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STORIES**

WESTERN



NOON TOMORROW

MOJAVE JACK WAS A PAID KILLER. A MAN WHOSE GUN WAS FOR HIRE DIDN'T PROD A TRAILTOWN MARSHAL INTO A FIGHT....

TENSE DRAMA BY **PHILIP MORGAN**

BIG BONUS EXTRA:

**5 TIME-HONORED
WESTERN CLASSICS**

**THE WILD
TIME**

MAYBE DICK FOSTER WAS SIMPLY BAD AND HEADED STRAIGHT FOR HELL-- OR MAYBE AT HIS AGE GUNS AND GIRLS WERE ALL A KID THOUGHT OF....

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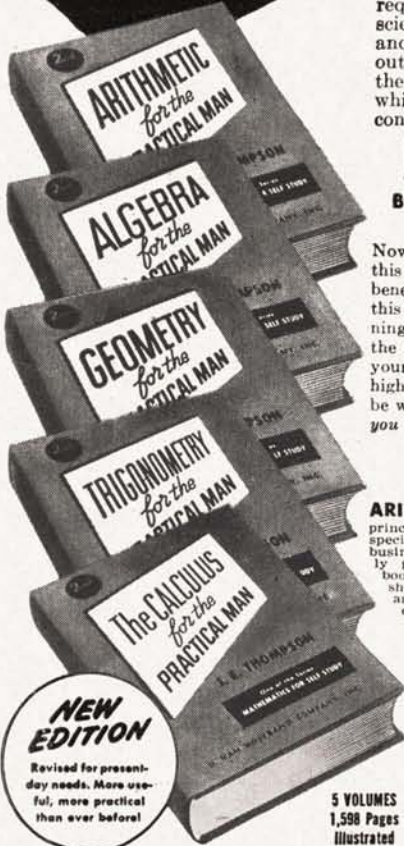
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Vol. 2

No. 5

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★ ★ BRAND NEW ACTION-PACKED THRILLERS ★ ★

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Lew Hatton had seen men bullet-blasted crumple to the dust before his sixguns, but this was one blood-hungry gent he'd have liked to lose the draw to copyright 1941 Manvis Pub. Inc.
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His finger was tightening on the trigger when Rod Donnelly, who'd been packing a gun ever since he was a kid, found out that he didn't have what it took to kill a man copyright 1941 Manvis Pub. Inc.
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It was a hell of a country where a law-abiding citizen couldn't ride through without getting his brain blasted out by a .45 slug, but Sheriff Carr couldn't challenge every sidewinder in town to guns in the dust at sunset! copyright 1941 Newsstand Pub. Inc.
- 14) **KILLER'S HERITAGE** Norman A. Fox 84
Bert Freeman's blazing sixguns marked him as a bushwhacker, but they burned the proper hide with the owlhoot brand copyright 1939 Western Fiction Pub. Co. Inc.
- 15) **HARDCASE OR COWARD?** Gunnison Steele 91
The years had hardened Kent Varing, turned him into a bitter cold-eyed man whose law lay in his lightning-fast guns. No mere slip of a girl could turn him back from the dark trails now copyright 1939 Manvis Pub. Inc.

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By the time Landry could get his bullets off, the Rangers had literally blasted him to hell!



DICK FOSTER said, "What do you mean, I never do any work? What about that last brushpopping trip I—"

"I didn't say you *never* did any work, and you know I didn't," Mrs. Foster said. "And that's no way to talk to your mother."

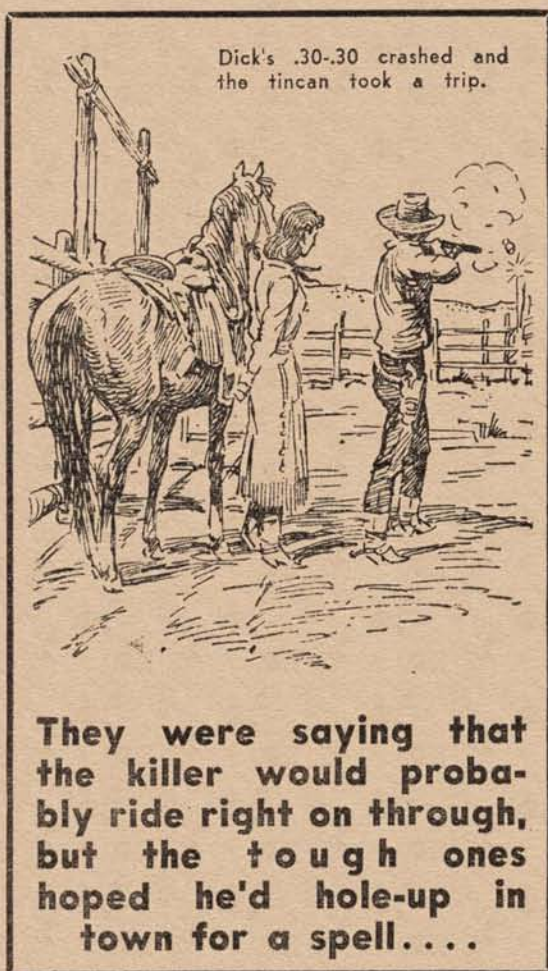
Dick winced irritably. "Oh for gosh sakes, Ma, cut that 'your mother' stuff. I'm eighteen now, remember?"

He flung up from the table and went and got the .30-30 from the corner and levered it violently. Then he squinted close at some detail of

MAYBE DICK FOSTER WAS SIMPLY BAD AND HEADED AND GIRLS WERE ALL A KID THOUGHT OF.....



THE WILD TIME



Dick's .30-.30 crashed and the tincan took a trip.

They were saying that the killer would probably ride right on through, but the tough ones hoped he'd hole-up in town for a spell....

the mechanism. Then he put the rifle up and sighted once down it. Mrs. Foster, her neck somehow looking scrawny from the way the muscles of her jaw tightened back to thin her mouth, finally turned back to the stove. But she didn't do anything at the stove. She stared at the top of it.

"I'll be back at dinnertime," Dick Foster suddenly said, and the concave-worn doorsill creaked as he stepped on it going out, and the big kitchen was thrown momentarily in shadow, as the landscape is when a cloud blots the sun, from his cutting off the bright morning sunlight that had been pouring through the

by JOHN LUMSDEN

STRAIGHT FOR HELL — OR MAYBE AT HIS AGE GUNS
★ GRIPPING THRILLER BY A GREAT WRITER! ★

doorway and reflecting dazzlingly off the wear-polished floor planking.

"He's not a bad looking kid," Merry Mason said to the sheriff. "Neither way, in appearance nor character. He's got that same lean face his dad had, I mean, and a good strong body. And if you didn't know him and saw him on the street, you'd never say there was a wild one."

Sheriff Barton Keller didn't take his gaze out of the street. He shifted the toothpick with his tongue from one corner of his mouth to the other, and his pale left eye went wall-eyed in a peculiar way it had. It was almost as dark as night in here in the store, or so it looked to you after you'd glanced into the mid-morning August-sun-blasted, extra-wide, dust-moted main street.

"Don't matter how they look, it's what they do," Keller said indifferently in his always almost inaudible voice.

"Oh, of course. But it's funny, isn't it." Standing behind the counter, Mason wiped the palm of one wrinkled hand once across the surface of it.

"He shouldn't 've got mixed up with the Noren boys," Keller said after a silence.

"No, I know." Merry Mason sucked a deep, quick sigh. "It's too bad for his mother. She's a fine woman."

"Alby Foster was a good man."

"I know, I know. Fine parents—and they turn out like that. What happens to them?"

Sheriff Barton Keller shrugged, the toothpick shifting again as his gaze came back into the store. "Hey, I need a sack of Durham," he said. He screwed up his face working with his thick fingers at the string of the tobacco. "They're sayin' Charlie Landry is headin' this way."

"Charlie Landry?" The elderly storekeeper's ears were tuned to the sheriff's indolent voice but he repeated interesting items in his own lively accents as a means of confirming that he'd heard right. "What would he be wanting here?"

"What does he ever want." Keller tugged the Durham bag shut again with his teeth. "Another notch on his gun."

"But who in this town would he

consider 'a notch'? Certainly Fern Noren's boasting about his gun-skill hasn't won the attention of so eminent a one as Charlie Landry."

Sheriff Barton Keller squinted his eyes up pulling a long inhale on his cigarette.

"Maybe he's just ridin' through." He said finally.

"Well, let's hope so," Merry Mason said.

THIS WAS not just an ordinarily pretty girl. Janice Wells was chewing in anger the inside of her lower lip but even the distortion this brought could not take from the flawless perfection, for example, of her soft red cupid's-bow mouth. She was not amused, was the trouble, at sight of Dick Foster drawing a bead on a tincan he'd placed on the Wells' corral fence.

"What I'd like to know," Janice was saying, "is what in heaven's name has got into you lately. *Every* time you come over here you have a new gun with you. I'm telling you, Daddy doesn't like it. Nor, what's more to the point, do I."

The .30-30 crashed and the tincan took a trip. Dick Foster squinted sourly.

"This was my old man's gun," he said, giving no sign of consideration of Janice's speech, pulling his horse to him and dumping the Winchester back in the saddle scabbard. He hiked up his extra-wide cartridge belt, pulled askew by the weight of the big holstered .45, and met her furious regard squarely. "It's not much good."

"How very interesting."

"What's the matter, aren't you interested in guns?" he said after a minute.

She put little fists at her slender waist and her creamy-tanned elbows jutted.

"If you knew how *silly* you looked, with all those *guns* hanging all over you—! Honestly!"

"You didn't say I looked silly last night." His tone remained flat, his delivery delayed.

"Last night I liked you. And I kissed you. Today I wouldn't kiss you for the world."

Dick Foster cracked his face with a broad grin.

"I'll bet you would."

Janice Wells lowered her head and her shoulder-length, shiny dark hair fell in a curtain. Dick Foster looked at it and his eye dropped to her bare ankles and he suddenly took her in his arms and he kissed her at length when she threw her hair back and put her face up. A moment before she was the responsible woman that she was on the threshold, at eighteen, of becoming; now she was the teen-age girl again swept by puppy love.

"Hey," she pushed free finally and murmured huskily, "you shouldn't do that out here in broad daylight." She cleared her throat.

"I shouldn't, eh," he said in a voice that was no less husky.

"No you shouldn't."

Janice, no more than Dick, had noticed her father coming from the house. Neither of them heard him even when he was upon them. So that it was like a bolt of lightning when he smashed a big hand down on Dick's shoulder, spun him, and slapped his other hand full-open and hard across Dick's mouth.

"I've had enough of your antics, young man," George Wells said in a voice that was as terrible as it was soft. "Now you get on your horse and ride out of here and don't come back until you've learned some manners."

Dick Foster ran the tip of his tongue across his bleeding lower lip, and the tongue and lip trembled. He kept his eyes fastened on George Wells for what began to look like a foolishly long time, for Janice's father had turned to her, saying, "You'd better get on up to the house, Janice."

She was watching Dick Foster worriedly, and she in her turn couldn't seem to pull her eyes from him, not even when her father took her arm to start her.

"I'll kill you for that, Mr. Wells," Dick Foster said very quietly.

"That's the kind of remark I'd expect from you," George Wells said. "That's a highly intelligent statement. Let's go, Janice."

"Oh Dad you shouldn't have done that—" she moaned.

SITTING HIS staring-tired lathered horse, Charlie Landry raised

his face to the sky and sniffed the air. Then he screwed up his face sourly. It meant nothing in particular. Charlie Landry was a tough, merciless, conceited young man, and he was full of such mannerisms. They grew out of his restless self-sufficiency; they were the sick flower of the insatiable craving that crawled him, to show off.

Charlie Landry had done a lot of showing off in the two blazing years since, a lad of seventeen, he'd risked drawing with a notorious notch-hunter and bested the fellow. The element of surprise had done it here, and his victory had been neat and easy. There had been shoot-outs since that had been neither neat nor easy. Death had taken a couple healthy swipes at Charlie Landry but without touching him, and his confidence had swelled with each new cut on his glossy gunbutt, until he was hard now to beat. Nervousness no longer stiffened his fingers, as it more and more did those of the ambitious hellions who had their try at him.

Charlie Landry was a legend and he knew it. At nineteen. A kid of nineteen is not able to carry fame too gracefully.

Here on the edge of the vast unknown hell that was the northern half of Texas, Charlie Landry made his arrogant decision. Murder, in the course of a bank robbery, was among his achievements now, and with a virtual Ranger army on his backtrail, he might wisely have risked the danger and drought of the High Plains, where warlike Indians ruled and what little brackish water was to be found was undrinkable. For even the Rangers never went beyond this point, obviously figuring that an outlaw chased north of here was a dead outlaw anyway.

But such drab practicality did not appeal to Charlie Landry. The hell with laying low for a few weeks, with Indians breathing down his neck and nothing to eat and alkali salts flavoring his water. What the hell, he could probably take on a dozen Rangers in a stand-in-the-street showdown. Charlie cracked a match into flame with his thumbnail to punctuate this decision, tilted his head and pulled his mouth up askew putting match to quirkly.

Then, wearing a sour, wholly self-satisfied little smile, he yanked his palomino's head around and continued west, ignoring the animal's weary blowing...

"HE'S THE BOY I'd like to put it on," Fern Noren said. Even standing with his feet set wide apart, Fern Noren was a full six-feet-five, a beanpole of a young man, and his head had the same long slender look as his body. His two kid brothers, hunkered on the other side of the campfire, had the same typical Noren face, narrow, fishy-eyed, under curly blond hair.

"What the hell's he headed this way for?" Hunk Noren growled.

Posy Noren wrinkled his eyes in a snaggle-toothed grin up at the eldest brother.

"He's after old Fern."

Fern Noren's little eyes flickered in the firelight and he sawed a long forefinger under his nose self-consciously.

"Wish to hell he was."

"What the hell's got your lip but-toned, Foster?" Hunk Noren abruptly flung over a shoulder at Dick, who was sitting on a small boulder back a way from the fire, staring steadily at it.

"Just not feeling talkative, that's all."

"He jest ain't feelin' 'talkative.' Where you get that high-falutin' gab, Foster—from that Wells gal?"

"She's got him wore out," Posy said.

"The hell with it," Dick Foster said.

"Tough tonight."

"He's tough every night, ain't you, Dicky boy?" Posy grinned.

"Maybe he's the one ought to take on Charlie Landry," Fern Noren said without humor, glaring at Dick Foster; Fern considered himself top man in this bunch, and his pigheaded brain inflamed quickly and easily.

Posy Noren wasn't any better endowed with gray matter than Fern, but he seemed to be because he grinned and joked a lot. Hunk was between his brothers in age and temperament.

"Yeah, Foster, how 'bout that?" Hunk said past a toothpick he was maneuvering.

"Hey, I thought we come out here to talk about slow-elkin' some of that nice fat Star Ranch beef," Posy Noren said.

Fern Noren sawed the long forefinger under the limp nose again.

"Mebbe we oughta wait until Laundry's took care of," he said.

Hunk squinted at him. "What're you sayin', Fern?"

"What's it sound like," Fern snapped.

"You thinkin' of bracin' Charlie Landry?"

"Why the hell not?" Fern growled.

Posy grinned at him, a big wide grin. "No kiddin', Fern boy?"

Five minutes later Hunk Noren shoved up and said, "Well, he ain't comin' out here lookin' for us, let's get the hell into town. You ridin' with us, Foster?"

Dick said, "Why the hell not?"

Posy was still wearing the big grin unhobbling the horses. "Dick boy's thinkin' he might be takin' a crack at Charlie Landry himself, ain't you, Dicky boy?"

Ed Spooner had been Alby Foster's one hired hand while Alby was alive. A lanky bachelor who you couldn't rightly estimate was he forty or seventy, he had that ageless dried-up kind of skin and wiry build that never tell of the passage of time—Ed Spooner had stayed on when pneumonia took Alby the past winter.

"I can't pay you, Ed," Martha Foster had said frankly to him.

"You're payin' me," Ed said. "I'm eatin' reg'lar and I got a roof over my head."

What neither of them had said was that with Spooner's help, Dick Foster could have kept the little spread operating as well as his dad had, the boy was old enough now...

THIS NIGHT, though, Ed Spooner did finally mention Dick. Spooner had kept his fingers crossed; he figured every lad worth his salt sowed a few wild oats before he put his shoulder to life's day-in-day-out grind; he figured that if Dick didn't get killed first or saddled with a sizeable prison sentence, he'd turn out all right.

This night Ed Spooner spoke to Dick's mother about him because this day Spooner had heard that Charlie

Landry was in the neighborhood.

"At first they were sayin' in town that he was just ridin' this way and would like as not ride right on through," Spooner told Martha Foster. "But now they say the Rangers are combin' this section for Landry, and that he's apt to hole-up in town for a spell. That's what they do when it gets hot: there's places to hide in a town, they can get food and liquor, they can fort up if necessary, they can take hostages.

"So what I meant was—if we could somehow keep Dick out of town for a few days—it might be a good idea. These young-uns get ideas. When they first get handy with a gun, they figure they can take on Jesse James."

Martha Foster dropped her sewing in her lap, and she put tired eyes on Spooner, the glow from the table lamp deepening the circles under them.

"He's his own boss now, Ed," she said softly. "He would never stay away from town if I asked him to. And he won't take the work seriously—"

"He ain't a bad boy, Mrs. Foster. He ain't nearly as disrespectful as you think. Young-uns act that way at his age, them with any get-up-and-go in them, especially. You wait; Dick'll be all right."

"If some Charlie Landry doesn't kill him first."

Ed Spooner came up from taking a long sip of coffee from his saucer, into which he always ceremoniously emptied his cup, with his head on one side.

"That's what we got to keep from happenin'," he said. "So what I figured, Mrs. Foster, you'll have to play-act like you're sick." Spooner's eyes went as round as his saucer with the daring of this unaccustomed connivance, waiting for her reaction.

But Martha Foster shook her head. "I doubt if even that would keep Dick here, Ed. I—I'm not sure that he really—loves me any more—"

"Sure he does. He just acts like he don't, like I told you. Deep-down he loves you same as ever, you'll see. . . So what I figured was—I'd ride into town and see if I can find him, and while I'm gone you hop into bed with a hot compress on your head." Spoon-

er's eyes went still wider with this imaginative scheming. "Yeah."

Martha Foster had to laugh at that. Then she shook her head and her eyes were moist when she said, "You're very sweet, Ed, and I'll never forget your—"

"I ain't sweet. I just want to keep young Dick in one piece, so's when he gets over his growin' pains he can take up where his daddy left off. So's I can start gettin' my pay reg'lar again," he added with a twinkle in his eye.

"**T**HAT ANIMAL could stand some attention, son," the white-haired hostler finally made himself say to Charlie Landry.

Like everybody else in town, he'd been frozen into slow-motion ever since the word had flashed about an hour past sunset that the notorious young killer was riding in, but no man who loved horseflesh could have stood to look very long at Landry's beaten mount and not spoken up in its defense.

Sitting the shiny sweat-wet palomino indifferently where he'd let it come to a stop halfway along the main street, Charlie Landry put his gaze on the aged liveryman, while the town waited breathless.

Landry said, as though he hadn't heard the hostler's words, "What's the town all lit up for, old man?"

The street was indeed, for a Tuesday night, inordinately illuminated, with the swaths of yellow light that extended from the saloon, the emporium, the hotel, the livery, the law office, the restaurant, blended by a full moon into an effect almost resembling daylight. Not, of course, actually like daylight; rather like a stage-set denoting it, with a tension about it such as one feels in the weird glow that precedes a tornado.

"It ain't lit up 'specially," the liveryman said.

"What's it, lit up for me or for the Rangers?"

The liveryman frowned, "What Rangers?"

"The Rangers that are on my tail. Fifteen of 'em. Big, tough Texas Rangers. I sat that hill you got out there and I watched 'em comin'. May-

be there's only ten of them, but it looked more like fifteen. What do you think of that, old man?"

The street was as quiet as if there weren't a soul up and down its length, so that Charlie Landry's voice rang out clear and sharp, like how a voice sounds on a still, cold night. Seeing Sheriff Barton Keller standing between the law office and the store, and the Noren boys and Dick Foster on the saloon veranda, and Ed Spooner beside his horse where he'd stepped down at the restaurant hitchrack, you would have done a double-take on them, for you wouldn't have believed that so many people could be there without any of them making any kind of a sound.

"I said what do you think of that, old man?"

The liveryman muttered grudgingly, "I don't think nothing of it."

"Well, maybe you'll think something of it when I fort up in your stinking stable and shoot it out with all them big, tough Rangers. Because right now that's what I'm thinking of doing, old man. And then not only my horse but all your horses too would get my attention, because like as not I'd fort right up behind them.

"Because them big, tough Rangers wouldn't want to mow down all them pretty ponies to get at me, and that way I could be mowing the Ranger boys down instead while they made up their minds."

Then Charlie Landry put his pale eyes on the group on the saloon porch. He might have been a good-looking kid except for those colorless eyes, though it was hard to tell any more whether their cold, dead look was a result of a lack of pigmentation or lack of any shred of warmth behind them.

It was difficult, in fact, to note much less remember any other detail of Charlie Landry's face than his eyes. They were him; they and the lightning-fast gunhand. They seemed to get bigger if you could stand to look straight into them, until they fascinated you, hypnotized you. Even Landry's flashy attire, even the jewel-studded black flat-crowned stetson, and the purple silk shirt with fancy white embroidery on one of the two breast pockets, did not

make the impression on you that the eyes did.

"Who are the quiet little boys lined up on the veranda there?" Charlie Landry said. Then one of his .45's was suddenly glinting in his right hand and he was blistering the saloon with bullets, so that the Noren boys and Dick Foster had all they could do to dive onto the planking in time to escape the fusillade.

"They're yellow little boys, I see," Charlie Landry said, deliberately reloading his gun. "Which is the sheriff?" he said a moment later. "You, fella?" he addressed Barton Keller.

The lawman stood as though frozen, his eyes wide on Landry, his hands flat on his belly, moving uncomfortably, as though he didn't know what to do with them.

"Hey, here come them Rangers, old man," said amiably then to the hostler, for the gentle thud of hoofs had begun to sound on the still night air. "Dry night like tonight, sound ain't carryin' far, so they'll be comin' in right quick, right, old man?"

THE HOSTLER, having been standing stiff, suddenly grabbed a shotgun from behind a doorpost and was squeezing the triggers before he had the weapon lined. This was why he had little success, but it was at the same time the only reason he had any success at all. Charlie Landry had expected such a move, but Charlie Landry didn't blow the top of an old man's head off in a hurried manner. There were times you needed to be fast; putting it on an old man was not one of them. That was how-come Charlie Landry's left arm got brushed by the shotgun blast. He'd timed his draw for a split-second later.

"Damn you!" he snarled, feeling the slugs rip his arm, the first taste Charlie Landry had ever had of hot lead, and in unleashed fury he emptied his gun into the already dead body, from which life had been torn by his first bullet.

Sheriff Barton Keller went for his gun then, stepping out onto the boardwalk, but the Rangers were sweeping into town in this same moment, and Charlie Landry had

wheeled his horses viciously and swung off and into the cover of the livery. He ripped off his left sleeve and when he saw all the bleeding holes he swore violently again and slammed his empty gun at the crumpled form of the hostler.

Then Charlie Landry's bloodshot pale eyes flicked wildly in the direction of the Rangers, who were stepping down in front of the livery with drawn guns amid the yelling and pointing of townsmen, and Charlie Landry palmed his left-side gun and, as promised, started yanking the horses out of their stalls so that they became a multi-layered barricade between him and the Rangers.

The horses remained an adjunct to Charlie Landry's stand but briefly, however, Landry's near-hysteria evidently spread to the animals, and as the excitement outside rose as well, they started moving. One, in fact, suddenly reared, and one of its pawing hooves caught Landry's already tortured left shoulder. Charlie Landry's profanity was purple at this and he wasted another bullet by smashing it at the horse's head.

Which only served to compound his difficulties, because the animal screamed before it died, and the other horses really started getting out of hand then.

The bullets, indeed, that the lightning-fast young gunman used on the old liveryman and the horses became, ironically, the only effective ones he got in during this his greatest show-down. For the stampeding horses caused him to have to abandon shooting at the Rangers in the street, sent him desperately to the rear door of the stable.

And by the time he got the door yanked open, four Rangers had sped back there between the livery and the next building, and were waiting with lined and levered sixguns and .30-30s'. So that Charlie Landry was literally blown to hell before his fabulous trigger-finger could react even instinctively....

SOMETIMES Ed Spooner not only put his head on one side when he poured his coffee from his cup into his saucer, but also arched the little finger of his pouring hand. He did

this on very special occasions. He did it this morning at breakfast with Mrs. Foster and Dick. Spooner had had, after all, to do all the talking. Mrs. Foster was obviously too nervous to talk. And Dick had simply eaten his bacon and eggs in silence.

Dick did, though, answer the remarks Ed Spooner addressed to him (with each of which Mrs. Foster became more and more worried) and his answers were notable.

"Man, them Rangers really give it to him, didn't they though, Dick?"

"They did, yes..."

"Funny. Charlie Landry. The toughest of them all. I don't reckon there ever was a kid slicker with a gun than him, do you reckon, Dick?"

"No, I doubt if there ever was."

"An' they lay him out jest as neat as a pin."

"I know..."

"You got to be low to shoot down an old man, an' treat a horse like he done, you know it?"

"You sure do..."

What Dick Foster replied to Janice Wells was well worth mention too, when she swept into the dooryard and slid off her horse and said breathlessly at once to Dick,

"I know Daddy will be furious but I had to see you and see how you were. I heard that—that Charlie Landry shot at you before they—"

"He shot at me, all right," Dick said with a weary little grin. "And what I did was dive for the floor with my heart in my mouth."

"Oh. But you weren't—"

"No, I wasn't hit. Look, Janice, I'll ride back with you, because I want to apologize to your father. And on the way I think I could do a little apologizing to you too..."

Standing in the bright sunshine in the doorway beside Ed Spooner, watching Dick and Janice ride out, Mrs. Foster suddenly put a hand to Ed's arm for support, because her knees were shaking so she thought they might give way on her. It was possibly a let-down from all the terrible tension, but more likely it was a reaction to Dick's having kissed her before he swung up on his horse... ●END

"THOU SHALT NOT KILL..."

by ELLIS SLOAN

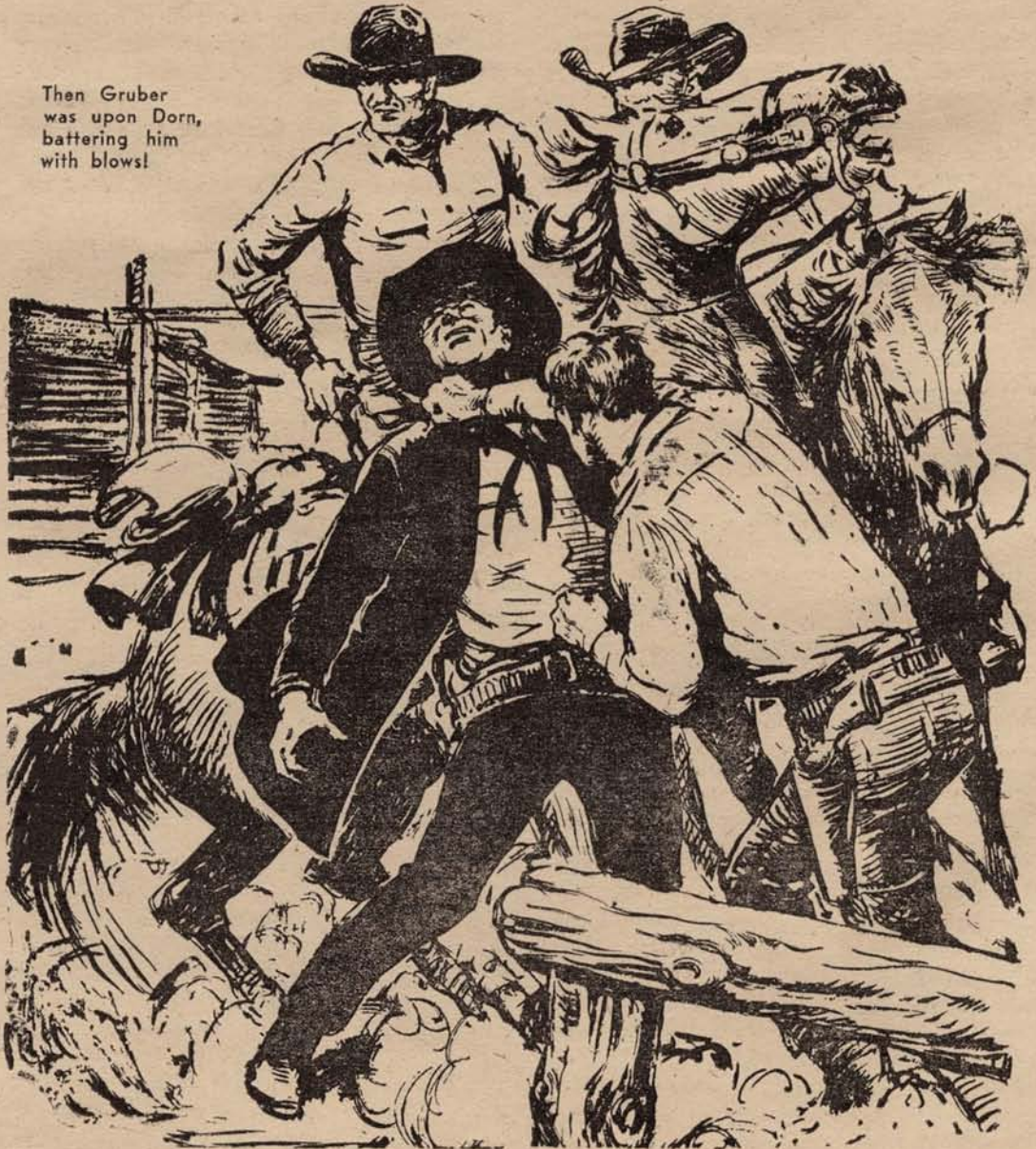
DORN RODE out of the pass at noon, a tall man whose angular face bore the weather-honed mark of long years a-saddle, yet whose brown eyes were kindly. In all Arizona Territory, there wasn't a circuit-riding minister who rode so wide a loop, or had hung his hat in so many back-trail places.

Here the land fell away before him broken with ravines and dark pine reaches, threaded with the quicksilver

of a small winding river, sweeping downward toward the valley of the

There were times, Dorn thought, when he was tempted to forget the words in the Good Book. When he longed to use the six-gun on his hip....

Then Gruber was upon Dorn, battering him with blows!



Rio Gato. And midway in the tumbled hills stood an adobe hut: the house of his friend Emanuel Rodriguez.

Dorn smiled and prodded his reluctant mare along the trail. It was a year now since he'd seen Rodriguez...

When he swung down in the yard Dorn found the Mexican waiting to greet him. Rodriguez has aged, the preacher thought when they shook hands; his round face, though smiling, looked tired and careworn. "I dig no longer for the silver," the old man said presently, as they sat reminiscing. "Maybe soon I go back to Sonora."

"And leave the mine?"

Rodriguez nodded, "It is sad, Senor." His eyes swung wistfully toward the dark opening in an outcrop of rock yonder.

Dorn was silent, thinking he'd miss this old man beside him. Rodriguez had no greed for the silver he took from the earth. But he loved the digging... Dorn reached for his pocket. "Perhaps a small stake, enough so's a man could keep going—"

Warmth kindled in the Mexican's eyes. "It is not money I need, Senor," He looked down at his gnarled brown hands, raised them painfully, "A man cannot dig with his hands full of misery. It is the water in the tunnel—always water. I can do nothing about it."

Watching the old man as he prepared a meal of frijoles, the Preacher couldn't help noticing the pain on his face, the halting motions of his hands. Dorn decided then that when he got to Junction at the head of the valley, he'd have a talk with Doc Weatherstone and see what the medico could do for Rodriguez...

An hour later, reining in beside the Rio Gato, the preacher sat his horse and stared at the river's sun-baked mud. "Dry," he muttered, wonderingly. In all his years meandering up and down the Territory, he couldn't recall when mountain water hadn't kept the Rio Gato full and running. It was a thing he'd taken for granted.

Dorn wheeled his horse and jogged up-river, reflecting on the will of God. Rodriguez giving up his mine

because it flooded with water—while here the Rio Gato ran dry and ranchers in the valley faced ruin. Whichever way a man rode, there was trouble.

He prodded the mare to a faster pace along the trail. This trouble was man-made, it occurred to him now. His eyes scanned the burned river bottom; there'd been enough rain in the hills, according to Rodriguez. Then, coming to a clearing, he saw the wall of rough-hewn timbers stretching solidly from bank to bank, and beyond, the flash of sun-lit water. So the Rio Gato had been damned, as he suspected.

He went on past the clearing. Here backwater from the dam had risen flooding the trail; he took to the brush, and rode around it. It was a short time later as the mare rounded a bend in the river, that Dorn, peering ahead, saw the woman standing in front of the cabin.

In her hands she held a rifle, but as he came close, she put it down. The preacher turned into the yard and reining up, said softly, "You won't need that Winchester, Ma'am. Surely you remember the riding minister."

"Dorn." The woman was young when she smiled. "It's been quite a while since you came this way, Preacher."

Dorn looked down at her. She was straight-backed and slender in a gingham dress, her chestnut hair drawn to the nape of her neck, glinting golden in the sunlight. But it was the fine, wide set of her face, the preacher reflected, that would make any man remember... "Sorry to hear about your husband," he said presently. "Johanson was a good man, and God-loving."

The woman's glance swept the unfinished cabin, the bare yard with its line of broken fencing. "John did what he could to build a homestead. It'd take a gunslick to hold out against Miles Gruber, once he started land-grabbing."

Dorn eyed the Winchester. "Is that why you're holding the rifle?" he asked.

"This place stands in the way of Miles' plans for his diversion dam," the widow said bitterly. "Does that answer your question?"

"So it was Gruber dammed the river," the preacher frowned. He peered yonder at the hollow slope of the hills, and remembering the backwater on the trail, said, "Now he wants your land, to flood with backwater."

The widow nodded. "My husband died in the brush with a bullet in his back, over a year ago. Miles has come here ever since, offering to buy the place—" She smiled, "He even offered to marry me. Gruber doesn't know what love is," she said, coloring. "Lately, he's started threatening me—" Hoof-tromp sounded in the yard, and she added, morosely, "Here he is now."

Dorn looked up to see Gruber riding toward them; he turned to the widow. "If you don't mind, Ma'am, I'll give the mare some water." He swung from saddle.

GRUBER REINED up beside the widow and swept off his hat with a flourish. "Fine day." His shrewd eyes took in the preacher, "I reckon it's generally known I'm courting the widow, but it's a little early for you, Preacher," he laughed. "What are you doing here?"

Dorn said, softly, "It's time you stopped bothering Mrs. Johanson, Gruber."

Gruber sat the saddle, a big man and florid, his face grown suddenly livid with anger. He glanced at the widow, then back at the man beside her. "Why, you damned tramp parson," he roared, "I'll have you run out of the country!"

He wheeled his horse dangerously close to the widow Johanson. "I didn't expect you'd have company, Ma'am," he said angrily. "I'll be back tomorrow. One of these days you'll think better of my offer." Spurring his gelding, he galloped from the yard.

The widow stood looking after him. Despair in her eyes, she turned to face the preacher. "Gruber means I'll sell, or be flooded out," she said. "The backwater from his dam is rising..."

Dorn let his horse drink from the pail. He said, mounting, "I'm stopping in Junction, Mrs. Johanson. There's a lawman there will take care of Gruber—"

The widow laughed bitterly. "Ever hear of a paper sheriff, Preacher? This isn't the only place Gruber is after. The ranchers have called a meeting tonight, in Junction..." Her voice trailed off.

"I'll be there," Dorn looked at the woman thoughtfully. "If the sheriff won't stop Gruber—"

The widow touched his arm, and there was a softness in her eyes as she looked at him. Dorn had removed his low-crowned hat, and the brown hand holding it was strong and gentle. A good man, like Johanson... She shook her head. "Keep out of this, Preacher. Things are worse, below the dam. Gruber wants the whole valley."

There were times, Dorn thought, when he was tempted to forget the words in the Good Book. When he longed to use the six-gun on his hip, that he carried for rattlesnakes. But he was a man of God. "*Thou shalt not kill...*"

Now, as his mare's hoofs beat a hollow tattoo across the wooden bridge at the edge of town, Dorn wondered at how things had changed, since he'd last ridden into Junction.

Coming up the Rio Gato he's seen the results of Gruber's thrust for power. *Things are worse below the dam*, the widow had said; a land of starved ranchers, and dead cattle... Had Gruber taken over the town, as he had the river?

Passing Stockman's Hall and the Mercantile, Dorn was about to swing down in front of the hotel, when he remembered the medicine he wanted for Rodriguez. Tired as he was, he rode to the far end of town, and called on Doc Weatherstone.

The ruddy-faced little medico listened, then shook his head. "Rheumatism," he pronounced. "Regardless, the old man'll have to stop his digging." He sat for a moment, his bright eyes studying the preacher, whistling tunelessly. Then he hurried into his dispensary. Returning, he handed Dorn a bottle. "According to my label, it'll cure anything." He laughed as he shook hands with the preacher.

Riding back down Main street, Dorn left the tired mare at the livery-stable. Tomorrow I'll see what I can

do about the widow, the preacher thought, as he toted his war bag toward the Star Hotel.

What with Gruber and trouble in the valley, it didn't look like he'd get much time for preaching, Dorn reflected morosely. Somehow the beautiful sermons he thought up while riding between towns always got lost, once he reached his destination. . .

At the hotel he took a room, and ate a late supper.

Darkness shrouded Junction by the time he started for the rancher's meeting at Stockman's Hall. Dorn went along the boardwalk past lamp-lit saloons and storefronts—aware of an unnatural quiet that pervaded Main Street.

Ranch wagons were drawn up, as though deserted, in front of the Mercantile. A scattering of saddle mounts stood at hitchracks further down the street. Somewhere in the shadows a horse nickered, the soft sound carrying clearly through the night air. . .

I can feel it, Dorn thought; the warnings, near-voiceless, were unmistakable. Gruber had stolen the river—and written his own law in Junction. But not for long. For Gruber had a valley of angry men against him. Tonight at Stockman's Hall, there'd be trouble. . .

"**H**E'S TOO smart to meet with us," a rancher said angrily. "He knows we're here for a show-down."

Dorn stood at the rear of Stockman's Hall, his eyes studying the taut faces of the ranchers as they sat discussing Gruber. A man with red hair and a gaunt face got to his feet.

"What none of you figure," he said, thickly, "is that we'll be too late with the civil suit we got pending against Gruber for damming the river. It'll take another month of court-wrangling anyway, and meantime Gruber can have any spread in the valley. To hell with talk, my cows are dying. Let's blast Gruber, the dirty, land-grabbing son. We'll tear down his dam—"

"Wait a minute, men," Sheriff Benson spoke from the edge of the circle. "Any shooting, and you'll have the law on your hands."

A thin smile creased the redhead's hard mouth. "You ain't done nothin' so far, Sheriff, while Gruber's been starving us out of the valley." Turning his back, he said to the others, "Are you riding with me against Gruber, or do I go alone?"

"I'm with you, Hannigan," one of the ranchers said loudly. A growl of approval rose from the others.

Dorn moved forward into the lamp-light. "Gruber has a tough crew behind him," he said slowly. "Begin, and there'll be more than one killing." His glance singled out young Johnny Hackett, standing in shadow. "I suppose you'll be riding too, Johnny. I came to Junction expecting to marry you." His glance travelled the circle. "You men should think of your womenfolk, before you start a range war."

