

Cover

Publisher's Page

Thirteen western stories by thirteen different authors appearing in 11 different magazines.

I think western stories can be divided into two groups, stories about the west and stories of action and sudden death. I've tried to bring a mix of both kinds to this collection.

1 Desert Dust by Hapsburg Liebe. Ace-High Dec. 18, 1932. Art: Delano Words: 5400.

Two ancient gunmen hoists a greedy man by his own petard.

2 A Six-gun Showdown By Carl Rogers. Ace High, Nov. 3 1932. Art: unsigned. Words: 5000.

How do you fight a crooked gambler who faster on the draw than you

3 The Tameless of the Wild West by William H. Greene. The Argosy, Feb. 1912. Art: unsigned. Words: 2580.

Too many dime novels makes one unprepared for the real west,

4 Night Raid by Ernest Haycox. Frontier Stories, Apr, 1929. Art: "W. M. A" Words: 19,500.

Wandering Cowboys Joe Breedlove and Indigo are mixed up with some rustlers

5 Dandy Boy and the Hon'able Mawde by Annesley Burrowes. Short Stories, April, 1916. Art: none. Words: 6500.

The course of love takes an odd detour through a rodeo.

6 Riders of the Rain by Allan R. Bosworth. Popular Western Nov.1941. Art: unsigned. Stories; 6000.

A sudden rainstorm brings star-crossed lovers into violent confrontation with bank robbers.

7 The Card on the Beam by Nevil G. Henshaw. Railroad Man's June 1910. Art: "SXC". Words: 4100.

Who would expect a western in Railroad Man's. A cowboy holding a winning hand for a big pot has an expected encounter on the way home.
8 Tascosa Partners by Robert Moore Williams, Mammoth Westerns, Dec. 1946. Art: Hinton? Words: 6500.

Going it alone may be OK sometimes but there's a reason men have partners.

9 When Brother Are Men by Wayne D. Overholser. Popular Western, Nov. 1941. Art: Parkhurst. Words: 5600.

Two brothers chase after the same girl but the girl has plans of her own.
10 The Riders of Ramapo Pass by Dean L. Heffernan. All-Story Weekly, Dec. 20, 1919. Art: None. Words: 13,900.

Bringing justice to a lawless gold town.

11 The Renegade of Painted Mesa By Ruth Anderson. Thrilling Ranch, Nov. 1933. Art: Amos Sewell. Words: 5200.

Ranch Romance was the last pulp, surviving into the 1970s, There is no stories from Ranch Romance this time but Thrilling Ranch was a competitor. About a woman who knew her man and stands by him for better or worse,

12 The Running of Silver River by C. F. Bourke. Munsey's Magazine. Mar 1908, F. X. Chamberlain. Words: 3400.

Another unlikely source for a western tale. Someone has stolen the water from a river and an engineer is determined to find out why.

13 Desert Drift by John Briggs Short Stories, Oct. 1, 1923. Art: unsigned. Words: 5200.

Prince Yuen Ming Chu has spent 30 years in the American desert searching for a stolen cultural icon and his not about to let a couple drifters take it from him.

total 89,000 words

Hopefully there will be something for everyone.

About Beb Books

Beb Books is dedicated to really, really cheap reprints of early pulp fiction.

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Desert Dust by Hapsburg Liebe.



DESERT DUST

By Hapsburg Liebe

It isn't every prospector who has a heart of gold. And it isn't every old-timer who can handle a six-gun like either Henry or Landsinger could. But then not many towns can boast of a "Dogtown" Granby. ... Somehow, Mesquit Bend enjoyed the combination.

THEY were scraggly-bearded and squint-eyed, and tanned to the hue of weathered copper, this pair of ancient prospectors. Joshua Landsinger was tall and exceedingly gaunt, a person of few words, as a general thing; "Doodlebug" Henry was very small and thin, and usually very garrulous. Each was ambidextrous and in his young manhood had been a double-gunned daredevil. Wized little Henry remembered answering to the far-flung nickname, "Cimarron Kid." Landsinger still dreamed of wild old days when the dark-skinned hombres of the Border had alluded to him fearsomely as "El Halcon," the Hawk.

The hard-bitten ex-terror of the Cimarron country rode to Mesquit Bend for supplies, and the equally hard-bitten Landsinger began to count the hours

until his partner's return. In the month just passed they'd been lucky in their never-ending hunt for the precious yellow. Old Joshua now cherished visions of something fancy in the line of edibles. Bacon and beans, sourdough biscuit and black coffee straight for a year or so fag the appetite. The tall *viejo* looked forward to tinned apricots.

Henry should have been back in mid-afternoon of the second day, even considering the set, plodding gait of the led pack mule. When the red-hot desert sun had gone down and there was yet no crawling speck on the horizon, Joshua Landsinger scented calamity. Perhaps it was because he was so lonesome without Doodlebug. They'd been partners for upwards of thirty years. Doodlebug, he told himself, might have fallen sick and died, or he might have been robbed, or killed, or both. Landsinger caught his raw-boned horse and saddled it, filled his saddle canteen, dug out another old six-gun and belt of cartridges and buckled them on. Then he mounted and rode toward Mesquit Bend to investigate.

He rode most of the night, reaching town shortly before daybreak. The dusty, stony streets were deserted. Nowhere did he see a light. He tied the rein of his weary horse to a hitch-rack in front of the one big saloon and sat down on the warped wooden sidewalk to await some sign of life. Dog-tired, he stretched himself out before the main entrance of the saloon and soon went to sleep in spite of his anxiety on Henry's account.

The toe of a boot in his gaunt ribs woke him more than an hour later. It hurt, and there certainly was no excuse for it. Landsinger rose with both hands full of worn black-walnut and steel that glinted in the early sunlight. The heavily built and dark, colorfully-garbed man who had delivered the brutal kick was the saloon keeper. Quickly he did another unwise thing. Had he known that Joshua Landsinger was more dangerous than heated dynamite-- but he didn't know.

"Why, you old tarantula!" he bit out, and went to an armpit holster for a pretty silver-mounted thirty-eight.

Landsinger's right-hand forty-five belched flame and lead and smoke to the accompaniment of a thunderous roar, and the owner of the saloon dropped like a pole-axed beef. Not a word had passed the lips of the grizzled

ancient. Doodlebug Henry was for the moment relegated to the limbo of the forgotten. Out of the corners of his squinted eyes old Joshua saw that men were running toward him. He sprang for his horse and was half in the saddle when Sheriff Abner Telford and a deputy each seized him by an arm and dragged him back to his feet in the street dust. He had no strength to waste in resistance that must prove futile. He growled:

"Take it easy, Ab. Don't git over-het. It skassly pays."

With their free hands the officers of the law snatched away his guns. The sheriff was elderly, lean, and had a set look of worryment on his face.

He knew the pair of prospectors a little--as well, perhaps, as anybody knew them. He began: "You danged old pepper-pod, what got into you, anyhow?"

Landsinger indicated the inert figure on the warped sidewalk boards nearby, and answered: "That polecat kicked me and then started to fix to go for his weepion, Ab."

Sheriff Telford noted that the saloonkeeper's silver-mounted thirty-eight was still in its holster, and he ran his gaze over the thin, early crowd.

"Anybody see it done?"

There were no witnesses, evidently. Landsinger suffered himself to be led down the street and to the squat jail building, in a front corner of which the Mesquit Bend sheriff had his office.

"I'll do what I can for you, old-timer," Telford said, as he unlocked and opened a cell door of iron latticework.

The new prisoner thought again of Doodlebug Henry. He stepped across the gloomy threshold and drew up short, staring as though at a ghost. On a narrow bed in a corner of that same cell Doodlebug sat blinking at him!

"You--hod-dang you!" suddenly erupted old Joshua. "You bander-shanked, pigeon-toed, fiddle-bellied packrat! You come to town after s'plies, git on a rampage and gamble all of our grub-stake away! Can you think o' one

single, solitary reason why I ortn't to choke hell plum' square out o' you, you fiddle-bellied packrat?"

On the other side of the iron door, Abner Telford heard, frowned, and lingered. Old Joshua had jumped at a conclusion. But his guess wasn't so poor, at that.

"Choke me if you wants to, Joshaway," meekly replied Doodlebug, one clawlike hand caressing his thinly-bearded chin. "But afore you does it, I craves to explain. Joshaway, I ort to had better sense, but apparently I didn't have. Some cowpoke, he gimme a long drink, and she mellered me up a heap, and I got to thinkin' about you in yore pore rags. Thinks I to myself, Joshaway:

"Now, if I can play stud and win a leetle extry dinero, I'll buy pore old Joshaway some new clothes. Y'see, I'd allus beat you playin' stud with matches. But the hombre I played with, he cleaned me so danged quick that my head ain't quit swimmin' yit! All right, Joshaway, I reckon that's all I got to say. Go to chokin'."

"And," Landsinger sneered, "they put you in jail here because you played stud and lost--hod-dang you, you can tell that to the hoot-owls!"

Sheriff Telford spoke from the cell door: "I didn't jail Doodlebug for that, Josh. I jailed him for shootin' the saloon and town up after he'd lost his money. I shore didn't know that one little old coot like him could burn so much gunpowder in so short a time--lucky he didn't hit anybody. Looked like he was huntin' trouble, wearin' two guns that way."

"But I has to wear two smoke-poles or none," wailed Doodlebug, "for because I'm so danged little that one gun pulls me sideways and throws me out of balance. I told you that, at fust, Ab."

"Who was that there fancy-dressed polecat I drilled a minute ago?" Landsinger inquired of the sheriff.

"The same hombre that won Doodlebug's money," growled the sheriff. "'Dogtown' Granby, the plum' slickest gambler I've ever seen; comes in here

some months ago from a place on Texas tidewater and gambled with anybody for any stakes. Cheated, yeah, but couldn't be caught at it. Soon he owned the saloon. Then he loant about a third o' the fool male population o' this town money on mortgages, and won it back, and still had their homes under his thumb. Then half o' the ranchers in the county was rustled to death, and Granby loant 'em money on mortgages, and they cain't pay out. He was back o' that rustlin', o' course, but there was no proof. Tried to boss everything and everybody, and danged near done it. Border riff-raff and for-hire killers flocked to him like flies to m'lasses. When he didn't want a man around, that man turned up dead--and no proof.

"Landsinger, I hated havin' to pretend I was mad about you drillin' Granby when I arrested you. If I hadn't thought fast, old-timer, you'd 'a' been shot in the back by some o' Granby's cutthroats!"

Joshua Landsinger said: "Shore looks like the public ort to thank me for removin' sech a pi'zen varmint--"

The interruption came from a point just behind Sheriff Abner Telford in the jail corridor. It was a cold, hard voice:

"Yeah? You old tarantula, the public cain't thank you yet awhile!"

The officer wheeled and gasped. There stood Dogtown Granby!

This would-be boss of town and county was a trifle pale, but otherwise he was himself again. Landsinger's bullet had been a little high; it had struck Granby's light gun in its armpit holster, and the jolt had merely staggered the star gambler's heart for a few minutes. Telford spoke in the grimmest fashion:

"Dogtown, yo're lucky, somehow. But I'll pin a hangin' on you yet. There's a few hombres in a hundred miles of here that don't owe you money and ain't afraid o' you and yore Border scrapin's, and I'm one o' 'em. Get out!"

The ultra-cunning and ultra-villainous Granby leered, but said nothing, turned on his heel, and left the squat building. The sheriff unlocked the cell door and liberated both Henry and Landsinger. "Them which don't like it,"

he declared, "can lump it. You *viejos* better high-tail it from Mesquit Bend pronto, is my advice."

"And us without a scrap to eat and prackly starvin'?" grumbled old Joshua. "They's a plum' needcessity for us to raise a grub-stake fust."

Telford nodded. "All right. I'll keep yore four guns here until you get ready to start. Granby wouldn't risk havin' unarmed old-timers shot down on the street in broad daylight, I'm shore."

He gave the lank, hungry-looking Landsinger a dollar, and the pair of ancients went to a restaurant. Old Joshua's wrath for his erring partner had evaporated, as it always had evaporated, and they discussed angles of their predicament as they ate. Independence having been the order of their lives, begging a grub-stake was an act that they disliked tremendously.

The moment they were on the street again, they found themselves face to face with Dogtown Granby, and the meeting was not a chance event. The snaky meanness of the gambler passed average human understanding.

"I'm givin' you tarantulas fifteen minutes for layin' me down a long string o' tracks out o' here," he blared. "Fifteen short minutes, and you'll haf to hustle to make it."

"Go ahead and talk big," creaked Doodlebug. "You got a gun."

Granby drew the gun, held it ready, and kicked viciously at the wizened little old Henry. Landsinger would have gone at the man's throat, the menacing thirty-eight notwithstanding, had not the ever-watchful Sheriff Telford rushed between. Telford escorted the *viejos*, ashen with bitter rage under their coppery sunburn, from the danger zone. Then he went with them to a storekeeper and stood for them in the matter of supplies.

A little later the desert's own buckled on gun and belts, mounted and rode westward with a laden pack mule following at the end of a frayed hackamore rope. Doodlebug muttered, at the edge of town:

"Lord bless that sheriff hombre. Say, big un', I know you well enough to know you ain't aimin' to let the Granby sidewinder git by with what he done."

"Skassly," replied old Joshua, taciturn once more. He lifted a bony arm and pointed to a dim line of cottonwood trees that marked the course of a cow country creek a mile or so ahead. "Som'eres hid there in the shade, little 'un, we can sleep the rest o' the day. Wish I'd had the nerve to ast that storekeeper for a can o' apricots, hod-dang it."

They rode on to the shade of the cottonwoods.

DOGTOWN GRANBY'S saloon building was big and barnlike, old and sun-blasted and sprawling. A partitioned-off room in the rear and to the left served the tyrant as an office, and most of the business transacted there was with multitudinous and murderous henchmen. There was a door leading to the saloon proper and another that opened to an alley.

The bartenders were rushed that night. The crowd was hilarious before nine o'clock. Granby sat alone in his office, smoked and listened to the innumerable sounds that filtered through to his ears, and of those sounds the only important one to him was the clanging of the cash-register bell. Suddenly he came out of his dark reverie to realize that he was looking into the muzzles of four worn Colt six-guns. And just beyond the weapons were the hard-bitten, scraggly-bearded countenances of the old-timers.

"Nary a word," Landsinger warned softly. "Doodlebug, lock that inside door. Keerless of you, polecat, not to keep yore doors locked."

In the squinted desert eyes Granby noted something that made him think of blood and steel. He went a little pale, spat his cigar, and slowly elevated his hands, Henry sprang to the inner door and shot the bolt, and hastened back and took possession of the pretty thirty-eight. The prospectors had a cut-and-dried plan, one that was strikingly unique.

"So the law couldn't git anything on you," pursued Landsinger. "Well, mebbe me and Doodlebug can git somethin' on you. We owes it to Ab Telford to do it if it's possible. Move a hair the wrong way, and you'll find out you ain't bullet-proof. Now git up and come along. Hustle!"

"Wait--" Granby said. "How much dinero you want?"

Plainly, he was fighting for time. Landsinger swore and brought a gun barrel down on the head of the would-be big boss, not too hard. The saloon hilarity drowned the noise of the man's fall. Old Joshua holstered his guns, snatched up Granby's silver-buff Stetson hat and held it with the brim between his teeth--Granby would need that hat--and stooped and caught the gambler under the armpits. Doodlebug thrust the thirty-eight inside his tattered shirt and bolstered his two Colts, then bent and seized the gambler by the ankles. The *viejos* then hurried the limp figure into the alley and away to thick darkness that hid their horses and laden pack mule. Quickly they bound the insensible captive across a saddle and set out westward, one of them walking.

The rest of that night and two hours of the next day they traveled, the old-timers walking and riding by turns. Granby had soon recovered consciousness; he had been placed upright in the saddle, with a rawhide thong holding his wrists securely behind him and his ankles bound by a short length of rope under the horse's belly. He'd tried to buy his captors off, begged, threatened, and finally had lapsed into the most lurid and futile of profanity.

Joshua Landsinger and Doodlebug Henry had a shack, a picturesque patchwork of mud and poles, odds and ends of boards and tin, at a seep-spring oasis in the hilly heart of the vast Seguardo Desert. There was ordinarily enough grass for their three head of livestock, a few *palo verdes*, and an ironwood or so. Tales of a great, lost gold lode had brought them to the Seguardo a year before. They hadn't been long in deciding that the lode was a myth.

Although Dogtown Granby was a Westerner born, he'd had little experience with hills and none at all with deserts. The eternal brooding silence terrified him, a fact which he concealed with some difficulty, when he could conceal

it. His wilting later would have seemed pitiful in a man whose make-up was leavened by a shred or so of decency. In Granby the wilting was ludicrous.

In mid-afternoon of the first broiling-hot day, the gambler asked bluntly: "What're you aimin' to do with me?"

They were in the hut, and he was looking at Henry. Doodlebug glanced at his partner. "Ast the other old tarantula."

Landsinger pushed his slouch hat to the back of his unkempt, grizzled head, raked perspiration from his parchment-like brow, and assumed a pseudo-judicial air. He proceeded with his and Henry's cut-and-dried plan:

"The law couldn't git anything on you, Dogtown, but me and Doodlebug can, mebbe. I reckon we'd as well have yore trial now; good a time as any. I'll be the judge. Doodlebug will be the prosecutin' lawyer. Set down on that soapbox, Dogtown, the one right behind you. Me, I'll set here."

He dropped to a crude stool at the rear end of the short, wide shelf that served as a table. Granby sank to the soapbox. It was anything but a farce to Granby. There was about the rats a set, iron grimness that made him afraid.

"But I ain't got anybody representin' me," he blurted.

"Don't make no diffunce," coldly replied old Joshua. With the butt of a six-gun he rapped on the shelf-table. "This here court will now come to order. Uh-Mr. Henry, present the indictments agin the accused."

Wizened little Doodlebug rose from the edgewise saddle in a corner, and began sternly:

"Yore Honor, the pris'ner is charged with crooked card-playin', loanin' money knowin' he was goin' to win it back, hirin' killers to do mudder for him, hirin' rustlers, mortgagin' right and left and danged near bankruptin' the city, o' Mesquit Bend and the county o' Red Rock--aw, hell, yore Honor, I'm out o' breath--ain't that enough?"

"No," said Landsinger, "it ain't. He cheated two pore old tarantulas out o' their grubstake, and he kicked one o' the said tarantulas and tried to kick the other--yeah, with a gun in his paw--and gives 'em fifteen minutes for layin' him down a long string o' tracks away from there. Keerful, Dogtown! Anything you say will be used agin you, as shore as--"

Granby went to his feet, interrupting: "Say, Landsinger, I--"

"Contempt!" shouted the tall ancient. "Contempt of court! Dogtown Granby, I hereby sentences you to stay in this desert until sech time as all o' them mortgages becomes--uh, null and void--" He had very hazy ideas about this--"and until the town and county has outgrewed yore devilment, and Ab Telford has cleaned out the last o' yore Border scrapin's without any hindrance from you--a snake with its head cut off ain't much snake, y'see. Now you listen further:

"You'll work whilst yo're here, diggin' with pick and shovel, minin', startin' at sunup tomorrow. Think we'd feed you for nothin'? Skassly! Git loose from us? I or Doodlebug'll be gyardin' you day and night. It ain't likely that any o' yore gang would think about you bein' 'way out here. You, Doodlebug, listen. If Dog makes a tricky move, we drills him. Little 'un, you unnerstands, don't you?"

"Shore, big 'un," Henry nodded, faced Granby. "I throwed yore purty thirty-eight away, Dog. Don't try to find it."

WHEN breakfast was over on the following morning, the gambler was escorted to a square of rugged terrain, each corner of which was marked by a warped gray stake, within revolver shot of both the hut and the seep-spring. As the trio drew up, Granby looked narrowly at his captors, then scowled at the pick and shovel that they had dropped at his feet. Henry drawled:

"This here is the only claim me and Joshaway ever bothered to stake and register in the Seguaro, Dogtown. A year ago, it was. We found some color,

but if they was much o' the yaller, she laid deep, and the sun was hot and the ground baked and rocky. But yo're a heap younger'n us, and you won't mind the hard diggin'."

"No? Guess again," bit out the tidewater Westerner.

But on the next day Granby worked. He had to in order to eat. This was his wilting. And on the next day it was the same, and the next. Moreover, he had become interested in his work. He ceased to curse the heat that drew perspiration from every pore of his body and grimed him with a thin caking of dust, ceased to be concerned over the pick-handle and shovel-handle blisters in his broad palms. A rest period of two hours, granted him by the *viejos* because of the broiling sun, seemed more torture to him than the labor.

At sunset, Granby came in acting queerly in spite of himself. It was not difficult to see that he was a man with some unusual weight on his mind. Landsinger and Henry exchanged sly glances. Although the old-timers hadn't been keeping very close to the gambler, except at night when they guarded him in order to prevent his escape, they had watched him closely. Doodlebug hitched up his two sagging gunbelts and began to put supper on the shelf-table. Old Joshua fingered his scraggly beard and drawled, as though more to make talk than for any other reason:

"Find any yaller today, Dogtown?"

"Found nothin' but the same old rock and dirt," came sullenly.

"Thought I seen you coverin' up somethin' out there on the claim, hidin' somethin'," Landsinger muttered. "Could 'a' been mistook, o' course."

Doodlebug Henry swore creakingly at the coffee-pot handle for being hot, then inquired: "Ever hear o' the lost Seguro lode, Dogtown?"

"Never did," said Granby.

He lied. That lost lode, popularly supposed to be worth millions, had become a part of tradition in the West.

"Hold supper," bluntly ordered Landsinger.

He left the shack, hurried toward the claim and the newest of the holes that Granby had dug. After ten minutes he returned, and his lined face was a hard mask now. The gambler eyed him narrowly as he crossed the earthen threshold. The voice of old Joshua was as hard as his face:

"You found somethin', Dogtown, all right. Why didn't you tell me when I ast you?"

"Not--not the lode!" gasped Doodlebug. "Right here at our door, after we'd hunted--"

Landsinger interrupted, almost purring: "Hombres, le's eat supper."

The three sat down and ate, the gambler wolfing his food and watching the rats covertly. Trying to snatch one of their guns entailed too much risk; they were quick with their hardware and quick-tempered. The twilight deepened. Henry lighted a tallowdip and stuck it deftly to the back side of the shelf that served as a table. Dusk welled upward from the desert hollows. There was the distant and lonesome yapping of a coyote, the lazy stamping of hoofs down near the spring.

Granby, who now sat on a box low in the shadows, lifted his tousled head into the range of yellow candlelight and spoke. "Yeah, Landsinger, I did find somethin' out there. Heavy gold ore by the barrel. You and Henry won't want to bother with developin' the mine, so why not sell out to me? I'll give you twenty thousand."

Old Joshua and wizened little Doodlebug laughed in unison. "Haw, haw, haw, haw--twenty thousand!" Landsinger sobered, and continued: "I got us a name for the mine. The 'Blue Ghost.' She sounds right purty to me."

"Shore," agreed Doodlebug. "She's plum' bootiful. Why, Dog, I and Joshaway could blow twenty thousand on one rampage."

Granby did not repeat his offer, not then. Plainly, he was doing some hard thinking.... If the claim hadn't been registered--but it had been. Probably

only Landsinger and Henry knew the exact location of the stake. Were it not for this, the stakes could be moved and the claim registered all over again in his own name. There were those who would make good guesses, in the event that the rats-- er, vanished completely. True enough, but guesses were not admitted as evidence in law courts. Granby did not doubt that this was the far-famed Seguaro lode.

The three bedded themselves down as usual, which is to say that the gambler lay on a blanket in one end of the shack and the ancients on blankets in the other end. Landsinger was to remain awake and on guard until midnight, Henry from that time until dawn. Throughout all the dark hours a tallowdip would be burning.

But on this midnight old Joshua did not waken his partner. He wished the gambler to believe that he had fallen asleep in spite of himself. He may, or may not, have thus deceived Granby. Before long he heard a slight noise, very slight; the interior of the hut was a mass of shadow below the level of the broad shelf, and he was unable to detect movement. Then the light of the glittering tallowdip showed him that a hand was creeping toward it and toward a meat knife that lay beside it. His experiment had borne fruit. Granby meant to murder them while they slept.

Bam--old Joshua had released a six-gun's hammer. The bullet sent the knife spinning.

The hand was no longer in sight. Doodlebug sat up gripping worn black-walnut and steel. Landsinger pushed him back. Not a word was spoken.

No mention of the incident was made on the next morning, either. After early breakfast, Granby visited the claim as though to convince himself that he hadn't been dreaming, hurried to the old-timers and began to bid frenziedly for the Blue Ghost. Gold fever had grown upon him until it threatened his reason. Only when his offer included all his earthly possessions was it accepted.

"Ketch up the stock, Doodlebug," said Landsinger, "and we'll go before the Mesquit Bend magistrate and close the deal proper. Mr. Granby, you reckon you can ride a pack mule to town?"

The jubilant Mr. Granby declared that he could ride a gopher.

Late in the afternoon of that day, the three appeared in the Mesquit Bend magistrate's office and made their trade legal. Granby did not have a great amount of ready cash, but he had many thousands in mortgages on town and country property, and he had the big saloon, and these followed the money into the possession of Joshua Landsinger and Doodlebug Henry. Granby swore triumphantly as he pocketed the document that proclaimed him sole owner of the Blue Ghost. The startling news was spreading with the rapidity of fire in a powder house, and a crowd had gathered in the street outside. The gambler used a rear window as a means of hasty exit. Soon he was astride a horse and galloping toward Benson City and the home of an assayer. Sheriff Abner Telford came fighting his way through the crowd at the front.

"Wish I could 'a' been the first to congratulate you, *amigos!*" he began whole-heartedly. "You can forget about the grub-stake, too. When you tell where you made the big strike--must be the Seguario lode--there'll shore be a rush--"

"Thanks, Ab, a heap," broke in Landsinger. "We ain't tellin' nothin', Ab. Say, I and Doodlebug has got a job for you. We're a-indorsin' these here mortgages back to the people which drawed 'em, makin' no charge a-tall--yeah, playin' Santy Claus--and we wants you to distribute 'em for us. Also, we're astin' you to hold this here cash money that Granby paid us, and the papers givin' us the saloon."

Telford was struck speechless. It really was an amazing thing.

The main street of Mesquit Bend held a milling throng of townsmen and men from outlying ranches before the night was an hour old. These tried very hard to show their gratitude and appreciation when they'd been convinced that there was no proverbial string to the gift. They dined and wined the *viejos* repeatedly. At ten o'clock, the star actors in the impromptu celebration were declining even tinned apricots; at one, the best of bottled goods had lost favor with them; at two, they were carried gently into the hotel and gently put to bed, to sleep the clock around and considerably more.

Sunset found them up, dressed, and in conference. They proceeded to the sheriff's office when the conference was over.

"Ab," said Landsinger, "though Granby beat us out o' grub-stake money, kicked me and tried to kick Doodlebug, and would 'a' knifed us whilst we slept if he could, we'll haf ta play square with him--even him. We'll give him his saloon back and most o' that cash money; then we ain't cheated him a-tall, and ain't lied to him none, but have only fed him the rope he ast for. Them mortgages, he got them by cheating', and it shore ain't right for him to have them back."

Telford said: "Dogtown just got in from havin' that claim assayed, and he'd rode a hawss half to death. Mad? Oh, gosh! But I reckon there ain't anything he can do about it, because all you sold him was a claim. You might tell me now, Landsinger: was the Seguro lode iron pyrites, fools' gold?"

Old Joshua shook his grizzled head. "I don't think they is any sech lode, Ab. Wasn't no fools' gold on that claim, nary speck. Say, them mortgages goin' home to roost ort to put spirit in people; ain't no danger o' Dogtown foreclosin' on 'em now, y'see."

"Put spirit in people!" echoed the officer. "Old-timer, you said it. After you two was put to bed last night, a big bunch o' cowpokes and ranchers drove all o' Granby's low-down friends--except the two bartenders--clean into Mexico and warned 'em to stay there. The town's been so quiet--"

"Fire!" yelled a man who stood in the doorway of a nearby store. "The saloon's afire!"

"By thunder, Dogtown's done that for spite!" exclaimed Telford.

That was a good guess, if guess it may be called. Granby, beaten and desperate, had no means of knowing that he was destroying property that was to have been returned to him. The old dry frame building was fast becoming a mass of roaring flames. Doubtless kerosene had been used in setting the fire. Quickly scores of people gathered in the street to watch. Landsinger and Henry hurried around to the rear in the forlorn hope that

they might be able to effect an entrance there and salvage at least one keg, and ran abruptly into Dogtown Granby and his bartender henchmen. Each of the villainous trio was armed. In half-insane rage, the gambler cried above the crackling of the flames:

"Drag iron, you tarantulas!"

He had his new gun out of holster leather before he spoke. But with that, the five of them drew in the same second, and in the same split second began to shoot. The guns of the desert men were like a pair of Gatlings, and they were accurate. When the Mesquit Bend sheriff turned a rear corner of the doomed building with a crowd at his heels, Granby and his companions lay face-downward in the sand, as dead as they would ever be. The old-timers had vanished; they were on their way to the doctor to have their wounds, lead burns, looked after.

"No witnesses, and it'll save the commonwealth the expense of a trial if we calls this a plain case o' triple suicide," bluntly said Telford.

Early next morning, Landsinger and Henry appeared in front of the sheriff's office. They had their horses and pack mule and were ready to start for their patchwork desert shack. Abner Telford hurried out to them.

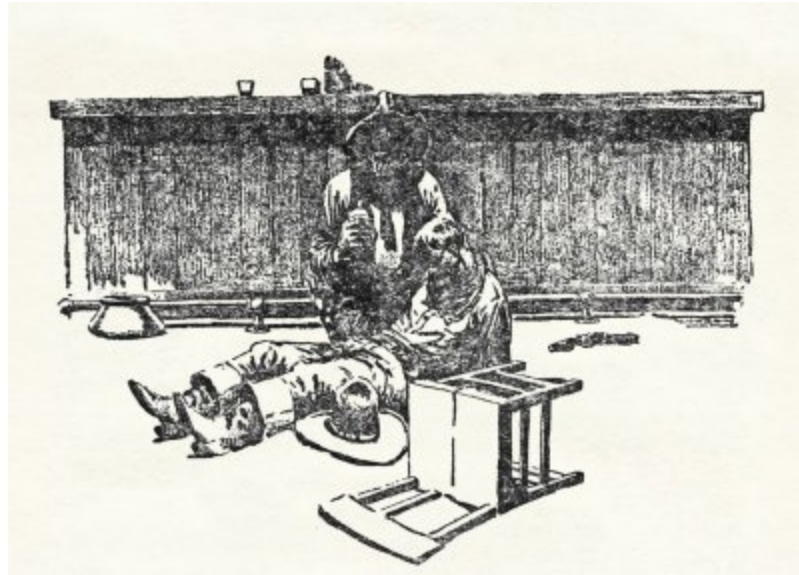
"You can pay for them sidewinders' funerals out o' the Granby money, Ab," drawled Landsinger. "Y'see, we're keepin' only what the assayer says the claim is wo'th. She was a rich pocket, but only a pocket; she was a blue ghost for Dogtown, all right. I and Doodlebug diskivered her a year ago, and had been holdin' her to pay for our buryin' when we cashed. Planned the thing right purty, didn't we? Dogtown bein' from tidewater Texas, we figgered he didn't know a heap about gold, and he didn't. We showed him where to dig, o' course. So long, Ab, and good luck to you!"

"Wait!" exclaimed the officer. "You two don't haf to work any more. Lots o' people has already spoke for the privilege o' keepin' you as long as you live. Take them hawsses and that balaam back to the livery stable."

But they wouldn't. No so-called civilization for them. They mounted stiffly and went riding into the west, leading the plodding pack mule; into the

west, toward the golden silence and brooding peace of their desert.

A Six-gun Showdown By Carl Rogers



Quick-fingered, flashy Slim Keene: lightning on the draw and snaky in a pinch. Steady, square-shooting Grindstone Arledge: accurate, fair, and sure-fire. One pitted against the other in a blinding, choking hell of sand and wind. A life--maybe several--in the balance of a moment filled with hot lead hurled from determined six-guns.... The showdown!

EMORY ARLEDGE, better known as "Grindstone" to his friends, leaned belligerently over the card table. His big body was rigid and cold all over. The cowboy knew that he was face to face with death.

The grim realization did not make him cringe or back up one inch from his firm stand. On the contrary, the determined light in his gray eyes, and the stubborn set of his square jaws, showed very plainly that he meant to see the game through.

On the opposite side of the table sat Slim Keene, the gambler. In Keene's little pale-green eyes there was a warning glint. The thin face was as cold as a mask of marble. Keene had just turned a crooked card. For once his

nimble fingers had fumbled. The bobble had been ever so slight, but the alert waddy, suspicions already aroused by Keene's steady winning, had caught the crooked deal.

Yes, Grindstone knew that Slim Keene had cheated, and Keene realized that the cowboy knew. He could tell by the look on the puncher's big, bronzed face.

Grindstone realized that if he accused Keene there in the presence of the other two men who were sitting in the game, the gambler would go into blazing action. He likewise realized that Slim Keene was speed personified. The long, slender fingers, rendered supple and kept trained by constant handling of cards, were as quick as glancing light. There was hardly another man in all the Southwest who could match Slim Keene's gun speed.

As for Grindstone, he was as fast as the average range rider, but no faster. A man of peaceful pursuits of life who had never lived by his gun, he had cultivated accuracy of shooting rather than celerity of draw. No, he was not like Slim Keene, a wizard on the quick draw, but a more deadly accurate shot than Grindstone Arledge had never been seen in the Black Buttes country.

As the cowpoke sat, strong face a little pale, looking into the bleak eyes of the gambler-gunman, he knew that he stood not a shadow of a chance to beat Keene to the draw. He realized, also, that to utter the accusation which was in his mind would be virtual suicide. And yet, utter it he would. The stubborn waddy was not going to let any slick-fingered card cheat hand him a crooked deal and get away with it unchallenged.

Keene's slender right hand was playing indolently with a pearl button on his fancy white vest. Grindstone knew, however, that the tips of those capable fingers were but a few inches from the butt of a pistol which reposed in a shoulder holster. His own big red hands were resting on the table.

Despite the warning stare which Keene was giving him, Grindstone Arledge spoke, and his voice was as harsh as the rasping of a file:

"Push them chips back into the center of the table, fella. I'm callin' for a re-deal, an' this time she'd better be a straight one."

The two other men who sat at the table looked surprised and startled. They gawked first at Grindstone and then at the dealer.

Keene's closely-chiseled mouth tightened. His eyes seemed to send out thin needles of icy light. "What are you getting at, cowpoke?" he questioned in a chilling voice.

"Yuh know danged well what I'm gettin' at!" Grindstone flared. "I'm callin' a new deal 'cause the last one wasn't straight. Yuh took that black ace from the bottom of the deck, Slim Keene."

The man on Grindstone's left sucked in a quick breath and hurriedly deserted the table. The one on his right likewise slithered out of his chair and faded back....

They were alone now--the husky, rock-jawed cowboy and the slender, cold-visaged gambler--facing each other across the card table. For just a few more tense seconds they sat there like stone images, glaring into each others eyes. Then it happened.

With the speed of shooting light, Slim Keene's right hand darted for his hidden gun. Desperately Grindstone went for his own Colt. As he made the play he threw his big body to the left, hoping thereby to get his broad chest out of the way of the gambler-gunman's weapon.

He was not fast enough, for Slim Keene was as quick as lightning. Grindstone's Colt forty-five had no more than cleared leather before Keene's blunt shoulder gun flashed into view and began spitting sizzling lead across the table.

Thrice that gun blazed within a single split second. The three reports sounded almost as one. It seemed to Grindstone that two arrows of flame stabbed right through his barrel chest, that a firebrand raked across the side of his head. His brain gave one cyclonic whirl and then became numb.

He realized dully that his heavy form had jarred to the floor. He felt as if he were spitted there by two red-hot rods of steel. He was breathing hard; his head ached.

Slowly his gaze roved the room. The drinkers and loiterers had deserted the bar. Why was everyone staring at him so stupidly? What had happened? He saw the slender figure of Keene, the gambler, standing behind the card table. A snub-nosed black Colt was held ready in the man's right hand.

Ah! Now he remembered! Keene had robbed him and then shot him! The dirty skunk!

Grindstone could feel his six-gun still within his grasp. He struggled to raise the weapon, but he could not move a muscle. He felt paralyzed from head to toes. The gun slithered out of his feeble grasp to the floor.

"Get him out of here," Keene clipped off.

A sympathetic bystander went to the assistance of Grindstone. He helped the wounded cowboy to a sitting position and gave him a drink. Then other men came out of their places of safety. The gunfight was over.

The two men who had been at the card table a moment before hurriedly took hold of the wounded cowboy and bore him out of the place. "Gosh, feller!" one of them said in a low tone, as soon as they were out on the street. "You was plumb loco to make a play like that! Shucks, man, it was sooeycide!"

Grindstone did not attempt to reply. He felt tired, very tired. He closed his eyes. It seemed that a sticky, black fog settled over him and that his senses melted into it.

When he awoke he was lying on a physician's operating table. The serious face of Doc Crawford floated above him. The doctor was just putting the finishing touches to a bandage about Grindstone's head.

At that moment the door opened and some one came in. Rolling his eyes aside, Grindstone saw that it was Slim Keene. The gambler was cold,

emotionless, as always.

"How about it?" Keene asked, and he nodded toward Grindstone.

The doctor gave him a half-hostile glance, then answered shortly: "He'll pull through all right. He must have leaned away from those shots, for the bullets plowed outward, instead of driving straight into the body."

Keene's thin lips twisted in a heartless smile. "Too bad I didn't drill him center," he remarked callously, in his taut, chilling voice.

He came to Grindstone's side and looked down into the broad face. "Cowboy," he warned, "as soon as you're able to sit a saddle you want to fork your cayuse and unravel a lot of trail between yourself and Black Buttes. Understand? If I ever run into you again, no matter where, there'll be another shooting scrape, and next time you won't need a doctor's care."

Grindstone breathed heavily for a moment, and then in a weak, gasping voice he replied: "Keene, soon as I'm up an' about, I'm a-goin' to tell the world what a card cheat you are. Then me an' you are goin' to have a six-gun showdown. Maybe yuh'll finish me next time, but at least I'll die with the satisfaction of knowin' I put ever'body wise to yore crooked game."

The gambler glared. Well he knew that much talk about crooked cards would seriously hurt, if not completely ruin, his nefarious business at the Golden Eagle. "If you don't leave Black Buttes as soon as you're able to ride," he bit out fiercely, "I'll kill you." Swinging abruptly on his heel, he left the office.

IN back of Doc Crawford's office there was a single large room which the physician utilized as a sort of hospital ward. It was there that Grindstone Arledge stayed while recuperating. The period of his convalescence was short. Strong men and husky cowpokes recover rapidly from wounds.

When he was able to be up and about, Grindstone did not immediately show himself on the street. He did not want Slim Keene to know how near well he was. He meant to be feeling fit when he went out to swap lead with the gambler-gunman. He therefore kept out of sight and got the doctor, who hated Keene, to put out reports that he was recovering slowly. During the daytime he exercised by pacing the ward. At nights he would steal away from the place and take long rides under cover of darkness.

Grindstone's cronies who came to visit advised him to leave the country. "Yuh know Slim Keene just about rules the roost around here," they reminded him. "Yuh wouldn't have a chance agin him. Nobody would in a gunfight. He's red lightnin' an' sudden death. Life's a lot sweeter than pride, Grindstone, so yuh'd better just swaller the pride, cowboy, an' hit the long trail."

The stubborn cowpoke's reply to all these well-meant entreaties had been that he had lived in the Black Buttes district for twenty-seven years, that he had been there before gold fever had brought human buzzards like Slim Keene flocking into the country, and that he meant to be there long after Keene and others of the gambler's kind were gone.

"Leave my own home stompin' ground just because I caught a snaky gambler in a crooked deal? Like hell I will! I'm staying for the six-gun showdown. An' if you cow-pokes were in my boots, you'd do the same thing."

That last statement definitely settled the argument, for not one of those cowboy advisers but knew in his heart that if he were in Grindstone's situation, he would do just as Grindstone was doing.

One day Doctor Crawford, looking a bit worried, came to Grindstone. "Cowboy," he said, "the time has come. Slim Keene knows you're up and around. Someone spied on you and reported to him. Keene stopped me on the street a moment ago. Told me to warn you that he was going to start looking for you at sunset, and that if he found you he would kill you."

Grindstone's heavy jaws tightened. His gray eyes narrowed just a little. For a moment he was silent, then he nodded slowly. "Yeah, I reckon the time

has come."

He went to his bed, lifted his belt and gun from the back of a chair, and drew the cartridge-studded strip of leather about his waist.

"You haven't got a chance, cowboy," the doctor blurted anxiously. "Why go out there and get killed? Why not fork your bronc and--"

"Hawgtie that talk," Grindstone cut in harshly. "I ain't runnin' away, an' that's final."

The doctor shrugged. He turned and walked back into his office.

Grindstone went to a rear window. For half an hour he stood there, slouched against the frame, staring moodily out into the open; thinking, thinking, thinking....

Doc had spoken the truth. He did not have a chance. There was not a lead-slinger in all the Southwest who could outdraw Slim Keene. Grindstone felt as if he stood within the somber shadow of death. Nevertheless, his determination was not shaken. He was still resolved that he would play the game to the end.

"I won't turn loose of life until I've got in at least one shot," he promised himself grimly. "An' I'll make that shot count. I ain't got Keene's flashy draw, but I've got accuracy. Yeah, he'll get me all right, but I'll take the polecat along with me as I pass."

A bit sadly, his eyes took in a far sweep of rolling country. He knew every nook and corner of that vast strip of terrain. To the north lay the sand dunes of a semi-desert. To the west, ten miles distant, stood a range of blue hills. Within them, and beyond, was good range--Grindstone's old stamping ground. He loved that country; he loved life. It was tough to have to part with it all. Well, he would go out like a man--but not alone!

Slowly he rolled himself a cigarette. Three hours! Three hours to live! The thought kept drumming in his brain. Keene had given him until sunset, and in three hours old Sol would be touching the horizon. Three hours to live!...

He stuck the cigarette into his slit of a mouth and felt for a match. Suddenly his probing fingers paused. For a full minute he stood as one petrified, gazing steadily toward the north. Slowly a light of discovery dawned in his gray eyes. A hard grin twisted his lips.

"Keene's a lot faster than me," he said to himself, almost in a whisper, "but they ain't no man can shoot straighter than yore ol' Uncle Dudley. Now if I could only get that snake into a situation where accuracy would count for as much as speed! That would give me a real chance!"

The grin widened. He nodded slowly. "Uh-huh; Grindstone Arledge, I'm a-thinkin' me an' you have figured this here thing out!"

GRINDSTONE hurried into the doctor's office. "Doc," he said, "yuh brought a message from Keene. How about takin' one back to the snake from me?"

"Why, certainly," Doctor Crawford readily assented. He gave the cowboy a shrewd glance, evidently wondering if Grindstone had changed his mind about hitting the trail.

"All right, then. Listen, an' get it straight. Go down there to the Gold Eagle an', in a loud voice so's ever'body in the place can hear, tell Keene my gun is in mighty bad shape an' that I aim to spend the next hour or so cleanin' it up. That soon as I'm through an' ready for business, I'll fire three shots as warnin', then I'm leavin' this place an' settin' out to get him. Tell him that if he's got any guts in his system tuh step out through the front door of the Gold Eagle when he hears them shots an' start walkin' up the street to meet me. Got it?"

"Yes, Grindstone, but--"

"Then go ahead an' tell him, an' be shore yuh break the news exactly as I've outlined it."

"But--"

The doctor paused and swallowed his protest. There was a warning glint in Grindstone's gray eyes. The stubborn cow-waddy was mighty tired of having people advise him what to do.

"All right! All right!" the doc hastened to say. "I'll go!"

As he left the office, he added in an undertone, "But you're a fool, Grindstone Arledge! A plain damned fool!"

Ten minutes later he was back. "Well, I told him. The fellow smiled that cold, devilish smile of his and said you'd better figure out who you want to have your pony and outfit after you're gone. There were several men in the place, and they all heard what passed between him and me. I suppose the news is all over town by this time."

"Good!" Grindstone exclaimed. "That's why Keene swallowed my challenge, an' that's why he'll go through with his part of my scheme, just as I've planned it. If he don't, the public might form an opinion he's yeller."

While the battered little alarm clock ticked away the minutes, Grindstone sat near one of the back windows. His big hands were leisurely cleaning and polishing his Colt forty-five. Now and then he raised his head, looked out through the glass, and smiled.

In the front office Doc Crawford, deeply concerned for his young friend, fidgeted and pondered. He was wondering just what scheme Grindstone had in mind, but he did not want to ask further questions. After half an hour had passed, he could no longer stand the strain on his curiosity.

Thrusting himself abruptly through the connecting doorway, he blurted: "Look here, Grindstone, what's all the mystery? What are you up to?"

The cowboy motioned him close and then pointed through the window. "See that sky over there all painted a dirty red?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Doc, I was born an' raised in this here country. I know its every trick an' whim. That red smear means a sandstorm is comin'. I reckon I've seen about a thousand of 'em come whoopin' across the spread of sand waste out there. This one's due to arrive in about another thirty minutes. Just before she hits town I'll fire three shots to warn Keene I'm comin' after 'im. As the first dust-devils go dancin' along the street, I aim to step out through the front door an', slow an' deliberate-like, start towards the Gold Eagle. Savvy the idee?"

The doctor nodded. "I believe I do, Grindstone. You mean you're going to fight Keene while the sandstorm is blowing."

"Uh-huh. With dust-clouds foggin' along the street an' sand blastin' eyes an' faces, I 'reckon it won't be the quickest draw which counts. We'll both have our irons out when we come in sight of each other, an' with the snap shootin' we'll have to do, accuracy an' gun judgment will count more than anything else."

"By Jacks, cowboy! You've used your head! That scheme will give you an even break!"

The little alarm clock ticked off another twenty minutes. Grindstone was now ready and waiting. He stood beside the back window, watching the long cloud of dust which was approaching from the north, drawing steadily closer and closer. Now it was rolling over the dunes a mile from the Chimney Rocks. Now it had smeared out the streak of trees which marked the course of Antler Creek. Now it was closing in toward the town like a rushing tidal wave....

Doc Crawford came in to report that the street was deserted. Evidently everyone meant to keep in-doors until the lead-slinging was over. Of course, everyone would try to watch the battle, but they would do so from windows, doorways, and alleys.

Grindstone took another look through the window. The doctor looked out with him. "Well, it's here," the physician remarked, as he saw a tawny cloud rushing upon the town livery stable.

Grindstone nodded. He hitched up his gunbelt and carefully pulled down his gray Stetson so that it would not be lifted by the wind. He then turned and strode out of the ward, across the office, and onto the sidewalk.

As the cowboy glanced along the street, he saw that Doc Crawford had stated the situation correctly. The town seemed suddenly deserted. Not a man was within sight; not even an animal! Horses had been removed from the danger zone, so as not to be frightened by the sounds of gunfire or struck by stray lead.

The first gust of the storm hit town. It rattled harshly against frame buildings, blew grains of sand dancing and crawling along boardwalks, sent dust swirling and fogging along the street.

Following the first gruff gust of it, there was a lull. During that moment of quiet, Grindstone Arledge drew his Colt forty-five and fired three deliberate shots into the air. Leisurely, then, he proceeded to punch out the smoking shells and replace them with fresh cartridges. All the time his gaze remained riveted upon the Golden Eagle, a hundred and fifty yards away. The front door remained closed. No one appeared on the threshold.

Grindstone was a little surprised. Why had not Slim Keene emerged from his den? Had the gambler-gunman misunderstood or forgotten the plan? Or had the final showdown found him yellow?

"Look out for tricks, cowboy,"

Grindstone heard the voice of Doctor Crawford advising behind him. "That fellow's as cunning as a coyote. Something's wrong. He may be planning to-

The voice was interrupted. Whether the renewed rush of the storm had drowned it out, or the sudden appearance of Slim Keene on the doorstep of the Golden Eagle had caused the doctor to pause, Grindstone did not know.

Keene was standing there, buttoning his black coat closely about his slender figure. His black hat was pulled low over his brow. He stepped down onto the ground, stood still for a moment, and then started slowly toward

Grindstone. The next moment a sweeping, swirling smoke of grit blotched the form from Grindstone's view.

"Well, Doc, here goes," the waddy called to his friend. Stepping from the plank sidewalk, he started down the street to meet Slim Keene. Keene, the superlative quick-draw artist; Keene the treacherous, the coldblooded killer.

THE dust-fog thickened. It was one of the worst sandstorms Grindstone Arledge ever had seen. The town of Black Buttes, situated at the north base of a great, barren hill, was wholly unprotected from the fierce winds which three or four times each year came booming across the arid stretch of wasteland that lay to the north.

The air was harsh with drifting grit. An awful semi-gloom had fallen, a gloom that was portentous of disaster and death. The sun rested on the horizon. Like a great rusty disk of bronze, it showed dully through the roiling, boiling dirt-clouds.

Grindstone had taken about thirty or forty steps when, above the snarling of the wind, he heard the bark of a pistol. Something plucked sharply at the collar of his shirt....

The big waddy stopped dead in his tracks. His Colt forty-five leaped from its holster. The shot which he had heard had come from his right front, just as a billow of sand-laden wind had rolled over him. Standing there, crouched in the middle of the street, gun poised, strong jaw outthrust, eyes slitted, he waited for the air to clear.

Grindstone was surprised that Keene had closed in so quickly and that the shot had come from a side of the street, rather than from the middle of it.

"Tricky coyote!" he thought. "Must have advanced at a run an' then ducked aside an' waited for me to show."

With startling abruptness the billow of dust rolled by, leaving the air almost clean for just a few seconds. Grindstone saw a man leaning out from an angle of a store building, peering into the street. At sight of the cowboy, the fellow became confused and fired a hasty shot. The bullet winged within an inch of the waddy's stern face.

Grindstone did not flinch, never moved a muscle. His own shot was deliberate. As it rang out the gunman at the edge of the building gave a sort of despairing cry and slumped. Grindstone ran toward him.

The killer whom the fighting cowboy had dropped proved to be not Slim Keene but one of the fellow's pals, one of two gunmen who usually hung around the gambler, acting as a sort of bodyguard. He had been drilled squarely through the heart.

Grindstone's rugged countenance was harder than ever as he turned back into the street. So that was Keene's game! Realizing that his gun speed would avail him little in a gunfight out there in the storm, the cunning scoundrel, under cover of the blowing grit, had dispatched gunmen to help him kill the cowboy.

Grindstone was like a stalking Nemesis as he moved on. He had no idea of turning back just because he had discovered the odds were heavily against him. He was more determined than ever to find Slim Keene and shoot it out with the fellow, man to man.

A sudden rift in the storm disclosed a second gunman, crouched between two buildings to his left. The killer had seen him first. Grindstone dropped quickly to one knee, blazing away with his heavy Colt as he did so. A bullet drilled through the crown of his hat, tunneling a swift course through his shock of stiff, sorrel hair.

Jerking himself upright, the big cowpoke started plunging through the tawny haze, making in a zigzag course toward the spot where a sand-billow had blotted out a human form an instant before.

Evidently the gunman had started toward Grindstone at the same instant, for the two men met right at the edge of the boardwalk.

They both stopped. Grindstone was the first, by a split second, to recover his wits. A bullet from his gun sent the man down with a bullet hole just below his right eye. A slug which the gunman fired dug harmlessly into the ground at Grindstone's feet.

"That rubs out the second bodyguard an' clears the way," the cowboy told himself grimly, as he reloaded the empty chambers of his gun. "Now it's me an' Keene, man to man."

THE bronze disk in the west was now halfway below the horizon. The other half rested flatly on the skyline. The eerie gloom had thickened. Buildings and deserted hitch-racks loomed weirdly through the haze. Grindstone stalked on, six-gun held ready, glance flitting here and there in search of Keene.

His first glimpse of the gambler was a fleeting one. A curtain of sand lifted just for an instant and then dropped, but not before it had revealed a skulking form dressed in black.

Doubtless Keene had felt pretty confident that one of his gunmen had downed the cowboy. The sudden sight of the husky waddy striding along the street threw him into a panic. His gun spat viciously, just as the sand-curtain fell. The miss was such a wide one that Grindstone sent a loud, taunting laugh ringing through the windstorm. Another shot cracked out, but the random bullet needled harmlessly through the gritty air.

A long gust of wind rolled over the town. It set up a low, eerie wailing among frame buildings as it swept along. Sand and tiny gravel hissed and scratched as the particles crawled and scoured across hard ground.

A dim black form showed through the darkening, dry fog. It leaped toward a hitch-rack and crouched, partly protected by a cedar post.

Three times within a single second Slim Keene's gun spoke. Its red fire flared dully through the sand-veil. The gambler's six-gun was fairly

spewing hot lead, but the shooting was being done from a distance of some twenty-five yards. At that range, and there amidst the haze with grit rasping faces and grating into eyes, speed was not the most important factor of the gunfight.

