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ME AN' SHORTY

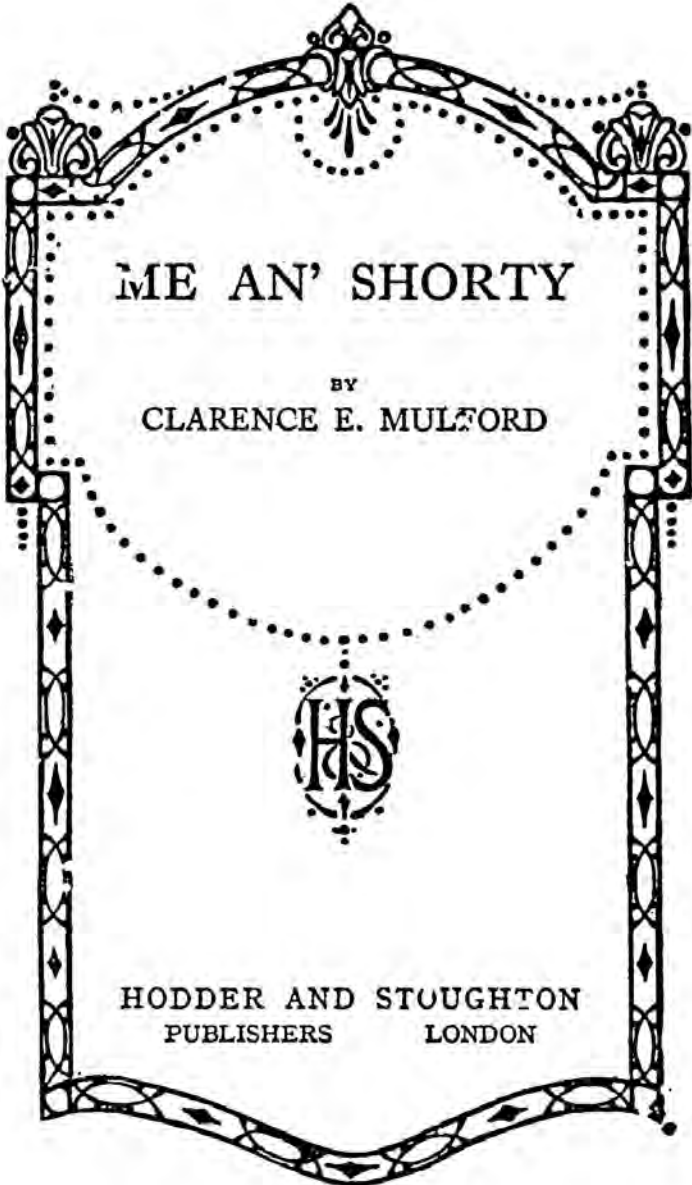
THE FAMOUS BAR-20  
AND OTHER NOVELS BY  
CLARENCE E. MULFORD

*Bar-20*  
*Bar-20 Days*  
*The Man from Bar-20*  
*The Bar-20 Three*  
*Tex of Bar-20*  
*The Bar-20 Rides Again*  
*Corson of the J.C.*  
*The Coming of Cassidy*  
*Hopalong Cassidy*  
*Hopalong Cassidy Returns*  
*Hopalong Cassidy's Protégé*  
*Johnny Nelson*  
*The Orphan*  
*Buck Peters, Ranchman*  
*Beckoning Trails*  
*Black Buttes*  
*Rustler's Valley*  
*Cottonwood Gulch*  
*Mesquite Jenkins*  
*Me an' Shorty*  
*The Deputy Sheriff*



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STOUGHTON  
LTD., LONDON





ME AN' SHORTY

BY  
CLARENCE E. MULFORD



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JIM WATSON had died: specifically, he had been hanged, and hanged by his best friend, the sheriff; and thereby the hand was played out, the loser lost, and the game was ended; and no one believed that a new game was to start, that the dead man would start it after his death. Sardonic when alive, he was as sardonic dead.

He had left a new will, made two days after he had taken possession of the JC ranch; and when he made it he had held no thought of what was to grow out of this proper and innocent bequeathing and devising of certain lands, tenements, and hereditaments; but had he known it, he might have made that new will just the same. Circumstances which he had failed to control determined that he was not to die in possession of the JC ranch, and those circumstances had so harried him and occupied his mind and time in a dis-

perate situation that he gave no thought to anything else, least of all such things as wills.

The facts are these: having willed this land and all that went with it, he transferred the property a few days later under a bill of sale to Bob Corson, duly witnessed; and immediately thereafter he was arrested, charged with murder, and soon tried, found guilty, and hanged. Bob Corson, having a proper sense of the fitness of things, had duly recorded that bill of sale in the office provided for that purpose, and was then and now the lawful owner of the JC ranch.

Jim Watson had owned two ranches, one of them honestly and for several years: this was the Bar W, and this was the only ranch of which he died seised. It was not only his to will, as had been the JC, but it was capable of being transferred under the will, which the JC was not. He left the Bar W to his unmarried sister, along with any and all moneys, notes, and chattels that he might own. In this bequeathing to his sister he repeated the first will word for word; and the

sister, not knowing how to run a ranch, not caring to find out, and caring still less to change her environment, ways of living, and her circle of friends, had sold it to a syndicate as soon as possible, and invested the proceeds in sound and long-term securities.

The second will differed materially from the first in the way it provided for Jim Watson's younger brothers. As it turned out, it differed materially on paper only. In the first document the brothers had been bequeathed each the significant sum of one dollar, as assurance that they had been neither overlooked nor forgotten, an assurance neither pleasant nor profitable. When making the second will, Jim Watson had just devilishly acquired another ranch, and his own villainy may have prompted him to forgive villainy in others: certain it is that he had experienced a change of heart and left the new ranch to his brothers, jointly and equally. He did not know it, but he was making a magnificent gesture: he was willing something of which he was not to die seise.

The brothers, having been entertained for a definite term of years in the penal institution of a South-western state, had been cheered during the last few weeks of their confinement by the knowledge that their brother had died and left them something; by the knowledge that they jointly and equally owned a fine ranch, a property worth anywhere from eighty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars.

At last came the day when they stepped forth to freedom, each clad in a new suit of clothes, with a few dollars in his pocket, and transportation to his home town. On their way home their train passed a certain mail train bound the other way; and on this mail train was a letter which would have informed them that their fine ranch had turned out to be a myth; and so, not knowing this, they leaped to the platform in their home town before the car wheels had stopped rolling, and straightway hastened to the office of the attorney having the matter in hand. There they would go through whatever routine re-

quirements might be necessary, obtain letters establishing their identity, and borrow enough money to pay their way to the ranch. They had punched cows for others; now it would be pleasant to hire others to punch cows for them. While they both were fair safe blowers, having rounded out a post-graduate course, consisting of whispered lectures, while in prison, safe blowing, although both exciting and lucrative, was not reputable; ranching often is all three.

It was a sad awakening. They learned that they had been willed a ranch which, at the time of their brother's death, was claimed and occupied by someone else; and their attorney assured them that the present occupant's claim was good: a certain Bob Corson owned the JC, the same Bob Corson who had brought about their brother's arrest and conviction. They looked at each other in disgust: their brother had not died soon enough!

When they calmed down and could speak without too much emphasis they made inter-

ligent inquiries about it all, learned what they could, and then asked about their sister, who had disowned them. They found that she had received a ranch, sold it, and invested the funds safely; and they spoke feelingly again. Leaving the office, they braved a visit to the sister, found her hostile and unwilling to lend them any of her own money or to borrow it for them from others. However, she did allow them to read her brother's letters and thus put them more in touch with the conditions which had obtained out in that ranch country.

By nature they were suspicious, as was to be expected of their kind; they also were stubborn, sullenly vengeful, persistent, and determined. There had been a ranch left to them. It had been owned by their brother when he had willed it. The attorney had told them that he did not own it when he died, which should have satisfied them; and probably would have done so, except that for weeks, in spirit and expectations, they had been ranch owners; and in some people hope



dies hard. The ranch was worth a deal of money and, therefore, was worth the trouble of investigating in person. There always was a chance, and with persons such as themselves there often were several chances, even though they had to be shaped, started, and directed. Besides, a change of scene would not be a bad thing: they had the uneasy feeling that watchful eyes were on them: the spot between their shoulder blades was uneasy and sensitive.

There always was a chance. Yes, for the last transfer of the property might have been made under duress, the signatures might have been forged, or there might be some other irregularity which would operate to set aside the act. It did not enter their minds that Watson's possession would not have stood close scrutiny had it been challenged at law. He had returned it much as he had obtained it, and the return was morally right.

They procured a suitable kit of tools, left town one night on a fast freight, dropped off

before dawn at a water tower just outside the business part of a small town, and became purposefully active. When day broke twenty-four hours later they were on a passenger train and on their way again with heavy financial reserves. The safe had yielded more than they had dared to hope for. They changed trains several times, doubling, crossing and criss-crossing, and at last left trains for horses in the vicinity of the country in which they were interested. They bought good horses and second-hand riding gear, so there would be no newness to make them unduly prominent. They had money enough to take care of them for an indefinite period of time and no need to be occupied, if they wished, with anything aside from the matter foremost in their minds.

After caching their tools they spent a week riding about the country, learning the lay of the land, and whatever gossip they could pick up; they looked at the record of the bill of sale and memorised the names of the two witnesses: Franklin Alexander Wilcox and

George Henry Blodgett, the latter a scrawl almost unreadable. These witnesses would be hunted up and questioned when it seemed expedient to do so, and thereon rests a tale—but let us come to that in the right and proper order. It will do no harm, however, to state that Franklin Alexander Wilcox was commonly and universally known as “Nueces”; and that George Henry Blodgett answered instantly to the name of “Shorty” and to his real name not at all; and it had been so long since either of these two persons had heard their lawful names that they might need time in which to recognise them. No one in that part of the country had ever heard their rightful names. Bob Corson, and perhaps El Toro, the Mexican bandit, had seen them written once, although it is possible that El Toro had not been able to read the signatures at the distance; and neither of these two people could fairly be called loose-mouthed.

Nueces and Shorty had drifted into the country under their commonly accepted

cognomens, and no one had questioned them in the matter, for along the frontier such things as names are strictly personal and have a way of changing, for good reason or bad, or for no reason at all. Nueces and Shorty were widely known personages, having acquired a sort of fame; Franklin Alexander Wilcox and George Henry Blodgett were names without meaning or owners so far as the inhabitants of that country were concerned.

The Watson brothers also took new names; and after their period of quiet and tentative inquiries, drifted down to Cactus Springs as Frank Smith and Tom Gade. Cactus Springs was the home of the sheriff, who had been their brother's best friend and almost his only friend. To the sheriff they confided their identities but nothing of their records; and in him they found a friendly and sympathetic listener. He was nursing grievances of his own, which covered the past and the present and promised to extend well into the future.

The sheriff gave them excellent advice, which they secretly scorned; they were determined to remain in the country and do what they could to better their condition in life. He told them facts which they treasured and stored up; and he described the personnel of the JC outfit frankly and honestly, which they took to be talk to frighten tenderfeet. Then, so that they might unobtrusively fit into the country and arouse no far-reaching gossip of a nature detrimental to the success of their plans, he got jobs for them with a herd summer grazing in the hills east of town.

The sheriff liked the brothers and felt sorry for them, but he shook his head regrefully when he thought of what chance they had to ever own any part of the JC ranch larger, perhaps, than a plot six feet by two. Nursing a bitter hatred of his own against that ranch and all of its friends, worried and perplexed by what it had done to him and was likely to do, he was almost fierce in his hope that the brothers might in some way win; but he was

fair enough with himself to feel positive that they could not win.

After they had become part of the scenery the brothers intended that Frank, who strongly resembled his mother and who in no way looked like his brother Tom or his dead brother Jim, should pay a visit to Willow Springs, the home town of the enemy, and make guarded inquiries regarding the present whereabouts of the missing witnesses to the bill of sale. They were prepared to pay for suitable information, and, if the information justified it, to pay high. They had a great deal of faith in the power of money. If they found that their mission into the cattle country was of no avail, they would amuse themselves for a while in creating trouble for the owner of the JC, and look over the frailties of the local bank. To cover their operations they might have to start the troubles early and harass the JC, if they could do so without calling attention to themselves; and in this they found the sheriff's almost fanatical hatred to be of value; and

the fact that an election was looming up on the local political horizon would provide means for further excitement. First and foremost, however, came the need to find the two witnesses, and this they proceeded to do.

THE Bar K herd was composed of about eighteen hundred head, and its outfit, after the drive, had been four men, one of them a cook. Two of these had quit and drifted on about their business, which fitted in nicely with the needs of the Watson brothers and provided them with something to do as soon as they reached Cactus Springs. The third rider was a puncher by the name of Harry Tomlinson, and the fourth was his brother John. The latter was a really good camp cook and was tacitly excused from the herd to attend to the culinary work. 'It had been found that he cooked immeasurably better when he had nothing else to do. Harry Tomlinson was in charge, and he was at the camp when the sheriff rode up to visit his two men, then out with the herd.

"Howdy, Harry. How's everythin'?"



"All right, Sheriff."

"Them fellers make good hands?"

"Can't complain."

"Wonder what you'd say if I asked you not to be too hard on 'em?"

"Hard on 'em?" inquired the foreman in some surprise.

"Yeah—let 'em come in to town kinda often, Harry," explained the sheriff, dismounting.

"Why, don't know but what they can when things are easy out here," replied the foreman. "You expect some kinda trouble?"

"Well, yes an' no," answered the sheriff. "Election's comin', an' I reckon there'll be right smart opposition this year. When Watson died we lost a mighty good driver, an' th' boys are kinda strayin' away. That Corson pup is runnin' ag'in' me, an' he's right popular. Other years he could run an' be damned; but times have changed since last election, an' he's got a mighty good chance to win. Politics is in a bad way out

here now: most of th' boys can vote as they want to. Them two riders of yourn, out there, are friends of mine, an' they got right good heads on their shoulders. I'd take it right kind of you if you didn't hold 'em too clost to camp."

"Well, what you say goes with me," replied Tomlinson slowly and with a smile. "My boss said to treat you good, seein' what you done for him; an' that, too, goes with me."

"That's mighty nice of you, Harry, an' you won't lose nothin' by it," said the sheriff, and he paused to think for a moment. "I might even be able to fix it so that you drawed down their pay, on th' quiet, you know."

"What you mean?" asked the foreman curiously.

"Just that"

"Oh, shucks;" exclaimed the foreman after a moment's thought.

"No, I mean that, Harry. I reckon mebbly I can work it. As a matter of fact them two

boys kinda suggested it. You wouldn't mind that, would you?"

"But what else have I gotta do before I draw it down?" asked the foreman, his expression blank. It had been years since he had believed in Santa Claus.

"Well, I can't just say, right now," slowly answered the sheriff. "Not nothin' that would make you any trouble, anyhow. No trouble to amount to anythin', anyway. Might not have to do anythin' a-tall, Harry. I can't just tell yet."

"All right, then I'll raise their pay, startin' now. They're worth more money, anyhow," said the foreman, grinning.

"Yes, I understand you started 'em kinda low to try 'em out," gravely replied the sheriff, "but that's between you an' th' owners. There'll mebbly be a lot of money come out of this thing, whatever it is, an' if that proves true, our *friends* won't be forgotten. Frank an' Tom are workin' on it with me."

"All right. They can leave when they

want, except on bad days an' nights, when I'll have to use 'em."

"Well, I could allus send out a couple of men, if I had to, to take their places," suggested the sheriff.

"If they're good men with cattle, you can."

"I wouldn't send you no other kind, Harry," said the sheriff, slowly mounting. He waved his hand and rode on toward the two men with the herd.

The foreman looked after him, watching his unhurried progress, and a smile crept over his face. The sheriff, he suspected, was a man somewhat like himself; a man who would not let little rules and questions of morals or ethics stand in his way. As he sized up the local situation, from his limited knowledge of it, it seemed to be a case of dog eat dog; and he was certain that he would much rather eat than be eaten. It looked as if the sheriff were still on the winning side, and that, of course, would be the side of the Bar K foreman.

The sheriff stopped short of the herd and

waited for the two men to join him, which they did readily enough.

"Howdy, Tom; howdy, Frank," said the sheriff, smiling a little.

"Howdy, Sheriff," said Frank.

"Glad to see you," said Tom, drawing rein.

"Reckoned mebby you would be," replied the sheriff gravely. "I just talked with Harry about you boys, an' it worked. He'll take yore pay an' let you do about as you please. That'll give you a business an' a reason for stayin' in th' country, but it'll give ycu all th' rope you need. That was our understandin', warn't it?"

"Yes. Glad you was able to fix it up with him," replied Frank. "We never would 'a' gone back to punchin' cows except that we had to git out of th' loafer class."

"It's cheap, Sheriff," said Tom, grinning. "What's th' latest news?"

"I reckon Corson will make a mighty good run if his friends have anythin' to do about it," answered the officer. "Understand he didn't want it; but he'll mebby have to take

it, if he wins. There's lots that favour him."

"You figger he's as strong as you figgered him th' last time we talked?" asked Frank.

"Yes; mebbly more so. If yore brother was alive I wouldn't give it a second thought. He had 'em lined up, fearin' th' crack of th' whip. When Corson had yore brother hanged he raised hell with things out here."

The brothers of the deceased showed a proper spirit at this casual mention of hanging, and both scowled blackly. He had not died soon enough.

"Reckon we owe Corson somethin' on our own hook," said Tom angrily. "We loth thought a lot of Jim, an' you can see how much he thought of us when he willed us that damn ranch."

"You said you reckoned he was mebbly forced at a gun's muzzle to sign that bill of sale?" asked Tom. "If that's so, then that transfer ain't worth nothin'."

"I said I mebbly reckoned so," replied the

sheriff. "I don't know for shore. You see, Jim had too much on his mind them last two days to say much about anythin' like that. He was scared. He knowed he didn't have a chance, an' he was bendin' his thoughts on hisself exclusive. But I suspicion he was forced to sign it. An' then, where are them witnesses? Who are they? Nobody ever heard of 'em in this part of th' country. Looks to me stronger an' stronger every day that us three fellers are bound up tight together in about th' same job. None of us will be any worse off for th' help of th' others, an' if I git another term, I'll shore as hell put my back into clearin' up that there bill of sale. I can promise you that."

"An' you reckon Corson's got a good chance to win?" asked Frank, his eyes narrowing.

"I just got to admit it to you boys but to nobody else," answered the sheriff, his expression betokening a troubled mind. "Th' whip hand is dead, an' there's too many breakin' away from me. I can't hold 'em

in line, like yore brother did: I don't hold their notes an' mortgages."

"All right; then there's only one thing to do," said Frank with decision. "We got to discredit Corson. We got to get somethin' on him an' somethin' strong. You ride on back to town, find some fellers that you can trust, an' let me an' Tom wrestle this thing out between ourselves. We're a purty good pair when it comes to head work; an' we can stand quite some spendin' of money if it'll help us along. Th' three of us oughta be able to stop 'most anythin'. You know th' people an' th' country, you know who you can count on; an' you know who to get to do any rough work that's got to be done. There ain't no use of callin' spades anythin' else but spades between us three. You got th' inclination to gamble a little, if we have to?"

"I got th' inclination an' th' nerve, too," said the sheriff.

"All right, then: you go back to town an' let us figger this job out," said Tom Gade reassuringly. "Don't do too much worryin'



till after election. You was Jim's friend, an' we owe it to him to keep you where he put you, an' keep you there we will."

"An' if you do that," said the sheriff, smiling grimly, "I'll mebbly be able to show you how you can git that ranch into th' hands it really belongs to. If I can lick Corson in this election I'll be in right good position to lick him in th' other; an' nothin' would suit me any better than to lick him in both, an' lick him good!"

"You will," said Frank, holding out his hand.

"You shore will," indorsed Tom, shaking hands in turn.

"See you boys later, in town," said the sheriff, and he turned and rode away.

"He shore is worried," muttered Frank, watching the departing horseman, "an' that's th' way we got to keep him."

"Yes to both," said Tom; "but he oughta be worried, an' he shore is right about winnin'. If he's licked he ain't worth a damn to us; but if he wins we can start all hell

ag'in' that JC crowd. We did'th' right thing when we came out here, 'though I never figgered we'd be partners 'with a sheriff!,"

"He ain't got no sense at all; we must have been easy for Jim," said Frank, chuckling. "All right, Thomas old son: here's where we use th' gentle art of fram'in'. We got right good tools, too. There's th' crooked sheriff an' his crooked friends; there's this herd an' Tomlinson; Tomlinson, that's scared of raids on th' cattle an' wants to fill his pockets any way he can. There's our money, an' that bank, an' them cached tools. We'll start in with plantin' a stolen hoss, an' we'll send somebody up to th' JC some dark night to steal us some handy evidence."

"Why not crack th' bank first an' plant some of that money on th' JC?" asked the brother.

"Because, if it blows up, we want it to look like a cowman done it: a local person, an' not a couple of bank robbers. Every man's thoughts are kinda limited an' favour th' thing he knows best; out here, they think

in terms of cows. We'll use cows, or hosses, or somethin' handy in their minds."

"Right," said Tom, grinning. "An' if we don't win with th' ranch we don't stand to lose everythin': that Willow Springs bank is right handy to take th' sting outa defeat."

"Yes, an' from what I've heard about that bank it'll be about a ten-minute job for us."

"Fifteen, at th' most," chuckled Tom. "Well, come on: let's get our heads together an' make a start."

And so it was that the seeds were sown from which came strange crops of trouble around the JC ranch.

ELECTIONS and pre-election interest are good things for the covering of inquiries and subjects which at other times might prove to be embarrassing. So thought Frank Smith as he rode into Willow Springs one bright morning, prepared to change his name again. Jeff Rawlins would do for Willow Springs. He had made his peace with Harry Tomlinson and was prepared to stay indefinitely in town, to mix with the citizens and to learn all he could. Here was the place where important inquiries should be started, for here was the place where the JC was well known. The election talk would be plentiful, and a stranger's natural inquiries would likely be lost in the general discussions.

He went to the hotel and registered, demanding a good room.

"They're all good," said clerk Tyson, twirling the register around and picking up

a pen: "Besides, there ain't none no place else. Stayin' long?"

"Depends a lot on how you treat me," said the stranger, smiling.

"Then I reckon you won't leave very soon, Mr. Rawlins. I'll give you Number Six. First flight to yore left. There ain't any more flights, but we allus say 'first.'"

"Politics stirrin' much down in this country?" asked Mr. Rawlins, looking into the cigar case. He rested a finger on the glass. "That looks like a good smoke: let me have half a dozen."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk, complying. He put the box away and tossed the money into a drawer. "Why, politics is stirrin' right strong. Considerable more'n usual, this year."

"Bigger county contracts this year to be given out?"

"Nope, 'tain't that."

"Down in this country," said Mr. Rawlins knowingly, "I reckon it ain't so much an election as it is a *re*-election?"

"Nope, not this year. It used to be that way, but since Jim Watson died—he used to like yore room, Mr. Rawlins—it looks like it might change."

"He was th' local boss, i take it?"

"Yes, he was. Funny thing, this year: th' man that caused his death is runnin' for sheriff. He don't want th' job, but he'll shore have to take it. A man owes somethin' to his friends."

"Good man?" asked Mr. Rawlins curiously.

"None better. Bob Corson would make a first-rate sheriff. He's honest an' a brave man."

"Bob Corson?" mused Mr. Rawlins thoughtfully. "Well, now, seems like I've heard his name before. Bob Corson—just who is he?"

"Owns th' JC ranch over west of town."

"That's it," exclaimed Mr. Rawlins, snapping his fingers triumphantly. "I remember it now. Let's see: there was some kind of trouble, wasn't there? Got th' ranch back

by forcin' th' owner to sell, or somethin' like that, wasn't it?"

"He got back somethin' that was just th' same as stol: from him, or rather, his father. Watson hung for it."

"Wasn't there a couple fellers named Wilcox an' Blodgett mixed up in it somehow?"

"No," answered the clerk. "I never heard them names before."

"Oh, well, I've got things mixed, I reckon. I'll put up my horse an' look th' town over. Dinner at twelve?"

"Yes, sir: twelve to one."

Mr. Rawlins wandered out and stopped in indecision before the building. He looked up and down the street, and a faded, bullet-riddled sign at the far end of the thoroughfare caught his eye, and he smiled. He smiled still more when he glanced at the little corral behind the building and thought about what it then contained.

There it was: the Cheyenne. The sheriff had been generous in his talking and with

his information, as behoved an aily. The Cheyenne was town headquarters for the JC men. He would go down and become familiar with it during an hour when it would be most suitable. He would strike up a friendship with the bartender and others. Just now, however, he would take a good look at the bank, open an account, and listen to the gossip in his immediate neighbourhood. An hour before noon, or evening, for that matter, would be time enough for the Cheyenne. His decision made, he mounted and rode around to the hotel stable in the rear to put up his horse. For an instant his gaze took in a long, lanky puncher leaning against a store across the street, and he thought that he never had seen a homelier face on a human being. He did not know that he already had seen Nueces, or that Nueces was going to play an important part in coming events.

Nueces leaned against the shady side of the general store, his contemplative gaze on the Cheyenne, saloon and gathering place for the men of the surrounding country. He



was waiting for Shorty, his bosom friend and irritant, who had gone on an errand for Bob Corson, their employer.

Corson was a tolerant, easy-going boss. He was so much so that although he knew that when he sent either of these two men to town the other would instantly find some excellent and arguementative reason to go along, he still picked one of the two to make the ride. Corson had humorously remarked that the pair of them could always be counted upon to do a man's work; but he also knew that if the occasion arose the pair of them could be counted upon to do four men's work. There was small thought, in the minds of the three, of boss and men, of hire and wages.

On the way to town Shorty had pessimistically remarked that he would bet that the saddle would not be finished; and Nueces had kept true to form by saying most emphatically that it would be finished and waiting for them; and out of the difference of opinion there quickly arose a squabble two

horses wide and twelve miles long. They had separated in a huff at the general store, Shorty riding on toward the harness maker's shop. Nueces was now waiting for him, an imaginary olive branch in his huge hand, a hand whose spread of palm and strength of thumb were peculiarly adapted for thumbing a gun hammer.

Shorty backed through the door of the harness shop, dragging the saddle through after him. Shouldering it, he carried it the remaining foot and a half to the horse, heaved it up, made it fast, climbed into his own saddle, and rode slowly back the way he had come. Exactly opposite Nueces he drew up and regarded his friend in strong but silent disapproval.

"Well?" demanded Nueces sourly and truculently.

"Well?" repeated the horseman in much the same tone.

"Well what?" growled Nueces, nearly dropping the imaginary olive branch.

Shorty's Stetson moved a little as he

scratched just under one side of it. He pondered for a moment.

"Well, it was finished," he grudgingly admitted.

"Any fool would 'a' knowed that," retorted Nueces, moving slowly toward his horse. "You reckon I'm blind? I can see it was finished, can't I? An' I said it would be, didn't I?"

"Yeah, any fool would," retorted Shorty. "But you sayin' so didn't mean nothin' to me. I know you too blame' well; an', besides, it was just a lucky guess." He watched his friend mount and turn the horse. "I'll play you two bits on th' One ball," he offered.

"You'll play yore gran'mother two bits on th' One ball!" snorted Nueces, smarting anew under the recollection of successive defeats and losses running back into the years. "You've done played me too many two bits on th' One ball, already. You know that table too blame' well."

"Then I'll play you straight pool," suggested Shorty.

"You couldn't play *straight* pool if you wanted to," said Nueces.

"I'll play you straight pool," persisted Shorty, ignoring the insult. "Two bits a game."

"I'll play straight pool, to yore five or nothin'," said Nueces flatly. "You figger I'm honin' to keep you in pocket money all th' rest of yore life?" He pulled his sombrero down in front. "Huh! I'm workin' for Bob, not for you!"

"Huh!" snorted Shorty. His voice slid up the scale. "Workin'?"

"Yes, workin'!"

"Workin', hell!"

Their horses moved restlessly and they caught a glimpse of the local bank, farther up the street.

"I betcha that bank's got more money in it now than it had when Jim Watson pulled out that eighty thousan' to buy th' JC," remarked Shorty.

"Yeah, I betcha. It's a fine bank. I got ten dollars in it somewhere," said Nueces,

regarding the building with pardonable pride. "I'm a depositor in it." He scratched his chin. "They gave me two little books."

"They should 'a' gave you hell instead," said Shorty scornfully. "Ten dollars! My Gawd, ain't you scared somebody'll rob that bank an' bust you flat?"

"An' I never thought of that before," said Nueces, his brow furrowing. "Now I got somethin' to worry about. Yo're a cheerful coyote, ain't you, springin' a thing like that on me?"

He looked at the financial institution with a deeper interest, his gaze lingering on the stout bars at its windows.

"You reckon it's plumb filled up ag'in since Watson drew out all that money?"

"Shore, ain't you a depositor?" jeered Shorty. Then he shook his head regretfully. "You know, Nueces, I'm kinda sorry Watson was hanged. Life ain't been near as interestin' since then."

"Yeah, them days was kinda interestin'," admitted Nueces, sighing. "If it wasn't for

Bob, me an' you'd pull stakes outa this part of th' country. There ain't nothin' ever happens 'round here no more."

The sale of the JC ranch to Jim Watson, and what had grown out of it, were still favourite subjects for conversation in the country roundabout. The murder of Corson's father, the desertion by his stepmother, and the legal hanging of Jim Watson, after a short but formal trial, were sweet mouthfuls; and sweeter yet was the fact that the sheriff, a citizen of Cactus Springs and Watson's henchman, had been obliged to adjust the noose and spring the trap. It was regarded as a rare joke on the sheriff. He was quite touchy on this subject and, therefore, heard plenty about it.

Another fact was still discussed: the quite innocent and lucky action that resulted in the total abolition of Mrs. Corson's dower right in the ranch. Placed in the position where he could have destroyed the bill of sale from John and Mrs. Corson to Jim Watson, and have claimed fraud, Bob let it stand and

tacitly admitted its validity. Since Mrs. Corson's signature was on that first bill of sale, she had parted with her one-third interest in the ranch; and the subsequent delivery of a bill of sale from Jim Watson, then the tacitly admitted owner of the ranch, to Bob Corson, had been another and distinct transaction. Even young Corson had not realised the significance of those two transfers until later. Now he was the sole owner of the ranch, which was deemed right and proper by every honest person who knew all of the circumstances; and the testimony at Watson's trial had aired those circumstances thoroughly.

Nueces and Shorty, Bludsoe and Burns, all had played their parts in the recovery of the ranch and now made up its outfit; and for certain uncertainty and stubborn loyalty the JC outfit was hard to beat. It was a combination to make even the most reckless man pause; it was tough and stringy, full of bones and gristle; it was made up of specialists, specialists in the use of firearms;

it was whimsical, like a tornado; and, all in all, was a good thing to let severely alone. Bludsoe and Burns had been professional killers; but Nueces could have killed them both in an even break. The first two would not have admitted it, but Fort Stanton, New Mexico, and the country around it, were very well remembered by them both. They had edged their tempers in the Lincoln County war.