Johnny Hackett spoke up. "You don't rightly belong here, Preacher," he said respectfully. "I ain't marryin' Beth—my place is wiped out." His voice shook with emotion, "Leave us alone, we'll settle with Gruber."

There was a rumble of agreement from the ranchers and the meeting scattered, men pushing past the preacher toward the doorway. "Meet in front of the hotel before daylight," the red-haired man called, "We'll ride to Box-G and give Gruber a surprise party."

THERE WAS nothing he could do, Dorn thought grimly, as later, he sat staring from the window of his room at the hotel.

Main Street was still ablaze with lamplight. A crowd of people stood in front of the hotel, talking in low tones of the morning raid on Box-G. Gruber would be ready; they're waiting, the preacher thought, waiting for the killing to begin.

He'd placed the lamp on the commode near his chair, and for a time, tried to read from the Bible. Now the book lay open on his knees, his fingers riffling absently through its dog-eared pages.

By noon tomorrow there'd be hell along the Rio Gato, and no way he could stop it, Dorn thought sadly. He wouldn't be able to help the Widow Johanson. . . *You don't rightly belong here, Preacher, Johnny Hackett had*

told him; maybe Johnny was right. In the morning, he'd ride from town. Down-valley he'd take the medicine to Rodriguez, and go back over the pass to Yuma. His fingers moved to close the Bible.

A page had come loose and he looked down, meaning to put it back in place. Out of habit, he started reading;

—and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thy hand, and go

...The river. The Rio Gato wound out of the hills above Rodriguez's place—and Rodriguez's mine was flooding with water. Dorn read the next verse, his heart pounding;

Behold...thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink... It was all there, in the Bible!

MINUTES later, Dorn came hurrying out of the Mercantile, a paper bundle in his arms, and called to Johnny Hackett, who'd just swung down in front of the Empire Saloon.

Johnny led his gelding across Main Street. "Sorry for what I said at the meeting, Preacher. That talk about me and Beth—"

"You want to marry Beth, don't you, Johnny? You'd rather save your spread than fight Gruber and his outfit?"

"I reckon so," Johnny eyed the preacher curiously. "What you got there, Preacher? Don't look like groceries—"

"Dynamite," Dorn said, softly. "Get back on that horse, Johnny. You're riding for me tonight, fast—and careful..."

GRUBER stood massive, his back to the dam, his feet planted in the dawn-lit clearing. His crew was spread out behind him, except for a few who stood guard on the opposite bank of the narrow river.

Box-G's owner smiled. "I don't scare easy," he said to the ranchers who sat their horses before him. His hand hovered above his holster. "You want to be the first to move, Hannigan?"

The red-head swore. He turned to the men beside him. "Keep listening

to the preacher here, and you'll all turn yellow."

He couldn't delay any longer, Dorn was thinking. Maybe he had heard the explosion, riding down-valley with the ranchers—but he couldn't be sure. He'd been too worried about Johnny's ever reaching Rodriguez, hard-riding with his saddle bags stuffed with dynamite... Dorn swung from saddle and walked toward Gruber.

"Stop where you are, Preacher," Gruber barked. He'd drawn his gun; his glance flicked over the ranchers, his will commanding.

Dorn unbuckled his gun-belt and let it drop to the ground. "I don't think you'll pull the trigger now, Gruber—that'd be murder." He went forward slowly, until he could see the grey hairs in Gruber's stubble of beard, the tiny beads of perspiration that stood on his forehead, "Besides, there's something I want to show you."

Dorn went to the edge of the dam, picked up a stick, and thrust it in the water. With his knife he notched the stick where it reached the surface. He turned to Gruber. "The Mexicans call it Cat River. You know, Gruber, you never can tell which way a cat'll jump..." He swung to face the ranchers. "Give me five more minutes, before you start shooting."

"Out of the way, Preacher," Hannigan warned. "We're not waitin'—"

Time, Dorn thought, minutes, and he might avert a range war. He turned again to Gruber, an answer forming as he spoke. "You thought you had a river—maybe a whole valley," he laughed. "It's going to be tough Gruber, watching your dam go empty."

Gruber's solid face worked with suspicion. "You lie, Preacher. But if you've done anything to that river, you damned, sneaking—"

"You wouldn't talk like that without a gun in your hand," Dorn taunted. Gruber out-weighed him by thirty pounds of solid brawn, he was thinking; Dorn straightened as the rancher dropped his gun-belt to the ground. Then Gruber was coming toward him, charging like a maddened bull, his fists swinging.

Dorn raised his arms, warding off the savage fury of those first sledge-

like blows while he waited for an opening. When it came he swung a hard right to the side of Gruber's head; the blow spun Gruber around, a look of astonishment on his beefy face. A growl came from the ranchers, "Hit him, Preacher," one of them yelled lustily.

Dorn's glance flicked over the horseman; Hannigan sat unmoving. They'll watch while it lasts, the preacher thought grimly. Suddenly Gruber rushed him, and this time the rancher's driven fist struck with an impact that resounded in his skull like thunder. Dorn fell sprawling.

Gruber was upon him in a second, his huge fists pounding, battering him with blows to the head and shoulders. Dorn struck back, realizing he fought a losing battle. But he fought for time. The sky wheeled crazily before his eyes.

In desperation, he grasped Gruber by the arms and, planting a knee in his belly, heaved upward. Gruber fell sideways and they grappled, rolling on the ground near the dam.

They broke apart and Dorn came up on one knee, and remained there, trying to clear his vision, when he saw Gruber coming toward him. The rancher kicked viciously at his face. Dorn grabbed the boot and twisted; Gruber toppled, swearing as he fell.

Tired, Dorn took the moment to stagger to his feet. Some of his blows had told on Gruber, he thought with satisfaction, as the rancher rose and came toward him. There was blood on Gruber's cheeks, and his eyes had the look of murder. "I'm going to kill you, Preacher," he muttered thickly.

Dorn stood still, waiting now for the chance he knew would come—for Gruber in his rage had become reckless. Even as the rancher swung, Dorn stepped inside the wide arching blow, and brought up his fist against the side of Gruber's head, with a crack that resounded in the clearing. The blow knocked the heavy man off-balance and Gruber was that way, his head back, his jaw out-thrust—when the preacher's last blow hit him.

Dorn stood for a moment looking down at Gruber, hearing only dimly the clamor of voices around him. Then he walked to the edge of the dam

where he's left the notched stick. When he swung to face the ranchers, there was a slow smile spreading on the preacher's face. "You've no reason to fight now," he said. "Get Gruber over here and I'll prove it..." It was then that he heard the beat of hoofs, and turning, saw Johnny Hackett come pounding into the clearing.

Johnny swung down from his lathered gelding and walked over to the sky-pilot. "You should have seen it, Preacher," he said, panting. "I strung that dynamite in the minehead, like you said. When she blew, me and old Rodriguez had to run like jack-rabbits to keep from getting drowned. Why, that there's the purtiest little river you ever did see, runnin' straight into the valley!"...

OLD RODRIGUEZ didn't really need the medicine, Dorn reflected now, as he prodded the reluctant mare back over the pass toward Yuma.

When he'd waved good-bye, Rodriguez had been bending over his new vegetable garden beside the river, happily digging. Working in the sun, Rodriguez's gnarled hands had lost the misery. Dorn chuckled; now that the old Mexican was something of a celebrity, he'd changed his plans about going back to Sonora.

All in all, Dorn allowed, it had been a pretty fair trip over. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never forget the dumfounded expression on Gruber's face, while water fell away from the notched stick—or the look in the Widow Johanson's eyes as she stood in her yard, and saw the back-water from Gruber's dam receding.

A fair trip, what with Beth and Johnny Hackett's wedding, and the way the Widow Johanson had smiled at him afterwards, when she'd said goodbye... "Get along, girl," the preacher said gruffly. He prodded the drooping mare.

A fine woman, the Widow, Dorn reflected; the kind that would make some lonely man downright happy. Maybe someday soon he'd come back this way, and just call on the Widow Johanson, social-like. Maybe someday in the spring...

The preacher rode on over the pass. ● END

AS FAST AS THEY CAME

by HARRY HARRISON KROLL



“YAS-SIR, BUB, I toted that thar shootin’ arn through four year of trouble,” the old man said reminiscently. “I done looked through them sights at many a damyank.”

Long Sam, his boy, leaned on the musket in question, nodding absently, for he’d heard the tale a good many times. His squinted eyes had caught a solitary wagon through the cottonwoods on the far bank of the river.

“No-sir, that thar ain’t no ordinary musket, bub,” Pappy Dodds went on. “Totes a slug the size of a buck-eye.”

“You said it. Hit’s rifle air bored and hit are twelve inches longer’n the average.”

“And if you p’int it in the right direction and let fly, it’ll knock a Dam-yank out of a tree a mile away.”

“Bub, you know it by heart. Or a dam’ Injun.”

“Wagon edging in on the fur bank.”

“Let ’er edge and be hanged. I’m a weary man.”

“You was born so, Pappy, though I own you was a good soldier. They’s hollering for the ferry.”

“Let ’em holler. Mebby if we wait a spell two wagons will come along and we’ll make two dollars instead of just one.”

The ferry lay tied to a willow. The water lapped at its crude sides pleasantly. The air was slumbrous. The sun hung low, round and red through the afternoon haze and dust. The mule that operated the treadmill which in turn navigated the primitive ferry stirred and stamped to get the horse-

flies off its rump. Except for the shouting wagoner across the river there was hardly a sound.

“Well, Pappy, let’s set the boat over. No need of the feller ripping out the roots of his tongue. Traveling by hisself, he might be in a hurry.”

“He’s likely some polecat from that wagon train we sot over yesterday, likely got too big for his britches and decided he’d go alone. Well, them Pawnees will make a good angel out of him.”

Languidly father and son manned the ferry. One took one side oar, the other the other, and the mule began his grind. They turned the boat and



The old man was a crack shot!

• • •
To the raiding Indians it looked like two old men, an old woman, a green kid and a spooked girl. They didn’t see Pappy’s shootin’ arn.....

• • •
headed across the river. At the tranquil rate of a mile in two hours they arrived at the landing.

Long Sam inspected the offerings. There was a big lumbering wagon pulled by a span of fleabitten mules, and a spare team led behind. A milk cow with dry bag was attached by a lead-rope. A tired calf bawled at the cow’s tail.

The freight on the wagon consisted of some battered pieces of furniture, rolls of bedding, a large wood box of provisions, and at the hind end a big crate with a sow and pigs, the sow being old and the pigs new. And higher up, a crate of chickens, mostly two hens and a rooster and maybe a duck. And still higher on the load was a big

lumpy old woman ambushed under a slat bonnet—and what really caught Long Sam's roving eye, a girl—

By gums, a gal!

He couldn't see much of her, though, she was so disguised in lye-faded homespun the general color of the dusty Western soil. What curves she might reasonably have had by virtue of her youth were hopelessly shrouded in loose calico. And her young face was barricaded by the slats of a bonnet twin-cousin to her ma's. She did have a pair of bright brown eyes, whose curiosity not even the past weary miles subdued; and with these she peered down at Long Sam, while he peered up trying to find what he had here in all this shrubbery of old clothes.

The head man of this outfit was travel-stained and tobacco juice ran down the edges of his mouth and discolored his scraggly beard.

"You been a long enough time getting acrost," this unmellow creature growled.

"Yap," said Pappy, "I had all the rest of my life."

"I been in a bigger rush than that," the man stated.

Pappy shrugged. "Some as is in a rush and some as ain't. I ain't. Now me'n the boy air hyar, we'll sot you acrost. The usual price is a dollar in gold. But seeing as you air so bad-tempered about hit, the price air two dollars."

"You are a damn-robber," said the man.

"I can tell by your talk you air a Damyank, and that's the same thing."

While this colloquy took place, Pappy leaned on his sharpshooter's rifle, placid and immovable.

"Before I'll be held up I'll stay on this side!"

"Shore!" Pappy said. He waved. "Lots of territory on this side. Redskins, too."

"By Judas I'll swim the river!"

"Shore. Ain't nobody stopping you. Only they is some sucks out yan, and treacherous waters, and instead of getting to the fur side you mout just drift down to hades, which is full of the likes of ye. A mess of 'em I sont thar myself with this hyar." He patted the gun.

THE EMIGRANT glowered, his thin blue eyes smouldering with a soldier's well-remembered wrath.

"I reckon I sent some of your brethern to the same place—at Shiloh, at Chattanooga, and a few other spots."

"Shiloh? Chattanooga? I war thar, neighbor. At Chattanooga I sot on a rocky crag and tuck aim with this hyar," and he again patted his rifle, "and shot down at a row of Dam-yanks and know what? It was like shootin' a roost of scrooch-owels off a dead limb!"

"Pa," the girl pleaded in a low but huskily musical voice, "pay the man the price and let's be set across."

The old woman put in her mouth. "You fit the wars enough times now. Latch your jaw and let's go where we aim to go."

"Shut up," the man told his women-folks. "Who's skinning this skunk?"

"Whoever is, it's making a mighty stink," the girl said.

"I'll slap yur teeth down your throat," her father stated.

Long Sam grinned. "Looks like the Civil War's fixing to bust out in the Yankee family."

The man glowered, but he seemed to give in. "I reckon I'll have to pay you two dollars."

"Cross my palm with gold, mister," Pappy held out his hand.

"I reckon you don't trust me."

"Nope. I don't trust Yankees, Pawnees, half-breeds, stray dogs and gamblers." He kept his hand extended.

Reluctantly the traveler reached into his jeans, extracted a coin; Pappy bit down on it to make sure, and nodded for Long Sam to man the broad-horn. All the while Long Sam and the girl had been eyeing each other.

Once the ferry was in motion, the Northerner inquired, "How's lands out there?" He waved to the west.

"Maybe more'n you seen back whur you come from," Pappy said.

"How's the redskins?"

"You ort to stayed with your wagon train. Now you may lose your hair." Pappy jerked his head toward the women-folks. "Some brave will keep your gal, and they'll shore take the hair of that old woman of yourn."

"I guess I can take care of my own,"

the Yankee said. But his voice didn't have much assurance in it.

Pappy shrugged and worked the oar. Long Sam had a device with which he manipulated the sweep and his oar and the mule all at the same time. The horseflies were terrible. The traveler's teams stamped and lashed with their tails. The hot dry air seemed to swirl in eddies above the water. The more humid it got the more one could hardly breathe it. Far up at the headwaters there had been heavy rains but none had come this way, only the dirty swill in the river.

Long Sam talked between movements of the broadhorn. "What's your name?"

"Betty."

"What's his name?" He pointed in the direction of her father.

"Sol McMasters."

"Where you ones headed, anywheres in particular?"

"Oregon, California—wherever that is. Pa's hard-hardheaded, can't make up his mind. All the time fussing with people. He's right good-hearted, but since the war he ain't been himself."

LONG SAM nodded toward the slowly approaching fringe of willows. "Good land thar as anywheres. I ain't been to the other end of the world, but far's I been it looks about the same. You ones mout settle nigh about?"

"Maybe."

"How you look without that thar durn bonnet?"

She took it off, shook her brown curls out, and gave him a starry smile.

"By gum," Long Sam said, "I'll help talk your old man into settling. Besides, it'd be a pity for the Injuns to scalp you. Long's folks travel in trains they don't pester. Let one, two, three tackle the trace and a dozen or twenty pounce on 'em and that's the last of that outfit."

"How come they don't get you folks?"

Long Sam indicated the shooting iron. "They seen Pappy use that tool."

The talk of the ex-warriors drifted to them. "I'll tell you, that Chickamauga she shore were one ripsnorter of a battle!"... "By Judas I tell you for a little we'd of licked the britches

off ye!"... "By dam's, for a little more and apt as not you wouldn't be hyar!"... "Nor you!"...

Long Sam shrugged, grinned. "It's that way ever'time some the veterans of the wars drift through. Now it's a cornfed, and they laugh and holler. Then hit's a Yank and they paw up the earth like a couple bulls."

"Many folks a-passing through?"

"They come from yan," pointing back, "and go yan," pointing ahead. "Droves and droves and droves. You wouldn't know they was that many folks in this world. All wanting to get someplace they ain't."

"I wouldn't mind staying," Betty said.

Far up the river Long Sam's keen eyes saw something dark lying against the fringe of willows. "Pappy," he said.

"Whut?"

"Looky yan." His voice was low. He pointed. The old man looked. He rubbed his eyes.

"I don't see nothin'."

"Hit's a canoe."

"Naw. Hit's a drift log."

Long Sam kept looking. Betty looked. The stranger stared. The old woman didn't want to look, she was too scared; but she looked anyhow, whispering hoarsely, "Injuns?"

"Hit's a bullboat, and they hid in the willers."

"Mout could be," Pappy admitted. "My eyes ain't as pert as they used to be when I could knock a Yank out of a tree a mile away."

"What kind of weepins you tote, stranger?" Long Sam asked the Yankee.

"The kind what I killed me a mess of rebs with—musket and pistols and a couple blades forged out of scythes; I heard tell the buffalo grass was tough and made 'em 'specially to whack grass."

"Where's they at?"

"Down in the wagon body."

"Haul 'em out."

The old woman moaned. "I don't want to see no Injun fighting."

"We don't neither," Pappy said grimly. "But that ain't fixing to help none if hit comes on."

They watched what they had seen hidden in the willows and it was only

a moment or two before Long Sam's report was verified. The boat shoved from its covert and headed into the fast water. It came swiftly, handled by two rowers, one an Indian in the stern, stripped to his waist and nothing else but a loin cloth; the other in the bow, wearing buckskin and hickory. He also wore a hat. At this distance he seemed more like a white than a redman.

"Whut's that they got in the boat?"

"Looks like a mess of willer branches."

And so it did—long limber willow limbs with the leaves still fresh, covering a mysterious cargo.

"She's a bullboat, all right, shore as sour apples," Pappy admitted.

A bullboat was a type of canoe not too often used by Indians. It was made by bending a very tough kind of wood, hickory, yew if it could be obtained, or splint oak, for ribs; and then by running a light tough keel along the bottom, and the same kind of wood around the tops of the ribs as a gunwale. Over this serviceable skeleton buffalo hides would be stretched. When the hides cured over the cedar resin calking, the bullboat was light, water-tight and swift.

By this time the canoe had come within hail.

"Cody," drifted over the water.

"Cody hell!" Pappy said.

"Cody friend."

"That's that half-breed," Long Sam said. "His pappy was a Mormon missionary, or something."

"Wouldn't trust the likes of him with the life of a dead mule," Pappy said. "You ones come down off the load."

LONG SAM helped Betty down, and took his time, liking the chore. The old woman got so flustered her foot slipped and her fat leg got hung up in the sow's crate. She began to yell like something possessed. "It's chawing off my leg!" Then she realized the word was indelicate and changed it. "Limb."

Pappy was calling back to the half-breed. "Come no nigher, Cody. What's your business?"

"Cody trade."

"Cody trade what?"

"Cody trade buffalo meat." He gestured toward the cargo concealed under the willow boughs.

"Don't you trust him, Pappy," Long Sam said. "They's Injuns under them willer branches."

"Whar you get buffalo meat?" Hadn't been a buffalo sighted in weeks.

Cody made a gesture toward the headwaters.

"Tell your mammy to stop her squalling, a body can't hear himself cuss," Long Sam said to Betty. Meanwhile he was busy. The Yankee had laid out his rifle, his pistols, and the scythe blades.

"Now hand down that thar front of the bedstead," Long Sam said.

The Yank put that off the load. The woman kept yelling. The tread mule understood the racket as a signal to pause. The boat now was drifting down the current. Cody and his cargo were coming nigher. Pappy kept up a parley.

"Lay down on your belly," Long Sam told Betty. "Know what to do with a shootin' arn?"

"You shoot it."

"Take one yur pappy's pistols. But don't waste no lead till we know for sure."

He had got the bedstead between the wagon and the side of the ferryboat. It made a good barricade. The horseflies and the old woman's squalls had the hitched mules nervous, and the lead team was tugging at their halters.

Long Sam took Pappy's rifle and bellied alongside Betty until he could sight upon Cody and the bullboat under the bedstead. It wasn't much of an ambush, but it was better than none.

"Don't shoot till I give the word," Pappy said, low. "We don't want to start nothin'." After all, the half-breed might be friendly.

It was just this element of doubt that always made it so dangerous. Long Sam could have killed either the Indian or Cody, but if those willows covered a half dozen warriors and their guns, that would only start the battle.

His eyes lifted and he searched the shoreline from whence had come the bullboat. This time there was no doubt. It was a typical Indian canoe,

and it had as many as ten braves in it. "Ain't no use waiting, Pappy."

"How?"

"I say hain't no use loitering. They's another boat load of 'em waiting up the river."

"The divil ye say."

Long Sam did not wait for the order to fire. Seconds now were too precious to waste. He let fly with the shooting iron that toted a slug the size of a buckeye, that Pappy had done notable carnage with. It was loaded with a round ball, not like the Mine ball, and wadded it with a double charge of powder. Pappy had worked out the logistics of it himself. At the instant of explosion the soft ball mushroomed and filled the barrel. When it issued it was twirling at great speed, and when it hit, it did considerable damage.

Pappy emitted a blood-curdling groan. "You missed him, bub!"

Which Long Sam had. But the Yank, all his battle blood roiled by the unfinished fight he'd had with an old enemy, now had something he could take out his hate on. His shot knocked the Indian in the stern into the river. Then up out of the willow wood rose the hidden braves. They poured a deadly fire into the ferryboat.

Long Sam saw the bullets splinter through the bedstead over his head. The redskins hadn't had too much time to take aim. But they laid out a a rear mule and crippled one of the lead mules, and the beasts plunged. The treadmill brute reared, tried to jump out of his stall, got his leg hung in the planks, and plunged about, whinnying piteously.

"Gimme that thar weepin!" Pappy snarled.

He snatched it from his son's hand. He reloaded with the skill of an ancient warrior. He knew how to use a wagon for cover. The Yankee knew what he was doing, too. He muttered, "Been laying all my time to kill me a mess of Injuns."

Long Sam was engaged in grabbing the bridles of the snorting, plunging mules and keeping them from dragging wagon, cargo, old woman and squealing sow and pigs into the river. It was a man's-sized chore. But he watched the bullboat, and the warrior canoe a quarter mile up the river.

THE BULLBOAT was sinking. The Indians became aware of their dilemma as the Yank knocked Cody's brains out. There now were six of them. Nothing was left but to swim. Some clung to the boat which, as soon as they got out of it, still floated. Pappy took one neatly through the head. The Yank took another neatly the same way. You could count 'em off—four now, and they were agitated like wasps when you stick a flame into their nest.

They hadn't quite figured on this. To them it looked like two old men, an old woman, a young squirt of a boy, and a scared girl. Now they were trying to save their guns, unable to shoot now they were in the river, and at the same time save their hides.

But reinforcements were moving swiftly to their relief.

"Thar they come, Pappy!" Long Sam yelled.

A rifle ball whizzed past his ears. Too close to ease his headache. "Lay low," he told Betty. With ten fresh ones on hand the redskins might manage to board the ferryboat. Likely they figured the junk on the wagon worth the risk. Some of the trashiest of these emigrants carried gold. No doubt they had also sighted the young girl. Such booty always stirred the braves to their greatest efforts.

No use shooting at the canoe, Long Sam realized. It was a log hollowed out with fire and hatchets. You couldn't sink the thing. *Here they came.* Knowing what they were going up against, the Indians moved desperately into the task confronting them. Pappy knocked one down and the Yank knocked one down. Pappy reloaded and the Yank reloaded and they let fly and now there were seven braves capable of fighting.

But the canoe was only a dozen lengths away. The mules were raising cain. Long Sam reached for the scythe blade. The redskins were shooting but it took them time to reload also. They were lying low in the canoe, doing their chores with apt fingers.

"Here they come!" Long Sam yelled again and the Indians shot their war canoe right up against the ferryboat. Strangely enough, the old woman on

top of the feather mattress made no sound. "Dead," Long Sam figured.

An Indian grabbed the edge of the boat to pull himself aboard, his knife in his teeth. Long Sam laid a nice swish with the scythe blade and cut off his hand. Betty was shooting point-blank with the pistols. Pappy and the Yankee had reloaded and fired again.

Long Sam did then what he had planned all along, if it came to that. He laid the flat side of the blade on the rump of the mule that had been bucking the worst, cut the leather trace, and the beast jumped off the side of the boat into the water. Then Long Sam belted the other mule and it snatched the wagon and tumbled it onto the Indian canoe, long Sam whacking rapidly at traces and tie ropes to free this animal and the led mules and the cow and calf.

Such a milling around Long Sam never dreamed of. Four mules and the cattle churning the river. Redskins trying to get out from under the wagon. Wagon, swimming cows and mules, canoe, and ferryboat by this time had drifted down the river far past the landing. An Indian who hadn't died, given up, or swum away, and who still had his gun, shot at Pappy. Long Sam saw Pappy grow limp. The Yank killed the Indian. Betty was still lying on her belly, pistol in hand. Long Sam discovered blood running out of him over his clothes, and stared at it in wonder.

He decided he would stay alive long enough to get the treadmill mule's leg undone and see if it would be possible to navigate the ferryboat back up the river, by warping and poling. The Yank examined Pappy.

"I seen 'em hit worse'n that and live to fight another day, bub," he said to Long Sam. "I'm one of 'em. But he's sorter bunged up, at that."

He stood and looked in all directions. "By Judas, where's my old woman?"

"She's gone, Paw," Betty said.

"Gone where?"

But he knew.

Long Sam pulled off his shirt. He saw something that looked like a rib sticking out. Betty pushed it back in, bound him in bandages. She didn't bawl. She helped Long John and her father warp the boat back to the landing, tie it up. Strangely, the sun was still shining. All this had happened not in a lifetime but in moments—and not too many even of them. Fifteen, twenty, at the outside.

The Yank said, "I'm going after my cows and my mules and my wagon. I can't go West without them."

Betty helped Long John up the rise to the shack. The Yank toted Pappy up and put him in the bed, saying, "I'll be back soon's I get my animals."

Ma was gone. So were the hogs and chickens. Betty said to her father with a weary kind of finality, "Pa, I'm not going West no farther. I'm going to stay right here. This is far enough toward the setting sun for me."

A snort of rum raised Long Sam's hopes of his life.

"I didn't miss that half-breed Cody, Betty," he said.

"You didn't? You didn't hit him."

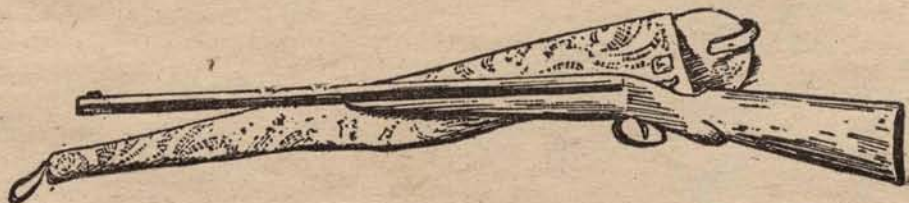
"I shot at the waterline of the bull-boat. I knew if it was loaded with redskins it would sink and that would give us a chance to pick 'em off."

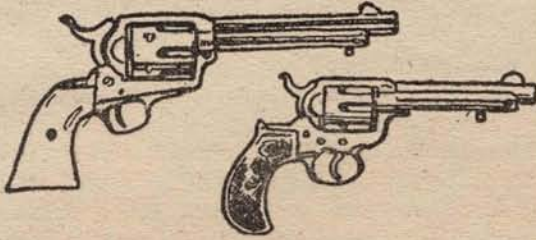
Betty patted his cheek. "You go to sleep. I knew you were as good a shot as Pa or your Pappy."

He took her hand. "You fixing to stay?"

"It's a hard thing to say, but Pa probably ain't going West now, where there ain't any women. He'll likely stay here and wait till some show up. But that'll be long enough for me and you."

Long John sank away into a rummy coma, loading and firing Pappy's shootin' arm and knocking 'em dead as fast as they came... ● END





Built for the Army, taken over by the gunslingers, the "great equalizer" is still knocking over everything from gangsters to grizzlies.

IT'S A LITTLE weapon, but since its birth over 120 years ago, it has grown to be the greatest killer of them all. It's been called the "great equalizer" because it makes little men big, and big men afraid, and today its voice thunders throughout the world.

It's as American as Buffalo Bill, or Teddy Roosevelt, or Ike Eisenhower. It's an international as the United Nations. The perseverance of one man—his indomitable faith in his invention—brought it into being, and to the last century it was as important a discovery as the A-bomb is to ours. The man and his brainchild altered the course of world history. They caused wars, and prevented them. The man was Samuel Colt, and his weapon—the Colt Repeating Pistol.

Contrary to most opinions, the Colt is not held only in the hand of the law. Although it is standard issue in almost all law enforcement agencies and commissioned officer ranks of the armed forces, of over 200,000 manufactured annually by the plant in Hartford, Conn., at least 50 per cent are used by sportsmen not only in competition on the target range but for actual hunting and as an auxiliary arm where beasts come large and dangerous. However, although the Colt today has peaceful missions

as well as deadly ones, there was no peace in either the history of the weapon itself or in the life of the man who created it.

Samuel Colt was only 22 years old, in 1836, when he was presented with a legal document by Andrew Jackson giving him the basic patent for a revolving pistol. The idea wasn't new, but he was the first to have the skill to put the various pieces together and make them work.

The first single-shot pistol was made in Pistola, Italy, in 1540. It was a hand-held pipe with a large hole at one end and a smaller one at the other. The measured gunpowder was poured through the large hole and then the lead bullet was seated on top of it. A flame applied to the small hole ignited the powder.

The flame could be supplied by a piece of rope soaked in saltpeter which was ignited, or by a wheel lock which was wound up and released to



It was the Colt's new five-shot one-piece pistol, that turned the tide for Texas.

SAM COLT'S KILLER

by GIL PAUST

spin against a piece of iron, thus causing a spark, or by the flintlock where a piece of flint struck a piece of steel when the hammer was released. These methods had been used on muskets

and were applicable to the hand-held weapon.

Gunsmiths before Colt's time had tried to perfect a revolving cylinder that would give a soldier multiple shots, but each design was far too complicated, using the ignition methods just mentioned. Many of them did work, at least in principle, but weren't reliable enough to become popular, especially when a man's life was at stake. The same was true of the pepperbox, the term applied to the multi-barreled pistol which had a number of barrels made to revolve in front of the hammer. The advent of percussion ignition gave Colt his impetus.

The percussion cap was a small metal cup with a primer chemical in its base. It was fitted over a nipple in the rear of the breech. When the hammer was snapped on the cap, the primer flashed through a hole drilled in the nipple and leading to the powder chamber.

Colt saw its possibilities immediately and based his revolving-breechblock rifles and pistols on its use, but he had a fight for recognition on his hands. His only customer at the time could be the United States military, and they never accepted the percussion cap ignition even on muskets until after the war with Mexico in 1848—almost 32 years after the cap had been perfected.

No one knows exactly how Colt became interested in firearms. Perhaps it was a combination of his inventive spirit (he also made an underwater bomb—which didn't go off—and, later, a submarine mine—which did) and the fact that he was forced to leave Amherst Academy when he was 15 for shooting off a firearm, an act strictly forbidden by the school.

Sam Colt had gotten his charter from New Jersey in 1836, and started his own factory in Paterson. He called it the Patent Arms Company. His first step was to whittle wooden models showing his pistol's mechanism, and on the basis of these he received a few orders from Major Sam Hall of Texas, then still an independent republic.

In 1837 he took some of his first real guns to the Washington Arsenal which rejected them, considering

them too heavy, expensive to make, too delicate for rough use in battle, and—too much of a temptation for a soldier to fire more than once and thus waste ammunition. But the American Institute of New York awarded a gold medal to his ten-chamber revolving-breech rifle which operated similarly to the pistol.

In a demonstration with it he fired 50 ball bullets in less than nine minutes, hand-loading from a powder flask and using percussion caps. Forty of the bullets were shot at a 40-yard target 12 by 30 by 3½ inches. Twenty-three hit it and all of these went through it. But they wanted nothing to do with his pistol, saying it was strictly a military weapon. At this time Colt was only 23 years old.

War had broken out in Florida in 1838. This territory, not a State until 1845, was having trouble with the Seminole Indians under the leadership of Chief Osceola. Colt packed 100 rifles and pistols and set out for Fort Jupiter on East Florida's Indian River. He sold them quickly since they were badly needed against the hard-fighting redmen, but he experienced infinite trouble in getting payment.

In 1839, Colt patented a waterproof cartridge made of tin foil with the bullet sealed to it with wax. In this year his rifles began to become popular, especially among the militia of New Jersey and Michigan. New Jersey had asked Washington for permission to use Colt's weapons as standard equipment, but it was refused. Sam Colt was discouraged, but Texas came to his rescue.

Texas had won her independence from Mexico in 1836 soon after the battle of the Alamo. The Texas Rangers, organized in 1835, were using some of Colt's guns, but they weren't working too well, especially against the Comanche Indians who became Texas' big problem after the Mexicans.

These redmen were cruel and accomplished warriors. Mounted on a fast horse, each could shoot 100 arrows so fast that one would be in the air constantly, and each could pierce a man easily. In addition to his arrows, each Comanche carried a shield and a 14-foot spear. They would dash

at the Rangers, fire 20 arrows, then retreat, all in the space of a minute.

The Rangers would dismount for defense and fight back from afoot with one or two single-shot pistols and a single-shot rifle, each of which had to be slowly reloaded by hand. The first pistols Colt provided for them—although they contained as many as five shots—didn't give the Rangers all the help they needed. The pistols had to be taken apart in three pieces (barrel, cylinder with five chambers, and frame), the right amount of powder had to be poured into each chamber, followed by the wad that held the powder in place, followed by the ball on top of the wad, whereupon the pistol was reassembled. All this took time, and certainly could not be carried out on a prancing or galloping horse, which meant that in spite of greater fire power the men were still at a great disadvantage: they still had to dismount in order to fight.

It was Colt's new five-shot one-piece pistol, patented in 1839, that turned the tide for Texas. Thanks to its built-in rammer, this weapon no longer needed to be taken apart, and while the reloading operation remained basically the same it could now be carried out on horseback, thus bringing the Rangers' maneuverability up to par with the Indians'.

A number of years later the Rangers were under the command of Capt. John Coffee Hays of Tennessee. He and 14 of his men were returning to San Antonio after a scouting trip when they were attacked by 80 Comanches who raced at them in the usual fashion, expecting the men to fire their weapons and then, before they could reload, the Indians would have 15 scalps on their belts. But they didn't know the Rangers were armed with the new Colts.

A short while later they fled, leaving 40 redmen on the field. Two white men were injured. Now the Comanches soon sued for peace. One chief said that it was impossible to fight a white man who had a shot for every finger of his hand.

That was just the beginning. Orders came from the Texian Fleet (not called Texan until it was annexed as a state) for 180 carbines at \$55 each

and 180 belt pistols at \$35 each. The Texas Rangers wanted 120 carbines and 160 pistols. In 1840 Florida ordered rifles, pistols and 100,000 waterproof cartridges for use in its swamps. A resolution was introduced in the U. S. Senate to provide the armed forces with Colts and Sam was happy when it looked as though he might at last be on the verge of success—but this happiness was short-lived.

The turbulent politics of 1841 saw three presidents—Van Buren, Harrison and Tyler—and Colt's resolution was lost in the shuffle. The government finally bought 100 carbines. In this year its Harper's Ferry Arsenal finally turned out a military percussion rifle, but full conversion didn't come until seven years later.

FOR A few years Sam Colt was in real trouble. His company went bankrupt; he was arrested for a \$400 debt; his brother was convicted of murder and killed himself in his cell, leaving his destitute family on Sam's hands. Then, in 1846, Texas saved Colt, as Colt had previously saved Texas in her war with the Indians.

Texas acquired statehood in February, 1846, and in April, United States soldiers fought against Mexicans; the Mexican War had begun. Captain Sam Walker came to New York to get Colt firearms—lots of them. But Colt had no money, not even machinery. It had all been sold when his Patent Arms Company went bankrupt, but Sam refused to be licked. He made a contract with Eli Whitney for the manufacture of 1,000 six-shot pistols in his plant. Colt didn't even have one of his own pistols as a sample to begin production. Finally he obtained one from a friend. Holsters were made from a wooden model Capt. Walker submitted to the manufacturer.

When the contract was completed in 1847, Colt took the machinery and tools, as per his agreement with Whitney, and moved to New Haven. But the Ordnance Department, hindered by red tape, was very slow to inspect and approve the first 1,000 pistols in spite of pressure by Walker and Colt.

Finally the weapons arrived in

Vera Cruz five days after Walker had been killed, a "smoking Colt in his hand," at Huamantla, Mexico, when two companies of Rangers held off 2,500 Mexicans. Walker was the first to refer to the pistol as the Peacemaker, and wrote a glowing testimonial for it before he died.

The Colt had arrived. Government orders increased, and orders for samples came in from England, Turkey, Germany, France and Russia, all of them curious to see the weapon made famous by the Mexican War. After the war the Mexicans demanded them in great quantities; they had had a first-hand demonstration of the terrific gun and needed no selling. Business increased by leaps and bounds. The pistols were improved by fluted cylinders and pins between the percussion nipples. The Colt factory moved to bigger quarters.

This was a period of expansion to the West. The frontier was pushed toward the Pacific by men armed with plows and Colts, axes and Colts, rifles and Colts, and bibles and Colts (such as Brigham Young of Utah, to whom Sam gave an engraved pair of his guns). The pistol embodied both the law of the marshal and the lawlessness of the rustler and bandit.

In 1851 Sam went to London with dreams of creating a great gun empire there, too. At the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park he had a display which eclipsed anything yet seen in the trade. He matched his pistol in a contest against the British Adam's revolver, and won hands-down. About 400 were purchased by the British Colonial Office for use against the Kaffir tribes in the Cape of Good Hope. In 1853 he opened his huge branch factory (later closed because the British would no longer tolerate this competition) at Pimlico on the Thames, and the English marveled at the speed with which he could produce production-line revolvers which could compete with their custom-made models.

Back in the United States the Colt works were going full blast. Commodore Perry wanted 100 for the Navy, which was the first sign of interest from that branch of the service. But business was so good that competitors were trying to get into

the act and soon became guilty of direct infringement of his patents. Colt sued the one who appeared to be the most dangerous threat to his empire, the Massachusetts Arms Co., and won. Then a new episode occurred which bore testimony to the Colt.

In 1853 Colonel John C. Fremont, governor of California, made an exploratory trip across the Rocky Mountains together with 19 men to determine railroad sites. One day at camp they were attacked by 60 Ute Indians who told them they wanted supplies and gunpowder. If they couldn't have these, they would kill the white men. Fremont gave instructions to one of his men who went outside, put a piece of paper against a tree, and shot it with his Navy Colt. The Indians laughed; they could do the same with their own rifles.

But the gunman fired a second and third time. Then the chief shot the Colt, as did two of his braves. They were amazed and decided they would gladly pay for their supplies with horses. They couldn't fight men who had guns which never needed reloading.

