

10¢ JULY 27 WESTERN STORY

# WESTERN STORY 10 CENTS

STREET AND SMITH'S

JULY 27, '40

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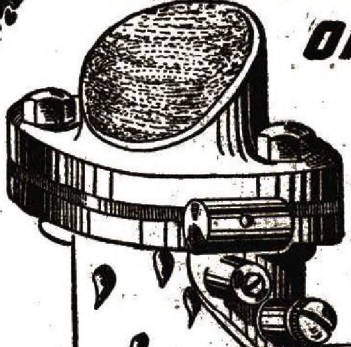
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STREET & SMITH'S

# WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR JULY 27, 1940

VOL. CLXXXIV NO. 2

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## BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

- DEATH TAKES A TALLY** . . . . . **T. T. Flynn** . . . . . 9  
 The day that made Mike McBride a wealthy cowman also gave him a gun-smoke heritage that he was going to spend mightily fast!

## SERIAL

- DARK FRONTIER** . . . . . **Frank Richardson Pierce** . . . . . 101  
 Fourth of Five Parts  
 Trapped by Clay Bullock's crew, will Steve and his men find that nature itself has joined the conspiracy against them?

## SHORT STORIES

- DEMON AN' PITHYPUSS** . . . . . **S. Omar Barker** . . . . . 46  
 Rowdy Ransom's beery-tone and Mac McCorkadale's whiskey tenor made a forty-rod duet that had the whole Ganado range bleery-eyed. . . .
- ACES AND EIGHTS** . . . . . **Ney N. Geer** . . . . . 55  
 The Powder River Kid held a dead man's hand—for himself or a murdering tinhorn!
- SADDLEFUL OF DYNAMITE** . . . . . **Jim Kjelgaard** . . . . . 66  
 Mac Williams knew just where to dab his loop on a horse worthy of that silver saddle. . . .
- SIDEWINDER'S RAIN CHECK** . . . . . **Wilfred McCormick** . . . . . 74  
 How to catch a double-crosser in his own trap was the problem that confronted Honest John Colter. . . .
- WHIPLASH FOR A GUN BUCKO** . . . . . **H. Fredric Young** . . . . . 83  
 Spawn of a renegade, Taw Ringo had one foot on the owlhoot and the other on Tully Gerault's neck!

## WESTERN STORY FEATURES

- IN TONTO TOWN** . . . . . **Harry R. Keller** . . . . . 54  
 A poem of the range. . . .
- RANGE SAVVY** . . . . . **H. Fredric Young** . . . . . 65  
 —A weekly feature devoted to cattle country facts and legends.

## DEPARTMENTS

- THE ROUNDUP** . . . . . **The Editor** . . . . . 5
- GUNS AND GUNNERS** . . . . . **Phil Sharpe** . . . . . 93
- MINES AND MINING** . . . . . **John A. Thompson** . . . . . 95
- THE HOLLOW TREE** . . . . . **Helen Rivers** . . . . . 97
- WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE** . . . . . **John North** . . . . . 99

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

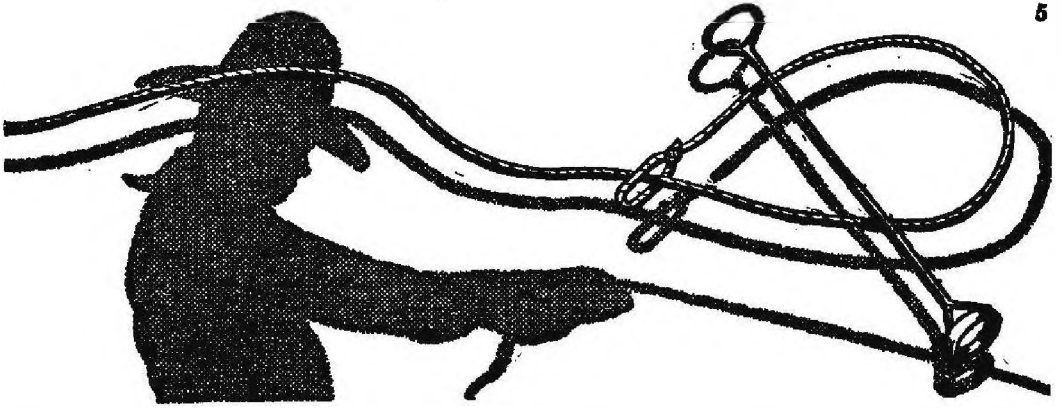
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# The Roundup

WITH plans for vacations in the air we're inclined to be a bit dreamy-eyed and "away in the mind" these warm summer days, particularly when we receive a letter like the one we reprint here from Harry F. Olmsted, who is taking his annual jaunt in the Southwest. Harry writes:

"New Mexico is beautiful at this time of the year—hot days, cool nights, and the verdure showing the effects of the winter moisture. The cactus is in bloom, and some of it is very beautiful. I brought in one yesterday to plant at Dean Kirk's new trading post that had seventy-five blood-red blooms.

"It has not been a very good year—little rain and not much snow. Last year was total drought, and the Indian corn crop was a failure. The result is a total lack of seed corn—and a Navaho will as soon sleep in a haunted "chindi hogan" as plant or eat the white man's superior corn. So, few are planting, but such as have seed are busy in their fields, using much the same technique their forefathers used here as far back as the year 1300.

"Thunder and lightning today,

with a little rain, and what a display the southwestern skies put forth. The Indians will soon start their rain dances, for the season is a full month ahead of schedule. A fascinating country this, one which goes far to restore me after an overly long period at the typewriter."

We know our readers join us in hoping that Harry enjoys his well-earned rest and we feel certain that he'll collect a wealth of material for future colorful and fascinating yarns for Western Story.

"And now," wrote Daniel S. Gage some time ago, referring to a story by Tom Roan in our April 20th issue, "we have another utterly silly and fool mess of words, GUN GHOSTS FROM BOOTHILL! Why inflict on us such nonsense? Stories which picture real life—which are possible—are literature—such nonsense as this story is just drivel."

Defending ourselves we wrote friend Gage that this type of story has become tremendously popular with our readers, judging from the fan mail received. The concensus of opinion seemed to be that not only was it exciting as well as entertaining, but was something different—a departure from the usual run-of-the-mine situations which have been written about time and again.

We reprint Mr. Gage's reply herewith because we consider it highly

interesting. Mr. Gage has this to say:

"Your letter in reply to mine criticizing GUN GHOSTS FROM BOOTHILL is at hand. No doubt many readers like such stories. It takes all kinds to make a world. But I think it more likely that those who like something are apt to tell you so than those who dislike it. It is not very agreeable to find fault.

"Reminds me of when Max Brand first began to write for the Western magazines. Of all the crazy tales, his took the cake. Horses galloping at full speed for hours without rest, dogs doing utterly impossible stunts, and men just behaving as if he were writing a fairy tale. But probably you recall them. I think in the end the majority of readers tired of them. As to whether such a story as GUN GHOSTS could have happened, maybe it could have, in some unheard-of place. But you must admit it is utterly improbable. And there is no good literature which deals in improbabilities.

"I have defended the type of story in the Westerns on the ground that they do picture life as one can hardly find it elsewhere. I have often discussed with our professors of English here whether they might not have their classes read some such writings. Whether these stories could be expected to rank as literature with Dickens, Eliot and others is not the question. But the fact is that they *are* read widely and they and other similar writings would be a valuable study of the mind of many readers. But the professors rejoin that such a study might be all right from the standpoint of sociology, but would hardly be the kind of literature their students should spend time upon. But there is no literature anywhere to be called by that name that is *improbable*. Except, of course, fairy

tales, fables, et cetera. So I do not like improbable tales in your pages—much less impossible stories. So if you print improbabilities, all my arguments are taken away."

We want to thank Mr. Gage for his frank opinion and we consider this reaction far from "finding fault," as he puts it. We are always appreciative of our readers' reactions to the stories we publish. After all, we want all of our members of The Roundup to feel free at any time to raise their voices whether it be in praise or censure. We welcome these letters which reflect the type of entertainment you prefer. And, naturally, it is to our interest to provide you with this entertainment. So keep your letters coming, for we'll take it right kindly to have your honest opinions of the stories you find in Western Story.

#### Coming next week—

With DARK FRONTIER winding up to a smashing conclusion, we're glad to announce the beginning of a new serial by Jay Lucas, the author of many fine cow-country stories. GUNMAN'S PROGRESS, is the story of young Lon Fallon and the forces of range hate which drove him to become a hired gun slinger. Filled with fast-paced action, it will, we predict, give you many a thrill.

L. L. Foreman contributes the full-length novel, SATAN CALLS A SHOWDOWN, and we've rounded up an impressive tally of stories by Eli Colter, Kenneth Gilbert, B. Bristow Green, Norman A. Fox and many other favorites. And, of course, you'll find all your favorite departments.

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National Radio Institute, Dept. OGD  
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# Death

# TAKES A TALLY



BY T. T. FLYNN

## CHAPTER I

### GUNFIRE RIDES THE DRAG

MIKE MCBRIDE was twenty-one this second day of the beef drive when the black clouds hung low from Big Baldy to the Screwjack Hills far south. And now and then the clouds dropped marching veils of mist and fine rain into which the big Circle 8 steers plodded with lowered heads.

Twenty-one this day—and under a down-pulled black hat and gay, close-woven blanket poncho, Mike

McBride was singing as he spurred the chunky claybank ahead toward Larrupin' Ed Shaw, who was riding point.

You could feel like singing on a day like this. You didn't care whether it was sleeting or snowing,

raining or sunny when you'd come twenty-one and half of a beef drive was your birthday present.

Half of six hundred and twenty-eight head by the final tally as they strung off the home ground for the leisurely two weeks' drive to the Two Rivers shipping pens. Prime steers for the most part, with a few old mossy bulls and cows that had been hazed out of the Salt Creek breaks.

Concho Walker had promised it three days ago, before riding to Salt Fork with the wagon and old Jump-John Myers.

"You're plenty man already, Mike, but it'll be legallike afore Jump-John an' I meet the drive at Dripping Springs with the wagon."

Concho's gnarled hand had reached for tobacco and brown papers as he growled: "Don't seem no time since you was that tough, hungry little button that the blizzard blowed in to help me 'n' Jump-John save them cattle."

Mike had grinned reminiscently as he stood wiry and lean, gray eyes level with old Concho's faded stare.

"Seems to me like it was a long time ago," Mike had said. "A heap has happened since."

Concho twisted the end of his smoke deliberately and lighted it before he spoke.

"Uh-huh. A heap. You was just shadin' twelve. I wa'n't but a busted-down old brusher squatter with a measly beef bunch that wa'n't even paid for. Salt Fork was half a dozen shacks, an' free grass laid from the Baldy range to the Screwjack malpais."

"I must've brought the rush," Mike chuckled. "Look at Salt Fork now—six saloons, a bank, a sheriff, an' a boothill. Every time I ride out I hear someone else has come into the country."

Concho's seamed old face had darkened at things he hated.

"Gittin' so a man cain't roll out o' his soogans an' stretch without pokin' some stranger in the eye. Good thing I got here first an' took my pick."

Then Concho had shrugged. "We've done all right, I reckon. The Circle 8 has got grass an' water, an' the beef drive this year'll bring us good cash money to bank. We've worked hard an' et old jerky an' bad beans long enough. The hard days is done. We're in the tall grass an' clover. An' you've more'n done yore share, Mike. All them lean years without wages, same as Jump-John an' me. So I'm gonna start you out a man with half the steer money in the Two Rivers Bank in yore name."

Mike had flared back quickly.

"Who wants any cash money in the bank? You think I've been hangin' around for a big hunk of the fat meat?"

"Shut up!" Concho had snapped. "I know what I'm a-doin'! An' like I told you—all this mornin', I'm leavin' you men to get the drive under way while I ride to Salt Fork with Jump-John an' the wagon. We'll meet you at the Springs."

"The way you cussed Salt Fork last time you come back," Mike had observed, "I wouldn't figure you'd hone to see it before Two Rivers."

"Don't care if I never see it again!" Concho had growled. "Just lookin' at the place gets me feelin' crowdy. But I got business to do, an' I might as well get it over with. Maybe you an' me'll ride on from Two Rivers after the steers is sold. It's time a younger feller like you shoved cash money in his pocket an' looked around. You been workin' too hard on the Circle 8 fer years now."

"I been gettin' out. Last year I rode to El Paso an' Santa Fe."

"I ain't askin' where you been!" Concho had snapped. "I'm tellin' you what you'll prob'ly do! You ain't big enough yet to stand an' argy with me! I told you—an' that's how it'll be! Dern that lead in my shoulder! It's gonna rain!"

**W**ELL, that was old Concho, a-snorting and a-bellowing like a tailed-up bull for fear someone would find how soft he was inside. But Mike McBride knew. Even now, as he spurred his claybank through a spit of rain, Mike's throat tightened at the thought of that birthday present.

Many a man worked hard all his life and never laid hands on so much money. It was wealth for a young buster just twenty-one. And hard to believe even now. Mike hadn't expected it.

Years back, when that hard-shelled button wearing too-big hand-me-downs had ridden out of the storm on a stolen horse, the Circle 8 sod cabin and the gaunt, stooped old brush buster had meant only warmth and grub for a few days until the weather faired. Helping hold the sorry bunch of cows from a disastrous drift had been no more than even trade for grub. But the "few days" had stretched into weeks, months, years. The button and the Circle 8 had grown together.

Old Concho Walker had been one of Quantrell's riders, and before and after that a freighter, gambler, cow-hand, handy with a gun from the Mexican settlements in California to the rip-roaring spot on Cherry Creek that had turned into the silver-and-cattle town called Denver. Concho had come out of it all an old man with empty pockets, and lead scattered in his tall gaunt frame

to ache when the weather was bad.

But land and cattle of his own had done something to the old man. Winter evenings when Concho told yarns of the past he talked calmly, as a man might speak of things some other man had lived through.

But when he talked of the Circle 8, Concho's faded, squinty eyes glowed and his voice grew eager.

"I had to live to be an old fool afore I dropped my loop on a good thing, button. A man ain't a man until his feet stand hard on his own land. The Circle 8 ain't much now, but she's a-gettin' bigger each year. Like you, button. Ain't no tellin' what a young un or a good cow spread'll grow into if they're handled right. Jest keep yore eye pceled an' watch."

Staying around to watch the Circle 8 grow had seemed natural to Mike McBride. Before a fellow knew it the Circle 8 was home, the Circle 8's good luck and bad luck were part of life.

You sort of forgot that all men weren't square and generous like old Concho, that life was wolf eat wolf, that when you grew up you were going to outwolf them all because of those early years when you'd been kicked around by bigger wolves.

Times you did think about it you were confident you'd outwolf them all when old Concho didn't need you any more and you finally left the Circle 8. You'd grown to handle guns in a way that made even Concho grunt with approval. Your half-starved kid body had grown fast to stocky, tireless manhood.

**C**ONCHO didn't know about that saloon trouble in El Paso last fall that would have ended in gun trouble if Mike McBride's fists hadn't beaten a border tough help-

less, and then the tough's partner, reeling and dazed before either man could snatch his gun.

Concho and old Jump-John and the newer hands, Larrupin' Ed Shaw, Slim Chance, Gus Delight, Jim Crowder and Sam Parks never suspected the cold, wolfish delight that flooded Mike McBride when he thought of that savage saloon fight that had left him cock of the walk and ready for more trouble—gun trouble if anyone asked for it.

The wolf pup had become a he-wolf ready for the pack. But now, as Mike stopped singing and stared into the misty rain, throat tight at the thought of those steers that were his birthday present, he felt less like a he-wolf than at any time he could remember.

Concho had given more than prime steers, more than money in the bank, or friendship and hearty words. A part of the old man had reached out to something in Mike McBride that had been frozen, aloof, coldly vengeful ever since, as a terrified kid just coming eight, he had seen his mother butchered by renegades masquerading as raiding Kiowas.

As Mike rode up, Larrupin' Ed Shaw observed:

"You shore pick purty weather to bust out singin' like a canary. Better save it for yore night trick in case we git thunder an' lightning. Them old mossybacks is still mad an' boogery an' layin' off to lead a run."

"I've got plenty left over," Mike chuckled. "Ain't you heard this is a birthday?"

Larrupin' Ed hunched under his yellow slicker, wet hat brim drooping and water trickling off his long mustache as he grumbled:

"When you git old as I am, you'll

groan on yore birthdays, kid. Concho knowed what he was about when he went around by Salt Fork with the wagon. Bet he's bellied up to a dry bar now, swappin' lies over a whiskey bottle."

"Concho ain't had a drink in years," Mike reminded.

Larrupin' Ed shifted in the saddle and snorted.

"Ain't because he didn't want it. Concho's been takin' his likker kick in buildin' up his cow spread. An' gettin' drier every year like a desert weed in a drought. When it comes time for rain, Concho's dry roots is gonna soak up everything in sight."

Larrupin' Ed shook water off his mustache and chuckled grimly.

"I've seen 'em dry out like that before. An' when they finally git set under a gentle pour o' whiskey, they sprout flowers an' green leaves an' howl. I hear Concho talkin' about the hard days bein' over. If that ain't medicine talk to break a drought, I never heered none. And I kin spot a sly look in that old coon's eye. He had somethin' on his mind when he lit out fer Salt Fork. It weren't grub fer us or dodgin' a wet saddle out here with the drive, either."

"It's your own tongue that's hangin' dry," Mike grinned. "Salt Fork ain't the place Concho'll go to do his drinkin'. He ain't liked Salt Fork since it growed up fast so close under his nose. If he was in Two Rivers, now, with the steers sold, you might be guessin' right. Concho's earned a case of likker the way he's worked an' done without."

"Why'd he have to go to Salt Fork, then?"

"Had business there. Maybe at the new courthouse."

"Have it yore way," Larrupin' Ed shrugged. "We'll know when we meet

the wagon at Drippin' Springs tomorrow night— Say, didja hear *that?*”

Two faint gunshots had come sog- gily through the mist veils hiding the brushy country through which the drive had just come.

“Sounded like a signal!” Mike said, twisting in the saddle and star- ing back.

Gus Delight and Sam Parks, rid- ing swing, were looking back also.

Several moments passed, and then two more shots rapped unmistak- ably far back of where Slim Chance was bringing up the drag.

“Trouble!” Larrupin' Ed jerked out. “An' a little more of that shootin' close in'll send them mossy- horns hightailin'! Better git back an' see what's wrong!”

Mike was already reining hard back past the noisy, nervous cattle, past Gus Delight, who was riding fast to head off an old cow and try- ing to look back toward the gun- shots at the same time. Back past the drags that had started to fan out from the gunfire behind them.

Slim Chance wasn't at his post, keeping them bunched and moving ahead. Slim might have been shot off his horse.

But the horse wasn't in sight, ei- ther, as two more shots cracked sharply. Mike galloped all of two hundred yards on the back trail be- fore he made out Slim's riderless black pony beyond a chaparral clump.

Swearing, Mike had his belt gun out from under the blanket poncho before he saw Slim getting to his feet on the other side of the horse. Beyond the chaparral clump a sec- ond horse was easily recognizable as Concho's pet Gray Star. Then Mike saw that a man was visible lying at Slim's feet.

## CHAPTER II

### BUSHWHACKER'S REWARD

**M**IKE swore again as he raced close enough to note the stricken worry on Slim's angular face. Concho hurt out here, miles from Dripping Springs, where he was to have met the drive!

Mike brought the running horse up short and hit the muddy ground before he saw that the prone man was old Jump-John Myers.

“Plugged in the lungs an' hip!” Slim said hoarsely. “Look at him!”

It was there plain enough to see. Old Jump-John, white-haired, bow- legged, stooped. He was older than Concho and not good for much any more but droll humor and driving a wagon and helping cook. Old Jump- John, with his slicker muddy and blood-smearred, and the crimson froth of his life bubbling on a slack mouth as the misty rain patted un- noticed on his wide, staring eyes.

“He must've cut our sign back there a piece an' burred on his horse until he sighted the drag!” Slim said huskily. “Guess he couldn't make it any more an' dragged his gun an' shot as he took a header off the hoss! He's been tryin' to tell me something about Concho, but he chokes up an' can't get it out!”

Jump-John was choking again as Mike knelt in the mud. Rattling gasps shook the frail, hunched fig- ure. Strangling on his own weak- ness and blood, Jump-John was, and not much could be done about it. There wasn't any way to get a doc- tor, and probably not even enough time to call back the grub wagon that was far ahead with the remuda, and give the dying man shelter.

Mike lifted the old man's head a little. It helped. Jump-John got his throat clear, drew a sobbing breath and gathered his strength

with visible effort. His harsh whisper was clear enough.

"Git to Salt Fork an' stop Concho! He done a little business an' took a drink an' was off like a wild man! Celebratin' about his son, he was whoopin' fer the whole damn town to drink to the feller who's a big cattleman."

Slim, bending over the spot, heard him and whistled.

"Concho never mentioned no son! Always acted like he'd never been married!"

"I told him so, an' he called me a ole fool an' yelled fer me to drink to the boy!" Jump-John gasped. "Concho's throwed his loop on a hellacious drunk that's gotta be stopped!"

"He have a gun fight before you left?" Mike demanded.

Jump-John rolled his head weakly in a negative.

"I seen he was set to stay in Salt Fork an' likely drink er gamble the Circle 8 away, so I got his hoss out o' the livery stable an' started to head you boys off an' git someone to stop him afore the tinhorn gamblers got at him. An' just this side of the Salt Fork crossin' by the Black Butte, I was bushwhacked. Feller plugged me twicet with a rifle an' then rode up to make sure I was a goner."

**J**UMP-JOHN choked and gasped again, and when the spasm passed he was vastly weaker. Mike had to bend low to hear now.

"Never seen the feller before. Look, near big pine. He should've . . . kept away."

"Why'd he shoot you?" Mike asked. "Can you hear me, John? Why'd he shoot you?"

Jump-John heard, for his head moved in another negative. But his gasping whisper was not the reply.

"Git Concho afore it's too late! I'm afeered—"

Jump-John choked again, and Mike's eyes were smarting and he was swearing in husky helplessness as he watched the old man go quiet and inert in the circle of his arm.

Larrupin' Ed came riding up as Mike lowered his burden to the wet, yellow slicker and stood up.

"I heered more shots! What the devil is it?" Larrupin' Ed yelled as he rode up.

"Jump-John was bushwhacked! There's trouble in Salt Fork! Circle the cattle an' get the wagon back here for a burying!" Mike threw harshly at the older man, "I'm ridin' to Salt Fork!"

But Larrupin' Ed was already swinging down.

"Bushwhacked? Who bushwhacked him?"

"He didn't get it out."

Larrupin' Ed's long black mustache jerked as he looked down at Jump-John and began to swear bitterly.

"How come someone shot a harmless old feller like him? Where's the wagon? Where's Concho? Ain't that his horse?"

"Concho's in Salt Fork on a drunk," Mike said hoarsely. "Something to do with a son he never told us about. Jump-John figgered he'd better get word to us an' started on Concho's horse. He was bushwhacked this side of the Salt Fork crossing. That's all we got from him. Jump-John never carried money enough to earn a killing, an' never made trouble!"

"On Concho's hoss it might be he was mistook for Concho!" Larrupin' Ed suggested.

"Concho was raising hell in Salt Fork," Mike reminded bitterly. "Why would anybody be at the Salt Fork crossing looking for him?"



*With the gun in his back Mike gambled everything on one wild chance!*

"It must've been a mistake," Slim put in heavily. "Concho ner Jump-John never riled anyone enough to bring on a killin' this way."

"Mistake, hell!" Mike said violently. "You don't make a mistake down a rifle barrel in daytime! Not twice! You know damn well who you're shootin' an' why! Jump-John was killed because he was

Jump-John! An' the reason's back there in Salt Fork, where Concho's blowed his top over this son that's turned up! You men'll have to bury Jump-John! I'm going to Salt Fork for the answer!"

Mike was swinging in the saddle as he finished. Larrupin' Ed plunged over to his stirrup.

"Wait'll we get the drive stopped an' the wagon back here an' I'll side yuh, Mike!" he urged.

"Stay with the cattle," Mike told him. "Better push on to the Springs for the water an' grass. I'll bring Concho to the Springs. Might as well bury Jump-John here. He was like Concho. Always wanted to be off alone a heap. I'll get my rifle and turn the remuda back."

Before Larrupin' Ed could answer, Mike was spurring away. Gus Delight saw him coming and rode back to meet him.

Jump-John's death made Gus erupt in profane anger. A signal caught Sam Parks' attention. Larrupin' Ed galloped up. Mike tarried long enough to help start the big steers circling, and then went on to get his rifle and turn back the wagon and remuda.

**J**UMP-JOHN had died late in the afternoon. Dark had just closed down, the rain had stopped, and patches of moonlight were gleaming through holes in the clouds when the Black Butte loomed off to Mike's right with cloud streamers drifting past the top like strands of misty hair.

Jump-John had said to look near a big pine. Many pines grew near Black Butte, and more than one big pine stood near the trail. The soggy ground was dark and there was little chance to find what Jump-John had been talking about.

Mike turned off the trail to several of the big pines, without much hope of seeing anything. It was as good a way as any to spell his horse. And it was the horse, snorting, shying from something on the ground, that located the body Mike would have missed.

A flaring match showed the man lying face down on the wet pine needles, black hat half crushed under his head. Mike rolled him over. Another match made clear the thin, foxlike face with a loose mouth under a neat brown mustache.

A two-gun man. One gun was still in the hand-stamped leather holster, the other lay beside the body. A bullet had struck beside the left nostril and come out the back of the head.

This was what Jump-John had tried to tell about, what Jump-John had meant when he said the stranger should have kept away.

Mike stood there in the black night, picturing old Jump-John galloping hard from the Salt Fork crossing while this fox-faced gunman carefully sighted a rifle and fired the death bullet.

Old John must have tried to reach cover. The second shot, perhaps, had knocked him out of the saddle under the pine. Like a dead man, old John must have lain here while the stranger came up to make sure the job was done right. Then old John had nailed him square in the face.

Old-timers like Jump-John and Concho were rawhide tough. Jump-John had been tough enough to get back on his horse and ride on to find the Circle 8 drive.

The dead man, Mike discovered, wore a money belt that held several hundred dollars in gold and a deputy sheriff's badge. Mike was frowning as he put the badge back and shoved the money belt in one of the saddle pockets. If the dead man was a deputy, why wasn't he wearing his badge? If he wasn't a deputy, why was he carrying the badge in his money belt?

Answers to those questions were no clearer than old Jump-John's murder. The dead man's horse was gone. Wandered away, probably, carrying the rifle that had killed Jump-John.

Mike was turning back for a final look at the body when his claybank nickered loudly. And over to the left, back in the trees, another horse nickered.

At the first sound Mike snatched his belt gun and jumped for the trailing reins. Then he listened. It might be the dead man's horse, still



tied where the owner had left him before ambushing Jump-John.

The horses nickered again and wind shook drops from the trees in ghostly pattering. Then silence fell again. The clouds parted and let silver moonlight drench the spot as Mike moved to mount and ride to the other horse.

A sharp, high voice behind the big pine froze his movement. "You're covered with a rifle! Stand still!"

### CHAPTER III

#### CHALLENGED

**U**NDER his breath, Mike damned the bright moonlight that made him a clear target to rifle shots only a few feet away. His back was to the gun, too.

Nerves on his neck prickled, crawled as he thought how he had stood there striking matches, with a gun covering him all the time. He could have been shot down easier than Jump-John.

"All right," Mike said without looking around. "Now what?"

"Drop the reins! Step back with your hands in the air!"

Mike took two steps back, grinning mirthlessly. It had been hard to believe his ears, but now there was no doubt that a woman held the gun on him.

"Drop your gun!" she ordered. Her voice was thin, tight, unsteady. Clear, though. Any other time it might have been a pretty voice.

"S'posin' I don't?" Mike said, listening for sign of a man. But if there were a man, he would have done the talking.

"I don't want to shoot you like a dog!" She sounded close to tears, as if nerves were ragged and tight, and her unsteady finger might press the trigger any instant. And she added: "Shooting is too good for

you! They'll know how to settle you in Salt Fork!"

"Here goes the gun," Mike said.

The moonlight still flooded on him. The soft thud of the gun on the mat of pine needles was audible.

"Now step back away from it!"

Mike stepped back without trying to look around.

"Mind telling me, ma'am, how come you're out here by Black Butte this time of evening? It ain't a place for a woman."

"If I hadn't met his horse heading back home and followed up the back trail, I wouldn't have caught you robbing his body! The rope they'll put around your neck will be too good for you!"

She must have been standing just beyond the pine trunk all the time he'd been examining the body, Mike thought. Not half a dozen steps away. One easy shot would have finished him—and she'd been in the mind to do it.

"Lady," Mike said over his shoulder, "I don't rob dead men. Ain't you a little hasty about a rope around my neck?"

The damp pine needles were noiseless under her movements. The rifle muzzle was prodding Mike's back before he knew she had come out from behind the pine. Her voice was bitter, scornful.

"You sneaking thief! I saw you take his money belt! And you knew where he was. I saw you come along the trail looking for him. One of your friends must have shot him, and you came back to rob him!"

Mike whistled softly. "So that's how you got it figgered? He your husband?"

"I haven't any husband! He's my brother!" She jabbed fiercely with the rifle. "You hear me? *My brother!* Shooting's too good for

you! Hanging's too good for a miserable thief like you!"

"Sister, huh?" Mike said, and his voice hardened as he thought of old Jump-John. "I might've known! Bushwhacking's more in the family line, ain't it?"

"What do you mean?" Somehow a little of the anger was gone as she put the question.

"You ought to know if you've growed up a sister to him!" Mike said harshly. "Don't tell me you don't know he was a skunk! A man don't get his age an' turn bushwhacker in a day! He's killed his men and run a dirty trail before, an' the family must have known it! He got what was coming to him—an' if there's any more like him in the family, they'll probably end up the same way! Get that gun out of my back! I don't hurt women!"

**T**HE rifle muzzle stayed hard in his back. But her voice changed to huskiness, to something close to fright. "Who are you? What are you talking about?"

"I'm Mike McBride, from the Circle 8. I rode here from our beef drive to Two Rivers. One of our men was coming from Salt Fork to meet us when your brother 'bushwhacked him here. Old Jump-John killed him an' managed to find us an' tell us before he died! I wasn't robbing the body! I took the money belt to give to the Salt Fork sheriff. Your brother asked for what he got! Killing me won't help! The Circle 8 men know about it!"

"So that's what happened?"

"That's what happened!" Mike said harshly.

"I . . . I believe you."

"Thanks," Mike said ironically over his shoulder.

"D-don't take that belt to the sheriff!" she pleaded.

"I'll take it if I can get there, lady!" Mike promised grimly.

"Stand still! Don't try to f-follow me!" she gulped. She was crying in soft, racking sobs that she seemed to be trying to conceal.

Despite the grim memory of Jump-John, Mike's anger vanished. This woman sounded young and suddenly helpless in grief and hurt. The gun left his back and she was gone.

Mike swung around and glimpsed her running out of the moonlight into the dark shadows beyond the pine, back toward the horse that had nickered. She stumbled slightly as her foot slipped, and kept on, a slim, small figure with both hands still clutching the rifle.

The whispering sound of her sobs came back for a moment, and then she was indistinct and vanishing in the night shadows.

A dead stick cracked, her horse nickered again, and then the stamp of hoofs, the crackling of branches, marked her spurring retreat on the horse.

Mike stood there alone with the dead man. He could have followed her—and perhaps been shot at. A woman in her state might do anything.

Helpless and crying, trying only to get away from him! As if he were guilty of her hurt! He didn't know who she was, but he was sure now that she hadn't realized the dead man was a killer. And she'd believed Mike McBride's angry words without question. Believed and fled.

"Didn't even give me an argument," Mike muttered, scowling down at the dead man.

But the dead couldn't hear or answer back and the girl was gone. It would be hard and maybe dangerous to try to catch her.

She must live this side of Salt Fork. It wouldn't be hard now to find out who the dead man was. And meanwhile, Concho Walker was in Salt Fork, maybe in trouble.

Mike left the dead man there under the big pine and started on toward Salt Fork. And the bleak, cold anger at Jump-John's killer was grimmer now, and he couldn't get his mind off that sobbing, fleeing girl.

## CHAPTER IV

### SALT FORK CELEBRATES

**S**ALT FORK was a raw, new town that had mushroomed at the fork of Salt Creek and Blue River. When, years ago, old Concho had brought his mortgaged cattle onto the lush grass north of the Screwjack Hills, Salt Fork had been only a few shanties and a trading post.

When the button named Mike McBride had thrown in with the Circle 8, the last Indian outbreak had just been cleaned up to the west, gold had been discovered in the Cohita Mountains, a hundred and fifty miles farther west, and the easiest way for the freight was through Salt Fork. With the Indians out of the way, cattle were safe in the Screwjack country and the settlers had come fast.

Salt Fork had grown as fast and been made the seat of a new country. And on his Circle 8 land Concho had grumbled about the rush of strangers that put neighbors within ten or fifteen miles and made Salt Fork, a bare fifty miles away, a raw, wide-open cattle town almost under their noses.

It was an hour's fast ride from the Black Butte to Salt Fork. The claybank was foam-flecked and blowing hard when Mike dismounted before the Colorado House, the two-story

adobe hotel where the stages stopped.

Wagons and horses were at the hitch racks along the muddy street. Windows were lighted, indicating that Salt Fork was wide awake. Mike walked stiffly into the hotel and spoke to a fat, gloomy-looking clerk who was seated on a high stool behind the counter making entries in a ledger.

"Where can I find a gent by the name of Concho Walker?" Mike demanded.

The fat man started and spilled a drop of ink on the sheet as he looked up and blinked. "You mean the old man who owns the Circle 8?"

"That's him? Is he around?"

"He's been around," the fat man said sourly. His pen tip indicated the long rafters behind Mike. "Peel your eye up there, bub, an' you'll see where he shot hell out o' the ceiling this afternoon. Said he was goin' to write his son's name up there so Salt Fork'd never forget it. He like to shot the shirt tail off a preacher that had the room up there."

"I ain't 'bub,' and the preacher can look after his own shirt tail," Mike said coldly. "What's the son's name?"

"Walker, I reckon. That's the old un's name."

"He have the son with him?"

"Not as I seen."

"Where's Walker now?"

"The devil only knows," the fat man said sourly. "I only hope he stays away until he sobers up."

**S**EVERAL men sitting in chairs had listened to the conversation. One of them said: "He was at the Gold Rush a couple of hours ago, going strong. Drinks is free, an' he swears he'll have the whole town drunk tonight."

"Why don't the sheriff lock him up?" Mike demanded harshly.

"If Ban Shelton locked up everyone that bought drinks fer the town," the fat clerk grumbled, "Salt Fork'd be a hell of a place. Shelton's got the right idea. He let's 'em have a good time."

"Specially when they howdy-do as how they'll pin a few ears back with a stud deck as soon as they square off at a table with any gents who'd like to learn poker from an expert," the other man drawled. "Shelton ain't the man to annoy his gambler friends by lockin' the sucker up, is he?"

A queer look came over the clerk's fat face.

"That ain't no way to be talkin', Shelton wouldn't like it."

"I'll bet not," the speaker agreed in his lazy drawl.

He was a clean-shaven, middle-aged man in a black suit, gray hat and expensive half boots. His air of prosperity suggested that he came from one of the larger towns. Long slim hands unmarked by hard work hinted that he might be a gambler. But his lip had curled with disdain when he spoke of the sheriff's gambler friends.

The clerk cleared his throat, frowned and started to say something. Then he pressed his lips together, dipped the pen into the ink and hunched back over his ledger.

"Thanks," Mike said and hurried out.

At least Concho hadn't gotten himself into a gun fight. But old Jump-John had been right. Concho was on a "hellacious" drunk that might lose him the Circle 8 and everything he had built up in the lean hard years of his old age.

Larrupin' Ed had called the turn,

too. Concho had dried out too long. And now the old man was roaring wild on whiskey, at the mercy of any crooked gambler who might be friendly with the sheriff. Mike was scowling as he looked in a saloon, saw no customers and crossed the muddy street toward another saloon.

Ban Shelton, Salt Fork's sheriff, had been in office less than a year. Mike had seen him only once, from across the street, a tall, stringy man with a reddish mustache, a fancy, pearl-handled revolver and a big, fancy white sombrero.

Shelton was a Texas man. He was said to be handy with a gun, and was backed by all the Texicans who had settled in the south part of the county.

The second saloon had only one customer and he was not Concho. Mike studied the hitch racks and building fronts along the street for signs of the most life, and ended up at a low adobe building that housed the Stag Saloon.

**T**HE Stag hitch rack was crowded with horses. Loud voices, laughter, fiddle and piano music were audible inside. And as Mike walked in, a high-pitched rebel yell keened over the other sounds.

A burst of laughter followed. The tall, gaunt bearded man in a battered black hat and worn buckskin who had given the yell sighted Mike and took a step toward him, whooping: "'Nother stranger! An' walkin' steady an' sober er my name ain't Jubal Lark! What'll it be, young feller? Yuh cain't stay the only sober un in town!"

Mike grinned as he allowed himself to be urged to the bar.

"Whiskey," Mike said. "I hear Concho Walker's gettin' the town drunk."

Jubal Lark whooped again.

"Concho Walker! *There's* a man who'll do fer ary partner! Knowed him on the Picketwire thirty year ago, I did, an' they wa'n't ary cur-rycomb made fer him *then!* We're a-drinkin' to Concho's boy, an' I'm keepin' 'er pourin' while Concho gits him some rest with a leetle poker! Barkeep! Everybody's drinkin'! I got the dust tuh pay fer it! Gold's gold in ary place yuh see hit! An' I got the gold"

His rebel yell split the noise again.

"Drink up on Jubal Lark an' Concho Walker! Hit's free an' hit's here a-waitin'!"

Whoops and yells marked the rush to the already crowded bar. The crowd was good-naturedly noisy and drunk.

It must have been going on for hours. Mike had never seen anything like it. Concho had likkered up most of Salt Fork. Half a dozen men already were lying helplessly against the walls where they had been dragged.

"Where'd you say Concho was?" Mike asked Jubal Lark.

"In the back, havin' him a few cyards. Yuh know Concho, young feller?"

Mike nodded.

Jubal Lark dropped an arm on his shoulder and grabbed for his hand.

"I'm proud to know yuh, son! Concho's friends is Jubal Lark's friends! Git outside that drink an' I'll take you to Concho! He's a-waitin' fer you, boy! Concho's a-waitin' fer all his friends! We'll tote him a bottle an' bring him luck with them cyards!"

The drink helped after the wet day and hard ride. But Mike was

hard-eyed and watchful as he edged away from the bar after Jubal Lark.

## CHAPTER V

### SHERIFF ON GUARD

THE saloon was L-shaped, with the bar in front and the side of the L a long, beamed room holding a dance floor and tables. Jubal Lark weaved toward a door in a partition at the back.

