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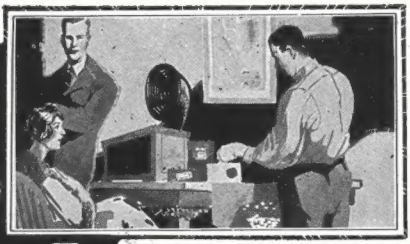

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Vol. LV Contents for October 10, 1925 No. 4

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EVERY WEEK

Vol. LV OCTOBER 10, 1925 No. 4

The Unbranded 30

By

Johnston McCulley

Author of "Holsters Tied Down," etc.

CHAPTER I.

GROWING ASSETS.

BROAD and gorgeous banners of scarlet and orange suddenly flamed in the western sky, and the deeper gulches already had turned purple, and the first breath of the night breeze was coming down from the distant hills.

The land was bathed in the glory of the sunset, a rolling country that stretched away on every side as far as a man could see, dotted here and there with groups of ranch buildings and grazing herds, and with trails winding across it like dirty yellow ribbons.

Shadows played about the stunted trees that grew beside the crooked, uncertain creek that was a mere trickle at some seasons of the year and a raging torrent at others. Clumps of brush commenced to take on unusual shapes in the dimming light. The rich blue of the sky was growing deeper.

The Square A outfit was giving slight attention to the beautiful sunset, having seen hundreds of similar ones. Nor did the deep purple of the gulches intrigue it, nor did it notice and welcome the cooling breeze that came as a great relief after the heat of a scorching day. This was because the Square A outfit had other and more important things to occupy its mind at the moment. It was riding at breakneck speed toward the distant ranch house, using spurs and quirt without mercy.

In a way, the Square A outfit was the joke of the cow country and all the cow towns at the edge of it, a subject

for frequent and ribald jest, and a constant topic for amusing conversation. It had come upon evil days after a season of prosperity, and was wanting in prestige; yet it endured.

The Square A outfit at the present moment wore a battered hat that was badly weather-stained, and pants and chaps so filled with holes that they looked as though a charge of buckshot had been fired through them. It had boots that revealed maps of cracks, dull spurs, saddle and bridle that often had been mended and patched. The only thing about the Square A outfit regarding which no complaint could be voiced was the horse, a good-looking mount of medium size that was noted for its speed and endurance.

The Square A outfit was "Lanky" Jings!

There had been a time when a score of good punchers had served old "Pop" Alderson, the owner of the Square A; and Lanky Jings, even at that time a man of uncertain age and a relic in the range country, had been one of them. The buildings had been commodious and new, and the herds large and thriving, and the outfit known as one of the best in the district.

But Pop Alderson, who had journeyed West for his health and did not understand a great deal about the cattle-raising business, and also being more of a dreamer than a man of action, had allowed the Square A outfit to dwindle year after year. Paint peeled from the buildings and was not renewed. Corral fences collapsed and remained down. The horse stock grew poorer and the herds smaller. Thieving Indians and some who were not red of skin, took their toll. Assets disappeared, and debts increased.

And so, one by one, the punchers left the Square A to seek more prosperous fields. Only Lanky Jings remained. He felt that he was getting too old to move on again; and, being the only man in the outfit, he became the foreman automatically—a position to which he had aspired for years without success.

The Square A Ranch was home to Lanky Jings. He got what food he required, he had the entire bunk house to himself, and now and then he received enough of his back wages to indulge in a hectic night in one of the cow towns and return to the Square A with enough tobacco, both smoking and chewing, to last out the month.

To Lanky Jings, the Square A remained an outfit to be reckoned with and admired, for Lanky Jings still lived in the past and refused to be convinced that its glories had dimmed. He was intensely loyal to old Pop Alderson, and to Pop's daughter, Nancy, familiarly known as "Kitten." He lied manfully in the town when grinning punchers from other and more prosperous outfits questioned about conditions at the Square A. Being the entire "outfit," Lanky Jings found the work hard even on such a run-down ranch, but he did did not utter a complaint.

And now he bent forward in his saddle and urged the horse he rode to do its utmost. The sun had dropped behind the western hills; the scarlet-and-orange banners in the sky were disappearing rapidly. There would be a short twilight—and then the star-studded night.

"Get goin'!" Lanky Jings shouted at his mount, using quirt and spurs again. "Step some, snail!"

There was an unusual excitement in the manner of Lanky Jings, who was a man not easily excited. He was agitated, there was a peculiar expression in his face, and he had every appearance of a bearer of unexpected tidings. The rushing wind flapped back the battered rim of his hat and caused him to squint his eyes more than they were squinted already.

"Travel, hoss!" he shrieked in his high, thin voice. "Pop'll want to hear

our news, I reckon. Shake all four legs, snail, and let's get somewhere. You dyin' on your feet?"

Despite this line of talk, the horse he bestrode was running like the wind and was glad of the chance to do so, for Lanky Jings was inclined to take it easy in the saddle for the greater part of the time. But that did not prevent Lanky from screeching at the top of his voice and bellowing his requests for yet more speed into the teeth of the rushing wind.

He came to the crest of a slope and saw the group of Square A ranch buildings in the distance. For a moment he allowed his mount to decrease speed, since there was a treacherous gravel slope that called for caution. But, once the bottom had been reached and Lanky found himself upon a well-worn trail used by wagons carrying fuel wood down from the hills, he shrieked for speed again.

Pop Alderson, standing near the corral, saw him coming from afar, made a peculiar noise away down in his throat, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. His shoulders squared and his chin whiskers seemed to bristle suddenly. Pop decided in that instant that the odor of trouble was in the air, for Lanky Jings did not ride in that manner for nothing.

"More steers gone, I reckon!" Pop Alderson said to himself, speaking aloud.

In his tone was mingled anger and despair. Blow after blow he had received, yet he took each one standing, his back against the ropes, so to speak. Despite his general peaceful nature, Pop Alderson could be a fighter at times. He was tall and thin, and he had mild-looking eyes that could blaze on occasion, the sort of fighter who does not know when he is whipped.

Lanky Jings dashed on along the road, circled a group of haystacks, and galloped madly straight toward the corral. Braced against the rickety fence, Pop Alderson awaited him. A quick command to the horse, a pull at the reins, four slipping and sliding hoofs, a cloud of dust and sand—and Lanky had arrived!

He dropped from his saddle and trailed the reins. There was nothing graceful or romantic in Lanky Jings' manner of dismounting; it was nothing more than a part of the day's work. He spat into the dust, tilted his battered hat to one side of his head, and advanced toward his employer.

"Pop——" he began.

Pop Alderson raised a hand to command silence. "Make it quick, Lanky, and let's have it over with," he advised. "How many head have we got missin' this time? We ain't got many left to lose."

"I've got some news, Pop——"

"Uh-huh! I didn't opine that you was ridin' like that just because you was so hungry for the Chinaman's chuck. Spit it out, Lanky! I'm braced against the fence, and I can take it. It can't be a whole lot worse than what I've heard before. Only if it's good news, you'd better prepare me beforehand, or you'll find me faintin' here in the dust and sand. How many head have we lost? Was it thievin' Indians or Mex rustlers? Any signs at all?"

"But you don't understand, Pop——"

"I reckon not. I gave up tryin' to understand four or five years ago," Pop persisted in interrupting. "They're gone, I s'pose, and that settles it. You spit out that there cud of tobacco you're chewin', and talk!"

"Well, Pop, it was like this——" Lanky Jings commenced. "I was ridin' back toward that draw in the hills, nothin' particular on my mind——"

"As usual!" Pop Alderson commented, shifting his bodily weight to his other foot.

"And I was followin' the fence in the upper pasture," Lanky continued, ignoring the interruption. "I got to the

top of the slope and looked over the two-year-olds."

"You mean that you looked for 'em and couldn't see 'em, I reckon," Pop Alderson told him. "Did the thievin' rascals leave us any of 'em at all?"

"All our stock was there, Pop!"

"What's that?" Alderson screeched. "How dare you ride into this ranch and tell me that? It ain't noways natural! Well, if all our stock is there, and Indians or Mexicans or whites ain't run any off, what's all the fuss about?"

"We had about thirty two-year-olds, didn't we, Pop?" Lanky Jings asked.

"I reckon! And that's about all we had in the way of assets, too."

"Yeh! And them thirty two-year-olds carry the Square A brand, don't they?"

"Yep! Natural! But what about it?"

Lanky Jings spat into the dust at his feet again. "Pop, I reckon that you'd better brace yourself against that there fence, and do the bracin' good," he remarked. "You're due for a shock. Time and time again I've ridden in and told you as how some of our stock had been run off or just naturally had growed wings and flew away. But I ain't here to tell you anything at all like that now, Pop. Not any!"

"You ain't tellin' one big lot about anything so far," Pop Alderson reminded him.

"I reckon that it'll be quite some shock, Pop," Lanky Jings continued. "Got yourself braced? All right! We had about thirty head, all branded with the Square A nice and proper. Pop—brace yourself! There's about fifty head of two-year-olds there now!"

"How?" Pop Alderson roared. "You're sure and certain gettin' old, Lanky. Your eyes are sure gettin' bad. You ought to stay in a dark room——"

"My eyes ain't so bad but what I can count critters in a pasture," Lanky Jings protested. "I know what I saw, dang it! I made an investigation. And here's the big kick, Pop—not a hole in the fence! And here's another big kick—them strange two-year-olds, about a score of 'em, ain't wearin' any brands at all!"

"Now I know that you're a locoed fool," Pop Alderson roared, conviction in the tone of his voice. "You've been ridin' out too much in the heat. You've got a touch of the sun, and maybe a couple o' touches. Dang your hide, Lanky, it ain't anything unusual to find a two-year-old maverick roamin' in the hills now and then at round-up time, but who in Hades ever heard of twenty of 'em all at once climbin' a barbed-wire fence to get inside a pasture?"

"I reckon that it is unusual——"

"You're danged right it is," Pop Alderson went on. "Now you stop your insane foolishness and tell me the truth. How many head have been run off this time?"

"Cuss it, Pop, I've already told you the truth," Lanky Jings declared. "Not a break in the fence, yet them twenty steers are in the pasture, and not a brand on 'em."

"That means somebody made an openin' in the fence and drove 'em in!"

"That's exactly the way she looks to me, Pop. But who'd be so nice and kind?"

"Nice and kind!" Pop exclaimed. "It don't look any like kindness to me. It's some sort of a cussed plot. Two-year-olds ought to be branded, hadn't they? You danged well know it. Twenty of 'em! My good gosh! Where'd they come from?"

"Anything that old as ain't branded is a maverick," Lanky Jings declared. "We've got the right to put our iron agin' their hides, I reckon. Then they'll belong to the Square A. Twenty two-year-olds are worth money, Pop. You're danged right they are."

"They are," Pop Alderson affirmed. "And that's what makes it look mighty

funny to me. Twenty—all in a bunch —no break in the fence——"

"We'll slap a sizzlin'-hot iron agin' them twenty steers the first thing in the mornin'," Lanky Jings declared. "It's sure a gift from heaven, Pop."

"You're locoed," Pop Alderson informed him. "It's a gift from the other place, if you're askin' me. Slap an iron on them steers, and the next thing we know the sheriff will be out here arrestin' us for cattle rustlin'."

"But how——"

"Walt Filkes, of the C Bar C outfit, will be sayin' that they are his steers, and that they got out onto the open range and we herded 'em in and branded 'em. I wouldn't put anything past Walt Filkes and his gang of cut-throat punchers."

"Me neither," Lanky declared. "But them mavericks——"

"Lanky, are you blind, deaf, and dumb? How many times in your career have you met up with a steer that wasn't branded? It's a trick, cuss it! You can bet that Walt Filkes has it all planned out. He'll have some good-soundin' story to tell. He hates me like poison, and has for years. And I hate him, too. He's a skunk! He's a Gila monster! He's——"

"Don't you go to startin' on Walt Filkes, Pop," Lanky Jings begged. "If you do, you're liable to keep me up all night while you are talkin'."

"If it ain't some trick of Walt Filkes and his gang, then maybe them steers belong to the Triple Triangle," Pop continued. "That big Eastern syndicate that owns the Triple Triangle does a lot of funny things. Them steers might be fancy stock that they didn't brand for some reason."

"What reason?" Lanky demanded.

"My good gosh, I don't know. But they might have been keepin' them steers in a special pasture, and maybe they broke out and roamed over into our upper pasture and are just grazin' there. And wouldn't we be fools to brand a lot of Triple Triangle stock. Them Eastern millionaires as own the Triple Triangle would just about have us hanged!"

"Cuss it, Pop, them steers didn't roam into our pasture by accident," Lanky said. "Didn't I tell you that there wasn't a bit of fence down?"

"Then somebody deliberately cut the fence and let 'em in, and then fixed up the fence again," Pop Alderson stated. "In the mornin', the first thing, we'll just turn 'em out. I don't aim to walk into any trap. I don't want any critters that don't belong to the outfit. They've about busted me, and they've rustled stock, and they've given me the laugh a lot of times, but they ain't goin' to make me do anything that'll land me in jail! Not at all!"

"But who'd want to do that, Pop?"

"Walt Filkes, dang it! He aims to run me down so he can buy the Square A for next to nothin', and you know it. Havin' an outfit like the C Bar C for a neighbor ain't my idea of a tasty dessert after a heavy meal. My good gosh! I sure have heard tell often of stock bein' missin' a lot of times, and herds dwindlin' mysteriouslike, but this is the first time in my young career that I ever knew of a fenced herd increasin' honest except by the natural process of cows havin' calves!"

Lanky Jings cocked his head to one side and squinted his eyes again. "Well, Pop, you're the boss," he said, giving a sigh of resignation. "But if it was me, I'd sure and certain slap a brandin' iron on them steers as soon after daybreak to-morrow as possible. Gifts like that ain't to be refused."

"Yeh, and you'd land in jail if you did it, and maybe in State's prison after that!"

"Maybe so, and maybe not again," Lanky replied. "I'd sure take a chance."

"There ain't goin' to be any argument about it," Pop told him decisively.

"If it wasn't within two spits and a sneeze of bein' dark, we'd ride right out there and turn them steers loose tonight. But I reckon that we couldn't see to cut 'em away from our own stock. We'll sure do it in the mornin'."

"That's danged outright foolishness," Lanky put in. "Now, Pop——"

"No argument, I said!"

"Yeh, but——"

Pop Alderson suddenly hissed a warning. "Careful!" he muttered. "The Kitten is comin'!"

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGER ON THE RANGE.

AT an early hour that morning, immediately after breakfast to be precise, Nancy Alderson had reached the conclusion that life on the Square A and the surrounding section of country was growing monotonous.

There seemed to be nothing new to do. She had been to town with her father only ten days before, and would not have the chance to go again for at least a month. There were no ponies to break. There were no new and interesting calves at this time of the year. The buildings, the trails, the sunrises and the sunsets, the hot winds, the cool evening breezes, broad acres, sloping hillsides, dry water courses—all were the same!

But within a few hours this dread monotony had been broken, Nancy Alderson had enjoyed a laugh, her womanly sympathy had been aroused, and she had met a type of human being new to her. Now she was riding toward the ranch house and her supper, well satisfied with the world.

Riding in a wide semicircle around the adjoining C Bar C Ranch, because she held an intense dislike for Walt Filkes and all of his men, Nancy Alderson paid a visit that day to a band of outlaws—not desperadoes by any means, not cattle rustlers nor horse thieves, train robbers, nor highwaymen, but a family that raised sheep for a living!

Mrs. Jones, the wife of the sheepman, was a kindly old soul Nancy liked to visit despite Mr. Jones' method of gaining sustenance for those dependent upon him. This was a sort of social "come down" for Nancy, of course, she being the daughter of a cattle raiser, but she discounted that. A certain brand of sugar cookies manufactured by Mrs. Jones for her husband and her numerous brood had a great deal to do with this. For there were times when Nancy, to speak both literally and figuratively, got "fed up" on the ranch Chinaman's flat cake and dried-apple pie.

Two hours before dusk, Nancy left the Jones place and rode at an easy gallop toward the Square A. She went through a narrow cañon, ascended to a tiny mesa, crossed that, and circled a butte to come to an abrupt stop.

"Marvelous mirage!" she gasped. That was Nancy Alderson's pet profane expression.

A hundred feet ahead of her was a man. At the first glance he did not appear to be the sort of man Nancy ever had seen before. His clothing determined that. He had on whipcord riding breeches, boots that could have served as mirrors, elegant spurs without rowels, such as a cavalry officer wears, a white silk shirt, and a gorgeous silk neckerchief.

Nancy did not see the hat because it was some feet to one side, upturned in the dirt. The gentleman himself was sprawling in the middle of the trail. His hair was unkempt and his face was red and glistened with perspiration. He had every appearance of a man who had just concluded a profane outburst.

Nancy Alderson glanced quickly at the immediate vicinity, but saw nobody else, and neither did she see a horse. Yet the scene convinced her that there had been a horse in it, and that his

sudden departure had left the rider thus. She urged her own mount closer, like the curious antelope creeping upon the proverbial red flag.

The man in the middle of the trail raised his head and regarded her as an insult added to injury. He gulped several times as though choking back verbal explosions not fit for the delicate ears of a lady. Nancy swung her mount sidewise and threw a trousered and booted and shapely leg around the saddle horn.

"Pardon me," she said, "but are you doing it on a bet?"

For an instant he looked at her, and then, without replying, he staggered and stumbled to his feet. It seemed that he could not stand upright, that there was a pain in his back, and that the portion of his anatomy that had recently touched a saddle was not inured to such contact.

With arms akimbo, he stood and glared at her. Again he gulped. In that moment Nancy decided that he was tall, broad of shoulder, and altogether good looking. His hair, soaked with perspiration, was thick and brown and curly. His eyes were brown also.

"My horse," he said, after a time, "threw me!"

"Yes?" she questioned.

"I called him a horse, but he is a brute! I have ridden many a horse, but never before such an animal as the one that left me a minute or so ago."

"He—he left you?"

"Madam, he did!" the stranger said with conviction. "He left me in the middle of the road."

"This isn't a road; it is only a trail," she corrected.

"Thank you. He also left me right in the middle of that big thistle!"

Nancy had grace enough to hide a grin. "Pardon me, but—but that isn't a thistle," she told him. "That's a cactus—of the long-sticker variety."

"I can testify as to the variety," he acknowledged. "I wonder if you could tell me how far it is to the ranch."

"There are several ranches in this part of the country," she said.

"I refer to the establishment known as the Triple Triangle."

"We call them outfits instead of establishments," she informed him. "And to what part of the Triple Triangle do you refer? It has fifteen thousand acres, you know."

"Merciful heavens! And I have promised to inspect all of it!" he replied. "I want to locate the principal house, of course, where Mr. Derker, the superintendent, presides."

"Oh! The ranch house is only a few miles away, if you know what direction to take. Are you working for the Triple Triangle?"

"I am the son of one of the stockholders," he explained. "Allow me—my name is Arnold Brown. I was a bit run down, and my fool of a doctor advised that I come out here for a month or so. Fresh air, regular sleep and meals, exercise, and all that sort of silly rot."

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"I have been here only two days," Arnold Brown said, "and I didn't know whether I liked it or not until a few minutes ago. Now I know that I like it. I've met you!"

"You don't need to strain yourself thinking up talk like that," she replied. "I'm Nancy Alderson, of the Square A."

"By Jove! The Kitten, I've heard you called. I say—pur, but please don't use your claws. I've endured enough violence for one day."

She grinned down at him. "You'd better put on your hat," she advised. "It is late in the afternoon, but the sun is still hot."

He retrieved his hat and donned it, first brushing the dust from it carefully. "I'm glad that I have met you, Miss Alderson," he said. "But I'm afraid

that your first impression of me is not a good one. You came upon me when I was in a rather undignified position, as it were."

"I reckon," she said. Nancy had been away to school, but she mingled school English with ranch English. "What are you going to do now?"

"If you'll be kind enough to direct me, I'll walk home."

"In those boots? Great blisters!" she gasped. "Why not ride?"

"The wild, untamed, untamable, unmentionable quadruped I once bestrode has gone hence."

"How far hence?" she asked.

"From the way he started to travel when he left me, he probably is below the Mexican border by this time," Arnold Brown replied.

"Nonsense! I'll find him and rope him for you. Which direction did he go?"

"Around that little hill."

"That isn't a hill—it's a butte," she said.

"Be careful," Brown warned. "That horse is half demon. I have a faint idea, Miss Alderson, that I have been played for a tenderfoot. I have heard of such cases. I requested Mr. Derker to give me a gentle horse, as I wished to take a little ride. He had that brute saddled for me."

"That's no way for a superintendent to treat the son of one of the owners," Nancy declared.

"My father probably told him to do as much," Brown told her, sighing. "Dad has an opinion that I'm a softie. It's true that I don't know a branding iron from a strand of fence, but I'm not a softie! I'd hate to have you think so."

"Certainly I do not think so." She hid another grin.

"I shall make it a point to prove it to you," he said. "I simply am not used to the country. If I had Derker in New York—no, that wouldn't do, either! He's been in New York. But you get my meaning?"

"Surely," she told him. "Wait here until I see whether I can locate that four-footed dragon of yours."

She touched her pony with the spurs and flashed past Arnold Brown and disappeared around a jumble of rocks. Within a few minutes she returned, her rope around the neck of a gray mare.

"Is this your horse?" she asked.

"That is the unmentionable beast!" Brown answered.

Nancy Alderson laughed outright. "A run-down, spavined, weak-kneed old mare," she declared. "The tamest mount on the range. Now you tell me just what happened!"

"I was riding along slowly, admiring the clouds near the horizon," he explained. "I had just fired my revolver at one of those little animals——"

"Prairie dogs."

"Thank you. And I missed, and returned the revolver to its pocket."

"Holster," she corrected him.

"I rode on. There was some sort of a peculiar little noise. The horse—er—jumped ahead and almost unseated me. And then the unmentionable whatisit side-stepped. And there I was in the dirt—rather on that confounded thistle—er—cactus!"

"A peculiar little noise?" she mused. "What did it sound like? It must have been unusual to fighten this old mare so."

"I scarcely can explain it," he told her. "It sounded like—pardon me a moment, Miss Alderson."

He drew out the revolver slowly and deliberately, and Nancy backed her pony with a gesture of alarm. "Careful with that gun, if you can't hit a prairie dog at five paces," she said. "What are you going to do?"

Mr. Arnold Brown fired as she finished speaking. He fired as a man used to firing a revolver, too.

"There you are!" he said, pointing

to a rock behind her. "I fancy that was the cause of the horse bolting."

She turned quickly to look. A few feet behind her pony was a rattler, writhing in its death throes. Mr. Brown's solitary bullet had gone to the proper spot.

Nancy Alderson turned and looked at him in amazement, and in time to catch a peculiar expression in his countenance. Her own face turned red for an instant.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?" he countered.

"Play me for a fool! You can shoot. And I'll bet that you can ride."

"Possibly. But I haven't ridden for quite some time, you see, having spent some weeks in a hospital because of a broken leg I got in a polo game and the—er—the saddle didn't agree with me. I'm a bit of a softie just now when it comes to riding—if you get my meaning."

"Polo!" she gasped. "Why did you play me for a fool?"

"Well, my dear Miss Alderson, when you came upon me there was an expression in your face that seemed to say you had come across a fool of a tenderfoot and were entitled to laugh. I regret it if I have made you angry."

For a moment she looked at him, her face inscrutable, and then she urged her pony forward and extended a hand. "Mr. Brown, I think that I like you!" she said. "We'll call it square. Now get on your unmentionable beast and I'll show you how to get to the Triple Triangle. You'll be there inside an hour, if this old mare doesn't fall apart before then."

Fifty minutes later they separated where the trail forked, and Arnold Brown waved at her from a distance and disappeared into the mouth of an arroyo. Nancy Alderson rode on toward the Square A. The country was no longer monotonous. She had even agreed to show Mr. Brown its many wonders. She was to commence the following afternoon by taking him to the famous Indian Spring, a dozen miles away.

Down the trail she galloped, came to the highway, followed it for a distance, and then turned toward the Square A. And a few minutes after that she pulled up her mount at the corral and looked down at her father and Lanky Jings.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What is the trouble now? Don't say that it is nothing, Pop. Your faces are telling a different story!"

CHAPTER III.

A PRISONER.

THEY told her promptly and to the last detail. Nancy Alderson had a faculty for compelling her father and Lanky Jings to reveal what she wished to know, and she knew how to exercise it. She listened gravely as she took saddle and bridle from her pony, stopping now and then to pay closer attention, and waving Lanky aside when he would have done the work for her. Nancy Alderson was a true daughter of the range; nobody else cared for her pony if she knew it.

When the pony had been turned into the corral and the story was finished, both events coming at about the same time, Nancy cocked her pretty head to one side and spoke.

"We'd better talk this thing over, I reckon," she said. "It doesn't look good to me. I suppose the Chinaman has supper ready, and we'd better go in and eat. Woo Chung gets rabid when the chuck gets cold."

"I'll be up later," Lanky offered.

"You forget your foolishness and come and eat in the house," Nancy commanded. "I'll tell Woo Chung to set another plate."

"Then I'll go and clean up first," Lanky declared. "It won't take me more'n a minute."

She glared at him, but Lanky Jings turned and hurried away toward the bunk house. An invitation to eat supper at the ranch house with the owner and his daughter stood as a command from royalty with Lanky Jings, despite the fact that he was the only hand on the place. Old traditions had to be maintained, regardless of monetary conditions. The occasion called for a special effort. Lanky generally ate in the cook house with Woo Chung.

So Lanky Jings scrubbed his face, paying more than the ordinary amount of attention to his ears, put on a clean shirt that he had washed himself the day before, slicked back his hair, dusted his boots, brushed his hat on his sleeve, and journeyed up to the ranch house again.

During the meal, the three of them discussed the affair, and even Woo Chung listened when he had the chance. Woo Chung lived in perpetual fear that something would happen to cause him to lose his job at the Square A. It was an easy job. He had worked on other ranches, and he knew what it meant to cook for a bunch of critical, hilarious, violent punchers and be the unwilling subject of their rough ribaldry.

After the conclusion of the meal, the three went to the front porch and continued the discussion.

"There is no chance for an argument, Pop," Nancy declared, when they were about talked out. "We must turn those steers out of the pasture the first thing in the morning. Lanky should have done it when he found them by all means."

"That's my idea, too, Kitten," her father replied. "But Lanky wants us to brand 'em."

"No, sir," she replied decisively. "We don't want any trouble. Walt Filkes may be behind this. We'll get to bed early, and we'll get up early and ride out there the first thing after breakfast and turn those steers out. I'll tell Woo Chung to have coffee ready an hour earlier than usual."

Lanky Jings growled his way back to the bunk house, ignited the wick of a kerosene hanging lamp, removed his coat and boots, and sat at ease on the side of his bunk, puffing at his old and odorous pipe. Lanky was thoroughly disgusted. He knew what he'd do if he owned the Square A outfit! But Pop was the boss, and Nancy was Nancy, and that settled it.

Presently he blew out the light and walked across to the open door, to stand framed in it and stare up at the star-lit sky. Insect life was buzzing. A restless horse was fussing down in the corral. The night breeze stirred the cottonwoods near the ranch house. A coyote howled in the distance.

"Nice night," Lanky growled to himself.

He knew that he should turn in, but he was not sleepy. He went to the pail of water on the end of the bench beside the bunk house and took a deep drink. He sat down on the bench and leaned back against the wall. His pipe had gone out; he pocketed it.

It was then that some unusual sense seemed to tell him that a visitor was on the premises. Lanky could see nobody, and neither did he hear actual sounds to indicate the presence of an unwelcome guest. But the feeling persisted.

He got up and slipped into the bunk house and drew on his boots. He also buckled on his belt and made certain that his revolver was loaded and in good working order. Then he fared forth again. Fifty feet from the bunk house he came to a stop, listening and straining his eyes in an effort to peer through the gloom.

"I know danged well——" he muttered to himself.

Gravel cracked up by the ranch house, as gravel cracks only when trodden upon by heavy boots. Then there was silence again for a time. Lanky Jings crept

forward like a soldier in enemy territory, making not the slightest noise himself. He approached the ranch house cautiously. Not a light was showing. Pop Alderson and his daughter had retired; Woo Chung had concluded his duties long since and had gone to his own quarters.

"Dang it!" Lanky gasped.

Gravel cracked once more. Lanky believed that he saw a shadow darting slyly and speedily through the group of trees.

"Hey, you!" he roared.

There came no answer in words. But there was a sudden clatter of hoofbeats as somebody rode furiously toward the distant highway. Lanky Jings promptly hurled three bullets in the general direction of the sounds. The hoofbeats grew more distant, and finally could not be heard at all.

A bellow came suddenly from the front porch of the ranch house. "What's goin' on?" it demanded. "You there, Lanky?"

"Yep! I'm here, Pop. Somebody was prowlin' around the place, and I took a few shots at him. He rode away."

Lanky hurried forward, and Nancy appeared with a bath robe wrapped around her girlish form and her black hair hanging in a braid down her back, and a lighted lamp held high above her head.

"I heard him sneakin' around the place," Lanky explained.

"You sure you didn't dream it?" Pop demanded.

"I ain't been to sleep," Lanky protested. "I heard him ridin' away. And he—what's that fastened to the door, Pop?"

Pop Alderson turned to investigate, Lanky went up the steps, and Nancy held the light in the proper position. Fastened to the front door of the ranch house was a sheet of common letter paper. A message had been scrawled upon it with a pencil. It was not at all difficult to read:

BRAND THE STEERS IN YOUR UPPER PASTURE. THEY'RE YOURS.

They all read the message and then regarded one another gravely.

"More of their tricks," Pop declared. "I wish you'd winged that feller, Lanky."

"Now, Pop," Nancy protested. "We don't want bloodshed."

"I didn't use to, but I'm gettin' to the point where a little bloodshed might be welcome," Pop replied. "I don't aim to have men prowlin' around the place at night. I'll bet if Lanky had winged him we'd have found him wearin' the C Bar C brand. One of Walt Filkes men, I betcha!"

"No harm done," Nancy observed.

"Sleep ruined," her father informed her. "I reckon he won't come back tonight, whoever he is. You go to bed, Lanky."

"'Pears to me, Pop, that this is a straight tip," Lanky said. "Me, I'd sure and certain brand them steers——"

"Didn't I tell you, and didn't Kitten tell you, that we wouldn't do anything of the kind? Are you runnin' the Square A, Lanky, or am I? Dang it, I'll get mad and fire you one of these days!"

"Have it your own way," Lanky said. "I probably could get me a good job by sayin' as how I'd been foreman of the Square A outfit."

Pop Alderson almost choked with rage because of this veiled insult. He gestured frantically, his gestures meaning that Lanky Jings should go away before Pop lost his temper utterly and committed a homicide. Lanky shook his head and went.

He went to his bunk, sleeping with his revolver ready beneath the folded blanket he used for a pillow. But he was up at break of day. Coffee odors were coming from the cook house, and

Lanky dressed quickly and went there. Woo Chung was broiling bacon and scrambling eggs and making biscuits.

"Woo, did you hear the talk last night at supper?" Lanky demanded.

"No sabe!"

"You're a liar. I saw you with your earmuffs off!" Lanky told him promptly. "What you think of it, Woo?"

"Nuthin'," said Woo Chung.

"You're a liar again! You're doin' a lot of thinkin'," Lanky said. "Do you realize that the foreman of the Square A is askin' you questions? You want me to fire you?"

"No can do!" said Woo Chung. "If do, Missee Nancy hire me back."

"Yeh? Maybe I'll perforate your yellow hide and see if she can bring you back to life," Lanky threatened. "What you think of this business?"

"Steer worth much money. Keep all steer can get," Woo Chung said.

"Them is my sentiments," Lanky Jings informed him. "It's all right to be honest, but a man's a fool to refuse a gift from heaven. Steers is steers when the market's right. Give me some more coffee!"

"Pop and Missee Nancy ready to lide," Woo Chung told him.

"Ready to ride, are they? Never mind the coffee," Lanky said. "I'll probably need it more when I come back. And I want to tell you somethin', and I'll make your hide look like a sieve if you don't pay 'tention and do as I say. You sabe somebody come along ranch last night?"

"Sure! You shoot—miss."

"Uh-huh! Never mind the missin' part. You keep your eyes open around here while we're gone to the upper pasture. Understand? If anybody comes prowlin' around here while we're away, you fan a gun at 'em! But if you get a chance, capture 'em! Sabe? Pop and I are right down eager to learn who's pesterin' us."

"I sabe," said Woo Chung.

"Uh-huh," Lanky grunted. "And you'd better remember what I'll do to you if you don't take care of the ranch. Oil up your gun."

"Him oiled!"

"All right." Lanky Jings left the cook house and hurried to the corral and caught up his horse. Pop Alderson and Nancy appeared before he had slapped saddle and bridle on the beast.

Across the country they rode and up the gentle slope in the face of the morning sun. Once atop the mesa, they urged their horses to better speed. Lanky Jings rode ahead, Nancy beside her father. They spoke little.

And after a time they reached the upper pasture and let themselves through the wire, since they were in a hurry and it was another mile to the nearest gate. On the crest of a slope they stopped their mounts and looked toward the two-year-olds grazing in the distance.

"My good gosh!" Lanky cried.

"What's the matter now?" Nancy asked.

"Look at 'em! Count 'em!" Lanky told her. "Thirty of our own, and twenty strange ones—and if there ain't more than that there now I'll eat one, hide and hair."

They went forward and made a closer inspection. The cattle were scattered, and counting them was not a difficult task.

"Sixty!" Pop Alderson roared.

"And I know danged well that I counted them right yesterday," Lanky declared. "I didn't make any mistake. Let's look at the fence."

They galloped to it, rode quickly along it, scanning the ground. After a time they found what they sought—a place where the fence had been cut, tracks to show where cattle had been driven through.

"New place," Lanky said. "Them tracks wasn't there yesterday. There's

been ten more two-year-olds turned into this pasture durin' the night, Pop. Fence mended ag'in, too."

"They came from toward that draw," Pop speculated.

"And that means," Nancy added, "that they might have come from either the Triple Triangle or the C Bar C. Or some outfit on the eastern slope."

"Pop, you let me hurry back and get the brandin' iron——" Lanky began.

"No argument," Pop Alderson snapped. "Lanky, you cut that wire! Kitten, you stay beside the cut. Lanky and me'll get them unbranded steers outa here quick as shootin'. I only hope we can do it before the sheriff and a posse come ridin' up to nab us."

Lanky Jings gave a sigh of resignation again and went to work. Cutting out half the herd called for time and trouble. Some of the unbranded two-year-olds were wild and showed remarkable speed and agility. The Square A stock grew nervous and complicated matters. Lanky and Pop rode and roped and swore. Nancy, at the break in the fence, turned back the Square A stock that tried to follow the others through.

The sun rose higher in the heavens and the day grew hot—close, sticky hot, irritatingly hot. Noon had passed before the last foreign steer had been driven forth and Lanky had mended the fence again. Then the three rode to the gate and through it, and started slowly back toward the Square A ranch house, allowing their mounts to choose their own paces.

"Cuss the man who did it!" Pop said. "Two thirds of a day's work for nothin'! If Walt Filkes——"

"Don't you start on Walt Filkes again, Pop," Lanky begged him. "You make him stop, Miss Nancy. He's hot under the collar already."

"But I want to know the meanin' of it," Pop protested. "Dang it, I don't like men who fight in the dark. Tryin' to hand me a young bunch of steers that way has got to be explained."

Through an arroyo they rode, using a short cut, to emerge from it and see the ranch buildings in the near distance. And they saw something else, also—Woo Chung dancing up and down before the cook house and waving his arms at them frantically.

"More trouble, I suppose," Pop declared.

They bent forward in their saddles, used quirts and spurs, and rode with what speed their jaded mounts could furnish them. Long before they reached Woo Chung's side they could hear him screeching. And as they pulled up sharply within a few feet of him, Pop Alderson and Lanky Jings reaching for their revolvers, they made out the words.

"Plisoner!" Woo Chung was crying. "Me catchee. Plisoner alee same in storeloom!"

CHAPTER IV.

A STORY OF THE PAST.

UTTERING little expressions of astonishment, the three sprang from their horses and trailed the reins with such celerity that the mounts themselves were startled. Woo Chung continued his dancing and screeching.

"Shut up," Pop barked at him. "Stop that racket. Now talk sense. What's happened around here?"

"Man come," Woo Chung explained, fighting hard to calm himself. He probably was rebuking himself also for having forgotten, for a few minutes, the inscrutable calm common to his race except in moments of severe stress.

"What man?" asked Pop.

"Stlange man," said Woo Chung. "I pointee gun and put him in storeloom. Tie him up!"

"Strange man!" Pop gasped. "Some new tough puncher that Walt Filkes has hired, I reckon. If he is, Woo, I'll sure treat you royal."

"Funny clothes," Woo Chung commented. "Talkee funny, too. No sense!"

Miss Nancy Alderson suddenly exhibited symptoms of choking. Her face turned red, almost purple. Then she changed, and appeared to be on the verge of hysterical laughter. But, before she could speak, her father had advanced to the door of the storeroom, revolver held ready for use.

Lanky Jings was close behind him, a set expression in his leather-colored face, seemingly prepared to murder joyfully if the occasion demanded it. Pop Alderson lifted the bar that Woo Chung had dropped into place, and jerked the door open. A shaft of bright sunshine darted inside the storeroom and illuminated the interior nicely.

"What the——" Pop Alderson stopped his profane expression just in time. His eyes bulged because of the sight he saw. He turned and looked at Lanky, and then turned back again.

On the floor of the storeroom was a man lashed with a lariat. The lashing was unusual, for Woo Chung had been more concerned in making his prisoner a sure one than in tying beautiful knots. The prisoner undoubtedly was helpless. Also, he seemed to be angry. Woo Chung had treated him rather roughly, and it was stifling in the storeroom.

"Who are you?" Pop demanded.

But Nancy thrust her way forward, sudden concern in her face, the laughter gone from it now. "Why, it's Mr. Brown!" she gasped. "He is visiting at the Triple Triangle, father. He is the son of one of the owners. I met him yesterday, and meant to tell you all about it, but this other thing came up and I forgot it. He was to call this afternoon, and I was to show him Indian Spring."

"My good gosh!" Pop muttered. Offending anybody connected with the mighty Triple Triangle was much the same as a peasant thumbing his nose at the king. "Lanky, cut that man loose so I can apologize to him proper. Woo Chung, dang your yellow hide, I'll skin you alive for this!"

"I reckon it's my fault, Pop," Lanky Jings put in. "I told Woo to handle any stray man that might come prowlin' around the place while we were in the upper pasture."

Lanky bent over the prostrate form and slashed at the lariat in half a dozen places. It was the only way in which the rope could be removed with speed. Then he aided Mr. Arnold Brown to get upon his feet, and stepped back.

"I'm right down sorry about this, mister," Pop said. "I wouldn't have had it happen for worlds. My gosh!"

"It—it was all a mistake," Nancy added.

"I hope so," Arnold Brown said, as though he doubted it. "The confounded Chinese held me up with a gun while I was knocking at the door, and wouldn't let me explain the nature of my visit. Then he compelled me to remain quiet until he tied me up. I—er—was unable to disarm him, and he disarmed me at the first. I've been on the floor of that hot room for just perfect ages!"

"I'm so sorry," Nancy put in, holding back her laughter with difficulty. "We've had some excitement around the Square A, and a sort of mystery, and it has upset everything. Please come into the house, Mr. Brown. Woo will get us something to eat immediately."

Woo Chung nodded his head violently. He realized that he had made some sort of a grave error, and if it could be corrected by cooking, then he was ready to cook. He turned back into the cook house, shaking his head as though he did not quite comprehend.

"Wouldn't have had it happen for worlds," Pop repeated. "Especially to any man named Brown. One of the best friends I ever had was named Brown. Lost track of him years ago.

Rich or dead by this time, I suppose. Come right along, Mr. Brown!"

Lanky Jings led the three horses toward the corral, where he could laugh in peace, and Pop and Nancy conducted their visitor to the house. Mr. Brown seemed undecided whether to take the affair as a joke or consider it a cause for breaking off diplomatic relations with the Square A and its people. But Nancy's chatter soon put him at his ease. She told him the story of the unbranded steers, and this led to a partial recital of her father's troubles, in which Brown seemed much interested.

He was allowed to refresh himself, and they ate. Nancy made another engagement for the ride to Indian Spring. There could be no denying the fact that Brown was captivated by Nancy, but he also seemed to be paying a lot of attention to Pop.

"So you like the name Brown?" he asked. "I always have thought it a common name, myself."

"Don't you ever dare be ashamed of it," Pop told him. "Ever notice how two men will meet accidental and take a likin' to each other right away, and be ready to scrap for each other like they'd been raised together? That's what happened to me and a man named Robert Brown, years ago."

"Interesting!" young Brown commented.

"I was workin' in an office in the East, tryin' hard to get ahead, and speculatin' a little on the side and makin' some money," Pop went on. "Just a young un, I was. Got sick from overwork, and the doctor told me to take a vacation. So I went into the North woods."

"My doctor sent me here," Arnold Brown commented. "He probably knew what he was doing." He glanced at Nancy as he spoke.

"I met this Robert Brown in the woods," said Pop. "He was just out huntin' and fishin'—had money, you see. Felt like I'd known him all my life. Got to be pals with him overnight! Funny thing."

"Fate works mysteriously," said Arnold Brown.

"Inside two weeks we was ready to die for each other. And I almost did die for him."

"How was that?" young Mr. Brown asked.

"He slipped on a ledge and tumbled into a lake. Water icy cold. Bumped his head on a rock just before he went under—stunned him. I was high up on the cliff, but I took a shot dive into the lake. Got hold of him easy enough, and then found that there wasn't any place I could land him. Had to swim a devil of a long way. He came back to his senses and started to strugglin', and I had to tap him on the chin. Finally got him to shore."

"Saved his life," Arnold Brown said.

"Oh, I reckon so! 'Twas like savin' a son or a brother. He did me a lot of good turns, too. Then he went away. We wrote to each other. I went back to the city and made some more money and got married. But I couldn't stand the city grind. The doctor told me to travel west. Brought my bride and came along. Twenty years ago. Nancy came soon after we got here. Bought the Square A—like a fool! Been holdin' on ever since."

"And Brown?" the other questioned.

"We finally lost track of each other—don't know exactly how. Give a lot to see him again, if he's still alive. That man was bound to make money. He had the gift. Full of schemes. Thought half a dozen times that I'd look him up—but there are a lot of Robert Browns. And—well, maybe I wouldn't want to see him now. Look at me. Just a fizzle in life!"

"Pop!" Nancy remonstrated.

"Just a fizzle! Been here so long I talk and act like all the old-timers. A man'd think I never had been to school

and didn't know the English language. Environment! Changed it all! Fillin' my little corner in the scheme of things, I suppose. But I've always got a warm spot in my heart for a man named Brown."

"I'll venture to wager," Arnold Brown said, "that you haven't told me the entire story. When two men grow attached to each other like that there generally is a great deal behind it."

"Just natural-born friends," Pop declared. "We shouldn't have drifted apart, I reckon. But he was travelin' his path through life, and I got sick, and —well, that's the way it goes! But I'd sure admire to have you drop over to the Square A whenever you can, Mr. Brown. I like your name—and I like you."

"Thanks," Arnold Brown replied. "And this trouble you are having? Isn't there any way of putting an end to it? Isn't there any law here?"

"Plenty of it," Pop replied. "But the sheriff is a heap too busy with big things, I reckon, to pay much attention to a few missin' steers and cows. If I had a big outfit, and a lot of political influence, it might be different."

"And these unbranded steers——" Arnold Brown questioned.

"Some of Walt Filkes' work, I betcha," said Pop. "He wants to get me into trouble if he can. He wants the Square A, and thinks he'll make me so sick of the place that I'll sell out for almost nothin'. I'd do day work to pay the taxes and let the place run wild before I'd sell it to Walt Filkes."

"What sort of a man is this Filkes?"

But Nancy had been waiting for that question, and dreading it, and now she came back into the conversation with determination in her manner.

"Pop, if you start talking about Walt Filkes, you'll be at it for hours," she said. "Mr. Brown can hear about it some other time. And it'll be dark in an hour or so, and unless he wants to spend the night, he'll soon be starting home."

"I promised Superintendent Derker that I'd be back," Arnold Brown said. "He'll be worried if I don't show up. He feels responsible for me, I presume, and he thinks that I'm so much of a tenderfoot that I might lose myself."

Pop and Nancy accompanied him to the door. He was not riding the gray mare to-day, but a spirited animal of good blood, upon which Nancy looked with evident approval. He mounted gracefully, though stiffly, smiled, waved his hand at them, and rode away.

"Nice young man," Pop averred. "Good name, too. What a funny thing life is!"

Nancy did not feel quite sure that she knew his meaning. But she feared that he was thinking of the father of young Arnold Brown, a gentleman wealthy enough to own a part of the famous Triple Triangle outfit, and comparing that gentleman's financial lot with his own. Nancy Alderson did not want her father to consider himself a "fizzle."

CHAPTER V.

A DISAPPOINTED SUITOR.

FOLLOWING the hard work of the day, Pop and Nancy and Lanky Jings had no difficulty in getting to sleep as soon as they retired that night. Snores coming through the open windows of the bunk house told of the descent of the Square A's foreman into the much-mentioned arms of Morpheus. Nancy and her father may not have snored, but their sleep was deep for all that.

But it was different with Woo Chung. The afternoon had been one of much excitement for him. He had captured a man at the point of a gun, and it had developed that the man was one of some consequence. The keen thrill of his adventure remained with him, and he lived it over repeatedly. His nerves re-

fused to return to their normal state for the time being. He could not sleep.

He smoked until he was tired of it, thought of different things until he was tired of that, and then sat down on the front stoop of the cook house in the darkness and looked up into the star-studded sky. He wished that the moon was up, for he never tired of looking at the group of ranch buildings bathed in bright moonlight, but the moon would not be up for hours.

He had everything prepared so that breakfast would be a matter of but a few minutes. He might as well go to his bunk, he told himself, whether he slept or not. Perhaps the gods of the upper air would be kind and make his eyelids heavy.

Starting to turn back into the building to seek his couch in the little room behind the kitchen, he came to an abrupt stop. To his keen ears there had come a noise foreign to a well-regulated night at the Square A.

Woo Chung crouched in the blackness and strained his ears. He thought he heard a step, but he could not be sure. No animals were prowling in the vicinity, he knew; Pop Alderson did not allow his stock to run loose around the ranch house.

Darting silently back into his room, Woo Chung got his gun—a mammoth, long-barreled, old-fashioned weapon that looked formidable and had a roar like that of a small cannon. Back at the door once more, he listened again.

Something squeaked, as though a door had been opened. There was a clatter of metal in the near distance, noise made by some tool crashing to the floor of the tool house. Woo Chung shrieked like a demon, and fired.

The roar of the revolver covered any other noise that might have been made at the moment. Woo fired again, and once more he screeched. Lanky Jings sprang from his bunk down at the bunk house and grasped his weapon. Pop Alderson did something similar in the ranch house. Nancy crept from her bed and reached for the bath robe with one hand and her revolver with the other.

Woo Chung heard another noise, and his revolver roared for the third time.

"Stop that!" the voice of Lanky Jings shrieked. "You almost got me then. What's the fuss?"

Pop Alderson was calling from the front porch, wanting to know the same thing. Woo Chung crept toward them through the night until he met Lanky Jings.

"Somebody prowl alound!" he explained. "Me hear noise in tlool house!"

"Chink, you've been dreamin'," the foreman accused.

"Somebody alongside tlool house," Woo Chung repeated firmly.

Lanky Jings lighted a lantern, and Pop Alderson did the same. And soon they gathered in front of the tool house, and immediately decided that this was no time to censure Woo Chung. The door of the tool house stood open, mute witness that there had been a prowler, for it certainly had been closed and barred at nightfall. Moreover, there were boot tracks in the moist earth in front of the building, where a trickle from a near-by spring kept the ground damp.

"Dang their hides!" Pop exclaimed. "They won't even let us sleep. What in time would he want in the tool house, whoever he was? All the truck in it ain't worth twenty dollars. Our supply of tools is gettin' mighty low."

They entered and flashed their lanterns just as Nancy appeared on the scene. Nothing seemed to be missing at the first glance. A string of new horseshoes was upon the floor, where the marauder evidently had dropped them and made the clatter that Woo Chung had heard.

"Woo scared him away before he could take anything," Pop declared.

"But what he expected to get is what's puzzlin' me."

"Yah!" Lanky Jings howled suddenly, almost choking in his effort to speak. "Look!"

"You gone loco again?" Pop wanted to know.

"Look!" Lanky repeated, pointing to one of the walls, which had a shelf running along it. "Not a brandin' iron left in the place. The skunk stole our irons!"

For a moment there was silence, while each was busy thinking. Some thief had stolen the Square A branding irons. What could a thief want with those?

"It's another of that Walt Filkes' dirty tricks," Pop said. "We'll have to have new irons made, dang it! He's gettin' pretty small and mean, if anybody is askin' me."

They investigated further, but found nothing else missing. Woo Chung went back to his room. Pop and Nancy and Lanky Jings walked back toward the ranch house. In self-defense, because Pop had started talking about Walt Filkes again, Lanky turned aside and sought his bunk once more. Grumbling at the injustice of it, Pop went on toward the house, Nancy at his side, trying in vain to get in a word.

Morning came, breakfast was eaten, the day commenced as many an eventless day before it, the sun mounting into the sky, the mist of the night disappearing, steam rising from the dew-wet rocks. Lanky Jings ate with Woo Chung and then saddled and rode away on his duties, which were nothing in particular. He circled toward the north side of the Square A and rode along the fence, inspecting it closely and the land beyond it, seeking for anything that might prove of interest.

Pop fussed around the buildings, doing odd jobs, muttering dire threats against Walt Filkes and the entire C Bar C outfit. Noon passed, and shortly thereafter Mr. Arnold Brown rode his spirited horse in from the highway, to find Nacy ready for the short journey to Indian Spring. Pop told Mr. Brown the history of the night.

"But why should anybody want to steal your branding irons?" Brown asked.

"Just to pester me," Pop declared. "They wouldn't have any use for 'em, of course. Just to make me get new ones, dang it! You be careful, Kitten. If any of them C Bar C skunks pester around you, shoot quick and often!"

Pop watched them ride away, and then he went into the house and got a cigar. Pop only smoked a cigar now and then, partly because they cost considerable money, and partly because he liked his pipe best. He fussed around inside the house for a time, and then went out upon the front porch to sit in an easy-chair and wait for evening and the return of Nancy and Lanky Jings. Woo Chung was fussing around the house kitchen, stirring up some sort of a concoction that undoubtedly would be upon the table when time came for the evening meal.

Because of his broken rest of the night before, Pop felt sleepy. He settled back in his chair and puffed at his cigar and regarded the lane and the distant highway through half-closed eyes. For an hour or so he sat in this manner, and then he suddenly opened his eyes wide and straightened in his chair.

A rider was approaching the Square A. He was coming along a little-used trail that joined the main highway a short distance from the Square A's front gate. That little-used trail led only to the C Bar C, which was why it was little used.

