Sometimes a man turns outlaw because there ain't anybody who believes in him. Like a horse, for instance. I've seen killer horses turn mild as paint when a man took a real interest in 'em, enough to care whether they was good or bad."

There was a little silence after that. Then Marylou whispered, "I think a girl ought to take that sort of an interest in a badman. I mean if he isn't all bad, and if she—likes him at all and—"

"I'm for that, whole hog!" answered Smith.

"A girl can do a lot for a man."

"She'd give him a new lease on life," he agreed.

"If a girl likes a man a lot," Marylou said hesitantly, "do you think she'd be a hussy if—she gave him a—a kiss?"

There was a sharp intake of breath and then a pause. Finally Charley Smith murmured, "Bein' an outlaw sure has a lot to recommend it!"

They moved off, side by side. We could hear the twigs snapping under their feet.

"By the eternal!" Jim Bentley whispered hoarsely. "We know who he is, now. There ain't no doubt no longer. I'm agoin' to get the rest of the boys together. We got to do somethin'."

The boys didn't like what they heard. There was a lot of grumbling and some blue-tinged profanity. Only Matt Kimberley stuck up for Smith.

"He's a good worker," he said. "Never swipes nothin', and he don't answer back. He does his work fast an' efficient."

"It's just a front," growled Jim Bentley. "An outlaw's an outlaw. We got to get rid of him."

"Cherokee Andy" Rowland, who used to be one of Custer's guides, clipped in with. "No tellin' but what he might be plannin' to rob the whole town, boys. I heard of it bein' done. We got to send him away."

FIRST thing next morning a few of the boys walked down the main street to the front doors of the livery stable where Charley Smith was work-

ing on a big Cheyenne saddle. He looked up and nodded, and his brown eyes slid away and up the street toward the Gila. He listened all the time Jim Bentley talked, but his eyes kept watching the desert road.

"Ain't that we got anything personal against owlhoots, Smith. Especially them that don't look to run a blazer on us. But we can't have no outlaws livin' off us. You take yore gear and hightail it out of Redeye, an' we'll forget we ever saw yuh."

Smith didn't stop his stitching. He brought his eyes back from the desert and said in his soft voice, "Sorry, boys. I got to stay. I like it here."

Cherokee Andy sent tobacco juice squirting all over the brown leather of the big Cheyenne. His black eyes glittered.

"You won't like it no more, Parker."

Smith was white. He was quivering like a top-string bucker when the blindfolds are on him and the saddle's just been cinched. He let the saddle slide down off his thigh as he stood up. He wasn't so big, but his brown eyes had a look in their depths that sent us stepping back to give him room.

"I've heard of wild horses turnin' an animal out of the herd, but when it comes to human bein's—"

He brushed past us, went walking down the street back the way he'd come into town. He walked slow and easy, not like a buckaroo who'd just been chased away, but like a wolf who was hankerin' for the lone trails again. There was menace in the stifflegged walk and the way he held his head. It was the first time us boys'd ever seen a killin' outlaw with the snubbers off. We didn't like what we saw.

Charley Smith went away, and he stayed away. We congratulated each other, sitting there on the cracker barrels and the empty whiskey kegs. We felt pretty good about seeing and doing our civic duty, until the first day Marylou Summers came to town in the buckboard.

She walked right up to the wooden sidewalk where we sat, but she didn't step on it. Her blue eyes sent off sparks.

"I wouldn't blame him if he came hunting every one of you with his guns," she snapped. "I hope he chases you from Yuma up to Abilene."

Tad Summers leaned from the wooden seat of the wagon where he was fiddling restlessly with the big bullhide whip Smith had made for him.

"Maybe that would teach you what it's like to be without a friend," he called shrilly.

Somebody started to choke and splutter. A hand went up, pointing toward the desert. We all knew, with an icy feeling deep down inside us, what that finger was pointing at. We swivelled our necks at the same time.

He'd come back.

This time he was riding, his legs forking as pretty a brown mare as us boys ever seen. She came prancing in, her dainty hoofs raising little puffs of dust. Smith—or Cactus Chan Parker—rode her like he was a part of her. Our eyes slid over the silver *Las Cruces* bit and the Texas style saddle, and fastened on something else. It was a sight to chase the chills up and down the spines of every manjack one of us.

Smith wore gunbelts around his waist. They were studded with cartridges, with brown holsters strapped low on his thighs, gunman's way. The walnut handles of the Colts were like we knew they'd be: smooth and worn, and walnut, so's they wouldn't slip in a man's grip even when his palms were sweating.

