



"I goes fer to hit Tamale, an' hits my own self. Ain't that a joke, hey?"

THE TOSS-UP

BY GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

INTO the stagnant heat of the "Bald Eagle," right at the desert's edge—heat that rendered languid even the forced profanity of the poker-players and flattened the beverages to tangless poison—fell the mangled stranger, like a bolt from the blue.

Just how he came, or whence, who could tell? A groan, a gasp, a limping shuffle, a creak of the swinging back door, and there he was. A skeleton of a man, brush-bearded, overhung with rags, powdered with dust which had caked on face and neck and clogged his bloodshot eyes—eyes that lagged and blinked, half blind, wholly terrible. Into his matted hair he thrust his fingers; he swayed a moment, then, like an empty gunny-sack, flattened into a chair, fell face down across a table, gasped, "Water!" and thereafter grew very still.

One moment, no response. Then chairs scraped, necks craned, men crowded toward him; and, over all, rose the voice of Buck Dawson:

"Water—hell! Hey, Bo, a slug o' Five-X!

Jump!"

But, as Bo Squires, behind the bar, stood rooted, Buck's own paw swiped up a long-necker, slopped four fingers into a fly-specked glass, and (just a second later, as Chato Andrews pulled back the stranger's head) emptied it down the blackened throat. Some of the stuff trickled through the man's beard and drizzled off upon his naked, bony chest.

Gulping, babbling broken odds and ends of speech, the derelict caved again. Two or three in the crowd tried to hold him up, but Chato interfered.

"Aw, drop him, you ring-boned pintos!" he bellowed angrily. "Kain't you-all see as how he's plumb winded? Let him rest, you, ef he 'lects to. Why—look a' *thar!*"

Staring, he pointed with a horn-like forefinger at the floor beside the stranger's right foot.

There, slowly widening, spread a trickle of blackish blood. They saw that the man's boot was all sodden and seepy, with a bullet-hole obliquely

through the ankle. His trouser-knees were torn as if from crawling far, far, over rocks and sand. His hands were just one great articulated rawness—nails worn down to the quick, fingers stripped of their skin.

"Scratchin' fer water, where thar wa'n't none!" squeaked the voice of old Pop Hadlock. "What *in* Tophet has he went ag'in'?"

Chato whipped out a seven-inch blade and slit the cloth, exposing the lip of a ghastly tear in the flesh of the leg high up on the calf—a wound clumsily dressed with a band of shirting that had slipped half off.

Something like a communal oath of commiseration escaped the gang.

"An' he ain't bled to death yit?" marveled Dexter, of Tres Picos. "Well, durned ef he ain't got vytality! Reminds me of—"

"Here, Bo! One o' them 'ar towels!" Chato interrupted. A moment later he was kneeling to bind the gap. "Chuck another gargle inta him, some un!" he commanded.

Shorty McGeoch tried to obey; but the stranger, getting a grip on the table-edge, shook his ghastly head. They heard his breath catch. Up came his face, white as a clown's under its mottles of dirt.

Still blind-seeming, he bleared around. Then a sort of smile cracked his parchment lips, and he held up one hand as if for silence.

Shaking, it fell again, and with it the babel.

"What—what day—?" he whispered. It was hardly even a whisper; yet not a puncher in the Bald Eagle but heard its every syllable. "Boys, what day is—this?"

Blank astonishment; then Chato answered:

"Friday. Why?"

The stranger shook his head again.

"Three whole days since—I left him," they heard him mutter. Then, louder:

"Where am I?"

"Bald Eagle, at Rawlin's."

"Rawlin's? Then I must ha'—went north. Didn't couldn't—tell—"

His voice tailed off to nothing, though his lips still moved.

McGeoch brought the glass to the mumbling mouth. The stranger blinked.

"No, no!" he objected. "Water—that's all!"

"*Git* him some—ef you-all kin find any!" cried Chato. "No 'countin' fer tastes. Humor him, kain't you?"

With wolf-eagerness the derelict guzzled the lukewarm slop that Squires shoved across the bar to McGeoch.

"An' a riata," he continued haltingly.

"A—? What fer?"

"Why, to string—me!"

"*String* you?"

Dexter's voice was the only one that audibly gave vent to the universal stupefaction.

"Bug-house?" judged Dawson, behind his palm, to Shorty.

The stranger, blinking, trying to lick his lips with a tongue all swollen and cracked, coughed:

"A riata! Yes, that's what—I said. Reckon that's what I—lived t' git here—for!"

IT must have been a full minute by the tin alarm-clock back of the bar before anybody moved or tried to speak. Down dropped the stranger's head again. He lay there motionless, wheezing slowly, his hands still gripping the table.

Round him the cow-men ringed themselves, staring blankly. Chato rubbed the blunt nose that had given him his Greaser nickname. Pop Hadlock twitched his long mustachios. Shorty leaned an elbow on the table, and, his left hand on his cartridge-belted hip, bored at the man point-blank with eager eyes. The others, each in his own way, tried to digest that astonishing pronunciamiento. Then out of the stillness rose Squires' judgment:

"I've seed 'em took 'most every way, by Judas Priest! but *this* sort o' bug has got *me* skun!" And on his hard, close-cropped skull his knuckles tapped out his opinion.

