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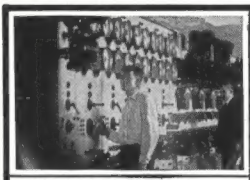

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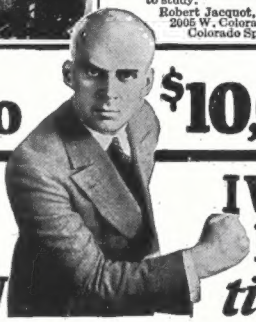

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Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

Vol. LV Contents for October 24, 1925 No. 6

SEVEN STORIES IN THIS ISSUE

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IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE:

Sammy Gregg and the Posse

A Novel

By Max Brand

Little Sammy Gregg becomes a hero in spite of himself

Salt for the Goose

By Herbert Farris

Two of the three partners in the gold mine are unscrupulous rascals who progress from playing practical jokes on the third to trying to swindle him

The Mutt

By Ray Humphreys

The owner of the ranch was studding thoroughbreds; he sneered at the stray cayuse that wandered into the corral. Just a "mutt," said the connoisseur; he changed his mind

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EVERY WEEK

Vol. LV OCTOBER 24, 1925 No. 6

The Runaways

By

George Owen Baxter

Author of "Fire Brain," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNWILLING SONGSTER.

THERE are two ways of taking a high note. The natural way is to squint up your eyes, get your mouth as wide open as you can, close your fists, and let it come. The other way is to keep your head down and your eyes wide—to try to smile and force out the note while you feel a sort of sick look coming on your face. That was the way that the minister wanted us to sing in the choir.

When Aunt Claudia sent me upstairs to put on a clean shirt with one of them big, stiff-starched wide collars on it, I knew mighty well that she would want me to sing for her guests that afternoon, and that I would have to sing the minister's way.

Well, it made me pretty sick.

I got up in my room and put the shirt on. The edges on the collars always sawed into your neck when you put the shirt on. I seen that I wouldn't be able to turn my head very much that afternoon without sawing my neck about off. That didn't make me much happier.

Just then the front doorbell rang. I could hear Aunt Claudia's voice bubbling and dancing up and down the scale. So I knew that the Porsons had come. Well, I knew that it would be a while before I was wanted. Aunt Claudia would have to settle them down, and ask how they were, and what they'd been doing. Then she would have to

paw over Jack Porson, who was only a year older than me. She would have to say how much he had grown, and how like somebody in the family he looked, and all that sort of rot.

All of this would take a lot of time. So I sat down by the window and looked out. I started thinking what a mighty lot of trouble and sorrow there is in the world. I mean, how much trouble there is for people. I could see the Simson's cow lying down in the shade of a tree over in the lot, chewing her cud and twitching her hide to make the flies leave her. Only they just buzzed up and settled down on her. She was so plumb lazy and contented that she didn't bother turning her head to lick them off, or switching her tail to knock them off. Just then a rooster hopped up on the top of McGregor's back fence, flapped his wings, crowed and then stuck out his head to see who had noticed his voice.

Well, you could see that there was happiness in the world for things like the rooster and the cow that didn't go bothering themselves all the time. But mostly folks is bothered a lot doing things that somebody has said that they ought to do. It is a queer thing how many "oughts" and "ought nots" there is—in school, in church, or in Aunt Claudia's house. It didn't make any difference. One was about as bad as the other.

Just when I was thinking of all this, a loafer came down the street playing a violin. He had a white dog along with him to do the begging for him. That fellow, he could play a violin pretty good, with a lot of quivers and things in the top notes. When I heard him first, he was playing "Ben Bolt" so sad that it made your Adam's apple ache.

He was a pretty slick player, all right, but it done you good to see that dog carry on when anybody stopped to listen—or just walked along, wanting to hear the music, but not stop and pay for it, you know. That dog would run up in front of whoever it was, and stand up on his hind legs, and walk backwards in front of him, sort of hopping along. It must have been pretty hard for a dog like that to stand up that way. I saw the minister come along, and I had to smile when I seen that poor dog try his trick on the minister. But the dog was right, and I was wrong. Pretty soon the minister reached into his pocket and tossed a coin that the dog grabbed right out of the air as slick as you please. Then he ran and dropped it into the hat of his boss.

The minister stopped and said something to the violinist just as he got to the quivering, quavering end of "Ben Bolt." I saw the beggar shrug his shoulders and the minister roll up his eyes. He shook his head mighty sad and walked away down the street, pitying the beggar. He was a great hand at pitying folks, the minister was. Except when he was rehearsing the choir, and then he laid his pity on the shelf for a rest which it had earned, I suppose. Well, I guessed by this that most likely this loafer with the violin was a lost soul, or something like that. Of course, it made me take a lot more interest in him and even in his dog, too. I just noticed that he had sort of reddish hair and that he was kind of big around the shoulders when a door opened downstairs and let out Aunt Claudia's voice, still bubbling and running up and down scales to show how plumb tickled she was to have the Porsons there that afternoon.

It made me sick to hear her because I knew that she hated Mrs. Porson. I don't know why, unless it was that she had to wear glasses, and Mrs. Porson didn't. I turned around and made a face. It's wonderful what you can do with your face when you let yourself go. I had done a good deal of practicing, so that I could make any boy on the block want to fight in a minute. It

comes mighty handy, being able to do a thing like that. In school, for instance, if there's some sassy-looking girl on the far side of the room with her nose stuck up in the air, it does you a lot of good to let her know what you think of her without having to use no words.

I could see by the glass that I had worked up an extra good expression, and I was so busy studying it that I didn't hear Aunt Claudia coming up the stairs. When she busted in on me I hadn't wiped off all the look that I was wearing. It brought up Aunt Claudia standing, as they say, and she flattened her shoulders against the door behind her.

"You young scamp," said Aunt Claudia in her most swearingest voice, "how dare you look at me like that?"

"I wasn't looking no way," I answered.

"Humph!" exclaimed Aunt Claudia. "I thought I sent you up here to put on your clean shirt. You ain't got the necktie on it, yet."

"I didn't know," said I, "whether you would want me to wear a bow tie or a——"

"Stuff!" said Aunt Claudia. "Did you expect that you would learn what I wanted by sitting there like a great lump? Come here to me!"

She gave me a yank, picked up a big, beautiful blue tie, put it around my neck and fluffed it out. Then she stood back and squinted at it, and nodded and smiled sort of critical, not admiring me, you understand, but the picture that she was going to make out of me.

She grabbed the comb and brush and begun to tidy up my hair.

"Ouch!" I howled, "that's a sore spot."

'Stuff!" exclaimed Aunt Claudia. "What a great softy you are! I wish to goodness I could understand why your hair is all bristles in back. Now, Sammy Moore, I want you to do your best this afternoon, because Mrs. Porson is a great lover of music and a great judge of it. She has got classical taste. Do you hear me? And I shall be dissatisfied if you don't sing *perfectly!*"

I knew what that meant. Whenever they say "classical," you know that it is something mostly without no tune and up around high C part of the time, the rest being down where you got to squawk it with your chin away inside of your collar.

"All right," I answered. "I shall do my best, Aunt Claudia."

"Sammy," she said, "you are a dear boy—when you want to be. Now you come along. And if you *impress* Mrs. Porson—the horrid, critical thing!—you shall have a great big piece of apple pie to-night for your supper!"

"A quarter of a pie?" I asked, not wishing to lose no good chances.

"Yes, I suppose so," she agreed. "But only if you do extra this afternoon."

If you ever had tasted one of Aunt Claudia's apple pies you would know why it was worth while to do extra good when she wanted you to. She had a way of cooking up green apples and sugar and crust so's it was half sweet and half sour. It sent a tickle from right behind your eyes clear down to your toes. So I promised faithful and I made up my mind that I would sing fine.

When we come in, Mrs. Porson smiled at me and sai : "How are you, Samuel, my dear boy?" Then she jabbed her elbow into Jack's ribs, and he gasped and got up, and wished that I might be feeling pretty well. I said that I was and shook hands with them both. I thought that that was all, when Aunt Claudia stepped on my toes—with her heel. That reminded me to hope that they was both well; which they was, they said, except that Uncle James had been throwed from a horse and broke his hip the week before.

I had never heard about any Uncle

James before; neither had Aunt Claudia, but she wouldn't let on. She began to exclaim, "Poor man!" Then she got reminded of one of *her* cousins that had broke both arms and a collar bone, once. It was pretty hard to come over Aunt Claudia in a thing like that; she had so many relations, and she could remember them all most amazing.

After that, they had a real good time for a while. Aunt Claudia told how they took care of the two arms and the busted collar bone of her cousin, and Mrs. Porson told how they fetched Uncle James home, and what a lot he had suffered. This talking give me and Jack Porson a chance to look each other over. It was easy to see that he didn't think much of me. It was because my big white collar always made me look sort of sick and thin. I could see that he was a lot fatter than he had been the year before when I seen him last. And I picked out the exact place where I would hit him hard if the time ever came.

He said to me with his lips, not making any sound: "I can lick you just as easy as ever."

He was referring to the last time he came over when he tripped me up and sat on me before I could get up. I had to tell Aunt Claudia that I had run into a swarm of wasps and that was why my face was swelled up so terrible bad.

I made as good a face at him as I could. It was a real whopper, because he sat up stiff in his chair and give me a pretty evil look, I can tell you. Just then both the ladies had come to splints; there they busted off talking sort of by mutual assent, the way ladies have of doing when they see that they can't talk each other down. They looked over at us boys, sort of smiling and nodding—with tears in their eyes, they had both been having such a good time talking so fast.

"But I must hear your dear little Samuel sing!" says Mrs. Porson. "I have heard such a lot about his thrilling voice."

Aunt Claudia was so pleased that she could hardly speak. But she pulls down her mouth as long as she could and says, "Poor child! He has such a frightful cold, I don't think he could possibly manage to sing a single note. Could you, Sammy dear, to please dear Mrs. Porson?"

Of course I didn't have no cold. Aunt Claudia had to run down everything that belonged to her. If somebody come calling and said how pretty the pattern in her carpet in the front room was she would say how bad the color was fading and that the dyes was not what they used to be. She never set people down to her table without apologizing for every dish, because the oven wasn't hot enough, or the wretched cake had fell just as it came out of the stove. She would even apologize for her green apple pie.

It was enough to make you ashamed the way that woman carried on about my cold, how my throat was terrible delicate, and how I was a frightful anxiety to her all the time, although she hoped I might one day grow up and retain my art and become a comfort to her old age.

Have you got any aunts? Well, you never could have had an aunt Claudia. When I stood up to sing that day I was really feeling sort of sorry for myself and weak. When I hit the first note my voice wabbled something awful. Aunt Claudia brought me out of that mighty quick with a look out of the corner of her eye. You can bet that I thought about the apple pie and didn't let my voice shake *at* all.

Well, I sang pretty good, that day. Particular because it made Jack Porson feel so mean to have me shining and showing off, like this. Every time he caught my eye I would see his lips say: "Gee, what a guy!" That didn't bother me none; it tickled me, rather. I sang

a lot of them classical songs. I suppose that you have heard most of them. They're all about islands of dreams where you are going to go to hunt up somebody that you never happened to meet, lately. There was a song called "The Curse of the Dreamer," that was so full of language, it used to send a chill right up and down my spine. It was about how a man lost his girl, and how he set in and told her how bad she was for leaving him, and how she would suffer, and how terrible hard fate was going to be on the gentleman friend that had run off with her. Right at the end the music gets mighty sad, and then you find out that the girl hadn't left him at all. It was only a dream—you see? But what he said to that poor girl while the dream lasted was something awful.

Just as he was waking up out of the dream, I heard the fiddle squeaking out in the street. Aunt Claudia give the window a wild look. She could hardly wait to finish the piece and hear Mrs. Porson talk about how I had "interpreted" that song; Aunt Claudia just tore for the door and sailed out to light into that tramp.

CHAPTER II.

THP TRAMP.

LOOKING out the window, I could see that he was a real tramp, all right. He was dressed up pretty good and neat, but there was a streak of red clay along the inside of the cuff of one of his trousers. I knew that he must have hoofed it all the way from Port Hampton, which was about fifty miles away. There was no red clay like that between our town and Port Hampton.

Aunt Claudia said, "Sir, your music will be more appreciated if you take it to another street in this town!"

The white dog sailed over the fence and stood up in front of Aunt Claudia, wagging his tail, and laughing at her out of his little, bright black eyes.

"That is a fighting dog!" cried Aunt Claudia. "That is one of those nasty bull terriers! Call it away from me this instant! Heavens, what a person to allow wandering around the streets of our town. I suppose it will be the death of some one before it's done."

"Come back, Smiler," the tramp ordered.

Smiler sails over the fence again.

"The lady doesn't like us, Smiler," said the tramp sadly. "We must go away!"

"Humph," exclaimed Aunt Claudia. "I suppose there is a place for every one of God's dumb creatures—but not in my front yard."

"Ma'am," said the tramp, with his hat in his hand, "I am going right on. I was misinformed. I was told that the mistress of this house was a great lover of good music."

"And who, pray," asked Aunt Claudia, "might have given me a name like that?"

"A lady on this same street——"

He waved to one side of him.

"Mrs. Rice?" asked Aunt Claudia. "Was it a Mrs. Rice?"

Mrs. Rice was the widow of the baker. She was pretty rich and always gave money to the school and the poor families across the track. She was terrible important in our town. She wore double spectacles and walked with a cane and had a stiff black silk dress.

"Yes, ma'am," said the tramp, "that is exactly who it was. She said that she thought you would appreciate my art——"

"You step around to the kitchen door, will you?" said Aunt Claudia. "I think that I've got a snack of something for you. But mind that dog of yours don't scare my chickens—because I won't have it! It spoils their laying for days!"

Aunt Claudia come back into the house, walking pretty proud. She got noticed by Mrs. Rice about once a month, and she was set up, I can tell

you. She give Mrs. Porson a family picture album to look at, and stopped only to point out the group picture of Cousin Minnie's children before she went on out to the kitchen to feed the tramp. I got caught with a terrible coughing fit right afterward and went out to listen. I heard the tramp apologizing for interrupting the singing. He said that the wind had been blowing toward the house, and that he hadn't heard. That was a whopper, because when I open up they can hear me two blocks away. But when Aunt Claudia wanted to believe anybody, the facts never bothered her none. When she didn't want to believe anybody, all the facts in the world wouldn't have proved anything to her. I come around to the door and looked through. Aunt Claudia was sitting down with her back to me. The tramp was sitting sort of sideways and saw me right away, but didn't let on.

He was telling Aunt Claudia about his life, which had been pretty sad. He had been the son of an opera singer. Nothing had been too good for him until finally his mother died of a fever. He was left in the world with "only a few trifling thousands to complete my musical education." When that was spent, he had to fall back on his fiddle to piece out, which was only natural.

Aunt Claudia pitied him a lot and hoped that he would soon be in better shape. He let on that he was saving enough money to rent a hall, and then he would start in to give concerts. Aunt Claudia said that she didn't mind giving a boost to a good cause and that there was ten cents for him. He thanked her for it, saying that if the world had more people like her in it, life would be like walking in a garden of roses.

Here she busted in, "Young man, did I see you give that piece of ham to the dog?"

It took a fast eye to see that trick, because he was mighty quick with his hands. Smiler had just opened up and swallowed that piece of ham like it was a gulp of air.

"It slipped from my fork," said the tramp, finishing his lunch and standing up.

So I went back to the front room. There was no more singing that day, though. Because when Aunt Claudia sat down to the piano and started to nod to me, Mrs. Porson started talking about it being time for her to start. I knew that she wouldn't be going for a long time, so I winked to Jack, and we went out in the back yard together.

I hoped that the tramp might be around, but he was gone. Jack Porson didn't seem interested at all in what I had heard at the kitchen door. He kept a sort of a fishy eye on me and in another minute, he gave me a shove.

You would think that he would have let things alone as they were, because he had given me such a beating the year before. He was just as sassy as if he had licked me fair and square the last time out. Well, I hit him in the stomach the first pass I made at him, and after that it was easy. He tried to kick me as I was coming in, but I managed to get close, and then I fair ripped into him. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer, and he dropped on his face, holding his head in his arms.

Fat boys are like that. They ain't apt to have any nerve. I asked him if he had enough. He said that he had, but that he would lick me to a pulp the next time he came over, and that he would start in and train for me. When he sat up and I saw his face I knew that I was headed for plenty of trouble without Jack Porson being mixed in it at all.

His face was so fat and soft that I had cut him up pretty bad. He had two black eyes and his nose was all blood, and there was a tooth missing from in the front of his mouth. And he was still dripping, and the blood was

running down from another cut in his lip; so that he looked pretty bad.

I wanted to clean him up. But he said that he would take care of himself. He went straight on into the house the way he was. You can see that he wasn't no sort of a man. He was just a mean, low-down welcher that wanted to have me get a licking.

I knew that after one look at him, Aunt Claudia would be ready to give me one of her best. Well, there are different kinds of lickings. Dad used to lay into me with a lot of muscle, but he was always so mad that he couldn't pick out the places that hurt the most. Aunt Claudia said that she always believed it was a sin to whip a child when anybody was in a temper, so her eyes were wide open all the time. She picked tender spots every lick.

Knowing what was coming, I decided that the whipping wouldn't be any worse if it come a little later. I lit out for the swimming pool as hard as I could split so that I would be out of hearing before she begun hollering for me.

It's a queer thing that when somebody calls you, you sort of got to go home so long as you can hear it. If you can't hear, you feel a lot better; and pretty soon you forget what's going to happen when you *do* get home. Then you go along and have a mighty good time, mostly. Aunt Claudia had a fetching sort of voice; it ended up with a squeak that traveled like a bullet. She would call "Sam-meeee!" starting down low and ending up high. When the wind was with her, I could hear her eight blocks away, and even when it was against her, I could hear her a good three or four blocks.

With one dive I took the fence and cut across the fields. Every minute I thought I heard the beginning of her siren call. I legged it out longer and longer till pretty soon I was taking the big barbed wire fences sailing.

When I got to the top of Gunther's Hill and I rounded over to the other side of it, I knew I was out of earshot of Aunt Claudia. I sat down and got my wind. Then I peeled and slid in Gunther's Pool.

I just lay there on the flat of my back with my head in the shadow of the willow tree and my toes wriggling out where the sun was the hottest. I just had to keep my hands flapping a little to keep the current from floating me down—which was about all that kept me from falling to sleep. However, sleeping ain't half so much fun; the best part of being asleep you never know anything about.

"How's the water, kid?" sang out a voice on the shore.

You know how sudden a voice comes clapping into your ears when you're lying in the water? I rolled over, and there I seen the red-headed gent that played the violin left-handed. He had his dog with him and everything.

I told him that the water was pretty good.

"I don't think that I'll go in," he said. "I'm worn out with travel. Do you live around here, my young friend?"

I could see that he didn't recognize me. You could hardly blame him, having seen me only once. Besides being peeled and in clothes is a lot of difference. So I just said that I lived pretty close.

"Ah, well," he remarked, "there are some cold-hearted people in that town.

I allowed that that was right and asked him how he had found out. At that, he lifted up his head and stood there sort of sad and noble.

"Why should I tell my troubles to a child?" he queried. "Ah, well!"

"Have you lost your suit case?" I asked.

"My uncle, the wealthy Sir Oliver Radnor," he replied, "was parted from me in Ashton by mistake. I found myself alone on the train. However, it is impossible to persuade the townsmen

I was about to walk back to Ashton——"

This yarn didn't hitch up with the one that he had told at Aunt Claudia's house about being the son of an opera singer. I could see what he hoped was that I would ask him home to supper, and maybe then he could get something out of my father, if I had one.

So I rolled over on my side in the water and winked at him. He stopped right in the middle of a sentence with a little frown.

"Where have I seen you before, youngster?" he asked, a little sharp.

"Back in the last house," I answered, "where you was the son of an opera singer."

You would think that he might get a little red or something after that, but he didn't. He just grinned at me as much as to say: "How do you do?" Then he peeled down to his undershirt and took the air in the shadow of the tree.

Looking at him then, you could tell that he was pretty strong by the way his chest stuck out and his stomach stuck in. He had a thick neck, a pretty deep chest. His arms were big, but over the muscles there was a little soft layer of fat, like there is on the arms of women that don't do much work. He had red speckles over his shoulders and down on his wrists, and there was a big white welt along his left side by the ribs. I would of give fifty cents to know what had made that white place on him.

But he wasn't the kind of a fellow you could rush with questions. I saw that I had better take my time a little.

CHAPTER III.

ROLLING STONES.

BY that, I don't mean that he was offish, because he looked very pleasant. He had a sort of a way about him that seemed to mean that he expected people to be a little respectful—which was queer in a tramp. He didn't make his own cigarettes, either, but took a smoke out of a silver-looking case. He snapped his match into the water, and while he was watching it sizzle he asked, "Do you smoke?"

"Everybody does at the swimming pool," I answered.

"Come ashore and have one, then," he invited.

I swam in and started up toward him, but the white bull terrier stood in front of me with a growl that meant business. I didn't wait to ask no questions; I just dived backward and as my toes went up in the air I could *feel* how close his teeth snapped at them.

"Your dog don't like me," I told him.

"He is only a little nervous about having people come up to me without asking leave," answered the tramp. "Sit down, Smiler."

Smiler sat down and grinned at his boss, but he kept the fishy corner of one eye pegged down on me all the time.

"You can come in now," "Lefty" said. "He won't bother you. This young fellow is a friend of mine, Smiler," he said to the dog.

Coming ashore beside that dog was a good deal like picking red-hot coals out of the fire. When there is a growed-up man around you got to act sort of easy and natural, no matter how you might be feeling. My legs felt terrible naked when I stepped past Smiler's nose to get one of Lefty's cigarettes.

I sat down on the edge of the sun and the shadow, so's I could dry off without getting chilly. Lefty said, "You live with the lady that loves music, I guess?"

"I guess I do," I answered.

"Do you like music too?" he asked.

"Her kind of everything I hate," was my reply.

His eyes slid over toward me gradual, then flickered up and down me quick and powerful, like the headlights of an automobile.

"She *is* a hatchet-faced old crow, isn't she," said he.

It is sort of comfortable to be asked opinions by a growed-up man. I told him that what she looked like was nothing to be compared to what she was inside.

"She is a maiden aunt, I suppose," said Lefty.

"She is all of that, and then something!"

Lefty gave me a grin which froze sort of halfway on his face. He looked all at once as though he seen something my way that scared him. I looked behind me with a sort of sick feeling that maybe Aunt Claudia might be sneaking up behind. There was nothing in sight. Then he asked:

"Were you doing that singing in her house?"

"Me? Oh, yes," I replied.

"Could you," asked Lefty, "sing 'Ben Bolt?'"

When I told him I could, he picked up his violin and played it. I sang it through, which is easy because no hard notes was put in it. That was why Aunt Claudia never bothered me none to sing it, because she mostly liked me to try things where I had to squawk for a while up near the top of my throat. And that violin had a way of coming right in on the note with you and boosting you along, or else where you were sailing along in the nicest, saddest parts, the violin would be saying things quite different, but very harmonious, if you know what I mean. Half the time I was almost forgetting what I was singing, I was listening so hard to the funny tricks that he was doing.

When I got through he said: "You need a lot of training. Who has been teaching you?"

"The minister," I answered.

"I thought so. The fool has been forcing you on the high notes. Don't force yourself, kid. If I never see you again, just remember that. It doesn't sound well, and it will ruin your voice sooner or later."

He got out a knife, then, and began to whittle a twig. I watched him at first because it was such a fine knife with an ivory handle onto it; in a minute I was watching because of the things that he was doing with the blade. He slit the bark off that twig, and he began to gouge into it as though it was dough or clay. First thing you know, he had shaped out the hull of a boat, long and low and racy-looking. He drilled out a couple of holes in the deck, stuck in two twigs for masts, and fetched a big leaf for one of the masts. Then he put it in the water.

It was no bigger than a handful, altogether, but it was mighty graceful on that smooth water. When I blew at it, it slid along with its image beside it very slick, and went clean out into the center of the pool, washing a tiny little ripple on each side of it.

Lefty and I smiled. It was so pretty and so small that it would of been spoiled if you had laughed out loud. I said that I would go in and fetch it out again, but Lefty said: "Never do any work that a dog can do for you! Go bring it to me, Smiler."

That white dog got up, walked down to the water, dived in and took the boat in his mouth.

"Careful!" cried Lefty.

It was funny to see that dog wag his tail in the water to show that he understood. He shifted his grip on the boat, took hold of the end of it and came swimming in with it, wagging his tail as if to call attention to what an extra good dog he was.

When he got to the bank, the leaf that was the sail fell out of the boat. I stooped to pick it up, but he stopped me with a terrible growl. I never seen a dog that could say so little and yet mean so much when he twitched back the corners of his lips.

Lefty took the boat from him, and

while he stood by wagging his tail, admiring his boss and cussing me out of the corner of his eye, Lefty told me to come up.

He took Smiler right by the muzzle and held him so hard it hurt.

"Now sock him good and hard!" said Lefty. "Double up your fist and hit him as hard as you can!"

I doubled up my fist and got ready to hit him. He knew what was coming. And he didn't budge; just looked up to me very quiet. I dropped my fist and told Lefty that I couldn't soak the dog. It was too much like hitting another boy that was being held for you.

"All right," said Lefty. "That was the way I taught him to follow me—by licking him. I used to have an old brown dog along with me with just about as many tricks as Smiler, here. One day Smiler came out and gave my brown dog a grab and a shake. That was the end of him. I managed to catch Smiler—which wasn't much trouble, because in those days he didn't know how to run away. He made quite a fight of it for a while, and then I beat him to a pulp. I didn't think he could walk. When I got about a mile away from that town, I looked back and there was that white pup trailing along behind me. He's kept on trailing for six whole months and never backed up from anything all that time!"

It was interesting to hear about the dog, of course. It was more interesting to see by this that Lefty was a regular tramp. He had had another dog before this one to beg for him, and he was still keeping at it.

Most of the tramps that I had seen were ragged and didn't use a razor more than once a week. Lefty could have stepped right in the way he was behind a counter in a "Gents' Furnishing Store," or any place like that where a man has to dress up real fine. Why, I wondered, did he want to be a tramp?

"But," Lefty continued, "if you don't want to be the boss, I'm not going to make you. Only, that Smiler will walk right over you until you show him that you're the master."

I asked what difference that would make, when I would probably never see the dog after to-day. Lefty looked straight at me for a long time. Before he answered, he blew out a little puff of smoke and punched a hole in it. Then he said: "Because I've taken pity on you, kid. And you're going along with me."

It took the breath out of me. I had heard, now and then, about tramps running away with boys. I edged away from him a little and looked at the top of Gunther's Hill and wondered if I could run to the top of it before Lefty could catch me.

He didn't seem to notice. He had half closed his eyes, the way that a man does when he is seeing something almost too good to be true.

"When I was about your age," said Lefty, "*I* had a voice, though it wasn't a patch on yours. It was good enough to cart me all over the world. I've gone where I liked, and when I ran out of money, I used to just take off my hat in the street and sing. Well, the windows would fly open, and the money drop like rain. It didn't matter where. Marks, francs, Mexican dollars; music is a language that the whole world understands, and I've had my share of the fun. Same as I'm going to show you how to have *your* share of it! Yes, I've made up my mind. You're a pretty good kid. There's no reason in the world why that old goat of a minister should make capital out of you, or the hatchet-faced dame give you a whacking when you get home."

When I saw that he didn't mean to take me by force, it made me look at the idea again. Of course, you can see for yourself that I wasn't having such a lot of fun at home there with Aunt Claudia.

"But I would have to go back and get clothes," said I.

"You have a suit and a cap and a pair of shoes. What more have I? No, you're fixed the way you are—if you want to come. Of course, it would be a lot of trouble sneaking you out of the county and a lot of danger to me. But I've taken a liking to you. I don't know why. If you say the word, I'll take you along with me."

CHAPTER IV.

THE JOURNEY STARTS.

YOU never can tell what you'll think of in a pinch. I saw my spot in the Sunday choir all vacant and the lead soprano in the singing gone, too. They would have to let Jimmy Roscoe take my part, and his voice squawked terrible whenever he got out of the high register. It made me laugh out loud to think of it. Also, I wondered if Aunt Claudia would miss me or just be glad.

I said: "I'll go along! Let's start now, if you want."

He rolled his eyes up at the top of that hill and said that it wasn't a bad idea, because Aunt Claudia impressed him as the sort of a woman who spent less time wondering, than going to see what was wrong. He dressed up again, tucked his violin into its case, and off we started.

We tramped along for about two hours, cutting through the fields until we got to a lane which we followed until the sun was down. We finally camped in an old barn with some hay of about ten seasons back stacked on the floor.

Lefty started a little fire in the woods near the barn, and told me to keep it up while he went off to the next village to buy some chuck. I couldn't go with him, because by this time Aunt Claudia had probably sent in an alarm call for the police.

It was dark when Lefty went away, but before he started he said: "Smiler, watch the boy! Take care of the boy, Smiler!"

Smiler came over and lay down where he could keep part of an eye on the fire, and the rest of his attention on me. You never saw such a dog! When I started to stand up to look around to get some more wood for the fire, Smiler stood up, too; his growl said just as plain as words:

"You stay put, kid! You stay right there where you were left. You belong to the boss. I don't know why he wants you along, because I'm sure that I don't like you a bit, but if you think that you can walk away from me, you're mistaken!"

Anyway, I didn't try! I just sat down again and reached out my hand over his head, slow, so that he could see that I wasn't going to hurt him. Then I petted the back of his neck, but he didn't like it a bit. He just sat there with a growl humming in the back of his throat. His neck was arched up, as hard as iron.

It was like being left in the woods with a wolf. I wouldn't have been surprised if that dog had taken a flyer at my throat any minute. And the woods got blacker and blacker all the time. Only off to the west through the trees I could see just a smudge of red made by the day dying very gradual. The birds were done talking for the day and only let out a few little squeaks when the wind came walking among the trees. The trees seemed to get bigger and bigger and taller and taller until they were reaching right up into the sky. Then the stars came out—just over the tiptop branches that kept brushing back and forth across their faces.

After a while, I began to feel eyes behind me. You know, you read in books that eyes can be felt. That night they were drilling into the small of my back. Sometimes I could almost see a pair of big yellow ones, like a panther's,

in the shadow across the clearing. I tried to tell myself that the dog would know if anything like that came around, but that dog didn't seem to have eyes or ears for anything or anybody except just me.

The fire had burned up all the twigs and grass that I could reach and was burning pretty small. Now and then a bit of flame would get a new start and jump up to show me all the trees standing around, wagging their heads in the wind.

Lefty was away only about an hour, but it seemed a lot longer time before I heard a crack! The dog sneaked a bit back from me and pricked up his ears. I got ready for almost anything to jump out from among the trees at me. Then I heard the step of a man walking along, whistling the first bars of "Ben Bolt" to let me know it was Lefty. He was thoughtful, that way. It didn't cost him much, and it eased me a lot. Mostly nobody but the women ever think to put the frills on things, that way.

He came in so cheerful and full of news that I forgot about how still and ghostly it had been alone in the forest. He raked the fire together in two jiffies and got it blazing. After that, he gave me some nice sausages and showed me how to roast them by spitting them on little sticks, then holding and turning them near the fire. He had brought a pot along that he made coffee in. Nobody would believe how terrible good those sausages could smell when the grease began to run out of them, and they began to turn brown and pop open, or how fine that coffee smelled when it began to simmer.

While we were eating, he told me how he had gone into the village telling people that he and his wife were making a tour in an automobile that had broken down back in the forest and that they intended to camp out that night. Somebody wanted him to take back a mechanic from the garage, but he said that he was a pretty good mechanic himself.

After that he got some of the news—how Sammy Moore had been missing from the town of Gunther that evening, and now there were parties out hunting all over the country for him. They had sent down a lot of men with lanterns and nets to drag Gunther's Pond for him, because it was thought that maybe he had got stunned diving into the water and hitting his head on a stone. The last reports were that nothing had been found of him, and Aunt Claudia was disturbed enough to offer a reward of fifty dollars for information.

It set me up a lot to know that people were fussing around and hunting for me. I was most surprised to learn about Aunt Claudia's fifty dollars because she was that way that she couldn't speak of ten dollars, even, without catching her breath before and after. She paid all her bills by the week instead of by the month, because it used to scare her to see such terrible big sums stacking up against her.

It scared me, too, because I knew that if she was offering fifty dollars for me, she would give me a whacking that would be worth remembering for years and years. She would start in to get the whole fifty dollars' worth out of me, and she knew exactly how to do it. It made me ache just to think about being caught and handed back to her. I suggested to Lefty that we put out the fire and start on the march again.

He only laughed at me. When I said that a hunting party might stumble onto us at any time, he agreed. He said they might if we were moving about, too. If luck was against us, I would be found. If the luck was not against us, I would not. There was nothing we could do to help one way or the other. He said that a lot of worrying was saved by leaving things to fate.

Lefty talked, very grave; it made me feel pretty grown up to have a man like

that talk so serious to me. He was always very thoughtful of me, just like I was his own age.

When we had got through with our supper, he hauled out about a pound and a half of mighty good hamburger steak, giving a little handful of it at a time to the dog. His tail nearly wagged off; between bites he would look up into Lefty's face as much as to say: "How come that any man as wonderful and as good and as great as you could ever be made? And how could you ever take any notice of a poor dog like me?"

I said I would like to feed him a little of that meat to make him more friendly, you know, and Lefty said: "Sure, here you are! You feed him the rest of it, if you want!"

It tickled me to do that. I took the paper of meat and made up a ball of some of it and offered it to the Smiler. Well, sir, that dog just turned up his nose and wouldn't look at it. He stayed there watching the meat very mournful. Now and then he would look at his boss as much as to say that he didn't see how Lefty could do such a thing as to let all that good meat be poisoned by a snake like me.

I can't tell you how small and mean I felt. Then Lefty took the meat and started in feeding again, and Smiler went on wagging his tail and eating. Mind you, that for all the things that dog had done all day, he never got a word of thanks, or hardly so much as a pat. But while Lefty was giving him that meat he would say now and then: "You are a pretty good dog, Smiler. Yes, sir, a pretty good dog, I have to admit!"

Well, sir, it tickled that dog so much to be spoke to kind, that he would leave off eating to listen. Before he would taste another bit of that meat, he would lick Lefty's hand. It put the tears in my eyes. I said to myself that if a dog could love a man as much as that, there must be a good deal in the man. Anybody would have felt the same way about it.

We slept in a heap of the hay that we carried outdoors, because Lefty said that you could always sleep just twice as good under the stars as you could under a roof. Maybe you could, after you got used to it. All that night, I would sleep five winks at a time and then stay awake forty, shivering, and watching the cold faces of the stars—but mighty glad to be there instead of in Aunt Claudia's house.

We got up before the sun and went down to the creek. We chased each other around until we were hot; then we peeled off our clothes, dived in and swam around. It was cold, but it was licking good sport. Lefty could swim like a fish.

After that, he cooked our breakfast, which was eggs roasted in the hot ashes and coals of the fire. There was never anything so good! Just with coffee and salt and eggs—that was our breakfast, but it beat almost anything that you could imagine. Then we hit away on our day's tramp.

CHAPTER V.

CAUGHT.

THAT early in the morning, even people in the country were not up at work, so we used the lanes, for a time. We even went out on the main road, keeping to it until an automobile honking for a corner made us dive for the bushes. We watched it go by and then headed across fields again. Lefty didn't like the rough going, so when we came to the next lane he said that he would risk it again. Risk it we did, though I felt pretty scary, you can bet. No matter what Lefty said about fate and luck, there was no sense running our heads right into such a lot of trouble.

On some of those lanes the dust was so thick that a horse hardly made any

noise. We hadn't been half a mile down that road before we turned a sharp corner—and there was a farmer driving his horse right at us. He hadn't made any more noise than a ghost, and the bushes had shut him out of our sight. Matter of fact, he might have run right onto one of us if he hadn't pulled up very sharp.

He gave me a look that sank right through to the bone.

"Well, Master Moore," said he, "I see that you're coming out in my direction. Maybe you're looking for work?"

I couldn't have answered him in a hundred years. And I couldn't help noticing that while he had a lot of sacks in the back of his buckboard, he had a fine new shotgun lying in the seat beside him. There was no doubt about who would have the upper hand if it came to an argument between him and us, unless Lefty carried a revolver, which I hadn't seen yet. Besides, those big, bony hands of that farmer looked like they could manage that shotgun pretty easy. They were a sporting lot, the farmers in that section. They liked to take a pop at the birds as they drove in for town.

Take him all in all, there was too much of that farmer for me. As I said, I could not have answered him a word, but Lefty clipped in as easy as you please.

"Yes, sir," said Lefty. "I've found the young rascal, and I'm tracking him right in to Gunther. I can use that fifty dollars' reward that is offered."

"You are taking him *to* Gunther?" said the farmer.

"Exactly! I only wish you were going that way."

"That *is* the way that I'm going," said the farmer.

Lefty took off his hat and stared at him. It would have done you good, to see how baffled and bewildered he looked.

"Going *toward* Gunther?" asked Lefty like an echo.

"That's exactly it, young man. Unless the town has moved overnight, I'm going to find it right there!"

He stuck out his chin and pointed with his whip. He was a man that looked pretty sure of himself.

"Why, sir," said Lefty, "if that's the case the young devil has let me walk him right away from—— What do you mean by it, you scamp!"

He grabbed me by the nape of the neck so hard that it didn't take much acting for me to double up and let out a yelp that you could have heard a mile away.

"Leave him be," suggested the farmer. "I think that his aunt will give him what's what when she gets him back home. You can have a lift, right into town, if you want—look out for that dog of mine, or he'll eat your pup!"

A big mongrel that looked half wolf and half mastiff came zooming down the road. When he saw Smiler he made a bee line for him. The white dog gave his master a look and Lefty said: "Heel, boy!"

Smiler trotted back behind Lefty and sat down, as quiet as you please.

"Take him up into the rig with you," said the farmer. "That'll get him out of the way of my dog. Get back, Tiger, you old fool. I never saw such a dog."

But just the same, you could tell that he was mighty pleased. Who doesn't like to have a dog that can lick almost anything in sight?

There was hardly anything for us, except to climb into the buckboard. Lefty got into the seat with the farmer and me. Smiler got into the tail of the wagon, and the big dog followed along behind, slavering at the mouth, he wanted to sink his teeth in the Smiler so bad. In the meantime, we started off at a good trot. My heart went down in my boots when we turned out sharp into the big main road!

Lefty had enough nerve for a whole army. He kept right on talking along, smooth and easy. He was a musical student, said Lefty, walking across this beautiful country as a sort of vacation, to build up his strength—he had been broke down so terrible.

"You don't look it," the farmer said, very flat.

"Overwork," said Lefty. "The nerve strain of violin practice is very great."

That seemed to hit the farmer in the right spot. He warmed up.

"Ain't that a fact!" he exclaimed. "My house is right close to another house, and my neighbor's daughter is took bad with wanting to learn how to play the violin. There is a forty-acre field in betwixt us, but with the wind favoring her a little, I can tell you what, she makes life mighty miserable over at our place, that girl does. She's got a violin that she can make squawk just like a sick duck. Most amazing part is that her ma and pa likes it and always trots her out to play for folks that come to the house. And yet they ain't people that got anything wrong with their ears! But most parents is that way. Peculiar about their kids. Personally, I never had no kids and I ain't never hankered for them any."

My, he was a mean man! You could tell it by the set of the big cords of the back of his neck. I was glad that I didn't work for him.

Then he turned around and popped out at me. "Look here, youngster, what made you run away?"

It made me mad, it did, to be talked to like that, and I barked right back at him without thinking: "Because I was tired of the house where I was living!"

He give me a look that was like a swat with a stick. Then he turned back to Lefty.

"There you are!" said he. "There's the gratitude that kids have for them that raise them and slave for them. No, sir, give me a dog, first. That's the breed that I raise."

He whistled, and Tiger ran up alongside the wagon, jumping up in the air so's he could see farther across the fields. You could see that when his boss called Tiger, it was usually to send him after something.

"There's a dog," said the farmer, "that can run like a hound and fight like a lion. He hunts his own feed. When one of my dogs gets too old to hunt his own feed, I finish them off and use their hide for leather. A dog that ain't wise enough and able enough to fend for himself, in my eye ain't any dog at all! Now that white pup that you got—I suppose that you got to buy food for that?"

Lefty was mad. I could see that even from behind. The big muscle at the base of his jaw kept working in and out as he set his teeth to keep his temper back.

But he said, very soft: "Oh, yes, I feed that dog. I buy raw meat for him."

"Do you, now? Good enough for a man to eat, I suppose?"

Just then an automobile came scooting by. The farmer jerked up in his seat and pointed his whip over his shoulder at me. All the people in the automobile turned around to see me and popped out their eyes and made "O's" with their mouths, as much as to say, "Oh, he's going to catch it fine!"

I never seen such a crowd of people. They made me sick.

The farmer had got onto a thing that he liked to talk about, now, and he went right back to it. He said: "Good enough for a man to eat, that meat you buy for your dog, I suppose?"

"I suppose it is," said Lefty, very patient.

"Blast me!" exclaimed the farmer.

It busted right out from him. He was so mad that he couldn't control himself.

I wish that he *had* been blasted. I never seen a man that I hated so quick and easy and complete as I hated him.

He went on: "And will you tell me what good that dog is?"

"I'll tell you," said Lefty. "That dog does what I tell him to do. And also, he will lay down his life for me and ask no questions."

"He will lay down his life!" retorted the farmer with a sneer. "And what in hell difference does it make if he *will* lay down his life for you? What good would it do? What could he save you from except a house-cat, maybe?"

"Sir," said Lefty, with a sort of bur-r-r in his voice that I had never heard there before, "I suppose you are not familiar with the breed. They are fighting dogs, sir."

"Fighting fish!" exclaimed the farmer. "Didn't I see him sneak out of the way behind your heels?"

"I ordered him to do that," replied Lefty.

"What chance do you think that he would have agin' my Tiger, yonder?"

"My dog is big for his kind," said Lefty. "Yours, yonder, is in good, hard condition and yet weighs all of a hundred pounds. He has size in his favor, you must admit."

"He has," said the farmer, grinning, "and that ain't all that he has in his favor. He has grit in his favor, and a fighting head on his shoulders!"

"If he has all of that," said Lefty, "I wouldn't mind pitching in Smiler against him. Though I don't let him fight with ordinary dogs." The farmer was staggered, but Lefty went right on. "I'll bet you ten dollars, though, that he chokes your Tiger down."

I thought that he was trying to bluff the farmer out. It made me pretty scared for poor Smiler—against a brute like that Tiger. The farmer had the same idea. He popped out ten dollars, quick.

"Cover that!" said he.

Lefty covered it quicker than you could wink.

"Is your dog ready?" he asked.

"My dog is ready!"

"Smiler," said Lefty, "go take that big, clumsy fool, will you?"

Smiler whined and dived over the tailboard. Tiger opened a yard of mouth to swallow him alive, but Smiler did a flip while he was sailing through the air and grabbed that big dog right across the nose—and glued onto him. There was nothing for Tiger to do. He growled and thrashed around and turned himself over on the ground to shake off Smiler. While he was doing that last trick, Smiler shifted his grip quicker than you could wink and sank that long fighting jaw of his right in Tiger's woolly throat. After that, Smiler just closed his eyes, contented, and worked his grip deeper and deeper.

The farmer reached for his gun. "My heavens!" he cried, "he's killing my dog!"

But Lefty grabbed the gun first. He said: "If you try to kill the terrier, I'll break you in two!"

It sent a wriggle through me, I was so proud of Lefty; I could see that he meant it, and that he could do what he promised. The farmer didn't let out a peep.

There was Tiger laying on his back in the road, just giving a little wiggle.

"I'll take the ten dollars," said Lefty, and he did what he said. Then he jumped down off of the wagon, took Smiler by the neck and hit him in the ribs. When Smiler opened his mouth as much as to ask, "What's the matter with you?" he was dragged off the other dog.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN HUNT.

SMILER hated to be yanked off like that. When Lefty spoke, though, Smiler stood back and didn't say a word to anybody; just licked his lips, very

regretful. Lefty went on working over Tiger, squeezing his ribs and working his big hind legs back and forth until the poor dog was breathing once more. Suddenly the farmer snapped out: "Leave that dog be!"

There he stood in the wagon, his face drawed a mile long with meanness, the shotgun over the hollow of his arm. Lefty got up and dusted his hands clean.

"Very well," said he, "let your dog die, if you want."

The farmer said something about not caring whether he lived or not if it couldn't take care of itself. Then he sat down in his seat and drove off, without saying any more to us about giving us a ride on to town.

We watched him around the next corner of the road, and then we started running. We kept at it until I was nearly black in the face.

Lefty pointed out that we would have to hoof it right along, because as soon as that farmer came to town he would spread the news, and they would probably send out searchers to look for me. I suggested hitting out in a different direction from the one in which the farmer had seen us traveling when he first came along. Lefty said we couldn't do that because our one hope was to get me down to the nearest railroad. So we *had* to keep along in that direction, and he only hoped that we might win through.

You can see how exciting it was. If they caught us I would get the worst lickings you ever heard of from Aunt Claudia and Lefty would go to prison. He said that the law was terribly strict about kidnaping, which was what he would be charged with. I said then he shouldn't go on with me.

"What difference does it make?" asked Lefty. "Either we get through safe, or we don't. Luck is with us, or against us. All we can do is to try! If they are going to get me, they'll get me with you or without you. And there you are!"

You couldn't argue with him when he began to talk like that. He had that superstition, and he stuck to it.

We worked along until noon; then we laid up in the woods. Lefty said that he reckoned we were about four miles from the railroad. After dark we could make a dive for it.

I was glad to stop there in the shade. Partly because of the heat of the sun, and partly because I was fagged out. When we got to the edge of a creek, and I took off my shoes. My feet were a sight. Lefty got out a little paper with some powder in it and fixed me up fine. He brought some soft white cloth out of his pocket and bandaged both feet. I can tell you that I felt like a different boy.

I asked Lefty how could he manage to carry so much around with him. He said it was all in knowing how to fold things. Most people crumple a handkerchief up so that it looks as big as an apple in a pocket. If you fold it down neat and flat, nobody could tell that there was anything there. That was the way Lefty managed. He had a little bit of nearly everything about him—just in papers, envelopes, or folded things. To look at him, you'd never know that he had anything in his pockets at all. He said that if he was to lose everything he had in his pockets, it would cost him a month of work to get another collection together. I believed him.

We laid up there in the wood all through the afternoon, but it wasn't a dull time. Lefty could have made things hum even on a desert island. He said that we had to eat. When I asked him what he had in his pockets to eat, he answered:

"The best half of any meal—salt!"

It made me smile, to think of eating salt, but afterward I saw what he meant. He made some little snares for birds, out of notched pieces of wood that he

whittled out of twigs faster than you could think. Then he looked around to find little runs in the grass. He put some of the traps there and picked out places in the trees for others. It was slick to see the way that he worked it. You would have said that he knew just where the birds were likely to be.

I knew there was no use suggesting that there was danger of us being seen, if we moved around among the trees so often. He would only have said that we had to trust something to luck. That was his way. It was an exciting way of looking at things; you just gambled on chance all the time!

After he had set those little snares of his and baited them with bread crumbs, we sat about. He wouldn't let me go near any of the traps for a long time. He told me even to stop *thinking*.

"What in the world good will that do?" I asked him.

He frowned and told me not to bother him with so many questions. I could see that what I had asked was working on him.

"I'll tell you why," he said at last. "It's because the birds might be able to *feel* your mind working!"

He went on to tell me how he had been lying in a room, once, sound asleep, and all at once he woke up with his heart beating fast. He sat up and looked around him, but there was nothing stirring and nothing to be seen. He lay back and tried to sleep again, but pretty soon he could feel danger sneaking in on him. He got up and sneaked around that dark room on his hands and knees, with a gun in his hand. There was nothing to be found.

Then he decided to take a look in the next room. He threw open the door quick and shoved his gun in ahead of him. Just as he did that a revolver exploded in the room. By the flash he saw the face of his worst enemy. All that saved Lefty's life was the man's aiming breast-high instead of knee-high.

Lefty said that that was a good example of what he meant—that if we knew more about our minds, they could tell us lots of things. All that most of us could understand was when our minds was telling us things in words; that that was only the beginning of what our minds could talk about. He said that a man's mind was not only with him, but it was in every place that he had ever been, and in a lot of places where he never *had* been, but would go before he died, and that mind was collecting information all the time and wirelessing the news back to the central mind that always stayed with you.

This was pretty hard for me to understand.

"Some people are sensitive to these things, and some aren't," said Lefty. "I'm pretty sensitive. I get lots of messages, like that one that I was telling you about. It saved my life that night, and it's not the only time that it has saved my life. Every one gets them, more or less. Why, you've been blue lots of times without knowing why you were really sad?"

I admitted that that was right.

"It's because you are getting messages that trouble is ahead for you, and your mind is trying to tell you about it, but the words of that language can't come home to you. You feel things in a general way."

It was a ghostly way of thinking about things. I couldn't argue with Lefty about it. I could see that he felt about it the same way that Aunt Claudia did about religion. There was no use talking to him any more on that line. I asked him, instead, what happened when he saw the face of his enemy.

He gave me a long look as though he wondered whether or not it was worth while to tell me. Then he said:

"This is what happened. I tried a snap shot at him as I was jumping back through the door. I missed.

"I slammed the door and made a pass

for the violin. That was all that I was interested in. I didn't use the other door because it led out on the stairs and I thought that that was where he might try for me next. Instead, I dived out the window, landed on the roof of the porch, and jumped down into the garden. I got away into the town, where I was pinched for going around half dressed. But it was worth while getting pinched; I was never so glad to see anything as I was to see the inside of that jail."

You can imagine how I stared, because I thought of him as just the opposite of a man who would run away from anything except work.

"Would you mean," I asked, to make sure, "that you were afraid of this man?"

He nodded. "I mean just that," answered Lefty. "I'd rather meet a dose of poison than that man!"

I kept my mouth shut and digested that for a while. I was beginning to get a sort of scent of trouble that was lying ahead of us if I kept on with Lefty. I saw shadows of guns and men bad enough to make even Lefty run. However, it was fun, too, to look ahead to chances that you couldn't figure up. I decided right there that I wouldn't change places with anybody. I was scared, too, on general principles. I asked Lefty if he would tell me the name of this enemy of his. But he only answered:

"You ask more questions than you're worth."

After that, it was time to look to see what the traps might have caught.

We let one little brown bird go free. Lefty watched it fly away and said: "That bird will bring us luck. I've got a feeling in my bones that it will."

"An army is a walking stomach, and so is a tramp," said Lefty. "We've got to have food."

We got the fire going and began to roast the birds, turning them on spits. With the salt and the water from the brook, they were prime. Just as we finished, Smiler jumped up and made a point, his head and tail stuck out in a line.

"Somebody's coming," said Lefty. He scattered that fire to pieces in one swoop. We stamped out the sparks, and the wind tossed the last of the smoke away off among the trees. All that happened before we heard voices. I wanted to run for it, but Lefty wouldn't let me. We just crouched in the brush with the dog sitting between us, wrinkling his nose and jerking his ears.

"He smells some kind of news that he likes," said Lefty in a whisper. "I wonder what it could be?"

Well, in another minute we saw them. There were five men scattering through the woods and coming straight at us. Three of them had rifles or shotguns. When we saw the big farmer in the lot, we didn't have to be told that they were after us.

I heard one of them say that he had seen smoke over this way. That made me look up reproachfully at Lefty, but he didn't change color a bit. He just said: "That's the first trick for them, but the game isn't over yet!" Then he said: "The devil, we're going to lose! There's that dog!"

It was Tiger! His throat was all black, where the dust had caked over his wound. He looked almost as frisky as ever, and he was scenting along the grass like a bloodhound. I never saw a dog that looked so big and so mean.