"He's come for us!" Matt Kimberley cried hoarsely.

The boys panicked, scattering and diving for the batwing doors, for huge kegs filled with nails, for any place that might stop lead. Nothing happened. We poked our heads out after a while, and Charley Smith was just sitting his kak, lips twisted into a wry grin. His brown eyes slid from one to the other of us.

Marylou flung her head back so the wind whipped her black hair away from her head. She smiled proudly. "Welcome to Redeye, Cactus!"

"It ain't fitten yuh should talk to an outlaw, ma'am."

"I'm talkin' to a man, Cactus. Light down."

He swung out of the saddle gracefully, but we noticed he kept his hands almighty close to the walnut grips of his

Colts. He took his hat off with his left hand and held it close to his thigh.

"Are you staying, Cactus?" Marylou asked softly.

"Reckon I am, ma'am. For a little while, anyhow."

"I'm gettin' the hang of th' whip, Cactus," the button shouted, leaning from the buckboard seat. "I can snip off a cigarette from a fence post twenty feet away. I did once, anyhow."

Smith grinned. "You keep it up, old timer. You'll be able to do it every time pretty soon, just like me."

Marylou went a little closer to Cactus Chan and smiled. "Will you come to the Walking Box with us, Cactus? We'd admire to have you stay to dinner."

"That would be right fine, Miss Marylou. I've been afoot for one of yore meals too long to suit me."

They rode off toward the Summers' spread, Tad driving the wagon and Marylou sitting beside him but looking at Smith who walked his mare within a hand's reach of her. Cherokee Andy squirted tobacco juice at a knothole.

"Reckon there's goin' to be a truce between him an' us," he shrilled.

"Not with me sittin' in on it, there ain't," growled Jim Bentley. "I'll take my Sharps down from the pegs and go get me an outlaw. I ain't forgot how to line up my sights on a man yet."

JIM got himself so riled up with talking about what he was going to do to Cactus Chan Parker that he started treating to drinks at the bar. We were so overcome by this that we didn't hear the saddler stopping at the tie rack outside, and when the stranger walked in it was a surprise to us.

"Just rode up from Quitobaquita," he told Gus Kieferhof who was tending bar. "Have they had their gunfight yet?"

"Have who had their gunfight?" wondered Gus.

There was a dead silence as the stranger threw back his head and let the liquor go down his throat. He wiped the back of his dusty sleeve across his lips, then looked at Gus and the rest of us.

"Ain't you heard?"

We shook our heads and the stranger grinned, liking all the attention he was getting. "Cactus Chan Parker an' Whisperin' Slim Olivet. They're meetin' right here in Redeye. Goin' to shoot it out."

The stranger watched Gus pour more liquor into his glass. "Heard 'bout it over the Border," he resumed. "Seems Cactus Chan is gettin' tired of bein' chased all over Arizona by Slim. Some folks allow he's afraid of him. Cactus ain't afraid of no man. He wants to show folks that, an' get rid of Slim at the same time.

"With Whisperin' Slim out of the way, Cactus will have things his own way around this part of the country. Ain't nobody but Slim can stand up to Cactus with six-guns. He sent word to Slim, tellin' him to meet him here this week. Wait seven days for him, he tells him. Then if Whisperin' don't come, Cactus is goin' out an' shoot him down on sight."

"Cactus has been waitin' ten days," growled Jim Bentley.

The stranger dropped his glass in surprise and stood watching the shattered pieces. Some of the liquor splashed onto his dusty boots, streaking them. He turned to Jim slowly with a thin smile.

"You're mistaken, friend. Cactus Chan is ridin' up from Mexico. He ain't here yet."

"He's here," insisted Jim, and we all shook our heads in agreement. "But he don't need to wait no longer. I'm goin' to take down my Sharps and let some air in his hide."

The stranger laughed harshly. "Friend, don't take offense, but you go hide that Sharps somewhere. I've seen Cactus Chan go for his guns. I've seen him scragged from ambush, fall off'n his horse, an' the man that drygulched him was dead before Cactus hit the ground."

"That don't spook me!" Jim grumbled, but he said it like it did spook him. A man is only human. He might miss that first shot complete.

"Then where's Cactus Chan now?" went on the stranger.

"Down to the Walkin' Box, havin' chow with Miss Marylou Summers," Matt Kimberley broke in.

The stranger nodded and tossed some coins on the bar. "Let me have a bed, friend. I want to get some shut-eye so's I'll be fresh when Whisperin' Slim runs into Cactus Chan."

