

# DESERT JUDGMENT

By E. Hoffmann Price

Epstein can fix anything—even the lives of his friends, when crookedness and deceit loom large.



**T**HE pushcart parked in the lot opposite the Jefferson House, the only hotel in Poplar Junction, was crammed with every sort of gear for making good the slogan: *Epstein Will Fix It*, in big letters on both sides.

At the moment, Saul Epstein was plying his razor at the horse trough. Finished, he crossed over to the Antler Bar, to see what news he could pick up about a boom in Panamint.

The first person he ran into was Ben Hurley. He was blowing the froth off his beer and his angular face bore no sign of the beating he had taken when a run had cleaned him out of his Silver Bend National Bank. No one could have suspected that he had just sold every acre of land and every steer to pay off his depositors.

"Yep! I'm makin' a new start," Hurley was saying.

"Aim to drive freight clear across the Amargosa to Panamint. It can be done, and save that long haul from here to Frisco, then over the Mojave Desert."

Epstein sidled up, a glass in his hand. "*Prosit*

Ben! I'm doing some freighting to Panamint by the Nevada backdoor myself!"

Hurley turned, surprised. "Saul! Where in hell did you come from?"

"When's your first haul, Ben?"

"Any day now. Mostly provisions. What me and Wiley, here, don't eat we'll sell."

"Got room to haul some freight for me?"

"Plenty—and that makes you my first bona-fide customer." He turned to the weather-beaten man at his elbow. "OK, Wiley—the jugheads are at the stable and the provisions at Hoskins' General Store. Get them stowed."

Epstein chuckled. "Just to make it interesting, I'll race you to Panamint."

"That's a bet." Wagging his hand at Epstein, Hurley walked out. But once alone his fierce animation quit him. His thoughts went back to the day after the bank failure, when he had faced Emily Crawford.

On his advice, she had bought into the bank. Like other stockholders, she had been forced to make good. Everyone had been flattened except

Lucky Ballard, who a month before had sold his shares to invest in a cattle outfit in Arizona. That was the rub—competitors in all things, Hurley and Ballard had been courting Emily.

“Honey,” Hurley had said, “saying I’ll make good might sound like big talk. But I see a fresh start, the way I got my first break—skinning mules.”

Though the well-shaped blonde was tall, she had to look up to meet his eyes. She forgot the bank disaster. Then, as he caught her in his arms, she said more than she had intended. “Don’t go yet—”

The catch in her voice, the misting of her eyes, and the ardor of her lips told him this was his moment, and that he had won an advantage over Lucky Ballard.

**T**HIS had been in Silver Bend, a month ago. Raising a grubstake had been harder than Hurley had realized. Meanwhile, Lucky Ballard would be on the job, smoothly sorry for a girl who had left her home and lived in a boarding house.

No one had known until after the bank failure that Ballard had gotten out. There had been nothing wrong with the bank; but one night when the vault was packed with cash and securities it had been blown open. Even so, it might have survived, had not the depositors stampeded.

He had all this in mind, and it drew his attention inward as he stepped into the lobby of the Jefferson House.

Drawn into himself, Hurley was not prepared to meet the couple leaving the dining room.

The girl had not put on her gloves. A diamond gleamed from her left hand. She was flushed and gay. Looking past the pair, Hurley saw the champagne bottle in the cooler beside the table they had just left.

The girl was Emily Crawford. From the grey tailored suit, Hurley judged she was traveling. The man was Lucky Ballard.

“Well, Ben!”

Ignoring the man, Hurley snatched the hand Emily had tried to draw from sight. His glance flickered toward the ring, then back to her face. “Not your honeymoon, anyway!” He thrust her aside. Caught off balance, she came near plopping into a chair, but missed. She landed in a tangle on the floor.

Hurley, swinging toward Ballard, had gone for his gun. Ballard clawed for his hip pocket. Hurley, only now aware that he had unintentionally floored a woman was gripped by the urge to pick her up. The conflict within him cost him his advantage.

Ballard’s gun was the first to come into sight.

And then Saul Epstein, who had followed Hurley, made a darting lunge, catching Hurley just above the knees, knocking him down and pitching him against Ballard before his gun could rise into action.