Keene's first bullet scorched Grindstone's rigid face. Another drew blood from the lobe of his left ear. The third dug between his left arm and his body, searing a hot course across his side.

Grindstone had not let the fierce and rapid gunning rattle him. Deliberately he fired. His ball of lead hurled Keene away from the cedar post.

A bullet laid open the cowboy's right cheek. He gritted his teeth and fired again, aiming for the patch of white vest which showed between the lapels of Keene's black coat. Keene's knees buckled a little, but he quickly jerked his sagging body erect.

The gambler's gun blazed again. The bullet flew wide, of its mark.

This time Grindstone had been the first to fire. His slug struck Keene's narrow brow, slapping back the man's head. Keene flung his arms wide, stiffened, and toppled rigidly backward like an overturned statue....

For just a moment the cowboy stood crouched, squinting at the quivering form on the ground. And then the storm threw a dark robe about it, clothing it from his view.

Once more Grindstone reloaded his gun, turned and made directly toward the Golden Eagle. Men stared at him in awe as he entered the dive and slammed the door behind him. Lamps had been lighted. Their dull illumination fell almost weirdly upon the scene, hazed dimly by dust blown under doors and window-sashes.

A red festoon had spread downward from the gash across Grindstone's right cheek. He tried absently to wipe it away with a sleeve of his shirt, but succeeded only in making a gory smear. His red-rimmed eyes, with their dust-laden lashes, took in the room. They fastened upon "Silver" Jack McQuade, cousin of Slim Keene and proprietor of the place in which the

gambler had conducted his crooked game. Silver Jack stood behind the bar, hands spread out on the wood, staring like the rest of the men.

Grindstone walked straight to him and paused, with only the counter between them.

"Silver," he stated quietly, "Slim Keene an' his two dry-gulchin' gunmen are dead. I reckon what belonged to him now is yores. In that card game me an' him played here just recent, he crooked me out of exactly sixty dollars. I need the dinero to pay Doc Crawford for the repairs he made to me, an' for some more he's goin' to make in a few minutes. Come on; shell out."

"Look here," Silver Jack started in to bluster, "you can't come into my place and hold me up--"

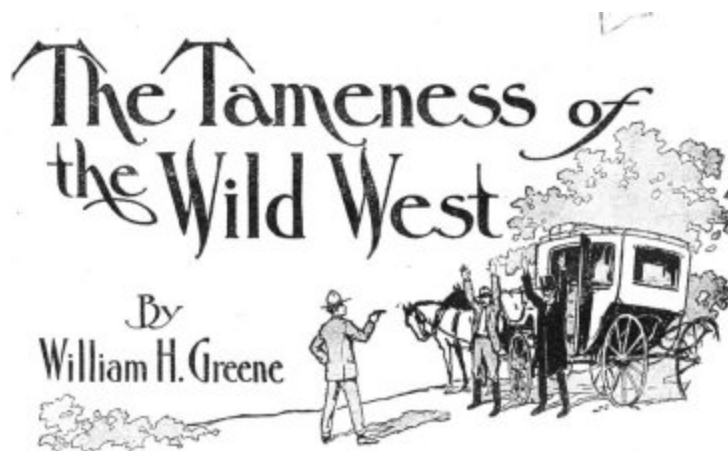
"Shell out," Grindstone repeated in a dispassionate tone, and his right hand moved down to the holstered six-gun at his hip.

Silver Jack weakened. "Why--ah-- of course, Grindstone," he hastened to say. "Here it is."

He took three twenty-dollar gold pieces from the till and clapped them on the counter. Grindstone picked them up, then turned and strode toward the door.

No one spoke or moved a muscle as the big cowpoke walked out of the place, turned toward Doc Crawford's office, and disappeared into the dust that was fogging along the street.

The Tameness of the Wild West by William H. Greene.



GEORGE W. SELDEN might have been of an adventurous disposition if he had not been a timid man. This is not to say that he was a coward, but he lacked a certain daring recklessness which is a characteristic of the real soldier of fortune. He went his way methodically and took no chances.

In the abstract, however, no one could have been fonder of adventure than he. At the age of twenty-seven he still read of the thrilling, hair-breadth escapes of *Diamond Dick*, *Handsome Harry* and *Jack Harkaway*. Accounts of murders, gang fights and other criminal items were his principal reasons for buying the newspapers, taking precedence even of baseball news and sporting topics of the day.

But he never applied the things he read to himself, and therefore kept a position as stenographer in the War Department at Washington, D. C., which was steady and sure, though people told him it held no "future" for an ambitious young man.

He knew, through the papers, all about New York's Bowery and "Hell's Kitchen," San Francisco's "Barbary Coast," and the modest "Swampoodle" section of his own beautiful city, but he never by any chance ventured into a

disreputable neighborhood himself, except in fancy, through the medium of his beloved literature.

His own habits were most conventional. Monday afternoons, when he could get leave from the office, found him at Chase's matinee, and later assisting at the promenade on F Street, where a lot of the prettiest girls in the world are to be met after that performance. Saturdays he drank "tea" with a cherry in it, in the New Willard's "Peacock Alley." A show on Wednesday evening with supper after at the Café Republic, and an occasional Saturday night dance marked the limit of his dissipations.

Sundays he usually spent in the land of romance, with his ever-increasing stock of novels. His was a blameless, quiet life for a man whose favorite hero was Jesse James.

But all this was changed when Selden's great uncle, Reuben Selden, died. Uncle Reuben had never given Selden a cent while he lived, and they had not seen each other oftener than about once a year, but he had known of his nephew's exemplary habits, without having heard of his desperate tastes in literature. So at the age of eighty-four he died very suddenly, leaving an absolutely unattached fortune of something like two hundred thousand dollars to George W. Selden, humble, humdrum government clerk.

Now, take a man who has never owned more than one hundred dollars at a time in his life, and has had to get up regularly every morning, go to the office and pound a typewriter all day to earn that amount in a month--and suddenly make him independently wealthy. Something is sure to happen. The average man will probably drift toward dissipation and extravagance.

But Selden's tastes lay in another direction. He was still loyal to his old hero, Jesse James, only his attitude changed. He was no longer satisfied to remain in the audience, but wished to help out in the performance, if it was only by carrying a spear. He could afford to do as he pleased now, and he began to picture himself playing desperate parts in wild adventures similar to the ones of which he had read so much.

And when a timid, quiet man does break loose, he can be depended upon to go the limit and do a lot of foolish things.

II.

THREE months later he got off the train at the little town of Calumet, Montana, a disappointed, disillusioned and disgusted man. Life was nothing like it had been in the good old days of '49. All the romance was gone, if there ever was any, or perhaps his favorite authors had been deceiving him.

He had visited all the places that were supposed to be "tough." In the Black Hills he had ridden over the route of the old Deadwood stage, and it was like a drive through Rock Creek Park at home. He had stood at the bar of the Gilt Edge saloon, in Butte, and seen men drinking creme de menthe! He had crossed Death Valley in an automobile.

The Indians he had found to be either drunken degenerates or serious-minded college graduates, who would not think of carrying a scalping-knife. Cowboys, like the ones he had read about, did not seem to exist. Once he saw what he thought was a band of real cow-punchers, in chaps, spurs, red- flannel shirts and sombreros. One of them began to abuse and threaten a young girl who was riding with them, and when Selden rushed heroically to her rescue he was nearly mobbed for ruining a moving-picture film.

The wild spirit of the West seemed to be gone. The Bad Lands of South Dakota sheltered no lurking fugitives.

"Cheyenne was shy any thrills for me," he wrote home to a friend, "and Weeping Wolf was a sad disappointment." Only a very much disgruntled man would make such jokes as that.

In several States he had been arrested and heavily fined for carrying a big Colt's .45 in his belt. He had not seen a single shooting, lynching or hold-up. Everywhere was peace, law, and order. Nowhere had he heard anything

half so exciting as the language old Major Dupont used to use when some stupid clerk made a blunder, back in the adjutant-general's office in the War Department.

It was all a fake, and he was going home mad. But he would give the West one more chance to make good. He would stop off at this little town of Calumet, though the very name meant an Indian pipe of peace, which was not encouraging.

The place was rather picturesque, he had to admit, but he was skeptical now, and they would have to show him. There were no gambling-houses open so far as he could learn. The two dance-halls were discouragingly respectable looking, but there was one redeeming feature.

There was still an old stage route between Calumet and the next town, Silver Creek. Next year they were going to build a trolley line, but he was in time.

Persistent inquiry unearthed the fact that there had once been some sort of a robbery on this route, about forty years ago, but details were lacking. Gossip spreads rapidly in a small town, and Selden's constant harping upon the subject of hold-ups and outlawry led first to the belief that he was slightly out of his mind, until later the theory was advanced that he must be a detective from the East, in search of some criminal.

He was stopping at the Nugget Hotel, about the most uncomfortable place in town, simply because the name pleased him, and, totally unaware of the reputation he was acquiring, he decided to make the stage trip to Silver Creek next day.

Then, made reckless by his unsuccessful search for trouble, an idea came to him which he considered nothing less than an inspiration. He had looked for adventure everywhere in vain. Very well, then he would create some excitement himself, since no one else would do it for him. He would hold up the stage himself.

The more he thought about this the more it pleased him, though he felt a little frightened at his own recklessness. But Jesse James would not hesitate,

he reasoned.

He had given up trying to wear his big .45, but had purchased a small .32 caliber revolver, which he carried in the side pocket of his coat. He also had a big, wide-brimmed "Stetson," which he considered a great addition to his costume.

There was a little fellow in a frock coat, silk hat and spectacles stopping at the hotel, whom he had several times tried to engage in conversation, but who had seemed to avoid him. The Rev. Elias Lambert, of Sioux City, was the man's name, he learned from the clerk, and when he got into the stage next evening he found the little clergyman sitting huddled up in the corner. Evidently they were to be companions for the trip.

The driver, a thin-faced man with a gray mustache, climbed up to his seat, cracked his whip, and they were off. They stopped at the post-office for the Silver Creek mail-bag, and clattered noisily down the main street, soon reaching the outskirts of the town, and then the dark, lonely highway.

The coach lanterns cast a fitful gleam upon each side of the road, showing brief glimpses of trees and rocks. They bowled merrily along, and Selden's spirits rose with the excitement and exhilaration of knowing that he was at last on the trail of a real adventure. The Reverend Lambert sat in his corner, silent as a shadow, but Selden could not keep quiet long. He had to relieve his mind with conversation.

"Going to Silver Creek on business, Mr. Lambert?" he asked.

"Yes--that is--not exactly," replied the clergyman.

"Pleasure trip?"

"No."

"For your health, perhaps?"

"Sure, that's it," assented the Reverend Lambert, with a short laugh.

"I see," said Selden, thinking he might have been untactful in mentioning the subject. Another silence followed, and Selden tried again.

"Are you familiar with this part of the country, sir?"

"Sure--er--yes, sir," answered Lambert. "My sister lives in Silver Creek, and I come to see her often."

"Ever hear of any hold-ups on this route?"

"No, sir."

"Liable to happen any time, I understand," said Selden cheerfully.

"Gee--goodness gracious--I hope not!" exclaimed the clergyman in a frightened tone, which made Selden grin.

"Yes, sir," he went on. "Liable to happen any time at all. This would be just the night for it. No moon and pitch-dark."

The little clergyman appeared to shiver with fright, but made no reply. Selden was enjoying himself thoroughly. Here was a man more timid than himself who would make an easy victim.

"Have you got any large amount of money or valuables with you?" he asked next.

"Not much, sir."

"I always carry at least five hundred dollars with me in cash," Selden boasted. "You never can tell when you may need it."

"That's right. Quite true, sir."

"If you haven't got enough money when you're held up the highwayman is liable to become angry and knock you on the head."

"Horrible!" quavered the minister.

Selden looked out of the window. On the left-hand side rose a high bank, while on the right the big pine-trees overhung the road, their branches sometimes sweeping the top of the coach.

They were going at a good rate, and had probably covered five or six miles. Now was the time and the place, Selden thought, to commit an act of daring which would put him in the same class with the great Jesse James himself.

His hand shook a little as he drew out his revolver, but he managed to make his voice sound steady and sharp enough as he turned the weapon toward his companion and cried:

"Hands up, my man! Quick, now!"

The Rev. Elias Lambert fairly gasped with fright and astonishment, but obeyed promptly.

"Hey, driver! Stop the coach a minute, will you?" shouted the amateur highwayman.

The horses were pulled up short, and Selden whispered to Lambert:

"Get out now. Hurry up. Jump down."

Again the clergyman obeyed with great alacrity, and Selden followed him out, turning his revolver quickly toward the man on the box.

"Throw up your hands!" he snapped, and the driver promptly obeyed.

"Jump down and line up against the coach beside our reverend friend here."

The driver did so.

"Now then, Brother Lambert," said Selden flippantly, "how much money did you say you had?"

"About fifty dollars," the minister answered weakly. "Take it; but don't shoot me, sir."

"Which pocket is it in?"

"The right-hand inside one."

Selden shifted his revolver to his left hand and slipped his right inside the minister's coat. Suddenly his left wrist was twisted nearly in two, the pistol was wrenched from his hand, and something which felt like a sledge-hammer struck him on the point of the chin. His head whirled, and the ground seemed to come up and hit him.

"Stay where you are, driver, and keep your hands up!" rasped a hoarse, ugly voice, quite different from the timid treble of the Reverend Lambert.

"Now, hand over your five hundred, Mr. Robber!" said the same voice, addressing Selden as he staggered to his feet. "I suspected you were a fly mug from the first. Hand it over!"

Selden took a large roll of bills from his pocket and gave it to the "minister." His watch and diamond pin followed.

"Take off your coat and pick up your hat," was the next order. "Hurry up. No stalling."

Selden did not stall.

"Now, put on these rags of mine, and these lamps," tossing his hat and spectacles to Selden and beginning to remove his coat.

He had been keeping a watchful eye on the driver, but while taking off his long frock coat to change with Selden he made a careless move. Instantly the driver's right hand swept down and a shot flashed out, followed by a cry of pain, and the ex-clergyman was dancing about, wringing the fingers of his right hand, Selden's weapon dropping from them to the ground.

The driver stooped and picked it up. It all happened so quickly that poor Selden, still dazed from the blow he had received, did not understand it at all.

"Come here, you two," said the driver, and Selden obeyed mechanically, while the other's language was unprintable.

"Hold up your hands, both of you!"

They did so, and a pair of handcuffs were snapped on Lambert's wrists, and then on Selden's.

"You gave us a long chase, McQuade," said the driver with a sigh of relief. "I've followed you all the way from Boston."

"Who are you?" growled McQuade, alias Lambert, and many other aliases.

"My name is Kendall," replied the other. "Ever hear of me?"

"Larry Kendall, of the central office?"

"The same."

"Gee! I thought this other guy was the bull. Oh, I am a simp!"

"Then you not Westerners at all, either of you?" asked Selden, his voice full of reproach.

"Allow me," said the detective. "Your fellow prisoner is Mr. 'Slim' McQuade, one of the worst men in the East, wanted very badly in Boston just now. I don't know just what to make of you; but you can both jump in the coach together now that the introductions are over, and we'll be getting on to Silver Creek. Don't try to make a getaway, Slim, for it's no use."

"I know when I'm licked," replied Slim.

Mr. George W. Selden, of Washington, and Mr. Slim McQuade, of Boston, got into the coach and were driven to Silver Creek, where they spent the remainder of the night together in the one small cell of which that town can boast. Before Selden got out of the scrape he had had so much adventure that he never wishes to hear the word again.

He is back in Washington now, and never ventures farther West than the Chevy Chase Golf Club. He has entirely lost his passion for "yellow" literature; and if there is one person whose name he hates the very sound of, it is that notorious and unprincipled outlaw, Jesse James.

Night Raid by Ernest Haycox.



NIGHT RAID

By ERNEST HAYCOX

"Mind your own business" was the Golden Rule of the rangeland--the code to which big Joe Breedlove and salty Indigo Bowers clung through thick and thin. Just once did they violate it--but when they did, pistol-fog rolled like night-mist across the Elkhorn range, and the roar of guns was like summer thunder

CHAPTER I - INDIGO FORETELLS SORROW

NIGHT had come again, a soft desert night that damped the intolerable heat of day. In another half-hour the small campfire gleaming on the edge of the gravelly creek would be a grateful barrier against the sharp, still cold. Overhead swung the infinite canopy of heaven, its metal blue expanse shimmering with stars; far and low on the horizon the moon hung at a crazy angle, a thin-edged crescent that gave no light. A thousand miles of desert and mountain marched to this solitary outpost of man and seemed to stop, while the bark and whine of distant coyotes and the murmuring of the creek alone broke the spell of silence. Sage smell was in the air; the smell of bacon and coffee had not yet quite gone. Two horses browsed beyond the rim of light, picketed. Blankets were down, and upon them stretched two weary travelers who had ridden a good many leagues in search of rest and surcease from the carping cares of men. Indigo Bowers and Joe Breedlove camped again.

No two individuals could possibly have been more dissimilar. Indigo was short and thin; his pointed, saturnine face was homely beyond description. And as he sat humped over, staring into the flames, it appeared that he thought of all the sorrows and all the troubles the universe bequeathed its mortals. No ray of cheer broke the set pessimism of lips, no trace of humor leavened his faded blue eyes. Life, it appeared, was just one dirty trick after another. Which is to say that Indigo Bowers was in his usual frame of mind and in his usual state of health.

Joe Breedlove, on the other hand, was a tall and muscular man. The firelight gleamed along his corn-yellow hair and snapped in his hazel eyes. He was looking up--up to the stars, his body relaxed and his face mirroring the perfect serenity that was so much a part of him. Joe made friends easily, and once made these friends clove to him forever; there was a mellowness about him, a whimsicality that tempered all his acts and all his words. The world, according to Joe, was the only world available, therefore why fret?

HE DROPPED his attention to the gloomy Indigo, fine wrinkles sprang around his temples. "Providence," said he in a voice that plucked the strings of melody, "sure thought about man's comfort when it created night an'

shadows. Me, I like shadows. It's all the same as takin' a bath after a hard day's work."

Indigo emitted a rasping sound of dissent and his cigarette drooped from a corner of his thin lips. "Yeah? There you go again with that doggone romantic imagination o' yours. Seems to me Providence made night because it's ashamed o' the ant-hill it created down here. Did you ever see anything more forlorn an' useless as the country we been ridin' through lately? I'm so cussed full o' sand I grate every time I move. I'm scorched like a kernel o' popcorn. Been lookin' at sagebrush an' distance so long I got a perpetual headache."

"Well," admitted Joe, mildly reluctant, "it's a mite sparse at that, but it's sure fine grazin' land for cows."

"A cow don't know no better," argued Indigo. "Personal, I don't like this land. A self respectin' buzzard wouldn't lay an egg in it. How long we been on this so-called journey o' rest anyhow?"

"Six weeks barrin' two days," said Joe.

"Yeah, an' how much rest have we got?" Indigo grew querulous. "It's funny how folks pick on us. Nothin' but trouble, nothin' but scraps. If ever we back-track we sure will have to pick another route. Six towns in a row is layin' for our hides. Rest--huh!"

"I'm a man o' peace," drawled Joe "I don't like to fight. If you didn't pack a temper full o' poison----"

Indigo stilled his partner with a gesture of a skinny arm and raised his somber countenance against the night. His nostrils dilated slightly, like a hound keening the wind. "They's trouble somewhere out there. I know it. Sounds to me like them coyotes is japin' us. I wish folks wouldn't pick on me."

Joe met this with a skeptical lift of eyebrows. His partner was like a bantam rooster strutting around the arena. Indigo's past life consisted of successive chapters of violence. He claimed he wanted to be left alone yet it was

always noticeable that when in the proximity of a fight he grew strangely restless. It only took one small word of invitation to bring him into the tangled affairs of other people. Many men had been deceived by Indigo's wisp of a frame; when he moved, he moved like dynamite, leaving destruction in his wake. And no amount of logic ever could convince him that he was other than a mild and inoffensive creature who had been unjustly picked on. He stirred on his blanket, the washed-out blue eyes darting around the rim of light.

"Just the same, they's somethin' goin' on around here I don't like."

JOE BREEDLOVE never moved, yet there was a slight tightening of his big frame. A sage bush rustled out beyond. Something stirred, the gravelly ground marked a body passing across the darkness, and the horses became uneasy. Both partners became unnaturally still. Out of the shadows marched a rawboned man with the russet beard of Judas and eyes that were brilliant black; a burly creature coated with dust and a general flavor about him that augured a shattering of the commandments. He squatted by the fire looking swiftly from partner to partner.

"Howdy, gents!"

"Huh," grunted Indigo, visibly annoyed. The fellow's approach violated all etiquette. Indigo believed in etiquette on the range.

"Nice evenin'," stated Joe Breedlove, mildly. "Stir up the fire."

"I ain't cold," said the newcomer and relapsed to a full silence.

It was up to him to announce himself and the partners waited, each staring into the flames. Joe Breedlove appeared to be in a deep and profound study; the placid benevolence of his face never changed. It was otherwise with Indigo and with each passing moment he grew more and more restive until it seemed he was about to suffer an acute attack of indigestion. Then there was another sound beyond the fire's rim and a second newcomer hitched

into the light and squatted by the blaze; he was built like a pole and his jaw was nearly as long as that of a horse. Once more the partners were inspected in a swift and sidling manner.

"Howdy, gents."

"The same," murmured Joe and casually draped himself in a manner that left his right arm free to swing. Indigo muttered and morosely held his peace. A moment later he flung up his head to find three other strangers marching out of the night. One by one they dropped to their haunches, none of them bothering to pass a greeting. Indigo looked across the flames to his partner, and Joe's left lid fluttered. The five visitors were as grave as redmen; the one who owned the russet beard looked around the circle and announced succinctly, "It's them all right."

"Yeah, I reckon," observed the gentleman with the horse jaw.

"You'll excuse the manner o' droppin' in," said the red-bearded gentleman to Joe and Indigo, with just a trace of deference in his words. "But we wasn't shore it was you boys. Elbow Jim is the only one which ever saw yuh an' he's laid up in town with a lot o' concussions where a hoss kicked him. I guess he's out of it for some days. Anyhow we sorter hung back an' watched yuh sashayin' acrost the country today. Elbow Jim said it'd be a big man an' a leetle man, so's we waits to get a good look."

It never took much to soothe Indigo's feelings. A sort of an apology had been offered and he accepted it with magnificent forbearance. "That's all right--that's plumb natchral."

"Well," went on the one with the red beard, "it was Elbow Jim's idea to write an' ask yuh to come down here. He had a lot o' confidence in you boys. Mebbe he told yuh all about it in the letter?"

Here was a situation. Indigo, never a great hand at deception, kept still. But Joe waved an arm. "I reckon he didn't say much. A letter, you know, is sorter public."

"That's right," agreed the red-bearded one. "Elbow'd be pretty secret. Well, it was his idea. But since he ain't here to unravel it I guess we'll have to go on without him. Me, I'm Bo Annixter. He's--" pointing to the fellow with the horse jaw, "Shirtsleeve Smith." And Bo Annixter went around the circle, calling names. The partners gravely nodded.

"The point is," proceeded this red-bearded Annixter, "we're plumb able to rustle our own critters, but lately the county's sorter tightened up. They got a sher'ff who's watchin' the railroad. We had a gent who took our stuff an' got it to market for us. Well, he quit--scared out. Reckon he's made all the money he wants so he's figgerin' to be an honest gent from now on. Which leaves us up a tree."

"The country," opined Indigo, "ain't what it used to be."

"Now you said somethin'," agreed Bo Annixter. His black eyes stabbed Indigo and passed on to Joe, leaving Indigo dubious. This fellow with the red foliage looked mighty tough and so did the other four rustlers. Doggoned tough.

"That's why Elbow wrote you boys. We figgered we'd rustle the cows an' run 'em to the county line. There's where you'd take 'em an' fog 'em to yore hangout. Elbow said yuh allus had a place to sell."

"Well--" murmured Indigo and waved his arm vaguely.

"Sure--sure," interposed Annixter hastily. "We ain't askin' nothin' about yore location. Jus' take 'em an' get rid of 'em. We split fifty-fifty. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

"That's downright handsome," agreed Indigo, almost with enthusiasm.

"It ain't everybody we'd trust like that," said Annixter. "But Elbow said you was four-square gents. So that goes with us."

"Our word," declared Indigo, rearing up, "is good as gov'ment security."

ALL the while Joe Breedlove had maintained silence. Indigo, meeting his partner's attention, was suddenly aware that he talked too much. And, upon a second observation of the five rustlers--seeing them sitting around so watchfully, and seeing the firelight slant across their hard jowls--he decided he had played the situation a little too far.

"It's like this," went on Bo Annixter, turning to Joe Breedlove. There was something about the golden-haired man that always attracted attention and respect. Inevitably he was looked upon as the leader of the pair; perhaps it was his smile, or the lazy way he carried himself, or the unbroken serenity of his countenance--at any rate when men dealt with the partners they soon came to ignore Indigo. Ordinarily Indigo would have resented such a thing, he would have risen upon his haunches and launched his defiance. But with Joe trailing beside him it was different; deep down in his heart Indigo admitted Joe to be the better head. Which was saying much for Indigo.

"It's like this," repeated Annixter. "They's the Elkhorn outfit five miles from here. Old man Stovall runs it. They's only five hands on the place. We ain't ever touched it, but now's the time. Part o' their summer range is right near the county line an' they ain't but one hand ridin' thataway. See? Shucks, it's easy. All clear?"

Joe's head bobbed slightly, whereupon Indigo began to worry. He depended always on Joe to get them out of trouble--and here was Joe drifting into stormy waters.

"Fine," said Annixter, and slapped his thigh. "Then we might as well get at it tonight."

Indigo bent forward to poke the fire and in so doing got a chance to look well at his partner. Joe appeared never so placid as now. By and by he stirred.

"How far is that Elkhorn ranch-house?" he asked, mildly.

"Five miles due south."

More silence on Joe's part. And this very silence plainly increased Annixter's respect. "Of course," said the man, "mebbe it ain't very big potatoes for you boys. Elbow says yuh handle consid'ble beef. Still, they's a neat profit. If yuh want, yuh can sit right on the county line an' we'll rustle 'em to yuh."

Joe squared his shoulders. "I guess not tonight. My partner and me always like to look a layout over before we do business."

"Shucks, it's pie," protested Annixter, evidently not liking the delay.

"Shore," agreed Joe. "But it's a rule of ours. Never pays to make a pass in the dark. That's why we're still free gents."

Annixter silently debated; the rest of the rustlers waited. There was something so taciturn and so calmly confident about them that Indigo, as hardy a gentleman as he was, grew nervous. The sooner he and Joe were out of this the better. "Yeah," said he in a dry voice, "it's a habit o' ours."

"All right then," agreed Annixter. "We'll sleep on it. Run over t'morra an' look. We'll do it that evenin'."

The rustlers rose and went back into the darkness. Saddle gear jingled, horses moved into view; and presently the whole five were back with their blankets, bedding down for the night. Indigo, scratching his head, felt the sweat trickle down his cheek. And it made him mad. The fire died and the camp slumbered, though Indigo's rest was broken by the memory of Annixter's beady eyes.

AT DAWN the partners were up and away, leaving to Annixter and the other four the assurance that they would be back at the same rendezvous around noon. Joe was profoundly buried in one of his meditative spells and Indigo kept the silence for a good quarter of a mile, or until he looked back

and saw the rustlers streaming across the land in another direction. Then he could hold himself no longer.

"Who started this doggone deception, anyhow?" he demanded.

"I'd be obliged for the information myself," said Joe, rousing. His mild glance fell upon Indigo with more than a passing interest. Indigo rose to his dignity.

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't tell 'em we was the gents they wanted to meet. Well, not exactly. Why didn't you speak up an' say it was all a mistake?"

"Why didn't you?" countered Joe, rolling himself a cigarette and studying the horizon with a far off gaze.

"I thought about it," admitted Indigo, "but judgin' from appearances it looked to me as if the news might've irritated 'em some."

"That was my conclusion likewise," agreed Joe. "And what's the use of disturbin' folks' feelin's?"

"Well," summed up Indigo, "we're supposed to be a couple of high-class rustlers from the county to the north. Must be awful high-class, the way they trust us. An' we're supposed to be friends to this Jasper Elbow Jim who's laid up with a belted coco. What gets me is how quick they figgered we was somebody we ain't. Awful careless."

"I sorter suspect," put in Joe, "that we camped on the spot the two parties was to meet. Indigo, wouldn't it be real interestin' if them two real rustlers should arrive about now, or if this gent Elbow Jim should appear on the scene?"

"I dunno," muttered Indigo in apparent despair, "why people should pick on us so. I don't see nothin' interestin' about said eventualities. All I see is a lot o' trouble. Told you so last night."

Indigo observed that Joe had a tight and familiar look upon his face. It meant profound thought and Indigo felt the chill of anticipation. It couldn't be that this easygoing partner of his-- No, Joe never horned into a strange game. Still, as a kind of feeler, he put forth a general statement. "The farther we ride an' the quicker we ride the sooner we'll be out o' this mess."

"That sounds sensible," murmured Joe, still engrossed in his thoughts.

Indigo was vaguely disappointed. "Mebbe we should stop at the next town an' tell the sheriff." But in a moment he answered that for himself. "No, it wouldn't be none of our business, wouldn't it? Same as spyin'. But, say, how about droppin' into this Elkhorn outfit an' passin' a hint?"

"That ain't much different from tellin' the hounds o' the law, is it? Why butt into somebody else's affairs? It's their game, not ours."

Indigo rode in moody silence for a mile before muttering, "I guess it's none of our business."

Joe had no answer for that. Indigo studied his partner surreptitiously and couldn't quite get a perverse idea out of his head that the smiling and debonair Joe was still on the rack of indecision. At the end of another ten minutes he repeated his remark. "I guess it's none of our business."

"That's right," declared Joe, as if he'd come to a decision. "We ride."

"Oh, hell!" snorted Indigo.

Joe grinned at his partner. "I thought you was tryin' to avoid any more trouble?"

"Well, but look at it," grunted Indigo. "It seems sorter stinkin' mean to me. There's that old gent who prob'ly don't deserve no misfortune. There's all them nice beeves--Joe, it don't seem right."

"Yeah, and there's all that trouble to fiddle your feet in," countered Joe. "Why don't you speak the real reason?"

Indigo refused to answer. He proceeded with a kind of smouldering excitement in his eyes and a feeling that his partner was wholly unreasonable and entirely too cautious. He knew as well as any man of the range could know that the first law was to mind his own business and not to tamper with another's quarrels unless definitely asked. Still, it seemed to him a bet was being overlooked.

UP FROM the distance rose a ranch-house surrounded by corrals and outbuildings and a scattering of cottonwoods. Joe studied the scene between half closed eyes.

"I guess," said he with admirable casualness, "we'd better drop in an' get fresh water, hadn't we?"

Indigo nodded, still resentful. They rode toward the house and presently reined in before the porch. Over the doorway spread an immense set of elkhorns. On the porch posts someone had imprinted the brand of the outfit with a hot iron--a miniature elk-horn. There was an ancient settee beside the door and in it reclined a man of about sixty with dead white hair and a florid face. He seemed quite hale and hearty, though a buffalo robe was thrown across his knees. Seeing the two partners he raised his hand by way of greeting. "Light and rest, boys."

"Why, thanks," replied Joe, eyes lingering a moment on the elkhorn brand, "but we're just passin' through. We'd trouble you, though, to show us the water. Canteens dry."

The man raised his voice, calling. "Oh, Julie!" Then he apologized. "I'd get up if I wasn't dead from the waist down. My girl will take care of you. Come from the north, eh?"

"Yeah," said Joe, only half hearing him. A girl stood in the doorway; a girl in her twenties with auburn hair and a rounding, supple body. The porch was shaded, yet it seemed to Joe Breedlove that the sunlight dwelt on her face. Gray eyes met and smiled at him.

"Julie," said the man, "take the boys' canteens an' fill 'em like a good girl."

Joe slid from the saddle, removing his hat. He collected the two canteens and passed them to the girl as if it were a ceremony. "Hate to trouble you, ma'am," he murmured, and again his voice plucked the strings of melody. Out of the saddle he made a fine showing, tall and muscular and self contained; a mature man who looked as if he loved life, who plainly had been through the world and seen it in many moods and yet could be whimsical and untouched by malice. The girl threw up her chin to study him, half grave, half smiling; just a trace of color came to her cheeks, then she retreated.

"Better stay to chuck," advised the elder man.

"It would be a command any other time," was Joe's courteous answer. "But we're just a mite rushed. Your range, I take it--your brand."

The man's chest filled. "You bet. Henry Stovall's Elkhorn ranch. Ask anybody in town about the name or the brand and see what they tell you. When I come here I used to ride herd on the Crow warriors. Long time ago. I've hired an' fired a thousand men--half of which is long dead. Now look. Four punchers and a foreman, a girl worth all of 'em and a paralyzed old duck better dead. But I bet I live to be ninety. Ain't that the way?"

"Who knows what the hole card is?" drawled Joe. "But it's tough not to be able to fork a horse."

Stovall's hands moved. "I'm a cattleman. Been one all my life. Be one after I die unless they make me shear sheep down in perdition. Does it hurt, not havin' a horse? I reckon yore man enough to know the answer to that."

"Well, you can still smell the wind," was Joe's grave answer, "an' hear the beaver-tails bellerin' out in the brakes. That's somethin'."

AROUND the corner of the house rolled a young man with dust on his chubby face. He was hatless and jet black hair curled around his head. Responsibility seemed to rest heavily on his mind, for he was very grave and he studied the partners with a quick, measured glance. Joe, who was a good hand at judging his own kind, decided that this chap was competent even if he wasn't much beyond voting age; and he returned the short nod with an amicable jerk of his own head.

"That calico is busted to work," said the youngster, to Stovall. "But he won't never be worth a whole lot."

"Let it lay," replied Stovall. "You boys are all a little heavy-handed with the ridin' stock. Takes an old-timer to deal with the cayuses." He turned his attention toward the partners again. "I could use some experienced hands. Want a job?"

"What for?" interposed the young man with just a trace of belligerence. "Ain't we got enough men already, considering' everything?"

Stovall spoke soothingly. "All right, Slip. I know you're the foreman an' it's your place to hire an' fire. But I like old heads around me an' I ain't had none for a powerful long time. I'm repeatin'--there's a job for both you boys."

The girl came out with the canteens, in time to hear her father offer the partners work. A kind of alertness crossed her face, a touch of expectancy. Joe took the canteens and entirely by accident his big paw brushed her white hand. Thus they returned steady inspections until Joe dropped his head, smiling. "I'm obliged," said he and moved to his pony. Slip, the foreman, was still young enough not to be able to conceal jealousy; his lips tightened, he was not far removed from sullenness.

Joe climbed to the saddle; his eyes looked to the spreading elkhorns and again to the girl. "Thank you kindly, sir. But we've already got employment. We'll be ridin'."

The foreman disappeared back of the house. Joe and Indigo rode off. A hundred yards removed the tall partner turned in the saddle and raised his

hand as a farewell. The girl still stood on the porch and her arm came up in reply.

All this while Indigo had said nothing. In company he seldom spoke, he always felt ill at ease and willing to have the more polished Joe take care of the amenities. But he missed nothing, he thoroughly inventoried the ranch and its state of prosperity in the few moments they had been by the porch. And he also had observed the glance the girl bestowed upon Joe. Well, many men admired Joe--and some women. How could it be otherwise? He turned to his partner and discovered that Joe was studying him quite soberly.

"News to me we had a job," grunted Indigo.

"I guess----" began Joe, and thereupon stopped. The youthful foreman came spurring toward them. The partners halted and waited till he came up.

"Didn't aim to be unsociable back there," he explained, still a little surly. "But the old man is losin' his grip. Think's he's better off than he really is. Always wants to hire somebody. You savvy, I guess."

"Sho'," murmured Joe.

INDIGO got the idea these two fellows were sparring with each other; the foreman was measuring Joe and Joe in turn seemed to be reading the foreman. The silence was broken by the youth. "See any tracks north of here?"

"What kind of tracks?" drawled Joe.

"I'd guess you know what kind of tracks I'm meanin'," replied the foreman significantly.

"We're only strangers passin' through," observed Joe in a curiously soft voice.

"Then you wouldn't know what's goin' on in this county," said the foreman. With no more parley he wheeled and rode off. The partners went on until the ranch buildings were lost below the undulating ground. Then, as if both were animated by the same idea, they came to a stop.

"Well, Indigo."

"Well?"

"You know blamed well we can't go an' squeal to the sher'ff," said Joe with a trace of impatience. "We ain't built that way."

"Didn't say we was, did I?"

"An' it'd be the same if we tried to tell those folks at the ranch, wouldn't it? We don' play double."

"You say it," grunted Indigo, not able to fathom his partner's intentions.

"I guess we better sashay back to the beetle-faced gents an' see this through."

"Yeah?" snorted Indigo. "So we should turn rustlers. Then what?"

"Well, if they rustle the critters in the dark and turn 'em over to us, we can throw the stock right back on the Elkhorn range can't we? Nobody's the wiser for the time bein'. Then we pull stakes and get out of this country. By then the real pair o' rustlers from the north will show up an' Annixter's gang will realize they've spilled the beans. They'll shy off from poachin' on Elkhorn again, figgerin' the ranch will be warned. And meanwhile the Elkhorn riders'll see all them tracks on their territory an' keep strict watch. Don't it work out? Nobody's hurt by the transaction an' we won't be squealin'. Leaves our conscience plumb clean."

The distinction was somewhat too fine for Indigo's forthright soul. He said as much, adding, "Supposin' the real pair is on deck when we go back? Or supposin' this gent Elbow Jim has showed up?"

"All we need is today an' tonight. It's a gamble we got to take."

"I dunno why it is you always got to do things the hard way," muttered Indigo. "Always got to embroider an' hemstitch till we're up to our neck in the soup."

"Great Caesar, wasn't you the fellow who wanted trouble a minute ago?" inquired Joe.

"In moderation," was Indigo's reply. "I want a run for my money. This is jus' foolish. Nothin' but calamity can come of it."

"Well, then, we'll keep headin' south an' forget it," decided Joe.

"Oh, hell, didn't I say I was willin'?" snapped Indigo. "Let's go. But jus' remember we're turnin' illegal. Don't forget it none. Mebbe we got good intentions but when we're caught nobody's goin' to know it. I don't see nothin' but sorrow. Well, if we got to do it, then we got to. Come on."

They described a wide circle in the prairie and struck north toward the rendezvous with Annixter and his rustlers. Joe Breedlove was as serene and benevolent as the winds of May; Indigo's pale blue eyes took on a certain narrowed fixity. The both of them were riding into action and each accepted the fact with characteristic expressions.

CHAPTER II - A NIGHT RAID

WHEN the partners, thoughtful and somewhat wary, reached the meeting place by the creek, Annixter's gang had not yet returned, and for this breathing spell both Joe and Indigo were thankful. The sun stood at its high mark; being normal men they were hungry, so they boiled a little coffee, fried some bacon and rummaged cold biscuits out of their rolls. After that they smoked in the shade of the cotton-woods, seeming drowsy yet not for an instant relaxing from a constant scrutiny of the horizon. They meant, above all else, to see the rustlers approaching in time enough to count noses. The sun slid west and the afternoon droned along.

"The beetle-eyed jasper," muttered Indigo, "said we didn't have to do any actual rustlin'. Said we could wait on the county line an' he'd bring the critters to us. Sounds reasonable to me."

"That won't work," argued Joe. "We've got to know where they get said cows else we won't know where to take 'em back."

"Was you aimin' to set each brute in its identical tracks?" questioned Indigo, scornfully. "Joe, I never mistrust yore abilities, but I shore do know you've got an awful habit o' addin' a lot o' unnecessary fancy work to an ordinary chore."

"The closer we stay to those fellows from now to midnight the safer we'll be," returned Joe. "We got a responsibility and we might as well see it through proper."

"Yeah, you're always hell for proper," grumbled Indigo. "Wish I had more cartridges."

"Dust off to the east," announced Joe.

The partners rose up in unison and stationed themselves at no great distance from the waiting horses. The dust cloud grew, and presently riders spurred through it into sight. Indigo squinted long and carefully.

"One more thing," murmured Joe, the words tightening, "in case of trouble and in case it's each fellow for himself, hit for those bluffs toward the northeast there."

"Then," snapped Indigo, rising to his full five feet, five inches, "we'd better hit pronto. They was only five gents last night an' right now they's six. Bet it's that Elbow Jim jasper. What about it?"

Joe looked for himself. Six riders came along at a lope, side by side, rising and falling in unison. The partners swapped somber glances and moved toward their horses. Presently they were a-saddle, yet they tarried.

"No use runnin'," grunted Indigo. "I don't feel crooked enough to let a bunch o' mugs like them chase me."

"Make it two," murmured Joe. He had a small, set smile on his face; and as the party swung into the grove his arm hung free beside his gun. Indigo appeared to have another severe attack of indigestion; his homely, wizened features were twisted at odd angles and the light of battle flickered in his blue eyes, turning them to a queer shade of green. Annixter, foremost, flung up an arm and the group halted. The sixth man, both partners were quick to note, was a shackling gentleman with a fever and ague face. He sat crooked over as if he were saddle galled, his clothes were wrinkled and one side of his head was wrapped in a blue neck piece. Undeniably this was Elbow Jim, and Elbow Jim at the present moment looked toward the partners with a vacant, unknowing glance.

ANNIXTER slid to the ground, speaking to Joe. "Elbow, the damned fool, wouldn't stay in his bunk. Had to come along. No use tellin' him anything, but he'll croak for it yet."

Joe was the picture of laziness. "Hello there, Elbow."

Elbow Jim seemed to be startled. He focused his attention, much as a man might strive to see through a fog. "Who are you?" he growled.

Annixter, shielded by his horse, tapped his head with a finger and winked at Breedlove.

"Shucks," protested Joe, still talking to Elbow, "don't you know yore old friends? Remember the time--"

"Who are you?" demanded Elbow. "What's all this foolishness about? I don't know yuh atall."

Annixter spoke up. "It's the boys you wrote to up north, Elbow. They come down, like you asked. We're all set now."

"No, we ain't set," contradicted Elbow Jim. "Never laid eyes on either party. It's a frame-up."

Elbow spoke with energy; the tone carried conviction. Annixter's head reared and his sparkling black eyes flashed from partner to partner, narrowing and hardening. The rest of the rustlers sat like ramrods in the saddles. Indigo, never a man to endure suspense any length of time, broke in angrily.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow? Ain't you got good sense?"

"What's yore monnickers?" asked Elbow craftily

"My name?" snorted Indigo. And by the way he weaved in the saddle, Joe knew his partner was about to fling down the gauge of battle "If anybody around these premises wants to hear my name it's--"

"Hold on," interrupted Joe He leaned toward Elbow and spoke persuasively. "Now, Elbow, don't you remember the night in the Dollarhide Saloon?"

Joe had seen that saloon in the course of their trip southward It happened to be in the town that was the seat of the county to the north--that county in

which he and Indigo were supposed to do their rustling. And since Elbow Jim was a friend of these two unknown rustlers it stood to reason he must have met them on their own territory and possibly in that very saloon. It was a chance shot in the dark. Elbow obviously struggled with his reason. He had been badly battered on the head and most of his faculties jarred out of him. "Don't you remember that, Elbow?" repeated Joe, in the tone of one talking to a backward child.

Of a sudden Elbow dropped from his horse and walked away. "My God, what's all this? Am I bugs? My haid hurts."

There had been a faint trace of suspicion in Annixter's eyes, but this last moment seemed to dispel it. He came toward the partners, lowering his voice. "No wonder his coco hurts. They's a dent in it big enough to sink an aig. Reckon he's off the track for keeps. Ain't been talkin' straight since he got kicked."

"Looks some thinner to me," observed Joe with an air of considered judgment.

Annixter nodded, thinking of other things. "Well, how about it? See what you want to see this mornin'?"

"I reckon," agreed Joe. "Any time you say."

Annixter's shoulder's rose, his jaws closed like a trap. "Fine! It's three hours to dusk. We travel then."

IN THAT gloaming hour when dusk marched out of the horizons and the cobalt shadows piled thicker over the land the party swung to horse and turned due east. They traveled silently and swiftly for a half mile, Annixter in the lead, Elbow Jim alongside. The injured rustler kept mumbling to himself, turning a puzzled eye on the partners. And finally he stopped, bringing the cavalcade to a halt with him.

"I'm goin' back," he announced.

"What for?" demanded Annixter, showing impatience. "Don't gum up the works, Elbow. We got business on hand an' it ain't like you to lag."

"I'm goin' back," repeated Elbow Jim stubbornly. "Seems like I remember I was to meet some fellows by the crick. It seems like I was."

"Why, you darned fool, here they are, right with us," reasoned Annixter.

But Elbow Jim shook his head. "They ain't the ones. Seems like I was to meet somebody." And without any more argument he left them and rode away. Annixter's head dropped, he stared at the ground for quite a spell. By and by he looked to the partners and in the interval it seemed as if he fought with his suspicions. Indigo's eyes, not visible to the rest of the party in the shadows, turned green again; Joe was relaxed and casual, though his attention never wavered from the leader.

"Maybe," he suggested, "I better go round him up."

"Let him mosey," decided Annixter. "He ain't much help anyhow." His hard glance measured Joe and fell away. "We ride."

They went on into the deepening night, hoofs drumming the ground. A small wind sprang up, the heat of day vanished. Once more the stars were out and the moon hung lifeless on the world's rim. Annixter kept a steady course into the east for an hour, then gradually veered south, checking the gait imperceptibly with the passing minutes. Joe judged that they were at a far corner of the Elkhorn range, traveling away from the ranch buildings all the while. It also seemed to him Annixter was circling toward his objective, not going in a straight line. Annixter, he decided, was a capable hombre and one who easily assumed authority. Certain it was the rest of the rustlers obeyed him without a murmur of dissent; a hard, unscrupulous fellow who would put a good front on anything he did. Joe's experience with lawless gentry was wide and varied; most of them were braggarts and bullies, with a courage that faded in a showdown. He rated Annixter as being of tougher grain. An inner warning bothered him; Annixter's bulky body made a formidable shadow in the darkness.

The leader grunted, and the group came to a halt. Annixter spoke in a rumbling undertone. "All right, Shirtsleeve."

Shirtsleeve Smith proceeded on alone. Annixter touched Joe's arm. "Ain't far now. When we round the brutes we hit direct north into them buttes. They's a pass thataway we go through. County line beyond. It's yore play then. I guess you know the country over there?"

"Yeah."

"How long will it take you boys to polish off the deal?"

Joe answered easily. "Three days."

Annixter seemed to be surprised. "That's pretty sudden."

"We do it sudden," responded Joe. "No use havin' illegal beef around you any longer'n necessary. It's the reason we're still out o' jail."

"Elbow thinks a lot o' you boys," said Annixter. Joe caught a trailing doubt in the words, but he forebore answering. Shirtsleeve Smith's shadow returned.

"All clear."

"We ride," grunted Annixter.

THEY traveled slower this time, the ponies' hoofs making a small and sibilant confusion in the sand. Within fifteen minutes they stopped again. Cattle ahead, cattle smell in the air and the vague outline of their presence. Annixter spoke. "All right, Shirtsleeve--Red--Mac."

The indicated ones left the group and merged with the velvet pall. The warning in Joe's head grew clearer and more insistent. This Annixter party did things too competently. No fuss, no excitement. It was like a drill. Too smooth, too doggoned smooth. Probably Annixter had a lot of other plans

concealed behind that red foliage--for instance, in case he decided there was trickery in the partners' presence. Running those critters back to their original range wasn't going to be half as easy as it seemed.

Cattle moved slowly. Annixter's voice was slightly brittle. "Go ahead, Buck."

The rustler remaining with Annixter rode away, heading toward the Elkhorn ranch buildings. "Allus keep a man on our tail to watch for trouble," murmured Annixter.

Joe feigned a hearty approval. "I shore like yore style, Annixter. Wish you was with us boys up north."

"It's an idea," grunted Annixter. The man was human enough to be flattered. "This country's gettin' washed out. They's a sher'ff who's hell on wheels. Elbow won't never be good no more. An' we're gettin' too prominent in the county. Said sher'ff was elected on a promise to clean us out an' the fool actually figgers to do it. Well, here we are."

Cattle moved by them at a shambling, uneasy pace. Soft oaths broke the night, and the slap of quirts. Annixter and the partners fell in behind. Joe assumed a sudden authority. "Lay on 'em now. We've got to mosey."

Annixter mildly protested. "What's the rush? This is easy."

"My style," replied Joe a little more crisply. "Didn't I say we worked fast?"

The pace increased; Annixter sidled off and was gone for some time, during which interval Indigo edged closer to his partner and started to speak. Joe interrupted with a quick phrase. "Neat work, ain't it Indigo? I like these boys' style." And Indigo, warned, held his tongue. A rider drew up to them, coming from some unexpected angle, and rode between, never saying a word. Annixter returned, also silent. The mass of shadow that was the rustled stock weaved uncertainly. Hoofs and horns clacked; the pound and shuffle of their gallop rose into the night.

"Shirtsleeve--drop back," snapped Annixter. And the man riding between the partners faded and was lost. "We're leavin' a broad trail. But they was an Elkhorn rider makin' the circle this mornin' an' I doubt if he'll get around till late tomorrow. That's ample time for you boys?"

"Plenty," said Joe.

"We'll meet yuh four days from now at the crick," suggested Annixter. But Joe knew that was more of a request than a suggestion. Annixter seemed to grow more gruff as the night wore along; more distant.

"Agreed," was Joe's response.

AFTER an hour the ground began to grow rougher and the outline of the broken country stood up before them. Annixter disappeared again. When he returned Joe felt the stock turning to another point of the compass. They dipped down and up several arroyos, they passed a clump of jackpines. On they hurried. The slope grew steeper, it turned rocky underfoot, the pace slackened and the horses began to breathe harder.

"The pass," said Annixter and for the third time rode off. The cattle were at a walk. High ground stretched on either side and the walls of a small canyon narrowed on them, pinching the whole procession to a long, trickling line. There were trees up this way, the breeze scoured against them, fresh and cold. Riders lagged and fell in behind. Then they were going up a stiff grade--a grade that of a sudden dropped into a summit meadow. The trees marched out to them, surrounded them; a coyote barked, the party came to a halt.

"Your turn, I reckon," said Annixter, returning. "Down the far slope is the county line."

Joe took off his Stetson and dropped his watch into it. Then he lit a match and discovered it was even twelve. All this had taken longer than it seemed;

dawn wasn't more than four hours removed--four hours in which to undo all that had been done. "All right," said he.

"Don't let this rough country fool yuh," warned Annixter. "Bear due north. Either way from that'll push yuh into a lot o' blind pockets. I'd go on straight to the line, but it's better we go back an' make a lot o' tracks leadin' another direction. One o' the gang, howsumever, will keep a lookout around these parts after daylight. If he sees anybody comin' afore yuh get far enough off he'll send up a smoke signal. Watch yore back trail for that."

"Good enough," murmured Joe. The rustlers had collected, waiting for Annixter to finish. The man tarried, saying nothing at all, yet bending close to Joe. Joe saw only a blur of Annixter's face; then the leader withdrew.

"Four days from tonight, at the creek," he called.

"That's right," agreed Joe. "Adios."

The rustlers dipped down the grade and presently the partners, listening carefully, lost the sound of them. Indigo sighed, as if he were pulling himself up by the roots. "Well, we got somethin' on our----"

Joe's arm touched him. "Easy, Indigo. Hold it a minute."

They waited five minutes longer, but nothing stirred the profound stillness of this night save the slight and uneasy movement of the stock. Joe stirred and spoke in a matter of fact voice, slightly louder than appeared necessary. "All right, now we've got to drive 'em hard as long as it's dark. Let's push 'em."

They pressed against the rear of the cattle. Indigo rode around to edge in the flanks. Once more the momentum of the mass carried the small herd along the trail and across the level ground of the diminutive meadow. Under cover of this orderly confusion Joe closed upon Indigo and spoke just above a whisper. "Keep 'em going five-ten minutes, Indigo. I'm waitin' on the trail. Think somebody's apt to be followin' us."

HE LEFT his horse at the side of the trail, back in the pines, and retraced his way afoot for a hundred yards. Here he stopped and waited. The noise of the cattle came to him as a muffled echo. Elsewhere was no movement save the slight scouring of the wind in the pine tops.

"Somethin' bothered that Annixter gent," he said to himself. "He's a shrewd duck. Think maybe he'd have a man track us till we got out o' the county, jus' to find if we was up to specifications."

He drew back a yard or so. A horse came up the slope, picking its way cautiously and with only the slight shuffle of its hoofs and the small abrasion of saddle leather to announce it. Well, there wasn't need for much caution; the noise of the herd would drown out this kind of pursuit. That fellow Annixter was nobody's fool, he took care of all bets. Joe's arm dropped toward his gun and he retreated still farther. The rider was muttering sibilantly to his animal. "Get along--get along. Don't yuh know cow smell?" Man and beast were abreast of Joe. Joe tarried one more instant; then his tall body weaved across the space and came up somewhat behind the rider. His arms swept forward and all his strength snapped into them. The horse reared. Down out of the saddle came the rider, fighting. A bellow woke the echoes as he hit the ground. Joe struck him on the face with a driving blow and his gun touched the man's ribs. "Easy, brother. Make it easy." There was a quick turning and slashing of legs and arms, a subdued volley of oaths. Joe's gun barrel laid along the fellow's head and then resistance died. The herd, evidently, had stopped for Joe couldn't make out their progress; but Indigo was coming back at the gallop.

