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MAY 1947
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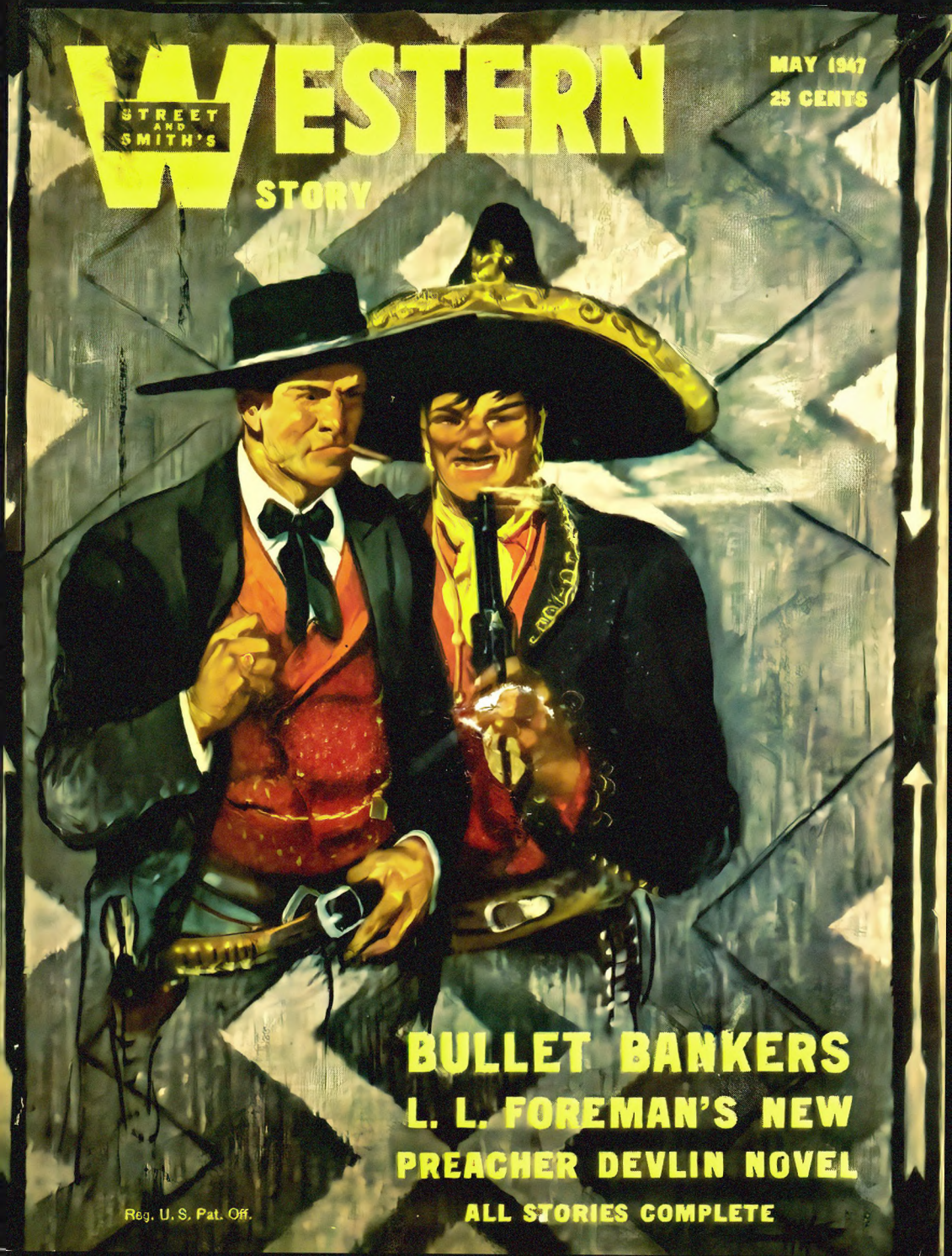

BULLET BANKERS

L. L. FOREMAN'S NEW PREACHER DEVLIN NOVEL

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

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out a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

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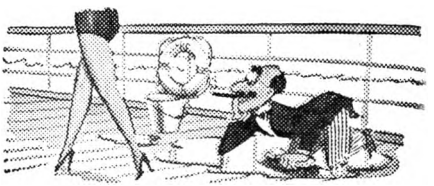
So—you'd better keep on saving.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.



They're safe and sound. And you get four bucks back for every three you put in!

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

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Street & Smith's

WESTERN STORY

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IMPORTANT
ANNOUNCEMENT

Every reader of this magazine will want to watch out for the forthcoming SHADOW ANNUAL.

It is a collection of the best SHADOW novels we have ever published—excellent shorter material selected by the editors from the pages of THE SHADOW magazine. **THREE - PLUS**

This dramatic, mystery-filled volume sells for only 25c, and will be obtainable at any newsstand. Be sure to ask for your copy of THE SHADOW ANNUAL, which will be on sale some time this month.

The SHADOW Annual

PUBLISHED BY STREET & SMITH

Tally Branding

CONSERVATION

When we published "Your Stake In Conservation," by John A. Thompson, in our November 1946 issue, we felt that we were on the right trail and it's gratifying to be backed up with the enthusiastic endorsement of this idea which concerns so vitally the preservation of our natural resources, by the many readers who have written in praising Mr. Thompson's article.

One of these letters, from a long-time reader, George E. Wood, of East Haven, Connecticut, expresses the growing awareness we all should feel about this question. "I hope," writes Mr. Wood, "that you can persuade Mr. Thompson to continue the interesting presentation of this subject and thus make a valuable contribution toward furthering conservation in general—a subject which is of far greater importance to everyone in this country than John Public ever dreams of."

Needless to say *Western Story* is solidly behind this program of saving the natural reserves which have made our nation great. And while we're on this topic, how's for taking off our Stetsons to L. L. Foreman (Bullet Bankers, p. 7) who hit the jackpot when he won first prize in the nation-wide conservation pledge contest sponsored recently by *Outdoor Life* magazine. We give you herewith Foreman's winner:

"I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully to defend from waste the natural resources of my country—its soil and minerals, its forests, waters, and wildlife."

Mr. Foreman was guest speaker on the N. B. C. broadcast last December

7th, at which time the winning pledge was formally presented to Secretary of Interior J. A. Krug and accepted by him for the people of America. Among others present at the impressive ceremonies held in Washington's beautiful Sylvan Theatre were Raymond J. Brown, the editor of *Outdoor Life* magazine, and A. E. Demaray, associate director of the National Park Service.

COWBOY LINGO

Don Alviso (Man From Marabon, p. 46) served Uncle Sam in the South Pacific during World War II and admires aplenty the cowboys from Down Under. "Their expressions," he says, "are mighty different from our Western lingo but they tell the same story. One very noticeable trait in both the Australian and New Zealand cowhands was great pride in their homeland—a fierce loyalty approached only by our own Texans! Our get-togethers were fine examples of how range hands can 'shoot the breeze,' whether they come from the States or the Barkly Tableland. And if we sort o' rock back on our heels when they mention a cattle station (*ranch to us*) we still know the herd (*mob to them*) has to go up the trail."

Wonder if an Aussie drover sings to his gal: "Don't sit under the coolibah tree with any one else but me . . ."

COMING NEXT MONTH

TOM W. BLACKBURN packs a load of excitement mixed with illegal fur hunting in coastal Alaska and a hardy robber baron in King Of Broken Knife. *Recommended for those wanting a real thriller!*

WALT COBURN writes of colorful Arizona, and all cattleman-woolie feuds are just Sunday School picnics till you cut sign on Sheeped Out.

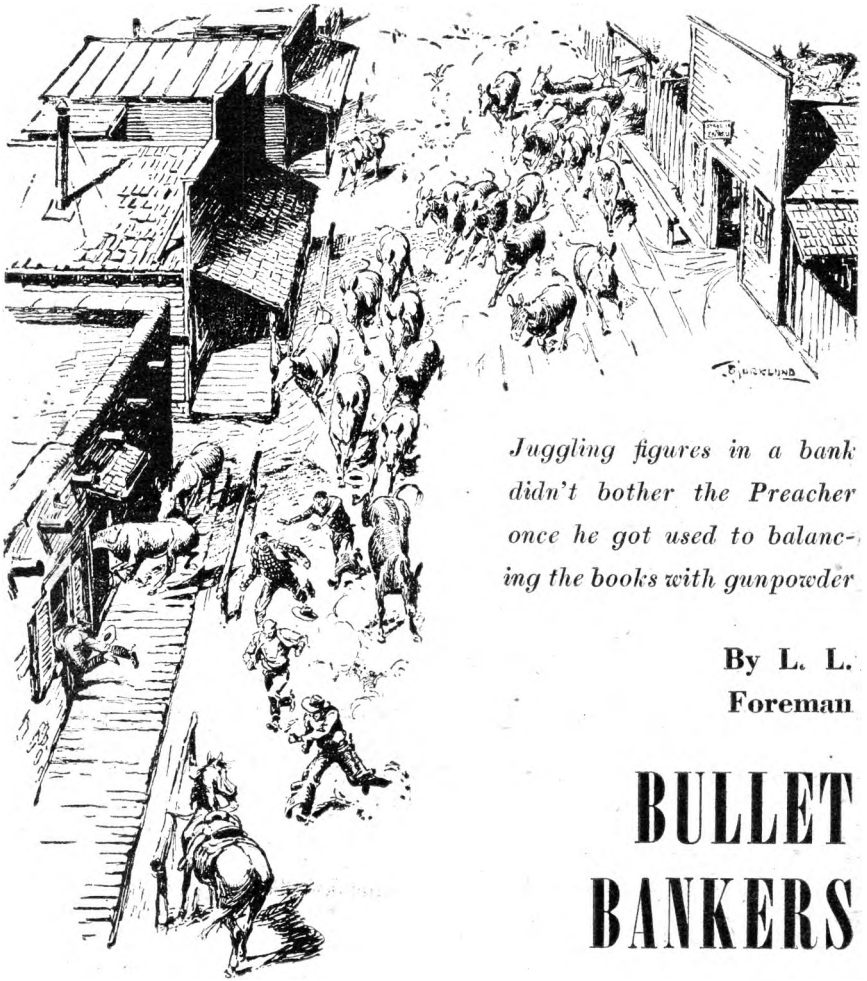
ROD PATTERSON tells all about a salty old-timer whose gun exploits were known from Abilene to Cripple Creek. But that was before they put up A Tombstone For Pronto Bill.

BENNETT FOSTER has you meet up with a tough, big-hearted cowhand, Jiggs Maunday, and a range orphan and his dog in Potluck Pardners—*as stout-hearted a trio as ever rode the range.*

JAMES SHAFFER provides mystery and six-gun magic for The Fighting Freemans. *You'll want to know, but sure, how they make out.*

JOSEPH CHADWICK figures that when an hombre operates a danger-fraught mail run from Dodge City to Texas, one should Never Bait a Texan!

Many other outstanding stories, features and personal service departments.



Juggling figures in a bank didn't bother the Preacher once he got used to balancing the books with gunpowder

By L. L. Foreman

BULLET BANKERS

I

THE gambling room of the big Bordertown Bar was never a place for penny-ante pikers. A man could lose his shirt there only if it had gold buttons. But this night there was one quiet table in a corner that made all the others look pretty picayune. It showed enough money on the green baize to attract wistful stares from many customers and envious glares from the professional housemen.

The customers of the Bordertown Bar were of various types, with generally a few distinctive traits in common: they were not gabby, seldom spoke of where they'd been or where

they were going next, and disliked to have anybody stand behind them. They were free spenders when they had it, and how they got it was their business. The town, on the tip of Texas, was a hop from Old Mexico, a skip from New Mexico, and broad-minded about any man seeking the better things of life as long as he didn't shoot any of its tax-paying citizens in the pursuance thereof.

So most of the patrons stared wistfully at the heavy money on that corner table. Wistfully, because frustrated in their instincts by knowing mighty well that at least three of the four players at the table would gunsmoke the gall out of anybody who made a pass at that dough. The three had caught a downy duck, and they were plucking him to his pin feathers.

One of them, a big, broad-shouldered man wearing a knee-length black coat and a ministerial black hat with a flat crown and wide brim, scanned his cards briefly and made his discard.

"Two, Rico," he said across the table. He had a deep voice, a wide mouth whose faint quirk bespoke a sardonic sense of humor, and a pair of guns under his coat. His dark, strong, forbidding face gave short-change tinhorns nervous twitches, and his wolf-calm gray eyes were fit to chill a Mescalero witch doctor.

He got his two requested cards from Don Ricardo de Risa, who, having the deal, by luck or something more dependable dealt him a pair of nines and made it a full house. Don Ricardo, ex-general, bandit de luxe and top-rank trigger swift, had trained hands and a fine sense of timing. Along with the cards, he sent a look from his dark, amused eyes.

"Do you good, Preacher?" he inquired.

Preacher Devlin, notorious gun fighter and gambler, tipped his flat-crowned black hat back an inch, chewed slowly on his unlighted cigar, and studied his cards, keeping the humor out of his eyes. He caught Don Ricardo's look, and nodded. He and the Don could tell by the signs that the downy duck was about plucked clean.

It was nearing time to pick the last feather and ring down the curtain. They had played the game before. They trusted each other no more than a couple of male cougars hunting the same lamb, but they knew the game upside down and sideways, and could work well together when the prospect of profit called for an alliance.

They both laid glances on Rusty Coe, third member of the poker-plucking party, and their glances were speculative. He was a tough young redhead, this Coe, a good gambler who caught on fast to teamwork, but they didn't know him and they could have done without him except that four made a better game. They had let him sit in, elected him banker to handle the chips and cash—it looked better that way, because he had an honest face—and now most likely, he'd be expecting a third of the loot. They were going to have, they figured, a little trouble with this Rusty Coe.

Right at the start, Rusty had looked

long at the downy duck and asked: "I've seen you before somewhere, haven't I?"

The downy duck, who said his name was Walker, abruptly and definitely disclaimed the honor. He had been somewhat drunk at that stage, but he sobered some and declared positively that he was from Chicago. Since then he had sobered a lot more, with plenty of reason, but a bit too late to do him any good. Having discovered he was out several thousand dollars, he did what they knew he would do—plunged, got in deeper. and, foolishly believing that fortune favored the brave bluffer. plunged deeper than ever.

He could be expected to behave like that, for he was a bulging-eyed man with a red and flaring kind of face. He wore town clothes, but he didn't talk like an Easterner, and he didn't talk to Rusty Coe at all after Rusty asked him that question. For his part. Rusty said nothing more to him, and only grinned and looked interested when Walker began buying fresh chips with cashier's checks. Walker's cashier's checks were stamped and perforated, signed, sealed and flawless—drawn on the Culp City Bank—a long, long way from Chicago.

Walker bought chips from Rusty with his last cashier's check, lost the chips in a last plunge to Devlin's full house, and sat there with the expression of a man who has eaten a bad oyster. He was eyed by the three, not particularly sympathetically—they liked him only as a duck—but curiously, to see if he'd now go haywire and pull a popgun or something they'd have to take away from him.

While waiting, Devlin said curtly: "All right, Coe—cash the chips. You've nursed that dinero long enough."

At it happened, Walker did pull a gun, a snubby sleeve pistol. And he sprang up, sending his chair crashing to the floor. But he didn't point his pistol at the three. He sort of waved it at two men who came marching into the gambling room, and backed toward a window, his eyes even more bulging than before. He quavered something that sounded like: "Stand back, blast you, you'll never get—"

And then one of the two men, a portly gent wearing a gold watch chain across his vest. took a nimble side-step and fired a pistol from his coat pocket. Without taking his eyes off Walker, he stepped up to the table.

"Leave that money right there!" he said commandingly.

That was going too far. Walker made it to the window, smashed it with his head, and hung over the sill, arms and legs dangling lifelessly. He'd jumped when he should have sat still. That was a poor gambler for you—wrong bet to the last. But the money was something else. On the same instant, more or less, Preacher Devlin kicked the feet out from under the portly gent, Don Ricardo heaved a bottle at him with a flick of the wrist. and Rusty Coe slapped out a gun and with a six-cent bullet did seventy dollars' damage to the big oil-lamp chandelier.

The game was over. Three aces matched grabs for the spoils.

II

They made the skip into New Mexico territory that night, Devlin and the Don, and followed a northward course up the Rio Grande Valley. It would take them to old Fort Fillmore if they stayed with it, and they didn't want that, so they swung east on the stagecoach road to cross the river below Anthony.

Devlin rode his black, a long-legged big brute as tough as himself, and Don Ricardo's mount was a racing palomino carrying a silver-mounted Mexican saddle. They weren't worrying about their back trail, with such horses, but it seemed wise to keep on the jump for a while. They'd had to do a little shooting, getting out of the Bordertown Bar, and with a long gun barrel had bent the jaw of an authoritative individual who happened to be the town mayor.

As for Rusty Coe, they'd mislaid him somehow in their dash out of town. But they weren't too bowed down with worry over him, either, until they compared notes and agreed that the redhead must have managed to cop all the winnings. They then voiced deep concern for him.

"Hell scorch him!" growled Devlin. "I figured you must've got your hooks on the cash, Rico. It's not like you to miss!"

"That *cabrón!*" swore the Don. "I thought you got it."

They halted within far sight of the stagecoach bridge that spanned the river, and dourly surveyed the empty road. Silently, they unsaddled. The bright morning sun came up and shone upon them while they watered their horses at a spring stream trickling merrily down to the river. A soft breeze came wafting along to fan them.

The sun could as well have been a black spot in their eyes, the babbling brook full of ink, and the breeze a blizzard. Devlin fished out a few coffee beans and smashed them, and Don Ricardo lighted a small fire by the roadside. They didn't exchange many words, but the air between them was heavy with unspoken insults.

Then into their darkness a dawn came up like thunder, Rusty's red hair doing well enough for a dawn, and the thunder that of his horse's running hoofs. He came beating down the road in a hurry, hatless, and showed some surprise at his warm welcome.

"Hi, partner!" Devlin greeted him cordially, and gave him a big grin, while Don Ricardo flashed white teeth and swept him a bow. "How d'you want your coffee?"

"With fresh cream, sugar, an' a dash o' good bourbon," Rusty answered promptly, pulling up in a dust but not dismounting from his sweat-streaked horse. "Four fried eggs,

plate o' crisp bacon, an' toast with—"

"You'll take it black an' bitter, bub, an' no trimmings!"

"Mebbeso, but not here, Preacher. Not with a posse right behind me! I'll be waiting at the bridge, sweetheart!" Rusty kicked his horse and took off down the road, and the pair of notorious long riders leaped and grabbed up their saddles.

The sullen drumming of the posse became heard after Rusty departed; it swelled strongly and the horsemen broke into sight, roaring up the winding valley road.

Rusty was waiting on the other side of the bridge, all right, when they got there, and he wasn't idle. From along the high bank he was gathering dry white brittle brush and piling it on the bridge. It was a nice new wooden bridge, but his purpose was plain. With his horse playing out on him, he had to stop that posse one way or another.

"That jigger's got a good idea," Devlin called to the Don. "Let's drag a contribution over from this side, for the good o' the cause!" He snagged a dead and pitchy piñon with his rope, from the saddle, and hauled it along behind him. Adding it to Rusty's brush pile, he tossed a lighted match after it. His black let out a scandalized snort and jumped clear, as the brittle brush went up like dry hay, and Devlin joined Rusty on the east bank.

In twenty seconds the whole pile was blazing furiously and sending showers of sparks down the wind. The pitchy piñon caught swiftly, flared, and added billows of black smoke to the sparks. That bridge wasn't going to be used any more by anybody—including Don Ricardo de Risa, as Rusty pointed out.

"Hey, he's still on the other side, for gosh sake!" Rusty yelled.

"Well, well, so he is!" murmured Devlin, chewing on his unlighted cigar. "Good thing for him he's got a fast horse. Look at him go! Maybe I was a little premature with that match. But then, he'll do as much for me some day!" He leveled coldly glimmering eyes at Rusty.

"How much dinero," he queried gently, "was on that table?"

"Fourteen thousand dollars in cash," Rusty replied. "And de Rica yonder has got every dime of it!"

"*What?*"

"Sure. Didn't you know? Shucks, why else would I follow you two hell hounds, 'cept for my share? He put his snatch on the cash while I was shooting out the lights and you were tending to the gent with the pocket gun!"

Devlin blinked once, and stared balefully after the rapidly disappearing Don. "Double-crossing twister!" he muttered. "Held out on me!"

"And twenty thousand dollars in cashier's checks," said Rusty, and kissed his hand. "Good-by to those, too!"

Devlin slid his rifle from its saddle scabbard and planted five shots just ahead of some possemen trying to work their way down the opposite bank. The possemen turned back.

"Speak for y'rself, firetop," Devlin commented dryly. "*I* got those!"

They rode together northeast, unhurriedly, toward the Organ Mountains and the direction of Culp City.

"Preacher, I'll tell you a funny story," Rusty said after a while. "I knew I recognized that Walker hombre. After he began cashing those cashier's checks you've got, and I spotted where they came from, I was dead certain. You see, I was born an' raised in Culp City."

"Good," remarked Devlin. "I might need your help, cashin' these checks there. But how's that so funny?"

"Wait, let me finish. I got hung up back there in that barroom, and before I got out I heard something that sets it all clear to me. Walker's right name was Lew Menham. He was the cashier of the Culp City Bank, and he absconded with all that dinero and those two gents tracked him down. Ill-gotten gains, Preacher!"

Devlin observed that he didn't give a hoot how ill the gains were, just so they were gotten.

Rusty grinned his freckled grin. "If Lew Menham stole those checks, or just made 'em up for himself—as I reckon he did—you might have a little trouble cashing 'em! But here's the funny part. I own that Culp City Bank! I own that bridge we burned down, too, because I own the stage line that built it!"

"Get in the shade," Devlin advised. "Put a wet bandanna over your forehead, an' lie perfectly still."

Rusty's grin widened. "I'm not crazy with the heat. Listen. My uncle, Mort Coe—they called him Old Mortgage—built that bank, started that stage line, and was getting a grip on all Culp City when he up and died. He died intestate, meaning he left no will. I'm his next of kin, and according to the lawyers his estate goes to me—total and complete!"

Devlin regarded him with new interest. "*Bueno!*" he murmured. "Now I *know* I'll cash these checks!"

"Don't be so sure," returned Rusty. "Three years ago when my father died, I asked Uncle Mort for the money my father had invested in the bank. Uncle Mort good as told me to go to hell, and denied I had anything coming to me. So I stuck up the bank for a few hundred—it was mine, after all—and he swore out a warrant and sic'ed all the law he could gather after me."

"He sure didn't like you much!"

"He never liked anybody, that widow-robbing old skinflint! I made it down into Mexico and I been riding for some trouble outfits down there. 'Bout a month ago word got to me that Uncle Mort had been dead two years and I was his legal heir. But if you think I'm going there to claim it, you're the one who's crazy!"

Devlin cocked a thoughtful eyebrow. "It's your own bank you stuck up—right?"

Rusty shook his head. "It wasn't mine then! And you don't know that Culp City marshal! His name's Cartwright—a sour chunk o' mutton if there ever was one. My uncle put him in. He thought my uncle was king o' the world, and he'd do his bidding, alive or dead. I hear he's still carrying the warrant for me, for bank robbery. He doesn't like me,"

Rusty added reminiscently, "partly on account he was in the bank when I stuck it up, and I had to slam him in the teeth and take his gun away."

Devlin agreed that might make any narrow-minded lawman a trifle bitter. "It's a problem," said the veteran long rider. "Tell you what. You camp this side o' the town a ways, an' I'll ride on in an' scout it over. Maybe I can figure out something for you."

"For me?" Rusty's grin grew crooked.

"We-el, a little for me, too," drawled Devlin. "C'mon, fire top, hustle up that damn nag o' yours. I got to get to Culp City an' do some bankin' business!"

III

At the bar of the Zia Palace, in Culp City, Preacher Devlin tipped his drink, set down his emptied glass, and motioned for the bartender to fill it up again. He was feeling the need for a little sustenance and cheer. In the three days he had been here he had picked up knowledge that, while educational, was unprofitable.

The reins that Old Mortgage Coe had dropped, when he died, were being gripped by other men who had reached for them quickly while the reaching was good. And the last thing those men would stand for was the appearance on the scene of Rusty Coe, the heir, to challenge their growing control. Marshal Cartwright was still packing the warrant and the grudge, and only wishing that he could exercise them if merely to restore his own prestige, which was evidently very low indeed in this town.

But the worst blow was the bank. It was closed, and when Devlin banged for service a girl came to the door and smiled sweetly at his request to change a bunch of checks into spending money.

"How much?" she asked, and Devlin told her.

"You'll have to wait, I'm afraid," she said kindly.

"How long?"

"Until we have twenty thousand dollars. We happen to be out of the stuff just at present."

Devlin scowled down at her. She was young and slender, a girl with laughing eyes and hair as red as Rusty's but more on the bronze side. The tall gun fighter saw her as a pretty and shapely little thing with altogether too much sense of humor.

"A bank," he stated annoyedly, "has got no business runnin' short o' money!"

She nodded agreement. "Very irregular, as our Mr. Hampden P. Gault would say. Most regrettable. But the circumstances are irregular and regrettable, too. They arise from the peculations and embezzlements of an absconding cashier who flew the coop with practically everything but

the vault!" Her smile brightened and she inquired helpfully: "Would you like to speak with our Mr. Hampden P. Gault? He's the bank's legal adviser, bookkeeper, teller, and worry wart."

"An' who are you?"

She dropped him a mock curtsy. "Miss Cassie Dowe—the bank's assistant legal adviser, assistant bookkeeper, assistant teller, and assistant—"

"All right, all right!" Devlin waved her inside. "Go an' assist Mr. Hampden P. Gault out here!"

Mr. Hampden P. Gault turned out to be a somewhat shriveled gentleman with no sense of humor whatever. He reeled slightly at the mention of twenty thousand dollars. Recovering, he examined Devlin's checks and mumbled to himself, shaking his head.

"Very irregular. Correct in all . . . ah . . . superficial details, but unauthorized. No record of them. Most regrettable."

Pinning his bleakest stare on Gault, Devlin demanded: "Does that mean I don't get the cash?"

Mr. Hampden P. Gault backed off hurriedly. "No, no, no!" he stammered. "I mean, yes, yes, yes! I mean we can't cash them, yes!"

"Yes or no," put in Cassie Dowe, "we just don't! And if we ever did, it would be after we'd paid off a lot of small customers who trusted their money to this bank and haven't got it back yet. Take your place at the end of the line, mister, and don't push! Good-by—it's certainly been a great pleasure to do business with you!"

She flashed Devlin another bright smile, dropped him another curtsy, and shut and locked the bank door. And Devlin, after glaring at the door for a moment, stalked off, feeling about as trimmed down as he'd ever been in all his violently turbulent career.

So he was in none too genial a mood in the Zia Palace. He picked up his drink, and old habit drew his attention to the back-bar mirror. He watched Ed Hagan, owner of the place, come smiling toward him.

"Howdy, Mr. Devlin."

Devlin mentally weighed the tone and the smile. This Hagan jigger had something up his sleeve besides a derringer.

"Howdy." He didn't bother to turn his head.

Hagan laid a restraining hand politely on the gun fighter's arm. "Don't drink that." He was dapper and on the handsome side, and inclined to affect the dress and manners of a Virginia planter. "Let me offer you something better, sir, in the back room."

The "Mr." and the "sir" went no deeper than the smile. Devlin followed Hagan leisurely behind the bar and into the back room, noting that the door had a glass panel that gave view into the barroom. To find two other men seated in the room didn't particularly surprise him. They were Tate Farnley and Jabe Conway, and he had learned that they, with Hagan, were the men who had scooped up the reins from Old Mortgage Coe's dead hands. To be invited to join them in

the private room carried a meaning. Something very interesting was in the wind.

Tate Farnley, a town-dwelling rancher with hearty manners and marble eyes, rose as Devlin entered. After a moment of hesitation, Jabe Conway followed suit, although deference to anybody didn't sit well on him. He called himself a business dealer, meaning he dealt in cattle, land, short-term loans, made the most of his opportunities and sometimes made the opportunities. He had the cool, superior air of a successful money lender.

Devlin returned greetings, sat down, and with no trouble to speak of dominated the room by his large presence and deliberately taciturn attitude of waiting. He tried out Hagan's best, nodded a critical approval, and leaned back, chewing his cigar.

It took the three-man combine some little time to get down to cases. They spoke of the weather, the beef market, the state of the town, and finally got around to discussing law and order.

"Frankly, Devlin," said Farnley confidentially, "we're going to have to boot Cartwright out of the marshal's office. The town isn't satisfied with him, and hasn't forgot he was old Coe's man. We three, here, are members of the town council, y'know. In fact, we . . . ahem . . . carry consid'rable weight in the council. Consid'rable."

Devlin got impatient at the beating around the bush. He laid his cold gaze on them, and they fell silent.

"Name the game, an' I'll see if I'm interested," he said bluntly.

Farnley and Conway frowned, but Hagan smiled and nodded. Yet they waited for one another to speak.

"You three have got a hold on the town," Devlin said encouragingly. "I'm a stranger here, but I know that much. You're trying for a better hold. Cartwright isn't your man, so you'll kick him out, put your own man in, an' throw the rules away. Isn't that the game?"

It was Hagan who answered. "Right," he said softly. His black eyes played over Devlin's hard, forbidding face. "And you're the man we want for marshal!"

Devlin bit deeply into the end of his cigar. His laugh was short and harsh. "The town won't stand for that!"

Hagan leaned forward. "How do we know till we try? There's been a lot of lawlessness here lately. Some tough jiggers have drifted in, and stayed here. Confidentially, *we* brought them here! Folks are sick and tired of it, ready for almost any change in marshals. We're putting out the whisper that maybe what Culp City needs is a star gun-slinger for marshal—the best that can be got—to fight fire with fire, see?"

"Yeah." Devlin nodded. "But what makes you think I'd be interested in any hundred-a-month job?"

"We don't," spoke up Farnley. "We wouldn't offer you less than an even cut. And if only half what we plan goes through, there'll be plenty to share! Why, we can milk this town

for years, besides what we'll—" He stopped, at a swift glance from Conway.

Devlin nodded again, studying the frayed end of his chewed cigar. Hagan would run a wide-open joint, complete with house gamblers, poke lifters and knockout drops. Farnley, owner of several ranches acquired through Conway, was hungry for more. Conway would be the one slated to take over the bank and the stage line. They'd make an unbeatable syndicate in their three high drivers' seats, flanked by their tough jiggers. But to get there they needed a gun master who would rod the law strictly according to their game and, more or less legally, smoke the ears off anybody who got in their way.

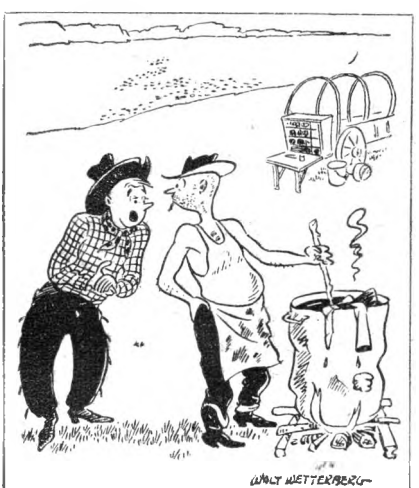
"We can force Cartwright's dismissal tonight at the regular council meeting," Conway said, "and have you appointed at the same time. Of course, if too many folks around town put up a kick, we may not be able to make it stick. If we can get through the first few days, though . . ."

Devlin opined that he figured it could be done. "Just give it out," he suggested blandly, "that as marshal o' this fair city I'd certainly feel morally bound to find an' produce old Coe's nephew—who I understand is his heir—an' make him open the bank an' pay off the depositors an' others it owes money to! In fact, I would guarantee to do it in quick order!"

All three looked unpleasantly startled, and then they laughed appreciatively.

"Damn good!" Conway called it. "By Hod, you'd make a fine politician, Devlin! Campaign promise—who ever remembers it a week after the election? We'll do it, by Hod, we'll do it!" He raised his glass. "A toast to the new marshal!"

"Gentlemen, I thank you," Devlin acknowledged, and strolled out.



"I thought you were washing clothes. It smelled too good to be your cooking."

Outside on the boardwalk, the veteran gun hawk let his estimating glance roam over the saloon front. It needed painting. Well, when he owned it he'd have it painted. It wouldn't be too hard to trip Hagan. Give him full rope, then clamp the law down on him sharp and sudden.

It was an intriguing thought. He gazed down the long main street. A good town, this Culp City. Good-looking bank. A man with ability and a dependable pair of guns could maybe go a far way here. And no damned posses and bounty hunters to

wreck the game. The town would back up its gun-slinging marshal. Shucks, he'd make it back him up!

Those three careful conspirators—who did they think he was? Damned scheming hypocrites, did they think he didn't know their double-dealing game? As soon as he boosted them up into their drivers' seats, there'd be a bonus for any of their tough jiggers who could put a bullet into his back. He'd seen this game played before. And he'd seen men like Hagan, Farnley and Conway play it. Their pattern was always the same. And they had chosen him—Preacher Devlin, who had forgotten more tricks than they had yet learned—for their tool.

"Hoddam insult!" he muttered, and grinned faintly, eying the bank. There was one campaign promise that would sure be kept—for twenty thousand dollars!

Rusty Coe declared it was a miracle. A black miracle, he added, conceived by the devil and broiled to a crisp brown turn in hell's deepest oven. "You—marshal of Culp City! You! Oh, brother . . ."

Unperturbed, Devlin gave it as his opinion that Culp City could have done a lot worse. "It's a respectable town now," he affirmed. "A good place to raise your children an' have your mother-in-law down for a nice, long, quiet visit. That is, if you're married."

"I'm not."

"Then there'll be no weepin' widow, case I heave you in the *juzgado*—as I may do if you don't pay proper respect to an officer o' the law, young feller!"

"Yessir, m'lord. But I still can't figure how your majesty got to be marshal, without the town stagin' a riot."

"Simple," declared Devlin. "All I did was promise to produce you an' make you pay off the bank's debts."

"Huh?"

"Close your trap; you look foolish with it open like that. Here's the bank. Let's open it. You got your first customer. Me!"

This time when Cassie Dowe opened the door, she said to Devlin: "You again! My, you're persistent, aren't you? Now, listen. I realize that by some miscarriage of fate you've become the big-badge buckaroo. But around this bank—"

"Tell your hired help off, Rusty!" Devlin grunted, and pushed on into the bank.

Cassie evidently didn't know Rusty, and Rusty evidently didn't know her. However, it became evident as they looked at each other that they were both willing to repair the matter.

"Say, your hair's even redder than mine!" Cassie exclaimed, and Rusty said: "But yours is a heap prettier!"

Devlin, indifferent to such idle persiflage, went and got Mr. Hampden P. Gault. That gentleman recognized Rusty at once, and gasped: "You shouldn't be here! My goodness, Linster, there's a warrant still out for you!" He had an order-loving mind that wasn't very nimble in adapting its ideas to change of circumstances.

Devlin put him right on it. "If

there's any warrant with 'Linster Coe' on it," he remarked, "it must've been in that batch I started a fire with this morning. So you can quit frettin' over that, an' give him a . . . uh . . . financial statement of his new wealth!" He pulled out his wad of checks as he spoke, cocking an eye at the teller's window.

Cassie chuckled. "Let me give it. Assets—one bank, busted, and one stagecoach line, not running! Liabilities—"

"Never mind them," Devlin interrupted. "How come the stage isn't running?"

"Somebody burned down the stage-road bridge near Anthony," Gault complained. "Vandals!"

"Oh!" Rusty coughed and grinned. "How busted is this bank?"

"Not a dime in the till!" Cassie assured him. "You can thank Hagan and his playmates for the wreck of your late unlamented uncle's financial ship. They began getting in their work on it as soon as he died. Among other things, they got Lew Menham to gambling with them. You can guess the rest. Lew lost heavily, and began using the bank's money and cooking the books to cover up—we're still trying to straighten them out. Finally he'd lost so much to Hagan and the others, and was in so hopelessly deep, he just took what was left and vanished."

"Most regrettable!" Gault muttered, shaking his head and wringing his hands. "Most regrettable!"

Devlin could go with Gault on that, but Rusty only shrugged and Cassie smiled up into his eyes and said: "You don't regret it too much, do you? After all, you know how your uncle built up his fortune. I saw some of his heartless, grasping methods, too. You've still got the stagecoach line, and it'll be running again after the bridge is built."

"But the bank!" mourned Gault. "Very bad, very bad! If only we had some negotiable assets left!"

Cassie nodded, her eyes serious. "Enough to pay off all those small depositors, yes. I can't get them off my mind. Most of them are poor folks—homesteaders, little shopkeepers, and the like. It's a tragedy for such folks to lose their bit of capital."

As far as Devlin was concerned, it was also a tragedy to lose twenty thousand dollars. "Got all the fixin's for a bank here, haven't you?" he said. "Counters, cash cages, a till, a vault, an' so on? What's in the vault?"

"Oh, some mortgages," Cassie answered him. "But they're all long-term, and can't be called negotiable assets, as Mr. Gault means it."

"By negotiable assets," Gault explained pontifically, "I refer to currency or an equivalent—something capable of being negotiated, assigned or transferred with or without endorsement as the case may be. Such as bills of exchange, promissory notes, checks payable to bearer—"

"Whoa!" Devlin stopped him, and turned to Rusty. "I'm buyin' full partnership in this bank, you hear? No argument, or I throw you in the jug!" He plumped his checks into Gault's hand. "Make out the papers,

an' chalk twenty thousand dollars up to the bank's assets!"

"B-b-but," Gault stuttered, waving the checks, "these are drawn against this bank, and—and—my goodness! The bank is closed. Th these things aren't negotiable!"

"So we'll open the bank," Devlin stated, shooing him to his desk, "an' then we'll see about the negotiatin'!"

"Very irregular! *Very* irregular!"

"It sure is, when a man has to turn lawman an' buy half a bank an' teach a banker his business—just to get to cash some checks!" Devlin swung his head toward the big plate-glass window, as a shadow fell across it.

Hagan was outside, peering through the window, his black eyes glittering. He stared furiously at Rusty, then at Devlin, then hurried on past.

Devlin moved to the window and watched with meditative gaze the saloonman's purposeful course to Tate Farnley's town house down along the main street. Those three—Hagan, Farnley and Conway—weren't going to be a damn bit pleased with the marshal of Culp City from here on. They were going to be even less pleased as time went by. They'd be giving the nod to their tough jiggers, and Culp City wasn't going to be such a nice quiet town much longer.

"Watch your step every minute," the gun fighter advised Rusty. "Us bankers have got our troubles!"

IV

There were those who hailed thankfully the reopening of the Culp City

Bank. A good many of them, oddly enough, had raised a howl over Devlin's appointment as marshal. Now they said he had certainly carried out his promise in a hurry. He was a man of his word and a hell of a fine fellow, in spite of his looks. It was a puzzle how he'd got that bad reputation pinned on him.

There were others who didn't share that opinion. They were those who had maneuvered his appointment and said he was a man of his word and a hell of a fine fellow in spite of his looks. Now they said he was certainly a double-crossing wolf. It was a puzzle how he had lived so long.

Soon after Devlin opened up for business, he and the bank became something of a puzzle to everybody.

Devlin's banking methods were a little unusual. To those who came running to draw out their cash, he offered to cut the cards with them, double or quits. When the depositor lost, the bank was that much to the good. If the customer cagily refused the gamble, Devlin merely handed him a check drawn on an El Paso bank for the full amount of his deposit.

"You can't do that!" Gault whispered in horror. "We haven't any account in that El Paso bank!"

"As long as they don't know it,"

Devlin argued reasonably, "what's the difference? These checks I'm handin' out, after they get cashed round town, will be sent to the El Paso bank, right? Well, they won't get there for some time, because that bridge is out an' the mail isn't goin' through."

"But they'll get there eventually!"

"All right. I'll make 'em good by sendin' a check to the El Paso bank, drawn on some other bank." Devlin had unearthed several blank checks from various banks. "Here's one on a Tombstone bank. I'll just fill it in for . . .oh, let's say five thousand . . . an' send it to El Paso. Trouble with you, Gault, is you keep your nose too close to the ledgers. No imagination. No vision. This bankin' business is a cinch! I always knew bankers had a soft snap!"

"Oh, my goodness! We'll all end in jail!" Gault tottered off.

Devlin also increased the capital assets by filling out a check on a Cheyenne bank for ten thousand, which he locked in the vault. He then made out a heap of small checks on the Culp City Bank, running from five dollars to a hundred and payable to bearer, which he put into circulation as small change. And he let it be known that he'd jail anybody who refused to accept them in trade as negotiable legal tender. A brisk business sprang up in those small checks, everybody eager to spend and unload them on the next fellow, and a spurt of prosperity—or at any rate business activity—struck Culp City.

Another progressive innovation of Devlin's was his bargain sale day. He marked down the mortgages to cut-rate prices, giving first chance to the mortgaged folks. The sale was a success. every mortgage peddled off over the counter and everybody satisfied except Gault, who declared faintly that the whole process was very irregular and most regrettable. The only stipulation Devlin made to the buyers was that they had to pay for the goods in cash. No checks, please: he was all stocked up on those.

"By golly, I'm having the time of my life!" Cassie chuckled. "This is wonderful, Devlin—I'm with you all the way! You know, I came here to teach school, but I quit and got this bank job after some of the big boys in the class got too . . . hem! Well, they got too big, that's all! Then I found this bank was no fun, either, what with widows and poor folks begging for more time to pay off their loans, and Old Mortgage foreclosing on them and counting the pennies. This is swell! This is how a bank should be run—bargain-sale days on mortgages, make your own money and make Hagan and his kind take it, and let Mr. Hampden P. Gault wrestle with those silly little scratches on the profit-and-loss ledgers! Devlin, you're okay!"

Devlin, who had come around to thinking she was okay, too, gave her the ghost of a grin. He was about to tell her that she'd do to take along and he hoped she could cook, when the last customer of the day sauntered in.

And the last customer was Don Ricardo de Risa.

Don Ricardo bowed. "Amigos!" he intoned, and swept the floor with

his sombrero. The floor needed it.

Rico looked fairly hard-worn and travel-stained, but his humor was fresh and gay, and he was his old jaunty self. His pair of bone-handled guns lay snug against his thighs in tied-down hand-tooled holsters, and with all his extravagant courtesy his hands never strayed very far from them. His dark eyes, alight with dancing devils, regarded Devlin admiringly.

"Marshal and banker of Culp City!" he exclaimed. "Preacher, amigo. I have often seen you do the improbable, but this time you have accomplished the impossible! Congratulations! You will yet die a member of high society, respected by solid citizens! I salute you!" He bowed again.

Devlin eyed him frigidly. "Speakin' o' dyin', Rico," he growled, "what in thunder did *you* come here for?"

Don Ricardo looked pained. "But to help you, of course!" he protested. "To lend you my aid in your honest and ambitious endeavor to rise to financial heights! I heard of your success, and I said to myself, 'My friend needs me!' I came to this town, and I learned that there are several powerful hombres here who will cut you down at the first chance. Then I knew you needed a partner! And you do, yes?"

"No!" said Devlin. "An' you can get the hell out o' my bank, damn your hide! You grabbed plenty enough from that Bordertown Bar deal, without tryin' to wedge in on this'n!"

Don Ricardo, as solemn as a martyred saint at the stake, sighed and bowed his sleek head. "To think that you, amigo, would grudge me that paltry trifle of fourteen thousand dollars. In my deep hurt, I am tempted to fling it in your face!"

"Go ahead and fling it!"

"Like the devil I will!" The Don clapped on his sombrero, tipped it to its accustomed slant, and roved an eye over Cassie. "This town is in a state of flux, of indecision and uncertainty. By which I mean that there is a fight for power going on which has not yet been won. At such a time, there are opportunities for a man of gifts! Such as you, Preacher! And such as me! Do I understand that you spurn my help?"

"I sure do, you cash snatcher!"

"Very well!" Don Ricardo clicked his spurred heels, gave a twirl to the ends of his neat black mustache, and flashed a stage villain's sinister smile. "Then it is war between us! And on your own head—which is no especial ornament, by the way—be it! Adios!"

"Go to blazes!"

"Meet you at the fire!" Don Ricardo departed, clowning a mincing step that jingled his spurs.