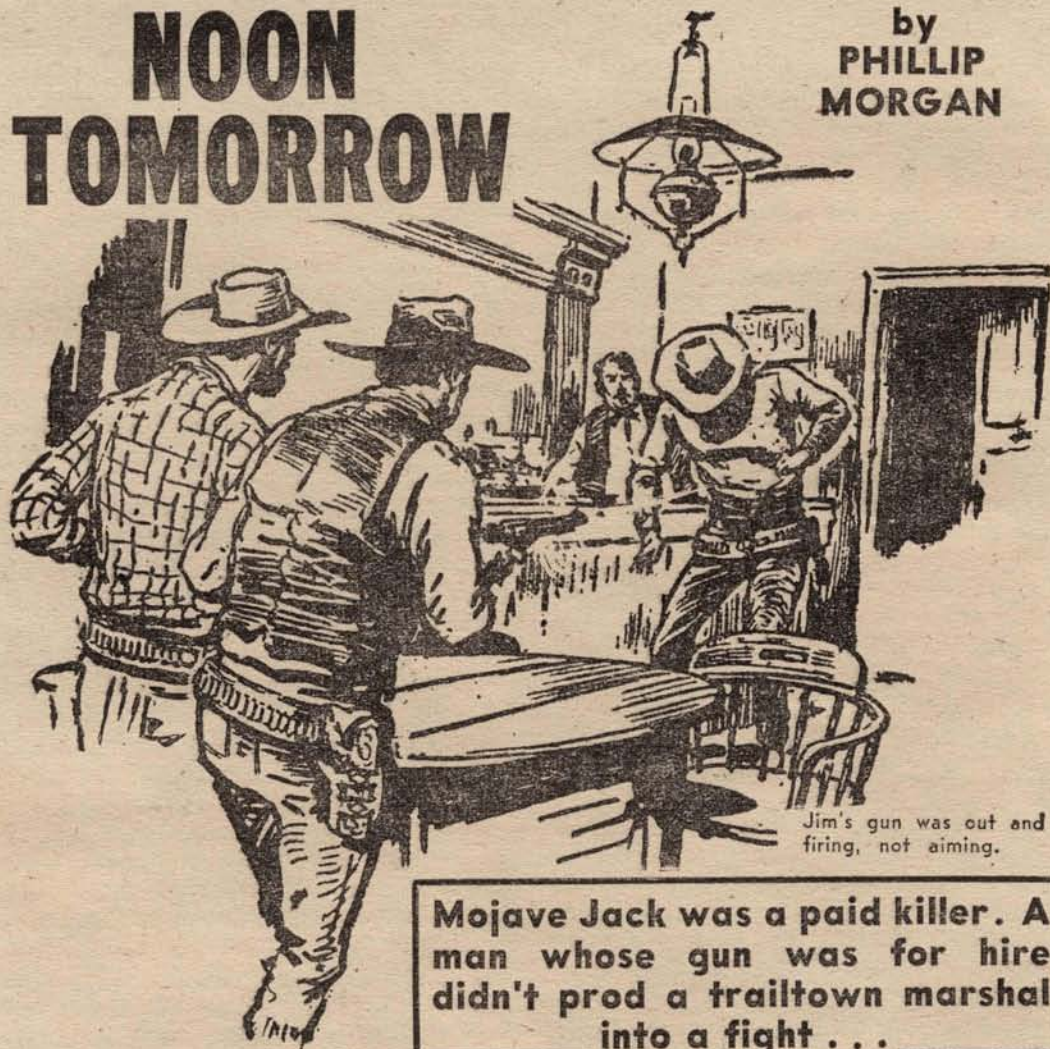
In 1855 Colt completed a vast new armory on the banks of the Connecticut River in Hartford. Its Persian dome can still be seen from afar by tourists traveling the main route through Hartford between New York and Boston. In that year he incorporated his business into the Colt's Patent Fire-Arms Manufacturing Company. Now there was no more to be done, and although only 41, Colt was old before his time.

He had succeeded in making his dream come true, but he was a sick man. He had contracted inflammatory rheumatism, was getting worse. The Civil War was imminent. The State of Virginia asked Colt to investigate the possibility of building an armory at Richmond, and he sent one of his men to investigate but his heart wasn't in it. Georgia, Alabama, Carolina—all pleaded with him for arms. In 1861 the Confederate States of America were formed and Colt offered his services to Lincoln, advising him to arm 1,000,000 men immediately.

(please turn to page 75)

NOON TOMORROW

by
PHILLIP
MORGAN



Jim's gun was out and firing, not aiming.

Mojave Jack was a paid killer. A man whose gun was for hire didn't prod a trailtown marshal into a fight . . .

THE GUNMAN KNOWN throughout the Territory as Mojave Jack rode into Bent Fork just before noon on a hot summer day. He stabled his horse at the Dutchman's and went down the street to the Palace Saloon. People were alerted when he rode in and by the time he took the stroll from the livery barn to the saloon there were two hundred pairs of eyes on him.

He wasn't anything special to look at, being about average height and build, but he moved with a feline softness and quickness. His face was all hard angles and planes, giving an overall impression of flatness, and his eyes were blue. He squinted so that it was hard to see his eyes and his head kept up a ceaseless turning as he looked this way and that.

There was a downward cast to his thin mouth and Monty Ferris re-

marked later that he looked like a man who hadn't smiled in twenty years. The marks of his trade were in the single gun he wore, low, tied down, its black butt shiny with wear, and in the thin leather gloves that covered his hands even on this hot day. That and the way he acted, so scornful and cold and aloof.

Mojave Jack was no more than through the doors of the Palace when they started coming. Marshal Jim Forbes had known they would come and he was patiently waiting, sitting solidly there in his big chair behind the desk in his office. He was a young, square-built man, with a face burned brown by years of riding in sun and wind, a man who had come up the trail from Texas four times and who knew the smell of trouble well. He waited while the influential, nervous citizens of Bent Fork

crowded into his small office. He nodded at each man as he came in. They didn't waste time once they were inside. There were twelve of them there.

"Jim, Mojave Jack just rode into town," Mayor Fred Keaton announced pompously, as if the whole didn't know already.

"I saw him," Jim answered.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Bill Osborn asked hotly.

"Nothing," Jim said.

"What do you mean, nothing?" Ed Holmes asked in a voice that was almost a shout. "You can't let him stay. Think of the women and kids. If he stays, someone'll get hurt. You're paid to keep this town clean and we want you to do your job."

"I told you when I took the job that I'd do it my way," Jim said. He was smiling at them and there was a cool contempt in that smile. "Mojave Jack isn't wanted anywhere in this Territory. I have no reason to run him out."

"He's killed ten men," Fred Keaton said. "You know he's been hired to do those killin's. It's common knowledge. Just because he's forced his victims to draw first, he's gotten away with it. But he's here to kill someone and you have to stop him."

"I'll talk to him," Jim said and got to his feet. He stood for a moment, silently regarding the anxious faces of the men. "I can't run him out unless he does something wrong. I can warn him against breaking the law and I can maybe tell him to be gone before tomorrow noon, but that's all. If any of you have any reason to think he's after you, I suggest you get out of town fast. I'll try to protect you, but I can't guarantee it." Jim strode through them and out of the office, leaving an uneasy silence behind him.

AS HE WALKED slowly down to the Palace, Jim was thinking. They were right, of course. Mojave Jack was a killer and he was here on a mission, but he was within his rights to be here. Jim had seen the gunman kill a man two years before in Cheyenne and he didn't like the idea of going against him.

Still, this was his town and he had to enforce the law and protect the

people. If that meant going against Mojave Jack, he would have to do it.

Then he was busy trying to think who it could be that the killer was after. It was impossible to tell, since anyone could have hired him to shoot any man in town. Jim shook his head and entered the saloon.

Monty Ferris, the owner, was behind the bar and he raised his eyebrows in mute warning when Jim walked in. Jim merely nodded to him and swept his eyes around the room until he found the still figure of Mojave Jack sitting at one of the side tables, his chair backed against the wall. The gunman was watching Jim with a strict attention, his hands motionless on the table. Jim crossed the room and stood beside the table.

"Welcome to Bent Fork, Jack," he said. "I'm Jim Forbes, marshal here."

"Glad to meet you, Marshal," Mojave Jack said.

"You've got people here all in a sweat," Jim said. "They're takin' it out on me. How long were you plannin' to stay?" Jim pushed his words at the gunman slow and easy, not wanting to anger him. Jim knew that Mojave Jack could probably beat him in a fight and therefore, he wanted no fight.

"I can't see that it's any of your business," the gunman replied coolly. There was insolence in his tone and that puzzled Jim. The gunman acted like a man looking for trouble. But from what Jim knew of Jack's type, they only fought when they were paid to kill.

"Just the same, I think you'd better tell me. You're welcome here overnight. After that, you're not welcome. I thought we'd better have an understanding about that."

Mojave Jack smiled tightly. "You're a brave man, Marshal. I admire a brave man, as long as he isn't a fool. It would be foolish to try to send me out of town before I'm ready to go." The gunman's eyes were wide-sprung and Jim smelled trouble on him. The man was cocked, ready to fight, and Jim didn't understand it.

"I'm just hopin' you'll go without that. Noon tomorrow should be time enough. Don't stay beyond that."

He turned on his heel and walked from the saloon, catching the frightened look on Monty Ferris' face.

Going back to the office, Jim pondered his conversation with the gunman. He was puzzled by Mojave Jack's edginess. It was almost as though the man had wanted a fight, but that couldn't be. If he was here to kill a man, he would want to keep out of trouble until the job was done.

Perhaps he thought that everyone was afraid of him and consequently was insolent with everyone. But if that were true, he was doing some wrong thinking. Jim wasn't afraid of Mojave Jack. He had a respect for Jack's ability with a gun, but better gunmen had gone down. If it came to a fight, it wouldn't be the first time Jim had looked through gun-smoke.

He intended to keep a sharp watch on Jack while he was in town and he intended to enforce his order to leave. He had governed Bent Fork for better than a year and no man was going to change that just by riding in with a big reputation and scaring the people.

JIM KEPT A sharp watch on the street all afternoon and it amused him to see Fred Keaton slip out the back door of the bank, saddle a horse and line out of town. Something was on Keaton's conscience and he was taking no chances. At three Ed Holmes also rode out. By five o'clock six respected businessmen had departed hurriedly. The town was quiet, as though peopled by dead men. No-one moved abroad and tension hung over the street like summer heat, close and binding. At six o'clock Mojave Jack came from the Palace and strode unhurriedly to Nell Peterson's Cafe. Jeff left the office and went down there at once.

Jim sat four stools down from Mojave Jack and ordered his supper. The gunman had given him one cool appraising glance when he came in and that was all. After that the two men ignored each other and ate in a strict silence. Nell Peterson was nervous and made an unaccustomed racket as she served the three other customers. She dropped a cup and the sound was like a shot. Men along the counter jumped at the noise and then grinned foolishly. Everyone ate in frantic haste and departed. Mojave Jack took

his time, drinking a second cup of coffee when he had finished his meal. He and Jim were the only two diners left in the cafe. Nell Peterson came to take Jack's dollar and the gunman smiled at her.

"You ain't too particular who you serve, are you, ma'am?" he asked and turned to look full on at Jim. Nell's blue eyes darkened with fear and her hand shook as she picked up the dollar. She couldn't answer.

"Are you on the prod, Jack?" Jim asked softly. "If you are, just make it plain."

"Why, no, Marshal, not at all. What ever gave you that idea?" Jack got up in one quick movement and went to the door. He stopped there and turned about and asked, "That was noon tomorrow, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"So-long, Marshal," Jack said and left the cafe. Jim sat still, more puzzled than before, trying to make sense out of the gunman's words. Nell came down the counter and put her hand on his.

"Oh, Jim, don't cross him. He'd kill a man just for the fun of it. You can see it in his eyes."

She was a tall girl, strong and well-built, a girl who had always had to work hard for what she got. She and Jim had gone together off and on for all the time he had been here. He could never quite face the thought of settling down and being married, so he had never asked her. Her pride was too strong to let her push him. But she loved him and she couldn't conceal it at this moment. Looking at her, Jim thought she was lovely. He squeezed her hand and smiled.

"Don't worry, honey, he's just edgy. His kind don't shoot men for fun. He's been hired to kill someone here and as soon as he's done his job, he'll ride out. I stepped on his toes when I told him to be out of town by tomorrow noon and he wants to show me he isn't scared any. But he'll get his job done before noon and be out of here."

"But won't you have to arrest him for murder?"

"He's too smart for that. He'll make the other man draw first and claim self-defense. I won't have anything to hold him for."

"But he was mad at you, Jim. The

way he looked at you, I thought he was going to draw on you right in here."

"It almost seemed that way," Jim agreed, "but it couldn't be. He'd have no reason for hunting me. No-one would pay good money to have me killed. No, he's just a killer and they all go off the deep end in time. His nerves are probably about shot." Jim stood up and smiled again. "Don't worry about him."

"I hope you're right," she said doubtfully. He started for the door and she said, "Jim," and came around the counter.

HE STOPPED and she walked up to him and kissed him on the lips and stepped back, her face very grave. It surprised him so that he stood motionless for a moment and then he stepped forward, took her in his arms and kissed her fully. When he released her and stepped back, he was shaken by the intensity of the kiss and by the warm crush of her soft body against him.

"I guess," he said, "it is time to either fish or cut bait, is that it, Nell?"

"That's for you to know, Jim."

"Why, I suppose that's right. I'll be around to see you sometime after noon tomorrow." He stepped forward and kissed her quickly and wheeled to walk from the cafe. The blonde girl stood with her hands pressed over her heart and her face heavy with worry for him.

A boy on the street told Jim that Mojave Jack was again in the Palace and he wondered about that. The gunman was apparently in no hurry to seek out his victim. With only a few hours remaining to him, it seemed strange that Jack would not get to work. Jim couldn't believe that the gunman would wait past noon. That would mean another fight and with a man who knew how to use a gun. Jack's kind didn't take unnecessary chances.

Maybe Jack thought his victim would come to the saloon tonight, a thought that ordinarily wouldn't be too far off, since the Palace was the town's best saloon. But everyone knew the gunman was in town and if a man had any reason to think that he was marked for death, he would not go

near the place. Several men had ridden out already. It had Jim baffled.

He made his usual night rounds, hitting all the saloons, including the Palace, and everything was running smoothly. In most of the places a sizeable crowd was on hand and they were all eager to talk to Jim about Mojave Jack. Jim didn't stop to talk. He knew no more about it than they did. The word was out that he had given the killer until tomorrow noon to leave and they were speculating about that, but he let them speculate.

When he came to the Palace, he found it deserted except for Mojave Jack, old Doc Barnes and Monty Ferris. The gunman only glanced at Jim incuriously and went back to his game of cards. Ferris shrugged expressively and Jim shook his head.

He went out and down the street and met Nell as she closed the cafe at ten. He walked her home and neither of them mentioned Mojave Jack. He knew she was worried, but she knew men and she sensed that he didn't want to talk about it. She would do her worrying in private. His respect for her increased with the knowledge that she refused to make his job tougher by saddling him with her worries.

After he left Nell, Jim continued his patrol of the streets until midnight, but the town was quiet. It was the time of year when there was plenty of work on the ranches and the only big night was Saturday. Mojave Jack sat quietly in the Palace, showing no interest in the town or its people, a deadly enigma. Shaking his head in wonder, Jim went to his room at the hotel, undressed and turned in. He laid awake a long time thinking, but got nowhere and finally dropped into an uneasy sleep.

IN THE MORNING, Jim was down early and had breakfast at Nell's. There were dark circles under her eyes, telling of a sleepless night, but she had a smile for him and she didn't mention Mojave Jack. After breakfast, he went to the Palace and found Monty Ferris in his office in the back of the saloon. There was no-one else in the place, except Ernie Shields, the swamper, who was lazily sweeping up. Jim sat down and pushed his hat back and smiled at Monty.

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing happened," the saloon-keeper said tersely. "Except he ruined my business. He just sat there dealin' cards and watchin' the door. He drank one beer between eight and one and got up and left. I can't figure it out. Somethin's up, but I can't get the drift of it."

"I can't either. I was certain he came here to kill someone and he acts like he did, but nothin's happened and he doesn't go lookin' for anyone." Jim got up and settled his hat on his head. "If he starts anything in here this morning, let me know and I'll come runnin'. He didn't ride clear up here from Cheyenne for the exercise."

"If he's still here at noon, what're you going to do?" Monty asked flatly.

"Tell him to leave town."

"And if he don't go?"

"I'll have to put him out. He's done nothing I can arrest him for, but he's disturbin' the peace just the same. I gave him time enough; at noon, he goes."

"I don't envy you the job. He's a mean one. You look into his eyes and there's nothing there. They're as cold as a dead mackerel."

"So-long, Monty," Jim said and walked through the saloon and out onto the board walk.

He was just up the street from the hotel now and Mojave Jack came out onto the porch. He looked up and saw Jim and a cold smile touched the corners of his mouth. It was less a smile than a smirk and Jim felt a cold tingle along his spine, almost like a warning. There was something evil about Mojave Jack, something missing that was found in decent men and it shook everyone when they saw it.

Jim returned the stare and Mojave Jack nodded and turned off the porch. He went up the street and turned in at the cafe. Jim angled across the street to his office. He dropped into a chair and prepared to wait. Until Mojave Jack showed his hand, there was little he could do. He took out his .45, checked the brass butts of the loads, slid the gun back into holster.

Then he was pushed by a sudden burst of energy and got to his feet

and punched the shells out of his gun. For the next fifteen minutes, he practiced drawing and firing. He drew and snapped the hammer at pictures and reward dodgers on the wall. Satisfied at last, he replaced the shells in the gun and settled again in the chair.

The morning dragged slowly by. By ten o'clock Jim felt as if he were sitting on a keg of dynamite. The whole town was waiting with a dread that was faintly mixed with anticipation. Life in Bent Fork was usually pretty dull and Mojave Jack had wiped out that dullness. The people feared him, yet his presence fascinated them and they had passed the stories about him from mouth to mouth until now he was reputed to have killed a hundred men and was supposed to be faster than Wild Bill. In his office, Jim watched the hands of the clock crawl towards noon and began to think for the first time that Mojave Jack was not going to leave. It didn't make sense, but that's how it looked.

AT TEN-THIRTY, Jim heard a horse come down Main at the gallop and went to the window to see who it was. Johnny Benton, who rode for Pete Hanson's Lazy 3, rode down the street and pulled into the hitchrack at the Palace. Johnny was twenty, slim and reckless and a little wild, but a good kid. He was wearing a gun, but Mojave Jack wouldn't be after him. Jim returned to his chair and settled down. He had barely gotten settled when boots thudded along the walk and Ernie Shields burst into the office. The old swamper was white and shaking with excitement. "Monty says to come quick, Jim. That killer's got Johnny Benton cornered and's givin' him a rough time of it. It looks like Johnny was the one he was after."

Jim was out of his chair and running before the words were out of Ernie's mouth. He aimed for the door of the Palace and ran hard, not stopping to think about this. In the back of his mind it seemed strange that a high-priced killer like Mojave Jack should ride five hundred miles to take on Johnny Benton. Johnny was no gunman. Anyone who half-way knew how to use a gun could

have done a job on Johnny. But in his haste, Jim didn't take time to think it out.

Jim piled through the door of the Palace and found Johnny Benton still-posted in the center of the floor. Mojave Jack leaned back negligently, his elbows resting on the bar. His right hand was dropped down near the butt of his gun and that wicked smile curled the corners of his lips. Johnny was white-faced with shock and fear, but he held his ground.

"What you pickin' on me for?" Johnny asked as Jim came in.

"I ain't pickin' on you, boy. I just said you looked like a yellow sheep-herder. It ain't my fault the way you look."

Jim moved up on Johnny's right side and Mojave Jack straightened. A queer light came into his eyes, a glitter, and suddenly it hit Jim with all the force of a sledge-hammer blow to the belly. It wasn't Johnny Benton that the killer wanted. That was a ruse. His real victim was Jim Forbes. For a moment the knowledge paralyzed Jim and then his mind began to function coldly and surely. If he was to survive, he had to think clearly, surely.

"Get out of here, Johnny," Jim said. "There'll be no fightin' in my town." Johnny wanted to go, but he didn't want to appear a coward, so he hung back for a moment. "Get movin', Johnny," Jim said again.

This time the young puncher left. Monty Ferris stirred behind the bar, as though released from the weight of some mighty load. He sighed.

Jim laughed then and he saw surprise momentarily break the surface of Mojave Jack's eyes. "You can quit actin', Jack. It took me long enough, but I finally know who you came to kill. Why didn't you just say so yesterday afternoon instead of sparrin' around all this time? You came to kill me."

Jim heard Monty Ferris gasp and then Mojave Jack's harsh voice rasped through the stillness. "That's right, Marshal, I came to get you and no-one hired me to do it. I wanted an excuse to get you to draw on me and that young puncher was it. But he wouldn't quite take the bait. You got here too fast."

Jim was placed twenty paces from

Mojave Jack and he wasn't going to let the man get any closer. At twenty paces a man could easily miss, especially if he hurried the shot. Jim didn't fool himself that he could outdraw the killer, so he had to make the man miss that first shot.

"What did I ever do to you?" Jim asked.

"You killed my brother in the street here last fall. He didn't have a chance."

Jim remembered the man and thinking back he could see now that there was a strong family resemblance between the two.

"I remember," he said. "He was in here drinking and causing trouble. I warned him to cut it out and left. He followed me out and called to me as I walked across the street. He drew and fired when I turned on him. His first shot missed and mine didn't."

"You killed him and I'm here to square accounts. That's all that matters."

"That would be all that mattered with you," Jim said, a sneer in his voice. "Sure, I shot him down and I'd do it again. He was a worthless, gutless punk, Jack, just like you."

He saw the words hit the gunman like physical blows, saw the hate that flared in his eyes. Mojave Jack's mouth twitched spasmodically and he looked like a crazy man. Jim felt cold and alone, his senses acutely tuned to every move the deadly one in front of him made.

Mojave Jack said, "I'm going to shoot you in the belly and watch you claw the floor while you die."

He stopped talking and Jim laughed at him. Jim saw the gunman's eyes flicker wildly once, then narrow, saw his shoulder dip, and Jim drew. Mojave Jack's draw was a flash that beat Jim a full tenth of a second. The killer's gun roared and bucked back in his hand, but the slug missed Jim's hip a split hair. Jim's gun was out and he fired, not aiming. He lowered the gun to his side, knowing he would have no time for a second shot.

Mojave Jack was jerked back against the bar as though some mighty fist had smashed him in the chest. His gun fell from his hand and bounced once on the floor. He

(please turn to page 44)

Reno never
got to use
that knife!



“THEY’VE caught the fellow who stole John Duncan’s horse!”

The cry carried from claim to claim and sweating miners tossed aside

remarkable auburn-haired beauty who, in the past few months, had enlivened both Caleb’s life and the season of serious drama at San Francisco’s Washington Hall. Her letter from a

FINAL CURTAIN

by L. V.
PIDGEON

shovel and pan, stopped a moment to consider the news, and drifted toward the main camp.

Caleb Halloway stirred. His six-foot frame was stretched comfortably in the shade of his tent, a favorite position in the late afternoons while other men labored.

“John Duncan’s a fool and his horse is an ass,” Caleb said indignantly and the saying of it made him feel better; helped greatly to break the spell cast over him by the contents of a letter received that morning from one Ellen O’Faye. Ellen was a young lady of

remote camp called Dogleg, in answer to a brief note of his, was in the nature of a surprise and the veiled sum-

He’d put endless dusty miles and numberless brawling gold camps between them, but it was a question whether Caleb Halloway could ever forget Miss Ellen O’Faye...

mons it contained was pure mystery.

"...And dear Caleb," she wrote, "if they do Uncle Windmill out of his little gold strike, you must come to my hanging, for I'll happily murder a vile person named Reno Cucci..."

Caleb sighed. He got to his feet, stretched and brushed aimlessly at his clothing. He placed the letter of Ellen O'Faye carefully in his pocket and with an ample kerchief bent to flick at the dust layering his tightly-tailored boot.

Lean and sun-whipped from his recent journey south, Caleb still held the touch of pallor across his features which hinted at time spent on the stage or in the pulpit. He had, in fact, graced the boards of Washington Hall and Sacramento's Eagle Theater in drama both legitimate and lusty. His present exile was purely the result of an unprecedented emotional collision with Miss Ellen O'Faye.

He had fallen in love, which was a matter of outrageous interest superimposed upon no principal. If he was in love, he also was chronically penniless and with scant prospects for the future. He'd fled like a coward from Miss O'Faye; placed many miles and brawling gold camps between them. Maybe she would go away, back East, and become famous and leave the West and Caleb Halloway alone.

Inside his patchwork shanty of canvas and board, Caleb donned a ruffled shirt and a cravat, a waistcoat of calfskin and a frock coat cut high in the back and with fine buttons and wide, silk lapels. The coat alone had cost him \$50 during a brief, golden period along San Francisco's Ambrosial Path. On his head he cocked a silk hat with a broad, graceful roll, which added a fine dignity to his appearance. Caleb was a man of no colossal humility.

"And one man in his time," he said wryly, "plays many roles." Then he stepped out into the hullabaloo of the Mariposa diggings.

FORTY MEN milled like nervous cattle in the opening before the circular tent saloon. Tied soundly to the trunk of a tree was a young miner known to Caleb as Joe Salem.

Upon Caleb's approach, the talk and milling came to a stop. Had Judge

Addison Halloway, on his bench back in New York, viewed the scene, he might well have experienced a momentary lessening of hostility toward this youngest son; the one who had seen fit to cast away a respectable career in the law for the sins and specious glories of the dramatic hall.

On three previous occasions in as many weeks, Caleb Halloway had held court in Mariposa. Tense and belligerent crowds had sensed the edge of calm reason in his rulings and noted favorably his judicial bearing. He nodded to many around and stood waiting, silent. The assemblage must act of its own accord, in the terms and traditions of the ancient folk-moot which ruled in the gold camp.

John Duncan finally spoke up in the shrill voice which betrayed his emotion. "I nominate Caleb," he said, "to be judge of the horse thief we got tied to the tree there." His announcement was promptly followed by sufficient eyes to make the election legal.

Caleb cleared his throat portentously. "The court," he said, "is in order."

He walked to the tree and gazed solemnly at Joe Salem. Joe was a young, fiery-eyed man of bullish strength and a reputation for sudden violence. He spat contemptuously at the ruffled shirt front, but Caleb craftily side-stepped without losing his composure. Turning away, he said, "All right, John Duncan. What's the story?"

"I caught him in the very act, Caleb," John Duncan said heatedly. "Got a touch of the sun, so I rode in early from the claim. Left the horse saddled and tied while I went into the tent to rest. Came out later to find Joe riding off on him."

There was an angry murmur from the others. "Go on, John," Caleb said, "when it gets quiet."

"I hollered and Joe started kicking the horse to get him going," said John. "Then the Wherry brothers ran up and caught him and brought him back and we tied him up after some fancy scufflin'."

Caleb's gaze found the Wherry brothers in the crowd. They both nodded vigorously in agreement and the older of them said, "It's what happened, Caleb."

"I wouldn't take \$300 for that horse," John Duncan declared. "A good mount's scarce in these parts and there's none I've seen as good as this one."

Caleb looked at Joe Salem. "If you've got any defense, Joe, we better hear it."

"I've been associating with polecats so long I got lonesome for a horse," Joe fired back.

"Maybe you were drunk," said Caleb.

"I was sober," Joe said.

"Maybe you got claim-happy, Joe," Caleb persisted. "Sort of lost your head for a minute."

"Most sensible thing I've done since I got to this hell-hole gold country," Joe Salem retorted, "I'd have rid that horse straight to Santa Fe and points east."

"He's a confessed horse thief," John Duncan said high and angry.

"Seems like time for a hangin'," the elder Wherry brother said.

Caleb said, "There being no defense, Joe Salem is found guilty of attempting to steal the horse of John Duncan. Now there's the question of the penalty."

"He's guilty, he hangs," said John.

Caleb turned on him and stared coldly. "As elected presiding officer of this meeting, I intend to do the fair thing according to common sense," he said.

"You afraid to hang a horse thief," John Duncan said.

"Joe did a fool thing," Caleb said, "which I don't think he'll repeat. And you've still got your horse, John."

"Ain't you going to hang him?"

Caleb felt a wave of distaste rise in him for John Duncan; a man wronged but claiming compensation to the hilt—compensation of another man's life. He pronounced judgment. "Joe Salem gets 40 lashes on his back for temporarily losing his head and trying to ride off on another man's horse."

"I'll be shot!" John Duncan yelled. "Of all the cowardly..."

"While the Wherry brothers turn Joe around at his tree there and deliver the sentence," Caleb cut in, "I'm straight-away going to lick John Duncan for calling me a coward. The court's adjourned."

THE MORNING was grey and cold as Caleb walked north. If there was a stiffer man in the Mother Lode, he was not sober to suffer as Caleb did. His legs and arms ached sorely and his head seemed split and held together only by the bandage bound tightly over his brow. One eye was purple, puffed and closed and his lower lip felt like some frog sat there. His nose was broken fearsomely and he groaned as the chill air buffed it.

When the first ray of sun topped a craggy peak, Caleb stopped beside a stream to bathe his face. He sat awhile to rest and cast a suspicious eye on his companion.

Joe Salem knelt down like a very old man to cup his hands and drink at the stream. When he stood up, Caleb could see the pain in the deeply drawn lines around his mouth. Caleb could imagine the striated back shorn of flesh and stiffening in the cold. Joe was like some thick trunk of tree bitten cruelly by the axe.

"You should have stole a horse 'stead of tanglin' with John Duncan," Joe said to Caleb. "They beat my hide off, but I still got my beautiful face."

Caleb grunted. "John's in poor shape this morning, too," he said.

Joe Salem nodded. "You was doing fine till the two of you went 20 feet down that coyote shaft."

Caleb winced at the recollection of that plunge; the rock sides of the shaft burning his hide raw and the slag-heap landing that came near to unhinge-ing him.

"You've busted me up for fair, Joe," Caleb said accusingly. "I was a respected man in the community till you stole a horse and I got mad at John Duncan and refused to hang you."

"You'd have been elected alcalde in time," Joe acknowledged. "Got a fair, sensible streak in you or I'd be danglin' from a tree this minute."

Caleb shook his head, and then hung onto it a moment with both hands to stop the throbbing. "They don't want an alcalde that won't hang a horse thief. That's why I was told to git when they dragged me from that hole."

"Thing is, I ain't a real horse thief,"

said Joe. "You got a mind and could see it. You're a man of justice..."

"You would have done until a real horse thief came along," said Caleb. He got to his feet, rolled a little with his dizziness, and then started north.

From Mt. Bullion, to Bear Valley, to Bagby, to Coulterville and on north he marched in the coming days. And it was a painful journey to a man of pride. Caleb felt the deep pity for himself—an actor with both his face and spirit mauled; an odd figure in rough pants and jacket cast off by some camp along the way; a filthy flop-brimmed hat partially obscuring a battered face thick-matted with a tawny beard.

There was the night the "hewgag" brayed in a lonely Sierra camp where Caleb and Joe found refuge. The Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus assaulted the black silences with hilarious revelry and a salubrious parade beneath a mammoth hoopskirt emblazoned "This Is the Banner We Fight Under!"

Argonauts fought the ravages of toil and boredom heroically that night and even Joe Salem marched and was duly initiated into bacchic and blissful unconsciousness. But Caleb had one single drink and brooded in the shadows.

Next morning he pushed on again and behind him labored Joe Salem. Joe had been beaten, too, and driven out, but not broken. "You're a man of justice, Caleb," he'd said. But Caleb knew that this was not so. He knew that he was an acting man—an actor who had filled a disastrous role one late afternoon and fooled an oaf named Joe Salem.

THE DRAMATIC HALL at the camp of Dogleg was low-ceilinged, with a slab-timbered roof which tilted south to shed the rains and a rough board floor which tilted north to shed tobacco juice and tears which flowed copiously on nights of rich drama. The slightly elevated stage rested precariously on wooden horses and a painted female figure of some bosomy munificence graced the calico curtains which drew the thin line between audience and player.

Dogleg was a larger camp than

Mariposa and, to Joe Salem's practiced eye, even less well organized. It had the feel of an ornery, brawling camp and Joe was surprised that Caleb would linger there. He was purely astonished when, on the third day, Caleb filed a small pan-and-shovel claim on a stream a mile out of camp and on that Saturday night followed other citizens of Dogleg to the Dramatic Hall.

Booming laughter, oaths and gunfire collided mightily with wind bolts from tall mountain peaks as miners crowded toward the hall. A large, soiled banner, pummeled by the gusts, proclaimed:

THE O'FAYES—
LOVELY ELLEN AND GRAND
WILLIAM WITH COMPANY
IN
"LADY OF LYONS" AND
"OTHELLO"

Caleb sat well back in the hall, a curious sickness in him, the like of which always assailed him at curtain time. Ellen had drawn him here, even in his present sorry condition—and Grand William; that was Ellen's Uncle Windmill O'Faye who got his nickname from the flailing violence with which he threw himself into his stage portrayals. Caleb well remembered the night in Sacramento when Uncle Windmill destroyed his voice during the mad scene in *Lear*. Uncle Windmill spoke ever after in a peculiarly resonant whisper.

Ellen's round, full voice jerked Caleb back into the present. He was on his feet and roaring with the rest when she took the stage. Her little speech was mainly cut off and she just stood there smiling and inclining her head and sweet-looking enough to squeeze a man's heart.

She raised her hands finally. "The show's on," she called out, "and we'll do our best for you handsome gentlemen. We've only one request—no shooting till the final curtain!"

The clamor rose again and Caleb blessed the anonymity of his hat and beard and battered face—for Ellen was close in that little hall; too close, and he felt like a sad dog of a man.

THE EVENING sped by while Caleb dreamed and Ellen and Uncle Windmill spun their magic for lonely gold seekers. It was near the end of the program when Caleb made his grievous error. Uncle Windmill, fortifying himself between scenes with hot water and whiskey, had overdone and become befuddled. When he labored to a tortuous halt in mid-speech, Caleb from far back in the hall intoned, "...then must you speak, of one that loved not wisely but too well..."

Uncle Windmill snorted dead center, swung around and stared. Caleb struggled to his feet in confusion and scuffled out into the windy night.

Caleb squatted three hours next morning over the streambed and panned a lucky ounce of gold and was ignorant of just when Joe Salem arrived to sit in the tree shade and smoke and contemplate him.

"You know them O'Fayes, don't you, Caleb," Joe said finally. Caleb nodded, sifting rhythmically at his pan.

"I figured so," said Joe. "Else why do we stop here and file a claim and go down to a showing at the Dramatic Hall..."

"I stop here," said Caleb shortly. "You can go where you please, Joe."

"Why do you keep hid under your hat and bush whiskers, Caleb? You afraid of her?"

Caleb stopped his sifting. He set the pan down on a rock and looked over at his companion. Joe, in some special way, had become a part of Caleb during their long trek north on the Mother Lode. He'd become an honest, dogged, goading thing which at first followed and later drove Caleb—like a conscience. He was prodding now; too hard.

"You think too much, Joe Salem. Either pan gold or get out."

"The girl's in trouble, Caleb. Her and her uncle are in a claim fight with a dude named Reno Cucci. He's about to beat them out."

Caleb picked up his pan again and resumed sifting.

"It's a queer point," Joe went on. "Reno was working quartz ledges on both sides of a little gulch. O'Faye tracked a rich placer run in the

stream between the ledges and claimed it. Cucci raised ned, of course, and some of the boys think he's mean, but in his rights. Most don't give a hoot."

"I don't give a hoot," said Caleb.

"They say Ellen O'Faye brought her uncle into the gold camps because the stage was killin' him off. They say if Reno takes this strike away from him, it'll kill him sure. Don't seem just, somehow."

"Hold court and settle it," Caleb snapped.

Joe got up and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "They're holding court tomorrow night and Reno's already spending the gold he's gonna be awarded."

Caleb sifted on, head bowed, still searching his pan for the tell-tale glitter. He was mightily relieved when Joe Salem walked away.

"IT'S NOT in my heart to dispossess a lady of such charm as Miss O'Faye of any rightful claim she may have on a fortune to match her fame," Reno Cucci was saying smoothly. The late afternoon sun struck a lively gleam in Reno's over-large black eyes and broad, toothy smile. He was a big man sure in the knowledge of his shrewdness and arresting good looks.

"This matter of a placer strike her uncle has made directly in the midst of my quartz ledges can be easily resolved," he said.

The men of Dogleg stirred and nodded to one another and Temescal Murphy, the presiding officer, looked hugely comforted. To be caught in the middle of a dispute between the adriotic and sinister Reno and a purposeful woman like Ellen O'Faye was neither pleasant nor healthful. Temescal was a simple and honest man who was well aware that a wrong move could ruin him.

Uncle Windmill, from across the circle of men, cleared his throat. "What is your purpose, sir—your offer?" he said in his half-whisper.

Reno shrugged, gesturing in comic exaggeration with his large, flat hands. "Ellen must marry me!"

The miners howled with laughter. They pounded knees, slapped hats to the earth and jig-stepped. And Reno grinned immensely.

"It's the only answer," one man roared. "Marry 'em up, Temescal!"

Uncle Windmill crossed the space in three short jumps. His nose collided agonizingly with Reno's suddenly doubled fist. He shuddered, groaned aloud and fell face-forward. Ellen was down beside him swiftly while Temescal took out his gun and fired twice in the air to restore order.

The sight of the girl there ministering to the fallen O'Faye sobered the men of Dogleg more effectively than Temescal's gunfire. Fun and hell are fine, but no lady is treated like that.

From the very midst of the crowd suddenly stepped a newcomer to camp, holding up his hands, demanding attention. Joe Salem, a flushed and angry man, addressed Temescal.

"There's a gent here who can talk on this case," he said loudly. "He's a man born with a nugget of sense—which is worth more than all the gold we'll dig out of this hell-hole. I demand he be heard. I refer to my pardner standing over there."

Faces turned toward Caleb Hallaway and a path opened to where he stood. Nervously, Caleb pulled his hat brim low and straightened his shoulders. He was painfully conscious of Ellen, still kneeling beside Uncle Windmill, but looking intently at him. This was a shameful entrance that was being forced upon him by the treacherous Joe Salem.

"Judge Hallaway!" Joe Salem announced, burning all bridges behind him.

Temescal Murphy sought to assess Caleb. "You know about this dispute—Judge?" he said cautiously.

Caleb nodded. There was the light now of recognition in Ellen's eyes. There was the mouth opening slowly in disbelief. And there was finally an urgent and troubling cue for action. Ellen's cue pierced a wave of such fright and dread as Caleb had never experienced before. He knew the sorry spectacle he made, but there was no place to run or hide.

"Dogleg's a fair and just camp," he managed to say, pulling his eyes from Ellen's. His mind reached back feverishly into his considerations of the sleepless night before. He had gone over Joe Salem's account of this dis-

pute minutely and somewhere he'd caught a spark of light.

"It's been held in other camps—according to common sense—that gold digging is a franchise from the government, free to all," he said.

He paused to look around, let his words sink in, to build some impact on the crowd. "If Reno Cucci staked a claim on quartz ledges, let him work the quartz ledges."

He waited another moment and looked down at Uncle Windmill. "If William O'Faye staked a placer—even in the very midst of the quartz ledges—let him use that placer claim."

There was a murmur and shuffling of feet among the miners. They were ripe now for any fair way out. The girl kneeling down by her uncle there, was a plumb embarrassing sight to men instinctively chivalrous; and then, too, this new fellow was talking sense.

"I say this," said Caleb, warming to his subject, "if in that same gulch of Reno Cucci and William O'Faye I find a breeze that carries gold dust, I should be allowed to stake a claim on that breeze and strain gold from it against all comers."

The final point immensely amused and appealed to the men of Dogleg. They forthwith and loudly voted sanction of Uncle Windmill's placer-claim and hauled him victoriously to the tent saloon for purposes of vigorous revival. Temescal Murphy shouted, "The dispute's settled," and led the way.

But Reno Cucci stayed behind. He intercepted Caleb on the way out of camp. He drew the long knife fast, with deadly purpose, but he never got to use it. Joe Salem's fist, from out of nowhere, nearly pulverized an ear and drove him senseless to the ground.

"The law is good, but you got to back it up, Caleb," said Joe Salem, grinning and rubbing at his big knuckles. Then he noticed the girl and promptly hustled toward the gathering where Uncle Windmill's wits were being joyously resurrected.