A man drinking beer at a table near the door stood up when Mike and Jubal Lark approached. The big, white sombrero topping the tall, stringy figure was familiar before Mike recognized Ban Shelton, the sheriff.

Shelton hitched his gun belt up as he stepped over before the door.

"Where you men headin'?" he demanded.

"Bringin' luck an' a friend to my ole pard, Concho!" Jubal Lark whooped. "Step in with us, sheriff, an' clean out yore guzzle with some real drinkin'! Beer ain't ary way to be celebratin' with Concho!"

The sheriff blocked the way.

"I'm drinkin' what I like, an' the boys in there are doin' what they like. They don't want to be bothered. You men wait at the bar. They'll be out when they get ready."

"Ain't a time when Concho wa'n't ready to see his old pard Jubal Lark! He's a-dryin' an' a-thirstin' fer this bottle we're bringin' him!"

"You ain't bringin' him anything!" Shelton snapped with a quick loss of patience. "I'm keepin' order around here, an' if the boys say they don't want to be bothered, I'll keep it that way for them while I'm around. Go on back to the bar like I'm tellin' you. I don't want to lock you up!"

"Ain't anybody gonna lock Jubal

Lark up fer tryin' to see an old pard-ner!"

Ban Shelton's weathered, reddish face was long and angular, with a small, tight mouth. And the mouth was hard now as he bit out: "I'll lock you up so damn quick you won't know what happened, old-timer! Don't crowd me, even if you *are* feelin' good!"

"Wait a minute," Mike said, elbowing Jubal aside. "Nobody's breakin' any law by walkin' in on a card game to speak to a man. Since

when did the Salt Fork sheriff start watchin' the door for a poker game?"

Ban Shelton's angular face reddened.

"Lippy young squirt, ain't you? Who'n hell are *you*?"

"McBride's the name. I work for the Circle 8 brand. I rode here to

*Mike was almost clear of Salt Fork when guns opened up across the street and the claybank went down.*



see Concho Walker, and I aim to see him. Anything in your law book that says I can't see him?"

**B**AN SHELTON'S eyes were set close and mean-looking when you watched them narrowing and flaming in dislike, as they did now.

"My law book says you're too damn smart for your age!" he said harshly. "It's got six pages, a handle, an' a steel barrel! An' I'll bend it over that swelled young head if you don't get back to the bar with this man an' stop disturbin' the peace! That's final warnin'!"

Mike was grinning. He'd grinned like this before, and felt like this inside when the wild fracas had started in the El Paso saloon. It was a hot and surging feeling inside, like fire suddenly roaring up against trouble.

"Workin' with the tinhorn gamblers, are you?" he said, still grinning. "Get them hands up! Turn around! Open that door!"

Ban Shelton's look had turned venomous as the first words came out. His hand had slapped down toward the fancy, pearl-handled gun, but it stopped when he saw the fast outflip of Mike's old wooden-handled .45.

The sheriff's jaw stayed loose in amazement as Mike bit out the orders with the same cold grin. Slowly Shelton turned and reached for the doorknob. Mike jerked the pearl-handled six-gun from the holster.

Juba! Lark had sobered into quick uneasiness.

"Wait a minute, young feller," he protested. "They ain't no use stickin' up the sheriff! Trouble ain't Concho's idee today!"

"Pick out a spot of floor an' guzzle yourself blind!" Mike said through his teeth. "I'm handlin' this! You, sheriff, hurry up! Lemme

see Concho Walker! I'm in a hurry!"

"There'll be hell to pay for this!" Ban Shelton threatened thickly as he stepped through the doorway into a dim passage beyond.

"Ask for it and you'll get it!" Mike said. "Open up that card game an' show me Concho!"

The edges of the second door on the right oozed light and murmuring voices. Then the bright-yellow lamp light glowed into the passage and the voices went silent as Shelton opened the door and stood there with his hands up.

"What the hell?" a nasal voice exclaimed.

**P**AST the sheriff's shoulder, Mike saw a bottle, glasses, and cards on a table under a hanging brass lamp that was wreathed in bluish tobacco smoke.

A stud game by the lay of the cards. Four players. Concho had his back to the door. The nasal-voiced man was across the table, facing the door. Under the down-pulled brim of his hat, a lean, furrowed face eyed the sheriff fixedly.

On the right side of the table a burly, red-faced man with his vest open and his sleeves rolled up on big hairy arms had been dealing cards. He put the deck down slowly as his head turned on a thick, powerful neck. Under bushy black brows, his eyes narrowed at the doorway.

The fourth man, on the left side of the table, was small, lean and young. Behind a scanty blond mustache his rather handsome face was suddenly nervous as he leaned forward and saw the sheriff. A stack of chips clattered softly as he dropped them on the table. He slid lower in the chair, as if shrinking from trouble.

"Get up, Concho!" Mike said sharply. "I've come for you!"

"Eh?" Concho's voice was thick. His chair scraped back and he staggered as he started to get up. "Who is it?"

"A damn stranger lookin' for trouble on account of the old man!" Shelton said harshly. "He drew a gun on me!"

"Shut up!" Mike said. "Concho, come out o' there!"

Concho caught at the chair to steady himself and lurched around into the doorway, peering to see what was happening. His stooped, spare frame hid the rest of the room for the moment. And back of Concho there was no warning as a gunshot blasted out the overhead light.

Mike couldn't shoot the sheriff in the back, but any tenderfoot would have recognized this as a mess of trouble for Mike McBride and Concho Walker.

"Damn your dirty tricks!" Mike swore as he jerked up the .45 to pistol-whip the sheriff out of the way.

The blow glanced off a shoulder. Shelton had nimbly dodged aside in the sudden dark as the pressure of the gun left his back.

"Duck, Concho!" Mike yelled. A second blasting shot in the card room drowned the words. Then there was a third shot.

A man lurched out of the doorway into Mike and would have fallen if Mike hadn't thrown out a supporting arm. It was Concho, reeking of whiskey and now worse than drunk.

Mike jumped back with Concho's sagging weight full on his arm. He fired past Concho at a gun flash inside the card-room doorway.

Concho was muttering something, but the words were lost as other guns hammered a hail of lead out the card-room doorway. Bullets that would have riddled them both

if Mike hadn't moved fast.

There was no time now to hear what Concho was saying. Concho was badly hit. He'd be killed and Mike McBride, too, if those poker sharks had their way.

## CHAPTER VI

### GUN-SMOKE INHERITANCE

**M**IKE bumped into Jubal Lark as he backed with Concho's stumbling weight. He was throwing shots past Concho at the doorway where red gun flashes searched after them. The sheriff had disappeared back in the dark hallway.

"Get outta the way!" Mike yelled, crowding back past Jubal Lark with his burden.

The numbing slam of a bullet furrowed his left arm, the arm that was holding up Concho. Maybe it meant another wound for Concho. The old man had been hit more than once. His weight was getting heavier.

Mike was raging with wild anger. This was like the killing of old Jump-John. This was cold murder a second time, without any excuse or reason that a man could see. Murder backed by Ban Shelton, the sheriff.

Concho was stumbling badly, ready to fall. There wasn't a chance to duck for cover and make a stand. Mike's shoulder hit the side of the doorway. He staggered back out of the passage, found the open door with a sweep of his arm and slammed it shut.

Beside him, Jubal Lark grumbled: "Why'd yuh have to start trouble thataway, young un? What's the matter with Concho?"

Concho's knees buckled and a great groan wrenched from him.

"Can't make it any more, Mike!"



he gasped. "Lemme down an' run fer it!"

Here outside the passage there was dim light from the front of the saloon. Light that showed Concho's weathered, wrinkled face contorted with pain.

Blood was spreading over Concho's shoulder. A great red blotch was widening on the front of his shirt. Mike swallowed a groan as he saw that a bullet had gone in Concho's back and torn out big in the front. Concho didn't have a chance.

Concho knew it. His look had cleared and steadied. Concho was a sober man now, calling on the last of his strength as he tried to push Mike away.

"Jubal!" Concho gasped.

"Here, pardner!"

"Help the boy git away! He's my boy! My son! Don't let 'em git him!"

"Hell's blazes! Whyn't somebody say so?" Jubal Lark blurted. "He never told me! Shore I'll watch him!"

Jubal Lark whirled menacingly toward the crowd that was cautiously moving out from the bar into the other end of the L-shaped room.

"Git back there!" Jubal Lark yelled. "Keep out o' this! I'll plug the first snake that gits in our way!"

**C**ONCHO was sitting on the floor now, supporting himself with a hand as Mike finished reloading the .45 and cocked the sheriff's fancy revolver in the other hand.

"Where's your real son?" Mike asked huskily. "I'll get to him if I can an' tell him!"

"Always wanted a son!" Concho wrenched out. "Been aimin' fer it since you throwed in with me, Mike. I come here to Salt Fork this trip

an' made it legal! Lawyer Sanders drawed up the papers so you'll git the Circle 8 an' all I own. I took me a drink to celebrate—an' couldn't stop the celebratin'."

Concho gulped and smiled faintly. "Ain't every day a old hardshell like me gits a bang-up son he's so proud about!"

Mike's throat was suddenly tight, so that it was hard to speak. His eyes were moistening strangely as he knelt there on the rough floor with cocked six-guns and looked at Concho's lean, wrinkled face and bowed shoulders.

Concho's faded frosty eyes were clouding now, and yet they were bright, too, with a pride and satisfaction Mike had never before seen.

"You needn't have done it!" Mike gulped. "You've been better'n a father!"

"Might 'a' whaled you a few times when I didn't," Concho said thickly, and managed to smile as he bowed there with a hand over the torn hole in his stomach and blood creeping out over the gnarled fingers.

A spasm passed over Concho's face. He fought it away and gasped:

"Listen while I c'n talk. It's the only chance I'll get to talk to a real son. You've growed up now. I want you tuh keep growin'. Don't wait like me till yo're busted down an' wore out afore you git yore roots in an' start growin'. Yo're young. You can go a long way with the start you got. Savvy?"

"Sure, Concho!"

"Savvy this, then," Concho gasped. "I aim fer you to keep growin' head an' shoulders over ary man you ever knowed. Listen, boy! I'm dyin'! I can't be with you like I counted on. I aim fer you to end up a king cowman that men'll talk about from St. Louie to Frisco! I

aim fer you to do all the things I should've done an' be all the things I might've been! You listenin', son?"

Jubal Lark was stamping back and forth beside them, warning the saloon crowd away. The sheriff and gamblers hadn't appeared. They might any second. Concho's eyes were clouding fast. Mike didn't know where he was getting the strength to hold himself up and pour out the dry, feverish words.

Kneeling there with the two .45s cocked and ready for the gun fight that might resume any second, Mike nodded again, unashamed tears in his eyes.

"I'm listening, Concho! I won't forget!"

"Yo're young enough to make it," Concho said. "It'll mean your heart an' yore head'll have to keep growin' with yore bank account. Jealous men'll try to cut you down. Some that seem friends'll try t' double-cross yuh. You'll have to be hard an' soft at the right time an' sharp *all* the time. Yore feet'll have to stay hard on the ground while yo're lookin' up above where yo're climbin'. An' when you get there, son, I want you to be proud an' big, with no shame behind you. Savvy?"

"I savvy, Concho—all of it!"

Concho was looking at him, but the faded eyes had a faraway look, as if Concho already were leaving and straining back for a last look.

Concho's voice was fading away, too.

"No matter where you bury me, son, I'll be lookin' when you git up there to the top. I'll be proud I pointed you right—proud of ol' Concho Walker's son—"

"Concho!" Mike caught the collapsing figure and eased it to the floor.

Concho was gasping. His eyes had closed. He was past hearing now, past caring what happened to Concho Walker. He had gone far on that trail all men travel alone, and was going faster, farther each moment.

"He's dying!" Mike gulped.

"Like he wanted to," Jubal Lark jerked out. "Concho use to say he'd like to git it with his boots on an' guns smokin' close. Ain't no more we c'n do, boy. Our skins is next. Let's get out o' here!"

**M**IKE stood up, blinking, gripping the two cocked six-guns. There was no time now to think it all out. There at his feet, Concho was dying. One of the gamblers had shot Concho in the back. And savagely Mike knew what had to be done.

"Ride your trail!" Mike threw at Jubal Lark as he turned toward the passage door.

"What yuh doin'?"

"I'm gettin' the dirty son that killed Concho!"

"No, yuh don't!" Jubal Lark said decisively. "Yo're Concho's boy! I told him I'd git yuh out o' here! That sheriff'll be back to even up the way yuh handled him!"

But Mike elbowed past the older man, jerked open the door, plunged into the passage taut and ready to meet triggered guns.

But the dark passage was quiet, deserted. The card room held no sign of life. On to the back Mike ran, guns cocked for any movement ahead. Then suddenly through another door he came out back of the building into the open night.

Jubal Lark was at his heels, protesting.

"They hightailed to a hole some-eres! Yuh won't find 'em if yuh hunt all night! Git out o' town,

boy! That sheriff'll have help by now. Yuh cain't gun-fight him an' his friends all alone an' come out with yore hair! Where's yore hoss?"

"In front of the hotel," Mike muttered, peering about, listening.

Jubal Lark caught his arm and spoke with hoarse urgency.

"My hoss is at the feed barn! I'll git him an' meet yuh out o' town on the Drippin' Springs trail! We'll jine yore outfit an' talk things over! Yuh'll do a heap more with friends at yore back an' plans made than a-chargin' around in another man's town at night askin' for trouble. Yuh go an' kill two-three o' them an' there'll be a dozen more to git yuh! *That ain't what Concho figured!*"

It was only words strung together, words that had no meaning for Mike McBride. Anger, grief at Concho's death had brought that cold, savage, wolfish feeling. They wanted gun fighting. They'd get gun fighting!

"Go get your hoss!" Mike said. "Don't worry about me!"

Jubal Lark held onto his arm.

"Still want trouble, don't yuh? Cain't ride away an' leave hit to another day. You young hotheads is all the same. Listen! Yo're Concho's boy! Yuh made Concho a dyin' promise! Are yuh gonna keep it?"

The harsh reminder struck Mike like cold water. It was as though Concho were standing there in the dark with the weight of his gnarled hand beside Jubal Lark's hand.

Mike wavered, surrendered. "I'll meet you out on the trail."

"Good boy! Keep offn the street till yuh get to the hotel an' then ride like hell! That blasted sheriff is wantin' yuh! He ain't forgot how yuh handled him."

JUBAL LARK vanished in the night. Startled, Mike tried to follow the buckskin-clad man's retreat. He heard nothing, saw nothing. Jubal Lark had gone like a ghost. With a grunt of approval, Mike went the other way, cutting back behind the store buildings.

The crowd in the Stag Saloon was boiling out into the street. The gunplay, the dead man, the threat of more to come had silenced all but the noisiest ones.

Mike heard a few uncertain yells as he ran toward the hotel. He met no one back there in the dark behind the store buildings. Everything seemed quiet in front of the hotel. The claybank drooped at the hitch rail.

But as Mike holstered his gun and stepped out to the rack, a quiet voice said, "Trouble down the street there?"

Mike spun toward the voice. Then he shoved his six-gun back in the holster as he recognized the clean-shaven stranger in the black suit and expensive boots who had spoken up in the hotel lobby. The man was leaning against the building front now, smoking a cigarette.

"I met the sheriff an' his friends," Mike said briefly as he turned back to the claybank and unwrapped the reins.

"Figured you might," the stranger drawled without moving. "Who got hurt?"

"The man I was looking for," Mike answered harshly as he reached to the saddle. "Murdered! Shot in the back! Might help you to remember that! In the back!"

"My memory," the stranger drawled, "is good." His cigarette end was glowing red as Mike reined the claybank out into the street.

Back at the Stag Saloon there was more noise now as the drunken

crowd spread along the street. Back there, too, was Concho Walker and a score that Mike McBride would settle before he again slept easy at night.

The bitter bite of it was in his throat as he settled in the saddle to ride, and the drumming crash of gunshots across the street was the first warning that he was not getting out of Salt Fork without more trouble. The next instant the claybank was screaming, rearing high.

## CHAPTER VII

### UNDER ARREST

**H**ALF a dozen guns, at least, were spurting fire. The claybank was badly hit. High it reared—and came down loosely, pitching forward into the muddy street.

Mike kicked out of the stirrups, threw himself clear of the saddle, hit the ground staggering and sprawled in the mud. The six-gun he had drawn went deep into the mud, clogging the barrel.

Mike hurled the gun away as he scrambled up and clawed out the sheriff's gun that was thrust inside his belt. The shots had stopped as the horse went down; now they started again as Mike came up in the street.

A trip-hammer blow seemed to tear off the top of his head, and he felt himself falling into blackness that had no bottom.

Then lamplight was in his eyes and men were about him. He was on his back, his shirt off. Someone was working on his arm.

The first words he heard sounded far away. His clearing head brought the voice suddenly just above him, speaking in a mild drawl.

"He was lucky. An eighth of an inch lower would have split his skull like a meat ax. This arm won't

bother him much. It gouged out a little muscle and he lost some blood. But he's young and husky enough to stand it."

"He'd be better off if he'd leaked all his blood!" an angry voice broke in. "Because I'm gonna hang him an' laugh while the rope stretches his dirty neck! I'd have killed him back there in the street if I'd known about him then!"

"He's your prisoner now. Better not lose your head," the mild voice advised. "After all, there might be a mistake."

"Mistake, hell! Witnesses seen him shoot old man Walker! That money belt in his saddlebag is one I give my brother! He had to kill Jake to get it! You tryin' to tell me he ain't a dirty killer?"

"I'm not trying to tell you he's anything," the mild voice said. "A jury will do that. But dead brother or not, Shelton, you'll do well to make sure he faces a jury. I'm telling you now that he'll be all right in a little while. I suggest you keep him that way."

"I'll ask for your advice when I want it!" Shelton snapped. "Too damn many folks tonight are tellin' me how I ought to act as a sheriff!"

The mild voice said, "I voted for you, Shelton. It was my understanding Salt Fork wanted a sheriff, not a judge, jury and public executionist as you see fit. You'd have killed this man instead of arresting him as he lay there in the street if that stranger hadn't stopped you."

"A damned lone-wolf gambler buttin' into something that was none of his business! He's another'n that'll learn to mind his own business!"

"Shelton," the mild-voiced man said, "I'm a voter, a taxpayer and the only medical man in three days'

*Mike heard the sheriff coming, but he had the lawyer by the throat before the sheriff could get to the cell.*



ride. You might remember that. A sheriff can always be replaced. A doctor can't."

**T**HE sheriff growled something as Mike opened his eyes. The doctor was putting on his black hat. Barely past thirty by his looks, clean-shaven, with a thin, likable face.

Ban Shelton was there and another man, and behind them were jail bars. Mike lifted his head. He was on a cell cot. Half a dozen men

beyond the bars had been watching the doctor work.

One of them exclaimed, "Looks like you was right, doc. He's a-rear-in' up."

"I'll handle him," Ban Shelton grunted. His red face was ugly as he said, "Where's Jake's body? Speak up or I'll choke it out of you!"

"Ask your sister," Mike said with an effort.

"What's Judy got to do with it?"

"She found the body. She'll tell

you I took the money belt to bring to the sheriff. Not knowin' you were brother to a man who'd bush-whacked an old man in cold blood."

"I don't know what in blazes you're talking about, McBride! It's a lie, whatever it is! Judy don't know Jake's dead or she'd have sent word! If you brought Jake's belt to the sheriff, why'n hell didn't you give it to me at the Stag instead of pulling a gun when I wasn't looking and crowdin' past to shoot that old soak you've been workin' for?"

Sitting on the cot edge, Mike was dizzy, sick with the hammering pain inside his bandaged head. The men outside the bars were watching for his reply. The doctor's look was thoughtful. Half an eye could see that even the doctor thought he'd shot Concho in the back.

Mike tried to stand up, protesting. "That's a lie! One of those gamblers shot Concho! One of your friends!"

Shelton pushed him violently back on the cot.

"That talk ain't helpin' you! There was witnesses. I saw it myself! We'll put you before a jury an' let them hang you! Now everybody clear out! I've got him safe and I'll keep him safe!"

"Just a moment," the doctor said. "What's this, Shelton, about your brother killing someone?"

"If this feller's got any kind of a likely story he can tell it in court!"

"Doc," Mike said, looking at the physician, "I need a lawyer. Tell Lawyer Sanders to get over here. The sheriff can't keep him out."

"That's right," the young doctor agreed. "I'll get Sanders at once."

"I don't hold a man from his legal rights," Shelton growled. "All right, men, move on."

The sheriff locked the cell door.

Alone, Mike hunched on the cot, holding his throbbing head.

Concho dead! Ban Shelton's brother dead! He, Mike McBride, charged with both killings! The money belt pinning one murder on him. Shelton and the gamblers swearing the other murder on him. Shelton knew it was a lie, knew who killed Concho.

Thinking back, it was easy to believe that Shelton must have known Concho didn't have a chance. And just now Shelton had stopped all questions about his brother, hustled witnesses out of the way. There was more to this than a card game and a killing, if a man could read the sign right.

Facts were plain. Concho had started his roaring drunk. Old Jump-John had taken Concho's horse and ridden to meet the Circle 8 drive.

Jake Shelton, the sheriff's brother, had shot Jump-John at the Black Butte. Shelton must have followed Jump-John out of Salt Fork to stop him. And had almost done so. Almost left Concho drunk, helpless in the hands of the gamblers and Ban Shelton.

They couldn't have planned to kill Concho and lay the murder on Mike McBride, because they hadn't known Mike McBride was coming.

But while Concho was dying, Ban Shelton had made no attempt to re-enter the Stag Saloon and arrest the men he was now charging with the killing. Shelton had gone for friends, had opened fire without warning as his man was riding away. By the doctor's word, Mike McBride would have been killed there in the muddy street if a stranger hadn't stepped in.

All that had happened before Ban Shelton had found his brother's money belt in Mike McBride's sad-

dle bag. Before Shelton knew that his brother was dead. For some reason Shelton had wanted Mike McBride as quickly dead as Concho.

You could bet good gold that Shelton still felt the same way, and not because of his brother. And then you could wonder why.

"The girl'd know," Mike muttered to himself. "She said not to take the belt to the sheriff. She knew damned well her brother Jake got what was comin' to him. Knew her sheriff brother was up to something snaky."

## CHAPTER VIII

### DOUBLE-CROSSING LAWYER

**D**AN SHELTON stepped back into the cell alone. The fancy pearl-handled six-gun was in his holster once more. He was scowling as he spoke through the bars. "So Jake's dead?"

"Shot by the man he rode out of town to kill," Mike said.

"You're claiming another man killed Jake?"

"It was Jump-John Myers, who rode in here to Salt Fork with Concho. Maybe you wouldn't be knowing that."

"Where's this Myers now?" Shelton demanded.

"Like to have a try at shuttin' his mouth, wouldn't you? Go talk to your sister. She found your brother's body before I did. She heard me say I was bringin' the money belt in to the sheriff."

"What did Judy say?"

"Ask her!"

Shelton's blustering anger was under control now. His mouth was tight and hard, eyes sharp, wary. He stared through the bars as if trying to read the prisoner's face. A slow grin twisted his mouth.

"You brought Judy into this. If

you're lucky enough to get into court, she'll help hang you."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Mike agreed. "It must run in the family."

Someone entered the front office, and Shelton turned away.

Mike heard voices murmuring for several moments, then Shelton brought in a smiling, roly poly little man in a black frock coat, black hat and red cardboard note case under an arm.

"Here's your lawyer," Shelton said curtly as he unlocked the cell door. "He's a killer, Sanders, and it'll take a better man than you to get him out."

The lawyer chuckled, bringing little creases over his smooth pink cheeks. He looked plump, jolly, sure of himself.

"We'll let the law settle that, sheriff. Lock the door and leave us alone."

"You bet I'll lock it. An' don't take all night. I'm leavin' with a posse to find Jake's body. I want you out o' here before I'm gone."

"According to the law—"

Shelton cut him off brusquely. "Damn the law! I'm running the jail tonight, Sanders, an' I'm in a hurry."

**W**HEN they were alone in the cell, Mike indicated the other end of the cot for the lawyer to sit on and spoke grimly.

"Shelton seems to be the sheriff an' the law both around Salt Fork."

"Talk. Only talk," the pink-cheeked little man said cheerfully as he sat down. "Now, then, young man, can you pay for a good lawyer?"

"Worried about the money already?"

"Lawyers have to live," Sanders reminded shrewdly.

"I reckon I can pay. Maybe you didn't get the name. I'm Mike McBride."

Sanders nodded. "Work for the Circle 8, I understand."

"I reckon I own it now."

"Hm-m-m. Didn't this Concho Walker own the Circle 8?"

"Concho signed papers making me his legal son! Said so in the Stag tonight just before he died. He told me to see you about it."

"You don't have to worry, then," Sanders said with returning cheerfulness. "Where are the papers?"

"You made 'em out," Mike said. "Where are they?"

"Eh?"

"Concho signed 'em."

Sanders stood up, smiling regretfully.

"Walker did say something about drawing up some papers before he left town. Perhaps tomorrow. He didn't sign anything. If that's all the title you have to the ranch, young man, you haven't anything."

The little good-humored crinkles in the plump, smooth face were still there, but Mike suddenly realized that the smile held no friendliness. It was a tricky smile.

"You're lying!" Mike charged. "Concho did sign them papers!"

"I didn't come here to be called a liar, young man. If you're going to get—"

"Concho trusted you an' you turned snake soon as he was dead!"

Sanders yelled with fright, tried to dodge in the cramped, narrow little cell as Mike came off the cot. Mike caught him by the throat, slammed him against the back wall, sinking fingers deep into the puffy neck.

The lawyer's face mottled as he clawed at the corded wrists. Eyes began to bulge.

"Concho's dead, but I'll get the truth out o' you!" Mike panted.

"What happened to those papers? What'd you do with them?"

Then, outside the cell, Ban Shelton was shouting: "What's the matter here? Leggo him, McBride! Leggo before I gut-shoot yuh!"

Mike yanked the struggling little lawyer around for a shield.

"Lead's what *he* needs! Shoot the hell out of him!"

Cursing, Ban Shelton unlocked the door and plunged in with his gun. Mike hurled the half-throttled little lawyer across the cell at him.

"Drag the little buzzard out of here before I break his neck! Tell him he ain't heard the last of this if I'm hung on every gallows from here to the border! I ain't the only friend Concho Walker had! It'll take more than a greasy little lawyer to work the trick he's trying!"

Shelton pulled the stumbling, choking man outside the cell, slammed the door and locked it.

"You get a lawyer an' then try to kill him as soon as my back's turned! It'll take a lynching to settle you, an' the quicker the better! Come on, Sanders. I reckon you're through here."

Coughing, feeling his neck, Sanders scurried into the sheriff's office without looking back.

**B**REATHING heavily, Mike dropped back on the cot. The bullet-furrowed arm was hurting. The head felt worse. Inside, too. For the first time he felt like a trapped animal. He swore thickly as he rolled a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

This afternoon he'd been Mike McBride, twenty-one, owning half of a prosperous beef drive. Tonight, for a little while, he'd been Mike McBride, Concho's adopted 'son, owning all the beef drive and the Circle 8, too. Now, here in the Salt



Fork jail cell, he was Mike McBride, Circle 8 cowhand, pockets almost empty and a hang rope staring him in the face.

Mike swore again. Concho *had* signed that paper. Drunk or sober, Concho had told the truth before he died. Which made sign that any man could read.

Concho had come to Salt Fork, left his business with a crooked lawyer and let whiskey make him a target for every sharper in town.

They'd worked fast. They'd gone after Concho's ranch and cattle. They'd shot Concho out of the picture. Now they had Mike McBride locked up and were ready to hang him. They'd have killed him tonight in front of the hotel if the stranger hadn't stopped them.

Mike paced the cell like a caged wild cat. Activity was audible in the sheriff's office. Finally it stopped. A lanky man with a drooping mustache and a deputy's star pinned on his vest stepped back to the cell and peered through the bars.

"Ban's rode out o' town, an' I'm in charge. Y'all set for the night?"

"Coffee'd help my head."

The deputy shifted chewing tobacco into the other cheek and grinned loosely.

"This ain't a hotel. Yuh'll get coffee with breakfast if yuh ain't lynched by then. Uh-huh, lynched. Heap of folks in these parts thought well of Jake Shelton. Us Texans stays next to one another."

"That lawyer, Sanders, from Texas, too?"

"Shore is."

"Can't all of you be from Texas."

The deputy grinned again. "The ol' Lone Star's a big un."

"Ain't big enough to hold all the crooks, skunks and snakes I've run into tonight," Mike said. "That

goes for you, too. Get out so I can rest my eyes."

The deputy snarled back through the bars. "Yuh won't be so damned talky ifn they get a lynch rope on yore neck! An' I ain't got no help to stop 'em if they're minded. Ease yore damn head with that!"

He stamped out. Mike started pacing again. Three steps one way, three the other.

Both Shelton and his deputy had spoken about a lynching. Miss out on killing a man when you arrested him, and a lynch rope would settle everything before he walked into court to tell his side.

Mike stopped as something tapped faintly on the window glass. It was the end of a branch tapping the glass. By standing on his toes, Mike could push the window up part way and reach through the bars.

"Yuh in there, boy?"

That would be Jubal Lark, outside under the window, speaking guardedly.

## CHAPTER IX

### JAILBREAK

**M**IKE moved the cot over under the window and stood on it. "Get me a gun!" he called in a low voice.

"Comin' up already, son!"

Jubal Lark had cut and trimmed a small tree branch. The heavier end poked up through the bars bearing a .45 tied on by a whang string. With the gun was a leather pouch holding extra cartridges.

"Soon as I heered the shootin' I knowed that polecat sheriff'd found yuh," Jubal Lark's hoarse whisper came up. "Time I got near the spot they had yuh an' was askin' where I was. I had tuh keep out o' sight. Ain't a chance fer me to git in there

an' git yuh. There's a crowd out front."

"Workin' up to a lynchin'?" Mike whispered back through the bars.

"Yuh might as well know hit," Jubal Lark agreed. "The fools is drunk an' believin' yuh walked right in an' holed Concho in the back. Them gamblers an' the sheriff swore yuh did! They're all fer lynchin' the hombre who kilt the feller that was buyin' 'em drinks. Come mornin' they'll git some sense. Tonight there ain't no reasonin' with 'em."

"An' by mornin' I'll be lynched."

"Looks bad if yuh don't git out o' there, boy. The sheriff rode out o' town. Ain't nobody to stop 'em. A friend o' yourn named Monte Hill has tried to talk sense to 'em an' didn't git nowhere. He's bringin' a hoss back o' the jail here fer yuh. If yuh can bust out, we'll side yuh out o' town."

Jubal spat audibly. "If yuh cain't, we'll take a hand an' try to git yuh out. They won't string yuh up, boy, whilst Jubal Lark c'n work a gun. I done promised Concho. How's yore head?"

"Good enough," Mike said. "Who's this Monte Hill?"

"Friend o' yourn. He run out from the hotel an' made sure yuh wasn't kilt when they had yuh down in the street. Backed 'em cold by swearin' he'd take on ary man who stopped a doctor from gittin' to yuh. Sent for the doc hisself."

"I'll be out to thank him," said Mike. "And I'll have to leave town fast. They're charging me with double murder. The lawyer says Concho didn't sign any papers today. They're after the Circle 8, too. Somebody'll have papers saying that Concho gambled away everything."

"So that's how it is!"

"The lawyer's a fatty little man named Sanders," Mike continued.

"Might be if I could talk to him out of town there'd be a different story."

"Fatty little lawyer named Sanders," Jubal Lark repeated out of the darkness under the jail window. "Yuh ride out the Drippin' Springs trail an' find yore beef drive, boy. I've toted in slicker game than fatty little lawyers. Yuh'll git yore talk with him. Jubal Lark's a-promisin' hit. An' don't waste yore time in there. Them drunken fools is a-gatherin' an' a-inchin' up to a lynchin'. I'm wishin' yuh luck."

"Thanks."

Jubal Lark evidently vanished quickly again, for he did not reply.

All chambers in the six-gun he had brought were loaded. Mike shoved it under his belt, closed the window and moved the cot back. Then he pulled on his muddy coat and buttoned it over the gun. His hat had evidently been left in the muddy street.

The left arm was stiff and painful, but usable. His head was feeling better. From the moment the gun came through the window, strength and hope had come flooding back. One friend outside had been all he needed. He had two. Three, if you counted the young doctor. Mike McBride had a chance now.

**F**OR a moment Mike had the feeling that old Concho was close, watching, waiting for Mike McBride to fight out of this trouble and start for those heights which Concho had planned.

Men might die. Concho might be avenged. But there was more to it than that. More than a jail cell. More than revenge for Concho and smooth trickery. This was the first testing of Mike McBride, who one day had to be all those things that Concho Walker might have been.

It had been a promise to a dying man.

Voices had been audible out front. Now, with the window closed, there were still snatches of sound, as ominous and distant as thunder warning of a storm to come.

The deputy had put up a window and was parlaying not very vigorously with someone. His office door opened, closed, and he talked to someone who had joined him.

Get several more men in the office and there wouldn't be much chance to get out past them. Mike called until the deputy came back into the little cell corridor.

"Going to let them lynch me?" Mike demanded.

"I'll stop 'em if I can."

"More likely you'll follow along to pull on the rope!"

The deputy's loose-lipped grin admitted it as he suggested, "Maybe you could talk 'em out of it from the front window. I'll iron yore wrists an' give you the chance if you want it. They ain't listenin' to me."

"A sight of me will start 'em off," Mike reminded. "I'll be there in the office, ironed and cold meat to grab and drag outside."

"It's yore only chance, McBride. I'll give ary prisoner his chance."

Mike grinned, too. He had that wolfish, savage feeling again.

"You and Ban Shelton," he said. "I'll try it."

The deputy was chuckling as he stepped back into the office, chuckling when he returned with wrist irons and the cell keys.

"Stick out yore wrists an' oil up your tongue. They're waitin' to hear yuh, an' there's company in the office to swear yuh got a fair deal."

The office door had swung shut. Mike was grinning, too, as he put

his left hand through the bars.

"Might be you'll have the same chance you're giving me," he said.

"Cain't tell, young feller," the deputy grinned.

Both his hands were bringing the iron to the wrist when Mike caught him and yanked him close to the .45 muzzle that the other hand had flipped out from under the coat.

"Quiet! Here's *your* chance now!"

The deputy read death in the thin smile and gasped through the sudden terror on his face.

"Get the key in that lock!"

The arm Mike held was trembling. The deputy was swallowing as if his throat had clogged. His shaking hand missed the keyhole twice before he unlocked the cell door.

Mike stepped out. "Want a chance to draw?" he invited.

"No, no! I ain't—"

"Shut up, then."

A moment later the deputy was ironed by a wrist to one of the cell bars. While he watched the office door and swiftly buckled on the deputy's gun belt Mike warned:

"Keep quiet while I go out. Tell Shelton I'm saving you both the same chance you gave me."

The deputy nodded dumbly. Mike inspected both guns, thumbed the hammers, jerked open the office door and stepped in. "Reach high and quiet!" he said curtly.

Then he gasped. The office held only a startled girl who jumped up from a chair. She wore riding skirt and jacket, a silk handkerchief around her throat, and her yellow hair looked soft and wind-blown about her thin, startled face.

"I . . . I was looking for a man," Mike said lamely. "Keep quiet an' you'll be all right."

Beyond drawn window shades, voices outside the jail were plainer.

And the girl's reply was steadier than he expected.

"You're the one they want," she guessed swiftly.

She was small and slim, and her eyes were unhappy. And Mike would have known that clear note in her voice anywhere.

"You're Judy Shelton!"

She nodded.

"Got here in a hurry to help hang me, didn't you? Must run in the family."

**T**HAT brought a blaze into her eyes. He'd thought her young, but not so young. Not younger than himself. Looking now, it was hard to believe she'd held him up by the Black Butte as coolly as a man.

"I believed you about Jake's money belt," she said scornfully. "And you rode into town and killed the man who was hiring you."

"You know the straight of it!" Mike threw at her. "You knew the

truth out there tonight! Ban Shelton and his gambler friends did the killing tonight. Pity you ain't a third brother. I'd start on you. They voted for a sheriff last year an' got a buzzard. He made the law gun law." Mike lifted the .45. "I'm raising him with six-guns. Him an' his friends an' any more of the Shelton breed that's running a loop on this range."

A drunken yell split the night outside. "What're we waitin' for? Let's git him!"

Mike grinned mirthlessly. "That would sound good to your brother, Ban. Better get in the back room."



*The gambler's foot caught in the stirrup as he left the saddle and he plunged under the hoofs of the maddened horse.*

"These windows won't stop lead." He turned the light out as he spoke.

And through the swift blackness that fell between them, Judy Shelton cried in protest, "They'll kill you! Brazos Jones is leading them! I . . . I saw him when I came in! There must be some other way! I . . . I'll help you!"

"Never heard of Brazos Jones. And the Sheltons," Mike answered her bitterly, "have helped me enough! Get back out o' the way! Hell'll be popping in a minute!"

Mike opened the door. He was in blackness. Cloudy moonlight brushed shadowy pallor over the muddy street outside the jail. Enough light to see the gathering crowd, twoscore or more. Some hanging back beyond the hitch rack and spreading to right and left along the slippery plank walk. Most of them liquored up, by the noise they were making. And the leaders already close to the jail steps, bunching up behind a broad-shouldered, powerful man who had drawn a gun and shouted as the door opened:

"That's right, Tomkins! Open up! All we want is that young killer! Come out with yore hands up an' you won't have any trouble!"

One quick look placed the men. There was enough light to mark the big fellow shouting at the doorway. He must be Brazos Jones. He was the burly, red-faced gambler with the bushy black brows and hairy arms who had been sitting at Concho's right hand in the back of the Stag Saloon. One of the men who'd murdered Concho.

Mike could have opened fire from the dark doorway and riddled Brazos Jones and some of the drunken men behind Jones. Dropped them before they broke into the jail. Scattered them in panic for a few moments. But if he did that, in

years to come the dead men would haunt Mike McBride. Many of the drunks were convinced that the prisoner was a killer. Sober, they'd look at the dead who hadn't fired a shot, and swear that all charges against Mike McBride must be true.

Mike made an instant choice before he moved—and took the greater risk.

"Stand back! Don't shoot!" he yelled as he dived out of the dark doorway.

## CHAPTER X

### CIRCLE 8 TALKS WAR

**U**NCERTAINTY stopped even Brazos Jones while a man might count four. In that time Mike dodged to the right along the front of the jail, cocked guns silent, the hell of gunfire and death hanging by a thread.

Then a bawl of anger came from Jones. "*That's McBride! Get him!*"

The big gambler's gun crashed furiously at the shadowy figure plunging to the corner of the building. Three shots came almost as one while Mike gambled with death to reach that jail corner without killing a man. And maybe he was a fool and maybe not. Concho would know.