When the stranger had tromped up the rear stairs, Jim Bentley looked around at us.

"What we goin' to do about that Cactus Chan?" he asked. "If all of us was to band together and hogtie him for Whisperin' when he rides in—"

Matt Kimberley was sliding his glass in little circles on the bartop, looking doubtful. "Reckon Whisperin' Slim might like to get his man his own way, Jim."

"Ain't a buckaroo just as glad to see a dead snake, no matter who killed it?"

We took a vote and the upshot of it was we all went home, brought back our shooting irons, and sat down on the cracker barrels and the whiskey kegs, and waited.

Cactus Chan rode into town on the brown mare early in the afternoon. He swung down at the tie rack and was knotting the reins when Jim stood up.

"Get 'em up, Parker," Jim rasped, lifting the big barrel of his Sharps. "We're all against yuh. Yuh might get one or two of us, but somebody'll be sure to plug yuh if yuh make a play."

Cactus slid his brown eyes around at us, and smiled a little as he lifted his hands to his shoulders.

"I'm sure glad to see such a law-abidin' group of hombres," he said. "The only thing is—"

"Here comes Whisperin' Slim now!" Matt Kimberley yelled, knocking over the cracker barrel in his excitement.

We all craned our necks toward the Gila. Whisperin' was riding a big black stallion, buckskin chinks on his legs, his yellow hair spilling down over his shoulders. Two guns were buckled low on his thighs, the way Cactus Chan wore them. When he saw Cactus standing with his hands up in the air, he kneed his cayuse toward the Last Chance.

Whisperin' had brown eyes, same as Cactus. He leaned across the undercut fork of his saddle and stared. Then he began to laugh hoarsely.

"So they caught yuh for me, did they?" He grinned, putting a hand on a curving gun butt and loosening the barrel from the holster. "They got yuh hogtied on the end of a Sharps barrel, just waitin' for it."

"We seen our duty an' we done it, Whisperin'," Jim Bentley said proudly.

The man on the black saddler poked the big Colt forward across the stallion's neck, holding it firmly aimed at Cactus Chan's chest. "Drop the guns, Cactus." He seemed inwardly amused about something.

Cactus Chan put his hands down, fumbling at the big silver buckle of his crossed belts. His holsters, weighted by his guns, slid down his thighs. He started to speak, but Whisperin' Slim's gun tilted and he closed his mouth again.

Whisperin' turned to the boys on the boardwalk. "Much obliged, gents. I'll be takin' this owlhoot off yore hands. They's a jail in Yuma just his size. Get a move on, Cactus. Start walkin'!"

"Heck," growled Matt Kimberly. "Yuh ain't gonna make him walk to Yuma, are yuh? Even an outlaw is human."

Whisperin' laughed grimly. "I ain't takin' no chances. If a man is plumb tuckered out from walkin', he ain't goin' to put up no fight, come time to camp."

THEY started down the dusty street, Cactus Chan's high-heeled boots raising little clumps of dirt. The big stallion walked at his heels.

Just then we heard the screech of unoiled wagon wheels, and the Walking Box buckboard came around the corner of the Wells Fargo office on two wheels. Tad Summers was standing up, flicking the sweatstained backs of the Walking Box bays with the bullhide whip Cactus had made for him. Marylou was half-standing too, calling out to Cactus.

Whisperin' Slim reined in the black and turned to stare at the careening buckboard. His face twisted angrily under the shadow of his wide-brimmed Stetson. He paused indecisively, a hand on his gun butt. By then it was too late.

Marylou was out of the wagon and in front of Cactus, flinging her arms around him. She turned her face angrily to Whisperin'.

"You're just like all the others!" she cried. "Hounding a man because he's an outlaw, because everybody's turned against him, not giving him a chance to go straight. You—you—"

Whisperin' stared at Marylou in ludi-

crous amazement. He took off his sombrero and scratched his thick yellow hair. Tad had urged the buckboard close to Cactus, was leaning forward in the wooden seat.

"I don't care what any of 'em say, Cactus," the button shrilled. "I'll always be your pal."

That was when Cactus moved. His hand snaked out and he had the button's bullhide whip in his hand and was bringing his right arm forward. The lash sang through the air, whirled and stung and writhed around Whisperin's neck. The sheriff went purple. His mouth opened and both his hands came up to the lash to claw at it. Cactus jerked on the plaited handle and Whisperin' slid out of the kak into the dirt of the road.