Ellen O'Faye said, "Judge Hallaway, as I live and breathe!" And there was a tender mockery in her eyes as she hurried toward him that purely captured Caleb. ●END



by
DICK BAIRD

The victim was directly in his sights.



DEAD MAN'S HAND

SHATTUCK was dead even before he pitched from saddle. He lay sprawled on his back, staring up banjo-eyed at the starry sky that looked like silver studs holding in place a vast blue-black lid.

Whoever had picked off Shattuck was a dead shot with a .30-30, and Sheriff Jep Parnell knew that the seven gunnies siding the killer would be equally handy with sixshooters...

The big claybank nuzzled Shattuck gently and tossed his head when the man failed to move. Whinnying softly, the horse then turned and galloped back the way he'd come—along the winding bed of the Rake. The river was low—there had been little rain in Sassafee Valley—and the claybank's hoofs shot occasional sparks as he pounded back toward Tonka City.

The Mineral Saloon was quiet, almost empty. Sheriff Jep Parnell straightened in his chair and glanced at the clock behind the bar. The hands lacked five minutes till midnight. He threw down his cards and stood up.

"I don't like this business." Parnell was tall, almost gaunt, and his gray eyes narrowed in their wide-set sockets. His blond hair was in sharp contrast to the brown planes of his face. "Shattuck shouldn't have gone by himself."

He stepped through the swinging doors, and the three cattlemen still seated at the table could hear the clump of his heels on the planking of the porch.

Keen Ralston sluiced a stream of tobacco juice into the spittoon. "Jep's worryin' about nothin'. Been itchy as a sand hen ever since Poler dropped Johnny Thomas last week. Hell's fire, Ben Poler ain't gonna start another ruckus now. Jep, bein' elected sheriff kind of set Ben back on his heels. He knows Jep hasn't forgot about that fifty head he's missin'."

A startled look came into Ralston's eyes. He ran his thumb along the gray stubble of his beard and fanned his hand. Aces-and-eights. He looked first at Cliff Bristow, and then at Cliff's brother, Jim. Neither spoke, but Cliff quietly picked up the "dead man's hand" and shuffled it into the deck.

The sound of running feet thudded on the porch. A fair-cheeked youth of seventeen or eighteen burst into the room and fell against the table. "Shattuck's horse just came in by itself," he almost babbled, "and Sheriff Parnell is goin' out to look for him. He says you all should go along."

Jep was already in the saddle when Ralston and the Bristow brothers hurried from the saloon. He was checking his rifle, but no sign of excitement or nervousness showed on his angular face. He pulled the flat-crowned Stetson low over his eyes.

"Let's get going," Parnell said to the three. "Shattuck probably followed the river, and unless I miss my guess, that's where we'll find him." He reined the black away from the rail and flung over his shoulder: "Then we're going out to find Ben Poler."

The three Bar K boys were right behind him. They hit the end of the street at a full gallop and didn't slow until they reached the banks of Rake River. Jep held up his hand.

"Ralston, you and I will follow the bed. Cliff, you and Jim trail along the bench, fifty yards apart. Keep your eyes peeled."

A BRIGHT three-quarter moon and a sky full of stars aided the search. They rode in silence; Jep close to the edge of the river, Keen Ralston near the rise of the bank, and the Bristows spread out on the shelf. The cllop of hoofs and the occasional clang of a shoe on a rock

was all that broke the silence. Twenty minutes went by without a trace of Shattuck.

"Mighty nice night to be lookin' for a dead man, Jep said to himself. Maybe he isn't dead, though. Lots of things could have happened.

But he didn't believe what he was saying, and he snapped shut his mouth in a thin hard line. He bent forward in the saddle, and his gray eyes drilled holes in the river's edge.

"Maybe he went down the other side," Keen's voice reached for him through the stillness.

"I don't think so," Jep answered. "He'd just have to ford the river farther up. No, I reckon he's on this side of the Rake."

"How come he took off for Pomeroy tonight? Even if one of Poler's slicks did jump his claim, they ain't nothin' he can do about it till morning. The courthouse won't open till eight or nine."

Jep rolled a cigarette. The glow of the match cast a yellow flicker across his lean, craggy face. "Probably figured he'd get the jump on Poler by leaving tonight. Ben's probably got a stakeout on his place. Poler wants that water bad."

"Well, Shattuck never made it. Lookathere." Jep pulled over, and Keen's gnarled finger pointed to Shattuck's body lying in the shadow of the bank.

Jep reined up. "Call Cliff and Jim. Poler must be crazy. Shattuck never harmed anybody. He was killed just because he was sittin' across Poler's creek—at least Ben called his creek—and that gun-happy thief is loco enough to pull the same job on anyone who gets in his way."

Ralston whistled twice, and Cliff Bristow's shout answered. Keen's white hair caught the moon's rays as he held his hat and knelt beside Shattuck's body.

"Plumb between the eyes," he said in a low voice. "Never had a chance. Looks like a .30-30 hole. Whoever shot him must have meen waitin' in that outcropping over yonder."

Keen pointed toward the bank with his hat, and Jep's gaze followed. Close to the edge of the shelf, at a bend in the river, was a pile of rocks which commanded an open view for

200 yards upstream. Jep nodded and headed for the rocks. Ralston and the Bristow brothers sat down beside Shattuck and waited for his return. Only the sloshing of the river broke the silence. They were thinking of Len Conway and Mart Haskins and Sheriff Thomas—and now Shattuck.

Ralston threw a stone into the river. "Reckon I was wrong about Poler layin' quiet. Looks like we'll have a little set-to with the boys." The picture of aces-and-eights came to his mind. "And that's okay with me. No tellin' who cashes in on a dead man's hand."

IN A FEW minutes Jep reappeared. He held out his hand. In his palm lay an empty .30-30 rifle shell. The sheriff's eyes swept the three men. The granite hardness of his gaze scraped against the steel edge of his words.

"This is Poler's work, sure as blazes. Whoever killed Shattuck was a dead shot, because Ben knew he couldn't take any chances on his getting away. Who would you say is the best rifleman in Poler's outfit?"

Ralston spat against a white rock, and watched the brown juice slide down the side. "I reckon Deck Koogler's about it. I seen him knock the spots off a trey last spring when he won Curly Bettner's roan."

Parnell turned the shell in his fingers. "I doubt that he would head back to Poler's tonight—too far and too late. Chances are he's holed up someplace, either waiting for the others, or fixin' to head in later."

"Ben's got a line shack about eight-nine miles from here. Sets in valley couple miles west of the Rake." Cliff Bristow's voice held a latent charge at the thought of a showdown. "I'd better lead the way. We'll go down river a piece, then I know where to cut off."

Jep nodded in agreement. He threw a blanket over Shattuck. The tension was mounting, and he knew he might have put all of them into a heap of trouble. Poler and his gunnies wouldn't be likely to wait and talk first. . . . Parnell kept his own counsel. Plenty of time for such considerations if the need arose; no telling which way Ben would jump.

The first gray streaks of morning found Cliff Bristow calling a halt. He turned in his saddle. "Poler's cabin sets just over that ridge. We can ride closer, but there's a clearing all around the cabin."

"We'll go over the hill and get as close as we can." Jep's voice was clipped, and Ralston and the Bristows knew he was in command again. They rode over the rise and into the pines covering the slope. A wisp of smoke rose from the stone chimney. Eight horses, saddled and ready, stood at the side of the shack.

"They're all inside," Jep said as he dismounted, "but we can't just walk in and open up. We've got no real proof that Ben had anything to do with Shattuck's death—even though we do know it ourselves. We've got to get him to show his hand."

Ralston and the Bristows spread out and took cover behind the trees and rocks. They could see both sides of the cabin as well as the front. Jep cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted: "Poler, this is Sheriff Parnell. We've got the drop on you, so don't try to run. I've come to take you in for killing Shattuck."

Silence greeted him. For three minutes no sound came from the cabin, then Poler's voice boomed up the side of the hill. "You got nothin' on me, Sheriff. I don't know anything about Shattuck or what's happened to him. I don't aim to come out and have your boys fill me full of holes. We're staying right here."

"He's stallin' for time—trying to size us up." Ralston's low growl carried to Parnell's ears. "Better answer him, Jep."

Jep knew he had to gamble. He stepped into the open and held his hands away from his gun. "No use wasting time, Ben. We found Shattuck before he died, and he recognized Deck Koogler's horse and that green jacket when he rode off. We all heard him name you and Koogler. Besides, I've got a .30-30 shell from Koogler's rifle."

A rifle cracked and dirt spurted up between Parnell's feet. He fell back and threw two quick shots at the cabin. The Bristow boys and Ralston opened up as Jep reached the trees.

"There's our answer," Jep gritted.

"Poler thinks we've got him dead to rights. We'll play hell taking him alive without a tough fight. There are likely eight men down there anyway, and pretty soon he'll know there are only four of us."

A yell of pain and a rifle shot pierced the air at almost the same instant. "Three," said Ken Ralston. Cliff Bristow lurched from behind a tree, his shoulder spurting blood, and fell in a heap at his brother's feet. Jim tore open his shirt and began to tend him. Jep and Ralston watched from the corners of their eyes.

Jim Bristow looked up. "I think he'll be all right, but he won't be doin' much shooting with that right hand for a while. Damn that lousy Poler and his slicks." He punctuated his words by emptying his sixgun at the cabin.

THE SUN began to climb higher in the sky. Both sides settled down to await the other's move. Only spasmodic bursts of gunfire split the stillness. Jep and the others kept changing positions in an effort to keep Poler from knowing how few were pitted against him.

"We won't get anywhere this way," Jep said as the morning wore on. "Pretty soon they'll come bustin' out of there and either make a run for it or spread out and try to finish us off. Keen, I've got an idea. It's a long shot, but it just might be crazy enough to work."

He rapidly outlined the plan to Ralston and the Bristows. Jim nodded and crept back to his horse.

"Cliff, can you throw lead with your left hand?" Jep asked.

"I can throw it," Cliff replied, "but I ain't sayin' what I can hit."

"You just keep pumping if you have to. Ralston and I are going down now to visit Ben... I'm coming down to talk to you, Ben!" Jep shouted. "Keep your boys off and we'll prevent a lot of bloodshed."

"Come ahead, Sheriff, but keep your hands up."

Keen Ralston began to crawl rapidly in the brush to the cabin's flank. A dusty road trailed from the clearing off into the trees and up into the hills. He worked as close to the road as he could and still remain unseen.

Jep walked slowly toward the cab-

in, stopping ten yards before he reached it. The door was opened warily, and Ben Poler, Deck Koogler and a burly gunnie stepped out in the morning sun.

Poler stood with his legs spread wide apart. "I'm listenin', Sheriff, but it had better be good. I know you ain't got but three men, and there's five more in the cabin right behind us."

Jep spoke slowly, letting the words sink in. He was playing for high stakes, and if he lost this hand it would be his last. "You're wrong, Ben. We've just been waiting you out. Jim Bristow left long ago for Pomeroy. He'll be back any minute with Sheriff Benton and a posse, and a sworn statement that you and Koogler killed Shattuck. I don't figure they'll feel much like playin'. You've got just five minutes to surrender to me, or your boys will end up in the same trouble as you and Koogler. Surrender now and I'll see that you all get a fair trial."

AN UNEASY shuffling and muttering came from the cabin, for Jep's voice had carried as he'd intended, to Poler's men. They clearly hadn't counted on this play.

"You're bluffing, Jep." Poler's lips were a bloodless line. He was trying desperately to save his hide, but he knew the sands were running out. He glanced back at the cabin and swallowed hard, his adam's apple running up and down the stubbled column of his neck. "You know we can blow our way out of here, and you'll go first."

"So you think I'm bluffing. Look there." Jep pointed to the road. Above the line of trees and hills rose a fat cloud of dust moving rapidly, such as would be made by a large party of riders pounding hell-for-leather down the road.

Poler swung his head around and wet his lips. His eyes dilated with fury and he stepped back, hand dropping toward his gun. "Damn you, Parnell," he hissed, "if I'm goin' to hell I'm takin' you with me."

Ben Poler's Colt came up and flame belched from the muzzle, but Jep's .44 crashed an instant before. Poler's shot plowed into the dirt, and

he sank to his knees as Jep's slug dug into his side. A third shot echoed the others, and Deck Koogler's gun fell from his fingers; Keen Ralston's shot carried Koogler's tag. A smear of blood grew larger on the gunman's shirt front, and his coughs brought red foam to his lips. The burly gunnie hadn't moved, then he dropped his sixgun and thrust his hands skyward.

"You've got about one minute," Jep shouted to the men in the cabin. He pointed to Poler who still knelt in the dirt, the blood oozing from between his fingers. "Throw out your guns and come out with your hands up or you'll get it just like Ben and Koogler did."

The rest of Poler's bunch had lost their stomachs for a fight. Revolvers and rifles were thrown through the door and windows, and Poler's five slicks came in a sullen file into the clearing. Their eyes burned with hatred for both Jep and Poler, and one kicked at his late leader. Keen Ralston, grinning in his gray whiskers, took up the slack space behind Ben and his boys.

"Here comes your posse, Ben." Jep waved his gun toward the road as Jim Bristow charged into the little valley on his leathered bay. Behind him dragged the limb of a tree, the branches bobbing crazily, and clouds of dust rising from the few remaining leaves.

A violent curse spurted from Ben Poler's lips and he tried to rise. An angry growl rose from his slicks, but they knew it was too late to make a

move. Jim Bristow was covering them from his horse, and Cliff, his right arm hanging limp, had made his way down from the pines.

A new calmness showed in Jep's face. "You fell for an old army trick, Ben. Jim raised a lot of dust draggin' that tree limb, and you thought it was the posse from Pomeroy. Don't worry though, we'll see that you get a tree limb—all legal and on the table. The people in Tonka City are mighty tired of the way you've been prodding this territory for five years. Tie them up, Jim, and we'll head back for Tonka."

It was almost twelve when Jep Parnell, the Bristow brothers and Keen Ralston stopped before the Tonka City jail and hustled Ben Poler and his boys inside. Deck Koogler hung face downward across the saddle, a trail of blood marking the path that led back to Rake River. A dozen hands helped Cliff into the doctor's office.

"Drinks on me, boys," Jep flung at Ralston and Jim Bristow, and led the way into the Mineral Saloon. "Cliff can collect his later, after the doc patches up that shoulder."

The batwing doors swung shut behind them, and the three sank wearily into their chairs. Keen Ralston idly picked up a deck of cards, grimly remembering the dead man's hand. Jep Parnell looked at the clock behind the bar, it was just noon, exactly twelve hours since Shattuck's claybank had come in by itself.

Ralston's long fingers started dealing automatically. ● END

NOON TOMORROW

(cont'd from page 33)

was held up by the bar and for a minute his cold eyes glared at Jim. Blood was running from the wound over his heart and his left hand started up as though to staunch it. But death caught him then and his eyes dulled and he pitched forward and hit on his face. He didn't move again.

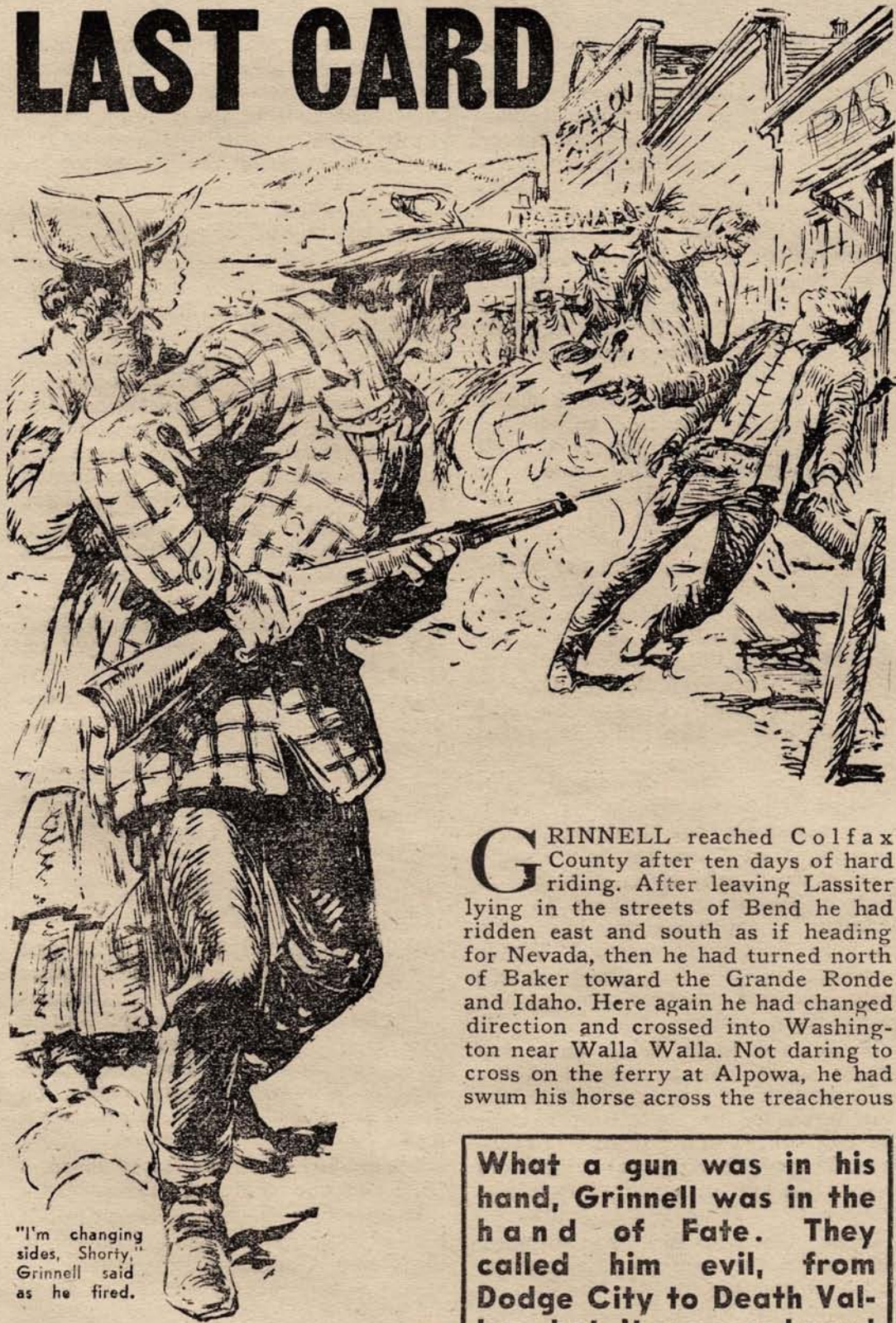
There was a moment's silence, while the shock of the noise made by the crashing guns wore off. Then Monty Ferris ran around the bar, grabbed Jim's hand and shook it violently. "You did it, kid, you did it. I thought you were a goner; how

did you ever beat him?"

"He beat himself. He let me get him mad and he fired wild. Always before he stayed cool and the other man got mad. This time he wasn't fightin' for pay and he blew it. I was countin' on that."

Jim turned and walked from the saloon. On the walk outside he remembered the gun which was still in his hand. He dropped it back in holster and started down the street, hurrying now, seeing Nell running toward him. He had something to ask her and it suddenly was very urgent. ● END

LAST CARD



"I'm changing sides, Shorty," Grinnell said as he fired.

GRINNELL reached Colfax County after ten days of hard riding. After leaving Lassiter lying in the streets of Bend he had ridden east and south as if heading for Nevada, then he had turned north of Baker toward the Grande Ronde and Idaho. Here again he had changed direction and crossed into Washington near Walla Walla. Not daring to cross on the ferry at Alpowa, he had swum his horse across the treacherous

What a gun was in his hand, Grinnell was in the hand of Fate. They called him evil, from Dodge City to Death Valley, but it was a brand that doubtless should have been blotted....

by CLAYTON FOX

Snake River near the mouth of the Palouse.

Here, in the badlands near Palouse Falls, he could go no further. He had not eaten in four days and had barely slept in ten. The bullet Town Marshal Lassiter had put through his side just above the belt had left a foul passage which had corrupted until his whole left side was bathed in fire at every jolt of the rawboned bronco he had stolen in the Grande Ronde.

The horse, battered by the long fast miles and the terrible struggle of the Snake crossing, was nearly gone. Grinnell was reaching the end of the road, driven by the fate which had goaded him without let-up for all his forty-odd years. The cards were shuffled and dealt, all he could do was as he'd always done, play out the hand.

All he'd ever been, from the beginning, when he'd been lost from a wagon-train, was the tool of fate. What a gun was in his hand, he was in the hand of destiny. They called him evil, in all the West from Dodge City to Death Valley. But evil was not a word that applied to him. The fate that pushed him was a brutal thing, cruel and heartless. Grinnell simply did what he had to do.

He rode on, his battered horse plodding head down, into a gray and shimmering world of sagebrush and stunted jackpines. Far off in the distance he could see the blue of a pot-hole lake in a coulee. Water wouldn't fill the emptiness in his belly, but it might get some of the grime from him.

He let the horse drink first, and thirsty as it was, it snorted at the brackish alkaline water. Where the tiny waves of the lake beat against the shore there was a foam like soap-suds. The water would eat the bottom from a tin cup in a year, but it was sweet enough for cattle to drink.

It was when he rose from dipping his face in the lake that he saw the house. It was set back in the wall of a grassy chute leading into the coulee from the prairie above. Its front was of pine logs daubed with clay and its back was the wall of the chute. It was half a dugout, half a house. The logs were still shiny, reflecting newness. A homesteader's wagon: a big Stude-

baker with a tent built on it, was pulled to one side. The pain of an empty belly twisted Grinnell. The homesteader might shoot him on sight but he could go no further without food, even if he had to get it at gun-point.

THERE WAS a child playing near the wagon, he saw now, and an obscure impulse made him turn back to the lake and scrub his face in the stinging alkali water. He got a broken mirror and razor from his blanket roll and set about the painful job of scraping his face free of the twelve day beard. There wasn't much he could do about a face that would scare the devil himself. Slowly he remounted and rode around the end of the lake.

The child, a boy about nine, stopped shooting at Indians with a stick gun when Grinnell rode up and stood painfully still, his bright eyes taking in the rifle in the saddle boot and the Colt hung dragon style on Grinnell's left hip.

Grinnell sat his horse, as was proper in this country until invited to get down. "Your pa home, boy?"

The boy's eyes flickered toward the horizon and in that glance Grinnell saw that the man of the family was gone. The boy set his jaw and said nothing.

"What is it, Jesse?" a woman called.

Grinnell turned in the saddle and saw her standing in the leather hinged doorway, a pretty woman, not yet thirty, with blue eyes and blonde hair, both already starting to fade from sun and wind and loneliness. Beside her, within easy reach, he could see the blued barrels of a shotgun.

"What is it?" she repeated sharply. "Are you one of Bayer's riders?"

Grinnell touched the greasy brim of his hat. "No ma'am, I'm a stranger in these parts, and nearly starved. I'd take it a most kindly act if you'd sell me some vittles."

Her eyes went over him and Grinnell could again see the image he had seen in the broken mirror across the lake. A dirty, scar-faced man with blood spots from fresh shaving on his mottled gray skin. Protruding un-

blinking eyes and a spade shaped head like a diamond-back rattler.

"I mean you no hurt, ma'am," he said. "I'm desperate hungry."

She nodded at last. "Step down. I've something left from Jesse's dinner."

Grinnell dismounted slowly and carefully, so as to not alarm her. The boy, Jesse, was still regarding him with the distrust of people who live lonely lives. But he was taken by the gunbelt on Grinnell and it would not be long before he made some friendly overture. Grinnell had no feeling for children, he could not remember having been one himself; when he had been this boy's age, he had been driving with a freighting outfit.

Out of long habit his eyes searched the surrounding screen of coulee walls before he hunkered down to wait for the food. He was a long way from Missouri River bottom land where he had started and still everything was the same. He was hungry, dirty, and still wary of the kick which would come if he wasn't fast on the dodge.

Over the years he had acquired a name—his last from a freighter who had picked him off the streets of St. Louis—the first, Slick, had been acquired in Abilene when he had dropped a tough Texas rancher with a hideout .41 derringer. The thing that went with the name Slick Grinnell, a reputation for fast and deadly and cold-blooded murder, had been acquired in a dozen tough places. Even the woman in there might have heard of Slick Grinnell. If she knew who he was, he would have been covered with the shotgun from the time he rode on the place.

The woman came to the door again. "Come in and set down, it ain't much but it'll keep body and soul together."

"I can eat out here, ma'am," Grinnell said.

"Sit down at the table," she said.

GRINNELL went in and sat down at a table made of split logs. Soft wood; cottonwood, he saw. It would soon fall apart. He had seen these homesteaders move in on the rim of cattle ranches before. They came stubbornly seeking out their hundred-sixty acres of land, worked

like demons night and day, and in two or three years went on to another bright promise, leaving decaying buildings and home-made furniture like this behind them.

It irritated him always: the people with their hopes and dreams pitting themselves against insurmountable odds. There was no use pitying them; they would not listen to reason.

The woman put a steaming plate of beans and some cold corn bread in front of him. The faint odor of molasses tinted the smell of the beans, turning Grinnell weak and ravening. He seized his knife and began to scoop up the beans, shoveling them into his mouth in a steady stream. He did not slow down until all the beans were gone, then he sopped up the remaining juice on his plate with the cornbread.

The boy was staring at him wide-eyed. "Maw," he said in an urgent voice. "He eats with his knife!"

"Hush, Jesse," the woman said, embarrassed.

"I bet he's one of Bayer's riders. They're all hogs."

"Jesse! I'm sorry, mister. It's pretty hard to strap manners into a wild boy."

Grinnell smiled, a remote bleak flicker of expression. "Nobody learned me better'n to eat with a knife until I was too old to change." He was acutely embarrassed for some reason, and wanted to change the subject. "Who is this Bayer?"

"This land used to be Indian Reserve," the woman said. "Bayer used to pay the Indians a dollar an acre to herd his cattle on here. Now the government has thrown it open for filing, and Bayer wants to keep it. He's brought in all the hardcases they have run out of Lewiston and Walla Walla."

"They've got a sheriff in the county, ain't they?" Grinnell asked.

"Sheriff!" she said scornfully. "Bayer's own man. The county commissioners are all cattlemen. When the old sheriff died the commissioners appointed this new man."

"I see," Grinnell said. A sheriff was the last man he wanted to see. He rose and tilted his hat forward over his eyes again. He was feeling the old irritation at helpless people who

did not believe they were helpless. There was no hope for these people. Lately, in Wyoming, he'd hired out his gun to the cattlemen fighting back a wave of settlers. The fight had been bloody, and the homesteaders beaten. Here, with a handpicked sheriff, the homesteaders had no chance at all. They could not fight the run of the cards.

He reached in his pocket for a half-eagle. He shook his head at the woman's quick protest. "For feeding a stranger, even if you was afraid."

The boy walked to his horse with him. Jesse's eyes were on the bone handle of the pistol. "You like guns, boy?"

"I got a dollar," the boy said. "You want to sell that gun, mister?"

"Afraid I couldn't get along without it," Grinnell said. "What do you need a gun for?"

"Maybe the Indians will come snooping around. I could shoot Bayer and his whole gang of mangy riders, too!"

Grinnell chuckled. "You save that fight, boy, you may need it."

He looked down at the house when his horse had climbed to the top of the grassy chute. Again he felt irritated at their helpless stubbornness. Bayer and his handpicked riders would force them to move, and they would go on and on, pushed by the same bitter fate that pushed him.

BY NIGHTFALL he had ridden several miles to the north without seeing another human being. The desert had given way to the deep soil of the Palouse hills and the wild grass, rolling in the wind, brushed at his hips as he rode through. At sundown a sage hen ran through the grass before him, dragging a wing in imitation injury. Grinnell took a quick glance at one of the balls of fluff which were her chicks, decided they were old enough to fend for themselves, and blew off her head with his forty-four.

Before dark he descended to the Palouse River, gathered a few limbs and roasted the sage hen on a stick. The meat was tough and stringy and tasted strongly of sage. Supper over, he untied his horses' picket rope from a sage and retied it to his wrist. Then he lay with his head on the saddle,

covering himself with the stinking saddle blanket, and with his pistol in his hand, fell into a profound sleep.

He was awakened some time later, about midnight, he judged by the slow wheel of stars, to the sound of a half-dozen horses trotting somewhere up on the coulee rim. He lay tensed, head lifted, with his pistol cocked, until the sound of the horses died out in the distance.

He awoke again in the first silver light of dawn with the sharp feeling that something had gone wrong. He did not move, other than to put his thumb over the pistol hammer.

"You can quit playing possum, Slick. Right now you're cold turkey," a faintly amused voice said.

Grinnell sat up slowly, tilting the gun barrel toward the sound of the voice as he did so.

"Don't try it."

Grinnell pulled his hand from under the blanket. "Shorty Morcross," he said. "Ain't seen you since Wyoming."

The short man sitting in the saddle, with the carbine centered on Grinnell's chest, grinned with mirth. "The name is Dyke, Ted Dyke, Slick. Shorty Morcross never got out of Wyoming." He pointed to his chest. "Ted Dyke is sheriff of Colfax County."

Grinnell shook his head as if to clear it. "I must be asleep, Shorty. I thought you said sheriff." His mind was busy with the play. If there was big enough reward posted for him in Oregon, Shorty wouldn't waste much time before shooting.

"Slick," Shorty said. "You're in a mighty bad spot."

Grinnell said nothing, tensing his muscles for a try at his gun. It would be useless. Shorty was no amateur, and he could put three bullets through him before he got his hand under the blanket.

"Colfax County used to be tough," Shorty said. "Right now they're looking over every strange rider that comes in. Generally, they issue a request to keep on riding."

Grinnell sat straighter, trying to postpone the moment when Shorty would pull the trigger.

Don't reach for that gun, Slick! I

could start even and still beat you. I'm giving you a good chance. We might just forget we ever saw each other before. Your name is maybe Jake Brown. I can use a good deputy for a month or so."

"New way of livin' for me," Grinnell said. Relief poured through him like pure, sweet water. "You got a dodger on me, Mr. Dyke?"

"No. Probably get it a couple of days after you ride out. I'm surprised at you, Slick. In the old days a man couldn't get within a mile of where you was sleeping."

"We all get old," Grinnell said. "For a minute there I thought I wasn't going to get any older. The people of this county know what kind of lawdog they got?"

Shorty smiled his mirthless grimace. "Only one person in this county whose opinion is worth a damn. His name is Bayer, big rancher. We'll ride by his ranch on the way to town."

I never knowed the time you needed help, Shorty."

"A man can't have eyes everywhere. These homesteaders will fight for this rich land. Some of them are pretty tough. You might say you're insurance for me, just like I'm insurance for Mr. Bayer. Let's ride, Deputy."

BAYER'S ranch was on a hill overlooking the river. Grinnell, when the horses splashed across the shallow ford, saw a blacksmith hard at work in the shop, a rifle leaning against the forge. Three men were working at the corral, repairing cinch straps, but behind them were three more rifles, new, from their appearance. The house itself was set back against the hill, and was made of fieldstone heavily mortared together. The full length porch commanded a view of the entire valley. Behind the house, up on the rim, more riders were hazing some horses. The Bayer's ranch was set for trouble. It would take a small army to get at Bayer.

One of the men at the corral had stopped hammering rivets into a strap and was carefully inspecting his rifle as Shorty and Grinnell rode up. Shorty jerked a thumb at Grinnell. "New deputy, name of Jake Brown,"

he said. "Parker Nichols, foreman of the Bar B, Jake. Bayer at home?"

"Up at the cookshack, getting breakfast. If the cook is in a good mood maybe you can get some grub, too."

Bayer, a heavy, red-faced man of forty, was seated alone in the cookshack. "Mornin', Sheriff," he said. "Who's your boy?"

"This side of the line his name is Jake Brown."

Bayer speared a slice of ham. "He ain't very pretty. Is he useful?"

"He'll get the job done."

Bayer's cold gaze rested on Grinnell. "You boys represent the law. I want the homesteaders off the Indian Strip. I don't want a federal marshal down here nosing around afterward. If you're wanted in other states, get the job done and get out of here." He turned back to his ham and eggs.

"How about some breakfast, Mr. Bayer?" Shorty asked.

"Don't anybody ever eat before they come out here? Plates are on the side table."

Grinnell was famished again. The meal he had got at the homesteader's and the sage hen he had eaten the night before had barely taken a wrinkle out of his hunger. He loaded a plate with the ham and eggs and filled a mug with coffee from the back of the big range. The ham was beginning to dry out and the eggs were greasy cold, but he grabbed a knife and began to take the slack from his empty stomach.

Bayer pushed his chair back and stood up. Grinnell, stopping to refill his coffee cup, noted he wore choke-bore riding pants and hand-tooled boots and that he carried a short-barreled gun in a specially tailored hip pocket.

Bayer grimaced at Shorty. "Your friend may be a curly wolf, but he eats like a hog. Next time, feed him outside; he turns my stomach."

Shorty laid a lightning-fast hand on Grinnell's arm. "Take it easy, Slick," he said.

Bayer stared at Grinnell with contempt, but Grinnell could see the nervous flicker of his eyes.

Outside they mounted and turned their horses up the valley toward Palouse City. Shorty seemed worried by

Grinnell's silence. "Hell, I wouldn't let what Bayer said bother me," he said. "He's been top dog in this country a long time; he just didn't know who he was talking to."

Grinnell turned his bleak gaze on him. "Don't worry about Bayer," he said. "I never kill anybody unless I'm paid for it."

EARLY EVENING filled the valley around Palouse City with plum-colored light when Grinnell awakened from an afternoon's sleep. After riding into town, he had checked in at Shorty's office, and then had bedded down in one of the bunks in the back of the livery barn. Now he went to the barber shop and bought a hot bath in which he soaked the grime from his body and some of the poison from the bullet gouge in his side. The wound looked purple and poisonous, he should have had a doctor look at it. His dirt-encrusted clothing felt strange after the bath, so he sent a boy to the store for new overalls and a shirt. He put them on and had a close shave and haircut. Then he sauntered on to supper smelling strongly of new clothing and bay rum.

His steak and apple pie eaten, he went back to the courthouse to report to Shorty. There were two other deputies: Walters, a blowhard who would crack in a tight; and a heavy-shouldered man named Spear, who had been the town marshal. A good man for shouldering drunks out of the way, but too slow-witted to be a gunfighter. Grinnell pegged him as the man to rough the homesteaders when they were in town.

"Here's the deal," Shorty said. "You, Spear, and Walters patrol the town. Some of Bayer's riders will be in. They'll be tough with homesteaders. Most of the farmers won't fight." He grinned. "They're married men, with wives and families, they can't afford to fight. But there are always one or two young bucks who think they're tough, or have to impress their lady friends. Those are the men we'll leave to Jake Brown. That clear?"

The night shadows were as thick and black as boiled coffee wherever the yellow lamplight did not reach. Grinnell stolidly walked the length of the street to where the two branches

of the Palouse flowed together. The creeks rustled faintly over the stones, and he was surprised to hear a booming rush as of a waterfall. It took him minutes of listening before he realized the sound was of the wind rushing over acres and acres of head-high grass up on the rim. This Palouse soil, he realized, if it grew grass that tall, would grow wheat beyond any farmers' wildest dream. He did not know how long Bayer could hold back the farmers from the country. It would not be long. It was only the first homesteaders who would suffer; those who came after would find courts and churches and impartial sheriffs. It was inevitable, as inevitable as the fate which would lead the bolder of them to die in the streets of Palouse under his guns. The westward settlements were the same always, repeated and repeated and repeated.

Grinnell wheeled and paced up the crooked street to its final turning to the road to Lewiston. It was quiet tonight, but tomorrow was Saturday. The homesteaders and Bayer's hands would be in town. Bayer and Shorty were set for violence, and he was the gun in their hands.

It would take a cool hand and steady nerves. A professional gunfighter he did not fear, there it was a question of nerve and hairline guessing about another man's reactions. It was the amateurs he had to worry about. Some farmer who never before had a gun in his hands might be lucky. He went back to the livery stable and rolled into his bunk.

HE AWOKE to a cloudless Saturday morning with an ache in all his joints and the coppery taste of fever in his mouth. The ease and well-being he felt the afternoon before had left him. His motions were sluggish and his head ached steadily.

He inquired of a boy the whereabouts of a doctor, and the boy pointed to a house four doors away. The doctor, an untidy man with the stains of his morning coffee on his shirtfront, was seated on the porch absorbing the sunshine.

The doctor took a quick glance at the wounded side, then looked at Grinnell's eyes and checked his pulse.

"My friend, you're in bad shape," he said. "You do any more riding with that wound, and you'll fall off your horse for good. You better stay here in town and get yourself a homestead out on the Indian Strip. You lie around for a month doing nothing, then you can prove your homestead. You've got a lot of poison in your system."

"Is it that easy to get a homestead?" Grinnell asked.

"Why not? This country's got a great future—a great future. You got time to see the garden I've planted in back?"

"Some other time, Doc." Grinnell paid the doctor his fifty cents. He was remembering the homesteader's place by the pothole lake. A nice place to stop and let the rest of his years run out. A place like that—or that place, after he and Shorty had moved the homesteader's family on. As long as Bayer and Shorty were in power in the country he would be safe, and he could help keep them in power.

His headache was worse, he wished that he had dared ask the doctor for some painkiller, but a dose of laudanum would make him too slow and draggy for the business at hand. He took a seat on the bench in front of the main store, not far from the hitchrack, which was already lined with horses wearing Bayer's Cross B brand. Out at the end of the street there were three farm wagons, the horses unhitched and munching hay from the wagon boxes.

After a time Bayer rode into town with his foreman, Nichols. He tied his high-stepping Kentucky horse to the hitch-rack, took a quick hard look at Grinnell, then went across the street to the Pastime. In three minutes, Shorty, the sheriff's star gleaming on his chest, strolled down the street and disappeared into the saloon after Bayer. Further down Grinnell could see Spear and Walters patrolling.

The cards were shuffled and dealt. The hand was ready to be played out. The farmers would push into the stacked deck. They would blame Bayer and Shorty and Grinnell, not knowing that they, too, were merely players uselessly playing the hands they got.

Near ten o'clock two wagons came into town from downriver. The first one held the woman and the boy, Jesse, who had fed him by the pothole lake. The man holding the reins was tall and dark-haired, with bulky shoulders and a tough, square set to his jaw. He drove directly to the hitch-rack. He stepped down, untied Bayer's fiddlefooted Kentucky horse, and moved it up the rack to make room for his team.

The damned fool, Grinnell thought, he's pushing himself harder than he has to. If he ran maybe he could get out of it alive. He's got the wife and the boy to think about.

But then he thought wearily: What difference will it make? The pride would ride with the farmer wherever he went, and the woman had probably been attracted to him because of it. What had made her a wife might make her a widow. If not here, then somewhere else.

GRINNELL felt a moment's admiration for the farmer, then again, pity. No matter how brave a show he made of it, he was beat.

The two young farmers, brothers, by their look, in the wagon behind had driven directly to the hardware store. One of them held the team while the other went inside. Grinnell saw Spear and Walters bearing down on the wagon, and the play was clear in his mind. He had seen it a hundred times before, in a hundred different ways. Different, but always the same. Bayer must have decided that these two and the broad-shouldered married farmer were the kingpins who must be driven out or killed.

Spear and Walters wheeled in concert and sat down on the bench in front of the hardware store. The farmer, a red-headed, fair-skinned Swede, glanced at them, then returned to his moody contemplation of the dashboard.

From where he sat Grinnell could not hear what Spear and Walters were saying, but it was apparent they were enjoying it. The farmer's face, already sun-reddened, turned a bright scarlet. The sound of Spear's unmelodious bray drifted up the street.

Just as the other brother appeared in the doorway with a gunny-sack of

supplies the farmer in the wagon dived between his feet and came up with a rifle. He was fast, the carbine was halfway to his shoulder before Spear and Walters could get untracked. Walters made an ineffective grab for his gun as Spear bumped the man in the door.