"All right. Draw in, Indigo. I got a nibble. Bring me yore rope."

Indigo groped toward Joe. "He's out? Lessee his complexion, Joe. An' do yuh reckon the rest o' that gang heard the yelp he lets loose."

"Don't believe so. They left him behind to scout. I figger they're well on the way to the crick by now. Light a match."

Yellow light sputtered under the protection of Indigo's extended hat-brim and the flickering rays fell upon the horse-jawed Shirtsleeve Smith. Shirtsleeve was unconscious and unlovely. The light sputtered out; Indigo wasted no time with his lariat, nor did he waste gentleness as he looped and knotted the cord about the recumbent rustler. Joe started to untie the man's bandanna and fashion a gag but Indigo, catching on to the operation, interrupted. "Lemme do that. You can palaver a whole lot better'n me, but when it comes to such chores as these here I'm the golden haired lad. If yuh want to know the positive truth, Joe, that feller Annixter reminds me o' bad medicine."

"Make it two."

The partners boosted the still mentally absent Shirtsleeve Smith to his feet and carried him back through the pines to a spot that felt secluded from the open ground. Then, they retraced their way toward the herd. "Good thing them brutes is tired or they'd be scattered from hell to supper. Joe, I ain't no saint, but it gripes me to be an amachoor rustler. Tain't a matter of morals either. It's a matter o' legal impediments. To state the bald facts it's a matter o' a knot under one ear."

"We've got less than four hours, Indigo. Have to hustle this."

"Why not run 'em anywhere down into the flat country an' leave 'em. That's near enough ain't it?"

"Not by five miles it ain't, Indigo. Supposin' Annixter should be ridin' this way at daylight an' see 'em all ready to be pushed back up here out of sight. He'd do just that. And there'd be our good intentions shore shot to pieces."

Indigo grunted. "You're just doin' fancy work now an' you know it. Yuh just got an idea an' yuh won't let go."

"Put it like that," agreed Joe. "Let's mosey."

THEY circled the cows and milled them back upon the trail, traveling across the meadow and down the slope. Presently they were on level ground again, urging the brutes to a gallop. They had no exact idea as to where the main part of the Elkhorn herd ranged, but being old and experienced at night riding they did know the approximate direction and the approximate distance back along the route. About an hour and a half of this progress would bring them to a good enough destination. Another hour and a half would put them well out of the way--just as dawn arrived. Not exactly a comfortable margin, but still sufficient if they kept fogging on during the day.

Joe looked up to the dim stars and grinned wryly. Well, maybe Indigo was right. It was a stubborn idea, this of running the brutes back to where they originally had been. It needn't be so close, almost anywhere along here was really good enough. But Joe Breedlove, as mild and peaceable man as he was, had queer streaks of illogical sentiment in him. He loved, above all else, to put an adequate, and artistic end to his chores. Indigo, now, was more of a realist. When the small and wizened one got into a jackpot his method was to drive ahead and tap somebody on the coco. That was effective, but to Joe it wasn't satisfactory. Joe's method was to use his silver tongue; if that failed then he resorted to stratagem, tied his man and lectured the unfortunate on philosophy.

In the present case there happened to be another motive. Up among those stars was the face of a girl--the clear and rounding face of Julie Stovall with her auburn hair and her gray eyes. She had looked at him with favor, there had been something of understanding in the short, grave glance. It reminded Joe of earlier days, of a time when he was a stripling and his future seemed to be settled among quiet ways. Well, that had gone under the bridge. But though time softened and mellowed the disappointment, it only took such a woman's look to unlock Joe's treasure box of memories. And then Joe's smile became a little wry and the magnificent chivalry of the man flamed high. As tonight.

Out of the darkness came a tremor of sound that was above and beyond the rumble of hoofs. Indigo had heard it too for he came in from a flank muttering.

"Hear that, Joe?"

Joe bent his head and listened. It vanished, then it came again, more strongly. Indigo grumbled. "To the right of us. Listen, we're makin' enough noise to wake the dead."

"Let the brutes run on a ways," murmured Joe. "We'll stick here."

"I'd jus' as soon orphan them cows right now."

"Easy, Indigo. Sift to the left some. You'd think the whole county was out ridin' tonight." His voice trailed to a mere whisper. "Sift. They ain't far away."

The cattle galloped on a piece then, no longer pressed, broke the pace and split in twenty different directions. Joe Breedlove saw the compact shadow of them dissolve and disappear. They were all over the compass. He heard Indigo shift restlessly in the saddle. Elsewhere was the sound of somebody circling and advancing. Elkhorn outfit--posse--rustlers? Joe didn't know, but any of the three possibilities spelled poison for he and Indigo. It was hell to be honest tonight, and it was hell to be crooked. However, the straying cows shielded them somewhat.

"Never get 'em together again," he thought to himself. "Looks as if we leave 'em here and fog."

THE outline of horse and rider moved in. Behind was the clink of a bridle chain. There was more than one and they were quietly prospecting the area, quietly dragging back and forth. Joe felt a presence to his left hand and he drew himself up, his head sweeping from side to side. Best to freeze until these gents got tired and passed by. If it happened to be Annixter's party a little lead slinging wouldn't hurt, but if it were either Elkhorn men or a posse the less gun play the better.

Indigo couldn't keep from stirring. Joe put out his arm to touch him in warning. At that moment Indigo's horse, smelling his own kind, elected to whinny. Suddenly riders drove toward the partners from all angles and there was a slapping and a jingling of gear and a challenging of voices.

"That's them! Bear down!"

Annixter's men!

"Out of this," muttered Joe, turning his horse. "Back to the buttes. Come on, Indigo, don't get reckless."

But Indigo had labored and sweated hard enough for his fun and now he meant to satisfy his ingrained instinct for trouble. Joe saw the little man rear in the stirrups; Indigo's cracked, falsetto tones sheered the night in ribald defiance. "Yuh suckers, come an' collect!"

Annixter's voice, hard and crisp seemed to carry over their heads. "Draw off, Mac." And at that somebody at their rear spurred away. Then the tornado struck. Mushrooming points of light glowed, flat waves of sound spat in their faces. They were whip-sawed. Indigo's gun roared, the wizened one swayed in his saddle like a common drunk and he yelled again. "What smells around here? Polecats!" Joe, who fought more methodically sent a brace of bullets toward a gun flash on his flank. Annixter shouldn't have more than four men, for Shirtsleeve Smith was tied and cached up in the pines. But in spite of that the rustler leader had found help somewhere; he could tell it from the revolver echoes. Must be six in the bunch. And they were whirling around like raiding Indians. Joe made up his mind on the spot.

"Come on, Indigo. Shells cost money an' dead is a long time."

They reined about and raced away. For a moment the volleying diminished; then they heard Annixter's gang in full pursuit. The protection of the buttes was about a half hour off, or less and the shadows were blacker--that piling up of shadows that came just before first dawn. The sharp wind struck their cheeks, the stars were dim. On they plunged.

It seemed to Joe that they gained distance. All firing ceased for a little while and there was only the pound of their own animals beneath them. But, some minutes later, Joe's ears caught the echo of the trailing rustlers again and for the next quarter hour the partners laid on their quirts with the knowledge they were but a scant hundred yards ahead of catastrophe. Presently they reached the rougher ground and Joe veered a little. "Hear 'em, Indigo?"

"Nope."

"Neither do I. They ain't direct behind any more. Damn that Annixter gent. He's as slick as a boiled onion."

"Their hosses is about as tired as ours, Joe. An' they can't be exactly shore which direction we take."

"That ain't the answer," grunted Joe. "They got somethin' up their elbows."

"Well, there's the end o' a good deed which never got done," muttered Indigo. "I wasn't so cracked about this business o' foggin' them critters clear back. But now that them dudes have spoiled our little journey I'm all in favor o' seein' it clear through."

"We ain't finished yet," Joe replied. "We'll hole up in the timber an' think about it."

They struck the entrance to the pass, wound in and around the rugged slopes and arrived at the narrowing walls once more. At that point disaster overtook them. Hemmed on either flank they were arrested by Annixter's harsh and peremptory order rolling down from the fore. "You're boxed. Stop right there!"

"Not me!" cried Indigo and sank his spurs. The partners flung themselves onward. The defile rang like a forge, bullets whipped at them from front and rear. Joe felt the shock of Indigo's horse colliding against his own pony and the succeeding moment Indigo was calling up from the ground. "They plugged my brute, Joe. Go on, beat it!"

Annixter sang at them again. "Throw yore guns thisaway!"

Joe slid from the saddle and retreated to his partner. The rustlers pressed nearer from either direction, barely outlined in the dim morning's dusk. Well, they could make a fight of it yet, but what was the use of the extra killing? Annixter had only to draw back, post guards, and wait for daylight. Meanwhile here he and Indigo were, exposed to the crossfire. This was the end of one episode; tomorrow was another day.

"All right," he muttered, "we're through."

Indigo swore like a man in pain, but Joe touched his partner's arm, whispering. "Remember what we decided once, old-timer."

"Stop that parleyin'!" boomed Annixter. "Throw yore guns thisaway or we'll open up!"

The partners obeyed. Annixter's men crept along cautiously and in a moment Joe and Indigo were prisoners. Light wavered across the eastern horizon.

CHAPTER III - ON THE LEDGE

IMMEDIATELY after the partners were disarmed and both tied into Joe's saddle, Annixter left a single man to guard them and withdrew down the slope a few yards to hold a parley. There seemed to be a division of opinion in the party, a heated contest between caution and recklessness in which the leader lost ground. At first nothing but the general sound of their talk reached Joe and Indigo, but as the discussion grew warmer they caught what went on.

"Daylight's about here," said Annixter. "They'll be an Elkhorn man ridin' circle. Why not wait till dark?"

"By which time said gent will see all them tracks an' then the whole danged ranch will be on the scout. If we git 'em, we got to git 'em now."

"They'll shore trail us then," argued Annixter.

"What of it? Ain't these hills big enough to cache in till dark? Then we can slip the stuff on acrost the line."

"It's a big risk," grumbled Annixter. "Don't you boys reco'nize the fact we got to live in this section? You're out of it--we ain't."

"Risk either way. We come a hell of a long distance on Elbow's call an' we can't stew aroun' here for a week while the excitement simmers down. If we wait another day to git them brutes we're only lettin' them folks fix a nice trap. If we go round 'em up now we can chose our own country to fight in--if we got to fight."

"I don't like it," protested Annixter. After this followed a flurry of argument. Joe understood then the situation. The pair of real rustlers from the north had arrived and Annixter's party had fallen in with them. A silence came over the group, broken finally by the leader's reluctant assent. "All right.

We'll go do it. But I got to leave a man out there today to take care of the Elkhorn line rider. Can't have him discover tracks an' run for help before we git everything settled an' out o' the way."

"We'll hide the critters up in the timber until dark," said one of the northerners. "Then we fog back with 'em. Shucks, what you afraid of?"

"Talk's cheap and it don't buy no ribbons" muttered Annixter. He returned to the partners. "What'd you highbinders do with Shirtsleeve?"

"Up in the brush takin' a wink," drawled Joe.

Annixter accepted this with an ominous mildness. "It's the fool's own fault for not bein' more careful. Well, I give it to you boys for bein' slick. We'll count up the marbles later. Elbow, come here."

The figure of Elbow Jim appeared through the filmy shadows. "Yeah?"

"You tail these fellows back into where that big cedar is. An' don't have no lapse o' memory either."

"Don't worry," mumbled Elbow. "I ain't all finished."

Annixter retreated, the whole party rode down the trail. Elbow grunted at his prisoners "Mosey up. I may be crazy, but I know a face when I see it. Go 'long."

THE horse carrying both partners moved up the trail and back to the small meadow. It was light enough now to distinguish the beaten pathway and the occasional stumps and boulders.

"Turn left," said Elbow, and circled the partners' horse to swing it off the trail into a lesser and much overgrown trace. This led them through ever thickening underbrush, down steep slopes and along miniature canyons. From the prairie this mass of buttes had not seemed large, but now that they were away from the open country everything took on greater proportions. It

was a good place to hide in or be lost in. Apparently the pass cut across the most gentle part of the ridge for the longer they traveled the more they climbed and twisted; once they had sight of a waterfall spraying against sheet rock a hundred feet below. Then they were more thoroughly enmeshed in the pines and the clinging brush.

"Turn left," droned Elbow, and again rode in to press the partners' pony. They broke through what seemed a wall of trees and came out in a glade not more than fifteen feet across. Elbow stopped and got down. Daylight flooded down, dew sparkled on the grass.

"This," said Joe in genuine appreciation, "is shore pretty ain't it?"

"Nice place for a murder," was Indigo's gloomy response. "Say, fella, you goin' to keep us up on this barbecue platform much longer?"

Elbow circled the pair, looking out from under his shaggy brows with a sly shrewdness. "No tricks, no tricks on pore ol' Elbow. I may be cracked but it don't hurt my shootin' none."

"Tricks with what?" snorted Indigo. "I can't do nothin' but google my eyes."

Elbow came over and cut the ropes fastening the partners to the saddle. "Git down--march over an' sit agin that log. No--not so clos't together. Yuh might fiddle with t'other's wrist hobbles. Ol' Elbow's still got a lick of sense."

The partners with their hands tightly lashed behind them, sat against the designated log and held their peace. Elbow roamed the small glade impatiently, his head turning to odd angles and every now and then he murmured a garbled phrase to himself. Anything interested him, many objects puzzled him. Once he stooped to the ground and was thus hunched over for a matter of minutes. Then he came toward the partners and swept them with the same sly look they had observed before. The longer he watched the more uneasy he grew, until at last he spoke.

"I don't know you gents."

"Why of course you do," said Joe soothingly. "We've hoisted many a glass at the Dollarhide."

Elbow Jim wrinkled his nose and peered down it somberly. "Ol' Elbow's shore cracked. Once, by Gabriel, there wasn't a man in the county what was able to down me. This was my gang, yuh hear me? Bo Annixter's boss now. Oh, Bo's all right, but he couldn't hold a candle to me. Them dam' bosses."

"Remember the Dollarhide?" persisted Joe.

"I know what I know," mumbled Elbow Jim, and he looked very shrewd.

Joe studied the log casually. "I'm sorter uncomfortable here. Elbow. It's a poor way to treat an old friend like me. But of course you got orders from Annixter an' I reckon you got to obey 'em----"

"Once I didn't," was Elbow Jim's quick reply. "But I'm out of it now. Yuh don't know Annixter like me. When he's got the bulge he keeps it. I'm kinder sorry for you gents. How'd you git in this scrape?"

He seemed to have lucid moments, moments in which he understood what had taken place. Then quite of a sudden his mind went off the track and he was both puzzled and sly, forgetting what he had said the instant previously. Joe went on. "I'm sittin' on a rock. Got any objections if I move over a little."

"Jus' so's yuh don't git nearer the skinny feller," agreed Elbow Jim.

JOE moved himself in a series of crow-hopping jumps, back all the while touching the log. Indigo's semi-closed eyes flickered with a baleful green light and he utilized Elbow's averted attention to do something with his pinioned hands. Joe's progress put the partners farther apart and made it more difficult for Elbow to keep them within the range of a single glance; nor did Elbow notice that when Joe stopped and leaned on the log he had his back directly against an out-thrust knot with a splintered edge. Joe timed

this well. Elbow moved around the glade with a sorry jaded expression on his battered face. The man was in bad shape; fresh blood caked the bandanna on his head.

Joe's body went rigid with effort and his arms snapped powerfully and fell limp as Elbow faced the partners again. "Yuh dunno Annixter. What he's got he keeps. Who're you boys? I'm cracked all right, but I know what I know."

After that he resumed his moody tramping, head swinging with his feet, gun dangling loosely in his fist. The morning wore along, the sun marched upward in the sky, the glade was flooded with a bright hot light. The partners seemed to accept their situation, attempting no more talk; but in those odd intervals when Elbow's attention left them Joe's arms bent outward, twisted and flexed. Beads of sweat crusted his forehead, stolidness touched his eyes--a sure sign that Joe was torturing himself.

It was more than an hour--nearer two hours since they had been captured--when they heard a voice sounding far through the trees. Elbow turned his back to the partners and cocked his head. Indigo stirred and looked warningly to Joe; the latter nodded grimly.

"Elbow," he purred, "be a good gent an' roll me a cigaret. Seems like you'd ought to treat an old friend like me better'n this."

Elbow bolstered his gun. "I been in the Dollarhide all right." He bolstered his gun and went searching for tobacco and papers. Brush rustled nearer, somebody swore. Elbow rolled the cigarette with a tantalizing slowness, so slowly that Indigo began to squirm restlessly and Joe struggled to keep a serene countenance. Elbow shambled across the space, the cigarette between outstretched thumb and forefinger. "No monkey business," he warned Joe. "I ain't to be took in nobody's camp. Open yore mouth."

He was within a yard of Joe. The latter tilted his shoulders forward, he had his feet crossed beneath him. As Elbow took the next step Indigo suddenly called out, "Say, Elbow, what's this over here--"

The trick was about to work. Elbow swung. Yet the spring Joe was on the point of making, never materialized; the impulse, swiftly checked, almost

carried him over on his face and thus he sat as Shirtsleeve Smith smashed into the glade, raging like a madman.

"Elbow, yuh passed within a foot o' me--an' there was I, stuffed like a turkey! Couldn't talk, couldn't move! I aim to bust somebody's ribs. There yuh be, daggone yore hides! Whicher one manhandled me--whicher one o' yuh gents stuffed all that grass in my gullet? I got a notion to fill yuh full o' pine needles."

"Good mornin', Shirtsleeve," drawled Joe. "Hope you slep' well. How far was you aimin' to trail us last night?"

Shirtsleeve advanced, the horse-jawed countenance crimped in lines of malevolence. "How'd you know I was trailin'?"

"Always been able to smell a skunk," was Joe's deliberate answer.

"Here's where I drum a tune on yore ribs!" snorted Shirtsleeve, and stood directly over Joe.

INDIGO made a noise that was indescribably contemptuous. It pricked Shirtsleeve Smith's vanity as a pin might explode a balloon. He swung toward the small partner, ready to blast him with profanity. Elbow Jim gurgled, but it was then too late. Joe's arms and hands shot out in front of him and his body sunfished through the air, striking Shirtsleeve as a battering ram. Shirtsleeve's angular frame work was too loosely coupled to absorb the impact; every joint in the man snapped, his head flew back and he bent double. Joe's fists struck Shirtsleeve's lantern face twice and the man pitched over. Elbow Jim's gun wavered uncertainly, trying to catch a clear target of Joe. Once more Indigo, who hadn't yet moved, served a useful purpose by yelling at Elbow and thus diverting the injured rustler's attention. It was, however, hardly needed. Joe--the man of leisure, the slow-talking, serene appearing man of the world--exploded like a box of dynamite. Shirtsleeve never had a chance. He was down before he understood what happened; he struggled a little and was battered again. Joe

heaved him up and made a shield of him; Joe whipped the gun from the prostrate one's holster and drew a bead on Elbow.

"Drop that piece, Elbow!"

"I got orders--"

"Drop it you crazy loon or yore dead as yesterday!"

The summons cracked over Elbow's head, making him flinch! There he stood, a sorry and troubled figure, fighting off the deadly mists in his brain. He knew he was licked, he knew that for him the days of usefulness were over and that never again would he stand as an equal among other men. Henceforth he would be a chore boy, a half-caste creature to be pitied or laughed at or kicked about; always he would be plagued by that curtain which darkened the brightest day and cut him off from his own past, rising only for an instant--an instant in which, as now, he saw the horror of his case and the utter futility of living.

In this flickering instant of self-knowledge Elbow Jim looked on down the alley of time and found nothing there for him. There was a grain to Elbow, there was pride. Why should he, who had commanded men now sink to the level of a camp dog? One thing he could do. He could carve his own epitaph and let men know that he was master of himself to the very end. So he turned and for a small space looked into the muzzle of Joe Breedlove's gun.

"Drop it," repeated Joe.

Elbow shrugged his shoulders and passed a glance to the still roped Indigo. He could kill Indigo, but if he did the other partner's leveled gun would crash into him before he turned his own weapon inward. And Elbow didn't wish it to be that way. Very slowly the gun in his fist veered and rose. He heard Joe Breedlove's last brittle injunction. And that was the final word that reached him from any mortal. He sent a bullet into his own tortured brain and fell.

"Well, by----" shouted Indigo, startled out of his calm.

Joe's revolver fell and a clucking noise passed his lips. Joe loved his fellow creatures and the sight of this moved him tremendously. "The pore devil--the pore old fella. Well, that's best." He flung up his head, hearing fresh sounds beyond the glade. The main body of rustlers were returning; that shot had warned them and it was only a matter of minutes. "Hustle over here, Indigo!"

Indigo rose and galloped toward his partner. Joe unraveled the knot holding indigo's wrists and transferred the rope to Shirtsleeve's arms. The fellow was not entirely out but there wasn't any resistance in him. Once more he was a stuffed turkey. Indigo ran over, got the dead Elbow's gun and belt, and collected the horses.

"Them boys will think we killed Elbow," said Indigo, "which impression I hate to have 'em get. This Shirtsleeve guy ain't out of the hop enough to understand."

"Let it ride. Damn the luck, we could've had the drop on that party if they hadn't heard said shot. Now they'll watch for trouble. We've got to sift."

THEY swung up on horses and started through the narrow exit--the same route by which they had come. The rustlers were not in sight but the sound they made indicated an uncomfortable nearness. "It won't do," muttered Joe. "We've got to make our own trail. Come on."

They turned, recrossed the glade and forced a way through the brush. It was slow, nervous work; within a few minutes Annixter's booming echoes announced the discovery of what had happened. Hard on this came the leader's harsh order. "Spread an' foller. They don't get away, hear it? Knock 'em out o' the saddles! Bring down the hosses. Shouldn't of left Elbow in charge, but I didn't--Shirtsleeve, yuh yella mongrel I got a notion to ride my hoss over yuh! Come on!"

"The boy's full of business," said Joe. "Well, he can't buck this brush any faster'n we do."

"No, but he sounds powerful mean," grumbled Indigo, "and he knows this country a heap better'n us. I'm for makin' a stand on the premises."

They put the worst of the brush behind and arrived at a deer trace dodging along the uneven earth. Joe went before and jockeyed his horse into a respectable run. Overhanging boughs whipped them severely. "How about bitin' back?" persisted Indigo.

The rustlers were in full pursuit; it sounded like a stampede. "What for?" queried Joe. "All we can do is argue an' run some more. I'm awful tired of this deal. My idea is to shuffle the cards again. If we stick here we're liable to be boxed an' licked. Then when it gets dark they'll sashay the stock on over the hump--and what've we got to show for all this sulphur an' brimstone, presumin' such to happen?"

The trace dwindled to nothing, leaving them high and dry in the brush. Once again they bucked through it. The rustlers, taking advantage of the same deer trace, closed the interval. Annixter's violent shout trembled on their ears. "Mac, strike toward the draw! They're headin' for it!"

Indigo grunted. "That's advertisin' for us to stay away from said draw. Well, doggonit, this was yore bright idee in the first place. So get another idee quick or we stop an' argue. I hate to run--it blights my morals scandalous!"

The brush gave way to a more or less open stand of pines; across this they swept. Beyond was a burn with charred snags trooping side by side. On they went, the rustlers seeming to slacken the pace. "Well," decided Joe, "I hate to think of 'em gettin' away with Elkhorn's cows, knowin' what we know. Guess we better swallow some pride an' ride for help."

"Which was my recommend in the beginnin'," jeered Indigo. "It's a hell of a time to be thinkin' of it now. How d'yuh suppose we get outa this wilderness without bein' sniped at?"

The ground began to wrinkle and grow rugged. Ahead they had a vista of lava rock bereft of any kind of foliage. Acres of it, where black pinnacles reared and fell into deep pits. And beyond that at some undetermined distance the ridges dropped into the prairie. The partners had seen the bluffs

descending sharply to level ground while riding across country the day before and thus they knew what lay ahead. Heat haze rested on the horizon; three hundred yards farther brought them to a draw sloping down into the prairie. Joe drew rein. He had made up his mind.

"Somebody's got to go down thataway and hit for the Elkhorn. Somebody's got to stay behind and entertain these gents a few minutes."

"That," declared Indigo with alacrity, "is my job." The wizened face flared with the only emotion it was capable of expressing, a grim and embattled pleasure; those washed blue eyes flickered, changing to an emerald green. "You travel. I'll stop 'em long enough to let yuh get a good start. Then I'll work back into the rocks an' pick my teeth."

"Pick lead from yore ears, you mean," muttered Joe. "They'll try to rub you out." His hand ripped at the buckle of his gun-belt; he flung the belt and revolver across Indigo's saddle. "You need this too."

"How about you?" protested Indigo.

"I'm runnin', not fightin'," was Joe's answer.

FOR an instant the partners studied each other. It was one of the few times in their joint career they had separated during trouble and it left both uneasy. Together they made a formidable, efficient machine. Asunder they were lost, like man and wife divorced. Yet there was nothing either could say at such a juncture for they were not made to say pretty sentiments. So Joe shrugged his shoulders and turned into the draw. "Be good, kid. I'll hustle back."

"Uhuh," grunted Indigo, watching his partner go. "Don't rush. I'll say I earned this fun an' they ain't no use cuttin' it short."

Joe dipped around a point of brush and was lost save for the clatter made by his pony's hoofs. And that scarce had died when Indigo flung himself into

the draw and crawled up the far side. Here was a fine breastwork of rock. Back of him were other equally good shelters in case he had to retreat. He jumped from the saddle, shying his horse into an adjacent pit, and settled to his haunches.

Annixter's men raised a great noise as they came. The chase had grown so hot that it made them careless for they plunged out of the concealing undergrowth and through the straggling pines with no side survey, no flanking forays. Annixter's eyes were pinned to the fugitive tracks; up to the edge of the draw they swept and halted. Annixter stood in his stirrups, looking down the draw; his arm made a semi-circular gesture and the rest of the riders closed toward him. There were six of them besides Annixter, and Indigo, raising his gun, admitted he had at last matched himself against superior odds. For Indigo that was a tremendous concession.

"One set of tracks goes down there," said Shirtsleeve Smith, indicating the draw. "Other gent has hit for the lava rock."

"Prob'ly jus' to throw us off," snapped Annixter. "They're both foggin' for open country, you bet. Back to Elkhorn, the dam' spies. Come on. If they reach help we might as well quit business."

"Don't be in no rush," sang out Indigo and placed a bullet just short of Annixter's horse. The distance made accurate revolver work out of the question, but all Indigo cared about right at present was to announce himself and keep the party occupied. The compact formation around Annixter was scattered instantly, as if a bomb had fallen in the center. Dust rose, men streamed back, spreading out. Annixter's voice rose again, though not loud enough for the intrenched Indigo to make out just what the man was saying. It didn't matter, however, for the small one's glittering green eyes saw them charge through the trees and momentarily disappear in the direction of the draw's head. That was clear enough; they meant to flank and surround him.

Indigo muttered wrathfully, "why don't they fight in the open?" and took steps to remove himself from the immediate area. The horse was no good to him out here where a yard of level ground ended in a forty yard crater or an immense monolith. Regretfully he left the pony and struck straight on

toward the end of the ridge. "When a man's got to take to his own locomotion," he soliloquized, "the situation ain't bright. Anyhow, Joe's clear an' safe."

INDIGO stood behind a rock shelf and watched a row of sombreros bob toward him, over on his left hand, a hundred yards away. The outlaws had deserted their horses likewise, which for a brief spell gave him the audacious idea of slipping across the draw and stealing the animals. He counted the hats and immediately decided not to be foolish; there were only five in pursuit. Evidently Annixter held a man in reserve--perhaps sent him on Joe's trail. Anyhow, it wasn't wise to buck into uncertainty. So he retreated again, keeping well out of sight. Once a burst of shots broke the silence and the lead slugs spattered an adjacent lava formation. Indigo derisively wrinkled his nose and made an insulting noise. They didn't know exactly where he was, therefore they prospected. But Indigo had cut his wisdom teeth in trouble and he wasn't to be tricked like that.

He crawled up and he slid down; he rolled over, he rested and he traveled again. The sun bit into the back of his neck and the lava rock was as sharp as broken glass. He began to sweat and at that point he realized he was going to be intolerably thirsty before this day's work was ended. Right there Indigo's wrath exploded sulfurically and all the rustlers' ancestors suffered blighting comparisons. Indigo was a man who could endure all sorts of hardship and privation willingly and cheerfully, provided he did it of his own accord. But the fact was, right now, he was being driven by a collection of mangy, louse-infested, mutton-eaters and it hurt his pride to think they were the cause of all this misery. He very nearly rose up from his concealment and challenged them. Some divine angel saved Indigo from his own impulse that time, or perhaps long association with Joe Breedlove had instilled a little caution in him. He kept on. And the farther he went the narrower the ridge became. Nothing was to be seen of the rustlers. Ominous quiet held the flickering heat haze.

Twenty yards brought him to the end of his trail. He climbed the side of another, huge bowl, hooked his chin over the rim and found himself staring

down a matter of four hundred feet to the prairie floor. It wasn't a sheer drop, but it was abrupt enough to bar Indigo from going farther. "A centipede would shore bust his laigs goin' down that," he grunted. "Here's where we fort up."

The idea of having so much space behind him didn't suit Indigo very well. It absolutely cut off his retreat, it made this argument a last ditch affair. So he returned several yards and settled behind a pinnacle, from which he ran three small alleys. Any of them, in case of emergency, provided him with a graceful exit. The only trouble was that it left his rear open to attack. Indigo turned it over in his head and ended by going back to the very edge of the bluff. "Why do things by half? If I got to die, I got to die." With that fatalistic decision he settled himself against the most comfortable slab of lava he could find and prepared for a stormy afternoon. His pale green orbs darted across the tortured surface, seeking sign of the party, and for want of a better thing to do he emptied half a sack of cigarette tobacco in his mouth and chewed doggedly.

"Joe," he muttered, "ought to be half way to Elkhorn by now. Hope he don't take my advice too literal about not hurryin'."

FURTHER soliloquy was abruptly terminated by the sight of a hat rising fifty yards on the right--rising and falling. Indigo fastened his attention upon it until something brushed his vision at the extreme left. Another hat. They had spread out and were sweeping the ridge top as they came. "Too thorough about it, daggone 'em," swore Indigo. He drew both guns and laid them over his parapet, grimly waiting. No more hats appeared for a little while and Indigo judged they had only been exposed to draw fire, thus identifying his location. "A barkin' dawg don't bite. Me, I ain't droppin' the hammer till I see solid flesh."

There was the faintest of sounds behind and Indigo whirled about like a tiger at bay. Down in the pit of the hollow crawled a horned toad, disturbed out of his customary somnolence. Indigo, whose nerves had been touched, cussed the toad with a roundness that would have shamed a mule skinner.

The toad, hearing all this reproach, skittered off. Indigo dropped his hat over the creature. "Daggone you, Oscar, what's the idee o' scarin' a gent like that? Thought somebody had clumb up behind."

The toad thumped the hat brim by way of reply. Indigo took another glance over his parapet and reached in his pocket for a piece of string. "No you don't, Oscar. Now that yuh come I reckon yuh might as well keep me company. We're goin' to see things which shore will broaden yore eddication." He slipped his hand beneath the hat and took the toad. Out came Oscar, blinking in the light, the skin beneath his throat rising and falling. Indigo threw a loop around the animal's barbed surface, laid him on the rocks and secured the string's far end beneath a loose lump of lava. Oscar was thus picketed.

"First off, Oscar," advised Indigo, "yore a livin' witness that a man can spit four hundred linear feet. It ain't a clean habit, Oscar. Wouldn't never advise yuh to chew. Wimmen don't like it. Now watch this." Indigo craned his neck over the bluff's edge and spat outward into space; for a moment he laid thus, as if waiting for an echo of the far off impact to return. Oscar walked out to the end of his tether and fell on his back, thus blinding himself to the record breaking feat. Indigo grunted. "Jus' like any other fool. Never go against the rope, Oscar."

The wizened one took another survey of the broken ground. Somebody ducked behind a hummock of lava. He heard a short signal and braced himself as five of the party popped into view and came forward on the run. Lead smashed against his parapet, splinters of rock struck his face. He took aim at the nearest and fired. The five dropped instantly. Another bullet sang above him, seeming to come from a different angle and before he had a chance to scout the area again a steady barrage played against his defense. He couldn't raise his head to see what went on, but he heard Annixter telling the rest of the rustlers to keep up the shooting and right after that he heard boots scuffing across the jagged surface. They were keeping him smothered and closing the gap.

Indigo gripped both guns in his fist and waited. "Oscar, it'll be over in a minute. This life is hell on frawgs." Reaching over he slipped the noose from the creature's neck. "You better hit for shelter." Annixter's sharp

command penetrated the still air; they were not more than fifteen yards away.

CHAPTER IV - TROUBLE BREEDS TROUBLE

JOE swept out of the draw and across the prairie as fast as the horse would take him. He thought he heard the reverberation of pursuit down the draw, but after he got a quarter mile away from the ridge he looked back and found no one behind. That encouraged him, as well as discouraged him. His own safety was assured; Indigo's was only made the more uncertain. One thing he knew very well--the rustlers would bend every effort to capture or kill Indigo. Otherwise they were betrayed and their activities in the country were necessarily at an end.

"Should be somebody foggin' after me," he murmured to himself. "Unless they think we're both holed up in the lava. Somebody must've seen my tracks headin' down the draw."

But there was nobody behind, not even as the bluffs grew dim behind the haze and at that point he decided the rustlers had figured his tracks to be only a blind. It was queer, too, they couldn't spot him out in the level ground from their vantage point. It must be they had their heads pretty close to the lava. The thought made him grin wryly. "Indigo'll see they don't stand very high in the air."

After that he discarded these speculations and took to nursing speed out of the pony. About forty-five minutes later he stopped the lathered, exhausted animal in front of the Elkhorn porch and dropped out of the saddle.

Stovall was in his accustomed chair. He saw the girl Julie hurrying through the house toward the door. And before he could say anything the young foreman, Slip, popped around the corner at a run. "What's up?" he demanded.

Stovall motioned the foreman to be silent, the ruddy face turning a deeper red. "Slip, ain't you learned politeness yet? Dammit, a man'd think you was

a pilgrim in the country. Julie--Julie!"

"Yes, dad." The girl was framed in the doorway, looking curiously at Joe. The silver-haired puncher removed his hat and ducked his head.

"Get the man a drink. Step to the porch, sir, an' take a seat. It's another hot day."

"Why, I'd reckon it was," agreed Joe. Time pressed, but he was an old hand and he recognized Stovall's ingrained courtesy. The West changed and grew away from men like the Elkhorn owner; folks put less faith in the ancient etiquette, but Stovall kept to it while the youthful foreman simmered and looked dourly on. The girl returned with a brimming dipper and a flashing smile. Joe drank.

"I'll be thankin' you, ma'am," said he, returning the dipper. The foreman stirred angrily as he watched the two of them stand so near together and for the moment so oblivious to all other things.

"Yore horse needs rest," suggested Stovall, "better lay over."

Joe heard in this an invitation to speak his piece. So he came directly to the issue, talking in slow, clipped words. "My partner and I was ridin' south yesterday. I guess you understand that we been trained to mind our own business, no matter what happens."

"Knew it when I saw you," interrupted Stovall. "Know a old hand when I see one. About gone from the country now."

"What's all this parley about?" grunted Slip.

Joe proceeded as if he hadn't heard the young foreman.. "Accidental, the other night we struck a party that mistook us for somebody else. They spilled the beans. A matter of rustlin' some cows. I'll just say that we knew yore stock was to be rustled. We knew it when we came past yore place."

The young foreman pointed an accusing finger. "Then why didn't you say something? That's a pretty kind of talk to spill now!"

Joe was looking at Stovall, almost apologetically. "I was hopin' you'd ketch on to my last remark. We been taught to mind our own business strictly."

STOVALL'S ruddy face lost some of its color and the coal black eyes snapped. Julie had retreated to the doorway and had her attention riveted on Joe "I was raised in the same school myself," said Stovall, quietly. "I've seen men killed for not keepin' out o' what wasn't their affair. You got nothin' to be sorry about."

"Well," went on Joe, still more apologetically, "when my partner an' I rode away from here we--well, we figgered it wasn't exactly right. So, not bein' able to squeal, an' yet knowin' what we did know, we decided to go back an' see the thing through. Aim was to throw in with the rustler gents an' later run yore stuff back on the range without sayin' anything to anybody. Point is, we was mistook by said parties for a couple northern rustlers who was to take yore stock an' fog it over the line. That's how we could swing the deal without a fight, or without blabbin'."

"Go ahead," said Stovall, with hardly any emotion in his words.

Joe turned to the girl. She nodded imperceptibly and seemed to withdraw still farther into the house. "It didn't work out," finished Joe. "Trouble. Real rustlers from the north turned up. My partner is barricaded up in the lava an' yore critters are hid somewhere along the pass. That's why I'm here. If it was only a matter of me an' Indigo I wouldn't bother you folks. But you stand to lose some cows."

The young foreman erupted disbelief. "I didn't like the way you fellows drifted in the last time. Didn't believe what you said. Don't believe it now. Sounds to me like yo're a couple of highbinders that got pinched an' now you're yelpin' for help. All this high an' mighty talk about not wantin' to squeal--"

Julie spoke for the first time. "Slip, stop that."

The foreman threw up his flushed face and stared at her in astonishment. "Listen, Julie, I'm responsible for this ranch and I can't go swallowin' a lot of honky--"

"Be quiet, Slip," said she.

"Is it his word over mine, then?" cried Slip.

"Don't you know an honest man by sight, Slip?" she asked him. And when Joe turned to watch her she was gone from the doorway.

Stovall's hands plucked at his blanket, and if ever a man struggled with a desire it was the Elkhorn owner. There was something so passionately wistful in the old man's face that Joe dropped his head. Stovall gave his foreman abrupt orders. "Call out the crew. Saddle this gentleman another horse."

"To ram ourself into hot lead an' a trap?" asked Slip.

"Do as I say, Slip. Hustle it."

The foreman retreated, calling to the crew. Joe rolled a cigarette, still feeling the necessity of an apology. "Reckon we made a mess of it all around. Either should of stayed out altogether or went in altogether."

"It reminds me--" began Stovall. He never finished that sentence, seeming to be lost in his past. A little later a slow grin spread over his ruddy features. "Hell of a way for a ranchman to take bad news, ain't it? You'd think I ought to be sore. But it's been so long since I saw anybody gallop up on a lathered brute that it sorter takes me back. Can you lick 'em with my boys?"

"I reckon," was Joe's brief answer.

"I'd give every red cent I own to go along," said Stovall, and the grin disappeared. "I don't believe you give me a name, cowboy."

"Joe Breedlove," said the tall one. "Happens to be my true name."

"Any name would've done," was Stovall's quick response. "Well, Whitey, you and yore partner have got a job here any time. Think it over."

The foreman rode around the house with a quartette of Elkhorn men behind him and an extra pony. Joe climbed up, nodding at the surly Slip. Stovall's black eyes held a glitter as he gave his last order to the youth. "Now, yo're takin' instructions from Whitey on this party. What he says goes. Hear it?"

"You're the boss," grunted Slip.

"You bet," snorted Stovall. "Ride!"

JOE swung away. Just as he reached the crest of a small ridge he turned to catch another look of the Elkhorn house. Stovall gripped the arms of his chair, trying to rise; and beside him was the girl, her hand above her eyes. It rose to him, and fell. The youthful foreman caught that gesture and he pushed his mount alongside Joe's angrily. "Who the hell are you, anyhow, to come here an' mislead folks? I'll play this game, fella, but you bet I'm protectin' the Stovalls. Leave yore betters alone."

Joe shook his head. "I know jus' how you feel, Slip," said he, gently "I had a girl, too, when I was yore age."

"Keep her off yore tongue!" snapped the young foreman. "An' if yo're any man a-tall, don't play ducks an' drakes with a good family."

Joe held his peace. The young fellow was all right, he was doing the best he could and he didn't really mean to pass the boundary of politeness. An older head might have understood, but Slip was very young and he felt his responsibilities. So Joe made the proper allowances, sympathizing with the man, yet all the while remembering Julie Stovall's gray eyes, and the smile she had given him. "It'd be a dreary world without a woman," he murmured to himself. "Wonder what Indigo'd think about workin' on the Elkhorn?"

"What was that?" asked the foreman.

"Bear a little left," said Joe.

Nothing more was said for a half-hour. The ridge stood clearer through the haze and the sheer bluffs at the western extremity began to show their ochre and black coloring. Joe followed the trail he had made earlier, a trail that led them directly toward the draw. A mile or two from the draw's entrance he began to debate the advisability of circling and entering the rugged land by the timbered half. He dismissed the move as a time waster. If Annixter's bunch were on the lookout they would see this party crossing the open land and prepare accordingly. Best to strike up the draw and take what came. He announced this decision to young Slip. The foreman, stirred by the proximity of a pitched battle, forgot his resentment and his suspicions.

"Where's yore partner?"

"Corraled somewhere in the lava."

"It's been near two hours, ain't it?" wondered young Slip. "Which is a pretty long time for one man to stand off five-six. Say, what gang is this? You ain't told me yet."

"Annixter's."

"The hell! Say, yore partner's out of luck by this time."

Joe turned on Slip with a swift, brittle retort. "They don't grow Indigo's kind down here, my boy. Don't feel bereaved none till you see him dead."

"Well, what's the play to be?"

"Bust into 'em when we see the color of their whiskers. Look sharp. Spread out a little. If there's any dickerin', I'll do it But don't go to sleep in the saddle meanwhile. Pick a man an' keep yore eyes on him. Up we go."

They reached the draw's mouth and threaded its tortuous course. It narrowed and grew steep; rocks went clattering down the slope behind. Somewhere was a single shot followed by silence. "Hustle it!" snapped Joe. "They ain't had sense enough to quit foolin' with Indigo yet."

The draw swooped along a final sharp grade and brought them to the exact point the partners had parted earlier in the day. Joe dropped to the ground and ran up to where he commanded a view of the lava bed. Another shot blasted the sultry stillness.

"They're givin' it up. Comin' back. Ain't seen us yet. Spread along the ground. Wait till I give the word!" whispered Joe.

THE Elkhorn punchers flung themselves against the earth at wide intervals. Joe plastered himself at the draw's rim, peering between boulders. Annixter's men came back, threading the lava pits, ducking in and out of view. There were five of them and Joe, casting up the account, wondered what had happened to the other one. Back watching the rustled stock, or dead by Indigo's gun. Well, it would soon be discovered. Another shot cracked across the barren strip and Annixter's men sank momentarily down, turning away from the hidden Elkhorn party. Joe's heart swelled a little and he felt like shouting; for Indigo's warped and wiry figure popped out of a depression seventy yards beyond the rustlers and waved his gun in a plain invitation for them to return and fight. It was beyond any decent gun range but the rustlers opened fire. Indigo wagged his thumb and fingers in a ribald manner; his yell split the air. Then he sank back. The rustlers took up the retreat once more. Annixter's heavy voice rose blasphemously, no more than fifty feet distant. Joe waited another dragging minute, feet doubling beneath him. His Stetson bobbed toward the Elkhorn boys. Together they sprang up and faced Annixter's crew.

"Up with 'em!" snapped Joe. "No parley! Up with the flippers! First man moves is first man dead!"

The rustlers stopped in their tracks, completely taken off guard. Annixter's russet beard flamed in the sun, his body weaved forward and back as if he gathered momentum for the draw. For the rest of the party surrender came quickly. One by one hands rose. But Annixter looked directly at Joe Breedlove, weighing the silver-haired partner with a long, harsh glance. The

power of it was like a rifle bullet and when he spoke, arms still at his sides, the somber, scornful words augured the danger in him.

"Thought you was back there behind the rocks, hombre. I ain't givin' in easy. Make it a fair deal. Drop yore gun an' we'll hit for the draw."

Joe shook his head. "I cut my wisdoms long time ago, Annixter. Why should I swap shots now? Ain't after yore hide. Up with the flippers."

"Yuh rat! They ain't nothin' lower'n a sneakin' spy like you. Somebody'll tear the liver out o' yore ribs one o' these fine days. And it'll be Bo Annixter. Mind that."

"Up with the flippers," droned Joe.

Annixter gave in. The Elkhorn boys moved on, disarmed the trapped ones, and herded them into the draw. Joe circled Annixter before lifting the rustler's gun; then his arms felt along the man's ribs. "Stinger's drawn, Slip. Take him away."

Indigo came across the lava casually, a cigarette drooping in his lips. And from the disillusion on his face, the weary carriage of his shoulders and the expressionless cast of his washed blue eyes he seemed to tell the disordered universe that it was just another bad day.

"Well, Joe."

"Well, Indigo."

"Back again, uh? Must've hurried."

"Oh, so-so. Any trouble."

"Not much. They rushed me. One of 'em out there. Not defunct, but harmless." Then a small gleam of interest came to the dyspeptic countenance. "Say, I spit four hundred feet. Tie that."

Joe grinned. "Didn't think it was that far down the bluff side."

"Hell," grunted Indigo, "I thought mebber you'd bite. Reckon I'll spend the rest o' my life tryin' to convince folks. Well, what next?"

THE partners returned to the bluff's rim and picked up the wounded rustler. It was Shirtsleeve Smith and the man was in poor shape. They lugged him back to the draw where the Elkhorn bunch had tied the prisoners into the saddles. Shirtsleeve was likewise lashed; they were ready for the trip home.

"Listen," growled Annixter to the Elkhorn foreman. "I didn't know yuh had these fellas on yore payroll."

"They ain't," explained Slip. "Strangers to me."

Annixter exploded in Joe's face. "Why, yuh damn' crooks! So yuh was jus' stealin' from me, huh? Wanted to let us get the blame for rustlin' while you piked off with 'em!"

"What's that?" asked the youthful foreman, growing suspicious again.

"A couple of sagebrush tinorns!" snorted Annixter "Without guts enough to steal their own cows so they double-cross me! Listen, you two. I'll live to tear yore livers out! Mind that--an' I'll see yuh roast in hell for killin' pore old Elbow--"

The youthful foreman dropped his head; the next moment both partners were covered with the Elkhorn guns. Slip's countenance blazed with suspicion. "It's what I thought all the time. Your scheme didn't work an' yuh got in a jackpot, so yuh crawls to the old man for help. I thought so. Stretch 'em elbows."

Indigo was on the verge of an explosion. Joe stilled him with a soft word and met the irate Slip's glance. "Son," he murmured, "is that all you've got in yore head?" The mildness and the serenity of a summer's morning rested upon the tall one's face. At the moment he seemed as if he were giving the young foreman fatherly advice; the hazel eyes beamed gently.

"Keep yore dirty tongue off--" began Slip, and checked himself. "Put up yore hands."

Indigo exploded. "What's yore itch, yuh bottle-fed crib sucker?"

"You'll itch in jail," retorted Slip. "Hands up. You'll never dirty Elkhorn again."

Indigo looked to Joe, the tall partner nodded back, raising his arms. "All right. It won't be long." He smiled at Slip. "Human nature is a big book. Read it sometime. We won't be in the lockup more'n two hours. Let's go."

Slip turned to Annixter. "Where's the critters?"

"Find 'em," muttered Annixter. "Well--north o' the pass. Elbow's down that trail, too. Take care o' him."

Slip nodded to one of his men. "That's yore job."

The rest of the riders gathered behind the prisoners and pushed them down the draw. At dusk they reached town. The sheriff put Annixter's bunch in one cell and the partners in another. The Elkhorn men went home.

"YORE prediction," said Indigo, three hours later, "is no good. Here's the finish o' a good impulse. Next time yuh desire to help anybody, strangle the idee. Stomp on it. Ain't yuh discovered yet they's nothin' meaner in this world than human nature?" Joe rolled a cigarette. It was dark in the cell and a brooding silence pervaded the jail. Through the barred window they saw the yellow lamplight twinkling out of a saloon opposite; boots scraped across the town walk and soft speech floated upward. Joe's match wavered in the gloom and went out, but by the moment's illumination Indigo saw his partner smiling. "Some people is bad, some is good," he murmured. "But most of us is half an' half, which makes life interestin'. Annixter, now, is all bad--or as near to it as anybody could get. The young foreman fella is fifty-

fifty. He's got a good heart an' sound impulses but he lets his temper get the best o' him. As for the--"

"Yeah," Jeered Indigo, "go ahead an' tell me somebody all to the good."

"The girl," said Joe, just above a whisper. His cigarette tip gleamed brightly.

Indigo moved uneasily. "Well, I think we're the singed ducks, m'self. That sheriff, they say, is desirous o' makin' a record. Oh, we'll get ample. Wonder how foolproof this mantrap is?"

"Won't be very long now," drawled Joe.

"What makes yuh so all-fired certain?" asked Indigo, irritably.

"I know. Say, Indigo, how would you like to hire out again?"

Indigo was silent for a long spell. He knew what was coming, he had seen the portents in the sky some time before. It dragged on his spirits, made him weary and depressed. "Who to?"

Joe's answer was too casual. "Oh, we got an invite to work for Elkhorn. Seems to me maybe we've done drifted plenty long. Don't it strike you like that, Indigo?"

Indigo merely grunted. Joe squinted through the darkness and found his partner humped over on the bunk's edge. Indigo always carried himself as if he was sick of the works of creation, but even through the shadows Joe sensed a difference and it made him thoughtful. He forebore pressing the matter.

Boots shuffled up the stairway and a key scraped the lock. The sheriff issued a reluctant invitation. "Come on out, you buzzards. The Elkhorn got soft-hearted an' they ain't makin' no charges. Personal, I'd like to see you get justice."

"Justice," drawled Joe, rising, "is a mighty word. An' it has many meanin's, sher'ff. Which meanin' was you alludin' to?"

The sheriff grunted. Indigo and Joe passed down the stairs to the office and found Slip, the young foreman, waiting for them. He had his hat off and the light glimmered along his curly hair. He was a good looking youngster, Joe decided. And at present he met Joe's eyes with a straight, frank glance. "Listen," said he, "I guess I got off on the wrong foot. Got the hell bawled out of me by the old man an' Julie. That's why I'm back. Mebbe you're off me permanent, but I jus' want you to know that I'd cut off my hands for Elkhorn an' the folks on it. Give 'em their guns, Sher'ff."

Joe was smiling, the sweet and twisted smile that was so much a part of him. He put out his hand. "I was young once, Slip," he murmured. "Don't I know how it feels? Once I had a girl--"

"I'm out of it I reckon," interrupted young Slip, gruffly. His eyes dropped as if to conceal some betraying emotion. When he raised his head again he had set his face as tight as he could. "They want you to come back. The old man--and Julie. Let's go outside."

THE partners crossed the threshold. There was a rig standing in front of the jail and Julie Stovall sat in the driver's seat, waiting. Her face was in the shadows and Joe couldn't see her eyes, but her words tinkled across the interval like the notes of a flute. "We're sorry. All of us. So is Slip. Slip has always fought so hard for us. We want you to come back. I--I hope you will."

"I'll go get the hosses," muttered Indigo, and went away. He stumbled on a plank and swore bitterly. And at the stable he saddled both horses in a kind of blind fury. The stableman started to talk. Indigo flared up. "Shut yore mouth, yuh galoot!" out he rode, leading Joe's pony. "I can see the end right now," he grunted. "Joe in harness. Hell! Me ---- "

He arrived at the buggy. Joe mounted and the three men followed the rig out of town and along the road to the Elkhorn. There was a soft breeze bringing up the aroma of the desert and the moon hung on the horizon like a Hallowe'en lantern. The lights of town faded, the horses' hoofs made a

lulling rhythm on the hard-packed road. Joe touched his partner's arm--a rare thing for him. "It's all right with you, Indigo? It's O. K?"

"I reckon," grunted Indigo and said no more. They crossed a creek and ran onward through the night. Slip, the foreman, muttered something and spurred ahead of the party. They wheeled around an area of boulders and took a short climb. Of a sudden Indigo took up the slack in his reins and halted. "I forgot somethin' in town, Joe. You go on. See yuh later."

"What----" began Joe, likewise stopping. But Indigo never answered. He was fifty feet away, traveling like a crazy man. The horse began to pitch and Indigo discovered he was sinking his spurs deep into the brute's flanks.

"It's the end," muttered Indigo, looking up to the black sky. "Yeah. Fare-you-well to old times. Joe's got a girl an' Indigo rides alone from now on. Hell!"

He was not an imaginative man, this warped and pessimistic and morose rider of the range; he was not one to nourish regrets for a lost past, he seldom ever found himself lifted in anticipation for the future. But tonight marked a milestone in his life, tonight was the forking of one more trail and down one of those trails he had to ride alone. Ride alone on into the southern horizon. All roads had an ending, all men came to the great divide and crossed into the misty land. Well, that didn't matter. But it would be lonely without Joe. How many a mile had they traversed, side by side? How many a campfire had they built together, how many a fight had they seen to a good ending? They were partners who knew each other so well that they understood the twist of each gesture, the inflection of each syllable. It would be a drab journey without Joe. A drab journey into the horizon to nowhere.