Pop shaded his eyes with a hand and watched closely. For a moment the rider disappeared into a depression in the earth, and when he came into view again he was considerably closer to the ranch, and Pop identified him and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

The lone rider was Walt Filkes, owner of the C Bar C, the man Pop Alderson despised. Without doubt, he intended paying a visit to the Square A, since there was no ranch beyond, and only rough country leading to the foothills.

Pop got out of his chair with alacrity, darted into the house, and buckled on his belt. He took his old revolver from its holster, looked to see that it was loaded, whirled the cylinder as though in anticipation, and returned to the porch. Once more he seated himself in the easy-chair, and he puffed at his cigar again, and, beyond a slight narrowing of the eyes, he did not betray that he had any feelings at all in the matter.

Walt Filkes came through the gate and up the lane. He could see Pop Alderson easily. He stopped his horse a dozen feet from the front porch and looked up.

"Howdy, Alderson!" he said.

"Howdy!" Pop growled in reply, taking his cigar from his mouth and turning it in his fingers, inspecting it as though he never had seen it before.

"You might ask a man to alight," Filkes told him. "I rode over to have a little talk wth you."

"'Lght!" Pop snapped. Even to Walt Filkes he could not deny the proper hospitality of the country, until Filkes made himself unworthy of it by some wrong word or overt act.

Pop was gently startled, too. This was not the Walt Filkes he was in the habit of seeing. Something must have happened over at the C Bar C, Pop decided. Filkes had a clean shave, which was unusual, and his hair looked as though it had been brushed recently, whereas it generally looked as though it had not been brushed for ages. Filkes had on his holiday chaps, and his boots glistened, and his shirt was clean.

The master of the C Bar C sat in the other chair on the porch, removed his hat, wiped the perspiration from his face, and filled and lighted his pipe.

"Warm!" he commented.

"Sure is!" Pop assented. He wondered what Filkes had come to the Square A to do. Make another offer to buy it, Pop supposed.

"General conditions better than last year, though," said Filkes.

"Uh-huh!" Pop resumed his smoking.

"How's things?" Filkes demanded.

Pop looked at him squarely. "Oh, so-so!" he returned. "A gang of thirty two-year-olds, all unbranded, jumped my wire fence and got into my upper pasture."

"How?" Filkes asked quickly.

"Uh-huh! Somebody turned 'em in for a joke, I reckon. Lanky and I turned 'em out again."

"Probably Triple Triangle stock," Filkes remarked. "Funny that they wasn't branded, though."

"I'll remark! Somebody left a note on my front door, tellin' me to brand 'em, and that they were mine, but I had more sense than to do that. Practical joke, I reckon."

"Anybody does that to me will lose steers," Filkes said. "I'd slap an iron on 'em quick as I could heat one."

"Maybe so, but I won't," Pop replied.

He looked at his visitor from the corners of his eyes. Walt Filkes tamped the tobacco in his pipe bowl and cleared his throat. Now, Pop thought, he would state the real object of his visit to the Square A.

"Alderson, I rode over here to have a nice long talk with you," Filkes said. "Can we be overheard?"

"Nope! Nancy's out ridin' somewhere."

"No use beatin' around the sagebrush, Pop. I know as well as you how things are around this outfit. You're run down and on your last legs."

"Last legs are as good as any as long as a man can stand on 'em," Pop said.

"Sure and certain! But a man can't stand on 'em forever. Now, Alderson, we've never been the closest of friends. Maybe it's part my fault, and if it is, I'm sorry."

Pop glanced at him quickly again. He could not conceive of Walt Filkes being sorry for anything unless it was his inability to work more devilment.

"I've offered to buy you out——"

"Yeh, for next to nothin'!" Pop exclaimed.

"I may be able to make a better offer now."

"But I ain't hankerin' to sell," Pop protested. "The Square A is all I've got in the way of assets. It's my home, dang it—and my daughter's!"

"Yeh! Your daughter's!" Filkes said. "You're gettin' along in years, Alderson, and you can hold on and go down hill and drift until you die. But you've got a daughter! She'll be all alone in the world when you bump off. Your future might not worry you much, but her future ought to."

"Uh-huh!" Pop grunted. He had faced that problem many a time, and he often tried not to think of it. But he did not feel like discussing the subject with Walt Filkes.

"I've been a rough one in my time," Filkes continued, "but my rough days are over. I'm middle aged and ought to settle down right. The C Bar C is a pretty good outfit, and commencin' with this year she ought to give pretty good returns. There's a plaster on it, of course, but not to amount to anything. If the C Bar C and the Square A could be combined, under one management, a man could work wonders and get rich."

"Maybe," Pop assented.

"Brace up the stock, say, and buy some fancy stuff. The combined outfits would be a credit to the range. We'd ought to get together, Alderson."

"How?" Pop demanded. "By me sellin' you the Square A for nothin' and bein' without a home in my old age?"

"We can be neighborly and get together all around," Filkes went on. "You wouldn't have to worry about your old age much—if you was my father-in-law."

"How?" Pop Alderson roared, dropping his cigar in his astonishment and failing to retrieve it.

"It's time I had a wife," Walt Filkes said. "I don't know a girl on the range that can touch your Nancy. We could combine the outfits and——"

"Are you suggestin'," Pop roared in interruption, "that you marry my girl?"

"Sure and certain! And by combinin'——"

"Why, you mangy maverick!" Pop exclaimed. "You locoed, no-good coyote! You ground owl, you!"

"What's this?" Walt Filkes demanded, getting quickly out of his chair.

Pop Alderson got out of his chair also. "You—you darin' to propose that you marry my girl!" he roared. "I'd choke her to death with my bare hands before I'd let her marry you! And she'd shoot you if you asked her!"

Walt Filkes sneered at him. "Yeh?" he asked. "Not good enough for her, huh? When I'd give her a good home, and keep you from starvin' to death and even——"

"You get out of here!" Pop ordered. "Off my place! I'll have the Chinaman scrub the porch after you're gone!"

"It won't get you anything to talk to me like this," Filkes threatened.

"Off my place! It's a decent place!" Pop took a quick step toward him.

Walt Filkes' countenance depicted a sudden and terrible rage. He snarled like a beast as he stepped back toward the railing of the porch. His eyes were blazing, his hands opening and closing spasmodically.

"Get away from here," Pop shrieked. "Away, before I——"

"Before you what?" Filkes sneered. "You broken-down old coot! It'd be a blessin' to the range if I put a slug of

hot lead through you and left you here on your own porch. Everybody gone —who'd ever know?"

"You bloodthirsty——" Pop began.

Walt Filkes' eyes blazed again. His right hand started to drop toward the holster at his hip. He had ample time to catch Pop Alderson off guard and do as he had threatened, add deliberate murder to his other crimes. But he did nothing of the sort, for a peculiar voice addressed him from the open door.

"Glet goin'!" it said. "No makee fluss alound here!"

Woo Chung stood there, only a few feet away, his face inscrutable—but his small cannon held ready.

CHAPTER VI.

FISTIC COMBAT.

INDIAN SPRING was only a few miles from the Square A Ranch, and less than a mile from the little-used trail that ran from the C Bar C property to the highway. It was a gushing spring of cold water set in a peculiar rock formation. The water had medicinal qualities. There were a few stunted trees around the spring, and a small patch of coarse grass at one side of it.

In the rock formation there was a series of small caves, the walls of which had been carved ages before and bore the strange hieroglyphics of some mysterious race now dead and gone, perhaps some relatives of the ancient cliff dwellers. Every stranger in the country was supposed to visit these caves at Indian Spring. It was the show place of the county.

Nancy Alderson acted as guide on the expedition this day, and told Arnold Brown the legend of the caves. He appeared to be vastly interested in both the scenery and the guide. They drank from the spring, and allowed their horses to drink, and then sat side by side on one of the big rocks and talked.

"My father must see this," Brown declared. "He'll be coming out with a couple other directors of the Triple Triangle Syndicate for a tour of inspection soon. He never has seen the property."

"You'll be glad to see him," Nancy said.

"Always glad to see the governor," Brown declared. "We're pals. My mother is dead, you know. But dad is mighty hard on me at times. He wants me to be a mixture of outdoors man and society leader—a tough job!"

"I should think so," she sympathized.

"I like this country," Arnold Brown declared. "It is what I have been longing for. I'm going to ask dad to let me stay on and learn the business. Some job, running the Triple Triangle. I've been watching Sam Derker, the superintendent. He has a thousand details to attend to, and almost a hundred men to handle. You know him?"

"Yes; I've met him a score of times," Nancy replied.

"Derker likes your father—says your father has grit."

"Father is a dreamer," Nancy said, smiling. "He talks action at times, but he doesn't always act it. He'd get along better if he was more aggressive—but I wouldn't have him changed for worlds!"

"I suppose not," Brown told her. "What shall we do now?"

"We might ride back to the ranch," she said. "Have you seen the big prairie-dog town? It's only half a mile from where you sat down in the thistle."

He turned and grinned at her, and extended a hand to help her to her feet. Nancy certainly needed no help, but she accepted it, and it seemed to her that he held her hand a bit longer than was absolutely necessary.

They mounted and made their way out of the rocks and along the narrow, uncertain trail that ran toward the nearest road. Their horses had an easy time

of it, for it became evident that the two riders wished to proceed slowly and talk.

Trotting around a bend in the road, they beheld the approach of another rider. Nancy Alderson knew him instantly for Walt Filkes.

Filkes had left the Square A in a rage, his blood boiling, his face almost purple with wrath, muttering threats under his breath. The animal he bestrode felt the weight of his anger during the first mile or so, for Filkes was that sort of man. And now he was cutting across country past Indian Spring, hurrying back to the C Bar C, intending to make plans for the downfall of Pop Alderson.

"Somebody's coming," Brown said to Nancy.

"Walt Filkes of the C Bar C," she replied.

"The man your father dislikes?"

"The man almost everybody on the range dislikes," she told him. "Filkes runs what is called a stag ranch—not a woman on it. His punchers are wild and lawless; they cause a fuss every pay day in town. Filkes has been accused of almost everything in the calendar of crime."

"Interesting specimen!" Brown commented.

"He has no regard for the rights or feelings of others," she went on. "He's a big brute of a man, boasts that he can break a steer's neck with his bare hands."

"'Um!" Brown grunted. "I've seen the type before, and don't particularly admire it."

"He's going to pass us," Nancy said.

Walt Filkes had recognized Nancy from a distance, and had decided to meet her and her escort. He did not know the latter. But, as he approached, he appraised Arnold Brown quickly, and not correctly. Another dude visiting on the range, Filkes supposed.

Perhaps this stranger was a visitor at the Square A. Perhaps he was interested in Nancy Alderson, and had money, and that was the reason Pop Alderson sneered at Filkes' efforts at courtship. The mere thought caused Walt Filkes' anger to flame anew.

And so it was a scowling, sneering Filkes who rode up to them, stopped his horse, and touched his hat sarcastically to Nancy.

"Howdy, Miss Alderson! I've just been havin' a little talk with your father," Filkes said. "We couldn't agree on some things, but perhaps he'll come to my way of thinkin' one of these days. Who's your friend?"

Nancy introduced the two men in a manner which said clearly that she apologized to Brown for doing so.

"Brown?" Filkes questioned, disrespect in both his tone and his manner. "And what nice clothes you've got on, Mr. Brown! You'll get 'em all spoiled ridin' out in this rough country."

Arnold Brown flushed and his eyes suddenly held warning flashes, but Filkes did not notice it. The guest of the Triple Triangle seemed to straighten in his saddle, too. But Walt Filkes had turned toward Nancy.

"I reckon that you'll have to excuse yourself for a minute, Miss Alderson," he said, "'cause I've got somethin' rather private to say to you. Your dude friend can watch the little prairie dogs until I'm through."

"I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Filkes, I am sure," Nancy told him, her face flushing, her chin held high.

"You didn't get me right—I said that I had somethin' to say to you."

"Nothing that could interest me, Mr. Filkes," she replied. "Good afternoon!"

She started her pony forward, and Brown, who was a few feet behind her, started his mount also. But Filkes turned his horse so that it was across the trail.

"I said that I wanted to talk to you,

Miss Alderson!" he told her. "Maybe you didn't understand me."

"I understood you, but I don't care to hold any conversation with you," she answered. "Turn your horse aside, so we can pass!"

"You'll listen to me first!" Filkes snapped. "What right have you got to be so high and mighty, with your old ranch in ruins and you and your father half starvin' to death?"

Brown urged his horse forward. "That's enough, Filkes!" he said. "Turn aside and let the lady pass!"

"And who are you to tell me to do it?" Filkes asked, sneering. "I'm not in the habit of takin' orders from some mail-order-store dude! You open your yap at me again, and I'll wring your neck!"

"I've been told that you boast you can break a steer's neck," said Brown. "But I'm not a steer. One side, please! You are delaying Miss Alderson."

"And if I am, what are you going to do about it?" Filkes asked. "Do you think you can step in and stop me? I said that I wanted to talk to Miss Alderson, and I'm goin' to do it."

"The lady has said that she doesn't care to talk to you!" Brown's face had grown white, but from anger more than fear. Walt Filkes was a full-throated, thick-chested giant, undoubtedly a strong brute, but Arnold Brown did not seem to be particularly afraid of him.

"You run along, little boy, and I'll call you when I'm done talkin'," Filkes told him.

Brown urged his horse forward again. He got between Nancy and Filkes, despite Nancy's efforts to prevent him. He did not look at Nancy at all now; his eyes were boring into those of Walt Filkes.

"You are an insulting, overgrown bully!" Arnold Brown told the master of the C Bar C outfit. "You may ride over your cow-punchers roughshod, but I am not one of them!"

"Do you want me to slap you to sleep?" Filkes snarled.

"If you wish to try it, take off your belt and gun and dismount, sir," Brown told him. "I'll gladly do the same. Miss Alderson, may I ask you to retire around that ledge of rocks?"

"I'm not the retiring kind," Nancy said. "And I do not want you to fight."

"No, he might get his face messed up!" Filkes exclaimed sneeringly. "I can break him in two with one hand tied behind my back."

He appeared able to do it; he seemed the personification of strength. Brown was as tall, and better formed, but not so hard. And he was recuperating after an illness. Nancy feared for the outcome, but she did not have a chance to prevent the combat. Walt Filkes welcomed it. He could handle this stranger without trouble, he thought. He could batter him into a pulp. The affair would be an outlet for the rage that was consuming him since his visit to the Square A.

Filkes sprang from his horse and trailed the reins. He took off his belt and gun, and tossed them aside, and started to roll up his sleeves.

Arnold Brown was only a moment behind him. Once more he asked Nancy Alderson to retire, suggesting that this would be a sight that the eyes of a lady should not witness. But Nancy had seen fights before, and she felt that she had a personal interest in this one. Filkes might defeat her champion, but Filkes would indulge in no brutality after he had done so, not while she was there and wore a gun and was in a position to prevent it!

Filkes bellowed like a bull and rushed over the rock-strewn surface of the ground. Brown was not quite ready—he had not finished rolling up his sleeves—so he merely side-stepped neatly and allowed Filkes to charge past him.

The master of the C Bar C stopped

and came back. This time, Arnold Brown made no move to avoid him. There was a sudden whirlwind of fists, the thudding of blows striking home. Walt Filkes reeled backward, blood flowing from a split cheek.

"The object of striking is to reach the target," Mr. Brown observed. "If you'll pardon me, you leave yourself wide open. To guard properly——"

Filkes bellowed again, and rushed with his head down. Arnold Brown promptly rocked that head upward again, and then tapped it on the left side so that it swung to the right, and then brought it back to center with another blow.

"Always watch your antagonist closely," Brown said. "Read his intention in his eyes, if possible. A man cannot do this, of course, if his own eyes are closed." Whereupon Mr. Brown deftly closed one of Walt Filkes' eyes with a smash that resembled the kick of a mule.

Filkes listened to the panting taunts of Brown and received his blows, and realized that he was getting far the worst of the encounter. True, he had struck Mr. Brown several times on the chest, and once near the chin, but that did not seem to amount to much. His rage increased until he seemed to see through a veil of scarlet. He roared his wrath—and charged again.

Now Walt Filkes attempted to show that brute force could be the conqueror of science, as many a man has done before him, and, like many a man, he realized his error. Force he had, undoubtedly, but he could not direct it properly. Calmly, sternly, silently now, Arnold chopped at him, cut him down, seemingly without malice and without anger, but more like a man setting out to accomplish a task that had to be consummated, no matter how distasteful.

Nancy Alderson watched it from a short distance away. Her face depicted agreeable surprise. She had expected to see Arnold Brown's face reduced to a pulp, his teeth ruined, perhaps an arm broken—for Filkes' cruelty to a fallen foe was well known. And here was Filkes, the terror of the range, gasping for breath, trying hard to keep his feet, fighting like a cornered rat that expected no mercy.

The owner of the C Bar C reeled backward as the result of another well-directed blow. Arnold Brown stepped back also, putting down his fists.

"You've had enough, Filkes," Brown said. "You're whipped! You asked for it, remember. Now apologize to the lady, and we'll call it a day."

"I—I'll get you for this!" Filkes began.

"I am visiting at the Triple Triangle, Filkes. You can find me there any time you want me. I'm not averse to giving lessons in boxing to a man like you—not at all! If I do not happen to be at the ranch when you call, Mr. Samuel Derker, the superintendent, will be able to tell you where I may be found."

Ordinarily Walt Filkes would have digested that speech well. He certainly had no wish to antagonize the powerful Triple Triangle outfit; and Brown's words should have hinted to him that Brown was a man of some consequence around that ranch. The Triple Triangle did not entertain guests wholesale. Wrath had robbed Filkes of his ordinary caution, however.

"Apologize to the lady!" Brown commanded again.

"I'm not in the habit of apologizin'!" Filkes snarled.

"So you want more, do you?" Brown asked. "You're not satisfied? Very well!"

Mr. Brown advanced again, sighing because this added task was inflicted upon him. Walt Filkes retreated, glancing wildly from side to side. A crafty look came into his face. He put up his fists and started circling.

Nancy guessed his intention first, and

opened her mouth to cry a warning. But Filkes was too quick for her. He circled until he came close to the spot where he had dropped his gun upon the ground. It was a good twenty feet from the place where Brown had tossed his weapon. A quick dash, and Walt Filkes had snatched his revolver from its holster and was holding it ready for use, crouching against a rock like a beast at bay, his legs bowed, his upper body thrust forward, his eyes blazing.

"Now, curse you!" he shrieked. "Make me apologize, will you? Easy there, girl! Go for your gun, and I'll shoot! Keep your hands in the air, girl! And you, too, you dude. Up with your hands! You make a move, and I'll plug you good!"

"Fair fighter, aren't you?" Brown said.

"I'm runnin' this show now. Maybe you're handy with your fists, but I've got the drop. I'll show you not to——"

There came a sudden clatter of hoofbeats. Around the jumble of rocks a short distance away galloped two men, Superintendent Derker of the Triple Triangle and one of his punchers.

Filkes snarled because of the interruption and stepped back, but still holding his revolver ready. Sam Derker reined in, his man behind him.

"What's this?" the superintendent of the Triple Triangle demanded. "Are you annoying Mr. Brown, Filkes?"

"If you don't want the infant annoyed, keep him home!" Filkes said. "Keep him home, or he'll be buzzard food!"

"'Um!" Derker grunted. "From the looks of things, Mr. Brown is able to take care of himself. How do you do, Miss Alderson. May I be of service?"

"Thanks, but everything is lovely," Nancy replied. "Mr. Filkes was insolent, and Mr. Brown punished him. And then Filkes went for his gun."

Derker rode forward slowly. "Give me that gun, Filkes," he commanded

"Yeh? Want me to fight the whole Triple Triangle with my bare hands only?"

"From the looks of things, the entire outfit wouldn't be necessary," Derker told him. "You're getting yourself disliked around these parts, Filkes. You couldn't play fair on a bet. Give me that gun!"

Walt Filkes had been glancing around as though to see a way out. He was incautious for a moment. In that moment Mr. Derker's right hand made a lightninglike movement—and he had Filkes covered.

"That gun—please!" The voice of the Triple Triangle's superintendent seemed to drip icy globules. There was deadly menace in it. Walt Filkes shivered.

He stepped forward, Derker watching him narrowly. He turned his gun and extended it—butt first. Derker took it calmly, returned his own weapon to its holster, deftly "broke" Filkes' gun, and scattered the cartridges on the ground. Then he returned the gun to its owner.

"Now that your teeth are drawn and you can't bite, you can bark all you please," Sam Derker said. "You got anything to say?"

"I'll be square with all of you for this!"

"Uh-huh! Your horse is a few feet behind you, Filkes. The C Bar C is two miles straight ahead. I reckon those instructions are enough. Get goin'!"

Walt Filkes glared at him and mounted. He rode around them and started toward his ranch. From the near distance he shook his fist at them, and then touched his horse with the spurs and disappeared behind a broken ledge of rock.

"Well, let's trot along, folks," Sam Derker urged. "It'd be just like that Walt Filkes to reload his shootin' iron and take a few shots at us long range.

Did you do all of that to him with your fists, Mr. Brown?"

"I did, Mr. Derker."

"I regret," Sam Derker said, "that I did not reach the spot some minutes earlier. I regret it exceedingly. I haven't seen a good fight for ages. You ride ahead with Miss Alderson, Mr. Brown. This other gentleman and myself will act as rear guard."

Arnold Brown and Nancy Alderson thereupon rode ahead as he had suggested. So they did not see the grin on Superintendent Derker's face, nor hear the soft chuckles that he gave. Mr. Derker was not without a sense of humor.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE MYSTERY.

TELLING the story of what had happened near Indian Spring, Nancy waxed eloquent and made quite a hero of Mr. Brown, ascribing to him more credit than he really deserved. She gave her recital down by the corral as she was turning in her pony, with her father and Lanky Jings for audience.

"By time, I'd have given my month's wages—if I ever get 'em—to have seen that scrap," Lanky Jings declared. "I'd have given half my back pay. I sure do admire that Mr. Brown!"

Pop Alderson glared at him. "Never mind that crack about your back pay," he said. "I'd have given half the year's profits—if any! But I ain't a mite surprised. Anybody named Brown is pretty liable to take care of himself. My good gosh! Now Walt Filkes will be wantin' to fight the Square A and the Triple Triangle and all the outfits on the range. It'll pay to keep an eye open for him, I reckon. I know the way he'll fight. He's half Apache and two thirds Mex. I'd rather play around with a Gila monster and a couple o' unfriendly rattlers than with Walt Filkes. Dang him, he's——"

"Pop!" Nancy stopped him. "Let's eat. Woo Chung will be poutin' if we let the chuck get cold."

Pop and Nancy went immediately to the ranch house, and Lanky Jings washed up and ate with the cook, where his table manners were strictly his own business. After the meal, Pop told his daughter of the conversation between Walt Filkes and himself, and Nancy's face grew red at thought of the insult, and more than ever she was glad that Arnold Brown had whipped the owner of the C Bar C so soundly.

Lanky Jings puffed at his vile pipe in the cook house after the meal and watched Woo Chung pottering around his pots and pans and setting out stuff for breakfast. Lanky carried the burden of the conversation, and Woo Chung indulged in monosyllabic replies.

"Woo, what particular brand of Hades are you goin' to raise to-night?" the foreman of the Square A demanded. "If you start to shootin' ag'in, do me a favor and shoot straight up in the air. You danged near winged me last night. When you go to gettin' excited and all het up, it's time for little children to run to their mothers."

"Shootee glood!" Woo informed him.

"Yeh! I'll remark that you cover considerable territory. When you fire that young cannon of yours, the folks over in California think that there's another earthquake playin' around. Why don't you get a human gun?"

"Glood glun," said Woo Chung.

"Yeh? I wish I'd known last month that you had it. Pop and me would have saved a lot of blastin' powder when we was clearin' stumps out of the calf pasture. You want to watch out for that Walt Filkes, Woo. What he'll do to you, if he ever catches you with your back turned, will make history."

"Alle time turn flace!" Woo said.

"Uh-huh," Lanky Jings grunted. "I'm goin' to the bunk house, Woo, and try to get me some sleep. And I'm

goin' to close and bar the door and shut the windows and not have any light. You'd better do the same. I don't mind bein' perforated with a forty-five or any other danged caliber you might mention, but I want to be awake when it happens!"

Lanky Jings journeyed to the bunk house leisurely and removed his boots without the preliminary act of lighting the lamp. This was not cowardice; it was caution. None knew better than Lanky the sort of man who had arrayed himself against the Square A outfit. Lanky felt a responsibility both personal and professional. Being the foreman and entire field force of the Square A was no sinecure at times.

However, the night passed without untoward event. Once more the odor of Woo Chung's fragrant coffee hung in the morning breeze. Mist arose from the dew-drenched rocks. Down by the creek; the meadow larks were singing. The Square A outfit began yet another day of its uncertain existence, each soul upon it wondering what the day would bring forth.

After breakfast Lanky Jings saddled his horse and rode to the ranch house for orders, exactly as though he had been a foreman with a score of punchers under his command, and stood intermediate between them and the owner. Pop Alderson had no orders to give. Lanky expressed a desire to ride toward the draw and upper pasture and look over the ground, and received permission to do so. There was no particular work to be done, Lanky already having attended to the regular chores.

And so, sitting far to one side of his saddle, his hat pulled down almost to his eyes, chewing plug tobacco, Lanky Jings rode forth, crossed the lower meadow, came to a line fence, and continued along it, allowing his horse to make its own pace.

Now and then Lanky stopped and shaded his eyes and looked far afield in every direction, but nothing unusual met his gaze. In time he came to the gravel slope and rode up it slowly and cautiously until he came to the summit, from which he could look across the upper pasture where the two-year-olds were supposed to be grazing.

But his first glance did not take in the two-year-olds and estimate their condition. That first glance revealed to Lanky's eyes a horseman emerging from a coulee. Evidently he saw Lanky Jings at about the same time. It was evident, also, that he did not care to hold conversation with Lanky. For he dug home the spurs, bent forward in his saddle, and started riding with what speed his mount could give him.

The attitude of the strange horseman looked suspicious to Lanky Jings. He did not know the man or what he had done, but the other's flight seemed to indicate that he had done something. He was out on the open range, riding toward the north, which meant that he might belong to any one of half a dozen outfits or be a range tramp and marauder.

Lanky Jings, as has been mentioned, bestrode a good bit of horseflesh. Also, he reached a sudden determination to ascertain the identity of the strange horseman. He was inside the Square A fence, but it did not take him long to get outside it. Over a low gate the horse carried him, and he rode furiously along the trail in an effort to intercept the stranger.

Finding himself pursued, the man ahead urged his horse to its utmost speed. Lanky gained, despite that. The breath of the chase was in Lanky's nostrils, so to speak, and through his old veins sang the coursing blood that, in days gone by, had boiled during many a range war. Lanky reverted to the good old days. He whipped out his revolver, though far out of range, and fired.

The chase continued, Lanky continuing to gain. The man ahead turned into a cross trail that led to the distant highway. Lanky thus came closer to him for an instant. He fired again.

This second shot, more by accident than by design, kicked up a spurt of dirt a short distance ahead of the flying stranger, and it is possible that the bullet sang past his head. He pulled up his panting horse in token of surrender. He did not reach for his gun; he held his hands high in the air.

Lanky Jings, cautious to an extreme degree, continued to approach. He saw, after a time, that the horse of the stranger was a C Bar C horse. It meant that the stranger was one of Walt Filkes' men, for, had he stolen the horse, he would not have stopped to submit to capture; he would have made a running fight of it.

Lanky did not know the man by sight, but there was nothing strange in that, since Filkes was always importing new men. And the C Bar C rider by this time had regained some of his composure, and appeared to be angry.

"What's the idea of gunnin' for me?" he demanded, as Lanky came close.

"What's the idea of you prowlin' around the Square A?" Lanky demanded in turn.

"I wasn't inside your wire. Ain't a man got the right to ride around the range?"

"Maybe so, and maybe not again," Lanky told him. "We don't hanker to have any C Bar C men foolin' around our premises. And what did you run for when you saw me?"

"I was just goin' home."

"You generally hurry that much when you're goin' home, especially in the heat of the day?" Lanky asked. "You're a new one on me. Walt Filkes must be borrowin' men from the devil ag'in. What's your name?"

"If it's any of your business, my name's 'Bud' Cradil. I've been workin' for Filkes a couple o' weeks. Since you're ridin' a Square A horse, I reckon you're Lanky Jings. I've seen Alderson, and they say that there's only two of you."

"None of your yap," Lanky warned him. "Take a ride for yourself now, Bud Cradil! And if I find that you've been playin' any tricks around the Square A property, I'll just naturally make it my business to come and look you up."

"I'll tell Filkes about this," Cradil promised.

Lanky's mustache bristled. "Yeh?" he said. "Ride on, or you'll have a lot more to tell him—as soon as you're able to talk!"

Bud Cradil sneered and snarled, but he turned his horse and rode on. Lanky Jings watched him out of sight, and then galloped slowly back to the upper pasture. This time he inspected the two-year-olds.

Half an hour later Pop Alderson, fussing around the corral, happened to glance at the trail. He beheld Lanky Jings riding toward him with the speed of the wind. Pop leaned weakly against the corral fence.

"More grief, I reckon," he said to himself. "That cuss of a Lanky can't ride home 'thout bein' the bearer of sad tidin's. Better get braced, I reckon!"

Lanky stoppd before him in a whirlwind of sand and dust. His face was streaked with dirt and perspiration, but the grim expression of it could be read, nevertheless. His mount was lathered. His manner was that of a highly agitated man.

"Pop——" he began, as he slid from the saddle.

"Uh-huh! What is it now?" Pop asked.

"Them—them thirty two-year-olds—that we cut out of the bunch and turned out of the upper pasture——"

"What's happened to 'em?" Pop

asked. "If you'd talk as fast as you ride, we might get somewhere."

"They're back in the pasture again!"

"How?" Pop roared.

"All thirty of 'em, Pop! And now they're branded!"

"My good gosh! We'll have to turn 'em out danged quick," Pop said. "Somebody'll be comin' along and seein' 'em. And if we say that they were turned into our pasture, it'll sound like a cock-and-bull story, and they'll give us the laugh first and string us up for rustlers afterward! What brand? The C Bar C, I suppose. It looks like a Filkes trick."

"Brace yourself, Pop," Lanky Jings instructed. "They're branded with the Square A!"

"What?"

"With our own brand, Pop! That's what the thief warted with our brandin' irons, I reckon. They were left behind on a fence post. I brought them in."

CHAPTER VIII.

A RACE TO TOWN.

PACING back and forth on the veranda at the C Bar C ranch house, Walt Filkes fumed and fussed that noon in his rage, making no effort to control it. His face was cut and bruised and puffed, his eyes were almost closed, and he certainly bore unmistakable and real evidence of his conflict with Arnold Brown.

His wrath had been gathering since the day before when he had ridden back to the ranch, a sorry sight. None knew better than Walt Filkes that his men were laughing at him, though they did not do so openly. He could make no excuse; the punchers of the C Bar C could tell without trouble that their leader had got the worst of it in some fistic encounter. Filkes' only hope was to do something to regain the respect of his men, something cruel and startling, something so daring that once more they would look upon him as a leader as well as employer.

Filkes was very careful not to let the name of his conqueror become public knowledge. He did not care to have it known that he had been whipped by a "dude," and before and because of a woman. And just now his men were as equally careful to remain away from his vicinity. They were not eager to have Walt Filkes work out his rage on them. They knew his moods, and at present he was in one of the nastiest.

He berated Pop Alderson in low tones as he paced. He clenched his fists when he thought of Arnold Brown. His rage increased when he remembered the icelike superiority of Nancy and her cool way of putting him in his place.

His sore eyes blazed when he thought of the timely interference of Samuel Derker, the superintendent of the Triple Triangle. Walt Filkes hated them all, longed to conquer them, torture them in some manner. They had dared array themselves against him; the time for decisive warfare had come.

And more than that, he wanted the Square A property, and on his own terms. Then he would own along one side of the famous Triple Triangle and would be a cattle baron. Aside from the Triple Triangle, he would dominate the district. His would be the second greatest outfit. He would be a power in the land. Any obstacle in the path of his ambition, human or otherwise, was to be swept aside.

Shortly after the noon hour, Bud Cradil dashed up to the ranch house, sprang from his horse, and approached Filkes. Bud Cradil was raging also, particularly at Lanky Jings. He was a good understudy for his employer in wrath and contemplated cruelty.

"There are about sixty head of two-year-olds there, boss," Cradil reported immediately. "Some of them are new-branded."

"The Square A outfit didn't have

more than half that many forty-eight hours ago," Walt Filkes declared. "I've been watchin' things there for my own reasons, and I know every bit of stock they own. Alderson told me some sort of fairy tale about a bunch of unbranded stock bein' turned into his pasture, and said he'd turned 'em out again. So he's branded 'em now, has he?"

"They're branded, all right," Bud Cradil declared.

Walt Filkes thought a moment, standing with his feet planted far apart and his fists resting against his hips. Then he opened one hand wide, closing it slowly.

"I've got him—just like that!" Filkes said. "Here's where I'm square with the Square A and Alderson and his daughter! Here's where I pay off the score—and get the Square A on my own terms. Alderson hasn't any standing. He's broke. No punchers behind him. The sheriff won't bother about him."

"I reckon not," Cradil agreed.

"How does that story listen to you, Bud? Thirty two-year-olds, never branded, climb a wire fence into his pasture? And now they're bearin' his brand?" Filkes grinned.

"Mighty thin!" Cradil said, grinning also.

"Those are C Bar C steers," Filkes declared. "We had 'em in a special pasture and kept 'em unbranded for our own reasons. And Alderson and Lanky Jings rustled 'em and branded 'em! You know they are our steers. The other boys know the same thing! It's a dead-shut case o' rustlin'!"

"Uh-huh!" Bud Cradil agreed again.

"So we'll raid the Square A and get back our stock, and maybe some more along with it," Filkes said, raising his voice and allowing his anger to grow. "And we'll string up Alderson and Lanky Jings. We'll show 'em that they can't rustle steers around this range. On his last legs, broke, and starvin' to death, so he starts stealin'. I reckon no trouble will come to us about it, with Alderson and Jings both strung up! And that girl—I'll tend to her if she raises a howl!"

"Good scheme," Cradil said. "I just want one thing, boss—I want a private crack at that Lanky Jings before we string him up!"

"Take a couple," Filkes told him. "We've got work to do now. We'll raid to-morrow. Call all the boys and have 'em meet down by the big cottonwood. I want to tell 'em what's to come off."

Except for three men who were far from the ranch house, the punchers of the C Bar C answered the emergency call struck on the big bell in the yard. They gathered around the cottonwood tree as they often had done before. It was an old scheme of Filkes' to get his men around him quickly, for he never knew when they might be needed to protect him. Filkes liked to pose as a sort of general; he would have made an excellent bandit chief below the border line.

For fifteen minutes Filkes harangued them. Alderson and Lanky Jings had rustled thirty C Bar C steers. They would not annoy the sheriff with the affair. They would take the law into their own hands, recover their property, and administer punishment! Filkes intimated, also, that the rougher his men were, the better it would please him. Alderson and Jings would receive the award generally meted out to cattle thieves! He also intimated, gently, that there would be lesser possibilities of trouble afterward if these two witnesses were put beyond ever speaking again.

"You men all know the facts," he shouted at them. "Remember that! We had those steers in that little pasture down at the head of the cañon. I was goin' to experiment with 'em—nobody's business what the experiment

was goin' to be. I'm not givin' away trade secrets. My own reasons why we hadn't branded 'em. Didn't suppose they'd need brandin', bein' kept in pasture. Didn't think stealin', thievin' skunks were on the next ranch!"

He stopped and looked at his men. They understood, all right. The projected raid appealed to them, too.

"To-morrow, shortly after noon, when they'll not be expectin' it!" Walt Filkes said. "And I want things watched meanwhile. So I'm goin' to send out some of you boys now. Take grub with you, for some of you will be out all night. I want the trails watched. I want to know if anybody rides away from the Square A or goes there. We'll keep eyes on the Triple Triangle trails, too."

Like a general in the field, Walt Filkes made his plans and sent out his spies, half a dozen of them. Away they dashed, to hide themselves and their horses behind ledges of rock, in coulees and cañons, to watch and to report to headquarters anything that they were able to learn.

An hour later one of his men reported. Nancy Alderson, he told Walt Filkes, had ridden to the Triple Triangle, being met part way by a young stranger. Filkes cared little for that. Derker and young Mr. Brown were her hosts for the afternoon, he supposed.

But at the end of another hour Walt Filkes got another report. One of his punchers rode furiously up to the veranda and dashed up the steps.

"Old Pop Alderson has somethin' up his sleeve, boss!" he reported. "He's hittin' the trail for town!"

"What's that?" Walt Filkes demanded.

"That's right, boss. He went alone, and he went as fast as his hoss could travel. Lanky Jings stayed behind at the Square A."

"Then I'm goin' to town myself and see what that old coot is doin'," declared Filkes.

He wanted to get there as speedily as possible, too. Alderson had at least half an hour start of him. He was considerably worried. Had Pop Alderson suspected the C Bar C plans? Had he guessed at Filkes' scheme? The owner of the C Bar C was determined to find out the truth. He would hurry to town and watch Pop Alderson, and see what he was about. A good general never was caught napping! And here was something that Filkes did not care to delegate to a subordinate.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO MISSING.

RECEIVING from Lanky Jings the intelligence regarding the newly branded steers, Pop Alderson spent a few minutes in impotent rage, and then cooled off and spent a few minutes in concentrated thought.

Pop decided that he was in a tight hole. Circumstantial evidence pointed to the conclusion that he was a rustler, and Lanky Jings also. Pop was fearful of a trap, of a scheme to cause him anguish, of a plot of Walt Filkes to railroad him to prison, whereon Filkes would be able to get hold of the Square A and Nancy would be left penniless and without the protection of a male relative.

Nancy was visiting for the afternoon at the Triple Triangle. Pop did not consider the advice of Lanky Jings to be of the best; it was a problem that had to be solved on the moment, and by Pop himself.

He decided that it would be best to hurry to town and inform the sheriff of the entire affair. The sheriff was notorious for being lazy and incompetent, and there had been dark hints that he was not altogether scrupulous, yet he represented the law, and was the man to consult under the circumstances. The

mere fact that Pop went to him might serve to help establish Pop's innocence.

"I'm goin' to town," he announced. "And I'm goin' alone! You stay here and take care of things. Nancy ought to be back by dark. You and Woo Chung keep your eyes open!"

Once in town, Pop Alderson hurried to the office of the sheriff. But the sheriff was not in, and neither was he in town. He had gone to a far corner of the county, with half a dozen deputies, in an effort to curb the activities of a new highwayman. Representing him was an aged deputy noted for his slowness and deliberation. His name was Selland.

Pop began stating his case. It was evident that the affair was something new in the life of Selland. He wiped off his spectacles and peered through them at Pop as though regarding a new specimen of something. Pop Alderson's tale sounded preposterous. And before he could tell it again in a more convincing manner the door was hurled open and Walt Filkes entered the office.

Filkes' eyes blazed and his manner was belligerent. "So here you are, Alderson!" he snarled. "You've got a nerve to come here where the law is! Come to give yourself up?"

Deputy Selland was wise through experience, and he knew a crisis when he saw it.

"Gents, this is a public office," he announced. "I'll listen to you both, but if you aim to muss each other up, you step outdoors to do it. I've got some thinking to do once in a while, and I want peace and quiet!"

"And I want justice and action," Walt Filkes declared. "When a man has thirty young steers rustled, he's got a right to howl!"

"Somebody been rustlin' your steers?" Selland asked.

"I've got about thirty two-year-olds missin'," Walt Filkes replied. "And I understand that the Square A stock of two-year-olds has increased about that number in the last couple o' days or so. The Square A brandin' irons have been hot recent. Anybody can read the answer."

"Are you darin' to accuse me of rustlin' your steers?" Pop Alderson cried. "Somebody turned them steers into my pasture, and somebody stole my brandin' irons and branded 'em!"

"Gosh, that's the wildest story I ever did hear!" Filkes said, sneering again. "Can't you make up a better one?"

"Maybe it does sound wild, but it's the truth," Pop declared. "If they're your steers, you put 'em in my pasture just to get me into trouble!"

"Nobody but a fool would do a thing like that," said Filkes.

Selland cleared his throat and tried to be impressive. "Were your steers branded, Filkes?" he asked.

"They weren't."

"Why not? Seems unusual for steers that old——"

"It's my business," Filkes snapped out. "I was experimentin' and didn't want to brand 'em at first, and just neglected it later on. They were in pasture, and I didn't suppose that there was a gang of cattle thieves runnin' wild through the county!"

"It's all a trick," Pop cried. "You're tryin' to make everybody believe I stole them steers!"

"If you didn't, how'd you get 'em?" Filkes asked. "You didn't buy 'em, that's certain. You couldn't buy a left hind quarter of one!"

"If you never branded 'em, how can you identify 'em?" Pop demanded.

"So that's your game, is it?" Filkes asked. "You think I can't identify 'em, just because they ain't branded. I'll get them steers back, never fear. And you'll pay for rustlin' 'em, too!"

"Never rustled 'em," Pop interrupted. "I've a notion to——"

"Gents!" Selland warned. "If you want to shoot each other, go outside in

the street. Filkes, do you aim to swear to a complaint sayin' that Alderson rustled them steers? If you do, there'll be a warrant issued, o' course."

"Yeh!" Filkes sneered at him. "And the sheriff will take a month to serve it. By that time the evidence will be gone! I won't stand by and be robbed like this. We never used to bother with the sheriff and complaints and courts in the old days when we caught a man rustlin' stock, and the old methods are good enough for me!" He turned and glared at Alderson again.

"Filkes——" Selland commenced a warning.

"I don't need any advice," Filkes interrupted. "I've got punchers behind me, and every honest man on the range behind me, too. I'll tend to this affair, and you needn't bother the sheriff. I'll get my stock back, all right. And there are plenty of cottonwoods along the creek!"

"You—you——" Pop sputtered.

"I'll show you!" Filkes said. "Got so low that you're commencin' to steal!"

Pop Alderson gave a howl of rage and sprang to his feet, reaching for his gun. Filkes stepped back and did the same. But Selland sprang out of his chair quickly and got between them.

"Nothin' like that," the deputy said. "You get out of here, Filkes, unless you want to swear to a complaint. Alderson, you stay here until he gets away. We won't have no shootin' bee while I'm around!"

Filkes snarled yet again and departed. He had done all he wished to do—he had appeared before the deputy and had laid claim to the steers and had threatened dire consequences for the theft. Now he would go forth and consummate his plans, and declare later, if there was a fuss about it, that Selland had refused him help. Pop Alderson would be swinging from the branch of a cottonwood. It would be Filkes' word against that of Selland, and everybody in the county, knowing that Selland was notoriously slow and deliberate, would believe Filkes.

Pop fumed and fussed, but Selland had little to say to him. A few minutes later Pop left town. He headed for the Square A. Everything looked black to Pop. There was nothing that he could do except defend his property until the sheriff returned.

Despondency came to him during that journey for the first time in months. He had endured everything, and this seemed to be the last blow. He did not doubt that there would be trouble. He would send Nancy to the Triple Triangle on some pretext, he told himself, so she would be out of it. Perhaps Lanky Jings and Woo Chung would stand by him in this emergency.

"Always done right by every man!" he muttered, dry of eye. "This is the reward, I reckon! Let 'em come, them C Bar C skunks! I'll get all I can before they get me, I betcha! If—if it wasn't only for the Kitten——"

And then the emotion did prevail, and Pop fought it off as best he could. On he went, through the gathering twilight, and came to the open gate and went through it. Lanky Jings came from the bunk house to greet him.

"That Walt Filkes was in town!" Pop said. "He swears that we stole his steers. He's plannin' to raid us, I reckon. And that—that'll mean some cottonwood limb, Lanky!"

"'Um!" Lanky grunted.

"The truth don't sound good, and nobody'll believe me when I tell it. I—I'm sorry, Lanky! You've been a good man for me—and a mighty good friend. You've stuck after the others left. But I ain't got the right to ask you to risk your life in a fuss like this. I—I'm afraid that I can't pay you all that I owe you, Lanky. But I've got a few dollars up to the house, and you can have that. You'd better get away to-night, I reckon."

"What you mean, Pop?" Lanky asked. "You aimin' to fire me?"

"Sure not, Lanky. But there ain't any need of you stretchin' a rope from some cottonwood limb just 'cause you've been workin' for me."

"Why, dang your hide, Pop!" Lanky exclaimed. "You ain't got a mite of sense. I'm foreman of this here outfit, ain't I? What the devil kind of a foreman would I be if I turned tail and ran at the first sign of trouble?"

"But there's no way out, Lanky!"

"Who the devil gives a cuss?" Lanky cried. "We've got a mess of revolver cartridges, thank Heaven! And we've got a couple of pretty fair rifles. And we've got Woo Chung and his young cannon! I've been waitin' years for this! And right when I've got a chance to sorter even things with that polecat of a Walt Filkes, you want to kick me off the Square A and make me miss the chance! That ain't any way to act, Pop."

They faced each other for a moment, scarcely able to see each other in the darkness, and then their hands met.

"Thanks, Lanky—thanks!" Pop said.

"Let's get this Woo and have a sorter council of war," Lanky suggested.

"Woo can leave, if he wants to," Pop said. "You and me, Lanky—two old-timers—we'll stand back to back and go out fightin'—like real old-timers should! If—if it only wasn't for the Kitten——"

Lanky Jings suddenly gave a peculiar grunt. "That reminds me," he said. "The Kitten ain't come home. Woo's been waitin' supper for her, and he's mad as blazes 'cause the biscuits are cold."

"How?" Pop cried. "She always gets home by dark, 'less she says beforehand that she'll be later."

" 'Tain't anything to worry about, I reckon," Lanky said. "Over at the big Triple Triangle there's a million things to see, and she ain't been over there for months. Maybe she stayed on for supper. She knows the way home, I reckon. You'd better eat, Pop."

"Gosh, I can't eat if I'm worryin' about Kitten!"

"You needn't worry about her," Lanky replied. "She knows every foot of the range and almost every critter on it. Her pony is a sure-footed fool, too! She'll be ridin' in before long, maybe with that Mr. Brown trailin' along. Don't worry, Pop!"

"You come along to the house and talk to me while I eat, then," Pop ordered. "We've got to plan somethin' quick. Walt Filkes and them devils who work for him might be comin' along any time."

They walked slowly to the house. As they stepped upon the veranda they heard horsemen approaching. Pop Alderson and Lanky Jings both drew their revolvers and got behind veranda posts.

The horsemen, however, made no pretense to secrecy. They rode frankly up the driveway and came to a stop before the veranda steps.

"That you, Alderson?" a voice cried.

"Yep!"

"This is Derker, of the Triple Triangle. Mr. Brown here?"

"Nope!" Pop said. "I just got back from town, and I ain't seen him."

"He started to ride back with your daughter three hours ago, and was coming right back to the Triple Triangle," Sam Derker said.

"My daughter ain't come home yet."

"That's funny," Derker commented. "When Brown didn't show up, I took these two men and started to look for him. His dad is one of the big men in the Triple Triangle, and if anything happens to young Brown, I'll get mine! I thought he might have lost his way coming back home."

"They never got this far, Derker," Lanky put in.

"Can't understand it," said the superintendent. "Brown is a sort of ten-

derfoot and doesn't know the country. But your daughter, Alderson, knows every inch of it! Something must have happened to 'em!"

Sudden fear came to Pop. "I—I'll saddle——" he began.

"Oh, let us do the work," Derker put in. "We rode here on one trail, and we'll go back the other. We'll pick them up, Alderson, all right, and I'll see that your daughter gets home safely. Don't worry about it. We'll make it snappy!"

Before Pop or Lanky could speak again, Sam Derker wheeled his horse and rushed away, his men at his heels. And so Pop did not get a chance to tell him of his affair with Walt Filkes, and ask his advice, and possibly get his help.

"'Tain't like Kitten to let anything happen to her," Pop said.

"Don't worry, dang it!" Lanky told him. "Nancy can take care of herself. And that young Mr. Brown is a decent feller!"

"Anybody can see that," Pop snapped out. "I ain't worryin' any about that. Maybe—maybe there's nothin' wrong. Maybe they're just ridin' slow—like young folks will."

"It ain't moonlight, and young folks don't do that kind of ridin' except on moonlight nights," Lanky Jings said. "I reckon I know that much about it."

CHAPTER X.

THE ULTIMATUM.

WHEN Nancy and Arnold Brown left the Triple Triangle it was almost dusk. Nancy had experienced a wonderful afternoon. There had been an excellent luncheon served by the ranch cook, who was a woman instead of a Chinaman, though a son of the Chinese race presided over the pots and pans for the punchers. There had been calves to see, and colts. Nancy inspected the new electrict-lighting plant, which also served power for washing machines and churns and a score of other pieces of apparatus.

And so young Mr. Brown and Nancy had all these things to talk about as they rode toward the Square A. And young Mr. Brown, it was evident, wished to talk at length about himself, also, and Nancy was willing to listen. So they rode slowly, it having been arranged that Brown was to turn back at a certain slope, as he had promised Derker to return before very long.

They rode into the mouth of a coulee that narrowed after a time until their mounts brushed against each other. Brown held back, and Nancy rode ahead.

Suddenly there was a clatter of rolling gravel, the snorting of horses, the hoarse shouts of men. The daughter of the Square A and her escort found themselves the captives of five horsemen almost before they realized that there was anybody in the vicinity.

Arnold Brown tried to pull up his horse and whip out his revolver, not knowing what to think of the attack. But he found two determined men pitted against him. They tore the gun away, pinioned his arms behind his back, bent him forward in his saddle, and held him securely, though with some difficulty.

Bud Cradil was in command of the squad that captured them. Even in the growing darkness it took Nancy Alderson only an instant to inform herself that they were prisoners of the C Bar C outfit.

"What is the meaning of this?" Brown demanded.

"Who are you?" Bud Cradil asked in turn.

"My name's Brown. I am a guest at the Triple Triangle. You men have made some sort of a mistake, I suppose."

"No mistake!" Cradil told him. "We just don't want people roamin' around

this part of the country this evenin', especially folks from the Square A."

"You let me go!" Nancy commanded. "Why are you doing this? What do you intend doing with us?" She turned to Brown. "They are some of Walt Filkes' men," she explained.

"Oh! That tells the story," Brown remarked. "I guess I am the man you want. Kindly allow the lady to go, and do as you please with me. I had the pleasure, yesterday, of giving Mr. Filkes a much-needed lesson in courtesy. Now, I suppose, he has sent his entire outfit to punish me."

Bud Cradil saw a great light. "So you're the man who beat up the boss, are you?" he said. "He'll be glad to have us bring you in, I reckon."

"Then you were not after me?" Brown asked.

"Not in particular, but I'm glad we found you," Cradil replied. "Some capture, this! You'll just ride along with us, now, and behave yourselves if you don't want to get hurt."

"Where are you taking us?" Nancy asked. "You know what will happen to you for this, don't you?"

"Not worryin' a bit," Cradil informed her. "Bring 'em along, men!"