A shot smashed into the pigeonholes behind the desk. The other raked the floor.

The marshal and his deputy ran out of the bar off the lobby. “That mule skinner again! Sam, help me haul this jigger to the hoosegow.”

Epstein said, “Listen, officer, nobody was hurt. You can’t put him in the calaboose.”

“The hell I can’t!”

“Well, I’ll go his bail. He’s got freight to haul.”

“That’s up to the judge,” the marshal spat, “If he gets off, he’d best haul freight out of this man’s town!”

**E**PSTEIN waved as Hurley overtook him at the outskirts of Poplar Junction. Whip cracking, Hurley’s voice boomed as he cursed the jugheads and the eighteen-foot wagon rolled on.

The second day out, Epstein got his chance to whittle down Hurley’s lead. There were arroyos, which a freighter could not cross. There were dry-lake beds—a hard crust of salt and soda, with a foundation of muck—into which a wagon would sink to the brake blocks. Epstein played the shortcuts as he made for the Amargosa Desert.

Lips cracked, eyes reddened by alkali dust, Epstein tramped along. Then the air became oppressive, the sky bronze-colored. An unnatural dusk darkened the desert. An icy wind whined across the flats. Raindrops, the size of grapes, plopped down, foretelling the rage of Nature that was poised in the skies overhead.

Epstein first was tempted by the gully ahead. The undercut bank offered shelter. Instead, he got under his cart. The rain came down, drenching, blinding, choking.

The dry wash became ankle-deep in water. Some moments later, a six-foot wall of water

came down the channel. It was as though a dam had burst.

Abruptly, the downpour stopped. The sun came out, blazing. Already, the mill race was subsiding as Epstein's garments steamed in the sun.

Soon he crossed over on dry bottom. Toward sunset, Epstein came to the wagon and the dry camp.

**H**URLEY said, "Wiley fell off. Wheel crushed him, but he may live."

"The buzzards say he won't. Let me look."

The peddler knelt beside Wiley, and shook his head. "There is nothing left to fix."

The man died within the hour. After they had buried him under a cairn of rocks, Epstein asked, "He was drinking?"

Hurley cursed bitterly. "I busted the bottle and told him I'd bust his head, but he had another one."

"You need a helper with the mules."

"That's what I've been thinking."

"Then hitch my wagon on behind, and I will take the job."

"It's a deal, Saul!"

The following day they paralleled the mountains. That evening, while getting camp gear from the wagon, Epstein found a case of whiskey cached among the canned goods.

"Maybe," said Epstein, in announcing his discovery, "Wiley was going to do some private trading in Panamint."

"Where the devil'd he get the price of a whole case? Old man Hoskins might trust him for a tin dipper of red eye from the barrel, but never for a case. There's something salty in this deal! Some one aimed to cold-deck me."

Epstein followed the hint and found a sales slip from the general store. It was a duplicate receipted by J. Wiley. But the goods had been sold to Lee Ballard.

**A** HAIL from the darkness startled the two. A man, weaving and lurching, stumbled into the circle of light. His clothes were bedraggled and torn. Bloodshot eyes stared from a taut face. He carried a satchel which he would not relinquish, even when Epstein caught him by the elbow to help him make the final step beside the

fire. "Water!" he croaked.

"Here is coffee. Wait, I will get some grub."

"Not now. There are others. All in. I chased your firelight. They're all played out. You've got to help us."

Epstein said, "What happened, where do you come from, on foot?"

"The stage from Poplar Junction was caught in a draw. We've been walking ever since. Lot of the road was washed out. Got lost, and then saw this fire. Take us to Poplar Junction, or to the nearest town in the other direction. I'll pay you well."

"Who the hell are you, hiring an outfit so free and easy?" asked Hurley, who had been studying the man.

"Jubal Garlock."

"You could be the Governor of Nevada, for all I care. We're bound for Panamint. Ride with us, or walk to wherever you please."

Garlock got up, stiffly and painfully. "I'll go tell the others there's grub and water, anyway."

He had scarcely gone beyond the circle of light when a woman exclaimed, "Oooh! That coffee smells good!"

