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TONIGHT!**

by **TOM ROAN**
TWO NOVELETTES

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by **MARVIN DEVRIES**

• **HOT BLOOD BRANDS
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HER FOOT'S CAUGHT!

KEEP THIS BOAT CLEAR! I'VE GOT TO CUT THAT LINE!



SHE'S OKAY, I THINK. JUST SWALLOWED SOME WATER.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
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VOLUME 41

DECEMBER, 1949

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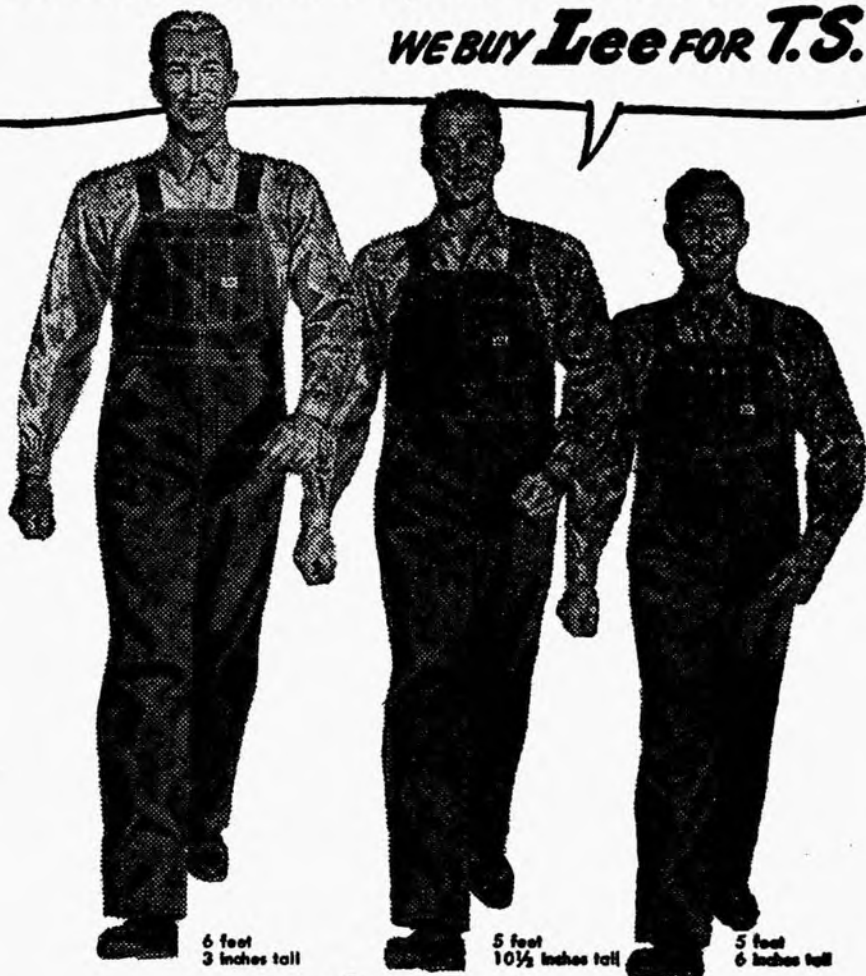
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Record Wrangling

By ARIZONA BLAKE

HOWDY, tophands. Here we are again in the old platter-chatter corral, ready for a roundup of some of the exciting new Western disks you folks shouldn't be missing.

At the same time, because we figure tunes are a lot more interesting when you know something about the fellows who have waxed them, we're taking time for a little chin-music about your favorite Western warblers and cowboy bands. We've also got a tale about a certain smash-hit Western tune that's spreading all over the world faster than a runaway prairie fire.

This song is one that's been breaking records as an All-American favorite. Not to keep you guessing any longer, folks it goes by the handle of **BUTTONS AND BOWS**, the movie-cowboy song which won an Academy Award recently, and which you probably heard sung in that comedy film, "The Paleface." We've gotten a whispered report that this tune has become a favorite in Moscow and it's a juke-box hit in Denmark and Norway. Only, translated into Scandinavian, **BUTTONS AND BOWS** has become **NYLON OG NIPS**.

(Please continue on page 93)

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*D. H. G., Waussu, Wis.



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*C. S. Leaden, Ohio.



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MUD AND MARES

A year after gold was discovered in California, over 50,000 persons had passed by ship through the Golden Gate. Crews deserted the moment mudhooks dropped in Yerba Buena cove. Over five hundred deserted vessels rotted at their moorings, many sank where they had anchored.

Rooms were at a premium. The clipper ship *Niantic* was sunk close to the mucky shore to form the foundation for the Niantic hotel. It became famous overnight.

The cheapest room in San Francisco rented for from two to three hundred dollars a month, pay in advance. Sleeping space on bench or table fetched from two to ten dollars for an eight-hour snooze. You furnished the blankets, the landlord the lice.

The rainy season of 1849-50 converted unpaved streets into bog-holes. Entire wagons sank from sight. Horses and mules drowned. So did fools and drunks. Not to mention women.

Since the miners didn't want to lose the latter, something was done. Brush by the wagonload was dumped into the muck, along with boxes and barrels still crammed with merchandise, cases of tobacco, bags of Chilean flour, and cookstoves still uncrated.

At the corner of Clay and Kearny, in the heart of town, a wag erected a sign:

THIS STREET IS IMPASSABLE;
NOT EVEN JACKASSABLE.

Now, a century later, matters are somewhat improved. You can venture across in safety—provided you own an army tank.

It is well-known that millions of split-hoofs (cows) went up the Chisholm Trail. What isn't so familiar to most persons is that hundreds of thousands of solid hoofs (horses) also went to market that way, but not for meat.

When the North West became cow-conscious, the ranchers soon discovered that eastern horses, of European stock, couldn't begin to measure up in toughness to the cowponies of the South West. Of Spanish stock, these hardy little animals had been toughened by three centuries of plains life.

Once the North West ranchers got that through their noggins, a great demand for brood mares of the Texas cow pony developed. Soon Texas cowmen were driving entire herds of horses north along the Chisholm Trail. These horses, almost worthless at home because of an over supply, fetched good prices at Dodge City, Abilene and Ogallala.

About a hundred thousand horses traveled the trail north in 1884 alone. The estimated total that traveled the trail till sodbusters fences closed it, reached close to the million mark.

By **ROY VANDERGOOT**

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caught in midair as they
came dropping from the
shattered window.



YELLOW DEVIL STARVES TONIGHT!

*Smashing Novel
of Gold-Trail War*

By TOM ROAN

CHAPTER

Purgatory Pass

1

It was hotter than the hubs of fury that late-August afternoon when Young Dave Mohawk pulled rein on the south lip of Hell Dive Pass.

Behind him the uncertain old gold trail had led upward, from the start an almost obliterated streak devil-bent on losing itself in buck-brush, manzanita thickets, scrub-oak and aspen clouding the east rim of the river. That was four days ago, Tuesday morning at dawn. In scores of places the rock-walled east bank had been covered with yards-thick layers of long-dry mud, the bends choked with drift-



wood matted with vines and creepers brought down by roaring spring floods and unpredictable cloudbursts had made Yellow Devil Canyon one of the most treacherous and dangerous hell-holes in the high California Sierras.

Many men in Indian Valley—still only thirty-odd miles behind to southward—had said that any outfit trying to reopen Yellow Devil Trail would be tackling the impossible. Mohawk had been called a fool, but Hell Dive Pass was at hand, two towering peaks against the sky. Below him the river appeared to drop completely away, the narrowing and twisting walls of the canyon, overhanging giant shelves, and ragged crags hiding it, making it appear as a great gushing of white-whipped water tearing from the mouth of an immense dark cavern.

Men with a dozen yokes of powerful oxen still labored behind him with scrapers, plows, crow-bars and axes, clearing the last barrier at the foot of an upward curving shelf, the final steep rise to the top. Behind those men, creeping up as the trail was cleared, was a train of huge old freighter wagons loaded with tons and tons of supplies for Yellow Devil Basin, the once-dead and nearly-forgotten old Chinese ghost town that had set the country afire in the early spring with another big gold strike that had brought people pouring in from everywhere.

Expecting trail that would yet have to be cleared on the north slopes, he turned to ride on, reaching the level floor of the pass, shelves and ledges in the sides of the peaks above him. The air changed now, a cool wind striking him. Suddenly he was pulling up, surprise filling his face under the wide brim of a black hat, right hand dropped close to the butt of a long Colt.

“HOWDY, pardner.” The speaker was an enormously fat, red-jowled man in ill-fitting gray, face covered with a week-old sandy beard, his eyes two pale blue buttons. He sat on a nail keg at the right side of the trail, behind an up-ended whiskey barrel, a six-foot umbrella of ragged brown canvas over him. Sixshooters were at his hips. Across the top of the barrel lay two double-barreled shotguns, each a short, sawed-down thing.

“Kinda warm, ain’t it!” the man said.

“Hot is a better word,” nodded Mohawk, wondering what was coming next. “How’s the trail on down the slope and into Yellow Devil Basin?”

“Fair shape now, all eight miles of it.” The man had leaned forward, fat hands resting on a shotgun. “It’ll cost a fella like yuh, just a man on a horse, only two dollars too, charge flat on the barrel head to ride on an’ see for yoreself.”

“So that’s why you’re here.” A thin smile hardened Mohawk’s lips. “Who’s claiming this as a toll trail?”

“Fan Cantello an’ Rance Rubaney, down in Yellow Devil.” Sitting back, the man slid one of the shotguns from the barrel head to his lap, a quiet move with a sinister meaning. “I’m Sam Trigg. Fat Sam, some most generally usually call me ‘cause I’m kinda portly, yuh see. I work for Fan an’ Rance. Gettin’ the trail open agin atter it lyin’ untouched for years has cost a lot of money, but it’ll save a lot of miles an’ time, bein’ the only direct way nigh straight into Yaller Devil Basin, cuttin’ four days at least off of any other, if yuh know what I mean. Some are gonna maybe kick, no matter the trouble an’ money Fan an’ Rance has been put to, but that’s to be expected, I reckon. Some people just naturally kick about anything.”

“And what,” Mohawk’s eyes had narrowed, “do you expect to collect for wagons going over the trail?”

“From ten to thirty dollars for things on wheels, pardner.” Sam Trigg had something in his huge fat face that might have been called a smile. “Big charge is for freight outfits, of course. They’re hard on a trail, an’ them that don’t wanta pay—well, they talk to me an’ this.” He lifted the shotgun from his lap into both hands now, fondling the hammers. “It packs a two-barrel charge of buckshot, enough lead to cut a fella in half.”

“An’ speakin’ of guns,” put in another voice between sixty and seventy feet above Sam Trigg’s umbrella, “we don’t know exact as to what’s in your mind but I wouldn’t go reachin’ for one, Mr. Mohawk.”

Dave Mohawk looked up. Standing on the edge of a wide shelf of rock were six big-hatted men, four garbed in buckskins,

two in homespun jeans. Three of them held double-barreled shotguns, the others long rifles, the weapons slanted downward, a bearded grin of cocksuredness on each man's face. Around their middles sloped cartridge belts, a six-shooter loosened in its holster at every hip.

"We don't aim to start a fuss or a fight." A tall, rusty-haired, rusty-faced man in buckskins with a long, curving nose was speaking again. "Just aim to back Fat Sam in such as he says or does. Plumb law-abidin' to the last fella, we are, an' the law's behind us for all this. That means we don't give a good Gawdamm whether yuh or anybody else is gonna like it or not. We are the law here. Would that be right clear to yuh or must I go over it agin?"

IT WAS a clear hold-up. There was nothing new about it. Hold-ups were everywhere, in one form or another from the lone stage coach bandit staking his life behind a pair of six-shooters to crooked lawyers scheming, fat-bellied judges backing them, supposed officers who were nothing more than professional gunmen sent out with badges on their chests.

Young Dave Mohawk had heard of Fan Cantello and Rance Rubaney, two smart wolves always to be found in the thick of things, especially when it came to new diggings, gold and silver rushes, anywhere there were dance halls, gambling parlors, honky-tonks and people enough to make it worth while.

Gold was where one found it, and a Chinese prospector had been the first to stumble upon it in the deep basin ahead. Few were the white men who had bothered themselves about the basin once Chinamen had given the basin up as worked-out and useless. True to the Chinaman's wily way, rarely a people to advertise fortune or misfortune, no one had ever known just how much gold had been taken out of Yellow Devil Basin, the name white men had given it when they had found their paths blocked, the yellow men firmly making them keep their distance.

In the spring it had taken one worn-out Ben Beck, an aged prospector considered little more than half-witted, to

make the big strike, the outside world up and down California going wild with the story as soon as it had broken. Reports had it that Ben Beck had already lost his claim, the law moving in, shotgun deputies and six-gun marshals backing the play and letting other men take over the diggings.

"The price can go up, but it won't go down, an' that's a cinch, pardner." Fat Sam Trigg was chuckling now, appearing to enjoy his position of absolute authority here all the way to the bottom of his huge belly. "She goes up just by my sayin' so if a fella gets tough an' wants to make us trouble. It's best to pay without complaint an' save yoreself a hell of a lot of money. I can turn wagons back an' not let 'em through a-tall. The law's right down clear on that. Each one of them fellas above me is a marshal, duly sworn."

Young Dave Mohawk was sitting there, an object of ridicule and knowing it. These men held all the advantage. If a man tried to fight back anything could happen to him. These men could shoot him out of his saddle and call it resisting an arrest, and that would be the end of it.

"It'll be a little hard, I kinda sorter reckon." Fat Sam was keeping up that hellish chuckling, big belly quivering. Yuh have ~~seventeen~~ extra-big freighters. Them'll cost yuh exact five hundred an' ten dollars to go on through. Them four lighter wagons—well, Mr. Mohawk," his blue button eyes were actually mocking now, "let's lump the works at six hundred flat. Plumb fair, ain't it?"

"You know a damned sight better than that, Trigg!" Mohawk had held himself as long as he could. "This is a plain hold-up. The men behind me have opened the trail nearly all the way to Indian Valley after it has gone untouched for years. Fan Cantello and Rance Rubaney haven't spent a dime on it. I doubt that they spent a dime on the rest of it from here to the basin."

"Now, yo're talkin', Young Dave Mohawk!" put in a new voice. "Nary damned dime, nary damned penny, would either of them two dirty-gutted thieves ever spend anywhere! They're the filth of hell, the scum of Missouri hawgpens. A meaner pair never blowed out of the damned!

There ain't nothin' on earth half so dirty an' low unless it's men who work for 'em an' with 'em, like this gang of stinkin' buzzards here."

EVERYBODY was looking up or trying to look by this time. The six gunmen on the ledge were like frozen apes with their mouths flapped open, only their heads turned, eyes glaring, unashamed fear suddenly filling every face. Sam Trigg seemed to have shrunk on the keg. With a short lurch he had let the shotgun drop back on the head of the barrel as if it had suddenly become so hot his hands could no longer hold it. The blood drained from his huge face as he now sat with his fat neck twisted, trying to look up, the umbrella spoiling the sight for him.

No ghost straight from hell could have had more effect on men. But it was just one man up there, standing on a narrow spur of rock, a perch for an eagle, a slip meaning a plunge to sudden death. He was twenty feet above the men on the shelf, a figure in time-battered and faded buckskins that were once made for a man of six feet four, a chest on him that might have belonged to a Spanish bull. Now he looked older than the hills, so gaunt and hollow-eyed he might have been something long-buried and just dug up again, the mould of the grave on him, the fire of the damned in those sunken dabs of pale and dry eyes. Across the crook of his left arm was a long rifle, at his hips six-shooters, and a twelve-inch knife that had cut throats and ripped hearts swinging down his lean belly in a ragged sheath.

"*Da-a-a-mn!*" gasped the rusty-head on the ledge, voice a dragged-out wheeze. "It—it's Pleasant Spurlock!"

"Naw!" Sam Trigg half-rolled, half-squashed himself off the nail keg, eyes looking as if they were about to bulge from their sockets as he stared upward. "Plez Spurlock's dead! Dead an' gone to hell!"

"Dead?" The ghost on the spur laughed a hollow sound, speaking now in a quarrelsome monotone. "I've been dead an' buried so many times I've forgot the count. Dead an' buried an' dug myownself up to ride, to shoot, to fight an' knife agin. **There's seven here to one, not countin'**

the young fella on the hoss whose daddy, some say, has been my friend through thick an' thin, but nary one of yuh with guts enough to fight. I'm the meanest man yuh ever looked eyeball to eyeball, bad as it's painin' all yuh seven to the bottom-pits of yore yaller guts right now, an' ever' one of yuh know it.

"Dump that barrel, that keg an' umbrella thing over the rim—an' don't keep me waitin'. Drop all yore hardware where yuh stand or squat, like the hell-scared an' gutless damn swine yuh are. Git back to Yaller Devil Basin. Tell Rance Rubaney an' Fan Cantello yo've seen me an' I'm settin' in on their show.

"Well, damn yuh, are you deaf!"

CHAPTER

2

Welcome—to Hell!

On the ledge they were six to one. The old ghost above them could have been swept from his narrow perch by a lightning swing-around and a sudden blazing of weapons already in the hands of those men. Not yet had he made a move to touch a six-shooter at either hip, the rifle merely lying across the crook of his lean old arm, the grin of a mocking devil leering down. In a scared outburst of gabbling and sputtering Fat Sam found his voice again.

"Don't—uh—don't try to mix it with 'im, boys!" he gulped, looking as if something was choking him. "I—I didn't take this fool job just to have Plez Spurlock kill me stoppin' the first wagon outfit to come along! Don't rile 'im! If—if he blows loose an' kills one he'll kill the whole damn works 'fore he quits shootin'!"

In less than a minute the shot-gun hold-up that had been so comfortably lodged here at the side of the trail had become a thing of the past. The whiskey barrel, the keg and umbrella had gone off over the nearest lip of rock overhanging the canyon on the north side of the pass, then down and down into bouncing and shattering bits scattering all the way to the river and into it. With a wild snatch-off of his hat, Fat Sam Trigg was gone also, around a bend and down the trail toward Yellow Devil Basin as if turned to a bouncing barrel himself on two short legs.

There was no fight in the men on the ledge. Fat Sam was their boss up here, and they had seen how he had taken it. Six-shooters, shotguns and rifles had been carefully lowered to the ledge, men pale as they lifted their hands, mean old eyes above watching every move, a hellish leer mocking them. In a line they turned, moving away slowly as if a quick move even now might start them falling dead in their tracks. Before they had gone far their pace was quickening. Soon their steps were becoming long strides, then a wild run, every man snatching off his hat. A shoulder of rocks hid them as they scurried on, heading for horses waiting for them somewhere down the ledges.

"Thanks to Pleasant Spurlock!" Dave Mohawk's big hat came off with a swing as he turned in his saddle, looking up, trying to see an old scarecrow figure who had suddenly vanished. "I—I—"

THE GHOST of the spur was gone, just as he had come, like something suddenly taking shape out of the thin air, like something suddenly vanishing back

into it. Murdock called up several times to where he had stood, but there was no answer. The only sound in any direction for more than a minute was the distant beat of hoofs somewhere down the ledge, that faint drumming dying away into the basin. Then yokes creaked in the other direction, and Murdock swung toward the sounds, the brass-tipped horns on the heads of oxen beginning to rise from the south slopes of Hell Dive Pass, his long-delayed outfit coming up at last. Once over the high hump here the rest would be down grade.


He had to be careful with anything he said now. Counting all hands, there were twenty one drivers, seven freight-buckers and one all-around troubleshooter in the outfit. Only a few of them would be real fighting men used to guns and knives being pitted against them without wavering.


All of them would lift a brow when he told them that old Plez Spurlock had appeared here on the pass. Young Dave Mohawk had been out here for seventeen years, coming west in a wagon train when

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he was ten, and he had heard of this wild man of the hills and valleys since the day he had landed in California. Many men thought of him as nothing less than a devil, an outlaw and a terrorist.

Like most noted frontiersmen, Plez Spurlock was supposed to have been everywhere and done everything. He had been rich a dozen times, gambler, trader, scout, captain of wagon trains crawling over the California, the Spanish, the Mormon and the Oregon Trails. In rousing gold camps he had been rated as king of the bonanza many times, rich one day and poor the next, envied, hated, cursed and damned, yet a man with friends who would still swear by him.

An hour ago the link-up of Plez Spurlock's name would not have been a good one with that of a man just starting an extra tough freight hauling contract in these high hills and dark canyons. After the attempted hold-up here one could expect anything, more and more troubles facing him, and even Satan's name might be a welcome one to receive before this long job was running smoothly, loads of supplies going into Yellow Devil Basin, tons of gold ore coming out in twice-weekly streams.

Whistling Pete Ford, a one-eyed hare-lipped giant red-head, was the man to talk to and let him pass the story back through the train in his own way. Ford had been trouble-shooter and the riding wagon boss since the start, going up and down the line to keep things in trim, getting the big freighters to rolling as soon as the slides were cleared ahead. He suddenly appeared now, spurring up and galloping around the first wagon on a tall, sweaty bay.

"First four wagons turn out here for camp!" He swung to his right, waving toward a small flat. "Let the others keep acim'in' as long as yo've got 'em rollin'!"

Mohawk spurred in beside him, taking only a minute to briefly outline what had happened, the giant listening intently, good right eye narrowing to a golden button, the black square of felt over the socket of his left appearing to tighten on the rawhide string around his head. He swore a couple of times in a whisper, face harder than rock.

"Plez Spurlock ain't a bird I'd like to

have in my string, Dave," he frowned, hare lip making a little whistly flutter, "but I'd yonder feel safer if he was on my side instead of agin me.

"Only one thing I'm glad about." He grinned now. "I never had any trouble with Plez Spurlock. The few times I saw 'im I think he sorter liked me, an' I know yore daddy was his friend. He won't forget, never. We'll just go on through. If he said the trail was clear, then she's clear. Plez won't lie to yuh."

MOHAWK was leading the way on for the big freighters a short time later. For two hours they were going down a great, twisting shelf that was like the wide brim of an enormous hat in the face of the cliffs. Dangerous rocks hung overhead in scores of places, troughs here and there where roaring slides could come down. There was no evidence of any work having been on the trail for years, but it was clear enough. Downhill now, the long yokes of cattle could walk with slacked chains, only the wheel-yokes having to swing the tongues here and there at the bends. Bullwhackers on the high seats were constantly applying their brakes until they struck a round flat mottled with fantastic knolls that was the floor of the basin itself.

Whistling Pete Ford came galloping up now, a grin on his face, the good eye sparkling with satisfaction.

"There's yore town ahead of us, Dave. Yuh can bet we're bein' watched right now—an' some things not nice," his grin widened, "is being said about us."

Bending westward, the sun gone behind the mountains ahead of them, they had come up a smooth, slight rise between a pair of those queer-shaped knolls that somehow reminded one of a great, sullen Buddha sitting at either side of the trail. All around them now loomed cliffs and crags, forming a monstrous hole six or seven thousand feet deep here in the sky-high reach of the mountains, the floor of it no more than three miles across at the widest place.

The river was ahead of them, so flat and shallow here it was more than eighty yards across, the water unwhipped and clear as it whispered over a bed of almost perfectly smooth rock. Beyond it was

the town. From the distance of yet a mile away it might have been something plucked from the heart of old China and dropped here in the middle of the towering California-Sierras.

As far as the old part of the town every mud and stone house was standing just as the yellow men had left it, the streets narrow and floored with natural rock. It filled a near-round little pocket there in the foot of the cliffs at the west side of the basin, two outward-curving walls of rock and mud guarding it, a tiny, veil-like waterfall shimmering down at the far end of it. Outside the wall now were new houses, shacks, tents, a few covered wagons and carts, the old town turned into gambling dives, saloons, honky-tonks and stores. At every hand outside were new diggings, fresh earth brought to the top of the ground, scores of men and even women laboring with rockers or standing barefooted in the water panning for gold up and down the river.

"An' yonder, a'ready, comes a greeter party!" Whistling Pete Ford nodded toward the break under a high log beam in the wall of the old town. "Won't be long now before our ears start burnin' with what they'll have to say about us."

Mohawk merely nodded in turn, blue eyes studying six horsemen galloping toward them, recognizing them even from the distance as the men who had been so cocksure of themselves on the high ledge back in Hell Dive Pass. Back here in the shadows of their masters they would probably be better fighting dogs. Each man carried a shining-new double barreled shotgun across his lap, new cartridge belts around him, the unblemished butts of six-shooters gleaming at every hip. In addition, as if to be more awe-inspiring with authority, each man wore a glittering, brand-new marshal's star pinned to the left side of his shirt.

CHAPTER

3

Underdog's Uprising

"If the war starts," growled Whistling Pete as they stopped to let their horses drink in the middle of the river, "try to center ever' ball on one of them little tin badges an' blow it through a dirty heart!"

The gunmen had come to the other side of the stream, pulling up in a little cloud of dust. Two were spurring their horses to the right, two to the left. The other pair pulled in the center of the trail, a somewhat nervous but evil leer on each face as Mohawk and Whistling Pete quietly rode on and up the slight rise. The rusty-looking red-head spoke.

"Yuh asked for trouble, Mohawk. Yuh get it. Damn it, the law's *the law!*"

"The law?" Dave Mohawk rode straight on to him and pulled up on the man's right with the toes of their stirrups a short yard apart. "Who in hell ever said there was any law in Yellow Devil Basin but Fan Cantello and Rance Rubaney!"

"No matter who says it or don't, we've got it!" snarled back the red-head. Rules ever'body has to go by whether they like 'em or not. Naturally there's got to be fees an' charges for this an' that to keep things agoin'—"

Mohawk cut him off, lifting his left hand. "We won't go into that. We're here with tons of supplies to cut the highway robbery price of flour down from a dollar a pound—"

"Yuh ain't here to cut nothin'!" ripped back the red-head. "Yuh got this train through this far, but unless yuh pay up like yo're supposed to pay, then I warn yuh that you'll never get a wagon in yore outfit back to Indian Valley. Yo've got to go see Fan an' Rance, an'—uh!"

Unable to stand that snarling lip any longer, Dave Mohawk had jabbed a spur to his horse, lunging him forward, right fist coming up and in like a maul on a swinging handle. A furious blow drove straight to the red-head's mouth and nose. The red-head rocked back in his saddle, feet flying up, spilling heavily to the ground. Before the man on the left could get out of the way a lightning hand had caught him by the shoulder, snatching him out of his saddle and hurling that surprised bully down atop the dazed red-head.

"He starts fast when he starts!" yelled Whistling Pete, a pair of cocked six-shooters filling his hands, mean good eye flashing right and left. "Let's go, law, an' finish 'er up! Let's go, I say, let's go! Reach for yore hardware an' then

hit hell feet-first!" His voice rose high.

"Law, hell!" The yowl came from a bare-footed, bare-legged old man who had been panning for gold in the river a few minutes ago. "There ain't no damned law in this forgotten, hell-cussed Chink hole! No law 'cept Fan Cantello an' Rance Rubaney!"

Peaceful-looking people who had been working up and down the river had suddenly dropped everything and were pressing forward. Six-shooters, old pistols or knives hung at the hips of the men. Women were following them with shovels, picks or knotty clubs of driftwood. One gaunt Missouri woman carried a round rock as large as her fist in each hand, sudden war in her pale eyes. She started screeching, her voice as mean and bitter as the squawking of a fighting magpie.

"I heard what this young feller said 'bout dollar a pound flour! He didn't say two dollars a pound for cheap brown sugar as hard as a rock an' filled with sand an' aswarmin' with ants! He didn't say three dollars for cheap damn green coffee ye have to roast yerself—when ye get the hellfired gravel an' dirt out of it! Kill 'em, mister, kill 'em, an', by Gawd, I'll help ye!"

"Somebody reach for a gun, *somebody reach!*" Whistling Pete Ford was yelling his head off, backing his horse now, army-fashion, with the rowels of his spurs pressed against the animal's shoulders. "If yo've got the guts of a body louse show it! I say reach—an' die an' go to hell with them little tin badges on yuh! Reach, Gawdamnit, an' don't keep me waitin'."

MOHAWK had dropped from his saddle and was standing there over the two men on the ground. Up as far as his elbow, the red-head rolled under his horse's belly with a sudden twisting and squirming, and came up on the other side. Leaving his hat behind he got into the saddle. Raking with both spurs and wildly flapping his reins, he was suddenly wheeling away, leaving the others to take care of themselves.

"Take out with him!" Mohawk kicked with all his weight and strength as he yelled the order. The man who had been merely snatched from his horse was up

to his hands and knees, looking addled, not knowing what to do. The toe of Mohawk's boot decided him. It caught him with the stab of the sharp end of a pole from straight behind, the hellishly painful drive lifting him, scooting him forward on his nose and face. "Get back to Fan and Rance! Tell them our wagons are coming right on in!"

Not bothering with his horse, having had more than enough of this business right now, the kicked man lurched to his feet, yelling in pain, fear and anger. One hand plopped and clamped behind him, he took off like a limping bird on the wing, his horse turning to snort and stare at him until Mohawk gave him a slap across the rump, the ganging up crowd yelling and laughing, watching that limping gunman go, the horse trotting along behind him.

"Yuh see 'em?" Whistling Pete was raging again at the other four gunmen who seemed too addled to do anything but sit there in their saddles staring, all the bristle taken out of them. "Get goin' behind 'em—an' keep right on goin' through them mountains ahead of yuh when yuh come to 'em! If yuh make a hole pull it in behind yuh!"

"Flour, folks, is acomin' down!" He was suddenly out of his saddle and bellowing at the crowd as the four remaining gunmen wheeled their horses, faces like chalk as they headed back for the gate in the old wall—anything to get out of this mess in a hurry! "Coffee, sugar, ever'thing yuh want at prices no higher'n San Francisco—or, by Gawd, Dave Mohawk will quit haulin'! I know what's in his contract! I know what kind of a fella Dave is or I sure as hell wouldn't be here with 'im!"

But the crowd had heard enough. Everybody was cheering. Out and out revolt was here, people now ready to fight. Mobs were crowding around them, slapping them on their backs. Others were ganging along the river bank, some wading out in the stream to cheer the bullwhackers as the long line of huge old wagons started lumbering across their canvas tops swaying, drivers grinning on their seats like bearded monks.

Being a cold realist, Fan Cantello had never expected the best. Knowing the

big wagons would come on in, he had waited, leaving it up to Rance Rubaney to give the order to pass out the new guns and shiny badges.

A figure always in gray, thin-faced and thin-bearded, he was now standing at an upstairs window in one of the largest groups of the old houses on the south side of the street, four of them so close together they had been covered with one huge roof. He had seen the trouble in the distance, had seen Rusty Medberry get knocked off his horse, the dark Seth Cantler yanked off. Medberry was now hammering it back to town, Cantler soon following afoot—hot-footing it as if the devil was after him.

There was nothing to the other four yokels, Kent Mall, Ira Delano, Punch Ritter and Paul Clark. He had known it all along. Given the supposed proper authority and armed to the teeth, they could roar and bully, pushing the more timid around and kicking them in their places, making them stand and cower, too afraid to strike back. It was something else when it came to sending them out to face real fighting men who would fly loose and come up gunning or knifing with all the odds in the world against them. Like Fat Sam Trigg—that big barrel of lard and guts!—they would wilt, turn tail, and suddenly find themselves running for it.

A little better had been expected of Rusty Medberry and Seth Cantler. Both had been prison guards back in a Mississippi penitentiary and should have learned something about handling men.

Big, dark and barrel-chested Rance Rubaney was handling the show this time, and Fan Cantello was keeping to the background, an agreement they had come to after landing here among the first in the rush. There had been trouble in several places behind them, the last one only as far away as Grub Gulch, down in Ahwahnee Valley where Rance took the greater share of handling the bar, the gambling tables and the dance floors. Fan Cantello himself, had taken over the rest of it. Later he had caught the blame for the blow-up. They had had just time and the foresight to escape by a quick sell-out for half the worth of their holdings and a sudden leave-taking forty hours before wholesale revolt had struck the

valley. They had barely kept their lives.

Not exactly resenting something of a little temporary set-back here, unable to swallow all ego and a feeling of I-told-you-so because he had caught so much hell over the business in Grub Gulch, Cantello turned and walked back downstairs now.

RANCE RUBANEY was not worried. Cantello saw that when he came to the foot of the stairs in the huge bar room and saw him sitting at a table in the corner with a big ledger open in front of him, a pen-quill and a bottle of ink beside it. At the bar was a good line-up, twenty-odd men and half as many of the percentage women and girls already at work urging the men to buy drinks, using their prettiest smiles, winks and whispered sweetness as come-alongs.