Their mounts were urged forward. There was no chance to attempt an escape. Two men cared for Nancy Alderson, two more watched Arnold Brown closely, and Bud Cradil rode ahead. They went slowly, making little noise.

And they left the regular trail almost immediately and struck out across country, the horses picking their way in the darkness. Growls from Cradil had urged the men with him to keep silent. Questions from Nancy and Brown elicited no rèplies.

Brown was not used to this sort of thing. He wondered why they had been captured, if not for Filkes to have revenge upon him for the beating. These were C Bar C men, punchers attached to a regular outfit, and not roaming bandits, though they acted like it.

"To Indian Spring!" Nancy said, after a time.

"You've guessed it," Bud Cradil told her. "We can keep you there until we let the boss know we've got you. He's the one to decide what's to be done."

"You'll need more than Walt Filkes to protect you!" she said.

"From what?" Cradil asked sneeringly. "From your old man and that fool of a Lanky Jings? We're not much afraid of 'em! And I want to get my hands on Jings—just once!"

Nancy said no more at the time. She did not get a chance to talk to Arnold Brown, for the men kept them some distance apart. On they went, over the uneven ground that was treacherous at times, down slopes, through coulees. Cradil rode ahead for a short distance, and then came rushing back.

"It's all right!" he announced. "Bring 'em on!"

The captives were conducted down the last slope and to Indian Spring. They were compelled to dismount. Bud Cradil lighted a lantern, and the ghostly gray rock walls suddenly seemed peopled with grotesque monsters. Cradil led the way to the mouth of one of the caves.

"In with 'em!" he ordered. "A couple of you stay on guard and I'll get word to the C Bar C. Put that lantern just inside the cave entrance."

Nancy and Brown saw their mounts led away toward the spring. Then they were turned into the cave, their hands lashed behind their backs, their weapons gone. Two of the C Bar C punchers took up their stations at the entrance, on guard.

"What's it all about?" Brown whispered.

"I suppose we'll know when Filkes gets here," she said. "They will send for him."

"But I never heard of such a thing!"

Brown protested. "Isn't there any law in the land?"

"Men like Walt Filkes make their own laws," she replied. "They don't worry much about sheriffs and judges and jails and trials—in this part of the country."

"Then we'll fight him with his own weapons, in a manner of speaking!" young Mr. Brown declared. "We'll consider that we are back in the old days, captured by savages or bandits, with no hope of anybody coming to our rescue. We'll have to rescue ourselves."

"Not so easy!" she replied. In the faint light cast by the lantern he could see her smile. Gritty girl! he thought.

"It won't be difficult for us to unfasten each other's wrists," Brown whispered.

"Wait until Filkes comes," she said. "If he finds our wrists unbound, he may have them fastened in such a manner that we cannot untie them. And you couldn't fight him, you know, with some of his men handy."

They walked back into the cave for a distance of thirty feet or so and sat down side by side on a huge rock. And there they waited, talking in low tones, speculating as to the meaning of this. Being in peril together drew them closer in an hour than weeks of ordinary acquaintance would have drawn them.

But Cradil himself rode like the wind to the C Bar C. He arrived a few minutes after Filkes' return from town. The master of the C Bar C was eating a belated supper.

"What's the fuss now?" he demanded.

"Caught a couple of prisoners, boss," Cradil reported. "Got 'em ridin' across country. Nabbed 'em in a coulee. I reckon you'll be glad to hear about it. A couple of the boys are guardin' 'em in one of the caves at Indian Spring."

"Who are they?" Filkes demanded with interest.

"One is that Alderson girl."

"Good!" Filkes roared. "That makes my plans complete! And the other?"

"He says that his name is Brown—and that he's visitin' at the Triple Triangle."

"What?" Walt Filkes sprang to his feet. "Cradil, you're a man after my own heart," he said, slapping the puncher on his back. "I couldn't have asked for anything better. Brown, eh? When I'm through with him——" He clenched his hands fiercely. "But I'll wait until this other business is over! That comes first, because I've got to rush things."

"This Brown said somethin' about havin' a fight with you," Cradil was bold enough to say.

"Just between ourselves, he's the man who marked my face," Filkes admitted. "But Sam Derker of the Triple Triangle showed up and helped him. I'll attend to Mr. Brown! It'll take more than the Triple Triangle outfit to stop me, too!"

"What shall we do with 'em, boss?"

"I'll ride back with you," Filkes said. "All my plans are made. Tell 'em to saddle me a good horse. I'll be ready in five minutes!"

It was a gloating Walt Filkes who dismounted with Cradil at Indian Spring. He walked to the mouth of the cave and nodded to his two men there.

"Fetch 'em out!" he commanded. "Bring 'em right here by the lantern."

Nancy and Arnold Brown were brought forth, their hands still lashed behind their backs. In the lantern light, Filkes confronted them.

"Well, I've got you!" he snarled. "I couldn't have asked for anything much better. Proud Nancy Alderson and her little dude playmate!"

"Why not be a man?" Brown asked. "Unfasten my wrists and I'll give you another beating!"

"I'm rememberin' your remarks," Filkes told him, fighting to retain his temper. "You'll answer for 'em all

when I'm ready. I've got other business to tend to just now. And it's the lady I want to talk to first. She wouldn't listen to me yesterday, but maybe she'll have to listen now."

"I don't want to hear anything that you've got to say!" Nancy told him.

"I reckon not. But you will, though. You can't even stick your fingers in your ears! I've got plenty to say—and you're goin' to hear it. In the Square A pasture there are thirty two-year-olds, new-branded! Your dad rustled 'em——"

"That's a lie!" Nancy cried.

"Is it? Who'll believe that it is? The evidence looks mighty bad, I reckon. And you needn't tell me that wild story about somebody turnin' that stock into your pasture for a joke, either. Your father told that in town this afternoon, but it didn't do him much good."

"You—you——" Nancy seemed unable to find the word that she wanted.

"Rustlers ought to stretch rope!" Walt Filkes continued. "I reckon that your dad and Lanky Jings can't put up much of a fight against my whole outfit. Nobody'll blame me if my men raid the Square A to-morrow to get back that stolen stock. And everybody'll say that it's right if Alderson and Lanky Jings are found hangin' to some cottonwood down by the creek!"

A cry of horror escaped Nancy. "You—you wouldn't dare——" she cried.

"Not so high and mighty now, are you?" Filkes inquired sneeringly. "The shoe is on the other foot! Why won't I dare? My plans are all made now. Rustlers must——"

"You lie! My dad isn't a rustler! It's one of your tricks——"

"The world won't think so!" Filkes said, laughing raucously. "To-morrow we do it! Nothin' can stop us! We'll wipe out the Square A! And then I'll buy it in for a song. You had your chance, young lady. I told your dad that I'd marry you and combine the two outfits——"

"You beast!" she cried.

"Hard names bounce right off my back," he said. "You and your dude playmate can stay here until it's over. And then I'll tend to elegant young Mr. Brown!"

"Try it now!" Brown suggested. He lurched forward as he spoke, but one of the watching punchers hurled him backward, and Filkes roared his appreciation.

"I'll tend to you!" the owner of the C Bar C repeated. "You won't be so eager to fight the next time. So far as the lady is concerned, I'll turn her loose. I ain't afraid of her talk makin' me much trouble. Maybe she can get a job in town, at the restaurant!"

"You—you——" Nancy's eyes were filled with tears of rage. She knew the character of the man speaking to her. She did not doubt for an instant that he intended doing as he had said. Her beloved father was in grave danger. She understood the situation too well to doubt that. And she was powerless to help him.

"I might overlook certain things yet, and forget about visitin' the Square A to-morrow," Filkes said, his eyes narrowing, "on one condition."

"What?" she asked.

"Exactly what I told your dad!" he replied. "Marry me, and I'll combine the two outfits. I wouldn't want to string up my father-in-law, of course! That wouldn't be nice. We could ride to town and be married early in the mornin'."

For a moment she was silent. Even in the lantern light they could see her face turn white. Brown took a step nearer her. But she had only a moment of indecision.

"My father would want to shoot me if I did such a thing!" she told Walt Filkes. "And I'd probably shoot myself if I did it!"

"Your father'll swing if you don't!" Filkes said.

Brown started forward angrily again, aghast at the sheer brutality of it, and again one of Filkes' men struck him in the chest and sent him reeling backward. He tugged at the rope that bound his wrists, but it would not give. He wanted to help her, fight for her, batter Filkes' leering face—but he could do nothing!

"Well?" Filkes snapped out, his face within a foot of that of the girl.

"I—I've got to think!" she gasped.

Filkes laughed again. "Take plenty of time about it," he told her. "I'll be back about ten o'clock in the mornin', with my whole outfit. Then we'll ride to town for the weddin'—or we'll ride to the Square A for your dad!"

CHAPTER XI.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

WALT FILKES whirled around and left them without another word. They heard him giving orders in low tones, but could not understand what he said. Then he rode away with Bud Cradil, and the two men remained on guard at the mouth of the cave, with the lantern sitting just inside it.

Nancy and Arnold Brown retreated for a short distance and sat down on the rock again. Brown wanted to say something to her, but scarcely knew what to say under the circumstances. He scarcely could comprehend the horror of it; he was too new to the country for that.

But he felt that he wanted to comfort her, or at least to get her mind off the situation for a time, so that later, freed of a part of her tense emotion, she could think rationally. The thing to do, of course, was to escape. He realized that.

"Let's untie each other's wrists," he whispered to her. "I'll free yours first, and then you can easily unfasten mine."

So they sat back to back, and Brown's fingers fumbled with the rope that bound her. It was no easy task, he soon found. The rope was small and tough, and the knots were tight. They had not been made to be untied, but to be cut.

But in time he felt the knots give, and presently her wrists were free.

"Rub them and start the circulation," he whispered. "Careful! Don't let them suspect!"

A few minutes later she was working on the rope that bound his hands behind him. He felt the rope give, finally felt his wrists come free. He chafed them quickly, feeling the tingle of coursing blood.

"Now," said Arnold Brown, "we must escape."

"They are probably expecting that," she whispered in reply. "We'll wait for a time before trying it. If one of those men comes into the cave, hold your hands behind your back, as though your wrists were still bound. How do you expect us to escape?"

"I don't know," he was forced to admit. "But there must be some way."

"It is early yet. We have plenty of time. Don't misunderstand me—I want to get away at once. But if we try it now, and are prevented, we'll not have another chance."

"If we had guns—and horses——" Brown said. "But it is foolish to wish for those, of course. I suppose you think I'm rather helpless. But this is all new to me."

"We'll find a way!" she said. There was determination in her voice.

"Do you suppose Filkes would do as he said? Or was he just saying all that to frighten you?"

"He meant it," she replied. "Oh, we must do something! Father will be helpless! They'll—they'll——"

Unconsciously he put an arm around her and drew her to him, as though to protect her.

"We'll think—think!" Brown said.

He got up and paced back and forth before her, holding his hands behind his back as she had suggested. It was not difficult to think, but it was no easy task to think to some purpose. Every plan that flashed into his mind was discarded instantly. They all seemed futile.

The hours passed; the stars wheeled in the sky. At times they sat on the rock and talked; at other times they walked back and forth nervously.

"Do you know anything of this cave?" he asked her. "There may be a way out at the rear."

"I've explored all these caves," she replied. "This one runs back for a couple of hundred feet and ends against a rock wall. We can't get out that way."

And then Arnold Brown had an idea. A scheme flashed into his head. It was a desperate one, and they considered it for some time. But it was getting along toward morning, and they dared not delay longer. Something must be tried—anything that had the slightest chance of success.

They got up and went slowly to the mouth of the cave, holding their hands behind their backs. The lantern was still in the opening. The two punchers on guard were a few feet away, huddled over a tiny fire. They sprang up as the two approached.

"Well, whatcha want?" one of them asked. "You get back in that cave and stay there!"

"It won't hurt if we talk to you a little," Brown said.

"Whatcha got to say?"

"I suppose your wages aren't so very high," Brown told them. "It'd take you quite some time to save a thousand dollars out of them, wouldn't it?"

One of the men laughed. "Yeh, quite some time!" he said.

"Suppose you could get a thousand dollars all in one lump? I mean a thousand for each of you."

"Is it some kind of a joke?" one of them wanted to know.

"It is no joke!" said Brown. "What is Filkes to you except an employer?"

"Nothin'!"

"Then you'll have your chance to earn a thousand each. Just turn us loose."

"Oh, is that all?" one of them asked. "Just turn you loose, huh? And what would Filkes do to us?"

"With a thousand in your pockets, you wouldn't care much. You could get away from this range quick enough. With a thousand a man can get quite a start."

"You'll give us a thousand each if we let you go?"

"Exactly!" Brown said.

"Got it with you?" one of them asked.

"Naturally not. You turn us loose and take us to the Triple Triangle. I'll get your money for you."

They both laughed. "Do you think we're fools?" one of them demanded. "Go with you to the Triangle, huh? And let you tell your little story, and have the Triangle punchers nab us?"

"I happen to be a man of my word. You'll be caused no trouble," said Brown.

"We'll take no chances like that. Better go back into the cave!"

"Be merciful enough to give us a drink of water, then," Brown said. "That won't cause you much trouble."

"Oh, well, I guess we can do that. Wait till I get my canteen. I just filled it at the spring."

One of the men leaned against the rock wall; the other went a short distance away and came back with his canteen. He uncorked it and offered it to Nancy Alderson.

She pretended that her hands were still lashed behind her. The C Bar C man held the canteen high, and laughed gently as the water gurgled from it and into her mouth.

Then he offered the canteen to Brown, who also pretended that his hands

were still tied. Brown tilted his head back and let the C Bar C man bend forward. And suddenly Brown kicked forward with one foot, putting all his weight behind the blow. At the same instant his hands came up. The man who held the canteen dropped it, grunted, doubled up, and collapsed to the ground.

"Quick!" Brown cried.

Nancy Alderson darted forward. Brown hurled himself upon the other man. Down the rocky slope and into the darkness the daughter of the Square A rushed, as they had planned. Brown was to down his second man, obtain possession of at least one weapon, and join Nancy. Then they would seize the first horses they came across—and ride!

But Arnold Brown was not to have it all his own way. His spring at the second man fell short. The puncher had his revolver out in an instant; the other was trying to get upon his feet, trying to regain the breath of which Brown's kick had deprived him. Brown sprang again, grappled. The revolver flew to one side, clattered against a rock, and was lost in the darkness.

And now he found that he had a fight on his hands. It was not such a combat as he had had with Walt Filkes. This was not a case of standing up to a man and proving the superiority of science over brute force. This was a rough-and-tumble fight in the darkness, where a man could not see a blow coming.

Brown felt an instant of despair. Was their escape to be blocked because he had failed? He could not get hold of a weapon; he could not join Nancy below, near the spring. And the man he had kicked was upon his feet now, lurching toward him, fumbling for his weapon.

There was but one safe thing to do, and Arnold Brown did it. He hurled his antagonist far aside. He bent double and ran with what speed he could down the slope through the darkness. A revolver cracked twice behind him, and bullets whistled past his ears. Brown ran on, unharmed.

He could not proceed silently at first. His foes could hear him, but not see him. There was only the starlight, and he was among the rock formations where even that did not penetrate. He located Nancy without trouble.

"Couldn't get a gun," he whispered.

"Then we can't get the horses," she said. "We'd have to hold 'em off to do that. They've picketed their horses. No saddles or bridles on. And we don't know them—can't handle them——"

"Then we've got to run for it!" he said.

"This way—quick!" she said. "Don't make any noise. They'll never find us in this darkness, unless they hear us. I know the way."

Down the slope they slipped, away from the vicinity of the spring. Behind them, two cursing men shouted instructions to each other, fired wildly, and hurried to their horses.

They were miles from either the Square A or the Triple Triangle, and the going was rough for persons afoot. They managed to get away from the spring and into a dry watercourse, and this they followed as swiftly as possible. Their foes were mounted now, riding near them at times, searching wildly for them, in their minds the everpresent thought of what Walt Filkes would do and say to them when he learned that his prisoners had escaped.

"They'll be watching for us to get to the Square A," Nancy said. "We'll make for the Triangle, and have somebody there ride over and warn father. It's the best way!"

On they went through the hours, stumbling over rocks and bumping into crags, Brown following Nancy blindly. Their boots soon were cut to ragged strips. Their feet grew sore. Fatigue tried to claim them, but they fought it

off. Their legs grew numb, moved mechanically.

In the east they saw the first streak of the false dawn. Now things around them commenced to take on shape. Insect life awoke. Birds called. Mist rose from the rocks. And suddenly the day blazed down upon them.

They were compelled to redouble their caution now. C Bar C men would be scouring the country, they knew. So with Nancy leading the way they kept to the depressions, climbing out of them now and then to see whether there was an enemy in sight.

Once they saw, in the distance, a rider they felt sure belonged to the Filkes outfit. They remained in hiding until he had disappeared, and then went on again.

Then they were in Triangle territory, but by no means safe. Because they longed for the sight of one, no Triangle puncher was in view. On they staggered, weakened, perspiration-drenched, gasping for breath, struggling toward the goal. They did not talk now; they urged each other on with glances instead of words.

Down into another coulee, and along it for quite a distance, and then Nancy led the way to the flat again—and they could see the Triangle buildings in the near distance. A rider was galloping from the corral. They waved to him, and he saw them and dashed toward them.

"The lady——" Arnold Brown gasped—then silently slid to the ground.

Nancy Alderson followed his example.

The Triangle rider emptied his revolver into the air. The signal was answered immediately. Three men rode furiously toward him. Nancy Alderson was picked up and loaded across the front of a saddle and carried swiftly toward the ranch house. Brown sat behind another rider, having barely strength enough to clasp the Triangle man with his arms.

Their journey was ended. Superintendent Sam Derker awaited them on the veranda of the house; he had heard the alarm shots.

"Filkes——" Brown gasped at him. "Give me—water! I—I've got to tell you——"

Sam Derker roared orders that were carried out immediately. Brown heard them as though in a dream. He realized that Nancy had been surrendered to the motherly old housekeeper of the Triple Triangle, and would receive care. Propped in an easy-chair, Brown tried to talk.

"Take it easy for a few minutes," Derker urged. "Don't try to say everything at once."

"Filkes—going to raid——" Brown gasped.

A deep voice sounded beside him. "What's the trouble, son?" it asked. "Take it easy, as Mr. Derker says. Then you'll be able to tell the story."

Tired young Mr. Brown smiled. Old Mr. Brown, his father and his pal, was there at his side. He must have arrived on the night train and had driven out from the town, Arnold Brown thought. However, he was there. And everything would be all right now—if there was time!

CHAPTER XII.

IN BATTLE ARRAY.

THROUGHOUT the long night three men, experiencing varying emotions, held the fort at the Square A.

Pop Alderson felt that his emotions had mingled and were bearing down heavy upon him. His face was pale, his eyes were dry, he moved like a man in a dream. He felt that there was no hope left to him except to make a last firm stand. Despondency had claimed him. There was no future. This was the end of his life, his toil.

He reviewed the life in flashes be-

tween conversations with the others. His boyhood, his young manhood in the city, his peculiar friendship with the wonderful Robert Brown, his marriage, the arrival of Kitten, his move to the broad West—he reviewed them all.

His fight against conditions over which, it seemed, he had had no control! Nancy! He wondered what had happened to Nancy. He hoped that it was nothing serious. He wondered, too, whether young Mr. Brown had returned safely to the Triple Triangle. Perhaps there had been a minor accident, and Nancy had returned to the Triangle to remain the night. Pop hoped so. After all, it was best that she was not home.

Lanky Jings fussed around the house, and now and then went out to the veranda to listen for sounds of the enemy's approach. It was Lanky's firm conviction that there would be a night attack, and he felt grieved, as the hours passed, that none came. He had placed the rifles ready, and he had oiled his revolver and had stuffed his pockets with cartridges. Lanky had a score of plans for the battle he felt sure was coming.

Woo Chung had been taken as an equal into the ranks of the defenders. Inscrutable, silent save when addressed, Woo Chung went about this business of preparing for combat as he might have gone about the serious business of cooking a meal. Nor did he forget that he was the Square A cook. Hot coffee, as fragrant as Woo could make it, flapjacks dripping with melted butter, ham and eggs, he served Pop and Lanky Jings at midnight without being requested to do so.

And now the dawn had come, and the three were standing a short distance from the house, having just completed an observation on all sides. Nobody was in sight. Pop and Woo watched, ready to give an alarm, while Lanky did his usual chores.

Three horses, saddles and bridles on, were at the side of the house. Nothing else had been made ready, except the guns. They could do nothing if trouble came, Pop had decided, except fight as long as they could, and go down fighting.

"Don't need to strain your eyes, Pop," Lanky said. "If them C Bar C skunks do come at us, we can smell 'em five miles away!"

"I'm goin' in the house a few minutes, Lanky," Pop replied. "You and Woo keep right on watchin', and yell if anything happens."

Pop went slowly to the veranda, up the steps, and into the house. He went into the little room that he always had used as a ranch office. He drew a sheet of paper before him, picked up a pencil, and wrote.

He was writing a last letter to Kitten, a loving, heartfelt letter that he intended carrying in one of his hip pockets, where it would be found after—after the Filkes crowd had finished with him. Somebody, he felt sure, would give it to her. It was a very tender letter, not at all like the Pop that Nancy knew. A mother might have written it.

He put it in an envelope addressed to her, and put the envelope in his pocket. He walked through the house, looking through all the rooms. Memories crowded into his brain, but he tried to brush them aside. It was no time for memories now.

Lanky Jings did not summon him, so he sat in the little office and waited, staring through a window at the new day. There was a break in the east fence that should be mended, he remembered. Silly to think of that now! He owed Lanky so much money! That last bacon he had bought wasn't up to standard!

"Fool!" Pop said to himself. "Dratted fool!"

Lanky was prowling around near the corral, searching the surrounding coun-

try with his eyes, waiting for the first sight of the enemy. Woo Chung kept near him.

"Got that cannon ready?" Lanky demanded.

"Alle time leady," Woo announced.

"If you want to save your hide, Woo, you'd better hop a horse and ride now. Walt Filkes will have a few remarks to make to you, after the way you made him move on when he was pesterin' Pop. You'd better take my advice and go from here pronto, Woo!"

"You flool!" Woo informed him.

"I know it! I'm one of them things, and I glory in it!" Lanky said. "I always said I wanted one more good fight before I cashed in, and I reckon I'm goin' to get it. How many of them jaspers do you figure on pluggin', Woo?"

"Slix cartridge—slix jaspers!" Woo replied.

"Yeh? You must be quite some shot!" Lanky Jings replied. "Do me a favor and leave Walt Filkes for me, if the pup comes close enough for me to get him. And don't get excited, Woo, and start to shootin' promiscuous. I don't mind bein' killed, but I want to be killed by the enemy."

"Tloo tough to kill!" said Woo.

"Tough? Boy, you never saw me in action!" Lanky replied. "I'm a whole army! My old .45 makes one of them smoke-screen things they talk about! I breathe fire! The earth trembles!"

"Tloo muchee talk!" said Woo.

"Yeh?" Lanky asked. He turned and surveyed the middle distance again. And this time he shaded his eyes and looked a second time, and his shoulders seemed to straighten. He took a deep breath. His fun making fell from him.

"Pop!" Lanky shrieked. "Pop, here they come!"

Lanky Jings ran quickly to the front of the house, and Woo Chung bobbed along at his heels. Pop Alderson met them on the porch. Lanky pointed, and Pop shaded his eyes and looked.

Along the trail that connected the C Bar C with the highway came almost a score of riders. Their approach was deliberate and sinister. They seemed to have a plan of campaign, and to be carrying it out. The three Square A men watched them in silence for a time.

"Well—well——" Pop muttered. "I guess it's them, Lanky."

"Ain't any doubt about it, I reckon."

"There'll be fireworks soon, Lanky. We—we might as well shake hands now, I reckon."

"I reckon!" Lanky said.

They shook hands, and that was all. But Lanky Jings' eyes were moist as he turned away. Pop faced Woo Chung.

"You've been a good boy, Woo!" he declared. "I want to shake hands with you, too."

Woo Chung extended his hand, and it was shaken. The Chinese cook seemed to grow in stature. He was a man among men! No longer a menial, at least not for the moment! He turned away and looked once more to his big revolver.

"Rifles are all ready," Lanky said. "As soon as we are sure they are the Filkes gang——"

"No doubt of that," Pop said. "You let me handle things at the start, though."

The riders came on. Now they were upon the highway and approaching the Square A at a better rate of speed. Two hundred yards from the gate, as though in answer to a command, they scattered, spreading out fan shape. Then they came on.

Pop Alderson put his rifle to his shoulder. He waited until the raiders were along the fence, until a man he knew was Walt Filkes stopped before the gate and prepared to open it. Then Pop fired once, high in the air.

"What do you want here?" Pop called out.

"We want you, you cattle-stealin' cur!" Filkes shouted in reply.

"Don't you come inside, Filkes! You ain't got any business here. I ain't a rustler, and you know it. Don't come inside that gate. Soon as you do, we'll open fire. You may get us, Filkes, but we'll get some of you first!"

"You can't bluff us," Filkes called. "There's only three of you, and one's a chink! We're here to get you, Alderson!"

As though he had issued another command, two of his punchers put their horses at the rickety fence and crashed through. At the same instant, Walt Filkes opened the gate.

Pop's rifle roared, but no man fell. The C Bar C men were circling, dodging, and now they commenced to fire. Bullets screamed past the house. Other bullets thudded into the porch posts. But the three defenders were not there. They had made their plans, too, and now they carried them out. Into the house they dashed, and took up positions there.

Firing from one of the windows, Lanky Jings brought down the first man; he did not wound him badly, for the man crawled to the protection of a clump of brush. Woo Chung's small cannon roared, and a horse fell. Getting behind cover, the C Bar C men ceased firing, rested, and waited for the word to charge. They were on three sides of the house, behind buildings, fences, brush heaps, trees. Some were mounted; some were not.

"Inside there!" Filkes called from his hiding place. "Alderson!"

"Well?" Pop called.

"We've got you, Alderson. Might as well give up. It won't do you any good to shoot some of my men!"

"Be a lot of satisfaction," Pop shouted.

"Come out—or we'll burn you out!"

"Come out yourself, you yeller cur!" Lanky cried. "Out in the open where I can get a shot at you!"

By way of reply, Walt Filkes yelled something that they could not understand. It seemed to be an order to his men. A fusillade beat against the Square A ranch house. The defenders fired in reply, shot at puffs of smoke, at exposed arms and legs and heads, unable to see whether they caused casualties. They ran from window to window, watching for an attack from the rear.

"They—they're goin' to get us, Lanky!" Pop Alderson said. "We can't hold on very long. They're sure to do it——"

"Get some of 'em first!" Lanky declared.

"Yeh, we can get some of 'em!" Pop agreed. "You watch your side, Lanky! Let's get Filkes if we can."

There came a sudden lull in the firing, and the defenders could hear exclamations of fright and surprise. They could not understand it. And then they heard thundering hoofs, and a hoarse voice calling commands.

"Watch out, Lanky! They're gettin' at us from behind!" Pop cried.

They rushed to the rear windows. Woo Chung threw aside his rifle and grasped his small cannon again. And Lanky Jings knocked its muzzle up just in time.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "They're friends!"

Down the slope from the upper pasture swept horsemen—grim and determined punchers—more than fifty of them—and at their head rode Superintendent Sam Derker, of the Triple Triangle!

CHAPTER XIII.

"MUSH!"

LIKE young chickens running to the protection of an old hen, the C Bar C men, not knowing what to think of this sudden and unexpected assault, their orders not covering this emergency, fled from their posts and rushed to the side of Walt Filkes.

The Triangle punchers circled the house and then drew up in a line between it and the Filkes gang. Sam Derker took up his position in front of them like the commander of a troop of cavalry. Holding weapons in readiness, Pop and Lanky and Woo Chung appeared on the front porch.

"Come here, Filkes!" Derker commanded. "Ride out where I can talk to you."

"Make those men on the porch hold their fire, then!" Filkes called.

"They'll do that. I'm handling this situation now. Make it snappy!"

The face of Walt Filkes was almost purple with wrath as he rode from behind a clump of brush and approached the superintendent of the syndicate ranch.

"What's the idea of you interferin' here, Derker?" Filkes demanded. "Is it any of your business?"

"The Triple Triangle doesn't want a range war, or anything like it," Derker replied.

"Has the Triangle taken to protectin' rustlers?"

"We're here to see about that," Derker told him. "We want justice, but not injustice. If you're after rustlers, and can prove that they're rustlers, it isn't any of our business what you do, but yours."

"Well, that's sensible!" Filkes said. "That's what I want, too—justice! I don't know what stories you've been told, Derker, of course——"

"Mr. Brown and Miss Alderson have told me a couple," Derker interrupted. "It seems that you kidnaped them and held them at Indian Spring."

"Maybe you didn't hear all of it," Filkes suggested. "The Alderson girl was goin' to ride home and help her father get away. I didn't have anything against Mr. Brown, but he was escortin' her——"

"Don't lie to me, Filkes!" Derker exclaimed. "Brown smashed your face, and you intended to have revenge after you got through with this job!"

"You callin' me a liar?" Filkes shouted.

"I am, Filkes! Now I want to know the meaning of all this morning's fuss!"

"The Triple Triangle ain't runnin' the whole range," Filkes growled. "What right have you got to come here with half a hundred punchers and interfere?"

"You've got a score of men trying to shoot up three!"

"Because they're rustlers! We're goin' to string 'em up, all except the chink, and then get our stock back."

"What stock? Let's hear about it!" Derker said.

"Thirty two-year-olds, in Alderson's upper pasture. He didn't have 'em three days ago. But he's got 'em now, fresh-branded.

"And you claim that he rustled them from you and branded them, and put them in his pasture—is that it?"

"It is!" Walt Filkes declared. "Now maybe you'll take your men and ride on, and let us tend to our own business—unless you want to join in the fun. The Triangle hadn't ought to love rustlers any more than the C Bar C does."

"We don't love rustlers," Sam Derker replied. "And we don't like dirty work of any kind. Filkes, those steers are not yours, and you know it!"

"No?" Filkes asked sneeringly. "Where did Alderson get them, then? Did he steal 'em from the Triangle? Is that your game—come over here with a bunch o' men and claim them steers?"

"The stock belongs to Alderson!" Derker said.

"Yeh? Where'd he get 'em?"

"My men put those steers in Alderson's pasture, if you want to know. They came from the Triangle. Alderson turned them out, but we put them back again, and got his irons and branded them! They're presents to Pop Alderson, with the compliments of the Triple Triangle!"

Filkes opened his eyes wide. "What rot!" he cried. "You can't put anything like that over on me, just to save Alderson's hide!"

"Plenty of proof, Filkes!" Derker told him. "Just stay where you are for a moment!"

Sam Derker turned and waved his hand, and around the corner of the house there crept one of the Triangle automobiles. One of the punchers was driving it, and in it was Nancy Alderson and Arnold Brown and the latter's father. The car stopped beside Derker.

"This is Mr. Brown, one of the owners of the Triple Triangle," Sam Derker said. "Perhaps you'll listen to him, Filkes."

The elder Brown stood up in the tonneau of the car.

"Filkes, you're a skunk!" he said. "I've had you watched for several years. You've done everything on earth to drive Alderson away from the range, because you wanted to get the Square A for about nothing, and join it to your own worthless outfit!"

"Say, you——" Filkes began.

"Silence!" Brown thundered. His voice was one of command, the voice of a man who had fought his way up the financial ladder against great difficulties and knew how to handle other men. "I like Pop Alderson!" Brown continued. "I learned of the fight he was making. I knew that he was a man too proud to accept help outright. I saw his assets disappearing, principally because of your dirty work, Filkes! If every rustler in this part of the country stretched rope, you and some of your men would be among them!"

"What's that? You——"

"Silence!" Brown roared again. "I planned to make Alderson a little present when he got almost down and out. I had those steers put aside, ordered that they be not branded. And when the proper time came I ordered Derker to put them into the Square A pasture. He did it, and honest Pop Alderson threw them out, and Derker put them back again and branded them. Those steers are the property of the Square A, Filkes! Presents from me! You never owned them!"

"Mighty thin story——" Filkes started.

"Want me to prove it by a score of witnesses?" Brown asked. "Want me to use my influence, financial and political, and have you up for criminal conspiracy, Filkes? Want me to have a posse corral you and all your punchers and throw you in jail? Conspiring against the life of a human being is a serious offense, Filkes! You're a low crook. And you're going to get off this range. We want honest men here!"

"Think you'll drive me out, do you?" Filkes snarled. "I happen to own a ranch——"

"Oh, no, you don't, Filkes," Brown told him. "I said that I'd been watching you for a few years. I know all about your affairs, Filkes. Your ranch is mortgaged to the hilt! Your notes are due day after to-morrow, and you think that the bank is going to renew them. But the bank isn't, Filkes. Because I bought those notes through an agent last month. You can't pay—so off you go!"

"You—you——" Filkes sputtered.

"I'll give you forty-eight hours, Filkes. And when you get home you'll find a couple of deputy sheriffs camped there to see that you don't destroy any of the property! Forty-eight hours, and if you're not gone by then I'll turn my son loose on you! He'll mark your face some more, you crook! Derker, have your men disarm this C Bar C bunch and chase them away. They pollute the atmosphere!"

Pop Alderson had been leaning weakly against one of the posts of the veranda. The reaction was about all that he could endure. He heard the elder Brown's words as though from a

far distance. He wanted to clasp Nancy in his arms, but the Triangle men were between him and the automobile.

But now they scattered and overwhelmed the Filkes gang before the latter could move in self-defense. And the car whirled around and dashed up to the porch, and those in it got out.

Nancy Alderson rushed up the steps and into her father's arms.

"Kitten! Kitten!" Pop breathed, his eyes moist, his hands shaking as he embraced her.

"Oh, father! I was so afraid for a time," she said, laughing and crying at once. "But everything is all right now. Old Filkes will have to leave the range, and we can be happy. Don't you understand yet, father? Everybody else does. Arnold's father is *your* Mr. Brown—your old friend——"

"What?" Pop cried.

"Sure, Pop! And here he is——"

Pop Alderson stared unbelievingly at the prosperous-looking man who was coming slowly up the steps to the porch, a smile upon his face, his hands outstretched.

"Hello, Alderson, old pal!" said Robert Brown. "Do I look natural? A little heavier than I was when you saved my life that time!"

Pop smiled like a happy man. He clasped the other's hand. Words seemed futile, and he was unable to utter them anyway.

"I've been keeping an eye on you for four or five years," Brown explained. "Intended to write you a score of times, but was always busy. You don't know what it is, Alderson, to have your affairs master you! Going to slow down, now, and take it easy."

"Them—them steers——" Pop muttered.

"They stay right where they are, Pop!" Brown said firmly. "That was just my little joke. I knew you were too blamed proud to accept help, so I was going to wish it on you."

"I don't need charity!" Pop said.

"None of that line of talk," Brown told him. "Let me hear any more of it, and I'll let Filkes and his gang handle you. I'm going to foreclose on the C Bar C, Pop. That boy of mine has an idea that he wants to stay out here and learn the business and grow up with the country. And he's got an eye on that girl of yours, too, if I am any judge. Look at them now!"

Nancy Alderson was down by the automobile again, and Arnold Brown was bending toward her, and they were talking in low tones, their eyes glistening. Pop sighed, but he smiled at the same time.

"Let's go inside the house, Pop. We must have a long visit," Brown said. "And I'd like some coffee and hot biscuits, and some fried eggs, and ham, and homemade preserves, and maybe half a fried chicken. This business pulled me out of bed right after daylight, and I'm not used to it, and I'm famished."

"Come along," Pop said. "I'll hunt up Woo Chung."

They turned and entered the house as Sam Derker and his men finished disarming the Filkes gang and sending them out toward the trail. The Triangle punchers were preparing to return to their own ranch, except a few who would be left on guard, in case Walt Filkes tried treachery.

But Pop did not locate Woo Chung at once, not until he had howled half a dozen times. For Woo and Lanky Jings were at one side of the house, talking.

"Just my luck!" Lanky said. "When I get a chance to have a good scrap, some gang of punchers has to run in and spoil it! We had 'em licked, Woo!"

"Uh!" Woo Chung grunted.

"Another five minutes and I'd have plugged that Walt Filkes, I betcha! You keep that cannon of yours oiled up, Woo. We may have another chance. And look at that, Woo! Look at Miss

Nancy and that young feller Brown. Looks like the Square A and the C Bar C might be combined, after all. My good gosh! I wonder if I'll lose my foreman's job!"

Woo looked at the love birds and then turned away, his face inscrutable again, ready once more to potter around his pots and pans, his chests and bins.

"What you think of it, Woo?" Lanky demanded.

"Mush!" Woo said. Whether he was reciting the menu for breakfast, no man knew.

MARAUDING BEARS "SPOTTED" BY FIELD GLASSES

AS a general rule bears are not regarded as stock killers by the hunters of the United States biological survey, whose duty it is to rid the Western ranges of predatory wild animals. As long, therefore, as the bears behave themselves and refrain from killing the stock, the hunters leave them alone. However, when a bear is proved to be a killer, they get after him.

A little while ago the bears in the Brookcliff country, northwest of Rifle, Colorado, began to make raids on the herds of that region, and W. H. Caywood, the government hunter, decided to stop their depredations. His first step was to determine the guilt of the bears. In order to do this, he hid himself near the herds that were being molested and kept watch with a pair of high-powered binoculars. Finally he saw a bear kill two lambs. His next move was to set traps for the marauders, and it was not long before six bears fell victims to these traps.

One of the animals caught and killed in this manner was known as "Old Clubfoot," because she had caught one of her forefeet in a trap some time previously and had left part of it behind her, traveling thereafter on three good feet and the one stump.

The heaviest losers through the depredations of the bears in that section were B. F. Haley, of the Haley Cattle Co., and L. W. Clough, both of Rifle, Colorado.

SEEKING OLD MORMON TRAILS

THE finding of a number of curious old rock trails near Lake Arrowhead, California, within the past few weeks, has given rise to an extensive search in that region for further evidence which would show that these are part of the lost Mormon trails, connecting Utah with the Pacific Southwest.

More than sixty years ago, San Bernardino, which lies some twenty-two miles south of Lake Arrowhead, was a Mormon village, planned along the lines of Salt Lake City. What is now known as Lake Arrowhead was then a rugged, mountainous section with rushing streams. The lost Mormon trails are believed to have traversed that territory. With the coming of settlers, the mountain streams were stemmed, and Little Bear Lake came into existence. Later, a huge, earth-filled dam created Lake Arrowhead.

In the virgin forests of oak, cedar and fir surrounding the present lake, old roads wind through the trees to the water's edge, where they disappear, to emerge again on the opposite side of the lake. It is believed that these trails once traversed the former mountain slopes and merged with the old Arrowhead Trail in the desert near Victorville and Hesperia.

A Dip in the Desert

by

Hugh F. Grinstead

Author of "Worse Than a Hawk," etc.

THE baked and barren earth of the right of way rose up to meet "Spider" Wilkins. He struck on his shoulders, none too gently, and, rolling down the railway embankment in a swirl of dust of his own making, he picked himself up from the ditch. As he sat up he gave utterance to a throaty curse and shook his fist at the retreating freight train from which he had been thrown.

It wasn't the first time Spider had been ditched by long-suffering trainmen, but never before had he found himself in the midst of such desolation. The train crew had apparently picked the most isolated region between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific, the middle of the Red Desert. Though the stranded hobo didn't know it at the time, it was nearly thirty miles east or west to a station of any sort—miles of scorching sand, upon which grew only stunted shrubs and giant cactus.

He watched the receding train until it disappeared; then he started walking along the track after it, between rails that extended on westward until they met in a blur. He knew that in the natural order of events he must finally come to a town where food could be had, or would reach a water tank where he might take passage on another freight going in his direction. Safety lay in sticking to the double line of steel that shimmered and writhed in the withering heat of a midday sun; for never in his life had he ventured out of hearing of a locomotive whistle.

When he had traveled thus for an hour, with the same dwindling stretch of track in front of him, the same monotony of sand and cactus to left and right, he stopped and looked back. To eastward, also, the rails melted together in a distant blur. The spot where he had been thrown from the train was lost in the dancing heat waves, and so far as he could see in every direction was the shimmering level of desert with never a tree nor a hill to break the flat monotony.

He kept on steadily for another hour. Fine alkali dust, raised by the fitful gusts of hot wind, powdered his clothes with frosty white and settled over the sooty grime of travel that covered his face. He was assailed by a torturing thirst, such a craving for water as he had never known before. He looked to right and to left in the vain hope of discovering a watercourse, such as he had seen in the country he had formerly traversed in his wanderings. To the south the level land appeared to break into low ridges and depressions, and as he moved slowly forward there burst suddenly upon his vision that

which brought a gasp of astonishment to his lips. He saw off there in a slight dip of desert, a lake of water with trees lining the shore!

"Plenty water and shade where a feller can rest!" he exclaimed huskily, and, forgetting his determination to stick between the rails, he stumbled down the low embankment and raced across the desert in the direction of the alluring vision.

After a dozen steps it disappeared, as if hidden by an intervening hill. He ran nearly half a mile before he stopped, spent and panting. There was nothing before him but the level desert, wavering and trembling in the scorching heat. The lake and trees must have been farther away than he thought; he would go on a little way until he topped the rise that hid it.

But a half hour of painful trudging through the sand brought no reward. It then began to dawn upon him that he had been lured from his path by an ignis fatuus, the mirage of the desert. In a vague sort of way he had heard of these tantalizing illusions. With bitter curses he turned to go back the way he had come. After an hour's erratic wandering, he realized that he was hopelessly lost. Accustomed to the regularity of city blocks, he had no sense of direction in the open country. In a panic of fear, he began to run. He stumbled and sat down on the sand with a sobbing curse.

The sun hovered above the western horizon and dropped from view. There came instant relief from the burning heat, but the consuming thirst remained. Darkness came and he went on timidly; for his ideas of the dangers to be encountered in the unsettled regions after dark were greatly exaggerated. After a time he saw what appeared to be a star touching the earth, but which he presently knew for the camp fire of some wayfarer. The only camps he had ever known were those of the hobos by the side of the railroad track. Perhaps he had at last returned to that great tentacle of civilization.

Spider Wilkins approached the camp fire with eager haste. There would be people there, and he wasn't afraid of people. And where man stopped for long there would be water. When he came nearer he saw silhouetted between him and the glare of the fire, the figure of a man, an old man with a long beard. He had known eccentric hobos to carry dogs with them on their wanderings, but never in a hobo camp had he seen a donkey, such as he now beheld cropping the scant vegetation at the edge of the circle of light.

"Water! Fer the love o' Mike gimme a drink," Spider rasped as he stumbled into the lighted area.

"Sure, son; you come to the right place," replied the patriarch by the fire as he produced a canteen.

Spider turned the canteen up to his lips and guzzled the water until the old man gently but firmly took it away.

"Better touch it light if you ain't had water fer some time, which I reckon you ain't from the way you go after it," he warned. "In a few minutes you c'n have all you want. They's a good spring right there in that wash. Might wash your face in that pan o' water settin' there, if you keer to git rid o' that dust."

Spider's ablutions had been few and far between of late, but he quickly availed himself of the opportunity to remove the coat of smarting alkali dust that had settled on his face. When the grime had been removed, Spider revealed to the old man a countenance belonging to a man under twenty-five, and, except for the crafty look in the eyes, not bad to look at.

"How come you travelin' without a canteen an' gittin' so dry?" queried the old man. "Springs ain't so fur apart; not more'n twenty mile, in this part o' the desert."

"I was ridin' the hog an' got ditched," Spider replied.

A puzzled frown puckered the old man's forehead. "Meanin' what?" he asked innocently.

"Oh, I was ridin' the rods on a freight train and the crew got ugly and throwed me off 'cause I wouldn't cough up," Spider explained, sensing for the first time that the old man was not a real hobo—that he was utterly ignorant of the vernacular of the road.

"I see. You was travelin' on the train an' got put off because you wouldn't pay 'em. I've heard them railroad fellers ain't accommodatin' none to speak of unless you got money to pay your way. Where was you goin'?"

"I was headed fer Californy to see my old mother," Spider lied glibly, resorting to an old trick that had got him more than one dinner and not a little money. "Got a telegram she was bad sick, and when I lost part of my money in Denver, I had to hit the rods from there on."

"Too bad, an' wouldn't them train fellers help you out none when you told 'em your hard luck?"

"Naw. I wouldn't tell 'em nothin'. They'd kick me off just the same."

"Always heared them railroad fellers wa'n't more'n half human. I ain't never rode them trains myself; just as clost to that railroad as I ever want to be, an' it's all of ten mile to it."

"Ten miles!" Spider exclaimed. "You ain't tellin' me I been walkin' away from that track all the time instead of back toward it?"

"I dunno how you been millin' around, but you're at Mesquite Spring, which ain't never been no nearer than ten mile to the railroad. Anyway, you're plumb petered out an' needin' grub. They's plenty o' coffee in the pot an' a slab o' bread. Soon's I fry some bacon you c'n eat."

Spider smiled at the evident simplicity of the older man. Wouldn't he be an easy mark, though? Never rode on a railroad train and didn't want to, a regular hick that would believe anything. No trouble to get his money, provided he had any.

"Nate Green is my handle," the old man volunteered as he put slices of bacon in the frying pan and held it over the fire. "I prospected all the way from Leadville to the jumpin' off place. Forty year I been follerin' a burro over the hills an' acrost the desert a-huntin' gold, with no great lot to show fer it. I got a good prospect over on Burnt Rock Mesa, though, an' I been savin' up what dust I take out'n pockets an' placers so's I can work it. It's in hard rock an' takes money to start it."

Spider, while he ate, regaled the old prospector with accounts of his travels, much of which he had borrowed from the recitals of other hobos. He was striving to create a good impression, for the old man had said something about having some dust saved up. He wondered if the old-timer had it with him, and just which favorite graft would suffice to separate him from it. The one about the sick mother in California had already been mentioned.

"Why, young feller, you're plumb entertainin'," old Nate declared, interrupting Spider's lurid account of his experiences in Chicago. "I ain't heard so many excitin' things since me an' old Mojave Jackson spent a week in Reno oncet. Glad you happened along the way you done. A feller gits lonesome by hisself out here. Wisht you could stay a spell with me, maybe go pardners with me on that hard-rock proposition."

"I ain't got the cash; money's all tied up so I can't use it right now," Spider replied with a grin, pleased at the progress he was making to gain the confidence of the guileless old prospector.

"Oh, it won't take no money to get

a half int'rest in my claim," Nate assured him. "What I need is a pardner that's able to use a drill an' hammer an' ain't afraid to work. I'd a heap rather have a young feller that's agreeable good comp'ny like you than some that's grouchy."

"I—I guess I couldn't stop off now. I want to——" Spider began cautiously, uncertain which tack to take in order to gain his object.

"Sure, I clean forgot you was goin' to see your maw," the old man interrupted. "Now I wonder——" He broke off and sat pondering a minute before he went on.

"Yes, I reckon you better go an' see her. It'll maybe be the last time. They wa'n't no telegraft nor railroads out here when I was a youngster, an' I didn't never hear from my mother after I left home to go to the gold diggin's. I didn't hear no more while she was livin'. Tell you what. Any young feller that'll ride a freight train to see his mother when she's sick will do to tie to. I'll loan you enough so's you c'n travel like a white man. It won't take more'n a third of what I got to take you to Californy an' back."

Spider gulped in astonishment at the unexpected offer. The bag of gold had been dropped in his lap, so to speak, while he was planning a way to get his hands on the old man's savings. Old Nate Green, mistaking the confusion and silence of the other for embarrassment due to the unexpected offer, hastened on.

"Knowed you'd kinda hold back about takin' a loan from a stranger," he said, "but I got the dust handy an' won't need it till I git to workin' that claim. You agree to come back an' go pardners with me an' I'll stake you to enough to take you to Californy an' back. A week from to-day, I'll be at Cactus Wells a-waitin' fer you, or if you want to make it longer, it'll be all right with me."

"I guess a week will be plenty," Spider replied somewhat absently. He was making a mental estimate of how far away he would be in a week.

"Knowed you was game; shake on it!" the old prospector exclaimed enthusiastically, extending a hand that was gnarled and calloused. "We'll be takin' pay rock out'n that claim on Burnt Mesa inside a month. Wouldn't surprise me none it was a bonanza."

In spite of his usual confidence, Spider's eyes dropped at the sincere handclasp of the old man. By various and difficult methods he had extracted money from the pockets of the unwary, but never had it been forced upon him in this manner.

"They's all of two pounds, countin' nuggets an' dust, that I got in this sack," the old prospector declared, drawing a short, buckskin pouch from his pack. "I got it a little at a time; nigh died of thirst fer some of it, an' froze my fingers diggin' out a pocket one winter. Been five year a-scrapin' it together, an' I figger it'll weigh out better'n four hundred dollars. Reckon a hundred would be enough for your trip."

Spider grunted assent to the arrangement. Why quibble over the amount of a windfall?

"We'll sleep a spell now an' git a early start fer Cactus Wells where you c'n ketch a train. It's maybe twenty mile in a straight line a little northwest, right under the handle of the big dipper like she hangs now," the old man explained, pointing to the northern constellation.

The old prospector was soon snoring, but Spider Wilkins didn't sleep. An hour after he lay down he got up cautiously and crept to the pack where he had seen the old man so carelessly stow the pouch of gold. He found it without difficulty, and when he had secured a canteen of water, he set out in the direction old Nate Green said the near-

est station lay. The night was cool, and with water in abundance when he became thirsty, he walked rapidly.

It was daylight when he reached the huddle of houses and the water tank at Cactus Wells, and beheld the smoke of a train approaching from the west. It stopped to take water, and when it pulled out again, Spider Wilkins was in an empty box car, going East!

He held the little pouch of gold tightly and chuckled at his good fortune. The foolish old prospector would doubtless have the sheriff after him, but they would never think of searching to eastward. A man so foolish as that old desert rat deserved to lose his gold.

Spider slept while he rode, and when the empty car was cut out and left on a siding at nightfall, he crept out and reconnoitered the little station. He had, at least, crossed the desert, for there were a few trees here. He entered an eating house, and when he offered to pay for food with a nugget, the man behind the counter regarded him suspiciously and called to another. Without waiting for the man to return with the small fragment of gold or his change, Spider ducked outside and ran. He hid in an empty car until morning. He was a thief, and everybody knew him for one at a glance.

Another train came through and he jumped aboard. He was discovered and thrown off at the next station. He begged food at a back door, not daring to invite suspicion and arrest by a display of the gold in his possession.

Time and again he was discovered and thrown off the freight trains upon which he attempted to ride. He determined to pass himself off for a prospector when he struck a small mining town, but a policeman saw through the deception and ordered him to move on. No use; everybody knew him for a worthless hobo. He couldn't fool anybody. Yes, there was one man—the old prospector back there at Mesquite Spring—who had believed in him. And he had robbed the old man.