A foot slipped on the rain-soft ground as he ducked around the corner. He stumbled, found footing and raced toward the back of the jail. Other guns had opened up. The lynch crowd was milling in excitement and uncertainty, some of them not sure yet what was happening.

Brazos Jones dashed around to the side of the jail. Mike spun around, saw the big figure, the red-sputtering gun muzzle. The smile that bared his teeth was cold and hard as the two big .45s blasted and

roared in his hands. The gambler and a man or two bolder than the rest were leading the wolf pack to kill. For years Mike McBride had been growing up for this moment. Music and a wild, surging excitement were in the six-guns that blasted and bucked in his hands. Head and wounded arm were forgotten. Screaming lead fanned death about him, and he had no thought for it as he triggered at the gambler's shadowy figure at the front of the building.

The men behind Brazos Jones and others on the plank walk out front dashed back and aside from the red gun muzzles that had suddenly turned on them.

Brazos Jones jumped into the shadows beside the jail building—and then lurched out, staggering a step or two as he fell.

"There he is, Concho!" Mike yelled. "Maybe he's the one!"

Excitement had him now like whiskey running fire in his blood. Gun law they wanted, and gun law they'd get! The man behind the jail must have yelled several times before Mike heard him.

*"McBride, you fool! Fork this horse!"*

**T**HEN Mike realized he'd been standing there shouting for Brazos Jones and the others to come and get him. They'd given him open space clear out into the street, and Brazos Jones was huddled on the muddy ground where he had fallen.

The man behind the jail was in the saddle and leading another saddled horse. Mike made a flying jump, clawed into the saddle, found the stirrups and grabbed for the reins as the man spurred away, yelling, "This way!"

Jubal Lark wasn't there. As he

followed, Mike recognized the gray hat and black suit of the man he'd last seen in front of the hotel.

"Are you Monte Hill?" Mike called as he spurred alongside.

"Shut up and ride! They'll be after us! This way!"

Monte Hill galloped through an open lot away from the main street. Dogs ran barking at them. They passed lighted windows and staring figures in open doorways. Then they were past the last houses and corrals, racing into the south.

"The old fellow said you'd go to Dripping Springs!" Monte Hill called.

"Our herd won't get that far tonight! Thanks for the help! I'll make it all right now!"

"I'm siding you! Pour it on!"

Miles out of town, east of the stage road, they reined up a second time. They were alone in the vast night.

"Lost 'em," Monte Hill decided.

"This makes a second favor I owe you," Mike said. "Are you sure Jubal Lark didn't get hurt?"

"He had some business that'd keep him a while," said Monte Hill. "He'll be all right."

Miles farther on they crossed the Dripping Springs trail, Mike guiding, and rode south and east for the Salt Fork Crossing and Black Butte. Mike's thoughts turned back to Judy Shelton, young and anguished as she had again abruptly sided with him.

"Shelton's sister was at the jail," Mike said aloud.

Monte Hill nodded. "I saw her ride by the livery barn. By the looks of her horse, she'd come fast. Must have heard about her brother Jake."

"She found his body," Mike said. "I met her there when I got the money belt to bring to the sheriff."

"That the way you got it?"

Mike told him what had happened, from Jump-John's death to the lawyer's visit to the jail.

"I had an idea Shelton's story was wrong," Monte Hill said coolly. "Good riddance to Jake. So Dude Ringold, Parson Pitts and Shelton are after your ranch?"

"Those first two names are new."

"Gamblers," Monte Hill said. "Dude Ringold's good-looking, with a light mustache. He'd rob his own mother. I hear that Parson Pitts was in the poker game, too. He's worse. They were friends of Shelton back in Texas."

"Know plenty about them, don't you?"

Monte Hill shrugged. "I've been through Texas. What do you aim to do now?"

"Maybe I'll have an idea by morning."

"You'd better," Monte Hill remarked. "Because Ban Shelton will have ideas tonight."

**THEY** were pushing the horses. By Monte Hill's watch it was past one thirty when they forded the Salt Fork, miles south of Black Butte. By three they sighted the wan glow of the Circle 8 wagon fire and hailed Gus Delight, riding night trick on the bedded steers.

Jump-John had been buried and the cattle thrown on a bed ground a mile or so away. Gus Delight was profane with dismayed anger as he rode with them to the sleeping men near the fire.

"Crawl out! Concho's dead! Git out, all of yuh, an' hear trouble!"

They came awake—Jim Crowder, Slim Chance, Sam Parks, Larrupin' Ed Shaw, Dozy, the cook, and Guaymas Red, the part Mexican wrangler with red hair who'd rather use a knife than a gun.

And as fresh, damp wood sizzled on the fire, Guaymas Red was as bitter as the rest when Mike told what had happened.

Larrupin' Ed Shaw spoke the violent thought of every man.

"We'll ride in on them snakes! Damn, if I'd only gone along!"

Monte Hill spoke coolly. "Ban Shelton's not there tonight. Half the town's still drunk enough to think McBride killed your boss. Better wait."

"You t'ink we do nothing for thees?" Guaymas Red said angrily.

"I'm waiting for this man Jubal Lark," Mike said. "We'll want good horses ready, Red. Dozy, how about some coffee? The rest of you better sleep it out till daybreak."

But there was no sleeping. Gun belts and rifles were brought to the fire and checked. Hot coffee warmed them and questions were volleyed at Mike until all details were known.

"If that damned lawyer gets here, he'll talk!" Larrupin' Ed harshly promised.

"He'll talk!" Mike agreed, and noticed Monte Hill watching him reflectively. The man was younger than he'd seemed at first. And more of a mystery than ever.

The steers grazed out as the false dawn gave way to the first faint gray. Monte Hill had wrapped himself in a borrowed blanket and tarp and slept near the fire. Mike moved stiffly about, thinking. Even now it was hard to believe that Concho was dead, that he himself was on his own now.

Jubal Lark hadn't appeared by the time Dozy called grub. The clouds were thinning. A scarlet sunrise colored the east. Monte Hill rolled out of his blanket and joined Mike.

"Time enough for that old fellow to be here."

"I don't like it," Mike admitted. "I should have stayed."

"They'd have hunted you down."

"That lawyer," said Mike, "was my only chance to show crooked work. I'm outlawed. Shelton'll make sure I'm hunted." Mike spoke savagely. "Killing Ban Shelton might make it worse. I'm through on this range, no matter what I do."

"Going to quit and run."

"What's it to you?" Mike said curtly.

Monte Hill was silent for a moment before he drawled:

"Judy Shelton helped her brothers take out from stock detectives who were ready to send them to the pen. One of the detectives had been fool enough to tell her, hoping she'd understand what he had to do. She didn't tell her brothers he wasn't the gambler they thought he was. But after they were safely gone, Judy told the man she was through with him. She'd never marry anyone who might take her brothers to court. She'd never marry anyway and disgrace a husband with her brothers, she said. She was young and broken up, and she meant it. He had to leave. And a year later he came back. Judy's mother was dead of heartbreak, they said, and Judy had gone west to the Screw-jack country. He came after her and found she'd joined her brothers and hadn't changed her mind. So he stayed around to see if the brothers wouldn't hang themselves by their own cussedness after folks found them out."

"And you're hoping this will do it," Mike guessed.

"Hoping like hell," Monte Hill drawled, "since I'm hogtied and helpless because of Judy."

"I wondered about you," Mike admitted. "Maybe we'll both have luck."

They were eating when Dozy called from the grub wagon: "Who's a-comin'?"

Riders had topped the slope to the west—four riders loping toward the wagon. One man wore a white sombrero that brought Mike to his feet.

"That's Shelton, the sheriff!" Mike said grimly.

## CHAPTER XI

### GUN TALK

LARRUPIN' ED picked up his rifle. "Sit tight, Mike. They ain't gonna get you."

Mike grinned coldly. "Meet him on the other side of the wagon. I'll keep out of sight for a minute."

Monte Hill joined Mike behind the wagon. "He's fast with a gun," he warned. "There's only three men with him, but he rode out of Salt Fork with nine or ten last night."

Mike looked past the wagon seat. "Ain't that the card sharp, Parson Pitts, with him?"

"And Lafe Cantwell and Montana Jack," said Monte Hill, looking. "They're killers."

Standing there behind the wagon, they heard Larrupin' Ed greet the newcomers.

"Howdy, gents."

"I'm Sheriff Shelton. Mr. Pitts, here, took over the Circle 8 last night. I've seen the papers Walker gave, and you can deal with Pitts from now on."

"Concho Walker'll tell us that."

The gambler's nasal voice said, "Walker's dead. Shot by one of his own men named McBride. The sheriff's got McBride locked up in Salt Fork for trial. Walker lost his ranch in a card game before he was killed. You men can have your pay and move on this morning."



Gus Delight's voice exploded high and angrily.

"No tinhorn gambler that oughta got what this Jake Shelton got fires me from anywhere while I got a hawglaig tuh talk—"

A gunshot blotted out the rest of his defiance, and Gus slid to the ground in an inert heap.

"Larrupin' Ed shouted: "That man murdered him, sheriff!"

"He pulled a gun on a deputy!" Ban Shelton rasped back. "Throw down them guns and step back while we take over! Who's that behind the wagon?"

**MIKE** thumbed both guns as he dived for the end of the wagon. No time now to plan further. Gus Delight's foolish outburst had set off a killer's gun and hell had started. Hell that would leave Ban Shelton running the Salt Fork country or stop him here in the scarlet dawn.

Shelton was waiting. His gun blasted as Mike plunged into the open behind the wagon.

The big smoke-blackened coffee-pot flew off the tailboard and showered Mike with hot coffee. And as a second shot roared on the heels of the first, Shelton recognized the bandaged head that should have been back in Salt Fork in jail or on the end of a lynch rope.

Shelton yelled and missed the second shot clean. The drive of his spurs sent his horse bolting, with Circle 8 men between him and Mike's guns.

Mike fired over their heads and missed the running horse and crouching figure. The slam of a bullet in his left arm, already wounded, knocked him half around.

That lead came from the gunman that Monte Hill had pointed out as Montana Jack. The numbing shock

left the arm useless as Mike got his other gun up again.

Montana Jack had fired hastily as he reined his horse away. Now he was spurring away after the others.

Mike stumbled past Sam Parks and Jim Crowder and aimed carefully as he emptied the old wooden-handled .45. Montana Jack lurched in the saddle, grabbed the horn and rode on, wounded but burring tight to the saddle.

Around Mike, guns were crashing, but the targets were moving fast out of range, scattering as they went.

Monte Hill ran past Mike with a rifle and took careful aim. He fired once and missed, coolly levered another cartridge in and aimed again. His target was the gaunt Parson Pitts, who was riding in a crouch, black coat tails flapping in the wind.

Monte Hill's rifle cracked a second time—and a second time he seemed to miss. His angry exclamation was audible as he hastily reloaded.

Then a wild Indian yell came from Guaymas Red. The flapping black coat tails were leaving the saddle. Parson Pitts was sliding over, clawing weakly at the saddlehorn. Then he seemed to stiffen as he pitched from the saddle.

"Look!" Slim Chance shouted.

The gambler's head and shoulders had hit the damp ground and bounced. And bounced again and again.

The shooting had stopped. Around Mike the men stood frozen as the gambler's foot stayed caught in the stirrup and he dragged under the driving hoofs of the maddened horse.

Mike thought he heard a thin, far, horrible scream from under the running horse. He wasn't sure. It came no more. The dragging body

was limp now, and the coat tails had dropped down over the head and were flapping grotesquely as flying hoofs shredded cloth and flesh and bone.

"Shoot the horse!" Mike cried hoarsely.

Monte Hill already had the rifle up. He took his time before squeezing the trigger. And dropped the horse, kicking and helpless, near the top of the slope. The inert body was pinned underneath.

"He come askin' for it!" Larrup-in' Ed said harshly. "But damned if I wish any man *that!*"

Shelton and the other two men were out of sight now. There'd been no time to look to Gus Delight, who had dragged himself over against the hind wheel of the wagon.

Mike could feel the warm blood over his arm as he stooped by Gus Delight's round, drawn face.

"How bad is it, Gus?"

Gus Delight tried to grin. "Busted up a rib an' missed the lung, I think. I don't feel no blood in my throat. We showed 'em where to get off, didn't we? Ain't that blood on yore arm, Mike?"

"Nothing to think about. Get flat on the ground and let's have a look." And Mike called over his shoulder. "Get the horses. There's something funny about that sheriff only bringing three men. I don't—" He broke off, demanding, "What's that?"

Guaymas Red was nearest the back of the wagon, and he, too, had heard the sudden rolling stamp of hoofs, the high, alarmed bellow of startled cattle. Then a fusillade of shots before Guaymas Red could speak.

"Stampede!" Guaymas Red yelled, bolting for his horse.

## CHAPTER XII

### SIX-GUN STAMPEDE

**U**NDER the wagon, Mike caught a glimpse of the cattle coming in a senseless wave of rushing bodies and clashing horns. They'd been started and pointed by a thin line of riders who had come down on them from the east.

Now it was plain why Ban Shelton had come with only three men, why the Circle 8 men had been told to get their time, why Shelton hadn't stood his ground to fight. Shelton had parlayed while other riders had circled around to get set for surprise and trouble.

The wagon offered some shelter, but the stampede would carry away their horses. They'd be afoot and helpless around the wagon, cold targets for hidden men whose rifles could pick them off one by one.

"*Ride it out!*" Mike shouted. "*Take your guns!*"

There was still Gus Delight, helpless on the ground, and for the moment all but forgotten. Mike jumped toward him. Monte Hill got there first, shouting as he lifted Gus Delight's chunky figure.

"Hit the saddle, McBride! I'll do this!"

Mike lingered to make sure while the bawling tornado of frightened steers bore down on the spot. The saddled horses that had stayed ground-tied near the wagon through the shooting were catching the panic, too, and starting to move as the Circle 8 men plunged to them.

Monte Hill all but threw Gus Delight into the front of the wagon. Rough treatment, but Gus would have to take it. Mike ran for his horse and it bolted. Then Slim Chance came spurring, stooped far over, caught the dragging reins and yanked the horse over to Mike.

Larrupin' Ed Shaw had seen how things were with Monte Hill and had gotten his horse and was bringing it at a run.

Mike's arm was still numb to the shoulder. He had to get into the saddle one-handed. He saw blood running over the wrist and fingers as his feet found the stirrups and his good hand took the slack out of the reins. Then the first of the bawling, thundering stampede was on them and the horse needed no spurring as it raced away.

Over his shoulder, Mike saw Monte Hill's horse stumble as a big steer brushed it, and then settle into stride. There was no dust. Ban Shelton's men were plain at the rear of the stampede. Nine or ten of them, at least, shooting forward over the cattle.

They had failed to put the Circle 8 men afoot. Now they were trying to gun them from their horses.

**A** WILD yell over to the right dragged Mike's look. He cursed helplessly as he saw Jim Crowder pitching out of the saddle. Jim's horse kept on. Jim stayed under the torrent of running steers.

Ban Shelton wanted it this way for anyone who stood in the way of his law. Gun law. Shelton law, that could wipe out an old man like Concho Walker, and all who tried to stand up to him.

Mike cut over toward Larrupin' Ed and Slim Chance, who were following Guaymas Red and Monte Hill to the west flank of the stampede. Dozy and Sam Parks were coming, also.

They were outnumbered. If they scattered now they'd stay scattered. The Circle 8 land and cattle would be in other hands.

Looking back, Mike could see the

gunmen bunching up to follow them. Ban Shelton and the two men with him evidently hadn't circled fast enough to swing in behind the stampede.

Monte Hill rode close. "Looks like Shelton pulled a trick that'll be hard to beat!"

They were plunging over a brushy ridge now, with the stampede swerving off over the lower ground. The Shelton men were following up the slope, shooting as Mike called:

"Ain't a chance to whip that bunch! Scatter the boys an' keep riding! Shelton's men'll give up after a few miles!"

Monte Hill nodded. His look was regretful, disappointed. Mike McBride was quitting after all his talk of blocking Shelton.

They topped the ridge and raced down through the brush, hidden for a little from the guns behind. Mike lagged, swinging to the left. Monte Hill caught up with Larrupin' Ed and the others, urging them ahead.

Dozy and Sam Parks passed on as Mike pulled his horse hard over along the ridge, paralleling the top. Brush and low trees closed in behind him. When he'd ridden a hundred and fifty yards and pulled up, the others were out of sight, crashing on down the slope.

Mike dismounted behind low bushes as the Shelton men topped the ridge in a bunch, quirting, spurring after the fleeing riders ahead. They swept on down the slope without looking toward the brush where Mike waited.

Blood covered Mike's left hand, and the throbbing hurt went up into the shoulder. But he could use the hand a little and reload both six-guns. His rifle was back in Salt Fork.

He was in the saddle again when he heard another coming. The man

cut the ridge and took the slope. His hat was black; he showed in the clear for an instant, and he was the gunman deputy that Monte Hill had called Lafe Cantwell.

Ragged bursts of gunfire marked the running fight moving off into the west. No one followed Cantwell as Mike put his horse into a run south along the ridge.

Minutes later the distant gunfire in the west seemed to double in intensity, as if the Circle 8 men had been caught and had turned to fight. Mike fought down the urge to head that way fast. His grim face was lined with strain as he kept on.

The grub wagon was out there on the sun-drenched flat. Parson Pitts' horse was dead and had been rolled off the body. Two saddled horses stood restlessly nearby, and the two men near the body were talking with some heat.

Dude Ringold, handsome, well-dressed, had a neck sling supporting his left arm. His voice was angrily clear as Mike stepped behind a small tree and listened.

**Y**OU'RE talkin' a lot, but it don't change me, Shelton! I shot that damn lamp out last night and put the lead in the old coot's back and got a bullet in my arm for it! I've earned the Parson's share, and I want it for the time I'll be laid up from gambling!"

"The idea was mine and the Parson's in the first place!" Shelton rasped. "There ain't too much to go around as it is, with that lawyer cuttin' in for his share."

"You can't claim the Circle 8, Shelton. There'll be enough talk as it is. That greasy little lawyer ain't to be trusted, an' Brazos hasn't got the head or tongue for this. You've got to have me to handle the Cir-

cle 8. I'll have my price for it or nobody cashes in. Savvy?"

"Brazos don't think fast, but he'll do what he's told," Ban Shelton sneered. "Dude, you've growed a big head for a young fellow."

Dude Ringold jumped back, grabbing under his coat. Then the vomiting six-gun in Ban Shelton's hand slammed him against the earth and he stayed there, trying weakly to get his gun out.

Ban Shelton tore the gun from him, threw it away and grinned down at the dying man.

"That's your cut, Dude. The Parson an' me was savin' it for you." Shelton was not a hundred yards away, back partly turned to the crest of the slope as Mike stepped out toward him.

"I'll take your money belt. You won't need it," Shelton said as he knelt by the young gambler. He had jerked the money belt out and was getting to his feet when Mike spoke.

"I've brought your cut, Shelton!"

Ban Shelton whirled around—and for an instant his angular face was stunned, unbelieving. Then he hurled the belt aside and his pearl handled gun streaked from the holster, blasting as it came out.

Mike's gun met shot for shot, handicapped by the sun into which he was facing. A bullet nicked his ear. Shelton staggered as lead tore into his leg. His gun emptied as he reached for Dude Ringold's gun, and he made a lurching dive and caught up the gambler's gun.

One-handed, Mike dropped his empty gun and caught the other from under his belt without stopping his advance.

That broke Ban Shelton's nerve. He made a limping break for his horse, which jumped back nervously.

Mike ran forward. He had three shots left and no time to reload if Shelton started riding. Shelton got the reins and cursed the horse wildly as he caught the saddle and swung awkwardly up.

For an instant he was silhouetted against the blazing morning sun. Mike stopped, steadied, and emptied the second gun in a roaring roll of shots that hurled Ban Shelton out of the saddle in a sprawling fall as the horse bolted away.

Mike stood grimly by the man as he died. He had had the feeling, when he sighted Shelton a few minutes back, that it would end this way.

Shelton died first, with Dude Ringold lying on his side, staring at the sight with a thin, fixed grin.

Mike looked around. His voice was husky. "Concho, I didn't aim to make the start this way. You figure it out."

He went back for his horse and rode to the wagon. Gus Delight was still alive. He'd keep on living. Gus was on the ground again, with his shirt off, when the first of a straggling line of riders swept down on them.

Larrupin' Ed and Monte Hill were leading. Close behind them galloped the buckskin-clad figure of old Jubal Lark.

**D**ON'T know what happened, but it looks good," Mike said to Gus Delight. The riders were around them a few moments later. Strange faces riding up. Smiling faces that gathered around while Jubal Lark leaped down, brandishing an old rifle and whooping:

"How's this fer fixin' yore business, boy? I cotched that snaky little law talker in his office as he was a-fixin' to ride to Shelton's ranch.

Sawed a knife agin' his throat an' he talked an' give me the papers Concho signed an' left with him. He squealed as how them gamblers an' a sheriff's posse was comin' to get yore cattle at daybreak, all legal an' nice."

Jubal spat again and continued:

"I taken him to the young doc to tell his story. Shelton's sister was there, a-talkin' already. They studied the papers Concho signed an' heered the lawyer talk again, an' the doc run out to see men he said'd like to know all this. Took some time to get 'em all together an' stop at a ranch er two fer more men afore we come a-ridin' hard to meet the sheriff at his dirty work. An' we met a runnin' gun fight an' heered the news! How bad yuh hurt, boy?"

"Not bad," Mike said. "The sheriff's dead. He killed Dude Ringold and shot it out with me."

"When I got a good look back and saw that Shelton wasn't with his men," Monte Hill said, "I had an idea maybe you still had him on your mind after all. We headed this way as quick as possible." And he said slowly: "So Ban's dead at last!"

"Come help haze them steers back, mister," Jubal Lark urged Monte Hill. "An' then we'll git to Salt Fork an' celebrate."

"Wasn't there some business you had to see about quick in Salt Fork this morning?" Mike said to Monte Hill. "Some Texas business you never finished?"

"I'll help here first, McBride."

"Steers can wait, and my business is mostly settled," Mike said, grinning faintly. "Not knowing about such things, I'd say your business has waited long enough. I'm obliged for everything—and good luck in Salt Fork."

# DEMON AN' PITHYPUSS

BY S. OMAR BARKER

You might doubt that a duck can swim, that a skunk sucks eggs, or that hawg fat will sizzle in Hades, but on the Shoe Bar Ranch there was one thing considered as sure and undoubtable as cockleburs in a coyote's tail. Even Pinch-pocket Patterson had been to town and bet twenty dollars on it, and Pinch was a man who wouldn't 've put up half that many cents on tomorrow's sunrise. The rest of the boys, as far as they could find takers, had done dug deep and laid it on the line.

Duff Moser, the ramrod, expressed the unanimous views of all Shoe Bar hands—and many others—in the statement he give Editor Strawn for *The Ganado Gazette*.

"In this here forthcomin' Range Reunion and Rodeo," he said, "I ain't claimin' my boys will top the pile in *all* events. The bronc ridin', the bulldoggin', the steer straddlin', the calf ropin', even this here cowboy-singin' contest—it's liable to be nip, tuck and tickle who takes 'em. But in the team-steer ropin', you can print it right out on the front page that the Shoe Bar team of Ransom and McCorkadale ain't been, can't be, and won't be beat. The way they work together, it's a wonder they ain't twins!"

"Pals, are they?" inquired Editor Strawn.

"Well," said Duff Moser, "I've noticed one of 'em can't even itch without the other un starts scratchin'."

"Like Damon and Pythias, eh?"

"I don't know about that," shrugged the Shoe Bar ramrod, "for I've never seen this Demon and

Pithypuss perform, but if they're aimin' to rope in this contest they just as well git their mouths fixed for a dose of bitters, because—"

"I doubt if Damon and Pythias will be entered," Editor Strawn reassured him. "But I hear the Box L has a couple of new boys that rate pretty high their ownelves. Bud Ross and Sam Hicks, I believe their names are."

"Ringers!" snorted Duff Moser, disdainful as a pup pretending he hasn't noticed the old tomcat spittin' at him. "Rodeo professionals! Arena roosters! Big-time tuckahoos dragged in by the heels an' signed on as ranch hands jest to qualify for this rodeo because the Box L ain't got no ropers amongst their regular hands that stands a Chinaman's chance. Well, they still ain't! Not agin' Rowdy Ransom an' Mac McCorkadale! You got any bettin' money itchin' you, Strawn, jest take my word where to lay it!"

"Here, have a drink," smiled Strawn, fudging a half-empty bottle out of his desk. "Maybe I will!"

**Y**OU take a pack of coon dogs, and there's always some amongst 'em that'll bristle up over who gits to the tree first. This is known in the dictionary as a universal human habit called "rivalry" or "who treed the coon?"

Same way with cow outfits, and in the Ganado country the Shoe Bar and the Box L was the main pair of rivals. That's why it made the Shoe Bar boys so happy to know that their steer-tyin' team was un-

*"You sniffle-snooted, wobble-tailed ol' coot, I made up that ballard," Ab Bunker yelled—and Nick Shortridge jumped him.*



beatable, even by this pair of rodeo ringers.

That's how it was a few evenin's before the Ganado Range Reunion and Rodeo, when they gathered in the bunkhouse to practice up some on their cowboy singin'. The Ganado Ladies' Social, Literary and Business Society had hatched out the idee of a Buckaroo Ballard-Bellerin' Contest in connection with the rodeo, and as they was in the habit of doing everything else together, Rowdy Ransom and Mac McCorkadale was entered for a duet.

Rowdy's voice was a beery-tone, Mac's a whiskey tenor and the piece they choose to sing was that sad and sentimental old ballard called "The Trail to Mexico."

When Mac come in that evenin', Rowdy was already singin':

"I made up my mind to change my way,  
An' quit my crowd that was so gay.  
To leave my nay-ay-ay-tive home for a  
while,  
An' travel west for—"

"Wup a minute, Rowdy," says Mac, reaching for the guitar with

a hand big enough to choke an elephant. "You got the tune all right, but the words goes like this:

"I made up my mind in an early day,  
That I'd leave my gal—she was too gay.  
That I'd leave my home an' roam for a  
while  
An' travel west for many a mile."

"Now then," he goes on, whanging more or less of a chord on the guitar and fixing his number 'leven mouth like he was about to spit out a prune seed, "let's try it together."

Rowdy Ransom had got his nickname for being just the opposite of what it labeled him. It's not an unfrequent custom amongst the cowboys. You take a feller so skinny that he has to hire help to throw a shadow and they're liable to name him Fat. I knowed a waddy once that outbellered a bull every time he flapped his tonsils, and they called him Whisper. So Rowdy wasn't really no rowdy. He was a mild-eyed, quiet-spoken little man, but shoulder-built like a bull yearling and plenty able in the muscles.

"All right," he says. "We gonna sing it your way or mine?"

"Why, the *right* way, o' course! O. K. Let's hit 'er!"

They hit the first five words together all night, then it begun to jangle, for while Rowdy was bravely beery-toning "to change my way," Mac made melody on "in an early day." They stayed with it through the second line anyhow, then ol' Mac slapped his big paw acrost the guitar's belly all of a sudden and give a snort.

"Dammit, Rowdy," he says. "Do you know the words to this here song or don't yuh?"

"Why, sure," says Rowdy, mild as a muslin mitten. "It goes—"

"It don't no suchuva!" busts in McCorkadale. "This here's the ballard of a buckaroo that took to the

lonesome trail on account of a female woman that was cuttin' up too gay with other fellers—like it says in the second line: 'That I'd leave my gal—she was too gay.' Did you ever hear of a cowboy runnin' off to a life of sin, sorrow an' shootin' on account of a whole *crowd* bein' too gay for him?"

"Why, sure," says Rowdy. "In this song I did."

"You're crazy as a locoed—"

"Hold on here a minute, boys," interposes Duff Moser soothingly. "As I recollect it, this here ballard has got plenty verses. If you can't git together on the first un, why not jest spare it an' start off with the second?"

"Why, sure," agrees Rowdy, and lets in to sing:

"'Twas in the merry month of May;  
When I started for Texas far away.  
I left my darling gal behind;  
She said her heart was only mine!"

"Rowdy!" exclaims Mac. "I've been knowin' this song ever since hell caught afire, an' there ain't no suchuva verse in it! The second stanzer goes like this:

"'Twas in the year eighty-three  
That A. J. Stinson hired me.  
He says, 'Young feller I want you to go  
An' feller my herd down to Mexico.'"

As Mac brung his tender tenor to a double demi-semi-quaverin' conclusion, Rowdy Ransom was seen to shake his head, and kinder of a saw-tooth edge begun to creep into that quiet way he had of speaking.

"Right's right an' wrong's wrong," Mac he says, "even in a song. That there's the *third* verse—only you got it plumb wrong. Here's the rightful way it goes:

"'Twas in the spring of eighty-three  
That ol' Jim Stinson said to me:  
'Young man, how would you like to go  
With a herd of steers to New Mexico?'"



For a mild little man with only one upper lip, Rowdy sure bellered it big and bold, bearing down pertickerly hard on the words that was different from ol' Mac's.

"There, Brother Ballard Buster," he says when he's finished. "If them oversize ears of yours ain't too fuzzy with jackass hair, now you know how it goes!"

"Jackass ears, huh?" snorts McCorkadale, slamming down the guitar. "Well, at least I got something besides jackass brains between 'em!"

"Yeah," grunts Rowdy Ransom, "mostly bone."

"Bone, huh?" McCorkadale flares up like somebody had lit a match to him and his voice gits plumb contemptuous. "Why, you little sawed-off sonuva short-horn—"

Right there was where Rowdy Ransom hit him—between the "sonuva" and the "short-horn." McCorkadale never even took time to look surprised. The roundhouse right that he swang at Rowdy Ransom's jaw would of downed a dromedary, but it never fazed Rowdy a mite—because it never hit him. But the left that follered it connected, and from there on for about a minute it was a sure 'nough dog fight. Then Duff Moser, Link Cassidy, Joe Clark, Pinch-pocket Patterson, Big-nose George swarmed on 'em from all directions and pulled 'em apart.

"Shame on you!" says the ramrod. "Fightin' over the fool words to a fool song, like a couple of didey buttons!"

"Duff," says Rowdy Ransom, wiping a little streak of blood from his lip, but not sounding noways excited, "ain't you rambled the range long enough to learn that it ain't manners to interfere in a fair fight?"

"It sure as hell ain't!" snorts McCorkadale. "Jest turn me a-loose an' I'll—"

"Sure," busts in the ramrod, "turn you a-loose an' you'd both spit out your teeth to spite your spleen. How you ever expect to—"

"For my part, we don't!" busts in Mac. "Either he agrees to sing this here song right or the duet's done cancelled!"

"Suits me," shrugs Rowdy. "I never hankered to hitch up for no duet with no whiskey-tenored hawg-caller in the first place!"

"Why, that settles it, then," says the ramrod, soothing as sugar-sirup. "Call off the duet an' everybody's satisfied."

"Now you're talkin'!" agrees Pinch-pocket Patterson. "Who gives a darn about them ol' hens an' their cowboy croonin' contest, anyways? My money's on the steer ropin', an' if you two grapplin' galoots don't git out there an' win it, by gollies, I'll—"

"Steer ropin'? Hah!" snorts Mac McCorkadale. "You think I'm goin' to team up in a public ropin' with a Lillypewshun lunkhead that blows up an' lambastes his own partner jest because he's too dumb his ownself to recollect the right words to a little ol' song? Hah!"

"But, listen, you fellers!" Duff Moser still tries to smooth 'em down. "The honor of the whole Shoe Bar outfit is staked on that steer ropin'! Our money's done bet, an'—"

"You better unbet it then, if you can," interposes Rowdy Ransom, quiet but firm. "For as far as I'm concerned, the ropin' team of Ransom and McCork-the-dull has sure 'nough come to the partin' of the ways!"

**D**OUBT if you will that a duck can quack, that your saddle will turn when the cinch gits slack, but don't you never doubt but what them two Shoe Bar rannyhans had

their necks bowed. By threatenin' to bonnet 'em with slop buckets and pen 'em up with the hawks, Duff Moser and the boys did manage to kinder hold 'em apart for the time being. He appointed Link Cassidy and Joe Clark to take turns hanging onto Rowdy, whilst Pinch-pocket Patterson and Big-nose George drewed the same responsibility for McCorkadale.

"If we ever let 'em tangle to a finish, fists or guns," says Duff, "there won't be enough left of either one of 'em to rope a rabbit, much less a thousand-pound steer. As long as we can keep 'em apart, there's always a chance they may cool off an' make up in time to git into that team-tyin' contest, after all."

But there wasn't much prospect of it. Follering the bust up, them two formerly pardners wouldn't even speak to each other. Meantime, the rest of them Shoe Bar waddies was gittin' plumb frantic. When they seen threatening wouldn't do no good, they let in to beg.

"Listen, Rowdy," pleads Link Cassidy. "It ain't fair to the rest of us boys. We've done bet ever' cent we got on you an' Mac—I've even put up my saddle—to win that ropin'!"

"Better cancel your bets, then," says Rowdy. "We ain't teamin'."

"Try cancellin' hell with a cup of coffee!" says Link. "Ol' Sheriff Millwee's holdin' the stakes. Duff's done been to see him. He maintains a bet's a bet an' as stakeholder he ain't goin' to cancel nothin' unless we git them Box L boogers we're bettin' agin' to agree to it. Personally, I'd rather lose forty saddles than humilimate myself by beggin' them bull-whackers to let me off!"

"I wouldn't," says Pinch-pocket.

"In fact, I've done been over and tried it. They say all their side of the bets was that Ross an' Hicks would win the steer-ropin', an' whether our men rope or not ain't got no bearing on it."

"Damn the bets," says Big-nose George. "It's the disgrace of lettin' them Box L lollypops walk off with a win after all the big medicine we've made about it!"

"Well," says Rowdy. "Lookin' at it from that angle, I'll swaller my insults on one condition: git holt of a songbook with 'The Trail to Mexico' in it, an' if it shows them words to be the way McCorkadale claims. I'll not only sing it his way in the duet, but I'll also git out there and help him win that steer ropin'."

When they put the same proposition to Mac, he faunched around right smart, but finally agreed to abide by the same conditions.

"Course," he says, "there ain't no question which one of us is right, an' any honest song book in the world will prove it."

Trouble was there didn't seem to be no song book in the whole town of Ganado that even mentioned such a ballad as "The Trail to Mexico."

"I've studied through ever' hymn book in both churches," groans Pinch-pocket Patterson, reporting to Duff Moser out back of the chutes not more'n a half hour before the rodeo was due to commence. "They got plenty pieces on the trail to heaven, but nary a mention of Mexico."

"Kinder peculiar, too," complains Joe Clark. "I've noticed a heap more people headin' for Mexico than I have for heaven! Well, it looks like— Wup, looky yonder! You reckon they've gone an' made up?"

It sure looked like it, for yonder was Rowdy Ransom and Mac McCorkadale a-straddle of their ropin'

ponies ridin' from the stable toward the outside gate, side by side.

"I told Link an' Big-nose not to let them two git together!" snorts Duff Moser. "Look! They got their guns on! We better see what's up!"

The three of 'em overtaken Rowdy and Mac just inside the gate.

"Well, boys?" inquires Duff. "Goin' out to limber up your ropes a little?"

"Limber up hell!" snorts McCorkadale. "We're goin' outside to settle this here disagreement once an' for all!"

"Like gentlemen an' cowboys!" agrees Rowdy. He pats the holt of his six-gun plumb significant.

If it hadn't been for the gate-man, Old Snapper Smith, swinging the gate shut quick when Duff hollered to him, they just might of done it, too. As it was Duff and Pinch-pocket and Joe Clark got between 'em. Rowdy and Mac looked at the ten or a dozen Box L cowboys approaching from the stables, then at each other.

"We don't want no Box L audience, Rowdy," says Mac. "Supposin' we tend to this later?"

"Sure," says Rowdy. "Anyways, Link says he's got wind of an old feller that'll prove—"

"Prove hell!" snorts McCorkadale. "I'll prove to you that—"

He didn't git to say what on account of the grinnin' arrival of them Box L hands.

"Hiyah, songbirds!" they all sing out together. "Any more cash to lay on the team-tyin'?"

"Sure," says Duff Moser grimly, yampin' some bills from his pocket. "Thirty more that the team of Ransom and McCorkadale wins it!"

"You shouldn't ort to of done that, Duff," says Rowdy, after them Box L's had rode on to line up for the Grand Entry. "You know there

ain't no such team any more, an' won't be, unless—"

"Unless we show you that song in a book, provin' which one of you is right! That there's the promise you made us. You're still aimin' to keep it, ain't you?"

"Yeah," grunts Mac, "but—"

"You an' Joe stay with 'em, Pinch-pocket!" busts in the ramrod, suddenly spurrin' for the grandstand gate. "I'm going after that song book!"

What Duff had got suddenly took with was a good-enough idea all right if it would work. The droop-eyed hombre he grabbed at the grandstand gate was Editor Strawn of *The Ganado Gazette*. On Duff's tip Strawn had bet some money on Rowdy and Mac his ownself, and he already knowed about the bust-up.

"Looky here, Strawn," says Duff when he got him cornered. "All we got to do is show them boys that blasted song printed out in a book an' they've agreed to abide by same an' call the feud off. Well, we can't find it in no song book, but what's to keep you from rushin' right down to your place an' printin' one?"

"Whaz prevent?" says Editor Strawn. "Jush three thingsh prevent, Mishter Mossher. Number one: Printin' takesh time. It'ssh too late now. Number two: Shopsh outa paper because the editor used paper money to bet on shteer-ropin'. Number three: Only one printer in town—thash me—ssh! He'sh drunk!"

SO the Ganado Range Rodeo banged open. It come on to the big main event of team steer roping, and the Shoe Bar still didn't have no prospect of winning, for the unbeatable team of Rowdy and Mac was still hatin' each other's innards over a song. Not only that, but

both Link Cassidy and Big-nose George were missing, which broke up both of the Shoe Bar's other entries.

"I leave them honyaks to keep watch over Rowdy and Mac," complained Duff Moser, "an' they not only don't do it, but plumb disappear into the bargain! I wisht to hell—"

He busted off all of a sudden, for yonder come Link Cassidy racing acrost the track, waving a guitar.



"Hey, Duff!" he pants. "I got him! Bring 'em over here behind the grandstand!"

"Got who? Bring who? What you mean, runnin' off when I—"

"Ol' Nick Shortridge, Rowdy an' Mac—an' pronto before the team-ropin's over!"

Still without savvyin' what it was about, Duff, with Joe Clark and Pinch-pocket to help him, managed somehow to haze them two feudin' ropers around behind the stand.

There, squattin' against a post was a weather-whipped little old man with droughty whiskers and irigatin' eyes.

"Boys," says Link, "this beats a book. Meet Mr. Nick Shortridge, the feller that made up 'The Trail to Mexico' in the first place, which I've brung him here to settle this song argument once an' for all. You tell 'em how it goes, gran'pa!"

"Tetch me a chord," says Mr. Shortridge. "My fingers is so stiff I can't whang it no more!"