Devlin scowled after him, not fooled by the comedy. When the Don, steeped in guile and trickery, showed his gayest humor, it was time to watch out. Rico had a sense of humor peculiarly his own, lethal as a sharp knife, and he flaunted it never so high as when matching wits with his old rival of the long-rider trails.

"I kind of think I could like that rascal!" Cassie declared admiringly.

Rico didn't know exactly why he was siding the Preacher but he didn't have much choice with an army of tough hands outside gunning for him.

"So could I," grunted Devlin. "With grass growin' over him!"

"And a ten-ton gravestone to hold him down!" said Rusty. "I heard tales about him halfway down Old Mexico. Which of you is fastest. Preacher. d'you know?"

"Stick around," Devlin told him dourly, "an' maybe you'll find out!"

V

Rusty was directing most of his time and effort to getting his stage line running. It had fallen into poor condition since the passing of Old Mortgage. Besides the rebuilding of the burned-out bridge, the coaches badly needed repairs and painting, harness had to be overhauled, and a good many of the mules could stand to be reshod. Rusty had all the mules brought in from the stations, into the big Culp City stage corral at the bend of the main street, and he was bossing several jobs at once. He said he didn't understand much about banking. Anyway, not Devlin's kind.

So Devlin had a business problem all to himself to start the day with, when Cassie came and informed him serenely that the bank was being mobbed, a few minutes before morning opening time.

Devlin, taking his ease in the president's office at the rear, had heard some noise out front, but paid scant heed to it. With his feet up on the polished desk, he was interestedly perusing the rules and bylaws of the Bankers' Protective Association. He wasn't aware that he needed any association to protect him, but he approved their concern for his welfare.

"Mob?" he said, looking up. "What in blue blazes do they want?"

"Money," Cassie answered simply.

"All right, give 'em some checks."

"They've got checks," Cassie explained, using the president's pen for a dart and scoring a bull's-eye on a picture of Old Mortgage. "That's the trouble. It seems that Hagan has upset the apple cart, and the panic is on! He's refusing to accept their checks. Says they're no good, and all of a sudden everybody is saying the same thing! Imagine that!"

"That," declared Devlin, scanning the Bankers' Protective Association's legal code, "is known as felonious slander!"

"Mutiny, I call it! What do we do now, Mr. President? Hightail?"

"We do not!" Devlin responded severely, rising and giving the heavy gun belts under his coat a hitch. "We take, it says, appropriate action!" He rubbed up his marshal's badge, gave a yank to the broad brim of his hat, and paced out to the mob.

It was quite a mob out front, muttering, half belligerent and half anxious, all flourishing checks. Up in the stage corral at the bend of the street, where about forty fractious mules had voted not to be shod without a fight, Rusty was peering through kicked-up dust to see what was going on. Devlin held up a hand and the mob hushed.

"I hear," Devlin proclaimed grimly, "that certain enemies o' prosperity are castin' doubts against the integrity o' my bank! Well, we'll see about that! Follow me!"

He marched down the street toward the Zia Palace. The mob, after some indecision, followed him, all talking at once, each one now telling his neighbors that he personally considered the checks as good as gold and never had really thought otherwise. They trudged down the street behind Devlin, and everything was encouraging and happy until Devlin came abreast of the saddle shop on his right.

"Fine morning, marshal!" Don Ricardo greeted him amiably. The Don lounged in the open doorway of the saddle shop, and his very position was a mute challenge. There was a stack of new saddles in the doorway and he was behind them, so that all that could be seen of him was his smiling face and a crooked elbow. Deliberately, he let his glance slide past Devlin to the feed and grain store across the street.

Devlin whipped a look that way. The faces of four men rose above the load of sacked grain piled on the boardwalk. He knew all four: Jingo, Crow Bonham, George Lupin and Kid Crowley. The Jingo trigger team, spearhead of the Hagan syndicate's tough jiggers.

Jingo, a wise old hand in a gun scrap, said quietly: "There's others further 'long the street, Devlin. You'd sure be lucky to make it to the Zia!"

"Perhaps," Don Ricardo suggested, "it might be best if you returned to the bank, and"—he nodded at the crowd—"let events take their course, eh?"

That, Devlin mused, would be best—for Hagan, Farnley and Conway. To spring a gun trap on him and cut him down, right before the eyes of the town crowd, would have repercussions. To the townsmen he was not only the marshal; he was the man who had re-opened the bank and at least gone through the motions of getting them their money out.

Best bet, for the combine, was to discredit him and the bank, turn the town against him, and, as Don Ricardo put it, let events take their course. Devlin sensed the Don's guiding hand there. Rico, his expensive services declined by Devlin, had gone blithely over to the enemy camp and promptly won himself a front-rank place.

"Damn turncoat!" Devlin called Don Ricardo, but without much posi-

tive bitterness. After all, the Don owed him nothing, and this was the game as they played it.

But it was galling to have to back up. It meant calling off all bets and quitting Culp City before it exploded in his face. Devlin stared dourly down along the street, and spotted signs that told him that Jingo had spoken the truth. There were a lot more tough jiggers waiting behind cover between himself and the Zia, in case he got past this first flanking party.

And at the front windows of the Zia he could make out three watching men—Hagan, Farnley and Conway.

While he raked the situation over with his glimmering stare, Devlin became aware of noises breaking out behind him. He knew better than to turn around for a look, and show his back, and his momentary guess was that the whole town had suddenly taken the notion to come and join the crowd. The clattering hoof beats and squealing snorts of forty mules dispelled that impression.

The crowd suddenly burst past him, shouting, some laughing, others swearing. And then the main street was full of runaway mules and dodging townsmen. It was a mule stampede that would be well remembered, if only for the fact that one big long-eared fool ran behind the pile of sacked grain, collided there into four armed men, and shied off into the feed and grain store window.

Devlin joined the running crowd. It was no joke to get tangled up among forty crazy, kicking mules. It was no joke for Don Ricardo, either, when Devlin took a passing shove at the stack of saddles and toppled them on top of him. A mule tried to enter the saddle shop, probably attracted by the odor of horsehide. Don Ricardo's head emerged from the heap of spilled saddles, and the mule shot its ears at him, snorted in his face, and whirled out again.

Devlin ducked through a gap between buildings, cut all the way around, and entered the Zia Palace from the rear. He helped himself to a drink of Hagan's best in the private room, took the rest of the bottle along and stepped without noise into the barroom. Hagan, Farnley and Conway were still standing at the front windows, watching the street, although, from their cursing, they didn't seem as satisfied as they'd been a short time ago.

Their dissatisfaction was not relieved by Devlin's rapped command. "Get behind the bar, hombres, an' tend to business!"

They spun around, began clawing under their coats, and froze. Devlin's hands, too, were under his coat, and his eyes were oblique and saturnine. He said again, softly, chillingly: "Get behind the bar!"

They obeyed, not uttering a word. They trooped behind the bar, were careful to keep their hands in sight by laying them on the red-brown mahogany and stared at him. Farnley's florid face was pale and apprehensive, and Conway had lost a good deal of his cool superiority. Hagan looked to be the only one of the three who might take a chance if it came up;

his eyes were narrowed and his lips were compressed.

Devlin went to the batwing doors. The mules had all plunged on by, and the crowd was coming together again in the street. Men were talking and arguing, looking around, glancing often toward the bank, and obviously in an unsettled frame of mind.

"C'mon in an' spend or cash your checks!" Devlin called out to them. "Mr. Hagan an' his friends are just pantin' to trade with you!"

He swung his cold gray gaze to the three behind the bar. "Pull out your wallets, hombres, an' get set for the rush!"

It was just as well he gave them that warning command. The batwing doors slammed open and the crowd charged in and romped up to the bar. Devlin got out of the way, stepped up onto a table, and watched the proceedings.

With Farnley and Conway as his unwilling helpers, Hagan was kept on the jump. In five minutes the three of them took in sufficient checks to start a bonfire, and poured out enough drinks to quench it, besides making and passing out change in cash. Farnley and Conway held out for a spell and let Hagan's till take the punishment, but the till soon got empty of everything but checks, and from then on they had to draw on their wallets and their pockets.

Ten minutes later Rusty came in, sighted Devlin, and walked over to him.

"One thing you can say for mules," he observed. "You can gen'rally depend on 'em to behave like mules."

"I never cared much for 'em till today," Devlin admitted. "Those jugheads o' yours sure knew when to parade!"

"They did, with me opening the corral and spooking 'em off to a start. I saw the jackpot you were in, Preacher."

"H'm. You did all right, fire peak!"

"Thanks," Rusty acknowledged the compliment. "You'll do all right, too, if you get out of here without a puncture! De Risa and the Jingo crew and the rest o' the bunch are all round this place, only waiting for the crowd to disperse—so they can disperse *you!* De Risa's got a hell of a bump over one eye, and Jingo's limping where a mule kicked him. They act a little sore. My mules can't help you out of this jackpot, Preacher—they're scattered all over creation!"

"I don't need 'em," Devlin informed him. He banged a gun butt on the wall for attention and got it. "Friends, neighbors, an' loyal customers o' the bank!" he announced to the crowd. "It's my pleasure to tell you that the bank is declarin' a dividend to everybody!

Step right down to the bank an' get your dividend checks! Get 'em while they're hot, gents!"

He and Rusty dived into the mob rushing for the doors, and went along with the human stampede to the bank. Don Ricardo and Jingo, waiting impatiently outside, got slapped down by the batwing doors and then stepped on.

Toward noon Cassie, massaging her right hand and wrist, suffering with writer's cramp from making out dozens of checks, said with a tired grin: "Well, that was a record morning in the banking trade, I must say!"

"Yeah," grunted Devlin, examining the till. "But where the hell's our profit?"

VI

The completion of the new bridge was signified by the arrival of the first mail in several days, and Gault retired to his desk with an armload of bank correspondence that would keep him silently occupied, Devlin hoped, for some time to come. Gault's everlasting worrying and fussing was beginning to get on Devlin's nerves. It seemed as though Gault was always nagging about something. When he wasn't doing that, he could usually be found surrounded by big open ledgers and account files, staring at them dismayedly and groaning to himself.

So the gun-slinger-marshal-banker had hopes of hearing no more worries from that quarter for a while. But pretty soon Gault paled and gasped out: "Oh, my goodness! Oh, I knew this would come! We'll all be arrested and sent to prison! Here's an official notice from the B. P. A., on Form 7-S921 Amended Regulation 5, to wit—"

"Never mind the wit right now!" broke in Cassie, at the front window. "Look, Devlin, is that another mob shaping up? There, down the street outside Farnley's house!"

"Damned if it isn't!" Devlin confirmed, and one glance told him that it wasn't a mob of anxious depositors to be put off and placated with a bushel of checks. It was a gathering of the combine clan—the tough jiggers, the Jingo gun crew, and Don Ricardo de Risa.

Devlin ran a grim look around the bank. There were iron bars at the windows, but they'd be poor protection from bullets. Rusty was off again somewhere, busy with his stage line after getting the mules rounded up. Gault was the kind of man who hardly knew one end of a gun from the other, and furthermore didn't care to learn.

"Can you shoot?" Devlin asked Cassie. She had displayed an aptitude for doing most anything, so he considered it a fairly reasonable question.

"Well," she answered, "I never have, but I bet I could learn."

"This is a hell of a time to think o' takin' lessons! Here they come!" He gave her a shove. "Take cover! You, too, Gault! Burrow into a ledger, or somethin', an' maybe they'll think you're only a deficit!"

For his own part, he went behind the counter to the cashier's cage, and up-ended a desk before him for an extra bulwark. He stood waiting there, chewing on a cigar, looking considerably efficient and businesslike, if not precisely bankerish. Cassie also got behind the counter. With a pen thrust into her hair over one ear, she looked both prim and impish. Gault huddled behind his desk, and sank to his knees there in an attitude of prayer, muttering distressedly that all this was very irregular.

The bunch of gun-slung jiggers in the street didn't behave like the townsmen mob. They moved obviously from previous instructions, deliberate purpose and plan guiding them. They split up, some of them crossing the street to this side and going around to the rear of the bank. Others stepped into doorways. The Jingo four, alone, Jingo limping in the lead, advanced past the feed and grain store and trooped into the lobby of the little Tivoli Theater directly opposite the bank.

There was a pause. Then along the waiting, watchful street came Don Ricardo, sinisterly elegant, bone-handled guns swaying at his hips, very much the debonair *caballero* except for the bump over his eye and a skinned nose. He paused to light a cigarette before the bank, came strolling on, and entered with all the easy assurance of a chief shareholder.

"Señorita!" He doffed his sombrero to Cassie, flashing her a charming smile. "Señor!" He sent a nod to the huddling Gault, and turned to Devlin. "Amigo!" He stepped forward, spurs jingling musically, hand outstretched.

"Put that in my reach, you're apt to go back with a stub!" Devlin promised him.

"But how unkind!" exclaimed the Don reproachfully. "I wish only to show that my esteem and friendship for you is unimpaired by your misfortune."

"What misfortune?"

The Don sighed sympathetically. "Alas! That I must be the one to break the sad news to you! At a special meeting of the town council today, you were dismissed as marshal!"

Devlin accepted the news without astonishment. "I'm all broken up about it," he commented.

"And I," Don Ricardo went on modestly, "was appointed temporary marshal in your stead!"

"Temporary? Yeah, it would be!"

"Yes. To do a temporary job."

"What job, Rico?"

"To arrest you, amigo!" the Don explained.

They eyed each other meditatively. "That's a job, Rico!"

"Yes. But they voted to provide me with full assistance and cooperation."

"Think you can do it?"

Don Ricardo shrugged, tapping the ash from his cigarette. "I consider it not impossible, with"—he gestured over his shoulder—"all the help out there!"

They went on eying each other, warily now. They were as dangerous and deadly a pair of long riders as ever wet their stirrups in the Rio Grande, and neither one of them had a low estimate of the other's violent abilities. Don Ricardo, holding his cigarette in his left hand, made no bones about letting his right hand rest on a holstered gun. Devlin's hands were hidden below the upturned desk and the counter, but their position could be guessed.

"Oh, of course," murmured the Don, "I probably could be persuaded . . . hem . . . unofficially, to resign from my job. For instance, if you unlocked that vault—"

"There isn't a dime in it!" Devlin told him.

Don Ricardo's smile was politely disbelieving. "No? You are running a bank. You pay out no money, but only checks—which you make others cash. Under such an admirable system, amigo, I fail to see how you could avoid making a good profit!" He addressed himself to Cassie, with a bow. "Señorita, may I ask you what are the assets of this bank at present?"

"You may. Just a minute." Cassie took her pen from her hair, dipped it in ink, and went through an elaborate figuring ritual.

"Not counting the value of the building and the furniture and equipment, I'd say that our assets must amount to at least thirty thousand dollars," she informed him. And when she set the figure at that, Devlin knew that she had arrived at it by adding twenty thousand dollars in cashier's checks to the check for ten thousand that he had made out against the El Paso bank.

"All in negotiable assets!" Cassie added, without the quiver of an eyelash.

Don Ricardo's eyes sparkled. "In the vault, there?"

"Sure!" Cassie nodded her bronze-red head. "Every bit of it!"

"Thank you! You are the kind of candid, guileless, innocent girl for whom I have a special liking," the Don complimented her, and grinned at Devlin. "Do you unlock the vault, or do I go out and turn loose the dogs of war?"

Devlin left his position and paced to the big steel door of the vault. "This," he said, taking the keys from his pocket, "is very irregular, Rico, I'm warnin' you!" He unlocked the steel door, the Don standing close behind him and smiling happily.

Cassie let loose with her pen. It sailed through the air and scored a bull's-eye a little below the back of Don Ricardo's short jacket, and the Don gave a leap and a yell of pained surprise, clutching at the spot.

"An' this," drawled Devlin, yanking the vault door open fast and slamming it against the Don, "is most regrettable!"

Don Ricardo, hit all the way up and down by the heavy door, lost his sombrero as well as half his breath and his senses as he was knocked over. Half wasn't quite sufficient. Devlin stroked out a gun and tapped him on the head with a long barrel. The Don landed on the floor like a slumbering babe falling out of its crib, and stayed there.

Something of the brief commotion had evidently been seen through the front window, for a shouted query came from the lobby of the Tivoli.

"Hey, de Risa, what's goin' on? What's holdin' you up in there?"

De Risa wasn't being held up by anything. He was down. Devlin borrowed the sombrero and the bone-handled guns, and moved to the front door in a crouch. He bobbed the sombrero into sight a couple of times, then poked the guns out and let blaze with them, pitching his shots into the theater lobby.

The "Show Tonite" sign came down with a crash, the box office glass window suddenly bloomed an unannounced star, and a placard picture of Oman, the Turkish Terpsichorean — "Best Stomach Dancer The World Has Ever Seen" —got a dimple in the stomach where nature intended one should be. Oman looked all the better for it, too.

Kid Crowley, youngest of the Jingo gun team and the only fool of the four, came out of the box office with glass on his hat and his guns thumping, yelling shrilly: "He's crossed us! De Risa—he's crossed us! That's him shootin'! He's—"

A bullet from a bone-handled gun took him high above the belt. He fell back into the box office, and the grating voice of Jingo responded. "Yeah. We know, Kid. We got eyes, too!"

The big front window was the bank's first casualty. It caved in, long slivers clashing and tinkling, and the bullet that did it struck a thin steel bar of the cashier's cage and curled it up like a clock spring. Devlin slid the Don's emptied guns back across the floor, and flipped his own big black-butted man-stoppers from under his ministerial coat. He could admit that Don Ricardo's handsomely engraved guns possessed some sound and sterling virtues, but he preferred his own in a pinch.

And this, he could also admit, was a pinch. He had kicked hades' door open a little prematurely and gained a slight advantage there, but the stokers along the street were rapidly catching up and fueling the fires. The bank was getting the hell shot out of its visible assets.

"An' just when it might've started to show a profit, too!" Devlin muttered, slinging a shot across the street and bringing a sweet note from an exhibited gong of the Waldron Swiss-Bell Ringers, Famed Performers Before The Crowned Heads Of Europe.

Jingo, seasoned and scarred in the lawless service of his guns, wasn't the man to stay squatting in a hole and be shot at. "Crow—George!" he roared

at Bonham and Lupin. "We're goin' over!"

VII

Don Ricardo came to himself with a start and a grunt, sat up groggily, and by instinct his hands explored his holsters. They were empty, and the discovery brought him lurching to his feet.

Cassie had his guns and most of his shells. She was learning how to shoot, and either she was enjoying beginner's luck or else she had a natural gift for the thing. From a rear window she had already half scalped one jigger, exploded the high boot heel under another, and caused three more to retire from behind a trash barrel.

The Don indignantly retrieved his guns from her and stumbled toward the front door, but he had sense enough to flop to the floor and roll to cover after a bullet plucked at his jacket.

"What the devil?" he inquired, and peered dazedly around for the answer. As far as he could recall, he hadn't come in here to be shot at by the combine's jiggers.

A voice outside, distinctly that of George Lupin, yelled exultingly: "Hey, bet I got de Risa with that'n! Saw the blasted cuss fall!"

"*Qué?*" mumbled Don Ricardo. He scrambled over the floor to Devlin. "What has happened? They're shooting at *me!*"

Devlin bobbed up to clip a shot, and ducked down again. "You only just findin' that out? Shucks, they been at it for five minutes now, doin'

their level best to smoke us both to glory! You've slipped a cog, Rico. Take it easy, boy; it'll all come back to you if you live that long!"

"But—but—the last I remember, you were opening the vault, and something stung me—"

"You got stung, all right! Don't ever trust hombres like Logan an' his pals—you should know that, Rico! Look at your hat over there. Two holes through the crown, an' that bottom one so low, it's a wonder the bullet didn't dent your skull."

Don Ricardo felt the top of his head, and winced. "It did!"

"Then that explains it. Now cut the fool questions, an' see if you still remember how to handle those silver-mounted smoke-poles. We're in a fine fix. Here they come!"

Don Ricardo breathed an oath. He hadn't time to reach back into memory and make a careful cut of the facts. Something was haywire, but he couldn't put his finger on it, and there was a sense of old familiarity in lining up his guns in a smoke haze alongside those of Devlin. They had

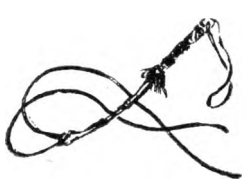
often pitched their scrap side by side and sometimes back to back when the game blew up and muzzle flame ringed them in, and gunned and smashed their way out together like brothers, before turning to swap challenging stares over the spoils, if any.

Jingo emerged from the Tivoli lobby, darting and weaving fast in spite of his limp, guns upraised ready to chop down, saving his fire until he could reach the bank. He was a blocky, grizzled gunman with a short, untrimmed beard, and he had a charging bull courage that had earned him a reputation for speed and luck.

Crow Bonham and George Lupin burst out after him, following his tactics and crossing the street in side leaps and crouching sprints. Bonham, half Indian, wore his black hair long and carried a knife at his belt and only one gun. Lupin, with a dash of the dandy, flaunted silver conchas on his cowhide vest.

"*Hola*, friend George!" Don Ricardo sang out. And Lupin, sure that he had downed the Don, hesitated an instant between side leaps. The Don's bullet spun a twisted silver concha in the sunshine, and Lupin tangled his feet and dropped in a heap.

Jingo made it all the way to the boardwalk, and there at the last instant switched his course from the door over to the window. The barrel of one of his guns clanged against an iron bar and came poking through the shattered window, and Devlin had to slide around in a hurry to thumb off a shot at it. Jingo cursed and brought his other gun down, and he and Devlin fired together, almost face to face through the bars.



It was Devlin who swore then, with a bullet-raked forearm. He let the hammers down on both his long-barreled guns, and Jingo, already falling against the bars, took the double discharge and fell from sight below the level of the window. Devlin moved and fired again out the window, at the same time that Don Ricardo slung a shot through the door.

Crow Bonham met the slamming impact of both bullets, and he straightened up and for three stiff-legged backward steps he stayed upright. When he toppled, he was gazing up wide-eyed and gravely at the sky.

"We're doing all right, amigo!" observed the Don, reloading.

"Don't brag too soon!" Devlin grunted. He was pulling up his sleeve to bind his forearm. "Plenty more where they come from! That was just a warm-up. Listen to Hagan yellin' to his jiggers to get the job done, will you? How's my hired help gettin' along back there, by the way?"

"Still alive and kicking!" called back Cassie.

"The B. P. A.—" bleated Gault.

"Stow it!" Devlin rapped, cocking his head. "Rico, what the devil is that racket comin' down the street?"

Don Ricardo offered the opinion that the racket sounded much like that of a stagecoach and team rocketing downhill with greased axles and no brakes.

"But it can't be!" he said positively. "No stage driver would be so loco as to drive into all this shooting."

The front of the bank was a target drawing bullets from half the doorways down along the other side of the street, and from Hagan's Zia Palace somebody with a rifle was ricocheting lead off the bars of the window. As for the rear, the gunmen back there were seeing to it that there'd be no getaway by that route.

The appearance of a stagecoach proved the Don both right and wrong. It was coming down the street with the team plunging at a dead run, the coach rocking and lurching, the driver's seat empty. It looked like a runaway, but it wasn't. The driver was inside the coach, and he wasn't loco; he was Rusty Coe. He was handling the lines from the coach door on the bank's side, by leaning out precariously with the door hanging open, one foot on the outside step.

Plainly, Rusty had only the intention to make it to the bank and lend a hand, because he began hauling on the lines as he neared his objective, wishful to slacken the wild speed so that he could jump out and still keep his footing.

Devlin changed Rusty's plan for him. He flipped his guns under his coat, gave his hat brim a yank, and got set.

"C'mon, Rico, we'll jump her on the bounce!" he called, and leaped.

Rusty, about to let go the lines and unload, was blocking Devlin. He took a straight-arm shove from the gun master that jolted him into and across the coach, and he came close to making his exit via the other door. He was getting back up onto his feet when Don Ricardo came diving into the coach and landed a-sprawl on top of him.

"Hey! Get off me!" Rusty struggled clear. "I want to get off at the bank! Cassie's still in there, isn't she?"

Neither of the two lobos bothered to reply. Don Ricardo, trying to steady himself with one hand, was chopping shots into doorways as the coach careened past. Devlin had the lines and the whip. He hung out the open door and sent the whip cracking over the team.

"Git along, jugheads!" Devlin yelled.

"Where in blazes are we going?" shouted Rusty.

"Stick your head out an' take a look!"

Rusty did so, and promptly pulled it in again. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" he yelped.

The off wheels of the coach hit the boardwalk, bounced onto it, and smashed full into the side of the three worn stone steps of the Zia Palace. Devlin swung the team at the same time and let go the lines, and the coach capsized with a splintering crash against the front of the saloon. Harness snapped and the mules broke clear and took off, leaving the overturned coach rammed fast through the Zia's wrecked front window with

its upper half jutting into the barroom.

It was some slight disappointment to Devlin to find that Hagan, Farnley and Conway had evidently sprung away from the window and dodged damage to themselves. He dragged himself out of the wreck, Don Ricardo and Rusty clawing out after him, in time to catch sight of Conway ducking into the private room.

Devlin ducked, too, and the buckshot charge of a sawed-off shotgun that blared from back of the bar screamed over the coach and into the street. The double barrel cut lower, searching for him, Hagan's face cool and tight-mouthed behind it. And at the other end of the bar, Farnley's marble eye lifted into view over the sights of a repeating rifle. Two of the combine, anyhow, could take on their own fighting if they had to, and make teamwork of it.

Don Ricardo, both hands busy disengaging himself from the broken coach, spat a warning, "*Guárdase!*" and Rusty tried to clear his gun for a shot.

Devlin whipped a side shot down the bar that tore a long furrow in the mahogany, dodged, and while splinters from the furrow were still falling, both of his guns roared at the bar's front panels. The shotgun slid away, vanished, blared again when it hit the floor, and Hagan's tight-mouthed face went lax before it, too, slid away and bumped on the floor.

Farnley laid his rifle carefully on the bar, and raised his hands level with his shoulders. He came out, his eyes hard and bitter, not a tremor in his face, and Devlin frowned surprisedly until he saw the front of the cattleman's shirt. Farnley looked down and saw it, too, then, and he gasped, went pale, and keeled over. Devlin went looking for Conway.

Don Ricardo glanced down at Farnley, shrugged, and placed his attention on the street. The jiggers out there were beginning to catch up with events, and were working toward the Zia. Chips flew from the capsized coach, and the Don answered with a chattering roar of exploding cartridges. He grinned when Rusty, shooting beside him, remarked that they were no better off here than anywhere else.

"True," said the Don. The reckless glitter was in his dark eyes. It took a last-ditch fight to bring out his most flippant humor. "But we had a nice fast ride, yes?"

Conway was in the private room. And, judging from his manner, what he wanted most was privacy. His poise was gone, his air of superiority was a thing of the past, and he was so scared when Devlin walked in on him that he couldn't speak. All he could do was shake his head pleadingly, and then shake all over.

Devlin steered him back into the barroom. There, Conway saw Hagan and Farnley, saw what had happened to them, and he nearly collapsed. He was a terrified money lender who had got into company too fast for him, and Devlin had to pour him a stiff drink to keep him from fainting. He craved peace and quiet and ten-percent interest plus extra charges, a big

desk to sit behind, and no sinister eyes glaring at him and nothing lethal coming in his direction.

"You're all alone now, hombre—the last boss o' the swindle syndicate!" Devlin told him harshly. "If you want to live an' get well, go out there an' tell those hired hellions the payroll is done closed, stopped, an' cut off! *Sabe?*" He bent a look upon Conway that chilled the man. "But maybe you'd rather stand all the expense by y'self—an' the risk an'—"

"N-nossir!" stammered Conway. "Y-yessir! I'll t-tell them, sir, to g-get the hell . . ."

Devlin stalked down the street an hour later with a few no-charge Zia drinks under his belt, not a shot fired at him, and entered the bank. He took a long look around.

"Damn sorry mess 'round here!" he remarked, examining the windows and floor. "What this bank needs right now is a good sweeper, cleaner, scrubber—"

"And banker!" put in Cassie, removing her head for a moment from Rusty's shoulder, where apparently it was finding comfort.

"The B. P. A.!" intoned Gault sternly, wagging a skinny finger over his desk, which had a couple of holes in it.

"What the devil is this B. P. A. you keep gabbling about, anyhow?" Devlin asked him casually, fishing out a fresh cigar from a pocket restocked in the Zia.

"The Bankers' Protective Association, of course!" Gault snapped. "Their formal communication in-

forms us that this bank is about to be investigated! Two of their detectives are coming! The bank examiners are coming! Federal investigators are coming! The El Paso bank is sending a representative, and in a private note he informs me that a sheriff and four deputies are also coming in a couple of days, armed with warrants for the arrest of—"

"Never mind the details!" Devlin interrupted him. "I'm goin' over to the livery for my horse. When those hombres get here, you can tell 'em right off that I've resigned as president o' this—"

He was interrupted, himself, by the arrival of Don Ricardo de Risa. The Don also had a few Zia drinks stowed under his belt, as well as a bottle of Hagan's best liquor reposing in his pocket.

"Señorita!" intoned the Don, with a sweeping bow that nearly proved too much for his equilibrium. "Señor!" He sent Gault a lofty nod, and another to Rusty, and smiled affably at Devlin. "Amigo! Is it not

time to speak of friendship? Of the fraternity of kindred spirits? Of business?"

"It sure is, Rico," Devlin agreed. "But damn the business. I'm tired of it. That a bottle in your pocket? Bueno! Come into my office. The president's office! Step in, Rico, step right in . . ."

Devlin stepped alone out of the office less than half an hour afterward, and closed the door quietly behind him.

"Don't disturb the new president!" he bade Cassie.

"The what?"

"You heard what I said, gal! I've just sold him my full partnership, includin' the keys to the vault, for fourteen thousand dollars!"

Devlin pondered for a moment, aware that Cassie was eying him waitingly. "Yeah," he muttered dourly, pulling out the money and cramming it into her hands. "Maybe you're right. You can pay it to those two-bit depositors who didn't get to cash the checks we gave 'em. I don't need money that bad."

There was always self-respect. There was always that code, tattered and tarnished as it might be, demanding, for self-respect's sake, that the winnings be won at the expense of the strong, not the weak. It was not altruistic, not soft, not foolishly noble. A man had to get along with himself, be on good terms with himself, when he was a lone wolf riding those long, dim trails, with only his thoughts for company.

He quirked a cynical lip at Cassie when she said: "You're all right, Devlin — I'm all for you!" What did she know about silent nights, the hidden campfire and the listening, the ghosts that came and gathered at the fire? She was all right, too, but she was a girl, young, and she'd never felt the necessity of turning her mind away from the memory of an old scar.

He scowled at Rusty when Rusty asked: "How about the cash you took in for those mortgages, Preacher?" Rusty Coe grinned, asking that question.

"You go to the devil!" Devlin growled, and stalked to the door. Before leaving, he looked back. "Keep an eye on Rico, eh? If he's still asleep when all that law comes riding into town, be sure to wake him up in plenty time for a getaway. You hear?"

"Sure," agreed Rusty.

"Don't worry about him," Cassie said softly. "Don't you worry, Preacher."

"Who's worryin' about that double-crossin' cuss?" growled Devlin, his hand on the door knob. "*Adios!*"

THE END

By S. Omar Barker

Romeo's Rodeo Romance

Birdie liked having the boys fall for her but not from the hurricane deck of a bronc!

ROMEO JONES and me sidled up onto the empty barrels the Potluck Café used for counter stools and took a buzzard's eye view of the signs tacked up all over the place: "Don't Cuss Our Coffee—It's Too Weak To Defend Itself." "Fried Pig's Vest—20c. With Buttons—25c." "All The Butter We've Got Is a Billy Goat In the Back Yard." "If You Can't Cut Our Flapjacks, Holler And We'll Help You Fold 'Em."

Then there's the one that ketches Romeo's eye: "Cowboys Wanting To Kiss The Waitress—10c."

I may have seen a few gals purtier than the buxom blonde that bounces

in to take our order, but of course they had all their teeth.

"What'll it be, boys?" she greets us, swiping at the already clean counter with her pink apron. "Beans with or without?"

"Without what?" I inquire.

"Spoons," she says. "When I dip from the top of the pot you can drink 'em. If I dip deeper, you got to have a lifter."

But I can see that the red-necked ranny I endure for a pardner ain't studyin' on beans. Set Romeo Jones down to a sack of gold double eagles, a turkey dinner, and a tub of champagne, and if there's a female in sight, he won't notice none of it but her. He slaps two dimes down on the oilcloth and starts around the end of the counter with a look in his eyes.

From under the counter the gal calmly pulls a sawed-off shoot-bang. She don't exactly point it at Romeo, but she looks like she could. It stops him like double-block brakes.

"What's on your mind, High Handsome?" she inquires with a smile that shows her missing tooth as well as her good humor.

"Well, shucks!" grunts Romeo. "Ain't you the waitress?"

"That's right," admits the gal, making like a banjo with her shotgun.

"Well, I'm the cowboy," Romeo explains. "The sign says 10c a kiss—an' there's my 20c! Ain't you goin' to deliver accordin' to contract?"

"Read that sign again, High Handsome," snickers the gal. "It don't say you can kiss the waitress for 10c. It just says we charge you a dime for wanting to! Savvy now, pardner?"

So saying, she scoops up Romeo's dimes and drops 'em in a cigar box.

"It's a gyp!" snorts Romeo, getting red plumb to the fossicles of his taffy-cotton hair. "Come on, Nogal, let's git out o' here!"

"Don't slip your daily, Pink-nose," I tell him. "Where else between here an' El Paso can we buy a bowl of beans for two bits?"

"Besides," says the gal, coy as a catfish, "I like to look at you, High Handsome. I think you're purty!"

After that you couldn't have dragged Romeo away from there with a team of *machos*.

While the gal is gone to the kitchen after our beans, a couple of other buckaroos breeze in and bench at the counter. Being drifters ourownselves, Romeo and me ain't acquainted with these spur-jinglers, so all we give 'em is a noddin' howdy. One of them is an overgrown rusty-haired whacker-ony, muscular enough to hunt bears with a switch. His face is as ruddy natural as Romeo's when blushing. His neck rag is black silk, and his sombrero is silver-belly Sundance wide enough to pitch camp under.

The small dose with him is a solemn, bald-headed jasper about the build of a hungry mosquito, in a blue denim jumper faded out by many washings and now needin' another.

When the blond heifer barges back in with our bowls of beans the big feller signals her with a jerk of his head to come over there.

"Hold your horses, Rusty Rupert," she says, sticking her tongue out at

him. "I got a couple of high-class customers here to draw coffee for."

After she fetches the java, she stands there in front of Romeo, prissing up her hair.

"My, you're purty!" she says.

"The same to you," beams Romeo. "Doubled an' redoubled. I bet you've got a purty name, too!"

"Ma named me Eunice Euphemia—Wiggins, that is. But my best friends call me Birdie—because I'm a nester's daughter. Ain't that cute?"

"Birdie," says Romeo earnestly, grabbing holt of one of her hands, "are you married?"

"Huh-uh," Birdie answers. "I got this tooth knocked out shoein' a mule. I'm fixin' to get married right soon, though." She throws a wink towards Rusty Rupert. "I'm goin' to marry the man that wins the bronc ridin' at the rodeo next Sunday. Ain't I, Rusty?"

"You said it, Sugar Babe!" says the big hombre. "An' you better quit flirtin' with that cow-faced stranger before I git jealous an' twist one of his ears off!"

"Which one of whose ears off?" inquires Romeo.

"Don't mind Rusty," the gal reassures him. "He's tame as a kitten."

To prove it she barges over and gives the big dollicker's nose a twist—and purt near gets herself kissed for her pains. She ducks out of his reach like a smart bronc dodgin' a rope.

"Don't git too previous, Big Toots," she warns him. "You ain't win that bronc ridin' *yet!*"

"An' what's more he ain't goin' to!" asserts Romeo. "Not with Romeo Jones in the contest!"

"Shut up an' eat your beans," I tell him. "You want to raise a rumpus so Birdie'll have to call the boss an' git us throwed out?"

"Don't worry about that," Birdie says. "I'm the boss and main thrower-outer around here myownself, but I don't throw nobody out except for complainin' about the chuck. Are you gents sure 'nough goin' to stay an' straddle 'em in our rodeo?"

"That depends," says Romeo. "Are you sure 'nough aimin' to make matrimony with whoever wins the bronc ridin'?"

Birdie gives a little .22 caliber laugh, then sobers up all of a sudden with a faraway gleam in her big blue eyes—at least in the one lookin' my way.

"'Course I was only jokin'—at first," she admits. "But the more I ponder it, the more it sounds like a plumb romantic idea. Like bein' one of them old-time princesses with a whole slew of knights battlin' to the death for the fair lady's favor. Yessir, by granpaw, I'll do it! I'll bestow my heart an' hand on the knight—I mean bronc rider—that tops Sunday's contest—an' I'll throw in the Potluck Café for good measure!"

"Birdie," says Rusty Rupert, just a leetle edgy, "if I didn't know that you know that ever'body knows that you're my gal, an' that I always win this Rock Hill ridin', I'd say that you're talkin' just a little mite brash for a gal that's already engaged!"

"Sir Rupert," proclaims Birdie,

striking a Statue of Liberty pose, "beginnin' from now, Lady Eunice Euphemia Wiggins ain't engaged to nobody! Him that wouldst wed her must win her!"

"Okay by me, Sugar Babe!" grins Rusty Rupert. "I'm the curly wolf that can do it!"

"Me too, by gravy!" says Romeo. He backs off his barrel and executes a bellyband bow with his sombrero over his boozum and his hip pockets stuck way out behind. "Lady Eunice Eu-what-yuhmacallit Wiggins, you are wunnerful! Ain't she, Nogal?"

"Oh, sure!" I agree. "I don't know when I've et better frijoles."

As a matter of fact, being temporarily out of a permanent job and on the drift, Romeo and me ain't been feedin' very heavy lately. I turn to the small dose with Rusty Rupert, who so far ain't took no part in the discussion except to set and look sad.

"What do you think of it, Sorrowful?" I ask him. "You a bronc rider, too?"

He gazes at me quite a while, like a scolded pup fixin' to whimper. "Oh, sorter . . . I reckon," he sighs finally. "Fourth money sometimes, if I'm lucky. No use nobody tryin' fer first when ol' Rusty's ridin'."

That's how come Romeo Jones and me to get roostered into this rollicky one-day rodeo at Rock Hill. I try to persuade Romeo that it's all a big load of hoopla, and that our best bet is to drift right on down the trail and let Rusty Rupert have his hope-happy hasher without competition. But Romeo has got puppitation of the heart so bad I can't even budge him.

"Nogal," he sighs, "it's the finger of fate pointin' us straight through the badlands to the mesa of bliss. Come Sunday I climb on my bronc an' ride like I never rode before. I win the contest. I marry the most be-yootiful blonde this side of Kansas City. After a short but brief honeymoon we settle down to a life of happy domesticacity runnin' the Potluck Café—an' you, my poddy-paunched pardner, eat for free the rest of your life, or anyways as long as the beans hold out. Ain't it wunnerful?"

"Yeah," says I, "but supposin' you *don't* win this bronc straddlin'? Supposin' *I* win it?"

"You won't win it," he affirms. "But if you should happen to, you'll be honor-bound to marry Birdie—an' I will go off some place an' shoot myself."

"Don't go too far," I tell him. "I'd feel awful foolish askin' my blushin' bride to postpone the honeymoon while I'm out huntin' for your carcass. But supposin' Rusty Rupert wins—then what?"

"Then," avers Romeo, sounding like a man chokin' to death on mashed pertaters, "then I will hide my broken heart behind a smile an' ride away into the sunset, never to gaze upon a female face ag'in!"

"I wish I could count on that," I tell him.

On the whole it looks like my patootie-pursuin' pardner has got me between a rock and a hard place. Whatever else he may be, he's a top-hand bronc peeler, and liable to win this contest. I'd hate to see him lose to this ol' braggin' Buckaroopert.

But, on the other hand, I sure hate to think of him fallin' into the matrimonial clutches of a female, even a first-class bean boiler like Birdie. I've entered the contest myownself in hope of maybe picking up a few tailings of the prize money, but I know I ain't no top bronc rider like Romeo. In spite of Rusty Rupert's reputation, I'm plumb scared Romeo is goin' to win this ridin' and me lose a pardner.

Meantime him and Rusty are both plumb bustin' themselves trying to keep ahead of each other in the courting of Buxom Birdie. You can see that this Cupidious competition convinces Birdie that she's a regular cowboys' Cleopatra. She wears ribbons in her hair and acts as happy and flustered as a little spotted pup with two tails to wag. But she makes both of them puppitatin' punchers do their courtin' from the other side of her bean counter. That makes it kind o' public—which is exactly what the gal seems to enjoy.

Rusty Rupert puts on like he considers Romeo's chances nothin' but a big joke. But his big medicine has the sort o' holler sound of a man that ain't right sure which rock the snake is under. And his rawhidin' gigs Romeo to where I've got to control my pardner's temper for him to keep them two lovesick *ladinos* from fisticuffs.

Then the evening before the rodeo, Romeo tells me that Birdie has consented to go for a buggy ride with him, providing I'll take care of the Potluck Café while she's out—and also loan him the money to hire a buggy.

"It'll give Birdie a chance to find out what a fine, lovable character I am," begs Romeo. "You wouldn't want the pore gal to haff to marry a man she ain't hardly even acquainted with, would you, Nogal?"

"Okay, Whistle Britches," says I. "Maybe if Birdie gits to know you a little better, she'll call off this fool bronc-ridin' proposition. Go ahead—tell her I'll handle the hashery for her!"

Most of the supper customers have done et before Birdie leaves it with me. I'm out in the kitchen fixin' myself a mess of French fries when Sorrowful Simpson, the mournful small dose, drifts in.

"Aw shucks!" he sighs.

"Aw shucks what?"

"Rusty sent me over here to mind the restrunt for Birdie while she went buggy ridin' with him — an' you've done beat me to it!"

"Wup!" says I. "I thought it was Romeo takin' her for a buggy ride?"

"Both," sighs Sad Simpson. "In the same buggy. Wunnerful, ain't it? You care if I come back there an' fry me a few eggs?"

"Come ahead," says I. "It's all on the house. There's the lard in that big can."

We cook us up quite a bait and git right chummy over it. We take turns waitin' on the few customers that come in. Sorrowful playfully shakes the pepper can under the nose of one of 'em, and the feller like to sneeze his head off. Sorrowful makes out like it was an accident, but after the feller

goes out he grins the first grin I ever see on him.

"I jist wanted to find out if pepper would sure 'nough make a feller sneeze," he says.

In about two hours Birdie barges in, beaming and blushing, with Romeo crowding one elbow and Rusty Rupert the other. Romeo has got the makin's of a black eye, and Rusty some skin off his nose.

"Just think!" burbles Birdie. "Two big strong he-men trying to fight over plain little me! Ain't it wunnerful?"

"Too bad you didn't let 'em finish it," I tells her.

"Don't fool yourself, Bowlegged," she says. "They got to be in shape for the bronc ridin' tomorrow, ain't they?"

The next morning I try once more to gouge the goo-goo out of Romeo and persuade him to drift on down the trail with me. But when Romeo ketches the amour, you'd jist as well try to persuade a hungry hog out of a corn patch.

This Rock Hill ridin' rumpus ain't no big contest. but the livestock is plenty wild and salty. So is the crowd. Evidently everybody's heard about Birdie Wiggins stakin' her heart and hand on the bronc riding, from the whoop and holler they raise when she shows up on my pony, ridin' between Rusty and Romeo in the grand entry.

"Ladee-eez an' gentlemuns!" bawls the local buzz-saw announcin' the show. "A little gillygaloo bird tells me which event you're all a-itchin' the worst to see. So we're goin' to give you plenty time to scratch, by savin' the best till the last—namely the bronc bustin'!"

The way the crowd hoots him, you'd think he was nominatin' a sheepherder for sheriff. But it's all good-natured.

Some of these country boys turn out purty salty, but by sweatin' my gizzard to the bone I manage to pick up ten bucks in the ropin' an' bull-doggin', five bucks for ridin' a steer and two-fifty for milkin' a wild cow. But I do it alone. That high-minded pardner of mine ain't entered in none of these other contests on account, he says, of savin' his strength for the buckin' horses.