The five of them found the fire and talked about it for a while. Our farmer said that the fire had just been put out and he pointed to the way that the grass had been burned off. Two of the others said that the way the wind had scattered the ashes made them think that it must be several days old. There hadn't been any strong wind since yesterday, at the latest.

We breathed a little easier, but the farmer said: "We'll beat up those bushes, before we go on."

"There goes Tiger," said one of the others. "He'll tell us what's there!"

Yes, sir, that big brute of a dog came crashing right into the thicket where we were. When he saw us his eyes flared like red fire. Then he got a whiff of Smiler, that Lefty was holding by the neck. When he seen the white dog, Tiger turned around and jumped out of that thicket as if he had been kicked.

"There you are!" some one sang out. "Tiger says that there is nothing in there. Let's go on, or we'll never catch them!"

Tiger wasn't interested in that bunch of bushes any more. He began to pretend to be busy among the trees right on ahead, but he and Smiler both knew why it was, I suppose. We were glad to see the five of them go on. Our farmer was mighty mad, saying that sort of searching would never find anything.

When we couldn't hear their footsteps or voices any more, Lefty said: "That goes to show you. A mean man can't persuade people, even when he's right!"

You can see how steady and brave Lefty was. That was all he had to say about our being in such a tight squeeze. A lot worse for him than it was for me, too, because all I would get was a hiding, while it meant prison for him.

We kept on there in the thicket until the dusk of the day. It was full dark before we got to the town. We skirted around and came down the track to a siding where a freight train was being made up. Lefty sneaked me under a car, showed me where to get on the rods and how to stretch out and be pretty comfortable on them. When I was fixed, he gave a little whistle. Smiler slid in and jumped up beside his boss without being told.

To be continued in the next issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

ESKIMO MURDERER COMMITS SUICIDE

ANOTHER story of tragedy has recently come out of the far North. It concerns Mike N. Eqwana, an Eskimo prisoner in the jail at Naknek, and F. J. Fleckenstein, the jailer. On May 19th the Eskimo prisoner is said to have found an opportunity to creep up on his jailer unobserved, while the latter was preparing dinner in the kitchen. A hard blow over the head with a piece of iron pipe killed Fleckenstein instantly.

The slayer than went through his victim's pockets, taking everything of value. Next he robbed the prison safe. Finally he picked up a rifle and a box of cartridges and left the jail unnoticed. Directly after the murder, it is reported, a wife of one of the prisoners happened to step into the kitchen. She was warned by Eqwana not to say anything or she would be treated as Fleckenstein had been.

The last chapter of the tragedy came in the form of a telegram from United States Marshal Harvey Sullivan a few weeks ago. This telegram announced that Eqwana had committed suicide, his body being found on the tundra near Naknek, the scene of his crime.

One Dog's Day

By E. C. Lincoln

Author of "With Salt on the Tail," etc.

"SEE you got a dog, Uncle Billy," commented the barkeeper of the Silver Dollar in greeting, as he ran his damp towel along the mahogany and slid forward the bottle of near beer which his customer demanded.

"Most anybody kin see that," the corpulent old stage driver agreed gloomily. "He ain't mine, though; he's just a consignment."

He viewed with disfavor the amber liquid slowly filling his thick glass, then, with a somewhat kindred disgust, he turned his heavy attention to the curly-haired brown spaniel which he held on a leather leash. The dog caught his look and patted the sawdust floor with an ingratiating tail.

"What kind might he be, anyhow?" asked the bartender. "I ain't seen nothin' like him in these parts."

"Well," answered the gloomy one, scratching his round, smooth-shaven jaw in some doubt, "personal, I don't rightly know, but the feller that owns him—he's the new boss up at the Sweetheart—he says he's a full-blood water spaniel."

"What's he good fer?" queried a voice from the little knot of evening loafers which as usual was gradually collecting at any chance of even the mildest interest.

"Feller says he's pizen on ducks. Sent clean back to Iowa fer him. Aims t' do some shootin' down at the sloughs this fall. Feller wus tellin' me to watch out, two-three days ago. Dog come today an' the railroad says I gotter take him up immediate." Uncle Billy, a talker by nature, was forgetting his gloom in the flattering attention of his audience. "Pup, he's a right smart dog. Knows lots o' tricks. Feller tells me about 'em. Watch here."

The little group drew closer. The bartender, mechanically wiping his hands on a grimy apron, strolled out from his domain for a better view. Even the stranger, a thin-faced young man in a blue serge suit, left the table where he had been smoking in solitude and joined the company. Uncle Billy stooped, slowly, as befitted his massive rotundity and aged joints, and snapped his fingers.

"Set up, Brownie," he commanded.

With a bark of delight the brown spaniel obeyed, fore paws hanging limp, nose uptilted. The audience laughed heartily.

"Now roll over. Fine!"

"This one's the best," Uncle Billy informed them, gratified at the success

of the entertainment. "Listen here, Brownie, wanter go swimmin'?"

The little dog yelped, set his four feet wide apart, and shook his rough coat with all his might. Involuntarily the spectators gave back. The instinct to dodge that imaginary canine shower bath was too strong for them. "That's the way he says yes," said Uncle Billy with a grin, when the applause had subsided.

Then a long, lanky figure, gray as Uncle Billy Dawson himself, pushed its way through the crowd. The newcomer stood silent for a moment, bearded lips bent in the tolerant smile of one who watches children at play. Finally he commented in a mellow drawl:

"Yes, suh, that dawg, he sho' has brains a-plenty. Seems mighty too bad some folks kain't share 'em."

The onlookers tittered. A slow flush crept up through the saddle-brown sunburn of Uncle Billy's massive neck. To cover his confusion he reached into his pocket, drew forth a packet of snuff, and tucked a generous pinch of the fine powder carefully under his upper lip before replying.

"I ain't makin' no talk with no ex-rebel, 'Dad,' an' you know it."

"Or possibly," continued the other imperturbably, "possibly you is fixin' to hitch him up 'stead o' that flea-bit nigh lead hawse o' you'n. Sho' would be sensible, suh. Ah observed that hawse stick a laig oveh the trace three mo'nin's runnin'. Brains could be used there, suh, an' not injure nobody."

Uncle Billy set down his glass with a bang. His vast bulk trembled with emotion. And because his pride was touched at its most vulnerable point he spoke slowly, carefully, that his words might be understood by all present.

"Môse ain't much on head work," he confessed. "I sorter depends on doin' the thinkin' myself, an' lettin' my hawses stretch their own traces. Mose is jest the pullin'est fool on the best durn stage hitch in this part of Montana, bar none. Guess you must work jest opposite. Them goats you drives don't pull fer sour apples."

Cheers from the audience. Uncle Billy versus Dad Parsons was a combination that had rejoiced the entire male population for almost two generations. "Come on, Dad," they yelled. "Talk to him!"

Dad squared himself, towering above his fleshy adversary. The time had come for a show-down. "Mistuh Dawson," he said, "you has been makin' speech. Ah trust, suh, you is willin' to back yo' opinions. You says you drives a better stage hitch than what Ah do. Ah says, suh, that you don't. Ah'll jest wait' fo' you up on the flat, come mo'nin', an' Ah'll race you from theah to Breed's Fo'd—ten mile. An' Ah suggests that the subsequent loser absent hisself from this county—permanent. You agrees, of co'se?"

Uncle Billy hesitated. He had supreme confidence in the four horses he handled on the first relay of his long run. He was thoroughly convinced that they could beat any other stage team ever foaled. Still, the stake was heavy.

"I dunno," he temporized. "To-morrow's the day I haul the Sweetheart pay roll. Mebby I hadn't ought to chance it with all that money aboard."

"Yo' caution, suh," murmured Dad regretfully, "is only——"

"No!" Uncle Billy roared. "You're on!"

And a stranger in a blue-serge suit, whose eyes had suddenly brightened at the mention of the pay roll, slipped quietly out the door in the confusion that followed.

It was an old game of endless possibilities, this business of drawing the two old stage drivers into a quarrel, yet the town loved them, and petted them, and spoke of them with pride. They were institutions as well established as the community itself.

Uncle Billy, slow of movement, but with an oxlike strength hidden beneath his mountain of flesh, had been first in the field, drifting in during the days of the gold rush in the late 'seventies, working at odd jobs for a while, then with the financial backing of the mining interests opening the Merchants and Miners Transportation Company, a stage line which edged the more important mountain properties to end at the boom town of Sweetheart, fifty miles distant. It had been a mighty affair for almost two decades, but as the famous old Sweetheart mine began to play out the company had dwindled to a travesty of its former self. Its stable of a hundred head had shrunk to a dozen, and for many a long year only the rotund Uncle Billy Dawson had held the lines on the single stage that rolled its way three times a week to Sweetheart and back. In fact, but for the partial revival of the property as a low-grade proposition Uncle Billy's job would have pinched out along with the mother lode.

Dad Parsons, he of the angular frame, Southern manners, and sartorial elegance, arrived later by five years. First driver, then owner, he had managed the fortunes of the Barstow Line, operating right across the mountains through Simpson's Pass to the town from which the outfit took its name, the going-in point for a limitless cattle country. Even when the railroad came, paralleling the ridges to the north, its engineers thought little of Barstow and left it so far from the rails that Dad still retained his mail contract. Like the Merchants and Miners, the Barstow Line had shrunk to a shadow of its former glory.

On the face of things there was no real reason for the feud of almost forty years standing between Dad and Uncle Billy—but—both lines ran straight north over the same road for a distance of twenty miles before separating like the forks of a Y, the Merchants and Miners swinging west along the foothills, its rival running on across the pass. For the first year after Dad's advent both stages chose the same hour of departure—eight thirty in the morning—and day after day resulted in a wild race to the first change station, a race which crippled stock, terrified passengers, and in general gave both outfits a black eye. Only when the newer line moved its schedule thirty minutes ahead was open conflict brought to an end.

The memory still rankled, and to make matters worse it was soon general knowledge that Uncle Billy in his early youth had shouldered a musket almost as heavy as himself and marched away to play his part in the War between the States as a full-fledged member of the Second Maine Infantry, at the very time when Dad Parsons was spending an equally busy two years in the ranks of the Louisiana Tigers. That was enough. From the moment of the discovery Dad became, as far as Uncle Billy was concerned, the personal representative of the unreconstructed South. Uncle Billy retaliated by a bitter denunciation of all rebels which made up in violence what it lacked in finesse. And in the course of years the feud had become their dearest possession. They fondled it. Not for anything in the world would they have it cease.

The town played no favorite. It took pride in Dad's temper. It enjoyed Uncle Billy's importance, especially when on the last Friday of each month he cinched the heavy, single-action Colt of historic vintage about his majestic girth and stopped for the Sweetheart pay roll at the First National. It laughed to itself, that night, over the news that Dad and Uncle Billy were at it again; that after a hostile truce of decades the two old enemies were going to race stages once more as far as Breed's Ford.

Main Street, next morning, lay bright in the glare of a September sun. A

gentle rain during the night had settled the dust and promised fine going on the level stretches of the bench, though in the creek bottoms, and in fact on Main Street itself, it had turned the gumbo soil into mud. The gray leaders and black wheelers shone like satin as Uncle Billy, with a pistol shot from his long whip, swung them around the corner of the First National and came to a stop in front of Durgin's drug store. Those old stage teams were of the best equine blood in the West, and Uncle Billy, whose pride of calling had increased with the years, had kept his stock fully up to standard.

"Anybody ridin' this mornin'?" he called jovially to the assembled spectators as he wound his lines about the brake and slid over the wheel with an agility surprising in a man of his weight. "Ain't got nobody so fer but the dog."

He freed the leash which held Brownie to the driver's seat, allowing the spaniel to jump down to the board sidewalk.

Nobody, on that particular morning, had any desire at all to ride, and they explained this profanely and emphatically. Experience and tradition had taught them that a man with business in Sweetheart or Barstow on a day when the stages raced had better postpone his business till fairer weather.

Uncle Billy looked relieved.

Then the same stranger in blue who had witnessed the encounter of the previous evening stepped briskly forward. "I'm goin' with you," he announced. "Goin' up to-day an' back to-morrow."

Uncle Billy registered surprise. Here was an unwelcome, and unexpected, addition to his load. "An' what might be your business in Sweetheart?" he inquired.

"Pumps," explained the stranger easily. "Company sent me up to sell Sam Phelps some new rotaries. See?" He held up a leather brief case which might contain plans and specifications.

"Oh," said Uncle Billy. "Well, we leave in five minutes, sharp."

"Nice dog, ain't he?" commented the stranger, stooping to pat the brown spaniel leaping at his leash and barking with excitement.

"Yeh?"

"I seen him doin' tricks last night. What was it you told him when he shook hisself so?"

"Asked did he wanter go swimmin'."

The stranger tried it. "Go swimmin', pup?" he coaxed. And again the spaniel shook himself in ecstatic imitation of a very wet dog freeing his coat of too much water.

"'Board!" called Uncle Billy, sliding his thick gold watch into a pocket of his ample vest and hitching his holster round to the front. "Shove Brownie up an' tie him to the back seat, feller. You better set with me—long's you stay."

"Git, there!" he yelled a moment later. The gray leaders reared and leaped forward. The wheelers dove into their collars. The heavy stage broke out and away with a jerk that almost snapped the stranger's neck.

"Like it?" queried the driver, his feet on the leather mail sack, left heel touching the steel box that held the Sweetheart pay. "Hold on tight."

At the head of the mile-long grade, which they took at a walk, Dad Parsons awaited them, his four bays grazing quietly on the thick buffalo grass that carpeted the flat.

"Would yo' wish fo' to breathe 'em?" he called as the gray leaders topped the rise.

"Two minutes," said Uncle Billy shortly. He had been thinking hard. Straight away across the grass the road led for a furlong or two, then into the rough sagebrush. Clearly it behooved him to take the lead in that first dash, for in the whole ten miles to Pretty Lady Creek there was hardly a point where one running team could pass an-

other with safety. He gave his lanky enemy credit for equal acumen.

"Ask an' answer?" queried Uncle Billy when the two minutes were up. The other nodded courteous assent. Lines were gathered, leaders straightened, wheelers brought up into the traces.

"Ready?"

"Go!" shouted Dad, and with creaking of leather and thunder of many hoofs they were off to an even start.

For as long as a man could hold his breath they raced on equal terms, but as the rough going drew near, the bay leaders forged a scant nose to the front. Uncle Billy, with an oath, threw his full weight on the lines to save the threatened spill, and the elongated Southerner swung into the narrow track safely in the lead.

"Dog-gone it!" was Uncle Billy's bitter comment to his passenger when both teams had settled to a steady trot, "I'd 'a' beat him if it warn't fer you an' that darn dog. Couple hundred pounds makes a heap o' difference, me weighin' what I do. Now we gotter trail 'em Lawd knows how long."

Twice in the nerve-racking miles that followed, on occasions when the sagebrush gave back a trifle, he essayed to break the order of procession, sending his team forward in a mighty rush that set the brown dog barking and forced the passenger to cling for dear life. Twice, Dad Parsons, not to be caught napping, beat off the attack and held his gains. Now the valley of Pretty Lady showed close ahead.

Here the road, faced with a two-hundred-foot drop from the bench to the creek bottom, angled sharply to the left, sliding down the breast of the rim rock in a quarter-mile grade. There was a curve to the right, and the shallows of Breed's Ford lay a hundred yards beyond. On the grade the road was wider.

Uncle Billy grew desperate. Cautiously he urged his leaders up to the flying wheels of the Barstow Line. Then, just as Dad Parsons swung the curve to the left and slapped on the brake for the steep descent, he drove them straight across the narrow angle in a spurt that brought him almost level. Wheel clashing wheel they plunged down the grade. But the instant of time necessary for Dad to throw off that screaming brake had set them on even terms. More than that—with the heavy coaches forcing the wheelers almost off their feet Uncle Billy had the slight advantage of earlier momentum. Slowly, surely, he was pushing ahead.

But Lady Luck must have her hand in every human game. She entered now, when the racing teams struck the reverse curve leading out on to the muddy bottom, for a nervous jack rabbit, startled from his nap under a stunted bush, leaped into the road under the very feet of Uncle Billy's leaders. The gray nigh horse, shying, swung in against his mate and forced him against the shoulder of Dad's nigh leader. There came a crash and splintering of wood, scrape of iron and bursting of leather, and seven crazed horses, kicking and plunging, churned the waters of the ford to spray as they shot through. They vanished over the edge of the rim rock. The two stages, wheels locked tight, bucked and came to a sudden stop.

Uncle Billy sat dazed, his huge body relaxed and helpless. At one moment victory was his. The next—nothing. In the mud below him Mose, his gray nigh leader, struggled to his feet, tangled again in the harness, and fell back heavily. "You blasted ijit!" muttered Uncle Billy. "Ain't even got sense to stick with the bunch."

Then a screech of anger almost in his right ear brought him to attention. On the splintered seat of the Barstow stage crouched the angular Dad Parsons, his wrinkled forehead knotted, his mouth working with passion.

"Y' dum Yank," he screamed, "y' fouled me. Y' done it a-puppus. Watch out fo' yo' windpipe, Yank; Ah'm a-comin'!"

With a snarl like an angry cougar he dived across the little space that intervened. The two old men grappled, strained, and as Dad's foot slipped from a precarious hold fell heavily over the dashboard. Over and over they rolled, biting, kicking, slugging, scratching, nothing barred and "devil take the under man." They gave themselves heart and soul to the work of destruction.

The sinews of age aren't the sinews of youth. Although at the end of five minutes their spirits were still willing, their flesh was patently all in. They fell apart, coated with mud from head to foot, too exhausted even to glare defiance.

From where he knelt Uncle Billy viewed the ruined stages—hazily. A dim thought began beating, somewhere in his head. It struck here; it struck there, till finally:

"Oncet I had a passenger," he soliloquized. "He orter be up there now. But he ain't. Jest the dog."

The thought kept beating. It became a worry. Uncle Billy crawled erect and rolled laboriously over to his wrecked vehicle. He ran his hand under the front seat and snatched it back with a yell of pain.

"Rattluh?" queried Dad in mannerly sympathy.

"Rattler nothin'! Pay roll's gone—an' the mail sack, too!" Uncle Billy bleated, agonized by the calamity.

Dad leaped to his feet, all his many aching bones forgotten. He investigated his own domain. "So's mine, suh," he announced miserably.

For a moment the two old men faced each other, helpless and stunned; then North and South joined in a common cause. "We'll git the duhty hound!" promised Dad solemnly. "We'll git the durn cuss!" said Uncle Billy, as he mopped his dripping face. He slapped the single action Colt affectionately. "Got a shootin' iron?"

"Suttinly, suh," from Dad. After some fumbling under the seats he produced a double-barrel duck gun, eight gauge, sawed down to a convenient length for rapid handling. He threw it to his bony shoulder and squinted along the rib. "Loaded with buck, suh. Where at 's his tracks?"

They circled for a hundred yards; the brown spaniel barked his loudest encouragement, but not a departing footprint could they find.

"'S funny," lamented Uncle Billy after twenty minutes. "He couldn't 'a' flew, but he's sure gone clean."

Lugubriously he surveyed the scene of conflict. A generous débris of broken harness lay all about him. The glint of a steel hames caught his eye. He started. Bending down with an accompaniment of many groans he picked up the hames and without comment showed it to his companion. The neck strap was free of the buckle, but unbroken.

Dad's lean throat emitted a rebel yell. "You got it!" he shouted. "Ah recollects seein' yo' leader down jest afore Ah climbed yo frame. He's gone and rid him off bareback while we was differin'."

"Sure did," assented Uncle Billy. "He's ridin' heavy though—two mail sacks an' the pay box."

"It's my opinion, suh, that he'll shuck them sacks in a mile or two, an' yo' box ain't so ve'y big. Come on, Mistuh Dawson!"

"Look fer a bar shoe on the nigh front foot, heel an' toe calks on the others. I tacked on that bar plate yesterday 'cause he wus goin' tender," Uncle Billy directed.

Again they circled, wider this time. Finally they found it, leading straight away with the others up the rim rock, and they agreed that the stranger had

sense. He had followed the runaways. He'd surely turn off inside a mile, they decided.

"Heah we goes!" chuckled Dad. But a woeful howl from the brown spaniel caught Uncle Billy's attention.

"Wait till I git that dog."

Dad was doubtful. "Sech dawgs is mostly no good at trailin'," he objected.

" 'T ain't that. I jest lost my mail, an' my passenger, an' my pay box. I aims t' keep the consignment safe, anyhow," Uncle Billy explained. "Git trottin', pup."

So they climbed out of the narrow valley, following the medley of hoof prints. The running teams had kept to the road, which bore straight ahead through the rolling, sage-grown foothills toward the dark line of timber five miles distant. Hardly had they left the rim rock before their reasoning was confirmed. A loping horse had left the others and struck off at an angle to the east, and his track showed one bar shoe.

Uncle Billy pointed to a ragged yellow scar on the face of the timber almost in line with the trail which they were following, the workings of an abandoned mine. "I'm bettin'," he proclaimed, "that feller's headin' fer the ol' Black Pete. There's a trail leads back there over to Sennet. 'Member it? Durn the luck, we won't never ketch him on foot."

Dad pondered. "He's headin' that a way, sho' 'nough," he agreed, "but Ah don't reckon he's goin' on oveh, not till dark, nohow. He won't crave to go bangin' into Sennet in broad daylight. Reckon he'll hang out at the Black Pete till dusk, so's he kin watch his back trail. Then he'll so'tuh slide oveh an' ketch Thutty-nine when she comes through."

"Gosh a'mighty, you got a head on you, Dad. That's him, certain." Then Uncle Billy pondered. "I dunno," he suggested. "What d'you think? Mebby we better git the sheriff?"

"She'iff be dummed! This heah's our pahty, ain't it? She'iff kin have the leavin's—if theh is any."

" 'S what I say," assented Uncle Billy, much relieved. And happy as country boys at their first ice-cream festival, the two old-timers bent their energies to the trail, towing the brown spaniel behind them. Ten minutes later they found the mail bags, slit open, letters strewn wide by the morning wind. Hurriedly they collected such as they could find in a hasty search, took their bearings with some care, and cached the lot in the depths of a convenient greasewood.

The sun was warm, the footing brought many a stumble, but steadily they drew nearer to the first ragged outposts of the pine slope. Soon the trail entered low second growth, brush and seedlings. It was well past noon. Maine and Louisiana both limped. Uncle Billy's great bulk "larded the lean earth" as he plodded on. Across the broad back of his vest a dark, wet area of perspiration was spreading steadily. Dad, with less weight to carry, fared but little better. His usually erect figure stooped lower and lower. His knees sagged with every step. His keen, thin face grew drawn and gaunt with weariness. They grumbled, but they economized on conversation. At last they debouched on the edge of that great scar made by the dump and surrounding clearing of the Black Pete. Somewhere in the brush a horse nickered.

"Check!" exclaimed Uncle Billy. "He's here, sure as heck." Hardly had the words left his mouth when a bullet clipped the twigs close above their heads. The report echoed and reverberated along the mountain side. The trailers threw themselves on their faces.

"See him?" Uncle Billy panted in a whisper.

"No suh, caught us nappin'. Don't reckon he meant to git us, nohow. What wus it?"

" 'Twarn't no hand gun I ever heard,

an' he didn't have no rifle. One o' them automatics, I guess. Let's work back an' scout a little."

Carefully they crawled in retreat to safe cover, though not without some argument from the brown spaniel, to whom the sound of a gun meant the finest sort of a good time. They tied the dog to a stump where a shoulder of the hills gave shelter and circled back through a heavy thicket of quaking asp to reconnoiter.

There was no sign of life in the open space some two hundred yards in diameter which lay before them. For the greater part the mine buildings were fallen to decay, or partly demolished by homesteaders who found it easier to get their logs ready cut. Only a small, square hut of rough stones set in mortar remained intact, its sheet-iron roof rusted by time. It stood well apart from the others, near the upper edge of the clearing. It was windowless, and its narrow door of heavy slabs was closed.

"Yonder's where he'd be," prophesied Dad, pointing cautiously. "In the ol' powder house. There's a-plenty cracks in that do' big enough to shoot through."

Uncle Billy studied the ground with care. "Can't be nowheres else, sure. An' there's a big log on the edge o' them asps that'll make cover fer us if we kin jest reach it."

He spun the cylinder of the old Colt lovingly. Dad Parsons broke down the sawed-off eight-gauge, extracted the shells, and blew through the barrels. He shut the weapon with a vicious click.

In a few minutes of diligent work on hands and knees they had reached the log, without demonstration from the fugitive. Half an hour later they were still there. A root was sticking Uncle Billy even to his deeply embedded ribs. He moved over, and found another.

"Say," he suggested after a long silence, "mebbe he ain't——"

"Sho' is," insisted the other. "He ain't goin' to waste lead bangin' at nothin', though. Ah suggests, suh, that we-all draws his fiah."

"You do it," Uncle Billy responded hastily. "Stick your hat up."

Over the butt of the duck gun Dad slipped his weather-beaten Stetson and protruded it a scant two inches above the parapet. Nothing happened. Only a mountain jay dropped down on a branch over their heads, scolding violently. He had small use for intruders.

"That fellah ain't no fool, nohow," Dad commented at last. "Ah reckon one of us must show hisse'f. You stand up quick like, an' Ah'll spot the smoke when he shoots."

"Which is plumb generous," Uncle Billy grinned. His red face crinkled with ironic mirth.

"Match you fo' it, then." Dad drew out a battered silver dollar. "Heads, you; tails, me."

The coin spun in the air. The two old men studied it carefully.

"An' the South is outlucked ag'in," lamented Dad at last. "Mistuh Dawson, you git where the cover's good an' shoot like blazes when you see smoke. Ready, suh?"

Uncle Billy cautiously shifted his great bulk to the left, advanced the ancient Colt through the sheltering aspen leaves, and nodded. "Heah goes," said Dad quietly, and he stood up.

Crack came the report of the automatic. Against the slab door of the hut a thin veil of blue smoke hung for an instant, and vanished. Down behind the log Dad Parsons grew vocal. He rubbed the crimson welt below his left ear tenderly.

"Ever git creased before?" Uncle Billy's voice was politely curious.

Dad's lamentations reached their height. The gist of his remarks seemed to be that however many times the particularly condemned Yanks might have wounded him in his early youth, a bullet nick was still the hottest thing this side

of the brimstone gates. Then he changed the subject abruptly.

"Does you reckon you pinked him?" he asked.

Uncle Billy looked confused. "I dunno," he confessed. "Seems like she didn't kick much. Let's see." Again he aimed carefully through the protecting cover.

Click—click—click—spoke the ancient Colt's faintly.

"Them shells is dented, all right," protested Uncle Billy after a moment of silent inspection. The angular Dad Parsons, rolling over to his end of the log, announced to the sky and leaves that it seemed to him exactly like one especial kind of a Yank to load his gun and not change the shells in thirty years.

The afternoon wore slowly on. At intervals a bullet from the powder house clipped across the top of the log, holding the watchers close to its protection. To tell the truth they were beginning to feel a decided doubt over their ability to bring the business to a successful termination. In the first flush of enthusiasm they had failed to consider the possibility of a siege. Now the day was passing, and with the coming of night the fugitive could most certainly slip away despite their utmost vigilance. In the minds of both was a pretty well-defined notion that perhaps after all it would have been better to have brought the sheriff.

"If we'd only jest got a stick o' dynamite," Uncle Billy remarked regretfully after one of their long silences, "we'd jest have him out o' there in two shakes."

Dad snorted. "Suttinly," was his scornful comment, "an' if we jest had one o' them big ten-inch guns the boys used over in France we wouldn't need no dynamite. But not havin' neither——"

Uncle Billy refused to be rebuked. He was frankly day-dreaming now. "Or if we had a airplane we'd jest sail over here an' drop one little bumb on that powder house, an' up she'd go—whoosh!"

" 'T wahn't them our troops minded," objected Dad, a stickler for facts, " 't wus gas. Ah've held talk with lots of 'em, an' they all tells me when the gas come a-sneakin' up they wus sho' weak in the middle. They had a kind that ate the hide off a man, an' another kind made him cry, an'——"

"Sure," agreed Uncle Billy, unwilling to lose his artistic leadership, "sure, gas'd do fine. It'd sorter scrawl in through that door an' the first thing that feller knowed——"

"Chaw?" asked Dad, as he proffered a thick black plug of Virginia's best. "Mostly allus makes a man feel bettuh."

His companion spat in disgust. "No, sir," he explained, "that stuff makes me sick every durn time. You got the right idea though." And he produced his own packet of snuff, to place a generous pinch carefully where it would do the most good.

The lanky Southerner watched him with interest. "Funny," he commented, "you kain't chaw, an' Ah kain't abide that stuff."

Down the hill, where they had tethered him in the underbrush, the brown spaniel kept up his eternal protest. He was fast growing hoarse, though as vociferous as ever. Dad's glance strayed in that direction. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation:

"Yank," he whispered excitedly, " 'membuh what we-all wus sayin' 'bout them gas attacks?"

"Yeh."

"How much o' that snuff might you got on you?"

Uncle Billy counted: "Well, they's one package fer the trip out—that's part gone. An' one fer the stop-over, an' one fer comin' home, an' one fer emergency. That's four. Why?"

Dad crawled over where he could whisper in Uncle Billy's ear. The fat

man's eyes opened wide. His mouth followed suit.

"Gosh, Billy," he murmured, "if the Rebs wus all like you we'd never of licked 'em, never!" But his New England boyhood had to assert itself.

"Pahdon, suh," objected Dad eagerly. "That felluh, Ah says again, ain't no fool. He'll say to hisse'f he don't want no crazy dawg round to go barkin' when he tries to sneak off quiet. Then he'll think what's the use wastin' shells when the dawg's comin' right to him to git his throat cut convenient. He'll——"

"Go git that dog," commanded Uncle Billy, "an' hustle back."

And when Dad returned with the delighted Brownie there was secret business behind the log, business which puzzled Brownie sadly.

"Sure do hate to take chances with a consignment," Uncle Billy muttered as the work was finished.

Again a bullet clipped the top of the log, and the spaniel set up a renewed yelping as he struggled to get loose. Surely there must be ducks where all that gunfire was going on!

"No sense waitin' fo' him tuh git it all off. Boost him oveh, Yank, an' Ah'll watch," breathed Dad, patting the stock of his double-barrel nervously.

So Uncle Billy freed the leash, shoved the spaniel to the top of the parapet, and let him go. Whining with excitement the little dog raced up the slope, quartered for a moment, then made straight for the stone powder house. He reared against the heavy door, barking, scratching wildly for admittance.

Then the door swung open a bare six inches and the spaniel squeezed through. It closed.

"Right!" squealed Dad. "Now do yo' stuff, suh, an' do it quick."

Uncle Billy filled his lungs to the very depths, made a megaphone of his horny hands, and in a stentorian voice in which prayer, entreaty, and command were all mingled, shouted the question:

"Wanter go swimmin', Brownie? Brownie! Wanter go swimmin'?"

There was an instant of silence. Then from the stone hut came the startled howl of a dog in dire distress, and in rising undertone a fervid burst of imprecation most human in its origin. The door flew open. Out of it rushed a blue-clad figure, bent half double, its hands wildly rubbing at its eyes. It stumbled over the fleeing spaniel and fell heavily.

Uncle Billy clambered to his feet. He ripped off his hat and sent it flying far ahead of him:

"For-rud, Secon' Maine *an'* Louisiana Tigers!" he yelled.

And the two old men leaped to the charge across the clearing.

In the Silver Dollar, late that night, Dad Parsons and Uncle Billy Dawson held high carnival. All the town was there, laughing, congratulating, buying drinks and being bought drinks with the recklessness of pre-war days. And as the stage drivers told their story over and over it gained in the telling.

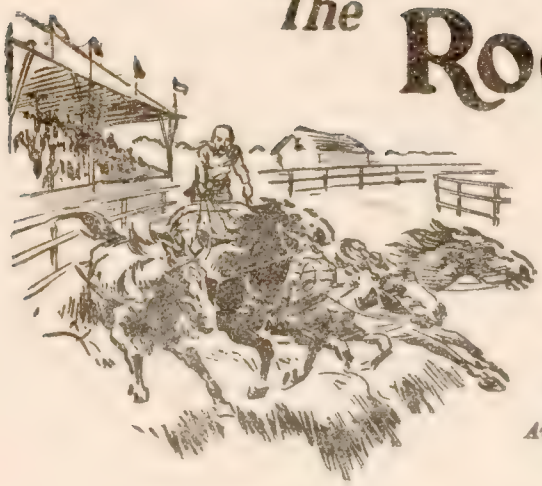
"How you fellers splittin' the reward? Fifty-fifty?" It was the jocular comment of a late comer when the hour was so near daylight that even Maine and Louisiana were thinking of bed.

Uncle Billy struck the wet bar with his open palm. This was the secret they had been keeping for a climax.

"We ain't goin' to split it," he announced. "We're—you tell 'em, Dad."

So Dad Parson threw out his chest as he draped one long arm across the ample shoulders of his former enemy: "Yo' attention, gentlemen," he commanded. "Ah takes pleasuh in announcin' that hencefo'th there ain't no mo' Merchants an' Miners, nor no mo' Ba'stow Line. Theh's jest one company, an' me an' mah friend Mistuh Dawson is it. It's the United States Transpo'tation Company, Inc."

"An' they can't nobody, nowhere, lick us at nothin'!" finished Uncle Billy.



The Rodeo Romeo

By

Robert Ormond Case

Author of "'Lonesome' Unchains a Wolf."

CHAPTER I.

THE ETERNAL TRIANGLE.

"I'VE got the instincts of a timber wolf," proclaimed "Windy" de Long, his black mustache bristling and his black eyes glittering as he glared across the oilcloth-covered table at his partner. "Something tells me the information I'm about to impart is going to make your granddad roll over in his grave. I'd ought to have brought along a bushel of rusty nails for you to bite when I give you the details, but I clean overlooked it. Get set for a shock, McQuirk."

"Lonesome," leaning back in his rawhide-upholstered chair, made no immediate reply. His mild blue eyes rested thoughtfully but keenly on the other's harsh and forbidding countenance as he tugged at his own tawny, drooping mustache.

He had known for two hours that Windy had brought back news of importance from Condon. The pair knew each other as thoroughly as though their various characteristics were written in large letters in an open book. By Windy's air of swelling importance, that also masked a certain concern, he knew that Windy had discovered something of more weight than casual gossip on his pilgrimage to the metropolis of the cow country. Yet he had asked no questions, knowing of old the futility of attempting to extract information before his lean and saturnine partner was prepared to impart it.

Now the supper dishes had been washed and stacked away. Twilight had fallen across the Wasco hills, and the cool mellowness of summer evenings was abroad in the land. Lonesome reached for the makings and rolled a cigarette with deft ease. He struck a match with a report like a pistol shot. The light gleamed on his bald head and brought out in high relief the contours of his square, fighting jaw. He blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, settled himself still lower in his chair, and eyed his partner.

"Shoot," he directed briefly.

Windy reached for his plug of tobacco and tore off a generous chew so that his lean cheek bulged, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Before I sneak up on this proposition," he began, "I got to cover a little ancient history. It's a kind of a delicate subject I got to deal with. Re-

member, I'm your partner, and what I'm saying is for your own good. I ain't the kind of a feller, you understand, McQuirk, that busts right into a man's private and particular business and tromps right over his delicate sensibilities without stepping soft and easy."

"Continue," said Lonesome pessimistically. "With all this preparation, I'm ready for anything. Never mind the formalities. The sky is the limit."

"Well, then," began Windy, "let us cast our eyes over some of them sweet yesterdays you got tangled up with. I'm referring to those rosy-hued hours you spent with your red-headed friend, Miss Emmeline. Just what sweet nothings passed between you is nobody's business but yours, but the fact is you've galloped around on her trail whenever you had half a chance, and more than once you've manufactured the chance. And notwithstanding that you're a bald-headed, bow-legged, long-whiskered, broken-down ex-buckaroo, fifty years old——"

"You're likewise fifty," Lonesome cut in, "lean as a snake, and handsome as a wart hog. You've got a nose like a bad bronc and a wart on your chin. But that's neither here nor there. I'm just mentioning them specifications while we was on the subject, you seemed that enthusiastic."

"Notwithstanding these said handicaps," Windy continued with virtuous forbearance, "and whereas this red-haired schoolma'am is considerable of a woman, easy to look at, and with a 'come hither' look in her eyes, it's still plain, even to an unobserving cuss like me, that you've been standing ace-high in her estimation. That don't sound reasonable, I'll admit. But we're dealing with facts. I ain't trying to explain no miracles. You seem to have quite a stand-in with the lady."

"You think so?" Lonesome brightened and his whiskers curled with appreciation. "Much obliged, Windy. You think I've got a fair-to-middling stand-in with her, huh?"

"You *had*," said Windy with somber emphasis. "Observe that I'm speaking of the past, McQuirk. You've been basking in the light of the schoolma'am's smiles, as you might say, like a horned toad soaking up the sunshine. But they's a cloud coming, Lonesome. Not very long now, 'less you watch your step, and you'll be setting all alone talking to yourself. Pretty soon your alleged stand-in will be like last year's snow—you remember how nice it was, but it ain't here."

Lonesome shifted uneasily. "How come, Windy? What's the earmarks of this said grief?"

"Rorden," said Windy. "That's the name he goes by. 'Tex' Rorden, but more often known as 'Romeo.'"

Lonesome was a skilled poker player. Long years of experience had schooled him in the art of successfully concealing his emotions. The bland expression on his seamed and weather-beaten face was unchanged. But at the mention of Tex Rorden, and Windy's significant manner, old doubts, long submerged, rose up and assailed him.

The spectacular Romeo had arrived in the Condon country with all the furtiveness and quiet of a Texas cyclone. In two weeks he had contrived to make himself the talk of Gilliam County. He had ridden into Condon from the southwest, mounted on a powerful black horse and bedecked like a range king. Arriving a stranger on Saturday night, through sundry exploits at the dance hall and in a poker game above Connelly's pool room, by Monday morning he was classed as an old-timer.

He had dropped in at the Double O Ranch at noon of the same day, and, finding the owner thereof absent on a trip to Chicago, established himself as foreman by the simple expedient of involving himself in an altercation with Hank Lowe, then in command, bluffing

him off the ranch, and assuming control. Upon the return of old Clayton, owner of the Double O holdings, he had so far demonstrated his efficiency and had sold himself so thoroughly to the Double O cow hands, that he was retained in that capacity.

This had been fast work, even for the Condon country. The newcomer was spectacular in appearance withal, being tall and broad and dark, of superb physique, and having the air, even when returning from a long day on the range, of being fastidiously well groomed. His black hair was invariably plastered back after the fashion of a dancing man. When he smiled, which was often, many gold fillings glittered by contrast with his gleaming teeth.

Lonesome had not met the spectacular newcomer. But he had heard too much of his exploits and personality for his peace of mind. There had been no sane reason for linking the colorful Romeo with the schoolma'am except that, subconsciously, Lonesome had come to appraise the importance of people and things only as these affected that stalwart lady and her friendship with him.

Lonesome was fifty years old. The schoolma'am was at least fifteen years younger than himself, he knew. Rorden must be about her age. Did youth call to youth? Prior to his own appearance on the scene, Lonesome knew that the schoolma'am had formerly been known in the Condon country as a man hater. Long and laborious had been his own progress toward her esteem. But was his age a handicap? He did not know, and his own modesty and humility had nourished the fear that sooner or later he must inevitably retire from the field to make way for some younger and perhaps better man.

He knew now that this probability had occurred to him when he had first heard of the arrival of the romantic Rorden. At the time, his sober reason had told him that the chance was remote that the pair would come together in the first place. Why, in any event, should he fear competition? But Windy's manner hinted of evil tidings.

"Yeah," he said aloud, blowing a smoke ring toward the ceiling, "I've heard of this Rorden hombre. What about him?"

"His eyes are too close together," averred Windy. "I don't like his looks."

"You met up with him at Condon?"

"No," said Windy. "I met him down in the John Day Cañon. He was riding up toward Shuttler's Flats." His eyes avoided his partner's as he added, "With the schoolma'am."

"Well," said Lonesome mildly, "they was nothing to prevent him from riding with her, provided Miss Emmeline didn't object."

Windy stared at the other with surprise in which was a tinge of resentment.

"I expect you're right, at that. I'll gamble it's plumb amusing to you to see them two young things playing together, ain't it?" He shifted his quid to the other cheek before resuming. "You know, McQuirk, there's something out of the ordinary about this young rooster. In most cases you got to admit when a feller tells the world how good he is, it generally develops that he's taking in too much territory. The feller that knows his stuff isn't telling anybody about it. He lets them find it out, and they remember it longer. But ever since this young buzzard come to these parts he's been informing everybody that will listen what a humdinger of a buckaroo he is, how he can ride anything with four legs, tells how good he is at roping, particularly the fancy stuff, and when it comes to shooting he's the original greased lightning —right or left hand, offhand, from the hip, or backward off a running horse. Well, sir, the funny part of it is, them

Double O boys swear he's just as good as he says."

"He must be good," conceded Lonesome. "Them Double O boys can see through a barbed-wire fence."

"And when it comes to women, he claims to be a heartbreaker. They just follow him around. Danged if he ain't pretty near right at that. Up to the dance at Condon, they tell me, the gals danged near mobbed him, he was that popular. And when the hair pulling was over and one of them draped herself on his arm and waltzed off with him, she would do so with a 'sweet-in-death' expression, just as much as if she was saying: 'You can shoot me now. I've danced with the prince!' "

Lonesome offered no comment, but his unlighted cigarette drooped disconsolately across his square jaw.

"But here's the part that'll interest you, old-timer. He has met up with the schoolma'am. She hasn't fallen yet for his fatal beauty, nor his eloquence, nor his golden smile, so he's concentrating on her. He evidently rode around when school was out yesterday just to ride home with her up to Jim Norton's place on Shuttler's Flats. When I rode up, she introduced me, and he grinned like a wampus cat and pulls off a fancy beaded glove to shake hands with me. I rode with them a couple of minutes. During that time he buzzed like a coffee mill. I'll swear he covered more territory in two minutes than I could cover in an hour. He mentioned that basket social the schoolma'am's giving next Saturday night. He claimed he was rounding up all the boys for miles around, and he would see to it that it was a success. I expect you know all about that basket social, though, huh?"

"Yeah," admitted Lonesome. "It's a blow-out she's arranged to wind up the school term. She figgers on raising enough to buy an organ for the school."

"Well, sir, after convincing her that the said blow-out would be a failure without his help, and that he was going to put it across just for one sweet look from her blue eyes, he jumps right in and starts talking about the rodeo in Condon next week. You'd ought to have heard him. All he aims to do is to win the bucking contest, the cowboy's open sweepstakes, the steer-roping contest, and the chariot race. That's all he aims to do. And while he was talking about the rodeo, what kind of a line do you think he pulled on her? You'd be surprised. 'When I'm matching my strength and skill against one of those raging demons in the bucking contest,' he says, 'I hope among the spectators I will see the sunlight gleaming in your wonderful auburn hair. The sight of you would inspire me to superhuman efforts.' "

"Wow!" breathed Lonesome in awe. "It's a wicked line at that. What did Miss Emmeline say?"

Windy chuckled. "'I'll be in the grand stand,' she comes back at him, 'but I hope there'll be some shade. And I would advise you to keep your eyes on your horse, Mr. Rorden, if you don't want to get your neck broken.' But that didn't faze him. He's got a crust like a mud turtle."

"Well," said Lonesome, his mild eyes twinkling, "he may be a smart young feller, but he's got a thing or two to learn about red-haired gals. You can't get by with that kind of apple sauce with Miss Emmeline."

"Point is," said Windy, fixing a glittering eye on his partner, "you going to let this gold-toothed maverick move in on your range without raising a finger to head him off? Are you going to let him be the whole show at this said basket social? And what about that rodeo in Condon next week? You ain't going to let this young buzzard jump in and hog the whole show, are you?"

Lonesome tugged thoughtfully at his mustache. A long silence ensued.

"How come you've got such an interest in seeing that I stack up high and wide with the schoolma'am?" he questioned at length. "Seems like you must have had a sudden change of heart. You used to pull with me like a balky mule in any deal involving the schoolma'am. It don't seem reasonable."

The other had the grace to flush. Throughout all Lonesome's previous encounters with the stalwart Miss Emmeline, the gaunt shadow of Windy had always loomed in the background, cynical and sardonic.

"It's this way," Windy defended himself. "When you was in danger of being overtook by matrimony, I figgered it was up to your partner to help you out, being in the condition you was. But when another young fellow comes frisking around and horns in on your deal, it's up to me to throw in with you, ain't it? And that reminds me. I danged near forgot it. Miss Emmeline wants you to ride around to-morrow afternoon. It's something or other about this basket social."

"Not a chance," Lonesome demurred hastily. "With this young cake eater riding around about that time? Nothing doing. She won't get any chance to get us together for purposes of comparison. I ain't strong on this social stuff."

"I'm a son of a gun!" exclaimed Windy wrathfully. "What ails you, McQuirk? You ain't got the good sense of a wood tick. Do you think Miss Emmeline's going to send you down the road talking to yourself just because you don't slick back your hair with vaseline, in the first place, and because you ain't got any hair, in the second place? I'll admit you ain't long on looks, but looks don't count for much in these parts. Notwithstanding, if it'll put any iron in your system," he added disgustedly, "I heard this Romeo person pass some remarks about not seeing her any more until the night of the basket social on account of branding some calves or something or other out at the Double O."

"In that case," agreed Lonesome, "maybe I'll ramble around that way. Point is, Windy, if this young fellow craves action, I'll be glad to meet up with him, but I'm getting too aged to enter any beauty contest."

"Aged? Why, you're good for forty years yet. Look at me. I feel just like a two-year-old."

"Two-year-old?" questioned Lonesome. "Horse or egg?"

"G'wan with you," replied Windy. "I read that somewheres, too. Be original, man, be original."

CHAPTER II.

AN EMBARRASSING REQUEST.

THE afternoon sun was slanting across the western ridges of the John Day Cañon as Lonesome waited on his point of vantage above the flat for the schoolma'am. Far below, he could see the schoolhouse nestling in its background of green fields, facing the road that paralleled the shining river. School was out, and the children were departing homeward, some on foot and others, coming from remoter sections, in twos and threes on horseback. One of the older boys was leading up the schoolma'am's horse, saddled and bridled, from the alfalfa pasture beneath the bluff.

Then the schoolma'am herself appeared and stood for a moment looking up toward the pinnacles. Lonesome moved out into view, waved his hat, and the schoolma'am waved in return. The youth who had brought her horse departed. The schoolma'am locked the door behind her, mounted, and rode up the steep trail toward him.

The approach of the schoolma'am invariably produced certain physiological reactions in Lonesome that filled him with a secret astonishment. Prior to

his first meeting with that stalwart lady, he had thought himself immune to any of the softer emotions, a hard-fighting, hard-bitten product of the old school. Often in his checkered career he had looked into the eyes of death and returned stare for stare, sat in games of chance where the turn of a card or the roll of a dice spelled affluence or poverty. On these occasions he had taken pride in the fact that no muscular twitch or leaping pulse betrayed the tension of the moment.

But now, curiously enough, at the mere approach of a certain feminine and altogether pleasing individual, clad in a boyish riding habit and mounted on a thoroughbred sorrel, his ears burned and he could hear his heart beating. To complete his confusion, the schoolma'am unloosed upon him a devastating smile as she joined him on the trail.

"You are certainly a most dependable person, Mr. McQuirk. I hope you haven't been waiting very long?"

"Not at all, ma'am," Lonesome cheerfully lied away the previous hour on the blistering hillside. "Ain't been waiting but a minute or two."

"It seems that I am always asking you to do something for me, but I do want this basket social to-morrow night to be a success. The children are so excited about it, and the parents, too. It has grown to be quite a community affair. But there is one little part on which I need your help. Yes, and I imagine your partner, Mr. de Long, might coöperate with you."

"Name it, ma'am," said Lonesome promptly. "We'll do it, notwithstanding that neither me nor Windy is social lions, as you might say."

"It's this way, Mr. McQuirk: I'm afraid you'll think it's something out of the ordinary, but I know you'll be able to do it. I've noticed, during the time I've spent in the Condon country, that at all such social gatherings as this where there is dancing until far into the night and many rough cowboys come in from long distances to attend the affair, there is usually considerable drinking during the evening. This leads to rowdyism and brutal fist fights. I've heard that there is sometimes even some gun play before the evening is over."

"Correct," assented Lonesome. "Seems like I have seen some of the boys get tanked up a bit at some of these all-night dances. But, shucks, Miss Emmeline, they don't mean nothing by it. When they's a difference of opinion, they don't bust up the dance. They're generally gentlemen enough to do their biting and gouging outside."

"That's just what I want to avoid," the schoolma'am said earnestly. "I want this to be one affair where there's no drinking at all. That's where I need your help. If you can see to it that the boys don't bring any liquor with them to the dance, then there won't be any fights. After this affair is over, I would like to have people say that this was one party where there was no disgraceful drinking and fighting. I think it would be a milestone."

"It would be what you might call unusual, at that," Lonesome said, grinning. "Outside of dancing and eating, what could the boys do to enjoy themselves? It wouldn't be a fine, large evening unless there were a drink or two. That don't mean," he added hastily in response to the schoolma'am's reproving glance, "that I believe in that kind of gymnastics. The boys has got to learn to get civilized. Only thing is, it will be kind of difficult to get them to see the light, as you might say."

"But you and Mr. de Long can do it," persisted the schoolma'am. "I have the greatest confidence in you. Both of you are diplomatic and resourceful, and if you make up your mind to it, I know that you can keep the boys from engaging in any of the disgraceful brawls that have occurred in the past."

"This said diplomacy will be all right

as long as they don't get any liquor. After that, the only thing that would get results would be a club. But we'll take a whirl at it, Miss Emmeline. Yes, ma'am, we'll surely do it, if it costs us every last friend we got in Gilliam County."

The schoolma'am beamed her approval, and the conversation turned to other channels. They had now surmounted the crest of the cañon wall, and the trail turned westward toward Shuttler's Flats. Lonesome examined the schoolma'am furtively as they rode, and he marveled anew at the good fortune that enabled him to ride with her on equal terms on the same trail. What trick of kindly fate had made it possible that he, Lonesome McQuirk, product of wind-swept ranges and lurid years, could ride down from the pinnacles with her in the mellowness of late afternoon? What miraculous chain of circumstances had made it possible that her laughing blue eyes should dwell upon him with such frank friendliness, red lips parted in a smile meant for him alone? He was a fool for luck, he told himself gravely.

Miss Emmeline was, even as Lonesome had often averred, easy to look at. Tall, imperious, yet altogether feminine, she sat the saddle like a queen. Looking now at her laughing eyes, framed by a wealth of sun-gold hair piled high on her shapely head, Lonesome remembered how frosty and austere those eyes had been on their first meeting and the dignified aloofness revealed in every resolute contour of her finely chiseled features. Dignity rode with her still, as always, but the imperiousness was gone. There existed now between them only a warm friendship born of mutual understanding and esteem.

"You're not listening to me," she challenged. "You haven't heard a word I said, now have you?"

Lonesome started and blushed furiously beneath the tan. "Darned if you ain't right, ma'am! I must have been daydreaming."

"Then you missed some pearls of wisdom, I assure you. Your thoughts must be more valuable than mine. Tell me about it, Mr. McQuirk. What were you thinking about?"

"I was thinking," said Lonesome frankly, "that your Mortimer hoss is about the finest piece of hoss flesh west of the Rocky Mountains, and the lady riding in the saddle was just as good; both thoroughbreds."

A faint flush touched the schoolma'am's cheeks in acknowledgment of this high tribute from a lover of horses.