The stranger roused again. Into his forespent body the Five-X had whipped a little life.

"No, not buggy," he thickly articulated. "I ain't that, not by a million miles. Know what I'm a-sayin'. It's right, too. Strung I'd oughta be, an' must be—what's left o' me to string. Huh? Don't you git me lucid? With a boss-rustler plumb virtuous beside o' me? Listen!"

THEY listened, hushed into tension. But for a time the stranger brought no words to utterance. He just sat there at the table, swinging a little from side to side, hands holding fast, eyes bearing. The blood-pool at his foot clotted and crusted. His face, beneath the beard and dirt, had gone the color of soggy pie-crust.

Pop Hadlock made as if to stir him in the ribs,

but Chato stayed the old man's hand.

"Cut that!" he warned. "Kain't you-all let him tell it the way he 'lects to? We'll git it soon enough! An'—"

Breaking the silence where one heard only the deep breathing of the punchers and the tick-tack of the impertinent clock, the stranger blurted in a raw, hasty, inhuman voice:

"There was him an' me. Just us two—savvy? Jackman. That was him. I'm Ryerson. Sam Ryerson—yes, sir. Sam K."

A sort of wondering murmur hummed into audibility. Two or three of the men glanced at one another. And Buck Dawson, peering into the stranger's face, let his list drop upon the table with a half-breathed imprecation.

"Sam K. Ryerson," the wounded man went on. "An' I ain't a-goin' to let nobody tie my laig up, nohow. Hell! What 'd be the use, when I'm done through with her? Sam K. I reckon you-all have heard o' me, down here south o' the Gila. Mebbe some o' you have even seen me, though you wouldn't nowadays place me now. No matter."

He lapsed.

"Go on!" growled Buck.

"Huh?"

"How *in* hell 'd you ever git here, hey?"

"Oh, that? Say, I dropped the faro a spell back. All along o'—Jackman. Him an' me squared it an' took up with prospectin'. Got it? Lost! Burned, cooked, frizzled! An' starved! An' no water! Only them damn mirages—you savvy—lakes an' such, here an' there an' nowhere. An' turkey-buzzards, leetle specks of 'em, miles high, jest a-waitin', waitin'.

"Down on his knees—savvy? Clawin' at the hard bed o' the dry creek, rippin' his nails off. Tongue lollin' like a bust-winded cayuse, an' one hand *jest* a-goin' fer to grab one o' them little brown lizards out from behind a rock, 'cause, you see, we hadn't had one damn bite fer—oh, fer weeks, I reckon.

"'O you liz! Come yere, you little son-of-a-gun! I *need* you!' barks Jackman, an' snatches. But liz, she ain't there. Then I—"

DAWSON laid a hand on the bowed shoulders. "See here, pard," said he, "'pears like there's a gap in your fences, an' your thoughts is some stampeded. Round 'em up, now, an' let's have it straight!"

The ex-gambler kept a moment's silence, blinking, while his mouth twisted into a dumb grin. Then, at last—

"Prospectin' with Jackman," he wheezed. "Say, where was I, boys?"

"Huntin' water," prompted McGeoch. "Cut that all out. Cut out lizards an' et cet. *We* know. Give us what happened. How you-all got that bum shaft." He pointed at the wounded leg. "An' Jackman, where *he* is!"

"Jackman—oh!" gulped the wreck. Then silence again.

"Must ha' crawled here, I reckon," he opined, brightening. This tangible reality cheered and steadied him. "Why, yes, sure!" he affirmed. "I sure *did* crawl. But that must ha' been after I went fer to shoot Tamale an' hit myself. 'Cause, you see—"

McGeoch shook him impatiently, despite Chato's growling prohibition.

"Say, *can't* you stick to it, pard?" he queried peevisly. "Here—take this!" And he proffered the glass.

This time the gambler accepted it eagerly.

"Why, I *am* a-keepin' to it," he protested. "Tamale, that's the burro, see? Well, after me an' her leaves Jackman—leaves him a-settin' in the sand, you savvy—an' strikes out—'cause, you see, Tamale can't carry us both—"

"We gits lost, Tamale an' me does," he went on, after a pause. "Lost entire. Pretty soon I can't stand it no longer. I 'lights, an' pulls my gun.

"'Now, Tamale,' says I, 'you got blood in you, an' I'm a-goin' to have some. It's wet, anyhow.'

"So I shoots. But things is rip-rarin' so, round an' round like, that—damn *me* if I don't plug my own self plumb through the ankle. Ain't that a joke, hey?" He cackled into a laugh. "I goes fer to hit Tamale, an' hits my own self!

"Well," he went on in a dead voice, with singsong intonations, "well, after that, I passes away some consid'able. Next thing, there's that she-devil of a burro rippin' away at my laig with her yaller teeth, suckin' *my* blood. I has to plunk her five times—five, that's right—afore I drops her. Now, ain't that a—"

"What *happened*?" insisted McGeoch, voicing the universal eagerness, while Pop swore under his breath. "We-all ain't pinin' fer no news about burros—no, nor yet lizards or sich. It's you an' this yere Jackman we wants to hear about. Savvy that?"