"Why should I stick on the ranch an' see him slip into double harness?" he muttered fiercely. "The time had to come, sooner or later, but why should I hang around an' see him swap to another partner? It had to be done--in a hurry. They's got to be an end an' this is it."

The lights of town blinked across the land. Indigo shook his head. "I ain't shore about Joe an' that girl. Well, I know what she sees in him. Any

woman ought to be proud o' Joe. Lots of 'em have looked twice an' wished. Yeah. But Joe's thirty-five an' she's no more'n twenty. When he's fifty she's thirty-five. Well? I ain't shore Joe'll like double rig an' a fenced pasture. Slip, now, is her age, he's honin' for the girl. They're a matched pair."

Indigo was a realist. And he knew that save for Joe's arrival Julie Stovall would probably have married Slip. Things happened that way. And they were a matched pair. What she saw in Joe Breedlove was the same thing other women and men saw in the silver-haired one. Joe brought a touch of mystery with him and a touch of romance. He was handsome and when he smiled the love of life sprang across his face, to weld others to him. He was a mature man; the gods had been kind to Joe.

"Yeah, she'd married Slip. Slip's young an' still flighty. But he's got the makin's of a good fella. She owns him, an' she knows it. Didn't I see her look at him once? They'd make a matched team. I ain't shore about her an' Joe. By God, why has things got to be thataway? It ain't a fair swap. Joe's got a long trail behind an' they was another girl way back."

On the edge of town he made one more observation. "If she lost him she'd get over it."

HE DROPPED the reins over a hitching rack and wandered into the saloon. The lights blinded his eyes and he blinked around at the scattering crowd, the washed blue orbs plainly hostile, plainly threatening. At the counter he raised his fingers to the bar-keep. The barkeep slid a bottle and glass toward Indigo, saying:

"It's a fine night, partner."

"The hell it is," snapped Indigo. He took the bottle and glass to a corner table and sat down. For some time he looked into the amber liquid as if seeing a great many pictures there. Then he poured, raised the glass and saluted the wall. "Here's to yuh, kid. Won't see yore kind again. Old Indigo rides solitaire from now on."

The trail ahead would be across the same old desolate prairie, the night fire would be by the same barren pines. And somewhere beyond the heat haze there would be an end. "Me," muttered Indigo, "I'm goin' to get so drunk tonight a hog wouldn't sleep in the same bed. Good bye, kid."

He drank. He drank again. Chips clattered at an adjacent table. Somebody called to him, inviting him to take a hand. Indigo half turned and the frigid blue eyes devastated the players. "Mind yore own business," grunted Indigo, and poured himself another glass.

He had his back to the door and therefore didn't see a tall man sweep through and in. Didn't see him sweep the room and then walk toward the corner. But he heard a familiar voice call his name roughly and before he could look up he saw a bronzed fist flash across the table and knock bottle and glass to the floor. Joe Breedlove towered over him; all the humor and all the serenity was gone and in its stead was a tight, bleak bitterness. Joe looked old at that moment, shockingly old and tired. And he stared at Indigo as if the latter were a complete stranger.

"What the hell are yuh doin' here?" he demanded. "Guzzlin' like an' old soak. Get up from there. We're ridin' tonight."

"Where?"

"South," muttered Joe. "Come on."

They went out, with the crowd watching, and they climbed up to the saddles and turned through the street, heading south, away from town, away from Elkhorn. Taking up the pilgrimage that had been interrupted the last few days. And some time later in the night when the lights no longer winked at them and the stark shadows wrapped around them, Joe spoke.

"It jus' wouldn't stick, Indigo. I ain't her kind. By God, I ain't! If ever she thought so, she'll change her mind later when she marries Slip."

Indigo was shrewd. He held his tongue. And if he had spoken, the thing he had on his mind would have seemed so completely foreign to his nature that

Joe Breedlove would never have believed it. But Indigo, looking up to the stars, found the world good.

Dandy Boy and the Hon'orable Mawde by Annesley Burrowes.

In Which the Punchers down at the Bunk House See the Course of True Love Interrupted. But Even Dandy Boy Was Forgotten When the Whole Outfit Went to Denver to Ride in the Great Broncho Busting Contest for the Honor of the Old Bar Z.

SAY, that was the doggonest, queerest outfit that ever come acrost the old San Angelo trail. They got it put together at the railroad, and when it come up over the big rise by the Bar Zee bunk house, say, it had Buffalo Bill skinned thirty-six ways from the deuce."

Buck Lanfear leaned back against the rocky hill-side and grinned under his brown mustache. His eyes traveled slowly across the sunburned valley to the summits of the Apache range, glowing in the rays of the noonday sun. In the upper air an eagle whirled. A thousand feet below a herd of peccaries nosed through the mesquite, looking like weasels in the distance. Beyond the blot of shade thrown by the single pine the sun beat fiercely, and the Pinto tugged at the long rope, and whinnied.

"He minds it," said Buck, nodding sidewise at his horse. "Old Easymark, there, was a three-year-old, and he seen the whole thing, same's me."

The cowboy rolled a cigarette very slowly, as though the memory were pleasing to him, then lighted it and blew a lazy smoke ring toward the blue sky of Texas.

"I'd been riding for the Circle C most five weeks," he went on, "me being loaned to old man Chadwick, along of Curly Weeks and Dad Webster being shot up by a bunch of sheepmen. I got back to the Bar Zee about four o'clock of a Saturday afternoon. There weren't none of the boys in sight, so

I set down on a bench, and dropped into a snooze. Then I wakes up quick-like, and here's the grand procession, just toppin' the rise.

"First comes the Big Noise--that's this Waldo Emerson, the Bar Zee manager I'm just telling you about, and he's looking solemn, like he was chief marshal at a Elk funeral. Then comes some of our boys riding mighty polite and their faces was dead straight.

"Then for fifty yards there ain't nothing but mesquite, and then comes the main show. Say, you'd swore it was the old Deadwood coach, only twice as big, and all painted up green and yellow to beat fourteen of a kind; and up on the box seat, driving four-in-hand, like a old stager, is the lord--the gink we'd heard tell of for years, but ain't never seen him--the Britisher what owns the Bar Zee outfit.

"I knowed it was the lord, soon as I seen him, 'cause one of the boys had cut his photograaft out of a New York paper and stuck it on the bunk-house wall. He was wearing white whiskers, and likewise a yellow overcoat with pearl buttons onto it 'most as big as the bottom of a tin cup, and each one of them buttons had a different picture on it--folks in uniforms riding after houn'-dawgs, and shooting prairie hens and catching fish--a different picture on every button, so help me gawd, and each of them as big around as a tin cup.

"This here Deadwood coach was full of lady-folks, and say, they was the real perfectos, just like them chromos what you draws with fifteen cigaroot coupons and five two-cent stamps.

"Following after the coach comes a string of buckboards full of menials, and then more of our boys, each of them towing a long-necked horse what was groomed so fine you could almost see to shave in him, and each of them ornery punchers looking sheepish, like he was piloting a zebra out'n the zoo.

"Well, this here cavalcade prances up to the ranch house, and the Deadwood coach vomits out its lady-folks, and the menials crawls out of the buckboards, and down comes the lord off of the box, and passes his picture-gallery overcoat to his valet, and they canters into the house.

"But the main actors is still to come, and the bunch ain't scarcely inside when down the trail comes a pink-and-white girl riding hell-to-split on a tall black, and this here girl is a dead ringer for Mlle. Dolly de Belmont, the champeen equestrienne what you see with the big show, only, believe me, she has Dolly de Belmont backed clean off the map for looks.

"She's wearing a little derby hat, like Mlle, de Belmont, and riding side-saddle, with one of them long slimsy black gowns that most touches the ground; and as she gewhizzes past she looks at me out of a pair of big brown eyes and throws the nicest smile you ever seen on a girl. I tell you, she 'most has me goin', and as I stands there in the middle of the trail, a-goggling, I'm 'most knocked off my feet by a dandy boy wearing balloon pants like he was George Gould, and he goes shooting past on a big chestnut mare. He's a right smart looking kid, too, with a clean shaved brown face and good shoulders, and by the way he looks after the girl you can tell he don't see the trail, or the ranch house, or the big blue sky. All he sees is the girl, and looking after them two folks I gets a hunch there'll be doings on the old Bar Zee.

"Well, Dandy Boy passes her just as they gets to the house. He jumps off his horse like he was a real rider, and helps her down. Then they lopes inside, and I got a chanct to round up old Baldy and ask him what's the dope.

"It's Lord Bruton," says Baldy, "the boss from over home. We been dreadin' for years he'd be horning in on us, and now," he says, "it's came. The boys is plumb loco, but the Big Noise, he's enjoying himself like he was a rat in a pork barr'l."

"Well, as Baldy dopes it out, seems like the lord has gone most broke, playing the horses and picking the one worst bet in the stock market, and so he's come out to the Bar Zee to economize, bringing Mrs. Lord, and his three sisters, what's named the Hon'rabl Miss King-Harmons; likewise his daughter, the pink-and-white girl, and she's christened the Hon'rabl Mawde Sybil Gwendoline Fraunces King-Harmon. D'ye get that? And her only a heifer, just rising eighteen. Likewise Dandy Boy, he's a lord's son and a hon'rabl, only his name's the Hon'rabl John Smith, which he spells it 'Smythe' for decency's sake, his grandfather having been in the beer trade.

That's a fine bunch of 'hon'rables,' ain't it? Most as many as they have on the board of education over to Tombstone.

"This here Hon'rabable Mawde is a fine up-standing girl, with wide shoulders and a little waist, and cheeks on her like a pair of Missouri peaches. So, it ain't long before the boys is peekin' at her sly-like, and, mighty wishful, and she's aglimpsing back at them, kind of admiring, like she thought cowboys was the real cheese; though of course the boys wouldn't have the nerve to get friendly, them being just ornery punchers and her being the lord's daughter; but the Big Noise, that's this here Emerson man, the ranch manager, there ain't nothing bashful about him. He's Johnny-on-the-spot with a red necktie and new brown boots, all a-shining, and a clean shave, and his teeth scrubbed up like they was marble headstones; and honest-to-Josh he's looking most like a lord himself. He's a handsome guy, this here Emerson, just like one of them cowboy pictures on the cover of a story book, and he fixes it to get acrost with this whole bunch. So, its Emerson here, and Mr. Emerson there, till the Big Noise gets to be a howling hurricane; and yet he's known all through the cow country for a skunk and a four-flusher, and one that'll back down before any real man that stands up to him. But at that, I got to hand it to him as a cow man. He knows his business. He's the best rider in the state and what he can't do to a steer you can just as well forget it.

"Well, while this Emerson is putting it over on the lord and the ladies, Dandy Boy, that's this Hon'rabable John Smythe, he's making good with the boys. He ain't no conversationer; he don't talk none, no more than he was a sheep-herder, and yet every one on the outfit knows him for a man, and likes him as such. Of course the boys can't help joshing a bit, and they slips him a few, such as always is coming to a tenderfoot, but Dandy Boy stands for it like a sport, and before long, I tell you Hombre! English-lord stock is over par on the Bar Zee. Only this here Negras, what had a greaser for a father and his mother come off the Bowery--this here Negras, he reckons it's up to him to show Dandy Boy where he belongs.

"So, when one of the boys hands out a story like punchers always passes to the simple stranger, this Negras lets out a yawp you can hear clear up to the ranch house where Hon'rabable Mawde's layin' in a hammock telling this

Emerson party what grand people punchers is, and how she admires to meet up with a gentleman what's a real man.

"By this time Hon'rabable Mawde and Emerson's so thick the boys is wondering where Dandy Boy comes in. Of course we know Dandy Boy's always stood ace-high with the lord and the girl, too, and if Emerson's trying to get her, as it sure looks that way, it won't be no cinch, and he'll be trying some of them low-down games he's noted for. So, when he starts getting next to this Negras person, and playing him favorite, like he never done before, I dopes it out that Dandy Boy's going to have something on his hands like he don't see in Shropshire. After thinking it over some, I passes him the tip, but he only smiles that quiet way the boys likes.

"Perhaps I'll be before him," he says, and he don't say no more, which seems nervy talk for a tenderfoot.

"Well, this Negras party from yawping every time one of the boys passes one to Dandy Boy--this Negras starts to hand out a few himself, and My Soul! as Dandy Boy says, they was sure raw ones. Dandy Boy stands for it longer than he'd ought to, and then he says one night, careless and quiet-like, he says:

"'Hombre,' he says, 'your style of humor is unpleasing to me. Amuse yourself tonight all you want,' he says, 'and then cut it out. Otherwise,' he says, 'it might have a ingrowing effect on your health.'

"Next evening when Dandy Boy comes down, Negras starts something again. It ain't much, but Dandy Boy just reaches forward like he was picking a cherry, and he passes Negras a little jolt on the jaw, much as to say, 'I don't want to take no advantage of your innocence, but this is just to let you know there's more like it in the same corral.'

"Negras lets out a squawk and jumps back, and I reckon all the greaser blood he's got is right plumb in his ugly face. He reaches in through the window, grabs a butcher knife that lays handy on the table, and jumps fer him.

"Dandy Boy don't move. He don't even bat an eye. He just stands there smoking his cigaroot, and looking pleasant. But every puncher in the bunch is moving and they pree-cipitates theirselves onto Negras like a thousand of brick, and when the dust clears Negras is on the ground, all covered with cowboys settin' on him.

"'Let him up,' says Dandy Boy, sharp-like, and six punchers crawls off'n the body, mighty unwilling.

"'Give him his knife!'

"'No, by g----,' says Baldy, holding to it hard.

"'Give it back, I say,' raps out Dandy Boy, quick and stern, like he was talking to soldiers. 'Fall back, you men!'

"The boys stands back kind of scared and startled, 'cause they never seen Dandy Boy like that before; and Baldy, he throws the knife on the ground, a-cursing.

"Negras grabs it and jumps for Dandy Boy like a catamount. Dandy Boy meets him square.

Honest-to-Josh, Hombre, it looked like a miracle. I don't know how Dandy Boy done it, but there he was smoking his cigaroot, with the knife in his hand, and Negras, he's on his back ten foot away, yawping, and feeling to see if his arm was broke.

"'Come on,' says Dandy Boy, to Negras, quiet and pleasant, like he was talking to a lady; 'hurry up,' he says, 'if you don't mind, I'm due back to the house.'

Negras turns to get away, but Big Larry Teagan grabs him by the neck, turns him round and passes him a kick in the stern. 'G'wan in, ye coyote,' he says to him, 'Fight!'

"By this time Dandy Boy has a fresh cigaroot lit, and don't never take it out of his mouth while he gives Negras what Teagan called 'the father an'

mother of a batin'.' Finally Negras gets in a clinch and the following second he's on his back, taking the count, having been thrown clear over Dandy Boy's head.

"Say, was there some yellings? Well, you're a tootin'. You could hear them boys clear over to the Lazy Y, yawping like a bunch of Navajos. Just to see a lord's son put it over on a puncher like that. Say, every one of them boys wants to shake hands with Dandy Boy at onct, and even Negras, having come to, and his Bowery blood boiling up on top--this here Negras comes up, mighty sheepish, and holds out his hand, and Dandy Boy takes it like a man, and says, 'Boys,' he says, 'this is just a bit of good humor between ourselves. Don't let it go no further than us,' he says; 'and specially not up to the house. This here Negras,' he says, 'is going to be a friend of mine!'

"Say, wasn't that great? Well, in a minute the Big Noise comes down a-towing the Hon'rabable Mawde, and they wants to know 'w'at fell,' and Dandy Boy he says we've been enjoying a bit of a friendly set-to, and the Hon'rabable Mawde asks us won't we please show her how them things is dragged off.

"So two of the boys does a little vaw-de-vill stunt, and Hon'rabable Mawde says its plumb grand. That's all there's to it. But say, after that, if the Bar Zee outfit was this here electoral college, and Dandy Boy wants to be President of the U-nited States, say, all he's got to do is whistle for it.

"By and bye we hears things about Dandy Boy. He don't never hand out no dope about himself, but Bud Skinner gets it on the side, being strong with the Hon'rabable Mawde's hired girl, what they call a lady's maid. Seems like Dandy Boy is a soldier out to India, and Bud Skinner gets it off the lady's maid that he belongs to what they call the extinguished service order, along of rounding up a bunch of brown niggers what's stampeding with a gatling gun; and that sends his stock up some more, not so much account of what he done, but because he keeps so darned quiet about it. And Bud Skinner, he gets it off the lady's maid, that the general thanks Dandy Boy in front of the regiment, and that if Dandy Boy wants he can write a lot a letters after his name, showing what he done, only he don't want to. And Bud gets it that Dandy Boy and the Hon'rabable Mawde was sort of half engaged, but not quite.

"Now, wouldn't you gamble that Hon'rabable Mawde would be proud to have a man like Dandy Boy a-chasing her? Well, she ain't. She's been reading story books till she's plumb loco. She thinks cow punchers is grand, and she picks this ornery, pusillanimous cuss, Emerson, as the real feathers. She's always settin' round with him, talking about manhood and strength, and primal instincts, and cowfeed like that; and Dandy Boy don't seem to be in it no more.

"Of course Dandy Boy gets plumb sore, but what's he going to do? He's too proud to mix in with Emerson, and he sure ain't going to squeal to the lord, so he just don't do nothing, but if you watch him close, you can see he's losing flesh and color. The boys seen it, same as me, and I tell you, it made us feel bad. 'Course the lord ain't on to this. He don't reckon Emerson's in the game no more than was Nigger Jim, carrying water to them long-necked horses in the box stalls. But you-bet-you, if it comes to a showdown between them three there'll be some bucking on the part of this here lord that'll make a untamed broncho look like it was a pet kitten.

"Well, about now, Hon'rabable Mawde, she reads a story-piece about a Ropin' somewheres up in Wyoming, and nothing does her but we has a little ropin' all to ourselves, and the lord, he's got to give a prize of fifty dollars for the champeen of the Bar Zee.

"So the boys has to round up a bunch of bad steers and the ropin' is dragged off. Say I sure got to hand it to this here Emerson when it comes to tying a steer. They ain't his equal in the state, and if he wasn't such a yellow dog I could stand for him, but of course he had to do a bunch of grandstand stunts that spoiled his work, as a real rider looks at it. But, Hon'rabable Mawde, she don't understand them things. She thinks Emerson's circus riding is plumb grand, and when he takes the fifty for roping and tying, which he certainly deserved it and spends the money on books for to uplift us punchers, why say, there ain't nobody like this here Emerson, and Dandy Boy, what's a real man, he's all to the bad.

"After the ropin', it's plain that there's only two things for Dandy Boy to do. He's got to call this here Emerson, or quit the game. Course, Dandy Boy won't shoot none. It ain't his way, and the boys don't expect it of him, so it ain't no big surprise when he says to me one night pretty soon, 'Buck,' he

says, 'I'm 'bliged if you'll hook up the buckboard early to-morrow and drive me over to railroad," he says, 'I'm going away.'

"He didn't say no more, and when I told the boys them words, honest to Josh, they most bellered--to think Dandy Boy had been beat out by the Big Noise.

"Next day, me and him drives over to the railroad, and all the way over, Dandy Boy don't open his head, and I don't have nothing to say neither. I gets his baggage checked, and then the train comes whooping along, and we says good-bye.

"'If you're ever in England, Buck,' he says--them's his very words--'if you're ever in England,' he says, 'come to see me at Hawkwood.' That's his father's ranch-- 'and,' he says, 'I'll try and give you as good a time as you've give me;' and he says: 'I want you to come.' And he gets aboard.

"As the train pulled out, I seen him come onto the back platform, and he stood there a long time, looking back wistful; and the last I seen him, when the train rounded the curve, he was waving his hand at me.

"So, I goes over to the hotel, and gets all lit up, and I stayed there three days a-whooping it. On the level, Hombre, I couldn't of drove home no sooner, not if I'd stood to win the whole blamed outfit.

"Well, with Dandy Boy off the place, things is plumb different. Everybody seems kind of lonesome, except this here Emerson, and he's grinning like a she-wolf. Only this lady's maid, she gives it to Bud Skinner, that when Hon'rabable Mawde's around, Emerson's looking like he was a sick hen, the way lovers does when they are trying to make a hit off one what's above them.

"By-and-bye, this lady's maid hears the two of them talking, and Emerson singing a song like how turrible it is to be born poor, when the girl you worships is far, far above you, and Hon'rabable Mawde tells him the rank is but the guinea stamp, and the man's the whole carcass, and this here Emerson ups and puts it to her straight--won't she fly with him, and Hon'rabable Mawde, she says this is so sudden, and it is a turrible step for a

girl to take, and she must have time to think. And Emerson, he makes a big squawk about if she loves him like he loves her, she won't want no time. And he most has her goin', when all of a sudden the lord, he horns in with a newspaper all about the big Fall Bustin' up to Denver, and he says Emerson is got to enter for the champeenship of the world, and he'll take along the whole blamed outfit to see him win the belt, and the dough goes with it. Hon'rabable Mawde, she says that's magnif'cent.

"So, what's this unhappy Emerson party to do? The lord tells him to rustle 'round, pronto, and get things in shape, for time is short. So off goes Emerson. But, this here lady's maid, she seen his face and she gives it to Bud Skinner, that he looks like a tiger balked of his prey. Them's the exact terms what she used, and Bud, he gives it to the boys, while we was bedding down at the bunk-house.

"That same night, when the lady's maid is doing the Hon'rabable Mawde's hair, she ups and tells, casual-like, what the boys thinks about the Big Noise, and Hon'rabable Mawde, she gets mad as a wet hen, and tells this maid she don't want to listen to no gossip from the bunk-house, and she's plumb surprised that this maid would dare to have the nerve to mention it to her. 'Course, the maid says she's plumb sorry, but she gives it to Bud Skinner that Hon'rabable Mawde ain't spoke to her since, except to order her round. This maid tells Bud he ain't to breathe it to nobody, and Bud says sure he won't, but when he gets down to the bunk-house, 'course he couldn't hold a thing like that.

"Next thing we gets, Emerson is still keeping after her hard, but Hon'rabable Mawde seems to be stalling him off, and this lady's maid, she catches Hon'rabable Mawde setting alone, looking at Dandy Boy's picture, and sort of half crying, and I tell you we was all wishing Dandy Boy was back again, but nobody ain't heard from him since he got to Chicago, and they reckon he's gone back across the salt water.

"'Course the boys is all tore up over it, and the betting's about even, some saying that if Emerson can't get her now, he won't never get her, and some saying that when he gets the belt, as he sure will, Hon'rabable Mawde will be so dippy, he'll have her roped and tied within forty-eight hours. Me, I dopes it out that Hon'rabable Mawde's about half woke up, only she's in so darned

deep with Emerson she don't know how she's going to pull out. She's sure did every blamed thing that would make a man like Emerson do what he done, but now he's gone and did it, she wishes he wouldn't. I tell you, these women people's all alike, don't matter whether it's the lord's daughter, or Mandy Jane, the biscuit shooter over to the Grand Union eating shack, and right now if this Emerson coyote has the nerve to throw Hon'rabable Mawde acrost his cow horse, and ride over to the nearest minister, I'd bet my shirt Hon'rabable Mawde don't tell him 'No,' when he gets her there.

"Next evening this here lady's maid passes it out to Bud Skinner that Emerson's been in, and made a strong play to get Hon'rabable Mawde away, because we're all starting for Denver in the morning, but seems the Hon'rabable Mawde don't fall for him, but finally he wants her to say that if he wins the belt she won't hold him off no longer, and he makes her say it. And this lady's maid, she says Hon'rabable Mawde is like a dove in the talents of a hawk--them's her exact words--and Hon'rabable Mawde's been crying all evening, and she says Emerson's going to get her, because Hon'rabable Mawde's all in, and won't have the nerve to hold him off no longer, belt or no belt. And when Bud Skinner reels this off down to the bunk-house, honest to gawd, it don't take much more to make the boys get out their gats and go after this here Emerson. They talked that way, but nothing come of it.

"We gets to Denver just in time for the first day's bustin', and I tell you when our outfit canters onto the field, we has 'em all a-rubbering. The lord has on his overcoat with the pictures on the buttons, and the Deadwood coach is all a-shining, and the four long-necks is groomed to a finish, and the ladies is all got their Paris gowns, and us punchers riding two-and-two on our cow-horses, with our guns, and chaps and all the regalia we got, and they's three or four Eastern dudes along with the lord's party. And I tell you when the crowd sees us, they sets up a roar like we was the President of the U-nited States, and all the White House ladies.

"The party don't get off the coach at all. They're showing people how they act Over Home, so they just pulls up a little way from the stand, and they stays right there a-top. They has champagne on ice, and sandwiches, and jellied birds, and all kinds of eatings. And there's Emerson along with the

dudes, all slicked up in a suit of Fifth Avenue fixings, and say, on the level, this here Emerson, he looks as good as any of them. And Hon'rabable Mawde, she acts kind of chirked up, like she was glad to see him looking so slick, beside them dudes. Seemed like she was thinking after all, he ain't such a bad bargain.

"Well, I ain't going to tell you all about this here Bustin'. You've saw the stands, and the flags, and the crowds, and all such. There's the usual skirmishing--loose horses tearing round the field, judges and ropers, running up and down, the air full of dust, the bands playing, bad horses thrun down, and kicked up, and saddled, and rid to a finish. And there was riders bucked off, and riders pulling leather, and riders a-riding on the cinch, and riders playing to the stand, and riders that rides like they was real riders, and judges cutting out the good ones, and passing up the mavericks, so's to settle whose the champion of the world.

"I tell you, Hombre, that's the greatest sight on earth, and the lord and ladies is pleased clean to the bones. Even Hon'rabable Mawde with Emerson a-hanging over her head like the sword of Dammickels, as this maid tells it, even Hon'rabable Mawde's looking like she never see such a grand sight before; and that day she learns things about clean riding, and dirty riding, and grandstand riding, that she never knowed before, and I reckon about this time she begins to guess that Emerson's doings at the Bar Zee ropin' weren't the real pigskin, like she thought they was. I was watching her clost, and it seems to me like Hon'rabable Mawde was kind of woke up.

"Next day Emerson has to ride, and he leaves his dude fixings down to the ho-tel, and wears his regular riding outfit. He rides twic't that day, and it sure was a sight to look at him. He's known for a skunk wherever there's cowmen, but the boys couldn't help but cheer him. Then of course he gets all swole up, and has to start playing to the stand. He starts bowing and grinning, and a-waving, and doing stunts that looks good to the tenderfoot, but they ain't riding.

"Then the real cow people that's cheering, they quits it cold, and when Emerson rides again, and starts drinking out of a bottle with his horse a-jumping, why that makes us all plumb sick. And when I looks at Hon'rabable Mawde, she ain't watching Emerson. She has her eyes on some of the boys,

and I guess she hears things, and is looking kind of sadful, and some ashamed.

"So, I dopes it out she's thinking about this here bunk-house gossip, what she wouldn't hear the maid tell to her.

"By this time everybody knows who the lord is, and the big men from all over the West are coming up, and making their-selves acquainted, and welcoming him to the country. The valet's passing out the wine and seegars like a bartender, but nobody mentions nothing about the Big Noise, which the lord thinks some queer. By-and-bye, the lord mentions this Emerson, and while they all has to admit that Emerson can ride, they quits right there, and the lord seems to gather that this Emerson party ain't liked.

"Then, after the bustin' is over for the day, the judges comes up to welcome the lord to their midst, and taste his champagne, and when they're going away, mighty pleased, one of the judges tips it off to him, friendly-like, that his manager is sure a rider, but the lord better tell him to quit this monkey-riding or he's going to lose the belt.

"Well, that night this lady's maid gets off, and goes to the show with Bud Skinner, and she gives it to Bud that she hears the lord telling the lady-folks about the judges warning Emerson, and Bud, he gets it, that Hon'rabable Mawde, she won't eat no dinner that night, and goes to bed sick, and won't have the maid undress her, and that's how this maid gets to the show with Bud. And this maid gives it to Bud, that Hon'rabable Mawde she's all a-trembling and white as a sheet. So I guess Hon'rabable Mawde is awoke!

"The third day of the bustin' we're all there, Hon'rabable Mawde, and the whole bunch. The Deadwood coach is the pop'lar centre of interest. They's always a crowd 'round, and the valet is dealing out seegars and sandwiches like it was a free lunch counter. This is the busy day for the judges. They was fifty riders, and nobody defending the title, and they has to work the candidates clean to the limit, so as to pick the man what's sure best.

"Emerson's riding again to-day, but still he can't help showing off a little--not much but just enough to kind of rile the boys up. I take notice of Hon'rabable Mawde, and she ain't looking at him at all. She's watching the

people she knows is off the range, and they ain't doing any yellings for Emerson. All the cheering is done by the towners in the stands. But I tell you, the cow people is dead scared Emerson's going to get the belt; and there ain't a puncher on the ground wouldn't give a month's pay to see him beat. Well, that night, they was a mighty sick bunch, for Emerson is still in the ring, and there's only one rider left to stand between him and the champeenship.

"The judges might have made Emerson ride again that day, and beat him, because he was tired, and the other man is fresh, but you know what them judges is. They was dead sore on Emerson but they'd give him the last chanct to win, even if it broke their hearts, so it went over for another day.

"You can bet when the show opens the next day, there ain't a vacant seat in the stands. The city's plumb empty, and every human being that's got the price is there to see the big ride-off for the champeenship of the world. Of course the Deadwood coach is on hand, and there's a hundred punchers and cowmen close to it.

"The other man is the first to ride, and there's a big roar when the judges calls him out. Seems like he comes way down from Idaho, and ain't rid the range for six years, but when he was riding for old Judge Larkin, up in Idaho, they say there weren't his beat for a horse-wrangler in the whole West. He's a likely looking critter too, well set-up, with a heavy brown mustache, and a little chin whisker, and looks good, in his gray wolf-skin chaps, and his hat turned down over his eyes. You can bet the boys gives him a hot send-off.

"The judges has picked a big black for him, a horse they call 'Blackie,' with a white stocking, that's said to be the hottest stuff they got.

"Blackie stands for the saddle like a lamb. And he keeps standing while Idaho mounts him slow, and careful, keeping an eye on his head.

"But Idaho's feet ain't scarcely in the stirrups when the black goes up in the air like a rocket, and comes down like a ton of brick. He goes up and down, up and down, four times, just like that, and then shoots acrost the field like

a whirlwind, twist and turn, sun-fish, side-buck, crow-hop, rear, and jolt! Say, there wasn't anything a bad horse ever done that this here one fergot.

"Gee! how the boys yelled, and this here Idaho a-sittin' him like he growed there.

"Right turn; left turn; but Idaho's always ahead of him, just as if he knew what Blackie's doing before Blackie knows it himself.

"You've heard the boys yell, 'Yip! Yip! rider, rider! He's a rider! Go it Idaho!' The whole mob's yawping like Injuns, and the judges howling with the rest of them, and Idaho, you bet he rides!

"Up in the air goes the black, and then straight ahead, pitching like a crazy ship in a typhoon, and Idaho a-settin' as ca'm as a bird, and gracefully swinging the quirt at every jump.

"The wire fence is just ahead, and Blackie shoots over and dives into it, head down, like a battering ram. The wire gives, and springs back, throwing Idaho and the Black into a tangle of hoofs, and legs, and dust, and the crowd falls dead silent. But when the Black comes up on his feet again, by gosh! Idaho's right there in the saddle. The Black can't shake him. He shoots half across the field, and stops dead in his tracks, all sweating, and trembling, and beat to a finish.

"All in!" yells the ropers.

"Get down!" shouts the judges, and then the crowd breaks into whoopings and yellings such as you never heard and they makes a run to grab Idaho, but the judges and ropers drives them back, and then they call Emerson.

"The Big Noise comes out grinning, and swaggering. As he passes the coach, he looks up at where Hon'rabable Mawde's settin', and smiles at her, but she don't smile back. It seems to me his face is kind of pale and green looking, and the smile don't set straight. They're holding a savage-looking gray for him, that's ramping and fighting like a she-lion.

"Emerson walks over. He's still grinning but there ain't no spring to his gait, and when he half turns, I see his face is gone white, like paper.

"He takes his saddle off his shoulder, and goes to her, and the mare turns and rises at him, like a whirlwind. Emerson jumps back, like he was a tenderfoot. Then he turns, and throws his saddle on the ground, and you can see he's trembling like a leaf.

"'Boys,' he says, 'I--I can't ride. I--I'm sick.'

"And the word goes whooping through the crowd that Emerson won't ride, because he's sick; and he sure was sick, but it was just the yellow boiling out of his gizzard, and poisoning his blood, because Idaho's made a great ride, and Emerson is dead scared he couldn't beat it.

"I looks at Hon'able Mawde on top the coach, and I lets out a yell, 'cause I can see she's half glad, and half sort of relieved-lookin'. Then the secretary's buckling the belt on the Idaho party. The crowd's yelling like they was crazy, and the punchers is most tearing Idaho limb from limb.

"The lord, he's plumb disgusted, but he's a good loser, and he says, 'Aw,' he says, 'I should like to congratulate this aw--cham-peen.'

"One of the big cowmen starts away, and ina few minutes come back a-towing Judge Larkin, and this Idaho, with his hat pulled way down like a tough man. And the judge he says, 'Lord Bruton,' he says, 'Let me make you acquainted with Buster Jack, of Idaho. He's rid range fer me six years ago, and he's just come back acrost the salt water. You got a right to be proud of a countryman of yourn', he says, 'what's the best rider in the world!'

"The lord turns to Hon'able Mawde, what's come down off the coach, and says he, 'Mawde,' he says, 'This is Mr. Buster Jack of Idaho.'

"Hon'able Mawde's a-looking at this here Buster person kind of scared-like and when he pulls off his big hat, that's been down covering his eyes, she gives a sort of little scream, and the lord and me, say! we most drops dead, fer I'll be gosh-dinged, if it ain't the Hon'able John Smythe--Dandy Boy!

"Hon'rabable Mawde stands a-swayin' for a second, with a look on her like somebody had saved her from drowning. Then she jumps for Dandy Boy, and him all in his chaps and covered with sweat, and she grabs him.

"Then everybody yells again, but the Bar Zee boys feels kind of fooled.

"For a lord's son they'd thought Dandy Boy licked the universe, but 'course if he was a puncher himself there weren't nothing so wonderful 'bout what he done."

Riders of the Rain by Allan R. Bosworth.

Riders of the Rain

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Author of "Job for a Ranger," "Riders of the Shadows," etc.



Donna King Journeys Through the Stormy Range and on a Mission Fraught With Danger and Mystery!

RAIN overtook the buckboard when Donna King still had fifteen miles to go. In one loud, lightning-ripped instant, the shimmering horizons she loved were blotted out by a wet welter, and the first fury changed to a gray

downpour as bleak as her mood. Farther on, she drew leather at the B Bar corrals.

Jumping down to open the pasture gate, she heard Dane Benson's shout of greeting above the swishing drive of the rain on tarp and slicker, and her heart shrank at the thought of seeing him. Which only went to prove that a woman's heart is strange beyond understanding, because Donna King had promised to marry Dane. She hurried the team through the gate and climbed back to her seat. Her yellow slicker and even brighter hair made her a slender, golden picture of loveliness in the rain's dreary murk.

IT WAS characteristic of Donna that she didn't wait for Benson to open and close the gate for her, for she had inherited proud independence from her father, along with that high-held chin which lost none of its soft, curved charm because it held determination.

She was much like old Rufe King who had asked few favors of his neighbors since that day more than twenty years before when he had unhitched and driven a singletree from his wagon into the uncompromising soil of the Big Bend, as his first stake.

This marked a corner of the Singletree range that had been Old Rufe's life and Donna's life. It marked the beginning of a battle that was not yet ended and never would be, it seemed--a battle with rustlers and Border bandidos, with drought and grass fires and flood. On the rocky reaches of the Singletree spread, Old Rufe had grazed his longhorn herds, buried his wife, and reared his golden-haired daughter to be as straight and proud and defiant as himself.

Dane Benson shouldered his big bulk through the wind-fluttered curtain of rain, smiling at the girl and shaking his head.

"Lord, Donna, I never seen anybody like yuh!" rumbled the B Bar owner. "With a thousand and one things to do, I waited here until the rain started,

just to open this gate for yuh. Then yuh do it yoreself! Climb down and come in out of the wet."

She ignored his outstretched arms. Her smile was brief and, perhaps, a little wistful.

The B Bar stone ranchhouse was as comfortable as any bachelor's quarters could be, and looked inviting. Like everything else on Benson's spread, it was more substantial than the sprawling Singletree adobe.

"You weren't quick enough," Donna chided, then gave a quick toss of her head that slung water from her white Stetson's brim. "I'm in a big hurry, Dane. The ranch is out of chuck. Besides--I've some news for Dad."

Benson nodded, pulling his slicker collar high and looking thoughtful. He was handsome in a big, slow way, with the good nature that went with an absence of worries. It was always flashing into Donna's mind that Dane had never known the bitterness of struggle, that he was like the white-faced Herefords he grazed on the lush valley of the B Bar. Rufe King, busy paying last year's debts with this year's beef, had clung to the gaunt longhorns.

"What kind of news?" he asked. "Good or bad?"

"Same old kind," said the girl, and the lifted shrug of her slickered shoulder was more truthful than her light tone. "Money's tighter than ever. We would have been able to borrow if we had tried two days ago. But the bank was held up yesterday."

"No!" Dane Benson ejaculated. "Who did it?"

Donna's voice sounded far away and strained in her own ears.

"They say Bob Wiley was in the gang," she said, and fumbled with the reins, not wanting to see the "I-told-you-so" in Benson's dark eyes. A year before, when the tall, reckless Wiley had been punching cows for the Singletree, he had been Benson's rival for her heart.

But Dane's sincerity sounded genuine.

"I'm plumb sorry to hear that, Donna. If Bob would settle down and straighten out, he wouldn't be a bad hombre. Trouble with him is bad company, and he don't seem to realize that the law has come west of the Pecos and took the place of reckless gun-slinging. How was the job pulled, and how much did they get?"

"About five thousand dollars. Just the amount Dad wanted to borrow. It happened so quickly nobody knows much about it. There were four or five men, altogether, and everybody but Bob wore a slicker and a mask. They shot Doane, the cashier. Sheriff Morgan was coming up the street on foot, and he saw them run out to their horses. He emptied his gun at them and hit one, he says. They scattered and headed for the Border. There's a posse out."

"Five thousand dollars," Dane Benson said, shaking his head. If there was one thing in his make-up the girl could criticize, it was his love of money. "That would have pulled the Singletree through until fall, eh?"

Donna nodded, her soft, full lips drawn taut. She knew what was coming now.

"Donna, darling," Benson pleaded, reaching up to lay a hand on her arm, "talk to yore dad again! Make him see how he ought to sell out to me. At least he could sell me the west ten sections, and that would pull him through."

"It's no use, Dane. You know Dad."

"Yes, but he has you to think about, too. We could get married right away, if yuh didn't have him to worry about. I'll give him the job as foreman. We'll clean out the longhorn strain and stock the combined ranges with Herefords. Please try, Donna!"

SHE shook her head, her proud chin higher. She would never marry Dane Benson until Old Rufe was financially secure. From the day Benson had proposed, somehow his marriage offer had seemed to her to be part and parcel of a land deal. "Dad may lose the Singletree, but he'll never sell it," she said. "Maybe this rain will help the grass, and he can pull through some way. Besides, you don't want the west ten sections. There's nothing on that strip but rocks. Dad is still trying to interest mining capital in it, and he's never had any luck."

Benson shook his head. "Gosh only knows where the King family stubbornness is gettin' both of yuh!" he said. "Won't you come in for awhile?"

But Donna slapped wet rein leather on the backs of the buckskins, and waved her gauntleted hand as the wheels began to roll. Benson backed his big frame against the stone corral fence and watched as she vanished in the silver-arrowed rain. The Kings, father and daughter, he was thinking were an independent pair.

Driving on along the mesquite-bordered road to the Singletree, Donna's thoughts were as dark as the rain clouds that brushed the tops of the rimrocked hills. Her mind told her that Dane Benson's plan was the only way out for the mortgaged ranch she and her father loved. Her proud heart rebelled.

She climbed the divide, and the wind rose to a wild, wet fury. The grassy valleys of the B Bar were behind, and a little farther on was the western strip of the Singletree, in its rocky wildness. When finally she opened the gate into Singletree range, water was over her spurred ankles, and the buckboard slipped and swayed on the treacherous slant of the farther divide hill.

An impatient exclamation leaped to the girl's lips as she sighted the west prong of Buckhorn draw. Where the road canted down into the wild walnuts, a yellow flood was swirling, licking at the driftwood left by the previous spring's high water. Too deep for the tarpaulin-covered load of chuck behind the buckboard seat on which she rode.

It was still rising, too. Donna wasted only a minute listening to the sullen roar of the torrent. There was a longer way around, to the north, where the west fork of Buckhorn was wider and more shallow. She swung the team through the untracked mesquites, paralleling the flood.

Followed two miles of twisting and turning, of ducking water-laden mesquite branches that could make her rain-tingled cheeks no wetter. Two miles of slow going, wondering why some men were born to wealth, while others had to fight every step of their way. Of wondering why gay, reckless Bob Wiley allowed himself to get mixed up with a bank robbery gang, and if Rufe King would possibly consider this new proposal of selling the western ten sections.

It wasn't right to ask him, Donna decided. Because Dane Benson undoubtedly had made the offer out of generosity and love for her. That ten sections of malpais would be practically worthless to him and his white-faced steers.

She swung the buckskins back toward the draw, the wheels rattling on flat, limestone ledges, slanting down to the wide channel. Standing up, Donna peered through the swirl and saw that even here it would be a close call for the load of provisions.

She halted, and with a strength unguessed by her slenderness, lifted a box of the more perishable groceries to the seat, covering it with a corner of the tarp.

The roar in the draw had flattened, here, to a droning dullness. Donna pointed the team into the flood.

IT ROSE, yellow and menacing, over the hocks of the sturdy buckskins. She felt the buckboard shudder, saw the ruffle of water streak downstream from the wheels, and watched anxiously as they neared the center of the channel.

Water swished against the floorboards and seeped through a crack at her feet. But it would get no deeper, now. That big willow, bending under the surge of the current, marked the middle of the channel.

There would still be the eastern prong of Buckhorn to cross. It was sweeping over there a mile farther, gullying down the eastern side of the rocky ridge that thrust like a bony finger from the divide. This western fork bordered the west side of the ridge, and a few miles below its point the two streams angled together in their course to the Rio Grande.

The roar came suddenly, deepening over the swishing current like continuous, booming surf, drowning the flat dullness with an intensity not to be mistaken.

Donna's widened blue eyes jerked upstream. She saw the big willow bend and dip until it almost vanished. And then, riding over it, came the foam-crested wall.

Cloudburst!

Divide rimrocks had ripped the bottom from those low-hanging clouds. With water-holes filled and the channel of Buckhorn already above normal rain flow, there was nothing to delay this swift, sullen sweep of destruction.

Fear's cold fingers plucked at her heart, but she was not Rufe King's daughter without the high heritage of Rufe King's courage. There might yet be time to make the farther bank.

She whipped over the sodden ends of tied reins, and stung the horses. Her shout was a puny whisper in the roar.

A thunder shook the smaller, stream-bent willows downstream. It was like a thousand cattle stampeding over the echoing rocks of the Singletree range. The girl lashed out again, and the off horse stumbled on a slippery rock. He recovered gallantly, but Donna was already yanking off her gloves and fumbling inside her slicker.

As she opened the gleaming blade of the skinning knife, it mirrored that curling wall of death.

It leaned against the lancing rain, rolling down upon her as a giant comber rolls against a sandy beach. It towered six feet over the level water, and driftwood rode its tawny crest as the willow tops flattened. It was less than thirty yards away.

Donna leaned down and made swift, sure strokes. One of the trace leathers parted, but the other was stubborn. She clung to the foot-board and slashed at it. The horses, at least, could save themselves.

The wall struck, and the shock seemed prolonged, endless. Donna saw the trace part with a jerk of flying leather. The buckboard whirled, tongue swinging upstream. A horse's shrill squeal of terror knifed the roar.

There was one swift glance that would always hold in Donna's memory--a split instant of action that was etched on her brain. It showed the buckboard's left wheels swung crazily to the pouring sky, provisions spilling from the seat, the tongue snapping like a rotten picket, the horses struggling toward shore and safety.

Not until the wet smother surged over her did she realize she was in the water. It hammered her down as if she were being pounded by the flat of a giant's hand. It rolled her across rocks and thrust her slender body through the scratching tangle of wild walnut bushes. Her slicker hampered her swimming. The weight of her shop-made boots and the pearl-handled .38 bolstered at her waist seemed to drag her under.

THERE must have been sixty seconds of pounding, choking fury before she was driven against an unyielding something that knocked what little breath remained from her body. She clutched it desperately, opened her eyes, and dared to breathe.

It was a willow in the rim of the eddying current, its limbs broken, its top barely above water. She saw the horses climb out and vanish in the rain, and then, after a long time, she struck out for the shore, breathlessly buffeted and infinitely weary.

Her boots touched bottom. She waded, then, and sat on a ledge of limestone at the draw's edge, shivering as the wind drove against the wetness of her clothes.

It was still ten miles to the ranch, and she doubted whether the flood-terrified horses would be anywhere within walking distance of the spot where they had emerged. She looked up at the softened outline of the rocky ridge and got her bearings. Then she remembered the old prospector's cabin.

It squatted close against the point of the hill, so it could not be far. The old man who once had lived there had been killed in a saloon brawl at Maravillas, and Donna hadn't been in the place since she was a child. But she remembered the two-room shack, with its half loft, its cracked, warped floor and rusty, sheet-iron stove.

She searched her pocket anxiously as she started walking, water swishing in her boots at every step. With a glad relief, she found the small waterproof container in which she carried matches. She could kindle a fire, dry her clothes, and wait for the storm to pass.

Her Stetson was gone. Her hair had tumbled to a clinging, curling mass, reaching just below her shoulders. The gold was gone from it with the wetness. It was now the color of wild honey.

She leaned against the slanting rain, and forced herself on. At last she saw it--the cabin, its back to the ridge. A silver filigree of water fluttered from its clapboard roof.

The door yielded, and she stood in the dim mustiness of the main room. A wood rat scurried under the stove and into the nest it had built high in the corner.

Donna shucked the wet slicker and emptied the water from her boots. She robbed the wood rat's nest of dry branches and paper, and huddled over the old stove as the flame flickered, then leaped upward. Smoke billowed from a dozen cracks in the stove, but the heat began to spread comfortingly. Donna added more fuel, then removed her cartridge belt and slung it, with the bolstered gun, over the back of a rickety, hide-bottomed chair.

There seemed to be a draught. In her stockinged feet, Donna went to close the partly-opened door to the rear room. As she reached for the knob, she halted tensely, and the color that had been returning to her cheeks suddenly ebbed.

Above the drone of the rain on the clapboards, she could hear the unmistakable sound of a man's heavy breathing!

Her first impulse was to flee, but where could she go, in the rain? She went back to the stove and yanked on her boots.

Her heart was a trip-hammer, driving the breath from her body.

She lifted the gun from its holster and tiptoed to the door, pushing it wider. The creak of a rusty hinge startled her, and she thrust the gun before her.

"Who's there?" she demanded, and kicked the door wide.

A tall man lay sprawled on a tarp and blanket, his head on a saddle. The shadows that lay deep along the wall of the rear room obscured his face, and he didn't move until the door banged against the wall.

THEN a muttered oath came out of the shadows, and the tall man jerked into sudden, startled wakefulness. From nowhere, it seemed, a six-gun leaped into his hand as he sat up and whirled to face the door.

Donna gasped. "Bob Wiley!"

"Donna!" he exclaimed with equal surprise, lowering the gun sheepishly. "I shore musta been sleepin' plenty hard. What yuh doin' here? Who's with yuh?"

A sharpness steeled his soft drawl as he asked the questions. Without waiting for an answer, he brushed the girl aside and took a long stride into the main room.

"There's nobody," Donna said. "Why, Bob! You're wounded!"

She saw the dark, caked stain on his shirt, high at the left shoulder. Then remembrance of how he probably had received the wound came like a blow. Robbing a bank! He wasn't the same irresponsible, gay cowboy who had made love to her in the moonlight that drenched the porch on summer nights at the Singletree. He was a criminal, now, wanted and hunted.

She remembered Dane Benson's words--"Trouble with him is bad company." Bob Wiley had joined the wild bunch, and this was how the wild bunch always ended up--holed up somewhere, waiting for the Law.

Bob whirled on her. He had his left thumb hooked in his cartridge belt to support the wounded arm.

"Yuh've got to get out of here, pronto!" he declared. "Hurry, Donna! Get yore hoss. It's nearly dark!"

"I haven't got a horse. I was driving the buckboard and got caught in the draw in a cloudburst. The horses are gone."

"But yuh can't stay!" He was at her side, gripping her arm with the same intensity that filled his words. "Yuh're not safe here!"

"Are you?" Donna retorted, turning abruptly from him.

She opened the front door and felt the coolness of the rain against her fevered face. Her mind was a confused battleground of thoughts. Perhaps Bob even had some of the bank money. If the Law came for him and got it

back, the bank ought to be ready to advance part of the loan to her father. There would be a reward, too.

She throttled the thought and flung it from her mind. Bob Wiley was standing in the center of the room, watching her. She saw the slow hardening of his gray eyes.

"I see," he said. "I sabe, now. Yuh've been to Maravillas."

Donna nodded.

"Yuh believed 'em when they said I helped rob a bank?"

"What else could I do?" she snapped at him. "You were shot, running away. Oh ... Why did you do it, Bob? Why? Bad company, I suppose!"

The tall man's laugh was mirthless, bitter. He wasn't handsome in the usual sense of the word. Too rugged, too intensely masculine, with his wide, firm slash of mouth and square jaw. More like Rufe King's type--the rangy, longhorn strain.

But Bob was the outlaw breed, Donna told herself.

"Yeah. I reckon yuh could call it that, Donna," he was saying. "Nothin' but bad company got me into this mess. But that has nothin' to do with you. Mebbe if I'd settled down, things would be different."

Donna couldn't answer, did not dare meet his eyes again.

"Mebbe," he ventured softly, "you coulda loved me."

"You'd better ride for the Border!" she said. "There's a posse out. The rain will wash out your tracks if you go now."

The mirthless laugh again. "I haven't got a hoss, in the first place. In the second place, I'm not goin'. But you are--even if yuh have to walk home. Get movin'!"

HER chin came up. Knowing Rufe King, he read the danger sign blazing in her storm-blue eyes.

"I'm not leaving you!" she retorted. "You're wounded. Sit down here and let me dress your shoulder."

"Yuh're as stubborn as ever," he growled. "All right. But there are some things I've got to do, first. Got to drag this saddle and beddin' into a dark corner, where it won't be seen."

Donna busied herself at her own task. She found a kettle on the cob-webbed shelf, caught water in it under the eaves, and placed it on the stove. She tore a clean strip from her shirtwaist, and bathed the bullet wound. The slug had entered from behind, ploughing upward, coming out almost on top of his shoulder.

"It must hurt terribly," she murmured, when he winced.

"Not when you're touchin' it, honey!" he said. "Donna--yuh do love me a little bit, don't yuh? Won't yuh say yuh do?"

"A little!" she said lightly, and smiled.

That was all, she told herself, and yet his bronzed cheek against her arm was a caress. She fought against this wonder that she should have known a year ago. Now she was engaged to another man; now Bob Wiley was a bank robber.

"Listen, darling!" he said seriously, catching her hand and drawing it across his lips. "Just trust in me for a little while. Then, if yuh still want me to get across the Border, I'll go. I've done nothin' but roam around since--since yuh told me yuh wouldn't marry me. So it won't matter. But now--well, I told yuh it's not safe here for yuh. If yuh stay, yuh've got to do what I say."

She was staying. A sob caught in her throat as she nodded.

"Pour that water in the stove," he ordered. "And get yore gun-belt off the chair. Is that thirty-eight in workin' order?"

"I guess so. It wasn't in the water long. But--but you're not going to resist, Bob. You'll only make it worse. Give up, and if you've got any of the money, turn it over to them. I'll make up the rest of it, somehow!"

Something of the old recklessness came back to Bob Wiley's laugh. There was that in her eyes and voice which made him sure of himself. He caught Donna in his good arm, and pulled her close. She tried to remember Dane Benson, but the tall man's lips were bruising her own with a fierceness that was strangely tender.

"Donna, darling!" he whispered, breaking away. "I asked yuh to trust in me a little while, not to pay any debts I might be own'. I've always loved yuh."

"I don't care what you've done, Bob," Donna heard herself saying. "It's hopeless, now, I guess. But I love you, too."

"Things ain't ever plump hopeless. There's somethin' I want to tell yuh, Donna, before--"

His lean jaw snapped shut. Donna heard it, too. The staccato rise and fall of horses' hoofs somewhere down toward the flooded draw, pounding across the limestone ledges. The Law, Donna thought. This was how the wild bunch always ended up--holed up and waiting.