Here were fighting men, all that would be needed. At the bar were buckskinned rough-necks, well-armed yokels in homespun jeans, bullwhackers and pack-train rowdies who had been bringing in all supplies by mule and horse or two-wheeled bull-carts over the dangerous trails at their own prices. The tale of the opening of the old Yellow Devil Train over Hell Dive Pass had already gone the rounds. It pleased none of these high-priced men to know that huge freighters were coming in.

"Dog eat dog is the way of life." A dark smile flashed over Rance Rubaney's face when Cantello dropped into a chair beside him, a man close to fifty, fond of doeskin trousers, high beavers and cut-away black coats. "That's how we got our start, and how we'll keep it."

"Then," a mirthless little smile rippled back at him, "you've seen your fine marshals come bustling back to town?"

"I hear all and see nothing, Fan." Rubaney's face darkened for an instant. "I'm not quite fumbly and crude enough to have them come rushing in to me and everybody staring at them. Our supposedly honorable and able Judge Fetzer Talbutt is the man they run to. I merely pass along the word what he is to say and do."

"That fat tub of tobacco-rusted whisks and guts is no better than Fat Sam when you look for brains!"

"Like Fat Sam, he at least will try to carry out orders." Rance Rubaney was smiling again. "A man too smart wouldn't stand in his boots to take the blame for everything that happens. This is not Grub Gulch, Fan. They can point their fingers at us here and say we're behind it all, but there's still the little matter of proof."

"Damned little needed," half-sneered Cantello, "when the people know a thing in their own minds and set out to get you. You know what I mean. We've had to leave some towns a damned sight faster than we left Grub Gulch!"

"We had an election here shortly after we came." It seemed that Rubaney was not going to let his temper be riled. "A tin-pan parade up and down the street, fiddles wailing, banjos ringing and guitars strumming, women singing and dancing, Fetzer Talbutt and Fat Sam bowing and wheezing, Talbutt even shedding a few crocodile tears on an up-ended whiskey barrel, just like you took the front in Grub Gulch. Here neither you nor I took part in it."

"And now," nodded Cantello, coldly, "at the first little set-back we curl our tails between our legs and go lie with our pups!"

"Nothing of the kind." Rance Rubaney laughed at him now. "A fair check says we have between six and seven hundred people here. It won't be nice to have to face the most of them in sudden revolt. We leave all that to Fat Sam Trigg and the right honorable Judge Fetzer Talbutt. Young Dave Mohawk came through with freight this time, but he'll never bring another wagon, and never another damned pound over Hell Dive Pass. That's fixed."

"Everybody knows we run this town! You can't laugh that off!"

"I'm king of the show this time, not you!"

"Even with the tale of Plez Spurlock showing up?"

"Are you fool enough to believe that?" Anger flashed now in Rance Rubaney's eyes. "Plez Spurlock's dead and gone to hell. The story was in every paper published in California!"

A vast upheaval of cheering from the street seemed to answer him, the noise of wagon wheels grinding, yokes creak-

ing, the slow but infernally steady sounds of oxen hoofs on the rocky ground. Dave Mohawk and Whistling Pete Ford were stringing into town, mobs of people from the river tagging along beside the huge old wagons, others piling out to join them.

"Grub at San Francisco prices!" yelled a voice. "No more dollar a damn pound for flour!"

"No more three dollar a pound damn coffee!" shrilled an old woman's voice. "No more two dollar brown sugar filled with phizzants!"

CHAPTER

4

Dance of Death

Two big, hairy-chested men of fifty-odd in buckskins were now leading the way. One was the six-foot, yard-wide, red-headed and red-bearded Buckshot Bill Driver. The other was the equally big, black-bearded Rip Chandler. The two were trappers, traders and Indian scouts from the Montana and Dakota Territories—men who had seen a damned sight worse places than this and had pulled through with the hair still on their heads and fighting blood in their veins. The only kind who would have dared to open a general store without first making a deal with the so-called law of the town.

It must have been a surprise to almost everybody when Driver and Chandler swung to their right and led the wagons into a horseshoe-like curve on the north side of the street. Here was the oldest and worst part of the town, six or seven stone-faced houses that were little more than ancient cliff dwellings jammed under a great overhang of rocks. Half the roofs caved in, hand-split doors down or missing, windows broken holes, they were places nobody had wanted.

At the beginning it looked as if it would go through without more trouble for the rest of the day. Unloading the wagons was a task that could have taken hours, but free help was suddenly surging forward. In a few minutes it was like bees swarming and working before a storm. More and more men kept pouring up, ripping off their coats, vests or shirts to pitch in and help. Women, girls and mere youths grabbed smaller boxes, bales, kegs and bundles, laughing as they hurried

them inside the old ramshackle houses.

But as always in such things another side of it had gathered. Sullen-faced men kept ganging up and crowding into a menacing half-circle on the outer rim of the humming activity. Whispering, growling and nodding started, a drunk or half-drunk here and there blurting out some uncertain threat. Seeing that they were being ignored they grew bolder. Several men started slapping a big, bull-chested, black-bearded giant on the back. A drunk howled.

"Bull Smith can whip any six damn heathen price-cutters among 'em!"

"Git 'em told, Bull!" joined in another voice. "Tell 'em where'n hell yuh stand!"

"Heez a man, Bull Smith is!" yarped another voice. "Bull's a brawny fightin' man!"

"Git 'em told, Bull, git 'em told!"

"Damn right, I can tell 'em!" Half-lurching, half-pushed forward, the giant was beginning to howl, at the same time swinging his arms and knotting his ham-like fists. A few pretending hands reached out as if to stop him. They were only urging him on, intended for nothing else, trouble-makers knowing how to start their bull.

"I can whip any ten men in Yaller Devil Basin!" He was roaring now, a white froth beginning to form in bubbles at the corners of his wide mouth, a bully believing he was about to make himself a hero in the eyes of his gang.

"Nobody's gonna cut our pay, Bull!" hissed a little buck-tooth. "Tell 'em that! Tell 'em nobody's gonna cut, the cheap lice!"

"That's a fact!" bellowed the giant getting bolder and bolder at every step. "That's a fact! Come on, all yuh fellas! Come on! Give 'em the ol' gang rush an' we'll mob 'em!"

Whistling Pete Ford had whirled and was stepping forward to meet him. "Come on, gang!" Ford said. "Where'n hell's yore yaller water guts! Where'n hell ain't I heard that yelp from rats of yore kind before! 'Come on, gang!' Allus a dirty gang of whelps! Come, Gawdamn, yuh, an' let me get my big feet in yore teeth! Yore teeth, I said! I've stomped the tongues down the throats—"

"Pete!" yelled Mohawk, rushing forward and suddenly grabbing him from behind. "Wait a minute! You're playing in their hands. *Wait!*"

"Wait, hell!" snarled the harelip, throwing him off.

"Get 'im, Bull, get 'im!" wailed the buck-toothed little heeler, safely wedged back in the edge of the crowd. "Show 'im what side yo're on! Don't let 'im cut our prices!"

"Stand clear, Dave!" Turned into a blood-hungry killer, Ford threw Mohawk back again. "Nothin' on this whole damn earth makes people madder than these overbearin' mobs pushin' an' stompin' little fellas 'round. Take me, big boy,

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'cause here I am! Take me as I come, but I warn yuh if yuh drop yo'll never get up!"

IT WAS all hell fury with the quickness of a shotgun's blast. The two giants came together, Bull Smith looking for just an instant as if he wished he had never been rodded into starting this thing of blood. A roar from the crowd behind drove him on—a head-lowered, rumbling, charging bull driving straight for big Pete's mid-section, unable to turn back after going this far.

Nothing was going to hold Ford. His right fist swung like a sledge on the end of a handle. It caught the charging human bull somewhere about the head, a blow to addle an ox, turning his charge, stumbling him, and sending him face-diving to the ground.

"I said don't go down!" roared Ford. "I give what yore kind an' yore gangs allus give! When they get a man in a fix like that! Stay on yore feet or die! I give no quarter an, by Gawd, I ask none!"

It was the nearest thing to murder a man could come to. Pete Ford was a big man. With a wild yell and a wilder leap, he went up in the air, feet drawing up. He came down in the middle of Smith's back, heels driving with all his weight and fury, flattening him out, bringing a groan from all around. Then, suddenly stooping, still kicking, blood flying, moving faster than a fighting bee, he had Smith by the slack of the pants and the back of his collar, swinging him straight above his head. With the strength of an insane giant, he sent Smith flying straight into the buck-tooth, knocking him down, then he was upon both of them, kicking, smashing, driving, the buck-tooth letting out just one wail of terror before a grinding heel found his mouth.

With the crowd who had urged Smith into it now falling back, there was only one thing to do. Dave Mohawk did it, and saved two men from being stomped into bloody, lifeless shapes there on the ground in front of every horrified eye. Mohawk rushed in. He caught Ford from the big man's right, getting a firm grip in the stout buckskin sleeve of the

upper arm. A fierce swing brought him around, a lightning fist driving true to its mark, landing just below Ford's right ear with a sickening smack. Whistling Pete Ford went down, addled like an ox under a butcher's maul. He came up in a daze, wheeling, sawing out his hands and powerful arms to tangle with Mohawk now. Before he could get set Mohawk had caught him on the point of the chin, this time a clean knockout that sent the ruthless fighting man sprawling backward on the ground.

"And the next time," Mohawk was turning on the fight-starters now, "I'll let him go and throw every man I've got into it. Get out of here, every damned one of you! Get going! Take these two hunks of bloody meat with you!"

"MOB US, would ye!" It was not over even with the trouble-makers falling back like scared curs with their tails between their legs, each man with the sole thought of finding a safe dive or hole somewhere. The rawboned Missouri woman had grabbed a rock in each hand and was swinging back, one leg up and suddenly letting fly. "Only in dirty gangs can yer kind ever fight, ye low-born filthy-necked an' stinkin' rat brains! Who'n hell told ye varmits ye could starve us to death!"

It was too late for anyone to hold the woman. The first rock was gone, as true as a baseball pitcher driving one squarely over the home plate. A running man in the would-be tough gang was suddenly catching it on the back of the head, the *plop!* the sound of a ball on a bat. Buckling forward at the belly, from the knees to the shoulders shaping like a fellow out of a wagon wheel, he went down. He hit on his belly, arched over, his chin striking the hard ground like a hammer.

"Now, Maw! Now, Maw!" yelled a lean old Missourian. "Ye dast not take things too far in yer own hands!"

Plop! Maw had let fly with the second rock. It was almost a miss, but it struck so close to its mark it seemed to tear a running man's right ear half-off and send it flapping forward, bringing a squirt of red and a yell of pain.

Dave Mohawk had pinned the hare-lipped Whistling Pete Ford's big arms

behind his back and was sitting astride of him, gripping him tightly between his knees. Ford was coming out of it, beginning to squirm, big legs and feet kicking, a man still dangerous, still apt to get up and do terrible things. Mohawk swore at him.

"Take it easy, damn it, Pete!" He tightened the big arms upward, pinching him with his knees, going to hold him or crush his ribs. "It's all over now—and they're not coming back!"

"But—but they will come back!" snarled and gasped Ford when he could get his breath, in great gulping and snorting sounds. "Rats like 'em always will as long as there's some dirtier rat around to back their play with the law! Let me up, Dave! Gawdamnit, you've just about busted my jaw!"

"You can get up if you'll behave yourself, Pete!" Mohawk gave his arms another painful push up his back. "I don't want to hurt you, but you're not running everything here. You're dragging in your bloody fighting horns and listening to me!"

"Didn't aim to fly off so hell-sudden, Dave." Ford was half-apologetic. "Maybe I've seen too many of these low-browed, bull-necked things in these towns, half the time their slimy wimmin out with 'em screamin' their dirty lungs out. I'd kill one of them as quick as I'd kill a man an' stomp her teeth an' face down her throat. She's just as low-gutted, just as rotten. The lowest she-male lice—"

"All right, Pete, all right!" Mohawk was finally shutting him up, gradually releasing his fierce holds on him, a still trembling, still dangerous man. "We've got work here to do, and there'll be fighting ahead of us—dirty fighting."

HE HAD him back to work a few minutes later, but he was watching him. Ford was now a man getting rid of some of his blazing fury on the heavy bales and boxes, pawing them out of the ends of wagons and carrying them inside the old houses, many of them so heavy three or four men should have tackled the job. Muttering, ire still holding, he was working like a beast in a frenzy when the last wagon was unloaded.

Buckshot Bill Driver came up now,

grinning through his big red beard and spitting tobacco juice.

"We'll handle the rest of 'er, Dave." He glanced around, one of the hackling, trouble-making mob left. "There's enough people here to tear the town apart if they start on us. Folks have to eat, an', by Gawd, we're goin' to feed 'em at decent prices, an' damn the would-be law bein' on the other side an' square agin us. Yuh watch the trail. That's a dangerous trail, an' it's right where they're gonna try to get even with yuh. They ain't quit. Hell, they ain't yet started to fight yuh! Gangs like this are the same the world over—gutless, sneaky, willin' to do anything if it's cowardly and dirty."

The wagons were rolling out and back down the street a short time later. Swinging on back to the east bank of the river, darkness was pooling around them when they started going into camp, but they were far from being alone here. Camp fires of the gold-seekers burned up and down the river, gangs of people keeping in bunches and strings for mutual protection were coming back with loads of supplies hastily doled out by Buckshot Bill Driver and Rip Chandler, everybody happy now that prices of the necessities of life itself had suddenly been brought down to where the common people could buy them. But after supper even with people they could trust all around them it was like a wagon camp in hostile Indian country, alert men standing guard over the freighters and cattle like sentries around a battle-camp.

Before dawn they were stirring, morning fires springing into being up and down the banks of the river. People cheered them at sunrise as the train, going out empty this time, came out of its circle and headed eastward across the basin, tall out-bound wagons over the dangerous trail for Indian Valley and another great load of supplies and food for the hard-pressed miners.

Despite the cheers many people stared at these long-swaying canvas tops and stringed yokes of cattle as far as they could see them among the queer-shaped knolls. Many men and women were convinced beyond any hint of doubt that they were watching them roll away to certain doom.

CHAPTER

5

Bitter Medicine

Riding beside the now calm and thoughtful Whistling Pete, Mohawk was alert at every bend and danger spot all the way to the top of Hell Dive Pass, but the trail was just as they had left it yesterday. At the camp up there not a thing had happened, no one passing up or down the trail in either direction.

It was something else when they struck the river. It seemed that everybody had heard that the trail had been opened. More and more gold-hunters were pouring into Indian Valley—men on horseback, lines of pack-mules, carts, light wagons and buggies, one string after another, the big freight outfit having a tedious time in places to pass them or let them pass.

At sunset when they camped for the night on a big flat far down the river people were still stringing north, one gang hustling to get ahead of another, everybody bug-eyed to get to Yellow Devil Basin.

"Gold!" growled Whistling Pete over his coffee. "All yuh gotta do is tell 'em where somebody's hit it, an' all hell pours out."

It was worse in Indian Valley when they rolled in next morning just before noon. Every vacant lot was filled, the main street milling with people. The three big stores of the town looked as if they had been looted, the most of their shelves empty, their long counters bare, more people reported coming and hurried calls sent down the valley for extra supplies.

Having a warehouse of his own to draw from, Mohawk rested the cattle until the following dawn, meanwhile rounding up ten more big wagons, and the freighters were rolling out. People, wagons, buggies, pack-trains and carts were ahead of them, others stringing in behind, everybody quivering and chattering with excitement.

"Damndest turn-out since the wimmin come in Fifty One!" grinned Whistling Pete. "Yaller Devil's gonna be runnin' over with 'em! We'll be runnin' hundred-wagon hauls if this keeps up."

With everything going north, nothing coming south, it was almost clear rolling. Now and then the breakdown of an over-

loaded cart or rattle-trap wagon held them up, but it only gave the oxen a chance to rest while the fall-apart ahead could be dragged off to the side of the trail, gold-seekers behind it cursing and yowling, pitching in to help get the wreckage out of their way.

When nightfall struck them Mohawk's outfit went into camp. Some of the gold-seekers camped above him or below him, others feverishly pushing on in the darkness, greed unable to hold them. When morning came, night behind them and another full day in front of them, the late afternoon found the freighters nearing the long drag-up where men and yokes from the camp on Hell Dive Pass were waiting to help them over. It was here, with half the men and cattle from the pass camp trying to squeeze down to the freighters that the damnation broke loose ahead.

Without any warning whatever a roar shook the mountains, the thunder of it reverberating down the canyon from end to end. Aheels of it came a tumbling, tossing and tremendous splashing sound ahead as if the high crags and ledges were falling into the river.

Distant yells from suddenly popeyed men, screams and wails from women and children joined the noise. Into that were bawls from panic-stricken cattle, mules setting up a wild and trumpet-like braying. Into all of that was suddenly injected a lasting outburst of gunfire, more men in the distance cursing and yelling. Then, over that, rode another tremendous explosion, a roar that shook the mountains and started loose pieces of rock falling as far as a thousand yards away from it, the canyon trembling again as if an earthquake ran up and down the river.

Mohawk and Whistling Pete managed to get their horses to the top, having to crowd and fight their ways through and past the swarming hordes of terrorized humanity, sawing and lunging animals, stalled carts and wagons. They found only one excited youth at the camp, a boy of seventeen armed with two big six-shooters and a rifle.

"They've hit, Dave, they've hit!" he yelled. "An old man who called 'imself Plez Spurlock showed up in camp 'way 'fore daylight this mornin'. He sneaked

half the fellas away with 'im. Somebody's tryin' to blow the pass clear from under us an' stop them freighters from acomin' in with the cheap grub! Take to the tops above the trail an' maybe yo'll find old Plez an' the fellas!"

SPURRING on, another wild let-loose of shots leading them, they went up a mere wild-goat trail in the rocks above the east side of the pass. Reaching the dangerous top, shots dying away ahead, Mohawk saw men from the camp in the rocks, all of them with leveled rifles, intently watching something coming up in front of them. As he pulled up the lean ghost that was old Plez Spurlock appeared. Behind him trailed three men with their hands in the air. One of them was Fat Sam Trigg, the other the red-headed, rusty-faced man who had tried to back his play on the ledge. The last was Bull Smith, face still a mass of court plaster and blue-black knots from Whistling Pete's terrible, grizzly bear mauling.

Putting his back to them looked like a hell of a way for a man to handle prisoners until Mohawk saw the red-headed, red-bearded Buckshot Bill Driver bringing up the rear, a rifle across his arm, six-shooters in his belt and a long knife swinging against his bosom.

"There's leastwise eight more down there sommers where they lodged in the rocks," growled Spurlock, "unless some two or three got away atter bein' hit. We saved these three to have 'em tell us an' the rest of the people all about it. They'll talk good, 'especially Fat Sam. They was gonna blow the trail down right in front of yuh, Dave. All these goldhunters pour-

in' in sorter held 'em back. I trailed 'em last night while they was settin' dynamite charges. I moved some of 'em an' shifted the wires runnin' to 'em to where they'd only roar without real damage to the trail. I wanted ever'body in the basin to hear what was bein' done to 'em. It's goin' to cause some deerect results, I think."

"I—I was only obeyin' the law, I—I thought!" gagged Fat Sam. "Fetzer Talbutt's judge. He—he says he is. Fan an'—Rance might tell 'im what to do, but—"

"Shut up." Old Plez Spurlock turned and took a firm grip in his collar, pulling him up to look keenly into his eyes. "If it warn't for havin' to pull it back outa all the grease an' muck I'd ram my fist through that fat-frog face an' push it clear out the back. We'll see Fan an' Rance, an' Fetzer, too."

Other people were coming by this time, gold-seekers who thought they had barely escaped with their lives. Soon the rocks were filled with them, muttering, snarling, men already beginning to talk about ropelaw right here on the pass.

"Only yuh ain't hangin' nobody here!" ripped in Spurlock. "There ain't no limb or crag to hang 'em on. Save yore fire for the basin. Let the town do what it will with 'em when we get there. I've been down 'most ever' night talkin' to some I know an' sorter preparin' 'em."

"We're rollin' on!" yelled the crowd. "On to Yaller Devil!"

Two hours later, well ahead of the big freighters, Mohawk and Whistling Pete, Plez Spurlock and Buckshot Bill Driver were riding into the gate of the old wall, their prisoners left behind them on the east bank of the river, two men from the

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pass camp and a gang of level-headed gold-seekers guarding them from the mobs.

Even with clouds of gold-seekers dropping work in all directions to follow them, a tense quiet seemed to hold everything when they pulled up in front of the Joyland. Mohawk led the way inside. At least thirty well-armed men stood at the bar, appearing glued to the hand-rail.

The rest of the room was empty. Mohawk spoke: "I see that Fan Cantello and Rance Rubaney run true to form. When danger comes they're not the men to face it. They leave others behind to fight and die for them."

No one answered him, but he saw a head jerk here and there, men quickly looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes. He went on, watching the foot of a dark stairway in the corner.

"Mobs are forming outside. The kind Fan and Rance use—when they can get other numbskulls like you to lead them. The only thing to save you from stretching rope in this is to keep standing right there at the bar. Where are they?"

Again no one answered him, but he saw two of the bartenders nervously turn their eyes toward the dark stairway. With gold-hunters crowding in behind the ghost-like Plez Spurlock and Whistling Pete Ford, there was no more waiting. Thumbs on the buckles of his belts, Mohawk walked on. Ford followed him. Old Plez Spurlock stood where he had stopped, a six-shooter coming into each hand, gnarled thumbs cocking them.

"What Young Dave Mohawk says is what I go by." His voice was a drone, old face that of a leering devil. "I don't need this damn crowd behind me to handle the likes of this line-up. Let him or them who will just buck back from the bar, an' I'll show him or them how quick I'll let 'em down. Some of yuh tin-horns have yore guns cocked in yore holsters, but I'm bettin' my hide on it that nary one of yuh have the guts to try a pull on me."

FOR A THIRD TIME no one at the bar spoke. All of them must have glanced at him. They must have seen the steadily growing crowd out front and heard the growing mumble of voices, but

everybody seemed to be listening now to the footsteps of Mohawk and Ford on the stairs. It must have reminded them of low hammer blows on a coffin lid. Somebody was going to die. That was a certainty, for up those stairs men were waiting, men who could not see the mobs hastily forming in the street. Suddenly the entire upper part of the Joyland seemed to shake with a flash of gunfire.

Mohawk and Ford had suddenly dropped, just their heads and hands showing above the top of the stairs, gunfire on the level of the floor jerking, answering shots that came from where a door had been yanked open straight ahead of them. Chairs crashed, a table upsetting, oaths snarling, then a furious burst of yells. A window being shattered to bits came into it, glass falling in a rain to the rocky ground behind the Joyland.

"Damn 'em, they're runnin' for it!" yelled a voice. "They're leavin' us to face it! I—I quit! I ain't standin' here dyin' like a damn fool! Rance an' Fran an' Fetzter Talbutt went out a window!"

Three men dead on the floor of a room ahead of them, Mohawk and Ford moved on, finding only two men waiting for them, their weapons dropped, their hands stretched above their heads.

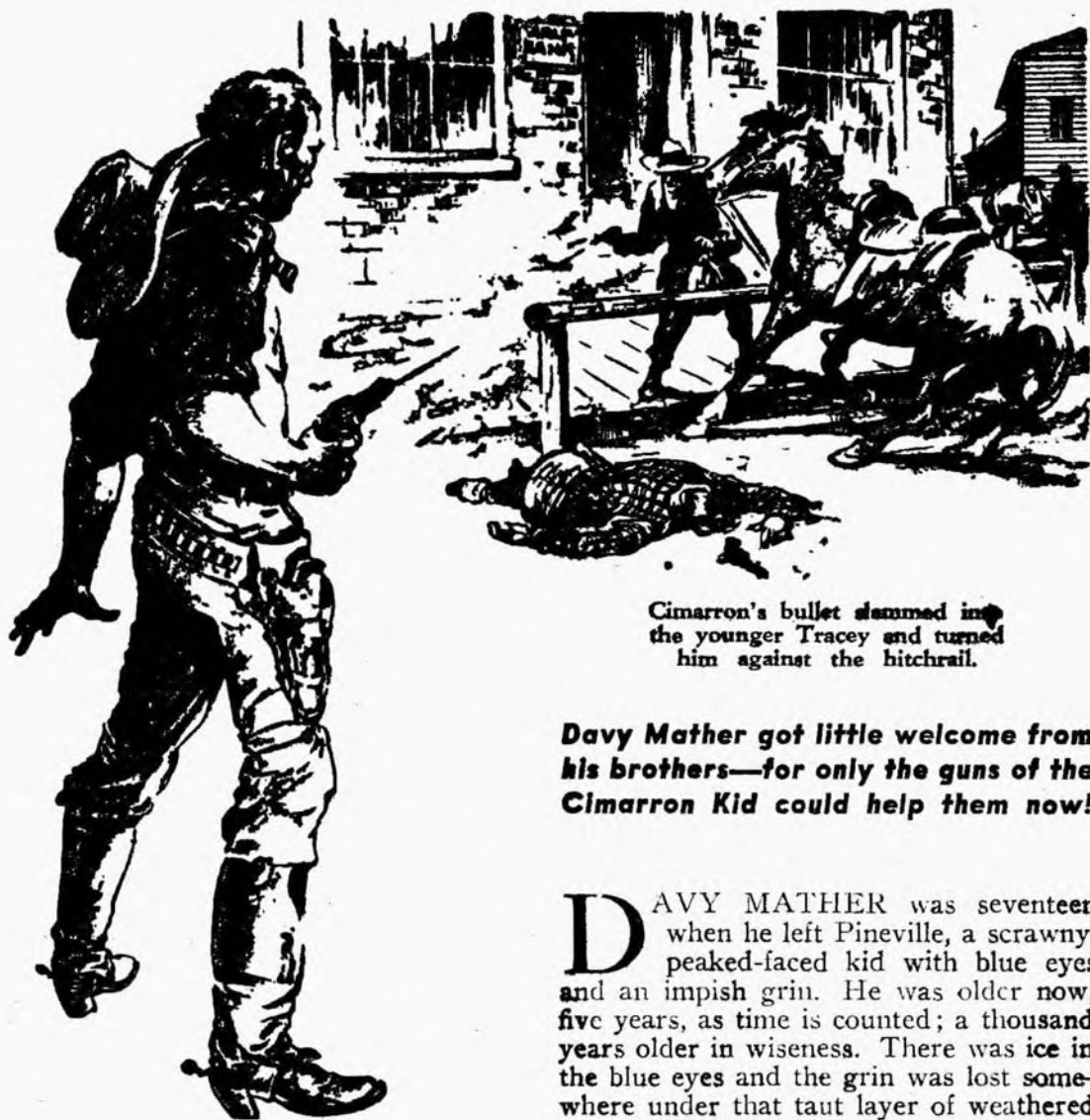
"Out and down the stairs!" Mohawk wiggled his six-shooters at them. "You won't be alone. Long before we crossed the river Plez Spurlock thought of those three taking a back way dive-out. I think there's a crowd down there to take them."

Fifty men had them when he marched these two scared gunmen back down the stairs, leaving the three dead men where they had dropped on the floor. Cantello, Rubaney and the fat, blond-bearded Judge Talbutt had been caught in mid-air, one after the other as they came dropping from the shattered window. Now they were being booted, shoved and rough-housed inside from a rear doorway, the bar room filled with men, crowds in the street yelling, women running up.

Above the noise of the trompling mobs, the howling of men, the shuffling, scraping and dragging of struggling feet, Mohawk heard his big wagons coming, women and the more timid among the men cheering them on. . . .

THE END

TROUBLE RIDES FROM TEXAS!



Cimarron's bullet slammed into the younger Tracey and turned him against the hitchrail.

Davy Mather got little welcome from his brothers—for only the guns of the Cimarron Kid could help them now!

DAVY MATHER was seventeen when he left Pineville, a scrawny, peaked-faced kid with blue eyes and an impish grin. He was older now, five years, as time is counted; a thousand years older in wisdom. There was ice in the blue eyes and the grin was lost somewhere under that taut layer of weathered hide.

There had been a lot of rivers to cross and those crossings had made him hard, gun-wise. There had been Hays and Baxter Springs and Dodge, on those long cattle trails north, and Ogallala and Miles City. There had been saloons and honk-tonks and gambling houses for a kid to learn about, and trail wolves and toughs

**By CHARLES W.
TYLER**

and drunken Texas men, setting their guns aflame.

In those years Pineville had seemed a long way off. A lot of times he had wished he was back in this sleepy town, nestling under the gray crags of the Saddlehorn. Funny, how a kid took fiddle-footed notions. Kinda figgered he'd make plenty money an' come back some day with a fancy saddle, a twenty-dollar Stetson an' a lot of shine to him, talkin' big of the places he'd been.

Davy Mather reined in where the road bent around the hill, looking down on the town. Approaching the bridge his ears caught the sing-song chant of the blacksmith's hammer, a cheery, friendly sound. Shod hoofs striking the planking turned attention his way and the loungers there eyed the rider, mildly curious.

Riding on toward the livery barn, Davy saw familiar faces but no one recognized the dusty horseman with his Texas rig. He stabled his pony and went toward Fred Hardy's barber shop, conscious of his trail grime and unkemptness.

Fred Hardy stared at the lean figure pushing through the door; then he said slowly, "Well, dog my cats! Say, when we hoe ye out from behind them whiskers I bet seven dollars ye turn out to be Davy Mather." He wrung Davy's hand.

"How's things in Pineville?" Davy said.

"Just like always." Fred Hardy's glance dropped to the worn gun-belt, the holstered six-shooter. "Where ye been keepin' yourself all these years, boy?"

"Punchin' cattle back on the big trails."

"Ye-don't tell."

It was good to soak in the old tin-lined tub in back of the barber shop, and after Fred had given him a haircut and a shave Davy Mather examined himself in the mirror with a curious half smile. "Don't look quite so much like an owlhooter."

"Been in to see Eben yet?" Fred said.

"Not yet."

Davy went out to the street and stood at the sidewalk's edge, shaping up a cigarette, looking around. Fred Hardy had been right; everything was the same. Pineville didn't change. It was a remote world, far removed from the dust-fogged rivers of hoofs and horns that flowed north out of Texas and the gun-belted

men that rodded them—or rustled them.

Davy Mather took a slow drag at his cigarette, having for the first time an awareness of the gun slung at his hip and feeling some small embarrassment. Pineville men didn't pack six-shooters. His glance swung toward the bank, thinking about Eben, about the solid, respectable pattern of Pineville. The name Mather was interwoven into this pattern with inflexible design.

Davy Mather's eye touched the loungers on the gallery of Oddie Orrum's store, the forming group by the post office. Over at the depot Andy Parker, the agent, was trundling a baggage truck along the platform, marking preparation for the arrival of the noon train.

Davy's glance moved on to the hotel and came hard against Will Tracey on the gallery. His lids pinched down. If Will was around, Neal and Dade wouldn't be far off.

Davy thought about this as he angled slowly across the street toward the bank. The Traceys had left a red scar of outlawry all across the Nations and on into Kansas, robbing trains and banks, ripping open the trail towns with their brawling and the flame of their guns.

THERE was coolness in the bank, coolness in the eyes of Eben Mather when he looked up and saw Davy standing there. Neither spoke for a little and Davy felt the edge of that old hostility. There had always been a dark gulf between them—the oldest and the youngest of the Mather boys. It had been one of the reasons Davy had gone away.

"So you're back, Davy," Eben said finally.

"Just like a bad penny," Davy said with a tight smile. Somehow, he had felt that Eben might be glad to see him after five years away.

Eben's scrutiny took in the soiled Stetson, with its rolled brim, the faded Levi's, the scuffed boots, resting finally on the gun-belt with marked disapproval. "So you're a gun-toter now."

It would be useless, Davy thought, to attempt to point out to Eben that on those roaring trails he had traveled a six-shooter was as much a part of a cowboy as his spurs; Eben wouldn't understand.

"We never did see things the same," Davy said, ignoring Eben's scornful thrust.

"It makes you look ridiculous," Eben said stiffly.

Eben didn't drink or smoke; he went to church on Sunday. His pride had always been a strong, polished surface that marred easily, Davy remembered. So afraid of what people would say.

"Reckon yuh would just as lief I stayed away," Davy said.

"I have a position to maintain," Eben said, "and the thought of a Mather strutting around with a gun on is not pleasing to me."