So Link give him the chord and he cut 'er loose, kinder shrill and whiney, but right strong for such an old coot:

"I made up my mind in an early day,  
That I'd leave my gal—she was too gay—"

"Yuh see?" gloats McCorkadale at the end of the first stanzer. "It goes jest like I said it did!"

"Quit interrumpin' me, young squirt!" snaps the old man. He cuts loose on the stanzer about old man Stinson, only danged if he don't sing this un Rowdy's way, endin' it up:

"'With a herd of steers to New Mexico—"

So now it's Rowdy's turn to look like the cat that caught the gopher. He's jest waiting for the old man to let go of the double-demi-semi-quaver on the last note before he starts crowing for his side, when all of a sudden another old whiskerino come hobbling around the corner of the grandstand, leanin' on a cane with one hand and on Big-nose George with the other. He looks plenty feeble, but his voice ain't.

"Drat your guzzle, Nick Shortridge!" he bellers. "Won't you never learn the right words to that there song? It ain't 'New Mexico,' it's Mex—"

"'Tain't no suchova!" busts in Mr. Shortridge, bristling his whiskers. "Ol' Jim Stinson never drove a steer to *old* Mexico in his life. He

drove into *New Mexico* at Salt Lake, swung past Fort Sumner, an'—"

What plumb drowned him out was this other oldster's bobbed-wire beller bawling out:

"'Twas in the year of eighty-three,  
That A. J. Stinson hired me.  
He says 'Young feller, I want you to go,  
An' foller my herd down to Mexico!'"

"That's the way it goes, gents," he puffs, "an' don't you let no watery-eyed, snuffle-snooted, wabble-tailed ol' coot like Nick Shortridge try to tell you different!"

"That's right, boys," says Big-nose George. "Because I jest found out that Mr. Bunker here is the feller that made it up in the first place. I reckon that ort to prove that—"

"Prove my tail feathers!" whinnies old Nick Shortridge. "I made up that ballard myownself back in '86! An' if Ab Bunker claims different he's a split-tongued, story-tellin' ol' magpie!"

"Why, you cockle-bur-tailed o' sawed-off song-stealin' sonuva short-horn—"

Right then was when old Nick Shortridge hit him with his cane—right between the "sonuva" and the "shorthorn." The next thing anybody knowed them two old whiske-roosters was goin' it for hell-ain't-half, cane-whippin' each other to beat a bullfight.

Strangely enough it was Rowdy Ransom and Mac McCorkadale that jumped in quickest to pull 'em apart.

"Shame on you!" says Mac. "Two

old mossyhorns like you, fightin' over the fool words to a fool song! We ort to bump your heads together for you!"

Then all of a sudden Mac seemed to realized what he's sayin'. He looks at Rowdy Ransom. His number 'leven mouth kinder dangles open, and one of his ham-size hands scratches his head kinder sheepish. Rowdy Ransom meets his look with sort of a sickly grin.

"Seems like that's what they been tryin' to tell *us*, Mac," he says. "Kinder silly, ain't it?"

"Specially when we didn't neither of us make up the dang song in the first place," grins Mac. "Listen—they're still callin' up steer ropers out there, Rowdy. Let's you an' me—"

"Get out there an' show 'em how it's did!"

"Well, I be damned!" says Duff Moser, watchin' 'em hightail it for their hosses. "Jest like Demon and Pithypuss, ain't they?"

That night, when the Shoe Bar team of winnin' steer ropers also teamed up on a duet in the Ganado Ladies' Social, Literary and Business Society's cowboy singing contest, the song they sung was "The Old Chisholm Trail." It had a new verse in it that they'd made up their own-selves:

"A kick in the pants or a punch in the nose—

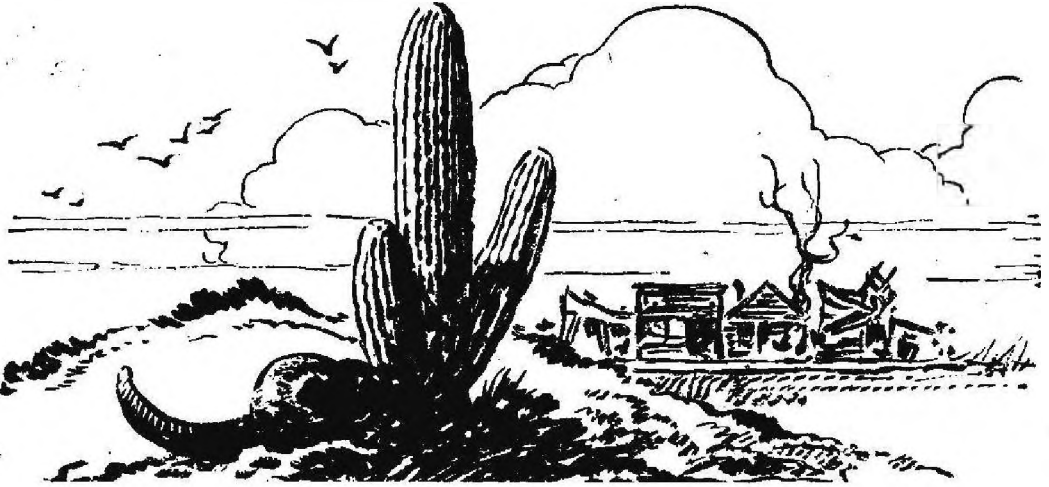
Who gives a hoot how the dang song goes?

Coma ti yi yoopy yoopy yip yoopy yay!

It's team-tyin' steers that draws the pay!"

THE END





## IN TONTO TOWN

By HARRY R. KELLER

In Tonto Town the silent streets  
 Lie buried in a drift of sand.  
 Like corpses in their winding sheets  
 The gaunt adobe houses stand.  
 Time was when clamor filled the air,  
 And range-bred men, all lean and brown,  
 Came riding nightly to the blare  
 Of revelry in Tonto Town.

I know, for I was one of these,  
 The wildest ranny of the band,  
 A wiry bronc between my knees,  
 A six-gun ready to my hand.  
 From fickle chance I caught my cue  
 To swap hot lead, or play the clown.  
 It mattered not, when life was new—  
 And likewise cheap—in Tonto Town.

I close my eyes and see them still:  
 The bearded freighters, gray with dust;  
 The gun hawks spoiling for a kill;  
 The panther play of greed and lust.  
 The rabble in the dancing halls,  
 The lurid lips, the gaudy gown—  
 Their shadows haunt the crumbling walls  
 In Tonto Town, in Tonto Town.

Nor will I be forgetting this:  
 Blue moonlight in a patio,  
 A touch of hands, a breathless kiss,  
 A promise whispered soft and low.  
 Too soon the eastern sky grew wan  
 With morning light. . . . Her eyes were brown,  
 But she, with all the rest, is gone,  
 Forever gone from Tonto Town.

The sun-bleached bones of cattle lie  
 Across the range that drought has swept.  
 Beneath the brazen, searing sky  
 For twenty years the town has slept.  
 Its darkened doorways mock the night,  
 Like sightless eyes its windows frown;  
 But it is not deserted quite—  
 My heart still lives in Tonto Town.

# ACES AND EIGHTS

BY NEY N. GEER

THE Powder River Kid drew rein at the high gap cutting through the Cascade Range. It had been a hard climb up the east slope, and his bay gelding was winded. With a caution that had become habitual during the past two years, the Kid's blue eyes narrowed intently as he looked back across the tufted pines and scanned his trail.

That trail was a thousand miles

long, and the Kid had left a few dead men along it for sheriffs to worry over. The first to drop had been Dutch Holtz, owner of the saloon where the Kid's father had been fleeced of his cattle and range in a crooked poker game, then killed by a derringer slug when he questioned the honesty of Three-finger Jack, a fly-by-night tinhorn gambler. It was Three-finger Jack that the Kid was after, and the tinhorn's erratic wanderings were hard to follow. The gambler was constantly changing his name and making long jumps between killings which invariably were

*The Powder River Kid was fast, but he wasn't expecting a sneak draw from the tinhorn.*



the result of card games. It was a trail that had put bitter lines in the Kid's young face and a sardonic smile on lips which had once been cheerful and friendly.

The Powder River Kid knew he would find no rest from the morose and brooding thoughts that drove him along this trail of Three-finger Jack until he sat face to face with the crooked gambler across a poker table. For, like many a man before him—some of whom were now dead—the Kid had vowed to beat the tin-horn at his own game. A game of draw—cards and guns!

The Kid was not a fool, however. By constant training his supple hands had acquired a lightning swiftness of movement that baffled the eye. Even as he paused on the trail, one hand expertly worked with a worn deck of cards, switching the top half off the bottom, then back again. Suddenly, his other hand dropped reins and streaked to holster, snapping out his Colt in a single motion that was quicker than thought.

He laughed without mirth, for his back trail was empty and he was entirely alone. No danger threatened. He returned the Colt to leather, changed hands with the cards, then executed a sudden cross-hand draw. A draw that was sudden death to tin-horns. Three times since leaving Wyoming's Powder River range the Kid had used that draw across a poker table. And it was his hunch that very soon he would use it on Three-finger Jack. Lucky Gulch, where a bonanza of placer gold had been recently discovered, was not far ahead and the card sharp was almost sure to be there. Unsuspecting miners would be easy picking for the tricky gambler.

The bay gelding nudged the slack reins and stepped off along the trail

through the gap and on down the west slope. Two days later the big bronc picked its way into the new gold camp.

Lucky Gulch was a five-mile stretch of looping curves where rough-clad miners toiled thick as ants, using gold pans, rockers, long toms and whip-sawed sluice boxes in which to wash out the rich red gravel and reap their golden harvest. First news of the strike had brought a wild stampede, not yet at its peak, for the population of the diggings was increasing hourly. Excitement prevailed everywhere, the Kid observed, and men moved about with tense nerves. Calmly riding at a walk through all this confusion, the Kid came into Stringtown which had mushroomed up overnight.

Stringtown was a double row of tents and rough-board buildings sprawling along the canyon trail. The Kid saw hotels under canvas, gambling dens, saloons and a few stores. The hot noon sun boiled pitch from the town's raw lumber.

The most pretentious of all the false-fronted buildings was the Ace High Bar, a combination saloon and gambling joint. The Kid stopped at the hitch rail before it, found a vacant place for his horse, then entered the bar, which housed a brawling, two-fisted, hell-for-leather sort of crowd, well sprinkled with professional gamblers, riffraff and outlaws, all seeking adventure and the quickest, easiest way to turn a dishonest dollar.

Near the front end of the long bar stood Diamond Joe, more of a lookout than a dispenser of drinks. He had observed the Kid ride up, and gave him a close scrutiny as he stepped inside. Diamond Joe saw with interest that this stranger was well built and wore his gun in an unusual fashion, butt foremost on



his right hip. Also, the stranger looked capable and willing to use that gun, if and when occasion required.

Diamond Joe's friendly smile was a magnet that drew the Kid to him. "Howdy, cowboy!" the saloonman called cheerfully. "Name your poison, pilgrim. A stranger's first drink is always free. Come far?"

The Kid smiled. "Far enough to be choked with dust," he replied easily, and ordered rye.

The Kid casually observed that the large room housed many and various gambling layouts, most of them receiving a good play. Across the room on a raised platform a small, droop-shouldered man was pounding from a battered piano something which passed for music with the boisterous crowd. To spot Three-finger Jack among this shifting camp population would take a little time, the Kid decided, for he had never seen the man and had only a sketchy description of him. He was said to be a nondescript character of ordinary size and build, whose only oddity was that the second finger of the left hand was cut off at the first joint.

"Any easy money around this diggings?" he asked of Joe.

Diamond Joe could detect only bitterness in the Kid's hard-bitten face and sardonic smile. "Not unless you've a stand-in with Ike Jenkins," Diamond said. "But if you're plenty handy with your gun, waal, Ike might use you. Just stick around camp a few days. Give the boss a chance to look you over. What's your moniker, son?"

The Kid thought of Three-finger Jack and decided changing names was a game two could play. He brought out his worn deck of cards and gave them a shuffle. Then, with studied carelessness, he cut the

deck and turned two cards face up on the bar. The ace of diamonds and king of spades showed. Diamond Joe looked at the cards, puzzled.

"That's my moniker," explained the Kid. "Just tell Ike Jenkins that Ace King will bear lookin' over. I'll stay a few days."

"You won't stay long with that moniker," said the lookout. "Not unless you take up residence in boot-hill."

"Yeah?" said the Kid. "That spade is to bury my dead."

**D**IAMOND JOE shook his head. He stepped to a drawer containing gambling supplies and selected a new deck of cards which he placed before the Kid.

"Your cards are about worn out," he smiled, still friendly. "Try your luck with a new deck. Pick another moniker, son. One of the boys answers to Ace Jackson. There's no use in you gettin' killed."

The Kid's blue eyes brightened. "That's right," he grinned. "I reckon I better try my luck again."

He broke the seal on the new deck and shuffled it while Diamond Joe watched narrowly and with keen interest. But when the Kid cut and turned up two cards they were the same as before, the ace of diamonds and king of spades. Diamond Joe looked startled.

"Pilgrim, you are slick with cards!" he conceded.

"Yeah, an' slick with a gun," said the Kid. "Better tell Ace Jackson to change his moniker—or leave camp. I aim to stay." He pocketed the new deck of cards, tossed a coin on the bar and walked outside to his horse.

Looking out over the painted half of a front window, Diamond Joe watched the Kid mount and ride off along the street. A young but mighty

salty gun hand, he decided, and hunting easy money.

There was a clearing amid the pines and chincapins where a large corral and open-faced shed served Stringtown as a livery. The Kid found it and left his animal with the hostler in charge. Next, he dulled the keen edge of his hunger in a tent eating house, where he picked up scraps of information while listening to the other patrons converse. He knew at once that the camp was on edge. Rich claims were constantly being jumped; thrifty miners who did not gamble or spend money over the bars were nightly being murdered and robbed of their hard-won gold; gunplay was so common that it passed with scant notice. The Jenkins gang, it seemed, held a death grip on this bonanza diggings. The Powder River Kid set out to prowl the camp.

The sun dropped behind high timbered ridges, and the sultry air of Stringtown cooled. Miners wearing the mud-stained garb of their trade thronged the street in increasing numbers. One of them, an elderly man who walked with a painful limp, attracted the Kid's attention. The man's hat brim was low over his eyes; a grizzled beard effectually obscured his features. Pausing frequently, the limping man spoke in low tones to other miners, who nodded as if in agreement, then continued on their way. This aroused the Kid's interest. Something was stirring!

He followed the man at a distance. Soon an entirely different type of man brushed past the Kid. A man who wore expensive and spotless garb, and whose half-lidded, hawk-like eyes were fixed intently on the movements of the one who limped. The stalker's lean, sharp visage expressed the predatory cruelty and

cunning of a wolf. His polished boots took him nearer to his quarry, while his lean hands drew closer to the butts of his thonged-down guns. Suddenly his cold voice chilled the crowded street.

"Tuttle!" he called. "You damned thief!"

Startled, the limping man whirled about, his hand going to his gun. It was a hopeless attempt to draw and shoot. His weapon never cleared leather. The hawk-eyed gunman blasted him down, shooting with both hands. Tuttle's body shuddered with the impact of smashing lead.

He gave an agonized cry: "Jenkins! You bloody devil! You'll—" A lead slug crashed through his teeth, another ripped through his heart.

Ike Jenkins stood in his tracks a moment, watching the body settle in the red dust of the street, carefully judging the temper of the startled crowd. Then he turned calmly and walked back toward the Ace High Saloon, while nearly fifty miners watched him go. They had witnessed cold-blooded murder, yet none of them made a move. A gunman laughed coldly, and the Kid was quick to understand. There were others of the Jenkins gang posted along the street. Their guns were protecting their leader's back.

"Laugh, you damned coyote," growled an embittered miner under his breath. "The Jenkins gang has just about shot its last wad in this diggin's."

The Kid swung about and faced him. "Yeah? What do you mean by that?" He eyed the big miner appraisingly, and his thin lips twisted in scorn.

Without answering, the miner spat into the dust and turned away. It was obvious that he wanted no words

with anyone who wore a gun in such a rakish manner as the Kid did. Other miners eyed the Kid sharply, no doubt considering him one of the Jenkins gang. None of them spoke, for the expression on the Kid's face was not friendly. He saw in these slow-handed, intimidated miners only so much pay dirt being run through Ike Jenkins' sluice box and washed clean of their gold. Where was their fighting spirit, he wondered. They stood huddled like a bunch of storm-whipped cattle. The Kid turned his back on them and moved away.

**T**HE Kid continued his prowl of the camp, while doves mourned in the chincapins and nighthawks cried in the darkening sky. Sight of that gunplay had intensified the hard-bitten expression on the Kid's face; it had plunged his mind into a dark interval of morose and brooding thought. The night life of the booming camp held small interest for him, and it was yet early when he paid an outrageous price for a room on the second floor of a frame hotel which was not yet completely finished, but was already open for business.

He pulled off his boots, stretched out on the narrow bunk and prepared to get some needed sleep. But sleep would not come, he soon discovered. Through the flimsy partition there crept into his ears the muffled sound of someone sobbing. A soul-racking outpouring of grief, all the more disturbing because it was almost wholly suppressed. It angered the Kid. He tried in vain to close his ears to the sound. He commenced wishing he had slept out under some chincapin. However, he was packing a considerable roll of money and had not wanted to run the risk of being murdered while he slept. But now that racking sound

in the adjoining room was cutting into his heart.

The Powder River Kid had long thought his heart was hard as stone. He was still more angered to discover it wasn't. That sound of grief, slight as it was, cut into his heart quite easily. He found no defense against it. Sitting up in the darkness, he rolled a smoke, waiting for the sound to stop. But it kept on and on. It drove the Kid to remove the chair from before his door and go out into the long hallway, where he gently tried the latch at the next door.

The door opened and the Kid went quietly inside. He struck a match and lighted a lamp on the wall. Face down on the bunk lay a slender figure in overalls and brush-frayed jacket, head buried under a pillow. At first the Kid thought it was a girl. He hesitated, as if about to back away, then thought better of it.

Snatching away the pillow, he said harshly, "Shut up! Stop that fool noise!"

With a violent start, the youngster sat up, shrinking back against the wall. He was dry-eyed now, for the wells from which tears flow had long since been emptied. He looked at the Kid and his quivering lips tightened. He became utterly silent and motionless, his grief-reddened eyes glaring at the Kid with an expression of bitterest hatred. His eyes were light-brown, well set in a handsome face. Something in that face turned the Kid's unreasoning anger. He sat down on a rough bench and worked up a smoke, eying the holes in his socks. The silence became a living thing.

"I couldn't sleep," said the Kid, and took out the new deck of cards. His skilled hands worked with them absent-mindedly, while the boy watched and the silence built again.

The Kid's hard-bitten expression softened somewhat, and when he spoke again his voice had softened, too. "Cryin' don't get a man nowhere. Better tell me about it, son."

The boy on the bunk drew a deep, unsteady breath and let go of it with a quivering sigh. "You're not one of the Jenkins gang?" The Kid shook his head, and the boy went on, "Ike killed my dad, and I . . . I couldn't even get pa's gun. They toted him off and slapped me away. Wouldn't even let me watch his buryin'. I'm sorry you couldn't sleep, mister. Soon as I can get over these shakes, I'll slip out of here. I gotta kill Ike Jenkins! That's why I snuck up here, mister. To get rid of these shakes."

"I know how you feel," said the Kid. "I've felt that way myself. You learn you got a chore to do even though you gotta grow up to the job. You're Tuttle's kid, I reckon."

"Yeah, Jim Tuttle. My pa discovered this diggings. Ike Jenkins drove us off and jumped our claims. He shot pa and left him for dead. But I managed to pack him back in the hills, and he come around again pretty fair. We kept to the hills, because the Jenkins gang had staked all the best claims here. Pa was lucky and struck it again, the mother lode, he said. We got a family back East dependin' on us, and pa was determined to make good. He came here thinkin' to pick some honest miners who'd help him hold that new strike for a fair share. Now pa's dead!"

"Gold never made anyone rich," said the Kid. "You better get out of this camp and head for your folks back home."

Jim Tuttle shook his head. "We hid our horses back in the chinca-pins. There's a rifle on my saddle. I aim to kill Ike Jenkins. Then I'll

hold that lode. You might have caught me cryin', mister, but I ain't a quitter."

"Sure not," said the Kid. "I know how you feel. You got a chore to do." He eyed the holes in his socks and continued to work with the cards, his thoughts taking a new turn. He wanted to help this kid.

A step came along the hall, doors softly opened and closed. Listening, the blue eyes of the Powder River Kid narrowed a little. Presently, the door of the room opened and a nondescript man in gambler's attire coolly stepped inside. The Kid felt his back hair raise, like the hackles of a dog scenting wolf. The intruder smiled and his left hand toyed with the heavy gold watch chain strung across his checkered vest. The second finger of that hand was short. Its fingertip had been neatly amputated at the first joint, and the Kid knew exactly why. That short finger offered a decided advantage to a crooked poker player. With it cards could be dealt from the bottom of the deck without a telltale glimpse of the working finger's knuckle.

The Powder River Kid knew he was face to face with Three-finger Jack, the tricky tinhorn who had killed his father. But not face to face across a poker table, so the Kid grinned. "This your room, amigo?" he asked easily.

"Not at all, sir," replied the gambler suavely. "I was hunting this fatherless lad. This camp is not unmindful of his sorrow. Over in the Ace High some of us gentlemen took up a collection in his behalf. Already it amounts to over a thousand dollars, and it's still growing. We will all feel honored if the lad comes over with me, so that the donation can properly be presented to him. You understand, sir?"

Jim Tuttle blurted out a hot re-

fusal, but the Kid silenced him with a look and said, "The lad is all on edge. He don't savvy how such things go. But I savvy. It was mighty kind of you gents to take up that collection for the youngster. He'll think well of you in the mornin' after he's had some sleep. I'll talk with him about it. Tomorrow, I'll bring him over to the Ace High, mister—"

The gambler smiled. "Just ask for Ace Jackson. I'll be looking for you. If I'm not around, some of the boys can find me. By the way, what's your name?"

"The moniker is Ace King," said the Kid, and matched the tinhorn's smile.

"I take keen pleasure in making your acquaintance," Jackson said. "You impress me as being a far-sighted young man. We have much in common, Ace." The tinhorn's colorless eyes turned suggestively to Jim Tuttle, then returned to the Kid. "It becomes obvious that we can work together. Diamond Joe speaks well of you." Three-finger Jack bowed courteously and departed.

Jim Tuttle looked accusingly at the Kid. "I don't want their damned money!"

"Sure not, Jim. But when you toss a cat on its ear, it always lands on its feet. We'll be mighty lucky to do that, I reckon. Was your dad packin' gold of rich quartz from that lode?"

"Yeah, Ace. Pa brought along some picture rock that'd knock yore eyes out. He wanted something to show the honest miners that'd draw 'em to him. Look here!"

The boy handed the Kid a lump of ore. It did not require a trained eye to see that the ore was the real McCoy, for it was seamed and splotted with yellow metal. The Kid viewed it with a sardonic smile.

"I thought so, Jim. The Jenkins gang searched your dad's pockets. They know he made a new strike. That talk of a thousand dollars was just bait. They aim to get their hands on you, so you can lead 'em to the rich lode your dad discovered."

"I'd never do that!" declared the boy.

"Sure you would," said the Kid. "They'd help you change your mind and it wouldn't be pleasant, the way they'd handle you. You got a kite to fly, an' mighty sudden. Come along, Jim. I'll get my boots on."

Jim Tuttle followed rather uncertainly. Events were moving too fast for him to understand fully. But he had looked behind the Kid's mask of bitterness and knew he had found a friend. The two of them left the hotel by way of the back stairs and without mishap gained the livery.

"I was lookin' to get some shut-eye," grumbled the Kid to the watchful hostler in charge. "But Ike gimme a chore to do straight off."

That seemed to satisfy the hostler, and his alacrity to serve the Kid proved he was one of the Jenkins gang. The Kid saddled and mounted. He rode to where the boy waited in the scrub timber nearby and swung him up behind. The two continued on for a little ways, then the Kid stepped down. He split his roll of money and tucked one half in the boy's overall pocket.

"So long, Jim," he said easily. "Give my bronc its head. It'll pick a game trail and take you up the east slope and over the pass. Keep on headin' east, amigo. My bronc knows the way. When you hit the T Bar Z on Powder River, just tell the boys that the Kid sent you. They'll make you right at home, no matter who owns the spread now."

"But I wasn't thinkin' to pull

out," said Jim Tuttle. "I got me a job to do."

"Skip it, Jim," said the Kid firmly. "I'll do yore chore along with one of my own." He slapped the bay gelding on the rump. "Give them T Bar Z punchers a howdy from me, Jim," he called softly as the gelding knowingly carried the Tuttle boy away.

**THREE-FINGER JACK** was dealing at a poker table in the Ace High Bar when the Kid found him a little later that night. They exchanged a look of mutual understanding as the Kid settled into a vacant chair at the table which an unlucky miner was vacating, having dropped all the gold in his poke in the game of draw.

The colorless eyes of the gambler asked a question.

"I left him asleep," answered the Kid, and bought a stack of blues. "He feels pretty tough but'll come out of it."

The gambler smiled and nodded. "You're mighty quick to catch on, my friend. It's a no-limit game with millions in it."

The Kid smiled. "I could use a little easy money," he replied ambiguously. "I been thinkin' to buy me a ranch."

So the Jenkins gang was after Jim Tuttle, he mused. The game was like mistletoe on the oaks, a parasitic growth that lived on the sweat and blood of honest men who toiled. He observed that the cards were factory marked, the same as the new deck in his pocket, bought from Diamond Joe. This was a no-limit game, and the miners were betting recklessly, not knowing that they were being fleeced. One of the miners was the same black-bearded giant the Kid had met in the street. His name proved to be Abe Benton, Big Abe,

his friends called him. Abe was losing heavily; losing temper, too, and grumbling.

When it came the Kid's turn to deal, his skilled hands stacked the deck. After the cut, he easily slipped the lower half back to the top again. He dealt top, bottom, and second cards. He dealt Big Abe a winning hand, and smiled sardonically as the giant raked in the chips.

"By thunder!" rumbled Abe Benton. "You've changed my luck, young feller." He gave the Kid a square-toothed grin.

Luck whipsawed back and forth across the table. Chips passed from Three-finger Jack to Abe Benton. Other miners and the Kid won a few.

The game became faster and wilder. It drew an interested crowd. The gambler's drawer emptied of gold dust and chips but he smiled thinly and sent for more. Jenkins came to stand at the tinhorn's shoulder, not at all pleased with the way the game was going. Always before Ace Jackson had been a steady winner. Abe Benton pawed his black whiskers and chuckled with delight. His luck was running high. The Kid remained cool and calm, the smile on his hard-bitten face never changing. He had his way with the deck and his trained hands escaped detection. Seated to the right of Three-finger Jack, the Kid was cutting the cards in such a way as to hamper the gambler's tricky dealing.

A grim-visaged gunman came to whisper softly into the ear of Ike Jenkins, who in turn bent forward and whispered into the ear of Three-finger Jack. The gambler's face tightened a bit. He opened a new deck of cards and gave them a rapid shuffle. He crimped the deck just a trifle, relinquished it for the cut.

The Kid saw the crimp, but care-

lessly cut to it. "Who's short in the ante?" he said.

Three-finger Jack glanced at the pot, then looked hard at Abe Benton and said, "Sweeten the kitty, my friend." The big miner grumblingly tossed in a chip, and the tinhorn commenced dealing the cards. But, unnoticed, the Kid had deftly switched the lower half of the deck to the top again. The deal went wild from there. The betting went wild, too, and everyone but the Kid, Big Abe and Three-finger Jack dropped out. Those three seemed to be holding pat hands. Abe bet his pile and called for a showdown, spreading a full house at kings and jacks. The tinhorn, his face a shade whiter, grimly exposed a higher full, aces and eights. He reached for his winnings. But suddenly the Kid stayed his hand.

"Just a minute!" he said. "I'm still in this game." With his right hand he fanned out his cards. He was holding the joker along with four aces.

"Five aces!" thundered Big Abe. "And Jackson has already turned up three! Someone has cheated!"

"I'll say," smiled the Kid, narrowly eyeing Three-finger Jack. "It was a new deck and this card-sharper's deal. By mistake, I reckon, he dealt himself the wrong cards. Aces and eights is a dead man's hand—so the boys say on Powder River. A cowman died with such cards in his hands once."

Two guns hung on the tinhorn's flanks. But he thrust at the table and snatched for his hidden derringer. The great arms of Big Abe had locked about the winnings and held the table fast. The Kid's cross-hand draw was fast as the tongue of a snake. His big Colt roared across the poker table. His slug ranged upward through the gambler's skull be-

fore the derringer spoke. Three-finger Jack dropped back into his chair, then sprawled forward with his head scattering the cards. It was over before surprised spectators had time to fling their bodies from the line of fire.

Looking first at the dead gambler, then at the smiling Kid, Big Abe slowly unfolded his arms. "Waal, by cracky, I reckon you win this pot," he said, a little shaken.

"Bring it along, pard," said the Kid, quite undisturbed. "If you like, we'll cash in at the bar and split the winnings."

Big Abe grinned. He took off his huge hat and scooped chips, currency and gold into it, then followed the Kid. Other miners crowded around him, and Big Abe grinned at them, spoke a low word or two, making clear to them that he was backing his new-found pard to the limit.

Ike Jenkins, a cluster of hard-eyed gunmen around him, had been informed that Jim Tuttle had vanished from the hotel. Ike correctly judged that this salty pilgrim was crossing his gang. Ike silently cursed Diamond Joe for a bungling fool. Then he cursed the dead gambler for another fool—allowing himself to be tricked at his own game. With a covert sign to his henchmen, Jenkins strode after the big miner and the Kid, determined to recover their heavy winnings. Jim Tuttle and the new strike also figured in this play.

**A**T the bar, the Kid saw the gang closing in. Two of them took positions near the front door, cutting off escape. Other hard-looking desperadoes set themselves to the Kid's right and left, where they had him hipped. Jenkins came in slowly. The Powder River Kid smiled in scorn. A prize bunch of gun-slingers! The gang must consider him pretty good,

if they reckoned it would take the whole dozen or so of them to down him in a gun fight.

With his back to the bar, the Kid braced himself against the shock of lead he knew was coming. Jenkins spoke sharply to Diamond Joe, who was counting the pile of chips.

"Don't pay off on that take, Joe!" he snapped. "I saw this card slick cheating!"

Diamond Joe ducked low. Jenkins was drawing and on all sides guns were being snatched from leather. The Kid's Colt was the first to go into action.

In the front doorway a Sharps rifle boomed its black powder thunder, leading a crashing symphony of gun fire. The Kid saw Ike Jenkins knocked off balance and start down. Fanning his hammer, the Powder River Kid heated his Colt into a flaming torch, pouring lead into the Jenkins gang. The Kid felt his left arm knocked limp and useless. Another slug took him through a leg. Whistlers were flying nine ways from the jack. The Kid's Colt ran dry! Diamond Joe cocked back an arm and hurled a bottle. It clipped the Kid's head and knocked him spinning to the floor.

"To hell with the Jenkins gang!" shouted Big Abe, a smoking gun in his fist. "Finish the bloody devils!"

Sprawled there under the rolling smoke, the Kid shook his head and cleared it. He saw the guns that had spilled from Jenkins' lifeless hands, and he snatched up one of those guns. He peered toward the front of the saloon. Under the thickening smoke he made out a slender figure in overalls and frayed jacket. Jim Tuttle was anything but a quitter! Jim was down one one knee, calmly squinting over the sights of a Sharps at one of the Jenkins gang. The

Sharps cut loose with a roar. The Kid knew now who had spiked Ike Jenkins, and he swung about toward the bar. Diamond Joe's head came into sight, and he was sighting a gun at Big Abe Benton's back. The Kid spilled a shot that dropped Diamond Joe into the discard.

Suddenly it stopped. The miners had finished the rest of the Jenkins gang. They could fight, those slow-handed miners, once they got started. Big Abe picked up the Kid, examined his wounds, then slapped him on the back. "By cracky, pard! We'll split them winnin's yet. They downed yuh, but you're all to the good."

In spite of two bullet holes, the Kid was feeling pretty good. A changed expression was on his face as he looked around at these hard-fisted miners. They were giving him warm and friendly smiles. The Kid grinned back in kind.

Jim Tuttle came to his side through the lifting smoke. He was carefully stuffing a cartridge into the Sharps. "Waal, I finished one chore, and I reckon you finished yourn, mister. I tied your bronc along with mine, back in the chins. Ifn you ain't too busy, maybe you'd help me with that other job back in the hills."

"Don't you two kids be in no tar-nation rush," said Big Abe Benton, kindly. "You ain't goin' no place, without I tag along. You need a gent about my size to look after you!"

"Then plug these leaks and let's fly our kite," said the Kid in Big Abe's ear. "Jim's got a lode to stake, and I reckon us three is equal to the job. The way I feel, it won't be healthy for no human to start both-erin' us."

"Not by a jugful, it won't," the big miner boomed.

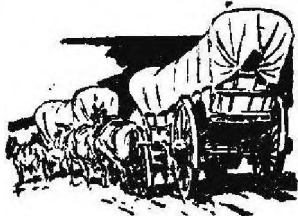


# RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Sixty years before the Oregon expeditions and the discovery of gold in California, pioneers from New England shouted "Westward, ho!" and the first of the covered wagons creaked out of Ipswich, Massachusetts, headed for the great adventure. On March 1, 1786, delegates from eight counties met in Boston and drafted a plan made by General Benjamin Tupper to explore northwest of the Ohio River.

The plan of action agreed upon involved the raising of a fund of one million dollars to be divided into one thousand shares of one thousand dollars



each, in continental land certificates, and the purchase of settlement land in the Western territory. Congress eventually granted five million acres of land at two-thirds of a dollar an acre. As this was to be paid in United States certificates of debt, which were worth about twelve cents on the dollar, the actual price of the land was about eight or nine cents per acre, perhaps but one percent of the present worth of that same land.

Armed and equipped for their dangerous enterprise, the emigrants gathered on December 3, 1787, at the Rev. Dr. Cutler's house, in Ipswich, and, after firing a volley as a salute, began their westward track. This was the first wagon train to strike out for the West.

In Western frontier times the ski, or Norwegian snowshoe, as it was then called, was an integral part of the equipment of the stockman. Very few possessed web snowshoes, much less the skill to use them, one reason being that

the legs of a man who rides a horse several hours a day do not handle the clumsy racquet easily.

A band of cattle might be trapped in some sheltered spot beyond gulches and drifts through which a horse could not wallow, and in such cases small bales of hay were carried to them by means



of skis. If roads and trails became blocked, the rancher waited only for the snow to settle, then, on a pair of well-taloned skis he set out to visit neighbors, the post office or trading post, probably at the same time enjoying the sport very much as the ski enthusiast of today does. The only difference in the ski of then and now was that the staff with rings attached, on which modern skiers depend so much, was unknown to ranchers.

Up to a few years ago, in order to bring religion into the various inaccessible hamlets of cattle lands, a circuit-riding preacher visited these places.



Often months and even years elapsed between his visits. Hence, arriving, it was not uncommon for him to hold services for a wife or husband long dead.

The word-coining cowboy, in order to avoid any confusion of identity, ingeniously nicknamed these gentlemen "sky pilots," and the name stands as one of the landmarks of the old West.

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



# SADDLEFUL OF DYNAMITE

BY JIM KJELGAARD

Down in the corral little dust bombs exploded under the hoofs of the two mares as they made a wild race around the inclosure and finally backed into a corner. But the sleek brown gelding, neck arched and pointed ears erect, braced his forefeet and lifted his tail a little as he faced the girl who was approaching him with hand outstretched.

Mac Williams, sitting on the top bar of the corral, felt his own hands tremble. The gelding reared and a great cloud of dust arose. When it cleared the gelding was nosing into

the pocket of the girl's buckskin shirt for the reward he knew would be his for this bit of play acting. And Mac heard Chris Lapham's admiring, "Joan, I think you talk horse language."

Mac said nothing. Then Joan Deering turned her quick gaze from Chris Lapham to him and smiled. Mac's white teeth flashed against his lean, sun-tanned jaw as he answered the smile. But his hands had dropped to the corral bar, and his knuckles showed white.

He and Joan Deering had grown

up together. Mac remembered her as far back as he remembered anything. They had ridden brooms about the yard, and after that she had been a half-wild, rugged little tomboy sticking like a leech to the back of the wildest pony. Mac had never thought of her as a girl in those days. She had been like another boy, riding with him as they explored the far blue hazes together. And always they had talked of horses, the wonderful horses both would own when they grew up.

Now this girl who had always been part of his life was a woman. And Mac knew that if she did not continue to be part of his life, for him there could be no life.

But there was Chris Lapham, who controlled a small empire of ranches and fifty thousand head of cattle and horses. Chris was a fair man, as he understood fairness. But what he already had in the palm of his hand Mac only hoped to get.

Joan Deering came out of the corral. Mac leaped down to join her, and for a moment before Chris Lapham came around the corral his gray eyes met her brown ones. They had known each other a long time and speech was not always necessary between them. But lately, by tacit consent, they had been more aloof from one another. Joan owed him nothing, and Mac wanted her to understand it. She needn't do anything she might later be sorry for.

"I've brought you something, Joan," Chris Lapham was saying.

"Brought me something?" Her brown eyes lighted pleasurably. "What is it?"

Chris grinned. "A little jigger I thought you'd like." He led the way to his car, opened the door, and bent over the back seat. Mac heard Joan Deering's gasp of incredulous de-

light, and for the fraction of a second felt Chris Lapham's eyes piercing him. Mac lowered his gaze to the present Chris Lapham had brought.

It was a saddle, a heavy stock saddle made of finest tooled leather. Silver stars and circles decorated the tree, skirts, and stirrup leathers. On one fender was a silver-inlaid picture of a girl on a bucking horse, holding her hat high in her right hand with reckless abandon. On the other fender was simply a horse, but it had been wrought with supreme artistry that made the horse come alive as he stood on a little silver-tinted hillock with his head alert.

Joan Deering was on her knees, the tips of her fingers daring only to brush the silver saddle. She looked up at Chris Lapham, her face flushed.

"Chris," she said haltingly, "—"

"It was made in London especially for you."

He might have said, "Especially for me," Mac thought, recognizing the silver saddle for what it was. A daring gesture, a bold stroke, telling Joan Deering that it was only the first of many marvels that could be hers with Chris Lapham. And it was a challenge to Mac Williams. At last the gantlet was thrown openly.

Joan Deering arose. Her riding skirt molded smoothly to her slim hips and swished loosely about her knees. Her buckskin shirt revealed her slender waist. A big hat hung down her back, and her tumbled brown hair framed her excited face. Mac knew that if she had designed the saddle herself, she would not have had it different. Chris Lapham could read a girl's thoughts, and know her dreams.