The softness was gone out of Bob Wiley. She had never seen a man so cool and tense. He lifted a stove lid, doused the little fire that was left with the water, and watched the smelly steam pour out. Then he stepped back and surveyed the half loft.

"They're comin', Donna, just like I figgered they would. Lucky it's gettin' dark in here. They won't notice the dust is disturbed, or that yore slicker's dripped on the floor. Climb up into the loft, and lie down!"

The girl balked. "And what will you be doing?"

"I'll go up with yuh!" he promised. "Hurry, now."

THE ladder was rickety and old, and cobwebs brushed her face in the utter darkness that lay close under the dripping clapboards. She crawled into a litter of chips and sticks. A wood rat darted ahead of her.

Lying down with her head toward the edge of the loft, Donna still didn't understand. It was odd that the posse should have been able to trail him here, in all the rain. A sudden hope flashed into her mind. Perhaps her father had ridden to meet her and had found the buckskins still in their harness!

Bob Wiley's head and shoulders loomed over the loft flooring. He grunted with the pain the climb cost him, and he might have fallen if the girl hadn't caught his good arm and pulled with all her strength.

"This is crazy!" she flared, as he stretched beside her, panting. "You ought to be getting out of here! You've got a saddle. I might find one of those horses that was hitched to the buckboard."

"Honey," he answered, and his strong white teeth gleamed in a smile, "I'm settin' down for fair. I'm through roaming'. I learned one lesson yesterday, and today I learned somethin' a lot more important. That you love me. I'm settin' down!"

Listening to the hoofbeats coming nearer, Donna wondered how a bank robber could settle down. The riders crossed the limestone. Their horses were slogging through the mud, now. They came straight to the cabin door, and the girl was sure they would hear the loud hammering of her heart.

"Here, darling!" whispered Bob Wiley. "Keep this for me. If anything happens to me, turn it over to the bank--and tell 'em that I didn't steal it. It's five thousand dollars!"

She felt the huge roll of greenbacks pressed into her hand, and she recoiled as she took the money. But his words were a song to the lilt of her heart! "Tell 'em I didn't steal it!"

Wet saddle leather creaked outside. The rusty hinges of the door creaked. Spurs were jingling over the threshold. A man swore loudly. It was a strange manner for the posse to enter a place where their quarry was hiding.

"Smells wet even in here," commented the man who had cursed. "Well, we're jest on time. It's dark now in a few minutes."

Another man grunted, and Donna heard the rustle of cigarette papers. When a match flared, she lifted her head as high as she dared. But the man's Stetson brim hid his face, and the wavering, distorted shadow cast on the wall told her nothing.

Bob Wiley's good arm forced her down. The fragrance of tobacco smoke wafted up to the pair in hiding. Donna's head was whirling as she tried to straighten out the tangle in her mind. There was a mystery here, somewhere.

"If Pete's double-crossed us--" growled one of the men, and left the threat unfinished.

He strode to the door. The other was sitting in the cowhide chair, chuckling.

"Pete's not loco enough to try that!" he declared. "He'll be here by the time the boss shows up. Both of 'em likely held up by the water in the draws. We shore picked a swell spot!"

"Well, nobody knew it was goin' to rain like this," the other man said.

He emptied water from his boots and stamped into them again with a jingle of spurs. His cigarette, only half-smoked, arced through the gloom and lay glowing on the floor while he rolled another quirkily.

Donna was beginning to understand. This wasn't the posse, but the other members of the gang. She knew a glad relief. At least, Bob Wiley wasn't in

imminent danger of capture.

If they left, he stood a good chance of escape.

IN CONTRAST to her nervous tension, the tall cowboy was lying quietly beside her, listening. She was thankful for the patter of the slackening rain on the roof, for it drowned the sound of their breathing.

Bob's arm muscles tightened.

"Here comes one of 'em!" the smoker was saying. He ground the second cigarette under his boot heel, and jingled his spurs to the door while the other waited only long enough to light the wall lamp, and turn it low.

Wiley's lips were at Donna's ear.

"Move over against the wall!" he whispered.

She took advantage of the noise at the door and obeyed. Now she could see nothing, but she heard the heavy tread of the new arrival, and unintelligible words from him as he halted just outside the cabin.

"Nope, Pete hasn't showed," reported the smoker. "And he's got the dinero! But I reckon he'll be here any minute."

"Yuh shore he got away all right?" the new arrival asked. "Last I seen of him, he was cutting south on the main road."

Donna King's golden head whirled dizzily. For the first time in her healthy young life, she felt as if she might faint.

That voice belonged to Dane Benson!

As if far away, so far that it mingled with the roaring of Buckhorn's west prong, she heard one of the other men talking. Gradually the blurred words cleared, and she heard:

"--and it worked out fine. Lucky that hombre was in the bank. His face was the only one Doane saw. 'Course, when Pete let Doane have it, it turned out not to make no difference, one way or the other. Doane won't be testifyin'."

"And that was bad business!" grunted Dane Benson. "I'm goin' to have it out with Pete on that score. There's just one more job I've got figgered out, and I won't have any itchy trigger fingers helpin' on it, if I know it. The next hombre might not die."

"How's the silver assay?" the man in the cabin door asked.

Benson lighted a cigarette, and laughed as he exhaled smoke.

"It runs plenty. To look at this shack, yuh'd never think it was practically settin' on a million dollar vein, would yuh? That old prospector dug everywhere but right under the cabin. And we're a cinch to get it. If I can work things right, I can buy this land outright. And if I can't do that, I'll get it anyway." He laughed again. "Because the old man won't live always, and I'm goin' to marry the girl!"

Donna felt the sweep of anger burning into her cheeks. She tugged the pearl-handled .38 from its wet holster, and might have brought the gun into play if Bob Wiley hadn't acted when he did.

But the tall cowboy had heard all he needed to hear. Something fell with a crash in the back room. Donna's tense nerves nearly snapped at the sound, then she realized that Bob Wiley had thrown a stick from the wood rat's nest through the open door.

"What's that?" Benson snapped, the lazy well being gone from his voice, leaving it strangely akin to the metallic click of his thumbed-back hammer.

The cabin shook under his heavy tread. The other two men went with him. They approached the rear door cautiously, crowded against it, and peered into the darkness.

"Rats, mebbe!" said one.

"We'll see!" Benson growled, scratching a match on the wall.

The brilliance grew in his cupped hand. Donna could see him plainly as he thrust the light through the doorway. The shadows leaped and wavered beyond.

SHE was thinking: "Now they'd see the saddle and the bedding roll! Now it would be three to one--and that one wounded. No! Three to two. When the shooting starts, I'll be at Bob's side."

But he sprang from the loft like a lean, lithe panther. She jumped, startled, as his dark shape shot down. He landed on the balls of his feet, with a jingle of spurs, in the center of the room.

"Reach high!" he ordered coolly.

Benson ripped out a curse. Donna, jerking to her hands and knees at the rim of the loft, could see only an indistinct mass as the three men whirled, snarling. Then gun-flame streaked to meet gun-flame, in a livid, crazy quilt pattern spread beneath her.

Somebody fell at the first hammering roar. It wasn't Bob Wiley. His gun thundered again and again. Donna could see Benson backing into the shed, taking crouching shelter behind the door jamb, blazing back at the man she loved, and the first man who had fallen sprawled across the table.

There was another crash, a queer, gurgling cough. The other man's shoulders hit the wall, and his boots slid out from beneath his wilting body.

Wiley's gun clicked, empty, and Benson's bulk filled the doorway. The dimness of the room below where blue powder smoke swirled was terrifying.

"So it's you, Wiley!" gritted the B Bar owner. "Here's where yuh sell out cheap. Like anybody's liable to sell out when he cuts hisself in on another

man's deal. Before yuh go, yuh might have somethin' to say. Talk up--and make it fast."

"Yeah!" There was supreme contempt in the tall cowboy's drawl. "I want to tell yuh there's no use lookin' for Pete Yeager. He's dead. I had to run out of that bank, Benson, or be mistaken for one of yore gang. And don't forget it was Pete who cut me in on yore crooked deal. I was just cashin' a check when he stepped up behind me and jammed one gun in my ribs and threw the other one down on the cashier. I didn't have a gun. This is Pete Yeager's gun I've got now, Benson. Before he died, he told me the boss of this outfit was comin' here tonight."

Benson sneered. "Mighty long speech, Wiley. But yah won't live to tell it to nobody else. And I can be the man who trailed the gang here and wiped; 'em out--sabe? Turn towards the door, Wiley!"

The cowboy was gathering his muscles for a spring. Donna heard his boot heels click on the floor. She could see Benson's gun, smoke still wisping from its muzzle.

The crack of the .38 sounded distant. But its kick against the heel of her palm was a comforting thing. She fired again.

There was a gun blazing below, but the bullet ripped harmlessly into the warped flooring. Dane Benson cried out, more in surprise than pain, and fell across the smoking weapon.

Donna was halfway down the ladder before the crash of his heavy body had ceased echoing in the room. Bob Wiley caught her and held her close.

"Yuh didn't kill him, honey!" he soothed. "He'll live to stand trial. Don't--don't cry!"

THE tears came, but she was Rufe King's daughter, and they were really tears of happiness.

There would be no arrest now for the tall handsome rider who was going to settle down.

"Here's the bank money, Bob," she said. "I'm sorry I ever distrusted you. I might have known all along that you were innocent."

"Shucks, nobody could blame yuh for thinkin' I was one of the gang," he said. "They didn't want to wait, because somebody else might come in the bank. So they pulled the job with me there. And Yeager woulda shot me, too, but Benson yelled at him. So I tailed 'em out of there--and got shot, anyway. I didn't have enough reputation to try and explain to the sheriff. Then I went after Yeager, and came on here--and the water came down in the draw after my hoss strayed to the other side. You know the rest."

"Yes," said Donna. "I know the rest up to now. But after this--what?"

He kissed her. "Yuh're goin' to be rich, sweetheart, when yuh find the silver vein. And I'm so poor, I--"

Donna put a finger across his lips.

"Imagine," she whispered, "finding something that's been around a long time and was never discovered! Something a lot more precious than silver!" And Bob Wiley, kissing her again, knew just what she meant.

The Card on the Beam by Nevil G. Henshaw.



AFTER he had read his letter, Cherry Turner, buster and nominal foreman of the Circle K, stepped down from the platform of the station at Kade. He was under thirty, clear-eyed and regular-featured, with a face as innocent of beard as that of a new-born babe. He was dressed in the wide Stetson and flannel shirt of the puncher, and his trousers were protected by a pair of dull leather chaps--severely plain, without either fringe or buckle. At his hip there hung a .45, and about his neck was loosely knotted the handkerchief of cherry red from which he had derived his name.

The letter was scrawled in pencil upon a sheet torn from a tablet, and was dated from the Pan Handle. It ran:

DEAR CHERRY: Last week our buster got throwed and broke his leg so bad the doc says he won't never ride no more. Buck Jarvis, our foreman, has heard about you, and he says, if you're willing, you can have the job. He says he'll hold off a week, after which he'll get some one else. So, come a running. From your friend,

FRIIO JONES.

Cherry read the letter a second and a third time to make sure, and then thrust it into the pocket of his shirt with an exclamation of joyous amazement.

"Sho," said he. "I reckon that's goin' some."

Indeed it was, for of all the great outfits of the State the Bar Circle, under Buck Jarvis, was the most celebrated. To punch with it was in itself no small honor. To have the breaking of its mustangs was to occupy a position of glory.

As he strode toward his pony, Cherry's brain was in a whirl of pride and pleased anticipation. If he were willing he could have the job. If he were willing!

Why, there was not a puncher on the whole gulf range, or in all Texas, for that matter, who would not have given his very soul to possess it. And the foreman would hold off for a week. Of that he was sure.

That there might be no chance of his changing his mind. Cherry decided that he would leave the following morning.

He had already begun a mental picture of his triumphal progress to the Pan Handle when a thought came to him that toppled his air-castles into, an abyss of black despair. How was he to make the journey? There would be the price of his ticket and of shipping his pony, without which he would not have stirred.

Thrusting a hand into the pocket of his trousers, Cherry drew forth four silver dollars--the remnants of his pay--spent in Beaumont the week before. Save for this amount, which he had prudently saved for tobacco and other essentials, he was penniless. His companions, he knew, were equally bankrupt.

For a moment, he thought of the proprietor of the Circle-K, and then dismissed the idea as useless. Surely Kade, his employer, would not furnish the means of ridding himself of so valuable a man.

Caught upon the horns of this dilemma, Cherry stood for a while motionless and thoughtful, the four coins still in his hand. He had abandoned all thought of an immediate return to the ranch, and the sight of the money, coupled with the heat of the sun, finally forced upon him the consciousness of a raging thirst. Returning the silver to his pocket, he picked up his pony's anchoring bridle from the ground.

"Sho," he said, "there ain't no use worryin' about somethin' you can't help. I'll take a drink and let her straighten herself out the best way she can."

With this philosophical reflection, he set forth toward the saloon across the way.

II.

LOPEZ'S saloon, being of two stories, was the most imposing building at Kade. Cherry called for a cold bottle, a luxury that had become possible at Kade through the advent of the newly built G. and I. Strictly speaking, the term was a polite fiction, as the beer was cooled by the simple process of putting a piece of ice in the glass.

Having served his customer, Lopez returned to the game of twenty-five-cent stud poker which he was playing at a table covered with a square of carpet.

Cherry drank his beer slowly and meditatively, pausing now and then to listen to the cool tinkle of the ice against the glass. When he had finished he went over to the card-table and began to watch the game.

Three men were playing: Lopez, a puncher from a neighboring ranch, and a small, crafty looking individual who had most of the chips before him.

Cherry knew both Lopez and the puncher well. The third man had not the pleasure of his acquaintance, although he was a citizen of Kade. His name was Dorsey, and he was heartily despised by the punchers, for it was said of him that he allowed himself to be supported by his wife.

At Cherry's approach, Lopez looked up from his hand.

"Come on in," he suggested.

"Sure," urged the puncher. "Three ain't no game."

Dorsey said nothing, being intent upon his cards.

After a rapid mental calculation, Cherry drew forth his three silver dollars and what was left of the fourth after paying for his cold bottle.

"All right," he said. "I'll stay in till this is gone."

He won from the start, and continued winning for the best part of an hour. Most of his chips came from Dorsey, who began to fall behind in the game.

Dorsey took his losses in a species of silent fury, betting wildly on each card in the hope of forcing his luck. Each time that his hand was bettered he would glare across the table at his opponent with a look of hate in his shifty eyes, and he kept continually repeating, "I never could have no luck in a four-handed game."

Finally, Cherry, grinning maliciously, replied, "Why don't you pull out, then, and make her three-handed again?"

But Dorsey shook his head.

"That's all right, young man," he growled. "I'll git you yet. Jus' you wait an' you'll see."

As he spoke, the opportunity for his vengeance arrived.

Lopez, who was dealing, turned up an ace for Dorsey's second card. To Cherry he gave the queen of hearts. The others having nothing of account, turned down their hands leaving Dorsey and Cherry to fight out the pot between them. Having the highest card, Dorsey bet off and was immediately raised by Cherry. After he had raised back again his opponent called, and the third card was dealt. This time Dorsey received a second ace and Cherry the jack of hearts. Again Dorsey bet and again his opponent called.

With the fourth card, Dorsey received another ace and Cherry the ten of hearts.

Lopez settled back in his chair, laying the deck upon the table in the manner of one who has finished with his deal.

"That'll be about all," remarked Dorsey confidently, as he bet again.

Cherry was of a different mind. Carefully lifting the edge of his first card, which lay face, down upon the table, he gave it a glance and then threw a chip to the center.

"I reckon I'll take one more whirl for luck," he said.

"Flush," commented Lopez, and dealt the fifth and final card.

In Dorsey's hand there now were showing three aces and the eight of hearts. Cherry was possessed of the nine, the ten, the jack, and the queen of hearts.

Amid the silence that followed the completion of the hands, Dorsey's quick breathing could be heard distinctly. Cherry's face was inscrutable as he carefully arranged his cards. Lopez and the puncher leaned forward, carefully examining the hands.

After Dorsey had bet off and Cherry had raised, the chips rattled furiously until the stakes of both players were gone.

Then Dorsey leaned back in his chair, pale and excited. His brow was wet with perspiration, and there was a look of greed and cunning in his eyes.

"It sure is always my luck to git a real hand in a measly little game like this." he complained. "Now, if we was playin' for real money I'd show you some gamblin', young man."

Cherry, who was as calm and collected as he had been at the beginning of the game, met this challenge with a smile.

"And I reckon in that case you'd find me some willin' to learn," said he. "If you've got any notion of takin' off the limit, or any such play, you'll sure find me willin' to accommodate you."

A look of sneaking resolve flashed across Dorsey's face, and he straightened up in his chair as though seized with a sudden determination.

"Now, if this was to-morrer mornin'--" he began.

"And if it was?" interrupted Cherry.

"I'd jus' bet you fifty dollars on the hand."

A feeling of peace entered Cherry's soul, and he let out his breath sharply in a sigh of satisfaction. Fifty dollars, and there was almost half as much more in chips upon the table. With this amount he could journey in princely style toward the Pan Handle.

Rising abruptly he went out to his pony, uncinched his saddle, and carried it into the saloon.

"Here," he asked, as he cast it upon the floor, "will you let this go as a set-off to that bet of your'n?"

Dorsey examined the saddle carefully. It was a heavy affair, rich with embossing and silver, and it had cost its owner a cold two hundred in San

Antone.

"All right," agreed Dorsey. "It's a go. Bring her in to-morrer mornin' before train time an' we'll turn up the hands."

"Why before train time?" asked Cherry. This was the same hour that he had decided on in accordance with his plans.

"'Cause I'm goin' to B'mont."

Lopez, as banker of the game, turned toward the table to gather up the hands.

"That's a good play, boys," said he. "I'll just lock these up in my drawer with the pot till you need 'em again."

"Sure," agreed Cherry, glancing toward the bar. Then he suddenly looked up at the heavy beam supporting the ceiling that ran above it. and he was struck with an idea.

"Hold on!" he cried. "I got somethin' bettern that."

Behind the bar he found hammer and nails. Going to the table, he picked up his unexposed card and returned dragging a chair behind him.

The others watched in silent wonder as he mounted the chair and nailed the card to the beam, face inward, fastening it securely at the sides and corners so that it would be impossible for any one to examine it without tearing its edge.

"Look here," exploded Dorsey. "What the--"

"Wait," said Cherry, stepping down to the floor. "and I'll put you on."

"You see," he continued, addressing Lopez. "there ain't no use in clutterin' up your drawer with all them cards. If this here Dorsey party ain't got the other ace, all I got to have is a heart to beat him. If he has got it, then there ain't but one card I can turn up to help me, which is the king of hearts. As he's got the eight, can't have no straight flush without it."

"Now, all you got to do is to turn up Dorsey's card and see what it is, and lock up the pot in your drawer. In the mornin', I'll pull down my card, which I put where it won't be in no one's way."

Despite its simplicity, this plan did not appeal very strongly to Dorsey's suspicious nature.

"I reckon it'll be all right," he said doubtfully.

The puncher, consumed with curiosity, joggled Dorsey's arm.

"Hurry up an' turn her over," he urged excitedly. "I sure am anxious to see what she is."

In a breathless silence the card was exposed, disclosing the single spot of another ace.

Cherry gazed at it calmly for a moment and then turned to pick up his saddle from the floor.

"That's what I figured," he said.

III.

As Cherry rode back to the Circle K., he was in a pleasant frame of mind. Through his disposal of the buried cards he had determined positively the contents of his opponent's hand; and these contents, notwithstanding their strength, did not disturb him. Instead, they rather reassured him and set his mind at rest.

Knowing well the reputation that Dorsey bore at Kade, both for cowardice and indecision, he had been afraid, that in the event of his having but three of the aces, he would fail to put in an appearance on the following morning. Now, however, there could be no doubt about the matter. Dorsey would surely be there.

As for the card on the beam. Cherry thought of it jubilantly, with a vision of the Pan Handle dancing before his eyes.

"I've got him locked. I've got him locked," he muttered again and again, repeating the words in time with the steady thumping of his pony's hoofs.

Suddenly, far up the road, a spot of red appeared, resolving itself, as Cherry drew nearer, into the figure of a little girl. She was a tiny, elf-like creature, with a thick mop of black hair that was drawn smoothly back into a pigtail and tied with a cotton string. She swung a faded sun-bonnet as she trudged along, digging her little feet sturdily into the soft sand of the road.



Cherry drew up before her as she stepped aside to let him pass.

"Hallo, sis," he called pleasantly. "Where you goin' this time of day?"

The child surveyed him thoughtfully with large black eyes.

"My name's M'line," she said finally, "an' I'm goin' to the ranch."

Cherry smiled in the vaguely affectionate manner of one who is both fond of and unaccustomed to children.

"All right, M'line," he said. "Want a lift?"

With a nod of assent, the child stepped forward and Cherry reached down a hand. He swung her onto his saddle, and she sat demurely before him, staring out between his pony's ears.

"And what you goin' to do at the ranch?" asked Cherry jocularly, after he was under way again. "Not goin' to roll me for my job, I hope?"

Turning her head, the child looked at him severely, as if to rebuke him for his levity.

"I'm after some shirts of Mister Kade's," she said. "Maw forgot 'em when she got the wash last time."

"So your maw washes for the old man, does she?" asked Cherry soberly, as if to atone for his former offense.

Once more M'line turned her head, this time to stare at him curiously.

"Sure she does. Didn't I jus' tell you so?"

Abashed and disconcerted by her steady gaze, Cherry abandoned the conversation abruptly, and rode for a while in silence, holding the child carefully with one arm.

"Crismus's comin' soon," observed M'line, following the trend of her thoughts.

Cherry looked as confused as if he had denied the assertion but a moment before.

"Sho, now; so it is," he said guiltily. "And here I've done gone and plumb forgot it. What's Sandy Claus goin' to bring you this time, M'line?"

"They ain't no Sandy Claus."

Cherry agreed readily.

"Sure they ain't. Leastways, I reckon not in Texas."

"But I'm goin' ter git a present all right," continued M'line. "Guess what it is."

Cherry was silent for a moment, feigning deep thought.

"How 'bout a doll?" he ventured finally.

"How'd you know? "

"I reckon I must have guessed it."

The child smiled happily, holding out her arms in a fond, cradling gesture as if she held the subject of her thoughts.

"An' it's goin' ter be the' beautifulest doll you ever seen," said she dreamily. "It'll have yaller hair, an' chiny eyes, an' a sure 'nuff dress what you kin take off. I don't know what I'll name her 'cause I ain't never had one before, but I reckon I'll call her M'line, after me. Paw's goin' ter bring her frum B'mom."

Cherry smiled approvingly.

"Your paw must be a mighty good man," he observed.

The child's eyes grew scornful.

"No, he ain't," she cried fiercely. "Paw don't never give me nothin'. It's maw. She's bin savin' up all year for Crismus, an' she's got a whole heap of money--most a million dollars, I reckon. She's goin' ter make paw buy her a real stove, an' a new dress, an' some of that there tin grub, an' a whole lot of things. She'd go herself an' take me if it wasn't for her work. Paw, he don't do nothin'."

The words poured forth in such a flood of bitterness that Cherry stared aghast, too overcome to reply. Tightening his arm about the child he gave her a short, sympathetic squeeze, and the two rode on in silence toward the Circle K.

When they reached the ranch-house, Cherry led his charge at once into the presence of Kade. After he had told her errand and she had departed with her bundle of shirts, he plunged at once into his own affairs with the lack of hesitation which he always employed in performing some disagreeable duty. Taking his letter from the pocket of his shirt, he handed it to his employer.

Kade read it slowly, while a little wrinkle of annoyance began to form between his brows. When he had finished, he returned it in the same silence with which it had been received.

"What outfit?" he asked finally.

"Bar Circle."

Kade gave a grunt of surprise and, stepping back a pace or two, surveyed Cherry carefully from head to foot as though he were taking his measure for the first time.

"You goin'?" he asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-morrow mornin'."

Kade nodded thoughtfully.

"All right, Turner," he said. "I don't blame you. You've done well. Remember, if ever you want to come back your job'll be waitin' for you."

"Thanks. I'll remember."

The matter settled, Kade turned away. With his hand upon the door he suddenly paused.

"How you goin'?" he asked. "You're about even with what you've overdrawn."

A look almost sheepish came into Cherry's eyes, and he twisted the brim of his Stetson in nervous embarrassment.

"I got a little speculation over in town I reckon'll do," he said finally, in a low voice.

"Cattle?"

"No, poker. Stud."

The line that had come between Kade's brows faded quietly away and his face expanded in a smile.

"Is that so?" he said cheerfully. "Well, I reckon you ain't gone--yet."

IV.

THE following morning a crowd gathered at Lopez's saloon that comprised the entire male population of Kade. It began arriving a good sixty minutes before train time, an hour that was definite, notwithstanding the irregularity of the G. and I., for Kade, being the first station on the return trip, the train was usually on time.

Dorsey arrived promptly at the half-hour, clothed in the full glory of his store-clothes and carrying a-small valise of the variety known as "telescope." His coming was attended by so much curiosity and excitement, that he immediately dropped his usual attitude of cringing servility and began to put on airs.

After he had taken the seat of honor at the poker-table and had counted out the fifty dollars in small bills and change, he leaned back in his chair with an attempt at importance.

"It don't look like the other gent's present enough to hurt none," he observed, running his eye over the crowd.

The puncher who had been in the game the day before stepped forward.

"Does you mean to say you think he ain't comin'?" he asked pointedly.

"Not at all. Not at all," said Dorsey, as he became more unassuming. "I simply mean he's late."

A subdued silence fell upon the crowd.

Five minutes before train time Cherry arrived, dressed also in the garb of a traveler, and accompanied by crowd of his companions who had ridden in for the double purpose of seeing him off and witnessing the exposure of the mysterious card.

Notwithstanding their anxious questioning of the night before. Cherry had preserved a tantalizing silence, saying only that if they would come in with him in the morning they could see for themselves. The arrival of this delegation was treated with the deference carefully exacted by those of the Circle K.

Cherry entered, carrying his saddle over his shoulder. He deposited it on the floor, made a hasty inventory of the money on the table and turned to Dorsey.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, "but I had to see about my hoss. I'm goin' away, too."

Dorsey smiled magnanimously.

"That's all right," he replied. "It don't make no difference."

"You are ready?"

"Let her roll."

In the hush that followed this exchange of courtesies, Cherry seized a chair and planted it firmly beneath the beam. As he did so the sound of a whistle was borne faintly in upon the quiet air.

The crowd surged eagerly forward. Dorsey squirmed uneasily in his chair.

"Hurry up," he urged. "She's blowin' now."

With his hand on the card Cherry paused, disturbed by a sudden commotion at the back of the narrow room. As he waited, a small red figure wormed its way to the side of Dorsey's chair and the silence was broken by the sound of a high childish voice.

"Come on, paw," it pleaded. "You ain't goin' ter git left now?"

It was M'line.

A sudden, sickening sensation came over Cherry, and he dropped his hand as quickly as if the card had been a coal of living fire. So the money that he was about to win was not Dorsey's. It was his wife's--the pitiful amount which she had been saving, piece by piece, from her earnings that she might enjoy a few of the necessities of life at Christmas.

If he went to the Pan Handle now he would be no better than the despicable creature before him. He would be living upon a woman's money.

From outside came the rattle of the approaching train, and as Cherry gazed at M'line the vision of the Pan Handle seemed slowly to fade away. In its place came the vision of a doll--a beautiful doll with yellow hair, and eyes, and a sure enough dress and hat that would come off.

Slowly twisting the end of his gaudy handkerchief, as was his habit in moments of perplexity, Cherry spoke to Dorsey. It was in simple, direct language.

Dorsey rose angrily and pushed the child aside.

"Git outer here," he commanded. "I'm comin' right away."

Then he turned impatiently to the quiet figure upon the chair.

"Let's have her!" he cried peremptorily. "I ain't got all day."

Without a moment's hesitation, Cherry reached up and tore away the card. Then he crumpled it up in his hand and thrust it into a pocket of his trousers.

With an oath Dorsey sprang forward, feeling for his hip, only to recoil in terror at sight of the .45 which had suddenly appeared in Cherry's hand. The crowd surged back uneasily, leaving the two alone in the middle of the room.

"Look here!" gasped Dorsey, white and trembling. "You-all ain't goin' ter let me be helt up this-a-way?"

Then Cherry said, slowly and distinctly, still covering the cringing figure with his gun:

"It's all right, Dorssy. You win. I just don't want you to make no foolish play, that's all. Now you take the money and the saddle and hike for the train, or you'll get left. Likewise, I'd advise you to play your winnin's accordin' to the advice of them who staked you. If you don't, I'll know. You needn't wait for me. I reckon I ain't goin' to-day."

Amid the relief that followed this announcement the crowd surged back again, curious and disappointed, anxiously questioning about the mysterious card.

Cherry smiled sheepishly as he put up his gun and stepped down to the floor.

"Sho," he said, "you-all don't none of you want to see my little old four of spades. Next time I want to run a bluff I reckon I'll be more careful who I try it on."

Then he gritted his teeth and went silently out to face the humiliation of his barebacked return to the Circle K.

Tascosa Partners by Robert Moore Williams



You can do a job right alone and still be alive afterwards if you're smart enough. But a time may come when you'll need help.

Jones, his three partners, watched him as he strode across the room and took the double barrel sawed-off shotgun from the antler prongs on the wall. Opening the breech, he slipped two buckshot-loaded shells into the barrels, put four more shells into his pockets. He took two blankets from the empty bunk and wrapped them around the shotgun. Then, using slip knots, he tied both ends of the blankets with a piece of rope, slipped them over his back, the rope coming across his chest.

The blankets looked like an ordinary bedding roll. A buffalo hunter, a wandering cowboy, even an outlaw riding the long trail, might carry a bedroll like this. The shotgun in the blankets was completely concealed.

His partners watched him in speculative silence. He took a box of .45 caliber pistol cartridges from the shelf over the fireplace and filled the empty loops in his pistol belt. He checked his gun, made certain that the barrel was perfectly clean and that the cylinder turned smoothly and easily.

Then he stepped out the door. When he returned a few moments later he was rubbing mud on the walnut grips of his pistol.

THE mud was an artistic touch. He smeared it liberally on the handle of the gun, slid the pistol into its holster, looked at Jones lying on the bed.

"What was the name of that gambler who held you up?"

Cal Jones tried to lift his bandaged head from the pillow. The effort was beyond his strength. His left arm was broken and there was a slug through his right lung, both relics of the town of Tascosa.

"Hewitt," Cal Jones whispered. "He's a--little man--with a crooked nose."

"Where does he hang out?"

"When I first saw him--he was playing for the house--in the Red Dog saloon. I guess that's his hang out."

"You sure he's the man?"

"I'm--dead certain of it. His first shot--knocked me off my horse and broke my arm. He came out from behind the bushes--and I got a good look at him--before he shot the second time. He's the man all right."

"And how much did he get?"

"Thirty-eight hundred. It was all--in twenty-dollar gold pieces. That's the way--the construction gang at Trinidad paid me--when I delivered the steers to them."

"Thanks," Jorgenson said. He picked up his hat, turned toward the door.

"Wait," Cal Jones whispered from the bed.

Jorgenson hesitated. "What is it, Cal?"

"Wait until tomorrow," Cal Jones begged. "I'll have some of my strength back then--and I'll go with you."

Cal Jones must have known that tomorrow might never come for him. He had been left for dead in the road and his life still hung in the balance. In spite of this, he wanted to go to Tascosa with Jorgenson.

Jones' request startled Jorgenson. More than that, it somehow sent a warm glow through the big man. Near death, Jones was still trying to help him. Jorgenson appreciated the effort, but he shook his head.

"Tomorrow may be too late, Cal," he said gently. "Hewitt may be gone by then. I can't wait, Cal. I've got to go today."

"Then--I'll go with you, now."

Jones tried to sit up in bed. Sim Sebastian and Ron Carter, sitting beside him, hastily but gently grabbed his shoulders. Jones thrust a foot over the edge of the bed.

"No, Cal," Jorgenson said.

"I got us into this," Jones argued.

"You can't help an ambush, Cal." Although Jorgenson didn't say it, he had the feeling that anybody who ran into an ambush was not up on his toes.

"But we need that money bad," Jones argued.

"And I'll get it for us, Cal."

"I'm your partner. It's my right to help you."

Jorgenson shook his head. Jones tried to thrust his other foot over the edge of the bed. The effort was too much for him. He coughed heavily, his strength failed. Sebastian and Carter hastily helped him to lie back down. Jorgenson went quickly out of the cabin, closed the door behind him.

He knew Cal Jones was a hopeless fool for trying to help him in his present condition but Jones' desire to help was a warm and friendly thing.

THERE were eight horses in the corral. Jorgenson looked them over carefully. He knew that the man who rode a good horse into Tascosa was taking a chance of having it stolen if left unguarded for a moment. He put his rope on the sorriest-looking mount in the bunch, an animal so nearly worthless that even the lowest horse thief would not stoop to steal it. He was tightening the cinches on his heavy silver-mounted saddle when his two partners emerged from the cabin. He watched them walk toward him.

Sim Sebastian was thin and slender. His frosty blue eyes were as bright as ever but the stoop of age was beginning to appear in his back. Sebastian wasn't a young man any longer. He walked with the shuffling gait of a man who has spent much of his life in the saddle.

Ron Carter was much younger and much bigger. Carter was as strong as a mule but like that animal, he was also heavy and slow-moving.

Neither an old man nor a slow-moving man would be able to help Jorgenson in Tascosa. He waited until they came up to him.

"We think we better go with you," Sim Sebastian said bluntly.

"That's right," Ron Carter nodded in agreement. "There ain't no law in Tascosa. There never has been. The town is a damned sight too tough for one man."

"I'm not going to fight the town," Jorgenson answered. "I'm going after one man."

He swung into the saddle.

"Jorge!" Sebastian said sharply.

"I can do the job," Jorgenson said. "You two stay here and take care of Cal."

Touching his pony's flank with a spur, he rode away. His two partners watched him in silence. Hard riding would get him to Tascosa by night. He wanted to reach his destination just after dark.

Tall and lean, Jorgenson had an easy seat in the saddle. Born in Missouri, he had come west when he was barely sixteen, following the growing tide of migration that was flowing into Texas after the Civil War. He had been successively a horse wrangler with the trail herds, then a regular hand, then a *segundo*, then, always moving up, he had been a full trail boss taking herds into Dodge.

Extension of the rail lines westward --construction at this time had reached Trinidad, Colorado, ten day's ride to the north--had ended the cattle drives to Dodge. By the time this had happened, Jorgenson was ready to quit the trail. He had discovered there wasn't much money to be made by working for the other fellow. The money lay in owning cows, not in taking care of cattle owned by somebody else. Jorgenson knew cattle. He had saved his salary. Using the money he had saved, he had gone into partnership with Sebastian, Carter, and Jones. They operated under the Z brand.

Although it had been started on a shoe-string, the Z brand gave every prospect of being a profitable venture. The four men knew cattle, his three partners had range-savvy, and they were willing to work.

CAL JONES had taken the first bunch of Z cattle north and sold them to the railroad construction gangs near Trinidad. It was a small bunch of steers but the \$3800.00 he had received for the beef represented the first income of the Z brand. That money would keep the four partners going. Without it, they would also be going--going bust.

Jorgenson rode northeast. He crossed the two enormous gashes in the Plains known as the Palo Duro. Deer and antelope were plentiful here. He saw them on every side. There were mustangs and mavericks here too, and an occasional buffalo, haunting a half-empty water-hole or loping lazily in play across an almost barren plain.

The day of the buffalo in this section of the Great Plains was past. The buffalo hunters had thinned the huge shaggy animals to the point of virtual extinction. The buffalo hunters had moved farther west.

Jorgenson, like most ranchers and cowmen, had only contempt for the buffalo hunters. He regarded them as the off-scourings of civilization and was glad that the majority of them had moved out of the country following the game.

All of them, he knew, had not left. The worst of the lot, those too shiftless to hunt and too worthless to work, the off-scourings of the off-scourings, lived in or around Tascosa. Night was falling when Jorgenson saw the town from the distance of about a mile. His horse clip-clopped down the main street in the gathering darkness.

There was only one street in Tascosa and it was more of a road than a street. The Red Dog saloon was a one story log building on the right side of the street. Jorgenson rode past without turning his head. He stopped in front of a ramshackle log structure that had the crudely lettered sign LIVERY STABLE above the door.

"I want my horse fed," he said to the surly proprietor.

"That'll be a dollar, in advance," was the answer.

Jorgenson paid the dollar. He led his horse into a stall and personally saw that the animal was fed before he sought food for himself.

There was no restaurant in Tascosa. His own meal was two cans of sardines with cheese and crackers in the general store.

Neither the owner of the livery stable nor the proprietor of the store asked him any questions. His name, where he had come from, and where he was going, were his own business.

Nobody in Tascosa asked a stranger his business. Such questions were not considered polite. Jorgenson spent an hour munching crackers, sardines, and cheese, then went back to the livery stable where he had left his horse.

He saddled and bridled the pony, rode down the main street, dismounted one door away from the Red Dog saloon. He used a slip noose to tie his horse to the hitching rack. A single jerk of the reins would free them.

He chose not to tie his pony in front of the Red Dog for two reasons. The first reason, a man mounting a horse in front of the saloon was an easy target for a shot through the two front windows of the place. The second reason for choosing this particular spot was an opening between two buildings. When he came out of the Red Dog, he could spur his horse directly through the opening between the two buildings and thus escape running down the main street where again he would be a target.

He used a slipknot in the reins because he expected to mount in one hell of a hurry when he came out of the saloon.

He checked the slipknots on his bedding roll, gave the whole roll a hitch so that it rode easily on his shoulders. He pushed open the door and entered the saloon.

THE bar was at the back. There was a side door at the right. To the left was a big cast-iron stove. The gambling tables were also to the left. Three smoky coal oil lamps shed a wan illumination over the fifteen to twenty persons present.

When he entered the door, Jorgenson had the instant attention of perhaps two thirds of the men in the saloon. He was a stranger. These men were instantly wary of him. Here and there around the room hands moved a little closer to bolstered weapons.

Two thirds of 'em either dodgin' the law or dodgin' personal enemies, he thought. The other third aren't much worried about strangers.

He walked up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said.

He turned to the group. "Be glad to have you gentlemen drink with me."

"Free whiskey!" the bartender sang out. "Line up and name if you want it mixed or straight."

It was an invitation that was seldom or never refused. With the exception of five men playing poker at one of the tables on the left, every person in the saloon lined up at the bar. Jorgenson glanced at the card players.

One of them was a rat-like little man with a crooked nose. Was this Hewitt? He suspected it was but he didn't know. Crooked Nose was smoking a cigar and studying the cards in his hands. Stacks of twenty-dollar gold pieces were lined up on the table in front of him.

"Aren't the card players drinkin'?" Jorgenson asked the bartender.

"Sure, they're drinkin'," the bartender answered. "Hewitt, what'll you and the boys have?"

Crooked Nose looked up. He stared at Jorgenson for a split second, then glanced back at his hand.

"We'll have cigars instead," he said.

Jorgenson had found his man. The twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table in front of Crooked Nose showed he had found the money too. He hitched his bedding roll to an easier position on his back.

"Give me the box of cigars," he said to the bartender. "I'll take the gents their smokes."

The bartender slid the box of cigars across the bar. Jorgenson picked it up. Silence fell in the room.

Most of the men in this place were on the dodge. Men on the dodge develop a keen sense of danger. Some of them sensed danger now. They didn't do it openly but out of the corner of their eyes they watched this big stranger who had come into the saloon. What they saw was a tired-looking but big cowpuncher with a bedding roll slung across his back. He was walking

across the room to deliver the cigars he had bought, to the men he had bought them for. It was a polite thing to do. True, this big waddie had a gun on his hip, but so did every other man in the place except the bartender and he had a gun under the bar. If Jorgenson hadn't been carrying a gun, they would have known something was wrong with him. If he hadn't had a gun in sight, they would have suspected he had one hidden, and they would have looked closely to see where. But he had a gun in plain sight.

They could even see the mud on the butt of his gun. Nobody who expected to use a gun would ever leave caked mud on the handle.

HEWITT glanced up when he saw Jorgenson coming with the box of cigars. His hand went under the table and his eyes narrowed. He looked this big stranger over very closely. He also saw the mud caked on the butt of the pistol. It was a reassuring sight, that mud.

Jorgenson set the box of cigars on the poker table.

"Excuse me for interruptin' your game," he said. "But help yourselves to some cigars."

Two of the men reached immediately for the cigars. The man on Hewitt's left hesitated, then accepted. Hewitt eyed Jorgenson. Crooked Nose had eyes that were half-yellow and half-green.

Jorgenson met the stare. "Have a cigar, friend," he urged.

Hewitt's hand slowly came out from under the table.

Jorgenson reached up to steady the bedding roll. Hewitt glanced at the box of cigars. He started to select one. Jorgenson gently tugged at the rope on his bedding roll. The knot gave. The blankets started to come loose.

"Dang that knot," he muttered. "I'll bet I tie it this time so it stays tight."

He lifted the bedding roll over his shoulder. His hands went inside the blankets. His fingers closed around the butt of the shotgun.

"Take all the cigars," he urged. "Then put nine of those stacks of gold pieces into the empty cigar box."

The tone of his voice jerked Hewitt's eyes up to him. Crooked Nose found himself looking into the twin barrels of the shotgun.

Jorgenson stepped back from the table, placed himself so that his gun covered the men at the bar, the bartender, and the card players.

"Don't anybody move!" he ordered. "That goes especially for you, Hewitt."

In the Red Dog saloon at that moment no one showed any signs of wanting to do any moving. The men in this place knew guns. Jorgenson had taken their knowledge into consideration when he chose the shotgun to hide in his bedding roll.

A pistol they would have respected. The Colt was a deadly weapon all right. A Colt would have held them motionless for a minute, maybe two minutes. At the end of that time, out of fifteen to twenty desperate men somebody would have figured he could take a chance on a Colt. Somebody would have gambled on a six-gun.

The men in this saloon knew better than to try to gamble with a shotgun. When they saw the shotgun in Jorgenson's hands, they froze where they were standing.

"I got business with only one man in this saloon," Jorgenson said. "If nobody else moves, nobody else is going to get hurt."

Stun them for a second with the shotgun. Then tell them he wanted only one man. That would keep the pack off him. That would keep some desperate man from making a break.

"You, Hewitt--"

Crooked Nose wet thin lips with the tip of his tongue. His yellow eyes were unwavering in their stare.

"Have you got twenty gold pieces in each of those stacks in front of you?" Jorgenson asked.

Hewitt nodded slowly.

"Then put nine stacks in that cigar box."

CROOKED NOSE was surprised. If Jorgenson had said to put all the gold pieces in front of him into the cigar box, he would have understood what was happening. This would have been just a hold-up. But when the big cowpuncher demanded nine stacks, it surprised a question out of him.

"Why nine stacks?"

"That's what you took off my partner yesterday," Jorgenson answered. "That's what I'm taking back tonight."

"Your partner!" Sudden understanding glinted in Hewitt's eyes. "But--"

"You left him for dead, didn't you?" Jorgenson answered. "Anyhow that's what you thought! *Start dumping gold into that cigar box, you tin-horn gambler, before I blow your guts all over this saloon and take the money out of your estate!*"

When he wanted to use it, Jorgenson had an edge on his voice that would curl the hide on a three-year old steer. He used it now. There was sudden death in that voice. There was boiling anger in it. Here was the man who had bushwhacked Cal Jones, left him for dead in the road. Jorgenson's finger itched on the trigger of his gun when he thought about Cal.

Hewitt heard the tones of sudden death in Jorgenson's voice. He hastily dumped nine stacks of gold pieces into the cigar box. Listening to that

voice, looking at that shotgun, only a crazy fool would have done anything else.

"Toss one of them to the barkeep to pay for the drinks and the cigars," Jorgenson ordered. The hot edge of his anger was cooling a little. He was beginning to think about getting away. Lifting the now heavy cigar box from the table, he stuffed it inside his shirt.

Keeping his back to the wall and his eyes on the crowd, he moved toward the door. Reaching behind him, he lifted the latch with his left hand, opened the door. He stepped outside.

A stampede started inside the saloon.

"Get that bastard!" he heard Hewitt scream.

He was ready for the stampede. He had anticipated what would happen the second he left the saloon. He stepped quickly to one of the front windows, lifted the shotgun to his shoulder. It roared heavily.

Over the tinkle of falling glass came the sound of men hitting the floor. The stampede of moving feet stopped.

Jorgenson grinned. He had aimed high. The buckshot hadn't done any damage except to the window but the rattle of the heavy slugs inside the saloon had stopped all activity. He turned, ran for his horse.

He still hadn't found a job he couldn't do. This had been easy. All he had needed was a shotgun and boldness.

HE FOUND the hitching rack where he had tied his horse, reached for the reins. He didn't find them. For a second he fumbled in the darkness.

Then he realized his horse was gone.

While he had been holding up the saloon, one of the thieves in Tascosa had stolen his horse.

"Who in the devil would steal that plug? The saddle! Damn me for a fool! I forgot my silver-mounted saddle. They stole the horse for the saddle!"

Although he had deliberately chosen a horse that would not attract the eye of even a Tascosa horse thief, he had forgotten that his saddle was a valuable and expensive piece of riding equipment. He was so accustomed to using it that he had forgotten it was valuable in the eyes of other men.

Jorgenson was afoot in Tascosa.

In that moment, possibly for the first time in his life, he realized that sometimes even the strongest, the bravest, and the smartest man may need help. If he had let either Sebastian or Carter come with him, they could have guarded the horses while he held up the saloon. They could have covered his retreat. If--!

Carter and Sebastian were back at the Z ranch and he was alone in Tascosa.

With a thud that rattled its hinges, the door of the Red Dog saloon was kicked open.

In split seconds Jorgenson knew that men would be boiling out all the doors in the saloon. With a horse, he could have made a clean getaway. On foot--

He ran between the two buildings. At the back end of the log structure the ends of the logs made a kind of a ladder that an agile man could use to climb to the roof. Jorgenson used that ladder. Hooking his heels in the wooden eaves trough, he lay flat on his back on the roof.

On foot, he couldn't escape. All he could do was hide. Sometime during the night--if he could stay out of sight and stay alive, maybe he could get his hands on a horse.

Fifteen minutes later every saloon in Tascosa had disgorged its occupants out into the street. The story of how some lone hand had held up Hewitt in the Red Dog saloon had been told and re-told. On the street out in front of the building on top of which he was hiding, Jorgenson could hear Hewitt making a speech.

"No damned road agent can come into a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens and pull a holdup like that!" Hewitt shouted.

Hewitt's statement that Tascosa was a community of peaceful law-abiding citizens was so much hog-wash.

"I'll give half the money he stole as a reward to the man who captures him," Hewitt continued.

Two men passed along the side of the building where Jorgenson was hiding.

"Half the money, hell!" one of them snorted. "If I can get my hands on that money, I'm heading west with all of it."

"Me, too!" the second man answered. "Almost four thousand dollars that buzzard got. If I can get my sights on him--"

HEARING this conversation, Jorgenson realized he had roused something hotter than a hornet's nest. Practically the whole population of Tascosa was hunting for him, not because they wanted to help Hewitt get his money back, but because they wanted the money themselves. Why split a reward when they could have the whole take? Jorgenson began to sweat. At least a hundred men were looking for him with what was to them the perfectly sound motive of shooting him for the cigar box of gold pieces he was carrying.

At this point he realized how big a job he had tackled.

He heard horsemen ride out of town, he saw lanterns bobbing around the back doors of the buildings in Tascosa. He wasn't much worried about the men who carried lanterns. They were just poking around in the general excitement but they weren't really looking for him. You don't carry a lantern when you go looking for a man armed with a shotgun. It was the men who didn't carry lanterns, the men he heard slipping silently between the two

buildings, the men who kept in the darkness and moved quietly, who scared him. They were the fellows who were out for business.

Jorgenson didn't like his position on the roof even a little bit but it was the best he could do for the time being.

He heard something clink below him. He craned his neck but could see nothing. Off to the left he saw three men near a building. One of them had a lantern, one of them had a Winchester, and the third had a long pole. He wondered what the pole was for.

He soon found out. They were using the pole to poke under the building. They found a dog. Bang! went the Winchester. The dog yelped, died in a flurry of kicking legs.

The three men moved on to the next structure. Watching them, Jorgenson was damned glad he hadn't crawled under a building. The clinking sound came again. It was right under him but he couldn't see the source. He lifted his head and watched closely. He saw a twenty-dollar gold piece slip out from inside his shirt, bounce from the roof, and drop over the edge. The clinking sound came from the gold piece striking the edge of the roof.

His profanity was none the less vicious because it was silent. He reached inside his shirt and hastily adjusted the cigar box so no more of the gold pieces would slide out. From the weight of the box, he decided he hadn't lost enough of the gold coins to make much difference. Anyhow he wasn't greatly concerned about the fate of the money any longer. He was far more concerned about his hide.

TWO men with lanterns came out of the back door of the building where he was hiding. They passed directly under him.

"Hey! What's that?" one said.

"By golly, it's a twenty-dollar gold piece!" he heard the second answer.
"Look! There's another one!"

There was a few minutes of silence while the two men searched for more golden coins. They found one more.

"That's all of them, I guess."

"Guess it is. Where do you suppose they came from?"

"Where did they come from? That's easy. The buzzard that held up Hewitt dropped them when he went by here."

Silence again. Jorgenson could almost hear the two men thinking. He was in a cold sweat. They had found the gold coins he had dropped. They were wondering how he had happened to drop them in this particular place. Sooner or later they were going to think of looking up on the roof.

Talking in a low tone of voice, they passed between the two buildings.

Jorgenson tried to hit the ground softly but his boots thudded into the hard dirt and the gold pieces in the cigar box rattled like a half empty keg of nails dropping from a wagon.

"What's that?" he heard a voice exclaim from the street in front of the building.

Jorgenson didn't run. He didn't dare to run. He walked away in the darkness. Skin crawled all over his back as he walked. He felt like he was fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him a target.

By the time the lanterns came around the corner of the saloon he was lying flat in a patch of dry weeds fifty yards from the back end of the building, his heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

"That son-of-a-gun was up on the roof!" he heard a man shout. "Here's his tracks where he jumped off!"

Lanterns came bobbing from all directions. The three men with the pole left off their efforts and joined the crowd. They held a regular pow-wow.

The sound of a stealthy footstep startled Jorgenson. A man with a Sharps rifle walked within ten feet of him, moving toward the crowd at the back end of the saloon. Jorgenson had a wholesome respect for the Sharps rifle in the hands of a buffalo hunter. He lay in the patch of weeds and tried not to breathe. He considered slipping away into the darkness. He might get safely away. On the other hand there might be another silent watcher out there in the night. Without knowing it, he might find himself in the sights of a Sharps and never know anything thereafter. The big guns, designed to stop a buffalo, tore a hell of a hole in a man.

He didn't dare move, he decided. On the other hand, he didn't dare stay still. The crowd was breaking up. Lanterns were moving to the right and the left along the back ends of the buildings. At the far end of the street to the right he could see three lanterns.

"That buzzard can't be far away," he heard someone say. "And he's still got the money!"

The knowledge that the man they sought--and the money--was still somewhere in the vicinity intensified the search. High heeled boots walked all around Jorgenson. A lantern moved toward him. It was coming closer and closer. He watched it, an idea growing in his mind.

THE man with the lantern moved closer. Jorgenson silently laid his shotgun down. He waited. The lantern passed within five feet of him. He rose to his feet, took three quick steps.

His gun barrel smashed across the skull of the man. He grabbed the lantern before it hit the ground.

The man who had been carrying the lantern never knew what hit him. He fell silently. To anyone watching it looked like the lantern had bobbed a

little. Maybe the man who was carrying it had stepped into a ditch and then stepped out.

Swiftly, Jorgenson traded hats with the man he had slugged. Nothing changed the appearance of a man so much as a different hat.

Lantern in hand, he walked back toward the main street of Tascosa.

Boldness must carry him to safety.

His shotgun he left where it was lying. Any man carrying a shotgun would automatically be an object of suspicion.

A hat, a lantern, and boldness against the ruffians of Tascosa!

"Seen anything?" a man asked him as he stepped out on the main street.

"I ain't seen a thing," Jorgenson answered, shaking his head. "It beats the hell out of me where that buzzard went. Seen anything of Hewitt?"

"He was going back to the Red Dog the last time I saw him."

"Guess I'll find him there," Jorgenson said. He didn't want Hewitt. Crooked Nose was the last man on earth he wanted to see. But if he used a familiar name, he would seem to be a resident of Tascosa. Hewitt was the only man he knew in the fierce little town.

He walked down the street. Again he felt fifteen feet tall and as broad as a barn door, all of him target. The man who had asked him if he had seen anything paid no further attention to him.

The search for him was continuing. Knots of men were talking in the street. The roof of every building was being inspected. The three men with the long pole were again at work poking under each building.

JORGENSON walked down the street. He was looking for a horse that did not seem to be too closely guarded. Outlined against lanterns far down the street, he saw three horses tied to a hitching rack in front of a saloon. He passed the Red Dog saloon. Hewitt was standing in the front door.