"Don't fret," Davy said, his temper rising, "I wouldn't figger on stayin' long." He added, "How's dad an' Amos an' Jason?"

"Father is quite well," Eben said stiffly. "He is out at the ranch with Amos. Jason is building a new home."

"Reckon I'll ride out an' see dad after I eat," Davy said.

"Do," Eben said. "He speaks of you often. I appreciate the fact that you have written him occasionally."

On the way to the hotel Davy met Oddie Orrum. The little store-keeper seemed genuinely glad to see him. "Well, well, Davy!"

"Howdy, Mister Orrum."

"We've been hearin' about ye."

When Pineville folks had asked about Davy his father would say, "Why, Davy is fine. Got a letter just the other day from Ogallala, Nebraska. He was headin' north with a Granville Stuart trail herd." Or, perhaps, it had been Dodge City or Abilene.

"Last we heard ye was trailin' 'em north with Ab Blocker," Oddie Orrum went on.

"The big drives are about done," Davy said.

Oddie's glance touched the gun-belt. "Expect Pineville seems pretty tame to ye."

"It's different from trail towns," Davy said.

"Ever git to see any of them gun-fighters like this Doc Holiday an' Bill Hickok?"

"I've seen a few."

"Asa Hooker, here in town, was back in Ellsworth, Kansas, a year ago an' was tellin' about a feller they called the Cimar-ron Kid."

"I heard of him," Davy said.

"Asa showed us a piece that was in the Ellsworth Reporter about him," Oddie said. "Come up with a Texas trail herd. A big fight started an' this cowboy helped out the marshal one night when a gang of toughs jumped him."

Davy watched Will Tracey walking across from the hotel to the drug store corner. He saw Neal then, coming on past the bank. The Traceys were wearing derby hats and town clothes. Eben came out of the bank and Neal stopped for a word with him. After a little he went on to join Will, who said something that turned Neal's glance toward Davy Mather.

Davy's lips tightened and a hardness came into his face. "How long have those hombres in the hard hats been in town?"

"A week-ten days," Oddie said. "Been dickerin' fer some minin' property up Piney Crick that Eben foreclosed on."

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"They alone?" Davy queried the man.

"No, there's a minin' man an' another feller with 'em." Oddie nodded at an acquaintance; then turned to Davy again. "Ye back fer good, Davy?"

"I don't know. Might stay to help Amos with fall roundup, if he needs a hand."

"Kinda hard fer a fiddle-foot to put down roots, I expect," Oddie said, "but the Saddlehorn is a good country, Davy."

Davy Mather went on toward the hotel, slowly turning over in his mind the names that had been associated with Will and Neal Tracey back there in Kansas. There had been a man called Luke Fargo, who had given town marshals a bad time. And Sonny Tate, gangling, baby-faced—a killer. Dade, the younger of the three Traceys, was a vicious hard-bitten youth, more inclined to treachery than any of them.

Davy was nearly finished with his meal when Will and Neal entered the dining room. They came to his table and Will said, "Ain't I seen you before?"

"Mebbe," Davy said.

"Ellsworth, wa'n't it?" Neal said. He had slightly protruding eyes, which pressed hard against Davy Mather. "Yuh was with that Texas bunch."

"Anythin' wrong with that?" Davy finished the last bite of his pie, drained his coffee cup.

"There was a little trouble," Will said, "with these Texicans an' that badge-toter."

"Yuh was on the wrong side, Kid," Neal said. "Don't let it happen ag'in."

Davy brought out cigarette tobacco and papers, shaped a cigarette and got up slowly, hunting a match. "Yuh ain't meanin' yo're lookin' trouble?" The match hand came up fast and hard. The blow caught Neal Tracey on the side of the head and sent him crashing back against a table.

"That's bad, Kid," Will Tracey said, his eyes hot, dangerous. "Very bad."

The waitress screamed. Ben Briden, the hotel proprietor, rushed in from the office and was stopped suddenly by the danger there.

Davy Mather was facing the Traceys, his hand poised above his holster. Neal had regained his balance and the fingers

of his right hand were clawing for the blind gun inside of his shirt. Will moved in between them, his voice sharp-pitched. "Stop it, Neal!"

"The man don't live who can lay his hands on me!" Neal snarled hoarsely, his face livid with fury.

"Use yore head," Will said.

Davy's blue eyes were as cold as glacier ice. He saw Neal's mad play stopped by Will's cooler head and his spread fingers relaxed. "Just keep out of my way, that's all." He swung on his heel and went out past the open-mouthed Ben Briden.

DAVY MATHER geared his horse at the livery barn and rode slowly down the street, savage thoughts running through him. Excited townfolk were clotted in front of the hotel and their eyes turned toward him. The high sound of their voices hushed and against this silence he heard someone say, "It's Davy Mather."

Davy's mind went back across the years. When devilment was raised in church or at school, or the high voice of the Chink laundryman screamed a protest of some new prank, shocked citizens would cry, "It's that Davy Mather!" There had been those who dourly predicted that he would come to no good end; those who said "good riddance" when he went away.

Davy could see Eben's look of horror when he came down the street from that haughty mansion and learned that he had been in a "scrape," that he had crossed men with whom the bank hoped to do business. His lips thinned and he looked straight ahead, facing toward the white, curving road that led into the great valley of the saddlehorn and on to the old Mather ranch.

Dan Mather greeted his son with a great bear hug and a shout of joy. "Davy, boy, ye're a sight fer sore eyes!" He stood back then, regarding the lean, bronzed figure proudly. "My, ye have growed up."

Big, somber Amos slapped Davy on the back, shook his hand. "Back fer good, ye fiddle-footed young hellion?"

Davy smiled wryly at his brother. "Mebbe. Mebbe not."

Amos pulled out Davy's six-shooter

and examined it. "Big gun fer a kid. Don't see no notches on it."

"A gunman don't have to advertise," Davy said.

"So ye figger ye're a gun-slinger. How good can ye shoot?"

"Fair."

Amos gave his attention to the gear then with a cowman's interest. "Double-cinch, eh?"

"Texas style is to tie hard an' fast," Davy said. "With the center-fire rig you folks use, when a critter hit the end of the rope you'd be travelin' in different directions."

"I'll still take a single cinch an' a rope long enough to use a dally," Amos said, "Spanish California buckaroo fashion."

"Cattle drives from Texas brought in those kind of rigs some years ago," Dan Mather said, "but they found no favor."

"Met a couple fellers campin' at the old miner's cabin up in the timber on Tumbledown Crick a few days ago," said Amos. "They had Texas rigs."

Davy's eyes narrowed. "What did they look like?"

"One was heavy-set, dark complected," said Amos; "the other was younger, baby-faced. They wa'n't very sociable, but spoke of workin' for some man interested in minin' property."

It sounded like Luke Fargo and Sonny Tate all right, Davy reflected. Evidently, Kansas had gotten too hot for the Tracey gang and they had headed for California.

"It's good to have ye home ag'in, Davy," said Dan Mather. "I'd hope ye make up your mind to stay."

"Sure, stick around, young feller," Amos said. He added with a chuckle, "I want to see what happens when ye pile that short-length Texas reata on one of our big steers."

"I guess ye stopped in to see Eben, didn't ye?" Dan Mather said.

"Yes," Davy said with a grimace, "I did, an' he offered me a dollar to go eat at the hotel."

"That's just his way," said Amos. "He means all right."

Davy said nothing of the trouble at the hotel; he felt that his father and Amos would hear about it soon enough, and it was going to hurt.

"Eben has been worried of late too,"

Dan Mather said. "There's been considerable panic talk in the San Francisco papers and the bank is holding a lot of mortgage paper."

"The Pineville bank is the backbone of the country," said Amos, "and Eben realizes his responsibility. He has loaned money against his better judgment at times. Now he is trying to build up his cash reserve by turning some of that paper into money. If anything happened to the bank a lot of folks would lose everything they have."

"Banks don't bother me," said Davy. "If I got a dollar I spend it! if I ain't—well, there's always a job."

"A rolling stone gathers no moss, as Eben would tell you," Amos said with a slow smile.

"Money isn't everything," said Dan Mather. "If you have grown in wisdom, Davy, the years have not been wasted."

Davy's lips thinned and his hand slid slowly down across his holster. "What I learned," he said, "I learned the hard way."

Back on the Texas trails the name, Davy Mather, meant nothing, but men knew of the Cimarron Kid, reckless, headstrong, steel-nerved. A blue-eyed young puncher, ready to whoop it up when riders hit town, quick to throw his pony into the teeth of those clashing horns when the cattle started to run, one of the first to grab his gun when trouble started.

Davy Mather lay awake a long time that night, staring into the blackness, nursing the resentment that Eben had set smouldering inside of him. Eben and his stiff pride—the almighty dollar his god. Eben, for all of his wiseness, suckered into the Traceys' game. They'd clean him like a crooked gambler would clean a greenhorn.

"Well, let 'em!" Davy told himself. "It's none of my affair. I ain't good enough to be invited to his house when I come home after five years away, I ain't good enough to stick my nose in his business."

Davy thought then of Fred Hardy and Oddie Orrum—of their hearty greetings. If anything happened to the bank they stood to lose, along with a lot more fine folks. And there was his father and Amos and Jason. Yes, and even Eben. In the Saddlehorn country the name Mather

stood for honor and straight fair-dealing.

Came the remembrance of that night in Ellsworth. He'd hated town marshals, throwing the law at Texas trail men; yet when the Traceys and their crowd of roughs backed the badge-toter against the wall he had sided him when the show-down came because it seemed the right thing to do.

"Reckon I'm still a Mather," Davy said aloud, and fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

DOWN at the corral the next morning when Amos was laying out the day's riding, Davy said, "Think I'll take a ride up Tumbledown Crick an' see if them men with the Texas rigs are still at the old cabin."

"Sure," Amos said. He watched Davy buckling on his gun-belt with a curious half smile. "Wearin' a gun gets to be sort of a habit, I expect."

"Sometimes it comes in handy," Davy said.

He passed the favorite pools when he had fished when he was a kid and watched the quick dart of trout with the same pleasant excitement he had known as a youngster, creeping stealthily to the bank's edge with his willow pole and the worm-baited hook.

He followed the creek trail into the timber and noticed fresh hoofprints, heading downstream. When he came to the clearing he saw that the cabin door was open; the bars of the old pole corral were down and there was only silence and emptiness in the small mountain meadow.

If, as he had surmised, the occupants of the cabin had been Luke Fargo and Sonny Tate, they had left not long before. Not much doubt that Will and Neal Tracey had learned that the puncher they had known as the Cimarron Kid was Davy Mather. Apparently, they had sent word to Fargo and Tate.

Davy followed the trail of the riders to the edge of the timber. It turned along the foot of the mountain in the direction of Pineville.

The time was close to noon when Davy Mather crossed Piney Creek and approached the sawmill on the outskirts of town. It was Jason's mill. Jason had come out of the office and he stood watch-

ing the rider, a big man in his shirtsleeves. His shout, as he recognized Davy, reached above the high whine of the saw, biting into a log.

"Davy! Our little brother!"

"Hullo, Jason."

"Get down here, ye young scalawag. I heard ye was back."

"I bet yuh did."

"An' ye never come in to see me yesterday. Explain yourself, young feller."

"Reckon yuh know I had a little trouble."

"H-m, seems like I did hear some talk,"

Jason said, eyes twinkling under puckered brows, "but I didn't pay much attention. Wouldn't be our Davy if he wa'n't stirrin' up a breeze."

"It was a couple men I met back in Kansas. They're bad actors, Jason."

"Shaw, now. Why, Eben was tellin' me they was moneyed men, interested in some local minin' property."

"They're more interested in banks," said Davy, "an' express cars. Ever hear of the Tracey gang?"

"I believe I read something about them."

"It was Will an' Neal Tracey I had the trouble with at the hotel. They're out-laws."

Jason's eyes grew grave. "Ye sure about that, Davy? Ye haven't got these men nixed up with somebody else."

"I'm sure all right." Davy added, half apologetically, "Guess I should have told Eben but I was sore at the way he acted."

"You come with me," Jason said. "We'll go see him right away."

Davy dropped the reins of his horse beside the sawmill office and walked with his brother along the rutted roadway between the lumber piles. They crossed the spur track that led into the yard, passed the loading corrals and the freight house beyond and came to the lower end of Depot Street.

Near the mouth of an alley that ran behind a block of buildings they saw five horses with Texas-rigged saddles. Davy told of the men who had been staying at the cabin on Tumbledown Creek and of the tracks leading away from there.

Jason said, "I don't like the looks of this," and his stride quickened.

When they turned the corner Davy saw

Neal Tracey at the end of the block. He was standing alone at the sidewalk's edge, watching across the street toward the bank. Davy's eyes frosted over. "There's one of 'em," he said.

As they moved up Depot Street, Davy's glance ran along the galleries, probing the shade beneath the board awnings, searching for others of the Tracey gang. They had almost reached the bank corner when he saw the bulk of Luke Fargo in front of the post office, one of the forming group that made a ritual of waiting there for the mail to be put up after the arrival of the noon train.

A man in his shirtsleeves came out of the Wells-Fargo office and spoke to Jason. Jason said, "Howdy, George."

George went up the bank steps and his hand went out to the latch but the door resisted him. He pushed, shook the door, a slow puzzlement spreading across his face. "The door is locked," he said.

A look of vast alarm spread across the face of Jason. "Something is wrong!" He sent a quick glance at Davy, standing a little past the steps at this main street corner.

Davy's eye took a quick run toward the post office and he saw Luke Fargo start along the sidewalk toward the place where Neal Tracey was standing. Toward the rear of the bank, in front of the alley that paralleled Depot Street, his glance came against young Dade Tracey.

The pattern was clear. Will and Sonny Tate had gone into the bank and locked the door. Will knew the interior well from his many visits there in connection with this mining deal; he knew the heavy door of the vault would be standing open, there

behind the cashier's grille. The looting of the vault would require but a few brief minutes. When they came out, Fargo and Neal would be there to cover their retreat to this alley, which led down behind the block to the place where the horses stood.

Davy's lips drew into a hard line. He was watching Neal Tracey now, there on the opposite corner. "Stand back from the door," he told Jason, low-toned. "This is it!"

SLEEPY Pineville. Birds singing. The high note of the saw at the mill. The patter of the blacksmith's hammer down the street. The lacy shade of the cottonwoods.

Here and there a slack-hipped horse stood at a hitch-rail. A settler's wagon was drawn up in front of Oddie Orrum's store. Two or three idlers occupied the bench along the front of the saddle shop. A woman with a market basket bobbed her sunbonnet at an acquaintance on the sidewalk outside of the butchershop.

One of a small group on a gallery across the street called out, "Hi, gun-toter!" Several faces turned toward the lean-framed figure wearing a cartridge belt and holster, there on the bank corner, and there was a low note of laughter.

The attention of the woman in the sunbonnet was turned toward the bank by this. An instant later her scream cut through the midday quiet, a high, piercing sound that was lost in a crash of gunfire.

Jonas Mather, moving away from the bank door at the command of Davy, said to George Passmore, the Wells-Fargo agent, "There's trouble here, George. Quick! Get your gun!"

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Passmore had been a gun-rider on the stage before the railroad had been built. He stood for a moment, absorbing the thing Jason said, this quiet warning, striking out of a blue sky. He turned then and went toward the express office at a run.

The sudden departure of Passmore, the hard rap of bootheels on the plank walk pulled Neal Tracey's bleak stare away from Davy Mather and his eye jerked to Passmore with swift apprehension. He knew the agent, knew that on the wall of the express office, two doors distant from the bank, there was a sawed-off shotgun in a rack.

Neal Tracey's hand swept under his coat and wrenched out a Colt .45. He fired at Passmore, a hurried shot that did no more damage than to smash a pane of glass.

Davy Mather, the Cimarron Kid of the Texas cattle trails, brought his six-shooter from the low-hung holster in a fluid flow of movement that seemed almost unhurried and yet was fast. Fargo had come up beside Neal Tracey, his gun leaping from its hiding place and swinging in a rapid, blue-steel arc.

The bullet from Davy's crashing Colt struck Luke Fargo before the outlaw had fully cocked his gun. The hammer-blow at belt-line bent him forward and he fell slowly, with the complete slackness of a man who will not get up again.

Certain that Fargo and young Dade would bracket the Cimarron Kid with their guns, Neal Tracey gave his full attention to George Passmore in an attempt to stop him before he reached the door of the express office. But again the bullet was wide.

Sight of the tawny Cimarron Kid at the bank corner set Dade Tracey in motion. He had no stomach for standing up to a gun-fighter of the caliber of the Kid and he put himself quickly on past the hitch-rail, taking cover behind a saddled horse. He jerked a six-shooter from the belt under his coat and thrust it across the saddle.

As Fargo collapsed, the Cimarron Kid whirled his eye searching for young Dade. A gun roared and he had an awareness of the wicked rush of the bullet. The gun blast set the horse to plunging and it jerked free and spun into the street, leav-

ing Dade to finish his duel in the open

Dade's second shot was thrown in desperation, a wild attempt to drop this lean-framed figure in faded Levis before that black gun jerked. Cimarron's bullet slammed into the younger Tracey and turned him in against the hitch-rail. He clutched at it.

Neal Tracey's bulging eyes rolled in their sockets like red-veined agates, leaving the disappearing form of George Passmore to whip toward the Cimarron Kid with blazing savagery.

The Cimarron Kid had turned, a quick pivot that faced him squarely toward Neal Tracey. He looked all rawhide and ice. His leathery features were taut with grim purpose.

Neal Tracey's nerves were turned raw at the unexpected turn of affairs. His gun-hand was a knot of steel springs wound tight. The Cimarron Kid was relaxed, every muscle perfectly controlled and obedient to a disciplined brain, trained to function with precision under physical tension.

Twin concussions rocked the street and when the sound of them had ebbed into a silence, broken only by the high song of the saw at the mill, Neal Tracey was sprawled in the yellow dust.

In the bank, Will Tracey had been in high spirits as he forced Eben Mather to drop the packaged greenbacks into the gunny sack at pistol point. "This beats that mining proposition all hollow, my friend."

"You're going to break the town," Eben said, his voice strained.

Will Tracey laughed harshly. "That's your worry." He went on conversationally. "Didn't know you had a gun-toter in the family until yesterday. With the damned Cimarron Kid showing up when he did, we had to pull the job a bit sooner than we intended. Too bad we've got to leave the gold, but we're traveling light and fast when we leave here. . . ."

The exploding gun-fire on the street brought Will and Sonny Tate to the door on the run. Cursing, they started down the steps, six-shooters drawn, to be caught in a leaden hail of buckshot from George Passmore's sawed-off shotgun.

Two outlaws were dead when the final

(Please continue on page 97)

Only two people dared buck Coll Lake's Vigilante gang. One was a
button—and the other was an old man. . . .

TOO OLD TO DIE!

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.



"Now," Old Sam said, rifle cradled in his big, horny hands, "you're gonna learn somethin'."

CLEM and me, we could see that Old Sam was getting in his dotage and we figured it was best to humor him. Old Sam—he liked it better that way than "Pa" or "Father"—was well on into seventy, though unusually well-preserved, physically. He had a game right leg and had to be helped into the saddle at times. What bothered us most was the way he took on about Coll Lake and the Vigilantes.

"Vigilantes are okay," he'd rant, "if they have the right kind of leader. That Lake skunk is ruining the organization. Runnin' hog-wild, that's what."

"Somebody's got to take a firm hand,"

I told him, Clem and me cleaning the supper dishes. "'Frisco was overrun with badmen until the Vigilantes buttoned down. They put the fear of God into those gunnies. Coll Lake's doing the same thing here. Corralled a dozen rustlers and highwaymen in the past coupla months."

"The men Lake hanged," Clem added, "had it comin' 'em. Caught with the goods, pure and simple."

I thought Old Sam would blow his top. He stood there by the wood stove, drawing and puffing on his pipe like one of those volcanoes you read about. Old Sam took the pipe out from between his teeth, spat out the window.

"Listen!" he bellowed, and Clem and me jumped instinctively. "Coll Lake don't bother with trials. Suppose his Vigilantes was to make a mistake sometime? String up somebody innocent? Everybody deserves a hearin'. I helped Nolan buck the Spaniards, back in 1799. Fought Injuns and renegades from the Mississippi clean out here to Californy. But I always give the other fella an honest break. I tell you, every man, boy, and skunk has a right to trial, and by Judas, I'm going to do somethin' about it."

Clem and me looked at each other, not feeling too good. "What you going to do, Old Sam?" I said, trying to sound collected-like.

Old Sam had picked up his heavy rifle from the corner, and was making for the door. He paused, those bright gray eyes of his stabbing at us from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"I'm doin' some scoutin'," he said. "Heard the Vigilantes are after four men suspected of hoss-stealin'. So I figure I'll do some scoutin'."

Clem and me, we stood there after Old Sam had left. We both were thinking about what we hadn't told Old Sam, namely that we had joined up with the Vigilantes this very afternoon. We wanted to ease the news on him gentlelike. Now, it sure looked bad for that. What if Old Sam was to bust up on us while we were out with the Vigilantes tonight?

Clem threw down his towel and grabbed up his hat. When he reached the door, he had his gunbelt buckled about his waist.

"We'll have to risk it," he said shortly. "Get your gun and saddle up. We're due at Lake's in half an hour."

I slipped my pearl-handled .44 into its holster, followed my brother to the corals. I sure hoped we wouldn't run into Old Sam. No telling what he'd do, him dead-set against us Vigilantes the way he was.

Coll Lake met us in his office behind the Boulder Creek Grain and Hardware Shop. Rafferty, Hillman, and the rest of the bunch were there already. The giant Vigilante captain glared at us Westons over his thick black beard.

"You're two minutes late," he snapped. "Fall in with the rest and ride. We're smoking those horse-thieves out of Sutter

Canyon tonight." His orders were sharp.

Clem and me dusted out of town with the boys, wondering where Old Sam was by now. There was a bright moon in the sky and you could see as good as day almost. We rode as far as the low-lying hills, then we advanced on foot over the scattered rocks about the canyon.

The cabin where the four Slaters were holed up snuggled in a group of cottonwoods. Lake and the rest of us eased down through the rocks. I reviewed then, in my mind, the facts in the case. Last night, Bill McClane, of the Bell-Bar spread, had been killed in a raid on his prize horses. This morning, Vigilante Rafferty had spotted the Siater family riding near the canyon on four Bell-Bar horses. The Slaters tried to feed Rafferty a cock-and-bull yarn about having bought the horses from four other fellows an hour previous.

Rafferty had started to make his arrest, the Slaters broke away hell-bent and holed up in their cabin. They had fired at the advancing Vigilante. Rafferty then had ridden back to town for reinforcements.

COLL LAKE stuck his bearded face around the side of the rock. "You birds down there in the cabin," he shouted through cupped hands, "We've got you cornered. Come out peaceablelike and you won't get hurt."

We all shot our guns at the cabin to show we meant business.

There was a dead silence in the canyon several minutes. Clem and me begun to think the quarry had skipped. Then a high, nervous voice yelled out, "You go to blazes! We're innocent, and we ain't gonna be took by no bunch of rope-crazy maniacs!"

The remark was punctuated by a bullet uncomfortably close to our rock.

Coll Lake's face was black-set. "If it's war they want—" He fired carefully into one of the windows.

There was a scream from the cabin's interior. It sounded like a rabbit I once heard, being gutted by a fox. I felt a little sick. Our boys fired again, and then a white cloth waved frantically in the doorway. A thin, tall man walked out, followed by a shorter, stouter fellow, a stooped, oldish man, and a sixteen year-

old kid with a bandage around his left arm. Tom Slater, his brother and father, and young son, Tim.

They walked slowly toward us, hands raised. Tom Slater, in the lead, was clean shaven, with the clearest, bluest pair of eyes I had ever seen. I couldn't help thinking that he didn't look like a murdering horsethief to me.

"You fellows are wrong about us," he said quietly. "We didn't steal no horses."

Coll Lake sneered. "Expect us to believe that?" he said. "You were caught riding Bell-Bar animals. That's proof enough for me. Bring over the ropes, Rafferty."

Rafferty was looking a little green about the gills. I strongly suspected he didn't like the job any more than the rest of us. But Coll Lake was boss, and it didn't do to buck him. The evidence was all against those four captured men.

"Maybe we oughta have a trial," Clem scared me by announcing. "Just to be on the sure side."

I thought Coll Lake would jump down my brother's throat. "I'm giving the orders here! These men are guilty. String 'em up, boys."

The men addressed hesitated, but only for a minute. Rafferty and a couple other fellows adjusted the noose about the four Slaters' necks, shoved them up to the cottonwoods. The free ends of the ropes were tossed over limbs and tied to saddle-horns of waiting horsemen. All four of the captives looked pretty grim and white-faced, but they didn't break down like you'd expect. Somebody gave old Matt Slater a chew of tobacco, and he worked on it silently, thoughtfully.

Tim Slater, the sixteen year-old, showed more courage than I would have, in his shoes. He just stared ahead, biting his lower lip a little.

Tom and Mark Slater smoked quietly on the cigarettes they'd requested.

Coll Lake raised his hand for the signal. "Anything you men want to say before you are sent on to your Maker?" he asked solemnly.

There was a moment of tight silence. Then a shrill voice from somewhere to the right of us split the night air.

"Plenty, Coll Lake!" it shouted, and we Vigilantes turned as a man toward the

jumble of rocks above. "They want to say they're innocent, and that neither you nor the rest of your so-called lawdogs are going to hang them for it. Take off them ropes, you thick-headed fools, before I puts a slug through every blisterin' mother's son of yuh!"

Clem and me, we really felt sick. That was Old Sam, holed up there in those boulders with his rifle. Our old father, tangling with the Vigilantes—Old Sam surely was in his dotage.

"Don't shoot!" I hollered at Coll Lake. "That's our old man out there. He—don't mean no harm. If we just humor him, get his rifle—"

Coll Lake already was raising his gun. "Humor—hell!" he said. "That old fool's dangerous. He's buckin' the law."

He fired before Clem or me could prevent it. Rock chips and dust flew from the boulder protecting Old Sam. Then, almost instantly, Old Sam's rifle began to bark, and bullets sprayed amongst us. When I say sprayed, I mean just that. Those bullets slighted nobody. Coll Lake's gun jumped from his hand, and the Vigilante captain howled in pain. Rafferty, right beside me, gasped as a slug burned a trough through his curly red hair.

The other boys ducked for cover, Clem and me doing likewise. We always had respected Old Sam's marksmanship, and tonight he sure didn't let us down none. Old Sam didn't know we were present. He didn't give us time to acquaint him with the fact.

"You there, the skinny galoot with the dirty mark for a moustache," Old Sam's high voice ordered, "You got jest five minutes to get the ropes off them four fellers."

The Vigilante addressed was Ned Hillman. Ned moved faster than I ever had seen him move. In three and a half minutes flat, those four Slaters were free as the air now fanning my sweating hands and forehead.

"Now," Old Sam said, jimping out from cover, rifle cradled in his big, horny hands, "you're gonna learn somethin'."

MAYBE you think it funny, the bunch of us toeing the mark to one old man. Us Vigilantes could have swarmed down on Old Sam in a group, taken away his

gun and rendered him helpless. The only catch was, several of us were pretty certain to go down before we reached him. None of us seemed eager to be included among those dearly departed.

Then, too, we all respected Old Sam's advancing years.

Coll Lake was purple to the ears, but he didn't make a dive for his fallen gun. "You—!" he cursed. "You old meddler! You realize I can have you jailed for obstructing the law this way? Interfering with a hangin' and—"

Old Sam just kept coming on, until he was within spitting distance of the Vigilante leader.

"Law?" he said. "That's a laugh. The way you run it, law-abiding folks ain't got a chance. Take them four fellers there you almost just now hanged. If I hadn't come along in time, they'd be half-way along the road to Glory."

Coll Lake's green eyes blazed. "They're murdering horse-thieves—"

Old Sam spat on a nearby rock. "That's just the trouble," he said. "You birds don't take time to be sure. Me, I got to thinkin'. I decided to do a little investigatin' on my own. I did, and it proved mighty enlightenin'. Mighty enlightenin'."

"You old goat," Coll Lake began, "We aren't interested in what you—"

Rafferty, the redheaded Vigilante, edged forward. "Just a minute there, Captain," he said slowly. "I reckon we would like to hear a mite more about this. Go on, Old Sam. What did you find out about Bill McClane's killers?"

"I found out plenty," he said. "I went and had a talk with Slater and his folks. Slater told me how four men rode up, offered to trade their mounts for his. Said they was from the Bucket B spread up north. They offered a generous cash bonus on each animal, to boot. Slater, needin' the money bad for livin' costs and an ailin' son, didn't ask questions. He didn't know them hosses was stolen. When your Vigilante tried to make the arrest, Slater and his kinfolk got panicky and lit out, just like any of you might of done."

Old Sam looked at the lot of us, and his eyes went a little wider when he spotted Clem and me, but he went right

on talking without batting any an eyelash.

"I picked up the trail of the real hoss thieves, flushed 'em in a valley six mile from here. They had a dozen broncs wearing the McClane Bell Bar brand. To shorten the story, I accused 'em, and they made a play for it. Three of 'em won't give you no more trouble."

His deepset eyes returned to Clem and me. "You two go up into them rocks and drag out that skunk I left tied there. He's the only one left of them killers, but he sure is in a talkative mood."

Clem and me, we hustled up among the rocks, and sure enough, there was a short, scar-faced man, trussed up and gagged, just like Old Sam had said. We yanked him to his feet, shoved him over to Coll Lake and the Vigilantes where he spilled plenty, after we took the gag out of his mouth.

The Slaters returned to their cabin. They promised to return the Bell-Bar horses first thing in the morning. Clem and me and the rest of us Vigilantes didn't say much, but we were doing a heap of thinking. We had almost hanged four innocent men, and we still were feeling sick to the stomach about it. Maybe that's why we didn't raise a hand to stop Old Sam from doing what he did to Coll Lake then.

Old Sam, well up in his seventies and a full three inches shorter than the Vigilante captain, swung out with that horny right fist of his. The blow caught Coll Lake squarely in the middle of his bearded jaw. Lake went down like a mule had kicked him.

"Just wanted to show you boys," Old Sam said calmly, dusting off his hands, "what comes of havin' the wrong leader."

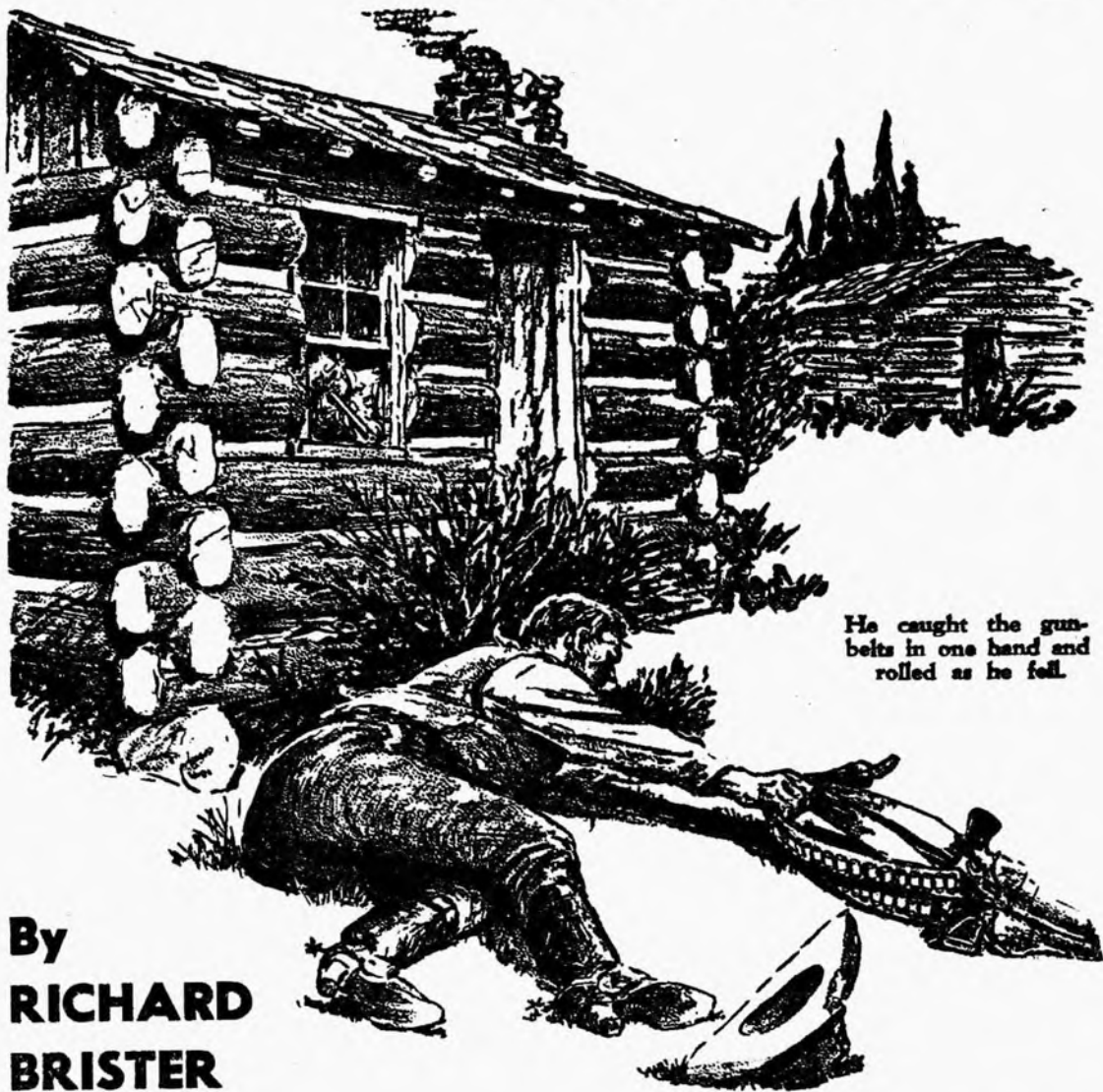
Rafferty jumped in front of Old Sam, as the latter was leaving.