The way he's savin' it is mostly by paradin' in front of the grandstand where all the women, including Birdie Wiggins, will be sure to take note how handsome he is. Rusty Rupert, on the other hand, is right out there contesting in everything, and winnin' his share. In fact, he shows up to be such a salty hand that I begin to feel kind o' optimistic about him savin' Romeo from the clutches of matrimony by beatin' him in the bronc ridin'. Besides, I've got a private hunch that even if Romeo don't git throwed, he's liable to lose a stirrup or something and disqualify.

While they're chousin' the buck horses into the chutes, I saunter off behind the gear shed after a little tin salve box I'd left cached there, but the darn thing is gone. Around the other side of the shed I come onto little Sorrowful Simpson makin' earnest talk with a rusty-knuckled kid in a cotton picker straw hat that looks purt near as solemn as he does. When the kid sees me comin', he scoots out

of sight right quick, but Sorrowful Simpson waits up and falls in step with me.

"Oh, gosh, Nogal!" he groans. "I jist don't hardly know what to do."

"Well, spit if you're about to run over," I advise him. "What's hurtin' you?"

"Oh, nothin' . . . much," he sighs. "Only I just been thinkin' — what's the use of a little ol' tin whistle like me tryin' to ride broncs ag'inst curly wolves like Rusty an' Romeo?"

"Well, you don't look a day over forty to me," I tell him. "Keep practicin' till you're sixty an' maybe you'll win somethin'."

"I'm a-notion to tell 'em I ain't goin' to ride," he whimpers.

But I could have swore he give me a wink.

The first five riders out of the chute was a bunch of country kids from 'way off up the crick, takin' their first lessons in rodeo ridin'. Three of 'em git throwed by the third jump. The other two manage to stay on by tight-leggin' it so close that their spurs never wiggle — which certainly ain't money ridin', even in a small-dose rodeo like Rock Hill.

The next rider called is Nogal Smith, namely me. Up to now I ain't made up my mind whether to ride my best or not, for fear I might happen to win first place an' Birdie Wiggins. But when my little ol' black bronc bucks out of the chute, I forgit all about everything but ridin' him like a cowboy ort. It's plain to me that he's one of them high, straight, purty buckin' broncs that ain't too hard to ride and a man can make a flashy showin' on. That's exactly what I'm doin', rakin' him good, while the crowd purt near hollers their lungs out, when all of a sudden that kid in the straw hat runs past purt near right under the bronc's nose. That does it. The bronc spooks sideways, ketches me off balance — and I'm throwed.

"Ladee-eez an' gentlemuns!" squalls the announcer as I limp back to the chutes. "We now come to what you all been waitin' for! Rusty Rupert, comin' out of Chute 4 on an ol' gut twister named Bear Sign — ridin' today not only fer money — but fer love!"

Rusty looks as sure of himself as a wolf that's done caught his rabbit. He waves his hat, the crowd gives him a big hand, and Birdie herself climbs right onto the wire fence in front of the grandstand to wave her purple bandanna and throw kisses at him. It sure looks like Rusty's big moment.

Up on the chute right close to the gate the kid in the cotton-picker hat adds his two cents' worth as Rusty eases down into the saddle.

"Ride 'im, Rusty, you big ol' forked jasper, you!" he hollers as the chute gate swings open.

What happens next I purt near hate to tell on a cowboy. Rusty comes out with his spurs plumb up in ol' Bear Sign's neck, and on the first snaky jump he starts scratchin'. On the next one Rusty Rupert starts sneezin'—and if you've ever tried to sneeze and stay on top of a bucker at the same time, you know what happens.

Rusty picks hisself up and comes

faunchin' back to the chute, wringy as a stump-tailed bull in fly time.

"Who the devil throwed pepper in my face?" he demands.

A few laughs and a little rawhidin' from some of the older cowmen is all the answer he gits. But I notice the kid in the straw hat ain't around no more.

Romeo Jones steps up to where Rusty Rupert is tryin' to argue with the judges.

"If this gent figgers he never had a fair ride," Romeo offers, "I'm plumb agreeable for him to straddle another un."

"No rerides," says the head judge. "unless the horse falls with you or fails to buck. It's in the rules."

"Goshamighty!" pants Romeo. "Then that means I win the bronc ridin' an' beyootiful Birdie is mine! Ain't it wunnerful, Nogal?"

"You ain't win the bronc ridin'—yet, Whistle Britches," Rusty Rupert reminds him. "Your bronc's in the chute, an' here's fifty bucks says you won't stay on him three jumps!"

But Romeo ain't got the money to take the bet. Neither have I — and wouldn't take it if I had.

Romeo is up in the chute. easing down into the saddle when I see Buxom Birdie herself come barging across the arena. Romeo is so busy fixin' to straddle that he don't notice her. She's red-faced as a chili pepper and she grabs Rusty Rupert by an ear purt near hard enough to unroot it.

"You big lunk!" she says, plumb ringy. "I thought you was a bronc rider! Do you think just because I kidded him along a little that I want to marry that doggone tossle-topped whistle britches and have to feed him an' that no-account pardner of his the rest of my life?"

I'm fixin' to tell her that I'm perfectly able to feed myself — if somebody will furnish beans and a spoon —when the chute swings open and out comes Romeo on one of them big. gut-jarrin' grays.

All muscle and no mind like Romeo is, that's exactly the kind of a bronc he most generally makes a fine showing on. But not this time. On the very first jump Romeo's left boot slips out of the stirrup like it was greased. On the second jump he loses the other stirrup the same way, and on the third he's throwed.

Even before he hits the ground I see Sorrowful Simpson break off from a palaver with the judges and run climb up on the chute.

"Ladee-eez an' gentlemuns!" squalls the announcer. "Please hold your 'taters! The bronc ridin' ain't over. Sorrowful Simpson, which had claimed he didn't aim to ride, has now changed his mind, an' being as how he paid his entrance fees, the judges are goin' to let him. Sorrowful Simpson — comin' out on Laffin' Water!"

To make it a short nail and soon hammered, this Laffin' Water bucks just lively enough to make a good show and Sorrowful Simpson scratches him freely from end to end. Even before the pick-up man gits him back to the chutes, the judges have told the announcer to name Sorrowful Simpson the winner.

Over in the grandstand as well as

out here on the chutes there's a heap of laughing and hooting, but Romeo don't seem to hear it. He grabs Sorrowful by the arm and marches the sad little man over to where Buxom Birdie has got Rusty Rupert backed up to the fence telling him what a lady like her thinks of a gent like him that can't even win a bronc ridin'.

"Fair Lady," Romeo interrumps them with a bow that would have done honor to Sir Launcelot hisself, "it is with a sore but aching heart that I hereby pursent to you the winner of the bronc-ridin' contest, the future Mister Birdie Wiggins! An' I wish you both many happy returns.

Before Birdie can answer, Romeo whirls on his boot heels, and together we ride off into the sunset.

We're about five miles out on the trail to nowhere before either of us says anything. Then Romeo heaves a gut-shivering sigh and sort o' grins.

"Anyhow, Nogal," he says. "I'm glad ol' Rusty didn't git her!"

Knowing what I do about the situation, I don't say nothing to that.

"Even if it was sort o' a dirty trick," Romeo grins, "now that it's all over, I'm sort o' glad you did grease my stirrups an' let pore little ol' Sorrowful win. He needs a wife like Birdie to cheer him up."

"I never greased no stirrups," says I. "I admit I borrowed a salve box full of Birdie's lard for that purpose, but some kid must have swiped it."

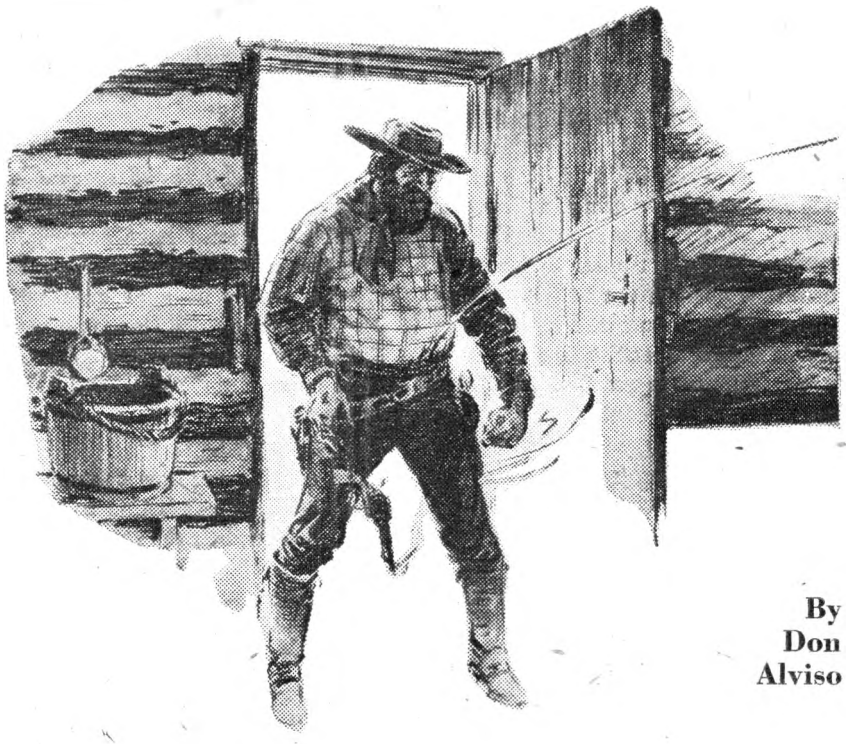
"Is that a fact?" says Romeo. But his tone proves he ain't even interested in the Rock Hill Rodeo no more. "Gosh, Nogal—look at that beyootiful sunset we're ridin' right into! Ain't it wunnerful?"

"Yeah," says I.

And considering how contented he seems to be, I don't bother to tell my moon-eyed pardner the rest of it: that Rusty Rupert will prob'ly git the gal after all, because Sorrowful Simpson has done got a wife and kids — includin' the brat in the cotton-picker hat that spooked my bronc, throwed pepper in Rusty Rupert's face, and prob'ly greased Romeo's stirrups for him. All so that his own pappy, for once, could win something besides fourth money in a bronc ridin'!

THE END

ON THE grounds of the State Capitol at Bismarck, North Dakota, there stands a statue erected in honor of a remarkable Indian woman whose loyalty to the intrepid pioneer explorers, Lewis and Clark, first white men to go down the turbulent Missouri River in 1804 and into the unknown reaches of the Pacific Northwest, rivals only the supreme devotion of Pocahontas to Captain John Smith in an earlier day in Virginia. Sacágawea, a Shoshone, not only facilitated the journey through good offices with her brother, a Shoshone chief, but she personally guided the explorers through untold hardships, acted as interpreter and was one of the most valuable members of the expedition.



By
Don
Alviso

What sinister secret made the Horseshoe forbidden territory for the stranger who called himself the

MAN FROM MARABON

I

LEAVING the river packet at its last landing just below the rapids on the upper Snake, the tall broad-shouldered man known as Wallaby observed another boat tied up downstream. This was a cattle boat which smelled of hides and dried blood and was obviously used as a slaughter house on its loaded outward run.

Wallaby bought a dun gelding from an outgoing rider who immediately boarded the cattle boat and disappeared below. The gelding wore a six-pointed star brand which might mean something or nothing.

and his flanks showed spur marks of hard riding. A heavy stock saddle had been part of the bargain, but this Wallaby discarded, replacing it with a flat hornless frame which had an extra surcingle with breast band attached and a wide strap running up over the horse's shoulders to hold the breast band in place.

This up-river landing on the Snake saw many odd men come and go, but the strange gear on Wallaby's dun brought some attention as he rode out of town. He wore no gun, rode without spurs or chaps, and a twelve-foot stock whip lay in loose coils over his shoulder. He followed the river south and east for long steady days, left it at the falls and rode over flat dry prairie until at last the country grew rough again. Coming to another stream, his eye could follow its course miles upstream to a break in the Shadow Mountains which made their roughly oval circle around Horseshoe range, and he saw at last his journey's end.

Darkness came before Wallaby reached the valley's entrance. He pulled off the trail in the first thick patch of scrub pine and made cold camp with the uneasy feeling of unseen eyes watching. He rolled into his blankets but sleep would not come and so after restless hours he sat up and made a smoke. With the cigarette between his lips and match poised, he debated momentarily the risk of showing a light. Then with a quick shrug of his high shoulders he rasped the match across a boot sole and it exploded into flame.

At once a voice called from the farther darkness, "A man don't ride into Horseshoe at night unless he's sent for." The reports of two closely spaced rifle shots came from the higher timber and the bullets whined sharply over Wallaby's head.

Wallaby jabbed the match into the damp earth killing its flame. Reaching into his grub bag, he drew out a gun and moved at a low crouch to the shelter of twin pine stumps close by. Even as he made the shift two more deliberate shots came from the rifle, one bullet making a twanging sound as it punctured the canteen lying alongside his grub bag. In the ensuing silence Wallaby heard the quick pound of a running horse and soon that sound faded into the narrowing canyon and the night was still again.

With the first sign of light in the east Wallaby made coffee, led his dun down to the stream to drink and then saddled and rode toward the town which lay just beyond the valley entrance. Higher hills closed in on either side of him and the timber thickened, veiling the sun's light. Used to flat and open country, Wallaby was aware of a shut-in feeling as though riding into a trap.

Traveling slowly, Wallaby studied the pounded earth of the trail and saw that more than one rider had passed this way during the night. Cattle sign showed going outward and he stopped for closer study and was thus paused when a horse and rider came around the bend and stopped, facing him squarely.

The rider was a girl with hair the color of clean straw. She sat in the saddle the way a man sits and with a man's directness said, "Good morning, stranger. Headed for Gateway?"

Wallaby lifted his hat. "Yes."

"Just passing through?"

"I hope to secure employment bronchoing for Horseshoe."

This precise reply brought a lift to the girl's arched brows and she made no effort to disguise her closer interest. Her look passed from his mount's odd gear to the man's snug-fitting dungaree trousers, coarse woolen vest and flat-brimmed hat

peaked by four even dents in the crown. She saw the man himself as of uncertain age but with a face that was pleasantly unmarked and a mouth and eyes made for laughter.

"You look like a man born and broke to the saddle in Australia," the girl said. "Perhaps on the northern tableland. Ever been to Marabon?"

"I shipped out from Marabon," Wallaby said, showing a slight surprise. "You've traveled?"

She shook her head slowly and the man noted a tenseness about her lips; a guarded tension in her face brought there by stern control, either from within or without. "No. I've never been more than a day's ride from Gateway. But I read books on faraway places. It helps to pass the time."

Wallaby's look traveled past her to the far blue haze of the Shadows and the half-hidden expanse of Horseshoe. "And you must also know this country well."

"As well or perhaps better than the men who ride it. Besides my books, riding over the trails is about the only interest and pastime I have." She turned her head and her thoughtful blue eyes surveyed the circling mountains as a man in prison might scan the wall which shut him in. Then she said abruptly: "I'm Doris Unger. Perhaps you've heard of my father."

Wallaby lifted his hat in acknowledgment of the introduction. "A pleasure, Miss Unger," he said, reflecting upon the stony bitterness in her tone. "Your father, I believe, is owner and manager of Horseshoe?"

"Stuart Unger runs Horseshoe, and Gateway—and about everything else within sound of his voice and reach of his gun." Then she asked with a trace of suspicion in her throaty voice: "Did my father send for you?"

"No. But I had heard that Horseshoe is quite a large cattle station and I thought perhaps it could use another rider."

"I doubt it. Horseshoe is suspicious of strangers and doesn't welcome drifting riders. But of course you can try." With a quick backward glance at the trail she swung past Wallaby and, spurring her bay into a gallop, rode on downstream away from Horseshoe.

II

There were five men in McFee's general store that fall afternoon when Wallaby rode into Gateway, tied up at the sagging rack and pushed open the front door. Alfred McFee stood at his usual place behind the littered counter. Jim Darby, who tended stable for the stage line, was there listening impatiently to voluble Bill Hembree, a two-bit cattleman from the hungry and desolate range lying north of the long canyon which was the entrance to Horseshoe.

Stuart Unger, scowling and silent, stood by a wooden crate of saddles, his wide heavy-browed face still showing the recent sweat and dust

of hard riding. On the saddle crate lay two fire-smoked branding irons, one a Circle Dot and the other a C with a W inside.

Beside the irons with his hat covering his face lay the lanky body of Fret Swan, who until this morning had run stock along the base of the rimrock which made Horseshoe's western boundary.

At any other time the arrival of a strange rider would have taken Unger's immediate interest. But now Wallaby could see that the minds of these men were held by the dead man on the saddle crate and, except for Darby's one brief and guarded look, Wallaby's arrival caused no ripple on the brittle tension in the room.

"I've killed men before when I caught them burning over brands," Stuart Unger said. "Killed them and left them lay. But Cort Winton and Joe Marcal will be in on the noon stage and I brought in Swan and his irons for you and them to see. I mean it as a warnin' for Marcal and Winton. These two-bit squatters think they can build up their herds by taking Horseshoe beef a few at a time. That's going to stop. Swan knows it now, and Winton and Marcal may as well know it and carry the warnin' up the valley. I caught Swan red-handed. Them irons is still warm. So as there'll be no question on that point later I want you men to come over here and feel them for yourselves."

Unger looked directly at McFee and that small man came obediently from behind the counter. Shying from Swan's body, he put out a hand and gingerly felt the smoked end of the irons and nodded back at Unger. Bill Hembree followed close behind McFee, barely touched the irons and, ducking his head at Horseshoe's owner, said volubly:

"No question about it, Mr. Unger. Even a mite of burnt hair on the Circle Dot. Mr. Unger, I sure think you've done this range a big favor."

Without moving from his place by the cold heating stove, Jim Darby said, "The irons was warm when you brought them in, but I can't see this is any affair of the stage company. Of course, old Swan there ran beef over under the west buttes for ten years before you come, Unger, and could hardly be called a two-bit squatter, but that again is none of my affair."

"Your talk ain't doin' your company any good, Darby—nor you either," Unger said. "This thing is comin' to a showdown and I want witnesses—"

Unger stopped abruptly and a sudden stony quiet came to his wide face. Wallaby had stepped forward, touched the irons lightly and then, reaching past them, lifted the worn and drooping hat from Swan's face. With thumb and forefinger he went through the careful motions of closing the dead man's eyes and then replaced the hat over Swan's weatherbeaten features.

"What did you do that for?" Unger demanded.

"Superstition, perhaps, old chap.

A dead man's eyes should always be closed. It may be that they see things to which the living are blind."

"Well, are you satisfied now?" Unger growled menacingly.

"Oh, yes. For the present quite satisfied," answered Wallaby.

"You talk like a city dude," said Unger.

Wallaby smiled. "Just my way, I suppose. I hope it doesn't offend you. I had intended asking for employment on Horseshoe."

"Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't say."

"When I ask a question I expect an answer," Unger snapped. "What brings you to my range?"

"I came only to Gateway," Wallaby said with restraint. "I presume Mr. McFee's store is open to anyone who has the money to buy."

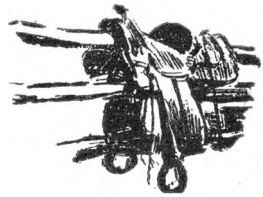
Unger ignored that remark with more than his usual patience and spoke with thick lips grimly taut. "You know anything about runnin' stock?"

"I've done some bronchoing on Barkly Tableland in Northern Australia; rode with the mobs to market and helped muster cleanskins for spring branding."

A puzzled look worried at Unger's face briefly and then he bent forward with loud laughter, slapping his knee with his gloves. "A Britisher! A Limey if I ever saw one. What's your handle?"

"I've been called Wallaby."

"Good enough, the little use we'll have for it. Well, Wallaby, see here.



No man I don't like the looks of rides through the gorge onto this range more than once. Stage stops in here twice a week from Patton, but nobody on it stays over unless I've sent for them. I didn't send for you and you're not staying. Is that clear?"

"Oh, yes. Quite."

"Then get what you need to fill your grub bag and be on your way."

"My swag is quite well stocked with tucker, thank you," Wallaby replied. "But if the shopkeeper has a rifle to my liking, I may make that purchase of him."

Unger threw one look at McFee and the storekeeper shook his head, saying with forced boldness: "I've none for sale, stranger. Better move on."

Wallaby turned, facing Darby. "Good day . . . gentlemen. I may see you again," he said and then left the store.

Stuart Unger addressed McFee: "Have Mel Lassiter nail up a pine box, but don't put Swan in it til after the stage pulls in." Unger opened the door with a push of his boot and, seeing Wallaby lingering by the rack, said impatiently: "I'd be ridin' if I was you. Dark comes early this time of year and it ain't

safe for strangers to camp near Horseshoe after sundown."

"I found that out last night," Wallaby said pointedly. "And I learned another fact this morning. Swan's branding irons were still warm, but Swan was cold and his eyelids wouldn't close. He was killed before midnight."

That hit the cattleman with unexpected impact and he turned it over in his mind while Jim Darby came out of McFee's and headed for the stage office. Then Unger's eyes narrowed and his voice dropped low. "You've a sharp nose, but let me tell you: men have lost noses putting them into strange doors."

"You wanted witnesses," Wallaby reminded him. "Swan and his branding irons are both part of the same picture and I merely learned a thing which was natural to observe."

"You've learned something, and now that you know it, I'll have to kill you," Unger said slowly and quietly.

"But as yet only you and I are aware of this knowledge," Wallaby murmured. "And my sudden passing could be a bit more difficult to explain than Fret Swan's." He mounted with no apparent haste. As he passed the stage office, Jim Darby was standing out front. "I hope you've got a bill of sale for that Six Point dun, stranger," Darby said in an impersonal tone.

"Now that you mention it, I haven't," Wallaby replied, a friendly twinkle in his steel-gray eyes. "The man I purchased the horse from said he couldn't write."

"Word has come down that Six Point up north has lost over fifty horses to rustlers last month. Stuart Unger is pretty close to Six Point and any man ridin' Horseshoe on a Star-branded nag is open to suspicion."

"Thanks," Wallaby answered. "It seems that to Stuart Unger all men are open to suspicion, but I'll remember what you said. Could you get a letter out to Portland for me on the next westbound coach?"

Riding north away from Gateway, Wallaby picked a wooded bend in the trail, swung left into thick scrub growth and hid out until after dark. Then, traveling the curving foothills of the Shadows, he followed a cautious course southward, detouring Fret Swan's Circle Dot ranchhouse and two other headquarters where light showed and thus after midnight came to Cort Winton's corral west and far south of the town of Gateway.

No light came from the farther cabin and, dismounting, Wallaby slip-knotted the dun to a corner corral post and felt his way past two outbuildings, coming abruptly to the back of the cabin. He picked a window which stood partly open, rapped sharply on the glass and called: "Cort! Are you awake?"

Cort Winton's answer came at once. "Who is it?"

"A friend you wouldn't know. I was in McFee's this morning when Unger made his speech over Fret

Swan's body. I'd like to talk to you."

A little silence ran on while Winton seemed to be thinking this over and then he said: "Stand fast till I call, then come up the front steps with a light on your face."

Wallaby waited until he heard the man's brief "Come ahead," and then circled the cabin. Lighting a match, he held it cupped in his hand under his chin as he climbed the three log steps, crossed the narrow porch, and stood in front of the door. A moment later Winton's voice came from the inner darkness:

"I don't know you, stranger. You got any friends in the valley?"

"I had once. Fret Swan would know me and I could make Joe Marcal remember, but Joe's place was too long a ride."

"Did Marcal have a scar on his chin when you knew him?"

Noting Winton's extreme caution, Wallaby realized the fear Stuart Unger had put into these men and he answered carefully: "No. The last time I saw Marcal his place had just been burned out by Unger's men and Joe was gathering rock for another cabin."

As if somewhat reassured, Winton moved inside the room and called back, "Come on in and find the lamp and light it. I don't want to seem unhospitable, but I've got a gun in each hand."

The two inspected each other in the frugal yellow light of the oil lamp and when he saw that Wallaby was unarmed, Winton laid his gun on the table.

"We can't leave that lamp burnin' too long, stranger," Winton said, "but there's time for you to speak your piece."

"Don't you know me?" Wallaby asked.

Winton looked again closely and shook his head. "No, you talk somethin' like the drummers that come to McFee's; you ain't dressed to ride this range, and you're either bold or careless to go without a gun, but I wouldn't know you from Adam's off ox."

"But you remember Jeff Hazard?"

"Like my own brother. Jeff was the first man in Horseshoe with the guts to cross Unger. Unger killed him for it and the rest of us have been like whipped dogs for seven years, with Unger callin' himself Horseshoe and pushin' us further back into the Shadows every year." Then, still suspicious, Winton asked: "How well did *you* know Jeff, stranger?"

Wallaby took from the pocket of his dungarees a worn gold-cased watch and held its engraved back for Cort's inspection. "I came to Gateway the day Jeff was killed. I went down to Mel Lassiter's and saw his body. I got this watch and information on things here in Horseshoe from Lassiter. I met Swan and his son, Dave, and Joe Marcal. Being a lad of sixteen with not much family resemblance to Jeff, I wasn't recognized as a Hazard by Unger. I had just come up from Texas, but

knew at once it wasn't safe here. I got a long look at Unger so I wouldn't forget him, had a talk with Jim Darby and left. I'm Lew Hazard, Jeff's brother."

Winton shook his head in surprise more than disbelief. "I'd never have knowed you, but I ain't doubtin' your word. That's Jeff's watch all right."

"Is there a chance that Unger would know me?"

"Not a chance in the world unless he was tipped off," Winton assured him. "But where'd you go after you left Horseshoe, and where in blazes did you pick up your talk and them outlandish clothes?"

"I took the river boat to Portland and talked with the U.S. marshal. I explained to him that Stuart Unger was trying to misuse an old rule of public lands: that cattlemen trying to hold open range without properly stocking it had no right to the range and another man with adequate stock could move onto the graze and hold it. I explained to him that the small owners here were just getting started and had lost most of their cows in floods and drought driving them in, and also how Unger came down from Montana with something over three thousand head and was crowding out the original settlers on the pretext that they had no herds and were not properly using the range.

"The marshal wouldn't take the word of a youngster without proof, and besides he was having his own troubles with Chinese smuggling and timber pirating there on the coast. He said if I could bring him proof to justify sending deputies all the way up the river, he'd take action. I knew how small my chance would be if I returned to Horseshoe to get this proof. I had to grow up and think things over and make plans.

"I shipped out on a freighter to Marabon, Australia, and there saw my chance to gain time and also perfect a disguise which might keep Unger from suspecting who I was. I spent several years riding for cattle stations in northern Australia, learning to use a gun—and a stock whip. On the way back I waited at the coast long enough to write a letter to Jim Darby and wait for a reply. The stage people there informed me that Darby was still in Gateway.

"Darby's answer told me that Unger just about had control of Horseshoe and I talked to a new marshal who gave me the same answer. He couldn't send men into these outlands on the word of a stranger who had been away seven years without some proof to justify the move. I've got part of the proof. The only way I can get the rest is to go to work for Unger on Horseshoe."

Winton shook his head. "Mighty

risky, even if you could do it. Only new men Unger ever takes on are them sent down to him by the Six Point outfit up north on the Snake. They ride down to Hembree's fake spread north of Gateway, Unger looks them over there, and if he's satisfied, they can come onto Horseshoe. How you figure to get a job with Unger?"

"There's two openings, but one of them I couldn't use. I met Unger's daughter on the river trail this morning and I think she'd put in a word for me if I'd ask her, which I won't. The other chance is that in McFee's I tried to close Fret Swan's eyes and they wouldn't shut. The branding irons Unger brought in were still warm, but Swan was cold. I braced Unger with that when we were alone and it hit him in a tender spot. I think he'd let me ride for Horseshoe just long enough to have one of his men put a shot in my back."

"Which is too slim a chance to take."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. Doris Unger hates her father. I could tell that; not by what she said but the way she said it. I can't ask her for help, but if she wants to talk, it wouldn't be polite to ignore a lady."

Restless sounds came from the corral and Winton immediately blew out the light. Lowering his voice, he said: "Well, better rest until mornin'."

III

When Wallaby rode into Horseshoe's yard the next afternoon the long stock whip was coiled over his shoulder and he wore a gun in a stiff holster which hung high on his right hip with the gun's butt pointed left. Two riders lounged by the corral gate. "I want to see Stuart Unger," Wallaby told them.

"We call him *Mister* Unger around here," one of the riders replied. "Did he send for you?"

"You can ask him that when you call him out," Wallaby said quietly.

The men exchanged glances and made no other move and Wallaby swung one leg over the hornless saddle and, kicking the other free of the stirrup, slid down and hit the ground with both feet. This move, which left both his hands free, brought the quick interest of the two Horseshoe men and the one nearest Wallaby, a shifty-eyed man with a pock-marked face, made an almost imperceptible move of his right arm. Then, thinking better of it, he stood still.

Wallaby moved away from the dun gelding and, holding the man's shifting eyes with an expressionless stare, said smoothly, "Make your move if you're going to make it. If not, one of you call Unger."

The pock-marked man thought that over and then, turning his back on Wallaby, went toward the ranchhouse.

When Stuart Unger came out he wore two guns and the pock-marked man followed close behind him. Unger kept his silence until he was close to Wallaby and then said abruptly: "I've thought over your askin' for a job and I've decided

there's a spot for you on Horseshoe. Brant here will show you a bunk and where to put your gear. I'll talk to you right after supper. Better get a nap. You'll be ridin' with Brant and Alec here tonight, drivin' a small bunch north in the cool of the evenin'."

Before Unger had finished speaking Wallaby saw Doris ride off the trail and enter the yard. Unger swung abruptly away, meeting his daughter as she dismounted at the steps of the house. Though his words were unclear at that distance the harsh threat of his tone drifted back to Wallaby, and Wallaby saw him step close to Doris, lifting the flat of his hand toward her face. Then, with a quick glance toward the men at the corral, Unger let his arm drop.

Wallaby followed the pock-marked Brant to the crew's sleeping quarters where slovenly bunks showed that around a dozen men rode for Horseshoe. He spread his blankets on an unused bunk and hung the punctured canteen from the corner post. Watching, Brant said dryly, "Funny how a bullet don't make a clean hole like that in a man, but most always tears hell out of him as it goes through."

Wallaby let the remark pass as though he hadn't heard. "What time is supper served?" he asked.

"Around six if Nils ain't drunk. What's the stock whip for?"

Wallaby glanced at the man expressionlessly. "On Barkly Tableland we use it to drive stock. It could also be handy for rattlesnakes or sidewinders."

"Smart dude, ain't you?" Brant growled. "Ridin' in here on a Six Point horse strangled in harness fit for a mule, but an insult to a cow pony."

Wallaby turned his back on Brant and went to feed and water the gelding. Returning to the deserted bunkhouse, he saw Brant and Alec cross the wide porch of the ranchhouse and go inside. Wallaby decided that Unger was making his own shrewd plans, without feeling and like a man used to having his own way. But there was no subtlety in the Horseshoe owner. His own assurance gave him away and that failing could be the chance to beat him.

Tonight's ride was one sign of Unger's impatience. In the cool of late fall a man didn't have to move his own stock at night to avoid the heat. This bunch driving north would be beef taken from the small west butte owners, or else the move was a deliberate plan to lead Wallaby off Horseshoe where his death would leave no finger pointing at Stuart Unger.

Around five-thirty Horseshoe riders began drifting in and soon after supper Unger sent for Wallaby, meeting him at the corral gate where Brant and Alec already waited.

"Brant will ramrod the drive," Unger told Wallaby, "and he'll tell you what to do. Might as well know now that a man follows orders or he don't ride for Horseshoe." He

turned abruptly to his saddled mount, swung aboard, and rode north.

Horseshoe headquarters lay on a flat knoll two hours' ride south of Gateway and squarely in the center of the valley. From this point a man's eye could sweep the roughly horseshoe-shaped curve of the Shadows which gave the range its name.

The open end of the horseshoe lay to the north with Gateway just inside the pass like a fort guarding the inner valley. The isolation thus afforded had no doubt helped to shape Stuart Unger's long plans, but now Wallaby felt again the pressure of the crowding mountains and the uncertainty which lay in the thick scrub-pine growth and he was remembering the stony, beaten undertone in Doris Unger's voice when she spoke of her life here on Horseshoe.

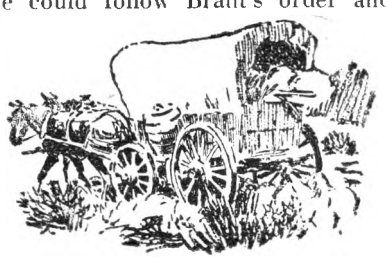
Just before dark Brant gave the word and the three rode west almost to the timber and there in a gully met a fourth man who stood guard over a band of thirty or forty head of beef. By then it was too dark to observe faces or brands and there was nothing familiar in the voice of the fourth man who was introduced to Wallaby as Luke. Luke and Brant drew aside talking in low tones. Then Luke rode on ahead and the other three started the band moving.

Skirting the timber, they drove east of Swan's Circle Dot and then cut straight into the foothills, angling into the little used trail which Wallaby had followed the night before in circling back to Cort Winton's. It was after midnight with a full moon just beginning to creep up over the Shadow when they passed through the gorge north of Gateway leaving Horseshoe range behind. Brant spurred on ahead to scout the trail with Luke and rode with him the next three hours during which time they left the river trail and swung gradually west toward Hembree's place on the farther prairie.

Within sight of Hembree's buildings, huddled bleakly on the treeless flat, Brant drifted back to ride beside Wallaby. The drive swung sharply westward, pushed on past Hembree's, and at dawn dropped into the deep channel of a dry river. With the cattle bunched, Luke circled back to take up the drive from behind.

Brant pulled close to Wallaby and said: "Well, stranger, this is as far as you go. You can ride back toward Horseshoe any time now."

The man's effort to keep his tone casual was forced and some recent decision stood out on him like a signal. From the edge of his vision Wallaby saw Alec swing around and come up behind him on his right. So this was the way it was to be. He could follow Brant's order and



take a shot in the back, or he could face these two here at closer quarters.

"Ride!" Brant said again. "We ain't got all day for this."

Wallaby reflected that Brant was as blunt and as transparent as Unger and so, his mind made up, Wallaby's left hand jerked to the high holster. Swinging his dun around as he fired, Wallaby aimed a shot that took Alec squarely in the chest while the move put Wallaby out of the way of Brant's first hasty bullet. Brant fired again, low between his mount's ears, but the animal was skittish and the shot missed. It was the last chance Brant had. Wallaby fired once more and, as the pock-marked man slipped from the saddle, Wallaby threw a look toward Luke and the cattle. Luke glanced back once briefly and continued on his way.

Catching up the two riderless horses, Wallaby headed south along the river bed. Well past Hembree's he swung up on the prairie, rode east to the river, and followed the trail through the gorge into Gateway.

IV

Riding south that afternoon toward Horseshoe headquarters, Wallaby felt a lightening of the pressure this strangely cursed range had laid on him. Autumn's first frosts had colored the leaves of maple and sage, leaving the dark green of conifers as a backdrop against which the brighter hues of shrubs and bushes showed in playful patches.

The crispness of the high clear air reminded Wallaby of fall mornings on Barkly Tableland and the words of an old song he had learned in camp by Moon Billabong came drifting into his thoughts. Without realizing that he was singing, his lips formed the words and his mellow voice rose clearly in a rousing plains song from Down Under which had to do with a billabong and jambucks and a swagman and his tucker bag sleeping under a coolibah tree.

Suddenly he saw Doris Unger stopped beside the trail ahead and he put the song from his mind watching her. When he came alongside he saw that the girl was smiling, and the expression changed the whole look of her face until she seemed a different person from the brooding and bitter girl he had met on the river trail.

Still smiling, Doris said, "You sing as if you really enjoyed it, like someone with songs inside that have to come out. What's a billabong?"

"A waterhole in a dried-up river bed," Wallaby told her, small laugh wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes. "A jambuck is a sheep; a tucker bag is just a grub bag. And a swagman is a fellow on the tramp. A billy is a tin stew can, and in case you don't already know, coolibah is the original name for the eucalyptus tree which was brought into this western country from Australia."

"That explains almost everything," Doris said, her eyes twink-

ling. "Except the Suzanna of the song, and you, of course; but perhaps that's a secret you'd rather keep."

"Suzanna is far away and she has too many men singing her name," Wallaby said lightly. "I prefer closer company, more charming and more real."

The girl flushed slightly at the remark but Wallaby saw quick pleasure come into her face and as in answer to unspoken agreement the two dismounted and, leading their horses, silently drifted off the trail and into the farther scattered growth of greasewood and stunted maple.

Ending the silence, Doris said, "You're a very strange person. Strange and different, and somehow . . . mysterious. You haven't even told me your name, and yet I'm awfully glad you came to Horseshoe. I had just about begun to think I couldn't go on; that I—"

Her voice broke off and Wallaby stopped, turning to face her. "You thought you couldn't go on? Why?"

Her confused glance met his for an instant and then her eyes turned away. She spoke quickly to hide her confusion. "There must be more to the Suzanna song. Can't I hear it?"

Still studying her, Wallaby began to sing again, but in a lower tone as if he sang to her alone. Doris watched the carefree expression on his face as he sang and some of the tenseness seemed to leave her. When he had finished he said abruptly, "You read of faraway places and yet you stay on Horseshoe where you find only disappointment. What is it you want from life?"

Her answer held her old directness. "What every woman wants, I suppose; but why talk about it? You've met my father and you've seen Horseshoe."

"Do you think you will ever find what you want . . . here?"

Her blue eyes lifted briefly to his face and quickly turned away. "Perhaps I have found it. But I learned a long time ago that we can't always keep what we find. You rode north to Hembree's with Alec and Brant last night. You weren't supposed . . . I didn't expect you to come back."

The stony hopelessness had crept back into her voice and Wallaby thought: Stuart Unger's greed has poisoned him. He would sacrifice anything for his ambition, even his daughter.

"I'm going back to have one more talk with your father," Wallaby explained. "Brant and Alec won't be riding this way again. I left their horses in Gateway and when Stuart Unger learns that, it may make our interview a bit . . . difficult."

There was fear in Doris' eyes when she looked up at him. "Must you go back?" she asked.

Wallaby nodded, searching his mind for words to comfort and reassure her, but the words he sought would not come to his mind.

"I'm afraid for you. He'll kill you," Doris said harshly, "or you'll have to kill him."

"Would that matter too much to you? Him, I mean?"

"I can't remember him ever showing any tenderness; not even to my mother when she was alive. He has never shown me any love. He thinks only of Horseshoe and the money and power it means to him. I suppose that sooner or later he'll die in the violence he has made. But it may be like an outlaw horse; you hate him until you are rid of him, and then you always remember the little good things about him and you wonder if there wasn't something you could have done and didn't. But my father has never let me get close to him, so you see, I don't really know."

Finding no answer to this, Wallaby let the silence run on until the girl spoke again: "The beef you drove north last night came from Swan's Circle Dot. That's the way Horseshoe keeps the herds of small owners down. The arroyos and dry river beds back of Hembree's are the holding grounds. Six Point Star riders pick them up there, drive them north to the landing where they are loaded on a slaughter boat. The hides are in brine and the meat ready for market when the boat reaches Portland. It's an organization which took years to build up. It's my father's plan and it has gotten so that it is his whole life and he won't give up easily. You wouldn't have gone along on the drive last night if they hadn't intended to kill you before you could tell what you'd found out about Horseshoe."

"Why are you telling me this? Is it because you hate Stuart Unger so much you want to hurt him?"

"They say that blood is thicker than water, but he killed my love for him long ago. There was a man here on Horseshoe. Dave Swan. He was Fret's boy and I thought he was the one. But my father learned of it and the night we tried to leave the valley . . . Well, after Dave was dead I knew neither Fret nor my father would rest until one of them was dead. Now Dave and Fret Swan are gone and that's all over. Then you came to Horseshoe and we met and talked and I . . . I like you and I'm trying to be honest with myself. The woman in me makes me want you to stay, but I know that for your own safety you should go . . . quickly."

"And if I stay and if Stuart Unger dies by my gun, I will be as far from you as Dave Swan."

Doris' lips trembled and a shudder seemed to vibrate her slim shoulders. "Knowing my father and what he has done, I don't think

I'd feel that way about the man who killed him."

"You don't feel that way now and maybe you wouldn't for a long time, but eventually his ghost would rise up against us. It would start with little memories and build up until some day, without knowing why, you would wish it had been me instead of him and you would hate me as you think you hate him now. You could forgive the man who sent him to prison for what he has done, but you could never love the man who killed him. That's the big difference, Doris, between you and your father. You have tenderness and mercy, and he has none."

She made no answer and Wallaby knew that this moment was over because the eagerness in her had dulled and the old hopelessness had returned. As he rode away she called after him:

"If you ride to the house watch the cook. Nils would shoot his own mother for Horseshoe."

V

Entering Horseshoe's yard, Wallaby noted its deserted look and reflected upon the evasive ways of Unger's outfit. He unsaddled the dun and turned him into the corral and after sousing his hands and face in the cold water on a bench by the grub shack door went inside. It was two hours before supper time and Nils sat at the farther end of the long table, a worn deck of cards dealt out in a hand of solitaire. The cook glanced up at Wallaby's entrance and said sourly, "When it's time to eat I'll ring the bell," and returned his attention to the cards.

"I'm used to being fed when I come in from a long ride," Wallaby told him. "I'll take mine now."

Nils shifted the deck to his left hand and with lowered head looked at Wallaby. "You wasn't supposed to come back at all and ghosts don't eat. Where's Brant and Alec?"

Wallaby stepped close and, leaning across the table, let the man have the edge of his hand hard on a nose already broken by previous experience. Nils went backward off the bench, his clawing fingers raking the cards.

Wallaby stepped around the end of the table and pulled the cook to his feet and knocked him down again. Afterward, he emptied the water bucket over Nils' face and, taking the gun from inside the man's shirt, he lifted him to his feet, gave him a shove toward the kitchen and said: "Now I'll eat."

Wallaby ate with half his mind on Nils who lingered in the kitchen. Before he had half finished his meal he heard determined boot sounds in the yard outside and then the door swung inward and Stuart Unger paused there, his small eyes adjusting to the meager light. Wallaby went on eating while Unger looked him over from the long stock whip coiled over his shoulder to the odd and awkward rigging of his gun.

"Stand up, man!" Unger said suddenly. "I never liked to kill anything squattin'!"

A board creaked in the kitchen

and Wallaby remembered Nils. Taking his time, Wallaby wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and, as his arm lowered, the hand grasped the stock whip. As though it was a signal Unger drew and fired.

Wallaby, rising sidewise from the plank bench, stepped out of the way, and the stock whip uncoiled in a backward lash which caught the cook across the eyes. When the whip snaked viciously forward, Wallaby jerked back on it with a quick tension and Stuart Unger's gun snapped from his hand. Some small bit of flesh dropped soundlessly to the floor and Unger stood motionless, an unbelieving and almost childish look in his porcine eyes as he watched blood spurt from the stump of his trigger finger.

Behind Wallaby there was a clatter of pots and pans as the cook stumbled blindly about, then a crash and mumbled cursing. Wallaby turned to see Nils crumpled on the floor holding his eyes with a bloodstained hand, whimpering hopeless profanity.

Turning back to Unger, Wallaby said, "There's been little chance for introductions and I doubt that you'll be pleased. The name is Hazard. Lew Hazard. You'll remember my brother, Jeff."

Unsteadily Unger draped a white handkerchief over his bleeding hand. With a confused and beaten look in his eyes he shook his head. "No . . . you . . ."

"We're riding," Wallaby said, "before your crew starts drifting in."

"Where?" Unger asked apprehensively.

"West," Wallaby told him. "To the timber."

The words brought a chill shiver to Unger's slumped shoulders.

Cort Winton, Joe Marcal, and two other owners from the west buttes were at Winton's when Wallaby rode in behind Unger.

"If you'll wrap Unger up a bit so he don't bleed to death and loan me a bunk, I'll grab a little shut-eye," Wallaby said to Winton. "Unger and me is takin' the back trail north tonight."

Winton smiled. "Now you're talkin' like your brother, Jeff, and you seem more like a Hazard. Where you and Unger headin' for?"

"The landin' on the Snake below the rapids. A U.S. marshal and his deputies will be there before many days. I expect they'll get the lowdown on the slaughter boat on their way upstream. With luck I'll have Unger waitin' for them at the landin'."

"You'll need help gettin' past Hembree's and Star," Joe Marcal said.

Wallaby nodded wearily. "Yes, I'll need help."

"And when we get back," Winton put in, "we'll wipe out Horseshoe; what's left of it."