How come *you* to git the critter, an' not *him*?"

THE ex-crook appeared to think for a moment, holding himself intent.

"Him?" he cried thickly. A faint flush oozed through his pasty skin. "Ho, ain't I told you *that* yit? Well, say! An' that's what I come fer! What—I—come—fer!"

The assembled punchers elbowed closer.

"There was Jackman down on his knees," recommenced the wreck, "an' *here* was a little brown lizard, back of a stone, so-fashion. Well—oh, say, I done told you that a'ready, didn't I? Excuse me, pards. After that, y' see, Jackman says to me, says he—

" 'Sam,' says he, 'it ain't no use. We're done fer if we hangs together. But one of us might git away. One.'

"That's what he says, damned *if* he don't! An' I could prove it, too, if he was here, which he ain't. Well—"

"Yes, yes?"

"Well, then, so we talks things over, settin' in the alkali, an' agrees to split. One of us to take Tamale, you savvy. An' one of us, by that there same agreement, knows he got fer to cash in. Yes, sir; got fer to croak—pantin', tongue bloatin' out, skull crackin', brains oozin' out—same as 'most always happens when the desert gits a man—*you*—all knows!

"Well, then, which one is it a-goin' to be? That there's the question.

" 'You go, Sam,' says he to me. 'You're younger 'n what I be. Ten year, mebbe more. Take the devil an' pull your freight,' says he. 'I'll stay.'

" 'No,' says I. 'No. We-all can't settle it that-away. This yere has got to be done proper an' decent—done right,' says I. Yet, all that time, you savvy—well, wait. You'll see why I ast fer that there riata. Listen!"

"We're a-listenin'!"

"Keep right on. 'This yere has got to be done right,' says I. So I takes a quarter out o' my pocket. A quarter, you savvy? One what I'd had a long, long time. You bet I had!

" 'Flip fer it?' says I.

"Jackman, he nods.

" 'First go, or two out o' three?'

" 'Two out o' three,' says he.

"He's lookin' almighty bad, Jackman is, an' he's tremblin' when he says that.

" 'You toss an' I'll holler,' says I, an' hands him the quarter. He flips her with his thumb, O.K.

"Up she spins, flickerin' in the sun, an' down she spuds into the sand.

" 'Heads,' says I, an' so it was. Jackman, he smiles kind of, an' pitches ag'in.

" 'Tails!' I calls her, an' loses. Oh, yes, I loses *that* time, all right enough. You'll see.

" 'Well, anyway, this time settles it,' says Jackman, his mouth a-workin' so he can't hardly make no sound at all, but game, game! Well, then—"

THE voice of the narrator died down to nothing. Chato and Pop Hadlock spilled another drink into him, unresisting, and after a little while he went along:

"There was a little brown lizard, you savvy. *Both* of us tried fer t' ketch him, but—"

But the old man interrupted with: "Say, drape that varmint, you, an' give us the third toss-up, kain't ye?"

"Oh, say, I told you that already, didn't I, 'bout that there pestiferous reptile? Excuse me, boys. Where was I? Tossin' up—that's it. Well, then, Jackman spins her the third time, an' down she comes.

" 'Heads!' says I."

The stranger stopped short. All about him, the silence became lethal.

Squires burst out: "An' it *was*?"

"Why, fer sure! Why wouldn't it be? Heads it was, all right, all right. So then me an' Tamale hiked. Jackman, he set still."

A long pause. Then spoke McGeoch:

"Well, boys, that was sure rough. Rough it was, but sich like kain't always be helped in these yere parts. Our friend here seems to be a-sufferin' from a case of inflamed conscience. *I* think he done acted plumb justifiable, an' I motions we-all exonerates him. Anybody differ?"

Up tottered the wounded man. By the table he stood, his lips writhen into a sardonic laugh, his eyes glazed and wide.

"Turkey-buzzards," he creaked. "Pickin' an'—pickin' away. An'—here's what—done—it!"

Into his pocket he fumbled a palsied hand, swaying the while. Out he fetched a coin.

"Look, you-all!" he shouted, as if with a last gush of breath; and flung the coin so high that it clicked against the ceiling-poles.

THEN he fell, knocking the table over. The glass spangled into slivers. In the hubbub, some one clapped a foot down on the gyrating coin and it spiraled over the floor. And, even before McGeoch and Chato had lifted the body, a cry went up:

“Gawd’s sake! Look! Look a’ yere!”

On to the bar, close beside where they had laid the ex-gambler, Hadlock slapped the quarter.

“Heads?” queried Squires. He turned it over.

“Heads ag’in! Heads! *Both* sides!”

Then, through the sudden hush, Chato gave judgment.

“Boys,” said he, laying his ear against the derelict’s chest and holding up a significant hand.

“Boys, I reckon as how this yere deceased *has* saved us a power o’ hard rope-pullin’, after all!”