"We admit we had the wrong leader," he said hurriedly. "We sure as hell regret it. But now we got to have another. A guy with guts and a level head. We want you for our new Vigilante captain, Old Sam. How about it?"

Old Sam looked at him. Then he looked over at Clem and me, and he winked. Old Sam spat.

"I'll think it over," he said. "Right now, it's late and I'm headin' for the hay. You, Ed and Clem, let's go."

BREED OF THE LAWDOG



He caught the gun-
belts in one hand and
rolled as he fell.

By
**RICHARD
BRISTER**

*You can't make a man a lawdog
by hanging a tin badge on him—
nor keep a Corbin from being
one, by taking it off!*

ED CORBIN lifted his eyes hopefully as a shadow fell on the threshold of the smithy. It was not business, he saw, only old Christianson, the town busybody. Ed tried to keep the disappointment out of his eyes and his voice as he nodded at the old man.

"Mornin', Dave. What's trouble? You look het up about somethin'."

"If you knowed what I know," said the

old man in his raspy accent, "you wouldn't look so calm neither. Jug Ewald has took off on another rampage."

"How's that?" Ed gulped. "You mean—"

"I mean when Lucas went for to open the saloon up this mornin', he found the place in a shambles. Cash box was rifled of the small change Lucas keeps in it, and there was a good fifty dollar's worth of booze missin'. That Jug's goin' to be a mighty hard cat to handle, by the time he gets full of that drinkin' likker."

"Excuse me, Dave," Ed said. He took off the big leather apron he wore to protect himself while at his anvil and forge and swung out onto Grove Street, a thin, sober-faced man with a light of intelligence about his brown eyes which seemed out of place, in a man of his calling.

"Where you goin' in sich a hurry?" asked the old man.

"Up to my dad's house," Ed said. "Be just like him to try to ride out after Jug, sick as he is. But there's a limit to a lawman's duty. Jug's mean enough to kill a man, and Jesse's gun reputation ain't going to scare him."

"Mebbe you're fixin' to go out and haul Jug in yourself, Ed," the old town idler cackled. Ed's slender shoulders stiffened under the weight of Dave Christianson's sarcasm, and it was in him to turn and fling a retort at the old man. He didn't bother. His mind was full of the scene he was about to have with old Jesse.

It was a good many weeks since he'd had any words at all with his father. . . .

In a way, he supposed, this situation was more his own fault than any one else's. In his mind's eye, he could picture once more that fateful day in front of the Cattlemen's Bank, when Cutbank Billy Eagan and the Jory brothers, Hall and Tom, had come charging out, throwing lead as fast as their guns could work.

It had been whang-leather-tough old Jesse Corbin, Bent Creek town marshal, and his son and deputy, Ed, in a shoot-out with those three reckless outlaws.

Jesse's first shot had caught Billy Eagan through the stomach, sent him jackknifing into the dust of the street, coughing, gurgling his life's blood out.

Hall Jory spanked a slug into Ed's shoulder. Ed was flung back against the

wall of Staple's Hardware. He braced himself there, firing deliberately at Hall Jory. And he hit his man, right through the chest. But not before Tom Jory had plugged Ed through the side.

Ed had come to a good twelve hours later, with Doc Lang breathing his whisky breath down on him, with Ellen standing tearfully above him, with the two kids, Janie and Jesse, lurking with frightened eyes in the background.

His dad was there, too. He would always remember the triumphant expression on his dad's leathery, thin face as the old man clapped spindly Doc Lang between the shoulder blades.

"By damn, Doc," Jesse said. "What'd I tell you? You can't kill a Corbin!"

"You can come mighty close," said Doc Lang, pulling a pint bottle from his pocket and taking a long pull on it. "Son, how you feelin'?"

The answer to that was, too weak to talk. Ed managed a wan smile and again his father clapped the little medico on the back.

"One thing about the Corbins is they always come up smilin', no matter what. Well, Ellen." Jesse swung toward Ed's tearful wife. "You can dry them purty eyes now. Tell the young 'uns their daddy's goin' t' be good as new." He chuckled. "You can't kill a Corbin . . . Ain't that so, Ed?"

Ed couldn't move his lips to reply. He moved an eyebrow, and Jesse acted as if that made his only son into a real special hero. "That's all right, boy. Just you take it easy. We'll get outta here now an' let you rest. By the way, I kilt Tom Jory dead as a doornail, 'case you wondered."

Ed hadn't given the matter a thought. He was too preoccupied with a more personal problem. He had a lot of time to think, during the next several weeks.

One day Jesse came in to see him, and Ed handed back the deputy's badge Jesse had pinned on him, months ago, down in the law office.

The old man's mustache jerked as his mouth opened. "What's this for?"

"I won't be needing that any more, Dad."

"Why not, in tarnation?"

"I'm not taking part in any more man-

hunts. From now on I'm going to concentrate on the smithy."

The old man took a gold toothpick from his vest pocket and went through an elaborate pantomime of removing foreign matter from between his teeth. When he spoke again, there was an edge of steel in his raspy voice.

"And jest how," he said, "did you come by sech a crazy idea?"

"I decided I've done my share of upholding the law in this town, Dad. I've risked my life plenty of times, and now it's costing me a pretty penny of business lost at the smithy. I was watching Ellen and the kids pretty close, that day when I finally got my eyes open. They thought I was dead, Dad. I ain't going to put Ellen and the kid through that kind of a wringer again."

THE old man's gray eyes burned at him, as if trying to see right inside him. "You an' me've always been mighty close, Ed. Always made me proud, the way we can speak out in meeting to each other. I'm gunna speak out right now."

"Go ahead, Dad."

"I say you're talkin' like a dad-blamed young idiot, Ed."

"I didn't really expect that you'd understand, Dad."

"Boy, where's your brains? You know what this town'll say, if you hand back that deputy's badge now? They'll say you turned on your daddy. They'll say—"

"And I'll say that a man's first loyalty is to his wife and children, even more than to his father."

"Mebbe. They's logic in that. I'm willin' to see it, bein' your father. This town ain't your father though, Ed. This town ain't goin' to see a dad-blamed thing but the fact that you got yourself shot up an' come a close call and decided that deputy's badge would look purtier on some other vest."

Ed's brown eyes met those of his father. "You sayin' I'm yellow, Dad?"

The older man shifted on his long legs and flung an uneasy glance out the window.

"I'm tellin' you not to be a dad-blamed fool. You'll lose a whole lot more black-smithin' business to Charlie Ingram if you get this town riled up at you, Ed."

"Why should they rile? I've done my share. I've taken my chances. Why shouldn't I be able to live a peaceable life now?"

"Dag nab it, becuz you're a Corbin, for one thing. The Corbins has always been tough and— Hell, boy, you know I been hopin' you'd take over this badge of mine some day."

Ed shook his head slowly. "I never will, Dad. I'm sorry."

"An' why won't you?"

Ed let a moment pass, then said, "Because I think too much of Ellen."

"You're talkin' like a daggone hollow-belly dude," the older man suddenly exploded. "You ask me, you think too much of Ed Corbin!"

He had gone rampaging out, slamming the door, leaving Ed to lie there frowning against the pillow. He had thought that Jesse would finally come around to his way of thinking, but the tough old badge toter had been cut too deeply by Ed's decision. Ed was his only son, the only kin he had in this world, and Jesse needed to be proud of Ed the way most men need food for their stomachs.

* * *

And now Jug Ewald, the town's number one trouble maker, had broken into Lucas' Saloon during the night, had stolen Lucas' cashbox full of small change and a supply of booze. And Ed had made a beeline straight to his father's house, where he knew the old lawdog was convalescing after his most recent attack of lung trouble. The white-mustached old man received Ed's news sourly.

"What're you so white about?" the old man croaked at him. "You ain't wearin' a deputy's badge these days."

"Dad, you're in no shape to go out there to Jug's place. You been down sick an' you're still weak as a kitten."

Jesse Corbin fingered the ends of the long white mustache. "Sick or well, I reckon I got enough manhood in me to cut Jug Ewald down to the size of his britches."

"Why can't you wait a while?" Ed said. "You know how Jug is when he gets his hands on a supply of booze. He's worse'n a rattlesnake, an' twice as dan-

gerous with them damn Henry rifles out there at his cabin. But if you'd give him time to drink himself—"

"Into a stupor, hey?" said Jesse Corbin. "So I could go out there and clap irons on him while he was unconscious?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothin' much," said old Jesse in a deceptively soft voice. Then his gray eyes hardened. "'Cept that I ain't that kind of a lawman. Now suppose you just hustle your hocks on outta here, Ed."

"But—"

"Drag it. Can't you tell when a man's busy?"

"Dad, you can't—"

"I'll tell you what I can't do. I can't stand here and listen to any more of your notions how to make a safe job out of toting a law badge. It ain't a safe job. Never will be. I knowed that when I pinned the badge on. I ain't never ducked around trouble, and I'm a mite too old to be startin'."

Ed took an outsized red handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his damp forehead. He looked down at the monogram his mother had stitched into one corner of the cloth, before making him a birthday present of it, one long ago day.

"Remember this, Dad? Mom gave it to me."

"What about it?"

"Nothin'. Just thinkin' how she'd hate seein' us squared off at each other this way, if she was still livin'."

The older man's face went dead sober, the old eyes started to film, then Jesse wiped his nose with an impatient finger and snapped, "Ain't no proper time for a man to be thinkin' them kind of soften-up thoughts, Ed. I got a tough job ahead of me."

Reluctantly, Ed stuffed the red handkerchief in his hip pocket. "Dad, I wish you'd wait."

The old man's unpredictable temper flared up. "An' I wish you'd haul your freight on outta here. If you can't act the part of a Corbin, the least you can do is keep clear. You're worse'n a calamity-howlin' female. I swear if they was any Corbin blood in you, it sure must of bled out when you was in that bank ruckus . . . Now skedaddle. You're makin' me nervous."

Ed stood there, wondering where his duty lay. Should he go, as Jesse commanded, and permit the old man to ride out to Jug Ewald's cabin, straight into a heap of gun trouble he was in no physical shape to cope with? Or should he prevent his father from going out there by force?

He considered that thought only for a brief instant. For old Jesse was snapping: "You hear me say git?"

The long white mustache quivered, attesting to the degree of Jesse's impatience now, and the thin, leathery face was red as a barn roof. He'll have a stroke, Ed thought, if I keep whittling at him. He turned to go.

"Next time I want to talk to you, Ed," the old man said, "I'll tell you." Then, as Ed paused in the door, the unpredictable old man changed his tack once again. "I s'pose you meant well enough. Wasn't no need for you to worry. Can't kill a Corbin."

CAN'T kill a Corbin, Ed thought, as he walked back up Semple Street to the corner of Semple and Grove. His father had said it a thousand times, more or less. Why? Why would a man say a thing like that, over and over? Because he believed it? Or perhaps because he wanted to believe it. Because it was necessary for him to believe it, in order to keep up his courage, which after all was the stock-in-trade of a town marshal.

But you can kill a Corbin. You can kill old Jesse, the shape he's in. Especially you can kill Jesse if your name is Jug Ewald and you're barricaded in your cabin with two Henry rifles and a supply of whisky.

Ed took the red handkerchief out of his pocket and again wiped globules of perspiration from his worried forehead. Suddenly his slight legs began to move faster, until he was going at a half walk, half jog down Grove toward the smithy. And then he was running.

The big long-coupled bay gelding belonged to Slim Cottrell, who rode for Teakettle. The bay was newly shod and ready to go. Ed knew Slim Cottrell's town habits, knew that the ranny would be too busy in Lucas' saloon the next three-four hours to be calling for his horse

at the smithy in the interim between.

Ed flung a saddle on the bay and rode out Davis Alley toward the Ridge Trail and the shortcut over the Notch that would take him to Jug Ewald's cabin.

If he rode like a demon, if Jesse took his time and went the longer but easier way, which seemed likely considering the old man's physical condition, Ed ought to have a half hour out there alone with Jug Ewald.

He tied the bay to a juniper tree, a quarter mile from the cabin, and walked carefully toward it on foot. As he came into the cleared ground that bordered the path to Jug Ewald's spring, he could see smoke curling from Jug's chimney. He stepped down onto the path, and would have continued toward the cabin, had not a slug whined past his head, gone spanging into a tree behind him.

He heard the sound of that Henry rifle's explosion from inside the cabin, and then Jug's voice, high pitched, strident with emotion, thickened by booze.

"One more step forward an' I'll correct my aim some, Ed. Them big buttons acrost your front'd make a right interestin' target. Whatta you want?"

"Talk with you, Jug," Ed called to the man who lurked behind that threatening rifle, within the cabin.

"Go ahead. I'm a-listenin'."

"You was always more hospitable than that, Jug. I could sure use me a mouthful of what you been guzzling."

"What you want out here, Ed? You reppin' for your old man, in his sickness?"

"I can't talk so easy, Jug, with that rifle trained on me."

"Don't tell me you got your nerve

back? You back to wearin' one of them deppyty badges?"

"Do I get that drink, Jug? Ed took a step forward, gingerly, like a man walking on rollers.

"You'll get a mouthful of lead, if you ain't damn careful. Take that gunbelt off nice and easy. Drop it in the dirt an' we'll talk about drinkin' whisky." His voice slurred. "How'd you know I was havin' a booze party?"

Ed kept his hands in front of him and took another step forward.

"You hear me tell you to drop them guns? Jug Ewald snarled from behind the long Henry rifle. The barrel jabbed toward Ed through the window, sunlight glinting off its blue surface.

"You wouldn't shoot me, Jug," Ed said. "You know you'd hang for it."

"Try me," said the booze-crazed man in the cabin. "Take another step towards me, Ed. Jest try me."

Ed stood there, testing the temper of his opponent another brief moment. It came to him that beyond any doubt Jug Ewald would shoot him down in cold blood, if pressed to it further. Ed said, "I ain't going to put my head in a lion's mouth, Jug. Reckon I'll drop the guns."

"Just be damn careful about it. I ain't in no mood to fool with you or nobody."

Ed unbuckled his gunbelt and dropped it on the ground.

"Do I rate that drink now?"

"I ain't drinkin' with Jesse Corbin's son," said Jug Ewald in a suddenly harsh inflection. "I spent too much time in jail on that old he-devil's account."

Ed heard that warning tone in the voice, like the noise of a rattlesnake get-

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ting ready to strike at a helpless victim. He could almost smell the ugliness of Jug Ewald's intention. He saw the sunspots shift on the rifle barrel as it moved slightly in Jug Ewald's hands, then flame belched from it, even as Ed dropped frantically to the ground.

He was a slight man, and agile, for a blacksmith. He caught his gunbelt in one hand, and rolled as he fell, hauling the clattering weight of those sixguns with him. He rolled toward the cabin, not away from it, and came up close to the wall, where Jug Ewald's black eyes and searching rifle barrel could not be brought to train on him.

He said, panting, "I'm going to kill you for that, Jug. Hear me?"

There was no sound from within the cabin. Ed stood frozen against the logs of the wall. He took one gun out of a holster, and dropped the belt to the ground.

"Come on out with your hands up, Jug. You don't have a chance, and you know it. You're drunk. I'll kill you, sure, if you try to make a fight of it."

MORE silence from within the cabin. Ed stood there, waiting, waiting unwilling to breathe hard for fear Jug Ewald could use that sound to locate his position against the wall, and so shoot him.

He heard a rumble of curses, then a sound which could have been only a shattering whisky glass, flung aside in a fit of temper. What he saw next was a sight he would remember down the long years till he lay on his deathbed. First one Henry rifle, then the other, hurtled through the window beside him and lay harmless upon the packed earth of Jug's pathway.

The front door of the cabin swung creakily inward and Jug Ewald himself staggered into the aperture, stood there unsteadily, frowning into the brightness of late-morning sunlight. He was drunk as a hoot owl and at the same time cold sober, which a man sometimes can be, as Ed knew when he heard Jug Ewald saying:

"I ain't goin' to tangle with you, Ed. I'm drunk an' like you say, you'd likely kill me. If I kilt you, theyd hang me. I

ain't so drunk I'm willin' to hang for stealin' a couple handful of silver an' a dozen bottles of whisky . . . You never had to duck down so fast, Ed. I was still just scare-shootin' at you. Figgered to get your guns, and run you off my land. You was too quick for me."

Ed looked into the bleary eyes and knew, suddenly, that the man was telling the truth. "Let's go inside and have that drink, Jug."

They did. Ed searched the cabin, and could find no more guns. "My pop's on his way out here, Jug, I'm takin' those Henrys along with me. Just you give yourself up to Pop, nice and peaceful, and never mention me bein' out here, and I give you my word I won't tell the court nothin' about how you tried to gun me. You'll get off a whole lot easier than you've got any right to . . . Is it a deal?"

"All right, Ed," said Jug Ewald, and he whined just a little. "I never meant to plug you. I was—"

"The judge," Ed said, "might not take your word for that, Jug."

He went out hurriedly, picked up his gunbelt and the two Henry rifles, and walked toward the tethered bay gelding, not even glancing back at the frightened face of the man who remained in the cabin. The undergrowth was thick as he left the path to reach the tethered horse.

He was tonging a redhot shoe from the forge, later that day, when his father strode into the smithy, "Lo, Dad," Ed said smoothly. "Dave Christianson was in a few minutes back to say you'd rode in with Jug Ewald. No trouble at all, hey?"

"That's right, Ed," the old man said. "No trouble."

"Guess I shouldn't have worried."

"Guess not," said Jesse. "No need of it. He come like a lamb . . . I—uh—I ain't a man that likes to admit bein' wrong, Ed, but it could be I've spoke out of turn towards you. Thinkin' back on the fights you an' me been in together, 'pears t' me you can stand on your record."

He turned to go, then paused in the door of the smithy. "By the way, I found that red handkerchief of yours hangin' on a catclaw bush near where you had your horse tethered this mornin'. Next time you go for to pull the wool on your pop's eyes, don't leave no red flags up."

Next

Published

**10 STORY
WESTERN
MAGAZINE**

issue

December 9th



Recovering a fortune in stolen horses, Andy Hogan and Dirk Keeler fought their way through a vaquero ambushade, twisting the noses of Don Patricio Raile and Perce Juran, his gun-chief.



Andy found himself wearing a law-badge, while Dirk turned outlaw. When Dirk surprised his bride Eileen with Andy, he pulled a gun, shouting: "Don't ever call me friend again, Andy Hogan!"



Dirk rode into a gun-trap to grab a Wells-Fargo payroll, but Andy braved possemen's bullets to rescue him with the message: "Juran's headed for Mexico with the payroll—and your pretty bride, Eileen!"



Dirk's outlaw savvy brought the two to a show-down with Juran's gun-crew in the fantastic underground ruins of an Indian city. The complete story will be told in L. L. Foreman's "Blaze a Wild Trail to Hell!"

All the Johnny-Reb cowpokes needed to hang Tott Crovet was a tall tree—and the savvy to outsmart and outfight a back-to-the-wall Yankee!

His gun blazed point-blank and Arbo hunched.



CHAPTER

Rebel's Revenge

1 Looking for a pool deep enough to bathe in, Tott Crovet headed up-stream. His dark face, rough-shaped and strong, but showing pinch and strain, was set in a deep frown. His mind, as well as his body, was full of grime and grit, and a swim would do him good both inside and out. It was early dark. Cap Andre's A Bar A herd was on the bedground, and the cook, shrill and cranky as a jay, was

Tense Novelette of Treachery on the—

HANG-TREE TRAIL

By **MARVIN DeVRIES**



giving the punchers lined up at the chuck-wagon a piece of his mind.

Away from the sound of their voices he slowed down. A flock of small birds rose ahead and he stopped to watch the stir they raised on the quiet water. Where they went was a small spit of white sand reaching out into the water like a bleached bone, and Tott's eyes, always attracted to natural oddments, rested idly on the spot a moment. Suddenly, his glance sharpened. A man was stretched out on his stomach on the narrow spit, his fingertips making a white riffle in the water. He

looked as if he were reaching for a drink, or cooling his hands, lost in the pleasure of what he was doing, but Tott knew it wasn't so. The man was too limp and motionless; he looked dead.

Tott waded in and went across. The spit sand was quick and drifted off in a froth when he stepped on it, but it wasn't deep, and he found solid footing underneath. The fallen man was the A Bar A trailboss, and he was stone dead. He had been shot in the back, and a gaping hole

showed in his chest where the bullet had come out. His body still felt warm to the touch. His name was Cobb. He had been a bitter die-hard rebel, and had condoned every humiliation his hot-blooded, Yankee-hating Texan sprouts had heaped on Tott. There had been time when Tott Crovet would gladly have killed him, and didn't care who knew it; the time would come when he would bitterly regret every mumbled threat.

Bogged to his knees in quicksand Tott got the trailboss halfway to solid ground when a gun roared and a bullet screamed past his ear. He dropped down again, and crouched behind the limp body, scanning the willows to see where the shot came from. Here and there a small-sized tree poked its head higher than the rest, but because of frequent Indian burnoffs most of it reached no more than head-high and made good bushwhack cover. Tott couldn't locate a sign of smoke or movement. The roar of the gun trailed off to nowhere, carrying with it the boisterous sounds from camp. A flight of ducks slanted toward him, then veered suddenly and made off in another direction.

"Throw off your gun, Crovet, and get your hands in the air," a man finally called from the brush. "Don't try anything funny or I'll blow your head off."

Tott recognized the voice. "Arbo," he called. "c'mere, quick. Cobb's been shot."

Kell Arbo crashed through the brush, cussing at the snags that raked at him, and came into the open. "What the hell ails you?" he snarled. "I know he's been shot. I seen it done." He carried his cocked gun in his hands and his fingers twitched on the trigger. "Grab holt an' get him to camp."

"That's what I was trying to do when you opened up at me. What's going on here, anyway?"

"That's what I'd like to know. An' I reckon we'll damn' soon find out. Grab holt." Kell Arbo was a big, shabby man, a different breed entirely from the rest of the crew. Outside of Cobb, he was probably the only one in the crew with enough trail savvy to make a drive like this tick, and he would probably be their next trailboss, a prospect that wasn't apt to please anyone except his special friends.

Cobb was a big man and Tott was com-

pletely winded by the time he got him to camp and let him sag to the ground beside the fire. "I saw him lying on a sand bar across the creek, and—"

"Shut up, I'll tell this," Kell Arbo broke in. "You, Yorey, grab his gun."

YOUNG Bub Yorey, one of the worst of the plaguers, stepped forward, and took Tott's gun. His eyes slanted up at Tott's when he did it, and a triumphant grin spread across his face. "There's hell a-brewin' now, blue-nose," he jeered.

Cap Andre, always a little slow to catch on to anything, leaned over Cobb for some time, his thin pointed face gradually tightening with distress. Finally he straightened and muttered in a dazed voice; "He's dead."

"Sure enough," Kell Arbo answered sardonically. "Stone dead."

"I heard the shot," Bub Yorey put in, sniffing at Tott's weapon.

Tott shook his head. "I haven't used that gun since we left the Brazos."

Yorey extracted the cartridges, and his grin widened. One of them was empty. "Ever hear of a Texas hangin' bee?" he inquired.

Tott looked from face to face. Old Suggs, the cook, a fire-eating unreconstructed reb if ever there was one suddenly slapped his knee and let out a howl. "I'm agoin' to make the rope," he shrilled. "I know how it's done. Get me a throw rope, Bub."

Jo Andre, the only one here who mattered to Tott, put her hand on Suggs' arm, trying to quiet him. She was slim and shapely, and most of these buttons almost lost their minds thinking about her. She was here because she knew her father wasn't the man to make this drive, and that unless she came along she would probably never set eyes on him again. She never spoke to Tott, but he knew she watched him sometimes, and he felt that somehow he stirred her interest. Whenever their eyes met, she put on an arrogant look and turned away. She spoke to Suggs now in a quiet voice and his toothless jaws clamped shut to hold back what he wanted to say.

Cap Andre, trailing again as usual, said; "Who did this?"

Kell Arbo canted his head toward Tott.

"You would have to hire a blue-nose Fed who can't take a little ribbing, wouldn't you?" he remarked, critically.

"You dirty lyin' crook," Tott flared suddenly. "You—"

"I heard the shot and saw Cobb drop," Kell Arbo broke in, curling the black twist of hair that always hung in his left eye. "Then Crovett came across and tried to hide in the brush."

"You liar," Tott flared. "You cooked this up so—"

"Don't call me a liar," Kell roared, giving Tott a hard shove with the muzzle of his gun.

Tott slammed into the chuckwagon headfirst, and pots and pans clattered. Suggs yelped angrily. Most of them laughed. Tott straightened slowly and turned to face them. Many times during the past weeks, when most men would have let their tempers fly regardless of consequences, Tott had taken a strangle-hold on his own and held it in check. But now at last he opened up and told them what he thought. "You dirty, mean, snivelling no-goods," he started in, pointing at Cobb. "There's the only man in the bunch of you. He hated my guts for being a Yankee as much as any of you, but he was honest and he knew his business and that's more than can be said for any of the rest of you. Get him buried. Pay your respects. Or are you all so tickled you've got an excuse to hang me you want to keep him lying around? That looks like your style and I'm fed to the teeth with it. If you're Texans give me anything else. I've stomached you for a year and a half and the only thing any of you ever thought of all the while was how to get my nose in the dirt and keep it there. Why should I kill Cobb? Because I couldn't take a hurrawing? That would put me in the same class with you, and I wouldn't like it down there. I think I know who killed Cobb—" his eyes raked Kell Arbo briefly from head to foot "—but I reckon it ain't worth mentioning to you."

"What about this empty ca'tridge?" Bub Yorey broke in, his eyes smokey with anger.

"Figure it out for yourself if it won't give you brain fever," Tott Crovet answered.

Kell Arbo stalked forward, his eyes

blazing. When he was close enough he struck Tott across the face with the flat of his hand, first on one side, then the other. Tott's head flopped and buzzed, and his blood boiled. He braced a leg against the wagon-wheel, and struck Arbo a blow in the face that sounded like a cook slapping a chunk of meat with the flat of his cleaver. Kell Arbo's head whipped back and Tott gave him another blow in the stomach, doubling him up. He staggered in a tight circle, swinging his gun like a club. It caught Tott across the legs, ripping his pants across both legs and cutting a gash across his thighs. But Arbo lost his balance doing it and went to the ground, his gun whipping out of sight under the chuckwagon.

Suggs let out a shrill yell, his eyes glittering with wild turmoil. Red Umley and the Nolan Boys stood apart whispering among themselves. Cap Andre lifted his hands trying to think of something to stop it.

"Don't nobody butt in," Kell Arbo warned. "I'll kill him with my bare hands."

He looked like he could do it. Veteran of a hundred bar-room brawls, each with its mark upon him, what he knew totted up to something a man didn't learn any other way. His hat sailed off his head, his unruly hair poured down over his eyes, and he came in like a charging buffalo. He struck, and Tott went to his knees. Arbo beat him on the head with both fists; he stomped the calves of Tott's legs; he hooked his bootheels behind Tott's ankles and tried to break his bones. Finally, he grabbed a foot and swung Tott in a circle, working back toward the wagon wheel so he could brain him. But he tripped on the uneven ground before he got that far and went down with a thud, losing his hold. Tott rolled out his momentum and came to his feet, bracing himself against the wheel, his chest heaving, his eyes smoky with wrath, the fury of Arbo's fist still thumping in his head.

Arbo rushed him again; Tott raised himself on the wheel and kicked out with both feet. One boot caught Arbo on the chin and his teeth snapped like a bear-trap. He went to his back again and rolled, coming up on all fours, working his sore jaw and wincing with pain. He made a swipe at Tott's boot with one hand, but

missed, then jumped forward like a frog, head boring for Tott's belly. Tott side-stepped the charge and Arbo crashed into the wagon-box. Tott gave him a hard rabbit punch that staggered him. He lurched around in a tight circle, his eyes rolling.

Tott bored in again and gave him more. One blow doubled him up, and he hugged his belly, yowling with pain. Half-blind, he rammed forward again. Tott backed off trying to keep out of reach, but somebody stuck out a boot and tripped him. He went down flat and Arbo jumped him again, raking and kicking until he exhausted himself. He was in no condition now to carry out his boast to kill Tott Crovet with his bare hands, but Tott didn't know it for some time to come. A vicious blow struck him in the head and knocked him senseless.

CHAPTER

2

Satan's Safari

Before long, Kell Arbo and Red Umley came back, and said they had found a tree. Arbo was in bad shape. He held his arm across his stomach, and moved his jaw carefully when he spoke. "You might know a stinker like that would fight dirty," he muttered. "Get a move on, Red."

Umley got a horse off the picket line and loaded Tott aboard, aches and pains included. Kell Arbo went ahead with the smoky lantern. Red Umley led the horse. The Nolan boys followed behind.

"I don't see why we can't wait till mornin', to hang him," Bub Yorey muttered. "There's no rush."

"He didn't wait to plug Cobb," Kell snarled over his shoulder.

Jo Andre stayed in camp, but before they reached the creek she came running and made a commotion. Cap Andre tried to quiet her, and finally went back to camp with her. Yorey cursed, and then they all wrapped themselves in bleak silence until they found the tree Kell Arbo had picked out.

"Hell's Blind Mice!" someone exploded when he saw it. "That's no tree. That's a bush."

"It's the biggest around here," the new trailboss snapped. "Throw the rope over that branch there, Red."

Until now, for Yorey and the other sprouts, this had been a pastime, like the rest of their hurrawing, a new way to twist a Yankee tail, but now they began to turn a little pale around the gills, and moved back step by step, letting Arbo, Umley, and the two Nolan boys handle it. Young Casson, usually full of starch and bluster, suddenly turned and stumbled back to camp. The rest of them, gulping to lubricate their lumpy throats, whispered and twittered among themselves like birds in the bushes. Oddly enough, Suggs, the old fire-eater, wouldn't have anything to do with this hanging and had gone to bed.

Kell Arbo looked things over, then stepped to the horse and slapped it on the rump. Tott slid off behind and dropped, his heart jumping to his throat. The rope jerked and twanged and Tott heard the sudden intake of breath all around him. Shame and humiliation touched him the most, because he had seen this done in the war, and knew how ludicrous a man looked dangling from a rope, twisting and squirming like a headless chicken. Then his feet touched the ground and he stood on tiptoe, neck stretched so his breath wheezed out of his throat.

"I knowed that damn' branch wouldn't hold," someone growled. "Anybody could 'a' seen that."

Bub Yorey stepped forward and cut the rope. Tott sagged to the ground and caught his breath. Kell Arbo swore and had a hurried talk with Umley. Then he strode back to camp, letting who wanted pick up the pieces.

"Better luck next time, Yank," Yorey muttered, getting back his lip.

Somebody laughed, and Tott was back where he started, the butt of their heritage of hate.