Nueces and Shorty looked at the Cheyenne, rode to it, dismounted, and went inside.

Steve smiled at them from behind the bar. Steve was both owner and bartender and had troubles of his own.

"Judgin' by you two fellers," he said pleasantly, "anybody would reckon th' JC was just around th' corner of this here saloon. Don't you never do no work a-tali?"

"He's talkin' about work," said Shorty to Nueces, jerking his head in Steve's direction.

"Aw, let him alone; he's allus talkin' about



things that he don't know nothin' about. Remember, now, five or nothin' to my straight pool."

Let it be said in parenthesis that five or nothing means exactly that. A player must make five consecutive points to have any of them count on his string. If he makes but one, two, three, or four, they do not help his score. This is a handicap of no mean weight, and it requires a high degree of skill to overcome it.

"Huh!" snorted Steve promptly and placidly. "Dumb calf, *you* are, Nueces; an' when Shorty gits through with you, you'll be a-bellerin' like a calf, too. Hot iron! Hot iron! Slap it on to him, Shorty; an' run her deep."

It was too early in the day for the other habitués of the Cheyenne to be present, and the two friends and Steve had the place to themselves. The spring round-ups were being worked on most of the ranches, and their own round-up would soon get under way. Nueces and Shorty had spent the last two weeks as Corson's representatives at the

other ranches whose ranges approached his own, there to protect his interests and to cut out and brand, and perhaps drive home, what cattle bore his two brands.

The game was a peaceful, listless affair for these two friends. Shorty's skill overcame the handicap imposed upon him, and there was not even the sign of a verbal skirmish. They agreed upon everything, and paid each other compliments on the shots. The atmosphere of sugary sweetness was heavy and sticky, and Steve was greatly disappointed, for he thoroughly enjoyed the gratuitous insults incidental to the playing of these two; and at last his self-restraint gave way, and he commented frankly upon the gentlemanly aspects of the game and the Christian spirit which bloomed so luxuriantly.

"What th' blazes is th' matter with you fellers? You both sick?"

Nueces yawned, stretched, and listlessly racked his cue.

"No; just sleepy, an' tired, I reckon."

Steve guffawed loudly.

"Look ou, or you fellers will shore work yoreselves plumb to death," he jeered. "Bob oughta be ashamed of hisself, routin' you outa th' blankets before breakfast. *Tired!* My Gawd! "

Shorty stood up on his toes and peered across the bar, looking with pointed directness at Steve's generous waist line.

"Well, anyhow, Steve, there ain't no signs that me or Nueces will have to wear no belly band; an' yo're gittin' closter to that every day. Come on, Nueces, let's go back to th' ranch an' let this cow tick herd by hisself."

"Cow tick?" pleasantly inquired his lanky friend. "Flattery shore is gettin' to be a habit of yourn, Shorty." He turned his head and let his gaze rove from Steve's plump face down to his belt and up again.

"Steve," he said, "me an' Shorty sat in a game last night that didn't bust up till near sunrise. I took four dollars away from Bob at five an' ten in straight draw poker, which is somethin' which should git into th' histories. It was worth settin' up for. For

th' last couple of weeks me an' Shorty have been cuttin' out, calf floppin', an' brandin', an' let me tell you that bull doggin' them husky caives is real work. Purty soon we'll be runnin' our own round-up. Monday is th' day we start, an' Bob asked us to spread th' news, spread it generous, so any interested parties can be present to claim their own. Havin' told *you*, we've done spread it from sunrise to sunset, from th' North Pole to th' South. So long, an' will you please go to hell?"

"You can take th' news *there* yoreselves," rejoined Sieve, and then looked curiously at the doorway, where a long shadow fell across the sill.

The shadow was followed by a stranger, about whose walk there was something peculiar. There was a smile on his face, and his manner was affable. He wore the regulation puncher outfit, and he wore it easily.

"Howdy, gents," he said, heading straight for the bar. "Hot day. What'll you have?" He listened, and nodded to Steve. "Have

one yoreself an' make mine th' same." He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with a sleeve, revealing a mass of hair as red as ever had been seen in that country.

The glasses rose and fell in unison, sundry smacks proclaiming satisfaction.

"One more, Steve," said Shorty, following the time-honoured ritual and smiling at the stranger.

Once more it'was, and then the ritual was carried out twice more, which left everybody even and under no obligations.

"Feel better now," said the stranger pleasantly. "Round-ups all over?"

"All but ourn, which we start Monday," answered Shorty, his eyes on the bottle; but out of the corner of his eye he saw Nuzes frown upon his longing.

"Understand there's goin' to be an election down here," said the stranger.

"There shore will be, couple weeks from now, an' Corson is goin' to win it," said Shorty.

"Corson?" muttered the stranger. He

thought for a moment and then leaned against the bar at ease. "Seems to me I've heard that name before. Some kind of a scandal about some ranch, wasn't it?"

"Scandal?" inquired Nueces, his horse-like face becoming grave.

"There was," said Steve, interposing hastily. "Feller named Watson plumb stole th' JC from Corson's dad an' killed th' old man, too. Young Corson got th' ranch back ag'in, an' Watson was hanged for murder."

"Watson stole it, huh?" muttered the stranger. "Yes, I reckon that's it. It's comin' back to me now. Read about it in th' papers." He frowned a little. "Didn't Watson have a clear title?"

"Didn't have clear title to an inch of it," said Shorty, his eyes momentarily leaving the bottle. "He took back th' money he paid for it an' killed to git it. Never owned two bits' worth of it. But Corson let it stand an' then let Watson sell it back to him." He paused. "Seein that Watson never did own

any o' it, it was Bob Corson's as heir of his father. He didn't really have to buy it back."

"Well, I reckon that's so, bein' put in that light," replied the stranger. "Only goes to prove you can't believe th' papers. They had it that Watson owned th' ranch an' sold it."

"He got it by fraud," explained Steve.

"What th' hell are we all talkin' about?" demanded Nueces coldly. "Reckon we all better mind our own business."

"Oh, shore," hastily said the stranger, smiling again. "Which brings me back to my own: I'm tryin' to find a couple of fellers named Wilcox an' Blodgett. Ever hear of 'em around here?" He waited for a moment for replies which did not come. "To be exact, Franklin Alexander Wilcox an' George Henry Blodgett."

Shorty's eyes were still on the bottle, held there now by a great act of will. He was doubting his ears. Out of the past his true name had come back to him, and he was not

comfortable. It had leaped upon him with no warning and set his mind feverishly at work swiftly reviewing his past life.

Nueces wore his poker face, hiding the shock, and he was gravely, innocently regarding the stranger, who somehow did not appear to be an officer of the law. If he was perturbed, no one but himself knew it. His own procession of thought was as swift, as searching as that of his friend, and in an instant he had been whisked back more than thirty years, mentally scrutinising each high spot. His inquiring glance rested upon Steve for a moment, and then slowly passed on to Shorty, and in his eyes there danced the light of mischief; but before he looked back at the stranger it had disappeared.

"George Henry Blodgett," he murmured, lingering on each name in turn. "Ht h! What's he wanted for? Train robbery?" He sensed Shorty's indignation, relished it, and ignored it. "Picture in th' post office, mebbly?"

"No," said the stranger, smiling broadly.



"It ain't in no post office. Only wished it was."

"Mebby it was for bank robbery?" persisted Nueces curiously.

"No, nothin' like that," answered the stranger, smiling still more broadly. "It's a personal matter. I'm tryin' to get in touch with him."

"Somebody die an' leave him some money?" inquired Shorty, now master of himself. "Somebody leave him somethin'?"

"If they did I hope it's th' itch," remarked Nueces.

"No, I'm just tryin' to get in touch with him," repeated the stranger.

"Reckon there's others besides yoreself, stranger, that's tryin' to get in touch with that feller," said Nueces, thoroughly enjoying himself. "There's mebbly two-three sheriffs that would like to get in touch with him."

"Then you know him?" asked the stranger with sudden hope.

"No, I don't know him," answered Nueces

hurriedly. "I never 'sociate with fellers like that. Th' name sounds familiar, somehow, an' kinda makes me think of train robberies an' such." He turned to Steve. "Ain't you never heard about that Blodgett coyote, Steve?"

"Nope, an' I've heard about all of th' bad ones, too," answered Steve.

"Then," said Shorty brightly, "mebby you've done heard about th' Wilcox skunk, Steve? Wasn't he in that North Platte train robbery?"

Steve shook his head as a sign of ignorance.

"You aimin' to take him outa th' state?" demanded Shorty, looking the stranger in the eye.

"No, I ain't aimin' to take him nowhere," answered the stranger. "I just want to talk to him an' ask him a few questions."

Nueces rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"If I happen to run acrost him, stranger, I'll tell him you want to see him, that you want to *talk* to him. In case he asks me,

what name you goin' under here in town?"

"Jeff Rawlin's, but he wouldn't know me by name. He never saw me or even heard of me," said the stranger, who did not take much stock in any of his companions ever running across either of the two men he had asked about. No one in town knew them or had ever even heard about them, as he had discovered before he visited the Cheyenne, and it was not likely that these men would be any different from the others. Evidently the bill of sale had been signed by two strangers who had ridden on again and disappeared. Still, that was hardly probable. There was some kind of a mystery here: perhaps the signatures had been forged. Under the circumstances that might be possible, and if it were so, then there was an excellent chance to have the whole transfer set aside and to inherit the ranch under his brother's will and the last authentic bill of sale. This caused another doubt to arise: from what he had learned during his few hours in Willow Springs, that

first bill of sale was also detestably fraudulent. His affairs seemed to be in something of a muddle, without head or tail to them.

"Do you know," he said thoughtfully, "I wonder if them fellers are real fellers? They're supposed to have been in this town, to have been well knowed, an' yet nobody knows 'em at ail. If I could prove that there ain't nobody with them names I'd really like that more than if I found th' fellers themselves."

"Huh!" said Shorty thoughtfully.

"Hum!" said Nueces even more thoughtfully. He felt a slight antagonism against this stranger who went under the name of Jeff Rawlins and who wished for the non-existence of Wilcox. His first impulse had been to agree that there were no such persons; but this, he now knew, would please the stranger; so he shifted and changed his attitude.

"Well, I can tell you this much, stranger: them fellers are real fellers," he said, and he felt Shorty's accusing eyes on him. "That

is, I'm right shore th' Blodgett feller is real. I never heard of th' other."

"Now, damn' if that ain't funny," said Shorty. "I've never heard of th' Blodgett feller a-t-all, but shore as hell I've heard of that Wilcox coyote. Only wish I could think just where it was that I heard about him. You say his picture ain't never been tacked up in no post office? There ain't no reward out on him, is there?" He grew crafty and suspicious. "You ain't lookin' for no reward, are you?"

"No. Far's I know neither one of 'em is wanted for anythin' like that," answered Rawlins.

"I know where I've heard of Blodgett!" exclaimed Nueces, his face wreathed with a smile. "Yes, sir, I do! He's one of El Toro's gang. He's a damn' cattle thief. Ain't it funny how you'll forget a thing like that an' then have it strike you all of a sudden?"

"Yeah," said Steve, looking at the lanky puncher curiously. "Yeah, damn' funny."

"That's it!" cried Shorty, the light of re-

membrance strong on his face. "Yo're right, Nueces—part way. You've got them fellers mixed up. It's Wilcox that's th' cattle thief with El Toro. Yes, sir; it all comes back to me now."

"Yeah, it does, but it comes back cross-eyed," growled Nueces.

"Then," said Steve judicially, "that kinda shows they both are with El Toro, don't it? You each remember one of 'em an' you both got both of 'em mixed up with each other." He turned to the stranger, while his three auditors tried to unravel his last sentence. "If they are with El Toro, Mr. Rawlins, yo're right welcome to go huntin' for 'em as long as I don't have to go along. If you got any sense you'll let that pair of bandits plumb alone."

The stranger masked his thoughts. He knew something of the capture of his dead brother, and the bandit's name was known to him. This must be the answer, since it was known that El Toro was present when that last bill of sale had been signed and de-

livered. This was, perhaps, why the two witnesses had been on hand to sign as such, and why no one in the country round about knew anything about them. His store of knowledge was slowly but surely growing.

"Where'll I find this El Toro?" he calmly asked, and smiled at the looks of amazement on the faces of his companions.

"You shore believe in goin' after what you want, don't you?" asked Shorty with grudging admiration. Trying to meet El Toro was equivalent to trying to meet a stroke of lightning.

"Th' quickest way to find him," said Nueces, a keen memory prompting him, "is to get together a nice bunch of cattle an' drive it toward th' border, *huh*, Shorty?"

"You go to hell!" snapped Shorty, writhing under the veiled taunt.

"That's th' very quickest way," continued Nueces. "You'll shore meet him then. As a matter of fact, you won't be able to keep from meetin' him."

"Yo're wrong!" said Shorty. "He won't

meet El Toro a-tall. He'll meet some of th' gang instead. Rawlins, if you want to meet El Toro, you go an' tell Tomas about it. He runs that lunch-room up th' street."

The stranger was thinking swiftly and deeply. If the second bill of sale had been forced out of his brother, if he had been compelled to sign under fear of death, then it would not hold, and the proof of this might be obtained if the witnesses could be found and bribed to talk. Yet that first bill of sale arose to confront him with its taint of fraud. Even if it was fraudulent, there could be no harm in getting together all the facts he could learn about either of them. He regarded his companions gravely.

"This Tomas, now: you say he can put me in touch with El Toro?"

"If he can't, you want to stay away from th' bandit," said Nueces. He thought a little. Tomas was a friend of his, and he did not want to get the Mexican into any trouble. "You see, it's like this: Tomas don't know anythin' personally about that bandit, but



he knows all th' Mexicans in town. Some of them know more than they'll admit about knowin', which means that some of them know about El Toro. Tomas talks to them, an' th' news is carried. El Toro learns it right quick."

"Rawlins;" said Shorty, yielding to sudden sympathy for the ignorant stranger, "let me tell you somethin', an' don't you forget it: if you get news back that El Toro will see you, you go right ahead an' foller instructions, an' foller 'em to th' letter; but if you don't get no news from him, then you let him alone. Savvy? *You let him alone!*"

"I savvy yore drift," acknowledged the stranger. "Much obliged, friend. Now I'll go an' have a talk with Tomas. See you all later, mebbey. I'm stayin' at th' hotel. So-long"

They watched him go out and stride up the street, and through the grimy windows they saw him reach the lunch-room and enter it.

Nueces stirred, his eyes on his friend.

"George Henry Blodgett," he murmured. "Th' sins of his youth are comin' home to him now. Wonder what he's wanted for?"

Shorty shrugged his shoulders and changed elbows on the edge of the bar.

"Don't know, an' nat'rally I don't care; but I'm shore wishin' I was in that lunch-room right now. It'll mebōy be worth listenin' to."

"Yeah, it mebbly will," replied Nueces, grinning. "After while me an' you'll drop in there."

"Shore will, Nueces; we ain't got nothin' else to do."

In this statement Shorty was mistaken, for in a few minutes they both would be too occupied to remember Tomas and his lunch-room.

Jeff Rawlins closed the lunch-room door behind him and came to the point without loss of time, his lack of circumlocution not a wise proceeding when dealing with Tomas.

"Are you Tomas?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"*Sí, Señor.*"

"You know El Toro?"

"I know of heem. Who does not?"

"I want to meet him, on business."

"Then you should do eet."

"I've been told you could fix it up for me."

"Een yore life you hav' been tol' many theengs, perhaps?"

"Yes; what you mean?"

"You hav' been tol' many theengs wheech ar-re not tr-rue. *Es verdad?*"

"Mebby, but why?"

"Notheeng, Señor."

"Then you won't do it?"

"*Won't* do eet? Señor, I cannot do' eet. Who am I to do eet? El Toro ees not een iny pocket. I hav' notheeng to do weeth El Toro! *Madre de Dios!*"

"Then you don't know where I can find him?" persisted Rawlins.

"I hav' hear-rd eet said he ees een Mexico. You weesh to die?"

"Die? Hell, no. I want some informa-

tion. I can pay for it. I reckon El Toro can give it to me. That's all. Suppose you tell yore Mexican friends about it? I'll be here in town an' will wait for th' answer."

"Who are you? You ar-re e-strange." Tomas's shoulders shrugged eloquently. His black eyes were like beads. "What you want to know?"

"That's somethin' between me an' El Toro."

"Then keep eet there. I know notheeng of El Toro, only w'at I hear; an' only thees: eef you look for heem, let me say *adiós* to you as one says *adiós* to the dead. *Adiós, Señor, adiós!*"

His visitor grew thoughtful. Tomas was not over-emphatic but gravely serious, and for that reason his words had more weight. The stranger's business with El Toro should be kept secret as long as it could be done: he did not want too many leads going toward Blodgett and Wilcox. He decided that there was a good chance of the news being

taken across the border; that his request would be made known to the bandit. If nothing came of to-day's feelers, then he could return and be more specific with the lunch-room owner.

"Well, it won't do any harm if you talk about my visit here," he said. "It's a business matter, an' I reckon El Toro will be willin' to listen to it. Much obliged."

"*Adiós*," grunted Tomas, and turned back to his cooking. He heard the door open and close and open again, and he looked up inquiringly, to see his visitor standing in the door and thinking deeply.

"Oh, yes, I near forgot. There's something else," said Mr. Rawlins. "I was thinking about El Toro, an' it kinda slipped my mind. Did you ever hear about a couple of feelers named Wilcox an' Blodgett?"

"No. They ar-re not een thees country." Tomas wiped off the counter. "I know the name of every man that ees here. I hav' never hear-rd of those hombres."

"But I've been told they were here," per-

sisted Mr. Rawlins, watching his companion closely.

"*Quién sabe?* Eef so then they deed not let themselves be known. They ar-re not here now."

"Well, all right, then," reluctantly replied Mr. Rawlins. "Much obliged, anyhow. I'll be back in a couple of days."

"As you weel, Señor. *Adiós.*"

"So-long," replied Mr. Rawlins, and he closed the door behind him and then caught sight of his friend the sheriff riding down the street in the direction of the Cheyenne. He chuckled grimly and made haste toward the hotel, without, nowever, any undue show of speed. Evidently the sheriff was a man who wasted no time.

NUECES and Shorty walked to a table and sat down, their questioning eyes meeting, their minds wrestling with an unexpected problem. Who was this man, Rawlins, this man who had resurrected their real names out of the past? What did he really want? Where did he come from? They were engaged in deep cogitations when Steve's voice brought them back to the present.

"Here comes th' sheriff," said the bartender cheerfully; and he smiled at the reaction to his words.

Three faces brightened simultaneously, three hearts beat as one. The sheriff was not only a citizen of a rival town, an officer of the law whose only qualifications for the office seemed to be those of a professional politician, but he personally was very much disliked by most of the inhabitants of Willow Springs and the region around the town.

Jim Watson had been the sheriff's unofficial but actual boss, and the sheriff's entire lack of interest in the apprehension of the murderer of old John Corson had but whetted the dislike that Willow Springs felt for him. Upon the discovery that Watson himself was the murderer, the sheriff shone in even dimmer light; and when Watson's will was probated and his possessions checked up, several overdue notes made by the sheriff were found among his papers. These notes had served Watson as a whip; and their enforced collection had nearly ruined the peace officer, which had only put a keener edge on his growing hatred for everything bearing the JC brand or friendly to it.

The officer slowed up involuntarily when he saw Nueces and Shorty peering out of the doorway at him, the head of the latter a foot or more below that of the former; and on each face bloomed hopeful but derisive grins. Daniel was about to enter the lions' den. Shorty stepped forth, removed his



Stetson and waved it toward the door.

"Come in, Sheriff, an' have a drink," he invited. "Steve," he called loudly, "glass of water for th' sheriff." He then grabbed hold of Nueces and jerked, but Nueces did not budge. A man who stands six feet six does not have to be very thick, physically, to pack considerable weight; and Nueces averaged more than two pounds per running inch, none of which was fat.

"Can't you get outa th' way?" indignantly demanded Shorty, hauling in vain, "an' let th' sheriff in?"

"Aw, don't allus be pickin' on Nueces," said Steve. "Let him alone. Anyhow, th' door's just as wide with him in it. Who did you say was a-callin' on us?"

"Why, th' sheriff," patiently explained Shorty.

"Good Lord! Wait a minute till I fix my hair," said Steve in simulated panic. He wet the tip of a finger, pressed it firmly on a lock of hair hanging down on his forehead,

and simpered. "Tee-hee-hee! Let th' gent in, Shorty."

"What th' hell's th' matter with you fellers?" asked the sheriff in deep curiosity as he stood before the door. His scowl was not pleasant to look upon, and his small eyes snapped.

"Nervousness," bleated Shorty. "Nueces, there, has worms. Steve is just plain loco. Somebody in town owe you money, Sheriff?"

"What you mean, owe me money?"

"Well, here you are a-visitin' Willer Springs, an' Watson dead an' buried. I was only just curious, wasn't I, Nueces?"

"What you allus askin' me for?" demanded the lanky puncher. "Shucks! Mebby th' sheriff got th' sheep itch an' come over here to scratch hisself an' give it to us. I ain't no mind reader, an' even a mind reader has got to have somethin' to work on. How do I know why th' sheriff's here. Huh, Sheriff?"

"Look here you fellers!" snapped the

arm of the law, anger sparking in his eyes. "Jokin' is jokin', an' I can stand my share; but don't go too damn' far!"

"You betcha!" said Shorty, nodding unequivocal endorsement. "Yes, sir, I allus said a sheriff should oughta be able to stand his share of jokin'. Either that or get outa town."

"Now you look here, Shorty!" snapped Nueces indignantly. "You quit pickin' on th' sheriff. I won't stand for it. No, sir. If there's pickin' to be done I'll do it myself. You savvy?"

"You allus was a hawg," growled Shorty. His face brightened instantly. "I got good news for you, Sheriff: we're figgerin' on electin' Bob Corson in yore job this time. *He* can take a joke, too, but not so damn' *many* of 'em."

The sheriff was growing white under his tan, but he did not dare to let himself go. If he did he would never come back. He was facing, in the person of the lanky puncher, the deadliest man in thought and

action that had ever been known in all that wide country. The quizzical, crooked grin on the homely horse face could mean anything; and the sheriff put his own interpretation on it now. He did not dare to try to catch Nueces off his guard, because at the first move in such a play Shorty would blow him apart. He moistened his lips and swallowed with difficulty, for his mouth and throat were dry, a matter of reflex action having to do with fear.

Nueces stood erect before he realised that he was squarely in the doorway, and the thump of his head against the upper casing was coincidental with the disappearance of his face into his hat. For a moment he could not see, but Shorty could; and therefore the lanky puncher took his own time in pushing up the hat. When his eyes came out from under it he peered curiously into those of the alert and enraged officer, and he chuckled at what he thought he read in them.

"It would 'a' been a right good play, Sheriff, if Shorty wasn't here," he said,

apropos, apparently, of nothing; and only a glint in his eyes showed that he now read the sheriff's change of expression as an acknowledgment that the guess had been right. The sheriff had been tempted, but he had not dared to take advantage of the temporary disability.

The grin on the homely face twisted a little more.

"You don't want to pay no attention to us, Sheriff," said Nueces. "We're just a couple of honest fellers, an' we feel sorta lost right now. Besides, while Bob Corson never had no better friends than me an' Shorty, we allus have felt right sorry for you ever since you had to hang Jim Watson. We would 'a' done it for you, only some friends of ourn wanted to see what a trial was like, an' wanted to draw down a dollar a day for jury duty. I have to laugh when I think of them hopeful hombres, countin' on a week's pay; still, a dollar ain't bad for ten minutes' deliberation, especially when they all had their minds made up before they left th' box.

An' I'll never forget *yore* face when that drop fell. *My!*" He sighed lugubriously. "I shore felt sorry for you that day."

"Hell, Sheriff, don't you let him put on no airs," said Shorty earnestly. "We *all* felt sorry for you, 'specially me." He looked at his long, lean friend. "Why don't you get outa th' way an' let th' sheriff in?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the lanky one, stepping hastily backward inside the building. "I didn't see him, Shorty. Come right in, Sheriff; come right in."

"You two—are goin' too—far one of these days!" choked the peace officer, his face suffused. He jostled Nueces, rebounded, and stalked to the bar, where he fixed Steve with a stare in which quivered and danced all his suppressed rage.

"I hear you bought a good ridin' hoss lately. A roan gelding, Bar K. Let's see it!"

"Aimin' to dicker for it?" placidly asked Steve, his hand on the bung starter under the bar.

"I'm aimin' to look at it," replied the sheriff. "Also, I'm aimin' to put a stop to some of th' things that are goin' on up in this part of th' county. Hoss stealin' is one of 'em. Where is it?"

Steve's mind was busy, but no matter how hard he thought he could not get away from the fact that he had allowed his love for a good bargain and a good horse to get away with his common sense. The very fact that the horse was such an excellent bargain should have made him suspicious; and, anyhow, a man was a fool to buy a horse from a stranger. He was filled with forebodings.

"Why are you so blame' interested in it?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you that after I see th' hess," answered the sheriff. "Where is it? You show it to me."

The tone of the officer's voice sent a flush stealing across the bartender's face, and he pressed against the counter, leaning forward.

"Come to think of it," he said slowly, "I ain't got time right now to show that hoss.

Won't have no time to-day. Come back some day next week."

The sheriff tapped his badge of office significantly and pressed against his own side of the counter, his face as close to Steve's as he could get it.

"I'm demandin' to see that hoss in th' name of th' law. I reckon it's th' one I've been lookin' for. Are you goin' to take me to see it, or have I gotta take you to show it to me?"

"W-h-a-t?" asked Steve, his face getting redder.

"That!" snapped the sheriff. "Just that! You heard me."

Steve looked helplessly toward the door, seeking hints from the faces of Nueces and Shorty, as if out of their greater experience they might know better how to act under such distressing circumstances. He did not see them because they were not in sight, and he bitterly although silently condemned their perfidious desertion. He realised the difference between baiting the sheriff in a personal



matter and balking and opposing him in his official capacity; and the realisation brought him no pleasure. He might demand the production of a search warrant, but he was hazy on such things and did not do so.

The sheriff seemed to read his thoughts, for he took a paper from his pocket and slapped it on the bar, but the bartender just glanced at the outside, read the words printed thereon in capital letters, and waved his hand.

"You gimme th' hang of this thing," said Steve, with much less assertiveness than he had first shown. The man from whom he had bought the horse had shown him a bill of sale; but bills of sale could be written by anyone. "You countin' on that animal bein' stole? I got a bill of sale with him."

"That's what I'm countin' on, an' yore bill of sale ain't worth a damn," replied the sheriff. "From th' way yo're actin', it looks like you know th' bill of sale ain't no good an' that I'm countin' right. Git out from behind that bar an' show me th' hoss. i

know where it is, but I want you to take me to it."

"But what kind of a hoss was stole?" persisted Steve desperately.

"Roan gelding, Bar K brand, which I've told you before. Come on, show it to me!"

There was nothing for Steve to do but to obey and, bowed with reprehensible responsibility, he did obey. He jammed his hat on his head and slowly, on dragging feet, he led the way out of the building and around it, seeking by this outer and longer course to postpone the inevitable. The sheriff followed him, almost stepping on his heels, and on the latter's face was a fiercely satisfied expression. To find a stolen horse in the possession of a friend of Corson, Nueces, Shorty, and the others of the JC crowd would be a joy, indeed. Then he stopped suddenly, to avoid running into his guide.

"Now, Sheriff, you know I wouldn't buy no stolen loss if I knowed it was stole," said Steve argumentatively as he swung around; but he kept right on swinging until he faced

the direction whence he had started. The sheriff's outthrust hand had kept him pivoting, for the sheriff in pursuit of his official duties was a different man from the sheriff in a purely personal matter.

"You keep right on a-goin'," ordered the officer, and once more moved slowly on the tail of the little parade.

Turning a rear corner of the saloon Steve raised an arm, pointing to an animal in the little flimsy corral. Then he blinked, his outthrust arm rigid, while alternate feelings of relief and disbelief rippled through him.

The animal in the corral was a roan gelding; but it was not the roan gelding which he had so trustingly bought from the stranger; it was not a Bar K horse. And while Steve silently wrestled with the problem a short squat person and a long lean person sauntered around the opposite diagonal corner of the saloon and leaned lazily against the front of the building, one on each side of the open door. Their faces were

serious, their brows puckered by thought, and they said not a word.

In the rear of the saloon the sheriff looked at the brand, at the horse, at the corral, and finally at the sky doubtless seeking inspiration from on high. Then he looked at Steve's placid, good-natured countenance, and the expression on his own face finished its slow and bewildered metamorphosis.

"That ain't th' hoss!" he snarled accusingly, his eyes boring into those of his cheerful companion.

"That all depends on what hoss it was supposed to be," replied Steve generously, "whether it was th' hoss you wanted or th' hoss I had. I never claimed nothin' about it. It was you that was makin' all th' claims. But if you want to buy a hoss there's a right good one, a roan geldin', like you said."

"But it ain't a Bar K hoss!" swore the sheriff. "That's a Box M!"

"Which you don't have to tell me," rejoined Steve. "I never said nothin' about

that; but if yo're so damn' particular about letters, why, you can run on any you want as long's there's skin enough left to trace 'em on. I'll sell that animal cheap, too. I'll even throw off a couple dollars because th' marks don't suit you. Th' policy of th' Cheyenne is satisfied customers, which I'll——"

"Th' hell with th' Cheyenne!" barked the sheriff. "Th' hell with its policy, an' th' hell with you! Gawd! I allus reckoned a cow was dumb—but that was long before I ever met you! You don't reckon I rode up here all th' way from Cactus Springs to buy me a hoss, do you? Why di-ldn't you tell me this wasn't a Bar K hoss?"

"Don't remember you askin' me, an' you wouldn't 'a' believed me if I did," said Steve. "If I paid attention to everythin' that is said on th' other side of that bar——"

"Where's that Bar K hoss that was seen in this here corral yesterday?" demanded the sheriff angrily.

"An' where's th' cross-eyed Judas that

said he saw any Bar K hoss in this here corral, yesterday or any other day?" demanded Steve in suing and hopeful curiosity. "You tell me th' name of that coyote an' then rustle right home an' put on yore best black suit of clothes. There'll be a funeral, an' mebbly you'll be one of th' chief mourners. Trouble with you is yo're all ears, like a jackass; an' they're damn' poor ears, at that. If you've got through lookin' at that hoss, say so; if you ain't, then stay here by yoreself an' look till yo're blind. I ain't got no time to waste foolin' around with you; an', besides, it won't do my reputation no good in this town, neither. But lemme tell you this: if that hoss suits you an' you take it, you want to be right shore that you *buy* it. *This ain't Cactus Springs. So-long.*"

The sheriff choked and glared and then, with renewed hope, worked around the corral, his eyes searching the ground for any tell-tale signs that he might discover. Had he known the identity of the long-legged,

horse-faced gentleman who had engineered that change of horses he might have been spared such a waste of time. His examination of the brand had been short but thorough; there was nothing the matter with it, no picking, no shaving, no curling, no acid; and even such work would not remove an original brand. It was an honestly burned brand, and it had been burned on a long time before.