Joan looked at Mac, and back to Chris. If she kept the saddle— Mac tightened his jaw suddenly, and did

not speak for a moment because he wanted his words to flow freely and naturally. Any man who could not stand and trade punches with another man admitted himself inferior to that man. And a man must never beg for what he could not get.

"Joan, that's as fine a piece of leather as I ever saw," he said admiringly.

And he saw respect in Joan Deering's eyes, resentment and involuntary admiration in Chris Lapham's.

**H**ALF that night Mac Williams lay in his bunk, his open eyes staring into the blank, unyielding darkness that was so heavy it almost seemed he could push it away if he reached forth his hand and tried. And, when he finally found sleep, it was troubled slumber broken by dreams of a huge silver saddle that had been fastened to his back and rendered him incapable of moving. Mac woke up again. He struck a match, and its yellow light made a puny effort to defeat the darkness. The alarm clock on the shelf said two o'clock.

Mac got up and dressed. He started a fire in the stove and cooked a breakfast of ham, eggs and coffee. He made a light pack of coffee, flour, bacon and salt, wrapped it in a tarpaulin, and strapped a holstered .38 around his waist. He took his strongest lariat from its peg in the store-room, and with that in his hand went out to the corral.

A hundred million stars were pin points in the sky, and above the dark bowl of hills that surrounded his ranch, the sky was light. The six horses in the corral snorted when they smelled him, and milled about. Mac opened the gate and went in. He dropped the lariat noose over the head of a stringy bay with a wall eye. There were faster horses in the

corral, but the stringy bay was longer winded and had more endurance than any of the others.

Mac drew the fighting horse to him, warmed the bit with his hands, and put on the bridle. The horse danced skittishly when Mac threw the heavy saddle on and fastened the pack to it. The rope he laid across the saddlehorn. Leaving the bay tied to a corral post, Mac hazed the other five horses out. They would find range fodder while he was away, so there was no need for anybody to be at his ranch. Mac mounted. The bay pitched briskly for a few minutes then, warmed up, and started off at an easy trot through the darkness.

Mac rode up a stone-bottomed gully and into timber at its head. The first light of day shot a wide silver streak across the sky. Mac turned south through the timber, and let the horse pick his own gait and his own way through. There was no hurry.

The light of the stars began to fade as the increasingly stronger hand of day shoved them back to distant hiding paces in the sky. Mac touched the spurs lightly to the bay's flanks and turned him down a hill into an aspen-covered valley. They climbed the hill on the opposite side and Mac drew up beside a natural meadow to sit his horse waiting.

Then daylight broke full and the pouring sun made dappled shadows on the trees and seemed to make a golden fire of the meadow. Mac bent low in the saddle, his eyes fixed on the lower end of the meadow.

A scrubby little white mare came into the meadow and started across it. She stopped in the center and looked back. Mac caught the motion of other horses following her. Seven more little white mares, their

tails and manes heavy with burdocks, came into the meadow and dropped their heads to crop listlessly at the grass. Then Mac sighted the blue roan.

**P**ERFECTLY formed from his small head to his black tail, the blue roan was a living model of a horseman's dream. Nobody knew exactly how he had come here, whether he was a throwback to fine forebears or whether he had escaped from some wealthy rancher's private stables. He was, Mac thought, mostly pure Arab with a dash of some other blood.

Only once in the three years the blue roan had been on the range had he been saddled. Two cowboys had trapped him in a blind gully, and had roped and saddled him. Blindfolded and still hobbled, the blue roan had been allowed to come to his feet. One of the men mounted while the other snatched the blindfold and hobbles off. Then the saddle cinches broke and the blue roan nearly killed his rider before the other man drove him off and back to the hills with the bridle still on.

In some way the blue roan had gotten rid of the bridle. Since then he had been chased numerous times, but catching him was like catching a deer. He was faster than any other horse and gave no man or group of men another opportunity to corner him. When pursued, he took to the hills and sought the wildest and most unapproachable breaks and canyons. But this time, Mac thought, with set jaw, the blue roan would have to trail longer than he ever had before and hide his trail better.

Mac rode into the meadow. The eight mares threw their heads up. The blue roan's nostrils flared and his eyes fixed on Mac. Mac held the

bay to a trot. The nine horses wheeled and were gone.

They scattered. The blue roan never held his bunch together when they were being chased. Mac still held the bay to a trot. Before he was through he was going to need all the strength, speed and endurance the bay had. The wild bunch came together in the gully, but scattered again when Mac caught up with them. They came together a third time in the main valley leading to the ranches, and again Mac found them.

The blue roan, black mane flying and black tail streaming behind him, broke into a gallop and drew away from the mares. He cut toward a side valley that led back into the hills, thundered up it. Mac roweled the stringy bay. A white mare squealed and her heels flashed up as he rode past her. He entered the valley, but the blue roan was not in sight. The little black marks where his pounding hoofs had scarred the green earth made an uneven line up the valley. Mac took the trail and followed it all day, camping on it that night.

**F**OR four days Mac trailed the blue roan, and in that time saw him twice. True to his habits, the horse had struck for the roughest of the upland country and for two days Mac had ridden the stringy bay through breaks, great spruce and pine forests, and over rough, rocky country so desolate and forsaken that it seemed unbelievable any other creature could live there.

It was not game country, though there was some game. A half dozen times a day big-eared deer flashed across the trail. There were trees that had been scarred and torn by bear's claws and big grouse that waited until the horse and rider were

almost upon them, then burst out on thundering wings. And at least once a day Mac saw fresh cougar sign. There would be cougars wherever there was deer. It was not a safe country for horses. Mac did not worry about the bay, but the blue roan had no protection.

A stubble of black beard itched Mac's tanned face. His shirt was ripped and torn by sharp spikes of branches, and the food he had brought was almost gone. But there was enough game in this country so that he need not fear starvation. He shot grouse with his pistol and reserved five cartridges in an inner pocket. They were for shooting deer if he got so far back that it would take him a number of days to get out again.

But while there was food for him, there was little forage for the horse he rode. The bay nibbled at shoots of trees and, whenever they crossed a patch of grass that the blue roan had not already eaten, Mac stopped to let his horse graze. And always the trail of the blue roan led farther back into the wilderness.

The roan was never more than a few miles ahead. But Mac could not shorten his lead. When he found the trail plainly marked and rode hard, the blue roan galloped to draw away from him. When he stopped to rest or camp, he found when he rode on where the blue roan had also stopped. When, because of hard or rocky ground, Mac had to walk and lead his horse, the blue roan walked ahead of him.

Another day passed. Mac found himself one more day's travel back in the wilderness, and no closer to the blue roan. He picketed the bay with the lasso and made his camp at the base of a towering pine from the foot of which a little crystal spring bubbled. His supper was a partridge

and sour-dough bread and when he finished eating, he sat with his knees hunched under his chin watching the fire cut the night with yellow knives and listening to the bay as he ranged to the end of his rope to smell out every last bit of the sparse forage.

MAC often thought of the silver saddle that had cost Chris Lapham half as much as Mac's whole ranch was worth, and of Joan who had accepted it as a gift. She had known as well as Mac knew what that saddle meant, had understood that to refuse it would have been to insult both men. If Mac couldn't match the present Chris had offered— But he would match it. He'd follow that roan devil to hell and back. He'd—

The bay horse raised his head and snorted. His hoofs thudded on the pine needles as he galloped close to the firelight and stood staring into the darkness. The pistol in his hand, Mac stepped up beside him. The horse had smelled either a cougar or a bear. Mac stroked the bay's neck, talked to him soothingly. When he returned to the fire the horse crowded close to him and stood swishing his tail and stamping his forefoot.

Mac wrapped the tarpaulin about him and lay down to sleep. A cold fear that had been present, but latent since he'd been in this country, started up afresh. The bay had nothing to fear because it was inconceivable that any animal would attack a horse while a man was near. But the blue roan was a different proposition.

The bay still stamped near the fire when Mac fell asleep, but it had wandered to the end of the rope and was lying on a small hummock when he woke up. It was still dark, but not the intense blackness of deep night.

A gray light filtered through the trees, and it grew stronger as Mac built up the fire. In these high altitudes the nights were always cold.

Breakfast—another partridge and more sour-dough bread—finished, Mac paced restlessly back and forth waiting for enough light to continue on the blue roan's trail.

At last, mounted and leaning from the saddle, he started. He sighed, knew tremendous relief when he found the blue roan's trail and, five miles from the place where he had camped, the horse's bed in a grassy little swale.

All day, trotting or cantering where he could, walking and leading the bay where trailing was hard, Mac followed. The day was a dreary repetition of the five preceding it. Just before dusk Mac swung from the bay to make camp. He went forward for one last look at the blue roan's trail and gasped. His heart seemed to skip a beat. Ten feet beyond the place where he had stopped, a big cougar had come out of a patch of small evergreen.

His track beside the blue roan's was plain.

**L**EANING close to the ground, Mac continued on the trail. Dusk became semi-night. Mac struck a match, and by the flickering light advanced a few more paces. Then, realizing the futility of such action, he turned to almost bump into the bay. The animal had smelled the cougar, and was afraid to be alone.

Mac returned to the camp site he had selected and built a fire. Cougars hunted by sight and hearing more than by scent. Undoubtedly this cougar had come out of the evergreens just after the blue roan had gone by, and had seen the horse. He

was following him to get some idea of the blue roan's line of travel, the places he would pass and the spot where he would probably bed down. If the cougar decided to hunt farther he would go to the bedding place and make his attack there.

But the cougar might not be hunting the blue roan, Mac told himself. Cougars didn't hunt by running along the trail of whatever animal they wanted to kill. They ambushed that animal, and sprang from some high place down on it. Besides, the blue roan was as swift and powerful as any horse his size could be. He could defend himself. Then Mac shook his head. Horses had defeated cougars, but not often.

But all he could do was sit the night out and see what the morning brought. He told himself that his chances of getting a rope on the roan were only about one in forty anyway, and, even if he roped him, there still remained saddling and riding him. But he had known before he started that his chances of getting the blue roan were small.

He rolled up in the tarpaulin and tried to sleep. But he could not sleep. Again he was troubled by visions of the silver saddle, and the tall, cool girl to whom he must take as good a present or admit defeat. Finally he dozed in fitful snatches to wake up long before daylight. The bay horse stood over him.

Mac cooked and ate breakfast and saddled the bay. Eagerly he led the horse out to the last point to which he had traced the blue roan's trail the night before, and waited fretfully there while the black curtains of night lifted from the wilderness. When it was light enough to see, he led the bay and followed the tracks farther.

Slowly the light grew so that he could stand erect and see the tracks.

Then he could follow from the saddle. The blue roan had gone on beyond his customary lead. He, too, must have scented the cougar. Mac touched the spurs lightly to the bay's flanks and put him to a slow trot. Then he rode out on a bed of almost solid rock with only scattered trees growing from cracks in the rock and lost the trail there.

He swore, and dropped from the saddle to search on his hands and knees. After five minutes he found where the rock had been scuffed by a pointed hoof. The next mark was ten feet beyond that and took another two minutes to find. Mac stood erect, beads of sweat dotting his temple. His shirt collar was hot about his neck. It would require hours of painful tracking to follow the blue roan across the rock. He might lose the trail altogether. The reins slack in his hand, he stood up.

Then the bay whinnied.

Mac turned. The bay's head was up and his ears were cocked forward. He was gazing intently across the rock in the direction the blue roan's trail led. Mac followed his gaze. Then he vaulted to the saddle and dug the spurs in. The bay leaped forward.

They thundered across the rock and were in a thin line of trees. The bay tossed his head and fought the bit. He wheeled in a little half turn and tried to go back. Mac brought his head around and raked his flanks. The bay began to pitch. Mac slid from the saddle and tied the reins to a small pine tree. His eyes rolling, the bay strained backward. Then, from ahead, came the shrill scream of a fighting horse.

Mac snatched the rope from the saddle and gripped his gun in his right hand as he ran on. Branches whipped him. The blue roan screamed again.

A half mile from where he had tied the bay, Mac broke from the trees into a rock-studded little glade. He paused for a split second.

Pitching, bending, twisting, the blue roan flung himself insanely about. His sleek sides were shiny with his own blood, and the cougar that clung like a tawny strip of shimmering satin to his back was digging claws in deeper. The horse rolled, but the cougar was on his back when he got up. The cougar must have jumped from one of the trees, and the blue roan had carried him this far.

Mac raised his gun, but he could not shoot from here without endangering the horse. Recklessly he ran forward, to get within five feet of the savagely plunging horse. Then the cougar saw him. The beast leaped, and his tawny length made a long arc in the air as he headed for a rock, gained it, and slipped behind it. Mac did not shoot. He jammed the gun back in its holster and took the lasso in both hands.

The rope snaked out and the blue roan was his horse.

**E**XACTLY thirty days after he had taken the blue roan's trail, Mac Williams rode out of the forest on the wall-eyed bay. He led a magnificent blue roan that had a row of freshly healed scars down his back. The horse made no effort to strain on the short lead rope or to get away. When Mac dismounted, the blue roan smelled him over with a friendly muzzle.

Only Mac knew exactly what had happened in the wild little upland pasture to which he had taken the blue roan. Only he could tell how, by infinite patience and tender care, he had taught the blue roan that while man might be the bitterest



of enemies, he could also be the kindest of friends. And only Mac knew how, finally, he had persuaded the blue roan to accept shackles in the form of a saddle and bridle. But Mac would never tell. He had done what he set out to do; the rest wasn't important.

Mac stopped at his house on the way in, shaved, and changed his clothes. He was hungry after living on venison and roots for three weeks, but he didn't take time to eat. He remounted the bay, and still leading the blue roan, rode down to the Deering Ranch. He put the blue roan's lead rope in Joan Deering's hands.

"I've brought you a horse," he

said, "a horse fit to wear that silver saddle."

He watched the blue roan arch his neck as his soft muzzle brushed the tips of the girl's extended fingers. She took the lead rope. The blue roan danced skittishly, but quieted under her expert hand. She looked from the horse back to Mac. And when she smiled it seemed to him that all the old days had returned, that forever he and this girl would ride their horses into the blue hazes—together.

"He's just good enough to wear my saddle," she corrected softly. "The day you left I told Chris Lap-ham he'd better give that silver saddle to somebody else."

THE END.

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## BUFFALO WALLOW

EARLY travelers on the western prairie were at first puzzled by deep cuts frequently found in the heavy sod far from any stream or water course. One spring a hunter, stalking a small band of buffalo, advanced under cover to within a hundred yards of the group. Two bulls were industriously digging at the sod with their short, heavy horns and throwing the loose dirt back over their bodies. When they tired of the play, others took their places. In a short time a trench was started. The animals were shedding, and since there were no tree trunks against which they might rub off their loose hair, they were making a place. Like all animals that shed hair or wool, the buffalo likes to roll in the dirt, and the wallows were as popular among them as the rolling place is with horses and mules.

Buffalo wallows served the pioneers in many ways. At times sufficient water collected in them during a heavy rainfall so that a horse could be watered. They afforded ideal cover for hunters, and some of them were deep enough to afford protection from the cyclones that swept the prairie.

Wallows had their dangers, too, as many a trail driver learned when, in riding out a stampede in the darkness, he suddenly felt the front feet of his horse give way under him. Even today one may find them in high mesa country along the Platte, where the land has not been cultivated.

# SIDEWINDER'S RAIN CHECK

BY WILFRED McCORMICK

HONEST JOHN COLTER would have fought any man that told him so, but he was something like the old gray mare, not what he used to be! It had taken him until sundown to finish his post-hole job on Rock Mesa, and ten o'clock wasn't far off by the time he finally reached the Y-O corrals. He was dog tired, and hungry enough to have eaten supper with a buzzard, but not too much of either to notice a strange line-up in the feed barn.

Saddled horses. Four of them. There was no reason that he could think of for the men to have left their mounts saddled and bridled at this time of night.

It bothered John. He didn't even take time to unsaddle his own raw-boned bay, but started immediately for the bunkhouse as fast as his stiff, cramped old legs could walk.

The boys were still up, all right. A sliver of light leaked from Monk Dooley's room in the west end, and the low hum of voices indicated that the foreman was not alone.

John pulled the latch string, setting his knee against the door, which opened with a squeak. Four men, huddled strangely in the center of the room, jerked around at John's noisy entry like so many wolves startled at a kill. He didn't attempt to move any closer, just stood there with his wide, gaunt shoulders filling the doorway.

"What's the matter?" he asked curiously.

With his white hair, contrasted by shaggy, still-black eyebrows and a black stub mustache, Honest John Colter didn't look like the average

broken-down old cowhand. Nor was he. A year ago he had been figured one of the wealthiest ranchmen in the county, with ninety sections of good grassland and plenty of fair-marked stock to graze it. But everything had gone in a single, calamitous day. All he had left now was his reputation of honesty.

"We've been waitin' for you, old-timer," Foreman Monk Dooley said, a bit uneasily, it seemed to John. The foreman was a big man, with the power of a pack mule inside his flannel-clad shoulders, and the hard-headed grinniness of a bulldog showing in his square chin and twisted, flat nose. "Shut the door, an' get over here closer so we won't have to talk so loud."

**W**ONDERING, John obeyed. He lowered his gaunt form stiffly onto an upturned nail keg, then leaned forward, chin in his cupped hands.

"You rannies," he remarked dryly, "look guilty as a litter of hound pups around a cut of dropped beef! What's goin' on, anyhow?"

"You knowed Bruce Gallop was losin' the Y-O tomorrow?" Monk Dooley asked.

John nodded soberly. "Unless he's been able to raise seven thousand dollars."

"Well, he ain't. He's still two thousand shy." Dooley, seated opposite old Honest John in the circle of men, leaned across toward him. "We don't dare tell Bruce ahead of time," he whispered, "but we're aimin' to rustle the rest of that money for him tonight."

"How?"

"Come midnight," the foreman explained briskly, "we're headin' for town. We aim to tap the bank, between two thirty an' three o'clock. It ought to be easy. They've given the night watchman a key to the place, an' he'll be the only hombre on the streets at that hour. With his key, the job's a cinch."

John's sharp old eyes studied the foreman intently. "You've got somethin' else up your sleeve," he accused him. "Shucks, this is the first time I ever knowed you to play nursemaid to anybody! What's your game, Monk—the *real* game?"

The foreman's swarthy face went livid. It looked for an instant as though he would climb old John



*"If there's a lynchin',"  
Honest John Colter said,  
"take me, too. I was  
in with those boys."*

While the foreman talked, Honest John's leathery jaw had dropped, giving his face an expression of unbelieving amazement. "You ain't—You ain't serious?" he sputtered.

"You're damn right we are!" the foreman declared. "We've got a heap more regard for Bruce Gallop than we have for the bank."

then and there, but the mood passed. He forced a mirthless laugh, shrugged his mammoth shoulders.

"If you think it's all my doin's," he said curtly, "just ask the rest of the boys."

John's gaze swept the circle. He saw them all nod agreement. His eyes met those of Dad Carver, who had cooked for the Gallop outfit nearly fifteen years.

"I'm in!" Dad told him frankly. "Bruce Gallop has been the best boss that ever walked on two legs, an' I'll stick my chin out for him any day."

"Me, too!" chimed Shorty Plunkett, a squatty, freckled little rider who had grown up in the canyon and never expected to leave. "I couldn't stand to see pore ol' Bruce out huntin' a thirty-a-month job next week."

"That's the way I feel," drawled lanky Tex Rowan. "It's a choice between the bank an' Bruce Gallop. I'm throwin' in with Bruce. Later, when he gets on his feet again, we can slip the money back where it came from, with interest."

"But . . . but dang it!" sputtered Honest John. "You rannies are jumpin' offn a cliff without even lookin' to see what's at the bottom! Don't you know there's a thousand bucks reward for the scalp of any bank robber these days?"

"Of course," Monk Dooley said sarcastically, "if you're *scared* to join us, we—"

OLD JOHN stiffened, and anger flared in his eyes. "One more crack like that, you loose-lipped rannihan," he said bleakly, "an' I'll blow them words clean through the back of your head!"

Tense quiet. The foreman's thick fingers started inching down toward his gun. Old John saw the move.

He waited, willing to let Dooley's hand reach the gun butt before starting his own grab. Then he'd show him! But Dad Carver, who was sitting next to Monk Dooley, intervened by linking his arm through the foreman's.

"Cut it out, Monk!" he warned sharply. "You know plumb well Honest John ain't got enough yellow in his whole carcass to paint a mustard seed!"

"Then why don't he throw in with us?"

"Maybe he will yet," returned Dad. "Let me have a try at him." He glanced across at John. "Now, listen here, you ol' rooster!" he said patiently. "It was this same bank that once busted you flatter than a split cigarette paper. If it was me, I'd help steer Bruce Gallop out of a similar chute. An' besides, you ought to be plumb tickled for a chance like this to give the bank a return wallop across the rump. Believe me, I would!"

"You're damn right!" growled Monk Dooley.

But old John continued to shake his head.

Monk Dooley, who had been frowning impatiently, suddenly switched tactics. He produced a grin that was evidently meant to be friendly, reached across and laid his hand on John's knee.

"Don't forget, old-timer," he said persuasively, "that Bruce Gallop has been mighty white to you. While everybody else was layin' men off, he gave you a job, an' he's told me many a time to make your assignments easy—in fact, I'll likely catch hell in the mornin' for sendin' you up to Rock Mesa today. Another thing," the foreman added hastily as old John attempted to cut in, "last month you were laid up three weeks with the rheumatism, but Bruce

never stopped your pay for a minute. He needed the money himself, too. You ain't forgettin' that, are you?"

"Of course not," John admitted miserably.

A flicker of hope lighted Dad Carver's face. "Then you'll throw in with us?" he asked, leaning forward eagerly.

It was a tough moment for the oldster. He was going to have to refuse them, he knew. But how could he say it? These rannies would never understand that to Honest John Colter it was one thing to be loyal to his friends, but quite another to break either his word or the law.

That very principle was responsible for his own plight now. It was a peculiar case: A year ago John Colter had wanted to retire. He figured on cashing out for some fifty thousand dollars, then being able to pay off a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage the bank held, so that he could spend his remaining years in town. A buyer had contracted for his stock, and the deal was practically closed when, in a far corner of his range, John had discovered a calf badly infected with the dread foot-and-mouth disease. He knew the penalty if folks found it out. He'd be forced to destroy his entire herd and set fire to the range.

Complete, total ruin stared John Colter in the face. But there was one way he could save himself. If he closed the deal without saying anything, it would be the other fellow's loss. Faced with such a prospect, only one man in a million would have called off the deal. But Honest John Colter was that man. Two days later, his stock having been killed by the sheriff's orders, his grass only a black, charred expanse, he surrendered his home to

the bank in payment of the mortgage.

This past year as a common cowhand had been mighty hard on John Colter, but he had been able to grit his way through because of his pride and his conscience. Now they were asking him to give up these!

"What do you say?" Monk Doo-ley urged impatiently. "Would you rather see Bruce keep his home or do you want him throwed out?"

John hesitated for only an instant longer. Then his head came up with a jerk. His old eyes now did not waver as he stared from one to another of the group.

"There's no excuse, *never*, for a man to break the law!" he declared sternly.

"Then we'll do the job ourselves!"

"Not if I can stop you—" began John.

**T**HE bunkhouse door squeaked suddenly open. As startled as though they were criminals already, every man lunged to his feet. But it was no sheriff's posse that had walked in on them. Just a stooped, kindly faced old cowman with his vest front open and his sleeves rolled up. He seemed mildly surprised at the gathering, then singled out John Colter.

"I'm glad you got back all right, John," he said, smiling slightly. "You're still tough enough to fight a wild cat an' give him the first bite, ain't you? But come on over to the main house. Mary's fixed you some supper. An', mind *you*," he said, shooting an angry glance at the foreman, "John gets tomorrow mornin' off to lay abed as long as he pleases! Come along, John, Mary's already got your biscuits in the oven." He held the door open.

John Colter hesitated. Once more his eyes swept the group of silent

men. He read the same question on every face: Could he still refuse to help Bruce Gallop, his closest friend for many years? His desperate gaze moved over to Bruce, as concerned over an old cowhand's getting his supper as though his own cares weren't weighing him down. Old John knew he couldn't refuse to help Bruce Gallop, no matter what the cost.

"Count me in, boys!" he said huskily, and followed Gallop.

"What're you boys fixin' to do?" Gallop asked him outside.

"Just a little poker game we're cooking up," lied John.

It was a strange night by two o'clock. Stuffy, with the thick feel of coming rain in the air. A brilliant moon was trying to shine, but fast-moving clouds high overhead would one minute plunge the little canyon into gloomy darkness, the next to dazzling light.

Monk Dooley led his little band of masked men into the alley behind the bank, and there motioned them to halt. Suddenly the threatened rain materialized in a soaking, drenching downpour that lasted for perhaps a minute, only to quit as quickly as it had begun. Monk took off his hat, swishing the water from its brim, then beckoning his men in close.

"It's about time for the night watchman to make the rounds," he whispered. "I'll sneak over to yon doorway an' corral him when he comes."

"Don't handle him too rough," cautioned John Colter.

The foreman grunted scornfully. Swinging down from the saddle, he handed the reins to Shorty Plunkett to hold. At the same moment a man strolled across the alley just ahead of them. The group went

rigid, not even daring to breathe. One of the horses coughed, but apparently the watchman did not notice. He disappeared from sight. Monk Dooley waited a few seconds, then pulled out his six-shooter and started in stealthy pursuit.

Presently the waiting group heard a scuffle, followed by sounds of a falling body and a low moan. Monk came hurrying back to them, and they saw that he was shaking his head.

"I couldn't find any keys," he explained. "We'll have to break in."

"Maybe that wasn't the watchman," John Colter suggested. "It seemed to me that he was a couple inches taller than Owl Malone."

"It wasn't Owl," Dooley said. "They fired him yesterday. This is some new hombre they put in Owl's place."

"Did you have to hurt him much?"

"Enough so that he won't stir till mornin'," the foreman said grimly. "But let's get started! Shorty, you an' the rest of the boys tackle the front door. I'll see if I can break in the rear. Come on!"

It was dark again now, but they could hear Monk Dooley just ahead of them as they rode out of the alley. He left them there, darting off toward the bank's rear door while the rest continued on toward the front.

Old John Colter hadn't said any more, but he was doing a lot of thinking. Now, as the group rode on, he quietly checked his horse and swung down from the saddle. He wanted to have a look at the injured night watchman. A man, left lying in the street with a busted head, might die before morning. Robbing a bank was bad enough. But murder, too— Old John's pulse nearly stopped at the thought.

A crushed hat on the ground indicated Monk had caught up with the watchman, but the man himself was gone. As moonlight lit the street temporarily, he got down on his knees, searching the ground for bloodstains. It was impossible to tell if there were any, though, since everything was damp from the dash of rain a few minutes before, so he rose again to his feet. He stood, undecided.

A movement down the street drew John's gaze. A hatless figure had darted nimbly in between two buildings. Old John sucked in his breath. The watchman hadn't been badly hurt. Not when he could move like that!

John wondered whether to go back and help the boys or collar this fellow to keep him from rousing the town before they could enter the bank. He decided on the latter course. Breaking into a stiff-legged trot, he hurried to the place where the watchman had disappeared, trailing after him between the two shadowy buildings.

**T**HE sudden rattle of gunfire jerked old John to a halt. More shots sounded, coming from the bank! He whirled, rushing out into the street, cursing himself for not being there to side the Y-O boys.

It was a block and a half farther on, and the fight was over by the time John reached there, panting and heaving like a foundered old horse. The sight that greeted his eyes sickened him. Lanterns—a dozen of them—had bobbed up from all sides, forming a circle of light around Shorty Plunkett and Tex Rowan, who stood with their hands high in the air. Dad Carver was on the ground, wounded, but giving vent to his anger at the ambush that had trapped them.

Big Sheriff Dawson walked over and grabbed Shorty Plunkett by the shirt collar. "Where's the money?" he demanded peremptorily.

"Hell, we didn't even get inside the place!" growled Shorty. "If it's gone, somebody else got there first!"

The sheriff whipped out a gun. He jabbed the muzzle solidly into Shorty's ribs. "Don't try to give me that!" he roared. "I want to know where the money is!"

"That's right!" a dozen members of the crowd muttered, almost in unison. "Make 'em come clean or we'll string the whole bunch up!"

John Colter pushed through the ring into the center of light. "If there's any lynchin' done around here," he said, "take me, too! I'm with these boys. But I'm backin' what Shorty said. We never even got inside the place!"

A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd. There wasn't a more respected man in the county than Honest John Colter, and his admission now that he was connected with a band which had intended robbing the bank jolted them to the heels.

Sheriff Dawson was the first to find words. "In the name of thunder, John, what got you mixed up in this?"

There was an ominous hush. Then:

*"I'll answer that!"*

Everybody turned. The words had come from the outer fringe of light, and now a big set of shoulders squeezed into view. At sight of Monk Dooley, old John's lower jaw sagged in amazement. He noted further that the foreman wasn't a captive like the rest of them.

Monk Dooley, a gloating smile on his face, swaggered to the near center. He pointed an accusing finger at John Colter.

"Not all of you know it," he said in a loud voice, "but Honest John, here, has carried a grudge against the bank since they foreclosed on his place. So he's been plannin' for a solid year to get a bunch together an' rob—"

"Why, you lyin' polecat!" John broke in hotly. "It was *you* that framed this! Ain't that right, boys?" He turned to the equally astonished Y-O captives. They nodded emphatically. "I've smelled trouble right from the start," John went on, "but Monk was a little too smooth. Now I'm beginnin' to savvy. It wasn't his wantin' to help Bruce Gallop that lays behind this. It's the reward money—a thousand dollars on each of our heads as bank robbers. Monk argued us into it, an' then tipped you folks off to ambush us so he could collect—"

Monk Dooley's scornful laugh cut through John's words. He threw a knowing wink at the sheriff. "Ninety-nine bandits in a hundred," he sneered, "claim they ain't guilty! Are you gonna swallow that?"

"I don't know," muttered Dawson. "After all, Honest John Colter ain't a man that would lie—"

"But this is different, sheriff!" cut in a hatless, red-bearded man whom John immediately recognized as the night watchman. "From what I gather, the bank took Colter's place away from him a year ago. You know how an old cow mopes around after losin' a calf! Well, no matter how honest he used to be, I'd say he's changed."

"That's right!" muttered a bystander.

"Sure!" another seconded. "He's hid that bank loot some place. Let's sweat it out of him!"

Old John whirled savagely on the man. "If that money's gone," he flared, "somebody else—"

"It's sure-enough gone!" another man broke in.

The sheriff laid a strong set of fingers on John's arm, jerking him off balance. "You come with me!" he said crisply.

**WAIT!** John yanked himself loose, his eyes fairly spurting flame. "You're lettin' the real bank robbers go free!" he charged hotly.

"Who do you mean—Dad Carver an' Shorty?"

"No!" thundered old John. "It's as plain now as the wart on your Aunt Sally's wooden leg! This new night watchman, with his key, tapped the bank before we ever rode into town. He an' Monk Dooley are in this thing together. No wonder he passed by us in the alley without lookin'! An' no wonder he got away so fast after Monk reported bustin' him across the head! Shucks—he wasn't no more hurt than me! The whole thing was a frame-up."

"You mean—"

"I mean," old John went on savagely, "that this pair of oily-tongued hellions stands to win plenty if you don't wake up! Besides collectin' four thousand dollars reward money on me an' the boys, they've probably got that bank loot salted away, too! I tell you, Monk Dooley framed this whole thing. He rode into town with us himself, an' then when—"

Again the foreman's sneering laugh interrupted. "I figure you gents are too smart to be fooled by any such yarn," he said to the group, "but if any of you do figure that I came in with these outlaws, I can prove it ain't so."

"That won't be necessary, Monk," Sheriff Dawson assured him. "We don't doubt you. In fact, the county owes you plenty for—"



"Let Monk tell us where he's been!" old John broke in sharply. "If he's so innocent, it won't hurt him!"

"That's right!" one of the men in the crowd muttered.

"Sure! If Monk offers to prove he wasn't with the gang," suggested another, "let him go ahead. There'll be time enough afterward to settle with the rest of these coyotes—if they don't produce the money."

The sheriff hesitated momentarily, then glanced toward Monk. "All right," he said. "Where were you when John an' his bunch rode into town?"

"From ten thirty until just now I was over there inside that empty water barrel!" Monk lied persuasively. "I didn't know just how soon these four hombres would strike town, so I tied my horse an' hid early to keep watch on the bank.

"That's gospel truth," the night watchman promptly seconded him. "Every time I made the rounds Monk was right there on guard. It was—" A near explosion from John Colter cut him short.

"You're the biggest two liars that ever fouled good air!" John charged hotly. "An' what's more, I can prove it!"

"Prove what?" asked the sheriff.

"I can prove," old John declared, "that Monk Dooley was in the saddle with the rest of us when we rode into town at two o'clock. An' if you're fair minded at all, you'll give me the chance."

"That's right!" a murmur came from the crowd. "Honest John is entitled to a chance."

"Then hurry," the sheriff growled. "Where is this proof?"

"Do you gents remember a heavy dash of rain about fifteen minutes ago?" John asked. As several nodded, he went on: "Well, we were

just enterin' town. It soaked us plenty!"

"What's that got to do with Monk Dooley?"

"Go look at his horse an' saddle!" John invited them. "You'll find they're both still wet—except for the seat of his saddle. That will be dry! That proves Monk was ridin' it when the rain hit."

"Evidence like that," pointed out Monk Dooley, "won't get you very far. You're too smart to swallow that, ain't you, sheriff?"

The officer scratched his head. "Of course," he said slowly, "if your saddle seat really is dry, an' the rest is wet, it would look bad for—"

"It wouldn't prove a damn thing!" Monk Dooley insisted nervously.

Sure of his hunch now, John Colter turned to the sheriff. "An innocent man," he surmised, "wouldn't be afraid to let us look at his saddle!"

"That's right!" agreed several in the crowd.

The sheriff nodded to Dooley. "Come along, Monk," he said. "Just to satisfy folks, we'll have a look."

Monk Dooley started to hold back, but the night watchman walked over and linked arms with him.

"Sure!" he said readily. "Me an' Monk ain't afraid of any honest evidence."

OLD JOHN saw the pair swap glances, and saw the watchman wink knowingly at Monk. Then Monk also began to grin. It bothered John momentarily, but he was still too sure of his ground to be much concerned. With the sheriff at his side, he led the way into the alley, turning to where Monk's big sorrel was hitched to a tree stump. A few of the group had stayed to guard the Y-O cowboys, but several

others had followed with lanterns. John Colter asked for one, then hoisted it above his head for a look at the saddle, confident that a single quick glance would be proof enough.

But he was wrong! The saddle, seat and all, was as wet as though it had been soaked overnight in a tub of water!

The sheriff grunted sourly. "I guess this clears Monk," he observed. "It's a cinch nobody was ridin' this saddle when the rain struck."

Monk Dooley, who had been strangely silent, now broke out with a gloating laugh. "I told you!" he sneered. Whirling on John Colter, he asked, "Well, have you got any more proof?"

John gulped for words, but found none. His gaunt old shoulders had sagged wearily forward, ten years heaped onto his age. His eyes, dejected and glassy-looking now, stayed fixed on the wet leather saddle and the pair of full, worn bags draped on either side of the pommel.

A hand clutched his shoulder. "Come along!" the sheriff said coldly. "I'm takin' you to jail."

"All right," John agreed wearily. He sucked in a deep breath and started to turn around. Then he thought of something. Quick as a streak, his eyes again showed fire.

"Look!" he cried excitedly. "The missin' money!"

"What do you mean?" Sheriff Dawson demanded.

"Look inside them saddlebags!" John directed feverishly. "It's all soaked through my thick head now! While Monk was preparin' the ambush at the front of the bank, his accomplice sneaked around here an' swapped saddles. This one's been waitin' out in the rain, but he had

it packed with the money an' all ready to go! I'll bet— *Hey!*"

He spun around just in time to make a wild grab for Monk Dooley. The foreman was trying frantically to break from the crowd. He would have made it, too, if old John's clawing fingers hadn't caught the back of his shirt. He fought to get loose, but John held on. Suddenly Dooley snatched out his gun, whipped the muzzle around and jerked a quick shot almost in John's face.

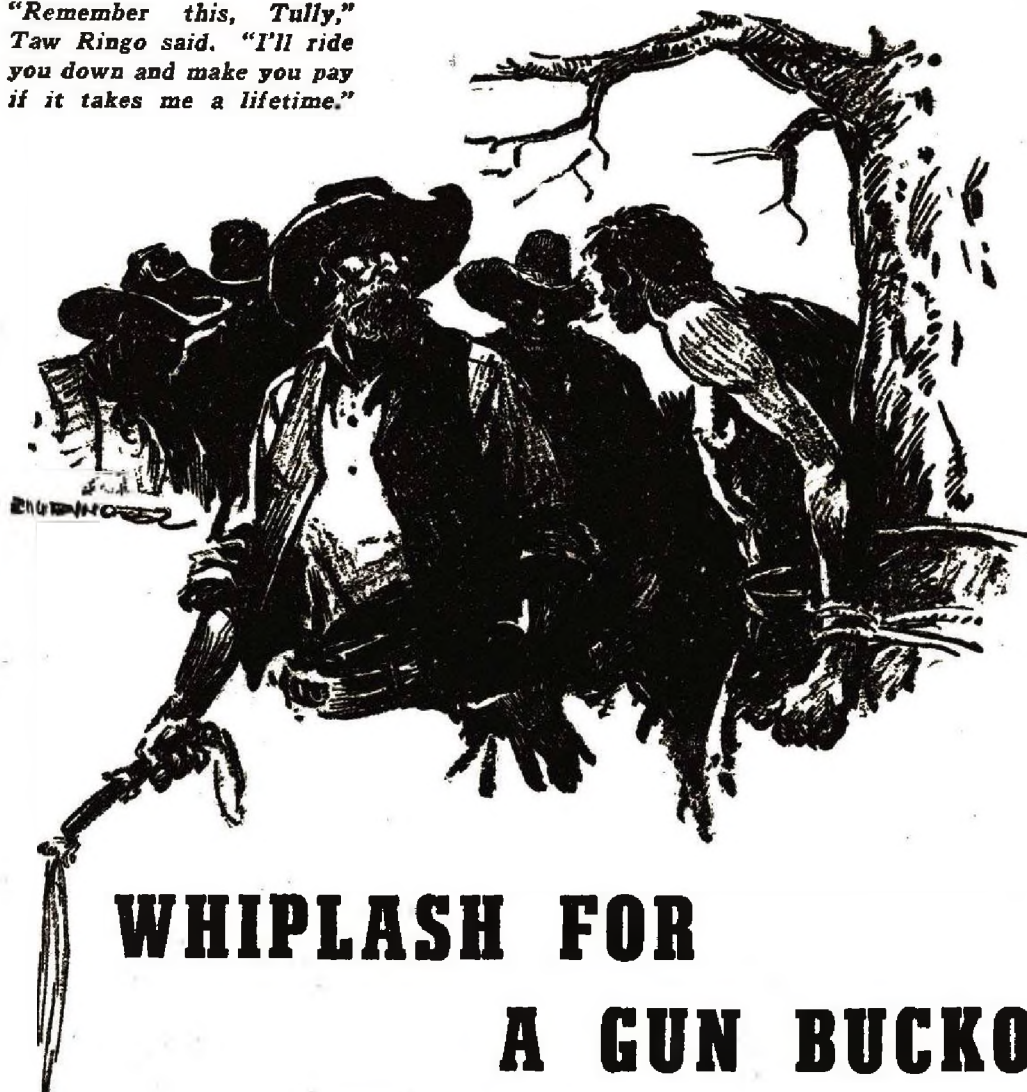
Scorching lead seared John's temple, but the old-timer clung like a leech. Dooley tried to shoot again. A desperate, twisting jerk threw him off balance, however, and John dazedly managed to trip him to his knees. John let go with his left hand, smashed the other a raking blow across the mouth. Dooley promptly countered with a clubbed wallop from his pistol. It knocked John away, but he dived back at Dooley with a fury that sent the foreman scooting forward on his face. Before he could get up, a dozen bystanders had leaped in to hold him helpless. Others had taken charge of the watchman.