"Hey, you!" Crooked Nose called out.

"What do you want?" Jorgenson gruffly answered.

"I want to borrow your lantern for a minute."

"Go hunt up your own lantern," Jorgenson answered. "I got use for this one."

He kept on walking. Hewitt swore at him.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the gambler turn around and walk back into the saloon.

The feeling of being fifteen feet tall disappeared. If the lantern, the hat, and boldness, had fooled Hewitt, they would fool anybody.

Five minutes later, he had blown out the lantern, left it sitting on the ground, had stolen a horse and was riding out of town on the main street. Only iron-nerved self-control kept him from putting spurs into the pony's flanks. He held the horse to a trot. The men he passed on the street glanced casually at him, then went on with their search for the road agent who had held up Hewitt. They weren't looking for a man riding a pony at a slow trot down the main street of Tascosa.

The twenty-dollar gold pieces, jingling softly in the cigar box inside Jorgenson's shirt, told him that he still hadn't found a job he couldn't do. For a time, it had looked tough. For a time he had thought he was a goner but all he had needed was intelligence and boldness. That was all anyone ever needed.

When he passed the last house of Tascosa, he put spurs to his horse and began to gallop.

He didn't see the two men on horseback beside the road. They were completely hidden in the darkness. He didn't know they were within miles of him.

As soon as they heard his horse, one of them began to swing a rope. He went past them at a gallop. The thrown loop leaped after him.

He never did see the rope but he heard it hiss through the air and knew instantly what it was. He ducked low in the saddle.

The rope was already around his shoulders. He yanked back on the bridle reins, grabbed with the other hand at the rope.

The yank on the reins slowed his pony, saved his life. But he didn't have time to throw off the rope. He was pulled back and out of the saddle. He had the sensation of sliding and falling. He hit the ground with a jar that knocked him unconscious.

"IS THAT the bastard?" he heard a voice say. It was a thin, far-away voice.

"I don't know yet," a second, gruffer, closer voice said.

"Well, hurry up and find out," the thin voice spoke. "There's somebody coming."

"I'm lookin' as fast as I can," the gruff voice answered.

Jorgenson was aware that rough hands were going over his body. He was lying face down in the road. His nose, his mouth, and his eyes were full of sand. He gasped for breath, blew sand out of his nostrils.

"Hello," the gruff voice said. "This jasper is waking up!"

"Then shoot him!" the thin voice said. "But find the money and be quick about it. I hear horses."

"Let 'em come," the gruff voice said.

Jorgenson abruptly stopped trying to regain consciousness. He let himself lie limp. He didn't have enough strength to make a fight.

There was bitterness in his mind. He had been ambushed, just as Cal Jones had been ambushed. He had thought that only a weakling let himself be ambushed.

He was turned over. Hands poked around inside his coat. He didn't dare move. He wasn't able to fight. If he even revealed he was alive, he would be shot.

A match flared. Jorgenson kept his eyes closed.

"There's twenty-dollar gold pieces scattered to hell and gone here in the road!" the gruff voice exclaimed. "Come and help me pick them up."

"I'm coming. But we got to hurry."

Saddle leather creaked. A frantic search began in the sandy road. His fall had smashed the cigar box and had scattered golden coins everywhere. He could hear the two men swearing and scratching in the sand. He could also hear the clip-clop of trotting horses coming nearer and nearer.

"Them ponies is gettin' awful close," the thin voice said.

"What the hell of it? We found him. I'd like to see anybody else cut themselves in on him."

The search continued.

The horses clip-clopped to a stop.

"What's going on here?" one of the riders asked.

"Burn the wind, you two," the gruff voice snarled. "We found him. Nobody else is going to cut in on him. See?"

"Wouldn't think of it," the rider answered. "Come on, Ron. We'll not disturb these two gentlemen."

Jorgenson blew sand out of his mouth.

"Sim!" he croaked. "Sim!"

THE voice of the rider was the sweetest voice, he had ever heard. It was the voice of Sim Sebastian speaking to Ron Carter. His partners! For the first time in his life he fully realized the meaning of the word partner.

There was a split second of silence after he spoke.

Jorgenson vaguely saw his two captors stand up. They were dim and indistinct figures reaching for their guns. Sim Sebastian shot first. Ron Carter shot later.

For the space of thirty seconds Jorgenson did not know whether he was going to be killed by a flying bullet or crushed by a plunging horse. He crawled toward the edge of the road. Bullets were thudding all around him. Sebastian's and Carter's horses, frightened by the sudden thunder of guns, were trying to buck and to run at the same time. Carter was thrown. He fell heavily but dragged himself to his knees and was looking for a target when the battle ended.

It ended with one dead bandit sprawled in the road. The second bandit darted into the brush that lined the road. For minutes Jorgenson could hear him running.

Then Carter and Sebastian were kneeling beside him and were gently helping him to a sitting position.

"Where," he whispered, "where did you two fellows come from?"

"We talked it over and decided you might need help whether you knew it or not," Sebastian said.

"I sure needed it," Jorgenson answered.

For him, this was the biggest admission he could possibly make.

"We stayed at the ranch as long as we could stand it," Carter said. "Then we decided to come after you. After all, we're your partners."

There was solid satisfaction in that word partner. Jorgenson let the satisfaction flow through him. Somehow it soothed his jolted, sore, and aching body. Partners. Men who help each other, men who fight for each other, if the need arises, men who share trouble and danger together. That was what the word meant. It was a grand word, one of the grandest words he had ever heard.

When Brother Are Men by Wayne D. Overholser.



The Rigdon Hellions Start a Fake Gold Rush--and Learn About Confidence Games from a Lady Cowpoke!

THE Rigdon boys were a pair of harum-scarum kids who'd had a hell-ripping good time ever since they'd come to live with their Uncle Hank Rigdon on his Cedar Flat ranch ten years ago. It was their habit to ride into Cowhorn on Saturday night and not only 'paint the town a particularly violent shade of red, but to pull its ears down so tight that they squeaked. It was considered just plain good sense around Cowhorn not to start any trouble with the Rigdon brothers, and even the hard cases who hung around Beauty Kling's place considered that a good principle. The Rigdon boys worked so hard at having a good time that they never gave much thought of settling down--that is, until Jane Collins came to Cowhorn.

No stranger would ever have sized the boys up as brothers. Albert was two years older than Alfred, and he had a pair of shoulders like a young mountain, a neck like a pillar of granite. He had brown eyes, hair that was almost black, and he didn't smile much.

Alfred was a head taller than his older brother and about thirty pounds lighter, with long whiplash muscles and a pair of hips that could slide through a darning hoop. His light brown hair was curly, he had blue eyes, and he liked to grin.

When they were twelve and ten respectively, their folks had been massacred by a roving band of Apaches. The boys would have met the same fate if they hadn't been off hunting jack-rabbits. The only blood kin they had left was their bachelor Uncle Hank. So they picked up a pair of crowbaits, and showed up one day at the Cedar Flat Ranch.

Albert slid off his mount.

"We're going to live with you, Uncle Hank. I'm Al," he said.

Alfred had been picking out a church hymn on his French harp. He took the instrument out of his mouth, and jumped down beside Albert.

"Sure, we're gonna live with you, Uncle Hank. I'm Al, too."

At that point, Hank found his voice. "Of course you buttons are gonna live with me. I been wondering where in tarnation you'd gone to. But you're not both Al. I ain't gonna have two yearlings running around here answering to the same handle. You" --he addressed the older boy--"will be Bert, and you" --he looked at the other lad--"will be Fred. From now on this is your home, and I'll make the dad-gummedest cow pokes out of you two this country ever saw."

So Bert and Fred they became, and Hank was as good as his word. They grew up into the hardest riding, hardest fisted cow punchers in the valley. Bert was the fist fighter of the two, and when he went into action he was a human thunderbolt of destruction. Twice he'd made kindling wood out of

the tables and chairs in Kling's place, before the sheriff arrived to help Bert spend some time cooling off in the calaboose.

Fred was the gunslinger. He wore a brace of black-butted .45's that snuggled against his lean hips as naturally as if he'd been born with them. His draw was more than fast, a synchronized coordination of muscles that was beautiful to watch.

Despite his natural speed, he seldom used his guns, and he'd never killed a man. Too much fun to fight with his fists, he always said, although he knew he had to hit a man twice to give as much punishment as Bert could hand out with one blow.

The only thing they disagreed about was Fred's music. Bert had listened to about six French harps that Fred had worn out, but he never said much except to complain rather gently. Fred would keep right on toodling, and allow that Bert didn't have an ear for good music.

Bert was the cooler of the two, and inclined to scheme a way out when they got into a tight. Fred was the talker, and it was usually his tongue that got them into trouble, but he never worried about that because Bert was always around when the going got tough.

So they went on their merry way, working together like the parts of a clock, and not giving any thought to the proposition that life was a serious business.

Then, one evening, Hank came home late from Cowhorn.

The boys were already eating supper when Hank stomped in, pulled up a chair, speared three potatoes, and covered them with a plateful of gravy. He didn't say anything, but both boys could see he was fuller of news than old Sam Phipps, editor of the Cowhorn *Blare*. Finally, Fred couldn't stand it any longer.

"Let's have it," he said.

"Have what?" Hank asked innocently.

"Why, whatever it is that's about to make your head pop open."

"Well, boys," Hank leaned back and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, "did either of you ever think of getting married and cut out this hell-raising?"

"Married?" Bert dropped a forkful of beef back into his plate, and for once Fred couldn't think of anything to say.

"Yeah, I said married. Ever hear of it? It's a state of living that sets in after you stand up before a preacher with a female alongside of you, and then you go home and have biscuits for supper that don't sink when you drop 'em in the gravy."

Bert was the cook, and ordinarily he'd have resented such an affront to his culinary artistry, but the idea was too amazing even for injured feelings.

Fred snorted. "The only unhitched gal in these parts is old Dugan's Susie, and besides having red hair, she can't cook worth a damn. Besides, she's so big she has to go through a door sideways."

"Now that's where you're wrong," Hank had the same expression on his face that their hound dog, Tip, did when he sneaked into the pantry last spring and stole the only ham in the house. "A new female's in Cowhorn. Her name's Miss Jane Collins, and she's staying with Mrs. Kennedy. I ain't lying when I tell you she's a right handsome morsel of femeenity."

Hank filled his mouth and sat back to enjoy the situation, but both boys were still too staggered to say anything.

"She came in on the stage this afternoon. I seen her myself. Now I think you boys ought to go right to work. We need a woman around here. This ranch needs a female touch."

FRED pushed back his plate. "Yeah, this place needs a female touch, all right. A lot of dresses and such-like hanging around. We couldn't smoke in

the house. She'd make Tip sleep outside. She'd--she'd, aw hell, she'd make us sleep in the barn."

Hank didn't say any more, but his words began to bear fruit. When Saturday night came around, Fred said he guessed he'd go to the dance in Cowhorn. Ordinarily, neither of them went because they couldn't stand Susie Dugan, and all the other women were married and just as homely. But this time Bert considered Fred's idea a good one, and allowed he'd go along just to hear some music that didn't come out of a French harp. So they slicked up and rode to Cowhorn.

The dance was up over Yancey's store, and the crowd was bigger than usual. The regular bunch was there--Sam Phipps and his wife, the Yancey's and the rest of the business people of town besides the married ranchers and their families. The kids were sitting on benches along the wall, and keeping time with the music by pounding their feet on the floor.

The Rigdon boys found the doorway blocked by a tightly pressed knot of cowhands, but Bert got in front and with Fred behind, they ploughed their way through. When the ones inside the dancehall saw who was coming, they opened a way and let them in. That was usually the best thing to do when the Rigdon brothers wanted to get somewhere.

Inside, punchers were leaning against the wall on both sides of the door. Every ranch in the valley was represented, all the way from the big Running W, in the south end, to the Bar 99, over on Testament Creek.

"Quite a crowd," Bert observed.

"Yeah, wonder what caused it," Fred said.

Then they saw her. She was dancing with Luke Bitters, foreman of the Slash 10. Hank hadn't lied when he'd said she was pretty. She wasn't tall--came about to Bitters' shoulders--and slim. Her skin was white and clear. The Slash 10 foreman had just said something funny, for as they danced by she threw her head back and laughed up at him.

"I'll bet she never was on a ranch," Bert said. "I'll bet she doesn't know what end of a steer you throw the rope over."

"Probably can't cook, neither," Fred nodded in agreement.

The music stopped, and Bert was looking around to see who was there.

Susie Dugan was sitting along the wall, but not a man was within twenty feet of her.

"Susie looks kinda lonesome, Fred," he said, but Fred didn't answer.

Bert turned his head, and saw that his brother had disappeared. Then the music started, and there was Fred with Jane Collins in his arms.

Fred usually had a lot of smart remarks to make, but he couldn't think of any now. Jane's eyes were very dark, and when she looked at him, something happened inside. He didn't know just what. It was as if he were riding herd at night with no moon above. Just the depthless, black velvet of the sky that reached on and on and held the answer to all the things he wanted to know.

"Do you live here?" she asked in a throaty voice that sent the blood pounding through his veins.

"Yes. On the Cedar Flat Ranch. Me and my brother work for my uncle."

"That must be lots of fun, to work on a ranch."

He thought there was a wistful look in her dark eyes. Maybe Uncle Hank was right. The ranch did need a woman's touch. Just then, the music stopped.

"You live at Mrs. Kennedy's, don't you?" He guided her toward her seat.

"Yes. Everybody seems to know that," she laughed.

"I'd like to call on you Sunday. That is, if you're going to be at home."

"Oh, yes, I'll be at home. I'd love to have you."

BEFORE he could say anything else, a Running W hand stepped in and she was gone.

It was half an hour before Bert got a dance, and then he had to elbow two Running Ws, a Slash 10, and a Circle Chain out of the way before he got to her. Before they'd gone around the floor once, he decided that Uncle Hank was right. The ranch did need a woman's touch. He couldn't think of a thing to say, but when the music was over, he said:

"You're staying at Mrs. Kennedy's, I guess."

"Why, yes. I wonder how everybody knows that."

"I'd like to call on you tomorrow. It's Sunday. That is, if you're going to be at home."

"Yes, I'll be at home. I'd love to have you."

She was claimed by Carl Yancey then, and Bert glared after him. He was married. What did he want to step in for?

Bert made his way to the wall. Presently Fred came up.

"How'd you like her?" he asked.

"She's all right, I guess," he shrugged his shoulders and looked bored.

"Yeah," Fred grinned, "I thought she was all right, too."

"Let's go over to Kling's place and get a drink," Bert said. "I got kinda dry stepping around out there."

"That's a good idea," Fred agreed.

They shoved their way out of the dancehall, and crossed the street to Kling's saloon. It was almost empty, except for a few habitual hangers on and some of Kling's hard cases who were playing poker at a table in the back of the room.

Dakota Slim was dealing. As usual, he sat with his back to the wall, his fingers never straying far from the ivory-handled guns that swung from his hips. Beside him was Butch Casey who claimed he could break a man's neck with his hands.

Windy Williams, the barkeep, shoved a bottle and a couple of glasses across the mahogany.

"Where's Kling?" Bert asked.

"He ain't in town," the bartender said. "Were you looking for him?"

"No." Bert set his glass on the bar and wiped his mouth. "I was just wondering. He's usually around."

"He won't be around much now, I reckon," Windy volunteered. "Dakota and Butch bought him out."

"The hell." Bert's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yep. Beauty's bought the bank."

"Reckon that means there's gonna be hard times around here." Fred grinned.

"Oh, I dunno." Windy squinted at the glass he was polishing. "Beauty's not a bad hombre. I've been thinking...."

"Shut up, you damned fool," Casey had come up behind them, a scowl on his huge face. He was built like Bert and was half a head taller. "If you're gonna keep your job here, you're gonna learn to keep that big mug of yours shut." He turned to Bert. "If you two want to come in here and drink, it's all right with us, but I'm telling you, me and Dakota ain't gonna stand for none of your hell raising. The first time you come in here looking for trouble, you're sure gonna find it."

"Well now," Fred stepped away from the bar, "me and Bert's always looking for trouble. Just how'll you have it, Casey?"

He was smiling pleasantly, an expression belied by the hard glitter in his blue eyes.

"Hold on," Bert grabbed his arm. "Reckon I was a mite rough in here a couple of times, but don't forget that I'd been taken for quite a roll of *dinero* by one of your light-fingered dealers. You're a crook, Casey, you and Dakota and Kling and your whole damned outfit. From now on, I reckon, me and Fred can do our drinking in the Palace. Come on," he said to Fred, and stalked out.

FRED followed reluctantly. "There's more to this than just meets the eye," Bert remarked, as they unhitched their broncs from the rack in front of Yancey's store.

"Mebbe so," Fred said, "but we've had a showdown coming with that outfit ever since they chucked you in the calaboose the last time. Tonight was as good a time as any."

"I didn't much feel like kicking up a ruckus tonight." Bert looked up at the light that streamed from the windows of the dancehall. The soft music of a waltz drifted down to them. "Maybe Uncle Hank's right. All this rip-roaring we been doing don't get us nowhere."

"Reckon not," Fred agreed. They swung into their saddles and turned their horses toward home. "She sure has nice eyes, don't she?"

Bert's only answer was a grunt. Fred took out his French harp and began playing. It was low, sweet music that echoed the feeling he had inside.

The next morning at breakfast, Hank looked at them with a knowing grin on his wrinkled face.

"Kinda funny, you boys going to the dance last night. You ain't gone for a coon's age, neither one of you."

"A fellow's gotta have a little fun," Fred said.

"How'd you like the new gal?"

"Purty nice," Fred tried not to appear enthusiastic.

Bert filled his mouth with a flapjack, and didn't say anything.

Both boys stayed around the house all morning and played at keeping busy.

After dinner, Fred looked out of the window and yawned loudly.

"It's a nice day," he said. "Guess I'll take a ride."

Bert watched him go out. After a few minutes he stretched casually.

"Guess I'll ride up and see if that bunch of critters on Dutch Flat are getting plenty of water," he said.

"Sure, go ahead." Hank hid a grin.

The waterhole on the Flat never went dry this early and Bert knew it.

Bert didn't follow Fred, but cut off to the north toward Dutch Flat. When he was out of sight of the house, he swung to the east and came into Cowhorn from that direction. A half dozen horses were tied in front of Mrs. Kennedy's, but he didn't think anything of it until he went into the house. Jane Collins met him at the door and greeted him pleasantly. She wore a fluffy white dress, and Bert thought she was prettier than when he'd seen her at the dance.

She ushered him into the living room, and he stopped in surprise. The room was overflowing with cowhands. Fred was sitting in a corner, and for once, he wasn't playing his French harp.

Somewhere Jane found a chair, and Bert sat down beside Luke Bitters.

Maybe Bert and Fred were better waiters than the others. Or perhaps they didn't want to compete with the Rigdon brothers. At any rate, the rest began drifting out. Bitters was the last to go. He glared savagely at Bert, and said he had some business uptown. Jane accompanied him to the door, and when she came back she looked puzzled.

"I wonder why they all had to go," she asked.

"I don't have any idea," Bert said.

"Maybe they figured Bert had the measles," Fred grinned. "You aiming to stay here in Cowhorn awhile, Miss Collins?"

"I hope to, that is, if I can find what I'm looking for. I want to buy a small ranch."

"Well now," Bert said, "I don't know of any good ranch that's for sale right now."

"Oh, I just want a small place. I only have a thousand dollars to put into a ranch."

Then both boys knew she didn't know anything about the cattle country. Nobody could do anything with a thousand dollars except buy out one of the little nesters who was trying to scrape a living out of the foothills, and that was certainly no place for a girl.

BERT started to tell her that when someone knocked. Jane went to the door, and in a moment came back with Beauty Kling. He was a tall man, this Kling, nearly as tall as Fred Rigdon, and heavier. He was always an elegant dresser, and now he wore a black coat, ruffled white shirt, and black string tie. When he saw the Rigdon boys, he scowled, his black eyes glittering like bits of chipped obsidian.

There was a long, tense moment of silence, the air pregnant with hostility, then both Bert and Fred growled a "Howdy, Kling."

Kling hid his hatred behind a forced smile, and with pretended courtesy, said, "Afternoon, gents," and sat down.

Jane looked from Fred to Bert to Kling, a puzzled expression on her face as if she couldn't understand the sullen antagonism that had laid its heavy hand upon the room. She tried to keep up a conversation, but monosyllables were her only answers. Presently Kling said he had some business at the bank, and Bert and Fred said they'd better be getting back to the ranch.

The three of them went out together. They reached the boardwalk.

"So you boys are aiming to curry the little filly," Kling said sarcastically.

Bert stopped beside his horse.

"Kling," he said bluntly, "you're no good, and everybody in Cowhorn knows that. How you figure on running a bank is a mystery to me, but Miss Collins don't know what kind of a polecat you are. I'm telling you right here and now, stay away from her."

Kling's lips became a thin, red line.

"Nobody tells me anything, my friend."

"You've been told," and Bert untied his horse.

Fred got his mount from the rack in front of the Palace Saloon, and they rode out of town together.

It was Saturday before they went back to Cowhorn. After they'd bought some supplies at Yancey's store, they called at Mrs. Kennedy's. Jane met them at the door.

"I'm going to be a neighbor of yours," was the first thing she said. "I just bought Mr. Kling's little place on Easter Creek. They tell me that's close to your Cedar Flat Ranch."

"You what?" Bert spluttered.

"I said I bought Mr. Kling's place. Isn't that all right? Don't you want me for a neighbor?"

"We want you for a neighbor, all right, but that place is no good," Fred howled. "You haven't any water."

"Why," she looked uncertainly from one to the other, "there's plenty of water in the creek."

"Sure, but it's early now. That creek dries up about the middle of July."

"Did you pay a thousand dollars for that place?" Bert asked.

"Yes, I did," she said firmly. "Mr. Kling tells me it is a fine little place."

"Sure, he'd tell you that," Bert growled. "But Mr. Beauty Kling is the orneriest coyote I ever had the misfortune to meet up with. He's been running a saloon for years, and working with a gang of rustlers and road agents, hombres like Dakota Slim and Butch Casey."

"Has he ever been arrested?" Jane asked.

"No," Bert admitted, "He's too slick for that."

"Then I don't believe a word of it," she said grimly. "He's in the bank now, and I think he's a responsible business man."

"All right, all right, think what you want to, but you're out a thousand bucks. Fred and me'll get it back for you. I don't know how, but we will. If a play comes along, don't forget to boost your ante. Come on, Fred. Let's get home."

THEY strode down the walk, and when they reached the hitch-rack, Bert untied his mount.

"Aren't you going over to the bank and work Kling over?" Fred asked.

"Not now." Bert swung aboard, "We've got to cook up something smart. Kling needs to be took, and took good. I'll think up something."

By the time they reached home, there was a pleased expression on Bert's face.

"I think I've got it, Fred," he said. "We're going back to town soon as I find Uncle Hank."

Hank was shoeing a horse in the barn, and he looked up in surprise when he saw Bert.

"Hello," he said. "I thought you'd be taking the gal out for a ride today."

"We got a big deal on," Fred grinned, coming in behind his brother. "We're gonna see that a little retribution gets properly retributed."

"I want to borrow your nugget," Bert said.

"Gonna spend it?" Hank dug a purse out of his pocket and tossed a piece of yellow metal to Bert. "If you do, I'll skin you and hang your hide on a corral post."

"You'll get it back by dark," Bert promised. "Come on, Fred."

"It looks to me," Bert said, as they rode back to town, "that Kling bought the bank just to appear respectable, and probably he's working right along with Casey and Dakota Slim all the time. If this scheme works and people hear about it, they'll laugh Mr. Beauty Kling right out of town."

Briefly he explained his plan, and Fred grinned.

"It'll work, just like spreading butter on hot biscuits, if there is still a tie-up between Kling and his old bunch, and if Jane's smart enough to do her part."

"I don't know about Jane," Bert frowned. "I don't want to tell her what we're doing, the way she feels about Kling. As for the tie-up, he'll hear about it all

right."

When they got to town, they went into the Palace Saloon, bought a drink, poured some whiskey on their shirt fronts, rumbled up their hair, and then reeled across the street and into the saloon that still bore the name, "Kling's Place."

It was the middle of the afternoon now, and cow punchers were lined up two deep along the bar.

"What the hell; what the hell," Fred bellowed. "Get out of the way, you cow nurses and let a couple of men drink."

When the men at the bar saw who it was, a gap miraculously opened up.

"Whiskey," Fred pounded on the bar. "Get a move on, Windy. Me and Bert's aiming to tear this place up. Come on, give us some of that gut wash that Casey calls whiskey."

He uncertainly poured a drink, gulped it, and handed the bottle to Bert.

"You poor devils," Fred swayed and caught the edge of the bar. "Riding around after a bunch of bawling steers, getting wet and cold and eating grub that'd give a hog a bellyache. No more of that for Bert and me."

"What are you talking about, Rigdon?" Luke Bitters asked.

Fred didn't have time to answer. Casey was coming from the back of the room. He had recognized the mood the Rigdon boys were in, and he wasn't taking any chances on having his place torn up.

"Get out of here, you Rigdons," he bellowed. "I told you not to come in here when you were on the prod."

"You're a damned fool, Casey," Fred shouted. "You and that ornery skunk Kling that you work for. He didn't pull such a fast one, selling that no-good place to Miss Collins."

"I said to get out," Casey looked as if he were going to have apoplexy.

"Sure, we'll get out, soon as we lay you out like a carpet and tromp on you. You ought to have a carpet in here. Floor's plumb dirty."

CASEY came in then like a bull, his head down and hamlike fists swinging. But it was Bert that stepped into his path. He moved amazingly fast for a man built as blocky as he was, ducked a roundhouse swing, and let his fists fly. One, two--wham, bang. Casey stopped as suddenly as if he'd hit a stone wall. He went back and down, his feet skidding out from under him, and his head cracked into the side of the bar with a sickening thud.

Dakota Slim was in the center of the room. When he saw Casey go down, he went for his gun, but Fred had been looking for that. There was no sign of drunkenness about the Rigdon boys now. Fred's right hand drove down in what was only a blur of motion to the onlookers, came up and his gun thundered.

Dakota Slim yelled in sudden agony, and clutched bullet riddled fingers as his own Colt dropped to the floor.

Bert turned to the bar and took another drink.

"I came in here to tell you hombres something, and these hellers try to kill us. Look here, does anybody know gold when they see it?"

Gold! The magic word that does strange things to all men. They crowded around Bert, pushing, shoving, charging for a look at the piece of yellow metal that he held in his hand.

"That's sure as hell gold," one old-timer shouted. "Where'd you get it, Rigdon?"

"It's on that place Kling sold Miss Collins," Bert chortled. "The money grubbing coyote kinda foxed himself. That Easter Creek bed's full of it."

It was as if Bert had turned a hurricane loose in the saloon. The men went boiling out of there a howling mob, pouring through the front door, out of the windows, and through the back door. Even grizzled Mike Melody, the swamper, joined the rush. Windy Wilkins took off his apron, threw it into the air yelling "Gold," vaulted across the bar, and jumped into the stampede.

"Let's go," Bert said.

They went out through the nearest window, and stayed in the alley while the crowd roared out of town on horses, buckboards, spring wagons and anything else that they could find.

Within five minutes the street was deserted. Then Beauty Kling came out of his bank and started across the street to Mrs. Kennedy's house.

"There he goes," Bert chuckled.

They ran down the sidewalk, but before they caught him he had reached Mrs. Kennedy's gate.

"Get out of my way," Kling snarled.

"Wait a minute," Bert caught his arm. "I told you to stay away..."

Kling swung his fist into Bert's face, a jarring, unexpected punch. Bert lashed out with one blow that picked Kling off the ground. He went down into the dirt of the street and didn't get up.

Jane Collins came running out of the house.

"You bullies," she shrieked. "Get out. Go away. I never want to see you again."

She knelt in the dirt beside Kling, talking to him in a mothering tone. He got to his feet, a little wobbly, and Jane helped him into the house.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle." Fred watched them until the door closed. Then he snorted. "Bullies! Hell's bells! After what we were doing for her."

"And that," Bert said, "proves how much we know about women. Looks like it's time for us to mosey along."

"If and when them hombres get back from Easter Creek, it might be a good idea for us to be farther away than home."

FRED pulled his French harp out of his pocket, and began playing, "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground."

"For once," Bert admitted, "your so-called music is fitting for the way I feel."

There was a gloomy atmosphere around the Cedar Flat Ranch that night, and the boys didn't even have their normal appetite by breakfast time. It was in the middle of the morning when they were sprawled on the ground in front of the ranchhouse that Fred suddenly sat up.

"Somebody coming," he announced.

Bert looked down the road. He recognized the bay as a horse that belonged to the livery stable in town, but he didn't think he knew the rider.

"By damn," Fred yelled, "it's her."

Bert rubbed his eyes, and he saw that Fred was right. It was Jane, but the horse was coming along at a ground-eating clip, and the girl was riding as if she had been born in a saddle. She wore a cream-colored Stetson, riding breeches, and tan boots, and they weren't new. Bert wondered where she'd found an outfit like that.

She pulled up and sat smiling down at them.

They were on their feet, hats in their hands, and they didn't know quite what to say.

"Good morning," she said. "I rode out to apologize for what I said when you knocked Kling down. I thought you probably wouldn't understand."

Fred was the first to find his voice.

"We didn't, exactly."

"I'll tell you all about it. You see, I'm not exactly what I pretended. I wanted people to think I didn't know anything about the West--just an Eastern girl who would be an easy mark for somebody like Kling. My brother was here awhile last year and Kling took him for three thousand dollars in a crooked poker game, and there wasn't anything he could do against the gunmen Kling had in his saloon.

"He came home broke. We needed the money and he needed a lesson, so I left home to do both. He had stayed with Mrs. Kennedy. I wrote to her and she gave me a big build-up so that most of the town knew I was coming, but they didn't know I was Jim's sister.

"I SAW a lot of Kling last week, and he was very interested in my money. I had several plans, but I wanted him to think I didn't have much savvy, so I bought his place. Then you boys came in yesterday, and said you'd get it back.

"I just sat back and waited, because I thought you might figure out something that was better than my ideas. Mrs. Kennedy had just told me about the gold rush. She'd been in Yancey's store when everybody left. Then when I saw you running down the street after Kling, I knew it was a trick, but I didn't want you knocking him around."

"I didn't figure on hitting him," Bert mumbled. "We were aiming to make him think we were trying to keep him from seeing you like we'd told him."

"I see," she nodded. "Well, anyhow, that was my chance to make Kling think I was all for him, so I brought him in the house and fussed over him to

beat the band." She laughed.

"Well, I've got to make that noon stage. Oh, I forgot to tell you. My brother and I live on the California coast, and I've really never been very far East. We have a cattle ranch in the Eel River country. If you're ever around there, please look me up. We can always use a couple of--men. So long."

"Wait a minute," Bert yelled. "What did you do with that no-good place of Kling's you bought?"

"Why, I sold that back to him for five thousand dollars," she called over her shoulder. "He thought there was gold on it."

"Yippee," Fred threw his Stetson into the air. "It worked."

Bert stood open-mouthed, watching the girl ride away.

"And that," he said, "as I once remarked, proves how much we know about women."

Fred pulled out his French harp and blew a long note. He took the instrument out of his mouth and started thinking aloud.

"You know," he said, "I always wanted to see that California coast country. I don't think Uncle Hank's gonna need us much after fall round-up."

"No, reckon he won't," Bert grinned. "She said they could always use a couple of--men."

The Riders of Ramapo Pass by Dean L. Heffernan.

CHAPTER I - A DOUBTFUL WELCOME.

THERE was a time in the West when hard men lived hard--and died hard! The mountains and ravines were pouring out their long-hoarded treasures with reckless prodigality, and the lure of gold, like a magnet, drew creatures of every description and nationality. So rapid was the invasion of eager fortune-hunters that law and order, unable to keep pace, were left far behind.

On the strength of a mere rumor, towns sprang up overnight, flourished feverishly and briefly, and expired. Fortunes were hourly lost and won on the turn of a card. A hasty word produced a hasty funeral. Men came to accept strangers at their face value; nor did they inquire too closely into the past life and antecedents of even their best friends. Every one was a law unto himself. The long-barreled six-shooter was the accepted judge, jury, and executioner in all controversies, and the slowest of tongue, the quickest of arm, the surest of eye. were the longest of life.

It was an everyday affair for a man to be a beggar at morn, a millionaire at noon, and a corpse at night!

The Red Valley stage, rocking and swaying, bowled down the steep, rutty road and came to a jarring halt before the "Silver Star" amid a swirling, scurrying cloud of dust. For a second or two it paused, with horses panting.

Then old Bailey, the driver, shouted and cracked his whip, the four horses strained forward, and the next minute the lumbering vehicle careened around a bend in the road and disappeared into the forest.

It left a stranger behind it, standing in the road beside his baggage.

He calmly looked over his surroundings. Then, with perfect ease, he lifted his heavy wooden box by its rope handle and advanced to the group of men who had been more or less disinterestedly watching him from the low porch of the town's combined saloon, post-office, and general store.

A miner who was distinguished by his height, his unusual slenderness of waist, and a long scar which drew up the left corner of his lip into a repulsive grin, eyed him closely from the front of the group. The new arrival set down his baggage and addressed him.

"Is this Ramapo, friend?" he asked quietly.

The miner let his eyes rove superciliously over his questioner. He saw a young man almost as tall as himself, with curly black hair. His features were clean-cut, his figure straight, and his shoulders broad and powerful. He wore the comfortable, careless western costume of that period, now dusty and mud-splashed from traveling; but he carried no pistol at his hip. Except for an indefinable air of breeding about him, and a soft drawl in his speech that proclaimed him as a Southerner, there was little to distinguish him from any member of the group before which he stood.

"You gits a bull's-eye, Curly," the tall man answered, making no effort to conceal the sneer in his voice. "This is the great an' infamous metropolis o' Ramapo, itself! An', bein' one of its leadin' citizens an' misfortunes, I hereby welcomes you, an' invites you to plant your stakes in this fertile landscape an' decorate the scenery with your charmin' personality."

There was a little snicker behind him.

"Thanks," the stranger answered coolly, his gray eyes, under his broad-brimmed hat, looking steadily into the other's. "Evidently Ramapo has some curious attractions."

"The keenness o' your observation is astonishin'," the other replied, his face flushing and his eyes narrowing. "Ramapo has special attractions to induce the weary traveler to locale here, the most convincin' o' which is a good supply o' lead, forty-four caliber, which it hastens to offer to them as has command o' language, but no control of it."

"I suppose you're a newcomer then." the curly-haired man remarked evenly. Then, seeing the other's scowl darken, he added quietly: "Perhaps you can direct me to Major Dudley's house."

The other's face instantly became suspicious. "What do you want there?" he asked.

"I reckon you needn't worry about that, friend," the stranger answered pleasantly. "Now, if you will kindly point out the major's house to me, I won't take up any more of your undoubtedly valuable time."

For a moment the other eyed him angrily. Then he smiled. "Why, yes, I'll do that, Curly," he said slowly. "I al'ys endeavors to prevent the wayfarer gittin' lost in the mazes o' this here metropolis. It's that one yonder that you see stickin' above the trees at the bend in the road."

The stranger looked up the road in the direction indicated.

"There are three white ones there," he said. "From your vivid description, it might be either."

The ugly grin deepened on the miner's iface. "I never was no hand at disseminatin' description." he drawled. "The domicile to which I refers, Curly, is the one with the broken winder in front."

With careless unconcern yet astonishing speed he drew his revolver and fired. From where they stood they could all see a pane in a front window of the farthest house collapse. The tinkle of breaking glass came to their ears.

A loud guffaw broke from the group. Passers-by stopped for an instant, saw what had happened, shrugged their shoulders and went on about their

business. The miner with a mock bow thrust his revolver back into its holster.

"That ought to help you locate it, Curly. Think you'll be able to find your way there now, or do I gotta send a guide along with you so's you won't git lost?"

The stranger gazed toward the house a moment, then turned to his informer. His face preserved its pleasant expression; but it was paler, and his eyes held a little gleam.

"I suppose there are people living there," he said.

"Your supposition is in accord with the law an' the evidence in the case," the other replied. "That disinspirin' mansion has the honor to contain the major an' Ramapo's pride an' joy, his daughter."

"Then, of course, there was a chance that your clever manner of pointing it out might have resulted in killing one of them."

"Them little accidents has been known to happen here, Curly. But us inhabitants o' this thrivin' city don't lose no sleep over no such uninterestin' reflections. Y'see, we git whisky here for a dollar a throw, an' life for nothin'; so we natcherly figgers as how the former ought to git considerable more respect an' attention. Life ain't at no high premium here, Curly."

The stranger's gray eyes had not left those of the man before him. "It mustn't be," he said pleasantly, "when they permit you to live here--you drunken dog!" He calmly reached for his baggage.

At the words a little murmur went up from the group. It shifted expectantly. The face of the miner went black with wrath, and his lip curled back from his discolored teeth in a vicious snarl. His revolver again flashed from its holster.

Over on the side of the crowd some one laughed.

"Fore y'kill it, Williams," the voice said, "ask it where it wants the remains shipped to. Maybe its maw is pinin' for it somewheres, an' might git angry if it was put away without no nice flowers an' oratory an' sech like."

The tall man turned quickly. "Shut up, Red! Reckon I can emanate all the elocution necessary for this here occasion." He turned again to the stranger. "Just a minute with that baggage, sonny, while I gives you a hint or two regardin' your future behavior in this here town. Them remarks you was uncautious enough to drop ain't considered courchus an' proper in polite s'ciety in Ramapo. We usually relieves our feelin's by applyin' gunpowder an' lead to the offender an' turnin' him over to the undertakin' Oscar for treatment. But o' course hain't reasonable to expect a newcomer to git to know us an' all our little customs all to once. So we'll overlook them little violations of etikett. Howsever, as spokesman an' representative o' this here unnoble metropolis, I begs to state as how we takes sort o' natcherl to entertainment, an' al'ays displays a brotherly interest in the accomplishments of our new citizens. We has a hankerin', therefore, to see what you can do. Next to drinkin', dancin' is our fav'rite sport an' recreation. S'pose you gives us some idear of your abilities along that line, Curly. Better begin now."

As he finished speaking, he lowered the muzzle of his revolver, and one after another the bullets cracked around the newcomer's toes, sending spurts of dust over his boots. But the young fellow did not move. He stood coolly eying the man before him. When the six chambers were empty, the miner angrily drew his other pistol.

Before he had time to fire a single cartridge, however, something happened. The stranger leaped forward like a spring suddenly released. His right hand shot out and struck the revolver from the miner's fingers, and his left, knotted into a solid ball of bone and sinew, flashed straight from the shoulder, collided firmly, but quite ungently, with that individual's unimposing physiognomy, and hurled him sprawling into the dust.

For an instant the miner lay where he had fallen; then, with a roar of rage, he started to scramble to his feet. He found himself, however, looking past the businesslike bore of his own weapon into two very cool but earnest gray

eyes. Discretion hinted that it would be best to retain a sitting posture for the time being.

"Keep your hands away from your guns, boys," the stranger was remarking. "It would be embarrassing to have to shoot such new acquaintances! As for you, you emaciated rum-hound, dancing is an excellent recreation, as you say, but unfortunately I enjoy it only when I do it to amuse myself. Now, listen--I'm not in the habit of repeating! My intentions in this place are perfectly peaceful; and I didn't come here to start trouble. But if you feel any inclination to begin it, I'll hold up my end. I'm pretty generous with it, when I get going. It would be best for your health, therefore, not to waste more of your valuable lead or time on me. Try to remember that, friend, and I have no doubt we'll get along splendidly."

For a moment he continued to gaze steadily into the furious, blood-shot eyes of the miner. Then he smiled, picked up his box with his free hand, and moved away in the direction of the house with the broken window. Fifty feet from the group, he tossed the pistol into the road. It lay there half-buried in the dust.

The crowd of miners milled around uneasily, and murmured under their breaths. It was an unwritten law that no man interfere in the little misunderstandings and arguments of any other man. One of them walked out into the road, secured the discarded weapon, and silently handed it back to its owner. It was evident that the tall man was one of these creatures who frequently attained a doubtful leadership in the early days of the West through sheer brutality and terrorism, and the ability to kill too quickly to be killed themselves. As he scrambled to his feet, his small, darting eyes caught the question and doubt in the faces of the men around him. He burst into a volley of profanity, raised the weapon, and pointed it at the disappearing figure.

Before he could fire it, however, there was an interruption. A big roan horse had darted suddenly from nowhere, flashed before the group, and reared up on its haunches before him. Now a riding-crop swung through the air and descended on his wrist. For the second time that afternoon, the revolver was sent spinning from his fingers.

Mad with pain and fury, he reached for the weapon. But the rider forced the horse against him and jostled him back. He looked up into the snapping blue eyes of a remarkably handsome and remarkably pale girl. She was dressed in a riding costume almost mannish in its Western simplicity; and a very serviceable revolver was suspended at her side from a well-stocked cartridge-belt.

"You coward!" she blazed. "Would you kill a man with his back turned!"

He was silent a moment, trying to meet the fiery gaze.

"Don't reckon I owe you no account o' my doin's," he answered with a curious mixture of deference and sullenness. "You better be on your way. I don't fight with women!"

"Oh, you don't! But you're perfectly willing to shoot a man when he's not looking! Brave, aren't you?"

His eyes dropped before her. For some reason, the man seemed to become a different creature in her presence. When he answered, it was almost respectfully.

"I don't intend to have no quarrel with you, anyhow."

"No?" Her eyes quickly ran over the smirking faces of the group behind him. "I'm glad to hear it. But I can't help wondering why I'm so highly honored."

"You know why just as well as I do!"

The girl flushed. "I'm not just sure that I understand what you mean," she answered coldly. "But if you insinuate what I think you do, I advise you not to make a remark like that again, if you value your life! I don't! Perhaps you understand me."

His face darkened; but the ugly smile appeared again on his lips.

"I ain't a man what gives up easy," he leered, "An' when I wants anythin', I usually gets it sooner or later! Maybe you gits my meanin'!"

The blood slowly drained from her face. The clean line of her chin seemed to become more apparent. Her fingers tightened about the handle of the riding-crop until the knuckles showed white.

"I ought to shoot you like a dog for that," she said quietly, "But, instead. I'll tell you this. There isn't a decent woman alive who would tolerate you near her! As for me, if you ever so much as repeat what you said, or show yourself inside our gate, I'll kill you without a second's hesitation! That's all I have to say to you."

With easy grace, she wheeled the big roan, touched him lightly with her spurs, and galloped up the road.

CHAPTER II - JEANNE DUDLEY.

"I'M glad you are here, of course, Rand--awfully glad; But I can't understand how you ever came to leave God's country for this!"

Her voice, soft and reminiscent, came to him through the darkness as they moved slowly across the little garden toward the high bluff overlooking the river. The garden was Jeanne Dudley's special care and pride; and the delicate odors of the vivid flowers were very sweet and refreshing to him after his long journey. Over head, stars twinkled with the bigness and brilliance which they show only in the high, free lands of the mountains.

"'Beggars can't be choosers,' Jeanne." Rand Cameron, the curly-haired man, laughed. "Dad left nothing--but bills; and they swallowed the plantation! I had to do something. "The gold-fields seemed to offer a chance; and, as I knew you and the major were in this neighborhood, I--well, here I am!"

"Yes, here you are." his blue-eyed companion answered seriously, "in one of the wildest gold-fields of the country!"

"But--with you," he replied softly.

She did not answer, and he took her hand. After a moment, she gently withdrew it.

"Don't, Rand, please."

"You're--you're not holding that silly quarrel against me, are you?" he asked dejectedly. "Five years, Jeanne! I--I hoped you would forgive and forget that!"

"I did, Rand! I realized long ago that I was wrong, too! It's not that. I'm afraid I can't make you understand! It's just that--that I've seen so much of

the wickedness and greed and brutality of-- men, since gold was found here, that--well, I don't expect--oh, I can't talk about it, Rand!"

"But we're not all that way, Jeanne!"

"I know that, of course. But it--doesn't seem to make up for some of the-- things I've seen."

"Then--is there no hope for me?"

"I'm afraid not." Her answer was in a low voice, and she did not look up.

They had come to the edge of the cliff and now stood looking down at the chattering little river whose magic name had summoned the treasure-seekers from far and wide.

"Nevertheless," he said quietly, "I *will* hope. I haven't come across a whole continent to--to give up now! I love you, Jeanne. I always have loved you. I won't lose you just because these creatures out here have been making-- gold-beasts of themselves!"

She was silent a moment. "Then," she questioned softly, "it wasn't true that you came here for the gold-fields?"

"That was the truth," he answered slowly. "but only a small part of it. I came here for you! And just as soon as I make my strike, I'll try again--and keep on trying until I win or there's not a chance left. But until then, Jeanne, you will not be bothered about it any more. I give you my word for that."

There was a little awkward pause.

"The major is looking well," he said, changing the subject with an effort. "The air and the climate out here must have helped him a great deal."

"Papa was getting along wonderfully until gold was discovered." Her voice was troubled. "But since then the excitement and the--the fever here have almost undone it all. It--it almost makes me cry to think of it! It was so beautiful and peaceful here, Rand. Now they're flocking into the valley by thousands, all kinds of creatures, some of them almost savages! They're

fighting and robbing and killing each other every day. There is no control whatever. Crimes of every kind are committed as if they were nothing! I'm afraid we'll have to move again, for papa's sake!"

"But can't something be done about it? Aren't there any decent men here at all?"

"There are lots of them," she answered hopelessly, "but they are all demoralized by the worse element. They have no leader, and they're so eager to get rich themselves they haven't time to think about anything like organizing. No one will accept the office of sheriff, or any other office that would require them to take risks! You must be careful, Rand! You did a dangerous thing in quarreling with Williams the very first day you were here!"

"Williams!" he echoed. "Oh, you refer to that thin, sneering brute that I had the pleasure of knocking down this afternoon. I'm not much worried about him."

The girl glanced at his clean-cut profile. It was evident that he was not aware of what had happened that afternoon after he had taken his departure from the "Silver Star."

"You don't know him," she answered anxiously, "or you would be! They call him "Wasp" Williams, and it's not merely because he looks like one, but because he is one! He is a coward at heart, I'm sure--like all bullies! But he is dangerous. He is the best and quickest shot around here. He has killed any number of others, and he won't hesitate to kill you, too, Rand, if you give him an excuse--and you have already done that, according to their code! He has a queer smattering of education, and he has got to be one of the leaders of the men. Most of them hate him; but they fear him even more so. You needn't expect any mercy or fair play from his creatures! There are quite a few who were probably glad of what you did, and would like to take your side! but they do not dare to. They know how any kind of a duel with him always ends! The worst of it is, Rand, he--he--"

"What?" He suddenly stopped in front of her and shot out the question.

"He--oh, Rand, it makes me shiver to--talk about it!"

Very quietly he took her by the shoulders, and stared down into the shadowy oval that was her face. When he spoke his voice was calm; but it was the dangerous calmness of deep waters.

"Jeanne," he asked, "did that beast dare to--make love to you?"

"He tried to," she faltered, "but I--I drove him away!"

"Good God!" His arms dropped to his side. "If I had known that this afternoon, I would have smashed his leering face to pulp!"

She placed a small, strong hand on his arm.

"Rand, for my sake, and father's, you must not do anything like that! Any trouble now might--take him away from me. I'm hoping we'll be able to manage till things get better here. And, in the meanwhile, we're just--being careful!"

He walked up and down for several moments in silence. Then he turned a controlled face to her.

"Perhaps in time we'll find a solution," he said. "In the meanwhile, don't worry, Jeanne. Above all, don't worry any more about that creature you call Wasp Williams. There isn't a drop of courage in his entire body!"

"That is why we should fear him!" she said quickly. "If he was a decent man, he would move in the open, and there would not be so much to be alarmed about. But he is a--a snake, Rand! You have not been here long enough to realize what a nest this place has become."

As if to prove her words, at that very moment a volley of shots rang out from the direction of the village. A sharp cry, a chorus of hoarse laughter, and then the usual low hum of the night-life in the little town!

The girl trembled. "It is happening like that every day and every night. I'm afraid poor papa won't be able to stand it much longer! And I have gotten to love this place so, Rand--these mountains and rivers and canyons! I love

them in spite of--this!" Her arm swept in a wide semicircle which took in the entire town. "It would break my heart to leave Red Valley!"

There was another little pause. He stood with grave face, looking in the direction whence the sound of the shots had come.

"There must be some way," he said thoughtfully. "I wish I knew what it was."

"There is only one way I can think of," she answered slowly. "It has often occurred to me, but it is unusual and extremely dangerous! Still, it succeeded once before, however, and might again."

"What is it?" he asked, trying to see her face in the faint light of the stars.

She came closer, and for several minutes whispered eagerly in his ear. Then she stepped back and waited. He drew a long breath.

"I think it would work again," he said at last. "Your father was one of the chiefs, wasn't he?"

"Chief of the Clans of our whole State," she answered proudly.

"It has this advantage," he said after a moment, "that it is most powerful against the ignorant and superstitious; and that is mostly the kind we would have to contend with here! And it would give the decent men a chance to do something without being known! Jeanne, I believe we can do it! I believe we can save this place yet!"

"We would need help, Rand, and we would have to be careful. But I'm sure if we got it started we could get many more to join us! I could name a dozen. And, if we began to be successful, the better element would be glad to flock to it. It would be hard at first; but I believe we can do it, too."

"Then we will!" he said quickly. "It's well worth the danger and the sacrifice. I'm willing to do my part, no matter what it brings!"

"And I'll do mine," she answered very quietly.

With a little murmur, he took her hand again; and this time he would not let it go.

"If we win," he said with grim tenderness, "I might not be willing to wait until I make my strike. I might claim my reward at once, Jeanne; and it will be--you!" He raised the hand to his lips and kissed it. "For success!"

CHAPTER III - LAW AND ORDER COME TO RAMAPO.

ONE morning the riotous, reckless, feverish town of Ramapo awoke to a new excitement. On a rude bulletin-board in front of the post-office, appeared a poster in large, clear letters. No one knew how it had come there. The post-office force had discovered it when "he" arrived to open up for the day. Its message was brief and to the point:

To the People of Ramapo:

Law and Order are hereby declared in force. All men are watched that henceforth lawlessness will be met with swift punishment. Serious offenses will merit death.

J.

Though the letters in all the rest of the notice were black, the "J" at the end was in bright-red. It was large, and set squarely in the center of the sheet. There was a quiet power in the single red character, an absence of bluster in the wording, that did not fail to have their effect. A large crowd quickly gathered. Men read the poster with serious faces, and questions flew thick and fast as to its origin and meaning. No one knew. No one could find out. Some openly scoffed. But the large J remained there, looking out at the crowd with a sort of calm and confident power!

Rumors sped from mouth to mouth, and were expanded at every exchange. A vague uneasiness, a feeling that there was something in the wind and that

the warning boded new and sinister experiences for the town, served for a time to throw a damper on its reckless gaiety.

Then a tall, thin miner forced his horse through the crowd, read the message, and broke into a loud guffaw. It seemed to relieve the situation. Several others laughed with him.

"Feller citizens," said Wasp Williams, wheeling his horse and facing the crowd, "I begs to call your attention to this noble appeal which you sees behind me. You all knows the respect an' esteem which I feels for them two contrivances, knowed as law an' order! There ain't nothin' to compare with 'em! They offers refuge to tenderfeet an' perfection to the weak-kneed. Them which is careless with language, but don't hanker none to face the business end o' these little toys us men is kind o' partial to out here, cries for law an' order like a baby for its bottle. They gotta have it so's red-blooded he-men won't decorate 'em with lead when they gits naughty. I'm in favor of it, by all means! But it strikes me, friends, as how this here notice shows a disconcertin' lack o' common ornamentation; and I figgers you'd be kind o' pleased if I fixed it up pretty an' attractive like."

He turned again, and drew both of his revolvers. With careless accuracy, he fired bullet after bullet into the sign. Twice he reloaded, and the flame leaped in a steady stream from the muzzles until the chambers were empty. Then he thrust them back. He took off his hat, made a jeering bow to the group before him, and addressed them.

"As a leadin' inhabitant o' this here flourishin' metropolis," he remarked, "I has the honor to present my answer to the aforesaid warnin'."

There was a shout, then a roar of laughter, from the crowd. The tension was broken. Across the face of the notice the bullet-holes clearly traced the letters D-A-M! That was Williams's version of the spelling of the word.

Another horse cantered up to the outskirts of the crowd. In the saddle was the straight, graceful figure of Jeanne Dudley. Seeing her, Williams made another mock bow and called to her across the heads of the men between them.

"We is celebratin' the beginnin' o' law an' order here in Ramapo," he said. "P'r'aps you would like to git a glimpse o' the announcement o' this surprisin' an' gratifyin' change. Boys, give way there a little an' let the lady through."

The crowd parted. The girl leisurely walked her horse nearer. Then she saw the bullet-holes in the poster and stopped. With a scornful glance at the man before her, she drew her own weapon and leveled it at the sign.

"Your spelling is rather poor." she remarked coolly. "There is another letter in that word. Perhaps I can impress it upon your memory better by using your own methods."