Steve now discovered that he was not so busy that he needed to overlook any incidental pleasure connected with this mysterious affair, and he forgot business to wander around the fence in the wake of the sheriff, also examining the ground. His remarks were not exactly soothing to a person labouring under high nervous pressure, and his suggestions indicated that he was even more dumb than the sheriff had suspected. When at last he climbed up on the corral fence and claimed to have found hoof marks on the top rail, he broke the camel's back.

The sheriff had been, for the past few mo-

ments, so deeply and professionally interested in what looked to be a hopeless problem that he had largely forgotten his anger; but Steve's discovery acted upon him like a burr under a saddle: the sheriff, figuratively speaking, went up into the air. He burst into inspired profanity, came down to whirl about on his high-heeled boots, and almost ran back the way he had come. As he turned the corner of the building and stepped into the street he bumped into the curious and bland Nueces and almost fell over Shorty's unreliable feet. It seemed to be a characteristic of Shorty's to be able to get his feet into the way of more people than could be done by any other person in town.

Here was a good excuse for a fight, but the sheriff knew the two punchers too well to make use of the opportunity; instead, he backed off and loosed the flood gates of his vocabulary; and the words he used could easily have been taken for a second excuse for a fight, but both Nueces and Shorty were too happy, and too fair, to press the oppor-



tunity. They were interested only in getting a friend out of an embarrassing position, and, incidentally, in enjoying whatever fun there might be found in the situation. Had they believed that Steve had knowingly bought a stolen horse they might have acted differently, and let him get himself out of his predicament as best he could. They did not know exactly what it was all about, but they knew Steve very well.

The sheriff stopped glaring at Shorty to glare at Nueces, and Shorty grinned.

"Don't you pay no attention to Nueces, Sheriff," he said. "He ain't been right in his head since you harged yore best friend. An' if you was to ask him, right now, where is th' best place to look for stolen hosses an' them that stole them, th' blame' fool would tell you to stay home. *That's* where Bob Corson figgers to spend most of his time after he's 'lected sheriff: right down in Cactus Springs, watchin' yore friends. But don't you pay no 'tention to Nueces. You come on in an' have a drink with me. Steve's got

th' best drinkin' water in this whole town. Why, where you goin'?"

There was a flurry of movement, a cloud of dust, and then down the gentle wind the floating profanity quickly thinned and died. The sheriff was going home.

"Aw," growled Nueces accusingly. "You shouldn't 'a' chased him away so soon. Now we might as well go back to th' ranch." He looked quickly around as ponderous footsteps sounded near, and saw the cheerful bartender turn the corner, his whole bearing grand and righteous. Steve had waited against the side of the saloon to enjoy his sense of hearing.

"Hey, Steve," said Nueces curiously. "Where's my cayuse? My Box M roan? It was in th' shade along th' side of th' buildin' when th' sheriff started to talk to you officially."

"Yeah," said Shorty quickly. "An' it would be right there now, Steve, if it was thought that you knowed anythin' about buyin' a stolen hoss."

"Fellers," said Steve, ignoring Shorty's speech, and beaming upon them both, "you won't believe me, but I've done seen a miracle!" He rocked back on his heels, removed his sombrero, gravely made three passes over it, and then snapped his fingers. "There! There she is, just like that! Nueces, I just saw a Eox M hoss that was changed, quick as that, from a Bar K animal. If you don't believe it, go 'round an' look into my corral. Never saw nothin' like it in all my life. Yes, sir. An' furthermore, I'm up an' presentin' that changed hoss to you, Nueces, to take th' place of th' critter which you just lost. I call that right generous. Don't you never say that I never gave you nothin'."

"Why, Steve, I never would say that anyhow," gently replied Nueces, with deep feeling. "There ain't nobody in this town that's gave me as many headaches as you have. Furthermore, I aim to believe you about that miracle; but th' question is, where is that Bar K hoss, if there ever *was* one?"

"I wish I knowed! I only wish I knowed!" said Steve, his brow puckering from intense thought. "If I knowed where it was I'd shore start out right now an' go th' other way. There's two things that I'd like to know: th' name of th' mangy gent that sold me that hoss, an' th' name of th' coyote that told th' sheriff where to look! But to go back, you got any idear a-tall where that damn' hoss went to?"

"How should I know where it went to, Steve?" asked Nueces, mildly incignant. "But you wait a minute: mebbly I can find out for you. You see, I can do them magic things, too." In explanation of this remark he removed his own big hat, made three passes over it, snapped his fingers, and then, turning it over and peering deeply into it, raised his head and spoke in an awed voice.

"Hah! Another miracle, Steve! I can see it, see it right in m'hat, a kinda little picture. Steve, shore as hell that Bar K hoss is a-wanderin' across th' flat, other side of that there ridge out back. On th' other

side of that flat is a pool of water, an' there's some fair to middlin' bunch grass higher up on th' bank. I wonder if that hoss was fed an' watered this mornin'?"

"I betcha it wasn't, though I don't know nothin' about no Bar K animal. Then it was headin' west, Nueces? Gawd give it strength an' persistence," breathed Steve, wiping his forehead. "I'm still wonderin' who is th' cross-eyed liar that told th' sheriff that he saw such an animal in my corral."

Nueces's eyes narrowed and his face went hard. He was a suspicious soul.

"Yeah, an' I'm wonderin' who told that stranger to sell that hoss to you, Steve. Say, do I look anythin' like you?"

"Gawd forbid!" exclaimed Steve fervently.

Shorty scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Well, that's an idear I don't take much stock in—anybody tryin' to sell you that hoss, Nueces, an' mistakin' Steve for you. You see, Steve was foreman of that jury that tried Watson, while you only stood off an

cheered 'em on. Well, it don't make no difference, anyhow."

"That so?" inquired Nueces with a rising inflection.

"Hell, it don't!" snapped Steve indignantly.

"No, not a whole lot," replied Shorty. "There's been a sign made. We've read it. It means: look out for storms." He hitched up his heavy belt. "All right: I got my lightnin' protector right here on my thigh: Colt's patent lightnin' rod. Let 'er storm."

"Shorty," said Nueces slowly, and smiling a little as he turned something over in his mind, "every once in a while you get hold of an idee that's worth somethin'. Every couple of years you do that, an' it's right noticeable, comin' from you. Yeah, let her storm: rain, hail, snow, or dust."

"Speakin' of dust makes me thirsty," suggested Shorty, looking pointedly at Steve and thence to the open door of the Cheyenne. "Awful thirsty," he amended.

"[Th' best in th' house is yourn, fellers,"

said Steve, moving with alacrity and pushing Nueces before him. In this shoving he met with no resistance.

"First that stranger, askin' fool questions; an' then th' sheriff, lookin' for a stolen hoss," muttered Nueces, ducking his head in the doorway.

"Hell with th' stranger; hell with th' sheriff: I'm thirsty!" said Shorty, his eyes already on a bottle.

"You allus are," chided Nueces sorrowfully. "I figger yore stummick is lined with blotters."

In due time they found it much more comfortable to seek chairs instead of standing at the bar, and Steve joined them: whenever he could. From time to time they roused themselves and indulged in jerky conversation, having sense enough to keep their voices low.

"Why was that Lombre askin' for Wilcox? Why did th' sheriff foller right on his heels? How did he know that Steve's corral held a stolen hoss? How did anybody know

anythin'? There's somethin' wrong som'er's."

"Hell with Wilcox! Hell with th' stranger an' th' sheriff an' th' stolen hoss! What's interestin' me is Blodgett! It's been more'n twenty years since I heard anybody say that name. Why was he lookin' for Blodgett? Can you tell me why? Huh, can you?"

"What you askin' me for? But, anyhow, Shorty, yo're lucky: th' statoot of limitations has done run out on you. An' he can't take you, anyhow: he ain't big enough. Stop that damn' singin'! You sing like a squeaky wheel."

"There wasn't never no statoot of limitations ag'in' me!" indignantly retorted Shorty. "I never done nothin' to make me run away. An' I can sing better'n you, any day."

"Mebby they know that you never done nothin'—no, that ain't what I want to say. This is: mebbly they don't know that you never done nothin'; an' yore singin' is hell.



There's only one feller in this whole country that knows our real names. That's Bob Corson, an' he's a b'lame' good feller, Bob is. He wouldn't know 'em, neither, only he saw us sign that bill of sale. By Gawd, Shorty! You reckon that's it?"

"What's it?"

"You reckon they're lookin' up that bill of sale?"

"Well, if that's all they're lookin' up they can look an' be damned," said Shorty, sighing with relief at the thought. Optimism took hold of him, and he began to sing again.

"Please don't sing that song, Shorty," requested Nueces. "We're *both* gettin' old, though I ain't got no silver thread. It allus makes me cry, an' I don't want to cry out in public like this. Sing about—sing about—'Come along, li'l' dogies'—you know, 'bout Wyomin' is our new home."

"Who said so?" demanded Shorty. "It ain't. It's too cold up there. You sing what you want an' I'll sing what I want."

A moment's silence ensued, and then

Shorty lifted his head from his crossed arms and looked curiously at his friend.

"What's th' matter, Nueces—ain't you goin' to sing?"

"I'm thinkin', Shorty—thinkin' hard."

"Huh! Another miracle. You better sing, Nueces."

"Shut up! I shcre am thinkin', but how can I remember what I was thinkin' about with you talkin' like that? Shut up! Now I can't remember what I was thinkin'."

"All right, then you can think by yoreself!" retorted Shorty with great indignation, and again his head sank on his arms.

"Oh, I know what I was thinkin' about," asserted Nueces brightly. "Shorty, I know what I was thinkin' about. Do I look anythin' like Steve?"

"No such luck, Nueces: you don't look like nothin' human. You goin' to sing?"

"Don't sing! You listen, Shorty. Then if I don't look like Steve, that hoss thief didn't mistake Steve for me, did he? Did he?" asked Nueces earnestly.

"No. Most likely he mistook you for th' boss. What was that you wanted to sing?"

"I don't know. What was it?"

"Then sing it yoreself. I'm sleepy. Askin' for Blodgett, he was. Twenty years. Hell with Wilcox."

Hours later Steve's corral was horseless, while out on the road leading to the gap in the hills and to the JC trail a Box M gelding, having no knowledge or even suspicion of what a magic metamorphosis it personified, jogged along in a little cloud of dust, from the exact centre of which sounded a pied duet consisting more of strength than of harmony; and back in Willow Springs sundry sleepy and indignant citizens slowly removed their hands from their ears, listened hopefully for a moment, and then went back to sleep. Nueces and Shorty were going home.

LOB CORSON rolled out of bed, dressed, and walked down to the bunkhouse for breakfast, as he was wont to do. There was nothing about the ranch house now to remind one of a boudoir, of the house as his stepmother had furnished it. There was no perfume in the air, no nude ladies in heavy gilt frames hung on the walls; gone were the brick-red Turkish rugs, the lace curtains, the spindly chairs, and all other things which connected it in thought to his father's second wife. It was now furnished as it had been in the time of his own mother. The old sampler was back in place, a sampler worked by his mother's girlish fingers many years before; the old rifles hung in their old places; hackamores, riding gear, a quirt, odds and ends, all lay where they had been dropped. The living-rooms and the attic had exchanged places, for the latter had given back those

old-time things stored in it by a supercilious woman and now sheltered her selections in furnishings. Smelling of stale tobacco smoke and looking in pleasant disarray, the house was now comfortable quarters for the young owner of the ranch, and he enjoyed using it.

Corson entered the bunkhouse and glanced around for his saddle, which Shorty and Nueces had gone to town to get. It was not in sight. Snoring sounding from the bunks, he walked over to the corner of the room and smiled. Bludsoe and Burns, already up and breakfasted, were out on the range; but Nueces and Shorty lay on their backs, their mouths open and their eyes shut. There was about them an odour which caused Corson to shake his head gently and to frown. He poked Nueces in the ribs and then chuckled at the canny wariness of this person; for Nueces's eyelids barely moved as his awakening consciousness appraised the situation. Finding that the disturber was a friend, and quickly orienting himself, the lanky puncher opened his eyes, yawned, grinned, and sat

up as straight as the height of the bunk would permit.

"Mornin'," he said brightly. There was no indication that he was bothered by any after-effects of Steve's liquor; and knowing this person as he did, Corson felt suddenly reassured: he had never known Nueces to permit anything to handicap him by jeopardising his control of thought and action—still, the odour was very plain. It must be Shorty.

"Gawd, what a taste!" growled a voice from another bunk, and Corson turned to look at the occupant of this, who was making faces as he twisted his mouth experimentally and sent his tongue exploring it; but his efforts were useless: the taste did not change. Shorty shook his head violently and scowled.

"I sent you after my saddle an' not Steve's supply of likker," said Corson not unkindly.

"Ugh! We got 'em both—one with each barrel," replied Shorty. "You can allus double yore bets on us."

"Us!" snorted Nueces indignantly.

"Huh! If it wasn't for me you'd be sprawled under Steve's bar right now, with th' flies crawlin' all over yore face. Us! Huh!" He scratched his head. "What did you do with th' saddle?"

"Saddle," said Shorty musingly. "Saddle," he repeated, as the hazy units of a vague and broken chain of thought began to shuffle themselves around in his mind. Yes, there was a saddle in it somewhere; Corson's saddle, to be painfully exact; a silver-mounted saddle worth considerable money. He had gone to town to get a saddle, and he remembered dragging it through the harness maker's door, fastening it securely on his horse, and taking it to the Cheyenne. Beyond that he could not remember, and he sparred for time. "Saddle," he again muttered, in frank perplexity.

"Yeah, saddle," said Nueces. "It's somethin' you throw on a cayuse an' sit in. It's got things called stirrups, to hold yore feet; an' a cinch, to hold it on th' horse. There's a pommel in front and a cantle behind. I'll

show you one, some day, you blame' fool!"

"It was my saddle," prompted Corson, trying to keep a straight face. "It was bein' fixed by th' harness maker. You was to go get it, an' Nueces went along with you to see that you didn't forget about it. So I can double my bets on you, can I? Well, I can; but I won't. I'll cccpper 'em, double. If you got it, have you any idear just where you left it?"

"He got it," said Nueces flatly.

"You shore it ain't layin' 'round here som'er's?" demanded Shorty.

"No, I ain't shore," answered Corson. "I ain't looked in th' flour barrel or th' water bucket."

"Aw, hell!" snorted Shorty. "If you'd looked for it better you'd 'a' found it. Trouble with you is you copper what you oughta bet on an' bet on what you oughta copper. Don't figger 't left it right in th' middle of th' floor, do you? Better look around th' corral gate. When I go for anythin' I allus get it."



"Yeah," chuckled Nueces. "You'd 'a' got a worse one, too, if I hadn't dragged you away from Steve's. Now, then, let's eat while Bob falls all over that saddle."

"Eat!" wailed Shorty indignantly. "Eat? My Gawd!"

Corson smiled and went out to look around the corral gate, while his two friends straggled after him as far as the wash bench outside the door. Their intermittent wrangling soon softened, and they went back into the house, where a third voice, that of the cook, aided in the beginning of a perfect day. The cook wanted information about how many breakfasts he was supposed to serve and just what kind of a long-eared animal they thought he was. He found out all about it.

After a thorough but fruitless search Corson returned to the bunkhouse and sat down at the table just as the cook slammed the galley door behind him, to give proper emphasis to what he had been saying.

"Big ham-head!" growled Shorty, glaring

at the quivering galley door. "He's allus totin' a grouch!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Nueces. "Him? *Him* totin' a grouch? He oughta have a sweet disposition like yours, Shorty! Ha-ha-ha!"

Shorty, whose attention had been about equally divided between the cook and the coffee pot, looked up at his employer.

"Found it, did you?"

"No, it ain't in sight. I looked good, too."

"Mebby you buried it, Shorty," suggested Nueces. "I don't know what you did after I came in th' house. Last I saw of you, you was climbin' th' wagon wheel; but that wheel was jacked up, off th' ground, an' you wasn't makin' much headway. What did you do with it?"

"Left it jacked up," retorted Shorty. "You figgerin' I took it to bed with me?"

"Well, you might have, at that; but I'm talkin' about th' saddle."

"Last time I saw that damn' saddle it was tied on my hoss, an' you *know* it, you

Siwash!" Shorty's vexation was blooming luxuriantly, and he took no pains to conceal the fact. "Mebby it fell off som'er's along th' way. It was dark last night."

"Yeah," said Nueces, nodding. "I was ridin' in front, leadin' th' way. It must 'a' fell off som'er's, Bob."

"Well, of course," drawled Corson, "I nat'rally suspected that it jumped away in th' dark when you wasn't lookin' an' got into th' brush; but if you say it fell off of Shorty's horse, tllen that's different; *only*, th' results are th' same; tn' saddle's gone. Now, while you reliable persons, that I oughta bet on, go out an' do somethin' to square up for at least a couple of meals, I'll take Dad's old saddle an' go look for my own."

He looked from one to the other.

"There's a question that's been pesterin' me: if it takes you an' Shorty all afternoon an' most of th' night to ride into Willer Springs an' bring back one saddle, which you don't bring back, then how long will it take you two fellers to fix up th' chuck wagon.

It's right where Shorty left it last night, an' that's where yo're supposed to work to-day."

"Aw, let up on us, Bob," said Shorty. "We ran into th' sheriff an' saved Steve from bein' arrested for stealin' a hoss that he bought from a thief. Nat'rally, Steve was grateful; an' when Steve is grateful, he's right generous; an' us three bein' such good friends, why—hell, can't you savvy it?"

"Generous!" exclaimed Corson. "I'm bettin' on that, with coppers. Still, th' results speak for themselves. Reckon he was, this time. He was so generous that you woke up nearly as bad as when you went to sleep, judgin' from th' dream you just told me. You better go back to yore bunk, Shorty: you may fall off that wagon an' bust yore neck."

"I ain't never been soberer than I am right now!" retorted Shorty.

"That's an awful thing to say about yore-self," rejoined Corson, drinking the last mouthful of coffee and getting up to leave the house.

"But I's right, Bob: that wasn't no dream," said Nueces, grinning cheerfully as the events of the afternoon before passed through his mind. "That's just exactly what happened. Seems like Steve bought a stoler hoss from a stranger, without knowin' it, of course. Somebody told th' sheriff, or else he knowed all about it beiorehand, an' he come over to get th' deadwood on Steve, Steve bein' foreman of that jury an' a good friend of ourn. Th' sheriff met me an' Shorty; Steve ain't been arrested; an' here we are, without yore saddle."

Corson whirled and dropped back into the chair he had just vacated, his expression hopeful, the saddle forgotten for a moment, the sins of his friends forgiven.

"All right: once upon a time——" he prompted, and crossed his legs comfortably.

The story was told, told two or three times as each teller tried to give his own truthful version of it, and argued with the other about trustworthy eyesight, hearing, and memory.

However, at last it was told, down to and including the most minute detail, secret thought, and facial expression. At its conclusion Corson sighed regretfully.

"Well, I'll be cussed," he said. "Every time I let you fellers go to town without me I allus miss somet'ing. Seems like th' three of us should 'a' gone after that saddle. Mebby it would 'a' been better if we'd took Burns an' Bludsoe, too; you never can tell about a saddle."

He leaned back and laughed wholeheartedly.

"I don't wonder Steve was grateful. You boys kept him out of a lot of trouble."

"Yeah, we did," said Shorty, grinning. "An' when Steve's grateful he's shore generous; an' I allus hate to hurt a man's feelin's, that way."

"Yeah, you shore do," admitted Nueces with a chuckle; "but if Steve was a doctor an' got generous with his quinine, I know where you'd tell him to go."

"I'm right sorry about th' saddle, Bob,"

growled Shorty. "It's too bad to drop a 'specially made saddle like that, with all them silver trimmin's an' everythin'. I'd be willin' to swear that saddle was fastened on to stay, an' if it wasn't so well knowed by everybody hereabouts I'd say it was stolen. But that ain't helpin' us none, now I'll ride back an' look for it, me an' Nueces."

"Me an' Shorty'll git it for you, Bob," said Nueces, nodding.

"You an' Shorty are goin' to wrestle with th' chuck wagon," replied Corson, turning to go toward the door. "I want to drop in at th' bank, anyhow, an' I might as well do th' work of two more men at th' same time. Don't you worry about it a-tall, Shorty." He laughed. "Mebby somebody stole it off'n yore cayuse an' sold it to Steve. Looks like he'll buy anythin' if it's a bargain. You set th' tyres on that wagon and get it ready for cook to drive."

"Say, Bob," drawled Nueces, his face blank. "You know anybody named Franklin Alexander Wilcox?"

"Or George Henry Blodgett?" asked Shorty hurriedly.

Corson smiled and nodded.

"I do, but nothin' to their credit," he answered. "What about 'em?"

"A stranger dropped into th' Cheyenne askin' for 'em, for 'oth of 'em," said Nueces.

"You fellers must 'a' sowed quite a crop of wild oats in yore youth," said Corson, grinning. "Anythin' serious?"

"Don't know," answered Shorty, squirming.

"Anyhow," spoke up Nueces, "th' statoot of limitations has run out on Shorty." His face grew grave. "There ain't nobody in this part of th' country that ever heard them names. Th' only time that anybody could 'a' seen 'em or learned about 'em was when we signed that bill of sale as witnesses. You reckon El Toro saw 'em an' remembers 'em? You an' him was th' only ones that had th' chance. Watson didn't. Don't reckon El Toro would say anythin' about 'em, an' we're right shore that you didn't. What you make of it?"



"If anybody learned yore names from that bill of sale, then they saw it on record," slowly answered Corson. "Either they knew 'em before or they saw 'em there. If they learned 'em from th' rec'd, they either looked it up out of curiosity or for a reason. A short time after Watson's death I had some inquiries from a lawyer who said he represented Watson's heirs. There was quite some letter writin', an' I reckoned it was all settled. Mebbe it is. If it ain't, I don't care, far's I'm concerned. I've got th' ranch on that bill of sale, an' it's good enough for me. What kind of a lookin' feller was he?"

Nueces and Shorty described him at the same time, but Corson managed to get a fair picture of him. He also learned about the whole episode.

"Well, I don't know what he wants," he told them. "Keep yore eyes open an' yore ears, too. He may show his hand." He started for the door, and this time he made it and passed out of the house.

The two friends watched him go off toward

the ranch house after his father's old saddle.

"Huh!" snorted Nueces, glaring at his companion. "If he'd 'a' lost *yore* saddle there shore would 'a' been some fireworks. You oughta feel right proud of yoreself."

"Yeah," said Shorty in a low voice. "I do. Look how easy he takes it. Yeah, I feel damn' proud of myself, *I* do. But what about *you*, you big ham-head? You went after it with me, didn't you? Huh? *Didn't* you?"

"No, I didn't!" retorted Nueces with spirit. "I went with you to see that you came right back here to set them tyres!"

"Yeah, you did! You got me mixed up with Steve an' th' sheriff an' kept me in town till near midnight! That's what you did! All right, if there's any brand-new, silver-mounted saddle to buy, you shore pay yore half of it. You savvy that?"

"I'll pay for half of yore great-grandfather's funeral expenses!" retorted Nueces, his face reddening. "An' if I could have had th' chance to pay for 'em *before* he got

married, c'amn' if I wouldn't 'a' paid *all* of 'em. Figger that out, you runt! "

"How many more times have I got to tell you to quit callin' me a runt?" demanded Shorty, pushing back his chair.

"An' how many times have I got to tell you to quit callin' me ham-head?" rejoined Nueces, glaring.

At that instant the galley door opened and the cook stuck his perspiring face in through the crack.

"Don't you neither one apologise," he counselled. "Yo're *both* right! "

The door quickly closed, and they thought that they could hear stifled laughter behind it.

"An' I got to go out an' fix up a waggin for *him* to ride around in, while we do all th' work," growled Shorty, glaring at the door. "He puts on too damn' many airs! "

"I hope th' king-bc't busts when he's makin' good time downhill," said Nueces, gloating over the mental picture which came to him of one of the worst wagon accidents

that can happen. "Come on: mebby you can climb that wheel better in daylight, when you can see which way she's turnin'."

A two-man parade formed and passed through the doorway, shedding dignity. The long-legged leader slowed, stepped to one side, and fell in with the drag when it came up.

"What you figger th' sheriff had on his mind about Steve an' that Bar K hoss, Shorty?"

"Nothin' that was good, but he snore got one thing out of it, anyhow," chuckled Shorty.

"Yeah? An' what was that?"

"Yeah. He earned th' right to bray right out loud in public any time he feels like it, for you shore made a jackass outa him, Nueces."

"No-o-o," modestly declaimed Nueces. "I was only a-polishin' up what Nature already had done. I betcha we're goin' to hear more about that. That squaw's dog don't forget."

"Well, nebbly; our ears are open all th' time," chuckled Shorty. He looked behind him and saw Bob Corson riding off, on his pet roan, sitting his dead father's old saddle.

"There goes 'h' feller that's goin' to be th' next sheriff. What you say we run him every year, year in an' year out?"

Nueces leaned down and peered under his companion's hat brim.

"Every once in a while you get a good idear, but this time it ain't worth nothin'. We'd run him, an' we'd elect him, only he won't let us keep it up. He ain't even takin' no interest in this here election. Won't even talk about it, or let us talk about it. Think some more, runt."

"Mind yore business, ham-head!"

They stepped forward, side by side, toward the blacksmith's shop, Shorty stepping more briskly than his long-legged friend; and they went at the wagon as if it were a pleasure instead of hard, hot work over a blazing fire under a broiling sun.

CORSON rode slowly toward Willow Springs, looking at the cattle on both sides of the ranch trail, pleased both by their condition and by their numbers. These were no ordinary range animals, no Texas longhorns, but, instead, were the results of reasonably careful breeding. No stock bull was allowed to roam over the range, and his father had preached this to the other ranchers; and finally, after the usual period of wrangling and recrimination, the less progressive cattlemen of the region had been persuaded to that idea; and now, thanks to old John Corson's persistent hammering on the subject, stray range bulls were either impounded or shot. Durham sires were the fathers of each year's increase, and the increase justified the selection. One range bull, straying over the range, could do a deal of harm, harm which

would take years to undo; and it was with hostile eyes that Corson now saw such an animal wandering up from the Cactus Springs road.

He pushed toward it at a lope, a frown on his face, but somewhat relieved by the thought that he had come across it almost as soon as it had crossed his south line. Drawing his Sharp's to which he had clung in the face of more modern and complicated rifles, he slipped a huge cartridge into the chamber, stopped his horse, and fired. The bull dropped as if struck with a maul, and the rider went on again to look it over.

"Bar K," he muttered as he stopped beside it. "Why, that's th' same brand that was on th' cayuse Steve bought from th' stranger. Now that's right peculiar. That Bar K outfit seems to be herdin' 'em loose an' wide. Bar K," he mused. "Never heard of it. Must be they're a herd on th' trail. Huh!"

He left the animal where it had fallen and, going back to the trail, followed it to and along the Cactus Springs-Willow Springs

road, and into and through the small cañon which cut the high ridge east of the ranch. As he rode he watched closely for the saddle, and, still watching, entered the village of Willow Springs. Nodding and speaking to acquaintances, he went along the main street and stopped at the tie rail in front of the Cheyenne.

Steve looked up and tried to grin. His face bore a pained expression, as if mirroring some inner misery. His generosity of the evening before had largely included himself as a one-third beneficiary; and the taste in his mouth was, no doubt, nearly as bad as Shorty's.

"Mornin'," he growled glumly.

"Mornin', Steve."

There was silence. It lasted for perhaps half a minute, and then Steve, having a guilty conscience, broke it.

"Well, what you lookin' at me like that for?" he demanded somewhat truculently. In some people a guilty conscience goes on the offensive with slight provocation or none



at all. Steve was such a person. He pressed the attack, anticipating an indictment.

"Shorty's a full-growed man, ain't he?" he demanded, frowning.

"I've heard you claim otherwise," replied Corson, smiling. He pushed back his hat and leaned easily against the bar in an attitude intended to invite confidences.

"Who was it you bought that Bar K hoss from, Steve?" he asked.

"News shore does travel, *don't* it?" retorted Steve, scowling frankly. "You been swore in as a deputy sheriff? Can't you wait till after election?" His tone was sarcastic and somewhat pugnacious.

Corson ignored him and continued to smile.

"I never heard of that brand down in this part of th' country," he mused. "You reckon it is some trail herd, passin' through? A trail herd without a ve'rt brand?"

"I don't reckon nothin' a-tall. Why you so damn' interested?" asked Steve suspiciously.

"Oh, don't be a damn' fool!" snapped Corson. "What did that stranger look like? American or Mexican?"

"Look-a-here!" protested Steve indignantly, and growing red in the face. "You reckon I'd buy a hoss from a strange Mexican?"

"Oh, yo're another one of them smart Alecks, ain't you? An' yo're right discriminatin', too, ain't you?" sarcastically asked Corson. "Let me tell you that anybody that buys a hoss from a stranger, at a bargain, ain't got sense enough to know that he's alive. Was you sober when you bought it?"

"Yes, I was sober; an' I know damn' well that I'm alive, worse luck," growled Steve, his hand pressing against his forehead and gently caressing his closed eyelids. "Th' feller that sold me, that hoss was about medium height, yore build, with brown hair, bow-laigs, an' a small chin."

"Shucks! I know three men, right now, that answer that description," said Corson.

"That feller didn't say he was with a trail outfit did he?"

"If he did, I wouldn't 'a' bought th' hoss; I ain't buyin' no part of some rancher's cavvy, except from th' straw boss hisself."

"More wise discrimination," said Corson, grinning. "How would you know he was a straw boss?"

"He'd have his papers, wouldn't he? What th' hell you drivin' at?"

"How did th' sheriff come to know that you had bought that hoss?" asked Corson, pursuing his own way.

"Only wish I knowed! He said somebody told him it was seen in my corral."

"Steve," said Corson, looking the bartender in the eye, "th' sheriff don't like you, an' he don't like me, or Nueces, or Shorty, or Burns, or Bludsoe. Jim Watson was th' political boss who electeded him, for Watson blame' near ran this part of th' country. It was near a gift, that election; but all Watson's gifts had strings to 'em, an' Watson held th' other end. No man was comin' out

to oppose th' man who held his notes or mortgage; an' could extend 'em if he wanted to; an' Watson invested his money where it would bring in more than interest, good as that interest was. You foiler me?"

Steve grunted, his 'thoughts mostly on his aching head.