Casson, who had stumbled away too soon to see what happened was throwing his stuff together and getting ready to pull out when Tott got back to camp. Jo Andre, showing in her eyes all the wild turmoil she had gone through, glanced swiftly at Tott, then turned away too unsteady to say anything. Suggs had one eye open, watching everything, his toothless face twisted sardonically, but he didn't get up. Kell Arbo watched Casson's flurried preparations for some time, and finally said; "Just what do you think you're

goin' to do?" Kell glared down at him.

"I'm pullin' out," Cassons answered. "I'm goin' home. Any objections?"

"Well. Don't you want your pay?"

"Why—why, sure."

Arbo walked toward him, fishing in his pocket. Casson waited, innocently surprised at the offer. "There then," Arbo said when he was close enough, and hit him in the face, a shocking, completely unexpected blow that turned Casson glassy-eyed. A sound fluttered on his lips, but before he got it out his neck kinked, his knees buckled, and he went down like a shot horse. Kell chuckled and turned to the rest; "Anybody else got any funny notions?"

"Well, not just now I guess," Yorey drawled. "Give us time."

"I don't want no more of that," Arbo snapped. "And while we're at it I might as well lay down a little law that goes from now on. Gather round."

Arbo had a whole headful of law. He said he was worried about the remuda because they were in Indian country, and he assigned two men to go out and stand watch with the wrangler every night from now on. He also doubled the herd night guard so that when he got through there wasn't much of anyone left in camp.

"When do we sleep?" Yorey inquired, mounting to ride off to the bed-ground.

"Next month when you get to Dodge. Now get a move on. There'll be no more round-sidin' or dodgin' work around here. Get that through your heads an' keep it there."

"What about him?" Yorey asked, pointing at Tott.

"Don't worry about him," Arbo answered. "We'll find another tree."

TREES were few and far between. The land was deep in grass that whispered a constant song above the low rumble of the moving herd, but day after day not a tree showed its fuzzy blur against the horizon. Tott Crovet had his liberty so he could help with the herd, but he didn't get back his gun, and he rode beat-up horses so he wouldn't get far if he tried to escape. Everybody kept an eye on him, Suggs especially. He had a rifle on the seat beside him in the chuckwagon and boasted he meant to use it if Tott made

any kind of a move to slope out of there.

By now, the crew was split wide open into two cliques, Kell Arbo and his three friends against the rest, but what it would come to Tott couldn't guess. Ever since that night Arbo laid down the law the young Texans had been worked and driven to death. Cap Andre was sick most the time and let things go. Even if he had had his health he probably wouldn't have stood up to Kell Arbo because the trail-boss could leave him flat and throw him into a worse fix than he was in now. Tott could have handled the drive, but it would have raised more commotion than there was now, and no one would have had the gall to ask him. He was living on borrowed time, for a little while only.

Young Casson, the first to feel Kell Arbo's heavy hand, lost his life crossing the Canadian. Worn out with day and night work, he went down in quicksand, lost his horse, and couldn't make it to shore. It might have happened regardless, but Yorey blamed Kell Arbo, and they had words about it. Now Bub Yorey was getting it in the neck. Arbo claimed he was stirring up talk of deserting, although so far Tott hadn't heard anything of the kind. Day in and day out, he and Yorey rode drag together, another thorn in Yorey's flesh. He claimed it ought to be rotated, the way Cobb had done, but Arbo wouldn't listen. One day, Tott asked him pointblank about the talk, but he denied it.

"You'll hear plenty of it, though, if he crowds me much more." Yorey stated. "I don't give a damn what anybody says. And it won't be just talk either. Maybe we'll all pull out."

"That would make it pretty tough for the Andre's."

"You can take care of them," Yorey answered sardonically. "Jo doesn't want me around anyway." His voice caught suddenly, and a bleak, bitter look clouded his eyes.

"She doesn't want me either. I'm a Yankee, you know."

"Well, dammit, you can get over it, can't you?"

"Maybe, when you get over being Johnny Rebs. That would clear it all up."

"So would a bolt of lightning."

"You would sure like to have somebody

feel sorry for you, now wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I would."

"Don't ask me to. After all, you know, you almost got me hung."

"Only almost," Yorey mumbled.

"You'd be surprised what even a little stretching like that can do to a man. It sticks in his craw a long time. And, remember, as soon as somebody sees a likely tree, I'm cooked."

"I didn't smell any gun-smoke on your gun that night," Yorey confessed suddenly.

"I know you didn't."

"You must think I'm a helluva heel."

"I do think there could be considerable improvement."

"The fact is, Arbo put the words in my mouth. I know that now. He rammed the whole thing down our throats."

"You liked it at the time."

Yorey cursed with exasperation. "You got to remember we've been mauled around considerable."

"That's what happens to anybody who gets in a fight, win or lose. You got licked and couldn't take it."

"You don't need to rub it in."

"I haven't noticed anybody letting up on me."

"I've let up. Hell, I get a thousand ideas I could use to pester you and I throw 'em all over my shoulder. I'm too damn miserable myself."

"What're you going to do when another tree shows up. Are you going to speak your piece?"

"What good would it do? Arbo knows I hate his guts and he'd claim I was changing my tune just to block him."

"I reckon that's true," Tott agreed glumly.

The grass thinned out for a stretch and dust choked them to silence. Slowly, they climbed a bare rise, and when they reached the top an up-sweep of wind took the dust away.

"Oh, oh," Yorey muttered, all at once, and pointed. "There she is."

HE WAS pointing to a tree that threw its green branches to the sky on the far horizon, and Tott saw where his trail ended. His lips twisted wryly. "It looks like a man wouldn't have any trouble finding a solid branch on that," he re-

marked, finding humor in his tight.

"Hell, it's bigger'n a windmill."

"Well," Tott muttered, with quiet resignation.

"I don't reckon we'll make it till tomorrow."

"No, I reckon not."

Suggs, topping the rise with the wagon let out a shrill yell, and pointed, too.

"That old buzzard," Yorey growled.

Kell Arbo rode up, a loose-lipped grin on his face. "Looks like rough country ahead, Crovet," he remarked.

Yorey scowled, and started to sputter about the way Tott Crovet had been rail-roaded into this fix. "Hell, he was out cold when we took a vote. We ought to give him his say, anyway."

"I always thought you was kinda chicken-hearted, Yorey," Kell Arbo stated. "Kinda yaller. Don't try to back up, that's all I got to say." He had a handful of raisins, a special treat for anybody, and popped them into his mouth one by one without offering them around.

"So that's where Sugg's raisins went to," Yorey exploded. "He's been belly-achin' about 'em all over the place for a week."

"Yeah," Arbo agreed coolly, "but he finally got a hunch who took 'em, Yorey, so we went through your bedroll, and there they were."

"My bedroll?"

"Yeah. So you see what you're in for. I told you boys anybody caught messin' around that chuckwagon would get a horse-whippin'. As soon as we make camp an' get some grub we'll have that out."

"Oh, no. I ain't messed around the chuckwagon. If them raisins was found in my bedroll somebody planted 'em there. As far as that goes, mebbe I don't need to look very far to see who did it."

Arbo's eyes glinted wickedly, and he snapped the twist of black hair out of his eyes with the back of his hand. He looked like he was boiling mad. He went through the right motions, but Tott Crovet could see it was a show. It was something that was part of a plan, to stir up a commotion and keep these young Texans in an uproar, picking on Yorey because he was their ringleader.

"You're a smart little snot-nose," Arbo

went on with calculated contempt, "cuttin' your fancy capers and makin' big talk about pullin' out and takin' the whole damned crew with you if I didn't let up. You still got a lot to learn, and it won't take me long to learn you, with a horse whip. I'll see you later." He popped the last of the raisins into his mouth, wiped his fingers on his shirt, and rode off.

Yorey's face was white with rage. "I don't like raisins," he ranted. "Why should I snitch raisins?"

"If you stopped to think, Yorey," Tott remarked, "you could put two and two together, and it might give you a notion how that empty cartridge got into my gun."

"The buzzard," Yorey growled, "The low-down buzzard."

"And if he put words into your mouth about smellin' gunsmoke on my gun, maybe he's puttin' notions into your head about pullin' out. It sounded that way."

"What would that get him?"

"I wouldn't jump too fast, that's all."

"Nobody's ever goin' to put a whip to me." He swung suddenly and rode around the edge of the herd, probably to let off steam to one of his young friends. He always talked too much, and it occurred to Tott that he might talk himself into a whipping.

Tott rode into the dust again and tried to make some plans of his own. Yorey wouldn't try to block the hanging. He might sputter and fume, but in the end he would let it go through, and settle with his conscience by building up his hate against the Yankees, convincing himself by degrees he had done the right thing. On the other hand, if he stirred up a big

row when Kell Arbo tried to put a whip to him, it might give Tott the chance he was looking for to make a break, and clear out. It would be near dark. There would be good horses on the picket line. If he could manage to get himself a gun he would have a good chance, the only one, probably, that would turn up before they reached the tree the next day. Arbo usually had the Nolan boys and Red Umley throw a circle around camp to look for Injun sign or whatever, and they seldom got back before dark, sometimes much later, so old Suggs and Arbo himself would be the only ones to give him trouble.

SUGGS pulled far ahead to make camp. Red Umley and the Nolan boys rode off together to make their circle. A half hour later, with evening shadows stretching horse and man to long stalking gaints, Arbo signaled to halt. Yorey didn't come back. He was making talk with all his friends, here and there. Arbo didn't seem to notice. The herd, trail broke by now, gave no trouble. A pond of water with tules around the edges gave them drink. Tott saw Arbo ride across a stretch of it to make sure cattle wouldn't bog down. Tott headed for camp, speculating on his chances of getting hold of Sugg's gun. He usually left it on the wagon seat when he worked around the chuckwagon. Tott circled the wagon, climbed the wheel on the off-side and looked in.

"If you're lookin' for my gun," Suggs spoke up behind him, "I've got it here. I knowed you'd be up to somethin'. I knowed it the minute we spotted the tree. Now get yourself tied to this rope."

"How in hell can I tie myself up?"

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"I'll finish what you can't do. This time, blue-nose, you're goin' to hang good."

"Here they come now," Tott said. He didn't look up, but he heard hoofbeats.

"'Tain't either," Suggs muttered. "It's Jo, and' it looks like she's got a bee in her bonnet."

Jo Andre, hair streaming and anger flashing in her eyes, had the answer to Suggs' question. Bub Yorey and the whole crew had caught fresh horses out of the cavy and had pulled out. "I spoke to Bub," she stated, trying to keep her voice down so she wouldn't disturb her father, "but he wouldn't listen. He said we could get along with the men we had."

"An' it's all that damn' buzzard's fault," Suggs growled, pointing at Tott. His eyes gleamed with bitter fire, and he suddenly left his pot and pans, and got busy making a noose, using some new rope he found. He worked with savage fury, and it didn't take him long. When he was finished he stuck one end of it through the iron loop at the end of the wagon pole, hoisted the pole in the air, bolstering it with the wagon tongue, and tied the loose end to a wheel. "If it busts I'll leave you choke to death," he snarled, adding the whole list of pet names he had accumulated for the cursed northerners.

Jo Andre tried to stop what he was doing, but he gave her a hard shove, and Tott tried to add his warning. Suggs was in the middle of a fit that had to run its course. He got a horse off the picket line and loaded Tott aboard, like Red Umley had done that night on the creek.

"You've gone nuts, Suggs," Tott told him.

"It's high time," Suggs shrilled back, walking the horse toward the pole.

"Stop it," Jo Andre cried again. "Stop it, Suggs. I—I'll shoot."

Suggs whipped out his gun, and turned. Wild as he was, he might have used it on her, but Tott Crovet moved fast. His hands were tied behind him, but his legs were free, and he swung out of the saddle and caught Suggs in the back with both boots. Suggs lurched forward and went down, his gun blazing wildly. Tott landed running and jumped him before he could twist around. He kicked Suggs in the arm and sent the gun flying. Then he put a boot across Suggs' neck and held him

down like a snake under a pronged stick. Jo Andre got some rope and tied the old fire-eater's legs, wrapping it around like a bandage from his ankles to his knees. When she was finished Tott stepped back, shaky with relief, and turned his back to her so she could cut the ropes from his hands. Suggs thrashed and squirmed, but the wildness was running out of him. A long way off Tott heard gunfire, and guessed what it was. Arbo had located Yorey and the crew, and was in the middle of a show-down with them. "Seems as if he'll fetch some of them back anyway," Tott muttered.

"Go now," Jo begged. "Please go, before they get back."

Their eyes met in sudden solemn understanding. He put his hand on her arm, and held it there, feeling her tremble. His eyes lighted with sudden joy, and his lips brushed her smooth cheek. "I'm coming back," he told her.

She shook her head bitterly. "Don't come back," she whispered. "We can't get past this bitter hate."

He didn't answer. He scooped Suggs' gun off the ground, climbed the horse and racked away.

CHAPTER

Die-hard Yankee

3

Kell Arbo came back empty-handed, and he came alone. "Those yaller dogs," he growled. "They heard us come an' laid an ambush. They didn't give us a chance. Poor ol' Red. An' the Nolans, too. Shot down like dogs. I don't know what we're goin' to do now."

"That damn' blue-nose got away, too," Suggs wailed. "I got mad clear through an' was goin' to hang him to the wagon pole, but he broke away."

"I helped him," Jo Andre spoke up with a defiant look at Arbo.

"I might 'a' knowed you would try it," Suggs muttered irritably.

"Yes, you might."

"You reckon the old man kin stand a talkin' to?" Arbo spoke up. "We got to settle what we're goin' to do."

"Come over here, all of you," Cap Andre called.

Kell Arbo gave a long-winded talk, mentioning the incidents that led up to

the fix they were in now. The only thing to do now," he finally ended up, "is to get outa here as fast as we cin git, an' save our skins. Willie ain't worth a hoot for anything except wranglin' horses; Suggs can't ride, and you're a sick man. That leaves Jo and me, and what the hell we cin do with a herd, I don't know."

"Can't we hire some riders—some-where?" Cap Andre put in.

"Where?"

In the end, grudging and bitter, Cap Andre said what had to be said. "We'll let everything go. Turn back. We'll take one wagon for Suggs and me, and a few spare horses. Let the rest go."

"Goda'mighty!" Suggs breathed, now that it was said. "That blasted blue-nose!"

"Let's put the blame where it belongs," Andre said.

"Where's that?" Suggs demanded.

"Not on Tott Crovet."

"He croaked Cobb," Suggs insisted.

"I doubt it," Cap Andre stated, bleakly. He turned to Arbo. "I think you did, Arbo, and I think you brought us to this for your own ends."

Arbo whipped the twist of hair out of his bulging eyes as if he'd been shot in the head. For a second he was too stunned to say anything. Then he grabbed Andre by the shirt and opened up. "I'd kill you out of hand for that kind of talk if you wasn't a sick man. Ain't I kept this outfit on the move ever since Cobb got croaked? I'd still keep it on the move if I had a crew." He stopped, and swallowed his words, and a hurt look came to his face. "Believe me," he went on, "it hurts, after what I've done. I reckon you think the same of poor Red and the Nolan boys."

"Oh, stop it," Cap Andre muttered, disgustedly.

Arbo's anger flared again, and he suddenly slapped Andre across the face. "Talk like that ain't free," he muttered. "You'll find that out."

Jo Andre struck out with the flat of her hand, and Arbo cursed. Andre caught her hand, and pulled her back. "You've done everything you can do, Arbo," he said.

Arbo's eyes suddenly shifted toward Jo. "I wouldn't say that, mister," he stated, running his tongue along his cheek. "Not a-tall."

"Goda'mighty!" Suggs breathed again.

Jo looked pale, but her eyes shone with contempt. "You killed Cobb and took his job so you could wreck this drive. I don't know why, but—"

"I'll tell you why," Arbo blurted, putting away all his pretense. "I got that herd right in my hand, the whole works, an' I cin scare up men to handle it. All I got to do is whistle. Sure I plugged Cobb and I had the whole thing set from there on. I hurrawed them slick-eared sprouts of yours to death so they'd clear out. Crovet took it on the run and he'll keep runnin' till he gets clear into Kansas. That's all right with me. I don't give a hoot if he hangs, or not. You were all so damned busy hatin' Yankees you never caught on what you were gettin' into. If you want to blame somethin' for the pickle you're in you cin blame it to that. Now you know, and you cin be damned sorry you do. I would've let you ride off, but I can't do it now." All at once he got to his feet, put two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

In a few moments a man rode in. He said his name was Jakes. He was badly scarred in the face, probably from fire, and his lips were pulled awry by scar tissue. He wanted to know if they had a riding job. He said he was a top hand and had worked cows all his life. He mentioned places he had worked, and Kell Arbo let him speak his piece in full. Then the trailboss grinned and said; "You do all right, Jakes, but you cin quit the funnin'. The cat's outa the bag."

"You don't say," Jakes remarked, a little disappointed. "Hell!"

"This is the girl I mentioned," Arbo said, pointing to Jo. "That's the old man, and this is Suggs, the cookie. The Yank dug out."

Jakes looked them over one by one, letting his eyes rest at last on Jo admiringly. "What're you goin' to do?" he asked Kell without shifting his glance.

Arbo shrugged. "It ain't the way I wanted it, but we git what we want. The crew cleared out, and it makes it easy pickin' anyway."

"Yeah, I seen 'em go," Jakes said.

"You go get the boys."

"Okey, Kell. They're off a piece and it'll take till mornin'."

"Yeah. That's okay," Arbo agreed.

"This girl," Jakes remarked coolly. "I understand we split even on everything in this sheebang. That's how it is, ain't it?"

"We'll see," Arbo muttered.

Muttering like a sick dog, Suggs moved around, kicking at tufts of grass. Jakes eyed him with growing curiosity, and finally asked what he was up to.

"I'm lookin' for my guns," Suggs shrilled. "That's what I'm doin'. You want to know any more?"

"Yeah," Jakes answered. "S'pose you tell me why for you want your gun."

"So I cin blow your brains out, that's why," Suggs ranted.

"Here, take one of mine," Jakes offered, and flung it down.

"Now, now," Kell Arbo put in, mildly.

Jakes held out his hand, and Arbo shut up. Suggs made a lunge for the gun and got it in his hand. Jakes let him go that far, then opened up, and riddled poor Suggs from head to foot. Jo Andre stared in unbelieving horror. Cap Andre tried to push up, but sagged back helplessly again.

A faint grin touched Jakes' face. He puffed smoke off the tip of his gun and shoved it back in its holster. "Well," he said, finally, "I s'pose I better git the boys."

Suggs went to his knees, then on all fours, and finally flat on his face. "Them damn' blue-noses!" he muttered. "Them damn—"

When Jo Andre reached him he was dead.

SUGGS had picked a good horse off the picket line for Tott Crovet to ride. It was a go-er, and sure-footed, and Tott headed it in the direction he had heard the shooting just before he left camp, the direction Jo Andre had said the crew of young Texans had taken. "If I was anywhere near smart," he told himself, "I'd head for Kansas and let 'em drink their own vinegar. With Suggs on the warpath all I'll get out of this is a hangrope the minute I show my face back in camp. But I can't do anything else, not till I've spoke my piece to her." He smiled ruefully in the dark. "I guess a man's bound to stick his head in a noose of one kind or another."

He started worrying about the gunfire

he had heard; if there had been a fight, it wasn't likely he could get the crew to come back, but if there had been something else, and Arbo was still on the prowl he had to watch out he didn't run into him and lose whatever chance he might have of talking to Yorey. He slowed up finally, and used more caution, but he didn't see or hear any riders. And in the end, he didn't have as far to go as he expected. Reckless as usual, the crew had built a rip-roaring fire in a shallow wash, and he rode in on them without any attempt at concealment. Yorey saw him first and started talking before he got off his horse. "Look who preached me a sermon and then grabbed a horse and ran," he taunted. "Why didn't you go the other way, straight for Kansas?"

"Maybe I don't want Kansas," Tott said. "Maybe I like you boys."

"No reason for that," Yorey answered.

Tott looked puzzled. "I thought I'd find half of you dead. Didn't you have a fight with Arbo? He lit out after you with Red Umley and the Nolans, and I heard gunfire."

"We heard gunfire, too, but we weren't in it."

"Suggs hogtied me when I got back to camp and then tried to hang me to the wagon-pole all by his lonesome," Tott explained. "He did almost as good as you did the first time."

"You're too lucky."

"Lucky enough to go back and try again."

"Like fun."

"I am."

"Hell's Blind Mice, man! You're really askin' for it."

"I'm going back because I think it looks too damned yellow not to, with the Andre's in the kind of a fix they're in."

Yorey flushed, and turned to the crew. "Another sermon comin' up, boys. He's goin' back to be noble and get hung. And I'm supposed to go back and take a whuppin', eh?"

"That's for you to say, Yorey, but I'll tell you this much, you'll never live down what you're up to now. It'll ride ahead of you like a yellow flag from now till doomsday."

"Oh, quit your damned preachin'," Yorey growled. "You made me sick to my

stomach." He made a gesture of disgust, with his hands.

"I'm about through," Tott said. "I just want to tell you this much—I don't have a ramrod up my back and I never bragged much about what a rip-roarin', hell-twistin' country I come from, like you're so good at doin'. But I'm going back to a hanging, and you're skeedaddling from a whipping. Add that up, and when you get an answer, do what you damned please." With that he turned and rode off, a profane mutter following him into the dark.

He climbed out of the wash at a place he could see the fire, and waited. He heard the sultry rise and fall of their talk, but he was too far off to hear what was said. One of them made a long-winded speech to the rest, and almost got into a fight. Another walked round and round the fire, stopping every once in a while to take a hard kick at the embers. There were eight of them. All of them had fire, and Tott was surprised their auguring didn't flare up into a free-for-all fight. Yorey did some more talking, and when he was through everyone raised a hand. Then someone stamped out the fire, and Tott was left to guess what decision they had come to in all that palaver.

A little later he heard the clatter of hoofs on stone and saw them climb out of the wash. Grinning he rode toward them and fell in beside Yorey.

"So you got an answer," he remarked.

"Yeah, damn you," Yorey growled ruefully, "we got an answer. But I must say I certainly didn't ever expect to see you again."

"I knew I'd see you," Tott said, and let out a soft chuckle.

CHAPTER

Swamp Fire

4

Jakes got back to the camp by the pond before dawn. Red Umley, the Nolan boys, and four other hardcases were with him. Jakes had told them the fun was up, and Red Umley claimed he knew from the start something would go wrong with all of Kell Arbo's scheming. "Hell's Thunderbolts, Kell, you get started on somethin' and a snake couldn't foller yore tracks. I don't hold with it."

"Saved us a fight, anyway," Arbo stated. "We got rid of the crew, didn't we? They're all green shorthorns, but don't ever get it in your noodle they wouldn't put up a fight."

"That's alright," Umley admitted, "but you get so almighty fancy, Kell. This last twist of your got me dizzy, claiming we had a fight with 'em, and me and the Nolans got plugged. Hell, that's just like somethin' you read in a book."

"When did you ever read a book?" Arbo muttered. The idea of going after the crew merely to make a show, shooting off some gun-powder and sending Umley and Nolan to throw in with Jakes while he came back to report them killed in the fight, was sound. It put an end to any possibility of keeping on with the drive. The whole thing had worked out just the way he planned, except that somewhere along the line Cap Andre had caught on to what was happening, and had to shoot off his mouth about it. If he had kept quiet, Arbo would have let the old cuss and the girl go. Still, this way had its advantages. A homely bugger like me don't often get a chance at a girl like her," he said.

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Jakes' bunch were tough renegades and had trailed the A Bar A herd ever since it crossed the Red River. This was a deal Arbo had cooked up with them before the drive started. He had killed Cobb, knowing he would get the job of trailboss in his stead. The nightly scouting by Red Umley and the Nolans was a cover so they could keep in touch with Jakes, and set the time to strike. Arbo hated to see all this smooth scheming go to waste, but it wasn't as though he had failed. He still had the herd in his hand, and the only thing left to do was to get rid of Cap Andre. "You do it, Jakes," he told the fire-scarred outlaw. "I'm squeamish. You know how it is when you been with a man a while. You don't like to shoot him out of hand."

"Oh, my Goodness Sakes!" Jakes remarked, mockingly, and shook his head. "Kill your own snakes, Arbo. I'm thinkin' about the girl, too."

"I can't do it."

"Well, put the old buzzard on a horse and let him ride. He'll fall apart the first jump."

"Yeah," Arbo said, thoughtfully. "I guess you're right."

"Give him a good kinky buckler."

"That sounds all right, Jakes."

Jakes laughed and Arbo walked toward Andre. Red Umley, his mind on something to eat, was puttering around the chuckwagon. Cap Andre, shaking with chill, was still in his soogans. Jo sat beside him, her face tight with strain. The morning mist, like a shallow sea, began to stir uneasily, lifting here and there in smoky tendrils. Wind whispered it away, and when it had cleared nine riders showed up along the edge of the pond. Jakes saw them first, and let out a yell. Arbo swung, pushed the hair out of his eyes, and made a rush for his horse, roaring orders. Red Umley dropped a pan, and climbed his horse again. The rest were still mounted.

"Looks like another one of your snakes back-tracked," Umley muttered, with a loose-lipped grin.

"Get the buzzards," Arbo snarled. "Cut 'em down an' kill 'em."

TOTT CROVET pulled up at the edge of the pond. Yorey stopped beside him. Both of them stared at the charging riders, and Tott counted them off. "Looks

like we ain't welcome," Yorey muttered.

"You run this, Yank. We're green."

A bullet slid past his ear and he ducked. Then the renegade rustlers set their guns on fire and snarling blasts of lead shook the air. Somebody went down with a crash near the edge of the pond. The horse spooked into the water and bogged down. Tott Crovet yelled and made a motion with his hand spreading them out, and they took his word.

Suggs' gun wasn't a bad weapon. Tott notched two riders before he had to reload. The boggy ground shook under the pounding hoofs, and sent ripples across the open pond. The top crust, strong enough for a lone rider, began to give way under the hard pounding, and Tott saw an animal break through and go down on its nose. The rider legged it out of there, but a bullet overtook him and knocked him flat.

"Don't go in there or the whole business'll sag out from under," Tott warned.

Yorey was hit. His arm hung limp, and he cursed at his left-handed clumsiness, but he gave Tott a cool, squint-eyed grin that was as friendly and substantial as any Tott had ever seen.

"Why didn't you say this was comin' up?" he asked.

"I didn't know it," Tott told him.

"You guess good, anyway," Yorey," Yorey said with another grin, and meant more than he said.

Tott read half the meaning in his eyes, and relief flooded over him like a wave. This was the place he had been looking for, the place where roiled waters met and mingled and settled again to quietude. Here again, although he had almost given up hope of ever seeing it, men with the same steadfast resolution and the same decencies stood shoulder to shoulder against a common enemy. Here again they had found their common heritage.

Somebody yelped like a trampled dog, and Tott looked back into a young blanched face streaming blood. Yorey cursed again and went that way. Tott stalked into the tules on the trail of the man who had fired the shot, but he lost him in the wild commotion. The hard top crust was cracked and broken where it had been trampled, and stood on end, sharp as shards of glass. Sleazy red mud lay be-

neath it. Tott passed a dead renegade, flies buzzing around his spattered face. A scattering of cattle spooked past and almost ran him down. The main herd was on the move, but it wasn't a stampede, and they wouldn't go far. Tott heard a rifle-fire and caught a glimpse of Jo Andre near the chuckwagon taking long-range shots at the churning renegades. The tules thinned out, and Tott came to a halt.

Kell Arbo rode a big appaloosa, the white spots on its rump trailing down to its hocks. He had made a try at flanking the crew on one side, and was circling the sump to see if he could do any better from the other. Tott fired a shot as he rode past, and took off his hat. The horse spooked and swerved, struck broken ground, and went down. Arbo ran for cover, and Tott headed that way, flushing muskrats as he went. A bullet whispered past him, slashing reeds. He made a fix on the spot where it came from, and closed in, but Arbo was on the move. Tott risked a peek over the top of the reeds, and saw the quivering trail Arbo was leaving behind him. Tott fired, and pulled a hard grunt out of the sweating trailboss. Nesting red-winged birds made a wild turmoil above them, and fledglings gawped from their nests as Tott moved past. With his feeling for such things he shifted his course to spare them. A heavy-winged thunderpump rose ahead of him, and Arbo fired at the thing before he realized his mistake.

"That's the wrong man, Arbo," Tott called, knowing the sound of his voice would filter through the reeds and come from all directions.

"Damn you," Arbo flared. "I know you."

"That suits me, Arbo."

"So you're the one hauled them buzzards back," Arbo rasped.

"They came of their own accord, Arbo, and I reckon they figure they couldn't've come to a better place."

Arbo, short on patience in the first place, and suddenly convinced he knew the exact spot where Tott's voice came from, leaped up and charged in, his gun flaming. He was close, but he wasn't close enough. Tott waited it out, and then came up. His gun blazed pointblank, and Arbo lurched, grabbing at the reeds, grabbing

at thin air, his legs wilting every step he took until he finally sagged to his knees, his mouth thrown wide open to suck in air, his eyes glazing. The last thing he did was to swipe that bothersome twist of hair out of his eyes, as if that would help him to see. Then he crashed forward in a dead heap.

Tott Crovet stood up in the sudden silence and looked around.

"I reckon that takes care of the whole sheebang," Yorey yelled. "We can't find nobody else to shoot at."

Tott waved, and headed for camp.

THE next day, after a late start, Tott Crovet, Bub Yorey, and Jo Andre, stopped under the cottonwood tree that Suggs and Yorey had crowed about.

"Good enough to hang anybody on," Yorey remarked, craning his neck at the thick branches.

"Get at it then," Tott invited, wryly.

Yorey pursed his lips. "I don't know how to make a hang-noose," he muttered regretfully. "Maybe Jo's got the hang of it."

Jo Andre shook her head and smiled, a soft gentle smile for both of them.

"Don't tell me we got to let it go past again," Yorey grumbled.

Tott grinned indulgently and let the taunting words pass because he knew what they were. He knew Bub Yorey. What the young Texan had showed him of himself during the fight at the pond would seldom come to the surface again, but it was there, and mocking words could never change it. In a pinch they stood together; all of them stood together. A boy lay dead in his grave by the pond to make it so. The others, battered and maimed, but tickled with themselves none the less, and tickled with their Yankee trailboss, would speak the words Yorey spoke, and try their old tricks, but they showed how they felt by going after the herd as if it were their own. Even Cap Andre took heart at the sight and rode a gentle horse again, hoarding his strength so it would be enough to see him through.

This place under the tree was something special for them, and all three felt it. A place where bruised pride could heal, and the wild flames of hate die out. Tott

(Please continue on page 97)

GRAB WEAPONS— OR WEEP!

By
**ROBERT L.
TRIMNELL**

*Johnny Tighe had figured wrong:
his hard-earned money branded
him a killer—and only his gun
could clear him!*

Then he was wheeling his
horse, cutting into an
alley. . . .



JOHNNY TIGHE slammed off the dun horse in front of the striped barber pole. He hopped up the boardwalk. Close-Cut Pete was inside, cutting hair. A customer waited in a corner. "Hi, Close-Cut," Johnny said. "It's easy Johnny Tighe, back after two years."

There was a yell of pain as the barber slipped and jammed his scissors into the customer's scalp. "Easy Johnny!" he blurted out. He stood there for a moment, staring open-mouthed at the tall

man before him. Slowly he laid down the scissors, snatched at the marble-topped work table, came away opening a huge razor. The two customers stared, scrambled to back against the wall.

"Close-Cut! What's eatin' you?"

The barber advanced slowly. "Lafe Durham was my friend for twenty years." He held the razor out before him, the glint of steel no harder than the light in his eyes. "I'm goin' to carve you down, killer. Easy Johnny was always too good

a name for you. You were just plain worthless. Then back-gunnin' a man who treated you like his own son!"

Johnny backed to the door, a hurt look in his gray eyes. "Close-Cut, I just come in to get a shave and a haircut so I could look good when I get out to see Lafe and—" He paused for a moment, added in a calmer voice, "And Jeanne, too."

The barber inched forward, his hand clenched until the knuckles were white on the handle of the razor. "I don't know where you get the nerve to come back, you sneakin' killer!"

Johnny found himself backing to the boardwalk. The turn of events was enough to make any man retreat. When a man comes home after two years, after two years of proving to the world that he is a man—

"Jist stand steady. And Close-Cut, pack that razor."

Johnny felt it prodding into his back. Only the muzzle of a six-gun could be round and hard like that. And from the quiet voice, he knew it was Sheriff Ben Jenks. Slowly he turned. The oldster's bristly white mustache was the same as ever. But not his eyes. He had never seen such burning hate in any man's eyes. And it was Ben Jenks who taught him a fast six-gun draw when he was just a kid.