Five days passed, and Spider still had all the gold in the pouch except the bit he had attempted to pass at the eating house. He didn't want to spend it now; the man who had toiled through heat and cold to accumulate the little hoard had believed in him. Spider began to wonder what it would be like to hunt gold, to be partners with a man like that—a man who believed in him. But even the prospector would not believe him now. Spider laughed at an idea that came to him suddenly; but when a train came through going west, he hid in a cattle car. Dusty and begrimed he dropped off at Cactus Wells.

Somebody grasped his shoulder and whirled him around. He tried to wriggle loose, from habit cringing as if expecting a blow. When he looked, he did not see the brass buttons of a policeman, but the grinning face of old Nate Green, hand outstretched.

"Knowed you'd be on hand, son, right on time just like I figgered," he declared as he gripped the hand of the hobo. "We'll be ready to start fer the Burnt Rock country soon's you've et somethin'."

"But you don't want me fer a pardner now; I stole your dust, all of it. Here 'tis," Spider blurted out as he thrust the buckskin pouch into the hand of the old prospector.

"I reckon not. Fellers that steal don't never bring back what they took; you just borrowed it."

"I lied to you; I ain't got no mother."

"If you'd had one, you wouldn't ha' took the gold, I reckon. I done wrong showin' you that gold, not knowin' how you was raised. It takes a plumb good man to bring back what he's took, but I been believin' in you all the time."

"I'm ready to start on that gold hunt any time you say, pardner," Spider Wilkins replied with a grin, and he looked the old man square in the eye.

Fire Brain

By

George Owen Baxter

Author of "His Fight for a Pardon," etc.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

JOHN SHERBURN, who is known for the pugnacity of his nature and the gun fights that he incites, finally seeks peace and quiet in the little town of Amityville. He makes a mistake, however, the first day by abusing the negro barkeeper in the Gresham saloon and ends up by getting into a fight with one Tom Kenyon and being ordered out of town.

Out in the desert country, without water—for he discovers that his canteen has sprung a leak—he is on the point of succumbing to the heat and thirst when he is rescued by Peter Gresham, the big man of Amityville.

Sherburn confesses to Gresham that he cannot return to Amityville, and truthfully tells what took place between himself and the townsfolk in the Gresham saloon. To his surprise Gresham offers to undertake to smooth the affair over so that Sherburn may return and take up his residence in Amityville.

When they arrive in town they go straight to Tom Kenyon and Sherburn offers an apology. Kenyon demands that Sherburn make the apology publicly, which Sherburn does, very much to his credit and very much to the discredit of the man who has demanded the apology. Sherburn, because of Gresham, is accepted by the whole town.

Gresham invites Sherburn to become his partner, intrusting the entire establishment to Sherburn's care, while Gresham goes on a hunt for Red Hawk, an Indian outlaw, and his band.

During Gresham's absence Sherburn succeeds in building a reputation for himself, and when an attempt is made by Red Hawk's gang to rescue Dan Juniper, one of their members who is in jail, Sherburn is called upon to guard the prisoner. Despite numerous precautions that are taken to safeguard the jail, however, Juniper and Kenyon are killed. Before the fatal shot is fired that kills Juniper, however, the latter confesses that Red Hawk is not an Indian.

Sherburn knows that it is up to him to "get" the Hawk, and although he has not a plan in his head, Sherburn announces that he'll "talk when the job is finished."

During a "set-to" with one Oliver Clement, Sherburn makes a bargain that the one who loses out will ride up Cricket Valley, that procedure being taken as a sign that the rider wishes to meet up with Red Hawk. Sherburn, through a perverse trick of fate, loses out, and before he has had a chance to make plans for the ride, Gresham appears and accuses Sherburn of trying to steal his girl, Jenny Langhorne, away from him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MEETING JENNY LANGHORNE.

WELL, I went out to think it over, at least. And there was so much to think over that I could have used a month as well as a day. I got a mean-mouthed pinto with a Roman nose, and a roman-nosed desire to do everything except what I wanted. That gave me a chance to work out some of my meanness. By the time he had bucked through the town and back again and then raced away for the dead hills, I hardly knew in what direction I was riding, except that I was glad that I was away from Amityville.

When the dizziness which that long bucking caused had cleared away a little, I was on the edge of a little valley—over the rim of the hill behind me, was Amityville, looking white and

pretty in the hollow. So I dismounted and threw the reins—that mean-tempered fool had been well trained in that respect, at least—and I sat me down in the shade of a tree and unlimbered a gun, for the lack of anything better to do.

Most people think better when they have their hands occupied. At least, I do. And there's nothing so satisfying in the fingers as the handles of a familiar old Colt, a little rubbed and thumb worn. There was a black chunk of rock weighing ten pounds or so down the slope. I began to kick it down the slope with bullets, just shaving all the top edge of the stone each time, and tipping it over like a bale of hay.

And that went on until I had emptied both guns and then loaded them again. When I got through with that, I started in again with my new loadings.

However, that old stone had been getting a pretty good hammering, and my thirteenth shot being aimed a little too low, caught the rock fairly in the stomach, as you might say, and made her fall apart in chunks.

I cussed a little under my breath. I was mighty glad that I hadn't cussed out loud, because just then a voice sang out behind me: "Thirteen is the lucky number for you, maybe!"

I turned around and I saw that it was nobody in the whole wide world except the face that I wanted the most to see, and that was Jenny Langhorne, with her freckled nose wrinkling as she grinned down at me.

She was a queer sort. She could grin like a man and she could smile like a woman. Mostly, she grinned like a man.

I said: "I didn't aim to bust that rock."

"You did more than you aimed for, then," said she. "Is this where you practice up?"

"Ma'am," said I, "it's not. I'm up here trying to think."

"That's a bad habit," said Jenny Langhorne. "I've given up thinking a long time ago, John."

"Why?" said I.

"Because it never works out," said she. "You always start thinking that you want to find out what's right. But you only end up with wanting harder than ever what's pleasant. So the first guess is about as good as the tenth, I suppose. They're all guesses, anyway."

She sent her pony down the slope and then twisted around in the saddle and dropped her elbow on the pommel of the saddle and her chin in the palm of her hand.

"You look glum," said she.

"I am glum," said I.

"Have you been in a fight?" said she.

"No," said I.

"Not since yesterday?"

"I dunno what you mean."

"Oh, I've seen Oliver Clement."

I gasped.

"I went over to see how his foot was. But I found out that there was a sore spot under his chin."

"Well——" said I, and stopped, having turned a brick red.

"But how," said Jenny, "do you make fellows like you after you've thrashed them?"

"I didn't thrash him," said I. "I—got in a lucky punch——"

Not that I was modest, but I wanted to turn the talk in another direction.

"He told me how lucky it was," said Jenny, and she grinned again.

"How much *did* he tell you?" I asked her in a good deal of alarm. And in my heart I was cursing that young fool with all my might. Why do men have to talk to women except in courtrooms?

"Only about how he fell—asleep," said she. And she added quickly: "How much else was there to tell?"

"Nothing," said I. "Of course, nothing else!"

"Of course," said she, and still she grinned.

She went on: "I was sorry that you didn't think more of my advice. And that you didn't pay any attention to my letter."

I shrugged my shoulders. I felt that I was cornered. But I still remembered that old Frenchman's advice: "Never explain. Your friends don't need explanations and your enemies won't believe you, anyway!"

Or at least, it went something like that. So I didn't try to explain this time. I shrugged my shoulders, as I was saying, and I was hunting through my mind for something that would make pleasanter conversation, when Jenny Langhorne said quietly: "I know how you tried to dodge the trouble. And that's particularly why I wanted to see you and thank you. Oliver says that you tried with all your might to keep him from making a fool of himself and that you almost succeeded."

But had he told her about my proposed trip up Cricket Valley? That was the main thing, of course, and since he had chattered so much it seemed quite likely that there was no place at which he had stopped. But she said nothing more about the interview I had had with Clement, and then I saw that he was a good deal more of a man than I had suspected. He had told her all that part of the scene that was to his disadvantage, but he had not said a word about how he had me helpless under the nose of his gun, or how he spared me then, and particularly he had not alarmed her with any story of Cricket Valley and the wild bargain which I had proposed to him—and then lost for my pains! All that he had talked about had been very complimentary to me and particularly she said that he wanted to see me at once, or as soon as possible, so that he could dissuade me from a plan I had in mind.

"But he didn't tell me what the plan might be," said the girl.

She was a curious imp. There was no doubt that she was hinting that I might be a little more open in my talk, but I saw that here was an excellent opportunity for me to drive an entering wedge. If I went up Cricket Valley there was probably small chance that I should come back.

I said: "Clement wants me to stay on in Amityville. That's what he wants to persuade me to change my mind about."

I could not help watching her closely as I said that, and I was rewarded mightily by seeing that her face had darkened when she heard me.

"You're going, too?" repeated Jenny Langhorne, and she looked gloomily straight before her, and over my head, and into the pale blueness of that Western sky where there are so rarely any clouds.

"I'm going," said I.

"Have *you* had trouble? Or are you simply tired of all the fight?" she went on.

What I said after that I've often regretted. But at the time I couldn't help it.

"It's trouble with a friend of mine," said I. "I've seen too much of the girl he wants to marry."

And there it was! I could have bitten my tongue out for saying that, the moment the words were in the air. But regrets are uesless things, as you all know.

I suppose that almost any other girl would have passed over a remark like that. But Jenny Langhorne never allowed talk to be composed of hints and innuendos. She pinned words down and fastened them to facts. And though her color had heightened a little, she looked straight at me.

"You'd better not leave that up in the air," said Jenny. "Will you tell me what you mean?"

"I mean you," said I. "And my friend is Pete Gresham."

"I guessed that he was behind it," she answered me rather bitterly. "So he's driving you out?"

"I'm driving myself," I corrected her hastily. "I'm not afraid. But I have no right to make myself miserable for nothing."

"I don't understand," said Jenny. "Peter tells you that you mustn't see me—that you've seen too much of me already——"

"No!" said I. "I tell myself that I've seen too much of you!"

There, you see, the whole cat was out of the bag. I suppose that no one ever took such a clumsy, roundabout, stupid way of telling a girl that he loved her as I had taken with Jenny Langhorne. I hardly dared to look at her. I was so ashamed of my thick-fingered methods. And the color washed in a flame into her face. I couldn't tell whether it was scorn or some other emotion. I waited for lightning to strike.

Well, she straightened suddenly in the saddle, and I saw her spur sink wickedly deep in the flank of her horse. That stab of the steel points made the little mustang bolt to the top of the hill in a few leaps. There she brought him up on the curb with a strength that would have taxed the wrist of many a man. And sitting there against the sky, she turned a little toward me again.

"Has Peter Gresham the right to run my life—just because he *claims* to be the boss?" asked Jenny Langhorne.

And with that, she was gone from my sight over the brow of the hill.

I was into my saddle in an instant and over that same hill in pursuit of her. Already the rocks were rattling down the slope behind her, and she was cutting across the face of the hill leaving a twisting little trail of dust that soon melted out of the air.

I gave that pinto his head in front and the full benefit of the spurs behind. He had bucked the bad temper out of himself that morning, and yet there was still enough devil in him to give him strength, and he ran as if he had eagle wings buoying him along.

Jenny Langhorne was jockeying her bay mare into a good stiff gait, leaning over the pommel to throw the weight forward, where a horse wants it when it is on the run, but the pinto was gaining in spite of my weight in the saddle. I thought better of the little mustang from that minute. For I had known, before, that he was tough, but I never had guessed that he had so much foot.

However, I saw as I came to the back of the next ridge that he had not foot enough. Jenny Langhorne was heading homeward, and the bridle path went toward her ranch with very few windings —only one sagging loop to avoid the clifflike descent which was now just before me.

That descent was the one thing that could get me to the girl now, however. And I decided that I must see her immediately. Something told me that if I did not get to her now, I was throwing away such an opportunity as would not come to me again.

It was a wicked descent, that cliff. But I paid very little heed to that. I was so hot on the trail, so blind with the love of Jenny, so keen with the chase, that when I saw my course before me, I gave the pinto the spurs again—I gave him the whole cruel benefit of them and the stabbing pain thrust him over the edge of the cliff with a squeal of agony and of fear.

I should not say cliff, of course. But it was mighty close to one. It was a slide pretty close to straight up and down, and it was faced with a hard sand and clay mixed—as fast to slide down as though it were greased. Here and there was a stretch of slatey rock that roughed up the surface, however,

and I depended upon those rougher places to ease up the velocity with which I skidded along.

However, the instant the pinto began to shoot down the face of that bluff, I saw what I was in for. I would have thrown myself out of the saddle, if I had had time. But I didn't have time to more than bat out one oath. We covered the first half of that drop with a whoop and a clatter, but when we hit the streak of slatey rock and I figured on the shod hoofs of the pinto really saving us.

No, that confounded rock was no stronger than soap! It gave way at the first thrust of his feet, and after a single wavering delay, we shot off again toward the bottom.

I knew what a bird felt like when it tumbled out of the head of the sky with a broken wing. There was a whir—a crash—the pinto turned on his side—and then I scooted into darkness, set around with shooting stars and sparks, and one flaming, flaring comet across the heavens.

No, that was the sharp sound of a human voice—a woman's scream off there in that distance. I came to myself, and staggered around on loose knees that sagged at every step. I was saying: "Where's poor pinto. Did I break his neck? Steady, boy!"

Something rushed up to me. It looked like a whole troop of girls.

I said to the troop: "Get the pinto—where is he? What turned everything so dark?"

The troop said with a single voice: "You terrible idiot! Have you killed yourself?"

But the voice was that of Jenny, and the sound of it dissolved my stupor and let me see that the many girls made only one, after all. One Jenny, and a powerful comforting sight she was to me. She was as white as the back of the hand of a man that always wears gloves. And she had to make the motions two or three times before the words came.

"John!" said she. "Did your horse slip—at the top—of that frightful slide?"

"It was my only chance to get to you before you reached home," said I, "and so, of course, I had to take the chance. Where's pinto?"

Then I saw him. Dead? Not at all! There was pinto as calmly as you please cropping the dead bunch grass of the last year that grew on the north side of a big rock. And if his side was a good deal skinned and scratched, where he had caromed along the bosom of that mountain, it made no difference to the appetite of pinto.

From the corner of his eye he watched me with a devilish interest and one flattened ear said to me: "Come and catch me if you can!"

I didn't try. I knew that look before. I had seen it in too many of the distant cousins of pinto.

"In the name of all good sense," said Jenny Langhorne sternly, "what brought you after me at all?"

"I don't know," said I. "But what made you run away?"

"Ridiculous!" said Jenny, with a delightful smile. "I didn't run away at all!"

"Well," said I, "I'm too polite to call you a liar, but I hope that you can read my mind!"

"You have a terrible black eye," said Jenny, "and your shoulder is bleeding. Come home with me this minute. Wait till I catch your horse for you—can you walk?"

"If you're going to catch pinto," said I, "I'll wait for you."

She gave me a side glance which told me that she understood, but she sailed after pinto, just the same. He let her come within a step and a half and then he turned himself into a grasshopper and dropped out of the air forty feet away and stood there with his head

high and his tail flaunting, and that happy look that a horse wears when it is making a fool out of a human.

"Your horse is an idiot!" cried Jenny.

"It's just his way," said I, delighted. "Try him again."

"I never heard of such a poorly trained horse!" said Jenny with much point, and with that, she marched straight up to that mustang and confound me if it didn't stand and let her take it by the reins.

"But you see," gloated Jenny as she came back, "how quickly it responds to intelligent treatment!"

I was too amazed to make any response. Besides, I was mighty glad to go out to the Langhorne ranch again so soon.

But when we got to riding along, side by side, I began to watch Jenny. She was staring straight before her. And her face was a mask.

I said suddenly: "I remember now why I had to try to catch you!"

"It's of no importance," said Jenny coldly.

"I had to catch you before you got to the ranch because—I had to tell you something."

"Did you?" said Jenny without interest. "What might it be, if you please?"

"I don't know, exactly," said I growing a little more abashed. "Perhaps it has been rattled out of my head."

"Oh," said Jenny.

But she lifted her head, and as she rode on I saw on her face a beautifully foolish expression of happiness. It sent an echo of the same emotion through me, of course. But I did not dare to say a word for fear I would break the charm of the spell under which we were riding.

I blessed the pinto, I blessed the steepness of that mountainside, and I only wished that it had been twice as long. I felt that I had come tremendously near to Jenny's inner self. And it gave me a giddiness, like standing on the top of a mountain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FEEL OF GOLD.

WHEN darkness closed upon that day, I had not accomplished much that could be reproduced in actual words. I had done nothing, you might say, that could be defined. But I felt that I had crossed a desert and climbed a mountain range and come within sight of a promised land. Yes, I had actually entered upon the borders of it.

Jenny said nothing, did nothing. But there was a change about her just as real as the change between the summer desert and the desert of the spring. Something like a delicate fragrance passed from her and made a sweetness in the air about her and kept my heart tumbling up and down like a boat at anchor in a heavy sea.

The scratch in my shoulder turned out to be deep enough to make Jenny say: "Oh!" and "Ah!" in such a manner as she was dressing it, that I almost wished I had had an arm torn off in that most blessed fall. But afterward, as the day came toward its end, I saw that I should have to leave.

I climbed onto the back of honest pinto and waved to Jenny Langhorne and rode back across the desert toward Amityville, swearing to myself that the mustang should never lack a home and a good one to the end of his days. Because he had done a great and a good work for me!

If he had kept on his feet and brought me actually in front of Jenny, she would probably have laughed in my face if I had grown sentimental.

And then, as I rode slowly along through the spring-colored valleys, and through the faint perfume of the flowers that filled me with a faint sadness, like the thought of Jenny herself, I re-

membered the ugly things that big Peter Gresham had said about her, and about her liking for strength, her cruel and unfeminine love of power, whether in herself or in others.

It was a depressing thought, of course, for I could see that the reason my lady might have looked on me with a little more favor on this day was because I had managed that absurd and foolish affair of tumbling down the face of a bluff for the sake of getting close enough to speak to her. I suppose, in a way, it was a sufficient proof of devotion.

I paused under the edge of that descent on my way back to Amityville and in the dusk of the day the slope seemed indeed almost sheer, with a ragged black head pressed up against the sky, and I wondered with all my heart how I could ever have managed to come down that slope without breaking every bone in my body. Yes, it was little wonder that Jenny Langhorne was impressed, and only the wildest giddiness of heart could have made me attempt such a thing.

So I continued my ride.

I was beginning to have a feeling something like homesickness in this part of the country. Everything seemed to be strange and wrong. The men were certainly different from any other men that I had ever known, and the Lord knew that this girl was not what other girls had been in my life.

I came back to Amityville in such a topsy-turvy state of mind that I struck in through a back street instead of the main highway. Then, as I passed Billy Marvin's eating house, I had a sudden horror of getting inside of the hotel again—a dread of having to continue the odd part which I had been playing there—and a greater dread of seeing big Peter Gresham again, whether it were to explain that I was going or staying.

So I stopped at Billy's and had my supper there, sat a long time over the table, and found that it was ten o'clock before I was ready to start on. A boy had taken pinto on, some time before, and put him in the Gresham stable.

And all of these unusual things had happened one on top of the other; had they not come together, I should have never approached the hotel from the rear at that hour; I should, as usual, have gone to the front of the building and entered, and been in the gaming room three minutes after I arrived, wearing my usual lugubrious look and acting the part of the hard-drinking bully.

Instead, there I was standing at the rear wall of the hotel and fitting the key into the lock of the gate.

I have to explain, first, that when Gresham built the hotel he had arranged for one private, cool, shadowy place for himself, and that was a space of ground at the rear of the building, which he surrounded with a thick ten-foot dobe wall, with a little red-tiled crest against the rains on top. He had a pair of big-limbed fig trees planted in that spot, and a patch of shaven lawn, and a little fountain that used to bubble defiance at the hot evenings. And, altogether, it was the one cheerful place in Amityville in the heat of the summer.

When he gave the hotel into my management, in that odd partnership which we had arranged, he had given me, among all the other keys, the one to the inner and outer door of his garden; but for some reason I had never used either of them, and had left that private place of his still sacred to its owner. However, on this night I did not want to pass many faces in review. I wanted to be alone and entirely free from the inspections of other eyes. And so I remembered, suddenly, that rear passageway through which I could get to the back staircase of the hotel and so up to my room unseen by any one.

A sand storm had been looming throughout the last half of the day. The northern horizon had been covered with a muddy mist, the air was still and hot, and as I left Bill's eating room, I felt a sudden stir in the air, and heard a queer hushing sound far away. As I stood in front of the garden door to Gresham's hotel, the storm struck Amityville like a clapped hand.

I heard shutters crackling to, and I heard doors slamming like cannon reports. That was in the distance down the street—and then the first hot gust of wind sluiced down that alleyway, turned the corner to my left, and poured roaring about me.

Not, however, with a great load of sand and of dust, as yet. That was drummed up in the heart of the storm, which would come later. There was only a level-driving silt that whipped down to the bottom of one's lung if one so much as drew a breath without turning one's head away from the air current.

I was forced away from the door, for a moment, by the riverlike thrust of the air. But I fumbled back to it, fitted the key into the lock with difficulty, and opened the door. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me and was about to relock it, when I saw a shadow moving in the garden near me.

I can tell you that if I had seen that shadow when I first opened the door of the garden, I should have jumped back for the street and run for it. But there was no way to run with speed, now that the heavy door was closed behind me.

I stared again. There was no doubt about it. There was a big double window on the second floor which threw out a considerable glow even in spite of its drawn curtains—always drawn, because it was one of the gaming rooms. The rapidly darkening flight of sand had diminished the glow of those windows to a pale thing, indeed, but against that ghost of light I saw a form stirring in the gloom of the storm—the dimmest outline of the form of a man doing what looked like a slow scarecrow's dance, with long and lanky, flopping arms.

Of course I was fascinated. Twice I gathered my voice and my courage to call out; and twice I decided that it was better to leave the possibility of unworldly things to themselves and content myself with the earth and things of the earth.

Presently the dance stopped. The figure seemed to fall into the earth. No, I could see it now huddled close to the ground, as though upon its knees. And after that, it stood up and moved toward the house.

I wondered how a ghost would melt into a solid wall, but an instant later I saw, by a faint glow of light from the interior of the house, that the back door of the hotel had been opened—the little garden door to which no one in the world possessed the key except big Gresham and I!

That was a staggering blow, you may well believe. And most of all, you may believe that I was flabbergasted when I made out that against the faint light from the inside of the building I could decipher the bulky outlines of Gresham himself.

I was astonished. Because Gresham was not the sort of a man to needlessly expose himself to dirt and inconvenience—such as was implied by remaining extra moments in the midst of a sweeping sand storm—and performing in the meantime, an odd, slow dance.

It was very baffling, of course. I waded forward through the heavy-handed pressure of the wind and stood on what I thought was about the spot where I had seen the silhouette—was it Gresham's?—dancing. And there I kneeled and felt about me. I found something at once. It was a patch of

soft dirt about two feet across, thinly sifted over with wind-sieved dirt.

The explanation of the slow floppings of the arms and the bendings of the body as though in a queer dance was obvious at once. Gresham—or some one else—had been out there simply digging in the garden—a most ordinary matter.

Ordinary—yes. Except at night. And most of all, except at night during a sand storm! Gresham above all who, in spite of his ability to withstand desert hardships, hated nothing in this world so much as small inconveniences such, say, as sore eyes and dirt down the back! But here had been Gresham swiftly and patiently doing such manual labor in his little garden.

Of course I guessed at once that it had been no ordinary task. I started digging, in my turn. The ground had been stamped down a little, but it gave readily to my fingers. I scooped out a narrow hole almost as deep as my arm was long, and then, thrusting my hand down as far as I could force it through the soft mold, the tips of my fingers touched upon a coarse cloth, or a canvas.

Perhaps the most honorable and patient man in the world would have set about inquiring, at that moment, who had planted that substance at that distance beneath the ground, and gone to such an expenditure of time and labor to accomplish the matter—but none of those delicate scruples troubled me.

I worked busily widening that hole in the garden muck until my prying hand caught hold of a loose, knoted top of a bag. That I gripped and started to draw up, but it slipped from my hand. I freshened my grip on it and tried again, and this time it came up.

I brought it out with a heave and a grunt, then, and dropped it with a sigh of triumph upon the top of the ground —a sigh of triumph that died at once and gave place to a thrill that was almost terror. For, as the canvas bag touched the ground, I heard the most exciting and the most musical of all noises in the world—the light jingle of metal upon metal—many sliding, faintly chiming bits of metal, one against the other.

Of course that bag was open in an instant. I knew the feel of the coins at once. Gold!

CHAPTER XXIX.

FACING GRESHAM.

IT made me a bit giddy, at first. Then I thrust down my hand again, but I found the bottom of the hole by the hardness of the undug ground. And there was no more sign of buried treasure. After that, I hesitated for an instant as to how I should get that money to a private place and count over the extent of the sum. And I am ashamed to say that, at first, it did not occur to me to call in the sheriff and make over to him my find. However, I suppose that that is no more than to say that I was simply human.

There was an easy way up to my room, however. And that was through the same semiprivate door which I had just seen opened by the digger of the shallow pit in which that gold had been buried. And, at this hour of the night, there was very little chance that any one would be abroad in the upper part of the building, and thus encounter me. Or, if I were encountered, I did not doubt that I could put off the questioner with some gruff answer which told nothing.

To find any other half safe retreat, however, seemed much beyond me. I thought of every other alternative, but in the end the best thing to me appeared to be to go straight up to my room with my precious burden and there examine it behind a locked door.

That, in fact, was what I did. I unlocked the little back door and through

it carried my canvas sack up the stairs and then lightly and swiftly as I could through the halls to my room.

I threw open the door and then my heart turned over with alarm and with anger. For there was old "Doc" seated at his ease, turning the pages of an ancient newspaper, much frayed at the edges from repeated handling. For, in those days, newspapers were a luxury —I mean the big metropolitan dailies. And they rarely got into our hands in the West. I have known a prospector to pay twenty-five cents for the privilege of perusing a newspaper. However, I had no sympathy with old Doc at that moment.

I shouted at him: "Is this my room or a public library? Get out of here and leave me in peace, will you?"

Doc rose with a world of dignity. He removed his glasses from his nose and thrust them into a breast pocket of his coat.

"Young feller," said he, "I come up here and I been waitin' up here because I got some news for you that would of meant a lot for you, but now I dunno that I see my way clear to tellin' it!" And he stalked slowly out of the door, which he closed with an offended slam behind him.

However, I was not inclined to worry about the state of mind of that old loafer on such a night as this. I was at work in a fever on the contents of that bag. I merely paused to glance out the window and make sure that the narrow little balcony which ran past—purely for ornament and not for use—had no one upon it. Then, with the door locked, I felt that I could take my time.

Presently little glistening, yellow piles began to grow upon the table, for it was new-minted gold, fresh from the milling machine, and every twenty-dollar gold piece had a face as clear as the man in the moon. It was a separate thrill of pleasure to stack each coin.

When all of that money was arrayed, I began the counting. There were fifteen stacks and two coins over in that little golden host—a fortune!

Not in these days of diluted prices, perhaps. But fifteen thousand dollars in the days when prosperous office men were contented with sixty dollars a month—fifteen thousand dollars in those times meant a lot—four or five times as much as it does now.

I sat in a pleasant trance adding up delicious possibilities. I saw myself leading the life of a retired gentleman. I saw that host of gold pieces laboring silently and earnestly for me day and night.

Then another thought jumped with electric eagerness into my mind, for I remembered the story that had been told to me by Peter Gresham about the bank robbery. Aye, and I had heard many rumors about it since his telling, for the story was on the lips of everybody. It was the common theme in the eating house where I had dined that night.

When the bank at Ludlow was robbed by Red Hawk, over fifteen thousand dollars in gold coin had been taken from the bank!

All of my exultation at my find left me and was succeeded by a thrill of fear that worked on my skin and drew it like a blast of icy wind. Cold perspiration oozed out. I was clammy with it. For the man who was found with this coin would be identified at once as Red Hawk himself, or as one of his chief lieutenants. And, such was the state of feeling throughout the community, that there was no doubt that the people would not wait for the process of a legal trial. They would arrange a noose for me and hang me up to the nearest tree.

What first ran through my mind was to go down to the garden where I had found the bag and re-deposit it. Because, when it was in its place, there,

I could have some opportunity of watching whoever might come to re-examine that spot. Then I recalled the bigness of him who had put the bag in the ground, and I remembered again that big Peter Gresham alone—outside of myself—had the key to that door. And my heart sank in my boots. Peter Gresham—Red Hawk!

I suppose that I should have dismissed the terrible idea at once; but as I have said before, Amityville had turned everything upside down for me and I no longer retained my old beliefs and trusts. And that thought still bored in upon me until I remembered the whole history of Peter and how for five years he had been distinguished for his war against the chief, carried on in vengeance for the death of his poor, tortured brother, Leicester Gresham. I thought of this, and my heart was easier again.

The very privacy of that garden was doubtless what had tempted the thief, whoever he might be, to secrete the money there—particularly since, in a garden, newly turned mold is not looked upon with suspicion.

These things were passing through my mind. And suddenly I rose from my chair with a swing to start walking up and down the room and try to get some better sense into my head—I swung out of my chair suddenly, as I say. And at that instant something plucked me violently by the coat under the pit of the arm and there was a sharp sound of shorn cloth. I looked down in amazement and there was a heavy knife hanging from the torn cloth!

I did not stop to ask questions. I got to the window in the split part of a second with a gun in each hand and leaned out ready to pump lead. But there was nobody in sight. Not a soul was clambering down toward the street.

I swung myself out through the window and started to climb up to the roof to look for the knife thrower there. But I didn't go far. I thought of fifteen thousand dollars in gold lying on the table in my room and shouting silently, all the time: "I come from the robbed bank at Ludlow! I am wet with the blood of men!"

Yes, the thought of that exposed money brought me back into my chamber on the double-quick. But, when I sat down, I faced that window and I kept my eyes upon it with a gun balanced on my knee.

What was I to do with that infernal white elephant?

And then a heavy knock came at the door to my room.

"Who's there?" I asked in a rather faint voice, I suppose.

"Doc, Mr. Sherburn."

"Darn your old hide, what do you want?"

"Gresham wants you—not me."

"Gresham? Tell him I'm busy."

Gresham of all people—the tall, honest, saintly Gresham to find me with this mess of rotten gold! And yet he was the only man in the town from whom I could expect mercy.

"Tell Gresham that?" echoed Doc.

"Yes, darn you!"

The footsteps of Doc withdrew. And I sat crouched and miserable, but feeling my mind drawn into a tight knot and knowing that there was no power in me to make that knot loosen. A man cannot force himself to be intelligent. That is the devil of mental work!

And then, slowly up the stairs and slowly along the hall, a calm, measured step, and a quiet rap at the door. It was Gresham—I knew!

And I saw, also, that the burden of this money was too great for me. I would have to let Gresham take part of the worry from me. I threw my knife-rent coat over the heap of money. I unlocked the door, and big Peter stood before me.

He was not in a passion because I

had refused to come at his message. He merely said: "I want to consult you about that new dealer, Gregory. Do you think that he's——"

"Darn Gregory!" I gasped, as I closed and locked the door behind him. "I've been sitting in this room alone with a murderer on my hands!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

YOU could say even such a thing as that to big Gresham and never unsettle his nerves. He should have been a doctor. He had the presence and the calm for it. And he merely put his hand on my shoulder and murmured: "Your head is a bit unsettled. I think that this job has been harder on you than you imagine. Now tell me what's troubling you."

It angered me a little. I felt fairly close to the end of my world—what with buried treasure mysteries, a trip to Red Hawk, knives thrown in the dark—I was in a muddle to be sure. And I wanted to unsettle big Gresham a little, too—sort of in spite, you know. I snatched my coat from the piles of gold and pointed it out to him.

Will you believe that when he saw it he merely laughed?

He said: "You *have* been playing in luck, eh? I congratulate you, Sherburn!"

But I snarled back: "There's a shade over fifteen thousand dollars in that pile of money!"

He only whistled. "That *is* a haul, Sherburn."

"Confound you," I shouted. "That's the sum of money that was stolen from the Ludlow Bank!"

Well, that man was a miracle. He merely smiled at me and shook his head. "I suppose you'll be telling me that you are the famous Red Hawk, in a little while?"

I was so irritated that I determined to corner him and shock him if it were possible.

I stabbed an aggressive finger at him and barked: "Gresham, do you know where I got that money?"

He smiled gently on me, as if I were a raving child. "If I had known," said he, "I should have gone to beat you to it, I suppose."

"I'll tell you then."

"Thanks."

"In your own garden!"

"What?" smiled Gresham. "Under my own fig trees, I suppose?"

"Exactly there!" I cried.

"Hush!" said the big man. "You really mustn't talk such nonsense as this, Sherburn. And in such a loud voice. There are other people in the building and some of them have sharp ears."

"I tell you," I whispered, "that I came through the rear door of the garden for a short cut into the house, and when I came through, the stand storm was just beginning. And while I stood there, I saw a dim silhouette against a window of the game room in the second story. A silhouette of a man digging. And when he got through digging and went away I got to the spot and pulled out that canvas bag. There was more than fifteen thousand dollars in it."

"It sounds like a pirate story," said Gresham. "The tail end of a pirate story, I mean. With the hero about to marry the heroine. Which is your heroine, Sherburn?"

He had swung suddenly onto the dangerous theme of thought which I wanted least of all to hear him talk about. And I went on with my story.

"There's one more thing that you ought to know, Gresham. The man who buried that money got out of the garden through the only other door—the door into the house—and he opened it with a key——"

"Impossible," murmured Gresham.

"Why impossible?"

"Because you and I are the only people in the world who have keys to those doors."

"That's it! That *is* the point."

He saw my hinted conclusion at once and he spoke it out with that wonderful, disarming frankness of his.

"I understand, Sherburn. Then *I* am the man who buried all of that loot?"

Of course I could not say that he was. But here I caught him by the arm and cried to him: "It's too much for me, old man. I can't stand it. I've stuck by one thing like a sort of needle of a compass pointing north—I've stuck to my idea of you being honest. But the outline of the man in that door—against the light inside the house—it was a big, burly outline, like yours, Gresham!"

He whistled, and freeing himself from my hand he walked up and down the room after his way when he was puzzled.

"A big man! A big man!" he repeated again and again. "That upsets all of my ideas. Do you think he was really as tall as I am?"

"I was looking through a yard filled with a driving sand storm," I confessed.

"That's it!" cried he. "And a sand mist is distorting. Every one knows that. Still, it could hardly have been a small man?"

"Hardly!"

"I had a suspicion, but you've upset it. Confoundedly upset it! As a matter of fact, Sherburn, I came back from the trail with a feeling that I had spotted the right man in Amityville!"

"The devil!" I gasped at him. "And you thought it was a small man?"

"Yes."

"But every one agrees that Red Hawk is a big fellow."

"His size depends upon what he has done, I'm afraid. And he has done a good deal. People have had flashes of him, here and there. But that's all. Mostly they've seen him whirl by with his men at night. And have you not noticed that a leader always looks bigger than other men? He's like the bank president, who always stands in the front of the photograph and makes his staff look knee high by the contrast."

Of course there was a good deal of truth in that. But here Gresham came back to the point at issue with a crash.

"Have you sent for the sheriff?" he asked.

"In order to have him take me to jail?" I asked.

"Bah!" snapped Gresham in disgust. "I hadn't thought of that! But it's true. The first thing he would do would be to land you behind the bars!"

He suggested almost at once the thought that had first come to me. "Bury it in the place where you found it, and then we'll wait for the thief."

But I shook my head. "Fifteen thousand dollars in one bag is too big a bait—the fish might swallow it and get away."

Of course, he saw the point to that, but he did not know of any other alternative and asked me to try to invent one.

I suggested his own safe, at last, and for the first time I had the pleasure of making the big fellow start and change color a little.

"It's a great responsibility," I admitted to him. "But what else would be better—until we think of some way? Every minute, this fifteen thousand in gold is threatening to put a rope around somebody's neck—whoever is found with it."

"Therefore, in my safe——" began big Gresham. Then he broke off with a careless smile: "Of course we'll put it there, if you wish. I'll take it down now, perhaps?"

"And be seen?"

I was horrified at that idea, but he laughed, and presently he had swept

the gold into the sack, knotted the top, and picked the burden up. I followed along and grew faint with dread and with excitement when Gresham stopped calmly in the hall to talk for a moment with a pair of punchers who had just come in from the cow range. One of them happened to touch the heavy bag which Gresham carried and there was a noisy, if not musical, jingling in response.

"Hello!" shouted the puncher. "What's that?' '

"Gold!" said Gresham calmly, and shook the bag. A shower of golden music came forth, But the two cowpunchers willingly and thoughtlessly broke into laughter.

Gresham was simply magnificent. The man's nerve was as bottomless as a pit. There was no fathoming the extreme limits of his capacity to outface danger and crises of any kind. So much so that when I had seen him swing back the heavy door of his safe and deposit the bag inside, I could not help saying gravely to him: "Gresham, there's only one thing that baffles me completely, and that's how any Indian that ever lived—Red Hawk among the rest—could have beaten you off for five years. It doesn't seem possible that you could have failed if you had put your mind seriously to the work!"

He had closed the door to the safe, and the lock had clicked before he straightened and put a hand upon my shoulder.

"I wish you could know more about it, Sherburn," he said. "I wish you could know what an oily, slippery devil he is! And now tell me how your nerves are riding?"

I took him back to my room again and showed him the slash under the armpit and told him how it had only been my accidentally sudden movement in my chair that had kept me from receiving the long blade of that same knife between my shoulder blades.

Big Gresham shuddered. "Let me see that tear again!" he said.

He leaned over it for a long time. Then he put a thumb and forefinger through the cut.

"Gad, Sherburn," he said, "that must have been a heavy knife and a strong hand that threw it. See how it tore the cloth as well as pulled it?"

"It almost knocked me off balance," said I.

"If the blade had struck your body, I think it would have gone up to the hilt—even through bone! Sherburn, I begin to think that you're pretty lucky!"

"Lucky to be alive, maybe, but unlucky to be in Amityville."

"Where's the knife?"

"On that chair."

"What chair?" asked Gresham, stepping to the place and moving the chair I had pointed to, to see if the weapon lay in the shadow beneath it.

I ran over to him. Certainly I had put the knife on the chair; and certainly it was gone now.

"Gresham," I gasped at him, "the devil who tried to sink that knife in my back had the *grit* to come back and steal the knife out of the room!"

I had the weird pleasure of seeing even the big man grow excited. So excited that he spoke only in a whisper as he said: "Then depend upon it that you've had a call from Red Hawk in person, because nobody else in the world would have had the courage to come back in here—for the sake of a knife! Has he come for that alone?"

"It's enough," I groaned. "Because that knife might have been our clew to his identity!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN CRICKET VALLEY.

WHEN I tell you, after this, that I was glad to leave Amityville, I suppose that you'll understand a little more clearly. There was Jenny Lang-

horne behind me and my heart was filled with her, of course. But on the one hand there was the agreement that I had made with young Oliver Clement, and on the other hand there was that horror of the old town of Amityville which was growing upon me every day, because I could not tell one honest man in the entire crowd. I had only one rock of surety; and that was Gresham, of whose perfect good faith, of course, I was convinced. But his calm integrity seemed to throw off the honesty of all the others in a blacker shadow by the contrast. Yes, and there was old Doc, too. I felt that my old friend from Louisiana was probably as honest as any one could desire—except, perhaps, in certain small things. He might steal a chicken now and then; but I felt an air of integrity about the old man. Particularly, I suppose, because he came from my own state.

I sat up a little later, that night, filled with my resolution. And I wrote this note:

DEAR GRESHAM: This is to tell you what I didn't want to say to your face, because it might have led to an argument, and I know that you argue a lot better than I do.

I have to get away from Amityville. I am pretty sure I won't come back. Partly, I'm tired of the town. And partly I'm tired of work. I want another sort of a life.

I suppose you'll be disappointed in me, but I have to tell you, in the first place, that the only thing that has kept me straight so long as this has been your trust in me.

I wish you all sorts of luck in case you don't see me again. Which you probably won't. Think a notch or two higher of me than any reports you get along the road.

So long. SHERBURN.

I sealed that letter in an envelope. It was a lucky hour when I wrote it. I don't want to anticipate the end of this history that I am writing, but I have to say right here that if it had not been for the fact that two constructions could be put upon that letter, I should not now be alive to report what afterward happened.

At any rate, I left that letter behind me, and I slipped out in the cool of the gray light that comes before the morning sun. I got back to the stables at the side of the hotel, and I saddled pinto, even with his side still scratched up a bit. Because, after my ride of the day before, I began to think that that cayuse was going to be a lucky horse for me.

After that, I jogged him out of Amityville, and on the side of the next hill, I turned and looked back on the town, looking all peaceful and sleepy in the early light of the day. Yes, it was a mighty quiet town—in the early morning. But I knew what it was dreaming about, and that pretty picture gave me no pleasure. Somewhere, in one of those houses, I felt middling sure, was Red Hawk himself. And it wasn't a pretty thought.

I sent Pinto away, again, and by the time the sun was edging up above the eastern heights, I was well into Cricket Valley. I stopped, then, by the edge of some brush and built me a fire and camped for almost an hour, making a big smoke and boiling me some coffee. I ate my breakfast there sitting on my heels and pretty glad to be out of a town and under the sky again. It was easier to breathe, a lot, and I didn't mind the heat of the sun—even though the desert sun begins to bite through your clothes and bake your skin the minute it gets out of bed, so to speak.

I made that smoke on purpose, of course. If there was anybody watching over Cricket Valley, according to the report, I wanted them to know that I was drifting up that way.

What I planned on was this:

I thought that Red Hawk would feel that I had been finally scared out of the hostile camp by that throw of the knife the night before—that he would trust me simply because I had played such a strong hand against him that he would not feel I was trying to deceive

him now. Having done what I had done, it was a fairly bold move to try to desert to his side of the war, and I expected my boldness to win for me.

I had gone about halfway down the second winding of that famous old gorge when my horse stopped. I listened just as the horse was listening. And I heard part of what he heard—a little chiming, metallic echo against the walls of a ravine that prolonged that sound delicately, as a mirror will prolong and remodel a ray of light.

I began to search the ravine on either side, ready to see a rider come out from some tributary gulch, but though one came out almost immediately upon my right, it was like a magic stroke, and I could not make out any ravine behind him. Rather he seemed suddenly to grow out of the solid rock. First the head of a horse—then horse and rider had issued from the living rock and were coming slowly toward me.

It was an odd effect. But when I strained my eyes, I could see something that ran up the face of the distant valley wall like a long crack. It was no crack. It was the screened mouth of a narrow gorge out of which the other rider had just come. That, however, was not the chief wonder to me, because, an instant later, I could make out the face of old Doc!

Old Doc in Cricket Valley! Doc here in the very throat, as you might say, of the monster. Doc in the midst of the pleasure ground of Red Hawk, chosen by him so skillfully because the tangle of intercrossing gulches, highlands and lowlands, made this an impenetrable stronghold for the chief. Doc here of all places on earth!

But that was not all. The chief wonder of all was his horse. I had seen the nag on which he jogged around the town of Amityville. It was a broken-down roan. It stood an inch or two under fifteen hands, so that the long legs of the old man seemed to be stirring up a cloud of dust on either side as he went along. He seemed to be playing horse, rather than riding a real one. The poor old pony could sometimes manage a trot with his hind legs, but he never could get his stiffened front legs out of the way any faster than a walk, and the result was that at full speed he made the most ridiculous picture in the world. He was so old that legend said his teeth were as long as a man's finger. And his temples were sunk far, far in his head.

This was the horse that we all were accustomed to seeing pass through the streets of Amityville when Doc was tired of ambling around on his own legs. I used to wonder why Doc did not get another horse, because I was certain that big Peter Gresham would give him a new pony at any time rather than see his old hanger-on in such a condition. Doc himself had explained it by saying to me:

"I hate to give up the old boy. If I had a nice fast-trottin' hoss, I'd just idle along and get fat and die quick. We all got to get exercise, and dog-gone me if I ain't so old and so ornery that the only way I'll take exercise is to club that old fool horse along!"

That was like Doc. You could depend upon it that he would not have a reason like any other man's. But this horse that I saw him on in the valley, there, was a different matter. It was a blooded bay. You didn't need to look it over inch by inch. One flash of it was enough to convince you that here was the real article in the way of horseflesh. He had the action of a fast wind skipping across the surface of a lake. And he blew across that valley and up to me as easily as you please.

When he came close, he made my pinto look like the shady side of nothing. He even transformed his rider, and old Doc sat there in the saddle looking actually graceful and much above me.

"I said: "Doc, darn your old hide, what are *you* doing out here where only the bad boys come to play?"

He said: "Well, Mr. Sherburn, when a gent gets as old as I am, folks don't much care where they go, and I thought I might as well skeedaddle out here and have a look at things, you see. And here I am."

"And here is a horse for you, too!" said I. "Where did you buy that horse?"

"A dog-gone queer thing that happened," said old Doc, "was that when I was riding down this here valley on that old skate of mine, I seen this here hoss go gallopin' along——"

"Without a rider?" I suggested.

"Exactly!"

"So you called to it, I s'pose, and it come right up to you—because you never could of come inside of a thousand miles of it on that broken-down old skate of yours."

"Young man, young man!" said Doc, shaking his head at me sort of sad. "I see that you ain't got no spirit of belief in you! And what might *you* be doing out here?"

"Don't change the subject," I said. "I'm plenty pleased just to talk about *you* for a while, because I got an idea that you're as dog-gone an old rascal, Doc, as ever come out of the State of Louisiana."

"Sir!" said Doc.

"The devil, man," said I, "don't you see that you got to tell a better lie than that about that hoss belongin' to you before I'll believe you?"

He looked down to the ground for a minute and he rubbed his knuckles across his chin, and in that pause I had a sudden flash into the truth of the thing and I shouted at him:

"Doc!"

"Well?" he said a little irritated. "Well, Mr. Sherburn, have you got some more mean names that you want to call me?"

"I got one thing more to tell you about yourself: You're the owner of that horse because you're on the pay roll of Red Hawk. Darn my eyes if you're not one of his rotten tribe!"

You would have thought that the old man would drop out of his saddle, I suppose, when he heard me accuse him like that, but he didn't. He just looked at me with a grin, and he said:

"All right, Mr. Sherburn. I hear what you say, right enough, but before I start in denyin' it, I'd like to know why *you* are in Cricket Valley at this time of the day!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

FACING THE TEST.

I GAVE the old fellow another look. If what I had guessed was true, I couldn't do better than to confide my purpose in him. But if I were wrong, then I was putting a rope around my neck by telling him. I had to do a little fencing, and I tried to do my best for him.

I said: "Why haven't I a right to be out here?"

"Only that you'd need an early start," said he.

"And how about you?" I asked him sharply, to show him that I was driving him into a corner as fast as he might be driving me.

"I often come out here in the hills," he said, "and sleep out with my blankets. Folks don't bother old gents at my age. We're figgered out to be pretty harmless, take us by and large!"

"You're figured wrong, then," I told him.

"But maybe you was starting on a trip?" said he. "Maybe you was aiming for some town?"

It seemed like an outlet for me, and so I nodded at once and said: "Of course. That's it."

He didn't change his expression; just kept on watching me as a cat

watches a bird that's not quite in the reach of its claws.

"I only wanted to know," said he. "Because of course there ain't any town that this here valley points toward."

"No?" I echoed, a little dumbfounded at this.

"It leads you to nothing but trouble, they say, and hard cash," said old Louisiana Doc.

"You old rascal," said I. "What is that to me?"

"Sure," said Doc, "it's nothing. Nothing at all! So I guess you were just having a little pleasure ride—ain't that it? Up the valley and then down again. Just for the fun of it?"

"I told you that I was starting——"

And then I changed my mind and stopped. Doc did not seem to notice the pause. He was reminiscing.

"When I first seen you," he said, "I made up my mind right off that you had come up the valley to join Red Hawk."

"You darned old rascal!" I barked at him, but without being able to work up a very convincing amount of heat.

"Oh," said he, "I didn't mean that you were crooked. But I recollect a mighty fine young gent that I knowed three years ago. He was a promisin' puncher, he was, by the name of Morganson. He up and decided that the punchin' of cows wasn't work enough for him and he figgered that he would get himself famous like the young Napoleon, or something like that. You see? So away he goes and slides off up Cricket Valley because he wanted to *pretend* to join up with Red Hawk's gang.

"And when he had joined up with them, he figgered he would find out all he could about them, and when he had a good chance, maybe he could sink a bullet in the heart of Red Hawk and then bust away into the clear on his fast hoss.

"Well, sir, that was how he started out, but in the end, they found him lyin' on the hot sands of the valley lookin' at the sun with wide-open eyes, and the buzzards was sailin' through the sky and all of them makin' eyes at him."

"You old villain," said I. "Who told *you* that he wanted to spy on the gang? Did Red Hawk pick you out to confide in you?"

"It was just a whisper that went around. Gossip and talk, that don't mean nothin' to me, but whispers—well, they're different, and you can put a little trust in 'em!"

It was rather hard to corral that old man. He was as tricky as any wise old mustang, and just as way-worn.

"All right," said I. "You may think that you're out of my bag, but you're not. You're in it. And as for me, you've made a pretty smart guess, but not quite smart enough. Guess again, Doc."

"But," said Doc in a tone of really holy horror, "there ain't no room in my head for the idea that you might *really* have come up here to join up with Red Hawk and go around robbin' and murderin' and——"

"Shut up," said I. "You talk like a parrot. Where did you learn that piece and who asked you to speak it?"

He didn't say anything back; just watched me with his old eyes puckering to points of light.

"I'm riding *up* the valley," said I. "Which way are *you* riding?"

"I'm keeping you company for a while, maybe," suggested Doc.

"I haven't asked you to."

"I wanted to go along and tell you that I thought I seen a gent on the edge of the valley, over yonder, with a rifle in his hand."

"On that side? Then I'll ride over that way and call to him."

"But there's one on the other side, too."

I looked, and thought I saw a gleam of sun, as though flashed from the bar-

rel of a rifle as a man sank among the rocks. But I could not be sure.

"And behind you, and before you!" said Doc with a grim tone. "You're in a little trap, Mr. Sherburn, it looks like to me."

"And you too!" said I.

He grinned at me, and there was no mirth in his grin. "Oh," said he, "I'm such an old fish that if they caught me, they'd probably throw me back into the water."

It was a pretty annoying thing. No matter how much you may have determined that you will walk right into the lions' den, after you have gone inside, it is a mean thing to hear the door click behind you and know that you can't get out until somebody else turns the key. That was how I felt—but more so! Because the men of Red Hawk had a reputation that would have made a man-eating lion tuck his tail between his legs and hike for the woods.

Besides, there was something about the self-satisfied way of old Doc that bothered me a good deal. Frankly, I didn't like the way in which he doddered along, smiling at me as though he knew a great deal that *I* should know.

As we rounded the next turn of the ravine, riding on side by side, I distinctly saw the tail of a horse as it swished out of view among some rocks in the distance. I turned. There was no need of asking any further questions. Behind me came two men, riding softly side by side. There were no masks upon their faces, but I did not need to be told that they belonged to the band of Red Hawk. The style of the horses they rode was eloquent and told me as much as I had already guessed from the type of horse that old Doc was riding when I first saw him in the valley.