"You'll mebby remember," continued Corson, "after yore valuable head gets useful again, that my old man was purty high up in th' other party; that he fought ag'in' Watson in politics an' had no use for our sheriff. When we brought Watson to trial we removed him not only from earth but from out of th' political game, an' we took away th' sheriff's crutch. We also took away about th' best friend he ever had. Not only that, but we indirectly caused the sheriff's notes to be called, an' we blame' near put him in th' poorhouse. Are you savvyin' all this?"

"Yeah, I'm savvyin' it," replied Steve; "an' I'm savvyin' somethin' that you ain't mentioned. You ain't said nothin' about runnin' for his job. You'll put that Cactus

Springs jasper right where he belongs: an' that's punchin' cows for a livin'. 'You ain't mentioned that, an' I reckon it's right important—from his standpoint anyhow."

"All right; if there's anythin' in it, which I doubt," replied Corson. "You want to remember that you've allus been a good friend of mine an' th' rest of my boys. You hated Watson. You was foreman of th' jury that made th' sheriff hang him. When anybody said 'Corson' or 'JC' or anythin' connected with us, it was like wavin' a red flag at a bull. I may be shootin' off some blank cartridges—oh, well: use yore head. You savvy?"

"I savvy your drift, anyhow," answered Steve, showing more signs of life; "but yo're so danged suspicious that anybody can tell who you've been hangin' out with. That Nueces has just about ruined yore outlook on life. An' Shorty has helped."

"Yeah, terrible thing, ain't it?" bantered Corson, grinning. "Oh, yes, Steve—you seen my saddle?"

"Seen yore saddle? What'd you do to it?"

"Nothin'. It's missin' "

"Missin'?" inquired Steve, craning his neck in an endeavour to peer out of the window for a glimpse at his companion's horse. "Missin'?"

"Yes. Shorty got it from th' harness maker yesterday an' was to bring it home. He didn't bring it. Somewhere between th' harness maker's shop an' th' ranch it disappeared. I thought mebbly you might 'a' seen it kickin' around here."

"No, I ain't seen it a-tall. That was a right nice saddle, too."

"Yes, it was. I wonder if Shorty had it when he left here last night?"

"I don't know, but, wait a minute!"

Steve's brow became furrowed by deep thought.

"I'm just rememberrin' somethin'," he explained. "Hah! I went out to their hosses with 'em, to say good-bye. I kinda lost my balance, an' stumbled over somethin'. It

wasn't th' saddle I stumbled over. I remember throwin' out my arms to save myself, to get hold of somethin', an' they struck Shorty's saddle, an' I grabbed it, pommel an' cantle. No, sir, Bob: there was only one saddle on that hoss. I know that, right positive."

"Are you shore that you was in any condition to know anythin' positive, seein' that you stumbled over somethin' which, like as not, wasn't there a-tall?"

"Now, look here, Bob, you know me, an' you know that likker allus gets into my laigs an' hardly affects my head a-tall—till th' next mornin'. I'm tellin' you that th' only saddle on Shorty's hoss was th' one that was cinched on, th' one he rode home in. If yours had been there it would 'a' stuck up as big as a house. It wasn't there."

"Mebby it was my saddle that you stumbled over," suggested Carson.

A slow flush crept up Steve's neck and spread over his face.

"No, it wasn't," he replied. "As long as

yo're so damn' curious an' persistent, it was my own foot that I stumbled over. I know that because when I picked it up an' got it out of th' way, there wasn't nothin' left to stumble over."

"Hum!" muttered Corson thoughtfully. "Steve, had Nueces or Shorty been drinkin' before they came in here?"

"No, they hadn't. Shorty was as sober as a minister. Nobody had nothin' to drink until that noisy stranger, that red-headed Rawlins feller, came in askin' his damn' fool questions."

"Then th' saddle must 'a' been on Shorty's cayuse when he got here," said Corson. "Sometime between th' startin' of yore generous treatin' an' th' time they left for home, that saddle disappeared. What does that suggest to you, since yore valuable head wasn't none affected?"

"That it was took off in noss while Shorty was celebratin'."

"Sounds reasonable, since nothin' else could hardly 'a' happened; but who would



steal that saddle, knowin' that it was so well knowed by everybody hereabouts?"

"It might 'a' been somebody that was ridin' straight through."

"Yes, it might 'a' been."

"Hah! It might 'a' been that damn' stranger that sold me th' Bar K roan! He might 'a' come back ag'in."

Corson chuckled.

"Yes, it might. He might 'a' figgered on sellin' it to you, Steve, to go with th' hoss."

"Aw, shut up! Don't you ever forget nothin' a-tall? But what you think of this: mebby it got loose an' worked off while th' hoss was movin' 'round restlessly. Why don't you ask folks here in town? Somebody might 'a' picked it up, an' laid it away for you. They all know it."

"If anybody that knowed it picked it up for me they would a' brought it right in here. Well, I'll see what I can find out. See you later, mebby. So-long."

"You don't have to strain yoreself none to

see me ag'in," growled Steve, again rubbing his head and eyes.

In a moment Corson was riding up the street, dismounting here and there to ask about the saddle, but he asked in vain. Passing the bank, he swung down and went in, transacted the business he had to do, and went on again. No one had seen his saddle. Finally he reached the little lunch-room of Tomas, whose culinary expertness was a thorn in the side of the local hotel.

Tomas beamed a welcome. He always had been friendly to Corson and the latter's friends, but after the events leading up to the recovery of the JC ranch he was even more friendly. To Bob Corson's generous sportsmanship he was in debt. He was the kind of a man who remembers a favour as well as he remembers an injury.

His cousin, Luis Chavez, in reality El Toro, the bandit, had been spared by the young rancher and his friends and turned loose to go back to his own country. By that act Corson and his friends had lost three

thousand dollars in reward money, but they had gained the undying friendship of every Mexican in the country; and they had, also, and without being conscious of it, gained the friendship of El Toro and his band of hard-riding, straight-shooting bandits on both sides of the border. In some parts of the country such a friendship is not to be despised; especially when one is the owner of large herds of cattle or other removable property. Many a ranchman within the zone of El Toro's activities would have counted himself fortunate had he been blessed with that friendship. Corson had captured the outlaw and had held him under the guns of himself and his friends and then graciously allowed him to depart without in any way indicating that he was bestowing a favour. El Toro's company manners were those somewhat of a gentleman, and somewhere in his nature, submerged it is true, were the remnants of the instincts of a gentleman. Quixotic, generous, close-fisted; kind and cruel; true and false; honest and thieving—

he was a strange character, a strange and puzzling mixture; but, all in all, he was a man, and a big man.

Tomas, who almost devoutly admired his cousin, poured out a cup of coffee such as could not be obtained within more than a hundred miles in any direction. He pushed it across the counter, his face wrinkled with pleasure and his white teeth showing in a wide smile.

"Eet ees a saddle you look for, no?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

Corson was reaching for the coffee cup, but his hand stopped halfway.

"It is. You seen it?" he asked in surprise.

"But no. I onlee know w'ere eet was w'en eet was last seen."

"Well, that's somethin', anyhow. On Shorty's horse?"

"No. On the horse of a man from Cactus Springs. Me, I deed not see eet. I was tol'."

"Hah! Who is he?"

"I do not know. He ees e-strange."

"Damn that feller! First he sells a friend of mine a stolen horse an' now he steals my saddle! Looks to me like he's fixin' to have his hide pegged on a wall. What's he look like?"

"Hees hair eet ees b-rown."

"Hah! Steve's stranger had brown hair. What's th' rest of him look like?"

Tomas shrugged.

"I don' know. But he has no cheen, to e-spik of."

"No cin? I don't like that kind: they're pizen dangerous if they are pressed ag'in' a wall. Well, he'll get his hide spread out to dry if he don't look out."

"Ah, Señor Bob! Eef I was you I would not peg hees skeen on the wall. I would do w'at you call geeve heem th' r-rope. A r-rope, eet has two ends. Sometimes you do not know w'ere the other end ees; but eef you follow the r-rope, then you fin' out. But that ees enough of r-ropes an' saddles.

"I have had wor-rd from my cousin, Luis,

He sends hees ver' high regards to you, an' to Nueces an' Shorty. He ees a gr-reat man, my couisir Luis. A ver' gr-reat man."

"I'm agreein' with you in that, Tomas; he is a great man; but he picked out a blame' foolish occupation. He could have gone far in some other business. Banditry don't pay in th' long run."

"No?" inquired Tomas, smiling broadly. He nodded. "Ah, yes, he could hav' gone far: to the wall, weeth hees back against eet, an' been e-shot for a tr-raitor an' hees beezeness taken. You do not know my country, Señor Bob. Eet ees much disturb. First one man he ees the boss; then another man he ees the boss. A successful beezeness man, he ees first r-rob by one side; then by the other. He must say wheech side he ees on, no? An' then that side, eet ees no more. No? My cousin, Luis, he ees a smar-rt man: he ees on his own side. That does not change. Eef they come to e-shoot heem, he e-shoots firs'. He ees a gr-reat man, a ver' gr-reat man."

Corson laughed until the coffee slopped into the saucer.

"Which goes to prove that it all depends on the viewpoint, Tomas. I reckon you've got it sized up right, at that. There's an awful lot of the Yankee in you Mexicans. You tell yore cousin that I esteem him very highly, regard his business in a different light, an' look forward to the day when I shall meet him again. Luis Chavez would spit in the devil's eye, an' laugh. Now let's get back to th' saddle. It was last seen on th' horse of a stranger. That right?"

"Sí, that ees so. You are a reech man, Señor. The saddle, eet ees onlee a saddle, though a ver fine one; but eet may be a r-rope to follow. Ah, when Señor Watson was hanged, eet was like pushing a leetle r-rock over the edge of a—w'at you call precipice—was eet not? Yes. a precipice. Onlee a leetle r-rock, Señor Bob: as beeg, maybe, as your head. Sometimes the leetle r-rock, eet roll to the bottom, an' all ees e-still; but other times—ah, whole trees, whole for-rests

are caught een w'at that leetle r-rock e-starts down, an' the r-roar, eet can be hear-rd for miles. Señor Watson was onlee a leetle r-rock, but, *quién sabe?* ”

“ Tomas, I reckon yo're full of *marihuana*,” said Corson laughingly. “ You Mexicans are too fantastic with all yore Yankee shrewdness; it makes a peculiar combination. That stranger, to my way of reckonin', is just a common thief, an' when he gets caught he'll be treated like one. Well, so-long.”

“ *Buenos días*, Señor Bob; *bucnos días*. Keep the eye open an' the mouth e-shut.”

Corson left the lunch-room and started up the street. In front of the hotel he stopped and was soon inside.

The clerk smiled and welcomed him.

“ Glad to see you, Bob. How's everythin' ? ”

“ All right, barrin' saddles,” answered Corson, looking slowly about the room. He saw a very red-haired puncher leaning back in a chair, a magazine in his hands. Their eyes met, and each nodded politely.



"Barrin' saddles?" inquired the clerk curiously.

"Yes, Tyson. Did anybody find mine an' bring it in here for me?"

"No. How'd you lose it?"

"Shorty lost it off his horse somewhere," answered Corson, giving out no unnecessary information in the presence of strangers. "I figgered if he lost it in town somebody would 'a' picked it up an' saved it for me. Everybody in th' country knows that saddle."

"Yes, they do," replied Tyson, nodding. "Too bad, but I reckon it'll turn up."

"Yes, reckon so," said Bob, turning to leave.

"Oh, Bob, meet Mr. Rawlins," said Tyson. "Mr. Rawlins, this is Mr. Corson, owner of th' JC, over west of town."

"How do you do, Mr. Rawlins? Stayin' long in our town?"

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Corson. I can't say just how long I'll be here."

"Well, Tyson will make yore stay comfortable. Glad to 'a' met you."

"Same here. Are you th' man they're runnin' for sheriff?"

"Yes, reckon so," answered Corson, grinning. "Th' boys will have their fun. Well, good-day."

"Good-day," said Mr. Rawlins, and turned back to his chair. He sat down and watched the young ranchman, the owner of the ranch which he and his brother coveted, step into the street. Waiting a few moments he looked at the clerk, realising that this was a good opportunity to talk about the man who had just left. Under the circumstances a few inquiries would be quite natural.

"What's th' talk about how Corson got hold of th' JC?" he asked curiously and somewhat carelessly.

"What talk?" demanded Tyson quickly.

"Why, seems to me inat I've heard there was somethin' unusual about it," answered Mr. Rawlins.

"There was—plenty."

"Heard it wasn't quite accordin' to Hoyle," persisted Mr. Rawlins.

"Then Hoyle didn't know what he was talkin' about," replied Tyson shortly.

"Mebby not" mused the other thoughtfully. "Still, he's a purty well-informed person, Hoyle is. I was wonderin' if that little matter would hurt Corson's chances in th' comin' election."

"I reckon it'll help elect him, if anythin'," replied Tyson. "Th' ranch was stolen from his father an' Bob got it back ag'in. Th' way he done th' whole thing made quite a hit hereabouts. As a matter of right th' ranch never should 'a' left th' Corson family. Watson got hold of it through fraud. Corson got it back accordin' to law. You interested in it?"

"Oh, no," sighed Mr. Rawlins. "Seein' Corson himself an' bein' introduced to him brought it to my mind. I've heard all kinds of things about that deal. Gossip, I reckon. Anyhow, my interest is only idle curiosity."

"Idle curiosity about some things in this'

part of th' country often makes a man far from idle when things bust," warned Tyson. "You might as well know about it, an' what I'm goin' to tell you ain't gossip: it's fact. Corson paid one dollar an' other valuable considerations for that ranch. Watson sold it, signed a bill of sale, an' a couple of fellers witnessed it. That's all there is to it."

"Of course, it's all right," agreed Mr. Rawlins, "'specially if it was witnessed. Witnesses are right important, an' they oughta be well known. I suppose they were a couple of fellers from these parts?'

"You'll have to ask Corson, I reckon," replied Tyson coldly.

Mr. Rawlins laughed easily.

"Don't reckon I will, seein' it's none of my business," he replied. "But Corson looks like he'll make a right good sheriff, an' I shore wish him luck."

Tyson grinned with restored good nature and forthwith began to tell his companion the many reasons why the local ranchman should have the office.

THE subject of the colloquy between the hotel clerk and his guest was riding out of town along the regular trail, the one leading south-westerly to Cactus Springs ; and he had reached the little cañon in the range of steep hills west of town when he saw a horseman approaching him, and something peculiar about horse and man held his attention. They were too bulky, and too bulky in the wrong place. A nearer view showed Corson that the bulky object was a saddle, and he became hopeful and expectant. Then he recognised the sheriff.

The two riders came abreast and stopped, looking at each other warily. The sheriff patted the extra saddle and looked curious.

"Reckon this is yourn, Corson," he said. "I was just makin' up my mind whether to take it to th' ranch or tote it in to Willow

Springs; but now you've saved me th' trouble. Here, take it."

"Much obliged. How'd you come to find it so quick?"

"Saw it lyin' in some brush alongside th' road. Looked like it must 'a' worked loose an' fell off when th' hoss shied or pitched. Some folks are damn' unreliable. Shorty had it on his hoss th' last time I saw it."

"Shorty is unreliable only to those who don't rely on him," retorted Corson. He changed the subject.

"I just shot a Bar K scrub bull on my range. Where's that outfit located? I never heard of it before to-day."

"It was a trail crew, passin' through south of Cactus Springs," said the sheriff. "Somebody stole their pet night hoss, an' I been lookin' for it."

"Yeah, so I heard; but it seems to me that you looked in a right strange place for it. You know Steve wouldn't steal a hoss."

"Some that ain't got th' nerve to steal 'em shore will buy 'em after they're stolen."

"An' you know blame' well that Steve wouldn't buy a stolen hoss if he had any idear that it was stolen."

"I take things as I find 'em, an' I know my own busiess right well, Corson, an' mebbly you know you'n. When I look for a stolen hoss, I look where I'm told to look an' where I expect it might 'be found."

"Yeah, mebbly like a man lookin' for his own cache."

"Meanin'?" demanded the sheriff.

"You know right well what I mean," said Corson stiffly, as Tomas's remarks flashed through his mind. They seemed, now, to have more significance than they had in the little lunch-room.

"You meanin' I planted that hoss so I could find it?" persisted the sheriff.

"Or mebbly knowed where it was planted!" retorted Corson.

"I don't like yore talk, Corson!"

"You'll mebbly like it even less some day."

"We'll handle that day when it comes," retorted the sheriff. "Let me tell you some-

thin': somebody swapped hosses in that corral behind th' Cheyenne; somebody took out that Bar K an' put in a Box M, like Nueces rides. Nueces was there that day. He was there before an' after I went out to see th' hoss. If I knowed for shore who made that swap they'd find themselves hooked up as an accessory after th' fact. There's a couple of fellers around here that are too damn' smart!"

"Then you might as well make it three," said Corson. "You might even make it five. An' then you can add that they never start any plays that they can't go through with. Watson found that out. An' instead of lookin' for th' buyer of that Bar K hoss you might do a lot better if you looked for th' seller, th' man that did th' stealin'."

"I know how to run my office," retorted the sheriff.

"Yo're shoutin' you do! If you looked for th' seller, th' man that stole it, it might take you too close to Cactus Springs an' yore friends."



"I suppose that's where you'll be lookin' if yo're elected to my job?" sneered the sheriff.

"I don't want yore job!" retorted Corson; "but th' way things are goin' it might be a good thing if I am elected. You ought to look closer to Cactus Springs for that hoss thief. Almost as close, mebby, as where you found my saddle. Thanks for bringin' it back ag'in."

"What you mean by sayin' ag'in?" snapped the sheriff.

"Oh, use yore head, you ain't half th' damn' fool that you act. So-long."

They parted slowly, reluctantly, warily; but increasing distance steadily cut down whatever threat there might have been of trouble and finally removed it altogether as each rode on about his own business.

The sheriff, bound again for his own town, jogged along with a sardonic grin on his seamed face, as if he were enjoying a joke or treasuring something in his mind. The

saddle had been a mistake, but only mature thought had developed that fact.

Corson stopped his horse and finished roping the saddle on, the first attempt being hurried and handicapped by the need for vigilance. Now he rode on homeward, his mind busy in vague explorations in the hazy land of conjecture and supposition. He had not taken himself seriously as a candidate for the sheriff's job, but it had swept on without any aid from him, and he had no idea of how seriously he was being taken by others, both friends and enemies; and among them was the present sheriff, who already was casting around for means to discredit a dangerous rival candidate.

Corson, turning things over in his mind and viewing them from every angle, believed that there was more in recent events than met the eye. The saddle had lain in no brush along the road, because he had closely scrutinised that thin and scattered growth on both sides of the trail as he had ridden in. Had the sheriff recovered the saddle as a part

of his duties, choosing to make a mystery of it? That would appear to be a sensible way of looking at it, since he had brought it back. If there had been anything crooked with his connection with it, he hardly would have been seen with it, but would more likely have tossed it into the brush and let it lie there. Still, suspicions once aroused are hard to put down. Was he shielding some friend who had belatedly realised that the saddle was too well known to be found in possession of it? That was a reasonable explanation but, somehow, it did not sufficiently explain, at least not to a suspicious mind. Had Corson known it, he was both right and wrong.

He reached the bunkhouse, dropped the saddle before the door where it likely would be stumbled over by some hasty soul coming out of the building in a hurry; and then he wandered down to the blacksmith's shop, from which came a great noise composed of ringing metal, hammer blows, loud and profane language. As he drew near the building he discovered that the noise came not from

within it but from its farther side, and he turned the corner and stopped, looking down on the noise makers.

Shorty glanced up as he saw the shadow pass into his restricted field of vision. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, snarled an order to his lanky helper, and grinned engagingly.

"Find th' saddle, Bob? Damn it, Nueces, *will* you quit jigglin' this wheel? How th' hell can you expect me——"

"An' will *you* set this tyre before it gets cold an' I have to heat it all over ag'in? Hello, Bob."

"Hello," replied Corson, stepping back to give them more room, and to get farther from the heat of the blazing fire close at hand. "Yes, I found it. You'd mebbly reckon it had a reward on its head: th' sheriff was bringin' it back. He found it near th' road, in th' brush, after I had passed along that way, watchin' both sides, an' watchin' close. A saddle is too big a thing to overlook."

"Yeah?" inquired Shorty. "Huh! So

he says! Did he claim second sight? Reckon th' thief found out that it was too well knowed an' turned it over to him." He reached for the light sledge hammer. "We oughta set this one kinda loose, Nueces, so he'll mebbly bust his blame' neck."

"My way is th' best," said Nueces, blowing a drop of perspiration from the end of his long nose.

"Yeah! It *allus* is, ain't it?" sarcastically demanded Shorty.

"My way is th' best," complacently continued Nueces, ignoring the remark. "Cut that king bolt half in two; that'll dump him quicker'n hell, right under their hoofs."

"Him?" inquired Corson curiously. "Whos' murder are you plannin'?"

"Th' only gran'son of th' cook's gran'pa," grunted Nueces, grinning, as Shorty tapped the tyre. "Hurry up, you runt! It's cool-in' fast!"

"So'll you be cool'n' fast if you don't mind yore own business!" retorted Shorty, blacksmith *pro tem.* for the JC ranch. "Who you

reckon is settin' this tyre—you or me?" His head was cocked on one side, his tongue sticking out of a corner of his mouth. The last and finishing tap of the hammer was the signal for the water bucket to come into play, and Nueces poured its contents around the edge of the wheel to cool the metal and shrink the tyre into place.

"There!" grunted Shorty. "Reckon that'll do. So he *found* it, huh?"

"In th' brush, along th' road, after you had looked for it?" inquired Nueces, tossing the pail aside. "Miracles are still bein' done, right here around th' JC. We didn't come home along th' reg'lar road: we took th' short cut, but forgot to tell you about that. Phew! I'm glad this job is done, an' I claim I done a good one. There she is, Bob—tight as th' day she was first put on."

"He might claim that he found it this side of th' cañon after th' short cut joined th' main road," suggested Corson. "How many more wheels you got to fix?"

"How many *more*?" yelled Shorty,

slowly straightening his back as he arose to an erect position. "We've done set four already; how many wheels you reckon this damn' wagon's got? Did he say he found it this side of th' cañon?"

"Bob's mebbly countin' in 'n' fifth wheel," ironically suggested Nueces. "We oughta saw that king bolt, like I said. He didn't find it along th' road up in *this* part of th' country. Did he say it was this side of th' cañon?"

"No, he didn't say much of anythin' about th' saddle," answered Corson, "but he had a lot to say about other things. He was plumb full of advice."

"Hell, that ain't near as heavy as somethin' else he may get plumb full of if he goes bustin' 'round, tryin' to fasten hoss stealin' on to Steve," growled Nueces. "Did you pull his nose for him?"

"There ain't no call for that yet," said Corson, laughing. "Well, if Steve is fool enough to buy stolen hosses then he's got to expect to get into trouble."

"Steve ain't got in no trouble," said Shorty.

"Not yet, anyhow. This ham-head kept him out of that."

"Aw," growled Nueces, "if everybody down in this part of th' country got into trouble buyin' stolen stock then there would only be th' J.C. outfit left out of jail." He scratched his head. "Wonder if th' sheriff is runnin' 'round settin' traps for them that he don't like? Them, of course, bein' us an' our friends. Well, it's a blame' good thing for a trapper to remember just where an' how he makes his sets: it's an awful thing to step into one of yore own."

Shorty snorted.

"Blame' if you ain't th' most suspicious feller I ever knowed! Fact of th' matter is some friend of th' sheriff didn't recognise that saddle in th' dark; but when he got home an' saw them silver ornaments he knowed that he dassn't use it an' that he couldn't sell it. So he took it around and showed it to th' sheriff, explainin' how things was, an' had that coyote bring it jack ag'in so nobody would be goin' after it. Simple, ain't it?"



"Not nearly as simple as you are," said Nueces, gratis.

Corson pushed his hat back on his head.

"Steve swears th' saddle was gone off th' hoss when you fellers went out to start for home," he said, tersely repeating the bartender's statements.

"Huh! Steve didn't stumble over his own foot," said Shorty, grinning. "He stumbled over mine. I felt him lift it up and put it out of his way. He near tipped me over, he did."

"All right," said Corson, holding back his laughter. "We stay with th' saddle. A Mexican saw a stranger with it. A stranger sold that stolen hoss to Steve."

"Huh?" breathed Nueces.

"Well, if that feller has got just common, ordinary good sense, he'll keep right on bein' a stranger 'round these parts," said Shorty flatly.

"But mebby th' stranger was a different one in each case," said Corson, grinning.

"Then it's a different case for each one," grunted Nueces.

"I shot a scrub bull, Bar K, down on our south line," continued Corson.

"Well, well, well," said Nueces, arising and leaning against the shop.

"Well, well, well," echoed Shorty. "Bar K, huh?"

"Tomas says for us to keep our eyes an' ears open," said Corson. "An' our mouths shut," he added.

"Tomas is a wise Mexican," commented Nueces.

"Yeah," grunted Shorty, grinning. "If you keep yore mouth shut you don't swaller no flies."

"El Toro sends us his regards, but he ain't got nothin' to do with stray bulls or wanderin' strangers," said Corson.

"Not unless he started th' strangers a-wanderin'," chuckled Nueces, significantly, thinking of the time when El Toro had driven Burns and Blue-soe out of his part of the country. "El Toro is all right, an' there

ain't nobody that's a better cattle thief, neither."

Corson was laughing outright at the way Nueces was mixing up his words and his thoughts and started for the bunkhouse, his two friends trailing along behind him and temporarily at peace with each other. But the peace was not to last.

"Eyes open, Nueces," grunted Shorty, giving up the attempt to keep in step.

"An' *mouths* shut, runt!" retorted Nueces, striding along.

"What you mean, ham-head?" blazed Shorty indignantly.

"If I reckoned he wouldn't git hurt but just git scared near to death, blame' if I wouldn't saw it half in two," chuckled Nueces to himself.

"So he found it in th' brush alongside th' road," mused Shorty. "A sheriff oughta be a better liar than that."

Corson left them and went to the corral to get his father's saddle and to put it away. It had been kept in the ranch house, but after

one glance in that direction Corson turned and went to the blacksmith's shop, nearer to him by half the distance. The pegs on the walls were covered to capacity, and after a look around he placed the saddle on the floor in a corner and threw a piece of sacking over it. The saddle was about worn out, but it had belonged to his father; and there was plenty of room for it.

There had been a deal of talk about saddles; but there would have been a deal more talk had any of the JC outfit been blessed with the gift of prophecy; there would have been more talk and quite some action.

Corson returned to the bunkhouse, and the rest of the day was given over to discussing the JC round-up, which was soon to start. Extra men had been hired for the work. Hectic activities were drawing near, and then there would be a herd of selected steers to drive to the shipping pens of the railroad, a special-order herd for late spring delivery.

At that moment, had they but known it, several head of prime beef were being given

to the JC. Three men drove them well across the south line and left them among the cattle grazing there. The original Bar K brands had been nearly burned out, and JC marks, more prominent because of their raw newness, had been placed beside the blistered blots. There was one place on the south line of the ranch where such presents could best be delivered in daylight: that was in the east section, along the base of the ridge, where draws and broken country could be relied upon to provide shelter if the riders kept to the bottoms and off of the sky-lines.

Burns and Bludsoe rode in for dinner and were told to take things easy during the afternoon. Many little odd jobs could be taken care of, and with the round-up not far away there was no great need to patrol the lines. The chuck-wagon harness, despite the oil which had been lavished upon it, was pretty well dried out, and this was remedied; a poor or broken strap here and there was fixed or replaced. The afternoon passed pleasantly and found the regulation appetites waiting

for supper. The outfit left the stripped table and wandered to the other end of the room, there to smoke and talk until bunk time put an end to wakefulness.

Nueces laid down the darning cotton and held up the sock to admire it. What the sock originally had been was hard to guess, for Nueces was a thrifty soul in little things, and much cotton had been used since he had acquired that pair of socks.

"Which reminds me that I got some to wash out," said Shorty, his eyes on the sock. The thought made him sigh. He was leaning back lazily in his chair, his big knotted hands crossed on his flat hard stomach, and he was at peace with the world.

"Uh! So have I," grunted Burns. He yawned. "Wonder who-all is goin' to be on hand to check up on th' round-up?"

"Oh, I reckon Burton will be there, an' mabby French, for th' Box M," said Nueces, picking up another sock, the mate to the first. "Now will you look at that hole?"

"Slim Porter an' Ted Perdue will be here

from th' Bar W," said Bludsoe. "I don't reckon Tom Powers will come hisself, 'though I hope so."

Corson smiled reminiscently. He remembered when the selection of Porter and Perdue on the part of the Bar W would have been the height of tact, for Red and Slim were local boys and well liked. In days not so long past the Texan outfit of Watson's Bar W had been very much disliked; and even now most of the people round about tolerated them without owing to any particular liking for them. On the JC there was an honest welcome for Tom Powers and his two remaining Texans, for they had squared themselves at the last moment, at the most critical moment. Burns and Bludsoe, once members of that Texan outfit of the Bar W, were now loyal JC riders. Up on the Box M, however, the old feelings had not been entirely laid; and since Watson's death Powers and all of his old outfit were like poison to Cactus Springs, which bothered them not a whit.

"You reckon anybody will come up here

from Cactus Springs?" asked Burns idly; but his eyes glowed a little.

"Ain't much reason for 'em to come," said Shorty.

"Then you can count on 'em comin'," growled Nueces nearly cross-eyed from picking up threads. Hands like his were not intended for a darning needle, and eyes which had been trained on the open plain did not take kindly to such continued short focus.

"Say, Bob, what do you reckon I saw?" asked Burns, grinning as he looked around. By now he had heard all of the latest news, and he did not wait for an answer. "I saw that Bar K roan hoss that th' sheriff's makin' such a fuss about."

Nueces' eyeballs slid around until he could see Shorty's face, and he found that Shorty's eyes were on him. On Shorty's face was a wide, impudent grin.

"No!" said Shorty "Where?"

"Over east, just th's side of th' ridge."

"Then Steve's prayer for strength an'



determination was answered," chuckled Nueces.

"Why didn't you drive it in, an' we'd turn it over?" said Corson.

"Oh, let that tumblebug find an' drive his own hosses," growled Burns.

"Kero," grunted Bludsoe with satisfaction. He looked at his employer. "We ain't seen no Bar K scrubs," he offered, referring to scrub bulls. "I reckon you dropped th' only one that was headin' our way."

Corson grunted affirmatively and slowly arose.

"I'm turnin' in," he said. "Nueces, why don't you hold that sock closer to yore face?" he asked, smiling at the length of the curved body bending over the darning.

"Huh!" snorted Shorty, grinning anew. "Then somebody would have to hold th' lamp for him. Hey! „You don't want to put all th' cotton in one place, ham-head, spread it all over, kinda even."

"Spread *you* all over," growled the lanky puncher. "If you'd wear yore own socks

steady an' regular I wouldn't have so much blame' darnin' to do."

"Right!" exclaimed Bludsoe quickly. "An' neither would I."