**A**ND the first of the group to take shape at the fringe of the firelight was Emily Crawford. She had slashed her tailored skirt to knee length. A piece of the garment had been used to make an outlandish sunbonnet. Other pieces were bound to her feet.

Hurley recognized her before she recognized him, since the fire dazzled her eyes. He took a step to meet Emily. She recoiled, and the face of the man following her changed. Hurley had command of the situation.

"Lucky Ballard!" he said, with an ironic bow. "But I'm kind of lucky myself, seeing you and Emily so soon after some one butted in on our talk."

Ballard stopped short. His hands made jerky motions, as though he could not decide whether to raise them or reach for a gun.

And then Epstein came over from the wagon. "Meals at all hours," he pattered, amiably. "Anything you want, ask for it—it gives bacon and biscuits and canned peaches."

Smiling, Hurley said, "Set down folks. I was only mocking you a bit. Saul, give them coffee,

it's better'n water, for folks plumb fagged out and all a-thirst!"

Epstein obeyed. Hurley came after him with a bottle. "Take a dollop in your coffee, Lucky. You, too, Garlock." He regarded the label and displayed it to his guests. "Best in the West, Lucky. Got a whole case of it, barring a couple bottles. Wiley drunk 'afore he fell under the wheels and killed himself. Yes, Sir, old man Hoskins does carry good case whiskey."

Ballard managed to keep his face immobile. Garlock, who had not spoken since his return reached out with his pannikin'. And as he drank, he kept a caressing hand on the satchel.

Hurley was breaking out blankets when Ballard said, "Ben, personal differences can wait on a better time. Carry us to the road and the nearest town. I'll see you don't lose out."

"I'm going to Panamint. Ride with me, or walk your way."

"Oh, Ben!" Emily cried. "You can't do that! It'll be a couple of days before they miss the stage. They're likely to find just enough wreckage to make it seem none of us lived through it."

"I said, you can ride to Panamint."

"My God!" Ballard exclaimed, indignantly. "You can't make a woman face that."

"When Saul came up, just as Wiley died, account of some one giving him a case of whiskey," Hurley said, remorselessly, "I knew I'd get a sign that meant, shove on. Now with you two moving in on me, I know it's all the more a sign. It's Big Medicine—it's desert judgment—and I can't back down." He dug the charge slip out of his pocket. "The whiskey was on you, Lucky. Now—see what I mean?"

"But—but—Emily—!"

Emily interposed. "Ben, Lucky was heading South, to look at his property. I was going to visit relatives in Yuma. I am sorry you jumped at conclusions, but I can understand. And you needn't carry on with what happened in the hotel. We all understand. Let's just forget it."

**I**N THE morning, Hurley acted as though there had been no dispute the previous night. "All aboard!" he shouted, as he climbed to the driver's seat. Epstein, after helping Emily, took his station toward the rear of the load. The cargo, well stowed, shifted hardly at all, but Emily, perched

precariously and muffled in a blanket, lost her balance. In trying to check herself, she landed in Epstein's arms. Then, as though at a signal, Ballard pounced forward, while Garlock turned toward the back.

"Take it easy, Saul," Garlock said from behind his short barreled revolver. "Let Emily take that gun you got stuffed under your shirt."

Epstein pretended to be a good deal more scared than he was. "I don't want trouble," he stuttered. "Watch out—it's loaded."

Up front, Ballard had a pistol against Hurley's back. "Pull up, Ben! You're covered."

Hurley obeyed. "What's all this monkey work?"

"You're going to take us to town," Ballard answered. "I'll take your gun first."

Disarmed, Hurley faced about, hands shoulder high. "Can any of you skin mules?" he asked, leaning forward, chin outthrust, brows beetling. His hands seemed about to reach out and slap down. Epstein broke out in a sweat lest Hurley try the fatal trick of making a swipe at Ballard's weapon.

"Can you skin mules?" Hurley repeated.

"Yes," Ballard answered, "even though I didn't get my start that way."

"She's all yours, then." Hurley clambered down. "I'm whipped."

"What do you think you're doing?" Ballard demanded, warily.

Then Epstein spoke up. "I'm going with him. I got to get my cart loose. Do you have to keep my pistol?"

Epstein unslashed the vehicle. He picked up gun and cartridges Garlock dropped. "All right, Ben," he said, cheerfully. "Panamint or bust. We're on our way!"