Those fellows were coming at a soft dog trot. But the slowness with which they were drawing along, somehow, suggested an infinite speed. A great horse always looks greater when he's in slow action than when he's slashing along. And so it was with that pair of beauties.

"If I wanted to run away," I said to Doc, "I don't think I would have much chance, unless I tapped you on the head and stole *your* horse."

That canny old villain had an instant answer for me.

"It wouldn't do you no good, Mr. Sherburn," he said. "He's all broke down in front, and besides, he's tenderfooted. On the rocks, he just curls up and can't go at all, but he manages to keep his head up pretty well when he's slithering along through the soft sand."

I looked at Doc and could not help laughing. "You're a grand old liar, Doc," said I. "What a man you must have been when you were young!"

He regarded me blandly and mildly. "Why, Mr. Sherburn, d'you think that they'd waste one of their *real* hosses on an old crippled good-for-nothin' like me?"

I turned my back on him. That last speech was a sufficient confession, if I had wanted any, that Mr. Doc was a member of the list of spies which Red Hawk maintained. I had had enough of him. I only feared that if I kept facing him, I might be tempted to put hands on him and wring his withered neck for him. My Louisiana patriot!

I made my ten thousandth resolution never to trust any man until I had known him for ten years. But I suppose that even ten years aren't long enough. Your best friend, who had never been tested by finding you in adversity, doesn't even *know* that he isn't devoted to you until the time comes when the call is to be made upon him. And then he weakens. And sometimes the fellow who merely likes you in a casual way, comes through like a hero

when your back is against the wall. Well, I can never hope to know a lot about human nature. The extent of my learning in that school is just enough to convince me that I'm a poor student and a bad observer. I would have sworn by Doc, as I was saying a little while before. And here I found him turned into a crook by a wave of the hand. Magic—black magic!

I say that I turned my back upon him and let my pinto walk back toward the two gents that were riding up. They were on chestnuts—that favorite color among thoroughbreds—and when I came up pretty close they drew up their horses as though they were thinking with one mind. And one of them held up his hand to stop me, in my turn.

They made a pretty rough-looking pair, take them all in all. They were about as far from parlor-lizards as anything you could imagine. Nothing of the half-breed or the Mexican or the Indian about them. They were simply hard-boiled American roughnecks. And, take them by and large, I suppose that there hasn't been a species invented that is any tougher than the American tough. This pair was a hand-picked couple to win a prize.

They looked like brothers. Oh, you see the general type anywhere on the desert; but these were *n*th-power duplications of the type. They had pale blue eyes—or gray, maybe—that looked at you as if you were empty air, or a mile away. They had high cheek bones without much flesh over them, and thin, drawn cheeks. The skin was drawn pretty tight over their noses, and their mouths were straight lines, without any of the lips showing—none of the lining of the lips, I mean. They had red necks with ragged looking bandannas knotted around them. And they had old felt hats stuck on their heads—old black felt hats, turned sort of purple with so many layers of dust on them. And they were finished off with a quid of tobacco stuck in the cheek of each of them and with four or five days' growth of blond, sunburned whiskers all over their faces. They had on old flannel shirts that had rubbed out at the elbows and been cut off there, and showed the old red-flannel undershirts running down close to the wrist.

They had dirty boots on their feet, and overalls; and they had a good cartridge belt apiece, all loaded around with shells, and holsters hanging low in what any one who has seen a gun fight would have called workmanlike, shipshape fashion.

They had repeating rifles stuck in long holsters under their right knees. And to finish every thing off, those rough boys were mounted on horses that a prince would have been proud to have in his stable. I knew what they were; I had lived and grown up with that brand of man. I waved a hand and grinned at them, and one of them grinned back.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SHERBURN'S LIFE IN THE BALANCE.

THEY said nothing. They sat their horses and waited, but they stared at me every instant and I stared back, because it is easy to understand your own kind. These fellows *knew* that I was their own kind. And, if all the wrong things I have done in my life had been heaped up together in one pile, I suppose that it would have made a blacker mass than their own bad accomplishments. Still, there was a difference. I had never taken an advantage, never so much as stuck up a man for the sake of getting his wallet. And yet I think that I didn't look to have that much virtue in me.

Three other men now came drifting up. Indians? Half-breeds? No, they might have stood as blood brothers to the first pair. Their bandannas might be of differing colors, but that was

about all that distinguished them. They all were riding on those same long-legged horses with a great stretch of neck and small heads set well on the end of them and the look of speed in their eyes. With old Doc, I had a congress of six men.

They didn't consult me. They consulted one another. Imagine being tried for your life by a gang of Chinese pirates. Except that here I could understand the pleadings back and forth. I knew, of course, that these men would as soon shoot me out of the saddle as they would bite off a plug of tobacco. There was nothing that would keep them from that act—since I had seen them and their faces—except the strong feeling that I might make a useful member of the organization.

They talked me over deliberately, rolling their cigarettes and smoking them, and looking me up and down. Some were for and some were against me. The very first speech was a blast for me. I think that it was the oldest man of the lot—except Doc—who began by saying: "This gent ain't for us. He ain't our meat. In the first place, he's a hound for the booze, and old Red Hawk hates the booze chasers. Then again, he's stepped out and raised all sorts of trouble in Amityville and give us a bad time. He would of kept the cork in Juniper, for one thing. And Juniper might of handed out the news about all of us. He was about to do it. I say, let's finish this boy off; and I'm willing to take the job!"

Old Doc began to speak hastily: "Sammy," he said, "you got a good head on your shoulders, but I want to say that I've been watching my friend from Louisiana for quite a spell. I've seen him fightin', tryin' to go straight, and I seen that he couldn't do it. Well, we all want to go straight some day. Can you blame him for that? He tried to go straight and he thought that he'd get in solid with the straight men by makin' a play agin' Red Hawk, but all the time he was with the big chief—he was drawin' toward him. He wanted to be ridin *with* us and not against us. And——"

"Wait a minute, baldy," broke in Sammy.

I made my own speech, then, and it was the only speech that I made on the occasion. I looked Sammy in the eye, and I said:

"Boys, I got just this to say. While you're talkin' me over, go back there a yard or two and talk low, because I don't want to hear you. There ain't any danger of me running away; because this pinto couldn't run one yard against your two. But if I hear any more of you braying against me the way my flat-headed friend Sammy has been doing, I'm going to hold it against him. Maybe this here argument will wind up with me getting a dose of lead through the brain. But if you take me into the gang, I tell you plain that I'm going to be rough on the ones that put any rocks in the way of me getting in!"

I said that and then I turned my back on them and lighted a smoke for myself. It was a fairly bold play, though I was scared almost to death, and it brought a snarl out of them that you could have heard a quarter of a mile away. I suppose that half of them were for shooting me down on the spot; but the other half had their doubts.

You see, my idea was that I'd make them feel that I had a right to *expect* that I would make the gang. And that was why I talked rough, as though I were already in it. At any rate, they took my advice and drew back a little where I could only hear a mumble, and two voices rattling on top of the mumble like pebbles on a board—Sammy, who had already let me know what he thought, and Doc, who was doing his best for me, in his own beknighted way.

It was sort of tense. You talk about the fellow who waits for the jury to say whether he's guilty or not—when guilty means hanging—but that fellow feels nothing compared to what I felt. Because a jury is made up of twelve honest men trying to find out the truth, and if they can't find the truth, as they feel, they'll disagree and save the crook's life. But here I was being talked over pretty casual by a lot of thugs, and at any minute one of them might get tired of the argument and decide to end it by planting a slug of lead in the small of my back.

No, it wasn't so pleasant!

After a while I judged that I was getting a better chance. I could hear Doc talking more, and when Sammy piped up, there was a sort of snarl that drowned him. I thought the boys were deciding that I would do. And I was right.

Because pretty soon somebody shouted: "All right, kid. You're with us."

I twitched pinto around on his hind legs—lifting him off his front feet by tickling him under the chest with a spur, and I barked at them: "Who called me 'kid?' I'm old enough to play grandfather in this here party, except for Sammy, yonder; and Doc, who's too old to count! Lay off of that 'Kid' talk. My name is Sherburn!"

And I jogged my horse straight up to them. They scowled at me as I approached. But then the scowls straightened out and they began to grin. I knew that I had won. They wanted hard-boiled men in their crew, and they were beginning to feel that perhaps I was an ideal recruit.

Well, it was a great relief; but I sashayed right up to Sammy and I said to him: "Sammy, you and me may turn into friends. But if we don't, we ain't going to mix. I give you a warning now. I'm watching you. If you see my back again, I give you leave to take off the back of my head. And if I see you make any funny passes, I'm not going to ask any questions. That's all!"

It wasn't all bluff. I didn't like Sammy. Partly because he had tried to get me butchered without a trial, and partly because he had a bad pair of eyes in his head. He was about thirty-five or six—just a little older than me; and every one of his years was chiseled into his face, and every year was worse than the one before.

He said: "All right, Bud. You chatter now. I'll have the last word to say, though!"

And I more than half believed him.

Well, after I was taken into the crowd they didn't step up and shake hands with me and they didn't crowd around and say that they were glad to have me, or anything like that. They just kept right on watching me out of the corners of their eyes—none too cordial. I was one of them, but I still had to prove my right.

There wasn't much talk of *any* kind in that lot. No, they were such a hand-picked lot of rough ones that they didn't waste much effort trying to be entertaining. They were with Red Hawk for one thing only—and that was the coin that floated around his camp and the sure, quick ways that that red-skinned villain had of getting the stuff.

We drifted up the valley and pretty soon we dipped into a wide rip through the cañon wall. Then we wound into another, and side-stepped into another, and so from place to place until I couldn't have found my way back with an interpreter.

I could see why Red Hawk had picked this place more than any other in the mountains. It was simply plain impossible to get at a crew of men in those valleys. Pretty soon a voice rang out above us. And I looked up and saw a fellow leaning out over the edge of

a cliff with a rifle in his hand. We had ridden into a long, straight channel, and he could have dropped every one of us, shooting at his leisure, if he felt like it.

"I see we got a little stranger with us," says this fellow on the rock. "Howd'yuh, Sherburn!"

I recognized him. A man whom I had seen twenty times in the streets of Amityville where he was known as a prospector. He had lost eight thousand dollars in dust at one whirl of faro. And I had seen him lose it and I had heard him say with a laugh: "Well, there's plenty more money where that little pile come from!"

And here he was—and this was his way of "mining!" I began to feel that I might learn a good deal about the real occupations of others who were prosperous, from time to time, around the streets of the town.

After a while we began to climb, and we kept on up to the crest of a plateau. It was about half a mile long and a hundred yards wide. There wasn't a vestige of tree or shade except for a ruinous tumble of rocks, here and there. And yonder some canvas had been pegged up on poles to make a shelter from the sun. Under that shelter there was some grain for the horses in sacks and there were some smoke-blackened cooking utensils. That was all. This was one of the camps of Red Hawk, and I could see that, even if he were not an Indian, he believed in keeping the equipment down to a sub-Indian normal. These fellows could sweep together their camp and become a free-swinging, fighting force with all their goods packed in half a minute.

There were not so many of them as I had expected. There were the six men who had come in with me—counting old Doc, who really didn't matter as a fighting force, I supposed. And there were four sentinels who were scattered about on high points.

Altogether, I made the eleventh man

I said to "Lefty" McGruder, who was next to me as we came in—he was the only one of the lot who had introduced himself to me: "Lefty," said I, "I suppose most of the boys are away—eh?"

He merely stared at me. "Away? The devil, man, d'you think that we're an army?"

I stared in my turn. "Is this your average turnout?"

"Average?" he snorted. "I've been with the boys for about a year and a half, now, barring a couple of months when I was laid up with a hole in my leg. And I never before seen such a crowd around!"

That was news to me, of course.

"There are about five of us around, as a rule," said Lefty. "And we got to keep camp, cook our own chow, tend the hosses, and stand guard. Nope, you ain't landed in no easy camp, bo. Lemme tell you that. It ain't nothin' but work, here. Nothin' but work, I tell you!"

"And pay!" I suggested.

He favored me with a twisted grin. "Sure!" he said. "And the pay is pretty sweet, at that!"

Yes, he was a tough mug, was Lefty. Peace be to his bones.

"When do we get an airing?" said I.

"You're in luck, Sherburn," said he. "We ride to-night!"

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

BURNING HORNETS' NESTS STARTS FOREST FIRE

A MAN burning hornets' nests started a forest fire near Elk, Washington, a little while ago. The blaze covered six hundred and forty acres, of which about sixty acres, in Pen Oreille County, was merchantable timber. It was several days before the fire was finally brought under control.

Flapjack Meehan's Last Laugh

By Frank Richardson Pierce

Author of "Not for Sale," etc.

THE operator of the steam shovel shut off the power, the fireman banked his fire and thrust his head through the door with considerable caution. He was ready to jerk his head back at the slightest sign of danger. "I believe that old bird is going to cut loose with that rifle the instant the shovel eats into his land," he suggested.

"I don't believe it; I know it!" the operator answered. "He came down yesterday and said he knew I was only obeying orders but that just the same I was the one operating the shovel and he was going to shoot to kill. Believe me I never knew how sweet life was until I looked into his eye. The company can get another operator, or a flock of soldiers. It can take its choice. I'm quitting."

The branch line of the railroad cut straight through Hank Shea's farm, missed his house by fifty feet, and continued on to the main line. That is, the right of way would be so extended if the railroad carried out its plan. A court decree had awarded Hank damages, but for reasons difficult to fathom the decree directed the railroad to pay Hank one thousand dollars, whereas ten thousand dollars was a low estimate of the real damage caused to Hank and his farm.

First he would have to move his house some distance beyond the track; secondly his entire irrigation system was disrupted. Once the line was in actual operation, Hank would have to drive his cattle across it night and morning. Hank had requested that the company insert a clause into the agreement providing for a tunnel under the tracks, through which his cattle could pass at will, but this had been refused. Hank was a fighter, and he had fought; the courts had given what seemed justice, but the judicial opinions had not taken into consideration that Hank had removed hundreds of fir stumps from four to six feet in diameter to clear that land; that he had put all of the fortune he had made in Alaska into its development—not to mention fifteen of the best years of his life. But the courts and railroad officials ignored this.

Hank, therefore, loaded up his thirty-thirty rifle, stocked a log shack overlooking the scene with grub, warned the construction gang, and prepared to defy the railroads, the courts, and the United States of America if need be, for Hank was fighting for his home.

The superintendent hurried down to the scene. He, too, was in a fighting mood. The right of way crossed a small stream bordering Hank's farm. About twice a year a tug of light draft

made its way up the stream, into a lake, and brought out logs cut by a number of independent loggers. Thus it was a navigable stream, and Uncle Sam insisted that a bridge, capable of opening and closing on demand of passing vessels, be constructed and maintained. Uncle Sam was big enough to get what he demanded—and Hank Shea wasn't.

"What's the matter?" the superintendent demanded. "Why isn't that shovel going?"

"We've reached Hank Shea's property line!"

"What of it?"

"Shea's up there with a rifle, and he means business," the operator answered. "Life is sweet, when a man is young and got a small family."

"We'll fix that!" The superintendent returned. "I want a dozen men, not afraid of a fight. Arm yourselves with pick handles and follow me."

Two minutes later the group massed behind the superintendent. Barbed wire blocked their path.

"We'll go over the top, boys; he's bluffing!"

The superintendent placed his hand on the fence post and landed in Hank's pasture with an easy leap. He was a strong man. The rest leaped over the wire with shouts of joy. They liked a fight, for they were a hard crowd.

"Whee! Whee!" Sang two thirty-thirty, metal-patched bullets. One seemed considerably above them, the second closer, and the third struck a rock and glanced off with a low, droning "Whaaaannng!" It made more noise than the other two put together. The superintendent paused, his pick handle in the air. The next instant an unseen hand plucked it from his grasp.

"He's getting the range!" yelled one. "He's out for blood!" He fled, and the others followed, with the superintendent leading the retreat as he had led the attack.

That afternoon the sheriff came and talked to Hank a long time. "You might as well admit defeat, Hank, for the railroad has the courts, and the United States army back of it if need be. The logs of your cabin are thick, and you can take a lot of good men with you, Hank, but in the end you'll go."

"I know it, but I didn't get justice, and so I'm fighting!" declared Shea obstinately.

"I'm sorry, Hank, because I feel like you do about it, but I've got to do my duty. I'm coming back with a posse to keep you from interfering with construction work. If that ain't enough, I'll return with soldiers. I ask you as a friend to think it over while I'm gone!"

"I've thought and thought, sheriff; this is the only answer. No, don't think my wife and children can influence me. They tried, and I've sent 'em away, until —until—the trouble is over."

"You're the boss, then!" With that the sheriff retired and Hank Shea threw himself onto the bunk for a rest. He knew no one would approach, and it would require several hours to form a posse. He did not want to kill; he was too old for that, and he liked mankind too well; but he was entitled to justice. He was a dead shot, and perhaps he could cripple them in the arms and legs; stop them but not really kill them.

Dawn of the following day the sheriff advanced and repeated his demand. His posse was posted, ready for business. The hilltops were covered with people, each of whom had selected a stump to shield them from stray bullets. Wayne, of the railroad company, was there, too. He had power to stop all this, and to him the sheriff appealed. "Let's compromise, Mr. Wayne, and save bloodshed!"

Wayne shook his head. He preferred crushing to compromise. "He's had his day in court; he's an outlaw. Blow

him out, sheriff; I've got a construction crew waiting on you!"

"It'll cost you more than compromise, Mr. Wayne!" the sheriff suggested.

"I don't care if it costs a million dollars—we're going ahead. It will be a lesson to some of the others we're having trouble with. You don't suppose I'd waste my time on a miserable farmer like Shea if there wasn't a principle involved, do you? Enough of this nonsense. Get him out or I shall appeal to the governor and prefer charges of failure to perform your duty."

The sheriff nodded. "Open fire, men," he ordered, "but keep under cover." He was hoping against hope that the moral effect would break down the rancher's resistance. The crashing of many rifles filled the air, bits of moss and an occasional splinter flew from the cedar roof. Bullets thudded against water-soaked logs at the cabin base and imbedded in the drier logs higher up. The cabin remained silent, waiting. The posse began shifting about, seeking a human target, wondering what method of defense the occupant within had if they rushed him. Rifles at first, perhaps, then automatic pistols. He was a dead shot and could take a number of them with him.

Wayne watched with interest. He found himself enjoying the experience. The sheriff stepped beside him. "Might against right, Mr. Wayne, and you still have the power to do justice!"

"I don't care to discuss it. He's an outlaw!"

"Legally, but not morally. You can save the lives of some of my posse. He'll shoot to kill when we rush him!"

"They're paid for it!" Wayne retorted.

Several minutes later the sheriff abruptly blew a whistle, the order to cease firing. A woman was seen hurrying from the center of the pasture toward the cabin, leading a small boy by the hand.

"Mrs. Shea," the sheriff said. Then, discarding his weapons, he walked toward the cabin with upraised hands. "Hank, listen to her," he pleaded. "I'm going to order a charge soon. It's not too late, Hank!"

Hank Shea opened the cabin door and stood there, a pistol in each hand. He was safe as long as the sheriff remained there. He was bracing himself against his wife's pleas. She entered, and the door closed behind her. The sheriff could hear her words, eloquent in her desperation.

"The only way I can get justice is to fight for it," returned her husband again and again. "I can't match wits with them and beat them. I only know how to fight."

Presently she emerged, crying, and the boy with her was sobbing also, because of the mother's grief. The sheriff swore. If Wayne were only half human, the scene would have moved him, but he was cold; the new angle to the situation merely interested him.

"Let's get it over with, sheriff," he said. "My men are drawing pay and doing no work."

The sheriff blew his whistle, and the firing was resumed.

"Flapjack" Meehan had spent five days in Seattle without meeting a single sour dough. It was an unheard-of experience. They were all in Alaska or living out of the city, he concluded. The shouting newsboys always interested him, but when he heard: "Rancher Battles Sheriff!" on their lips he tossed the first boy a quarter, accepted the paper, and walked away without thinking of his change. He had paid twenty-five cents for his newspapers for so many years that he forgot that they were down to a nickle and dime in Alaska and even as low as a cent Outside.

"Things are quiet," he muttered. "Maybe I can get on the sheriff's posse. My forty-fours are always ready for business. Hello! Sufferin' Malemutes; the sheriff's battling Hank Shea. Well, by heck, if it's the Hank Shea I wintered with on the Kobuck that time, I'm going down and fight the sheriff!"

Flapjack read directions as to the location of the Shea ranch, and then hailed a "for hire" car. "Go as fast as you can, keeping within the speed limits," he ordered the driver.

They were off the main highway almost at once, following gravel roads fringed on either side by towering firs and cedars. Here and there Flapjack caught glimpses of chicken ranches tucked away among the stumps. The grief attending such ranching always gripped Flapjack. The soil was good, once the stumps were removed, but the labor of doing that was heartbreaking unless one had money enough to blast them out.

Above the hum of the motor Flapjack caught the crackle of rifle fire. "Speed her up a bit!" he directed.

"The speedometer is at fifty-five right now and this is a one-way road most of the way, sir!" the driver explained as he put the hand up to sixty and let it ride.

Suddenly the driver jammed on the brakes and skidded through a gate into a pasture. The sheriff cupped his hands and bellowed a warning and the rifle fire slackened.

Flapjack was out of the car by the time the sheriff reached him.

"Better clear out before you are hurt, 'Slim!'" growled the official.

"My name is Meehan," replied Flapjack. "I'm a friend of Hank's, and I want to talk to him."

"Flapjack Meehan of Cold Deck, Alaska?" the sheriff queried.

"That's my name," Flapjack answered.

"Then for the love of Mike go in there and see if you can talk some sense into Hank's head. I've heard him tell about you a lot of times. In the slang of the day, he thinks you are the cat's ankles or the Malemutes ears, or whatever the Alaskan term is. You know the situation?"

"Yep! Read it in the paper. And, sheriff, Hank is right!"

"He is, morally, but I have to enforce the legal law. Good luck. I've stalled two hours, now, hoping that something would happen."

Again the door opened, and it was but a second in closing behind Flapjack Meehan.

"Hank, you can't get away with it!" Flapjack said as soon as the greetings were over. "You can't!"

"But my cause is just!"

"I know it, but you are fighting the United States of America, and whole nations have taken a whirl at that game and fallen down," Flapjack answered. "Listen, man, you've got the sweetest hand in the world against Wayne and his crowd. Play it. It's more fun than fight. Now you are fighting the law. There's no sport in that. Fight him and have the sport of watching him draw in his horns and come to you!"

"But, Flapjack, that railroad cuts straight through my property. I'll have a deuce of a time driving my cattle back and forth. Moving the house is bad enough. I can't afford to move my barns!"

"Make them do it!"

"They won't!"

"I'll bet you a hat they'll be eating out of your hand in less than three months." His voice was lowered. "Now," he said, in conclusion, "I've got to go to Washington, D. C., on an oil-claim matter. The road will be done by the time I get back, trains running, everything going nicely. Then we'll drop a monkey wrench into the machinery and watch the fun. I'll hang around a week or ten days just to see

it. Say, don't forget to pick up a light-draft power boat somewhere. It'll only cost you a few hundred dollars, and you can always get your money out of it—most anything will do!"

Hank Shea suddenly threw his head back and roared with laughter. He was still laughing as he emerged from the cabin and walked toward the posse, but at sight of Wayne, he became cold and silent.

"All right, Wayne," he said, "put your gang to work."

Wayne laughed as he turned to go. "Quit cold as I knew you would, Shea. I'm rather sorry; I'd hoped to make an example of you."

Flapjack placed a restraining hand on Hank Shea's arm. "Mr. Wayne, you are a wise man," he said softly. "You took the first laugh and thereby made sure of it. Hank and I are going to laugh last, and surely at your expense!"

Wayne walked away, deeply puzzled.

On his return from Washington, D. C., several weeks later, Flapjack Meehan changed cars and proceeded to his destination on the branch line. As the train neared the Shea ranch, Flapjack opened the window and peered out. A fill crossed the ranch from border to border, the tops of the rails being some twelve feet above the pasture. Hank had already moved his house, and as they crossed the slough, Flapjack noticed that the rancher had built a small dock, and, gently tugging at the dock was an ancient and somewhat battered light-draft craft bearing the freshly painted name on her bows: *Flapjack Meehan.*

Flapjack grinned and was still grinning as the train stopped at the station a quarter of a mile away. Shea was there to meet him. "Named the boat in your honor, Flapjack. She's not much of a boat, but she bears a noble name. When do we start the fun?"

"Have they employed a bridge tender yet?"

"No. That bridge will only be opened every six months, according to figures, so the station agent will act as bridge tender on state occasions when a vessel wishes to pass through. At that he don't have much to do, for only one train passes through a day, except logging trains."

"Then we start to-night!" Flapjack announced.

Toward evening lines were cast off, the gasoline engine grunted, and the *Flapjack Meehan* started up the slough. Presently she paused, and from her whistle came a nerve-racking appeal. It continued at intervals, and finally Hank Shea stepped ashore and headed for the station.

"Say, I want that draw opened," he said. "I'm going through with my boat!"

"You don't need to go through now. I'm busy!"

"Makes no difference if you are busy or not. It's a navigable stream, and I can go and come as I please. The government regulations are strict on that point. Why, in Seattle, a dinky tug can hold up fifty street cars and a thousand automobiles if it wants to. Come along, or there'll be trouble!"

Jenner, the station agent, hastily scanned rules and regulations, and then obeyed.

"What you taking up?" he asked.

"Just going up to get some dry cedar for kindling! Better hang around for a while; we might come back. Still, we might be delayed. When we want you, we'll whistle!"

The *Flapjack Meehan* grunted her way up the slough and nosed in to the bank. For a half hour Flapjack and Hank were busy loading four-foot lengths of cedar aboard; then back downstream she came. Again the draw opened. Jenner watched the craft tie up to the dock, and a great light began

to dawn. He hurried back to the station to catch up with his work.

At eight o'clock that night the whistle brought him down on the run. "What the——" he demanded.

"Sorry," Hank said sweetly, "but this calf got lost from its mother. I'm taking it back. If the railroad only had put a tunnel under the tracks I could have saved you this trouble, but I've either got to carry it in my arms and climb the right of way, or go on my boat, and that's easier!"

The draw opened and the boat bearing Flapjack, Hank, and one small, bawling calf, passed through, and a few minutes later returned. The men were alone. Hank thanked Jenner.

At ten o'clock Jenner retired, after a tough day, and at eleven fifteen he was awakened by the tooting of the *Flapjack Meehan*. He swore, dressed, and hurried down to the bridge.

"Sorry," Hank said with a note of deep regret in his voice, "but I guess that calf didn't find its mother; it's still bawling. I'm going to bring it down to the barn for the night. If I only had a tunnel, I wouldn't have to get you up. You see, the cattle could wander back and forth then!"

"I see!" Jenner answered. "And believe me, Wayne is going to hear. I'm going to be transferred or quit!"

"They should employ a regular tender," Flapjack explained. "It isn't fair for one man to do double duty. In fact, a man should be kept here steadily. It'd mean three shifts, of course, but it'd be——"

Two days later, when the *Flapjack Meehan* whistled, a bulky gentleman with a hard look and harder fists looked down. "Who wants to get through?" he demanded.

"We do!" Flapjack announced.

"Let's see you make me do it!" the other challenged.

"We've got to take these empty spud sacks up to the North Forty," Hank explained. "If I had a tunnel under the tracks I could drive over, but it's easier to use this boat than it is to drive way around to the road, and then back again."

"We are men of peace," Flapjack added, "and have no taste for common brawls with the employees of public-service corporations, but just you glance at your rules and regulations and see what the penalty is for refusal to open the draw!"

The other gritted his teeth. He had tried to pick a fight and failed. The draw swung open. Twice that day, and once at midnight he was routed out. The following day he quit, and was in turn followed by a mild young man named Mercer. Mercer stood it three days, and then quit.

A government official then put in an appearance. "Wayne is complaining about a too frequent use of the draw," he began. "Now you'll have to try to——"

"To what?" Flapjack demanded. "We'll have to do nothing. The tracks cross a navigable stream. It is a privilege, not a vested right. If the tracks don't clear the water high enough, the draw must open for a canoe. You tell Wayne that he is barking up the wrong tree!"

The official smiled. He knew that his bluff had failed, and he didn't care particularly. "Is it true you had the draw opened at three o'clock in the morning to bring a cow through?"

"It is," said Flapjack. "The poor cow had been out to a dance and sprained her ankle. We had to get her down to the barn for attention; couldn't let her suffer. As we didn't have crutches that would fit, we had to use the boat, because she couldn't walk!"

The official laughed. "That's good!" he exclaimed. "Good enough for me. You've got the law back of you, and you know it."

An array of important-looking officials wearing good clothes and frowns appeared at the Shea ranch the following afternoon. Wayne was in command.

"Shea, you can't get away with this sort of thing!" he roared. "You are using the law as a club!"

"Why, Mr. Wayne," said Flapjack, "he's doing no such thing. Once Shea was foolish, but I talked him out of it. Told him you were absolutely right; that your tracks would cross this farm because you were legally entitled to lay them. You did. In turn, he's legally entitled to use that waterway to get his produce to market, and to aid in his farming. He's just a poor rancher trying to get along, and he's getting along. Employing three bridge tenders may be inconvenient, but he can't help it. He has to keep an eye on things and be careful——"

At this point an elderly gentleman addressed as "judge" interrupted.

"It is a subterfuge," he began ponderously. "This cow spraining her ankle, and——"

"But the cow had been out to a dance," explained Flapjack, "and you know how modern dances are." He walked over and dug the judge in the ribs. "Forget it, judge. You had us licked a while back, and you had your laugh. Now we've got you licked. We know it, you know it, now give us our laugh."

The judge adjusted his glasses. "A remarkable man, Mr. Meehan! Mr. Wayne, I advise a settlement. There is no use in squirming; they have you on their hips and no amount of litigation will change conditions. What do you want, Meehan?"

"Hank Shea wants a tunnel under that road bed, the cost of moving his barns to a suitable location, and seven thousand dollars damage to his land and irrigation system. As for myself, I'll take my last laugh at Mr. Wayne's expense."

And Flapjack laughed.

ZION PARK MORE ACCESSIBLE

THIS year it is expected that more visitors than ever before will visit Zion Park. The attractions of this region are being made better known by means of illustrated literature and moving pictures. The latter have been exhibited in New York and other Eastern cities. The Union Pacific Railroad has spent over two million dollars in building a branch line to Cedar City and in acquiring the Hotel El Escalante at that place, besides putting up lodges in Zion Cañon and Bryce Cañon.

MONUMENT TO PIONEER TRAPPER

ACCORDING to reports from Washington, D. C., it is planned to erect a fitting monument in Glacier National Park, Montana, to the memory of Trapper Kline, who died about two years ago. Kline was one of the last of the pioneer fur men of the West. He traversed the Rocky Mountain region now included in Glacier National Park, long before the Blackfeet Indians ceded this part of their land to the government for national park purposes.

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 at the reunion.

The man who attacked her is Pierre Moxie, who has learned that Lucky Bug has information about a gold mine, and hopes to blackmail him on the ground 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 seeing 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.

CHAPTER XIX.

COMPLICATIONS THREATEN.

IT was after dark when Nell and her father reached Nancy's Dishpan. Mrs. Hulette called to them as they rode past the gate and insisted on their coming in to supper, which had been delayed because the men had not got in from work as soon as they had expected to. So they let one of the cow-punchers take their horses to the stables and accepted the invitation.

After the meal Lucky Bug and Hulette sat on the broad veranda, smoking. Nell had gone home. Lucky Bug turned the conversation to the subject of Twain Reading and his homestead.

"So you see the place, eh?" asked Hulette. "Pretty spot, ain't she? But the soil in this country ain't anythin' to speak of, Mr. Noble. Good for grass—that's all. That boy'll just naturally starve to death over in that little *escondido*."

"Where did he drift from?" Lucky Bug asked.

"He's a New Englander," Hulette re-

plied. "Boston, I think. He had all kinds o' high an' mighty idees when he first hit Nancy's Dishpan. He was just a hobo, he said. But he'd learned to fork a hoss in the late war, an' he hadn't been on the ranch long till he become the best rider I had. I like the fella. That's why I don't want 'im to lose out over there. But, shucks! He's young an' c'n begin all over again any time. What's the difference?"

"He doesn't seem to be much of a roughneck," Lucky Bug felt a bit further.

"Roughneck! That boy! I should say he ain't! He comes of a fine family. He's been to college and all. He was an officer in France. He's kind an' gentle an' true. We like 'im a heap."

"Folks have no money, I suppose," Lucky Bug ventured.

"I don't know about that. I've heard a lot o' them old Boston families get along on their respectability, and don't need much money. But he never said anythin' about his people's financial standin'. Money don't seem to pester him a heap. He jest wants life outdoors. I never saw a boy so confound'ly in love with jest hangin' 'round an' lookin' at the sun and the trees and everything that's growin' like that there Reading boy."

"He *must* be in love with nature to choose to live out here in the hills when a career might be open for him back East."

"Yes, yes—so I've thought time and ag'in. But it wasn't none o' my business, so I never said nothin'."

Lucky Bug didn't know whether to consider this as a mild rebuke or not. He did consider, however, that Reading's past, his family, and his outlook on life were swiftly becoming his business.

"He got discouraged with civilization, I reckon," said Hulette after a long pause. "Told me once, I remember, that he studied law in college. Said he'd been admitted to the bar, too. But his first two or three cases disgusted him complete.

"Said they was a murder case he got tangled up with. He had a partner. He knew, he said, the bird was guilty. So did his pardner. Smooth talker, this partner. Well, they took the fella's case, anyway—against young Reading's judgment. An' he said it was rotten. How they got a bonehead jury up there—deliberately picked boneheads, he said—an' twisted things 'round till they wasn't no truth in it. And the jury goes out an' comes back in an' returns a verdict of not guilty.

"Well, that an' a couple other cases got this boy sore, an' he give up an' come out West, where, he said, he hoped things was clean. His folks raised a row because he quit his practice, an' I guess they're on the outs. And that's about all I know o' the boy's past, Mr. Noble. But I know he's keen for law enforcement an' all that, and the words right and justice mean a lot to him. Too bad a fella who feels like that couldn't stick, ain't it? The grafters stick, I notice."

"He has a certain mold of the lips and an intensity of gaze that make him look as if he might be a stickler for what he believes to be right," admitted Lucky Bug. "It would be hard to swerve him."

"Swerve him! That boy! I'd as soon try to swerve a breachy cow from goin' through a drift fence when her calf's bawlin' its lungs out f'r her on t'other side!"

In the little cabin that Nell and her father called home, the girl lighted a coal-oil lamp and proceeded to make the beds, which task she had been obliged to postpone that morning because they wanted to get an early start.

She finished and sat down to await her father. The long ride that day had

wearied her immeasurably. They had attempted too much, strangers as they were to the saddle for so long a time. But her eyes were glowing. She noted this as she caught sight of her face in the mirror of the old-fashioned walnut dresser with which her bedroom was supplied. There were two pink spots in her cheeks, too. And it seemed to her that the face which peered back at her from the looking-glass was a trifle shamed.

She tossed her head. She had nothing to be ashamed of. The man did interest her—no, fascinate her. Why deny it? He was tender, considerate, manly, brave, picturesque, true—and he laughed with sympathy when mud puppies fell down banks that they had climbed. He was just such a man as she had dreamed about ever since her sojourn on Conrad Gaslyn's ranch in New Mexico, where she had discovered that pavements and overstuffed furniture were not for her. Every cowboy or miner or outlander of any description whom she had met had attracted her. But at the same time their uncouthness had repelled. Twain Reading was different. He was a gentleman in chaps and spurs. She had discovered her ideal. She was going to love him. She knew it. *She loved him already!*

The face that looked back at her from the mirror was radiant. A year and a half had added to her beauty; she was now nothing short of striking. She knew that she was almost beautiful. Did *he* think her so?

There came a soft tapping at her door. She had not heard her father returning. With a guilty blush she left her place before the mirror and invited:

"Come in, daddy."

Lucky Bug entered. "Not in bed yet?" He smiled at her. "Your face is flushed. Too much spring wind on your white tender skin all at one dose, I guess."

He looked at her admiringly, proudly. She was distractingly feminine and pretty in negligee. A low groan escaped him. "Nell," he cried, "you're the prettiest thing God ever made!"

"Oh, no, daddy—not that!" But she was immeasurably pleased. He came close and took her in his arms. She lifted her lips to his.

"When we've starved for each other for all these years," he said huskily, "it wouldn't be fair if we were separated now, would it?"

"No, not fair to either of us," she acceded.

"But some day you'll find a man who really wants to marry you. Then what?"

"Suppose I want to marry him? You wouldn't be selfish, would you, daddy? You wouldn't be giving me up, you know. I'd still be the same to you. And I wouldn't leave you."

"No, you couldn't be the same," he told her soberly. "And if you loved your husband, and he wanted you to cast me adrift, you'd do it."

"No, daddy—never! You're my hero. You have been ever since I heard your name."

"Do you like this young Reading?" he quizzed bluntly.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I don't know whether I do or not," he confessed. "I haven't had time to figure him out. He likes you, Nell—tremendously."

"Oh, are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow morning, Nell."

"Well"—she said thoughtfully—"I want him to like me. I think he must have many commendable qualities, daddy. He's so straightforward—so enthusiastic—so genuine—so——"

"So confoundedly good looking and picturesque," Lucky Bug cut in.

"Lucky Bug Painter," and she shook an accusing finger before his nose—"you're as jealous as a lover!"

"I am," he pleaded guilty. "I admit that freely. But listen, Nell: Don't be in a hurry. You're only a girl yet—not twenty-two. My Lord, child, there's lots of time!"

"Why, you speak as if some man had asked me to marry him and I had accepted!"

"I'm just feeling around—reconnoitering, as it were, to find out how to build my defenses, Nell. He's a possibility—I'm watching him. You met many handsomer men in Europe and South America. Yet you——"

"But they weren't my kind," was her quick defense.

"And Reading is?"

"Well—nearer, I'll say. But don't be foolish, daddy. This is the first day in my life that I ever spoke to the man."

"That's just the trouble," said Lucky Bug, as he kissed her good night. "If you look at him like you did to-day, how'll you look at him a month from now? Good night, now. I just want you to be careful, Nell, and not do anything hastily. Take your time—watch your step. Know your man thoroughly before you decide to give yourself into his keeping for life."

"Cautious old daddy!" she ridiculed him. "And all about nothing! Good night. Are we going to hunt for the ledge again to-morrow?"

"I think not," he answered. "We'll rest up a day. I think that, after you and Reading and I set out to go to his place to-day, I got my bearings."

"Really? Then—oh, daddy——" She stopped short, lips parted. And after a little: "He told me that all the land on both sides of the creek below where we were camped is on his homestead claim."

"I know it," said Lucky Bug gravely.

"Then it's possible that—that Lucky Bug Lode is on his land!"

"Highly possible," her father replied. "In fact, I'm almost sure it is."

CHAPTER XX.

A GUEST.

AS proposed, Nell and her father rested the day following their first trip in search of the lost lode. Afoot they investigated Nancy's Dishpan more extensively than they had had an opportunity to do before, and watched the horse wranglers working with unbroken colts which were desined to become cow horses before the season's end. In the afternoon Nell took a swim in the deep pool close to their little cabin. At five o'clock Twain Reading galloped in on Silver.

He had made no pretense at dressing up. He was free and easy and perfectly at home the minute of his arrival. His frank, honest, sunburned face was as open as a book. But Lucky Bug, studying that face more carefully since his short conversation with Hulette about its owner, became positive that here was a man as fixed in his ideas as his Puritan ancestors. Whenever anything of a controversial nature cropped up in their conversation, his blue eyes would begin to snap and his nostrils to quiver. A look almost fanatical claimed his features. He had his ideas of what was what, this fellow had; and he was ready, even eager, to fight for them to the last atom of his energy.

It was while they were at dinner that Reading made such a startling observation in such a matter-of-fact way. What he said would have been startling to nobody else on earth, perhaps, save Nell Painter and her father.

"I dropped in to say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Hulette before I rode on down here," he said. "I see they have a visitor overnight. Fellow that I must say I don't like any too well, though he's never done me any harm and I have no reason to dislike him. Just instinctive on my part. He's a sort of petty hide buyer named Kenelm Laplace. He's conceived the idea of traveling around

to big cow ranches over the West and buying up hides from them."

Lucky Bug had paused with a forkful of food on its way to his mouth, but he quickly steadied himself and cast a warning look at his daughter.

"I shouldn't think it would pay him," he said complacently. "There can't be many hides for sale on ranches. The beef stock is sold on the hoof, and the hides accumulate in the packing houses."

"You're right, of course," returned Reading. "But that's just where this fellow's idea comes in. There are a great many ranches that butcher to quite an extent. More than you'd think, Mr. Noble. For instance, Hulette, here, kills a lot of beef stock in a year. He sells meat to near-by resorts, mines and meat markets. Sometimes a rancher will get a standing order for a year's supply of beef from a construction contractor in a country where a big railroad is building. Cases like that, you understand.

"Well, Laplace makes it his specialty to nose out these places and buy 'em up cheap. I understand he knows the hide-and-leather game pretty well, and makes a lot of money."

"Does he come here frequently?" asked Lucky Bug, trying to make his tone disinterested.

"Once a year, I think. I met him when he was here last year. Before that, of course, I don't know anything about his movements, as that was before I rambled West."

Lucky Bug thought it advisable to change the trend of the conversation, for surely it would not seem logical for him to be greatly interested in the coming of an itinerant hide buyer. But he was longing for a private word with Nell, and the opportunity for this was not offered until Twain Reading had ridden away at half-past nine.

As the sound of the gray's hoofbeats died out, Nell, standing on the little veranda beside her father, slipped a tiny warm hand into his.

"Well, how about that for a piece of news?" she asked.

"A remarkable coincidence, of course," Lucky Bug answered after a period of thinking. "And not such a remarkable one, either. If this Laplace travels over the West in search of ranches where hides may have accumulated, it's only natural that he should hit upon Nancy's Dishpan. But I'll admit that Nine Mile, California, is a long distance from Puerta de Luna, Mexico."

"What on earth can we do about it, daddy?" she puzzled.

"We must contrive to pump Mr. Hulette, or somebody connected with the ranch, and find out whether Laplace has been coming here regularly over a period of years. Before he got acquainted with us, in short. If last year was the first time he came here, I'll be extremely worried, Nell, for that may mean that he was the brains behind Pierre Moxey and his gang. And that, knowing *about* where the gold was located, he came into this country and made up to the Hulettes preparatory to our coming. But, of course, we spent a year and eight months abroad, which fooled him. Now perhaps he has come again to find out if we've been in the neighborhood.

"But if he has been coming here for hides for several years before he met us, I'll call it merely a strange coincidence. But he mustn't see either of us. He knows you as Nelita Painter and me as Lucky Bug. Whether he really is after us or not, uncomfortable complications would arise if he were to see us here. Of course, if we're mentioned up at the ranch house, we'll quite be more than likely referred to as Noble.

"We'd better lie low until he's gone, or contrive some way to sneak our horses out unseen to-morrow morning

and get into the woods before he's about."

"Let's try to do that," Nell suggested. "We can get up early and saddle our own horses before the boys are stirring. We can find out about Kenelm Laplace later."

"All right. Set the alarm clock for four-thirty. And we'll pack our grub and traps to-night. I don't fancy the idea of hiding in a cabin all day when there's gold to be found out in the hills."

The result of following this plan was that Lucky Bug led the two horses to the cabin door next morning while it was still dark. He returned to the stables and brought back an armful of hay and an extra amount of barley, so that the animals could eat while their riders were at breakfast. They finally rode off to the highway shortly after the triangle had been rung at the ranch house to call the hands from their bunks. They felt sure that the Hulettes' guest would not be stirring at that early hour.

Reaching the highway, they galloped along it to Nine Mile, where they took to Reading's trail between the post office and his homestead. This made a much shorter route than they had taken on their first trip, when they had continued on the highway in the opposite direction to pass around the foot of Jackstone Mountain on the Convict Road.

The trail was leading them parallel with the banks of Lucky Bug Creek before nine o'clock in the morning, and before ten they had reached the place where Reading had found them camped. Only steep, rocky hills and a heavily timbered stretch now separated them from Lucky Bug Ranch.

Back from the creek they dismounted, threw off the saddles, and picketed their horses in a small, natural meadow. Then in heavy hiking shoes instead of riding boots, they returned to the creek bottom and began a search of the frowning, rocky hill that overhung the stream on its eastern side.

An hour after they had left the horses Lucky Bug dropped to his knees below a monstrous overhang and began working with the short-handled pick that he had brought along.

Nell stood with parted lips and glistening eyes and watched him. Once she breathed the question: "Have you found it, daddy!" But he gave her no reply. The perspiration was streaming down his face and neck as he delved forcefully under the overhang. White quartz showed in the muck that he pushed behind him. At last he dived under, and next instant stood beside her, panting.

"There!" he cried boyishly. "How do you like the looks of that?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREE OF GOLD.

LUCKY BUG had dropped into his daughter's palms a lump of pinkish quartz, from the veins and crevices of which something flashed back the light of the noonday sun. It was bright and glistening, this gold, and traced delicately in a pattern somewhat resembling a spreading tree.

"Oh, daddy!" was all that Nell could gasp.

"We've found it," he told her in a low, tremulous tone, he who ordinarily was wont to show so little emotion in moments of stress. "This is the very spot in which the old man and I did our digging. The hole that I uncovered is the one we plugged up nearly thirteen years ago. Here's our fortune, Nell, if the vein is what the old prospector thought it was."

Nell sat down tremblingly on the ground, the glittering lumps of quartz in her hands. Her father chose a stone beside her, where he sat mopping his brow, unable to keep his eyes from the fascinating object which she held. Nell

remained very thoughtful, very silent. She lifted her glance presently and cast it afar across Lucky Bug Creek at the reddish hills beyond.

"We're only a short distance from where we were camped that day when he appeared across the stream," she said.

"Yes, we were closer then than I realized," her father replied.

"Do you think, daddy, that—that——" She floundered to a pause, afraid to voice her fears.

"Yes, I think the ledge is on Reading's claim," he answered her unfinished question. "Don't you remember that he pointed out a tall, dead pine up this way, which he claimed was close to the southeast corner of his quarter section?"

"Yes, I remember that."

Lucky Bug stood on his feet and pointed. "There it is," he told her. "You can just see the tip of it peeping over the brow of that chaparral-covered hill. The Lucky Bug Lode is well within the limits of his hundred-and-sixty, Nell."

"Then what shall we do, dear?" she asked pensively.

Her father brooded. "That," he replied finally, "is a mighty hard question to answer, daughter. It'll take a lot of thinking."

"But the gold is his, not ours. It's on his land."

Lucky Bug smiled indulgently. "I'm afraid you don't quite understand the situation, Nell. The land isn't his yet. He's been squatting on it only about a year. And the land is on trial, at that, as an agricultural proposition. But even if his homestead claim is finally allowed, he'll have to live on the land and improve it for two years more before he can get his patent."

"What is a patent, daddy?"

"It's the best deed to a piece of real estate that a man can have," he explained. "It is the instrument by which title to public land in the United States is conveyed to an individual holder. A patent makes this land actually Reading's, without any strings attached."

"But he'll get his patent in time, won't he?"

Lucky Bug shrugged. "That remains to be seen," he said.

It was her turn to study the matter thoughtfully, her broad brow puckered as her brain struggled with the unfamiliar problem.

"It seems to me," she ventured at length, "that the fact that he hasn't got his patent has little to do with this situation. He thinks of the land as his. He calls it Lucky Bug Ranch instead of Lucky Bug Homestead. He has every expectation of actually owning the property when the government requirements have been fulfilled. So anything and everything that is on the land is his. It will be when he has his patent, anyway, so theoretically it is his now. Am I not right?"

"To a certain extent you are," he told her. "And there has been many a bitter dispute, many a fight over the question that you've brought up. But in the present case things are slightly different. You must remember that Reading has filed a homestead claim—squatted, rather, as the situation stands at present—in a section of the country which has been allocated by the government as mineral land. Therefore the prospector, in filing on a mining claim, has priority over the man who files on a homestead claim in such a district."

"And just what does that mean, please?" she asked, straight-lipped.

"It means," he said carefully, "that we have a perfect right to file our mining claims on Reading's homestead. We would have that right even if Reading had succeeded in convincing the secretary of agriculture that his piece is more valuable as a farming tract than as mineral ground or forest land. In short, even if Reading's homestead

claim has been allowed and he were a bona fide homesteader, we could file mining claims on his land and he couldn't legitimately raise a protest."

"Why, daddy!" Her tone was of horror.

"That's how things stand," he informed her doggedly.

"But surely, daddy, it isn't fair to Mr. Reading!"

Again her father shrugged. "We didn't make the law, my dear," he reminded her. "Young Reading took that chance when he filed on a homestead claim in a mineral district."

She cupped her round chin in her hand and looked away across the sunny hills once more. Then suddenly she stamped her foot a number of times.

"I hate the law!" she cried. "I hate it!"

Her father laughed. "That remark sounds familiar, Nell. I think I've made it myself on several occasions."

She rose to her feet and came close to him. Impulsively she threw her arms about his neck and nestled her head against his cheek.

"But we're not going to pay any attention to any old laws, are we, daddy? We're going to play fair, aren't we?"

"We always try to play fair," he said soothingly, passing his hand lovingly over her glistening hair. "But how about Twain Reading? I understand from what Mr. Hulette told me that this boy is a stickler for the law. We certainly ought to be justified in expecting him to back out gracefully, then, when the law that he holds in such high esteem happens to hand him the dirty end of the stick."

"Don't say law again!" she cried. "We don't need to have anything to do with the law. We can just go to Mr. Reading, tell him that we've found gold on his place and—and——"

"Yes? You were working up a rather interesting little episode before you stopped. What's the climax, Nell?"

"Well, couldn't we offer to share with him? Wouldn't that be fair for both parties concerned? Fifty-fifty?"

"It sounds nice and Sunday-schoolly," he answered. "But I'm not ridiculing the idea at all. It's the natural, the logical, the equitable thing to do. And I may say that I am willing, if everything turns out right."

"And why shouldn't everything turn out right?" she wanted to know.

"That," he told her, "depends entirely on Twain Reading himself. If he turns out to be all that we hope he is—all that we now believe that he is—I think what you've suggested would be the only decent way to settle the matter. I'm not a hog, Nell. I'm perfectly willing, under the peculiar circumstances, to share with the boy. But he's got to be *there*. He's got to be *right* from the toes up."

"Oh, daddy, I know he is! I just *know* it!"

"Yes, I know what it means when a woman 'just knows' a thing. She means she hopes and trusts that it is so, and is willing to bet that it *is* so. But that's merely intuition. Men demand more often to be shown the goods."

"But, daddy, what are you afraid of? Surely he will be everlastingly grateful if you go to him and tell him that you know where there is gold on his land, and offer him a half interest in the mine that is to be!"