"Socks?" ironically inquired Shorty. "Sacks, you mean. I couldn't wear yore socks an' get my feet into my boots. I'm turnin' in."

"Th' reason Shorty wants you to spread that darnin' cotton, Nueces," said Burns, "is because it's made his feet sore th' way you put it on."

"Huh!" said Shorty, working off his boots.

"Good-night," said Corson from the door, and his steps died out toward the ranch house. Had he gone in the other direction, toward the blacksmith's shop—— But let's take things in their right order. And had the JC horses been thoroughly rounded up the following day and a strict count taken one would have been found to be missing—— But that, too, should be taken in its right order.

THE round-up was a busy affair. The first day's drive was over and a large herd of excellent cattle had been collected and drifted to the bed ground. Their numbers exceeded expectations and threw out of step the planned method of procedure. They could not be cut out and branded on the same day, for every draw and thicket, every hollow and wash had fairly spouted cattle. By noon the plain was darkened by the moving animals, and when the drive was completed for that section of the range Corson looked with pleasure upon his herd. He knew, of course, that this was the best section, but the results were well beyond his hopes.

The round-up outfit camped on the range, the cook's wagon the rallying point. A carefully built fire winked in the little hollow, and above it arose eddying streamers of steam. The cavvy had been driven off by the

wrangler, and the night horses were close at hand in a flimsy rope corral. The night herd guard had been arranged into shifts. Across a long, sweeping slope, which dipped in the middle and went upward again on the far side, was the wind-kissed bed ground, the crest of the second swell, where any breeze which stirred would reach the cattle.

The Box M had sent three men; the Bar W, two. Half a dozen extra men had been hired by Corson. After the drive had started five more men had reached the field, coming from other and distant ranches, offered in the spirit of neighbourly helpfulness rather than for checking up on the branding of cattle so far from their own range. Even Cactus Springs had sent three riders, and they had worked as hard as any of their companions.

The cook was on edge. He had expected to prepare food for perhaps a dozen men, but was faced by nearly twice that number of hungry punchers. He growled and swore and complained; but he rolled up his sleeves, put a chip on his shoulder, and fed his crew

in relays, since plates and cutlery were at a premium.

"I shore feel sorry for you, cook," jeered the wrangler. "'Vish there was three times as many. If you had all these cayuses to look after you'd have some reason to growl. Cripes! You know how many hosses I got to wrangle?"

"Hosses!" sneered the wrathful cook. "Hosses! Every hoss feeds hisself, don't he? All you got to do is drive 'em off an' let 'em graze. Hosses! *Me*, I got two dozen human hawgs to stuff, three times a day, an' every one of 'em bawlin' for food like a hungry calf! How many plates have I got? How many tin cups? How many knives? Them fellers was supposed to bring their own eatin' tools, but did they? They did like hell! What did they do with their own? How th' hell do I know? Lost 'em, mebby, or swapped 'em for whisky. Hosses! Hell, you don't have to wash no dishes for hosses, do you? They're in th' way when they wash their own, an' I won't have it! You don't

have to rustle wood, keep a fire goin', mix up biscuit dough by th' barrel, an' then wash dishes in between, besides peelin' potatoes, slicin' meat— Oh, 'iell, what's the use! ”

“I asked you if you knowed how many hosses I got to wrangle,” persisted the cavvy boss. “I got more'n a hundred an' thirty! No two of 'em has got th' same idears, an' most of 'em ain't got none a-tall. Tom Powers, who just would come taggin' along where he ain't wanted, says to me: ‘Git me my night hoss.’ Git him his night hoss! How th' hell do I know which is his night hoss? That Box M foreman, he grins like an idiot an' he says: ‘Mister Wrangler, cut out an' corral me my roan.’ His roan! Th' Box M brought seventeen hosses with 'em, an' six of them hosses is roans! ”

“Huh! ” sneered the cook. “Lookit out there! Here comes another bunch of wolves, an' I ain't got thirgs cleaned up after th' last bunch. You an' yore hosses! An' eat? My Gawd! Where do they put it all? What

kinda stummicks have they got? I'll betcha them Cactus Springs coyotes ain't had a square meal since they first come into this country, an' I hears they been here for near twenty years. Biscuits to them fellers is like th' tickin' of a watch: one a second, sixty seconds to th' minute; an' damn' if they can't eat an hour! You an' yore hosses! Git th' hell away from here before I bend this iron skillet around yore head! *All right! All right!*" he shouted as indignant and almost pained inquiries came from the foremost of the group.

"Make 'em wash up their own stuff, jam or no jam," suggested the wrangler. "They allus do everywhere else, don't they? You tryin' to make pets out of 'em?"

"An' have 'em millin' around my water barrel like flies around sugar?"

"Hey, cook!" called out a newcomer. "You oughta do yore sleepin' at *night!*"

"—— —!" said the cook. "Sleepin' at night, huh?" he shouted. "If I slept

at night, or any other time, who'd peel potatoes an' get breakfast for th' hawgs? If I don't git somebody to help me, I'm quittin'!"

"Here comes th' boss!" warned the wrangler, seeing Corson riding in from the herd.

"That so?" demanded the cook truculently. "Then he's gittin' here just in time to hear what I got to say, right smack in his face!" But the cook's voice had fallen steadily lower, and his last words trailed into silence. He looked at the wrangler and grinned; but the wrangler was becoming busy with ropes and props and fussing over his little ridiculous corral.

Corson rode up and swung down near the wagon.

"Cook," he said, "you grab yoreself a man or two to help you. Put a pan of hot water on th' other side of th' fire an' let 'em wash their own dishes. What you reckon this is: a ladies' school? I'm sendin' a man to town to-morrow to bring back Miguel to help you



feed this gang. Make out a list of supplies that you want to come along at th' same time."

He turned toward the wrangler.

"How you findin' things, Jim?" he asked. "Cavvy too big for one man? Can't you let 'em pick out their own?"

"Cavvy?" asked Jim scornfully. "That little bunch of hosses too big for one man? *I* didn't come from Cactus Springs! If me an' th' night wrangler can't handle a little bunch of gentle hosses like that, then you oughta give us some crutches. Cavvy, hell!"

"Hey, cook!" called some cheerful soul, winging his way blithesomely into that place where angels are supposed to fly instead of walk. "Don't burn th' beans next time. I wasn't brought up on shot."

"No, but you'll damn' shore die on shot if you start ridin' me!" retorted the cook. "Trouble with you is that you ain't seen no grub for so long that you don't savvy it when you do see it."

The men drifted in toward the fire singly and in small groups, covered with dust and sweat, tired, good-natured, hungry, talkative. The rattle of knives on tin plates, the banter of the waiting line, the satisfied retorts of the first served made the camp a noisy place. The cook grunted and swore and sweated, but his bad humour was entirely on the outside, an ill-fitting garment that failed to hide the real nature under it. He was the king pin of the round-up, his fire and wagon the rallying point, and the goal of many impromptu horse races as the men came in. His was a position of great importance, and he let no one forget it.

"I never did see so many ace-high cattle in all my life," said one puncher, polishing the last trace of bacon grease from his plate with his last piece of biscuit.

"Huh!" chuckled Shorty, stirring restlessly in the waiting group. "You do yore oratin' after you pass that plate along to somebody else. You should 'a' seen th' herd that me, Nueces, an' Corson rounded up out

west in them brakes last summer, huh, Nueces?"

"What you allus askin' me for?" demanded Nueces. "Ain't you got a mind of yore own?" He looked at the plate polisher. "You've done scraped it all off: there ain't none on th' other side. Git through with it an' pass it over. What did you fellers do with yore own? Sell 'em?"

The Box M puncher rose, grinned, passed his plate toward Shorty, and, as Shorty reached for it, raised it high in the air and put it into Nueces' hamlike hand, above Shorty's head.

Shorty looked up, said something about a telegraph pole, and then, feinting with his left, stepped in and gently placed his right against the stomach of the Box M man.

"There," he growled, "but for my good-nature an' forgivin' disposition, you'd be a dead man right now. They never git up after I hit——" His words stopped as if bitten off, for another plate slid into his field of vision, and his left arm moved like a rapier. Grip-

ping the plate tightly, he ran toward the water bucket near the wagon.

The interval between the last man to eat and the first to roll into his blankets was about one cigarette in length; and soon the fire burned low, casting flickering shadows to dance and play on the human cocoons. To the tired men the night seemed but a breath long, for the cook's stentorian bellow routed them out at the break of day; but the odours of his steaming hot breakfast tickled the olfactory nerves and kept awakening dispositions sweet.

The first day shift rode off to take over the herd and let the last herd shift ride in; the cutters-out, the branding-iron handlers, the bull-doggers, all prepared for a hard day's work; horses, already corralled by the wrangler, filled the little rope enclosure and milled about endlessly to escape the casts. As the second squad rode forth the last of the night crew came in, sleepy, hungry, and belligerent, to eat their fill and then to join the others.

All morning long the work went on, seemingly a kaleidoscope of confusions; but it had its pattern, and the confusion was only in the swiftness and the general aspect; the work itself moved with almost automatic co-ordination. The main herd shrunk; the cutters-out, moving unerringly in the press of the cattle, forced their chosen victims to the outer edge and thence from the herd into the insistent guardianship of the waiting riders. Anxious mother cows and frightened calves were driven inexorably toward the waiting handlers and the branding fires, the mother to be checked and diverted while the calf went on to suffer more indignities than it ever had known before.

Yesterday Spotty was a calf without a care, a four-legged chunk of india-rubber, filled with bumptious deviltry calculated to raise hell wherever it mischievously wandered; the bane of the herd, the apple of its mother's eye; it cavorted, it butted, knowing that if a merited punishment threatened it had only to bawl lustily for help; and, snug

in the knowledge that the help would come, that its mother would stand with more than usual courage, it went its mischievous way.

Then came the horsemen with waving hats, with shouted words. The world suddenly grew chaotic. As far as it could see, other calves and mothers streamed across the plain toward a common point; and they streamed more or less placidly unless the riders pushed too hard. The units joined and became small groups; small groups melted together into larger groups, and Spotty was often hard pushed to keep his place at his mother's side, and as the herd grew and shifted, cows and calves worming into the centre of the mass, he grew more and more panicky and more and more was cut off from her, and late in the afternoon he lost her altogether. He and dozens of a kind kept the herd in a ferment in their mad, hungry, and bawling search for bawling and anxious mothers. Perhaps he tried to steal a meal from some other mother, and suffered further troubles for his

pains; and then, at last, his heavy heart exulted, his glad bawl merged into that of his mother, and, paying no heed to her caressing muzzle, he butted her flank for his supper. All was again well with the world.

Then the dawn had come, and with it came calamity. A hard-faced puncher espied him as his mother suddenly and determinedly pushed in toward the centre of the herd, and he had trouble sticking close to her, but he managed it. The puncher grinned, said something, and moved through the herd. The mother tried all of her tricks to escape, but by now the puncher's horse had marked its quarry, and this horse was trained to cutting out. There was no escape. Try as they might, the hunted pair were worked toward the edge of the herd, and then suddenly found themselves outside it, a persistent horse and grimy rider between them and the shelter of their kind. A hat swung up and down, a whoop rang out, and before the frightened pair could check their involuntary run they found another rider

behind them and their immediate course laid out.

Suddenly Spotty became aware of two things, became aware of them with a shock. Up to now he had let his mother do the purposeful observing; but now he was alone, his anxious mother kept from him. As this bitterness sank in, he found himself too close to the bull-doggers and the crackling fire. He wheeled to run, but a rope dropped down upon him and dragged him none too gently into the waiting hands of the grinning men. As one of them grabbed him he found his tongue and gave one terrified bawl for help; he saw his mother elude a rider and charge to his aid; he saw her meet a sauntering puncher, saw the man kick dust into her face; and then, forsaken and black with despair, he bumped against the knees of the waiting bull-dogger. The rope slackened, the bull-dogger, bending forward, reached down over him, grabbed the slack of the skin on his belly, leaned back in a partly sitting position with him pressed against the bony knees,



and heaved. Spotty felt his hoofs leave the ground, swing upward in a half circle as the world turned upside down, and quivered from nose to tail as his back resoundingly struck the earth. Vicelike hands gripped his legs, pulling one backward and the other forward; a knee pinned him helplessly; and, red-eyed, terrified, sore, and panting, he awaited the end.

“ Hot iron! ” roared a voice like a trumpet of doom.

An iron rod, with a cherry-red mass on one end, was lifted from the fire, passed swiftly, examined in a glance which appraised its heat, and then, with the pungent smell of burning hair it bit into the skin, to leave for all time the imprint of its mark. Other hands were busy. A knife flashed, precursor to another stabbing pain; it flashed again and an ear was gripped and a V notch slashed through the almost unfeeling cartilage; and Spotty, forlorn son of his agonised mother, arose to his trembling feet, too frightened to kick, too sick to bawl. A bump-

tious male calf was now a weak-kneed steer, and it tottered to its mother's side, to be led away and comforted.

"JC, tally one," said a puncher through his nose.

"Tally one, JC," came the instant answer from the tally man.

Another voice, at another fire, repeated the mystic words.

"JC, tally one."

"Tally one, JC," chanted the tally man, marking down the tally record of some other calf.

Thus the work went on through the rising heat, the mounting dust, the increasing pungent smell of burning hair, and the even more unpleasant odour of burning flesh. Heifers suffered one less indignity, although they knew it not; but the brand and the ear notch went on all alike. The morning passed, as mornings do; and clamouring stomachs urged their owners to hasten to answer the cook's signal, and the working force was cut down. A slackening of the pressure marked

the duration of the noon meal, and then it surged high again until the waning afternoon threatened the end of the day. As it chanced it was both the end of the day and the end of the work on this round-up section. The herd was cleaned to its last unbranded animal, and the morrow would find the wagon on the move to a new rendezvous. This was the orderly plan, no hitch foreseen; yet the hitch was even then in the making. In the night the three herders from Cactus Springs arose silently and silently left the fire. There was no herd to watch, since it had been released to break up and for its component parts to wander where they would, and, serene and happy in the knowledge that they could sleep the whole night through, the round-up crew slept soundly.

AWAKENING at dawn, the round-up crew prepared to shift camp, no one taking the trouble to count noses. Breakfast over, the wagon was swiftly loaded and earth was kicked over the embers of the fire. Off to one side moved the cavvy, grazing on the way; in a cloud of dust ahead of the wagon rode the punchers, to repeat their labours in a new section.

Time passed, and then Corson raised his hand. Two men left the group and rode off to the left. The disintegration, having begun, grew with each mile, and finally the group had become a strung-out line of riders to move again toward a common centre, where the wagon would mark it and a new round-up would be under way.

Bob Corson rode on alone, to choose the camp site and to await the coming of the

wagon. He searched for the little water hole, and then espied its telltale greenery from afar. Riding over to it he looked at it, found it good, and dismounted to sit in the shade of his horse until the cook wheeled up. At last the wagon came into sight on the crest of a distant ridge, crawled over it, and moved down the nearer side. With his interest divided between the wagon and the activities on the plain to the north of him, Corson did not notice the dust cloud in the south, and had he done so he would have taken it for part of the round-up crew.

At last the wagon came up and stopped, the cook stepped down and paused to stretch. He saw the nearing riders, sensed that they were a strange group, and swore in his throat, thinking that he would have more hungry mouths to feed.

"Lord A'mighty! Ain't we got enough now, without no more empty bellies ridin' in?" He raised a hand over his eyes and with the other pulled down his hat brim to shut out the strong side light. "Looks like

his honour, th' sheriff, but what's that he's goin' on his hoss?"

"Don't know an' don't care," grunted Corson, his eyes and thoughts in the other direction, where a slowly growing film of dust moved steadily heavenward. The riding line was already converging the cattle toward the centre of the day's operations.

The cook became busy with his numerous tasks but kept track of the group riding up from the south, and he then noticed a single horseman riding at speed from an angle and heading for the nearing group of men. He grimaced and spat disgustedly.

"It is th' sheriff, with his Cactus friends; an' one of them Cactus riders that was with us yesterday is ridin' hell-for-leather to overtake 'em."

Corson looked southward, saw the group and the man now racing toward it.

The cook scowled.

"Taint their natures to do no work, not since they had them badges pinned on 'em,

so what mischief are they up to?" He focused on the foremost rider. "Looks like he's totin' a saddle."

"It is a saddle," grunted Corson curiously, apprehensively. "Huh!"

The group approached and stopped, gazing upon the little camp and its occupants with cold unfriendliness. Its leader tossed his burden to the ground and leaned slightly sidewise in his own saddle.

"Ever see that before, Corson?" he asked, forcing a grin, a grin to disarm suspicion.

Corson stepped up to it, looked down, moved it with a foot, and then straightened up to look questioningly into the eyes of the man above him.

"Yes, Sheriff, I have," he answered slowly. "That saddle belonged to my dad. Where'd you get it?"

The group had been spreading out, a manoeuvre due, perhaps, to their prancing horses; and Corson's acknowledgment was a signal. Two men behind him and the cook

snapped out sharp commands and had their guns on the wondering pair. Other guns appeared swiftly, and the two men in front dismounted and advanced, handcuffs dangling from the hands of one of them.

"I got it where you left it. Yo're under arrest," answered the sheriff, tapping his badge with a finger of his left hand. He swung down, handed the saddle up to a companion, and mounted again.

The two men behind Corson and the cook reached around in front of their victims, unbuckled their belts, and stepped back with the armaments.

"What for?" asked Corson, his face red under its tan.

"Rustlin'," grunted the sheriff. "Climb up on yore hoss an' come along." He turned to the man with the cuffs. "Snap 'em on him, tie him to his saddle, an' start south pronto. Couple of you fellers give him a hand," he said to the group.

The Cactus Springs rider who had ridden toward the posse at an angle now pushed up



and said something in a low voice in the sheriff's ear.

"You did?" snapped the officer in pretended surprise. "How many, an' where?"

"Three, over at th' base of th' ridge," replied the other. "I knowed 'em by th' ear notches. Wouldn't 'a' noticed 'em particular, only th' old brands had been so plumb burned out." He grinned. "There's plenty of th' old marks left, however, showin' up under th' blisters."

"What are th' old marks?" demanded the sheriff curiously.

"Bar K," answered his companion, trying to keep his face straight.

"Hah! Fits right in!" said the sheriff triumphantly. He looked at his prisoner, now handcuffed and his feet tied under the horse.

"You got some explanations to make to me, Sheriff," said Corson evenly. "Where an' when did I do any rustlin'?"

"You'll find that out in plenty of time," growled the sheriff. He waved to the wait

ing guard. "Take him to Cactus, an' move rapid."

All eyes for the moment were on the departing prisoner and his guard; all eyes but those of the cook. Unarmed, and only a cook, he was momentarily forgotten; and in that moment he stepped to the rear of his wagon not five feet away, jerked out a Winchester, and fired three shots into the air as rapidly as he could work lever and trigger. Near at hand a Colt roared, and through the swirl of smoke the cook sank slowly to his knees and gripped the short grass with clenching fingers to keep from going all the way down.

Curses and a whirl of movement followed the shots, and set faces looked into the north and around the horizon toward that film of dust which here and there extended toward the wagon like pointing fingers. From out of one of these sounded three flat reports, both an answer to that call for help and the relaying of it.

The sheriff was standing over the wounded

cook, his face white with anger. To that meddler he owed the failure of his next movement, and perhaps he would owe him for more than that. Swiftly through his mind there passed a list of names, such a list as might well make any guilty man know the weight of fear: Nueces, Shorty, Bludsoe, Burns—gunmen all.

From the north rode a tall and gangling horseman; to his right and his left rode two more men, tearing after him and begging him to wait. This he did. From the west came two more riders, quirting and spurring; over a ridge to the east three more horsemen shot into sight; and all were headed toward the wagon. Every man who had heard any of those three-shot signals repeated them and raced for the storm centre.

In they came, spread out ominously, and now at a walk, their very horses seeming to swagger and to chafe for action. And then the leader's squinting eyes picked out the figure on its hands and knees, and he shot ahead at top speed. Behind him crowded

his friends, among them Shorty, Bludsoe, and Burns. Not a man in either group had an unsheathed weapon; every hand, as yet, was innocent and peaceful.

Nueces swung down at the cook's side, eagerly and anxiously questioning. The answers were low and hesitant, but clear and concise. In a few words the story was told, and then the cook thought of himself.

"Not bad," he grunted. "Shock, mostly, I reckon. Git me—to th' ranch house—an' I'll be all right."

Nueces stood erect, his long horse face cold as frost. He looked into the sheriff's eyes and saw a cringing, guilty soul. He spat contemptuously.

"You—— ——!" he growled. "What th' hell does this mean?"

"It means that I'm carryin' out th' duties of my office," replied the officer. "Bob Corson has been arrested for cattle stealin'. Here's his dad's old saddle, which we found where his horse dropped with a broken laig. He shot th' hoss, but he didn't have time to

take th' saddle. Hoss had a JC mark, anyway. He didn't rustle alone, neither. You know anythin' about it?"

"Yo're a — — liar!" snapped Nueces, passing fighting words again.

"Liar nothin'!" retorted the sheriff. "One of my deputies found three Bar K steers with the old brand nearly blotted out, an' a brand-new JC burned on each of 'em. That's evidence enough for most people. You know anythin' about it?"

"No! But I'm goin' to!" rejoined Nueces. "An' when I do, Gawd help you! Shorty, you blame' fool, can't you see that you've got a job to do? Don't ask me what it is, but go do it! Take Burns to help you."

"Help *me*?" indignantly asked Shorty. He whirled his horse and raced southward in the direction of the two small dots moving steadily toward the Cactus Springs jail, Burns spurring and quirting to overtake him.

"Stop!" shouted the sheriff, raising his hand forbiddingly.

"Shut up," said a cold, calm, and conversational voice at his right.

The sheriff turned and looked at the speaker, and saw the two gold teeth gleaming in as deadly a smile as he had ever looked upon. Bludsoe was a little man, a very little man; but so is a side-winder a little snake. George Bludsoe's fangs were machine made but just as deadly. He had listened to Nueces' expert exposition of the art of gun-play, listened and believed; and he now carried thirty-eights instead of forty-fives, and found that Nueces had been right: the difference in weight was in favour of a man of his almost insignificant stature. His draw, swift enough before, was now even swifter.

The sheriff, momentarily lost in the compelling abstraction caused by the little man's teeth and facial expression, now cleared his throat to speak, but Nueces forestalled him.

"Why did Hurley shoot th' cook?" demanded the horse-faced *segundo*, his words somewhat slurred because of the tightness of his jaws.

"Why?" repeated the sheriff in a rising voice, vaguely realising that there was no gain in pleasure in his shift from one face to the other. "He interfered with the duties of a sheriff's posse—that's why!"

"He was *shot* after he interfered, an' not durin' it," retorted Nueces. "That means he was shot as a punishment an' not in no effort to stop th' interference. Yore dirty little posse went beyond its powers in that, an' I'm goin' to do some shootin' of th' same kind. Hurley!" he snapped as he turned. "Take off that lyin' badge!"

"He's a deppity!" warned the sheriff, a peculiar gleam in his eyes: it looked like satisfaction. "You keep that badge on, Hurley!"

"Shut up," said Bludsoe, with a sneer.

"Shut up yoreself!" snapped the sheriff, whirling in anger.

"All right: let everybody shut up; an' you an' th' rest of yore gang take off yore badges!" retorted Bludsoe, the gold teeth gleaming. He chuckled. "Shucks! There

ain't a man among you that's got th' guts to talk back to a baby. After election there won't be one of you able to hide behind a badge, an' then I'm figgerin' on goin' on a tour of Cactus Springs, slappin' faces as I find 'em."

Nueces had seen the gleam of satisfaction in the sheriff's eyes and had puzzled over it; now he believed that he understood it. The warning came just in time and caused him to swerve from directness toward indirectness.

"Hurley, if you'll take off that badge an' meet me man to man I'll give you a chance to shoot at somebody that's expectin' it."

"He's my deppity," said the sheriff calmly. Nueces grinned.

"You've saved a deppity, but you've lost yore play, Sheriff. We ain't turnin' outlaw for you. Now, then, who else was you figgerin' to arrest?"

"Nobody else to-day, but I'll be wantin' some of Corson's friends purty soon."

"Ambitious pup," drawled a humorous



voice at the left. Its owner had attended, as best he could, to the cook's wound, and found it far from serious.

"Corson's friends?" inquired Nueces, smiling grimly. "You'll have to use a corral, if you get 'em; th' jail won't hold a tenth of 'em. Just who you got in mind?"

"Nobody to-day."

"Well, when you get ready for 'em," drawled Nueces, "you come right up after 'em, but you better come alone. We'll go with you, *if you got proof enough*. We aim to uphold th' law. If you figger on us startin' somethin' that'll either put us in jail or make us take to th' hills, yo're shore figgerin' wrong. Hurley's alive right now for just one reason: Corson needs his best friends, an' he needs 'em out of jail an' free to ride any place they wants at any time. If Shorty brings Bob back I'll hand him over to you ag'in."

"An' Shorty with him!" snapped the sheriff.

"Mebby even that; mebbly Shorty with

him," conceded Nueces, with a frown. He looked at each man in the posse and then back to the sheriff.

"Politics is a rotten game, ain't it?" he asked. "Just as rotten as some of th' folks that play it. Arrestin' Corson for cattle stealin' an' hopin' to jail his friends so they can't help him, was a reg'lar, good political play to make right now, wasn't it? All right, Sheriff: you've got Bob, an' you must have some kind of crooked proof or you never would 'a' dared to make th' play. Couple of funny things have happened recently: stolen hosses, lost saddles, stray scrub bulls, blotted brands. All right. Now you listen:

"Corson's friends are goin' to show you somethin' that ain't never been seen in this part of th' country. We are goin' to elect Bob Corson sheriff while he sits in jail charged with rustlin'. You chew on that!" A chuckle rumbled in his skinny throat. "An' just to make it funnier, when th' new sheriff comes out of jail th' old one is goin' in. An' you can chew on that, too."

"Is that so?" snapped the sheriff, his face suffused.

"Want to bet that it ain't?" asked Bludsoe tauntingly.

Nueces kept right on talking.

"There's only one thing, Hurley, that keeps me from pullin' you out of that saddle," he said slowly. "An' that is, yo're a deppity. I don't aim to be no fugitive. Th' day is comin' when you'll have to take off that badge an' keep it off. You've got till then."

Nueces turned and faced the sheriff.

"If you've got any sense a-tall, you'll take yore law coyotes off this range before some hothead pulls a gun. Any time you want one of us, *an' have proof enough*, you can come up an' get him. Now you get th' hell away from here before we're both sorry."

The sheriff, redder even than before, gulped, looked at his friends, and waved his hand toward Cactus Springs. The party whirled and rode slowly away, slowness in this situation bespeaking a hostile dignity. They rode so slowly that they had not gone

far before they met and passed Shorty and Burns, who stuck squarely to their course and spat sidewise as they passed the posse. In a few moments the two friends drew rein in camp.

Nueces forestalled his partner.

"I'm glad Bob had more sense than I did," he said frankly. "Tell us about it, Shorty."

"He wouldn't let us do it," said Shorty, pushing back his hat. "He said that he was under arrest, an' if he was rescued an' turned loose it would make him a fugitive from th' law an' proper meat for any ambusher's gun. He says for us to mind our ways an' stay out of jail. We can help him more that way."

Nueces nodded and faced the crowd, a crowd whose scowls were slowly fading before grins.

"Boys, we'll finish this round-up: that is, you fellers will. Th' work's got to be done; an' while yo're doin' it a few of us will start at some other work that's got to be done. But that ain't th' main idear: this is:

“Up to now Bob’s campaign has been kinda driftin’ along without anybody gettin’ behind it. Up to now we’ve all heard a lot of talk about electin’ Corson sheriff. It’s more than talk now: it’s actin! It’s a nasty thing for an honest man to git arrested for rustlin’, no matter how innocent he is. There’ll allus be some mean talk about it till th’ day he dies, an’ after. We need a new sheriff, an’ need him a lot; we want to clear Bob an’ clear him clean; an’ we want to put such a stamp of confidence on him that it’ll be right persuadin’. Here an’ now I’m tellin’ you boys to get out an’ work hard to make Bob Corson th’ next sheriff. Every one of you! Make it yore business after this round-up is over. Get out an’ work for him an’ work hard! From this minute Bob is runnin’ for that job harder than he has any idear of. Never mind what party you belong to—we have got to have a change. Will you boys stick to a white man, a friend, an’ help elect him to fill th’ job of that damn’ coyote that’s just left us?”

The shout, although uttered on a flat and echoless plain, had power enough to reach the ears of the departing posse. The sheriff and his friends turned a little apprehensively in their saddles and looked back ; but all they saw was a cheering, hat-waving group of hard-bitted punchers, celebrating something known only to themselves. The posse faced about again and increased its pace, leaving behind it a leaven of trouble which threatened to grow and to swamp them all.

NUECES started for Willow Springs while the sheriff's posse was in sight, and since it was riding in the direction in which he had to go he followed behind it at an interval of a mile or two. When well past the ranch house and on the beaten trail to the Cactus Springs road he saw the posse turn aside and ride eastward, following the man who had brought the news about the rebranded cattle.

Nueces followed them, striking across the range in a straight line where they had made nearly a right-angled turn, and when once again behind them he had cut down their lead by half. He saw them go up a ridge and drop from sight down its farther slope, and he pushed on at a better gait. If they were going after the rebranded cattle he intended to have a look at the animals before they were driven south.

His conjecture was correct, and after

several more miles he overtook them rounding up three steers. They watched his approach with hostile closeness, but he gave no indications of anything more than sheer curiosity.

The posse had the three animals bunched and was now driving them slowly south toward Cactus Springs, and Nueces rode up beside them, studying the brands.

The work had been done with almost inexcusable carelessness. The old Bar K brands showed plainly through the blot, and the new JC marks could by no stretch of the imagination have been attributed to stencil irons. The ear notches were old, and there had been no reason to alter them, since they were the same as the JC used. There was no doubt in Nueces' mind that they were really Bar K animals worked over into the JC brand.

Nueces pushed up to the side of the sheriff and drew rein.

"Damn' bungler," he said, waving at the three animals.



"Done it in a hurry," explained the sheriff.

"Reckon so; figgered that one of th' JC riders might catch him at it an' fill him full of lead. Also done so that th' old marks would show through right plain. No honest jury would ever convict a man on marks like them, because no puncher could bungle 'em like that unless he wanted to bungle 'em; an' no puncher would drive cattle like that on to his own range, in his own brand, unless he was loco an' wanted to die. You say Corson's saddle was found on a JC hoss, som'ers, an' that there was rustlin' goin' on. Who told you about th' rustlin'?"

"Th' Bar K boss. They heard th' cattle runnin', an' got there in time to drive off th' raiders an' save all th' rest of th' animals."

"But they didn't git there in time to keep these three from bein' drove off, huh?"

The sheriff was silent, closely watching his companion.

"Trail herd, huh?" asked Nueces coldly.