Cactus was on him like a cat. He lifted his guns and stepped back to give the sheriff time to catch his breath.

"Where's my Sharps?" Jim Bentley yelled. "Who took—"

Cactus whirled and shot, right at us boys on the porch of the Last Chance. Somebody gave a low moan and staggered between Cherokee Andy and Matt Kimberley. It was the stranger, guns in his hands, knees caving in under his weight.

"Hold it!" snapped Cactus to Jim Bentley. His gun barrels tilted, breathing smoke.

The only sound was the thin, harsh breathing of the man on the street whose hands clawed feebly at his torn throat. Cactus stepped toward him like a hunting cat.

"Tell them!" his voice lashed out.

The other nodded feebly. He tried to speak, finally managed a hoarse whisper. "It's—it's him. He's the real sheriff. I'm—Cactus Chan. The—the man he shot was my right hand pard. All you blasted fools tried to make him out to be an outlaw but I'm the—outlaw."

Marylou Summers had been standing proud and erect all the while lead was flying. Now her eyes were filled with fury. She walked up to the real Whisperin' Slim and slapped him.

"I don't care what you let *them* think!" she cried. "You made me believe the same thing! I can't ever forgive you for that—listening to me say all those fool things I did—about outlaws and all, trying to defend you. I—"

"I had to play my game that way, Marylou," he pleaded softly. "I had to find out if Cactus was stagin' a drygulchin' for me. If I rode in with my guns, I'd likely be shot out of the saddle before I set foot on the ground."

Marylou pretended not to listen. She walked over to stand in front of Cactus Chan, who was still sitting in the dirt stroking his throat. Then she turned toward Whisperin'.

"Get out!" she said angrily. "Get out! Leave him here. I meant what I told you —about outlaws."

Whisperin' drew a deep breath. "Yeah. I reckon yuh did. I was agoin' to let him go anyhow, if he'd swear to go straight. That shows how much I believed yore talk about outlaws not havin' a chance."

Marylou looked down at the real Cactus Chan. "Will you make that promise?" she asked.

"I swear it," the outlaw cried urgently. "I'll find me a new section an' settle down. I got money. I'll buy me a ranch."

Whisperin' Slim didn't wait for the rest of it. He slid over to where his gunbelts hung on Cactus Chan's saddlehorn, drew them down and buckled them around his waist. Going to his own horse he stepped into the box stirrup and eased into the kak.

He paced the mare to the buckboard and reached out to take Taddy's hand. "Sorry, ol' timer," he said. "It would've ended different if I could've helped it."

Taddy nodded, not speaking. For a long time he sat and watched Whisperin' ride the brown mare off into the desert. There was a forlorn look in his eyes. Marylou watched too, and you could see her chin tremble and the tears well up in her eyes.

Some day Whisperin' Slim will come back, forking that brown mare of his. He's got to —for Marylou's sake. He'll hear how Cactus Chan broke his promise, and he'll go after him. He'll get him for keeps, this time. Then he'll come riding in from the Gila and his spurs will jingle and his yellow hair will shine, and Marylou will run to meet him.

It gives us boys on the cracker barrels and the whiskey kegs something to look forward to. Life around Redeye is pretty dull, lately.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 8)

Bud Linderman won the first go-round, Sonny Tureman was second, Bud Spealman was third and Casey Tibbs was fourth, while fifth place was split between Buster Ivory and Tater Decker. In the second go-round, first and second was split between Bud Spealman and Larry Finley. Wag Blessing was third, Johnny Cobb was fourth and Cecil Henley was fifth.

In the jackpot roping Jack Skipworth was the winner, Troy Fort was second and Walton Poage was third.

In matched ropings, Toots Mansfield defeated Homer Pettigrew in a four-calf match with a time of 63.4 seconds against 68.4 seconds. Zeano Ferris won a close match from N. A. Pittcock, 74.8 seconds against 75.9 seconds. Lefty Wilken won over Jim Espy, 93.7 seconds against 112.8 seconds.

Point Standings

According to the last compilation of points in the Rodeo Cowboys' Association point award system for the championship titles this year, Bill Linderman is leading in the race for the bareback bronc riding title with 2,882 points. His closest rival is Sonny Tureman with 2,648 points.

Carl Olson, a Canadian cowboy, is out in front in the saddle bronc riding with 2,712 points, followed by Bill McMackin, with 2,425 points. Homer Pettigrew is the leading steer wrestler with 3,384 points and next in line is Buck Sorrells, with 2,953 points. Wag Blessing is top man in the bull riding with 3,074 points, followed by Jake Monroe, with 2,251 points.