"I—I don't get this, Sheriff. I don't understand."

"You'll understand," the sheriff rasped out. "You'll understand that you can't gun the man who raised you like his own son. Then comin' back after two years of hidin' out and actin' like you expect the fatted calf to be killed!"

Slowly it sank into Johnny's mind that Lafe Durham was dead. And that somehow, they thought he had done it. Automatically his hand reached in the left shirt pocket and dragged out a bag of makings. He rolled the cigaret without thinking, because he was too numbed to think.

"Jeanne," he said, "she's still—"

"Still runnin' her daddy's ranch," the sheriff said. "Runnin' it like a man. Like a man you never was. Now I'm goin' to take that there hogleg of yours."

Johnny knew then that he had to see Jeanne. She would tell him. She wouldn't think first with a razor or six-gun. He had to have someone tell him.

"Sheriff, give me two hours. Two hours and I'll come back."

Ben Jenks snorted. "That's what you'll get. Two hours in jail before we hang you."

Johnny lit the cigaret, staring over the flame into the oldster's face. What Jenks had said seemed very likely. He would hang first, and then they'd ask questions. He saw the sheriff's hand reaching for his gun. Coming close to where his own hand was. It had to be now. He stared out over the sheriff's shoulder, let his mouth drop in apparent surprise. For a second Jenks glanced away. In that second Johnny clamped a range-hardened hand on the oldster's wrist. With all his strength he twisted.

"Aw—" gasped the oldster. He swung around, the gun wide of its target. He thumbed hammer, and lead crashed into the doorjamb. Johnny brought a boot up, fast. It slammed the gun high into the air, and then the youngster was outside the door, back against the wall, six-gun leveled at the barber and sheriff. He felt back for the hitchrope, untied it. Suddenly he was vaulting into saddle. He saw Ben Jenks scoop up his six-gun. Then he was wheeling his horse, cutting into the alley. A minute later he pounded across Hangdog Creek and up through the Little Woods.

THE woods had looked like paradise when he rode down from the bluff that afternoon. All going red and gold with autumn frosts. He remembered the time he and Jeanne had been riding into town, and all of a sudden he'd been overcome with the way the sunlight filtered through her hair and made it seem alive and golden. He'd hooked an arm out and pulled her to him. The horses seemed to understand, and they closed up. He kissed her then, and for a second she answered the kiss. Then she was racing her pony through the Little Woods, and he pounded after her, laughing and shouting, not catching her until they reached town. That's the kind of harum-scarum Easy Johnny Tighe was in those days.

He slapped the dun on the rump, and they cut up over Bull Bluff, through into the grasslands that fringed the Axe Head. The Axe Head was the ridge that ran

through and up to the grasslands to the north. He was breathless when he got to the top. All that had happened to him in Rocksalt was forgotten for the moment. For Big Eight lay beyond Axe Head.

The grasslands made a two-mile sweep down to the ranchhouse. Glossy green, tinged with brown from the frosts, they rolled gently to the right clear to the northern arm of the Axe Head. To the south they were lost in the distance. And in the lowest part, where the little Jalco River wound, was the windbreak of cottonwoods, sprawling across the stream. There were barns and log corrals, and the painted whiteness of the ranchhouse. Johnny felt something tug inside of him when he looked down there. He realized that he hadn't come back just to show Lafe Durham that he was a man. He'd come back to the Big Eight.

He thought of the time when he left. Ever since his father died, Lafe had raised him like his own son. Right along with Lafe's daughter Jeanne. They first climbed on a horse together, he and Jeanne. They learned to rope and cut out calves, to spot market-size steers and tell weights at a glance. Lafe promised that someday his daughter and adopted son would get equal shares in Big Eight. It was plain too, that he hoped they wouldn't split it. He wanted them to marry when they came of age. He had made that plain.

It was when Johnny took to gambling that Lafe really got mad. He had been content to put up with Johnny's crazy kid tricks. Johnny remembered the night Lafe had come into the Rocksalt Saloon, and found him owing Ace Pracket three hundred dollars, besides having lost his gold watch and horn-handled six-gun. Before everybody, Lafe blew off. "Tuh think I raised a younker for this!" he yelled. He yelled some more, too, and Johnny yelled back. He remembered shouting, "I'll even up for this!" Then he was gone into the night. He hit the saddle and rode, rode straight south. At first he just tried to remember what caused the argument, and what happened during it. Words like "worthless pup." He vowed then to erase the mark. He'd go out and make his own way. Then he'd come back and show the oldster. He'd show him ten one-hundred

dollar bills. Show Lafe that he needed no help from anyone.

And he had come back to this.

Johnny headed the pony down the slope. A movement caught his eye. Two riders, up along the Axe Head. He turned the pony back into some horse-high brush to watch. They were trotting slowly. Suddenly he recognized the left-hand rider. Golden hair flying in the wind, sitting the horse as though she were part of it. Jeanne! Johnny wheeled his pony, headed straight for them. He saw Jeanne's blue eyes then, large and lustrous, and staring at him as though he were a ghost. With a shock he recognized the other rider. Mel Koles. A cowhand of Lafe's, when he left. A big man, though not as tall as Johnny, with black hair and a black mustache. A handsome man, except for the thin lips. They were just the outward things that Johnny didn't like about Mel Kole. Others were the way he kow-towed to Lafe, and the soft, oily words he always had for Jeanne.

He spun his pony to a stop before them. "Johnny!" the girl cried. "Johnny, you've come back!"

He tried to grin at her. There was too much emotion pent up in him. "I've come back," he said. And he rasped out, "And found my name smeared with mud."

"He has a lot of nerve," Mel Koles said. "A killer coming back to the scene of the crime."

Johnny lowered his head a little. "You go run and tell the sheriff I'm here, Kole."

Kole glowered at him, lips a hard, thin line.

Johnny shot a glance at Jeanne. He saw a tear in her eye. "You don't believe I did it, do you, Jeanne?"

She sobbed. Slowly she brought her chin up and looked him straight in the eye. "Maybe you were a crazy youngster, and even worthless, like Dad said. But I could never believe you killed him." She sobbed again. "The evidence though, running away the night he was killed, and after everybody heard the argument, and you saying you'd get even—"

Johnny knew then how much he loved her. His eyes were glued on her wet ones. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of Mel Kole, a big hand streaking for gunbutt. Johnny whirled but made no move for his

own gun. He stared into the man's face. "Leave it, Kole." His eyes blazed with anger. He rasped out flatly, "You aren't man enough to gun me."

Kole's hand stopped on gunbutt. He measured his chances, glancing at Johnny's gun, at his rawboned hand resting easily on the saddle horn. He blinked, and his breath wheezed out.

"Kole, get out of here unless you're ready to draw. But I say you're too yellow for that." His face wore an expression of contempt.

Kole's eyes flicked up and down him. You'll hang by tonight, boy," he growled. He cut his horse viciously to the left, raking spurs into its flanks. Johnny watched him, looking back over his shoulder as though he expected a slug to come whining at him. And Johnny remembered that Mel Kole had one of the fastest draws he had ever seen. And yet, he had been afraid to use it. Plainly, Johnny Tighe's return had shaken him badly.

"Why is he still here, Jeanne?"

"He's my foreman." Her chin was up, and her eyes showed the stubbornness Old Lafe used to have. "You own half the ranch, by dad's will. But I'm running it at present, and I'll hire whoever I please."

He stared at her, moved his horse closer. "Do you believe I killed your dad?"

Her eyes dropped. "Since Dad's death I've been so alone, Johnny. With everyone saying you were always no good, I—I—" Her voice trailed off. "Where've you been, Johnny?"

"California, Mexico. I've spent two years proving I'm not what Lafe thought I was." He pulled a money belt out from under his shirt, drew out ten one-hundred dollar bills. "These were to show Lafe." His voice went bitter. "I suppose that showing them now will look like they're stolen. Easy Johnny Tighe. Drygulcher."

She sat still looking at him, and the tear was still in her eye.

"So all of a sudden," he rasped, "I've got to prove I didn't kill Lafe. When did it happen, Jeanne?"

"The night you left."

"Two years after the killing I've got to prove I didn't do it! And with a hangrope ridin' my backtrail." He moved his horse over close to her, and his voice softened. "If you said you believed in me,

Jeanne—" He looked straight into her eyes.

She dodged his glance. Then she started. Hoofs were rattapanning up the Axe Head. "The sheriff, Johnny! Three or four men. They must have met Mel Kole!"

Johnny didn't look toward them. "I won't go until you tell me, Jeanne."

Her eyes went wide with terror. "They're coming! Two hundred yards. You've got to go!"

"Do you believe in me?" He sat his horse quietly, back turned to the galloping horsemen.

Her eyes darted around. "Yes! Yes, I believe in you. Now go!"

Johnny grinned. He swung an arm around her, pulled her to him. He kissed her hard. As he drew his face away he said, "I'll be back, Jeanne." Then suddenly he was spurring along the Axe Head, waving back to her. Mel Kole sent two shots burning after him, but Easy Johnny had cut out into the brush. He knew the posse had ridden hard. His horse was rested and the climb up the Axe Head should put them behind. He glanced back, saw Sheriff Ben Jenks, Kole, and two others. Kole seemed to be holding his horse back. Johnny grinned. Kole's horse was the freshest, but he was afraid to lead the others by too much. He reached a heavy growth of jack-pines, slashed the pony through them. Then he stopped to breathe the horse. Let them tire their mounts, he thought. When they had worked over his trail a while, he could cut them out and lead them off again. He sat there quietly, rolled a quiry. He told himself they'd have a job catching Easy Johnny Tighe.

THEY came close later that afternoon.

He gave them a run, his jack-pines again and lost them. When dark came they had to give up. Johnny sat on a cleft of rock up on the rim of the Axe Head, smoking. Below he could see a glimmer of light at the ranchhouse. Inside, he was aching to see Jeanne. For one thing, while she said she believed in him, it had been hurried. Anything to make him leave. But that meant she didn't want him killed. One small comfort, anyway.

He knew that no amount of earnest talking would really convince her. Talking

about it wouldn't convince anybody. He had to find who murdered Lafe. And the trail was two years old.

But there he was bogged down. He knew that Lafe was killed the same night he left. But no more than that. Maybe the oldster had been carrying a sizeable cash wad. Maybe someone had slipped out of Lafe's past and done a job of vengeance. At any rate, the murder was timed well to put the blame on Easy Johnny Tighe.

He had to find out. And Jeanne was the only person he could trust. He dragged deep on his cigaret, crushed it out on his bootheel. He hopped on his horse, and in a minute the pony was plodding down through the deep valley grass.

When he came close he spotted a light in the kitchen. Figuring on a possible trap, he ran his horse into the far corral, then slipped quietly around to the kitchen window. Inside, he saw Jeanne, standing against the far wall, her arms folded. Her brow was puckered, and she was talking fast to the four men seated at the kitchen table. Jenks, Kole, and two men Johnny didn't know. The window was closed, and all he could get was the murmur of voices. At length the four men got up and left the kitchen. Johnny slunk back in the bushes alongside the house. He watched them climb into the saddle and head off toward town.

When they were out of sight, he tapped on the kitchen window. He saw Jeanne stiffen. Then she recovered and pointed toward the front door. Johnny hurried around and into the house. He met her in the dark hallway.

"Think they might come back?" he said.

She shook her head. "Not now. We'd best stay in the dark, though. They've gone to town to round up a big posse. Going to comb the range for you."

Johnny shoved back the emotion that made him want to put his arms around her. With difficulty he managed to remember that he was in immediate danger. He said, "Jeanne, where was Mel Kole the night Lafe was killed?"

She frowned. "Why, he was with Dad. He saw—" She stopped, suddenly broke into hurried words. "He says he saw you pull your horn-handled gun and shoot Dad. He fired at you, but you were gone."

It hit Johnny hard. His fists knotted. "He saw it!" he almost shouted. "That means he did it, Jeanne!" He paced hurriedly up and down the hall.

She turned to him, grabbed his shirt. "But Johnny, he's been such a good foreman, so nice to me, even though we aren't making much money."

He stopped. "Not making money? Listen, I've been away in California and Mexico, but I know what cattle prices have been."

"Yes, prices have been good. But the calf-drop seemed to be low, and—"

"And Kole has been rustling your cattle. He killed Lafe when he saw I could be blamed for it. That was so he would have a free hand with the place. I'll bet he has a wad of cash tucked away." He paced the floor again, muttering to himself. He was certain that Kole had done it, and he knew why. But that only confirmed his suspicions. He was a hunted man. His only evidence was that Kole had claimed he saw Easy Johnny Tighe kill the rancher. And because he hadn't done it, he knew that Kole was the killer. But who would listen to him?

"The sheriff," Jeanne said. "Ben Jenks is a fair man. If I talked to him—"

Johnny shook his head. "There's only one way. Got to prove that Kole did it." He hiked up his gunbelt. "I'm goin' to town, Jeanne. I've got a hunch that Kole has overplayed his hand." He hurried toward the door. Jeanne grabbed his arm.

"Johnny, if they catch you—"

He grinned at her, threw an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry." He kissed her quickly, then ran to the door. She stood staring after him. The way he did that—she couldn't explain it, but there was something about the old Easy Johnny Tighe that would never change.

He got a fresh pony from the corral and headed for town. He rode hard, and knots of muscles worked up in his shoulders. He resolved one thing, that if he couldn't bring Mel Kole to justice, Kole would still pay for killing Lafe Durham. But ahead lay a town full of hostile people, men who would shoot him on sight.

He left his horse as he swung up in back of Rocksalt's low frame buildings. He walked silently out to the mouth of an alley, glanced both ways down the street.

There was a bunch of horses tied in front of the sheriff's office. Others at the Rock-salt Saloon hitch-rail. He thought of the last time he was at the saloon, when Ace Pracket had cleaned him of every cent, taken his watch and gun as well. He glanced over at Close-Cut Pete's barber shop. His eyes lit up. The gray Kole had been riding that afternoon was tied in front. He hurried over to the barbershop's side window to make sure.

Somebody was getting into the barber's chair, but Close-Cut was standing in the way. The barber moved, and Johnny saw Mel Kole's black hair as he laid back in the chair. Close-Cut was putting towels on his face.

THAT was enough. Johnny slipped around to the front door, stepped inside. The barber didn't look up from the wash stand. It gave Johnny a chance to glance around. The shop was empty. Kole's face was covered with towels. Johnny drew his gun. He gulped a couple of times. It was a thin, long hand he was playing. He raised his voice to a high pitch.

"Kin yuh cut a old feller's beard, Close-Cut?"

The barber turned, his mouth dropping open. For once his slicked-down hair seemed ruffled. Or maybe it was the way his face was working. Kole, hidden under the steaming cloths, didn't seem to notice anything.

"I'll just set my old bones down over here, Close-Cut. You just scrape that there feller's beard."

The barber wrung out some hot cloths. He eyed the open gun barrel that stared at

him. Johnny counted on his being shocked into silence for a few minutes before he started grabbing razors. But at any time the barber might start yelling for the sheriff. Or Johnny's voice might crack back down to normal, and Kole would start throwing off hot towels and reach for his gun.

"See yuh got Mel Kole under them towels, Close-Cut. Mel, reckon you'll be a big help in swingin' that there Tighe killer. After all, you seed him kill old Lafe. You was ridin' back to the ranch with Lafe that night, wasn't yuh, Mel?" For a moment Johnny thought his voice had cracked down to normal. Kole didn't seem to notice it.

"He'll swing." Kole's voice was muffled under the cloths. "I saw him. I turned around just as he was pullin' that horn-handled Colt of his. I saw him shoot old Lafe in the back. He got away from me that time, but not the next time."

The door creaked open. Johnny's eyes switched. Sheriff Ben Jenks was standing in the doorway, his silver star glittering in the lamplight. For a moment he didn't notice Johnny. "Posse's ready, Mel. Whenever yuh get prettied up like—" His voice broke off when he saw the man he was after, sitting in a chair and leveling a six-gun at him.

Johnny lost his voice for a moment. Then he gripped gunbutt savagely. He knew there were only seconds to make his play. "Sheriff," he said in the high-pitched oldster's voice he had been using, "you never got all the facts straight on that killin' before. Mel just told Close-Cut and me that Johnny pulled that horn-

(Please continue on page 98)

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TAKE A TIP . . .

TAKE THE POPULAR TRAIL!



ARTISTS OF THE ◆ DIAMOND HITCH ◆

By J. W. IRVING

THE expert of the Diamond Hitch and the mule pack train had an essentially important part to play in the transportation of supplies, machinery and every conceivable thing necessary to make available the resources of the vast mountainous regions of the West to man. Where wagons couldn't go the diamond-hitch artist and the pack mule took over.

In the mountain sections of Northern California and Southern Oregon, alone, there were thousands of pack mules in use during the sixties, seventies and early eighties, carrying their burdens to the isolated homesteaders, ranches and mining camps. Throughout a vast region there were no wagon roads, no bridges across the rivers; just narrow, often dangerous trails, zigzagging back and forth across mountains, stringing along steep cliffs, or crossing and recrossing some stream, following always the line of least resistance.

Far-seeing merchants placed stores at convenient locations, and equipped pack trains of from thirty to 60 or more mules—to pack everything from food, dynamite and kegs of whiskey to quartz mill machinery, saw mill parts and hydraulic monitors. A first class outfit was supposed to average 300 pounds to the animal. These mules were carefully picked—usually of the blocky type and weighing around 900 to 1100 pounds. They had to be good walkers.

A packer just had to be GOOD or he was no good at all. He had to be quick, active, strong, and use good judgment. Everything about handling freight was systematized. Packages of ordinary freight would be lashed together in side packs of around 150 pounds each, and the "cargo" conveniently arranged for rapid work in loading. Three good men and a "bell boy" could handle a train of around 30 to 40 animals.

The work of packing begun, the train would have to be loaded and moving within an hour. You couldn't keep an animal standing around for two or three hours with a 300 pound pack on his back. Packers had to be expert saddlers. A dirty blanket or an overlooked crease could cause a saddle sore. Each saddle tree was adjusted to fit the individual animal. A pack had to balance perfectly, else it might turn and pile the pack and animal down in some canyon.

Every good outfit had reserved a few of the most intelligent and strongest animals for "top packs." These top packs were single pieces of machinery, stoves, trunks, or what-not too heavy for side packs. Often a section of a stamp mill mortar, or an hydraulic monitor would weigh 350 pounds or better.

In the handling of such pieces pack train owners often demanded full insurance on the value of the animal before they would touch them. To handle these top packs, a piece of wood would be lashed on each side of the saddle and even with the top of the tree forks. This made a base for the pack to rest on. An absolutely expert job had to be done on a heavy top pack. Perfect balance was imperative and the job had to be done fast. Gold mines had a habit of locating themselves in the most inaccessible regions; and in such impossible places most of such packs had to go.

A good pack outfit was well trained. Undesirable animals were soon weeded out. Mules for some unexplainable reason will follow a gray mare to hell and back. The custom was to put a bell on the mare and ride her in the lead. The mules soon got used to the sound of the bell and would follow as long as they could hear it. At night when the animals were turned loose to gaze they seldom strayed beyond the sound of the bell. In the morning the

trick was to catch the mare, and the mules would follow her to camp.

Saddles in camp were placed in a semi-circle. And while the "bell boy" was cooking breakfast the gray mare would be led to the "near" end of the semi-circle on the outside. Each mule would crowd in along-side, heads over the saddles. The packer from the inside of the semi-circle would place slip halters on the mules' heads. They would then be tied together for saddling. With breakfast over the packing starts. Two men on the "near" side deftly swing up the 150 pound side pack to rest on tree forks of the saddle. The man on the "off" side swings a loop around it; pulls it over on his own side and steadies it. The end of the sling rope is thrown over and tied from the near side. "Walk him," says the boss. The mule is led a few steps to see that the pack is balanced.

Now comes the art of throwing the famous Diamond Hitch. The lash rope seems almost a living thing—no lost motion. Every move counts. With the real diamond-hitch artist the rope fairly sings! A few incredibly quick movements and the thing is done in less than a minute—the pack securely lashed to all four corners of the pack saddle and under the animal's belly. When finished, a diamond shaped design shows in the rope on top of the pack—hence the "diamond hitch." In less than an hour the packing is done; the bell boy has packed his "kitchen" and is on the trail riding the mare. The loaded train is on its way. Around 15 miles was considered a day under heavy packs.

A mule is a most intelligent pack animal. He may be full up to the neck with cussedness. He may kick your eyebrows off. But he knows how to take care of himself—and does! You can't get him on a dangerous bridge or in miry ground. If he can't go around or jump a dangerous place he just won't go at all. He will travel a narrow, dizzy trail around some almost perpendicular cliff or canyon wall. But he must have clearance for his pack. Just a few inches clearance is enough in order that he can keep his pack from striking an obstruction and hurtling him and his pack to destruction. A good boss packer always looked out for this and

never put his loaded train on a trail unless he was sure of sufficient clearance for his packs.

Pack trains in the days of the early West were used to pack flume and building lumber; also mining timbers. Packing boards 12 to 16 feet in length was no "great shakes" at all. For packing lumber, racks were suspended on either side of the saddle from the tree forks.

Wooden pins were adjusted to rest the lumber on. With one-inch lumber, the front ends were tied together. A loop was slung over the rear ends and drawn tight. Then again would come the inevitable diamond hitch. The load would resemble an inverted row boat over the "deck" of the mule. The intelligence of the mules in carrying lumber through rough and broken country was nothing short of amazing.

With perhaps only a width of 12 to 18 inches for his hoofs, and in steep country, he had no way to recover from a jar. He would be just a "gone duck." But here is where the mule really used his intelligence to save himself. If, in a tight place, where there would be danger of the lumber striking an obstruction close to the trail, he would keep his eyes "peeled." With greatest of care he would swing the end clear and ease himself around the dangerous spot, keeping as close as safety would permit to the outer edge of the trail, and in no case would he get careless in a situation dangerous to himself.

He might for some reason of pure, unadulterated cussedness try to rub off his pack by going between two trees; but it had to be on level ground and involve no danger to his personal safety! To climb a steep grade with a heavy top pack required some careful work too. He must walk steady, head well down, lest the pack pull him over backwards. A horse might throw up his head to look at the scenery, but never a mule. He is all for safety first.

The large mule pack trains, with their highly skilled Diamond Hitch artists, belong to a past and heroic era. But they, as the wagon trains, had their important part in blazing the way for the up to date methods of transit that the West now enjoys.

SANTA CLAUS OF BITTER CREEK

By A. C.
ABBOTT



He peeped in to find the boy and his mother decorating the tree.

Christmas Eve is no time to be out hunting strays—unless you're a stray yourself. . . .

CHRISTMAS EVE on the Bitter Creek range found a grim-lipped stranger loping steadily through the deepening snow toward Hill City—and escape. He was a tall man, under thirty, with dark hungry eyes burning out of a lean brown face.

Rounding a sharp corner in the trail, the rangy black mare almost knocked down a small figure plodding determinedly through the drifts.

"Hi there, Bud!" called the rider, his

hand flashing out of his pocket to quiet the startled mare.

"Hi there, yourself!" chirped back a sassy little voice; and the kid, endeavoring to get out of the trail, sat down suddenly in a huge drift.

"Kinda cold settin', ain't it?" inquired the cowpuncher innocently as he leaned out of the saddle to lift the five-year-old up behind him. The cowpuncher's horse, Molly, objected to the strange feeling of a person behind the saddle and started down the trail sideways, snorting her protest.

"Looky here now," drawled the rider reprovingly. "Ain't you got no social instincts?"

Finally persuading her that everything was all right, he turned in the saddle to view his new found traveling companion. A chubby, cold-reddened face and bright blue eyes shone at him from a bundle of dark heavy clothing, and the cowpuncher grinned.

"Where you headin', Bud?" he asked.

"I'm goin' to town to get my Mom a Christmas present," came the prompt answer.

"Well, I'll be darned," muttered the rider. A dream he had buried six years ago rose out of the depths to turn his voice husky.

"Christmas Eve's kinda late for shop-pin', ain't it?"

"Yep, but I just got the money for helpin' old man Benson find his spotted calf. Sure was a job in all this snow, but he gave me a dime. And I gotta get Mom somethin' good."

"You bet," the puncher murmured softly. "Somethin' grand for a fella's Mom." He squinted suddenly as he realized that his own son would have been not much bigger than this.

"You headin' for town, mister?" the boy asked.

"You bet."

"Whatcha gonna do?"

"Get plastered," came the instant response.

"Get what?" the kid asked blankly.

"Pie-eyed. Stinkafoo!"

The kid only looked more puzzled at each word. The rider fumbled around for another term, found none, and shrugged helplessly.

"What's all them?" the kid asked with

grave interest. His eyes were curious.

"Never mind," drawled the cowpuncher. "You'll prob'ly read about it in the paper next week."

But the kid couldn't "never mind". "Plastered," he said again. "Like as if you was gonna get kalsomined?"

The puncher's laugh rolled out into the snowflakes. "I'll prob'ly get kalsomined, too," he said.

"What for?"

The puncher abruptly faced ahead and looked studiously at Molly's short ears. "That's a long story, Bud," he said curtly.

"Tell me," insisted the kid.

The man swore under his breath. How could he tell a button like this about six years of running from Christmas, of being afraid to greet the Yuletide without a bottle in his hand and a blurred hilarity in his eye? He hated Christmas. He hated himself for running from it, but he couldn't help it. He could still see that little cabin, snug and comfortable, with cretonne curtains at the windows and a baby bed that was never used. His wife had gone that night—Christmas Eve. . . .

He had buried her and then had pulled out, leaving the ranch in the care of a reliable foreman. He had been wandering aimlessly ever since.

Now from under a wide-brimmed, snow-filled hat he looked at the large softly falling snowflakes, at the pines patiently holding out arms already heavily laden. He swore again and his voice was strained. "Ain't this snow purty?"

"Yeah, it's purty," said the kid impatiently. "But why you gonna get all them things? You gonna give 'em to somebody?"

"I—ain't got nobody to give 'em to, Bud."

The man rode with easy relaxation, the turned-up collar of his heavy mackinaw allowing only a glimpse of his bright scarf to peep through. His chin was clean shaven and his hands were shoved deep into his pockets, leaving the reins draped loosely over the saddle horn. He looked the picture of carefree deviltry, but there was in his voice a loneliness that stopped even the kid's questioning.

"Yeah," the little fellow said slowly, "it sure is purty."

"You know," mused the puncher, "I

haven't done any Christmas shoppin' for a long time. What do you say—"

He hesitated. Maybe this independent young man didn't want any help. He would have friends in town, maybe relatives; and a drifting, whiskey-drinking cowpuncher had better keep on drifting. So the man kept his pockets and his mind on a drink, while Molly loped on toward town.

HILL CITY, with all its excited occupants, its two stores, and its three saloons, was soon reached. The rider inquired the way to the livery stable and then offered to let his new friend off at the store.

The little fellow hesitated, his chubby fists tight in the back of the man's coat. Finally he suggested, "I'll help you put your horse up if you'll help me get Mom's present. I don't know just what a feller ought to get his Mom."

The man's heart leaped, but he kept his voice casual. "That's a fair enough bargain, pardner. What say we get Molly, here, a box of sugar lumps for her Christmas present? She's an awful old beggar, but I promised to get her somethin'."

"Sure," said the youngster eagerly. "I'll hold her while you get it."

The puncher knew very well that the mare would stand until she starved to death waiting for him, but he didn't let the kid know this. He strode heavily into the bustling store; and while he was making his purchase, he covertly watched the boy. He was such a little squirt, his heavy clothes looming black in the softness of the snow. He gripped the reins in a tight fist, looking up at the towering horse with wide-eyed confidence; and he had asked the man for help!

Suddenly the rider grinned broadly. His booted foot began to tap against the rough board floor, and a Christmas spirit he had thought long dead came to life and ran away with him.

When Molly had been shown to her hotel, served in her room, and permitted to see and sample her Christmas present, the two pilgrims went out to see what could be done for Mom.

Happy confusion was everywhere. Horses and buckboards lined the street, and "Merry Christmas" filled the air.

Pink-cheeked women hurried in and out of the stores while red-nosed cowpunchers lounged in and out of the saloons. The rider stared for a moment at a noisy group going into Mac's place. He ran a tongue around his dry lips.

The enthusiastic boy had been babbling constantly about different things he might get, asking questions that went unanswered. Suddenly the cowpuncher smiled, thinking of the dime. He shoved the kid into the big general store, drawling softly, "Looks to me like you got one of those champagne appetites and a beer pocketbook."

They had time to look over everything in the store before old Mike Gabby, with his gray handle-bar mustache and bald head, came to wait on them. The boy pointed to a beautiful hand-made cedar chest and asked Mike how much it was.

"That'll only cost you a nickel!" the rider spoke up, glaring fiercely at the startled old man behind the counter.

Old Mike's mouth popped wide as he stared at the young stranger, and then, slowly, a grin touched the far corners of his eyes. He fumbled for his suspenders, hooked his thumbs comfortably, and began rocking back and forth on age-bowed legs.

"Yep, that's right," he boomed heartily. "Just a nickel. Things shore have come down in price lately."

"That leaves you a nickel, Bud," drawled the serious cowpuncher. "What else'll you have?"

"Well, lessee," the kid murmured, puckering his brows in thoughtful satisfaction. "Mom and me cut a tree yesterday, but we haven't got nothin' to put on it. Maybe I could get some of those little dodaddies. You know," he added confidentially, "women like to have things purty."

"What about your Dad, Bud?" the rider questioned helpfully. "Are you gonna get him somethin'?"

"You oughta have some candy and nuts and stuff," spoke up Mike hastily, giving the nonplussed cowpuncher a hard shove toward the candy counter. When the young man recovered his balance, Mike was beside him, whispering hoarsely, "Dad's dead. Got bad hurt in the slide last year. They used up every cent they

had tryin' to save him, but he didn't make it." His keen old eyes rested briefly on the stranger's face.

"Ahuh!" The rider shifted his weight to one long leg, deftly tipped his hat down over his eyes, and let his hand fall to Mike's stooping shoulder. "I reckon," he said gravely, "that we'll have a penny's worth of candy, about five or ten pounds mixed. Be sure to give us some of all kinds. And we'll have another penny's worth of mixed nuts, about the same amount. And we'll have a couple dozen oranges and some bananas, if you got 'em, and a big box of those fancy chocolates for Mom, huh, Bud? And a gob of pop corn and cranberries to string for the tree. And we'll take a penny's worth of them trinkets and candles, and that gold and silver braid stuff, and some of those bells. That about finishes the dime, Bud. Is there anythin' else you want?"

"Gosh, no!" the little fellow gasped, with shining eyes. "How we gonna get all this home?"

"Jim Bailey's up the street a ways with his buckboard," Mike suggested, trying vainly to keep his exultation from showing. "He'll take you home."

Big, hearty Jim Bailey was more than glad to take the kid home. His eyes were brightly astonished when he saw the cedar chest, and he looked quickly at the cow-puncher. That individual flushed deeply and only said, "Give me a hand here."

"Gosh!" the kid squealed. "I'll bet Mom doesn't know you can get all this much stuff for a dime!"

"I'll bet you wouldn't either if you'd ever seen a dime before," said Jim Bailey quizzically. "And besides that, I'll bet your Mother doesn't even know where you are. We better get a-kinin'."

When the kid and his dime's worth of purchases were started home, the puncher turned back into the store. Old Mike met him at the door and began, "Boy, I could hug—"

"Shut up, Dad, and come wait on me," the rider interrupted mildly. "I ain't through with my Christmas shoppin' yet."

"I got somethin' here," said Mike, running a guilty eye over his store, "that's awful good for your Christmas spirit."

He pulled a bottle from under the coun-

ter and shoved it across. The puncher reached out and again his tongue slid around his lips. Then he shook his head and grinned.

"Thanks, Mike, but I ain't got time— yet. I better wait till I get everythin' else done and then go at it slow and thorough!"

AFTER an hour of careful and much-debated selection, the rider went out in the gathering dusk after his horse. On his return he cut a length of his rope and took it into the store, leaving Molly standing indignantly out in front, still chomping a clump of good hay.

"Here," he said. "We can strap it on with this. You bring the sled, and I'll take the pack."