Hurley wheeled about. "There's not a drop of water in tank or barrel. While you pounded your ears last night, I gave every jughead all he could drink. You can backtrack and follow my wheel tracks, but nary a drop of water for three days. The nearest water is toward the mountains yonder. A spring hidden so's you could die of thirst within a hundred yards of it and never know it was there. Pull down on me, and you're shooting yourself out of your last chance of a drink till you find it in hell. Let's go, Saul!"

**E**PSTEIN bent to the push-bar of his cart. Stretching his legs in a long, swinging stride, Hurley set the pace.

A pistol whacked.

Hurley swung along as though he had heard neither report nor the zip of the wild bullet, but Epstein, looking back, saw that Garlock was grappling to disarm Ballard.

When this was done, Garlock raised his voice. "You win, Hurley! He lost his head for a second. Come back, and take over."

Hurley turned, grinning. "Bring me all the hand guns." And once they were back at the wagon, he said, "Saul, they didn't even look to see if I was a-bluffing. Show 'em!"

The tank and barrel were dry.

By the time Hurley reached the promised spring, his passengers had learned a few things about thirst.

Toward the end of the day's drive up the ravine, they came to another spring, small but sweet. On the cliffs were marked figures that looked like a schoolboy's attempt at drawing men and animals. Epstein studied these and turned and eyed Hurley. Since they stood well apart from the others, he risked a single word: "Indians."

Hurley nodded. Both scanned the cliffs and the bare suggestion of trail which snaked along toward the rim-rock.

Hurley announced, without any mention of Indian sign, "We're shoving on as long as we can see. Drink up, and we'll make for the open. We have no time to lose." Ballard was becoming more and more uneasy, which was odd, since he had not noticed the drawings on the cliff. He had been too busy squinting at the upper slopes of the mountains. Epstein baited him by getting his binoculars and saying, "Here, have a good look."

Ballard snatched at the glasses. He muttered something about the kinds of ore indicated by the bands of green which streaked the slopes.

**W**ELL out on the mesa. Hurley pulled up to make camp. He said, "Just to be sociable, everybody gets his shooting iron. Whoever craves to drive back is welcome. Saul and I can hoof it from here to Panamint. We've answered the question whether wagons can get through with freight. Saul—get out some of that whiskey Lucky sent with us—we'll have a drink to good

fellowship."

Before dusk closed in, Epstein picked a spot, somewhat apart from camp, close enough for him to be handy, yet not in the middle of things. Issuing guns and whiskey had been a taunt and he feared Hurley was pushing his luck too far.

After supper, Hurley and Epstein decided to stand watch, each taking a four hour trick.

"Saul, which'll you have?"

"I'll take the second. What do I watch out for—passengers or Indians? You've been rubbing it in on Ballard. If you are looking for a showdown, you will win a gun fight but lose the girl."

"Mmm...you're right. What do you make of Garlock?"

Epstein shrugged. "What does Emily say about him?"

"He is some kind of engineer, studying irrigation and reclaiming land for sodbusters."

"I'm moving my cart over by those rocks, so I can watch the camp and the mules, too," Epstein said sagely. "The way things are, I'll need four eyes to see in all directions at once."

**W**HEN voices awakened Epstein, the moon was spreading its glow across the mesa. He saw Emily, blanket about her shoulders, going with Hurley toward a small outcropping.

Emily was saying, "Ben, do quit trying to get my mind off the track! What more is there to what you were going to say?"

Hurley drew a deep breath. "Maybe Lucky told you the truth when he said he was strictly on the level, staking Wiley to a case of whiskey to sell in Panamint. Maybe he didn't aim to undermine me the way it looks he did. But look at it all—everything!

"I once heard a fellow say every man, woman, and child has an angel tagging along, watching him. Well, it's been as if some critter with wings big enough to cast a shadow over half of creation has been riding herd on the whole pack and passel of us."

"All of us?"

"Sure! Look back at all the freak things. Saul running into me in town, and being able to give me a lift when lacking Wiley. And you three, wandering around half *loco* from thirst, finding my camp which wouldn't've been there at that

time, excepting Lucky had staked Wiley to whiskey. That's how it came to me, that night, to give the mules every drop of water."