"Very prettily put, Mr. McQuirk. Thank you. I have been hearing rather too many compliments lately. But, knowing your sincerity, I prize yours the most."

Lonesome started at this intrusion of bitter thoughts. Who else could have been paying her compliments on a wholesale scale but the repugnant Romeo? His conversation with Windy flashed through his mind. Almost instantly, as was his habit, he made a decision. "I was thinking, too, about that there Mortimer. He'd ought to make a good showing in the cowboys' sweepstakes at Condon next week. Would you let me ride him?"

The schoolma'am hesitated briefly, eyes downcast, and fumbled in Mortimer's golden mane.

"I was wondering whether it might cause some hard feelings, Mr. McQuirk. You see, another person has already asked me to let him ride Mortimer in the same race."

"Excuse me," said Lonesome instantly, much abashed. "Forget it, ma'am. I never dreamt anybody else had the same idea."

"It's perfectly all right," the schoolma'am hastened to explain. "In a race like that, I wouldn't let anybody else ride him but you, Mr. McQuirk. But I was wondering whether, after refus-

ing this young man—you see, it might make an enemy of him."

"I wouldn't ask you to do it, ma'am," Lonesome insisted. "You shouldn't take no chances on losing your friends."

The schoolma'am's blue eyes widened. "I didn't mean that in reference to myself, Mr. McQuirk. The young man means nothing to me, though, of course, it would be unfortunate if his feelings were hurt. I was thinking that he might hold some animosity toward you."

Lonesome's smile deepened into a grin of vast relief. "Don't you worry none about me, ma'am. Didn't a wise hombre say once that sometimes a feller was judged by the enemies he made? If this gent craves to hate me, that's his job. They's plenty of other good hosses in Gilliam County, though I don't doubt Mortimer can hold his own with the best of them, give him half a chance. Well, Miss Emmeline, if that's the only objection you've got, we'll call it a deal. Much obliged. If I'm lucky, you and me will split a nice pot after the race."

He was in high good spirits as he rode back across the John Day Cañon after parting with the schoolma'am on Shuttler's Flats. The decision to enter at least one event in the forthcoming rodeo released in him the old exhilaration that always preceded the spectacular conflicts. Prior to that afternoon and his conversation with the schoolma'am, he had resolutely repressed a sneaking desire to participate in the festivities. Why, he had argued with Windy, should they help in putting on a Roman holiday before several hundred frenzied spectators? They had engaged in too many such gruelling contests before in years long past. It was time now to ride on the side lines and watch reckless youth match its bounding energies and flirt with death for the amusement of the populace.

But all the while he had argued thus with Windy he had known that the virus was in his blood and could not be denied. The lure of the dirt track and dusty arena was too much. It might be called spectacular and foolhardy, but so long as far ranges were unfenced and old frontiers not yet plowed before the advance of a chapter of civilization, men would risk their lives in just such spectacular and foolish ways. They would do these things before cheering crowds, to be sure, but they would also do it with equal zest in a blistering corral where the audience consisted only of a half dozen buckaroos roosting buzzard-like on the top rail, and the thunderous applause of the thousands would be of no greater weight than the casual comment of "That's riding, mister," from one of those lean-jawed spectators as he rolled a cigarette.

"I'm in for the cowboy sweepstakes," Lonesome chuckled to himself. "Maybe I'll enter some event more primitive. Yes, sir, I sure feel myself slipping. You can't see nothing from the grand stand," he defended himself. "If I'm going to watch this Romeo person do his stuff, I've got to get right down amongst them."

His part in the schoolma'am's forthcoming social event had certain disturbing aspects, however. To have the unpopular rôle of impromptu law enforcement thrust upon him was not so good, he reflected. But it had to be done. The schoolma'am had requested it, and it naturally and inevitably followed that he must do it. He winced at the thought of the bitter and caustic comment that would undoubtedly be forthcoming from the owners of blistering tongues and parched throats during the dance.

He thought over the situation that evening as he and his partner ate their evening meal in silence. Later, when Windy sat back and reached for his plug of tobacco, Lonesome rose quickly to his feet.

"Unscramble yourself," he directed. "You and me has got to ride around and see the Double O boys to-night. We've

got a little missionary work to do. Let's get going, and I'll give you the low-down on the deal while we travel."

CHAPTER III.

FANCY SHOOTING.

"YOU'VE sure got yourself into a jack pot, McQuirk," complained Windy as the pair pushed their way through the flaming sunset toward the Double O Ranch. "How come you let the schoolma'am hornswaggle you into a deal like that? After policing all the boys at the basket social and protecting them from all the various brands of snake-bite remedy they're sure to bring, you'll be about as popular as seven-year itch."

"I couldn't very well get out of it. What are you in the habit of doing, Windy, when a lady asks you to do a favor? I expect you're in the habit of saying, 'Ma'am, I'll do anything in the world you want me to, except this, that, and a couple of thousand other little errands.'"

"I don't give them any chance to ask such ungodly favors. Why don't you get Sheriff Hornaday or Deputy Joe Powers to come down and give it the once over? That's what the county pays them for."

"Too much politics," averred Lonesome. "This peace-officer business ain't all sunshine and roses. I learned that sheriffing in Wasco County. Laws ain't worth the paper they're printed on, 'less the people are with you. If good, respectable citizens has got to have their hooch, the sheriff can't do nothing about it."

Windy's mustache bristled. "You don't call them Double O boys good, substantial, law-abiding citizens, do you? They're the wildest bunch of reckless hombres this side of Mexico."

"But unless some taxpayer complains about it, and the sheriff knows he's going to be backed up, he'll let them tear around as much as they please. But they ain't bad scouts, them Double O boys. That's one reason we're riding around that way to-night."

"And I expect you're going to ride all over this end of the county and tell everybody that's even thinking about coming to the social to leave their moonshine at home, huh?"

"You know danged well I'm not," said Lonesome. "But I figure the Double O boys would be good Indians if they knew the schoolma'am particularly craved it. They're the ones you can expect any trouble from at the festivities."

"Well," said Windy resignedly, "go to it. I expect, as usual, you want me to sit in the game? I swear, McQuirk, for a gent that's supposed to be fair-to-middling intelligent, you sure get yourself into some lovely layouts. Appearances ain't so deceiving, after all. I ain't prepared to swear that you're not solid ivory from the ears up."

"The best furniture has marble tops," retorted Lonesome. "Whereas, De Long, you can lay off my bald head for a while. It's getting to be kind of a touchy subject, particularly when it looks like I've got to get mixed up with slick-haired gents like this said Romeo Rorden."

Windy merely snorted in reply. Inwardly he was hugely pleased at the chance that was taking them to the Double O. Lonesome and the spectacular Romeo must come together sooner or later, he reasoned. Therefore, the sooner, the better. Moreover, he strongly suspected that his partner's pilgrimage to the notorious ranch was less for the purpose of preparing them in advance for a torrid evening at the schoolma'am's social than to meet and appraise his rival. His black eyes glittered with anticipation at the thought. No meeting between the pair could ever be on a casual plane. Their characteristics and reputations were too much at odds and the stake too great.

As they rode up to the scattered buildings of the great Double O holdings, they found the cow hands' bunk house deserted. While they were debating whether or not they would inquire at the farmhouse itself as to the whereabouts of the crew, loud shouts from the corral beyond the feed lot gave them the clew. They accordingly turned and rode in that direction.

They found four or five of the cow hands seated on the upper paling of the high corral fence, but whatever horseplay was in progress was evidently not in the corral itself but in the open ground beyond, for the backs of the spectators were toward them. Windy and Lonesome turned their mounts into the corral, dismounted, and unobtrusively joined the spectators on their point of vantage.

The nearest youth, a sandy-haired individual known generally as "Curly," spoke to them guardedly from the corner of his mouth. "Howdy, gents? Don't bust up the show. The boss is just about to give 'Sleepy' a lesson in the gentle art of fancy shooting."

The others in the group merely nodded briefly and turned their attention again to the pair mounted and facing each other some thirty yards distant.

One of these was Sleepy, a gaunt and cadaverous individual, a dependent and efficient cow hand, but slow and methodical in speech and thought. The other was the notorious Romeo Rorden.

Lonesome stared hard at the latter, and pulled his hat lower over his eyes, studying him as minutely as a poker player studies a new and unknown opponent. He saw instantly that rumor had not exaggerated the other's fastidiousness of dress. His black, high-heeled boots of figured leather seemed bright and newly polished, notwithstanding that the owner thereof must have just concluded a dusty and blistering day on the range. His corduroy trousers were tailored with a certain flare that suggested a riding master. His dark flannel shirt and his darker bandanna served as a contrast to the pearl-gray sombrero set at an exact angle so that his eyes were shadowed but the balance of his regular features appeared in bold relief. Strapped to his waist was a glittering studded belt from which were suspended two sheathlike holsters housing a brace of pearl-handled weapons. At the moment, his hand rested carelessly on the right-hand gun.

"What's Sleepy carrying in his hat?" questioned Windy.

"Eggs," said Curly, grinning. "I just fetched them from the haymow."

"Something tells me," offered another sage, "that this said demonstration is going to mean grief for Sleepy. Every time Romeo grins like that, something is getting ready to bust."

"Sh," warned a third. "Key down, boys. We're missing out on the details of this massacre."

"You mean to say," the sleepy one was inquiring, "you can hit one of them eggs on the fly? You mean draw and shoot?"

"Sure," replied the Romeo loudly. "Now listen, Sleepy. Unroll your ears and listen while I explain this stunt. You watch your step." Sleepy nodded, and Rorden's golden-toothed grin flashed toward the spectators.

"Poor old Sleepy," muttered one of the crowd. "If he wasn't petrified from the ears up, he'd know the boss was framing on him."

"Now then," continued the spectacular Romeo, "they's four parts to this stunt. In the first one we stand about fifteen paces apart, our horses parallel, but facing in different directions. Throw the target straight up, and I shoot it at its highest point. In the second one I stand still, and you lope by about fifteen paces away. Right opposite me you throw up the target again. That looks harder, but it's just as easy as the first one, and it always

gets a hand. Next, we ride parallel at the same distance. You are on my right and we're both at an easy lope. That's a little harder. By that time the folks think we know our stuff. But the last one is a humdinger. I lead and you follow about fifteen paces back. We're both loping. I lean back at full length and shoot from that position."

"I've done some shooting in my time," Lonesome muttered to Windy, "and I've seen some fancy shooting, but if that hombre can put a bullet through a hen's egg from a running horse, I've got to hand it to him. I'll sure admit that he's an artist with a six-shooter."

"He ain't done it yet," said Windy.

"He'll do it, though," cut in Curly pridefully, overhearing the interchange. "He's sure got them guns of his trained. What he's able to do is right down surprising. But that ain't what's worrying me right now. Question is, what happens to the eggs?"

The group tittered at this. Then all eyes were fastened on the pair who were backing their horses away to the appointed positions.

"I'm a little out of practice, Sleepy," Rorden informed his solemn helper. "But we'll try the first one. Give me a good throw, now. Toss it high and straight."

Obediently the sleepy one fumbled in his hat and produced an egg. Swinging low from the saddle to give him free arm motion, he tossed it into the air. All held their breath as the white oval mounted, gyrating slowly as it soared higher.

Rorden sat the saddle statuesquely, one hand resting on his hip. At the highest point in the flight of the target the weapon flashed into view. Still the Romeo did not fire. The egg descended, gathering momentum as it fell. The rigid arm and gun of Romeo followed its descent.

Too late, the sleepy one woke from his trance. But even as he spurred his horse to leap from beneath the descending missile there came a sharp report Six feet above his head, the egg shattered into a thousand fragments. The luckless Sleepy was all but smothered in the débris.

Delighted howls of laughter came from the Double O boys. They all but dislodged themselves from their precarious perch, clapping each other on the back and laughing again as the sleepy one retired sheepishly and precipitously from the field. He disappeared at a furious pace toward the distant bunk house, pulling off his shirt as he retreated.

But whatever humorous aspects there were to the situation were lost on Lonesome and Windy. The two ex-gunmen were concentrating solely on the exhibition of marksmanship. The pair stared at each other, Windy's black eyes narrowing and Lonesome in frank amazement.

"He done it, Windy," he breathed. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. At fifteen paces offhand, he puts a bullet through a hen's egg on the fly. I would have sworn there wasn't five men west of the Mississippi could do it."

"Well, I dunno," said Windy. "I got a hunch."

But his further remarks were cut short by the arrival of Romeo, who had ridden up, laughing triumphant at the real discomfiture of the departing Sleepy.

"Well, boys," he said with a suggestion of a sneer in his boastful tone, "I christened him, didn't I? Sleepy isn't his right name. We'll call him 'Eggnogg' after this."

The cow hands chortled loudly at this suggestion. It seemed to Lonesome, observing them, that their laughter was somehow forced, both too loud and too long, as though all were anxious to establish themselves in the good graces of their spectacular foreman. It was ap-

parent that he had dominated them completely.

"Any more of you boys got any doubts about this shooting business?" demanded Romeo belligerently. "Am I a topnotcher or not?"

"You're a topnotcher," drawled Windy, "when it comes to shooting eggs. I see that Slim, yonder, has a can of Copenhagen. I'll gamble even money you can't put a bullet through that said can on the fly at fifteen paces, offhand."

A momentary silence greeted this unexpected challenge. Then loud protests arose. "You're crazy, man," asserted Curly. "Why, he's just knocked an egg for a row of ash cans, hasn't he?"

The Romeo had started as though stung at Windy's words. He now spurred his horse forward and pulled up before the old gun fighter, thrusting his jaw out menacingly, his manner threatening.

"Money talks," said Windy, giving the belligerent youth stare for stare. "That can is bigger than an egg. I said you can't put a bullet through it at fifteen paces offhand, and I can back it up."

"And if his roll ain't big enough, I got a few sheckles myself that'll go in the pot," added Lonesome blandly. He had no idea what his partner was driving at. It had all the appearance of a foolhardy bet, but Windy was his partner. "Boys, this money ain't talking; it's shouting."

A tense moment followed. The ethics of the situation demanded that Rorden himself, as the challenged party, be the first to call the bet. Had he done so, his cow hands would undoubtedly have hastened to throw in their last nickel with him. Obviously they were bursting with eagerness to do so.

Unexpectedly, however, their handsome leader's manner changed. He pushed back his hat with a great show of frankness and extended his hand.

"I've got you placed, now, De Long," he said, grinning broadly, so that his gold teeth gleamed. "I was wondering who had the unlimited gall to bust into our little, private functions here. I see it's a habit you've got. You're the same gent that popped up when I was riding with the red-headed queen, aren't you? And I suppose this is the hard-boiled partner I've been hearing so much about?"

His manner was boisterous, presumably on the plane of good fellowship. But there was a sting in his words, only half concealed.

"Meet McQuirk," said Windy shortly. "Lonesome, this is that gold-toothed snake charmer I was telling you about."

"Howdy, Mr. Rorden?" said Lonesome with great mildness. "I've been hearing a lot about you. I figgered we would meet up sooner or later."

"And I've been hearing a lot about you, McQuirk," returned the other. "Particularly from the ladies."

Lonesome's rejoinder to this thrust was cut short by growls of protest from the Double O cow hands. "What about this shooting business? Ain't we going to get no action on that bet?"

"Never mind the bet for the time being," said Rorden instantly. "It's getting a little dark for fancy shooting, anyway. Let's amble over to the bunk house where we can chin a little. I've got a hunch these gentlemen haven't ridden around to-night for the purpose of passing the time of day."

"Correct," assented Lonesome. "I've got a little proposition I want to put up to the boys."

In the process of returning to the bunk house, the group split up into twos and threes, Rorden, having to unsaddle and bed down his horse, being temporarily absent from the group. Lonesome and Windy, riding together, overheard snatches of disgruntled conversation from the cow hands.

"Romeo kind of fell down, didn't

he?" questioned one in a hoarse undertone. "The light's just right for shooting. The sun ain't set but a few minutes."

"Them two old-timers was out on a limb," complained another. "We could have sent them home talking to themselves."

Lonesome rode close to Windy's side. "What ailed you back yonder, De Long?" he questioned softly. "That had all the earmarks of a haywire bet you pulled."

"Tell you later," said Windy mysteriously. "I think I've got this lad's number. I think he's a four-flusher, McQuirk."

CHAPTER IV.

LONESOME COMMITS HIMSELF.

LIGHTED cigarettes glowed in the semidarkness of the bunk-house porch. Lonesome and Windy were seated on a bench against the wall, elbows resting on knees. Rorden occupied the center of the stage, as was his habit. On the edge of the porch, with backs against the posts, the rest of the crew were scattered in the darkness beyond.

From the interior of the bunk house came the snores of Sleepy, who, it was hilariously explained, having been forced to launder his complete outfit after the egg incident, had necessarily retired for the night.

Lonesome did not immediately broach the subject of his visit. The conversation, dominated by Rorden, swung through devious channels, including politics, price of beef, good old days, moonshine, women, and the weather.

The latter subject was discussed at length. Blistering days had fallen upon the Condon country. Of interest to all men connected with the cattle industry was the recurrent outbreak of rabies among the range stock on the heels of the hot weather. A rabid coyote had been killed on the upper flats above Rock Creek, reported one of the hands. Another had been sighted near Mitchell.

Several times the spectacular Romeo introduced the schoolma'am as a topic of conversation. This in turn led to the forthcoming basket social.

Rorden made it plain that while the forthcoming affair was of interest to the school district and inspired by the schoolma'am, he, Rorden, had engineered most of the details. It would be a success due to his efforts, he gave his listeners to understand; he had helped the schoolma'am decorate the schoolhouse, had supervised it, in fact. He had arranged for fiddlers from the upper Willow Creek country, and had seen to it that a piano was transported from Shuttler's Flat.

It was inferred from his manner that these activities had tremendously increased his standing with Miss Emmeline, and his gold teeth gleamed triumphantly in the darkness as he admitted it.

Finally, Lonesome yawned and rose to his feet. "Well, Windy, let's get going. These hard-working hombres have got to get a little beauty sleep."

He climbed down from the porch, moved past Rorden, and faced the cow hands through the gloom.

"Boys," he said casually, "Romeo's talk about the dance and social reminds me. It seems he's going to get all the glory out of this said affair, and the rest of us get the grief. Miss Emmeline has done unloaded a responsibility on me that's made me bow-legged, it's that heavy."

"I was wondering how you got that way," interjected Romeo. "Old age sometimes does it."

"It's this way," continued Lonesome, ignoring the interruption. "Miss Emmeline has worked like a Chinaman getting ready for this said social. She's got the kids all trained to speak pieces and so forth. All the gals in this end of the county is busy right this minute

making up some pretty baskets filled with fancy victuals that will kind of put new heart in the boys after they have danced till about midnight. Now this here's a community affair staged mostly for the benefit of the school, which is for the benefit of the coming generation. Every gent in these parts had ought to do his darnedest to make it a success, hadn't he?"

"Sure, sure," agreed the cow hands good-naturedly. "No question about it."

"Sounds like a campaign speech," chuckled Rorden. "Are you trying to elect yourself a school director, McQuirk? Instead of being bow-legged, those additional responsibilities will make you plumb paralyzed."

"Son," said Windy bluntly, "if you ain't already paralzed from the ears up, lay off McQuirk, and leave him give his spiel. I hate to call a gent when he's roosting on his own porch, but it does appeal to me that you talk too much."

The handsome youth leaped to his feet with an oath. But hoarse protests from the cow hands in the gloom halted him. "Sit down, Romeo. Give McQuirk a chance."

Muttering, Romeo resumed his seat.

"Well, sir," continued Lonesome, "there was one point about this coming struggle that worried the schoolma'am. She asked me about it, and I agreed with her that it was a tough one. But when she put it up to me straight, I told her I thought you fellers would back me up."

"Sure we'll back you up." This from the generous Curly. "Miss Emmeline's a regular woman. Shoot, old-timer. We're with you. What is this said point?"

"Moonshine," said Lonesome. "Red-eye. White mule. Hooch. She wants to throw a party where nobody fetches any liquor. She's afraid some of the boys will get lit up and spoil the show."

"Wow!" groaned Curly. "That was a tough one, Lonesome. You said a mouthful. You mean to say, we ain't supposed to touch nothing a-tall? It hain't hardly possible, is it, to wrastle all evening on the dance floor without a little liquid nourishment?"

"You could do it once," argued Lonesome, "seeing that that's what the lady craves."

"I had some soothing syrup cached away just for that evening," complained another of the cow hands. "But I reckon it will keep at that. Only thing is, McQuirk, if the boys can't fetch any liniment with them, you'll have to provide stretchers to carry them away before the dance is over. It just natu-ally ain't human to dance all night without lubrication."

"I reckon we can try it once, at that," continued Curly. "Don't forget we get some victuals at midnight. All them prize baskets the gals are going to bring had ought to sustain us for a while. Tell you what," he suggested gleefully as an idea seized him. "This said high-stepping, law-abiding Double O gang will form ourselves into a committee for the purpose of aiding McQuirk in policing the low-brows that come to this said wrangle. Yes, sir. We'll meet 'em all at the door and search the low-down mavericks. Bring liquor to the schoolma'am's party? It's a right-down insulting idea. How about it, gang? Shall we do it?"

A chorus of delighted "yeas" greeted the proposal. The spectacle of the notorious Double O cow hands posing as pillars of virtue and law enforcement appealed to their sense of the ludicrous. Lonesome sighed with relief. He turned to Romeo. That individual had been silent and morose since his interchange with Windy.

"You're with us on this, ain't you, Mr. Rorden?"

The Romeo did not immediately reply. He rolled a cigarette, and then fumbled for matches.

"As I understand it," he growled at

length, "you don't want any of the boys to bring liquor with them. Is that it?"

"Correct," said Lonesome.

Rorden struck a match and puffed at his cigarette. By its light, Lonesome's keen eyes noted that the man was fairly smoldering with resentment. But when he tossed the match away and made reply his voice was deliberate.

"It's a worthy enterprise, Mr. McQuirk. Unquestionably the boys shouldn't bring liquor to the schoolma'am's party." There was a malicious inflection in the words that almost escaped Lonesome at the time. "I'll see that the boys don't bring any."

"Much obliged," said Lonesome briefly. "Well, we'd best be going, Windy. So long, boys."

"Wait a second," said Rorden. His cigarette glowed in the gloom, and he blew a cloud of smoke lazily above his head. "You've got considerable of a stand-in with the schoolma'am, ain't you?"

Lonesome turned abruptly to face the other, his pale-blue eyes striving to pierce the gloom to gauge the other's expression. Windy, too, halted in his tracks. The words themselves had been simple enough. But in them was a sneering that shattered the good humor that had held the group in its spell during the previous minutes. The restless cow hands, sprawled on the porch, grew still.

"How you do it," continued the youth in the same lazy voice, "is an unexplained mystery on which I crave a little light. Being a bald-headed, long-whiskered, aged, and broken-down ex-buckaroo, how do you qualify as a lady killer? That's something I crave to find out. You know," he continued, while all the others who knew McQuirk held their breath, "the lady kind of appeals to me. I've met blond ones and I've met dark ones, but none of them interested me very long. She's the first red-headed girl that's caught my eye."

Windy laid his hand on Lonesome's arm. "Son," he said softly, addressing the Romeo, "you're young and have got a number of years to live, if you don't get hung. You've got a lot of manly beauty and some gold teeth. If you crave to keep that said manly beauty, and don't aim to swallow your teeth, you'd best watch your step. Being his partner, I hate to have to say it, but some one had ought to tell you that you'd best step soft and easy when you're talking to McQuirk."

Lonesome shook off the restraining hands. "Rorden," he said, "I can see you're a gent that runs pretty strong to conversation. But leave Miss Emmeline out of it. That's one subject you ain't equipped to talk about."

"Fair enough," agreed the other. "We'll forget the lady for the time being. I take it, though, that you don't object to talking about yourself, huh? That's a satisfactory topic of conversation at any time?"

"Within limits," said Lonesome. "Within limits, mister. Whereas your kindly interest is sure mighty flattering."

"For instance," continued Romeo with an airy wave of his cigarette, "here you are, one of those romantic and long-whiskered men that appeal to the ladies. I'm a comparative stranger in these parts, but you seem to have a reputation for being a man of action. Particularly, as I said before, among the ladies. But I haven't seen any evidences of it, McQuirk. For instance," and he flicked the ashes lazily from his cigarette, "they's a rodeo coming up in Condon next week. Up until a couple of days ago, I noticed that you hadn't signed up in any of the events. Is that sort of thing too rough for you, Mr. McQuirk?"

"It's awful rough," admitted Lonesome. "That sort of stuff danged near shakes the fillings out of a feller's teeth. Whereas the lists don't close till the last

day, being lazy by nature, I hadn't gotten around to sign up yet."

"Except for the cowboy's sweepstakes," Windy cut in. "I forgot to tell you boys that Lonesome has done decided to step out in that event. That'll make it interesting, huh?"

"So you've entered the sweepstakes," Rorden ruminated. "Well, well. I'm entered in the bucking contest, too, McQuirk. Do you want to take a whirl at it?"

Thus, at last, the challenge was definitely laid down. It had been apparent to all that Rorden had been leading to this point from the first. Lonesome chuckled outright. There was a joyous intonation in his voice.

"Oh, sure. Let her buck, caballero. And I suppose you crave to rope a steer, too, eh?"

"What?" said Rorden in pretended astonishment. "Do you figger you'd be able to make a throw, after the bucking contest? Oh, very well. But what about the chariot race?"

"It's a bet," said Lonesome genially. "Son, you seem to have your points, after all. If you're as good out in the field as you are at talking, you'd ought to make a fine, large exhibition."

"Fellow," said Windy as he clapped Lonesome triumphantly on the back, "you ain't such a maverick, after all. You're an eloquent cuss, too. I been trying for weeks to get McQuirk interested in this said rodeo. You've done it in just a very few choice words."

The cow hands buzzed with hoarse and excited comment. Rorden tossed away his cigarette and rose. Lonesome and Windy turned toward their saddle horses, the former calling over his shoulder, "See you to-morrow night at the social, boys."

The spectacular Romeo followed the partners into the semidarkness. As they swung into the saddles, he stood at Lonesome's stirrup.

"McQuirk," he said softly, "I crave a little private conversation with you."

"Shoot," said Lonesome, motioning Windy to remain. "Never mind De Long. Him and me is always a pair."

"Back yonder, you said something about the cowboys' sweepstakes." He was staring fixedly at Lonesome. "What horse you riding, McQuirk?"

Lonesome squirmed in real embarrassment. "Give me credit, mister, for not rubbing it in. He's registered as Hildebrand's Mortimer. He belongs to the schoolma'am."

Rorden stood rigid for a moment. Then he pushed back his hat. His face, in the dim light, was twisted with rage.

"McQuirk," he said harshly, "I don't like your looks. You're the most pestiferous and irritating hombre I've ever encountered. Sink your teeth in this, old-timer—from now on, I'm going down the line with you. By the time this rodeo is over I intend to see to it that your overgrown reputation is pretty thoroughly exploded. Even among the ladies. Do you get me?"

"Much obliged for telling me in advance." Lonesome grinned. "It ought to be interesting. No holds barred, eh?"

"No, the sky's the limit," said Rorden. "Good night, gents." He turned on his heel and strode back toward the bunk house.

"Just between ourselves, and mentioning no names," said Windy, as the two loped homeward beneath the stars, "they's a gold-toothed hombre in these parts that's got a streak of saffron in him. That's the way I got him sized up."

"Those are harsh words," demurred Lonesome. "I wouldn't have said it out loud myself. He did back down a couple of times, at that. By the way, De Long, I've been aching to ask you, what in Sam Hill did you mean by that bluff you pulled. I mean when he was demonstrating his fancy shooting."

"It wasn't any bluff. I had a strong hunch, and I backed it up. If you weren't so danged honest, you'd have gotten it, too. I said he couldn't put a bullet through the Copenhagen can because," his voice was confident; "he wasn't shooting no bullets."

Lonesome's jaw dropped.

"You mean he was using trick ammunition? It don't seem reasonable that he'd take such a chance. It would be too darned easy to show him up."

"That's what I done," said Windy complacently. "I showed him up. But only you and me know it, he's that tricky. You better watch that hombre, McQuirk. But I expect maybe you and me can give him a run for his money."

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS BASKET.

THE evening of the basket social found a goodly proportion of the population of northwest Gilliam County moving toward the schoolhouse in the John Day Cañon. By twos and threes and in larger groups they came, on horseback and via buckboard and hack.

Social occasions such as this were rare along the John Day. The prospect of a program by the school children, followed by dancing until midnight, when the baskets of food would be auctioned off and eaten, and thereafter dancing until daylight, was a pleasing and irresistible combination. Unquestionably it would be a fine, large evening.

During the day preceding the affair, members of the fairer sex throughout the community had been engaged in the business of preparing delectable dainties for the baskets. It had been noised about that competition would be keen, and in half a hundred ranch houses wonderous and soul-satisfying creations were being manufactured by deft fingers. It became evident when the baskets began to assemble in the anteroom of the schoolhouse that no member of the stern and hungry sex should want for nourishment when the time arrived, providing he had the price.

The procedure in auctioning off the baskets was fixed by custom. The name of the maker of the basket would not be revealed. The successful bidder would find the lady's name within the basket, and the pair would consume the dainties together, automatically becoming partners in the following dance. Thus, the bidder was actuated, not only by his desire to acquire food, but, also, the double pleasure of sharing it with the fair manufacturer thereof.

It was this element of secrecy concerning the ownership of the individual baskets that presumably added to the excitement of the auction. As a matter of fact, however, the most frenzied bidding was invariably concentrated on the baskets prepared by the most popular girls. How these secrets leaked out was mystifying. Yet long before the auction would take place those desiring the information usually knew the identical basket they wished to acquire. It may be that the ladies themselves would drop a discreet hint, or that the cow hands, skilled in the art of poker playing, could read the truth in the eyes of a blushing damsel when her basket was held up for display by the auctioneer.

In any event, it was a known fact that rival would be pitted against rival in the frenzied bidding. The cost meant nothing, for what red-blooded man would weigh his lady's favor against mere money? Thus, it was a foregone conclusion that the proceeds from the auction would provide ample funds for the schoolhouse organ.

Obviously, the fair maker of a basket could not herself bring the basket to the schoolhouse. This would give away the ownership to all beholding. It was customary, therefore, that the basket be entrusted to some individual who could be depended upon to hide

the owner's identity, or at least to reveal it with discretion. Sometimes the children were conscripted into this service, but more often it was the men themselves.

Notwithstanding that this was the accepted procedure, it often required more than ordinary force of character for a dignified cow hand to arrive boldly at the scene of festivities, gingerly bearing a dainty and effeminate basket outstretched on a calloused palm. Often it was the occasion for loud and facetious comment, particularly for a late arrival.

"Boys, cast your eye at Slim. Danged if it don't look like he's got a wrist watch. Ain't he the artist, though? Where'd you get it, Slim?"

"Dunno," Slim would mumble. "Some gal asked me to bring it. I forget her name."

Lonesome was not surprised when Windy made preparations for an early departure that evening. An air of great mystery surrounded his lean and taciturn partner. Notwithstanding that Windy growled profanely under his breath as he donned his regalia for the evening, Lonesome knew that he was secretly somewhat pleased that he had been requested to act as bearer for a basket to the schoolhouse.

"I've done some riding in my time," complained Windy, his mustache bristling, "but danged if I ever rode herd before, rounding up a basket for a social like this. Won't I look like a Christmas tree, prancing up with one of them fancy jimcracks hung around my neck, with all its pretty pink ribbon, et cetera? Just let me hear one laugh when I show up at the schoolhouse, and they'll be a brand-new bunch of widows and orphans in Gilliam County. I certainly do hope my hoss ain't basket shy."

"G'wan with you," said Lonesome with a chuckle. "You're all swelled up, you're that tickled. Whose basket you fetching, Windy? Miss Emmeline's, I'll gamble."

"Correct, and you best treat me like a white man, McQuirk, or I'll sneak that there basket in without giving you a chance to give it the once-over."

As he rode along toward the schoolhouse, Lonesome speculated on what the evening held in prospect. He felt oppressed with a certain sense of his responsibility. It was no easy task to keep the boys in line during festivities such as these. But with the Double O boys backing him up, it seemed probable that moonshine could be kept at a reasonable distance.

What would develop, he wondered, when the schoolma'am's basket was being auctioned off? It would not be surprising that some of the boys would pool their resources and strive to wrest the prize from his grasp. Undoubtedly the wily Romeo would find some means of identifying Miss Emmeline's offering, and would go to great length to secure it.

As Lonesome turned down into the great cañon, he noticed a rider half concealed in the chaparral below and to the right from the trail. As he drew abreast, this rider spurred forth to meet him. Lonesome saw at once that he was a stranger.

He was a gaunt and lugubrious youth whose gloomy cast of countenance was further affected by his eyes, which, it was immediately noticeable, failed utterly of coördination. One of these was now fixed upon him gloomily, while the other rested vaguely and somewhat pessimistically on the distant pinnacles.

"You're McQuirk, ain't you?" inquired the somber one. "I'm Crim. Just signed on at the Double O. The boys call me Wally."

"Howdy, Crim," said Lonesome. "What's on your mind?"

"I got a basket cached here in the brush," said the other sorrowfully. "I was supposed to take it down to this

struggle below. But I ain't got the heart. I'm a stranger in these parts. I generally circulate around Prineville. Well, I figgered out I'd best wait along here for some one who was heading down to the schoolhouse and ask them to take this gadget for me."

"You don't want to be bashful, son," said Lonesome genially. "Fetch your basket and ride down with me. It'll put more iron in your system if you don't have to bust in alone."

Another peculiarity of the other's eyes now became manifest. The optic that had been regarding Lonesome fixedly had now wandered far afield. Lonesome had almost decided that the other was an untrustworthy fellow incapable of facing a man squarely, until he realized with a start that the other's right eye was now examining him with gloomy intentness.

"I ain't even going to the wrangle," said the youth. "I don't know nobody, and I ain't what you'd call a social lion, anyway. Rorden was supposed to fetch it, but he palmed it off on me."

"And now you're passing the buck." Lonesome grinned. "Well, trot along, son. I know how it is when a feller's bashful. But it won't hurt me none. They's better men than me fetching baskets to-night."

But he whistled aloud in astonishment at the size and splendor of the offering dragged forth from the brush by the melancholy youth. It was a hamper fully twenty-four inches in length, broad and deep, gilded and bedecked with flowers and streamers. Its weight was staggering. Lonesome could scarcely hold it at arm's length to examine it.

"Son," he said in wonder, "the gal that fixed up these rations must have figgered on feeding an army. I can see now it wasn't bashfulness that made you back down. Your strength just naturally gave out on you, carrying it this far."

"She's from the East," explained Wally. "I reckon she don't know much about this kind of a stunt. Old man Clayton's niece, Mamie. She got here yesterday. As soon as she heard about this doings, she began making a basket. The boys is all very much hopped up over it."

"You hadn't ought to have told me whose basket it was, son," reproved Lonesome, "but I'll keep it dark. You've got to admit the lady's sure got large ideas. Do you expect maybe she's got a couple of dozen roast chickens in here? And a half a barrel of apples, huh?"

Later, however, certain puzzling aspects of the situation occurred to him. It was odd that the Double O had taken on another cow hand when he knew them to be full-handed. He had never heard Old Man Clayton mention relatives in the East. He had thought, in fact, that the old cattle man had come originally from Arkansas.

He did not have time to ponder the situation long. He was now in the flats bordering the John Day River, where he was joined by others moving in the direction of the schoolhouse. He noted when depositing the basket among the others arrayed in the anteroom that it was by far the most gorgeous and largest of the entire array.

The schoolroom was crowded. The windows were pushed wide open to secure the benefit of whatever air was circulating abroad in the night. Gay laughter and banter filled the room. Light blazed from the bracket lamps along the walls. The fiddlers and trap drummer, coatless and with sleeves rolled up, were in a group well to the front, waiting to take their places on the platform when the children's program was completed.

The belles of the neighborhood were out in full force. There was much giggling and guarded whispering as they discussed the forthcoming auctioning of

baskets. Cow hands and buckaroos, wheat farmers and cattlemen, were gathered in dignified groups, exchanging confidences in hoarse whispers.

The arrival of the Double O boys was the occasion for much laughter and good-humored discussion. They came in a body, bedecked like range kings, and entered single file. The breast of each bore a huge gilt star. Loudly announcing that they were the official "bouncers," and that any man found possessing liquor would be hanged forthwith, they circulated among the crowd, forcing each man to stand and subject himself to search.

The spectacular Rorden himself took no part in this horseplay. Many languishing feminine glances were cast in his direction as he stood a little apart, suave, courteous, smiling. He greeted Lonesome casually, as though all trace of the previous animosity was forgotten.

To Lonesome the schoolma'am had never before seemed so downright charming. In a gown of some green and shimmering material that set off her auburn hair to the best advantage, with her blue eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed with excitement and triumph, she was indeed, he assured himself gravely, decidedly easy to look at. When she approached him presently, his ears burned and he could hear his heart beating.

"Oh, Mr. McQuirk," she whispered, "I'm so glad you got those Double O boys interested in keeping liquor away from the party. They were the ones I was particularly afraid of. Since they're taking the lead in the matter, I feel perfectly safe, don't you?"

"I do," agreed Lonesome. "Notwithstanding that I have been wondering what they would do with the liquor if they found it."

"They would confiscate it, wouldn't they?"

"If that's another name for imbibing it, I expect they would," Lonesome agreed. But as the schoolma'am's face clouded a little he added hastily: "Don't you worry none about it, ma'am. I don't doubt but what we can handle them."

Across the room, he noticed the black eyes of the spectacular Romeo fixed upon them speculatively. It was only a hunch, no more, but a fleeting expression on the handsome youth's face warned Lonesome instantly. There was a hint of cool amusement in the eyes that were a little too close together, a touch of gloating complaisance on the full lips, as though the owner thereof was merely biding his time with the certainty of ultimate triumph.

The splendor of the occasion had dulled Lonesome's sensibilities somewhat. But now he became watchful and suspicious. What diabolical plot was the slick-haired youth hatching? He could find no clew, but he resolved to keep perpetually on the alert.

The evening began auspiciously enough and without incident. The children's program was very prettily done and won loud applause from doting parents and indulgent neighbors. Then chairs and benches were pushed back to make ready for the dance, and the musicians, mounted on the platform, began to tune their instruments. Presently a rousing two-step burst forth. There was a mad scramble for partners, and the dance was on.

Lonesome was dancing with the schoolma'am. The crowded floor covered up somewhat the deficiencies in his terpsichorean art. The music was superb. Fifty years were not too long to wait for moments like these. He knew his good right arm was trembling as it encircled the very ample but quite yielding form of the schoolma'am.

But his bliss was short-lived. The schoolma'am was whispering in his ear, a worried note in her voice.

"I want you to do something else for me, Mr. McQuirk. Mr. Rorden had promised to act as auctioneer to-night, but he has changed his mind. He says that somebody better known in this country should act in that capacity. It was his own suggestion, too. I am wondering if you would do it for me, Mr. McQuirk?"

Lonesome's heart sank. Inwardly he shrank at the thought of appearing in such a prominent rôle before the assemblage. "Gosh, ma'am, I'm no spellbinder! It takes just such an eloquent gent as Romeo to put that sort of thing across. Can't you persuade him to do it?"

"No. He refuses absolutely. I wanted you all the time, anyway, Mr. McQuirk. You are so well known and so well liked and have such a fund of quaint humor that I know you could do it admirably."

Lonesome demurred further, but in vain. Finally he agreed, casting a bitter and hostile glance at Romeo, who was gyrating with the grace of a dancing teacher not far distant.

Later, at an intermission between dances when he and Windy had retired outside for a smoke, Lonesome overheard certain scraps of conversation that partially substantiated his impression that some plot was afoot that was distinctly hostile to the schoolma'am's plan of staging an arid party.

Two or three of the Double O boys were with some of the cow hands from the Bar X. They were chuckling hoarsely, and their cigarettes gleamed in the darkness.

"This business of waiting till midnight is the bunk," said one. "I'm a human cinder, I'm that dry. This 'Mamie' stuff may be all right, but it's a long time to wait till after the auctioneering is over."

"Mamie." Lonesome had temporarily forgotten what the wall-eyed stranger had told him concerning old Clayton's niece. The old cattleman himself was inside, but no niece had accompanied him.

"Friend," another of the cow hands was saying, "you ain't got nothing on me. I'm so dry I've been eating dust to wet my tongue. But I can't hold out much longer. I'm getting weaker every minute."

"Sh! Not so loud," cautioned the listener. Lonesome recognized the voice of Curly. "Hold your hosses till midnight, mister. After that it'll be a fine, large evening."

Lonesome drew his partner a little to one side.

"Windy," he whispered, "there's something funny going on. The schoolma'am's depending on me, and if any of the boys get liquored up, I'm sunk. You scout around a little and see what's going on."

But Windy reported later in the evening that he could find nothing unusual or suspicious. The boys were more than ordinarily genteel and soft spoken, he declared. There were certainly no liquor-laden breaths to be found among them.

"Just the same," he said guardedly, his black eyes glittering, "I feel the same as you, McQuirk. "They's something in the air."

"Long as it stays in the air we're safe enough," said Lonesome with a chuckle. "Maybe we're too danged suspicious. Just the same, I wouldn't put nothing beyond your slick-haired friend, Rorden."

"His eyes is too close together," averred Windy belligerently. "I just naturally don't like his looks. Give me leave, McQuirk, and I'll take him to one side and hand him one just for luck. A gentle hint like that might possibly let him know where we really stand."

"Hold your horses, Windy," counseled Lonesome. "No rough stuff. But keep your eye on that hombre."

CHAPTER VI.

TRAPPED.

AT the stroke of midnight the dancing ceased. Benches and chairs were dragged forth to sustain those who had become enfeebled by the preceding struggle. The perspiring musicians descended from the platform with their paraphernalia to make room for row on row of baskets being brought in from the anteroom and placed in squad formation on the platform before the hungry eyes of the multitude.

"Ladies and gents," proclaimed Auctioneer McQuirk, pounding on the table. "For the time being, this said struggle is declared a draw. The hour has come when it becomes my duty and privilege to dispense a little nourishment. Gents, cast your eye over this array of prize baskets. Pretty fancy nose bags, huh? You lean and hungry lads cinch up your belts and get your hands to your pocketbooks. Remember, a dollar talks more loud and eloquent than a four-bits, and anything less than two-bits hasn't got a vote in this meeting. Remember, you're bidding for the best efforts of the finest cooks in Gilliam County. All set, gents? Ready for the massacre?"

Deafening shouts of applause greeted the speaker. "Let 'er buck, cowboy. Let's go. Start her off, McQuirk."

Lonesome stooped and swung aloft a dainty but gorgeous basket beribboned and bedecked with flowers. "Look it over, men. Ain't that a sweet morsel? What am I bid, gents?"

"One dollar."

"One dollar!" cried Lonesome, his mustache curling. "Fellow, you sure are an optimist. One dollar, he said. If that goes for a dollar, I'll eat it myself, basket and all. A dollar and a half says the lad with the Adam's apple. Two dollars, says the gent from Willow Creek. Step up, men. Two dollars. Going at two dollars."

Thus the bidding went on to the accompaniment of thunderous laughter and loud shrieks of applause. Once on his feet, Lonesome's confidence returned. He knew from the start that the crowd was with him. To every individual in the room he was known and respected, and their smiling faces were upturned to his. Their thunderous applause and instant response to his drawling banter warmed him to his task.

As auctioneer, he could not himself bid in the schoolma'am's basket. He had accordingly arranged with Windy to perform this service for him. He was certain in his own mind that there would be a terrific battle centered around that lady's basket.

But Windy's strategy in a measure warded off competition. In addition, his partner alone knew which was Miss Emmeline's basket. While it was suspected that Windy was substituting for Lonesome in this competition, the wily old-timer threw them off the track by bidding on several offerings. Rorden and several others followed closely on his bidding, though in each instance Windy left them with the highest bid, and when the hammer fell on Miss Emmeline's basket, Windy bore off the prize.

Finally, in the natural course of events, the next basket up for auction was the wondrous creation given to Lonesome by the wall-eyed stranger. Lonesome stopped and raised it aloft, pretending to be all but crushed to the earth by its weight.

"Gents, here's the heftiest package in the whole collection. Observe its size and beauty. Down in the Congo, they tell me, is the granddaddy of all bull snakes. He's eighty feet long and six feet through the middle. He's a right-down big snake, according to the truthful gent that tells me about him. For six months he don't eat anything at all. but at the end of the six months—well, men, he craves nourishment. Well, sir,

if they's a hungry buckaroo here with the instincts of a wild cat and the appetite of that said bull snake, let him ante up and draw for this here basket. Place your bets, men. What am I bid?"

For a brief moment no bid was offered. Members of the fairer sex looked at each other aghast and whispered together. Obviously, no one recognized the collosal offering.

But the lull was only momentary. A cow hand whom Lonesome recognized as Curly leaped to his feet. His bid was instantly raised by representatives of the Bar X. When the lines of battle were laid down by the two factions, the cow hands from both ranches gathered around their respective spokesman, and the price soared steadily upward. When the hammer finally fell and the basket was passed over to the grinning Curly, to the accompaniment of loud whoops of delight from the Double O crowd, Lonesome's gaze fell by chance upon that of the spectacular Rorden.

It was as though a mask had fallen from his face. The expression of fixed good humor with which he had regarded Lonesome throughout the entire evening was transplanted momentarily by a leer of triumph.

Lonesome had no time to ponder the situation. He proceeded with the work in hand. But ever and anon his roving glance rested upon the Romeo. That individual was calm and smiling as before.

When the bidding was over, Windy unobtrusively appeared at Lonesome's side and slipped the schoolma'am's basket into his hand. Lonesome urged him to remain and help them consume the dainties, but Windy merely snorted and withdrew to a luncheon prepared in a secluded corner for the benefit of male wall flowers. The schoolma'am herself appeared, beaming and breathless.

"I'm certainly proud of you, Mr. McQuirk," said that lady, her blue eyes resting upon him with warm approval. "You were splendid. It couldn't have been done better. Do you know how much money we raised? More than two hundred dollars. We'll be able to have the finest rural-school organ in the county."

"That's fine, ma'am," grinned Lonesome, mopping his perspiring brow. "Two hundred dollars, huh? That one ungodly big basket is responsible for a good share of it. It's lucky the boys got to fighting over it. They sure came up noble."

As he spoke, his eyes roved about the room, examining the laughing groups, hilariously dismembering the hampers of food. The Double O boys were conspicuous by their absence. Questing further, Lonesome discovered that the Bar X contingent had likewise disappeared. The sole surviving member of the cow-hand group was the debonair and smiling Rorden. He was seated in graceful ease beside a blushing and triumphant damsel whose basket Windy's strategy had forced him to buy. His golden teeth at that moment were sinking into a generous wedge of angel-food cake. As a good listener he was evidently doing justice to his share of gay conversation. His black eyes flitted again and again toward Lonesome and the schoolma'am.

Lonesome shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to the schoolma'am's basket. Long before, that lady had established herself high in his unshaken esteem by her culinary ability. Why worry over trivial things with food like this staring a man in the face?

"Ma'am," he chuckled, "let's eat. It's a long haul till daylight. The night, in a manner of speaking, is but a pup."

Following the midnight lunch, Lonesome claimed the first dance with the schoolma'am. For the next he yielded her to the silken arm of the Romeo. A little fresh air could do him no harm, he assured himself as he moved away.

He dodged revolving couples as he stepped toward the door.

As he laid his hand on the knob, the door swung inward. Deputy Joe Powers, right-hand man to Sheriff Hornaday of Gilliam County entered unobtrusively and stood for a moment, blinking in the light.

Lonesome was somewhat surprised to see the deputy. On the other hand, that youthful officer was generally among those present at social events such as this, if business permitted. Nevertheless, looking at him more keenly, he could see that the deputy had arrived on official business. His silver star gleamed on his breast and his guns were strapped to his hip. His lean, freckled face was hard with a determination somewhat mixed with irritation.

"Howdy, Joe?" greeted Lonesome. "You're a little late."

"Had some other business up on the flats, or I would have gotten here sooner," said the deputy tersely. "McQuirk, who's in charge of these festivities?"

"Miss Emmeline, though I expect you could call me a kind of straw boss. Why?"

The deputy's keen gray eyes bored into his own. "The sheriff's mad as a hornet, old-timer. He got word to-day that there would be liquor enough at this struggle to-night to float a battleship. A while back somebody telephoned in that they had to organize a bunch of vigilantes to police this struggle. Talked like they was expecting a riot. The sheriff told me to burn up the dust down here, and if anybody brought any liquor, to nail him and fetch him back to Condon, if I had to handcuff him. What's going on, anyway?"

Lonesome grinned. "Somebody's been stringing you, Joe. A Sunday-school picnic couldn't be more quiet and according to Hoyle."

But there was no answering gleam of friendliness in the gray eyes of the deputy. Lonesome's geniality quickly faded under the cold and calculating appraisal.

"You've always been a friend of mine, McQuirk," said the deputy, "but I'm playing no favorites to-night. Your name was mentioned in this business."

"But I've just told you that as far as boozing and fighting is concerned," said Lonesome, somewhat aggrieved, "a graveyard is a circus compared to this struggle."

As if in direct refutation of this last statement, a long, mournful howl came from the hillside above the schoolhouse. This was followed by a burst of ribald laughter and frenzied whoops. The music within had ceased, and the sound could be heard plainly through the open windows. There was a crash as of breaking glass, and a voice lifted up in wailing protest: "Busted, by heck! Oh, my, oh, my, and they was still a swallow left!"

"Don't cry, ol' man," counseled another. "Never mind. Don't you care about that old bottle. Plenty more where that came from. Oh, you Mamie. Fellows, let's have that Mamie song."

Whereupon, a dozen raucous and unmelodious voices were lifted up in a song whose meaningless words set them into paroxysms of laughter.

She's a lollipop; she's a gum drop;
She's a candy-coated pill; she's a clam.
Oh, she sings, and she plays, and she whistles all the day.
Oh, such an education that Mame's got.

"Yeah," said the deputy, staring fixedly at Lonesome, "you don't say, McQuirk." And at this sarcastic comment he turned on his heels and disappeared into the night.

The schoolma'am bore down upon Lonesome, closely trailed by Romeo. Her blue eyes were wide with a shocked surprise.

"What has happened, Mr. McQuirk?

I do believe those men outside are drunk."

Lonesome nodded dejectedly. "It sure sounds like it, ma'am. I expect I've fallen down on the job."

"It's funny, too," put in Romeo. "I'll swear my cow hands didn't bring any liquor with them."

The door opened slightly. The crooked finger of the deputy beckoned briefly. Lonesome excused himself and withdrew. But the determined schoolma'am followed, with Rorden at her side. Several of the men standing near by joined the procession that led out into the night.

In the dim light, Deputy Powers was surrounded by a swaying group of Double O and Bar X cow hands. In one hand the peace officer held the remains of the large basket that Lonesome knew so well. In his other hand was a flask whose amber depths reflected the light from the closing door. An air of vast and dignified solemnity clothed the swaying group. The face of Deputy Powers was motionless and forbidding. Curly, in a thick voice, was urging his comrades to stand fast.

"Just a minute, men," he exhorted solemnly. "Deputy Powers is about to make a speech. Yes, sir. Good old Deputy Powers. He's an officer o' the law, men. Yes, sir. Got a star and everything."

"I busted it," wailed the disconsolate individual. "It still had a swallow in it, men. But I done dropped it and busted it. Oh, my, oh, my!"

"McQuirk," accused the deputy, "this is a solemn aggregation of boiled owls. They're drunk, every man of them. Polluted. Lit up just like Christmas trees."

"Drunk!" protested Curly with vast indignation. "Listen to him, men. We ain't had but a snort or two, and he calls us drunk. It's awful."