The revolver cracked out six times, was quickly reloaded, and flashed again. Then the girl returned it to its holster, skillfully piloted her roan through the crowd, and trotted away.

Another burst of laughter and applause went up from the crowd. The missing "n" now appeared on the poster, and its even lines exhibited much more perfect shooting than had the letters stamped by the leaden markers of the Wasp. His triumph had-been snatched away from him! Chagrined and flushing, he stood scowling after her.

"Got yuh that time, Wasp!" one of the men before him laughed.

Williams looked down from his horse upon the speaker, a small man notable for his very gray hair and his pleasant expression. The heavy, vertical lines between his eyebrows deepened.

"Mebbe so," he answered; "mebbe so! But git this idear into that little think-organ o' yoarn, an' plant it there: I'll git *her* 'fore I'm done, an' what I gits I keeps!"

"You got a full day's work ahead o' you, then! There ain't no 'fool's gold' about that girl!"

"Your tongue is too active for a feller o' your size, stranger. Reckon you better be movin'!"

The little man paled, but his voice, when he replied, was even and unafraid.

"I never run from nobody yet, an' I don't figger to begin now."

"No? Then stay, since you insists! An' accept this little token o' my esteem!" The revolver of the Wasp darted from his hip, shot forward, and flashed once. The other staggered. He strove to keep his feet, but collapsed in the dust. A couple of bystanders carried him into the nearest house, while some one casually looked for a doctor. One of the bearers, a huge, powerful fellow, swore violently.

"The hound!" he growled, "He didn't give little Peterson a chance!"

The other eyed the wounded man sympathetically. "Williams ain't bothered with no sech scruples as that," he said. "Besides, he's been totin' a grudge agin 'Smiley' here, an' figgered this was a chance to git even."

"How's that?"

"Seems the little feller strayed into town a couple o' days ago an' showed some nuggets so big they nearly made the eyes o' Wasp an' his gang pop out. They tried to git him full an' then find out where his claim is. But It didn't work. The little man was too sharp for 'em."

"Good for him! Hope he gits well an' shoots the everlastin' daylights out o' that coyote!"

"He'll git over it, all right. Ain't nothin' serious, I reckon. Guess the Wasp wasn't tryin' to kill him outright, 'cause then he'd never git to know where the little feller has planted his stakes! An', if I was you, McCoy, I wouldn't be too careless with them remarks. Funerals is too common in this town as it is!"

Outside, the momentary hush which had fallen upon the crowd was quickly lifted. Some shrugged their shoulders. Others laughed. One or two tried a few pot-shots at the red "J" for luck; and in a short while the town was about its haphazard business as indifferent, as unconcerned as ever.

CHAPTER IV - THE RIDERS.

BUT less than a week later it had occasion to remember the incident!

The stage was held up and robbed in the deep woods just before it entered the town. Old Bailey, gallantly attempting resistance, was brought down with three bullets from the revolvers of the highwaymen. But the keen eye of the old Westerner somehow recognized the two assailants. Before he died, every one knew that the bandits were "Pete" Slocum and "Red" Ritter, two of the worst characters in the valley. Yet no effort was made to apprehend them. They quietly disappeared. No one assumed authority to trace them and administer punishment.

Nevertheless, two days afterward the bodies of both men were found on the post-office steps. The looped ends of the ropes with which justice had been done upon them had been left around their necks. And on the shirt-front of each there was a piece of black paper about four inches square, with a red J in the center!

This disquieting incident was quickly followed by others. "Big Bill" Bondy, slayer of "Gabby" Taylor--and others--was found sprawled out on the floor of his shack with a bullet-hole in his forehead. The room showed abundant evidences of a struggle--and the red J was pinned on his breast!

In the weeks that succeeded, other leaders of the worse element, men whose pistol-stocks bore many a notch, and whose sense of decency and morality bore more, met the same fate. After a particularly notorious example of his marksmanship, and disregard for such trifles as the conventions, one would be located swinging from a tree; another discovered, lifeless, in his cabin; still another picked up, now and then, from the dust of the road. In every case the same terrible red letter on the body showed whence the retribution had come.

Fear and excitement ran high in the valley. Men became cautious about venturing out after sunset. All went fully armed. But, withal, it did not escape the notice of many that the better inhabitants were not molested. Only those whose crimes were known and certain had suffered. There was a large element which found relief and satisfaction in that reflection.

Rumors began to spread of night-riders roaming the valley. On several occasions pale-faced men galloped up to the "Silver Star" and reported having seen small troops of horsemen flitting along the dark roads. Their tales were usually incoherent and contradictory; but all tallied in one particular--that the riders wore some kind of long, dark, flowing garment, and that nothing could be seen of their faces.

It was observed also that certain of the lesser desperadoes were mysteriously disappearing from time to time and failing to return. Their shacks betrayed signs of a hasty departure. Invariably hoof-prints around their deserted cabins indicated that a considerable number of horses had been present.

At last, at two different times, parties composed of the most determined and desperate of the troublesome element, set out in search of information about the nocturnal raiders, and, if possible, revenge. "Wasp" Williams was not a member of either of these expeditions. For some reason he found it necessary to attend to important business each time they were being formed.

The first party returned late at night, unsuccessful and grumbling at their long, useless ride. The second one did not return at all!

Two hours after they had ridden away from the town, a solitary horseman galloped furiously through the Pass, launched himself from his foaming animal before the Silver Star, and staggered up to the bar. His face was ashen. He gulped down glass after glass of whisky as though it were water. Then, somewhat calmer, he noticed the gathering around him, eyed them stolidly a moment, and spoke:

"Boys," he remarked grimly, "I'm sayin' 'Adios!' I got my fill o' this here hellhole, an' I'm pullin' my stakes soon's I can git my dust together. I wish

you all luck that stays here, but I reckon Ramapo ain't in fer no happy times!"

It took a long time, and much coaxing and whisky, to get him to explain more fully. Finally he consented.

"We was trottin' through that gulch they calls Rapheel's Ravine--'count o' the echo, I guess--an' Bud Borresky was leadin'. We was all feelin' pretty boisterous, when all of a sudden we hears a voice yell 'Halt!' We don't see nobody at all, but we don't waste no time comin' to a stop.

"Well, we waits awhile without sayin' nothin'; but I can see everybody's kind o' loosenin' up his shootin' iron. Then a figger rides out from behind a big rock about thirty yards ahead. It's all rigged out in a kind o' shapeless, black cloak or somethin', an' has a sort o' hood over its head. Couldn't see no face at all! There was somethin' on its chest that looked like a letter.

"I ain't a goin' to deny as how I gits to feelin' kind o' creepy! The moon was up, an' the light, comin' down from the openin' at the top, was queer an'--an' confusin'. The place is full o' big boulders, an' the shadows an' bushes an'--oh, hell!" He took another gulp of the liquor, and stared gratefully into the empty glass for several minutes. Finally he drew a long breath and resumed.

"Well, this black thing eyes us a couple o' minutes an' then says, kind o' quiet an' convincin': 'Better turn round an' go back. If you value your lives, don't try any more o' these excursions!'

"Boys, I knows right off I has heard that voice before. I couldn't make out who it was, but it was somebody from this here town.

"Bud don't say nothin' for a second or two. Then he pushes his gun out. 'You damn night-runnin' coyotes!' he yells, 'I'll git one o' you anyhow!' With that he lets fly. The black figger gives a little cry, rolls around in the saddle, an' drops off.

"Then I hears a whistle blowin' loud an' shrill. Good Gawd! At that a reg'lar flock o' them black birds dashes out everywhere, an' the whole place busts into uproar! Guns begins crackin' from behind every bush an' rock, an' the

noise an' echoes 'd wake the dead. Bud an' about five o' the other boys goes down with the first volley. We tries to git in a few shots ourselves, but we was wastin' lead--didn't seem to have no heart in the work, nohow! Some o' the horses is hit, an' they all begins kickin' an' tearin' around. Fust thing you know, what's left of us is gallopin' back up the hollow hell-for-halleluiaah, all mussed up an' gittin' in each other's way! But we ain't gone far when shots begins to come from that end, too, an' another flock o' them hooded devils pops out! Some o' the boys drops off. Gawd! I ain't no good recollection o' what happened after that, an' I don't know how I ever got out o' that partic'lar portion o' Hades' A couple o' them black figgers dashes out from behind rocks an' comes after me on horseback. I ain't denyin' as how I give poor old Billy some rough persuasion--but there wasn't no time for kindness an' sympathy! I ain't no clear idear when them two give it up--didn't have no hankerin' to look back! But I guess they must've followed nearly all the way to town!"

He reached again to the bottle, then turned away. No amount of coaxing could induce him to delay and tell more. With drunken awkwardness, he mounted his horse, mumbled several times "I'm through, boys! I'm sayin' 'Adios,'" and vanished into the night.

The following morning a small party set out, very doubtfully and cautiously, for the scene of the encounter. They buried four of their former comrades, and brought home three whose wounds had received a rude first-aid from the night-riders. The other doughty members of that notable expedition, wounded and otherwise, were never seen again in Ramapo.

CHAPTER V - A TRUST.

TWO riders appeared upon the crest of the hill overlooking the Pass. They drew rein and looked down at the rough little town below them straggling along beside the river.

"Jeanne, we are going to win," he said at length. There was quiet triumph in the tone.

Her eyes remained fixed on the scene below her. When she answered, her voice was sad. "Oh, Rand, think of what it is costing! I know that it has been necessary. But it's terrible to me anyhow!"

"Is it any more terrible than what was going on before?" he asked kindly. "It was happening then simply as murder and crime. Now it is justice! There is a tremendous improvement all over the valley. Most of the people are secretly in favor of us, and there are a great many now who openly support us. It is a rough cure. I know; but remember that there was not one of those creatures we punished who had not merited it a dozen times. No one was ever killed in cold blood. All that did not resist were given the fairest trial we were able to give them under the circumstances. Nearly all of them admitted their guilt in the end. Of course, some of them fought it out; and I must admit that their courage would have been fine, if they had not been merely murderers resisting justice. My only regret, Jeanne, is that we haven't been able to get our hands on that coward, Williams! But he's shrewd enough not to leave town, and to keep close to the Silver Star."

His voice had been growing more and more earnest as he spoke. "That incident in the Ravine was regrettable; but after Borresky killed poor Bernard, there was no hope of restraining the boys. You need not waste your sympathy on those rascals, Jeanne! They were caught in a trap they had hoped to spring themselves!"

She did not answer, and after a moment he spoke again.

"We have done well in the first part of our work. But we will never be entirely successful until we make a public display of our power, and convince them that we are not merely a band of marauders working under cover of the dark, but a strong organization, capable of holding its own in the open. That is our final goal! It's a chance; but if we win it our work is done. And we are strong enough now to try it with good chances of success."

"And this time," she said quietly, "I'm going with you."

He started a little. "I hope you won't do that," he answered, his gray eyes gazing anxiously into hers. "You've done your part, Jeanne! Without that endless work of yours, we could not have made much of an impression. Isn't it enough," he asked, smiling a little, "to have supplied the--er--army with uniforms, without going out into the thick of the battle, too?"

"Not quite, Rand," she replied. "I want to feel that I've done something more than just sit at home and sew. I want to have a little share in the actual winning of this victory! I'm jealous of you getting all the honor, you see!"

He hesitated. "You have done too much to be denied whatever you ask. Jeanne," he answered seriously. "Moreover, the whole thing is your idea. I have no right to refuse you. But I hope you will change your mind."

Her clear, blue eyes looked up into his, and she smiled. "We have an unfortunate habit in our family," she said quietly, "of not changing our minds."

She patted her horse affectionately, and moved off with her companion's powerful chestnut pacing gracefully beside her.

They had scarcely begun the descent of the hill, however, when a voice hailed them. A moment later a small, gray-haired man trotted up. He was smiling amiably.

"Howdy. Miss Jeanne! Howdy, Rand!"

"Hello, Peterson," Cameron answered heartily. "How is the convalescent?"

"Gittin' along fine," the little man answered. "Say," lowering his voice, "I thought I'd tell you I'm with the boys tomorrow night."

"Do you think you're well enough?" Cameron's voice was doubtful.

"Well or not well don't make no difference! I got a few little obligations comin' to me which I'm mean in' to collect if anybody gits excited."

"Suppose I forbid you?"

"I'd shore hate to go ag'in' the rules o' the organization," Peterson grinned, "but I'm afeard I'd have to chance it." His face became serious again. "Can I see you alone a minute. Rand? I asks your pardon, Miss Jeanne. but I got to talk over a little business with Rand in private."

The girl smiled and nodded. The two men drew away a little, and Peterson took a sealed envelope from his pocket. He held it out to Cameron.

"I'm askin' you to keep this," he said gravely, "in case somethin,' might happen to me durin' the next couple o' weeks, Better put it in a safe place an' take care of it. If I'm unlucky y' understand--open it up. If not, I'll take it back; an' then I'll have a little business proposition to talk over with you. But whatever you do, don't lose it!"

Cameron took the envelope and put it in his pocket.

"I'll be glad to, 'Smiley,'" he said quietly, "and you can trust me to see that it's kept safely."

A look of relief flashed over the little man's face. "Thanks," he said. "It means a lot!"

They rejoined the girl, who had ridden her horse fearlessly to the edge of the cliff and was now looking out across the green valley. A moment later the three trotted down toward the town.

CHAPTER VI - AT THE "SILVER STAR."

"HANDS up!" The command rang simultaneously from three directions. After a startled interval, during which many arms made unconscious gestures toward many hips, every hand was raised. These men that lined the counter and crowded the sloppy tables of the "Silver Star," were rough creatures all of them--men that had ridden weary miles, borne bitter hardships, and faced death in countless forms, in every State west of the Mississippi! But this was different. They were awed. More than one strong face paled. The silence became intense.

From every window at least two bright rings of metal--remorseless eyes of the grim forty-four--were turned upon them. And behind each weapon was the motionless, black figure of one of the dreaded night-riders!

The costume of the visitors consisted of a long, loose garment which fell almost to the feet, and was topped by a cape, so arranged as to cover the back and breast while leaving the arms free. It was surmounted by a round helmetlike hood. A flap, which fell like the chain-mail of the knights of the Middle Ages from under the hood, and in which oblong horizontal apertures were cut for the eyes, effectively concealed the entire head and face. The sinister blackness of the habit was relieved by just one thing--the even more sinister red "J" on the right breast of each rider!

One of the visitors, distinguished by his height, his powerful shoulders, and the slightly larger "J" on his arm, advanced into the saloon. The men gave way before him, and he stood alone before the bar.

"Keep quiet," he said in a clear, emotionless voice, "and there will be no trouble."

Nevertheless, from the back of the crowd, a voice spoke. "I know you," it snarled. "Tryin' to work the Ku Klux Klan again, eh? Well, that old game won't go in this town!"

Very quietly half a dozen revolvers focused themselves on the unprepossessing face of "Wasp" Williams, rising above the heads of his

companions. He did not speak again.

The black-robed figure in the center eyed the silent assembly keenly for a moment, then beckoned toward the door. Another figure entered, carrying several articles. It climbed nimbly upon the bar, straddled the space between it and the wide shelf where the array of bottled liquor stood, and, with leisurely attention to symmetry and design, pasted two posters upon the mirror behind. Then it swung down again. It stood for a moment beside the other, and seemed to be dwarfed by comparison. Its eyes could be seen traveling slowly over the speechless crowd. Finally, with a gesture plainly expressive of contempt and disappointment, it turned and passed out as silently as it had come.

The posters were printed in large, black letters, and at the bottom of each was the now familiar red "J."

The tall man before the bar again addressed the crowd. His voice was quiet; but there was a quality in it which conveyed a stern warning.

"Just a word or two before we leave. This organization has been formed in the interests of decency and justice. It will exist just as long as it is necessary--and no longer. No man who is decent and straight has anything to fear from us.

"One of these posters announces an election three days from now. It is time this town had a mayor, a sheriff, and some sort of governing body and authority. We propose to give it a chance to select those. The notice explains all that is necessary. Every man is welcome to vote, and vote as he pleases. Nobody will be molested, no matter how he votes, provided he is peaceable. But you are warned against attempting lawlessness of any kind. It will be put down without mercy!"

He turned, crossed the room, and went out. There was the sound of men getting to horse. A little later all but the four figures at the doors withdrew; and, a moment later still, four others on horseback appeared at the windows, and the ones at the doors also backed out. After a short delay, during which the noise of pawing hoofs and the jingle of trappings entered the silent room, the black figures at the windows suddenly vanished.

A dead instant followed, every one in the saloon standing with hands still upraised. Then, with an oath, a burly miner, who towered above his fellows rushed to the door, jerking out his two revolvers as he ran. Fifty yards along the road a large body of black figures was just getting under way. He fired into the very center of the group.

A little muffled cry came back on the wind, and a figure, strangely smaller and slighter than the others, reeled for a second in the saddle.

Instantly, the tall rider who had addressed the crowd, wheeled his horse, glanced at the smaller figure, saw that it was again sitting its horse easily, and galloped back toward the door.

Spurring straight into the stream of bullets that poured from the two revolvers before him, he swiftly closed up the interval. His arm darted from under his cape, and a flash of light stabbed the darkness. The huge man in the doorway clutched once at the jamb for support, then toppled backward. A clean hole in his forehead told that he would never cause trouble again.

Others in the saloon had also hurried toward the windows. But the sight of this sudden retribution stopped them in their tracks.

The avenger waited a moment, facing them unmovingly, then rode back to his comrades. After a deliberate delay, the black band, unmolested, trotted quietly away.

Back in the saloon, the pause held but a moment, broke, and left the crowd in uproar. One or two ran out into the road and sent a belated, scattered, and harmless volley after the riders. Others examined the fallen miner; but it was evident that he was past assistance, and scant attention was given him. It was the way of the youthful West to pay ready homage to any one who could amuse, interest, or terrorize it; but, once a leader went down, it turned readily and quickly to any one else who could take his place. There were not a few who openly murmured that Simpson had got what he deserved. The majority ignored him completely and surged around the posters.

As the leader of the visitors had said, one was simply an announcement of an election, giving the time, place, and details, and suggesting the names of

various men as likely candidates.

The other was a column of seventeen names. Beneath was a curt order giving their bearers forty-eight hours to leave town. The name of "Wasp" Williams headed the list.

CHAPTER VII - WHAT CAME IN THE STAGE.

AS the empty stage reached, the edge of the town on its homeward trip, it slowed up and stopped in front of Major Dudley's house. Dooley, the young fellow who now had the proud distinction of driving Red Valley's only means of rolling transportation, climbed down from his high perch. To the casual observer he would have appeared to be examining one of the wheels. As a matter of fact, his sharp eyes were carefully scrutinizing the surrounding territory. After a little, he began to whistle.

Almost immediately, the door of the house opened, and Jeanne Dudley hurried out. He whispered earnestly in her ear.

"That's fine, Jimmie," she answered, elated. "But we haven't a minute to waste! I'll have to be a bit careful with this shoulder, but I think we can manage it. Let's get to work!"

"He shore paid--for--what he done to you, Miss Jeanne," Jimmie panted, struggling with a heavy box in the interior of the coach. "Rand didn't waste no time in givin' him what he desarved!"

Together they began to lower the box to the road. They had nearly succeeded when the young fellow caught his foot on something inside. His momentary loss of balance tilted the box, jamming the girl's left shoulder between it and the side of the coach. With a sharp gasp of pain, she started back, losing her hold. She tried to recover it again, but failed. The box fell to the ground with a heavy thud and split wide open. Bolts of black cloth, and several large pieces of red, were revealed.

For a moment they stood eying the catastrophe in silent consternation, the girl biting her lips to keep back sobs of pain, and the driver flushing in mortification. Then she sprang again to the broken container.

"Quick, Jimmie! If we get it into the yard and under the bushes, there is no harm done. Hurry! Some one may be coming."

With considerable difficulty they managed at last to get the wrecked packing-case and its contents into the yard. They concealed it as well as they could under a big laurel. Breathing heavily, she sat down upon it. She leaned back with closed eyes, and fought to keep down the tears which insisted on welling out between the long, dark lashes. The boy eyed her miserably.

"Gawd, Miss Jeanne," he burst out, "I'm hell-fired sorry! I wouldn't 'a' hurt that shoulder o' yores for all the dust in Ramapo! Damn Simpson!"

"Steady, Jimmie, steady," she said, trying to smile. "My shoulder will be all right in a, minute or two. Don't worry about it--it was just an accident, anyway. And you've done wonderfully, Jimmie, wonderfully! Now hurry along or some one will be passing and wondering what the coach is doing there!"

Somewhat relieved, but bitterly cursing his clumsiness, the young fellow trudged reluctantly away. A minute later, as the lumbering old vehicle gathered headway, he turned around on the box and lifted his broad-brimmed hat in a gallant, if somewhat awkward, salute. He saw a white handkerchief flutter in answer. Vastly heartened, he lashed the horses into a gallop.

For several minutes Jeanne Dudley remained sitting on the box under the laurel. Then, having regained her composure, she started to rise.

A man suddenly stepped around a thick fringe of shrubbery, vaulted lightly over the low fence, and stood before her. Her startled eyes met the leering gaze of "Wasp" Williams.

"Evening, Jeanne," he said. He lifted his hat and swept it almost to the ground in his usual mocking manner.

The girl stepped back a pace. Her face alternately flamed and paled.

"Don't seem to be particular cordial in welcomin' your guests," he grinned, putting the hat on again. "Thought all us Southerners had the name o' bein' mighty generous thataway!"

"Apparently," she answered through set teeth, "you have forgotten what I told you some time ago."

"You can't kill with conversation," he replied calmly. "So I guess you'll jest have to have a nice little chat with me instead."

The girl's hand dropped quickly to her waist, and she reddened. In her hurry to come out, she had not thought to strap on her belt and revolver!

"No, I ain't goin' to forgit what you said," he continued. "An' what's more, I ain't goin' to forgit what I seen out here on the road a few minutes ago, either!"

During the last few years, Jeanne Dudley had undergone hard training in a rough school. Many things had been indelibly graven on her mind that had had little effect upon her in her untroubled, girlhood days in the far Southland. Not the least important of these was the value of keeping cool under all circumstances, and steeling the face never to betray the thought that lay behind it. But the remark of the man before her was a bolt from the blue; and the significant tone in which he made it was not to be misunderstood. For an instant, in spite of herself, her eyes were wide and frightened.

"Well, what do you think you can do about it?" she asked coolly. "By the way, I understand that you and some of your friends are going to leave town to-day or to-morrow."

The ugly grin vanished from his lips. "I wouldn't risk no dust on that," he remarked scowling. He stared silently at the lovely, scornful face before him for several moments. His expression slowly changed. Finally, he came a step nearer.

"Listen, Jeanne," he said in an oddly-pleading tone, "I--I ain't a-goin' to do nothin' about it--give you my word for it--if-if--"

"What?" The question cut through his sentence like a knife.

"--if you--treat me right! I ain't never done nothin' to you to git treated like-- a dog; Ain't I al'ays been respectful an'--an' decent?"

"Oh, remarkably so!" Her voice was so soft, her face became so pleasant, that he was actually deceived. "You have always been a gentleman, at the least! Really, I have been rather unkind to you, haven't I?"

"I ain't a-goin' to say no more about it," he said, surprised and encouraged. "I'm a good man to them I likes--an'--an' I shore likes you, Jeanne! I'd shore treat you--mighty fine! I'm askin'--I'm askin' you to marry me!" The last words came out in a rush.

For a moment the girl's steady eyes gazed into his. Then suddenly she burst into laughter, high, clear trills of genuine amusement. Astounded by this remarkable change, he stared at her uncertainly. Finally she regained her calm.

"Get out!" she ordered briefly. "I warn you for the last time not to come here again!"

It took him several seconds to realize that he had been duped. Then, with an oath, he sprang. He gripped her fiercely by the shoulders.

"You little cat," he snarled, "I'll learn you to fool with a he-man!"

The girl struggled fiercely in his grasp and struck again and again at the vicious face before her. She was young and strong; but the fearful agony of her wounded shoulder rapidly weakened her. The miner, though thin, was sinewy, and not without a sort of wiry power. Gradually he pinned both her arms behind her and held them there. He forced her writhing shoulders against him, and began to press kiss after kiss upon the white face.

Then suddenly she was released! He seemed to fly from before her face and to go tumbling over and over into the bushes!

Sobbing weakly, the girl sank to the ground.

When she could open her eyes, she saw Rand Cameron standing over the fallen miner.

"You yellow hound!" he was muttering with murderous intensity. "I'm going to send you to join the rest of your crew in hell!"

He extracted both of the other's pistols from their holsters. It is highly probable that, in the violence of his rage, he would have slain the brute without mercy, had not the girl, with a cry, thrust herself between.

"Don't, Rand!" she begged wildly. "Don't, for God's sake!"

He would have pushed her aside even then: but she clung to his arms. The fury of the man was almost uncontrollable. His baleful eyes glared past her. At length, with a tremendous effort, he regained some measure of control. But it was long before his heavy breathing calmed.

Finally, he drew a deep breath and lifted her to her feet. He tenderly assisted her to a seat on the stump of a tree.

Then he turned again to the stingless "Wasp." "Get up! You're not through yet!"

When the dazed creature did not respond quickly enough, he roughly dragged him to his feet. Without giving him time to speak, he hustled him toward the girl.

"Now," he commanded grimly, "get down and beg her pardon on your knees!"

At last beginning to recover his senses, Williams declared with violent profanity that he would not get down on his knees to any woman alive. He started to back away.

In an instant Cameron was upon him. Breaking down the miner's resistance as one might crush the puny efforts of a child, he seized his wrist, and forced it around behind his back and upward. Then he began to twist. That hold, properly taken, is one of the most terrible tortures to which a man can

be subjected. Each attempt to escape only increases the agony. Under its deadly punishment, strong men break down and cry like children.

That is exactly what Williams did. His breath coming in harsh sobs, he at length muttered the words of the required apology.

Cameron instantly released him. Again jerking him to his feet, he hurried him to the gate and shoved him out.

"Now go," he ground out, "and thank God, if you know who He is, that you're alive! Never mind the revolvers! I'll take charge of them. And, if I ever catch you around here again, I'll shoot you on sight!"

He watched the man as he made his way, humiliated, venomous, muttering, into the town. Then he hastened back to the girl.

"Oh, Rand, oh, Rand," she whispered through white lips, "I wish I had never seen this place!"

"Don't feel so badly, Jeanne," he pleaded unhappily. "It will soon be the town you used to love. We have little to fear from that beast now. And I think, sweet--er--I think we have almost reached the goal! Our work the other night won all of the good element over, and most of the doubtful ones. The big majority are eager for the election. I feel sure we are nearly at the end of our troubles!"

But had he known of a bitter meeting which took place that night between a certain seventeen, he would not have been so confident.

"I know who's at the head o' this thing now," one of them was muttering savagely. "I seen somethin' to-day, an' I know all I needs to know! I figgers that if we can git rid o' the leaders--or any o' the rest o' them, in the mean while--we can put a stop to it yet! An' I'm not agoin' to leave Red Valley until I gits one o' them myself!"

CHAPTER VIII - THE WASP'S STING.

TWO days later, at nine o'clock in the morning, a cavalcade of black-robed riders, in column of fours, trotted silently into Ramapo. There were at least two hundred of them. Their costume was identical with that of the body which had appeared at the "Silver Star," with one exception--behind the large, red "J" other smaller letters completed the word "justice."

Once inside the town, they quickly broke up into smaller units. Strong groups posted themselves at the head of each road leading into the town. Others quietly patrolled the streets. The main body formed in front of the post-office and made preparations for the work before them. There was a skill in the disposition of the riders, an orderly snap and precision about all their movements, that betrayed competent leadership by one experienced in military strategy. When the visitors had taken position, there was as much chance for resistance in Ramapo as for the proverbial snowball in the well-known place of warmth and discomfort.

But no resistance developed. There was no organization in the town which could combat these well-drilled and determined men. Not all the inhabitants were in favor of the riders; but the few who were not displayed no overmastering desire to attempt to subdue them alone. The majority were loud in their expressions of welcome and approval.

For a brief period after everything was in readiness the men hesitated to come forward. Then one of the hardier spirits stepped up and recorded the first vote ever cast in Ramapo. He was quickly followed by others. The ice once broken, it was only a short while before the self-appointed election commissioners were working under high pressure. Lines were formed, directions given, and the voting went merrily on. At the invitation of the riders, several of the better known miners took their places on the board, as an assurance that everything was being done "above the table." Half in a spirit of jest, half in a spirit of grim earnestness and sober satisfaction, the

rough-and-ready men of that rough-and-ready country hastened to deposit the little slips that told of their choice.

It was a crude election, if you will. But in those pioneer days men had neither the time nor the inclination for the complicated restrictions which the law of the present day casts around its ballot-boxes. A pencil, a piece of paper, a basket, and a battery of forty-fours to guarantee peace and fairness, were all that was necessary. On this occasion they were amply sufficient. The votes were squarely cast and squarely counted.

At two o'clock the last man dropped his ballot. At six the committee, which had been working steadily throughout the day, had completed its work. The precious slips were carefully locked in the post-office safe--the only one in town. Then the leader of the riders advanced to the porch of the building and quietly announced the results.

Ten minutes later the riders reformed. A few sharp words of command, a rolling beat of hoofs, a cloud of dust gently eddying upward above the road, and the black cavalcade had vanished as unostentatiously as it had come.

Not a shot had been fired during the whole day. But now, as the last of the visitors disappeared, a perfect blast of explosions shattered the quiet. After a momentary pause the black company moved leisurely on, and under every hood there was a broad grin. That was merely Ramapo's way of celebrating its first proud consciousness of the inauguration of law and order!

A mile from the town the troops halted. The leader rode back toward the center of the column and drew rein.

"Boys," he said in a quiet voice, which nevertheless came clearly to every man's ears, "I can't thank you for the work you've done. It's bigger than words. All I can say just now is: we've won! I'll have to be content with that until the general assembly to-morrow. After we break up I'm going to take a short cut back to Ramapo and see that everything is still all right. I'd like to have about thirty men with me in case anything goes wrong."

More than that number promptly offered themselves. Then, at a word from the leader, the rest broke ranks and began to disperse, going in all

directions. The new party plunged into the woods. In a few seconds the black riders had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

Two of them, however, were moving along a by-road which led in a roundabout direction back toward the town. Talking over the victory, and trotting leisurely through the soft light of early evening, they had covered nearly two-thirds of the distance, when more than a dozen men suddenly dashed from the trees of each side. In an instant they were surrounded. In the face of such odds their resistance, valiant though it was, lasted but a moment. Both were roughly dragged from their saddles, disarmed, and secured with stout cords. They were then hurried beneath the overhanging branch of a giant oak.

"Boys," said Wasp Williams, "I reckon it wouldn't be decent an' respectful not to call attention to the fact that Providence has obligin'ly presented us with two o' these here coyotes, accordin' to our prayers! So don't waste no time with them preparations for the ceremony. After we has decorated the scenery with these black beauties from time to time, Ramapo'll begin to see as how there's al'ays two sides to every question. An' by the way, reckon it would be considerable more satisfyin' to git a look at these pretties 'fore we elevates 'em."

He advanced to the nearest prisoner and lifted his hood. The undaunted eyes of Smiley Peterson looked out at him.

"Well, well," the Wasp grinned, "this is shore a unexpected pleasure! I didn't make a very good job o' you some time ago, friend; but I guess there ain't no excuse for not completin' it this time. Now, let's see who we got here."

As Williams advanced to the other, Peterson struggled fiercely to extricate himself from his bonds. The cords had been bound only around the waists of the two, securing their arms to their sides, and not very tightly at that. It had not been the intention of the captors to waste much time on their prisoners. Nevertheless, the little man was apparently unable to loosen himself. After a short struggle he desisted.

Williams smiled tantalizingly. "Enjoyin' yoreself?" he asked.

"I will be," Peterson growled, "if I ever meets you in the next world!"

"Look here, Wasp," one of the others broke in, as he clambered up the tree and threw two ropes across the overhanging branches, "git through with that there little comedy o' yourn, an' let's git out o' here. We ain't exactly in no encouragin' situation ourselves." He lowered himself to the ground and waited impatiently with the two looped ends in his hands.

Williams ignored the thrust and coolly lifted the hood of the other. Then he started back. "Gawd!" he ejaculated.

Before them was the ashen face of Jeanne Dudley. She was standing with closed eyes. Her white teeth had sunk so deeply into her trembling lip that a little drop of blood had welled out and now stood like a bright-red spot upon the soft, pale bow of her mouth.

For several moments Williams stared at her in genuine amazement. Then, gradually, the consternation on his face was supplanted by his evil, leering grin. Under the influence of their surprise, none of the captors was watching little Peterson. Very slowly, very cautiously, his right hand was working its way into a slit in the side of his garment. There was no hope of entirely freeing himself, and he had no weapon even if he succeeded. But he was not entirely at the end of his resources.

Williams turned to his confederates. "Boys," he said, "as I says before, I got a lot to be thankful for; but I never counted on no blessin' like this! You're welcome to that little ungrowed bunch o' cactus there; but, as for me, I reckon I'll jest struggle along with this one myself!"

"You mean yo're a goin' to take the gal?" one of the men asked, grinning.

"Them's my sentiments," Williams answered. "Y' see, I been holdin' a sort o' option on this here person for some time. Reckon I'll jest take it up now that I got the chance. Mrs. Wasp Williams! Sounds purty nice, don't it?"

The girl opened her eyes. They were dark and glittering.

"You coward!" she taunted. "Why don't you shoot me? I dare you! I dare you all!"

But the grin on his face only broadened.

"Reckon I ain't a goin' to do no thin' foolish like that--sweetheart," he mocked, "I got better plans." He advanced toward her.

Just then Peterson, with a supreme effort, withdrew his hand from the slit in his robe. There was a small cylindrical object in his knotted fist. So far he had not been noticed. Now he suddenly stooped forward and struggled to reach his half-freed hands with his lips. He could not quite make it. Without hesitation, the quick-witted little man dropped the object he had been holding to the ground. He threw himself upon it.

The others had quickly realized his intention, and with a rush they were upon him. But they were a moment too late. He had succeeded in closing his teeth upon the precious whistle, and before it could be knocked from his lips its loud, long blast had shrilled through the woods.

Taking advantage of the momentary pause that resulted, the little man managed to drag himself to his feet. Now he hurled himself, bonds and all, at the figure of Williams. With a snarl of fury, that highly moral and conscientious individual snatched his revolver from its holster and fixed twice, pointblank. Both bullets buried themselves in Peterson's breast.

The little man stopped, stood still an instant with an old, surprised expression on his face, and crumpled up in the dust of the road.

"Don't stand there gawpin', you fools!" There was a note of alarm in the Wasp's shout. "Quick! Git aboard them nags o' yourn an' clear out! First thing y' know, we'll have a flock o' them black devils on our heels. I'll take care o' this here person."

He leaped at the girl, lifted her in his arms, and carried her in among the trees. He thrust her upon his horse. She was too stunned by the sudden catastrophe that had just taken place to resist. Williams sprang up behind her.

Several minutes later all were in the saddle and driving in their spurs.

But they had not gone twenty yards when there was a heavy crashing among the underbrush. A moment later black figures seemed to swarm into the road in front of them. So sharp and furious was the onslaught that the demoralized ruffians had no time to prepare themselves for the shock.

Some of them were literally ridden down; others managed to fire a few scattered shots before the attackers were upon them; the majority turned tail and fled. The leader of the newcomers had picked out one man and ridden straight at him. Williams had no opportunity even to draw his weapon when the other's fist smashed him senseless to the road.

In less time than it takes to tell it the melee was over. Those of the defeated party that had not escaped, or gone down in the skirmish, were standing sullenly in the road, well guarded by the rescuers. The steady drum of galloping hoofs and the occasional crack of revolvers, dying away in the distance, told of relentless pursuit of the rest.

"Rand, Rand--come quick! Cut these cords!" At the girl's despairing cry, the leader had dashed again to her side. In a moment she was free. She leaped weakly down, and stood there, grasping the saddle for support.

"Peterson!" she gasped. "Williams shot him--when he--blew the whistle! Back there on the road!"

Then she let go and rushed dizzily back to where the little, gray-haired man lay on his side. Careless alike of pain and the eyes that watched her, she dropped beside him and took his head into her lap. Little wordless murmurings fell from her lips.

Peterson opened his swiftly dimming eyes and looked up. He recognized the two faces bending over him. A smile, a shadowy reflection of the pleasant expression that had given him his nickname, hovered round his lips.

"Guess--it's--good-by--this time," he whispered faintly. "Rand, reckon you can--open--that letter now. An'--an'--take care--o'--Miss Jeanne here. She's a

fine-- girl--a almighty--fine--fine--"

The last words trailed off into silence. And with the little smile still on his face, Smiley Peterson crossed the Great Divide. Minutes later Rand Cameron, utterly unsuccessful in his efforts to console her, rose from beside the bitterly sobbing girl. He walked softly back to the group which had been watching them in silent sympathy.

"McCoy," he said in a low, hoarse voice, "I'm going to take Miss Dudley home. She's been under too great a strain. I wish you'd bring back little Peterson when you come. I'll leave these creatures to you, and"--his gray eyes burning into the steady pair that showed through the slits in the black hood before him--"you can use your own judgment!"

McCoy threw back his mask. His gaze strayed to a big overhanging branch a little farther back beside the road. His jaw tightened grimly.

"All right, chief," he answered coolly. "Reckon everything's all ready to take good care o' them!"

CHAPTER IX - THE AFTERGLOW.

THE afterglow of the sunset, welling up from behind the ridge of mountains along the western horizon, bathed the girl's face in its soft, warm light. She was seated, cross-legged, on the outermost point of a narrow, jutting crest, and her gaze roamed out across the town of Ramapo, far below her, and the rolling, green velvet of Red Valley beyond. A little way behind her, her big roan, Ted, was peacefully nibbling at the scattered tufts of coarse mountain grass.

She heard a step in back of her and turned quickly.

A tall, curly-headed man was smiling down at her. His dusty clothes showed abundant evidences of long, hard riding, and he appeared to be exceedingly weary. But there was a quiet satisfaction in his eyes that seemed to overshadow everything else about him.

"Rand!" She sprang to her feet, and her voice was glad. "Where have you been all this last week?"

"I've been about twenty-five miles from here, Jeanne," he replied, coming forward and taking her hand. "In fact, I was that far away until this very afternoon. Then I decided that there was nothing to keep me away from you any longer; and Baldy and I came back in a hurry." His gray eyes looked into his blue ones; and, under the influence of that steady gaze, the blue ones dropped. Her cheeks became the color of the red rose. "Let's sit down for a while. Jeanne," he said, after a bit. "This is a pretty spot you've selected."

"Now," she said severely, when they were seated, "perhaps you'll let me know why you were so unkind as to rush off without telling me a word about it. I could not find out what had become of you." Her smile of welcome, however, robbed the words of their pretended rebuke.

"I went away for two reasons," he answered slowly. "One was that I wanted to verify some information that I had received; the other was that I had something to say to you, Jeanne, and I felt that I couldn't say it while you were under the--er--influence of certain--certain events that happened recently." He was beginning to have a hard time of it.

After one startled look the girl turned away her face, and her eyes stared vacantly across the valley. He waited for her to speak; but when she remained silent he resumed.

"Jeanne, do you remember when we were out riding some time ago, and Smiley joined us just as we were starting down toward the town? Do you remember he asked to talk to me alone?"

She nodded without looking around.

"Well, he gave me a letter then and asked me to keep it, unless--er--something happened to him. Perhaps you remember what he said to me about opening a letter when he was dying?"

She turned slowly, at that, and her eyes were misty and questioning.

"I remember," she said softly.

"That letter contained a queer document." His voice was strangely deep and quiet. "It told where his claim was located, and--it gave it to you and to me. That's where I've been, Jeanne. I was looking for the claim and investigating it. It is one of the richest I've ever seen. His document--I don't know what else to call it--asked us to take it as partners and develop it."

It was long before she answered.

"Poor little Smiley!" she murmured. Her lips were trembling and her eyes were full.

"A finer or braver friend never lived," he answered gently.

He waited with averted eyes until her heavy breathing calmed. At length he rose to his feet and began to walk uneasily up and down behind her.

"Jeanne," he said finally. "there is no reason for--for me beating around the bush any longer. The first day I came here I told you what had brought me here. I told you it was you. I still love you--I always have, and I always will. I can't be without you any longer, sweetheart. But I told you also that I would not ask you again until I made my strike--or until we brought peace and decency back to Red Valley."

He paused a moment and glanced at her in an effort to read her thoughts. But her face was turned away from him. She was unconsciously pulling out blades of the long grass and winding them in and out between her slender fingers.

"I've kept that promise. Jeanne," he said quietly. "Both conditions were fulfilled a week ago. I did not come to you then because you had just been through some terrible experiences, and were---er--weakened from your wound and depressed and--and pretty well worn out. But now--"

"But now," she interrupted in a low voice, getting slowly to her feet, "after deserting me, you follow me out here, and take advantage of me when I'm lonely and unhappy to--to tell me all--this! It is no use, Rand."

"Jeanne!" His voice was hurt, dumfounded.

"Yes." she continued still in the same subdued tone, "I could have given you my final answer a month ago--and I won't change it now. Rand, even if you have taken me unawares!"

She faced him, and his despairing gaze met the deep, tender light that glowed in her eyes.

"It is no use, you see." she said softly, "because you must have known long ago that I love you."

"Jeanne!" This time the glad cry fairly echoed over the mountain. In a bound he was beside her. He took her face between his hands.

"You adorable torturer!" he cried. "Why did you give me that terrible minute?"

"Because," she murmured, "you kept me--waiting so long till you made your strike! Did you think that mattered?"

"Good Lord!" The exclamation came forth on a long sigh of relief and happiness. "Oh, Jeanne, why didn't I have enough sense to refuse to take your answer that last time!"

"Why didn't you!" she breathed. "It would have been just as well." There was a little gleam deep in the blue eyes beneath his. "You are so--so stubborn, Rand, that I knew as soon as you came here it was useless for me to resist."

He drew her closer and gently tilted back the blushing face until the tender sweetness of the red lips lay defenseless before him.

And only the evening star, peeping down from the deepening blue of the twilight sky, saw what he did then!

The Renegade of Painted Mesa By Ruth Anderson.

The Renegade of Painted Mesa



NORMA LEWIS pulled her calico pony to a halt on a small rise and drank in the pine-scented breeze that came in gentle waves over Painted Mesa. She gazed off across the purple-shadowed canyons and arroyos with eyes that sparkled with the joy of seeing the friendly and restful hills again. The figure of the girl perched erect on the patch pony, divided skirt, and cream sombrero cocked jauntily over a wild tangle of chestnut curls, blended smoothly with its background of juniper studded bluffs and jagged buttes.

BEFORE her the broken lands extended as far as she could see, making jagged outlines on two sides, rough natural boundaries that separated her father's B-L Ranch from the barren wastes on the other side of the divide. But now the sharp crags were softened in the afternoon sun, and the sawtooth hills took on shadows in grotesque and lovely shapes and shades.

As the girl relaxed on her horse drinking in the loveliness of her old home, she was utterly unconscious of her immediate surroundings. The juniper and pine covered crag beside the trail formed a table a bit higher than her head, a thicket of tangled shrubbery to which she gave no attention at the moment.

On the tableland and several yards behind her a slinking yellow form crept forward on noiseless padded feet. Step by silent step, belly to the ground, it skimmed through its green concealment.

Now it was directly over the girl's head, crouching, green eyes narrow and sharp. The girl was gazing dreamily at the distant hills.

Then it sprang. Lightning quick! The air suddenly became filled with reeling, flying forms.

The terrified little horse screamed. A shot roared, and the pony lunged. Norma Lewis felt herself thrown spinning over her animal's head.

She landed in a heap against a great boulder and her senses began deserting her. A pungent odor permeated her consciousness, a decidedly unpleasant odor, it was. And then she lost all control of herself and everything went black.

"YOU feelin' better now, miss?" It was a quiet masculine voice, full of assurance and comfort, that brought her back to her senses.

Slowly, through the haze of her mind, a form took outline. She was lying in the shade of the boulder and a man was kneeling over her, fanning her face with his almost-white Stetson.

Norma opened one eye a little wider, then dared open the other and give the man more careful scrutiny.

He was slender, and his silk shirt was white, she noted. His eyes were gray, she decided. Then they seemed blue. At any rate, they were deep and, although he was young, they had tiny crows feet barely showing in the corners, indications that he had spent a lifetime out in the sun.

IT SEEMED comfortable, lying there and being fanned by such a stranger, but Norma made an effort to get up.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing much." His voice was deep and cool, like springs of fresh water under shady trees. "You almost had an accident. It's all over now. Feel better?" Norma sat up experimentally, then got to her feet.

"I don't think any bones are broken," she answered, examining a long scratch that could be seen on her arm through a rip in her sleeve.

She looked at her horse. The animal stood near-by, trembling. Several long welts and scratches were raised on his back. She stepped over to the animal and patted his head while she examined his wounds. Her face went white and she felt terribly weak.

"Panther?" she asked huskily.

"Yes, miss," the man replied. "He sprang from that boulder over your head. I got in a lucky shot just as he came sailing down on you."

Norma shivered.

"Ought to be careful while ridin' these trails, miss. The panthers are awfully hungry this spring. Been starving all winter, and now they're killing cattle and even full grown horses."

Norma looked about her but did not see the dead animal.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Threw it behind the boulder," the man said. "Hoped you wouldn't see it. No use to upset you more."

"Thanks, but I'm not so easily upset. I've seen lots of them around here. May I see it?"

The man led her around the boulder and showed her the dead animal. Its wicked mouth was open, exposing needle-sharp teeth.

Its velvet-covered claws were slightly flecked with blood.

A bullet hole squarely behind the shoulder spoke eloquently of the accuracy of the stranger's aim.

Norma turned away with a shrug. "You didn't finish telling me all of what happened," she said to the man beside her.

"That was all. He just jumped and I just shot. When he landed on your horse he sunk his claws in and your pony did a song and dance and you landed on that stone."

SONG and dance, indeed! Norma smiled at the stranger's efforts to make his rescue sound so matter of fact.

"Oh, I see," she said mischievously. "It's as simple as all that."

The man made some kind of depreciating gesture with his hands.

"Well, even if saving girls from panthers is a simple, everyday occurrence with you, I ought to thank you for what you've done."

"It wasn't anything," the man assured her.

"All right, I'll take your word for it, Mr.--" she looked at him questioningly for a moment. Then to cover the silence she said, "I'm Norma Lewis." Another silence. "This is my father's place--Bob Lewis--"

The man seemed not to have noticed her hesitation when she expected him to give his name. Or, if he had noticed it, he choose to act as though he hadn't.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Lewis," he said. He spoke absently, looking off toward one of the valleys. Then after a moment he turned and eyed her frankly.

"You said something about thanking me," he said. "I reckon there is something you could do for me--that is, if you would."

SO he didn't intend to tell her his name. Norma bit her lips to hide her annoyance. But she answered. "Why, of course. Anything I could do--"

"Thanks a lot," the man answered quickly. "I hear some horses coming. There'll be friends of yours in the party. Now I'll just call this little incident square if you'll promise me not to say anything about it happening. Or if you have to, don't mention that you saw anybody. I'm sorry I can't explain right now. Is that a bargain?"

"Of course," the girl returned. "If you ask me not to--"

The man interrupted again. "Much obliged. And watch out for panthers." And then as an afterthought, "--of all kinds."

Puzzled, Norma Lewis saw the stranger jam his hat on his head and disappear around the boulder, then a few moments later she heard the clump

of galloping hooves, distinct at first, then growing fainter until there was nothing but silence.

The girl gave her attention to her horse, still wondering at the strange action of the stranger. She was examining the scratches on the animal when a party of three riders appeared on the trail and brought their mounts up short.

The foremost rider in the party was her father's foreman, Bart Bradley. She had seen the other two working about the place.

"Howdy, Miss Lewis," Bradley said, easing himself across his saddle. "What's the trouble?"

HIS piercing black eyes roved over the girl's dusty clothes and came to rest on the bleeding hips of the pony. "Them's panther scratches, ain't they?"

"Yes," the girl answered reluctantly. Remembering her promise to the stranger, she tried to head off any more questions. "He jumped on Patch, but I shot him before he did much damage. Everything's all right now, thanks."

Bradley looked at the girl in a way that sent an uncomfortable shiver down her back. "You sure are lucky," he said, "and brave," he added patronizingly. "It ain't every girl brave enough to shoot a painter."

The girl mounted her horse, eager to be gone.

"Where's the animal?" Bradley asked her.

The girl nodded toward the boulder. "Behind there."

The two riders left the foreman and nosed their horses around the massive stone. Bradley, seemingly losing interest in the dead panther, eased his horse over beside the girl's animal.

"Miss Norma," he said. "Things has been pretty bad since you been on your trip back East. Cattle is disappearin' wholesale. Some was stole last night.

"And folks has been seein' a stranger, a puncher feller around lately. I'd advise you to kinda keep clear o' these here badlands. Cow hustlers kinda resents folks nosin' around where they're workin'."

Norma bit her lips, filled with resentment at the foreman for having said what he did, and a sense of guilt, as though she had been having an intrigue with a cattle thief. She felt as though she were caught in an illegal act.

"Why--I'm not afraid," she said lamely.

"No, I know you ain't," Bradley answered. "But you'd better stay away from this neck o' the woods." His eyes searched her face eagerly. "You ain't seen anybody around, have you?"

Norma Lewis looked off into the distance for a long moment. Then slowly she turned to her questioner.

"If I see any cattle thieves around I'll report it right away. Why do you ask?"

"Because we're out looking for him now. Somebody seen him headed this way, so we're makin' up a surprise necktie party for him."

"Oh." The girl looked queerly at her father's foreman, then quirted her horse and galloped off down the trail to the ranch house.

Bradley turned in his saddle and watched her until she was out of sight, and the light in his eyes would have made her very uncomfortable had she seen it. Then he joined the men who were still looking at the dead panther.

NORMA LEWIS prepared supper for her father with restless hands. This first night after her return from a winter spent with friends in Denver was turning out a failure.

Old Bob Lewis was so worried that he seemed not to realize that his daughter had returned. He sat at the table and ate quickly and silently while Norma sat across from him, uncomfortable and nervous.

Time and time again there came back to her the events of the afternoon, the stranger who wouldn't tell his name, and who disappeared so abruptly the moment he knew that somebody was coming up the trail. And the foreman, a man her father had hired while she was away; the man's gaze had made her feel unclean.

Old Bob got up from the table and without a word buckled on his gun belt and joined his foreman and men out at the corral. From the kitchen door, Norma heard determined voices and the stamping of horses' feet.

Presently she heard them ride away into the darkness and she sat under a tree beside the house and waited. The hours stretched out slowly, as though the night would never end.

AFTER a while the moon came up, casting a feeble yellow light over the prairie and deepening the blackness in the hills where her father had gone with his men. And still time seemed endless.

Then, at last she heard hoof beats, faint at first, then louder, until at last three horsemen dashed up to the corral and slid to a stop. The men were off their animals and stripping off their saddles to change them to fresh horses when Norma ran to them.

"Did you catch him--where's father?" she asked incoherently.

"Old Bob's shot--he done it. We're gonna run him down."

"But where's father? Tell me what happened!" Norma demanded with increased excitement.

Bart Bradley took the girl gently by the arm and patted her back. "Don't worry. We'll find him."

A chill ran down Norma's back as the man's hand rested on her. "Please tell me what happened!" she repeated.

"I was just going to tell you," Bradley returned. "We was out hunting that man *you was talking to this afternoon*. We flushed him in that *malapais*, and in the chase we got separated. We heard a shot, an' yore dad didn't show up, so the rustler must have shot him. We're gonna find 'em both now."

NORMA'S fingernails dug into the palms of her hands.

"Have one of the man saddle Patch," she ordered.

"No!" Bradley said in a voice of authority. "You couldn't do no good."

"Don't tell me what to do," the girl said sharply. "I must find father. Please have my horse saddled."

Bradley was adamant. "No!" he said. "Your dad may be dead now and I'm in charge. It's too dangerous for you out there."

The foreman turned to one of his men and handed him a key. "Lock her saddle in the shed," he ordered. "And shake a leg; we gotta get goin'."

Then he turned to the girl. "You can just blame yourself if yore dad's dead," he shot at her. "If you hadn't lied to me out there today this might not have happened."

"I didn't tell you I was talking to anybody out there," Norma said lamely. She was humiliated that she had got herself into this unpleasant position. It seemed now that the man she had lied for had turned out a murderer as well as a cattle thief.

"Maybe not in them words, but there was a man there. He shot that painter."

"How do you know?"

"Because if you shot him, how come he was shot with a *forty-five* slug when your gun is a *thirty-two*? That little pistol of yours wouldn't kill a panther."

Anger surged up in the girl and, without answering the foreman's accusation, she turned suddenly and ran toward the house. In the depths of her emotion she positively hated the thoughts of the man who had got her into all this trouble. "I hope they find him and hang him," she said between sobs.

EVEN as Bradley and his men rode off, she was getting into riding clothes and strapping her little gun about her waist. They were hardly out of sight when she was out to the corral throwing a bridle on her pony.