Grinnell hurled himself to his feet and drew his pistol in the same motion. It was an impossibly long shot for a pistol, but he sighted and fired. The shot was high. The heavy slug caught the farmer in the shoulder and knocked him from the wagon seat. He fell between the wagon-box and wheel, which saved his life. Walters had finally got his gun clear of its holster. Spear had pinioned the arms of the brother.

"Hold it!" Grinnell shouted. He plodded down the street to them, feeling the steady throb of his fevered blood behind his eyes.

Walters was looking down at his gun, a foolish smile on his face. Spear looked stunned, as if what had been a rude game had suddenly exploded beyond belief. The farmer Spear had grabbed, slammed himself free with his elbows and went to assist his brother.

There was a quick rustle of skirts as the homesteader's wife ran to the wounded man.

"Axel! Are you all right?"

Axel grimaced from pain. "Smashed a shoulder."

"Doctor up the street," Grinnell said. "Get your shoulder fixed and either get out of Colfax County or go on trial for assaulting a peace officer."

The woman turned on him. "So you are one of Bayer's pet curs! I'm sorry I wasted food on you the other day! I should have fed it to the hogs. There's no reason for a man like you living."

Grinnell looked at her blankly.

Shorty strutted over importantly from the Pastime. "A little trouble, Jake?"

"Our friend went for Spear and Walters with a rifle. I had to cool him off."

Shorty looked, not at the brothers, but at the farmer's wife. "We are giving you the same orders we give all troublemakers in Colfax County. Get

your wagon rolling and don't stop this side of the line."

"So that's it," she said. "We move out, and tomorrow you or some other dog of Bayer's files on our land. Why bother pretending it's legal? Why not kill us outright?"

"Lady, you've heard what I have to say," Shorty said. The woman turned away, tears streaking the faint layer of dust on her face. Grinnell, watching her, saw the boy Jesse standing a few feet away, his eyes wide and frightened. Well, it was a tough world and the boy might as well learn it now as later. Jesse reached out and took his mother's hand as they trailed back to the wagon.

Grinnell, his head floating from fever, watched the husband running to them. The woman went to his arms, while the boy Jesse stood close, not understanding the violence which outstripped his wildest dreams of Indian battles.

The farmer finally pushed his wife away and wheeled toward the Pastime. It was then Grinnell saw the pistol stuck in the waistband of his overalls.

Bayer and Nichols were watching from the saloon door. The last card had been played, the last part of the design put in. It was exactly as Grinnell had known it would go. There was no escape.

"Use that rifle, Slick," Shorty called.

Grinnell lifted the rifle, and in that moment rebellion overtook him. It was his chance to spit in the eye of destiny.

"Shorty, you always thought you was faster than me. Now's the time to find out."

Shorty looked, not understanding. "I'm changing sides, Shorty."

Shorty had his gun clear of the holster and half-raised when Grinnell's bullet hit him in the throat.

Grinnell whirled on Walters and Spear. "Stay out of this or you're dead," he said. He leveled the carbine.

His first shot lifted a spout of dust in front of the farmer. His second shot jerked the batwing door to the right of Bayer. The rancher and Nichols turned and dived into the saloon.

(cont'd on page 55)

ROTTEN BELLY'S SAD SIEGE

by NOEL M. LOOMIS

ROTTEN BELLY was one of the great chiefs of the Crows. A savage fighter, friendly toward the whites, and of unquenchable pride and spirit, he was forced by his tribe into an adventure for which he had no heart, and at the end he told his people to keep peace with the white man forever after...

Rotten Belly first appears in 1825, when he met General Henry Atkinson at one of the Mandan villages.

Congress had passed a law to authorize treaties with the tribes on the Missouri River, and President Monroe appointed a commission headed by Atkinson. The commission established headquarters at one of the Mandan villages in what is now western North Dakota, and sent out runners to the surrounding tribes, inviting them to come to the village to make treaties. There would of course be gifts in celebration, and medals to be hung around the necks of the chiefs. There would be many pipes smoked, and perhaps a few surreptitious nips at the bottle.

The normal headquarters of the Crows was somewhat west of the Mandans, but they sent a delegation headed by Rotten Belly, who was then about thirty-six years old, tall, dignified, of splendid physique, admired for his unquestioned bravery, and considered quite humane for a man raised under savage conditions.

Atkinson's effort was successful, for he concluded a treaty with the Crows on August 4, and it is interesting to note that the United States promised not to furnish arms to any enemies of the Crows. Inasmuch as the Crows fought the Blackfeet, the

Shoshones, the Assiniboines, the Gros Ventres, and from time to time practically every other tribe in the area, it would seem to pose a problem in administration—especially so since similar treaties were also made with the other tribes.

The story of the siege of Fort McKenzie, the farthest northwest outpost in the United States (for at that time the west coast was Spanish and British) begins in April, 1834, when a party of three Blood (Blackfeet) warriors and one squaw came to the fort, announcing themselves as a war party headed for Crow country on a horse-stealing expedition.

Major Alexander Culbertson, in charge of Fort McKenzie, talked them out of the idea, and they started back.



The fort was provisioned, guns cleaned, balls poured, a guard established. And then the savage Crows came thundering in, armed to the teeth...

But a few miles north, thirty Crows rode down upon them as they were enjoying a smoke, and with their concentrated fire killed two of the braves and wounded the third.

The wounded Blood, however, knocked a Crow from his horse with a single sweep of his rifle, leaped on the horse, seized a lance, and galloped away. He was fortunate in having taken an unusually good horse, and so he reached the fort, but the squaw, who was his sister, was still in the hands of the Crows.

The Crows rode hard toward the south, guarding the squaw with care. Her clothing was taken away from

her at night, and she was forced to sleep with a Crow squaw who awoke at the lift of an eyelash. The Blood woman had no chance to escape until she was several days away. Then a storm came up one night and she escaped. She found herself in an enemy country, without food or weapons, and completely naked. She traveled five days under a blazing sun and through rugged mountains where water froze at night, back toward the fort.

MAJOR CULBERTSON, guided by the squaw's brother, had returned to the scene of the tragedy and recovered the bodies for burial. Then one evening he saw movement in the brush on the opposite side of the river. He crossed in a rowboat, and to his amazement found the squaw who had been taken away by the Crows. She was naked except for bunches of sagebrush tied on her body; her feet were cut and bleeding from the long days of hard travel through stones and prickly pear cactus, and she was gaunt from exposure, weariness, and hunger.

Culbertson took her across the river to the fort, gave her food and clothing, and was astonished to hear her say that the Crows were preparing a heavy attack against the fort, with the intention of destroying it. This was the attack made against Rotten Belly's desire, and it is necessary to understand the Indians' practice. When a brave becomes a war leader, he is to some extent subject to the wishes of the tribe. He may decline to lead them on some raids, but if the sentiment of the tribe is strong he cannot so decline without losing face, and most Indian warriors would go to certain death rather than lose standing.

A band of Crows drove thirty horses away from the fort, but this was not the attacking party. However, it was Crow custom to send scouting parties ahead when they planned a movement of any size, to be sure they would not run foul of the Blackfeet, their deadly enemies. Therefore, when a second band of Crows appeared, Culbertson knew the squaw's story was about to be borne out.

The fort was provisioned. Rifles were cleaned and balls were poured. The fort had two bastions with a three-pound cannon in each, and they were put in readiness for service, and supplied with powder and balls. A guard was established. Water was available, and the fort was equipped to sustain an indefinite attack against any number of Indians except for one item—food. The fort depended primarily on wild game for sustenance, and in fact one man was hired as post hunter for this purpose, but game was scarce in the vicinity, and with the horses gone, the amount of meat procured by foot-hunters was far less than needed.

In June the Crows appeared. They made a camp about 400 yards away, and a large contingent, well armed, came to the gate and demanded admittance. Culbertson asked about the horses, but got no satisfactory answer. It was apparent that the Crows were bent on war, and he ordered them away, warning them that if they came to the fort armed he would have his men fire on them. He showed them the Blood squaw who had escaped and they were astonished, thinking that she had died.

So the siege began without a shot. The Crows were alert and on the prowl, so that the post was surrounded. But Culbertson kept a constant guard, and the Crows were careful not to come within range with their weapons.

The fort was almost on the river, but the Crows were watchful; Culbertson had a well dug within the stockade so no one would have to go outside, for he knew that Rotten Belly's people were looking for an excuse to start an assault in force. They struck water ten feet down.

Their fresh meat lasted two days; dried meat lasted two days more. Then the dogs were killed and eaten.

Finally they boiled the parfleches—containers of raw buffalo hide, which cooked up in a mess that resembled carpenter's glue.

Now Alexander Harvey, a prominent company man, demanded permission to shoot the Indians. They could not stay shut up in the stockade and starve, he said.

MAJOR CULBERTSON, though only twenty-five years old, realized the necessity of avoiding open warfare with the powerful Crows. The Crows did not trade at Fort McKenzie, but if they took a notion they could wreck the Blackfeet trade—and that would put the post out of business.

The same Harvey found this out ten years later at the same fort.

But Culbertson's hand was forced, for Harvey planned with some of the men to take the boat at night and leave the fort. Culbertson therefore notified Rotten Belly that if the Crows did not leave by noon, he would open hostilities and hurl thunderbolts upon them. Rotten Belly laughed.

The three-pounder in the upper bastion was charged with ball and aimed at the Crow camp. At exactly noon it crashed, and the heavy shot went through the middle of the camp.

Rotten Belly laughed no longer. Nor did the Crows, who had insisted on this expedition, linger. There was shouting and turmoil. Lodges came down; horses were mounted. Lodge skins were thrown on the backs of pack horses (the Crows did not use the travois), and soon the entire village was strung out along the river—all going upstream away from the fort.

A few of them crossed the river and fired some shots at the fort, but without damage. The siege was over.

The Crows said later that they had never intended to hurt the garrison; they had merely wanted to destroy the fort which supplied their enemies with rifles and ammunition. It was an easy thing to say—as easy, perhaps, as it had been for the white men to say they would not supply such arms to enemies of the Crows.

Rotten Belly had been shamed. His large party of warriors had been put to rout by a single shot. Never mind that it was a cannon. His shame was great, and he now called on them to follow him in Blackfeet country, where they might take some scalps and wipe out this disgrace.

He got volunteers and they started out, but they did not fight Blackfeet. Near Fort Benton at a place called Goose Bill they ran into twelve warriors of the Gros Ventres. Rotten Belly called on his Crows to attack.

"We shall see who are brave men," he said. "I shall lead this attack, although I do not think that I shall live."

The Crows charged the Gros Ventres and took exactly twelve scalps, but the Gros Ventres were fighters too, and Rotten Belly received a fatal wound. "Tell my people," he said before he died, "to keep peace with the whites hereafter. There must be no more war between them."

The dying chief's words were heard and remembered, for the Crow nation never again took up arms against the white man. ● END

LAST CARD

(cont'd from page 52)

Grinnell emptied the magazine of the rifle through the doors after them. If he had judged Bayer right, the rancher would stay belly-down in the sawdust for some time to come.

He was weary; it was an effort to force his feet to move to the hitch-rack where Bayer's Kentucky horse was dancing.

The farmer still held his pistol, puzzled. Grinnell turned to the woman. "Get word to the U. S. Marshal at Spokane Falls," Grinnell said. "Tell him Bayer had Shorty Morcross and Slick Grinnell in here as lawdogs."

But—why?" the woman asked, and

he knew she was talking about the change.

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't know exactly... Mighty pretty place you got there, though, by the lake."

He mounted the Kentucky horse and pointed it toward the rim where the tall grass grew. On the horizon were the hills of Idaho, where he could find a spring and rest awhile. The horse could find its way back.

The fever was high in his blood and he started to grin. No matter if the cards were marked, a man could upset the deal... ● END

TWO OR THREE FUNERALS

by D. AYDELOTTE

There were no courts in No Man's Land, no law except that of the sixgun. And yet Buck Sizemore wondered if civilization hadn't begun to reach this raw frontier

IT LOOKED to Buck Sizemore, riding up the main cowpath of mustang, as if the town was getting to be real civilized. There were a few more shacks and dugouts, and instead of only the two saloons—the Wild Horse and the Black Wolf—various business establishments now spread all up and down the street.

After this last long stretch on his ranch in the lonesome reaches of No Man's Land, Buck was cheered to see the note of progress. It did seem queer, though, not to find a single cowpony waiting at a hitchrack, nor anyone along the main street.

And Trady's feed barn, where Buck went to put up his pony, was deserted too; no sign of even Limpy Horton tilted back in his favorite chair. But as Buck led the sorrel to a stall, he discovered at last a sign of life: a powdering of dust filtering down

"How's tricks?"

"There ain't no tricks," answered the barkeep gloomily, "and you better find you a hole and crawl in it. Un-shirted hell's liable to bust loose here any minute." He pushed bottle and glass toward Buck and propped one elbow on the bar.

Thinking back to that sifting of dust from the barn loft, Buck decided to play innocent. "I just this minute hove in," he explained, searing his gullet with a drink. "What's going on?"

"You'll know soon enough," hinted Anse. Leaning near, he whispered, "Thompson and two others mebber won't see the sun come up tomorrow. The vigilance committee's after 'em."

"That being the case," drawled Buck, "I'll mosey on to Gus Willard's and lay low."

Stepping outside, he saw Ed Mun-



from a crack in the loft floor. Almost certainly this meant that someone was hiding up there, but in Buck Sizemore's code of etiquette, it wouldn't be polite to inquire who. So he got feed and water for his pony, gave the animal a parting slap on the flank, and left without looking back.

He was the one, lone customer at the Wild Horse, and his spurs clattered loudly in the empty room. It wasn't healthy for a cowtown saloon to be so quiet, that time of day. Even Thompson, the gambler, wasn't at his usual table, riffing a deck of greasy cards.

"Howdy, Anse," hailed Buck.

ger walking down the middle of the street, holding a Winchester and looking both ways. Trailing him were four men, all toting rifles and seeming itchy to use them. Buck dodged back inside.

"Kinda crowded out there," he grinned. "Last time I saw Ed Munger, Thompson had got the drop on him and made him dance, and there was Ed with his hands up, kicking sand fit to kill. He didn't much like the tinhorn after that."

"Ed's been bound to get even," said Anse, "and this here claim-jumpin' give him his chance to put it on Thompson."

As one of the posse turned in at the swingdoor, Anse fell silent and began busily polishing the bar.

"Howdy," greeted the guntoter. Then, staring suspiciously at Buck, "What you doin' here?"

"Just got in from the ranch," answered Buck, "and stopped here for a slug of red-eye to warm me up. Then I'm going on to Gus Willard's."

"If you go there," growled the man, "be sure to stay inside. You hear?"

Buck was no stranger to violence, he had been in the thick of more than one running fight with cattle rustlers, yet he felt a chill prickling down his spine as a few minutes later, he walked along the street with four men on his heels. Old Man Willard met him at the door of his little shack.

"Come right in," he called, "and rest your hat while I warm up the beans and cawfee. I been waitin' ever since I heard you'd hit town."

"First time in my life," drawled Buck, closing the door behind him, "that I ever had an armed escort. Those fellers must think a lot of me."

"They seen you go to Tracy's barn," said Gus, "and they been here askin' about you."

"I don't see what for," puzzled his guest. "What's back of all this kihootin', anyway?"

"Plenty," said old Gus cryptically. "Come on, set up to the table and I'll tell you later on."

At the crash of gunfire, Buck was on his feet, reaching for his gun. "I'm not going to set here like a plumb coward while there's shootin' going on."

"You step outside," warned Gus, "and you're liable to run into a bullet. There'll be two or three funerals tomorrow, and that's enough."

After another roaring fusillade, silence and darkness closed in upon the little town.

Later, there was a knock at Gus Willard's door. The old man started up in his bunk. But Buck opened the door, six-gun in hand.

"Did you see Limpy Horton at the barn?" asked one of the posse.

"Not a sign of him when I went there," answered Buck.

"Well," growled his inquisitor, "we

knew he's there and we're goin' to root him out." They made off, grumbling among themselves.

"What they got against poor Limpy?" asked Buck.

"Nothing," said the old man, "only he worked for Tracy, and they figger he might talk too much."

THE TROUBLE had begun when One-eye George came to Mustang and bought a claim at the south edge of town, paying a few hundred down and the balance mebbeso-tomorrow. Instead of living on his land to help "prove up," he got a job at the Black Wolf Saloon and slept in the back room.

Three men—Bennet the storekeeper, Tracy who ran the feed barn, and Thompson the gambler—put their heads together and decided to run One-eye off. So Thompson put up a tent at one corner of the claim, and when One-eye, warned of what was going on, showed up and claimed possession, he was driven off at gunpoint. Being mild-mannered and a bad shot besides, the luckless fellow stayed away.

There were no courts in No Man's Land, no law except that of self-defense. You might say that the law ended at a man's front door. In Mustang, a man couldn't be arrested, no matter what he'd done. There was no jail to hold him, no judge to try him, no jury to convict him. Only horse and cattle thieves, when caught, were punished—by the law of hemp, a rope slung over a limb of the nearest tree.

Claim-jumping was generally considered a nuisance rather than a serious crime, but the high-handed tactics of the Thompson trio gave Ed Munger his chance to finally square things with the hated gambler who'd made him dance to the song of bullets cutting around his feet. And as Bennet and Tracy were in on the land deal, they had to be dealt with also.

About sundown, while Buck Sizemore was having supper at Old Man Willard's, the five man self-appointed vigilance committee headed for Thompson's tent. They met their man leaving a place where he'd had supper. One of the posse fired, but the shot fell short.

"Better raise your sights," advised their target coolly. The next bullet came closer, and the gambler, for once unarmed but defiant, sneeringly told them to try again. The third shot struck him in the kneecap; he spun around and fell, but managed to crawl back to the one-room half-dug-out, where the landlady was hiding in terror.

Instead of finishing off their victim then and there, the posse went on to Bennet's store. The door was locked, the building dark, but after repeated pounding with gun butts, the storekeeper came to the door, holding a lighted lantern.

"What's up?" he asked shakily.

"Thompson wants to see you," said Ed Munger. "He says you're back of the trouble over One-eye George."

"He's mistaken," said Bennet, "but I'll go see him anyway." As he turned to get his coat and hat, one of the men ordered, "You come right now."

They tramped down the snowy street, Bennet hatless and coatless, his thumbs (by order) hooked in the armholes of his vest.

At the dugout, Thompson was lying on a cot, his knee swathed in bandages. Half-conscious, he opened his eyes and tried to speak. Then he fell back, twenty-three bullets riddling his body. Screeching in panic, the landlady fled into the night.

"It's your turn, Bennet," said Munger. "You deserve to die for stealing One-eye's claim." A bullet crashed through Bennet's brain. He fell dead near the bloodsoaked bed where Thompson lay.

The posse then rode on to settle with Tracy. But when they reached his place, the feed-barn man had his

light buggy hitched up and he and his wife were ready to drive off.

"Halt or we'll shoot," the posse shouted. Bullets whined through the air, but Tracy laid the whip to his team and left on a dead run. At the first Kansas town they came to, he begged for protection, and he and his wife slept in the jail that night.

Next morning, as Buck stood in front of Old Man Willard's, a wagon came along, drawn by a yoke of steers, a boy driving. Two armed men walked on either side. Ed Munger following behind. Seeing two long, narrow boxes in the wagon, Buck called, "If you need help with the grave-digging, I'll come along."

"Come on," jeered a guard, "and we'll bury you on top of the boxes."

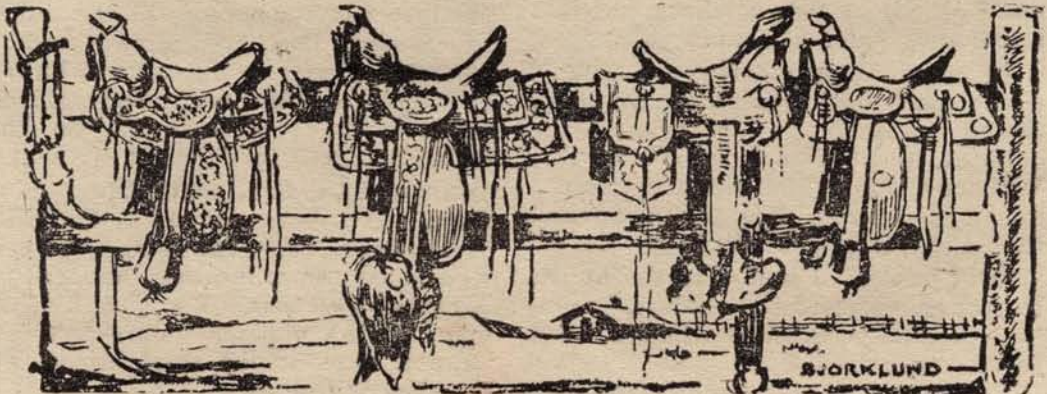
"Much obliged," said Buck politely, "but I've changed my mind."

Ed Munger was hanging around at the feed barn when Buck went to get his pony. "Did you see Limpy here yesterday?" he quizzed.

"I told you before," answered Buck, "I didn't see a soul."

"Well, he was here all right," said Munger grimly, "hiding up in the loft. We made him come out, then we paid him off, give him a good hoss, and told him he better go where it was healthier. He lit out."

Buck made no answer. He saddled the sorrel and rode away, not even stopping at the Wild Horse Saloon for a parting drink. Mustang looked more natural, with men going into the saloons, and ponies waiting outside. But as Buck headed for the snowy stretches of his ranch in No Man's Land, he wondered if the town had got such a big dose of civilization after all. ● END



A TINHORN HOT

by D. B.
NEWTON



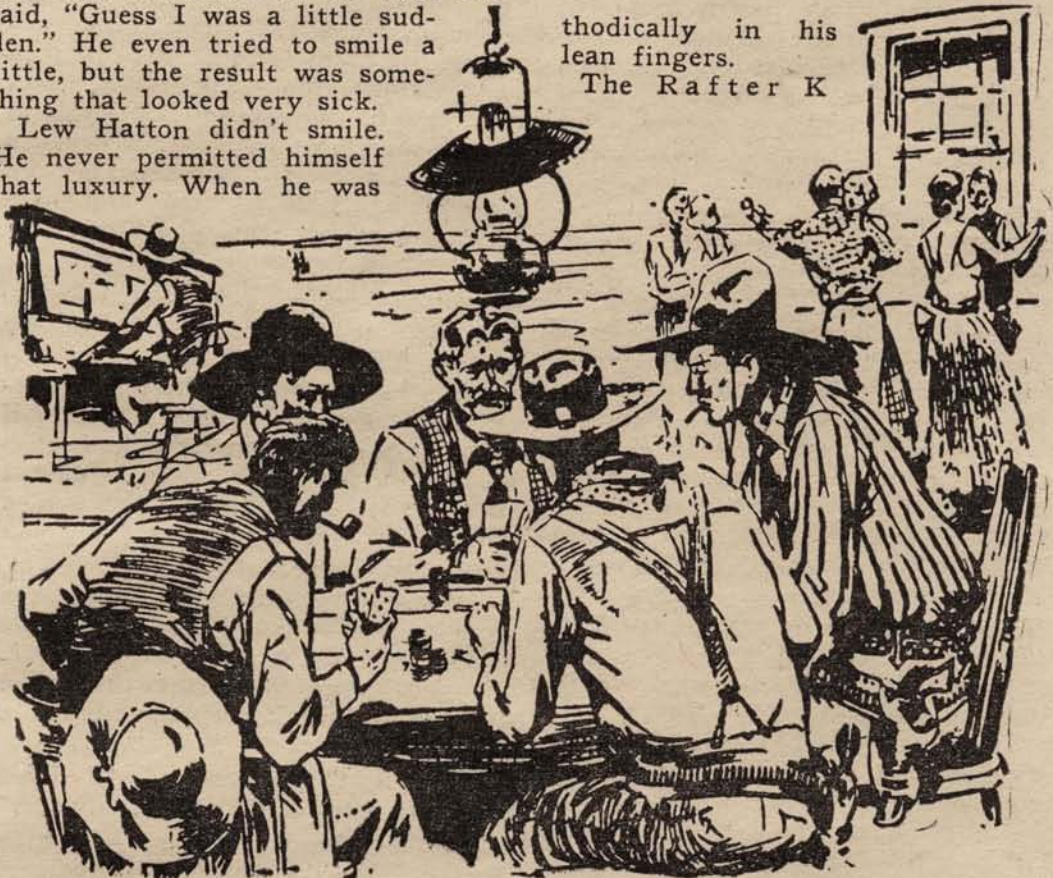
CHOOSES LEAD

TOM KELSEY had been so sure of winning that his eager fingers were already dragging in the pot before Lew Hatton had a chance to spread his own cards upon the green-covered table. When he saw the hand that beat his own, however, the rancher stopped. He studied the cards with worried blue eyes. And then, slowly, he pushed the chips back into the center of the table and said, "Guess I was a little sudden." He even tried to smile a little, but the result was something that looked very sick.

Lew Hatton didn't smile. He never permitted himself that luxury. When he was

Lew Hatton had seen men bullet-blasted crumple to the dust before his six-guns, but this was one blood-hungry gent he'd have liked to lose the draw to....

thodically in his lean fingers.
The Rafter K



Kelsey was an easy mark for the gambler. working, his sallow face with its clipped mustache and closely-lidded eyes never changed expression. He went to work now stacking the chips he had won for the house, and gathering the cards me-

owner was fidgeting a bit, uncertainly, a frown on his homely, red-burnt face as he eyed Hatton. He opened his mouth hesitantly, said, "I'm—I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to let me sign some more paper, Hatton. I put a little more than I had into that pot—"

The gambler looked at him sharply. Without a word he put down the

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cards he was shuffling; without a word, eased his lean frame out of the chair, went over to a closed door and threw it open.

A swart, paunchy individual in shirt sleeves and arm bands looked up from behind a battered desk. This was Spade Pierce, owner of the Red Rooster. He eyed Hatton through the smoke of a cigar that was stuck in his slitted mouth.

"Kelsey wants to make another note, boss," Hatton said. "You told me to let you know."

A gleam as of anticipated pleasure sprang into the narrow eyes of the man at the desk. He took the cigar out of his mouth and put it in an ash tray, the chewed end dripping saliva. His puffy hands rubbed together softly. "Send him in," he directed. "Send Mr. Kelsey right in!"

Hatton nodded shortly, came out of the office closing the door behind him. Going back to the table he glanced at the rancher with an eyebrow raised, and indicated the door. "You'll have to see Pierce," he said.

Kelsey looked like a dog that knows it is going to be whipped. Slowly, he got to his feet. He looked at the eyes around him, and saw them all turned away or merely staring at him with helpless sympathy. With an effort, the Rafter K owner straightened his shoulders and walked into Spade Pierce's office, bearing the air of a doomed man.

The game broke up all at once. The other players mumbled excuses, and got up pushing back their chairs with a shuffling of feet. They didn't look at Hatton squarely; the gambler shrugged, and cashed their chips for them without comment.

He knew, of course, what they were thinking. No one ever lost any love on a house dealer, and he had long ago grown accustomed to that fact.

He boxed the cards, put out the hanging lamp above the table, and walked over to the bar alone for a drink. The Red Rooster was as good a place as any to work, he thought as he picked up the glass; but after he'd been here a few months he'd probably wander on to a job at another town somewhere. Always taking with him the agility of his lean, supple fin-

gers, and the luck that never failed him as far as cards were concerned. They were the instruments of his trade.

Leaning casually against the polished bar, he drank his whiskey slowly, tasting it. One drink after every session—that was all he allowed himself. Silent moments dragged by. There was the drone of a fly, and the sounds in the street outside where a hot afternoon sun spilled its heat.

Presently the door of Spade Pierce's office opened and Kelsey came out again.

THE RANCHER stopped just within the threshold, stood there staring at the room. The handful of men in the saloon didn't look at him. After a moment he came on shuffling feet to the cherrywood bar and ordered a drink. His voice was hoarse; he stared blankly at his own expression in the bar mirror while the liquor was poured, and threw the drink into his mouth with a hand that trembled.

After that he turned and faced Lew Hatton. The rasp of his breathing was audible in the room, as he tried without success to check his anger. "All right, you!" he gritted, blue eyes blazing out of his homely, brick-red face. "So it's done! I know how you've helped Spade Pierce to rob me, you dirty, thieving—"

Setting down his own glass, the gambler straightened and looked at him coldly. His eyes still hadn't changed expression. But the voice that cut through Kelsey's words had a sharp edge to it.

"Hold on!" he snapped. "I don't take that kind of talk from anyone!"

"You'll take it from me—because it's true! My luck couldn't have been that bad. Not for two weeks straight! I should have won part of the time—and I would have, if you hadn't stripped the decks and played out of your sleeve every damn chance you—"

"That's a lie!" Hatton charged.

Kelsey went right on, hotly, building into a weak rage. "You led me on! You milked me clean for Pierce, day after day—"

"You led yourself on!" the gambler amended. "I work here—it's nothing to me who I play with. I have to make a game for anybody who wants one. But you kept coming back, and every time you got wilder. You beat yourself!"

The rancher's face had paled a little, and his mouth twisted harshly. "Try to talk out of it—go ahead! Why, you filthy tinhorn—"

Hatton saw it coming a moment in advance. Lashed by his own words, Kelsey suddenly bit them off and was falling back into a crouch. His right hand shot downward, came up palming the rubber butt of a heavy sixgun.

Lew Hatton couldn't do anything else in the face of that but defend himself. Seconds after the other started his draw, his own hand was moving—up toward the breast of his coat, sliding in easily toward his armpit. Fingers closing around the hideout, he drew the lean hand out easily, gracefully. The two weapons coughed their bullets forth almost at one time.

But as burnt powder and silence pressed in again on the tail of the shots, Kelsey stumbled. He caught himself with one hand gripping the edge of the bar, hard. Astonishment and pain washed across his homely features. The gun slipped from his fingers with a thud against the floor, and he reached up to claw at his chest as though he would try to dig out the bullet that was killing him.

Then he collapsed, dropping in a lifeless heap at the foot of the bar.

Looking down at him, Hatton frowned. He hadn't wanted this. He had killed before; and always, it seemed, in some futile manner. There was no reason why Kelsey should have died. But the rancher had forced him to it.

Hatton looked around at the men in the silent room. He saw Spade Pierce, who had come to the door of his office at the shooting. As he looked at the paunchy figure of the saloon man, and the evil that lived in his narrow eyes, the beginning of disgust tugged at the gambler's mouth...

Then there was a great deal of confusion. Town Marshal Ed Lane came hurrying in—a small, spare gent in his fifties, with thinning hair and level

eyes that seemed to look right through you. Lips pursed at sight of the dead man on the floor, he set briskly to work. He took a look at Hatton's gun, and shot out a rapid fire of questions about the shooting; everyone who had seen it told him that the gambler had been forced into his part.

AFTER A bit, the coroner came in and took the body away. And presently, Hatton found himself alone with the marshal in Lane's cubbyhole of an office, eyeing the back of the little man as the latter stood gazing silently out the door, pipe smoke curling above his thinning hair. Shadows were long and sharp in the late sunlight outside.

"A bad business," said the marshal at last, with a sigh. "I'd close that Red Rooster in two minutes if I could." He turned, cocked a challenging eye upward at the gambler. "Yeah," he added, "you can tell Pierce I said so, too!"

His words irritated Hatton. "Don't look at me," he retorted "I'm new to this town, and I don't figure to take sides in its battles. I draw my pay, and that's all I care about."

Lane puffed a cloud of smoke, shrugged. "Okay," he said. "But Tom Kelsey was a good man—hotheaded and unreasonable at times, maybe, but that's little enough against him. It's made me pretty sick to watch him goin' back and goin' back to that clip joint, and losin' his shirt every time—"

"The games I deal are square," Hatton told him, levelly.

"Well, maybe so. But what of it? That can't make much difference now to Kelsey—or his womanfolks."

Hatton looked at the other sharply. "What women?" he demanded.

"He had a wife and a girl—both as fine a pair of ladies as I ever knew. They had this little Rafter K spread down on Somers' Creek, and they was a mighty happy family—until the Red Rooster got its claws into Tom!"

The marshal glanced into the street again, suddenly pointed with his pipe stem. "You can take a look for yourself!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's been and told them what's happened, and they're comin' in now. Take a

look and see what your cards and bullets have done."

Reluctantly, Lew Hatton went to the door and stood there watching as a buckboard and team tooled into the thick dust of Banville's main street. The younger woman held the reins; her mother sat beside her, head bowed in crushing grief. Looking at the dark face of the gambler, Ed Lane thought for a moment he saw a shadow there—a hint of self-disgust, or regret for irrevocable wrong done.

"I didn't know," Hatton said, slowly. "I didn't know about them—"

The marshal only grunted, but he put a lot of meaning into it.

Riding beside the buckboard was the man who had gone out to tell Kelsey's widow and daughter the news. He happened to glance in the direction of the marshal's office now as they rode abreast of it, and caught sight of Hatton standing in the door. At once he leaned and spoke to the women in the buckboard, and both lifted their heads and stared at the gambler.

There was loathing in their eyes. And Hatton, his face like stone, met their glances squarely, bearing the brunt of their scorn. He was familiar with the painted girls of saloon and honkytonk; he was not prepared for the loveliness he saw now, as the face of Tom Kelsey's daughter was turned to him. Somehow, it tightened his throat for an instant.

And then the buckboard had passed on down the rutted street, leaving Hatton staring after it from the doorway. Behind him, the marshal asked quietly, "Sort of proud of your profession right now, Hatton?"

The gambler jerked around in sudden anger. "That killing wasn't my fault," he retorted, hotly. "Kelsey picked the fight, didn't he?"

Lane said nothing; only looked at Hatton as he dragged another puff of smoke out of his pipe. But the gambler knew suddenly, as well as though it had been put in words, what the other was thinking.

HIS FACE darkened with resentment. "All right, say it!" he gritted. "Cards and liquor and gunplay—I stand for those things, and it was

those things that ruined Tom Kelsey and finally killed him. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The marshal calmly tamped out his pipe. "You said it pretty well," he muttered. "An' I reckon the Kelseys see it the same way." He stuffed the briar in the pocket of his coat. "Well, remember this, Hatton! Honest cards or not—if I ever get the chance to buck Spade Pierce and close out that damn Red Rooster place of his, I'll close you out with it!"

Hot with rage, Lew Hatton turned his back and strode out of the marshal's office. Lane had struck very close, with those few terse words. The pride of a gambler, and his anger at being looked on as a pariah, were suddenly very high and strong in him.

But what the lawman had said troubled him, too, the more he let his thoughts work on it. And there was something else. Two women in a buckboard, looking crushed and alone as they drove through Banville's dusty street. A face, young and proud and sadly beautiful. . . .

He passed the saloon owner, Spade Pierce, almost without seeing him. But then, without knowing exactly why he did it, he turned on his heel and came back a step along the plank sidewalk, stopping the fat man.

"Just a second, Pierce," he said. "I want to talk to you."

The narrow eyes bored into his; the cigar wheeled as the other said, "Yeah?"

"About the notes Kelsey signed for you. Now that he's dead, I suppose you're going to go easy on those, aren't you?"

Pierce studied him coldly. "What's it to you?" he demanded.

Hatton was asking the same question of himself. He said, "Nothing, I reckon. But I was just thinking of his widow—"

"And the gal, huh?" There was almost an evil sort of humor lurking far back in the saloon man's piggish eyes as he said that. He took the soggy butt of the cigar out of his mouth, spat on the sidewalk. "Well," he said, surprisingly, "you can forget about the notes. I've torn 'em up already."

Hatton hadn't expected that. He'd thought it might take some persuad-

ing. Now he blinked a little, nodded. "Good," he said. "I'm glad you saw it that way..."

But he was not quite convinced, for there was something in Pierce's manner that didn't set right.

However, that seemed to close the episode of Kelsey's death. Hatton went back to his work at the saloon, and no one detected any change in him. He was, perhaps, even more close mouthed and unreadable than before, but that in itself wasn't strange.

The front he gave to the world hid much; and if he suddenly began to find less pleasure in the whisper of the cards, in the clink of chips on baize-covered tables, he did not show it. If, in the deep of the night, he sat on the edge of his cot in the hotel, smoking and staring at nothing, no one knew. For he hardly understood with any clearness, himself, just what was happening to him.

It was with strangely mingled feelings of dread and anticipation that, on the day of the funeral, Hatton found himself in the group that went to stand at the grave of the man he'd killed.

He knew he wasn't wanted there. He felt the weight of the hostile glances that ranchers and their wives threw at him as he stood apart from the rest, gaunt and sombre in his dark gambler's clothes. Mouth hardening a little, he ignored them. He knew, suddenly, that he was waiting for only one thing, and when it came his heart leaped and swelled within him until he thought it would pound a hole in his chest.

One arm around her mother, the girl came walking across the clipped grass of the crude burial lot. Hatton had learned her name—Mary. A very ordinary name, but somehow filled with the honest simplicity that was the girl herself. She had real strength in her. Hatton knew at once that his first brief glance had not lied to him; and looking at her, he told himself, bitterly, that he was a fool.

THROUGH the brief services he watched her quietly, drinking in the sight of her. Then the pine box coffin had been laid away, and the first clods of earth dropped in upon

it. The little group dispersed. The girl was among the last to leave, and Hatton stood at a distance watching her as she remained arranging the flowers she had brought.

Hat in hand, he walked over to her. She glanced and saw him coming, and at once he saw the stiffening of her body. Coldly, she rose to face him; and not far away, her mother had turned and was staring at him, too.

"Miss Kelsey," he began, "I—just wanted to tell you how sorry—"

He faltered and stopped. There was a bitterness and a wall between them against which his poor words could not prevail.

The girl said only, "Very well."

Hatton fumbled in his pocket and brought out a battered wallet. He looked down at the cracked, bulging bulk of it, and then at Mary Kelsey. "I would like to do something," he told her. "I was going to offer money to you and your mother, but—I suppose you wouldn't take it—"

"You are quite right we wouldn't!" she answered, shortly. "And if that is all you have to say—"

The same resentment Marshal Lane had roused began to stir in him again. "You're not being fair, Miss Kelsey," he protested. "I didn't want to do—what I did the other day. It was forced on me. I couldn't stand there and let your father plug me, could I?"

"You should have!" The loathing was in her gray eyes; her breast rose and fell under the black of her mourning dress. The mother came a pace or two nearer; uncertainly. "You should have died, not him! The money he lost to you was the thing that put him in a mood for killing. You goaded him on—and he was the one to die!"

Dark thunder swept uncontrollably into Hatton's face, at that. "I see!" he exclaimed. "'Holier than thou,' is that it? Miss Kelsey, I'm not proud of the work I do; but just because I make my living out of cards instead of breaking my back in the dirt, I'll be damned if I—"

He caught himself suddenly, and instantly his mounting temper cooled. He had forgotten where he was; had forgotten the silence of the burial lot, and the newly covered grave at their

feet. This girl, whose scorn-filled eyes and biting words had lashed his anger, was the daughter of the man who had just been laid there for his final rest. The man whom he had killed.

Contrition filled him. "Forgive me!" he pleaded humbly. "I didn't mean—I'm sorry!"

She tried to control her voice, but emotion put a trembling in it. "Are you finished?" she asked, tensely quiet. "I think you've done quite enough, Mr. Hatton. You've taken away my father, and our home—"

His head jerked up as he stared at her. "Your home?" he echoed. "I don't understand!"

"I suppose you didn't know that Spade Pierce made my father deed over the Rafter K to him!"

That staggered Hatton. "No!" he exclaimed. "I swear it!"

She said, "I think he made it contingent upon payment of the money my father owed him. But now—father is dead! And Pierce has the deed, and—I hope you're pleased with everything you've done!"