"They was on th' trail, but they're lettin' 'em feed for a few days, to git over th' scare."

"Where are they now?"

"Down south-west of Cactus Springs, half a day's ride," answered the sheriff.

"Huh!" muttered Nueces thoughtfully. Half a day's ride south-west of Cactus Springs would put the herd squarely on the desert: a strange place to choose for the feeding of a herd.

"Reckon yo're takin' these lyin' cattle for lyin' evidence, huh?"

"We're takin' 'em for evidence, an' good evidence!"

"Huh! Then nobody saw Corson? They just found th' hoss an' saddle?"

"That's enough, I reckon," retorted the sheriff.

"You reckon so?"

"Yes."

"Then anybody whose hoss an' saddle are found after a little stampede is guilty of rustlin'?" persisted Nueces.

"What do you think?"

"I'm askin' you. I want to know what you think about it."

"Yes. Seems enough, don't it?" asked the sheriff.

"Mebby. How long you aimin' to keep Corson in jail?" He looked more closely at his companion. "Till after election?"

"Till court meets in th' fall."

"Huh! You won't keep him in there three days, not if he has to put up th' whole JC ranch for bail."

"He can't put up his own bail, an' you know it."

"Yes, I know it, but his friends can."

"Go ahead," retorted the sheriff calmly

"Aim to. Aim to go ahead, an' you can go to hell," said Nueces, backing off before he realised that he must be outwardly pacific.

"Make yore play," invited the sheriff as one of his men swung a gun on the back of his companion. "Go ahead, Nueces; I'd as soon have you in jail, too."

"Mebby you'd rather, if you knowed what I'm figgerin' to do to you."

"That a threat?" asked the sheriff.

"No, that's a promise. I told you before

that I'm aimin' to stay within th' law; an' that's right where yore trouble starts. I'm stayin' within' th' *law*, Sheriff."

"What you tellin' me for?"

"Just so that feller behind me can put up his gun: you'd never face me like this unless I was covered. Why, yo're right pert an' foolhardy, you are."

"Did you an' Shorty swap cayuses in Steve's corral?" asked the sheriff, flushing from the taunt.

"Did you make th' lyin' evidence that put Corson in jail?" countered Nueces. "Th' same word answers both questions."

"Th' evidence wasn't made ag'in' Corson."

"Then we didn't swap no cayuses," said Nueces, stopping his horse and letting the posse ride on without him. He whirled and struck straight for the cañon and in due time rode into Willow Springs.

Tomas looked up at the sound of the steps and saw the lanky puncher stop near the counter.

"Señor Nueces, how you do?" beamed

the proprietor, who liked the horse-faced man a great deal and often wished that he would go down and join his cousin Luis. Luis could use a man like Nueces.

"Bob Corson's in jail at Cactus Springs."

"W'at? W'aat you say? Señor Bob een the *calabozo*? *Madre de Dios!*"

"Yeah. They put him in for rustlin' Bar K stock. Stacked deck, Tomas. What you know about that Bar K outfit?"

"Not as much as I weel know! Ther-re ar-re four hombres weeth that herd. The work eet should tak' three-e or even two. They are not on the dr-rive. Four ees too many. For why you don' go an' see? But why deed they come for the Señor Bob? For why?"

Nueces told all that he knew about the matter, and he dwelt particularly on the nature of the evidence.

"So," he concluded, looking strangely at Tomas, "th' sheriff figgers that any man is guilty whose dead hoss an' saddle are found on th' scene."

"*Si?*" asked his companion curiously.

"*Yeş,*" said Nueces, looking Tomas squarely in the eye. "Yes," he repeated, slowly and with emphasis.

"Well, but ees eet not enough?" expostulated the Mexican. "The question ees who put them ther-re. *Es verdad?*"

Nueces shook his head sadly, smiling provocatively.

"Turn it over in yore mind, Tomas," he suggested, and smiled as he saw a peculiar look come into his companion's face.

"Eet ees an eenterestin' point, Señor; eet ees ver' eenterestin'."

"Yeah, it shore is," replied Nueces, and changed the subject. "Bob's runnin' for sheriff. How does he stand in with th' Mexicans?"

"Ver' well, but w'en the wor-rd goes out he weel stan' even better," said Tomas, nodding emphatically. "My cousin, Luis Chavez, he ees a ver' gr-reat man. The wor-rd eet weel go out, of that be assure'. Now w'ere you go?"

"To see two men. One's a lawyer, an' his brother is a politician. After I get Ben Hutchinson started with his lawin' to git Bob out on bail, then I'm goin' to see that th' sheriff's fool play is made good use of. Frank will see to that. I'll drop in frequent to see you."

"Een the *calabozo*! Señor Bob!" muttered Tomas, his swarthy face growing darker. "Eef the bail eet ees no good—you want heem out?"

"No; much obliged, Tomas," replied Nueces, grinning broadly. "If we wanted him out illegal he'd never 'a' gone in. Everythin's got to be done legal, accordin' to law."

"Law!" snorted Tomas, grimacing. "The law eet put heem een. Weel eet tak' heem out?"

"Yes, in a couple of days," answered Nueces easily.

"Law!" chuckled Tomas, spreading his hands in a comical gesture. "How my cousin Luis would laugh at that!"

"Some day yore cousin ain't a-goin' to

laugh a damn' bit at th' law, Tomas," retorted Nueces seriously, "though I hope that the day never comes."

Tomas shrugged.

"Thees herd, now: eet ees near two t'ousan' head. Two, three year old. Fat, e-strong. Eet can roon a long way. *Sí*. The grass over there eet ees not so good, no? Leetle thin an' scatter'. Mebby one ondred head to the squar-re mile, eh? Four men een the outfit, but onlee two are count. *Si*. Bar K. Hah! "

"Yo're gettin' to talk like an Injun," accused Nueces, grinning widely.

"Señor! W'en weel Señor Bob come out?" asked Tomas suddenly.

"Mebby three days. Why?"

"Eet ees too e-soon! Eet ees too *pronto*. One week, mebby?" he was eager, and lights played in his black eyes. "One week!" he repeated, shaking a finger at his visitor.

"What you mean?" demanded Nueces, frowning in concentration.



"Notheeng. W'en you see Señor Bob you say to heem that Tomas say for heem to e-stay een; the *calabozo* one week. Weel you tell heem that?"

"Yes, I'll tell him," growled Nueces, "an' I know right now what he'll say."

"So do I! Eef you tell heem Tomas asks eet, so do I!"

Nueces was studying the eager, friendly face of his companion. He knew Tomas, and he was positive of the man's loyalty and friendship for Corson. The veiled offer to break into the jail and release the young ranchman was still fresh in Nueces' mind; and he knew, too, that it was no idle offer. He knew that if time enough elapsed for word to go across the border and to come back again the jail would be opened like a sick oyster. And if Cactus Springs got wind of the attempt and objected, then Cactus Springs might be very sorry.

"All right, Tomas," reluctantly yielded Nueces. "I won't put it up to Bob a-tall; I won't take no chances with him. I'll fix

it with th' lawyer an' hold him back a little with his work on th' bail. Somethin' goin' to happen?"

"*Quién sabe?*" countered Tomas carelessly. "Something ees always happen, *es verdad?*"

"Huh! Reckon so. Is there anythin' I should know or do?" persisted Nueces.

"*Sí.* That ees that you an' Shor-rtty an' Bludsoe an' Bur-rns—you all be here een town, w'en I say eet. *Sabe?*"

"Uh-huh—playin' poker in th' Cheyenne all night?"

"No! Not een the Cheyenne: een the—een the hotel, near the window or the door."

"Huh! Want us right plain an' prominent."

"Ver' much. Ah, I tol' the Señor Bob that the leetle r-rock eet roll!"

"Does it?" inquired Nueces, scratching his head.

"Eef you go to Cactus Spreengs do not jump een the air; do not e-shoot; be quiet, Señor. Eef you find the man weeth no

cheen, talk to heem, like to a fr-riend or a str-ranger. The r-rock, eet steel rolls, an' we hav' onlee one end of the r-rope. *Sabe?*"

"Damn' if I sa-rvy!" grunted Nueces in perplexity. "Do you?"

"*Sí, sí, Señor.*"

"All right, then; that's good enough for me," sighed Nueces reluctantly. "I'll be as gentle as a blind kitten. But if that don't work out right I'll shore make up for it later, me an' Shorty!" He turned toward the door and then back again.

"Oh, say: did a stranger come in here askin' questions about a couple of fellers named Blodgett an' Wilcox—Wilcox 'specially?"

"*Sí, he deed.*"

"Did he tell you why he wanted to find 'em?"

"No. Who are they, Señor?"

"Couple of train robbers, I reckon; Blodgett is, anyhow."

"Ah! Eet was Señor Rawlins. He e-stay at the hotel, no?"

"Yeah, he does. I'm going over, after while, an' treat him gentle."

"Do not forget: one week!" prompted Tomas earnestly.

Nueces grunted affirmatively and went out, and in a few moments he dismounted before the newest building in town, which boasted of two honest stories instead of a fake front. Climbing the stairs he soon had explained matters, as well as he could, to Counsellor-at-Law Hutchinson; and then he wandered into a back room which was thick with tobacco smoke and carefully closed the door behind him. He came out again half an hour later, and his grin was almost shameful to see. Bob Corson's arrest very likely would have a far different effect than Cactus Springs was planning for and hoping for. In Nueces' mind there was no doubt at all about the outcome of the election: Corson was now as good as elected. Climbing into the saddle, he rode down to the Cheyenne, dismounted, and shoved his head in through the doorway.

"Steve," he called, "keep yore ears open in here. We've got to elect Bob for sheriff. Talk to th' boys about it an' keep it in th' air all th' time. Right now Bob's in th' Cactus Springs jail, charged with cattle stealin'. So-long."

Steve seemed to be petrified, and before he could get command of himself Nueces was loping up the street. The bartender ran around the end of the counter, sprinted to the door, and through it into the street.

"*Hi!*" he shouted. "*Hi, Nueces!*"

Nueces paid no attention to the hail, and kept right on going, having changed his mind about calling on Mr. Rawlins.

Steve swore whole-heartedly, and then, seeing a crowd gathering before the law office of Ben Hutchinson, ran toward it to get the details. The lawyer was haranguing the crowd, counselling calmness and patience and not making much headway. Then his brother joined him and made a stump speech that set the crowd wild with hilarity.

NUECES kept right on going, and it was about mid-afternoon when Cactus Springs came into sight. He scowled at the sprawled collection of adobe buildings. The adobe jail was on the far side of the town, just behind the sheriff's office.

When Nueces rode in he was slouched down in the saddle until he appeared to be no taller than the average horseman. Dismounting at the intersection of the trail with the main street he left his horse, shook his gun belts, and went ahead on foot. As he stepped around the corner of the first building he came upon a man seated on a box against the wall, enjoying the transient shade. The man appeared to be drowsing. Nueces bent down, peered under the hat, and stepped back one pace as the seated man started and looked up curiously. He had no

knowledge of what a blessing it sometimes is to have a full, square chin.

"Nice day," said Nueces, "for a funeral."

"Hell! Reckon so: who's dead?"

"Nobody, yet. I'm lookin' for a couple of strangers," Nueces explained affably. "You might be one of 'em, for I shore never saw you before."

Tom Gade was watching the speaker, a puzzled grin on his face.

"Then I reckon that makes me a stranger to you, but I ain't no stranger to this town."

"Mebby not to Willer Springs, neither, if th' truth was knowed," replied Nueces gently. He leaned down a little and became confidential. "There's a couple of strangers in this part of th' country that have both got one foot in th' grave and mebbly don't know it. I'm aimin' to put their other foot in. What's yore name, an' what are you doin' 'round here?"

"Well, I once was a travellin' man," replied Tom Gade, watching the other curiously, his grin fixed.

"You don't reckon you mebby stopped travellin' too soon, do you? Who knows you 'round here, anyhow?"

"Th' sheriff, for one. He'll vouch for me."

"Hell! He vouched for Jim Watson, an' Jim was hanged. What's yore name?"

"Kinda personal, ain't it?" asked Gade, the grin fading.

"Shore is, an' that's why I'm askin' it. An' I aim to keep it personal. What's yore name, an' what are you doin' with yore time durin' workin' hours?"

"Suppose I don't feel like answerin' yore impertinent questions?"

"Then you shore will come to feel like it," replied Nueces coldly. His big hands opened and closed. "I'll get th' answers sooner or later, an' it'll save a lot of public brawlin' if I get 'em sooner."

"Well, sir: I ain't ashamed of my name or my job. Th' first is Tom Gade; th' second, one of a summer grazin' crew."

"Triple X?" asked Nueces, mentioning a brand which was purely fictitious.



"No, sir. It's th' Bar K, from over east."

"Oh," said Nueces. "You fellers kinda shift around. Last time I heard you was down south-west. Summer grazin' huh? Then you ain't on th' trail?"

"No, we ain't. We're holdin' on grass. Just summer grazin'."

"Huh! Summer grazin' kinda careless, ain't you? Kinda free an' wide?" asked Nueces.

"What's th' matter, stranger? Are we driftin' over onto yore range?"

"Driftin' ain't hardly th' word. Looks to me like it's drivin', an' drivin' a long ways," retorted Nueces.

"What you mean?"

"Well, you lost a Bar K cayuse, a roan. Somebody rustled it off you an' tried to sell it to a friend of mine named Steve. Then one of yore scrub bulls wandered up onto our range an' we had to shoot it. Right on top of that somebody stole Bob Corson's saddle from in front of th' Cheyenne over in Willer Springs. Th' sheriff brought it back,

seein' he figgered that it would look too raw if it was planted on th' range for somebody to find. It was too well knowed for Bob to use it on a rustlin' expedition. Then some coyote sneaked on th' ranch an' stole old John Corson's saddle from th' blacksmith's shop. It was found on a dead JC cayuse, where it would do th' most good. Then three blotted Bar K steers, rebranded JC, were found on our east range. They were put there to be found in our round-up, but somebody couldn't wait, an' discovered 'em right quick. I'm lookin' for the coyote that's been doin' these things, an' I reckon that th' sheriff will vouch for him, too. If I find him I'm aimin' to take him home with me. But you don't look like him. However, I'll give you some free advice: any time you get th' itch to fool around Willer Springs or th' JC ranch, you do yore foolin' in plumb daylight an' let folks see you. Then you won't get in th' way of a Sharp's special. An', also, you might tell yore outfit that a good summer grazer stays with his herd, an' that poor

summer grazers right now will likely be good Injuns. An' that means dead ones. Much obliged an' so-long."

"Wait a minute," said Gade, slowly rising from the box. "I've told you my name: suppose you tell me yourn?"

"Fair enough—mine's Nueces, *segundo* of th' JC. That mean anythin' to you?"

"By Gawd! You've got a nerve!" snapped Gade, anger glinting in his eyes.

"I was born with it an' been cultivatin' it ever since," growled Nueces, his eyes glowing. "My dad was a patent-medicine man an' had plenty of it. An' I still remember enough of his songs to pervide dance music for anybody that wants to step out. If I have to I can dig up enough music for this whole damn' town. You feel like waltzing?"

Gade was of two minds, but instinctive caution prevailed, and he shook his head slowly.

"Why should I give every cheap two-gun man a chance to advertise himself at my expense?" he asked sneeringly.

"I reckon you know th' best answer to that, an' I figger that th' answer's painted in yaller letters ten feet high," retorted Nueces, backing off. Receiving no reply to this, he backed around the corner, waited a moment, and then turned and strode along the street.

Tom Gade had watched his visitor disappear around the corner, and he slowly sank back upon his box. Being a professional crook, he could read human nature rather better than the average man; and his summing up of the nature of the man he had just talked with was not such as to reassure him or any of his kind.

There are different kinds of killers, differentiated by nature, by specialities, and by environment. Back in a densely settled community, where he had lived for most of his life, Tom Gade would have been at home and abrim with assurance; here, notwithstanding the two years he had spent in the saddle, he felt out of step, handicapped by a different environment, by a different code of action and behaviour.

Your hop-fed Eastern crook holds it ethical to shoot a man from behind, or he lacks the nerve to do otherwise; among his acquaintances he is acclaimed as a killer and is given plenty of respect and room. In another environment he would be shot down openly by the first public-spirited citizen he met and dumped into a ditch. A Wyatt Earp, a Bat Masterson, or even a Wild Bill Hickok, depending altogether on their guns, would not last very long in some parts of our larger cities. They would be killed by that very thing which made them truly great: an honest, fearless courage and a set belief in the code of an even break; but in their own country they would think nothing of mastering and driving out a herd of the shifty-eyed, pasty-faced doorway killers. The whole fabric of their reputation rested upon the fearlessness with which they faced their enemies even more than upon their uncanny celerity with weapons; and they depended upon speed rather than upon doorways; depended upon it out in the open, for

all men to see. They were on the top of the heap because they were, in all ways, the better men.

Tom Gade had sensed this difference, and he knew that Nueces was at home, that the lanky puncher was the most dangerous man he had ever met. In the land of the even break he was a mighty good person to let alone until stern necessity drove; and then the best way to shoot Nueces would be from behind or from ambush; and the first shot must do it.

Nueces strode along to the next building, a general store, and he entered it casually. Three men were playing cards to kill time, doing more talking than card playing. The whole atmosphere was lazy and casual.

The visiting puncher walked up to the three, looked closely at each face in turn, and then walked to the rear of the store, where a noise informed him that another human might be found. The clue was right, for the fourth man, the storekeeper, had just finished dragging a new box of crackers into the front

line of edibles. He eased his back and stood erect, to find an intent and curious person closely scrutinising his jaw, which thereupon dropped a little.

Nueces sighed, turned on his heel, and started toward the door.

"Well!" said a mildly disapproving voice behind him. "What you think of that?"

Nueces turned and looked at the speaker.

"Well, what *do* you think of it?" he asked pleasantly enough. Tomas's plea for peace was at that moment in his mind.

"About what?" asked the storekeeper.

"Chins," said Nueces, and turned away again.

"Chins," repeated the other somewhat vaguely, and not ashamed of his frank and open ignorance. "Chins?" he said again, and then cogitation blocked speech. He looked at his friends and found them looking at him, and he went back to his box.

Among the card players there also was cogitation. One of them, who had laid down his hand, reached over it and picked up the

discard and wondered how it was that his four spades had lost their characteristics and turned into so many cards when he had only kept four.

"Chins?" asked the storekeeper, who varied the monotony of the word by putting it into interrogatory form. He looked around accusingly at his stock as he cogitated again.

"Yeah, chins," said Nueces, grinning widely. His eyes were on one of the player's cards, and he frowned in quick disapproval at the holding of a sider with a high pair. "An' none too much, at that," he added. The board porch squeaked and he was gone.

After a moment's studious silence the first speaker suddenly threw down the discard, picked up his own hand, and asked a question.

"Where th' hell was we at?"

The storekeeper sighed again and reached for the claw hammer.

"Chins," he muttered, and went to work on the wrong box.



Back behind the first store near the trail Tom Gade sat quietly on his box, thinking over the possibilities which might grow out of the visit of this JC puncher. The man was looking for strangers, and to him the whole Bar K outfit were such. There was one man in particular in that outfit whom Gade did not wish to be discovered by any JC sympathiser, and that man was the foreman's brother. Nueces would bear a little watching and checking up.

Gade arose and walked around the building to the street, and he waited there until he caught sight of Nueces. The latter emerged from the general store and went into the blacksmith's shop, evidently going on with his search in a thorough manner. Just how thorough he might be Gade did not know; but he did not purpose to run any chances. As Nueces entered the blacksmith's shop Gade went back behind the building and made his way to the general store, entering it through a rear door. He stopped by the side of the proprietor and smiled.

"That Willer Springs feller must be lookin' for somethin'?" he suggested.

"Lookin' for chins, th' blame fool!" snapped the proprietor, and snorted. "What th' hell are *you* lookin' for?"

"Well, there's quite some few chins in town," said Gade, chuckling; but the chuckle did not in the least express his real feelings. Looking for chins! In his mind's eye he could see the Bar K cook, and that person's lack of chin was painfully apparent. Gade, ignoring the storekeeper's question, moved toward the front of the store and looked out of the grimy window just in time to see Nueces turn into the saloon and dance hall. So far he had investigated every building along his way, and this gave promise of being a search of such determination that he might receive a hint and depart to look over the Bar K outfit. This would not do, and Gade, going out at the back door, hastened to his horse and rode out of town, keeping the buildings between him and the dance hall; and when far enough out, he circled and

rode rapidly toward the Bar K camp. John Tomlinson, cook for the Bar K, would not be in sight if the search went that far.

Nueces, having left the general store and its card players, stopped before the blacksmith's shop and looked into the dim interior. The shop was full of sound and fury, signifying something. Sweat streamed down the smith's face, making flesh-coloured streaks against the black. He laid down the hammer, jammed an iron into the coals, and started to build up the fire. He stirred it, clawed coals into it, heaped it up nicely, pulled at the bellows, and glanced around when he sensed that he was no longer alone. He saw six feet of puncher silhouetted against the glaring sunlight outside, but he could not clearly make out the face.

"Fooled ag'in," said the visitor, and walked out.

The smith stood suddenly erect, shoved an iron into the roaring fire with a quick, energetic motion, and strode hastily to the door. The visitor was just then entering the

saloon and dance hall, which was at this hour very quiet.

"Glad of it!" growled the smith, and went back to his fire, and found that the second iron, pushed into the glowing coals through force of habit, was his best pair of tongs. He forgot the stranger in more personal matters, and cursed as he stuck the tool into the water barrel.

The dance hall was so quiet that two men napped in their chairs, each of them with his big broad hat slanted across his face to keep out the light. The bartender looked up lazily but professionally as Nueces entered, but found that his services were not in demand. He frankly returned Nueces' stare, and then turned his whole body to watch the puncher's progress across the big room.

Nueces stopped at the side of the first sleeper, lifted the hat and looked under it. He shook his head and passed on to the next, where his touch was a little bungling and knocked the hat off the face and to the floor.

"Hell!" muttered Nueces.

"I pass," grunted the sleeper. He opened his eyes, blinked, stared at the standing puncher, and reached for his gun.

Nueces' left hand darted down, took the weapon from its sheath, turned it, and handed it to its owner.

"It's loaded," he said. "Look out."

The owner turned it end for end, looked into the cylinders, and glanced up.

"So it is," he said asininely. Then he came to his full senses.

"What you reckon yo're doin'?" he demanded with some asperity.

"Just lookin' at chins," answered Nueces, grinning. "Yourn won't do."

"Hell it won't!. It does good enough for me!"

"Shouldn't wonder, partner; it's a right good chin," assured Nueces. "However, it ain't th' one I'm lookin' for. Let's all have a drink," he invited. They all had one, including the other man, the sleeper, who was awakened by his friend, and thus had nothing to regret.

The next building was Zeke Pike's saloon, and Zeke had met Nueces before. A friendly grin went across the proprietor's face, a grin of welcome, for with all Nueces' sins Zeke loved him still.

Nueces leaned against the bar, his belt buckle almost even with the top, and he grinned in return.

"Zeke, I'm lookin' for a feller that's got about half a chin."

"You lookin' friendly or hostile?" asked Zeke alertly.

"Don't know which."

"Then I ain't seen him an' don't know him," said Zeke, and fell to mopping off a perfectly dry counter. "I ain't seen him a-tall," he needlessly repeated, and looked Nueces squarely in the eyes.

"Too bad; neither have I," replied the lanky puncher, critically studying his friend. "But mebbly you've heard about him, Zeke?"

"I have."

"Recent?"

"Recent."

"How does he fit in up in this part of th' country?" asked Nueces.

"He don't fit in. He just passed through, stealin' everythin' that lay around loose." Deliberately Zeke's gaze wavered, left the face of his visitor, and moved restlessly around the room.

Nueces read the symptoms, as Zeke intended that he should.

"Far be it from me to hurt yore feelin's, Zeke, but yo're lyin'," said the puncher, tolerantly and without emphasis.

"Mebby, mebbly I am," replied Zeke cheerfully. "When a feller sticks his long nose into other folks' business he's likely to run up ag'in' lies."

"You dead shore it ain't my business?" demanded Nueces.

"Is it?" asked Zeke curiously, and again his eyes wandered.

"It is. Bob Corson's in that damn' jail right now. I'm lookin' for one of th' coyotes that helped to put him there.

You dead shore it ain't none of my business?"

"Now, you look a-here, Nueces," said Zeke somewhat indignantly. "I got to live right here in Cactus Springs. My business is here, an' I don't want to pack up an' get out. My waggin's all shrunk to hell, an' I'd have to buy me a new one; an' movin' is a lot of trouble an' right uncertain. I'm here to stay. Don't you ask me no questions, an' don't you pay no 'tention to my answers if you do ask 'em. What'll you have? I'm treatin'."

"Cigar, Zeke," answered Nueces, shifting to a more comfortable position. "Don't reckon I blame you none."

"Figgered you wouldn't. How's Shorty?"

"Oilin' his gun."

"I allus try to stay neutral, bein' a business man," mused Zeke. "Right comfortable feelin', bein' neutral. Reckon *yore* gun's all oiled?"

"Keno," grunted Nueces. "I hear that Bar K outfit are right nice boys an' like lots of company. That right?"



Zeke mopped again and nodded.

"Yes. They ain't right nice boys, an' they don't like company."

"Unfortunate critters," sighed Nueces, scratching his head.

"Still an' all, Nueces, a lonesome feller like you shore oughta pay them boys a visit. Mebby you could make 'em a little more sociable. They'd mebby even like a *little chin-nin'*."

"*Little chin-nin'*?" inquired Nueces innocently.

"*Little chin-nin'*, yeah."

"Wonder just where they're located now? Reckon they move around quite some, with all them cattle. Takes a lot of range to feed that many, a lot of th' kind of range you got down here."

"Yore range ain't no better," retorted Zeke. "Last I heard tell about 'em they was over east, in th' hills. That was some time ago, an' they ain't moved since."

"Been here long?" asked Nueces conversationally.

"Since spring."

"Oh," grunted Nueces, swiftly reviewing what he had heard before. "You know, Zeke, I kinda suspicioned it was a trail outfit driftin' through."

"Wrong, as usual. They ain't driftin' through. I reckon millin' around would be better."

"Hard luck they had, with that raid on 'em," said Nueces. "Lose many cows?"

"No, but somebody lost a hoss."

"An' saddle. That makes two hosses that's been lost. An' two saddles. Zeke, you ever hear of any feller bein' elected sheriff while he was in jail or out on bail for rustlin'?"

"How old do you reckon I am? I never did."

"Well, you won't be so very aged when you do hear it. Reckon I'll go over an' tell Bob that he's shore goin' to have that job."

"Here," said Zeke, "here's a deck of cards an' a bottle of good stuff. Playin' solitaire shore helps to pass away th' time. If you can't get in to see him, his winder faces east

on th' south corner. If you was to put yore back ag'in' his winder an' then ride a little south of east, you'd bump right into that Bar K outfit. But you mustn't pay no 'tention to what I tell you."

"I won't," said Nueces. "East winder on th' south corner," he mused. "An' th' camp is a little south by east of there. Much obliged: th' sheriff said scuth-west. Reckon he wanted me to think that herd was feedin' out on th' desert. Say, Zeke, you ever hear tell of a couple of fellers named Blodgett an' Wilcox?"

"Never till that Bar K outfit came. Two of them punchers have been askin' right persistent for Blodgett an' Wilcox. You ever heard of 'em?"

"Yes," said Nueces, an idea suddenly popping into his mind. He called himself a fool for not having thought of it before. "Yes," he repeated. "If anybody asks you about them two strangers, you send 'em to me. I know all about 'em."

Zeke nodded and looked casually out of

the window, whereupon the casualness vanished.

"So-long," he said quickly. "Th' sheriff's comin'."

"So-long yerself," retorted Nueces. "You hang 'round here an' you'll see him goin'."

"Thought you was a friend of mine," said Zeke accusingly.

"Ain't I?"

"Not if you make any rough plays in here! I got to live in this town!" He looked at the rear door. "Go out th' way you come in."

Nueces considered, saw that Zeke was worried, and nodded reluctantly.

"Then you better light a cigar to explain my own," he said, and departed.

He had nothing to gain by remaining, and he was around the corner and out of sight when the sheriff walked in through the front door, to find Zeke trying to lengthen the ashes of a freshly lighted cigar.

There were three things which Nueces wanted to do. First, to see Corson; second,

to visit the Bar K camp; third, to get back to Willow Springs and have a heart-to-heart talk with Mr. Jeff Rawlins about Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Blodgett.

Making his way back to where he had left his horse, he mounted and rode toward the jail. Two men loafed in front of it, Winchester across their knees. They were indolent in the sunshine, without a care; and then, catching sight of the lanky puncher riding nonchalantly toward them their indolence vanished as their cares returned. They arose hastily and hastily stepped into the building. The big door slammed and a head appeared behind the bars of a window.

Nueces jogged on, turned the corner of the building, and stopped under a barred window.

"'Lo, Bob," he called.

There was a sound as of something dragging, and in a moment Corson's face appeared behind the wrought-iron rods.

"'Lo, Nueces! How are you?"

"Free, white, an' twenty-one," chuckled the man on the horse. "That makes me a voter, an' I'm shore goin' to vote. You bein' treated all right? That so? Well, we'll get better grub. That's right simple. Bail's bein' fixed up. You'll be out in about a week."

"About a week!" snorted Corson indignantly.

"Yep. We want to elect you while yo're settin' in jail. It's a kinda fancy idear."

"I don't fancy it a damn' bit!"

"It was never done before," placidly continued Nueces, not heeding the interjection. "Tomas is awful strong for it. He can't think about nothin' else, an' when he thinks, he *thinks*. He said that you would do it if he asks you to, an' he's *shore* askin' you."

"Tomas, eh?" queried Corson thoughtfully. "Figgerin' on a jail break?"

"No, not now," answered Nueces, grinning widely.

"Tomas wants me to stay here a week," muttered Corson, and a smile broke over his

face. "You tell him that I'll be here; but I hope he don't make it two weeks."

"Reckon he won't," replied Nueces. "I saw a hundred-pound Mexican ridin' Tomas's best hoss before I left town, an' he was shore streakin' south toward th' border. We got friends down there; an' th' Tomas tribe is shore makin' big medicine." He put his hands in his pockets and handed up a bottle and a deck of cards. "From a lovin' admirer, but we'll name no names."

"An' don't you hand nothin' else in there!" said a harsh voice from another window. The sun glinted for an instant on something black and shiny. It looked like a rifle barrel, and perhaps it was.

Nueces looked up and saw the face behind the bars of the next cell, a cell in a small wing of the building.

"Yo're th' very hombre I'm lookin' for," said the horseman, digging down into a pocket. "Here's twenty dollars. Five of 'em are for you an' th' other fifteen are for

good grub for Bob. When that's gone there'll be more. What you say?"

"Reckon it's all right if it ain't a bribe," growled the watchful jail guard. "I'll risk it: hand it over."

Nueces rode forward and obeyed.