"You forget, Nell, that Folsom Penitentiary is not so very far from where we're sitting now, and that I belong there, according to the law."

"All the better to have Twain Reading in with us then," she argued. "He could file on the mining claims in his own name, and the name of Painter, or our assumed name, need not appear in the transaction at all. Of course you two could have a private understanding between yourselves——"

"Beware of private understandings," Lucky Bug interrupted soberly.

Then he rose to his feet, kissed his daughter, and made ready to clamber down the hill to Lucky Bug Creek again.

"There's one thing certain," he cast back at her over his shoulder: "Whatever you do, we'll stake out our mining claims and file on 'em first, *then* study over what we had better do in regard to Reading."

"Daddy, aren't you showing just a little bit of suspicion and selfishness?"

"I hardly think so," he answered, unruffled. "But I'm more than twice as old as you are, Nell, have had more than twice the experience of life and men, and am consequently more than twice as cautious. We'll stake out our claims to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE VERANDA STEPS.

WHEN Nell and Lucky Bug reached the bald hill that looked down upon the ranch houses of Nancy's Dishpan they drew rein for a consultation concerning the menacing Mr. Laplace.

It was logical to believe that he had consummated his business at the ranch and taken his leave while they were on Lucky Bug Creek. Surely it would not require hours for him to contract to buy a few hundred hides, they reasoned. But since they could not be sure of this, they decided to gallop directly past the houses, giving them a wide berth, and into the timber beyond. There they would turn and ride back to the stables from the opposite direction, and, when they were free of their horses, cut across the fields toward home.

They carried out this scheme. Half an hour after they left the baldpate hill they were at the corrals and throwing off the saddles. They gave their ponies a perfunctory rub-down and turned them in. Nobody else was about. They hung their saddles on their accustomed pegs; and as they left the stable Nell caught sight of a runabout under a lean-to shed which sheltered wagons and implements and tools.

Was it Kenelm Laplace's car?

"It was so dark that I caught up the horses and saddled them this morning that I didn't notice it," said Lucky Bug. "If it's his, we're in for another period of dodging. Let's cut across to the cabin with as little fuss as possible."

Now and then they cast glances toward the huge log ranch house as they skirted a field of young barley and took up a bee line for home. But they saw nobody stirring. They rounded the first corner of the cabin, and were about to set foot on their little veranda, when a man came suddenly into view on the other side.

Simultaneously the three caught sight of one another. Recognition was instantaneous.

Kenelm Laplace carried in one hand a wet bathing suit. Apparently he had been to the swimming pool in Nine Mile Creek, and, returning, was taking a short cut to the ranch house. He wore whipcord outing clothes, consisting of Norfolk jacket and bellows breeches, with russet-leather puttees neatly buckled about his calves.

Nell did her best to pretend that she had not recognized him, and tripped rapidly up the steps without a sidelong glance. Lucky Bug, however, realized that Laplace knew who they were. He realized, also, that to sham was little short of suicidal. He paused at the foot of the steps and prepared for the worst.

"Well, this is the biggest surprise of my young life!" chortled Laplace, hastening forward, round-eyed, a peculiar smile on his lips. "Lucky Bug Painter and his daughter, or I'm absolutely dead! For the love of Mike, how come?"

"Hello, Mr. Laplace," Lucky Bug returned gravely, extending a hand perforce. "What on earth are you doing here?"

On the veranda Nell turned, with something of a sickly smile, to act the part that her father had forced upon her.

"Goodness gracious!" She tried to put astonishment into her tones. "Is it really you, Mr. Laplace?"

"That's what I thought when I stepped around the corner of this cabin," he said whimsically, "but I'm not so sure of it after this pleasant shock. How are you, anyway, Lucky Bug? Say, isn't this rich?"

He wrung Lucky Bug's hand, then dropped it and leaped up the treads to the side of Nell.

When the hand-shaking was over, he stood on the veranda, spread-legged, and surveyed them. His rather good-looking face was one big smile of greeting. He seemed as honest and sincere as Mr. Hulette himself.

"The Hulettes told me they had some vacationists renting one of their cabins," he said. "But if they mentioned the name, it meant nothing to me. Or else I forgot it. And to think that they were talking about you folks! Say, I don't want to be a bromide, but it *is* a little world, isn't it? Tell me all about it, won't you? How on earth does it happen that I find you here? And what about The Lucky Bug, down in Puerta de Luna?"

"One question at a time, please," begged Lucky Bug, forcing a short laugh. "It's probably pleasanter here on the veranda than inside—I'll bring out chairs."

He went in and got them, and set them in a row. Then, with Laplace effervescing and Nell and her father sickeningly at a loss for words of welcome, they took their seats.

"I sold out down there shortly after you left, Mr. Laplace," Lucky Bug told him. "That business was all right for me while I was an old bachelor, but when I accidentally picked up a full-grown daughter, I decided that she was entitled to something better in life. So I sold the joint and brought Nelita to the United States."

"And so you've been here ever since?"

"Well, we traveled about a bit directly after leaving Mexico," was the evasive answer.

"Where are you living?"

"Here. We haven't any permanent headquarters. Home is wherever we take our hats off."

"Lord, I've thought about you two a thousand times!" glowed Laplace. "But I haven't had occasion to visit Puerta de Luna since I saw you there, so knew nothing about your change. Remember Con Gaslyn?"

This seemed a boyishly foolish question, but Lucky Bug answered readily enough that he did.

"Saw him last summer—on his ranch in New Mexico. I asked him about you people, and he said he hadn't heard anything more of you."

"And we haven't heard from him, either," Nell put in, thinking that she must say something. "He promised to write to daddy, too."

"It's funny he didn't. That old boy's promise usually can be depended upon."

"How are things with you?" Lucky Bug asked, his thoughts so taken up with this new problem that he scarce realized what he had asked.

"Oh, same old thing—buying up skins, as Miss Painter called them."

"You certainly cover a wide territory," Lucky Bug marveled.

"Yep—the entire West is my field."

"And to think," said Nell, "that your hide buying should bring you to the very ranch where daddy and I are spending our vacation! Have you been coming here for years, Mr. Laplace?"

It seemed to both of his eager listeners that there was a period of undue hesitation before Laplace replied. And when he did make answer it was in the nature of an evasion.

"Well, I can hardly say 'for years,' Miss Painter. I was here last year, I remember." He looked admiringly at the handsome girl. "How have you managed to keep her so long, Lucky Bug?" he deliberately changed the subject.

"I have my own secret method," Lucky Bug almost growled. The inanity of the conversation was getting on his nerves.

Nell realized that she had failed. She ought to have asked the young man how many years he had been coming to Nancy's Dishpan, which question would not have allowed him an avenue of escape from a direct reply. Now she dared not broach the subject again. Her father's suspicions of this man were taking hold on her now. Why couldn't he have answered outright by telling just how many years he had been coming to the ranch? An honest man would have done that, she reasoned. People usually seem to take stupid delight in trying accurately to recall such data.

Lucky Bug was now positive that Laplace had not visited Nancy's Dishpan prior to the year before, when, without a doubt, he had come in the hope of getting track of them. This man was an accomplished actor. He had come seeking them now. Lucky Bug was extremely worried, in any event, over the possibility of Laplace referring to them as the Painters when he was again with the Hulettes. He decided upon a bold, swift, conclusive move.

He rose abruptly to his feet. "I've just thought of something that I've neglected, Nell," he said. "I ought to attend to it at once. Will you let my daughter entertain you, Mr. Laplace, while I look after this matter? I'm sure, though, that with Nelita to talk with you, you won't miss me in the slightest." He had called his daughter Nelita twice instead of Nell for Mr. Laplace's particular benefit. "I'll be back shortly." And he went down the veranda steps and started toward the stables.

He did not go to the stables, however. When he had veered in their direction until the corner of the cabin shut off Laplace's view of him, he changed course and walked directly to the ranch house.

In the big kitchen, as he had hoped, he found Mrs. Hulette, fat and perspiring and working like a Trojan over the coming evening meal for fourteen hungry men.

"Mrs. Hulette," he asked. "Can you spare me a few moments' time? I want to ask you some questions."

"Why, sure, Mr. Noble," she replied, and her gray eyes grew round and expectant. Few people ever came to this hard-working woman with any question of importance, much less such a personage as she considered Mr. Jerry Noble to be. She assumed a witness-stand attitude immediately, and seated herself ponderously, with a scared look which plainly said, "I knew there was something the matter the moment I saw your face in the doorway!"

"This hide buyer," began Lucky Bug. "He's over at our cottage now, talking with Nell. How long have you known him, Mrs. Hulette?"

"Oh, I hope there's nothing wrong, Mr. Noble!" she gasped. "Surely Mr. Laplace is a perfect gentleman! He seems as kind and considerate, and——"

"Yes, I know. He undoubtedly is all that. But will you please let me know how long he has been coming to the ranch to buy hides?"

"Why, let me see." She crooked one toil-worn finger at her lips. "He's been here twice, now. Last spring and this spring."

Lucky Bug breathed a deep breath. "And you never saw him before last spring?"

"No, never heard of him before that. I remember he said when he was here

first, though, that he might come back in the fall if he would be welcome, and there was a chance of goin' bear huntin' with Ed and the boys. But he didn't."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hulette," said Lucky Bug. "That's about all I wanted to know."

"Mr. Noble, I just know there's something wrong! Tell me what has happened. What's he done?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Hulette. Nothing serious has happened. Please don't worry. It's merely this," and Lucky Bug hated to resort to subterfuge but could see no other way out. "It seemed to me that I have seen this fellow before some place. Please think no more about it."

He left her with deep lines of puzzlement on her honest, round face and stalked right back to the cabin. His mind was settled now as to Laplace's business at Nancy's Dishpan. He was as sure as he was of anything in his experience that the young man was the brains back at Pierre Moxey, and that he had journeyed to the ranch to try to find out whether or not Nell and he had entered the country in search of the Lucky Bug Lode. And when a conviction had settled in the mind of Lucky Bug Painter, he usually acted forthwith, according to his lights.

He would go straight to the cabin and have it out with the hide buyer then and there—and let the best man win!

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ACCIDENT.

THERE seemed to Lucky Bug, as he strode rapidly toward Nell and Laplace, seated on the little veranda of the cabin, that there was only one logical thing for him to do. That was to face Laplace and tell him that he knew why he had come to Nancy's Dishpan, and to warn him that, in attempting to work a scheme to dog the notorious Lucky Bug Painter into paying hush money as the price of his freedom, he was playing with fire.

There would be no beating about the bush. He would not permit Kenelm Laplace to feign surprise and make the claim that he had no idea of what Lucky Bug was talking about. Lucky Bug had taken it for granted that he would know. There would be no need to go into painful details. He would simply inform Laplace that he knew all about the game he was playing, and show him that he hadn't the slightest chance of winning.

But after the cat was out of the bag—what then? Nell and he could not afford to remain at Nancy's Dishpan. Laplace might realize that, so long as Lucky Bug knew his secret, he was beaten from the start. Then he might, in a spirit of revenge, tell the prison authorities what he knew.

Lucky Bug suddenly slowed his steps. Careful reconsideration of the matter now caused him to wonder if he was acting wisely in not playing the game as this fellow played it. That is, resort to pretense and secrecy, and not let him know that he was under suspicion. Laplace would do nothing, anyway, until after the claims had been filed upon. More than that, he would not do anything until the mining venture had been launched, and profits were beginning to show.

Lucky Bug had decided in his own mind, riding home with Nell that day, that the decent thing to do would be to take Twain Reading into partnership. All his life he had been taking chances on men, and, when all was said and done, he was not afraid to take a chance on Reading. It was Nell and Reading's sudden and indisputable liking for each other that worried him most. A partnership would throw these two into close contact, perhaps a daily contact; and Lucky Bug was not ready yet to give his daughter into the keeping of another man. He had had only a year and a

half of her—he wanted more before surrendering her to a lover's arms.

Now, however, he would be obliged to risk that, too. He would go to Reading to-morrow, tell him about the gold, and arrange with him to make filings on the claims. Neither the name Painter nor Noble would appear on the papers at all. He would throw himself upon Reading's mercy and trust to him for a square deal. He would tell the young man everything, in order that he might be spared the shock of hearing that his partner was an escaped convict in the event that Laplace should strike when the mines had been put on a paying basis. Laplace would not strike before the mines were established and running smoothly. And before he did, Nell and her father could be on their way around the world again—wanderers once more. Or they would live somewhere abroad, trusting Reading to send them their share of the profits from the Lucky Bug Lode, leaving their fortune in his hands. Better that than the great gray walls of the penitentiary! Unless—unless Reading had claimed Nell in the meantime. Then he—Lucky Bug—would become a lone wanderer over the face of the earth.

Lucky Bug was bitter as he walked on slowly. It looked at if he might get the worst of it no matter how things turned out.

With his plans completely changed, then, he stepped upon the little veranda and entered into the lax conversation of Laplace and Nell. And presently, to the great relief of the Painters, Mrs. Hulette pounded upon the triangle over at the ranch house, and Laplace arose and answered the call to supper. He said in taking his leave that he would be driving to Sacramento early the following morning, and bade them goodby, and hoped that he might meet them at Nancy's Dishpan the following season.

Then he went swinging toward the ranch house, and Nell burst into tears from the strain.

As they watched him depart, Lucky Bug said to his daughter: "There is no doubt in my mind as to his business here. But if it should turn out that we are mistaken, he'll certainly tell the Hulettes to-night that their renters are old acquaintances of his. And he'll mention the name of Painter. So if we hear nothing after he's gone about the discrepancy in names, we can rest assured that Laplace kept his own counsel. That will prove he's crooked."

It was about nine o'clock the following morning that a shelf of loose rock and dirt gave way underneath Lucky Bug's horse as they were on the trail to Reading's homestead. Nell was riding behind, and her horse reared back from the edge of the break just in time, while her father and his mount went rolling over and over down a steep slope to the bottoms of Lucky Bug Creek. Halfway down the struggling man managed to disengage himself from the saddle, but not before the horse had rolled over him twice. The horse plunged on and splashed into a deep pool of water. But Lucky Bug lay silent and immovable halfway up the slope, one knee upraised, both arms flung wide in a lifeless attitude.

The girl contrived to turn her frantic pony in the narrow trail. She raced him back to a zigzag cañon that gave access to the creek below. They slid down in a shower of dirt and stones and galloped to where her father's horse, snorting with fright and indignation, was struggling to dry land.

Nell flung herself from the saddle, and, holding a hand over her wildly thumping heart, fought her way up the steep slope to her father's side. She cried out with relief as, upon drawing nearer to him, she heard a low moan from his lips, and saw that he was trying to rise. Next instant she was on her knees before him and had her

arms about him. He looked sick and white, but gave her a hopeful smile which was more of a grimace.

"Gosh Almighty!" he breathed. "How far did the earthquake spread?"

"Daddy, are you badly hurt?"

"H'm! Haven't hardly had time to find out yet. Left arm feels funny—dead. And I think the saddle horn punched me in the ribs a couple of times. How's the horse?"

"Alive, anyway—I didn't stop to look. Oh, daddy! Tell me you're not badly hurt!"

Using his right hand, and with her aid, he managed a sitting posture. His left arm dangled.

"Busted," he remarked nonchalantly, looking down at it. "And at least two ribs caved in."

"Oh, daddy!"

He looked up at her and smiled, but his lips were the color of clay from pain.

"Don't let little things like those worry you," he said. "I've had more than this happen to me and been obliged to keep on fighting. Now all I've got to do is get on my horse and ride back to Nancy's Dishpan."

"Daddy, can I do anything at all for you?"

"Help me down to the floor of the cañon," he told her. "Then get some sticks, cut off a saddle string, and tie my arm up rigid. Can you ride bareback as far as the ranch, Nell?"

"Oh, easily. I don't mind it at all. I used to lots on Mr. Gaslyn's ranch."

"Then if you'll take off your saddle cinch and use it and the latigo straps, you can strap up my ribs with them so it won't jolt me so much to ride."

She helped him to his feet and together they slid and stumbled on down the creekside. Here she busied herself as he had directed, while Lucky Bug, with his upper teeth set in his lower lip, looked over his horse.

"The son of a gun is hardly scratched," he announced, after leading the animal forward a few steps. "I wouldn't have been, either, if I could have gotten my feet out of the stirrups sooner. Well, we're not so badly off. I'll be about in a few days, after a doctor has set my arm properly. There's nothing to worry about. I can ride slowly, too, if my ribs are well strapped."

"Daddy, we're much nearer to Mr. Reading's homestead than we are to Nancy's Dishpan. I say we try to get down there. And you can stay there till I've brought a doctor."

"I don't want to impose on the boy," he replied. "He has little enough room. And you may not be able to get a doctor before to-morrow. I haven't the slightest notion as to where one can be found."

"We're going there, anyway," said his daughter decisively. "Please let me run things now, daddy! You've been boss all along. It's my turn, I think."

"All right," he gave in. "To be frank with you, I don't stand a battering up so well as I did ten years ago. I'm feeling a good deal of pain all over right now. Let's go to Reading's, if you think best."

She tied the splints on his arm, and with all her strength strapped up his ribs with the latigos and cinch. Then she hid her saddle in the brush and helped him to mount. With a graceful leap she reached the bare back of her own horse, and they set off down the creek for Lucky Bug Ranch.

When they came out in the open and the cabin was in sight, Twain Reading, who was grinding an ax beside his stable, looked up and saw them coming. He seemed to realize at once that something was amiss, for he dropped the tool and began striding rapidly toward them.

"Well, well! What's all this about?" he called as the little cavalcade drew near. "Broken arm, eh?" He had

noticed the splints. "And ribs busted, too! What does the other fellow look like, Mr. Noble?"

Nell sprang down when Reading had led them to the door of his cabin. She and the homesteader helped Lucky Bug to the ground, and Reading led him inside. In one corner of the room stood his bed, a simple affair made of fir boughs. On it he made Lucky Bug sit down, and then he lifted his legs, swung him around, and eased him to a prone position.

"Now, Miss Noble," he said, turning to the girl, "all I can do is to ask you to make your father as comfortable as possible, while I ride to Nine Mile and telephone for a doctor.

"Well, I'm off. The sooner that arm is properly set and the ribs strapped up scientifically the better it'll be for him. You can tell me what happened when I get back. I won't be gone two hours. Make yourself at home. Cook anything you can find."

He bustled out of the door, and in a few minutes Nell heard the clattering of the gray's hoofs as he leaped across the level land toward the mouth of the trail to Nine Mile.

Lucky Bug had dropped into a restless sleep. He moaned softly now and then.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON.

IT was the day following the accident on the trail. The doctor had come and gone. Much painful prodding had revealed two broken ribs in Lucky Bug's torso. He was strapped up tightly with wide bands of adhesive tape. The break in his arm was not complicated; it had been quickly and neatly set, and the owner of it now carried it in a sling.

But the medical man had given strict orders that there be no horseback riding until the ribs were knitting satisfactorily. In a week, perhaps, Lucky Bug might be able to walk to Nine Mile without injury. There he could get some conveyance to carry him on to Nancy's Dishpan. But in the meantime—"Nothing doing!" He was an old-timer, this doctor of the hills, gruff, good-natured, and set in his convictions; and the most important of these was that a doctor should be obeyed.

"Well," remarked Lucky Bug, as Reading came in and stood grinning at him from the doorway, "I've wished myself onto you, all right."

"Now, listen," said the homesteader sternly: "Let's not have any palaver about that, Mr. Noble. You know you're welcome. I couldn't have expected you two to accept an invitation to spend a week with me because of the poor accommodations I have to offer. But I'm tickled to death when you're forced to stay. We can make out fine. I've plenty of bedding, which is the main thing. If I haven't, I can soon get more by riding to Nancy's Dishpan. You sleep here in the living room. Your daughter says she will be content on a straw shake down in the kitchen. I'll blink up at the stars outside under my old live oak. Not a word, now!"—as Lucky Bug opened his mouth to protest. "You know I'll like it. Whoever heard of a cowpuncher that didn't? You like it yourself! Your unspoken objections, then, are out of order. The matter is closed."

There followed for the crippled man a week of restfulness. He sat in Reading's can rocking chair under the spreading live oak that roofed the space before the cabin with a canopy, reading books and magazines of ancient vintage. He lay on his bed a great deal of the time, looking up at the crude rafters of the cabin and speculating on the intricacies of life. He walked about frequently, but never far from the shack; sat for hours beside the musical waterfall smoking cigars and cigarettes and idly flipping pebbles into the clear,

deep pool with his working arm. He tossed bread crumbs to the leaping trout. He watched the mud turtles and water dogs engaged in their daily task of living.

And through it all he refused to be self-centered. He almost became angry when Nell or Reading purposed to stay with him and keep him company. He insisted on their riding away together, or being together somewhere away from him, while they learned each other and wrested with the old, old situation. It seemed to his philosophical mind that fate had taken the reins from his hands. No more would he interfere. Nature would have her way. All about him he saw her irrevocable workings. As well to stand beneath the waterfall and try to stay its rushing with his outstretched arms as to interfere with her world-old schedules.

Meantime Nell and Reading played and worked together. She held fence posts plumb while he threw in dirt and tamped it. She drove staples into the yielding wood while he stretched wire. He was plowing with a borrowed team. She drove while he "shook" the plow in virgin soil that was obstinately rocky or tough with a network of roots. She drove the team hitched to a "go-devil," a homemade implement that raked up sage and chaparral bushes which the mattock had loosened from the ground. Together they pitched the accumulated brush in piles and fired it in the calm of evening, when the flames leaped straight upward toward the heavens and lighted the barriers of the forest that stood about the clearing.

Or, when toil became too irksome, they mounted their horses and explored the country round about.

Then came a golden day when they sat their saddles on a wind-swept hill and gazed far off to the mysterious Sierra peaks, wrapped in purest snow and purest silence. And from their horses' feet the land shot down in rock-ribbed shelves and timbered slopes to the bosom of the green American as it romped along to the romantic blue Pacific. Twain's arm went about the waist of the girl beside him, and he half drew her from the saddle and kissed her upon responsive lips.

Below them in the trees red-breasted linnets sang. Grave towhees chirped in the chaparral close by. Gray ground squirrels chattered, and a falcon hung motionless in the air above their heads. A low, hushed murmuring floated gently up to them from the turbulent racing river.

Nell's horse reached out, appraisingly, lipping at a bunch of grass. The silence was broken by the girl's tiny scream. But the man gathered her closer and touched her horse's side with the toe of his foot. The horse stepped out from under her entirely, leaving her hanging in his arms.

With powerful muscles he lifted her to a new position, one arm supporting her back, the other wrapped about her knees. And there he held her on his saddle horn, a willing captive, close to his breast, and kissed her again and again before they had spoken one brief word of love. For words were useless things, designed for those who wished to gossip or quarrel or argue, or ask for bread or money—but not for those who loved.

"Nell, there never was another girl like you," he told her tremulously at last. "I've loved you since the first time I spoke to you, that day in camp on Lucky Bug Creek. That seems years ago—and it seems that I have loved you always."

Nell said nothing, but hid her flushed face against his breast. Her kiss had told him that she loved him. She was too ashamed of her ready surrender to add words to the token she had given him. She felt his trembling as he held her closer and closer. He knew that she had given herself to him. Somehow she

believed that he would ask for no other sign.

There was no talk of his poverty as opposed to the comfortable circumstances which her father had made for her. He had no apologies to offer, no regrets. He had won her, and now he claimed his prize. He was too proud to minimize what he had to offer her, which was only love and the manly work that he could do toward making a successful future for them. He loved her and she loved him. That was all that mattered in the universe. But——

"Are you happy?" he asked at last.

"Yes," she whispered. "Happier than I've ever been before."

That was all. He drew her close again. Their lips were pressed together in a lingering kiss. Then he lifted her one side and lowered her by the hands gently to the ground. She mounted silently, and silently they rode back, side by side and hand in hand toward the little cabin down by the waterfall.

"Shall we tell your father at once?" he asked, as the narrowness of the trail forced their horses into single file.

"I suppose so," she answered. "But—but it's going to hurt him, Twain. You see—there's something we haven't told you. Something you must know soon. Daddy and I haven't known each other long. We never saw each other in our lives until about a year and a half ago. He—he was away when I was born, and we didn't get together for over twenty years. We'd lost track of each other. So you see—we've been pretty dear to each other since we met. It's a long story—daddy must tell it to you. I—I shouldn't have given in to you, Twain. I—but I couldn't help myself."

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when Nell and Twain Reading were riding down the winding trail to the cabin on Lucky Bug Creek. In the cabin Nell's father was lying on the bed, reading a book, and he was so nearly asleep that the significance of the printed words was halfway lost to him.

He had felt for several minutes an unexplainable irritability, which his half-slumbering condition failed to soothe. It was as if he were dreaming, with his fanciful subconscious mind struggling between a dream of peacefulness and a tormenting nightmare. He could not account for his restlessness, for neither his broken arm nor his bound up ribs were paining him just then. It was as if he desired greatly to sleep and somebody or something was creating a slight disturbance near that made restful sleep impossible. It seemed sometimes that eyes were watching him, and that this was the telepathic reason for his lack of ease.

Then, suddenly, the strain departed, and he dropped into deeper slumber.

When he awoke, perhaps two minutes later, it was with a decided start of apprehension. His well being seemed strangely threatened. He was wide awake in an instant, with his mental faculties totally alert. But inured as he was to danger, reason cautioned him immediately to make no move other than to turn his head slowly. And slowly, as he turned it on the pillow, the indistinct figure of a human being crept into his range of vision.

It was the figure of a man. He wore no hat, and his hair was cropped close to his nutlike head. He wore a suit of denim which had faded with repeated laundering. The shoes on the feet of this character were brogans.

The back of the man was toward him—a broad back, a little bent. Above his head the man's hands were reaching, and generous portions of his white arms were showing above the wrists as the sleeves crept down.

Noiselessly big fingers turned the catch of the cupboard door. As noiselessly the door swung open. Then Lucky Bug sensed that the man was

turning his face to make sure that he was still asleep. He closed his eyes and waited until a tiny sound told him that the intruder was again engaged with whatever task had brought him there.

Again Lucky Bug watched him. He took down the remains of a beef roast, which Reading had brought behind his saddle from Nancy's Dishpan the day before. There was part of a loaf of pan bread, such as outlanders make hastily when the system is crying for food.

These the thief set on a chair beside the cupboard. Once more he cast a glance of alarm toward Lucky Bug, but before he could turn his head the prone man's eyes were closed. Lucky Bug heard him moving stealthily about, and when again he looked he saw him gathering together old clothes of Reading, including a battered hat, a pair of corduroy trousers, and a shirt with the sleeves cut down to halves. He wrapped these garments about the meat and bread; and while he was thus engaged, Lucky Bug edged cautiously toward the board wall against which his bed was set, and with his right hand jerked down a cartridge belt that dangled from a nail. The belt was reeved through a leather holster, and in the holster was a Colt six-shooter, caliber .45.

One dexterous flip and the weapon was out of its leather holder and in the old gunman's hand. The sound of the weapon plunking on the bed had warned the daylight burglar, but before he could leap away in flight or charge the man on the bed, Lucky Bug was coolly looking at him over the sights of the heavy Colt.

"Take it easy, my friend," said Lucky Bug softly. "I'm not going to plug you. I threw down on you only to make sure that you'd stay put while I say what I have to say. If I'd spoken to you to let you know I was awake, you might have bolted through the door. Then I wouldn't have had a chance to speak to you. Step over there between me and the window, please. The sun has dropped behind a hill; the light is dim in here. I want to see your face."

The man obeyed without a word, backing into the position that Lucky Bug had ordered him to take.

The face that the better light revealed was scarred and bore a predatory look. The nose was negroid, and lips puckered and thick. The eyes, slate-blue, were small and scared and held a hunted look. Above them the eyebrows were inordinately thin. A stuble of beard showed on the dirty face.

"When did you squeeze out?" Lucky Bug asked casually.

The slitted eyes darted a look of fright and understanding.

"Come—talk fast!" the master of the situation advised. "The owner of this cabin will be here shortly."

"D'yuh savvy, boss?" It was a husky croak of horror.

"I savvy," was the answer.

"Six days ago, I t'ink it was—maybe only five. I'm all mixed up. Mister, I'm starvin'. Honest, I am, mister. Youse wouldn't—wouldn't toin me down f'r a little grub, would youse?"

"You may take with you the grub you have when you go," said Lucky Bug. "The clothes, too. I'll figure out a way to explain their loss. Are they after you?"

"Dey was, fer a little. I hoid de houn's t'ree days ago. But I beat it up de cricks an' lost 'em. W'ere am I, mister? I don't savvy how to beat it outa dese jungles. I been wanderin' aroun' fer days an' couldn't get no grub. I seen sev'ral houses, but I didn't dast show meself. I'm pretty near nutty, mister. Youse wouldn't toin me in, would youse? I never done nuttin' to youse, did I, sir?"

"I am not going to turn you in," Lucky Bug promised him. "I have a broken arm and two crushed ribs, and couldn't very well handle you. But you

know what it means for a person to aid an escaped convict. Come here."

The man shuffled toward him, suspicious of such treatment, wary, ready to bolt if a good chance offered.

"When you leave this ranch, walk up the creek for half a mile and watch carefully for a trail that runs due south, almost. That's south—that way. Keep to the trail till it leads you to the highway. Then you'll have to watch out for yourself. Travel east, and travel only after dark. Take the grub you have there, and the clothes. Burn your prison clothes when you've put those on. They'll fit you pretty well. Look over there on the wall. Do you see that pair of chaps—leather riding pants?"

"Yes, mister."

"In the right-hand pocket you'll find a purse with about fifty dollars in it. Go get it."

The escaped convict almost ran as he crossed the floor, dug into the pocket of the chaps, and twisted out the well-filled purse.

"Take that and the grub and the clothes and run," said Lucky Bug. "And if you're caught, be a man and please don't tell anybody that I helped you."

"Boss, I won't—honest to Heaven! I'll let 'em——"

"Beat it!" Lucky Bug cut in. "The man who'll be here shortly would probably never speak to me again if he knew what I've done. Good-by—good luck!"

The man grabbed up the food about which the old clothes were wrapped and darted for the door. But there he paused, drew back, and glanced helplessly at his benefactor.

"Great heavens!" he breathed. "Dere's a guy an' a goil ridin' here now!"

"Out through the kitchen door!" cried Lucky Bug. "Your only chance. Keep the cabin between yourself and them and run like the devil!"

With the breath rattling in his throat from fatigue and fright and deprivation, the man slithered awkwardly across the living room and out into the sunshine through the kitchen door.

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

GOOD BERRY PROSPECTS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

BERRY growers in British Columbia expect 1925 to be a banner year for their industry, according to late reports from Vancouver. A recent survey shows that there are two thousand five hundred and twenty-eight berry growers in the province and that the total acreage devoted to the cultivation of their crops is six thousand three hundred and eight. The chief varieties are raspberries, strawberries, loganberries, blackberries, red and black currants, and gooseberries.

PROSPECTOR'S BATTLE WITH RATTLERS

SEVERAL weeks ago, Thomas Toner, an aged prospector, formerly working in the Klondike, was traversing a rough stretch of country in the vicinity of Goldfield, Nevada, when he stepped into a nest of rattlesnakes. The reptiles inflicted several bites on his legs, while he was killing four of them with a shovel. Toner refused to go to a hospital, saying that he could treat himself better. At last accounts, he was still living, but his condition was critical.

Your Dog

By David Post

Author of "The Scottish Deerhound," etc.

THE OTTERHOUND

ALTHOUGH seldom seen in the United States, the otterhound is an old and well-established breed. An outdoor, sporting dog, it is very popular in England, where it is used to combat the wily otter. This is work that makes more than ordinary demands upon the canine hunter, for the otter is one of the most expert swimmers and divers; it has exceptionally keen hearing and scent, and is so intelligent that it is rarely to be caught in traps. Its home is in the bank of a stream, and the entrance to its burrow is under water. The dog that runs down the otter must have a keen scent, a sturdy constitution, exceptional natatorial ability, endurance, intelligence, and great courage and determination. Otter hunting is a sport in which the odds are in favor of the pursued; the chase often leads over land and in and under water, and to cope successfully with the quarry, the pursuer must be game. For otter hunting, there is no breed that can compete with the otterhound.

This dog resembles the bloodhound in general conformation, but its coat is as shaggy as a deerhound's. Its skull is thicker and flatter than that of the bloodhound; the forehead is rather high; the eyes, very dark and thoughtful in expression, are sunk in the head. The lower lid droops so that the haw of the eye is exposed. The eyebrows are prominent and shaggy. A long muzzle, well covered with wiry hair, terminates in black, wide-expanding nostrils; heavy lips—flews—hang below the jaw level on either side of the muzzle. Long, thin, pendulous ears should be well covered almost to the tips with rather long, coarse hair.

The otterhound's neck is moderately long, and strong and muscular; it should have a dewlap—loose, pendulous skin—but one not so full as the bloodhound's. The chest should be deep, but not too wide; the shoulders sloping, and powerful; the ribs, deep and well sprung; the back should be strong and wide, with well-developed loins.

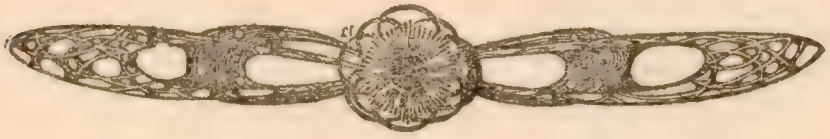
Straight, strong, heavily boned legs are characteristic of the otterhound. The elbows of the forelegs should be well let down, and the feet should be well knuckled up. It is only of recent years that the feet have been of the cat type; earlier otterhounds had large, partly webbed feet. The hindquarters should be large and muscular; the stern, carried like a bloodhound's, gayly, but

not curled, should taper and be well covered with hair.

Dense, wiry, and hard, the coat should be moderately long. The colors vary; brown, tan, and grizzle being the usual ones. The coat, however, may be gray, black, or red mixed with black or gray.

The height of a dog should be not less than twenty-five inches; of a bitch, not less than twenty-three inches.

Another sporting dog, the foxhound, will make its appearance in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE



RIO GRANDE'S CHANGES CONFUSE SURVEYORS

WHEN appraisers were making a revaluation of property in El Paso, Texas, a little while ago, they thought that they had discovered a lot of unassessed land, but City Engineer Anderson informed them that changes in the Rio Grande had put the land in question under water.

"The promoters laid off a lot of blocks on paper," Mr. Anderson explained, "without going down to look over the land. Since then, the river has slowly moved into the United States, and the land that shifted to the Mexican side of the river is now in Mexican territory. Much of the land down there is cut up irregularly, and the assessor will have a nice time trying to fix up values."

The Santa Fe railroad owns a great deal of the property in the principal riverside block under investigation.

HISTORIC GOLD MINE TO RESCUE

THE historic old Plumas-Eureka gold mine at Johnsville, California, is resuming operations after a long period of inactivity. The holdings consist of about two thousand five hundred acres of quartz, placer, and timber claims, and these were operated by separate interests beginning in the early '50's. The Plumas-Eureka Mining Company was formed in 1872 to mine the properties. They were purchased by an English syndicate in 1878, and this concern continued to work the mine until 1894. In this period about eighteen million dollars' worth of gold was produced.

Later, former employees took a lease on the famous property. Other interests acquired it in 1905. Then, in 1909, George W. Phillips, of Boston, purchased the properties, and gave Joshua Turner, of Oakland, a working bond to operate them. This arrangement remained in effect until the latest purchase by San Francisco capitalists.

Two shafts that go down one hundred and eighty-five feet below the lowest tunnel of the mine will be drained, permitting the prospecting of a large ore body which is known to exist at the bottom of these shafts.

Remade in the West

By *Harry Adler*

Author of "No Danger from Without," etc.

PEACEFULLY smoking his after-supper pipe in the fading glow of the sunset, Matt Keane sat before his rough log cabin. There was naught in the surrounding scene to suggest the impending catastrophe. Below the cabin, Crooked Creek tumbled on its foaming, twisting way, the road to the near-by town of Placer skirting its farther bank. Beyond the road the magnificent mountains lifted their dark green, pine-covered slopes. The narrow valley, back of Matt's cabin, spread to the mountain wall hemming it in on that side. Dusty sagebrush and an occasional jack pine broke the rocky flatness.

From up the valley, around the bend of the creek, came the distance-softened crash, grind and groan of the gold dredge that was working its way slowly down the stream.

At Matt's side on the wooden bench sat Bud, cleaning his shotgun. Bud was the twelve-year-old son of a long dead partner of Matt's. The latter had, at his partner's death, undertaken in solemn trust the guardianship of the boy; he had poured into the lad an ocean of affection, matched in intensity only by the fierce adoration that the youngster nourished for his "Uncle Matt."

From the direction of Placer a flivver came rattling along the road, stopping opposite the cabin. A man clambered out and crossed the rough bridge.

"Hello, Matt," he greeted. "'Lo, Bud. Looks like you're getting fixed for some rabbit stew."

He dropped to the ground and leaned back against the cabin wall. Sam Tingley was county clerk and recorder, one of the early pioneers in this district and a true friend of Matt Keane's.

"Matt," Sam began, loading his pipe with troubled, awkward fingers, "I'm afraid there's going to be trouble with the Crooked Creek Company."

Matt turned a surprised, but unworried look upon his friend. "How do you mean, Sam?" he inquired.

"Ettinger—the new superintendent, you know—was in the office to-day, filing a placer claim. It was this claim of yours here that he filed on."

Amazement overspread the prospector's countenance. "He filed on *this*—on the Buddy Placer?"

Sam nodded. "Yes, only that ain't what he calls it. He's named it the Leo—that's his first name."

"But how can he? I filed on it nearly ten years ago. Didn't look like so much then, enough for a man to do pretty good with a pan. When the dredge started in up the Creek five years ago, of course, that made things look differ-

ent. They've got to go through here. Every foot of it can be worked, and they can get all the gold out. It ought to be good for more than a quarter of a million dollars."

"Don't you suppose they know that?" demanded Sam. "They'll be up to your line in about a year, and they're looking ahead. It's my guess that's why they moved Tom Patton out of this district to their property in California. Tom is a square shooter, and he wouldn't have stood for the sort of deal they're trying to work. So they moved him and put in this fellow Ettinger. He's a stony-hearted icicle. He was in the company's legal department back in New York, you know, before he came out here, and the sort of trick he's up to now is just what he thrives on. Practicing law back there, he's got the attitude that everybody is a man-eating shark, and it's a case of get him before he gets you. He stands ace high with the company, too, I understand. He's related to the president—nephew, I think, and the old man lets him run things to suit himself."

"But just the same," Matt expostulated, "I still don't see how he can touch this piece of ground. I own it; everybody knows I own it; he knows I own it. And he nor nobody else can take it away from me!" he finished fiercely.

Sam puffed at his pipe for a troubled few minutes.

"I've been checking up the records pretty carefully, Matt," he said. "About four years ago you overlooked filing your certificate of labor. Of course, you know what the law requires, that you've got to file a certificate each year showing one hundred dollars' worth of labor put in on the claim."

"Sure, I know, but I've always done it! Maybe, though——" Matt's brow wrinkled thoughtfully. "That was just about the time things looked so good over Wild Cat way," he said reflectively. "I was putting in a lot of time over there, and in chasing back and forth maybe I did get sort of careless and overlooked filing that certificate."

"It looks like you did," Sam stated soberly.

"But I did the work," Matt protested fiercely. "I did the work all right—more than enough. Even if I did forget the certificate, I can prove by witnesses all over town that I was here working the claim most of the time."

"That ain't the point," the other man argued regretfully. "The law says you've got to file a certificate."

"But they wouldn't rob a man of his property just on a fool thing like that!"

Sam shrugged his shoulders mournfully. "It don't look good to me," he said. "Better come in to-morrow, Matt, and we'll go over the records. Then you'd better grab the train for Denver and hire the best lawyer you can find down there."

Bud had listened intently to Sam's first few sentences. Then, unnoticed, he had laid down his gun, risen from the bench, and trotted swiftly away. Now he came running up, his eyes blazing with angry excitement.

"He's got his location stakes and notices, Uncle Matt," he panted. "I've just been down to the corners to look."

Sam nodded. "Sure. You can bet he's going to be careful to do things proper. Of course, even though he's filing in his own name, he's just doing it for the company, on account of it being so much swifter and more convenient for an individual to file than a corporation. After his title is sure, if he wins out, he'll just transfer to the company. You'd better get busy on it, Matt; I don't like it a-tall."

When Sam had headed back toward Placer, Matt stood staring through the now dusk-filled valley toward the never-ceasing noise of the dredge. There was in the familiar sound a threatening, challenging note now. He recalled with what a joyous bound of hope he had

first heard of the coming of the gold dredge—how he had counted each day's approach of the giant monster that would make a realization of the fortune that lay hidden beneath this rocky surface.

Bud stepped to the prospector's side. "Uncle Matt," he inquired, "did he mean that they're going to take your claim away from you?"

"It looks like they're going to try to, Bud," the man answered.

The boy stood for a few moments, his little fists clenched tightly. "Don't let 'em, Uncle Matt!" he cried fiercely. "We'll fight 'em! It's yours—we won't let 'em take it away from you!"

A mist other than the falling gloom of night blurred Matt's eyes at the loyalty of that stout declaration: *"We'll* fight 'em!"

He dropped his hand on the boy's tousled head. "Fight 'em! I should say we will fight 'em! I've watched and I've waited, hoping all the time to make something out of this for you. For myself I don't care; I'm getting old and don't need much. But it's for you I wanted it, and I'm going to keep it for you, too."

" 'Tain't mine," the boy denied. "It's yours. And we'll fight 'em for it."

Early next morning Matt circled the boundaries of his claim. True enough, at each corner, beside his own old, scarred, weather-beaten stakes, new ones had been driven, bearing neatly-lettered notices of Ettinger's claim.

"He must have put 'em up at night, in the dark, the crooked devil!" Matt reflected. "And filed his claim the next day."

It was with a great effort that he restrained his impulse to tear down the mocking signs.

He went back to the cabin, saddled his horse, and rode in to Placer. An examination of the record showed the facts to be as outlined by Sam the preceding evening. Matt's salvation seemed resolved into a question of law and court interpretation.

Matt walked slowly to the building housing the offices of the Crooked Creek Gold Dredging Company. Superintendent Ettinger was seated at the desk in his private office as Matt stepped slowly within the door.

Ettinger was a man of about thirty-five, with a deceptive youthfulness in his round, cold face. He was inclined to rotundity, and a bald center was spreading upon the top of his oat-colored head. His blue eyes were dully burnished buttons of cold metal. At Matt's entrance he looked up.

"Come in, Mr. Keane," he invited with mocking suavity. "Have a chair."

Matt ignored the invitation. He remained standing where he was, his gray eyes fixed unflinchingly upon the superintendent.

"I see you've filed on my placer claim, Mr. Ettinger," he said.

"By no means," the other denied. "How could I file on *your* claim, or a claim belonging to any other man?"

The man's cynical meaning did not escape Matt.

"I say," Matt repeated firmly, with slightly raised inflection, "that you've filed on *my claim.*"

Ettinger shook his head. "I have filed on a claim that I am calling the Leo Placer," he declared. "That is the only claim which I own."

"You came out here just to steal my claim away from me," Matt accused.

"Those are harsh words, Mr. Keane. Any lawyer will tell you that the record does not show you as owning any claim—at least, in this county. You can hardly be robbed of property you do not possess."

Red rage flooded up to the prospector's face. He took a step forward and raised his clenched fist.

"You crooked, robbing devil!" he cursed. "I'll fight you to the last ditch! If there's justice anywhere under this

Colorado sun, I'll show you up for the lying, thieving coyote you are!"

He turned and flung himself from the office, trembling with fury. To stay another moment would surely lead him to physical assault upon that cold, insolent, leering countenance.

Matt returned to the cabin and made his few simple preparations for departure for Denver. By hurrying he could catch the noon train.

He had no apprehension about leaving Bud alone. The boy's life in these hills had bred a thorough independence and self-reliance. Often Matt had gone off on prospecting trips—sometimes taking the boy along with him, and sometimes not.

"Good-by, Bud," the prospector said to the lad, when he was ready to ride in to Placer. "I'll be back in a few days. We'll fight 'em, if it takes our last cent and our last breath."

"You bet we will!" the boy stoutly agreed.

Three days later Matt returned, with a worried look in his eye; the furrows on his tanned brow cut deeper than usual. He had spent the time in the offices of the leading mining law firm in Denver, listening in dazed despondency to the ponderous legal arguments of the firm members as they consulted over his situation. They had gravely informed him that his case was a weak one indeed. Nevertheless, with clenched fist and tightened jaw, he had instructed them to proceed with such legal action as was necessary.

"It's going to be a tough fight, Bud," he stated gloomily, as they sat at supper.

"But we'll win," the boy asserted confidently. "They can't steal your claim away from you that way."

The optimism proved to be unjustified. The case came to trial and the district court judge solemnly, ponderously, and with much verbiage smothering the technical legal quibbling, rendered judgment that Matt had forfeited his rights in the claim and that Ettinger's filing was valid.

Dazed, bewildered, scarcely comprehending what he had just heard, Matt stiffly descended the steps of the courthouse. Bud, sitting on the lowest step, sprang to his feet. He had accompanied Matt to town, but the gloomy atmosphere of the courtroom had weighed too oppressively upon him, and he had spent the time during the progress of the trial in roaming sadly about the streets of the town.

One glance at Matt's face was sufficient. The boy gulped. Then he placed his hand in the man's and squeezed it comfortingly.

"Never mind, Uncle Matt," he whispered bravely, although a bit chokingly, "we'll lick 'em yet."

Down the steps, with calm, sure, unhurried tread, came Ettinger. His face was smiling, triumphant. He passed a mocking glance over the prospector and his little companion, as he walked away. But in that instant there had been imprinted upon his brain a sudden flash of an impression of a pair of deep blue boy's eyes, fiercely blazing with an intensity of passionate hatred that for a startled moment sent a twinge of apprehension through the man.

To the last ditch he would fight, had Matt vowed; and so he would fight. If he was to be beaten, he would go down fighting. Wherefore it was that he instructed his lawyers, even in the face of their meager hopes, to proceed with an appeal to the supreme court of the State.

The days dragged by, the weeks, the months, bringing with them the usual succession of delays. And with each day the dredge crept closer and closer, feeding its insatiable gorge upon the rich, gold-bearing gravel of which nature had seen fit to construct the valley. The distance between the dead line marked by that fateful clump of sagebrush and the clawing buckets of the

dredge shrank daily—slowly, but with an inevitable certainty. The distance shrank to a matter of rods—and of yards.

And then, when it looked as if matters must come to an immediate climax, the fateful envelope came. Matt ripped it open with trembling fingers. He drew forth the sheet; it rattled as he spread it open—and crushed it with a sudden, convulsive clenching of his hand. The supreme court had finally rendered judgment; the decision of the lower court had been affirmed. Ettinger had won.

"We've lost, Bud," he gulped. "We've lost. They've taken our claim away from us."

Manfully the boy choked back the grief that was welling up in his throat—grief more for the sorrow of his Uncle Matt than for the loss that they had suffered. He took the rough, hard hand between his own two small, tanned palms and stroked it gently.

"Never mind, Uncle Matt," he comforted. "We don't care. Even if they take this away from us, we'll go out and find another one."

Despondently Matt prepared for another trip to Denver for a last consultation with his lawyers. He clenched his jaw. Whether there was any further course of action open to him, he did not know. Perhaps this was the last ditch; perhaps there were no other trenches to which he could withdraw for another stand.

He glanced anxiously toward the dredge, now in full view of the cabin—looming, indeed, ominously above it. The grinding of the buckets, the screeching of the cables and gears, had been the incessant accompaniment of life in the cabin for some time past. But a few feet now remained between its greedy bucket lips and the clump of sage.

"I'm going to make a last trip to Denver, Bud," he declared. "I'll be back before they get to the line, and when I do get back, I'll know where we stand." He smiled sadly. "We ain't licked yet, Bud, are we?"

"Not by a darned sight!" the boy promptly retorted. "They won't cross that line! This is still your placer, and I'd like to see anybody say it ain't!"

As soon as Matt had boarded the train for Denver—an act which in that small community was, of course, of immediate universal knowledge—Ettinger proceeded toward a demonstration that he did not share Bud's views as to the ownership of the Buddy—or the Leo—Placer. Sensing a possible tactical advantage in at least partial possession, he gave hurried instructions to forge ahead with all speed. The pond corners were to be but roughly worked and bed rock was to be but superficially scraped. The proper working of this intervening strip was to be sacrificed to the effort to enter upon the actual digging of the disputed ground before Matt's return.

The second morning after Matt's departure found the dredge within reach of the line. Confidently, in triumphant elation, Ettinger directed the first shift of the day in working out the corners of the pond and preparing for the moment of triumph. If he noticed at all the small, still figure squatted near the clump of sagebrush, watching with sullenly smoldering eyes the activities aboard the dredge, he gave it little thought. During Ettinger's residence in this district, Bud, with his inevitable shotgun, ranging the valley and the hills for rabbits, grouse, quail, and other game, according to the seasonal restrictions, had been a common enough figure.

The three o'clock oiling period came. The huge buckets halted in their diving beneath the surface of the muddy pond, while the crew clambered about the boat, giving it a hurried greasing and oiling and making the necessary minor adjustments. The spud suspension sheaves screeched and the shore lines

strained and creaked, as the spuds were raised. The dredge took its clumsy, heavy-footed, single step forward, placing itself in position to bite its first mouthsful out of the Buddy Placer.

Suddenly the sound of a shot startled Ettinger and the members of his crew into surprised attention. They hurried up on deck. On the shore, back of the disputed line, stood Bud, his shotgun at his shoulder. Evidently he had fired as a call to attention.

Through the surprised stillness his shrill voice cut pipingly. "The first bucketful you dig out of Uncle Matt's ground," he warned, "I'll shoot."

For a moment the men stood on the boat in wordless astonishment. Then Ettinger broke forth with an oath.

"I'll wring your little head off!" he shouted. He turned to his crew. "Get on the job; it's time to go."

For a second the men stood uncertainly. Then the winchman turned to the iron ladder and mounted to the winch room. The other men scattered about to their various posts.

The winchman threw on the power switch. The chain of buckets began slowly revolving.

Into the bank they bit. The clump of sagebrush was seized by a violent agitation. It lifted, clung desperately to its lifelong hold upon the earth about it, then succumbed to the remorseless grind of the buckets.

And with the moment of its surrender, a charge of buckshot broke against the side of the winch house. With an oath, the winchman hastily jerked out the switch. Through the window at his side his head and chest were in full exposure to the youthful warrior on the bank below, and the man knew that Bud was too good a shot not to be able to reach that mark with his next shot; this first charge, he well understood, was merely final warning of the deadliness of the boy's intent.

At the shot, Ettinger had ripped out a volley of furious oaths and dashed up the gangplank. Without waiting for it to be lowered, he seized the rope dangling from its end and dropped off onto the bank.

He ran over to the boy. "You little idiot!" he yelled. "I'll wring your neck off for you! Do you think you can stop me with any foolishness of this kind?"