"Condemning us to this trip!"

"No! But I'm facing judgment with the rest of you. Couldn't I've shot it out with him 'afore now?"

"You couldn't force a fight with a man you've taken into your camp. Can't you understand—this ring is not an engagement ring. He didn't give it to me, it's family jewelry. And where else'd I keep a ring but on my finger? I know you think Lucky was just too lucky, selling out of that bank when he did—but you'd've done the same, if you'd had a sudden opening in a good land investment. But you suspect him as though he'd made the bank crash!"

"Honey, that's why I stick to the one thing that does show up clear—this here is a desert judgment to answer things. If I *knew* he'd been fixing and planning to sink me, I'd have shot it out."

**E**MILY, despite herself, was impressed, yet she said, "You've not accounted for Jubal Garlock. Your dark angel, your desert angel must've had some reason for putting him into this!"

He shrugged off the hollow-hearted mockery, knowing why she offered it. "Betwixt here and Panamint, that'll be answered."

She bounced to her feet. Then Ballard broke in on the two. Epstein knew he had to do something quickly. He moved, cat-quick, and silently.

For such close range, the shooting light was perfect. Ballard made his move.

There was a hiss, a blast, a cry of pain. "Don't shoot!" Epstein shouted, but only after his whip had paralyzed Ballard's gun hand and disarmed him. Then Hurley pounced and clouted him, dropping him in his tracks. Emily cried out, as though there had been an exchange of shots.

**T**HE whine of the wind, combined with the dry rustle of sand blown against his sheltering rock made a curtain of sound which might have soaked up the less regular noises of the night, had Epstein not been so thoroughly at home in the desert. Presently, a mule snorted,

making a sound which put Epstein more on edge. After some moments, he noted motion in the solid shadow. There was a dim glint of metal at a mule's forefeet. Some one was cutting the hobbles. Epstein was certain only of one thing—an Indian was at work.

Epstein drew his gun. Then the show opened as though at a signal, before Epstein fired his first shot. From his right a flight of blazing arrows thudded into the side of the wagon. Simultaneously, arrows with flaming heads raked the browsing mules.

Epstein's gun roared. The prowler jerked upright, then fell, kicking and clawing. The mules with fiery arrows sticking in their hides stampeded. Then the raiders turned on Epstein.

Several had muskets. Epstein's sheltering buttress of rock stopped a dozen arrows and several bullets. He let out a yell, and lurched into full view, to lie there, exposed.

**S**EEING Epstein apparently finished, the Indians checked their rush. One said in pale-face English, "Watch out for the other one."

His advice came too late. From beneath the wagon came the whack of a Winchester. The marauders scattered. The muzzle loader boomed again. Epstein, popping up from an unexpected quarter, had drawn the attention of the raiders long enough to give Hurley and the others a chance to gather their wits and fight back.

The wagon sides, tinder dry, began to burn from blazing arrows. Jubal Garlock, who was sleeping on the cargo, grabbed a blanket to swing down at the flames.

"Keep down, Jubal!" Ballard shouted, and Hurley called, "I'll slosh it with water! Keep down!"

Taking heart, the raiders made a rush. Emily screamed a warning. Epstein saw his chance to come into action. He took the enemy from the rear, now that they were bunched up and silhouetted by the blaze they had started. When his gun was empty, the show had ended: the survivors raced after the animals they had stampeded.

Once the fire was out, Epstein learned that while Hurley and Ballard had suffered only scratches, Garlock had been nailed with an arrow, and drilled by a bullet.

Once they got Garlock down from the wagon, Hurley demanded, "Saul, you can doctor a fellow. Get busy!"

"For bullets, I can't probe. But that arrow is so near through that if I drive it on, while he is unconscious, and cut off the head, I can pull the shaft out."

As Epstein set to work by the light of the lantern, Ballard demanded, "Let's round up enough mules to pull the wagon without cargo."

"Keep your shirt on, Lucky! Mules are as good eating meat as anything else, and them Injuns'd fight to the last man to keep 'em!"