Troy Fort is leading the field of calf ropers with 9,110 points. His closest rival is Toots Mansfield, with 5,414 points. Asbury Schell has the best score in team roping with 1,059 points, with Buck Sorrells next in line with 961 points.

Intercollegiate Rodeos

As radio announcers often say in crying the wares of their sponsors, "Something new has been added!" Now, in Texas, they have intercollegiate rodeos.

For a number of years Baylor University at Waco has held a rodeo, but the Junior College Rodeo at Corsicana this season started a series of intercollegiate competitions. The rodeo was held at the Corsicana Fair Association's arena. The events were bareback bronc riding, calf roping, trick riding, saddle bronc riding, fancy roping and wild bull riding.

Roy Rogers

After being all set for a tour with his rodeo, Roy Rogers cancelled the tour. It is said that the cause of the cancellation was due to the fact that he could not obtain time out from his movie making with Republic Pictures for the tour which included bookings in April and May.

However, Roy is making summer and fall rodeo tours. Rogers planned a thrill circus with Thomas N. Packs, of St. Louis, and played the Polo Grounds in New York City and ball parks in Columbus, Ohio, Indianapolis, Ind., Louisville, Ky., Cincinnati, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pa. Roy will open his fall rodeo tour in Philadelphia, September 3rd, and will play Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis and Chicago.

Other Rodeo News and Notes

Jimmy Wakely, singing cowboy of Monogram Pictures was guest star of the Championship Rodeo staged in Soldier Field, Chicago. Jimmy is coming to the front with rapid strides. A few years ago he was one of the leading musicians with Gene Autry's group of guitar strummers and singers, then went in for bits in pictures and after a time secured leading roles in a number of films. Jimmy is from Lawton, Okla., and started out ten years ago with just a guitar and no horse, but now seems to be well on the road to the top.

Casey Tibbs, a young rodeo cowboy from Ft. Pierre, South Dakota, is a cowboy who, it seems, will attract plenty of attention this season. He has been in the winning column in practically every rodeo he has played, is a young, slender, good-looking cowpoke who really does not look stout enough to perform the stunts he does, but he has riding ability and plenty of grace. He is a bronc rider of the late Fritz Truan style. Upon the hurricane deck of the worst sunfishing bucker, he seems to ride with exceptional ease, and he is riding into the prize money at a lot of rodeos.

McGuffin & Rippeteau, a new firm in rodeo productions, are staging a number of rodeos this season. Rippeteau is a well known promoter of Corpus Christi, Texas, and McGuffin is an oil rig equipment merchant and rancher of Alice, Texas. Their stock consists of about 160 head of saddle horses, bucking horses and rodeo cattle. They opened at Alice, Texas, moved on to Sedalia, Missouri, then on to Terre Haute, Indiana and Danville, Illinois. Other rodeo men are watching the outcome of their venture as they are playing good sized cities with only three or four performances to the engagement, and it is interesting to know how business will stack up at such short stands.

Important Meetings

A series of meetings were held in which officials of the Rodeo Cowboys' Association the International Rodeo Association, stock contractors and contract performer representatives, ironed out a lot of differences that have existed between the associations. This should have a lasting effect upon the sport of the cowboy. The gist of the agreements were that rodeo contests are no longer a closed shop, but open to all contestants who wish to enter whether they are members of the RCA or not, but anyone who is on the RCA blacklist or who is undesirable to the managements (on blacklist of IRA) shall not be permitted to enter.

The rodeo livestock contractors have agreed not to furnish stock to any closed amateur rodeo--meaning that if an amateur bars professional or RCA members, then the regular stock contractors cannot furnish them stock. For many years in the past, at some rodeos, the local management, wishing to see to it that home boys won all the prize money, have barred the traveling or professional contestant. They may continue to do so, but will now also have to procure stock from contractors who do not furnish stock to regular rodeos.

Another ruling is that it shall be optional with individual rodeos as to whether they join the RCA point award system. Formerly each individual rodeo whose prize list was OK'd by the RCA was supposed automatically to become a member of the point award system, and was levied upon for the dues. It is doubtful if this ruling will keep any individual rodeo from joining the point

[*Turn page*]

award system, as it is a good thing, and the dues paid in by rodeos goes toward the expense of compiling the points and to the awards to the champions at the end of the season. It is simply the difference between an invitation to join and a demand to join, and any American likes an invitation better than a demand.