Suddenly she couldn't bear to talk to him any longer. She turned and walked away, small shoulders back, head proudly erect as she took her mother's arm. Hatton was left staring after them.

HIS RESENTMENT at the girl had been swept away by the news she had just given him. Dragging on his hat, he stood there thinking over this new angle; and slowly his jaw muscles began to harden into knots.

So Pierce had lied! He remembered how smoothly the saloon man had told him about tearing up Kelsey's notes. Hatton was just the tool he'd used to satisfy his greed!

Inwardly seething, but with the old, deadly calm showing in his face, Hatton started down the hill toward the sunbaked boxes that were the houses of Banville.

When he reached the saloon, he strode on back and looked in Pierce's office. The fat man wasn't behind his desk. Hatton slammed the door and went over to the bar. "Where's Pierce?"

"I dunno," the barkeep told him.

"He went out awhile ago. Took Stew Bardon and one or two of the other boys with him."

Hatton stopped outside the batwings, looking up and down the sun-smitten road as he built a cigarette and lighted it. Then he went over to the livery barn and rented a bronc.

He was a good horseman, although he seldom rode. Leaving the town behind him, he struck out across lush grazing land, browning now under the hot summer sun, and sought the wooded foothills where Pierce's Wigwam outfit was located. But he never got as far as the ranch, for as he came out on a spur he looked down over the burning plain and saw three riders jogging away from there.

At this distance, through the heat haze and dust of the valley floor, he couldn't see the trio clearly; but he didn't have to be told who they were. Pierce, and his gunslinger Bardon, and another. And they were heading in the direction of the flashing brightness which was Somers' Creek.

Face grim, Hatton ticked his mount's ribs with spur steel and set it on a course down through the hills. The leisurely gait Pierce and the others were taking indicated they were very confident and sure of themselves; it also gave Hatton time to beat them to the goal if he hurried. And that was what he did. Using the spurs, he cut a circle around them and then struck out in a rolling gallop. He had left them far behind when Somers' Creek showed ahead, and the tiny buildings that were the Rafter K.

Hatton dropped from a saddle into a cloud of dust, and waded through it toward the front door of the little house. It was a neat place, with a tiny porch and curtains at the windows, and vines climbing up the white wall. The door opened as Hatton came up, and Mary Kelsey faced him.

She had a rifle in her hands, and beyond her Hatton caught a glimpse of her mother, face white with grief, and with fear at the sight of him. He needed nothing more to tell him that these women were alone here, and that there would be no one to help them when Pierce came.

But the gun made him hesitate. The

girl said, "All right. You don't need to come any closer."

He shook his head. "You won't listen to me," he told her. "So I'll not try to talk. But take a look back there along the trail."

She followed his pointing finger, and caught her breath sharply at what she saw. "Spade Pierce," she exclaimed.

"Yes. He's coming to take over—or try it!"

Her eyes blazed, and her small hands tightened on the rifle stock. "Just let him!" she said, tightly.

Hatton heard the gasp that the old woman gave, at that. He said, rather harshly, "Don't be silly. You're all alone. One woman against the three of them. And I think your mother looks as though she were going to faint."

The girl turned then to glance at her, alarmed. She freed one hand to put it on her mother's shoulder. And it was a simple matter for Hatton to step to the door and pick the heavy rifle out of her other hand.

MARY KELSEY tried to take it back; but he took her arm gently and forced her into the living room of the little house. "Please," he begged. "Look after your mother. I know you hate me; but let me try and handle this for you."

Before she could answer he was outside again, closing the door behind him. The last glimpse he had of her showed her gray eyes baffled and angry, and yet with a new uncertainty creeping into them as she stared after him.

Lew Hatton didn't like a rifle, so he leaned this one beside the door and felt instead for the light revolver in its clip holster under his arm. It was there, and ready. So he went to the front of the little porch and leaned casually against a post with the vines dripping about his head, and waited for Pierce.

The fat man was in the center, on a jug headed roan, with squint-eyed Stew Bardon at his right and another gunslinger on the other side. They drew rein before the house and stayed in the saddle, while they eyed the lone man who guarded the door.

Spade Pierce looked suspicious and puzzled. "Morning, Hatton," he said, cautiously. "I didn't figure to find you here."

"Don't reckon you did." Hatton still stood at ease, one shoulder against the post. His face was blank, unreadable.

"Social call?" the saloon man asked, feeling him out.

The gambler's reply was a slow shake of the head. He didn't once take his glance from the eyes of the other, and Pierce began to grow nervous.

"Well," the saloon man said, "we're here on business ourselves. If you'll excuse us, we want to talk to the ladies—"

"I'm settling this affair for them," Hatton answered. He straightened, and was suddenly wary, intent. His voice cracked out: "Take that phony deed and turn around and get the hell out of here, Spade! That goes for your hired killers, too!"

Pierce tauted. "Oh, you know about it, eh?" he snarled. "Well, this deed—"

"—Was bought with gambling debts—which aren't and never have been legal!" Hatton finished. "I'm not letting you collect on it; and I reckon you know Marshal Lane wouldn't have anything to do with it, either!"

He thought Spade Pierce was going to explode, then. He saw the two gunmen watching their boss, waiting for instructions.

"Damn you, Hatton!" the saloon man shouted. "Keep your nose out of other people's business! Get out of that doorway and—"

"I don't know but what I ought to kill you, Pierce," said Hatton, quietly. "I killed Tom Kelsey, and he didn't deserve it any more than you do. He wouldn't have crowded a man's widow and daughter this way, on the very day of the funeral. He wouldn't have been such a damn skunk!"

With a screech of rage, Spade Pierce suddenly dug for a gun. He was fast—faster than Hatton could have dreamed. The gambler's weapon was barely out of its clip holster when the first bullet crashed into him. That bullet was meant for his heart; instead, it hit the gunarm that was

doubled across his chest, and broke it. The hideout gun dropped from Hatton's numbed fingers and struck the floor of the porch. And the gambler, in the fierce grip of pain, dropped after it.

He heard Pierce's shout of triumph, as from a great distance, and knew the saloon man thought that slug had killed him. Fire raged through his shattered arm, gnawed into his brain.

HATTON forced himself up, looked and saw the gun he'd dropped lying inches away. He groped for it with his left hand. Stew Bardon yelled at his boss as he saw that the man was still alive.

Next moment a snarling hell of lead rained down on the neat painted floor of the porch. Hatton hoped vaguely none of those flying slugs would go through the door, into the house where the girl and her mother were. He got the gun into his fingers as the hot hand of lead touched him in a couple of places.

Then he was answering the fire of the three killers, left-handed. Stew Bardon screamed and dropped from saddle.

Spade Pierce and the other man were fighting their lunging horses, that had been frightened to a panic by the racket of the gunfire; Hatton knew that only that fact had saved him from their bullets. Carefully, he propped his elbow against the floor beneath him and drew a line on the saloon man's bulky frame.

Acrid smoke bit into his eyes with the tug of the trigger.

He barely heard the report. A gray fog was coming down on him. Through it he saw, dimly, two horses galloping away, dwindling against the horizon. There was a man on the back of one, crouched low over the neck of the pony as though mortally afraid of bullets from the rear. But the saddle of Spade Pierce's jug headed roan was empty.

A bulky figure lay still in the dirt, in front of the house.

Fog settled in again. It was cool—cool and soft, like a hand. But maybe it really was a hand he felt.

He heard himself saying: "The deed—get it from his pocket. Tear it up. It's worthless. . . ."

Another voice was sobbing. Something like, "Don't die! Please don't die!"

"You're being silly, Mary!" That, he thought, must be Tom Kelsey's widow speaking. "He won't die," she said. "He's only shot up a little."

And Hatton told himself that she had to be right! For Mary Kelsey and her mother would need help on the Rafter K, now that Tom was gone.

He knew for sure only that, if he lived, cards and gambling would be a thing of the past with him. It was better to sweat and toil in the clean earth, and be free of men like Spade Pierce, and the Red Rooster with its smoke and stench.

He knew, too, that the loathing would be missing from the girl's gray eyes, after this. To Hatton, lying half in the shadow of oblivion, it was not necessary to ask for more. . . .

● END

SON OF A GUN

by Bess Ritter

ONE OF THE favorite dishes of the old-time western cowboy was a stew called all sorts of names but the mildest of them all was "son of a gun". Everything went into it except the hide, horns and hoofs of the animal in question. This always, incidentally, came from "the other feller's herd," as no cowman liked the taste of his own beef.

To rustle it up, you cooked the toughest ingredients first—such as the heart, which was cut into tiny cubes; and the tongue, which was skinned before it was cubed. Then pieces of tenderloin, and sweetbreads and liver. These last were used sparingly to avoid bitterness.

Next, you had an argument, if there were other cooks around, as to whether or not the marrow gut should be added. For even though this is only the tube connecting the two stomachs of cut-chewing creatures, opinions on its value to the stew were always varied and sometimes violent. If

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THROUGH GUNSIGHTS

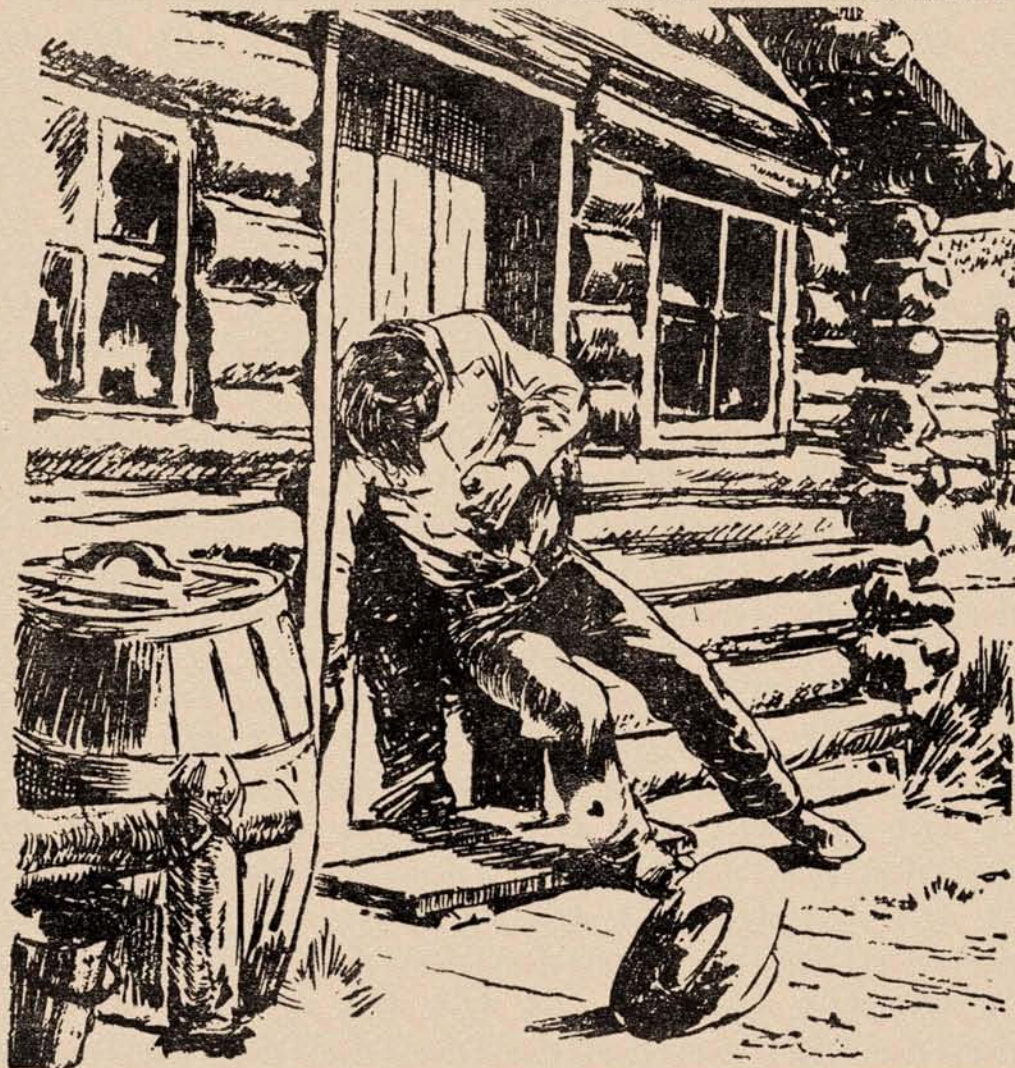
by JOHN COLOHAN

IT WAS a disconcerting discovery that big Rod Donnelly made in Elmo

Park that day. He was sprawled flat on the ground then, with a rifle shoved out before him and a man's white face notched neatly in the center of his sights; his finger was tightening on the trigger when big, rawboned easy-going Rod Donnelly, who'd been packing a gun of one sort or another ever since he'd been a kid, found out that he didn't have what it took to kill a man.

Not that there was any lack of provocation. Just a few minutes before Donnelly and bearded little Alec Brendle, who rode humped over in his

Bullets whined about him as he reached the cabin.



His finger was tightening on the trigger when Rod Donnelly, who'd been packing a gun ever since he was a kid, found out that he didn't have what it took to kill a man....

saddle like a jockey, had swung their mounts across a flat filled with new snow. They had covered forty miles since daybreak, the better part of it in silence. Alec Brendle was a Scotsman, frugal even with his words, and Donnelly had picked up something of the old man's habit; but as they turned their horses up slope toward the trees Donnelly put his head back and saw their cabin just ahead. Beyond the cabin, still hidden by the trees, was the prospect shaft they had gouged out of the rocky slope—the mine that was to make them rich.

"She's still there, Alec," the younger man said cheerfully.

"Aye," said Alec Brendle.

It was the last word he ever spoke. The bullet hit the little Scotsman in the chest; it knocked him backward and out of saddle as his frightened horse plunged aside. Donnelly heard the blasting roar of the shot, the twin echoes of the two shots following; he felt the tug of the bullet that touched a sleeve of his bearskin coat. His horse was rearing frantically when hidden rifles on the hillside slope crashed in a second shattering volley.

The shelter of the trees, and safety, was no more than twenty feet away, but there was little Alec Brendle on the ground. Deftly the big puncher slipped his carbine from the saddle boot. Unhesitatingly he quit the plunging horse to kneel beside the fallen man. With bullets whining overhead he turned Alec Brendle on his back; he looked at Brendle's face and saw that the little Scotsman was beyond the need of help. Lead burned a path of fire across his ribs. As he threw himself toward the trees a bullet cut his feet out under him and sent him pitching forward in a headlong dive.

He landed on hands and knees, and still clutching the short rifle grimly, he crawled toward a snow-covered pinyon log. Back braced against the log, safe for the moment, Donnelly checked up on the damage done. One bullet had grazed his ribs quite harmlessly; a second had struck him in the leg, just above the ankle. It was this second wound which made Donnelly frown. Already his boot was filling up with blood.

He lifted his head for a hasty glance over that snow-covered slope, but saw no sign of the killers he knew were concealed somewhere above in rocks and trees. Calmly, dispassionately, he considered the situation. Old Alec Brendle dead, killed by a cowardly bullet out of ambush. An unknown number of killers between himself and the cabin. In an empty, desolate land, winter-locked, with the nearest ranch-house almost twenty miles away, he was afoot and wounded and outnumbered by a murder pack. What motive might lie behind the treacherous attack he did not know. It would be something about the mine, he thought. If he pulled out alive there would be time to consider motive later.

Flat on his side behind the log he removed the blood-filled boot. Awkwardly, but efficiently, he bandaged the ankle tightly with strips of cloth torn from his undershirt; that done, he set out to locate the men above him. Having lost his hat in his hasty dive for shelter he was forced to use his coat as a decoy. It was a good coat, a bearskin coat cut hip length for a man who spent time in the saddle. Donnelly had killed the bear; he had tanned the hide himself, and had the garment tailored to his own particular specifications.

Draping the bearskin coat over the barrel of his rifle, carefully the wounded man hoisted it above the level of the log. On the hillside a rifle crack. Donnelly lowered the decoy.

"One," he said.

He worked patiently, crawling through the snow, sliding the fur coat along the snow-covered log. By the time he reached the end of the log he had drawn half a dozen shots, and had a fair picture of the problem ahead of him. Three men on that hillside slope, he guessed; two hidden behind rocks close together, the third in trees and brush some fifty feet farther up the slope. Already this third man was working around the hillside to cut behind him.

There was no pain in the wounded leg yet, but the blood in his boot was uncomfortable and he was dragging a crimson trail behind him through the snow. The situation seemed to call

for a flanking maneuver, and with this in mind he turned his back on those men above him. Like a wounded animal slipping away from the hunter's gun he crawled through tunnels between snow-laden clumps of brush, using each bit of cover, each slight depression on the hillside slope to aid him on his way. He got away without a shot being fired; two hundred yards and he was deep in brush and trees, and he pulled himself erect then and tried his weight on the bullet-torn leg. And gasped at the sudden stabbing pain that ran through his body, knowing then that the bullet had shattered a bone. Donnelly's lips tightened in a twisted grin.

"Nice," he muttered. "Very nice, indeed."

WITH NO knowledge of when the first of that killer pack might break through the trees, calmly he took time out to make a pair of crutches. They were nothing fancy; they were two cedar branches hacked off with a pocketknife, with limb crotches to serve as arm rests, but Donnelly tried them in a few hobbling steps and found they would suffice. He went on awkwardly, slipping and sliding on the frozen slope, stumbling, falling, climbing to his feet again, but always working deeper into the trees as he pushed steadily up the slope.

How long it took to reach the top of the ridge Rod Donnelly didn't know. On crutches it was a heart-breaking chore; but reach the top he did; and once across the ridge abruptly he changed directions, pointing up canyon in a course which would lead him to the cabin. For the moment he had slipped away from his attackers. How long his luck would hold he didn't know. In this game of life and death he was terribly handicapped, but he had also one slight advantage; he knew each foot of this lonely country as a man might know his own back yard.

Two hundred yards up canyon he cut back toward the top of the ridge. Discarding the crutches temporarily he crawled through snow on hands and knees, shoving the rifle before him. Atop the ridge he lay flat, sweeping the wintry waste below in slow and careful inspection.

He located one man first, and then another. They were far below, mere blurs of color against a white background, moving cautiously from tree to tree as they sought to locate the man who had slipped away from them. If there was a third one in the party Rod Donnelly could not find him, although he gave ten minutes to the effort.

"He's gone ahead," he decided. "He's worked around the point."

Having placed the missing member of the murder pack to his own satisfaction Donnelly faced another problem. Both men below were within rifle range but as a shot would be a gamble, and with his crippled leg the cowpuncher didn't feel like trying to slip closer to the pair. And a shot now would reveal his position, undo all the advantage gained by the heart-breaking effort on the crutches. He was not very far from the cabin. . . .

The sound of a snapping stick jerked Donnelly around, froze him into sudden rigidity there on the frozen ground. Off to his left and below him a man had come suddenly into view from behind a snow-blanketed clump of brush, a man who must have been resting there through all the time that Donnelly had tried to locate him. In corduroys and heavy sheepskin coat, with a rifle swinging in his hand, he was pushing his way slowly up the slope. He was so close that Donnelly could hear the crusted snow crunching beneath his boots.

And Donnelly's lips moved soundlessly. "Galt!" he said. "Dave Galt!"

Dave Galt he knew quite well. Galt owned a little one-cow spread beyond the mountain. Also, he owned a pack of hunting dogs, and in spare time Galt had built a rep hunting mountain lions. More than once, on the trail of a big cat, he had stayed overnight at the cabin with Donnelly and little Alec Brendle. That now Galt should reveal himself as one of the men who had ambushed little Alec and himself was for an instant unbelievable to big Rod Donnelly; and then, suddenly, it was not surprising at all. He could remember nights when that dark and sullen man had sat around the cabin, asking questions about the mine the

while his beady eyes moved restlessly missing nothing.

Dave Galt had reached the top of the ridge. He went down on hands and knees; he crawled forward pushing the rifle ahead of him, scanning the snow-filled canyon below with alert and wary eyes. Quite evidently he had guessed that Donnelly might double back up-trail. He wasn't fifty yards from Donnelly, but Donnelly was beyond him on the ridge and Galt's attention was directed the other way.

And slowly, carefully, Donnelly worked the thirty-thirty carbine around and laid the barrel across a snow-crust rock. He knew this man he dealt with; even before today's events; he'd known that Dave Galt was a dangerous man. Galt was sprawled flat now, head and shoulders up, his body hidden by brush. Donnelly could see his tight fitting fur cap, the collar of the sheepskin coat. He drew a careful bead, his finger closing down on the trigger. He hesitated.

And then, as though warned by some subtle sixth sense, Dave Galt turned his head slowly and looked straight into Donnelly's eyes.

It was a queer thing. There was this moment when these two men looked at one another across fifty yards of space— Dave Galt, caught off guard, helpless, looking down a bright and shining barrel into the eyes of a man he'd planned to kill— Rod Donnelly, squinting through gun-sights at one of the murder pack who had done for Alec Brendle, his finger tightening on the trigger for the shot that would send a bullet crashing through Dave Galt's head.

AND NOTHING happened. It was queer, even to Donnelly. He couldn't pull the trigger. He couldn't add that ultimate ounce of pressure which would smash a thirty-thirty bullet between Galt's staring eyes. It wasn't sympathy, compassion, doubt; in Donnelly's mind was no question but that Galt was the man responsible for Alec Brendle's death. It was something fundamental; something buried deep in Donnelly himself. He wasn't a killer, it seemed. He couldn't kill a man.

And the big puncher's finger was still tugging at the trigger, and he was still staring at Galt through rifle sights, when suddenly the other man broke the spell. Dave Galt spun like a big cat in the snow to fling himself behind a pile of snow-covered rocks. Hardly had he disappeared when his rifle crashed, one shot and another and another, the bullets kicking up puffs of snow around Rod Donnelly's head.

Donnelly had ducked back automatically. He lay sprawled in the snow, thinking of that priceless chance he had let slip through his fingers—the chance to pay off one of Alec Brendle's killers with hot lead. He said disgustedly: "I'm damned! Buck fever!"

Pain from the bullet-shattered leg throbbed through his body. Face down in snow, he cursed the chicken-hearted softness which had caused him to spare Galt's life, knowing quite well that he might pay dearly for that instant of weakness before this game was over. Granted a similar chance there would be no hesitation on the part of Galt, or of that pair who travelled with him. Old Alec, dead on a snow-filled flat below, offered mute testimony on that point.

It was too late for regrets. Galt had ducked from sight. Galt was on one side of the ridge now, Donnelly on the other. The puncher twisted in the snow, gun held on the spot where Galt had disappeared. He gained a glimpse of Galt's fur cap above a rock; he triggered a hasty shot and the cap pulled out of sight. He knew that Galt had held it up to draw his fire. A second later Galt fired twice, the slugs whining harmlessly overhead.

Then it was that Donnelly got another shock. He had known that his leg was bleeding, but he was not prepared for the widening crimson circle in the snow where his foot had rested. That much blood meant that the bullet must have severed an artery in his leg. Already he had lost more blood than he could conveniently spare.

He threw a shot down slope in Galt's direction, not bothering to aim. Then, swiftly, he went to work on the ankle. With his bandanna handkerchief he rigged a tourniquet above

the blood-soaked bandage, twisting it tight and tighter with a stick, setting his jaw against the pain that rolled over him as he lashed the stick itself against his leg. It was done at last, and then, slowly, cautiously, crawling from bush to rock, from rock to snow-covered bush, he worked his way back along the ridge away from Galt and toward the cabin.

Knowing each foot of this country he knew exactly the point at which, having left Galt behind on the thickly-wooded hillside, he had to cross the ridge to drop down on the cabin from the rear. He persevered grimly, pushing his rifle ahead and dragging his useless leg behind, dropping down slope with agonizing slowness toward the cabin. The crutches he had abandoned.

There was a small space of level ground at the bottom of the slope. He managed it on hands and knees, expecting each instant to hear the blasting roar of guns from the hillside. Nothing happened; he pulled up in the shadow of the cabin wall without event. The cabin had one door, in front; there was a window at the back, on hinges and fortunately unlocked. He shoved the window open, hoisted his body over the sill, crawled inside the cabin.

Inside, he managed to get his one good leg under him and pulled himself erect. He hopped through to the kitchen. There was a fire in the range, and on the oilcloth-covered table were dirty dishes which had not been there when he and Alec had left the cabin two days before. Outside the kitchen window he could see a path already well-broken through the new snow leading to the tar-paper shack which had served Alec and himself as combination stable and blacksmith shop. That Galt and his men had spent time here was evident, but now Donnelly could see no sign of any of them about the place.

ON A CORNER of the kitchen table Donnelly assembled a miscellany of instruments and material: a Colt sixgun, a pocket-knife, a quart bottle of whiskey, a package of absorbent cotton, and strips of white cloth for bandages. Aware that he might be

interrupted any moment he lost no time. Already the tourniquet on his leg was biting into flesh; he set his jaw and hooked it up another notch. He cut the blood-soaked bandage from his ankle and soaked the leg liberally with whiskey. The bullet had gone through neatly, in and out. In the wound he rammed plugs of absorbent cotton soaked in whiskey, closing his teeth against the pain and pushing the plugs solidly into place with a match stick. He sloshed more whiskey on the leg, wrapped it tightly with layer after layer of bandage. That done, he removed the tourniquet and wrapped leg and foot in wide strips torn from a blanket. It was makeshift medicine, the best he could manage under the circumstances.

He was finished barely in time. He had just finished tying the blanket-bandage in place when he lifted his head to see men and horses coming up the trail toward the cabin. Three men, with two saddled horses; and then Donnelly saw that Galt and his crew had caught up old Alec's horse and his own. Their thought was plain enough; in this lonely wasteland a wounded man on foot would be in desperate plight.

The three men came on carelessly, Dave Galt in front, and behind Galt two men leading the captured horses. Donnelly recognized them both; the tall one was Pete Duchelle, the shorter one Clint Abad; both worked for Dave Galt's K Bar outfit beyond the mountain. Knowing them only slightly, Donnelly knew them well enough to know that both were tough hands.

He reached for his rifle, resting against the table. By the time he got the gun the men with the horses had turned aside toward the stable and Galt was coming up the trail alone. He came on, striding carelessly, a big, hook-nosed man in levis and sheepskin coat. Sixgun in hand Rod Donnelly worked his way along the wall to stand quietly just inside the cabin door.

The door shoved open. Galt was coming through the doorway when Donnelly stabbed him with the Colt.

"Lift 'em, Galt!" he snapped.

For the space of a single heartbeat big, hook-nosed Dave Galt stared at

him in stunned surprise. Then he moved like a striking snake. One hand pawed out in a lightning thrust to knock the gun aside. Galt's body twisted, and his big shoulders pinned Donnelly back against the wall. One hand found Donnelly's throat. With the other Galt was grabbing for the sixgun when Rod Donnelly shoved clear of the wall and smashed the barrel of the gun against Galt's head.

That single stunning blow checked the fury of Galt's attack, drove the hook-nosed man back on his heels. With only one good leg under him Donnelly grabbed Galt around the neck; he held with one hand while he brought the sixgun crashing down on Galt's head in a terrific blow that sent Galt toppling backward through the open cabin door. Donnelly sprawled on top of him.

Dave Galt was spread-eagled in the snow, unconscious. Donnelly pushed to his knees, and a gun roared, and the big puncher looked up to see Pete Duchelle, rifle in his hand, taking careful aim for a second shot from the door of the blacksmith shop. He threw himself aside as the gun exploded, and he heard the bullet thud into log walls at his back. With his sixgun he threw two shots at Duchelle and drove the man back inside the blacksmith shop. Grabbing Dave Galt by the collar he dragged the hook-nosed man inside the cabin.

There, watching meanwhile through the window, he bound Galt hand and foot.

Dave Galt rolled over. For an instant the beady black eyes he fixed on Donnelly were filled with puzzlement. Donnelly was sprawled on the floor by the window, watching the blacksmith shop.

"For a wounded gent you get around fast," the hook-nosed man growled suddenly.

He wriggled into a more comfortable position. "I could use a smoke."

"You could?" said Donnelly. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, drank in a lungful of smoke. "I could use some information, Galt. What in hell was your idea, killing Alec?"

Galt regarded him unblinkingly. "Figured the mine was worth it."

Donnelly stared at him. "The mine's

recorded. You couldn't jump it—you couldn't get away with it if you killed both of us—"

"Figgered to kill both of you," stated Galt brazenly. "Mebbe, though, I wasn't figgering to jump the mine."

"What was it, then?"

Galt's thin lips curled mockingly. "Roll me a smoke and I'll tell you."

BYOND the cabin, from the direction of the blacksmith shop, a gun roared once, and window glass shattered on the floor and the slug crashed into pans behind the stove. Donnelly glanced out casually. He rolled a cigarette and leaned over to shove it between the lips of the bound man on the floor. He held a match while Galt puffed contentedly.

"Tell me," he said.

"It was a tip I got," said Galt. "A gent in town tipped me off you two jaspers had banked more'n five thousand dollars in the last three months. Way I figgered it, that meant you and old Alec had hit a pocket of high grade—it couldn't mean anything else. I knew once the Pass snowed in there'd be nobody here until spring. Mebbe not then. Three men can do a hell of a lot of digging between now and next spring."

"You figured to clean the pocket out? Be gone in the spring, before we were missed—before the killings were discovered—"

Dave Galt grinned harshly. "Something like that. Course, after it was found you two had disappeared, after the excitement died down, a gent could move in and take the mine without too much trouble."

And Donnelly nodded grim understanding. His first thought had been that the killing of Alec Brendle had been brutally purposeless; he saw now that the crime, his own murder as well, had been planned by a cold and ruthless brain. Dave Galt had guessed correctly when he guessed that the two partners had hit upon high-grade ore. And, during the long winter months, the three killers could quite easily have cleaned out that pocket. They could have been gone with the spring thaws, leaving behind no record of their crime. If, later, they cared to come back and file claim to

the mine, there would be none to dispute their ownership.

"You hit it right, Galt," Rod Donnelly said slowly. "We found a pocket, Alec and me. Quartz you can crumble in your fingers, rotten with gold. It's up there now—and you'll never get it. Some of it will buy drinks for San Lorenzo the day you hang."

Dave Galt expelled a thin stream of blue smoke. "Mebbe," he said hardily. "I ain't on the gallows yet. It's forty miles to San Lorenzo, and you got two jaspers to wrap up and tag before you make delivery."

"Those gents will pull out, Galt."

Galt grinned at him. "With Alec Brendle dead down on the flat?" he jeered. "With them knowing they got a murder charge to face if you get out of here alive? Don't fool yourself, Donnelly. Those gents will camp right here till your hide's nailed on the wall."

And, deep in his heart, Rod Donnelly had no choice but to agree with that hooked-nose killer on the floor. The odds were two to one against him. More, the scales were tipped in another way: he was crippled; he had lost more blood than he could afford; and he knew in a few hours more or less that fever would be rushing through his veins. He knew that then he would be in no shape to deal with those killers beyond the cabin.

"They got the horses," Galt said. "Don't reckon you'll try to hop to town on one foot. And you got to sleep sometime. This is a finish fight, Donnelly, and you're still a hell of a long ways from San Lorenzo."

A finish fight! A fight he didn't have much chance of winning. Donnelly could see that now, very clearly. Stretched out beside the window, his wounded leg on fire, he watched against the chance of a surprise attack by that pair camped in the blacksmith shop. But probably they wouldn't attack; probably they would be content to wait. They could afford to wait. In this empty, snow-filled wasteland there was no need for haste.

"You had your chance to kill me once today," said Galt suddenly. "You had me dead center in rifle sights. Why didn't you squeeze trigger?"

"Maybe I was saving you for the gallows, Galt?"

"Hell!" said the hook-nosed man scornfully. "You didn't have the guts to shoot! I've known gents like that before now—gents packing a gun they were afraid to use. It takes nerve to kill a man, Donnelly—even a man you hate. Mebbe you didn't know that before today."

DONNELLY looked up. "You got that kind of nerve, Galt."

"Sure," said Galt. "It was my slug killed Alec Brendle. Why should I lie now? You had your chance to square it and you couldn't pull the trigger." He grinned wickedly. "Mebbe it was Bible stuff. Thou shalt not kill, eh, Donnelly? Mebbe that's why you held your fire?"

"Maybe," said Donnelly. He crawled across the kitchen to stoke the range with clumps of pinyon wood. He piled the firebox full, then crawled on to close the door between kitchen and bedroom, and came back to take his position at the window. Pain moved along his leg in knife-thrusts of agony. There was still no sign of activity from the blacksmith shop. Those men could wait. He couldn't. He had to bring this to a boil—had to end it quickly, one way or another.

Heat from the blazing stove spread out and filled the tiny room. Dave Galt wriggled in his sheepskin coat, perspiration flowing down his lean face.

"You trying to roast us Donnelly?" he snarled.

"Take off the coat," said Rod.

"With my hands tied behind me?"

Donnelly moved around him. "I'll untie you long enough to slide out of the coat," he said. "Don't try anything, Galt. Maybe I ain't got nerve enough to kill a man, but sure as hell I'll knock your skull loose from your shoulders if you make one funny move!"

He untied Galt's wrists, waited while the hook-nosed man wriggled out of the sheepskin coat, tied the wrists again. His gun was in Galt's back, but the other submitted without protest. From the blacksmith shop a rifle roared and a bullet buried itself in log walls.

Time crawled. Rod Donnelly sprawled by his window, thinking back. Remembering how his partnership with Alec Brendle had begun.

Suddenly, he rolled over, shoved the cabin door wide open. A lead slug sliced slivers from the door jamb. He looked at hook-nosed Galt. "We'll be going now," he said.

"Going!" echoed Galt. He stared at Donnelly. "You aiming to crow-hop to town Donnelly?"

"I got a better way," said Donnelly curtly. He reached for a strip of the torn blanket on the floor. "I'll have to blindfold you."

"Blindfold me?" said Galt. For the first time a trace of uneasiness was in the tone of the hooked-nosed man. "What you figgering to do?"

Donnelly's face was a bleak mask. "It will be revealed," he said, "Hold still or I'll cave your head in."

Tightly he fixed the blindfold around the bound man's eyes. And suddenly all of Dave Galt's harsh assurance was gone. There was the beginning of panic in Galt's voice.

"You aiming to use me for a shield, Donnelly?"

Donnelly cut the ropes binding his legs. "Stand up," he said. "It's cold out—you'll want a coat."

"What you planning, Donnelly?"

"Listen, Galt. I'm going to untie your hands now. Just long enough for you to crawl into your coat. I'll have a gun in your back all the time."

He prodded Galt with the six-gun to let him know that it was there. Then, body braced against the wall, he held the coat while the blindfolded man slid his arms reluctantly through the sleeves. He slapped a Stetson on Galt's head. "Your hat's outside. You'll have to wear one of mine."

Galt spoke earnestly. "Pete Duchelle and Clint Abad are out there, Donnelly. Both of them jaspers know how to shoot. I don't know what you're planning—"

Curtly Donnelly cut him short.

"Shut up. I thought you was a tough hand, Galt. Better save your wind— You'll need it. I'll get my

He saw the tight line of Dave Galt's lips. He knew now that there was a hat," said Donnelly. chink in Galt's armor.

HE TURNED, awkward on the one good leg. And in that instant, swiftly, Dave Galt made his play. Dave Galt, whose eyes were blindfolded now but whose hands were free, lifted a hand in lightning movement and jerked the blindfold from his eyes. For a fraction of a second the big man stood balanced on his toes. Rod Donnelly was in the act of reaching for a hat hanging from a wooden peg in the wall.

In a flash the hook-nosed killer saw his opportunity; just as swiftly he grasped it. His hands were free now; so were his feet. The blindfold was torn from his eyes. Weaponless, he lashed out savagely at Donnelly's jaw with his fist. He missed the jaw; the blow struck Donnelly's shoulder; but it knocked the one-legged man off balance and sent him spinning to the floor. He landed on his hips, gun lifting. Too late. Dave Galt was already at the door. Donnelly threw a shot at him, but Galt was through the door. Galt was outside, running—with desperate speed to beat a bullet at his back.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. Dave Galt, head down, was racing toward the blacksmith shop. His whole concern was to escape a bullet from Donnelly's gun and so he was quite unprepared for what occurred—for the crashing roar of guns from the blacksmith shop, or for the bullets that met him before he had covered half a dozen yards. They struck the hook-nosed killer, one bullet and another; they stopped his head-long rush and propped him upright for a moment, and then Galt's knees caved under him.

Rod Donnelly had crawled to the window. From the window he watched the blacksmith shop. He saw the door of the shop swing open, saw two men step outside. A tall man and a short one, they trudged across the snow-covered ground toward the cabin. Each man carried a rifle. The tall man said something to the short man. Both laughed. They came on. They had almost reached that twisted figure in the snow when Donnelly rolled over into the doorway. Donnelly edged the thirty-thirty through the door.

"Get 'em up! he rasped.

And both men stopped. Pete Du-

chelle and Clint Abad. Tough hands both, but now they were two statues, frozen into place. Then Lanky Pete Duchelle looked down at the figure in the snow.

"It's Dave," he said stupidly.

The words seemed to break a spell. Clint Abad flung himself aside, trying desperately to swing his rifle into line. The rifle barked from the cabin, and Abad went down, his gun unfired. Pete Duchelle managed to get in one shot, firing his rifle from the hip. The slug kicked up snow a foot in front of the cabin doorway. Rod Donnelly took deliberate aim. His bullet hit Duchelle in the center of the chest.

Rod Donnelly watched Duchelle go down. He lowered the rifle slowly. *Not a killer*, he thought. He'd been unable to shoot a little time back, when he'd had Dave Galt helpless under his gun. Now, with two killers trying to get guns into action, he'd had no trouble squeezing trigger. It was hard to understand. He let it go.

It wasn't over yet. He still had a long ride ahead of him—twenty miles to Lige Altman's ranch on Rock creek.

He owed Galt's crowd something there; they'd caught up the horses for him and put them in the barn. He was pretty sure he had enough left to make the ride to Altman's.

He crawled outside. Pete Duchelle was dead in the snow. So was Dave Galt. There was a bloody froth on Clint Abad's lips, but his eyes were wide open. He looked at Donnelly.

"We figgered...you was dead," he muttered. "Figgered...Dave was...in cabin..."

Donnelly crawled on. He picked up the black Stetson hat which had dropped from Dave Galt's head. It was his best hat, his town hat. He rolled Dave Galt over, and patiently he began to work the dead man out of the big coat—the black bearskin coat which had set that hook-nosed killer up as a target.

When he had finished the task, he glanced again at Clint Abad. Abad's eyes were closed now. Donnelly spoke softly to a man already dead.

"I figured maybe you would, Abad," he said. "That's why I let Galt wear my coat and hat." ●END

SAM COLT'S KILLER

Shortly afterward the father of the revolver died of his affliction. Just a few years earlier he had been arrested for a \$400 debt; upon his death he left an estate valued at \$5,000,000. His armory was making weapons at the rate of 1,000 per day, and also gun-making machinery for other armories all over the world. He did not live to hear the death knell of his revolving-breech rifle. Nor did he know that a new invention was about to come upon the scene which would revolutionize the firearm almost as much as had his own patent: it was the metallic cartridge.

However, the Colt armory survived this new ammunition. And after the first automatic pistols made their appearance abroad, his feature was soon adapted to Colt models, too. Since then, Colt has been the main supplier of this through two World Wars and several local ones, but world competition has increased.

Of about 200,000 revolvers and automatics made by Colt annually in today's relatively peaceful times, about 25 per cent are .22 caliber and

(cont'd from page 27)

for sportsmen and target shooters. The rest are for military, police and sportsmen. But the chips are down; there has been an influx of arms from other countries at lower prices which Colt has difficulty matching because of cheap labor abroad. Sam Colt started the game, but makers in Italy, Spain and England and Japan may be stealing the ball.