Wallaby shook his head. "That's a job for the law. Killin' only breeds more killin'. Let's not make the mistake Unger made."

Traveling north through the gorge

out of Horseshoe in the night's last shadows, Wallaby left Winton and Marcal to ride guard on Unger while he followed behind, turning over in his mind the jumble of fast-moving events since his arrival on Horseshoe.

Since his first meeting with Doris Unger he had been aware of a deep and sincere sympathy for Stuart Unger's motherless daughter. How barren and hopeless her life had been only she herself could know. Living under the heartless and intolerant domination of her greedy father, small wonder she had thought herself in love with Dave Swan, finding in him her only hope of escape from her prison.

But now after his last meeting with Doris on the trail and with Stuart Unger no longer a menace to the valley, Wallaby knew that his feeling for the girl was a thing far deeper and more personal than sympathy. But what would her reaction be when she learned of her father's fate and that he, Wallaby, had been responsible for Stuart Unger going to prison. In spite of the wrongs her father had done her. Doris could not avoid pity and compassion. It was an innate part of her.

Wallaby was thus absorbed when Doris Unger rode out from the trees and pulled onto the trail ahead of her father. The horses halted and the girl sat facing Unger, saying nothing. Apprehensive, Wallaby rode ahead and spoke to the girl:

"I'm sorry you came. I would have spared your this."

Doris nodded. "Yes, I think you would. When I stood outside the grub shack window yesterday and heard you say you were taking him west to the timber I thought you were bringing him to Winton and Marcal and the others to be hanged like any common rustler. Then I was ashamed for thinking it and I knew what you would do and so I rode here."

She turned to face her father and in her expression there was tenderness and an almost motherly pity for him.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way, father," she said quietly. "I wish it could have been different. If mother had lived, perhaps . . . but no, you would never listen to her, either. You broke her spirit as you've tried to break mine. You had to do things your way no matter who was hurt."

Unger's small hard eyes returned her gaze with no love and no regret. "No use of a man fightin' on-

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

■	B	U	C	K	B	O	A	R	D	■
P	A	P	A	L	■	P	L	A	I	T
R	I	■	P	I	P	E	■	P	R	E
O	L	D	■	P	E	N	D	■	G	R
S	E	A	L	■	N	E	U	T	E	R
P	■	C	O	W	A	R	D	S	■	I
E	L	E	V	E	N	■	E	A	S	T
C	O	■	E	A	C	H	■	R	H	O
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less he intends to win. I've fought that way and always will. Rules don't matter; it's only winnin' that counts. I've never in my life asked for sympathy and I'm not askin' it now."

Doris shook her head sadly. "I'll write to you. Perhaps some day . . ."

"No," Unger said harshly. "You take your trail and I'll take mine. Let's start movin'."

As Unger spurred ahead Wallaby waited by Doris at the edge of the trail. "Your mother must have been like you," he said to the girl softly. "Or perhaps it's the other way around."

"She died when I was very small," Doris told him, fighting to keep back the tears. "But she was brave and tender and kind, and deserved a better life than she had. I only hope I can be like her."

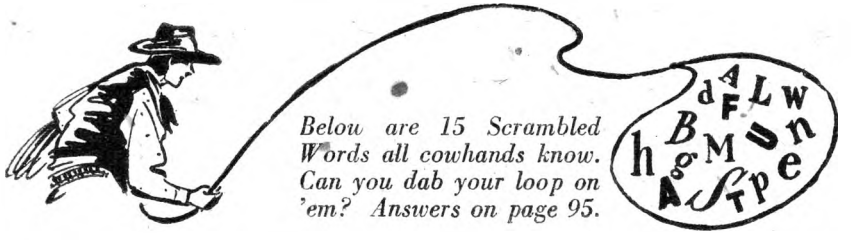
She had one long look at the riders on the outward trail and then turned back to Wallaby. "I didn't know until Jim Darby told me last night that you were Jeff Hazard's brother. That explains a lot of things. I hope you'll be staying on at Horseshoe. It would seem so lonely and empty now . . . without you."

"Life would seem empty for me away from Horseshoe," Wallaby answered. "You see, we go on living and finding and losing. But we have to go on believing, too; because the time always comes sometime in our lives when we find something we can keep."

Doris reined her mount around and came close. "Be careful passing Hembree's and Star. Ride fast, and when you come back I want you to sing again."

"About Suzanna?" Wallaby asked, and the laugh wrinkles crept back at the corners of his eyes as he swung to ride after Winton and Marcal outward on the river trail.

THE END



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11. edewcolo
12. hewel
13. dalle
14. horngib
15. aget

RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King

For years "forty dollars and found" was the standard wage of the Western cowboy. Year in and year out, cowhands earning that salary performed intelligent work in an arduous business that required riding skill, personal bravery and no small amount of individual integrity. There were a few hellions among them, of course. But in the main cowboys are, and always have been, an honest, trustworthy lot taking excellent care of hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of their employers' stock in all kinds of weather and under all sorts of hazardous conditions. Now, in belated keeping with the times, the cowboy's wages have been raised and he receives about $125. a month along with his board and lodging.

In many an early cow town or mining camp, boothill cemeteries gathered in a fair portion of the populace. Situated outside of town, they were the accepted burying place of those who died of violence—with their boots on. Such cemeteries were not "hallowed ground" and so differed in this important respect from the regular cemeteries in which the God-fearing citizens were buried.

Wild horses are said to be the "spookiest" of all range animals. Often in capturing a wild bunch, mustang runners seeking to drive their quarry into a wing-fenced corral trap set in a valley, would cut off escape up side draws and narrow canyons by the simple expedient of stretching a wire across the gap and stringing a few pieces of canvas or brightly colored cloth on the wire. The flapping bits of cloth or canvas would spook the horses away from the gaps and turn them back into the valley. Wild horses in full flight have even been known to spook at a rabbit darting across the trail in front of them, wheel suddenly and set off in another direction.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

GUN SEAL ON RUSTLERS RANGE

"I had nothing to do with the murder of Sheriff Mike Garrigan," declared Ramrod Kane—yet a bushwacker's snake tracks led straight to his outlaw-guarded stronghold!

By
Walt Coburn

I

THE Mexico Kid and grizzled Circle Cross Smith lazed in the sleazy scrub pine shade on the big sandstone rimrock that looked down into the narrow gorge called Gunsight Pass. Their saddle carbines lay within reach and they had a pair of old army field glasses that would pick up a distant rider and bring him and his horse into a closer vision. The field glasses saved the men on guard up there on the rimrock a lot of bothersome worry. Their gun sights were raised to the third notch to line an accurate bead on whoever rode into the pass.

But the trail to the floor of the narrow gorge was no more than a mountain goat trail that twisted a torturous mile down from the rimrock. So when they could study a man through the glasses and recognize him for a friend, it saved them a ride down. Or if the horseback turned out to be an enemy, and if the man on rimrock guard was some quick-triggered renegade like the Mexico Kid, the field glasses that made for closer scrutiny served a grimmer purpose. A crack shot could dead-center an enemy down yonder. A high-crowned Stetson hat made a good target.

On a sunshiny day like this the pair of men on rimrock guard could tell time by the length of the shadow. Late afternoon was throwing a long shadow now. They had been up here since sunrise. Time had covered some of the flat sandstone rimrock with enough dirt to grow the scattered scrub pines and cushion the sandstone so a man could roundside without being too uncomfortable. And the dirt was deep enough for a jackknife blade to stick when they played mumble-peg.

Mumble-peg was the main pastime for the men on rimrock guard at the Gunsight Pass leading into the renegade cow country called Rustlers'

Range. Mumble-peg is played with a jackknife. The players go through a long routine of somewhat difficult manipulations where the knife blade must stick into the ground, and when the blade point fails to stick, the player loses his turn to his opponent. The one who completes the routine first wins the game.

The loser pays the penalty of pulling out with his teeth a small wooden peg like a match stick driven into the ground by five or ten whacks of the jackknife handle. Five whacks for a short peg, called a pigtail. Ten whacks for a longer peg which was known as a bull's tail. A skilled mumble-peg player could drive either the pigtail or bull's tail peg plumb out of sight in the ground with a few smart expert taps of the knife handle. So that the loser had to root it with his nose and eat dirt before his teeth could get a grip on the peg.

Losing a game of mumble-peg was tough on old Circle Cross Smith because he had false teeth. And when the Mexico Kid drove either a pigtail or bull's tail, he could bury the peg deep with a couple of whacks to spare.

Circle Cross lay flat on his belly now with his hat off and his splayed nose buried in the sandy dirt. He was making grunting noises and sweat dampened his shock of uncombed grizzled black hair. His week's stubble of gray whiskers was grimed with sand.

"Gum it, you damned ol' son of a warthog." The Mexico Kid squatted on his spurred boot heels. He wasn't even looking at Circle Cross Smith. He had the field glasses focused on a man on a dun horse who had just ridden into Gunsight Pass.

The Mexico Kid was not a Mexican. He was towheaded and his eyes were pale gray. Hatchet-faced and lean-muscled, he was slim, almost skinny to look at. Somewhere in his twenties, he was building himself a tough rep among older renegade cowpunchers and outlaws. He was a crack shot and cold-blooded as a young snake. A bushwhacker killer, the Mexico Kid had never been actually tried out in a bad tight, and older tough cowhands like Circle Cross Smith were a little leary about taking him along. There was a thin streak of treachery in the Mexico Kid that kept men from trusting him. Tricky, they called him; and they turned him over to grizzled Circle Cross Smith for a guard pardner while the roundup worked Rustlers' Range on a big beef gatherment.

"Spit out them store teeth, you damned ol' son"—the Mexico Kid laid down the field glasses and picked up his saddle carbine — "an' gum that bull's tail. . . ." His pale eyes were squinting along his gun sights.

The Mexico Kid had never seen Mexico. He was working his way south and had gotten this far. Wyoming. He was always talking about Mexico. Hence the nickname, Mexico Kid.

"I'll rob me a bank and hit the trail for Mexico." He would grin his buck-toothed grin. "Git me a string of them Mexico señorita fillies. . . ."

The rider on the dun horse was wearing a high-crowned Stetson hat. The Mexico Kid got the top of the

moving hat crown in his gun sights and pulled the trigger.

The explosion of the .30-30 was cannon-loud in the rocky badlands. Circle Cross Smith's splayed nose plowed into the dirt. He choked on his false teeth and spat them out with a mouthful of sandy dirt as he rolled over and came up onto his knees with his saddle gun gripped in both hands. Then his faded blue eyes slitted.

The Mexico Kid levered the smoking shell from his Winchester and a cartridge into the breech. His buck-toothed grin twisted.

"Look that hombre over with the glasses, Circle Cross." The tough Mexico Kid had a choir boy's voice. "See kin you read his brand."

"You bald-faced, quick-triggered, boneheaded young fool!" Circle Cross laid down his saddle gun and picked up the field glasses.

The man on the dun horse had his hat in his hand. He was poking a forefinger through the bullet rip in its high, dented crown. His bared head showed thick sweat-matted black hair. His teeth bared in a grin that was white against the darkness of his weathered tanned face. His blue-gray eyes did not show their color under the heavy black brows at the three hundred yards distance.

The rider was looking up towards the rimrock. Either the Mexico Kid had aimed to drill the man's skull under the hat and barely missed, or he had done an expert marksman's job of creasing the hat with a bullet. There was no way of knowing because the Mexico Kid's wicked buck-toothed grin and pale eyes told nothing.

The grizzled renegade cowpuncher lowered the glasses. Picking up his saddle carbine, he pulled on his hat.

"He's a rank stranger to me." Circle Cross answered the question in the Mexico Kid's pale eyes. "Keep him covered while I ride down and auger 'im. And none of your knotheaded smart-Aleck monkeyshines. Mind, now."

"Aw, now, Circle Cross"—the Mexico Kid reached for the glasses—"you know me."

"That just it." Without his teeth, the old puncher's voice had a lisp.

Circle Cross Smith wiped the dirt off his false teeth with an old black silk neck handkerchief and shoved the upper and lower plates into his mouth, spitting out the surplus sand. He called down from the rimrock.

"Stand your hand down yonder, stranger. Roll yourself a cigareet. I'm a-comin' down. Don't try to coyote or it'll be your hard luck. Feller up here on guard has the itchin'est trigger finger I ever knowed."

The man on the dun horse pulled on his bullet-ripped hat and lifted both hands. Then he reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers.

"My pony will stand!" he called back up at the rimrock. There was no sound of fear or panic in his voice.

"Nervy, ain't he?" The Mexico Kid had the glasses focused. "Too damn nervy, mebbyso."

"None of your fool tricks, Kid. You bin bendin' your welcome at Rustlers' Range consider'ble lately. Don't bust it off."

"Old Man A-scared Of His Horses . . . I'll keep the stranger on ice for

you, Circle Cross. But because I wanta. Never because I'm scared of the Ramrod. Nobody ever seen the Mexico Kid when he wouldn't stand flat-footed and spit in any man's eye."

II

Circle Cross always felt uneasy when he had to turn his back to the Mexico Kid. He got his horse from its picket rope and rode on down the steep winding trail. It took him a while to get down to the floor of the narrow rock-walled gorge, following the loose gravel that was kicked down ahead by the shod hoofs of his horse. He had a six-shooter in his hand as he rode up to where the rider sat his dun horse. The man stubbed out the short butt of his cigarette on brush-scarred bullhide chaps and grinned flatly.

"Long time no see you, Circle Cross." His voice was a quiet, lazy drawl.

Circle Cross Smith's ragged eyebrows beetled. His voice was low-toned.

"The rocks has ears. You gone plumb locoed, Clay Garrigan?"

"Mebby." The white teeth grinned but the eyes under the heavy black brows were as cold and hard and bright as polished steel. "Most mebby, though, I know what I'm doin'."

"That's the Mexico Kid up yonder."

"Am I supposed to break out in a sweat, Circle Cross?"

"You kin h'ist your hands, anyhow. This gun in my hand is loaded."

Clay Garrigan lifted both hands to the level of his wide shoulders. He sat his saddle squarely. He rode a shorter stirrup than most men. His shopmade boots were no larger than size six and his hands were small inside the buckskin gloves. But every ounce of his five-foot-seven, one hundred and sixty-five pounds was tough bone and rawhide muscle. Clay Garrigan, cowhand, was all man.

"Unless the Mexico Kid decides he wants to kill hisself another man," said Circle Cross, "I kin ride back a ways with you. Then you whip under and over till you're a long ways gone. I'd do that much fer my old friend, Sheriff Mike Garrigan's boy Clay."

"You'll do more than that for Mike Garrigan's boy Clay. You'll slip me through Gunsight Pass. Ramrod Kane must be short-handed for tough cowpunchers. There ain't a renegade on the Rustlers' Range knows me by sight or by name. You'll pass me through the Gunsight, Circle Cross."

"What if I don't?" Circle Cross Smith's voice sounded dry, brittle.

"Then I'll know for a fact what they're tellin' me up in Montana. That Circle Cross Smith had a hand in the bushwhackin' killin' of Sheriff Mike Garrigan."

Circle Cross Smith had had to quit plug tobacco for fine cut since he had store teeth. He crammed some in his jaw and let it soak. His eyes were bleak. Finally he broke the silence.

"I'd ortei double a rope acrost your back for that."

"That goes as she lays. Circle Cross."

"Even if I got to git you'n me both killed to prove 'em damned liars back up in Montana?"

"That's about the size of it. Only we're hard to kill. You might look at it thataway." Clay Garrigan grinned and the grin came up across his black-whiskered face to squint his eyes to shining slivers.

Grizzled Circle Cross Smith felt empty and cold, almost sick inside. That was Sheriff Mike Garrigan's grin, passed on down to his son, along with that old ivory-handled six-shooter Clay Garrigan packed. It was the gun the bushwhackers never gave Sheriff Mike Garrigan a fighting chance to use that moonlight night when the fearless peace officer had ridden so boldly into their gun trap.

"You win, son." Circle Cross Smith's voice was toneless. "Come along."

Standing in his stirrups, he pulled off his hat and waved it. Looking up at the rimrock high above the narrow pass, he could see the sunlight glinting on the blued steel of the Mexico Kid's gun barrel. He pulled on his hat and reined his horse, and he and Clay Garrigan rode side by side through Gunsight Pass. When they had ridden through and out of sight and beyond carbine range, Circle Cross let out his breath in a gusty noise.

"That Mexico Kid" — he spat tobacco juice at the rocky wall—"is the coldest-blooded thing on earth."

"How about Ramrod Kane?"

"A hard un to figger out. Them quiet kind always is. He'd burn a church for a friend. But I'd hate to have him hate me."

"And the rest of the outfit?" asked Clay.

"No worse, no better than cowhands you bin raised amongst in Montana. A few of 'em born ornery, the rest of 'em just cowpunchers that's made a mistake somewheres. You'll find cowmen and the tough hands they got hired outside Rustlers' Range who are as crooked and ornery as Ramrod Kane and the bulk of his outfit. Kane and a couple others has good little cow outfits on Rustlers' Range. We're gatherin' cattle now to trail out and down into Colorado. Them steers will change hands before they reach the Denver market. The herd will be clean enough to pass stock inspection, when it reaches the Denver stockyards. . . . Don't go makin' no snap-judgment mistakes, boy."

"I don't aim to."

"You could be follerin' the wrong trail."

"I could be," admitted Clay Garrigan. "The trail was cold by the time I come up from Texas to pick it up. What sign there was to follow taken me here."

"Meanin'" — Circle Cross Smith smiled grimly—"the tracks I left along my back trail."

"Your tracks was mixed in with other tracks, Circle Cross."

"I still got to prove they ain't snake tracks." It was a flat statement rather than a question.

Clay Carrigan let it pass. They rode

along in silence until they sighted two armed men riding towards them out of the broken badlands that was the forbidden cow country called Rustlers' Range.

"Them's the two relief men comin' to take mine and the Mexico Kid's rimrock guard," Circle Cross explained. "Your name is Clayton. Clay fer short. I knowed you somewheres. That'll do fer a while. They won't ask no questions. I'll tell Ramrod Kane you're all right."

"You're a white man, Circle Cross."

Circle Cross Smith snorted, dislodging his upper plate. He shoved it back into place with both thumbs. Clay Garrigan grinned and the grizzled old renegade cowpuncher's hard black eyes crinkled.

"I got three sets. Made to order like a pair of boots by the dentist at the Deer Lodge pen in Montana. He was doin' time there an' the warden let 'im rig up a dentist shop. When the warden told me Sheriff Mike Garrigan was workin' on my pardon, Doc worked overtime buildin' me them extra sets of choppers to take along. . . . You ever git that horsehair bridle I made you in the pen, Clay?"

"Yep, I got it. I wrote you. Didn't you get the letter?"

"I kind o' outrun my mail," Circle Cross told him dryly.

They met the two armed riders and Circle Cross Smith made the introductions.

"Meet Clayton. Clay fer short. I've knowed Clay a long time. He's hirin' out to Ramrod Kane. . . . Slim an' Shorty, Clay. Slim's the pot-paunched un. Shorty stands six foot six in his sock feet. . . ."

They were looking at the bullet rip in Clay's hat. He grinned.

"That damned Mexico Kid," said Circle Cross, "is bound to kill somebody."

"Unless somebody gits the notion first," Shorty agreed. "I'd be proud to attend that buryin'. Looks like he had you rootin' the peg again."

Circle Cross Smith sprayed the rocky ground with tobacco juice. His eyes glinted wickedly as he rubbed the dirt in his gray whiskers.

"I'm old enough," he said, "to know better. . . . Come along, Clay. I'm ga'ant fer grub."

They rode on. Slim and Shorty were headed for night guard in Gunsight Pass. Circle Cross Smith told Clay they had their orders to stop all riders going or coming after dark. Nightfall put a gun seal on Rustlers' Range—to turn back outsiders and to hold in any man with a double-crossing streak and treachery in his heart who might take a notion to slip through Gunsight Pass to tell the law or the outside cow country what was going on.

"Till we git a herd gathered and trimmed and on the trail," said Circle Cross Smith, "it's just as well nobody on the outside knows how many steers we got gathered or when we're trailin' out. Thataway, there's less danger of the trail herd bein' held up for a Winchester cut."

III

It was getting dusk when Circle Cross Smith rode up to the roundup

camp with Clay Carrigan. They swung around the beef herd that was being bedded down on flat ground, and on towards where the outfit was camped on the banks of a swift-flowing creek.

It was like any ordinary roundup camp. The remuda was inside a rope corral where the cowhands were roping out their night horses. Bedrolls were scattered around the bed wagon. A pair of riders who had been on day herd until relieved by what was called the cocktail guard, rode up, unsaddled and turned their horses loose and went into the corral with their ketch ropes to get their night horses.

The slow eaters still squatted tailor fashion or on their hunkers finishing the grub on their tin plates. Even a renegade rustler roundup is bound to have its quota of "coffee coolers." The horse wrangler was dragging up wood by his saddlehorn to finish up his day's camp chores before unsaddling. The cook was fixing the midnight lunch the nighthawk would carry along wrapped in the yellow saddle slicker tied behind the cantle of his saddle.

There was some joshing back and forth as the men picketed their night horses. The jingle of horse bells was like music in the early twilight and it blended with the distant bawl of a cow that had gotten separated from her calf during the late afternoon's calf branding. It was peaceful, like any big roundup. These men were cowhands. Regular forty-a-month common cowhands—until you noticed that nearly every man, even the horse wrangler and nighthawk, packed a saddle carbine and even around camp kept his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled on.

And Clay could not help but notice how every man in the outfit was sizing him up, cold-eyed and with suspicion. He let on not to notice. He was checking all bets to Circle Cross Smith as they reined up and swung from their saddles. Clay rode a horse with a blotched brand and every man took a look at that gelding because in the cow country you size a man up while you read the brand on his horse and, more often than not, the horse's brand tells what outfit the cowboy works for, or if the brand is vented, where he bought it, while a blotched brand hides the identity of the stolen animal. You can tell a lot about a man by sizing up his horse, if you savvy. And that savvy is a part of the cowpuncher trade.

The big rawboned man with graying red hair and drooping mustache was Ramrod Kane. He was a homely man with a skin that freckled and sunburned and peeled. His nose and jaw and cheekbones were rugged, roughly hewn. The drooping mustache partly hid a wide generous mouth. A pair of hard, gray-green eyes peered out from ragged, craggy reddish brows. Straight-backed, he walked with a short stiff-legged, saddle-warped gait.

John Kane's brand was the Ramrod and he ramrodded the Rustlers' Range roundup. It was a pool outfit, but most of the cattle were in Kane's iron. His Ramrod Ranch was a big spread. If he had built it up with a long rope and a running iron, he was no more guilty of cattle rustling than were any

of the big outfits beyond Gunsight Pass.

Rustlers' Range was outlaw country because it was rough badlands where a man on the dodge could hide out for weeks or months or years if he had brains and guts. If the cowhands who worked for Ramrod Kane were renegades with a bounty on their hides, that did not keep them from being good cowpunchers. They had been regular forty-a-month cowboys, most of them, until some twist of fate had outlawed them. A lot of them were broke and needed the wages Kane paid them. All they wanted was to be let alone. There were exceptions. The Mexico Kid was one of them. Ramrod Kane did not ask the pedigree of every man who tackled him for a job. He knew how to weed out the bad uns. The others stayed on till they got ready to drift yonderly.

Ramrod Kane took a quick look at the sweat-marked dun gelding. Then Clay felt the hard searching scrutiny of the cold gray-green eyes.

"Shake hands," said Circle Cross Smith, "with a friend of mine, Ramrod. Clayton. Clay fer short. I fetched him through Gunsight Pass. This is Ramrod Kane, Clay." He let it go at that. The rest was up to Clay himself—and up to Ramrod Kane.

The cowman was looking at the bullet rip in Clay's hat. It was a fifty-dollar 5X beaver Stetson and hardly sweat-marked.

"Damned shame"—there was a hard bright twinkle in Ramrod Kane's eyes —"spoilin' a hat that cost a month's wages."

"It could be worse ruined," Clay grinned faintly, "if it was splattered with brains."

"That damned Mexico Kid," Circle Cross Smith declared, yanking at his latigo to undo his saddle cinch, "will pull up lame one of these times with his doggoned monkeyshines."

Ramrod Kane cut the old cowpuncher a look and grinned. "He had you rootin' the mumble-peg again?" Then he was looking at Clay and the grin faded.

"I'm tacklin' you," said Clay, "for a job."

"If Circle Cross Smith says you're all right, you're hired. Turn your horse loose. You bronc rider enough to take the rough string?"

"I'll tackle your rough string," Clay said quietly.

Ramrod Kane turned Clay over to Circle Cross Smith. The grizzled old cowpuncher showed Clay which were the broncs in the rough string and pointed out a big bald-faced bay with four stocking legs. He said the Bald Hornet was the best night horse in the Ramrod's string of broncs. Once you uncocked the Bald Hornet, he would pack a man without further trouble.

"Let the hammer down on the Bald Hornet and he'll pitch a few jumps and then it's out o' his system," declared Circle Cross. "I'd git the job done while it's still daylight."

Clay was no bronc stomper but, on the other hand, he wasn't scared of any horse and he rode the Bald Hornet without much trouble. Every man in the outfit was watching the ride he made. Not even Circle Cross Smith gave a nod of approval. This was a

part of Clay's initiation and he was cowhand enough to savvy. He expected nothing in the way of ready welcome here. He was on probation and until he somehow proved himself, he was a rank outsider, with only old Circle Cross Smith to vouch for him.

The Mexico Kid had taken his own time about riding to camp. Somebody had caught his night horse for him before the nighthawk took the remuda away. He rode up about the time Clay had taken the pitch out of the Bald Hornet. There was an ugly look in the Mexico Kid's pale eyes as he swung from his saddle and looked at Circle Cross Smith.

"You lied, old-timer," the Mexico Kid said flatly, "when you said that gent was a rank stranger."

"And I'll lie again, button," Circle Cross retorted, "if it'll keep you from murderin' a man."

"I watched you through the field glasses," the Mexico Kid went on in his clear-toned, choir-boy voice. "I studied the pair of you while you was augerin'. And I knowed you lied when you said the feller was a rank stranger. I had a good notion to knock both of you loose from your saddles with a couple of .30-30 bullets. It would've bin easy as knockin' over a pair of shootin' gallery ducks."

"What made you change your mind, button?" asked old Circle Cross.

"I had my sights lined," grinned the Mexico Kid, "when I remembered somethin'. Just in time." His gopher teeth showed.

"What was it you remembered, button?" The old cowpuncher's gnarled hand was resting on his six-shooter.

The Mexico Kid pretended he hadn't noticed the grizzled old cowhand make the gun move. His pale eyes shifted to see if the others were listening. They were.

"You still got a mumble-peg to pull. You was rootin' at it when I stopped that feller in Gunsight Pass."

The Mexico Kid took a match from his pocket. He packed a horn-handled knife with a three-inch blade that opened when he thumbed a spring.

"Pig tail?" He sliced off the match head and began sharpening the end of the match stick. "Or bull's tail?"

Clay rode up and swung from his saddle, dropping the bridle reins. The bronc stood there, ground-tied. Clay stepped in between old Circle Cross Smith and the Mexico Kid.

The Mexico Kid, tall, slim, lean-muscled, topped Clay by a head. So that Clay had to look up a little to see into the Kid's pale eyes. Then Clay looked up past the pale eyes and at the almost brand-new Stetson hat on the Mexico Kid's tow head.

There was a faint grin on Clay's black-stubbled face. Then he moved fast. Reaching up, he yanked off his bullet-ripped hat and clapped it hard across the Mexico Kid's face, whipping at the pale eyes. It was a backhanded slap that twisted and came

back to knock the Kid's hat off onto the ground.

The long, sharp blade in the Mexico Kid's hand slashed at Clay, ripping down the shoulder of his faded blue denim brush jumper. Clay's other hand was knotted into a hard fist that smashed the Kid's gopher-toothed grin into a smear of blood. Then, dropping his hat, Clay bored in with both fists. Short, vicious, punishing blows that traveled no more than a dozen inches, but that had all Clay's husky shoulder power behind them. The long-legged Mexico Kid went staggering backwards off-balance and Clay moved in close. He hooked a hard right into the Kid's eyes and ripped a vicious uppercut into the Kid's middle. It was low and punishing and it doubled the Mexico Kid up.

Clay straightened the Kid up with a right and left that rocked his tow head backwards. The knife slashed and ripped across Clay's back and shoulders, tearing the tough blue denim and flannel shirt and undershirt to his hide. Then Clay grabbed the Kid's wrist above the hand that gripped the knife and he yanked and jerked. Then, when the Mexico Kid was pulled off balance, Clay kneed him in the stomach and swung all his weight on the Kid's wrist and threw him over his hip. The Mexico Kid landed on his back on the ground. Clay twisted the knife loose, then let go. His high boot heel smashed the knife blade and it broke with a snap.

The Mexico Kid lay doubled up with sickening pain. His face was sweat-beaded, a dirty yellow color. His pale eyes rolled in agony, bloodshot, ugly. Blood trickled from the smashed open mouth and the gopher teeth showed through the battered lips.

Clay walked over to where the Mexico Kid's new Stetson hat lay on the ground. He picked it up, dusted it off and read the 5X marked on the sweatband before he creased the crown Texas style and pulled it down on his head. The hat fit him for size. He was breathing fast and sweat trickled through the black stubble of whiskers on his face.

Clay stood on widespread saddle-bowed legs, the wings of his bullhide chaps standing out. He hitched up his sagging cartridge belt and his right hand was near the ivory butt of his holstered six-shooter. From under heavy black brows his blue-gray eyes cut a hard, swift look around at the tough cowhands who had formed a big circle. Then he looked straight into the hard gray-green eyes of Ramrod Kane.

"Now," said Clay, "would be the time for any of the Mexico Kid's pardners to take it up from where he dropped it."

Ramrod Kane shook his head. "Don't look at me, young feller." He turned a slow grin on his cowpunchers. "Any of you boys want chips in the game?"

"You ain't a-talkin' to me, Ramrod," said one of them. The others either shook their heads or grinned.

Grizzled old Circle Cross Smith stood a little to one side and behind Clay. His voice sounded dry when he spoke.

"Better crowd the Mexico Kid into

makin' a gun play, boy. Then gut-shoot 'im—while you got the bulge."

The Mexico Kid heard him and he rolled over and onto all fours. He would have gotten to his feet but pain seemed to stab him and he doubled up.

"Kill him when he gets up, Clay," said Circle Cross. "It'll save you trouble later."

It looked to Clay as though nobody wanted to keep him from killing the Mexico Kid. And he knew that old Circle Cross Smith was right. Unless he killed the Mexico Kid while he had the bulge on him, he was letting live a killer who would never give him any part of a fighting break for his life. The Mexico Kid was a gun-notcher who did his killing from the brush. A bushwhacker. A tough young curly wolf who was making himself a tough rep with a gun. A killer who enjoyed his work.

But Clay was not ready yet to kill the Mexico Kid. There were some things he had to learn first. And this pale-eyed renegade might have the right answers. Perhaps that was why Ramrod Kane and his tough cowpunchers were so willing to let Clay kill the Mexico Kid—before the bragging young outlaw could talk out of turn. It was risky, letting the Mexico Kid stay alive. But it was a risk Clay had to take if he hoped to learn the cold-blooded facts that concerned the bushwhack killing of Sheriff Mike Garrigan up in Montana. Because Sheriff Garrigan had been on his way to take a look at a trail herd that had come up from Wyoming, the moonlit night he got drygulched. The trail herd had been in the Ramrod road iron. . . .

"I couldn't kill a man that cold-blooded," Clay said flatly. Then he forced a grin. "Besides," he added. "I'd shore hate to miss watchin' Circle Cross pull the mumble-peg with them Deer Lodge teeth."

Ramrod Kane's wide mouth spread in a slow grin under his drooping mustache. The grin spread through his roundup crew and the tension eased off.

Clay's grin was lopsided. He picked up his bullet-ripped hat and walked with it over to where the Mexico Kid was sitting up.

"Just call it a hat swap." Clay tossed the bullet-ripped Stetson in the Mexico Kid's lap.

The Mexico Kid's bloodshot pale eyes stared up at Clay. He wiped his smashed mouth with the back of his hand and bared his gopher teeth and began to curse Clay.

Clay just stood there, looking down at the Kid with a faint grin of contempt. His eyes, cold, gray-blue, stared at the tough young killer until the Mexico Kid finally stopped his cursing. Then Clay turned his back on the Mexico Kid and walked over to the creek bank and squatted there. He took off his new hat and sloshed cold water on his head and face. Then he unknotted the black silk handkerchief from around his neck and shook the dust from it and used it to dry his head and face and hands.

The Mexico Kid got to his feet and stumbled off down the creek to wash the dirt and blood off. He pawed in the

brush until he found a cached bottle. Then he sat on the creek bank and drank the raw moonshine whiskey.

Clay filled his plate with grub and poured strong black coffee into a big tin cup. He squatted beside old Circle Cross Smith and they ate their supper in silence.

A few of the cowpunchers were showing the first faint signs of accepting Clay. Their talk would now and then include him with a look or casual remark. Clay did not try to wedge in so much as a word. And when he had dumped his empty plate and cup in the big dishpan, he squatted on his hunkers. Reaching for his sack of tobacco and book of cigarette papers, he discovered he had lost his tobacco. It had dropped out of his shirt pocket.

One of the cowpunchers tossed Clay a sack of tobacco and book of papers and told him to keep 'em, that he had plenty more in his warsack.

"Anyhow, it was worth a sack of Bull Durham to see you give that Mexico Kid a whuppin'," the cowpuncher declared.

Clay grinned his thanks. He still wore his knife-ripped brush jumper. The knife had done little more than scratch his hide, but the scratches had bled some and the dried blood had glued his undershirt to his back and he felt uncomfortable.

Circle Cross noticed him shrug his shoulders against the annoying itching.

"No sense in your playin' tough, son," he said. "Skin off them duds and let's have a look at it."

Clay said it wasn't anything. But the old cowpuncher made him peel to the waist. The scratches were deeper than Clay had reckoned. His whole back was caked with dried blood. Circle Cross and the cook sponged him off. A little deeper and those knife cuts would have really done damage. The cook rubbed some kind of carbolic salve along the knife rips. One of the men gave Clay a clean undershirt and flannel shirt.

"I hate a knife," said Circle Cross Smith, "worse'n a gun."

They were all of the same opinion. And they talked about knife slingers as they sat around smoking and augering.

They were still augering about how nobody had any business with a knife when the Mexico Kid showed up. He had finished his bottle and was half drunk. His gopher teeth were bared. He had a short stubby-bladed butcher knife in his hand. Squatting on his boot heels across the campfire from Clay, he took out a pocket whetstone and began whetting the blade. His pale eyes gleamed wickedly in the firelight.

"I'll use a knife," said the Mexico Kid, "when it'll do the job better than a gun. There's times when a gun makes too much noise. . . ."

Ramrod Kane rode back to camp from the herd. He picketed his night horse and joined them around the campfire. He took his tally book and stub pencil from the pocket of a buttonless old vest.

"I got you down for third guard, Clay." His voice sounded casual. "You and the Mexico Kid is guard pardners, if you got your war hatchet

buried. I won't stand for no shootin' or ruckus that'll spook them cattle. Reckon the pair of you kin stand a two-hour guard together without lockin' horns?"

"I won't make a damn sound." The Mexico Kid showed his gopher teeth. He ran the whetstone along the sharp edge of the butcher knife.

IV

Clay and the Mexico Kid rode in opposite directions around the bedded beef herd. There was a sickle moon that barely outlined the shape of a man on horseback. The cattle were "layin' good" and it was a warm September night but a shiver threaded along Clay's spine as he rode at a running walk around the bedded-down cattle.

Riding that way in opposite directions, Clay and the Mexico Kid would meet twice on each wide-around circle. Clay kept his hand on his six-shooter and his nerves were pulled taut. In the dim uncertain light rocks and patches of brush can take on human shape. . . .

Then Clay heard the Mexico Kid "singin' to 'em" and he relaxed a little in his saddle. At first he felt only that vast relief of knowing where the treacherous pale-eyed killer was. Then, with a sort of shock, Clay heard the clear pure tone of the singer's voice. The voice of a choir boy. And the beauty of the singer's voice was something to pinch the heart of a lonely cowboy on night guard. Clear, pure, sweet-toned, the song of the Mexico Kid sounded in the Wyoming night:

Last night as I lay on the bed ground
And looked at the stars in the sky
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Will ride to that sweet Bye and Bye . . .

An old, old trail song. It crept deep into a cowhand's heart and through his blood and Clay listened spellbound. Not to the words, but to the music of the song, the choir-boy voice —until he was rudely shaken from the spell of the singer's voice.

Clay had listened only to the clear, sweet-toned voice. He had no way of knowing how long he had been listening before he began actually hearing the words of the song and he realized that the Mexico Kid had discarded the old cowboy parody that had been written to the tune of "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean." The Kid was not singing the words of the old trail song Clay knew from his early boyhood.

The Mexico Kid had dug deep into a depraved and foul vocabulary to make his own parody of one of the sweetest folk songs ever composed. . . . Sung now in that choir-boy voice, it was all the more evil. Enough to make Clay sick inside with nausea.

Up out of the dim moonlight rode the Mexico Kid, singing. And Clay reined the Bald Hornet wide on the outside to meet and ride on past the singer because if he let himself ride any closer he would be unable to hold back the uncontrollable urge to drag the Mexico Kid from his horse and smash his foul-tongued song with a gun barrel. So he gave the Mexico Kid a wide passage. The tough young renegade, seeing him, knew why Clay rode wide of him and he broke the

song off for a moment to hail the other cowpuncher with a low-toned insult.

When they had ridden past each other the Mexico Kid once more began to foul the clean Wyoming night with his off-color song sung with a choir-boy voice. There was something horrible about it.

Then the song was ended somewhere across the wide black blot that marked the bedded cattle. Clay heard it no longer. And for a few minutes he felt only thankful, grateful for the clean silence of the night.

Singing to bedded-down cattle is a custom as old as the cowboy and his cattle. The song of a man on horseback gives the cattle a bovine sense of security. They lay there and chew cud or blow in their heavy slumber, and they seem to know that they are being guarded by the singer who rides around their bed ground.

Now there was no song. The cattle would not quit their bed ground. They would lie there till daybreak unless something spooked them. But it was better if a rider on night guard sang to 'em. . . .

The Mexico Kid had quit singing. He might be still riding around the big herd to meet Clay. Or he might be bushed-up somewhere in the night waiting his chance to kill Clay when he rode within striking distance.

"Watch that Mexico Kid," Circle Cross Smith had warned Clay when he was called from the tarp and blankets the old cowhand shared with him. "I've watched him practice throwin' a knife. He kin bury that blade into a man's back from thirty feet distance."

Circle Cross would have ridden out on night guard with Clay, but Clay wouldn't let him. He said he wasn't giving the yellow-bellied bushwhacker that much satisfaction. He told the old cowpuncher he hadn't come here to let any man take his part.

Clay rode with his gun in his hand now. He circled the bedded herd without meeting the Mexico Kid. Circled the herd again and again and he still did not sight the pale-eyed killer. Nor did he again hear the Mexico Kid's clear-toned voice lifted in song.

Clay's eyes ached from staring into the night, gun ready, nerves taut, muscles strained from the tight tension. A feeling akin to fear chilled his back. Not relying on his own senses, he watched the ears of his horse. Bald Hornet was a good night horse. He'd sight and hear the Mexico Kid before the human eyes and ears of his rider could pick the killer out of the black shadows. But the Bald Hornet gave no indication of sighting the Mexico Kid and his horse.

Clay hummed softly now and then to the bedded cattle as he rode around the big herd. But he kept watching and listening and he would quit humming at the slightest fancied sound or sight of a shadow that seemed to move. He knew his eyes and ears were tricking him and he cussed himself for getting spooked. Chances were, he told

himself. The Mexico Kid had ridden off a ways to sleep off that jag he was packing around and was letting Clay do a lone night guard. On a calm night like this with the cattle laying easy on their bed ground, one man could hold 'em as well as two. And it would be like one of the Mexico Kid's tricks to ride off and grab himself a two-hour sleep while Clay rode around the herd.

So Clay rode around and around the herd, now and then singing to the cattle, and he reminded himself of a kid whistling in the dark while he walked past a graveyard. He dared not risk the flare of a match flame to light a cigarette because the lighted match might spook the cattle. Or it might get Clay a thrown knife in the back.

The Mexico Kid had taken the big silver watch from the man on second guard when third guard relieved him. Clay had no watch of his own, no way of telling time, and it seemed as though he had been riding around alone for a lot longer than the regular two-hours guard time, when he heard the crunch of loose rocks under shod hoofs. He had his gun in his hand and it was pointed at the man who rode up out of the night. There was a gun in the rider's hand, too, and his voice called a flat-toned challenge.

"That you, Clay?" It was the voice of Circle Cross Smith.

"Yep. It's me. Circle Cross."

"You an' the Mexico Kid must be enjoyin' your night guard. It's half past three by the cook's alarm clock. Your third guard time was up at two. Anything wrong?"

Clay grinned as they rode along together around the herd. He shook his head.

"Nothin' wrong. Only the Mexico Kid pulled that old trick we've played on more than one tenderfoot of a night when they lay good on the bed ground. He rode to camp with the guard watch and left me to hold 'em alone till breakfast. Not that I mind the horseback exercise or losin' my sleep. But I bin ridin' tight, waitin' for that knife throwed into my back till my spine is plumb shriveled. It's a josh on me."

Circle Cross Smith said it might be a hell of a josh on somebody besides Clay.

"How long since the Mexico Kid pulled out and left you out here alone?" he asked.

"He rode around the herd about once. Singin' the dirtiest song that ever clogged a man's ears. Then I didn't hear him singin' no longer and I didn't meet him again on the ride around 'em. I don't reckon the Mexico Kid stayed out here on guard a quarter of an hour, till he rode back to camp."

"The Mexico Kid didn't ride back to camp, Clay." The old cowhand's voice sounded dry and brittle as the breaking of dry sticks.

"Then he's rode off somewheres to sleep off his jag."

"Mebby. But most mebby that Mexico Kid is on the prowl."

"What's there to prowl for?"

"We're holdin' this herd no more'n a hour's drive from Gunsight Pass.

boy. It's bin trimmed an' shaped-up and it's ready for the trail. We bin holdin' 'em on feed and water, layin' over till about day after tomorrow before me'n Ramrod Kane points 'em through Gunsight Pass and down the trail to the Denver market.

"There's cattle rustlers yonder side of Gunsight Pass would make it worth a man's while to tip 'em off when this trial herd is ready to move. Let the herd git strung out through the Gunsight Pass and they kin ambush us. Pick us off as easy as the Mexico Kid shot that hole in your hat. Gunsight Pass works both ways. It's hard to git through that narrow pass and onto Rustlers' Range. But unless we got our own guards posted there, it's rank suicide shovin' a trail herd out through that same Gunsight. That's why them two fellers you met, Slim an' Shorty, has their orders to let no rider in or out durin' the night. I done told Ramrod Kane he better hogtie that Mexico Kid or kill 'im."

Circle Cross was worried. He reined up. "You bin standin' lone guard since a little after midnight. Another half hour won't matter. I'll send out somebody to relieve you when I git to camp. It might be just a fool josh, but I got a hunch it's somethin' more than that. There's a bad, treacherous streak in that wall-eyed Mexico Kid. I don't like the looks of it. Keep your eyes and ears open, boy. When your relief shows up, you ride straight to camp. Stay there till I show up. Don't go prowlin' or somebody will kill you and then ask what you was prowlin' after. So long. Keep your gun handy."

The old cowpuncher rode back towards camp at a long lope. The herd was bedded a mile or so from where the wagons were camped.

Clay had ridden around the herd again when two men rode up to relieve him.

"We got 'em," said one of the pair. "Go on to camp." His voice had a grim sound. Both men rode with their saddle guns out of the scabbards.

The cook had breakfast started when Clay rode up. The cook and horse wrangler were the only men at camp. The wrangler told Clay to unsaddle and turn the Bald Hornet loose. He and cook had their hands on their six-shooters and they eyed Clay coldly, with suspicion. They were setting him afoot. He didn't know why.

Ramrod Kane and Circle Cross Smith and every other man in the outfit had ridden off somewhere. It was cracking dawn when Clay heard the jingle of horse bells. The nighthawk fetched in the remuda and the horse wrangler pulled the rope corral closed. Clay drank strong black coffee and smoked.