"There's McQuirk," shouted another gleefully, "good old McQuirk. Let me at him, men. Leave me shake hands with a white man."

"Lonesome," the deputy cut in, "these polluted morons tell me that they bought this basket at the auction. And, as I understand it, you auctioned it off. You was also seen bringing this said basket to the struggle. How about it?"

Lonesome's jaw dropped in amazement. "Sure, I fetched that basket. It's Mamie's. I done so by request. You mean to say there was liquor in it?"

But his words sent the tipsy cow hands into paroxysms of uproarious glee. "Mamie!" they howled, weeping with laughter. "Whoopee! Good old Mamie."

"Who in blazes," inquired the deputy, "is Mamie?"

"Old man Clayton's niece." Lonesome's eye swept the crowd. The grizzled old cattleman pushed forward. "Haven't you got a niece named Mamie? That just arrived from the East?"

The veteran rancher shook his head. "I got a raft of worthless nephews, but nary a niece. There ain't no such animal."

"I suppose," said Lonesome bitterly, "that you didn't take on a new cow hand yesterday, neither. A wall-eyed critter named Crim?"

"I ain't seen Wally for six months," said Clayton. "I wouldn't have the shiftless maverick on the place. You must have had a pipe dream, McQuirk."

Lonesome's eyes roved over the faces in the circle about him, rested for an instant on the sneering face of Romeo, and hesitated a moment in passing on the schoolma'am. That lady's eyes were frosty and austere. She was biting her lip as though the bitterness of disillusion struggled with her pride.

"Just a second, men," said Lonesome. He addressed the crowd, but his eyes were on the schoolma'am. "Let's get to the bottom of this business. Am I

the kind of a gent that would bring liquor to a lady's party? Here are the facts: As I was riding down to this struggle, this said wall-eyed polecat popped out of the brush. He claimed he was a new cow hand at the Double O. He tells me old man Clayton's niece has just come from the East and fixed up a basket. He claimed he was too bashful to bring it and hornswoggled me into fetching it. That's gospel truth and all I know about it. No, there was another little thing." He pointed at Romeo. "Crim said Rorden was to fetch that basket, but passed the buck. How about it, Rorden?"

Romeo's lip curled cynically. "As an afterthought, that was pretty weak, trying to shift it onto me. Picayune, I'd call it. I've never met this fellow Crim. Never heard of him until to-night. Seems to me," he offered blandly, "you're in a jack pot, McQuirk."

The disbelief expressed in the dim faces about him was staggering. His part in the affair of the ponderous basket had been so natural to Lonesome that it seemed impossible to discredit it. Yet his statements had obviously appealed to his listeners as incredible and untruthful.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "I've lived a long time in these parts and thought I had a reputation for being fair-to-middling truthful. Isn't there a gent in this crowd that figgers I'm talking straight?"

"They is," said a voice at his elbow. Windy, as was his custom, was at his side. That worthy's black eyes were glittering, and his lean jaw was thrust out belligerently. "It's a frame-up, McQuirk, and I'll gamble dollars to doughnuts I can name the polecat that arranged the whole deal."

He stepped quickly toward the debonair boss of the Double O.

"Rorden, if you're anything but a tailor's dummy, if you've got the spine of an angleworm, come out like a man and admit that you arranged this jack pot as a joke on McQuirk."

Rorden shrugged his shoulders and turned smilingly to the crowd, his manner indicating that Windy was merely a loud and boisterous person whose words were unworthy of notice.

"That's aplenty," cut in Deputy Powers. He tossed the basket away and slipped the pint bottle in his hip pocket. "I've got all the facts about this I need. You admit, McQuirk, that you personally fetched that said basket and auctioned it off?"

"I did," said Lonesome shortly. "But that don't explain nothing by a long ways. I didn't know they was liquor in it."

"Ignorance is no excuse," said the deputy. "There's plenty of witnesses prepared to swear the basket was full of liquor."

"He's gone and put it in his pocket," wailed the disconsolate one. "And that's the last bottle, men. Oh, my! Oh, my! And I busted that one that had a swallow in it yet. Yes, sir, dropped it right down and busted it."

"Whereas," continued the deputy, "I ain't the kind of a gent that would bust up a nice, large evening, I'll have to take you to Condon, McQuirk. But I'll wait till the end of this struggle, if you give me your word you'll stick around. Meanwhile, you polluted buzzards circulate around outside and cool off," he continued, addressing the buckaroos. His voice was firm, but paternal and indulgent, for the deputy was used to handling men, both drunk and sober. "Keep off the floor until you can walk without getting tangled up with yourself. All right, folks, the dirty work's done. On with the dance."

In the schoolhouse, the dance was in full swing. Except for the men who had been attracted outside, the majority of those on the floor were ignorant of what had transpired. These now

turned back toward the door. Lonesome moved to the schoolma'am's side.

"I crave a word or two with you, ma'am," he said bluntly.

That lady hesitated, obviously undecided. Her face was cold and severe. Romeo withdrew with a smile as though conceding that even the most villainous culprit should be allowed to offer whatever feeble excuse his desperation could contrive. The tipsy buckaroos stumbled away.

Windy's figure alone was discernable in the gloom, leaning against a veranda post.

"Well, Mr. McQuirk?"

Certain bulging contours had appeared in Lonesome's jaw. His pale-blue eyes were unwinking. His manner in addressing the school-teacher was as courteous as ever, but it was as though his words were directed, not to a friend, but to an individual.

"How come, Miss Emmeline, you lined up so quick on the other side of the fence?" His drawling voice failed to conceal a certain hurt pride and bitterness. "This pickayunish business would have been a joke if you had stood by me. I aim to get at the bottom of it, if I have to tear that gold-toothed maverick apart in chunks. But the point is, you had me branded in advance without giving me a chance to square myself."

His words apparently banished all doubt the schoolma'am may have entertained in his favor. They served to steel her against him. She looked at him imperiously, head high, eyes blazing.

"You need say no more, Mr. McQuirk. I'm surprised and disappointed in you. Mr. Rorden has been very gentlemanly throughout. There is no reason why you should even suspect him. Yet you and Mr. De Long have had the impudence to accuse him publicly. I admire him for his forbearance in the matter."

Lonesome made no reply, but he did not cringe before her.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. McQuirk, this whole affair has the appearance of being staged for the purpose of humiliating me. I remember when I first mentioned the matter to you, you brushed aside my suggestion that there should be no liquor here and excused the boys for their carousing and so forth. Now didn't you?

"And as for Mr. Rorden," she continued, harking back to this angle of the situation with true feminine singleness of mind, "your animosity toward him serves only to heighten him in my esteem. He appears to represent a fine type of the old, colorful Western chivalry, Mr. McQuirk. I shall continue to so regard him until it has been proved otherwise."

This was too much. As she turned away, Lonesome reached for his plug of tobacco and tore off a generous chew.

"Can you beat it, Windy?" he questioned as that worthy joined him in the gloom? "I never mentioned that gold-toothed hombre but once, and did you hear the landslide? Well, that's that. Let's go, Windy. They's no use waiting any longer. I'll go round up Joe and we'll start for Condon."

"Wait a second, Lonesome." Windy rolled a cigarette with deft ease and hung it on his lip. He lighted it and exhaled the smoke slowly. "Don't get rushed off. You and me has got to turn over a new leaf. The time has come for action, ain't it, old-timer?"

The words were casual enough, yet Lonesome started and stared keenly at the other. It was the Windy of old that had spoken. A voice from earlier and more lurid years on the Panhandle, when an issue was met with action and soft words preceded gun play. Looking at his lean, gaunt partner, he warmed to the old reprobate anew. He realized instantly that he was no longer depressed. It was as though the inner

man was striding up from the débris of shattered illusions with his feet set on an old trail that was known and familiar.

"High and wide," he agreed, grinning. "You old snake in the grass. Got an idea?"

Dawn was flaming in the eastern sky when the dance broke up. Sleepy-eyed, hilarious still, the good citizens of Gilliam County betook themselves homeward. Rorden rode away with the schoolma'am. Lonesome watched them go without the quiver of an eyelash.

Later, he and the deputy rode together up the cañon toward Condon; Windy had already disappeared.

Where the trail swung around an abutting shoulder of rock that was crowned with sagebrush, Lonesome turned to the sleepy deputy.

"Joe," he said with a chuckle, "how do you know that bottle is hooch? They's a bunch of jokers loose in these parts. Maybe the boys was stringing you. Hold it up, and let's take a squint at it."

"Of course it's hooch," grunted the deputy. "Do you think them buzzards got polluted on tea?"

Nevertheless, he produced the flat bottle, sniffing the cork, and held it aloft. Halting, the pair squinted up at its amber depths thus revealed against the sky.

A sharp report resounded from the heights above. Shattered glass tinkled musically on the stones of the trail. The deputy's arm and hand were drenched with pungent liquid. He stared foolishly at the neck and shank of the bottle which he still held in his grasp.

"Danged if you ain't right," said Lonesome, his blue eyes twinkling. "Sure enough, that was liquor, Joe."

From above came the rattling of stones and the sound of fading hoofbeats. The deputy reined his plunging mount in that direction, then hesitated and turned back. He grinned as he tossed the fragment of bottle away.

"The gent that can shoot like that is also a riding fool," he opined. "Life's too short to squander it trying to catch him. Well, there goes my evidence. Without evidence I ain't got anything. You two hombres worked that pretty slick. So long, McQuirk. See you at the rodeo."

CHAPTER VII.

PREPAREDNESS.

THE word went forth in Gilliam County that old scores would be settled at the Condon rodeo. Bad blood was known to exist between the stellar contestants, Romeo Rorden and that hard-bitten old-timer, Lonesome McQuirk, particularly since the differences of opinion originated at the schoolma'am's social.

Immediately after this there had been much speculation as to Lonesome's future course of action, for it was known throughout the cattle country that McQuirk was not the type of man whose trail could be crossed with impunity. But the publishing of the final list of entries in the rodeo cinched the rumor that something out of the ordinary, even for that spectacular and colorful spectacle, was in prospect.

For the name of Rorden appeared at the head of the list in each of four events. Unobtrusively, at the bottom of each of these same lists, appeared the name of Lonesome McQuirk.

These four events were the cowboys' sweepstakes, the steer-roping contest, the bucking contest, and the chariot race.

The fact that Lonesome had elected to appear in the rodeo at all was an event of importance. Old-timer though he was in the Condon country, he had never before taken part in a public exhibition in that region. His skill in all the spectacular arts of the buckaroo was beyond question, and it was known that

in his earlier years in the Panhandle his name had been a byword among men who rode hard and died young.

In the Condon country he had preferred to sit back and take a quieter rôle unless circumstances forced more colorful events upon him. There had been a persistent rumor that he would ride in the cowboys' sweepstakes on the school-teacher's thoroughbred sorrel, Mortimer, but this had been appraised as more or less of a gesture of courtesy on his part. As a skillful rider, he could undoubtedly put Mortimer through his paces to the best advantage.

His name in the more primitive events, and particularly in those events where he must battle for his laurels against the spectacular Romeo, added tremendously to the interest. Notwithstanding that the Condon country boasted of buckaroos who had achieved recognition at the Olympian spectacles at Pendleton and Cheyenne, it was generally conceded that the spectacular Romeo and the old-timer, McQuirk, were the best of them all.

Thus, developments had the effect of dividing the cattle country into two distinct camps. One was the younger element, to whom Rorden had sold himself by his spectacular exploits and his colossal self-confidence. The older men, quick to suspect that glittering superficialities of manner hid defects of character, swore by McQuirk.

Lonesome and Windy kept their own counsel. When approached on the subject of the coming rodeo, they merely grinned enigmatically and said nothing. Between themselves, their future course of action was outlined explicitly.

"After this rodeo business is over," Lonesome told Windy, his pale eyes cold and determined, "I aim to ride around by Prineville and look up this Crim person. With a little persuasion, that wall-eyed critter will give me the dope I need to settle my difference with Rorden."

"If it was me," said Windy, his mustache bristling, "I'd forget this wall-eyed individual. You and me know that Rorden framed that liquor deal. Why wait till after the rodeo? There's no time like the present for settling differences of opinion with Rorden."

"Your sentiments do you credit, but your boisterous instincts have led you astray," Lonesome pointed out. "They's two perfectly good reasons why I want to see this young rooster in action in the rodeo. In the first place, I think with you that he's a four-flusher. If it's in me, I aim to show him up. The second reason is a demonstration of human frailty, Windy. I aim to show three individuals that I ain't too old and busted down to hold up my end in a struggle like this. One of them is Rorden. The second is a red-haired lady who was once a friend of mine. The third"—he blushed a little as men do when baring their souls, even to a tried-and-trusted friend—"is a bald-headed gent named McQuirk."

"Yeah," said Windy, his mustache bristling, "if you want to see an intelligent cuss named De Long throw a fit right pronto, just continue that line of talk. Getting old! Just you enlarge any further on them sentiments, and I'll be danged if I don't enter this struggle myself, just to make it interesting for you. No, sir, McQuirk, thirty years from now, when you're beginning to feel the effects of the easy life you've led, such as not being able to ride more than twenty hours in the saddle continuous, and find yourself craving to get up around five o'clock in the morning, instead of four, at calf-branding time, you can begin to suspect that you're getting aged and decrepit. You ought to be thankful this business has come up while you're still young and spry. It'll be apple sauce for you, provided Rorden plays straight. Question is, what kind of skullduggery will the polecat figure out?"

In the short time yet remaining before the rodeo, it speedily became apparent that Rorden did not intend to trust to his skill alone in the four events in which he was entered. Less suspicious men than Windy might have attributed no importance to certain developments. Lonesome himself might have suspected nothing. But his lean, gaunt partner unerringly detected the fine hand of their spectacular enemy behind the scenes.

There was, for example, the dilemma of the schoolma'am's horse, Mortimer. It was true that the schoolma'am had promised him to Lonesome for the cowboys' sweepstakes, but that had been before the psychological upheaval at the schoolhouse social. Lonesome stubbornly refused to ride over to Shuttler's Flats to get the horse, declaring he would rather forfeit his chances in the event than to lay himself open further to the schoolma'am's disfavor.

In vain Windy attempted to point out the falsity of his position.

"She promised you the critter, didn't she?" he demanded wrathfully. "What difference does it make if you're off her calling list now? Don't you see that it was part of Rorden's scheme to separate you from Mortimer? I mean this liquor business. I swear, McQuirk, you've got to get down to brass tacks a little. You can't just lay down and let him walk off with the purse in the sweepstakes. That would be playing right into his hands."

The difficulty solved itself without intervention on Lonesome's part. The day before the rodeo there appeared at the McQuirk-De Long farmhouse a youth from Shuttler's Flats with a led horse. The horse was the splendid sorrel, Mortimer, and the youth was the bearer of a note from Miss Emmeline which read:

MR. MCQUIRK: If you still wish to ride Mortimer in the cowboy's sweepstakes, he is entirely at your disposal.

EMMELINE SEGRIST.

"I won't take him," was Lonesome's first reaction. "She don't want me to ride that critter. I don't like the looks of that note. It makes me feel just like she was throwing me a bone, just to keep me from growling."

But the exultant Windy brushed his objections aside.

"Sure we'll take him," he said gleefully. "Much obliged, son. How do you get that way?" he demanded when the youth had departed. "With things the way they are, do you expect a 'billy deuce?' I'll admit there ain't any 'Dear Mr. McQuirk' in it, and she ain't signed it 'Your affectionate friend,' but outside of that it's as plain as the nose on your face, which is considerable. When that red-headed gal says you can ride her horse, it means she stands by it, even though you ain't on speaking terms no more. McQuirk, we're sitting pretty in the sweepstakes. Whereas, I ain't never seen that Mortimer horse run when he really had to extend himself, if I'm any judge of horse flesh it'll be a race, anyway."

But the fine hand of the wily Romeo speedily became apparent in other departments of the rodeo. Inconspicuous among the list of minor officials for the field events was the name of Curly, Rorden's right-hand man. The three judges of all the rodeo events were Colonel Thompson, retired cattle man of Condon; Judge Brady, owner of large holdings in the upper John Day, and old Clayton, owner and proprietor of the Double O.

Windy returned from Condon greatly upset by this and other news. But Lonesome refused to be perturbed.

"Them three judges are all old-timers," he pointed out. "Square as they make 'em. The fact that Rorden is his foreman won't make any difference with Clayton."

"Maybe not," admitted Windy, "but I aim to keep my eye on these proceedings. It's kind of hard for a feller to

keep from pulling for his own horse. Rorden is riding Black Comet in the sweepstakes."

Lonesome's eyes glistened with excitement. It would be a real race, after all. Black Comet was a colt bred by Judge Brady for the announced purpose of making a royal bid for the sweepstakes purse.

"That's fine, Windy. Great stuff. That black is a powerful brute, but I've got a hunch he'll eat his heart out before the finish."

"This business of having Curly out in the arena didn't appeal to me," continued Windy, "so I done elected myself to the same capacity. I'm taking Lem Jorden's place. Lem's a good scout. When I explained a few things to him frank and earnest he offered to leave me have his place."

"You're a suspicious cuss," observed Lonesome. "Them steers and bucking horses is all drawn by lot."

Windy's mustache bristled sardonically. "I ain't suspicious, but I just naturally got my eyes open. You and me has seen too many prizes drawn by lottery, McQuirk. For instance, out of all them outlaws, if you was to draw Desolation in the bucking contest, just by chance, you understand, I'd figure it my duty to see to it that this Romeo person drew Star Chaser. That'd be fair enough, wouldn't it?"

"I expect it would," Lonesome admitted reluctantly. "But if they's any funny business, Windy, let them show their hand first."

"Here's something more for you to sink your teeth in." There was real concern in Windy's voice. "You and me have been asleep at the switch, McQuirk. Judge Brady has gone and promised his chariot team to Rorden. I raised an awful holler about that, seeing that we had mentioned it before, but he claims he didn't understand there was anything definite. He seemed real cut up about it."

Lonesome stared at his partner, consternation written large on his face. It had been known only to a few in the Condon country that the judge was whipping a chariot team into shape in time for the great round-up at Pendleton. He had mentioned to Lonesome in confidence that he would have liked to have a dependable driver try them out in the Condon rodeo. Lonesome, at that time having not yet decided to enter the classic, had neglected to seize the opportunity definitely. It was obvious what the judge had been hinting at, for Lonesome was known to be an expert in all phases of handling horses.

Deep in his mind Lonesome had been sure the judge would permit no other driver than himself to guide the superbly matched quartet in the grueling contest. Now he bitterly assailed himself for his procrastination in the matter.

"No question about it, this Romeo person is an eloquent cuss," he said ruefully. "How in blazes does he do it? I would have gambled dollars to doughnuts the judge wouldn't let anybody drive them horses 'less he was sure they knew their stuff. The judge isn't anybody's fool, either."

"We can concede him the chariot race," said Windy hopefully, "provided you make a good showing in the other three events."

But Lonesome had set his heart on the chariot race. The last event on the program, and one of the most spectacular, it was one field event in which he had never participated, as it was foreign to the rodeos of earlier days in the Southwest. In imagination, since his decision to enter the Condon exhibition, he had thrilled to the exaltation of the cometlike ride that would be his in the jolting chariot, with four plunging horses before him, his opponent wraithlike in the dust ahead or thundering blindly and hopelessly in the rear.

There were other excellent chariot teams that he could get for the event, but the four matched beauties from the Brady stables would be guided by his bitter rival. His pale-blue eyes rested fixedly but unseeingly on his partner as an idea slowly took root in his mind.

"Windy," he said at length, "there's too much at stake in this business for me to trust much to luck, but in this said chariot race I aim to bet before the draw. If the cards are with me, we still have a chance at the pot. I've figured me out a chariot team."

"Yeah?" said Windy. "Jack rabbits, huh? Or lions, maybe?"

"Fuzztails. You remember them buckskins we hooked onto the stone boat a while ago, figuring on breaking them to harness?"

"Do I remember them?" snorted Windy. "You mean them short-barreled mavericks that we put the chain harness on and the blinders? I'll say I remember them. They danged near tore my arms off, tromped me to death, and chawed me up. We figured life was too short to waste any more time with them." He paused and stared fixedly at his partner. "You don't mean, McQuirk, that you figure them long-legged hyenas is a chariot team? Why, they ain't even half broke. Give them one look at a chariot, and they'd jump clean into the next county."

"But when they ran," Lonesome pointed out, "they ran together, didn't they? Well, sir, that's a chariot team. If we can once get them started and headed in the right direction, they're liable to tromp on somebody's heels."

Windy grinned as the idea took hold, chuckled outright, then laughed loud and long, slapping his thigh. "McQuirk," he said, wiping his eyes, "if any of the young buckaroos in these parts had sprung an idea like that on me I'd have started for my guns, figuring he was crazy and fixing to bite me. But coming from you, it has the earmarks of genius. It's a slim chance you're taking. That gives me a downright inspiration. I'll take Geronimo with me to Condon and ease him into the corral with the other roping steers. Then, if Curly picks out a shorthorned old razor back for you to rope, I'll turn loose old Geronimo for Rorden. He'll give that gold-toothed lady-killer a chance to show the fanciest roping ever seen in Gilliam County."

Geronimo was the name Windy had given to one of his particular pets, a red maverick steer to which he had taken an unreasoning fancy. He was a lean, shaggy, hard-bitten animal, disreputable of appearance and worthless of character, yet something in his rolling eyes had intrigued Windy—a hint of truculence and a gleam of more-than-ordinary bovine intelligence. He had pampered this old reprobate, and with an enthusiasm worthy of a better cause had spent patient hours teaching him tricks that were profitless and absurd.

"What you aim to do with that hunk of worthlessness beats me," said Lonesome. "Figuring on furnishing a little comedy, maybe."

"Just you wait," said Windy mysteriously. "If luck's with me when the steer-roping contest comes up, Geronimo's liable to furnish more than comedy."

CHAPTER VIII.

"THEY'RE OFF!"

FROM its flag-swathed box in the center of the crowded grand stand the band blared forth triumphantly. Straw hats, sombreros, and printed programs waved a challenge against the sweltering heat from every point in the vast grand stand and bleachers. Buckboards, hacks, mounted men, and others afoot extended like horns of a crescent far around the oval track.

Within the oval was the dusty arena, the guard rail of the track being reinforced by stout palings of sufficient

strength to withstand the assault of the frenzied steers or plunging horses. Within the high-walled corral on the side of the arena opposite the grand stand, steers, fresh from the range, milled and bellowed. In another inclosure glimpses could be caught of wildly tossing manes and muscular, gleaming bodies where the wild horses squealed and snorted. Only the outlaws themselves, a score or more of imperious and invincible veterans, were comparatively quiet. Yet they were tense and watchful, their rolling eyes and extended nostrils indicating their certain knowledge of the desperate battle they would presently wage against their relentless enemy.

Buckaroos by tens and scores, rainbow-hued and gorgeous, dashed hither and yon, some on business connected with the field but others in sheer exuberance of spirit. This was the day of all days in the Condon country, an event anticipated with the utmost enthusiasm during the year, and each detail of which would be revived over and over again after the day itself had passed. It was the day in which the love of barbaric splendor could be released. Sartorial elegance was expressed in blinding colors. Men scaled the pinnacles of skill and strength to the applause of a no-less-primitive and exultant crowd.

The love of gorgeous colors was not confined to the field alone. In the grand stand, bleachers, and along the side lines, purple shirts and scarlet bandannas vied with orange, lavender, and gold. Flaring sombreros tossed among the sea of faces, and white teeth gleamed by contrast with features tanned by constant exposure to the heat and wind of the high country.

Here was no cosmopolitan gathering of blasé spectators witnessing a drama which they could not understand, but friends and neighbors gathered to appraise glorified perfection of speed and skill in events that were known and familiar. Outside the Condon country, the major contestants might risk their lives before the plaudits of strangers for a stipulated stipend. But here they put forth their greatest efforts before their own people on their own ground. Friend called to friend across the arena —sarcastic banter and jovial criticism, and though bitter rivalry and far-from-genial animosity rode with the contestants, it was masked with a grin. The ethics of the game required that the vanquished come up smiling.

The music from the band stand died away. Cow hands hurried from the field to join a column forming beyond the corral inclosure. The Umatilla Indians, mounted on their war ponies, and in full war regalia, were already waiting to head the procession. A bulky and perspiring individual, mounted on a ponderous gray, was left alone in the center of the arena. This was the announcer, and he seemed fairly to swell with pride and importance as he raised the megaphone to his lips.

"Ladies and gents," he bawled, his voice penetrating the farthest corners of the field. "The Annual Condon Rodeo is about to commence. It gives me great pleasure to announce that in today's rodeo is gathered together the greatest aggregation of racing horses, bucking horses, outlaw horses, wild horses, bucking steers, wild steers, wild Indians, and wild buckaroos ever gathered together in these parts. Each and every event will proceed according to the printed program you hold in your hand. First is the cowboys, cowgirls, and full-blooded Umatilla Indians in grand mounted march around the arena. Following the grand march will be the cowboys' sweepstakes for a purse of five hundred dollars, offered by the Breeders' Association. This race is open only to horses bred in Gilliam County. Distance, one mile. Names of entries will be announced before the

race, following the grand march. While the boys are getting their racing horses lined up at the start, Ed Garlock, the optimistic buckaroo from Prairie City, will earnestly endeavor to ride the bucking steer. Ladies and gents, I thank you."

Loud and prolonged applause greeted this announcement. Its subsiding echoes were drowned out by the crashing notes of the band. Moving slowly and majestically, the first riders of the long line moved into the arena, and the great Condon rodeo was officially under way.

The grand march preceding the field events is the most spectacular and gorgeous event of the day. Without the Umatilla Indians no Western rodeo is complete. It is no mere parade that passes in stately review before the grand stand. It is a pageant which breathes of lost frontiers and literally typifies the historical and storied West.

When Umatilla Indians pass in review in rodeos and round-ups outside of the Oregon country, they are merely colorful actors moving across the stage, symbols of days long gone, whose interest is purely historical. But in that section of the fast-fading frontier lying between the Rockies and the Cascades the Indian parade represents something that is vital and terrific. Sinister history is too near in that region for mere academic analysis, bloody yesterdays too close.

The glory of the Umatillas is gone now. As wards of the white man, they have become wealthy, waxed fat and indolent. The far ranges over which they roamed in early days are forever closed. For the white man never yields up a domain upon which he has entered and established a home. Yet in brief instances such as these the civilized savage casts aside the light cloak of civilization, dons his war paint and sinister war regalia, and is a Umatilla of old.

Thus, as the painted warriors passed in review, bronzed flesh gleaming, gorgeous feathered headdresses waving, the applause was generous enough. Youthful eyes regarded them curiously and cheered with enthusiasm. But there were old men in the bleachers and grand stand who stared at them stonily in passing, and whose applause was merely a formality. Within their memory, the fathers of these braves—almost, it could be imagined, these braves themselves—had peered down from rocky ledges at passing immigrant trains, sent their bloodcurdling war whoops through lonely cañons, and by night had circled beyond the light of the waving fires.

They knew, these old-timers, that back of the beady, expressionless eyes that rested so casually on the grand stand lurked the savage of old, that the wave of the hand whereby the two-score braves acknowledged the plaudits of the crowd was intended as a salutation, not from a degraded and dying race, but from a people who recognized an inferiority only of numbers.

Then came the buckaroos, their lean, grinning faces a contrast to the stolid and solemn braves who had passed before. A happy-go-lucky throng of dare-devils, they appeared, lean-featured and hard-bitten, gorgeous as peacocks, their flaring sombreros tilted with jaunty exactness. Foremost among these, self-assured, jaunty, rainbow-hued, was Romeo.

Loud applause greeted individual buckaroos, redoubling momentarily in volume as a particular favorite lifted his hat in acknowledgment. The Romeo drew a generous salvo, particularly from the feminine contingent and the younger element, who cheered him boisterously. Their eyes lighted with hero worship. The spectacular youth took full advantage of this ovation, waving his hand again and again in graceful salute.

Toward the end of the procession came Windy and Lonesome, riding side by side. By contrast with the colorful youth who had gone before, they seemed drab and uninteresting, though Lonesome had purchased a new and gorgeous sombrero for the occasion and Windy had donned a purple bandanna. Yet as the pair rode by the grand stand there was a tried and seasoned air about them that compelled attention. Sunburned faces wrinkled in infectious good humor as they waved to the crowd. The applause was generous but scattering, much of it coming from older men whose reticence and training precluded an exaggerated show of emotion or approval.

The hard-bitten pair made no comment on whatever lack of applause they might have discerned. But far up the line, where the parade was departing from the arena, Romeo twisted in his saddle and grinned maliciously.

"Curly," he chuckled to his lieutenant, "that bald-headed old buzzard didn't get much of a hand, huh? Well, sir, if I'm lucky, all he'll get after this show is over is a laugh."

"You want to watch your step," advised Curly. "They's darned few men can put anything over on McQuirk. On top of that, his unbeautiful partner is on the job. Working together, them two old-timers is more than a pair. They's most generally a crowd."

"They's two of us," Rorden pointed out. "If you can outfox Windy, I can outride McQuirk. That makes it even, doesn't it?"

Immediately after the parade had left the arena, there was a wild dash for the track. A dozen or more powerful and rangy thoroughbreds were already being led from the stables by assistants. During the interval, while the riders were drawing for places and receiving instructions from the judges, the bucking steer emerged from the chute into the arena, with the optimistic buckaroo from Prairie City swaying uncertainly on his back. But his optimism failed him utterly. The steer was a wary old veteran who had thrown forty riders in that many rodeos. At the third short, choppy, stiff-legged jump the hopeful one hurtled through the ether and sprawled in a smother of dust and profanity to the hilarious delight of the grand stand.

"Ladies and gents," boomed the perspiring announcer, "the steer-bucking contest is now over, our friend from Prairie City having done bit the dust. Herewith and as follows is the list of entries in the Cowboys' Sweepstakes, which is now lining up at the start."

Whereupon he named, one by one, mounts, the riders, and lastly the owners.

The Cowboys' Sweepstakes was the greatest classic of its kind in the county. Originating, as its name implied, as a cowboys' "free for all," in which was eligible the mount actually ridden by the participant in his routine duties on the range, it had been taken up by the Breeders' Association and fostered as an annual track event. The rules had been broadened in scope to permit any horse in the county to participate. The distance had been lengthened to a mile. The size of the purse and the prominence achieved by the event had speedily eliminated the average cow pony and placed it among the best thoroughbreds the county had to offer.

All of the horses on the track boasted of track history, save Mortimer. But the fact that the lean, rangy sorrel had been bred by Hildebrand and was being ridden by McQuirk, placed him among the topnotchers. Black Comet, pride of the Brady stables, was the favorite, due to the breeder's prestige and the rumored ability of the spectacular youth who was in the saddle.

The noise of the crowd had died away to a tense and expectant silence. All eyes were fixed on the group of

horses, plunging and rearing nervously on the track, awaiting the signal.

Far up in the grand stand, "Big Jim" Norton turned to chuckle to the lady at his side, a blue-eyed individual whose cheeks, white with excitement, seemed the whiter by contrast with her red-gold hair.

"Who you betting on, Miss Emmeline? Rorden or Mortimer?" He chuckled outright, unusually pleased at himself at this thrust, being well aware of the difficulties that had arisen between Miss Emmeline and McQuirk."

"Please don't, Mr. Norton," pleaded the schoolma'am. Unconsciously she was wringing her hands in her excitement. "Oh, why don't they start?"

"They'll start fast enough," said Norton. "And it'll be over in a hurry, too. A couple of minutes, maybe."

"That's pretty fast, ain't it?" An old-timer chuckled from the row below.

"Hush!" warned Mrs. Norton, her voice trembling. "They're getting ready to start."

But they did not immediately start. Some wrangle had arisen on the track. It could be seen that Romeo was in close conference with the judges.

"Excuse the delay, ladies and gents," bellowed the announcer. "One of the entries has just been protested. Just a second or two and the judges will reach their decision."

A buzz of excited comment hummed through the grand stand and bleachers. Young Rorden could be seen gesticulating and shrugging his shoulders in conversation with the judges. Could it be that the handsome youth had personally challenged the qualifications of a fellow contestant? Old-timers looked at each other silently, and the younger men strained their eyes to watch proceedings.

A heated discussion was in progress in the judges' stand.

"You mean to say," growled old Clayton, eying Romeo dubiously, "that you make a point of the fact that Mortimer was foaled on Hildebrand's summer range in Grant County?"

"I hate to have to make a point of it"—Rorden was apparently reluctant—"but somebody ought to see to it. And I presume you want to adhere to the rules."

The three judges stared at each other aghast. Colonel Thompson's eyes were cold and quizzical.

"I suggest," he said, turning to Judge Brady, "that the judge give his opinion on this point, since it is his entry that has called our attention to it."

"Opinion!" said the judge, stung by the good-natured suggestion that he himself had instigated the protest. "You know danged well what my opinion is. Rorden, you've got the gall of a brass monkey. Your protest is nothing but sheer impudence. The fact that Mortimer was foaled in Grant County don't cut any ice. Hildebrand's one of the biggest breeders in the county and makes his headquarters here. Furthermore, all you have to do in this event is ride. If there's any protesting to be done, I'll do it. Get back to your place."

"Protest overruled," bawled the announcer. Romeo returned to his position, cursing under his breath.

A moment later the arena echoed with the battle cry of those who follow the sport of kings:

"They're off!"

CHAPTER IX.

CROOKEDNESS VERSUS STRATEGY.

BREATHLESS thousands were on their feet to a man as the finest racing stock in Gilliam County were away to an excellent start.

They were bunched at the beginning so that it was impossible to distinguish the relative positions of individual mounts. The brilliant-hued riders, the leaping bodies of the horses, trailed by a cloud of dust born of flailing hoofs,

formed a chaotic and jumbled mass that took concrete form and substance only as it made the turn and merged into the back stretch.

Then Black Comet, the far-famed thunderbolt from the Brady stables, drew away into the lead, his splendidly muscled body gleaming like polished ebony and his powerful legs driving like pistons. He pulled away steadily on the long back stretch, by one length, two lengths, three.

"Black Comet leads! Oh, you Black Comet!"

But the frenzied roar from the backers of the favorite was drowned by another that was like a battle cry: "Mortimer! Mortimer!"

The lean, rangy sorrel had detached himself from the bunched stragglers in undulating flight, smooth and graceful as a greyhound in full cry, giving no hint of the terrific energy and stamina required for the effort. It was a heart-breaking pace the black thunderbolt was setting. He seemed a tireless bundle of explosive energy, the powerful driving muscles of shoulder and flank coiling and uncoiling like snakes.

Mortimer hung doggedly three lengths to the rear. By contrast to the rugged black, he seemed fragile, almost delicate, his lean neck stretched in a horizontal line, his long legs spurning the track with a colossal stride that made the black's seem choppy and energy-wasting. In this position the two leaders drew away from the motley aggregation in the rear, increasing the distance with each forward leap.

As they flashed by the grand stand at the half, the black was laboring mightily, but apparently tireless. Mortimer was running free and strong, neither gaining nor losing. The attention of the frenzied crowd was fixed on the two leaders to the exclusion of those battling for third place.

To youthful and inexperienced eyes it seemed the race was already won. Both were apparently running at top speed, and the black's lead was too great. But old-timers who knew horses and men realized from the sorrel's gait that he had not yet unloosed his greatest effort. Also, in the brief instant in which they swung into the turn, Rorden looked back over his shoulder. His face was white and teeth bared, as he cast a brief glance of appraisal at the thundering sorrel.

Keen eyes noted it and saw the desperation in the glance, born of the knowledge that only the man in the saddle can have of how strong or how long his horse can run.

As they swept into the back stretch Mortimer was gaining. The roar from the grand stand was like the crashing of giant surf. Foot by foot the sorrel crept up. Lonesome was low over Mortimer's back, his loosely knit body swaying and synchronizing perfectly with the great, surging roll of plunging horse.

Still in the back stretch, Mortimer's nose was even with the flank of the laboring black, and Rorden was reaching for his quirt. His arm rose and fell as he flayed the black to greater effort.

Suddenly the roar of the crowd ceased with startling abruptness, then crashed forth again, astonishment and incredulity in its changed note. With certain victory almost within reach, Mortimer had fallen back. Running almost neck and neck with the black, he had changed his stride suddenly, tossing his head and the undulating rhythm of his furious pace momentarily changing to a bewildered, pitching gait. Instantly the black pulled away.

The frenzied crowd rose to their toes. What had happened? Had Mortimer blown up in the last quarter? Did the gaunt sorrel lack stamina or a fighting heart? Or had his rider fallen down on him in the final effort of holding his horse to his pace? Whatever the rea-

son had been, it appeared that Mortimer was through.

Then new bedlam acclaimed the fact that Mortimer was not through. Swinging around the turn, he had regained his stride. But he was a length behind. Though the black was obviously tiring fast, it was too much to ask of horse flesh that he regain his loss on the turn. He would be on even terms again only on the home stretch, but was the lead too great?

As they thundered into the home stretch, Mortimer was still gaining. Lonesome was standing in the stirrup, low and forward over the horse's neck as the raging sorrel put his all into a last mighty effort, ears laid back, whites of his eyes gleaming, his nostrils distended. Inch by inch he crept forward. Forty feet from the wire it was a dead heat. To the vast majority in the grand stand, except those directly opposite the judges, it was still a dead heat at the finish.

But Mortimer won by inches as he crossed the line.

The great race was over. Only the judges knew which among those who trailed behind qualified for third. There was an almost hysterical note in the roar of the crowd as they relaxed after the terrific strain of the preceding moments.

Far up the straightaway, Windy was waiting as the thundering Mortimer came to a staggering halt. He ran a hand that trembled a little over Mortimer's quivering neck as he grinned up at Lonesome.

"That was a race, McQuirk. It's lucky this critter's got a long neck, or it still would have been a dead heat. What ails you, old-timer?" Lonesome had dismounted, his breath whistling through his set teeth. At the look that peered forth from his pale eyes, Windy seized him instantly in an iron grasp that no longer trembled. "Wait a second, Lonesome. Don't get rushed off. Let me in on it. What happened back there at the turn?"

"Leggo, De Long." Lonesome's voice was hoarse and rasping. "Leave me get my hands on Rorden. He's the crookedest polecat north of the Rio Grande."

"Easy, old-timer." Windy clung like a leech, despite Lonesome's furious struggles. "Get ahold of yourself. I'm with you, McQuirk, but this ain't the time and place. Slow and easy, partner."

Lonesome's struggles subsided as his better judgment gradually asserted itself.

"So he pulled some dirty work on you, did he?"

"Dirty work!" There were tears of rage and grief in Lonesome's eyes. "He quirted him, Windy. Fetched Mortimer a dirty crack across the nose as we come into the turn. Look." Just above Mortimer's sensitive, quivering nostrils a long welt was plainly visible.

"Wait," counseled Windy. "Wait till after the rodeo. Chalk it up on the score and take it out of his hide. You start anything now, and it's liable to be misunderstood. Let's get going back to the stable. The crowd is bellering for you."

Lonesome mounted and rode the panting Mortimer back past the grand stand toward the stables, Windy at his stirrups. He received an ovation that was deafening. Men poured into the track and surrounded him, shouting and exultant. Lonesome forced a grin as he waved his hat in response, but his smoldering eyes were fixed on the distant figure of Romeo, who was in the lead of the group returning to the stables.

"The polecat!" said Windy as the pair returned to the arena on their own mounts. "It looks like they's nothing too low for that hombre to do. But just you wait, McQuirk. The crowd's going to get next to him before the day's over."

"Ladies and gents," bellowed the announcer, "the next event on the program will be the drunken ride by 'Art' Beals, once around the track, following which will be the steer-roping contest. Kindly note, ladies and gents, that the same two lads that done their stuff so noble in the sweepstakes are also headliners in this roping event. I'm referring to McQuirk and Rorden. Keep your eye on them, friends. These gents are supposed to know their stuff."

In thus headlining the competition between Lonesome and the spectacular youth the announcer was interpreting the feeling of the crowd. The bitterly contested race had clinched the rumor that had been afloat regarding the differences of opinion between the pair. The attention of the crowd was now focused on those events in which the names of the two rivals appeared. While the winner of each event received an ovation, it was obvious that the spectators were intensely interested in which of the pair should emerge the victor, irrespective of other competitors.

The spectacular Romeo had already lost considerable prestige even among his most ardent supporters. Only a few had been close enough to the judges' stand to understand the matter of the protest Rorden had filed against Lonesome prior to the race. No one but Lonesome, his partner, and Rorden knew of the deliberate foul during the race itself.

But persistent rumors spread that the glittering youth had shown a decided tendency toward sharp practices and unsportsmanlike behavior.

While the drunken ride was in progress and the contestants in the steer-roping contest were receiving their instructions, a game of which spectators were ignorant was in progress at the corral. Windy and Curly were eying each other, their tanned faces expressionless, like poker players after the draw.

"McQuirk's up first," said Windy, scratching his lean jaw reflectively. "I mean as between him and Rorden. We might as well put our cards on the table, huh?"

"Might as well," agreed Curly casually. He grinned. "Of course, we want to see that both of them get an even break. Got any ideas?"

"Dealer's choice," said Windy. "You name it."

"As a starter, then," said Curly at length, "how does this appeal to you? I'll haze out Rorden's steer and you haze out McQuirk's."

"I'll go you one better," said Windy instantly. "You cut one out for McQuirk, and I'll name one for Rorden."

Curly stared at the other in surprise. It had the appearance of a proposal decidedly in his own favor. Yet there must be a catch in it. He turned it over in his mind, studying it from all angles. Assuming that both were good judges of steers, it was to his advantage, for he could select the worst of the milling animals for McQuirk.

"I'll do it," he said, and Windy nodded briefly. "It's a deal."

The rules in the roping contest were simple. Each contestant took up his post at the corral gate. The steer, emerging from the inclosure, was allowed a start of thirty yards. The time interval in which the steer was to be roped, thrown, and hogtied was measured from the moment the rider quitted his post.

The technique of roping was familiar to at least half of the spectators whose attention was focused on the arena. Four or five contestants preceded Lonesome, and as these roped and threw their animals, loud shouts of approval greeted those whose work was efficiently and thoroughly done, while a loud and raucous groan fell to the lot of those who failed to measure up to the various departments of the work in hand.

When Lonesome took up his posi-

tion, the coiled rope in his hand, there was an expectant hush and a general craning of necks. Each move he made was studied for comparison with those of Rorden, who followed next on the list. The judges waited, stopwatches in hand.

"Ladies and gents," boomed the announcer, "Lonesome McQuirk, ex-buckaroo of the Panhandle, is about to rope a steer. Watch his technique, gents. We crave to know how they do it in the Lone Star State."

Curly was in the milling corral, with Windy standing guard at the gate. The latter's mustache bristled, and his lean features swelled with suppressed emotion as he saw the steer that Rorden's lieutenant picked from the group.

He was a great, shaggy animal, lean of barrel but heavy of shoulder and neck. Quivering muscles, frenzied snorting, and rolling eyes were evidence that he was wild as an antelope. But what marked him as a rarity on the Condon ranges was the tremendous sweep of his horns, which curved outward and upward like a great crescent.

Curly cast a look of triumph at Windy as this long-horned monstrosity leaped forth from the corral like a thunderbolt. But Windy avoided his glance and pulled his hat lower over his eyes.

The thrill of seeing Lonesome in action was short-lived. The shaggy product of the ranges, with visions of far horizons before him, and raised to a bovine hysteria by the unaccustomed sounds and color about him, departed across the arena at cometlike speed. When he had crossed the appointed distance, Lonesome spurred forth in pursuit. The rope whirled above his head in majestic circles as his powerful mount overhauled the fleeing steer. With a snap of the wrist he made a perfect throw. His trained horse was set for the shock. As the long-horned maverick leaped through the air and crashed to earth, Lonesome hit the ground running. The actual hogtying could not be seen, but when the dust cleared away, Lonesome was standing, hands upraised, above the prostrate and motionless animal.

"Thirty-two seconds," bawled the announcer. "Ladies and gents, that there time would have placed McQuirk in the finals at Pendleton."

Loud and vociferous cheers greeted this announcement.

"I got to admit Romeo will have to go some to beat that," said Curly ruefully, turning to Windy. But that worthy was doubled over in his saddle in a paroxysm of mirth. "What ails you, DeLong? What's so gosh-awful funny?"

"McQuirk's from Texas," gasped out Windy, wiping his eyes. "Out of all them hard-boiled critters, you picked a long-horned steer, figuring he was tough. Why, he grew up among them kind of mavericks."

But Curly refused to see the humor of the situation, covering his mortification by a terrific scowl.

"Son," continued Windy, "I done you an injustice. Anybody with half an eye could see you wasn't aiming to do McQuirk any dirt when you picked out that steer. Well, sir, I'd just as leave Rorden had an even break with McQuirk. Just you pick out the one you want for your bright-eyed playmate to tackle."

Curly scowled ferociously at Windy's open sarcasm, but unhesitatingly accepted the apparently generous offer. His spectacular superior might yet be able to clip a few seconds from McQuirk's record.

Windy held his breath as Curly rode into the dust of the milling corral. Having made a concession to his conscience in that he had left the choosing of Rorden's steer entirely with Curly, he now hoped for the worst. It seemed too good to be true. His grim and sardonic sense of humor caused him to

hug himself in sheer delight, for Curly had unhesitatingly cut from the milling group a small, red, disreputable maverick, apparently quiet and docile, though perhaps bewildered by the bad company in which he found himself and the strange sights and sounds. Mentally Windy raised his hat in salute to whatever gods of chance had induced Curly to select a certain steer known only to a select few as Geronimo.

To the ruthless old-timer it seemed almost that a gleam of malicious amusement was in the rolling eyes of his vagabond pet as he charged out of the corral gate—a knowing glance as of one pal to another. His shaggy, triangular head seemed to shake in bovine amusement.

A fine figure of a buckaroo was Rorden as he waited in conscious splendor at his post, the attention of thousands upon him. The worried look in his eyes departed, and he grinned broadly in complaisant self-confidence as the animal that Curly had selected dashed by him and out into the open arena. Unquestionably, his henchman had done his duty royally and well. Such an undersized maverick should be easy to capture. He spurred from his post in pursuit, whirling his rope with a graceful flourish.

The red steer was galloping across the dusty arena, apparently anxious only to put as much distance as possible between himself and whatever lay behind him. One protruding, heavy-lidded eye was fixed warily on the rider thundering at his heels. Standing up a little in his stirrups, and swaying outward to give him free arm motion, Romeo made his throw at such close range that the loop left his hand almost over the back of the careening animal. So sure and certain was Romeo, that his gloved hand continued its motion in a flourish to the crowd, even as he pulled up his mount.

But instead of applause from the grand stand he was greeted by loud and raucous squawks of glee. Unbelievable though it was, he had missed his throw. The moment the rope left his hands, the wily Geronimo had dodged like a sensitive jack rabbit, changing his course almost in mid-air. He was gone at a new angle across the fields, head shaking, tail rampant and waving.

White with rage and mortification, Rorden recoiled his rope and spurred in pursuit, while the crowd bawled sardonic encouragement.

Again he made the attempt, and yet again, while the seconds crept into minutes and peal on peal of laughter echoed from the shrieking spectators. Up and down the arena they raced, and forward and back until Rorden's horse was streaked and laboring and Geronimo's tongue was hanging from his dripping jowls.

Whereupon the judges put an end to the performance, manufacturing a rule for the occasion to the effect that five minutes of unsuccessful effort disqualified the contestant.

The ruthless Windy added the finishing touches to the fiasco. He spurred forth to the weary maverick, whose light-footed run had now degenerated into a shambling trot. Swinging from the saddle as in bulldogging, he gasped the animal's horns and brought him to a halt. Thereupon he grasped Geronimo by the nose and led him back to the corral to the huge delight of the crowd.

Rorden meanwhile, in a black and sulky rage, was upbraiding his henchman, Curly.

"You're a cute little helper, aren't you?" he said with a snarl. "Look at that easy-going hunk of beef McQuirk drew. And what do I get out of the shuffle? A maverick that's so rope shy he's like a wild cat. How in blazes did you let them put anything like that over on you?"

"I done it myself," said Curly with

some truculence. "And I ain't got any apologies to offer." Some of the open admiration with which he had formerly regarded his new boss had now subsided. "Speaking frank and earnest, Romeo, you're falling down on the job. Granting that that jack rabbit was about the oneriest, twistingest critter I've ever seen, you'd ought to have nailed him on the second or third throw. On top of that, you've got to admit that McQuirk has done about the sweetest job that a man could possibly hope to see."

"That's aplenty," raged Romeo. "In the roping contest your help has been a handicap. From now on, if you've got a gleam of human intelligence, use your bean. I'm going to get that bald-headed buzzard, if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Seeing that my way is wrong," said Curly, rolling a cigarette, "I want you to tell me how you want me to proceed in the bucking contest."

"Maybe that would be best," agreed Rorden with some sarcasm. "Now then, there's some bad horses to draw from."

"They is," agreed Curly. "In this man's country we ain't in the habit of rounding up a bunch of broken-down plow horses for a bucking contest."

"I figure the worst of them all is Starchaser," continued Rorden. "I don't like the looks of that Roman-nosed critter. Let McQuirk have him."

"Now, ain't that lucky?" remarked Curly in surprise. "Personally I'd figured Desolation to be the toughest one of them all. If you hadn't mentioned it, I'd have figured that white-eyed wild cat for McQuirk."

"White horses is my particular meat," boasted Romeo. Nevertheless, he eyed the other somewhat doubtfully. "You think he's a mean one, huh? Well, maybe you'd best draw some other critter for me. But see to it that that long-whiskered Lone Star buckaroo gets Starchaser."

"Bah!" said Curly suddenly, tossing away his cigarette and pulling his sombrero lower over his eyes. "Rorden, if them people yonder knew how you was crawfishing and pussy-footing around in this layout, your name would be mud. Why don't you ride 'em straight and take your chance like a man? This business has just about got me down. Oh, don't worry." His tone was bitter. "I ain't the kind of a gent that starts something he can't finish. I'll string along this once. But after this said bucking contest I'm through."

"That's all that's worrying me," said Rorden with an evil grin. "I figure I've got the chariot race. I've got to get this said bucking contest to play even with McQuirk. Just you give him Starchaser, and if I'm any judge of hosses the crowd will get a bigger laugh than they did out of the steer roping. Outside of that, what those hyenas yonder don't know won't hurt them any."

CHAPTER X.

LUCK OF A BUCKAROO.

"LADIES and gents," roared the announcer. "The boys has done noble in the various and sundry stunts that have been staged for your edification. But the most primitive and hairy-chested act of them all is about to commence at once, immediately, and forthwith. Cast your eye at the corral yonder. You'll observe a dozen or more unbroke outlaws who have strenuous objections to being rode. Each and every one of them have demonstrated their ability to back up their objections. Two of them, ladies and gents, have never been rode. One is that roan wild cat, Starchaser, so named because of his habit of reaching for the stars. The other is that white man-killer, Desolation."

He paused for effect, while an ex-

pectant hush swept away the laughter and chatter from the long grand stand and bleachers.

"Ladies and gents." The voice of the colossal one was charged with dramatic importance. "The first horse up is Starchaser, who will be ridden by Lonesome McQuirk, following which Romeo Rorden will ride at Desolation."

A roar of excited applause greeted this announcement, intensified by the different shade of meaning used in the introduction of the spectacular Rorden. In a semihumorous vein he of the megaphone had boldly interpreted the waning confidence of the spectators in the ability of the much-touted Romeo. For in the parlance of the cow country to "ride" means exactly what the word implies; "ride at" suggests that the issue is problematical.

In the grand stand, the preparations for the event going forward in the arena seemed businesslike and matter of fact. But the trained eyes of the spectators studied each move. All leaned forward a little in their seats. Unconsciously their voices sank to a lower key as they discussed the dramatic possibilities of the forthcoming contest.