Friendly arms helped old John Colter to his feet, and he was dazedly conscious that the sheriff was pumping his hand.

"I'm sure glad to admit I was mistaken," the officer said warmly. "An' for trappin' two bank robbers, against plenty of odds, I'll see to it that the county pays you a couple of thousand dollars the first thing tomorrow mornin'. I reckon you can 'most retire on that, old-timer!"

"Two thousand dollars!" muttered Honest John Colter. His tired old face broke into a grin. "Why, that's enough to clear Bruce Gallop's place—an' do it *legal!*" He chuckled happily.

*"Remember this, Tully,"  
Taw Ringo said. "I'll ride  
you down and make you pay  
if it takes me a lifetime."*



## WHIPLASH FOR A GUN BUCKO

BY H. FREDRIC YOUNG

THERE was no fear in Taw Ringo's tanned face, and only hard anger and contempt in his eyes. "Lay that lash to me once, Tully," he said with deadly earnestness, "and you'll pay a devil's ransom. I'll collect if I have to crawl on my belly like a snake through a prairie fire!"

The moon was coming up, filling the raw pits and crooked fissures of the Mustangs with silver glow. It made pasty-white the faces of the score of Block G punchers who formed a horseshoe around the base

of the cottonwood. It seemed to etch deeper the stern, almost savage lines on the face of old Tully Gerault. And its lifting rays bounced back from the defiant, blue fires in Taw Ringo's young eyes.

Taw Ringo was lashed with his back to a cottonwood tree. His hard-muscled brown body had been stripped to the waist, and the hard-bitten old man who owned the Block G stood before him with a quirt in his hand.

Taw's muscles were strained, but

he made no struggle against the hemp lariat that held him. There was laughing contempt in his eyes as he looked first at Gerault, then down at the thonged quirt.

"Go ahead," young Ringo taunted contemptuously. "Go ahead. You'll collect yore pay farther up the crick."

Tully Gerault's seamed face split in a grin of derision. "I been threatened all my life, Ringo," he said, "and threats never did spook me. I could do worse than I'm gonna do—I could string you up. But I swore the next thief I caught using his owlhoot iron on my range, I'd lash him and send him back to his kind—and now I aim to do it."

"Then go ahead!" Taw said bleakly. "Do it! You're wastin' good time, my time and yores. The quicker you git it done, the sooner I'll start to collect. But remember what I'm telling yo', Tully, you got the wrong hombre. I ain't a thief."

"Mebbe I shouldn't hold too much agin' you," said Gerault. "You got your old man's black blood in your heart."

"Leave Jed out of this," Taw said thinly.

"I slapped the cayuse from under Jed when we hung him," Gerault continued relentlessly. "We caught him deadwood just like we caught you. Standing there with a hog-tied calf at your feet and a hot iron in the fire. Trouble was, we didn't catch Jed until he'd stolen several hundred head of my cattle. I don't think you've gotten away with many. I seen a few calves hair-branded of late, so I been having you trailed. I'm doing this to warn your kind. Go an' tell them you was whip-lashed by Tully Gerault. Go to Ringo Roost and tell Carp Peters if he ever rides out of hiding, I'll do the same to him, an' then hang him

higher'n a crow's roost. And tell 'em I'd hang you now, but I know I can catch you again sometime, and I'll wait till then to hang you."

Taw Ringo only laughed. "Is that palaver part of the lashing?" he inquired mockingly. "When I die it'll be my way, Tully, not yores. An' I'm tellin' you again, I didn't hogtie that calf!"

"Your story don't hold water," the grim-faced cowman said savagely. "You claim you rode up and scared an hombre away. I'll admit there wasn't a brand on the calf yet—I reckon I'd be hanging you now if there had been—but if my boys had just waited five minutes longer they'd 'a' caught you in the act. If you are such a law-abiding citizen as you claim, why didn't you catch the hombre?"

"I wouldn't care if rustlers stole you blind," said Taw. "I know what happened and that suits me. If I'd been rustlin', yore punchers would never have tied me without a fight."

**T**HERE was a shuffling of feet amidst the Black G hands, and some went so far as to lift their brows, punch back their Stetsons, and nod to each other. There was logic in Taw Ringo's words, all right, and there was no guilt written across the bronze of his face, only bitter defiance and a laughing contempt. But then he was the son of Jed Ringo, and what was more likely than that Jed's mean blood had cropped out in his lone offspring.

The moon was lifting higher, bringing awing hordes of screaming night hawks, sending its revealing waves deeper along the jagged terrain, splashing deeper shafts of silver along the face of Tully Gerault. The lines in that face attested to the cowman's two-fisted fight for supremacy in the Mustangs. A two-

fisted fight that carried him often to his back, but ever forward over the long years, and that was enough to satisfy Tully Gerault. A savage hulk of a man whose guns had never slowed or shown mercy to an enemy. And now, before him, stood the offspring of the man who had been his worst enemy. And being of Ringo stock, Taw knew he could expect no mercy. He didn't ask for any.

"I'll use a rope on your neck next time I find you on Block G land," growled Gerault. "If you want my advice, dig up your old man's booty and hit the long trail. You know where it's cached. There's thousands of dollars he hid from his thievin' and marauding. Dig it up and git!"

Taw Ringo laughed. "I ain't askin' yore advice, Tully. Mebbe I know where Jed hid his money. If I do, I'm the only hombre that does. But what's wrong with yore nerve, Tully—you ain't crawfishin' on that quirt? Lay it on, and lay it on hard, because I want to remember it a long time. I want to be able to count each drop of blood on my chest—and that many drops will be yore pay."

"I'll draw blood, Ringo," Gerault whispered hoarsely, and his great arm rose and fell. Long, lean strips of buckskin made loud explosions against taut skin, but Taw Ringo never flinched.

Twenty-five times Gerault's brawny arm rose and fell, and sweat oozed from his face, making it a gleaming mask that shone with dull and cruel radiance. The sound of whipped flesh sung a high song that penetrated far up the pine-choked slopes of the Mustangs. Taw gave no indication of the hot fire that must have been ripping into the heart of his chest muscles, and at last Gerault stepped back. The quirt

left his fingers as if it had suddenly grown white hot, and hit the dust at his feet.

"Untie him," Gerault panted.

Two punchers leaped forward and dropped the ropes around Taw Ringo's shabby boots. He stood there a moment, his eyes measuring those of Gerault.

"Beat it!" ordered the cowman. "Take your old man's booty and git!"

But a full minute passed before Ringo moved. Then he took one swift step toward Gerault. "Yo're old, Tully, or I'd tear you limb from limb," he spoke in a low, tension-filled voice. "But you'll pay, and don't forget that."

Then he moved through a parting lane of Block G riders, leaped to his horse, and vanished into the night, the tattoo of his horse growing fainter and fainter, and finally dying, while the echoes lingered like some last, hushed warning.

As if mesmerized, every Block G man listened until the hoofbeats died away. It was some moments before they discovered the newcomer in their midst.

"Gramp, what are you doing?"

Tully Gerault whirled. "Tad!" he gasped. "What you doing out at this hour?" Anger vanished from his eyes as he gazed at this seven-year-old boy who seemed to hold no fear, night or day, of the rangeland. Tad, whose mother was dead these seven years and whose father had fallen a victim to one of the owl-hooters from Ringo Roost, was the very cornerstone of Tully Gerault's kingdom.

"You whipped a man," Tad said accusingly.

"It's part of this kind of life, Tad," his grandfather explained. "You run along home. And don't ever come out at night again."

**T**AW RINGO rode with fury-charged recklessness through the night, toward the shack he called home, a lopsided log cabin on free land long since deserted by some aspiring squatter. Rage and shame burned in his heart.

He had been playing a game with that little one-room, gee-gaw place, a game of dreams known only to himself and, ironically enough, to little Tad Gerault, who often sneaked away from his grandfather's domain to while away happy hours with Taw Ringo. They called this tumble-down structure the Running R, for Taw dreamed of a spread to call his own, bought with honesty and hard sweat and smashing knuckles if need be.

But his mind was made up. The instant that whiplash seared into his flesh he knew what he was going to do. He had tried to live down the name of Jed Ringo, tried to prove to people that an outlaw's offspring could be a decent citizen. He had tried all that, and now he was through. Tully Gerault had branded him an outlaw, and he'd be one; he'd surpass the misdeeds of Jed Ringo so completely that people would recall his father with a forgiving sigh. And he had the money to hire gun hawks by the dozen. It had been a temptation, knowing that twenty-five thousand dollars was his for the digging. All these years since his father's death, he had been taunted by that money—enough to set up a ranch equaling that of his dreams. But he had forswore ever touching that money for personal use; he had wanted a spread built on honesty, sweat, and skinned knuckles. Well, he was through with such dreams.

Home again, Taw realized he was hungry. He warmed some beans on the stove and made some coffee. When he had satisfied his hunger he

heated water and bathed his chest. As he swiped away clots of drying blood he tried to count the livid marks, but gave up when rage blazed up in him again.

Next morning he was out on the trail early. He headed for a distant peak that bore his father's name—and his own, he thought savagely—Ringo Roost. He could see the dim outline of the peak. In one of its hidden canyons, he knew, a nest of renegades had their hide-out. There he could hire as many guns as he needed. He spurred on.

He laughed aloud at the irony that had brought all this about, a twist of fate as vicious as a rattler that he had fought against for years. Tully Gerault was to blame for it all. Tully had thrown jeering remarks at him every time they met, had taunted him, tormented him about trying to pass himself off as an honest citizen. Tully Gerault would pay—pay with his most sacred possession, the undisputed power of the Mustangs. It would send the old man to his knees, crushed, quivering, begging for mercy.

Taw knew from range gossip that the present year had been disastrous for the Block G outfit, knew that Tully Gerault's salvation lay in the fact that recent heavy rains had filled his tanks and reservoirs. But at the moment Gerault could not stand a hard blow below the belt. Anything that would require hard cash and a lot of it would send the Block G to its knees for the count. For instance, a blasted dam or the loss of a couple thousand head of stocky yearlings.

Skirting the lower realms of the Mustangs, Taw Ringo suddenly stopped his horse. There, on the trail ahead, was the answer to his promise of revenge, if he wanted to take it. Tad Gerault was gouging

his small pony along a brush-walled trail. Taw swerved his horse and met the youngster.

"Howdy, Tad," said Taw, smiling crookedly. "Where you headed so early?"

The boy looked startled, then a quick smile lighted his face.

"Oh, you frightened me, Taw. You see, I was riding over to your cabin to see you, and here you are!" His boyish laughter rang like a bell through the pine-clad slopes.

Taw swallowed, surprise lingering long on his face. But he said gruffly, "What you riding to my place for? Tully'd skin you, was he to know it."

"Sure, I know that," said the lad, and he cast a backward glance over his shoulder. "But I have been coming here for a year and he ain't caught me yet. He asked me the other day who taught me to spin a rope, but I wouldn't tell him. That's what you said for me to do."

"Sure," Taw said brusquely. "Sure. But you run along, now. I got business on hand." He seemed to forget that here was the means of revenge, within reach of his fingers.

"I got to hurry back. Taw, I . . . I just wanted to tell you that I think you're honest and that Gramp was wrong in whipping you. I'm sorry."

Taw gritted his teeth, ground them until they ached. "All right, you're sorry." His voice was harsh. "Now run along."

With a hurt look in his eyes the lad turned his pony and rode away. Taw's eyes followed him for a moment, and he swallowed again. Then he jabbed his spurs and headed up-slope.

**TAW RINGO** rode into a world of jagged peaks and yawning chasms, higher and higher toward a hidden valley. There was one door

to that valley, and one door only, but Taw knew where the opening lay. He rode through it unchallenged, a high-walled, knife-cut pass, and entered upon a flat, arrow-shaped area of land comprising about a thousand acres. It was completely walled in with staggering slabs of upright granite. Taw headed straight for a group of log huts he could see in the distance.

It was nearing sundown, and the valley was already growing half dark as Taw dismounted before a large cabin set apart from the rest. He recalled this cabin vividly, for it had been the home of Jed Ringo. Now, however, it was occupied by an outlaw named Carp Peters, who had been second in command to Jed.

As Taw dismounted, a man emerged from the door of the place and walked toward him. He was a tall man, and the drawing shadows distorted his heavy figure until he looked amazingly broad. He had a short neck, bullet-shaped head, and small, suspicious eyes. His arms, thick and hairy, flapped loosely at his sides, and his flat features seemed continually wrapped in a snarl. This man, Taw knew, would be Apache Rance.

Rance tilted his head forward, resting his scarred chin on his barrel chest. "Who in blazes are yuh?" he demanded.

"I'm Taw Ringo, and I want to see Carp."

"Ringo, huh!" the giant drawled. "What you want? Yuh think to take Jed's boots over? Skeedaddle if yuh do, Ringo! I'm it when Carp is gone. Besides, I heard yuh was too good to mix with yore pap's friends. If yuh think—"

Taw turned and strode into the cabin, aware that the giant Rance was at his heels. Carp Peters was alone in the large, littered room.

Carp was small, withered, like an aging hawk that had a cracked voice, but deadly talons. He'd written grim history in blood, and seemed to be gloating over it as he sat at the table, turning a bottle of whiskey in his yellowed fingers. His small, shrewd eyes lifted to Taw, studying the youth at first without a sign of recognition. Finally his eyes gleamed, and he said:

"Taw Ringo. What's up, you comin' here? You scoutin' for the law?"

"No, I'm not," Taw said curtly, "but I'm scoutin' gun hands. How many you got here for rent?"

Carp Peters yawned, and poured himself a drink.

"So the saint's come home," he taunted. "Well, make track out o' here, Taw. I know you're lyin'."

Taw smiled bleakly and stood his ground. "I could have brought the law here if I'd wanted to," he reminded. "I mean what I said—"

"The boss says git!"

**T**HE voice came from behind Taw, a snarling reminder from Apache Rance. Taw spun round quickly. The giant's huge arms stabbed out at him, blunt fingers clutching at his jumper. Taw struck, and he struck hard and quick, a short, right hook that cracked against Rance's cheekbone, spinning the big hombre half away. A choking roar filled the room. Rance whirled with amazing speed for his size, hunkered his shoulders, and began charging. Carp Peters leaped to his feet.

"Pull in your neck, Apache!" he ordered. "Leave the kid alone. Maybe he's right. He could have brought the law along with him."

Rance was still snarling, but the gun that had flashed into Peters' hand cowed him. He straightened and turned toward the door.

"I'll kill you for that, Ringo," he threw over his big shoulder. "And it won't be long."

Alone with Peters, Taw propped himself on the edge of the table.

"Now what's all this talk you're makin', Taw?" the owlhooter asked calmly.

"I said I want to hire some guns," Taw reminded. He opened his shirt, showing the lash welts to Peters. "Tully Gerault done that. I aim to break him in two."

Carp Peters chuckled. His lids drooped like those of a drowsy catamount. "I been up to that idea ever since he hung Jed. I got three men down there right now on his spread, and if they get what they went after, Tully's a broke gringo."

Taw's lips tightened. "What's it about?" he asked.

"Mebbe I'll tell you—later. Mebbe you won't have to break Tully in two. I think I done got him broke."

"What about the gunhands I want to hire?" asked Taw.

"Come back in two days," said Carp mysteriously. "If my plan don't work, I'll throw in with you. We'll work together."

Not at all satisfied with this answer, Taw nevertheless had to accept it. He left, saying he would be back in two days. As he rode away he saw Apache Rance hanging back in the deep dusk watching him.

**T**HE next evening, as he sat in his cabin eating a tasteless meal, Taw heard the drum of approaching hoofs. A horseman was speeding across the grassy flat, punishing his horse cruelly.

When Taw finally recognized the rider he stepped over and grabbed his gun belt from a wall peg, throwing it around his waist.

Tully Gerault leaped from his horse and ran to the door. He



banged his fist against the outside, then plunged through, stopping short as he came face to face with Taw Ringo. Heart beating like a trip-hammer, Taw stared at the old cowman. The lines on Tully's face were deeper even than when he wielded the quirt against Taw's bared chest, and in his eyes was a strange mixture of fear and dread.

"I don't know what you want, Tully," Taw said after a moment of deadly silence. "But whatever it is, git out o' here. You ought to know yo're as welcome as a rattler."

"I can't help that," gasped Tully. "You've got to help me. You're the last man in the world I'd let see me grovel in the dust for help. But I came to you—and I'm begging on my knees."

Taw Ringo was taken aback for an instant. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was too good, but it had happened. The man he despised was begging—begging for help, and he hadn't had to turn a hand.

"Hurry," Tully pleaded. "Man alive, I wouldn't be here if you wasn't the last one who could help me. I need money and I need it fast. I'm mortgaged to the hilt and can't get it from the bank."

"If that's all you want," Taw rasped tightly, "you can git on yore horse an' ride back to the Block G."

"But man—they got Tad! Kidnaped him and sent me a note. They want twenty thousand ransom—"

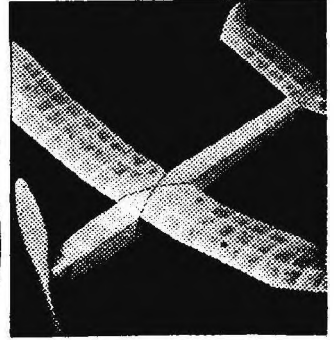
Taw's eyes were suddenly lidded. "Who got him?"

"Carp Peters. He wants twenty thousand. Git your horse saddled, Taw. You're leading me to your old man's booty."

"Yo're cracked, Tully," Taw said flatly. "Loco, if you think I'd lead you there. I told you I'd collect my pay."

Gerault's lips faded to ashen white. He rocked on his heels and then his face was shot livid. He jammed a

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gun in Taw's middle. "You'll come or I'll put daylight through you!" he rasped.

Taw only laughed. "Go ahead, Tully. Why don't you put daylight through me?"

Their eyes met, locked fiercely, then the gun sagged in Tully's hand. The boss of the range was whipped—like a yellow cur. Wild, fierce triumph was rioting through Taw. Here was the man he wanted to break—broken.

"Yo' don't dare shoot, Tully," he taunted. "I'm yore last chance—and I'm telling yo' to go to blazes. Why should I help yo'?"

All the iron went out of Gerault. The corners of his mouth sagged and his eyes went dead, and a pained look of defeat showed on his face.

"No," he said wearily, "I can't shoot you. I came here hoping I'd been wrong about you, thought maybe you was right, that you really wanted to go straight. But I was wrong. You're rotten, rotten to the core."

Shoulders suddenly drooping, Tully Gerault turned and strode toward his horse. Slowly he lifted himself a-saddle and rode away, the slow beat of his horse's hoofs echoing with leaden intensity.

As Taw watched, the fury in him slowly subsided. Impulsively he took a forward step, then drew back. A terrible conflict raged inside him, and he tried to feed it with thoughts of hatred. He glanced down at the red marks on his chest, and his fingers touched them gently. Then, as if he had no control over his own actions, he moved to the door and shouted.

**TULLY GERAULT** stopped, turned, something jerking at his lips. Taw bolted out to the corral, saddled and mounted and rode

alongside the old man. Their eyes met and held an instant. Then Taw grunted and jerked his head toward the mountains. He rode that way and Tully followed.

The moon came out, painting the pine-choked slopes a frothy white, splashing like phantom waves along the rugged rocks, and still they rode, on and on. Tully's eyes were half closed and he kept his lips sealed. Nor had the younger man spoken a single word. It was midnight when Taw halted.

Dismounting, he warned Gerault to keep watch. Then he strode off into the underbrush, came to a small, rock-crested cave and crawled in. Five minutes later, his nails grimy with fresh clay, Taw Ringo handed Tully a huge leather case.

"There's about twenty-five thousand in greenbacks there," he said. "I always intended giving it back to you some day."

Joy leaped into Tully Gerault's eyes, his lips parted.

"I don't want any thanks," Taw said harshly. "But I'm gonna deliver that money myself. Let's go."

Near daybreak, they reached Block G headquarters. Men were already astir hitting the trail, while others were dragging in, weary after a night's search for Ringo Roost. They bunched around Gerault and Taw.

"Boys," said Tully in a trembling voice, "I got the money. Taw lent it to me. And he's ramroddin' the affair from here on."

Eyes flashed to the young man, eyes filled with amazement and new hope.

"Tully says this money is to be delivered to a hombre who will be in Shotgun Gulch at noon to-day," Taw said abruptly. "I want every man here to go to the gulch and hide in the south end. Crawl on yore

bellies for five miles if you have to, but don't be seen. Is that straight?" He glanced around at the nodding heads, quickly estimating the man strength at twelve or thirteen. He felt a dull foreboding that the delivery of this money would not assure the return of Tad Gerault. He knew the way of Carp Peters, and did not trust the outlaw an inch.

"You better get started now," Taw added. "I'll ride into the gulch at noon and meet this hombre. But I don't want a shot fired until something starts from the other side."

"The other side?" asked a waddy. "What you mean, Ringo?"

"Just what I said!" Taw said shortly.

**T**AW waited, unconscious of the noonday heat of Shotgun Gulch. Just when the sun was directly overhead, Apache Rance, a rifle across his lap, came riding in on a tough big dun stallion. Rance's face bloated with anger when he saw who was waiting for him.

"Where's the kid?" Taw demanded.

"Where's the money?" snarled Rance.

Taw opened the top of the leather bag, and the owlhooter's eyes widened with greed as he saw the packets of green money inside. His blunt paw shot out, but Taw jerked back.

"Wait a minute!" Taw warned.

"Yuh'll git the kid back," Rance spat out.

Taw let his glance stray back amidst the oak trees hugging the gulch floor. His sharp eyes detected the tip of a black Stetson, but his expression did not change. Suddenly he handed the sack to Apache. The big man hugged it against his body.

"You see the kid gets safe to the

ranch, Apache," Taw said mildly. "You see to that, and don't forget."

He turned, gouged his horse lightly in the flanks. Apache Rance, a little puzzled, sat gaping at Taw's back, then glanced down at the bag, poked his fingers inside and licked his cracked lips. Then his laugh—a signal that Taw awaited—sounded loud and callous.

Taw Ringo suddenly pulled in his mustang, dropping to one side Indian fashion, just as two slugs chopped at his hat crown. Gunfire broke loose on all sides in a split second's time, and suddenly Taw could hear pounding hoofs bearing down on him. He flung up his gun, too late, for Apache Rance was already upon him, ramming his horse with the big dun stallion. Taw felt himself spinning through the air; he lost all control of arms and legs. Once, twice, during that spin, he heard the report of Apache's gun and felt the staggering power of slugs shattering their way through flesh and bone. When he hit the ground he hit in a limp heap.

Coming to—he didn't know how much later—the roar of Winchesters and Colts dinned in his ears, hoofs were knifing the air over his head, and he had a drugged feeling which made movement almost impossible. He began clawing the dirt with his fingers and finally rose to his knees. He felt his six-gun on the ground beneath one knee, and, grabbing it, staggered to his feet.

**D**IMLY Taw saw a horse charging down on him. He ducked to one side and saw the hulk of Apache Rance lean down. Taw yanked on the trigger, missed, but Rance's horse stumbled in a dog hole and threw its rider end over end. The giant hit like a huge ball, rolling over and over, but miraculously

coming to a halt on his feet. Instantly he roared and charged.

Taw, dizzy and weak, saw two or three men where there should have been one. He saw forked tongues of flame dancing before his eyes, and felt the jerk of lead as it passed through his clothes. His mind was playing tricks on him, for he was sure that Apache Rance was twins, or perhaps triplets. So, as a drunken man might do, he fired at each of the figures in turn.

Sound filled the air, a hoarse, fatal screeching followed by several choked coughs, and then something terrifically heavy slid against his legs, knocking him back. He lay there struggling until finally he gained his feet. As in a daze he pointed his gun at the figure sprawled at his feet. But he didn't pull trigger, because he suddenly realized that Apache Rance was dead.

Taw kept shaking his head, trying to jar loose the cobwebs that affected his vision. He thought that sounds of the battle were dimming. He was still doing that when a group of punchers thundered up and dismounted. Taw lifted his gun, it wavered, and somebody shouted a warning, then Taw felt the dead click in his hand. Somebody laughed—the laugh had a friendly sound—and Taw Ringo at last saw clearly the group of Block G riders at his front.

Taw counted and knew some were missing. Several were bleeding from open wounds, but they seemed happy about something. Then Taw saw Tully Gerault and Tad moving toward him.

"We got Tad," said an exultant voice. "But we had a hard time finding him. Thought you'd been killed."

Taw recognized the voice as Tully Gerault's. Taw stood there, slamming his open hand against his head, clearing it some.

"Good," he mumbled. "I'm glad Tad's all right. Well, so long."

"Wait a minute!" boomed Tully's hearty voice. "You ramrodded the act before Ringo, but this time it's mine. Tad told me all about the ranch you and him called the Running R. Well, we found the money where Rance dropped it. I'm beggin' you again, but in a different way this time, Taw— Here's the money. Take it. It'll set up that Running R in fine fashion. And I need a neighbor on that side of my spread—a man I can trust!"

Taw turned to face the cowman, staring at him as though his words were beyond credulity. Then his glance drifted to Tad's jubilant face.

"Pinch me, kid," he said huskily. "I want to be sure this ain't still a dream!"

THE END.





# Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

OUR readers seem to become more and more active in sports as time goes on. In recent months we have received a surprising amount of inquiries concerning firearms for sporting purposes, and this interest is growing.

One of the most frequent of these inquiries concerns the Model 1917 Enfield army rifle and its possibilities for conversion to a good hunting rifle. This particular rifle is available to any American citizen who is a member in good standing of the National Rifle Association. Dues in the N. R. A. are only three dollars per year, and the Enfield is sold to N. R. A. members simply because it is war surplus, not because the government considers the gun useless.

Here's the story behind the Enfield rifle. Back along in 1916 the Allies required large quantities of

arms and ammunition. Their own factories were loaded to capacity, so accordingly contracts were being actively filled in the United States by our own commercial gun makers. They were producing the British Enfield rifle in enormous quantities for England. Of course, this gun known as the Model 1914 Enfield was chambered for the British .303 service cartridge.

When the United States entered the war in 1917 it was totally un-equipped to fight. Only a small quantity of rifles were available to take care of the rapidly mobilizing United States army. The service Springfield known as the Model 1903 had been built in only two factories

The following list of literature is available to our readers: STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON, 3c each; MOSSBERG, MARLIN, 2c each; WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, 5c; REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

Application blanks for membership in the National Rifle Association may be obtained by writing to Mr. Sharpe. Inclose a three-cent stamp with your request.

—Springfield Armory at Springfield, Massachusetts, and Rock Island Arsenal, at Rock Island, Illinois. It was being turned out in such small quantities that the capacity of these plants would not permit us to produce enough rifles to take care of the increasing number of soldiers.

To ask any factory to produce a new rifle is a rather complicated job. Thousand of dies, jigs, special gauges, and other small tools would have to be made before the first gun could be produced. This would take many long months of effort. Uncle Sam looked at all available guns and decided that the Enfield would be the best bet.

Accordingly, we stopped manufacture of the British Enfield for England and altered it slightly to handle the regular .30-06 army cartridge. Factories were already tooled up to produce this gun and the army took the entire production. The altered 1914 Enfield became our Model 1917.

The British Enfield had not been standardized so that parts were readily interchangeable. Uncle Sam changed all of that. After we had standardized the Enfield, the assembly record was 280 rifles a day, while skilled assemblers in the various plants average 250 rifles a day per man.

The production of Enfield rifles for the duration of the war was 2,193,429. The British government had been paying \$42 each for these rifles in the enormous quantities they were taking them. Standardization by our methods of manufacture

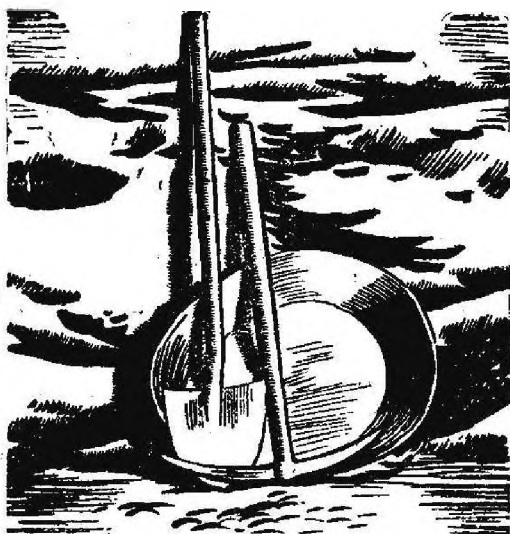
brought the cost down to the United States to approximately \$26 each. Therefore, the rifle that you can buy from Uncle Sam actually costs him \$26, and you can acquire it for one-half that amount of money.

Uncle Sam still has considerably more than a million of these rifles stored away. That's the reason he can afford to spare a few of them to shooters of the United States. The price to members of the N. R. A. is \$12.50 for a new gun, or \$7.50 for a used gun. Used guns are serviceable, but it is recommended that you plan to buy a new gun.

Of course, this is a military rifle, and if you want to make a neat sporting arm out of it, it requires some home gunsmithing. The barrel is twenty-six inches long with a military front sight. The gunsmith can cut this barrel down to twenty-four inches, remove the ugly front sight and fit a modern sporting sight designed for this particular rifle. The rear sight is crude and mounted on the top of the receiver. This could readily be used for hunting purposes, but the average amateur prefers to have this machined off and a good peep sight mounted in its place.

The military stock can be cut down and reformed to make a sporting type, but the average man desires a stock made along neater lines. For about five dollars you can get a good walnut blank roughly formed on the outside and with the action parts all inletted, so that any good craftsman can do the final fitting in a few evenings. Many shooters prefer to build their own in this fashion.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



# Mines and Mining

BY J. A. THOMPSON

**DRIFT MINING** is the working of placer gold deposits by underground methods. The system is applicable where the gold values are held to a fairly narrow, well-defined pay streak close to bedrock and where there is considerable barren overburden above the gold-carrying material. Moreover, drift mining can be used by individual prospectors in small-scale operations. No extra, expensive equipment is required, but some knowledge of the process is essential.

H. H., of Charlotte, North Carolina, has asked us about drift mining this week. "Can an individual drift mine?" he writes. "Is the method suitable for Alaska, which is where my partner and I intend to do some prospecting in the near future? How is it carried on?"

Those are the questions. Now for the answers. Alaska, because the permanently frozen condition of

many of the placer gravel deposits there eliminates the need of heavy timbering in underground work, is one of the sections in which drift mining has played an important role in the past. The method is also extensively employed in northern California in working old channel beds, bench gravels and buried placers.

Among old-time Alaskan prospectors, drift mining often afforded excellent opportunity for winter work on the gold-flecked patches of a bedrock pay streak that could be taken out best when the country was frozen, piled on a dump, and washed in summer when water for the purpose was available.

Today, once you have first located suitable gold gravel, this same system can be used. The practice formerly was to sink a small shaft down to bedrock on the pay streak. The shaft should be located on the lowest part of the channel and in approximately the middle of the pay. From the shaft, run a main drift or tunnel the entire length of the claim or the pay streak.

In working out the ground, start mining at the lower end of the main drift by establishing working faces across the channel at right angles to the drift, extending them, of course, the full width of the pay streak. In small-scale work the custom in Alaska used to be to thaw the frozen gravel with wood fires.

Both care and skill were required in handling these fires so as to keep the heat directly against the face. Otherwise the roof would warm up and slough badly. First kindling was placed along the face when an area of several hundred square feet had been opened up. On the top of the kindling a layer of dry wood was built up until it was roughly two feet thick. Over this a layer of green

wood was sometimes set, and the whole thing covered with long sheet-iron plates. Or else the dry wood was simply topped off and muffled with a thick layer of coarse gravel.

Once lighted, such fires usually burned about five hours, more or less, and would thaw the frozen gravel about a foot back into the face. General custom was to build and light the fires in the evening, so that they accomplished their thawing job during the night. By morning the fires had burned out and at the same time the thawed gravel had not had a chance to refreeze. The day could then be spent in getting out the thawed material, wheeling it to the shaft, and hoisting it to the ground surface for deposition on the dump to await washing when warmer weather came. The face was cleaned up, and a new fire set to thaw the next day's quota of gravel.

An average prospector working fairly steadily under at least medium satisfactory conditions ought to be able to get out about a thousand wheelbarrow loads of gold gravel during a winter this way. His returns will naturally depend on how much gold the ground averages per wheelbarrow load. Where three or four partners are working together, faster handling for the frozen pay streak can often be obtained by sinking two shafts instead of one. The shafts should be between fifty and seventy-five feet apart. While the gravel is being mined from one shaft,

thawing can be carried on from the other.

Pay streaks that are on bedrock at a depth of anywhere from fifteen to thirty feet below the surface are the handiest depths for small-scale drift mining in frozen ground such as is prevalent in Alaska. Large-scale drift mining has been accomplished with bedrock depths as high as two hundred feet. Such work necessitates a hoist and other equipment, as well as considerable man power.

In country where the ground is not frozen, northern California, for instance, timbers and lagging must be used both on top and sides of the main drift to keep the ground from sloughing. Faces are worked essentially the same way, except that there is no need of pre-thawing the ground. It can be picked down. Suitable timbering in the form of posts, lagging, and head boards is also required in the cross cuts.

Likewise interested in gold prospecting in Alaska, is J. F., of Tacoma, Washington, who writes that "just for the record" he would like to know when placer gold was first discovered there.

In 1850 a Russian engineer made the first reported discovery of placer gold in Alaska in the Kenai River Basin. Gold was found in the Tanana Valley in the '70s, near Juneau in 1880, and at Circle and Forty-mile about 1885.

• We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.





# The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We get so many letters asking what has to be done to "join" the Hollow Tree and what the "requirements" and "obligations" are that we thought we'd do a little explaining. In the first place, to join the Hollow Tree you simply have to send us a letter for publication stating that you want pen friends, and it's a good idea to be specific as to what type and what age you'd like your Pals to be so that you won't get bogged down with mail from folks with whom you might not have much in common. As for the requirements, there are none except your sincere desire for friends, and your only obligation is to at least acknowledge every letter you receive if you find that it's impossible to carry on a lengthy correspondence with all.