V

It was daylight when Ramrod Kane and Circle Cross Smith and the rest of the outfit rode into camp. They were hard-eyed and grim-lipped. They all stared narrowly at Clay as if trying to figure him out.

"Tell it to him, Circle Cross." Ramrod Kane's voice was rasping.

"Somebody," Circle Cross Smith said to Clay, "killed Slim and Shorty durin' the night where they stood guard, one on each side of Gunsight Pass. They was both stabbed in the

back, and their throats cut from ear to ear. We found an empty jug there."

"Where," asked Clay, "is the Mexico Kid?"

"That," Ramrod Kane said flatly, "is what I'm askin' you, stranger."

Ramrod Kane's eyes were bloodshot. Green as slivers of glass. The others were watching Clay with hard-eyed suspicion. It took him the long part of a minute to get it. Ramrod Kane was accusing him of killing the Mexico Kid and murdering Slim and Shorty and getting news to somebody on the outside of Gunsight Pass that the Ramrod trail herd was shaped and ready to hit the trail.

Clay was thinking fast. His life depended on it. He cut a quick look at Circle Cross Smith. The old cowpuncher's face was as gray as a dirty blanket. Two or three of these tough cowpunchers were standing behind old Circle Cross Smith, their hands on their guns. Circle Cross Smith was carefully keeping his right hand clear of his six-shooter. They had him under suspicion along with Clay.

The time had come for a showdown. Clay grinned flatly. Staring back into the hard green eyes of Ramrod Kane, he turned his cards face up.

"My name," he said quietly, "is Clayton Garrigan. My father was Sheriff Mike Garrigan. He was bushwhacked while I was down in Texas where I'd hired out to pilot a trail herd from Texas to Montana. I caught the first train back to Miles City when I got the news of my father's murder.

"A few years back Sheriff Mike Garrigan was handed a bench warrant for Circle Cross Smith and told to serve it. The law had him accused of cattle rustlin'. Smith's Circle Cross Ranch was small but it was the best little outfit in that part of Montana. Smith and Mike Garrigan had come up the Chisholm Trail from Texas together when they was kids. They'd bin friends. But Mike Garrigan was wearin' a law badge and he had to serve the bench warrant and he did so. And when Circle Cross Smith told him it was a frame-up to git his outfit, Sheriff Garrigan believed him. And when the law sent Circle Cross Smith to the pen, Mike Garrigan pulled all the ropes he could to git his old friend pardoned.

"Circle Cross Smith was pardoned out o' the pen a few weeks before Sheriff Mike Garrigan got bushwhacked. When I picked up the cold trail I found Circle Cross Smith's tracks along with others. Sheriff Mike Garrigan was on his way to inspect a Wyoming trail herd when he got killed. That trail herd was in your Ramrod road iron, Kane. . . .

"I follered that cold trail here. Bluffed Circle Cross Smith into lettin' me through Gunsight Pass. I went out on third guard last night an' I rode around them cattle till Circle Cross Smith showed up at half past three. The Mexico Kid quit the herd a little after midnight. He was alive the last I heard him singin' a dirty song in the night. I'm checkin' the bet to you. If you had a hand in killin' Sheriff Mike Garrigan, fill your gun hand and we'll shoot it out."

Clay's hand was on his ivory-handled gun. Circle Cross Smith's gnarled

hand gripped his old wooden-handled six-shooter. He was backing Clay's play to the limit.

Ramrod Kane made no gun move. His eyes held Clay's. His voice came quietly from behind the drooping mustache.

"I recognized that dun horse," said Ramrod Kane. "It's the same horse Sheriff Mike Garrigan was forkin' the night he got bushwhacked. I rode up on your father's dead body. His saddle horse was grazin' a ways off. I'd heard the shots in the night at our camp on Tongue River. I sent a man to Miles City with the bad news. I had no reason to kill that law officer.

"But there was an outfit that *did* want Sheriff Mike Garrigan killed. That outfit was movin' stolen cattle up out o' Wyoming and into Montana. They had a market near Miles City but they couldn't deliver their stolen cattle there because Sheriff Mike Garrigan had caught onto 'em. Those are the cattle rustlers that're layin' for my trail herd right now, yonder side of Gunsight Pass. They was operatin' then, full swing.

"The Mexico Kid was workin' for 'em, then. He was young and tough and he wanted to whittle more notches on his gun. They sent him to Montana to kill Sheriff Mike Garrigan. They put a bounty on Sheriff Mike Garrigan's hide an' the Mexico Kid taken the job. He went to Montana. And when he figgered the sign was right, the Mexico Kid bushwhacked Sheriff Mike Garrigan one night and made it look like Ramrod Kane had done the job.

"My herd was as clean as a hound's tooth," Ramrod continued. "I sold it a week later and come back with my remuda and wagons and my crew. Circle Cross Smith hired out to me when we was breakin' camp to start back. I wasn't short-handed. But he showed me a horsehair bridle he'd made in the pen, like a letter of introduction, and I let him come along. He'd bin Sheriff Mike Garrigan's friend. I knowed that. I could figger out why he was throwin' in with my Rustlers' Range outfit. He was gunnin' for whoever bushwhacked Sheriff Mike Garrigan.

I knew Garrigan had a son named Clayton. Clay for short. I read your brand when Circle Cross Smith fetched you through Gunsight Pass to my roundup camp. Neither of you has had me fooled. I had nothin' to do with the murder of Sheriff Mike Garrigan, nothin' to lose by lettin' Circle Cross Smith and Mike Garrigan's son Clay come onto Rustlers' Range. But somethin' like hell is about to bust loose and I got to know where you two fellers stand."

Circle Cross Smith took it up. "Ramrod Kane ain't the only man who knowed that dun horse of Sheriff Mike Garrigan's. The Mexico Kid aimed to bust your skull wide open with the .30-30 bullet that spoiled your hat, Clay. He was too prideful to use a second shot, so he let it ride like he meant to do no more harm than crease your hat. One man and only one man bushwhacked Sheriff Mike Garrigan. Looks like we got it figgered out.

"Nobody but the Mexico Kid

would knife Slim and Shorty. That was his jug we found. He used it fer bait last night. Slim and Shorty would never turn down a drink of likker. It was the last drink they taken on earth. . . . The Mexico Kid rode through the Gunsight Pass. He sold Ramrod Kane out to the rustlers waitin' to hear when the sign was right. Then the Mexico Kid rode back. He's back now on Rustlers' Range; I picked up his tracks. He's on a lone prowl. You kin gamble on it. Them rustlers might be bushed up waitin' to cut us down when we trail them cattle through. But the Mexico Kid has come back alone to kill the only man that has ever actually whipped him."

Ramrod Kane had given his men orders to saddle fresh horses and shove plenty of cartridges into their pockets. They would wolf a big breakfast before they rode through Gunsight Pass to lock horns with the cattle rustlers who were waiting to bushwhack the trail crew. That was a big job that had to be done. But now something was worrying him. And he dreaded putting that worrisome fear into words.

It was grizzled old Circle Cross Smith who again picked it up.

"It won't be throwin' you too shorthanded, Ramrod," he said flatly, "to let me'n young Clay hunt down the Mexico Kid and kill him where we find him. These boys will fight till they drop if they got you to ride in the lead. Otherwise they'll take a bad gun lickin'. You're the only man they'll foller straight through Gunsight Pass to lock horns with them

renegades that's layin' in wait on the yonder side. I reckon you kin trust me'n Sheriff Mike Garrigan's boy Clay to hamstring the Mexico Kid."

Ramrod nodded. "I got to put my trust in you, Circle Cross. You and young Clay Garrigan. You got a notion where you'll cut the Mexico Kid's sign?"

"I know where we'll find the Mexico Kid. We'll kill him there."

VI

Clay and Circle Cross Smith were headed for Kane's Ramrod home ranch.

"His kid," explained the old cowhand, "is there alone. Molly's seventeen and red-headed and freckled. Mammy died when she was about twelve and she taken care of Ramrod like she was his mother. There ain't a man here on Rustlers' Range that wouldn't go through the hot clinkers of hell barefooted for that li'l ol' kid. She kin bake a pie or fish a bullet out of a man's hide without it hurtin', nurse the roundup cook through a bad case of the lemon-extract drunken horrors and do his cookin' for the crew, to boot. Homely little thing but a hundred percent—"

"She's left alone there?"

"She's bin left alone off and on since her mammy died. She tends

the ranch chores. Bein' left alone never bothered that young un. And don't think she can't take her own part. She ain't red-headed fer nothin'."

"But the kid's alone now," said Clay, "and that Mexico Kid thing is on the prowl."

Old Circle Cross Smith nodded grimly. "Ramrod Kane done warned the Mexico Kid what'll happen to him if ever he bothers that young un. And up till now that young killer has rode clear of the Ramrod Ranch. But from what happened last night, it looks like the Mexico Kid has busted loose. He's made a deal with them outside cattle rustlers. He's got nothin' to lose but his hide. He's bin camped alone somewheres in the badlands till the roundup commenced. He knows he's safer inside Rustlers' Range then he'd be if he throwed in with them renegades he sold out to, because he'd have to help 'em fight and he don't like a big ruckus. Bushwhacker murder is the Mexico Kid's idee of a gun fight."

Clay wasn't riding any bronc from the rough string today. Ramrod Kane had pointed out a blue roan gelding and told Clay to dab his rope on him. The blue roan was one of Kane's own top horses.

"You kin lay a gun barrel down between his ears and empty it and he won't move his head enough to git your sights out o' line," Ramrod Kane told Clay. "You don't want to be settin' no spooky bronc when you jump out the Mexico Kid."

Clay wondered why Ramrod Kane was trusting him and Circle Cross to go after the Mexico Kid, and said so as he and the old cowhand rode along together.

Circle Cross said it wasn't just a blind trust Ramrod Kane was putting in them.

"Mebbyso Kane figgers we'd be willin' and rearin' to kill the bushwhacker that murdered your daddy, but we mightn't put our best efforts into sidin' this Rustlers' Range outfit in a range-war ruckus with them outsider renegades. Anyhow me'n you are kind o' corraled here inside Gunsight Pass. We can't git out without shootin' our way out. Besides, Ramrod remembers I owe his Molly kid a debt. She nursed me through a bad spell of pneumonia, saved my life. And this is a showdown, boy. Ramrod Kane has got to take his outfit into battle. Right now. He knows it and they know it. If they don't, them outsiders is a-comin' in here a-shootin'. So Ramrod Kane has got to trust me'n you to hamstring the Mexico Kid before the Kid gits a chance to harm that little red-headed gal. And we better whip up. I'd hate to git there too late."

Clay, remembering the Mexico Kid's song in the night, nodded.

"Amen to that," he said, and his voice was cold-toned.

When they topped a scrub-timbered ridge that looked down into the fertile little valley where log buildings and pole corrals marked the home ranch of Ramrod Kane, old Circle Cross reined up. He said that this was where they parted company. He pointed out the dim trail that forked

off the wagon road they had followed the last mile or so and told Clay to follow it. It came in behind the barn and corrals and was brush flanked most of the way and all Clay had to watch out for was a gun trap.

"It don't look like he's got there yet," Circle Cross said. "I'll ride on down the wagon trail after I give you about a quarter hour to git there by the brushy trail. You bush up there in the willows along the crick behind the barn and horse corrals. You'll see me ride down the wagon trail. I want you to stay hid out till I git there. I want to be on hand to make you acquainted with that young un. Now rattle your hocks, boy."

It took a while to get there by way of the brushy trail. Clay was hidden by the brush and still had nearly half a mile to travel when he heard the savage barking of hounds. Immediately he spurred to a long trot. Old Circle Cross Smith had said nothing about a hound pack. Clay wondered if the dogs had heard him or scented him coming. He slid his saddle carbine from its scabbard.

Clay pulled up at the edge of the high willows before he was sighted. His carbine ready, he stared, narrow-eyed, at what he saw happening.

The Mexico Kid sat his horse out in the clearing between the barn and log cabin. His gopher teeth were bared and his pale eyes glinted evilly. His notched-handled six-shooter was in his hand while all around him, hackles lifted and growling, were a dozen or fifteen big shaggy mixed-bred hounds. They were keeping the tough Mexico Kid from getting off his horse.

"You, Molly!" The Mexico Kid was assuming the role of a young cowboy who had come to call on his girl. "Call your dogs off! That's a hell of a way to treat a feller come a-sparkin'!"

The cabin door opened. The girl in the doorway was dressed in faded green-and-white-checked gingham. Her heavy curly coppery-red hair was parted in the middle and plaited in two squaw braids that hung below her slim waist. Freckles sprinkled her tanned skin. Dark lashes fringed gray-green eyes that looked over the Mexico Kid with cool appraisal. White teeth showed in a brief smile that held no welcome.

The Mexico Kid pulled off the bullet-ripped hat Clay had swapped him. He swaggered in his saddle.

"I'm the Mexico Kid."

"That," Molly Kane's quiet voice was cold-toned and contemptuous, "is what I thought."

"You've heard of the Mexico Kid, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then call off your houn's. I kin use a cup of coffee spiked with some of Ramrod Kane's likker. After breakfast me'n you'll git better acquainted. I'm a sucker for red-headed gals."

"Don't step down off your horse," Molly Kane warned, "or those hounds will tear you apart. You'd better hit the trail before they decide to pull you down. Ramrod Kane has 'em trained. You might get a chance to shoot one or two but the rest of the pack would finish you. You've worn your welcome out quick. Don't crowd your luck any further."

The Mexico Kid pulled on his hat.

His gopher teeth grinned but there was a look in his pale eyes that was not quite sane. His tongue licked his bruised lips and he was letting his sweat-marked horse walk towards the cabin. Slowly, so as not to excite the big hounds that gave way and followed alongside his horse.

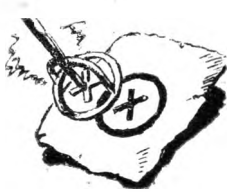
If he could ride near enough, get his horse close enough to where the girl stood in the open doorway, he could jump for it. Knock the girl down. Jump inside and slam the door on the dogs. Shoot any dog that jumped him.

Clay sat his horse behind the edge of the brush. Carbine lifted, he lined his sights. Then he lowered the gun. He could not kill a man from the brush. Not even a thing like that Mexico Kid. He'd ride out in the open.

"That'll be about far enough, Kid!" Old Circle Cross Smith's voice creaked like a rusty hinge. And he came down the short slope along the wagon trail. His saddle gun was cradled in the crook of his left arm.

"Me'n you, Kid," he called out as he rode boldly down the hill and towards the Mexico Kid, "has got to have a little powwow — regardin' the killin' of Sheriff Mike Garrigan up in Montana. Remember the night you bushwhacked that sheriff, Kid?"

"You're damned right. I got it notched on my gun, old-timer," the Mexico Kid bragged. "I'll put your notch there directly. You ain't pulled that mumble-peg. So you might as well step down and show this purty little sorrel-maned filly how to root a peg with them prison teeth of yourn. If them hounds is spoilin' fer meat, you'll do. Throw away your gun, you old' buzzard, or I'll gut-shoot yuh!"



"Keep your shirt on, Kid." Circle Cross Smith threw away his saddle gun and lifted both gnarled hands almost to his shoulders. A faint grin on his leathery face, he watched the Mexico Kid as he rode up between the cabin and the renegade.

"Howdy, Molly." He pulled up. "It looks like I got to root that mumbly-peg. Reckon you kin keep your hound pack from chawin' me up?"

"The dogs won't bother you, Circle Cross. They know you."

Circle Cross Smith swung from his saddle. He stood in front of Molly, his big old tough rawboned frame shielding her. His voice creaked.

"I'd feel shore silly," he said, "havin' you watch an old fool like me rootin' a danged mumbly-peg. Git inside and shut the door, young un."

Old Circle Cross Smith moved fast and without warning. He gave the girl a back shove that sent her reeling, and kicked the door shut on her. He was reaching for his six-shooter as he whirled around, when the Mexico Kid shot him.

Clay had waited too long. But he waited no longer. He spurred the big blue roan out from behind the brush and rode straight at the Mexico Kid. Within six-shooter range Clay let his

carbine drop and the old ivory-handled six-shooter that had belonged to Sheriff Mike Garrigan was gripped in his right hand.

Old Circle Cross Smith rolled over onto his side. Pain seared his faded blue eyes and his voice creaked.

"That's Sheriff Mike Garrigan's boy Clay," he said, "comin' to kill you!"

The Mexico Kid was holding his fire. Molly shoved the door open. Old Circle Cross Smith's voice creaked again.

"Call your dogs off, young un. The Mexico Kid is Clay Garrigan's wolf!"

Molly called the dogs. Then she dropped on her knees beside the old cowpuncher and her hands were busy locating the bullet hole in his tough hide.

Clay slacked the blue roan down to a running walk. His gun was cocked. He could see the Mexico Kid's pale eyes. They were the eyes of a killer. Hatred had warmed the chill of fear in the Mexico Kid. His gopher teeth bared.

Clay Garrigan and the Mexico Kid fired at almost the same second. Clay was twisted sideways as a .45 slug seared his ribs. He thumbed the gun hammer and pulled the trigger a second time. And for a moment he was in the grip of a nightmarish panic because it looked as though the tough Mexico Kid was bullet-proof.

The Mexico Kid swayed in his saddle and the gopher-toothed grin was there on his face and his pale eyes stared without blinking. Clay's two heavy .45 slugs had hit the Mexico Kid in the belly. There were two round holes in the front of his shirt. The first shot should have killed him. The second shot was almost in the same hole. But the Mexico Kid sat stiff in his saddle. The notched gun had slipped from his hand. Then his horse spooked and whirled and the Mexico Kid collapsed like an empty sack and pitched over sideways onto the ground, dead before he landed with a dull thud.

"Down, dogs!" Molly Kane's voice was shrill, brittle.

The big shaggy hounds obeyed sullenly. They lay crouched, eyes fixed on the dead Mexico Kid, fangs bared, hackles lifted.

Blood was staining Clay Garrigan's shirt. Cold sweat beaded his hide. He let the blue roan carry him to the cabin doorway.

Old Circle Cross Smith shoved his prison teeth into place. His faded blue eyes were bright.

"Sheriff Mike Garrigan," he said, "couldn't've done it neater. Git down, boy. And let Molly take a look at yuh. That's blood on your shirt."

Clay was off his horse and squatted beside the old cowhand. Molly's hands were bloody. She had Circle Cross Smith's shirt and undershirt pulled away from a bullet rip along the old cowpuncher's side and was holding a strip of white petticoat she'd torn off, against the wound. Her face was so pale the freckles looked like brown lumps. But her eyes were shining green.

"It just ripped the hide," she answered the question in Clay's eyes. "I'll have it wrapped up by the time you skin out of your shirt and under-

shirt. Don't gawk at me like an idiot. I've seen bare hide before. Sometimes men can certainly be the bashfullest boneheads."

Clay managed a lopsided grin and quit staring at the girl. He cut a look at Circle Cross. The old cowhand clicked his prison teeth.

"You're a doggoned liar, Circle Cross . . . " Clay began yanking at his shirt buttons.

Circle Cross grinned. "I bin a-tellin' Clay all along the way, what a pore sorry homely little thing you was, Molly. You just heard him call me a liar. You better take it from there on."

Molly's freckled face crimsoned. She said it wasn't too late to sic the dogs on both of them. But the big shaggy hounds were sniffing Clay and when a cold wet muzzle was shoved against the back of his neck as he squatted there pulling off his shirt. Molly and Circle Cross knew the dogs had accepted him as a friend.

Molly patched the two men up and took care of their horses and the Ramrod horse the Mexico Kid had ridden. Then she fed them strong black coffee and steak and fried potatoes and corn on the cob, and cut a big dried apple pie in half and slid the halves on their plates.

The Mexico Kid lay where he had fallen, his body shrouded by an old bed tarp.

When they had tobacco lighted. Circle Cross Smith told Molly that her father and his cowpunchers were fighting it out, once and for all, with the renegades who for years had waged a range war against Ramrod Kane and his Rustlers' Range cattle outfit.

"All we kin do, young un, is set back and wait. This'll take all the courage you've got."

Molly Kane nodded. Waiting, she said, was the woman's job. And when Clay Garrigan said he hoped it would be the last time she would ever have to wait for the man she loved to get back home, he felt his ears redden and his face flush.

The long hours dragged and it was past sundown when they saw riders top the scrub-timbered ridge. The man riding in the lead took off his hat and stood in his stirrups and waved to them.

Clay Garrigan and Circle Cross Smith laid down their saddle guns and Molly ran out to meet her father.

Ramrod Kane had come through the battle in Gunsight Pass without a bullet scratch. He had lost three men and four others were wounded. But they had wiped out the outside renegades, Ramrod told Circle Cross Smith and Clay Garrigan, down to the last man.

"We'll take that trail herd plumb to the Denver yards," said Ramrod Kane, "without a Winchester guard. It never was the law that bothered us. There ain't a man in my Ramrod outfit with a price on his head. And that's a fact. But it was easier to let them outsiders figger us as renegades. Only bad un in the outfit was that Mexico Kid. They sent him in as a sneaker spy. . . . I ain't shook hands with you yet, Clay. I'd be proud to now."

Clay said it was Circle Cross Smith

who had sprung the wolf trap. Molly told her father it was both Circle Cross and Clay who had gotten the job done.

When Molly had fed the men and turned over the dishwashing job to the Ramrod roundup cook, she and Clay wandered outside to take a look at the moon and count the stars.

Inside the long log bunkhouse Ramrod Kane and Circle Cross Smith and the Rustlers' Range cowhands sat around a jug.

Ramrod Kane said he felt as though he was getting a little too old and stove-up to be running a cow outfit. He hoped he could some day set back and mebbyso beat Circle Cross Smith playing mumble-peg.

Circle Cross Smith agreed that would suit him fine. Even if he lost a game now and then and had to root a pigtail or bull's tail with his Deer Lodge pen teeth.

Clay Garrigan and Molly Kane sat holding hands in the light of a sickle moon. It was the same moon Clay had watched the night before on guard. . . .

"It's a wishing moon, Clay." Molly's voice was soft.

Clay held her hand a little tighter. He had never heard, he told her, his voice sort of choked and dry, about a wishing moon.

"We wish on the moon, Clay . . . together."

They must have wished the same thing. Because somehow Molly was in Clay's arms and he kissed her clumsily. Her hands held his face and he was glad he'd borrowed a razor and shaved. And then they were talking out all their dreams while the pack of big shaggy hounds lay around their feet.

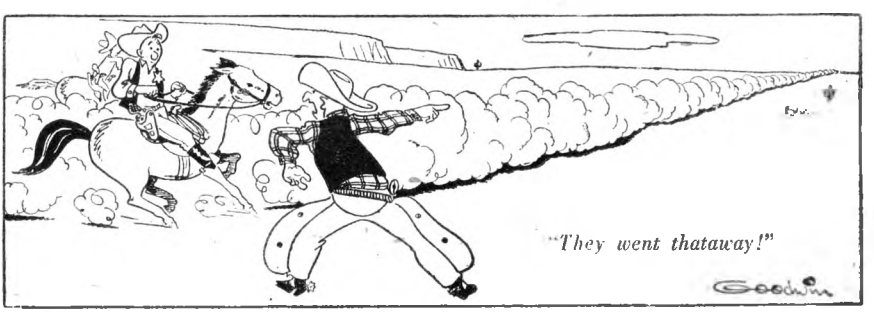
Ramrod Kane went out for a breath of fresh air. There was a slow grin spreading under his drooping mustache when he came back in and shut the door.

"It looks like," he said to Circle Cross Smith, "we'll soon have plenty of time to play mumble-peg."

A twinkle showed in the faded blue eyes of old Circle Cross Smith.

"I could've told you that, Ramrod, a long time ago. I knowed Sheriff Mike Garrigan's boy Clay would show up. I knowed where I was a-fetchin' Clay Garrigan yesterday when I piloted him through Gunsight Pass."

THE END



By Steve Hail

STAND BY FOR A LANDING

The Delphine *proved she didn't have to be seaworthy to keep the Sacramento from cutting capers!*

AFTER twenty-odd years on the roisterous Sacramento, Captain Jeffrey Dodds readily admitted to himself the possibility, even probability, of catastrophe falling from the unpredictable California sky, or rising from the depths of the fickle river of gold itself, for that matter. Such calamity

could strike when least expected, and often did. But that it could saunter casually aboard over the *Delphine's* gangplank in the guise of a man was inconceivable—up until now.

The morning was pleasant enough, even for tardy spring, and the captain squatted on his thin thighs, and pressed his equally fragile shoulders gratefully to the sun-blistered paintwork of the *Delphine's* pilothouse. He flipped the cracked peak of his pilot's cap backward with a spoke-calloused hand and ran his fingers through the revealed sparseness of his whitening hair. Beneath him the aged sidewheeler appeared to groan in sympathy with the captain's mood of the moment as she surged against the pilings of Collinsville Landing to the charge of the swollen Sacramento running strong and sullen past the wharf.

Hunkered beside the *Delphine's* captain-owner, Samuel Farnsworth, the paddler's crotchety engineer, filed at a burred crank pin, noisily but withal an obvious tenderness of feeling for the worn piece of machinery.

Captain Dodds opened his mouth to offer half-hearted banter on the state of affairs in the packet's patched-together engine room, but recalled in time Sam's bellicose pride in the ancient Simmons walking-beam. Instead he fished a tooth-scored plug of tobacco from his waistcoat and began the ritual of removing its adhering bits of pocket lint before biting off a solacing chew.

"You figger that bucket of bolts down below'll hold together for another up-river run?" he asked in semi-seriousness.

Farnsworth's stubble-grown chin bulged under a faded eye as he squinted along the smoothed roundness of the crank pin. "It'll run," he retorted, "until it walks off the holding-down bolts that just about keep the frame of this floating hen house together."

"Which same ain't going to be too far in the future," Captain Jeff sighed with uncharacteristic gloom. "We gotta face it, Sam. The *Delphine* ain't good for much longer." He mouthed a plum-sized quid of the sanitized tobacco and went on thoughtfully, "You and me, either. The valley here's fast becoming a farming country. The days of water transportation are about gone. What's left of the river trade is going to the railroads and the crack packets. The *Delphine* now . . ."

"That Simmons down below is a spankin' enjine for all your disparagin' remarks," Sam broke in belligerently. "She'll be runnin' when you're walkin' — which in my opinion ain't too far in the future!"

Jeff let the aspersion pass. "What I'm getting at," he continued patiently, "is that I'm fixing to swallow the anchor. I . . . we . . . got a few hundred dollars saved up, Sam. Give us the rest of the year and a little luck, along with what we can get out of the *Delphine* for scrap, and we'll have enough to build us a shack by the river. Get us an acre or two of bottom land, a few chickens, maybe even a cow—"

The incredulity in the engineer's eyes stopped Jeff's voiced plans.

"You aim to sell the *Delphine?*" Sam Farnsworth said with deep hurt. "I brought that Simmons around the Horn. I've nursed it, coaxed it, even cussed it. I ain't seein' it broke up for junk on nobody's account, even yours. It and me have got a lot of good years left, even if you ain't."

"Look, Sam," Jeff tried again. "We got what remains of Jay Wilson's contract at Grand Island. Once he gets his levee strengthened and built up, what's left for us? We'll be through with it by the end of summer. And after that it's pickin' with the chickens; a sack of onions here, a lug of peaches there—not enough to pay expenses for running. Wilson's offered me a couple of acres in pears for our own, Sam, at only a thousand dollars. We—"

A purposeful clatter of gaitered feet on the gangplank jarred Jeff out of his dreams of independence. He looked up at a stranger, a sparse figure and austere, regarding him with somber eyes. The intruder's mouth was tightened with seeming distaste for his surroundings.

"Name's Wharton," he introduced himself. "Steamboat Inspection Service. I'm here to pass on the seaworthiness of this . . . uh . . . craft."

Jeff arose slowly. "This ain't no offshore packet," he said, mystified. "Or even coastwise. The *Delphine's* a river boat."

"No matter," Wharton answered. "New law says inland waterways and their carriers come under our jurisdiction. People have had enough of boilers goin' heavenward with them aboard. I'll be pleased to look at your plant, sir, and after that determine the soundness of your hull. Captain . . . uh . . ."

"Dodds," Jeff said grimly. "And this is my engineer, Mr. Farnsworth. I'm certain you'll find everything in order. Show the gentleman below, Sam."

Sam got up, affronted, about to offer objection, but the frigid warning in Jeffrey Dodds' eyes stopped him. Jeff had heard tales of the Inspection Service. They'd as soon slap a plaster on a steamer as spit. Jeff demonstrated the latter, squirting a brown stream to the flood-borne drift swirling past the offshore rail.

Sam understood and started grudgingly for the boiler deck. Wharton followed officiously in his wake, pawing the while through a set of tools carried in the carpetbag in his hand.

It was a worried hour later before Jeff knew the worst. Wharton was the first on deck with a smug light of dutiful discovery in his eyes. But it was Sam's countenance, with the whiteness of controlled fury seaming his mouth, that told Jeffrey Dodds all was not what the engineer claimed it was in the *Delphine's* engine room.

The inspector fingered through a sheaf of papers picked from an inner pocket. He selected one, inked in the blank spaces, and handed it to Jeff.

"I've condemned your boilers, captain," he said with evident relish. "among other things. Bored 'em in a dozen places. Thin as a beaver hat in spots. They're not dangerous exactly, but they're definitely on the weak side.

As to your hull, as far as I can determine, it's only hope and prayer that holds it together. You'll find a listing of required repairs and deficiencies on the paper I've given you. You'll be allowed to operate again when they're complied with. Not before. Good day, Captain . . . ah . . ."

"Dodds!" Jeff supplied curtly. "And hold on a minute! This packet's our livelihood. You can't go around condemning vessels as if they were steam kettles in a Market Street chophouse. We've got cargo aboard for up river. A full load of jute sacks for sandbagging the levee at Grand Island. They're needed bad. The river's been threatening to break through there for days. I'm taking 'em!"

"I'm sorry, captain," Wharton said, not sounding sorry. "But you're not to leave the dock, except down river to Frisco to have your repairs effected. I've explained that to your engineer. I've set your safety valve at ten pounds and sealed it officially. That'll be pressure a-plenty for a downstream run. Your hull should last you that long. If you don't run afoul of a sand bar!" he added caustically.

He paused for breath, then went on: "As for authority, it is invested in me as an agent of the Department of Commerce of the United States Government. That should be enough, I presume. If my recommendations are disobeyed, I'll have to revoke your operating certificate, and pilot's license as well. I'd suggest you conform, captain. I repeat, good day, sir."

The rhythm of his departing footsteps on the gangplank was like the pulse of defeat hammering in Jeff's veins. Watching the inspector's righteous back disappear around a corner of the loading shed, he felt the fire of his imagined injustice simmering down to futile anger at the destiny that had brought this traveling inspector on his rounds at this time, instead of six months hence.

Scrambled Words Answers (page 64)

1. beech 2. sunbonnet 3. hive 4. younker 5. caterpillar 6. Eskimo 7. farm 8. wigwam 9. butter 10. doe 11. locoweed 12. wheel 13. ladle 14. bighorn 15. gate

Why, given half a year, they'd have profit enough to provide for a secured future, and to blazes with the Commerce Department and its addle-brained ideas of determining a boiler's worth by formula, and a hull's strength by measurement and guess. Shucks, he'd grounded on a hundred sand bars with the *Delphine* and she'd never faltered. Well, shuddered a bit perhaps, but . . .

Sam Farnsworth was the first to recover from their stricken silence.

"We goin' to Grand Island, cap'n?" he asked hopefully. "You goin' to let that pompous old buzzard herd us to the boneyard? I've known you twenty years, Jeff Dodds, and I never knowed you to take guff from any man before. And I know them boilers o' mine, too. They'll hold forty pounds any day of the week includin' Sunday. Of course," he added innocently, "that worm-eaten hull o' yours mightn't take the poundin' the flood'll give her."

For once Jeff Dodds couldn't find it in him to rise to the bait. "Get your

crank pin back in, Sam," he sighed, "and plug those test borings in the boilers. We'll be getting under way for Frisco. You can't mess around with gov'ment inspectors."

Shortly after noon Captain Jeffrey Dodds shouted the shore lines aboard and the *Delphine* nosed tentatively out of the sheltered curve of the Collinsville bend under her reduced head of steam. When finally Jeff rang down a jingle for Full Ahead, the reluctant paddler hardly seemed to have increased her way over maneuvering speed.

Jeff grunted disdainfully at the punchless power of the idling buckets. He spoked the wheel to larboard in order to take advantage of the midstream freshet, then settled back for a leisurely downstream run.

Sam Farnsworth climbed to the pilothouse, deep disgust wrinkling his nose as he looked aloft at the blubbering safety.

"Got a fireman chunkin'," he explained. "A babe could fire them boilers now and never scorch his pinky." He leaned his length disconsolately in a corner and gave himself up to gloom.

As they neared the point off Spinner Island, Jeff could see the flattened smoke and the belled stacks of another steamer showing astern and to larboard over the tule-grown flats of Chain Island. She was footing fast, by the look of her, downstream like themselves, and converging on the *Delphine's* course as they both made for the narrow channel skirting the shallows off Point San Joaquin.

"That'll be the *Sonoma* out of Sacramento on the Frisco run," Jeff said, putting down his glass. "She's flying for fair." There was a wistful note in his voice as he eyed the other's wake creaming astern in a fine display of power.

"She's bearin' to larboard," Sam observed, "toward New York Slough. She stoppin' at Antioch these days?"

Jeff shook his head and shrugged, the thunder of the overtaking vessel making talk hard to understand.

The *Sonoma* swept abeam in a flurry of flung spray. A brass-buttoned figure leaned out of the other pilothouse and aimed a megaphone at the lagging *Delphine*.

"Tarnation, cap'n, which way you headed? The levee's breached at Grand Island and Jay Wilson's screaming for your cargo. You gone crazy, man?"

Jeff raised his own megaphone to reply, but realized the futility of explanation. There was something tightening in his throat, too, that made it hard for him to talk.

The *Sonoma* was past then, flinging whipped water and a last tart admonition back at them. "I'm headin' in to Antioch, cap'n, to send all the help I can. If'n that break widens, there'll be loss of life as well as prop'ty. You . . ."

The last words were lost in the thrashing of the steamer's paddles as she swung hard a-larboard for New York Slough.

Jeff Dodds wiped a suddenly weary hand across a face that matched the whiteness of his hair. "Fine way to

aid a friend," he mumbled to Sam, but really addressing Inspector Wharton of the Steamboat Inspection Service. "Legging it to Frisco to save our own hides while Jay stands to lose a lifetime's work."

"But the *Delphine's* your life, too, cap'n, don't forget." Jeff heard the voice clear as day, and turned sharply on Sam Farnsworth, but the engineer hadn't spoken. He was staring broodingly after the fading *Sonoma*.

"Jay Wilson's young; his life's ahead of him," Jeff argued half-aloud. "Me and Sam here are near finished. On the last leg of our voyage home. It don't matter much about us."

"Your life's as valuable to you, as Wilson's . . ." the unseen voice argued on.

"Shut up!" Jeff yelled suddenly, and his voice boomed through the pilothouse like a boiler letting go.

Sam jumped as though he had been stung by a bee.

"Don't stand there gawking!" Jeff roared at him. "Get below and start pitching pine to that coffee mill of yours — if you think she'll stand a driving. I'm a-going to Grand Island!"

Sam's snaggle-toothed mouth widened in a broken grin. "'Bout time you came to life," he said. "That's the trouble with the deck department, never no gumption." He started for the door. "I'll give you revolutions enough to shake you to your knees," he said over his shoulder, "but, mind you, keep clear of snags or you'll have this egg crate hull falling around my ears like a rotted sluice box."

Jeff shot a menacing look at his engineer and mouthed a steadying chaw of tobacco, lint and all. "Less talk," he growled, "and give me steam." He spun the *Delphine's* big wheel into a blurred halo of whirling spokes.

Jeff turned hard around and took the back-water channel behind Montezuma Island, staying out of the fluming freshet as long as possible. They steamed by the Collinsville wharf again, but flying now, with the *Delphine's* bow wave curling viciously over the flooring of the dock. Jeff loosed an ounce of steam from the whistle, figuring he could spare it as a warning to the open-mouthed onlookers.

Once out of the lee of the island, though, they were breasting the onrushing flood, running yellow and angry from bank to bank. The unobstructed wind swept the open reaches with a wild fury, building up a formidable sea for the shallow draft sidewheeler. Jeff clung to the edge of the channel, using every remembered bit of river knowledge, fighting for the slightest advantage of tide and back eddies.

The *Delphine* staggered as the crest struck and tried to climb her low-built bows, but her buckets never faltered. She flung severed tules to her churning wake like a frantic mongrel digging for a misburied bone. Jeff hung grimly to the kicking wheel, tobacco juice staining his chin for lack of time to spit. He was depressingly conscious of the silence of the safety valve atop the pilothouse behind him, but from the corner of his eye he saw cinders, hot and flaming, streaming astern to die, hissing, in their wake. Jeff al-

lowed himself a brittle smile. Sam was firing like Old Satan himself below decks, judging from the ash.

At Rio Vista, below Grand Island, the river widened, but shoals guarded either bank. Jeff jockeyed the paddler to midstream against the chance of fetching bottom. He held her there, headed up the middle, only veering now and then to avoid onrushing drift.

It was up to Sam's old Simmons now. And, too, to the honest-built but aging bones of the *Delphine* herself. She shivered as the full charge of the river met her, seeming to shake the fastenings out of her planking. The spray came hog-frame high over the pilothouse, but she forged ahead. Slowly, but still ahead. Jeff was hard put at times to make out the ranges through the driven scud.

By the end of an hour that seemed like a bad dream to Captain Jeff they had fought their way out of midstream and into the comparative quiet of Steamboat Slough. The river, divided here by Grand Island, still roared down upon them, sucking hungrily at the *Delphine's* underbody, but the seas of the main reaches had moderated, giving Jeff a steadier footing and a view ahead of the island and the high-sided levees on either hand.

Before them, as the *Delphine* clawed her way around a bend, Jeff made out the distant figures of men fighting like frantic ants around a boil of water pouring through a break in the bank. Jeff recognized the spot as one where Jay Wilson's pumping station siphoned irrigation water into the fields beyond during the dry season. It was the one weak spot in the levee, and the Sacramento had searched it out like a mouser ferreting out a rat in the *Delphine's* China hold.

Something knotted hard in Jeff Dodds' stomach and he recognized it as despair. The breach was wide, as broad as the *Delphine's* ample beam itself. They were too late. Sandbags, even filled with fear-spurred rapidity, could never hope to plug that gap. It would be like throwing rocks into quicksand.

With a heavy hand Jeff rang the walking-beam down to half speed and leaned his weight on the whistle lanyard, as much to relieve the gloom clouding his conscience as to advise Wilson of his belated arrival. If they'd only left an hour sooner!

Sam Farnsworth's roar came up the voice tube. "What's the ruckus up there? You fogged in? You're wastin' good steam, man!"

Jeff grinned in spite of his dejection. "Somebody's got to take the pressure off those rust buckets of yours," he shouted back, "before they come through the deck! You got that safety lashed down, Sam?"

"Lashed down nothing! Lashings part. I got your spare kedge hangin' to it!"

On the near bank Jeff recognized the bluff, heavy-set figure of Jay Wilson staring forlornly out at them. Even at this distance he saw the sagging, defeated set of the rancher's shoulders. He sobered.

"Unhang it, Sam," he growled at

the voice tube. "We ain't going anywhere. We've lost."

Then, as he rang down Slow, keeping only enough way on them to breast the current, the slender thread of chance that had been raveling in his mind spun into a strengthening yarn of hope. Strange excitement was in his voice as he swung around to the speaking tube.

"Stand by, Sam! We haven't lost yet. I'll need your steam."

His answer was a blast of flame vomited aloft from the *Delphine's* overheated stack.

Jeff gauged the opening in the levee with a practiced eye. What he planned had to be done at once, before the cutting force of the water widened the hole in the embankment. Trouble was, if it didn't work, it would be the end of the *Delphine*. Thinking about it, Jeff realized it would be the end anyway, even if he succeeded. But then they were through as it was, he remembered suddenly. Wharton would have his license for having come this far even, and the *Delphine's*, too. He, Jeffrey Dodds, would never get a chance now to earn the price of Wilson's offered acres.

Jeff sighed finally, and shrugged. There'd be women and youngsters beyond the levee that'd be homeless tonight if that break wasn't stoppered. Fatherless, too, some of them, the way it looked. And kids needed homes and fathers more than he needed a plot of ground to grow old on. Shucks, there was no reason he couldn't go deckhanding again, for that matter. He still had a few years left and . . .

"Hey!" came an indignant roar over the voice tube. "You moonin' up there? I got a full head of steam down here wantin' to go some place, and your blasted anchor's holdin' it down! Somethin's gotta go!"

Captain Jeffrey Dodds sighed again and straightened.

"Full ahead, Sam," he ordered then. "Hook 'er up! And you'd better grab a double handful of stanchion. We're not goin' far!"

He emphasized the order with two bells and a jingle on the engine room pull, then turned his snatched-up megaphone toward the men lining both sides of the break.

"Stand clear!" he trumpeted. "I'm comin' in for a landing!"

He braced himself at the wheel, feet spraddled wide, and his knuckles tightened to paleness on the spokes as he lined the jackstaff dead on the opening in the bank. Beneath him the *Delphine* shuddered as she gathered way under the impetus of Sam's imprisoned steam.

There was full, pile-driving way on her as she struck with a deadening crunch, a few feet off center. She clung to the edge of the break as the Texas deck railing hung up momentarily on an uprooted willow. Hurled to his knees, Jeff felt the big Simmons die below him.

"Danged engine-room gang never could take orders," he growled in righteous wrath as he clawed his way to his feet. "I never rung her down!"

He grabbed for the bell pull again, fighting to clear the webs of concussion from his brain. In answer, the *Delphine's* buckets came leaping to life again in frenzied forward motion. She hung there, trembling, for a seeming age, then slithered free. Her wide-veed bottom shot into the notch in the levee like a hammered bung. From somewhere forward Jeff was aware of a shattering, collapsing crash. He rang down a multiple jingle to Sam: Finished With Engines.

He was standing at the paneless sash of a forward window, watching Wilson's ranch hands feverishly filling the remaining gap between the levee and the *Delphine's* guards, when Sam bounded into the pilothouse.

The engineer was bleeding from a gash that had all but severed an ear. His eyes were dark with wrath.

"I told you you'd—" he started in, then stopped in wordless wonder as he followed Jeff Dodds' brooding gaze. Forward, where the main deck had joined the house, there was a disquieting nothingness. The *Delphine's* tired bows had sheered off and fallen away into the bottom lands below the levee. She was only half a packet.

Above them a plume of steam blossomed skyward as a fireman bled the boilers. To Captain Jeffrey Dodds its murmur was a final requiem for the river packet, *Delphine.*

"I . . . I take it back, Jeff," the engineer exclaimed at last in an awed voice.

"Take what back?" the captain demanded.

"About the deck department not having gumption. That was a landing to end 'em all!"

"It was," Jeff Dodds agreed with emphasis. "And, pardner, it did!"

Jay Wilson clambered aboard over the dirt fill, where the fore hold had been short minutes before.

"I'm obliged to you, Cap'n Jeff," he said humbly. He looked around at the earthbound *Delphine,* and at the ravenous Sacramento rushing past, imprisoned now to its natural channel.

"Looks like you're here to stay," Wilson went on pensively. "Well, your parcel of land's waiting for you whenever you want to move in."

"I ain't moving in," Jeff Dodds said. "I haven't got the money, or the packet to earn it with. I've never taken charity an' I ain't starting now."

Wilson nodded. He nudged his hat forward and scratched thoughtfully at the back of his neck. "I know that, Jeff. What I was thinking . . . what kind of power plant you got down below?"

"Simmons walking-beam," Jeff answered, puzzled.

"An' a good one!" Sam bristled, sensing disparagement of his only love.

"What I'm getting at," Wilson said, "is that my pumping unit—what's left of it—is buried under about ten tons of river silt. Ruined. Any reason we couldn't hook up the Simmons for a permanent irrigation station?"

"No reason at all," Sam cried, excited for once. "Best damned enjine—"

"Sam!" Jeff stopped him. "You forgot, maybe." He turned to Wilson in explanation. "Fellow name of Wharton, Steamboat Inspector, condemned the boilers for anything over ten pounds pressure. Got to replace them or he jerks the *Delphine's* license. Mine too," he remembered morosely.