"I dunno about this business." Big Jim Norton shook his head. "McQuirk's sure drawn a bad horse. That critter and Desolation is a pair. I don't give a dang about Rorden. He's young enough to stand it. But McQuirk ain't rode for quite a spell. I hope he hasn't grown soft."

The schoolma'am's blue eyes were wide and troubled, her face set.

"Why do men do these things, Mr. Norton? I do believe I could live out here for a hundred years and never fathom the psychology of Western men. I can understand why they would attempt desperate things like this if it were absolutely necessary. But why do they take their lives in their hands just for sheer recklessness?"

"It's the nature of the brute," grinned Jim Norton, his eyes on the field. "They don't know no better, the dumbbells." He sighed heavily. "Gosh, I wish I was young again. On the hurricane deck of one of them outlaws a feller can live a long time in two minutes."

"But Mr. McQuirk is almost as old as you, isn't he, Mr. Norton?"

"They's few good horses like McQuirk," said the other enigmatically. "They never get old."

Starchaser was led forth from the corral. He was a thick-barreled roan, but long and powerful of limb, with bulging muscles born of years in the open range. The whites of his rolling eyes could be seen plainly in the grand stand. He circled warily in a somewhat crouching posture as he was led into the center field. Every move of the famous outlaw breathed of explosive energy and savage determination.

A wild horse, saddled for the first time, is in a frenzy of fear. His attempts to unseat the rider are instinctive. The frenzy of the outlaw is of a different color. His contacts with men have been many and pitiless. Added to his instincts is a knowledge born of experience. Given a streak of obstinacy, his frenzy is more than desperation; it is studied and terrific—unyielding as long as his vigorous muscles can respond to his indomitable will. Some outlaws die but are never broken.

Thus Starchaser, the outlaw, seemed docile enough as he was blindfolded and saddled, though he stood on spraddled legs and shrunk back unconsciously while the blindfold was being adjusted over his eyes. He crouched a little lower and flinched as the saddle was placed upon him and cinched by expert hands. But this was a routine preliminary his experience had taught him invariably preceded the conflict. From the depths of his fighting heart all his strength and reserve of strength was

welling up and storing in his quivering muscles to meet the issue.

Keen eyes were upon McQuirk during these preparations. The reaction of a buckaroo who faces a savage struggle with an outlaw before whom good men have gone down in defeat, is intensely interesting to those whose own experiences have included similar primitive conflicts. Unconsciously, on these occasions, while waiting for the ordeal to begin, the riders show their nervousness in many small but significant ways. They are restless in the extreme. They pace back and forth, swing their arms, snap their fingers, rub their sweating palms in the dust of the arena or wipe them on their chaps. These movements are mechanical and unconscious, for their minds are concentrated entirely on the grim battle before them, to the exclusion of all else.

Lonesome did none of these things. Prior to preparing the outlaw for the battle, he had inspected the saddle, and, while two buckaroos held it from the ground, tested it for the length of the stirrups.

Now he stood a little apart, watchful and motionless, thumbs hooked in his belt. Either through iron determination or supreme self-confidence, he seemed unaffected by the impending crisis.

But beneath his shadowed sombrero his pale-blue eyes glistened with grim satisfaction. Ruthless in his appraisal of himself as of others, he knew in his own mind that this was the final and supreme test of the truth or falsity of the things that had troubled him since the spectacular Rorden had appeared upon his horizon. This was a savage trial of muscular coördination, skill, and strength, presumably to be supplied only by the reckless and unbounded energy of youth.

When the preparations were complete, and the field assistants had turned to Lonesome with an "All set, old-timer?" he made his sole concession to the gravity of the test. From his hip pocket he extracted a plug of tobacco and tore off a generous chew, so that his tanned cheek bulged.

Then he strode forward and mounted into the saddle. He grasped the hackamore and nodded. "Let her go." Men on foot leaped to the saddle. The group backed away as the blindfold was snatched off.

Immediately thereafter the roan thunderbolt was reaching for the stars.

Five times the roan leaped skyward, descending stiff-legged, with a terrific impact. He gave vent to his rage in savage squealing that was almost a snorting bellow. These first wild lunges had accounted for thirty of the thirty-six buckaroos who had ridden at Starchaser in his lurid career.

But Lonesome weathered the storm. It was as though he was riveted to the saddle, though his supple body swayed and rocked with the crashing impact. Only men who had ridden bad horses could realize the twisting, tearing shock sustained by the rider when the rigid, ironlike muscles of the outlaw checked the downward descent.

Then the outlaw was off across the arena, weaving, twisting, "sun fishing," calling upon all his vicious and heretofore successful repertoire of tricks in a raging attempt to unseat the rider.

No other rider in the history of the outlaw had traveled this far with him. But Lonesome was still in the saddle. His hat was gone. The sweltering sun gleamed on his bald head that was streaming with perspiration. His grip on the hackamore was still a grasp of steel.

A savage satisfaction burned like fire in Lonesome's veins. Not because the admiring roar of the crowds beat upon his ears like surf, nor because he had acquitted himself well in the eyes of seasoned men—in the eyes of one man who was his enemy and one woman

who had been his friend—but because he could stand alone, face to face with his inner and ruthless appraisal of himself, and say, grinning, "The toughest horse you ever rode, and you held him down."

The roan was weakening now. His pitching and twisting was more labored. Madness gleamed in his rolling eyes. His imperial spirit refused to accept defeat.

As the judge's pistol was upraised to fire the shot that would indicate the struggle was over, the roan leaped suddenly across the arena. Spectators gasped in horror as his right side crashed against the stout barrier. But Lonesome saved himself from injury by swinging his leg high above the point of contact. The roan recoiled, gathered himself to leap again against the inclosure, even as the judge's pistol report sounded sharply above the din.

Lonesome was capable of lightning decisions. The struggle was over, but he was still in the saddle. He was entitled to dismount in any way he saw fit. The humorous aspects of it appealed to him. Ere the report of the pistol had died away the outlaw leaped again. Lonesome's left foot spurned the stirrup. The upward motion catapulted him skyward, and he alighted easily and naturally on the highest rail of the corral fence.

Grinning, he raised his hand in salute, while the frenzied roan, still reeling and kicking, galloped away.

The delighted crowd howled with applause. For a breathless instant it had appeared that he was thrown. But when he perched on the rail, toes hooked in a lower paling, and made his genial salute, grand stand and bleachers rocked.

"You danged old walrus," chuckled Windy, riding up with Lonesome's hat and mount. "You sure got a nerve. I reckon that stunt showed 'em you was riding easy."

A group of riders were milling around the three mounted judges. One of these was Rorden. Others had drawn near to listen. The spectacular youth was in heated conversation with Judge Brady. The latter's voice was scandalized and wrathful.

"I swear, Rorden, you're the protestingest critter I've ever had any dealings with. Don't you know the rules? I fired the gun, didn't I? Well, sir, McQuirk could fall apart in chunks after that if he had a mind to, and he would still have completed his ride."

"He was leaving the saddle when the gun was fired," Rorden insisted. "He was already thrown. How about it, men?" He turned to the group of listeners. "You all saw it. Wasn't McQuirk loosened up and on his way when the gun was fired?"

But the boys looked at each other askance and said nothing. Rorden's eyes sought out Curley's, but that worthy shook his head.

"I dunno about that," he opined. "It appeals to me McQuirk done pretty noble. I'll gamble he could have rode that loco critter till he dropped."

Muttered assent greeted this opinion.

"I reckon you're out of luck, young fellow," said the judge, while Clayton and Colonel Thompson nodded their approval. "Go out and do your stuff. I see they're fetching Desolation out of the corral. It's lucky the critter is rated as tough as Starchaser. That gives you an even break with McQuirk."

"If he's as good at riding as he is at protesting," whispered one buckaroo to another as the disgruntled Romeo rode away, "McQuirk is sure out of luck."

A premonition of disaster was undermining the egotism and colossal self-confidence in which the spectacular Romeo was clothed. He had drawn Desolation after all, and McQuirk had already triumphed over Starchaser. The second place that he had thus far been forced to accept from the despised Mc-

Quirk had been bitter and humiliating. Of what avail had been his carefully laid plans? Some infernal species of luck must surely be dogging his footsteps.

Comment on his forthcoming ride by the buckaroos about him filled him with secret dismay. It was the unanimous opinion that the outlaw was fully as powerful and more tricky than the Starchaser. For the first time, the name of the mount he had drawn had a menacing and forbidding sound. "Desolation!" He lighted a cigarette, puffed at it furiously, only to cast it aside.

The gaunt, white outlaw was rawboned and battle scarred. Lean-muscled and with a catlike quality in his gait, his pale eyes seemed suddenly sinister, gleaming with vicious malice.

"Killed a fellow over at Cañon City a couple of years back," grunted one of the buckaroos as he cinched the girth across the lean, scarred barrel of the white outlaw. "Fell on him. Done it deliberate, too."

"Feel lucky to-day?" grinned the youth who grasped the ears of Desolation. "I've got an A-1 rabbit's foot I'll loan you."

"That purple shirt you're wearing sure appeals to me," offered another ruthless joker. "Give me leave to take it off the remains."

This banter merely attested to the seriousness of the situation, as Rorden knew. He forced a grin that was weak and sickly.

"Go after the claret, Rorden," advised a hard-bitten old-timer, a malicious glint in his eye. "That's the only way you can outpoint McQuirk. Lonesome's got some funny ideas about using the spurs on a bad horse. He'll ride 'em, but he won't rake them. On top of that, you can make a record for yourself. They's only three men who have scratched Desolation. One of them is dead."

When preparations were complete, Romeo examined the cinching of the saddle girth with studied intentness. He delayed a moment longer on pretense of adjusting his spurs. When he climbed into the saddle, he did not immediately give the word to cast off, but experimented a moment with the hackamore, shifting his grip and adjusting himself to the saddle with meticulous care.

The grand stand was hushed and expectant. The group about him were tense and watchful. No one hurried him, since it is universally conceded that a man who rides a bad horse is entitled to get set to his own satisfaction. Yet he knew that keen, appraising eyes were upon him.

He wiped the perspiration from the palms of his hands and gripped the hackamore anew. Through his set teeth his voice was hoarse: "Let 'er go."

The blindfold was snatched off. The group darted from the danger zone as the ghostly outlaw leaped from a crouching position like a coiled spring set free.

Discussing the situation long months after the event, some of those in the field close enough to observe, swore that the white-faced Romeo prepared himself from the second jump for a speedy if undignified departure from the saddle to the welcome dust of the arena. Others, more generous, pointed out that Desolation had unseated many good men before Romeo, and that the gilded youth was merely unequal to the occasion.

But at the moment events followed too closely for cold analysis.

Three times the gaunt outlaw unloosed his most dangerous and vicious trick—a tremendous lurch upward and forward through space, then down, twisting in mid-air before the shattering, stiff-legged impact.

Romeo weathered the first of these, though the shock imparted by the iron-muscled outlaw was similar to that of falling ten feet spread-eagle on con-

crete. The second found him loose in the saddle and reeling. With the third, at the highest point of the twisting lunge, he rocketed into space.

For a photographic instant in mid-air it seemed that he was standing on stirrups upreared above the saddle of the high-arched outlaw. His right foot disengaged itself even as his mount twisted sideways on his downward trip. But his left remained in the stirrup. Pivoting as he fell, the shank of his spur was locked behind the stirrup strap.

Squealing with triumphant rage, pitching, and kicking viciously at the prostrate man trailing in the dust at his side, the white outlaw plunged across the arena.

It had happened so quickly that for a moment the crowd sat paralyzed. Then, with death stalking in the arena, they leaped to their feet with a bellow, horrified yet fascinated. Through the swirling dust the helpless figure of Romeo could be seen, his left hand clutching vainly at the loose earth in passing, his right pressed upon his eyes in an instinctive gesture of protection against flailing hoofs.

Above the snorting and squealing of the enraged animal came a sound that made blood run cold. It was the voice of a man, screaming in the desperation of mortal terror.

Mounted men were in the arena for emergencies such as this, when the luck of the buckaroo turns against him. Lonesome and Windy were among those who spurred forward into the converging circle to help the luckless Romeo. Trained men though the others were, accustomed to meet a crisis with action, for a split second there was a division of authority as to how to proceed.

But Lonesome uncoiled his rope as his horse leaped forward. As he made his throw Windy hit the ground running. When the boiling dust cleared, Windy was seen seated on the head of the fallen horse. Rorden lurched to his feet and stood, swaying.

Men swung to the ground and laid hold of him lest he fall. For a moment he clung to them, edging a little away from the fallen and quivering outlaw, perspiration streaming down his grimy but pallid face. His breathing was hoarse and sobbing. His eyes were still staring with the horror that had passed so close.

It was apparent that he was uninjured. Presently he stood alone, rubbing his eyes like one emerging from a dream. Men spoke to him jokingly as they edged away, calling upon the high heavens to witness his luck in emerging unscathed.

Yet they avoided each other's eyes as they swung into the saddle. The tension of the moment had passed. A human life had been snatched from death, and the men in the field and the thousands in the grand stands and bleachers relaxed in relief.

The voice of the announcer boomed forth, informing the spectators that Rorden was unhurt and proclaiming the name of the horse and next contender. On the face of it the incident was closed. The business of the rodeo went on.

But, in the memory of lean-jawed and seasoned men, the megaphoned voice of the announcer, colossal though its volume was, could not drown out the echo of another sound—a certain scream of terror foreign to the code of the buckaroo, who, having taken his chance, spurs on, should be grim lipped and silent when death is at his side.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GUNS THAT FAILED.

THE pitiless sun was low and blazing in the western sky when the track was cleared for the chariot race, last of the major spectacular events of the rodeo. The great day was drawing

to a sweltering close. From the blistering hills to the east a hazy breath of wind passed at intervals, hot as from a blast furnace, suggestive of withered ranges and bone-dry water courses.

Long since the perspiring spectators had given up their fight against the incessant heat. They sat quiescent, waiting for the last magnificent spectacle of the program.

"Coyote weather is right," muttered a grizzled old veteran, mopping his face with a huge and damp bandanna. "How them young bucks out in the field stand it beats me. I'll gamble they're plumb tuckered out. This ain't doing the range no good, neither. The weather we've been having this week, plus to-day, ought to fetch out a brand-new crop of rabid varmits, huh?"

"I expect. Whereas the heat does some good, at that. For instance, that young lizard yonder." Rorden had emerged from the building adjoining the track, mounted on the chariot, driving the splendidly matched Brady team. "It'll keep his feet warm, huh?"

The two old reprobates chuckled at this.

"McQuirk's shown him up this far," the speaker continued, "but I'm afraid that rosy-cheeked near buckaroo will grab the chariot race. Brady's team is the best in these parts. Ain't they high-stepping beauties? Nobody knows what McQuirk's driving."

Rorden was adorned anew for the occasion—gorgeous-hued, eye-filling. But his face was grim and set. As he guided the four prancing bay thoroughbreds to the judges' stand, for once he correctly gauged the applause that swept the grand stand. He lifted his hat perfunctorily in acknowledgment that the tribute was to the horses, and that the driver was secondary.

Deep within him he knew that his performance in the forthcoming event must be spectacular indeed to regain the confidence of the group. The knowledge was bitter.

It developed that of the four original entries in the chariot race there were but two, his own team and McQuirk's. The driver of one of the other entries had sprained a shoulder in the bulldogging contest; a horse had been injured in the cowgirls' relay, accounting for another quartet. These teams had been withdrawn with good grace, since it was generally conceded that the contest would be much more than mere formality against the Brady entry. Of the team McQuirk was to drive, nothing whatever was known.

A stir was created in the grand stand when Lonesome and Windy appeared on the track, dragging the horseless chariot behind them. The vehicle was piled high with harness. Grinning broadly at the mystification of the crowd, the pair galloped down the track and slid to a halt before the judge's stand.

Gleeful questions were hurled at the two by the curious spectators.

"The rules calls for four horses," shouted a stentorian voice. "What's the idea, McQuirk? Think you can get by with two mules?"

"Loan me a black snake, somebody," begged another humorist. "I crave to drive that team. Maybe I wouldn't make them burn up the dust."

The crowd waited expectantly. Evidently a little horseplay was in prospect. The judges called Lonesome to the stand for consultation. There was much chuckling among these officials as Lonesome and Windy turned back toward the stables.

"Ladies and gents," bellowed the announcer. "You're about to be treated to a royal entertainment by that high-stepping, fancy-roping, hard-riding, hard-bitten Lone Star buckaroo, McQuirk. This said McQuirk, having figured there isn't four horses in Gilliam County broke to harness that has a

chance with the Brady team, has gone and rounded up four wild horses, matched and unbroke. With this said team he aims to give the Brady string a race, provided his mavericks will stay with the chariot. In this connection, the judges has asked me to call to your attention section one of the rules of the rodeo, in which the rodeo assumes no liability for personal injury. If McQuirk's wall-eyed cayuses start climbing into the grand stand in place of running around the track, each gent will have to look out for himself. But if those jack rabbits ever start, it'll be a race, friend. Yeah, it'll be a race."

This was good news indeed. In anticipation the crowd dropped the high tension of the preceding hour.

"You sure got a nerve, McQuirk," chuckled Windy as the pair hurried toward the stables. "The more I think of it, the more haywire it looks. They may not start, in the first place. If they do start, they're liable to run in the opposite direction. They may get tangled in the harness before they get going."

"I don't stand to lose nothing, either way," said Lonesome, his pale-blue eyes twinkling. "I've been lucky to-day, Windy. If I can't get 'em going, or they act temperamental, they're sure to furnish a little comedy, anyway. On top of that, I'm taking a long chance. If they start, and if they stay on the track, it'll be a race, even as that big-voiced hombre said. You got those lads placed on the turns?"

"I have," said Windy. "It ain't in the rules, but maybe we can get by with it."

With the help of several assistants, the genial partners led forth the four buckskin fuzztails to the waiting equipment. With the aid of several hilarious buckaroos, the wild and suspicious animals were blindfolded, herded into a semblance of a position four abreast, and harnessed. This was accomplished after much squealing, plunging, and striking by the frightened untamed buckskins.

The bulky announcer had been slightly in error in describing Lonesome's team for the information of the spectators. They were not strictly unbroken to harness. Back on their homestead, the partners had attempted to gentle them somewhat, but it had been a time-and-energy-wasting performance. After several ineffectual efforts they had given it up. Life was too short, they had agreed. Splendidly matched though the buckskins were, they had lived on the range too long.

They were range-bred fuzztails, no more, no less. In a sheltered valley far up at the headwaters of the John Day they had waxed strong and supple muscled, with speed and stamina beyond belief. They seemed small and stocky, bulging of muscle, compared to the slick thoroughbreds of the Brady string.

Several times during the harnessing there was a vast upheaval. The touch of the leather tugs against their legs sent them into paroxysms of fear and rage. But finally they stood, blindfolded and quivering, bit to bit, and securely tethered to the lumbering chariot.

Lonesome stepped into the low bed of the vehicle, his black snake trailing from his wrist. He picked up lines that were only a formality, useful, perhaps, to help him maintain his balance, and signaled with upraised hands to the judges.

Very gingerly indeed the helpful buckaroos released the animals. One on each side and two in front, they leaned forward in the saddle.

The restless thoroughbreds of the Brady team had been circling nervously in the rear. Under the skillful hand of Rorden, they now pulled up to the start. Snatching at their respective blindfolds, the buckaroos spurred forth

out of danger. The Brady team leaped forth from the mark. The race was on.

For a moment the buckskins stood crouched and trembling. Then Lonesome's blacksnake cracked like a pistol shot, and they leaped forward spasmodically. Bewildered, they huddled together, pitching and snorting. Then and, as it seemed, simultaneously their rolling eyes lighted on the weird and cumbersome chariot and the occupant thereof. This terrifying monster was not only hard on their heels, but progressing with them as they advanced. Immediately after this fact had impressed itself upon their suspicious intelligence, they were on their way, digging their unshod feet into the dirt track with explosive energy that straightway resolved itself into projectilelike speed.

Fear lent them wings. Their course was straight as an arrow down the track, and so into the billowing dust left in the wake of Romeo. The Brady team was far ahead, hugging the inner rail as they swung around the wide turn, running with smooth precision and terrific speed.

Grand stand, field, and track meant nothing to the raging buckskins. Far horizons lay before them. A monster was at their heels. Inevitably, they must have rocketed from the track at the turn. But in the swirling dust at the outer edge their rolling eyes lighted on the figure of a mounted buckaroo. From the arm of this new enemy swirled and flapped a gaudy-colored Indian blanket. The air was filled with his weird yells.

The fuzztails shied away from this new menace and so into the track.

At the turn into the back stretch another whirling dervish menaced them from the edge of the track. Astonished yells from the grand stand boomed across the field as they swerved their main course to the straightaway.

The buckskins now settled down to the real business of outrunning the chariot. Never in their untamed career had anything that moved been able to stay so consistently on their trail. Tossing their heads, they unloosed all their raging energy in a burst of dazzling speed.

It was on the back stretch that the spectators were treated to the rare spectacle of a quartet of untrained range stock, unpedigreed and unknown, overhauling a team of matched thoroughbreds that later thundered to glory and triumph at Cheyenne and Pendleton. For a brief moment, while the fuzztails thundered hard on the heels of the Brady team, the spectators realized that a race was in progress. But they lost their advantage on the turn. The speed attained at the start had been too great.

As Rorden swung his horses easily and surely into the home stretch, and flashed across the line, his triumph was brief and fleeting. Bitterly he realized that his victory was a hollow one. Winning, he had lost again, so far as the interest of the public was concerned.

Even as he pulled up his plunging horses, a new roar from the grand stand told him that the attention of the spectators was fixed on his rival. The buckskins had swung so wide on the turn that the mounted spectators beyond the outer rail could almost have touched their gleaming backs in passing. Catching the spirit of the moment, every spectator near enough to do his part assisted in the work of hazing the runaway fuzztails into the track.

As Rorden pulled up his team to a walk, and turned to face the grand stand, prepared to raise his hat aloft, he was blotted from view by the rolling dust left in the trail of McQuirk.

A thrill that was new and breathtaking, yet old as the race itself, held the vast crowd in its grip during the brief moment that Lonesome thundered by on the home stretch. The ungovern-

able and furious speed of the buckskin outlaws, their rolling eyes, distended nostrils, streaming manes and tails, formed a swift-moving spectacle that was the epitome of reckless and leaping energy.

"Question is," queried an old-timer, "how in blazes will he stop them critters?"

The same thought occurred simultaneously to mounted men on the track. Buckaroos spurred forth in pursuit, reaching for their ropes. The iron-muscled buckskins were running away.

Crouching a little on the swaying bed of the chariot, Lonesome stood with feet firmly planted. His sleeves were rolled up, and the corded muscles stood out on his sunburned arms as he leaned back on the lines. But the effort was purely mechanical. He knew even better than the spectators that his strength would avail nothing against four furious horses given over to mad flight.

A grin of sheer reckless delight was on his weather-beaten face. He had known from the beginning that the buckskins were beyond his control. Nothwithstanding that he was mounted on a vehicle from which his method of alighting was problematical and in the future, he was enjoying himself hugely. Never before had he traveled with such cometlike speed. The vibrant thrill imparted to him through the lines from the leaping horses filled him with a savage satisfaction.

With a score of excited buckaroos hard on their trail, the buckskins swerved suddenly from their course. Man-made obstacles meant nothing to the mad horses. A section of the rail went down as they plunged into and across the field. Head on into the barrier again. The splintered rails flew as they dashed again into the track.

They were on the course at right angles at the point where the turn merged into the back stretch. The runaway horses were headed east, directly toward the big board fence that inclosed the rodeo grounds. The crowd gasped in horror as the maddened horses continued point-blank at this obstacle.

Three vertical boards were missing from the high wall, an aperture through which one horse might have passed. The four buckskins leaped upon this opening like a projectile.

Lonesome was seen to crouch low on his haunches at the moment of impact. There was a rending crash as two sections of the fence went down. Out of the welter of splintered wood and the rolling dust the plunging team emerged and continued on its way. A great shout crashed forth as the figure of the driver was seen to rise again on the swaying chariot. McQuirk was still on deck.

Buckaroos swarmed in pursuit. The entire procession disappeared from view in the rolling country. Later a single pillar of dust, rising in the breathless air, attested to the fact that a distant mêlée of some sort was in progress.

In a smoldering rage Rorden retired from the field and emerged again on his own mount. The day, for him, had been an utter failure. His sole triumph, the chariot race, had passed all but unnoticed. Humiliation, chagrin, and wounded vanity caused him to writhe in the saddle as he pondered the situation.

What a vast chuckle would spread over Gilliam County when the affair was over and they appraised his ill success in the light of his previous boasting!

It was all due, he felt, to the obnoxious McQuirk. Had it not been for that bald-headed old-timer, he, himself, might have been the stellar contestant of the day. With McQuirk out of it, his bad luck in the roping and bucking contests would have fallen to some one else.

Even now, with the rodeo officially over, the crowd still remained in their

places. They were waiting for word from McQuirk. Romeo ground his teeth as rage shook him anew. Was there no way to divert the attention of these people from that long-whiskered old grand stander?

A sudden thought struck him. His wrath subsided a little as he considered it. Why not? McQuirk and De Long were both absent from the field. It was a chance worth taking. He turned and spurred toward the stables and his blanket roll.

A moment later, when he appeared, the pearl-handled guns that had so dazzled the Double O boys were strapped to his waist. An oblong box was in his hand. He rode straight to the bulky announcer in the center of the arena and engaged in close conversation with that worthy. The judges had retired from the field to a point of vantage in the grand stand.

"That's a good idea," said the bulky one. "A little fancy shooting, eh? That ought to appeal to the crowd while they're waiting. What'll you shoot at?"

Rorden opened the oblong box. In it, packed neatly and securely in cotton, were a dozen balls of fragile and frosted glass.

"You mean to say you can hit them things on the fly?"

"I can," said Rorden, "providing I can get one of the boys to toss them up for me. I'll shoot from the saddle," and he explained the exhibition as he had previously demonstrated to the luckless Sleepy at the Double O Ranch.

"I'll toss them for you myself," said the bulky one, "provided you'll guarantee not to put a hole through me by mistake. Only thing is, you'd best do your stuff on foot. Circling around that way, you'll kick up too much dust and the crowd couldn't see what you was doing. On top of that, if you take up your position over yonder, directly in front of the grand stand, and with your back to the crowd, they could watch you draw and shoot. That would let them study your technique. Some of those folks know a little about shooting."

"Fair enough," agreed Rorden. He was anxious to get started. From the comments of those high up in the grand stand, it was evident that the distant buckaroos were returning. "You tell them about it while I get set."

He rode his horse to one side so the animal would not obstruct the view of the spectators, dismounted, and returned on foot to a position before the center of the grand stand.

"Ladies and gents," bawled the announcer. "While we're waiting for news from that bold charioteer, McQuirk, we'll stage a little act that wasn't on the program. Romeo Rorden will entertain you with some fancy shooting. Friends, observe this glass ball I hold in my hand. Not much of a target to hit on the fly, huh? But this gent with the educated guns claims he's the lad that can do it. For instance, I'll toss up the ball at fifteen paces and he'll draw and shoot. Are you ready for the fireworks?"

The crowd applauded, but the gaze of the multitude was fixed on the distant squad of buckaroos who were returning with McQuirk.

The ponderous one slowly circled his horse to the required distance. "Speed up, you big ham," muttered Romeo under his breath.

But even as the announcer prepared to toss the target into the air a new roar from the crowd halted him. The returning riders were swarming through the breach in the fence. McQuirk was observed riding double with Windy.

"Get us the dope, big boy," shouted the crowd. "What happened to McQuirk?"

"Toss it up," urged Romeo hoarsely, gritting his teeth in baffled rage as it appeared that the interest in Lonesome was once more to crowd him

from the spotlight. But the other demurred.

"Wait till I find out about this high-stepping charioteer. They'll pay more attention after they've got the details."

Cursing under his breath, Rorden looked about him. But there could be no withdrawal now. The spectacular youth's anxiety to complete the performance before the return of the party did not involve Lonesome so much as his partner, Windy. Even at that distance, and without knowledge of what was being staged, he felt that the cold, implacable black eye of that ruthless old-timer was upon him.

Lonesome, it appeared, was unhurt. In a shallow draw, out in the rolling flats, the buckskin quartet had come to grief in an attempt to scramble up a seven-foot bank. The chariot was wrecked, Lonesome admitted, grinning. The buckskins had shed their shreds of harness and were on their way. They were only fuzztails, anyway, not worth the effort to recapture them. Thus, the driver alone was all that had returned.

These details were transmitted by the announcer to the huge delight of the spectators. As the bulky one lowered his megaphone and turned back to his position in readiness for the shooting exhibition, bystanders informed the newcomers what Rorden proposed to do.

Suddenly a curious twist of mob psychology showed itself. Perhaps it was born of the fact that the name of Lonesome and Romeo had been linked throughout the day. It may have been a tribute to the popularity and prowess of the old ex-gunfighter. From whatever cause or source, a suggestion was made among the spectators that caught like wildfire and swelled into a roar that swept through grand stand and bleachers.

"Let McQuirk in on it," they yelled. "Make it a contest, big boy. Unlimber your guns, McQuirk."

"How about it, Lonesome?" bellowed the announcer.

"He'll do it," shouted Windy before his partner had a chance to answer, his mustache bristling and his black eyes glittering.

"What ails you, De Long?" asked Lonesome, glaring at his partner. "That maverick is a circus performer. He'll make me look like a ham. On top of that, it's his private and particular stunt. I'm danged if I'll horn in on it."

But Windy had already retrieved Lonesome's horse and delved into the saddlebags for his guns. "Strap 'em on, old-timer," he ordered harshly. "Leave this to me. That polecat yonder don't know when he's licked."

The announcer had already bellowed the news to the elated spectators that Lonesome had agreed to shoot. There was a glint of malicious amusement in Rorden's eyes as Lonesome strode forward and took up his place at his side, hat pulled low over his eyes. Provided no one interfered, this might yet be a colossal triumph, for Lonesome's greatest fame rested upon his ability with the guns.

They were standing some fifty feet within the arena, to allow the spectators an unobstructed view. Save for the announcer, who was guiding his horse to the allotted place, they were alone on the field. All others had withdrawn from the track. The nearest of these was Windy.

When it appeared that the event was to proceed without interruption, all the rage and bitterness that was in Romeo, came to the surface. His rival's very calmness and placidity added fuel to his wrath.

"Here's where I show you up, you bald-headed tinhorn," he gloated savagely. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd have been sitting pretty now. But all good things have got to end. McQuirk, a red-headed friend of mine is going to get a laugh out of this."

Lonesome had been feeling almost in a genial mood toward Rorden. In the face of his triumph and the ill-starred youth's misfortune, his animosity of preceding days had cooled considerably. But at the deliberate insult of word and manner, his good humor faded.

"Rorden," he said brusquely, "do your shooting now and talk later. When this business is over, you and me has got to have a little conversation."

"Ready, gents?" queried the bulky one. "You shoot first, Rorden."

"Wait a second," cut in the voice of Windy. At the casual words, Rorden's brow went livid. Again, the announcer's arm dropped. "You going to let him use them fancy guns, McQuirk?"

"It don't make no difference to me," began Lonesome. Then he stopped and stared hard at Romeo.

"Now what?" queried the bulky one, spurring forward. "I thought you birds was all set. What's the argument?"

"There isn't any argument." The perspiring Romeo pointed a quivering finger at Windy. "That long-jawed buzzard yonder butted in when we were ready to shoot."

"McQuirk has the right to examine Rorden's guns and ammunition," insisted Windy impassively. "That eliminates all trick stuff."

"Who ever heard of such a thing," began the Romeo in frenzied protest. But the harassed announcer turned away.

"I don't know anything about this business, gents. I'll go get the opinion of the judges. Hold your horses a second."

He turned and spurred through the arena gate toward the grandstand.

But the opinion of the judges on this particular point was never announced to the good people of Gilliam County. A turmoil arose among the crowd of spectators lining the track at the north end of the grand stand. They split apart, and through the aperture burst a youth, riding bareback. The eyes of this individual were blazing with excitement.

Seeing the announcer crossing the track in front of the grandstand, he dashed forward to intercept him. A few hoarse words were exchanged and the bulky one clapped the megaphone to his lips, turning toward the buckaroos who were massed outside the track in preparation for departure.

"Every mounted man that's wearing his guns, ride around to the east side of the rodeo ground," he thundered. "A rabid coyote passed the Moreland place a few minutes ago. They telephoned in he was heading west and going strong. Now just sit still for a minute or two, gents, while the boys round up this said critter."

A gasp of horror like a great sigh came from the grand stand. The Moreland place was a scant two miles east and a little north of town. The rodeo grounds itself would be directly in line with the animal's crazed flight.

"I told you this was coyote weather," cried an old-timer triumphantly, slapping his crony on the back. "But I sure didn't expect a locoed critter would head straight for town." There was no comedy in the situation. Citizens of the cattle country know only too well the terrific consequences that can easily follow an outbreak of rabies. Fear of the diseased animal itself is heightened beyond all reason by an instinctive revulsion against a menace that is peculiarly horrible and sinister.

At the word of the announcer, the buckaroos spurred forth from the rodeo grounds, whooping with excitement. To McQuirk and Rorden, the words of the bulky one were somewhat muffled, since his back was toward them. Echoes from the grandstand further garbled the message. When they realized his meaning, each turned toward their respective horses.

But they halted abruptly in their

tracks at a new and horrified roar from the grand stand, in which were the hoarse shouts of excited men and the shrill, terrified screams of hysterical women:

"The coyote. He's coming through the fence."

They whirled to see the animal leap lightly over the bank, and so into the track.

A rabid coyote, unless his attention is diverted, runs in a straight line until he dies. Fear is not in him. Lashed on by the pitiless malady that burns like fire in his veins, and sears his maddened brain, when the virulent stage of the disease is upon him, he starts forth across the land, and runs until he dies. If there is life that moves and breathes, in his path or near it, he jumps upon it and rends it with a savage desperation that is pure unreasoning madness. He is no longer the skulking prowler of the plains, but a red-eyed demon who is the epitome of savage despair.

Thus, as the coyote hurtled through the broken fence, up the bank, and into the track, the crowd knew instantly that here was horror. He was running with a peculiarly rigid gait, yet at untiring and relentless speed—head, belly, and tail low. He advanced across the field, turning neither to the right nor the left. His bared fangs were gleaming in his slathering jaws. His course was straight as an arrow across the arena.

Only two men on foot intervened between him and the grand stand.

"Easy folks," bellowed the big announcer, though his lips were dry. "McQuirk and Rorden have their guns."

At his first glimpse of the approaching coyote across the arena Rorden turned again to flee. But Lonesome's iron grasp fell upon his arm and spun him around. Pale eyes that were cold and pitiless bored into his own.

"You claim to be a fancy shooter," Lonesome's voice was harsh. "Draw and shoot, Rorden!"

But the Romeo merely struggled desperately to get away, eyes staring, teeth bared in an agony of fear.

"Shoot," repeated Lonesome inexorably.

"Let me go, McQuirk." The coyote was less than a hundred feet away, red eyes upon them. The Romeo's voice broke into a wail. "I've got trick ammunition. Bird shot."

Lonesome released him. His guns leaped from their holsters. Twin reports crashed as one. The approaching horror crumpled in an inert hulk, less than thirty feet distant, rolled twice over, shuddered, and lay still.

It was all over. The danger had passed. Less than thirty seconds had elapsed since the coyote had appeared above the bank of the racetrack, yet that interval had seemed minutes long. With the crisis over, it seemed almost ludicrous that the frail and disease ravished figure lying huddled and motionless, could have struck terror to the hearts of thousands. Yet a vast, shuddering sigh swept the grandstand and bleachers as the crowd relaxed.

The buckaroos, called back by hysterical cries of the spectators, had witnessed the final act of the drama in the arena. Spurring forth, guns in hand, they had been too far away to render assistance. They now swarmed about Lonesome as that worthy methodically replaced his smoking guns in their holster and strode to his horse. Thunderous applause boomed forth as he vaulted into the saddle.

"Take off your hat, you dumb-bell," said Windy with a growl as he spurred forward to his side. "Can't you see they're giving you a hand?"

Grinning self-deprecatorily, ears burning, Lonesome lifted his hat and waved it aloft in response to the frenzied acclaim.

"Ladies and gents," bawled the vast

and irrepressible announcer, "Lonesome McQuirk has done won the shooting contest."

"I'll say you did," chuckled Windy, his mustache bristling. "You likewise showed up that four-flusher. Where's Rorden?"

But the gilded youth was gone.

Immediately after being released by Lonesome, he had sprinted to his horse at the gate of the arena. He leaped to the saddle. In the excitement following the shooting of the coyote, he had spurred forth unnoticed, out of the crowd and out of the rodeo grounds. Later, it was reported by a few stragglers that a gorgeous-hued rider with hat pulled low over his eyes had thundered down the all-but-deserted main street of Condon, heading south.

And that, so far as the Condon country was concerned, was the end of Romeo.

CHAPTER XII.

"GOOD EVENING, MR. MC QUIRK."

BUCKAROOS and cow hands swarmed to the "Condon Chuckwagon," largest and busiest restaurant along the teeming main street of the metropolis of the cow country. Frenzied waiters dashed to and fro, striving manfully to keep abreast of the demand for food. Hungry newcomers crowding in continually from the streets watched with hawklike intentness for the first vacancy at counter or table.

Lonesome and Windy were seated in a secluded corner. Their table, which once had groaned beneath the weight of vast portions of nourishment, was now a devastated waste. Both exhibited the bland and complacent satisfaction of men who have dined heartily and well.

Windy was in high good humor. It had been, from every conceivable point of view, a fine large day. He had contributed in some small measure to Lonesome's success. He had not been bashful about accepting a generous share of the tribute. The inner man had been thoroughly satisfied. What more could be asked of a kindly fate?

He leaned back somewhat heavily in his chair. "What's on the program, McQuirk? With all this rodeo crowd cluttering up the landscape, there'll be a big blow-out here to-night. Having demonstrated to all and sundry that you're still young and spry, you'll want to circulate around a little, huh?"

But Lonesome shook his head. His feeble grin was but a pale reflection of the other's genial mood. Incongruous though it seemed in view of the amount of food that he had demolished, in the depth of his mild blue eyes was an expression somewhat akin to hunger.

"Not me, Windy. This has been a strenuous day. I feel about as ambitious as a jelly fish. If I was to fall down, I couldn't get up, I'm that crippled. Whereas, there's still a little business to attend to. What did you find out about Rorden?"

"He's gone." Windy's mustache bristled. "When last seen, he was burning up the dust, heading south. And say, you ought to hear them Double O boys. That gold-toothed four-flusher sure taught them a lesson. They're howling like coyotes. It seems he borrowed money from the whole bunch of them, figuring on paying it back from the prize money from the rodeo. Now he's vamosed." He grinned across the table, his black eyes glittering. "You mean to say you've still got a bone to pick with Rorden? I'm surprised at you, Lonesome. The way I look at it, you and him is square. It's all right to knock a man down, but you hadn't ought to tromp on him."

"It ain't on my own account," said Lonesome with a deep sigh. "They was some information I wanted to get from him. But if he's gone, he's gone, and that's all they is to it. What about Mortimer? You took him to the livery stable, huh?"

"I did," said Windy. "And Lem said he'd tell Miss Emmeline he was there. She's already got her half of the sweepstakes purse. So you're square with her. That means you got no further business with red-headed gals, huh, McQuirk?"

"I expect so." Lonesome's tawny mustache drooped disconsolately across his square jaw. "I expect you're right, Windy."

His manner was so lugubrious that the other snorted outright.

"What ails you, McQuirk? I swear sometimes you give me the willies. Here you are, sitting on top of the world. You've done covered yourself with glory before the admiring populace. Right now as you sit here, they's hard-boiled buckaroos giving you the once-over between times while they're balancing beans on their knives, and whispering to each other, 'There sit's McQuirk yonder. He's that son of a gun on wheels that done this and that and the other thing over at the rodeo.'"

Lonesome shifted uneasily in his chair. His eyes, avoiding Windy, roved pessimistically about the room.

"Right now, as you sit there looking like a horned toad in distress, is reposing in your pocket a check for half the Cowboy's Sweepstakes purse. Hanging on a peg by your critter in the livery stable is a saddle that went to the champion buckaroo. They's also a bridle with fancy silver trimmings you got for forty seconds work in the steer roping contest. Why, you're the luckiest hombre in Gilliam County. And yet you sit there with a sweet-in-death expression, just as though you were saying, 'Look me over, gents. There ain't nobody in all the world as miserable as me.'"

But Lonesome was paying scant attention. His eyes had lighted upon a lean, gaunt individual at a distant table. The back of this person was toward him, but he seemed vaguely familiar. Now he had arisen, and was making his way between the crowded tables toward the door.

Windy, still uplifted with his own eloquence, was thunderstruck when Lonesome leaped to his feet, reaching for his hat.

"Now what——" he demanded. "Where in blazes you going, McQuirk?"

But Lonesome was already on his way to the door.

When the gaunt individual's roving eye observed the approaching McQuirk, he started spasmodically and accelerated his pace. He tossed a bill at the cashier, and, without waiting for change, leaped through the door with Lonesome at his heels. Here, a milling crowd momentarily impeded the chase. Before the gaunt one could disentangle himself and continue his dash for liberty, Lonesome, despite his alleged crippled condition, leaped upon him and bore him to the pavement.

A grinning crowd gathered around them as Lonesome dragged his lean and trembling quarry to his feet and held him at arm's length.

"Don't you hit me. Don't you do it, McQuirk." Beneath an arm upraised in self-protection, one eye of the prisoner regarded Lonesome with gloomy apprehension, while the other was fixed on some distant point beyond the crowd.

"Crim," said Lonesome softly, his pale eyes unwinking, "you're just the gent I've been craving to see. I'm sure happy to meet up with you."

"You're in luck, fellow," chuckled a near by buckaroo. "McQuirk being happy that a way. You can figure what would have happened if he'd gone gunning for you."

"Don't you do nothing rash," pleaded the gloomy one. "I can explain that basket social business. You and me was goats in that deal."

At this moment, Windy pushed

through the crowd and confronted his partner.

"How do you get that way, McQuirk," he accused. "That's a new wrinkle. I've done made a note of it. Next time I'm in a restaurant and want to get out of paying the feed bill I'll chase some hombre out into the street. Whereas I didn't want to lose our credit, I paid your check myself. Fork over two dollars."

"Windy," said Lonesome by way of introduction, "this is that wall-eyed polecat that got me in bad down at the schoolhouse. Come along, Crim. You and me has got to have a little private conversation."

To the infinite disgust of the spectators, the trio moved away and out of earshot.

"Rorden framed on you," explained Crim, the eye nearest Lonesome lighted with gloomy indignation. "I met up with him down on the flat. He claimed it was just a joke on you. He also give me a song and dance about that being the only way the boys could get any liquor at the blow-out. I was doing a little bootlegging at the time," he groaned aloud. "You know what that business cost me? Sixty bucks. They was ten pints in that blasted basket. That ain't counting the ten spot Rorden was to give me for passing the liquor over to you. I was the fall guy in the whole layout."

"No, you ain't," asserted Lonesome. "That alleged practical joke cost me more than your feeble intellect could grasp if I was to explain it to you. It's enough to say that it busted up a friendship with a lady."

"Wait a second," protested the gloomy one. "I ain't done explaining. Give me credit, Mr. McQuirk. I ain't the kind of a feller that would put a gent in a hole and not try to get him out. I've done fixed it up with Miss Emmeline."

"Fixed it up with Miss Emmeline," repeated Lonesome aghast. "You're crazy, Crim. You've done made the mistake of drinking your own hooch."

"I did so," insisted the other vehemently. "I can prove it by Lem at the livery stable. Rorden told me to come to town to-night after the rodeo to get my money. I done so and found that gold-toothed wampus cat had fliyvered at the rodeo and had departed for parts unknown. Scouting around, I learned from the boys what kind of a jack pot I'd gotten you into down at the schoolhouse. Well, sir, I felt pretty bad. Every one was telling me you were such a good scout. So when I was in the livery stable and Lem pointed out Miss Emmeline, I busted right up to her and told her all about it. She seemed right down pleased."

The partners stared at each other for a moment.

"It's easy to prove," said Windy dryly. "Let's waltz this hombre down to Lem."

Lem, the livery stable proprietor, substantiated all the gloomy one had said. He amplified the incident at length. Each word he said was music to Lonesome's ears.

"Yeah, that's the way it went, McQuirk. She looked at him kind of hostile at first. You know how she can do it. Them blue eyes of hers just looked right through him. But before he was done all that haughty stuff had done faded away, and her face was lit up like a Christmas tree. Them blue eyes of hers that was like ice on the pinnacles at first, was sure kind of melting then, and she give him a smile that would have made one of them prima donnas sit back and holler for help."

The eyes of the hard-bitten Lem glistened at the memory.

"'Mr. Crim,' she says, 'what you have told me is just about the nicest thing I've ever heard. It has restored my confidence in Mr. McQuirk. I should never have doubted him, and I

never will again.' Well, sir, all I can say is," concluded Lem, chuckling, "some fellers is fools for luck. If I had half your stand-in with Miss Emmeline, old-timer, they'd be looking for another school-teacher along the John Day."

"Much obliged, Crim," said Lonesome abruptly, and turned on his heel.

"Hold on," demanded Windy, "where you going now?"

"You're heading in the wrong direction," offered the astute Lem. "She come and got Mortimer a half hour ago and left for Shuttler's Flats."

"Left!" repeated Lonesome, turning back. "With Jim Norton and his family?"

"No. She's traveling alone. Jim told her she'd best go along with them. He pointed out that it was getting dark and it was a long ways to the Flats. But she said she was safe on Mortimer. Claimed something or other about having her thoughts for company. Her face was still lit up and she talked kind of soft and gentle. Again I crave to know, McQuirk, how do you get that way?"

But Lonesome was already saddling his horse and reaching for the silver trimmed bridle. Windy was forced to terrific activity to keep pace with him.

"What's the idea of all the speed, McQuirk?" demanded Windy wrathfully, as the pair pushed northward through the twilight and the whispering sage. "Ain't you had enough hard riding for one day?"

"I feel plumb refreshed, Windy," said Lonesome mildly. "Whereas we ain't going so danged fast."

A little later, Windy received another inspiration.

"Surely you don't figure you can outrun that Mortimer horse, McQuirk. If so, you should have run that plug of yours in the sweepstakes." But to this, Lonesome apparently had no fitting reply.

It was shortly thereafter that they overhauled the schoolma'am proceeding at a leisurely pace along the deserted highway.

Long afterward, in describing the meeting of the pair that evening, Windy was wont to say:

"Language? It don't mean nothing. Words is only words. It's how you say 'em that counts. When McQuirk rides up beside the schoolma'am and takes off his hat, grinning like a lonely buckaroo that's heard from home, the schoolma'am says, 'Mr. McQuirk, I have crossed burning deserts since I saw you last. I have been hungry for the sight of you, thirsty for the sound of your voice. But I am feeling fine now. It looks like a different world when you are near. Please, don't you ever think of riding away any more.'"

"And how did she say all them sweet nothings? Just by saying kind of soft and low, 'Good evening, Mr. McQuirk.'

"And what does McQuirk say? He gives her an earful of the same eloquence as follows, 'Howdy, Miss Emmeline.'"

Thus Windy grew loquacious indeed in describing the meeting. But on that evening, he merely nodded briefly, and spurred away, leaving the pair to trail behind in the twilight of the glittering stars.

The Lucky Bug Lode

by Arthur Preston Hankins

Author of "The Wife of the Grizzly Bear," etc.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

JEREMY PAINTER, bridegroom of a week, is held up on pay day. Desperate at the thought of returning, penniless, to his bride, he in turn holds up the thief whom he suspects. He is detected, and a sentence of forty years is imposed upon him.

Ten years elapse, in which time he is informed that he has a daughter, and that his wife has married a former sweetheart, Keister. Painter is transferred to a prison camp, and here is given the secret of the location of a gold mine by a dying comrade. Lured by the thought of the **riches of the "Lucky Bug Mine," he escapes.**

After a checkered career, Painter settles in Puerta de Luna, Mexico, where he becomes the respected proprietor of a hotel and bar. Powerful and enigmatical, he is known as Lucky Bug.

He is accosted one day by a stranger, one Conrad Gaslyn, who claims that he is searching for Nelita Painter's father. Lucky Bug is wary about disclosing his identity. That evening Lucky Bug saves a girl by gun play and dexterous methods from a mysterious assailant. He **discovers that she is his daughter, and is overjoyed by the reunion.**

The man who attacked her is Pierre Moxey, who has learned that Lucky Bug has information about a gold mine, and hopes to blackmail him on the grounds that he is wanted by the law. Lucky Bug arranges to have Moxie and his gang arrested, and terrorizes them to a certain extent.

But a suave Kenelm Laplace, whom Nell has met on the train, pays a call on her, and seems **to be in possession of sufficient data about Lucky Bug to alarm him.**

Lucky Bug and his daughter leave Puerta de Luna without trouble, however, and after touring South America and Europe, they return to the States, where Lucky Bug takes up his **search for the Lucky Bug Mine.**

It is disconcerting to Lucky Bug to learn that there is a stream called Lucky Bug Creek, located near where he supposes the "lode" to be, and that a young man by the name of Twain Reading has a homestead that he calls "Lucky Bug Ranch," through which the creek flows.

When Lucky Bug locates the lode, he decides that he will share with the young homesteader, who has fallen in love with Nell. A complication comes up, however, in the form of the sudden appearance of Kenelm Laplace, and Lucky Bug decides that Laplace is waiting only until the mine **is on a paying basis before Laplace starts his blackmailing scheme.**

In the meantime, Lucky Bug has met with a mishap and is suffering from a broken arm and two broken ribs. It is while he is recovering that he helps an escaped convict to evade the pursuit of the law. In doing this, however, Lucky Bug incurs the anger of Twain Reading, who wants the **convict returned to the prison. Temporarily there is a break between the two men.**

CHAPTER XXX.

TWAIN MAKES A DISCOVERY.

READING had spent a bad night in his little cabin on Lucky Bug Creek. The fight within his soul was a hotly contested one, for his pride was grievously wounded. But along toward morning, as he tossed about, sleepless, pride succumbed to love. He decided to saddle up that day, ride to Nancy's Dishpan, and make his peace with the father of Nell.

He had done his best to live up to his stern convictions, and had lost by reason of unexpected opposition. His conscience was clear; he had not given in one inch. But the mere fact that he and Noble looked at certain matters from different angles of life had noth-

ing whatever to do with his love for Nell. He would tell Noble just that. Surely Noble had not been serious when he said that he feared for his daughter's happiness if she married him. Those words had been spoken in the heat of passionate anger.

He didn't wish to apologize—he would not apologize. He had nothing to apologize for. He would simply tell Noble that he was sorry for the part he had played in the quarrel, even as Noble had been generous enough to confess regret over his own bullheadedness. The prisoner had escaped. In a way, both men had gained their point. He would call this to Noble's attention, offer him his hand in reconciliation, and propose that they continue as friends for the sake of Nell.

He could not, however, recover from his amazement over Noble's swift, decisive action. Though he knew very little about this man, or even his daughter, for that matter, he had thought of him from the first as a man of means—a city man, perhaps a retired business man—a courteous gentleman cast in the same standardized mold as hundreds of thousands of fairly successful, more or less prosaic Americans. To have witnessed this man looking coldly at him over the sights of his own six-shooter, and stating casually that he could shoot three buttons off the front of his shirt before he could jump back, created a puzzled wonder in his mind.

Who was this man, anyway? Where did he come from? What was his function in life? What strange, secret past lay behind him? He rode a horse like a veteran cowman, loosely hung in the saddle, with feet thrust far into the stirrups, range style.