And now, here's our first letter this week. It comes from out California way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I've been reading your Hollow Tree in Western Story for about two years and I thought that I'd sort of like to see my letter printed there. I'm crazy to get Pen Pals from all over. I'm twenty years old and my favorite sports are football, swimming and hiking. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, gang, let's keep the mailmen busy. Here's hoping I have good luck.—Carl Holser, P. O. Box 874, Santa Cruz, California

*Drawing is her hobby—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is a nineteen year old putting in her pica for Pen Pals from all over the world. My favorite sports are fishing and hiking. I have several hobbies, but drawing and collecting pictures are my favorite ones. I promise to answer all letters, so here's hoping I hear from someone soon.—Bessie Walker, General Delivery, Luverne, Minnesota

*These two lads have diversified interests—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

This letter is being written by two sixteen-year-old boys. We want to hear from boys and girls between thirteen and seventeen years of age. We are interested in collecting cigar bands and newspapers from all parts of the world, writing short stories and drawing cartoons. You will find us very interesting.—Buddy Krusen and Dick Connolly, 118 Pennsylvania Avenue, Elmira, New York

*You can depend on Auriel to answer—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a fifteen-year-old college girl who would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world not under fifteen years of age. I would be very grateful for any letters and promise to answer all as I know how disappointing it is to write to a person and be turned down. I love swimming, singing and cycling, and I collect stamps, snaps and match-box tops. Well, here's hoping I get scores of letters.—Auriel Garratt, 9 Derwent Park Road, Moonah, Via Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

*George wastes no words—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

Can I join the Hollow Tree, too? I am forty-nine years old, a widower, have been in California eight years and love it. Would welcome letters from men and women near my age. I'd like to join someone on a ranch, farm, mine, or anything. Could be a partner, Pal, or what have you. Love the mountains and outdoor life but can adjust myself to the city. Have been in the music business for years. Will tell you all about this part of California if you'll write to me.—George Boyland, 431 East Main, Stockton, California

*These two gals are lonesome in a big city—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two very lonesome girls although we live in one of the largest steel cities in the United States. Marge is seventeen and has many interesting hobbies and enjoys music. I

am seventeen, too, and will send a snapshot to the first ten who write. I am, so they tell me, a very good dancer.—Marge Perry, 3902 Madison Street, Gary, Indiana, and Lola Cash, 3964 Madison Street, Gary Indiana

### **Calling a "jack-of-all-trades"—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'd like to hear from someone who answers to the description of "jack-of-all-trades." Someone who does art work, can write short stories, poems and songs. A serious person looking for a business partner as well as correspondent. I've got some good information to hand out to those answering this plea. You have nothing to lose by writing and hearing my proposition. Please state a small amount of your ability. This is a brain plea, so let's forget the age and beautiful looks. This may be the chance you've been looking for, so get busy and write to me.—James Paugh, No. 19, Gray, Pennsylvania

### **Jean's letters should be entertaining—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Calling the Hollow Tree! Calling the Hollow Tree! Be on the lookout for Pen Pals who would be interested in writing to an eighteen-year-old Hoosier girl whose hobbies are writing letters and collecting snapshots and post cards. If found, please report to me.—Jean Pisowicz, 4832 Walsh Avenue, East Chicago, Indiana

### **Howard has had lots of different jobs—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Texan twenty-three years old. I've been in the CCC and national guard and have worked on ranches, in stockyards, and dozens of other places. I'll send a snap of myself to all who send me one. I've quite a few tales to tell of my adventures and all are welcome to write. My chief likes are movies, popular music, boxing and football. Everybody, everywhere, please write to me.—Howard A. Deaton, 3800 Jackson Street, El Paso, Texas

### **Carrie is a sports fan—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm an Oklahoma girl, twenty years old, a junior in high school, and am considered good-looking. I love all sports, especially basketball and horseback riding. My favorite pastime is dancing. I promise to answer all letters from Pals in foreign countries or the United States and will exchange snapshots.—Carrie Hamilton, Rt. No. 2, Westville, Oklahoma

### **Sig and Nick's case is herewith dismissed—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is it possible to present our case before your court? We, Sigmund and Nicholas, plead guilty of having enjoyed Western Story in many strange lands, such as Panama, Hawaii, and now, the Philippine Islands. We are twenty-six years old and represent the long and short of soldiering—Sig is small and Nick is quite tall—anyway, we'd enjoy writing, swapping yarns and snaps.—Sigmund Loskowski and Nicholas Fkac, Headquarters 20th Air Base, Nichols Field, Rizal, Philippine Islands

### **And here's a Canadian "hook-up"—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

Hello, Pals! This is Station P. A. L. S. broadcasting from Red Willow, Alberta, Canada. I am a Canadian girl requesting just oodles of Pen Pals. I'm sixteen years old and interested in many sports. I will be anxiously waiting for many replies.—Margaret Robinson, Red Willow, Alberta, Canada

### **Richard wants to hear from everyone—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I often read the Hollow Tree and I wondered if I wrote to you would you try to get me some Pen Pals. I am nineteen years old, enjoy all sports, and my hobbies are collecting stamps and match-box covers. I would like to hear from young and old, from far and near, so please don't fail me. I'll exchange snaps, so write, everybody.—Richard Reid, 1431 Cleveland Avenue, Lincoln Park, Michigan

### **Bill and Johnny are cowpunchers—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two "ornery" cowpunchers. Bill is eighteen and I'm nineteen. We would like very much to have Pen Pals. We work on a ranch and fork broncs from sunup to sundown. There's a rodeo Saturday and, boy, you should see us cut up the earth! We will send an arrowhead to the first one who writes to us.—Bill Platt and Johnny Miller, Corralitos Ranch, Los Cruces, New Mexico

### **Keep Peggy busy—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to correspond with anyone in America, especially cowboys and cowgirls. I am twenty-one years old, my favorite sport is swimming, and I would like to exchange newspapers, photos, et cetera. I promise to answer all letters and the more I get, the busier my pen will be, which is just what it likes.—Peggy Wright, 7 Townsend Street, Goodwood Cape, South Africa

### **This soldier has lots of time to write—**

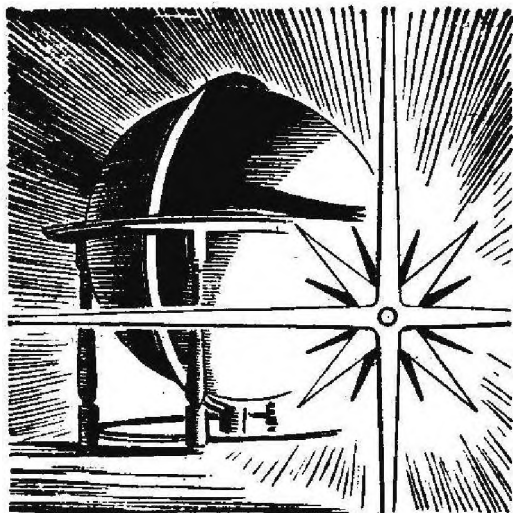
Dear Miss Rivers:

I've been answering letters published in the Hollow Tree and am very much disappointed to only receive one answer. I'm hoping to get some Pen Pals now, by having my letter appear. I am twenty-three years old and would like to hear from young and old. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots of myself and the Islands with anyone who wants to. I have lots of time to write.—Private Andy Blum, 35th Infantry, Company B, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, T. H.

### **Not so tall, but dark and handsome is this sailor—**

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a faithful reader of Western Story for several years and wish to crash the Pen Pal column in the Hollow Tree. I am a twenty-four-year-old sailor just back from a three-year cruise in Asiatic waters. I'm dark and handsome, but not tall enough to make it the famous three. I will swap souvenirs and snaps with all who write. I've been to South America, China, Japan, Alaska, the Philippines, Hawaii, and both Atlantic and Pacific ports in the United States.—L. J. Brooks, U. S. S. Trippe (403), Boston, Massachusetts



## Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

CARRYING along some sort of concentrated food or emergency ration is important to every camper. Trappers, hunters, timber cruisers and prospectors out far from the beaten trail may find themselves farther from their base camp than they anticipated, or caught and kept from camp several days by storms, swollen streams and a host of other unpredictable occurrences that are always cropping up to test the stamina and the resourcefulness of the true outdoorsman. A pocket pack of concentrated food on such occasions may literally be a life saver.

Moreover, hikers off on a few days' jaunt into back-country wilderness must perforce travel light. Canned goods for such trips are heavy, bulky and awkward for the back packer to handle. Concentrated foods have none of these drawbacks. On the other hand they are primarily useful

as emergency rations, and not intended for a steady, un-supplemented diet over long periods of time.

A. H., of Chicago, Illinois, is one of that ever-growing group of wilderness hikers, men who are city living, but outdoor loving, and who find they can cram more real back-to-nature stuff in a week's walking trip through woods and forests than any other way. "How about concentrated foods for such trips?" wrote A. H. "Remember shelter, food, in fact everything I take with me, I tote on my back."

First and foremost among such concentrated foods is that old standby of the Indian on long, lone trips—pinole. Our own famous pioneer frontiersmen, like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Bridger, and their contemporaries, relied heavily on pinole. Even today down in the Southwest and particularly below the border, lone Mexicans will start off on trips of several days' duration with just a little sack of pinole tied on behind their saddles.

About two heaping tablespoonfuls of pinole stirred in a cup of cold water will make a meal. You drink the stuff down. And for the modern traveler your pinole in water, plus a small handful of raisins, another excellent, concentrated food, will make a pretty square meal with lots of sustaining power.

Pinole itself is simply pulverized, parched Indian corn. The corn can be parched in a frying pan on the stove. Stir it constantly, however, to prevent scorching it. The Indians used to parch it in hot wood ashes until it was brown, then sift the ashes out and grind the corn. At home you can grind the corn yourself in one of those old-fashioned coffee mills that used to hang on nearly every kitchen wall. The idea is to grind it fine enough to be drinkable

when mixed with water, but not so fine that it merely flours into a thin paste when put into a water-filled cup.

Pinole was originally intended for a quick meal while on the trail, or on long trips as an alternative standby when game was scarce. It gets its "staying" qualities not only because it is surprisingly high in nutritive content, but also because when added to water and consumed, the parched corn swells in the stomach creating that customary full after-dinner feeling.

Pemmican, of course, is the old standby of arctic explorers, and hunters in the far Northwest. Because it contains a considerable percentage of suet or fat it is essentially a cold-climate concentrated food. The early-day pemmican of the Far North, a standard item of diet among the old Hudson Bay trappers, was made of lean buffalo meat, dried like jerky in the sun or over a fire until it was hard and brittle, then pounded to powder. The buffalo fat and marrow was then melted, mixed to a pasty mass with the powdered, dried lean meat and the whole packed into cloth bags.

Thus prepared, pemmican would keep for years in the cold North country climate. It can be eaten raw, sliced and fried like sausage, or boiled with a little flour into a thick, heavy soup.

Modern manufactured pemmican is made of beef meat instead of buffalo, but is just as nutritious as the

old-timers' product. Perhaps even more nutritious because, as a rule, a little sugar, and some raisins are added to the manufactured beef pemmican which is squeezed into cakes and packed in moisture-proof containers.

So much for the two mainstay emergency rations—pinole for the hot climate of the South and Southwest, and pemmican for the cold country of the North or for winter travel. Neither of these foods alone constitutes a balanced diet by any means. Both are notably lacking in the acid factor. Nowadays hiker, hunter, trapper or trader can get his daily fruit-juice vitamins on the trail via the medium of concentrated citric-acid or lime-juice tablets that may easily be taken along anywhere. Raisins, as already mentioned, are an excellent concentrated food affording a handy form of sugar.

Tabloid tea tablets which come a hundred in a little box that will slip into your vest pocket, and make a cup of fairly good tea per tablet, are another modern innovation. But a real bread substitute still seems to be the unsolved, perhaps unsolvable, concentrated food problem. Regular old-fashioned hardtack still remains about the best emergency bread ration. Dessicated eggs, dried milk powder and various forms of compressed soups may also be included on extended trips where food bulk must be kept to a minimum and at the same time a greater variety in diet is desired.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

# DARK FRONTIER



Part Four

BY FRANK  
RICHARDSON PIERCE

*The Story So Far:*

Steve McGraw is hired by Ed Page to search for the latter's father, lost in the remote and unexplored Dark River country in Alaska where he went to search for tin. Steve locates the missing prospector and makes a rich find of tin. When he returns to Seattle, he finds that Page, without his consent, has formed a company to develop the claim. Involved in a partnership which he had entered involuntarily,

Steve is arrested with Page on charge of violating the stock-selling laws.

Steve is paroled by the judge and allowed to return to Dark River on condition that he fill a contract to supply a large amount of tin. Clay Bullock, a mine promoter who has a reputation for fleecing miners out of their claims, believes he has Steve in a hole because one of his men filed on the Dark River ground before Steve. He intends, however, to let Steve

get his operations under way, and then take over.

Professor Boyer, one of Bullock's men who is posing as an anthropologist, learns that Steve filed on the South Fork of Dark River, not on the North Fork where Bullock's claim is located. Realizing that Bullock's plans will have to be changed, he sends word to the promoter.

Steve charts a course over the ice from Schooner Bay to the South Fork in order to bring a dredge to the place where mining operations are to begin. Unknown to him, Boyer has dynamited a hole in the ice over which the dredge will have to pass.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ICE-TRAPPED

THE Diesel motor, turning over at top speed, pulled the dredge slowly upstream. The work proceeded slowly until the engine man suddenly bellowed, "Somebody better take care of that wire rope. It's twisting into loops as it comes off the winch."

Steve climbed onto the dredge, grasped a loom and got the rope back onto a drum once more. "She's O. K. now," he said. "Don't know whether it's the cold or what, but the line's giving a lot of trouble of late. I'll hold it on a couple more revolutions. Feed it to her."

"O. K."

A moment later the dredge gave a convulsive shudder. "What's that?" Steve asked. "It felt like something giving way."

The forward part of the dredge was a third over the pit Boyer had dug when the ice on the downstream end crumpled under the load. The dredge shot forward, and the front end was buried deep in the water. Then, as the buoyancy of the pontoons started lifting it up, the end wedged under the thick, unbroken ice ahead.

The engine man had shut off the power, but his body pitched forward with the momentum and he cracked

his head on solid steel. He slipped into the water as it boiled over windlass, cable and engine. Pee Wee Bompard leaped to the dredge, grasped the man's foot and hauled him out. His clothing glazed instantly. Half conscious, he gasped, "Steve's down there!"

"Steve's down there!" Pee Wee bellowed. He turned to the watching men. "Some of you fellers get a fire goin' an' sleeping bags laid out. Somebody tear the clothes offn this man an' get him into a bag."

As Pee Wee talked, Paddy Hogan, unnoticed, was stripping off his clothing. He grasped a rope and had dived into the black, icy waters before anyone could stop him.

"The fool!" Pee Wee shouted. "That won't do any good."

Paddy was down a long time. At last he broke through the skin of ice that had formed and drew in choking gasps of air. Ice was already beginning to glaze over his face and head. Paddy shook his head and spoke with difficulty, "He's caught by the cable. Couldn't hold my breath long enough—"

Pee Wee hauled in the rope Paddy was grasping and pulled him clear of the water. He was hurried into a sleeping bag.

"You're a brave man," Pee Wee told him, "but it was the wrong move."

"Me intentions was of the best," Paddy said feebly. "I never was so cold in me misspent life."

Pee Wee had pulled down a length of half-inch water pipe. Now he stripped off his clothing and picked up a heavy chunk of iron. "Get the headlights of one of the tractors on the spot," he ordered.

The tractor was on its way almost before he finished speaking. He turned to another man. "Keep this end of the pipe above water. Don't

let it get wet or it'll ice over. I've got to breathe through it."

He eased himself into the ice water and submerged, lips to the other end of the pipe. It was awkward and hard to handle. A hose would have been better, but there was none available. Ice coated the pipe, and every time it moved, skin ice was broken on the surface of the water.

Pee Wee had to move crabwise with his neck twisted in order to keep his lips to the pipe, but he knew every inch of the dredge, and as his feet struck objects he identified them. The heavy weight in his right hand kept his body submerged. His feet touched a loop of cable, and he half turned his head. By the vague light seeping down from the tractor headlights he saw Steve's ankle tight in a loop of cable.

He got down close and studied it. Looking up to make certain there was nothing above to trap him, he dropped the weight and grasped the cable. He twisted it, widened the loop, and then, gripping the air pipe in his teeth, pulled Steve free with his left hand. He got a good hold on Steve's body and planted his feet firmly on the dredge deck. Then, grasping the air pipe with his left hand again, he kicked upward.

**P**EE WEE felt the ice break across his back. He held tightly to the pipe while men hauled him and Steve within reach. Pee Wee kept Steve's head under water until he could work his hand over the unconscious man's mouth and pinch his nostrils tightly.

"Keep his mouth and nose covered," he warned. "Don't want the water in 'em freezin' up."

One of the men wrapped a blanket around Steve's head and hurried him to the fire. Others helped Pee

Wee, now a weak, stumbling giant incased in a thin covering of ice.

A roaring fire had been made with gasoline and driftwood. Men held a tarp to inclose a small space and imprison the heat. Pee Wee's coating of ice melted instantly. He was dried off with rough towels and put into a sleeping bag. Other men had removed Steve's clothing, got him into a bag and were now emptying the water from his lungs.

"Keep it up," Pee Wee ordered hoarsely. "Make him breathe. Keep that fire going. A blast of freezin' air might be fatal."

Paddy was watching the operation with sober, worried eyes. "Ain't there some signs of life?" he asked.

"Not yet," a man answered. "I learned first aid as a boy scout, and if anybody laughs I'll kill him."

"Nobody's laughin'," Paddy said solemnly.

After what seemed hours to Paddy, the big Irishman saw Steve's eyes flutter. Then the half-drowned man began heaving up river water from his stomach and coughing it from his lungs.

"Keep that air warm!" Pee Wee kept repeating. "Frosted lungs would kill him." He spotted a man who seemed to have no particular job. "Light out for the Paddy Creek cabin and get a fire going. Make it so hot the walls smoke, but don't burn the cabin down. Hey, you tractor man, be ready to take Steve into your cab. The rest of us will ride on the sled."

"Anything we can do about the dredge?" the engine man asked.

"It's here until spring," one of the men observed dejectedly. "Then the break-up will take care of everything."

"Steve ain't said so," Pee Wee said curtly. He turned to another man. "You leg it for Schooner Bay,

tell 'em what's happened and ask Dorothy Sheldon if she wants a nursin' job."

When Steve could stare weakly at the wreckage, they carried him to the tractor cab, sleeping bag and all. "It's a mess," he muttered. "Wonder how you go about getting an ice-locked dredge out of a river."

"You just forget the dredge," Pee Wee told him. "It'll keep."

"Yeah," Paddy muttered. "It'll keep. It's in ice."

**P**EE WEE had a hunch Steve wouldn't be on his feet the next day, and he was right. Steve was a very sick man. Somewhere in the crash he had received internal injuries of an undetermined nature. He remembered vaguely the heavy ice on the edge of the hole leaping at him. Perhaps he was thrown against it—he didn't know. But he did remember one thing—there was water filled with broken bits of ice boiling around him just before he passed out. He knew this was no air hole the dredge had tumbled into.

Paddy, being in better shape than Pee Wee, was the logical man to send on a special mission. Steve sent for him.

"How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Fit as a fiddle," Paddy declared.

"Paddy, I think someone dug a pit in the ice," said Steve. "Then they let it fill and freeze over. You know the rest."

"If they did," Paddy said shrewdly, "they must've done something with the ice."

"Exactly," Steve exclaimed. "And I want you to see if you can find it. Take things easy. Don't hurry, and be careful not to frost your lungs. And another thing, don't let anyone know what you're up to. I want the report circulated that the

dredge dropped into an air hole."

"Leave it to me," Paddy told him.

To save himself unnecessary walking, Paddy rode a tractor down to the dredge. The headlights showed him a lone figure contemplating the wreck. "Dorothy, me darlin'!" he shouted.

The girl turned. "Paddy!" There was an anxious look on her face. "How's Steve?"

"He's in better shape than his dredge is," answered Paddy.

"I'm glad. He might've been killed or drowned," Dorothy said. "How did this happen? Steve told me the ice had been tested every few rods, and the bad places marked. Why, tractors have gone over this place for weeks and dragged heavy loads on sleds."

"It's a secret," Paddy told her, "but I'll give you the low-down." He explained Steve's theory. "I wouldn't mention it, but you're a friend of us boys, even if you do work for one of them grave diggers. I'm on me way now to hunt evidence."

"Let me help you," Dorothy begged.

"No," Paddy answered, "you'll be more help lookin' after Steve. Pee Wee and I are afraid he'll try and get up and do somethin' about the dredge before he's able. Then he'll really be a sick man."

So Dorothy went upriver through the gloom, while Paddy searched for likely spots to begin his search.

When Dorothy got to the cabin, Steve was running a temperature. A man was doing his best to hold him in the bunk.

"Listen, you!" Steve was shouting. "We've got to figure a way to get the dredge out of there. Horse it up onto the ice and keep it moving. I've seen the break-up on Dark River. I've seen the ice tumble



through Black Canyon. That dredge will last about as long as an antique fiddle."

Dorothy could see that he was only half conscious. He was really trying to solve the problem, but his feverish brain couldn't maintain a constant, logical thought process.

"All right, Steve," the girl said soothingly, "I'm going to help you get back on your feet. If you'll help, it won't be long. But if you buck us, there's no telling how long you'll be in bed."

"But don't you see, if you'd just take me down there and let me size up the situation," Steve argued, "I might work out something. Then a crew of men could tackle the job."

"Steve! That isn't your biggest problem right now," Dorothy said sharply. She took his arms and forced him back onto the pillow. "Now relax!"

That was the last thing Steve McGraw remembered for some time. His next impression was of Pee Wee Pompard sitting beside the other bunk, where Dorothy was stretched out.

"Poor kid," Pee Wee said. "You're all in, I reckon." Pee Wee was only a blur, and Steve closed his eyes and tried to straighten out things.

When he opened his eyes again, Pee Wee was whittling on a piece of wood. "Can't figger it!" he said savagely. "Can't figger it!"

"Can't figure what?" Steve asked.

Pee Wee stopped whittling and stared. Then he crossed the room and looked down. "What's that?" he asked. "Say it again."

"Can't figure what?" Steve repeated.

"By golly, son, you're out of it," Pee Wee cried exultantly. "You're yourself again. For a minute I fig-

gered you was gettin' fixed for another session of ravin'."

"I've been out of my head, eh?" Steve asked weakly.

"Yep. You had a whale of a fever. Dorothy had a big hand in pulling you through," Pee Wee said. "She's a mighty good little nurse."

"It's too bad I wasn't conscious to enjoy it all," Steve grinned. "But I'm still weak, and I'll need a nurse quite a while longer." Suddenly Pee Wee's face seemed blurry again. Steve knew he had been overdoing at the start and settled back.

When he awakened from another sleep, Dorothy was sitting in the chair beside his bunk. Pee Wee and his shavings had vanished.

"I've put you to plenty of trouble," Steve told the girl.

"I'm terribly sorry you had to go through such an ordeal," Dorothy said, "but I'm glad I could nurse you some of the time." She walked over and gazed out the window. Steve did not hear her as she murmured, "The debits have piled so high and my credits are so few." She stood there, trying to get a grip on herself. Steve's appreciation was so deep, it almost shattered her poise. She regained her composure, but there was no concealing the exhaustion in her face as she sat down beside the bunk again.

**P**ROFESSOR BOYER appeared later to ask how Steve was getting along. He expressed his regret at the disaster and asked if there was any possible way of salvaging the dredge. Steve made vague, non-committal replies to his questions.

When Boyer left, he motioned the girl outside. "Have you learned anything of his future plans?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hardly," she answered. "He's been unconscious."

"Sometimes unconscious men reveal things in their ravings," Boyer suggested.

"He hasn't mentioned a thing," Dorothy said briefly. "And if he had, I wouldn't tell you. I still have some sense of ethics, you know."

Boyer studied her intently and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you'd better return to Schooner Bay," he said. "They believe this affair was an accident, of course?"

"Steve hasn't been conscious long enough to talk of it," Dorothy said evasively.

Paddy came to see Steve the next day. "It is just as you figgered, Steve," the Irishman declared. "Somebody dug a hole. I found the hunks of ice—tons of it. At first I thought it'd be like huntin' for a needle in a haystack, then I says, 'Paddy Hogan, use your head for somethin' besides buttin'!' And I used it. Just drove the tractor in all the snowdrifts I could find. When I hit somethin' solid as a rock I investigated, and there was the ice—ragged pieces split up."

"Got any ideas?"

"There might be a spy planted in our gang," Paddy said. "By brushin' away the snow carefully I thought I might find footprints or somethin' to prove who done it. What I found was tractor marks."

"And we own the only tractors in the region," Steve murmured. "Well, Paddy, thanks. And keep your find to yourself. You haven't mentioned it, have you?"

"Only to Pee Wee," Paddy assured him.

Dorothy came in. In a few minutes she sent Paddy away and told Steve he was to go to rest. He obeyed, growling that she was always insisting on sleep just when things were getting interesting.

"You're getting along all right,

Steve," Dorothy told him, "so I must leave you. Professor Boyer insists that I return to Schooner Bay and catch up on my work."

"I suppose you'll have to do it," Steve said glumly. "I wish he would fire you. We'd give you a job in a hurry."

"I'll tell him," Dorothy smiled. "Maybe he'll raise my pay. I'll send Pee Wee in to look after you."

Steve must have fallen asleep again, because when he opened his eyes again Dorothy was gone. Pee Wee was sitting there with another pile of shavings at his feet.

"I see you haven't solved the problem yet," Steve remarked. "Well, what is it?"

"Dorothy gave strict orders you shouldn't talk about minin' and the dredge for another week," Pee Wee explained. "But time's flyin', as the feller says. I've practically whittled up a tree tryin' to figger a way of gettin' that dredge out, but I haven't had any luck."

"Tomorrow," Steve said, "you're goin' to bundle me up and take me down there."

**P**EE WEE argued the point the next day, threatening Steve with Dorothy's wrath, but he lost. Steve was carried out to the dredge.

There was a smugness about the way the river held the bulky machine in its icy grasp that challenged him. Boiled down, the problem was simple: Push back the river, remove the ice, lift the dredge onto the ice and continue on up the stream.

"How're you goin' to push back the river?" Pee Wee grumbled when Steve outlined the problem. "If we had a lot of cement we could build a bulkhead around the dredge to keep the river out and—" He stopped and looked a little resent-

ful. "You ain't listenin' to what I'm sayin'."

"You've hit it!" Steve said excitedly. "A bulkhead! Put the men to work cutting trees long enough to reach the river bottom and a little to spare. Trim the branches off and bring 'em down on sleds. Carry every tree you can each trip the tractors make to save fuel."

Then, to his disgust, Steve realized he was beginning to feel tired already. "I guess you'd better get me back to the cabin. I can't seem to take it like I used to."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE EASY WAY OUT

**A** DAY after Steve visited the dredge, every man except Pee Wee was at work in a patch of timber a mile up Paddy Creek. Kulalik grew restless and took to snarling for no good reason.

"A dog team's coming," Steve remarked. "Kulalik always acts that way when he scents a rival dog. It's probably Professor Boyer."

Pee Wee rubbed the frost off the window and looked out. A fine team, with tails up to prove their freshness, and with plumes of vapor coming from their mouths, pulled up in front of the cabin and stopped. The driver, a swarthy, heavy-set man, tied the dogs to convenient trees and helped a big man from the sled.

"Holy mackerel!" Pee Wee roared. "Steve, it's Clay Bullock."

"Bullock!" Steve sat up in the bunk. "Are you sure?"

"I'd know him in hell," Pee Wee growled. "How the devil did he get here, and what's he want?"

"A plane equipped with skis could land on Schooner Bay," Steve said. "And it could bring dog team and outfit with it. Well, we mustn't forget our men." Steve said.



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hot tea and food and a drink of whiskey if he wants it."

"This is going to hurt me," Pee Wee muttered, "but I'll go through with it." When Bullock yelled and knocked on the cabin door, Pee Wee opened it. The big man stamped into the room and looked around.

"Hello, Bullock," Steve said quietly. "What's going on Outside? We haven't been getting much over the radio. Too much magnetic iron in the mountains, I guess."

"The price of tin is holding up," Bullock answered as he shed his parka. "That's what you want to know, isn't it? This is one of my men, Big Chris. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"Yes," Steve answered. He was watching Big Chris and Pee Wee sizing up each other.

"So you're Pee Wee Bompard," Big Chris said. "I hear you claim to be a rough-and-tumble fighter?"

"I never make any claims," drawled Pee Wee. "I mind my own business"—he paused and added significantly—"as long as others mind theirs."

He knew all about Big Chris, too. One of the most valued men in Bullock's employ, he was a past master in the art of taking the fight out of rival outfits. "Cripple 'em, but don't kill 'em," was supposed to be his motto. Rivals buried dead men, but they had to care for cripples, and that was an added burden. If robins heralded spring, then Big Chris heralded trouble.

Bullock and Big Chris ate the food Pee Wee gave them in silence. Then Bullock settled back and lit a cigar.

"Got bad news for you, Steve," he said casually. "I'm takin' over the company's operations here. Got a court order appointin' me receiver."

"First you were a friend of the court's," Steve observed, "and now the court's a friend of yours. Well, you and the court can go to hell. You're not taking things over until you're bigger'n you are now."

"I expected a little trouble with you," Bullock said lazily.

"You should. You've had plenty of experience in that line," Steve said.

"Yes, and I'm prepared. I had Big Chris here appointed deputy United States marshal," Bullock continued. "Want to see his authority?"

"Yes," Steve answered.

CHRIS nonchalantly turned back his coat, then amazement filled his eyes. "My badge's gone," he exclaimed. "Somebody stole it."

"Don't look at me," Pee Wee growled, "I haven't been near you."

"I won't insist on a badge," Steve said. "Just show me your commission, Chris, and I'll accept you as special deputy to do Bullock's dirty work."

Chris took out a billfold and opened it. Again surprise filled his eyes. "Commission's gone, too." He glared about him with rage-filled eyes. "Somebody swiped it from me."

Steve grinned. "You've got to show your authority, Chris, before you can order me around," he said.

"I've a receiver's authority," Bullock said angrily, "and I'm taking over. Now look here, McGraw, you're under suspended sentence right now in a State court. If you get tough and resist me, you'll have to serve out your sentence, and you'll be subject to a Federal contempt charge as well."

"What started this receivership?" Steve asked. "You're back of it, of course."

"I had a man cached back in the hills checking over things," Bullock explained glibly. "He learned you'd actually staked the South Fork ground. I pointed out to Judge Lund that you had used deception. You'd let him think the North Fork ground was involved. The receivership was a cinch, then." He grinned. "Then, coming upriver, what do I see? You know damned well what I see—a dredge iced in."

"I don't think this hombre's showing the proper attitude, boss," Big Chris grinned. "Maybe I'd better work on him if he has any ideas of resistin' the law."

"I don't have to take your word on the deputy-marshal business," Steve pointed out. "And Bullock knows it. You can't come into country like this and assume authority without proof."

"Boss, let's go outside and talk things over," Chris said. "I'm ready to move in now."

"I think we'd better," Bullock drawled. "With a dredge ready to go out with the ice, the situation's changed. I imagine the poor, deluded stockholders of McGraw-Page Metals will be tickled to death to unload their claims on me—if I put it up to the court in the right way." The two pulled on their parkas and went outside.

"What do you say, Steve?" Pee Wee asked in a hoarse whisper. "Is this receiver and marshal business on the level?"

"I think it is," Steve admitted. "He had a man watching us, which doesn't surprise me at all. The man made his way to some cannery or settlement and communicated with Bullock by radio. I'm dead sure Chris had his badge and commission, but lost it, which is lucky for us. We may have to do some backing down now, Pee Wee, and swal-

low an insult or two that won't taste sweet, but we're going to do it, knowing our turn will come to even things up with fists. Keep your temper and leave everything to me."

But Bullock and Big Chris surprised them when they returned. "You're right, McGraw," Bullock said. "You're entitled to see Chris' authority, and he can't produce it. We won't make an issue of it. Have you any objections to us sleeping here tonight?"

"None in the world," Steve said. "Make yourself at home."

"They may sleep," Pee Wee growled when the two went out to bring in their sleeping bags, "but I won't. They're up to something."

"You're right," Steve agreed, "but it won't happen tonight. I'm sure of that. I don't want them to know about the tree-cutting gang. You light out and warn the boys against showing up around the cabin."

**B**ULLOCK was a genial, entertaining guest. He related what had happened Outside during the winter and told a few yarns. In spite of his dislike for Bullock, Steve had an enjoyable evening. But Big Chris and Pee Wee scowled at each other all night.

In the morning, when he and Big Chris were ready to leave, Bullock said, "McGraw, you're licked and you know it! You've got a jail sentence hanging over you besides. Now string along with me and I'll not only put you on my pay roll and give you a chunk of money to boot, but I'll go to Judge Lund, explain you did everything possible to deliver the goods, and get him to suspend your sentence for good. It's an easy way out."

"No dice," Steve said promptly, "I'll play my hand through and next

fall I'll either be in the money or in jail."

Pee Wee trailed Bullock and Big Chris all the way to Schooner Bay. A light snowstorm concealed him nicely, and when he arrived he slipped into the bunkhouse without being seen. Only a few McGraw-Page men occupied the structure now. Most of the others, including the resentful Ed Page, were upriver.

Doctor Zednick had moved in, along with several of Professor Boyer's men. Just to be on the safe side, Pee Wee occupied a storage room on the second floor. He heard Bullock come in during the evening and say, "I'm flying back to Seattle and will be glad to take any letters you want to write. I'll leave my dogs and ample food to the man who will take care of them and work them."

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Bullock," Boyer said. "I already have a team, but I can use another. I have some supplies I want to freight up river. I expect to make some important discoveries this coming year."

Pee Wee heard Dr. Zednick give the snort of disgust which he used to express his opinion of Boyer. Then quiet settled as the man settled down to write their letters. Pee Wee turned in, awakened at four o'clock and, peering through a crack in the floor, noticed some were still writing.

The McGraw-Page storekeeper, who also acted as postmaster, sold stamps, received the letters and placed them in a pouch. Pee Wee sneaked into the kitchen a few minutes later, ate a hurried meal, then faded into the lightly falling snow. He made his way over the Schooner Bay ice to a drift near Bullock's plane, then he burrowed in and

waited. It was a long, cold wait, for the air didn't clear until after daybreak.

"I had the pious idear of fixin' their plane so it'd quit and set 'em down two hundred miles from nowhere," Pee Wee told himself, chuckling. "But my second idear was a better one." He chuckled again. "It'll give Steve a laugh, too, and fill him with hope. And he ain't had much to laugh at lately."

Pee Wee would have liked to visit with Dorothy Sheldon, but he decided it would be just as well if he left as quietly as he had arrived. When he reached the dredge on the upstream trip, the first sled load of trees had arrived. He rode the tractor the remainder of the way and found Steve sitting up in a chair when he reached the cabin.

"Full of business, eh?" Pee Wee said.

"Yeah. Had two of the boys build a cabin on a sled," he said. "I'm moving in, and the tractor will haul it downstream. They put in windows next to the lower bunk so I can rest and watch operations at the dredge. You get the upper bunk and the cooking job."

"Now, listen here," Pee Wee protested. "You aren't well enough to do that."

"If I'm in a bunk and warm, that's all that's necessary," Steve told him. "I can just as well be watching the men work as to be here looking at the ceiling. What'd you find out down below?"

"I tried to find out whether Bullock was on friendly terms with any of the grave-diggers," Pee Wee answered. "He didn't seem to be, though. But somebody is playin' his game, and we've got to find who it is, or they'll knife your plans in the back again."

THE shack on the sled was tried out the next day. Steve was moved without the slightest discomfort, and Pee Wee cooked his first meal on a Yukon stove en route. Half of the force was on hand to greet the two of them, the other half remained in the woods. Under Steve's instructions, Pee Wee marked out an area that included the dredge.

"All you've got to do," he said, "is to cut holes in the ice and shove trees down to the bottom. Each tree is to be pointed on the end. You take sledge hammers and drive it into the bottom a few inches. Cut the holes as you need 'em. Otherwise they'll freeze up."

It was slow work, because the trees were placed tightly together. In a few days the supply was ex-

hausted, and Steve sent all hands back to the woods again. Paddy Hogan was straw boss, and he saw to it that Ed Page did more than his share of work. If there were trees to pack, Ed had to carry one end, a husky man the other. Rather than drop his end and be subjected to a rawhiding, Ed stayed with it, all the while nursing his hate of Steve, Paddy and the others. He had long since ceased trying to get by on personality.

Steve spent less time each day in his bunk, and more on the ice. The second week he put in a full shift, but he continued to live in the shack. The others lived in the forest camp a mile above Paddy Creek Canyon.

The great day came when the dredge was completely inclosed with

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trees. Steve had the men bring down piping and pumps from Page City and set them up. Every tarp, hide and blanket that could be spared was brought up, also. Ice was cut on the outer side of the fence and the tarps lowered into the water. There was no trouble in fastening the upper edge. It froze to the trees almost as soon as it touched.

"O. K.," Steve said, "now pump out the water around the dredge and we'll see what happens."

While ice imprisoned the dredge, nevertheless the lower part was in the water area below the ice. It was necessary to turn the pumps over at top speed and keep them insulated besides, otherwise they would have frozen up tight. Water gushed from the outlet, moved a few inches and froze. This problem was solved by the crew breaking up the slabs and skidding them downstream.

Steve watched the ice around the dredge carefully. Presently it began to break up, drop an inch or so. Then the space between glazed over, only to break as the slabs sank lower.

"This is a crazy, expensive idea," Ed Page sneered.

"That's because you haven't any brains," retorted Pee Wee. "The fence of trees helps keep the water from reaching the area around the dredge. The pressure of the water against the tarps stops the water from seeping in between."

"Well, not quite that," Steve said, "but almost."

"That's it," Ed insisted. "It comes in faster than the pumps can take it out."

"Not quite," Steve insisted. "We're gaining slightly."

"And using up costly fuel!" Ed argued.

Steve stayed up all night and all

of the next day. That night the pumps sucked the inclosure dry. Water seeping slowly through tarps and trees had gradually frozen, sealing everything tight. What remained turned to ice. Steve put a gang to work removing the remaining ice, then went to bed. He was satisfied with the progress they had made, but he knew the toughest job was ahead.

## CHAPTER XVI

### NO ADMITTANCE

**S**TEVE, still underweight and lacking his usual strength, arrived by tractor at Schooner Bay. A few minutes after he sat down in the bunkhouse mess room, Dorothy Sheldon and Professor Boyer arrived.

"What's going on upriver?" Boyer asked curiously. "Not that it's any of my business," he added.

"We're doing the best we can," Steve answered.

"I heard you'd put up a barricade below the dredge and erected a 'No Admittance' sign."

"That's right," Steve admitted. "It's our way of handling a little problem. In case Clay Bullock has men planted in the region, we don't want them to know what is going on. Barring everyone is easier than trying to find out who's who. We came down to pick up a little equipment we need. Later we'll be glad to have visitors. I'm sure you can realize we have to take this stand. Plenty depends on our success. One more mishap and we won't be able to operate next season."

"More power to you," Boyer said with an enthusiasm he did not feel. "Let me know when the bars are down. Dorothy and I have just about finished our work. The break-up is a long way off, and time



will hang heavy on our hands. You wouldn't permit me to examine the ice man, would you?"

Doctor Zednick had entered just in time to hear the request. "Mr. McGraw realizes by this time you're no anthropologist," he told Boyer hotly. "He'll not permit you to ruin the greatest find—"

"I'm getting tired of your insults, Zednick," Boyer flared.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Steve admonished. "When the time comes I'll give the ice man to the scientist who proves to me he's the most advanced in his work."

"Thank you, McGraw," Zednick said. "The ice man, as you persist in calling him, is as good as mine right now."

Boyer and Dorothy left a few minutes later, without the girl having an opportunity to talk to Steve. As they walked along, Boyer said, "Dorothy, the time has come for you to make up for the blunder you caused when you reported that Steve had staked the North Fork ground. I think he's more than half in love with you."

"I nursed him," Dorothy said quietly, "and he may feel a little romantic. But he'll get back to normal as soon as he's himself."

"I think you're wrong there. It's more than appreciation. With a little playing up on your part, you could have him eating out of your hand. Barrier or no barrier, you're going up there on a visit. You're going to bring that pup to heel and find out just what he expects to do."

"I see," she said thoughtfully, "I'm to make him feel I'm in love with him, win his confidence—"

"Become engaged to him, if necessary," Boyer insisted. "Bullock will remember you when it's all over."

"It's a part I've never played," Dorothy said slowly.

"I think you'll do all right," said Boyer. "Steve McGraw has been too busy trying to lick the frontier to pick up an education on the tricks of the fair sex. You'll find your part easy enough. In a day or two you'll go upstream, slip past the barrier—"

"What'll I give as an excuse?"

"Tell them anything," Boyer said. "Tell them I'm in a romantic mood." He looked at her intently, and Dorothy flushed. "Which wouldn't be far from the truth, you know."

**W**HEN the tractors left Schooner Bay they were hauling the big timbers used as ways when the dredge was built. Loaded on a sled were the powerful jacks used in shifting the dredge.

Men had already cleared away the ice that had gripped the bottom of the dredge. Considerable work had been done inside where water had entered and frozen. The dredge was heavy enough without its load of ice.

The heavy timbers were placed under the dredge, a task that required many days' work. They had only started the job when the man on guard at the barrier sent for Steve. "Miss Sheldon wants to come upstream," he said. "You said nobody was to be passed, and I figured that included girls, too."

"Right," Steve answered. "I'll go down and talk to her." He found her sitting demurely in the watchman's shack. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Yes," Dorothy answered. "Professor Boyer has been getting a little romantic. He's my boss, and I didn't want a scene, either, so I told him I was getting away from it all for a few days." She looked at Steve appealingly. "Of course, if your rule includes me, I'll go back.

I can make Boyer head in, I suppose."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Steve said. "Come along with me. We're doing some interesting things. When you get tired of watching you can go on to the Paddy Creek cabin and make yourself at home. Did you bring anything with you?"

"My sleeping bag and a few clothes on a hand sled," she answered.

"You can have the cabin. Pee Wee and I'll stay in the sled shack," he said.