Epstein, meanwhile, lost little time. He had the arrowhead cut off and the shaft withdrawn before Jubal Garlock regained consciousness. Then he said, "I have some laudanum for cholera medicine. It will keep him resting easy."

No one had thought of getting a look at any of the fallen raiders. As far as Epstein knew, he was the only one who had heard the use of English. He paused when he came to those that had dropped when he had caught them from the rear and it was not until he came to his cart that he found the one who had crawled to the shelter of the outcropping. He had been winged. And that man was white.

**P**ISTOL drawn, Epstein knelt beside him and took the renegade's gun. "Who are you?" he asked. "Why do you run with Indians? I've seen you in Poplar Junction. Or maybe in Silver Bend. Who set you on this job with Indians?"

The man cursed. Epstein cocked his pistol. "Two things I can do. First, what a man deserves for running with Indians, I can fix it for you. Or I can give you something for the pain. And put some rocks on you when you are done so the coyotes won't scatter your bones." He hefted the big S&W, and resumed, "Not with a bullet. Just with a good pistol whipping—"

"Ballard, the dirty son! He said—only two—only two—" The man choked and went limp. The face relaxed.

Epstein shrugged. "So? I scared him to death. He don't need a pain killer."

Now Epstein knew why Ballard had been afraid: having sent a renegade to get Indians to ambush Hurley, the man naturally had shrunk from going into the trap. His proposal to trail the

mule-stealers suggested he hoped to deal with his accomplices, and get back enough animals to get him out of his own snare.

When Epstein rejoined the others, he was wondering about Garlock's black bag; but they were wrangling about the best way out of their predicament. Hurley was saying, "The further we'd chase those varmints up into the piñons, the more advantage they'd have on us. And getting Garlock to Panamint comes first. This poker-faced jigger from nowhere got shot and riddled, fighting in the open, whilst the rest of us scrunched down behind cover. So we're hoofing, and toting him in Saul's wagon, to give him his chance."

Epstein gave Emily the bottle of laudanum. "He will soon be conscious. Give him a spoonful, no more."

**T**HEN EPSTEIN got Garlock's keys and hunted for the satchel. The shifting of the cargo had locked it among the boxes, so he could not release it except after prying with a pick-axe handle. He opened the bag, and when he saw the sheaves of currency and Government bonds, he said to himself, "No wonder he fought the fire to keep this from burning when he couldn't get it out."

After locking the bag, he got down the shadowed side of the wagon. The water tank had been bullet-riddled. The barrel had been nearly emptied to fight the fire. But both canteens were full.

Hurley said, "With nothing but water and a bit of grub to tote, I can move twice as fast as when we're shoving the cart. Let me hoof it to Panamint, and hire one of those carry-alls with fast horses. You can wait here, if water holds out, or you can head south. If I can gain no more'n a day, it's worth the gamble. Garlock drew the Injuns' fire and sort of saved our hides, and I owe him any chance I can win for him by gaining time."

He stuffed his pockets with jerked beef and slung a canteen from his shoulder. "Head due south," he repeated. "You'll cut the wagon track from Bakersfield or else I'll be meeting you with fast-stepping horses."

Toward evening, Garlock began muttering and mumbling, "Saul, hadn't you better give him some more laudanum?" Ballard asked.

"If it gets on your nerves hearing him, get away and I'll sit out your turn."

"No, no, that's not it!"

Whereupon Epstein went to grab dead mesquite for the fire. When he had stacked up a heap, he let Emily help cook supper. "What do you want?" he asked her. "Wait here, where the water is not so good, or move on, and gain a day that way? If you sleep till moonrise, can you walk another stretch, like we've already covered?"

"Walk it or drop from trying," she answered, smiling away her weariness.

"Then we move tonight. Hey, Lucky! Supper is ready."

Ballard ate as though swallowing blotting paper. Finally Epstein asked, "How is the patient?"

"Resting. But I'm afraid he'll be hard to handle when the fever gets bad. He's got something on his mind."

"Right now, you better get some rest before we move on. I'll watch."

**W**HEN the night chill bit into Epstein's bones so deeply he quit cat-napping, he knew it was time to strike out. After throwing wood on the coals, he shouted, "Coffee! Wake up!"