And Twain recalled now that he had heard the click of the hammer as this man jerked the gun from its holster. The six-shooter was of double-action pattern. Only an experienced gunman would have cocked the weapon, for some of the best shots with six-guns completely ignore the double-action feature of their Colts. They cock the hammer as the gun comes out of its holster, and some continue to cock it if rapid firing is required. Many, even, cling to the old single-action pattern, maintaining that their thumbs are as swift as the mechanism which automatically cocks and sends the hammer driving into the cartridge cap in one continuous process. And their aim is usually far more deadly than the double-action marksmen; for the hammer, descending from a stationary position, does not tend to disturb the rigidity of the weapon as when the trigger is pulled to draw the hammer back until it trips and leaps forward for the cap.

Twain was beginning to fear that Noble must have a doubtful if not altogether reprehensible past. And what about Nell?

But he did not dwell for any length of time on doubts concerning Nell. Instinctively—for love is totally instinctive—he trusted her and knew that she was good and true, no matter what her father might have been or was. No, Nell Noble was above censure. In good time she would tell him everything that he ought to know about her father—if there existed anything that he ought to know. Anyway, his Puritanism was not so deep-seated as to cause him to look with favor on the practice of visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. At least, he imagined that it was not.

He arose from bed with the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky. He had had breakfast and was continuing his fencing job—alone now—before the sun was up. He left his work at noon for lunch, and, after eating, listlessly dragged his feet back to a task from which almost all the enjoyment had departed.

He threw down his shovel before he had finished another post hole. "I'm

going to see Nell," he decided suddenly, "and have it over with."

As John Silver daintily and carefully picked his course about the obstructions in the trail, Twain lolled in the saddle and continued to think of the remarkable man of whom he had been thinking all morning and the greater part of the night just past.

Was he a common braggart? It seemed to Twain at the time of the quarrel that he was disgustingly egotistical. But now that he had cooled off he began to doubt this. Noble had not spoken in the tones that a bully uses.

There had been a deadly earnestness in his voice, and it struck Twain now that he had merely been stating what he believed to be facts when he spoke of his marksmanship and of what an invincible person he was. There had been a sort of fatalism back of his words that was convincing. It was as if Noble had been talking about some other than himself when he warned Twain not to trifle with him. As if the two had been discussing in a confidential way the advisability of Twain's opposing some one reputed to be a hard man to deal with.

The squatter's brown study was interrupted by the sound of voices up the hillside on his left.

The midday stillness hung over the forest land. The tops of the pines and spruces were motionless. The sun beat steadily upon their bright-green needles, and the sweat that oozed from them filled the air with a pleasantly pungent odor. Lucky Bug Creek babbled softly far below him. From far off came the notes of turtledoves. But these soothing nature sounds seemed not to disturb the tranquillity in which the beautiful foothill country was steeped. Rather, they seemed almost a part of the breathless silence, so that the sound of human voices that he heard came as a jarring element, came hollowly, boisterously through the stillness.

Silver pricked up his pointed little ears and fluttered a soft snort through his velvet-lined nostrils. Twain reined him in gently and sat motionless in the saddle, listening. Such dissonant sounds as he had heard will carry far in the wilderness. At times, on a still day like this one, one can distinguish words spoken in an ordinary tone half a mile away.

In this instance, however, while the voice that was speaking was indisputably voluminous, the words seemed to make only a meaningless sort of jumble.

Then came a second voice: "Another run right here, Gus."

And the man addressed returned in deep-throated tones something that sounded, more than anything else, like: "Here's where you get your red-hot popcorn."

Twain Reading swung lightly from the saddle and lowered the reins from John Silver's neck. "Stick here a minute, son," he said to the horse, "till I find out what's going on up there on our estate."

Then he clambered up the steep bank which had been cut in the side of the hill in building the trail, parted chaparral bushes, and began breasting his way through.

It required fifteen minutes for Twain to get close enough to hear the men moving about through the brush. And when he had come so close it seemed that they were moving away from him down the other slope of the hill. He heard a few words now and then, indistinguishable because of the crackling of the branches. He discovered footprints in the loose-leaf mold under the buckthorn and manzanita, and followed them.

He brought up suddenly and stared in unbelief. Before him stood a pile of rocks, perhaps two feet high, from the top of which protruded a spruce limb three inches in diameter, axed at the

upper end, with its bright wood showing.

He took three steps and knelt before it. Through the interstices in the pile of stones he saw the gleam of a new tin can. He jerked away the stones and drew it out. It was a baking-powder can. There was a cover on it which fitted tightly. He wrenched it off and drew forth what he had expected to find—a location notice to the effect that a quartz claim had been filed on there, and that the pile of stones marked the northwest corner of the claim, which extended for fifteen hundred feet in a northeasterly direction, et cetera, et cetera.

" 'To be known as The Lucky Bug Lode,' " he read aloud. And on the dotted lines at the bottom: " 'The Lucky Bug Gold Mines Company, by N. Painter.' "

To the left of this, under the heading of "Witnesses," was: "Edwin Hulette. William—Water-leg—Mahoney."

" 'Old Man' Hulette and 'Water-leg' Mahoney!" he gasped in blank astonishment. "And on my claim—*my ranch!* And who in the devil is The Lucky Bug Gold Mines Company? And who in the devil is 'N. Painter?' "

Then he squatted on his heels and glared at the offending rectangle of paper for at least two minutes—glared from it to the can, from the can to the heap of stones, from stones to upreared stick. Meanwhile the sounds of the retreating footsteps had died away, the sounds of bodies pushing a course through crackling chaparral.

But wilderness dwellers, individualists though they may be, are not altogether free from the commanding finger of the law. And, above everything else in life, Twain Reading was law-abiding. "A dirty, low-down trick!" he gritted through his teeth. Nevertheless, over the bronze-green tops of the fragrant chaparral the inexorable finger of the law was pointing straight at his clean-cut nose; and, with a heavy sigh, he replaced the paper in the can, twisted the can's lid home, gently set the can within its stony fortress again, and rebuilt the pile of stones where he had torn it down.

Then, with nostrils wide and quivering, he leaped to his feet and continued hastily on in the direction from which the last sounds of the departing men had come.

There was law, yes—and it must be obeyed. Prospectors had a perfect right to file mineral claims on his homestead. But these men were fools. There was no gold here. He had not come upon a single fresh prospect hole, to prove that these two had tested the ground and found a legitimate excuse to file mining claims on that hillside. They couldn't have prospected there for any great length of time without his discovering their presence. This was spite work of some sort. But who had reason to spite him? Not Old Man Hulette—not Water-leg Mahoney, big, awkward, grinning, good-natured, splatter-brained! And who was "N. Painter?"

He was hurrying forward. He reached the brow of the hill. Before him the land sloped down to the waters of a branch of Lucky Bug Creek. On the crest of another higher hill not far away, he and Nell had sat their saddles and gazed down at the green ribbon of the boisterous American. And only the day before! It seemed as if a hundred bitter days had passed since then.

Below him he caught sight of a movement in the buckthorn. It ceased at the edge of the timber that lined the little branch.

Twain swung about and ran in the opposite direction. He could get around the hill on Silver, forge up the creek, and gain time.

He clattered down into the trail at

last, and leaped into the saddle. At a reckless gallop, for the trail was narrow and washed in places from the rains of winter, he sent the gray along toward the joining place of the two streams.

An hour later, stealing carefully forward on foot, he parted a mass of wild cucumber vines that clambered up a tree at the creek side and peered out upon the lazy camp of Pierre Moxey, and Gus, the Finn.

CHAPTER XXXI.

EYES IN THE CHAPARRAL.

TWO men occupied the camp. On the hard ground they lazed, one on each side of a fire. The fire, newly kindled, was blazing sturdily. They apparently were waiting for it to burn down to a bed of coals on which to do their cooking.

One of the men was large and muscular, with a negroid nose, thick lips, and reddish hair. The other was short of stature, slight of build, pigeon-breasted, and with sunken cheeks and a strange-looking head that was flat at the back. His hair was light and wispy, his face grotesque and seamed.

They did not speak. The large man lay on his back with fingers interfretted behind his head, gazing with blue eyes at the placid blue of the sky above him. The other gloomily watched the fire, poked it now and then with a charred stick.

The camp looked as if it were a more or less permanent one, but there were no signs of four-footed burden bearers anywhere about. The heavy Hungarian nails in the soles of the campers' high-laced boots, however, proclaimed that their mountaineering was accomplished on shank's mare.

For more than five minutes Twain watched them, while one continued to gaze lazily up at the floating clouds above and the other occasionally prodded the fire into renewed activity. Then, realizing that he was gaining nothing by spying on this undemonstrative pair, the homesteader parted the cucumber vines and strode into their camp, determined to have an understanding with them forthwith.

The man with the flattened skull heard him coming and looked at him with startled eyes. Up from his stomach came a series of guttural sounds like the growling of a peevish bear, directed as a warning to the man on the other side of the camp fire, but uninterpretable to Twain.

The big man understood, however. He half raised his body from the ground, gave Twain an apprehensive stare, flopped over on his stomach, and clawed his way over the earth toward the trunk of a near-by tree, at the base of which an automatic pistol lay.

Twain's voice rang sharply: "Don't grab it, brother! You're several seconds late."

His own six-shooter had leaped from its holster the instant the man started for the tree and Twain saw the automatic there. Its muzzle waved slightly from Moxey to The Finn, like the upreared head of a cobra threatening to strike.

Gus, the Finn, dodged every time the muzzle covered him. One hand he held to his face, frozen there, as if to block a possible stream of bullets directed at that gargoyle mug.

Moxey had ceased his crawling. On hands and knees he remained motionless, looking sidewise at the invader of the camp as he waited for the next command.

Twain's tones were modulated when he spoke again.

"No use to dive for that gun," he said. "A rather silly move, for you might have seen that I was heeled. I want a few words with you men. I want to know about the quartz claims filed on up there on the hill at ten

twenty-five this morning, according to the date and hour written on the notices. What have you to say about 'em?"

Moxey changed his ridiculous position to a sitting posture on the ground. He bent his legs and clasped his hands about his shins. He leered up at Reading with eyes that blazed sarcastically from the mat of stubby reddish beard that covered his face.

"Well, *what* about 'em?" he demanded.

Twain lowered his gun, but did not return it to the holster. "Which of you is 'N. Painter?' " he asked.

"Maybe I am and maybe he is," was Moxey's contemptuous return, as he nodded his head at the trembling Finn.

Twain held his temper. "Perhaps you don't know it," he said, "but you've staked out your quartz claims on land that I have claimed as a homestead. It's true that I'm only squatting on it now, but the department of agriculture is back of me; and in less than a year from now I have every expectation of being permitted to make a filing as a bona-fide entryman.

"Now," he continued, "while it's true that this land of mine is in a mineral reserve, a country that's always been looked upon as a mining and cattle district, I think that I'm entitled to demand that you show good cause for filing quartz claims on it.

"In other words, false mining claims, located for any reason whatsoever on my land, will not be tolerated. What or who is back of all this business I can't imagine; but I do know, or thoroughly believe, that the entire matter is farcical.

"While the creek that runs around the base of that hill shows a little color in the pan, there's no gold hereabouts that's worth a genuine prospector's attention. So I demand to know something about these quartz claims of yours before I'll back out and give you a free hand to go ahead with your assessment work. Talk up, please. I'm entitled to know all about this deal."

He had addressed his words to Moxey; for the other man looked stupid, excepting that he seemed to have brains enough to be afraid, for his ugly face was still pallid and distraught. His weird eyes remained fascinated on the six-gun that hung in Reading's hand; and now and then he licked his lips like a culpable dog who anticipates punishment.

The man with the flaring reddish hair, however, seemed not afraid. In his small eyes had come a scheming, weighing look that was fraught with cunning. He studied Reading with insolent speculation, and it seemed to the cautious watcher that his brains were struggling with some momentous problem connected only indirectly with himself.

"Come! Can't you talk?"

"If you'll le' me get to that bag over there by that tree, boss man," drawled Moxey, "I'll show you somethin' that maybe you won't like to see."

Twain stepped promptly to the hole of the tree in question, stooped quickly, and picked up the automatic.

"All right," he said. "Let's see it. I'll keep this till I'm ready to leave."

He deposited the short-barreled weapon in a pocket of his leather chaps.

"Oh, you needn't be scared I'm gonta start anythin'," the man reproved him. "They's nothin' we need fight over. You just surprised me when you come buttin' in a minute ago, and I went fer the gun before I thought."

Lazily dragging himself along the ground like a crippled beggar, he reached the tree and fumbled in a knapsack that stood against the trunk. One by one his big, hairy hands brought out lumps of quartz that flashed yellow in the sunlight sifting down through the tops of the spruces overhead.

"There's six chunks that come from

a hole in the ground up there on that hillside," he said, sitting back and nursing his shins again. "Look 'em over, old-timer." And he began rocking backward and forward to show complete indifference.

Twain stooped and, one by one, took up the glittering lumps; which in size were from that of a walnut to the dimensions of his fist.

Delicate, frosty-looking designs blinked up at him from the crevices in the quartz. They resembled the fern-like traceries that frost leaves on the windowpane, but their gleam was golden instead of silver. Twain Reading gazed at them, his heart beating very rapidly, his brain almost stunned with disbelief.

"Purty, ain't they, kid?"

Twain raised his haggard eyes and fixed them on his inquisitionist. *"You dug these out of my land?"*

Moxey nodded toward the sun-bathed crest of the hill. "Up there. I c'n show you the hole."

Twain stood erect again, allowing the lumps of crystal to thump hollowly on the ground. The thumps were representative of the despair and disappointment that were torturing him.

"You're Painter—N. Painter?" he asked dully.

"That's what them notices say," Moxey answered.

"And this man here?"

"Don't think about him. He's jest my flunky—a poor goof that the brains leaked out of when somethin' flattened the back of his nut that way. I'm the guy you gotta deal with, kid."

"How long have you known about this gold deposit, Mr. Painter?"

Moxey shrugged. "Matter o' sev'r'l years, I judge. Been keepin' it dark while I raised the money to—now—go ahead and work the claims. Jest made the riffle lately."

"You're a prospector, then?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? Do piano tuners hunt for gold in such jungles as you got 'round here?"

"And you intend to go ahead with development?"

"That's the big idear."

Twain remained silent for several seconds, Moxey eying him evilly. "You realize," he said finally, "that you won't be popular in this country, don't you? All of the people about here will sympathize with me. It isn't the popular thing to do, in a country like this, to file mining claims on a homestead claim without notifying the homesteader of intention to do so and making some arrangement with him whereby he will share in the profits."

"Well," considered Moxey, "I hadn't thought anythin' about that. But I guess it don't worry me none. I never been so popular, anyway, that people pestered me. I guess I c'n stand the gaff. And as fer splittin' the loot with you, I jest can't see it. Nobody never split nothin' with me. Not once. Finders is keepers—that's my motto."

Twain Reading's lips looked hard as he abruptly turned about to go. "I'll find that prospect hole you mention," he said, "and investigate for myself. I can't believe that such a gold deposit as those samples indicate could have escaped prospectors in these hills for years. But we'll see. And don't for a minute consider that this matter is closed, even though I'm satisfied that your claim is legitimate and made in good faith. I was here first. That is, I made my claim first. I'm going to stick. And I hope to be able to regulate what goes on within the boundaries of my claim. I'll see you later, perhaps."

"Don't hurry any to get to the recorder's office and try to file ahead o' me," Moxey jeered after him. "That's tended to already."

Twain swung about. Here was a point that had escaped him. If the claims had been located at ten twenty-

five that morning, as the notices proclaimed, how could this man Painter have recorded his filings and returned to the hills by half past two in the afternoon?

But as he turned to demand the explanation, he saw a pair of eyes that were witnessing this little woodland scene from the cover of chaparral bushes that grew luxuriantly across the creek.

Then a man with a broad-brimmed, black Stetson on his head, a six-gun dragging at his hip, and a short-barreled shotgun in his hands, stepped forth. Two others rose behind him—both heavily armed—and followed him into the open space which was centered by the camp.

Both Moxey and Reading stared their astonishment over this unexpected appearance. Gus, the Finn, licked his lips, and his flabby cheeks shook ludicrously from this new terror that threatened.

"Well, for the love of Mike, Sheriff Olcott!" gasped Twain, as he recognized the foremost man. "Trying to scare me stiff? What in the devil are you doing here?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

RESULTS OF INTERRUPTIONS.

READING knew Sheriff John Olcott quite well. He was a dark, heavy-set fellow with rank black eyebrows that bristled over piercing eyes. His record as an officer of the law was enviable.

The two men accompanying him were strangers to the squatter.

Olcott came to Reading's side and offered a tremendous hand, but he kept his eyes on Moxey and The Finn.

"Glad to see you, Reading," came his rumbling voice. "Who're your friends?" He nodded toward the men beside the camp fire.

"They're hardly friends of mine, sheriff," Twain answered, smiling.

But Olcott was not listening. He strode across to the fire and fixed his eyes on Moxey, who screwed himself about and looked most mighty uncomfortable.

"What's your name, friend?" the sheriff asked.

Moxey hesitated. Then out it came, in self-protection: "Painter."

"Yours?" The sheriff swung about on Gus, the Finn.

The Finn's quivering chops seemed almost to flap like canvas in the wind. The name that he shiveringly gave—if it was a name—caused the sheriff to ask Moxey:

"What's that he said? What's the matter with 'im?"

"You can't make him," Moxey explained. "I guess I'm about the only man that can. They call 'im Gus, the Finn. That's the only name I know 'im by."

"Where you from?"

"Well—now—jest drifted in here, sheriff. We're prospectin'."

"You look like a jailbird to me," the sheriff told him candidly. "Sure you didn't help an escaped prisoner to get away durin' the last few days?"

"No, sir—I never seen 'im. Honest!" Moxey's eyes were blue and round with the fervor of his denial.

"Oh, well," remarked the sheriff, "you needn't be so emphatic about it. You talk like a bird that knows how to lie, anyway. I don't believe I'm gonta like you, fella. Reading"—he glanced back over his shoulder—"what about these Ikes filin' minin' claims on your land? Us boys was hidin' there in the chaparral and heard it all. Been squattin' there, watchin' this camp and waitin' fer these birds to return, for over two hours. Then when they did come, and before they'd said anythin' worth while for us to hear, you come buttin' in and crabbed the game. What's it all about?"

Twain walked over to the three. The other men sat on a down tree to wait and listen. Briefly Twain told the

sheriff about the rock pyramids on the hillside and the notices within them.

"That's tough, all right," observed Olcott, glowering unfriendly at Moxey and the unobtrusive Finn. "I reckon these boys here are within their rights, but it's a devil of a note, just the same. I've seen sections here, if a thing like this took place, they'd be bodies danglin' from a limb to-morrow mornin'.

"Well, boys"—the sheriff addressed his companions—"guess we can't get nothin' here. Le's hunt up the rest o' the bunch and find a place to camp and eat. By the way, Reading, *you* didn't see anythin' of the bird we're after sneakin' around in these woods, did you? We heard he had made this way. Couple o' fellas sighted 'im three days back. He's a bad one. We think he bumped a guy off t'other side o' Jackstone Mountain, jest after he made the break. That's what let's me in on the hunt. Personally, I wish they'd keep their prisoners to home, or else know how to find 'em when they make a getaway. I got plenty o' county stuff to look out for, without chasin' escaped prisoners fer the State. How 'bout it, Reading?"

There was only a moment's hesitation before Twain made answer. Swiftly his mind had turned the problem this way and that while the sheriff had been talking. The sheriff had asked him if he had seen anything of the escaped prisoner in the woods. He hadn't. He had seen him in his own cabin and running across the clearing. Twain Reading didn't believe even in white lies. But he felt that, for at least once in his strictly regulated life, he must evade in order to protect the father of the girl he loved.

"I've been pretty busy," he said, "and haven't been in the woods a great deal. No, your man didn't show up in the woods near my place."

"Well, keep your eye peeled, will you, Reading? I'd like to get this bird back home and get the matter off my hands. Drop in on me when you're in town and le' me know how you come out with these claim jumpers here. C'mon, fellas—I'm starved. And we're a long way from the grub wagon, I reckon. Better'n two hours wasted here. You might give this fella back his gat, Reading; I saw you slip it in your chaps."

Twain's face flushed. He had actually forgotten Moxey's automatic in his perturbation. He plucked it out with a grin and passed it, butt first, to its owner.

The sheriff and his deputies walked away into the northeast, and soon were hidden by the trees.

Twain turned his back on Moxey and The Finn and hurried back to his horse.

The interruption of his trip to Nancy's Dishpan to make his peace with the father of Nell had occupied considerable time. Twain glanced at the sun as he rode up out of the cañon. No, he would not make that trip to-day. But to-morrow morning he would start out early. For the remainder of the afternoon he wanted to study over this new problem that had presented itself. And when he did ride to the Dishpan, he wished to have a talk with Old Man Hulette and Water-leg Mahoney regarding their witnessing the signature of N. Painter on the location notices.

How had they happened to be on hand? Didn't they even suspect that the alleged claims were on his homestead? And he wanted, too, to find the remainder of those notices that afternoon, and, if possible, the prospector's hole from which the glittering crystals had been taken. One problem at a time. He would see the Nobles to-morrow morning.

Then it occurred to him that he had not secured an answer from the man called Painter as to how it had been possible for him to file his notices on the land at about half past ten in the

morning, then go to Sacramento and record the filings, and be back on Lucky Bug Ranch at two o'clock—a physically impossible feat. The interruption by the sheriff, just as he had turned to put the question to the man, had driven the matter from his thoughts.

Ought he to go back now and find out all the details? No, it was too late. There would be another time. Soon enough, perhaps, all of the appalling details would be tormenting him. The last two days had been bitter ones indeed for the ambitious homesteader. It seemed that relentless fate was pursuing him, determined to crush his prospects at every turn.

Moxey became intensely active after Twain Reading had left his camp. He cuffed the meek Finn into swiftly preparing something for him to eat, and stalked about, with corrugated brows and fingers locked behind his back, while the hasty cooking was in progress. He gulped the food when it was ready, choked until his face was purple on the coffee. And with a sandwich in either hand he hurried away through the trees, ordering Gus to "stay put" until he returned.

Moxey's outlined business also had been interrupted that same morning. He had planned for an early start to the highway, where he hoped to catch a passing automobile and buy or beg a ride to Sacramento. Preferably the latter. He had been anxious to get in touch with Ken Laplace and tell him that Lucky Bug and his daughter had spent a week or more on the little ranch which was bordered by the creek.

But after he had started, and was two miles from camp, he saw Lucky Bug, his daughter, and two cow-punchers riding down the trail that connected Reading's ranch with Nine Mile. Through the trees he had watched and had seen the little party climb a hill on the north side of the creek. Stealing closer, he became aware that he was at last looking upon the coveted site where the gold was hidden, and that Lucky Bug was posting location notices on the claims, with the two vaqueros as witnesses.

This engrossing development held him in the woods until the girl and the men had ridden off again up the trail. Then Moxey had taken their place on the hillside and, one by one, nosed out the pyramids of stones. Also he found the spot where Lucky Bug had dug some days before, and, delving into the earth, had found the glittering quartz which had so greatly disturbed the squatter.

Childishly wishful to share his discovery with another and thus bring glory upon himself, he had hurried back to camp to get The Finn, there being no one of more importance before whom Moxey could parade his triumph.

And thus it came about that Reading had heard them talking, and had tracked them to their lair, where they had gone for food before Moxey continued his journey to the highway.

It was now quite late in the afternoon, but Moxey felt that he must get to Laplace as soon as possible with the welcome news that the fortune was finally just outside their grasp.

Moxey frowned as he hurried on. Things were not going just to suit him. This homesteader threatened to wreck their plans. He had not known that the man at whose cabin he had seen Nell and Lucky Bug was a squatter—had had no idea that the gold was on land that was claimed by him. Here was a new and quite unforeseen element of risk.

Moxey, however, had a plan. He had advanced it by leading Twain to believe that he was N. Painter and had made the filings on the claims. And if Laplace would agree with him in this plan, everything would come out all

right after all—at least so far as Moxey was concerned.

He reached the trail to Nine Mile and hurried along it, keeping a sharp lookout for Reading, lest he should chance to be on his way to the store and post office. And presently, when he heard sounds of footsteps ahead of him on the trail, he ducked headlong into the underbrush on the uphill side and waited anxiously.

Nearer came the footsteps, and they were coming fast. Moxey held his breath. Then into a sunlit spot walked Ken Laplace, and the heart of the yeggman slipped down in place again.

"Hey, Ken!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Wait! It's me!"

And he came from hiding and stood on the trail before Laplace.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MISCHIEF AFOOT.

"LUCK at last!" puffed Moxey, as he and Laplace stood face to face in Reading's trail to Nine Mile. "When'd you come out, boss?"

"Just got here," was Laplace's obvious answer to an obvious question. "Came out from Sacramento at forty miles an hour. Car's up on the highway. Lucky I stumbled onto you. Don't know whether I'd have been able to find your camp again or not. Why haven't you drifted in to see me? Hasn't there been anything to report at all?"

"Plenty to report, boss—plenty," quoth Moxey. "And I wanta tell you it ain't as easy fer me to drift in to see you as it is fer you to float out and see me. I ain't got no flivver."

"Let's get off the trail and sit down and have a talk," Laplace suggested. "I'm sweltering."

They clambered down into the bottoms of Lucky Bug Creek, where the man from Sacramento laved his flushed face in the cool water. Then they sought out a ferny glen on the other side for their consultation.

"Anythin' new with you?" asked Moxey.

"Plenty," Laplace replied. "I saw Lucky Bug in Sacramento. He has a broken arm. Don't know how he got it—hadn't time to ask before he started panning me. The claims have been recorded in the name of The Lucky Bug Mines Company, signed 'N. Painter.'"

Laplace waited in vain for a gleam of pleasurable surprise in Moxey's eyes. But Moxey only rolled a cigarette and remarked: "I knew that before noon this mornin'. Has Lucky Bug gone crazy, to name the claims that way and have the kid sign her name Painter instead o' Noble?"

"I don't know whether he's crazy or not," Laplace replied. "But he's a fighting fool again. And he told me to my face that he's been onto us since we tangled up with him in Mexico."

And the hide buyer told in detail about his encounter of the morning with Lucky Bug. He concluded:

"He's stubborn, reckless, fighting mad—bad medicine. He told me to make one more move to get him and he'd kill me."

"That settles it," said Moxey promptly. "Me—I'm through, boss. I'm as scared o' that bird as I am o' the devil 'imself. I got enough."

"Now listen here," Laplace flared up. "What's the difference between facing him now and later on? Any way you figure, it has to be done some time. We've got to get a dead drop on him. There's no other way, as I've told you all along. Got to find him out alone and gang him. Then he'll be harmless."

"That's what the lion tamer thought when he put the lion in the cage," Moxey murmured. "But that same lion's had sev'r'l tamers since. Me—I'm through. Because listen: Wait'll I tell you what I found out to-day. It ain't only Lucky Bug we got to buck.

There's some one else. Listen to my tale o' woe, boss."

Then Laplace gave ear to the story of the posting of the notices, Moxey's discovery of the gold-bearing quartz, of Reading's pitching himself headlong into the machinery of the plot, of the sheriff's unexpected appearance in camp.

"And you let this homesteader believe you were N. Painter?" Laplace burst forth hotly.

"Boss, I done just that. I couldn't see no other way. I was aimin' to keep him from scoutin' round and discoverin' jest who had done it. He don't know his friends have stung 'im. He thinks their name is Noble, don't he? He didn't know nothin' at all about this gold. Lucky Bug, pretendin' he's his friend, has gypped 'im. Or else Lucky Bug don't know neither that his gold is on this Hoosier's land

"I let him think my name was Painter, didn't I? 'Cause why? To keep 'im from findin' out the truth immediately. He's a fightin' fool, too, this hick is. If he finds out Lucky Bug has gypped 'im, he'll try to shoot him. And if he does, where are we? Lucky Bug will be dead, and we ain't got nothin' on his kid. She c'n go ahead with her minin' proposition, just like Lucky Bug told you she could, and laugh at us.

"And now, on the other hand, if Lucky Bug kills this bird in the quarrel, where'll we be? He'll either be sent to the pen for murder—which will leave us holdin' the sack entirely—or he'll hafta beat it outa the country. If he does the last, where are we? He'll either turn the claims over to the kid and back her with coin from some distant hidin' place, or he'll drop 'em altogether and take her with 'im.

"Now, listen, boss. Don't interrupt. You been doin' all the talkin' since I let you in on this deal. Now I'm gonta talk a little. I got a plan that'll let us out. As things stands, we ain't got no chance to win at all. So listen to what I gotta say:

"I let this feller think that I'm N. Painter, didn't I? So then he won't rush off to Nancy's Dishpan to find out from old man Hulette who N. Painter is. He thinks he knows—see? That keeps him put till we're through with Lucky Bug. Now listen: Is Lucky Bug in Sac?"

"I doubt it. I think he's on his way back here. He was packing a suit case when I talked with him in his hotel rooms. I must have passed him, for I drove like the devil."

"Well and good. Then if he's comin', you and me gotta get 'im before the day has passed. Get 'im, and get 'im right!"

"What do you mean, get him before the day has passed?" Laplace demanded suspiciously.

"I mean jest that, boss. The time has come for the big clean-up. And if we don't get ours now, we won't get nothin'. Lucky Bug has got money. You told me you found out down in Mex that he got over sixty grand for his joint. And he'd been pullin' down jack hand over fist for years before he peddled his place."

"Well, what of it?" the hide buyer demanded.

"We want it," said Moxey.

"Of course we do," Laplace said sneeringly. "We want that and five times that added to it."

The tramp shook his head. "Listen," he said: "The stuff is off for the big haul. I already explained how this homesteader buttin' in has queered the deal. We gotta get somethin' of what Lucky Bug's got now while the gettin's good.

"Listen here, Laplace: Me and The Finn ain't been livin' any too high since we hooked up with you. You ain't comin' acrost as reg'lar as you might. I——"

"I've supplied you with all the money

that I could spare," Laplace cut in. "You know I haven't been making anything at all since I came to California this time. I'm about all in financially. But I've played square with you."

"We ain't livin' in no hotel in Sac—The Finn and me," Moxey reminded him. "We're livin' in the jungles, doin' all the work, and the livin' ain't any too good. I got enough of it myself. I stuck her out a long time, but I'm weary now. If Lucky Bug has got fifty thousan', I want half of it. The other half is yours. That's enough for me."

"But——"

"Wait a minute," came Moxey's inexorable tones. "We'll get the drop on 'im to-day. You and me'll beat it up to the highway right now. I got my glasses with me. You know his machine. We'll get on that long, straight stretch o' road and watch. You c'n tell his car comin' a good ways off. When we see it we'll drag a log across the road, and he'll have to stop when he gets up to it. I know the place—I figgered it all out a little while back.

"He stops his car, gets out. Then you and me show up, holdin' guns on 'im. You cover the kid; I'll tend to Lucky Bug. We'll run their car into the trees and hide her. Then we'll bring Lucky Bug and the girl down this way.

"You keep your gun on 'em—see? I'll ramble over the hill and get The Finn. We'll break camp, Gus and me, and come back to where you are. Then we'll make Lucky Bug write his check for fifty thousan' dollars. We'll tie 'em up, give The Finn a gat, and tell 'im to watch 'em till you and me go to Sac and cash the check. We split the loot. Then we bid each other one big, fond good-by and beat it, every fella fer 'imself. When The Finn gets tired waitin' fer us he c'n turn his prisoners loose, or do anythin' he pleases with them and himself. Half o' that fifty thousan' is enough for me, boss. I'm through. The play's gettin' too thick. It's thick as mud already."

Laplace glared at him contemptuously, his lips wrinkled. "Why, you poor fish!" he scoffed. "You weak-spined quitter! Do you think I've waited and worked two years for a measly twenty-five thousand dollars? Not on your life! This is the only really crooked thing I ever went into. And it isn't crooked, at that. Just business. But I don't want any more of it in mine. I want to make one big haul and quit forever. I want at least a hundred thousand, or nothing."

"You'll take nothin', then," growled Moxey.

"There's no sense in quitting, Moxey," Laplace pleaded. "This homesteader's appearance on the scene doesn't mean anything. Only that we'll have to wait a little longer, till things are running. He and Lucky Bug will reach some understanding, and the development of the mines will go right ahead. Beat it out of the country for a while, you and The Finn. Keep in touch with me. I'll leave, too, and see if I can pick off a piece of money. Then we'll come back, when Lucky Bug really has something worth our time."

Moxey slowly shook his head. "No, I'm through waitin'. I been a good waiter, but it ain't the best thing I do. I ain't a hog, either. Twenty-five thousan' would make me king o' the earth. That's all I wanta be. And if you ain't satisfied with the same, here's where we split. Talk fast, 'cause if you don't want any of it in yours, I'm goin' up on the highway, and——"

"Yes, and what?"

"Well——" Moxey hesitated.

"Well is good! You can't do anything. What bank would cash a big check for you? I'd have trouble myself, even, in getting one cashed. Besides, I'm sure Lucky Bug banks in San Francisco instead of Sacramento. I saw a check book on a San Francisco

bank open on the desk in his suite this morning, and made a note of it."

"All the more reason, then, why you gotta stand by me," said Moxey complacently. "I ain't waited and worked two years fer *nothin'*. Get that!"

They were watching each other warily. Both were thinking fast. It seemed to each that they were facing a deadlock which could not be broken.

Moxey was thinking: "Just one way for me to handle this thing. Pull my gun and throw down on him. Take his gun away from him. Unload it. Give it back to him. Make him go with me and use the empty gun to make the girl come to time. I'm through—posi-*tive*-ly! I gotta——"

His eyes narrowed suddenly and he dragged at the gun that was slung under his left arm. But the atmosphere seemed to be charged with orange fire. A great roaring filled his ears. His gun came out. He staggered to his feet. Another roar. Orange fire blinded him again.

Then Laplace stood over him where he lay prone on the ground, his tongue protruding, the breath rattling in his throat, one leg working slowly up and down as if it were pedaling a bicycle.

Laplace's face was paper white. His chest was heaving. With popping eyes he gazed in horror and a sort of childish wonder at the twitching thing at his feet.

There came a final convulsion, and Moxey lay still.

Laplace whined nasally: "I—I didn't know I was doing—*that!*"

And the derelict, Moxey, had gained his point. *He was through.*

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONDEMNING EVIDENCE.

IT was shortly before dusk that same day. Twain Reading had just finished his lonely evening meal and washed the dishes. Now he was seated under the spreading live oak before the little cabin, listening to the murmur of the waterfall and the incessant croaking of frogs.

Then, suddenly, he was reminded of Hulette's note, for, just before supper, one of Hulette's cow-punchers had stopped at the cabin with a note from the old man and some fresh-cut meat and freshly baked bread sent by Mrs. Hulette. And Reading had been so interested in putting the fresh meat through a chopper and in preparing some longed-for Hamburger steak, that he had forgotten about the note until now

He rose and went into the cabin. He lighted the coal-oil lamp and sat on the bed to read. His eyes grew wide, and he stared at the sheet of paper in his hand, as these words blazed up at him:

> I thought maybe the monuments you piled up was pretty close to being on your land. I did not say anything about it to him and the girl, but I thought it was only right that you be told about it. These people are city folks and you might say outsiders. And I think us fellows up here in the hills had ought to stick together in a case like this. I suppose you will be surprised to read that their name is Painter and not Noble. I thought that was kind of funny, but did not say anything about it. And it was the girl who signed the notices you will find under the name of N. Painter. I hope everything comes out all right and that these claims are not on your land. They are probably not worth much, anyway. Yours,
>
> EDWIN HULETTE.

Twain scarcely had time to realize the full significance of this when there came the sound of thudding hoofs moving toward the cabin through the gathering night. He looked up, a frown of puzzlement on his brow.

Who now? It had been a day of some activity already. Not since he had started living on Lucky Bug Ranch had he seen so many people in the vicinity within so short a space of time.

The hoofbeats stopped before the cabin door. He heard low voices. He

rose, as he shoved the note into a pocket, to face Sheriff John Olcott in the doorway. Behind him three men peered in over his shoulder.

"Well, Reading," came the sheriff's voice, "here we are again."

"So I see, sheriff," Reading dully laughed. "And you didn't find your chuck wagon. And your keen sense of smell told you that I have fresh beef to-day. And you're here to eat. All of which is fair enough. You'll find some feed for your horses in the stable. You know where the creek is. I'll start the cooking right away. How many of you came?"

He was trying bravely to appear hospitable, but his heart was leaden. "N. Painter"—Nell!

The sheriff came on in. There was no answering smile on his face. The other three men passed over the threshold and stood looking curiously at the squatter.

"Thank you kindly, Reading," said the sheriff. "But it ain't a matter of eats that brung us boys here. Reading, I reckon I'll have to arrest you fer the murder of that fella, Painter, that you was havin' it up an' down with over on the crick to-day. I certainly hate to do it, son. But I'm bound to say things look bad fer you—and a sheriff's gotta do his duty."

Twain's lower jaw sagged. He stood like a man struck between the eyes, wondering whether or not his muscles will keep him on his feet until the brief paralysis has passed.

"What's that?" he croaked feebly at last. "You—you're not talking to me, sheriff!"

"I sure am," returned the sheriff in a kindly tone. "And I sure hope I'm wrong, Reading. But, by golly, everything points to you bumping that guy. And—and it's jest naturally gotta be looked into."

Twain sank into a chair beside the table. "Is—is this fellow who called himself Painter dead—actually dead?" he asked in what he realized to be pure childishness.

"Dead as can be," replied the sheriff, coming farther into the room. "I'll look at your gat, Reading, if you don't mind."

"No—not at all. Certainly not," Twain consented absently. "But who killed him, Olcott? I don't understand at all."

The sheriff returned a grunt to this as he stepped to the bedside, climbed upon the bed with one knee, and lifted down the .45 that hung above it.

He pulled the cylinder pin, flopped the cylinder outward, dumped the six big cartridges into his palm. Through the chambers and barrel he squinted at the light.

"Bright and clean," he offered. "When'd you clean her, Reading?"

"I—I don't remember. I keep it clean, usually. Wait a minute! I cleaned it just last night. Right after supper. I had nothing to do and nothing new to read. I was worried. I cleaned the thing then, sheriff, to kill time."

"I thought it'd been done some recent," the sheriff answered simply. "No dust in the chambers or the bar'l whatever. It was to-night you cleaned her, wasn't it?"

"No, last night. I—for Heaven's sake, man, you don't think I killed that fellow, do you? And why don't you tell me all about it? Why don't you tell me! I've got a right to know!"

"You have, at that," agreed Olcott, seating himself and crossing his legs. Twain's gun, unloaded, he held in his lap.

"We heard the shots this afternoon—late. Not so very long ago. We wasn't far from here. I ast the boys where the shots had come from. They all said from somewhere clost to where your cabin stands. We worked this way. They was a mighty patch o'

chaparral between us an' your crick, and we had trouble gettin' 'round her. You know the place. We'd caught up with the rest o' the posse and forked our hosses. Harder to get here with the brutes than without 'em. So we made it late.

"Comin' down a little cañon t'other side o' Lucky Bug Crick—ridin' along the lip of her—down in the rocks Lafe Slider sees a huddled figger, crowded in among the rocks. Two of us gets off and finds a way down in afoot. The figger was forty feet below the lip, where we'd seen it. It was wedged in between two big stones. It had fell in head first. Been thrown down from the lip o' the cañon up above, er pushed off, er somethin'. But we dragged 'im out. Two holes in 'im had done the croakin'. Two holes in his breast. It wasn't the fall. He'd been heaved off the lip above after the shootin'. It was this Painter that filed quartz claims on your homestead land, Reading. That's who the fella was.

"Then, up above ag'in, we found the trail where the body'd been drug along. It was comin' from this cabin, looked like. We follied her some ways, as far as your trail from here to Nine Mile. Then it was gittin' too dark to see anythin' more on the ground. So we jest rode on here to see if you could tell us anythin' about it. Can you?"

"No, no!" cried Twain. "Not a thing. I got my horse and rode straight home after you left the camp on the branch creek. I've been here ever since. And I didn't hear any shots, either. Surely you don't think I did this thing, sheriff! And where is the other man—this fellow's partner, whose voice rumbles in his throat?"

"We don't know that. Some more o' the boys are huntin' fer 'im. They've gone back to the camp where you fellas was to-day. They'll drift in soon, if the man is still there. O' course, maybe he did this killin'. A lot'll depend on the caliber o' the bullets when they been dug out. But the holes in his body look like .45s done the job, Reading. And that funny-talkin' fella wasn't near your cabin, was he? That's where the sounds o' the shots come from."

"No, of course he wasn't here," Twain said calmly. "And the shots couldn't have been fired here, for I've been here right along since I came home, and there have been no shots fired. These cañons are peculiar, sheriff, in the matter of carrying sounds. There are echoes, when the wind's just right. It's confusing. I've noticed it often. The shots that killed this man must have been fired miles from here. Some freakish current of air carried them to you and deceived you."

Twain laughed. "What a devil of a mess!" he cried. "But of course I can't blame you, Olcott. It's your duty to investigate. I'm willing to be under suspicion. I'll help you all I can, too. But as for me having anything to do with this—knowing anything at all about it——"

"In the mornin'," Olcott interrupted in a matter-of-fact tone, "we'll be able to follow the trail where the body was dragged and find out more. That trail, though, was pointin' straight this way the last we see of her. If you shot this bird here in your cabin, Reading, and carried 'im off into the woods afterward, why didn't you carry 'im all the ways? Why drag 'im any?"

"Oh, forget that!" Twain blazed, suddenly angry. "You have no proof whatever that I know anything about this. Suspect me all night, if you feel so disposed. The morning will clear me. I'll try to make you comfortable till then, if you want to stay. And I'll be a passive prisoner, too, if you want it so."

"That man," said the sheriff in a gloomy voice, "wasn't killed in the woods. He was killed here in this cabin, Reading, and his body drug into the tim-

ber and dumped into that cañon afterward. O' course, you mighta had good reason to smoke 'im up. Maybe he come here, got fresh with you, and threw down on you first. Then you shot 'im in self-defense. But you better tell me the truth, son. You know I'm your friend. I'm sure you wouldn't murder a man in cold blood. Come clean, Reading. I'll stand by you to the end."

"But, sheriff, I'm absolutely innocent!" Twain pleaded passionately. "I know nothing at all about this thing."

Sheriff Olcott sighed and lifted a thick forefinger. He pointed it at the wall—at the inside window frame at the front end of the cabin. This frame, as were the other trimmings of the cabin, had been painted by the owner. There had been a little paint among the belongings of the departing family whose effects he had taken over. With it he had painted the trim of his little shelter inside and out, there not being enough for the adornment of the remainder of the woodwork. The color was light buff.

"What are you pointing at?" Twain asked.

"Them red splatters on that yeller window frame," said Sheriff Olcott morosely. "If you'd lit the lamp as soon as you got back from dumpin' 'im in the cañon, Reading, maybe you'd seen them spots an' wiped 'em out. Look at 'em, boys, an' tell me if they're fresh—an' if they look like blood."

Several breathless moments followed, while the three men who had come with Olcott studied the crimson beads that stood out in such sharp contrast to the buff background of the window frame.

Then a man said: "They're fresh—wet. And they look very much like blood."

"Don't touch 'em," ordered Olcott, fixing his gloomy eyes on Twain again.

To be concluded in the next issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

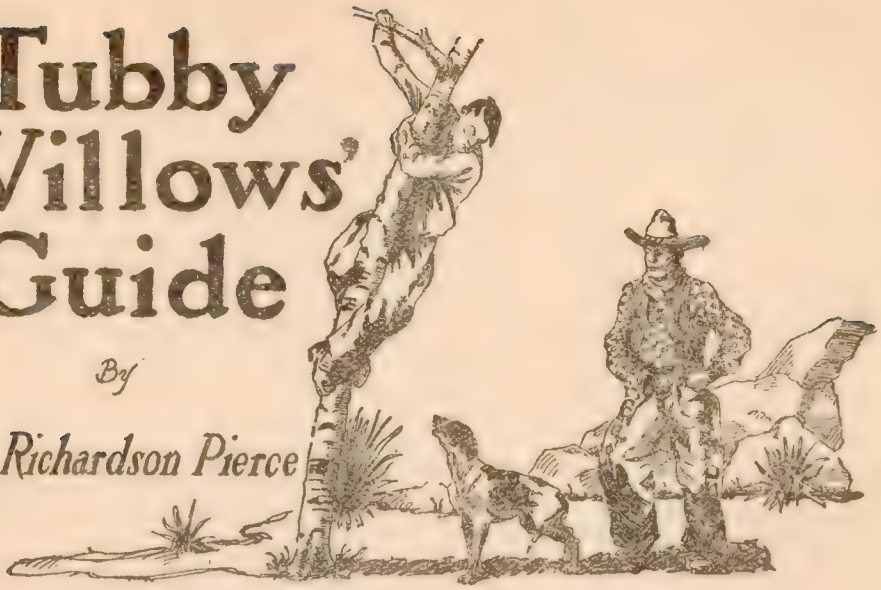
ODDITY OF TAHOE'S TIMBER GROWTH

VISITORS to Lake Tahoe, which lies between the States of California and Nevada, are generally struck by the fact that the California shores of the lake are heavily forested with lordly pines and other monarchs of the woods, while a great deal of the Nevada side is bare or else has only straggling timber growths. This is not due to any superiority of the California soil, but to the fact that the eastern or Nevada shores of the lake were stripped of most of their timber supply in order to protect the vast underground workings of the silver mines at Virginia City, in the days of the Comstock Lode boom.

For many years following the great silver discoveries at Virginia City in the early sixties, two to four huge lumber mills operated near Glenbrook, and in 1875, twenty-one million feet of timber were cut. This was the high peak, but for many years the annual yield of lumber averaged twelve million feet. Huge timbers went into the Virginia City mines to support the caving ground and form the square-set method of mine protection. The hundreds of miles of underground workings on the Comstock Lode are said by mining experts to contain sufficient lumber to build a city for half a million people, and old records show that nearly a cord of wood went underground for every ton of ore extracted.

In addition to the vast amount of timber used in underground construction, an immense amount of wood was also used as fuel in generating steam power at the mines and mills. At the height of the Comstock Lode mining boom, Virginia City had a population of fifty thousand, while Washoe City, Carson City, Galena, Gold Hill, and other points had thousands.

Tubby Willows' Guide



By

Frank Richardson Pierce

Author of "Flapjack Meehan's Protege," etc.

"DID you ever hear such swearing in all your life!" The nurse hurried toward Red Rowland's room, but as the uproar increased she decided Rowland's violence was beyond her strength to handle, so she called a doctor. "Doctor, come quick!"

When the doctor entered the room, the patient was sitting up still swearing. There was a wild light in his eyes and about the room was evidence of his sudden violence. "Here! Here! Rowland!" cried the doctor, "what's the meaning of all this?"

"Crooks! Thieves! Skunks! Snakes!" Rowland shouted.

"Here I've been waiting fifteen years for Uncle Sam to open up that reserve so I could stake me a coal claim and what do they do? What do they do, I ask you? They wait until I'm flat on my back with a broken leg, then they open it up, giving my worst enemy a chance to put over his dirty deal! Doctor, put a plaster cast on my leg. I'm going to get out of here!"

"Impossible, Rowland. If you expect that leg to knit properly you must be absolutely quiet. Why if you should attempt to leave you might even lose your leg. Absolutely, no!"

Rowland scowled. "You talk like you mean it! Well, you know best, but it's the toughest break I ever had."

The doctor gathered up bits of the offending paper, pieced them together and read the account. It proved to be a brief dispatch from Washington stating that on a certain date the Leary Mineral Reserve would be thrown open to entry. To millions the news meant nothing, but to those on the "inside," mostly Alaskan sour doughs, it meant a chance to stake some mighty good coal claims. To Red Rowland it meant an opportunity to cash in on work he had done many years before. He had staked the claims originally, spent several thousand dollars in development, only to have turned into a reserve.

"Why don't you have a friend stake the land for you, Rowland!" the doctor suggested.

Rowland grunted. "Huh! If anybody tackles that country this time of the year, he'll stake claims for himself. There's a lot of grief ahead for the stampeders and they'll be looking out

for No. 1. Only two things would make the average man go in there—the chance of grabbing a good, rich coal mine or possibly to square off an old account with an enemy. That's why I'm willing to go and drag my hind legs after me—to restake what is morally mine and to square accounts with Pete Stoddard. He's got millions where I've got dollars and while I never could prove it, he got the land withdrawn. He is influential and he probably deceived the officials. Anyway he's ready to go ahead and the land is conveniently thrown open. He'll have a clear field with me flat on my back."

"If you have a friend——" suggested the nurse, "somebody who owes you a debt of gratitude." She knew the ways of the North where man depended on man.

Rowland scowled. "Yes, I've got a friend but he's well fixed. Still, you can never tell and besides he's no use for Pete Stoddard. Say, young lady, get me a pencil and paper. I'm going to send him a cablegram. But first, plug in that telephone, I'm going to find out something!"

He called a number and presently spoke in a normal voice. "I would like to speak to Mr. Peter Stoddard. It is important! How's that? Oh, I'm sorry!" He hung up the receiver. "Just as I figured, Stoddard has gone to Alaska. With all the money he has it'll be impossible to beat him. He'll make a couple of millions out of this."

Nevertheless despite his gloomy viewpoint Red Rowland scribbled a message:

TUBBY WILLOWS,
Cold Deck, Alaska.

Leary Reserve to be thrown open. Stoddard on way. I am helpless with broken leg. You know history of case. You know Stoddard. You know me. It's prospecting time. Let conscience be your guide.

RED ROWLAND.

General Hospital, Seattle, Washington.

After sending the message, the nurse was surprised to find Rowland's pulse, temperature and respiration normal once more. In fact the patient grinned cheerfully. "I may lose out on this after all but I've sure stirred up a lot of trouble for Stoddard. You see this fellow, Tubby Willows, is an old-timer, an honest to goodness sour dough. Well, it makes no difference how much money they've got. When the break-up comes in Spring, they get the itch to go prospecting. Besides Willows and his partner 'Flapjack' Meehan are great old boys to want to see the right thing done. That's why I said 'Let conscience be your guide' because he's blessed with a large conscience. Besides that he's a go-getter!"

Tubby Willows received the cablegram two days before Stoddard's arrival. He read it carefully, then handed it over to Flapjack. "What had I better do about it?"

"Well," Flapjack answered, "Rowland is a friend, and sick; Stoddard is no friend and is well. Let your conscience tell you what to do. I can take care of things here. I'd go with you if I had a chance. But I'm needed here. When do you think you'll start?"

"I'll wait until Stoddard shows up. I want to kinda size him up."

"Why not beat him to it?"

"Because he can't travel any faster than I can, and if he runs true to form he'll probably waste some time trying to put over something crooked. He never was one to want an even break—he always wanted more!"

From where Flapjack was seated he could see a low, wide building. The doors were rolled back and the nose of an airplane was visible. Ed Morgan had brought the plane in the previous Fall and planned to pick up some loose change by transporting miners from camp to camp. Some of the younger generation were inclined to go via the air route, but the old-timers, considered

the lack of landing fields, the swiftness of air currents through mountain passes, unexpected snow storms in the higher altitudes and shook their heads.

In time, of course, the plane would be used in many places instead of dogs, but for rough country they preferred dogs which were slower, also surer.

Flapjack Meehan jerked his head toward the plane. "Why not try it, Tubby, this once?"

"Nope, I'm going to stick to earth this time. I know that country. You know how it is when the break-up comes—rivers run wild."

"But it'll cover in a few hours what it'll take you nearly two weeks to do afoot!"

"Yep, but I'll stick to the ground, Flapjack!" Whereupon he proceeded to overhaul some of the packs for his dogs. He had no intention of using a sled so late in the season and any one of the Willows-Meehan malemutes was good for forty pounds.