The RCA will continue to approve the prize lists of rodeos and no member contestant will be permitted to enter any rodeo where the prize list has not been approved by the RCA. The RCA has saved the contestants thousands upon thousands of dollars in prize money and has practically eliminated the fly-by-night promoter who sometimes absconded with the prize money, leaving the contestants holding an empty bag.

The entire picture is simple. The Rodeo Cowboys Association looks after the interests of the rodeo contestants, the International Rodeo Association looks after the interests of the rodeo producers and managers and the interests of the local rodeo committee. There is need for both organizations and there is also room for both of them, and if they work in harmony, each association with the other, meeting the issues squarely and frankly, it will do the sport a lot of good.

JE Ranch Rodeo

The JE Ranch Rodeo at Washington, D. C., was a great show, but did not attract the patronage that it did a year ago when Gene Autry was guest star. Washington had come to expect a name star with its rodeos, having had Autry and Roy Rogers, either one or the other, at the rodeos there for the past seven years.

Col. Jim Eskew was the producer, Jim Eskew, Jr., assistant arena director, Bill Parks and Ole Rice were the judges, Bob Matthews arena secretary, Mary Parks chief timer, Clay Hockman announcer. Among the trick riders were Rex Rossi, Ted Warhol, Jimmy Miller, and Beryl Jackson. The fancy ropers were Jim Eskew, Jr., Rex Rossi, and Buddy Mefford. The clowns were John Crethers and Brahma Rogers. Among the specialty acts were the Shooting Mansfields, Marvin Hoover's bucking Ford, Johnny Weese and his horse "Bob White," Ted Allen, World's champion horseshoe pitcher, Jack Andrews and his trained Brahma bull "Henry", Jim Eskew, Jr., and his rope spin-

ning specialty, and John Crethers and his mule "Mickey Mouse."

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: First, Ted Warhol; Second, Jimmy Schumacher; Third, Jim Like; Fourth, Sonny Tureman.

In saddle bronc riding, Red Wilmer was the winner, Casey Tibbs and Sonny Tureman split second and third, Jim Like was fourth. Choat Webster was top man in the calf roping, Jim Eskew, Jr., was second, Hugh Posey was third and Sonny Tureman was fourth. Choat Webster also copped the steer wrestling, Tom Davis was second, Clayton Hart was third and Jim Eskew, Jr., was fourth. Jim Whiteman won the bull riding, Sonny Tureman was second, Gerald Roberts was third and Lou Quirk was fourth.

Pittsburgh Show

The JE Ranch Rodeo moved into the Gardens at Pittsburgh, from Washington, D. C., with the same setup of contract performers and specialty acts, with the exception that Johnny Weese was dropped from the program, and Slim Bryant and his Wild-

[*Turn page*]

cats, a popular cowboy singing group from station KDKA of Pittsburgh, was added. The show played to capacity crowds.

Only the winners of the first go-round are available at this time. They were in saddle bronc riding: first, Casey Tibbs; Second, Red Wilmer; Third, Clayton Hart; Fourth, split between Ralph Collier and Frank Duce.

Jim Eskew, Jr., won the calf roping, Ralph Collier was second, John Poage was third and Choat Webster was fourth. Red Wilmer copped the bull riding, Sonny Tureman was second. Pete Baker was third and Gerald Roberts was fourth. Mike Fisher won the steer wrestling. Clayton Hart was second, Curley Hatchell was third and Buck Dowell was fourth. Buck Dowell and Casey Tibbs split first and second in the bareback bronc riding, Gerald Roberts was third, and Jimmy Schumacher and Paul Gould split fourth.

1946 Champion bareback bronc rider, RCA Bud Spealman, suffered a broken leg when a bucking horse fell with him at the Washington, D. C., Rodeo, and will be out of the game for a few weeks. That's about all we can dish up at the chuck wagon this trip. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

YOU'VE read a lot of stories in WEST about cow country conflict of one kind and another—and there was certainly plenty of conflict in those old, bold days when men of many types and many interests were jostling and shoving and shooting for position and power in that wild new land of endless possibilities.

But you haven't read many stories of the conflict between cattlemen and wheat growers in a land where wheat was really getting to be a big industry. And right there is where we have a treat for you. Walker A. Tompkins, one of your favorite authors, has written a novel titled HANGMAN'S HARVEST that is absolutely guaranteed to keep you turning the pages until you have read the last word!