Emily answered. Ballard did not. The blankets he had kicked aside were a dozen yards from the small circle of camp activity. Snatching a blazing brand, Epstein went over to the undisturbed ground—and saw footprints leading north.

When Emily joined him, Epstein said, "Lucky went back the way we came."

"But why, Saul? Good lord, *why?*"

Instead of answering, Saul said, "Hold the light," and went to kneel beside Garlock. He raised the man's eyelids, looked at the pupils, and asked, "How much laudanum did you give him?"

"Saul, you know I didn't give him any."

"Somebody did. The pupils of the eyes—they are like pin points, see? And the pale lips."

"Do you suppose Lucky made a mistake, and then realized what he'd done, and then got scared?"

"If you made an honest mistake, would you run from Saul Epstein?"

"Oh, this is crazy, crazy, *crazy!* We can't go

off and leave Lucky, so we'll have to wait now,"

"Maybe that is why he went away, just to make us wait," Epstein said. "You go back to sleep. But first, let me show you this man's watch. It is interesting. I looked at it some time ago. How do you read the initials on the case?"

"Why, J. G., of course—no, J. C. Maybe it's an heirloom."

"Let me open the back and show you. Here, see the engraving inside."

She read, "*From the Directors of the First National Bank of Independence. Kansas, to Joash Carson, June 15, 1848-June 15, 1873. Well Done, Thou Good and Faithful Servant.*"

Epstein said, "Now, less than a year after he finished being a good and faithful teller or cashier he shows up in Nevada being an engineer. Is he making some kind of deal with Lucky?"

"I don't know. But if they did have any plans, I think Lucky ought to be on the look-out for crooked work."

"So? Now watch this." He reached inside his shirt and brought out a bundle wrapped in a red bandanna. Opening it, he displayed high denomination currency, United States bonds and other negotiable securities. "Count this. You are a witness that this is how much he had."

With trembling hands, she counted the gold certificates, and the bonds. She exclaimed, "There's over \$200,000 here!"

"Keep it until we meet the law. You fix it up inside your dress, so it don't make bulges. Nobody must know, so there won't be trouble between Lucky and Ben. Don't tell anybody you've got it. No matter what happens."

**S**HORTLY after dawn, Ballard stumbled into camp. He had Garlock's satchel. He asked, "How's Jubal? He muttered so much about his bag, I was afraid he'd get up while we were dozing and start back for it."

"That makes you a Good Samaritan," Epstein said. "But now we can't move on—not before you have rested." A few hours of rest, then Epstein aroused him, saying, "Time to shove."

They plodded through the blinding glare. Epstein would not halt until at last Emily protested, "Saul, Lucky is ready to drop."

They stopped. Epstein bent over Garlock.

"This man, whoever he was, has taken a

shortcut. Pick up rocks, while I dig.”

When he had dug a shallow trench, he took Garlock’s watch, purse, keys and pistol, putting them in a compartment of his tool chest. After letting Garlock down into the trench and filling the grave, he reached for the pushbar, and they tramped on. Ballard cursed him. Epstein said, “Walking back was foolish. What good was a satchel to a dying man?”

After three more cruel hours, Emily clung to him. “Saul, I can’t go another step.”

Epstein picked her up bodily, and set her into the cart. “Then ride. And have a drink. The last, until I find water.”

Ballard jerked along like a mechanical toy. When they got to a fringe of ironwood trees, he sprawled face down in the shade.

There was water. Epstein drew some from the pool.

**L**ATER, while Ballard still lay in an exhaustion which made him seem lifeless, Hurley drove up with a carryall.

“Oh, Ben!” Emily cried, kissing him hungrily.

Ballard seemed half numbed by the fierce punishment. His eyes, however, were unnaturally bright. When he aroused himself, his words and gestures were jerky. Hurley listened to an account of what had happened and then asked, “Saul, what was that name in Garlock’s watch?”

“Read it,” Epstein answered, after getting the watch and the other things. “A bank man all his life until last year, and all of a sudden he becomes an engineer.” As he spoke, Epstein dipped into the satchel and brought out a packet of hundred dollar gold certificates. “No wonder he worried. Here’s more!”

Ballard came to life. “He said he was Garlock,” the watch says he used to be Carson. What’ll we do with his property?”