"Patch," she said, as she climbed up on a corral pole and mounted, "you have to show me the way to that stranger. I'm going to find him just as soon as I find dad."

The sure-footed little animal led her over the trail that she herself could hardly make out in the darkness. His mile-eating gait had brought her almost to the point of her afternoon's adventure when the horse stopped dead still and pricked up his ears.

Listening carefully the girl found the cause--another horse was whinnying off to the left, out of sight in the scrub pines and boulders.

The girl loosened the gun in her holster and turned her horse's nose toward the sound. Her heart pumped madly but she rode determinedly, no thought of panthers or other dangers besetting her.

And her valiant little animal, with unerring instinct led her through the treacherous badlands to a point where the moon shone down on a small clearing in the scrub. The black figure of a horse stood with drooping head near the shadow of a man who lay stretched out flat near the edge of the clearing.

The girl slid to the ground and was instantly beside the person lying on his back. It was old Bob Lewis.

He lay with one leg drawn up under him, twisted horribly. Blood soaked his shirt front. He was groaning weakly and his hands clutched at stray pebbles on the ground.

The girl's arm encircled his neck as she spoke, but the man was too weak to answer her. She tore off his shirt front and ripped it to pieces, binding the wound in his breast with the strips. She gently lifted his heavy weight and shifted his great body until she had his leg straightened out under him. This seemed to ease him somewhat and he regained a little control of his dissipated senses.

HIS eyes settled on his daughter and he seemed to recognize her. He lifted one hand and placed it feebly on his daughter's arm. He tried to say something.

"Can you tell me who shot you, Daddy?" she asked brokenly.

Her father looked at her with pain in his eyes and tried to speak, but his voice was inaudible.

A different voice came--unexpectedly--out of the dark.

"I think I can tell you, Miss."

The girl turned suddenly. Litted in the moonlight was the stranger of the afternoon.

Norma caught her breath, hesitated for a moment, then her hand came up with her gun.

"Don't move--you murderer!"

The stranger paid not the least attention to her command, but dropped to his knees beside her father and inspected the bandages she had improvised.

"This won't stop the flow of blood," he said over his shoulder while his nimble hands stripped off the cloth and readjusted them. "How long has he been here?"

As he talked he took a flask of whisky from his pocket and poured a few drops between the lips of the wounded man. "That ought to bring him around," he said.

The girl stood by, helpless and angry. She felt foolish standing with the gun in her hand and yet unable to use it on the man who was ministering to her father. And the stranger had knelt with his back to her as unconscious of her presence, apparently, as though she had been one of the boulders that loomed darkly around them.

The whisky showed signs of reviving the rancher, and the stranger seemed relieved. "Now," he asked, "can you tell us who shot you? I have an idea, but--"

Old Bob Lewis gazed at the stranger and didn't recognize him. "It must have been you," he said weakly.

THE girl heard the accusation with mixed disappointment and resolution.

While the man still had his back to her she raised her gun and aimed it squarely at him.

"Lift your hands straight up or I will kill you," she said in deadly earnestness.

The man turned and recognized the seriousness that was hers. He elevated his hands.

There was no longer the fleeting play of laughter in his face which she had noted during the day, but even in the feeble light of the crescent new moon

she caught the bright sparkle in his eyes and the frank but respectful look he gave her. Pain shot through her but she kept to her resolution.

"Don't move," she commanded. "I'm going to get your gun, and if you make any movement I will shoot."

She took two steps toward the man and reached for his gun. He was still looking at her and she felt her eyes drawn to his, held there as though she were hypnotized by the serious depths of his.

Then the man slowly and deliberately lowered one hand and took her gun by the barrel.

"You'd better give me this," he said with gentle firmness. Before she knew it he had her weapon in his belt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But there's too much to do and I can't let you interfere right now. Tell me all you know about what happened.

Something in his voice made the girl answer his question. It wasn't fear that the man inspired, but obedience. She told him what the foreman had told her.

"And wasn't your foreman here when you found your father?"

"Why, no. I haven't seen him since he rode off. I wonder--"

"I think I know the answer to that, too," the man said. "I have an idea they'll be along here pretty pronto now. Will you help me move your father--" He paused, listening intently.

The girl heard the faint sound of horses' hooves clattering on the stones. The man grasped her by the arm.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "They will be looking for your dad, I've an idea. Come back here in the shadows--quick!"

WITHOUT waiting for an answer the stranger led the girl out of the moonlight and into the blackness of the scrub pines. He guided her to one of the upright boulders just as the riders came close enough for their conversation to be heard. She recognized Bart Bradley's voice.

"You sure you got him?" Bradley asked.

They were walking their horses and the girl had no difficulty in hearing them talk.

"Yeah," growled the second rider.

"I seen him fall when I potted him. He was right about here somewhere."

"I don't think we ought done it," the third man offered. "There wasn't no use of it as I could see. I don't like this killin' business."

Bradley snarled his reply. "There was plenty o' use of it. He's been askin' me too many funny questions lately. Kinda gettin' suspicious o' our not bein' able to stop this leak in his herd."

THE man wasn't satisfied. "That don't make him havin' anything on us--just bein' suspicious. But killin'--now maybe we got our necks in a noose. Potting' a man's different from just runnin' off some of his stock."

"Let up on that squawking," Bradley answered. "We got things cinched now." As the foreman spoke he pulled up his horse and the three men dismounted, preparatory to searching for Lewis' body.

"How?" the man continued.

"This strange hombre that's prowling' these hills. The girl havin' seen him this afternoon, she'll have to swear he was skulking' around. He's probably in here just to knock off a few head o' the old man's cows--which suits us perfect. We blame him with the killin', chase him down and hang him--and that's that. Whoa; here's the old coyote an' his horse." Norma shivered in

revulsion at what she heard, and she leaned a little closer to the man who stood beside her. It was an unconscious gesture and the man took her arm reassuringly.

She felt his hand touch her arm and slide down to her own hand, then felt the smooth steel of her gun as he placed it in her hand. She felt new strength rush through her.

The man beside her was alert, silent, but she felt the taut movement of his body as he breathed evenly. He was crouched almost on tiptoe now as the three men approached the body of her father. Old Bob Lewis' life depended on whether the stranger could protect him from the group.

Bradley barked a curse. "Hell's bells! He's still alive an' somebody's done found him. Look at them bandages! Wonder if he's talked?"

The moonlight was just enough for Norma Lewis to see the indistinct form of the foreman as that worthy's right hand went for his gun, bent on making sure her father would not live to say any more. Her nerves were keyed up almost to the breaking point.

Near-by, the girl's pony whinnied, as though it were a warning. And that startling sound halted Bradley's gun-arm for a fraction of a moment.

In that split-second the man beside the girl acted. His gun roared and one of the three men fell across the body of her father.

The other two dropped low for the protection of darkness and scuffled toward the edge of the clearing.

THE stranger came out of the shadows with his gun belching orange streaks of fire. Bradley whipped a couple of answering shots at him and scuttled to the protection of a boulder, closely followed by the second man.

Norma's man followed them up, filling the night with the roar of his weapon, crouching forward as openly as though he were on a public street.

The little hollow rang with the bark of Colt-guns as the two men behind the rocks returned his fire. Orange stabs lit the clearing and the pungence of gunsmoke cut the nostrils. Horses neighed in frightened crescendo and clattered into the darkness.

The stranger barked an order. "Come out of there with your hands in the air," but he did not wait for the obedience he knew would not be forthcoming. A new volley of bullets answered him, and the roar echoed off into the hills.

The girl stood, half paralyzed, watching the flaming tableau before her. Then her eyes caught a new movement, the shadow of the man who had fallen wounded on her father. She saw the black silhouette of the man raise to one elbow and saw one arm extend with a gun pointing at the stranger's back.

She raised her gun in deliberate aim and squeezed the trigger. As her weapon barked a dagger of flame spouted from the fallen man's gun, and the man dropped down again with a convulsive shudder.

But his own weapon had found a mark. The man beside Norma spun around as the bullet caught him. His head jerked back and he toppled over forward.

Heedless of the foreman and his one man hidden behind boulders, the girl rushed forward to the man who was fighting for her.

SHE dropped to one knee beside him, answered a couple of shots with two from her own gun.

She became suddenly a thing transformed. A fierceness took possession of her and changed her from the civilized creature she had been to the

primitive woman--fighting! Fighting with a woman's fury for those she loved!

She knew it now--as she must have known it since she had seen this man the first time. This was her man who had come to her!

The stranger saw her, lying on his back as he was, and he motioned for her to get back into the darkness. He was trying to get up onto his knees. "Get back," he shouted in a voice that did not conceal the pain he was suffering. "Quick."

THE girl ignored the command. Instead she helped him to a sitting posture and handed him his gun which had fallen in the dust.

The man snapped the trigger on a spent shell.

The girl took the weapon and handed him her own. She broke the heavy Colt and stuffed its cylinders with fresh cartridges from his gun belt. Then, while he fired at every intermittent flash from behind the rocks, she reloaded her own .32.

Crouched side by side, they settled down to a steady exchange of fire. Twice, then the third time, the man snapped his cylinder around while each time the girl refilled it. Then--there were only three more shells in his belt. Grimly she stuffed these into the gun and showed him the three empty chambers before she closed the breach. Then she started to crawl away.

On hands and knees she reached the body of the man who lay beside her father, and she unbuckled the cartridge belt from the dead man's waist and brought it and his gun back with her.

They had almost emptied the last gun when a sudden blaze of thunder roared from behind the rocks. The stranger yelled as though a bullet had ploughed through his heart. He started upward, then fell flat on the ground.

As he fell his flailing arms caught the girl and brought her down with him. Then he quickly placed his hand over her mouth, lest she should speak. Surprised, she lay without making a sound.

The trail that had echoed with the sound of battle now was silent as a tomb. The eerie light played on the bodies stretched out among the rocks.

The girl lay, panting with the excitement, wondering. The seconds seemed like years. And as she looked up at the stars, fleeting glimpses of the last few hours raced across her mind. Her father, lying near her, dying perhaps. The stranger's unaccountable conduct.

Then she heard the soft crackle of a boot on a dried twig. It sounded with the sharpness of a rifle shot in the stillness, and it brought her back to reality.

Again the sound. And again. The foreman or his man was coming out from behind the boulder. Cautiously !

Three times more she heard the single step. But the man beside her did not move a muscle. He lay there, his hand clapped over her mouth.

By the sound of the footsteps she judged the action of the foreman. Warily he was coming out, believing that he had killed the stranger and the girl, but cautious nonetheless. More confident now, the man behind the boulder ventured out. No shots greeted him, and he grew bolder, his footsteps halting, light and alert.

Crash!

THE deafening explosion of a pistol almost beside her ear!

Over by the boulder she made out the dim form of the foreman, saw it reel and spin, then topple to the ground.

The body was hardly fallen before the stranger was on his feet, racing with drawn gun. It was the foreman; his man lay nearby with a bullet in his chest. Both men were helpless but still alive.

The stranger gathered up all the weapons in sight, then whistled for his horse. "We'll saddlebag these hombres across my animal's back," he said to the girl. "And make a travois to get your dad home."

While the man lashed his prisoners to his horse the girl worked over her father. The old man had fainted from loss of blood, but more liquor from the stranger's flask quickly brought him around.

"Now that you're feeling better," the stranger said when he saw old Lewis examining him through eyes whose brightness had returned. "Maybe I'd better introduce myself." The old man grunted.

"I'M THAT range detective you asked the Association to send out about three months ago. We been so busy I couldn't get here any sooner. Been working down on the Rio."

The old man spoke. "You should have made yourself known. My foreman had us all gunning for you and from what I just been overhearing, they sure wanted you bad. And to think, Bradley and them two skunks of his was doing the stealing all the time."

"I don't usually make myself known until I get things straightened out. It makes things easier--" he looked at the girl--"that is, in most cases. Anyway, my name's Gooding--Phil Gooding. I'll present my credentials when we get you up to the house."

"You done presented them as far as I'm concerned--when you gunned out that sneakin' foreman o' mine. Norma, I want you to meet this feller--he's a range detective."

Gooding smiled at the girl. "Gooding's the name," he said. "Glad to know you, because I have a lot of things I want to say to you."

"Would it take long to say them?" Norma Lewis asked, looking at him squarely.

"Yes. A long, long time. Because I want to keep saying them over and over-and over and over!"

The Running of Silver River by C. F. Bourke.



IT WAS TWILIGHT WHEN HE REACHED THE SPUR OF ROCK SHELVING
ABOVE A YAWNING CAVERN

WHEN a young and ambitious professional man like Harlow, C. E., is informed by a briefly brutal telegram that his first important piece of work has been wiped out by a stroke of misfortune that offers no remedy, he is likely to do one of two things, according to his nature and instinct.

He will either sit down with a cold feeling in the region of his stomach and passively accept the probable ruin of his professional career, or square his jaw and get into action as fast as railroad facilities and the operation of the

human brain can encompass the deed--cataclysms of nature and dispensations of Providence to the contrary notwithstanding.

The latter was the course selected by Engineer Harlow, who, representing his patron, the president of the Western Reducing Company, had recently completed the construction of the reducing-plant at Silverton, the first child of his technical training.

When the plant first went into operation, Harlow looked upon his work and found it good. The great ore-crushers and distributors roared and wheezed like twelve-inch turret-guns in action; canvas-coated, red-ore-splashed men washed out the last remnants of metal, and the main artery of the plant, the Silver River, swirled athwart the mountainside to continue on its way a turbid, red-stained stream, useless for further purposes of cleanliness.

"The work is good, the plant the best, and the ever-flowing creek will keep her going till we've washed up all the pay-rock on this slope of the Rockies!"

So said Engineer Harlow to Houghton, the manager. Surly, taciturn, and pessimistic, the manager grunted a non-committal reply, and the engineer betook himself plainsward on the overland railroad.

A few days later, while Harlow was resting in Denver, he got a telegram from Manager Houghton, announcing the coming of disaster and the permanent destruction of all the company's hopes--all within the economical limits of an unsatisfactory ten words.

The morning overland train deposited Harlow at Silverton, and twenty minutes later the engineer flung himself from a smoking buckskin pony into the presence of the tiger-snarling Houghton, who awaited his arrival in the spacious office of the Western Reducing plant. There were no polite preliminary greetings.

"What the devil's the matter with that qualified Silver River you boomed in your report? Gone dry almost overnight--stopped running like a piker--quit dead as a cut hose!"

"I know that from your telegram," Harlow replied curtly. "By the way, I presume you forgot the office has a telegraph-code?"

The sarcastic flingback missed its mark.

"Don't you bother about my telegrams, son," the manager growled. "The cat jumped the bag in New York before the crick got through drying up. Wall Street had advance information on that job."

Hardly catching the sense of the manager's words, Harlow turned to the window commanding a view of the little city of Silverton, below them. Sharply back from the side of the ore-plant he saw the melancholy dry bed of the Silver River.

A week ago the stream was singing out of the bowels of the mountain, furnishing life-blood to the big ore-plant on the hillside.

That was all that had happened in his absence. The rest was the same--the morning sun tipping the backbone of the continent; the heathery hillside; the little town flooded in golden sun-glare. The silent works shed a grotesque black shadow down toward the town, where idle men prowled in the streets--for the ore-plant was the life-blood of the little city, as the Silver River had been the life-blood of the ore-plant.

"Picturesque view, ain't it?" Houghton growled. "Nice place to go fishin', eh?"

In the brief moment of silence Harlow realized what the last few days must have meant to the big manager, lacking intuition, but full of pessimistic imagination.

"It is rather discouraging," the engineer said. "I suppose it's been a pretty bad grind?"

"Grind!" Houghton's fat fist punctuated the exclamation like the fall of a rock-crusher. "Grind! It's been ashes to ashes, all right, all right! A month after we start the plant, the bottom drops out. Black Friday, too! Then Graveyard Saturday and Tombstone Sunday. Dribble, dribble, dribble; that's

the way the creek went out; and all of us staring like bull-calves. Pretty soon she was shut off dead, with blind fishes from inside the mountain wrigglin' on the gravel. Then, to cap it, Western Reducing stock was thrown on the market in N'York, an' wouldn't sell for scrap-iron. Oh, my Aunt Maria! Them Raynor brothers did us up plenty and frequent when they unloaded this barn, half-finished, for fifty thousand dollars!"

"The Silver River was flowing out of the side of the mountain, five miles from here, fifty years before the Raynors staked out this property," Harlow returned. "It was a subterranean stream, coming out of the big divide, before Fremont crossed to the coast."

"Well, it ain't running any more," Houghton replied doggedly. "And them Raynors have gone off with our fifty thousand to irrigate the Yuma Valley, somewhere t'other side of the divide. Them chaps know where to find water!" He put up his big hand, as Harlow picked up his hat with a sudden gleam in his eye and moved toward the door. "It's up to you to do some hustling. The N'York gang's ready to sell this plant for old junk--they got an offer through some real-estate shark--only they want your report first. Sing your swan song, so's I can get out of here and hunt another job!"

Harlow had already passed the door and flung himself on the buckskin bronco.

"I'll take a week to sing my song," he said grimly. "I'll go over that mountain, or through it, first. That's what none of you seem to have thought of!"

II

THE young engineer realized that he faced a problem for which the text-books offered no solution. He rapidly rehearsed the details of disaster--the purchase of the reducing-plant, with its seemingly time-defying water-supply; the inexplicable cutting off of the subterranean stream, the artery of its life; the raid on the company's stock, and the proffered purchase of the plant for junk. There were others, apparently, who knew as well as Harlow and Houghton the importance of the part played by the Silver River in the operation of the Western Reducing Company's ore-works.

The sun was still high in the heavens when he turned the buckskin bronco's head out of Silverton, following the bed of the dried stream into the recesses of the mountain. He carried with him food and candles, and--the last thing Houghton, relenting in his surliness, had suggested--a heavy Remington navy revolver and a well-filled cartridge-belt.

It was twilight when he reached the spur of rock shelving above a yawning cavern whence, formerly, the Silver River had sprung from its unknown source in the heart of the hills. He had searched the creek's rocky sides, but had found no indications of former drought. So far as the rocks told him, the stream had simply lost its way, or had forgotten to flow along its accustomed route.

He had drawn out a match to light a candle when the sound of horses' hoofs and men's voices on the mountain trail caused him instinctively to draw the bronco within the shelter of the cavern's mouth. When the twilight riders stopped just above him, he stood breathlessly with his hand clapped on the bronco's muzzle.

"Aw, come on!" a voice said. "What's the use hanging round that hole in the mud?"

The response came, accompanied by a chuckling laugh.

"I was just wondering what that kid Harlow said when he saw that dry stream. Lordy, we didn't wipe his eye or nothing, did we, Billy? Wonder what that Western Reducing gang would think if they was real wise to the job?"

"They'd get after our scalp four ways to once, if they was," the other man growled. "Just the same, it will be time for us to whinny when we get the transfer-papers signed, sealed, and delivered. Then they can squeal all they want, and so can the ranchers over in Yuma. Come on, Bob!"

Harlow drew his first full breath simultaneously with the sound of the men's departure. Bill and Bob Raynor! So they were the mysterious bidders for the ore-company's plant--the very men who had sold the works to the company a year before. Chance had sent to him the very men who had been

in his mind all the afternoon, as connected in some way with the failure of the stream.

What he had heard swept from his mind all thought of exploring, single-handed, the bed of the lost river. His way lay now after the Raynors. He left the shelter of the cavern, following their trail cautiously as an Indian on the slot of an enemy. Over the tortuous turns of the mountain path he had no trouble in keeping the two brothers in sight, silhouetted against a starlit sky, as they toiled upward toward the backbone of the range.

Under the clear stars he watched them gain and cross the plateau that topped the range, doubling sharply to the right before they dipped behind the ridge on the other side. A second later the buckskin bronco was speeding across the open plateau. It stopped at the top of a steep slope, and far below Harlow saw the twinkling lights of a ranch-house. The night riders had disappeared, but he followed down into the hollow. There he pulled up sharply, checking a cry of surprise.

A sound of swirling water came from the right--water, where he had found only a dried-up hillside the summer before! He turned the bronco toward the sound. One hundred--two hundred yards, and the pony's feet paddled in water pouring swiftly downward. Directly over him projected the frowning front of a huge precipice, and from the base of the cliff the water was spouting forth in a cataract. Then he saw something else--a passageway and a hand-rail leading inward on the side of the torrent, the pathway showing white on the rock.

The ranch-house was so close that he could hear the laughter and shouting of the men. He dismounted from the pony, dropping the reins over the bronco's head to hold him in his place, and entered the face of the mountain, bending his head to follow the narrow pass that skirted the rushing water. He was beginning to understand what Manager Houghton said about the Raynors' "irrigating" Yuma Valley.

"They've tapped the subterranean stream here, and they're checking against our bank-deposit!"

Under the shadow of the cliff he lighted a candle, and drew back as his foot touched the margin of a wide, shining body of water. From the base of the ledge, as far back as he could see, the water shone and rippled toward the outlet into the valley. But something to the right diverted his eyes and drew a savage oath from his lips. Across a gloomy arch a wall of rock rose above the surface of the water, stopping its course into the depths of the mountain, whither it had doubtless flowed for ages before the barricade was erected.

That the work of diverting the stream was not yet completed was evidenced by the loose blocks of stone, the crowbars, and the pickaxes strewn about the path.

Picking up a handful of clay from the margin of the underground lake, Harlow plastered his candle against the wall of the cavern. Then his quick ear caught a faint sound, as of a man's voice outside. He snatched up a crowbar that lay handy.

"Before they get me I'll leave my mark," he muttered grimly.

He set the crowbar into the interstices of the stones, exerting all his strength to lever the top blocks off. Then he heard the crack of a rifle outside the cavern, followed by the shrill whinny of the buckskin bronco.

He ran along the narrow path, tossing the candle into the water as he reached the overhanging cliff, and sprang upon the bronco's back. The buckskin slipped on the damp rock, recovering himself with a snort. As he headed for the trail up the mountain he saw a bunch of horsemen coming from the ranch-house, and bullets began to whistle about him.

"After him, boys! Corral him before he gits up top! He's been in to the lake!"



HE SAW BOB RAYNOR PLUNGE HEADLONG FROM HIS SADDLE

With the yelling voices behind him and the bullets whistling past his ears, Harlow lay down on the gallant little buckskin's back to ride as he had never ridden before in his life.

" He's seen the dam. Take him, boys! Don't let him get over the range alive!"

Harlow knew the trail. Besides, he was riding for his life; and he was carrying with him the secret of the Silver River.

At the top of the slope he gave the bronco his head across the plateau, unbuckling the holster-flap of his Remington navy revolver as he sped for the other side. A slow rage was growing in him at the treachery of the Raynors, who, not content with ruining him, were now eager to take his life.

Half-way across the plateau a horseman was only a few yards behind him. The riders were not ten yards apart when Harlow wheeled the bronco. He felt a stinging burn in his shoulder; then the big Remington spoke, and in the flash he saw Bob Raynor plunge headlong from his saddle. When he swung the buckskin again into its course, the others were yelling after him like wolves.

III

AN hour later, Houghton, of the Western Reducing Company, sprang to his feet at the sound of a galloping horse sliding and slithering on the gravel

before the door. Harlow, revolver in hand, stumbled into the room.

"There's no time to talk--get the Winchesters!" Harlow gasped.

He fell into a chair and turned down the lamp, but not before Houghton had jerked two rifles out of a locker and spilled a box of cartridges upon the table.

"Who are we goin' to shoot up?" he asked laconically. "Hoss-thieves?"

"The Raynors--or one of 'em. I got Bob Raynor. I found the river. They'll get me, if they have to burn down the plant!"

The pursuers must have come up quietly. There was a slight scuffling before the office; then a voice rang out sharply:

"You Houghton, hand Harlow out here, or it'll be worse for both of you! You hear?"

The big manager slid up the window softly.

"Ain't receiving callers to-night," he said. "Come t'morrow, Bill."

An oath and a shot answered him, chipping the window-ledge. The manager dropped to the floor, shoving the barrel of his Winchester across the sill. A scream followed the report, and then from both sides of the house came a shower of bullets, shattering the window-panes and knocking the mortar from the ceiling of the room.

"Confound 'em," Houghton growled, "they've got behind the powder-house! I can't shoot over there!"

The besiegers had gathered about a small structure on the far side of the road, facing the office-building. Behind them the hillside sloped steeply; there was no other cover under the bright starlight except the dry bed of the river.

The horsemen had stopped firing. Harlow, leaning upon his window-sill, heard the manager's voice coming from afar off.

"What are they down on us for? What got them after you, anyhow?"

Harlow tried to get his voice, but his senses seemed to be drifting away on some boundless sea, far from the trouble and pain of life. Everything seemed dimmed and dulled except that horrible stinging wound in his shoulder. Then he screamed with agony. The manager's big hand was on his arm, brutally shaking him into consciousness.

"They're going to rush us. Wake up here! They're bunching behind the powder-house--my God, they've *fired* it!"

Harlow caught, that. The devils from the mountain had fired the powder-house, which held enough grain-powder to blow a troop of cavalry into chin-straps.

A shout from Houghton roused him. The light was growing brighter behind the little house across the road. A man on a black horse shot away from the light, crossed the road, as Houghton fired at him, and leaped his horse over the steep bank into the bed of the river.

"Missed the brute!" Houghton growled. "It's Bill Raynor. He's going to enfilade us when we jump for it out back. There go two more! I can't hit anything in this light. Are you awake, boy? Got hurt, didn't you?"

Two or three shots entered the side window, coming from the river-bed, and Houghton pulled Harlow to the floor.

"They're all over in the river now," he growled, "except two of the brutes that's gone up under the trestles. What's it going to be, son--blow up, or run for it? What's that?"

It seemed to Harlow that he had been listening to the sound for hours. Far out in the night, a deep, dull boom came out of the darkness of the hills. Harlow crawled across the room and laid his rifle across the sill of the side window commanding the river-bed. He knew what ghostly vengeance it was that was roaring and booming closer and closer; and a moment later the men hidden in the river-bed knew, too.

"They blocked the creek on the other side of the range," he whispered, in answer to Houghton's excited questions. "Keep the devils in their own trap; they can't come out this way! Don't you hear the water? I found the dam, and got a crowbar under the keystone. It's the river coming!"

"They're afraid to come this way, an' they're making up stream to where the bank is lower," the manager cried, as a flare of fire from the burning powder-house lit up the scene like daylight.

"There's one of the brutes trying to climb the bank now," Harlow chattered, half crazed from pain and weakness. "If I thought it was Bill Raynor, I'd pot him!"

"You'll get out of this hole right now, that's what you'll do!" Houghton exclaimed. "See that fire out there? The whole place will go up in about a second. Mosey, man!"

He sprang to the rear of the office, flinging open a back door; but Harlow did not heed either his words or his actions. A spitting, clear stream of fire spurted up from the roof of the powder-house, like the fire-spurt of a blow-pipe. Then a blast like the explosion of a twelve-inch gun rose in the midst of a great furnace of flame, lifting the whole front of the building with it. But, regardless of falling timbers and crashing glass, the engineer clung to the remnants of the window, glaring at another devouring element that was forging onward with irresistible might. He saw the white crest of the mighty wave that led the coming river, and he heard the wild shrieks of the men caught down between the banks of the torrent.

IV

"THOUGHT we'd never get you awake," the manager was saying. "Thought you was sure finished when that bang came. The powder blowed a hole in the ground big enough to plant Raynor and all his gang, including the cayuses. How d'ye feel?"

A shade of anxiety crossed Harlow's features.

"The Raynor crowd are dead, you say?"

"Dead, not them!" The manager grunted his disgust. "That bloomin' river came down like Niagara on a bender, but it only accounted for two or three drowned broncs. The sheriff came back from Yuma Valley this morning, and he says the Raynors have skipped clean out o' the country. They must have been working to block up Silver River ever since they sold this plant to the Western Company. Figured on getting the plant back for nothing, an' then they'd turn on the water again. See? Nice pair of citizens!"

Harlow was lying in the back room of the wrecked office. The crushers were pounding and booming in the reducing-works, and he smiled as he listened to the fuss and flurry of the river.

"I wired N'York," Houghton said. "Guess you get most of the credit, son."

"I guess the credit goes to Providence, all right," Harlow murmured. "She did her work with fire and flood, but she always does it handsomely. I guess she knew where she wanted the Silver River to run!"

Desert Drift by John Briggs.



DESERT DRIFT

By JOHN BRIGGS

East and West Meet on the Treacherous Sands of the Painted Desert J and Only the Sands Which Saw the Meeting Can Tell of the Fate of the Black Opal, Which Was the Heritage of an Ancient Dynasty

b

"ONE First Class Passage--Prince Yuen Ming Chu." Thus his American Pacific Liner passport had read, thirty years ago.

The Chinaman halted his time-and-wind-worn outfit in the sickly shadow of a smoke tree. He was clad in blue jumper and overalls. His gray felt hat was peaked after the common fashion of the desert country. With hands long accustomed to the task, he slipped his diamond hitch, removed his bed roll, kiaks and canvas water bags, and after a few final jerks with the cinches, he had uncovered a dust-hued beast so diminutive that the revelation might have startled a casual observer.

After staking the little animal where it could enjoy some very dry galleta grass, Prince Yuen Ming Chu accomplished a feat never duplicated before his time, nor since, on the drifting surface of the Painted Desert. He picked up a long roll of heavy pongee, from one end of which projected a large bamboo stick.

Holding one hand under the end of the innocent-looking roll and pulling down on the bamboo, there suddenly came into being a flowery and dragon-festooned sunshade of immense size. He gave another pull, and the bamboo stick lengthened out several feet. The end of it he stuck down into the sand, and then from the eaves of the contraption he unfolded four stay rods. With these in position, he gave a pull at a cord, and behold! the big umbrella divided itself at the peak, and curtains dropped to the ground. Yuen Ming Chu parted the curtains at one side and drew them up at the opposite side, allowing for air circulation, whenever the air should decide to circulate.

Laying a grass mat down under his silken shelter and seating himself, he proceeded to undo the rawhide thongs of his laced boots. One might have noticed that the fingers so deftly engaged were very long and delicately tapered. This Celestial son could not deny himself the simple luxury of washing his feet, notwithstanding the scarcity of water. That accomplished, he exhaled with deep satisfaction, slipped his sensitive toes into loose sandals and went about under the smoke tree gathering fallen twigs with which to cook his rice and brew his tea.

For thirty years he had wandered under the far stretches of brilliant skies and over the tinted dunes that had been as home to him for so long. He had pitched his dragon tent under the lee of the purple and vermilion cliffs and at the foot of God's Altar Stones, the needle pinnacles of an old continent which seemed to pierce the riotous sunset heavens. He had communed with eternal quiet and had become the intimate of the stars by night. He had come to America on an Imperial mission, and hopeless as it had seemed for years, he had pursued it long after the fall of Imperial power in China; for his heart was in the task.

His quest was the recovery of the wondrous black opal, talisman of the Ancient Tsins, pillaged by a band of smugglers from the old Palace of the early Manchus at Mukden. Under disguise he had followed the smugglers to their stronghold in Lower California. He had joined them. By assiduous cunning, he had located the great jewel. And then, almost successful, his plans to regain it had been suspected. A furious chase had led him through the wildest regions into Arizona and on up into the Painted Desert. One by one he had accounted for his quarry until one alone remained. And then that

one had perished in a sand storm which had buried him and his fabulously precious burden without a trace.

The shifting face of the desert had altered with the long years of Prince Chu's search, he was an old man now. He knew the arid region as a parent knows his wilful offspring. He had witnessed the strange and various vegetation creep slowly over the dunes which he had with his own hands shoveled aside. He had seen old dunes melt and blow away, and new ones rise. Now he was bound southward across the desert to Flagstaff, thence homeward. He had found the ancient talisman of the Tsins, the remarkable black opal, the most precious stone, at least in his understanding, in the world. The silver-haired old Oriental could hardly picture the changes which had taken place in his native land. He could not fit his imagination to what he would find at the other end of his long journey; but here he was leaving peace.

With a gesture almost of reluctance, he stood erect and raised his arms in a simple obeisance before partaking of his last meal there. It was a leave-taking of reverence and almost of sadness. His glance traveled to the northwest and fixed itself on the far horizon meditatively. In the distance the hazy cliffs were slowly being obscured by an undefined cloud which seemed without dependence on the sky--a volume yellowish and murky. The dunes were stifled in dead calm. Nothing moved. Only the heat waves writhed upward as though to lick the still air in their ravenous thirst.

"It will be another hour, maybe," speculated Prince Chu. "Then the Twin Gods of Thunder Mountain will begin to sweep the desert." He had learned the legends of the desert peoples, and he had found beauty in their poetry. In his eyes smouldered a certain brilliancy--the look of a dreamer. In his sensitive lips, in his long, thin-bridged nose, spoke ages of refinement. Prince Yuen Ming Chu's family history stretched back two thousand years, even to the ancient Tsins.

After eating, he carefully rinsed and packed his fragile porcelain rice and tea bowls. Emerging from under his sunshade, he righted one of the kiaks, and was about to repack it, when some inner sense warned him to straighten up and look back of him.

Staring at him, about forty feet away, were two individuals of the genus homo and otherwise not easily classifiable. One was taller than the other, and the shorter one seemed the most ragged of the two. Their much-traveled appearance suggested that they had been somewhere; but their lack of any equipment for a journey aroused Prince Chu's suspicion that their destination might be "just anywhere to get away from where they had been." He rightly guessed that their object was to put a considerable distance between themselves and the Hopi Reservation.

He had been long enough in the country to recognize these two specimens as a certain brand of unscrupulous white riff-raff, driven from the city slums, which was given to preying upon the Indians, in one way or another. It was evident that they were leaving the Hopi people under circumstances of haste. In one swift glance he gleaned all of this, and then continued unconcernedly with his packing.

After their astonished survey of the dragon tent, the pair limped nearer.

"Hey! Got any water?" croaked one.

In response, Prince Chu merely grunted and poured water from one of the bags into the stew pan which he happened to have in his hand. Still squatting on his heels, he handed it to the man who reached for it, and the other, the shorter one, made a grab for the bag.

The old Chinaman drew it back and held up his hand in refusal. He was particular about who drank from his water bags.

The bandy-legs growled a curse and reached lightning-quick toward his hip, but as quickly checked the motion. "Wot'n 'ell d' yuh mean?" he hoarsely demanded. "Can'tcha give uh man uh drink?"

"No savvy," responded Yuen serenely.

"Don't get too ripe, Shorty," cautioned the taller, bleak-nosed one with red-rimmed eyes. "Take uh swig outa this."

After draining the tin, the ragged Shorty extended it for more.

Obligingly, indifferently, Prince Chu refilled it.

"Can'tcha talk English?" questioned the sun-blistered rogue.

Yuen Ming Chu, the scholar, simply shrugged, shook his head and smiled. Though granting them their needs, with a courtesy inherently his, he desired speedy riddance of his unwelcome guests. An eye even less discerning than his would have marked them as a cold-blooded pair. A weapon bulged in the hip pocket of each, and their movements were nervous and jerky. Obviously they were assassins and drug addicts. The old Chinaman's only weapon, an antiquated shotgun, was still strapped to his pack.

"The freak is uh Chink!" suddenly exclaimed the tall one. The speaker's beak nose and pasty cheek points gleamed strikingly. Apparently the sun had not affected the small area of his face which was exposed.

"Got anything to eat, John?" he questioned. Then, as an after-thought, he performed the motions of consuming food.

"All li--all li!" acknowledged Yuen. He put more rice to cook, and added his last piece of bacon. Covertly watching his guests, who had stretched themselves out under the smoke tree to wait, he observed that they were stealthily watching him also. Their conversation was low mumbled. They evidently mistrusted that he might understand them; but they were careless enough to let escape a few words which could be caught by the ears so long attuned to desert stillness.

"Damn funny--Chink out here--Yeh, runnin' hop t' the Injuns-- Got it?-- Sure 'eez got it. All Chinks uh got it! --Huh?"

They ate their rice with poor grace, frequently casting surreptitious glances over his outfit. Yuen led the small burro in from its dry grazing and readjusted the pack-saddle. He faced the burro so that his gun would be on the opposite side of the saddle from the two thugs. He perceived that they were suspicious. An astute reason counseled him that their suspicion of him could arise only from their offensive intentions. A deduction in which he was right.

His long, facile fingers were not quite quick enough to release the straps holding the shotgun before the red-eyed one had sprung up on his long legs and had covered him with a mean-looking automatic. Plainly the man was a professional killer. His order to "Get 'em up in a hurry!" was undebatable.

Prince Chu neither hesitated nor hastened. He simply accepted his strategic defeat. The malign glint of the red-rimmed eyes behind the black bore of the implacable-looking instrument of death, seemed to project a cold eagerness along their line of vision; as though hungering for the sight of a blood splash at the spot upon which their stare was fixed. The tip of the man's protuberant nose quivered like that of a beast scenting his quarry. The Chinaman dispassionately made note that the drug degenerate would welcome an excuse to murder.

"No more stallin', Chink," the voice grated. "Yuv got the stuff somewhere. Come through!"

Had the speaker known that he was addressing a man in whose blood flowed the quality of blood which had ruled China for two thousand years; and that governing the unaltered expression of the face he was looking into, there was the kind of mind at work which is dangerous to cross even when deprived of every vestige of defense, he would not have hesitated to release the death which his taut forefinger begged to deliver. But he was not yet aware of his mistake.

"Let's have it!" he barked again. "Show us where it is."

"No savvy," repeated Prince Yuen Ming Chu.

"Hey, Squint," interrupted the scalded-faced Shorty, "maybe the crazy Chink don't savvy!"

"He savvies, all right," was the response. "Step around from behind that donkey, there, yuh heathen. Quick!"

Yuen obeyed. He knew that the murderer would shoot if he did not.

The renegade laughed. "All right, John. Now yer commencin' t' learn English. Where's the stuff?"

Prince Chu took his second discomfiture collectedly.

"I admit that I can speak your language," he said, "but you have not made it plain what it is that you want of me."

"Holy fish!" the gunman exclaimed. "What next? Yuh can talk, can'tcha? Whadda we want, huh? We want the hop, the snowflakes, er whatever kind yuh peddle. An' we want it right now--get me?"

"You are mistaken," replied Yuen. "I do not peddle opiates. I have nothing of the kind. If I had, I would gladly let you have it."

The Squint made only one response to this.

"Hell! He's stallin'. Go through 'im, Shorty. Try his pack first."

The short and ragged one tore the pack to pieces and left no space the size of a lead pencil unsearched. He finished his fruitless task in exasperation.

"Clean out His Nibs next," commanded the pasty-nosed ruffian.

Panting from his exertions and the blistering sun, the plunderer stepped up behind their victim, and keeping himself out of gun range, he deftly felt through Prince Chu's garments. "I have not what you want," stated the Chinaman calmly.

"Yuh haven't, hey! Then wot's this?"

The eager fingers were fumbling with the clasp of a long, flat pocket case, black leather bound.

"It contains medicines, and certain chemicals, but nothing of value to you. Yes--cigarettes. Help yourself."

The case opened suddenly. Viewing an array of little vials, the searcher noticed one containing a white, crystalline powder, and his glum expression

lightened immediately. He jerked out the vial and dropped the case to earth.

"Here's the snow, Squint!" he rasped excitedly, working at the cork.

The gun-wielder's drawn face relaxed in pleasurable anticipation.

"Mistaken again," remarked the measured voice of Yuen Ming Chu. "It is an anti-venom, to be used in case of snakebite. Should you use that as you would cocaine, without first having been bitten by a snake or the black spider, it would kill you."

The blue-bearded gunman's face clouded with anger. "If that's uhnother bluff, Chink," he threatened, "I'll croak yuh!"

"It is not a bluff," responded the silver-haired Oriental.

Sensing truth in the impassive words, the tall man ordered his partner to further rifle the Chinaman's person.

Prince Chu's face was still steadily expressionless.

"You are wasting your time," he said.

"Well, wot in 'ell er yuh doin' in this country, anyhow?" peevishly questioned Shorty, of the blistered face.

Before his question could be answered his exploring fingers encountered a chain of heavy linked gold about the Chinaman's neck, and he yanked at it.

"Wot's this?" he demanded.

For the first time, he might have seen a change come into their victim's expression. Exultantly observant, his partner directed him to snip the chain. When the chain had been removed by the practiced use of a small pair of sharp nippers, the two crooks beheld at its end the most marvelous stone that they had ever seen. As large around as the rim of a tea cup, it covered Shorty's palm, while the gold chain glittered unheeded down from his hand. In the half-shadow of his hat, the opalescent lights flamed from the great

jewel with a rapidity of changing fire which seemed alive--emerald, crimson, orange, pink and blue; fascinating, benumbing.

"My God! It's worth a million!" gasped Shorty.

Prince Chu's stern old lips curled slightly upward in their irony.

"Do not make a second mistake, my friend," he said. "In your dollars, it is worth ten millions. But if you should find it possible to dispose of the jewel, it would be worth your life."

"Wot's that!" the two exclaimed, almost in a word.

The Chinaman shrugged and smiled enigmatically.

"'Nother one uh yer Chink bluffs," mumbled Shorty.

"I ain't so sure," joined his partner meditatively. "But we better get movin'. Com' on! Stick 'er where she'll be safe, Shorty. Get that shotgun. Get both them water bags. That's it--both uv 'em. It's hot an' we'll need 'em," he added with a chuckle of grim significance.

"All right," announced Shorty, lowering his gun and grinning at the Chinaman with lips that twitched. "We'll toddle on, Ole Timer. Sorry can't have yer company."

"You may need it," tranquilly replied Prince Chu, commencing deftly to pick up his scattered things. "I shall not be far behind."

The gunman laughed unpleasantly. "I guess yuh'll keep outa gun range," he retorted, backing away a few steps.

"Which way?" inquired Shorty, loaded with the appointed articles. They contemptuously turned their attention from their late victim, now that they had rendered him harmless, they thought, and disabled by lack of water.

"Wait uh minute," the Squint interjected. "Let's see the rock. I wanna look at it close."

Shorty dug the great black opal from an inner pocket and was about to hand it to the other, when he halted suspiciously.

"Yuh ain't startin' nothin', Squint, are yuh?" he inquired.

"Com' on, yuh boob," protested the other. "How could I? We're t'gether, ain't we? Ain't there enough in it fer both uv us, anyhow? I jus' wanna see how the thing feels. Gee, she's some rock!" he exulted, as Shorty released the great jewel unwillingly. He allowed his attention to be consumed by the fascinating opal for a moment, and then he slipped the stone into an inner vest pocket.

"Hey, you! Wot're yuh comin' on me?" challenged the ragged one.

"Yer pockets're apt t' have holes in 'em, Shorty----"

At this point they were interrupted by the even-toned, dispassionate voice of the Chinaman. He had stood up from his patient reassembling, and there was such a contempt, such an impalpable foreboding in his voice, that both bad-men were impressed with a vague apprehension.

"Mr. Shorty, you have made your third mistake today," came the veiled, slowly articulated words.

Then addressing them both, "You have never seen such a stone, before, have you?"

"Com' on--cut it short," interrupted the squint-eyed.

"There is only one such stone in the world," continued Prince Chu, unhastened.

"It has ruled empires for ten thousand years. Before this, thieves have stolen it; yet none have kept it long, except its rightful owners." He paused impressively.

Despite their callousness, the two thugs were getting a little nervous. Each had been speculating on the almost impossible value of the jewel. How

could they dispose of it? Perhaps he was right. Maybe it wasn't intended for such as they. Still they should be able to realize something out of it.

"It has this peculiar faculty," continued the smooth, unruffled voice, "that when it falls into the hands of one who is not entitled to it, the unlawful possessor will enjoy good fortune as long as he retains it; but if he should relinquish it from his person, it becomes his fate to meet a violent death, very shortly afterward."

Prince Chu allowed himself the shadow of a smile, then his inscrutable eyes searched the faces of the ruffians to note when the significance of his clever invention should have penetrated their heat and drug crazed brains. He knew that superstition was not peculiar to his own race. It was the common penalty of all killers of men. Murder had stamped itself on the faces of these two, for such eyes as his to read, and fear now swept into the features of the one called Shorty.

"Gimme that back!" he shouted, his voice rising to a strained pitch and breaking. "Wot'd'ga have t' take it for, anyhow? Com' on, Squint, lemme have ut back," he begged.

The pasty-nosed Squint laughed sneeringly, and his lips twisted in a simulation of pity.

There came a low whine over the distant dunes. The disputing pair had not noticed that the sun's light was fading out. The air was stifling.

"Don't be uh boob," giped Squint. And there was a crackling edge to his laugh. "The Chink's tryin' uhnother shindy on us." But his tone carried no confidence in his words. There seemed to be an insidious, occult, inexorable something about this Oriental who had communed so long with the desert.

The badgered Shorty twitched his gun hand instinctively, then discreetly checked himself.

"Yeh--yeh, damn yuh!" he wailed in terrified anger. "Now yer scared to let go of it, yerself !"

Neither of them had noticed why their words had to be shouted. They were too wrapt in their argument to perceive that the dull whine had risen to a distinct roar. Swiftly the Chinaman had gathered up his outfit, and he was cinching it into place on the burro. The cut-throats had taken about twenty paces from him when he had halted them with his recital of the black opal's mythical qualities. Still in verbal conflict, they moved on.

A wind puff swished over the low dunes, driving loose sand through the crackling branches of the brittle salt bush. An incessant rush of suffocating air followed. Little rivulets of sand began to lift and worm along the ground and spill over the rolling dunes. Dust cloud blanketed the desert.

Prince Chu picked up the lead rope of his abbreviated burro and commenced to plod southward, with his back to the swirling, wind-driven dust. A hundred yards ahead of him the fleeing pair were trying to take note of their position and were traveling undecided as to direction.

In the south distance, before the dust had filled the air, there had been visible the jagged outline of the San Francisco Mountains. Now nothing was visible save the immediate wind-swept surface of the earth, the troubled dunes, and the higher desert ridges. Yuen Ming Chu had no intention of letting his despoilers beyond the range of his vision. And he was obliged to shorten the intervening distance; for the hot wind rose into a hurricane.

He rapidly overtook the two wobbling, stumbling men. They were letting themselves be swept directly with the drift of the storm, hunched over, running, scurrying up the ridges, sliding down.

They were not concerned with their pursuer's presence. They had shorn him of harm. He looked down at them, as they picked themselves up under the leeward of a sand drift.

"You are drifting with the storm," shouted Ming Chu. "It is blowing a west angle to our course. You must walk so that it strikes first the point of the left shoulder."

"You lead out," faintly responded the authoritative one of the pair. "Move on ahead, there. We'll follow. But no damned monkey business, Chink!"

Prince Chu looked back at them as he brushed by with his burro, and he interrupted a significant exchange of glances between them. Steadily he bore ahead, and the very surface of the earth seemed to be lifting up to bear them all down into smothered oblivion. He was fully at the mercy of these plunderers who followed him six paces in the rear. He had read the meaning in the look which they had exchanged. They intended to coolly shoot him down when they had done with his guidance. The drifting sand would do the rest.

"Such as it is to be, so it shall be," meditated this silver-haired son of the Great Ancients.

They were not following him easily. The driven sand cut through their ragged clothing. Occasionally one of them fell headlong. Neither tried to assist the other. The shorter one seemed to be the sturdier of the two. The long-legged one stumbled more frequently. One or the other of them frequently called on him to wait for them. He perforce obeyed. When they were close behind him, Ming Chu could see contortions of fear at work in the pallid face of the gasping Shorty. Each time that his partner went down he registered a look of satisfaction.

Prince Chu smiled inwardly. The prospect of violent death was fermenting in Shorty's brain. His features portrayed a fixed terror born of the alleged fate dependent on his losing possession of the marvelous opal. His mind was caught in the dread that the prophesy's fulfillment was bearing down upon him.

The surface of the desert was moving, shifting; slow rollers rose and sank, and drifted on. The earth picked itself up and rushed whither the mad wind drove. Small dunes melted away, where they were not rooted down by the stunted growth. New ones swelled up before their eyes-- swelled up and burst and crawled ahead. Flat rivulets of sand ran, riffled, spumed against the rifted cholla trunks. The wild dry sea tumbled, rushed and roared on, relentless, insatiable. The three men and the beast were pounded, blasted, blown tumbling with the drift. There was no longer any tacking against its

drive. The slipping sand sucked them down. Each step made a whirlpool into which they sank, straining to tear free, while the awful volume of the wind drove down upon them.

The high outline of a sand ridge loomed suddenly before them. It was an elevation which had built itself up year after year, by reason of its resistant creosote bush and other tenacious growth. It was halting the rushing flood of sand, banking it back against the terrific current. They were swept toward it. Its base seemed swelling, crawling to meet them, and its outline was mounting higher and higher. They were driven up with the piling earth. The thundering volume frayed at them, pressed the breath from their lungs, tumbled them, carried them with it. A mountain was being formed. They shot across its summit and dropped as though from a cloud. They slid and rolled and lodged under the lee of the ridge.

His face bleeding, his hands shaking, the ragged, short man stepped backward from the creeping pile and laughed. The sound made the other jump and whirl around en him. It was a sharp, strained cackle--a mad expression of release from the immediate clutches of death.

The man's pasty face was pale green and drawn into lines of pain. He cursed the laughter.

"Laugh when we get outa this," he snapped, "er that damn Chink'll get us yet." He made a threatening step toward the shorter one.

"Yer scared yer goin' t' croak, ain'tcha?" he snarled. "Yuh wanna see me croak first, don'tcha? Well, don'tcha try t' start nothin' with me! I'm uh live man yet, by God!"

The smaller man stepped backward again. The sand sucked in around his shoe-tops. He stood still a moment, and then a curious, pained, questioning look came into his face. He advanced a step, hastily, and whirled about. Looking down at the spot where he had stood, he saw two black-spotted coils, one above the other, partly buried, and a flat, fanged head protruding from the sand. He had felt three sharp stings in his half-deadened leg, before he had moved.

Almost forgotten by the battered twain, the harmless Yuen Ming Chu had also observed the mottled coils and the venomous puffed head of the diamond rattler.

On recognizing what had befallen him, the stricken man's screech mounted to the whistling roar overhead.

"Wot's'a matter? Bit--hey?" interrogated the Squint.

"I'm croakin'; now I'm croakin' sure!" gasped Shorty.

"Hey, shut up! Can the racket! Ain't the Chink got some stuff fer that? Sure he has.

"Hey, John--come through with yer snake dope. Bring it here!"

Prince Chu was standing about fifteen feet from the pair. Now he drew from his inner pocket the little flat case of medicines. Selecting the vial of white crystals, he replaced the case in his pocket and drew the cork from the bottle. Before he made any move toward the distressed Shorty, he emptied the contents of the vial into the palm of his hand. Sufficient wind yet stirred within their shelter to disturb the light pulverized stuff. So he closed his fingers over it. Holding it thus, he waited, while the flicker of a smile touched his impassive features.

The smitten Shorty caught the inkling of some subtle purpose back of the Chinaman's pause.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Wot's'a matter?"

He tried to draw his gun. It was packed solid in his pocket with sand. Frantically he dug it out, while his partner stood by, half-amused.

"No tricks, Chink! Come through with it!" he frenziedly commanded. He drew the pistol finally.

The old Chinaman maintained his distance. "Why should you shoot me?" he questioned. "If you should do that, the powder would spill from my hand and be lost in the sand."

A startled look overspread the features already terrified.

"If you come any nearer," was the mild assurance, "I will let the powder scatter."

"Hell!" articulated Shorty, deadened in his tracks.

"I will give this to you when you have returned the black opal to me," stated the scion of the Ancient Tsins.

These words acted as a spring releasing the afflicted man's action. He wheeled about to his partner.

"Now, will yuh gimme that?" he shrieked.

But a mortal terror had at last entered the face of Squint. He saw his partner dying a violent death, and he had no mind to release the uncanny stone which he was now convinced would work the same fate with him, if he should let it go. With the most desperate speed he had ever achieved in his lifetime, his hand flashed for his gun.

There followed a streak of flame and a report against the twilight and the din of the storm. The tall, squint-eyed man sank first to his knees, and then crumpled down into the sand. Death caught the horrified expression in his red-rimmed eyes and held it until he pitched forward, face down, his right hand still wedged in his hip pocket by the sand which had prevented him from drawing the gun.

With fingers shaking out of his control, Shorty turned the limp form over and clawed into one of the inner vest pockets until he triumphantly drew forth the smoldering black opal at the end of its shimmering chain. Half-crawling, half-stumbling, he started with it for the extended hand of Yuen Ming Chu. He had dropped his short weapon behind him, and the troubled sand was crawling down over the upturned form of his victim.

He did not reach the outstretched hand, even though Prince Chu was coming to meet him. His face purpled in blotches, his breath choked, and the grip of convulsion tore him down.

The old son of the Tsins and the Mings stopped over him for a moment and examined the purpled veins and the black, contorted features. He shook his head.

"Too late," he murmured.

And again opening his little, flat case, he extracted another vial, and from it he let a few drops of the amber liquid trickle down between the gasping lips. Soon the movements relaxed and calm wiped out the tortured lines. The sand sifted down and the moving mountain crept on.

There was as nothing where the two men had stood and fought, and enacted the latest chapter in the history of that great, black, lambent jewel; more precious even than life, outlasting death; which had ruled empires for ten thousand years.