Flapjack finished up a number of duties, then wandered over to the plane "Got a passenger, Ed?" he inquired.

"Yep! He wants to go into the Leary Reserve country. He claims he's an old Alaskan and knows the country well. I haven't been there but he says there are places to land and take off. Fellow named Stoddard, know him?"

"I know him!" Flapjack's tone was grim. "Charge him a good price. See that he pays you in advance. You are a decent young fellow, so I'm tipping you off. It might be well if you made him put up the price of your plane!"

"Yes? Why, he can't steal it!"

"True, but I have a hunch it may be wrecked. Stoddard is two hundred pounds of greed, son, and he only considers one man's self and property and that man is Stoddard."

"Thanks, Flapjack!"

Flapjack hurried over to the New Deal Café and found his partner reading a paper as if he had nothing on his mind. "You'd better dig out, Tubby, Stoddard is going by plane. He can start a week after you do and still beat you!"

Tubby Willows leaped to his feet. "I hadn't thought of that. Say, I'll start right now! So that's why Ed Morgan is tuning up his plane. Why didn't I think of it before!"

Within ten minutes Tubby slipped out of Cold Deck. Spring was undoubtedly right around the corner; pools running into the thousands had been formed and bets laid as to when the ice would go out, but the country about Cold Deck was as tight as ever. Tubby moved at a brisk pace; the cold air or the lure of the stampede quickened his pulse, the old thrill gripped him. "By golly, boys," he informed the dog team, "we're going to win this, plane or no plane. See if we don't. We've got to prove to old Red Rowland down there in the hospital that he placed his poke on the right color this time." He had his choice of going a great distance down stream, then back up a tributary to the Leary district, or going over the pass. He chose the pass! "The plane can go that way, but it'll take a lot of gasoline and time. It wouldn't surprise me if Ed Morgan took the pass, too."

Pete Stoddard arrived at Cold Deck unheralded. He tried to attract as little attention as possible, but within five minutes an old-timer had cussed him out for a wrong committed many years before, and Cold Deck knew Stoddard was back in Alaska again. "I've seen Meehan," he announced, "but where's Willows? That pair used to be thicker than thieves!"

Dad Simms took it upon himself to reply. "They're as thick as ever, Stoddard, but Tubby is off on a little matter of business." He chuckled and prepared to watch Stoddard's expression. "A little business he's tending

to for Red Rowland. Red's tied up with a broken leg!"

Without replying Stoddard hurried over to Ed Morgan's cabin. "How soon can we get out, Morgan?"

"I'd advise waiting until to-morrow. Things are pretty gusty up in the pass!"

"How long has Willows been on the trail?"

"Four days!"

"Then we'll start now. That fellow can travel once he gets his second wind. He may be kind of fat but he's got endurance. We start now. Here's the thousand dollars!"

"Sure, but you also agreed to stand damage to my plane and it may be lost in that country. She stands me ten thousand laid down here in Cold Deck. If I lose the plane I lose ten thousand!"

"We'll arrange that on my return. I'll make good any damage, of course!"

The aviator became firm. "Listen, Stoddard, pardon frankness; while these old-timers argue about a lot of things they seem to be pretty well agreed on you. Do you get my meaning? If you don't, I'll make it plainer. You evidently expect to walk out, for you are taking along quite an outfit for a day's hop. I'm willing, though, as soon as you deposit eleven thousand in the Cold Deck Bank."

"You have a partner and another plane. How am I to know he won't take a passenger to the Leary district?" He looked about and suddenly spoke. "I'll be frank. I want that coal and I don't care how I get it. Here's twelve thousand, ten a deposit, one thousand as your fare and the other thousand to insure your partner staying here and refusing other offers. I want that coal, understand. And, what's more, I'm going to get it."

He took Morgan's receipt, then climbed into the plane. Presently he chuckled. "When Willows arrives I'll be sitting on the claim with a gun. I'll watch him depart and I'll be waiting to give him the laugh at Cold Deck."

Several minutes later Morgan climbed in and his partner started the motor. The plane roared across the field and then took the air. She was heavy with a capacity load of fuel, Stoddard and Stoddard's grub.

Tubby Willows had left cold sunshine below him and was now facing the teeth of a blizzard. Hour after hour he plodded with his dogs, equally as tired, at his heels. Abruptly he stopped and listened. A new note had entered the howling storm—the snarling, angry note of a plane fighting the elements. It came nearer and nearer and Tubby stood still. It was overhead, then died away, then returned. "He almost made it, boys. If he does, we're done!"

Tubby increased his pace and took a chance by climbing the almost sheer face of a rock, then pulling his dogs from ledge to ledge. "We'll save a few hours this way and if luck is with us we won't break our necks." It required two hours to gain the ledge he sought, and even then a hanging glacier momentarily threatened to drop tons of ice upon him. "If it was thawing I wouldn't chance it! Well, we're up now and the storm is breaking." Flakes still swirled about them, but it was drifting rather than falling snow.

Again the roar of the plane came. This time the sound came from below, then he saw it, circling like a bird for elevation. It banked and headed for the pass. As Tubby watched from the ledge, he found himself almost on a level with the plane. "I'm on the ground," he muttered, "and he's in the air, yet. Say, that young fellow has nerve."

The wing tip missed a needle rock by feet then swept toward him. He could see the aviator and Stoddard and he shouted in sheer good sportsmanship.

If they could beat him by taking such chances, it was fair enough. He shouted again, then realizing he could not be heard, waved his parka. Stoddard saw him and pointed. Morgan's head came around, then Stoddard pointed ahead, but the aviator shook his head. The pass looked easy enough to the inexperienced eye, but the aviator knew he needed a thousand feet of air between him and the snow to allow for tricks of air currents. Tubby guessed the load Stoddard had insisted on taking was now hampering them. Pounds counted at this elevation. When the plane again approached, he could have tossed a snowball onto the wing. For a half hour he watched the struggle between man who insisted on speed and Nature, who insisted that men walk, then suddenly the aviator waved his hand in token of defeat and turned his plane toward the distant cloud bank beneath which lay Cold Deck.

Tubby Willows knew that defeat was only temporary, however. He would lighten the load and return. "And they'll sleep in warm beds to-night," he mused, "but just the same I'll stick to the earth in matters of this kind. There's only one place I know of in the Leary district a plane can land and I have my doubts. If Stoddard gets off, he may have to do it with the plane doing sixty miles an hour, which might be a blessing to humanity at that." Having informed his dogs of what was on his mind, Tubby gingerly made his way along the ridge for several hundred yards, took to the ice and eventually descended on the opposite side. He was through the pass.

Taking advantage of the long hours of light, Tubby plodded steadily, knowing that at any moment the plane might return. The aviator was not made of the stuff to admit defeat repeatedly, nor would Stoddard's greed permit him to lag. Stoddard must be frantic by this time.

Within thirty-six hours Tubby again saw the plane. It had given up the pass plan and had made the long trip down stream, then back up the tributary. He broke into a trot as the plane thundered overhead. It was flying low, seeking a place to alight. "I'll get my monuments up as quick as I can," he said thoughtfully, "then I'll unlimber the old .44s and keep him from jumping what's rightfully Red Rowland's property." He looked at the river with critical eyes. Already the ice was overflowed with water from nearby streams. In fact, the main river was beginning to break up.

The plane vanished in the distance and returned as he was driving the first stake. It dropped lower and lower, then suddenly the drone of the motor died. Tubby Willows stopped and commenced to run toward the river a half mile away. "If that cuss is landing on the ice or that bar, he's done!"

Tubby made the last few yards in nothing flat. The plane had landed on a bar, then struck a rock and upended. Stoddard had already climbed from the machine and was rushing over the overflowed ice, which as this point was perhaps a foot deep. Even as he ran, cracks opened up, and cakes began to grind. The aviator, stunned from the shock of the bad landing, was gazing about stupidly. As yet he did not comprehend the situation. "You fool," Tubby shouted, "why didn't you cut him loose and bring him with you!"

Stoddard did not reply. Water was waist deep, footing was difficult. Twice he fell but each time regained his footing. Right then was when Tubby built a fire. When it was blazing nicely he looked downstream and saw Stoddard lying just out of the water. On the sandy island in midstream, the aviator was rushing about seeking means of escape.

Tubby carried Stoddard beyond danger, then sought means of aiding the

aviator. The grinding of the ice sounded like some mighty creature in distress, the uproar drowned his voice before the words were hardly out of his mouth. The flood rose rapidly as jams upstream broke and released pent-up waters. Morgan started to cross, but Tubby waved him back and the man's common sense told him it would be fatal to swim it. Water had completely flooded the bar, the plane swerved this way and that as the eddies caught it. Morgan climbed in as the advance guard of broken ice swept the bar. For an instant the weight of the motor resisted the pressure, then the ice jammed behind it, picked it up and carried it into the main stream.

Tubby Willows needed help just then. He looked back; apparently Stoddard was unconscious. Tubby shook him but the man remained silent. "You yellow dog, give me a hand. He'll be lost if you don't!" Tubby's toe caught him lightly in the ribs and the man grunted, but did not move. Had Tubby known it, Stoddard's muscles were tense, his eyes open. He was playing a game he felt would win. So long as Morgan was in danger, staking coal claims was secondary with Tubby Willows. Stoddard was cashing in on that angle. If the incident became known, Alaska would not be big enough to hold him, but he had no intention of remaining anyway.

He waited until Tubby had disappeared, then he raided Tubby's pack of dry clothing. This done, he gathered up the food available and proceeded to erect hasty monuments about the old coal claim. The task was about completed when he caught sight of the drama on the river. Fully a mile below he could see the remains of the plane in a mighty ice jam. One figure lay across a block of ice between the plane and shore. A second figure, rather stout and determined was working its way over the jam toward the first. Stoddard's eyes lighted murderously. "If that jam only goes," he whispered, "if it does, they're done for and I'm sitting pretty. If it will only go."

But the jam did not go. The figures met, then one moved toward shore dragging the other. At times they disappeared as footholds slipped on the ice. The dirty flood seethed about and over them, yet invariably the stout, tubbylike figure crawled shoreward, dragging the other behind him.

Stoddard saw them reach shore, then fall. He shouldered his pack and struck off toward the pass. "I've got it on him," he muttered, "he's tired from mushing in and I'm fresh. He's wet and I'm dry; that counts!"

Tubby Willows limped as he left a silent figure on the shore above the water line. "Turned my blamed ankle on that jam," he grumbled, "and I've got a fight on my hands. Where in thunder's my .44?" His holster was empty. "Oh, well!" He whistled and presently Mike, one of his wheel dogs, bounded from the brush. "Come on, Mike, we're skunk hunting!"

He struck straight from the river, his eyes studying every foot of ground. As he expected, he found tracks leading toward the pass. For fifteen minutes he walked, half ran, then his ankle began to quit on him and he fell. "Mike!" he ordered. "Go fetch him! Get him, Mike!"

The dog sniffed, looked a bit doubtful, then suddenly bounded from sight. Tubby followed as best as he could. The crack of a .44 broke the stillness, then the scream of a frightened man came directly ahead. Tubby cupped his hands, "Easy, Mike," he shouted, "Easy!"

Rounding a clump of brush, a sight greeted Tubby's eyes that made him forget his bad ankle and his sodden clothing. Stoddard was clinging to a swaying birch, while within a foot of his

heels stood Mike with bared fangs, waiting. Tubby's .44 lay on the ground beneath, and a torn spot on the sleeve of Stoddard's parka indicated the method the dog had used in disarming the man —a trick Tubby had taught him during winter months.

Tubby picked up his weapon, called off Mike, then ordered: "Get down. Now undress and give me my clothes! You put on these wet ones. Move fast and don't argue—I've a mind to shoot you right here and now. I'll take my chances with an Alaskan jury when they hear the facts. You've been up in the air a bit, in more ways than one, now you are down to the earth and we're on even ground!" Tubby nudged Stoddard in the ribs with the .44. "Savvy!"

"Yes. If that fool had landed right he would——"

"Never mind, I know all about that. You forced him to land there against his better judgment. You know you have to have landing fields for planes—something we don't need for men and dogs. Now move. No, over that way, we've got to pick up Ed Morgan or what's left of him. I couldn't wait to see how he was, I had to get you."

Morgan was sitting up groaning when they reached the spot where Tubby had left him. He half struggled to his feet in an effort to hit Stoddard. "You left me to die," he said, "no wonder you are hated in this country." He turned to Tubby. "Thanks, Willows, you saved my life. I went through those cakes and figured I was done, until you reached me. What are you going to do with me, I can't travel for days!"

"Wait and you'll find out," Tubby replied, "I'll fix you up a camp right here and leave most of the grub. Give me your automatic pistol." To the aviator's amazement Tubby threw it into the river. Later he found Stoddard's weapon and heaved it as far as he could. Then under his direction Stoddard brought up all the provisions and equipment. Then Tubby disappeared for a time.

His limp seemed better when he returned. "I'll wear it off," he informed them, "and now I'll leave you here with Stoddard. I've got to get in and file that claim and while I'm about it, Morgan, I'm filing one for you, too. Stoddard, you see that he's taken care of until I get to town and send out help!"

"Yes!"

"Say, yes, sir, Mr. Willows!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Willows!"

"Now, Morgan," Tubby continued, "if there's anything you want just ask Stoddard and I'm sure he'll fix you up. He got you into this."

Morgan nodded. "I'd feel better if you hadn't heaved those gats into the drink. There's nothing like a good gat to convince birds like Stoddard."

"Oh, yes, there is," Tubby replied, as he started to go. "Stoddard could steal the gat while you slept, take the grub and pull out. But I defy him to steal what I'm leaving you as protection!"

"What's that, Tubby!"

"Good old Mike, here. Mike is always loaded for his kind. You don't have to aim or pull a trigger, just say 'Take him, Mike' if Stoddard doesn't do the right thing, and see what happens! S'long, gents, I'll see you later." And Tubby Willows, with scant food in his pack, but with happiness in his heart, limped toward Cold Deck. "Gosh," he whispered to himself, "won't old Red Rowland cuss when he hears about all the fun I had squaring accounts with Stoddard. There's nothing like letting your conscience be your guide."

Your Dog

By David Post

Author of "English and American Foxhounds," etc.

THE BEAGLE

WHILE the general appearance of the beagle is suggestive of a miniature foxhound, the former was recognized as a distinct breed as early as 200 B. C. Its origin lost in antiquity, the beagle is one of the oldest breeds and most popular hounds. Queen Elizabeth, the far-famed sixteenth century sovereign of England, had a pack of pocket beagles, to which she was much attached.

The smallest of the hunting hounds, this breed has been brought to a rare perfection of type. Among beagles exhibited at dog shows, there may be many that so nearly conform to the standard that it is very difficult sometimes for the judges to decide which is the best. At late shows hounds of this breed about thirteen inches in height have been winners. There are two varieties, the smooth and the rough-coated; the smooth is the more popular and more frequently seen in this country.

The beagle has the most melodious voice of any hound, and when it "gives tongue," its belllike bark can be heard afar. The rabbit is its natural prey and it loves the chase. Rabbit hunting with the beagle as an aid is done on foot. Sometimes only one beagle is employed; or the hunter may have a pack of hounds. The usual pack is composed of six couples.

With a very keen nose, the beagle has fair intelligence and speed, and exceptional tenacity. Moreover, it is sweet-tempered, affectionate and merry—a good pet and working companion for the farmer or rancher.

The standard for the beagle is as follows:

Head—Of fair length, powerful without being coarse; skull domed, moderately wide, with an indication of peak; stop well defined, muzzle not snippy—very pointed—and lips well flewed.

Nose—Black, broad, and with nostrils well expanded.

Eyes—Brown, dark hazel, or hazel, neither deep-set nor bulgy, and with a mild expression.

Ears—Long, set on low, fine in texture, and hanging in a graceful fold close to the cheek.

Neck—Moderately long, slightly-arched, well set on shoulders, and throat showing some dewlap. The larger beagles, especially, have considerable loose, pendulous skin along the throat.

Shoulders—Clean and slightly sloping, with ample muscle.

Body—Short in the couplings—the

body between the fore and hind limbs; chest, deep; ribs fairly well-sprung and well-ribbed-up, with powerful and not tucked-up loins.

Hindquarters—Very muscular about the thighs; stifles and hocks well-bent, and hocks well-let-down.

Forelegs—Placed well under the body, of good size and strength, and round in bone.

Feet—Round, well-knuckled-up, with full, hard pads.

Stern—Of moderate length, thick, set on high, and carried gayly, but not curled over the back.

Color—Any recognized hound color. Black and white, tan, black and tan, and black, white and tan are the preferable colors.

Coat—Smooth variety: smooth, very dense, and not too fine or short. Rough variety: very dense and wiry.

Height—Not exceeding sixteen inches. The average size is fifteen inches; many good beagles, however, are twelve inches in height. The pocket beagle, which is a dwarf, should not be more than ten inches in height and may reach a height of only eight inches.

General Appearance—A compactly-built hound without coarseness, conveying the impression of great stamina and vivacity.

Voice—Should be melodious and far-reaching.

A hound whose native home is France will make its bow to you in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE. Meet the basset hound.

THE BALD ROCK PROJECT

CONSTRUCTION of the Bald Rock project in California, one of the greatest power projects in the history of power development in the West, is now getting under way, instead of being delayed until next year. The total cost of the new power project will be eight and a half million dollars. The power house will be situated twenty miles up the Feather River from Las Plumas, the Great Western Power Co.'s power plant fed by the Lake Almanor reservoir. The new plant will have a record head of water, the drop being two thousand five hundred and eighty feet. This is one hundred feet higher than the present highest plant in the State.

ALASKAN LANDS RESERVED FOR LIGHTHOUSE

FIFTY-THREE parcels of public land along the coast of Alaska are desired as reservations for lighthouses and will be set aside for that purpose. According to information sent from the surveyor general stationed at Juneau, Alaska, no valid prior rights are attached to any of the lands or islands in question. Notice has been sent to the local land agents throughout Alaska to permit no appropriation of the tracts or islands under the homestead or other land laws.

Burglars' Day in Drydust

By Herbert Farris

Author of "'Society Red' from Painted Robe," etc.

THE cashier of The Drydust State Bank, Hubert N. Dabeny, consulted his watch and saw that it was twenty-seven minutes after nine. Hubert prided himself upon his promptness. It was an invariable rule with him to unlock the bank at nine thirty in the morning, and he was quite as punctilious about closing the bank at four in the afternoon. With a "so long, boys," he left the group in front of Lem Bragg's soft-drink parlor and took his bustling way to the bank.

Dabeny had formerly been a clerk in The Commercial Bank and Trust Company at Pine Bluff, and, being young and ambitious, had embraced opportunity when the first rap sounded upon the door of ambition. And Dabeny had been suitably rewarded for his three years of faithful service in The Commercial Bank at Pine Bluff, for, six months before, he had been transferred to the Commercial's newly established branch at Drydust.

At the door of the bank Dabeny paused and once more consulted his watch. It was now nine twenty-nine. With a full minute to spare, he surveyed the few men who were abroad on Drydust's single street. A young man of nearly his own age was riding down the street. The young man was "Society Red" O'Hearn, Drydust's newly appointed deputy sheriff. Dabeny's information was to the effect that O'Hearn owed his appointment to the fact that The Commercial Bank's president had prevailed upon Jud Adams, the county sheriff, to install a deputy in the village. Due to his information on this point, and regardless of its truth, Dabeny felt a proprietary interest in the young deputy, and hailed him.

"O'Hearn!" he called. "If you've got a minute to spare, I wish you'd come in."

With these words, and without a backward glance to see whether or not the deputy intended to obey his somewhat peremptory summons, Dabeny unlocked the door and entered.

Red frowned his disgust, sheered his big bay across the street, and dismounted. His bridle reins trailing, his horse minced daintily at dust-covered grass while Red entered the bank. With his Stetson perched well back on his flaming mop of red hair, and his spurs jangling at every step, Red strode to one of the bank's two grilled windows. He glanced contemptuously at the small sign above the window.

"Teller," he read aloud; then he removed his hat and grinned up at Dabeny through the window. "If I don't act right when I come in here, why, just you call me down for it, Dab'ny."

"How do you mean, act right?" the cashier asked with dignity.

"Well, here I am, talkin' to you through the teller's window, when

maybe I'd really ought to be pokin' my muzzle through the one that's labeled 'cashier.'"

Dabeny flushed to the roots of his shining khaki-colored hair, parted with much care and precision in the exact mathematical center of his egg-shaped head. For Dabeny was not only the bank's cashier; he was also its teller, stenographer, and janitor. In short, the entire responsibility for the bank's proper functioning and its ultimate success, rested upon the young shoulders of Hubert Dabeny and his shoulders alone. And the Atlaslike weight of his many obligations had already imparted a slight stoop to his thin shoulders.

"Listen, O'Hearn," he said, wisely ignoring Red's little joke, though the jibe at his expense had set him quivering, "have you heard about the bank robbery at Salesville?"

"Salesville?" Red pretended to consider the matter. "Salesville ain't in this county."

"No, it's in Gallatin County. But I thought I'd call it to your attention. It's a long way from here, but you can never tell where those fellows will strike next. Mind, I'm warning you; the responsibility is yours."

"It ain't *my* bank," Red protested with a trace of malice for the youthful guardian of the institution; "an' if it's robbed, the little I've got in it won't either make or break me. So why should *I* worry?"

Red was justified in making this sarcastic speech. Toward him, at least, Dabeny had always been arrogant, and Red resented the banker's supercilious attitude. Also, there was some feeling between them, by reason of their mutual interest in Jane Thurston, the daughter of a near-by rancher. But first of all, Red was an officer, and his happy-go-lucky speech was all pretense; in reality, he would stop at nothing to protect the property of the bank, or, for the matter of that, the property of any citizen in the community, and Dabeny, of course, knew this.

"Stop your foolishness, O'Hearn, and listen a minute. As you know, more than a dozen small banks have been looted in Montana during the past year, but even so, I'm not particularly worried. Until our new vault is installed next month, I'll keep just a few hundred on hand. Take to-day, for instance; there's less than two hundred in that old safe there. So, you see, I haven't a great deal to worry about."

Then what's the notion of tryin' to make *me* worry?" Red demanded indignantly. "If you're not worried about your bank why should I be?"

"But I *am* worried—just a little," said Dabeny seriously. "Not much, of course, but there are times when I can't help being worried. As you know, O'Hearn, these cattlemen hereabouts often surprise a man with the size of their deposits. Naturally I'm worried at such times, though I always shoot the money up to The Commercial at Pine Bluff at the earliest possible moment. But while it's here, I tell you, O'Hearn, the responsibility is something terrible."

"Boy, I don't see how you stand up under it," Red remarked ironically. "But what's all this stuff about bank robbin' got to do with the price of chop suey in New York? You didn't call me in here just to tell me a lot that I already know about the banks that's been robbed all over Montana."

"You're right; I didn't." With a portentous frown, Dabeny shoved a brief, typewritten letter through the window. "Read that," he said, and then I'll tell you what I'd like to have you do for me."

Red hastily scanned the letter. "I got nothin' to do with a mortgage to Eli Baker. I don't know anything about no suits to quit title, an' the rest of this stuff."

"I suppose not." Dabeny took the

letter from Red, and returned it to its file. "I showed you the letter in order that you might understand that the matters mentioned are important. I have to see Eli Baker to-day and secure a quitclaim deed from him in order to save The Commercial Bank at Pine Bluff the expense of a suit. I *must* see him to-day."

"Show me the guy that's holdin' you back from seein' this Eli Baker, an' I'll put him under arrest," Red volunteered facetiously.

"And what I wanted you to do," the unruffled Dabeny continued, "is to stay here for me while I ride out to Baker's place. I won't be gone long."

"Kid, you're crazy!" Red exclaimed. "I'd keep bank like—about like you'd hold down *my* job. If a man was to come in here an' ask me for a draft or anything like that, my hands'd be up, an' I'd be hollerin' for help."

"Naturally I wouldn't expect you to do anything that is at all difficult," Dabeny explained patiently. "I simply want you to sit here while I'm gone, and explain to any one who comes in that I'll return shortly. You see, I don't want to lock the bank. I've never done that yet; my policy is to always keep a bank open during banking hours."

"Well," said Red doubtfully, "I'll do it for you, if you'll promise not to be gone too long. Was you goin' right away?"

Dabeny reached for his hat. "Just as soon as I can get away."

"All right, I wish you'd do me a favor. If I'm goin' to be banker for you, you can do something for me. My horse out there needs exercise—I was just goin' for a little ride when you called me in here—so suppose you ride him out to Baker's place."

"Why certainly, and——"

"An' about my stayin' here," Red interrupted. "Suppose somebody wants to make a dee-posit. Want me to turn down real money?"

"Why, certainly not. Just accept the money and write out a deposit slip. Of course you know how to do that; any child understands." Dabeny had now reached the door. "That's all, I think; I won't be gone long."

"You don't want me to make any loans?"

"Of course not!" Dabeny snapped out. He was not in the least amused by Red's little joke. "Whatever you do, don't attempt anything funny while I'm gone."

Red seated himself at Dabeny's desk, placed his feet upon it, and rolled and lighted a cigarette. "There's nothin' that beats the life of a banker," he remarked as he took a deep drag at his cigarette. "Close the door softly when you go out, Dab'ny."

Dabeny closed the door with a bang, mounted Red's horse, and galloped off down the road. It was six miles to Eli Baker's ranch, and Dabeny wanted to finish his business and return to Drydust at twelve o'clock. Three miles out he met and was hailed by Traynor Moss, a well-known cattleman.

"Howdy, Dab'ny," the old man greeted him. "Bank closed, or what?"

"Oh, no," Dabeny replied pleasantly, "I never close my bank during banking hours. I've left Red O'Hearn there during my absence. Have you anything of importance to——"

"Nope," interrupted the old cattleman, "nothin' much." He clucked to his horse. "Just sold nearly a hundred head of beef stuff, so I've got a few thousan' to deposit, but I reckon Red can take care of me, all right. So long, Dab'ny."

Dabeny had an uneasy feeling that he should ride back to Drydust with Traynor Moss, accept the old man's deposit, then return to his errand with Eli Baker. However, to do this, meant that he could not see Baker before afternoon, and Dabeny did not care to delay the mat-

ter. Accordingly, with a shrug, he once more set off down the road.

Shortly after eleven o'clock that morning two strangers rode slowly into Drydust. Their arrival caused no comment, aroused no particular interest. A small group of loafers in front of Lem Bragg's soft-drink parlor glanced casually at the two strangers as they rode by, and from beneath the lowered brim of his Stetson, old Tom Applegate, who was sitting in front of The Brody House, appraised them with a shrewd blue eye. Possibly they were ranch owners, riding in from a distance, though this was unlikely; most probably they were ranch hands in search of work. They hitched their horses at a hitch rack beyond and paralleling the lower side of the bank, and entered.

Alone in the bank, Red O'Hearn rose from Dabeny's desk when the strangers entered. One of the men advanced briskly to the window labeled "cashier," and fumbled in an inner coat pocket; then he muttered something that was inaudible as he produced a worn letter and laid it in the window. An instant Red looked at the letter; then the stranger spoke. This time he spoke distinctly, and Red had no difficulty in understanding him.

"Pardner," he said with a cold, rasping voice, "my friend up there is awful steady. If you'll look to you right, you'll see that he's holdin' a gun on you. Don't go for yours, or he'll plug you, see?"

Red slowly turned his eyes. What the stranger had said was true. His companion was leaning over the low rail that extended from the door of the bank to the partition behind which Red was standing, and held steadily in the fellow's hand was a short, ugly-looking automatic. Unbidden, except by a short impatient jerk of the weapon, Red slowly raised his hands.

"That's right, kid," said the one who was covering Red. "You've got good sense." He laughed suddenly, surprisingly. "Look here, Joe," he mirthfully called to his companion, "look who's tendin' bar here!"

"What is it?" asked the one called Joe, who, with his hand at his hip, had stepped to the door and was looking out on the almost deserted street. What's so funny, Dick?"

"I ain't the *reg'lar* bartender!" Red interjected angrily. He's——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Dick with a menacing gesture of his automatic. "Why, Joe, here's a banker wearin' *chaps*. Funniest lookin' banker I ever saw; say, Joe, come an' take a look at 'im!"

"I got to watch this door." There was mixed anger and trepidation in Joe's voice. "Somebody's li'ble to happen along any time now; hurry an' make that guy dig up!"

Dick laughed. "Listen, Joe, we got no reason to hurry. Let's take our time, an' do this job right. To-day's goin' to be burglar's day, an' if we——"

"Dick! Are you plum crazy?"

"Crazy? See if you think I am." With a wary eye on Red, Dick picked up a heavy tin sign from the counter at his elbow, and carelessly tossed it over his shoulder. "Joe," he said, as the sign struck the floor, "it pays to use your head. To-day's a holiday—burglars' day. Hang that thing on the door outside; then pull down them blinds."

"Holiday?" With a puzzled frown Joe took the sign from the floor and turned it over; then, as he realized the full purport of his partner's cryptic remarks, he read the sign between chuckles of admiration. "'National Holiday—Bank Closed.' Say, Dick, this is sure pullin' a good one! But how long do you suppose it'll take these boobs here in town to figure out that it ain't a holiday?"

"Go on an' hang it out!" Dick rasped. "They wouldn't get wise in a hundred years. When they come along an' read that sign they'll likely think it's the

Fourth o' July, an' go to shootin' off firecrackers! Go on—get busy!"

Joe sobered and went into action. He hung out the sign, pulled down the shades, and released the catch on the lock of the door. Unfortunately for Red, who had hoped that the drawing of the shades would darken the room and give him an opportunity to draw his six-shooter, a small window at his back made such a thing impossible. He was now a better target for Dick than before the shades were drawn, and Dick, Red had long since decided, was a man who would kill without hesitation. Joe now stepped over the low railing.

"We got all the time we need, Dick," he said as he approached Red. "I got to hand it to you for havin' brains. It sure pays to use your head."

During the next half hour three men halted in front of the bank, each with the intention to enter. The first two were men who lived in the village; they hesitated momentarily, read the sign, and went their respective ways quite contented. The third, however, was old Zeb Taylor, who had spent the forenoon riding from his shack to the bank for a specific purpose. Old Zeb needed money; he needed it badly, and had made up his mind to try to negotiate a loan from Dabeny. Zeb, who was near-sighted, almost nosed the sign on the bank's door, and read aloud: "Bank closed."

"Well, dog-gone my old hide," he muttered disgustedly, "if it ain't just like me! Here I ain't been to town for nearly six months, an' when I do decide to come, I gotta pick me out a nay-tional holiday. Let's see, now, what holiday *is* it?"

He began naming them, counting them off on his fingers as he did so. "There's the Fourth o' July; there's Columbus Day; there's Memorial Day; there's Chris'mas, Thanksgivin', an' New Year's. An, then, let's see. Here in Montana, the leg'slature's made us a holiday what they call Amer'can Injun Day. But, shucks, to-day's the first—or maybe it's the second—day of June. None of them holidays falls durin' the fore part of June. Still an' all," old Zeb concluded as he shambled off up the street, "she's a holiday of some kind all right, for Dab'ny knows what he's doin'. Dab'ny knows."

Old Zeb had gone but a short distance when the beat of a galloping horse caused him to turn about. It was young Dabeny. Old Zeb recognized him instantly. Surely here was a piece of good luck; even if it was a holiday, he could arrange for the loan, or, possibly, Dabeny would lend him the money right out of his own pocket. Hopefully old Zeb retraced his steps, and met Dabeny just as the young banker dismounted in front of the bank.

"Say, Dab'ny," said the old man earnestly, "I'd like to make a little borrowin' from either you or your bank. Seein' that it's a holiday, I reckon it'll have to be from you, because——"

"Holiday, your foot!" interrupted the impatient Dabeny. "This is no holiday!"

"Why, sure it is, Dab'ny; you done got your sign out, ain't you?"

Dabeny shot a swift glance at the door of the bank. Speechless with astonishment, he looked at the drawn shades and the holiday sign; then, with an exclamation of anger, directed at a certain young deputy sheriff, he raced to the door of the bank.

"Confound him, anyhow!" Dabeny was fumbling for his keys. "I might have known he would do some fool thing like this. If he's playing some idiotic practical joke on me, I'll——"

Dabeny opened the door and stepped inside. Accustomed as his eyes were to the glare of the June sun, he could see nothing at first. Hurriedly he threw up the shades and looked about him. At first he saw no one; then, as he vaulted over the low rail leading from

door to partition, his eyes fell upon the figure of a man lying prone on the floor. He recognized Red at a glance, and sprang forward.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded sharply.

A faded blue handkerchief, securely knotted over Red's mouth, prevented him from making verbal response to Dabeny, but there was nothing to check the eloquence of the young deputy's blue eyes, and they spoke volumes. Before asking any more questions Dabeny untied the ropes which bound Red hand and foot; then he started to remove the handkerchief gag. But Red was ahead of him. He tore the handkerchief from his face, threw it from him, and turned quickly upon Dabeny with sharp, flashing eyes.

"Did they go your way—did you meet 'em when you rode in from Baker's?"

"Meet—meet who?" Dabeny stammered.

"Why, the robbers; two strangers. Did you meet 'em?"

For the first time it flashed upon Dabeny that Red was in deadly earnest; that the bank had been robbed. Instantly followed the thought of his meeting with Traynor Moss, and the intention of the old cattleman to make a deposit of several thousand dollars with Red.

"Was—did Traynor Moss make a deposit with you? Did——"

"Yes, Moss was in an' made his deeposit—but did you meet 'em?"

Red had seized Dabeny by the shoulders and was shaking him violently. "I want to know which way they went. They haven't been gone ten minutes; did you meet 'em—quick!"

"Yes, about a half mile out of town; but——"

Red had shot through the door, however, and Dabeny broke off his speech when he realized that he was talking to the empty bank—a bank that was deserted, save for old Zeb Taylor, who was gazing mournfully at the young banker.

"It's too bad, Dab'ny," said old Zeb with a sympathetic shake of his head. It's too bad they got away with it." He went on, speaking more to himself than to Dabeny. "An' now, I reckon it won't be in the cards for me to borrow my twenty-five dollars from the bank." The old man suddenly brightened. "Unless," he added hopefully, "Red happens to catch them burglars."

"You get out of here, you croaking old idiot!" Dabeny shouted the words at old Zeb, then took a few tottering steps to his desk, collapsed in his chair, and buried his face in his arms. A minute later he arose and stared vacantly at the litter of papers which covered the floor; then his eyes rested upon the rifled safe which stood in one corner of the room, and finally upon old Zeb who was mournfully staring at him. "Get out of here," he repeated mechanically.

Old Zeb left the bank and took his shambling way to The Brody House. Tom Applegate, Drydust's ancient stock buyer, was still sitting idly on the porch. He looked up at Zeb's approach.

"Tom," said old Zeb, much inflated with the importance of the news, "the bank over there's done been robbed."

"The thunder you say!" Applegate was on his feet instantly. "I'll bet it was the two I saw come ridin' in over an hour ago! An' I saw Red light out less than five minutes ago like the devil was after him. Me, I'm a goin' to light out after Red, an' see if I can help him!"

Five minutes later Applegate thundered forth from the hitch barn and took to the road. Dabeny came out of the bank, locked the door, and listlessly walked to The Brody House. It was noon, but Dabeny did not eat. An hour went by. He returned to the bank and went apathetically about his work. During the next hour a dozen men dropped

in; some of them had business to transact, ostensibly at least, though most of them were frankly curious, and questioned Dabeny about the bank's loss until the young banker was almost frantic. At three o'clock old Zeb rushed in with the news that Red was returning.

"An' he's a-bringin' one of them pesky burglars in with him," Zeb announced enthusiastically. "It sure takes Red to land 'em!"

Almost the entire population of Drydust was on hand to witness the triumphal entry of Red. Ahead of him rode one of the robbers, the one called Dick. Dabeny's face was a study. Two men had robbed the bank, and Red had captured but one. Was the prisoner the one who had on his person the money deposited by Traynor Moss? Red's face was beaming, and Dabeny quickly took heart.

"You got the right party, did you?" he called, as Red halted. "This fellow's the one who got the money?"

"Sure he's the right party," Red replied. "I watched him stick the money in his pocket when I was layin' there on the floor. I lost the other one—his pardner. You see, when they come to the forks of the road a few miles out, they divided. One went to the right, an' the other to the left. Of course, I took out after the one that had the money."

"Good for you, O'Hearn!" shouted the exultant Dabeny. "I was terribly worried, but I might have known that you would use excellent judgment!"

The time seemed particularly propitious to old Zeb Taylor. Dabeny had recovered the bank's money, and now was the psychological moment to ask for that loan. Dabeny was in the best of spirits now. Perhaps—Zeb carefully studied the young cashier, who was still smilingly complimenting Red. Perhaps Dab'ny might be induced to double the amount. At any rate, it would do no harm to ask. Zeb huskily cleared his throat.

"Dab'ny," he asked plaintively, "now that you've got your money back, how about lendin' me that fifty dollars I asked you for this mornin'?"

Dabeny wheeled upon Zeb. "*Fifty* dollars!" he shouted. "Why, you old scoundrel, you asked for only twenty-five this morning!"

"Listen, Dab'ny." This from Red. "Let him have his fifty, an' I'll go on his note. Zeb's slow pay, but he's good."

"All right," said Dabeny, "and now let's have the money from this outlaw."

"Come on," Red commanded, "dig up the bank's money. I saw you stick it away in your inside coat pocket."

Dick, the bank robber, fished in his pocket and produced a crumpled roll of bills which he handed to Dabeny. Dabeny swiftly counted the money.

"There's only a hundred and ninety here," said Dabeny. "Give me the rest of it—there's five thousand, two hundred more."

"You're crazy with the heat, young fella." Dick looked long and searchingly at Dabeny. "Either that, or you're tryin' to make a big play with this crowd. Say, I don't think you *ever* had as much as five thousan' in that dinky bank of yours. Anyhow, I give you all I got."

The bank robber's speech was obviously true, and Dabeny was once more on the verge of a collapse. He looked wildly about, and at last he saw Red, the man he quickly decided was responsible for the loss.

"O'Hearn!" he shouted. "You let these fellows fool you. You brought in the wrong man after all!"

Red, who had been holding a whispered conversation with old Zeb Taylor, was unaware of the cause of the uproar. "Why, Dab'ny," he remonstrated softly, "what's got into you? Sure I got the right man."

"You *did* not!" Dabeny was almost

frantic. "You brought in the man who had one hundred and ninety dollars, and the man who had the five thousand—well, you didn't do a thing but let him go!"

"Five thou——" Red was grinning now. "No wonder you're all excited, Dab'ny. You see, when Traynor Moss made his dee-posit, right at first I didn't hardly know what to do with it." While Red was speaking, he was fumbling for a pocket under his chaps. "Anyhow, I didn't like to trust that little tin safe that a man could open with a can opener, so I just stuck it in my pocket, an'—here she is."

Dabeny was too astounded to think of counting the money that Red handed him. "And you've been carrying this around with you all this time," he muttered in a small, awe-struck voice. He laughed nervously. "Well, I'll certainly never leave *you* in charge of the bank again."

"Just think, Red," old Zeb piped up with a shrill cackle of delight, "if one of them bad men had of shot you, an' all this money'd been found on you when you was dead, Dabeny'd sure of thought *you* was the biggest burglar of 'em all."

"Reckon you're right, Zeb, an' it looks like all us burglars was caught today." Red was quizzically studying a cloud of dust at the end of the village street. "First you get caught tryin' to make Dab'ny double the loan you wanted; I caught Dick, here; Dab'ny just got me with the goods on; an' now here comes old Tom Applegate with the *other* one. Yes, sir, it sure does look like a holiday—burglars' day."

EXTRA WARDENS FOR TEXAS PANHANDLE

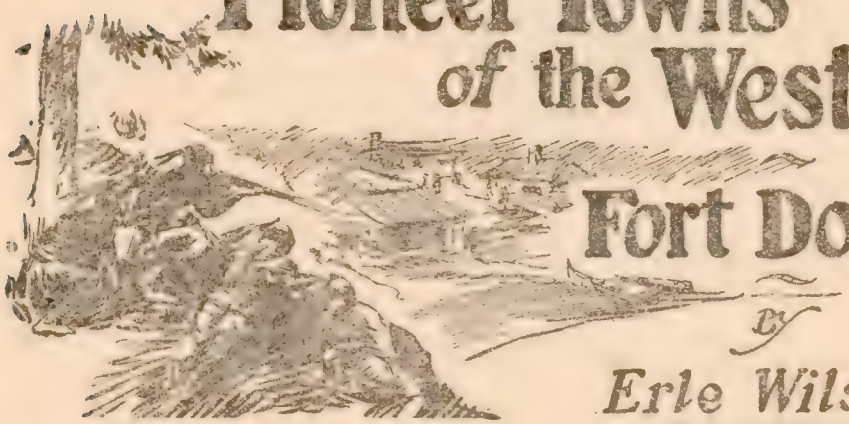
DEPUTY Game Warden D. B. Garmon, of Panhandle, Texas, has recently announced the addition of between fifty and seventy-five special deputy game wardens to the staff working in the Panhandle section of the Lone Star State. These men will use every effort to run down game-law violators, and game poachers will find tough sledding. A special warning was issued to killers of prairie chickens. The law provides a fine of from twenty-five to two hundred dollars for every prairie chicken killed, so that this is likely to prove an expensive form of outdoor sport.

PASSING OF CHILLIWACK PIONEER

ONE of the early settlers of the Chilliwack Valley in British Columbia died recently at Chilliwack. The career of this man, James Armstrong, was a picturesque and interesting one. As a boy, he left his home near St. Mary's, Ontario, to join in the gold rush to California. For a number of years he engaged in freighting in New Mexico and California. In 1884 he went to the Chilliwack Valley, where he engaged in logging operations at Katz Landing, near Hope, his partners being Johnnie Campbell and "Baldy" McRae.

Two years later he purchased a farm on Camp River Road. About eighteen years ago he took up his residence in the town of Chilliwack, where he recently died at the age of seventy-nine.

Pioneer Towns of the West



Fort Dodge

By

Erle Wilson

Author of "Dallas," etc.

WHEN the West was still an unexplored wilderness, a scattering of pioneers built themselves cabins on the Des Moines River, where it flows slightly west and north of the center of the State of Iowa. The Indians of the surrounding district resented this encroachment of pale faces upon the banks of the stream which they called "Moingona," and in savage fashion expressed their hostility by frequent raids. It was to protect the white men from Indian warfare that Fort Clark was built among the cabins in the year 1850.

The following year the name of the fort was changed by order of the secretary of war to Fort Dodge in honor of Colonel Henry Dodge. This officer had a brilliant military career behind him, having served as a Lieutenant-Colonel of Missouri Volunteers in the War of 1812, and also as a Colonel of the Michigan Mounted Volunteers in the Black Hawk War.

In 1853 the pioneer fort on the banks of the Des Moines was abandoned. A little later a town was laid out on the site. Fort Dodge was chartered as a city in 1869. From this time onward the growth of this town has been steady, until to-day it is the metropolis of northwest Iowa, with a population of 27,000.

To the east of the city lies the most valuable gypsum bed in the United States, extending over an area of fifty square miles. Fort Dodge is therefore America's largest producer of gypsum products, being known as the "Gypsum City." To the south of Fort Dodge coal abounds, as well as limestone quarries and deposits of clay. The town's second largest industry is the manufacture of clay products. It is also a large hog and grain-buying market.

Surrounding Fort Dodge is a rich farming country, for the agricultural products of which this Iowa city is the market. It is also a railroad center, sixty freight trains and seventy-eight passenger trains running in and out of its stations daily. Here it is that the Des Moines River is spanned by the Chicago Great Western railway steel bridge, one of the longest in the country.

Fort Dodge has many splendid public buildings, among which are a public library, a hospital, nineteen churches, nine modern ward school buildings, three parochial schools, a modern high school building, a country club, three

hotels, and a fine municipal building. This city owns its own water works plant, the supply being secured from artesian wells. It has a paid fire department with modern equipment, owns its own hydro-electric plant; forty-seven miles of asphalt, concrete and bithumlite paving, and a modern electric light and power plant.

This progressive western town has four parks. Oleson Park, given to the city by the former state senator, O. M. Oleson, comprises some eighty acres of wooded ground, and is one of the beauty spots of Fort Dodge. Phinney Park, located on the west bank of the Des Moines River, was donated to the city by the late Joseph Phinney, and Reynolds Park, situated in the eastern part of the residential district of the city, was the gift of George Reynolds, a former townsman. There is also the Public Square Park, which, while smaller than the former ones, nevertheless is a welcome resting spot for weary pedestrians.

Eight miles southeast of Fort Dodge is Wild Cat Cave, a ravine cut out through the centuries by a rushing stream which to-day is a sluggish flowing brook. Among the western walls are a series of six or seven shallow chambers hollowed out of the soft sandstone cliffs which tower upward sixty or seventy feet. A few miles beyond this interesting spot along the wooded banks of the Des Moines River is the well known and very pretty Dolliver Memorial State Park, which is reached by highways passing through Fort Dodge.

Fort Dodge is the county seat of Webster County. It has the commission form of city government, the present mayor being C. V. Findlay.

In next week's issue Seattle, Washington, a pioneer town of the West, will be discussed.

CALIFORNIA QUAIL'S LONG TRIP

SOME weeks ago, a California mountain quail hoboed its way from its native clime, concealed in a carload of lumber consigned to Lansing, Michigan. Workmen unloading the lumber discovered the bird; it was so weak from lack of food and water, as well as from the travel and confinement, that it could not make an effort to escape. It was taken to the conservation department offices, and from there was sent to the game farm at Mason. Efforts to introduce the California quail into Michigan have hitherto been unsuccessful. The California species are of about the same size as the Michigan birds, but darker in hue, and they are unable to stand the rigors of the winters in the latter State.

TOTEM POLE FOR GREAT WHITE FATHER

AS this is being written, an eighty-foot totem pole is having the finishing touches put to it on the Taholah Indian reservation in the State of Washington. This totem pole tells in its odd way the story of the Northwest from the earliest times to the recent settlement of land grants. The totem pole is a gift to President Coolidge as a tribute to his administration for awarding payment to the Indians of the Northwest for their forest lands. The work is being done by Chief George Sheldon, who is an expert at this form of primitive Indian art.

The Desert Cheater

By

Kenneth Gilbert

Author of "The Beast," etc.

OLD Ranse Brockett came out of his cabin hidden among the cottonwoods at the foot of the mesa and stared off into the desert, with squinting eyes habitually puckered from peering across long, empty expanses where the fierce sunlight is almost blinding. By night the desert would be a mystic spot breathing an almost imperceptible perfume from hardy, flowering shrubs, and the great stars blazing overhead would seem to be very near to earth; but now, in the pitiless glare of midday, the desolation of the place was revealed in its nakedness. It was an evil spot of eternally shifting sands, foul alkaline pools charged with arsenic, and whitened with borax deposits.

He shaded his eyes and peered more intently in one direction, off to the southwest. Old he was, yet his eyesight was still good. What he saw would hardly have been visible to eyes untrained to the desert, but high in the air, two miles away, perhaps a great deal farther, tiny black specks were floating lazily in space.

The movements of these specks—huge buzzards they were—interested Brockett mightily. Some living thing out there was in trouble. It might be some animal, enticed from the hills by the promise of food, who had penetrated too far into the desert, and was now about to pay the supreme penalty which the desert exacts—death by thirst.

For Brockett, wise from long watching these grim birds which are the harbingers of death, knew that it was not a man. High though the birds were in air, they would be circling still higher if a human being was their ultimate prey. It was only when the thing was a dumb brute of some kind that they flew as low as they did now. Brockett went back into his cabin.

In the single bunk was another man; gaunt, pasty-colored, who looked as though he had just pulled through some terrible sickness. His eyes were still unnaturally bright, as though the fever which had racked him, still burned in his body. But at sight of Brockett, he smiled, a grateful smile, it seemed.

"Is—is there anything out there?" he asked. Brockett shook his head.

"Buzzards hev spotted somethin'," he announced. "But it ain't a man, for they're flyin' too low. Still, they're up a bit high at that. When I first glimpsed 'em, I'd a sworn they'd spotted a man—but they're too low, it seems like." He sighed.

"How yuh feelin', 'Professor?'" he

went on. "Want a drink o' water, or somethin'? Hungry? Or can yuh wait till supper time?"

The other man smiled.

"I can wait," he said. Old Ranse nodded.

"Like to hear yuh say that," he remarked. "Waitin'—that's me, too. Why, I been waitin' five years now, or maybe it's ten—I dunno. And I reckon I can keep on waitin' a spell yet."

The other stirred in his bunk.

"Waiting?" he asked, "What for? You know, sir, that since I've been getting my senses back, I've fallen to wondering what it is that makes you live out here alone on the edge of the desert. Whatever the reason is, I owe my life to it! It must be nearly a week since you went out there and got me—crazy I must have been, with the heat and the thirst. And those cursed birds wheeling high up in the sky over me, watching, watching for the time when I'd stop crawling, and lie still. I tell you, sir, it was the knowledge that those birds were up there, waiting for me to die, that kept me going! And then you found me."

The old man stared out of the open door with unseeing eyes.

"Them buzzards know somethin' about waitin', too," he said. "And if they hadn't marked you down, I'd never have known you were out there, needin' me.

"Nor you ain't the first one I've picked up. Reckon there must be nigh onto twenty people I've rescued from the desert out thar, and all on account of them buzzards flyin' high, like they do when a man is about to give up the fight. I ain't never found the one yet that I'm lookin' for! But some day—it's an old man's hunch, Professor—the man I'm waitin' for is comin' back this way. Them old buzzards are goin' to fly higher than ever, that day."

The desert silence crept into the cabin; the utter stillness of a spot where winds seldom blew; where the pattering of rain was not known, and where nothing happened from one day to the next before man came. Noiselessly, a lizard dragged his scaly length upon a flat rock outside the door and lay there steeping in the blistering sunshine. Within the cabin, a fly droned uneasily. The man in the bunk propped himself up on elbow.

"What goes up has got to come down, ain't it, Professor?" went on old Rance. "Pete Stallings went into the desert five or mebbe it was ten years ago. Reckon he hit for Mexico. Some day he'll come back, if the greasers don't kill him, and it's a hundred to one bet that he comes back this way. If he didn't come back this way, he'd have to hit for the seacoast and board a ship.

"But he won't do that; he'll backtrack his own trail. I know Pete. When he comes, I'll be waitin' for him He was a middle-aged man then, same as me; he'll be close to sixty-five now." Old Ranse rubbed his stubbled chin, in contemplation.

"Me and him were partners," he resumed. "We'd knocked around together for a long time, but never had any luck prospectin' till we made the strike that built the town of Diomede. There was a stampede thar, and inside of a month from the time that we came out to Coconino with gold, Diomede was a real minin' camp. She's goin' strong yet, although the claim we had petered out about the time I came here.

"Pete and me quarreled over some darn fool thing that seemed mighty important to two old desert rats who hev been cooped up together too long. Our claim was about a mile out of Diomede, and Pete throws his stuff together and announces that him and me has busted. He'd been worried anyway, I reckon, for he'd been throwin' his gold away, and the claim we had turned out to be only a pretty rich pocket with no real ledge. But I'd been savin' my gold. I

had nearly twenty thousand hid in the cabin. When Pete had got over his foolishness, I was goin' to take it and stake ourselves to some little place down in the California hills, where we could spend the rest of our days in peace. It was just goin' to be my surprise for Pete.

"But he hits for Diomede, and I don't see him again. A week later, I steps out of my cabin one night, and somebody who's been layin' for me just outside the door, wallops me over the head with a six-shooter. I clinches with him, and we battle for a few seconds, when he slugs me again, and I go out. When I come to, the shack has been turned inside out, and the gold is gone. It was too dark for me to see who it was that slugged me, but, when I got to lookin' around, I found out who it was. It was Pete Stallings!"