Perhaps you think wheat was dull and prosy business compared to the spur and lariat of the cowman, the wild riding and the tied-down holsters of the boys who tended the longhorns. Or that mebbe a small-town newspaperman just sat at his desk and mois-

tened his pencil in his mouth and wrote how Bill Jones out west of town was shingling his barn—and Pete Hoskins was in town yesterday with a dollar to pay up his subscription—and such? Then you'll just have to meet Cole Kerrigan, who could sling lead as forcefully as he did the King's English, and wasn't afraid to do whichever needed doing.

Also, there was a girl—and what a girl! Rona Prescott, who raised wheat—thousands of acres of the golden stuff—and was afraid of no human living.

Cole Kerrigan was tall and big-shouldered and young—and in Texas, down on the Chisholm Trail, as later in Wheatville, Washington, there were plenty snakes wanting only to see to it that young Cole Kerrigan never got any older.

Here's how the story starts:

Longhorn squatted like a malevolent spider across the Chisholm Trail, where north-bound cattle herds made their annual crossing of the Red River between Texas and the Indian Nations. For years the gamblers and jezebels and bartenders had fattened like parasites on the tribute they exacted from the free-spending Texas drovers, on their way to Abilene and Dodge. But this spring, the cattlemen were boycotting the town, avoiding the spider in the web, hazing their herds far to east or west of Longhorn to ford the Red at less-favored places.

You can see that something was badly wrong in this trail town, can't you? Cole Kerrigan knew what it was, and he wasn't afraid to come right out and say so, in his paper. He headlined the story, "Either Longhorn or Kiowa McCord Must Die!" and he went on to say just why.

Well, that was certainly kicking the devil in the shins, for Kiowa McCord was more dangerous than a bagful of bobcats. And so the time came when Cole Kerrigan had to leave town on a high lope, because there are circumstances in which the man who mixes brains with his bravery knows it's stupid to stick around, and just common sense to run.

Kerrigan left with a murder charge against him—and landed in another hot spot when he hit Wheatville, in the state of Washington. Giff Ogrum, cattle king, was running things there, and Ogrum was every bit as mean and dangerous as McCord had been. He and Cole tangled in personal combat one day, and the story gives you a suggestion as to the kind of gent Ogrum was. Thus—

A haymaker with all the rancher's desperation behind it dropped Kerrigan. Sheriff McCaw's bony hands were ready on gun butts as he saw Ogrum leap into the air with bunched heels, aiming to stomp his full weight on Kerrigan, rip out his entrails with sharp spike heels.

[Turn page]

Nice fella, this Ogrum, don't you think? And have you any idea what fire can be like, spreading in thousands of acres of ripening wheat? There's a saga of battle—how Cole Kerrigan and Rona Prescott and wheat men from all over the valley fought the red destruction launched by Giff Ogrum. Like this—

The blistering heat forced Kerrigan to rip out a section of gunnysack and tie the wet burlap over his face. He charged onward, passing men who reeled and fell and dragged themselves back from the spark-laden air. **** The stars had long since been blotted out by the clouds which palled over dozens of square miles of sky. It seemed that the entire planet was a seething lake of hellfire, against which the puny assault of mere man was a feeble, futile thing. . . .

And—well, there's more—a lot more. Action and drama, and danger and death. But you'll want to read it for yourself, not have it all told to you here. HANGMAN'S HARVEST will be in the next issue of WEST!

Then there's RED FANG DEATH, by Harold F. Cruickshank, another of the White Phantom series. One of the best, too. Right in the beginning, Olak, the White Phantom wolf king, tangles with one of the biggest cougars of the wilderness, and Sanyek, Olak's mate, is badly, perhaps fatally, torn by the enormous lion. This is a story of brave men in action, of savage animal combat in the wilds.

Cruickshank knows his north woods country and its wild denizens, and he gets them down on paper so that you know them, too—and thrill to them. Look forward to RED FANG DEATH, in our next issue. It leads off a bunch of swell short stories, each one a winner, all in the next gala issue!