Wilson smiled. "Low pressure'll be plenty for this job. And I don't think either of you'll be needing licenses. You won't be going any place, so that inspector'll have no jurisdiction over you. The *Delphine's* a shoreside installation now. Is it a deal, Jeff?"

Jeff Dodds looked at his engineer, and after a thoughtful moment they both smiled happily.

"It's a deal," Jeff agreed. Then his smile died, his face paling to gray.

"What's the matter, Cap'n Jeff?" Wilson asked concernedly. "You sick?"

"I—I swallowed my tobacco when we struck," Jeff gulped. "I've felt better." Then he thought about the fast-changing events of the day. "No," he corrected himself, and grinned. "Come to think of it, I guess I haven't."

THE END

EVERY TIME we read of disastrous river floods taking their toll of life and property, soil and crops, we have reason to stop and think and see that mental picture of the timber-stripped hillsides which were the cause of it all. The nation's forest conservation program is helping to rectify the tragic mistakes of former generations who overlooked that axiom so well known to all who are aware of the importance of our forests: "Protect the hills with trees and they will protect the valleys."

LOST TRAIL DRIVE

I

BILLY BOWEN was riding Sugar. He spoke to the lantern-jawed roan, and Sugar broke into a swift little trot that carried him up the strung-out trail herd. A big blue steer that had broken out of formation cast a jaundiced eye at horse and rider, and quickly lost himself within the sea of tossing backs and swinging horns. At a slight pressure on the reins Sugar slowed to a walk, and Billy looked among the drive as he made an effort to relocate the big blue steer.

But the blue steer had gone, vanished into the herd with all the stealth and cunning of a mother quail slinking with her brood into a thicket. Billy rode on, waving to Al Zebaugh, the swing rider on the right of the herd, as he did so. He drew Sugar to a walk beside Tommy Heermance, one of the point riders, and the two horses swung close together.

"I reckon the trail boss just had to come an' see if I was still here?" Tommy asked bitingly.

Billy grinned, and swung his horse a little nearer Tommy's. It hadn't set

By Jim Kjelgaard

Abilene was still a mighty long way off when Big Blue showed those Texas cowboys he, too, could make a hand

well at first with the riders, this idea of the youngest trail boss—Billy Bowen was twenty—ever to set out for Abilene giving them orders. But things were running all right so far. There had been no special trouble, and the dozen riders were gradually swinging around to his side. Billy hadn't made the mistake of giving peremptory orders; Texans didn't like them.

"I saw that big blue outlaw steer down beyond the swing rider," Billy explained.

"Yeah. He was up here on the point a little while ago. Doggone, he goes the length of the herd an' slips through it like a ghost. Whyn't you have him for meat, Billy?"

"Can't do it. I just can't. That's little Al Murchison's steer. I promised Al I'd get him to Abilene, and bring back whatever money he sells for."

Tommy nodded, and let his horse choose its own pace while the grazing herd drifted slowly on. They had been pushed hard, twenty-five miles a day for the first three days, to take the spirit and the desire to break back

out of them. Now, except for the blue steer and a few more die-hard outlaws, the herd grazed along at about ten miles a day.

Billy used the end of his neckerchief to wipe his face, and let the neckerchief drop back into place. A big brindle cow whose hair was white with the frost of age started nervously at the movement, then resumed her grazing walk. The brindle was one of a dozen old mossbacks that had appointed themselves the leaders of this trail herd. They'd remain leaders until the herd got to wherever it was going. But . . .

That had to be Abilene. It just *had* to. Down in Texas the Murchisons, the Taylors and the Croyles had banded together to make up this herd. And they'd said to him, in effect: "Billy Bowen, we Texans got more cows than we know what to do with. We're cow-poor. We can't sell 'em in Mexico because the Mexicans got as many cows as we have. We can't send 'em east to Louisiana because there ain't any money there, either. But we *can* sell 'em in Abilene. The East wants beef, the railroad will carry all the cows we can land in Abilene. Billy Bowen, take this herd to Abilene. Pay off your riders, take a fair cut for yourself, and bring us the rest of the money. We need it."

Sugar was walking now, suiting his pace to that of the grazing cattle and loafing along. A good cow pony knew as well as his rider what he should and should not do, and it was all right for Sugar to walk as long as he had plenty of speed when it was needed. He had it, and endurance too. Tommy Heermance, walking his horse too, broke into a soft little song:

Oh, the boss, he says, "Dick,
Can you ride a pitchin' hoss?"
"I can ride him in the slick,"
I tells that dad-blamed boss.

Billy Bowen thoughtfully sucked his lip, and looked back at the vast arrowhead that was the trail herd. The dozen leaders formed the point, but the rear was almost a mile wide. A pall of dust hung over the moving cattle, and Billy tried to distinguish the following smaller palls that would locate the chuck wagon and remuda. He could not.

But there was no reason to worry. One-eye Slaughter, the grizzled old vaquero who was driving the chuck wagon, knew better than to trail a herd too closely and eat the dust it kicked up. Juan, the fourteen-year-old Mexican kid who was hazing along the sixty-five horses that made up the remuda, had almost been born on a horse. He'd have his mounts in at the bedding ground when night came.

Tommy was singing the chorus of his song:

Come-a-tie-wy-waddy,
Inkie-eye-eye-a-a-a.
Come-a-tie-wy-waddy-inkie-eye.

The hot sun burned down, and Billy Bowen wiped his face again. And this, he decided, was the trail to Abilene. It was sweat and work and worry, and the Chisholm Trail was well-marked with the bones of the cattle and the graves of the men who had preceded this drive. Jesse Chisholm, who had marked out the trail to haul supplies from the Arkansas Valley into Indian territory, could follow his own route now by the bones along it. Of course, the true Chisholm Trail was only about two hundred and twenty-five miles long. But the whole long stretch to Abilene had gradually acquired the name.

Abruptly Sugar pricked up his ears and snorted.

"Don't let that old brindle cow there eat you, Tommy," Billy Bowen said, and reined Sugar around. A man just couldn't drive cows unless he had a good horse under him, and there were no other horses like Sugar.

Born of a wild mustang mother, having spent the first three years of his life running with the herd to which his mother belonged, Sugar had all the keen senses of a wild thing, plus intelligence. He had smelled or heard the gaunt blue steer making a break towards a small, brush-strewn gully, and without any rein guidance, the horse leveled out to cut the steer off. Big Blue heard him coming and sneaked back into the herd.

Billy Bowen swung down the length of the moving herd, cut behind it, and across to the other side. There were eighteen hundred cows here, and the folks at home were expecting money for them. It was up to Billy, and no other, to see that they got it. Every one of those eighteen hundred cows must get to Abilene and the buyers awaiting there. But they were all here, even the big blue steer, and when night came they forded a little stream.

The thirsty cattle stopped to drink, and went on into a meadow lush with grass. Tommy Heermance and the other point rider, Mike Slattery, checked the leaders. Gradually they swung back into the base, and the herd became a milling circle. One-eye Slaughter brought his chuck wagon in, unyoked his ponderous oxen and turned them out to graze, then made his fire of buffalo chips. Juan, the Mexican herder of the remuda, slithered in clinging like a leech to the back of a saddleless mustang and dismounted. But he kept hold of the rope that trailed from the mustang's hackamore. It wasn't right for a Texan to have to walk even a hundred feet so long as there was a horse to carry him. The night herders caught fresh mounts and their soft singing drifted in from the bedding ground.

Billy Bowen sighed, and covered himself with his blanket while he looked up at the stars twinkling above him. The trail herd had passed another day safely. He rose once in the night, disturbed by the cattle which, as though they had one impulse, got up to lie down on the other side. They settled themselves again and Billy relaxed.

With morning the leaders drifted from the bedding ground and started grazing their slow pace northward.

Billy Bowen rode Dusty, one of his spare horses. Tomorrow he would have Star, then Blue, then Sugar again. A man on the road to Abilene had to have extra mounts; it would kill one horse to be ridden all the way.

Billy rode up to the point and Dusty fell in beside the chestnut gelding that Tommy Heermance was riding this morning. The big blue steer was walking beside the old cow. Billy eyed the steer and turned to speak to Tommy.

Just at that moment a dozen mounted men rode out of a small gully ahead and dashed toward the herd. Billy was aware of Tommy shooting the revolver that he wore at his belt, and he drew his own gun. The mounted men were Indians, Comanches out to raid. Billy Bowen tried to rein Dusty in so he could get a steady rest from which to shoot. But Dusty was not as reliable as Sugar, and he danced nervously while the superbly mounted, yelling Indians swept along the flank. The big blue steer bellowed, lowered his head, and started to run.

The next minute Billy Bowen found himself borne along ahead of a stampede.

II

There was nothing behind him save a blurred phantasy of swaying backs and tossing, clicking horns. The trail herd had only one mind, which was centered on running as far and as fast as possible. Billy Bowen relaxed the reins on Dusty's neck, and the little mustang lengthened out to a gallop. The cattle pounded on, knowing neither sense nor direction but only that they must run. Billy cast one fleeting glimpse to either side, and gaunt, wild-eyed longhorns plunged there. The other riders were lost somewhere in the chaos that the orderly drive had become.

A great cloud of dust, churned up by thousands of thudding hoofs, rose to trail back along the route they were taking and the wind whipped it into fantastic shapes. Clicking through the thunder of the plunging herd, there came the rattle of hocks and the wild knocking of horn on horn. Dusty swerved a little, and Billy Bowen looked down from the saddle to see a badger or skunk den there. He reached gratefully forward to touch his mount on the neck.

Dusty was not Sugar, a horse that knew as much about herding as did the rider that bestrode him. But Dusty was a sensible horse, one that would not run blindly even before a tidal wave of terrified cattle. To go down meant death and the horse knew it. Little by little, Dusty drew ahead, and Billy saw the brindle cow that had been among the leaders racing with head down.

Billy swore under his breath, and gripped the saddle with his knees while he worked the gun out of its holster. Only a fool would think of a longhorn, brought up in chaparral thickets and depending for its life on its own wits almost from the day it was calved, as a senseless thing. Longhorns could slink away from riders almost as silently as could a deer, and they could run almost as fast as deer.

They'd charge and kill a man on foot, and they knew well how to take care of themselves.

But in a stampede there was neither sense nor reason. Unstable at the best, now the cattle were insane. Nothing could stop them once they started. The wild race just had to die of its own volition, when the cattle had run themselves out and could once more be brought under control of the riders.

Billy holstered his gun, and felt a little shame creeping over him because he had drawn it. He had had two ideas in so doing. Once he'd heard a cowboy tell of being down in a stampede, and of using his gun to shoot the cattle that bore down on him. Thus he had created a little island of dead cattle, and the rest had split around it. But that rider had been exercising the cowboy's privilege of expanding the truth. No man who went down in this maddened animal flood could stay on his feet long enough to shoot a gun. He'd be pounded into a bloody pulp within a split second. Secondly, Billy had thought of shooting some of the cows anyway, to see if, by so doing, he might not make them mill. But a stampede was not a hopeless thing. It had to run itself out. Regardless of how far or how furiously the cows might run they had to stop some time.

Now, while Dusty traveled with the flying herd, Billy thought of something else. Mounted Comanches had started the stampede, and the chances were that even Comanches would not have dared come so near a trail herd unless they had more than a dozen or so braves to back them up. They might follow, and if they did they certainly would attack.

Dusty lengthened out and began to run just a little bit faster, and there seemed to be fewer racing cattle now. Billy bent low in the saddle, giving the horse all the chance he possibly could. Dusty's stride increased a bit more, and almost imperceptibly the thick cloud of dust began to thin. The horse was running with the leaders now, the faster cattle that were outdistancing the rest. A yellow cow running just ahead thrust her foot into a hole, and her hindquarters flew high into the air as she thudded to the earth.

Billy Bowen watched, and within his mind rose a vision of the few bits of yellowed skin and the stains of blood that tomorrow would mark the place where the yellow cow had gone down. Then, to the left and ahead, he saw the big blue steer. Its huge hoofs pounded into the earth, and behind it was a brown heifer that raced furiously along. Billy brought his right knee sharply against Dusty's side, and the horse swerved towards the two. Hearing, or sensing, the approach of the horse, the big blue steer tried to run faster.

But it could not. Long-winded and gaunt, it still did not have speed to

match that of a mustang, and when Billy rode in ahead of it he shouted. The blue steer turned, racing off to the side, and the brown heifer followed. Those coming behind swerved in the same direction Big Blue had taken, as though the steer's path was a marked road that they had to follow. Dusty bent with them, running in toward the head of the blue steer and swerving him farther. Off in the distance another rider was working furiously to help. A dusty rider mounted on a dust-covered horse rode in from another direction and the stampeding herd started to mill.

Then, almost as though they themselves had planned it that way, instead of running straightaway, the cattle were traveling in a circle. Those which had been leading the stampede came up behind the rest and cast their heads high over rumps as they sought a place to go. Riders appeared magically, as though they'd risen out of the dust itself, and worked the milling herd into a tighter and closer circle. The cattle started walking aimlessly around and around.

The settling pall of dust dropped like a slowly folding sheet, and a rider whose lathered mount had been colored by it came close. His eyes were ghostlike through the mask of dust that covered his face, and his mouth formed a wry grin.

"That's what you call a stampede, trail boss," he said amiably.

The voice betrayed him as Tommy Heermance, but nothing else was recognizable. Billy Bowen looked at the now slowly milling herd, and back at his point rider.

"There's maybe a little more than half our herd here," he said.

"You're lucky to have half," grunted Tommy. "I've seen those fool cows run till not even ten percent of 'em ended up in a mill. What you aimin' to do about it?"

"I started for Abilene with eighteen hundred cows, an' eighteen hundred's what I'm takin' in," Billy Bowen said grimly. "How do you figger those Comanches?"

"I don't rightly know. But since you asked me, I'd say there just might be more layin' along the trail."

"Do you reckon we can stay off the trail for a piece?"

Tommy Heermance shrugged. "I reckon we can try it."

"Maybe we'd better. Anybody hurt?"

"Nope. All the riders are accounted for, one way or another. Juan an' One-eye'll be in this evenin' some time."

Billy looked again at the herd, and a thoughtful frown creased his brow. Indian knowledge had been born in Juan. The Comanches might lie in wait for him, but somehow he'd swing his remuda past. If he did not, if he was caught, he'd have been caught before this. If that had happened, Juan was dead and the Comanches already had the remuda. It was the same with One-eye.

"The horses are played out," Billy commented. "The remuda's got to come in before we can do anything."

"What you aim to do?" Tommy Heermance asked Billy curiously.

"Round up the missin' cows."

"Okay, trail boss."

Billy Bowen rode at a walk around the exhausted herd, studying them and taking tally. The riders had dismounted, and were standing near the run-out herd with reins over their arms and holster flaps loosened. The cows wouldn't run again. But the Comanches might follow up. A rider named Harris grinned, wiped his face was not much more.

I'd rather eat a pan of dope,
I'd rather ride without a rope,
I'd rather from the country lope,
Than . . .
Than . . . .
Than to fight . . . .
Than to fight the bloody In-di-ans.

Billy drew rein beside him, and mentally tallied the cows remaining in the herd. Maybe it was half of what they'd started with; certainly it was not much more.

"Want to go up the trail, Harris?" he asked.

"All right with me." Harris shrugged, bit a piece from a plug of tobacco, and began to chew on it while he still hummed his song. Billy Bowen glanced back over the stampede route. The herd had drawn apart while racing that mad course. Bunches of anywhere from five to perhaps fifty had cut off, and they'd be found in the brush, draws, and gullies over which the rest had stampeded. Nearly every trail outfit lost some cattle in stampedes, and plenty were never found again. It was hard, dirty work to haze them out of wherever they took refuge. But it had to be done.

Dusty pricked up his ears and began to eye a little knoll directly in front of the now quiet herd. Billy's right hand stole down to the hilt of his gun as another horse's ears and head appeared for a moment over the edge of the knoll. A second later the missing remuda broke over the knoll and walked down towards the cattle. Juan kicked the black gelding he was riding into a little lope and swung over toward Billy. White teeth flashed in his dark face.

"I could not come es-straight," he said apologetically. "The Een-dee-eens were in the path."

Billy rode up to the grazing horses, caught and saddled Star, letting Dusty go with the remuda. Al Zebaugh, Harris and Tommy Heermance were riding up. Billy Bowen nodded. They'd just come through a stampede. But that was a part of the normal course of events; few trail herds went to Abilene without one. Now they were ready to ride back and pick up strays. Texans were ready to do anything as long as their trail boss led them. But they could not be driven —even at the point of a gun.

Without waiting for the rest, Billy swung back along the stampede path and cut from it up a little, brush-covered hollow. There was no certainty that there'd be cows up it. But there might be, and certainly if they were going to get back all that were missing, they'd have to comb every hollow and every bit of brush.

There was a rattling in the brush

ahead. and Star cut around it to turn back the fourteen cows that had started to run as soon as they smelled the horse. Billy Bowen looked them over. Only six, dust-covered and weary, were from the herd he was bossing. The other eight were fresh and fat from easy living on rich grass. They'd been lost from some other trail herd, but they'd go to make up for eight that he wouldn't get back. Billy hazed them down the draw into the open grass, and they went unwillingly along the stampede trail. But they calmed and entered the herd when they saw it. Billy went back to look for more strays.

Evening had fallen, and he was bringing three in, when he saw the chuck wagon ahead. One-eye Slaughter, burning with rage, sat on the seat of the rumbling cart with his bull whip in one hand and his Sharps in the other. One-eye was the lone member of the trail crew who had room for, or faith in, a rifle. His stream of sulphurous invective split the air.

"I saw 'em!" he sputtered when Billy Bowen rode past. "There was a full dozen of 'em hazin' some of our cows into the brush. Dang it! Wish I'd been alone with no fool chuck wagon to lose! I'd've gone after 'em!"

At dawn the next morning, and again the morning after, half the crew went out to round up strays while the rest rode herd on the cattle they were holding. That night Tommy Heermance saddled his horse and rode to where Billy Bowen was sitting.

"We got all except maybe a hundred. trail boss," he said. "Are we movin' tomorrow?"

"I'm goin' to Abilene with eighteen hundred cows," Billy told him. "We stay here until the rest's in."

It was two days before the trail herd moved.

III

Billy Bowen knew that the herd was lost. He had known it would be when they swung off the marked trail to take their chances on the wilderness. More than two weeks out from where they had left the trail, there was no sign of another one or of a human habitation. There was nothing at all save, on the far horizon, an occasional swirl of dust that might betray anything from wandering Indians to a herd of buffalo. Again riding Sugar, Billy swung up abreast of Tommy Heermance on the point. Tommy's face was sweat-stained and dry, and the cattle beside him were uneasily sniffing the air.

"What do you make of it?" demanded Billy.

"Don't like it," Tommy said shortly. "This place looks bad."

"Where do you think the trail lies?"

Tommy shrugged. "East an' north. We come west off it."

"Well, let's keep goin' the way we're headed," Billy said wearily.

"Mebbeso you're goin' to take each one of them cows up behind your saddle, an' carry 'em?" Tommy said meaningly. "I'd say we ain't goin' to hit water tonight."

"We'll have to keep movin'."

"That's all we can do."

Billy rode back along the plodding herd. They were walking with lowered heads, and a great cloud of dust rose from their hoofs to settle on horses, riders, and the skimpy brush that grew about them. They had bedded last night near a tiny stream, a discouraged trickle of water. Three hours along the trail this morning they had crossed a dry stream bed, and now it was almost bedding time again. Night closed down, and a three-quarters moon cast its elusive light over the desert upon which they were traveling. Billy saddled Dusty and put Sugar back into the remuda. Out of the darkness he heard One-eye Slaughter's imperative:

"Hey, somebody bring them fresh oxen back here."

One of the drag drivers, a sixteen-year-old boy named McHenry, cut out the lumbering oxen that always followed in the drag and drove them back to the chuck wagon. Billy frowned. One-eye's oxen were practically indestructible. So far One-eye had changed teams only to let the driven one rest. But no ox had been worn down before. Now the six that were released came questingly up, pawing the ground and snuffling for the water they had always found when the day ended. A placid gray ox began to bellow. Billy Bowen turned to the two youngsters on the drag.

"Keep 'em movin'," he ordered.

"Sure thing."

The herd wound through the night, a sinuous, weaving line that was one unit. But the unit was made up of individual beasts, and each one was already suffering the hellish tortures of thirst. The horses, tough little mustangs that were accustomed to staying away from waterholes, were not in bad shape. But, even when running wild in the thickets the cattle had watered at least once a day, and now they had endured a hot march. Riders began to go up and down the line of march, urging laggards on and cutting strays back in. Tommy Heermance, bestriding his third mount since they had left last night's bedding ground, came riding back.

"Let's go see One-eye."

His voice was a husky croak, like that of the frogs that frequent swamp edges in spring. Billy Bowen turned his horse, and they rode back to the chuck wagon.

"Got any coffee?" Tommy croaked.

"Yup."

One-eye passed down a huge pot full of cold coffee, and Tommy let the reins hang slackly while he drank. He gave the pot to Billy who drank deeply of the bitter black liquid and passed it back to One-eye.

"Chouse them oxen back come mornin', will ya?" One-eye said calmly.

"Sure."

The sun broke hotly over a bleak plain and climbed the far horizon like

a slowly ascending, fiery balloon. The herd was traveling very dully now, with heads hanging. Swollen tongues licked out, seeking the water that was not there. Shimmering heat waves rose from the barren earth towards the hot sky. Billy Bowen paused a second beside Al Zebaugh.

"The buzzards, if any such are fool enough to come into this God-forsaken stretch, are goin' to eat plenty if we don't hit water soon." Al commented.

The sun wandered with infinitesimal slowness around its appointed orbit, and a low, tortured moaning came from the thirst-maddened herd. They moved in a semi-delirium through the dust kicked up by their own plodding hoofs. Billy rode up to the point and saw the big blue steer leading the drive all by himself now. There were big gaps in the heard, and the youngsters on the drag worked frantically to keep the slower cattle moving. A gray cow slumped to her knees, and a rider lashed her mercilessly with the end of his rope. The cow got up to move on unwillingly.

"When I get to own the biggest ranch in Texas, and send my cows up the trail, you can boss the drive," Tommy declared. "You keep 'em goin' after they can't move no more."

"This herd's goin' to Abilene."

"They're sure enough headed towards it. But they ain't goin' to get too many hours closer to it, trail boss, without they wet their whistles."

As though the words were a signal, Big Blue started to run. At once his excitement spread to the rest of the herd. They moved forward in a great, surging mass. Billy Bowen felt a thrill course through his own body. Dusty, the horse he was riding, pranced happily. There was water ahead. Tommy Heermance laughed out loud.

"They'll get there! Let's go, trail boss!"

The two spurred ahead of the running herd—this was not a stampede. Harris and Al Zebaugh drew up even with them, and the horses galloped on. If there were cliffs or banks at whatever river lay ahead, the cattle would plunge right over them in their eagerness to drink. Somebody had to be there to head them back. But there were no cliffs.

There were only gently sloping banks leading down to a wide river, and both banks were green with grass. Tommy Heermance looked at the roily, sand-laden river and said more to himself than to anyone else:

"I never seen a purtier sight in my life."

They rested in the green grass and lush grazing on the banks of that river. Then they moved once more.

IV

Billy had long ago lost count of the days. He knew only that it was a very long while since they had left the river. Behind lay more rivers, and grass, and long hot days, and a grave on the prairie that was marked only by a big black hat. They had covered the brim of the hat with dirt to hold it down there. As Billy

Bowen rode along this morning he remembered that grave, and the McHenry youngster who lay within it.

The kid had been all right, riding back there on the drag. And he had done a lot towards keeping the herd moving properly. But he was only sixteen, therefore not to be contained by the long hours of drudgery while the trail herd moved towards Abilene.

For a long while the youngster had had his eye on one of the horses in the remuda, a vicious black gelding that had wandered out of a draw one morning and just joined the riding stock. Juan had taken him in and the next morning Mike Slattery, who had lost one of his own string, had roped him. The black had thrown Mike and after that none of the riders wanted him. You had to have a steady horse for riding herd, or at least one you could steady. The black was a natural outlaw. But any outlaw horse would be a challenge to a sixteen-year-old kid who knew himself to be a rider, a Texas rider. Young McHenry had roped the black one night, saddled him and been pitched off.

He had got up limping and laughing, and the next morning had taken his place on the drag. It had been three days later that he couldn't eat his chuck, and two hours after that he had grinned up at One-eye Slaughter, said, "I dang near rode him," and died.

They had taken off his boots and chaps, and seen the ugly gash in his leg where the black had trampled him. The hot red streaks running out from the gash extended the length of his leg. All they could do was bury young McHenry on the prairie and give him his big hat for a tombstone. Had he said something, he might have been helped. But then, he might not have. And, anyway, most cowboys preferred to die in the saddle.

There had been an aftermath. The next night Juan had roped the black, mounted him, ridden him to a standstill, and hazed him, a broken, spiritless thing, back into the remuda. The black was anybody's horse now, except Mike Slattery's. If Mike couldn't ride him wild, he wouldn't take him tame.

Billy Bowen let Star idle along while he kept pace with the grazing herd. There were more graves than anybody knew of marking the trail from Texas to Abilene, and there would be more. But down in Texas there were thousands of people who still had too many cattle and not enough money. People who loved the land they had

"Gimme a drink of water, pardner. That bronc was sure salty!"

settled and would never leave it. Texas was — where Texans wanted to stay after they died.

The Comanches, the droughts, the fierce sun, and the hundreds of miles of wilderness between themselves and their markets . . . Maybe some day those hundreds of miles would no longer be wilderness. Texans lived in a big State, and did things in a big way. It was not—Billy Bowen gasped at the idea—it was not beyond the realm of possibility that some day they'd have their own railroads, on which they could load their own cattle right in Texas. Then there'd be no more trail drives, no more of this blazing trail, no more lonely graves . . . Not that Texas, and Texans, were not big enough to cope with all such. And they'd whip it, just as they'd whip all the other problems that arose.

Tommy Heermance came riding back. Billy looked at him, and grinned. Tommy's clothing was in tatters. His beard swung in the wind. His hair was long and unkempt. Billy's grin widened. The whole crew might easily pass for scarecrows.

"Where do you think we are?" Tommy asked.

Billy shrugged. "On the trail to Abilene."

"You sure pin things down so a man knows exactly where he is, don't ya?"

"Well, I told you near's I can."

"The trail still has to lie east."

"Has it?"

"Oh, well." Tommy shrugged resignedly. "We'll get some place if we keep movin'. Say, trail boss, I'm kind of glad we didn't beef that big blue steer you was so set on bringin' along. He's been kind of a mascot for the crew, ain't he? Look at him go."

Once again Big Blue was out in front of the leaders, trailing along with his head up and ignoring the grass all about. Gaunt and lanky, with his hip bones protruding like knobs through his skinny frame, he stretched out his head and bellowed. Billy Bowen looked, and a flush of something that was almost gratitude permeated his whole being. The blue steer had been the leader in all the trouble. But, at the same time, he had led throughout the hard and dangerous times when there had been real danger of losing the entire herd.

The rest of the herd had quickened their pace, were no longer grazing but following the lead of Big Blue. Billy frowned.

"What do you make of it now?" he asked Tommy.

"Dunno, trail boss." Tommy shrugged. "The way some of the things been runnin' on this here drive I sort of expect to hit the Styx any day. But I'd say this'n's the Cimarron. We're about due for her."

"Have you ever crossed the Cimarron?"

"Yup, and she's the meanest, orneriest ditch of water what ever flowed out of a spring. I'd as soon tackle the Styx any old day at all."

The cattle broke into a soft run, and along with other riders Billy Bowen spurred ahead to be at the river when the herd arrived. He came to it, a broad and roiling flood that moved with deceptive gentleness down its

bed. The cattle spread out to drink, and the carcass of a buffalo floated down the river. Billy looked at the other side, and he saw the green grass there.

"Well?" he said to Tommy Heermance.

"The Cimarron, sure enough." Tommy looked at the river. "Yup, here she is. And there's enough cows in her quicksand to stock every ranch in Texas, enough men to herd 'em, and a good horse for every man."

"What do you think?"

"Ab'lene ain't on this side."

"Let's move."

Riders rode among the cattle, gathering them together and hazing them down to the river. The big blue steer struck out, and turned as though to come back. Al Zebaugh flicked him on the end of the nose. Big Blue turned, struck out towards the opposite bank, and a dozen cows followed him. A few more started, and then the whole herd was swimming the Cimarron. A floating cottonwood tree came almost idly past, and the blue steer turned in sudden panic.

The cow directly behind him turned, swimming back into the face of the one following her. A breeze rippled the water, casting a muddy wave into the faces of the swimming herd. A brindle steer tried to mount the back of another, and a low muttering swept through the herd. As though it had been planned, they started to swim around and around in the middle of the river.

Billy rode in, swimming his horse directly to the center of the mill. lashing with his rope and striking and kicking as he sought to turn the cattle. And, now that he was in it, the Cimarron showed its true self. On top it was a gentle, placid-looking thing with no evil intents. But sand had surged up from the bottom, making the water a thick, soupy mass. Vicious undercurrents surged through it, whirling the sand downstream and churning up more.

Then Billy Bowen came to Big Blue. Mercilessly he lashed with his rope, striking the gaunt beast about the head and face while it blinked back at him. Another wind rippled the water, sending waves over the tangled herd. A cow broke away, started swimming for the other shore. Half a dozen more followed her, and Billy felt the angry pull of a current that almost dragged his horse under. He saw a cow go down, and stay there.

Then, slowly, the snarled herd straightened out. In little groups, urged on by the riders, they started for the other bank. Larger groups broke out to follow, and the first cattle to start heaved themselves humpily over the far bank. They started cropping the green grass there. Billy Bowen swam his horse behind a group of eight stragglers that were swimming strongly. He saw riders climb out on the opposite bank, and the cows he hazed finally reached safety.

When Billy rode up the far bank half a dozen riders were grouped about a riderless horse that stood with trailing reins before him. The animal belonged to Al Zebaugh.

"Al allus would do to ride the river with," Tommy Heermance said softly.

He and Billy Bowen swung to look at the swirling Cimarron that, with this crossing, had claimed another victim.

V

Day by day the trail herd grazed on, always heading north and a little bit east and bedding where night found them. They crossed the Arkansas and went into the flat country beyond it. The sun broiled them and the wind raged against them. Sudden thunderstorms struck without warning, and blue lightning that flashed along the ground revealed the dark shapes of the bedded cattle in ceric relief while all the riders joined to keep them from stampeding. And always Billy Bowen watched while he joined the rest in doing whatever had to be done. This was not just another trail herd. It was part of Texas, an empire on the move.

A great State was bursting at the seams with its own wealth, and a growing nation was waiting for it. Well, the nation could have it. Texas would bring it to them. And, down along the wild river beds where they had built their ranches, men were waiting for the money that would be theirs when the herd was sold. Texas would create more wealth when it got that money, and the rest of the nation needn't worry. There would be enough for all.

Billy Bowen was riding Sugar again, on the point with Tommy Heermance, when the horse suddenly pricked up his ears and blew through his nostrils. Billy looked in the direction that the horse was looking, and he saw the blue smoke that rose from the prairie. Tommy reined in beside him, and together they studied the smoke.

"What do you make of it?" Billy asked quietly.

Tommy Heermance's horse danced nervously, and Tommy spat between his mount's ears into the grass. There had been signs of other men; horse tracks, at various places. Once there had been a wheel rut, and Billy had looked down it the while he pondered what might lie at the end of the lonely trail made by a single passing wagon. Probably there'd be only one end out here where the Indians had not been tamed and a wagoneer was so foolhardy as to travel alone. There had also been signs of what might have been people, but only a fool would ride off to see what made a puff of dust in the distance. If anybody was out there they could always come in to the herd. This was the first positive indication that some living person was at the source of the sign they saw. People did not just go away and leave fires burning. Again Tommy spat accurately into the grass.

"Some of those fool hoemen are over there," he said deliberately.

"Looks that way to me, too. Let's go over."

They swung the herd and made towards the smoke, while the blue steer and the grizzled old cow walked eagerly beside them. The only smoke

they had smelled was that which arose from One-eye Slaughter's buffalo-chip fire, and possibly this amazing new source was worth investigating. The blue steer shook his long horns and rumbled deep in his throat. With the cow, he dropped back into the herd as Billy Bowen and Tommy Heermance spurred ahead.

They could see buildings now, square, flat sod houses from which smoke was coming. There were five separate plots of ground, marked off by a furrow plowed around each. Eight ponderous work horses grazed near the buildings, and they swung up their heads to look. A ragged boy about ten years old ran from one of the sod houses, and a woman came to drag him, squalling, back in. Two bearded men with hostility in their eyes and rifles in their hands stepped around the last house.

"Git your herd back to Texas!" one of the men said harshly.

Across the space that separated them Billy Bowen felt Tommy Heermance stiffen. Black anger shot from his eyes. His right hand strayed towards his gun. One of the farmers drew the hammer of his rifle back. Tommy's hand came reluctantly away from his gun.

"We come a right smart hop from Texas," Billy said easily. "Should we ought to go back today?"

"We don't want your blasted cows up here, bringin' Spanish fever to ours. Git goin', an' start now!"

Billy raised his eyes to where eight dairy cattle and a dozen steers chewed lazy cuds. He saw Tommy Heermance looking too, and a faint amusement came to dwell with the anger in Tommy's eyes.

"How do you keep count of so gol' darn many cows?" inquired Tommy.

In a sudden burst of fury the other granger raised his rifle. "Git goin' an' start now!" he snarled. "We mean business! I count to ten an' start shootin'! One . . . two . . ."

Billy and Tommy wheeled their horses, and trotted back to where the rest of the trail crew had stopped the herd. Big Blue raised his head to glower. Slinger Harris came out to meet the two men.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"There's some of those fool hoemen over there" — Tommy Heermance's face was red with rage—"who say we ain't goin' through!"

"They do, huh!" Slinger exploded. "If the fool hoemen are here, Ab'lene ain't far! I ain't gettin' this close to a drink of whiskey an' stoppin' for anybody!"

"They've got rifles," reminded Billy.

"So's One-eye," Slinger retorted. "Besides I think they're bluffin'. I'll go see."

Billy Bowen looked meditatively at the ground. The herd must get to Abilene, but as many riders as possible must get back to Texas.

"We can swing around 'em," he suggested.

"An' stay lost for the rest of the season?" Slinger inquired. "Nope. There has to be a wagon track goin' from them buildin's to Ab'lene. I'm ridin' over."

Billy shrugged. "All right."

Slinger Harris roped the black

gelding that had killed the McHenry youngster, bridled and saddled, and mounted him. He swung off towards the sod buildings. Billy Bowen, watching him go, sighed. It would be possible to go around the settlers' homes, but sooner or later they'd run up against more settlers. The issue might just as well be settled now.

Slinger was within a hundred yards of the sod buildings when a rifle blasted. The black horse thudded down.

Billy Bowen leaped to his saddle, and without looking around he knew that every other trail crewman had mounted. Nobody killed a member of a trail crew, not as long as the rest had guns that would shoot. For a split second Billy remained where he was. Then he reined his horse in instead of spurring him forward.

The black gelding did not move but Slinger arose, dusted himself off and started hobbling back towards the trail herd. Billy rode out to meet him. He swung Slinger up behind his own saddle.

"They said leave the saddle and bridle!" Slinger's voice trembled with rage. "They said they'd take it in! Let me have your horse, Billy! I'll ride up there and show them coyote baits they can't do this to me!"

"Don't go off half-cocked," Billy counseled. "They've got rifles."

"I don't give three toots on a willow whistle if they got cannons!" snarled Slinger. "They shot my horse!"

"We still ain't goin' off half-cocked. Let's think a bit."

Billy dismounted and sat on the ground, while the angry trail crew crowded around him. One-eye Slaughter, dismounted from his wagon, raised his long rifle and tentatively sighted it.

"I could reach 'em if I was a little closer," he muttered.

"So could they reach you," Billy pointed out.

"You aim to leave 'em get away with killin' a hoss?" demanded One-eye.

"Nope. Let's think a bit."

Big Blue walked officiously over towards an especially green bunch of grass. He butted out of his way a cow that would have shared it with him, and started to eat. Billy Bowen slapped his thigh.

"By gosh!" he chortled. "I bet they haven't got eighteen hundred rounds for them rifles of theirs!"

"What do you mean?" Slinger Harris inquired.

"Stampede the herd through 'em!"

Tommy Heermance chuckled. One-eye grinned. The other riders ran towards their mounts.

"Suppose," Tommy Heermance said meaningly, "just suppose that we get near 'em and they sort of take a few shots at us?"

"You've got a gun."

"That's all I wanted to know," Tommy said happily.

He mounted, and the riders on both sides of the herd pointed it towards the sod buildings. Billy fired his gun. Slinger Harris, a jubilant grin on his face, yelled like a Comanche. The blue steer pawed the ground, bellowed indignantly and started to run. The rest of the herd streamed out behind him. Billy Bowen sat his horse and watched them go, and the amusement

in his eyes was tempered by something else. It was a long trail from Texas to Abilene, but nobody had a right to stop the herds coming up that trail. Nobody was big enough to stop them. Billy galloped his horse along the flank of the herd, and at first he didn't see the half dozen riders who appeared at the head of the scarcely started stampede.

They beat at the rushing herd with their hats, shot their guns, and turned the surging stream of cattle. The big blue steer headed the forming mill, and reared to hump his head and shoulders over the gaunt rump of another steer. Billy, gun in hand, rode furiously forward to meet the leader of the riders who had halted the stampede.

"What—" he started.

"Keep your shirt on, bub," the rider, a hard-bitten man in his early thirties, said coolly. "We know all about it."

"Who are you?"

"The name is Knowles," the rider said, still coolly. "Harry Knowles. I'm a buyer from Abilene, and these are some of my boys. We heard you were comin' and knew you were lost because a rider come up the trail without findin' you. We thought, seein' as too many herds haven't come into Abilene lately, we'd drift down this way and find out about things. Just so happened we dropped into these granger houses right after they shot your man's horse. They ain't so onreasonable if you just talk to 'em right."

"They still shot one of our horses!"

"I guess that . . . Here they come!"

Seven men from the granger settlement were striding over the prairie. Theirs was a loose-legged walk, a farmer's walk, and not the painful stride of the cowboy who, even if he had to go only a hundred yards, was lost without his horse.

"They ain't too onreasonable if you talk right," Knowles repeated, "and they're afraid of Spanish fever. We told 'em to come in to Abilene with us, and see how you riders from Texas spend money. We also told 'em you'd bed your herd near their claims tonight. Buffalo chips ain't plentiful around here, but after a herd of cows like this has bedded on land, a man can pick up enough good burnin' fuel to last him through the winter."

"They shot one of our horses an' they got to settle for it!" Billy Bowen said grimly.

Just then Big Blue gave a grunt, pawed the earth with his front hoof, and charged the advancing grangers. A man on foot was only a strange animal to the blue steer, something to be fought and driven back, or killed if it wouldn't run. The seven nesters stood for a second, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Then they scattered like a covey of gunned quail, and ran.

The big blue steer stopped to paw the earth, while he attempted to de-

cide just which one to chase. Slinger Harris, falling from his saddle, rolled on the ground while he gave way to helpless laughter. Tommy Heermance reined in beside Billy Bowen, and for the first time in his life held on to the saddlehorn. He wiped from his eyes the tears that laughter had put there.

"Shucks!" he choked. "Look at 'em go!"

"It sort of looks as though you've collected for your horse," said Knowles with a grin. "How many cows you got in this herd?"

"I can sell you just seventeen hundred and ninety-nine," Billy Bowen answered quickly.

Tommy glanced at him. "You was the trail boss so set on gettin' eighteen hundred steers up to Ab'lene," he drawled.

"Eighteen hundred are goin' to Abilene," Billy Bowen affirmed, "but only seventeen hundred and ninety-nine's stayin' there. That Big Blue is prob'ly the cussedest cow ever born in Texas but he's goin' back with us. I'll pay little Al Murchison for him myself. We'll be needin' that ornery old outlaw—to lead the other herds we'll be trailin' up from Texas!"

THE END

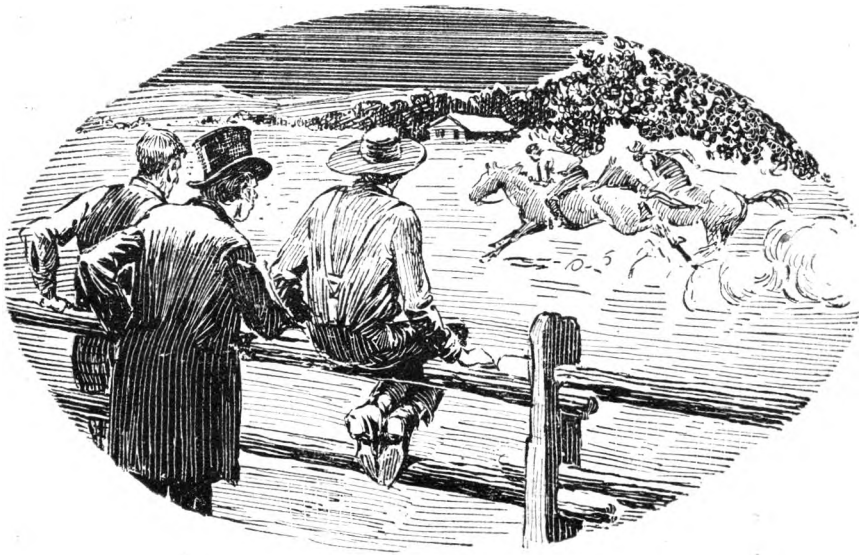
EARMARKS

The necessity for some means of marking calves prior to branding has led to many inventions. The established method of cutting the ears of young calves, has never been satisfactory. Every cattleman prefers to see his animals unmutilated, but since a "slick ear" that is separated from its mother at roundup time is very likely to get some other man's brand run on it, earmarking of some sort has been the most practical method of protecting one's property.

This method, however, could not be used with horses, as nothing detracts from the appearance of a horse so much as to have its ears disfigured. There was a time when earmarking of horses was practised by some Western stockmen, but it was never popular.

Metal tags wired into the ear of an animal were never considered dependable, as they could be easily torn loose. Branding while the colt was very young was unsatisfactory because, as the colt grew, the brand grew with it. Now comes a discovery that promises to solve the problem—the use of a chemical that will cause the hair to turn white temporarily. It may be applied with a rag to the jaw or neck of the animal without causing discomfort and will last for several months, but will finally disappear.

The use of this modern method of marking calves and colts may bring about the reinstatement of the small leather pockets, once standard equipment on all range saddles, since no cowboy will consent to carrying a bottle of acid in his chaps pockets.—G. C. F.



CRAZY OVER QUARTER HORSES

By Nat W. McKelvey

Next time you want a run for your money, try a small bet on a "cold deck"

To select judges for a horse race a group of rough-clad "sports" gathered one bright day in 1836 in the heart of Kentucky's Blue Grass country. Naturally, I was not among them. But I have witnessed enough informal Quarter Horse races to visualize the scene. It is worth the effort, for today this oldest American sport is once again sweeping the nation.

The celebrated star, amiable Bing Crosby, who endured a king-sized ribbing before quitting Thoroughbreds, has joined the ranks of short-race fans. At Tucson, Arizona, Quarter Horse capital of the world, he has purchased fourteen registered Quarter Horse colts.

Also at Tucson, R.K.O. cameramen shot thousands of feet of film, recording for posterity the thrills of Quarter Racing as viewed every Sun-

day by an enthusiastic gathering of fans at Rillito Track.

Rillito fans would have cherished that ancient Kentucky contest. Typically, it lay between Grapevine, a sorrel that had plowed twenty-five acres of corn that season, and Popcorn, a frisky bay. At following the furrows, Popcorn, too, boasted an impressive record.

Assorted wrangling accompanied the picking of judges. The final panel included one fellow "so cross-eyed he could look at his own head" and another noted for his stubbornness in sticking to a friend. Presumably, the third arbiter must have been a kind of compromise between these two.

Small bets were laid, and after many false starts, during which each rider tried to wear down the other man's horse, the race was run. Grapevine, proving the superiority of training on corn, waltzed in to win. This should have ended the affair. But dissatisfied wagerers fell to settling differences with fists and knives. Persuaded at knife point, one fellow amiably accepted his winnings in the form of a note.