Back out with Molly, who was straining her neck to see what was going on, old Mike set the big, shiny "Flyer" sled down in the snow and turned to help with the huge bundle. After much planning and rearranging they got it tied securely on the sled. Then the puncher, fastening the end of his shortened lariat onto the sled as a tow rope, took a couple of dallies

FIRST AID

COLD DISCOMFORTS

HEADACHES

ACID INDIGESTION

MUSCULAR PAINS

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ALL DRUG STORES U. S. AND CANADA

around the saddle horn and swung up.

Mike advanced and placed an affectionate hand on the rider's knee.

"Boy, I don't know what to say to you," he stammered. "You've got enough stuff to last a family of ten for a year. All kinds of clothes, toys galore, a little saddle for the kid, and every book and fancy knick-knack I had for his mother. They're the finest kind of folks, and they've sure had tough luck. I wish I could thank you, but I—"

"Aw, lay off, Dad," protested the embarrassed puncher. "If I'd known you were gonna act like this, I'd of gagged you."

Mike had to say something, though, so he mumbled, "That's a fine lookin' horse."

The puncher settled back with a relieved grin. "Only female I ever found," he drawled, "who don't talk back."

Following the directions given him, the rider jogged reluctantly past the humming saloon and was soon out of town and on his way to the little cabin. Molly stepped high and wide, with a cautious eye always on that top-heavy bundle following her.

"First time I ever played Santy Claus," the rider muttered; then to Molly, "Reckon you'll have to sprout a pair of horns and change your name to Blitzen, and I'll have to cultivate a crop of whiskers. We'll have to get us a job ridin' line, though, or Santy's goin' broke. And I'm darn near starved."

The cabin in the little clearing looked like a doll's house under its load of snow, its windows like tiny lamps in the darkness. It was built neatly on a slope, with steps and a small landing before the plank door.

The cowpuncher breathed more easily when he decided that the dogs, if there were any, were in the house. Dismounting and stepping cautiously up to the landing, he peeped in to find the boy and his fair-haired mother hilariously decorating the little tree in the corner. The fireplace was glowing lustily. The cedar chest was still in the center of the floor. On a table within reach of the tree were heaping dishes of candy, nuts, and fruit; and a dog was sitting beside the table looking expectantly from the exuberant couple to the high-piled dishes.

The man on the outside suddenly choked over an obstruction in his throat. This might have been his own home if— He cursed savagely as he felt his emotions getting out of control, and he turned blindly toward Molly with only one idea in mind—leave his bundle at the door and ride!

He lunged for the steps, the second of which gave under his weight with a screeching rend. He felt himself falling and clawed vainly for support. Then he was upside down in the drift at the bottom.

The dog set forth a furious barking. The kid yelled. The woman screamed. And poor Molly, stiff-legged and terrified, practically sat down on the bundle of toys.

The door flew open; and the woman, the kid, and the dog bounded out in a single motion. In the full light of the door the cowpuncher struggled to a sitting position, found his hat, and jammed it viciously on his head.

"That damn step," he blurted, "needs fixing!"

"Yes," the woman replied quietly, smothering a giggle. "I know."

The cowpuncher knew, too. They needed a man around a homestead. He got to his feet and somehow found the grin he had lost so abruptly in the snow-drift.

"I brought a little somethin' for the kid," he drawled, with a little careless gesture.

He wasn't quite sure how it happened, but presently he found himself sitting in the warm cabin, eating a piece of candy, and no longer wishing he had time to get drunk. When the bundle was opened, the woman failed utterly to find the words to thank him. She just looked at him for a long time.

The puncher guessed that some of his loneliness was sticking out around the edges because she said, unexpectedly, "Spend Christmas with us."

He sailed his hat across the room where it settled, with a permanent-looking dangle, on the deer horns above the cabin door.

"I'll fix that step in the mornin'," he grinned.

TRUST A DEAD MAN

By

W. J. REYNOLDS

Bill Knight would have been a son or brother to Kane Outler—but Outler was friends only with death. . . .



Panic-stricken screams broke from the two gunmen as they jerked at their Colts.

"THEN you're really going to Dodge, Bill?" The hurt inside reached her soft brown eyes and spilled over to her voice. Bill Knight tried to ignore that hurt, tried not to see it. Marie didn't understand how a man felt about these things.

"Marie, try to see my side. It's my big chance. Think of it, a marshal under Kane Outler!" He grasped her shoulders, some of his habitual reserve falling away as his enthusiasm mounted. "He's heard of me, honey, and he's pleased with the way I've handled this town. He wants me as his deputy, and he's stopping by for me! He'll be here tonight. Kane Out-

ler! Why, honey, we can be married now in a month or two—"

She hadn't moved under his hands, but stood straight and still. "No," she said. "No, Bill, we won't ever be married—now."

His hands dropped to his sides. "You want me to stay here and go into your

dad's hay and grain business. You won't see what this means to me. You won't understand, will you?"

There was sudden passion in her voice. "I understand, Bill. Too well. In Dodge it will be only a bigger, a worse version of the last two years here in Watergap. The days and nights of horror as you became known as Bill Knight, marshal of Watergap, and the gunmen wanting to add you to the notches on their guns. The nights I lay cold with terror, listening for the shots and the sound of feet, someone coming to tell me you were dead, or had added another notch to your gun."

"Marie, I—" His hands lifted toward her again then stopped.

She lifted her head and was looking at him suddenly, steadily. In the deepening twilight, he saw the finality in her eyes.

"Bill," she said, "if you go with Outler to Dodge, it's over between us. I can't live like that!"

His lips opened to speak, a plea there ready, then they closed tightly, and his dropping hands made a hopeless gesture.

"Goodbye, Bill," she whispered and was running into the house.

Bill Knight turned downtown, his hand moving in a half understood gesture to the spot on his vest where the marshal's star had hung for two years. He had turned it in today and his valise was packed and ready in the Watergap Hotel. His stride lengthened. Kane Outler would be arriving at the hotel in a few more minutes. He would stay there tonight and tomorrow embark for Dodge. And Bill Knight would be with him.

Somehow, Bill did not feel the awe he had expected as he watched Kane Outler step down from the stage a few minutes later. The marshal was tall, lean and had a still, flowing movement like a boa constrictor that Bill had once seen in a circus. His eyes were a gray-blue with shreds of northern ice, never melting. They gave Bill Knight an unpleasant shock.

Kane Outler's eyes didn't dart and stab, but went in an easy sweep that missed no detail, an indefinite stare. His white, slender hands were still with latent power near the broad belt that supported the famous stag handled Colts.

As Bill Knight stepped forward, he received the full force of Outler's eyes,

and Bill's lifting hand dropped back. He instinctively knew that Outler would not shake hands now.

"I'm Bill Knight, Mr. Outler. Welcome to Watergap." As Outler nodded briefly, Bill went on with unaccountable lack of enthusiasm. "I've taken the liberty to reserve you a room in the Watergap Hotel—upstairs."

Outler nodded again. "We'll go up then," he said.

As Bill Knight paced Outler through the lobby, skirted the bar and climbed the stairs to Outler's room, Marie's words kept prodding him. With different eyes, he noted the gunman's encompassing glances that missed nobody, weighed each man they approached, those slender hands still and ready. The tension crept into Bill Knight, the shuddery feeling of hungry guns waiting, waiting . . .

KANE OUTLER did not relax in the room either, he never turned his back to Bill Knight as he investigated the closet and looked under the bed. Bill tried to conceal his surprise but knew that Outler had noted it.

Outler said without humor, coldly, "You'll learn, Knight—if you live. Had a man take a shot at me from under a bed once. Luckily I had tired of sleeping on a straw bed and I'd had a cotton mattress put on the day before."

Bill Knight felt uneasy, a little choked. He wished they were already on tomorrow's stage.

And it was no better in bed later. Around midnight, after tossing for two hours, Bill Knight got up and dressed. Maybe a long walk would tire him enough to sleep. Hell of a Dodge City marshal he'd make, foggy with sleepless nights . . .

He spotted the two strangers at the bar, standing apart from the thinning crowd. From habit, he started toward them. Then he remembered he was no longer marshal here, and shrugging, went out. But his thoughts kept returning to them, the pale eyes, that he had glimpsed in the mirror, of one, the bulging, frog eyes of the other. The crossed cartridge belts. Gunmen.

They were still in the nearly deserted bar when he returned two hours later. Bill turned through the bar and Curley,

the bartender got off his stool and poured him a drink. He was raising it to his lips when the two moved up beside him, one on either side, suddenly, smoothly. Under their stare, Curley moved back to his stool.

"You're Bill Knight?" asked Pale Eyes.

"That's right."

"You and Outler figger to leave for Dodge tomorrow?"

"That's right."

"Man needs money in Dodge," said Pale Eyes. "I know where you can get a lot of money. Five hundred. Ain't that right, Frog?"

"If he co-operated he could," agreed Frog. "And was real smart. He might even get to be marshal of Dodge hisself."

"If Kane Outler was dead, that is," said Pale Eyes.

Bill Knight knew the tight he was in. If he refused to help them kill Kane Outler, they wouldn't allow him to go tell the marshal. If he agreed, he might be the badman's marshal of Dodge . . .

Bill Knight set his glass down carefully, and they were pressing closer then, pinning his arms just enough without being too obvious.

They had him. Bill Knight knew that and lifted his eyes to the mirror, better to see them both. Unbelievably then, he stared into the mirror, seeing the lean, fearful figure just inside the door. Kane Outler's cold eyes were wide and glaring now, and his white hands hovered over the stag handled Colts that showed like bleached bones from the pushed back coat.

In that tension charged moment, Bill Knight knew, clearly and without doubt, where Outler had been. He had been following Bill Knight. The wolf in him had felt Bill Knight's unease, that animal instinct suspecting a trap and those glaring eyes now told Bill that he stood convicted with those other two.

Bill Knight knew that those hungry, stag handled guns would make no distinctions. His life hung by a slender thread.

"These two are out to kill you, Outler," Bill said clearly. "They tried to ring me in on it."

"Why, damn you—" began Pale Eyes.

Bill Knight shoved with his arms suddenly, hard, then went in a long dive along the sawdust floor, hands stretched above his head. "They're yours, Outler!"

But his words were drowned. Panic-stricken screams broke from the two gunmen as they jerked at their Colts. Then Kane Outler's lead was skimming over Bill Knight and the saloon rocked to the thunder of those famous guns. Frog died with his gun half out of leather, and Pale Eyes followed him so close that they fell together with the dying Pale Eyes squeezing off a shot into the sawdust floor.

Slowly then some of the fearful tension ran out of Outler and the guns sagged almost imperceptibly.

"Those men have followed me from Santone," Outler said finally, his voice an even monotone. "They were hired to kill me by a certain element in Dodge. They could and would have made it interesting to anyone who helped them." His cold eyes bored into Bill Knight.

"I know," said Bill Knight and his own even speech astonished him. "They offered me five hundred. I was in a tight." He stood up and looked at Outler. "You followed me."

"Yes. Just to make sure why you were prowling around after going to bed." There was no apology in Outler's toneless voice. "Don't make it a habit to worry me, Knight." For a second the glare was back, then it was gone and he holstered his guns. "Get a pattern and no impulses, understand?"

"Yeah, I understand, or I am beginning to, anyway. Marie understood before and she was right." He knew now that Kane Outler was killer first, lawman second.

"What?" snapped Outler. "Who's Marie?"

"My girl," said Bill Knight. Then he repeated softly, "My girl."

Then under Outler's stare, Bill Knight unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it on the bar. "Curley," he said gently, "a present for you. I won't need it in the hay and feed business!"

He walked past Kane Outler and out the door into the street. In him was a pressing urgency to see the worry and fear in a pair of soft brown eyes turn to shining happiness.

BUCKSKIN LOBO

There must have been several hundred howling savages.



By **L. C.
DAVIS**



Trail-blazer Leonard was so itchy for trouble—he stirred up a nest of arrow-slinging hornets.

THE name of Zenas Leonard, mountain man, author and pioneer trader, may not be too familiar to Western readers, but he had a very prominent role in the winning of the West.

He was born in Clearfield, Pa., in 1809, the same year that Abraham Lincoln was born, and he died in the year the Great Emancipator was first elected President. That life span of fifty-one years was eventful. Besides spending four years as a trapper in the Northwest during the most exciting and dangerous period of the fur trade, he was among the first Americans to reach the Pacific Coast.

When Zenas Leonard was twenty-one years old, he had a burning desire to see the West.

Stopping at Pittsburgh, which was beginning to rise as a metropolis on the site of old Fort Pitt, he found gainful employment for a year. With a fresh stake, he moved on to St. Louis. In 1831 the Mississippi River port, ten miles from the mouth of the Missouri, was the Western capital for the fur trade.

Gant & Blackwell were outfitting an expedition to the Northwest, and Leonard joined them. There were seventy in the party that proceeded up the Missouri River to old Fort Osage, near Independence. They paused there briefly, then headed up the Kansas River to the mouth of the Republican, trading with the Kansas Indians en route.

Going up the Republican in a northwesterly direction to the Platte, they took the north fork of that stream. They passed Chimney Rock, landmark in later years for travelers on the Oregon Trail, on their way to the mouth of the Laramie River.

It was here that the party broke up into three groups for the purpose of trapping along the three rivers that emptied into the Platte near this point. One group selected the Timber River, another ascended the Sweetwater, while Leonard's group, under command of Captain A. K. Stephens, went up the Laramie as far as the Medicine Bow Range in what is now Wyoming.

But it was rough going and their horses died of starvation during the winter because of the scarcity of forage. In desperation, Captain Stephens thought of Santa Fe, eight hundred miles to the South.

"I've been there," he told his haggard men. "It's on the Santa Fe Trail and I know we'll find horses there. Missouri mules, anyway."

They set out afoot—but the mountains had them trapped. After a struggle of ten weeks through snow passes, in which they suffered severe hardships, they returned to their Laramie River camp. Leonard, however, wanted to try again, and the intrepid young frontiersman took seven men and set forth. They might have made it, at that, if they hadn't misjudged the population of an Indian camp which they attacked. Only a few braves lounged around as they opened fire.

The first few shots stirred up a hornet's

nest, as redskins sprang up everywhere. There must have been several hundred howling savages besides the screaming squaws. The mountain men beat a hasty retreat and were glad to get away from there alive.

That was the last attempt to reach Santa Fe. They returned to their camp after being away for a month, and the entire group went back to the rendezvous at the mouth of the stream. There was no sign of the others, however.

About that time Thomas Fitzpatrick, well known trapper and guide, in command of a group of one hundred and fifteen men, happened along. He had news.

"Gant & Blackwell are out of business," he told them. "But we need more men. Why not join up with us?"

They did, and the former employees of the St. Louis firm next found themselves delivering supplies for Fitzpatrick to trappers on the Snake River, beyond the mountains.

The following summer four hundred mountain men gathered at Pierre's Hole, summer rendezvous. "Holes" came big in those days, for this one happened to be a valley seventy miles in length and ten miles wide.

They must have been scattered or hidden on July 18, 1832, for Blackfoot Indians made the mistake of attacking them on that day. This was known as the Battle of Pierre's Hole. During the attack, Leonard crawled on his hands and knees and dragged a wounded comrade to safety, after which he returned to the fray and fought until the invaders were routed.

He was a man of action, always wanting to be on the move, and when Capt. B. L. E. Bonneville, encamped on the Green River, organized an expedition to explore the country to the Pacific Coast, Leonard and other trappers joined it. He had always wanted to see the Pacific, and Lieutenant Joseph Reddiford Walker, who was to command the group, loved to explore unknown regions. Leonard signed up as a clerk.

Walker had orders from Bonneville to take a small group of men and "steer through an unknown country to the Pacific." Whether this route was to take them through California or the country

to the north wasn't quite clear. Anyway, California was "unknown," and Walker, who was from Missouri, may have exceeded his authority in leading his party in that direction. Zenas Leonard might have had something to do with it, too. They couldn't have selected a tougher route.

Leaving the Green River, they proceeded down the Humbolt and began the arduous journey over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Some historians believe they discovered the Yosemite Valley and were the first to see the famous giant redwood trees on the western slopes of the mountain range. But they never stopped to plant any flags.

A week later they heard a distant rumbling, like thunder, and were alarmed—until they learned that they were approaching the Pacific.

If this phenomenon of sound startled them, they were in for a greater sensation a few nights later—November 13, 1833—when they saw an immense shower of meteors. Negro slaves in the Southern States saw that heavenly display also, and dropped to their knees in terror, for it was "the year the stars fell."

AFTER all this, the men were ready for a drink or two, and they were afforded all they wanted when they reached the northern arm of San Francisco Bay, where a ship lay at anchor. It was the *Lagoda*, from Boston, and Captain Bradshaw, its master, invited the explorers to come aboard.

"I have a few casks of cognac that need sampling," he told them with a smile. "It's a long trip around the Horn."

It was a hard trip across the Sierras, too, and the sailors and "landlubber" mountain men drank and fraternized for several days. Walker's men spent several months visiting the Spaniards in San Jose, San Juan and Monterrey. In the spring of 1834 they began the return trip, which wasn't quite as tough, but bad enough. They rejoined Bonneville on the Great Salt Lake.

As in years gone by, the brigade was broken up into smaller groups for trapping purposes. Leonard's group trapped on the Tongue, Wind, Powder, Yellowstone and Big Porcupine Rivers, ending

up on the Popo Agie, where they again rejoined Bonneville. It was a profitable year for Leonard.

He returned to Independence in August, 1835, with Bonneville and his party, and eleven hundred dollars, which wasn't exactly chicken feed in those days when a dollar went a considerable distance. He kept on going to Clearfield, Pa., where the young explorer was welcomed as warmly by his parents as if he were the Prodigal Son, since nothing had been heard from him since his departure five years before.

But Leonard grew a little weary of reciting over and over his adventures to citizens of his home town. Instead, he got the idea of putting it into writing—so the young explorer turned author.

His story was printed in weekly installments in the *Clearfield Republican*, and the usual "*Continued next week*" at the foot of each chapter left townspeople agog and anxious for the next copy. When the yarn was printed in book form, it was entitled *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*.

Unfortunately, the newspaper plant was destroyed by fire. All but two copies of the book went up in smoke. The publisher had one copy at home, the author the other. A limited edition of the book was finally printed in 1904.

However, a few months in his home town was all he could bear. The call of the West again beckoned to Leonard and his restless soul obeyed. This time he stopped at Sibley, on the site of old Fort Osage, where in 1836 he established a trading post. He outfitted traders of the Santa Fe Trail as well as taking care of the needs of local customers.

As if this wasn't enough to keep him busy, he ran a string of boats on the Missouri between Cogswell Landing, at the mouth of Fire Prairie Creek, and St. Louis. Upstream came Indian trinkets and Yankee notions. Downstream went furs to the St. Louis market.

Zenas Leonard died in 1860 and was buried in Sibley Cemetery. A grandson, William D. Leonard, lives in Kansas City—and Zenas Leonard's fame survives among historians, who still quote him as an authority on Western lore and an outstanding frontiersman.

Indian-fighter Jim Bowie wrote a bloody page of history—for the . . .

TREASURE OF SAN SABA

By DAVE SANDS



The chief accused Bowie of treachery.

JAMES BOWIE, who gave his name to a famous knife, was no legendary figure. He was a real flesh and blood frontiersman who lived a vigorous life and died a hero's death in the Alamo, yet most of his life's history is cloaked in legend. David Crockett, who also perished in that flaming cauldron of Texas independence, left a biography, but not Bowie. He was just too busy to give it much thought.

It is said that he rode alligators in Louisiana, speared wild cattle much in the manner of chasing buffalo, fought duels in dark rooms with the bowie knife, and bartered with Laffite the pirate for ivory on the Texas Gulf coast. All of this before he went to San Antonio and married the daughter of the vice-governor of Texas.

Bowie was a forceful leader of men, but a meek follower of the Goddess of Fortune. It wasn't the flick of a card or the

turn of a wheel that intrigued him. He was a high stake gambler who asked no odds. He gambled with his life, not money, for a great cause, or for the chance of finding gold or silver. In his zealous search for the famed lost mines on the San Saba river, his exploits rivaled those of other great figures in frontier history.

One account handed down by frontiersmen relates that Bowie went to Texas about 1830, or about the time the Lipan Indians made the Llano river region their hunting grounds. Chief of the Lipans, a branch of the far-flung Apaches, was Xolic, who led his people on a bartering expedition to San Antonio every six months, taking along a small amount of silver bullion for that purpose. There was a little gold mixed in the silver ore, which led residents of San Antonio to believe it was chipped off a rich vein.

Efforts to learn more were futile as the Lipans were sworn to secrecy under penalty of a slow death by torture. But if the Mexicans and Spaniards gave up easily, the Americans were more persistent. One of these was James Bowie.

As part of his campaign to win the friendship of the Lipans he presented a fine silver-plated rifle, imported from the east, to Chief Xolic. After a powwow, Bowie became a member of the tribe in a ceremony at San Pedro Springs. In the months that followed he became adept at hunting buffalo and battling enemies of the tribe. In fact, he became such a good warrior and brave that his patience and efforts were rewarded by a peek into the tribe's treasure trove.

Bowie was amazed at what he saw.

Whether it was a great storehouse full of smelted bullion or natural veins of ore, mattered little. The fact remained that there was millions of dollars worth of Spanish gold and silver there. He had no sooner learned the secret than he took leave of the tribe and headed for San Antonio. He would need help if he planned to lift the treasure by force.

But Bowie was between the devil and the deep blue sea. Too large an "army" would mean too many with whom to divide the wealth. Too small a force would mean dismal failure in the venture. While he was making plans Chief Xolic passed to his happy hunting grounds and was succeeded by Tres Manos (Three Hands), a young warrior who was not so kindly disposed to the adopted member of the tribe. In fact, he lost no time in going to San Antonio and accusing Bowie of treachery. It nearly cost him his life, too.

So much for the "off-the-record" account. Another version of the same story, which has some historical basis, relates that Bowie, with ten other men, including his brother, Rezin P. Bowie, set out on an expedition to locate the lost Spanish mines on November 2, 1831. Among the others was Cephas K. Ham, who played an important part in the explorations.

Both accounts claimed that James Bowie had been in the San Saba country before, looking for gold and silver, but if he had he acted mighty queer for one who apparently knew where he was going. So much time was consumed in "examining the nature of the country," as he put it, that he hadn't arrived at the abandoned fort on the San Saba after more than two weeks in spite of the fact that it was but a hundred and fifty miles from San Antonio.

THE site of the old presidio was thought to have been only a mile from the mines, and was the main target of their expedition. Why did Jim Bowie wander for nearly three weeks? Did he have other information?

They were told by a friendly Comanche on November 19 that hostile savages were in the vicinity. For the most part they were Tehuacanas, Caddos and Wacos. Whether Three Hands and his Lipans were in the war party was not learned.

They struck at dawn on the 21st—a

hundred and sixty-four strong, or about fifteen to one, but the Bowie camp wasn't caught napping. In fact they had forty-eight hours to prepare for the assault.

The battle raged all day. Fifty redskins were killed and thirty-five wounded. One Texan was dead and three were wounded. But most of the mine hunters' horses were killed or crippled, and they remained in the camp for another week licking their wounds. One of the men, by the name of Buchanan, was badly wounded in the leg, and they "boiled some live oak bark, thickened it with powdered charcoal and Indian meal, made a poultice of it and tied it around Buchanan's leg." A piece of buffalo skin was sewed around the bandage. His recovery was rapid.

Time hung heavily on their hands and during the period of convalescence some of the able bodied members of the party found a cave near the camp, which served to place the location of the battle about six miles east of the presidio, instead of twenty-five miles east, as was generally believed. It took them ten days to limp back to San Antonio.

According to Cephas Ham, he—not Bowie—was adopted by Indians, but they were Comanches, not Lipans, and their chief was Incorroy. He was on horse trading expeditions with the tribe in 1831, when he *almost* saw the mine. The price of a good horse was two brass rings, eight balls of lead, a pint of powder, a butcher knife and a plug of tobacco, and they caught mustangs and drove them to Louisiana.

One of Ham's hunting companions was a fat warrior. One day he took the Texan into his confidence.

"Plenty silver other side," he said, pointing to a hill. "We go alone. I show you. But others mustn't know. They kill us."

The fat brave was unable to keep his promise, however, for the camp moved on next day. Then Ham received a message from James Bowie saying that the Mexicans and Comanches were on the verge of war. When he arrived in San Antonio he learned that the real purpose of Bowie's warning was to enlist Ham's aid in his search for the San Saba treasure. The expedition then took its departure.

"Rezin P. Bowie had already been to

the mine," Ham said. "It wasn't far from the fort. Rezin descended to the bottom of the eight-foot shaft on steps hewn from an oak log. With his tomahawk he hacked off some ore and took it to New Orleans where the assay showed it to be of excellent quality." He returned to San Antonio, and his further moves were chronicled in the "historical" account of the expedition.

Jim Bowie did not give up the search, however. Jason was no more persistent in his quest of the Golden Fleece than this man Bowie. He raised a second expedition of thirty men, all authorities agree. This time, according to Ham, he got to the San Saba but failed to find the shaft, which had been filled up. However, he may have found it, and was getting ready to develop it when the war between Texas and Mexico broke out. Many Texans, too, were insistent in their belief that Bowie's real motive for getting hold of the San Saba wealth was to help finance the Texas army in its battle for independence.

One authority believed that the Lipans showed Bowie several hundred jack loads of pure silver that had been moulded into bars and stored in a cave, instead of a mine. There also is a story that five hundred dollars was paid to a Mexican for a document that one of Santa Anna's officers took from the dead body of Jim Bowie in the Alamo. It purportedly gave directions

for finding the mine. But for some reason or other the purchaser was unable to find it. Be that as it may, many believe to this day that Bowie died on that 6th day of March, 1836, knowing where untold wealth was hidden.

Out of all this welter of fact and fiction, it seems that Jim Bowie set out for the mines, all right, and must have known its location, for his name appears on two different stone gateposts of the old stockade ruins on the San Saba. One, badly mutilated, bore the date 1829, while another, more plainly, reads:

BOWIE
MINE
1832

Whether Jim Bowie carved his name on either of these gateposts near the northwest entrance to the presidio, along with the dates, will never be definitely known, but the last San Saba mine has ever after been known as the Bowie mine. Four years later, as Col. Bowie, he led his company in the so-called Grass Fight, when he mistook bundles of hay loaded on Mexican mules for bags of silver with which to pay off the soldiers of General Cos. And with a hundred and eighty-odd other Texans, he carved his name indelibly in the minds of the common people for his brave part in achieving Texas independence.

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Hard as gunflame, swift as an arrow, he blazed his hell-born pilgrimage . . . the phantom from the land of scalps and gold who swore he'd shuck his guns six feet under—or take—

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**By ROD
PATTERSON**



There was an instant in which
sternity was suspended before
two shots banged in the room's
trapped silence.

HOT BLOOD BRANDS THE CROSSBONE



It wasn't till Clyde Tunis' bullets had marked him for sudden death that Ral Bristow even began to live!

CHAPTER

Rustler's Nest

1

With his cigarette trailing the aromatic smell of Bull Durham, Ral Bristow turned into the Casino in Sag City and put the buckle of his cartridge belt against the raw pine bar, resting spread arms and elbows on the ledge. A barkeep turned from the line of drinkers and laid bottle and glass before him. Irv Staw-

Stawbuck, the proprietor, walked the length of the crowded room and clasped Bristow's rope-scarred hand.

"Why, howdy, Ral," said the owner, a small black-mustached man dressed in a fustian waistcoat and the string tie and gates-ajar collar of his trade. "Been six months since you shined your elbows on my bar. How's everything on Lodgegrass Creek?"

"Not good," Bristow said frankly, harshly. "Rustlers cleaned my feeder ranch."

Stawbuck nodded in a grave way, then murmured for Bristow's hearing alone: "Cylde Tunis is in town."

"Saw him," Bristow said laconically.

"Got his boys with him over at the Shindy—Hipe Luckinbill, too."

Bristow took his drink without comment. Stawbuck watched him with a hard care but said no more on the subject. Nobody had to caution Ral Bristow regarding his enemies. He knew them as thoroughly as he knew his friends and this town was full of both.

Stawbuck bought Bristow's second drink, smiled his practiced smile, and returned to the faro game he had left at the rear of the noisy room. Bristow slicked the whisky down and left the place. He was bone-tired from the forty-mile ride from his spread down on the desert's rim, but determined to make the calls he had to make before taking a room at the hotel for a brief siesta.

Pacing back up the street, he noticed that Tunis had departed from the porch of the Shindy yonder though the Crossbone horse still switched flies at the hitching bar.

His walk was sauntering as he made his way past the hotel, a three-story wooden building with a double-decker porch and a cloth sign cornice-high that read:

STOCKMEN'S ASSOC. DANCE
TONIGHT
ODDFELLOWS HALL

He was moving past Scatterday's Mercantile when someone called. "Hey!"

THE voice pulled him around on his high spurred heels. Three men paced up the sidewalk toward him, and the street

in their vicinity had cleared of everyone else. Bristow saw Hipe Luckinbill, Crossbone foreman, in the middle, with two of Tunis' saddle stiffs flanking him. Hipe, a stocky man whose face showed nothing but aloofness, had skin the color of coffee, surly suspicious eyes, a straight slit of a mouth and no friendliness whatever for anyone.

There was a tenseness in the way the trio walked that told of strung-tight nerves and a guarded though aggressive interest in the man who stood beneath the arcade, waiting, still-faced and completely motionless.

There was all at once a queer lack of sound in this part of the town. Three pairs of spurs came jingling to a halt. The cowboys, Lefever and Dawkins, hung back a pace behind Hipe, one at each of his elbows. And Hipe was saying, "Tunis wants a word with you—at the Shindy."

Bristow's rangy frame showed an idleness that was belied by the watchfulness of his steady eyes. He sized the men up deliberately, then bluntly said, "Tell Tunis I've got nothing to say and he's got nothing I want to hear."

Hipe's bleached eyebrows came together in a frown. "He's got an apology comin'. You better not rile him too far."

"To hell with Tunis! To hell with the bunch of you!"

Hipe reared back, bracing his hands on his hips. His coat of faded ducking fell open, showing the gun on his belt. Anger washed over his face at Bristow's affront. "Fella," he stated in a rancorous tone, "do I get it straight you been callin' Crossbone a rustlin' outfit?"

Bristow shrugged. "I called your boss a cow thief and I said it in public. The remark still stands!"

"He'll kill you for that crack!" Hipe blurted savagely.

Bristow laughed coldly. "More likely he tells you or his hired gunmen to do the job! Maybe he thought I'd sing low because you've got Dawkins and Lefever with you. Maybe he figured he wouldn't have to risk facin' me himself." He paused a second, then hit the other rider with his challenging command. "Go ahead, Hipe. Go ahead and make your play. But remember if you had ten men sidin' you, they couldn't plug me any quicker than I

can pull my gun and drive *your* tack!"

Hipe Luckinbill let his arms come up a notch. It was like a signal to the men at his flanks. Lefever's eyes seemed to crowd closer to his flattened, ugly nose. Dawkins' chilled gaze grew even more intense. Hipe said in his loudest voice, "You got an hour to leave town. Take Osburn along, and don't make the mistake of ridin' back!"

Then Hipe knew it had done no good. What had been the face of a quiet ranchman hardened in every line. The only part of it that seemed human were the eyes and those, too, changed as Hipe stared into them. They changed subtly, and suddenly were like hot light.

"I called you a bunch of rustlers," Bristow said, and his tone was queerly like a shout uttered in a whisper, and it carried hollowly beneath the overhead arcade. "It still stands. I've said all I have to say to you—"

A voice behind Bristow stopped him in midsentence. "Ral, hold up!" He didn't move to look around but he knew the speaker was Sheriff Limes. Hipe and his men seemed suspended between action and uncertainty. The foreman's narrowed eyes, however, showed something he would rather have dropped in his tracks than reveal to Bristow—unequivocal relief. His arms came down again. He turned away abruptly, growling: "That's all. Come on, boys."

BRISTOW remained a slack shape where he was, watching the Crossbone crew retreat along the deserted walk. Behind him came the slow pace of boots on the packed earth. A hand touched him on the arm. He moved his head in a half turn and was looking into a pair of penetrating deep-set eyes that had never known fear or hate and never would know either.

Limes was seventy-five and the years lay solid on his wide square shoulders and through his thick-chested six-foot frame. He brushed a hand along his drooping white mustache and tightened his grasp on Bristow's arm. "Ral, come over to the office, will you? Something I want to speak about. Don't mind, do you, son?"

Bristow shrugged his shoulders, his eyes half closed now against the glare of

sunlight in the street. "Not any, Sheriff. In about a half hour. That all right?"