The boy stood dauntlessly, unflinchingly. His eyes met Ettinger's without wavering. "You ain't going to dig on Uncle Matt's ground," he declared.

"I'll dig any place I please, without asking any brat like you for permission!" bellowed Ettinger, and started for the boy.

The gun in Bud's hands dropped in swift defense. The man's rush had brought him forward swiftly, and at the lowering of the gun, almost in his very face, he gave an instinctive, startled leap to one side.

He landed heavily, stumbled, and fell. And a cry of fright rose from his lips, echoed by the simultaneous cry from the men on the boat, who were standing at the edge of the deck, watching the proceedings. The digging of the buckets had undermined the bank, the top crust of earth curling back over the pond like the crest of a wave. Ettinger's sidewise leap had thrown him upon this overhang. As his weight struck, great radiating cracks shot out. For an instant the crust held, while the man clawed frantically in an endeavor to secure a hold on solidity. Then, amid a cloud of dust, man and earth slid down the twenty-five feet to the muddy dredge pond.

Startled, white-faced, Bud stood looking down the sheer bank cleared away from his very toe tips. For a few moments there was but a muddy churning of the water as the dirt sank beneath the surface; then Ettinger's head bobbed uncertainly to the surface. From his frantic splashing it became immediately

evident that the man could not swim a stroke—and the pond was some fifty feet deep. A crimson stain appeared from a cut above his eyes, inflicted, probably, by a rock during the fall. Weakly, feebly, he managed to grasp a fragment of solid rock, jutting out from the bank.

After the first few moments of stupefied alarm the crew on the dredge had dashed for the side of the boat where the flat-bottomed scow, used for bringing coal and other heavy supplies aboard, was fastened. But before they could jump into it the sound of the shotgun again broke the air.

"Keep away from that scow!" the boy shrilled.

The men stared at the sturdy, defiant little figure, gun to shoulder, standing on the bank.

"Oh, say, Bud," one of the men finally found breath to expostulate. "You're going too far. You can't just let him drown!"

"I said keep away from that boat!" the boy doggedly repeated. And the muzzle of the gun held unflinchingly into the midst of the group.

"Help!" came Ettinger's feeble cry. "Help! I can't swim."

Impotently the crew stood clustered at the edge of the deck. Bud dropped to the ground and, lying flat, held the men covered, while keeping an eye on the man in the water below.

The latter had by now grasped the situation.

"You little devil!" he cried in terrorized fury. "I'll break every bone in your body when I get up!"

Fiercely he strained to lift himself from the water and claw a hold in the bank, for ascent. But without avail; and in slipping back he was barely able to regain his former hold. His face was ashen gray, except for the streams of crimson trailing across it. His strength was fast ebbing; he would not be able to maintain his grip long. Across his brain flashed the sickening recollection of that pair of blazing, hate-filled eyes that had met his that day on the courthouse steps.

"I promised Uncle Matt I wouldn't let you dig on his ground," Bud declared; the simple explanation was, apparently, full and complete justification. And the gun muzzle held its position.

From behind came the sudden sound of galloping hoofbeats. As Bud jerked his head about, he saw Matt come dashing toward the dredge. Evidently he had returned from Denver on that afternoon's train and on riding home to the cabin had observed something unusual happening at the edge of the pond.

He sprang from his horse and strode to the edge of the pond. With a gasp he sensed the situation.

Matt stared down at the streaked face of the man who had ruthlessly, joyously despoiled him and wrecked the hopes he had murtured for these past years.

For a desperate moment Matt stood thus and stared, his hands gripped fiercely at his side. Then he dived off the edge of the bank, into the muddy waters below.

At his leap, the men on the dredge had sprung into the scow and started pulling eagerly toward Ettinger. Part way across they met Matt, swimming with the now senseless superintendent in tow.

Silently Matt lifted Ettinger aboard and climbed in himself. But the moment the dredge was reached he clambered out of the scow onto the dredge. Without a word or a backward glance he strode up the gangplank, swung off the end, and headed back to the cabin.

At twilight Matt sat again on the bench in front of his cabin. By his side, again, sat Bud, cleaning his gun. Matt stared wearily at the dusk-swathed mountains beyond the creek. His heart was leaden. His visit to Denver had resulted simply in the confirmation of

the hopeless news. The fight in the last ditch had been fought—and lost. He was now without a single legal recourse. The Buddy Placer was no longer his.

Along the road came the purr of an automobile. Matt gave it no heed, hardly heard it, in fact—not even when it halted opposite the cabin and its driver came across the bridge.

Not until the man stood almost before him did Matt notice his caller. Then, recognizing him, he rose slowly to his feet. His face turned white with anger.

Superintendent Ettinger came slowly forward. A large patch of court-plaster covered the cut on his forehead. He was still the same cold individual he had always been, but somehow new lines seemed to have carved themselves into his face.

He held out his hand to Matt. "Mr. Keane," he said, "this afternoon you saved my life. I want to thank you."

Matt's hand remained at his side.

"If your thieving, rotten life is worth anything to you," he answered, "you're welcome to it."

"I want to shake your hand," Ettinger persisted, "and I want to be your friend."

For a moment he halted. Then he continued: "The first thing to-morrow morning I'm going to withdraw my filing on this placer. And I'm going to prepare a contract between you and the Crooked Creek Gold Dredging Company covering the dredging of your ground, on the usual basis of fifty per cent of the net proceeds, which I think will be satisfactory to you."

Matt's brain was whirling. But the words of the man before him were too plain to be mistaken.

"I guess I came out here to a wrong start," Ettinger was saying regretfully. "You see, I have lived all my life in the East—got all my business and legal training there. We do things differently out there. But you grow boys who are loyal enough to commit what amounts to murder, in defense of their people's rights. And you grow men who will save the life of their bitterest enemy, when they could conveniently avoid seeing certain situations until too late to interfere. I—I sort of like that kind of man," he finished. "I like that sort of country. I'm going to stay and try to grow to fit into it."

And there was no suggestion of a sneer in the wistful smile that brightened his face as his right hand grasped Matt's, and his left hand gripped the shoulder of the wondering, barely comprehending boy.

MORE RAILROADS FOR WESTERN TEXAS

THE development of business in western Texas has caused plans to be made by the Burlington System for a straight-line railroad that will run westward from Fort Worth to Plainview and Lubbock. The proposed line would branch northwest from Spur to Lubbock. The main line would proceed north and west through Dickens, Floyd, Crosby, and Hale Counties to Plainview. From Stamford, the terminal of the Wichita Valley lines, the road would probably run east through Haskell, Throckmorton, Young, Jack, Parker, and Tarrant Counties to Fort Worth. In some places this road would rather closely parallel the proposed Texas, Panhandle & Gulf Line from Fort Worth to Tucumcari, New Mexico. There are a number of large cattle ranches in this part of Texas, and the added railroad facilities would be of great service to these cattlemen.

Silvertip~ Beast of Burden

By

Austin Hall

Author of "Silvertip," etc.

PERHAPS it was old John's fault in the beginning, or it may have been merely the pure cussedness of the others, but at any rate the thing was fast approaching a tragedy.

It began in the winter when the snow had come and the Siskiyous were like titanic piles of powdered sugar. All the world was white and silent. Vast stretches lay toward the horizon with only the tips of the firs peeking out at a wan cold sky. Silvertip, John's pet grizzly, had long since curled up for his winter's sleep. The short days had come when the shadows hit the cañons almost as soon at it was noon—moody days, in view of which, the old man had filled the cabin half full of pine knots and was spending the long evenings beside his roaring fireplace. There he could watch the pot of beans suspended over the blaze, fix his traps, and dream of the beautiful days of the coming summer. In the mornings he was up at dawn to eat a hearty breakfast and depart on his long trap line.

John Harper Adams believed in fairness. Consequently when one day he skied over the top of Indian Ridge and ran into indiscriminate slaughter, there was trouble a-plenty. What he saw made his heart grow black and caused his trigger finger to develop an incipient attack of St. Vitus' dance. He had heard shooting, but when he came over the hill and saw what it was, he did a little practicing himself. What he saw was a band of deer floundering in the snow with three men perched on the rocks enjoying themselves. The deer had been run into the drifts and were helpless. Furthermore, they were mostly does, fourteen all told. At the sight, old John skimmed over the snow like a bullet. Before any one was aware what was coming, there was more than doe shooting going on. Old John did not shoot to kill. He did not have to; he was too good a shot. One of the men tumbled off his rock and landed head first in the snow. He had lost his gun and the concussion of the stock against his chin had put him out of the battle. John swept the others with his rifle.

"By thunder," he said slowly, "you boys surely have been enjoying yourselves. It's great sport to kill, ain't it? And mebbe it's a lot more sport getting killed. So if you want to go on with the game we'll continue. You boys can shoot the rest of them poor does if you want to, and while you're doing it, I'll just improve my shooting average by giving you a taste of your own medicine. How about it? You want to play?"

He eyed the two fellows on the rocks. The other was digging his way out of

the snow amid a splutter of curses. The poor deer, sunk to their bellies, were looking out of plaintive eyes. The two men knew the old man's penchant for shooting, and were loathe to take a chance. Argument was a better policy.

"Aw, come off of it, John," said one. "What's it to you? Them deer are to kill, ain't they? And we're killing them."

"I see you are," replied the old man. "Deer are to kill and then again they ain't. Deer's for meat, and to furnish sport. But they ain't no sport in murder, boys, never. Besides these deer are does, and a man that shoots a doe is just like a man that hits a lady. What are you a going to do about it?"

The man spoken to fumbled with his gun; he was watching his companion climb back on the rock; also he was watching John's gun.

"Why. I don't suppose we're going to do anything about it. Not with an old woman like you around. I ain't aiming to get killed—yet. But I'm a going to warn you, John, that it's a pretty good practice in these here mountains to mind your own business. You don't have to shoot does unless you want to, but when I take a notion to shoot, I'm going to do just as I dang please. I——"

He stopped suddenly. The old man had shifted his gun; there was a look in his eye that told that he meant business. Nevertheless the other was no coward.

"Well?" asked the old man.

"Aw, go to the devil!" said the other. "Keep your deer. We're going home."

He turned to leap off the rock, but just as he did so, old John let loose with the quickest kind of a shot. His free arm swept up and his .45 barked. Simultaneously a bullet struck the butt of the man's rifle and splintered the stock. This was old John's favorite trick. The man followed the gun and landed face down on the snow. The other fellow had made a movement, but when old John swept the gun right on, and he found himself looking down the barrel, he thought better of it.

"By thunder!" said the old man slowly, "I guess that's a fair persuader. I ain't come here for no argument whatsoever. And I ain't agoing to take no impudence. What I say is just exactly what I mean. You aim to go home and leave these deer. And I aim to see that you don't. Them dead deer is meat, and it ain't agoing to be wasted."

The third man had said nothing. He was the only one who was not *hors de combat*. The other was looking at his ruined rifle and muttering vengeance; but otherwise he was pretty well whipped.

"You mean that we got to carry these deer out?"

"Yep," said John, "that's the English of it, and English is the only language I speak. You're a-going to do just that. There's widows down in town who have a hard time making a living. It ain't fair to leave all that meat up here to waste when they can use it. They's four of them deer. And we're four of us. I can pack one along with the rest of you. We can make my cabin to-night, and to-morrow we can go down to Sweet Valley. But first we'll get out the deer that you didn't shoot. They're the little mothers, boys, that bear the bucks that give us the venison steaks. You want to remember that."

Two days later four weary men staggered into the town of Sweet Valley and headed straight for the office of Sheriff Byrnes. The three men were so thoroughly subdued that old John was covering up their misdemeanor as well as he could. To the town of Sweet Valley they had merely been hunting, but it looked rather strange to see them heading for the office of the sheriff. Sheriff Byrnes closed one eye and looked at the does; then he looked at old John.

"Been huntin'?" he asked.

"The boys have," said old John. "They had a little luck and they just couldn't waste that meat by leaving it in the mountains. They said as how they was some poor widows with families in town who could use that meat more than anything, and as I just happened along when they had killed the animals, they persuaded me to help them pack one of them in. I was coming in after provisions anyway. What's the matter?"

The sheriff was smiling knowingly, but at John's question his face became serious.

"I was just thinking," he said. Then to the others: "Boys, you're improving every day. I'm getting proud of you. It's the first time that you ever thought of a white thing like that. That was a noble thing to do, and there's some here that can just use that meat."

But the others were not so comfortable. They shuffed around and looked shyly at old John—looks that bore more than malice. At the first opportunity all three sidled out of the door and crossed the street to the Mountain House. When they were gone, Sheriff Byrnes turned to old John.

"Now, you old blunderbus," said he, "I want to know what it is all about."

"That's a secret," said old John carefully. "A secret that wouldn't be exactly fair for me to tell. They're just mountain boys who went out for a little shooting, and when they came to good shooting, they didn't exactly stop to reason things out. They——"

"Fine." The sheriff laughed. "Then you admit that you caught them. I'm a-going to stop you now, before you tell it. You don't ever want to get in trouble, John, because your mouth will convict you sure. I knew right at the start that you had worked a trick on them and made them bring in them deer. Those fellows never did a good turn in their lives. You know who they are, don't you?"

"They're brothers, I understand," answered the old man. "That's all they told me. I've seen them here in town."

The sheriff lit his pipe; he looked out of the window at the snow-covered mountains.

"They're the Butters boys," said he. "Bad hombres all three. Just about as gentle as Red Turner and his bunch, only a little bit more careful. They belong in the jail, all three of them, and some day I'm a-going to get them there. If you had brought them in here with them does a week from now, I could have put them in the jug, but the governor hasn't signed the bill yet."

"Signed what bill?"

"The game bill. Ain't you heard yet? That's right. You don't get the news, do you? Well, it's this way, John. They've passed a law down in Sacramento to protect game. There's a-going to be an open and a closed season. That means that you can only shoot deer at certain times of the year, and even then you can only shoot bucks. Does are going to be taboo. The man who shoots a doe from now on will face a term in jail."

"That's good," said John. "That's the first time the legislature ever did a thing with sense. How about bears?"

"Nothing about bears, John. They ain't educated up on bears like us. Bears are legitimate game. They're killers. Now, don't snort. That's what they think. Anyway they've made this law and as soon as the big chief signs it, it will go into effect. There's going to be a State game warden and a number of deputies, all with power to arrest. They'll look after the game and see that hunting is done for sport, and sport only."

"That's a dog-gone good law," said the old man. "There was a professor man up through my country one day who told me of a motto that the good

men of the old days used to carve on their guns. It read *'Noblesse Oblige,'* and he said that it meant that a nobleman should do what a nobleman ought to do. And it seems to me that the same motto ought to apply to any man living. Only it don't. So I guess we've got to have game wardens. I suppose we're going to have one up here?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"Nope. We're too far up in the woods, John. A game warden is a good deal like a pound man in the city. He ain't welcome. The boys around here regard these mountains as their own particular playground. Also they've got their own notions about game. Of course I'd arrest any man if I caught him, because it's my duty. But just now a game warden up here would be rather uncomfortable."

Old John was watching one of the Butters boys walking down the street; he was thinking about those does.

"Well," he said, "I was just thinking. I want you to send and get me one of those deputy stars. I kinda like that law, and as long as I like it, I'm going to do what I can to help it along."

Sheriff Byrnes looked long and keen; he knew old John.

"Don't do it," he said. "You'll be just inviting trouble. The man who starts that up here is going to have his hands full. The boys ain't ready for it. You know the men we've got." He closed one eye. "I don't want to be chasing up some one for murder."

"You just send for that star," said John. "I'll tend to the murder part. I'm kind of used to ducking shots anyway."

That's how John got his star. Two months later he returned to town and found everything waiting. Sheriff Byrnes handed him his badge of authority without comment. Old John pinned it on his jumper and marched straight over to the Mountain House. He proclaimed the law and told what it meant. A game warden! And in the Siskiyous! Said John to the astonished listeners:

"You can all come into the mountains and do all the hunting you want, provided you do it legal. All we ask is that you be sportsmen. They ain't a-going to be no doe hunters allowed. If they do come, by thunder, they'll have to deal with old John."

He knew by their attitude that there was not a man in the mountains who liked the idea of a warden. Sheriff Byrnes coralled him before he left town and gave him a last injunction.

"Better be careful from now on, John. Accidents are bound to happen, and a stray bullet is a hard thing to account for. That's been the fate of many a game warden in a new country. The boys like you as John, but as an officer to oversee their hunting—I don't know."

That's all that happened until spring. Then one day the old man received a note. It had no signature, but its purport was manifest.

JOHN HARPER ADAMS: You're a game warden, but you ain't got no license to tell us mountain fellers when and what we kin hunt. You send back that star, or you'll git what's a-coming to you. We've decided that we'll be our own officers and hunt just the way we dang please. You're a pretty good old cuss as long as you mind your own business, but your business ain't to take care of us. We mean just what we say. And we ain't responsible for what happens if you get sassy.

A nice little missive for a man just starting out. John knew that sentiment was against him, but he knew also that most of it was centered in the Butters boys. They had avowed revenge, and he knew that they would get it—if they could. That night the old man took down his guns and oiled them carefully. Over his pipe he read the letter again and thought it out.

"Well," he said to himself, "the sooner she comes, the better. Them

boys don't like it, of course. But somebody has got to take up the task of giving the animals a fair deal. After a few brushes the boys will think different."

As it happened, the trouble came sooner than he was looking for it. It was the season of the year when the winter was overlapping into spring and the snow had not yet vanished into the freshets. The pussy willows had come on the banks, and venturesome greens were thrusting out their doubtful flowers to make a test of the weather. The trapping season had gone with a bang. Old John had left some traps on a ridge about twelve miles from his cabin. Now that the season was done he bethought himself of getting them in. Also there was some gravel on the other side of the ridge that he had figured on panning. He would be gone some days and so he must fit up his kit. But first he went into his mine to look up Silvertip. That is, he went in —but when he came to the tunnel where the big grizzly hibernated, and found the rubbish still in place, he changed his mind. He remembered that a bear coming out of hibernation is a poor traveler and a poor eater. If he awoke the bear, he would have to wait for several days. By that time he could make his trip and get back to camp and all would be well. He was skeptical about Silvertip. He was afraid that his enemies would work their vengeance by taking a shot at his bear. That would be easy, and there was no law in the land to reach the man who did it.

All went well for several days. He made the trip and prospected the little creek he had had in mind. Then one day he heard shooting. It was early for hunting; and deer, according to the new law, were out of season; but, for all that, John had no idea of making an arrest. He would merely go over and find out who it was and see how they were getting along. They might be unfriendly; but John had no fear of an enemy so long as he could meet him face to face. He wanted to show that he could be fair with his enforcement.

The old man came across the ridge and skirted around; but he ran across no hunters. After that first spell of shooting there was no sound whatever. So he turned off the ridge and dropped down toward a little flat where there was a bubbling spring of crystal water. It was John's favorite spring. He descended noisily through the brush and climbed the little hogback that bordered the flat. Then he stopped—stopped because he had seen enough.

The hunters had made camp in the flat, and that was not all. They were hunting in open defiance of all law. The season was closed on deer, but these men were hunting and killing does! The proofs were hanging up in the trees. Six of them! And not a man in sight. Old John made sure of that. Then he made his way down the hill and onto the flat. He sat down.

"By jingo," he muttered to himself, "I guess the boys are making a test of it. This law is, or it ain't. That's all. It begins to look as though they wanted to make a fool of old John. Either I do or I don't—and I'm thinking I do."

He went over the camp carefully, but there was not a thing that would lead to identification. Just the six does. He had seen no one on his way into camp. The old man decided that the best plan would be to go out and catch them on the way in. Then he heard shooting again, this time on another ridge. Curiosity led him out of camp and back to the hogback. In fifteen minutes he was on top of the ridge. He made his way for half a mile.

There came a report from the opposite ridge. The old man went up in the air, his left leg shattered. Then a cut across his scalp and for him, darkness. That was all, until three hunters

emerged from the brush and advanced cautiously to his fallen body.

"Dead?" asked one.

"Well, mebbe not dead yet, but by the time we get out of here, he will be. That's what he gets for being nosy and making us pack out them deer. He sure rubbed it in. You remember? I guess from the looks it's up to us to make a sneak."

"Are we going to leave him here?"

"Sure. Why not? We shot him accidentally, didn't we? And if it was a stray shot, we don't know nothing about it. And we better leave these here parts so that we don't learn. We'll go down and pull camp."

Silvertip was waking up. On the very day that the old man had entered the tunnel, the big grizzly had stirred uneasily and looked about in the darkness. He had heard old John thumping around outside, and then he had heard steps passing down the shaft. For a moment his beadlike eyes peered into the blackness and his ears pricked up. Then he was silent. Sleep was good, and there is nothing like the "forty winks" at the end of a bear's hibernation.

But the next day was a different matter; the strange impulse of spring had come, and the bear understood. For some minutes he stood perfectly still, his bulk filling the hole, listening. Fresh air was coming over the rubbish that filled the entrance, and that air bore its message. There was a great world outside—the world of a new year, which promised adventure. The big fellow thrust his head through the rubbish. The light in the mine shaft was soft, and the air was sweet. From the entrance he could smell the budding greens and hear the twitter of awakening life. Slowly he walked along the slanting shaft and looked outside.

A fine place to be in—the sunshine bathing the green forest and the spring wind soughing among the willows. He had awakened just in time, when the willow tips were tender and the lilies budding at the edge of the lake. His feet were covered with a new skin and as soft as a baby's, but down by the water was sand as smooth as velvet. Nature had planned it all—had given him a wake-up appetite for the willow tips that grew in the easy sand. Silvertip studied the world. It was the same old place, with the same old landmarks —the creek and the river, the big mountains and old John's cabin. But there was no old man. The bear listened and pricked up his ears. The scent was there, but it was not an active scent that indicated his master's presence. In his bear's way he wondered, and finally gave it up to wobble down to the river and end his winter's fasting. First he drank of the water, swallowing little sips that were far out of keeping with his huge bulk. Then he broke off a willow branch and ate of the budding tips, sparingly, here and there, until he had consumed a small cupful. A scanty breakfast for a bear, but a great one for a stomach that had shriveled during hibernation. After that he lay down. The water relaxed his stomach and the willow tips stirred up the dormant juices. All day long he lay in the sand, dreaming and drowsing and scenting the wind that was wafting up the cañon. He was too lazy to walk up to the cabin, but as he was a grizzly and able to reason, he wondered what had become of old John.

It was three days before he had roused enough interest to leave the sand spit. Old John had not returned and there was no sign of life up in the clearing. Contact with the sand and the water was beginning to toughen the soles of the bear's feet; likewise his stomach had become stronger. Slowly his hunger was returning, but his hunger was as nothing compared to his longing for old John. He remembered

his pettings. He longed to roll on his back at the old man's feet and have his belly rubbed. He was a bear and getting older every day, but no bear was ever too old for a delight like that.

That is how Silvertip came to the clearing. All was still. The sheds were closed and the cabin locked. No smoke was coming from the chimney and there was no welcoming word from his master. The grizzly sidled up to the door and pulled the latch string—a trick that he had been taught by old John—but it did not open. He dropped to his four paws and turned around; then he looked up at the high ridge that led into the mountains. He knew the old man's habits. The cabin would not be locked unless—— Well, when it was locked, John would be fishing. A grizzly's memory is strong. There was a lake over on the other side, a sheet of water filled with sparkling speckled beauties. Old John would be there. It would not be the first time that he had tracked his master over the mountains. But first he must pick up the trail.

That was easy. There were thousands of tracks about the cabin, each one bearing a scent; but there was one that led to the shaft, out of it, and along the bank of the creek. Silvertip picked it up and started towards the river. Then he crossed the stream and picked up the trail on the other side. Sure enough, the old man had headed up the ridge. That meant the mountains and the lake and a great time for Silvertip. There would be fishing and swimming and a rollicking time with old John.

But Silvertip was not as wise as he thought. The trail struck up the ridge and kept straight on towards the high peaks. The bear changed his mind and began to think of snow. Snow meant coasting. Also, snow meant ice, and ice for tender feet would not do. He was a wise bear and had a way of thinking. John was following a path that he did not understand. Just as he was sure of the snow peaks, the trail turned and hit another ridge. Then all at once the bear heard shooting—on the other side of the gulch. That would be old John. He stopped and listened. His eyes were keen and once he had started looking for a thing, he was pretty sure to see it. Three men were coming down the other side of the cañon. But there was no old John. The three men were strangers, and Silvertip had learned from bitter experience that a stranger was almost sure to be an enemy. So he withdrew to a convenient thicket and waited. The men ascended the ridge on which he was hidden and ran along the summit. After some time he heard them talking. They were about a mile away; then he saw them climb down the side and disappear in the flat. Half an hour later he watched the three men packing down the cañon. It was time to investigate.

Old John had been wounded sorely. When he awoke he was lying in a great pool of blood. His hair was soaked and his face crimson. But that was not as bad as his leg. He could move it, and a cursory examination showed that the bone had been struck above the knee. The old man twisted around and tried to straighten himself out. The pain was terrible. He was weak, his head was bursting with its pain, and he was cold. Besides, he was miles from home without a soul to help him out. It began to look as though he were in a fix from which he could not escape. Still he did not despair.

"By heavens," he said, tearing up his shirt for an impromptu bandage, "they got me that time—pretty near. I'm in a heck of a hole for sure. I guess that's what they calls sport. It goes to show what a man will do, who will shoot a doe. Sheriff Byrnes was right only——"

The world suddenly swam again; black spots danced before his eyes and

then he remembered no more. His exertion had been too much and had started the blood flowing afresh. He dropped back into a motionless, inert mass. After that he felt nothing. This was succeeded by the strangest feeling of his experience. He began dreaming—a nightmare—a rush of subconscious agony that was akin to terror. He was in a horrible place covered with blood with some strange bellows that blew a hot wind into his face. He could not get away from it; he fought and pawed with his hands to keep the thing off, but he could not. Then he felt something warm—a blanket—hair—and he began to wake up. At last he opened his eyes and saw Silvertip.

Silvertip—Silvertip! For one whole minute the old man could not understand. What could Silvertip be doing there? He had been dreaming before, and he must be dreaming now. Half conscious as he was, he could hardly think. Still he remembered looking into the tunnel. But that had been several days before. Yet it must be. Then the old man's mind began to clear, and he began to understand. The big bear had come out of hibernation and had started out to track his master. He had found him just in time. Once again the bear began to smell the old man's face. Then he held up his paw; he seemed to understand.

"Well, well," said old John, "if it ain't that rascally old bear. My old Silvertip! Thought you'd hunt me up, eh? Well, old-timer, I guess old John ain't never seen any one that was any more welcome."

The man was feeling better. The bandages that he had bound about his leg had stopped the flow of blood, and the coming of Silvertip had brought him new life. He had trained the bear and he had confidence in the animal. First he must get home. The bear was a godsend. Old John could scarcely move, but there was a chance that he could ride. He had ridden on Silvertip's back many a time in fun, but now he was in dead earnest. He would have to tie himself on. That was a problem. He had ropes to do it with, but he could scarcely move.

During the next hour old John gave thanks for a bear's intelligence. Silvertip, blundering hulk that he was, treated him as tenderly as a mother would a baby. He seemed to know. It was a terrible task for John to get a strap around his neck, but he did it. The bear lay down, rolled over on his back and did as he was told, and so it was possible for the old man to girdle him with a rope. Then with incredible pain, John caught hold of the shaggy coat and pulled himself on Silvertip's back. He had made a loop in the girdle to act as a stirrup for his one good leg. Then he started the bear up. Silvertip knew the way home and would go there when he was bidden.

The trip back to the cabin was a nightmare. The bear crossed the high ridges and passed down the cañons. Every move, every twist, sent a twinge through the old man's body. But there was no other way out; he must get home. He fainted twice, and each time he had to go through the agony of mounting again. The moon looked down all the time and gazed upon a man riding the strangest mount ever seen in the mountains. All John needed was grit. There was no question of Silvertip. The trip took the whole of the night and a part of the day. When they reached the clearing the sun was shining brightly. The bear took the path that led by the mine shaft.

Suddenly he stopped, and his little ears went up; the old man listened, and drew his .45. Silvertip was never mistaken in sounds, and the old man had a keen sense as to what that sound might be. There was some one rummaging around in the shaft. The old man urged the bear within twenty feet of the open-

ing. Then he waited. Still there were sounds. Then at last came a noise like some one walking down the shaft. Old John let him come and look right down the muzzle of his .45.

It was a surprising moment for the man, and a welcome one for old John. He spoke not a word; he did not have to. The man was afraid of the bear, but he was a whole lot more afraid of the .45. At John's nod he came over and gave up his gun. Then the old man motioned him over against the bank.

That was number one. There was a chance that the other two would come out together, and in that case there would be a fight. Old John was ready to kill. Luck was with him now, and he was not afraid of shooting it out with any man alive. This time there was a half an hour's wait; but again there was no shooting. The second man acted as though he had seen a ghost. He was the one who had left the old man to die. He could not run and it was a whole minute before he could stagger up to the old man and surrender his artillery.

John was getting tired; he began to feel faint. The third man was in the shaft a long time. Twice the black spots danced before the old man's eyes, and he began to wobble. Then he heard the man coming. He knew that he could not last—the man was almost at the entrance. He——

Then he heard the voice of Sheriff Byrnes: "Never mind, John. I'll take care of the next one myself."

That is all that he remembered. When he came to he was lying on the bed, and the sheriff was giving first aid. Three men, bound and tied, were lined up against the wall. The sheriff nodded genially and smiled. Old John looked up. At first he could not understand; then he saw the men.

"Where's Silvertip?" he asked.

"Silvertip? You mean the bear? You want him in here?"

"Well," said old John calmly, "I guess so. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't have been here myself, would I? Bring him in, and then I'll tell you the story. And say, sheriff—did they make a law for bears?"

"No, John, the law protects only deer. Why?"

"Well, it ought to protect bears, too. When an animal has got that much sense they ain't much use shooting it, is they? They don't nobody know nothin' about bears but me. Some day I guess I'll have to go down to that legislature and give 'em a speech. That bear saved my life."

"So I see," said the sheriff. "But you haven't told me how."

Then John told the story. When he was through the sheriff turned to the bear. Silvertip was standing beside the bed with his muzzle in the old man's lap. The officer was reaching into his pocket.

"John, you old son of a gun! If you wasn't so lucky and didn't have that bear, you'd a been dead a long time ago. Eh? And to tell you the truth, there's a whole lot of arrests that I wouldn't have made either. We were both lucky to-day, I guess. I had an idea that they were up here, and I took a chance and dropped in just in time. You know what I'm going to do? No? Well, I'm a-going to make Silvertip a full-fledged deputy right now. Here's his star. I'll string it on this rope that's around his neck. There! And now, what are we going to do with these fellows over against the wall?"

Old John looked over; for a moment he did not say anything. Then he smiled.

"I don't know," he said. "There was some one who shot me, of course; but I don't know. Mebbe they was stray bullets after all. How can I prove that they wasn't? Then, again, there was some one that shot them does. But I didn't see them. So what are we going

to do with these boys? Tell you the truth sheriff, I don't want to do anything. They're only mountain boys, you know, and they don't realize. I didn't start out to arrest them to-day, but just to let them know. They'd be good boys, if they was only given a fair chance. I'd suggest that you give them to me and let me have them for game wardens."

That was the end of that. Three weeks later John was lying under the tender care of the very men who had shot him. Their hate had turned to a different feeling. Tom Butters was just coming out of the house. He spoke to his brother: "Say boys, he's gettin' along like a top. And us fellers game wardens! Can you beat it?"

He looked at the star on his jumper. "Old John is sure a straight shooter, ain't he? Come on, let's feed that bear."

LARGE TEXAS RANCH MADE INTO PARK

FIFTEEN miles southeast of Amarillo, Texas, is Palo Duro Cañon, wherein is situated the headquarters of the Harding Ranch. This is one of the large ranch properties of the Texas Panhandle, with an area of about one hundred thousand acres. Henry Harding, its owner, is one of the Panhandle's pioneer ranchmen.

Last year Mr. Harding decided that it was time to turn his ranch into a playground for the people, instead of giving it over exclusively to the use of his herd. With this idea in view, he improved the automobile roads leading into the Palo Duro Cañon, built a dam across the creek so as to store water for a swimming pool, and erected bath houses. Then he constructed a pavilion where visitors might amuse and entertain themselves. His original ranch house, he enlarged into a sort of lodge for the accomodation of guests.

Mr. Harding continues to carry on his cattle ranching and agricultural work on his property, and those who visit the place as a resort will have the opportunity to study his methods.

In addition to the improvements already mentioned, the owner of the vast ranch has stocked the streams with many varieties of fish and has imported a number of song birds to the woods. He has also brought in many native animals that had been driven out of the cañon by ruthless hunters. It is his intention to have the park a sanctuary where the creatures of the wild may live in peace and safety.

TWO INDIANS KILLED OVER SQUAW

A TRAGEDY on the Navajo Indian reservation was recently brought to light when the death of two Navajo braves in a fight over a squaw was reported to the Indian agent at Keams Cañon, in northern Arizona. The story goes that the two Indians both claimed the squaw. One stated that he had given three horses and a cow for her on the day of the quarrel. The other insisted that the squaw was his. After some heated controversy, they parted, agreeing to lay the matter before the Indian agent for arbitration the following day. A few hours later, the second Indian returned to the hogan occupied by his opponent and the squaw. He found his enemy asleep and killed him while he slept, striking him over the head with a neckyoke. Thereupon, the squaw, summoning her mother and sister to aid her, seized the murderer, and, while the other two held him down, she killed him with the same neckyoke that he had used in killing her man. The merits of the case will be considered by the Indian agency at Keams Cañon.

Pioneer Towns of the West

Astoria

By
Erle Wilson
Author of "Cheyenne," etc.

ASTORIA is the oldest American settlement in the valley of the mighty Columbia River. It was founded in 1811 by John Jacob Astor, in whose honor it was named, and began its pioneer existence as a depot for the fur trade of the Northwest. During the War of 1812 this outpost of civilization was seized by the British, but was restored in 1818. Two years later, while occupied by the Northwest Fur Company, it was burned and practically abandoned, only a few settlers remaining. It was not until 1876 that the town was chartered as a city. To-day, with a population of over fourteen thousand, it is one of the thirty great ports of the world.

Situated in northern Oregon, eight miles from the mouth of the Columbia River, Astoria has five miles of water front and a deep, placid harbor. Extensive docks and commodious warehouses line the banks of the river, while the business section lies along the low bottomlands. The residences of the city rest up the hills, overlooking the blue water of the harbor. On December 8th, 1922, the entire business part of this Western city was burned. But with characteristic enterprise the citizens of this town busied themselves with plans for reconstruction, and since that date at least half of Astoria has been rebuilt with modern and up-to-date edifices.

Astoria is the port of entry for the Oregon customs district. It has a heavy export trade in the products of the surrounding country, such as lumber and wheat, and a large maritime commerce. Fisheries are the leading industry. Here the Royal Chinook salmon, found only in the waters of the Columbia River, are caught, packed, and sent to all the ports of the Seven Seas. Offering employment to many workers, this industry constitutes a giant pay roll for Astoria, and is seemingly a permanent source of wealth, for years of fishing have failed to deplete the run of salmon.

Every year the huge red fish, fat and clean from their feeding in the sea, return unfailingly to the stream where they were hatched, only to become entangled in the gill nets of the fishermen. From shoals and islands in the Columbia, giant seines comb the river, and in shallow places stationary traps are constructed, where the fish become confused in a maze of netting. Of late years commercial trolling for salmon has developed, small boats going to sea beyond the mouth of the river, dragging metal lures behind them to attract the fish. By varying the tackle, this troll-

ing becomes the acme of sport fishing. The Columbia River flows through one of the world's great lumber districts, and since pioneer days Astoria has been an important center for this industry. Mills up and down this majestic stream and along the Oregon coast ship their lumber to Astoria terminals, there to be loaded on ocean-going vessels and railways. Great logging rafts of Douglas fir, cedar, hemlock, and spruce from the forests around float down the river to this terminus, and within the city limits may be heard the hum of several busy sawmills. Iron works, flour mills, and ship yards are also among the chief manufacturing industries of this city.

Astoria is the seat of Caltsop County. Here upon the tide lands which skirt the Columbia River and its tributary streams, extensive dairying is carried on. Pure-blooded cattle are numerous in this section, and blooded herds are rapidly being increased. The mild winter climate offers open pasture during the cold months, while the cool summers of the region keep the fields green throughout the hot season. The only agricultural experiment station in Oregon is situated near Astoria.

As a residential city, Astoria ranks high. Its school system is efficient, its buildings modern, and its social life attractive. From this city may be reached many delightful beach resorts. Seaside, the premier water place of the Pacific Northwest, is only eighteen miles away. This resort is known as the Trail's End City, commemorating the fact that it was at Seaside that the Lewis and Clark expedition concluded its westward journey. In fact, the citizens of Astoria have a perpetual vacation land at their very doors, offering sport in the open throughout the entire year.

Astoria is served by the Astoria and Columbia River Railroad, of the Northern Pacific system, and by several coastwise and foreign steamship lines. It has the city managerial form of government. At the present time the mayor is the Honorable O. B. Setters, and the city manager is O. A. Kratz. This city has a well-organized fire department which has been unusually effective in preventing losses, considering the flimsy character of the temporary buildings following the fire. And due to the thoroughly competent police department, Astoria has for years been practically free from serious crimes, such as murder and hold-ups.

Among the prominent citizens of this Northwestern city are Mr. R. D. Pinneo, traffic manager of the Port of Astoria, who, well known in traffic circles throughout the United States and the Orient, is an outstanding personality, and Mr. S. W. Lovell, president of the Astoria Chamber of Commerce.

MOUNTAINTOP IN TETONS FALLS INTO RIVER

AN immense mass of rock toppled from one of the mountains in the Teton range in western Wyoming a few weeks ago, causing considerable damage and some changes in the topography of the region. The section of mountain traveled at incredible speed and in the course of its journey, it destroyed a portion of the Teton National Forest, splintering hundreds of trees. It also dashed to death several herds of cattle and wrecked a number of buildings.

The Gros Ventre River, into which the débris of the fallen mountain finally fell, was dammed by the vast mass of earth and rock, and a lake about seven miles in length and a mile wide was formed.

One More Notch

by

Richard Rowe

Author of "Sandy's Poke," etc.

"WHAT this camp needs is a good old-fashioned miners' meeting," announced Cal Sexton. "I say it again, and I say it in a loud tone of voice so if any of Neff's gang is outside listening they can hear me. What this camp needs is a miners' meeting of the old-fashioned kind when all the crooks and bums were chased out of camp or strung up after a trial. And the kind of a trial I mean got right to the point, chucked technicalities, and dealt out justice. No, it wasn't lynch law, it was miners' law, and it sure had a sobering effect."

Having unburdened his mind, Cal Sexton seated himself. The coroner's jury, of which he was a member, was sitting for the purpose of determining just how one John Doe Parsons, deceased, came to die. The facts were known to everybody. John Doe Parsons had bought a bottle of whisky and had proceeded to toss the stuff off. The local doctor had done his best, but Parsons had died.

The foreman of the jury now read the verdict that he had scribbled while Sexton was making his speech:

> "We, the jury, find that John Doe Parsons came to his death from a sudden attack of ptomaine poison, cause unknown."

One by one the jury signed it until it reached Sexton. He tossed it back. "I refuse to sign something I know is not true, and if you gents had any backbone you'd do the same."

"But—Neff!" whispered one.

"Well, what of Neff?" snapped Sexton.

"He's fast on the draw, and he's sure to get anybody who starts trouble," warned one. "I've got a family to think of," he added.

"I haven't!" retorted Sexton. "All I've got in the world is a malemute dog named Grouch, and a lifelong reputation of square dealing and standing up for my rights. I'll submit a minority report and see what happens." He scribbled something on the blank just below the majority report, signed it, then read it aloud:

> "The undersigned minority finds that John Doe Parsons came to his death from drinking moonshine purchased from Neff's Miners' Club and recommends that the said Neff be arrested and tried for manslaughter!"

The men looked from one to another nervously, almost as if Sexton had announced that he had the smallpox. They disliked to even be a part of the same jury.

"Hadn't you better——" began the foreman.

"No, I hadn't better——" interrupted Sexton.

"We're few and they are many," the foreman argued. "Neff will get you, Sexton. He has never liked you anyway, because you lived down there alone with your dog and minded your own business instead of blowing your money at his place. Sexton, sure as you stand there, he'll get you!"

"I'm pretty old for gun fighting, I'll admit," Sexton answered thoughtfully, "but for close on to fifty years I've done the right thing and no man has ever yet killed me for it. In the old days a couple tried to bump me off. You might ask Neff to look up my reputation before he starts trouble. I move that the jury adjourn and report!"

Those who had gathered, listened in amazement to the minority report, and a man in the back of the room slipped away and reported in this fashion to Neff: "The others turned in the verdict we expected, but Sexton wants you held for manslaughter. That worm on the still you know——"

"Shut up!" Neff scowled darkly. That report would go forth into the world and bring attention upon him that he did not care for. "If I could only get him to tackle me," he muttered, "then I could shoot him in self-defense."

Neff was a student of human nature; he realized the value of impressing his audience, and on more than one occasion he had won the respect if not the affection of some unruly customer by his marksmanship. Now he unlimbered his pair of well-oiled pistols. They were always loaded. He stepped outside and made a circle of bullet holes in the end of a small packing box; then, with the final shot, he put a bullet through the exact center of wood, knocking out an irregular wooden wheel that looked something like a cog. This never failed to impress.

"Send that over to Sexton," he directed, "with my compliments, and tell him that any time he figures this community is too small to hold us both he can either get out or chase me out!"

They understood it as a challenge and wondered what Sexton would do about it.

Sexton, however, did nothing but mind his own business. They noticed that he carried his old forty-four as usual. His method was peculiar. The holster was carried on the right side, arranged so that the butt extended forward. Neff had often noticed it, but now he began to study it carefully. He called his chief lieutenant aside.

"Higby, this fellow, Sexton, paid no attention to my challenge, but it is easy to see that he's not hiding. He comes and goes as he always did, and the camp is taking it as a punch at me; like he figured I wasn't worth noticing. Those hounds," and he pointed to the crowd of miners playing cards and consuming his moonshine, "are watching! Find out if he's right-handed or left-handed. The way he carries that gun makes me think he shoots with his left hand!"

"All right, Neff, I'll find out!"

"You see I can't very well hang around his cabin myself!"

That afternoon Cal Sexton came into camp for supplies. His wants were simple, and he panned more than a sufficient living from the gravel bar behind his cabin. Grouch, his lead dog, followed as usual. There was something about the pair that attracted attention. Grouch commanded the respect of the curs about him by his manner of ignoring their snarling and snapping from a safe distance; so, too, did Sexton ignore the yapping of the "curs" in camp. He sensed the tenseness, knew that something would snap before long. He did not want trouble, but was too much of a man of the fron-

tier to move a single inch to avoid it. He played the game as he had always played it. Higby, trailing, saw him go into his right pocket for his poke of dust, saw him use his right hand to sign his name; his right hand for a number of things including the stroking of his dog's head. This last was done mechanically as he talked to the trader.

"He's right-handed!" he informed Neff. "Even to petting his dog and splitting kindling."

A week slipped by and a drunken miner lurched up to Neff, saying: "Well, what are you going to do about Sexton—swallow it?"

Neff started to hit the man, but Higby stopped him. "He's speaking what's on the minds of the crowd, Neff. If you hit him, it's like hitting the crowd."

Neff nodded. "You're right, Higby; but I can't start this thing myself. Sexton's got to attack me, or I can't prove self-defense. A trial won't take place here, but down to Valdez, you see!"

"I know all that. Sexton's not lived all these years for nothing! He knows human nature, and he knows you are on the defensive, but I've an idea!" Higby talked at length in a low tone. "You see," he concluded, "he made a crack or two about what he would have done if Parsons had been his pardner. Well, the only thing he cares about is that dog. We can get him riled up through the dog, see?"

"Then get the dog!" directed Neff.

Several days elapsed before a miner who had once ridden the range dropped a lariat over Grouch's head, choked him into submission, muzzled him and then carried him to Neff's back room. Several miners took turns cracking a whip over his head until the dog was exhausted from his running to escape a lash that always threatened but never quite reached him. The room was hot and presently he fell panting in his tracks.

"That's enough," Neff ordered. "If this don't stir up Sexton, nothing will!" He opened a bottle and let the contents gurgle into a pan.

The dog sniffed. This stuff was not water, yet it was liquid and cold, and he had run miles in a warm room. Besides this, nature had given him a coat suitable for below-zero weather. He lowered his head and lapped the liquid. Neff chuckled and presently kicked the dog out into the cold, very much as he would kick out a miner who had spent his last cent. "There's nothing that'll make a man see red so quick as injuring his dog," he reflected. "Particularly in Alaska. Guess I'd better examine the guns; they'll be needed before night!"

An old gun fighter and peace officer had taught Cal Sexton how to shoot. "Young man," he had said sagely, "the reason I've lived so long and have so many notches on my gun is not because I'm so all-fired good at shooting; I'm just ordinary. You're just ordinary now, but some day you'll be better than I am. That won't help you, son, if you play the other fellow's game—make *him* play *yours*."

Many times in the years that followed Cal Sexton had remembered the advice in the nick of time when his impulses were to ignore it and wade into the other fellow's trap for the sheer satisfaction of the thing. Now, as he saw Grouch staggering home, he felt the lump of rage choke his very breath; felt an urge to ignore the dog even and rush forth seeking vengeance. With an effort he steadied himself.

"He wants me to attack," he muttered. "He's waiting up there with his witnesses. Come here, boy; what's he done to you?"

The reeking fumes of moonshine came from the dog as it coughed, and

Sexton understood. He could almost visualize the scene in the courtroom—Neff, charged with his murder, testifying.

"Yes, we got Sexton's dog drunk for a practical joke. Perhaps it wasn't just the thing to do, but when he came up to my place and began shooting, I had to shoot in self-defense."

For about an hour Sexton worked on the dog. Then, satisfied that he would recover, he buckled on his belt and holster with the butt of the gun extending forward, and stepped into the night. He walked rapidly, his mood grim.

In a secluded spot some distance from the main stream he paused and listened. The gentle fall of water came faintly. He found a path and followed it for a quarter of a mile. Here a stream tumbled from a cliff a hundred feet high. Snuggled close was a rough cabin. Sexton drew his weapon and entered the building. A man sprang from the bunk with his hands uplifted.

"Don't shoot, Sexton!" he pleaded.

"I won't if you behave yourself! I once said what I'd do if my partner had died from moonshine. Well, they poured it into my dog, and he's my partner. I see you've got quite a layout here!"

Sexton secured the man and then picked up an ax and proceeded to demolish a large still. There were several barrels of mash which he broke open. Then, heaving every keg and bottle he could find into the center of the cabin, he touched a match to a pile of rubbish which he soaked with coal oil.

"If that's arson, son," he observed, "tell Neff to make the most of it!"

The glare lighted the sky, tinged the snow-clad peaks with beautiful tints of pink and red, then died away leaving a mass of charred wood, melted copper and lead, and bursted bottles. Even a drenching rain failed to check the flames until the work had been completed.

Sexton trudged home in silence. Once he grumbled. "The danged rain is stiffening up my fingers again." He worked the fingers of his right hand, particularly the trigger finger. "Dang rheumatism," he muttered. "Won't hardly be able to move my fingers by to-morrow noon. I know the signs too well!"

A man running from camp to ascertain the cause of the fire had slipped into the brush as he heard Sexton's footsteps. In the half light he saw the old man test the fingers of his right hand, then thrust his hand into his pocket to keep warm and dry. The man's eyes lighted.

"His shooting hand," he muttered. "That'll be good news for Neff!" Then he broke into a steady trot. A half mile farther on he met a plodding, dispirited figure.

"What's up, Sam?"

"Old Sexton's gone hog wild. Pulled a stunt down at the still. What he didn't spoil with an ax he ruined with flame. Neff will have to send Outside for another outfit. It'll take weeks. I hate to tell him; in fact, I won't tell him. You break the news, Bill, and I'll hide out until it's safe to show up. Tell him I couldn't help myself. Sexton got the drop on me."

Bill agreed. "I'll tell Neff. And I'll tell him that the rain stiffened up old Sexton's trigger finger, too. I saw him trying to work the stiffness out. He figures he'll need it to-day, and he sure will."

The men parted close to camp, Bill continuing on to Neff's place, Sam slipping into a cabin long enough to pack up a ten-day supply of food. He estimated that it would be at least ten days before it was safe to show up. But for once in his life Sam badly overestimated.

Bill informed Neff of the news in the early-morning hours. The big man leaped to his feet and for several minutes his anger ran unchecked. It was Higby who stopped him as he rushed through the door.

"I'm going to get him right now," he shouted. "I'm——"

"Sure you are going to get him, Neff; he's got it coming, and you'll get him, but remember that you are nervous—your aim won't be as sure as it'll be after a rest. Don't go into this thing drunk or crazy mad. Go into it cold—deadly cold. And another thing; he's having trouble with his right hand—his gun hand; the rheumatism is getting him. Remember that crack he made about his reputation? Well, I got hold of an old-timer who told me that he was a dead shot when he was young. He told me something more—in one fight a bullet grazed the trigger finger of his right hand. He's had trouble off and on ever since, and when it's damp, he's slow, see? In gun fights the margin between success and failure is so narrow in time that the finest stop watch in the world can't time it."

Reluctantly Neff obeyed. He was no fool; he knew he was nervous from a long session at the card table. When a man is running a crooked game against shrewd men, the nervous strain is great. He went to bed and felt better. Presently he fell asleep, and the word was passed that men in the vicinity must keep quiet and not disturb him.

The lawful element in the camp trembled the next morning when the news was known. Some time that day Neff and Sexton would meet, and Sexton would fall. It was known that his right hand was stiff; it was felt that he would not leave town.

The mail arrived on time. It was remembered that Neff always called for his mail an hour after arrival. By that time it was all distributed. Sexton, too, called for his mail with the others.

The minutes ticked by, and, fifty-nine minutes after the postmaster had received the pouches, Neff stepped from his establishment. He was tense, heavily armed, and his eyes alert. He suddenly stopped as a malemute dog, somewhat the worse for illness, came slowly around a corner.

"There's Sexton's dog!" Higby shouted. "Sexton isn't far off. Somebody's going to get hurt or quit cold!"

Men began to run for cover and a man midway between Grouch and Neff cried out in terror and dropped flat to the ground. Somebody laughed. It was the nervous laugh of a man highly strung; it lacked humor. The dog moved slowly, yet his old dignity was there; his contempt for the curs was as strong as ever. They might sense his weakness, but they hesitated to attack. Neff was different; he knew that Sexton's right hand was crippled, and he was cashing in on it. He was no sportsman; never took chances, but always played sure things.

His hand was ready to go for his gun, and but for the scores of eyes upon him, he would have drawn the gun in advance. Would Sexton never come?

And then, as if in answer to his query, Cal Sexton walked into view. It was the same cool Cal as ever. He saw Neff and the frightened miner who had sprawled in the mud because he was afraid that stray bullets would hit him before he could reach cover. He saw Grouch; then he saw Neff go for his gun. No stop watch could have caught the time of subsequent movements.