"Due Dempsey," this document declared, "the just and lawful sum of ten dollars . . . payable on the 26th day of December, 1836 or 1837, or any time after that I am able to discharge the same. . . ."

That was Quarter Racing a century ago. Today, from Florida to Washington, to the annoyance of Thoroughbred fanciers, wildly cheering throngs are wagering their lunch money on the barrel-chested Short Horse. But modern Quarter Racing is carefully regulated and formalized, and nowadays entries are not penalized by enforced sessions at the plow.

Quarter Horses are consistently beating Thoroughbreds at the quarter-mile. This, of course, is a natural source of irritation to racing men who place a premium on the label, "bred in old Kain-tucky." By winning the 1946 world's championship quarter in 22.9 seconds, Shue Fly, renowned registered Quarter Horse, bettered the records of such Thoroughbreds as Noo Music, Gallant Maid, and Dolly Dimples.

Obviously, Quarter Racing is a contest between horses running a quarter mile. In Colonial times, around 1600, periwigged sportsmen of the Carolinas and Virginia gathered in village streets to race their saddle ponies. They chose the streets because the rigors of chopping lengthy tracks from the primeval coastal forests did not appeal to them.

However, street racing had one immediate drawback. Races could scarcely be longer than the street, in most cases not more than a quarter mile. So for a time, while pedestrians fled in terror and wild-eyed horsemen destroyed private property, the Colonials had their little fun. But soon public indignation forced them to restore the safety of public streets. So the sporting crowd took to the woods where they exerted their servants to

the extent of constructing quarter-mile-long tracks for the purpose of racing.

To these clearings thronged a motley group of "sports": gentlemen with their Negro slaves; rough-shod wilderness dwellers in buckskin; Indians; Hollanders, and now and then a wagering Puritan. These were exciting contests, many of them ending in challenges to settle differences on a field of honor. Others wound up in Colonial courts where dignified magistrates had to rule whether such-and-such a horse won its race by a nose or whether the competition came in first by an eyelash.

In the beginning, the Quarter Horse did not exist as a breed. He sprang from a crossing of Arabian stallions on Chickasaw mares. Colonials obtained these sturdy, hardened mares from the Indians, who got them from Florida Spaniards. To the everlasting confusion of Thoroughbred horse fanciers, who will deny this *in toto*, the Quarter Horse and the American Thoroughbred began from the same basic breeding.

In our murky yesterdays, a Quarter Horse was simply any horse from this fundamental cross that could excel at running the quarter mile. Thus Thoroughbreds were—and are today—sometimes Quarter Running Horses. Meanwhile, horsemen gradually developed the true Quarter Horse by the breeding of quarter-mile racers to quarter-mile racers.

A distinct type, the Quarter Horse stands fourteen to sixteen hands, weighs from 900 to 1,100 pounds. His short, strong back, topping a long body, slopes to heavily muscled shoulders and a deep, wide chest. His sturdy legs and powerful rounding hindquarters give him a look of durability that is usually lacking in the streamlined Thoroughbred.

At present, many Thoroughbreds shine at the 440-yard distance. Actually, they are not Quarter Horses but Quarter Running Horses. By stepping a quarter at Mexico City in 20 4/5ths seconds, Big Racket, a Thoroughbred chestnut mare, currently holds some kind of world's record. But Big Racket is not a Quarter Horse.

To dispel some of the fog surrounding Quarter Horses and Quarter Running Horses, breeders, a few years ago, founded the American Quarter Horse Association. Headquartered at Eagle Pass, Texas, this organization preserves true Quarter Horse blood lines by registering qualified horses in its stud book. No Thoroughbred may enter.

In 1944, at Tucson, sportsmen created the American Quarter Racing Association. Qualification for registry by this group is based on performance without regard for color, sex, age, or breed. Thus a registered Quarter Running Horse may be a Thoroughbred, any other recognized breed, no breed at all, or a registered Quarter Horse.

It is my belief that the Quarter Horse is the best horse in the world. Certainly, he is the outstanding working race horse. In the cow country, you may see him performing expertly as a cutting horse, roping horse, or saddle horse. You may see him as the cowboy's favorite mount in the world's championship Madison Square Garden rodeo. He makes a capable partner for trick riders and a top-notch horse for polo. Amazingly, he is of such even temper that he is often used—and, unfortunately, sometimes abused—as a dude horse by tenderfeet from the populous, and relatively horseless, East.

During the winning of the West, the Quarter Horse gained wide popularity in his twin role of work animal and race horse. He had the stout build necessary for popping cattle out of dense brush and the bottom and speed to run them down for roping.

Even so, I know one Thoroughbred lover who swears: (1) that there is no such animal as a Quarter Horse; (2) that if there were, his good qualities would trace to Thoroughbred blood. But among the nation's top hundred Quarter Running Horses, only fourteen percent are Thoroughbred. Any horse with more than half Thoroughbred blood in his pedigree is automatically excluded from the Quarter Horse register.

When costs are considered, the cold-blooded Quarter Horse, also dubbed a "cold deck," has it over the Thoroughbred like a horse blanket. To ready a Quarter Horse for a race, you need no expensive stables, trainers, exercise boys, handlers and assorted "yes men." By riding him for pleasure, you give the Quarter Horse regular workouts. Or you can make him earn his keep and attain first-class racing condition, too, by working him on your ranch.

If you yearn to own a registered Quarter Horse, you may, in the markets of the West, take your pick of acceptably good ones for as little as $100. For the hottest thing on the tracks you will seldom pay more than $10,000. Contrast this with $300,000 paid for the Thoroughbred champion, Nearco.

But I hasten to confess that at least two Quarter Horses have sold for a price in excess of $10,000. Sam Watkins, famous Oklahoma sire, fetched $35,000 in a Mexico City sale. At Fort Worth, Buckskin Joe, purchased as a colt for $75, as an adult lined his owner's purse with $25,000. Which merely proves what an exceptional investment the "stout breed" can be.

Usually, you do not have to sport a Bradstreet rating to own a Quarter Horse champion. Even men of such modest means as a cowboy of Tucson have managed to scrape up enough money to buy Short Horse champions.

Even in old age, Quarter Running Horses perform well. At twenty-two, Black Beauty wins frequently. And Speedy, a champion whose blood traces partially to Up-

set, only horse in the world ever to beat Man O' War, had a twenty-three-year-old racing mother.

In the past, as Quarter Racing spread from coastal colonies to Kentucky and the western frontier, city slickers tried ringing unrecognized Thoroughbreds into quarter-mile contests.

Of this practice, Melville Haskell, the secretary of the American Quarter Racing Association, succinctly says:

"Occasionally, a smart horseman would bring a fast sprinting Thoroughbred from the eastern tracks to try and pick up some easy money. Usually he learned an expensive lesson when he hooked one of the low-geared wonders at his own game. . . ."

Today, thanks to regulation by Haskell's association, such ringing has been eliminated. Through registration, the life history of each horse is known.

For racing, Quarter Horses are graded according to speed into five classes. If a horse can run a quarter-mile in 23.4 seconds or better, he earns the title, "Celebrated American Quarter Running Horse." Among the many thousands of registered living Quarter Horses, only a scant hundred carry this proud designation.

When a Quarter Horse runs 440 yards in 22.6 seconds as did Shue Fly or 22.7 as did Queeny, that's flying! Ask the Thoroughbred boys under what conditions Big Racket set her sensational mark of 20 4/5ths. If urged, they will confess that she had a running start of sixty feet or more before timers' watchers started ticking.

The Quarter Horse has no such advantage. He springs away flat-footed, time being taken from the instant the starting gates flash open. On that basis—and I duck the flying horseshoes while claiming it—the Quarter Horse is a better animal.

Perhaps Quarter Racing bears the same relation to Thoroughbred racing as sable-dyed coney to ermine. If so, I am for it. After all, more customers can afford to invest in coney.

For work and for sport, at a reasonable out-of-pocket investment, you will travel far without finding a bangtail to equal the democratic cold deck. Somehow, I'll always be crazy over Quarter Horses.

THE END

COW COUNTRY COMPLIMENT

The highest of praise
Of the true Western brand.
Is to tell a young cowboy
He's makin' a hand!

S. Omar Barker

ALIAS JACKSON J. JACKSON

The 7 Bar 7's tophand didn't carry a gun, but was that any reason to let himself be pushed around by an hombre half his size?

By Hapsburg Liebe

At the time it happened I was foreman on Hank Barlow's 7-7, a Hereford outfit that occupied a lot of territory. Not as big as that tremendous kingdom of a ranch that uses several counties in south Texas, of course, but plenty big just the same. Figuring at my desk in a front corner of the bunkhouse that evening, I was, when the first of the pair of strangers arrived on the spread.

The light of the oil lamps showed me that he was young and tall, broad of shoulder, blond, and dressed in range clothes dusty from long riding. But the most noticeable thing about him—except for the fact that he carried no six-shooter—was his grin. It was friendly, and it stretched from here to yonder.

"Lookin' for a cowpoke job, boss," he drawled.

"You've got it," I said. We were always in need of riders. "No gun.

eh? Suppose you met up with a lobo on the range?"

His grin shortened a little and his blue eyes twinkled oddly. "Got a good pair o' hands here," he said, and showed them to me. I didn't tell him we were thinking of different kinds of wolves. "As for a name," he said, "you can put me down as Jackson J. Jackson."

"What's the middle J for?"

"Jack," he answered, eyes twinkling.

A man scouting from the law was no nine-day wonder to us. There was a heap of likable daredevil humor in that grinning, and gunless, range rider; the name he'd turned in was a sample of it. I felt clean to my bones that he wasn't any criminal.

Jackson J. Jackson won the rest of the crew to him easily. He laughed a lot, and you could hear that laugh nearly a mile away, wind right. And when he sang, as he did now and then, you could hear that even farther. In the matter of range work, no other 7 Bar 7 cowboy topped him.

Then his nemesis, if that's what you'd call it, bobbed up.

His name was Pinkney Sneed, and he was a skinny, hatchet-faced little devil, not far past twenty. He wore shabby clothes and carried an old "owlhead" .38 in a holster too deep for such a gun. The dish-faced pinto he rode was so ornery and mean that nobody else would have had it as a gift.

Giving Sneed a handy-man job around 7-7 headquarters seemed better than having him ride grub line on us indefinitely. At supper in the long bunkhouse lean-to that evening, he ate like a starving dog. So far as we'd seen, he hadn't even noticed Jackson, and Jackson hadn't shown the least interest in him.

But as we rose from the table Pinkney Sneed peered across at the big blond cowboy and said boldly: "Like to have me a five spot to start up a stud game tonight, amigo, and my book says you'd better do somethin' about it."

Jackson looked a bit sick. From one of his pockets he drew three crumpled dollar bills, and gave them to Sneed. "Here's all I got, Pink."

"Five, not three!" Sneed said hotly.

Jackson whitened slightly under his bronze, and turned to me. "Boss, could you advance me a couple dollars?"

"Sure," I said, and beckoned to Pink. "Come with me, kid."

Pink followed to the desk in a front bunkhouse corner.

"Wanted a word with you, kid," I said, and gave him the money. "You and Jackson Jack Jackson have met before, and there's something between you, which is no business of mine. But let me tell you this: If you push Jack too far, you'll be sorry!"

The little devil laughed in my face. "Yeah?" he hooted. "It don't say so in my book. My book says—"

What sort of locoed stuff was that about a "book"? Pink had mentioned it before. I put the question into words, and he said:

"Jest a figger of speech. Habit, like." He dropped a hand to the butt of his "owlhead," and kept going:

"Look, boss. I ain't afraid o' Jackson, as he calls hisself. I ain't afraid o' anybody here. Do you git that?"

I was mad enough to sizzle. "Kid, you saddle that dish-faced monstrosity of a pinto, and ride!" I told him.

"Please don't fire Pink, boss," said the voice of Jackson; I hadn't seen or heard him walking up. "Please don't."

You just couldn't beat that. Well . . . I didn't fire Pink.

Sneed tried to start a card game in the bunkhouse that night, and sulked because nobody would play with him. The boys had spotted him for exactly what he was, and from that time on they left him strictly alone.

Some of us expected that he would take it out on Jackson, and in this we were correct. He played tricks, some of them brutal, at Jackson's expense. As time passed he kept hounding the big cowboy for money and always got it.

I wanted to ask the new rider what it was that Sneed had on him. But I held off. You just didn't do a thing like that. If Jackson had wanted me to know, he'd have told me.

He had become gloomy and silent. No more did the 7 Bar 7 range hear his big laugh, and he never sang, though he worked harder than ever.

Soon after Pink had played three of his mean snide tricks—salt instead of sugar in Jackson's coffee, gunpowder in Jack's cigarette tobacco, a spiny prickly-pear leaf in his bunk—I gave Pink a warning that should have jarred him a little.

"You've got to be a heap worse than a nuisance, kid," I told him. "All the boys like Jack, and they're plenty mad on account of the way you've treated him. Wouldn't surprise me if something happened to you one of these dark nights. Why can't you be at least half as decent as a rattlesnake or a buzzard?"

Pink Sneed laughed and put his hand on his gun. "I figger, boss, I can take care o' myself. My book says I can, anyhow. Say, I know why you don't fire me. You know danged well I'd take Jackson J. Jackson with me, that's why. Ain't I right?"

Of course he was right. Again he laughed at me. You've heard of folks being drunk with power? Pink was. Then all at once he went sober and his rat eyes slitted.

"I need dinero, boss. You gimme a five spot," he said, bolder than any brass, "and I'll tell you what I've got on Jackson Jack Jackson. Huh?"

"Wouldn't give you a lone centavo," I threw into his teeth. "Anyway, I don't want to know!"

He was sure plenty mad at that. Then his rat eyes widened.

"I'm goin' to tell you anyhow," he said spitefully. "Here's the way of it. Jack shot my oldest brother and skipped out, with me on his trail, and everywhere he'd go I'd foller him and make him pay to keep me from turnin' him in to the law. See, don't you?"

"Not altogether," I told him. "Jackson is no killer, and if he shot anybody, my bet is that it was in self-defense. Another thing I'd bet on is, the reason Jack doesn't carry a six-shooter is because of the temptation to shoot you. He's too good in his

heart to want to kill a crazy-fool kid."

"No," Pink contradicted, "that ain't the way it was. I made him sell the gun and gimme the dinero."

Worse and worse. Sneed almost got the boot now, regardless.

"With Jackson working for you this way," I said, after a minute, "looks like you'd wear decent clothes and tote a man-sized gun. Or do you lose the money gambling on those sneak trips you make to town at night?"

That was a first-rate guess. Pink's glowering face told me I had figured it right.

Hank Barlow, owner of the 7-7, was a good man and a big man. When he came back—he'd been gone close to a month on a cow-buying trip into the Big Bend country — I would put this case before him and see if he couldn't do something that would save the best cowboy on his range.

But the case settled itself early in the evening of that same day.

It was the fourteenth of the month. The 7 Bar 7 paid its crew on the fifteenth. I finished the payroll sheets just after sunset and stepped outside to see a dozen or more of the boys, sweat-stained and dusty, riding in to the horse corrals. Among them was Jackson J. Jackson, looking gloomier than ever.

Pink Sneed had already looked after his dish-faced pinto. As the big, blond cowboy dismounted, Pink walked up to him and said cockily: "Tomorrow's pay day here, as mebbe you've heard. You still got three dollars comin'. You can keep twenty cents for cigarette tobacco, which leaves me two-eighty ezzactly. My book says—"

He broke off there because he had noticed Jack straightening as though he'd just been hit by a bullet. With his blue eyes flashing queerly, Jack was staring over the kid's head; he had seen something that the rest of us, watching the pair, had not seen. I jerked halfway around. Three strangers had drawn rein few rods away.

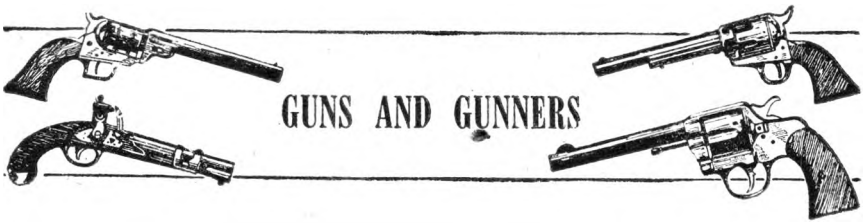
"Boys," Jackson said to the other riders, in a voice too low for the newcomers to hear, "cluster around them three jiggers there and don't let 'em make a move or speak a word until I finish a sweet little job I got to do here."

The boys asked no questions but ran at once to surround the strangers. Then Jackson began a job that I was sure glad to see him do.

He snatched Pink Sneed's owlhead and tossed it to me, picked Pink off the ground, peeled his britches off clean to his underwear, and sat down on a convenient empty box with the little devil facing downward across his knees. Talk about spankings! We'd never seen a real spanking before! Jackson's big hand rose and fell with the regularity of a steam piston. Pink bellered like a calf. After the bellering had become only a whine. Jack flung him aside as though he was a rag doll and ran toward the three strangers.

The other boys had disarmed the trio, pulled them off their horses and formed a ring around them. Jackson

(Continued on page 161)



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

ONE of the fine things about being an American is the privilege of griping whenever the spirit moves. This is our department for gunbugs. And now for a gripe or two of my own.

Since my return to America from my military junket overseas, the letters have been pouring in asking for information. We try to give that, but some things are impossible. Here's a letter from a lad in Oklahoma, in this last mail, and quite a common type. Read it—read my gripe, and perhaps it will help you.

"What gun should I get," he writes, "for deer and antelope in Wyoming?"

In the first place, there are dozens of standard calibers that would be satisfactory. But the most important is that the writer forgot to suggest his own preference. There are bolt actions, semi-automatics, pump guns, and lever-action types. Some fellows, for instance, swear by the lever actions, and want none of the bolt guns. Should I recommend a bolt gun, I have wasted your time and mine—but what is most important, I haven't helped you.

Some guns make fine saddle guns, others are very clumsy for a mounted man. Some guns are fine for short-range positive kills, but their bullets lose velocity, power and accuracy at the longer ranges. It's like asking a mail order house to send you a suit without mentioning the size, style, color, and other important details.

Gripe Number Two. A chap in Texas writes: "I have a German rifle. It has marks that look funny, and 'St.M.G.' What ammunition can I shoot in it?"

The marks that look funny are probably proof marks. The letters stand for *Stahl mantel geschosse*—meaning that it was proof tested with a steel-jacketed bullet. How can I tell what caliber it is? There are hundreds of German cartridges, and I don't even know whether the gun is a military or sporting type, the kind of action, maker's identification, or bore and chamber data. No one could identify the caliber on such information.

Gripe Number Three. From a lad in Louisiana comes the "simple" request: "Please send me information on how to blue a gun."

A couple of years or so ago, we covered this subject here, but it took two full departments to give the basic data. Obviously it couldn't be done in a letter. There are many books on gunsmithing, and most of them are available in larger public libraries. You'll find chapters of information on blueing and its preparation.

Perhaps it is beside the point, but you'd be surprised to see how many of the boys forget to put their address on a letter. I have to raid the waste-basket to find the envelope the letter arrived in, and sometimes that, too, is devoid of a return address.

Over and over again I get requests for ammunition to fit Japanese military rifles. These are in two calibers —the 6.5 mm., or .25 caliber, and the 7 mm., or .30 caliber. Neither cartridge has ever been made in America. No American cartridge will fit either rifle. They cannot be rebored and rerifled for American ammunition as the cost would be far more than the value of the rifle. If you have such a gun, it is a souvenir only.

"Where can I get ammunition for . . ." is another old refrain. I know that things have been tight since the war ended, but the demand has been ten times normal. Ammunition is slowly becoming easier to get. See your sporting goods dealer. If he hasn't what you want in stock, have him order it for you. You'll get it as soon as he can get his stock.

Perhaps these gripes will help you. There is just one more, and whenever one of these letters comes in, my hair stands on end. These are from the boys who have an unidentified gun and try every cartridge they can find to get one which will fit. If they can close the action they will try to fire it. Fortunately, cartridges do not compress easily, so they do not always make them fire.

One fellow wrote that he tried to get a .30-06 cartridge in his 7.7 mm. Jap rifle. It wouldn't quite make it. Then he tried a .30-40 Krag cartridge. It went in, but the bolt wouldn't close over the large rim. He worked so hard that he pushed the bullet down inside of the case mouth.

Another chap has a .44-40 revolver and shoots .30-40 ammunition in it. The cases split, gas spits in his face, the barrel leads badly. The bullet just skids through the barrel, because it's too small.

Another fellow has a German Three barrel gun. The rifle barrel is for the German 8x57JR—a rimmed cartridge similar in size to the .303 British, but not identical. He squeezed a short .38-40 into the chamber and wants to know if it would be safe to shoot. He'd have to squeeze that .40 caliber slug down to .31 caliber to get it out of the barrel—it would just lodge in the front of the chamber and the gun would blow up.

If you insist on shooting your gun, and the caliber is not clearly marked on it, have some competent gunsmith make a sulphur cast of the chamber which may make it easier for him to identify the gun.

As a last warning, remember this—you endanger your life whenever you try to make something fit and fire in a gun for which it is not intended.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

DON'T look now, but the age of airborne prospecting may be just around the corner. Electronics and the airplane have been combined to produce a remarkable and workable method of geophysical prospecting by air.

Ever since World War I planes have been increasingly used by prospectors and mining men as a means of rapid transportation for supplies and personnel into hard-to-reach country. In North America this has been particularly noticeable in the widespread mining regions of Alaska and northern Canada.

By the same token, geophysical prospecting, the science of obtaining amazingly accurate ground surveys of certain types of sub-surface mineral formations—oil and large bodies of iron ore for instance—has been making rapid strides during recent years.

But airborne prospecting which records the delicate sub-surface readings by a plane in flight is distinctly new. It represents one of the greatest advances in the growing field of geophysics. Basic mineral formations underlying vast stretches of wilderness country may, by this method, in certain instances, be foretold, mapped and recorded by a specially equipped plane flying over the area on regularly plotted flights.

Airborne prospecting is not likely to supplant the pick-and-shovel prospector. At least not for some time to come. This new type of prospecting may, however, do much in the way of making preliminary mineral surveys of unprospected country.

Without going into technical details, the story is simply this: The device now adapted to the checking of mineral formations from the air—the airborne magnetometer—was originally designed as a military device for locating submarines by planes flying over the ocean. Right up until the present, military security considerations have prevented specific information regarding the equipment from being made public.

On the basis of wartime results, peacetime applications of the airborne magnetometer were tried out. Experiments have already proved it possible to fly over unknown territory at great speed and, by proper interpretation of the records obtained, to infer what basic mineral formations lie beneath the ground flown over.

Better read that last sentence again. Let it sink in. It means just what it says.

And it answers Reader T.G.'s recent letter sent in from Omaha, Nebraska. The letter was full of ire about some

"cock-and-bull" story T.G. had heard concerning a "Buck Rogers" scheme of prospecting from an airplane. The quotes are T.G.'s.

How do scientists know airborne prospecting works in the field of its own special application, T.G.? They know because test flights have been made carrying the airborne magnetometer over known mineral formations in the Adirondacks in New York, the Iron River country in Michigan, and the oil structures of the Big Horn Basin in Wyoming. In every case the magnetometer recording checked with the actual known ground, and underground, conditions.

In operation, the delicate detector mechanism of the magnetometer is housed in a streamlined, bomb-shaped case and towed behind and beneath the plane on a cable about 100 feet long. The recording part of the mechanism is carried in the plane itself.

A series of flights is made at regularly spaced intervals across the territory to be surveyed. The flight lines are correlated with ground maps of the area. From tests already conducted, it is generally considered impractical to space these travefses, or flight lines, closer than a quarter of a mile.

Flights may be made at any elevation and even at speeds as high as 450 miles an hour. However, experience has shown that the greatest magnetic detail in the recordings is obtained at relatively low flights maintained at a constant elevation above the ground pattern. The ideal elevation seems to be about 1,000 feet.

Similarly, best working speeds appear to be around 150 miles an hour. This speed cuts down the margin of error in checking off specific readings with their proper ground location.

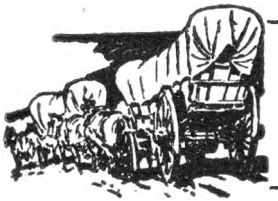
The traverses flown can be any length. But here again tests point to lines 25 to 50 miles long as the handiest to correlate and the least tiring on the pilot. Such lines can be completed in between 10 and 20 minutes of actual flying time.

The pilot is accompanied in the plane by a highly skilled observer who directs the flight pattern and marks important check points on maps and the recording instruments. A continuous strip photograph of the flight path is also taken on each run.

This data is then digested back in the office where it is transformed into a series of graphs and magnetic curves. By studying these, an expert can read off with almost wizardlike accuracy the approximate whereabouts of certain large-scale mineral formations on distant land he may never have seen, and only flown over in a plane carrying an airborne magnetometer.

Airborne prospecting is a large-scale proposition, extremely technical, highly expensive. Belonging strictly to the new era of electronics and radar, it is certainly something to think about in the days to come.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



WHERE TO GO

By John North

FOR many kinds of camping trips, in the West or elsewhere, there is no better way to reach your destination than by car. Often such adventures into the untrammeled wilderness mean leaving paved highways far behind. That's half the fun of the trip.

But whether your car is an ancient, beat-up jaloppy, comfortable as an old shoe and twice as creaky, or a streamlined late model, there is an art to handling it on a cross-country basis. Winding mountain roads, bumpy logging trails, mud holes, or even just following wagon tracks across the desert present their own problems.

Suspecting something of the sort, G.L., of Allentown, Pennsylvania, has written for some pointers.

"Traffic doesn't bother me," his letter said, "but I am primarily a pavement driver. This summer I plan a trip West with my family. We would like to take in some off-the-highway side trips. So how about some tips on this sort of driving for myself and other readers who may be mainly city or hard-surface motorists?"

Driving skill, G.L., depends largely on what a fellow is used to. For instance a good friend of ours, a whiskered old prospector out in the high mountain country of the Idaho Panhandle, can't travel ten blocks in a city like Seattle or Portland, Oregon, without breaking all the traffic regulations in the book.

Yet out in the mountains old Bill handles his decrepit junk pile with skill and hair-raising precision. Swinging down steep, twisting mountain grades so narrow his inside fenders are scraping the solid rock wall and his outside wheels are flipping pebbles into a canyon bottom hundreds of feet below, Bill is as good a driver as they come. He knows to an inch how much skid he can allow for on each turn without sending himself, his car and his passengers—if any—into immediate eternity.

Whenever a mountain stream has to be forded because there is no bridge across it, Bill brakes to a stop, hops out and sizes up the flow of water over the riffles. It takes him less time to raise the hood, remove the fan belt, tie a piece of oil cloth over the distributor, churn over to the other side and be on his way again than it does for the average driver to decide whether to tackle the ford or not.

Bill isn't a "better" driver than a city motorist. He's just accustomed to back-country auto travel.

We asked him one time what he would do if he got stuck crossing a stream.

"Get wet, same as anybody else," he

grinned, "but it ain't hopeless. If you gotta, you can take the spark plugs out, put the car in reverse or low—depending on which bank is the easiest way out—and crank the doggoned buggy out by hand. It's slow, but it'll get you back on dry land, if you got a good bottom. Most mountain streams have."

Generally Bill didn't aim to get stuck. He checked every stream before tackling it. And he knew the limits of his car at a ford.

"This four-wheeled jassack'll handle about eighteen inches of water, maybe a little more, without drowning out. You can't make a general rule, however," declared Bill. "Some cars are built higher'n others. Take a stream mighty easy with a new, low-slung modern car."

That also applies to another hazard on back roads — rocks. Late-model cars have a very low clearance under the crankcase.

Crankcases are particularly vulnerable to a blow caused by striking a high rock in the middle of the road. Take rocky roads slowly. If you can't go around a protruding rock, you can build a short lane of smaller rocks on both sides of it. Then gently ease one wheel over the obstacle. Don't try to straddle it. Sometimes it may be necessary to get out a pick and crowbar and move the rock. Hard work, but it's better than a broken crankcase.

Having mentioned the pick and crowbar, we might as well bring up another important point—tools. Travel prepared. Don't forget a shovel to go with the pick and crowbar. Take along a good ax. And a pretty fair set of tools, including wrenches, hammer, file, tow rope, friction tape, tire irons and a tire-patching kit. You may have to patch a tire before you get back to civilization and a filling station.

Tire chains are handy. They afford one of the best ways to get through a mudhole that has a solid footing. Put them on before you tackle the mudhole. It's a lot easier to put chains on when you're on dry ground.

A few emergency items carried in the car won't hurt, either. Such things as a first aid kit, spare spark plugs, a spare fan belt and a box of fuses. Chances are you won't need 'em. But if you do, you'll need them badly.

For the same reason carry extra oil, gas and, in country where it may be hard to find, extra water for your car.

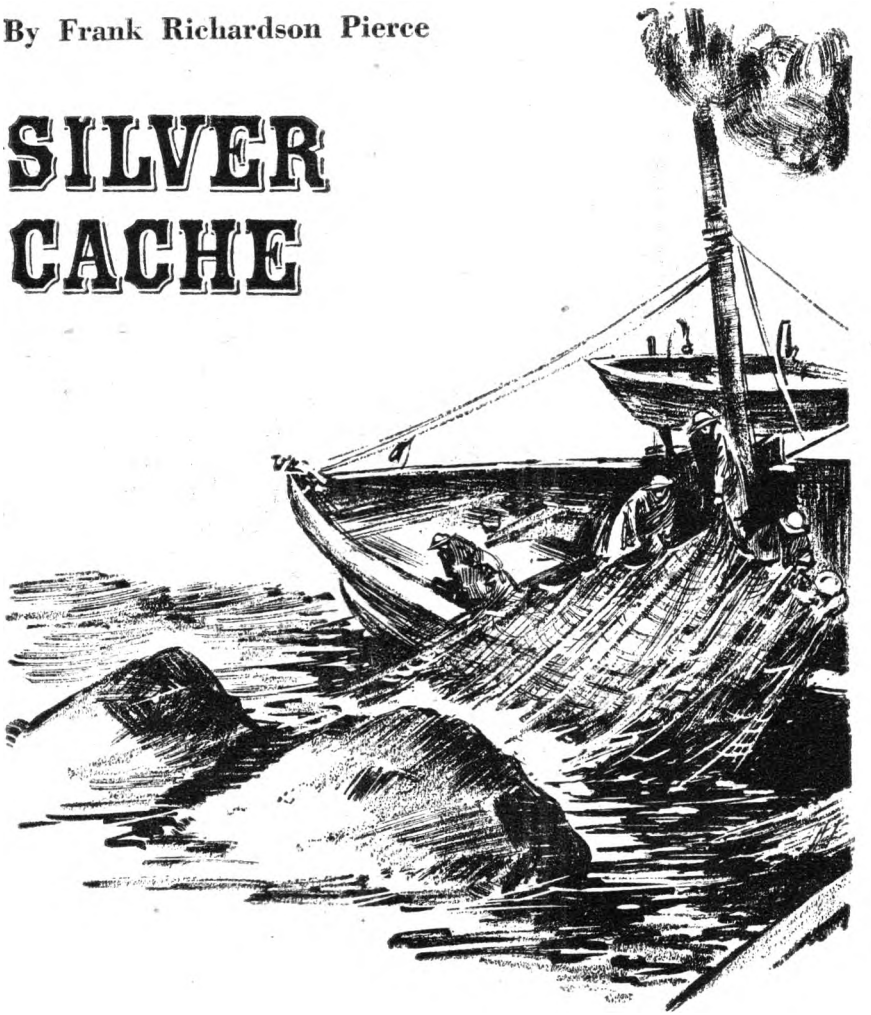
If you get stuck in desert sand, let the air out of your tires until the pressure is as low as fifteen, or even ten pounds. Then back out or pull on through, whichever is the shorter, or the downhill, haul. On solid ground pump your tires up again.

Back-country driving is mostly common sense plus experience. Take it easy, don't speed, and your car will get you into plenty of fascinating off-the-trail camping spots.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

By Frank Richardson Pierce

SILVER CACHE



I

TIM DONOVAN, stripped down to his underwear, stood in the *Molly-O's* hold, tearing out the planking that formed the inner "skin" of the stricken purse seiner.

"If I can find the leak," he growled in desperation, "I can make temporary repairs and we'll get her into port." He knew the odds against the aged, storm-battered vessel seeing calm waters again and he was using optimism to lash himself to greater efforts.

An unseasonable storm had caught

Even if Tim Donovan could keep that storm-battered old purse seiner from sinking under him, he still had to match a double-crosser's cutthroat tactics to win a deep-sea jackpot

the *Molly-O* and was threatening to claim her among other victims. The salmon-bearing waters off Cape Flattery, in the Straits of Juan de Fuca, Puget Sound and British Columbia can do serious damage, for all the stretches protected by coastal mountains and islands. Tim could feel the vessel flinch under the impact of each wave. He could hear the seas crash on deck and he knew that they were momentarily smothering what was left of the wheelhouse.

A big, tough Swede named Sven Nordstrom was at the wheel, which was comforting knowledge. The re-

mainder of the crew was composed of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, most of them American born. "It's going to take one hell of a storm to lick a shanty Irishman and a bunch of Nordics," Tim told himself.

His common sense, his sea "savvy" kept reminding him of the true odds against him. But he knew, too, that his crew would never even think of taking to the boats as long as he fought back. The water sloshing about smelled sickeningly of the bilges and was coated with engine-room grease and oil. Tim hardly noticed it as he kept driving himself.

He found the leak at last. It looked as if the purse seiner had glanced off a floating log. The impact had opened seams that Tim couldn't get at without running serious risk of flooding the engine room. He knocked off, went to his quarters, put on his clothes, adding hip boots, yellow slicker and a sou'wester. Then he made his way to the wheelhouse. The glass was broken, planks shattered and the door splintered on the weather side.

"I'll take over, Sven," he said. 'Go down to the galley and get yourself hot coffee and something to eat."

Sven, for all his sturdiness, looked weary to the point of exhaustion. "If we can just make it around the point," he said.

Tim nodded. The strain would be eased and they might make it to Snug Bay — that is, if their steering gear didn't quit and leave them at the mercy of conflicting tides infesting the channel.

The *Molly-O* was a very old ship. Frequent groundings had weakened her frames; some of her planks needed replacing, and her engine had seen its best years. No one had wanted her, even for Puget Sound service. It was almost unthinkable that anyone familiar with rugged waters would take her fishing, but that was what Tim Donovan was doing.

Such as she was, the *Molly-O* was a start on the long, hard trail back to Donovan prestige in the salmon-canning business. Tim's grandfather had done the pioneering, and his father had carried on after the old man's death. It was only when exposure in a winter steamer wreck had shattered Jim Donovan's health that the Grambs had succeeded in smashing the old, established firm.

Those in command lacked the experience and the incentive to fight just enough harder and better to win, and Tim was then but a boy. Now, if all went well, the old purse seiner, bought for a song, would catch the salmon that would buy a new vessel; and the new vessel would lead to others and eventually to a cannery. Tim's family still owned the brand so familiar to housewives of an earlier generation— Red Silver. And some of these days it would reappear on pantry shelves. But, at the present moment, no gambler would bet on it.

Tim hung on as a breaking sea smashed at the *Molly-O*. Water piled up to his knees, then spilled away as the vessel slowly lifted. The purse seiner dropped into a valley, then the next sea, solid green, lifted her high, and Tim saw the headland shrouded in driving rain, and another craft that seemed to be about a mile distant.

"That's the *Anna Grambs*," he growled, "and Buck Grambs will be in command. What's he doing out here? He overtook us a day ago. He should be in Snug Bay by now unless he had a breakdown."

Sven Nordstrom joined him. "Water's gainin'," he said briefly.

"I know it. She's harder to handle. That seam must be opening up more," Tim declared. "Is the engine room bulkhead holding?"

"Leakin' some," answered Nordstrom.

"What do you think?"

"I think the *Anna Grambs* is goin' to offer you a line, which'll mean salvage," Sven replied dryly, "and you'll have to decide whether to take it or risk sinkin'."

"If I take it they'll tie up the boat in a salvage suit," Tim said, "and that'll put me out of business when the run comes. That's what they want —nip the sprout before the roots go deep. I won't take it. Check on the boats. We'll have to move fast when the *Molly-O* starts to go. If she does." Hope always died hard in Tim Donovan.

The *Molly-O* was doing three knots when the rival boat came within hailing distance. A man stood ready to toss them a line and Buck Grambs came out of the warmth of his wheelhouse for a better look at the damaged vessel. Tim saw a girl's face framed in the wheelhouse window. The cold wind had whipped her cheeks to a fine glow; the dampness had given a wave to her blond hair, and her blue eyes were alive with excitement. To Tim she seemed to be a girl meeting high adventure for the first time in her life and enjoying it.

The line darted like a snake through the air, fell across the *Molly-O's* stern, then slipped into the sea. No man made the slightest effort to touch it. Taking it would have laid the groundwork for salvage.

"Take a towline and I'll get you into quiet waters!" Grambs bellowed.

"Quiet waters and salvage," Tim retorted. "No dice!"

"Man alive, your ship is sinking under you!" Grambs yelled. "Think of your crew!"

"Shall we take a line, boys?" Tim asked.

"Not on your life!" they roared as one man.

"The men say no," Tim yelled. He stood there, face to the storm, rain drops beating like buckshot against his slicker, determined to win or lose without help.

There was a smile on the girl's face and for some reason it penetrated the raw air and warmed Tim's heart. He grinned and gave her a careless salute, then hastily stepped inside the wheelhouse. Another sea was coming. It smothered the *Molly-O* and she lifted sluggishly. The rival boat dropped astern to be ready to pick up the survivors when she went down.

The *Molly-O* didn't go down. She limped around the point and, because it was high water, managed to clear a reef and take a short cut to the beach. Tim drove her bow hard onto the soft sand and grinned at Nordstrom.

"Say, that was quite a girl on the Grambs' boat!" he said enthusiasti-

cally. "She seems to fill some specifications I've had in my mind for a long time."

"Leave it to a Donovan to take time off to look at a pretty girl while a boat sinks under his feet," Nordstrom grinned. "She's prob'ly Buck Grambs' wife or sister. I saw her last year. She's one of the tribe."

They turned in for a brief rest. It seemed to Tim that the cook was calling him before his eyes were closed.

"Tide's out," the cook reported.

Tim dressed, lowered a ladder to the beach and went down. Water was seeping from the leak. The strain had opened a seam. Nordstrom, joining him, cut off a sliver of wood and examined it.

"She's held together by her paint," Sven observed. "Another bad storm will finish her."

"Then we'll have to keep out of bad storms," said Tim. "She's got to last out the season even if we have to install a couple more pumps."

All hands went to work and completed temporary repairs before the tide came in again. Cleared of water, the purse seiner continued on to Snug Bay. As usual, the scene was a challenge to Tim Donovan.

His grandfather had built some of the settlement's older buildings. This same grandfather had discovered a falls a quarter mile up Raging River, at the head of the harbor, and realized it prevented salmon from reaching a vast, natural spawning grounds about five miles upstream. The river's source was a chain of lakes over a wide area. The elder Donovan had blasted out the falls, creating a series of rapids, then in successive years had bought thousands of fingerling salmon from a nearby stream and stocked the river. He had nursed each weak "run," keeping obstructions out of the river, killing off the bear, hair seal and eagles in the region until annual runs were established. Now, Raging River was responsible for thousands of cases of salmon annually, and each case contained forty-eight cans. Today the Grambs were filling and selling those cans.

Across the bay stood the buildings of the Cold Inlet Packing Company owned by Hole-card MacNaughton who had made and lost three fortunes in the salmon-canning business and was now trying to make the fourth. He was seventy years old and looked much younger. A tall, rangy man, he had weighed over two hundred in his prime but the years had taken forty pounds from his frame. Usually when financial trouble seemed about to swamp him, a hole card had pulled him through. It had failed him but three times. Sometimes the hole card was money, selecting the right man at the right time for a tough job, or a peculiar knowledge of the North gained by his experience.

MacNaughton was highly respected by the honest, and feared by the dishonest. The fact that he had established a cannery which would compete with the Grambs for salmon caught in the area was regarded as audacious to the point of foolhardiness.

Tim Donovan once suggested a partnership, but MacNaughton declined and his reason made Tim seethe.

"Your generation don't come tough enough," MacNaughton had declared. "I'll play out my hand alone this time, sonny."

The Cold Inlet Packing Company had a marine ways and Tim went to MacNaughton to make a deal. "Time's short," he explained, "and I'd like to make permanent repairs."

"Haul her out," MacNaughton answered.

There was nothing private about the ways, and when the *Molly-O* was out and repairs under way, men from the Grambs cannery, including Buck, came over to estimate the strength of the opposition. MacNaughton himself sauntered about one afternoon.

"Sonny," he said with a faint smile, "you're coming into a mighty stiff game with a pretty poor hand."

"If I play a poor hand well," Tim retorted, "it's more satisfaction for my dough than winning the pot with a pat hand." He wanted to add, "And lay off this 'sonny' business!" But he knew that protesting a nickname was one sure way of making it permanent.

MacNaughton gave a final glance at Sven Nordstrom who was repairing the wheelhouse, and returned to his cannery.

II

"She's okay," Nordstrom said several days later. "Extra pump installed, wheelhouse repaired and painted. Now all we've got to do is put her back in the water and wait for the salmon run. What about going to the dance tonight? Everybody will be there."

"Someone should hang around and

keep an eye on things," Tim replied thoughtfully. "Suppose I dance until one o'clock? Then you can kick up your heels until sunrise while I stand watch."

"Okay," Nordstrom answered, and Tim began dressing. He knew by the very nature of remote dances, everyone at all interested would be there. A girl of seventeen might have a young fellow of twenty for a partner one dance, and a seventy-year-old sourdough, the next. Good times didn't come too often in the country, and the enjoyment was greater.

An orchestra, made up of local talent and cannery hands, was hard at work when Tim arrived. He eased his way along the wall to the stag line and sized up the dancers. The third girl he noticed was the blonde he had seen on Grambs' purse seiner. She was dancing with Buck Grambs whose possessive attitude bothered Tim for some reason he didn't understand. The girl's eyes brushed past Tim, then suddenly returned and for a moment he saw surprise and pleasure in them.

As she danced past Old Man Lynn, the fiddler, her lips formed the words, "Circle two-step!" Lynn's aged blue eyes had watched many a romance flower and he had often helped things along. At first the old fiddler was puzzled, then he remembered the girl

telling of the *Molly-O's* struggle. "And Tim Donovan was magnificent!" she had declared. "He was refusing aid, defying the sea and keeping his vessel afloat. There was the rain beating against his oilskins, and the storm hammering away and . . . oh, it was something out of this world!"

When Old Man Lynn shouted, "Circle two-step!" Buck Grambs scowled, muttering, "One of those damned things!" Everyone joined hands, responding to the fiddler's call. "For'd and back! Grand right and left!"

Old Man Lynn watched the blonde girl and just as Tim approached her, he yelled, "Everybody two-step." The timing was perfect.

"I'm Tim Donovan," Tim introduced himself, noting that she wore an engagement and not a wedding ring.

"I'm Martha Lane," the girl answered.

"When I saw your face framed by that wheelhouse window," Tim told her, "it was a bright spot on a stormy day."

"Irish blarney," she accused, "but pleasant to the ears. Now it's my turn. I thought the way you handled your boat and your courage were superb."

"When your eggs are in one basket," said Tim, "it doesn't take much courage. You've no choice." For a few moments they danced in silence, then he asked hopefully, "How about a dance later on?"

"The eleventh?"

"Can't we make it the ninth?" he suggested. "I have to return to the *Molly-O* and the eleventh number comes right after intermission time."

"I'll arrange it," promised Martha Lane with a smile.

Buck Grambs' angry eyes turned on Old Man Lynn as he and his partner danced near the orchestra. "What about changing?" he demanded. He was very unhappy and, being a suspicious man by nature, he knew that the odds against Tim's drawing Martha without help from Old Man Lynn were about eighty to one.

"All join hands," Old Man Lynn said, going through the routine, and shortly afterwards ending the number.

Hole-card MacNaughton seated his partner and sauntered over to the orchestra. "Trying to start something. Lynn?" he asked.

Old Man Lynn waited until other orchestra members were busy arranging their music. "I'm only a fiddler, Mack," he answered, "and not a very good one, but when a maid wants to meet a lad. I do my best."