LETTER BOX

WE GET letters of all kinds, from all over the country, and from other countries, regarding WEST and the stories in the book. And we like the way you readers come right out and tell us what you think, and why. You see, you are the final judges. We know what *we* like, and, judging from your letters, our likes and yours are not so far apart when it comes to western yarns. But we are not mind readers, and the best way we have of giving you just what you want in succeeding issues of the book is for you to write in and tell us your preferences. So we'll be plumb grateful if you unlimber that pen or pencil arm, and get busy. Here

are some of those who did, and this is what they said:

Reading an issue of WEST is like having a grandstand seat on a western hilltop, fifty years ago, and watching things happen. Even before you open the book, the cover gets you into the right spirit for reading, because it fits the contents—kind of a show window, you might say. Thanks for a fine magazine.—*Raymond G. Amundson, Spokane, Washington.*

Mighty nice letter, Ray, and our thanks for writing it. By the way, the feature novel in the next issue, HANGMAN'S HARVEST, ought to make a very special appeal to a State-of-Washington reader, huh? And another—

Certainly a lot of western magazines on the stands these days. Must be a lot of us like to read about the old west. I know I do, and always have. And the favorite mag, to me, is WEST. I like your long stories best, because you can sort of settle down and get acquainted with the characters. But the shorts are good, too.—*Arthur (Chick) Magellan, Fort Worth, Texas.*

If you like the long yarns, and the shorts, too, it would seem we are rollin' 'em right up your alley, Chick. We're glad of that, and we appreciate your telling us. Write again, won't you?

[*Turn page*]

In the main, your stories are good, and I guess WEST measures up to about anything in its field. But sometimes you publish a story that is terrible, and when that happens I always wish I could have the editor sitting right by me, so I could do a real job of sounding off. But there's been nothing lately to get my mad up, so I'll just have to close with saying that, take it all along, you do a pretty good job with WEST and I'll keep on buying it.—*Stuart M. Westover, San Diego, Calif.*

Thanks, Stuart, for being so frank and honest. We are reminded of something that the former editor of a very important magazine said once. He had received a letter from a reader, saying "I liked everything in the current issue of your magazine."

The editor shook his head over that. He figured that if any one individual reader liked *everything* in the magazine, then they were not publishing enough variety to appeal to the multitude of different tastes of their millions of readers. But don't get us wrong. We'd be mighty sorry if you didn't like the majority of our stories—and we guess you do. Anyway, here's a suggestion for you—and for our other readers, too. When you read something you like—or don't like—don't put off writing us about it. Break out the old paper and ink and tell us while it's fresh in your mind!

Of course, the longhorn was the animal that got the big play in the early western days, and that's easy to understand. That's where the meat was—and the money. But the horse was important, too, and sometime I wish we could have more stories about them. I don't mean just the ones the cowboys are riding, but stories about horse ranches and about adventures in capturing wild horses. Every now and then you have a story like that, but not often enough to suit a horse lover like me.—*Ben Kessel, Fargo, N. Dakota.*

You bet the horse was important, Ben. You sure said something there! Without the horse, there could never have been an Old

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ZORRO RACES WITH DEATH

by

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

West, never those far-flung ranches and those huge herds of longhorns, never any conquest of the western wilderness at all. Men made that conquest—men and women —*and* horses. Good horse stories are scarce, though, and we don't want to publish any other kind. But you can count on us to give you a horse yarn one of these months, soon. Lots of our readers like 'em.

Many thanks for writing in, folks. And, everybody—never get the idea that your opinions are not important to us, and don't run off with the notion that you can't write a good letter. If we were sitting there with you, across the coffee cups or mixing the smoke of pipe or cigarette, you'd say your say about WEST, wouldn't you? Okay, a letter is just saying your say on paper. Can do? The address again: The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

All the best, all the time!

—THE EDITOR

CURTAINS FOR A KILLER

(Concluded from page 71)

The youth shuddered and ran his hands ruefully through his hair.

"I'll never get that curl and color back again—not in three months," he said, ruefully. Then his face lighted. "But I really scared the stuffing out of them, didn't I? You should see me, Officer, in '*Diamond Dick, Terror of Gold Camp.*'"

"I *have* seen you," said Shorty. "Goodnight, Mr. Storm. In you go!"

The cell lock clicked. He hurried out, glancing at his watch. One o'clock. Still time for a cold venison sandwich at Auntie Ferguson's, and *she* had promised to make coffee. It would be four days only until the next stage came through. He'd have to talk fast!

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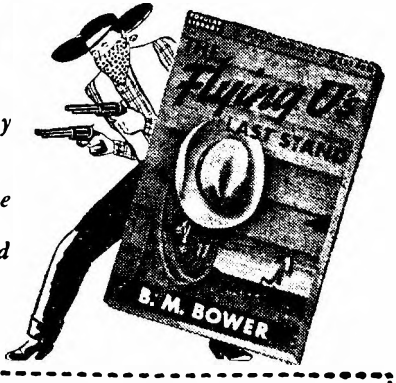

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