The man on the bunk leaned forward, interested.

"How do you know?" he asked.

Old Ranse fumbled in his shirt pocket and brought forth a rolled-up red handkerchief, faded and discolored. From it he shook a pale-yellow and black stone, a cat's-eye setting such as might have once graced a ring.

"'Twas Pete's," said old Ranse simply. "I give it to him years back. Picked it up from a peddler in Diomede, and I reckoned Pete would like it. A solid gold ring, she was, set with this here stone.

"'You're the champion flapjack maker in the hull West,' I tells him. 'Here's a mark o' my appreciation.'

"How do I know it was Pete who slugged and robbed me? I find this stone outside the door, where we'd fought it out before he clipped me the last time."

Old Ranse got up and pottered about the stove.

"Reckon I might as well get supper under way," he announced. The fire started, he turned to the stranger again.

"How yuh feelin'?" he asked solicitously. The man smiled.

"Better," he replied. Then, after a pause:

"Why do you call me 'Professor?'" Old Ranse looked at him quizzically.

"Yuh haven't told me much about yuhrself," he said. "Yuh don't seem to be a cowman or a prospector. Seem more like a city feller. Thought maybe yuh was one of these here fossil hunters who maybe got lost out there in the desert. Yuh came from Cuyalpa, didn't yuh? That's a hundred and twenty miles across the sand and sagebrush. And yuh tried to make it on foot!"

The other grinned.

"You're right about my being a 'city feller,' as you say," he answered. "But I've knocked around the West for quite some time. I'm not much good, to tell you the truth. I've been a gambler all my life, and when the luck has gone against me, I've done worse." He mused for a moment.

"You might have been hasty about judging your pardner."

"Nope," returned old Ranse firmly, "although I wish to heaven I was! But he jumped me, shore as yuh're a foot high! Him losin' the set from the ring, in the fight we had, proves it. I heard later that he'd struck across the desert for Cuyalpa and Mexico. First off, I was goin' to track him down and kill him, but, thinks I, he'll be comin' back this way some day, so I builds me this shack out here on the edge of the desert, and sets down to wait.

"I've done some good, at that. When I figger on all the people I've saved from dyin' out thar in the sand, I reckon I'm kinda repaid for what I suffered when Pete Stallings turned out to be a no-good skunk. Why, I've bunked, suffered, and shared with that feller since I don't know when! More like a brother to me, than a pardner, Pete was."

The man in the bunk turned his eyes hungrily toward the food on the stove.

Old Ranse lifted the cover of the soup kettle and surveyed its contents with a practiced eye. Then he went outside again, to shade his eyes and peer at those distant specks circling in air. When he reëntered the cabin, there was an odd look in his eyes.

"Bad luck shore does run in streaks, Professor, don't it?" he remarked, as he walked to the water bucket and began filling a canteen that hung on the wall just back of the bench. "Them buzzards are flyin' higher than I ever seen 'em before. I'm goin' out thar.

"When I pulled you out of the desert a week ago, it was the first time in six months that anybody had been in trouble out thar. But now some other poor cuss is up against it. Them buzzards don't make any mistake about a man; and they're sure wheelin' high right this minute.

"I won't be gone long; probably two or three hours. I'll put some of this grub where yuh can get it."

He did as he said; then threw the strap of the canteen over his shoulder, and stepped out of the door.

"See yuh later, Professor."

Out in the glare, the heat smote him as from the opened door of a blast furnace. His foot scuffed a clump of sagebrush, and at the sound there came from just beyond a dry rattle, the warning of a diamond back. But old Ranse was not concerned with snakes. He fixed his eyes on those wheeling dots in the heavens and trudged on.

His seamed old face, dried out by years in desert places and wind-burned until it had the color and texture of saddle leather, reddened more deeply with the heat. Fine alkali dust rose lazily after him and hung in air. Now and then his heavy shoe crunched sand crystallized with salt, or crumbling black rock.

Higher and higher rose the buzzards. They were perhaps two miles away; no great distance as distances go, but a tremendous stretch in this place. Old Ranse wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and trudged on.

Many times he had done this before; always when he set out thus he had the thrill, the anticipation of a hunter who drew close to his game without knowing just what that game can be. Ranse hoped that the person would be Stallings.

Experienced as he was, the old man knew how to find his way to the object which the buzzards indicated. Ceaselessly, the big birds wheeled overhead. Old Ranse paused a moment and wet his lips with water from the canteen.

"'Tain't far now," he said aloud.

Yet in that waste, with its humps and hollows and patches of sagebrush, it was not so easy to locate the object of the buzzards' scrutiny as it would have seemed. It took old Ranse a full hour, with the sun beating down pitilessly, before he made the discovery.

The man, his torn clothing powdered with alkali dust, and his body caked with it, lay face downward in the thin shade of a clump of brush. Old Ranse swung the canteen from his shoulder and bent over. The man's hands were clenched in the sand, and he stirred feebly, as though trying to rise.

His shirt had been shredded to ribbons; his shoes were worn so that only the uppers remained, and these clung around his ankles, exposing his bare feet. Gently, old Ranse turned him over, stared hard for a moment, then broke into a cackling laugh. He got up and chuckled again. He slapped his thigh in his mirth, then bent forward again and peered hard into the half-lidded eyes of the sufferer.

"I been waitin' for you a long time, Pete," he announced.

For a moment old Ranse pondered; then decision came to his eyes. He put his arm under the other, and lifted him to a sitting position. Old Ranse re-

moved the cupped top of the canteen and measured out a bare spoonful of water, which he held to the swollen lips. The liquid disappeared as though it had been poured on dry ground. The sufferer groaned and stirred. Old Ranse eyed him in silence for a moment.

Then he stared aloft at the wheeling buzzards and apostrophized them.

"You're waitin' and watchin' up there, ain't you, wonderin' if you're goin' to be disappointed again. I swore that you wouldn't be—this time—and I don't go back on my word very often. But——"

He bent over the sick man again and poured another teaspoonful of water between the lips. The sufferer stirred and opened his eyes wider.

"Pete," said old Ranse,"Pete, do yuh know me?"

The eyes were vacant, unseeing. Old Ranse appeared disappointed.

"Pretty far gone," he said aloud. "Off his nut, mostlike. He don't know me—don't know that it's me that has him in the holler of my hand. Reckon he don't even remember the dirt he done me. If he don't recognize me, he won't understand——"

A little more water; then old Ranse resolutely stoppered the canteen and swung it over his shoulder. The head of the sufferer now lay in the sand; a grayed head, like that of an old badger. Old Ranse crouched and drew the other's arms over his own shoulders. Then he arose, with the other hanging on to him pickaback fashion, Old Ranse began the weary trudge back to his cabin.

It was a blistering day, hotter than ever old Ranse had known it before; or else he was getting so old that his powers of resistance were gone. He did not go far before he was compelled to put down his burden and rest.

The water was producing a reaction in the sufferer. He stirred restlessly and mumbled unintelligible things. Old Ranse judiciously gave him a few more drops of the precious fluid; then picked him up again.

A hundred yards was the limit that the old man could carry his burden without stopping. The labor produced a fierce thirst, which he quenched sparingly. After he had gone a half mile, he sat down for a longer rest than usual. He wiped his brow, and regarded the incumbent Stallings with new anger.

"What an old fool I be, luggin' yuh like this, when I'd ort to let the buzzards take yuh!" he exclaimed. "But unless yuh *understand,* why, it's no good. And I've been waitin' too long to pass up this chance."

He rose to his feet a trifle unsteadily and picked up his burden again.

"Gosh, yuh're heavy for an old desert rat," he complained. "Seems like yuh weighed a ton!"

Somehow the next half mile was accomplished. But the cabin was still a good mile farther. Old Ranse himself, tired as he had never been before, threw himself on the sand beside the sick man and lay with eyes half-closed, praying for strength.

He removed the stopper of the canteen and shook its contents, which gurgled enticingly.

"Two drinks," he said aloud, addressing the unconscious man. "One for each of us."

He took the first one, not daring to trust the dazed Stallings. Only half of it, and then he held the canteen to the other's lips. Stallings gulped the water in one swallow and sucked at the neck of the container, but the canteen was empty. Old Ranse debated a moment; then tossed the canteen aside.

"Gosh, I'll hev to make it now on nerve," he muttered. He shouldered Stallings with considerable effort and staggered on.

Not so far now, but it was growing hotter. Old Ranse admitted to himself he was growing weaker. Now and then

he had sensations of faintness, dizziness. The terrific exertion he had put himself to, coupled with the intense heat, was too much for his old heart. He felt himself becoming light-headed, and the thought made him swear. Odd it would be, indeed, if after waiting all these years for this moment of vengeance, he would be cheated of it by "going out" himself. The suggestion brought new determination, and he fought.

He topped a little rise of scab rock, and pondered a moment, Stallings on his back, while he set a straight course for the cabin, which he could almost see among the cottonwoods at the foot of the mesa. Then, he struck out once more, scuffing his way through sand and sagebrush. He trod upon a piece of crumbling shales, and as he did so, there came a warning buzz, startlingly loud, almost under his right foot. Involuntarily, he leaped, shifting his load, and at that precise instant his ankle turned. The weight of Stallings bore him down. There was a wrench that made him cry out, and then he fell, twisting in agony with a sprained ankle. The giant diamond-back rattler, who was the cause of his misfortune, glided away silently.

Realization of his predicament smote him, and almost he gave way to a panic that would make him grovel and scream and claw futilely at the sand, but by a superhuman effort he retained control of himself. Then he swore softly and thought grimly of the trick fate had played upon him.

Under ordinary circumstances, old Ranse knew that despite the ankle upon which he could bear no weight, he could hobble or crawl the rest of the distance to the cabin. But this was no ordinary circumstance. The tremendous exertion of carrying Stallings had sapped his strength; the sun had burned energy out of him, and already his tongue and throat were dry for want of water.

The Professor, the man whom he had rescued a week before, was not likely to be of any assistance. In fact old Ranse doubted whether The Professor had strength enough to crawl from his bunk. But the gambler might have been largely shamming. In any event, old Ranse felt that he was in a bad way.

"The buzzards are goin' to get yuh anyway, Pete," declared the old man. "I wanted yuh to know that it was me that pulled yuh out of the desert, before I killed yuh. But I reckon I've got to be satisfied with savin' my own life."

Painfully he set off on a crawl. Weakness overtook him, and he was compelled to rest before he had gone many feet. The heat was maddening; it seemed to sear into his body.

"Don't believe I'm goin' to make it."

Nevertheless, he set off again. When he halted once more he cocked a curious eye skyward. The sinister birds were still wheeling up there; they seemed to be directly over *him* now—and closer to earth, too, as though they knew the end could not be far away.

He struggled on.

At last he stopped to look back. For an instant he forgot his torture, in the amazement that gripped him. Stallings was crawling after him!

Possibly the water had revived the man; it might have been the jar of the fall when old Ranse collapsed that had shaken consciousness back into him. In any event, he was blindly following; crazed, perhaps, yet automatically fighting for life. The sight heartened old Ranse.

"Come—on, Pete." So dry were his tongue, throat, and lips, that he could not finish. But Stallings seemed to have heard, for he kept coming. Now he was up with old Ranse. His eyes, glaring with semidelirium, nevertheless mirrored intelligence.

"Yuh—Ranse?" The question was barely a whisper, a hoarse, croaking whisper. "I was lookin' for yuh." Seemingly it was not an unusual thing that Stallings should have found his

former partner out here; or else his mind was too confused to regard it as extraordinary.

Yet the words certainly caused real anger to flare up in Old Ranse once more.

"Reckon—yuh have," he replied, his parched throat giving the words a sibilant sound. "I been lookin' for yuh, for nigh onto five year, or maybe it was ten. Waitin', waitin' all that time, Pete, just to kill yuh.

"I'm glad yuh know me. Now them old buzzards can get yuh——"

He broke off, and his head dropped on the sand. The first fainting spell that comes to the victim of the desert, had gripped him. Stallings hitched himself closer.

"Ranse!" he said hoarsely, shaking the old man's shoulder. "Ranse!" But the other did not answer. Stallings grimaced with pain; the agony that comes of summoning to duty muscles which have already been taxed beyond the limit.

Then happened a curious thing. The delirious light in his eyes grew stronger. Weakly he staggered to his feet, and stayed there, held upright by strength from a source in his body which normal mind did not control, but which obeyed the indomitable will.

Old Ranse was stirring again, the fainting spell past. Still with that remarkable strength, Stallings dragged him to his feet. Stallings said nothing; his eyes shone with the same unnatural glare, yet his arm was around old Ranse, supporting him.

And the two of them walked!

A few feet, and then they fell. But once more both old men struggled to their feet. As if sensing that something unusual was taking place, something that would baffle them, the lowering buzzards circled higher. Their time was not yet.

Falling, rising to walk a few steps; or perhaps crawling side by side, old Ranse Brockett and the man whom he had waited years to kill, went on.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard. A lizard, lying directly in their path, noted their approach, but so slow and gradual it was that he lazily refused to move until they were all but on top of him. Coiled beneath a clump of sagebrush alongside the trail, a rattlesnake regarded them from lidless eyes, but did not sound his warning. They did not seem to be menacing, so slowly did they move.

They went on. And somehow they made it. The fierce heat of day had given way to the coolness of night, with big stars, like drops of cold fire, hanging close to earth, as the two old men reached the cabin.

This much done, both collapsed and lay insensible for hours, while their racked bodies went about the work of physical readjustment. The east was salmon-colored with the early dawn when they aroused, strengthened and refreshed. Younger men would have "come back" sooner, but these two were old.

"Ranse," said Pete Stallings at last, "I'm glad to see yuh. When I left yuh, I went to Diomede and tried to drown my troubles in wildcat likker. A feller who was real chummy with me, pumped me all about myself and about yuh, too. I don't remember much after that, because when I woke up I was broke, and sore at the world, and I hit across the desert for Mexico. After that——"

But they had made their way into the interior of the cabin, which was empty. Pinned to a blanket on the bunk was a paper, which old Ranse unfolded, and read in the gray light. It said:

OLD-TIMER: It's a small world after all, and we meet again. I didn't dare tell you the truth, when you confided your secret to me. But your partner is innocent.

I met him in Diomede and robbed him, for he was drunk. He had told me about you and hinted of your cache of gold dust. So I went out there and stuck you up. In our

scrap I lost the set from the ring, which I had taken from your partner a few hours before. I took your gold and squandered it. And in return, you saved my life, which is worthless.

I got to thinking it over to-day, after you give me the facts, and, weak though I am, I determined to go on, rather than face you. Good-by and good luck and when you find your partner, if you ever do, remember that he was square with you.

THE PROFESSOR.

Old Ranse handed over the letter to Stallings, and when the latter had finished reading, Brockett stared hard at the one-time friend whom he had waited years to kill. Then he held out his hand.

"Pete," said old Ranse, "I reckon it pays to wait, sometimes. If I'd killed yuh out there, or left yuh for the buzzards——"

"But yuh didn't," returned Stallings, "and 'twas mighty good for both of us that yuh didn't. I've got the finest little claim over back of Cuyalpa that yuh ever see. I'm all loaded up with gold dust now; bringing it to yuh, for half of it's yuhrs, Ranse."

Old Brockett sighed

"My gosh, I *thought* you were consarned heavy!" he remarked.

PIONEER KICKS POST TO CELEBRATE

RESIDENTS of Plattsmouth, Nebraska, were somewhat surprised at the actions of an elderly gentleman who visited their town a few weeks ago. He was of prosperous appearance, with a youthful step, notwithstanding his gray beard. He walked up to an old oaken post projecting about eighteen inches above the ground a short distance southwest of the C., B. & Q. depot and gave the post a kick.

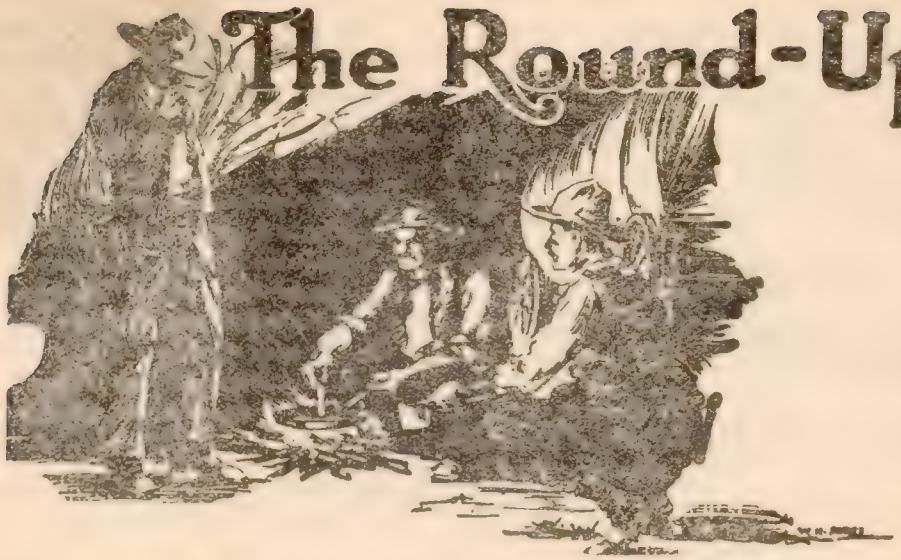
The elderly gentleman is George L. Berger, and kicking this particular post has become a part of rite with him. When asked to explain his peculiar method of celebrating his visits to Nebraska, he said:

"I came West in 1857 by steamboat. We went down the Ohio from Pittsburg to Cairo, then on the Mississippi to St. Louis and up the Missouri to the Platte. We landed at Plattsmouth, and our boat was tied to an oak post, then standing eight feet above the water. The river filled in around the post, and kept filling in, until now it is flowing about two and a half miles away; but the post is still there.

"That post has all my life been indelibly associated with my arrival in Nebraska. Why do I kick it? I can't tell you why. I've done the same thing many times before I left for the Far West. It takes me back to April 28, 1857. I hope to be able to go up to that old post and kick it a good many times more."

Since 1917 Mr. Berger has lived at Orange, California, and has revisited his old home and performed his peculiar post-kicking ritual five times.

The Round-Up



SAY, kindly, please gather round and listen to what Gerard McGinnis, of Brooklyn, New York, is going to say about us, and in a poem, too. We've had lots of things said about us, to our face and behind our back, for us and against us, but when they get to spoutin' poetry a-praisin' of us up—well, we sure begin to feel like we had gone and become one of these here gents, famous in history, what we used to recite poems about out of the "Fourth Reader," that bein' the book we quit on in the little red schoolhouse—only, to be honest about the color of that little red schoolhouse, it was white; that is, it started white, oncet, only by the time we started goin' to it the color sure got kinda wore off.

Well, come on, let's get to the poem. First, we'll introduce our real friend and admirer, Gerard McGinnis. Heaven bless the Irish, we say. Yes, we're part Irish ourselves—one third, to be exact, and if you don't believe it, insult me and find out if we're lyin' to yer or not.

Mr. McGinnis:

"Boss and Folks: In saying what I'm going to say I am trying to pay a compliment to the foreman of this ranch, meaning by ranch Western Story Magazine. Whether I succeed or not depends upon the way you-all receive the following:

"To the Boss of the Round-up.

"I'm no hand for thinkin' up stories,
An' at poetry I guess that I'm worse;
But I think if I get any glories
They'll have to be gotten with verse.

"I've never yet writ to the Round-up,
So I'm takin' this chance while I can
To tell you I like from the ground up
Everything that you tell us, old man.

"There's been hundreds as wrote to you, sayin',
'I like Max Brand an' Bob Horton, too,'
But there's none of them wrote to you payin'
A compliment, sort of, to you.

"So I'm doin' it now—an' there's others
As will join me in cheerin', old hoss,
For the fellow who treats us like brothers,
Our pard of the Round-up—*the Boss.*"

Let any of them receive your words badly, McGinnis, and they'll—but jest let 'em! And, as for Brooklyn, we'll never say one more word against it, no matter if we do get lost every time we go over there.

Encouragin' words, these, from Vincent Shea, of Ottawa, Canada.

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: I have been reading the WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE for some time, and think there is no better reading to be had. I have no complaint to make of any of the stories, but at the same time I have my favorites. I would like awfully well to hear more stories about Leon Porfilo and Lew Melody."

Now for a little shootin', L. M. Gilliland, of Silver City, New Mexico, bein' the first performer.

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: We want to see 'Wishful' and 'All-in.' Who was it that some time back said that Cherry Wilson was the bunk? He ought to be drug at the end of a forty-foot rope. It is hard to say who is the best author, but everybody likes them all.

"Going back to guns, here is another little case against the automatic. Last week while our cavalry troop was encamped at Fort Bliss, Texas, one of our men, an expert pistol shot, used a .45 automatic that he had pampered for years, and had it clean as a whistle inside. While shooting at a regular target, the gun jammed on the closing movement of the slide, binding the cartridge against the side of the barrel. It did this several times, and nearly ruined his score by the slide finally coming loose and discharging the cartridge. This man has a dozen single-action Colt .45s, and can do wonders with them, and can also depend upon them. I have been using a .30-30 with a long barrel, and I find it is no harder to carry on a saddle or in your hand, and it will shoot farther and harder, than the carbines. I never could see any advantage in a bolt action. They are slow, awkward, and in the way on the saddle as well as taking much more room in the rifle. Maybe if people would stick to the old reliable Winchesters, there would be less going around always trying to find a good gun. I know that a lot of you will not agree with me, but most of you will after a little headwork.

"I will be glad to argue via mail with any one in the bunch. I will always stick up for revolvers and Winchesters, also the .25-20 or .32-20 for the best all-round gun."

Albert Wheeler, of Utica, New York, will now give us some how-to-take-care-of-the-stock-of-your-gun information:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Is there room for a tenderfoot? For if there is I'd like to horn in. I have been readin' the WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE for over three years, and I would have gone without my smokes to get it, so now, if there is room, I'd like to get my say in. In answer to Percy L. Rodman, for oiling the stock of a gun, will say the best way I have ever heard of is this: Sandpaper your gun stock, being sure to get it perfectly clean, then give it a good coating of boiled linseed oil, then take the handle of an old toothbrush and rub the first coating of oil till the bone handle is warm, then give it another coat of oil, rubbing in well with the palm of your hand. Now give the stock two more coatings of oil, rubbing them in very briskly with the palm of your hand until your hand is nearly hot. Do as I have directed, and you will have a natural-wood stock, with a highly polished finish. This method I have just told you about is an army trick, and it's in the army where they have the best target rifles made."

Well, boys, there will be no excuse for any of us havin' dingy-lookin' stocks on our guns after this.

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

THERE'S a letter on top of the pile this morning that seems to promise good things, so suppose we investigate that first. Sure enough, it's from our old friend, the White Wolfer, and he invites us to sit beside his camp fire again. "You who enjoyed the 'song of the wind' with me before, come listen with me now to the voices of the desert night," he says.

See how nature's evening prayer spreads over the buttes and plains, painting them as if from them emanated an inner glow? How the mystery of twilight creeps among the shadows of the pine groves and thickets of mountain trees? How the peace and hush of the dying sun bathes the brooding isolation of the crags, the bare, slim, towering fingers of the pinnacles! How the glow of the fire slowly deepens and the green-gold flames paint ever-darkening phantom rings around this charmed Circle!

Relax, then, from all your worries. Rest your tired spirit in this world of peace and dreams. Watch the soft velvet charm of the night stealing over the sky, lighting the countless little candles of the universe, and behold the pale circle of the sympathetic moon shedding golden mystery over the sage lands.

At your feet, their shaggy heads stretched to the fire, their eyes glowing at you like green, brilliant star stones, the lean, powerful wolfhounds recline motionless. Aloof from them even in respose, the giant mastiff stares unblinkingly into the darkness, contributing to the restful lure of the scene. The horse grazing contentedly, in the meadow by the creek, off sweet tufts of buffalo grass and spicy wild flowers, snorts and switches its tail, whickering its gladness of life at times to remind you of its presence.

Night is beginning her harmonious song of creation. Hear the lowing of the cattle on the gumbo, melodious and softened by the distance. Queer how the distance sweetens the voices calling from crag and lowlands. How fitting into the camp-fire dream seems the wavering howl of the wolf from the rim of yonder cliff. From that throat seems to pour forth all the sad complaints, renunciations, and pleadings of life through the ages. Yet how arrogant, how weirdly savage is the trembling answer of the wolf's mate from the pinnacles close by.

In the ashwoods where the eyes of buck and doe reflect the fire's light, a pair of wood doves coo their sleepy notes, and overhead, two owls flit in ghostly flight among the pine tops, hooting their eerie threefold warning, mournful and unreal.

From somewhere beyond the rim rock undulates the melancholy back of a watchdog, answered here and there faintly by its kindred in the prairie, and arousing the hounds at our fire to listen intently for a moment to the message that only they can understand. As the sounds die away, they yawn lazily and replace their massive heads on their crossed forepaws.

Then the busy hum of the night begins, a thousand stealthy little voices, voices that

whisper and creak and murmur, singing and whistling their song in a world steeped in mystery and supplication. The rustling of the wind-kissed leaves, the gentle swaying of the trees, the crack of a dry stick touched by an unguarded foot, the swish of branches released by a passing animal, the squeaking and chattering of countless little desert people, and occasionally the scream of mortal agony from some rodent who forgot to be careful.

The creek at your feet babbles and ripples with soft laughter, the beaver pair, who have their home under the bank, whine and plead their melody of love, and from the willows a startled bird chirps a sleepy protest.

My eyes are heavy and the fire is low. I leave you, dear Gang, to dream of the lure of the desert, the night singing your lullaby. I'll dream of many letters coming my way and hope that you enjoyed the evening at my fire. THE WHITE WOLFER.

Care of The Tree.

This sister hopes for "two coat pockets full of mail next time I go to the post office." Here's her letter.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Those who are lonely have my sympathy for as a girl my home was in the very heart of the timbered hills with the post office and store many miles distant. Most of my days were spent climbing the hills, fishing in the streams, swimming, and horseback riding, all alone.

I now live close by the seashore where the breeze always blows and only wish I could describe it to you as I see it—the beautiful sunset, the red-gold reflection on the water making each swell a thing of beauty, the white sand hills dotted here and there with a clump of bushes, or one lone tree against a background of blue sea, fading far away into nothingness against the sky.

Will those who love nature as I do write, also any one interested in oil painting or art work of any kind? I love to sketch and paint scenes as I see them, but have never had any lessons. Would like to hear from some who make their way with brushes and paint, sisters near my age, which is twenty-five. HATTIE E. SJOGRÉN.

Empire, Coos Co., Ore.

Another sister who lives near the ocean says:

We live three miles from a little town and about four from the sea. When I first came to Florida I would often go to the ocean's shore and watch the big ships come in. Our five-acre farm touches four big canals. I enjoy fishing. The Seminole Indians live just nine miles from us in the Everglades; when fishing we often see them. Their huts are built of palmetto leaves.

MRS. MYRTLE OF FLORIDA.

Care of The Tree.

From out Seattle way comes this note:

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I am twenty-four years old and work in a department of the municipal government. I live out as far West as one usually goes. Fellow citizens like to imagine we live in a great metropolis, but as a matter of fact the great metropolis is only an overgrown small town, and after ten o'clock most folks are in bed or soon will be there. Once the corner drug store closes night life has ceased.

I speak as one versed in the ways of many and strange cities, but the truth is I have seldom been beyond the city gates and never out of the State. But I hope for better and bigger things.

If you can encourage any of your readers to write to me I shall be delighted to reply and shall endeavor to be as entertaining and illuminating as my humble talents permit.

F. E. M.

Care of The Tree.

Are you absent-minded? Don't give yourself a chance to forget. Order your badge now.

Send twenty-five cents in stamps or coin to The Hollow Tree, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, and state whether you wish the button style for your coat lapel or the pin.

DEAR GANG: Will you let a young fellow join you? I am sixteen years old and live on a farm in Wisconsin. I trap, hunt, and look after the cows and horses in the winter and help around the farm in the summer.

You can see Lake Superior from our place, and in the night you can see the lights of Superior and Duluth. I would like to hear from Gangsters my age; I will answer all letters. BADGER JOE.

Care of The Tree.

Where To Go and How To Get There

By John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE CARSON NATIONAL FOREST

SOME people think that New Mexico, apart from its towns, is one big, sandy desert, hot and uncomfortable, treeless and trackless—just a vast place to get lost in. As a matter of fact nearly one fifth of the State is covered with forest. It is true that much of the growth is piñon and juniper, which flourish on arid soil and are of no value as saw timber; these stands are used extensively for fuel, fence posts and mine props.

Over five million acres in the mountains where the rainfall is more abundant, yield valuable saw-timber, and the six national forests of the State comprise an area of over nine million acres, with a saw timber stand of fifteen billion board feet and other forest products, providing a permanent lumber industry and supplying material needed in the development of ranches, farms and cities.

The Carson National Forest, named after the famous scout and pioneer, Kit Carson, is situated in the extreme north-central part of New Mexico, the four divisions of the forest area being known as the Amarillo, Taos, Picuris, and Jicarilla divisions. This is a section that teems with legendary lore, archæological relics, prehistoric cliff dwellings and old adobe missions built by the early Spanish explorers. The whole area is of intense and varied interest, where something different may be seen every day, where trips to unexplored and almost inaccessible regions may be made on foot or on horseback, and where the climatic conditions are such that there is little fear of one's holiday being spoiled by bad weather.

The extensive grazing resources of the forest are taken full advantage of by the inhabitants of the small towns adjacent to the forest boundary, thousands of cattle, horses and sheep being grazed here every year. Local settlers have the privilege of grazing their milk cows and working stock free on the for-

est ranges and may also obtain without charge certain classes of timber for fuel and for the development of their homesteads.

The country in and near the Carson National Forest is one of the oldest settled regions of the United States, and although it has been used for grazing since the days of the early Spanish settlers there is every indication that, under the careful administration of the forest service, this area will continue to support indefinitely even more head of stock than are now permitted.

A small amount of agricultural land at the lower elevations within the forest boundaries consists of tracts most of which were taken up as homesteads before the creation of the forest. The remainder is included in three hundred and twenty-six tracts listed to settlers under the forest homestead act. There are no opportunities here now for homesteading, but persons who wish to have summer homes in the forest may receive long-term permits to build upon small locations at quite moderate annual charges. Those who desire simply to camp for a time may do so without charge on condition that they keep a clean camp, leave clean grounds when they depart and regard the rules for the prevention of fire.

Throughout the Amarillo and Jicarilla divisions of the forest there are numerous prehistoric cliff dwellings, the most famous and the largest ruin being that at Ojo Caliente, near a hot spring which possesses medicinal qualities, just south of the Amarillo division.

There is a legend among the Taos Indians that Montezuma lived here and led from this place into Mexico the great migration which is supposed to have been the origin of the Aztecs. There are many picturesque old chapels near the forest which date back to the early days of Spanish occupation, and there are many scenic attractions, with beautiful streams teeming with fish. Scores of attractive parts of the forest have yet to bear the impress of a human foot, and to echo to the sound of a human voice.

Few travelers as yet penetrate the more inaccessible solitudes, where it is believed that prehistoric ruins may yet be discovered, most visitors being contented with visiting the town of Taos, famous for its Indian pueblo, its picturesque Indian festivals, its historic dwellings and traditions, and for its colony of American artists, who gather here at all seasons to get first-hand sketches of the life and surroundings of real Indians at home. In this town, the former home of Kit Carson, is also the headquarters of the forest administration, where information regarding the Carson National Forest may be obtained from the supervisor, who will be glad to answer all inquiries.

Good roads and trails are being built here by both the Federal and State governments as rapidly as funds permit. One has already been completed from Taos up Taos Cañon, to the top of the divide where it joins the road to Cimarron. The Red River Road from Ute Park west over the divide and down Red River to Questa, and from there to Taos, has also recently been finished. These roads give access to the heart of the Taos Mountains with their wonderful scenery and excellent camping places. Those who are fortunate enough to have their own little car, and who are anxious to see the unusual, may now make this once-almost-impossible trip with safety and comfort.

A HOMESTEADER WON OUT

DEAR MR. NORTH: I spent three years prowling over Oregon and Washington, looking for a good cattle or grazing homestead, from 1912 to 1915. I would work in the harvest fields in the summer and fall. I finally tackled a homestead under the Newlands irrigation project in Nevada, twelve miles from Fallon and the railroad. Water costs eighty dollars per acre. You have plenty of water to irrigate crops. Grain, alfalfa, cattle, sheep,

horses, dairying, poultry, cantaloupe, and potatoes all do well here if given half a chance. There is wild game in abundance, such as pheasants, quail, ducks, geese, rabbits, and coyotes.

It is best not to take up too much land, if your capital is limited. A person with twenty or forty acres can keep down overhead expenses better than on a large place.

Well, boys, if you come to Nevada, you'll find coyotes and jack rabbits, also sandstorms If you put in some new alfalfa, irrigate it. Then it won't blow out. If you'll spend a few dollars on a couple of good foxhounds or greyhounds, they'll take care of your coyotes and jack rabbits. Besides, you can enjoy yourself hunting them. Coyotes' hides are worth from eight to seventeen dollars in fall and winter. If you raise poultry, build a fence or some protection for them. Your dogs will help you watch them.

I started on eighty acres, then saw that it was too much to handle alone, so took in a partner. He does the outside work. I tend the poultry. He had a small car. To start, we put twelve acres in alfalfa. This spring, we put in eighteen acres of wheat and barley, five acres of alfalfa, and we have about five hundred head of poultry running around.

If you're going to homestead, go where there are other homesteaders. You may have to borrow a tool or so, and if you're sixty miles from nowhere, you'll have to buy everything, and that takes money Well, some day I may feel sorry I came to Nevada to homestead, but I don't think so. If I do, I'll never knock homesteading in the West.

C. D. F.

Fallon, Nev

Which goes to show that one who knows the ropes and can pick out the right sort of land can make a go of homesteading. This experience, it must be noted, refers to irrigated land, on one of the government's irrigation projects.

THE LOST LEDGE OF GOLD

THE country for about fifty miles north and northeast of Reserve, New Mexico, consists of numerous valleys, sloping to the southwest, some containing running streams all the year.

Years ago two young men on a hunting and prospecting trail camped for some time in that region. One day, while taking a drink from a waterfall, one of them, quite by accident, thrust his head through the water finding a cavity behind the waterfall. He idly picked up a few rocks and carried them back to camp. These rocks proved to be gold nuggets.

Soon thereafter his partner became ill, and they returned to Magdalena, New Mexico. There, however, pneumonia developed and his friend died. Being very short of money, the young man disposed of the nuggets to B. L. Byers, of Socorro, New Mexico, who found them to be almost pure gold.

As soon as possible he returned to the country and began hunting for the waterfall. But with hundreds of valleys and countless waterfalls he was unable to locate the right one. He finally lost his mind hunting for the gold. He was taken to an asylum, and there he attempted to continue his prospecting, laboring under the delusion that he was out in the wilds instead of in a cell.

Numerous people in that section of New Mexico have hunted for the waterfall. In Zuñi, New Mexico, a very old Indian squaw claimed that she had often visited the ledge and that Geronimo's band of Indians used to go there and get gold to trade at the Indian stores in Arizona. She claimed, however, that the signs of the trail had been destroyed by the settlers, and also that the water poured from that ledge at a certain time of the year only. That would fit the description hundreds of waterfalls in that country, however.

The general vicinity of this ledge is somewhere between Piñon Mount—known there as Cottonwood, Fox, and Elk Mounts—and Frisco Creek. Some day it will be found probably by accident.

MISSING

This department is conducted in both WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE and DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

SHALLER, BILLIE or **LILLIE.**—During the winter of 1920 she lived at the St. Francis Hotel, Ft. Worth, Tex. She is twenty-two years old. Her friend, Irene, will be very glad to receive some word from or about her. Write care of this magazine.

TIDWELL, ROY D.—Hugh advised us you were in K. C. Please write to Irene D., care of this magazine.

KINDRED, MURL, or **ROYALL, MARIE.**—Please let me hear from you. Everything is O. K., and we are still at the same address. Write to Irene.

HAAS, ANNA and **CATHERINE,** were living in Rogers, Ark., in 1922, but have probably changed their residence since that time. Any one knowing their present address please write to Irene, care of this magazine.

BLANCHARD, ARTHUR, ETHEL, and **PEARL,** were last heard of when living in Brockton, Mass., in 1919. Mrs. Edith Hunt de Spain, 708½ 29th St., Oakland, Calif., will be very glad to receive any information about them.

BALLARD, LILLIE.—I think of you often. Things have developed very differently from the way we planned. Write to Mrs. Edith Hunt de Spain, 708½ 29th St., Oakland, Calif.

ENGLISH, JAMES DEALEY, electrician, lived and worked in Chicago, Ill., in November, 1924, but has not been heard from since. He is twenty-six years old, five feet seven inches tall, has gray eyes, auburn hair, and is blind in one eye. His mother is worried and grieved about him and will be grateful for any information sent to Mrs. Maude Dealey, 558 Sherbrooke St., Winnipeg, Man., Can.

JACK.—All at home are well. Your mother fails to understand your absence. Write me personally. Adelaide.

ANDERSON, TEDDY, left his home in San Francisco, Calif., a few months ago. He is sixteen, but makes an older appearance, has light complexion, and a scar on right thumb. Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write to his invalid mother, Mrs. M. Anderson, 644 Elizabeth St., San Francisco, Calif.

HAMMERS, JAMES.—He is fifty years old, and has spent his life in Texas or vicinity. His sister, whom he has never seen, Mrs. Stella Hammers Snook, R. F. D. No. 1, Tolent, Ore., would like very much to communicate with him.

LYNCH, ANNA and **JUNIOR.**—We want you back. If you need money, wire us. We are at the same address in Cleveland. Budd.

MEANS, JAMES ALEXANDER, civil engineer.—When I hurt you fifteen years ago it was unintentional, and I have tried to find you ever since. Please write to N., care of this magazine, sending your address.

DANIELS, FRANKLYN KELLER, has been missing from his home in Chelsea, Mass., since June, 1922, and was last seen in Everett, Mass. He is nineteen years old. Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write to his mother, Mrs. Emma Daniels, 44 Hawthorn St., Chelsea, Mass.

MURREY, TED.—Information as to his present address will be appreciated by his friend, Robt. R. Marquande, Collect. Co. No. 31, 11th Med. Regt., Schofield Bks., Hawaii.

LAWRENCE, FREDERICK and **MARY.**—Their younger son, who was adopted from the Buffalo Orphan Asylum, in 1905, is anxious to meet them. His mother's maiden name was Mary Mahoney. She was born in Scotland, and his father in England. Any one knowing them at this time please write to Robert W. B., care of this magazine.

DOROTHY.—The three years are up. If you can't come back now please write to me. Erny.

McNEILL, WILLIS A., of Canadian birth.—When last heard of, in August, 1909, he was working as a bridge builder in St. Louis, Mo. His niece, Zola Taylor MacLellan, Rt. 5, Dover, N. H., is very anxious to get in touch with him.

SUTTON, T. O., twenty-seven, a switchman, was last heard from at Lubbock, Tex. L. B. Sutton, Rt. 3, Box 75, Ft. Worth, Tex., wants to hear from him now.

BOWLES, WM.—I need you, and want to be with you. Please write to me at Gen. Del., Little Rock, Ark., E. B.

TIPPET, LEO, when last heard of was en route from Ponca City, Okla., to Connersville, Ind., but has not been seen nor heard from there since. He is nineteen years old, five feet tall, has blue eyes, and light hair. His grandmother, Mrs. Mollie Cotner, 1515 Indiana Ave., Connersville, Ind., is worried, and will be thankful for any assistance in finding him.

B. C. L.—If you don't write as you promised will know you don't care any more. Am still at the same address. L. L.

ACKERMAN, WINONA.—Billie would like to hear from you. Please write to Marie S., care of this magazine.

HOOKE, Mrs. NELLIE VIOLA, has not been heard from since 1906, when she was living in Brockton, Mass. She was the mother of five children through a former marriage to a man named Welch. Any one knowing where she is now located please advise Mrs. B. Griswold, 357 Jefferson Ave., New London, Conn.

BOFF, RUSSELL HARRY.—Have good news for you. Trust me. Write at once to Norma Mihm, 8999 Norma Place, Sherman, Calif.

COLLINS, LLOYD or **"SHORTY."**—In December of last year his season's work with the Miller-Via Shows ended in Savannah, Ga. Any one knowing his address at this time please communicate with Cecil East, 37 York St., Hanover, Pa.

HUDSON, SAM TOMMY.—Your mother worries about you constantly. The least you can do is to write and let her know if you are well. Grace.

HIALEY, LAVERN, is sixty-five years old now, and has not been heard from for the last twenty-one years. Any information regarding him, whether he is dead or alive, will be gratefully received by his sister, Mrs. Madge Hialey Rector, R. F. D., Box 521 G, Richmond, Calif.

N. W. E.—Would like to hear from you again. Tots.

BROTHER GEORGE F. has been missing for about four years. His mother and sister worry about him always. Any news will be appreciated by Crissie Cavan, 41 Barker Ave., Toronto, Ont., Can.

BUD.—Baby asks for you every day. Write or come home to your mother's, as my folks don't know you have gone away. O. G.

KOTTER, EDITH, lived in Oakland, Calif., until 1924, but left no forwarding address when she moved. Any one knowing her present whereabouts please write to Al Davis, 2718 Seminary Ave., Oakland, Calif.

KENT, HARLEY.—Please have Bobby write, advising me where you are. I want to join you. Jop.

SMITH, Mr. and Mrs. WM.—Mrs. Smith was formerly Mary Conroe of Chicago, Ill., and Mr. Smith was born in Yorkshire, Eng. They were married in 1845 or 1850. One of their children, Mildred Mary, married Doctor Lewis, of New York. C. M. Spencer, Box 338, Chilliwack, B. C., Can., is interested in receiving any news of the family.

LENT, VIRGINIA or **JENNIE,** will receive some news of personal interest by communicating with Mrs. John J. Marek, Rt. 1, New Auburn, Wis., as they are waiting her return pending the settlement of her father's estate.

LEONARD, JAMES.—His father practiced medicine in Canada. During the Civil War he married Caroline Wingate, of Alabama, and settled in Texas. In 1890 he died in San Antonio, Tex. Any information about this family will be appreciated by D. Lott, care of this magazine.

DOUGLASS, WALLACE.—Your nephew, John B. Douglass, 215 Summers St., Hinton, W. Va., is anxious to hear from you again.

VAN HOUTEN, EVERETT ADAM, was last heard of in Oklahoma. He was brought up by his grandparents, as his mother and father separated when he was very young. He is thirty years old now. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will confer a favor upon his cousin, Beulah Van Houten, McCall., Fla., by writing at once.

WALLACE, Mrs. FLORENCE, or **TALLISON, Mrs. JESSIE,** mother and daughter, were last heard from in Blissville, Ark. Please send advice regarding their present whereabouts to Mrs. Chester Maxie, Rt. 6, Box 19, Laurel, Miss.

LaFORGE, Mrs. GEORGE, is being anxiously sought by her youngest daughter, Mrs. Hazel B. Wilson, Rt. 6, Hillyard, Wash. She has been told her mother left her with her two sisters when they were children. George LaForge is dead, and a sister Nellie is also dead.

MONTGOMERY, J.—Have left Madden's. Wrote many times to your address in Cleveland, but have received no replies. Please write to Julia Mahler Smith, Box 501, Harrison, N. Y.

WALKER, WILLABY FREDRIC, a World War veteran, was last heard of in St. Louis, Mo., three years ago. He is thirty-five years old, five feet eight inches tall, of dark complexion, and weighed one hundred and sixty pounds. His father, W. N. Walker, Rt. 2, Hill City, Kan., is seeking information.

CURLEY.—Any one knowing any member of this family please write to Mrs. Mamie Itley, Hyman, Tex., who was born in the family, but adopted and brought up by J. C. Couch, of Midland, Tex.

CARNEY, MICHAEL, has been missing from his home in Buffalo, N. Y., since November, 1924, and his mother is almost frantic from worry. He is thirteen years old, of medium height, weighed one hundred and fifty pounds, has auburn hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion. Please send information about him to Mrs. R. Carney, 242 Elm St., Buffalo, N. Y.

ALDRICH, VICTOR ROY.—Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write to R. M., care of this magazine.

FEEHLEY, BERNARD J., has not been heard from since he was in Beaumont, France, in 1919, when he was a private in the 116th Amb. Co., A. E. F. His home was in Baltimore, Md. Any news from or about him will be appreciated by Helen M. Siegel, Dodge, N. D.

WEAVER, WINIFRED E., was last seen June 21, 1918, in Chester, Pa. Any one knowing her present whereabouts please notify W. C. Rowland, Girard, Ala.

CONNORS, JOHN and **MIKE,** thirty-three and twenty-seven respectively, were last known to be in Leadville, Colo., and enlisted in the American service for the World War from there. Their father, M. T. Connors, Pine Hotel, Flagstaff, Ariz., will be grateful for any information.

AL.—Please write or come back to me. J. M. H.

MITCHELL, THOMAS.—Four years ago he was confined in a hospital, in California, for rheumatism. He is forty-eight years old, five feet eight inches tall, has dark eyes and dark hair. Mrs. Mary Brown, Rt. A, Haywood, Okla., will be grateful for any information.

ROYCE, FRANK, recently of Seattle, Wash.—He has been gone from his home in Dubuque, Iowa, since his separation from his wife thirty-one years ago. His daughter, Mabel, now Mrs. Allison, of Rawlins, Wyo., is anxious to hear from him.

ALBERT.—The children and I want you to come home. Please do. May.

KANE, MICHAEL, born in Ireland, is thought to be in America at this time. His mother and father are both dead. He will learn other news of personal interest by communicating with his niece, Mrs. Mary Boyarth, Rt. 1, Benton, Ill.

REDENOUR, ROBERT N., fifty-four, has not been heard from for twenty years. Information will be appreciated by Mrs. J. B. Ott, 730 Hart St., Princeton, Ind.

LEIBERGER, GEORGE, was discharged from the 13th Cavalry, Ft. D. A. Russell, Wyo., on December 13, 1923. George H. Parker would like to have him, or any of the other boys who served with him, write care of this magazine.

BEEBE, ROY E., originally of Miles City, Mont., was last heard of in Ariz. His mother, Mrs. C. F. Beebe, 2801 S. State St., Chicago, Ill., is very sick and can be helped by seeing or hearing from him.

KNIGHT, ARMANDA or **AMADA,** of Cheyenne, Wyo.—Your silence worries me. Please send your present address to C. C., care of this magazine.

RICE, HENRY C.—The last word from him was received about twelve years ago, when he was in Kellacy, Ky. His cousin, Rosa Rice Allin, 1202 W. Jackson St., Enid, Okla., will be very glad to receive any word from or about him.

MAYLEE, EUGENE, left Everson, W. Va., about eight years ago, deserting his wife and four children. He is colored, five feet ten inches tall, about forty years old, and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. Any information as to his present whereabouts will prove helpful to E. C. Sloan, Brownsville, Pa.

BRYANT, J. P., was living in Bessemer, Ala., about three months ago. Mrs. Cora Bryant, Harvey, Ill., will be thankful to any one sending information as to her husband's present whereabouts.

HARRINGTON, HELMSLEY and **MARY E.,** started from Peoria, Ill., for California, in the spring of 1859. A descendant, H. A. Harrington, Box 520, Walla Walla, Wash., is interested, at this time, in communicating with any relatives of the family.

HENRY, Mrs. NELLIE BARTLETT, taught school in Charleston, Ill., in 1889. Since her marriage she has lived in Oklahoma, also in Colorado, and is thought, at this time, to be in either State. Mrs. O. Nhy Baune, care of this magazine, would like to hear from her.

DE NEIR, WALTER.—Waiting to hear from you. Gene Williams, 705 N. Madison St., Peoria, Ill.

CARPENTER, EUGENE F., was last seen in 1911 in Springfield, Mo. His home town, where he worked for an electric company, was either Boston or Newton, Mass. His niece, Ida May Carpenter, 527 S. Yorktown, Tulsa, Okla., wishes to hear from him or his family.

KARL, M. B.—Have news for you. Will keep your address secret, if you'll write to Grace.

D. D. S. B.—We all feel badly about your absence from home. Please come back, or write to your sister, V. L. D. B., care of this magazine

VOSS, RICHARD L.—Your best friend has been taken to the State hospital over worry about you. Try to see her there before it is too late. Geo. Cochrane, Rt. 19, Lendenaw N., New Brunswick, N. J.

FRAZIER, HARRY, formerly with Bernice Allen Shows.—He is short, of medium build, and has dark hair. Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write to B. Willard Colbert, Box N-Radio, U. S. S. "Arizona," care of Postmaster, San Francisco, Calif.

LAIRD, CARL E., was stationed, in 1918, at Fort Sill, Okla. He is thirty years old, has light hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion. His home, originally, was in Colorado, but his family has since moved to Iowa. Any one who can offer information regarding his present whereabouts please write to Mrs. A. S., care of this magazine.

WHERRIFS, WINNIFRED G.—When last heard from, December 15, 1924, she was living on Monrose Blvd., Chicago, Ill. Any one knowing her present address please write to Mrs. Claude Mitchell, 149 Bostwick Ave., N. E., Grand Rapids, Mich.

PARKER, ROY, recently of St. Louis, Mo.—His father is dead. Mrs. Dora Bush, 814 Highland Ave., Lead, S. D., wishes Roy to write to her.

ALLEN, WM. JONES, was last heard of at Ft. McDowell, Calif., while serving with Battery A, 2d Field Artillery, in 1916. Any one knowing him, or having known him there, please communicate with his sister, Mrs. Philip S. Olin, 54 Beach St., Bristol, Conn.

DOT.—Why don't you come home or write? We are so worried about you. Mamma.

LAUBE, JOHN.—He is of German descent, sixty years old, five feet six inches tall, weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds, has blue eyes, light hair, and a fair complexion. Last word was received from him in Ragley, La. His daughter, Mrs. Claude Freeman, Rt. 12, Frost, Tex., will be grateful for any information.

McMAHON, J. G.—I understand and forgive all. Freddie is sick, and F. F. refuses to help me. Please come back to your wife. Peggie.

FERGUSON, JAMES T.—Last word was received from him seven months ago, when he was in Corsicana, Tex. He is six feet tall, thirty-one years old, and has a small scar over the eye. Any one knowing where he is please write to his brother, E. H. Ferguson, Rt. 1, Hartsell, Ala.

MEIVES, Mrs. RUTH.—My health is poor and I am worried about you. Please write or come home. Mother.

HOFMANN, PAUL.—We have moved next door to 3722. Mother, brother, and I are very anxious to see, or at least hear from you. Papa.

DIMOND, BYRON A., sometimes known as B. A. LeAndo.—Was last heard of in Missouri. He is five feet tall, has dark hair, dark eyes, and is rather stoop-shouldered. He usually travels as musician with a show or circus. His sister, Mrs. F. E. Wade, Rodney, Mich., would appreciate any information from or about him.

R. A. B.—Everything is O. K. at home. Waiting for you to come back. Olga.

WALKUP, WALTER JAMES.—About two years ago he was in Wallace, Idaho, running a dinkey engine, hauling logs, and was then using an assumed name. He is thirty-seven years old, five feet seven inches tall, heavy set, and has black hair and gray eyes. His niece, Lois Morton, Garnet, Mich., would be very glad to hear from him.

BARTHELSON, EDWIN W.—Your buddy from Guam would like to hear from you.

EDER, JOHN, was in New York City in 1892, and is thought to have moved to Los Angeles later. He had a son, Arthur, who was adopted by Mrs. Gilde, of Hartford, Conn. Any information regarding either one would be gratefully received by Marion C. Stiles, Box 176, Verdugo City, Calif.

A. T. McD.—We are being mistreated here. Please arrange to have us taken away. America.

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