"Who doesn't?" said MacNaughton. "But hasn't Tim Donovan enough on his hands without taking Grambs' girl?"

"Such things are out of our hands," the old fiddler observed sagely. "And since when has a Donovan weighed the odds?"

"It'll be a dirty fight," MacNaughton predicted. "The Grambs never let go of anything they get their hands on."

"It'll not be a dirty fight of Tim Donovan's making," Old Man Lynn contended. "But if dirty work starts in the clinches, Tim will take care of himself. I've been thinking . . . wouldn't it be a shame for a fine girl

like Martha Lane to marry Buck Grambs?"

"Some wouldn't call marrying a million dollars a tough deal," MacNaughton said. "Others would think differently. I've never been able to figure Martha Lane." He sauntered off as if he had all the time in the world.

Passing Grambs and Martha Lane, MacNaughton heard Buck say, "Why did you give Donovan the ninth dance?"

"Because he asked me for it. Besides, he dances beautifully," Martha answered.

"But you shifted Bill Dixon to a later dance," Buck argued.

"True. Bill didn't care, and it was the only way Tim Donovan could get a dance with me."

"Or was it the only way *you* could get a dance with Tim Donovan?" Grambs countered.

"Don't be difficult, Buck," the girl said quietly, "or should I say, don't be normal?"

"Skip it," he snapped. "But I'd rather you didn't dance with my worst enemy."

"Surely," Martha said lightly, "the powerful Grambs canning people don't fear one man and a leaky purse seiner?"

"Of course not!" Buck spoke loudly, but without conviction, MacNaughton thought.

Finding a chair, MacNaughton sat down and watched Tim and Martha dance their number through. Old Man Lynn, who regarded himself as a tool of fate in such matters, made the dance a long one and responded nobly with encores. It seemed to Hole-card MacNaughton that Martha lingered a moment in Tim's arms after the last note ended, but he wasn't quite sure. He was very certain, however, of their smiling faces in parting, and Buck Grambs' unsuccessful attempt to mask his fury as he leaned against the wall, watching.

Mechanically Tim picked up his hat and left the hall. "The hell of it is," he told himself, "she's engaged to Buck Grambs."

The *Molly-O* was dark except for a galley light. Sven Nordstrom, shaved, hair brushed and reeking of strong shaving lotion, came down the ladder.

"Coffee pot's on," he said briefly. "How's the dance?"

"Swell! Have yourself a good time," Tim answered. He climbed the ladder and went on to the gallery, poured himself a cup of coffee, added sugar and a bit of cream from a can, then eased back in a chair. The coffee hit the spot and he started to think of the morrow when they would put the *Molly-O* into the water again. Somehow his thoughts kept straying to Martha Lane. "She can develop into a problem," he mused. "That is, unless I hang onto myself."

The galley door was closed, but the window looking out on the deck was open, and the cool air was blowing in. Tim could not hear the man slinking along the deck, because the fellow was barefoot and moved cautiously. He carried a heavy shoe, which he gripped around the toe. Stopping near the galley window, he peered intently at Tim. He reached through

the window and brought the heel of the shoe down with a sharp, powerful blow that caught Tim on the skull. The coffee cup clattered to the deck and Tim slid slowly downward off the chair.

He groaned, half opened his eyes, and tried to get up. The intruder stepped quickly into the galley and cracked him again, growling, "You'll stay out this time."

The man went below to the bilges and stuffed two of them with waste matter, then he hurried to the engine room. The bilge job was well done, but this one was purposely performed in a careless manner to divert attention from the bilge damage. A few minutes later the man, his work done, climbed down the ladder and vanished behind the nearest building.

The dance was still going on when he drifted into the hall, found a chair and sat down. Buck Grambs left the stag line and joined him.

"Having a good time, Tremper?" Grambs asked casually.

"*Had* a good time," answered Tremper. "Put on a poker face, Grambs; you're showin' you're excited. That's better. I popped him one. Naw, didn't kill him. But he'll drown the next time that tub gets in rough water. Say, when're we goin' to take on old MacNaughton?"

"One at a time," Grambs answered. "We haven't got Donovan yet. He's young and dangerous. MacNaughton's old. He's just a horse fly buzzing around. A slap will take care of him at the right time. If too much happens here all at once, we'll have a United States marshal investigating."

"I never leave tracks for marshals to follow," Tremper boasted. He was a big, solid man with closely cut black hair. He was very sure of himself and his brute strength. He enjoyed setting a trap for a man, then waiting for his victim to fall into it. The suspense fed a savage hunger deep in the man. Back in Tremper's mind was the hope that the *Molly-O* might venture into a stretch of rip tides known as the Mill Race and spring a leak.

When a boat was caught in the Mill Race with a broken-down engine, or leaking seams, she was doomed. And her men were doomed because whirlpools sucked them under, beat them against the rocks, then spilled what remained into the quiet pools below, sucking them under even when they wore life belts.

Tonight as Tremper considered the future, his savage hunger ran strong. He could hardly wait for the salmon run to start.

Tim Donovan opened his eyes and his first thought was, "I went to sleep and fell out of the chair." He rubbed his eyes and swore. "What a headache! I can't figure it!" Objects blurred at first, then he noticed that it was twilight outside. He rubbed his head, wincing from pain, and when he looked at his hand he noticed clotted blood on his fingers.

"Take her easy, mister," he muttered. "This was no ordinary fall out of a chair. You were socked plenty hard."

Without moving, he looked down at the deck for possible clues. A bare foot had stepped in spilled coffee,

leaving a damp imprint in a couple of places. He dismissed the clue as worthless for the prints were not clearly defined, though it did prove that a barefooted man was involved.

When Tim stood up things blurred for several seconds, then slowly cleared. In the skipper's quarters behind the wheelhouse, he washed the wound and noted that hair covered most of the area. But a strip of flesh below the hair line contained four punctures from which blood oozed.

"Now that's mighty queer," he murmured. "Someone evidently reached through the galley window and cracked me. A club with slightly protruding nail heads would make such a bruise; or a shoe heel, if the leather was worn down around the nails. Now here's a clue that may lead to something."

He went to the paint locker, got a piece of putty, pressed it smooth and flat with a putty knife, applied it to the bruise and got an impression. The impression was placed in a locker in his quarters for future reference.

"Now," he thought, "for a look around. Obviously the fellow wanted to knock me out, yet not kill me, while he got in some dirty work aboard."

He examined the hull on the theory that the intruder had removed caulking from the seams. The seams were evidently tight. Next he made a careful inspection of the propeller shaft. None of the bearings had been disturbed. A main bearing caught his eyes. He was working on it when Nordstrom came back from the dance.

"Somebody socked me," Tim explained, "then put emery dust into this bearing—a hurried, careless job. There wasn't time for him to get to the others."

"That would be enough to put the engine out of commission," Nordstrom said. "And if we happened to be fishing near the Mill Race." He shrugged his big shoulders expressively. "Who do you suppose done it?"

"That, I hope to find out." Tim answered.

All hands turned in and slept until afternoon. Tim dressed and spent some time wandering about the settlement, with his head down. Absorbed in what he was doing, he didn't see Hole-card MacNaughton stop and watch him.

"You can't cover up that bruised spot, sonny, going around with eyes downcast like a shy girl," MacNaughton said. "You might just as well face the fact that somebody socked you."

"Somebody did," Tim answered, "then put emery dust into a bearing on the *Molly-O*. And, Mr. MacNaughton, there's a reason for my shy, downcast expression."

"Is there a reason for the flapjack turner you're carrying around inside your shirt?" MacNaughton inquired. "When you straightened up I could see the outline against the cloth. If I were you I'd carry brass knuckles instead of a flapjack turner."

Tim grinned. "The Grambs are just as hot on your trail as they are on mine. Are you sure you've caught up all *your* loose ends?"

"Correction," MacNaughton said. "They're after me. but you're after

them. They aren't after you. They want no part of a Donovan."

He watched Tim the better part of an hour, then saw him whip out the flapjack turner and squat down where the soil was moist. "Damned queer proceedings," the old canneryman mused. "I think I'll trail that cuss."

He watched Tim return to the *Molly-O*, emerge a few minutes later, then set off for the Fishermen's Rest. "Donovan's full of business now," MacNaughton said. "He's as eager as a bank vice president hurrying to collect a trustees' meeting fee."

The old man pushed through the batwing doors into an atmosphere of stale smoke, air heavy with the smell of damp woolens and rubber, and the confusion of loud talk.

Tim Donovan was shouldering fishermen aside as he set a direct course for Tremper. "There's a polecat here named Tremper!" he roared. "Last night he socked me from behind and put emery dust into a bearing on the *Molly-O*."

Astonishment filled Tremper's face, but only for a moment, and then he rushed, bellowing, to the attack. Buck Grambs' eyes narrowed appraisingly. The swiftness with which Tim had uncovered the guilty man suggested a serious slip somewhere. Grambs was worried, fearing the chain of evidence might lead to him.

As he watched the fight, MacNaughton picked up a pool cue lovingly, as if an old and familiar weapon had come into his hands. "I'll keep 'em off of your back, sonny," he said.

The two were slugging it out when a Grambs' man slyly tried to trip Tim. As the heavy end of MacNaughton's cue bounced off his shin, he howled like a painted Indian. Others with sly tricks in mind forgot them.

It was a good fight. Both men knew how to handle their fists. Slowly Tim worked Tremper around until his back was to the batwing doors, then he feinted him off balance and let him have it. The doors parted violently, swung furiously and came to a reluctant stop. Tim stood there, breathing hard, waiting for Tremper to return. He could see the man's toes pointed upward, then they turned slowly as Tremper got to his knees. When he didn't come back for more, Tim turned to Buck Grambs.

"Never mind how I pinned that dirty work on Tremper," he said grimly. "He's guilty and you know it. If he did something to the *Molly-O* that I've missed, I'll take it out of your hide."

"You won't be around to take anything out of anybody's hide," Grambs thought. But he said, "If you want to take anything out of my hide, Donovan, now is as good a time as any."

"No, you don't, Tim," MacNaughton warned as Tim started to accept Grambs' challenge. "It wouldn't be a fair fight. There isn't a man in the fishing fleet who can take on Tremper and Buck Grambs within a few minutes of each other. Go back to the

Molly-O before I crack you one with the cue. Grambs, back up or I'll let you have it. Wouldn't you like to take on the man that Tremper's softened up?"

His cutting comment made it impossible for Grambs to fight Tim without losing face. Half reluctantly Tim let MacNaughton herd him toward the door with the cue. "Danged if I don't believe you mean it, Hole-card," Tim said.

"Danged right I mean it, sonny."

"Blast you," Tim whispered, "cut out the 'sonny' stuff before I murder someone."

Grambs downed another drink, then returned to his cannery. Martha met him in front of the owner's cottage. "What happened?" she asked curiously. "Tremper staggered home as if he had been drinking too much."

"He was punch drunk," Grambs answered. He was tempted to make a good story of it and put Tim in a bad light, but he realized Martha would hear the true version sooner or later. "Tim Donovan jumped him. He claimed Tremper did him dirt. Of course I don't believe it. These damned Donovans have always been short-tempered. I'm going to hear Tremper's side of it."

He went on to the barracklike building that housed the fishermen. Tremper, in a vile mood, sat scowling.

"You slipped, somewhere, Tremper," Grambs accused. "Where?"

"Damned if I know," growled Tremper. "Nobody saw me on the *Molly-O*. I was off before it got twilight. He fell for the emery in the bearin's, but he ain't wise to the jimmied-up pumps. He's a tougher fighter than I thought he'd be. But I'll get him yet. Now go 'way and leave me alone. I feel sick as a dog."

Tim didn't feel much better, and he was convinced that MacNaughton had done him a favor in refusing to let him fight Buck Grambs. "I probably would have taken a licking," he mused. "And if I hadn't, chances are I'd be in no shape for the run."

With Nordstrom's help, he got the *Molly-O* into the water the following day at high tide. She looked as smart and tough as the other purse seiners, but Tim knew that in this instance beauty was only skin deep. Beneath the paint were planks afflicted with the horrible enemy of wooden ships—dry rot.

III

The *Molly-O* and all of the purse seiners and fish traps were ready for the run. And this was the trying time of salmon fishing. The plant is ready to can fish; the crew, waiting for the run, is eating three times a day and drawing pay; the tugs, the scows, the trap men are all set. It is one of the few business propositions where the operators must make a year's income in a few weeks.

Daily the boats went out seeking signs of gathering birds or jumping salmon that would indicate that the run was on. The law requires that the fish be canned within forty-eight hours after being caught. And the sooner they're canned, the better the quality of the finished product.

Sven Nordstrom, standing a wheel watch, stood in toward MacNaughton's Granite Point fish trap. A long arm of webbing strung on piling extended into the channel. The salmon following along the webbing ended up in the trap. Traps had one big advantage. If the cannery was swamped with fish from trollers and seiners, the fish in the trap could wait, swimming about, without danger of spoilage.

Nordstrom called Tim. "Salmon jumpin'!" he reported.

Tim was into his clothing and on deck in a couple of minutes. The clear, cold waters of the channel were dimpled where salmon had leaped and struck the surface. There were generally two or three in the air at the same instant.

"Salmon go against the current," Nordstrom reminded him. "That means that they've swum through the trap. Something's wrong there."

"And what about those flocks of gulls on the beach?" Tim asked. "Gulls don't hang around unless there's something to eat."

They took the *Molly-O* in close, then Tim went ashore in a boat. The air was filled with protesting gulls and the beach was covered with various kinds of fish, including salmon. There wasn't a mark on most of them. Tim picked up several pieces of splintered piling, studied them briefly and took them aboard the seiner.

"My guess is that someone's blasted MacNaughton's trap," he told Nordstrom.

They approached the trap and noticed salmon passing through a large break in webbing and piling. As the *Molly-O* came alongside, Tim jumped onto the trap and made his way to the watchman's shack. It was deserted, and the stove was cold. There were signs of a struggle — an overturned chair, a splintered bunk plank, and drops of dried blood on the planking.

"They may have murdered the watchman," Nordstrom shouted in answer to Tim's report, "and dropped his body into the channel. Remember the time we brailed a trap and found a dead guy amongst the salmon? Nobody knew how he got there."

Before Tim left he checked on the trap's heart and spiller. Normally the areas would be alive with salmon, but the fish were now escaping after some confused milling around. There was no sign of the watchman's body.

Aboard the *Molly-O*, the men looked at each other. "They'd be MacNaughton's fish if someone hadn't blasted his trap," Nordstrom argued. "Now they're anybody's, so let's make 'em ours."

"We'll see what we can do," Tim said. He looked at the net, arranged so that it could be put overboard swiftly and without fouling up matters. It was nineteen hundred feet long, and one hundred and fifty feet deep. Lead, rolled over lines fastened to the bottom, pulled the net downward. Floats attached to a line on top pulled upward. This caused the net to remain upright in the water.

The *Molly-O* examined the area until Tim decided on the greatest concentration of fish. Then he dropped a heavy skiff manned by Sven Nordstrom. They retained the free end of

the net while the purse seiner circled. As the two ends were brought together, a man, jabbing a pole which stirred up the water, turned back salmon that might have escaped through the opening.

"What a haul!" Nordstrom yelled. "Thousands of 'em!" The surface was churning with jumping fish, and the net itself seemed to take on life as the salmon hurled themselves against it.

Tim Donovan now began the next phase to prevent escape. A rope, running through rings five inches in diameter along the bottom of the net, tightened. This, called the purse line, was in a sense a draw string. As it was hauled in, the bottom of the net was drawn together, preventing the salmon from diving down and escaping under the net.

The crew went into action with a dip net, operated by tackle, which went into the seine and emerged with a load of gleaming, twisting silver.

"Just like reaching into a silver cache," Tim exulted, "and hauling out bright, new dollars!"

"They'll run about a dollar apiece," Nordstrom estimated. "Here comes Grambs!"

The rival purse seiner, the *Anna Grambs*, had just rounded a point and was approaching at full speed. Her men lined the rail, gazing at the *Molly-O* with hostile eyes as she searched for the remains of the school. Tim Donovan had cut the heart out of that school and they knew it.

There seemed to be no end to the fish in the haul. They filled the *Molly-O*'s holds until she rode low in the water, then they piled up on deck. Men hauled in the seine over a wide roller, and placed it for the next haul.

The rival craft had her net out and was making a small haul as the *Molly-O* started for Snug Bay.

"The *Anna Grambs* is faster," Nordstrom said. "She'll overhaul us."

"Some of these days we'll have one like her," Tim told him. "That is, if the *Molly-O* hangs together for this season."

They were just entering Snug Bay when the Grambs seiner came abeam.

"This is business, Donovan," Buck Grambs called. "What do you want for your salmon?"

"MacNaughton's coming out," Tim answered. "He needs salmon, too. Competition is the life of trade, they say."

A fast boat was coming out from the MacNaughton plant. The old man was alone. This was an old story to Hole-card, but it was also the breath of life. His weathered face took on a brisk color, and his eyes were fever bright.

"It's a poor day when a Donovan doesn't make the first haul," MacNaughton yelled. "I bid sixty-five cents apiece!"

"Seventy-five," Grambs offered.

"Eighty," MacNaughton bid. "You must have ten thousand aboard, Donovan."

"About that," Tim agreed.

"A dollar!" yelled Grambs. If he could keep MacNaughton from packing this year, it was a sure way of

breaking him. To put MacNaughton out of business, Grambs could afford to pay premium prices. When competition was gone, the independent purse seiners would take his price and like it.

"I can't go above eighty cents," MacNaughton told Tim.

"Sold to Hole-card MacNaughton for eighty cents," Tim said.

"What?" Grambs roared. "Are you crazy, man? You're throwing away two thousand dollars."

"Easy come, easy go," Tim said lightly.

He headed the *Molly-O* toward the MacNaughton cannery and when he docked, the old man was waiting for him with his checkbook. And his checks were as good as gold.

"Sonny," he warned, "you're carrying your hate for Grambs too far when you pay for it with thousand dollar bills."

"We Donovans have never taken all the traffic would bear," Tim told him. "And, in a way, these are your salmon, Hole-card. Someone blasted your trap to bits or the salmon would have been there."

For a moment the old man looked hard hit, but he rebounded quickly. "And the watchman?"

"No sign of him. They may have knocked him off, or he may have figured there was no sense in standing up to a tough crowd," Tim said. "For my dough, you rated the edge on the price of my catch."

"I'll send a crew to the trap to make repairs," MacNaughton said. "Unload, and we'll start canning."

A conveyor took the salmon to the fish floor within the cannery building. Machinery removed head, tail, fins, cleaned and cut up the salmon which went into hurrying cans along with a spoonful of salt water. Floods of icy water washed the fish at the beginning, and human hands found little to do. A machine weighed and kicked off cans that were under weight.

At top speed the filling machinery could pop out four cans a second, but this first day MacNaughton was content to operate at a slower pace. Tins were sealed in vacuum and hurried on to the retorts where the salmon was cooked ninety minutes at 240 degree temperature. The cans emerged to be cleaned in lye water, then cooled off, labeled and packed in cases.

"A drop in the bucket," Tim said to MacNaughton, "but it's nice to hear machinery hum. Well, this isn't catching salmon. I wonder when the real run will start?"

"I've been wondering that, each year, most of my life," the old canneryman said. "We know about when they'll come. But we never know in what numbers nor the exact date. Nor do we know where the fish spend their salt water lives. If we did, we might predict the size of annual pack. We only know they return to the rivers of their spawning, in turn to spawn and die. We can only hope that this year they don't decide to pour through the Mill Race—that they go around Donovan Island where seiners can get a crack at them without risking their lives."

IV

Tim went back to the *Molly-O*—and the search for another school of salmon. Purse seiners from nearby regions were coming into the channel. From now on it would be dog eat dog. A school of salmon was like five or ten thousand dollars swimming around in the water—or gold on unstaked ground. It would belong to the first man who claimed it.

Several times seiners raced to areas where the fish were jumping. Seines went out over the big roller. were pursed and emptied, only to yield a few dozen fish.

"Let's have a look at the Mill Race," Tim said, and Sven Nordstrom. who knew as much about salmon as any fisherman. nodded. The tide being high, they left the main channel and went through a narrow strait that was foul with reefs in low water.

Tim was in the galley mugging up on coffee when Nordstrom called him.

"Power boat in distress," Nordstrom said. "They're flying the flag upside down."

Tim put the binoculars to his eyes briefly, then grinned. "It's the Grambs' speed boat." The small craft was wallowing in the succession of swells rolling through the straits and as they came alongside, Tim looked down and saw Martha Lane.

"What's the trouble?" he called.

"I went for a ride and the engine quit," she answered.

"I'll tow you to a cove," he offered. "You can drop anchor. The boat will be safe enough. One of the Grambs tugs can pick it up later on. Okay?"

"Okay," she answered. taking a line.

Tim went into the cove, taking soundings because the rocks were too close to the keel for comfort. He anchored the speed boat for Martha and helped her aboard the *Molly-O*. She removed her gloves and blew on her fingers which were stiff with the cold.

"You're a long way from home," Tim suggested.

"Everyone was out looking for jumping salmon," explained Martha, "and I thought I might as well go along. Where are you bound?"

"Mill Race," he answered.

"Mill Race!" she exclaimed. "I've always wanted a look at that. Will you run through it?"

"Not if I'm in my right mind," he told her. "Still, if there was a big school of salmon going through, I might risk an old, beat-up purse seiner."

As they approached the northeasterly end of the Mill Race, Martha saw hundreds of salmon in the stretch of water between the Race and the river mouth. "Why don't you fish up ahead?" she asked.

"Government rules and regulations

forbid fishing that close to a river mouth," explained Tim. "Otherwise fishermen would fish so close to fresh water that salmon never would get up the river to spawn. A river mouth is always a sort of bottle-neck. There's just about a thousand feet of water above the Mill Race entrance where it's legal to fish. No telling what the tide rips will do, and if you're carried into forbidden water, you may be arrested, thrown in jail, and your boat and gear confiscated." He turned to Nordstrom. "Kind o' tempting, isn't it?"

Nordstrom's eyes were on driftwood bobbing about. To a man of his experience, driftwood was a clue to what the deeper currents were doing.

"Put me on that rock," he said, pointing to a rock awash, "and we might get away with it. I'll take a chance."

"One end of the net couldn't drift," Tim reasoned. "We might make a haul in legal water and get out before the Mill Race sucked us in. It'll give the engineer quite a work-out going full speed ahead or full speed astern."

"Let's do it," urged Nordstrom. "Jumpin' catfish, there must be ten thousand dollars in sight." He gave Tim a quick glance, adding slyly, "Eight thousand if you sell to MacNaughton."

"There's the *Anna Grambs*," a fisherman yelled, pointing. Several seiners were laying off, waiting for the tide to turn before going through the race. The *Anna Grambs* pushed through the waiting seiners and came on. Either she was going through the Race, or else was gambling on setting her seine in spite of the obstacles. And this she couldn't do without running the risk of fouling the *Molly-O*.

"I'm ready," Nordstrom said. Tim shouted an order and men put the heavy skiff over the side.

When Martha was beyond earshot, a fisherman growled, "Watch that dame, Tim. She's Buck Grambs' girl. Damned queer, say I, that she'd be adrift just at this time. She'll do you dirt."

"That I doubt," Tim answered, "but I'll admit it's odd she'd be adrift just when we're the only seiner to pick her up."

Martha returned, and seemed inclined to stay in the wheelhouse where those aboard the *Anna Grambs* could not see her. She stood quietly, a little behind Tim, and he was acutely conscious of her nearness. His pulse quickened and for a moment he remembered the joy of dancing with her. He thought, with what was now usual resentment, "Buck Grambs' girl! What does she see in him, anyway?"

Now they were nearing the rock. Tiny waves were breaking over it, and the *Molly-O* was dangerously near.

"Be careful!" Martha cried out, "or you'll crush the skiff between the rock and the hull." Quickly she added, "I'm sorry, Tim. Of course you know what you're doing."

"Sometimes I wonder," he said dryly, ringing for full speed astern, and spinning the wheel.

It was neatly done and Nordstrom leaped from skiff to rock, then hauled

up the skiff until it was firmly lodged. Now they began paying out the seine and Tim put the *Molly-O* on a course that would complete a circle and trap the thousands of salmon. He was half through when the Grambs' boat began spreading its net.

"Hold it!" Tim yelled at his men. He turned and bellowed, "Grambs! Full speed astern before you ram me! The current is tricky—"

"I know all about the currents," retorted Grambs. "You're afraid you'll lose some fish." He waited a moment. then a bell sounded and the *Anna Grambs* began backing. To Grambs' astonishment the current threw the seiner off of her course and an instant later she was bearing down on the *Molly-O.*

One of Tim's men threw a massive rope fender between the two craft and this took up some of the shock. Then, under momentum, aided by a tricky current, the *Anna Grambs* smashed the older vessel against the rock.

"Stop your propeller!" Tim warned. "Stop it!" He could see his seine being drawn toward the propeller.

"What the devil you talking about?" demanded Grambs. "I want to back out of here before she's carried into the Mill Race."

"Stop your propeller!" Tim repeated. The *Anna Grambs*' engineer heard the demand. He grew tense, but rightly took orders only from his own skipper.

The propeller cut through the net, picked up a loop of the leaded line on the bottom and wound it around the propeller shaft along with the heavy purse line. The propeller came to a grinding stop.

"Cut the net," Tim yelled, "and keep it from fouling our propeller. You bull-headed fool, why didn't you stop your propeller? You're going into the Mill Race all right, and with no power to keep your boat headed right."

A fisherman on the *Molly-O* who had gone below came up hurriedly. "The rocks opened up new seams, captain," he reported.

"Get the pumps going. All of them!" Tim ordered. His words, sharp and clear, reached Tremper's ears.

"I stuffed waste into two of those pumps, Buck," Tremper whispered. "She won't stay afloat long if the leak's bad."

"Get aboard and undo the damage," Grambs answered in a low voice.

"How?"

"Don't ask me how," Grambs snapped. "Do it!" He turned back toward Tim. "Lash the two boats together. You give me power and steerage way, and I'll help keep you afloat."

"Good idea!" agreed Tim.

Grambs turned to Tremper. "This is your chance!" he said in a low voice. "Take a line aboard the *Molly-O.*"

In the excitement Tremper leaped aboard, handed the line to two of the *Molly-O*'s crew, and went below. Martha had been watching him curiously. Without saying anything she

left the wheelhouse and followed, taking care to keep deckhouses between herself and Buck Grambs.

Tim noticed her absence, but was too busy to give it any thought. The seiner had been drawn clear of the rock by the current, and Nordstrom was in the water, clawing at the net. His rubber boots had filled with water and the instant he lost his grasp, or the net sank, he would go under. The floats were helping, but sections of the leaded part of the net were a hindrance.

"Tim!" Nordstrom bellowed.

Tim knew from the tone Sven must be desperate. In their long relationship he had never known a time when Nordstrom couldn't take care of himself. As Tim left the wheelhouse, he shouted at Grambs, "Don't make a move until you hear from me!" He looked over the side and saw Nordstrom who was now submerged to the shoulders, his thick fingers clawing at the strands, Sven kept climbing and sinking, climbing and sinking.

Tim jumped to the turn-table, then pulled sections of net over the roller until Nordstorm was clear. The net piled up in tangled masses as Tim turned off the power and pulled Nordstrom aboard.

"Get off those boots, Sven," he ordered. "We may be swimming the Mill Race before we're through."

Suddenly he heard the engine room "Stand by" bell sound, followed by slow speed astern. "Don't obey!" he bellowed down.

"I won't." the engineer answered. "I saw Grambs come aboard and figured he was in the wheelhouse."

"Nordstrom, make sure there's no dragging net to foul the propeller, then report to me," Tim said. He ran to the wheelhouse. Cold anger gripped him and he had to wait several critical seconds to calm down, but when he saw Grambs at the wheel, he almost lost his self-control again.

"Grambs, what the devil do you mean by signaling the engine room?" he demanded. "I told you to do nothing."

"The two boats had twisted around, and the *Anna* was about to smash against a rock," Grambs answered, "and I thought a little shot of power would take her clear and save my hull."

"You knew some net was still overboard," Tim accused. "You knew that it could foul up my propeller, too. I'm sorry that we can't have this out. We've had a good rough-and-tumble fight coming for a long time. But I've got to make it a short one."

He saw Grambs' fists come up defensively, then the man was crumpled on the wheelhouse floor and Tim had no recollection of hitting him. He only knew that the skin across the knuckles of his right hand was split and bleeding. He knew, too, that the water was gaining on the pumps, because the *Molly-O* was developing a list.

Nordstrom hurried up to the wheelhouse. "All clear, sir," he reported. "It looks as if we're going through the Mill Race, packing a cripple."

"It'll be a good trick if I do it,"

Tim answered. "I know this—neither seiner has enough power to keep out of the Race the way it's running this morning. And salmon everywhere! Drag Grambs into my quarters. Remember to fetch him out if we start going down. Or . . . is he dead?"

"He's breathing," Nordstrom answered. He didn't add, "But I don't like the looks of him." He reasoned that Tim had responsibility enough for three men without worrying over Grambs.

"One more thing," Tim said. "Where's Martha Lane?"

"She went below, to get out of Grambs' sight, like as not, and she hasn't come back, though she might've come up when I was in the water."

"Go below and check," Tim told him. "She might have slipped on a ladder, fallen and knocked herself out. All this may make sense in the end, but I doubt it. Why should she be aboard just at this time?"

As Nordstrom hurried off, Tim noticed that the *Anna Grambs* was beginning to list toward the *Molly-O*, and that the hawsers lashing the two vessels together were under a tremendous strain. The *Grambs* was beginning to supply buoyancy to the sinking purse seiner.

V

A Grambs fisherman had taken the *Anna's* wheel and was leaning out the window, ready to respond to Tim's orders. To maintain control, the vessels must have steerage way. The swift tide wasn't helping. As a result, the two vessels must move faster than the tide.

Tim's seamanship brought the purse seiners safely through three bad spots, but the *Molly-O*'s waterlogged condition made them increasingly hard to handle. She struck the fourth reef and stranded. The current, working against the *Anna Grambs*, began slowly dragging her off. With new leaks, she would never survive.

"Cut the hawsers!" Tim yelled. He turned to the Grambs' wheelman, adding, "You're on your own. Good luck." Then he caught up an ax and helped cut the hawsers.

Each snapped under the strain as soon as blades severed a few strands. The *Anna* went on, sideways, completely out of control. Tim kept the ax in his hand, as he went below. Nordstrom hadn't returned. Then as Tim started down the ladder, he saw Tremper slink into the darkness of the hold.

Tim ran back to the wheelhouse and caught up his .45 caliber automatic pistol. He kept his head clear of the hatchway as he shouted, "Tremper, come out. I don't know what you've done, but I'm justified in shooting first and investigating afterwards. Come out!"

There was a long delay, then Trem-

per came slowly up the ladder. Two fishermen helped him up the last two steps, searched him carefully then, at Tim's order, tied him hand and foot. Tim went below.

Nordstrom, dazed, was gagged and tied up to a timber. Martha, conscious, but as thoroughly tied and gagged, lay on ship's stores.

"I saw Tremper go below," she explained, "and I knew that he didn't belong there. You were busy, so I went down to check. Tremper was doing something to the pipes, or whatever you call them, that draw up bilge water."

"Then what?"

"He turned suddenly, and that's the last I remember," the girl said. "Now I have a splitting headache."

Tim helped her on deck and examined her bruised head. The pattern was strangely familiar. "He took off his shoe, Martha," Tim said, "grasped it by the toe, and brought the heel down on your head. It's an old sailor trick. That's how I learned Tremper was the one who popped me that time in the *Molly-O*'s galley. The leather around the nail heads was worn down enough so that the heads punctured the skin. I took an impression of my bruise with putty, studied it until the pattern was thoroughly fixed in my mind, then prowled about until I found a heel print in the mud that would match up."

"So that's how you found the guilty man?" Martha marveled. "Don't tell him. He thinks you have the Indian sign or something on him. I think he'll crack under pressure. From the day you beat him in the Fishermen's Rest fight, he's been a changed man—uneasy and worried."

"Sit here where the breeze can cool that throbbing head," Tim advised. "Later, I'll have to ask you some questions."

"Why not now?"

"I don't want to take advantage of a girl with a headache," he replied.

Tim heard a motor humming and saw Hole-card MacNaughton coming up the channel. His powerful speed boat was making good time against the swift current. In a few moments it came alongside the wrecked purse seiner. "Take a line, Tim," MacNaughton yelled.

"For once he didn't call me Sonny," Tim thought. He took the line, made fast, then helped MacNaughton aboard.

"The *Anna Grambs* made it through with only a splintered guard rail," Hole-card reported. "As soon as they were through, the men aboard got down a couple of anchors. Unless leaks develop she'll be okay. They were trying to remove wads of net from the propeller when I passed them."

"My net, and it'll take days to repair it," Tim said savagely. "But what difference does it make? My purse seiner is wrecked. Well, there are several messes to clean up, so let's get at it. Tremper, you're first. I can't tell you what the government will do to a man who damages pumps and prevents a boat from saving itself. It'll likely be a good stiff term in

the federal pen. But helping me by coming clean won't hurt you when I start collecting damages for wrecking the *Molly-O*. You can talk now, write out a confession, or you can have your day in court in a damage suit and listen to the evidence we'll bring in, including Martha Lane's testimony."

"I've had enough," Tremper snarled. "Buck Grambs was afraid you'd get a foothold in this field and he hired me to put you out of business. I knocked you over the head with my shoe heel that night and made like I'd tried to put emery in the bearings to keep you from finding out what I'd really done. Today, when it looked as if both boats would sink, unless the *Molly-O*'s pumps all worked, I had to take a chance and clear out the waste I'd stuffed in. When Martha Lane came down the ladder and caught me, I rapped her one. Then Nordstrom came down and I got him. That's all there is."

"Put it down in black and white," Tim said, getting a pencil and paper while Nordstrom untied the man's hands.

Tim went up to his cabin and found Buck Grambs sitting on the edge of the bunk, holding his head. Tim felt relieved. There had been, of course, the possibility that his single blow had killed the man. Grambs deserved it, but Tim was glad a killing wouldn't be on his conscience in the years to come.

"You couldn't dish it out fairly and squarely, Grambs," Tim said grimly, "and you couldn't take it when the cards were down. Your blundering cost me my purse seiner. That's one part of this deal that will be aired in a damage suit. What the government does to you is something else. Tremper's spilled everything. Oh, don't think he talked until he knew we had the goods on him. He knew when he was licked."

Buck Grambs didn't answer, except to shrug his shoulders in a gesture of defeat.

"MacNaughton's taking you to a Coast Guard cutter that's cruising off Donovan Island," Tim continued. "I'll make my report to the United States Commissioner at Snug Bay. After that it's up to Uncle Sam who won't view such an affair lightly."

Grambs got to his feet and made his way slowly to MacNaughton's boat. Martha Lane was not in sight, Tim noticed. Grambs and Tremper exchanged brief glances, but said nothing. It was too late for talking and planning an avenue of escape from this latest episode in their disreputable careers.

MacNaughton followed them into the speed boat and shoved off. "I'll be back," he said to Tim.

The cook came from the galley with a couple of bags of ice. He put one on Nordstrom's head, then asked, "Where's the girl?"

"I'm here," Martha answered, coming from the other side of the boat. The cook put the bag on her head and brought her a chair. Nordstrom followed him to the galley, leaving Tim and Martha alone.

Tim noticed the engagement ring

was gone from her finger. She had worn it when she came aboard, because the flash of the diamond had given him a touch of that human emotion known us jealousy.

"Where's the ring?" he asked. "Did you give it back to Grambs?"

"Does it interest you?" Martha asked.

"Plenty," he answered.

"I won't give it back . . . yet," Martha told him. "After all, he's taken about all the beating one man can take today. Returning the ring on top of it all would be too much like kicking someone who's already down."

"You have a code of your own, and it's pretty swell," Tim said. "Now explain why I happened to find you adrift, flying distress signals."

"I wanted to be in on whatever happened," she answered. "I heard Buck and Tremper talking. They planned to take a netful of salmon right from under your nose. They knew where you were, and they reasoned that if you failed to find a school you'd look over the Mill Race. It was their opinion that you'd probably take a short cut through the straits, so that's where I stationed myself."

"But what was back of it all?"

"Buck came to school two years ago to visit his sister, and . . . well . . . he sold me a bill of goods," she said. "You see, I've always wanted a life of adventure. It's in my blood, and I saw no reason for resisting the force of it. Buck made a pretty good story of the looting Donovans who were bleeding a silver empire until the Grambs came along. The Donovans were a monster that kept coming to life."

"We try to die hard," Tim admitted.

"There was a third generation Donovan on the horizon, a sort of fish pirate and what-not, and he, Buck was taking him on," Martha continued. "Well, Buck can be charming when he wants to be, and . . . we became engaged."

"How long had you known him?"

"Seven months," she answered. "Well, last winter he came to my home town and got acquainted with the folks. At a party one night, he got a little tight and began boasting. Some of his stories were too rugged to be true, and I began to wonder. I almost broke the engagement, but I wanted to be fair, so I came out this year to visit the Grambs family and become acquainted with the real Buck." She drew a long breath. "It didn't take long to get the true picture. It's a shock to learn that you were in love with a phony, or thought that you were. But it's nice to know there are men who fight clean and fair. . . . Does that cover everything, Tim?"

"For the present," he answered. "And don't look at me too hard, because I'm not a pretty picture when I'm feeling as low as I do now. Sure, I can sue and get back my loss, but that isn't fishing. That isn't raiding a silver cache and coming back with ten thousand bucks." He stood up. "Let's go down to the galley and mug up."

"I could enjoy a cup of coffee," she

said. "I've known happier moments in my life, too."

They sat across the galley table from each other, drinking coffee thoughtfully, saying little. About an hour later MacNaughton's motor boat come alongside and they heard Nordstrom helping the old canneryman over the side. When they finished their coffee they went on deck.

"I'll take you to the Grambs' cannery, Miss Lane," MacNaughton offered. "Or, there's room at my place if you'd rather."

"Under the circumstances," Martha answered wryly, "I guess I'd *rather*."

Tim walked over to the rail and looked down. The tide had fallen, and he could see that the *Molly-O* had come to her final resting place. Here, on this reef, she would leave her bones when the first winter gale reduced her to wreckage.

Climbing down a ladder to the reef, Tim examined the hull. A rock had penetrated the forward section and held it firmly. The after section was wedged in between rocks, but the hull thus far was undamaged. The engine room would remain dry as long as the bulkhead held. The machinery and equipment above and below decks could all be salvaged.

MacNaughton and Martha had joined him. "Do you know, Holecard," Tim said at last, "as long as salmon come through the Mill Race, I can fish—perhaps keep a few thousand a day moving toward your plant. With the help of a powerful skiff, we

could operate in slack water and dump the catch into small scows, which would have to be brought in and towed out when the tide was right."

"I've been waiting for you to rebound, Tim," MacNaughton told him. "And I've got the very skiff you need—solidly built and equipped with a powerful engine. And now is as good a time as any to apologize for calling you 'sonny.'"

"It's about time," Tim grinned. "If you'd been my age and size I'd have started swinging long ago."

"I wasn't sure how tough you were, and figured a little needling would put you in fighting trim," Hole-card explained. "Thus a nickname that stirred you up. I realize now it wasn't necessary. I'm sorry."

"Maybe it *was* necessary," Tim told him. "There've been times it took all I had to finish out in front." He grinned. "No hard feelings."

"Nicknames don't come accidentally," MacNaughton said, "and 'Hole-card' was given me for a reason. I've needed a hole card for some time, if I'm to hold my own in the salmon game. For instance, it took me too long to locate my missing watchman, then to gather evidence that would prove the Grambs blasted my fish trap."

"So you cleared that up!" Tim exclaimed. "What happened?"

"A Grambs bunch beat the watchman up, and he got out of the country," said MacNaughton. "That left the trap unprotected and they blew it up. Details will come out in court when I sue Grambs for damages. But to get back to the present. Youth and experience are a good combination, and I need youth to go with my experience. How'd you like to buy a thousand shares in my cannery?"

He waited for Tim to recover from his surprise, then added, "You'd be superintendent, and there'd be an annual bonus besides a good salary."

"Nothing would suit me better," Tim answered. "But your stock costs plenty, and what'll I use for money?"

"You've caught salmon, and you're going to catch more," MacNaughton said. "There'll be the damage money collected from Grambs which will be no small item. Besides that, I'll pay you a pretty penny for your 'Red Silver' brand."

"It's a deal," Tim said quickly.

"I hope so," MacNaughton said, "but talk it over with Martha, first, because if I'm any prophet, you'll be talking over plenty with her. And now's a good time to start. Of course, we'll put Nordstrom and the others on the cannery pay roll."

They watched him climb the ladder to the *Molly-O*'s deck, then Tim turned to Martha.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

"I think that Hole-card's settled just about everything," she answered.

"Yes," Tim agreed as he took her in his arms. "Just about everything."

THE END

ALIAS JACKSON J. JACKSON

(*Continued from page 129*)

tore through the ring and started fighting the newcomers with his fists. They raved and swore and tried to fight back, but they'd as well have been bucking a cyclone.

At last Jackson picked them off the ground one by one and fairly threw them into their saddles. "Now high-tail," he ordered, "and I do mean high-tail!"

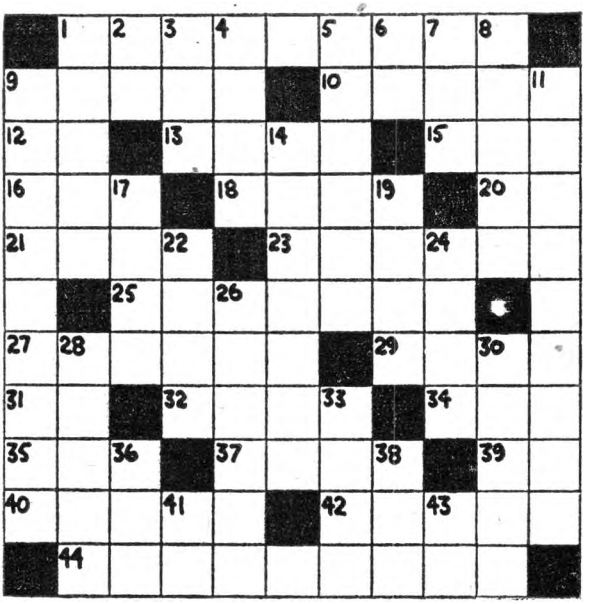
When they were gone, the big cowboy grinned at us and began to talk. He had plenty to say:

"I take it they was huntin' for the kid. Anxious about him, maybe, seein' they're his kinfolks. Back in my home county, them three and Pink ganged up on me and I had to shoot that oldest one. Looked like I'd killed him. I had a fightin' reputation, and sure couldn't have proved a thing in court, so I set out scoutin' from the law — with Pink always trailin' me. But when I saw the jigger I thought I'd killed . . . alive and well, here . . . Say, look at that, will you?"

He roared with laughter. Our eyes followed the line of his gaze, and we laughed with him. It was genuinely funny. Pink on his mean pinto had joined his kinsmen. Pink with no britches on, not sitting in his saddle but standing up in the stirrups. Suddenly the voice of Jackson Jack Jackson bellowed out across the range:

"Hey, Pink, I plumb forgot to ask you—what does your book say now?"

THE END



CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1. Four-wheeled vehicle used in the West
9. Pertaining to the Pope
10. Braid
12. State founded by Roger Williams: abbr.
13. Conductive tube
15. Before: prefix
16. Ancient
18. To hang fire
20. Greece: abbr.
21. Close tightly
23. Neither masculine nor feminine
25. Poltroons
27. Football team
29. Antithesis of the West
31. Company: abbr.
32. Every
34. Greek R
35. Couple
37. Ooze through
39. Land measure
40. Woolen cloth
42. Prepared
44. Winners of the West

DOWN

1. Southwestern Spanish dance affair
2. Toward the sky
3. Top off
4. Cliff: South Africa
5. Canned goods implement
6. Man's nickname
7. Knock
8. Funeral song
9. Seeks for metal in the earth
11. Land
14. Act of mortification
17. Carplike fresh-water fish
19. Newcomer to the West
22. The tender passion
24. Ex-ruler of Russia
26. Small predatory animal
28. Beneath
30. River fish delicacies
33. Man of courage
36. Mouths: Latin
38. Good soup vegetable
41. Any U. S. soldier
43. Paid newspaper item

(The solution of this puzzle may be found on page 63)

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