"You won't lose nothin' by it when th' show-down comes," he promised. "Well, Bob, you'll be bailed out in a week. See you later."

"So-long, Nueces. Don't you get in here! I need you outside."

"That's my greatest trouble, stayin' out," growled Nueces. "I got to keep pullin' leather all th' time. Oh, well, later on I'll pull some noses to make up for it. So-long."

Nueces rode straight out of town and about two hours later he came in sight of the Bar K wagon, near which loafed two men. One of these was the man he had seen back in town, and he guessed that the other was the foreman. He now knew that his mission was practically useless, in view of the word which had gone on before. The two men were idly



watching his approach, and they acknowledged his nod.

"I been told some volunteer herd trimmers have been to work out here," he said as he drew rein. The third and fourth members of this little outfit were not in sight. One of the missing pair might be the man with the insignificant chin.

"They started trimmin' but they didn't finish," said the foreman. "Any trouble any place else on th' range?"

"None of that kind, though some folks is right generous with their cattle," replied Nueces. "My boss lost his hoss an' saddle that same day. Reckon mebby it's Greasers."

"Yore boss was in hard luck," said the foreman shortly.

"Mebby," replied Nueces, smiling pleasantly. "I come down to see if you got a look at them fellers."

"No, I didn't see any of 'em," said the foreman; "but I shore heard 'em yellin' in right plain English."

"You got damn' fine ears," commented Nueces, and then remembered that he was to act like a Christian and stay out of jail. "Did they git away with any?"

"Oh, mebby a handful; we busted up their party right quick. We ain't even bothered to tally th' herd."

"Ain't necessary, I reckon, long's you know that you lost just three head," said Nueces, "an' shore have got them three back ag'in. Blodgett told me that I'd waste my time comin' down here, an' I reckon he was right. Well, so-long."

Tom Gade looked up quickly at the mention of the name, but Nueces appeared not to notice the action. He raised his hand in a careless salutation, wheeled, and rode back the way he had come. He changed his mind about his next stop: he would ride on to the JC ranch and visit Willow Springs later. As the miles strung out behind him he smiled with grim satisfaction. Mr. Rawlins was not the only man who was interested in Blodgett.

Doubtless Gade was also interested in Wilcox.

When he reached the ranch houses he kept on going, and it was dark when he rode up to the little fire near the chuck wagon. He asked about the progress of the round-up and then told a little of his own work; but when Shorty rode out to take over the first night trick with the cattle Nueces went with him and talked matters over thoroughly. At the conclusion of the talk he looked at his companion and chuckled.

"Shorty, you come from one part of th' country an' I come from another. When we joined up we was both goin' under th' names that folks know us by 'round here. Nobody ever knowed us as Blodgett an' Wilcox. Now somebody comes bustin' into th' country askin' for *both* Blodgett an' Wilcox; they couple up th' names in th' same breath. That means that th' names have been coupled up for 'em; they heard 'em together or they shore read 'em together. Th' only time our fambly names have been

used, an' used together, 'specially, was right up in th' ranch house when we witnessed that bill of sale. Now, what's their game? Why are they lookin' for them two witnesses?"

"Th' only thing I can think of would be to ask about th' signin' of 'em," answered Shorty, his brow wrinkled deeply.

"Shore: either th' signin' of th' witnesses' names or to find out somethin' about that deal. An' our friend, Mr. Rawlins, at th' hotel, ain't th' only feller that's interested in our fambly names. A Bar K puncher down in their camp is interested, too. Don't that kinda connect Mr. Rawlins with that Bar K outfit?"

"Seems like it 'does," growled Shorty.

"An' don't that kinda hook up Mr. Rawlins, th' Bar K outfit, th' arrest of Bob, th' stolen hoss that Steve bought, an' that bill of sale?"

"Yo're shootin' straight, for a wonder, but I can't see th' target," replied Shorty. "I can't hardly see how them others can have anythin' to do with that bill of sale."

"Neither can I," admitted Nueces; "but they shore are roped together. To-morrow, bright an' early, I'm headin' for th' hotel an' Mr. Rawlins. Me an' him are goin' to have a right nice talk by ourselves. There's more'n th' election an' th' sheriff mixed up in this mess, an' I'm aimin' to find out what it is."

"Ride her out, Nueces: I'm bettin' on you!" Shorty swore under his breath. "Hell! I'm with you. This job don't need me no more. It's all done but cleanin' up th' fringes."

"Yeah, th' fringes an' that south range," retorted Nueces, "which is th' slowest, meanest, an' hardest work. You stay right here. When I want to be bothered with you I'll come an' tell you."

"Hell you will!"

"Yes, I will!"

NUECES dismounted in front of the hotel and sauntered in to the desk, intending to inquire for Mr. Rawlins, but he saw that person in a chair in the office and stepped to his side.

"Mebby you'd like to take a little ride," he suggested, smiling. "I mebbly can tell you somethin' you'd like to hear."

Rawlins arose, studying the horselike face.

"Mebby you can," he admitted. "Did you see one of them fellers?"

"Yes," answered Nueces, nodding. "I saw one of 'em."

"I'll be with you in a shake," replied Rawlins, and he hastened toward the back door to go to the stable.

Not long thereafter he and Nueces were riding through town along the main street, which led to the Cactus Springs trail. It was not long before the town was behind them and they had the road to themselves.

"I saw Blodgett," said Nueces without preamble, breaking the silence. "But that won't do you no good till he knows why yo're interested in him."

"An' Wilcox?" asked Rawlins quickly.

"I can put my hand on Wilcox any time, but he's like Blodgett. You'll have to deal 'em face up, I reckon."

"I don't know that I can do that," replied Rawlins slowly.

"If it's got anythin' to do with th' JC ranch, you'd better."

Rawlins looked quickly and a little suspiciously at his companion, studying the grave, baffling face. There was no sign of softness, no sign of yielding to be seen, and he came to the conclusion that he would have to deal them face up if he was to learn anything to his advantage; but he determined to spar a little in the hope of picking up unwary admissions. Frankness could come as a last resort.

"Did I say it had anythin' to do with th' JC ranch?" he asked curiously.

"No, you didn't," admitted Nueces slowly; "but it can't mean nothin' else.

"Yo're right shore of that?"

"As shore as a man can be about anythin'."

"How do you figger it?"

"How do I figger it?" growled Nueces, turning to look slowly and deliberately at his companion. "You listen an' you'll learn how. Blodgett an' Wilcox never knowed each other till they came out here. They came from different parts of th' country. Nothing they ever did then would couple 'em up like you've coupled up their names. Long before they came to this part of th' country they both dropped their fambly names an' nobody out here ever even heard of 'em. Then you drop into town, askin' for 'em, askin' for both of 'em, by their right names. You couple 'em up. That right?"

"Reckon so," gruded Rawlins. He was very alert and thoughtful.

"Reckon it is," replied Nueces, smiling thinly. "Now then: only once did them two



fellers ever use their right names in all th' years they been out here. Just once, an' then they used 'em at th' same time. Nobody saw them names but a Mexican bandit an' Bob Corson. Neither of them two hombres ever said a word about seein' that writin'. Th' writin' was on th' bill of sale that Jim Watson gave to Bob Corson, transferrin' th' JC back to Corson. Them two fellers you've been askin' about wrote their names as witnesses. That right?"

"Why, mebbly so. It is for all I know," answered Rawlins, his hopes flaring high. "I ain't sayin' one way or th' other."

"You know damn' well that it is so; an' if you ain't sayin' then you can go on huntin' for Wilcox an' Blodgett an' be damned to you."

"Don't go on th' prod, friend," expostulated Rawlins hurriedly.

"If you reckon I'm on th' prod you oughta see me when I *am* on one; an' it remains to be seen if I'm a friend of yourn. I've met you more'n half-way, but you're shore comin'

th' rest of it if yo're goin' anywhere with me."

Rawlins rode on in silence tor a few moments, his mind racing; and he finally was forced to accept the only conclusion possible: he, himself, had to go the rest of the way.

"All right: this is th' layout," he said. "I want to find both of them fellers to ask 'em some questions about them signatures. I want to know if they wrote 'em."

"They did," said Nueces, and waited.

"Yes, reckon so," admitted Rawlins uncertainly, and also waited.

The silence was stubborn and continued, but Nueces jogged along, his face set, his whole attitude forbidding and determined.

Rawlins cleared his throat after a while.

"I want to find them two fellers to learn if Watson signed that bill of sale of his own free will or if he was forced to sign it."

"An' why do you want to know all that?" inquired his companion curiously.

"Hem! Because I represent his heirs."

"Hem! Now we're beginnin' to git some place. Deal another round."

"All right. Those heirs were left th' JC ranch in Watson's last will. If Corson is th' legal owner then they are through with it for good an' all; but if Watson was forced to sign that bill of sale, then th' whole transfer can be set aside. You savvy my drift?"

"Kinda," answered Nueces, keeping his face blank.

"Well, where can I see 'em, an' when?" asked Rawlins casually; but he was tense.

"Them heirs, I reckon, are them two sisters of Jim Watson's?" asked Nueces idly.

"Yes, they are," answered Rawlins, and instantly knew that he had made a mistake.

Nueces' face hardened still more, and there was now frank hostility in his eyes as he looked at his companion.

"Ben Hutchinson, a lawyer in town, had letters from their lawyer," he said slowly. "Ben also saw th' will. In it there was one sister. She was left th' Bar W an' got it, I reckon. Th' JC was left to Watson's two brothers. That makes you a liar."

"What you mean?" snapped Rawlins, his face red.

"Just that."

"No man can call me a liar!"

"Well, I ain't no woman an' I just called you one," said Nueces placidly. He nodded encouragingly. "Go ahead: draw it."

Rawlins's red face paled a little, but he made no move with his hand; instead, he stared at his companion, his eyes blazing.

"You sayin' there was no force used on Watson when he signed that bill of sale don't mean nothin' to me. How do you know there wasn't none used?"

"For a damn' good reason," answered Nueces, a grin struggling through his mask. "I was there an' saw it all, from soda to hock."

"Yeah!" sneered Rawlins. "You just said—— *Say!*" he exclaimed, a great light breaking upon him. "Which one of them two are *you*?"

"Wilcox. My partner, Shorty, is Blodgett.

There wasn't no force used on Watson. He took his little one dollar, U. S., an' wrote his name right out. That sale stands."

"Then it's legal," muttered Rawlins.

"I don't know now legal it was, but it was *right*: an' that's all that interests me an' Shorty."

"But you know damn' well he didn't sign that ranch away of his own accord!"

"Th' transaction was right. Me an' Shorty will swear that he wasn't forced. That'll make it legal. El Toro can't be got to come into any court. We ain't arguin' whether it's true or not: all that we are interested in is whether that sale will hold in court. Watson stole th' ranch, in th' first place. He never really owned a foot of it. Corson could 'a' had that first bill of sale throwed out on fraud an' come into th' ranch as his father's heir. He didn't bother to do that. It was easier to let it stand an' then buy it from Watson. He owns th' JC an' he's goin' to keep it. You savvy?"

"Then th' heirs are bein' robbed," replied

Rawlins angrily. "They ain't got no chance!"

"They ain't bein' robbed because they never was heirs so far as th' JC is concerned; an' they ain't got th' chance of a bat outa hell."

"Well, if you two witnesses stick to that idear an' swear to it, I reckon they ain't got a show."

"We'll not only stick to it, an' swear to it, but we'll shoot for it. There ain't no damn' man livin' that can take th' JC away from Bob Corson seein' how it was stole from him in th' first place; not while me an' Shorty can pull a gun. An' if you don't believe that, Mr. Rawlins, you can prove it right here an' now."

He waited for a reply, but there was none.

"Now, Mr. *Watson*, you can tell yore brother, down there with that Bar K, that what I said goes! An' what I says, Shorty, Burns, an' Bludsoe say, only mebbly more emphatic."

"Well, I had to make th' try, didn't I?"

growled Rawlins. "But yo're wrong about me bein' a Watson; an' there ain't no Watson near th' Bar K, wherever that is."

"Who sold that stolen roan hoss to Steve?" asked Nueces coldly.

"I don't know what yo're talkin' about."

"Who cold-decked Bob an' put his dad's saddle on that JC hoss, an' shot it down there where that raid was supposed to take place?"

"I don't know anythin' about that a-tall. Don't even know what yo're talkin' about. I come here straight from a point farther east to find Blodgett an' Wilcox."

"Uh-huh," said Nueces. "If I wanted to I could get proof through Tomas an' some of his friends as to whether or not you know anythin' about that Bar K outfit; but I don't care a whole lot. Now then, you shore better head back for that same point over east now that you've done what you started out to do."

He considered a moment, his cold eyes on the flushed face of his companion.

"You git yore brother an' clear out of this

part of th' country, because me an' Shorty will shore as hell pick a fight with you two hombres. I mean that, Watson. We'll slap yore faces in public, an' if that don't do, then we'll kick you outa town. Th' sheriff is on th' losin' end around here. I mean that, too, an' you can tell him I said so."

"Sorry yo're so set in yore idears," said Rawlins carelessly. "As long as I can't persuade you that yo're dead wrong then I'll head back for town. So-long."

"Better make that 'so-long' permanent," said Nueces, slowly turning his horse to keep the other in sight.

Rawlins rode toward Willow Springs with Nueces jogging along half a mile behind him, and when the latter passed the hotel he saw the former's horse in front of it. The Concord stage was standing before the post office and the usual crowd had collected, waiting for the mail to be distributed. The crowd was bigger than usual, and there was much hilarity in the air. Jokes passed back and forth, punctuated with bursts of laughter:



it was a rare thing to be able to vote for a man for sheriff who at that moment was sitting in jail under a charge of cattle stealing. The joke had swept throughout the county, making votes everywhere.

Nueces saw Frank Hutchinson in the middle of the crowd and, as the politician looked around, the puncher jerked his head back as a signal. In a moment Frank edged out of the crowd and joined the lanky puncher, his face wearing a grin that would not lessen. They walked off a few steps, talking in low voices.

"Been workin' hard," said Hutchinson, chuckling. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the crowd and continued: "I never saw nothin' like it. Th' idear of th' owner of a ranch like th' JC stealin' three measly cows is funny enough; but th' big kickback is th' idear of electin' a man that right now sets in jail accused of rustlin'! An' there's somethin' else, Nueces: Corson ain't done a thing or said a word to help elect hisself. Everybody knows he don't hanker for th'

job, an' everybody knows that he'll make a right fine sheriff if he's elected; an' lemme tell you th' boys are r'arin' to hand him a job he don't want, to elect a man in jail in place of th' coyote that put him there, an' all hell won't stop them. It's all in a sack, tied up an' ready to be delivered. Blame' if th' Mexicans ain't for him to a man! Some of 'em are gettin' so excited that they're ready to fight about it. It looks to me like they had their orders. Get down every cent you can scrape up, Nueces: I never saw nothin' like it in all my life, an' I've seen some blame' funny things in politics."

"Comin' right before election, th' sheriff's play was too plain," replied Nueces, grinning. "When you see yore brother you tell him that Jim Watson's two brothers are in th' country, smellin' around to find out if that last bill of sale was reg'lar. I've just persuaded one of 'em that if it ain't reg'lar it still is th' strongest bill of sale he ever heard tell of. Far's he's concerned it's hawg tight an' bull strong. If he takes th' advice that

I just gave him, him an' his brother will leave th' country right soon."

"What's all this yo're talkin' about?" asked Frank curiously, and then listened with interest to what Nueces told him. At the conclusion of the recital he nodded and smiled.

"Ben's done quite some worryin' about them two witnesses," he said. "He had to be right cautious when he answered that other lawyer's letters. Who are them witnesses, Nueces?"

"They're real folks, Frank," answered Nueces. "You can tell Ben that they are all right an' can be produced any time he actually needs 'em. He's been told that a couple of times before, but you can make it extr'y strong."

"He's workin' on th' bail now," replied Frank. "He'll ride off to-morrow to get th' judge to sign th' papers. Keepin' Bob in jail was th' greatest idear that politics ever knowed—down in this part of th' country, anyhow. You got a long head, Nueces."

"Yeah," said Nueces with a trace of modesty. He did not say that the idea belonged to Tomas and that it grew out of something entirely different from politics, and that neither he nor Tomas had given the slightest thought to its political worth. He was very much amused by the thought of the surprise in store for Frank, his brother, and everybody else in the county.

"You see," he said, smiling, "Bob wouldn't do a thing to help elect hisself. Wouldn't go round talkin', wouldn't make no speeches, wouldn't even talk about it with us fellers on th' ranch. Somethin' had to be done to make up for that. That was th' way *I* figgered it; an' when th' sheriff put Bob in jail he gave me just what I needed."

"You shore have got a mighty long head," muttered Frank in open admiration. He called out an answer to a member of the crowd, and smiled at the mirth which followed it. "My Gawd, Nueces; just look at 'em an' listen to 'em! An' it's near that way all over th' county. Never saw nothin' like

it before. Damn' if it ain't like a grass fire in a high wind! "

"Yeah, I reckoned mebby it would be," admitted Nueces unblushingly. "Hey, Frank!" he said in a low voice. "Look there, in front of th' hotel. That's Mr. Rawlins, who was born Jim Watson's brother. Watch him a minute. Yeah, he's startin' right: headin' east. If he keeps it up he'll be mighty wise; but he won't. He'll ride east over th' old stage road till he gets a few miles outa town, an' then he'll turn south to go to his brother. After while I'll ride out an' see, but I'm willin' to bet right now that he does turn south."

An hour later Nueces made good his promise and followed the old stage road, and as he had surmised he found the place where Mr. Rawlins had turned from the road and headed south, in the direction of the Bar K camp. Nothing more was needed to convince Nueces that Mr. Rawlins had, indeed, been born a Watson.

Just as it happened, also, there was now

nothing needed to convince Mr. Rawlins that several unpleasant truths were very plain to be read. He was quite certain, for one thing, that he and his brother had no chance whatsoever to build up a claim to the title of the JC ranch which would be worth even the smallest effort. He had found the witnesses and he had found them prepared to go to any length to keep the title of the ranch where it now was lodged.

The other unpleasant truth was the deep-rooted conviction that the present sheriff was in for an overwhelming defeat, that the efforts to discredit the other nominee had recoiled with devastating effect upon those who had developed them. Ridicule is a terrible weapon; vicious persecution another; and during his loitering and listening he had learned a bitter fact: the sheriff was now regarded as the biggest joke, the most colossal fool in the county; and the majority of men who had visited Willow Springs were more deeply stirred than usual: they were open and belligerent in their contempt and hos-

tility for the man who had persecuted the owner of the JC; and they could hardly wait for the day to come when they could slam their ballots in the box with a curse on their lips and hatred in their hearts.

Mr. Rawlins strongly believed that it was time to get out from under the shaking structure which he had been instrumental in erecting; and then, amid the gloom, there came a beam of light: the bank!

The Willow Springs bank and its antiquated safeguards would yield easily to modern methods, and when he and his brother had obtained their cached tools they would be provided with methods entirely sufficient for the task. The black clouds were taking on a tint of silver, and as mile after mile rolled behind him his planning grew clear and lucid and his frown changed almost insensibly into a smile. There would yet be some balm in Gilead.

ZEKE PIKE, owner of the largest saloon in Cactus Springs, looked up at the sounds of horses before his front door. A tall shadow fell across the floor and ushered in Nueces, whose sun-dazzled eyes required a moment to become accustomed to the dim, cool interior of the adobe building.

"Huh!" said Zeke, in restrained welcome.

"Huh," grunted Nueces, draping himself on the edge of the bar.

"Well, *now* what's th' matter?" asked Zeke apprehensively.

"Where do you fellers vote down here?"

"Blacksmith's shop," answered Zeke. "We used to use th' general store, but old Carberry raised hell about it last time. Said th' crackerbarrel sharpshooters ate him out of a profit an' into a loss. Dried prunes, apricots, dried beef, cheese, an th' Lord only knows what else, plumb disappeared before



th' polls closed. Cleaned him outa everythin' that wasn't nailed up; an' th' lunch-room man swore he didn't sell a supper an' blamed Carberry for it. So now we vote in th' blacksmith's shop, where hungry bellies stay hungry."

Nueces walked slowly to the door and looked out across the square. On the other side of this and in front of him was the polling place, its wide double doors revealing the interior. He scratched his head, grunted, and returned to the bar.

"You got a right nice location here, Zeke," he said, smiling.

Zeke looked at his companion inquiringly, vaguely disturbed by he knew not what.

"Well, you might as well tell me th' worst," he suggested, having long since learned to discount all kinds of flattery. Never before, in more than ten years, had Nueces discovered anything favourable in the location of his place of business.

"Th' worst, Zeke?" inquired Nueces gently but reprovingly.

"Yes. How come you discover, all of a sudden, that I got a nice location when you know damn' well that I ain't?"

"But it is," said Nueces. "It looks right plumb into th' blacksmith's shop an' at point-blank range for a rifle. Us boys from th' ranch aim to be in town, here, when th' polls open. Last time this place showed three times as many voters as it had inhabitants, of all ages an' sexes. We may figger on usin' repeaters to stop repeatin', an' this is a fine place for a couple of good rifle shots to hole up an' pectect th' sanctity of th' ballot."

"Like hell!" snapped Zeke, in arms instantly. "This is th' sheriff's headquarters on election day!"

"He can easy find some other place," suggested Nueces. "Anyhow, I can put my boys up on th' roof, out of his way. I reckon that would be better, anyhow."

"He'll not look for no other place, an' you'll not put nobody on my roof!" retorted Zeke, frankly hostile now. "How many

times have I got to tell you that I have got to live in this damn' town?"

Nueces sighed and reluctantly nodded his head.

"Reckon mebbly yo're right; though why any human bein' would want to live in Cactus Springs is plumb past my understandin'."

"An' don't you do no worryin' about repeatin' this year," said Zeke reassuringly. "How Corson ever done it I don't know; but he's gettin' more friends every day. There'll be enough Corson men at th' blacksmith's shop to see that if there's any repeatin' bein' done it'll be done for him. He ain't made a speech, has he?" He brightened as a new thought struck him. "Would he make a little speech to th' boys through th' jail winder?"

"No, he won't. He ain't made a speech, talked to any voter, or gave away a single cigar," replied Nueces. "Ain't even bought a voter a drink! Not one! He's been lettin' th' sheriff run his election for him, th' sheriff

bein' an expert politician. All he done was let hisself get put in jail. Seems like there ain't no party lines down in this part of th' U.S.A. no more. I kinda figger th' sheriff will only get one vote unless somethin' keeps him away from th' polls."

"Well, between you an' me, Nueces," said the proprietor in a low voice, "I'm for Corson, though you needn't tell nobody till we see how it turns out. You seen any of them Bar K fellers lately?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Why?"

"Understand there's two of that outfit missin'," said Zeke, with strong suspicion. "Yo're *shore* you ain't seen 'em?"

"Zeke, you've saved me a long, dusty ride," said Nueces, his face wreathed with a smile. "Now I won't have to go to their camp. Yes, I saw one of 'em. Told him to pull his stake. Reckon he did. What was th' second feller's name?"

"Gade," answered Zeke. "Who was it you spoke to?"

"Mr. Rawlins; red-haired an' quite rangy. Had a funny kinda walk."

"That's th' other," said Zeke thoughtfully; "but around here he was knowed as Smith. That walk of his has had me wonderin'; but it shore wasn't no business of mine. If th' sheriff don't know th' lockstep when he sees it, that's his affair; but, of course, he ain't experienced none with penitentiaries."

"Not as much as he's mebbly goin' to be," replied Nueces cheerfully. "I've done lost all my pressin' interest in little chins, Zeke. I'm just feedin' out rope while th' sheriff helps elect Bob. After election—savvy?" He grinned and turned toward the door. "I'm goin' over to gloat at Bob. Never had a boss in jail before. Any word you want to send?"

"Th' jail's too full of ears," answered Zeke, "so you might tell him that I'm glad he's in there."

"Well, so am I, seein' how things are breakin'," chuckled Nueces, going out to his horse.

Again the riflemen, sunning themselves in

front of the jail, slipped swiftly inside, closed the door, and went on guard inside the building; but the sheriff sauntered out of his office and stopped near the window which was Nueces' objective.

"Why don't you go up to th' door an' ask to talk to th' prisoner, instead of workin' round-about?" demanded the peace officer as Nueces drew rein. "Don't you know that you ain't allowed to talk to a prisoner through th' window?"

"Well, them deppities of yourn didn't act very invitin'," retorted the puncher. "Besides, I ain't hankerin' to git into no jail."

"You want to talk to Corson?" asked the sheriff coldly.

"Yeah, I do. Want to ask him if he'd like some clean clothes an' things."

"Foller me, then," said the officer, leading the way.

The door opened to the sheriff's demand, and they entered under the levelled rifles of the two deputies. The sheriff locked the door behind him, put the key in his pocket, and

waved his hand toward his companion's belts.

"Leave yore guns on th' desk," he ordered.

"What for?"

"Rules an' regulations."

"All right," said Nueces, eyeing the rifles. "Don't blame you much, with only two fellers throwin' down on me." He unbuckled the belts and dropped them on the desk. "I got a pocket knife, too," he jibed, moving toward the sheriff.

The deputies stepped between Nueces and the belts, and then the sheriff unlocked another door, opening it to show four cells, one of which was empty. In the fourth was Bob Corson, grinning through the bars.

Nueces waved his hand toward the empty cell.

"That's a nice little coop," he said flatteringly. "Savin' that one for yoreself, Sheriff?"

"What you mean?" snapped the officer, flushing.

"Hello, Bob," chuckled the visitor, show-

ing his great hand in through the bars.  
"How are you?"

"Fine, Nueces! Fine, thanks to th' grub you've had comin' in three times a day. How's th' bail comin' along?"

"Accordin' to lawful procedure, as Ben Hutchinson would say. You want some clean clothes, don't you?"

Corson was gently scratching himself here and there, actions which now had the mark of habit, and his friend watched him curiously.

"Bring me a bundle of clothin'," said Corson, his fingers shifting to his back.

"Hah!" exclaimed the lanky puncher, voicing a discovery. "I picked out th' wrong cell for th' sheriff, though I reckon they're all alike."

"If you——" began the peace officer angrily.

"Shut up! I ain't talkin' to you, yet!" retorted Nueces, his face flushing and then growing pale. "I've held myself down till I'm damn' ashamed of it! I'm due to bust



purty soon, an' I'd just as soon do it here an' now! You an' yore deppities don't mean a damn' thing to me!" He turned to Corson again. "When you get outa here, Bob, you'll be th' new sherifa: you might pick out his cell right now."

"Easy, Nueces," warned Corson, laughing in spite of himself. "You got to stay out of here if you want to help me. I want socks, a clean shirt, an' pants, an' coat, an' underclothes—th' whole rig. No, I don't neither: just th' things that go under my outer clothes. No use havin' to burn up two suits."

"You'll have 'em," promised Nueces. He was somewhat restored to good nature outwardly; but inwardly he fairly itched to precipitate a fight. He and Corson talked for a few moments longer, and then Nueces turned and faced the door. The sheriff obeyed the hint, opened it, stepped through first, and walked swiftly to the table where the puncher's gun belts lay; behind him came Nueces, followed by the two deputies. The inner door again locked, the sheriff waved

his hand at the belts and stepped back while Nueces picked them up and put them on.

"Sheriff," he said in a casual tone of voice, "I'm a law-abidin' citizen an' yo're an officer of th' law. There's a day comin', however, when you won't be an officer. Open that door an' let me get out into th' fresh air: all you hombres stink in th' nose of an honest man."

"Open th' door," ordered the sheriff, and as one of his men obeyed the command the officer looked at the visitor. "Git out an' stay out; an' if you got any sense you'll keep out of Cactus Springs. First break you make yo're comin' in here to stay awhile."

"If it comes to that," retorted Nueces, pausing on the threshold, "I won't be taken alive; an' that means that I'll have a lot of company on my way to hell. Chew on that!"

He went to Zeke Pike's saloon for a drink to fortify him against the long, hot, dry ride home.

"Hey," said Zeke cautiously, as he leaned

far across the bar. "There's a feller in town right now that you'd mebbly like to look at. He ain't got no chin to speak of."

"I'll look at him when th' time's ripe; just now he's wor'kin' for Bob. After Bob's elected I'll take a look at that hombre, an' then mebbly he'll lose what chin he has. There's a round-up comin', Zeke, with some brandin', after election. That means in about four days. So-long."

NUECES was at the ranca again, marking time, and was exercising the authority and duties of *segundo*, or second in command. He had the riders out on the afternoon's work and intended to follow them shortly and to ride his own trick.

He was in good humour, for everything looked bright. His examination of the tally sheets of the round-up just finished told him that the JC was growing steadily. The indications were that the beef drive to the railroad in the fall would be the heaviest in the history of the ranch. Bail bonds would be served upon the sheriff the following morning, and Bob Corson would be home again a few hours afterwards. The enthusiastic electioneering of Bob's friends and the blunders of the opposing side made the election a foregone conclusion. The threat against Bob's title to the ranch had died down

and become nothing; and the criminal charges against the young ranchman, in Nueces' mind, would never stand in a court of law, if, indeed, they ever went that far.

He picked up the tally sheets and went to the ranch house, where he placed them in a drawer in Bob's old desk. As he left the building and closed the door behind him, he saw a horseman riding swiftly toward him from the direction of Willow Springs. Sauntering to the corner of the house, he leaned against the wall and waited the rider's approach. Soon he saw that the man was a Mexican, and then that he was one of Tomas's closest friends. The rider swept up, stopped, and raised a hand in salutation.

"*Buenas tardes, Señor,*" said the horseman, his teeth gleaming in a broad smile.

"Afternoon," acknowledged Nueces.

"Tomas he say weel you breeng the hombres to town to-night?"

This was a summons for which the *segundo* had been waiting for some days, and it was a welcome one.

"Little poker party in th' hotel?" he asked, grinning.

The teeth gleamed again, and the brown face wrinkled with mirth.

"*Sí Señor, sí,*" came the answer in a chuckle. "Weel you go there before eet ees dark? An' weel you e-stay there onteel I walk een to the bar? Eet may be the light of day before I come, but weel you e-stay?"

"Yeah, we'll stay right there till you come in," assured the *segundo*.

"I weel not e-spik; I weel notheeng say. I weel just walk een an' out again. *Sabe?*"

"I savvy," grunted the puncher. "I ain't got no idear what this is all about, but I reckon it's in th' hands of th' Lord an' all for th' best."

"Eet ees well, Señor, that you know notheeng."

"Well, that's me, then, accordin' to my best friends," said Nueces. His eyes gleamed with lights of deviltry, and a grin fought its way through the sober poker expression on his face. "You tell Tomas we'll be there in

plain sight, for all to see an' to admire."

"Sí, Señor," replied the visitor, raising his hand again as he wheeled his horse. "*Adiós, Señor.*"

"Good-bye," called Nueces, and remained leaning against the wall, watching the graceful rider swing back toward town. The grin was now master and showed frankly as the puncher pushed from the house and started toward the corral to get a horse and to do his trick of line riding.