COLT WAS great gun fighter, although he never shot a living thing in his life as far as anyone knows. He gave us a precise system of mass production which was far ahead of his time, in addition to one of the greatest weapons the world will ever know.

The next time you pull out a Colt, whether it's a Trooper, Police Positive, the Cobra or the new Marshal—all revolvers—or the Woodsman, the Government .45, or the Commander—all automatics—remember the man who spent his life fighting those who said it couldn't be done, until he proved it could. ●END

BLOOD AND SWEAT - OR BULLETS?

by L. P. HOLMES

THE TRAVELING man wasn't exactly coherent, for which he could hardly be blamed. For when a man had been first scared half to death, then creased with a .45 slug and left for dead, and finally woke up to find himself still in the land of the living, his recollections of what had happened were bound to be somewhat distorted.

Of only one thing was he reasonably certain. At least two men had been in on the stage hold-up, and both were masked. As Sheriff Barney Carr pieced the picture together from the drummer's disjointed story, the drummer had been dozing and was awakened when the stage stopped abruptly. Right away there were two shots, and the startled drummer had stuck his head out the stage door just as Macklin, the shotgun guard had toppled limp and dead into the dust right under the drummer's horrified eyes. After which the drummer had just time to throw a single glance along the road and see the two bandits standing there, both masked, both with smoking guns. One of the bandits had cursed, stabbed his gun level and the drummer's senses had left him in a great, flaming crash of thunder and shock.

The grizzled old sheriff tried a few questions in his slow, gentle drawl. How had the bandits been dressed? Were they big or little men, or of medium size? Was there any characteristic of any sort by which they might be marked?

To which the drummer mumbled that all he knew was that there were two of them,

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The lynch mob had already gathered.



It was a hell of a country where a law-abiding citizen couldn't ride through without getting his brain blasted out by a .45 slug, but Sheriff Carr couldn't challenge every side-winder in town to guns in the dust at sunset!

that they were masked, that they had tried to kill him and that it was a hell of a country where a law abiding citizen couldn't ride through without getting his brain half battered out by a .45 slug.

BARNEY CARR looked up at Doc Oliver and shrugged. Doc shrugged back. So Barney left and Doc walked with him as far as the door. "Maybe when the shock has worn off he'll remember something else. Barney," said Doc. "If he does, I'll let you know."

Barney Carr walked slowly back to his office. Down street the stage stood in front of the livery barn. The grizzled old law man had already looked that over, along with the bodies of Jim Dykes, the driver, and Shove Macklin, the shotgun guard. So

much for visual evidence. Now he had to think.

There would be a lot of bumble-heads thinking about this too, reflected Barney grimly—and probably jumping at conclusions, like they always did. And the usual criticism would begin to be whispered about. That Barney Carr had been a good sheriff, but was getting a little old for the job now. That he spent too much time sitting around his office and not enough in the saddle. That if Longhorn County had a younger sheriff with plenty of 'git-up-and-git' to him, this sort of murder and banditry would not take place. That when next election time rolled around it might be a good idea if folks started voting with their heads and not with their hearts.

Barney had heard it all before. It took place every time any sort of a major crime hit the county. And those who did most of the criticising neglected entirely to keep track of the subsequent arrests and convictions, which, Barney reflected with a grim and sober pride, had been well nigh perfect.

And when they started talking a younger man for Barney's office, the name most often mentioned was that of Ed Dow. That was all right with Barney, for Ed was a good boy. Like his daddy had been, old Grizzly Dow, afraid of nothing under the sun. Strong and rugged, Ed could ride five horses into the ground and come up smiling. A better than average hand with a gun and a good head on him. But a little too chock full of the bust 'em wide open spirit of ebullient youth. Which led him to jump at conclusions a little too readily. Given time and the right sort of training, Ed would make a right smart law man.

That was why Barney had hired Ed on as deputy, though there were plenty who said at the time that Barney Carr had pinned a deputy's star on Ed Dow to move competition from the field. The fools! Couldn't they get it through their thick heads that a good law man had to be trained, same as for any other profession? That was the trouble in a lot of counties. They elected a backslapper, a gent with swagger and big mouth—and nothing else. Then wondered why so much

crime danced loose and free across the range.

Well, Ed Dow was out with a posse now at the scene of the hold-up, trying to pick up a trail and run it down. Maybe it would all turn out that simple. Once in a while it did. Though Barney figured this case as being a little different. There were certain angles about it which needed thinking over. And Barney Carr was still in his office, thinking over those angles when Ed Dow and the posses came clattering back into Prairie City, just at sundown.

Ed reported immediately, his wide shouldered, dusty figure filling the doorway as he came in, chaps swish-in, spurs clashing.

"No luck, chief," he reported succinctly. "There was a trail—two men. We followed it clear back into the Cutbank country. They split up there, one going east, one west. I sent Tom Garson and half the posse along one set of tracks while me and the rest of the boys followed the other. My set ended up in Whit Horse Creek and Tom's ran out in the Hardin Valley trail. Both broncs were bare-foot with nothing about 'em to tell off from any other set of bare foot bronc tracks. All we could go on was the original direction of the getaway trail, which was back into Cutbank. That set Tom and some of the boys to wondering about—well, they mentioned the names of Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger."

"What do you think, kid?" asked Barney Carr quietly.

ED DOW spread his long length in a chair and built a smoke. He stirred a little restlessly. "Well," he blurted finally—"Caspian and Studinger both got records. They both did time for this same sort of thing—stage robbery. And I've heard my old Dad say that a sheep killin' dog never gets over his taste fur mutton."

Barney Carr nodded slowly. "Something in what you say. I'm going to rustle a bite of supper and ride out to have a talk with Buck and Milo."

"I'll jog along," said Ed Dow. "Them two jaspers gone bad again, they'd know right off what you were riding in for and they'd smoke you down without giving you a single

chance for your alley. I'll go along to keep an eye..."

"No," said Barney Carr. "You're staying right here in the office, kid. Your job will be to keep the fur smoothed down on the wise ones. They'll be drifting in after supper, to tell you what I should have done, to hand out advice that nobody wants and that ain't worth a damn nohow. And to criticise; that's the best thing they do is criticise. You listen and you'll get a couple of ear-fuls. But it all comes under the head of experience."

It was near midnight when Barney Carr got back to Prairie City. A light was still going in the office and when Barney went in he found Ed Dow waiting for him. Young Ed was looking a little sullen. After one swift glance at his deputy, Barney smiled slightly. "They must have been rawhiding you and me pretty heavy, kid. Let's hear about it."

"Rawhiding is a mild word," growled Ed Dow. "Chet Shadrow was in and fit to be tied. He'd been over at Stone Corral setting up a way station for the projected stage line he aims to run into Baker Valley. He didn't know a thing about the hold-up until he got back to town. And then he hit here, raving. Vinson was down from the mines and demanding action of some kind or another. For do you know what them damned holdup got off the stage? They got the mine payroll, that's what they got. Close on to twelve thousand dollars. Vinson said the mine owners are going to yell bloody murder, and as Superintendent, he's going to be on the spot. Shadrow is howling because this is going to be a black mark against his stage line, besides losing his best driver and shotgun guard. They're going to raise hell and put a rock under it, them two are, if we don't get some kind of results and get 'em in a hurry. And I don't know as you can blame 'em. In their place, I'd feel the same."

Barney Carr got out his old pipe, stuffed it and puffed it aglow. "Along with all their howling, did they have any suggestions?" he asked mildly.

Ed Dow's tone grew a little defiant. "Everybody who was in seemed to be thinking along the same line.

Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger. Did you see them two?"

"Yep. Spent the evening with 'em. They're like a pair of tickled kids. They been digging a well up on that dry Bald Knob range of theirs and they hit a swell flow of good water. That means they can graze that chunk of range the year round now, instead of just in the spring. They aim to put in a wind mill and a couple of concrete water troughs. Opening up that Bald Knob range to year round grazing means they can put some of their bottom range into alfalfa. Darned smart, progressive cattlemen, them two boys."

Ed Dow got abruptly to his feet. "I'm going to turn in," he growled.

"Sure," said Barney Carr. "G'night, kid."

Ed Dow slammed the door behind him as he went out. Old Barney smiled grimly. "Think I'm a simple minded old fool, don't you, kid?" he murmured. "Well, youth has to learn, I reckon."

BARNEY spent the balance of the night on the office bunk and met Ed Dow at breakfast in the hash house. Ed was still sulky, curt and uncommunicative. While they were eating, Chet Shadrow came in, growling behind his black, bristly beard.

"Wondering when I'd get a chance to talk to you, Carr," he snapped. "What you aiming to do about that hold-up?"

"Why, try and run down the trail, of course. Golly! The cook sure got a good brew on the java this morning. Tie into a cup or two, Chet. Cheer you up."

Shadrow cursed, grabbed Barney Carr by the arm and jerked him around. "Listen here, you simple old coot," he growled. "You act like that hold-up was a joke. Well, it ain't. Two good men were killed, Jim Dykes and Shove Macklin. That drummer nearly got his, too. The mine payroll was lifted. It is all a heavy jolt against my stageline. I don't see it as any joke. Neither does Stent Vinson, the mine superintendent. Neither does anybody else around here who believes in law and order. And when I start talking serious business with you, you moon

over good java. Well, get this straight. We want some action on this thing. If you can't get it, we'll put that star of yours on somebody else who will."

Barney Carr blinked. "I aim to get some action, Chet—soon as I know where the trail leads."

"Why don't you try the trail that leads out to the Circle C S?" sneered Shadrow. "I've heard it said that Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger have had experience at robbing stages in the past."

"Mebbe so," murmured Barney Carr. "But that was in the past. I'd say those boys were pretty good citizens, now. They been digging a well up on their Bald Knob range and . . ."

"Listen!" growled the irate stage owner. "Maybe you were a good sheriff—in the past. But this is—now! And folks are wondering. . ."

"Folks are always wondering," murmured Barney Carr. "That's their privilege. Well—I got to be going. Pour your troubles on Ed. He's got young shoulders and broad ones. You stick around, Ed. I got some riding to do. Don't know when I'll be back."

Sheriff Barney Carr was gone from Prairie City for two whole days and nights and during that time he put in a heap of riding. He circled almost as far out as Baker Valley, came back through the Cut Bank country, hit the mines on Rawhide Peak where he had a talk with Vinson, the superintendent, then went back to Cut Bank. He hit White Horse Creek and the Hardin Valley trail, riding circle after circle, his weather-puckered eyes full of earth-searching scrutiny and remote, gathering thought.

He lived off a box of crackers and a chunk of cheese he had picked up at the store before leaving Prairie City. Both nights he slept on the ground, his saddle for a pillow, scanty saddle blanket his only covering. He seemed to grow more lean and leathery by the hour, but in those puckered old eyes a gleam of triumph was growing sharper and sharper. And at mid-morning of the third day, gaunt and dusty, Sheriff Barney Carr jogged back toward Prairie City.

On his way in he dropped by at the Circle C S for another little talk with Buck Caspian and Milo Stud-

inger. But the only person about the ranch was a wrinkled old Mexican, whom Caspian and Studinger had hired as a man of all work about the place. The Mexican was squatted on his heels in front of the ranchhouse, and his black eyes, as he looked up to face the sheriff, were sullen and resentful.

"Howdy, Pedro," hailed Barney Carr cheerfully. "Where's Buck and Milo? Up at the new well?"

PEDRO SPAT deliberately, with a contempt which made Barney's eyes narrow. "They are in jail," said Pedro. "You should know that, Senor Carr. You—who have posed as their friend. Yes—they are in your jail."

Barney Carr was suddenly very cool and quiet. "Let me get that right, Pedro. You say Buck and Milo are in jail. Who arrested them?"

"Your deputy, of course. Who would have taken them, if not you? Ed Dow arrested them, he and a posse. That, Senor—was black treachery on your part. And I, Pedro Lopez have little liking of you for it."

A flash of grim anger showed in Barney Carr's eyes, then faded to a cool, calculating gleam. "If I was responsible for it, I wouldn't blame you for feeling that way, Pedro," he said. "But I haven't been anywhere near town for the past two days and nights and I knew nothing of this. Nor did I give the order that it should be done."

Pedro searched the sheriff's face with a long, intent scrutiny, then nodded. "I am sorry, Senor," he said gravely. "You are not at fault. But I would get to town quickly, for among the posse I heard some talk of lynching."

"Grab a bronc, Pedro," said Barney Carr grimly. "We'll ride in together."

They wasted no time along the trail, but Barney Carr slowed as they reached the outskirts of the Prairie City. The town was crowded, the single street full of milling riders. And there was a group of miners there also. Barney let out a gusty breath of relief. There was a lynch mob forming, all right. But it hadn't reached the point of insensate, blind

action yet. Which meant that Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger were still safe.

"Stick around, Pedro," said Barney. "Nothing to worry about yet. I got a little chore over at Doc Oliver's place."

Barney slipped around the back way to Doc Oliver's house, which also contained the doctor's office and a hospital bed or two. Doc Oliver himself let Barney in at the back door. "About time you were showing up," grumbled Doc. "There'll be a lynching bee if you don't do something pretty quick. They tell me Ed Dow is sweating blood, worrying over whether he can protect his prisoners, now he's got 'em."

"Let him sweat," said Barney. "Do him good. Teach him something. How about that drummer, Doc? Is he thinking any clearer, now?"

"He's about well enough to travel, if that's what you mean. You want to see him, of course?"

"Yeah. For a few minutes."

The drummer was sitting up in bed, head encased in a broad, white bandage. "I know what you want," he said peevishly, as soon as Barney entered the room. "And there is only one thing I can add to what I told you before. Thinking everything over, particularly, how they looked—well, there were two of them, both masked. And I can't recall anything else but this. The one who shot me when he cursed and half whirled my way, the tails of the handkerchief he was masked with, sort of fluttered aside. And it seems I recall seeing something that looked like the edge of a beard. I wouldn't be positive, understand—for the next split second everything went to pieces in thunder and lightning. It ain't much—but it's all I can do about it, sheriff."

The gleam in Barney Carr's eyes had deepened. "You got no idea how much that little thing means, amigo. Thanks—a heap."

At that moment a wild, deep throated, concerted yell echoed in from the street. The drummer squirmed nervously. "Now what?" he demanded shrilly. "The crazy, damned country...!"

Barney was already on his way out. "Just a few of the boys who

need to have their ideas straightened out," he drawled.

THE MOB had made up it's mind. The crowd, a full hundred strong, was massed before the door of the sheriff's office, swaying, growling, cursing—yelling for the prisoners. Ed Dow stood on the step, facing that mob. He had a sawed off shotgun, held waist high, the twin muzzles swinging back and forth in a threatening arc.

Sheriff Barney Carr, slipping unnoticed up to the fringe of the mob, watched Ed Dow and nodded grimly. "Worried," he told himself—"worried and a little uncertain, the kid is. But not one damned bit afraid. He'll do."

Then Barney Carr went driving through the mob and he was no longer a shuffling, amiable, easy going old timer. In some strange and mysterious way he seemed to have grown taller. His leathery face was grim and harsh, his puckered eyes full of fluid ice. Men who turned to curse him when he shouldered them aside, quieted suddenly as they glimpsed that ice in the old man's eyes. And when a burly miner, somewhat addled with drink, aimed an angry blow at Barney Carr, Barney gun-whipped him with the merciless speed of a pouncing wolf. And in two more strides, Barney was up on the steps beside Ed Dow and turning to face the mob.

They yelled when they saw who it was, yelled taunts and threats. Barney looked them over coolly, waited until they quieted. "You're clawing at the wrong corral if you think you're going to take any prisoners away from the kid and me," he told them harshly. "You might as well break it up and git. Lynching is out. That's final!"

Ed Dow didn't say a word, but Barney heard his deep gulp of relief.

The mob wanted to argue. "We want Caspian and Studinger," yelled one of them. "We're going to string those two damned crooks up. They should have been hung long ago. You can't keep us away from them."

Suddenly Barney Carr was a snarling old tiger. He half crouched and both big guns leaped into his hands. "That's what you think!" he spat.

"Come and get 'em, if you think you're good enough. Ed, when I say the word, let 'em have that buckshot—both barrels. We'll show 'em who runs the law in these parts!"

That put it all distinctly up to the mob and they didn't like the spot. They might have rushed Ed Dow, had he been alone. They might even have rushed Barney Carr, had he been alone. But the prospect of rushing both these defenders of the law, when one held a sawed off shotgun and the other a pair of ready and potent six guns—well, that was something else again.

Those in the front rank of the mob began pushing back, away from the threat of the guns. Those in back and reasonably safe if the guns should bark, tried to hold the lines. Soon the mob was quarreling and cursing back and forth among its members. Barney Carr knew the signs.

"They don't want any of it, kid," he told Ed Dow quietly. "They'll be heading for the bars to try and drink their self-respect back pretty quick."

Barney holstered his guns, lifted an arm for attention. "I see Chet Chadrow and Sten Vinson out there," he shouted. "They claim to be the most hurt by that hold-up. I'll talk compromise with 'em—but I won't be bullied into anything. All right, Shadrow want to talk it over, we'll try and hit some agreement."

"Listen, chief," muttered Ed Dow in a choked sort of voice, "I ain't sure but what I've made a damned fool of myself. But Caspian and Studinger get a fair break before the law. I don't stand for them to be turned over to Shadrow and Vinson on any kind of a compromise. That goes!"

"Good kid!" murmured Barney Carr. "You're learning."

The mob, knowing its bluff had been called, and anxious to save its face, hailed Barney Carr's proposition with a yell of approval. Shadrow and Vinson were shoved forward and they came up to the steps sullenly.

"I'm tired, boys," said Barney Carr. "My feet hurt. Let's go in and sit down, where we can talk this over quiet."

HE LED the way in and relaxed with a sigh behind his battered

old desk. At the rear of the office was a locked door. This led directly into the jail in back. Ed Dow moved over and stood with his back to that door. He was taking no chances on Shadrow and Vinson pulling some surprise move and winning a way past that door to the two prisoners beyond. Barney Carr smiled slightly to himself as he noted the move.

Shadrow straddled a chair, stocky and sullenly defiant. Vinson, a thin faced man of medium size, nervous as a cat with all the excitement, paced up and down the room a couple of times before he sat down.

"I'm surprised at you two," said Barney Carr, in his old, amiable manner. "Last men in the world I'd expect to see in a mob. That ain't law and order and you know it."

"It ain't law and order to let hold-ups and killers run loose in this country, either," growled Chet Shadrow. "When the man supposed to handle such things, which is you, Carr, won't get off the dime—why then you got to expect the boys to take things into their own hands. If Ed Dow hadn't listened to reason and gone out and slapped an arrest on Caspian and Studinger, them two whelps might have been clear out of the county by this time."

"Buck and Milo wouldn't have left the county," drawled Barney Carr. "No need of 'em to. They ain't done anything wrong. Ed made a mistake when he went out and arrested them two. But Ed's young and anxious to do his duty. Any kid is liable to get over-eager and make a mistake. So I ain't blaming Ed none. I'm blaming," and here a distinct edge came into the old sheriff's voice—"I'm blaming them who talked Ed into it. Which, I'll gamble, is you, Shadrow—and you, Vinson. I figured you'd probably overplay your hand."

Shadrow grew very still in his chair. Vinson stirred, licking his lips. "What you driving at?" blurted Shadrow. "I don't like what you're hinting at."

"Shouldn't imagine you would, Shadrow. You're both under arrest, of course. I'm charging you with the murder of Jim Dykes and Shove Macklin, and for robbing the stage they were driving and guarding." Ab-

ruptly Barney Carr was a watchful tiger again and his puckered eyes full of ice.

Shadrow's laugh was more like a startled cough than anything else. "You're loco," he scoffed. "Don't make me laugh. Charging me with holding up my own stage."

"Of course," said Vinson thinly. "You're senile, Carr. I'd be liable to steal the payroll of my own mine."

"Not your mine, Vinson," rapped Barney curtly. "You only work there. Now let's get down to cases. You weren't in town the day of the robbery, were you, Shadrow. You passed out the story that you were at Stone Corral. Well, you went out there all right—in a buckboard. But you didn't stay there. You got a saddle bronc at Stone Corral and told the folks there you were riding into Baker Valley to look over the road and see where it needed fixing for stage travel. Well, you rode into Baker Valley all right, but then you cut back down White Horse Creek where you met Vinson. I found out at the mine that Vinson was away during the time of the hold-up. Shut up! I'm talking—and don't try and make any breaks. Keep an eye on 'em, Ed."

BARNEY CARR stuffed tobacco into his old pipe, puffed out a huge cloud of smoke. His cold eyes stabbed back and forth at Vinson and Shadrow as he tolled out his indictment.

"So you pulled that holdup. There was a chance Jim Dykes or Shove Macklin might have recognized you. So you shot 'em down—cold. You thought you'd left that traveling man dead, too. Then you grabbed the payroll money and headed back into the Tut Bank country.

"There you split up. Vinson went out over the Hardin Valley trail, which leads right around in back of Rawhide Peak, where the mines are, which made it easy for him to slide back to the mine, soft and cute. Shadrow, you took, to White Horse Creek and headed back for Baker Valley. You thought riding the creek bed would cover up your tracks. Well, it did as long as you stayed in it. But you had to come out of it finally, and you did. I can show you the exact spot.

"From there you cut across Baker Valley and back to Stone Corral, where you got your buckboard and drove home to town here. And were very indignant and surprised to hear about the robbery. And then wasted no time steering talk toward Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger. Easy to blame it on them two boys, because of their past records. You and Vinson had that angle all figured, didn't you. Well, it might have fooled a kid like Ed Dow, who is just learning this law game. But it didn't fool me. I been too long at the job of sorting out humans skunks from decent folks."

Ed Dow was listening and watching like a man mesmerized. Vinson had a shriveled, hunted look about him. Shadrow had a hard glare in his eyes. He laughed harshly.

"I can just see you presenting that kind of hairbrained moonshine in any law court as evidence, Carr. You'd be put in a straight-jacket, and rightly. You'll have to think up something better than that. Come on, Vinson—he's crazy as a coot."

Shadrow started to get up, but Barney Carr lashed a whip-like order. "Stay put! I ain't through. I got my best cards to lay on the table—yet! Twelve thousand dollars in that payroll. Pretty nice chunk of cash, split two ways. Six thousand apiece. Enough to make up for any loss of reputation to your precious stage line, eh Shadrow? And a pretty juicy chunk to add to your wages, eh Vinson?"

"And here is the funny part, the first angle that started me thinking. Nobody knew that payroll money was coming in. I didn't. Neither did Ed Dow. And it was a cinch that Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger didn't. No way they could have learned. But you knew it, Vinson and you, Shadrow. That fact will make a big difference in court, Shadrow.

"Couple of other things. That drummer saw one thing worth while before his light went out. He just remembered it and told me about it half an hour ago. The mask of the gent who shot him fluttered aside and he saw a portion of a beard. You're the only man in these parts who wears a beard, Shadrow. And on top of that—there's this!"

From an open drawer Barney Carr pulled a reward notice and slapped it down, face up, on the desk. "Wanted for murder and stage robbery," droned Barney Carr remorselessly. "Chet Sheldon alias 'Blackie' Sheldon. And the height and weight data fits you like a shirt, Shadrow. Also, it mentions a scar, across the left angle of the chin. Which a beard would come in mighty handy to cover, if you ask me. We'll have to call the barber in to shave that set of whiskers you pack, Shadrow. Just to be— Ah! You fool—!"

While Barney Carr had been speaking, Shadrow's lips had been peeling back in an ever growing snarl. Now he bounced away from his chair like a cornered cat and his right hand licked under his vest and came away bearing the blue-black bulk of snub nosed shoulder holster gun. But he got the weapon no farther than just into the clear when one of Barney Carr's guns stabbed across the desk top and coughed heavily.

Chet Shadrow staggered back, dropped his gun, made some blind and aimless passes before his face with loose and wobbling hands, spun slowly and crashed down, shot through the heart.

Barney Carr was up and leaning across his desk, smoking gun bearing on Stent Vinson. "Don't you try it, Vinson!" rapped Barney. "You'd have no better luck!"

Vinson wasn't trying anything. He was shriveled down in his chair, face and eyes ghastly. He had to gnaw at his shaking lips before he could get out a word. "It was all—his idea," stammered Vinson shrilly. "And he did the—the killing. He shot Dykes and—and Macklin. I swear he did. I swear it—I—"

"All right, Ed." broke in Barney Carr. "You turn Buck Caspian and Milo Studinger loose. We got a real

prisoner, now."

IT WAS GETTING on toward sun-down, Sheriff Barney Carr had been making up for lost sleep on the office bunk. Ed Dow was out around town, telling the world that the best and smartest sheriff in forty-eight states was Barney Carr. And if anybody wanted to say different, they had him, Ed Dow, to lick. Nobody did.

Barney was awake when Ed Dow came back in. For the first time since the showdown, they were alone. Ed Dow took off his deputy's badge and laid it on the desk. Barney yawned. "What's that for, kid?" he asked cheerfully.

"I ain't got brains enough to be a law man," mumbled Ed. "I'm going back to punching cows, where a strong back counts."

"You put that badge right back on, where it belongs," growled Barney. "You're doing all right. You're doing fine. Shucks! I came near muffing things myself. Take that reward poster. I nearly chucked it away half a dozen times, I'd had it so long. But each time I looked at it I got the feeling that I'd seen that hombre somewhere. So I kept it. And not until I come to suspect Shadrow did I realize who the poster was a picture of. If I hadn't been able to flash that on him, chances are I could never have bluffed him into a betraying break. Because I was guessing plenty. In this game you got to do that, once in a while. You got to learn all the angles."

"And me arresting Buck and Milo," growled Ed. "When was there ever such a clunk headed fool!"

Barney chuckled. "Everybody makes mistakes, kid. And everybody has to learn. Any law man needs training. Put that badge back where it belongs and we'll go eat."

● END

SON OF A GUN

(cont'd from page 66)

those against it lost, you cut it into small rings, threw these in the pot.

Warm water was used. Ingredients were added a handful at a time, and thoroughly stirred after each addition. The brains were cooked separately, and poured in at the end to provide a thickening. Vegetables were outlawed, except perhaps for just a small "skunk egg" (onion). The finished product was eaten with either biscuits made from sourdough, or "wasp's nest" or "gun waddin'" (typical Western names for Eastern-type white bread).

● END

KILLER'S HERITAGE

by NORMAN A. FOX

THOUGH the blue shadows of night were crowding down from the surrounding peaks, Webb Freeman could still see many miles of the wild tangled Mustang country from his porch steps. Hunkered there, his long body folded into an inverted N, the old rancher had identified the riders toiling up the trail from town long before Sheriff Anvil Shane and his posse were within hailing distance. It gave Webb time to prepare himself for their

coming but Webb was not a top-hand at deception and his heart was hammering when the lawman dismounted before his gate.

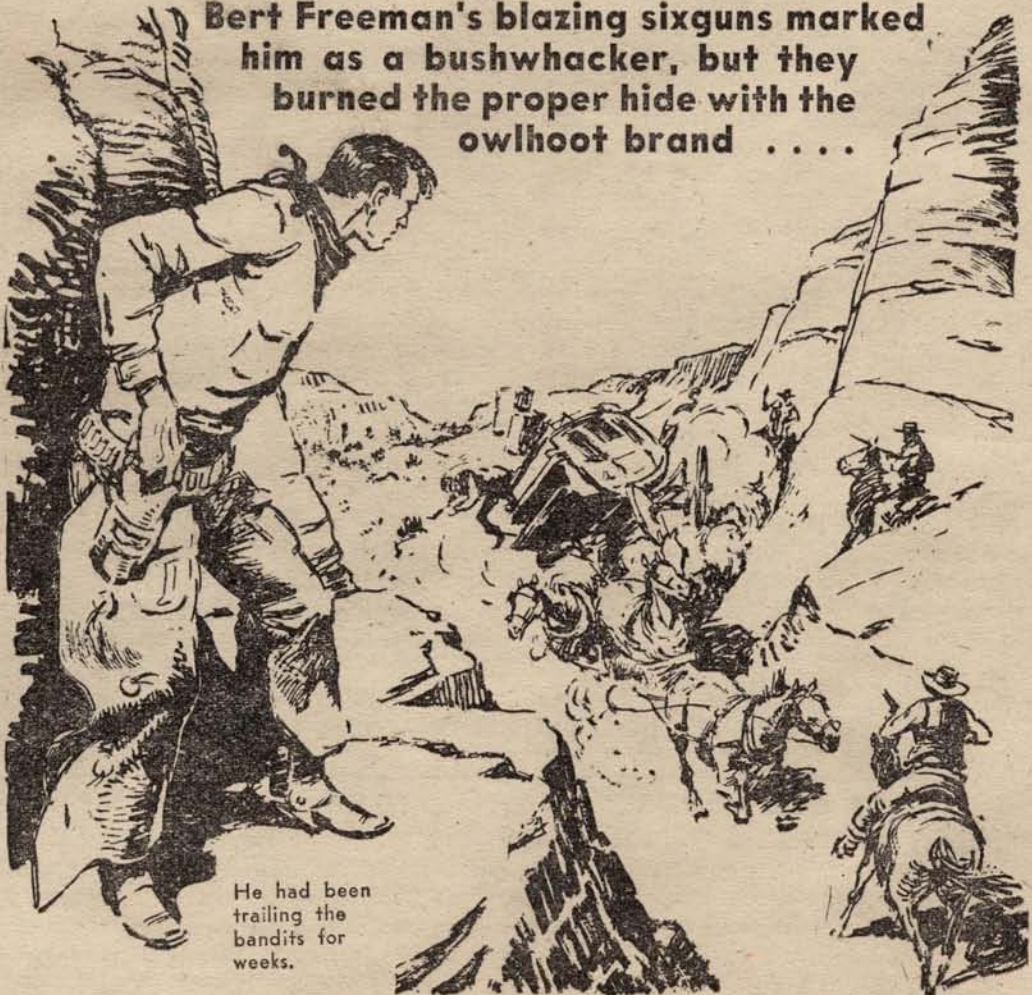
The posse sat their horses in silence beyond the ranchyard fence and Webb was glad Anvil Shane was coming in alone. He and the sheriff had been friends for more years than either could remember. Even though things were shaping themselves to ruin that friendship, Webb knew he should be glad to see Shane so he mustered a smile as the squat, solid-looking lawman came on.

"How-do, Anvil," he jerked. "How come yuh're galavantin' away up here this time o' evenin'?"

Shane's gray mustache drooped as though it were registering the weariness of his entire body. "I been galavantin'

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Bert Freeman's blazing sixguns marked him as a bushwhacker, but they burned the proper hide with the owlhoot brand



He had been trailing the bandits for weeks.

all day," he replied, "lookin' for a trail that ain't."

"The Jumping Jack?" Webb asked.

"Yeah. That black-masked hellion held up the night stage from Missoula again. But this time it's murder."

"Murder!" Webb echoed.

"Shorty Dale, the shot-gun guard," Shane amplified. "Shorty made a damn-fool play at the wrong time and the Jumping Jack got him plumb center."

Webb puckered his seamed face, tried to whistle his amazement but the chill coursing through him froze his lips. If Shane had looked at him then, the sheriff would have read the fear in Webb's face. But Shane's eyes were probing about the ranchyard. Webb Freeman's spread had seen better days, for blackleg had taken a lot of his cattle the season before but Webb knew Shane wasn't looking for the signs of his poverty.

"Bert around?"

"My boy? Nope. Sent him to comb a few strays out o' the timber," Webb replied. "We're kinda short of ready cash hereabouts so I thought I'd have Bert drive some stock to the butcher at Mustang."

ANVIL SHANE digested the information thoughtfully, tugged at his moustache. And Webb, who knew Shane better than he knew any man, recognized that tell-tale symptom. There was something the sheriff wanted to say but didn't know how to word.

"Yuh wanted tuh see Bert?" Webb encouraged.

"No-o-o," Shane countered. "You might keep Bert close to the place, though." He paused, reddened, blurted on: "The whole country's just about loco account of this Jumping Jack. Folks don't always think straight when they're riled up and they're apt to be suspicious of a shadow. Bert does a lot of lopin' around by his lonesome..."

The words stiffened Webb. Anvil Shane was voicing Webb's own suspicions but it hurt like blazes to have someone else point an accusing finger at Bert Freeman. Something akin to wrath tinged Webb's tone when he spoke.

"Yuh mean folks think my boy's the Jumpin' Jack?"

"Now don't get het up," Shane said soothingly. "Half the country is suspicious of the other half. Look at it this way, Webb. You're broke, need money. You been a damn good dad to Bert and the younker would probably do anything to help you out. Bert's about twenty, ain't he? Just at the wild age when a younker's ready to do a man's work but ain't got a man's judgment. You see how it adds up?"

"And that's what yuh believe?" Webb asked weakly.

Anvil Shane rested a friendly hand on the oldster's shoulder. "Bert's your son—which means he couldn't be anything but straight," the sheriff said softly. "I'm just showin' you how a lot of folks might figger things. I'm just suggestin' you keep Bert home so nobody can talk."

The kindness in his voice warmed old Webb Freeman. That speech was like Anvil Shane, typical of his generous heart. Webb had voted for his old friend election after election and he could understand why the people of Mustang had unanimously followed suit. Shane was worth it. Webb raised grateful eyes, was framing a reply when one of the posse called the sheriff.

"Come on," the fellow shouted. "Don't chin all night, Shane. We got to be riding."

Webb recognized that petulant voice just as he recognized its fancy-garbed wasp-waisted owner. Tate Jervis was branch manager of the Western Overland Stage Company at Mustang and Webb understood the man's eagerness to be on the trail. The mysterious black-masked bandit had been dubbed the Jumping Jack because he had flitted from holdup to holdup. But mostly the Jumping Jack had concentrated on the gold-laden stages of the Western Overland. The head office at Helena had offered five thousand dollars reward for his capture. Rumor had it they were riding Tate Jervis pretty hard, prodding him for action on the matter.

So Webb watched Anvil Shane join Jervis and the others, gallop on up the trail. Then Webb sat alone on the steps and the shadows gradually

blurring out the surroundings were no blacker than his thoughts.

Anvil Shane had denied that the suspicions against Bert were his own but the sheriff hadn't fooled Webb. Shane was giving Bert Freeman the benefit of doubt because Anvil Shane and Webb had began a friendship in Texas thirty years before. That friendship had matured here in Montana where both men had migrated. Shane and old Webb had been mighty close but there was one phase of Webb's life that Anvil Shane didn't know.

ANVIL SHANE didn't know about the early years of Webb's married life. Shane had been pushing cattle north in those days. True, Shane had probably heard of Wild Bill Leatherby, the Texas badman, who had been corraled and sent to prison for twenty years. But Shane didn't know Webb and his wife had adopted the infant son of Wild Bill Leatherby to bless their childless marriage.

That was Webb's secret, and Webb's alone. His wife had died a dozen years before and Wild Bill Leatherby was lost among the shadows of the past. So Webb had been living with fear and uncertainty since the Jumping Jack had began to ride. Webb had reared Bert by the same rigid code of honesty that had governed Webb's own life. But blood is blood—and Bert Freeman was the son of Wild Bill Leatherby, badman.

The dead past had refused to stay buried, Webb reflected bitterly. He called Bert his son and the boy was everything to him that the word implied. He thought of it now and felt very old and very much alone. Then, as though summoned genie-like by his thoughts, Bert Freeman dismounted at the corral, headed for the house.

Bert might have been his kin for the boy was tall and lath-like too. His shock of hair was the same blue-black that Webb's had been before the years had thinned it and sprinkled it with gray. Slumping down beside his foster father, the boy grinned wanly.

"Left the beef in the corral up at the line shack," he reported. "I'll

drive 'em down to Mustang come morning."

Webb remembered Anvil Shane's advice about keeping Bert at home but only grunted. After all, Bert was twenty, a man by range standards. Bert had taken a lot of the work from Webb's shoulders. He couldn't order the boy to hang around the ranch-yard from now on.

His hands were tied by Bert's maturity and next morning he watched silently as Bert rode away. It was the beginning of a week of sheer torture for the lanky oldster for each day the boy found something to keep him in the saddle and Webb was usually in bed when Bert returned by night. They always met at breakfast and, facing the boy across the table, Webb would choke back thronging questions he wanted to ask and couldn't.

Once Webb saddled up, rode down to Mustang. There were supplies to be bought but, afterwards, Webb prodded himself into the sheriff's office. Anvil Shane greeted him wearily and gave him the information he wanted.

"Yep, the Jumping Jack held up a prospector night afore last," Shane reported.

There were new worry lines etched in Shane's broad face and a heap of untouched correspondence was piled upon his desk. Webb didn't linger and he almost collided with Tate Jervis as he went through the door. The carefully-dressed Western Overland manager gave Webb a long searching glance as the oldster grunted his apology.

Afterwards Webb toiled up the hill trail to the ranch and found Bert absent. Nor did the boy show up for supper. Webb spent another solitary evening brooding on the porch steps and went to bed early. But his thoughts made for sleeplessness. He wondered where Bert was riding—and why. And he was still wondering when Bert came in hours later. He heard the boy steal along the hall, pause for a moment at Webb's bedroom door. Then, apparently deciding the oldster was asleep, Bert went to his own room.

FOR LONG moments Webb lay there listening. Then, impelled by

some undefinable urge, he rose, picked up his boots and tiptoed to the porch. Pulling on the boots, he started for the barn, a phantom-like figure in his flapping white nightgown. The breeze chilled him and he was glad to reach the shelter of the barn where he fumbled for a lantern.

Bert's horse, a deep-chested roan, was in its stall and saddle and gear were tossed over the stall partition. Webb peered about uncertainly, overwhelmed by the fact that he did not know what he sought. The roan had its nose in a ration of oats and, without forethought, Webb plunged his hand into the oat bin. His probing fingers closed on something buried there and he drew the object into view. Moving the lantern closer, he examined his find and his eyes widened with horror.

Many men had seen the Jumping Jack and all of the victims had reported like descriptions—a tall man dressed in nondescript range garb and wearing a black mask. Sometimes the details of the garb varied but always that black mask had been the insignia of the Jumping Jack. And Webb was clutching such a mask in his trembling fingers.

He thrust the mask back into the oat bin, blew out the lantern and reeled toward the house. And the night breeze sighing down from the peaks seemed to carry the mocking laughter of Wild Bill Leatherby to him. It was like the death knell of a lifetime's hopes. He had tried to mould Bert Freeman after himself but wild blood had had its way.

Webb carried that hideous thought to bed with him and it kept him tossing and turning until sunup. When he awoke from fitful slumber, Bert had left. But Webb was glad he didn't have to face his foster son this morning—and he was glad to be alone to fight the battle he would have to fight.

All through the long day he wrestled with his problem. What was he to do with his knowledge? A dozen times he thought of facing Bert with an accusation but discarded the notion. Bert would naturally deny everything. It would be far better to go to Sheriff Anvil Shane, lay the facts before him. Webb owed that

much to his old friend. But Webb knew that to do so would be like betraying his own flesh and blood.

And then, when the shadows were spilling from the peaks once again, Webb heard a clatter of hoofs and when he hurried to the door Sheriff Anvil Shane was dismounting before the gate.

They had arrested Bert! All day Webb had contemplated betraying the boy to the law himself but sight of the squat lawman filled him with panic. Shane's first words dispelled Webb's fear, however.

"I'm still trailin' the Jumpin' Jack, Webb," the lawman said as he was ushered to the living room. "Thought I'd drop in this way."

"Reckon yuh'll cut his sign one of these days," Webb ventured.

"Maybe so," Shane reflected and the proffered rocking chair creaked with his weight. "Me, I'm tryin' mighty hard. Had an idea to start checkin' on everybody workin' for Western Overland seein' as how that hellion always seems to know when a gold shipment's comin' through. Tate Jervis reckoned it was a good idea but figgered it would take too long. Seems like Western Overland is hollerin' for blood—and pronto—so Tate's got a better idea."