“We turn this over to the law,” Epstein remarked.

“That’s crazy!” Ballard flared. “Money is money, and nobody knows who this man really was. Ben, you and Emily were hurt badly in the bank crash. We can call this salvage. You’re crazy not to do it! What the devil has Epstein got to say?”

Epstein gave him a biting glance. “Maybe the

desert. plays this cockeyed trick to give you back what, you lost.”

“Saul,” Hurley persisted, “you’re entitled to a cut.”

Epstein’s eyes became more emphatic. “I want none. For you folks, maybe it is different. Anyway, I don’t know the law, and I won’t take chances.”

“I’m not looking a gift hoss in the mouth!” Hurley declared “Dip in, Lucky!”

**B**ALLARD dug eagerly into the bag. His face changed when, clawing again, he came up with socks, a shirt, a necktie. Hurley exclaimed, as he eyed the pile, “Something like thirty thousand bucks! Nice divvy.”

“Thirty thousand?” Ballard echoed, dazedly. “Nice divvy?”

Epstein said, “Ben, I’ll tend to the horses. You sit down. You’re winning again. Enjoy it.”

He had the horses unhitched, and was busy grooming the long-legged sorrel when Ballard came up. The animals were some yards from camp, and Hurley and Emily were busy beside the fire.

Ballard said, in an ominous voice, “You’re foxy, Epstein, pretending you wouldn’t touch that money, and spouting that stuff about surrendering it to the law. You took most of it. Make a good story.”

“What do you mean?” Epstein countered. “You walked to get the satchel. I didn’t. If something is missing, you took it. Anyhow. How do you know something is missing?”

“He told me how much he had. There’s \$200,000 missing.”

“I don’t have it. And let me tell you something. I said, don’t give him more laudanum, and you gave it. His eyes showed it. Hey, Ben! He says—”

But Hurley was too much interested in Emily to hear; and Ballard cut in, “You lying son, *what’s that you dropped over there?*”

He gestured toward something on the ground, and went for his gun. Emily cried out. Ben, belatedly aroused, shouted, “Hold it!”

Guns blazed, one-two. Hurley, on his feet, lowered his weapon. Epstein looked through swirling smoke at Ballard, who was down and twitching.

Epstein indicated the paper band at which Ballard had pointed. "It came off of a pack of bills. When he saw it, he thought I had swiped \$200,000 from Garlock's satchel."

"You'd been a dead duck if you'd looked the direction he pointed!"

Epstein nodded. "I knew this was coming, so I dropped that on purpose. He knew if he shot me and I had all that money in my pockets, it is justifiable homicide. And shooting would keep me from telling about the extra laudanum he gave. Now search me! I got no money. Emily, you are a witness."

Emily said, "If you two turn your backs until I can get out of what's left of my dress—" And, wasting little time with safety pins, she said, "All right. Here's the money."

Hurley demanded, "Saul, you had it figured out?"

"Yes, and no. If you shot it out with Ballard, then Emily would be sorry for him maybe. And I knew he was not sore at me. He would get me the first chance, so I got him first."

"I still don't see the point!" Hurley grumbled.

"I can't prove it, but this looks like bank loot, all new bills. For a year or two, there is only one

bank robbery in the state, and that is at your bank in Silver Bend. Maybe the till was cleaned and the robbery a fake. I mean, something fixed up, which is why Ballard sells his shares—he and the Good and Faithful Servant from Kansas worked in cahoots. Would Ballard know all about this money if they weren't in cahoots?"

"Numbers of the bonds maybe can be traced," said Hurley. "Your guessing sounds pretty good."

Epstein said, "This time, you do the grave digging. For a change, I am going to be a gentleman and get waited on."

Hurley let out a long sigh. "You're a crazy coot, baiting that jigger to pull a gun on you. Sit down while I bend on the shovel."

And then Epstein went to the fire where Emily sat. Her face was drawn, and her color had not yet returned. Epstein said, "Always, you knew Lucky for a nice fellow. I knew from the night when the Indians came for us. Leading them was a white man that Ballard had sent, to stop Ben. The man told me before he died. But what could I prove? How could I show it all up?"

"Only this way. Now you see what it means, desert judgment?"

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