Was it Sexton's gun or Neff's that barked first? To many the shots came as one almost—something like a blurred letter. Neff went down as if a fist had struck his jaw. His expression was one of surprise and hate. His gun slipped from his fingers, and he turned over. Sexton returned his gun to the

holster almost as soon as he fired, as if he knew that one shot would be sufficient. He was cool, although it was noticed that the fingers of his right hand were crooked and drawn from the rheumatism.

"You shot with your left, Cal! Your left hand!" some one shouted.

Cal Sexton nodded. "Yes, I've used my left hand ever since an outlaw crippled my right trigger finger." He glanced about and saw a change. Those who wanted law were stiffening in their attitude. The other element, lacking a forceful leader, were wondering which way to turn. A tough man is tough only so long as he has a leader.

Cal Sexton shook his head sadly. "I'm getting pretty old to add notches to my gun, but it had to come. I had to add one more notch." People gave way and he found himself before the window. "Is there any mail?" he queried in the tone of voice he had used for a lifetime. For Cal Sexton's code was to remain cool, to go out of his way to help the deserving, but never to give in an inch to arrogance.

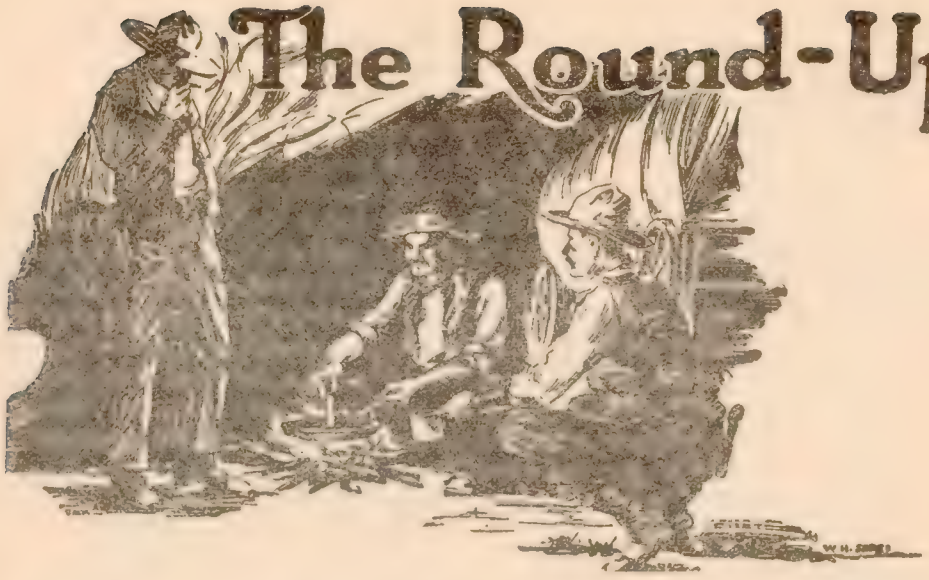
GERMAN FARMERS TO HOMESTEAD IN MEXICO

TEN thousand German farmers are expected to arrive in the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, Mexico, during the next few months, according to rumors current in Nogales, Arizona. It is stated that the Mexican central government has made arrangements for this influx of German settlers, and that it will be the largest colonization project Mexico has ever attempted. It is supposed that either a large tract of land will be turned over to these homesteaders or else that they will be permitted to take up public land in the regular way. The states of Sinaloa and Sonora have some of the richest farming and grazing lands in Mexico.

A NOVEL LOG-RAFT RACE

WHAT is said to be the most novel boat race ever staged in the Pacific started recently at Astoria, Oregon, and finished at San Diego, California. The test was to determine the relative speed of two tugs towing heavy log rafts. The contestants were the tug *Sea Ranger* and the tug *Sea Lion*. The *Sea Ranger* defeated the *Sea Lion* by approximately twelve hours, but this decisive victory was due to a mishap to the latter tug. The *Sea Lion* got away first from the Astoria roads, but tempestuous seas off the Mendocino coast put her in difficulties, and when off Point Reyes, the towing hawser snapped. It took nearly four hours to get another hawser on board. In the meantime, the *Sea Ranger*, which had kept farther out to sea, gained the lead and retained it for the remainder of the race down the California coast. The race covered over fourteen hundred miles, and the log rafts drawn by the two tugs contained a total of ten million feet of lumber.

The Round-Up



A FORMER Texas ranger, one who calls himself "Tex-Mex," has ridden all the way in to the fire to-night to say a few words in defense of that writer gent, Robert Ormond Case. Can a horse lope sixty miles, as Bob Case says he can? Tex-Mex knows of one that can and does lope seventy-five miles "between suns" and it is a "little old flea-bitten horse," at that.

All right, Tex, we're listenin'; shoot.

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: For years I have endured in silence the noise and palavering of these wild punchers and gunmen of yours, but, when they start questioning and abusing our friend R. O. Case regarding the distance he states a horse can lope continuously, I am bound to step in and state what are facts, real facts, folks, from one who comes from one of the least-known and least-spoken-of section in these United States—the Big Bend district of Texas.

"Out there the air is dry and pure, and horses raised in that country are usually very long winded, not in the sense, however, that our friend Vaughn's conception of Mr. Case's narrative implies.

"Down in the Glenn Springs and Toboso Flats country there are several cowmen that can tell you of a certain little old flea-bitten gray horse that can and has on several occasions made the long run from Glenn Springs to Marathon on the railroad, a distance of seventy-five miles, between suns, and the only time that he slows out of a lope is in crossing the Tornilla and Maravillas creeks. He has made this trip several times on wagers of one hundred dollars, and the last run that I personally know of his making he was between twelve and thirteen years old.

"Had Mr. Case known it he would not have had to go to Canada for his mount for Lonesome McQuirk at all, but could have picked him from 'most any remuda that is ranging on the Chisos Mountains in the Big Bend district of Texas.

"Were I a writer I could spiel many yarns that might be of interest to you folks; things that occurred in that country while I was a State ranger there, and also during the eight years that I lived in Mexico. If ever I go

back to Texas I am sure going to look up that man Buckley and have a long powwow with him on guns."

Now comes Bob Aiken, of Murray, Utah, with some words about what to do, and what *not* to do with a rope.

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: Your letter pleased me and I'll say that any man who thinks you can be fooled has a plumb foolish notion.

"About ropes: In the first place, don't ever tie a rope to yourself, anywhere, wrist or any other place, especially if you are roping anything. I learned that from experience. Years ago I roped a man on a high bicycle. The rope was tied to my wrist. I couldn't get it off and consequently he caught me, and I got an awful licking. Also don't drop your coil—you are apt to step into it and get real upset—which would be getting off easy.

"In leading a horse back of a rig, don't drop your coil on bottom. I did it once —once was enough. The horse set back and I went over the back of the rig because I had put my foot in the coil. Nobody ever told me, and I think it's a good point to remember, as children are careless and unthinking. I read an article in your magazine that said 'tie the other end to the wrist.' The writer undoubtedly meant in practicing on fence posts or such, but it's bad dope. Tie to the horn of your saddle, if you like, or don't tie and take your dollies, but when you do this, watch your fingers. The bulge on the horn will keep your dollies, also protect your fingers. With dollies you hold the rope with thumb and finger, with hand on horn braced, but not grasped.

"In range work, or any roping from a horse, twirling the loop around your head for casting is the only way. In corral work, do not do it unless you are roping a horse and there are only one or two horses in a corral. Where there is a bunch of horses, a roper who whirls the loop around his head ought to be given his time. Flip the loop overhand, side throw or up in front—the latter only in case you are in a small corral with one or two horses. I like the overhand cast or flip—the fingers up, the knuckles down, the loop dragging back —and an overhand cast. It always seemed faster and is certainly higher in case a horse is between you and the one you are roping. The coil is in the other hand and drops out as speed requires. Practice is the only thing, and you must do that until you get the 'feel' of the rope. You do it by feel, not by thinking out each step. The individual can select his method. In whirling the loop around the head, twist the wrist on the loop so as to keep it open—otherwise she will straighten out on you. In horse or steer roping, use a good-sized loop—in calf roping, a small loop. The latter is hardest roping for that reason. If you use a big loop, the calf will go through it. For trick roping, use a maguey—it makes a good saddle rope, too, but is only good for light work.

"For rope spinning, use a three-eighths spot cord. For usual tricks, twenty-five feet is a good length. Fold end back and tie with fine wire or strong thread. Wrap the end of the loop with copper wire to make the rope slip easy. Balance counts with spinning rope, and you must not have too much weight in the honda.

"Practice is the only thing, but remember that in all loops going one direction, the rope must be turned in the hands, otherwise the ropes will soon kink on you and quit. On reverse loops you can hang onto the loop, as the reversing prevents kinking. Try the ground loops first, both right and left. From these work into the more difficult ones. Take a lap on your loop, of a foot or so, according to the size of loop and in the same direction of loop; hold

your rope with thumb and first finger—the loop hanging loosely on the other three fingers, so it can be dropped. Start your loop around and remember to hold the rope loosely and keep turning it in the hondo. To start, lay your loop as much on the ground as you can and hold it. If you are going to do a left ground spin, lay the loop back of your right leg, holding it with palm up. When you start it, bring your hand over slowly, turning the wrist like you would if you were starting to draw a ring with a long stick.

"Hope this all helps you boys."

Here's George Smith, of Silver Lake, California, who has been sitting in the shadows for more than a year and now comes out into the firelight. He has something to tell us about knife throwing.

"I have been a reader of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE for over a year and a half," he says. "The Round-up is my favorite. I've set back in the shadows, listening to arguments on horses, guns, and the like, but knives, well, that is certainly quite different. Here's my say:

"For short distance throwing, a knife like this suits me. Blade, three inches, two-edged and tapering. Handle, wood, large at center, sloping toward hilt and guard. The guard should be diamond in shape, and three quarters of an inch each side of the blade. The handle is three inches in length. This knife can be made from a small pike, well tempered. The knife weighs three ounces. The butt is leaded.

"When throwing, I catch the blade between thumb and second knuckle of the index finger. The knife should be raised to the shoulder. The whole arm is not put in the throw—just a flip of the wrist. I would like to hear some one else's opinion."

Now for a little shooting from "Oregon Slim."

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: I have been dodging bullets fired by these WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE gun toters for some time, so figure it is time for me to shoot some. Now, Boss, if those boys had shot some with my old favorite, the .32-20, some one would have been badly shot up. They were shooting too far with a Colt .45. This old noise about .32-20 being no good is shore bunk. I have a .32-20 7½ inch barrel that will do its stuff. Not long ago a friend of mine knocked a five-hundred-pound bear with it at fifty yards. Now, boys, you take it as a rule, sportsmen aren't so narrow-minded as some of the boys seem to be. Now one man in Portland, Oregon, said he could not hit anything with a .32-20. Now here it is. Can he shoot with any gun? The .32-20 is a good gun. So are some of the others. The .45 Colt is a good gun for a peace officer, but too big for hunting.

"For a rifle I use a .25-35 W. C. F. for open country, and a .30 caliber Luger carbine with eighteen inch barrel for brush. They are some gun too.

"Well, let us hear from some more of you boys.

"OREGON SLIM.

"Raymond, Washington."

So long, every one. Meet you again next week.

DEER USE CABIN AS SALT LICK

WHEN William Plangrave returned to his cabin in the mountains some distance northward from San Francisco, after an evening stroll, a few weeks ago, he was surprised to find that the place had been taken over by four deer. All four of the animals were licking the salt off the kitchen table.

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.

BE sure to wear that Hollow Tree badge, folks, where it can be seen, whether you're traveling or moving to a new town or just staying right on the farm. Because, in any case, it may bring about a helpful, pleasant meeting between you and another member of the Gang. "Toronto Slim" writes us that he met up with a Gangster while with a threshing outfit in Saskatchewan. "I knew him by his badge; it surely is a fine idea," he says. Toronto Slim is English, but has been in Canada for five years, one year of which he has spent on a ranch.

"Being in a strange town and lonesome I thought the best thing I could do would be to join the Tree," opines "Happy" Don, "so am sending for a badge." Happy's roamed about considerable, he states, is interested in athletics, fishing and shooting; he's also considered to be an expert crack shot with a rifle. Send letters for him in my care.

Now let's have another look into the post office. A sailor Gangster wants a little information.

Pardon my interruption, folks: What's the chance for a real tenderfoot to ask a few questions? Since I'm a stranger in camp I know introductions are in order. I'm a sailor, but a "short-timer." Any ex-service man will know the meaning of such terminology. Served a hitch in the army, left it with a hunch to go to sea. Should have throttled it, but didn't.

Yes, I've traveled a little; covered near forty thousand miles, and seen a few foreign parts. Name? That doesn't matter so much unless there should happen to be a good-sized string of honorable deeds to back it up. I'm what's known as a "Georgia Cracker" or "Rebel," so I'm to be considered more or less dumb in the ways of the world. Age twenty-seven.

In service it has been my portion to become quite familiar with service arms. The heavy-caliber hand gun is still a mystery. But the rifle is my one best friend and side kick. I've had to trust it in times of emergency, and it has never failed.

For target shooting, some one please inform me as to the best type of target for that type of arms. Range is of no moment. From two hundred to two thousand yards is my favorite. I've had to shoot over all of them, standing, kneeling, squatting, and prone, both slow and rapid fire. My scores and record do not count so much. Suffice to say, I drew money from the army for holding the pin of a sharpshooter.

My preference is the boat-tail type, twenty-

seven-hundred-foot second, one-hundred-and-fifty-grain ammunition. Any suggestions as to more suitable ammunition will be appreciated. There seems to be some obstacle that I cannot surmount. My shooting appears to be above the average up to a certain point, beyond which I cannot progress. That is why I never qualified for the pin of expert rifleman. I want to break that jinx if I can.

In every way I have adhered to the laws of handling a rifle, and every time, not just occasionally, I meet that same abrupt halt at a certain point. I've tried many ways to remedy the thing, but it persists. I do not flinch nor jerk my trigger. Both army and navy range have long since worn that out. By the same token, I have formed the habit of automatically lining my sights on the target. I know where my shot will strike when it is fired.

I have followed very closely the United States small-arms manual, both army and navy as well as the firing regulations. I have applied to the N. R. A. for assistance, and still meet the same difficulty. Will some one heed the S O S signals of a brother in distress? REBEL ANDY.

Care of The Tree.

Door's wide open,
Come on in;
Which shall it be
A button or a pin?

Send twenty-five cents to The Hollow Tree, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, and be sure to state which style badge you want.

"Will you boys just move over and let an old-timer get in a word?" asks the Gangster whose letter follows.

I was born in Santa Barbara, California, in 1853—get that. At the age of twelve I worked on cow ranches as herder and milker and have ridden all kinds of horses. I am a harness and saddle maker and claim to be a horse breaker. I am also an advocate of the Spanish bit. I can give you the inside to the way saddles were made and used back in the fifties by the Mexicans and Indians. I have helped to make reatas, also hair ropes. The best hair rope is made with two twisted strands of tail hair for a core, and mane hair twisted around that.

Now if this interests any of the boys, let me know. JOHN MCDOUGALL.

223 John Street, Salinas, Calif.

A sister heard from this time.

DEAR GANGSTERS ALL: I have never seen a letter from sunny Maryland. I have lived here seven years; previous to that I lived in the West, and although Maryland is a beautiful historic State, it doesn't appeal to me as much as dear old Colorado. I just read "Spurred Spurring Spurs," and it makes me feel rather homesick, as I was born on Tip-top Mountain between Idaho Springs and Georgetown. Dad was a prospector in days gone by, and it is 'most like reading a copy of WESTERN STORY to hear him tell tales of frontier life in the mining camps. He is quite interested in "The Flooded Treasure," as Gilpen County and Central City sound like home to him.

I have lived in Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma —mostly in Oklahoma, near Vinita. Nothing can beat the good old horseback rides I had out there "where the wind blows free."

At present I live about two miles from Chesapeake Bay on the bank of a river, and the motor-boat rides out to the bay fishing are pretty fine. I am not far from Easton, where stands the Old Friends Meeting House, built in 1684, and believed to be the oldest frame house still standing in the United States. At Wye Mills is a magnificent white oak tree, the largest in America. It has a spread of one hundred and forty feet and is three hundred and seventy-five years old. There is another one near Rising Sun believed to be at least five hundred years old.

Here in my home town, Princess Anne, is Washington Hotel, named for George Washington, who once honored it by being a guest there. Teacle Hall is also an old brick mansion over two hundred years old. A few miles south of Princess Anne is Kingston Hall, where one of Maryland's first governors once lived.

In the spring of 1921 we made a trip from Princess Anne to Vinita, Oklahoma. Saw some beautiful sights en route and also some not so beautiful, especially through the Ozarks on a dirt road right after a rain.

I want to exchange letters, snapshots, cards, or souvenirs with any of you sisters. It doesn't matter if you are five years old or a hundred and five.

Yours with heaps of sunshine.

ETHELYN T. LAUCHNER.

Venton, Somerset County, Md.

James Buckley, 57 North Wallace Street, Glasgow, Scotland, wants some American pen friends.

Hart, care of the Tree, is looking for a real pal who lives in Chicago, "a brother who enjoys shows, parks, riding and getting out in the country over the week-end with a tent and frying pan."

Jack Kiser's hobby is guns, and he has one over one hundred and twenty-five years old. He likes to hunt and fish, and has traveled considerably. At present he's a lineman for the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad Co., so write him in care of it, at Harvey, Illinois. "If any of my old buddies in the One Hundred and Thirty-seventh Field Artillery, Headquarters Co. see this, please write," says Jack.

If you'd like to know where to go and what to see in Colorado, just drop a line to Theo. E. Kusnierek, Duluth, Minnesota.

"I am a person who has never seen a ranch, rodeo, round-up or any part of the West. Won't some of you who know all about it be friends with me? I'll do my best to be interesting about the East in return," writes Ohio Patsy. I'll forward letters to her.

Mary L. Fletcher, 302 Chestnut Street, Needham, Massachusetts, would like to get in touch with Gangsters who're interested in dramatic work, poems, dialogues, and short stories.

"I'm interested in all outdoor activities, swimming, baseball, hunting, and fishing," says Kenneth Hall, 101 Noel Street, Springfield, Massachusetts, "so pile up the letters."

Ernest Boisvert of Sunburst, Montana, will give information about his State, including its wonderful oil fields.

"I was born in Arizona on a cattle ranch and love outdoor life. Even here in Los Angeles I go horseback riding. Have been here two years; this State is a wonderful one. I get lonesome and blue, though, so please write, sisters, to Marion Boyd, 449½ Hartford Street, care of Apartment 17, Los Angeles, California."

Doctor John A. Neva, 242 West Sixty-seventh Street, New York, would like to hear from men interested in Central or South America or the South Sea Islands. He is a lover of adventure and has been all over the world, he says.

Here's a brother who's mighty anxious for some letters and says he'll answer all, if it's only an address that is sent him. "I was in the Royal Flying Corps during the war and hope some of the boys see this and remember me," he writes. Address Edwin M. Glaze, P. O. Box 161, Florence, Vermont, folks.

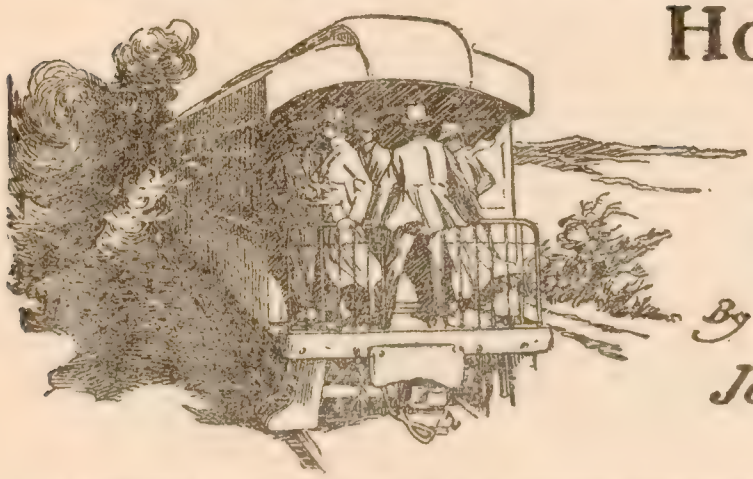
L. Eggleston, 298 North Thirteenth Street, Niles, Michigan, would like to get a writing acquaintance with the Gang. He's thirty, an ex-soldier, and somewhat of a hunter.

Lonesome Mother, in care of the Tree, says, "I'd like to make a friend near my age, thirty-two, who lives near Greenfield, Massachusetts, one who could come to see me often, as I have five children and cannot go out very much. Most of the women near me are much older than I am, and friends and relatives do not live near us. My husband works on a large farm."

TRAPPER FOUND IN CANADIAN LAKE

TWO trappers heading for civilization during the early part of this summer, after a winter spent in the back woods of northern Ontario, found the body of an aged trapper and the body of a dog in a deserted shack on the shore of Lake Cat, north of Fort William. Near the door was a toboggan loaded with a rich catch of furs, ready to trek south. There were no signs of foul play.

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.

OLYMPIC NATIONAL FOREST

THOSE adventurous spirits to whom the call of the wild is so irresistible that they want to follow only unbeaten tracks, can have their heart's desire fully realized by a visit to the Olympic National Forest, for there are places here that have never yet been trodden, and it is a known fact that the Olympic Mountains are the least known and the least visited of any mountainous region of the United States. Here is a chance that the hardy mountain climber, with an ambition to discover something new, shouldn't miss, for there are unknown spaces to explore, untrodden heights to scale, and enchanting scenes to record for the benefit of future pleasure seekers.

Mount Olympus was never climbed, so far as any record shows, until 1907, and is seldom visited by more than two or three climbing parties during the summer months, so that there is no danger of overcrowding. One can lose oneself here and not see a soul for weeks at a stretch. There are mountain peaks almost equal to Mount Olympus in glacial grandeur, that are still waiting for the tread of a human foot and the sound of a human voice. Wild life abounds within the forest and around it, its right of way never having been disputed, and large bands of elk are often seen browsing in the high mountain meadows. Under the protection of the State game laws the Olympic elk have grown to over seven thousand head within the boundaries of the Olympic National Forest, and there are besides deer, black bear, lynx, civet cat, muskrat, and occasionally the timber wolf.

In the extreme northwest corner of the State of Washington is a rugged block of territory known as the Olympic Peninsula. This peninsula is skirted by a fringe of low land, rising rather abruptly into what are termed the Olympic Mountains, the larger part of which, comprising nearly a million and a half

acres, is within the boundaries of the Olympic National Forest. The Olympic Highway runs for nearly two hundred miles around the east and north sides of the peninsula, and for more than one hundred miles around the south and west, through scenery that is as beautiful and varied as any on this continent.

On the evening of January 29, 1921, an unprecedented hurricane swept up the west side of the Olympics and blew down something like five or six billion feet of timber, mostly hemlock, with some Douglas fir, spruce, cedar, and white fir. All of this was not lost, much of the fallen timber being salvaged. This section, covering about one thousand square miles, is known as the Olympic storm zone. Then there is the Soleduck Burn, a denuded area of many thousands of acres, whose barren, fire-swept slopes present a picture of desolation in sharp contrast to the near-by luxuriant forests, an object lesson that should bring home to the most careless the importance of fire prevention.

Because of the large size of this burn and the complete destruction of all trees, replacement by natural means would be so slow as to be practically impossible. Therefore the forest service, at great expense, has reforested the government-owned portions of the area by sowing seed and planting young trees, and it is hoped that, before many more years pass, the entire area will be clothed once more in green forests, provided that the visitors use precaution and care in the handling of their fires.

Camping places have been set aside along the more popular lake shores and along the main trails, the best of these being the Lapoel on Lake Crescent, Klahowya on the Soleduck, Rainbow at the big Quilcene Cañon, and the Falls and Willaby camps on Lake Quinault. Many other delightful camping places can be reached only by trail, and the use of them is subject to the procuring of a special written camp-fire permit from the local ranger or patrolman. There is also hotel service for those who do not want to be bothered carrying camping outfits, and there are also summer home sites which may be rented from ten to fifteen dollars a year.

Quinault Lake, surrounded by a dense stand of beautiful old-growth timber, is a haven for the camper and the fisherman. Its waters are within the Quinault Indian reservation, but fishing for rainbow and other trout, and small salmon, is allowed under free permit obtainable at the government fish hatchery, near the Quinault post office.

The trails in this forest are particularly fascinating to those who enjoy climbing, hiking, and horseback riding, leading as they do into regions otherwise inaccessible. The trail follower gets more thrills and more knowledge to the square inch than the comfort-loving tourist, rolling along in his limousine, does to the square smile, and any one who wants to enjoy a real back-to-nature experience in this wonderful recreation wilderness would do well to remember this, and just pack his bag and be off.

Information pertaining to all matters within the forest will be gladly furnished by the Forest Supervisor, Olympia, Washington.

PYRAMID LAKE

DEAR MR. NORTH: I have heard stories about a lake somewhere in Nevada having no outlet, and in which some monster in the depths is said to sink and destroy boats. Can you tell me if there is such a lake, and how it can be reached? J. STURGES.
Bakersfield, Calif.

I have heard stories of the kind you mention circulated with regard to Pyramid Lake, Nevada. This lake answers the description in that it has no outlet. You can reach Pyramid Lake by auto from Reno, a picturesque drive of two hours or so over sagebrush desert, and investigate this sea-serpent yarn. It is on the Pyramid Lake Indian reservation

and contains plenty of big fish, but I doubt if the serpent story can be substantiated. The cutthroat trout is one of the principal varieties of fish found in the lake, sometimes running in size to twenty-two pounds and over. Perhaps this is just a big fish story lengthened out; and then again perhaps some reader has a better line on the subject than I have. If so, I shall be glad to hear from him and pass the word on to this correspondent.

RANCH HORSE TAKES FANCY TO AUTO

WHILE C. J. Kinney was driving his car along the road about five miles south of Cheyenne, Wyoming, one night a few weeks ago, a pony running loose started following him. The little animal kept up its pursuit right into the city of Cheyenne, following the car through the streets even among the heavy downtown traffic. Twice or three times it was struck by other cars, but this did not deter it in its purpose. Kinney made several efforts to give the pony the slip, but always without success. Finally, he sounded his horn, and this evidently frightened the pursuing animal, for it at once ran into the show room of a near-by building then jumped through a narrow plate-glass window to the sidewalk. Thereafter all trace of the pony was lost. It is thought that it belonged to a rancher living several miles south of Cheyenne, and that it had been attracted by some peculiarity about Kinney's car.

COWGIRLS' BUCKING CONTEST AT CHEYENNE A THRILLER

AT all the big rodeos of the West, the cowgirls' bucking contest is generally one of the most interesting and exciting events, but this year's contest at the Cheyenne round-up was a superthriller. The riding of Ruth Roach on Pale Face was a remarkable exhibition. Pale Face started in by shaking his fair rider in an effort to get her out of the saddle, but she stuck on. Next Pale Face broke down a length of fence on the inside of the track and fell through it, carrying Miss Roach with him. In the struggle to regain his feet, it seemed inevitable that the girl would be injured, but she stuck to her mount and was on his back when he was ready to resume his bucking. After that Miss Roach rode Pale Face to a standstill, despite his desperate efforts to throw her.

Another interesting ride was one that Miss Brida Miller made on Watch Me. During the saddling Watch Me lifted three men off their feet and carried them down the track before he could be blindfolded and saddled. When Brida Miller got on his back, he tried to cover the whole track at once, but this did not bother the cowgirl. She stayed put and showed Watch Me that she was capable of managing him in his worst moods.

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 these 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.

BRICK, GEORGE, was last heard of at North Antler, Sask., in the fall of 1922. If any one knows of his present whereabouts please communicate with his sister, Nora Brick, Manitou, Man., Can.

NEILAS, WM.—He is about five feet eight inches tall, has black hair and brown eyes, and a fair complexion. He was last heard from in Huntingdon, Quebec. His sister has been trying to find him for several years. Write to Rose Sheffield, Rochester, N. Y.

ATTENTION.—I am anxious to get in touch with the children of Katherine Powell Clay, deceased. It is thought they were in a home in England in 1916, but no definite word has been received since that time. If any one knows them, or knows of them, please write to Mrs. Dorothy James, 156 Cortlandt St., Tarrytown, N. Y.

COHEN, ISIDORE.—It is important that you get in touch with me at once. Mike Cohen, Box 381, New Orleans, La.

FLYNN, ELLA BROOKER, has been missing from her home in Buffalo, N. Y., since 1925. She is twenty-four years old, five feet five inches tall, weighs one hundred and fourteen pounds, and has dark-brown hair and blue eyes. Any one who can tell me of her whereabouts please write to Wm. J. Flynn, care of Lake Carriers Asen., Cleveland, Ohio.

MALMSTROM, ELLEN or **JULIUS.**—Mother has had a stroke and is almost helpless. Please write to her immediately.

DANLY, EDWARD, was last heard from in Milwaukee, Wis. His father died and his mother is very lonely. His sister would like him to write to her. Doris Danly Cottenell, 50 Sandown Cott., Middle Hill, Englefield Green, England.

FIN.—We had nothing to do with the trouble you had after you left, and are very anxious for you to come back or write to M. and T., care of this magazine.

HARDESTY, CURTIS, was last heard from in Palo Alto, Calif. He is about thirty-eight years old, six feet one in height, and has blue eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion. He was born near Catlin, Ind., and has served in the U. S. marines at Annapolis, Md. Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write to his sister, Mrs. C. R. Murray, 597 Cass St., Milwaukee, Wis.

WHENTHWORTH, ALBERT E.—He is about fifty-five years old, has a dark complexion, and is of heavy build. His daughter, Agnes, would like him to write to her at her grandfather's old address.

MERRELL, Mrs. MARY.—She and her daughters were last heard of about ten years ago in Okla. If any of her family sees this advertisement please write to her niece, Mrs. Annie Ervin Miles, McKinney, Tex.

DOWNS, LAWRENCE, JIM, and NINA.—I have been trying in vain to find you since mother's death. Please write to your stepsister, Ruth Patterson, Charleston, Wash.

EDWARD.—You have my sincere affection and trust. Please write me care of this magazine, before it is too late. Mary.

SWAIN, BERT, whose home was in Toledo, Ohio, was last heard of in New York City, in 1918. Raymond wants to hear from you. Write Jack Vaughn, care of this magazine.

HARTMAN, ERNEST or **ED.**—He was last heard of when he worked for the Crystal Peak Gem Co., and is thought to be in Leadville or Cripple Creek, Col. He is six feet tall, fifty-two years old, has black hair, blue laughing eyes, and dark heavy eyebrows. His shoulders are slightly rounded. His daughter is very anxious to hear from him, and will appreciate any mail sent to Olive Hartman Anderson, care of this magazine.

COWAN, BENJAMIN, left his home in New York City in 1899 to go to the Klondike when the great gold fever hit New York. He is about fifty-eight years old, and was married to a girl in East Orange, N. J. Any word from or about him would bring much joy to his aged mother. Please write to Harry Cohen, 514 Henry St., Utica, N. Y.

PRINCE, PHILIP JOHN or **JACK.**—He is thirty-four years old, about five feet seven inches tall, dark, and has a scar across his throat. He was heard from at Hoople, N. D., in 1920, and is thought to have gone to Regina, Can., later. Any information regarding his present whereabouts will be appreciated by his sister, H. A. Prince, 124 Brackett St., Portland, Me.

BERTZ, EMMA and **LUDWIG.**—Have not heard from you for several years. Please write to your brother, Charles F. Bertz, Box 131, Leola, S. D.

BETTY.—I'm lonesome for you and promise to make you happy if you will come to me. Please write to Jack, care of this magazine.

YATES, JAMES.—Your sister is anxious to hear from you. Please write to Margaret Yates Bessle, Portland, Ore.

SHANAHAN, WM. HENRY, was last seen at Bemidji, Minn. He is five feet six inches tall, has dark hair and dark eyes, and is twenty-eight years old. His mother is anxious to hear from him. Please write to Mrs. Clara Shanahan, 100 Washington St., Vancouver, Wash.

CAMERON, BRUCE, who worked on the river dams in Ohio, has news awaiting him at a friend's. He is five feet ten inches tall, weighs about one hundred and seventy pounds, is forty-eight years old, and has poor teeth, the front ones being gone. He is thought to have gone back to the neighborhood of the dams in Ohio. Please send any information about him to James W. Smith, Box 29, Des Arc, Mo.

STONEY.—I need you. Please write to me at home. Curlie.

THOMPSON or **THOMSON, ANDREW** and **ELIZABETH,** who once lived in Hartford, Conn., and had two boys in the home at Warehouse Point in 1891, are being looked for by a relative. Andrew was a molder and traveled West from Boston. Any one knowing anything about the family please write to A. Thompson, 42 Hartford Ave., New Britain, Conn.

TENBROOKS, WM. W.—He left Penn, twenty-seven years ago and is now about forty-five years old; was last heard of in Calif. His daughter is anxious for news of him. Mrs. H. C. Booth, W. Pearl St., Wellsville, N. Y.

A. T. McD.—Will accept proposition. Please write immediately. Mrs. Annie McDowell, 421 Cherry St., Florence, Ala.

BROOKS or **SIMMONS** (given names unknown).—Both were from Mississippi and were at Leavenworth, Kan., in 1918. An old friend would like to hear from them. Deck Smith, Box 190, Kentwood, La.

CLARK, R. P., was last heard of at Dodge City, Kan. His brother Harry would appreciate some word from or about him. 20 Notre Dame Ave., E., Winnipeg, Can.

KENNEDY, Miss LaVONNE, who lived in Indianapolis, Ind., in 1918-19, please write to J. D. Gibson, Box 825, Balboa, C. Z., Panama.

MANRAU, CARL, whose home is in Wisconsin, was last heard of in Ranger, Tex, in 1920. He has black hair, black eyes, and stubby teeth. Any one knowing his present address please write to M. S. McIntyre, care of this magazine.

DILL.—Memories of last summer! Would like to see or hear from you again. "Chick."

ALLRED, J. H.—Was last heard from in Douthat, Okla. If any of his present acquaintances see this please ask him to write his friend, Mrs. A. S., of Hannibal, Mo.

RYAN, LAWRENCE HENRY.—He is about fifty-three years old. He has a sister Miss Annie Ryan, and brothers Ed and Tom. The three men are all railroaders. Any information will be appreciated by M. E. R., care of this magazine.

WHITMAN, JOE, was last heard of in Houston, Tex., in 1922. He is thirty-eight years old, five feet six inches tall, and has dark hair and dark eyes. His parents need his help. Any one knowing him please write to his niece, Miss Pauline Strealy, Grand Saline, Tex.

WARD, WENONA N.—She is thought to be in the neighborhood of San Diego, Calif., and is twenty-two years old. Please send any information about her to H. B. Arns, Box 402, Norwalk, Calif.

BALDWIN, "SHORTY."—Have some news about Dot! Please write to your old buddy at San Bernardino. Bill.

FLETCHER, KITTY and **FRANK,** were born in London, England, and were last heard of in New York City in 1918. Any one knowing anything about them please write to their daughter, Mrs. J. Fred Melton, 454 Beach St., Welch, W. Va.

JOHNSON, MAURICE, was in Pittsburgh, Pa., in 1919. He is of Swedish birth. Please send any news of him to H. K., care of this magazine.

HAMMER, DOROTHY and **MARGARET,** twelve and fourteen, who were put in a home in Richmond, Va., in 1919, are now being sought by their brother, Julian E. Hammer, 2931 W. Marshall St., Richmond, Va.

LONGUERAN, ZEAB.—He left Mora, N. M., with me several years ago, and is now thought to be in California. A boyhood chum, who is now a cripple, would like some word from or about him. Seferino D. Martin, 1115 Rialto Ave., San Bernardino, Calif.

ORTH, CHARLES B.—Please write. Am anxious to know if you are well. All letters will be treated confidentially. "Gil."

CHADWELL, FRANK or **GEORGE.**—The sweetheart you left behind in Webb City, Mo., still cares for you and is anxious for you to write her. Sophia Capps, 712 S. Front St., Rawlins, Wyo.

KELLY, P. R.—Your relatives are anxious to find you. Please write to E. J. Kelly, 32 Harvard St., Charlestown, Mass.

MILLER, ED. L.—Was born in Salina, Kan., in 1865, and was last heard from while he was working for the Missouri Valley Bridge Co. between 1890 and 1892. Any one knowing his present whereabouts please write his old friend, John Dooley, 427 Cherokee St., Leavenworth, Kan.

ATTENTION.—Any one knowing of a World War veteran with right arm off, right eye out or sunk in, and last two fingers off left hand, please write to Box 456, Perryton, Tex.

HEILBRON, J. R.—It is important that I hear from you at once. Write Dorothy, care of this magazine.

GIBBS, JOHN S. M.—Mother seriously ill. Please come home immediately.

STEELE, Mr. and Mrs. VERNON, were living in Kent, Wash., when last heard of. Any news of them would be appreciated by son of Mrs. Steele, Jesse Leon Leach, 1007 Wabash Ave., Spokane, Wash.

McROBERT, J. E., was last heard from at Mina, Nev., in November, 1923. He is now forty-eight years old. His mother, Mrs. Mary Stuart, will appreciate any information about him. Box 214, Parma, Idaho.

EISENBARTT, JOHN.—Please write to your folks at home. The new address is 2211 Metropolitan Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

TRUDEAU, THOMPSON or **McKAY, CLEO,** when last heard from was living with her father in Chicago. She has light, wavy hair, blue eyes, pleasant disposition, doesn't weigh over one hundred and ten pounds, and is twenty-two years old. Her aunt, Mrs. Minnie Bertrand, is very anxious to get in touch with her, and will appreciate any information sent to her at West River St., Momence, Ill.

WATTS, ROBERT, TERRY, and **CHARLIE,** left Booneville, Ark., in April, 1925, for Ft. Smith, Ark., to hunt work, but have never been heard from since. Charlie's mother needs him and is badly distressed over his absence. If any one seeing this notice knows of their present whereabouts they will confer a favor upon her by writing to Mrs. Lillie Watts, Booneville, Ark.

ATTENTION.—My father, Wm. Franklin Stewart, came from Daniel Boone, Ky., where he left his mother, sisters, and brothers, but he has not heard from them since. His mother is said to have married once or twice again, also his sister Sara. I will be grateful to any one who can give me any information about the family. Mrs. Margaret Stewart Woodward, White's Creek, Tenn.

SNYDER, GEORGE.—Please write to your father and mother. They are worried about you. Mrs. Homer Snyder, 752 Franklin St., S. E., Grand Rapids, Mich.

DODSON, EDWARD.—We have heard nothing from or about him since he worked for the Commercial Mining Co. at Las Vegas, N. M., in 1924. His wife is very much worried. She has written many letters, but received no replies. Please write to his daughter, Mrs. Mary Tyler, Simi, Calif.

ELEANOR OF FRISCO.—Am in dire need of your assistance. Please write me and I will atone for my wrong of July, 1923. Pvt. Ralph D. Thissell, Motor Transport Co. No. 5, Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Tex.

MARIE.—I have never forgotten you, and if you will send your address to Mrs. Cecil Hansen, R. F. D. 2, Box 132, Hopkins, Minn., I will write you more fully. Jim.

FRANK V. A.—Can't stand this separation much longer. Will be at 601 for a short time. Mail waiting for you at Gen. Del. and William's Hotel, Milwaukee. Please write to Elsie.

WELCH, "DAD."—Sis has very important news for you. Please write and send your address. E. T.

CLAYCOMB, HAROLD HUNTER, left his home in Owensboro, Ky., on March 27, 1924. His mother would be extremely grateful for any word from or about him. J. A. Claycomb, 215 Creek Ave., Bartlesville, Okla.

BURKE, BUD.—Your mother is sick and grieving for you. Please write. If you are in need, she'll help you. Howard Svita, 16 27th Ave., S. E., Minneapolis, Minn.

BARRINGTON, RALPH.—Please return to your wife and everything will be forgiven. My sister has been ill and is in the hospital. Rita.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from any of the men who were members of the old 21st Balloon Co. from 1919 to 1922. W. B. Browne, 741 Stamford Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

BUSH, CECIL.—We have good news for you, and we all miss you. Please come home. Helen.

CLIFTON, WALTER.—Last heard of in Centerville, Iowa, about a year ago. Is about forty-five years old. His sister would appreciate any information about him. Mrs. O. E. Jones, Rt. A, Box 65, Issaquah, Wash.

ARROWSMITH, MARK, disappeared from his home on May 25th and no word has been received since. If any of his present acquaintances see this notice please ask him to write or return home, as his wife has been ill since he left, and the children miss him. Mrs. Mark Arrowsmith, Taylorsville, Ala.

W. H. W. (DADDY).—Your silence worries me. Please write to my home, addressing letter by my maiden name. Babe.

MIZE, CALVIN, thirty years old, over five feet tall, fair complexion, blue eyes, left his home June 2, 1925, and has not been heard from since. Any one knowing of his present whereabouts please advise his wife, at 107 2d St., Gaffney, S. C.

BOYLE, HARRY, formerly of Pennsylvania.—Please write to your lonely friend, Margaret W.

TARMER, W. LEE.—Your wife is not able to work any longer and needs you. Please write her at Box 58, Bushnell, Fla.

FINESTEIN, CLAIRE.—Your silence makes me very sad. Please let me know what the misunderstanding was caused by, and I will gladly apologize for any wrong on my part. Green.

EGGER, JOHANN FREDERICK, was last seen in Alliance, Ohio, in 1903. He is a native of Switzerland, and is about fifty-four years old. His stepbrother, Jacob Kunz, would like to hear from him. Write to P. O. Box 590, Evanston, Wyo.

FRANZEN, GERTRUDE.—I have some interesting and beneficial news for you. Please write to Perry D. Long, 8145 Radcliffe Ave., Detroit, Mich.

MAHONEY, LEO THOMAS, was adopted by a family, through an orphan's home at Sioux Falls, S. D., in 1911, and his sisters and brothers have tried in vain to find him since. He is now twenty-three years old. Any one knowing his present address please write to his sister, Mrs. Millie Tholander, R. R. 1, Drakesville, Iowa.

MILTON, W. B.—Please write, Bill, and tell me what to do. Grace Kallas, Gen. Del., Birmingham, Ala.

CLICK, ROY, was in the Army and Navy Hospital at Hot Springs, Ark., in 1917. An old friend, Pansy Hulen, is anxious to know his present address. Any one who can enlighten her please write care of Gen. Del., Bolivar, N. Y.

DIEHL, GUY C.—We don't understand why you left us. We all love you and want to do the right thing by you. I am living at an orphan's home with the children and we all need you. Please write V. A. D., care of this magazine.

CALABRESE, ANTHONY THOMAS, disappeared while on a business trip to Chicago, five years ago. He was of medium height, weighed one hundred and eighty-six pounds, was smooth shaven, had gray eyes, light-brown hair, and very fair complexion. He had spells of epilepsy, and may have had a lapse of memory. If any one knows of his present whereabouts please advise his wife, Mrs. Josie Calabrese, 601 E. Swan Ave., Webster Groves, Mo.

McCORMACK, JOHN; KAIGER, ANDREW.—I would like to get in touch with any descendants of either of these men. The last heard of lived in the Sequatchie Valley, Tenn., just before the Civil War. Write to Burel James, R. R. 1, Spark's Hill, Ill.

BURNES, Mrs. and Mr. EDWARD, who were last heard of in Detroit, Mich., are being looked for by a friend, L. Blodgett, Ft. Washington, Md.

Can You Guess This Man's Age?

See if You Can Tell Within 25 Years; The Author Couldn't; But He Stuck With Hobart Bradstreet Until He Revealed His Method of Staying Young

I USED to pride myself on guessing people's ages. That was before I met Hobart Bradstreet, whose age I missed by a quarter-century. But before I tell you how old he really is, let me say this:

My meeting up with Bradstreet I count the luckiest day of my life. For while we often hear how our minds and bodies are about 50% efficient —and at times feel it to be the truth—he knows *why*. Furthermore, he knows how to overcome it —in five minutes—and he showed me *how*.

This man offers no such bromides as setting-up exercises, deep-breathing or any of those things you know at the outset you'll never do. He uses a principle that is the foundation of all chiropractic, naprapathy, mechano-therapy, and even osteopathy. Only he does not touch a hand to you; it isn't necessary.

The reader will grant Bradstreet's method of staying young worth knowing and using, when told that its originator (whose photograph reproduced here was taken a month ago) is sixty-five years old!

And here is the secret: *he keeps his spine a half-inch longer than it ordinarily would measure.*

Any man or woman who thinks just one-half inch elongation of the spinal column doesn't make a difference should try it! It is easy enough. I'll tell you how. First, though, you may be curious to learn why a full-length spine puts one in an entirely new class physically. The spinal column is a series of tiny bones, between which are pads or cushions of cartilage. Nothing in the ordinary activities of us humans stretches the spine. So it "settles" day by day, until those once soft and resilient pads become thin as a safety-razor blade—and just about as hard. One's spine (the most wonderfully designed shock-absorber known) is then an unyielding column that transmits every shock straight to the base of the brain.

Do you wonder folks have backaches and headaches? That one's nerves pound toward the end of a hard day? Or that a nervous system may periodically go to pieces? For every nerve in one's body connects with the spine, which is a sort of central switchboard. When the "insulation," or cartilage, wears down and flattens out, the nerves are exposed, or even impinged—and there is trouble on the line.

Now, for proof that sublaxation of the spine causes most of the ills and ailments which spell "age" in men or women. Flex your spine—"shake it out"—and they will disappear. You'll feel the difference in *ten minutes*. At least, I did. It's no trick to secure complete spinal laxation as Bradstreet does it. But like everything else, one must know how. No amount of violent exercise will do it; not even chopping wood. As for walking, or golfing, your spine settles down a bit firmer with each step.

Mr. Bradstreet had evolved from his 25-year experience with spinal mechanics a simple, boiled-down formula of just five movements. Neither takes more than one minute, so it means but five minutes a day. But those movements! I never experienced such compound exhilaration before. I was a good subject for the test, for I went into it with a dull headache. At the end of the second movement I thought I could actually feel my blood circulating. The third movement in this remarkable SPINE-MOTION series brought an amazing feeling of exhilaration. One motion seemed to open and shut my backbone like a jack-knife.

I asked about constipation. He gave me another motion—a peculiar, writhing and twisting movement—and fifteen minutes later came a complete evacuation!

HOBART BRADSTREET, THE MAN WHO DECLINES TO GROW OLD

Hobart Bradstreet frankly gives the full credit for his conspicuous success to these simple secrets of SPINE-MOTION. He has traveled about for years, conditioning those whose means permitted a specialist at their beck and call. I met him at the Roycroft Inn, at East Aurora. Incidentally, the late Elbert Hubbard and he were great pals; he was often the "Fra's" guest in times past. But Bradstreet, young as he looks and feels, thinks he has chased around the country long enough. He has been prevailed upon to put his **Spine-Motion** method in form that makes it now generally available.

I know what these remarkable mechanics of the spine have done for me. I have checked up at least twenty-five cases. With all sincerity I say nothing in the whole realm of medicine or specialism can quicker re-make, rejuvenate and restore one. I wish you could see Bradstreet himself. He is arrogantly healthy; he doesn't seem to have any nerves. Yet he puffs incessantly at a black cigar that would floor some men, drinks two cups of coffee at every meal, and I don't believe he averages seven hours' sleep. It shows what a sound nerve-mechanism will do. He says a man's power can and should be unabated up to the age of 60, in every sense, and I have had some astonishing testimony on that score.

Would you like to try this remarkable method of "coming back"? Or, if young, and apparently normal in your action and feelings, do you want to see your energies just about doubled? It is easy. No "apparatus" is required. Just Bradstreet's few, simple instructions, made doubly clear by his photographic poses of the five positions. Results come amazingly quick. In less than a week you'll have new health, new appetite, new desire, and new capacities; you'll feel years lifted off mind and body. This miracle-man's method can be tested without any advance risk. If you feel enormously benefited, everything is yours to keep and you have paid for it all the enormous sum of $3.00! Knowing something of the fees this man has been accustomed to receiving, I hope his naming $3.00 to the general public will have full appreciation.

The $3.00 which pays for everything is not sent in advance, nor do you make any deposit or payment on delivery. Try how it feels to have a full-length spine, and you'll henceforth pity men and women whose nerves are in a vise!

HOBART BRADSTREET, Suite 7275,
630 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

I will try your Spine-Motion without risk if you vide necessary instructions. Send everything post out any charge or obligation, and I will try it fiv find Spine-Motion highly beneficial I can remit payment; otherwise I will return the material you nothing.

Name .....

Address .....

A Handsome, Massive Davenport By Day a Comfortable Bed By Night.

This picture shows Bed Davenport open—ready for use as a bed. Circular insert shows portion of mattress and spring. No extra charge is made for the mattress; it is included with this Bed Davenport. Bed measures 72 x 46 inches—large enough for two persons. Be sure to state whether you want the Oak or Mahogany Finish.

A Handsome, Massive and Useful article of Furniture by day—A Comfortable Bed by Night—Large Enough for Two Persons—Beautiful in Design—Honestly Made of Durable Materials—Will Give Years of Satisfactory Service.

Highly Glossed Golden Oak or Hand Rubbed Mahogany Finish

Be sure to state your choice

30 Days' Free Trial

I want this Bed Davenport to be its own salesman. I want to send it to you at my risk on 30 Days' Trial. I want you to use it every day and every night just as if it were your own. I want you to know from actual experience, its attractiveness by day, its comfort by night. Then if your satisfaction is not complete, I want you to return the Davenport. I will refund your first payment and all freight charges. The trial will not cost you a penny.

MATTRESS INCLUDED **To make this offer additionally attractive I am including a comfortable, rest-giving 18 pound quality cotton mattress. It is covered with a good wearing grade floral art ticking of an attractive design. Mattress is made especially for the Davenport and fits it perfectly.**

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Construction and Materials: Built of solid oak and hard wood, selected and well seasoned. Strong, handsome arms and Colonial Design front posts 3½ inches wide. ***Finish and Upholstery:*** Choice of two beautiful finishes—Rich Golden Oak or Hand rubbed Mahogany. Seat and Back covered with excellent grade of Brown Spanish artificial leather that will give enduring service. Non-Sag Seat is built over an 18 oil tempered coil spring support covered with heavy duck canvas and an abundance of sanitary, resilient upholstering materials. This Davenport is desirable for medium sized homes. When closed it takes up only 58 inches of wall space, yet open it is a comfortable bed for two people. ***Bed Features:*** You do not sleep on the upholstery, but on a separate and comfortable bed spring, built into the Davenport. To make up the bed, unfold seat with one easy motion; the mattress and bedding are all ready in position on the spring. **With the outfit comes an 18 pound restful cotton mattress covered with a good floral art ticking, for which not one penny extra is charged.** Bed is 46 inches wide by 72 inches long — large size. One easy motion closes the Davenport and conceals the bedding, which is out of sight all day. Opens and closes easily. A child can operate it. **Be sure to state your Choice of Finish, Oak or Mahogany. Order No. TA1530. Price $39.95. Terms: $1 with order, balance $3 Monthly.**

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