"Tate's a smart hombre."

"A gold shipment's comin' over from Missoula tomorrow afternoon," Shane went on. "Tate's having a special driver and a special shot-gun guard, hand-picked men. Likewise Tate's riding the stage hisself this time and he's a good hand with a gun. He's asked me to come along so they'll be four of us all primed for trouble. If the Jumping Jack stops us, one of us is bound to get a chance to make a play. The reward is to be split four ways."

"Ought to be a cinch if the hombre shows up," Webb said and his eyes drilled into Shane's "Just why yuh tellin' me all this, Anvil?"

THE DIRECTNESS of the question staggered Anvil Shane. He stared wordlessly, one hand tugging at his moustache. Webb knew that once again Shane had something to say and didn't know how to say it.

"Spill it," he urged the lawman.

"Wa-al, I don't exactly know where to begin," Shane stammered. "Yuh see, Webb, this being a lawdog is a tough job. A gent sorta has to forget he's human and that's mighty hard sometimes. Reckon every sheriff has a day when he wonders which he's gonna serve—his badge or hisself. And when a gent's had hisself pulled out of the Canadian on a trail drive and nursed through a seige of smallpox, it's sorta hard to forget..."

"If I saved yore carcass a couple of times," Webb interjected feelingly, "it was because I had the chance. Reckon yuh'd 'a' done likewise."

"Just the same, a lot of water's gone under the bridge for us two, old-timer," Anvil Shane said, hushed-voiced. "So here's my say-so. If the Jumping Jack shows up tomorrow, he'll get cut to pieces. It's my job to jail that gent—and maybe I'll have to do it some day. But there's a helluva lot of difference between jailin' a hombre and spillin' his guts with a scattergun!"

"I savvy," Webb said evenly. "I savvy and I'm thankin' yuh, pard."

His words trailed away for a shadow had fallen between the two men as Bert Freeman stood framed in the doorway. For a moment he paused there. Nodding cordially, he strode through the room and into the kitchen.

Watching him go, Webb wondered how long Bert had been on the porch, how much of the talk he had heard. And wondering, he remembered the things he, Webb, might say to the sheriff. But Webb's tongue was locked.

Anvil Shane wasn't sure Bert was the Jumping Jack. Otherwise the sheriff would be doing his duty—arresting Bert. At showdown Shane would be true to his badge but for the time being he had side-stepped duty to warn Webb of the death trap waiting the Jumping Jack. And with Bert out there in the kitchen, Webb knew he was going to side-step his obvious duty too.

He walked to the gate with Shane in silence and when the lawman clambered into his saddle Webb shook his hand, a long, hard grasp eloquent or his unspoken gratitude. Then he watched Shane lope away.

Returning to the house, Webb found Bert preparing supper. The oldster helped. Bert, facing him across the table later, spoke for the first time.

"Wasn't the sheriff saying something about a trap for the Jumping Jack just before I walked in?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Yes," Webb replied and avoided Bert's eyes. "Of course it's sort of confidential like, but the stage will be loaded with gunnies tomorrow. They'll get that gent for shore if he's crazy enough to show up."

Covertly he watched for a sign as he spoke but Bert gave none. Still, the warning had been passed along. At least Bert wouldn't tackle the Missoula stage on the morrow. Webb carried that consolation to bed with him and was gladdened next day to see that Bert lingered near the ranch house.

STUDYING him from the porch, Webb knew the first measure of contentment he had tasted in a long time. Perhaps the news of the gun-trap had sobered Bert, started him thinking of the odds that are perpetually stacked against those who ride the owlhoot. Maybe Shane would never learn the whole truth and Bert might still become the kind of son Webb had hoped he would be.

Those were peaceful thoughts and, lingering over them, Webb felt as though a load had been lifted from his heart. His chin sank upon his chest for it was a warm, pleasant day and under the spell of the smiling skies and his re-born hopes he began to doze.

He awoke with a start. Shadows were spearing downward and the day was dying fast. Coming to his feet, Webb entered the house, found it empty. Half-stunned by a budding fear, he lurched into the yard, called Bert's name. Only his echo answered him.

Bert was gone! And with the realization, Webb knew Bert had gone to stop the Missoula stage. The boy had been warned but there was one thing Webb had forgotten, a thing Anvil Shane had put into words when he had said Bert was ready for a man's work but didn't have a man's judgment. For Bert, with all the self-

assurance of Wild Bill Leatherby, had undoubtedly reasoned he could turn the tables, having been forewarned about the gun-trap.

Webb thought it all out as he tossed gear onto his horse. Then, bolting for the house, he stopped to don a holster-laden belt that he hadn't worn for a long time. He looked to his gun as he clattered down the trail and found it ready for work.

No definite plan shaped itself as he galloped along. He would let circumstances take care of themselves when he reached trail's end. And trail's end would be far below where Lobo Canyon cut through the Mustang country, walling in the road that squirmed among the hills.

Mentally charting the country ahead, Webb had a sudden hunch. Less than ten miles out of Mustang a spring bubbled beside the canyon road. The stage always stopped there to allow the passengers time to drink and to stretch their travel-cramped limbs. The canyon's walls sloped gently at this spot. The country was bush-mottled, a perfect place for a lone bandit to lie in hiding, waiting the advantage that would be his when the passengers spilled from the stage to drink.

Accordingly, Webb nosed his mount toward the promontory looking down on the springs. Nearing it, he dismounted, stalked forward on foot. It was well he had adopted caution for his hunch was correct. Crouching among the bushes at the canyon's crest was the lanky form of Bert Freeman.

Webb hadn't arrived a minute too soon. The portion of the road below that he glimpsed was empty but he could hear the creak of the stage, the cracking driver's whip, and he knew the death-laden coach was just around a turn. And Bert was ready to strike. He hadn't donned the black mask yet but he was looking to his gun, testing the hammer action. Satisfied, he eased the weapon back into leather again and at that moment Webb moved forward.

Three long, lunging strides brought him to his foster son's side. Jabbing his gun into Bert's spine, he snatched the boy's weapon, thrust it into his

own belt. Bert stiffened, turned his head and dismay creased his face.

"Dad!" he gasped.

"Yes," said Webb, "it's me, son, and I'm sorry it had to be me. I'd like tuh think that what yuh've been doing, yuh been doing to help me out. I'd like to think yuh didn't mean to cut down on Shorty Dale. But what I think don't count for much. Yuh see, son, I know yuh're the Jumpin' Jack. I found the mask."

"You're...you're makin' a mistake, Dad," Bert blurted. "You..."

"Nope," Webb said, "I'm not makin' a mistake this time. I made my mistake a long spell ago but..."

HIS WORDS choked him. He had been ready to say his mistake had been in adopting the son of Wild Bill Leatherby. But gazing at the boy over the barrel of a gun, sudden moisture stung the oldster's eyes as he knew a stunning truth. Regardless of Bert's Freeman's wild blood, regardless of the tragic outcome to the boy's career, he had raised this youngster. For years he had made himself believe Bert was really his kin until the thought had become an actuality. And even now at the bitter end, Webb Freeman didn't want to change that.

But regardless of his feelings, Webb's duty lay clear before him. Anvil Shane had given Bert the benefit of doubt because of a long-fostered friendship and Webb had been content to take advantage of their friendship and still his own conscience. Bert had spoiled that by coming here, showing his hand. There was nothing left to do but turn Bert over to the sheriff.

The stage had jerked to a bone-jolting stop below. Anvil Shane was piling from the big Concord and wasp-waisted Tate Jervis was easing to the ground after him. With a nod of his head, Webb indicated the trail leading downward.

"Move on below, Bert," he said.

Bert opened his mouth to speak but Webb never heard him. For Webb himself was suddenly shouting, a horror-inspired shriek. By the roadside Anvil Shane had thrown himself prone to the ground to bury his face in the bubbling spring. Tate Jervis

was palming a gun, leveling it at the sprawling lawman!

The gun spoke but Webb had saved his old friend's life. His ear-splitting shout had disconcerted Jervis just as the man's finger squeezed the trigger and Shane had lifted his head to listen. The bullet that would have buried itself in the lawman's brain grazed his head and Shane sank forward unconscious.

Then Tate Jervis raised panic-stricken eyes, glimpsed the two on the crest of the canyon. With a hoarse bellow of rage and fear, Jervis fired at them even as he hurled words at the driver and the shot-gun guard.

"Gun them two!" he bellowed. "They saw me shoot Shane!"

Webb was charging downward, Bert beside him. There was a lot the oldster couldn't understand about the thing he had witnessed but certain facts were obvious enough. One was that Tate Jervis had tried to kill Anvil Shane. And the guard and driver were involved too. All three were plainly bent on killing the witnesses for bullets buzzed about the Freemans as they dodged and twisted.

Webb wasted no time wondering about the deal. His gun was answering the challenge of those below and then he remembered Bert was unarmed. Snatching the extra weapon from his belt, he passed it over wordlessly and both went into action.

The guard with his scattergun was the deadliest menace as they came into close range and Webb broke the man in the middle with a snap shot. But Jervis had truly hand-picked his driver and Jervis himself was no slouch with a six. Both were spraying lead that was finding marks and Webb cursed as his thigh flamed with agony.

But Bert was shooting now and Webb's eyes snapped wide as he saw the deadly efficiency of his foster son. Bert's gun bucked once, a careless shot apparently, and the driver reared upward, sprawled head foremost to the road. It was miraculous shooting and suddenly Webb understood its meaning. This was Bert's heritage! Whatever else the boy had or hadn't gotten from Wild Bill Leatherby, his was the same deadly hand as his owlhoot sire's.

THEN BERT crumpled. While he had been gunning the driver Tate Jervis had utilized the moment to aim at the boy. The bullet had struck Bert in the leg. With a fierce yell of rage, Webb brought up his own gun, eared back the hammer and Tate Jervis was slammed against the stage to slip lifeless to the ground.

Bloody and disheveled, Webb Freeman stood panting. His oldest friend still lay silently beside the spring but though his heart went out to Anvil Shane, it was Bert that he turned to. Wincing with pain, Webb kneeled, gathered the boy in his arms and something clogged the oldster's throat when he spoke.

"I don't savvy this set-up a-tall," Webb said. "But I do savvy yore gun saved my bacon today, son..."

A bullet had furrowed Bert's scalp and the boy grinned through a bloody mask. "There's things I was gonna say before the fireworks started, Dad," he said. "Maybe they'll help you savvy. You see, I've been trailin' the Jumpin' Jack for weeks. I figgered that five thousand reward would come in mighty handy out our way. When you told me about the gun-trap set for today, I figgered it was my last chance. Either I got the bandit before he stepped into the trap—or not at all. So I rode out here to lay for him..."

"But Jervis tried tuh shoot Anvil," Webb muttered in bewilderment and then the light of truth dawned upon him. "I savvy," he ejaculated. "Jervis was the Jumpin' Jack! Shore enough! When Anvil figgered on checkin' on the gents workin' for Western Overland, Tate got worried seein' as Anvil was gettin' close to the truth. So Tate talked Anvil intuh takin' this ride along with him and these other two jaspers who must 'a' been helpin' Tate all along. Tate probably figgered on gettin' rid of Anvil and grabbing this gold shipment at the same time. Afterwards they'd 'a' reported that the Jumpin' Jack had did the job!"

"It all fits," Bert ruminated slowly. "I found a black mask near the Western Overland office but I didn't savvy at the time." His grin broadened. "And you found the mask out in the barn. Reckon I can savvy how things

(cont'd on last page)

HARDCASE OR COWARD?

RUSS KILRAIN cursed suddenly, with angry surprise, and his upraised hand halted the five hardfaced riders behind him.

"What the hell!" Kilrain growled. "Somebody's took up in that old shack down there. That's bad luck, for whoever it is. It means another killin'!"

The smoky, reckless eyes of Kent

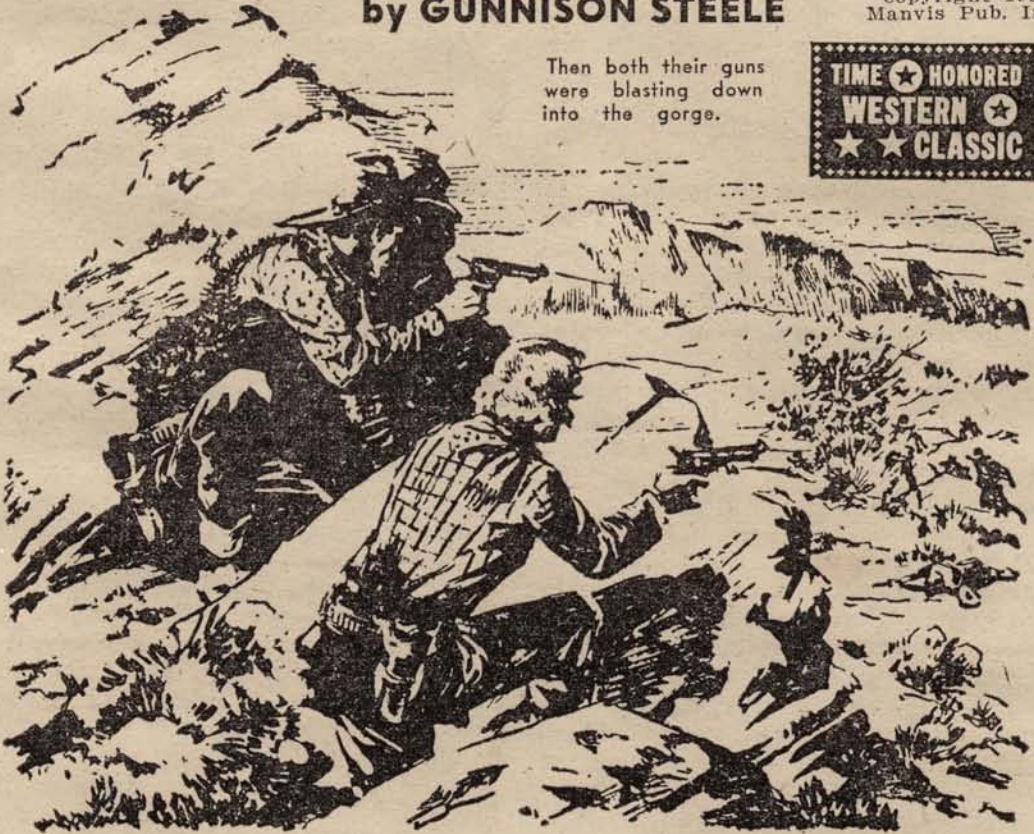
cabin was a fenced garden, green with young vegetables. A few scrawny cows grazed nearby.

Kent Varing's eyes shifted and probed thoughtfully the length of the narrow valley along which they had been riding. It began with the hills that rimmed the northern end of San Simon Basin, and traversed the basin's

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Then both their guns
were blasting down
into the gorge.



The years had hardened Kent Varing, turned him into a bitter, cold-eyed man whose law lay in his lightning-fast guns. No mere slip of a girl could turn him back from the dark trails now. . . .

Varing, riding next to Kilrain, followed the gaze of the outlaw leader. Smoke was curling lazily from the mud chimney of the cabin that huddled amid gaunt cottonwoods at the foot of a decline three hundred yards away. The place looked desperately poor, but neat. At the back of the

entire length; its southern outlet was a thin cleft in the hills that was a gateway into Mexico. In spots, it was really a canyon. One of these spots was just beyond the cabin, where the granite walls drew in till they almost touched.

"That won't do," Russ Kilrain was

saying. "We've got to drive cattle through here. We cain't afford to have somebody in that shack. They might talk, and cause trouble. Varing, you got any idea who it might be?"

Kent Varing, muscularly lean body slouched in his Texas saddle, shook his dark head. He said, "Likely a stranger, somebody who hasn't heard it's sudden death to squat hereabouts, or a nester with a bunch of kids."

"They've got to get out, whoever it is," Kilrain scowled. "First, though, we'll give 'em a chance to leave peaceable. Varing, you're acquainted in the basin, and yore picture ain't on pieces of card-board all over the country. You ease down there and look things over. We'll wait here."

Kent Varing touched spurs to his big dun, rode through the screening thicket of cedars and toward the cabin. A tight, sardonic smile twisted his lips as he rode. Despite the fact that his home range was only twenty miles away, in the northern end of the basin, the odds were against his knowing whoever was in that dilapidated cabin. He'd been away almost five years.

THE TRANSFORMATION wrought by those five years, Kent Varing realized, was bad. The basin had known him as a wild, but honest, good-natured buckaroo. Folks had grinned and predicted that slim, red-haired Barbara Wayne would tame him. But, a week before her scheduled marriage to Kent Varing, Barbara Wayne had suddenly and without explanation married handsome Jack Ivor, and the devils that were in Kent Varing's heart burst their bonds.

He'd sworn to kill Ivor. But dudish, whiskey-drinking Jack Ivor, son of a well-to-do cowman, had turned yellow and refused to fight. So Kent Varing had ridden away, swearing never to return. The last year he'd been riding with Russ Kilrain's gang over in New Mexico. Kilrain had once operated here in the San Simon, running stolen cattle into Mexico, but for the last year he'd been away while things cooled off.

And now Kilrain was riding back, Kent Varing with him. Varing had thought, "This is my chance to get even with that yella skunk, Jack Ivor.

I'll help break him, then kill him!"

The years had hardened Kent Varing, turned him into a bitter, cold-eyed hombre whose law lay in his lightning-fast guns. He'd severed all ties with the past, except for the memories he couldn't crowd out....

A spotted puppy bounded from the porch and came barking and nipping at the dun's legs as Varing rode up and stopped. Drawn by the racket, a wide-eyed, curly-haired boy of no more than four, came onto the porch and stared solemnly at Kent Varing.

Varing dismounted, his silver spurs jingling as he placed one shiny boot on the porch. He asked, "You here all alone, sonny?"

"You ain't my daddy," lisped the youngster, backing away. He called, "Mummy! Mummy!"

Footsteps sounded inside, and a low voice asked, "What is it, Billy? Is somebody...?" The voice dwindled to silence.

Kent Varing had thought he was immune to shock. But something almost like a physical blow shook him as his gaze lifted to the woman in the doorway. This was not the figure of his dreams that he'd seen in the red heart of a hundred campfires, but living flesh and blood.

Barbara whispered, "Kent—Kent Varing! Why—why..."

The years had changed Barbara too. Still slim and pretty, but there was a haunting sadness about her violet eyes. She looked thin, tired, and her hands were toil-worn. She stood there looking at Varing, bewilderment in her eyes.

Varing fought to steady his whirling mind. Barbara—here! He was conscious of resentment for the fact that she was still able to make him feel fierce emotions. Affecting a casualness he didn't feel, Kent Varing doffed his cream sombrero, smiled tautly.

He said, "I'm sorry, Barbara. I—didn't know you were here."

The youngster was tugging at his mother's skirts. "That ain't my daddy," he piped. "Who is it, Mummy?"

Barbara said, "Hush, Billy." Then to Kent Varing, "I—won't you come in, Kent? You look tired, and hungry."

On an impulse, Kent Varing went

into the cabin. The room was neat and clean, but almost bare of furnishings. It showed evidence of desperate poverty.

Varing asked abruptly, "Barbara, why are you here?"

Her face pale and still, she said, "I live here."

"And Jack Ivor...?"

"He lives here too. This is our son, Billy. He was born soon after you—went away."

"Jack Ivor brought you here—to live?"

A WISTFUL smile touched her red lips. "Why not? There was nowhere else to go."

Questions hammered at Kent Varing's mind, and memories flooded through him. When Barbara Wayne had married Jack Ivor, without warning or explanation, it had cut deeply. It had shattered his faith in humanity. Barbara's head had been turned by Jack Ivor's fancy clothes and flashy good looks, and by the prospect of spending some of old Buck Ivor's cattle money, Varing had thought.

Five years ago, Buck Ivor had owned a big cow outfit. Jack Ivor had had money to squander on whiskey and cards and women. Why, then, was Barbara here in this squalid shack?

"There was nowhere else to go," Barbara said simply, uncomplainingly. "Soon after we were married, Jack's father died. He left us the ranch. But things didn't go well. We lost cattle. Drought came. Things went from bad to worse, and we lost the ranch, everything. That was a year and a half ago."

There was a brave tilt to Barbara's chin as she talked. Kent Varing savvied what had happened, as much from what she left unsaid as the things she said. She was still loyal to Jack Ivor. She didn't say that Jack Ivor had gambled their ranch away, and spent it on whiskey and dance hall flossies, but Kent Varing knew that was what had happened. She didn't admit that she'd married a weakling and a coward, but Varing knew that that knowledge too was in her mind.

"So we came here," she went on as if talking helped her. "We just moved in. Nobody would live here; the place was supposed to be haunted, or something. Everybody who'd ever tried to live here had been killed, or scared away. But we didn't have any choice. We've lived here a year and a half and nothing's happened. There's not much room, but the ground's fertile. We have a garden, and raise a few cattle...."

Kent Varing listened as she talked on. She was trying pitifully to convince him that she was happy and satisfied here. Varing knew she was neither. He looked at a row of empty whiskey bottles on the mantel, and had the answer. Jack Ivor was still a weakling, a wastrel, and with him into the depths he was dragging his loyal wife and their curly-haired son.

Varing knew why they hadn't been molested here. Russ Kilrain had been away. But now he was back. A chill touched Kent Varing; momentarily, he had forgotten why he was here. Kilrain's wolves had killed others who'd tried to live here.

Kent Varing thought: Why should I warn them away? These two, Jack Ivor and Barbara Wayne, had humiliated him, hurt him more than anybody else in the world. They'd suddenly turned a world of brightness and hope into a place of darkness and bitterness. Let Russ Kilrain move them in his own way....

Billy had lost his shyness. He climbed hesitantly onto Kent Varing's lap and tugged with pudgy hands at the ivory handle of one of his sixshooters. "Are you a sher'ff?" he asked.

Varing grinned, said, "Not exactly, Button!" He looked at Barbara, and knew that she guessed the truth—that he was an outlaw.

"Jack should be in soon," Barbara said. "He went to town this evening. I—he'll be glad to see you. Kent, are you alone?"

"No." After all, he thought, why should a girl and a curly-haired kid be made to suffer for Jack Ivor's sins? He said, "Barbara, you've got to leave here."

"Leave here?" She shook her head. "We couldn't do that. We have no

where else to go. Why should we leave here?"

"People have died here in this cabin."

"But that was several years ago. Nobody has bothered us."

"They might, if you stay. You must leave, as soon as you can."

BARBARA shook her head again. "I know you have a reason for saying those things, Kent. But we've got to stay here—got to! It's our only chance, Jack's only chance. I know I haven't fooled you. You know why we lost everything, why we're living here. Jack's weak. He's always had too much. I made him come here. I thought, away from everybody, he might—do better. In time, he may. It's his only chance, our only chance. I married him, and I'll stick with him. I owe him that much."

Varing fought back the words of contempt he felt for Jack Ivor that came to his lips. He said, "If you feel that way..."

Barbara had quieted. Her eyes steady, she said, "I owe you something, Kent Varing. I know how terribly I hurt you. I want you to know why I married Jack Ivor, without even telling you I aimed to do it. It can do no harm, now. I did it for an old, old reason. Money—money Jack Ivor promised to pay off a mortgage on daddy's ranch with. Jack wouldn't let me explain, or even tell you what I meant to do."

"So I married him; but I didn't get the money. Daddy lost the ranch, and it broke his heart. He died soon after. Then Buck Ivor died, and Jack seemed to go to pieces."

Fresh hate and contempt for Jack Ivor welled inside Kent Varing. He got to his feet. He didn't want to see Jack Ivor, for fear of what he might do.

Barbara had got to her feet and gone to the window. She said: "Here comes Jack now."

Varing heard hoofbeats outside. They stopped at the rear of the cabin, and footsteps sounded as somebody entered through a back doorway. The footsteps came through a back room, then Jack Ivor stood in the doorway.

Again shock over-rode the hate that

smouldered inside Varing. This wasn't the old, debonair Jack Ivor he'd known, the old swaggering, arrogant dandy. A stubble of beard covered Ivor's gaunt face. His eyes were bleary. His clothes were dirty, unkempt. Jack Ivor had a quart bottle in his hand, and he swayed a little as he squinted in the sudden change from sunlight to shadow.

Jack Ivor asked, "Barbara, whose bronc is that outside? And who're them hombres coyotin' out behind the thicket?"

And Barbara said softly, "Jack, here's an old friend of yours. Kent Varing..."

Jack Ivor stiffened, took a backward step. Then his eyes focused on Varing, and he laughed sneeringly. "No need to come sneakin' back now, Varing. She's my wife now, remember that!"

Barbara flushed, said pleadingly, "Jack, please! Kent didn't know we lived here when he stopped."

"Then why is he here?" Ivor asked. "Anyway, he knows it now. He's not wanted here. Is that plain, Varing?"

Kent Varing held himself rigidly in check. "Plain enough. Your skunk smell is worse than ever, Ivor. It must be hell to have to stand it for five years. Five seconds is too long for me!"

KENT VARING whirled, strode from the cabin. He swung into the saddle, his brown, hawkish features harsh with anger, and sent the dun at a gallop up the incline and through the cedars to where Russ Kilrain and the others waited.

"It took you a hell of a long time." the burly, red-bearded Kilrain growled impatiently. "Who's down there?"

"Just a woman and a kid."

"I saw a man ride up on a hoss a minute ago. What about him?"

Varing shrugged, said, "He don't count. Soused to the gills, and yella. Name of Jack Ivor."

"Ivor, huh?" Kilrain grunted. "I've had dealin's with him. He's yella, all right, and treacherous. He can't be trusted. Rather have most anybody there than him. Did you tell 'em to get out?"

"No," Varing said tautly. "I figured—"

"You're not supposed to do any figurin'," Kilrain snapped, hard-eyed. "You're supposed to do as you're told. I'm not so blasted finicky. You gents wait here a minute!"

Russ Kilrain whirled his big black, sent it pounding down the decline. Kent Varing, watching, saw him fling from the saddle and stride into the cabin. He was in the cabin no more than sixty seconds. Then he came out, mounted and rode back to his waiting men. A grin was on Kilrain's thin, cruel lips.

"I gave 'em till midnight to pack and get out," he said. "Told 'em I'd be back then. Well, let's ride!"

Kilrain's four henchmen grinned wolfishly. They were hard men, scum of the outlaw trails; murder was the kind of work they enjoyed. Kent Varing said nothing as they rode on through the notch beyond the cabin and along the widening valley. He tried to hide from Kilrain and the others the turmoil that was in his mind.

The sun was sinking into its nest of blue hills when they arrived at the hideout—a big log cabin huddled back under the walls of a nidden canyon. Until his depredations had become too bold a couple of years ago, Kilrain had operated from this headquarters, driving stolen cattle southward into Mexico. Their trail to the Border lay along the canyon-like valley they'd traversed that evening.

The horses were watered at a little stream that trickled along the canyon, and turned loose in a rude pole corral. Kent Varing remained aloof from the others as they prepared a meager meal and wolfed it. He'd never liked them; only his bitterness had driven him to seek their reckless company.

"Ivor's yella, all right," Kilrain had said. "But the gal's got spunk. She the same as told me to go to blazes. She said they wouldn't leave, and that I couldn't make 'em. Well, mebber I cain't. But I shore as hell can plant 'em!"

"You can't kill a woman and a kid," Varing said softly.

"Cain't I?" Russ Kilrain growled.

"If they're not outa that shack by midnight, I'll burn it over their heads."

Varing shrugged, let the subject drop. Kilrain would carry out his threat, he knew. Kent Varing thought: Well, why not? He'd come back for vengeance against Jack Ivor. But now there was no savor to the thought. Jack Ivor's cattle were gone, and Ivor himself was a broken, whiskey-soaked derelict, without courage or hope. Vengeance against Jack Ivor would be tasteless now.

AFTER EATING, Kent Varing went outside. A white moon had soared into the sky. The hills were cool and quiet and peaceful. But there was no peace in Kent Varing's mind. He kept seeing the shadows in Barbara's tired eyes; he kept feeling the tug of a curly-haired youngster's pudgy hands.

Barbara wouldn't leave. She'd said, "We've got to stay here. It's our only chance, his only chance..."

Barbara and the youngster would be better off with Jack Ivor dead. But if Ivor died, they'd die too...

Kent Varing roped his dun from the corral and saddled him. Then he went back to the cabin. It still lacked three hours till midnight. Kilrain and his four followers were seated about a rude table, dealing blackjack.

Kent Varing stood just inside the doorway. He said, "Kilrain, you'll have to pull that job tonight without me. I'm takin' a little ride. Mebber I'll be back, mebber not."

Surprise leaped into the eyes of Kilrain and the others. Then Russ Kilrain's reddish eyes went bleak and wary. "You gettin' cold feet, Varing?" he asked.

Varing said softly. "Call it what you like. I just don't cotton to murderin' women and kids."

"So that's it?" Kilrain purred. "You wouldn't have any ideas about double-crossin' us, would you, Varing?"

Varing shrugged, said, "My ideas are my own business. I'm ridin' now. And I'll have a gun lined on this door till I'm out of sight. Adios!"

He backed through the doorway and to his horse. His eyes never left the lighted doorway as he swung into

the saddle and spurred through the jackpines that hemmed the cabin.

He put the dun into a mile-eating lope and headed southward. He knew he was doing a crazy thing. But he had to get Barbara and the boy out of that cabin. Jack Ivor had dragged them down to disgrace and shame. Now, unless they left that cabin, they'd die.

Kent Varing knew that Kilrain would be furious at his desertion, and suspicious. Maybe he wouldn't wait till midnight to start on his murderous mission.

The moon was high in the sky when Varing pushed his tired dun through the canyon mouth and stopped before Jack Ivor's cabin. The cabin was dark and quiet. Hope lifted inside Kent Varing. Maybe, after all, Kilrain's warning had had its effect.

Then, suddenly, a puppy started barking excitedly inside the cabin. Billy would never have gone off without the pup. Kent Varing dismounted, stepped across the porch and rapped on the door with his knuckles. For a moment there was deathly silence. Even the pup had stopped barking.

Then Barbara's voice, calm but defiant, called out, "Get away from that door, or I'll shoot!"

Varing said, "Barbara, it's me—Kent Varing. Open the door!"

And Jack Ivor's voice, high-pitched, fearful. "Don't open the door—it's a trick! Varing's one of Kilrain's gang. Don't open the door!"

But footsteps sounded, a latch lifted and the door opened. Barbara stood revealed in murky light, a gun in her hand, and Varing saw that the windows had been blinded. There wasn't any fear or distrust on Barbara's pale face as she stood aside for Kent Varing to enter. Varing stepped inside, closed it and stood with his back to it.

PLAINLY, preparations for a fight had been made. There was an air of tension in the room. Barbara was dressed in denims and shirt. Billy huddled on a pallet on the floor, eyes wide and bewildered, his puppy clutched in his arms. Jack Ivor stood against the wall, repeating rifle in his hands. Ivor's face was ghastly pale

through his stubble of beard. His hands were shaking, and stark fear showed in his staring eyes.

Jack Ivor said shrilly, "Blast you, Varing, I know what you're up to. Russ Kilrain sent you. Put up your hands or I'll cut you in two!"

"Please, Jack!" Barbara said sharply. Then, "What is it, Kent?"

"All of you must leave here, now," Varing said swiftly, ignoring Jack Ivor. "There's no time to explain."

"You don't need to explain," Barbara said quietly. "Russ Kilrain, if that was his name, made everything pretty plain when he was here this evening. He told us to leave, or he'd kill us."

Varing said to Jack Ivor, "You fool, why haven't you taken her and the boy away? Kilrain wasn't bluffing. He may show up any minute."

Jack Ivor was plucking nervously at the buttons on his dirty shirt. His lips seemed stiff. "I tried to get her to leave," he whined. "I told her Kilrain would kill us all. But she wouldn't leave. Maybe she'll listen to you, Varing."

"I won't" Barbara declared firmly. "If we left here we'd have nothing, no place to go. We'd be out on the prairie, homeless, with the rain and wind in our faces. What we have here is pitifully little, but it holds all our hopes for the future. It's worth fighting for, worth dying for if we have to!"

"There are other places, Barbara," Jack Ivor said pleadingly. "I—I know I haven't been much of a husband. I've been weak, worthless; I've dragged you and the boy down with me. But leave here with me, Barbara, and I promise you things will be different. I'll get a job. I'll quit whiskey, and all the other things. I'll be a man."

Barbara's face was pale and strained, but she was adamant.

She said, "If you want to be a man, you'll never have a better chance than to be one right here, tonight!"

Billy had gotten up from the pallet. He went to Jack Ivor and looked up into his fear-distorted face.

"I'm not afraid," he lisped. "My daddy won't let anybody hurt me."

Jack Ivor looked down at the youngster, as if just then aware of his existence. His trembling fingers

touched the curly head. He opened his lips as if to speak, then closed them.

Kent Varing said to Barbara, "Then you won't leave?"

She shook her head. "I won't leave. But you'd better go now, Kent; it may be too late in a little while."

Varing shook his own head. An odd exaltation had lifted inside him. He said, "If you stay, Barbara, I stay. We'll fight."

There was nothing to do, except wait. They talked little. Barbara was quiet-eyed, tense. Billy huddled again with his puppy in his arms. Jack Ivor had quieted some; several times he drank from the quart bottle on the mantel. But he was still nervous. He paced the floor, the rifle in his hands.

BARBARA had nailed thick boards over the windows, leaving cracks to fire through. They barricaded the doors. Kent Varing crouched at a window, where he could watch through a chink the dim trail that snaked through the narrow canyon pass three hundred yards above the cabin. Through this pass Russ Kilrain and his gun-wolves would come.

Kent Varing smiled sardonically in the dim lamplight. Kent Varing, outlaw, waiting to fight, probably die, for the very ones who had driven him out onto the owlhoot! He knew they wouldn't have much of a chance against Kilrain's killers. They could hold them off a while, but there could be but one ending.

Barbara and Jack Ivor must have realized that too. But the girl showed no signs of fear or regret. She had nothing to lose, perhaps nothing to gain. But she meant to fight. Varing looked at Jack Ivor. Ivor had paused beside the pallet

Billy's pudgy fingers were tugging at the tattered leg of Ivor's levis. He heard Billy say, "Daddy, you won't let anybody hurt me, will you?"

Jack Ivor started, looked down at the boy. He said hoarsely, "I—don't you worry, button. I—I'll take care of you." Then Ivor went to the mantel, reached a shaking hand for the bottle.

Kent Varing turned back to the window. He didn't feel any contempt for

Jack Ivor's weakness and cowardice now. A coyote couldn't change into a wolf.

Jutting against the moonlit sky, Kent Varing could see dark mountains. The mountains looked friendly and inviting; the silvery moonlight gleaming on their crests looked like a beckoning finger. Beyond those mountains was safety for Kent Varing; here in this cabin was death. There was yet time to ride.

Kent Varing grimaced in the dim light. Guns in hand, he hunkered lower beside the window. He knew that midnight was almost at hand. Any minute now Russ Kilrain would come...

He heard Billy ask, "Mummy, where's my daddy?"

Varing turned. Jack Ivor wasn't in the room. Now Varing remembered hearing Ivor in the kitchen a little while before, moving something about. Strengthening the barricade, he'd thought.

Barbara was looking at Kent Varing, a mute question in her eyes. Varing got to his feet, went into the tiny back room. Jack Ivor wasn't there. The barricade had been pulled aside; the door was slightly ajar. Jack Ivor was gone.

He replaced the barricade, returned to the front room. He looked into Barbara's wide, questioning eyes, and nodded. Barbara bowed her head, and Varing thought he heard a sob. He went back to his vigil at the window.

Billy had crossed to his mother. He asked, "Where's my daddy? He said he'd take care of me."

"Daddy'll—be back in a little while," Barbara said. "He'll take care of us. You go back and lie down."

Harsh anger rioted through Kent Varing. Jack Ivor was lower even than he'd thought. To save his own cowardly hide, Ivor had deserted his wife and child just when they needed him most. Varing remembered what Barbara had said a little while ago: "If you want to be a man, you'll never have a better chance than to be one right here, tonight!"

Jack Ivor hadn't taken that chance...

THEN KENT VARING tried to forget about Jack Ivor. Ivor's desertion had cut down their already slim chances. Barbara realized that too. Her tanned face was strained and pale in the dim light. Billy, sensing at last that something awful was about to happen, had begun to whimper.

Kent Varing tensed suddenly. Faint, yet plainly audible on the still night air, he heard the sound of hoofs. Eyes glued to the crack in the window, he stared into the shadowy mouth of the pass three hundred yards away. He could see nothing, yet he knew that Kilrain's renegades were coming.

Then, all at once, the canyon mouth seemed to explode in a red burst of fury before Kent Varing's eyes. A blasting roar of gunfire beat against his eardrums, and the pass was criss-crossed with writhing tongues of gun-flame. In the gunpowder torches he could see weird, leaping figures.

Kent Varing leaped to his feet. He tore the barricade from in front of the door, hurled his body through the opening and started running toward the canyon mouth. The pass was still a fiery chaos of leaping flame and boiling gunsmoke, of screaming lead and yelling, confused men.

Varing's pumping legs seemed to carry him at a snail's pace toward the pass. He was aware that Barbara's slim, flying figure was beside him; he could see moonlight gleaming on the gun in her hand. Side by side, they leaped into the canyon mouth.

The gunfire had slackened. Riderless horses were pounding along the canyon. Motionless figures lay on the ground. Then two mounted figures loomed before Kent Varing. They'd

seen Varing and the girl in the moonlight, and their guns started blazing. Kent Varing heard the waspish hiss of lead; he felt a fiery sting as a bullet grazed his thigh.

Then his own deadly guns started hammering and flaming. He heard the blasting roar of Barbara's .38 beside him. Fresh sound beat back from the canyon walls. The shadows churned with cyclonic gun-fury. In the red glow, Varing saw one of the mounted figures suddenly drop his gun and tumble stiffly to the ground.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the gunfire subsided. Whipped by the chill wind, gunsmoke rolled like a fog up out of the gorge, and the ribbon of moonlight that penetrated to the floor of the canyon revealed six dead men. One of them was Russ Kilrain. Four others were his henchmen.

The sixth man was Jack Ivor. Jack Ivor sat with his back against a wall, the still-smoking muzzle of his rifle thrust over a boulder before him. He didn't look scared or weak now. As he died there had been a soft smile on Jack Ivor's gaunt, bearded face, like he was thinking of something pleasant.

Jack Ivor had said, "Don't you worry, button. I—I'll take care of you!" And he had. He'd made it possible for them all to live.

Barbara was sobbing softly, and Kent Varing put his arm about her slim figure and led her out of the canyon—toward a future that had been purged of its bitterness and glowed bright with promise of happiness. A future made possible by a man who, afraid to live, had in the end found something worth dying for. ●END

KILLER'S HERITAGE

(cont'd from page 90)

looked for me, seein' as how I'd been doin' a lot of night ridin' on the bandit's trail—and seein' how I showed up here today..."

Webb was silent, mutely grateful because Bert wasn't blaming him for the ugly suspicions he had nursed. But even if Bert had damned him to the skies, Webb would have been happy at that moment. For regardless of the blood of Wild Bill Leatherby,

Bert Freeman was the kind of man his foster father had wanted him to be. Bert was *his* son. That thought was like a hymn of joy in the heart of Webb Freeman.

He cradled Bert closer to him, began to wipe the blood from the boy's face. It was thus Sheriff Anvil Shane saw the pair of them when the lawman opened his eyes a minute later... ●END

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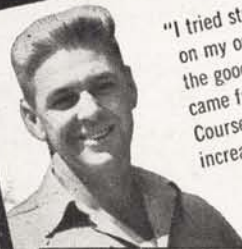
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