Limes glanced down the street, the edge of uneasiness in his eyes. "Why, no," he said, then murmured, "Ral, Clyde Tunis is the dirtiest fighter in the country!"

"He'd be dead by now if he wasn't," said Bristow with a flickering smile.

The Sheriff lowered his arm, his hand. "Ral, I can't let a gun-fight happen. Not here in town. Give me your word you'll keep clear of Tunis while you're here."

Bristow shook his head, genuine liking for the old lawdog like sudden warmth in his eyes. "Limes, I came forty miles to take Verna Redding to the dance tonight and try to square myself with her. You're askin' something I can't and won't promise."

The Sheriff's bristly white eyebrows knotted together in a troubled frown. "Well," he said like a sigh, "I guess I'd like you less if you did. But, son, Tunis has friends in Sag City. There's a few men here figure him for top-dog in the valley in a year's time. Scatterday for one. Will Pardee for another. It's all over the county you called Clyde a rustler. Meb-beso, but the boys I jest mentioned ain't in sympathy with such a statement."

"If an hombre called me that," Bristow told him softly, "I'd make him prove it or take it back."

"You're proud," said the Sheriff troubledly. "And pride kills more men than courage! Well, maybe you'll change when you've talked to Verna."

CHAPTER

2

Writ in Blood

At the far end of the street, where the beaten road petered out to a stretch of *vega* with a creek and scrub-covered ridges a mile beyond, stood Verna Redding's small slab-plank bungalow under a pair of live oaks whose reaching boughs drooped long festoons of Spanish moss. A hollyhock border rimmed the yard and a foot path that brought Bristow to a porch and a shadowed door.

At his knock, the door opened as though Verna had seen him coming and was waiting with a hand on the latch. Bristow pulled off his hat and stood, rangy and grave, saying quietly: "Verna, how've

you been?" Their eyes met, fair and direct.

She was a slim fair girl of twenty-five, straight-standing, well-formed of body and limb, a girl who, in a land where most women lost their allure, managed always to look fresh and sweet in the simple things she wore. Today she was dressed in a plain gingham frock cut low enough to show her softly rounded throat and the gentle curves of shoulders and breast.

She said, very softly: "Ral, you are an easy-going man. You come and go and stay away as if life were bound to last a thousand years. Come in."

He followed her through the doorway, and she faced him in a room that held a table, a sewing machine and the neat disorder of a dress-maker's workshop. She snatched a bolt of yard goods from an easy chair and made a place for him to sit. But he remained standing; the shadows of the room made the chiseled angles of his dark face stronger. His gaze stayed quietly on hers. Color rose against her cheekbones; she was pleased by his glance. He said, "I rode in hopin' you'd let me take you to the dance. It's been a long time since the last one."

She was smiling as he spoke but now soberness came to her eyes. He remembered that this was the girl he had known so long a time and yet nothing had ever been any different than it was now—a quiet pleasure in each other's company.

"A long time," she echoed. "And each time it grows longer. Ral," she told him candidly, "I'm going to the dance with Will Pardee."

"My usual luck," he answered, chagrin in his gaze. He saw regret in hers, adding with one of his rare smiles: "Tell Will I'll be cuttin' in tonight. . . ."

Bristow's room was at the front of the hotel, with a single window overlooking the second-story porch. The bed looked good, but he slept on the floor, after pulling the tick into a corner out of range of the window. He knew about what to expect of Tunis and his rough-head crew, and the Sheriff had warned him. A gunfight was coming, of that he was sure, and he had no intention of letting them slaughter him while asleep.

He slept three hours. At three o'clock some outside sound awakened him. He got off the floor, hand on his gun, and lifted

the window shade, peering out on the upper gallery but seeing no one. Then he heard the voices in the street below. He stepped through the open window and went to the railing.

His own spring wagon and team of blacks stood before the hotel. Lacey and Springer, the remainder of his crew, sat on the seat, and Clint Osburn stood with a hand on Springer's saddle-whitened knee, speaking swiftly, urgently.

Bristow called down, "You got the calf, boys?"

All the men looked up and Lacey nodded and motioned toward a canvas tarp stretched over the rear of the wagon bed. "Ev'rthin's like you said, Ral," Lacey called back soberly. Both men were wearing guns on their belts and a pair of Sharps rifles lay on the floorboards at their feet.

"Drape the hides on the hitch rack and tie the calf near 'em," Bristow ordered. "Be right down."

When he reached the street five minutes later, the scene was set as he had planned it. Here was the main drag lying bright with afternoon sunlight on the rusty-colored dust, and on the saddles of the rows of ranch horses. A group of riders and townsmen had gathered before the hotel, and others were hurrying up under the arcades, drawn by the sight of a bawling brindle calf that had been tied to the hitch rail close to a brindle cow's fly-swarming hide that still dripped blackening blood.

The crowd was staring at the fresh brand on the calf—a plainly marked blotting job that represented the Crossbone of Clyde Tunis. But the brand on the hide draped over the rail was Bristow's B-Bar, unmistakably.

AS BRISTOW came up, Clint Osburn gave him a nerved-up grin that showed his broken teeth. "Keep cool, son! Here they come now!"

Down the street three men were striding toward the scene before the hotel—Luckinbill, Lefever, Dawkins. Behind them, dimly seen on the gallery of the Shindy Bar, sat Tunis and two other Crossbone men.

Hipe Luckinbill and the two gun-slammers butted their way through the crowd

and halted, all the three staring incredulously at the blating calf and the hide of its mother.

"Bristow!" Hipe's voice was harsh with anger. His eyes were only streaks against the coffee-colored toughness of his face. "What's this damned foolishness about? If it's got anything to do with Crossbone I want it stopped!"

Bristow stood with his back to the hotel porch railing. He felt steady and cold; a kind of deadly amusement glittered in his eyes.

"What's it look like, Hipe? Come on and see for yourself!"

The trouble had reached its climax here before the crowd, and that was the way Bristow had planned it. He had kept the business of the calf and its mother's hide to himself and to the members of his own crew. Consequently the dramatic impact was explosive. Here before the crowd, before part of the Crossbone crew, was the flat, indisputable proof of Clyde Tunis' nefarious activities against B-Bar. The Crossbone-branded calf bawling so mournfully at the hide of a B-Bar cow was all the evidence needed to run Clyde Tunis and his rowdies out of town, out of the country, out of the State.

Up the street a woman's voice cried, "Somebody get the Sheriff! Stop them before the shooting starts!"

The cry had a steadying, sobering effect on the tempers of Hipe and his men. But Hipe's leathery face worked in a twitching way that told of his inward fury and discomfiture.

Bristow's greenish eyes squinted with contempt. He said, slowly, carefully, yet with anger: "There's the proof. That B-Bar cow was shot! There's her hide! There's the calf wearin' your brand! If you've got anything to say, make your talk!"

Hipe swallowed hard. His slitted gaze swung from side to side, seeing the grim looks on the faces of the crowd, seeing the bleak triumph on Bristow's, the watchful wariness on those of the B-Bar crew. Then he snarled an oath and wheeled, striding furiously back toward the Shindy Bar. Lefever and Dawkins hung back a moment, eyeing Bristow in a hungry way, then they, too, whirled and walked away.

The crowd began to disperse, murmur-

ously. In the crowd, Bristow knew full well, were a few of Clyde Tunis' friends, but now they would keep silent about any sympathy they might hold for the Crossbone boss. The business of the hide and the calf had accomplished this much—it had driven Bristow's enemies to cover, except for Tunis and his crew. They would be out after his scalp within a matter of hours. And there would be the shoot-out Bristow wanted before another dawn. He was ready for that fight, actually welcomed it, for it was the only sure way of putting an end to rustling in High Valley, the only way of heading off his own eventual bankruptcy and ruin.

IN ODDFELLOWS' Hall, a block north of the hotel, the fiddles and guitars had started up and there rose from the long many-windowed building the sounds of scraping feet moving in the rhythm of a waltz, of young girls' tittering laughter, the maturer laughter of women and men caught up in the keen excitement of the night.

When he left his room in the hotel, Bristow went to a restaurant across from the livery stable and had his supper with the B-Bar crew. The four men ate in silence, but each man had his instructions for the evening. When they finished the meal and Bristow paid the bill, they left, one at a time, and took up prearranged positions along the four-block street, and were immediately lost to view.

Bristow was the last to leave the restaurant. He went at once to the hall and bought his ticket, kept the stub, and went inside. Paused against the wall under the flickering chandeliers, he searched the groups of revolving couples on the broad dance floor for the woman he now belatedly knew he had to win for his wife.

He finally found her waltzing with Will Pardee. Her glance came to him as though she had been waiting and watching for his arrival, then swung away as Pardee turned her in his arms, and returned again. He saw her smile flash toward him, reaching through the turning, swaying crowd, as clear an invitation as a man ever had from a woman.

Pardee saw Verna's head turn, and glanced across the hall, a stain of resentment rising to his dark, long-jawed face.

He was dressed in evening clothes, boiled shirt, swallowtail coat, trousers pulled tight by straps fastened under the soles of patent leather boots.

Bristow dropped his half-smoked cigarette into a sand-filled crack against the wall, and walked out on the dance floor, a solid force moving in a straight line. His surroundings, the confusion of lights and voices and music, faded away, and he saw only Verna and knew only one thing. This time he wasn't going to lose her.

He reached them, touched Pardee on the shoulder, gathered the girl in his embrace and swung her away before her partner knew what had happened. Then the fiddles ended the waltz, and applause washed over the crowded room with its festoons of crepe paper and candle lanterns.

They stood close, Verna's gaze lifted to his. "I've been worried," she whispered. "All the talk about Tunis—"

"Where can we go to be alone?" he said impatiently.

She looked around the room, then back at him. "I don't know. But, Ral—"

"I've got to talk to you."

"Please, Ral. Everybody's looking at us."

But he was determined. He held her arm and began steering her through the crowd. The band started up with the opening bars of a square dance. The caller sang, "Choose your partners!" and then began his chant:

"... Four in the middle and
can't git about,
Turn, Cinnamon, turn!"

A rough hand clapped Bristow's shoulder, gripped and spun him half way around. Bristow's gaze veered toward Will Pardee who had come up behind him through the stamping swaying couples on the floor. Pardee's eyes gleamed hate. "Listen, cowpunk!" he said in a jarring tone. "You're butting in on the wrong man!"

Bristow thrust his arm out straight and hard. The force of his push staggered the other man back a pace. Bristow's face was saturnine, but calm. He did not speak. Pardee went white with fury. He gathered his muscular body as if to spring at Bristow, and his mouth was stretched

back savagely. Then came the volley of revolver shots outside the hall.

CHAPTER

3

Peacemaker Perdition

The dancing stopped as men and women whirled, staring toward the street doors. The fiddles and guitars petered out to silence. The caller quit in the middle of a word.

A small man with a red face poked his head in the doorway, hollering, "Gun-fight! Ev'ybuddy duck!"

Bristow was on his way out of the hall, moving with long, reaching strides that carried him swiftly through the gaping, startled groups of men and women on the floor. They parted ranks to let him pass and those who inadvertently blocked his way he bumped aside with elbows and arms.

The street, streaky with shadows and the outshining lights of late-closing shops, looked empty. But there was a huddled figure lying in the center of the square, a shapeless crumple of a man resting on his side, both arms hugging his knees against his body as in pain.

Bristow strode into the street. A voice—Lacey's—called from nearby shadows: "Be careful, Ral!"

Then Bristow saw the red glow of cigarettes farther down the street under the arcade near the hotel. Across from those two hidden figures another pair of cigarettes glowed and faded like red eyes in the darkness.

Bristow said to Lacey softly: "Cover me!" and walked directly to the fallen man.

It was Clint Osburn. The old man had been hard hit. His grizzled face was contorted and he was softly groaning. Bristow got down on a knee. He lifted the foreman in both arms and held him, supporting his head from which the hat had fallen. Iron-gray hair clung wetly to his wrinkled brow. Osburn opened his eyes and they were bitterly bright.

"Tunis . . ." he gasped. "Got me in . . . the belly! Tried to stop him! He . . . was goin' in the hall!"

"Why'd you do it, Clint? I told you I'd handle him!"

"All them wimmen in there," the old

man whispered "That varmint wouldn't keer who he hit! Ral, I'm a goner. Wish't I knowed the end of this trail, son. It . . . it's a new one."

Bristow's jaw knotted. "Rest easy, pard," he breathed. "Nothing to fret yourself about. Rest easy now." He lowered the foreman's head, rose and hauled off his coat, rolling it while he watched the street, then bent and pillowed it under Clint.

Boots were clumping up the sidewalk from the courthouse. Through the shadows Sheriff Limes came striding with two deputies. The pair of cigarettes had ceased their glowing on that side of the street. The men who had stood there had disappeared down an alleyway. Yonder, before the hotel, was vague movement. Those two still waited in the dark, watching, perhaps with guns still gripped.

Bristow didn't wait for the Sheriff to reach the scene. He went back to the shadows and found Lacey waiting, a hand resting on his gun, an ugly scowl on his leathery face. "Bob," said Bristow, "find Sam and keep watchin' the street. I'm goin' after Tunis!"

Inside the hall the band began again, but half the crowd was pushing out through the open doors, cautious, staring, wondering. And then a slender figure came running through the shadows. It was Verna Redding, her hair disarranged, Bristow's name on her lips in a low, choked cry.

"Ral!" she said. "Will Pardee left the hall by the back door! He—had a revolver in his hand!"

Bristow gripped her by the arms, his face stern, almost forbidding in its savage calmness. "Verna, go back inside! Stay there till I come for you" That was all. Then he wheeled and started down the walk.

His right elbow broke upward. His hand lay against the coolness of his gun's bone butt. As he walked, he cocked the hammer over a live shell and left it cocked.

He heard brisk movement under the darkened arcade a hundred feet ahead of him. He ducked aside and moved along in the dark against the building fronts. The last few lights in stores had gone out, extinguished as by swiftly flattened hands. A stock train's staccato stack thunder was coming up Frevert's Grade a mile

east of town. The sound increasingly filled the night, then the engine's whistle screamed for the lower crossing.

Bristow reached the corner of the hotel and there halted, flat against the gallery, his gaze swinging. This was the spot where he had seen the first two glowing ends of cigarettes. There was a narrow passage running rearward beside the hotel. He entered it and made his way through blackness as deep as that in a mine.

Then ahead of him in the hotel's rear quarter someone fell over a barrel of empty food tins. The clatter was brief but through it he heard a man softly cursing. He quickened his pace and broke out in the rear yard, fully halted, his gun drawn and ready against his thigh.

He caught the movement of a man, perhaps two, ducking back toward the street through another alley to the south. In a silence so profound he was aware of the thud of his own boots on the earth, Bristow ran toward that alley.

Then the alley's darkness was split asunder by the stabbing flash of a six-gun fired at him. The bullet slapped a shed behind him and the crash of the shot left his ears ringing and half deaf. He flattened himself to the ground, raising his weapon, then lowering it. He heard boots and spurs clanking at a run toward the street.

He was up and pursuing instantly, but very wary now, his night eyes working at last. His guess was that someone was baiting him farther from the heart of town, perhaps somewhere near the cattle pens where he would be cornered by the whole Crossbone crew and shot down like a dog.

He smiled savagely to himself at the thought. He had no intention of continuing this game of fox and hounds. And, as he came sliding out of the alley and hit the street, he tried to put himself in Tunis' boots. And, in that space of a short-drawn breath, he made his guess where he would find the man he meant to kill.

Staring toward the railroad depot some three hundred yards away, he saw two men moving surreptitiously away from him beneath the overhead wooden awnings. Every few feet, this pair hesitated, paused, and stared back toward him.

THERE was only one splash of light at this end of town. It came under and over the batwing blinds of the Shindy Bar, about a hundred feet away. Bristow glanced back toward the Hall and the crowd that now was standing in the street. With gun gripped in a sweating palm, he walked to the next alley, ducked into it, then ran swiftly to the rear yards once more.

Seconds later, he came behind the saloon, found a door that was unlocked and let himself into a rank-smelling passageway. At the street end of it, a sliver of yellow light gleamed down low against the floor. He went toward it, left hand brushing the passage wall, his boots making scarcely any sound. He reached another door, patently leading into the barroom. There was the muffled rumble of men's voices beyond the panel.

He found the door knob, gave it a twist, flung the door inward violently, checked himself with slitted eyes, then entered the room with two long strides.

There were five men in the room, at the bar, a pallid-faced barkeeper behind it. Bristow saw Clyde Tunis standing at the far end, his back to the doors which had been closed and bolted against the outer blinds.

Next to Tunis stood Will Pardee, and next to Pardee were three Crossbone gunhands, their backs turned to Bristow. That meant four of Tunis' men were out in the town, waiting to cut him down when he walked into their trap!

As Bristow entered, all five at the bar swung about. Their faces swam into focus, and Tunis stiffened, shock in his staring eyes. Will Pardee glanced over his shoulder and then froze motionless. His frock coat and white shirt looked incongruous here beside the sweaty, dusty riding garb of his companions. The three gunmen, caught flat-footed by surprise, blinked and started raising arms and hands to shoulder height.

Bristow stood spread-legged near the door. He held his gun straight-armed beside him; his expression was unreadable. His keen eyes saw the bartender bend cautiously, reaching with a furtive gesture beneath his bar. Bristow warned, "Never mind the shotgun!"

The barkeep shot arms and hands

toward the smoky ceiling, his mouth dropping and swinging like a loose flap. All talk had died. Outside was the sound of men running the walks, then came scattered shots, and a voice yelled in unexpected pain.

Clyde Tunis recovered himself like a man shocked awake. His big boot slipped off the brass rail and thudded dully to the floor. His spur chimed once. Bristow didn't speak for a moment, only stared at Tunis, the other men also bracketed in his gaze. Then he said, very softly: "Go ahead, Tunis! I'm givin' you the draw!"

Tunis hadn't expected this. Tiny, twinkling beads of sweat showed on his reddened cheeks. Next to him Pardee never moved, both hands gripping the edge of the bar, his black eyes bright and bitter and hating Bristow with silent fury. The three gun-hands hardly seemed breathing.

"Wait!" Tunis finally found voice to speak, "You—wouldn't shoot your turkey cold!"

The three hands squeezed their bodies against the bar, as if trying to merge themselves with the wood and become invisible. Pardee stood statue-still, his head frozen in a three-quarter turn, face now inscrutable.

There was not a man here, and that included the bartender, but would take pleasure in shooting Bristow where he stood, if he could have done so without risk. And so Bristow was compelled to gauge the others and try to guess which one would draw and fire the second he threw his gun on Tunis.

To the Crossbone boss, he said in a thin-lipped way: "Make your draw! I don't want it said I shot a sittin' bird!"

More distant shots came through the saloon's closed doors. Somewhere down near the stock pens a wicked dogfight was going on. Then a kind of groaning gasp seemed to explode from Tunis. He went for his belted gun, pitching his burly body into the clawing motion as if trying to hurry his draw with every muscle and all of his will.

The big man's fingers locked over the six-gun and he drew it with a bleating cry, stripping the long barrel clear of leather with a jerk, and standing sideways in one swift movement.

Hot Blood Brands the Crossbone

BRISTOW waited a split-second, then bent his arm and fired. There was an instant in which eternity was suspended before two shots banged in the room's trapped silence. A third followed as Pardee pulled a parlor gun from his vest and took snap aim at Bristow, letting go. Bristow's hat jerked on his head.

Tunis was going down, bent double, his six-gun falling to the floor, his face twisted in agony. There was a bullet in the hollow under Bristow's shoulder bone. The impact knocked him back a pace. It was Pardee's lead that had hit him.

And even as he swung his gun on Pardee, the dark man fired again, though the bullet sliced through Bristow's shirt between elbow and ribs. He had to silence that derringer, for if he fell, he knew Pardee would fire again and again into his prone body, would end his life in the saloon's sawdust and a pool of blood.

Bristow let go with his second shot, not aiming, not pulling the trigger, but slapping the hammer back and letting it fall against the nested shell.

He heard and saw the bullet slug into Pardee's chest and stagger him around. Bristow fired again. Pardee seemed suddenly pinned against the bar, his mouth contorted, his eyelids whitening with strain as he fought to lift the tiny pistol in his hand. Then he fell, turning half way around like a man feeling for a step in the dark. His long body dropped over the prone one of Clyde Tunis.

Oblivious to the hot agony in his shoulder, Bristow pinned the three gun-hands and the barkeep with his icy eyes. Through a halo of gunsmoke, he said, "There wouldn't be many complaints if I made it a massacre, so don't move!"

With these murmured words, he covered the four men with his gun, and started backing toward the bolted doors. He came against them, reached back and shot the bolt. At the same instant, boots came kicking up on the saloon's gallery. Voices shouted in the street. Bristow pulled aside, still covering the men before the bar, and the saloonman behind it who still held his hands high.

Sheriff Limes came lurching in with the aged rider's stalking gait. A deputy followed him, and then the crowd came push-



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ing through the batwing blinds. Limes took one look around the smoky room, then went over and stirred Pardee's lifeless body with a boot. He glanced over his shoulder, saying wearily: "All right, Ral. You had your way. Reckon it was better'n mine." He sighed, adding, "We got four of 'em near the depot. They was forced up, waitin'—Oh, hell, somebody call the coroner!"

Bristow brought his six-gun back and down into its brush-scuffed holster. There was blood dripping off his wrist—not much. He said to the Sheriff, "I want the doc for Coburn, and fast!"

Limes waved him away impatiently. "Clint's goin' to pull through. The bullet only punctured him."

Lacey and Springer, Bristow's men, walked with him up the street toward the hall whose windows looked like yellow squares against the summer night. At the hall's doors, Bristow turned and said, "Hire me a team and buckboard at the livery. We'll have company goin' home."

He went into the hall where small groups of women huddled, waiting for the men to return. He found Verna waiting in the shadows near one of the wide-open windows. The night wind stirred her hair, and she faced around as he came up. He said, gently: "How long'll it take you to get ready?"

She stood before him, tremulous suddenly, her gray eyes shining up at him. "Ready? Ready for what, Ral?"

"To get married," he told her, and put his arms around her and pulled her close. The pain of his wound was nothing now, but she saw the blood, gasping, "Ral, you're hurt!"

"Not bad, "I'll take you home and find the doc and the preacher while you're packing."

She said in a whisper, "Now, Ral? Tonight?"

"Tonight. I've waited long enough."

She heard the brusque and possessive rise of his voice. She could feel the compulsion of his restless will, could feel the passion he had kept hidden for so long a time. She said, softly, and against his chest: "I've waited, too. Of course, I'll go with you—tonight!"

THE END

RECORD WRANGLING

(Continued from page 6)

YOUNGER ALL THE TIME

They really do seem to be finding talent in younger sprouts these days. Newest of the small-fry thrushes is Georgia Ann Williams. She's the thirteen-year-old daughter of Curly Williams. And, of course, Curly's the leader of the Georgia Peach Pickers. Now he's grooming Georgia Ann for a radio spot as band songster.

The Peach Pickers have a spry aggregation, what with Jimmie Summey handling the comedy and bass; Boots Harris plunking the steel guitar; Jack Ford taking care of the rhythm guitar and vocal chores; while Billy Simmons bangs on the piano; Smokey Paul does the electric take-off; and Curly Williams music-manages the fiddle and mandolin for the Peach Pickers.



DON'T EVER FALL IN LOVE WITH A COWBOY and NOTHIN' IN MY LETTER BOX by Dale Evans (RCA Victor)

As you all know, Dale Evans is not only Roy Rogers' screen partner—she's his real-life wife, and plumb popular with the fans of the King of the Cowboys she is, too.

That means that Dale Evans should really know what she's talking about when she sings DON'T EVER FALL IN LOVE WITH A COWBOY "because he'll love his horse the best." Dale hedges a bit though, near the end of the record, and says she doesn't exactly mean that Trigger is edging her into second-best place with her cowboy. But mean it or not, she sure is fun to listen to on the platter.

Give the platter a twirl, and you'll find Dale singing in her straight-forward, pleasing way that she's wondering why there's NOTHIN' IN MY LETTER BOX.

Too much popularity—too many requests for personal appearances—made Dale and Roy Rogers decide not to go to England. But so they wouldn't feel so



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

bad, Roy and his hoss Trigger went down to the sidewalk in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where many other famous film stars have left their mark in the cement, and signed their hand-and-hoof prints.



SAGEBRUSH SWING
 by Spade Cooley and his Orchestra
 (Columbia)

Did you know that it was the Boots and Saddle Club which first called Spade Cooley the King of Western Swing? Columbia now has brought out a collection of eight of his sizzling sagebrush rhythms: *Devil's Dream* and *Yodeling Polka*; *Steel Guitar Rag* and *Cow Bell Polka*; *Oklahoma Stomp* and *Shame on You*; and *Spadella* and *Three Way Boogie*—and they're all high-spirited, zingy arrangements. It was Spade Cooley who brought a harp into a country orchestra, and here he demonstrates to good effect the sweeping runs on the strings, always keeping the tunes vigorous and fresh. Most of you will keep these platters spinning.



I'M ONLY A SHOULDER TO CRY ON and WHY PRETEND
 by Red Sovine (MGM)

Red Sovine is a comparative tenderfoot among the folk singers, but already his steel guitar has gotten a lot of favorable notice. And here, when he sings **I'M ONLY A SHOULDER TO CRY ON** "so why should I waste my love on you?" Red Sovine has a quiet instrumental background to accompany his straight-from-the-heart song-styling.

The other side of the coupling is just as effectively chanted in an easy, relaxed vein by Red Sovine. It's the familiar but never old story of a cowpuncher who realizes that "you don't love me anymore, so" **WHY PRETEND**.

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RECORD WRANGLING



I WISH I HAD A NICKEL and TWO CENTS, THREE EGGS AND A POSTCARD
by Red Foley (Decca)

Last month we told you about Jimmy Wakely's rendition of I WISH I HAD A NICKEL. It's a song we like a lot, and Red Foley now puts across his own inimitable version of it in strong fashion.

He's got a really intriguing title on the pairing, and gets across his lilted message—TWO CENTS, THREE EGGS AND A POSTCARD—with plenty of impact. Especially so as far as the refrain goes. You'll find it easy to remember.



I'M TIRED and PRECIOUS LORD
by The Harmonizing Four (MGM)

The Harmonizing Four are a new and smoothly harmonizing quartet who know how to put across these traditional religious numbers in a purely beautiful rendition. The foursome's blend of voices is ingratiating and they build the spiritual I'M TIRED to a vital climax.

The second half of the release is just as good with a contrast in mood. PRECIOUS LORD is slow and solemn, and the Harmonizing Four sustain the atmosphere perfectly, with a top-caliber performance.



HEAVEN IS MY HOME and COMMUNITY CHURCH YARD
by The Red Teague Trio (Bibletone)

Mountaineers and Southern folk should really go for both sides of this recording. HEAVEN IS MY HOME is enthusiastically harmonized, while the rhythmic meeting song called COMMUNITY CHURCH YARD has a real catchy flavor that the Red Teague Trio vigorously gets across.

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TENNESSEE YODEL POLKA and SWISS LULLABY

by Rosalie Allen and Elton Britt with the Skytoppers (RCA Victor)

Duetting Rosalie Allen and Elton Britt pair up for a warbling and yodeling spree in TENNESSEE YODEL POLKA, and this hillbilly duet is just their meat—especially since Rosalie Allen is known as the Queen of the Yodelers.

With the reverse side, the duo turn to a more soothing type of yodel-harmony to sing, appropriately, a SWISS LULLABY. It's the kind of thing any button would be delighted to hear, for Rosalie Allen and Elton Britt make a double-barreled team as they describe two little blue eyes peeping up from the crib.



TENNESSEE BOOGIE and A DRUNKARD'S CONFESSION

by Zeb Turner (King)

The resonant-voiced Zeb Turner warbles the easy-going but strongly moving back-hills TENNESSEE BOOGIE. Complemented by a well played steel guitar, this recording should find some appreciative listeners.

On the flipover, there's a nice change of mood as Zeb Turner sings in fine vocal form the sincere yarn of A DRUNKARD'S CONFESSION. There's a real point to this sad tale, but it's made without an excess of preaching.

* * *

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TROUBLE RIDES FROM TEXAS!

(Continued from page 34)

breathless hush fell. Sonny Tate's gusty breathing indicated that he was mortally wounded. Will Tracey and Dade were hard hit.

Slowly Davy Mather holstered his six-shooter, watching Eben's pale face when he came to stand in the door of the bank. Jason's booming voice reached out to him, wildly exultant, filled with pride. "It was our Davy that stopped them, Eben!"

"Davy?" said Eben, bewildered, shaken. He looked from Jason to the slim figure with the gun-belt on the sidewalk. "Why—why, he must be the Cimarron Kid."

"That was back on the Texas cattle trails," Davy said in a voice that held quiet rebuke. "The name is Davy Mather."

(Continued from page 59)

had a notion to carve their initials, at least his own and Jo's, on the tree for all to see, but he knew how Yorey felt about her and didn't want to rub it in.

Yorey fussed and fidgeted, and finally spoke again. "I still got something on my mind," he announced.

"Well, I want to ask you to come back to Texas. I'll be proud to call you neighbor, and I'll shoot the ears off anybody who offends you."

Tott gulped and blinked his eyes, and couldn't say anything.

"And when you and Jo get married—" Bub Yorey gulped now, too, but he went through with it—"we'll put on the biggest baillie ever seen in those part."

"Stop it, Bub," Jo breathed with a wild look. "Stop it."

Yorey grabbed her arm indignantly. "Don't tell me you turned him down just because he's a Yankee, after all that dreamy-eyed lookin' you've been doin'."

"He—he hasn't asked me," Jo breathed.

"Oh, my!" Yorey muttered, clapping his hand to his mouth. "Ain't I previous with my big mouth."

"A little," Tott told him. "Only a little. Now go somewhere."

"Okay, blue-nose!" Yorey answered, and rode off.

THE END



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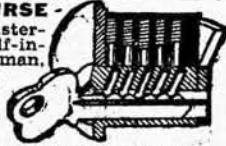
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(Continued from page 65)

handled six of his and shot Life in the back. Right, Mel?"

Something in his voice must have gone wrong. Kole vaulted out of the barber's chair, towels flying. "You son—" he gasped.

Johnny stood up. He rasped out, "You forgot that Ace Prackett won not only every cent of mine that night, but he won my watch and my horn-handled Colt, too!"

It sank in. Sheriff Ben Jenks had been about to draw, but his hand stopped in mid-air. Kole's face was a twisted mask of fury, and his hand was slashing for his Colt. He yanked, thumbed hammer on the throw.

Johnny was half-paralyzed. If he killed the man, his excuse would sound thin. It was then that he saw Close-Cut Pete's hand reach out, light flashing off the open razor.

A second or so later blood was spurting, Kole's six bouncing to the floor. "You've cut me!" Kole screamed.

"Tell them, Kole!" Johnny yelled. "Tell how you lied when you said I killed Life. Tell them I couldn't have done it. Ace Prackett had my horn-handle gun. I left town that night unarmed and you know it!"

The spurting blood left Kole's face blanched white. He clutched his slashed wrist, and nodded yes to Johnny's accusation.

Suddenly the gush of blood had taken all the fight out of him.

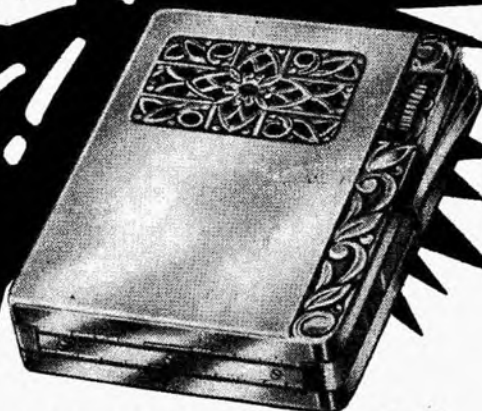
Ben Jenks cleared his throat. "Reckon we owe yuh an apology, Johnny." He scratched his head and muttered, "Easy Johnny Tighe."

Close-Cut Pete grinned and pumped Johnny's hand. "You're wrong, Ben. Easy Johnny left town two years ago. He won't come back, I don't believe. Meet John Tighe!"

John Tighe grinned back at him. Maybe, he thought. Maybe, he thought. Maybe Easy Johnny was gone. But there was a girl out on Big Eight that believed in Easy Johnny. Or maybe she had seen in the harum-scarum kid the makings of a man. The makings of John Tighe.

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