Steve was glad to have the girl with him again. She was fresh and stimulating. It seemed to him she was not only interested in his work, but pulling for him to overcome the obstacles that kept presenting themselves.

"Here's the idea," he said when they reached the dredge. "We jack up the dredge a few inches, admit water and let it freeze solid. Then, using the ice as a base, we jack it up some more. In time we'll have the dredge level with the river surface and we'll continue the journey."

A week later the watchman again sent word to Steve. The latter went down and found Boyer at the barricade. "Hello, professor," he said cheerfully.

"I came for my secretary," Boyer said. "We had a little quarrel, and I think I ought to apologize. I guess I had a touch of cabin fever."

"I know," Steve said. "But Dorothy can't go back awhile. You see, she knows what's going on, and while I'm sure she wouldn't mention the matter to you, we can't take any chances."

Boyer's pretended indignation was well done. He raved, stormed and said that Steve's action bordered on kidnaping, but Steve didn't weaken. During a lull in the Boy-

er's protest, the canyon echoed with the roar of motors.

"What's that?" Boyer asked, forgetting his anger in his curiosity.

"That, professor," Steve answered, "is the dredge moving upstream again."

"You mean to say that you got it out of the ice? It's actually moving ahead? You got it out of that hole? You—" Boyer was so dumfounded he couldn't talk.

"That's about the size of it," Steve admitted. "Congratulate me, Boyer. Bullock hasn't quite got the upper hand. I'm knocking on wood, understand, but we're out of one bad hole."

"I congratulate you," Boyer said, regaining his poise. "But I still resent your holding my secretary prisoner."

"I'll take the responsibility," Steve answered. "And don't bother to come up again. We'll send her back when I think it's safe."

Boyer had difficulty restraining himself. Then he remembered that an outburst wouldn't be in keeping with his position. He turned and walked slowly down the canyon.

**S**TEVE hitched up the dogs that night and asked Dorothy if she wanted a ride. He wanted to exercise the dogs, he told her.

He drove to the forks without stopping. Some of the time he rode the runners. At others he ran beside the sled. He helped the girl from the sled while the dogs were resting.

"I didn't bring you up here just for the ride," he told her quietly. "I wanted to talk, wanted to forget I'm a cog in a machine called McGraw-Page Metals and you're a cog in Boyer's machine. I wanted to think of the two of us as a couple of human beings. But first I want

to tell you Boyer wanted me to send you down river today. I told him that you knew too much, that you had to stay."

"And he didn't like it?" Dorothy asked.

"Not much," answered Steve. "Do you know, I have the feeling you wouldn't mind staying up here awhile. That it'd be a change."

"I'm glad you didn't send me down, Steve," she said.

"I'm beating around the bush," he said hesitantly, "in trying to tell you how I feel about things." Dorothy smiled faintly. "I know if you gave me your word you wouldn't mention how things are going with us, you'd keep it."

"Now you're getting into something else," she said. "I've made certain agreements with Professor Boyer and his people. I intend to carry out those agreements to the letter."

"Are you trying to tell me, Dorothy," Steve said only half seriously, "that if Boyer's anthropology plans and mine clashed, you'd fight me?"

"To the last ditch, Steve," Dorothy said quietly.

"Good. You're my kind of person," he said. "Always go through with any deal you've made. That's what I'm trying to do for the stockholders and Jerry Page. Pay them dividends and make Jerry's dream come true by producing the tin we need. I don't think tin production and grave digging will clash. But if it does, we'll be good enemies."

"Yes," she answered. She looked at him and realized his thoughts were far from tin and anthropology. Something fine and enduring in his face touched her deeply, and she was prepared for his next words.

"We've been through a lot, Dorothy," Steve said, "and we know our way of life. I know what you can

do in my life, and you know what I can do in yours. Some of the time I'll be in the city, but most of the time I'll be on the frontier. I want you to go along with me. There may be better ways for a man to tell a girl he loves her than just saying 'I love you,' but I don't know them."

"There are no better ways," she answered.

That was all, except her face framed by the fur of her parka hood was very beautiful. Steve told himself it wasn't just the physical beauty of a lovely girl, but the spiritual beauty of a girl whom he loved and who loved him. He kissed her and held her in his arms.

"No matter what happens," he said tenderly, "no matter how wide our trails separate, we'll make them come together again, won't we?"

"Yes, Steve," she answered. Then her face clouded as she remembered that Boyer had once ordered her to make Steve love her. "Well," she thought wearily, "he ought to be satisfied."

**T**HE barrier guard glanced down Black Canyon and yawned. Vapor billowed from his mouth with each breath. He was bored. No one had come up the canyon in days. But this morning, Kulalik, who was there to keep him company as well as warn him of the approach of strangers, suddenly grew interested. He pricked his ears and sniffed. The guard got out his sawed-off shotgun. It was a very effective weapon, but Steve had told him never to use it.

Several minutes passed, then a lone figure came out of the gloom of the bend. The guard put down the shotgun, but he looked surprised. The new arrival was the storekeeper from Schooner Bay.

"I'm softer'n a kettle of mush," the man panted. "Listen, hightail it upriver and tell Steve there's hell to pay. Bullock and a bunch of thugs hit Schooner Bay last night."

"How could they?" the guard asked. "Did they come by plane?"

"No. Hired a arctic tradin' schooner. One with plenty of iron on its bow. It bucked the ice into the bay and landed sleds, boats, tractors and a mountain of grub on the ice. They're gettin' the stuff onto the land. I figger they'll be comin' up the canyon in a day or two."

"You go back to Schooner Bay," the guard advised. "Take your time, and if you can keep 'em from knowin' you come up here, so much the better. Bullock may have an idea he'll catch us by surprise."

The guard hurried to the Paddy Creek cabin and sent a man on to Page City, where Steve was keeping a watchful eye on the dredge, which was now nearing its destination. The guard returned to his post, ready for business if necessary. And it was well he did, for soon he could hear the roar of a tractor coming over the ice.

The barrier was formed of ice blocks and logs five or six inches through and thirty feet long. The guard got behind a mass of ice and waited until the tractor stopped. Two men got out to move the logs.

"Nothin' doin', brother," the guard warned. "This is private property. Didn't they tell you down at Schooner Bay nobody could pass here?"

Clay Bullock, swinging his big shoulders aggressively, got out of the tractor cab. "You can't get away with this," he blustered. "Come here, Chris, and arrest this man." Big Chris unloaded his bulk from a sled load of grub.

"You step over that barrier or touch it," the guard said, "and I'll let you have both barrels. That ought to pretty well take care of things."

"He means it," Big Chris said. He looked at Bullock.

"Where's McGraw?" Bullock demanded.

"I've sent for him," the guard said. He was hoping the storekeeper had managed to slip past without being noticed.

An hour passed, then Ed Page appeared. He had heard a rumor of approaching tractors and had come down to investigate.

"Hello, Page," Bullock said easily. "Talk some sense into this man, will you? We've got claims on the North Fork, and if we don't get our grub in over the ice we're licked."

"That's right," Ed agreed. "What about the receivership business?"

"I'll talk that over with McGraw when he shows up. Now, confidentially," Bullock continued, "you'll admit—" His voice grew low and confident. Ed stepped closer.

"I wouldn't do it, Page," the guard warned, "you're flirtin' with a rattlesnake."

"Don't be foolish," Ed snapped. "Mr. Bullock and I have something to discuss."

"Something I don't want the world to hear," Bullock growled. His hand shot out and grasped Ed's wrist. He jerked him over the barricade, and Big Chris, leaping to lend a hand, caught the other wrist and twisted Ed's arm up behind his back.

Sweat poured down Ed's face, and he turned white from pain.

"Don't worry," Chris said grimly, "I won't break your arm; I'll just pull it out of the shoulder socket." He grinned at Bullock. "Been itchin' to get my hands on one of them

McGraw-Page fellers for a long time. Sorry it ain't McGraw, but this one will do."

Bullock looked at the guard. "How about it? Do we go upriver or does Chris work over your chump boss?"

"He's no boss of mine," the guard answered. "Twist and be damned and I won't lift a hand. He's the cause of all this trouble. If he hadn't got drunk and blabbed, you'd still think you owned the pay ground and you wouldn't be here."

Chris twisted, and Ed alternately begged Bullock and the guard for mercy. "It's no use," Bullock said at length. "You can tear him apart and get nowhere." He stepped nearer the guard. "I can use a man like you. I'll pay you twice what you're getting and give you five hundred dollars bonus to quit right now."

"I'll take no bonus, half the pay and stick with Steve," the guard answered crisply. Bullock shrugged and made no more offers. The group settled down to wait. The men on the load got off and walked around, beating their arms against their sides and stamping their feet to keep circulation moving.

**I**T was three hours before Steve arrived. He came on a dog sled, with Pee Wee riding the runners and the team on the dead run. The dogs had been fresh and in racing form when they started, but they were ready to drop in their tracks at the finish.

In the distance, Steve could hear his own tractors coming downstream with his men and another coming upstream. He wasn't expecting a showdown this early in the game, but he was ready for it.

"Where's your badge and commission, Chris?" he demanded.

"I've got them this time," Chris snarled. "Now call off your guard

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and let us through. We're peaceful men."

"The only time you're peaceful," Steve answered, "is when somebody beats hell out of you."

"Let's start in and make him peaceful," Pee Wee suggested.

"Not yet. Wait'll the others get here," Steve said. "No need of playing Bullock's game." He could see the others move up. He saw Chris give Ed Page's arm a twist, and he noticed Ed's lips trembling like a frightened kid's.

Steve's tractor, pulling a sled black with men, came around a bend, the sled skidding dangerously. They unloaded and grouped behind Steve. Paddy was in this group. He forged his way to the front, then started to go over the barrier. Steve pulled him back.

"Just a minute," he said, "I want to be sure we aren't fighting a deputy marshal and posse. Now let's see your credentials, Chris."

Chris' answer was cut short by the arrival of the downstream tractor. Steve expected Bullock reinforcements, but to his surprise, Professor Boyer and Dr. Zednick jumped off the tractor.

"Well," Steve exclaimed, "when did you fellows start billing and cooing?"

Dr. Zednick snorted. "Necessity makes strange bedfellows."

"We were afraid we'd get a short shift if you miners started fighting," Boyer explained. "So we got together."

"We ask permission to take the remainder of our outfit through," Zednick said. "My people, hearing that a trading schooner with power for ice breaking was coming to the bay, sent me additional supplies. Mr. Bullock very kindly offered to bring them."

"And he brought men and sup-

plies for me, too," Boyer said. "His contribution to science—"

"Forget it," Bullock said. "I had the space and was glad to accommodate you. It's too bad McGraw isn't accommodating."

"All right, go ahead," Steve agreed. Pee Wee and Paddy removed the logs. They kept their eyes on the enemy, ready to meet any attack. Too ready, in fact. Steve had to calm them twice.

The tractor, dragging sleds loaded with supplies, snorted by. At that precise moment, Big Chris, evidently believing Bullock would rush the opening, momentarily relaxed his grasp on Ed as he set himself. Ed jerked free and fairly soared over the barrier. Big Chris leaped the barrier, and Pee Wee's fist caught him flush on the jaw. It staggered him, but he didn't go down.

"Wait a minute!" Bullock roared. "Chris! Come here! Obey orders, blast it!"

"Pee Wee! You hair-trigger mug, stop it!" Steve's half-joking reprimand checked Pee Wee.

"I'm not ready for the showdown, McGraw," Bullock said. "We'll test this later. I want plenty of John Law to back my hand."

"You're yellow," jeered a McGraw man.

"That'll do," Steve warned.

"Turn the tractor around," Bullock ordered. In sullen silence, his men returned, climbed on the loaded sleds, and began lighting pipes and cigarettes. The tractor snorted, turned and moved slowly down river.

"Yellow," the McGraw man repeated.

"No," Steve answered, "you're dead wrong. Bullock doesn't hire yellow men. Remember, he's smart, and he knows it's important to win only one battle—the last. He's up to something. We're going to shift

the barrier closer to Paddy Creek cabin. There's a narrower spot that's easier to defend, and help can get to the guards quicker. I want to thank you boys for keeping cool and obeying orders."

Steve put on extra guards at the new barrier and sent the others away to rest up. Late that night the tractor and empty sleds came back from Page City. Boyer and the driver were alone.

"Did you murder Dr. Zednick?" Steve inquired.

"I'm saving that until later," Boyer answered, laughing. "Zednick and his men are watchin' the supplies. We're going back after another load."

"Another?" Steve asked.

"Yes," Boyer answered. "The last!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### AN EARLY BREAK-UP

STEVE, Pee Wee and Paddy hooked empty sleds onto their fastest tractor and followed Boyer down to Schooner Bay. The three carried a sawed-off shotgun, rifle, and six-guns.

"Here's a swell chance for Big Chris to flash his badge," Steve said, "if he's got one."

The Brock-Bullock crowd was shifting a ton of supplies from the beach to the river bank. Bullock was surprised at Steve's unexpected appearance, but he made no move. Steve's men loaded their few remaining supplies onto the sleds, left enough to last the storekeeper until the first steamer arrived, then started back.

"We'll follow you," Boyer said.

The return was made without incident. They unloaded one sled at Paddy Creek cabin, then Steve took over the tractor and drove away while the others ate. When they

had finished he was back again, and there was a very small, square load on the sled. "Paddy and Pee Wee, I can use you," he said.

"You'd better take some more of us," a man urged. "I hear Bullock's tractors comin' again."

"Listen, you fighting fool," Steve said, "save it for later on."

Pee Wee and Paddy climbed aboard, and Steve drove the tractor at top speed to the barricade. They could hear the Bullock tractors coming. "They're wide open," Pee Wee said, "and draggin' the limit load. I can tell by their exhausts."

"One's ahead, two are quite a way behind," Steve said. "Boyer hasn't passed yet."

Boyer came around the turn a few minutes later. He stopped on Steve's signal.

"What've you got on the sleds?" Steve demanded.

"Cases of canned goods," Boyer answered. "Tools for my men, and a few odds and ends."

Steve brought the butt of the shotgun down on a bulge in a tarp and a man howled. "You didn't mention having a phonograph with a record on," Steve said softly.

"If there's a man hiding in that load, it's a surprise to me," Boyer shouted. He ran back, but Steve made him return to the tractor.

"Come out of there," Steve ordered. "Hands up." He stepped back and a Bullock man crawled out. "Now unlash that load." The man obeyed, revealing ten men crouched on the last sled. A framework supporting the tarp gave it the appearance of a well-lashed load of canned goods.

Boyer, with a show of indignation, lighted into them. "You threw off food I'll need and hid on my sled," he shouted. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Very simple, professor," Steve answered. "The boys had an idea they'd jump us from behind while Bullock and the others kept us busy in front. Go on, and don't stop." He grinned at the men as Boyer disappeared. "A fine lot of suckers you turned out to be. You don't suppose we weren't expecting some such trick. Turn around and get going."

**F**ACED with a sawed-off shotgun, the men obeyed. The moment they were out of sight, Steve and his companions began digging holes in the ice. He removed cases of powder from his load, inserted fuses in several sticks, loaded the holes and covered the powder with ice and snow, then tramped it down.

The three lighted the fuses, hopped onto the tractor and rode to the nearest bend, a hundred yards away. It was midday and fairly light in this part of the canyon. Gray smoke rolled from the fuses. It was still rolling when Bullock's tractor came around a bend. He saw the smoke and knew instantly what was happening. A few seconds later the blasts went off, almost as one. Ice filled the air, water geysered up, then fragments tumbled back and smoke slowly drifted up the canyon.

Bullock and his men left their tractors and came over the ice. A yawning hole, a hundred feet wide and extending from wall to wall, separated the factions. Steve looked at the hole, choked with shattered ice, then at the men, then beyond. He noticed for the first time that sheet steel had been attached to the tractor cabs. Bullock had intended coming through regardless of shotguns.

Steve lighted a cigarette, watching the baffled expressions on the

faces of the Bullock men. It was slowly dawning on them just what this meant. It was still cold enough for the surface to glaze over, but the ice would never be thick enough to support a tractor.

"You're building up one hell of a debt, McGraw," Bullock said at last. "What with selling stock unlawfully, resisting officers, and dynamiting river ice, you're going to be in the pen a long time."

"It had to be done, Bullock," Steve said. "You should look upon this as a beautiful compliment. It indicates I have such a wholesale respect for your dirty fighting that I'm trying to head it off. You're right. I've troubles enough delivering tin as per contract without taking you on, too."

Bullock made no answer. He stared long and hard at the ice, as if speculating on means of getting across, then he started to look at the canyon rim, but changed his mind.

"It's winning the last battle that counts, boys," he said finally. "Let's go back."

Steve listened until the roar of the tractors had diminished, then he went back to Paddy Creek Canyon. The men there swarmed around. "What happened?" they asked. "We heard a blast."

"What you heard," Steve answered, "was an early break-up."

**S**TEVE left two men to guard the break in case it froze thick enough to bear a man's weight. He didn't want the Bullock crowd sifting across and scattering in the back country. All the others moved to Page City in the next two days. The dredge passed the small settlement and moved on to the south side of the South Fork.

Steve opened a case of whiskey and told the boys to use their own



judgment by way of celebration. Within an hour their judgment was sound or unsound, depending on the viewpoint. Not a quartet, but a male chorus, sang "Sweet Adeline" and "Little Liza Jane" as they had never been sung before.

Voices carried far on the cold, still air and presently Dorothy stood in the doorway of her shack, listening. Boyer came out of his cabin.

"A lot of fine-feathered cocks are crowing too soon," he observed. "And we know it, don't we?"

"That's the way it usually works out," the girl answered. "But what can Bullock do now? He's stopped dead in the canyon, and in a few weeks it will be white water."

"I don't know what he'll do," Boyer answered, "but I know he's one man who's never stopped dead. Damn it all, if Steve McGraw hadn't looked into that sled load we'd be sitting pretty right now."

"But Steve did," the girl said, "and he'd have been much dumber than I think he is if he'd let you get away with anything like that."

The male chorus stopped while the members argued over the next number. Pee Wee's voice booming like a rapids, came clear and sharp, "Hey, Ed, none of this sissy drinkin'. Drink 'er straight, like a man. Or if you must have water, drink the water first. Bottoms up, boys!" A period of silence ensued, followed by what appeared to be violent coughing. Then there was a burst of laughter, and Pee Wee bellowed, "Fine work, Ed. We'll make a man out of you yet."

Hours later, the voices had been reduced to three. Dorothy, growing curious, made her way down to the South Fork, then walked along the ice for some distance. On the highest part of the dredge she saw three figures silhouetted against the sky,

singing to the moon. "The survivors," she said softly. "Steve, Paddy and Pee Wee."

Even they faded before dawn, and the silence on the South Fork was impressive for the next twelve hours. Steve was the first up, followed by Ed, who muttered and held pieces of ice to his head.

"I'm dying of thirst, Steve," he complained. "I thought men only died of thirst on the desert."

"Here's an eye-opener," Steve said, pouring him a small drink. "Toss it off. Well, boys, the party is over. We start hitting the ball again."

Everyone in the region watched the days lengthen, the sun grow warmer and winter gradually fade. The creeks began gathering melting snow and spilling the water into the forks. It spread, crusted over at night and made dangerous overflows. Dr. Zednick formed the habit of following Steve about and Pee Wee nicknamed the serious, explosive man Shadow. In time, Boyer followed Zednick, explaining that if Steve uncovered any anthropological evidence of the frontier that was once dark, he wanted to be in on it.

Steve explained that he was checking over the ground once more in order to be ready to work that which thawed first. The break-up was near when a snowslide slipped from a bank, dragging hundreds of tons of dirt with it and exposing an unusual stratum.

Dr. Zednick stood stock-still, gasped and stared. He said something Pee Wee didn't catch and stepped closer, then he turned and glanced sharply at Boyer. Pee Wee caught Steve's arm and whispered, "Wait, your shadow's just spotted somethin' in them layers of dirt. He's tremblin' like a bird dog on a point. He called it some kind of a

word that sounded as if it meant things a million years old."

**D**R. ZEDNICK wiped his forehead, put on a pair of glasses and continued to look at the stratum in a fascinated manner.

"He's goin' to start purrin' in a minute," Paddy whispered. "Danged if I can see anything but dirt, stones and somethin' that looks like a tin nugget."

Suddenly Dr. Zednick's attitude changed. He whirled, scowled at Boyer, then his eyes narrowed. "Bah!" he snorted. "Bah!"

"Black sheep, have you any wool?" Paddy chuckled. "This is goin' to be good. A fight between two sissy anthro . . . anthrop . . . grave-diggers."

"Fraud! Impostor!" Zednick raged. "So you're an anthropologist, Boyer?"

"Who're you talking to?" Boyer demanded.

"You!" Zednick shouted. "One of the greatest discoveries in its field in years, and you don't even see it. And all the time you've been trying to cut in ahead of me. Amateur! You might have ruined an important discovery with your blundering!" The very thought seemed to make him white with rage.

"Why, damn you!" Boyer shouted. "Calling me a fraud!" He looked at the stratum, but could see nothing, and he knew he was trapped. But he decided to bluff it through. He made his way through the mass of snow and muck to the stratum, saw a piece of fossilized bone protruding, and started to heave away on it.

Zednick took off his glasses and carefully tucked them into his pocket. He walked over to Boyer. "Drop that!" he said thickly. "Drop it!"

Boyer whirled and let fly with his fist. Zednick ducked the blow, but the second one caught him squarely on the nose. Then they were at it. Sometimes they were in the mud, rolling over, sometimes standing up. Zednick was the smaller, lighter and older of the two, but his fury offset Boyer's physical advantage. He never let Boyer get set, and presently Boyer began retreating. He looked around wildly for a club.

It was then that Pee Wee stepped in. "Fight fair, you," he ordered. "I'm refereein' this brawl."

"Nobody asked you to," Boyer snarled.

"I'm asking you now," Zednick shouted. He knocked Boyer down and the latter got up again. Zednick had found a combination that worked. "Remember your promise," he yelled at Steve. "You said if I showed this man to be a fraud I'd be given the ice man." He made the mistake of looking at Steve, and Boyer nailed him.

Zednick went down, and Boyer started to kick him in the stomach. Pee Wee shoved him back. Zednick got up and went after Boyer. Both were tiring, and their punches lacked steam. But Boyer was discouraged and Zednick wasn't. Then Boyer went down and didn't get up!

"Anthropologist! Fighter! Bah!" Zednick panted. His knees buckled, but he managed to remain upright until he found a rock to sit on.

"The winner and still champion," Steve shouted, "and the owner of the ice man—Raw Meat Zednick."

Then Steve turned to Boyer, who was getting up slowly. "You're a fake, Boyer," he said sternly. "I'm sure of that now, thanks to Dr. Zednick. Paddy, take this cuss into the brush where he can't be seen. If he opens his mouth, knock him cold. Dr. Zednick, you get out of sight.

Pee Wee, leg it up to Boyer's headquarters, mobilize his grave diggers and tell 'em their boss has made a great discovery. We'll find out whether they're anthropologists or not."

Everyone complied with enthusiasm. Boyer's men, eyes alert for danger, muscles tense, followed Pee Wee to the slide.

"All right, boys," Steve said, "here's a great discovery—the story of this country when it was the dark frontier. Hop to it, get your specimens before another slide comes down and covers things up."

**M**CGRAW-PAGE men had followed the Boyer group down, and were standing around, trying to decide what was going on. The Boyer men approached the slide and studied the dirt, asked questions, answered them and tried to carry out a bluff.

"Here's tin nuggets," one said when the silence grew painful. It was the only reaction.

"It's no use, boys," Steve said, "you aren't up to it. But I admire you for trying. Paddy, bring the professor here." When Boyer was brought up, Steve continued, "You're all wearing the Brock-Bullock brand. Get your things and start hoofing it down the river."

"Hold on," Boyer protested hotly. "You can't do that. We can't get across the place you blew up and—"

"We'll get you over that," Steve told him. "The rest of the ice is safe. A little mushy in spots, maybe, but in better shape than when we made it up here."

The McGraw-Page men herded the others back to their cabins and shacks and gave them time to pack up personal belongings, a week's grub, and sleeping bags. Dorothy Sheldon came out in the midst of

it. "What's wrong, Steve?" she asked.

"Cleaning out the Brock-Bullock bunch," Steve said briefly. "The professor is going, and I suppose his secretary had better go along, too."

She looked at him quietly, but made no protest.

"Aw, Steve, let her stay if she wants to," Pee Wee pleaded.

"No dice, Pee Wee," Steve said. "She's been in the thick of this with the others."

"You're right there," Dorothy told him in a low tone. "You'd be astonished if you knew just how much I've been in all this, in more ways than one. Some day— Oh, well." She shrugged and turned away.

"Good-by," Steve said. For a moment he almost faltered. Then he put personal feelings aside as he had done from the beginning. "You're going down on a tractor," he informed the waiting men. "Pile on." He waved his hand toward the sleds.

The tractor stopped at Paddy Creek, picked up several long planks, then continued on to the break in the ice. Steve thrust the planks over the spots where the ice seemed thickest, then tested them. They held up, but he ran a hand rope across as an added precaution.

Grasping the rope, the Bullock men and Dorothy crossed the break one at a time. They gathered on the lower side, picked up their belongings and started off. The rest of the way was a matter of hiking. Steve waited until they were out of sight, then he picked up the planks. "That's that," he said. "But it isn't the end of the fight."

"It kind o' hurts," Pee Wee said, "to think Dorothy was a spy all the time. I always figured she was one of us. I told her plenty."

"So did I," Paddy said. "But

Steve kept his trap closed, I'll bet you."

"No, not always," Steve said quietly. "Now that I look back, there were times when it seemed I was ready to open it and Dorothy closed it for me."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### ICE JAM

**D**R. ZEDNICK was apologetic when Steve and the others returned to Page City. "I made a regular savage of myself," he said. "I don't know why I lost my temper so completely."

"Don't worry about it," Pee Wee told him. "I've a new respect for college doctors. You certainly showed Boyer up. Me and Steve don't know anything of the fine points of your work. There was times when he didn't ring true, but we didn't know he was puttin' over a Bullock trick. He must've been the one who dug the ice pit for the dredge."

"Who else?" Steve asked. "Dr. Zednick, we'll show our appreciation by calling you if we see anything that looks like dark-frontier evidence. Naturally, the most important thing to us is to mine, but we'll try to co-operate with you as much as we can."

The anthropologist thanked him profusely. Then Steve gathered his force together.

"There's work to be done," he told them, "between now and the next freeze-up."

Where the sun beat down hard near the bench the ground was thawing steadily. Some time in the distant future this would be dredging ground and Steve was anxious to clear away the portion above high-water level as soon as possible.

The creek which he had explored the previous summer was frozen to

the gravel, but melting snow water was tumbling over the falls and running over the surface. That indicated that plenty of water was in the lake above the falls. Steve's men had installed a pipe line from the lake, carried it along the bluff above the bench, then dropped it to the bench proper.

Steve ordered a monitor connected to the pipe line and the water turned on. The results brought broad grins to the faces of Steve, Pee Wee, and the Alaskan miners they had included in their gang.

A jet of water two hundred feet long shot from the nozzle and knocked sod, dirt and small stones into the air. A skilled man, handling the stream, could undermine small boulders and keep them moving.

The men moved the stream slowly, clearing everything down to the frost line and knocking out protruding objects. The dirt, carried by the flood, flowed into the sluice boxes and spilled onto the river ice.

Disposal of the tailings brought a smile to Steve's face. Sometimes the costs of tailing disposal eats deeply into the profits. Here, everything would be carried down to Schooner Bay with each break-up and during the high-water season.

Men moved slowly along the sluice boxes, dislodging boulders that had jammed. Dr. Zednick was working on the slope exposed by the slide. He had found part of a mastodon bone and was excavating in the hope of finding the remainder of the skeleton.

Zednick had converted a couple of fuel-oil drums into boilers and was thawing ground. He was so absorbed in his task that Steve had to remind him he had better shift food for several days from Page City to the scene of operations.

"When the break-up comes," Steve warned, "we won't be able to cross the stream for several days. When things quiet down I'll build a bridge."

**S**TEVE held clean-ups frequently, sacking the tin nuggets and caching them well above high-water mark. It was necessary to shift the monitor often, for the ground had thawed but a few inches. The pipe line was extended and carried close to the bluff, but on the bench. This brought it under Zednick's operation.

"Cover it up," Steve said. "Don't try to keep the pipe clear. I doubt if we move the line unless we make a big shift and run out of pipe."

There was a stub nearby fitted with a valve, and Zednick kept this clear of muck. And it was well that he did so. The climax Steve had felt was certain to take place was rapidly approaching. So far as he knew, every man in the vicinity was a hundred percent loyal. He had even made quiet tests of Zednick's men. There was no doubt of it. Every man was an experienced anthropologist enthusiastic about Zednick and his work.

Steve made a quick trip down to Paddy Creek cabin and found no evidence of recent visits. He swung over creeks ready to go out and found nothing to arouse his suspicions. He returned to Page City, wading through water in the upper canyon. "It must be plain nerves," he told himself ruefully.

Paddy had Ed on the monitor nozzle when Steve arrived on the job. It was tough work, even though the nozzle moved on a ball-bearing assembly. The pressure had a tendency to whip the nozzle about.

"We've just about stripped this ground," Paddy reported. "What'll we do? Make another shift, or wait

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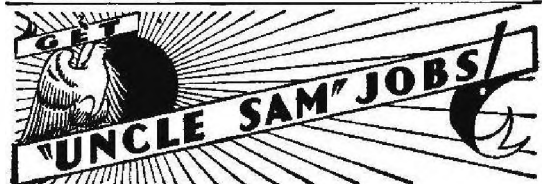
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still the break-up is over and we know where we stand?"

"Wait! It won't be long now. Warm winds and rains will move the ice," Steve predicted. "How much tin have we got?"

"A ton," Paddy reported. "Now if that was only gold."

"There's more tin, though," Steve consoled him. "Turn the stream into that bluff just below the high part of the bench. We'll prospect the ground afterward and see what it's got."

The stream hit the bench well down, cut a trench into the frost line, then moved slowly upward. Presently a mass tumbled. Ed kept the water eating into the mass.

"Let me have it," Steve said. He had hydraulicked thousands of cubic yards before he was twenty and had learned a few tricks. He kept large masses moving. Everything fell away, leaving a sheer wall of frozen gravel a hundred feet high. Then Steve saw something curved and dark protruding from the wall and turned the stream aside.

"Get Zednick!" Steve yelled. "Hop! Ed! Don't stand there gaping!"

"You're gaping, too," Ed snapped, showing more spirit than Steve had seen in him in a long time.

Water had stopped running by the time Zednick and his men came panting up. There were pools, masses of muck and muddy boulders scattered all the way to the sluice boxes. Several tin nuggets as large as a man's head were visible, but none of the scientists paid the metal the slightest attention.

"Mastodon tusk," Zednick said. "And in fine state of preservation." He could hardly talk. "A ladder, boys. Hurry."

"The thing's been there thousands of years," Pee Wee observed, "and now you fellers are in a hurry."

The ladder was brought and Zednick climbed up. "No doubt of it,"

he said. "I wonder if in that ice and gravel we'll find a perfectly preserved mastodon. I'm afraid even to dream it."

"According to legend," Steve said, "one came down. An ice jam, turning the river, might have washed out the bank and released it. As it did the ice man."

"We shift our operations here," Zednick declared. "The other can wait."

**S**TEVE left Zednick and his men working on the mastodon and checked on Power Creek. An ice jam had formed in the canyon above the falls, and he decided to cash in on it. A few cases of powder started a slide that almost filled the canyon. The intake to his water supply was beyond the slide, and unless the run-off was too great and water poured over the slide, washing it out, he was assured of a season's water supply.

"Things are goin' pretty slick," Pee Wee said. "Zednick's got his break. You've got yours in all the water you need. In a few days Power Creek ice will go out, then you can put the dredge to work. Hadn't we better move it onto the job?"

"No," Steve answered. "We'll leave it where it is until after the break-up." They had left the dredge on the south side of the South Fork on a low bench a quarter mile from Power Creek. There were no signs that water had ever reached that level in recent years, and Steve felt it was safe.

They did turn water into the powerhouse turbines, and the electrician who had installed the small plant during the winter made his first practical tests. For the first time electric lights glowed on the dark frontier.

The electrician was as interested and enthusiastic as the rest of them. "Everything O. K.," he announced. "Now all we need is the break-up, and then we can clean up, and I ain't tryin' to be funny." Steve nodded and went outside.

"Boss seems down in the dumps," the electrician remarked. "Seems like he's fearin' the worst. I reckon he misses Dorothy Sheldon."

"He sure is on edge," Pee Wee agreed. But he wasn't sure Dorothy was responsible. Steve appreciated Bullock's uncanny ability to snatch an eleventh-hour victory, and he had discussed the matter with Pee Wee many times of late. The latter knew Steve's chief concern was the possible loophole he might have failed to plug.

The flow of water over the South Fork had increased during their inspection. Several very small creeks emptying into Power Creek were now flooding its ice to a depth of several inches, and Steve concluded it was no longer safe to use the South Fork ice in reaching Page City.

Everyone ate in the tent cook-house they had erected near the monitor. After the evening meal they sat around and listened to the gradually increasing mutter of the water.

"By morning," Steve predicted, "it'll be a roar."

After months of dead silence the sound of water was welcome, but it awakened them at four the following morning. The ice was tumbling through the South Fork, and those in Page City signaled that the North Fork ice was beginning to go out, too.

Everyone dressed, wolfed down something to eat, drank hot coffee and hurried down to the river bank. To those who hadn't seen it it was

a stirring sight. To those who had, it was almost as thrilling.

"River's just getting warmed up to the subject," Steve said. "In a couple of hours you'll see real action."

Even Dr. Zednick had left his beloved mastodon and was staring, fascinated by the spectacle. Paddy started to climb down the bank, but Steve grabbed him by the collar and hauled him back again. "Trying to commit suicide?" he demanded.

"I saw a piece of tree," Paddy said, "and it had ax marks on it."

"How could it?"

"That's just what I'm wonderin'," Paddy declared. "There's another hunk of wood. It's gone! Sucked under!" They watched, and presently saw splinters. Trees didn't last long with the ice grinding away.

The river was jammed now, the water high, and the ice piling up. Slabs fifty feet in diameter turned slowly and on edge like three-foot-thick cartwheels. Some would jam and break off, others would move on, shattering smaller slabs. The roar was tremendous, and men shouted to make themselves heard.

**A** CROSS the fork, those in Page City had lined the bank and were watching. The volume increased until some of the slabs were higher than the bank itself. They swept along, striking the edge of the bank, ripping off rocks and blocks of half-frozen sod and gravel.

Paddy suddenly jumped down, leaped to a cake and gave a mighty heave. Both hands were clutching the stub of a limb. The ice shifted and he brought out a two-foot length of tree, the upper portion chewed to a pulp by the ice, the lower showing ax marks.

He struggled to the bank with it, and Pee Wee lifted him up.

"No doubt of it," Steve said. "They're ax marks. If this were the North Fork and the wood older, I'd say it was a souvenir of Jerry Page and Sam Taft's operations. But the wood is freshly cut. Someone is up that canyon."

"Maybe a trapper over from the upper country," Zednick suggested. "We know no one passed through here."

The day slipped by before they knew it. Everyone turned in late, only to be awakened at two o'clock by a diminishing in the grind of ice. Steve and Pee Wee ran down. The river was dropping rapidly. Ice was stranding everywhere. An hour later the flow increased until the banks almost overflowed.

They returned to bed, but the silence came again at five o'clock. Water in the South Fork was a tenth of normal, the largest flow coming from Power Creek.

"There's a jam up the canyon," Pee Wee declared, "and it's a honey to stop the river like that."

"We've got to break it," Steve declared. "How much powder have we left?"

"Plenty. We used some to blast the ice downstream," Pee Wee answered. "If we can shatter the key ice in the jam, pressure will do the rest. It dropped down to freezing last night, which means it's colder higher up. That should tighten up the run-off and help us that much."

Steve called his men together and asked for volunteers. "I'm not ordering any man into that canyon," he said. "No married men can go, either. If the ice let's go, it's curtains, no need of kidding ourselves." He looked at Ed, but the man would not meet his eyes.

There were plenty of volunteers, however. Steve led the way to the powder cache. When each was



loaded, he outlined his plan of action. "It'll be a case of crawling into holes and out again most of the time," he explained. "Again, we can jump from slab to slab. But it's risky business. And watch out for small pieces that'll drop you into the water. We'll keep pretty well apart, just in case somebody slips and his powder goes off."

"Make Ed go," Pee Wee urged.

"He might fold up on us. Pass out from fright," Steve explained. "Then we'd have to pack him out. I can't take that chance."

"I'm glad his old man isn't here to see it," Pee Wee said. "There was a man I'd go to hell for."

"And maybe that's just what you're doing, Pee Wee," Steve said. The final plan of action was clear in his own mind. He would check on the time consumed going up and allow that much for the return. He would send the others out, and when the time had nearly elapsed, he would light the fuse and try to race back before the ice let go.

They plodded steadily and in single file a short distance, and suddenly a rifle cracked too close at hand for comfort. Steve stopped dead in his tracks as the bullet kicked up the muck a couple of yards ahead of him.

"I got him spotted," Pee Wee said in a low voice. "He's up there in the first tunnel Zednick drove into the bluff."

STEVE turned and saw a man's face in the vague light. He noticed the man had built a protective mound of rocks across the tunnel mouth. Looking the other way, Steve realized the man commanded the canyon mouth. He turned his gaze back to the man again.

"McGraw, you're in a jackpot," the man shouted. "The first man startin' up that canyon gets a .30-30 bullet in the dynamite he's carryin'.

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We had one hell of a time jammin' that ice, but there she is. Just keep your shirts on, gents, and it'll break of its own accord—when there's enough water behind it."

Pee Wee looked at the tunnel curiously. "Two or three guys up there could hold off an army. You can't attack 'em from in front or behind, or any other way. And if we don't get rid of 'em and hurry up and blow the dam when she does let go—" He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

They all knew what would happen when the jam finally let go. A wall of water a hundred feet high and perhaps several miles long would be released. And as the flood burst from the canyon mouth it would hurl thousands of tons of ice at everything in its path. Dredge, townsite, monitors, and in fact everything not carried to high points would be lost.

Looking across to Page City, Steve could see that the men over there had already sized up the situation. They were beginning to move food and supplies to higher ground.

"The first thing they're takin' is them skin boats you brought up, Steve," Pee Wee said. "Figger we'll need 'em to get out of the country after the flood."

Steve didn't hear. He was admitting to himself, reluctantly, that his men could neither get up the canyon, nor shoot the Bullock men in the tunnel.

"You know you're licked," the man jeered, waving the rifle barrel back and forth. "Better make up your mind what you're goin' to do next."

"I have," Steve answered.

*What will happen to Steve and his men when the ice jam breaks? Will Steve be able to fulfill his contract? Has Dorothy Sheldon left the Dark River country? Don't miss the final installment of this gripping serial in next week's issue.*

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