Supper time found the members of the outfit straggling in, and soon they were all there, sitting on a bench near the bunkhouse door, waiting for the meal to be ready.

Nueces scratched his chin and looked along the line, his face grave and his voice level and calm. "You boys can wash behind th' ears, if you want to," he said. "We're all ridin' to town for a little celebration."

"More trouble for Steve," chuckled Burns.

"Steve mebbly won't even know we're there," said Nueces. "This here is a bang-up, special celebration. We feed at th' hotel,

an' we play cards there till mebbly daylight, or later."

"Suits me," said Bludsoe, grinning. "They got a better brand of whisky there."

"Blame' little whisky in this celebration," said Nueces reprovingly. "Want our heads all clear. No tellin' what's goin' to bust. This here is goin' to be a plumb polite celebration."

"All right," sighed Shorty dejectedly; but inside he was taut and expectant. He, too, had been waiting for this call to town.

The meal was silent and hurried, and no fault was found with the food or the man who cooked it, much to that person's surprise. His wound had amounted to very little, once the shock had worn off, and he was back in the kitchen again, doing his best.

Nueces stepped to the galley door and raised his voice.

"Cook," he shouted.

"Now what th' hell you want?"

"Figger you can stand a ride to town startin' now?"



"Got a touch of th' sun?" asked the amazed cook's voice, followed by that person's face around the door casing.

"Let th' dishes go an' come on," said the *segundo*, grinning "Had a bång-up round-up, big tally sheets, an' Bob's gettin' out of jail to-morrow. We're celebratin' at th' hotel in style. Get a rustle on you."

The cook touched the bandage, looked curiously at his boss, and became busy. Not long thereafter the five men rode at an easy pace along the trail to town, laughing and chatting and chaffing each other. The cook found that he could stand a swifter pace, and set it, the others letting him take the lead and hold it.

They streamed into the hotel and began to bedevil Tyson. Then they wandered into the bar and solemnly drank a toast to the next sheriff and told all and sundry that this was their night to howl and that they would do their howling right where they were. Nueces calmed the bartender and the clerk and banished the apprehensive expressions

from their faces. They swarmed to the big round table in the rear of the room and called for cards and chips; and so they started, and so they played, hour after hour, with a decorum which worried the bartender and caused Tyson to rub his eyes and to wonder. Closing time came, but still the game went on. The bartender locked the front door and drew the shades. He placed two bottles of his best on a chair near the table, nodded his good-nights, and disappeared. A few minutes later Nueces moved swiftly and silently to the front of the room, raised the curtains, unlocked the door, and went back again; and all through the night any passer-by could have seen five men playing poker earnestly but almost silently.

Darkness fell, and Cactus Springs melted into the soft blackness of the night, except where lamplight streamed from its windows. These windows one by one became dark, until only a few belonging to the jail, dwellings, and saloons remained glowing.

In Zeke Pike's place the crowd thinned gradually until at last only Zeke and the sheriff remained. They talked casually for a few minutes, and then the officer said good-night, went out to his horse, mounted and rode the short distance to the jail, whose narrow, high windows in the office dimly reflected the light cast against the ceiling. He knocked at the door and stood on the sill when it opened.

"All right, Charley; you might as well turn in," he said, and turned to lead his horse to the corral behind his own dwelling just a few steps away. Putting up the horse, the officer carried the saddle to the galley connecting his kitchen with the living-room, threw it across a pole placed there for that purpose, and closed the door behind him. His bedroom window glowed for a few minutes and then became dark.

It was close to midnight when a horse carrying double moved vaguely across the desert and stopped on the outskirts of town. Its double burden moved, split, and became

one as the other half dropped to the ground and slipped around a deserted building. The riding half of this nocturnal pair wheeled the horse and departed whence he came, soon being blotted out by the Jark.

The man on foot, a Mexican if one might judge from certain peculiarities of clothing discernible even in the night, moved swiftly and silently toward the group of buildings standing on the jail lot. His movements, while furtive and hesitant from caution, bespoke a certain directness of purpose which told that he knew every foot of the ground as well as the habits and customs of the inhabitants of those two buildings. The blackness of the galley swallowed him momentarily, and when he reappeared he made a grotesque silhouette in the dark, something unshapely and unnatural. Flitting along in what deeper shadow the buildings afforded, he slipped swiftly across the open space and stopped at the corral. Putting the bulky saddle on the ground, he lowered the bars, caught and led forth the horse, saddled it,

and was a man on foot no longer. He rode from the prenuises at a walk, then struck into a lope, and soon disappeared.

On the far eastern edge of town a silent group of horsemen waited patiently, their high-crowned sombreros with tasselled brims standing out against the glow of starlight on the horizon. Almost magically their numbers increased by one, and without a spoken word they moved forward in a body.

The Bar K camp was peacefully wrapped in sleep, its fire dying as the embers greyed. The wagon loomed up like some monstrous animal, and the night horses cropped contentedly at the ends of their tethers. There was no need for night herding, since this was not a herd to be kept from straying, but a collection of cattle scattered over several square miles of grass. The camp slept, the fire shrunk, the tethered animals cropped noisily. Suddenly they raised their heads and stared out into the night, their ears pricked forward; but to senses other than theirs there was nothing to awaken interest.

Out in the darkness, too far from the little camp to have been detected had there been anyone awake to play at detection, the little group of riders had become two score. They had appeared in ones and twos and larger groups, apparently from out of the earth. There was no confusion, no shouting of orders, no duplication of effort; the swift, certain movements bespoke good drilling, plenty of practice, thorough experience. From the outer limits of those several square miles there was a steady drifting of cattle and riders, the broken line gradually becoming unbroken as the cattle multiplied and concentrated. It swept forward much like a huge animated net, and now the discrete units began to aggregate and grew into a compact, unhurried herd.

The herd found itself with pointers and flankers and a closely knit afterguard, and now it streamed soberly and sedately southward, gradually acquiring speed. Through the night it moved as rapidly as experience justified, and at daylight it was split into half

a dozen smaller herds and sent on in half a dozen different directions. One of these smaller herds was the chosen one, to strike straight for certain fastnesses that could be reached and defended if the rest of the plans did not fail.

The other herds, each with a full complement of riders, pushed on to lure a pursuing posse to divide and to follow. As the miles went past, rider after rider left these other herds and struck by devious ways to join that chosen one. If that selected herd should be overtaken, there would be more than thirty of the forty riders to protect it on their own selected battleground.

These raiders were not humanitarians—far otherwise. They drove the chosen herd at the highest speed obtainable, and calculated to a nicety on the last pound of strength of its component animals. No one better than they could judge that delicate balance between exhaustion and the greatest mileage. And so the selected herd thundered on through the night and through the following

day, and far into the second night, an occasional weakling shot down when it could not be forced to hold the pace. Behind it rode a crescent of riflemen, directed by a master raider; and so it moved out of the sight and knowledge of Cactus Springs, never again to be seen by its lawful owners.

Back on the despoiled range there remained one solitary horseman, mounted on a thoroughbred, stolidly sitting his saddle, with the bridle reins of a second horse dropped over the pommel. This second horse was well known to every man in Cactus Springs, and for many miles around. The saddle on its back was nearly as well known, its repairs easily recognisable by the various harness makers who had made them. Around this lonely horseman there settled down that darkness which comes just before the dawn, and now he moved.

Leading the sheriff's horse, he rode slowly toward the distant camp, watching it intently. He slowed again and stopped, his gaze fixed on the dull glow which pointed out



the almost dead camp fire. Suddenly he saw a streamer of sparks soar upward, a tiny licking flame curling under them, and then it swiftly grew as the first man up stirred the embers into new life and fed them with fresh fuel.

The lone horseman ironically raised his great hat in greeting to the stirring cook, who as yet could not see him, threw the reins from the pommel of his saddle, and backed away from the now freed horse. His hand dropped down came up again, and a thin spurt of fire stabbed through the night as the heavy concussion of a Colt .45 roared about his ears, to sound flatly at that camp fire.

There was a shout, confusion, running men silhouetted against the distant light; oaths and shouted threats when the loss of the night horses was discovered; spurts of flame darted vividly, to die instantly. The lone horseman placed a hand to his nose, and then, whirling his mount, raced eastward to greet the dawn. Behind him he had left evidence, evidence which on the word of the sheriff was

sufficient. He had left a dead horse to mark the identity of the raiders, and on it was a well-known saddle; but this time it did not belong to Bob Corson or the JC, it belonged to the sheriff. As evidence, it was as honest as that other evidence; and even more so, for it marked a real raid, a real and valuable loss. No three cows, later to be recovered, was the measure of this raid; but three hundred, which never again would be seen north of the border. They had vanished, together with their new and unknown owners.

Shorty caught himself as his head dropped forward, and opened his eyes with a jerk. The bartender, his mouth agape, stood in the door and looked with amazement upon this poker party.

"Never reckoned I'd get more poker than I wanted," growled Shorty, his words interrupted by a prodigious yawn. "But when a feller has got to do a thing, then it's work.

Hello, Bill," he said, espying the stunned bartender.

"My Gawd!" said Bill simply.

"What time can we eat breakfast?" asked Nueces, blinking.

"My Gawd!" said Bill. And then he looked in still greater surprise at the front door, which suddenly opened to admit a slender and youthful Mexican.

"Change for me an 'ondred dollar beel?" asked the newcomer, holding out a yellow-back and ignoring the poker party.

"My Gawd!" said Bill, and then he moved swiftly forward, his foot leaving the floor. It struck nothing more substantial than air, but the effort strained a muscle and made him limp for several days. A soft laugh floated back from the open door, and the youth was gone.

With the disappearance of the Mexican there came concerted action. The card players arose as one man, stretched, flexed, yawned, and did anything else which pro-

mised ease of body. They stood around the table while the chips were counted and redeemed, and then wandered about the room and even out into the street.

Bill was still limited in speech, a threatened recovery being blasted when he picked up the two whisky bottles and found them as full as when he had placed them on the chair. He was shaking his head mechanically, which was no more than a continuing motion begun upon his entry on the scene. He turned to raise the curtains and found them raised, a fact which up to now had been a secret because of his dazed condition. Suddenly he snapped out of the daze, and his functions leaped to full life and purpose. He almost jumped to the door and nearly collided with Nueces, who was at that moment about to re-enter.

"Judas priest!" he yelled. "You fools play cards all night?"

"Needn't yell, Bill," reproved Nueces sorrowfully. "We did."

"Then why didn't you tell me you was

goin' to?" pugnaciously demanded the bartender.

"Didn't know it ourselves, Bill; time sorta slipped past."

"Reckon it did! Judas priest! When did you put up them shades?"

"Now, seems like I remember hearin' them shades fly up right after you left us, Bill. There ain't no dependin' on them patent roller shades."

"Great Gawd! Shades up all night with you fellers gamblin' all night plumb in sight of th' street? This is a ho-tel! This ain't th' Cheyenne!"

"I know it," sighed Nueces. "When can we eat?"

"Who unlocked that front door?" asked Bill loudly.

"Needn't yell," said Nueces sweetly. "Wasn't it locked?"

"No, it wasn't, an' you know it!"

"Now that you tell me, I do know it. You shore you didn't unlock it yoreself, kinda mechanical, an' forgot all about it?"

"No, I didn't! That Greaser just opened it an' walked right in!"

"Ah-hah!" exclaimed Nueces significantly. "He *did*, huh? Reckon he's th' feller you oughta ask about that."

"Reckon yore great aunt was a hoss thief!" snapped Bill, with heavy sarcasm. He burst into a flow of inspired profanity and stamped back to the bar, where his words flowed together and became unintelligible.

"Hey, Nueces!" came a wail from the street. "When are we goin' to eat breakfast?"

"Yeah," said Nueces, looking earnestly at the bartender. "When *do* we eat breakfast, Bill?"

"When they open th' dinin'-room an' not before!" snapped Bill.

"You lose," said Nueces, turning and going out into the street. "We eat it before then, with Tomas." He raised his arm, and shouted. "Grub pile! Grub pile! We'll eat with Tomas!"

Either it was something of a coincidence,

or Tomas had second sight and the gift of prophecy, for the odour of food cooking and cooked filled his little lunch-room an hour earlier than usual and violently assailed the keen and wide-open nostrils of five hungry and hurrying men. They piled through the door and charged the counter and almost in one voice demanded coffee. Coffee first, and then anything that was already cooked. Again it appeared that they had been expected, for each man found his favourite dish awaiting him.

Tomas smiled paternally upon them as he kept up to their demands, and he talked to them while they were busy with sterner matters. Aside from a grunt of negation or affirmation he evoked no answering talk, and he rambled on and on, saying nothing worth while.

Nueces drank his third cup of coffee, sighed, and reached for a toothpick.

"Ah-h-h! Begin to feel like somethin' human. Tomas, you gossip like an old woman. Got any *real* news for us?"

"Why should I have?" asked Tomas, his eyebrows going up. "I tell you all I hear an' you are not satisfied. *Madre de Dios!* I e-spik onlee w'at I know!"

"Ah," said Shorty, patting his belt buckle. "Then you don't know a hell of a lot. I been under an awful strain all night: two full whisky bottles at my elbow an' I never even smelled a cork!"

The five men were watching the proprietor curiously, expectantly; but his bland and placid face told them nothing. They became uneasy and moved restlessly on their stools, and gradually their expressions indicated a vague accusation; but he only smiled impartially upon them, his swarthy face wrinkled by good nature. And so they sat, uneasy, curious, disappointed; and then shouts on the street made them sit erect and become alert, straining their ears.

"Sometheeng ees happen," said Tomas, a hand to an ear; and then he made a sweeping gesture toward the door, an imperative ges-



ture, and his five companions arose as one man and streamed into the street.

A crowd had gathered before the hotel, surrounding a mounted man, a man who lived in Cactus Springs. His horse was in a lather, and his face was tense with excitement.

"Whole damn' herd run off!" he was shouting. "Must 'a' been thirty, forty men! Eighteen hundred cattle scattered to hell an' gone, an' nobody knows how many have been stolen! Sheriff's dead hoss found a mile from their camp, right where they found Bob Corson's hoss! Git yore hosses an' come on!"

Roars of laughter, catcalls, and jeers drowned his voice. Here was a joke they all could appreciate. The evidence which had been enough to put Bob Corson in jail was his dead horse with his father's saddle on it, found on the scene of a cattle raid; now it was the sheriff's horse, found in the same place, after a real and successful raid.

"Git yore hosses an' come on!" pleaded

the messenger, raising his arms in supplication. "Th' whole damn' herd was stam-peded! No tellin' how many are lost!"

"Did you arrest th' sheriff yet?"

"Mebby Corson sneaked outa jail an' run another raid!"

"Hey, Nueces! Where was you fellers last night?"

"I saw 'em playin' cards in th' hotel," shouted a kindly soul. "That was past midnight."

The laughter roared out again, coarse jests impinging on the pleader's ears. Somebody made a suggestion, and it was uproariously adopted: there was a rush toward the messenger, and he was lifted from his saddle and carried into the nearest saloon, where willing hands poured whisky down his throat as long as he could swallow: and he had to swallow or choke. It was not long before they carried him into a corner and laid him on the floor, where he slumbered the day through and most of the night which followed it.

Nueces and his friends formed a rallying point, calling for riders, and the answers were prompt. Man by man slipped away, to return astride a horse. Ben Hutchinson joined the milling crowd waving a paper over his head, and pushed through to the lanky puncher's side.

"Here, Nueces!" he shouted. "*Nueces!*"

Nueces looked around, saw the paper, and grinned. His long arm reached out and he took it.

"Bail bonds?" he yelled above the noise.

"Bonds an' th' court order!" shouted Hutchinson. "Serve 'em yoreself!"

"Come on, boys!" shouted Nueces, standing up in his stirrups. "We'll all go down an' git Corson out, an' then we'll see about th' rustlin'! *Come on!*"

Through the rising dust burst yells and cheers, and the mounted population of Willow Springs, shouting, laughing, and shooting into the air, thundered down the street on the road to Cactus Springs, a law-abiding body bound upon a lawful mission.

WELL to the east of Willow Springs three horsemen rode slowly in the direction of the town. At last, reaching a natural hiding-place, they rode down into a ravine, dismounted, and turned their animals loose to graze. Five miles west of them lay Willow Springs and its little bank. They leisurely set about preparing the evening meal, and two of them lazily watched the third perform his duties with frying pan and coffee pot, as they had watched him many times before when they all were members of the Bar K outfit.

"Last night would 'a' been th' time," said one of the loafing pair.

"Yes, it would," replied the other. "Th' job would 'a' been all over now if we had worked out that relay properly. Still, tonight is all right if we wait for th' town to settle down. All we need is a little more patience."

The cook drew back from the streaming smoke of the sizzling bacon grease, blinked, and looked a little anxiously at his companions.

"There's one part of town that won't quiet down a mite," he said. "To-morrow's election, an' th' Cheyenne will be roarin' all night long."

"All th' better," said Tom Gade easily. "It'll hold th' boys away from us. Th' bank's far enough off from th' Cheyenne to let us go ahead."

"Shore," said the elder Watson, alias Frank Smith, alias Jeff Rawlins. "Their noise will drown out our own."

"Well," said the cook, brother of the foreman of the Bar K outfit, "I shore wish th' job was done an' we was on our way. There's four, five hell-roarin' hombres in that town that I don't like."

"They can't do any hell-roarin' to us unless they catch us," retorted Gade. "Th' relay will take care of that."

The cook nervously stroked his almost

chinless jaw, his gaze flicking from Gade to Smith and back again.

"Just th' same, I wish we was well out of it," he growled.

"A feller allus feels like that on his first job," said Smith, grinning. "Anyhow, you got th' easiest part of it. All you got to do is to stay outside an' watch. And," he said, leaning forward ominously, "you be damn' shore that you do *stay an' watch!*"

"Oh, I'll do my share, now that I'm in it," sighed Tomlinson, turning the bacon with less deftness than was his wont.

The meal cooked, it was eaten in silence, and then, everything made ready for departure after dark, the three sat around the dying embers of the fire and went over their plans with meticulous care, rehearsing every detail, discussing every contingency which arose in their minds. And so they sat until time to depart.

The crowd in the Cheyenne had thinned about half, which meant that the big room

was not crowded too much for comfort. How it had held the earlier crowd was a mystery to Steve; but, of course, it was the night before election, and Bob Corson had come to town to raise temperamental souls to a fever heat of enthusiasm. His entry had been a triumphal march into a town with a pre-election crowd which tripled its usual number of people. An impromptu parade formed behind him and his outfit; there was continual cheering, uproar, and swirling excitement; there were stump speeches, abandoned because the listeners flowed away toward the real centre of the night's activities. The Cheyenne had been packed inside and surrounded without, and Steve's arms still ached from the press of business.

Corson had told and retold his story, standing on the bar where he had been lifted, until his voice had grown hoarse from words and tobacco smoke. His right hand ached from the grips it had given and taken, his shoulders smarted from the effects of the slapping; and now that the crowd had been

appeased and had shrunk in size, he thankfully sank on a chair and signed with relief, wondering how soon the others would leave and let him and his outfit hold their little party in peace and partial privacy. The clock ticked on, reached midnight, and started on a new day, and the crowd's deserters fell away more rapidly until at last there were not more than a dozen men in the big room. At his own table Bob was surrounded by his outfit, and someone tossed a deck of cards before them. The other half dozen men gravitated to a table of their own to start another game.

The two games had run along for a little while when Steve closed the front door and gratefully dropped on a chair at Corson's side to watch the play. Nueces was gathering in the cards for his own deal when Corson pushed back and looked about the room.

"Reckon we can have our party now, Nueces," he said. "We'll make her double-barrelled an' take in th' other table. We



want coffee an' grub, an' Tomas won't mind doublin' up th' quantity. Get a bucket of coffee an' all th' grub you an' Shorty can tote. Bring Tomas with you, for he's shore in on this."

The two punchers laughed and arose, exchanging banter with the other table. They stepped to the street and looked about them. The night was bright, and the town was quiet. They grinned at each other and strode off toward Tomas's lunch-room and domicile, and had covered nearly half the distance when a muffled *boom* struck their ears.

"What's that?" whispered Nueces, freezing like a startled cat.

"Sounded like a blast som'er's," answered Shorty, his head bent forward in the effort of listening. For some reason he was as taut as a fiddle string, and he sensed the same tenseness in his companion.

"There ain't no blastin' goin' on round this town," reproved Nueces, still whispering.

"That's what it sounded like, anyhow,"

replied Shorty, crouched and alert. Premonition of evil and danger awakened caution, and he thrilled to he knew not what.

Nueces was looking steadily in the direction of the sound, the bank blocking his vision. For a moment the two punchers stood still, and then, straightening up, Nueces walked on again toward the lunch-room, but he was alert and wary, his suspicious mind giving him no peace. So suspicious was he that he slipped behind the building at his side and sought its deeper shadow. Behind him pressed his friend, walking on tip-toe. Reaching the corner, they both looked out cautiously and caught a movement near the bank, and they saw four horses standing bunched not far from the bank's rear door.

"Four men," whispered Nueces, and then he looked closer, his eyes by this time accustomed to the poor light. "No, by Gawd! One of them cayuses has a pack saddle! A pack saddle, Shorty! Now I wonder what in hell——"

There came a low ring of metal and Nueces' gaze forsook the horses and moved to his left. A man came into sight, peering around nervously. He moved past a lighter patch of wall, and his profile could be made out. Nueces reached out and gripped his friend's arm.

"Chinless!" he breathed. "What deviltry is he up to now?"

Shorty took a step forward to peer around the corner, and his spur struck a half-buried can. The noise was slight, but the man on watch at the bank was a bundle of nerves, new to his part, and the noise struck him almost like a blow. He whistled, whirled, and raced for the horses; and he might have made his get-away if he had been content to keep on going, for the watchers so far did not suspect the truth and had no real reason to shoot. They were in doubt and hesitant; but when the running man stumbled and fell, and then, in a panic of fear and desperation, jerked out his gun and began shooting at the two vague figures he lost what chance

he had. Nueces' hand dropped, swung part way up, and his gun crashed once. The man on the ground bridged, rolled, and lay still.

The two friends leaped out of the fogging smoke of the shot and ran forward, but as they did so two men jumped from the door of the bank, a drop of only a few feet. Each of them had a sack in one hand and a gun in the other. As they struck the ground they saw the running punchers and both began firing as they raced for the horses. The punchers stopped, were instantly wrapped in powder smoke, and then ran on again.

Windows were going up, doors slammed, loud voices in the street were asking questions. From the Cheyenne there streamed nearly a dozen men, guns in hand, running toward the sounds of battle. The awakened citizens, not having taken time to dress, made a strange sight as they dashed through the night, bare legs twinkling under nightshirts, and many of them had slept in their underclothes.

They stopped at the rear of the bank to

find themselves gazing into the muzzles of Nueces' and Slor'y's guns, and profane inquiry instantly took the place of curiosity and held it until the guns were lowered.

Corson pushed through the thin line surrounding the scene of the fight, sheathing his gun as he bent down.

"Masked!" he muttered.

"Robbin' th' bank, I reckon," said some perfect fool glowing with the pride of discovery.

Nueces bent down and ripped off the mask hiding the face at his feet. He looked closely and exclaimed,

"Rawlins! Hah! Then that other feller is Tom Gade."

Corson removed the mask and let his friend see the face.

"Right!" said Nueces, and turned to go to the third man, the man who had been on watch. "This feller is Chinless, brother of th' Bar K boss," he said.

A curse answered him, and he leaned closer to the hidden face, hidden in the crook of

an arm. Chinless for some reason wore no mask.

"Well, well, I reckoned you was dead," said the puncher, and then swiftly placed his foot on a darting hand. "I'll take that gun outa yore way, Tomlinson," he said, and slipped the weapon into his shirt.

"Here comes th' Doc," said someone.

Nueces turned and took a few long steps stopping the doctor before he reached the wounded man. The two whispered together for a moment, and then the doctor went on again and knelt at Tomlinson's side. Someone appeared with a lighted lantern and brought it forward. By the aid of its dim rays the doctor made a quick examination and shook his head.

"I'm afraid yo're goin', friend," he said. "You've got ten, fifteen minutes left you."

Tomlinson sobbed and rolled over on his back, and then he began to speak, swiftly, brokenly, paying no attention to the men who softly gathered around him to listen to his words. One by one he cleared up the

puzzles, one by one came the names of the men implicated in the strange doings of the last few weeks. The sheriff and two of his deputies played leading rôles in these; and the names of Gade and Smith completed the list.

The doctor slipped away for a moment and in a moment returned.

"Th' other two are dead; they died instantly," he said. "Some of you boys take this man into th' bank an' light all th' lamps so I can look him over under better light. I don't believe he's in any danger. He was stunned and shocked by th' bullet, but barrin' that an' th' loss of a little blood he's all right."

The man on the ground, realising how he had been tricked, cursed at the top of his voice as he struggled futilely in the hands which held him. So busy were the men about him, so engrossed, that no one noticed the swift departure of a fully dressed man on the outer edge of the crowd. This man slipped away around the corner of the bank and then raced to the street and across it. In a few

moments more he was on his horse and riding out of town on his way to Cactus Springs to warn his friends.

Dawn revealed the little huddled town of Cactus Springs and three silent men riding into it. They dismounted at the sheriff's office, found the door open, and slipped inside. The owner was not there. A glance at the corral showed them no horse, and they moved on to the jail. One of them, looking around, watching the quiet buildings across the square, saw a man step from the open door of Zeke Pike's saloon and beckon imperatively.

"There's Zeke," said Nueces. "I'll see what he wants."

His companions waited, saw the lanky puncher enter the saloon, and almost instantly come out again on a run.

"Sheriff, Hurley, an' Jimson are on th' sneak," he said. "They got an hour's start. Headin' for Rock Springs."

"Fresh hosses an' an extra one apiece,"



snapped Corson, coming to life like a released spring.

"But can we arrest th' sheriff?" asked Shorty, purely as an academic question.

"Any citizen can arrest him if he's got th' nerve to go through with it," replied Corson, leading the way in search of the required mounts.

"Then I reckon we can do it," panted Shorty, a poor third in the race.

They found the horses, threw their saddles on them, took a supply of food and water, and, leading the three extra mounts, struck off on the desert along the trail of the fugitives. Changing horses at proper intervals, leading one and riding the other, made its effect noticeable by mid-afternoon, for to Corson's trained eyes the tracks were rapidly growing fresher. They were out on the desert now, pushing relentlessly after their quarry, and the goal of the race was the little spring bubbling up out of a tumbled mass of disintegrating rocks, a natural fortress in a waste of sand and clay and broken rock.

At last three specks were discovered far ahead, and the last stretch of the pursuit therewith began. Steadily the gap shortened, and now the pursuing three changed horses for the last time and left the trail at an angle, to endeavour to cut around their quarry and reach the spring first. To win the spring was to win the race, for the horses of both parties had gone long without water. The losers would either have to give up, or rush the garrison lying under cover of the rocks.

Nueces pushed over against Corson and began handing him food and the canteens, to lighten his horse to the last possible ounce; and then he applied quirt and spurs and drew steadily away from his friends. One of the fleeing men cut loose from his companions and rode off at a tangent to meet and overcome Nueces' threat, to stop him or to turn him aside; and after a moment the second fugitive followed him, while the third raced straight for the distant rocks, trying to gain them and to hold them.

Shorty, lighter than his friend Corson, threw away his impedimenta and spurred for this second fugitive, aiming at a point where their trails would most likely coincide. The two fugitives, risking all in a desperate situation, paid no attention to Shorty but strove to get within range of Nueces, hoping to centre on the advance pursuer, put him out of action, and then meet Shorty in turn.

Nueces kept on at top speed, straight for the rocks, and grinned as he realised how comparatively fresh his horse was. He was drawing away from the two nearest men and even forging ahead of the third. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him Shorty, steadily pushing on. Shorty's horse was even fresher than his own, and its rider was steadily cutting down the gap between them. Shorty's lighter weight accounted for this. Nueces suddenly made up his mind to trick the tricky. The thought was action. He swung abruptly from his course and headed straight for the threatening pair, his long arm reaching out and swinging forward in an im-

elling gesture, which Shorty read, understood, and obeyed, and his gaze now fixed itself on the distant rocks, his new objective.

Here was the unexpected. The two fugitives involuntarily drew rein as the deadly puncher charged toward them. They hesitated, separated, came together again, and then swiftly dismounted to seek cover behind their horses. Nueces threw himself down on the far side of his own horse and kept on, and then, with the first burst of rifle smoke, he swerved, rode on at a sharp angle, and leaped to the ground as his horse stopped. Prone on the sand, he raised the big Sharp's, now to prove its superiority over more modern weapons, aimed with deliberate care, and fired. A horse reared up on its hind legs and fell over backward. The second shot grazed the other horse and sent it tearing off across the desert in a panic of fear and pain. The range of the big rifle was nearly twice that of the repeaters in the hands of his enemies, and his last swerve had taken him

out of any real danger. Now he arose, leaped into the saddle, and raced after Shorty, who by now was far in the lead.

To the south, holding doggedly to the trail of the third man, rode Corson; to the west raced Shorty, steadily gaining in the dash for the goal. Nueces grinned, slowed his mount, and jogged on leisurely after his two friends. He saw Shorty reach the rocks, leap from the saddle, and become lost to sight; and almost instantly a puff of smoke burst from the goal and the third man stopped. Nueces headed for him, riding now at a lope. The third man was the sheriff, and, stung by desperation and hatred, he whirled and galloped back to meet Bob Corson.

Again Nueces dashed forward, rifle in hand. The sheriff, seeing that he was between two men, either of them better with weapons than he was himself, stopped and raised his hands.

Dawn broke and found Cactus Springs stirring. Zeke Pike moved sleepily around in

his saloon, opening doors and windows. He began to sweep up the litter of the day before, when the county had elected the JC man as its sheriff, and wondered where that man and his two friends were. They had left nearly twenty-four hours before, and he did not believe they had returned during the night. He stepped out into the street and looked toward the desert and grinned as he caught sight of a cavalcade entering town. It rode slowly on and passed across the squalid square. The first three riders were the old sheriff and his two deputies; the following three, the new sheriff and two of the men who were certain to be deputies. They stopped before the door of the jail, and all dismounted.

Zeke hastened across the square and reached the jail's outer door in time to hear the ringing clang of steel, the closing of the last cell door. He stepped curiously through the portal and bumped into Nueces, whose homely face wore a grin.

"Got 'em, huh?" inquired Zeke, feeling

that he should say something, even if it was asinine.

"Right where they belong," said Nueces as his friends stepped out of the cell room and closed the door behind them. "I put th' sheriff where I said I would, with Jimson on one side an' Hurley on th' other. What you got for breakfast?"

"Who's goin' to stay in here an' watch this jail?" asked Corson, nodding to Zeke.

Nueces sighed and pulled in his belt.

"Me an' Shorty," he said.

THE END

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